

Original research papers

# Topographic position effects on Bark beetle damages on spruce differs between Belgium and north France : a remote sensing analysis of 2016-2021 dieback

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## Abstract

Following the droughts of 2018 to 2020, numerous norway spruce diebacks were caused by bark beetles outbreaks in Wallonia and in the Grand-Est. A methodology for detection the health status of spruce was developed based on satellite imagery from the European Union's Earth Observation Programme. The time series of satellite images allowed the modelling of the spectral response of healthy spruce forests over the seasons. Deviations from this seasonal vegetation index trajectory for a healthy spruce stand are caused by a decrease in photosynthetic activity of the forest canopy. This decrease in photosynthesis is caused by a bark beetle attack and is detected automatically. This technique, inspired by the work of INRAe, is robust because of the redundancy of the information from the spatial images, which are repeated every 3-4 weeks. The method results in the production of annual maps of the health status of the Walloon and Grand-Est spruce forests. The most important damage occurred in the years 2018-2019, affecting 2.8% of the total area of spruce stands in Wallonia. Although the main part of the crisis seems to be behind us, it remains to draw the necessary conclusions. The relationship between climatic conditions and the presence of the bark beetle has proven to be complex in Wallonia. Nevertheless, a very strong relationship between altitude and the presence of bark beetle damage could be demonstrated. Stands below 300m in altitude were indeed much more affected. Moreover, forest sites located on steep slopes ( $> 20\%$ ), whether on cold or warm slopes, are more affected than sites located on low slopes (plateaus). In the Grand-Est, the peak of the crisis has been reached in 2019-2020. Altitude and slopes are not strongly influencing factors for spruce dieback.

*Keywords:*

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## 1. Introduction

Global changes imply an increase of disturbances in the forest environment. Frequency and intensity of abiotic (fire, wind, drought) and biotic (pest invasion) will be more and more recurrent (Lindner et al., 2010). Since one decade, principals timber species are affected by sanitary crisis. Norway spruce (*Picea abies* L. Karst) occurs widespread throughout central and western Europe and is one of the most important economic plant species in Europe (Nystedt et al., 2013). Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this species has been used to reforest European forests (von Teuffel et al., 2004). These massive reforestations have generally led to the formation of pure even-aged stands.

The norway spruce is a species that is naturally present in part of the Grand-Est (Vosges mountains) and artificially in Wallonia. The norway spruce was introduced into Wallonia in the second half of the 19th century (Noirfalise and Thill, 1975). This resinous species has taproot sytem with fine roots in shallow depth adapted to intercept rainfall. The precipitation are its primary water source(Weihe (1984) in Tjoeker and Boratynski). In the context of global change, this two regions will suffer in the future of a diminution of precipitation and a increase of drought period in summer. This climate impact the range of tree species in Europe (Hanewinkel et al., 2013). The lack of water for norway spruce involves stress. When this species is stressed, it produces volatile compounds (Netherer et al. (2021)). This extreme event impact the growth and the health of the tree. In condition of stress, the tree is more susceptible to pest attack (Netherer et al. (2015)). The two most important pest for this species are two bark beetles species: *Ips typographus* and *Pityogenes chalcographus*. *Ips typographus* cause the most part of damage. Generally the outbreak of bark beetle are linked with windthrow but also with drought. There are 6 000 species of bark beetle. They play a important role in the cycle of ecosystem. However some species of bark beetles comes into conflict with human because they attack the use the same resource(Raffa et al., 2015).The cycle of life of *Ips typographus* depend on temperature and photoperiod (Baier et al., 2007; Annala, 1969). After swarming, the adult enter in the bark of weakened tree and burrow wood to make brood gallery. They mate and lay the eggs in this gallery. Eggs mature to larvae in the phloem of the tree and will eat the phloem (Hlásny et al., 2021). After the maturation the new beetle emerge to attack new norway spruce. The old adult can re-emerge and produce one sister brood (Zolubas and Byers, 1995). The level of population can be in endemic phasis with low damage but when the condition are favourable for the bark beetle (climate or stressed tree), this level can progress in a epidemic phasis(Kautz et al., 2014). During epidemic phases all health levels of trees can be attacked.

The forest site conditions are important for the good growth and health of the tree. The forest site varies with topography and climate (Brethes, 1989). The non suitability of the tree species for the forest site increase the vulnerability (Jandl, 2020).

