

sPlot open - An environmentally-balanced, open-access, global dataset of vegetation plots

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Abstract

Vegetation provides the foundation of life on Earth. Assessing biodiversity status and trends in plant communities is therefore critical to understand and quantify the effects of global change on ecosystems. Here, we present the largest dataset of vegetation plots (i.e. species co-occurrence or community composition data) ever released in open access. It contains information on 91,031 vegetation plots recording the cover or abundance of each plant species that occurs in a plot of a given surface area at the date of the botanical survey. Plots were derived from 103 local to regional datasets. To improve the representation of Earth's environmental conditions, plots were resampled from a larger pool of vegetation plots using an environmentally stratified sampling design. Each vegetation plot comes with information on community-weighted means and variances of key plant functional traits. Our open-access dataset can be used to explore global patterns of diversity at the plant community level, as ground truthing data in remote sensing applications or as a baseline for biodiversity monitoring.

Background & Summary

Biodiversity is facing a global crisis (1). As many as 1 million species are estimated to be already facing extinction, mostly as a consequence of anthropogenic impacts, land-use and climate change (1). The rates of biodiversity redistribution and homogenization are also accelerating (2; 3). Biological assemblages are becoming progressively more similar to each other globally, as local biodiversity and endemic species go extinct and are replaced by introduced exotic species or by more widespread and competitive native species (1; 3). This has profound potential impacts on human and ecosystem health (4; 5). For instance, many terrestrial and marine species are shifting their geographical distribution as a response to climate change (2), including animals hosting pathogens transmissible to humans (6; 7; 8).

Vegetation, i.e., the assemblage of plant species, is no exception to this biodiversity crisis (9; 10; 3). This is worrisome, since terrestrial vegetation accounts for 80% (450 Gt C) of the living biomass on Earth (11). Given the central role of vegetation in ecosystem productivity, stability and functioning (10), assessing biodiversity status and trends in plant communities is paramount, for other life compartments and human societies alike.

Monitoring plant biodiversity trends requires adequate data across a range of scales ([???]). Large independent collections of plant occurrence data do exist at the global or continental extent via the Botanical Information and Ecology Network (BIEN) (12), the Global Inventory of Floras and Traits (GIFT) (13) or the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) (<https://www.gbif.org/>). However, all these occurrence-only databases either neglect how individual plant species co-occur and interact locally to form plant communities, or are collected at spatial resolutions (e.g., one-degree grid cells) which are too coarse to assess biodiversity trends at the most relevant scale of local plant communities (14).

Yet, there is a long-lasting tradition among botanists to record the cover or abundance of each plant species that occurs in a vegetation plot of a given size (i.e. surface area) at a given time (e.g. 15). Compared to species-level data, vegetation-plot data present many advantages. First, they contain information on which plant species co-occur together in the same locality at a given moment in time (16). This built-in feature of vegetation plots is a necessary prerequisite for testing hypotheses related to biotic interactions among plant species (i.e. plant-plant interactions). It can also provide crucial information on where and when a species is absent, therefore improving current species distribution models (17). Being spatially explicit, vegetation plots can be resurveyed through time to assess potential changes in plant species composition relative to a baseline (18; 19, 3). As they normally contain also information on the relative cover or abundance of each species, vegetation plots are more adequate to detect subtle biodiversity changes, compared to data based on the occurrence of individual species only (20).

Vegetation-plot data are very fragmented, though, as they typically stem from a myriad of research projects. As such, these data often suffer from the usual trade-off in biodiversity data: Collections have either fine-grain spatial resolutions but small spatial extents, or vice versa (21). Furthermore, with their disparate sampling protocols, standards and taxonomic resolutions, aggregating and harmonizing vegetation plot data proves extremely challenging (22). It is not surprising, therefore, that these data have only been rarely used in global-scale biodiversity research until recently (23; 24).

The sPlot initiative tries to close this data gap. It leverages on several existing local to regional vegetation-plot datasets, to create a harmonized and comprehensive global geo-database of terrestrial plant species assemblages (25). Established in 2013, sPlot currently contains more than 1.9 million vegetation plots, and is fully integrated with the TRY database (26), from which it derives information on plant functional traits. The sPlot database is increasingly being used to study continental- to global-scale vegetation patterns, such as the relative contribution of regional vs. local

factors on the global patterns of fern richness ([27](#)), the mechanisms underlying the spread and abundance of native vs. invasive tree species ([28](#)), and worldwide trait–environment relationships in plant communities ([22](#)).

