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Enhancing Carbon Sequestration and Soil Fertility Through Agroforestry: A Sustainable Land Management Approach

Sahil Chauhan and Kamal Kishore*
Department of Silviculture and Agroforestry
Dr Yashwant Singh Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Nauni, Solan (HP)
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Introduction

Carbon (C) is a fundamental component of all living organisms and plays a crucial role in sustaining life on Earth. It exists in various forms, including soil organic matter, plants, animals, geological deposits, atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO_2), and dissolved in seawater. Increasing interest in diverse land-use systems for their potential to stabilize atmospheric CO_2 levels, mitigate CO_2 emissions, and enhance carbon sequestration. Agroforestry is recognized as a viable approach for both reducing CO_2 emissions and enhancing carbon sinks.

While pristine ecosystems serve as the largest carbon reservoirs, significant portions have been lost, particularly in developing nations. Transforming low-biomass land-use types, such as arable croplands and fallows, into tree-based systems, including plantations and agroforestry, can effectively sequester carbon. Spanning over a billion hectares across various ecological regions, agroforestry systems (AFS) offer substantial potential for climate change mitigation. According to Makundi and Sathaye (2004), agroforestry supports carbon sequestration by:

- Storing carbon in both vegetation and soil, contingent upon initial soil carbon levels.
- Reducing the need for slash-and-burn practices and shifting cultivation through intensive land use.
- Providing sustainably sourced wood products, minimizing deforestation pressures.
- Enhancing farmers' incomes and reducing reliance on forest extraction for economic sustenance.
- Acting as a dual-purpose system where fodder species improve livestock nutrition while simultaneously sequestering carbon (Thornton and Herrero, 2010).

The integration of trees in agroforestry systems enhances their role as atmospheric carbon sinks due to their rapid growth and high productivity. Promoting agroforestry as a land management

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strategy can contribute to CO_2 reduction and address global warming challenges. This article emphasizing the carbon sequestration potential of different agroforestry systems.

