Carbon dynamics in tropical trees from a seasonal dry forest reveals storage-growth trade-off

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**Abstract**

Trees use non-structural carbon (NSC) to survive seasonal stress. Thus, NSC accumulation competes with other carbon sinks such as growth. We investigated the seasonality of NSC storage and use in three tree species representing different storage strategies and leaf habits in a seasonally dry tropical forest in the southern Amazon. We also aimed to identify storage-growth trade-offs and their response to seasonal changes in precipitation in these species. We measured monthly growth rates, soluble sugars and starch every three months during 2019 in *Dacryodes microcarpa* (semi-deciduous/fiber-storing-species), *Ocotea leucoxylon* (evergreen/parenchyma-storing-species), and *Sacoglottis guianensis* (semi-deciduous/parenchyma-storing-species). Seasonal changes in NSC content were dominated by changes in starch, not soluble sugars, and these changes were significant only for the semi-deciduous species *D. microcarpa* and *S. guianensis*. There was a negative relationship between starch consumption/accumulation and growth rate during the wet season for fiber-storing-species. For parenchyma-storing species, this negative relationship was evident during the transition between the dry and wet seasons, although with a time lag. This negative relationship indicates a trade-off in carbon allocation between starch consumption/accumulation and wood growth during the rainy months, and suggests that reserves are accumulated at the expense of tree growth in these species.

1. **Introduction**

Trees assimilate CO2 via photosynthesis to produce non-structural carbon (NSC), which consists mainly of soluble sugars, starch and lipids. Sugars are transported to all tree organs to fuel metabolism and growth, and locally accumulated as starch and lipids to provide energy reserves on different time scales, e.g., daily, seasonal or interannual (Chapin et al., 1990; Richardson et al., 2013). Seasonal changes in the NSC content in different tree organs reflect imbalances between carbon sources (e.g., photosynthesis) and sinks (e.g., growth and respiration) (Kozlowski, 1992; Körner, 2003) and can indicate the use of stored carbon to fuel different vital metabolic functions in order to survive disturbances, dry and hot conditions, or droughts (Hartmann and Trumbore, 2016). Understanding how trees accumulate and use their NSC in key organs such as stem wood will improve our understanding about how trees maintain their metabolism under stress.

Stem wood plays a central role in NSC dynamics and long term storage in adult trees (Arx et al., 2017; Furze et al., 2018, 2020; Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). It is not only the largest reservoir of NSC in trees, but it is also the main transport route of NSC and water between tree organs (Plavcová et al., 2016; Furze et al., 2018). Wood anatomical traits can influence the way trees access or accumulate carbon reserves (Barbaroux and Bréda, 2002; Furze et al., 2020; Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). For instance, in temperate trees, wood anatomical traits such as vessel distribution constrain not only the NSC distribution in wood, but also its seasonal dynamics (Barbaroux and Bréda, 2002; Michelot et al., 2012; Furze et al., 2020). Other traits such as the formation of living fibers in the stem wood, the abundance and size of parenchyma cells, and their longevity may also influence the seasonal response of NSC and tree survival following environmental stress in tropical trees (Arx et al., 2017; Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). Understanding how wood traits are related to NSC dynamics will provide a mechanistic understanding about how trees regulate carbon storage to increase competitiveness and/or survival.

Carbon storage dynamics can be controlled by physiological processes related to carbon source or sink activity under the influence of environmental conditions (Würth et al., 2005; Palacio et al., 2014; O’Brien et al., 2015, 2020; Resco de Dios and Gessler, 2021). However, NSC storage processes can be up-regulated by increased gene expression, so that reserve formation competes with other carbon sinks (Wiley and Helliker, 2012; Martínez-Vilalta, 2014; Huang et al., 2021). This may allow trees to maintain carbon stores that enable them to face future stressful conditions (Sala et al., 2012; Dietze et al., 2014; Resco de Dios and Gessler, 2021). Storage up-regulation may be species specific (Poorter and Kitajima, 2007) and likely greater in species that store NSC for long periods of time (Blumstein et al., 2022). A large amount of living cells used for NSC storage (e.g., species with living fibers and parenchyma) may indicate a high prioritization of storage formation, which may compete with other carbon sinks like growth and respiration (Plavcová et al., 2016; Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). Trees with better control of storage and sink activity may be better adapted to stressful conditions that severely reduce photosynthesis or increase carbon demand. Thus, it is important to identify tree traits that could indicate which tree species may have better control over their carbon storage and sink activity in highly vulnerable tropical forests.

