This article has been published as: Wanyama, J., Herremans, K., Maetens, W., Isabirye, M., Kahimba, F., Kimaro, D., Poesen, J. and Deckers, J., 2012. Effectiveness of tropical grass species as sediment filters in the riparian zone of Lake Victoria. *Soil Use and Management* 28(3): 409-418.

Effectiveness of tropical grass species as sediment filters in the riparian zone of Lake Victoria

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Running title: Tropical grass species as sediment filters

Abstract

The effectiveness of tropical grass species in strips of different length in trapping sediment from cropland was assessed and the influence of filter length was determined. The assessment was done under natural rainfall which induced sheet and rill erosion in runoff plots and then using simulated runoff which caused concentrated erosion. The evaluated grasses were elephant grass, lemon grass, paspalum and sugarcane. Runoff plots were on a 10% slope in a randomized complete block design replicated three times. Filter lengths were 2.5, 5 and 10 m against a 10 m long sediment source area planted with maize on a clay loam soil. The results show that sediment trapping effectiveness increases non-linearly with increasing filter length for all grasses. Under natural rainfall, > 70% of sediment was trapped in the first 5 m and lengthening the strip to 10 m only resulted in a marginal increase in trapping effectiveness. With concentrated runoff, < 70% of sediment was trapped in the first 5 m and lengthening the strip to 10 m resulted in a significant increase in trapping effectiveness. Paspalum and lemon grass performed significantly better than other grasses ($P < 0.05$) due to their spreading growth pattern over the soil surface. Paspalum also has the highest root density in the upper 0.3 m layer of the soil followed by lemon grass, hence offering the greatest resistance to erosion from concentrated flow. The results demonstrate that tropical grass filter strips provide a viable means for reducing the sediment flux from cropland.

Key words: Tropical grass species, sediment trapping, Lake Victoria basin

Introduction

Soil erosion from cropland is an important sediment source for rivers and lakes in the Lake Victoria basin. Sediment lost from cropland is mainly from the topsoil which is rich in nutrients critical for crop production. Low agricultural productivity and fish catches which are attributable to soil erosion and sediment pollution of Lake Victoria as well as others threaten the fragile livelihoods of local people (Olago and Odada,

2007). The major runoff pathway from cropland is overland flow causing sheet and rill erosion followed by concentrated flow along gullies and footpaths.

Various studies have shown that sediment flux from cropland can be controlled in the riparian zones through the use of grass filter strips, e.g. Dillaha *et al.* (1989); Van Dijk *et al.* (1996); Ghadiri *et al.* (2001); Hook (2003); Abu-Zreig *et al.* (2004); Blanco-Canqui *et al.* (2004); Mckergow *et al.* (2004); Ziegler *et al.* (2006); Mankin *et al.* (2007) and Owens *et al.* (2007). Grass filter strips are defined as strips of cropland adjacent to water bodies or drainage ditches that are planted with grass with the aim of trapping sediment.

The factors determining the performance of a grass filter strip are the filter strip (length, slope, vegetation height, density, stiffness and type), water inflow (runoff velocity, discharge, volume and type), sediment inflow (grain-size distribution, aggregation and concentration) and rainfall (intensity and depth) (Verstraeten *et al.*, 2006). Various studies have shown that filter length is the most important factor (Dillaha *et al.*, 1989; Van Dijk *et al.*, 1996; Lee *et al.*, 1999; Abu-Zreig, 2001; Abu-Zreig *et al.*, 2004; Owens *et al.*, 2007; Yuan *et al.*, 2009). Most previous studies investigated grass filter strip performance for sheet and rill flow with a shallow flow depth where the grass was not submerged (Dillaha *et al.*, 1986; Magette *et al.*, 1989; Van Dijk *et al.*, 1996; Valentin *et al.*, 2008). The sediment trapping effectiveness of the filter is expected to decrease with concentrated flow due to a decline in the overall hydraulic roughness of the filter following submersion (Verstraeten *et al.*, 2006).

Furthermore, despite the wealth of information on performance of grass filter strips, especially in North America and Europe, there is a paucity of quantitative information for tropical regions (Valentin *et al.*, 2008). There is no published research on grass filter strips for East Africa and on the best grass species that can be used. Also, there is no information on the effect of filter length on the performance of appropriate grass filter strips in this region. The effectiveness of grass filter strips depends on environmental conditions such as climate, soil type, topography and grass species (Syversen, 2005).