Since 2018, massive bark beetle attacks killing spruce trees have been occurring in Wallonia and in the Grand-Est. Following these events, foresters have asked themselves about certain topographical factors that seem to have strongly influenced bark beetle attacks. The spruce forests located at low altitude seem to have been more affected as well as the stands located on southern slopes. The aim of this paper is to describe bark beetle attacks between 2017 and 2021 and give silvicultural advice to limit damage in the future norway crisis.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Study area

The study area was located in the south of Belgium and in the north east of France. We study 2 regions: Wallonia and Grand-Est (Figure 1). In Wallonia, the altitude varies between 100 and 700m. The walloon forest covers 554 600 Ha. The norway spruce stand occupied 139 600 Ha (Alderweireld et al., 2015). Two thirds of the Walloon spruce forest is located above 400m altitude. The Walloon climate is located in the temperate oceanic bioclimatic zone (Lindner et al.,

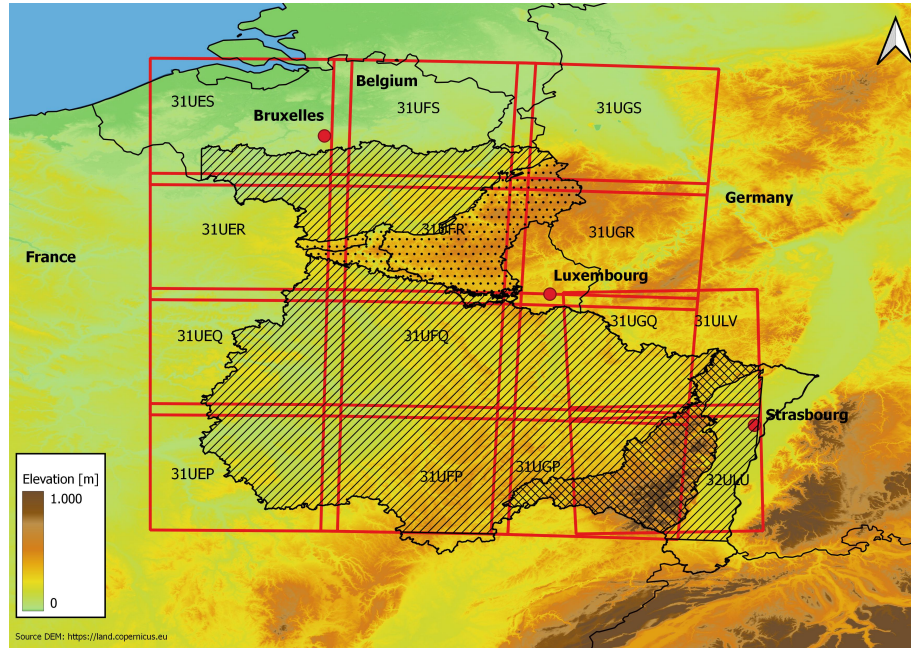


Fig. 1: Study area: Grand-est(hashed) and Wallonia (black dot), tile Sentinel 2 (red square)

2010). Over the 1989-2020 period, the average temperature vary between 8,7°C and 10,7°C and the average sum of rainfall range from 800mm and 1120mm. During 2018, the average temperature was 9°C between 11,7°C and the average sum of rainfall varie between 605 mm and 1015 mm (data of Institut Royal Météorologique). In the Grand-Est, the elevation is between 100m and 1300m. The Grand-est forest occupies 1 939 000 ha. The norway spruce forest covers 136 000 Ha (Inventaire forestier national français, 2022). The majority of norway spruce stand of this region grow between 400m and 900m. The Grand-est is included in the temperate oceanic bioclimatic zone(Lindner et al., 2010). During the 1989-2020 period, the average temperature was between 8,4°C and 11,2°C et the average sum of rainfall range from 720 mm and 1475 mm. During the year 2018, the average temperature vary between 10,16°C and 12,4°C et the average sum of rainfall was 640 mm and 1362mm.

This two regions have been divided with natural regions. We form three group in fonction de precipitation and temperature of this natural regions (Figure 2).

The Ardennes group wich temperature of the growing season varies from 14 °C to 15,5°C and average precipitation between 400mm and 450 mm. The growing season temperature varies 15.5°C and 17 °C and the growing season precipitation between 425mm and 600mm for the Vosges group. The Plaines group are natural region with growing season temperature between 15.5°C and 18°C and with growing season precipitation between 300mm and 400mm.

