

**The future of coffee and cocoa agroforestry in a warmer
Mesoamerica**

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26 **Climate change threatens coffee production and the livelihoods of thousands of**
27 **families in Mesoamerica that depend on it. Replacing coffee with cocoa and**
28 **integrating trees in combined agroforestry systems to ameliorate abiotic stress are**
29 **among the proposed alternatives to overcome this challenge. These two**
30 **alternatives do not consider the vulnerability of cocoa and tree species commonly**
31 **used in agroforestry plantations to future climate conditions. We assessed the**
32 **suitability of these alternatives by identifying the potential changes in the**
33 **distribution of coffee, cocoa and the 100 most common agroforestry trees found in**
34 **Mesoamerica. Here we show that cocoa could potentially become an alternative in**
35 **most of coffee vulnerable areas. Agroforestry with currently preferred tree species**
36 **is highly vulnerable to future climate change. Transforming agroforestry systems**
37 **by changing tree species composition may be the best approach to adapt most of**
38 **the coffee and cocoa production areas. Our results stress the urgency for land use**
39 **planning considering climate change effects and to assess new combinations of**
40 **agroforestry species in coffee and cocoa plantations in Mesoamerica.**

41

42 Adapting agricultural systems to climate change is particularly challenging for perennial
43 crops that take long before farmers fully benefit from their management decisions. Yet,
44 a sense of urgency has developed among farmers, scientists and policy makers across
45 the tropics as climate warming and extreme weather events compromise the
46 productivity of major perennial crops¹. In Mesoamerica – the area comprising Panama
47 to central Mexico – the productivity of Arabica coffee (*Coffea arabica* L.) is expected
48 to drastically decline as suitable growing areas shift², and pests and pathogens incidence
49 increases under unfavourable climate conditions^{3,4}.

50 Since the first reports of potential impacts of climate change on coffee suitability² an
51 ever growing number of news and blogs from private sector, NGO's and research
52 organizations are reporting the replacement of coffee by cocoa in zones under 600 m
53 a.s.l. (above the sea level) mainly in Mesoamerica (supplementary information Table
54 S1). According to these sources the drivers of this shift are trends in recent years of
55 increasing coffee production costs and large losses due to pests and diseases (leaf rust
56 crisis)⁴ at low altitudes, attributed to climate change and fuelled by differences in coffee
57 and cocoa prices. All in all, replacing coffee by cocoa has become one of the main
58 strategies for climate change adaptation for producers in low elevation areas⁵, already
59 taking place in Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. Moreover, this strategy is
60 strongly advocated by large NGO's and development agencies active across the region,
61 under the assumption that areas not suitable for coffee can become unequivocally
62 suitable for cocoa⁶. Nevertheless, there is no quantitative assessment of the feasibility of
63 such strategy, starting from considering that cocoa is vulnerable to climate change
64 itself^{7,8}, plus other limitations for transformation of cropping systems.

65 On the other hand, agroforestry – the deliberate and simultaneous management of
66 trees within crop or livestock systems^{9,10} –, is considered another key strategy to
67 increase the resilience of agricultural systems to climate change^{11–13}. Currently, most
68 coffee and cocoa production in Mesoamerica occurs in agroforestry systems^{14,15}. Under
69 proper management, agroforestry trees can improve microclimatic conditions that
70 reduce abiotic stress and facilitate the performance of understory crops^{16,17}. In addition,
71 farmers can benefit from agroforestry systems by its capacity to provide a number of
72 ecological services, such as water and soil conservation, maintenance of soil fertility
73 and biodiversity conservation¹⁸. Nevertheless, climate change can also affect the future

74 ecological niches of several tree species^{19,20} and may restrain the prospects of
75 agroforestry as a viable approach for climate adaptation.

76 To evaluate these two alternatives, shifting coffee-cocoa plantations or maintaining
77 and promoting crops-agroforestry, we assessed the vulnerability of both coffee and
78 cocoa under climate change and the potential impacts of climate change on the habitat
79 suitability for 100 of the most common tree species in coffee and cocoa plantations
80 across Mesoamerica. We modelled current and future climatic niches with ensemble
81 modelling algorithms²¹ using bioclimatic information²², downscaled from 17 General
82 Circulation Models, under two Representative Concentration Pathways scenarios of
83 climate change²³. We selected the intermediate scenario RCP 4.5, which predicts an
84 average temperature increase of 1.4 °C (0.9-2.0 °C), and a scenario with high emissions
85 RCP 8.5, which predicts an average temperature increase of 2.0 °C (1.4-2.6 °C) by 2050
86 (period 2046-2065). We focus on climate projections for the 2050s to align with the
87 United Nations framework of global challenges in agriculture and food security¹³. For
88 simplicity, we focus the results in the intermediate scenario and included the variation
89 between the two scenarios assessed here into the main text, the full results for climate
90 change scenario with high emissions are available as supplementary information.

91 **Results**

92 ***Coffee is more vulnerable to climate change than cocoa***

93 Between 55-62% of current areas for coffee production will no longer be suitable by
94 2050 (Fig. 1a) especially in mid-altitudinal areas (400-700 m a.s.l.). Highlands (> 1,800
95 m a.s.l.) may partly compensate these losses, where coffee will likely expand up to 9-
96 13%. In contrast, cocoa production will probably lose between 13-17% of the current
97 distribution range (Fig. 1a) especially in some lowland areas (0-300 m a.s.l.), expected

98 to become drier in the next decades¹⁹. Our model projections show that 83-87% of
99 current cocoa areas will remain suitable, especially in the humid areas along the Atlantic
100 coast (0-300 m a.s.l.) (Fig. 1b; Supplementary Fig. S1, Text S1).

101 Cocoa could potentially replace 85% of the vulnerable coffee areas under climate
102 change in moist regions at elevations under 400 m a.s.l. and 53% at elevations between
103 400-700 m a.s.l. Areas to be replaced decrease sharply with altitude with no possibility
104 beyond 1,200 m.a.s.l under RCP 4.5 and 1,600 m.a.s.l under RCP 8.5 (Fig. 2,
105 Supplementary Fig. S2).

