Contribution statement

This manuscript reframes Terra Preta persistence as a falsifiable systems hypothesis: not a claim that Terra Preta is proven to be an attractor, but a proposal that autonomous Terra Preta like persistence should be tested through resistance, hysteresis, assembly dependence, and management withdrawal rather than inferred from compositional replication alone.

Terra Preta de Índio as a Possible Emergent Ecological Attractor: A Systems Hypothesis of Path Dependence and the Limits of Compositional Replication

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Abstract

Terra Preta de Índio, or Amazonian Dark Earth, is widely recognized as an anthropogenic, carbon rich, fertile, and unusually persistent soil associated with long term Indigenous land use in the Amazon Basin. Prior research has established the importance of charcoal derived black carbon, nutrient enrichment, stable organic matter, and high nutrient holding capacity in explaining many of its distinctive properties (Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003). This manuscript does not claim those foundational observations as novel.

This article advances a narrower falsifiable hypothesis: Terra Preta persistence may be better investigated as a possible path dependent emergent ecological state rather than as a substrate reproducible by compositional replication alone.

Under this framework, black carbon is treated as necessary infrastructure, but not as the whole system. Terra Preta like persistence may depend on long term interactions among aged carbon, minerals, organic inputs, ceramic fragments, microbial succession, spatial heterogeneity, disturbance regimes, Indigenous land use, and time. Such interactions could generate attractor like dynamics characterized by resistance, hysteresis, basin thresholds, assembly dependence, and persistence following management withdrawal.

This is not presented as demonstrated multistability. It is an operational hypothesis. It generates testable predictions. Reproducible creation of self sustaining Terra Preta like fertility within decadal timescales through compositional manipulation alone would substantially weaken or refute the framework.

Keywords: Terra Preta; Amazonian Dark Earth; black carbon; biochar; anthropogenic soils; path dependence; attractor dynamics; soil multistability; hypothesis paper.

Synopsis

1. Prior work has established Terra Preta’s anthropogenic origin, black carbon enrichment, elevated fertility, nutrient holding capacity, and long term persistence.
2. This manuscript proposes a narrower systems hypothesis: Terra Preta persistence may reflect path dependent attractor like dynamics rather than compositional replication alone.
3. The framework generates falsifiable predictions involving resistance, hysteresis, assembly dependence, and management withdrawal.

1. Introduction

1.1 Prior Foundations and Scope of the Present Hypothesis

The anthropogenic origin, elevated fertility, black carbon enrichment, nutrient holding capacity, and long term persistence of Terra Preta de Índio are well established in the Amazonian Dark Earth literature. Glaser et al. (2001) showed that Terra Preta soils contain elevated nutrients and stable soil organic matter, that charcoal derived black carbon is a key factor in soil organic matter persistence, and that Terra Preta soils may contain far higher black carbon concentrations than adjacent soils. Earlier work by Sombroek

(1966), Smith (1980, 1999), and Woods and McCann (1999) established the anthropogenic origin and broad distribution of these soils, and subsequent syntheses (Lehmann et al., 2003; Glaser and Birk, 2012) consolidated their fertility and persistence characteristics. These foundational findings are not claimed here as novel.

The contribution of this article is narrower. It asks whether the persistence of Terra Preta is better investigated as a possible path dependent emergent ecological state rather than as a substrate that can be reproduced through ingredient replication alone. In this framing, black carbon is treated as necessary infrastructure, but not as a complete explanation. The hypothesis advanced here is that long term interactions among aged carbon, minerals, organic residues, ceramic fragments, microbial succession, spatial heterogeneity, repeated disturbance, Indigenous land use, and time may produce attractor like soil dynamics that cannot be inferred from composition alone.

This article therefore extends, rather than replaces, prior black carbon and anthropogenic soil explanations. Its novelty lies in the operational dynamical framing: resistance, hysteresis, basin transition thresholds, assembly dependence, and management withdrawal criteria are proposed as tests capable of distinguishing a persistent ecological state from a managed amendment effect.

1.2 The Empirical Pattern Motivating the Hypothesis

Building on the established foundations summarized above, Terra Preta de Índio occupies an important position in soil science: well characterized in many respects, while autonomous Terra Preta like persistence remains difficult to reproduce experimentally. These soils, found throughout the Amazon Basin in association with pre-Columbian settlement, exhibit properties that raise unresolved questions for pedology, soil biogeochemistry, and long term soil management. High fertility appears to persist after abandonment or reduced management across centuries, although intermittent use, low level disturbance, and site specific histories cannot always be excluded. Cation exchange capacity (CEC) often exceeds surrounding oxisols by factors of three to ten (Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003). Microbial biomass and diversity remain elevated despite no documented differences in contemporary inputs (Kim et al., 2007). Radiocarbon dating places formation at approximately 500–2500 years BP, coinciding with peak regional population density (Neves et al., 2003), and recent archaeological evidence is consistent with intentional carbon-rich soil creation (Schmidt et al., 2023).