Regulation of storage and sink activity results in trade-offs between NSC storage and some important carbon sinks such as growth, respiration and defense compounds (Poorter and Kitajima, 2007). These trade-offs may indicate different plant survival strategies, ranging from long-lived species that may prioritize NSC storage at the expense of growth to ensure future survival, to short-lived species that invest into fast growth while storing less NSC (Wright et al., 2004; O’Brien et al., 2014; Blumstein et al., 2022). Trade-offs between NSC storage, growth and defense have been observed in some temperate species. For example, studies have shown that NSC may be prioritized over growth under various stressful conditions such as defoliation, drought and low atmospheric CO2 concentrations (Anderegg et al., 2012; Hartmann et al., 2015; Piper et al., 2015; Wiley et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2019; Piper and Paula, 2020). Allocation to defense compounds have been reduced to maintain the minimum operational NSC storage required for survival under shade and low CO2 (Huang et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2020). However, NSC can also be accumulated to build defenses in the future and therefore such trade-offs may not be immediate and may exhibit time lags. Thus, in many instances, trade-offs are not clear. In some cases, identifying growth-storage trade-offs can be difficult due to the variability in carbon assimilation or by other competing carbon sinks such as respiration and reproduction (Wiley and Helliker, 2012; Huang et al., 2019; Blumstein et al., 2022). For example, as carbon supply increases, both growth rate and NSC content may increase, masking the trade-offs between the two competing sinks (Huang et. al., 2019; Blumstein et al., 2022). Therefore, these trade-offs should be examined by accounting for differences in carbon assimilation while measuring seasonal changes in starch content, growth and other sink activities that may actively compete for NSC. Understanding these trade-offs and their relationships with wood anatomical traits would help us to know what conditions benefit high storers or fast growing trees to improve tree survival in seasonally dry tropical forests.

In this context, here we aim to understand how seasonal changes in precipitation and relative humidity are related to seasonal changes in starch mass in the stem wood and stem radial growth in three tropical tree species that contrast in their strategies for starch storage in the stem wood (as identified in Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021) and leaf habit (evergreen and semi-deciduous). We used leaf habit as a proxy for carbon source variation throughout the year. To achieve this, we divided our tree species into four functional groups (Fig. 1). Each of these groups is expected to have different seasonal dynamics in stem wood NSC, responding to different imbalances between carbon sources and sinks. Nevertheless, in this work we only measured trees from three functional groups (Fig. 1). These species were selected because they represent well the combinations between the considered life history traits (starch storage strategy in wood, leaf habit, mortality and growth), as estimated in Herrera-Ramírez et al., (2021). Based on this conceptual framework, we expect that: i) semi-deciduous/fiber-storing species would have larger seasonal changes in NSC due to a greater seasonal variation in photosynthesis, greater demand for carbon for respiration and a greater plasticity in growth rates than the other functional groups; ii) an increase in carbon sink activity during the wet season will lead to consumption of NSC reserves and therefore NSC storage-growth trade-offs would occur during this season; and iii) NSC storage-growth trade-offs would differ between functional groups. Thus, fiber-storing species would show a negative correlation between growth and storage during the wet season due to strong seasonality in growth rates, whereas parenchyma-storing species would not show a strong negative correlation between growth and storage.

# Methods

# 2.1. Site description

This study was conducted in a transitional forest between the Amazon rainforest and the Cerrado, located at Tanguro Ranch, Mato Grosso, Brazil. It is a seasonally dry forest with mean annual precipitation of 1770 mm distributed between the dry season (May to September) with less than 10 mm of precipitation per month and a wet season (October to April) with a mean precipitation of 150 mm per month (Fig. 2). Relative humidity follows a similar seasonal pattern, falling below 60% from June to September and above 80% from December to February (Fig. 2). The mean temperature is 25˚C with almost no seasonal variation throughout the year (data obtained from the local station at Tanguro Ranch, operated by the Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazônia, IPAM).

## 2.2. Species description

We selected three tree species previously shown to have contrasting starch storage strategies in wood, parenchyma-storing species and fiber-storing species (Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021), different leaf habits (evergreen or semi-deciduous), and different growth and mortality rates (Table 1). From each tree species we chose 12 mature and healthy trees reaching the canopy with a diameter at breast height (at 1.3 m, dbh) bigger than 20 cm (Table 1).

## 2.3. Sampling strategy

We sampled the selected 36 trees every three months from May 2019 to February 2020, specifically in May 2019 (transition from wet to dry season), August 2019 (dry season), November 2019 (transition from dry to wet season), and February 2020 (wet season). During each field campaign we took two wood cores (~ 5mm diameter and 20 cm long) approximately 10 cm away from the last collection point. We used one wood core to quantify starch distribution along the radial axis from bark to pith using the histological quantification method described in Herrera-Ramírez et al. (2021). The second wood core was used to incubate CO2 and estimate wood respiration rates.

