

¹ Habitat edges affect tree diversity more than biomass
² regeneration in a wet neotropical secondary forest

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⁹ **Keywords:** secondary forest; regeneration; timber plantation associated biodiversity; edge
¹⁰ effect; aboveground biomass; shade

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¹⁵ **Abstract**

¹⁶ About half of all forests are tropical and secondary, making tropical forest regeneration
¹⁷ integral to future forests. Tree stand biomass and taxonomic richness can recover in a few
¹⁸ decades, but relative abundances may lag indefinitely. Since most forests are within a km of
¹⁹ a habitat edge, edge effects likely affect community composition regeneration, mediated by
²⁰ shade tolerance and dispersal traits, along with management history. This study addressed
²¹ how wet tropical secondary forest regeneration was affected by distance to habitat edge, and
²² hypothesized that old timber plantations facilitate regeneration by favoring shade tolerant
²³ or late successional taxa, and adjacent forest edges mediate community composition. An
²⁴ abandoned neotropical timber plantation adjacent to primary forest was censused for trees
²⁵ along a 300 m edge distance gradient, and analysis matched taxa to traits using relevant
²⁶ literature.

²⁷ As distance from primary forest edge increased, stem and wood density tended to increase
²⁸ significantly, with ca 10% variation explained, while biomass and canopy light tended to stay
²⁹ the same. Stand tree richness also tended to increase significantly, but diversity decreased
³⁰ steeply and non-linearly, and taxonomic composition varied notably. Finally, tree taxa as-
³¹ sociated with both early and late successional stages decreased significantly, but biomass by
³² dispersal mode did not tend to change. Overall this study supports that stand composi-
³³ tion is less resilient and more subject to edge effects than biomass and richness, suggesting
³⁴ that global forests will likely be distinctly new assemblages in the future, with timber and
³⁵ biodiversity trade-offs occurring based on local and regional management activity.

³⁶ Abstracto

³⁷ Más de la mitad de bosques son tropicales y secundarios, indicando que la regeneración
³⁸ de bosques tropicales es integral al futuro de bosques, globalmente. Biomasa riqueza tax-
³⁹ onómica pueden recuperarse en algunas décadas, pero abundancias relativas pueden durar
⁴⁰ más de un siglo. Dado que la mayoría de bosques quedan entre un km de su orilla, efec-
⁴¹ tos de borde probablemente afectan la regeneración de composición de comunidad, mediado
⁴² por tolerancia a sombra y características de disperso, y también historia de manejo. Este
⁴³ estudio investigó cómo la regeneración de bosque secundario tropical húmedo fue afectado
⁴⁴ por distancia a borde de hábitat, e hipotetizó que plantaciones de madera viejas facilitan
⁴⁵ regeneración porque favorecen a taxa tolerantes a sombra o de sucesión tarde, y que oril-
⁴⁶ las de bosque adyacente median cambios a composición de comunidad. Una plantación de
⁴⁷ madera neotropical adyacente a bosque primario fue censada por árboles siguiendo un tran-
⁴⁸ secto de 300 m midiendo un gradiente de distancia de orilla, y análisis combinó taxa con
⁴⁹ características ecológicas usando literatura relevante.

⁵⁰ Mientras distancia de bosque primario aumentó, densidad de madera y tallos tendieron a
⁵¹ aumentar significativamente, con 10% variación explicado, mientras tanto biomasa y luz de
⁵² dócel tendió a quedarse igual. Riquesa taxonómica de árboles también tendió a aumentar
⁵³ significativamente, pero diversidad bajó profundamente y no-linealmente, y composición tax-
⁵⁴ onomica varió notablemente. Finalmente, biomasa de taxa de árboles asociados con etapas
⁵⁵ de sucesión ambos temprano y tarde bajaron significativamente, pero biomasa por modo de
⁵⁶ disperso no tendió a cambiar. Entre todo este estudio apoya que composición taxonómica es
⁵⁷ menos resiliente y más sujeto a efectos de borde negativos que biomasa y riqueza taxonómica,
⁵⁸ sugeriendo que bosques globales probablemente serán ensamblajes nuevamente distintos en el
⁵⁹ futuro, con compensaciones entre producción de madera y biodiversidad que ocurren basado
⁶⁰ en manejo local y regional.