Recognition of charcoal as a ubiquitous Terra Preta component motivated the biochar replication hypothesis: that persistent carbon structures provide the mechanism for long term fertility. Meta-analyses of short-term trials (1–5 years) report yield improvements averaging 10–25%, with greatest effects in low-fertility substrates (Jeffery et al., 2017). However, a more nuanced temporal pattern has emerged across longer monitoring horizons. Short-term gains (years 1–3) are frequently reported. In medium-term studies (5–7 years), responses become more variable. In rare trials extending to 10–15 years, outcomes diverge by soil texture and management context. In long-term German field experiments, compost combined with 31.5 Mg ha^{-1} biochar increased SOC stocks by +38 Mg ha^{-1} in loamy soil, remaining stable after 11 years; in sandy soil treated with 40 Mg ha^{-1} biochar, initial gains of +61 Mg ha^{-1} declined to +7 Mg ha^{-1} after nine years (Gross et al., 2024). Global synthesis indicates that sustained benefits often depend on continued annual re-application, while single applications more frequently decline over time (Yang et al., 2025). Most meta-analyses synthesize predominantly short-duration experiments, and long-term aging effects remain underexamined (Marazza et al., 2022).

It is important to distinguish two claims: that biochar functions as an effective soil amendment (well-supported), and that biochar application alone has been shown, in the screened literature, to recreate autonomous Terra Preta like persistence (not yet demonstrated). The temporal pattern, consisting of early gains followed in many trials by attenuation, soil-context dependence, and persistent management requirements in single-application experiments, motivates the systems level question pursued here, while leaving open the possibility that simpler explanations (slow kinetics, insufficient cumulative input, mineral or hydrological mismatch) may suffice. Many biochar researchers do not claim that simple one step amendment can recreate Terra Preta. The contrast pursued here is therefore between documented amendment benefit and the stronger claim of autonomous Terra Preta like persistence after management withdrawal.

1.3 Interpretation: Compositional Optimization versus Possible Emergent Attractor

This work proposes that Terra Preta persistence may be productively investigated as a possible path dependent emergent ecological state rather than as a system fully reducible to additive inputs alone. Here, “attractor” carries its formal dynamical systems sense: a region of state space toward which a system tends to evolve under endogenous dynamics and to which it would tend to return following moderate perturbation. “Emergent” denotes system-level properties arising from component interactions that are not reliably predictable from compositional analysis alone. Both terms are operationalized through measurable variables and falsifiable predictions in later sections. The framing is hypothetical, not asserted.

A strong substrate sufficiency model would predict that once relevant compositional targets are achieved, durable convergence should become more likely even without historical pathway reconstruction. An attractor framing would predict, instead, assembly dependence: system properties arise from historical trajectories and self-organizing feedbacks, and identical compositional endpoints reached via different sequences may diverge over decadal timescales. Available empirical literature is broadly consistent with the latter pattern in single-application trials, though this consistency does not exclude simpler explanations (Section 4.2). The inference is abductive: the framework is advanced because it may provide higher explanatory power for the observed temporal pattern, not because limited evidence for autonomous Terra Preta like persistence in modern reconstruction attempts proves impossibility. Table 1 summarizes the distinction. This article is offered as a theoretical hypothesis paper: its purpose is not to demonstrate attractor dynamics empirically, but to define a falsifiable systems-level interpretation and the empirical tests required to challenge it.

Table 1. Two claims about biochar and Terra Preta.

	Biochar as Soil Amendment	**Biochar as Terra Preta Replicator**	**Treatment in this manuscript**
Claim	Biochar improves soil fertility metrics under	Biochar application recreates a self-sustaining	Distinguished as separate claims

	management	Terra Preta like system	
Evidence	Well-supported by meta-analyses (Jeffery et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2025)	No screened long term unmanaged trial was found to demonstrate autonomous Terra Preta like persistence	Reframed as evidence gap, not proof of impossibility
Temporal pattern	Often positive short-term effects; sustained under continued re-application or favorable co-amendment	Some long term trajectories attenuate or remain management dependent; sustained gains occur in some co amended or favorable contexts	Texture, mineralogy, climate, and management dependencies acknowledged
Predicted trajectory	Proportional dose-response; convergence with refinement	Threshold behavior; hysteresis; path dependence (under attractor framing)	Treated as competing model predictions
Disputed here?	No	Reframed here as an unresolved stronger claim requiring withdrawal evidence	Falsifiability criteria proposed in Section 4.3

1.4 Hypotheses

The central hypothesis is that Terra Preta persistence may be productively investigated as a possible emergent ecological state, interpreted here as a hypothesized attractor basin in tropical soil state space, arising from path-dependent processes over centuries. Three specific predictions follow:

Hypothesis 1 (Resistance): Attempts to force conventional soils toward Terra Preta composition through biochar are predicted, under the attractor framing, to exhibit resistance rather than convergence. Forcing below threshold intensity produces only transient displacement.

Hypothesis 2 (Hysteresis): Degradation and recovery trajectories are predicted to be asymmetric. Moderate disturbance is predicted not to collapse system function, whereas recreation from degraded soils is predicted not to retrace formation pathways.

Hypothesis 3 (Assembly dependence): Order, timing, and duration of input sequences are predicted to matter independently of final composition. Identical total inputs in different sequences are predicted to diverge in long-term properties.

Figure 1.

Figure 1. Schematic Illustration of Compositional Forcing versus Attractor-Style Dynamics. Left panel: linear trajectory predicted under a strong substrate sufficiency model. Right panel: conceptual state space with two hypothesized attractor basins separated by an activation barrier, showing the expected trajectory of a single-

application biochar trial under attractor assumptions. Basin geometry is illustrative, not empirically derived. The figure is conceptual and does not present a fitted model.

