

# 30 Years of Post-disturbance Recruitment in Tropical Forest

Ariane MIRABEL<sup>1\*</sup>

Eric MARCON<sup>1</sup>

Bruno HERAULT<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Trees biodiversity is central for tropical forests functioning and services. In the current climatic and land-use changing context it is urgent to clarify the response of communities diversity and composition to disturbance. Recruitment as major driver of forests trajectories is crucial in that regard to highlight the underlying processes of forests response. Through recruitment trajectories, clarify forests resilience and recovery would come to (i) unravel the stochastic from deterministic recruitment processes and (ii) specify the deterministic competition rules involved in species selection, and finally (iii) resolve the time to recover pre-disturbance recruitment processes and the completeness of their resilience. We examined the trajectories of recruitment diversity and composition in 70ha of a neotropical forest over 30 years after a gradient of logging and thinning disturbance (from 15 to 60% of AGB removed). Specifically we analysed the trajectories of three taxonomic diversities assessing communities richness and evenness, of Rao functional diversity integrating species ecology through 7 key functional traits, and of the species turnover of recruited trees compared to pre-disturbance communities. Recruitment trajectories were besides compared to null models of stochastic taxonomic and functional recruitment. We found three-phased recruitment trajectories shaped by the gradual balance between stochastic and deterministic processes. Trajectories first relied on the stochastic recruitment of pre-disturbance grown saplings. Then it relied on the deterministic recruitment of *true recruits* from the seed bank undergoing competitive exclusion favoring acquisitive, light-demanding species. In a third phase an inversed balance restored the stochastic recruitment observed in mature forests and marked a return to communities initial states. Recruitment trajectories entailed a fast recovery of the functional diversity but a slower taxonomic recovery still unachieved although it maintained composition differences among plots. The response to disturbance is a combination of deterministic and stochastic processes, first altering recruits diversity and composition in favoring light-demanding species, and then restoring pre-disturbance taxonomic and functional structure through stochastic recruitment processes. Both of the recruitment proved resilient, although the species composition of pre-disturbance communities remained unachieved. Still, after 30 years recruits' composition remained alter so if promising for the maintenance of the multiple facets of forests biodiversity, these results called cautions regarding the necessary time for forest recovery and the response of repeated disturbance.

## Keywords

Taxonomic and Functional Diversity, Recruitment, Resilience, Tropical Forests, Disturbance Dynamics

<sup>1</sup>UMR EcoFoG, AgroParistech, CNRS, Cirad, INRA, Université des Antilles, Université de Guyane.  
Campus Agronomique, 97310 Kourou, France.

<sup>2</sup>INPHB (Institut National Polytechnique Félix Houphouët Boigny)  
Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast

\*Corresponding author: ariane.mirabel@ecofog.gf, <http://www.ecofog.gf/spip.php?article47>

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## 1. Introduction

Determining the response of tropical forests to disturbance is key to predict their fate in the global changing context. In the last decades, tropical forests experienced a wide range of disturbance, from radical land-use changes for agriculture or mining (Dezecache *et al.*, 2017; Dezécache *et al.*, 2017) to more insidious changes of communities structure, diversity and functioning following climatic changes (Aubry-Kientz *et al.*, 2015) or anthropogenic activities like selective logging (Baraloto *et al.*, 2012; Hérault & Gourlet-Fleury, 2016). In that respect a vast literature successfully modeled communities response to disturbance in terms of tree growth (Gourlet-Fleury & Houllier, 2000), tree height (Rutishauser *et al.*, 2016), carbon stocks and water and nutrient fluxes (Putz *et al.*, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2015; Piponiot *et al.*, 2016). However, similar approaches regarding forest diversity re-

main hindered the scarcity of long-term monitoring and by the huge biological diversity that constrain the analysis to focus on common or commercial species (Sebbenn *et al.*, 2008; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2010; Vinson *et al.*, 2015).