## 2.2. Description of environmental description

We have used the digital surface model data from the Copernicus Land Monitoring Service (Union, 2022) at a resolution of 25mX25m for all elevation data and slope calculations. Solar orientation influences bark beetle capture in pheromone traps (Mezei et al., 2012). We determined this solar orientation using the Delvaux and Galoux (1962) definition of the three topography orientations. Plateau and low slope are slope less than 20% that does not create a particular micro-climate. Cold slopes are slopes greater than 20% facing north and valley bottom. These are shady, cool and humid areas. Warm slopes are slope greater than 20% facing south. In this orientation the air is warmer and drier and the temperature difference between day and night is

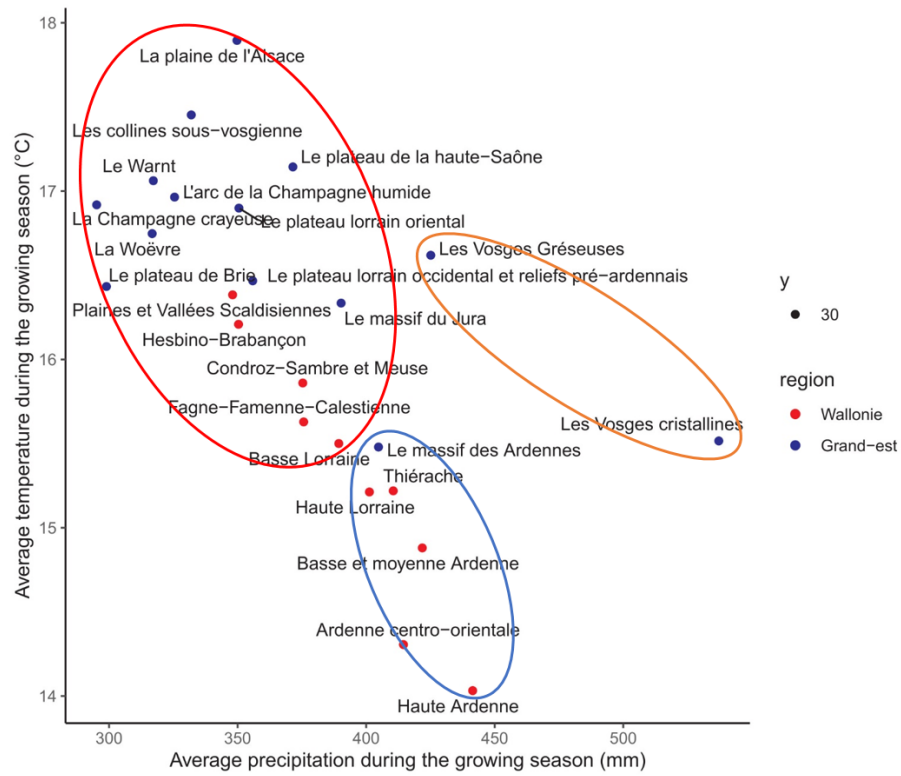


Fig. 2: Grouping of natural regions according to the temperature and precipitation of the growing season to form three groups: Ardennes (blue), Plains (red) and Vosges (orange).

greater. Based on this definition and on the DEM, we produced topography orientation maps for Wallonia and the Grand-Est. Climate data for Wallonia have been provided by the Institut Royal Météorologique (IRM). The resolution of the data is 5km X 5km. Climate data of Grand-est come from the data base Digitalis (Piedallu et al., 2014). The resolution of this data is 1km X 1km.

### 2.3. Mapping of spruce dieback and mortality by analysis of sentinel-2 time-serie

The European Union’s earth observation programme, with its satellite twin constellation Sentinel-2A and Sentinel-2B, provides free earth imagery with a high revisit time. Sentinel-2 (S2) satellites carry multispectral sensor with a ground resolution up to 10 m. S2 imagery have been intensively used recently for forestry purpose, including for the monitoring of bark beetle outbreaks. Low and Koukal (Löw and Koukal, 2020) have modelled phenology courses of vegetation indices to detect forest disturbances. They have properly mapped Bark beetle infestation in Austrian spruce stands. Ali et al. (2021) have used multi-years time series remote sensing data in order to detect early bark beetle infestation in Germany. They have highlighted the potential of S2 data for the production of reliable infestation maps. Bárta et al. (2021) have studied spectral trajectories of nine bands and six vegetation indices from S2 imagery for the 2018 vegetation season. They have confirmed the superiority of multi-date data for the classification by Random Forest of infested stands in the Czech Republic.