Agroforestry's Contribution to Agriculture and the Environment

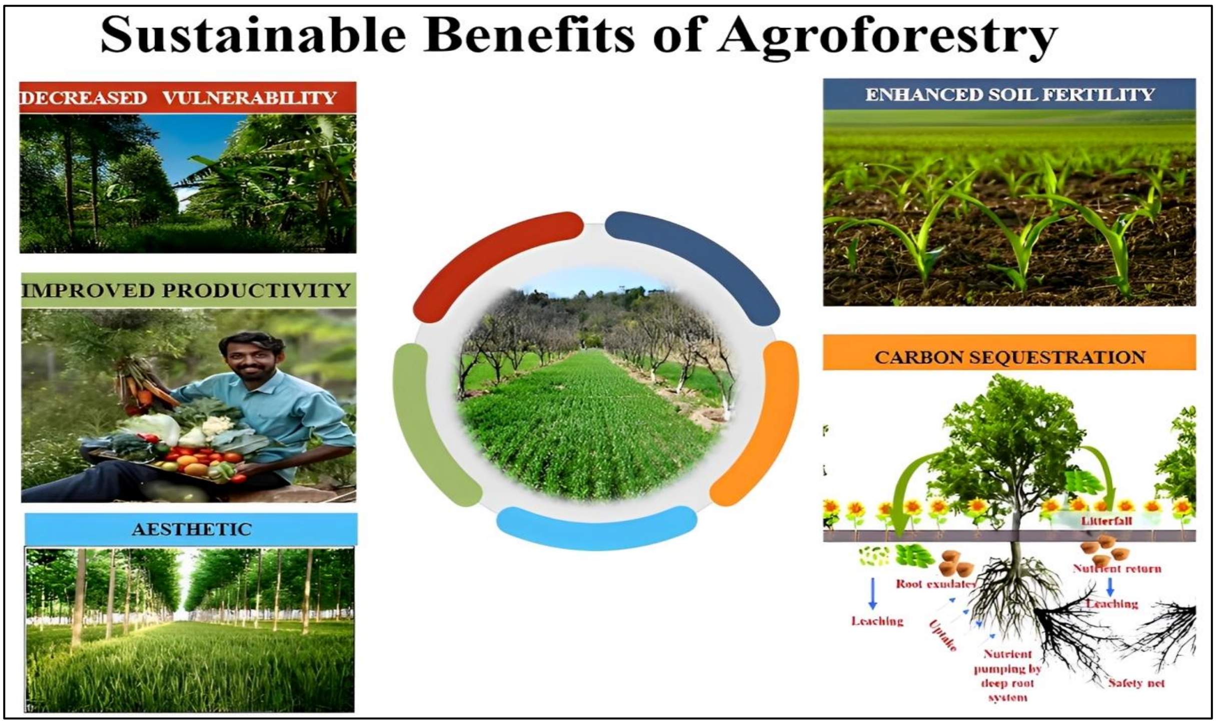

Figure: Sustainable Benefits of Agroforestry

Enhanced soil fertility

Soil fertility is essential for food security, poverty reduction, environmental conservation, and sustainable agriculture. Agroforestry systems, such as agri-horticulture, agri-pastoral, and agri-silvipastoral, effectively restore soil organic matter (Pandey, 2007). The leaf litter from trees decomposes into humus, improving soil properties (ICAR, 2006). Moreover, agroforestry helps control runoff and soil erosion, preventing nutrient and organic matter loss. Additionally, it mitigates soil toxicity, including acidification and salinization, and facilitates the reclamation of polluted soils.

Augmented carbon stock

Agroforestry plays a crucial role in climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon in trees and soil. Estimates suggest that agroforestry systems can sequester 9, 21, 50, and 63 Mg C ha^{-1} in semiarid, sub-humid, humid, and temperate regions, respectively. In tropical smallholder agroforestry, sequestration rates range from 1.5 to 3.5 Mg C ha^{-1} $year^{-1}$, making it a viable strategy for carbon storage (Roshetko *et al*., 2007).

Decreased vulnerability

Agroforestry enhances farm resilience by mitigating both biophysical (e.g., soil fertility improvement, hydraulic lift) and financial risks through diversification and income generation

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(Verchot *et al*., 2007). It also stabilizes seasonal labor demands and ensures year-round income generation, benefiting farmers over short, medium, and long-term horizons.

Improved productivity

Agroforestry improves soil conditions, leading to higher crop yields compared to conventional agriculture. Studies in India's Tarai region have shown that taungya cultivators achieved superior yields than those practicing monoculture. Research at IGFRI, Jhansi, demonstrated increased fodder yields when intercropped with fodder trees compared to sole fodder cultivation. Additionally, intercropping food crops with trees in states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat has been reported to enhance productivity (Prasad, 2003).

Aesthetic worth

Agroforestry improves soil, water, air, and biodiversity while utilizing only a small fraction of total farmland. It supports over 50% of biodiversity, creating habitats for wildlife and beneficial insects that control crop pests (Basuki *et al*., 2009). Tree biodiversity adds variety to the landscape and improves aesthetics values. Furthermore, agroforestry systems optimize solar energy use, reduce pest populations, improve nitrogen fixation, moderate microclimates, and enhance yields of adjacent crops and livestock.

Measurement of carbon sequestration in agroforestry systems

Aboveground (Vegetation)

Aboveground carbon sequestration is derived from biomass estimates, assuming 50% of biomass consists of carbon. Measurements typically involve summing harvested and standing biomass, with estimations refined through allometric equations based on parameters like diameter at breast height (DBH), tree height, and wood density.

Belowground (Soils)

Belowground organic carbon (C) dynamics in agroforestry systems (AFS) are crucial for understanding C sequestration but are more challenging to assess than aboveground C. Soil organic C exists in various forms, including root and hyphal biomass, microbial biomass, and soil organic matter (SOM) in both labile and recalcitrant forms. The complexity of separating these components and their interactions complicates C sequestration assessment. The most common method involves soil analysis, where C content (e.g., g C per 100 g soil) is measured and expressed in megagrams (Mg) per hectare. SOC is typically assessed on a whole-soil basis, with some studies quantifying it through CO_2 emissions from furnace heating.

