

Topographical heterogeneity governs species distribution and regeneration potential by mediating soil attributes in Western Himalayan forests

Shipra Singh (✉ singhs@iiasa.ac.at)

International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis

Abhishek Verma

Forest Research Institute

Florian Hofhansl

International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis

Research Article

Keywords: Diversity, Elevation, Forest structure, Montane ecosystem, Slope aspect

Posted Date: October 20th, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-3462205/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

1 **Topographical heterogeneity governs species distribution and regeneration potential by**
2 **mediating soil attributes in Western Himalayan forests**

3 Shipra Singh^{1,2*}, Abhishek K. Verma^{2,3} and Florian Hofhansl¹

4 ¹International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Schlossplatz 1, A-2361 Laxenburg,
5 Austria.

6 ²School of Environmental Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

7 ³Forest Ecology and Climate Change Division, Forest Research Institute, Dehradun,
8 Uttarakhand-248006, India.

9 Corresponding author: Shipra Singh (singhs@iiasa.ac.at)

10

11 **Acknowledgement**

12 SS is thankful to Ambuj Mishra, School of Environmental Sciences, JNU for his support in
13 field survey and sampling. SS and AKV are extremely thankful to Forest Guard, Late
14 Ambadutta Sharma, Himachal Pradesh Forest Division. We are extremely thankful to residents
15 of the reserve forest for their help and support throughout the field survey. We acknowledge
16 the financial support from University Grants Commission (UGC) (Grant number: 3787/NET-
17 DEC 2018), New Delhi, India.

18 **Abstract**

19 The present study is an attempt to understand variation in species composition
20 and diversity and soil properties along topographic gradients in Western Himalayan reserve
21 forests (400-3000m asl). To analyze changes in floristic composition, diversity, and
22 regeneration status, we measured woody vegetation in forest plots at different altitudinal levels
23 and contrasting aspects (North and south). Trees (diameter at breast height (DBH)>10cm) and
24 saplings (3-10cm DBH) were sampled in 10m×10m plots, shrubs were sampled in 5m×5m
25 plots and seedlings (0-3cm DBH) were sampled in 1m×1m plots. To study variation in soil
26 properties, samples were collected from each forest stand in five replicates from layers of 0-
27 10cm, 10-20cm, and 20-30cm in soil depths. Canonical Correspondence Analysis (CCA) was
28 applied to identify important factors that govern species distribution. Variance partitioning was
29 conducted to quantify the relative contribution of elevation, slope aspect, vegetation attributes,
30 and soil properties on regeneration potential of tree species. We found that environmental
31 filtering shapes local species composition and associated edaphic factors in the region. Species
32 richness and diversity were found to decrease with elevation. Soil properties (Organic Carbon,
33 pH, and texture) and associated vegetation parameters did not vary significantly between the
34 aspects. CCA confirmed that species composition was positively related to moisture content
35 and available phosphorous at higher elevations, while reduced weathering rates and bulk
36 density at lower elevations might have caused relatively lower nutrient turnover rates. Our
37 study concludes that topographical variation and increased sum of soil nutrients are highly
38 favorable for growth and development of plant species.

39 **Keywords:** Diversity; Elevation; Forest structure; Montane ecosystem; Slope aspect.

40 **Introduction**

41 Topographical features, such as slope angle, aspect, and elevation (Singh, 2018) affect
42 species diversity, ecosystem structure and processes, resource availability, and energy
43 partitioning in forest ecosystems (Jucker et al., 2018; Méndez-Toribio et al., 2016) through the
44 modification of the surrounding environment (Ali et al., 2019; Jucker et al., 2018). In Montane
45 Forest ecosystems, the slope aspect and topographical position are the most influential drivers
46 of temperature changes (Geml 2019) and soil water content variability (Wang et al. 2011).
47 North-facing slopes are characterized by relatively moist conditions and cooler temperatures,
48 whereas south-facing slopes are comparatively warmer and drier (Holland and Steyn 1975).
49 However, this relationship is inverted in the northern and southern hemispheres, such that the
50 northern hemisphere exhibits a cooler climate at north-facing slopes while the same applies to
51 south-facing slopes in the southern hemisphere (Budyko, 1969). Resulting differences in solar
52 radiation, soil water content, and temperatures between the two different aspects strongly affect
53 the vegetation's structure and composition (Guo et al. 2017; Jucker et al. 2018). Furthermore,
54 the asymmetry in environmental drivers between northern and southern aspects was shown to
55 affect crucial ecosystem processes such as organic matter decomposition, which in turn
56 determines local resource availability of water and nutrients (Sidari et al. 2008; Fortunel et al.
57 2018; Muscarella et al. 2020). The slope aspect further governs the input of solar energy at the
58 landscape level forming distinct microclimatic conditions (Goran et al., 2012; Jucker et al.,
59 2018), which trigger differences in temperature, moisture, humidity, and evaporation
60 (Chadwick and Asner 2016; Jasińska et al. 2019), and thus affect soil edaphic properties and
61 vegetation dynamics (Eisenlohr et al. 2013; Uriarte et al. 2018; Yang et al. 2020). Due to the
62 linkage of elevation and slope aspect to multiple environmental variables, topography has been
63 proposed as the single most important factor responsible for determining spatial patterns of
64 biodiversity (Singh, 2018; Tiwari et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

65 Within a micro-climatic condition, forest attributes such as species composition and
66 diversity along with edaphic properties affect the regeneration pattern in montane forest
67 ecosystems (Rodrigues et al. 2020). Forest stands having increased soil moisture and optimum
68 light availability tend to regenerate rapidly (Verma and Garkoti, 2019). Topographical
69 heterogeneity creates variations in soil nutrient availability, pH, and soil texture that ultimately
70 affects regeneration pattern in any region (Pinho et al. 2018; Tiwari et al. 2020) via mediating
71 their effect on species composition and richness (Laughlin et al. 2015). In addition, temperature
72 variability with increasing elevation plays an important role in understanding seedling survival
73 rates, providing clues for climate change effects (Dobrowski et al. 2015; Shive et al. 2018;
74 Verma and Garkoti 2019). Thus, regeneration potential could be considered an important
75 indicator to analyze shift in vegetation composition and diversity with changing climate
76 (Woodall et al. 2018). Regeneration of species on gentle slope tends to be comparatively higher
77 as compared to steeper slope (Finegan and Delgado 2000; Estrada-Villegas et al. 2020). The
78 gradual development of an individual from seedling to mature individual faces increased
79 environmental harshness with increasing elevation (Yan et al. 2015). Additionally, it has also
80 been found that saplings are more prone to environmental harshness with increasing elevation
81 (Liang and Wei 2020). With increasing topographical heterogeneity, distinct regeneration
82 niche leads to species stabilization in different ecosystems (Dobrowski et al. 2015; Uriarte et
83 al. 2018).

84 Mountain regions are considered an important habitat for endemic species and natural
85 forest vegetation, which typically provides important ecosystem services, such as carbon
86 sequestration, nutrient cycling, climate regulation, and timber production (Ai et al. 2017). In
87 addition, montane forest ecosystems provide natural laboratory conditions to understand the
88 important biotic and abiotic factors shaping species composition and biodiversity locally as
89 well as globally (Raz et al. 2009). These differences vary greatly depending on the scale of

90 observation (Jarzyna & Jetz, 2018) and the underlying environmental factors governing species
91 composition at the landscape-scale (Hofhansl et al. 2021). Regional studies investigating
92 biodiversity, species composition, and plant community structure along altitudinal gradients,
93 have documented soil physicochemical properties as drivers of vegetation structure in Central
94 Himalayan regions (Kharkwal et al. 2005; Sharma et al. 2010; Gairola et al. 2012; Tiwari et al.
95 2020) but are comparatively missing in Western Himalayan forests. Therefore, we state that
96 there is currently a lack of knowledge about the effect of contrasting slope aspects on vegetation
97 composition at varying elevations, which would be required to develop sustainable
98 management strategies for Montane Forest ecosystems in the Western Himalaya. The objective
99 of this study was 1). To investigate the effect of topography (slope aspect and elevation) on
100 soil properties (soil texture and chemistry) and woody vegetation characteristics (floristic
101 composition and diversity, forest structure and regeneration pattern) and 2). To quantify the
102 relative contribution of topography and soil properties on regeneration potential in the
103 protected forests of the Western Himalayan region. Due to the fact that topographic features
104 such as slope aspect and elevation drive environmental heterogeneity among forest sites, we
105 hypothesized that (1) soil properties and associated woody vegetation characteristics differ
106 along elevational gradients; such that (2) local plant species composition varies with specific
107 forest habitat types located along environmental gradients of the study region and therefore,
108 (3) the impact of topographically mediated species composition and associated soil properties
109 might affect regeneration potential of species. Eventually, we discuss our findings in light of
110 the scientific literature with the goal to develop sustainable forest management
111 recommendations for the Western Himalayan Forest ecosystems.

112 **Methods**

113 Study site

114 The study was conducted in protected forests located between 30° 22'30"–31° 01'20"
115 N, and 77°01'12"–77°49'40" E in Sirmour district, Himachal Pradesh (Fig. 1). The altitudinal
116 variation of Sirmour district ranges between 400 m a.s.l. and 3630 m a.s.l., with Churdhar peak
117 being the highest point of the district. The climate of the district is sub-tropical to temperate
118 depending upon the elevation. Climate varies from hot and dry (up to 1,800 m) to moderate
119 (1,800-2,500 m) and cold to very cold at higher elevations (2,500-3,630 m). The temperature
120 in the summer season (May-June) ranges between 15 to 42 °C, while in the winter season
121 (November-February), it varies from 0 to 21 °C. The region has an average annual rainfall of
122 1,014-1,547 mm with an average of 1,250 mm (District Survey Report, 2016) (Fig. S1). The
123 region also experiences snowfall above the altitude 1800 m. The rocks found in the area consist
124 of sandstone, shale, limestone, and schist (Rawat et al. 2010). Soil type varies from deep
125 alluvial sandy loam at lower elevation to clayey loam at higher elevations (District Survey
126 Report, 2016).