61 1 Introduction

62 Forest and landscape restoration is a key international conservation and climate change adap-
63 tation strategy (*De Pinto et al., 2020*), and while tropical forests specifically store most land
64 biomass (*Pan et al., 2013*), most are now secondary (*FAO, 2020*) and regenerating degraded
65 functions (*Hubau et al., 2020*) amid increasing climate stressors (*Anderegg et al., 2022*) yet
66 insufficient policy support (*Chazdon, 2018*) via skewed priorities (*Pyron and Mooers, 2022*).
67 Secondary forests can regenerate relatively quickly compared to old-growth forests in some
68 ways, but in other ways remain distinct. Neotropical secondary forests can grow quickly
69 enough to accumulate biomass >10x faster than old-growth forests (*Finegan, 1996; Poorter*
70 *et al., 2016*), and substantially offset carbon emissions, with estimates ranging from ~10%
71 from Amazonian deforestation (*Smith et al., 2020*) to a decade of fossil fuel emissions from all
72 of Latin American and the Caribbean (*Chazdon et al., 2016*). They also recover taxonomic
73 richness and biomass quite quickly, as well as tree height, averaging 80% of old-growth forest
74 levels in just 20 years, especially in wetter regions (*Rozendaal et al., 2019*). The recovery of
75 species richness alone is beneficial in that it also tends to correlate with the recovery of some
76 ecosystem services (*Guariguata and Ostertag, 2001; Stanturf et al., 2014*) like biomass and
77 carbon storage (*Liu et al., 2018*). However, secondary neotropical forests diverge widely in
78 taxonomic composition (*Norden et al., 2015*), potentially taking over a century to recover
79 (*Poorter et al., 2021*) with added variability (*Atkinson et al., 2022*). Despite being one of
80 the slowest ecosystem properties to recover, restoring recovering community composition is
81 often important for preserving rare taxa (*Carlo and Morales, 2016*), which can be keystone
82 to locally-adapted food webs, including birds (*Maas et al., 2016*). Understanding secondary
83 forest regeneration is key for global biodiversity conservation at the global scale, yet local
84 management remains the strongest driver of tropical forest carbon stores (*Pyles et al., 2022*).
85 Secondary forest regeneration is often affected by edge effects, or changes near an ecosystem
86 boundary, as well as land-use history, especially in heterogeneously-managed landscapes

87 (*Melo et al., 2013; Perfecto et al., 2009*). About 70% of all forests have been estimated
88 to be within a km of their edge (*Haddad et al., 2015*), resulting in tropical forests having
89 been estimated to lose ~22% aboveground carbon along heavily-managed edges >100m, in
90 part due to shortening trees and lighter leaf mass (*Ordway and Asner, 2020*). Edge effects
91 also have the potential to shape community composition, based on the local dispersal kernel
92 patterns of existing taxa (*Wandrag et al., 2017*), which while complicated (*Muller-Landau
93 and Hardesty, 2009*), can also correlate with simpler plant traits like height and seed mass
94 (*Tamme et al., 2014; Thomson et al., 2011*).

95 Properties of the existing tree community also depend on land-use history and previous
96 management (*Omeja et al., 2012*) including plantation use for timber production, which
97 historically has favored tree taxa that tend to pioneering, or be faster-growing, have lower
98 wood densities, and be less shade-tolerant (*Tabarelli et al., 2008*). Legacy effects from
99 management like intensive timber planting could in theory delay or result in non-linear
100 changes between successional stages (*Albrich et al., 2020; Gough et al., 2021*), which would
101 make future management more uncertain, unlike more sustainable thinning practices and
102 agroforestry (*Lefland et al., 2018*). Overall, while edge effects near degraded habitat edges
103 are often negative, meta-population (*Levins, 1979*) and -community (*Leibold et al., 2004;
104 Warren et al., 2015*) theories highlight dispersal as a key process for offsetting extinction debt
105 and thus maintaining biodiversity. Near primary forest, dispersal may facilitate secondary
106 forest regeneration, and help explain relatively high biodiversity compared to adjacent stands
107 that can be found in agroforests (*Oliveira-Neto et al., 2017*), forests affected by logging (*Clark
108 and Covey, 2012; Edwards et al., 2014*), and timber plantations (*Pryde et al., 2015*).