106 ***Agroforestry trees: winners and losers***

107 The distribution range of 79% of the tree species assessed in coffee areas and 62% of
108 the tree species assessed in cocoa areas will drastically shrink or become unsuitable in
109 both remaining and vulnerable areas for coffee and cocoa. Major losses are expected for
110 the most popular trees used for fruits, *N*-fixing and timber in mid-altitudinal coffee areas
111 (400-700 m a.s.l.) and lowland cocoa areas (0-300 m a.s.l.; Fig. 3).

112 Looking at specific tree groups by their main use, we estimate that 20 of the 33 fruit
113 trees will lose more than 15% of their current suitability in coffee areas. The same trend
114 is observed for 14 fruit trees in cocoa suitable areas. The common fruit trees in coffee
115 and cocoa plantations, *Persea americana* (avocado), *Psidium guajava* (guava) and
116 *Manguijera indica* (mango) are among the most vulnerable species with average loss of
117 53% in suitable areas. Major gains (>15%), however, are found for species such as
118 *Spondias mombin* (jobo) and *Manilkara zapota* (sapodilla) in coffee, *Melicoccus*
119 *bijugatus* (mamon) in cocoa and *Tamarindus indica* (tamarind) in both coffee and cocoa
120 areas (Fig. 4a, Supplementary Fig. S3).

121 High losses (>15%) are expected for 25 of the 30 *N*-fixing tree species assessed in
122 coffee and for 18 *N*-fixing tree species in cocoa areas (Fig. 4b, Supplementary Fig. S4).
123 Most common *N*-fixing trees currently growing in coffee and cocoa plantations, such as
124 *Erythrina poeppigiana* (poró), *Inga oerstediana*, *I. ruiziana* and *I. jinicuil* (guama) are
125 the most vulnerable to expected climate change, with losses of 56% in suitable areas.
126 Only two species, of the selected, may expand their suitability in >26% across cocoa
127 areas, *Inga laurina* (guama) and *Senna atomaria* (vainillo), but only up to 4% in future
128 coffee areas.

129 In the case of timber trees, we estimate losses of >15% for 22 of 37 species in coffee
130 and 12 tree species in cocoa areas. The most vulnerable timber species include the
131 widely common *Cedrela odorata* (cedar), as well as, the locally important timber
132 species *Perymenium grande* (tatascán) and *Pachira quinata* (pochote), in both coffee
133 and cocoa areas (Fig. 4c, Supplementary Fig. S5). Marginal gains (~5%) are expected
134 for *Albizia saman* (carreto), *Ceiba pentandra* (ceiba) and *Guazuma ulmifolia* (guácimo)
135 in both coffee and cocoa areas.

136 ***Prospects for future coffee and cocoa under agroforestry***

137 Despite the overall losses in suitability for some of the most popular tree species, our
138 projections suggest that agroforestry could persist as a viable alternative to manage
139 coffee and cocoa plantations in Mesoamerica under climate change. By 2050,
140 approximately 72% of coffee areas (both, remaining and vulnerable) will be suitable for
141 more than 30 tree species. This includes a portfolio of at least 10 species per main use
142 (10 fruit species, 10 *N*-fixing species and 10 timber species). Most of these tree species
143 are already present in coffee plantations but mainly in low densities and remain
144 underutilised. Only 9% of coffee areas have very low tree species options (≤ 3 species).

145 Our results suggest that cocoa suitable areas have a higher potential for agroforestry
146 than coffee. By 2050, 95% of cocoa areas will be suitable for more than 30 tree species.
147 Only 3% of cocoa areas have very low tree species options (≤ 3 species) potentially
148 available (Supplementary Fig. S6).

149 **Discussion**

150 Our results stress the urgency for land use planning that considers potential climate
151 change impacts to define the best areas and growing systems for production of coffee
152 and cocoa under agroforestry management. These results suggest that important changes
153 in tree species composition will be needed for agroforestry systems to remain as the best
154 alternative for climate adaptation of coffee and cocoa fields.

155 Large areas are highly suitable for cocoa production in Mesoamerica under current
156 climatic conditions and this suitability remains under climate change in 2050, opposing
157 to the trends reported for the current largest cocoa production countries in West
158 Africa²⁴. In fact, the total area potentially suitable for cocoa in 2050 in the region could
159 be four times the current world's cocoa producing area (11M ha)²⁵ stressing the
160 comparative advantage of the region for cocoa production. Despite this large potential,
161 currently Mesoamerica is a minor player in the global cocoa supply chain (providing
162 $<1\%$ total world cocoa production in 2017). In general, cocoa production systems in the
163 region include smallholders, with low levels of input use, old plantations and low yields
164 ($60\text{--}328\text{ kg ha}^{-1}\text{ year}^{-1}$)²⁶. It is argued that this panorama could change substantially if,
165 for instance, farmers used to the management of a specialized perennial crop such as
166 coffee, turn their efforts to cocoa production.

167 Only considering the coffee vulnerable areas to climate change that will be suitable
168 for cocoa in 2050 (a modest 18% of the total suitable area), there could be 7.5 M ha in
169 Mesoamerica available for cocoa production. Even at the extremely low yields typical
170 of the region, these potentially new producing areas could add 1.5 million tons of cocoa
171 to the global supply. In reality the actual coffee areas that can be replaced by cocoa will
172 be lower than these estimated areas, because farmers may lack financial capacities to
173 transform their coffee plantations²⁷ and the capacity to meet the strict existing quality
174 standards. Still, the potential of the region remains large, but fuelling cocoa expansions
175 will require well-structured efforts to i) reduce barriers to transformation, ii) ensure
176 coupling of production to markets and iii) adequate land use planning to avoid
177 expansion of cocoa into natural forests^{28,29} (cocoa suitable areas do coincide with
178 various protected areas within the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor).