127 Site selection

128 The different forest types in the study region are classified under 3C/C2a- Moist Shiwalik Sal
129 Forest, 9C1- Himalayan Sub-tropical Pine Forest, Group 12 C1- Lower Western Himalayan
130 moist-temperate forest, C2- Upper West Himalayan moist temperate forest, and Group 12- DSI
131 oak scrub (Champion and Seth, 1968). Five different elevational zones (E1:400–1000 m,
132 E2:1000–1500 m, E3:1500–2000 m, E4:2000–2500 m, and E5:2500–3000 m asl) with
133 contrasting aspects, north and south, altogether forming ten forest stands representing diverse
134 forest types were chosen for the study. We expect low levels of anthropogenic disturbances
135 since the study sites are located inside protected areas.

136 Vegetation analysis

137 Physiographic factors i.e., altitude and coordinates across different forest types were
138 determined by Global Positioning System (GPS-Garmin). Sampling was conducted in two
139 layers of the vegetation i.e., adult trees and shrub layers, and three life cycle stages of tree
140 species i.e., adult trees (Circumference at breast height, CBH >30 cm), saplings (10-30 cm
141 CBH), seedlings (CBH <10 cm) (Saxena and Singh 1984). A total of 200 plots (20 plots × 5
142 elevation zones × 2 slope aspect) measuring 10 m × 10 m each were sampled between
143 September 2016 and April 2017. Shrub species and tree saplings were sampled within sub-
144 plots of 5 m × 5 m, and tree seedlings within sub-plots of 1 m × 1 m (Curtis and McIntosh
145 1950). Tree and shrub species were identified with the Glossary of forest flora provided by the
146 Sirmour district Forest Department at Forest Division, Nahan, and Rajgarh. CBH was used for
147 determination of tree basal area, which was later converted to the DBH (Diameter at breast
148 height). The data were quantitatively analyzed for stem density, frequency, and abundance
149 following (Curtis and McIntosh 1950). Shannon-Wiener Diversity index (H') (Shannon and
150 Weaver 1949), Species evenness (SE) (Pielou 1966), and species richness (SR) (Margalef,
151 1973) were calculated. Density-diameter distribution curve (population structure) for each site
152 along with the dominant tree species was analyzed by plotting the graph against the number of
153 individuals in different DBH classes i.e., 0-10; 10-20; 20-30; 30-40; 40-50; 50-60; 60-70; 70-
154 80; and 80-90 cm respectively. The regeneration pattern of tree species was analyzed based on
155 the presence of number of seedlings, saplings, and adults of each species (Khan et al., 1987).

156 Soil sampling and analysis

157 From each of the ten forest stands, soil samples were collected in five replicates from
158 layers of 0-10 cm, 10-20 cm, and 20-30 cm in soil depth to analyze variations in physical and
159 chemical properties. Soils were sampled using a soil corer of 5 cm inner diameter and were
160 packed in airtight zip bags and brought to the laboratory. Soil samples were air-dried for 48

161 hours and sieved through a 2 mm and 0.5 mm sieve for further analysis. Soil moisture content
162 (MC) was determined gravimetrically on a wet basis by oven drying 10 g of fresh soil at 105 °C
163 for 48 hours Mishra (1968). Soil bulk density (BD) was determined from the undisturbed core
164 segments as dry soil mass per unit volume (Ingram and Anderson 1993). The Bouyoucos
165 hydrometer method of silt and clay measurement was followed for analysis of particle size
166 using 10% Calgon's solution (sodium hexametaphosphate) (Okalebo et al., 2002). Organic
167 carbon (C) of the soil sample was measured with dichromate oxidation using an air-dried
168 sample of 1 g and titrating with FeSO₄ based on modified Walkley and Black method (Verma
169 et al. 2021) Total Nitrogen (N) was estimated by digesting 3 g soil sample with concentrated
170 H₂SO₄ and K₂SO₄:CuSO₄ catalyst, and further analyzed using Micro-Kjeldahl apparatus
171 (KELPLUS Distyl-EMBA) (Jackson, 1973). Available Potassium (K) was extracted following
172 neutral normal ammonium acetate method (Morwin and Peach, 1951) and was determined
173 using the flame photometer. Available Phosphorous (P) was estimated colorimetrically using
174 Bray reagent (0.025N HCl in 0.03N NH₄F) in 1N sulphuric acid system (Bray and Kurtz,
175 1945).

176 Statistical analysis

177 Data matrices of species' IVI and the corresponding variables were prepared in Microsoft
178 Excel-2019. Soil data normality was assessed based on Shapiro–Wilk's test and homogeneity
179 of variance was tested by Levene's test. Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) was
180 performed to visualize the floristic associations among the sites by using Bray–Curtis
181 dissimilarities (Minchin 1987) using the metaMDS function of the vegan package. Significant
182 differences in species composition were determined through permutational multivariate
183 analysis of variance (PERMANOVA) by using the adonis function of the vegan package
184 (Clarke, 1993). Species vegetation parameters and diversity indices were determined using
185 different functions of the vegan package and visualized using ggplot2 package. β diversity

186 variation along the elevation gradient and between contrasting slope aspect was analysed using
187 the quantitative Sorensen (Bray–Curtis) distance measure (Yang et al. 2020). The analysis was
188 done using betadiver function of the vegan package. Comparison of vegetation structure and
189 diversity along elevation, contrasting slope aspect, and their interaction were analyzed using
190 two-way ANOVA for the study sites, and the differences were reported significant at $P < 0.05$.
191 Soil values were regressed along elevation using ggplot2 function. Soil values were visualized
192 using box plot for contrasting slope aspect and independent t-test was applied to calculate the
193 difference of means between north and south aspect. Further, Principal Component Analysis
194 (PCA) was used to analyze correlation among vegetation parameters and soil properties using
195 factoextra and imputeTS packages. Additionally, Canonical Correspondence Analysis (CCA)
196 was used to investigate significant relationships between tree species distribution and
197 associated environmental variables among study sites. After CCA, the Monte Carlo test was
198 used to evaluate the effect of explanatory variables obtained on the vegetation composition
199 using cca function. In the end, variance decomposition analysis was done to quantify the
200 relative importance of the environmental factors that shape the regeneration potential in the
201 region thus confirming the important factors that affect the regeneration pattern using varpart
202 function of the vegan package. All statistical analyses were conducted using R version 3.5.0 (R
203 Core Team, 2018).

204

205 **Results**

206 Floristic composition and species diversity

207 A total of 3486 individuals belonging to 47 tree species and 19 shrub species were found in the
208 study sites (Fig. S2 and S3). Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) produced a two-
209 dimensional plot of species composition along an elevational gradient (Fig. 2) and between
210 contrasting slope aspect (Fig. S4). We found a stress value of 0.03 indicating a greater reliable
211 ordination. NMDS showed species composition based on elevation gradient were strongly
212 separated in ordination space with least overlap, however, species from the E3 site (mid-
213 elevation zone) formed a connecting bridge with the adjacent elevation zone (Higher, E4).
214 Permutational Analysis of Variance showed significant compositional differences among the
215 elevation zones ($F=5.72$, $P<0.001$). However, species composition did not significant
216 differences between the north- and south-facing slopes ($F=1.02$, $P<0.419$) (Fig. S4). Tree
217 Species Richness (SR) and Shannon-Weiner Diversity index (H') were found decreasing with
218 increasing elevation (Fig. 3). The values for SR and H' were found maximum for E1 (400-1000
219 m) sites and northern aspect. Whereas for shrub layer, NMDS showed a stress value of 0.15
220 (Fig. 4). The plot showed species at E1 and E2 sites were closely associated whereas species
221 at E3, E4, and E5 sites were clumped together. Overall, we found significant differences among
222 species composition with increasing elevation ($F=6.29$, $P<0.001$). Based on slope aspect
223 variation, NMDS plot showed no significant variation (Fig. S5). Shrub SR and H' first
224 decreased with elevation and then increased after 2000 m asl. The values for diversity indices
225 were greater for the northern aspect except SR which was found greater for southern aspect in
226 lower elevation (Fig. 5). β diversity was found significantly ($P<0.05$) higher on higher elevation
227 (Fig. S6) and northern aspect. For the tree layer, it was found significantly higher ($P<0.05$) for
228 E3 sites indicating increase in vegetative heterogeneity with increasing elevation (Fig. S6). β
229 diversity was found higher on southern aspect as compared to northern aspect for both the tree

230 and shrub layer, however, the differences were not found significant. The diversity indices were
231 found significantly varying with increasing elevation for both tree and shrub layer (Table S1).

232 Vegetation structure and regeneration pattern

233 For the tree layer, Tree density ($F=13.41$, $P<0.001$) and basal area ($F= 22.14$, $P<0.001$) were
234 found decreasing with elevation and then increased after 2000m (E3) significantly. The least
235 values for both density and basal area were found for E3 sites. Shrub density ($F= 41.72$,
236 $P<0.001$) and basal area ($F= 9.51$, $P<0.001$) were found decreasing significantly with elevation
237 (Fig. 6). Both total basal area as well as stem density were higher in northern aspect than in
238 southern aspect, but the differences were not significant. A density-diameter curve was drawn
239 to understand the distribution of individuals in different DBH class for each site (Fig. 7) and
240 the dominant tree species (Fig. S7). Greater number of seedlings and saplings than adults
241 indicated an inverted-J shaped curve for E1N, E1S, E3N, E3S, E4N and E4S sites whereas
242 E2N, E2S, E5N and E5S represented a bell-shaped curve. Species-wise population structure
243 showed inverted-J shaped for species restricted to lower elevation (E1) like *Shorea robusta* and
244 *Mallotus philippensis*. Similarly, species at higher elevation (E5) such as *Quercus*
245 *semecarpifolia*, *Q. floribunda*, *Abies pindrow* showed bell-shaped pattern. A total of 7480
246 individuals of seedlings and 8180 individuals of saplings were observed in the study sites (Fig.
247 8). Taken together, maximum regeneration was observed for lower elevation (E1) which
248 decreased significantly with increasing elevation ($F=3.89$, $P=0.008$). Overall, the number of
249 seedling counts were maximum in north aspect irrespective of elevation change however
250 sapling counts were higher for south aspect in lower elevation (E1, 400-1000m) and south
251 aspect for higher elevation sites (E4, 2000-2500 m and E5, 2500-3000 m) (Fig. 8).

