

FOREST ECOLOGY

Cross-biome synthesis of source versus sink limits to tree growth

Antoine Cabon^{1*}, Steven A. Kannenberg¹, Altaf Arain^{2,3}, Flurin Babst^{4,5}, Dennis Baldocchi⁶, Soumaya Belmecheri⁵, Nicolas Delpierre^{7,8}, Rossella Guerrieri⁹, Justin T. Maxwell¹⁰, Shawn McKenzie^{2,3}, Frederick C. Meinzer¹¹, David J. P. Moore⁴, Christoforos Pappas^{12,13}, Adrian V. Rocha¹⁴, Paul Szejner¹⁵, Masahito Ueyama¹⁶, Danielle Ulrich¹⁷, Caroline Vincke¹⁸, Steven L. Voelker¹⁹, Jingshu Wei²⁰, David Woodruff¹¹, William R. L. Anderegg¹

Uncertainties surrounding tree carbon allocation to growth are a major limitation to projections of forest carbon sequestration and response to climate change. The prevalence and extent to which carbon assimilation (source) or cambial activity (sink) mediate wood production are fundamentally important and remain elusive. We quantified source-sink relations across biomes by combining eddy-covariance gross primary production with extensive on-site and regional tree ring observations. We found widespread temporal decoupling between carbon assimilation and tree growth, underpinned by contrasting climatic sensitivities of these two processes. Substantial differences in assimilation-growth decoupling between angiosperms and gymnosperms were determined, as well as stronger decoupling with canopy closure, aridity, and decreasing temperatures. Our results reveal pervasive sink control over tree growth that is likely to be increasingly prominent under global climate change.

Forest ecosystems currently constitute a net carbon (C) sink that offsets ~25% of yearly anthropogenic C emissions, thus actively mitigating climate change (1). C allocation to aboveground wood biomass is the largest contributor to vegetation C storage over climate-relevant time scales. However, wood C allocation is poorly understood and is a major uncertainty for projections of future forests' C storage potential (2). The common representation of wood growth as a linear function of C assimilation has been identified as a major structural limitation of current vegetation models (3, 4). The development of improved C allocation schemes currently lacks a solid empirical and mechanistic basis (5). Thus, there is an urgent need to illuminate the relationship between C assimilation and tree growth.

A fundamental debate revolves around the degree to which C assimilation via photosynthesis (source limitation) versus direct environmental limitations to cambial cell development (sink limitation) controls wood growth (6). As reflected by C allocation schemes in the vast majority of vegetation models, source limitation has been the dominant paradigm for decades (4). Yet a growing body of literature indicates that cambial activity is typically more sensitive than photosynthesis

to a range of environmental conditions, including low water availability, temperature, and nutrient availability (7–11). The prevalence of source versus sink limitations to tree growth has far-reaching implications for forest dynamics under climate change, because these processes will likely respond differently to global change (6–9), potentially shifting C allocation away from the stem. Substantial indirect evidence supports the hypothesis that C sink limitations may be particularly important in cold, dry, and late-successional forests. For example, elevated concentrations of non-structural C (e.g., starch and sugars) are frequently observed in colder environments or during drought (8, 12). Additionally, free air CO₂ enrichment (FACE) experiments tend to show that increasing CO₂ concentration improves tree growth in early-stage forests but often not in mature forests, perhaps because of stronger nutrient limitations (13–15). But the relatively small scale and replication of FACE experiments, especially in mature forests, prevents general conclusions regarding the linkage between C source and sink dynamics in trees.

Colocated assessments of gross primary productivity (GPP; e.g., by eddy-covariance) and tree growth theoretically enable evaluation of the coupling between tree C assimilation and growth increment. Past studies adopting such

