

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

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Authors

✉ Francesco Maria Sabatini^{1,2,†}, Jonathan Lenoir^{3,†}, Tarek Hattab⁴, Elise Aimee Arnst⁵, Milan Chytrý⁶, Jürgen Dengler^{1,7,8}, Patrice De Ruffray⁹, Stephan M. Hennekens¹⁰, Ute Jandt², Florian Jansen¹¹, Borja Jiménez-Alfaro¹², Jens Kattge¹³, Aurora Levesley¹⁴, Valério D. Pillar¹⁵, Oliver Purschke¹⁶, Brody Sandel¹⁷, Fahmida Sultana¹⁸, Tsipe Aavik¹⁹, Svetlana Aćić²⁰, Alicia T.R. Acosta²¹, Emiliano Agrillo²², Miguel Alvarez²³, Iva Apostolova²⁴, Mohammed A.S. Arfin Khan²⁵, Luzmila Arroyo²⁶, Fabio Attorre²², Isabelle Aubin²⁷, Arindam Banerjee²⁸, Marijn Bauters^{29,30}, Yves Bergeron³¹, Erwin Bergmeier³², Idoia Biurrun³³, Anne D. Bjorkman^{34,35}, Gianmaria Bonari³⁶, Viktoria Bondareva³⁷, Jörg Brunet³⁸, Andraž Čarni^{39,40}, Laura Casella⁴¹, Luis Cayuela⁴², Tomáš Černý⁴³, Victor Chepinoga⁴⁴, János Csiky⁴⁵, Renata Čušterevska⁴⁶, Els De Bie⁴⁷, André Luis de Gasper⁴⁸, Michele De Sanctis²², Panayotis Dimopoulos⁴⁹, Jiri Dolezal⁵⁰, Tetiana Dziuba⁵¹, Mohamed Abd El-Rouf Mousa El-Sheikh^{52,53}, Brian Enquist⁵⁴, Jörg Ewald⁵⁵, Farideh Fazayeli^{56,57}, Richard Field⁵⁸, Manfred Finckh⁵⁹, Sophie Gachet⁶⁰, Antonio Galán-de-Mera^{61,62,63}, Emmanuel Garbolino⁶⁴, Hamid Gholizadeh⁶⁵, Melisa Giorgis⁶⁶, Valentin Golub⁶⁷, Inger Greve Alsos⁶⁸, John-Arvid Grytnes⁶⁹, Gregory Richard Guerin⁷⁰, Alvaro G. Gutiérrez⁷¹, Sylvia Haider^{72,73}, Mohamed Z. Hatim^{74,75}, Bruno Héroult^{76,77,78}, Guillermo Hinojos Mendoza⁷⁹, Norbert Hölzel⁸⁰, Jürgen Homeier⁸¹, Wannes Hubau^{82,83}, Adrian Indreica⁸⁴, John Janssen⁸⁵, Birgit Jedrzejek⁸⁶, Anke Jentsch⁸⁷, Norbert Jürgens⁵⁹, Zygmunt Kaćki⁸⁸, Jutta Kapfer⁸⁹, Dirk Nikolaus Karger⁹⁰, Ali Kavgacı⁹¹, Elizabeth Kearsley⁹², Michael Kessler⁹³, Larisa Khanina⁹⁴, Timothy Killeen⁹⁵, Andrey Korolyuk⁹⁶, Holger Kreft⁹⁷, Hjalmar Kühl^{1,98}, Anna Kuzemko⁹⁹, Flavia Landucci¹⁰⁰, Attila Lengyel¹⁰¹, Frederic Lens¹⁰², Débora Vanessa Lingner¹⁰³, Hongyan Liu¹⁰⁴, Tatiana Lysenko^{105,106,107}, Miguel D. Mahecha¹⁰⁸, Corrado Marcenò³³, Vasiliy Martynenko¹⁰⁹, Jesper Erenskjold Moeslund¹¹⁰, Abel Monteagudo Mendoza¹¹¹, Ladislav Mucina¹¹², Jonas V. Müller¹¹³, Jérôme Munzinger¹¹⁴, Alireza Naqinezhad¹¹⁵, Jalil Noroozi¹¹⁶, Arkadiusz Nowak^{117,118}, Viktor Onyshchenko¹¹⁹, Gerhard E. Overbeck¹²⁰, Meelis Pärtel¹²¹, Aníbal Pauchard^{122,123}, Robert K. Peet¹²⁴, Josep Peñuelas^{125,126}, Aaron Pérez-Haase^{127,128}, Tomáš Peterka¹⁰⁰, Petr Petřík¹²⁹, Gwendolyn Peyre¹³⁰, Oliver L. Phillips¹⁴, Vadim Prokhorov¹³¹, Valerijus Rašomavičius¹³², Rasmus Revermann^{133,134}, Gonzalo Rivas-Torres¹³⁵, John S. Rodwell¹³⁶, Eszter Ruprecht¹³⁷, Solvita Rūsiņa¹³⁸, Cyrus Samimi¹³⁹, Marco Schmidt¹⁴⁰, Franziska Schrod⁵⁸, Pavel Shirokikh¹⁰⁹, Jozef Šibík¹⁴¹, Urban Šilc¹⁴², Petr Sklenář¹⁴³, Željko Škvorc¹⁴⁴, Ben Sparrow¹⁴⁵, Marta Gaia Sperandii^{21,146}, Zvezdana Stančić¹⁴⁷, Jens-Christian Svenning¹⁴⁸, Zhiyao Tang¹⁰⁴, Cindy Q. Tang¹⁴⁹, Ioannis Tsiripidis¹⁵⁰, Milan Valachovič¹⁴¹, Kim André Vanselow¹⁵¹, Rodolfo Vásquez Martínez¹¹¹, Kiril Vassilev²⁴, Eduardo Vélez-Martin¹⁵², Roberto Venanzoni¹⁵³, Alexander Christian Vibrans¹⁰³, Cyrille Violle¹⁵⁴, Risto Virtanen^{1,155,156}, Henrik von Wehrden¹⁵⁷, Viktoria Wagner¹⁵⁸, Donald A. Walker¹⁵⁹, Donald Waller¹⁶⁰, Hua-Feng Wang¹⁶¹, Karsten Wesche^{1,162,163}, Timothy Whitfeld¹⁶⁴, Wolfgang Willner¹¹⁶, Susan K. Wiser⁵, Thomas Wohlgemuth¹⁶⁵, Sergey Yamalov¹⁶⁶, Martin Zobel¹⁶⁷, Helge Bruelheide^{1,2}

✉ — To whom correspondence should be addressed: francesco.sabatini@botanik.uni-halle.de

† — These authors contributed equally to this work

2. Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Institute of Biology, Am Kirchtor 1, 06108, Halle, Germany
3. Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Unité de Recherche "Ecologie et Dynamique des Systèmes Anthropisés" (EDYSAN), UMR 7058 CNRS, 1 Rue des Louvels, 80000, Amiens, France
4. MARBEC, University of Montpellier, CNRS, IFREMER and IRD, Sète, France
5. Manaaki Whenua - Landcare Research, PO Box 69040, 7640, Lincoln, New Zealand
6. Masaryk University, Faculty of Science, Department of Botany and Zoology, Kotlářská 2, 611 37, Brno, Czech Republic
7. Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), Vegetation Ecology Group, Institute of Natural Resource Sciences (IUNR), Grüentalstr. 14, 8820, Wädenswil, Switzerland
8. University of Bayreuth, Plant Ecology, Bayreuth Center of Ecology and Environmental Research (BayCEER), Universitätsstr. 30, 95447, Bayreuth, Germany
9. Université de Strasbourg, Institut de biologie moléculaire des plantes-CNRS, 12, rue du Général-Zimmer, F-67084, Strasbourg, France
10. Wageningen Environmental Research, P.O.Box 47, 6700 AA, Wageningen, Netherlands
11. University of Rostock, Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Justus-von-Liebig-Weg 6, 18059, Rostock, Germany
12. University of Oviedo, Research Unit of Biodiversity (CSIC/UO/PA), C. Gonzalo Gutiérrez Quirós s/n, 33600, Mieres, Spain
13. Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry, Hans Knöll Str. 10, 07745, Jena, Germany
14. University of Leeds, School of Geography, Woodhouse Lane, LS2 9JT, Leeds, United Kingdom
15. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Department of Ecology, Av. Bento Gonçalves 9500, 91501-970, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
16. Medical School of the Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Institute for Medical Epidemiology, Biometrics and Informatics (IMEBI), Interdisciplinary Center for Health Sciences, Magdeburger Straße 8, 06112, Halle/Saale, Germany
17. Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark
18. Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Forestry & Environmental Science, 3114, Sylhet, Bangladesh
19. University of Tartu, Department of Ecology and Earth Sciences, Department of Botany, Lai 40, Tartu 51005, Estonia
20. University of Belgrade, Faculty of Agriculture, Department of Botany, Nemanjina 6, 11080, Belgrade-Zemun, Serbia
21. Roma Tre University, Department of Sciences, V.le Marconi 446, 00146, Rome, Italy
22. Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Environmental Biology, P.le Aldo Moro 5, 00185, Rome, Italy
23. University of Bonn, Plant Nutrition, INRES, Karlrobert-Kreiten-Str., 53115, Bonn, Germany
24. Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Department of Plant and Fungal Diversity and Resources, Acad. Georgi Bonchev 23, 1113, Sofia, Bulgaria
25. Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Forestry & Environmental Science, Akhalia, 3114, Sylhet, Bangladesh
26. Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno, Dirección de la Carrera de Biología, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia
27. Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada, Great Lakes Forestry Centre, 1219 Queen St. East, P6A 2E5, Sault Ste Marie (Ontario), Canada
28. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Department of Computer Science, 201 North Goodwin Avenue MC 258, Urbana, IL 61801, 61801.0, Urbana, USA
29. Ghent University, Department Green chemistry and technology, Isotope Bioscience laboratory (UGent-ISOFYS), Coupure Links 653, 9000, Ghent, Belgium
30. Ghent University, Department Environment, Computational and Applied Vegetation Ecology (UGent-CAVELab), Coupure Links 653, 9000, Ghent, Belgium
31. Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Forest Research Institute, 445 boul. de l'Université, J9X5E4, Rouyn-Noranda, Canada
32. University of Göttingen, Vegetation Ecology and Phytodiversity, Untere Karspüle 2, 37073, Göttingen, Germany
33. University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Plant Biology and Ecology, P.O. Box 644, 48080, Bilbao, Spain
34. University of Gothenburg, Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Carl Skottsbergs gata 22B, 41319, Gothenburg, Sweden
35. Gothenburg Global Biodiversity Centre, Carl Skottsbergs gata 22B, 41319, Gothenburg, Sweden
36. Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Piazza Università, 5, 39100, Bolzano, Italy
37. Institute of Ecology of the Volga River Basin, Department of Phytodiversity Problems, Komzina, 10, 445003, Toljatty, Russian Federation
38. Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sundsvägen 3, 230 53 Alnarp, Sweden
39. Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute of Biology, Novi trg 2, 1000, Ljubljana, Slovenia
40. University of Nova Gorica, School for viticulture and enology, Vipavska 13, 5000, Nova Gorica, Slovenia
41. ISPRA - Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, Biodiversity Conservation Department, Via Vitaliano Brancati, 60, 00144, Roma, Italy
42. Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Department of Biology and Geology, Physics and Inorganic Chemistry, c/ Tulipán s/n, 29833, Móstoles, Spain
43. Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Department of Forest Ecology, Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences, Kamýcká 1176, 165 21, Praha 6 - Suchbát, Czech Republic
44. Central Siberian Botanical Garden SB RAS, Zolotodolinskaya Str. 101, 630090, Novosibirsk, Russian Federation
45. University of Pécs, Department of Ecology, Ifjúság u. 6., 7624, Pécs, Hungary

46. Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Institute of Biology, Arhimedova 3, 1000, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia
47. Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO), Biotope Diversity, Havenlaan 88, bus 73, 1000, Brussels, Belgium
48. Universidade Regional de Blumenau, Rua Antonio da Veiga, 140, Blumenau, 89030-903, Brazil
49. University of Patras, Laboratory of Botany, Division of Plant Biology, Department of Biology, University Campus, 26504, Patras, Greece
50. Institute of Botany, Czech Academy of Sciences, Department of Functional Ecology, Dukelska 135, 37901, Trebon, Czech Republic
51. M.G. Kholodny Institute of Botany, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Geobotany and ecology, Tereshchenkivska, 1004, Kyiv, Ukraine
52. College of Science, King Saud University, Botany and Microbiology Department, P.O. Box 2455, 11451, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
53. Damanhour University, Botany Department, Faculty of Science, Damanhour, Egypt
54. University of Arizona, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, 1041 E. Lowell St., AZ 85721, Tucson, United States
55. Hochschule Weihenstephan-Triesdorf, University of Applied Sciences, Hans-Carl-von-Carlowitz-Platz 3, 85354, Freising, Germany
56. Google LLC, 1600 Amphitheatre Pkwy, 94043.0, Mountain View, USA
57. University of Minnesota - Twin Cities, USA
58. University of Nottingham, School of Geography, University Park, NG7 2RD, Nottingham, United Kingdom
59. University of Hamburg, Biodiversity, Ecology and Evolution of Plants, Institute for Plant Science & Microbiology, Ohnhorststr. 18, 22609, Hamburg, Germany
60. Aix Marseille Univ, Avignon Université, CNRS, IRD, IMBE, Campus St-Jérôme Etoile, 13397, Marseille, France
61. Universidad CEU San Pablo, Laboratorio de Botánica, P.O. Box 67, 28660, Boadilla del Monte, Madrid, Spain
62. Universidad Privada Antonio Guillermo Urrelo, Laboratorio de Botánica, Jr. José Sabogal
63. Estudios Fitogeográficos del Perú, Herbario AQP, Sánchez Cerro 219, Manuel Prado, Paucarpata, Arequipa, Peru
64. Climact Data Science (CDS), Nova Sophia - Regus Nova, 291 rue Albert Caquot, CS 40095, 06902, Sophia Antipolis Cedex, France
65. University of Mazandaran, Department of Biology, Babolsar, Iran
66. Instituto Multidisciplinario de Biología Vegetal (IMBIV-CONICET), ECOLOGÍA VEGETAL Y FITOGEOGRAFÍA, Av. Vélez Sársfield 1611, 5000, Córdoba, Argentina
67. Institute of Ecology of the Volga River Basin, Laboratory of Phytocoenology, Komzina, 10, 445003, Toljatty, Russian Federation
68. The Arctic University Museum of Norway, UiT - The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway
69. University of Bergen, Department of Biological Sciences, Postbox 7803, Bergen, Norway
70. University of Adelaide, School of Biological Sciences, North Terrace, 5005, Adelaide, Australia
71. Universidad de Chile, Departamento de Ciencias Ambientales y Recursos Naturales Renovables, Facultad de Ciencias Agronomicas, Santa Rosa 11315, La Pintana, 8820808, Santiago, Chile
72. Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Institute of Biology, Am Kirchtor 1, 06108, Halle, Germany
73. German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig, Puschstraße 4, 04103, Leipzig, Germany
74. Wageningen University, Plant Ecology and Nature Conservation Group - Environmental Sciences Department, P.O. Box Postbus 47, Droevendaalsesteeg 3, 6700 AA, Wageningen, The Netherlands
75. Tanta University, Botany and Microbiology Department - Faculty of Science, El Geish St., 31527, Tanta, Egypt
76. CIRAD, UPR Forêts et Sociétés, Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast
77. University of Montpellier, Forêts et Sociétés, CIRAD, Montpellier, France
78. INP-HB, Institut National Polytechnique Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire
79. ASES Ecological and Sustainable Services, Pépinière d'Entreprises l'Espéridou, Parc d'Activités du Vinobre, 555 Chemin des Traverses, Lachapelle-sous-Aubenas, 07200, Aubenas, France
80. University of Muenster, Institute of Landscape Ecology, Heisenbergstr. 2, 48149, Münster, Germany
81. University of Goettingen, Plant Ecology and Ecosystems Research, Untere Karspuele 2, 37073, Goettingen, Germany
82. Ghent University, Department Environment, Laboratory of Wood Biology (UGent-WoodLab), Coupure Links 653, 9000, Ghent, Belgium
83. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Service of Wood Biology, Leuvensesteenweg 13, 3080, Tervuren, Belgium
84. Transilvania University of Brasov, Department of Silviculture, Sirul Beethoven 1, 500123, Brasov, Romania
85. Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen Environmental Research (Alterra), P.O.Box 47, 6700 AA, Wageningen, Netherlands
86. University of Münster, Institute of Landscape Ecology, Heisenbergstr. 2, 48149, Münster, Germany
87. University of Bayreuth, Disturbance Ecology, Bayreuth Center of Ecology and Environmental Research, Universitaetsstr. 30, 95447, Bayreuth, Germany
88. University of Wrocław, Botanical Garden, Sienkiewicza 23, 50-335, Wrocław, Poland
89. Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research, Holtvegen, 66, Tromsø, 9016, Norway
90. Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL, Biodiversity and Conservation Biology, Zürcherstrasse 111, 8903, Birmensdorf, Switzerland
91. Karabuk University, Faculty of Forestry, Kilavuzlar Köyü Öte Karsi Üniversite Kampüsü Merkez, 78050, Karabuk, Turkey
92. Ghent University, Department Environment, Computational and Applied Vegetation Ecology (UGent-CAVELab), Coupure Links 653, 9000, Gent, Belgium

93. University of Zurich, Department of Systematic and Evolutionary Botany, Zollikerstrasse 107, 8008, Zurich, Switzerland
94. branch of the M.V. Keldysh Institute of Applied Mathematics of Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Mathematical Problems of Biology of RAS, 1 Prof. Vitkevich, 142290.0, Pushchino, Russia
95. Universidad Autonoma Gabriel Rene Moreno, Museo de Historia Natural Noel Kempff Mercado, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia
96. Central Siberian Botanical Garden, Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences, Geosystem Laboratory, Zolotodolinskaya str. 101, 630090, Novosibirsk, Russian Federation
97. University of Göttingen, Department of Biodiversity, Macroecology and Biogeography, Büsgenweg 1, 37077, Göttingen, Germany
98. Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI-EVA), Primatology, Puschstrasse 4, 04103, Leipzig, Germany
99. M.G. Kholodny Institute of Botany of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Department of Geobotany and Ecology, 2, Tereshchenkivska str., 01601, Kyiv, Ukraine
00. Masaryk University, Department of Botany and Zoology, Kotlářská 2, 611 37, Brno, Czech Republic
01. Centre for Ecological Research, Institute of Ecology and Botany, Alkotmány u. 2-4., 2163, Vácrtót, Hungary
02. Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Research Group Functional Traits, Darwinweg 2, 2333 CR, Leiden, The Netherlands
03. Universidade Regional de Blumenau, Departamento de Engenharia Florestal, Rua São Paulo, 3250, 89030-000, Blumenau, Brazil
04. Peking University, College of Urban and Environmental Sciences, Yiheyuan Rd. 5, 100871, Beijing, China
05. Komarov Botanical Institute RAS, Laboratory of Vegetation Science, Prof. Popov 2, 197376, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation
06. Institute of Ecology of the Volga River Basin RAS - Branch of the Samara Scientific Center RAS, Laboratory of Phytodiversity Problems, Komzin str. 10, 445003, Togliatti, Russian Federation
07. Tobolsk complex scientific station of Ural Branch RAS, Group of Ecology of Living Organisms, Academician Yu. Osipov str. 15, 626152, Tobolsk, Russian Federation
08. Leipzig University, Remote Sensing Centre for Earth System Research, Talstr. 6b, 07745, Leipzig, Germany
09. Ufa Federal Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Biology, prospekt Oktyabrya, 69, 450054, Ufa, Russian Federation
10. Aarhus University, Department of Bioscience, Grenaavej 14, 8410, Roende, Denmark
11. Jardín Botánico de Missouri Oxapampa, Bolognesi Mz-E-6, Oxapampa, Pasco, Peru
12. Murdoch University, Harry Butler Institute, 90 South Street, Building 390, 6150, Murdoch, Australia
13. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Conservation Science, Wakehurst Place, RH17 6TN, Ardingly, West Sussex, United Kingdom
14. AMAP, Université de Montpellier, CIRAD, CNRS, INRAE, IRD, 34000, Montpellier, France
15. University of Mazandaran, Department of Plant Biology, P.O. Box 47416-95447, Mazandaran, Iran
16. University of Vienna, Department of Botany and Biodiversity Research, Rennweg 14, 1030, Vienna, Austria
17. Polish Academy of Sciences, Botanical Garden - Center for Biodiversity Conservation, Prawdziwka 2, 02-950, Warsaw, Poland
18. University of Opole, Institute of Biology, Oleska St. 52, 45-052, Opole, Polska
19. National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, M.G. Kholodny Institute of Botany, Tereshchenkivska 2, 01601, Kyiv, Ukraine
20. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Department of Botany, Av. Bento Gonçalves 9500, 91501-970, Porto Alegre, Brazil
21. University of Tartu, Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, Lai 40, 51005, Tartu, Estonia
22. Universidad de Concepción, Laboratorio de Invasiones Biológicas (LIB). Facultad de Ciencias Forestales., Victoria 631, 4030000, Concepción, Chile
23. Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity (IEB), Chile
24. University of North Carolina, Department of Biology, CB3280, South Road, 27599-3280, Chapel Hill, NC, United States
25. CSIC, Global Ecology Unit CSIC-CREAF-UAB, Edifici C, Campus UAB, 08193, Bellaterra, Spain
26. CREAL, Edifici C, 08193, Cerdanyola del Valles, Espanya
27. University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, Department of Biosciences, Carrer de la Laura, 13, 08500, Vic, Barcelona, Spain
28. University of Barcelona, Department of Evolutionary Biology, Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Diagonal 643, 08028, Barcelona, Spain
29. Czech Academy of Sciences, Department of vegetation ecology, Institute of Botany, Zámek 1, 25243, Průhonice, Czech Republic
30. University of the Andes, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Carrera 1 Este No. 19A-40, Edificio Mario Laserna, Piso 6, 111711, Bogota, Colombia
31. Kazan Federal University, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Kremlevskaya 18, 420008, Kazan, Russian Federation
32. Nature Research Centre, Institute of Botany, Zaliuju Ezeru 49, 08406, Vilnius, Lithuania
33. University of Hamburg, Biodiversity, Ecology and Evolution of Plants/Institute for Plant Science & Microbiology, Ohnhorststr. 18, 22609, Hamburg, Germany
34. Namibia University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Natural Resources and Spatial Sciences, Windhoek, Namibia
35. Universidad San Francisco de Quito, COCIBA, Diego de Robles, 170177, Quito, Ecuador
36. 7 Derwent Road, LA1 3ES, Lancaster, United Kingdom