252 Moisture content (MC) was found significantly increasing with elevation ($R^2=0.63$,
253 $P<0.001$) (Fig. 9). Between the contrasting slope aspect, MC was found to be significantly

254 different ($P<0.05$) being greater for northern aspect. The values for MC were found increasing
255 with increasing depth (Table S2). Similarly, bulk density was also found increasing with soil
256 depth and the values were found to be significantly greater for southern aspect than northern
257 aspect ($P<0.05$). Texture of the soil varied from sandy loam to loam irrespective of aspect,
258 elevation, and depth. Soil pH was found to be acidic to slightly acidic throughout the study site.
259 Soil OC decreased with increasing depth and the values were found to increase with elevation
260 significantly ($R^2=0.53$, $P<0.001$). Similarly, Total N, Available K, and Available P decreased
261 with increasing soil depth. Available P and Available K were found significantly varying with
262 elevation. All the soil nutrients (N, P, K) and OC showed greater values in the north aspect as
263 compared to south. PCA plot explained around 49% of variation in vegetation and soil
264 properties among sites (Fig. 10). PCA clearly showed two spectra of variation among the sites.
265 The first PC axis reflected increased soil pH and BD. Whereas the second spectra of variation
266 showed increased diversity (H' and SR), seedling, and sapling count at lower elevations on one
267 hand and increased MC, organic C, and soil nutrient (N,P,K) at higher elevations on the other
268 hand. Constrained correspondence analysis (CCA) revealed the interrelationship of species
269 assemblage, study sites, and environmental variables (Fig. 11), such that environmental
270 heterogeneity caused distinct clusters of floristic composition at different elevations, which in
271 turn significantly ($P<0.05$) affected MC, AP, Texture and BD. The CCA plot furthermore
272 indicated that elevation significantly affected species composition via increased MC and AP at
273 higher elevation sites and by decreased soil BD at lower elevation sites. The eigenvalues were
274 0.92 (CCA axis 1) and 0.81 (CCA axis 2) whereas, the proportion of cumulative variance
275 explained for CCA1 and CCA2 were 70.23 and 87.91% respectively. The total inertia was 3.45
276 while the explanatory variables accounted for 82% variation. The Monte Carlo test showed
277 significant variation after permutations (F-ratio: 3.41, $P<0.001$). Further, the effect of
278 topographical heterogeneity (elevation and slope aspect), associated vegetation attributes and

279 soil properties on regeneration potential were visualised using venn diagram. The explanatory
280 variables used for the analysis were grouped into four classes: Elevation, Aspect, Edaphic
281 factors (Soil texture, pH, BD and OC) and Vegetation attributes (Density, Basal Area and
282 species richness). Variation partitioning tests (partial CCA) were conducted for all 15 possible
283 classes (Table S3). Overall variation in regeneration pattern explained by the associated
284 environmental factors was 94%. Maximum variation was explained by soil properties (41.12%)
285 followed by elevation (39.18%), vegetation attributes (37.59%) and aspect (18.33%) (Fig. 12),
286 which reflected the number of variables in a particular category. The value of fractions with
287 shared variance were not very high. Hence it was found that the variance partitioning among
288 factors explaining regeneration potential revealed a significant relation to environmental and
289 topographical variables.

290 **Discussion**

291 We found striking variation in soil properties and associated vegetation characteristics
292 between inventory plots located in Western Himalayan forests. In accordance with foregoing
293 studies our analysis identified topography as the most important factor affecting taxonomic
294 species composition along orographic gradients (Måren et al., 2015; Méndez-Toribio et al.,
295 2016). However, we furthermore showed that variation in soil properties (MC, BD, AP, and
296 texture) was the underlying factor driving these relationships, such that there are distinct
297 clusters in taxonomic species composition associated with specific forest habitats across the
298 landscape.

299 Environmental filtering shapes local species composition and diversity

300 Species composition significantly differed among the elevation zones based on NMDS, such
301 that species composition at lower elevation (E1 and E2) was found to be completely different
302 from that at higher elevation (E4 and E5), while the mid-elevation zone (E3) created an ecotone
303 with the adjacent community (E4). Distinct cluster formation across the elevation zones might
304 be due to the creation of patchy microhabitats based on resource availability and competition
305 in a heterogeneous environment (Guo et al. 2017). Thus, the distribution of species and their
306 co-existence are strongly under environmental control having different microhabitats
307 irrespective of their life histories (Douda et al. 2012). For instance, *S. robusta* and *M.*
308 *phillipensis* were restricted to lower elevations (E1) whereas *A. pindrow* and *Q. semecarpifolia*
309 dominated the higher elevation sites (E5). Therefore, the observed strong differences in species
310 composition are probably due to different ecological adaptation of species surviving in different
311 environmental conditions (Yang et al. 2020). This separation of species composition in the
312 region supports the Champion and Seth (1968) forest classification which classified forest
313 vegetation based on climate variability. Species diversity is expected to increase with

314 increasing elevation with a peak at the mid-elevation zone. This was not possible in our study
315 since *P. roxburghii* tend to form nearly mono-dominant stand in the mid-elevation sites (E2 and
316 E3) which contributed to observed reduction in diversity indices in these sites. It doesn't allow
317 other species to proliferate in its vicinity because of its capacity to immobilise the soil nutrients
318 which makes it unavailable to other species (Singh et al. 1994). Additionally, it forms thick
319 needle-like leaf layer on forest floor that hinders the growth of other species. Therefore,
320 competition exclusion might be another phenomenon responsible for the paucity of tree species
321 diversity in these sites. Since according to the species-area hypothesis, species diversity should
322 increase with the number of forest plots observed within a study region, we would expect a
323 decrease in similarity of plant species composition with geographic distance among forest sites.
324 Indeed, it was shown that geographic distance led to a reduction in floristic dispersion among
325 forest plots (Prada et al. 2017) with increasing elevation and change in aspect. Thus, we found
326 distinct species composition associated with certain forest habitat types varying across the
327 study region.

328 (Måren et al. 2015) in his study on variation in species composition in semi-arid trans
329 Himalayan region based on slope aspect found high density of tree species in north aspect and
330 few species were restricted to the north aspect only. The present study did not find aspect to
331 play significant role in governing species composition and structure, however the values for
332 tree density and basal area were found greater for northern aspect as compared to south.
333 Maximum tree density and basal area were reported for higher elevation and northern aspect
334 sites. Sharma & Baduni (2000) also reported the highest tree density at an elevation of 2875m in
335 their studies covering an elevation gradient of 2600 m to 2875 m. Lower atmospheric pressure,
336 higher atmospheric precipitation, and humidity might be the reason for increased density at a
337 higher elevation (Sharma et al. 2010). (Singh 1998) reported highest human population density
338 in 1000–2000 m elevation zone in the Indian Himalayan region. On the contrary, lowest tree

339 density values were found for this range in the present study which could certainly be due to
340 increased number of household residences in lower elevation zone which are dependent on the
341 forest resources for their survival and livelihood. For instance, species such as *Q.*
342 *leucotrichophora* is one of the most important species supporting human livelihood in such
343 regions (Rawal et al., 2012). This suggested natural and anthropogenic disturbance factors such
344 as lopping, deadwood counts, etc. to be equally important in governing species composition
345 and diversity. Another study conducted at three sites of sub-alpine forests revealed that density
346 decreased with increasing elevation (Gairola et al. 2012). We here observed the same trend of
347 decreasing total basal area and density of shrub species with increasing elevation. This was
348 specifically due to contribution of maximum basal area at lower elevation by *Lantana camara*
349 (~50%) which is an invasive species. *Lantana camara* was found to take advantage of scattered
350 canopy cover on south aspect and it doesn't allow other species to grow in its periphery.
351 Therefore, due to competition for resources and space, invasive shrub species grow well in
352 lower elevation zone leading to lower tree density as compared to higher elevation (Kumar et
353 al. 2021). We found shrub density and basal area to be higher at lower elevations, unlike tree
354 layer. This might be due to scattered tree canopy at lower elevations allowing more light
355 penetration such that the understorey species can proliferate well.