179 Alternatively, by managing agroforestry systems, farmers could potentially maintain
180 their current coffee and cocoa plantations using suitable trees to ameliorate
181 microclimatic conditions. This alternative could also prevent the expansion of
182 agricultural activities towards protected areas that are reported to be suitable in the
183 future³⁰. However, it seems highly probable that current agroforestry schemes will need
184 to be modified in terms of species composition, since some of the most popular tree
185 species are also vulnerable to future climate. It is particularly concerning the losses in
186 habitat suitability of *N*-fixing trees such as *E. poeppigiana* (poró) and the majority of
187 *Inga* species. These species make up the most abundant agroforestry trees in coffee and
188 cocoa plantations in Mesoamerica^{31,32}, and have a key role for the management of soil
189 fertility and sustain more stable productivity^{33,34}, especially in low-input and small

190 farming plantations³⁵. Therefore, our results anticipate a serious threat for future coffee
191 and cocoa plantations if alternatives for *N*-fixing species are not promptly identified.

192 Rethinking current agroforestry species composition in coffee and cocoa landscapes
193 requires the identification of the best tree species. Currently, farmers have a clear
194 preference towards few species such as *C. odorata* (cedar), *E. poeppigiana* (poró), *Inga*
195 spp., *M. indica* (mango), *P. americana* (avocado) and *P. guajava* (guava), all widespread
196 in agricultural fields or open areas and of easy regeneration and propagation. We found
197 that some currently underutilised tree species in coffee and cocoa plantations could
198 potentially maintain or even increase their suitable distribution ranges under future
199 climate, such as the fruit trees *M. sapota*, *S. dulcis*, *Brosimum alicastrum*, and the
200 timber trees *Simarouba glauca* and *Ceiba pentandra*. These species are present in low
201 densities in coffee and cocoa plantations, and most of them are remnants of previous
202 vegetation³⁶.

203 Expanding the use of underutilised species in agroforestry systems will require a
204 deeper understanding of their agronomic performance considering other factors beyond
205 just climate (e.g. pest, diseases, soil fertility), ecological interactions^{37–39}, farmers’
206 perceptions and local knowledge regarding management and utilisation of these tree
207 species, as well as market incentives to facilitate their wider use. In our assessment, we
208 employed a species distribution modelling (SDM) approach disregarding these aspects.
209 Therefore, the interpretation of our results is driven by the expected changes in
210 biophysical conditions characterised here as changes in extreme precipitation and
211 temperature events. The evidence has shown that these changes are particularly
212 important for agroecosystems in Mesoamerica, and other regions affected by El Niño

213 Southern Oscillation, in which this phenomenon shapes the ecosystem productivity^{20,40},
214 not only across dry regions but also in rainforests¹⁹.

215 Here we show that coffee systems are more vulnerable than cocoa systems to climate
216 change. Not only is coffee more sensitive than cocoa to future climate, but also the tree
217 species commonly used in coffee plantations are more vulnerable to the expected
218 climate change. Cocoa as an alternative to coffee could potentially occur in most of the
219 vulnerable coffee areas, but this will require addressing other ecological constraints, the
220 impacts of pest and diseases, costs of technological change and market requirements to
221 determine the real potential of cocoa to replace coffee. Adapting coffee and cocoa to
222 changing climates can benefit from agroforestry systems with a new set of currently
223 underutilised tree species already present in coffee and cocoa plantations. The results of
224 this study are a starting point to develop lines of research that support the re-design of
225 agroforestry schemes and open new venues of research to adapt coffee and cocoa
226 production systems in Mesoamerica.

227 **Methods**

228 *Selection of tree species*

229 We selected 100 of the most commonly used tree species in cocoa and coffee
230 plantations across Mesoamerica (Supplementary Table S2) using three criteria: i)
231 abundance assessed from compiled inventories of shade species in smallholder farms
232 across the region^{41–43}; ii) ecological and economic services identified by farmers^{44,45};
233 and, iii) availability of a minimum of 60 records to ensure accurate modelling results⁴⁶.

234 From these 100 species, 30 are mainly used due to their potential to improve soil
235 conditions by fixing nitrogen, 37 species mainly used for timber products (within the

236 farm and potentially marketable) and 33 species mainly used as fruit trees^{44,45}. The
237 selected species belong to 27 botanical families and most (91 species) are native of the
238 neotropics; the others are economically important species and naturalised fruit trees in
239 Mesoamerica (Supplementary Table S2).

240 ***Compilation and validation of presence location points***

241 We compiled presence location points of selected tree species (including coffee and
242 cocoa) from the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF)⁴⁷, MAPFORGEN⁴⁸
243 and from the database of farm inventories used to select the tree species. No distinction
244 was made between locations from natural forests or farms because this information was
245 not always available in the original sources.

246 Records with no geographic information or with obvious errors such as incomplete
247 coordinates, locations in the ocean and mismatches between administrative data and
248 coordinates were excluded from the analysis. For this, we compared the collected
249 presence data and information on administrative boundaries with information from the
250 DIVA-GIS database⁴⁹, removing the mismatches. Presence locations from 1959 or
251 before were also removed to meet the current baseline climate used. Finally we reduced
252 the possible effects of sampling bias and spatial autocorrelation through systematic
253 sampling⁵⁰. This approach consists in create a grid of a defined cell size (in our case 2.5
254 arc-min) and randomly sample one presence points per grid cell. In the Fourcade *et al.*
255 (2014)⁵⁰ assessment, the approach showed well performance among the other tested
256 approaches irrespective the species and bias type, which is our case.

257 The final dataset with validated and unbiased presence locations comprised 130,480
258 occurrences for the 100 tree species combined (Supplementary Table S2), 2,194

location points for coffee and 1,241 location points for cocoa. Since absence locations were not available, for each species, we allocated 1,000 random pseudo-absence locations within the study area, which were sampled (without replacement) using the R⁵¹ package dismo⁵².