an approach were nonetheless limited by dataset size (site number ≤5) and yielded contrasting findings, with no clear explanation of observed differences (16–21). The advent of large-scale, long-term networks of flux towers measuring C exchange across a diverse assemblage of biomes, in combination with a growing number of both on-site and global tree ring datasets, opens new opportunities to characterize C source-sink relationships at larger temporal and spatial scales. Here, we compiled a new dataset comprising eddy-covariance GPP records at 78 forest flux sites (table S1), together with on-site tree ring width chronologies at a subset of 31 sites (RW_{on-site}; table S2) as well as 1800 nearby regional ring width chronologies (RW_{region}). GPP and RW records were detrended to remove low-frequency signals (e.g., stand structure; tree age and size) and were aggregated such that records were representative of year-to-year variations of stand C assimilation and aboveground woody growth, respectively (22). This C assimilation and tree growth dataset extends across most of Europe and North America, encompassing a variety of forested biomes from semi-arid to boreal, and representing both angiosperm and gymnosperm tree species (Fig. 1, fig. S1, and table S3). We used this dataset to (i) quantify the strength of tree C source-sink relationships across biomes, (ii) identify the seasonality of these relationships, and (iii) explore their environmental drivers.

We first characterized C source and sink relationships at the regional scale by statistically accounting for the decrease of the correlation between GPP and RW_{region} (r_{region}) with increasing geographic and climatic distances, as well as with an index of species dissimilarity between sites (22) (fig. S2). As expected from reported tree growth synchrony over large distances (23), we observed sustained correlations up to ~500 km. We thus built on this widespread ecological feature to derive robust regional estimates of tree C assimilation and growth correlation, $r_{D=0}$, for theoretical colocated sites of identical climate and species composition (i.e., spatial distance, climatic distance, and species dissimilarity of 0), integrating over multiple time scales. We then complemented regional-scale analyses with paired GPP and on-site tree ring correlations ($r_{\text{on-site}}$; see annual GPP and RW series in fig. S3). The latter dataset has a lower sample size than the regional

¹School of Biological Sciences, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA. ²McMaster Centre for Climate Change, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1, Canada. ³School of Earth, Environment and Society, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1, Canada. ⁴School of Natural Resources and the Environment, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA. ⁵Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA. ⁶Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA. ⁷Université Paris-Saclay, CNRS, AgroParisTech, Ecologie Systématique et Evolution, 91405 Orsay, France. ⁸Institut Universitaire de France, 75231 Paris Cedex 05, France. ⁹DISTAL, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy. ¹⁰Department of Geography, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA. ¹¹USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Corvallis, OR, USA. ¹²Centre d'étude de la forêt, Université du Québec à Montréal, C.P. 8888, Succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada. ¹³Département Science et Technologie, Téliq, Université du Québec, Bureau 1105, Montréal, Québec H2S 3L5, Canada. ¹⁴Department of Biological Sciences, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA. ¹⁵Geology Institute, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Coyoacán, CDMX, Mexico. ¹⁶Graduate School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Osaka Prefecture University, 1-1 Gakuen-cho, Naka-ku, Sakai 599-8531, Japan. ¹⁷Department of Ecology, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, USA. ¹⁸Earth and Life Institute, Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. ¹⁹College of Forest Resources and Environmental Science, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI, USA. ²⁰Department of Ecology, W. Szafer Institute of Botany, Polish Academy of Sciences, 31-512 Kraków, Poland.