109 This study reports tree regeneration patterns of an abandoned wet neotropical timber plan-
110 tation, highlighting edge effects from an adjacent primary forest. We hypothesized that
111 remaining timber trees would mediate forest regrowth by maintaining shade that would sup-
112 press less shade-tolerant pioneer tree taxa and allow for more tree diversity closer to the
113 primary forest edge. Accordingly, we predicted that further from the primary forest edge,

114 canopy light availability would increase, while stand biomass and diversity would decrease.

115 2 Methods

116 2.1 Study site

117 This study was done in a neotropical lowland rainforest on the Osa Peninsula at the Greg
118 Gund Conservation Center (approx. 8.3778176, -83.2935426) near the Piro Biological Station
119 run by Osa Conservation. (See *Taylor et al. (2015)* for a broader ecosystem description of the
120 region.) The study site was a regrowing 20 ha timber plantation of *Bombacopsis quinata*
121 abandoned in ~1990 after the dry-adapted species from the Guanacaste region (*Hulshof and*
122 *Powers, 2020; Pérez Cordero and Kanninen, 2002*) grew poorly in very wet conditions. This
123 focal secondary forest area was roughly triangular, surrounded by primary forest on the two
124 S and NW sides (Fig 1) and a wide service road on the third NE border, with primary forest
125 beyond it. This census was done in 2013 during the rainy season months between June and
126 August.

127 2.2 Census design

128 Edge effects were studied by dividing the secondary forest area into six 50 m strata spanning
129 0 - 300 m away from the primary forest edge on the S and NW sides, going inward to the
130 E (Fig 1), using available GIS software (*ArcGIS 10*, esri.com, and *QGIS 2*, qgis.org). Each
131 stratum was randomly filled with a number of 21 x 21 m square census plots oriented N
132 that was proportional to its area—specifically with 11, eight, five, three, two, and one plot(s),
133 respectively, as distance away from primary forest increased. The total area of the 30 census
134 plots equaled ~1 ha or 5% of the total secondary forest stand area, which is comparable to
135 similar studies (*Onyekwelu and Olabiwonnu, 2016*).

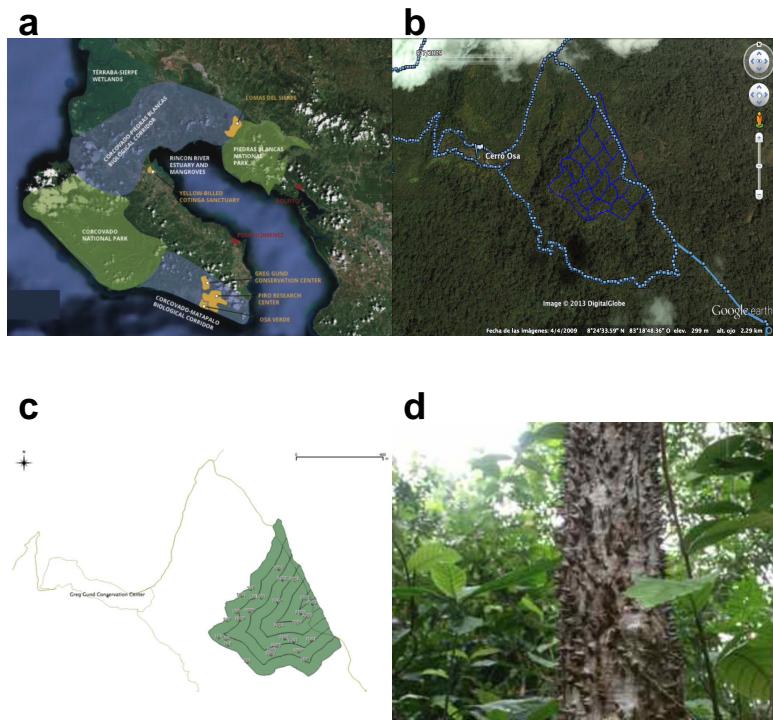


Figure 1: Map of (a) conservation areas and (b) study site (c) showing plot design among distance strata, and focal plantation timber taxon (c) *Bombacopsis quinata* on Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica. Map image data © 2009 Google, © 2022 Osa Conservation. Photo credit: Nicholas Medina.

¹³⁶ **2.3 Plot measurements**

¹³⁷ Light reaching the forest floor was measured at the center of each plot at chest height using
¹³⁸ a densiometer (*Forestry Suppliers, Inc.*), as an average of four readings taken facing each
¹³⁹ cardinal direction.