Climate data

We used bioclimatic predictors (baseline period of ~1960-1990) from WorldClim²² at a spatial resolution of 2.5 arc-min. The bioclimatic variables include extreme or limiting factors that are ecologically important based on the variation in precipitation and temperature. We selected the least correlated variables applying an analysis of variance-inflation factors (VIF)⁵³, whereby the variables with the highest correlation (VIF > 10) were removed, resulting in nine bioclimatic predictors. Which were: i) bio02, mean diurnal range; ii) bio03, isothermality; iii) bio08, mean temperature of wettest quarter; iv) bio09, mean temperature of driest quarter, v) bio13, precipitation of wettest month; vi) bio14, precipitation of driest month; vii) bio15, precipitation seasonality; viii) bio18, precipitation of warmest quarter; and, ix) bio19, precipitation of coldest quarter.

We based the projections of future distribution in 2050s on two Representative Concentration Pathways scenarios (RCPs) of climate change from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)²³. We selected the intermediate scenario RCP 4.5, which predicts an average temperature increase of 1.4 °C (0.9-2.0 °C), and a scenario with very high emissions RCP 8.5, which predicts an average temperature increase of 2.0 °C (1.4-2.6 °C) by 2050 (period 2046-2065). We focus on climate projections for 2050 to align with the United Nations framework of global challenges in agriculture¹³. For each selected scenario, we predicted species suitability

282 using the 17 General Circulation Models (GCM) available for both RCP scenarios
283 (Supplementary Table S3).

284 ***Data analysis***

285 We modelled the distribution of all species within the longitudes -101 and -77, and the
286 latitudes 7 and 22. All analyses were done in R⁵¹ using a consensus method for species
287 distribution modelling (SDM) compiled by the package BiodiversityR²¹, which
288 calculate ensemble suitability as a weighted average of probabilities predicted by 17
289 SDM algorithms (Supplementary Table S4). Previous studies have shown that the
290 consensus method based on weighted averages can significantly increase the accuracy
291 of SDM⁵⁴.

292 For the model calibration, we performed a 4-fold cross-validation by randomly
293 assigning (without replacement) location data to four bins. The performance of different
294 SDM algorithms was evaluated for each bin separately after algorithms were calibrated
295 with data from the other three bins. The SDM performance was assessed by the area
296 under the curve (AUC⁵⁵) criterion computed by the R package PresenceAbsence⁵⁶.
297 Although some authors tend to criticise this method, the evidence⁵⁷ has shown that
298 AUC has strong correlation with the presence-absence threshold that makes sensitivity
299 equal to specificity and remains a valid measure of relative model performance.
300 Considering that, predictions from each of the 17 SDM algorithms were transformed to
301 AUC weights by dividing each by the total of all AUC predictions. We selected the
302 SDM algorithms with AUC weights > 0.05, which means at least 5% of contribution to
303 the consensus predictivity²¹, and recalculated weights to sum to one⁵³. The AUC values
304 for the selected SDM models are shown in supplementary information Fig. S7.

305 Therefore, selected SDM algorithms were used to obtain the suitability model for
306 coffee, cocoa and the 100 tree species. We then applied the derived suitability model to
307 each of the 17 downscaled GCMs to predict the distribution of suitability by the 2050s.
308 For each species, ensemble suitability maps for baseline and future climates were
309 converted in absence-presence maps with the recommended threshold method of
310 maximum sensitivity (true positive) + specificity (true negative)^{58,59}.

311 Since there are no criteria to assess which of the GCMs best predict future climate,
312 by incorporating all 17 GCMs we included all plausible changes in the distribution of
313 the focal species. The results of the 17 GCMs presence-absence layers were integrated
314 into a single layer, using the criterion of likelihood scale⁶⁰, which requires at least 66%
315 of agreement among GCMs to keep the predicted presence or absence in a given grid
316 cell.

317 Organising the datasets relied on R packages magrittr⁶¹ and tidyverse⁶². Layers were
318 processed using the R packages maptools⁶³, raster⁶⁴, rgeos⁶⁵ and rgdal⁶⁶. To produce
319 Fig. 3, 4, S3, S4, S5 and S7, the R packages ggplot2⁶⁷ and svglite⁶⁸ were used.

320 **Data availability**

321 Data and R code used is available through Dataverse⁶⁹. The full project replication
322 workflow is deposited on GitHub
323 <https://github.com/agrobiinfoservices/enm_agroforestry>.

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494 **Figure legends**

495 **Fig. 1.** Shifts in suitability due to climate change (RCP 4.5) by 2050 for **a** coffee (*Coffea*
496 *arabica* L.) and **c** cocoa (*Theobroma cacao* L.) in Mesoamerica. In **b** and **d**, shifts in suitability
497 are shown for the altitudinal gradient covered by coffee and cocoa within the continent. Light
498 blue indicate new areas for coffee/cocoa by 2050. Dark blue indicate areas where coffee/cocoa
499 will remain suitable under climate change. Red indicate areas expected to be no longer suitable
500 (vulnerable) for coffee/cocoa under climate change.

501 **Fig. 2.** Potential areas in Mesoamerica where cocoa (*Theobroma cacao* L.) can replace coffee
502 (*Coffea arabica* L.) under climate change (RCP 4.5). Dark blue indicate vulnerable areas for
503 coffee that can be replaced by cocoa. Light blue indicate areas suitable for coffee and cocoa.
504 Red indicate vulnerable areas for coffee where cocoa is not an alternative under climate change.
505 Light yellow indicate remaining areas for coffee where cocoa is not suitable.

506 **Fig. 3.** Changes in suitability of the 100 most common tree species in coffee (*Coffea arabica* L.)
507 and cocoa (*Theobroma cacao* L.) agroforestry over the altitudinal gradient in Mesoamerica.
508 Panels **a**, **b** and **c** shows the shifts for fruit, N-fixing and timber trees in coffee areas,
509 respectively. Panels **d**, **e** and **f** shows the shifts for fruit, N-fixing and timber trees in cocoa
510 areas, respectively

511 **Fig. 4.** Expected changes in suitability due to climate change (RCP 4.5; expressed as % of
512 current suitable areas) of the most common **a** fruit trees, **b** N-fixing trees and **c** timber trees in
513 coffee (*Coffea arabica* L.) and cocoa (*Theobroma cacao* L.) plantations in Mesoamerica. Grey
514 dot represent the area of a given species under the current climate conditions; Red arrows (left
515 direction), represent decrease in suitable areas; Blue arrows (right direction) represent increase
516 in suitable areas. Species ordered by main use and by their abundance (from top to bottom) in
517 the inventoried coffee and cocoa farms across Mesoamerica.