The National Environment Regulations in East Africa require a 60 to 200 m long buffer zone for major rivers and lake shore, (URT, 1999; GOU, 2000), and this has important socio-economic implications in regions of a high population density. Furthermore, the buffer zones are usually located on old lacustrine terraces which are the best agricultural soils. Under such circumstances, a win-win situation exists when buffers satisfy both ecological and socio-economic requirements. Also, due to land pressure, it is important to determine the minimum grass filter length which should be used to reduce runoff and sediment fluxes.

The objectives of this research were to (1) assess on an economic basis selected tropical grass species for trapping sediment from cropland, (2) determine the effectiveness of these grass species in reducing runoff discharge in the riparian zone of Lake Victoria under natural rainfall and simulated concentrated runoff, and (3) determine the influence of filter length on runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness.

Materials and Methods

Study site

This study was at Mayuge, Uganda located between 33° 15' to 33° 25' E and 0° 25' to 0° 30' N in the sub-catchment of Kafunda bay (ca. 1 km²) along the Lake Victoria shoreline [Figure 1]. The landscape is an undulating peneplain (1204 to 1371 m a.s.l), characterized by erosion- resistant quartzitic hills (De Meyer *et al.*, 2011). The interfluvies between the isolated hills and swamps are underlain by rocks with Lixi-Rhodic Ferralsols developed on the oldest landforms and Plinthic Acrisols and Petric Plinthosols on the lower ones. The soil texture at Mayuge is clay loam (clay: 35%, silt: 24%, and sand: 41%). The site has a bimodal rainfall pattern with a mean annual rainfall of 1050 mm. The rainy seasons are from March up to May and from September to December. The area is dominated by intensive agriculture based on a banana-coffee system with maize as the main annual crop. Fishing is also important.

Selection of grasses

Four tropical grasses compatible with local farming systems were selected: lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), elephant grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*), paspalum (*Paspalum notatum*) and sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*). Lemon grass is a perennial which grows in dense clumps up to 1.8 m in height. Lemon grass is used as a non-toxic insect repellent and as an ingredient in citronella oil for pesticides, toothpaste, tea flavours and perfume. Lemon grass was planted at a spacing of 0.6 m x 0.6 m in the filter strips. Elephant grass is a perennial which grows in dense clumps of up to 3 m tall and 0.03 m in thickness near the base and is drought tolerant. It is harvested for animal fodder. Elephant grass was planted at a spacing of 1 m x 1 m in the filter strips. Paspalum is a low creeping perennial with stolons and stout scaly rhizomes. It can grow up to 0.2 to 0.6 m in height, is adapted to a range of soil types and is drought tolerant. Paspalum is harvested for livestock feed or for mulch. It was planted at a spacing of 0.15 m x 0.25 m in the filter strips. Sugarcane grows in clumps with stems up to 3.5 m in height and 0.02 to 0.03 m in diameter. It is grown as a cash crop for sugar and is often chewed by people to extract the juice. Sugarcane was planted at spacing of 0.3 m x 1 m in the filter strips.

Runoff plots

The experimental bounded runoff plots were 2 m in width and 10, 12.5, 15 and 20 m in length. Within these plots, filter lengths were 2.5, 5 and 10 m with a standard sediment source area of 2 m width and 10 m length planted with maize (*Zea mays*) which is a dominant food crop grown along the Lake Victoria shoreline. The filter lengths were selected based on farmers' plot sizes as obtained during a reconnaissance survey. The grass filter strips were planted three months before maize was planted on the standard plot to allow for establishment.

The treatments were arranged in a randomized complete block design replicated three times [Figure 2]. The plots were bounded by 0.3 m high corrugated iron sheets on the upper and lateral sides. At the bottom end of each bounded runoff plot runoff collecting tanks of 200 l capacity were installed in a 1 m deep trench to collect sediment delivered by sheet and rill runoff from the maize plots through the grass

filter strips. Maize was planted at a row spacing of 0.3 m and 0.6 m between rows. Land preparation such as planting and weeding was done according to local practice and after harvesting maize straw was left on the plot. In total 48 runoff plots were installed; four grass species, three filter lengths replicated three times. The slope gradient at the experimental site was 10 %.

