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The Future of Soil Science in a Warming World



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Umair Riaz, Awais Raza and Rabbia Khalid

Soil plays a vital, yet often underappreciated, role in combating climate change. As global temperatures rise and natural resources are stretched thin, soil faces new challenges, but advancements in technology offer promising solutions. In this evolving landscape, soil science is positioned to be at the forefront of climate change mitigation, safeguarding food security, and enhancing environmental resilience.

Reimagining Soil's Role

Soil is crucial for carbon storage, water regulation, and supporting life. However, climate change threatens its balance. Soil holds more carbon than the atmosphere and all vegetation combined, but rising temperatures risk releasing that carbon back into the atmosphere. If global temperatures increase by 2°C, soils could release 55 billion tons of carbon by 2050. Desertification, erosion, and nutrient depletion are also degrading soils, with 33% of global soils already affected. These issues underscore the need for innovative strategies to protect and optimize soil's role in carbon sequestration.

Technological Innovations in Soil Science

Technological advancements are reshaping soil management practices, offering new ways to monitor, restore, and enhance soil health.

- 1. IoT and Sensors:** IoT-enabled sensors can continuously monitor soil moisture, pH, carbon levels, and microbial activity. Companies like CropX use this technology to help farmers optimize water usage, increase yields, and reduce carbon emissions.
- 2. AI and Machine Learning:** AI models analyze extensive soil data to predict how soil will respond to changing climate patterns. At Stanford University, researchers use AI to track soil carbon fluxes, providing valuable insights for policy decisions.
- 3. CRISPR-Engineered Microbes:** Gene-editing technologies, such as CRISPR, are creating soil microbes that enhance nitrogen fixation, boost plant growth, and increase carbon capture, offering hope for restoring soil in nutrient-poor or drought-prone areas.
- 4. Autonomous Soil Restoration Machines:** Prototypes of AI-driven robots, equipped with sensors and drones, are being developed to restore degraded soils. These machines, powered by renewable energy, could one day help rejuvenate desertified regions.
- 5. Biochar:** Biochar, produced through advanced pyrolysis methods, captures carbon while enhancing soil fertility. Companies like Carbo Culture are pioneering its use to improve soil quality and reduce emissions.

Soil's Role in Climate Initiatives

Soil science is becoming integral to global climate efforts. Monitoring soil carbon levels has led to

the development of carbon markets, enabling farmers to earn credits for practices that improve soil health. Australia's Carbon Farming Initiative incentivizes farmers to adopt regenerative practices that enhance soil carbon, serving as a model for other countries.

The "4 per 1000" Initiative, introduced at COP21, aims to increase soil carbon stocks by 0.4% annually. This modest goal could have significant impacts on global carbon emissions, and AI-assisted soil mapping can help identify the best regions for carbon storage.

A Multidisciplinary Approach

Collaboration across various fields is essential for advancing soil science. Scientists, engineers, and policymakers must work together to translate innovative technologies into practical solutions. Integrating traditional knowledge with modern tools can further enhance soil resilience. Agroforestry practices, supported by AI, can provide economic and environmental benefits for farmers.

Education and Community Involvement

Educational institutions, like Wageningen University, are offering programs that combine soil science, AI, and sustainability. Training the next generation of scientists, equipped with practical skills in digital mapping and soil analysis, is crucial for ensuring sustainable soil management.

Community-driven programs, such as the FAO's Global Soil Doctors, empower local farmers to

monitor and manage soil health, bridging the gap between research and real-world applications.

Vision 2050: The Future of Soil Science

Looking ahead to 2050, soil science will be transformed by cutting-edge technologies. Global soil monitoring networks will provide real-time data on soil health, accessible to everyone from farmers to policymakers. Autonomous robots will restore degraded lands, while designer microbial communities will be tailored to specific soil types to enhance carbon sequestration and boost agricultural productivity. The integration of AI, IoT, and biochar technologies will contribute to carbon-neutral farming, making soil a central part of sustainable food systems.

By 2050, soil science will play a pivotal role in addressing climate change, ensuring food security, and achieving global sustainability goals, such as Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Life on Land (SDG 15). Achieving this vision requires innovation, leadership, and global collaboration.

Conclusion

The future of soil science lies at the intersection of technology, policy, and human creativity. By leveraging modern tools, we can transform soil from a victim of climate change into an essential solution. As the foundation of life, soil holds the key to combating climate change and ensuring a sustainable planet for future generations. Through continued innovation and collaboration, soil

science will remain a critical building block for a thriving, resilient world.