¹⁴⁰ The slope of the forest floor was measured using a rangefinder (*Bushnell, Forestry Suppliers,*
¹⁴¹ *Inc*) to measure the distance the diagonal between two plot corners and triangulate the
¹⁴² observation angle.

¹⁴³ The diameter of all stems >10 cm wide were recorded in each census plot, totaling over
¹⁴⁴ 1,000 trees. Following common forestry guidelines, in cases where a tree split into 2 or
¹⁴⁵ more stems below breast height, each stem was measured separately; in cases where a stem
¹⁴⁶ split only above breast height, it was measured as a single stem. Tree height was recorded
¹⁴⁷ by measuring distances to both the crown and the stem at chest height (~2.7 m) using a
¹⁴⁸ rangefinder (*Bushnell, Forestry Suppliers, Inc.*) and triangulating the missing side length.
¹⁴⁹ Taxa were identified with localized knowledge and field guides matching common names to
¹⁵⁰ Latin binomials, and trait information was gathered from the literature.

¹⁵¹ Aboveground biomass (AGB) was estimated per stem using the allometric equation by *Chave*
¹⁵² *et al.* (2015). The equation specifically for wet tropical forests was used, which has performed
¹⁵³ slightly better compared to both pantropical and previous other models by (*Alvarez et al.*,
¹⁵⁴ 2012; *Chave et al.*; 2005; *Ngomanda et al.*, 2014). The equation version with height was
¹⁵⁵ used since height was accessibly measurable and has shown improved local accuracy (*Domke*
¹⁵⁶ *et al.*, 2012; *Khan et al.*, 2020). Wood density (or specific gravity) values when available also
¹⁵⁷ improve biomass estimates even more than height (*Van Breugel et al.*, 2011). The equation
¹⁵⁸ used was:

$$AGB = 0.0673(pD^2H)^{0.976}$$

¹⁵⁹ with diameter D in cm, height H in m, and wood density or specific gravity p in $g\text{ cm}^{-3}$.

160 DBHs and heights were measured in the field and wood densities were extracted from avail-
161 able literature. Where information was limited, values at the genus level were used and
162 unrepresented taxa were assumed to be *0.58* following World Agroforestry Database guide-
163 lines (worldagroforestry.org). Original values found and recorded were later updated to
164 modern values using the pipeline developed in the *BIOMASS* 2.1.8 R software package by
165 *Réjou-Méchain et al.* (2017), which notably replaced unknown wood density values with
166 plot-level averages instead during stem biomass calculations.

167 Traits including successional stage and main dispersal mode were matched to species with
168 *Werden et al.* (2020) data, and wood tissue carbon matched to genera with the GLOWCAD
169 database (*Doraisami et al.*, 2022) given high alignment at species levels (*Chave et al.*, 2006).

170 2.4 Statistical analyses

171 For all response variables, data were analyzed using plot or distance strata medians and
172 subject to linear regression with distance to forest edge as the only independent variable,
173 after assumption checks of residual normality with Shapiro-Wilk tests and equal variance
174 with Levene tests, using base R version 4.2.0 (2022-04-22) and *rstatix* 0.7.0 package functions
175 (*R Core Team*, 2022).

176 Non-linear regressions were run using the function *poly()* in the base R package *stats* 4.2.0,
177 which was only ultimately recorded for stem density and richness variables, based on signif-
178 icance and explained variance over linear models. All trees censused were included in each
179 analysis including unidentified taxa that represented a single group in taxa-specific analyses.

180 Community analysis and ordination was done as a PERMANOVA with the *adonis()* func-
181 tion from the *vegan* 2.6.2 R package (Dixon, 2003). Data and code were organized with R
182 packages *here* (Müller, 2020), *bookdown* (Xie, 2022), and *grateful* (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al.,
183 2022), and internal pipeline *oir* (Medina, 2022a) are stored at github.com/nmedina17/osa
184 (Medina, 2022b).

185 **3 Results**

186 **3.1 Biomass**

187 Aboveground biomass did not tend to change with distance to primary forest edge (Fig 2a),
188 despite significant trends with underlying related variables (Fig 2). Median plot wood density
189 tended to increase marginally significantly ($p=0.105$) with edge distance by 0.00019 per m ex-
190 plaining 10% of variance among median distance strata values (Fig 2b), while tissue carbon did not change significantly with distance to fore-
191 of variance (Fig 2f).