Vegetation cover (VC, %) of the filter strips was determined Sheila (1996), also taking any mulch into account. Vegetation cover was determined when the grasses were fully established. Root density (RD, kg/m^3) for each grass species was assessed using the dry excavation method (De Baets *et al.*, 2007a). From each grass species at least three representative plants were selected and excavated. The volume of soil column was considered as a cylinder with the vertical orthogonal projection of the above ground biomass as a diameter. A soil column was dug along this circle as deep as local conditions permitted. The soil material was removed carefully from the excavated soil column from the top to the bottom. After excavation digital photos of the root systems were taken. Height and diameter of the orthogonal projection of the above-ground biomass were measured. Then grasses with their root system were laid on a horizontal plastic sheet and the root pattern during growth was reconstructed. The roots were then cut along soil depth intervals of ca. 0.1 m. The roots were collected per soil depth interval and placed in a labelled plastic bag. Next, the roots were sun dried for two days and then weighed. By dividing the dry root mass (M_D , kg) with the volume (V , m^3) of the corresponding soil depth class, the root density for each soil depth class was calculated.

Runoff plot experiments under natural rainfall conditions

Data collected included rainfall, runoff and sediment delivery. Rainfall depth (P, mm) was measured after each rainfall event by means of a manual rain gauge installed at the site. Runoff depth (R, mm) was measured from the runoff in the tanks [Figure 2] after every rain event. The collected runoff was stirred thoroughly and a depth-integrated sediment sample was taken by ensuring that the travel rate of the sampler was constant in upward or downward directions. This runoff sample was filtered

through a pre-weighed standard filter with 0.45 µm pore openings and oven dried at 105°C for 24 hours in the laboratory.

The corresponding sediment concentration (SC, g/l) was obtained using a mass balance method given by the following equation:

$$SSC = \frac{G_1 - G_2}{V_{\text{sample}}} \quad [1]$$

where G_1 is the dry mass of the filter paper and the sediment in grams, G_2 is the dry mass of the filter paper in grams determined by taking the average of 10 oven-dry filter papers, and V_{sample} is the volume of sample in litres determined using a graduated cylinder. Sediment delivered (SL, g) was determined by multiplying the sediment concentration with the runoff collected in the tanks. The experimental runoff plots were monitored under natural rainfall between February 2007 and June 2008 and data were collected from 67 events.

Runoff plot experiments under simulated concentrated runoff

The same runoff plots established to collect data under natural rainfall were used for simulated concentrated runoff with an average sediment concentration of 5500 mg/l. A 1000 l water reservoir with an adjustable opening of 0.07 m diameter was setup horizontally 0.3 m above the soil surface and 1 m before the top of the filter strip. Concentrated runoff was generated by emptying the reservoir onto the grass filter strip through a 1 m long and 0.3 m wide V-shaped iron gutter designed to represent a channel [Figure 3 and Figure 4]. At the start of each experimental run 10 kg of topsoil from the experimental site was added into the reservoir and stirred continuously throughout the experiment. The experiment runtime started immediately the tap was opened. Runoff samples were taken intermittently at time intervals of ca. 2 min for 5 seconds during the experiment at the inlet and outlet of the filter strip. For each experimental run, 10 runoff samples were taken at the inlet and the outlet of the filter. Runoff discharges (Q , m³/s) were obtained using the sample volume measured and the corresponding sampling duration. Runoff collected in the buckets was stirred

thoroughly and a sample was taken. This sample was filtered and oven dried at 105 °C for 24 hours in the laboratory and the corresponding inlet and outlet sediment concentration determined [1]. A total of 72 simulated concentrated runoff experiments were carried out; six experimental runs per filter length per grass species in October 2008.

Data analysis

In order to examine the performance of the grass filter strips in reducing runoff discharge and sediment, the trapping effectiveness (TE) was calculated:

$$TE = \frac{X_{in} - X_{out}}{X_{in}} \quad [2]$$

where X_{in} is the incoming amount and X_{out} is the outgoing amount of either sediment mass or runoff volume. Under natural rainfall, the measured sediment mass or runoff volume from the control plots was assumed to be the incoming value for the plots with a grass filter strip in each set of plots (Dillaha *et al.*, 1986, Vigiak *et al.*, 2008, Yuan *et al.*, 2009). The trapping effectiveness was computed for each runoff-generating event in the control plots and a mean trapping effectiveness value was calculated for the monitoring period. Under simulated concentrated runoff, the trapping effectiveness of all grasses and filter lengths was determined for each experimental run [2] and a mean trapping effectiveness value was calculated for the experimental runs. Testing for significant differences between trapping effectiveness of different filter lengths and different grass species was done using the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon *U*-test, a non-parametric two-sample probability test. This test was chosen because the compared data groups were not normally distributed. The correlation between sediment and runoff trapping effectiveness was analyzed by means of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (r_s).