In this present research, the detection of bark beetle infestation is realized by using dense time series of S2 imagery following the methodology developed by DUTRIEUX et al. (2021). The two regions studied are covered by 14 Sentinel-2 tiles (Figure 1). Vegetation changes are tracked by means of a phenology metric, the *SWIR Continuum Removal* ( $SWIR_{CR}$ ) indice. All S2 acquisitions are used in the analyses, provided that the cloud cover do not exceed 35 percent. Bottom Of Atmosphere reflectance images (L2A product) are downloaded from the Theia data cluster (Team, 2022) for all the 6 granules, which are tiles of 100km x 100km, that covers Wallonia. For north France, 10 granules cover the Grand-Est. The  $SWIR_{CR}$  is based on three spectral bands, the near-infrared, the shortwave infrared 1 band and the shortwave infrared 2, and is sensitive to the foliage water content (figure 3). Seasonal variation of  $SWIR_{CR}$  for healthy stand is modelled and a bark beetle attack is detected if the observations deviates from the healthy phenology trajectory. Figure 3 illustrates a time-serie of  $SWIR_{CR}$  observations (grey dots) for one pixel. In 2018, the observations goes beyond the threshold represented by the purple-dashed line, which shows that the spruce stand suffer from a serious stress induced by a bark beetle attack. A bark beetle outbreak is confirmed as soon as  $SWIR_{CR}$  vegetation indice show a stress for at least three consecutive times. In parallel to the detection of bark beetle stress, stand cutting and thinning are subject of particular attention. Bare soil is detected by using a combination of red, green and shortwave infrared reflectance values. Cutting are thus taken into account and are classified either as normal harvest cutting or as sanitary thinning based on the health status prior to the cutting. The analysis of image time-serie is thus quite straightforward and is performed individually pixel per pixel starting from the 2016 year, which is the beginning of S2 acquisitions. The dense time-serie covers the 2016-2021 period and count a minimum of 180 acquisition dates. The health status is summarized in annual health maps by means of four classes ; healthy, bark beetle attached, cutted and sanitary thinning.

Our approach of bark beetle detection is only suitable for spruce, as it is closely related to the phenological course of healthy spruce forest. An essential prerequisite is thus to have a proper mapping of spruce stands. For the south of Belgium, we use existing reliable composition maps (Bolyn et al., 2018) computed from remote sensing data in order to restrict our analysis to spruces.

In the Grand-est, the composition map comes from the French Mapping agency (Forest BD version 2). Composition of forest stand is determined by photointerpretation and forest stands identified as "spruce or fir" serve as starting point to limit our analysis. Time series are a convenient means to track phenology changes. More broadly than the detection of bark beetle infestation, phenology courses are highly suitable for forest tree species discrimination (Lisein et al., 2015; Grabska et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2021). We have used S2 spectral bands courses along the vegetation

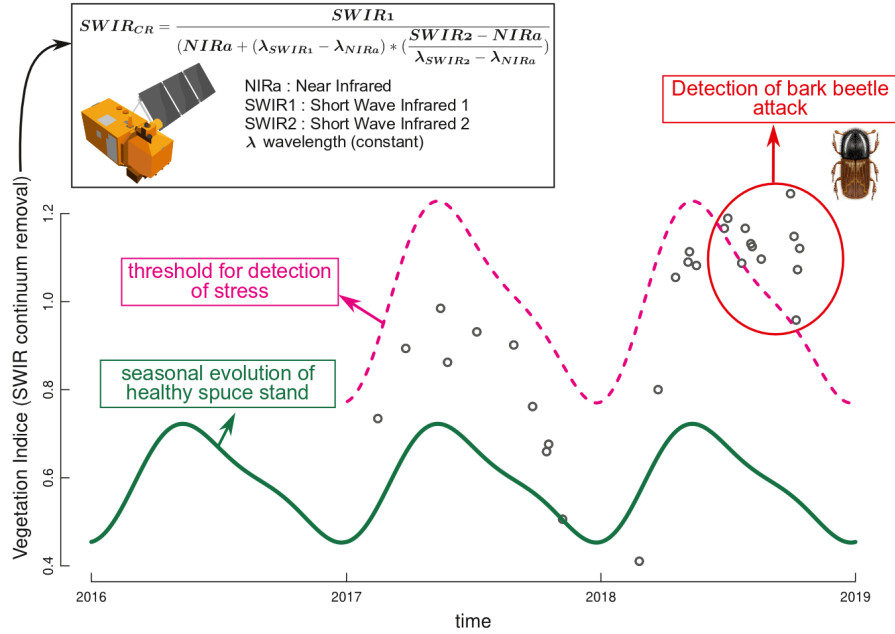


Fig. 3: Bark beetle infestation map are computed by detecting change in the  $SWIR_{CR}$  phenology metric. The  $SWIR$  Continuum Removal is computed using three bands from Sentinel-2 imagery for every single acquisition date and his value is compared to a threshold (purple dashed line) in order to detect vegetation stress. If a stress is detected three consecutive times, we assume that a bark beetle infection occurred.

season to refine the determination of species present in the area interpreted as "spruce or fir" in Vosges. The objective is to identify and remove every area that are not spruce stand, as pixels located on others species than spruce are likely to be wrongly detected as a bark beetle attack. All S2 spectral bands were first summarized for each of the four trimesters of the year, by simply averaging all observations occurring during the trimester. Then, a Random Forest algorithm was trained on these synthetic intra-annual time serie to discriminate spruce from non-spruce pixels, based on a training set of observation from Belgium (Bolgen et al., 2018). Eventually, this Random Forest classifier was applied on "spruce and fir" area of Vosges and bark beetle detection was carried on only for pixels detected as spruce.