356 Topographical heterogeneity and vegetation structure drives edaphic factors

357 There is increasing amounts of evidence that soil moisture plays an important role in governing
358 the composition of vegetation communities in mountainous landscapes (Kutiel and Lavee
359 1999; Panthi M et al. 2007). Differences in soil MC played an important role in controlling
360 species composition across the sites. The higher elevational site (E4 and E5) has greater soil
361 MC which might be due to dense canopy and multi-layering at higher altitudinal forest whereas
362 lower density and basal area at lower elevation creates sparse canopy cover which enhances
363 light penetration resulting in higher evaporation rate and lower moisture content (Saxena and

364 Singh 1984). The study suggested increased amount of soil nutrient (N and K) along with OC
365 and MC to be greater in higher elevation sites. The complex structure of the vegetation in the
366 study region results from the interaction of edaphic factors and associated forest attributes. The
367 successional changes occurring in an ecosystem with time and their development process bring
368 about changes in edaphic properties whereas selective absorption of macro- and micro-
369 nutrients by different species alters the process of feedback mechanism by them (Singh, 2018,
370 2021). PCA plot showed tree basal area and soil total nitrogen were strongly correlated along
371 with soil OC. Generally, the increase in OC with increasing elevation is due to an increased
372 amount of litter accumulation on the forest floor and due to lower temperatures, there is a very
373 slow rate of decomposition (Singh & Kashyap, 2006) and lower turnover of nutrients and thus
374 selects for species with a conservative resource-use strategy characterized by slow growth and
375 high biomass (Quesada et al., 2012). Also, increase in soil nitrogen and available potassium
376 with increasing basal area might be the result of increased tree growth which in turn leads to
377 higher nutrient returns via litterfall (Verma and Garkoti 2019). A possible explanation for this
378 might be that presence of organic matter due to reduced decomposition rate at higher elevation
379 leads to slow turnover of plant materials that significantly improves the retention of potassium
380 in the soil (Sharma et al. 2006) but this impacted the phosphorus concentration which was
381 lower in higher elevation sites. Aspect significantly affected moisture content, bulk density,
382 phosphorous, and potassium in the present study however, other soil parameters were not
383 affected confirming relatively low role of aspect in creating differences in soil parameters. The
384 study site showed slightly acidic pH throughout which is recommended for nutrient availability
385 to the plants in the forest (Paudel and Sah 2003). Thus, the study suggested soil moisture
386 content and nutrient availability are the important edaphic constraints for species distribution
387 which are significantly influenced by topographical variation. CCA also confirmed that the
388 sites at higher elevations had higher AP and MC content which might be due to slower cycling

389 of nutrients in response to reduced decomposition at low temperatures while reduced
390 weathering rates at lower elevation might have caused relatively lower nutrient turnover rates.
391 However, over any large region, distribution of species is supposed to be governed by two or
392 more environmental factors, not a single factor (Sagar et al. 2008).

393 Topographical heterogeneity and associated edaphic properties regulate regeneration pattern

394 Density diameter curve suggested high density of species in lower DBH class whereas
395 absence of old-growth individuals in higher DBH class indicating natural succession of young
396 forests as opposed to mature forest stands (Singh & Singh, 1986). However, higher elevation sites
397 (E5) followed bell-shaped pattern indicating mature forest stands. However, species-wise (for
398 *Pinus roxburhii*, *Q. leucotrichophora* and *Q. semicarpifolia*) population structure showed
399 slight discontinuity in number of individuals with increasing DBH class. This was mainly due
400 to different levels of environmental harshness to be responsible for governing population
401 structure. The seedling density varied nearly three-fold and sapling density varied nearly two-
402 fold amongst the study sites. The values fit the values reported by previous studies from other
403 regions located in the Himalayas (Pant and Samant 2012; Pala et al. 2013; Malik and Bhatt
404 2016). Seedling and sapling density decreased with increasing elevation while the opposite was
405 found for matured tree individuals. This might be due to the lower survival rates of species in
406 lower elevation sites along with low soil TN which increases with increasing basal area. This
407 suggests that lower elevation sites are characterized by late-successional forest stands with low
408 stand density but higher recruitment rates. A higher number of saplings indicate an increased
409 survival rate and low mortality rate (Uriarte et al. 2018). Increased seedling density at lower
410 elevation sites could be also due to increased amount of light penetration to the ground layer
411 creating favourable conditions for regeneration, unlike higher elevation sites which form closed
412 canopy due to increased density and basal area (Singh 1998). Also, reduced seedling density
413 in E2 (1000-1500 m) sites might be due to mono-specific nature of *P. roxburghii* that forms

414 thick needle-like leaf layer on forest floor obstructing the growth of seedlings in the area. It
415 also holds the capacity to immobilise soil nutrients which makes it unavailable to other species
416 seedlings (Saikia et al. 2009). Therefore, there occurs an increased rate of competition for the
417 survival of new seedlings in such sites. This suggests vegetation attributes and soil nutrient
418 availability along with topography play a major role in governing the regeneration potential in
419 such regions (Terakunpisut et al. 2007; Gairola et al. 2012). Furthermore, these changes cause
420 differences in the overall productivity of the region (Hall et al., 2006).

421 Implications for forest management under future scenarios

422 Montane forests are very fragile ecosystems and are highly affected by variation in
423 climatic changes and global warming scenarios (Barradas et al. 2011). A forest having multi-
424 layered canopy with significant canopy index and depth, as well as forest floor rich in organic
425 matter and nutrients has a greater protective value compared to a forest with lesser layers and
426 a lower canopy index (Kumar et al. 2013). Without adequate baseline data on floristic
427 composition and diversity and factors determining regeneration potential are fundamental for
428 management of natural regions (Prada et al. 2017). Variation in soil properties adds another
429 dimension to changes in species diversity and species distribution pattern. The aforementioned
430 parameters are therefore liable for creating variations in ecosystem functioning at local level
431 (within stand differences) as well as landscape-level (between stand differences), thereby
432 producing spatial heterogeneity (Timilsina et al. 2007). Studies conducted to date suggest that
433 more emphasis should be given to the northern aspect for conservation as well as restoration
434 purposes due to its favourable properties for plant growth (Sharma et al. 2010). However, a
435 similar assessment of management implementations should be considered for the southern
436 aspect. After a reconnaissance survey, one should adopt different strategies for the conservation
437 of vegetation in different habitat types. In moist Shiwalik Sal forest, reduced density, and basal
438 area due to increased dominance of *L. camara* should be managed using mechanical uprooting

439 and chemical control methods whereas, in the pine forest, pine leaves that form the forest floor
440 further inhibiting regeneration and habitation of other species should be collected and removed
441 periodically. The soils at higher altitudes (Himalayan moist temperate forests) with steeper
442 slopes having scattered canopy tend to get eroded easily. Programs should be launched to cover
443 those areas with native shrub species as well as fast-growing and light-demanding species to
444 reduce the chances of erosion and maintain overall soil properties at both aspects. Therefore, it
445 is recommended that plantation of species should be considered for both aspects to increase
446 biodiversity and a sustainable management of Himalayan forests. Also, predictive models of
447 vegetation changes suggest climate be the most important factor exerting strong effect on
448 variation in species composition and diversity (Heikkinen et al. 2006). However, several
449 studies, in line with this study suggest plant composition and diversity to be largely affected
450 by edaphic properties, such as soil pH, elevation, slope aspect, and, soil nutrients (Bertrand et
451 al. 2012). Therefore, evaluation of edaphic parameters and topographic features such as slope
452 aspect and elevation could benefit projections of next-generation vegetation models
453 significantly (Franklin et al., 2020)

454 **Conclusions**

455 The study suggests that among topographic factors, elevation rather than slope aspect is
456 important in governing differences in species composition among study sites in Western
457 Himalayan Montane forests. Tree density and basal area were found maximum at higher
458 elevation sites while seedling and sapling density along with shrub density and basal area were
459 maximum at lower elevation sites. This was basically due to increased light penetration for
460 understory and regenerating species due to scattered canopy at lower elevation sites. Variation
461 in soil properties adds another dimension to changes in species diversity and distribution
462 pattern. Soil nutrient (TN, AP and AK) along with OC and moisture content significantly

463 increased with increasing elevation. Therefore, the study concludes that topographical variation
464 and an increased sum of OC, TN, and available K contents of the soil, are highly favorable for
465 the growth and development of plant species. Population structure was found to expand at
466 lower elevation sites (E1) which indicates rapid growth in population. However, higher
467 elevation sites (E5) followed bell-shaped pattern indicating mature forest stands. There is a
468 growing need for incorporation of the herbaceous layers that form a significant part of the forest
469 understory and thus should allow to improve predictions based on observations of the
470 overstory, which might lead to uncertainties related to changes in species composition under
471 future scenarios. The study also strongly argues integration of spatial and temporal
472 heterogeneity across resource gradient at both local and regional scales to analyze the species-
473 environment relationships considering several abiotic as well as biotic factors.

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719 **Statements & Declarations**

720 **Funding**

721 University Grants Commission (UGC) (Grant number: 3787/NET-DEC 2018), New Delhi,
722 India.

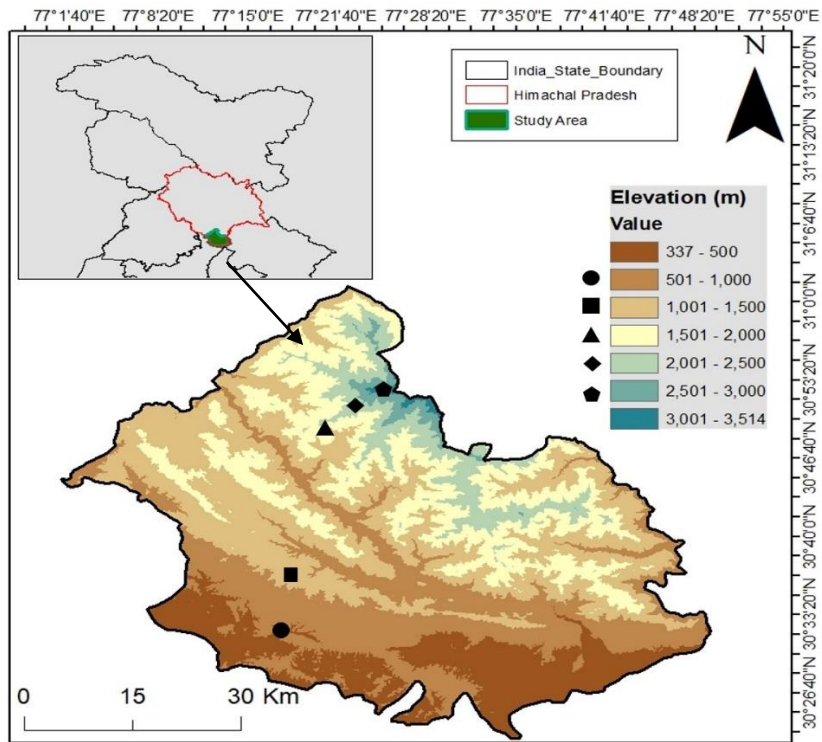
723 **Competing Interests**

724 The authors declare no competing interests among themselves.

725 **Author contributions**

726 SS: Designing, Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis, Writing Draft of Manuscript, and
727 Literature Survey; AKV: Statistical Analysis, Writing and Reviewing Draft of the Manuscript,
728 and Finalization; FH: Reviewing, Finalizing, and Supervision.