37. Babeş-Bolyai University, Hungarian Department of Biology and Ecology, Faculty of Biology and Geology, Republicii street 42., 400015, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
38. University of Latvia, Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences, Jelgavas iela 1, LV 1004, Riga, Latvia
39. University of Bayreuth, Climatology, Bayreuth Center of Ecology and Environmental Research (BayCEER), Universitätsstr. 30, 95447, Bayreuth, Germany
40. Stadt Frankfurt am Main - Der Magistrat, Palmengarten, Siesmayerstraße 61, 60323, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
41. Plant Science and Biodiversity Centre Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Botany, Dubravska cesta 9, 84523, Bratislava, Slovakia
42. Research Centre of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), Institute of Biology, Novi trg 2, 1000, Ljubljana, Slovenia
43. Department of Botany, Charles University, Benatska 2, 12801 Prague, Czech Republic
44. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Forestry, Svetošimunska 25, 10000, Zagreb, Croatia
45. University of Adelaide, TERN, North Terrace, 5005, Adelaide, Australia
46. CSIC-UV-GV, Centro de Investigaciones sobre Desertificación, Carretera Moncada-Náquera km 4.5, 46113.0, Moncada (Valencia), Spain
47. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Geotechnical Engineering, Hallerova aleja 7, 42000, Varaždin, Croatia
48. Aarhus University, Department of Biology, Ny Munkegade 114, DK-8000, Aarhus C, Denmark
49. Yunnan University, School of Ecology and Environmental Science, Building Shixun, Chenggong Campus, Dongwaihuan South Road, University Town, Chenggong New District, 650504, Kunming, China
50. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, School of Biology, 54124, Thessaloniki, Greece
51. University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Department of Geography, Wetterkreuz 15, 91058, Erlangen, Germany
52. ILEX Consultoria Científica, Amelia Telles 184, 9.046007E7, Porto Alegre, Brazil
53. University of Perugia, Department of Chemistry, Biology and Biotechnology, Borgo XX giugno 74, 06124, Perugia, Italy
54. Univ Montpellier, CNRS, EPHE, IRD, Univ Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, CEFE, 1919 route de Mende, 34293, Montpellier, France
55. University of Oulu, Ecology and Genetics Research Unit, Biodiversity Unit, Kaitoväylä 5, 90014, Oulu, Finland
56. Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research - UFZ, Department of Physiological Diversity, Permoserstr. 15, 04318, Leipzig, Germany
57. Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Institute of Ecology, Universitätsallee 1, 21335, Lüneburg, Germany
58. University of Alberta, Department of Biological Sciences, Biological Sciences Building, T6G2E9, Edmonton, Canada
59. University of Alaska, Institute of Arctic Biology, P. O. Box 7570000, 99775, Fairbanks, United States
60. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Botany, 430 Lincoln Drive, 53706, Madison, United States
61. Hainan University, Hainan Key Laboratory for Sustainable Utilization of Tropical Bioresources, College of Tropical Crops, 58 Renmin Avenue, Meilan District, 570228, Haikou, China
62. Senckenberg Museum of Natural History Görlitz, Botany Department, PO Box 300 154, 02806, Görlitz, Germany
63. Technische Universität Dresden, International Institute Zittau, Markt 23, 02763, Zittau, Germany
64. Brown University, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology/Brown University Herbarium, 34 Olive Street, 02912, Providence, United States
65. Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL, Forest Dynamics, Zürcherstrasse 111, CH-8909, Birmensdorf, Switzerland
66. Ufa Scientific Centre, Russian Academy of Sciences, Laboratory of Wild-Growing Flora, Botanical Garden-Institute, Mendeleev str., 195/3, 450080, Ufa, Russian Federation
67. University of Tartu, Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, Lai st 40, 51005, Tartu, Estonia

Abstract - Alternative for GEB (290/300 words)

Motivation: Assessing biodiversity status and trends in plant communities is critical for understanding, quantifying and predicting the effects of global change on ecosystems, among other applications. Vegetation plots record occurrence or abundance of all plant species present (community composition) in delimited local areas. These data also allow inferring absences, enabling many analyses not possible using the presence-only data provided by existing global plant datasets. Although very many vegetation plots have been recorded, most are not available to the global research community. A recent initiative, sPlot, compiled the first global vegetation plot database, and continues to grow and curate it. However, this large dataset is challenging to work with because it is extremely unbalanced spatially, and because the data are not open-access. Here, we address both these issues by (a) resampling the vegetation plots using a novel algorithm and (b) securing permission from data holders to openly release data (from 105 local to regional datasets). We thus present the largest open-access dataset of vegetation plots ever released. Our open-access dataset

can be used to explore global patterns of diversity at the plant community level, as ground truthing data in remote sensing applications or as a baseline for biodiversity monitoring.

Main types of variable contained: 91,205 vegetation plots, recording cover or abundance of naturally occurring vascular plant species in delimited areas. Besides geographic location, date, plot size, biome, elevation, slope, aspect, vegetation type, naturalness, coverage of various vegetation layers and source dataset, plot-level data also include community-weighted mean and variance of 18 plant functional traits from the 'TRY' database.

Spatial location and grain: global, 0.01-40,000 m².

Time period and grain: 1888-2015, recording dates.

Major taxa and level of measurement: 39,997 vascular plant taxa, plot-level records.

Software format: three main matrices (.csv), relationally linked.

Background & Summary

Biodiversity is facing a global crisis. As many as 1 million species are currently threatened with extinction, the vast majority due to anthropogenic impacts such as land-use and climate change ([1](#), [2](#)). In addition, the rates of biodiversity homogenization and redistribution are accelerating ([3](#), [4](#); [5](#)). Biological assemblages are becoming progressively more similar to each other globally, as local and endemic species go extinct and are replaced by more widespread and competitive native or alien species ([1](#); [5](#)). Many terrestrial and marine species are also shifting their geographical distribution as a response to climate change ([4](#)), including animals hosting pathogens transmissible to humans ([6](#); [7](#)). This has profound potential impacts on ecosystems and human health ([8](#); [9](#)).

Plant communities are no exception to this biodiversity crisis ([10](#); [11](#); [5](#)). This is particularly worrying since terrestrial vegetation accounts for 80% (450 Gt C) of the living biomass on Earth ([12](#)). Given the central role of vegetation in ecosystem productivity, structure, stability and functioning ([11](#)), assessing biodiversity status and trends in plant communities is paramount for other kingdoms of life and human societies alike.

Monitoring trends in plant biodiversity requires adequate data across a range of spatiotemporal scales ([13](#), [14](#)). Large independent collections of plant occurrence data do exist at the global or continental extent via the Botanical Information and Ecology Network (BIEN) ([15](#)), the Global Inventory of Floras and Traits (GIFT) ([16](#)) or the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) (<https://www.gbif.org/>). However, these databases are either imbalanced towards tree species only, or neglect how individual plant species co-occur and interact locally to form plant communities, or are collected at spatial resolutions which preclude intersection with high resolution remote sensing data and are too coarse to assess biodiversity trends (e.g., one-degree grid cells) at the plant community scale ([17](#)).

Yet, there is a long tradition among botanists to record the cover or abundance of each plant species that occurs in a vegetation plot location of a given size (i.e. surface area) at a given time (e.g. [18](#)). Compared to presence-only data, vegetation-plot data (termed 'presence-absence' here) present many advantages. As all visible plant species are recorded, plots contain information on which plant species do, and do not, co-occur in the same locality at a given moment in time ([19](#)). This is important for testing hypotheses related to biotic interactions among plant species. Vegetation-plot data also provide crucial information on where and when a species was absent, therefore improving predictions from current species distribution models ([20](#)). Being spatially explicit, vegetation plots can be resurveyed through time to assess potential changes in plant species composition relative to a baseline ([21](#); [22](#), [5](#)). As they normally contain information on the relative cover or abundance of each species, vegetation plots are also more appropriate for detecting biodiversity changes than data representing only the occurrence of individual species ([23](#), [24](#)).

Globally, however, vegetation-plot data are very fragmented, as they typically stem from a myriad of local research and survey projects ([25](#)). Consequently, these data often have either high fine-grain spatial resolutions but small spatial extents, or broad extents but coarse grains ([26](#)). Furthermore, with their disparate sampling protocols, standards and taxonomic resolutions, aggregating and harmonizing vegetation plot data proves extremely challenging ([27](#)). It is not surprising, therefore, that these data are rarely used in global-scale research on the biodiversity of plant communities ([28](#); [29](#); [30](#)).

The sPlot initiative tries to close this data gap. It consolidates numerous local to regional vegetation-plot datasets to create a harmonized and comprehensive global database of georeferenced terrestrial plant species assemblages ([25](#)). Established in 2013, sPlot (version 3) currently contains more than 1.9 million vegetation plots, and is fully integrated with the TRY database ([31](#)), from which it derives

information on plant functional traits. The sPlot database is increasingly being used to study continental-to-global scale vegetation patterns, such as the relative contribution of regional vs. local factors on the global patterns of fern richness ([32](#)), the mechanisms underlying the spread and abundance of native vs. invasive tree species ([33](#)), and worldwide trait–environment relationships in plant communities ([27](#)).

Yet, most of these data are not open-access. Here, we secured permission from data holders in the sPlot database to openly release a dataset composed of 91,205 vegetation plots. We selected the plots to release using an environmental stratification, in order to represent the entire environmental space covered by the sPlot database. This maximises the benefits of this large dataset for a wide range of potential uses. The selected vegetation plots stem from 105 databases and span 115 countries (Figure [1](#)). This resampled dataset (sPlotOpen - hereafter) is composed of: (1) plot-level information, including metadata and basic vegetation structure descriptors; (2) the vascular plant species composition of each vegetation plot, including species cover or abundance information when available; and (3) community-level functional information obtained by intersection with the TRY database ([31](#)).