## 2.4. NSC seasonality

To quantify the starch concentration using the histological method we took 30 m thick slices and mounted them on a glass slide with glycerol. The wood surface was covered with Lugol’s iodine solution for 3 minutes to stain starch grains and then covered with a coverslip. The stained samples were photographed using an optical digital microscope with a large depth-of-field (Keyence, VHX-6000, USA) within 3 hours. Panoramic images of the sample were taken at 300x magnification.

We quantified the percentage of starch in the samples by repeatedly measuring the areal percentage of starch coverage for each 1 mm2 area over the wood surface using the Image J software (Schneider et al., 2012). We divided the images into radial increments of 5 mm from bark to pith to measure the radial distribution of starch in the wood core. We measured starch in all 5 mm-increment sections until no starch was found in the wood. While doing so, we also manually eliminated artifacts from the images that may have interfered with the quantification. After preparing the images, we ran an automatic script for identifying and quantifying starch grains in multiple 1 mm2 regions of interest (ROI), randomly selected along the images (see supplementary material Methods S2 in Herrera-Ramírez et al. (2021) for details). After identifying all starch grains in a ROI, the script calculates the percentage of the surface area covered by starch. We measured 50 ROIs in each image of 5 mm segments of the stem increment core. We took the average of these 50 ROI measurements as an estimate of the percentage of starch for each of the 5 mm sections of the increment core in each of the 12 trees per species. Measurements of the areal percentage covered by starch closely approximate the concentration of starch per gram of dry wood (Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). Finally, we estimated the mass of starch per wood core by integrating the starch mass per 5 mm segment based on wood density, segment volume, and the measured percentage of starch per unit of volume along the radial path of the wood core. We estimated the seasonal changes in the starch content by estimating the change in the starch mass between two consecutive sampling periods: thus the starch change for the dry season June-August 2019 (Aug19) was the change in estimated mass between May 2019 and August 2019; for the transition between dry and wet season September to November 2019 (Nov19) was the change between Augusts 2019 and November 2019; and the starch change in the wet season December 2019 to February 2020 was taken from the difference in mass between November 2019 and February 2020

To measure the concentration of soluble sugars, with a chemical method (Landhäusser et al., 2018), we segmented the wood core in two depth ranges: 0-2 cm and 2-4 cm. These measurements were made only for 5 individuals per species and for samples taken in January and July 2018. In order to quantify soluble sugars, we followed the protocol “*S1*" described in Landhäusser et al. (2018). Each wood core segment was ground to a fine powder using a ball mill (Retsch MM 400, Haan, Germany) at 25 Hz for 30 seconds and dried at 60 °C overnight. We weighed 50 mg of wood powder and mixed it with 1.5 ml of 80 % ethanol for 10 minutes at 90 ˚C in order to extract the soluble sugars. After cooling to room temperature, the samples were centrifuged at 13000 g for 2 minutes. The supernatant was recovered in a new vial, diluted, filtered, and then used for measuring three specific sugars (sucrose, fructose and glucose) by HPAE-PAD. For quality control we used blanks, standard solutions with known concentration of glucose, fructose and sucrose and internal standards made of a mix of tree leaf and branch samples as detailed in the protocol “*S3*" of Landhäusser et al. (2018). We estimated the average concentration of soluble sugars per wood core and compared between time points.

## 2.5. Sink activity measurements

We measured monthly stem growth with manual dendrometer bands (D1, Labcell Ltd, UK). These dendrometers were installed at breast height for each tree in July 2018, and measurements were collected monthly (by manually reading) until July 2020. We used three month moving averages of growth rates, which we calculated to reduce the effect of water dynamics in our growth data, capturing the average intra-annual radial growth variations (Zweifel et al., 2006, 2016). From these data we calculated annual growth for each tree during 2019 and compared it with the mean annual starch mass and the changes in the starch mass every three months. We also estimated seasonal growth, summing the monthly growth from the three months before each collection date and correlated this with the estimated starch mass and the starch change between seasons.