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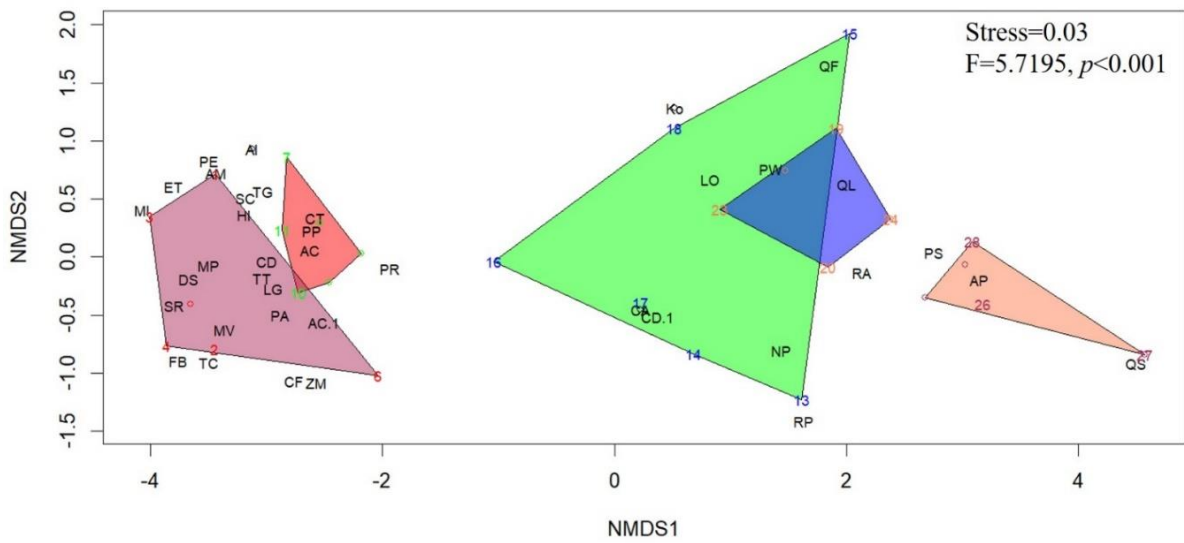


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731 **Fig. 1.** Location of the selected sites in Sirmour district (Study Area), Himachal Pradesh, Indian
 732 Himalaya. The different symbols represent different elevation ranges. ● :500-1000 m asl, ■ :1001-
 733 1500 m asl, ▲ :1501-2000 m asl, ◆ :2001-2500 m asl, ◆ :2501-3000 m asl.

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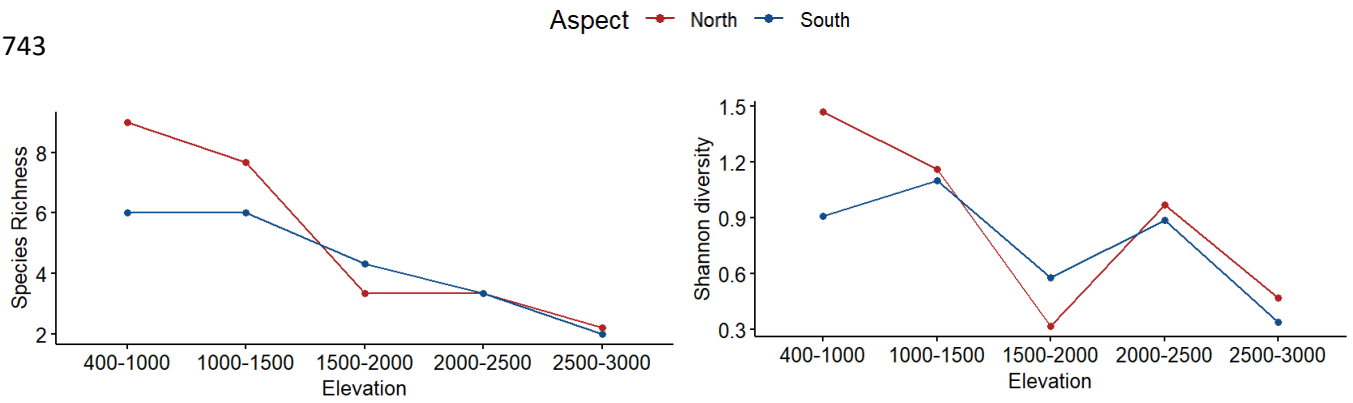
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737 **Fig. 2.** Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) for tree layer. Plots located on different
738 elevation zones were represented based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarity (stress 0.03).
739 Permutational analysis of Variance indicates significant variation among sites (F=5.72,
740 $p<0.001$). Species abbreviations are mentioned in Fig. S1.

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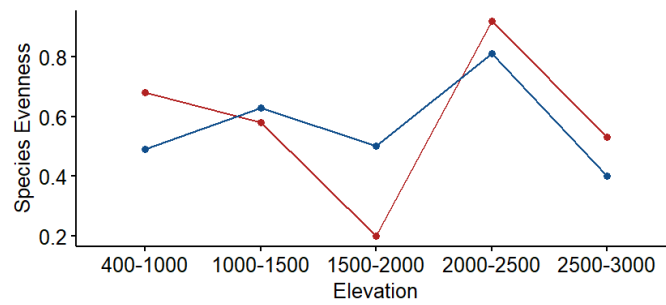
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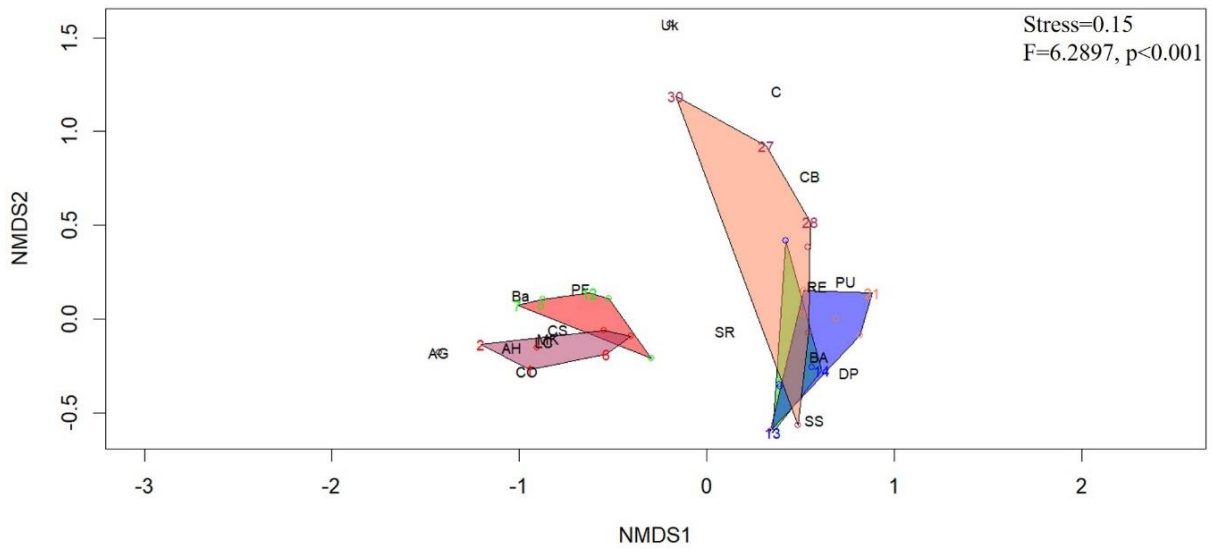
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755 **Fig. 3.** Line plots showing variation in tree Density (ind ha^{-1}), Basal Area ($\text{m}^2 \text{ha}^{-1}$), Species
756 Richness, Shannon diversity and Species Evenness with increasing elevation and contrasting
757 slope aspect: North (red) and South (blue).