Here, we provide an open-access data set composed of 91,031 plots, which is representative of the environmental space covered by the sPlot database. Plots stem from 103 databases, and span across 115 countries (Figure [1](#)). This resampled dataset (sPlot Open - hereafter) is composed of: (1) plot-level information, including metadata and basic vegetation structure descriptors; (2) the species composition of each vegetation plot, including species cover or abundance information when available; and (3) community-level functional diversity indices derived from the TRY database ([26](#)).

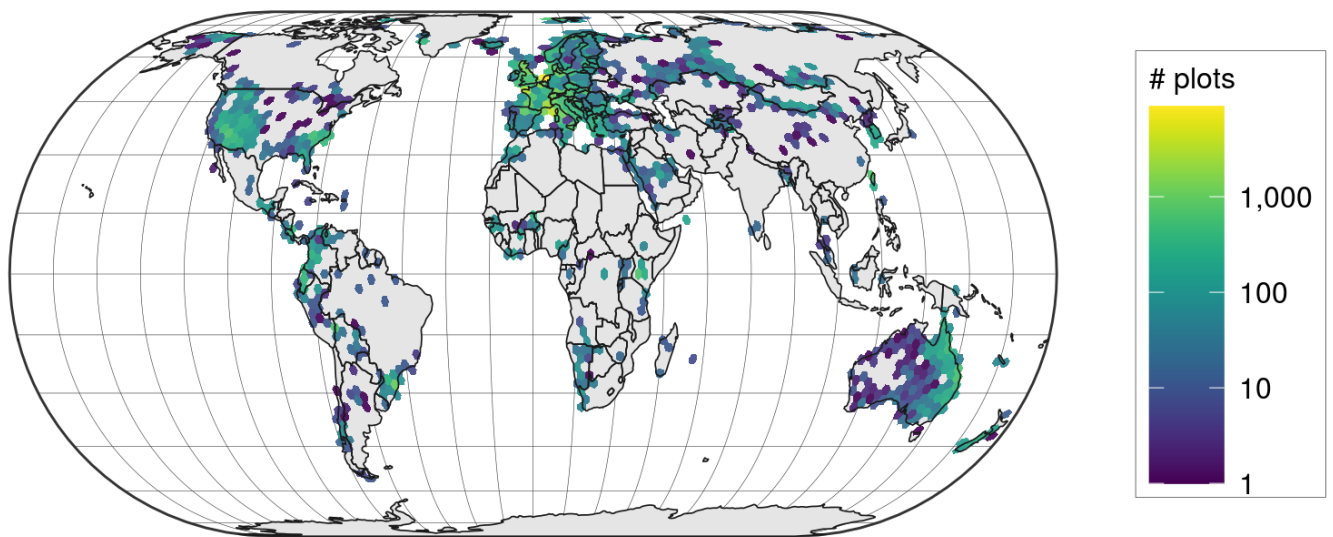


Figure 1: Global map of sPlot Open ($n = 91,031$) and spatial distribution of vegetation plot density per hexagonal cell with a spatial resolution of approximately 70,000 km². Map projection is Eckert IV.

Methods

Vegetation plot data sources

We started from the sPlot database v2.1 (created October 2016), which contains 1,121,244 vegetation plots and 23,586,216 species records stemming from 110 different vegetation-plot datasets of regional, national or continental extent. Some of the 110 datasets stem from regional or continental initiatives (see [25](#) for more information). For instance: 48 vegetation-plot datasets derive from the European Vegetation Archive (EVA) ([16](#)), three major African datasets from the Tropical African Vegetation Archive (TAVA), multiple vegetation datasets in the USA from the VegBank archive ([29](#); [30](#)). Data from other continents (South America, Asia) or countries were contributed as separate datasets. The metadata of each of the 110 vegetation-plot datasets stored in sPlot are managed through the Global Index of Vegetation-Plot Databases (GIVD; [31](#)), using the GIVD identifier as the unique dataset identifier.