*Corresponding author. Email: antoine.cabon@utah.edu

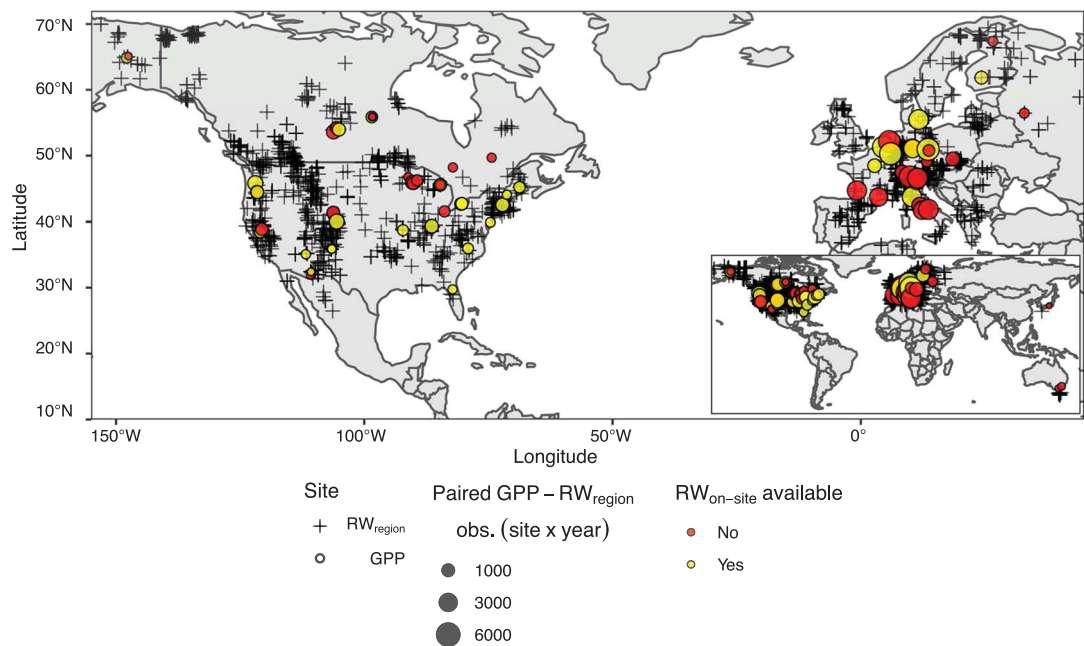


Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of gross primary production (GPP) and regional ring width (RW_{region}) sites used in this study. Crosses, RW_{region} sites; circles, GPP sites. Circle size denotes the number of RW_{region} site \times year observations associated with each flux tower. GPP sites that further include on-site RW are shown in yellow; others are red.

network but is model-free and therefore reduces the risk of methodological artifacts.

Both on-site and regional correlations showed an overall weak association between tree C assimilation and growth, with $r_{on-site}$ and $r_{D=0}$ reaching maxima of 0.26 and 0.38, respectively (Fig. 2, A and B). The observed difference between on-site and regional estimates could be offset by setting species dissimilarity to the average encountered for $RW_{on-site}$ resulting in a maximum regional correlation of 0.27 (22). RW_{region} observations partially build on the International Tree-Ring Data Bank, where sampling is often biased toward dominant and climate-sensitive trees (24). However, we find that this is unlikely to be an issue here, as dominant trees account for most of stand GPP and we statistically corrected for differences in climate (22). Overall, similar regional and on-site results show the suitability of regional RW data to quantify local GPP-RW correlations and broad agreement between the two approaches, both of which suggest a substantial decoupling between C assimilation and tree growth across multiple biomes.

On-site and regional GPP-RW correlations exhibited a similar temporal structure (22), with correlation magnitude increasing with the length of the GPP integration period and maximum correlations being found at the 10- and 12-month scales for $r_{on-site}$ and r_{region} , respectively (Fig. 2). This supports the often-implicit assumption that annual tree ring increments are most strongly related to annual carbon assimilation (27). Overall, RW was best