Major insights on the response of forests diversity to disturbance would be given by the trajectories of tree communities along time. Communities comprise on the one hand the trees surviving from before disturbance and on the other hand those recruited afterward (Héroult & Piponiot, 2018). Surviving trees already proved to mirror the diversity and composition of pre-disturbance communities, so the dynamics and the resilience of communities would depend on the diversity of recruited trees. First, recruitment trajectories depend on the composition and diversity of the initial, pre-disturbance community as this conditions the pool of recruitable species via the existing saplings and seed bank (Héroult & Piponiot, 2018). Trajectories besides depend on recruitment processes, either stochastic and driven by recruitment and dispersal limitations (Hurt & Pacala, 1995; Hubbell, 2001), or deterministic and driven by niche-based competition or biotic interaction (Adler *et al.*, 2007). Stochastic processes build communities as random samples of the larger regional-scale forest. Deterministic processes in turn rely at this spatial scale on the interactions among species and with abiotic environment that filter-out recruited species following their ecology. Understand the mechanisms of communities trajectories first comes to estimate the importance of the initial taxonomic composition and second to explicit the balance between stochastic and deterministic processes. Recruitment processes would then shed light on the resilience of communities and on the time before recovering the pre-disturbance ecosystem properties, and eventually help adjusting exploitation and conservation guidelines (Díaz *et al.*, 2005; Gardner *et al.*, 2007; Schwartz *et al.*, 2017).

The recruitment processes shaping the trajectories differently affect communities taxonomic structure, referring to species composition and diversity, and functional structure, accounting for species ecology and functioning (Violle *et al.*, 2007; Kunstler *et al.*, 2016). Two communities may indeed be very different in terms of taxonomic diversity but very similar in terms of functional traits and functioning (Villéger *et al.*, 2012). The differences between taxonomic and functional trajectories are therefore insightful of the recruitment rules involved, specifically regarding the deterministic processes and their strength (Mayfield & Levine, 2010; Fukami *et al.*, 2005). At this local spatial scale, deterministic processes rely on competitive interactions among trees determined by their functional differences regarding the use of limited shared resources (Webb *et al.*, 2002; Peronne *et al.*, 2017). The competitive interactions among species are a balance between their differences in competitive ability and ecological niche. Differences in competitive ability drive the most competitive species to dominance and the least competitive to elimination, and thus decrease the functional diversity of the community. Niche differences in turn favor low densities and low similarity among species, and thus increase the functional diversity (Ackerly, 2003; McGill *et al.*, 2006; Kunstler *et al.*, 2012). In tropical forests

where the light is limiting, communities response to disturbance translate in a shift from slow-growing, long-lived species with “conservative” resource use to fast growing, resource “acquisitive” species (Denslow, 1980; Molino & Sabatier, 2001; Bongers *et al.*, 2009).

The competition processes at stake would therefore be grasp by shifts in key leaf, wood and life-history functional traits assessing species resources acquisition strategy and ecology (Wright *et al.*, 2004; Chave *et al.*, 2009; Héroult *et al.*, 2011; Gerhold *et al.*, 2015).

Beyond the mere understanding of response mechanisms, disentangle deterministic from stochastic processes insights the tenants of communities resilience. Controversies remain about whether resilience is deterministic, and thus entails the convergence of communities towards a given structure likely defined by the environment (Clements, 1916), or stochastic, and thus entails communities divergence through species random recruitment (Diamond, 1975). Recently both points of view were reconciled under the hypothesis that communities diverge in the taxonomic space while they converge in the functional space, and therefore have a determined diversity and composition in functional niches, but this hypothesis remains to be tested in tropical forest.