Resampling method

Data in the sPlot database are unevenly distributed across continents and biomes (see [22](#)). Mid-latitude regions in developing countries (mostly Europe, the USA and Australia) are overrepresented, while regions in the tropics and subtropics are underrepresented, which is a typical geographical bias in biodiversity data (e.g., [32](#); [2](#)). To reduce this imbalance to the extent possible, we performed a stratified resampling approach, using several environmental variables available at the global extent as sampling strata. We considered 30 climatic and soil variables. For climate we complemented the 19 bioclimatic variables from CHELSA ([33](#)), as well as two variables reflecting growing-season warmth (growing degree days above 1 °C - GDD1 - and 5 °C - GDD5), which we calculated based on CHELSA bioclimatic variables. In addition we considered an index of aridity (AR) and a model for Potential Evapotranspiration (PET - [34](#)). For soil, we extracted seven variables from the SOILGRIDS database ([35](#)), namely: soil organic carbon content in the fine earth fraction, cation exchange capacity, pH, as well as the fractions of coarse fragments, sand, silt and clay.

We stratified our sampling effort based on the following procedure. First we ran a global principal component analysis (PCA) of the 30 above-mentioned environmental variables. We considered the full environmental space of all terrestrial habitats on Earth at a spatial resolution of 2.5 arcmin, totaling 8,384,404 terrestrial grid cells, irrespective of whether a grid cell hosted vegetation plots from the sPlot database v2.1 or not. We then subdivided the environmental space represented by the first two principal components (PC1-PC2), accounting for 47% and 23% of the total variation on PC1 and PC2, respectively, into a 100 × 100 grid. This PC1-PC2 bidimensional space was subsequently used to balance our sampling effort across all PC1-PC2 grid cells for which vegetation plots are available. Before projecting vegetation plots from the sPlot database v2.1 onto this PC1-PC2 environmental space, we removed vegetation plots: from wetlands; from anthropogenic vegetation types; without geographical coordinates; and with a location uncertainty higher than 3 km for those having geographical coordinates. This led to a total of 799,400 out of the initial set of 1,121,244 vegetation plots. When projecting the 799,400 vegetation plots in the PC1-PC2 grid, we calculated how many vegetation plots occurred in each PC1-PC2 grid cell. For those grid cells with more than 50 vegetation plots ($n = 858$), we randomly selected up to 50 vegetation plots using the heterogeneity-constrained random resampling algorithm from [[36](#)]. This approach optimizes the selection of a random subset of vegetation plots that encompasses the highest variability in species composition while avoiding peculiar and rare communities, which may represent outliers. We based the quantification of variability in plant species composition among the 50 randomly selected vegetation plots by computing the mean and the variance of the Jaccard's dissimilarity index ([37](#)) between all possible pairs of vegetation plots for a given random selection of 50 vegetation plots ($n = 1225$). We chose this

dissimilarity index because it is not influenced by differences in species richness among vegetation plots. More precisely, for a given PC1-PC2 grid cell containing more than 50 vegetation plots, we generated 1,000 random selections of 50 vegetation plots and ranked the 1,000 random selections according to the mean (ascending order) and variance (descending order) value. Ranks from both sortings were summed for each random selection, and the random selection with the lowest summed rank was considered as the most representative of the focal grid cell. In case a grid cell contained fewer than 50 plots, we retained all of them. In this way, we reduced the imbalance towards over-sampled climate types, while ensuring the resampled dataset to be representative of the entire environmental gradient covered by the sPlot database. We repeated the resampling procedure three times to get three different possibilities of a random selection of 50 vegetation plots per PC1-PC2 grid cell with, initially, more than 50 vegetation plots. Vegetation plots selected during the first iteration were our first choice, while we considered the vegetation plots additionally selected in the second and third iteration as reserves when asking for the permission to release the data as open access to each dataset's contributor(s).

Permission to release the data as open access

The resampling procedure resulted in a preliminary potential selection of 98,383 vegetation plots (first choice) and 51,634 vegetation plots flagged as reserves (second or third choice for the subset of PC1-PC2 grid cells with more than 50 vegetation plots available). Being the sPlot database a consortium of independent datasets, whose copyright belongs to the data contributor, we used this preliminary potential selection to ask each dataset's custodian (i.e., either the owner of a dataset or its authorized representative in case of a collective dataset) for permission to release the data of each selected vegetation plot as open access. For 8,070 vegetation plots, permission could not be granted, for instance because the data are unpublished, confidential or sensitive. For these vegetation plots, we used the reserve pool to randomly select replacements, for which such permission could be granted. We imposed the constraint that each vegetation plot in the reserve should belong to the same environmental strata, i.e., the same PC1-PC2 grid cell, of the confidential vegetation plot. Note that a given PC1-PC2 grid cell may have one or more confidential vegetation plots (max = xx) that could not be replaced from the reserve pool.