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Belowground living biomass

The root-to-shoot ratios help estimate belowground living biomass, which varies by species (e.g., higher in monocot trees than in dicot) and ecological region (e.g., higher in cold than in warm climates). In addition to SOM, belowground biomass serves as a significant carbon pool (Nadelhoffer and Raich, 1992).

Carbon sequestration in different agroforestry systems

Carbon sequestration in agroforestry systems occurs both aboveground, through carbon stored in standing biomass, and in belowground, via increased soil carbon and root biomass. Early studies on carbon storage potential in agroforestry and alternative land use systems in India estimated a sequestration range of 68–228 Mg ha^{-1} (Dixon *et al*., 1994). The extent of carbon sequestration varies across regions, depending on biomass production, the scale of forestry activities, and the ultimate use of harvested wood.

Agri-silvicultural systems

Agri-silvicultural systems integrate agricultural crops with tree cultivation, enhancing carbon sequestration. Studies indicate that tree species planted on abandoned agricultural lands can sequester 3.9 t C ha^{-1} $year^{-1}$, while degraded forest lands store approximately 1.79 t C ha^{-1} $year^{-1}$. Poplar-based agroforestry in India showed 113.6% higher total biomass than sole wheat cultivation, with net carbon storage reaching 34.61 t C ha^{-1} compared to 18.74 t C ha^{-1} in sole wheat systems (Chauhan *et al*., 2010).

Silvopastrol systems

The combination of woody plants with pasture is referred to as silvipastoral system. Silvopastoral systems combine tree cultivation with pasture management, serving as a sustainable livestock fodder source while sequestering carbon. Biomass accumulation studies in Uttar Pradesh

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revealed species such as *Albizia procera*, *Eucalyptus tereticornis*, *Albizia lebbeck*, *Emblica officinalis* and *Dalbergia sissoo* accumulated 8.6, 6.92, 6.52, 6.25 and 5.41 t/ha/yr of biomass (Rai *et al*., 2009). Kaur *et al*. (2002) reported a 1.7 to 2.3 times increase in organic carbon in a silvipastoral system incorporating *Leucaenea leucocephala*, *Cenchrus ciliaris* and *Stylosanthes hamata* as compared to a control.

Accumulation of carbon in homegardens

Homegardens are land-use systems that integrate multi-purpose trees and shrubs with annual and perennial crops, along with livestock, within household compounds. These systems are intensively managed by family labor, ensuring a closely interlinked crop-tree-animal unit. Carbon sequestration in homegardens has been recorded at 101.5 to 127.4 Mg C ha^{-1} in soil profiles up to 1m deep, with smaller, high-density homegardens storing more carbon per unit area than larger ones (Saha *et al*., 2009).

Accumulation of carbon in block and boundary plantations

The carbon stock in both soil and aboveground biomass in block and boundary plantations within agroforestry systems can enhance soil fertility and contribute to carbon accumulation. Numerous studies in India have examined carbon sequestration in tree biomass. Kumar,(2010) reported that the 9-year old block and boundary plantations for four different agroforestry systems (*Populus deltoides* block plantation + wheat, Eucalyptus hybrid boundary plantation + wheat, *Populus deltoides* boundary plantation + wheat and *Populus deltoides* block plantation + lemon grass), and it was found that total carbon sequestration in trees was 70.59, 21.38, 116.29 and 18.53 t ha^{-1} in all of four agroforestry systems, respectively.

Conclusion

Agroforestry systems effectively integrate trees with crops and livestock, enhancing carbon sequestration compared to conventional agriculture or pastures. These systems offer multiple environmental, economic, and social benefits, making them a promising strategy for climate change mitigation. Additionally, agroforestry practices can reduce deforestation by providing sustainable alternatives for food and fuelwood production. Further research is needed to quantify their long-term carbon storage potential and optimize their role in sustainable land management.

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