In this paper we followed the fate of recruited tree communities (60 121 individuals) over 30 years on a large disturbance gradient, with 15 to 60% of forest biomass removed. We assessed the taxonomic and functional diversity of recruited trees and associated traits trajectories, using a large functional trait database covering the leaf, wood and life-history spectra. We besides followed the dissimilarity in composition of recruited trees compared to the initial communities. Eventually we compared the observed trajectories to a stochastic recruitment entailing a random sampling of recruited recruits and the randomization of their functional traits. These trajectories aimed to highlight the recruitment processes underlying forests response to disturbance, specifically assessing (i) the role of deterministic compared to stochastic processes and (ii) the competition deterministic processes involved. Recruitment trajectories eventually (iii) enlightened the taxonomic and functional facets of forests resilience and there consequences for forest management.

## 2. Material and Methods

### 2.1 Study Site

The Paracou station is located in a lowland tropical rain forest in French Guiana (5°18'N and 52°53'W). Climate is tropical wet with mean annual precipitation averaging 2980 mm.y<sup>-1</sup> (30-y period) and a 3-months dry season (< 100 mm.months<sup>-1</sup>) from mid-August to mid-November, and a one-month dry season in March (Wagner *et al.*, 2011). Elevation ranges from 5 to 50 m and mean annual temperature is 26°C. Soils are thin acrisols over a layer of transformed saprolite with low permeability generating lateral drainage during heavy rains. The disturbance experiment spread over a network of twelve 6.25ha plots (Table 1) that underwent three disturbance treatments in 1986-1987 (Héroult & Piponiot, 2018). Dominant families are Fabaceae, Chrysobalanaceae, Lecythidaceae and

Sapotaceae.

## 2.2 Inventories Protocol and Dataset Collection

All trees above 10 cm DBH were mapped and measured annually since 1984. During inventories, trees were first identified with a vernacular name assigned by the field team, and afterward with a scientific name assigned by a botanist during regular botanical campaigns. Botanical campaigns have been carried out every 5 to 6 years from 2003 onwards. These changes in identification protocol raised methodological issues as vernacular names usually correspond to different botanical species, resulting in significant taxonomic uncertainties that had to be propagated to composition and diversity metrics. Vernacular names were replaced through multinomial trials  $M_v([s_1, s_2, \dots, s_N], [\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots, \alpha_3])$  based on the observed association probability  $[\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots, \alpha_3]$  between each vernacular name  $v$  and the species  $[s_1, s_2, \dots, s_N]$  recorded in the inventory. See appendix 1 and Aubry-Kientz *et al.* (2013) for the detailed methodology. To avoid remaining identification caveats, the simulated botanical inventories were reported at genus level.

Eight functional traits representing the leaf economic (leaves thickness, toughness, total chlorophyll content and specific leaf area) and wood economic spectra (wood specific gravity and bark thickness), and life history traits (maximum specific height and seed mass) were considered. Traits were extracted from the BRIDGE project<sup>1</sup> where trait values were measured on nine forest plots in French Guiana, including two in Paracou. Missing trait values of the trait database (10%) were filled by multivariate imputation by chained equation using the Mice R package (van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). F-tests demonstrated that traits variance were essentially lower within genera and families compared to the whole inventory: we accounted for the phylogenetic signal of the functional traits by restricting the gap filling processes to samples pertaining to the next higher taxonomic level. As seed mass information corresponded to a classification into discrete mass classes, no data filling process was applied and analysis were performed only considering the 414 botanical species of the seed mass dataset.

## 2.3 Recruitment trajectories

To tease apart recruitment trajectories communities were split into per-disturbance surviving trees and recruited trees afterward. Recruited communities were examined either considering the “punctual recruitment”, *i.e.* recruited trees by 2-year intervals, or all recruits since disturbance as the “accumulated recruits”. Eventually, in disturbed plots the recruited communities were examined distinguishing the undisturbed and logging gap areas to test the validity of recruitment processes for the whole area at whole plot scale.