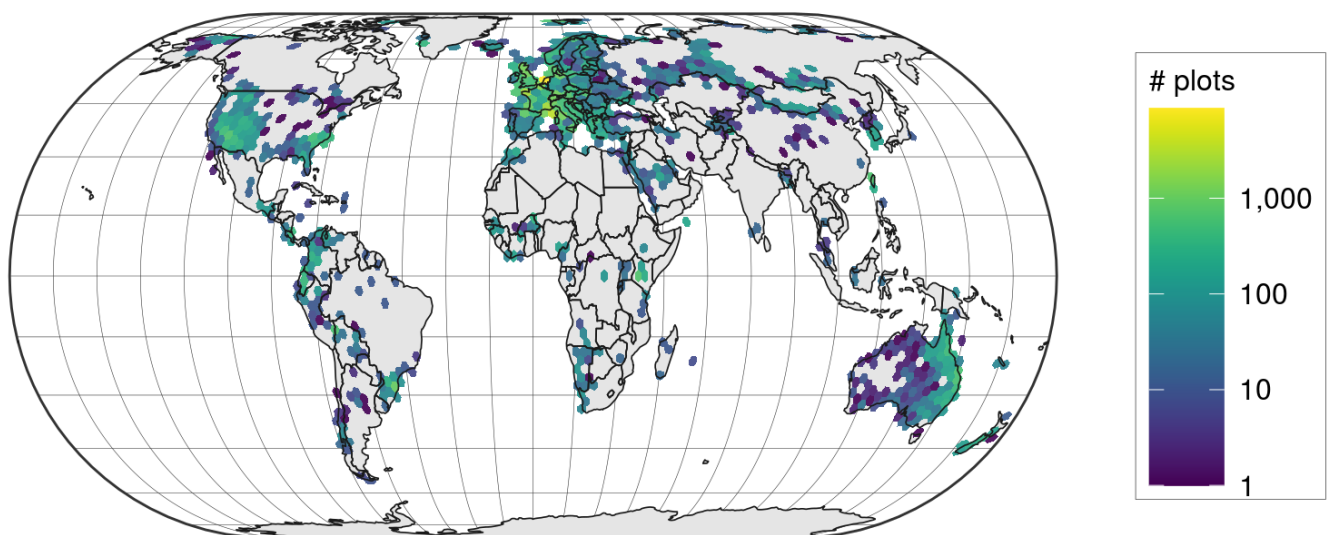


Figure 1: Global map of sPlot Open ($n = 91,205$) and spatial distribution of vegetation plot density per hexagonal cell with a spatial resolution of approximately $70,000 \text{ km}^2$. Map projection is Eckert IV.

Methods

Vegetation plot data sources

We started from the sPlot database v2.1 (created in October 2016), which contains 1,121,244 unique vegetation plots (also called 'relevés') and 23,586,216 species records. sPlot focuses on natural vegetation, i.e., plant cover that develops with little or no human interference. Data originate from 110 different vegetation-plot datasets of regional, national or continental extent, some of which stemming from regional or continental initiatives (see [25](#) for more information). For instance: 48 vegetation-plot datasets derive from the European Vegetation Archive (EVA) ([19](#)); three major African datasets derive from the Tropical African Vegetation Archive (TAVA); and multiple vegetation datasets in the USA and Australia derive from the VegBank ([34](#); [35](#)) and TERN's AEKOS ([36](#)) archives, respectively. Data from other continents (South America, Asia) or countries were contributed as separate standalone datasets. The metadata of each individual vegetation-plot dataset stored in sPlot are managed through the Global Index of Vegetation-Plot Databases [GIVD](#) ([37](#)), using the GIVD code as the unique dataset identifier.

Resampling method

Data in the sPlot database are unevenly distributed across vegetation types and geographic regions (see [27](#)). First, we removed vegetation plots without geographical coordinates or with a location uncertainty higher than 3 km. We also removed vegetation plots from wetlands and from anthropogenic vegetation types, since these data were available only for few geographic regions, mostly in Europe. This resulted in a total of 799,400 out of the initial set of 1,121,244 vegetation plots. We then tried to reduce the geographical imbalance. Mid-latitude regions in developed countries (mostly Europe, the USA and Australia) are overrepresented in sPlot, while regions in the tropics and subtropics are underrepresented, which is a typical geographical bias in biodiversity data (e.g., [38](#); [4](#)). To reduce this imbalance as much as possible, we performed a stratified resampling approach, using several environmental variables available at global extent as sampling strata. We considered 30 climatic and soil variables. For climate, we complemented the 19 bioclimatic variables from CHELSA v1.2 ([39](#)), as well as two variables reflecting the growing-season length (growing degree days above 1 °C - GDD1 - and 5 °C - GDD5), which were derived from CHELSA's monthly average temperatures. Specifically we summed the number of days of those months with average temperature greater than 1 °C or 5 °C, respectively. In addition, we considered an index of aridity and a layer for Potential Evapotranspiration from the Consortium of Spatial Information (CGIAR-CSI) [40](#)). For soil, we extracted seven variables from the SOILGRIDS database ([41](#)), namely: soil organic carbon content in the fine earth fraction, cation exchange capacity, pH, as well as the fractions of coarse fragments, sand, silt and clay.

We stratified our sampling effort based on the following procedure. First, we ran a global principal component analysis (PCA) on a matrix of terrestrial grid cells by the 30 above-mentioned environmental variables. We considered the full environmental space of all terrestrial habitats on Earth at a spatial resolution of 2.5 arcmin, totaling 8,384,404 terrestrial grid cells, irrespective of whether a grid cell hosted vegetation plots from the sPlot database v2.1 or not. We then subdivided the PCA ordination space, represented by the first two principal components (PC1–PC2), which accounted for 47% and 23% of the total environmental variation in terrestrial grid cells, into a regular 100 × 100 grid (Figure [2](#)). This PC1-PC2 two-dimensional space was subsequently used to balance our sampling effort across all PC1-PC2 grid cells for which vegetation plots were available. After projecting the 799,400 vegetation plots onto this PC1-PC2 grid, we calculated how many vegetation plots occurred in each PC1-PC2 grid cell. For those grid cells with more than 50 vegetation plots ($n = 858$), we selected up to 50 vegetation plots using the heterogeneity-constrained random resampling

algorithm from Lengyel et al. (2011) [42]. This approach optimizes the selection of a random subset of vegetation plots that encompasses the highest variability in species composition while avoiding peculiar and rare communities, which may represent outliers. We quantified the variability in plant species composition among the 50 randomly selected vegetation plots by computing the mean and the variance of the Jaccard's dissimilarity index (43) between all possible pairs of these 50 vegetation plots ($n = 1,225$). More precisely, for a given PC1-PC2 grid cell containing more than 50 vegetation plots, we generated 1,000 random selections of 50 vegetation plots and ranked them according to the mean (ascending order) and variance (descending order) value. Ranks from both sortings were summed for each random selection, and the selection with the lowest summed rank was considered to provide the most balanced/even representation of vegetation types within the focal grid cell. Where a grid cell contained less than 50 plots, we retained all of them. In this way, we reduced the imbalance towards over-sampled climate types while ensuring that the resampled dataset represents the entire environmental gradient covered by the sPlot database. We repeated the resampling procedure three times to get three different possibilities of a heterogeneity-constrained selection of 50 vegetation plots per PC1-PC2 grid cell with, initially, more than 50 vegetation plots. Vegetation plots selected during the first iteration were our first choice, while we considered the vegetation plots additionally selected in the second and third iteration as reserves when asking for permission to release the data as open access to each dataset's contributor(s).

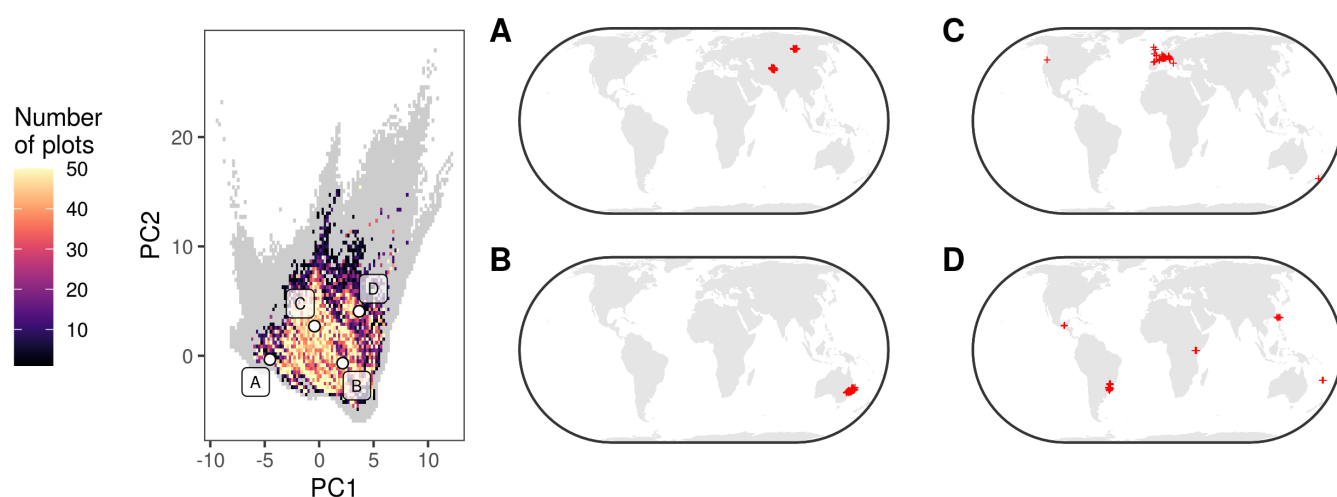


Figure 2: Distribution of vegetation plots from sPlotOpen in the global environmental space. Left: Distribution of plots compared to the distribution of all terrestrial 2.5 arc-minute cells (gray background) in the principal component analysis (PCA) space based on 30 climate and soil variables. The PCA space was divided into a 100×100 regular grid. The first and second PCA axis explained 47% and 23% of the total variance. Right: Geographic distribution of the vegetation plots contained in four randomly selected grid cells.

Permission to release the data as open access

The resampling procedure resulted in a preliminary selection of 98,383 vegetation plots (first choice) and 51,634 vegetation plots flagged as reserves (second or third choice for the subset of PC1-PC2 grid cells with more than 50 vegetation plots available). Since the sPlot database is a consortium of independent datasets whose copyright belongs to the data contributor, we used this preliminary potential selection to ask each dataset's custodian (i.e., either the owner of a dataset or its authorized representative in case of a collective dataset) for permission to release the data of each selected vegetation plot as open access. For 8,070 vegetation plots, permission could not be granted because, for instance, the data are unpublished, confidential or sensitive. These confidential plots were distributed across 2,380 PC1-PC2 grid cells (11.7% of total), having on average 3.4 plots (median = 1, max = 171) that could not be replaced from the reserve pool. For these vegetation plots, we used the reserve pool to randomly select replacements, for which such permission could be granted. We imposed the constraint that each candidate vegetation plot in the reserve pool should belong to the

same environmental stratum, i.e., the same PC1-PC2 grid cell, of the confidential vegetation plot. We acknowledge, however, that this procedure does not maximize the variability in plant species composition of the replacement plots.

