**Title:** Nuisance species compromise the carbon sequestration potential in an Eastern US temperate deciduous forest

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**Running head:**

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# Abstract

* temperate deciduous forests play a critical role in the global carbon cycle, accounting for a substantial portion of the global forest C sink
* The dominant view imbued in Earth System Models is that, at least within the eastern US, the biome is likely to remain a C sink for the remainder of the 21st century
* However, these models do not incorporate nuisance species – i.e., species whose local abundance has been dramatically increased as a result of human activities and that are causing ecological harm.
* Nuisance species are known to increase tree mortality (non-endemic pests and pathogens) and decrease recruitment (deer, non-endemic plants) throughout the (Eastern US) temperate deciduous biome, yet we don’t know net effect on current and future C cycling
* Here, we use 15 years of detailed census data from a large forest dynamics plot with a deer exclosure to understand how nuisance species are affecting C cycling
* we show increased biomass mortality, reduced ∆AGB (only outside deer exclosure?), reduced AGB (only outside deer exclosure?)
* if current trends continue, forest will continue to lose C sequestration capacity/ likely to be C source in future
* thus, C sequestration potential of temperate deciduous forests is overestimated

**Keywords**:

# 1 Introduction

The temperate forest biome plays a critical role in the global carbon cycle, accounting for almost half of the net global forest carbon (C) sink (Harris *et al.*, 2021), with deciduous forests representing a substantial portion of this, sequestering >300 Tg C yr-1 (Pugh *et al.*, 2019). Although currently a C sink, the future of the biome remains uncertain. The dominant view imbued in Earth System Models is that, at least within the eastern US, the biome is likely to remain a C sink for the remainder of the 21st century (Finzi *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2023), albeit with declining CO2 sequestration capacity (Ahlström *et al.*, 2012). Yet, global C models predict a wide range of future trajectories of CO2 sequestration (Ahlström *et al.*, 2012; Arora *et al.*, 2020), and current global C models do not represent some influential mechanisms (e.g., Fatichi *et al.*, 2014; Clark *et al.*, 2021). One mechanism that is not represented in global C models is the impact of nuisance species – i.e., endemic or non-endemic species that, as a result of human influence, have much greater abundance in an ecosystem than they did historically, resulting in undesirable ecological consequences (**refs?**). Similarly, the impact of nuisance species on forest carbon budgets is not considered in machine learning/niche models that seek to project future forest distribution and carbon stocks (**?** Wu *et al.*, 2023), nor in carbon offset projects (**???** **refs?**). This is problematic in that nuisance species – including non-endemic insect pests and pathogens, non-endemic plants, and over-abundant herbivores – are dramatically impacting carbon cycling in temperate deciduous forests around the world, as described below.

## 1.1 (paragraph on tree mortality from non-endemic pests and pathogens)

Non-endemic pests and pathogens have been important driver of mortality (Anderson-Teixeira *et al.*, 2021). These can reduce C and need to be considered in future climate change projections.

Fei *et al.* (2019)

## 1.2 (paragraph on recruitment failure because of deer and non-endemic plants)

* white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus* ) is important endemic nuisance species, over-abundant because of human influence

McGarvey *et al.* (2013) Holm *et al.* (2013)

The capacity to regenerate following disturbances, including ongoing gap formation through mortality of canopy trees, critically influences long-term forest dynamics. Regeneration depends first upon seed production and then upon seedling recruitment, survival, and growth into trees. When any one of these steps fails, the stage is set for disturbance to push forest ecosystems over a tipping point, whereby there is little chance that a forest will recover to it’s pre-disturbance state in the foreseeable future (**refs?**). Global change pressures can set the stage for such critical transitions by gradually shifting baseline conditions, making post-disturbance recovery unlikely despite the persistence of mature trees (Anderson-Teixeira *et al.*, 2013; McDowell *et al.*, 2020; **refs?**). In the mid-Atlantic region of eastern North America, forests face a severe “regeneration debt”, meaning that there are insufficient juveniles of current canopy tree species to replace the mature cohort when they eventually die (Miller & McGill, 2019; Miller *et al.*, 2023). Low juvenile abundance in the region is driven by a combination of over-abundant deer, competition with non-endemic species, and possibly climate change (Russell *et al.*, 2017; Miller & McGill, 2019; Miller *et al.*, 2023). The juveniles that are present tend to represent a different, more mesophytic set of species (*Acer spp.*, *Fagus grandifolia*) than currently dominate much of the region (*Quercus spp.*, *Carya spp.*, Miller & McGill (2019); Nowacki & Abrams (2015)]–a dynamic driven by fire suppression and mesophication (**refs?**).

Here, we use 15 years of detailed census data from a large forest dynamics plot including a 4-ha deer exclosure to test the following hypotheses: (1) canopy tree mortality and associated biomass loss are increasing, in large part due to non-endemic nuisance species (pests & pathogens) (2) growth and recruitment (outside deer exclosure) have not kept pace with tree mortality, resulting in declining AGB (-∆AGB) (3) C stocks have declined (-∆AGB), and will decline further if current trends continue

# 2 Materials and Methods

## 2.1 Study site

*(describe location, forest type, etc)*

In addition to our consideration of the plot as a whole, we give special consideration to three portions of the plot: (1) representative upland forest (Fig. 1a) - # ha of the plot, excluding areas around streams (*delineated using topographic wetness index, described in McGregor et al. (2021)*) and the two special focal areas (2) deer exclosure (Fig. 1b)- 4 ha portion of upland forest in the SE quarter of the plot, fenced in YEAR and maintained mainly deer-free for the past ## years; (3) “tree graveyard” (Fig. 1c) - a # ha section of upland forest in the NE corner of the plot where extensive mortality of *Fraxinus* and other canopy trees within the past decade has resulted in an open canopy and heavy ground cover of invasive plants. The latter was delineated based on *(define & describe criteria)*



**Photos within the SCBI ForestGEO plot: (a) represenative upland forest, (b) deer exclosure, (c) “tree graveyard” in NE corner**  *(Perhaps combine these with a map of the plot?)*

## 2.2 Data collection

*(describe main census & years occurred)*

*(describe mortality census)*

*(describe invasive plants survey)*

*(describe seedlings survey, if used)*

## 2.3 Analyses

# 3 Results

# 4 Discussion

# 5 Conclusions (optional)

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# Conflict of Interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

# Authors’ contributions

*[Name of author 1] and [Name of author 2] conceived the ideas and designed methodology; [Name of author 1] and [Name of author 3] collected the data; [Name of author 2] and [Name of author 4] analysed the data; [Name of author 1] and [Name of author 4] led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.*

# Data availability

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