#### 2.4. Relation between bark beetle attack and environmental condition

##### 2.4.1. Choice of important variables

We try to choose the two most important environmental variable that influence the attack of bark beetle. We make a resample spruce mask in tile of 50mX50m (the minimum area to make productive silviculture). Each tile corresponds to a productive stand. We extract for all of stand the value of environmental variables. To select the important variables influenced the attack of bark beetle, the random forest algorithm is used (Genuer et al., 2015). Individual classification trees are trained on a 1000 samples of spruce stand of 0,25 Ha by randomly selecting a subset of explanatory variables.

##### 2.4.2. Variation of attack along important gradient

For this study, we selected only spruce trees over 15 m and we have worked on 90 500 Ha in Wallonia and on 125 800 ha of spruce in the Grand-est region.

To characterise the bark beetle attacks, we applied the random forest method to select the two topographic factors that most influenced the bark beetle attacks. These two factors are altitude and

Table 1: Summary table of the crisis

| Region   | Total norway spruce<br>area killed by bark beetle (2016-2021) | Total norway spruce<br>area before crisis |
|----------|---|---|
| Plaines  | 13665 Ha  | 25 552 Ha                                 |
| Ardennes | 13435 Ha  | 101 600 Ha                                |
| Vosges   | 4540 Ha   | 101 065 Ha                                |

topography orientation. We broke down the altitude by 100m classes and kept the three topography orientations classes defined by Delvaux and Galoux (1962). Then, in order to determine the classes of these factors most impacted by the bark beetle, we estimated the bark beetle areas for each class of each factor based on the sanitary status maps for each year of the period 2016-2021.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Choice of environmental variable

#### 3.2. Evolution et importance

The evolution of the crisis differs between these three regions. In the Ardennes, the peak of attack is reached in 2019. The maximum of the ratio of area touched by bark beetles is 3,4%. A begin of decrease is started in 2021.

In the Vosges, the peak is not yet reached. However, the maximum ratio of area affected by bark beetles is inferior of 1,8%. This group is the less impacted.

The Plains group is the group with the most proportion of area affected by this beetle. The Plains region reached the maximum of area affected by bark beetles in 2020. The peak is 23,7%.

#### 3.3. Elevation vs bark beetle presence

The variation of the probability of presence of bark beetles in the three groups natural regions for the period 2017-2021 is described in the figure 5.

In Ardennes group, in the begin of the crisis, the low altitude classes are more affected than high altitude classes. The dieback of norway spruce occur along an altitudinal gradient. This gradient is confirmed over the 5 years of the study. Indeed, during this year a strong increase in the 100-200m and 200-300m altitude classes is observed. These two altitude classes are more affected during this crisis. The stand located above 400m are weakly attacked with maximum 2,5% of presence.

In Vosges group, there are not altitude classes more affected than other. The low altitude are poorly represented. There are no impact of elevation on the presence of bark beetle. The probability of presence of this insect is inferior of 5 % during the study period.

The Plains group are affected mainly in low elevation with a high probability of presence of bark beetle. During the crisis the class of elevation 100m-200m et 200m-300m are strongly affected with a probability of presence exceeding 20%. There is also like in the Ardenne group, a diminution of bark beetle attack along altitudinal gradient. The low altitude stand are the more affected stand and are disappearing.

#### 3.4. topography orientation vs bark beetle presence

In Ardennes, from the beginning of the period to the end, the trend is the same slope are more affected by bark beetles. The north and south slope are similarly affected. The maximum of attack is reached in 2019 with 4 % in the two orientations slopes.

The Plains group is the most affected. There are not clear trend. Before 2020, the north slope are the most touched by bark beetles. From 2020, the attack in the south slopes exceed the attack in north slope. The peak of attack is reached during this year.

The Vosges group is the group of natural region that are the less infested by bark beetle. Before the peak in 2020, there is no trend. However in 2020, the plateaus are more affected than slopes. The trend seem decrease in 2021.