Trait information

For each vegetation plot for which open access could be granted, we computed the community weighted mean and variance for eighteen plant functional traits derived from the TRY database v3.0 (31). These traits were selected among those that describe the leaf, wood and seed economics spectra (44; 45), and are known to either affect different key ecosystem processes or respond to macroclimatic drivers, or both (25). The eighteen plant functional traits (all concentrations based on dry weight) were: (1) leaf area [mm^2]; (2) stem specific density [g cm^{-3}]; (3) specific leaf area [m^2kg^{-1}]; (4) leaf carbon concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (5) leaf nitrogen concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (6) leaf phosphorus concentration [mg g^{-1}]; (7) plant height [m]; (8) seed mass [mg]; (9) seed length [mm]; (10) leaf dry matter content [g g^{-1}]; (11) leaf nitrogen per area [g m^{-2}]; (12) leaf N:P ratio [g g^{-1}]; (13) leaf $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ [per million]; (14) seed number per reproductive unit; (15) leaf fresh mass [g]; (16) stem conduit density [mm^{-2}]; (17) dispersal unit length [mm]; and (18) conduit element length [μm].

Because missing values were particularly widespread in the species-trait matrix, we calculated community weighted means using the gap-filled version of these traits we received from TRY ([???]). Gap-filling was performed at the level of individual observations and relies on a hierarchical Bayesian modeling (R package 'BHPMF', 46; 47). We then transformed to the natural logarithm all gap-filled trait values and averaged each trait by taxon (i.e., at species, or genus level). Additional information on the gap-filling procedure is available in [25].

Community-weighted means (CWM) and variances (CWV) were calculated for every plant functional trait j and every vegetation plot k as follows (48):

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

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

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

Data Records

sPlot Open contains 91,205 vegetation plots from 115 countries and all continents except Antarctica (Figure 1). This randomized selection comes from 105 constitutive datasets (Table 1). It only contains the species composition of vascular plants; information on the composition of bryophytes and lichens was discarded since it was only available for a minority of plots ($n = 4,963$ and $n = 3,045$, respectively). Information on the size (surface area) of the vegetation survey is available for 61,898 vegetation plots, and ranges between 0.01 and 40,000 m² (mean = 270 m²; median = 78.5 m²). Similarly, only for a minority of plots ($n = 17,757$) information on the exact group of plants sampled in the field is available (e.g., complete vegetation, only trees, only trees > 1 m height, and so on). However, as most data were collected using the phytosociological method, we deem safe to assume that, unless otherwise specified, plots contain information on all vascular plants. We retained plots with incomplete vegetation, because they were mostly located in the tropics, i.e., in areas where vegetation plots are particularly scarce otherwise. The average number of vascular plant species per vegetation plot ranges between 1 (i.e. monospecific stands) and 270 species (mean = 17.6; median = 13).

By capping the number of vegetation plots in overrepresented environmental conditions, the resampling procedure described above strongly reduced the bias in the distribution of vegetation plots within the environmental niche space. Yet, due to the lack or scarcity of data from some geographical regions, like the tropics, the spatial distribution of vegetation plots remains unbalanced across geographical regions (Figure 1). This is evident when comparing the number of plots across continents or biomes. Europe is by far the best represented continent, with 53,884 vegetation plots. In contrast, in Africa and South America the remaining plots after data edition and selection were 4,507 and 5,533 vegetation plots, respectively. The representation of biomes is also unbalanced. The biomes 'Temperate mid-latitudes' and 'Subtropics with winter rain' have 37,507 and 16,510 vegetation plots, respectively, while none of the other biomes have more than 10,000 vegetation plots (Figure 3, left). Despite these imbalances, all the Whittaker biomes are covered by sPlot Open (Figure 3, right), and our resampling algorithm has resulted in a much more balanced dataset than many other large global datasets that are available, such as GBIF.

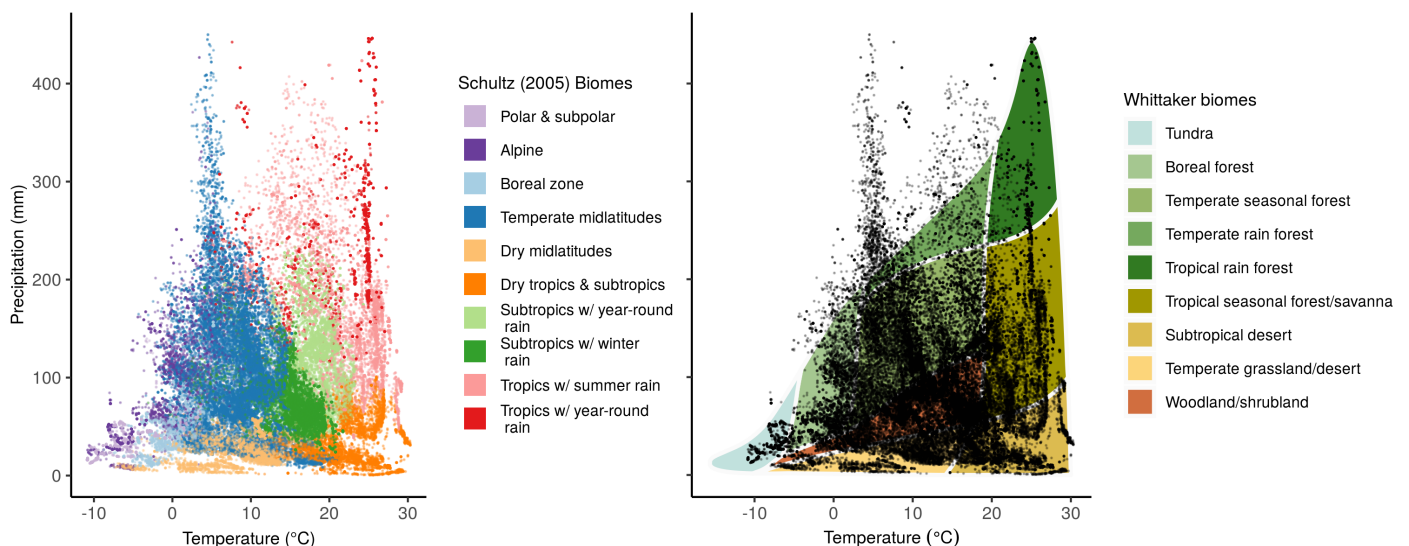


Figure 3: Distribution of all the vegetation plots in sPlotOpen ($n = 91,205$) in the two-dimensional climatic space represented by mean annual temperature and mean annual precipitation color coded based on biomes as defined by Schultz 2005 (49) modified to include also the alpine biome from Körner et al. (2017)(50)(left), superimposed onto Whittaker biomes (51) (right).

Almost one third of vegetation plots in sPlot Open belong to forest ($n = 25,740$), two thirds to non-forest vegetation ($n = 58,145$) vegetation, with 8 % of plots remaining unassigned ($n = 7,320$). When

not directly done by data providers, the assignment of plots to forests and non-forests was based on multiple lines of evidence, including the plot-level information on the cover of the tree layer, as well as traits of species composing a plot, such as growth form and height. In short, a plot record was considered as forest if the cover of the tree layer, or alternatively, the sum of the (relative) cover of all tree taxa (normalized to 100%), was greater than 25%. It was considered a non-forest record if the sum of relative cover of low-stature, non-tree and non-shrub taxa was greater than 90%. For an extensive explanation of this classification scheme, we refer the reader to Bruelheide et al. (2019) [25]. Even if the proportion of forest vs. non-forest vegetation plots is relatively well-balanced, the geographical distribution of vegetation plots belonging to different vegetation types is likely not balanced in the geographical space, as it depends on the idiosyncrasies of the constitutive datasets composing the sPlot database. For instance, the data from New Zealand only include plots collected in non-forest ecosystems, while data from Chile only refer to forests. We urge potential users to carefully read the description of each individual dataset in [GIVD](#), or to contact the custodians of each dataset before using sPlot Open.

Database Organization

sPlot Open is organized into three main matrices, relationally linked through the key column *'PlotObservationID'*.

The **'header'** matrix contains plot-level information for the 91,205 vegetation plots provided in sPlot Open, including: metadata (e.g., plot ID, ownership, sampling date, geographical location, positional accuracy); sampling design information (e.g., the total surface area used during the vegetation survey); and a plot-level description of vegetation structure (e.g., vegetation type, percentage cover of each vegetation layer), vegetation type, and naturalness level (i.e., whether a plot belongs to the same formation that would occupy the site without human interference). Plots in Europe are also classified according to the EUNIS habitat classification (column *'ESY'*), based on the habitat classification expert system described in Chytrý et al. (2020) ([52](#)). For each vegetation plot, we further provide information on the dataset it originates from, based on the IDs used in [GIVD](#). A brief summary of all the 43 variables in the header matrix is provided in Table [2](#).

The **'DT'** matrix contains data on the species composition of each plot. It is structured in a long format and contains 1,608,610 records from 39,997 vascular plant taxa, mostly resolved at the species level. For each record, we report both the taxon name as originally contributed by the data custodian (column *'Original_species'*), and the taxon name after taxonomic standardization (column *'Species'*). For each record, we report the species cover/abundance values. These follow different standards across the datasets constituting the sPlot database. We, therefore, provide both the cover/abundance value as reported in the original data (column *'Original_abundance'*), together with the abundance scale that was originally used (column *'Abundance_scale'*). This can take seven values: *'CoverPerc'* = percentage cover, *'pa'* = presence-absence, *'x_BA'* = basal area (m²/ha, only for woody species), *'x_IC'* = individual count, i.e., number of individuals in plot, *'x_SC'* = stem count, i.e., number of stems in plot, *'x_IV'* = importance value index, *'x_PF'* = presence frequency. The great majority of entries, however, use the percentage cover scale (n = 1,397,109). Finally, for each entry, we calculated a *'Relative_cover'*, i.e., the cover/abundance of a given taxon divided by the total cover/abundance of all taxa in that vegetation plot.

The **'CWM_CWV'** matrix contains the community-weighted means and variances calculated for each of the 18 functional traits mentioned above. It also contains three additional columns. The column *'Species_richness'* returns the number of species recorded in each plot. The columns *'Trait_coverage_cover'* and *'Trait_coverage_pa'* return, respectively, the proportion of total cover and species in a plot for which functional trait information was available. Functional trait information was available for 20,932 species. The average proportion of species in each plot for which we have functional trait information is 0.88 (median = 1). For 47,177 plots, the coverage is complete, while for only one plot do we have no functional trait information for any of the species occurring in it. When considering relative cover, the average trait coverage is 0.89. As many as 68,234 and 74,388 plots have functional trait information for more than 80% of the species or 80% of relative cover, respectively.

sPlot Open contains two additional objects. The **'metadata'** matrix contains plot-level metadata, which provide information on the origin of each individual vegetation plot. This object contains 15 columns, with information on the dataset of origin (column *'GIVD_ID'* - [37](#)), author or surveyor names (columns *'Releve_author'* and *'Releve_coauthor'*), bibliographic references both at the dataset (column *'DB_BIBTEXKEY'*) and plot level (*'Plot_Biblioreference'* and *'BIBTEXKEY'*), when available. Similarly, the column *'Project_name'* provides information on the project in which a vegetation plot was collected. When available, we also provide information on the numbering of the plots in the publication where they originally appeared (columns *'Nr_table_in_publ'*, *'Nr_releve_in_table'*), or in the dataset where they were initially stored (*'Original_nr_in_database'*). In the case of nested plots (n = 1,786), we also provide the original plot and subplot IDs (columns: *'Original_plotID'*, *'Original_subplotID'*). The last two columns

report plot-level *'Remarks'*, and the unique identifier produced by Turboveg when the vegetation plot was first stored (*'GUID'*).