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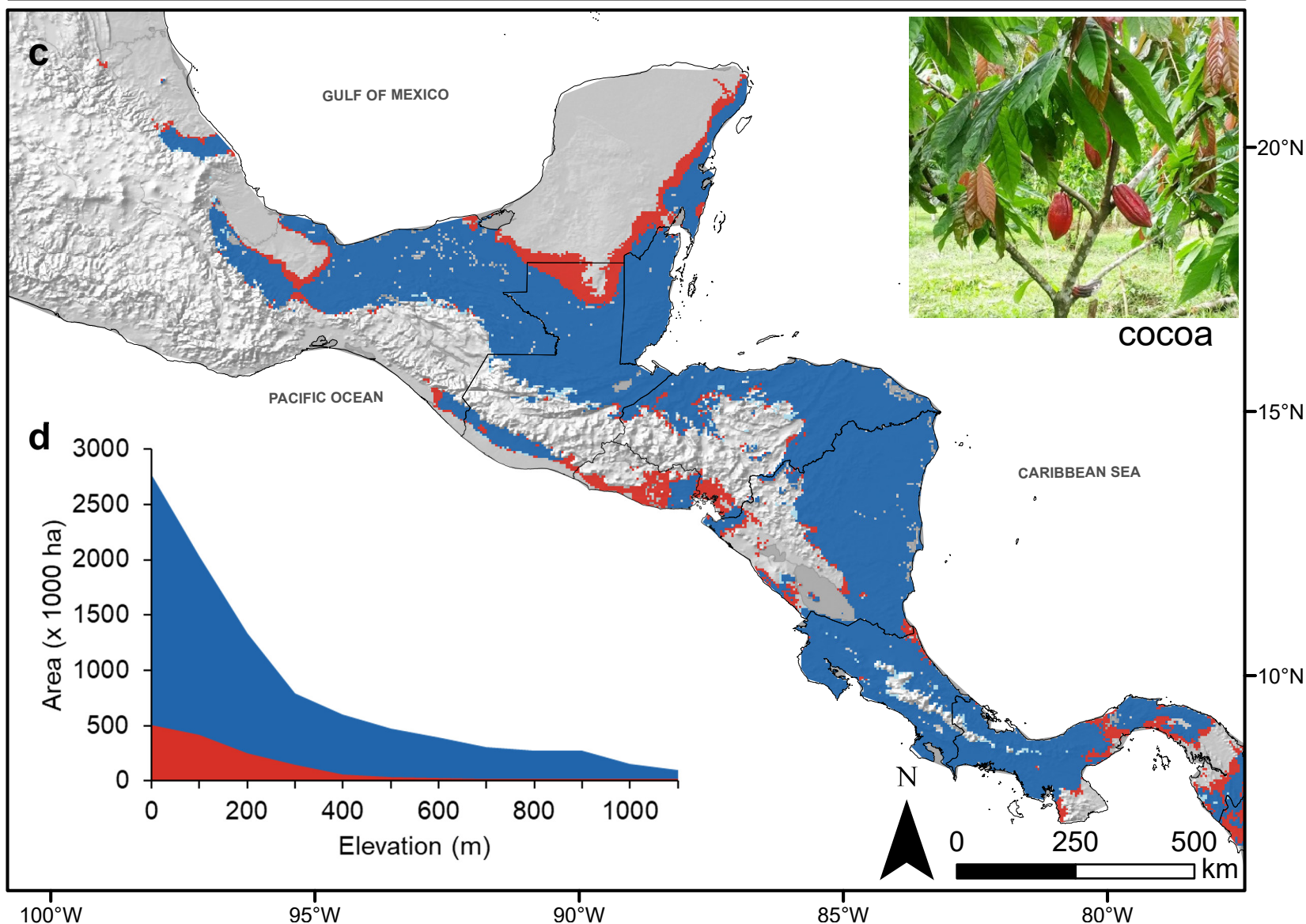
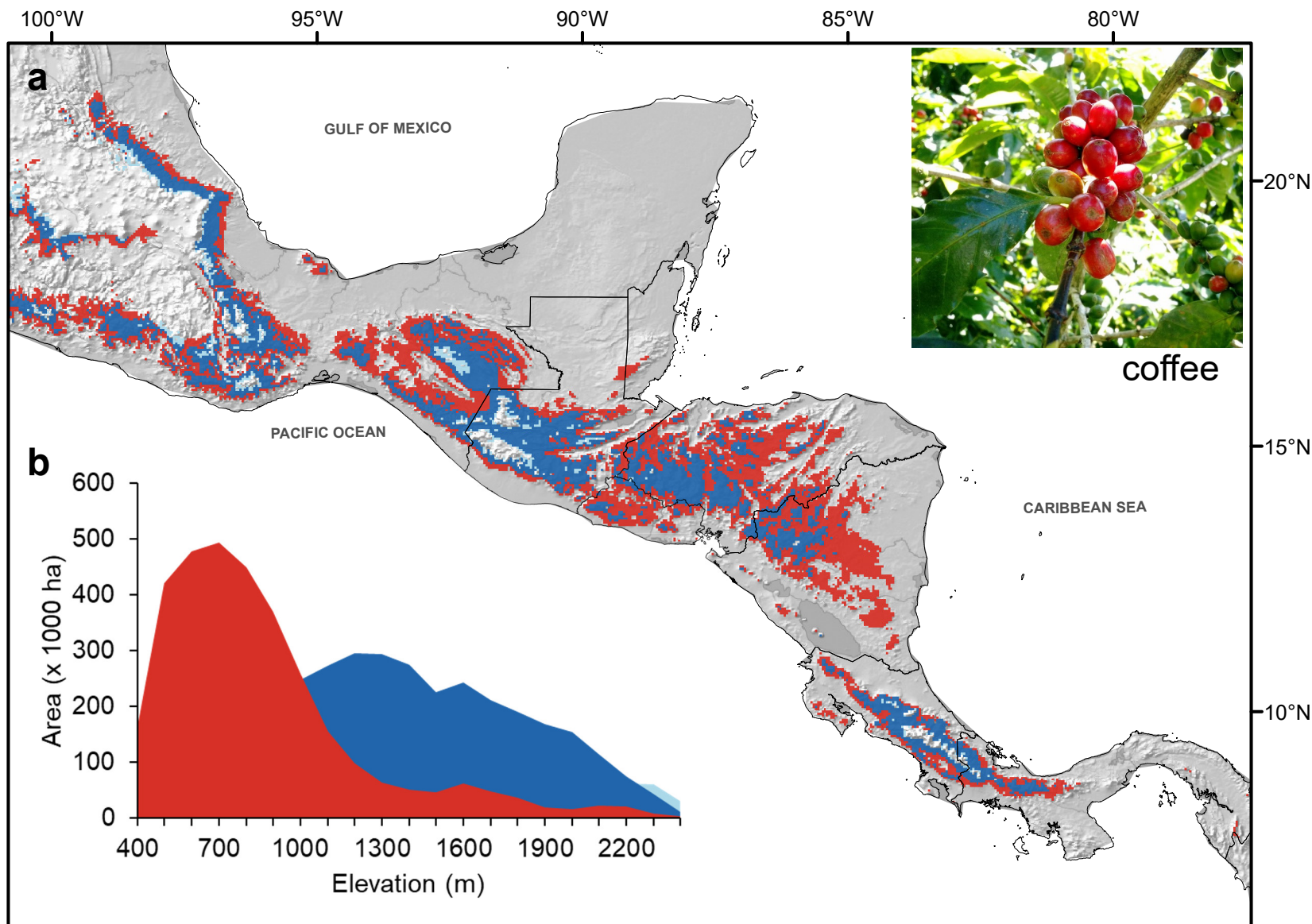
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527 **Author contributions**