We measured wood respiration during the wet season (May) and the dry season (August) of 2019 by incubation of stem cores taken from each tree for a period of 36 hours following collection. The wood cores were cut at the depth in the stem we had previously identified where starch is depleted (6 cm for *O. leucoxylon*, 8 cm for *D. microcarpa* and 12 cm for S. guianensis). The cores were sealed in cylindrical chambers and incubated in parallel for 36 hours at ambient temperature (~25C˚). The produced CO2 was collected in custom made glass flasks. We purified the total amount of collected CO2 volumetrically after cryogenic separation on a vacuum line, and the total sample volume by measuring the pressure at room temperature. Flask volumes were calculated individually by filling with water and weighing. Then we calculated the respiration rate for each sample by dividing the total amount of collected CO2 (in mg C) by the incubation time and wood volume of the incubated core segment.

We monitored other seasonal carbon sink activities by observing leaf, flower and fruit phenology patterns, using observations made for each species at this location over the last 8 years. The percentage of crown coverage of young leaves, mature leaves, flowers and fruits have been recorded monthly from selected species. The patterns were classified in 5 categories (0, 25, 50, 75 and 100%). We used these data to estimate seasonal changes in the phenological data by fitting a smoothing spline model to the monthly data.

## 2.6. Data analysis

We used a Wilcoxon rank test with paired samples to compare starch content and growth between measurement dates. We used ANOVA and Wilcoxon tests to compare starch content between species, storage strategies and leaf habits. We estimated the effect of environmental variables such as precipitation and relative humidity on the starch mass variability by evaluating differences between the group of trees measured at different values of the climatic variables. We compared growth with the estimated starch mass and starch changes between seasons using linear regression models. We used R version 3.6.1 for all calculations.

# Results

## 3.1. Seasonality of NSC mass, growth and respiration

Starch and soluble sugar concentrations decreased radially across the sapwood from bark to pith for all species for all sampling dates. The soluble sugars concentration was always very low (up to 2 %) for all species and we did not find significant differences between the wet and dry season of 2018 (Fig. S1). Therefore, they were not measured for 2019.

We found significant differences in starch mass between sampling dates for semi-deciduous species *D. microcarpa* and *S. guianensis*, while the evergreen species *O. leucoxylon* did not show significant changes in starch mass in the stem wood during 2019. The effect of storage strategy on the starch dynamics was significant (*p = 0.055*). Seasonal changes in starch mass were stronger for the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa* (*p*=0.009) than in the parenchyma-storing species *S. guianensis* (*p* = 0.059, Fig. 3). For both species the lowest starch mass was found during the dry season (August 2019) while the starch mass was higher in February 2020 for *S. guianensis* and in May 2019 for *D. microcarpa* (Fig. 3).

Seasonality in growth rates during 2019 were only significant for the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa*. These trees grew slower during the dry season and faster during the wet season (Fig. 4). The two parenchyma-storing species did not show a clear seasonal pattern, although a slight decrease in growth rates during the dry season can be noticed (Fig. 4).

Wood respiration was higher in the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa* (*p<0.01*) than in the parenchyma-storing species *S. guianensis* and *O. leucoxylon*. Nevertheless, despite a slight decrease in wood respiration during the dry season for all three species, the differences between wet and dry season in 2019 were not statistically significant for any of the species (Fig. 5).

## 3.2. Relationship between NSC, precipitation and relative humidity

We observed a parabolic trend (inverted-U shape) between precipitation and relative humidity and starch mass in the fiber-storing species (*D. microcarpa*) where starch was greatest at moderate levels of both environmental variables (Fig. 6). In contrast, we observed a linear positive trend between starch mass and monthly precipitation for *S. guianensis* trees (Fig. 6a). Nevertheless, when considering three months of accumulated precipitation the trend between starch content and precipitation also becomes parabolic. For *O. leucoxylon*, there was also a slight parabolic trend in starch content with respect to precipitation and relative humidity (Fig. 6).

## 3.3. Storage-growth trade-offs

For the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa* we observed a negative correlation between the last three months of growth and changes in starch content during the peak of the wet season between December 2019 and February 2020 (*p* = 0.05, r2 = 0.36). During this period some trees consumed starch to grow faster and some other individuals accumulated it at expense of growth (Fig. 7). For this species most of the individuals consumed large quantities of starch during the dry season (from June 2019 to August 2019), but this was not related with growth.

For the parenchyma-storing species *O. leucoxylon* and *S. guianensis*, there was a time lag in the relationship between the starch consumption/accumulation and growth. Starch accumulation during the transition months between the dry and wet seasons (from September 2019 to November 2019) resulted in a decrease in growth rates during the peak of the wet season (September 2019 to February 2020). For instance, most of *O. leucoxylon* accumulated starch during the period from September to November 2019 (transition from dry to wet season), which resulted in lower growth rates during the wet season (December 2019 to February 2020, *p*=0.033, r2=0.41, Fig. 7). A few individuals consumed a small proportion of NSC, which had a positive effect on growth during the upcoming wet season (Fig. 7). For this species, most of the trees consumed their reserves during the wet season, but it did not correlate with growth.

