**Title:** Thermal sensitivity of canopy versus understory leaves: patterns, mechanisms, and ecological implications

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## Abstract

## Introduction

**As the climate warms, understanding forest responses to temperature is critical.**

**Forest canopy microclimate buffering is emerging as important for forest ecology in an era of climate change.** Forest canopies buffer temperatures and other conditions - Zellweger *et al.* (2020)

We’re seeing increasing evidence that this impacts the ecology, with potential feedbacks to climate change. - Zellweger *et al.* (2020) - (Suggitt et al. 2018, Scheffers et. al 2014) - Larger trees suffer more during drought (Bennett et al. 2015) and may be partially influenced by temperature

**However, we lack a systematic understanding of biophysical and biological patterns across this gradient, how these affect leaf-level processes, and in turn how it affects ecology (Fig. 1).**

**This review addresses the following questions:**

1. How does the biophysical environment vary with height in forests?
2. How do leaf traits vary with height (or between sun and shade leaves) in forests?
3. How do biophysical environment and traits combine to affect leaf temperature?
4. How does leaf metabolism respond to temperature in canopy and understory settings?
5. What are the implications of these patterns for the ecology and climate change responses of canopy versus understory trees?

*Our primary interest is the gradient in height and exposure from the top of the canopy to the understory in forests. However, because a lot of the relevant research has focused on exposure gradients near ground level (e.g., comparisons of sun and shade leaves), we also review studies focused on exposure gradients.*



**Figure 1. (schematic of a forest summarizing most important gradients.** Current fig is just a rough illustration of how this might look – a draft figure that KAT had on hand illustrating hypotheses (ignore specific content). We could have a set of arrows for each of the major categories considered here. This would be a key figure, and should be beautifully illustrated—KAT could do a watercolor, or Nidhi could illustrate).

## The biophysical environment

**Forest canopies have a buffering effect on multiple aspects of the understory climate (Fig.** 2**).** Most notably, solar radiation decreases along a vertical profile from the top of the canopy to the forest floor (Fig. **2x**). - *Bonan (2016) reviews this and points to appropriate references* - (Mau et al. 2018?) - Sunflecks: Leaky et al. 2003?

**Wind speeds are also higher at the top of the canopy (Fig.** 2x**).** - *(find some good refs for this/ fill in more specifics)* - McGregor *et al.* This results in higher boundary layer conductance, *DEFINE*, for canopy leaves (Martin *et al.*, 1999).

**Air temperature, , is sometimes significantly buffered by forest canopies (Fig.** 2x**).** Studies comparing under forest canopies with nearby clearings have found lower maximum temperatures under forest canopies across Europe (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019) and in the northwestern United States (Davis *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, maximum air temperatures were higher above than below tropical forest canopies during wet seasons in Panama (Rey-Sánchez et al. 2016) and coastal Brazil (Fauset et al. 2018). However, similar maximum temperatures have been observed during the dry season in Panama (Rey-Sánchez et al. 2016) and in a temperate deciduous forest in the eastern United States (McGregor *et al.*). Minimum is also buffered by forest canopies under some conditions. Higher minimum temperatures under forest canopies relative to nearby clearings have been observed across Europe (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019) and in the northwestern United States (Davis *et al.*, 2019). However, similar minimum temperatures under forest canopies have been observed in tropical forests in Panama (Rey-Sánchez et al. 2016) and coastal Brazil (Fauset et al. 2018), as well as in a temperate deciduous forest in the eastern United States (McGregor *et al.*). *(Add something about risk of freeze.)*

**Humidity also varies across the forest vertical profile, being generally higher in the understory (Fig.** 2x**).** - DETAILS - REFS - McGregor *et al.* RH, in combination with temperature, determines vapor pressure deficit, - is lower in understory of Atlantic forest during wet season (Fauset et al. 2018) This means that canopy leaves tend to be exposed to higher *evaporative demand*.

**Finally, carbon dioxide (CO2) concentrations tend to be higher in the understory.** - Higher in understory, particularly at dusk (Koike et al. 2001). - Higher in the understory overnight; difference persists during the day but is very small (Yang *et al.*, 1999). Differences in concentration are by far most pronounced near ground level. Given that differences are small during the day when photosynthesis is active, and that even nighttime differences are modest at the height of understory tree crowns, CO2 concentration is unlikely to have much effect on the energy balance and metabolism of leaves across the forest vertical gradient.



**Figure 2. Vertical gradients in the biophysical environment, from NEON data.** Current placeholder figure is old version from Ian McGregor’s in-review paper, showing NEON data from SCBI. See issue 2: <https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/2>.

**The strength of this buffering varies across forests, being influenced by both forest characteristics and the biophysical environment.** First, buffering increases with canopy cover. - greater cover –> lower max T and VPD, higher minT (Davis *et al.*, 2019) - greater cover –> lower max T (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019) - (Thom *et al.*, 2020) *Presumably, buffering would also be affected by canopy roughness, which affects turbulent air flow and the canopy boundary layer.* Taller trees don’t necessarily increase buffering (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019). SCA species increase T buffering (Zelllweger et al. 2019) (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019) The strength of buffering also varies with respect to geographic and climatic factors. - Distance to coast, topographic position, elevation (Zellweger *et al.*, 2019) - (Davis *et al.*, 2019)

## Trait variation

**Many traits vary with height and/or between sun and shade leaves on the same species (Table 1).** Here, we focus on traits that are important for shaping leaf temperature () and thermal sensitivity.