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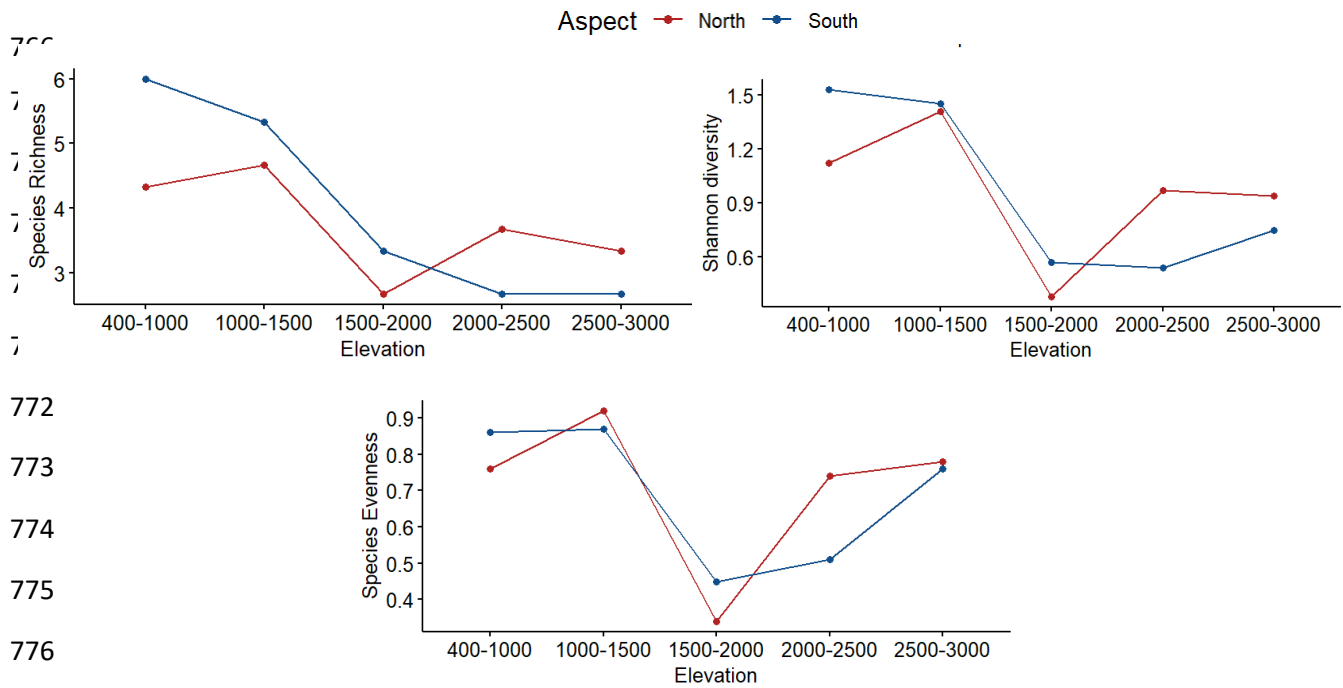
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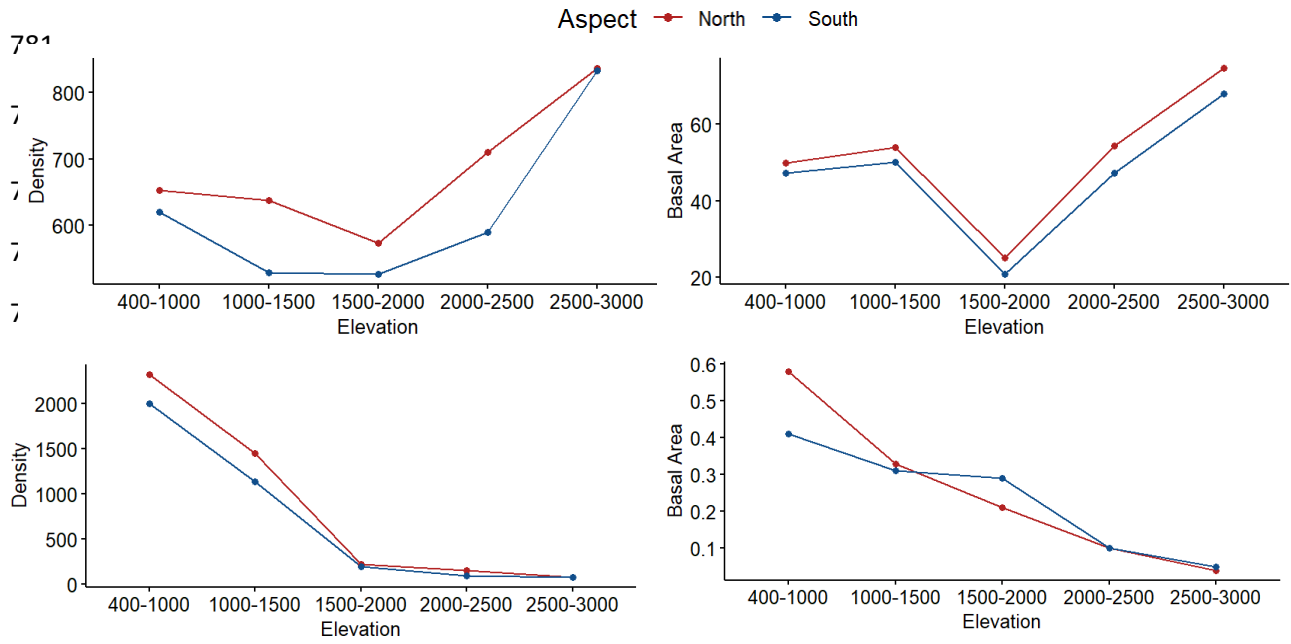
761 **Fig. 4.** Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) for the shrub layer. Plots located on
762 different elevation zones were represented based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarity (stress 0.15).
763 Permutational analysis of Variance indicates significant variation among sites ($F=6.29$,
764 $p<0.001$). Species abbreviations are mentioned in Fig. S2.

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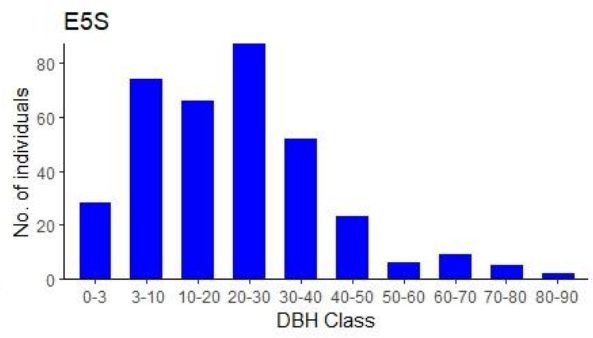
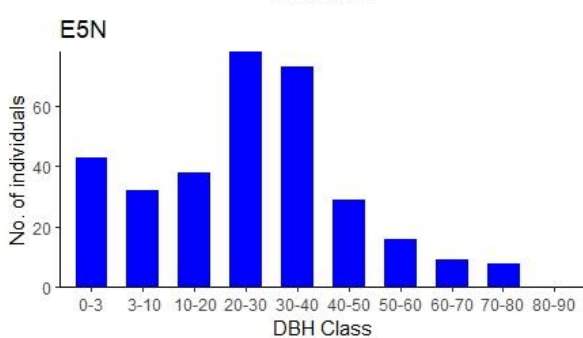
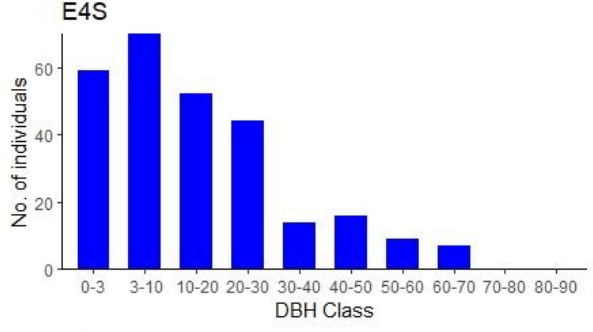
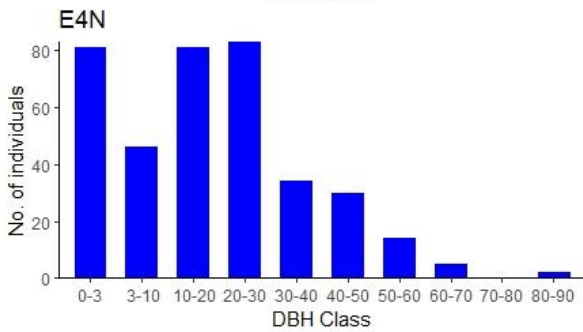
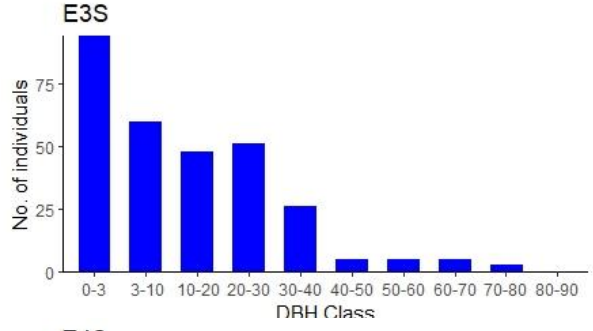
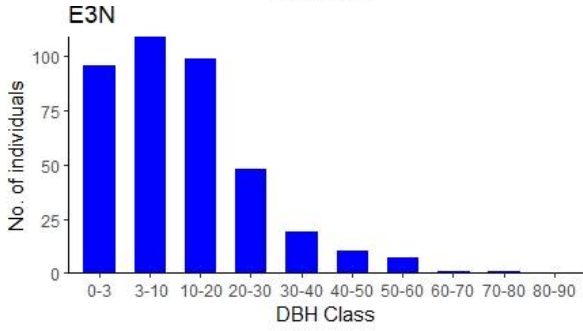
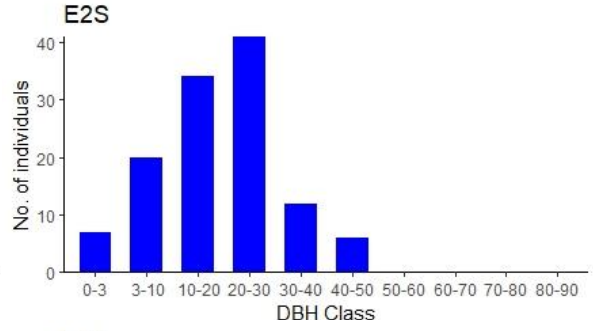
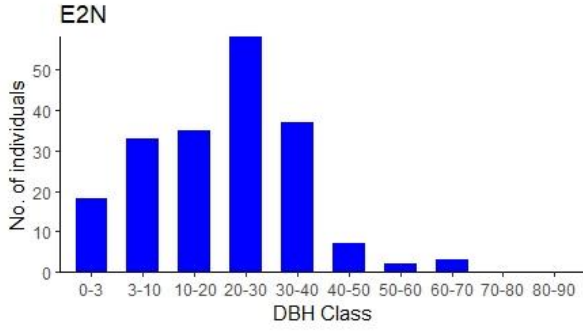
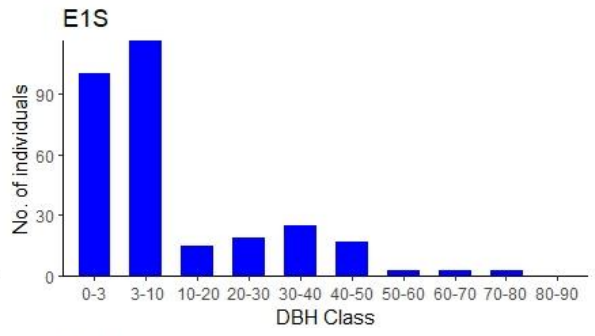
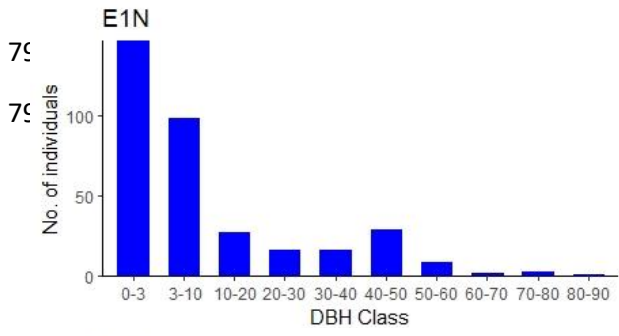
777 **Fig. 5.** Line plots showing variation in shrub Density (ind ha⁻¹), Basal Area (m² ha⁻¹), Species
 778 Richness, Shannon diversity and Species Evenness with increasing elevation and contrasting
 779 slope aspect: North (red) and South (blue).