Trait information

For each vegetation plot for which open access has been granted, we computed the community weighted means for eighteen plant functional traits derived from the TRY database v3.0 ([26](#)). These traits were selected among those traits that describe the leaf, wood and seed economics spectra ([38](#); [39](#)), and are known to either affect different key ecosystem processes or respond to macroclimatic drivers or both ([25](#)). The eighteen plant functional traits were: (1) leaf area [mm^2]; (2) stem specific density [g cm^{-3}]; (3) specific leaf area [m^2kg^{-1}]; (4) leaf carbon concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (5) leaf nitrogen concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (6) leaf phosphorus concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (7) plant height [m]; (8) seed mass [mg]; (9) seed length [mm]; (10) leaf dry matter content [g g^{-1}]; (11) leaf nitrogen per area [g m^{-2}]; (12) leaf N:P ratio [g g^{-1}]; (13) leaf $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ [per million]; (14) seed number per reproductive unit; (15) leaf fresh mass [g]; (16) stem conduit density [mm^{-2}]; (17) dispersal unit length [mm]; and (18) conduit element length [μm].

Because missing values were particularly widespread in the species-trait matrix, we employed a gap-filling procedure based on hierarchical Bayesian modeling (R package 'BHPMF', [40](#); [41](#)). Gap-filling was performed at the level of individual observations. We then loge-transformed all gap-filled trait values and averaged each trait by taxon (i.e., at species, or genus level). Additional information on the gap-filling procedure are available in [\[25\]](#).

Community-weighted means (CWM) and the variances (CWV) were calculated for every plant functional trait j and every vegetation plot k as follows ([42](#)):

$$CWM_{j,k} = \sum_i^{n_k} p_{i,k} t_{i,j} \quad (1)$$

$$CWV_{j,k} = \sum_i^{n_k} p_{i,k} (t_{i,j} - CWM_{j,k})^2 \quad (2)$$

where n_k is the number of species with trait information in vegetation plot k , $p_{i,k}$ is the relative abundance of species i in vegetation plot k calculated as the species' fraction in cover or abundance of total cover or abundance, and $t_{i,j}$ is the mean value of species i for trait j .

Data Records

The final dataset that is provided here as open access contains 91,031 vegetation plots from 115 countries and all continents except Antarctica (Figure 1) and stems from 103 constitutive datasets (?). Information on the size (surface area) of the vegetation survey is available for 61,898 vegetation plots, and ranges between 0.01 m² and 4 ha (mean = 270 m²; median = 78.5 m²). The average number of vascular plant species per vegetation plot ranges between 1 (i.e. monospecific stands) and 270 species (mean = 17.6; median = 13). Most plots only include information on vascular plants, while a minority also includes information on lichens (n = 3,045) or mosses (n = 4,963). By reducing the overrepresentation of vegetation plots in specific environmental conditions, the resampling procedure described above strongly reduced the bias in the distribution of vegetation plots within the environmental niche space. Yet, due to the lack or scarcity of data from some geographical regions, like the tropics, the spatial distribution of vegetation plots remains unbalanced across geographical regions (Figure 1). This is evident when comparing the number of plots across continents or biomes. Europe is by far the best represented continent, with 53,884 vegetation plots. In contrast, Africa and South America have only 4507 and 5515 vegetation plots, respectively. The representation of biomes is equally unbalanced. The biomes 'Temperate midlatitudes' and 'Subtropics with winter rain' have 37,507 and 16,510 vegetation plots, respectively, while none of the other biomes have more than 10,000 vegetation plots (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Distribution in environmental space (R package plotbiomes by Valentin Stefan).