Finally, the object **'references'**, contains all the bibliographic references formatted according to a BibTex standard. Each reference is tagged with a key corresponding to the fields *'DB_BIBTEXKEY'* and *'BIBTEXKEY'* in the metadata. We further provide an R function (*'sPlotOpen_citation'*) to create reference lists, based on a selection of plots and/or datasets.

Except for the 'reference' file (format .bib), all objects/matrices are provided in tab-delimited .txt files. All objects, including the *'sPlotOpen_citation'* function, are also compiled inside an .RData object.

Technical Validation

The original sPlot database has a nested structure and consists of several individual datasets, each validated and maintained by its respective dataset custodian. In many cases, individual datasets are also collections whose vegetation plots were provided by their respective owners (the person who performed the actual vegetation survey) or by someone who digitized the original data from the scientific published or grey literature. We obviously have no direct control over the individual vegetation plots that we provide here in sPlot Open. Yet, all these vegetation plots stem from trained professional botanists, or published scientific work, and are accompanied by detailed information on the sampling protocols used, thus ensuring data quality and reliability.

Before integration into the sPlot database, each dataset was further checked for consistency and, if it was in a different format, we converted it to a Turboveg 2 dataset ([53](#)). During this conversion, we checked that all datasets contained the required metadata information, and cross-checked that each plot was located within the geographic scopes of its respective dataset. All individual Turboveg 2 datasets were then integrated into a Turboveg 3 database, and exported to comma-separated files. Finally, we harmonized all the taxonomic names from all datasets, based on the sPlot's taxonomic backbone ([54](#)). This backbone matched all the taxonomic names (without nomenclatural authors) from all datasets in sPlot 2.1 and TRY v3.0 ([31](#)) to their resolved version based on the Taxonomic Name Resolution Service web application (TNRS version 4.0; [55](#); iPlant Collaborative, 2015). This allowed us to (1) harmonize all datasets to a common nomenclature, and (2) link the sPlot database to the TRY database ([31](#)). The final backbone only retained matched taxonomic names at the rank of species or higher. Additional detail on the taxonomic resolution is reported in Bruehlheide et al. (2019) [[25](#)], while a description of the workflow, including R-code, is available in Purschke (2017) [[54](#)].

Usage Notes

The sPlot Open database can be downloaded from <https://www.idiv.de> (link to PlantHub). Users are urged to cite the original sources when using sPlot Open in addition to the present paper, particularly when using data contained in BioTIME ([56](#)). For two datasets (AF-00-009, AF-CD-001), the identification of taxa at species level is still in progress. As most of the constitutive datasets remain under continuous development, sPlot Open users are encouraged to get in touch with the custodian(s) of the data they are planning to use (custodian names are reported in <https://www.idiv.de/sPlot>).

The data included in the present paper represent the subset of sPlot for which we were able to secure permission for making these data open. The additional data in sPlot are available under sPlot's Governance and Data Property Rules (www.idiv.de/sPlot). Using the full sPlot dataset is also recommended if a stratification is desired that is different from the environmental factors used here, for example by geographical region or plot size.

Code Availability

The R code used to produce sPlot Open from the sPlot 2.1 database is contained in the *sPlotOpen_code* GitHub repository: (https://github.com/fmsabatini/sPlotOpen_Code/). This manuscript was produced using the Manubot workflow ([57](#)). The code for reproducing this manuscript is stored in the *sPlotOpen_manuscript* GitHub repository: (https://github.com/fmsabatini/sPlotOpen_Manuscript).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to thousands of vegetation scientists who sampled vegetation plots in the field or digitized them into regional, national or international databases. We also appreciate the support of the German Research Foundation for funding sPlot as one of the iDiv (DFG FZT 118, 202548816) research platforms, as well as for funding the position of Francesco Maria Sabatini and the organization of three workshops through the sDiv calls. We acknowledge this support with naming the database “sPlot”, where the “s” refers to the sDiv synthesis workshops.

The study has been supported by the TRY initiative on plant traits (<http://www.try-db.org>). The TRY initiative and database is hosted, developed and maintained by J. Kattge and G. Bönsch (Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry, Jena, Germany). TRY is currently supported by DIVERSITAS/Future Earth and the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig. Jens Kattge acknowledges support by the Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry (Jena, Germany), Future Earth, the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig and the EU H2020 project BACI, Grant No 640176.

Isabelle Aubin was funded through Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Yves Bergeron was funded through Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. Idoia Biurrun was funded by the Basque Government (IT936-16). Anne Bjorkman thanks the Herschel Island-Qikiqtaruk Territorial Park management, Catherine Kennedy, Dorothy Cooley, Jill F. Johnstone, Cameron Eckert and Richard Gordon for establishing the ecological monitoring programme. Funding was provided by Herschel Island-Qikiqtaruk Territorial Park. Luis Cayuela was supported by project BIOCON08_044 funded by Fundación BBVA. Milan Chytrý, Flavia Landucci, Corrado Marcenò and Tomáš Peterka were supported by the Czech Science Foundation (project no. 19-28491X). Brian Enquist thanks the following individuals and institutions for contributing data to sPlot via the SALVIAS database: Mauricio Bonifacino, Saara DeWalt, Timothy Killeen, Susan Letcher, Nigel Pitman, Cam Webb, The Missouri Botanical Garden, RAINFOR and the Amazon Forest Inventory Network. Alvaro G. Gutiérrez was funded by Project FORECOFUN-SSA PIEF-GA-2010-274798 and FONDECYT 1200468. Mohamed Z. Hatim thanks Kamal Shaltout and Joop Schaminée for supervision of the MSc thesis, and Joop Schaminée for support and funding from the Prince Bernard Culture Fund Prize for Nature Conservation. Jürgen Homeier received funding from BMBF (Federal Ministry of Education and Science of Germany) and the German Research Foundation (DFG Ho3296-2, DFG Ho3296-4). Borja Jiménez-Alfaro was funded by the Spanish Research Agency through grant AEI/10.13039/501100011033. Dirk N. Karger received funding from: The WSL internal grant exCHELSA and ClimEx, the Joint Biodiversa COFUND project ‘FeedBaCks’ and ‘Futureweb’, the Swiss Data Science Projects: SPEEDMIND, and COMECO, and the Swiss National Science Foundation (20BD21_184131). Attila Lengyel was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office, Hungary (PD-123997). Tatiana Lysenko was funded by Russian Foundation for Basic Research (grant No. 16-04-00747a). Alireza Naqinezhad is supported by a master grant from the University of Mazandaran. Jérôme Munzinger was supported by the French National Research Agency (ANR) with grants INC (ANR-07-BDIV-0008), BIONEOCAL (ANR-07-BDIV-0006) & ULTRABIO (ANR-07-BDIV-0010), by National Geographic Society (Grant 7579-04), and with fundings and authorizations of North and South Provinces of New Caledonia. Arkadiusz Nowak received support from the National Science Centre, Poland, grant no. 2017/25/B/NZ8/00572. Gerhard E. Overbeck acknowledges support from Brazil’s National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq, grant 310022/2015-0). Robert Peet acknowledges the support from the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, the North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement Program, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. National Science Foundation (DBI-9905838, DBI-0213794). Josep Peñuelas would like to acknowledge the financial support from the European Research Council Synergy grant ERC-SyG-2013-610028 IMBALANCE-P. Petr Petřík and Jiri Dolezal acknowledge the support of the long-term research development project No. RVO 67985939 of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Oliver Phillips was funded by an ERC Advanced Grant (291585, “T-FORCES”) and a Royal Society-Wolfson Research Merit Award. Valério D. Pillar has been supported by the Brazil’s National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq, grant 307689/2014-0). Solvita Rüşina was

supported by the University of Latvia grant AAP2016/B041//Zd2016/AZ03 within the “Climate change and sustainable use of natural resources”. Franziska Schrodte was supported by a University of Minnesota Institute on the Environment Discovery Grant, a German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig grant (50170649_#7) and a University of Nottingham Anne McLaren Fellowship. Jens Christian Svenning considers this work a contribution to his VILLUM Investigator project “Biodiversity Dynamics in a Changing World” funded by VILLUM FONDEN (grant 16549). Kim André Vanselow would like to thank W. Bernhard Dickoré for the help in the identification of plant species and acknowledge the financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation (AZ I/81 976) and the German Research Foundation (DFG VA 749/1-1, DFG VA 749/4-1). Evan Weiher was funded by NSF DEB-0415383, UWEC-ORSP, and UWEC-BCDT. Work by Karsten Wesche was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG WE 2601/3-1,3-2, 4-1,4-2) and by the German Ministry for Science and Education (BMBF, CAME 03G0808A). Susan Wiser was funded by the NZ Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment’s Strategic Science Investment Fund.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Ching-Feng (Woody) Li.

Author contributions

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

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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I. Aubin, S. Gachet, C. Messier, A. Bouchard
Ecoscience (2007)

124. Vegetation and altitudinal zonation in continental West Greenland

B. Sieg, B. Drees, F. J. A. Daniëls
Meddelelser om Grønland Bioscience (2006)

125. VegBank – a permanent, open-access archive for vegetation-plot data

Robert Peet, Michael Lee, Michael Jennings, Don Faber-Langendoen
Biodiversity & Ecology (2012-09-10) <https://doi.org/ghgvcm>
DOI: [10.7809/b-e.00080](https://doi.org/10.7809/b-e.00080)

126. Vegetation-plot database of the Carolina Vegetation Survey

Robert Peet, Michael Lee, Forbes Boyle, Thomas Wentworth, Michael Schafale, Alan Weakley
Biodiversity & Ecology (2012-09-10) <https://doi.org/ghgvcn>
DOI: [10.7809/b-e.00081](https://doi.org/10.7809/b-e.00081)

127. The Alaska Arctic Vegetation Archive (AVA-AK)

Donald A. Walker, Amy L. Breen, Lisa A. Druckenmiller, Lisa W. Wirth, Will Fisher, Martha K. Reynolds, Jozef Šibík, Marilyn D. Walker, Stephan Hennekens, Keith Boggs, ... Donatella Zona
Phytocoenologia (2016-09-01) <https://doi.org/f877ht>
DOI: [10.1127/phyto/2016/0128](https://doi.org/10.1127/phyto/2016/0128)

128. VegPáramo, a flora and vegetation database for the Andean páramo

Gwendolyn Peyre, Henrik Balslev, David Martí, Petr Sklenář, Paul Ramsay, Pablo Lozano, Nidia Cuello, Rainer Bussmann, Omar Cabrera, Xavier Font
Phytocoenologia (2015-07-01) <https://doi.org/f7m9cj>
DOI: [10.1127/phyto/2015/0045](https://doi.org/10.1127/phyto/2015/0045)

129. The Floristic and Forest Inventory of Santa Catarina State (IFFSC): methodological and operational aspects

A. C. Vibrans, L. Sevegnani, D. V. Lingner, A. L. Gasper, S. Sabbagh
Pesquisa Florestal Brasileira (2010)

130. Plant Invasions in Protected Areas

Springer Science and Business Media LLC
(2013) <https://doi.org/ghgt8v>
DOI: [10.1007/978-94-007-7750-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7750-7)

Supplementary Material

Table 1: List of databases contributing to the open access dataset extracted from the sPlot database. Databases are ordered based on their ID in the Global Index of Vegetation Databases (GVID ID).