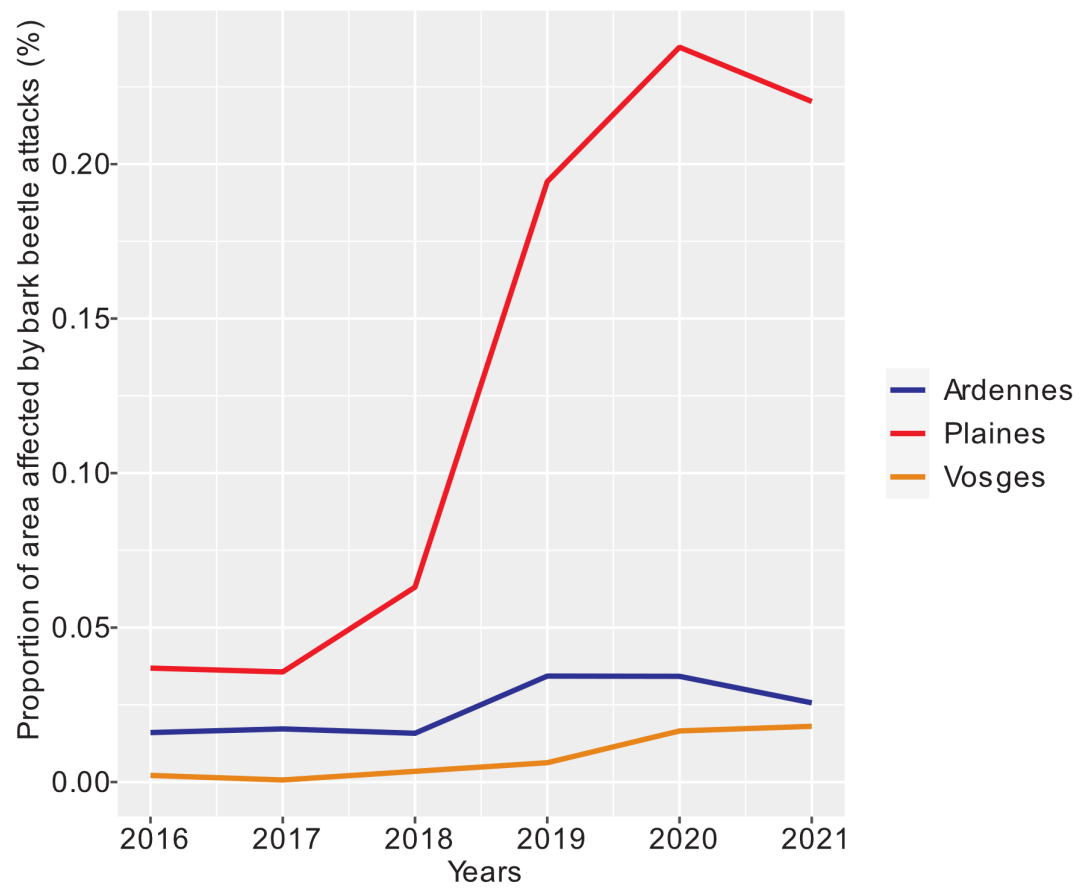


Fig. 4: Proportion of norway spruce area affected by bark beetle. Plaines region in red, Ardennes in blue and Vosges in