Most of the *S. guianensis* trees also accumulated starch during the transition months between dry and wet season, which also had a very marginal negative impact on the stem growth during the upcoming wet season (*p*=0.10, r2=0.38, Fig. 7). For this species, it was not clear when trees consumed more starch. During the peak of the wet season for instance, about half of sampled individuals consumed starch while half of them accumulated it, but it was also not related with stem growth.

We observed that starch mass was related to annual stem growth, but there were differences between storage strategies. A potential storage-growth trade-off is distinguishable for the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa*, which showed a marginal negative relationship between the starch mass in February 2020 and the annual growth calculated from February 2019 to February 2020 (*p*=0.11, r2=0.31, Fig. 8). This trade-off is stronger (*p*=0.08, r2=0.30) if we consider only the mean growth during the growing season and compare it with the starch content in February. This means that trees that grew more slowly during 2019 accumulated more starch, suggesting a higher priority for starch storage in this fiber-storing species. The parenchyma-storing species showed positive correlation between annual growth and starch content during the dry season. For instance, *O. leucoxylon* showed a positive relationship between starch content in May 2019 (transition time between the wet and the dry seasons) and the annual stem growth (*p*=0.088, r2=0.4), while *S. guianensis* showed it during August 2019 (*p*=0.003, r2=0.76, Fig. 8).

1. **Discussion**

Our results support the hypotheses set up by our conceptual framework, which relates differences in carbon dynamics in mature trees to two specific functional traits: 1. Storage strategy of starch in the stem wood and 2. leaf habit (Fig. 1). The interaction between these traits in our conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between carbon sources (e.g., photosynthesis), the strength and seasonality of carbon sinks (e.g., respiration, growth and reproduction), and the NSC dynamics in stem wood, and together may help to explain differences in growth and mortality response to stress among species. For instance, the slow growing semi-deciduous/fiber-storing species *Dacryodes microcarpa* showed stronger seasonality in NSC mass and growth rate than the other functional groups. For such species, storing large amounts of starch is fundamental to meet the future high carbon demand for respiration (due to the large volume of living stem tissue), resulting in a lower and more seasonal allocation of carbon to growth, which is likely to benefit plant competition/survival and result in low mortality rates (Table 1). The fast-growing semi-deciduous/parenchyma-storing species *Sacoglottis guianensis* showed seasonality in NSC but no plasticity in growth and respiration, and the evergreen/parenchyma-storing species *Ocotea leucoxylon* showed no seasonal variability in any of the carbon fluxes, suggesting a priority of growth over storage in the long run and a higher vulnerability to environmental changes, resulting in higher mortality rates for these species (Table 1).

Our conceptual framework and measurements also suggest the differential occurrence of trade-offs between growth and storage (Fig. 1). Negative correlations between growth and storage occurred during the wet season for the slow-growing, fiber-storing species, mainly because of the strong seasonality in growth rates (Fig. 4, Fig. 7, Fig. 8). This indicates that these species may better regulate carbon sink activity to ensure long-term storage, which could result in lower growth and mortality rates than their counterparts the parenchyma-storing species (Table 1, Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these trade-offs were also evident in parenchyma-storing species during the transition months from the dry to the wet season, although with some months of delay, probably reflecting the use of reserves for other carbon sinks like reproduction. The conceptual framework supported by our results improves our understanding of the carbon dynamics in mature trees and provides insights into the mechanisms behind storage accumulation and use that may lead to plant survival in tropical forests.

## 4.1. Semi-deciduous and fiber-storing species have seasonal changes of NSC

As we expected, leaf habit and storage strategy of starch in the wood influence the seasonal fluctuation of starch in the stem wood. Semi-deciduous species showed significant starch seasonality (*p*=0.001), while evergreen species did not. Semi-deciduous trees may experience large imbalances between carbon sources and sinks during the dry season due to the high demand for carbon to rebuild the canopy, therefore showing larger seasonal changes in starch mass than evergreen species (Kozlowski, 1992; Hoch et al., 2003; Würth et al., 2005; Richardson et al., 2013; Furze et al., 2018). This is consistent with studies showing strong seasonality in temperate deciduous species but not in evergreen species (Chapin et al., 1990; Piispanen and Saranpää, 2001; Trumbore et al., 2015; Martínez-Vilalta et al., 2016; Furze et al., 2018). Our results support the idea that semi-deciduous trees are more dependent on NSC storage than evergreen species in seasonally dry tropical forests. Nevertheless, a larger number of species and longer time series of NSC dynamics should be examined to confirm these patterns. Histological methods provide a rapid and convenient method for quantifying starch storage that can support observations in a high number of species over the longer term.