GVID ID	Dataset name	Custodian	Deputy custodian	Nr. open-access plots	Ref
00-00-001	ForestPlots.net	Oliver L. Phillips	Aurora Levesley	108	58
00-00-003	SALVIAS	Brian Enquist	Brad Boyle	2860	
00-00-004	Vegetation Database of Eurasian Tundra	Risto Virtanen		600	
00-00-005	Tundra Vegetation Plots (TundraPlot)	Anne D. Bjorkman	Sarah Elmendorf	227	59
00-RU-001	Vegetation Database Forest of Southern Ural	Vasiliy Martynenko	Pavel Shirokikh	25	
00-RU-002	Database of Masaryk University`s Vegetation Research in Siberia	Milan Chytrý		128	60
00-RU-003	Database Meadows and Steppes of Southern Ural	Sergey Yamalov	Mariya Lebedeva	99	
00-TR-001	Forest Vegetation Database of Turkey - FVDT	Ali Kavgacı		15	
AF-00-001	West African Vegetation Database	Marco Schmidt	Georg Zizka	184	61
AF-00-003	BIOTA Southern Africa Biodiversity Observatories Vegetation Database	Norbert Jürgens	Ute Schmiedel	562	62
AF-00-006	SWEA-Dataveg	Miguel Alvarez	Michael Curran	1211	
AF-00-008	PANAF Vegetation Database	Hjalmar Kühl	TeneKwetché Sop	942	
AF-00-009	Vegetation Database of the Okavango Basin	Rasmus Revermann	Manfred Finckh	202	63
AF-BF-001	Sahel Vegetation Database	Jonas V. Müller	Marco Schmidt	279	64
AF-CD-001	Forest Database of Central Congo Basin	Kim Sarah Jacobsen	Hans Verbeeck	97	65
AF-ET-001	Vegetation Database of Ethiopia	Desalegn Wana	Anke Jentsch	59	66
AF-MA-001	Vegetation Database of Southern Morocco	Manfred Finckh		266	67
AF-ZW-001	Vegetation Database of Zimbabwe	Cyrus Samimi		17	68
AS-00-001	Korean Forest Database	Tomáš Černý	Jiri Dolezal	766	69
AS-00-003	Vegetation of Middle Asia	Arkadiusz Nowak	Marcin Nobis	128	70
AS-00-004	Rice Field Vegetation Database	Arkadiusz Nowak		31	
AS-BD-001	Tropical Forest Dataset of Bangladesh	Mohammed A.S. Arfin Khan	Fahmida Sultana	82	
AS-CN-001	China Forest-Steppe Ecotone Database	Hongyan Liu	Fengjun Zhao	97	71
AS-CN-002	Tibet-PaDeMoS Grazing Transect	Karsten Wesche		27	72
AS-CN-003	Vegetation Database of the BEF China Project	Helge Bruehlheide		18	73

GIVD ID	Dataset name	Custodian	Deputy custodian	Nr. open-access plots	Ref
AS-CN-004	Vegetation Database of the Northern Mountains in China	Zhiyao Tang		70	
AS-EG-001	Vegetation Database of Sinai in Egypt	Mohamed Z. Hatim		98	74
AS-ID-001	Sulawesi Vegetation Database	Michael Kessler		24	
AS-IR-001	Vegetation Database of Iran	Jalil Noroozi	Parastoo Mahdavi	105	
AS-KZ-001	Database of Meadow Vegetation in the NW Tien Shan Mountains	Viktoria Wagner		3	75
AS-MN-001	Southern Gobi Protected Areas Database	Henrik von Wehrden	Karsten Wesche	688	76
AS-RU-001	Wetland Vegetation Database of Baikal Siberia (WETBS)	Victor Chepinoga		6	77
AS-RU-002	Database of Siberian Vegetation (DSV)	Andrey Korolyuk	Andrei Zverev	2150	78
AS-RU-004	Database of the University of Münster - Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research Group's Vegetation Research in Western Siberia and Kazakhstan	Norbert Hölzel	Wanja Mathar	85	
AS-SA-001	Vegetation Database of Saudi Arabia	Mohamed Abd El-Rouf Mousa El-Sheikh		607	79
AS-TJ-001	Eastern Pamirs	Kim André Vanselow		174	80
AS-TW-001	National Vegetation Database of Taiwan	Ching-Feng Li	Chang-Fu Hsieh	897	
AS-YE-001	Socotra Vegetation Database	Michele De Sanctis	Fabio Attorre	190	81
AU-AU-002	AEKOS	Ben Sparrow		7443	36
AU-NC-001	New Caledonian Plant Inventory and Permanent Plot Network (NC-PIPPN)	Jérôme Munzinger	Philippe Birnbaum	98	82
AU-NZ-001	New Zealand National Vegetation Databank	Susan K. Wiser		983	83
AU-PG-001	Forest Plots from Papua New Guinea	Timothy Whitfeld	George D. Weiblen	53	84
EU-00-002	Nordic-Baltic Grassland Vegetation Database (NBGVD)	Jürgen Dengler	Łukasz Kozub	931	85
EU-00-011	Vegetation-Plot Database of the University of the Basque Country (BIOVEG)	Idoia Biurrun	Itziar García-Mijangos	1694	86
EU-00-013	Balkan Dry Grasslands Database	Kiril Vassilev	Armin Macanović	224	87
EU-00-016	Mediterranean Ammophiletea Database	Corrado Marcenò	Borja Jiménez-Alfaro	3713	88
EU-00-017	European Coastal Vegetation Database	John Janssen		1369	
EU-00-018	The Nordic Vegetation Database	Jonathan Lenoir	Jens-Christian Svenning	1755	89
EU-00-019	Balkan Vegetation Database	Kiril Vassilev	Hristo Pedashenko	211	90

GIVD ID	Dataset name	Custodian	Deputy custodian	Nr. open-access plots	Ref
EU-00-020	WetVegEurope	Flavia Landucci		61	91
EU-00-022	European Mire Vegetation Database	Tomáš Peterka	Martin Jiroušek	1843	92
EU-AL-001	Vegetation Database of Albania	Michele De Sanctis	Giuliano Fanelli	99	93
EU-AT-001	Austrian Vegetation Database	Wolfgang Willner	Christian Berg	950	94
EU-BE-002	INBOVEG	Els De Bie		48	
EU-BG-001	Bulgarian Vegetation Database	Iva Apostolova	Desislava Sopotlieva	74	95
EU-CH-005	Swiss Forest Vegetation Database	Thomas Wohlgemuth		1409	96
EU-CZ-001	Czech National Phytosociological Database	Milan Chytrý	Ilona Knollová	579	97
EU-DE-001	VegMV	Florian Jansen	Christian Berg	5	98
EU-DE-013	VegetWeb Germany	Florian Jansen	Jörg Ewald	199	99
EU-DE-014	German Vegetation Reference Database (GVRD)	Ute Jandt	Helge Bruelheide	286	100
EU-DK-002	National Vegetation Database of Denmark	Jesper Erenskjold Moeslund	Rasmus Ejrnæs	1181	
EU-ES-001	Iberian and Macaronesian Vegetation Information System (SIVIM) - Wetlands	Aaron Pérez-Haase	Xavier Font	292	
EU-FR-003	SOPHY	Emmanuel Garbolino	Patrice De Ruffray	13322	101
EU-GB-001	UK National Vegetation Classification Database	John S. Rodwell		5457	
EU-GR-001	KRITI	Erwin Bergmeier		43	
EU-GR-005	Hellenic Natura 2000 Vegetation Database (HelNatVeg)	Panayotis Dimopoulos	Ioannis Tsiripidis	777	102
EU-GR-006	Hellenic Woodland Database	Ioannis Tsiripidis	Georgios Fotiadis	4	103
EU-HR-001	Phytosociological Database of Non-Forest Vegetation in Croatia	Zvezdana Stančić		213	104
EU-HR-002	Croatian Vegetation Database	Željko Škvorc	Daniel Krstonošić	688	
EU-HU-003	CoenoDat Hungarian Phytosociological Database	János Csiky	Zoltán Botta-Dukát	17	105
EU-IT-001	VegItaly	Roberto Venanzoni	Flavia Landucci	2712	106
EU-IT-010	Vegetation database of Habitats in the Italian Alps – HabItAlp	Laura Casella	Pierangela Angelini	155	107
EU-IT-011	Vegetation-Plot Database Sapienza University of Rome (VPD-Sapienza)	Emiliano Agrillo	Fabio Attorre	1003	108
EU-LT-001	Lithuanian Vegetation Database	Valerijus Rašomavičius	Domas Uogintas	119	

GIVD ID	Dataset name	Custodian	Deputy custodian	Nr. open-access plots	Ref
EU-LV-001	Semi-natural Grassland Vegetation Database of Latvia	Solvita Rūsiņa		306	109
EU-MK-001	Vegetation Database of the Republic of Macedonia	Renata Ćušterevska		10	
EU-NL-001	Dutch National Vegetation Database	Stephan M. Hennekens	Joop H.J. Schaminée	10223	110
EU-PL-001	Polish Vegetation Database	Zygmunt Kącki	Grzegorz Swacha	464	111
EU-RO-007	Romanian Forest Database	Adrian Indreica	Pavel Dan Turtureanu	60	112
EU-RO-008	Romanian Grassland Database	Eszter Ruprecht	Kiril Vassilev	44	113
EU-RS-002	Vegetation Database Grassland Vegetation of Serbia	Svetlana Ačić	Zora Dajić Stevanović	57	114
EU-RU-002	Lower Volga Valley Phytosociological Database	Valentin Golub	Andrey Chuvashov	149	115
EU-RU-003	Vegetation Database of the Volga and the Ural Rivers Basins	Tatiana Lysenko		96	116
EU-RU-011	Vegetation Database of Tatarstan	Vadim Prokhorov	Maria Kozhevnikova	94	117
EU-SI-001	Vegetation Database of Slovenia	Urban Šilc	Filip Kuzmič	435	118
EU-SK-001	Slovak Vegetation Database	Milan Valachovič	Jozef Šibík	893	119
EU-UA-001	Ukrainian Grasslands Database	Anna Kuzemko	Yulia Vashenyak	149	120
EU-UA-006	Vegetation Database of Ukraine and Adjacent Parts of Russia	Viktor Onyshchenko	Vitaliy Kolomiychuk	479	
NA-00-002	Tree Biodiversity Network (BIOTREE-NET)	Luis Cayuela		208	121
NA-CA-003	Database of Timberline Vegetation in NW North America	Viktoria Wagner	Toby Spribille	38	122
NA-CA-004	Understory of Sugar Maple Dominated Stands in Quebec and Ontario (Canada)	Isabelle Aubin		9	123
NA-CA-005	Boreal Forest of Canada	Yves Bergeron	Louis De Grandpré	44	
NA-GL-001	Vegetation Database of Greenland	Birgit Jedrzejek	Fred J.A. Daniëls	340	124
NA-US-002	VegBank	Robert K. Peet	Michael T. Lee	6456	125
NA-US-006	Carolina Vegetation Survey Database	Robert K. Peet	Michael T. Lee	2317	126
NA-US-014	Alaska-Arctic Vegetation Archive	Donald A. Walker	Amy Breen	467	127
SA-00-002	VegPáramo	Gwendolyn Peyre	Xavier Font	1591	128
SA-AR-002	Vegetation Database of Central Argentina	Melisa Giorgis	Alicia T.R. Acosta	42	
SA-BO-003	Bolivia Forest Plots	Michael Kessler	Sebastian Herzog	18	
SA-BR-002	Forest Inventory, State of Santa Catarina, Brazil (IFFSC Project)	Alexander Christian Vibrans	André Luís de Gasper	1345	129