Finally, the dataset contains a relatively balanced number of forest (n = 25,832) vs. non forest (n = 38,203) vegetation plots, with a minor proportion of plots remaining unassigned (n = 10,050). The assignment of plots to forests and non-forests is based on multiple lines of evidence, including the plot-level information on the cover of the tree layer, as well as traits of species composing a plot, such as growth form and height. In short, a plot record was considered a forest if the cover of the tree layer, or alternatively, the sum of relative cover of all tree taxa, was greater than 0.25. It was instead

considered a non-forest record if the sum of relative cover of low-stature, non-tree and non-shrub taxa was greater than 0.90. For an extensive explanation on this classification scheme, we refer the reader to [\[25\]](#). Even if the proportion of forest vs. non-forest vegetation plots is relatively well-balanced, the geographical distribution of vegetation plots belonging to different vegetation types is likely not balanced in the geographical space, as it depends on the idiosyncrasies of the individual datasets composing the sPlot database. For instance, the data from New Zealand only include plots collected in non-forest ecosystems, while data from Chile only refer to forests. We invite potential users to carefully read the description of each individual dataset before using this open-access dataset.

Database Organization

The open-access dataset is organized into three matrices.

The *'header'* matrix contains plot level information for the 91,031 vegetation plots provided in this open access dataset, including metadata (e.g., plot ID, ownership, sampling date, geographical location, positional accuracy), sampling design information (e.g., the total surface area used during the vegetation survey), and a plot-level description of vegetation structure (e.g., vegetation type, percentage cover of each vegetation layer). A brief description of all the xx variables contained in the header matrix is provided in ??.

The *'DT'* matrix contains data on the species composition of each plot. It is structured in a long format and contains 1,607,826 records, from 39,922 taxa, mostly resolved at the species level. For each record we report both the taxon name as originally contributed by the data custodian (column *'Matched_concept'*), and the taxon name after taxonomic standardization (column *'Species_name_harmonized'*). For each entry, we report the species cover//abundance values. These follow different standards across the datasets constituting the sPlot database. We therefore provide both the cover//abundance value as reported in the original data, which often is given on a cover//abundance scale (column *'Cover'*), and a *'Relative_cover'* field, i.e., the cover//abundance of each taxon in each vegetation layer divided by the total cover//abundance of all taxa in that vegetation layer. Finally, for each entry, we provide a *'Taxon_group'* field, reporting whether the corresponding taxa is a vascular plant, moss, lichen or alga.

Finally the *'CWM'* matrix contains the community-weighted means and variances calculated for each of the 18 functional traits mentioned above. It also contains three additional columns. The column *'Species_richness'* returns the number of species recorded in each plot. The columns *'Trait_coverage_cover'* and *'Trait_coverage_pa'* return respectively the proportion of total cover and species in a plot for which functional trait information was available.

Functional trait information was available for 20,932 species. The average proportion of species in each plot for which we have functional trait information is 0.88 (median = 1). For 47,177 plots the coverage is complete, while only in one plot we have no functional trait information for any of the occurring species. When considering relative cover, the average trait coverage is 0.89. As many as 68,234 and 74,388 plots have functional trait information for more than 80% of the species or 80% of relative cover, respectively.

Technical Validation

The sPlot database has a nested structure, and is composed of several individual datasets, each validated and maintained by its respective dataset custodian. Each individual dataset also has individual vegetation plots, each provided by its owner (the person who performed the actual vegetation survey) or by someone who digitized the original data from the scientific or grey literature. We obviously have no direct control on the individual vegetation plots that we provide here in an open access dataset. Yet, each of these vegetation plots are stemming from trained professional botanists, or published scientific work, and are accompanied by detailed information on the sampling protocols used, thus ensuring data quality and reliability.

Before having been integrated into the sPlot database, each dataset was further checked for consistency and, if having a different format, was converted to a Turboveg 2 database ([43](#)). During this conversion into a Turboveg format, we checked that all datasets contained the required metadata information and we converted this information to the sPlot database standards, if necessary. Furthermore we cross-checked that each plot is located within the geographic scopes of its respective dataset. Finally, we harmonized all the taxonomic names from a dataset, based on the sPlot's taxonomic backbone (Purschke 2017). This backbone matched all the taxonomic names (without nomenclatural authors) from all datasets in sPlot 2.1 and TRY v3.0 ([26](#)) to their resolved version based on the Taxonomic Name Resolution Service web application (TNRS version 4.0; [44](#); iPlant Collaborative, 2015). This allowed to (1) harmonize all datasets to a common nomenclature, and (2) to link the sPlot database to the TRY database ([26](#)). All taxa originally denoted at taxonomic ranks lower than species, were aggregated at species level. Additional detail on the taxonomic resolution is reported in [[25](#)], while a description of the workflow, including R-code, is available in [[45](#)]

Usage Notes

The sPlot Open database can be downloaded from <https://www.idiv.de> (link to PlantHub). The use of data contained in BioTIME should cite original data citations in addition to the present paper. The data included in the present paper represent the subset of sPlot for which we were able to secure licences for making these data open. The additional studies in sPlot are available under sPlot's Governance and Data Property Rules (www.idiv.de/sPlot).