Wood anatomical traits also influence the seasonal dynamics of NSC. So far, the storage strategies defined based on wood anatomical traits had a marginal effect (*p*=0.055) on the starch seasonality, where the fiber-storing species (*D. microcarpa*) had slightly larger seasonal changes than parenchyma-storing species. Other wood anatomical traits such as vessel distribution have been shown to influence seasonal NSC dynamics, with ring-porous species showing larger seasonal changes in NSC content than diffuse-porous species (Barbaroux and Bréda, 2002; Furze et al., 2020). For fiber-storing species, the high seasonal carbon consumption may reflect the larger volume of living cells that require more carbon for respiration than the smaller volume of living cells in parenchyma-storing species (Fig. 5). Despite the high carbon demand by the living fibers, the fiber-storing species also had a higher starch storage capacity than the parenchyma-storing species to buffer carbon deficits under stress. Such trees would be better prepared for the uncertainty under stressful conditions, which may be reflected in lower mortality rates (Table 1).

## 4.2. Fiber-storing species have tight control of carbon sink activity reflected in growth seasonality

Trees growing in a seasonally dry environment should balance their carbon sources and sinks in order to survive recurrent stressful conditions. The fast growing, parenchyma-storing species *S. guianensis* kept growth relatively constant throughout the year, whereas the slow-growing, fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa* significantly reduced growth during the dry season. Thus, these trees, with contrasting storage strategies, may differentially adjust their balance between carbon sources and sinks to survive seasonally dry conditions (Fig. 1).

The fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa* reduced growth during the dry season from July to September and grew faster during the rainy season from October to May. This seasonal pattern is reflected in the anatomy of the tree rings, where the annual limit of the tree ring is defined by a reduction in the size of the fibers, indicating a reduction in growth. By contrast, the parenchyma-storing species *S. guianensis* and *O. leucoxylon* may not be able to regulate their growth rates seasonally. For *S. guianensis* non-seasonal growth is also reflected in the absence of clear tree rings and wood anatomical changes. Nevertheless, *O. leucoxylon* has clear annual tree rings that are also defined by a reduction in fiber size, suggesting a seasonal reduction in wood growth. Then, it may be possible that growth rates in these trees did not have an accentuated seasonal change during the single year of observation (2019). Some tree rings of this species showed a diffuse limit, indicating that in other years trees did not strongly reduce growth during the dry season such as in 2019. These results suggest that *D. microcarpa* trees, which have significant NSC and growth seasonality, may have a tighter regulation of their carbon sink fluxes, which would likely benefit them when facing changing environmental conditions.

Contrary to the growth patterns described above, wood respiration showed no seasonal changes for any of the species evaluated. Although not significant, there was a small reduction in respiration during the dry season for all species (Fig. 5). Similarly, Asao et al. (2015) found no seasonal changes in respiration in tropical forest trees, but it is not clear if these species have a large amount of living cells in the stem wood such as fiber-storing species. No changes in respiration between dry and wet seasons in tropical forest trees have been previously reported (Asao et al., 2015). Some other trees can regulate stem CO2 efflux to adapt to certain environmental conditions such as seasonal changes in precipitation and temperature, releasing resources for other metabolic activities (Teskey et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2019; Sierra et al., 2022). In addition, wood respiration was greater in *D. microcarpa* trees, probably because of the large amount of living tissue compared to *S. guianensis* and *O. leucoxylon* trees, where respiration was lower (Teskey et al., 2008; Meir et al., 2020). Therefore, fiber-storing species such as *D. microcarpa* trees may have greater carbon requirements to keep all living wood tissue alive, which may reduce their ability to regulate respiration seasonally. These results suggest that wood anatomical traits such as living fibers may indicate a large carbon demand for respiration that may heavily compete with other carbon sinks such as growth, leading these trees to have a stronger regulation of growth rates and have a high reliance on storage.

## 4.3. Starch consumption during the wet season led to starch mass reduction

As discussed above, seasonal changes in starch content corresponded with imbalances between carbon sources and sinks. These imbalances might have been induced by seasonal changes in precipitation and relative humidity causing leaf abscission for the two semi-deciduous species. For *D. microcarpa*, the starch response to monthly precipitation and relative humidity appears to be non-linear following an inverted-U trend. For *S. guianensis* starch content and precipitation were positively correlated (Fig. 6), although the signal became non-linear when three months of accumulated precipitation were evaluated. Low starch mass during the dry and wet seasons could be associated with NSC investment in basic metabolism such as respiration, defense compounds, osmoregulation, reproduction and growth, which exceeded the fixation of new photoassimilates.