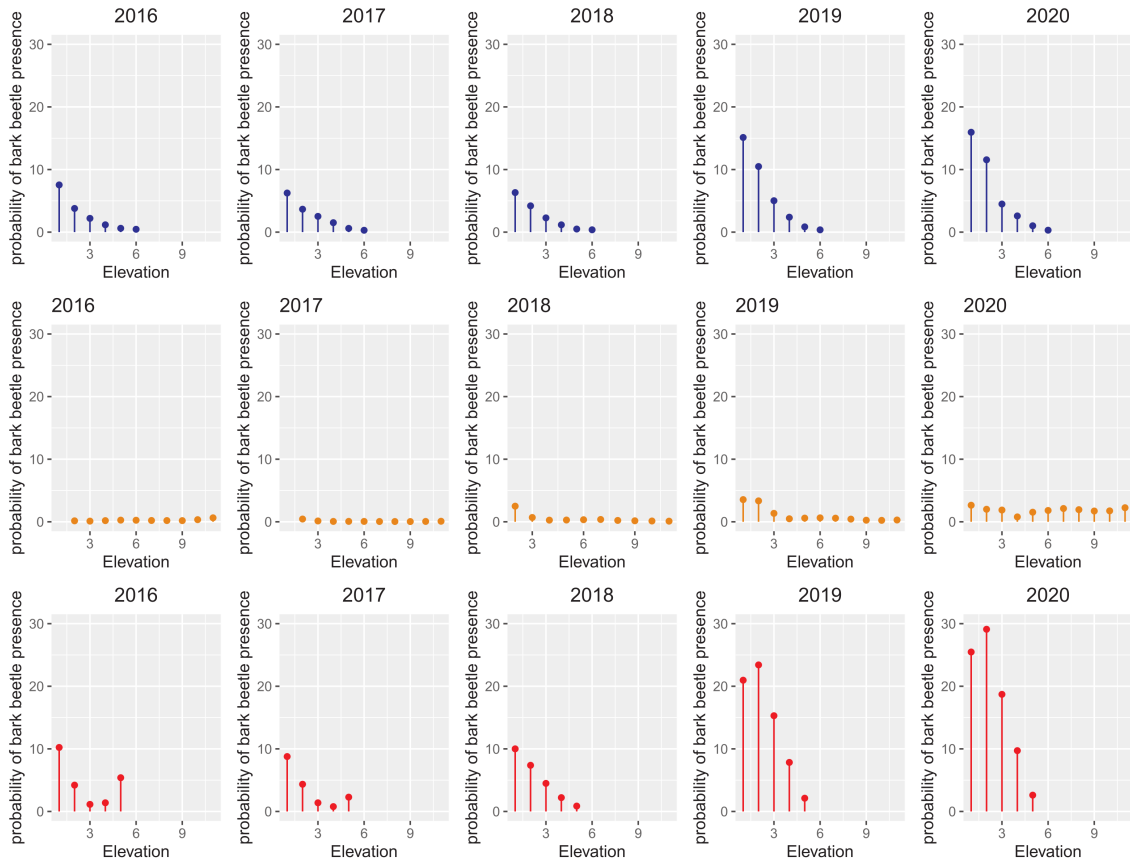


Fig. 5: The altitude has been subdivided into the same 12 elevation classes for both regions. The graphs corresponding to the variation of the probability of presence in Ardennes (blue) are in the upper part of the figure, the Vosges (Orange) in middle part and for the Plaines (red) in the lower part.

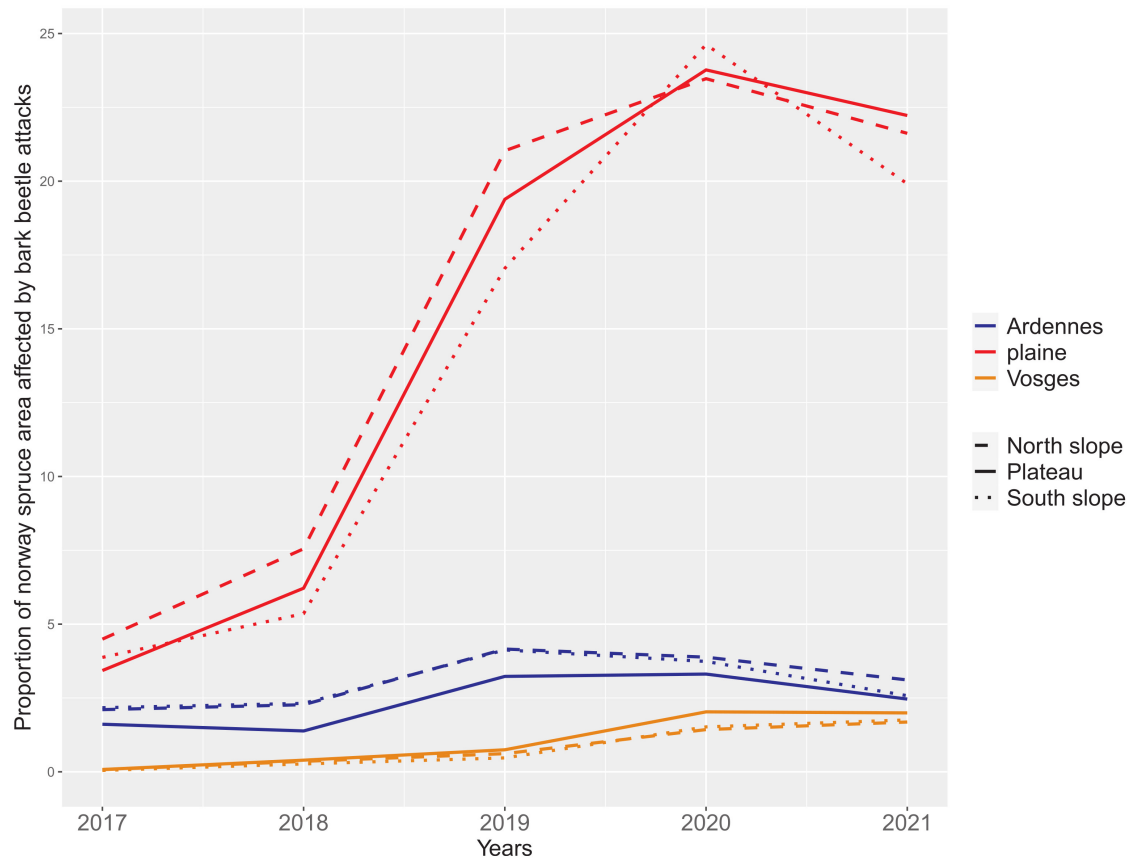


Fig. 6: Proportion area affected by bark beetle attacks in relation to topography orientation. The north slope and south slope are affected similarly by bark beetle in Ardennes and in the Vosges