GIVD ID	Dataset name	Custodian	Deputy custodian	Nr. open-access plots	Ref
SA-BR-003	Grasslands of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil	Eduardo Vélez-Martin	Valério D. Pillar	271	
SA-BR-004	Grassland Database of Campos Sulinos	Gerhard E. Overbeck	Valério D. Pillar	111	
SA-CL-002	SSAForests_Plots_db	Alvaro G. Gutiérrez		163	
SA-CL-003	Chilean Park Transects - Fondecyt 1040528	Aníbal Pauchard	Alicia Marticorena	33	130
SA-EC-001	Ecuador Forest Plot Database	Jürgen Homeier		156	

Table 2: Description of the variables contained in the ‘header’ matrix, together with their range (if numeric) or possible levels (if nominal or binary), and the number of non-empty (i.e., non NA) records. Variable types can be n - nominal (i.e., qualitative variable), o - ordinal, q - quantitative, or b - binary (i.e., boolean), or d - date. . Additional details on the variables is in Bruelheide et al. (2019) [25]. GIVD codes derive from Dengler et al. (2011) [37]. Biomes refer to Schultz 2005 [49], modified to include also the world mountain regions by Körner et al. (2017)[50]. The column ESY refers to the EUNIS Habitat Classification Expert system described in Chytrý et al. (2020) [52].

Variable	Range/Levels	Unit of Measurement	Nr. non-NA Records	Type
GIVD_ID			91205	n
Dataset			91205	n
Continent	Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania, South America		91205	n
Country			91205	n
Biome	Alpine, Boreal zone, Dry midlatitudes, Dry tropics and subtropics, Polar and subpolar zone, Subtropics with year-round rain, Subtropics with winter rain, Temperate midlatitudes, Tropics with summer rain, Tropics with year-round rain		91205	n
Date_of_recording	1888-07-05 - 2015-02-03	dd-mm-yyyy	75971	d
Latitude	-54.73863 - 80.149116	° (WGS84)	91205	q
Longitude	-162.741433 - 179.590053	° (WGS84)	91205	q
Location_uncertainty	1 - 2500	m	91176	q
Releve_area	0.01 - 40000	m ²	62063	q
Plant_recorded	All vascular plants, All trees & dominant understory, Dominant trees, Only dominant species, Dominant woody plants >= 2.5 cm dbh, All woody plants, Woody plants >= 1 cm dbh, Woody plants >= 2.5 cm dbh, Woody plants >= 5 cm dbh, Woody plants >= 10 cm dbh, Woody plants >= 20 cm dbh, Woody plants >= 1 m height, Not specified		91205	n
Elevation	-25 - 4819	m a.s.l.	52277	q
Aspect	1 - 360	°	30842	q
Slope	0 - 90	°	37817	q
is_forest	FALSE = 58145; TRUE = 25740		83885	b

Variable	Range/Levels	Unit of Measurement	Nr. non-NA Records	Type
ESY			55631	n
Forest	FALSE = 50071; TRUE = 23979		74050	b
Shrubland	FALSE = 62967; TRUE = 11083		74050	b
Grassland	FALSE = 26974; TRUE = 47076		74050	b
Wetland	FALSE = 55970; TRUE = 18080		74050	b
Sparse_vegetation	FALSE = 62728; TRUE = 11322		74050	b
Cover_total	1 - 313	%	24850	q
Cover_tree_layer	0.5 - 150	%	7270	q
Cover_shrub_layer	0.5 - 145	%	10209	q
Cover_herb_layer	0.2 - 180	%	26846	q
Cover_moss_layer	1 - 100	%	9685	q
Cover_lichen_layer	1 - 95	%	739	q
Cover_algae_layer	1 - 100	%	221	q
Cover_litter_layer	1 - 100	%	4510	q
Cover_bare_rocks	1 - 100	%	1904	q
Cover_cryptogams	1 - 95	%	593	q
Cover_bare_soil	0.1 - 99	%	1414	q
Height_trees_highest	1 - 99	m	6140	q
Height_trees_lowest	1 - 90	m	246	q
Height_shrubs_highest	0.1 - 9.9	m	2902	q
Height_shrubs_lowest	0.1 - 9	m	350	q
Height_herbs_average	0.1 - 440	cm	10161	q
Height_herbs_lowest	1 - 250	cm	2809	q
Height_herbs_highest	1 - 600	cm	1744	q
Naturalness	1 = Natural, 2 = Semi-natural		68179	o

Supplementary Material

Figure S1

Figure S1: Global principal component analysis (PCA) of the world environmental conditions. The PCA is based on the matrix of all terrestrial grid cells ($n = 8,384,404$, spatial grain = 2.5 arcmin) by 30 environmental variables. The PCA space represents the full environmental space of all terrestrial habitats on Earth, irrespective of whether a grid cell hosted vegetation plots from the sPlotOpen or not. The PCA space is divided into a 10,000 regular tiles (100 x 100), and the number of 2.5 arcmin terrestrial grid cells counted for each tile. Abbreviations - Climate - Bio1 = Annual Mean Temperature, Bio2 = Mean Diurnal Range, Bio3 = Isothermality, Bio4 = Temperature Seasonality, Bio5 = Max Temperature of Warmest Month, Bio6 = Min Temperature of Coldest Month, Bio7 = Temperature Annual Range, Bio8 = Mean Temperature of Wettest Quarter, Bio9 = Mean Temperature of Driest Quarter, Bio10 = Mean Temperature of Warmest Quarter, Bio11 = Mean Temperature of Coldest Quarter, Bio12 = Annual Precipitation, Bio13 = Precipitation of Wettest Month, Bio14 = Precipitation of Driest Month, Bio15 = Precipitation Seasonality, Bio16 = Precipitation of Wettest Quarter, Bio17 = Precipitation of Driest Quarter, Bio18 = Precipitation of Warmest Quarter, Bio19 = Precipitation of Coldest Quarter. Soil - CECSOL = Cation Exchange capacity of soil, ORCDRC = Soil Organic Carbon Content, PHIHOX = Soil pH, BLDFIE = Bulk Density, CLYPPT = Clay mass fraction, SLTPPT = Silt mass fraction, SNDPPT = Sand mass fraction, CRFVOL = Coarse fragments.

Figure S2

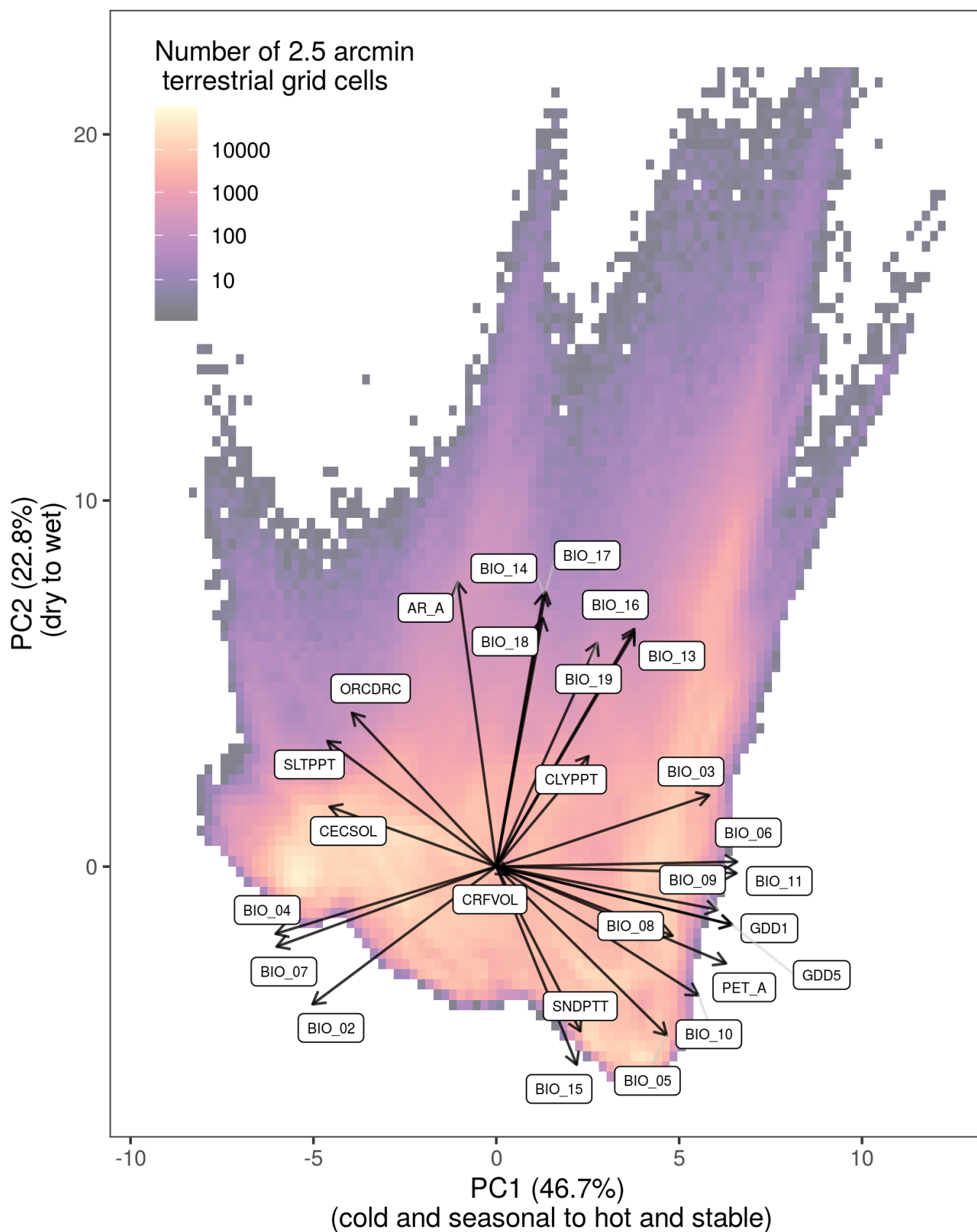


Figure S2: Spatial distribution of principal component analysis (PCA) values. The PCA is based on the matrix of all terrestrial grid cells ($n = 8,384,404$, spatial grain = 2.5 arcmin) by 30 environmental variables.