**Table 1. Summary of observed variation in thermally-relevant leaf traits with canopy height and/or between sun and shade leaves** ([*GitHub issue #9*](https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/9))

Are traits shaped more by height or light? - “Height is more important than light in determining leaf morphology in a tropical forest” (Cavaleri et al. 2010) - (Cavaleri et al. 2008) - from Martijn: “If I remember correctly, height and light exposure are closely correlated and things like LMA scale with both, but above a certain level of light exposure, the effect of additional light disappears, while the relationship of the morphological traits with height continues. I have often been a bit skeptical about assuming height drives morphology, as most of the work that convincingly shows that (and relates it to turgor pressure for example) is from 100 m tall redwoods.”

*Leaf area / characteristic dimension*: - Recent paper on influence on leaf size/shape in PCE – certain aspects of leaf shape were not as relevant as expected.

*Max stomatal conductance*

*Thermal time constant (probably not a lot out there)* - Curtis et. al, 2018 – higher in more exposed leaves (heat up slower, cool slower) - Michaeletz has used this in theoretical calculations (Michaeletz et al. 2016 and 2015?

*Carotinoids* - photoprotective- disseminate heat, acclimate to high T. THese are proportional to irradiance - antioxidant scavenging function- protect against cellular damage - Königer et. al. 1995, and Matsubara et al. 2009?

*Isoprene production* - Emission as a species trait- Tyeen Taylor, Marielle Smith - The high temperature carbon compensation point of sun leaves is higher in isoprene emitting species than in non-emitting species, so it is to be expected that other aspects of heat tolerance will be similarly affected by isoprenes (<https://doi.org/10.1111/pce.13564>) - Within species, isporene production scales with light/ T

*Deciduous leaf habit* - (Meakem et al. 2018) and refs therein

## Leaf temperature

**Many of the biophysical and trait variable reviewed above affect leaf temperature, , which in turn has a strong influence on leaf metabolism (see following section).** is determined by the energy balance of a leaf and can be estimated based on basic biophysical principles (Campbell & Norman, 1998; Muir, 2019) (Fig. 3). While small leaves remain within a few degrees of , regardless of stomatal conductance, wider leaves can have temperatures deviating more from air temperature. Large leaves can be significantly cooler than under low radiation with stomata open, and significantly hotter under high radiation with stomata closed.  
Leaves with open stomata and high radiation loads maintain similar to , with coolest leaves at intermediate sizes (~10mm). Shaded understory leaves should tend to maintain cooler daytime leaf temperatures for any given level of stomatal conductance. However, counteracting this, lower wind speed in understory would reduce latent heat loss. Thus, under hot conditions, canopy leaves exposed to higher wind speeds would be most effective at cooling when sufficient water is available to maintain high stomatal conductance; however, their can be highly elevated above when stomatal conductance is limiting.

 **Aligning with biophysical expectations, field observations have show that leaf temperatures are influenced by the biophysical environment and leaf traits.** 1. Air T 2. Solar radiation 3. Leaf traits - Michaletz et al have done some interesting work on leaf thermoregulation in relation to various leaf traits. I don’t think there is sun vs shade tests, but we could look at how this might translate, or how some of the traits he has calculated might differ between sun and shade leaves. For example, he has this thermal time constant parameter that is calculated from leaf mass per area, leaf dry matter content, and some environmental parameters. E.g.: DOI: 10.1038/nplants.2016.129, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2015.09.006>

**When vertical gradients in the biopgysical environment and leaf traits combine to shape leaf energy budgets, often differs little from and between understory and canopy (Fig.** 2?**).** For instance… (Bolstad et al. 1999). Similarly, during the dry season in a tropical moist forest in Panama… (Rey-Sánchez et al. 2016). **However, canopy leaves can reach much higher maximum , and higher , than understory leaves.** - (Slot et al. 2019) and refs therein - (Fauset et al. 2018) Sun leaves can also be cooled relative to more than shade leaves (Rey-Sánchez et al. 2016).

## Leaf metabolism and thermal responses

Leaf metabolism is strongly shaped by leaf temperature, and by the traits and environmental drivers reviewed above, all of which vary across vertical forest gradients (Fig. 1). However, as we detail below, there are limited studies comparing thermal responses of sun and shade leaves.