The taxonomic diversity was assessed through Richness and the Hill number translation of Shannon and Simpson indices (Hill, 1973; Chao & Jost, 2015; Marcon, 2015). The three diversities belong to the set of HCDT or generalized entropy, respectively corresponding to the 0, 1 and 2 order of diversity ( $q$ ), which grasps the balance between

richness and evenness in the community through the value of  $q$  that emphasizes common species. Functional trajectories were estimated with the Rao quadratic entropy, summarizing the functional richness and evenness (Clark *et al.*, 2012) through the measure of communities functional divergence using Gower distance as recommended by Pavoine *et al.* (2009). Functional diversity was completed by the trajectories of traits community weighted means (CWM), representing the average trait value in a community weighted by relative abundance of the species carrying each value (Díaz *et al.*, 2007; Garnier *et al.*, 2004; Mason *et al.*, 2013). Seed mass trajectories were reported by the proportion of each class recorded in the inventories. The similarity between recruited trees and pre-disturbance forest was measured with the turnover metrics detailed in Podani *et al.* (2013). To estimate the importance of stochastic processes the recruitment was compared to the trajectories of a stochastic model of random samplings. For the taxonomic trajectories the stochastic model was a random sampling of individual trees according to their observed abundance that preserved species abundance and tree density. For the functional diversity the stochastic model was a shuffle of functional trait values among species that randomizes abundances across species but within communities (Mason *et al.*, 2013).

All composition and diversity metrics corresponded to the median and 90% percentile obtained after 50 iterations of the taxonomy uncertainty propagation and gap filling frameworks. The stochastic trajectories were similarly obtained after 50 iterations of the random sampling.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Recruitment Diversity

All the trajectories were identical in disturbed and undisturbed areas, confirming that recruitment processes applied to whole communities and not restricted to logging gaps.

#### 3.1.1 Taxonomic Diversity

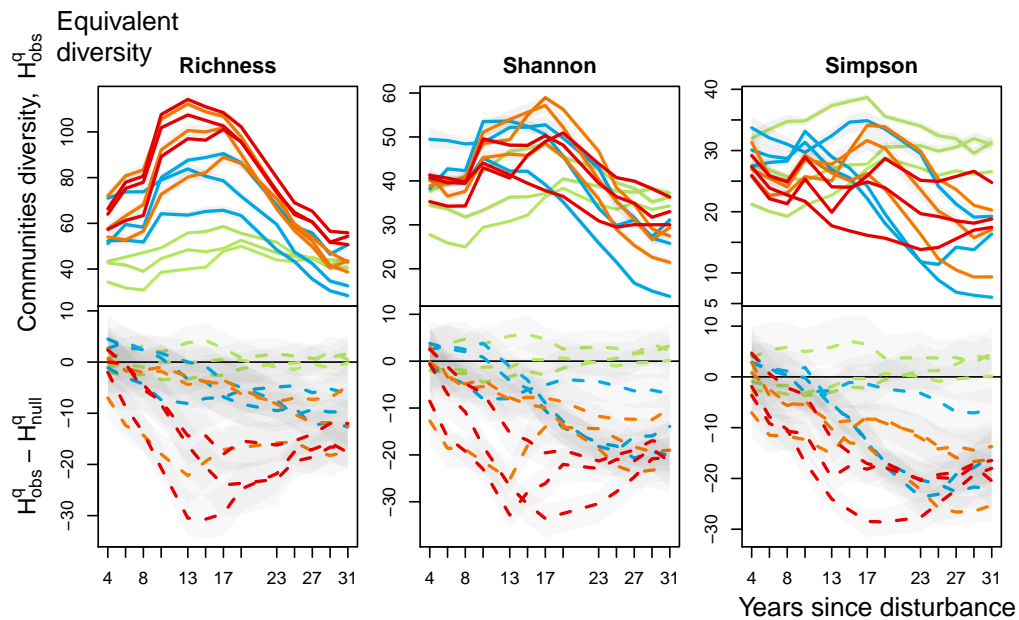
The diversity trajectories of punctual recruitment followed a consistent trajectory after disturbance, with first an increase of the richness and a decrease of the evenness (Figure 1). For all disturbed plots both richness and evenness tended to return towards initial values but none had recovered 30 years after disturbance. The accumulated recruits displayed sharp increasing richness (order 0) and decreasing evenness (order 2) after intense disturbance (T3 and some T2, Appendix I, fig. S1).