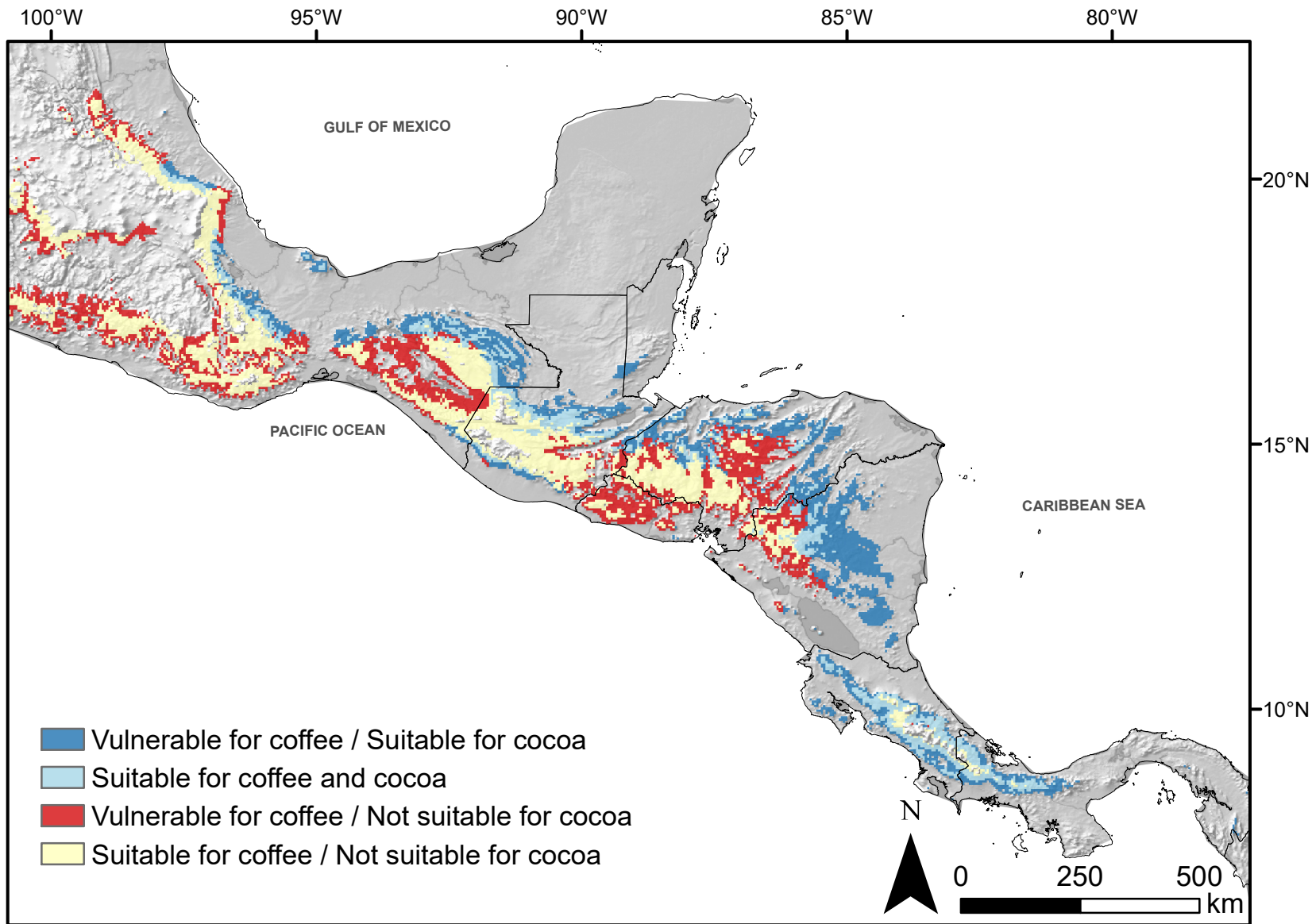
528 J.C.O., M.vZ., K.dS., R.K. and M.H. designed research; K.dS., M.vZ. and J.C.O.
529 collected the data; K.dS. and M.vZ. analysed and processed the data; All authors
530 contributed to writing.