Box 1. Established Findings versus Hypothesized Mechanisms.

Element	Status	Evidence Source
Anthropogenic origin, black carbon enrichment, elevated nutrient status, nutrient holding capacity, and long term persistence	Established prior foundation	Sombroek 1966; Smith 1980, 1999; Woods and McCann 1999; Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003; additional Amazonian Dark Earth literature
Elevated CEC and SOC persistence	Established	Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003
Distinct microbial community signatures	Established; causal stabilizing role unresolved	Kim et al., 2007; Silva et al., 2013
Temporal attenuation or context dependence in screened long term literature	Synthesis finding	Schmidt et al., 2021; Gross et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025
Possible biological regulation as a stabilizing mechanism	Hypothesis	Inferred from community structure data; falsifiable
Attractor basin classification	Hypothesis	Dynamical model prediction
Asymmetric hysteresis under perturbation	Model prediction	Dynamical model output

2. Methods and Dynamical Framework

2.1 Targeted Structured Literature Synthesis

This study employs a targeted structured literature synthesis of the biochar and Terra Preta literature, organized by trial duration: short-term (1–3 years), medium-term (5–7 years), and long-term (10–15+ years), compared against archaeological persistence data spanning 500–2000+ years. This synthesis is not a formal systematic review or statistical meta-analysis. It was designed to identify long duration biochar studies, Terra Preta characterization studies, and ecological theory relevant to persistence, path dependence, and management withdrawal; it was not designed to estimate pooled effect sizes or to provide exhaustive systematic review coverage. The synthesis draws on published meta-analyses (Jeffery et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2025), individual long-term experiments (Major et al., 2010; Gross et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024), the LTEP-BIOCHAR platform (Marazza et al., 2022), and microbial characterization studies (Kim et al., 2007; Silva et al., 2013). The synthesis is selective by design: it prioritizes studies with sufficient monitoring duration to evaluate trajectory shape. Findings from short-duration experiments and from repeated-application regimes showing sustained benefits are not disputed but are distinguished from the specific question of autonomous, management-independent persistence.

Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed soil science, agronomy, ecology, and archaeological literature published through 2025, accessed through standard scientific bibliographic channels and supplemented by forward and backward citation tracing from foundational Terra Preta and biochar references (Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003; Jeffery et al., 2017). Studies were retained where they (i) reported field trial durations of three years or longer addressing soil organic carbon, cation exchange capacity, microbial community structure, or yield trajectory under biochar amendment; (ii) characterized authentic Terra Preta or comparable anthropogenic dark earth properties; or (iii) developed ecological theory directly relevant to soil multistability, regime shifts, hysteresis, or path-dependent state formation. Studies reporting only short-duration agronomic response (two years or fewer) were retained as context but were not weighted as evidence for or against persistence claims. No pre-registered search protocol or PRISMA-style screening was applied; the synthesis is scoping in character, appropriate to a theoretical-hypothesis genre rather than to a systematic review.

The search is limited to screened published literature. Within this limited body of sources, no explicit multi-year withdrawal study was found documenting autonomous convergence toward Terra Preta like fertility in biochar-amended soils. This empirical gap, the absence of managed-to-unmanaged transition evidence, motivates the falsification criteria proposed in Section 4. The absence is noted as an observational gap in the screened literature, not as proof of absence. Withdrawal is rarely the explicit objective of funded biochar trials, and the gap may reflect experimental design priorities and funding constraints rather than system behavior. Unpublished datasets, industry trials, or ongoing long-term experiments may contain relevant withdrawal data not captured here.

2.2 Operational Definition (Replication Success Criteria)

A Terra Preta–like state is defined operationally for replication success purposes as a soil system simultaneously satisfying: (1) soil organic carbon persistently exceeding 120 g kg^{-1} in the upper 20 cm; (2) effective CEC exceeding 60 cmolc kg^{-1}; (3) sustained crop productivity without external fertilization for a minimum of 10 consecutive years, evaluated as yield stability relative to an on-site, same-season control; (4) resistance to nutrient pulse disturbance; and (5) microbial community stability under moderate perturbation. Authenticated Terra Preta sites vary considerably and may not meet every criterion simultaneously. These thresholds are conservative benchmarks for claiming replication success, not a universal definition of Terra Preta. The values are drawn from the upper range of reported Terra Preta properties (Glaser et al., 2001; Lehmann et al., 2003) and should be treated as provisional, requiring site-specific calibration.

These criteria are intentionally conservative: they are designed to minimize false positives when claiming convergence toward a Terra Preta like state. “Without external fertilization” means no synthetic fertilizers or imported amendments; in situ biomass recycling is permitted and must be reported. This criterion does not require zero biomass export; sustained productivity is evaluated relative to an on-site control under identical recycling conditions. The distinction between “self-sustaining under recycling” and “self-sustaining under harvest removal” represents a spectrum that future protocols should quantify through defined biomass export thresholds.

2.3 Dynamical Model Formulation

Guardrail. The model presented here is not calibrated to Terra Preta. It is not evidence that attractor dynamics are operative. It is a qualitative structural discriminator generating qualitative signatures (threshold behavior, hysteresis, basin-dependent recovery) that can be tested against substrate sufficiency expectations. No parameter values are inferred for real Terra Preta sites. The model serves solely to demonstrate that attractor dynamics, if operative, would produce qualitatively different trajectories from those predicted by simple compositional convergence.