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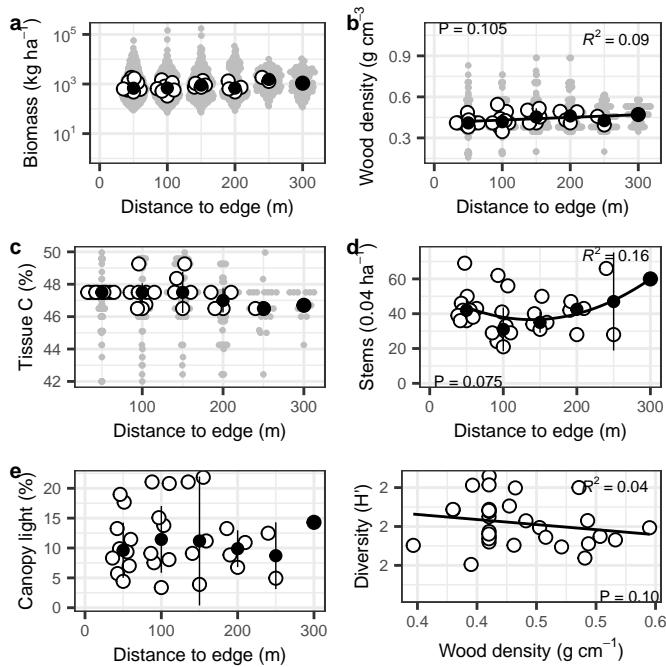


Figure 2: Plot stand properties, namely (a) biomass, (b) wood density, (c) tissue carbon, (d) stem density, (e) canopy light availability, all across distance to primary forest edge gradient, and (e) diversity against wood density. Grey dots show individual tree values, white dots with border show plot medians, black dots show distance strata medians ± 1 absolute deviation, and black lines show linear or non-linear regression through strata medians.

193 **3.2 Composition**

194 Overall diversity changed significantly with distance to primary forest edge (Fig 3). Diversity
195 significantly ($p=0.003$) decreased non-linearly by $\sim 0.5 \pm 0$ per m as distance to primary forest
196 edge increased, which explained 73% of variance among distance strata medians (Fig 3a) –
197 while in contrast taxonomic richness increased slightly ($p=0.067$) and linearly by 0 ± 0 per
198 m and had 16% variance explained among distance strata (Fig 3b). Community composition
199 and beta diversity also changed significantly ($p=0.01$) with 11.4% variance among distance
200 strata explained by distance to primary forest edge, and the first two principal components
201 explaining 47% and 23% totaling 70% of variance among calculated plot distances (Fig
202 3d). Key abundant taxa *Vochysia* and *Ficus* showed different responses – *Vochysia* nearly
203 tended to decrease with distance to primary forest edge (Fig 3e), while *Ficus* decreased
204 marginally significantly ($p=0.088$) and linearly by -62.6 ± 25.1 per m with $\sim 20\%$ variance
205 among distance strata explained (Fig 3f).

206 ## |

207 **3.3 Traits**

208 Overall trait regeneration highlighted successional stage associations over primary dispersal
209 mode along distance to primary forest (Fig 4). Taxa associated with both early and late
210 successional stages decreased significantly ($p=0.042$) and curvi-linearly by $\sim -584.9 \pm 167.3$
211 kg per m with distance to edge explaining $\sim 14\%$ variance among distance strata medians
212 (Fig 4a). Dispersal modes did not show consistent trends in biomass with increasing distance
213 to edge (Fig 4b).