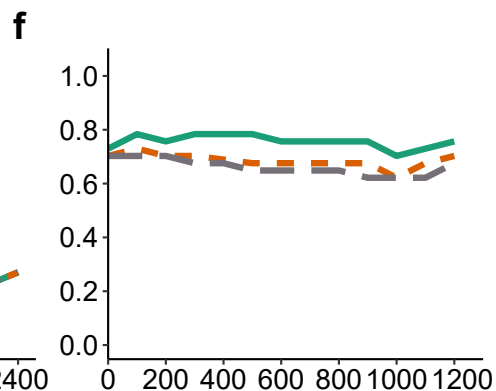
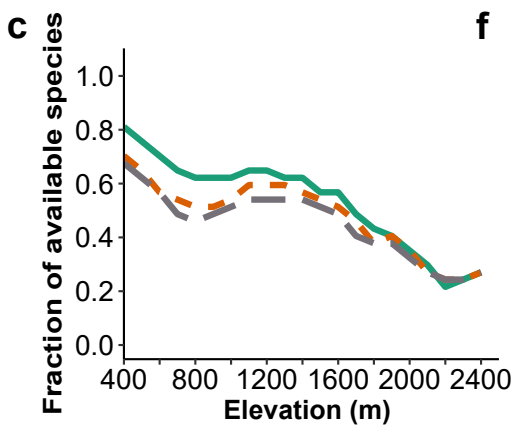
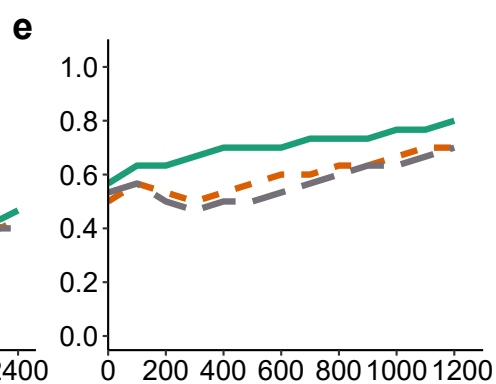
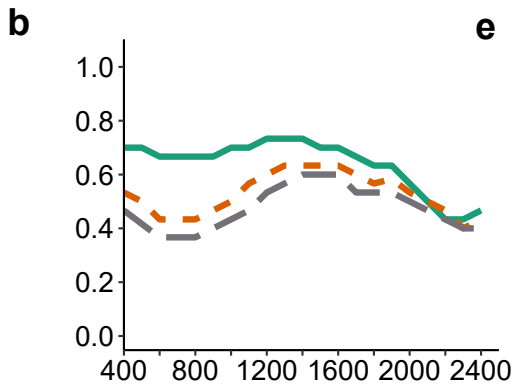
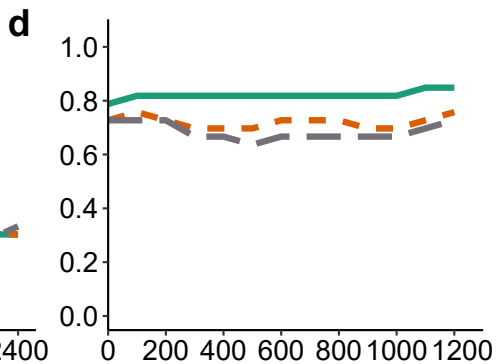
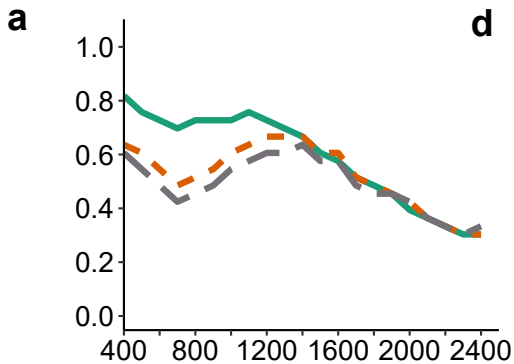
531 **Competing interests**