The model represents soil state as $dS/dt = F(S, B, M)$, where S represents the composite soil state, B stabilized carbon pools, and M microbial and mineral-mediated processes. Terra Preta is treated as a hypothesized locally stable regime that, if such dynamics are operative, would be maintained by reinforcing interactions among carbon stabilization, nutrient retention, and microbial structuring. The state variable x represents a normalized composite index combining (with equal weighting) SOC, effective CEC, microbial diversity, and nitrogen retention efficiency, each rescaled to [0, 1]. Equal weighting is adopted for simplicity; no empirical or theoretical basis for differential weighting is currently available. Sensitivity of model behavior to alternative weightings has not been assessed and represents a limitation. The forcing term F is a dimensionless scalar representing the net amendment intensity imposed on the system. Basin depth corresponds to the disturbance magnitude required for collapse; hysteresis width corresponds to the difference between formation and collapse thresholds. Neither parameter has been empirically estimated for Terra Preta.

A critical distinction separates century-scale formation from decade-scale stability testing. Formation concerns the historical trajectory through which Terra Preta originally arose, a process spanning centuries that cannot be experimentally reproduced. Stability testing concerns whether the resulting state, if found in candidate replication soils, exhibits attractor properties: resistance to perturbation, hysteresis under forcing, threshold-dependent transitions. Decadal experiments test for attractor-like behavior consistent with hypothesized basin dynamics; they do not claim to recreate formation. Under the model, single-application trials would be expected to relax back toward the original basin if forcing remains below threshold. This is a model expectation, not a universal empirical claim.

2.4 Worked Example: Contrasting Substrate Sufficiency and Attractor Predictions

Consider a hypothetical oxisol receiving a single high-rate biochar amendment of 40 Mg ha^{-1}. Under a strong substrate sufficiency model, the system should converge toward Terra Preta values given sufficient input, since the relevant compositional targets are approached. Many biochar researchers do not endorse this strong sufficiency view; the contrast here is therefore between documented amendment benefit and the stronger claim of autonomous Terra Preta like persistence after management withdrawal.

Under the attractor model, the same amendment is predicted to produce a transient displacement: soil properties shift toward intermediate values in the first several years, but if forcing intensity remains below a critical transition threshold, the system relaxes back toward its original state once amendment ceases. This trajectory, initial improvement followed by attenuation, qualitatively parallels the Gross et al. (2024) sandy soil result (initial SOC gains of +61 Mg ha^{-1} declining to +7 Mg ha^{-1} over nine years). The model is not calibrated to this dataset and the parallel is illustrative, not quantitative.

Under the attractor interpretation, only sustained forcing above threshold intensity, maintained over multi-decadal timescales, would be expected to drive transition toward a hypothesized persistent Terra Preta like state, consistent with the centuries-long archaeological formation record. A strong sufficiency model, by contrast, would predict that a sufficient single amendment should produce durable convergence. The key discriminator is therefore whether gains persist after amendment ceases: a strong sufficiency model would predict that they should under appropriate dosing; the attractor model would predict that, in most below-threshold cases, they will not.

2.5 Empirical Precedent for Soil and Ecosystem Bistability

Bistability has not yet been empirically reconstructed for Terra Preta through formal state-space mapping. No published chronosequence has demonstrated two measurable stable equilibria separated by a quantified basin boundary for these soils. However, bistability and hysteresis have been documented in other soil and ecological systems at multiple organizational levels: alternative stable microbial community configurations exhibit regime shifts under environmental forcing (Beisner et al., 2003; Scheffer et al., 2001), and peatland systems demonstrate state persistence maintained by coupled carbon–hydrology feedbacks. Attractor-based reasoning has previously been applied to agricultural soil development and degradation trajectories, including quasi-steady states, thresholds, master soil properties, and multidimensional attractor spaces in agropedogenesis (Kuzyakov and Zamanian, 2019). The present manuscript does not treat that precedent as evidence for Terra Preta attractor dynamics; rather, it extends the logic of attractor-based soil-state reasoning into a different and explicitly hypothetical context: Terra Preta persistence, management withdrawal, resistance, hysteresis, and assembly dependence. These precedents establish that emergent soil and ecosystem states are empirically plausible, though they do not confirm that Terra Preta specifically instantiates such dynamics. The Terra Preta attractor hypothesis is framed here as a specific, testable instantiation of soil multistability, motivated by the temporal pattern described above.

Figure 2.

Figure 2. Terra Preta System Architecture: Conceptual Synthesis. Integrated components and hypothesized feedback loops, comprising aged biochar with surface oxidation, mineral integration, spatial heterogeneity, and microbial community regulation. The diagram is conceptual and illustrative; the specific feedback topology shown is not empirically derived and the panel labels (carbon infrastructure, mineral integration, spatial heterogeneity, distributed microbial regulation) are organizational categories drawn from the literature, not measured architectural elements. Numerical values cited within the panels (e.g., CEC ranges, OTU counts) are taken from the cited published sources and are not new measurements.

3. Synthesis of Temporal Patterns

3.1 Temporal Trajectory Patterns

Short-term trials (1–3 years): Often positive effects: 10–25% yield improvements, enhanced nutrient retention, increased microbial biomass (Jeffery et al., 2017). Effects are frequently reported, with strongest responses often observed in degraded or low fertility substrates.