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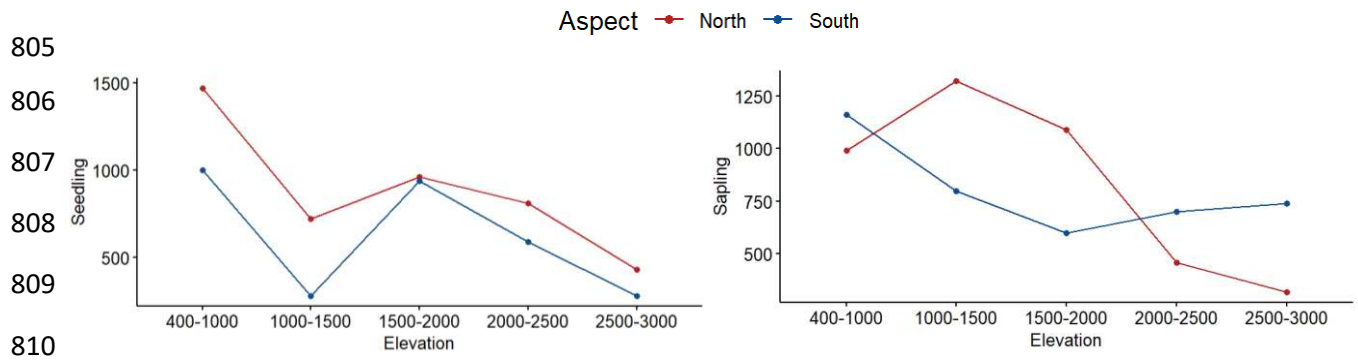
791 **Fig. 6.** Line plots showing variation in Density (ind ha⁻¹) and Basal Area (m² ha⁻¹) for trees
 792 (upper panel) and shrubs (lower panel) with increasing elevation and contrasting slope aspect:
 793 North (red) and South (blue).

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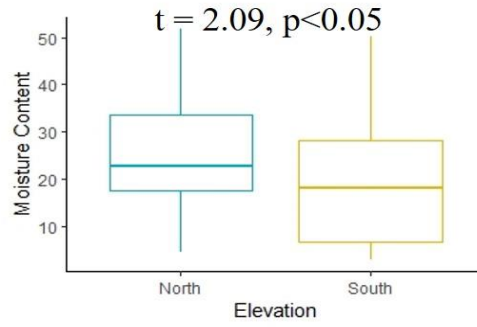
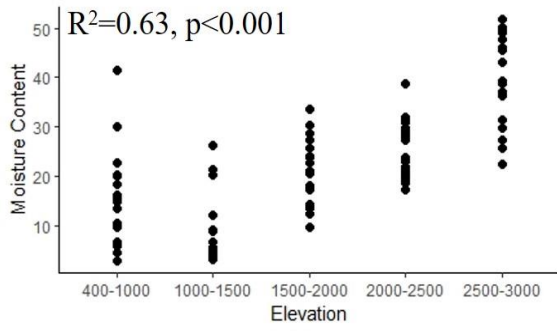
797 **Fig. 7.** Population structure of tree species for all the sites: E1N (400-1000 m asl northern
798 aspect), E1S (400-1000 m asl southern aspect), E2N (1001-1500 m asl northern aspect), E2S
799 (1001-1500 m asl southern aspect), E3N (1501-2000 m asl northern aspect), E3S (1501-2000
800 m asl southern aspect), E4N (2001-2500 m asl northern aspect), E4S (2001-2500 m asl southern
801 aspect), E5N (2501-3000 m asl northern aspect) and E5S (2501-3000 m asl southern aspect)
802 where x-axis represents DBH Class (Diameter at Breast Height) and y-axis represents number
803 of individuals.

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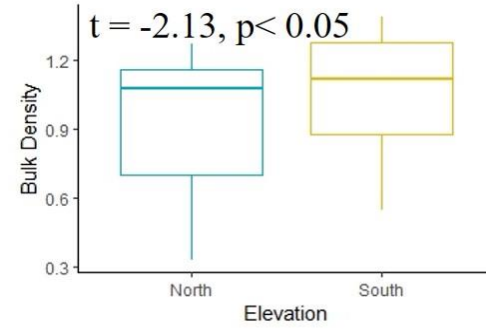
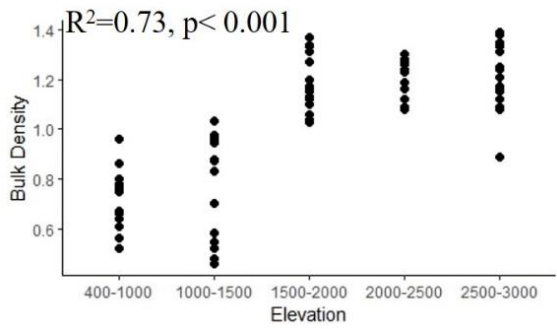


811 **Fig. 8.** Regeneration status (seedlings and saplings, no. of individuals ha⁻¹) of tree species with
 812 increasing elevation for contrasting slope aspect: North (red) and South (blue).