Code Availability

The R code used to produce sPlot Open from the sPlot 2.1 database is found here (<https://portal.idiv.de/nextcloud/index.php/s/YjMZtwFDwtoefGi>).

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Author contributions

FMS wrote the first draft of the manuscript, with considerable input by JL and HB. JL and TH wrote the resampling algorithm. FMS set up the GitHub project and produced the graphs. He also coordinated the sPlot consortium. SMH wrote the Turboveg v3 software, which holds the sPlot database. JK provided the trait data from TRY and FS performed the trait data gap filling. HB secured the funding for sPlot as a strategic project of iDiv. All other authors contributed data. All authors contributed to revising the manuscript.

Competing interests

[A competing interests statement is required for all papers accepted by and published in Scientific Data. If there is no conflict of interest, a statement declaring this must still be included in the manuscript.]

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Brad Boyle, Nicole Hopkins, Zhenyuan Lu, Juan Antonio Raygoza Garay, Dmitry Mozzherin, Tony Rees, Naim Matasci, Martha L Narro, William H Piel, Sheldon J McKay, ... Brian J Enquist
BMC Bioinformatics (2013-01-16) <https://doi.org/gb8vxz>
DOI: [10.1186/1471-2105-14-16](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2105-14-16) · PMID: [23324024](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23324024/) · PMCID: [PMC3554605](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PMC3554605/)
45. **Oliverpurschke/Taxonomic_Backbone: First Release Of The Workflow To Generate The Taxonomic Backbone For Splot V.2.1 And Try V.3.0**

Variable	Range.Levels	No.record	Type.of.variable
GIVD_ID		91031	character
Dataset		91031	character
Continent		90729	factor
Country		91031	character
Biome		91031	factor
Date	-29764 - 16469	75798	numeric
Latitude	-54.73863 - 80.149116	91031	numeric
Longitude	-162.741433 - 179.590053	91031	numeric
Location_uncertainty	1 - 2500	91002	integer
Releve_area	0.01 - 40000	61898	numeric
Herbs_identified	FALSE = 4876; TRUE = 6323	11199	logical
Plant_recorded		91015	factor
Altitude	-25 - 4819	52121	numeric
Aspect	0 - 360	30796	numeric
Slope	0 - 99	37784	numeric
is_forest	FALSE = 20396; TRUE = 25832	46228	logical
is_nonforest	FALSE = 50870; TRUE = 38203	89073	logical
ESY		55457	character
Naturalness	1 - 2	68011	integer
Forest	FALSE = 38295; TRUE = 23735	62030	logical
Shrubland	FALSE = 38233; TRUE = 11081	49314	logical
Grassland	FALSE = 10213; TRUE = 46947	57160	logical
Sparse_vegetation	FALSE = 33381; TRUE = 11315	44696	logical
Wetland	FALSE = 29078; TRUE = 18038	47116	logical
Cover_total	1 - 313	24712	integer
Cover_tree_layer	0.5 - 150	7245	numeric
Cover_shrub_layer	0.5 - 145	10197	numeric
Cover_herb_layer	0.2 - 180	26679	numeric
Cover_moss_layer	1 - 100	9643	integer
Cover_lichen_layer	1 - 95	734	integer
Cover_algae_layer	1 - 100	221	integer
Cover_litter_layer	1 - 100	4500	integer
Cover_bare_rocks	1 - 100	1897	integer
Cover_cryptogams	1 - 95	593	integer

Variable	Range.Levels	No.record	Type.of.variable
Cover_bare_soil	0.1 - 99	1412	numeric
Height_trees_highest	1 - 99	6115	numeric
Height_trees_lowest	1 - 90	221	numeric
Height_shrubs_highest	0.1 - 9.9	2880	numeric
Height_shrubs_lowest	0.1 - 9	328	numeric
Height_herbs_average	0.1 - 440	10125	numeric
Height_herbs_lowest	1 - 250	2785	integer
Height_herbs_highest	1 - 600	1733	integer