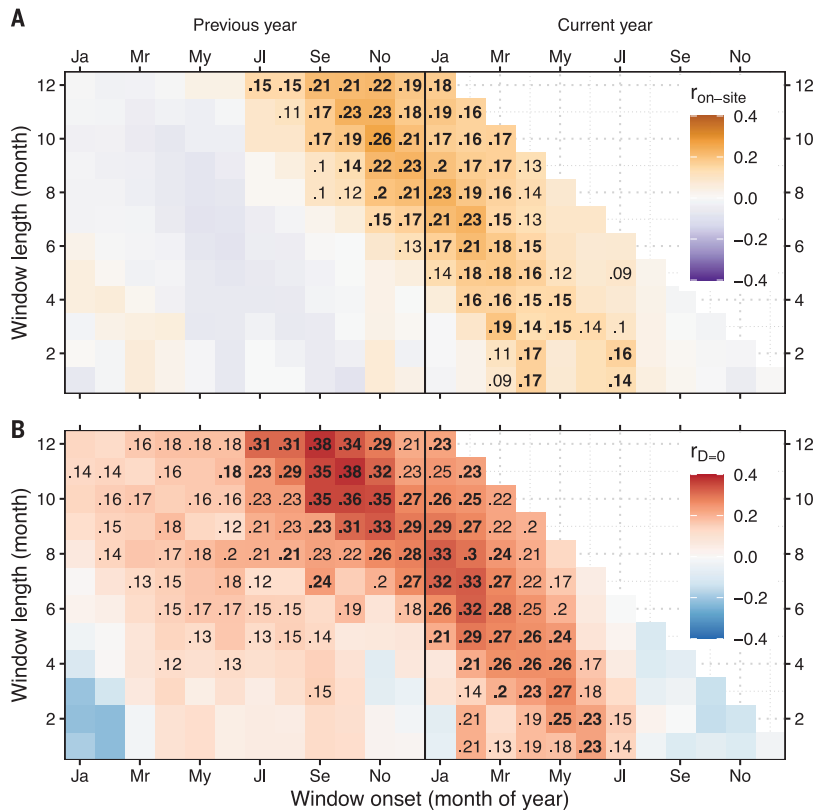


Fig. 2. Temporal structure of GPP versus RW correlations. (A) Seasonal on-site correlations ($r_{on-site}$). Each cell corresponds to the average correlation calculated between on-site RW and GPP summed over a time period defined by a window onset (from previous-year January to current-year December) and length (from 1 to 12 months). **(B)** Regional-based estimates of null distance correlations ($r_{D=0}$) modeled by eq. S1 (see fig. S2 for an illustration of the 12-month case from current-year January). Significant correlation values are displayed on top of corresponding cells (all p values < 0.05 , except for boldface: $p < 0.01$).

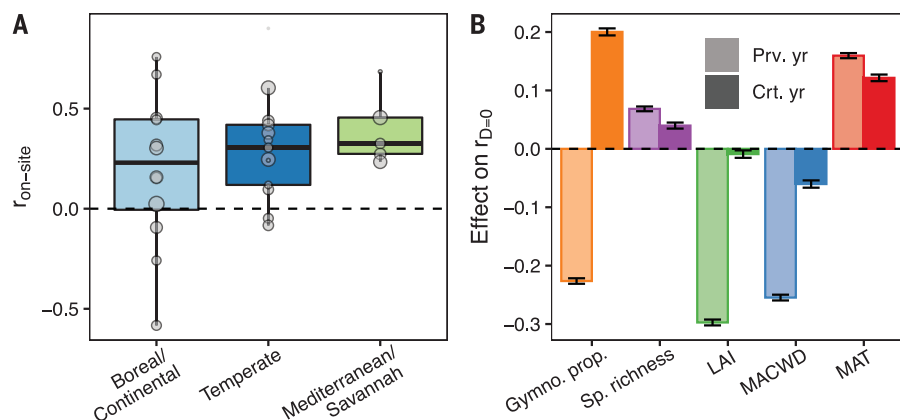


Fig. 3. Spatial variations and environmental drivers of GPP versus RW correlations. (A) Effect of biome on on-site correlations ($r_{\text{on-site}}$) observed in the period with highest correlation average (previous November through current October; nonsignificant). Boxes represent the median and first and third quartiles. Whiskers represent 1.5 times the interquartile range. Dots represent individual r values; dot size is proportional to the underlying number of observations. (B) Effect of stand structure and climatic variables on current- and previous-year regional-based estimates of null distance correlations ($r_{D=0}$). Error bars denote SE. All effects are highly significant [$p < 0.001$: gymnosperm proportion, species richness, mean annual climatic water deficit (MACWD), mean annual temperature (MAT)] except for that of leaf area index (LAI) on current-year correlations (nonsignificant).

correlated to GPP integrated over the period spanning previous-year September or November to current-year August, indicating a short temporal lag between C assimilation and tree growth, consistent with a previous study (20). This result suggests that despite estimated low C source limitation of tree growth overall, excess photosynthates are stored over winter (following radial growth cessation) and are allocated to the next year's growth. This phenomenon is often cited as a potential explanation for delayed climatic effects on tree growth and growth autocorrelation (25, 26). Analysis of multiyear trends (table S4) nonetheless indicates weak association of RW and GPP at this scale, contrary to the hypothesis that C storage might lead to the convergence of tree growth and C assimilation over the long term (27).