Medium-term trials (5–7 years): Some effects attenuate or become more context dependent. Yield improvements often persist but diminish in many trials. Microbial communities frequently shift toward intermediate states. Studies report dependence on continued fertilization (Major et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2024).

Long-term trials (10–15+ years): Outcomes diverge by soil texture and management context. In temperate field trials, biochar effects diverged markedly between loamy and sandy soils over decadal timescales, with stable SOC increases under compost-amended loam but substantial attenuation in sandy soils (Gross et al., 2024). The stable SOC increase in compost-amended loam after 11 years indicates that sustained co-amendment can produce durable soil carbon gains under favorable textural conditions; this does not constitute autonomous persistence, since continued organic inputs were required, but it demonstrates that not all long-term trajectories attenuate. Some long term trajectories attenuate, while others show sustained gains under favorable conditions or continued co amendment. Importantly, none of the sustained-gain trajectories identified in the screened literature have been shown to persist after complete management withdrawal, which remains one of the most direct empirical tests of management-independent persistence. Separately, global synthesis suggests annual re-application sustains benefits, whereas single applications more frequently decline (Yang et al., 2025). Long-term field datasets remain sparse relative to short-duration experiments (Marazza et al., 2022).

Archaeological contrast: Many sites appear to maintain elevated fertility across long timescales after abandonment or reduced management, although intermittent use, low level disturbance, and site specific maintenance histories are difficult to exclude (Glaser et al., 2001). SOC stocks are typically several-fold those of adjacent soils; black carbon up to 70-fold greater; available phosphorus up to seven times background. Published estimates indicate long residence times for recalcitrant biochar carbon pools (Wang et al., 2016), although values vary by method, soil context, and carbon fraction. Silva et al. (2013) documented distinct microbial community signatures persisting across sites of different ages. These observations build directly on prior Amazonian Dark Earth literature and are not claimed here as novel.

Figure 3.

Figure 3. Conceptual Synthesis of Long-Term Biochar Trajectories. Schematic temporal contrast between typical biochar trial trajectories and archaeological Terra Preta stability across a log-scaled time axis. The figure is schematic; it is not a statistical meta-analysis and individual data points represent illustrative summaries of the sources cited in Section 3.1, not new measurements.

3.2 Pyrogenic Carbon as Physical and Chemical Infrastructure

Some biochar replication narratives implicitly treat carbon as sufficient cause. The framework advanced here reinterprets it as necessary infrastructure: pyrogenic carbon and aged biochar surfaces provide habitat for microbial colonization, adsorption sites for nutrient and organic molecule retention, porosity and moisture buffering capacity, microenvironmental heterogeneity across redox and pH gradients, and interfacial surfaces for nutrient retention and biochemical processing. These properties are well documented, but they do not by themselves demonstrate formation of an autonomous Terra Preta like state. Fresh and aged pyrogenic carbon can differ substantially in surface oxidation and exchange capacity (Cheng et al., 2006), with progressive weathering increasing oxygen-containing functional groups and nutrient retention potential.

In situ aging appears to involve mineral encrustation, microbial biofilm formation, and microaggregate binding, processes that may not be readily imposed through external amendment alone, though this inference rests primarily on observational comparison rather than controlled experimentation. The infrastructure argument is that pyrogenic carbon may create the physical and chemical preconditions within which coupled biological and mineral processes develop over time, not that carbon addition alone is sufficient to produce an autonomous Terra Preta like state.

Heterogeneous carbon distribution within Terra Preta profiles creates spatially variable conditions that may support functionally diverse microbial communities. Spatial heterogeneity may be reduced or differently organized in uniformly incorporated biochar systems. The framework yields an empirical prediction: soils amended under deliberately heterogeneous regimes are predicted, under the attractor framing, to diverge in long-term dynamics from uniformly amended systems, even when total inputs are equivalent. This prediction has not yet been tested but could be evaluated in the near term through deliberate patch-versus-uniform incorporation trials at equivalent total rates.

Figure 4.

Figure 4. Illustrative Attractor-Style Dynamics. A: Schematic asymmetric double-well potential. B: Conceptual basin stability under zero forcing. C: Strong versus weak forced transition (illustrative). D: Hysteresis pathway (illustrative). All parameter values and basin geometries are schematic and not empirically derived. The figure illustrates structural features of the dynamical model; it does not constitute evidence that such dynamics are operative in Terra Preta soils.

3.3 Microbial Community Structure and the Question of Biological Regulation

Distinct microbial community signatures have been reported in Dark Earth systems relative to adjacent soils. Kim et al. (2007) reported distinct bacterial community composition and elevated microbial indicators in Terra Preta relative to adjacent soils, including shifts in dominant phyla. Silva et al. (2013) found persistent microbial community signatures across Terra Preta sites of different ages. Distinct microbial signatures are established. The causal stabilizing role of these communities, however, is unresolved.

Available evidence supports a more limited claim: pyrogenic carbon and aged biochar surfaces can provide habitat, adsorption sites, and microenvironmental heterogeneity that influence colonization, nutrient transformations, and microbial carbon processing over long periods. Biochar-amended soils show higher carbon use efficiency (10–30% increase; de Graaff et al., 2010) and negative priming effects, where labile carbon addition slows native organic matter decomposition. Long-term field studies further indicate that biochar can produce persistent shifts in microbial structure and enzyme activity, although these effects are strongly soil-dependent and do not by themselves establish Terra Preta like autonomous persistence.