532 The authors declare no conflict of interest.



■ New areas ■ Remains suitable ■ Vulnerable areas



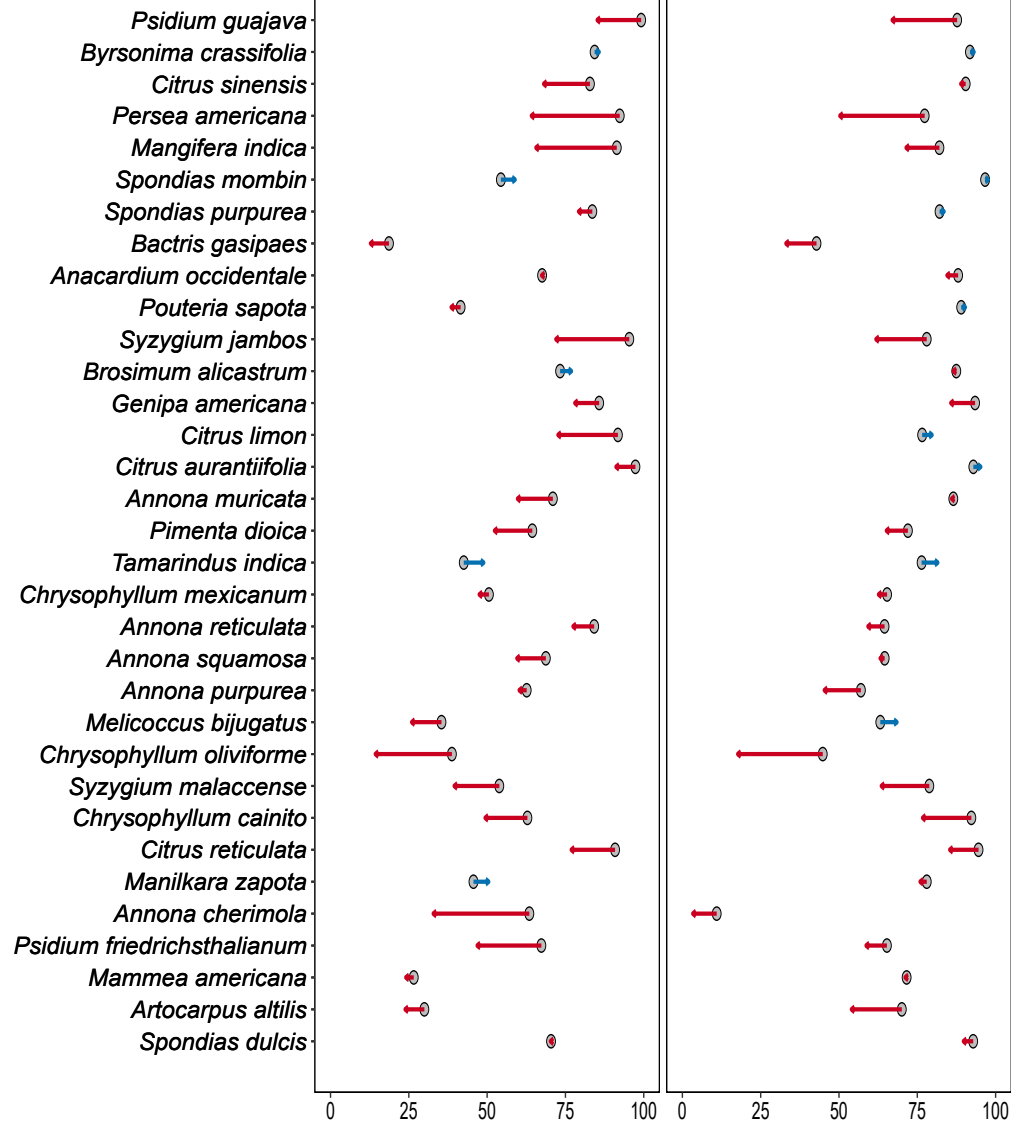


— Current - - - RCP 45 - - - RCP 85

a

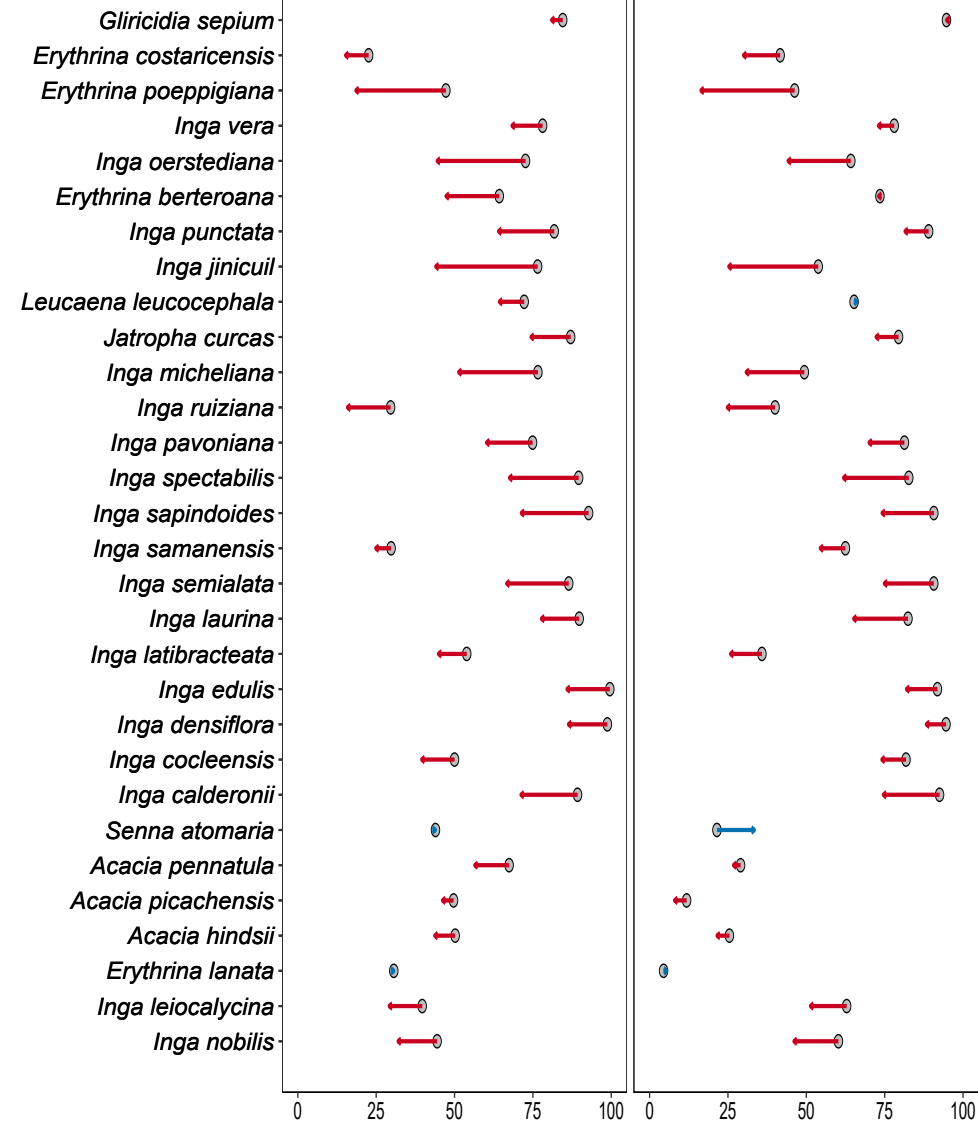
coffee

cocoa

**b**

coffee

cocoa

**c**

coffee

cocoa



Suitability (%)