Punctual and accumulated recruitment diversities were compared to the stochastic trajectories of a random sampling. Richness (order 0) and evenness (order 2) of punctual recruits remained equivalent or higher than for a random sampling in control plots while both were lower in disturbed plots. Disturbed plots however followed humped shaped trajectories heading towards a recovery of the initial state (Figure 1). Accumulated recruitment richness and evenness were higher or equivalent to those of a random sampling after low disturbance intensity (plots T1 and some plots T2) but lower after intense disturbance (plots T3 and a plot T2, Appendix I fig. S1).

<sup>1</sup><http://www.ecofog.gf/Bridge/>

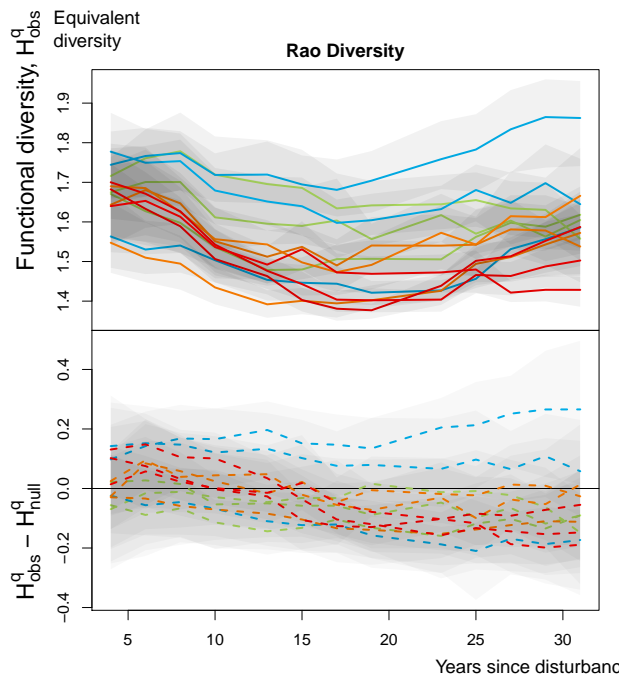
**Table 1.** Intervention table, summary of the disturbance intensity for the 4 plot treatments in Paracou.

| Treatment | Timber  | Thinning  | Fuelwood  | %AGB lost   |
|-----------|---|---|---|-------------|
| Control   |   |   |   | 0           |
| T1        | DBH $\geq$ 50 cm,<br>commercial species,<br>$\approx$ 10 trees/ha |   |   | [12% – 33%] |
| T2        | DBH $\geq$ 50 cm,<br>commercial species,<br>$\approx$ 10 trees/ha | DBH $\geq$ 40 cm,<br>non-valuable species,<br>$\approx$ 30 trees/ha |   | [33% – 56%] |
| T3        | DBH $\geq$ 50 cm,<br>commercial species,<br>$\approx$ 10 trees/ha | DBH $\geq$ 50 cm,<br>non-valuable species,<br>$\approx$ 15 trees/ha | 40 cm $\leq$ DBH $\leq$ 50<br>cm, non-valuable<br>species, $\approx$ 15<br>trees/ha | [35% – 56%] |



**Figure 1.** Trajectories over 30 years of Richness, Shannon and Simpson diversities of punctual recruitment (2-years laps, upper panels) and divergence to null model (lower panels). Values reported correspond to plot-level 0.025 and 0.975 percentiles (grey envelopes) and median (solid or dotted lines) obtained after 50 repetitions of the taxonomic uncertainty propagation and the functional database gap-filling frameworks. Colors correspond to the disturbance intensity (green for control, blue for T1, orange for T2 and red for T3, see Table 1 for details).