Several mechanistic possibilities have been proposed in the literature. Shifts toward slower-growing microbial taxa may reduce rapid nutrient drawdown and increase functional redundancy. Complex trophic networks may create buffering through multiple feedback loops. Spatial heterogeneity within pyrogenic carbon may enable compartmentalized nutrient cycling. These mechanisms are consistent with observed community data but none has been causally demonstrated for Terra Preta. The causal direction may run from soil chemistry to microbes, not microbes to stability: distinctive microbial community structure may be a consequence of altered soil chemistry and physical structure in Terra Preta rather than a driver of its persistence. Determining whether any particular community architecture acts as a stabilizing mechanism, rather than simply reflecting the stable environment, would require manipulation experiments that selectively alter microbial community composition while holding soil chemistry approximately constant.

Possible biological regulation therefore remains a plausible component of the attractor interpretation, but its causal role, directionality, and necessary form are empirically open questions. The framework treats biological regulation as a hypothesis to be tested, not an established mechanism.

4. Discussion

4.1 Empirical Predictions and Protocols

Prediction 1 (Resistance): High-rate biochar amendments are predicted, under the attractor framing, to produce transient displacement without attractor transition in below-threshold dosing regimes. Protocol: paired plots with Terra Preta–equivalent amendments versus unfertilized Terra Preta controls, minimum 15 years, minimum 4 replicate plots per treatment.

Prediction 2 (Hysteresis): Degradation–recovery trajectories on authenticated Terra Preta are predicted to be asymmetric. Protocol: graduated disturbance (0–75% biomass removal, 5 years) followed by 10-year recovery monitoring on authenticated Terra Preta, minimum 3 replicates per disturbance level.

Prediction 3 (Assembly dependence): Temporal sequence is predicted to affect outcomes independently of composition. Protocol: factorial designs with staggered, reversed, and simultaneous amendment schedules, 10 years, minimum 3 independent site replications.

4.2 Alternative Explanations

Several competing explanations for the temporal attenuation pattern must be considered before inferring attractor dynamics. The available evidence does not decisively favor one interpretation over others, and each of the explanations below could individually account for much or all of the observed pattern. The attractor framework is advanced as an organizing hypothesis, not because alternatives have been eliminated.

Insufficient cumulative input. Archaeological Terra Preta received centuries of diverse organic additions at unknown rates, while modern trials apply single or few amendments over years to decades. The total carbon and nutrient loading of archaeological sites may simply exceed what any feasible modern experiment can deliver. If the gap is purely quantitative, attractor dynamics would be unnecessary; slow kinetics and cumulative accumulation would suffice. However, if the issue were simply insufficient total input, one would expect monotonic dose–response relationships. Instead, long-term data show texture-dependent divergence and persistent management dependence rather than gradual convergence. This pattern is consistent with system-level thresholds, although cumulative-input effects and threshold effects are not mutually exclusive.

Slow aging and slow kinetics. Biochar surface chemistry evolves over decades through oxidation, mineral encrustation, and microbial colonization. Trials spanning 10–15 years may capture only the early phase of a century-scale maturation process. Differences in surface oxidation and exchange capacity between fresh and aged pyrogenic carbon (Cheng et al., 2006) could reflect time-dependent surface evolution rather than emergent dynamics. This explanation is difficult to distinguish from the attractor hypothesis without explicitly designed aging studies tracking functional property development over multi-decadal timescales.

Wrong amendment chemistry, mineral context, or hydrology. Most modern biochar is produced from single feedstocks under controlled pyrolysis, whereas archaeological inputs included heterogeneous mixtures of bone, shell, ash, food waste, and charred vegetation deposited over long periods. Mineral interactions, clay mineralogy, and hydrological regime may all modulate biochar aging and function. Trials conducted in temperate soils with different mineralogy and rainfall patterns than Amazonian oxisols face inherent comparability limitations.

Climatic and pedological mismatch. The majority of long-term biochar trials have been conducted in temperate systems, whereas Terra Preta formed under tropical conditions with distinct weathering regimes, soil fauna, decomposition rates, and mineral cycling pathways. Extrapolating from temperate field data to conclusions about tropical soil dynamics introduces systematic uncertainty. Some attenuation patterns observed in temperate trials may partly reflect environment-specific processes rather than general system behavior.

Ordinary management dependence. Most productive agricultural soils require ongoing management inputs. The observation that biochar-amended soils require continued management to sustain gains may simply reflect normal agronomic behavior rather than a failed attractor transition. Under this view, expecting management-independent persistence from any amendment is an unreasonably high bar derived from the exceptional archaeological case rather than from standard soil science expectations.

Experimental design limitations. Few biochar trials are designed to test management withdrawal. Replication, soil heterogeneity, plot size, and reporting completeness all bound what can be inferred. The screened literature gap may reflect funded experimental priorities rather than system behavior.

Each of these explanations is plausible individually. Some may operate in combination. The cumulative-input confound in particular cannot be resolved by short- or medium-term trials; only multi-decadal withdrawal experiments on soils that have already received equivalent total carbon and nutrient loading to archaeological Terra Preta could discriminate between insufficient forcing and true basin separation. The attractor interpretation is advanced not because these competing explanations have been eliminated, but because it organizes the observed pattern into a coherent set of testable system-level predictions. If future evidence favors simpler explanations, the attractor framework would be substantially weakened or refuted, depending on replication, site context, and duration.