Results

Runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness of grass filter strips for natural rainfall

Plot runoff depth (mm) and mass of sediment delivery (kg/ha) decreased non-linearly with increasing filter length for all grasses [Table 1]. Also, the runoff trapping effectiveness increased non-linearly with increasing filter length for all grasses [Figure 5]. An increase in filter length from 2.5 to 5 m and 5 to 10 m resulted in a significant increase in runoff trapping effectiveness for all the grasses ($p < 0.05$) [Table 2]. At all filter lengths, runoff trapping effectiveness for sugarcane was significantly lower than that for lemon grass, elephant grass and paspalum ($p < 0.05$).

Sediment trapping effectiveness also increased non-linearly with increasing filter length for all grasses [Figure 6]. An increase in filter length from 2.5 to 5 m resulted in a significant increase in sediment trapping effectiveness for all the grasses ($p < 0.05$) [Table 2]. The results show that over 70% of sediment was trapped in the first 5 m of the filters and there was a marginal increase in sediment trapping effectiveness for a filter length > 5 m. The percentage increase in sediment trapping effectiveness ranged between 4.4 to 5.6 % per meter of grass filter by increasing the filter length from 2.5 to 5 m. By doubling the filter length again from 5 to 10 m, the sediment trapping effectiveness increased by 1.6 to 2.4 % per m of grass filter strip. Results from elephant grass and sugarcane were the only ones to show a significant increase in sediment trapping effectiveness when the filter length was increased from 5 m to 10 m ($p < 0.05$). At all filter lengths sediment trapping effectiveness for lemon grass and paspalum were significantly greater than for elephant grass and sugarcane ($p < 0.05$).

Runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness of grass filter strips for simulated concentrated runoff

Trends in runoff trapping effectiveness with increasing filter length for all grasses under concentrated runoff was similar to that from natural rainfall [Figure 5]. At filter lengths of 2.5, 5 and 10 m, runoff trapping effectiveness for paspalum and lemon grass was significantly higher than for elephant grass and sugarcane ($p < 0.05$).

Paspalum had the highest sediment trapping effectiveness for all filter lengths followed by lemon grass, elephant grass and sugarcane [Figure 6]. An increase in filter length from 2.5 to 5 m and from 5 to 10 m resulted in a significant increase in sediment trapping effectiveness for all the grasses ($p < 0.05$) [Table 3]. Sediment trapping effectiveness for paspalum and lemon grass at filter length of 2.5, 5 and 10 m were significantly higher than that of elephant grass and sugarcane ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Paspalum and lemon grass perform better than elephant grass and sugarcane due to their spreading growth pattern over the soil surface [Table 4] and due to the dense network of fine roots. In addition paspalum has the highest root density in the upper 0.3 m layer of the soil followed by lemon grass [Figure 7] and [Table 4], hence offering the greatest resistance to concentrated flow erosion (De Baets *et al.*, 2007b; De Baets and Poesen, 2010). The below-ground biomass is thus an important aspect of the grass filter when the above-ground biomass is harvested, destroyed by fire or a storm event.

At all filter lengths, runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness decreases under concentrated runoff erosion in comparison to sheet and rill erosion for all grasses [Figure 5 and Figure 6]. The grass filter strips are thus more effective when the runoff passes through the grasses in the form of shallow uniform overland flow than when the flow is concentrated in rills or gullies. (Loch *et al.*, 1999; Verstraeten *et al.*, 2006). This implies that for trapping sediment and for reducing runoff in concentrated flow, a filter strip longer than 5 m is required, while under sheet and rill erosion, a filter length of 5 m is sufficient. Sediment trapping effectiveness exceeding 50% for grass filter strips with a minimum length of 5 m have been reported by Dillaha *et al.* (1989), Magette *et al.* (1989) and Daniels and Gilliam (1996) for sheet and rill erosion and lengthening the filter strips does not always result in a significant increase in trapping effectiveness (Schmitt *et al.*, 1999; Abu-Zreig *et al.* 2004).