**Figure 2.** Functional diversity of punctual recruited trees (2-years laps) from the 7 functional traits (upper panel) and divergence to null model (lower panel). Values reported correspond to plot-level 0.025 and 0.975 percentiles (grey envelopes) and median (solid lines) obtained after 50 run of the null model and 50 repetitions of the taxonomic uncertainty propagation and the functional database gap-filling frameworks. Colors correspond to the disturbance intensity (green for control, blue for T1, orange for T2 and red for T3, see Table 1 for details).

### 3.1.2 Functional Diversity and Composition

Communities functional diversity was measured with the Rao diversity and compared to the stochastic trajectories of a random traits shuffling. In disturbed plots (T2 and T3), the functional diversity decreased until 15 years after disturbance (Figure 2) before recovering towards initial values. While the recovery was not achieved for the most disturbed plots, it was faster after the low disturbance intensity and for some T1 plots exceeded the initial values. For both disturbed and undisturbed plots, the observed functional diversity was lower than this of the random model, to the exception of two plots T1.

Trajectories of the functional traits showed a switch in disturbed plots towards species with large exchange surface area, light tissues (high SLA, low leaf toughness and thickness and low wood specific gravity) and with smaller maximum height (Figure 3). Functional traits either followed humped shaped trajectories with an ongoing recovery or an achieved return to the initial state (for SLA, Bark thickness and leaf thickness and Hmax to a certain extent).

### 3.2 Recruitment Turnover

In control plots species turnover remained highly stable for the 30 sampled years (Figure 4), reflecting a strong similarity between the initial plots composition and the punctual recruits. In disturbed plots, the taxonomic turnover followed a

marked humped shaped trajectory, with a maximum reached around 15 years after disturbance and a value positively correlated to the disturbance intensity ( $\rho_{\text{spearman}} = 0.93$ ). Thirty years after disturbance the turnover of all disturbed plots had returned to low values close to zero.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The three phases of recruitment trajectories

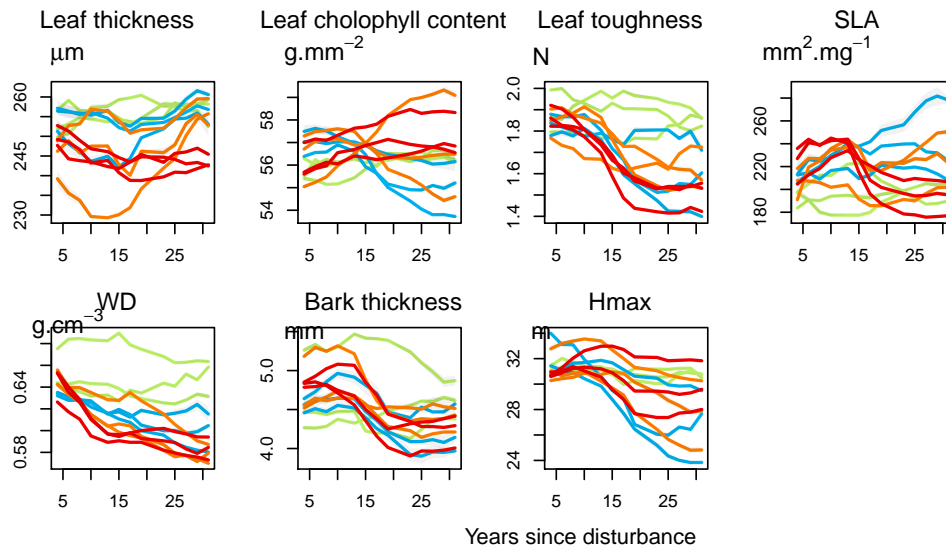
Along the 30 years, the recruitment richness and species turnover compared to the initial composition, and the trajectories of key functional traits (SLA and bark thickness) exhibited clear humped shaped trajectories, revealing three distinct recruitment phases. Communities trajectories involved an combination of stochastic and deterministic recruitment based on competitive exclusion for resources, and eventually restored initial recruitment processes.