4.3 Falsification Criteria

The framework would be substantially weakened or refuted, depending on replication, site context, and duration, by: (1) reproducible conversion of conventional soils to stable self-sustaining fertility within 10–20 years through compositional manipulation alone, including via engineered microbial consortia; (2) evidence that authentic Terra Preta rapidly degrades (>50% loss within 10 years) under moderate disturbance without recovery; or (3) identification of treatments that reliably bypass historical contingency across soil types.

A fourth line of evidence would materially weaken, though not necessarily refute, the framework: documentation of self-sustaining persistence in systems whose microbial community structure does not differ from that of adjacent non-Terra Preta soils. Such evidence would specifically undermine the hypothesis that distinctive biological regulation is a necessary component of the attractor state, though the broader attractor interpretation could still hold on the basis of carbon, mineral, and physical soil structure alone.

4.4 Synthetic Biology and Engineered Consortia

Advances in synthetic biology raise the question of whether designed microbial communities could bypass centuries of succession. The attractor framework does not dismiss engineered approaches a priori but generates a specific prediction: engineered consortia are predicted, under the attractor framing, not to sustain Terra Preta like properties once external control is relaxed unless embedded within equivalent long-term feedback structures. Three structural challenges have been identified in the literature: lack of spatial organization created by heterogeneous carbon infrastructure, competitive displacement by resident communities, and the absence of community architecture that typically arises through sequential succession over extended periods. If future approaches achieve persistent self-regulation following management withdrawal, the emergent state hypothesis would be substantially weakened. This constitutes one of the most tractable near-term tests of the framework.

4.5 Comparative Anthropogenic Soils

The attractor framework may extend, in principle, beyond Amazonia. European plaggen soils, African Dark Earths, and Asian paddy soils all show distinctive long-term properties associated with sustained anthropogenic management. African Dark Earths in particular show microbial community shifts and persistent fertility in long-term settlement profiles (Camenzind et al., 2018). Whether these systems represent true alternative attractors, long maintained managed soils, or persistent amendment legacies remains empirically open and should not be generalized without system specific withdrawal and perturbation evidence. Extension of the framework to any of these soils would require independent verification through the same falsification criteria proposed for Terra Preta. No claim is made here that all anthropogenic dark earths are attractors; each system requires independent testing.

4.6 Implications for Soil Management

Biochar demonstrably functions as an effective soil amendment, particularly in degraded tropical soils (Jeffery et al., 2017). These findings are not disputed here. The distinction is between documented biochar utility and formation of a Terra Preta like state exhibiting self-sustaining fertility without continued management. A dual-track approach is warranted: continue using biochar as a proven amendment while implementing emergence-oriented practices on experimental plots. Emergence-oriented principles may include heterogeneous rather than uniform amendment application, low-intensity continuous inputs (for example 2–5 Mg ha^{-1} annually rather than single large applications), minimal disturbance regimes, and monitoring trajectory indicators such as microbial community composition trends, shifts in functional group ratios, and decreasing management dependence, rather than static compositional targets. These recommendations are provisional and should be evaluated against long-term experimental evidence.

The framework suggests that biochar based sequestration claims should distinguish short term carbon addition from evidence of long term autonomous soil state stability. This is a framing recommendation, not a critique of biochar carbon accounting per se.

4.7 Conservation Priority

If the attractor interpretation is correct, existing Terra Preta sites have potentially irreplaceable scientific, cultural, and ecological value as instances of a state not yet reproducibly engineered. Legal protection, standardized non-destructive research access, Indigenous community stewardship, and economic valuation reflecting potential non-substitutability are warranted. Even under alternative interpretations, these sites represent unique long-term soil–culture systems whose scientific and cultural value justifies precautionary conservation. Indigenous stewardship is integral to both the historical creation and the ongoing protection of these soils; recent work mapping widespread Amazonian Dark Earth across Indigenous territory in collaboration with resident Indigenous communities reinforces this point (Goldberg et al., 2024). Any conservation framing should be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities and should respect Indigenous knowledge, rights, and stewardship.

4.8 Limitations and Research Agenda

Several critical limitations frame this work as a hypothesis-generating contribution rather than a confirmed theoretical framework. Direct testing is constrained by centuries-long formation timescales. The framework relies on indirect evidence, pattern comparison, and qualitative modeling rather than direct experimental demonstration. The dynamical model is a qualitative structural discriminator, not a calibrated tool; future work should focus on parameter estimation using long-term field data and chronosequences. Once suitable chronosequence datasets with sufficient temporal resolution become available, the qualitative framework presented here could potentially be upgraded to a minimal calibrated bifurcation model capable of generating quantitative predictions for specific soil–climate combinations.

Five empirical gaps define the priority research agenda. First, no formal state-space mapping has demonstrated bistability in Terra Preta; controlled perturbation–recovery experiments on authenticated sites are needed. Second, no multi-year withdrawal experiment in the screened literature has tested whether biochar-amended soils can maintain enhanced fertility after complete input cessation. Third, the hypothesized role of microbial community structure as a stabilizing mechanism requires direct causal testing through manipulation experiments, not merely correlative community profiling. Fourth, extension of the attractor framework to non-Amazonian anthropogenic soils requires independent demonstrations of multistable dynamics. Fifth, long-term monitoring of engineered microbial consortia following management withdrawal would provide one of the most informative near-term tests of the framework.