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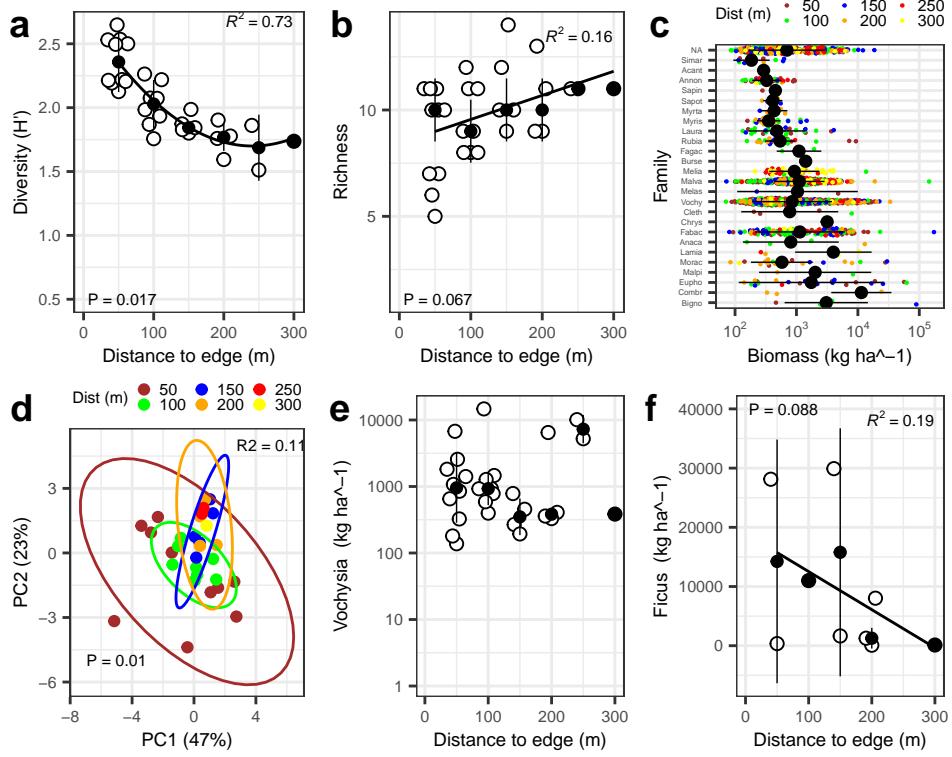


Figure 3: Taxonomic composition measures including (a) diversity, (b) richness, (c) overall biomass, (d) beta diversity, and (e,f) biomass of key taxa. White and colored dots with border show plot medians, black dots show distance strata medians ± 1 absolute deviation, and black lines show linear or non-linear regression through strata medians.

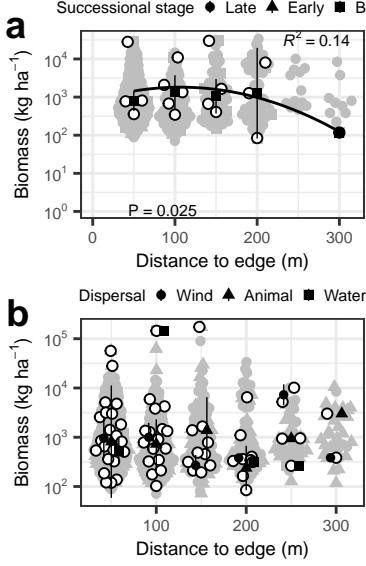


Figure 4: Functional regeneration based on taxa associations with (a) successional stages and (b) primary dispersal mode. Grey dots show individual tree values, white dots with border show plot medians, black dots show distance strata medians ± 1 absolute deviation, and black lines show linear or non-linear regression through strata medians.

217 4 Discussion

218 This study found significant edge effects on secondary forest stand wood and stem density,
 219 tree diversity and community composition, and some functional traits, yet not on overall
 220 aboveground biomass. It was initially hypothesized that community composition would
 221 vary with distance to edge, favoring more shade-tolerant taxa, due to light availability and
 222 dispersal potential, and the evidence presented here supported edge effects on community
 223 composition and biomass of taxa associated with both early- and late-successional stages,
 224 but without detectable roles for light availability or general dispersal mode. Accordingly, this
 225 suggests that edge effects do significantly change humid tropical forest community taxonomic
 226 and functional composition, but primarily due to factors other than light competition or
 227 dispersal limitation (*Krishnadas et al., 2020*), and also suggests that aboveground biomass
 228 and even low taxonomic richness are resilient after a decade of regeneration.