As a first phase (0-8 years), recruited trees showed low turnover compared to the initial composition and matched the functional diversity of a stochastic recruitment process. This first recruitment phase, mirroring the old-growth pre-disturbance communities, likely involved already grown saplings (DBH < 10cm) immediately benefitting from the increased enlightenment and the alleviated competition induced by disturbance (Hérault *et al.*, 2010).

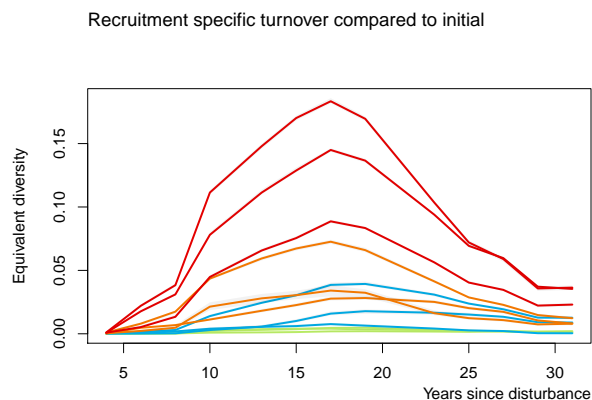
A second phase (8-15 years) then fell into place, corresponding to marked changes in several functional traits trajectories and to a decrease in recruitment evenness and functional diversity. This second phase likely incorporated true recruits, *i.e.* trees germinated from the seed bank that constitute the main part of the recruitment (Lawton & Putz, 1988). The pool of species recruited then was restricted according to their resource acquisition strategy, following deterministic processes that balanced the stochastic recruitment observed in the first place. Indeed, sharp changes in the SLA, wood density and leaf thickness trajectories occurred after intense disturbance and revealed the prominent recruitment of short-lived, fast growing hard pioneer species with competitive and efficient light acquisition (Wright *et al.*, 2004; Chave *et al.*, 2009; Hérault *et al.*, 2011; Reich, 2014).

The recruitment was therefore shaped by exclusive competition among species based on their differences in competitive ability for light acquisition (Mayfield & Levine, 2010), as already demonstrated in temperate forests (Kunstler *et al.*, 2012). The balance between deterministic and stochastic processes shaping the second phase was determined by the initial disturbance intensity. After light disturbance (T1 plots), despite a restricted pool of recruited species, the species turnover compared to initial state remained low. Recruited trees still mirrored the pre-disturbance communities but recruited species were more pioneers and light demanders, with strategies of efficient resource acquisition (high SLA and leaf chlorophyll content) and inexpensive, short-lived tissues (low leaf thickness and toughness, small Hmax and low wood density and bark thickness) (Hubbell *et al.*, 1999; Schnitzer & Carson, 2001; Sheil & Burslem, 2003; Bongers *et al.*, 2009). At these low disturbance intensity the recruitment evenness and functional diversity remained high so despite the selection of more light-demanding species the recruitment was not overwhelmed by

## Punctual recruits CWM



**Figure 3.** Community weighted means (CWM) of the four leaf traits, the two stem traits and the specific maximum height. Values reported correspond to plot-level 0.025 and 0.975 percentiles (grey envelopes) and median (solid lines) obtained after 50 repetitions of the taxonomic uncertainty propagation and the functional database gap-filling frameworks. Colors correspond to the disturbance intensity (green for control, blue for T1, orange for T2 and red for T3, see Table 1 for details).