Advances in synthetic biology and soil network modeling represent the most plausible near-term challenges to the emergent state interpretation. The model itself should be developed toward spatially explicit representations capturing microbial–carbon coevolution and multi-variable coupled systems incorporating mineral and hydrological feedbacks.

Figure 5.

Figure 5. Hypothesized Attractor-Basin Representation. Schematic surface plot of potential V(S) over the Cs–Md plane at fixed Nr = 0.55, showing conceptual oxisol and Terra Preta basins. Basin topology is schematic and illustrative only; no parameters have been empirically reconstructed for Terra Preta. The figure illustrates a structural feature of the dynamical model and is not a measurement.

5. Conclusions

This commentary proposes that Terra Preta persistence may be productively investigated as a possible path dependent emergent ecological attractor in tropical soil state space, arising from centuries of path-dependent processes involving black carbon, minerals, organic inputs, ceramic fragments, microbial succession, spatial heterogeneity, disturbance, Indigenous land use, management withdrawal, and time. A qualitative dynamical framework illustrates that the attractor hypothesis would generate distinct predictions, including threshold behavior, hysteresis, and asymmetric recovery, that are structurally distinguishable from substrate sufficiency expectations. Weak forcing, representing experimentally feasible single-application biochar amendments, would be expected, under the model, to produce only transient displacement, qualitatively consistent with the empirical pattern of initial promise without long-term autonomous convergence in many trials.

This framework does not claim demonstrated multistability in Terra Preta systems. It defines testable structural criteria under which such multistability could be empirically established or rejected. Short-term agronomic enhancement via biochar remains well-supported and operationally valuable. The limited evidence for autonomous Terra Preta like persistence in modern reconstruction attempts is reinterpreted not as evidence of insufficient optimization, but as potentially indicating that compositional logic alone may be structurally misaligned with a phenomenon possibly governed by path-dependent, historically contingent processes. If the attractor interpretation withstands empirical testing, the scientific task reframes from recipe optimization to attractor identification: characterizing feedbacks, protecting existing systems, and orienting soil stewardship toward emergence-aligned management.

This manuscript does not claim novelty for Terra Preta’s anthropogenic origin, fertility, black carbon enrichment, nutrient holding capacity, or long term persistence. Those are established foundations in the Amazonian Dark Earth literature. The contribution advanced here is narrower: Terra Preta persistence may be productively investigated as a possible path dependent emergent ecological attractor, with black carbon functioning as infrastructure within a broader feedback driven system involving minerals, organic inputs, ceramic fragments, microbial succession, spatial heterogeneity, disturbance regimes, Indigenous land use, management withdrawal, and time. The framework is therefore not a claim of demonstrated multistability, but a falsifiable research program for distinguishing managed amendment effects from persistent ecological state formation.

Glossary of Dynamical Systems Terms

Term	Definition
Attractor	A state toward which a dynamical system tends to evolve from nearby initial

	conditions. Operationally: the soil configuration to which the system would tend to return after perturbation, if such dynamics are operative.
Basin of attraction	The set of initial conditions from which a system evolves toward a given attractor. Operationally: the range of soil states from which recovery occurs without external forcing.
Hysteresis	Path-dependent asymmetry: the trajectory from state A to B differs from the reverse. Operationally: degradation and restoration of Terra Preta would, under the attractor framing, follow different pathways requiring different forcing magnitudes.
Multistability	Coexistence of two or more stable states under identical external conditions. Operationally: the same climate and parent material could in principle support either oxisol or Terra Preta states.
Path dependence	Sensitivity of system state to historical input sequence, not merely cumulative magnitude. Operationally: identical total inputs in different sequences may produce different outcomes.
Basin depth	Integrated resistance from equilibrium to basin boundary; a measure of attractor stability. Operationally: the magnitude of disturbance required to induce irreversible state collapse, under the model.

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Appendix A. Detailed Experimental Protocols

Protocol 1 (Resistance): Minimum 3 authenticated Terra Preta sites with adjacent controls. Factorial biochar rate (0, 10, 20, 40 Mg ha^{-1}) × organic amendment × mineral enrichment. Duration: 15 years minimum. Minimum 4 replicate plots per treatment. See Section 4.2 for the rationale distinguishing insufficient forcing from true basin separation.

Protocol 2 (Hysteresis): Minimum 2 authenticated sites. Graduated disturbance (0–75% annual biomass removal, 5 years) followed by 10-year recovery. Minimum 3 replicates per disturbance level.

Protocol 3 (Assembly dependence): Amendment order (carbon-first, mineral-first, simultaneous) × temporal spacing (pulse, monthly, continuous). Duration: 10 years. Minimum 3 independent site replications.

Protocol 4 (Microbial regulation): Terra Preta under contrasting nutrient-management regimes expected to favor different microbial community structures (e.g., high-NPK fertilization versus low-input maintenance). Monitor community composition and soil function following management withdrawal at year 5. Duration: 15 years. Minimum 3 sites.

Protocol 5 (Engineered consortia): Biochar-amended soil receiving designed microbial consortia versus controls, management withdrawal at year 5. Duration: 15 years post-withdrawal. Minimum 3 soil types.