Sediment trapping effectiveness is highly and positively correlated with the runoff trapping effectiveness ($r_s = 0.99$, $p < 0.01$). Hence, sediment trapping and runoff reduction are closely linked (Abu-Zreig *et al.*, 2004; Weihang *et al.*, 2011). Comparison of sediment and runoff trapping effectiveness values shows that the former tends to be higher than the latter for all filter lengths and grasses [Figure 8]. Hence, the tested tropical grass filter strips have a higher effectiveness in trapping sediment than in reducing runoff from cropland for the same filter length. In order to improve the sediment trapping effectiveness of grass filter strips, best management practices in soil and water conservation such as mulching and reducing runoff are needed upslope of the filter strip.

This study demonstrates that tropical grass species that have an economic value can be used as filter strips for trapping sediment from cropland. Thus, the portion of agricultural land set aside for the grass filter strip is not lost from an economic point of view. This is a win-win situation for farmers and for the environment. The four studied grass species can provide an additional source of income to the community besides their bio-physical functioning for sediment filtration. The results suggest that there is a need to re-assess the suitability of the 60 to 100 m buffer zone as required by legislation in the riparian zone of Lake Victoria basin. Filter strips with a smaller filter length, repeated at regular intervals could be more effective than one large riparian filter strip since sediment is caught closer to its source and costs associated with filter strips are equitably distributed among land owners. This will boost the adoption of sediment filter strips in local farming systems and help to alleviate the problem of sediment pollution of Lake Victoria.

Although the initial runoff discharge in the experiments (mean 2.2 ± 0.3 l/s) was sufficient to simulate a realistic concentrated flow, future studies need to consider the application of an additional simulated rainfall on the grass filter strips to better mimic the natural situation. The experimental runtime in the simulated concentrated runoff was on average 25 min. However, the duration of some rainfall events may be several hours which could have an effect on the performance of the grass filter strips. This study is the first to test the effectiveness of tropical grass species in reducing runoff and sediment delivery in the Lake Victoria basin. However, it is recommended

that further experiments are conducted in more varied ecological settings in order to determine the effect of soil texture, topography, area of the field draining towards the filter, type of grass species and different grass combinations on the performance of these tropical grass filter strips.

Conclusion

This study shows that tropical grass filter strips provide a viable means to reduce the sediment flux from cropland. Runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness increases non-linearly with increasing filter length for all grasses. With a filter length of 5 m, lemon grass and paspalum have the highest runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness against a sediment source area with a length of 10 m planted with maize on a slope of 10%. Given the decrease in runoff and sediment flux associated with longer grass filter strips and the economic value of elephant grass and sugarcane, these grasses could also be used in filter strips at least 10 m in length.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Lake Victoria Research Initiative, RipaVic VLIR-OI project and Belgian Technical Cooperation for the research grant. Kristof Herremans from K.U Leuven received IRO-funding for conducting fieldwork. Willem Maetens received funding from the EC-DG RTD 6th Framework Research Programme [sub-priority 1.1.6.3] - Research on Desertification- project DESIRE [037046]: Desertification Mitigation and Remediation of land - a global approach for local solutions. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments that helped improving this paper.

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List of Tables

Table 1. Mean runoff depth (mm) and mass of sediment delivery (kg/ha) for different grass filter lengths under natural rainfall (values between brackets are standard deviations, $n = 67$)

Grass species	Mean runoff depth (mm)			Mean sediment delivery (kg/ha)			Tab le 2. Mea n run off and
	2.5 m	5 m	10 m	2.5 m	5 m	10 m	
Lemon grass	1.3 ^(0.11)	0.8 ^(0.10)	0.3 ^(0.09)	3.1 ^(2.2)	2.6 ^(1.9)	2.3 ^(1.5)	
Paspalum	1.51 ^(0.20)	0.88 ^(0.15)	0.31 ^(0.10)	3.6 ^(3.0)	2.8 ^(2.1)	2.4 ^(1.7)	
Elephant grass	1.62 ^(0.22)	0.89 ^(0.18)	0.31 ^(0.11)	3.9 ^(3.4)	3.2 ^(2.8)	2.6 ^(1.5)	
Sugarcane	2.03 ^(0.70)	1.01 ^(0.30)	0.34 ^(0.24)	4.8 ^(4.0)	3.8 ^(3.3)	2.9 ^(1.8)	
Control			2.3 ^(1.1)			11.8 ^(4.8)	

sediment trapping effectiveness (%) for different grass filter lengths under natural rainfall (values followed by a different letter within the same row are significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$, $n = 67$))