It is surprising that starch mass slightly decreased during the wet season under high precipitation and high relative humidity. There could be several reasons for this: For fiber-storing trees (*D. microcarpa*), it is possible that the carbon demand of wood growth (which is the highest during the wet season) and respiration exceeds the supply of new photoassimilates. In addition, some other sink activities such as reproduction may also contribute to a greater carbohydrate demand during the wet season (Hartmann and Trumbore, 2016). For instance, both *D. microcarpa and S. guianensis* produced fruit during the wet season (Fig. S2), which may constitute a large demand for carbon reserves. The use of NSC for reproduction and its impact in the NSC seasonality have been largely overlooked in the literature (Hartmann and Trumbore, 2016; Blumstein et al., 2022). These results suggest that for some tree species, flowering and fruiting may be a significant carbon sink that can influence the seasonal dynamics, probably causing trees to deplete NSC during the wet season.

Alternatively, the rainy season comes with its own dangers that put pressure on available NSC. During the rainy season, blowdowns, storms and lightning can cause physical damage to trees, increasing the risk of individual mortality (Zuleta et al., 2022). Rebuilding the lost tissue could represent a large demand on NSC. There may also be an increase in herbivory or fungal infection, increasing the demand for NSC to rebuild lost foliage and roots and to ensure defenses (Zuleta et al., 2022). Because of these hazards, tree mortality is highest during the wet season in some tropical forests (Aleixo et al., 2019). Thus, trees that may not have fully replenished their NSC content and repaired their damage during the dry and wet seasons may be vulnerable to such stressors and more susceptible to die (Anderegg et al., 2013; Arellano et al., 2019; Aleixo et al., 2019). In a previous work, we found that fiber-storing species may have larger NSC pools, lower growth rates, and lower mortality than parenchyma-storing species (Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021). Therefore, trees with larger NSC pools and better regulation of the seasonal cycles of NSC content (such as the fiber-storing species *D. microcarpa*) may be better prepared to face both dry season limitations and wet season hazards, thereby increasing survival.

## 4.4. Storage-growth trade-offs occur during the wet season

Seasonal patterns in starch mass showed us when trees use and accumulate stem NSC. Our results indicate a trade-off between starch consumption/accumulation and growth only during the wet season for *D. microcarpa*, and during the transition from dry to wet season for the other two parenchyma-storing species (*O. leocoxylon* and *S. guianensis*), while consumption or accumulation of starch in the other seasons was not related to growth (Fig. 7).

For instance, *D. microcarpa* trees strongly reduced starch during the 2019 dry season, but this was not related to stem growth. This may indicate that all these resources could have been allocated to other functions such as respiration, which seems to be prioritized over growth (Fig. 5), flushing new leaves and flowers (Fig. S2), and maintaining osmotic potential (Salleo et al., 2004). The trade-offs between growth and starch consumption/accumulation were clear during the wet season (Fig. 7, Fig. 1). There, some trees consumed starch to grow faster, while others grew slower and accumulated starch.

For the parenchyma-storing species (*O. leocoxylon* and *S. guianensis*), trade-offs between growth and starch consumption/accumulation were evident with a time lag of three months. Trees that accumulated starch during the transition months from the dry to the wet season grew more slowly during the wet season. This accumulation of NSC during the transition months may reflect a preparation for growing fruits during the wet season (Fig. S2), while maintaining relatively high constant growth rates.

Identifying these trade-offs with field measurements is challenging (Blumstein et al., 2022). Here we show that annual estimates of starch content and growth may hide the seasonal trade-offs between these two variables (Fig. 8). Furthermore, we show that they may be restricted to certain periods of the year such as the wet season (Fig. 1, Fig. 7). Trade-offs may be affected by variations in carbon supply. Individuals with higher carbon supply may be more able to invest more in both growth and storage than individuals with lower carbon supply (Blumstein et al., 2022), as was the case for our parenchyma-storing species. These two parenchyma-storing species grew faster than the fiber-storing species and the correlation between annual growth and starch mass was positive for both species during the dry season. For more conservative species, such as the fiber-storing species, trade-offs between starch mass and growth were still observed. Our results suggest that these trade-offs may not be reflected in the annual carbon balance, but would only be evident in some seasons. Therefore, evaluating seasonal changes in starch mass (rather than mean storage mass per year or max starch storage per year) in relation to seasonal growth can better inform us about when and under what conditions such trade-offs occur, avoiding the influence of some confounding factors when annual averages are used.