**Photosynthesis is generally higher in sun leaves– a fact that is well-established (REFS) and observed in numerous field studies.** This is primarily driven by the greater light available to sun leaves. In response to the greater light availability, sun leaves have traits allowing greater photosynthetic rates at high light, including …. The vertical gradient in photosythetic rates is also influenced by…

**While sun and shade leaves differ dramatically in , the temperature sensitivity of photosynthesis does not appear to differ substantially between sun and shade leaves** Biophysically, we might expect that sun leaves should tend to have a stronger temperature-dependence and higher temperature optima than shade leaves (Fig. 14.5; *revisit this!*) (Campbell and Norman 1998). However, this does not appear to be the case based on the limited number of field studies that have compared temperature sensitivity of photoshythesis in sun and shade leaves. For 3 species in Panama, (Slot et al. 2019) found that the optimum temperature for sun leaves tended to be slightly higher than that of shade leaves, but differences were not significant. Mau et al. found no trend along a height gradient in Puerto Rico, and no significant trend in temperate trees (Mau et al. 2018).

**Similar to photosynthesis, respiration tends to higher in sun leaves, but its temperature sensitivity appears to be similar between between sun and shade leaves.** (Bolstad et al. 1999) did a study at Coweeta, including elev gradient. Found higher respiration (at reference T) in canopy leaves (Bolstad *et al.* (1999)). (*Martijn has some unpublished data on this that we might include:* [*https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/8*](https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/8)*.*) At Coweeta, Q10 showed a variable pattern, with a slight tendency to increase down the canopy (Bolstad *et al.*, 1999). (*Martijn has some unpublished data on this that we might include.unpublished data showing higher Q10 in shade than in sun leaves for 10 species or so. May make sense to include here:* [*https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/8*](https://github.com/EcoClimLab/vertical-thermal-review/issues/8)*.*) Combining reference respiration and , Bolstad *et al.* (1999) found a modest net decrease in R for understory leaves relative to canopy leaves as T increases (*see their Fig. 1*). Thus, Bolstad *et al.* (1999) found evidence of acclimation, but there remained a declining trend of respiration with elevation.

**VOC production**

**Leaf thermal tolerance (Tcrit/ T50)** - define. Typical values ~45-50C, varying somewhat across latitude/climate (O’sullivan et al. 2017), with elevation [Feeley *et al.* (2020); Slot unpublished data], with leaf traits (Sastry et al. 2018, Zhang *et al.*, 2012).

**Thermal tolerance (e.g., ) varies with exposure, but there are no studies isolating effect of height.** For two of three species studied in a tropical moist forest in Panama, was slightly lower for shade than sun-exposed leaves, both measured near ground level (Slot et al. 2019). Similarly, for *Acacia Papyrocarpa* (Benth.) trees in an arid region of southern Australia, higher was observed in more exposed (North-facing) canopy positions (Curtis et al. 2019). We’re not aware of any other studies on this.

## Ecology

**Differences across forest vertical gradients in biophysical conditions, plant traits, and metabolism and its thermal responses scale up to affect whole-tree ecology in several ways.** First, vertical gradients in the biophysical environment shape which plant strategies, or sets of traits, are competitive in understory versus canopy conditions. - *Spring and fall leaf phenology in temperate deciduous forests (Augsburger). Mechanism: more moderate conditions (T, wind) in understory (REF).* *Among species that can be deciduous, greater proportion of deciduous individuals in larger size classes (Condit et al. 2000). One potential mechanism is lower temperature/hydraulic stress in understory*

**Vertical gradients also affect tree growth and survival, and how these respond to climatic variation.** There are numerous demographic differences between understory and canopy trees, which have been linked to both the physical environment and plant traits (e.g., REFS), and we will not attempt to review those here. More interesting in this context is how these shape differences in the climatic sensitivity of growth and mortality. Many observations of larger trees suffering more during drought (Bennett et al. 2015). One likely mechanism behind this pattern is that the crowns of larger trees exist higher in the vertical profile and therefore are exposed to higher evaporative demand and solar radiation (McGregor *et al.*). Although drought is primarily a hydraulic problem, lack of water –> lower gs –> higher leaf T, so leaves face tradeoffs of water loss vs potentially damaging leafT.

**There is also recently emerging evidence that understory trees tend to exhibit greater growth declines with under mesic conditions.** In eight forests across the northeast United States, growth rates of understory trees declined sharply at higher (Rollinson et al., in review). Similarly, our previously unpublished analysis shows that in a broadleaf deciduous forest in Virginia, understory trees in a Mid-Atlantic forest responded more negatively to warmer than did canopy trees (Fig. **4**; Appendix **S3**). This pattern is initially counter-intuitive in that sun-exposed leaves can experience greater elevation of over than shade leaves (Fig. **3?**). However, given adequate moisture to sustain high , canopy leaves exposed to more wind and lower humidity should be more effective at cooling when exceeds physiological optima (Fig. **3**). It is also possible that competition is accelerated under warmer temperatures.

**Appears to affect community change under warming (Zellweger et al. 2020).**



**Figure 4. Temperature sensitivity of tree growth for understory versus canopy trees.** Analysis methods described in Appendix S3. Data from Helcoski et al. 2019.

## Future Questions

* Are patterns (in traits, metabolism, ecology) driven by tree height or exposure?
* CO2 may lead to denser understory (Martijn)

## Conclusions

## SI files

Appendix S1. Methods for NEON vertical profiles

Appendix S2. Methods for literature review

Appendix S3. Methods for SCBI tree-ring analysis

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