Grass species	Mean runoff trapping effectiveness (%)			Mean sediment trapping effectiveness (%)		
	2.5 m	5 m	10 m	2.5 m	5 m	10 m
Lemon grass	50 ^c	65 ^b	79 ^a	72 ^c	84 ^{ab}	92 ^a
Paspalum	43 ^c	59 ^b	76 ^a	65 ^c	78 ^{ab}	88 ^a
Elephant grass	40 ^c	58 ^b	75 ^a	62 ^c	73 ^b	84 ^a
Sugarcane	32 ^c	51 ^b	69 ^a	56 ^c	70 ^b	82 ^a

Table 3. Mean runoff and sediment trapping effectiveness (%) for different grass filter lengths under simulated concentrated runoff (values followed by a different letter within the same row are significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$, $n = 6$))

Grass species	Mean run-off TE			Mean sediment TE		
	2.5 m	5 m	10 m	2.5 m	5 m	10 m
Lemon grass	39 ^c	55 ^b	69 ^a	54 ^c	66 ^b	78 ^a
Paspalum	48 ^c	60 ^b	70 ^a	60 ^c	70 ^b	80 ^a
Elephant grass	32 ^c	44 ^b	55 ^a	48 ^c	59 ^b	70 ^a
Sugarcane	23 ^c	37 ^b	53 ^a	34 ^c	51 ^b	67 ^a

Table 4. Mean vegetation cover (%) and root density (kg/m³) for different grass species in the filter strips (values between brackets are standard deviations, $n = 6$)

Grass species	Mean vegetation cover %	Mean root density (kg/m ³) at different soil depth (m)			
		0-0.1 m	0.1-0.2 m	0.2-0.3 m	0.3-0.4 m
Paspalum	100 (0)	70.1 (0.2)	11.1 (0.8)	1.2 (0.1)	0
Lemon grass	92 (5)	20.0 (1.0)	3.8 (0.6)	1.6 (0.3)	0.8 (0.1)
Elephant grass	73 (7)	10.3 (1.3)	3.9 (1.2)	0.7 (0.1)	0.4 (0.2)
Sugarcane	65 (11)	11.4 (1.1)	7.1 (1.7)	3.4 (0.7)	1.6 (0.8)

List of Figures

Figure 1 Location of experimental site for evaluating tropical grass species as sediment filters in Lake Victoria basin, Uganda

Figure 2 Schematic design of a run-off plot block (upper) and an application of the design of such a block for paspalum grass at Mayuge, Uganda (lower)

Figure 3 Schematic presentation of the experimental layout, simulating a concentrated flow: side-view (left); front-view (right)

Figure 4 Set up of simulated concentrated flow experiment: top left; water reservoir with indicated dimensions, top right; close-up from tap with adjustable aperture, bottom left; mixture of sediment and water is conducted by gutter (vegetation in photo is paspalum grass), and bottom right; experiment lay out used (vegetation in photo is elephant grass)

Figure 5 Mean run-off trapping effectiveness (TE) for different filter lengths with tropical grass filter strips: a); under sheet and rill erosion ($\pm$ standard error of mean, $n = 67$) and b); under concentrated run-off flow ($\pm$ standard error of mean, $n = 6$)

Figure 6 Mean sediment trapping effectiveness (TE) for different filter lengths with tropical grass filter strips: a); under sheet and rill erosion ($\pm$ standard error of mean, $n = 67$) and b); under concentrated run-off erosion ($\pm$ standard error of mean, $n = 6$).

Figure 7 Root density at different soil depth for different tropical grass species in the filter strips.

Figure 8 Sediment trapping effectiveness (TE) versus run-off TE values for tropical grass filter strips for all filter widths under sheet and rill erosion (open) and concentrated flow erosion (black).