Evidence for growth-storage trade-offs is growing in the literature and has been linked to survival (Wright et al., 2004; Poorter and Kitajima, 2007; O’Brien et al., 2014, 2015; Klein and Hoch, 2015; D’Andrea et al., 2019, 2020). Studies comparing highly conservative species and highly competitive species in surviving stressful environmental conditions are needed to further understand how variation in storage-growth trade-offs are maintained across space and time. Our results are a good indication that highly conservative, slow-growing, and high-storing species, such as fiber-storing species (e.g., *D. microcarpa*), may have greater trade-offs between starch storage and growth, indicating a greater capacity to regulate their sink activity, or a higher prioritization of storage, than parenchyma-storing species. Life history traits such as low growth and low mortality are associated with highly conservative species and are a good proxy for tree longevity (Wright et al., 2004; Herrera-Ramírez et al., 2021; Piovesan and Biondi, 2021). Therefore, we would expect that as stressors intensify, highly conservative trees, such as fiber-storing species, would have higher survival rates and would become more competitive in seasonally dry forests. Future work should focus on understanding how these storage strategies are distributed in forest communities and how their different storage-growth trade-offs affect productivity and species survival in tropical forests under climate change.

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**6. Data accessibility statement**

The authors state their willingness to share the data upon request.

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**8. Tables**

Table 1: Species names and traits: wood storage strategy, growth rates, mortality rates, phenology, and the sampling dates.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Species name | Growth rate (cm/year) | Mortality rate  (%/year) | Storage strategy | Leaf phenology  (~% of leaf loss) |
| *Ocotea leucoxylon* (Sw.) Laness | 0.295 | 5.7 | Parenchyma | Evergreen (~30) |
| *Sacoglottis guianensis* Benth. | 0.72 | 5.0 | Parenchyma | Semi-deciduous (~45) |
| *Dacryodes microcarpa* Cuart. | 0.078 | 1.6 | Fiber | Semi-deciduous (~60) |

**9. Figure Legends**

**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework that relates the differences in carbon dynamics for trees with different combinations of two functional traits: leaf habit and storage strategy of starch in the stem wood. Here we show the seasonal behavior of carbon sources - photosynthesis (red line)- and carbon sinks - growth (green), respiration (orange), and reproduction (purple) - and their interactions with NSC storage or consumption (blue line). Expected trade-offs between growth and storage are indicated by black arrows and the thickness of the line indicates the strength of the trade-off. Thus, thicker and darker lines indicate strong trade-offs, and dashed and lighter lines indicate weaker or less clear trade-offs. The seasonal patterns of photosynthesis are taken from the phenological observations of leaves reported in Fig. S2.

**Figure 2:** Mean seasonal course of monthly total precipitation (mm) and relative humidity (%) during 2016-2020 (black lines). Gray areas correspond to the standard deviation. Data provided by IPAM.

**Figure 3:** Box-plots that show the dispersion of the starch mass measured in the wood cores from trees of each evaluated species at different times/seasons during 2019. The yellow shaded area corresponds to the dry season, while the blue shaded areas correspond to the wet season. Differences between groups are indicated by different letters (with 95% confidence) above the box-plots and show the observed seasonality of starch mass in stem wood.

**Figure 4:** Seasonal trend of growth rates for the three species evaluated. Solid lines show the smoothing trends, while the dispersion of the measurements is shown by box-plots. The lines inside the box-plots show the median of the distribution of the measurements. Yellow shaded areas indicate the dry season and blue shaded areas indicate the wet season.

**Figure 5:** Box-plots showing the dispersion of the measured CO2 efflux from the stem core of the studied trees during the wet and the dry seasons of 2018, for each species. There were no significant differences between the wet and dry seasons for any species.

**Figure 6:** Box-plots showing the dispersion of the estimated starch mass in the wood of the selected trees and its changes with respect to 4 levels of monthly precipitation and the three months average relative humidity. The continuous lines in each plot show the general trend between the groups.

**Figure 7:** Relationship between changes in starch mass (accumulation or consumption of starch) and three-month growth in 2019 for the three species studied. The dotted line marks the 0, points on the left indicate starch consumption and those on the right indicate scratch accumulation. The dry season is indicated by shaded yellow areas, while the wet season is indicated by shaded blue areas.

**Figure 8:** Relationship between annual growth and the starch content at different times of the year for each of the species studied. The yellow shaded panels correspond to the dry season, while the blue shaded panels correspond to the wet season.