We found large spatial variations in the strength of GPP-RW coupling (Fig. 3). Weighted deciles of maximum on-site r ranged from -0.08 to 0.60 , consistent with previously reported values (16–21). These spatial variations imply a range of source versus sink limitations. We estimate that because of approximations and measurement errors, RW-GPP correlations between 0.7 and 0.9 would be expected under strong source control of tree growth (22). The high end of the observed correlation range ($0.6 \leq r_{\text{on-site}} \leq 0.9$; 10% of observations) thus appears reflective of substantial source limitation of tree growth at the corresponding sites, whereas the majority of sites display evidence consistent with sink limitations. Although we did not observe a biome effect on on-site correlations, regional-scale r was significantly related to several environmental factors (Fig. 3B).

Specifically, gymnosperm proportion had a positive effect on current-year r_{region} but a negative one on previous-year r_{region} ; this suggests that gymnosperm growth relies more directly on current-year and less on previous-year C assimilation than angiosperms, reflecting fundamental physiological differences between these two clades. A small but positive effect of species richness on r_{region} suggests a link between species diversity and C use efficiency (i.e., the ratio between net and gross primary production), which may arise as a result of increased complementarity with structural and functional heterogeneity (28). Decreasing r_{region} with increasing leaf area index indicates that closed-canopy forests, which under a given climate tend to be older and more nutrient-limited than open-canopy forests, are prone to stronger decoupling between C source and sink activity. This result agrees with observations that CO_2 growth fertilization tends to fade in older, nutrient-limited forests (15). Last, r_{region} was found to be positively related to site temperature and water availability, consistent with known biophysical controls of cambial activity and the ensuing prediction that sink limitations are stronger under colder and drier conditions (6–9). These combined results draw a clear picture that increasing resource limitation, aridity, and low temperatures promote C source-sink decoupling across a broad range of biomes.

Finally, decoupling of C assimilation and tree growth was further revealed by diverging climate sensitivities of these two processes (22) (Fig. 4). As anticipated from C assimilation and wood formation literature, GPP and

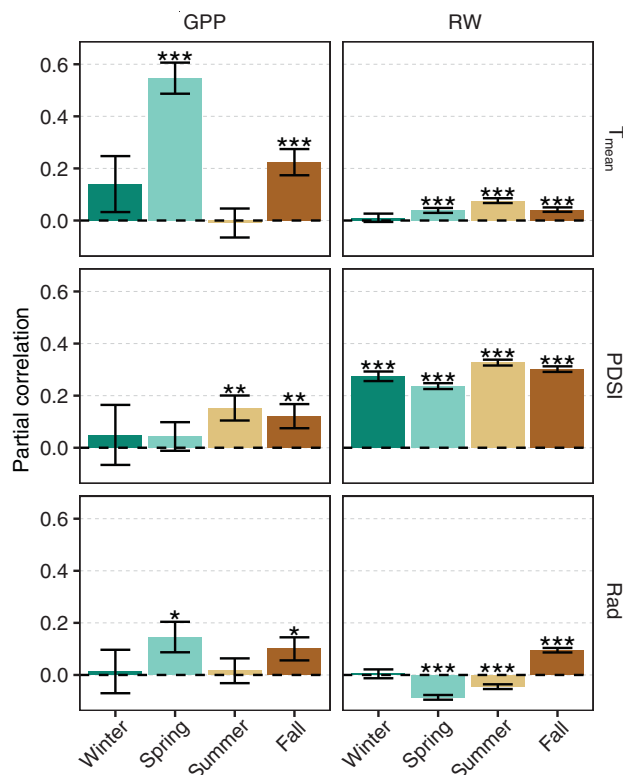
RW both responded positively to temperature and water availability but were weakly correlated with photosynthetically active radiation (29, 30). However, their seasonal variability differed markedly, indicating that fundamentally different physiological processes may limit C assimilation and tree growth. GPP responded mostly to spring and fall temperatures as well as to summer water availability, suggesting an important role of temperature-triggered leaf phenology controlling annual GPP (31). In contrast, RW appeared to be most strongly related to year-round water availability, with a weak positive temperature effect peaking in summer. This agrees with previous observations that tree growth is primarily and increasingly water-limited in the study regions (29) and is consistent with the central role of cell turgor in controlling cambial cell division and expansion (7, 11). Overall, this analysis shows the large but contrasting climate sensitivity of the tree growth and photosynthesis proxies used here. This is contrary to the expectation that RW and GPP would have weaker but similar climate sensitivity if low RW-GPP were due primarily to large measurement errors. These results instead strongly suggest that weak control of C assimilation over tree growth is underpinned by fundamentally contrasting source and sink processes with diverging environmental sensitivities (6).