229 Aboveground biomass storage is a key global ecosystem function and service, but edge effects

tend to release about one-third of carbon lost from tropical deforestation (*Brinck et al., 2017*), with more expected in the future (*Mitchard, 2018*). Management has been found to explain most of biomass variation among tropical forest fragments, and wood density ~10% biomass variation (*Pyles et al., 2022*). This study adds that management via edge effects can also mediate ~10% of wood density variation without affecting local biomass, although median stem wood density can describe regional spatial biomass patterns (*Baker et al., 2004*). In this study, wood density and richness values may have been pulled down by early-successional clonal trees closest to the primary forest, which tend to have lower wood densities, lowering carbon (*Gonzalez J and Fisher, 1998; Pyles et al., 2022*), and increasing nearby stem density. Lower wood density can also reflect more dynamic forest stands (*Malhi et al., 2006*) with higher tree turnover, a consequence of forest fragmentation (*Nascimento and Laurance, 2004*) together with other global change drivers (*Laurance et al., 2014*), as well as may reflect possible differences in soil fertility (*Malhi et al., 2004*), all of which represent possible future research directions, beyond strictly neutral dynamics (*Terborgh et al., 1995*). Furthermore, light availability at the plot level did not affect biomass storage, but instead, individual light gaps may be more important for biomass dynamics (*Chazdon and Fetcher, 1984*).

Edge effects have been shown in other studies to lower both forest biomass and change community composition (*Anderson et al., 2022*), and this study adds that the decline in diversity can be rapid and non-linear across edge gradients, along with supporting the likelihood of lasting changes to community composition. This rapid loss of diversity across the edge gradient may be in part due to existing higher yet constant levels of shade limiting shade-intolerant seedling recruitment and/or performance, together with insufficient time for slower-growing shade-tolerant taxa to accumulate significant amounts of biomass. Another possible factor may be overall short dispersal kernels, in part due to higher fungal pathogen pressure under higher constant shade, also increasing tree mortality. Decomposing compositional changes into key specific taxa, while the biomass of the most abundant taxon *Vochysia* was resilient

257 to edge effects in this study, that of the key taxon for frugivores like birds and bats *Ficus*
258 was significantly lowered across the secondary forest edge, pointing to potentially different
259 responses of biomass and food web associated ecosystem services. Community composition
260 also tended to show lower variance across the edge gradient, although this effect cannot be
261 confirmed here given the uneven sampling that accounted for variable forest area at different
262 distances from edge.

263 Characterizing community composition by functional traits is also increasingly studied (*Kear-*
264 *ney et al., 2021*), but less so regarding edge effects. A study in Madagascar found lower
265 phylogenetic diversity closer to degraded forest edge, but no change in aboveground biomass
266 (*Razafindratsima et al., 2018*). These results parallel in showing lower taxonomic diver-
267 sity, although biomass specifically of taxa assoociated with both early- and late-successional
268 stages also decreased with away from primary forest edge. This result by successional stage
269 can be explained by slightly lower habitat quality inferred near exposed habitat edges near
270 roads, and accordingly relatively higher habitat quality near closed primary forest edge.

271 While lower biomass of succession-agnostic taxa further from primary forest edge appears
272 consistent with dispersal kernels, the lack of pattern by broad dispersal mode limits this
273 explanation here, yet could be further tested by measuring taxon-specific dispersal kernels.

274 Overall, this study highlights how abandoned wet tropical timber plantation can regenerate in
275 alongside fragmented forests. Results support related syntheses that biomass and taxonomic
276 richness often regrows relatively quickly, while taxonomic composition recovers much more
277 slowly, if not diverging altogether (*Norden et al., 2015*). These findings can suggest that
278 more efficient reforestation could more actively target biodiversity conservation over other
279 resilient functions like carbon storage, and that restoration efforts could include focusing
280 activities like native species planting efforts on degraded habitat edges away from primary
281 forest edges, and investing less in areas closer to existing forest edges, where recruitment
282 may already maintain diversity levels. As forests continue to become fragmented (*Haddad*
283 *et al., 2015*), understanding how to work with natural regeneration patterns around edge

²⁸⁴ effects will likely become increasingly important.

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²⁸⁷ **Declaration of interests**

²⁸⁸ Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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²⁹⁶ **Author contributions**

²⁹⁷ MV and AJ contributed to study conceptualization, administration, and supervision; NM
²⁹⁸ and AJ contributed to funding acquisition; NM contributed to data collection; NM and MV
²⁹⁹ contributed to data analysis; NM wrote initial draft and later revisions.

³⁰⁰ **Data statement**

³⁰¹ Code stored at github.com/nmedina17/osa (*Medina, 2022b*).

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