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Limit and weakness of methodology

The detection of bark beetle attack is based on Sentinel 2 satellite imagery. The methodology use norway spruce mask. In pure even aged norway spruce, the method works well. However, in mixed forest, the norway spruce mask is less accurate than in pure even aged. In fact, our sanitary map resolution is 10m and if there somme deciduous tree or others resinous in the norway spruce mask, there is a risk of error. In Ardennes and in the Plaines, there is principally pure even aged stand of norway spruce but in the Vosges the stand are more mixed. In this region, there is more risk of presence of beech and silver fir in our norway spruce mask.

We overestimated probably the norway spruce area in the Vosges region.

### 4.2. Global trend

In the current study, we found that the plains natural region is most sensible at the attack of bark beetles.

In this natural region , the proportion of attack in 2017 is already over 4 %. This proportion is superior at all maximum of two others regions. The bark beetle is already present in this region because the climate in 2016 was favourable for the development of bark beetle. In fact, the sales data of Department of nature and forest of Wallonia show a increasing volume of Norway spruce infested by bark beetle. The plains region is more hot and with less precipitation than the 2 others regions. The climate condition are suitable for the multiplication of generation of bark beetle during the year ((Baier et al., 2007) and (Annala, 1969)).

The first major attack of bark beetle have started in the plains in 2018 but the majority of the damage occurred in 2019. The explosion of the ratio of area impacted by bark beetle can be also explain by a non-proactive management of forest in this area. The sanitation felling allow to limit explosion of bark beetle (Stadelmann et al., 2013). The plains region is not a resinuous region and the resinous sawmill are far the forest. The time between the infestation of the stand and the sanitation felling is probably to long and allow more easily a pullulation of bark beetle.

In Ardennes, the peak is reached in 2019. The maximum is 4 %. The climate of ardenne is more suitable for norway spruce. This climate is nearby mountain climate. The climate can explain a the limitation of damage in region.

Les masses d'air viennent se caller sur le massif ardennais et des précipitations importantes se créent suite à un effe foehn, permettant à l'épicéa de moins souffrir de la sécheresse dans cette regions à des altitudes faibles par rapport au massif vosgiens.

A des altitudes similaires, cet effet de foehn permet aux épicéas ardennais d'être moins impactés par la secherresse que les épicéas des plaines.

In the Vosges, the increasing of area impacted by bark beetles is relatively weak. The norway spruce os a endemic species in the Vosges mountain. The moutain climate protect this resinous species. Besides the vosgian forest is generally mixed with beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and silver fir (*Abies alba*). Mixed forest are significantly more resitant to pest attack (Jactel et al., 2021).

The difference of proportion affected by bark beetle in Ardenne and Vosges can be explained by type of forest. In Ardennes, the even aged pure stand is predominantly whereas in the Vosges the forest are more mixed.

### 4.3. Altitude

In the plaines, all classes of elevation are touched more than 10 % during the crisis except for the classe 500-600m. The altitude didn't protect the tree during the drought. All of this stand are artificial stand plant in area not adapted for mountain tree. In the Ardennes from 300m to 700m the forest have been affected to a maximum of 5%.

- Différence climat (Climat semicontinental/montagnard vs climat tempéré océanique)

- Différence sylvicole ( Wallonie futaie régulière exploitable vs Vosges peuplement + mélange et moins exploitable en haute altitude)
- Sommet des vosges épicéas endémiques vs épicéas en plantations (résilience peuplement )
- adaptation ép à condition plus rude en versant sud que nord D'après la théorie il devrait y avoir plus de génération sur versant sud car car + chaud et donc plus touché Seuil létal ou le letargie atteint en versant sud?
- meilleure surveillance des forestiers sur versant sud que nord

#### 4.4. Topography orientation

explain that the bark beetle attack more in south slope. However, our result show that there is no more attack on south slope than in north slope. Bark beetle attack norway spruce with same proportion south slope and north slope in the Ardennes and in the Vosges. In the Plaines, there is no tendency of topography orientation.

#### 4.5. Facteur déterminant l'attaque par l'épicéa ou le scolyte

- Discussion généralisation de modèle scolyte/ dépérissement des épicéas
- est ce la Biologie du scolyte/ ou le stress de l'épicéa qui conditionne le dépérissement massif ?

## 5. Conclusion

## 6. Figure

## 7. Acknowledgements

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