**Figure 4.** Trajectories over 30 years of the abundance-based turnover between recruited trees (2-years laps) and initial communities before disturbance. Values reported correspond to plot-level 0.025 and 0.975 percentiles (grey envelopes) and median (solid lines) obtained after 50 repetitions of the taxonomic uncertainty propagation framework. Colors correspond to the disturbance intensity (green for control, blue for T1, orange for T2 and red for T3, see Table 1 for details).

hard pioneers. This might be explained by the recruitment and dispersal limitations due to the short dispersal distances observed for tropical trees, specifically in Paracou (Leclerc *et al.*, 2015; Scotti *et al.*, 2015). After intense disturbance in contrast (T2 and T3 plots), the recruitment rapidly differed from the pre-disturbance composition and corresponded to a sharp increase of the SLA and bark thickness. These drastic trajectories changes reflected an overwhelming recruitment of hard pioneers likely entailing significant changes in communities functioning (Díaz *et al.*, 2005).

A third recruitment phase eventually entailed a return towards initial taxonomic and functional diversities. Recruited species remained mainly light-demanding and submitted to competitive exclusion, but their functional diversity and their compositional similarity with initial communities progressively increased which revealed the recovery of stochastic recruitment processes dominating in mature forests (Lawton & Putz, 1988; Mayfield & Levine, 2010).

The recruitment trajectories were identical in disturbed and untouched areas, demonstrating the homogeneity of the recruit processes in the whole community. Indeed, in undisturbed forests the light availability proved quite homogeneous and unrelated to trees recruitment success (Dalling & Hubbell, 2002), while disturbance gaps and their edge effect significantly increase the global enlightenment and likely enhanced all trees recruitment success (Rüger *et al.*, 2009).

#### 4.2 The questioned completeness of communities resilience

After 30 years, although taxonomic and functional diversity had recovered initial values, the recruitment processes remained constrained by the deterministic selection of recruited species contrasting with the stochastic recruitment

of undisturbed forests. The recruitment processes proved resilient but over a decades-long period.

The recovery of both recruitment processes and initial composition and diversity meant the maintenance of pre-disturbance differences in communities taxonomy. This entailed the existence of multiple stable equilibrium among communities, corresponding to the initial communities restored after disturbance, in accordance with the assumptions made for highly diverse and productive ecosystems (Chase, 2003). Besides it meant the dependence of communities response on their initial composition that oriented the trajectories, consistently with other case study and with the involvement of pre-disturbance grown saplings and local seed bank (Dalling & Hubbell, 2002; Anderson, 2007).

In contrast the trajectories of some traits and global functional diversity were essentially similar among treatments and recovered quickly. This translated the convergence of communities in the functional space and the fast recovery of communities functioning despite their divergence in the taxonomic space (Fukami *et al.*, 2005). This confirmed previous results from the Paracou experiment, conducted 10 years (Molino & Sabatier, 2001) and 20 years (Baraloto *et al.*, 2012) after disturbance, where the early signs of the resilience of taxonomic and functional composition had been detected.

Although consistent communities recovery proved slow, specifically for taxonomic diversity and several functional traits that remained altered 30 years after disturbance. The disturbance response besides impacted the seed bank, that is the stock of recruitable species and that determines communities resilience. Its involvement might therefore alter the resilience and future trajectories of communities (Norden *et al.*, 2009).

## 5. Conclusion

The hindsight of the 30 years of forest monitoring highlighted a three-phased disturbance response, defined by the balance between stochastic and deterministic recruitment processes. Communities trajectories were first driven by the stochastic recruitment of already-grown saplings mirroring the pre-disturbance state before it was shaped by the true recruits from the seed bank that underwent competitive exclusion based on species light acquisition strategies. After intense disturbance the second recruitment phase was dominated by short-lived hard pioneers that drastically changed the diversity and the functioning of communities. A third phase eventually carried out the recovery towards the initial communities with the resurgence of stochastic recruitment progressively balancing the competitive exclusion for resources. The recruitment response to disturbance demonstrated communities quick functional resilience in a common functional space while it highlighted the long-term taxonomic resilience, *i.e.* several decades, that maintained initial composition differences. Even though the accurate impact on the seed bank remains to be clarified, communities recovery was tangible but its length entailed great caution regarding forests management guidelines that aim to a complete recovery of ecosystems.

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