Taken together, our results provide consistent evidence for the pervasive influence of nonphotosynthetic processes on tree radial growth. This conclusion has major implications for projections of forest dynamics and feedbacks with the global C cycle and climate change, as most global vegetation models essentially simulate forest productivity and C sequestration as a linear function of C assimilation (3, 4). Because, compared to C assimilation, sink processes are relatively more sensitive to water availability and less to temperature constraints (Fig. 4), as well as not directly dependent on atmospheric CO_2 concentration, unaccounted-for and widespread sink limitations could lead to overestimating the positive effect of warming and CO_2 fertilization while underestimating the negative effect of increasing water stress on forest productivity. Overall, accounting for sink limitations on tree growth may lower projections of future forest C sequestration in many regions and could thus potentially compromise forests' potential for climate change mitigation. Hence, our results underscore that incorporation of sink-limited carbon allocation schemes in global vegetation models is urgently needed (3, 4).

Our results nonetheless indicate a certain degree of interaction between C source and sink activities, as suggested by the weak but significantly positive correlations observed between GPP and RW, as well as their temporal and

Fig. 4. GPP and RW_{region} climatic sensitivity.

Climate-corrected partial correlations between GPP and RW_{region} and three climate variables [mean temperature (T_{mean}), Palmer's drought severity index (PDSI), and photosynthetically active radiation (Rad)] are shown at the 3-month scale over the period 1990–2015 (to the extent of series span). Error bars denote SE. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.



spatial variations. Such dynamic coupling between C assimilation and tree growth potentially reconciles contrasting observations of the prevalence of source versus sink limitations (15) and provides a bridge between current source-centered representations of tree growth and sink-driven schemes. Variations in the prevalence of source versus sink limitations to tree growth further highlight the importance of understanding their drivers (5). Our findings indicate that across biomes, the occurrence of sink limitations is highly consistent with known biophysical controls of cambial cell division, notably turgor-driven growth. Because turgor is a central mechanism of growth across scales and has a large potential for the integration of several relevant processes as well as parameter-parsimonious upscaling (32), the turgor-driven growth framework appears to be a promising way to progress toward developing mechanistic sink-limited schemes in vegetation models.

Key remaining uncertainties concern whether our results can be generalized to other biomes such as tropical forests, which are central to the global C cycle, and the dynamic nature of source and sink interactions. Likewise, characterizing

the degree of C source and sink decoupling at decadal to centennial scales is relevant to climate change but currently remains elusive because of the temporal depth of C assimilation measurements. Source-sink decoupling over both short and longer time scales implies less C limitation of tree growth. Weak C limitation of tree growth under certain conditions nonetheless raises the question of the fate of excess C. Closing trees' C budget and elucidating drivers of C allocation to different sinks, specifically stem versus underground growth and C storage, thus emerges as a critical way forward (14).

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Materials and Methods

Figs. S1 to S5

Tables S1 to S4

References (33–55)

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Antoine CabonSteven A. KannenbergAltaf ArainFlurin BabstDennis BaldocchiSoumaya BelmecheriNicolas DelpierreRossella GuerrieriJustin T. MaxwellShawn McKenzieFrederick C. MeinzerDavid J. P. MooreChristoforos PappasAdrian V. RochaPaul SzejnerMasahito UeyamaDanielle UlrichCaroline VinckeSteven L. VoelkerJingshu WeiDavid WoodruffWilliam R. L. Anderegg

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Uncoupled carbon uptake and storage

Forests are expected to help mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon, with elevated carbon dioxide boosting photosynthesis and carbon uptake. However, the amount of carbon that can be stored in wood also depends on temperature, water, and nutrient availability. Cabon *et al.* examined temporal correlations between trees' carbon uptake and woody growth by combining data on tree rings and gross primary productivity measures from 78 forests with carbon dioxide flux towers (see the Perspective by Green and Keenan). They found weak correlations between productivity and woody growth, which responded differently to seasonal temperatures and water availability. Their work shows that limits to tree growth, particularly in dry and cold areas, may constrain potential forest carbon storage. — BEL

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