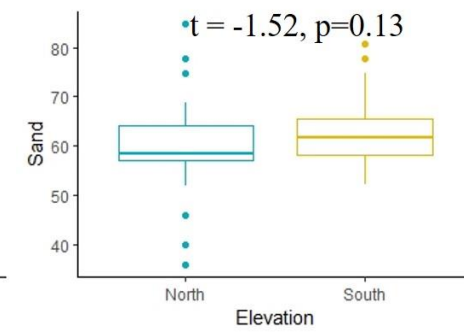
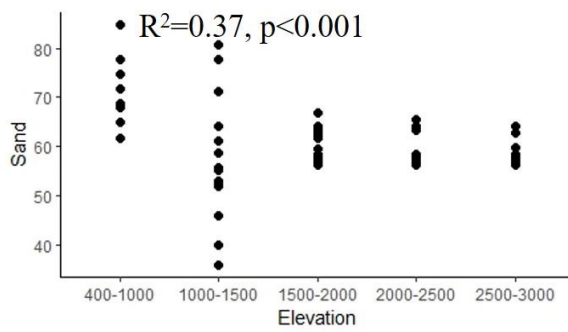
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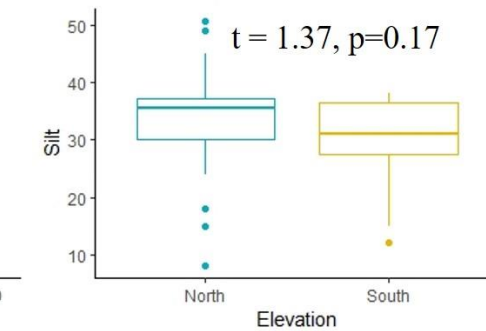
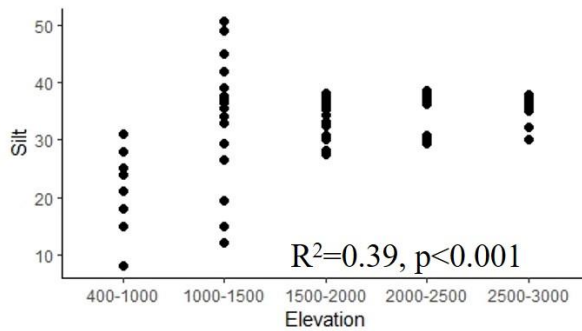
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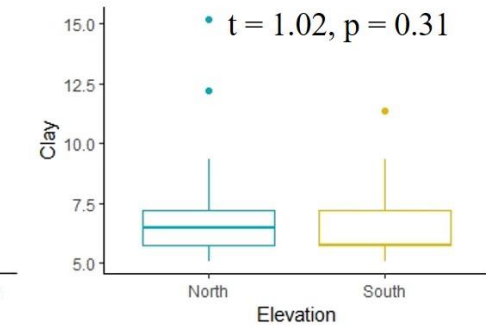
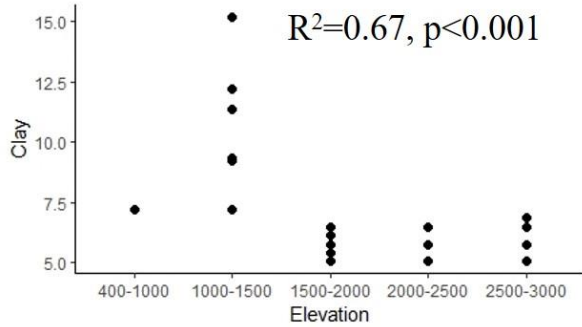
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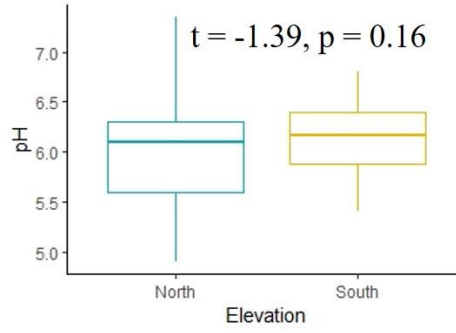
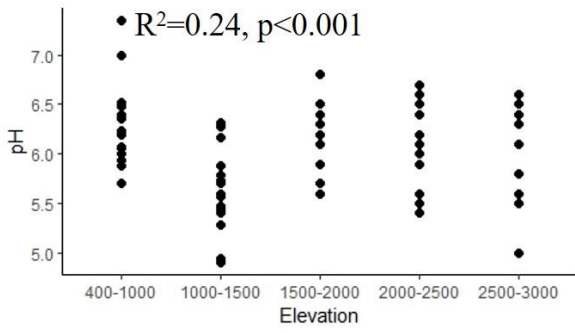
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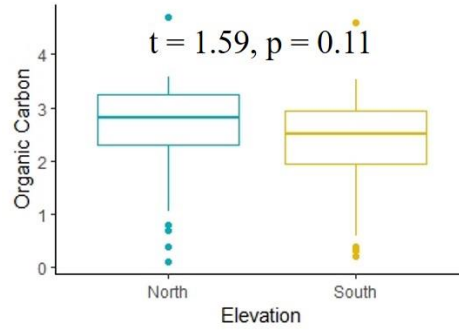
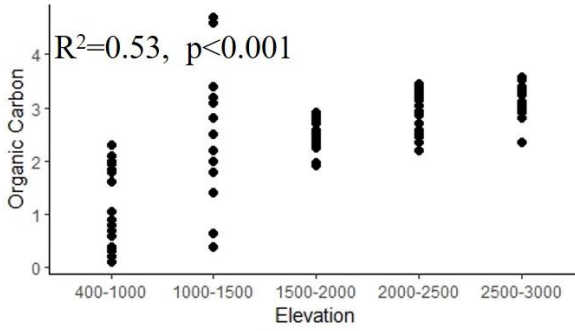
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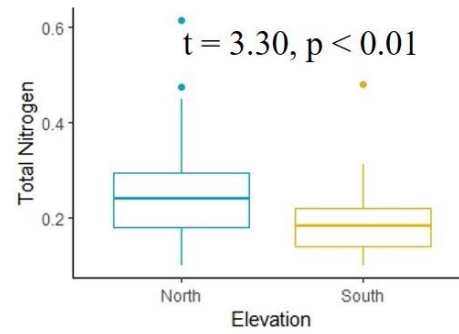
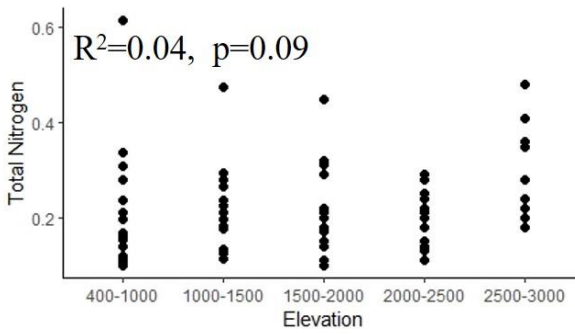
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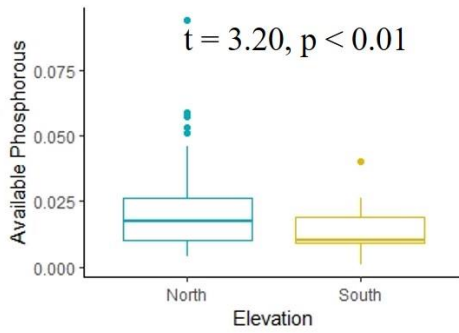
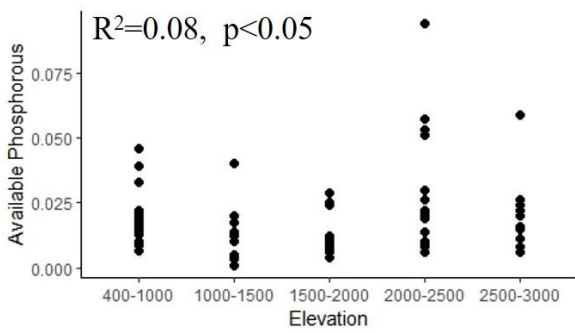
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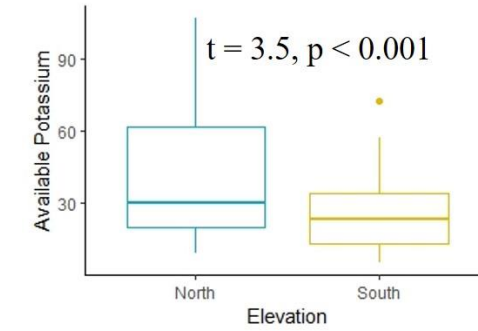
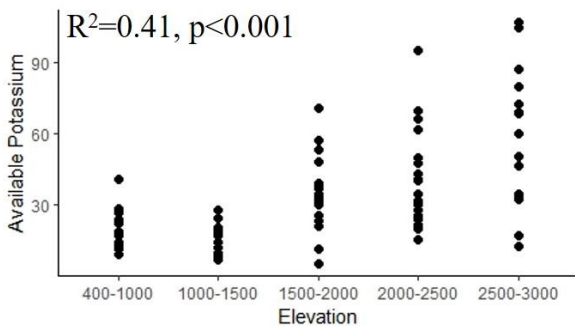
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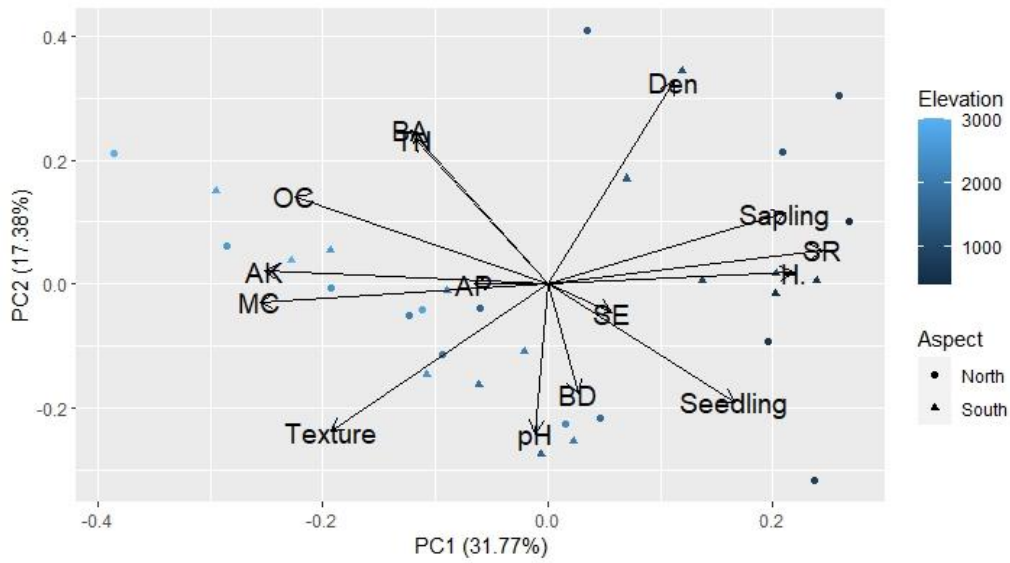
824 **Fig. 9.** Linear regression analysis of soil properties along increasing elevation
825 [Moisture Content (MC %), Bulk Density (BD g cm⁻³), pH (unitless),
826 Texture-Sand, Silt and Clay (%), Organic Carbon (OC %), Total Nitrogen
827 (TN %), Available Potassium (AK %), Available Phosphorous (AP %)].



828 Right panel: Box plot with t-test showing variation in soil properties with varying slope aspect:
829 North (blue) and South (yellow). The limits of boxes indicate the first and third quartiles, and
830 the horizontal line within boxes corresponds to the median. The upper whisker extends from
831 the third quartile to the highest value within $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ (interquartile range) of the third quartile.
832 The lower whisker extends from the first quartile to the lowest value within $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ of the
833 first quartile.

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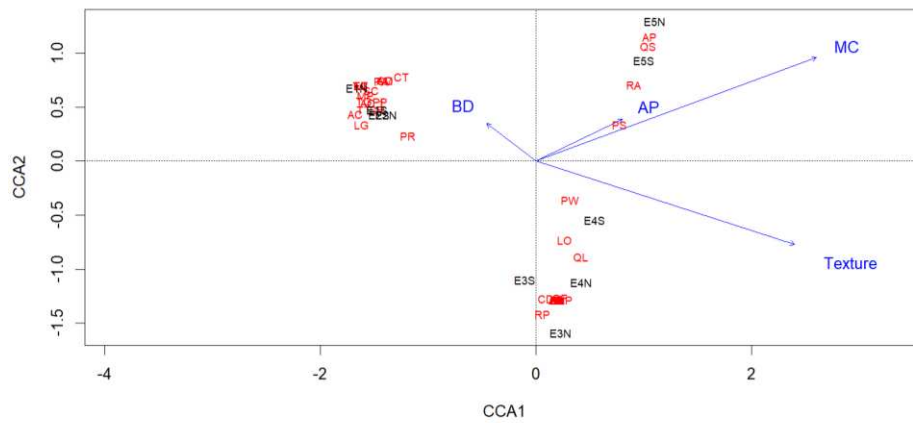
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837 **Fig 10.** Principal Component Analysis of vegetation attributes and soil parameters among sites.
838 Abbreviations: Density (Den, individuals ha⁻¹), Basal Area (BA, m² ha⁻¹), Seedling and Sapling
839 (individuals ha⁻¹), Shannon-Weiner Diversity (H', unitless), Species Richness (SR, unitless),
840 Species Evenness (SE, unitless), Moisture Content (MC %), Bulk Density (BD g cm⁻³), pH
841 (unitless), Texture-Ratio of Sand, Silt and Clay (%), Organic Carbon (OC %), Total Nitrogen
842 (TN %), Available Potassium (AK %), Available Phosphorous (AP %).

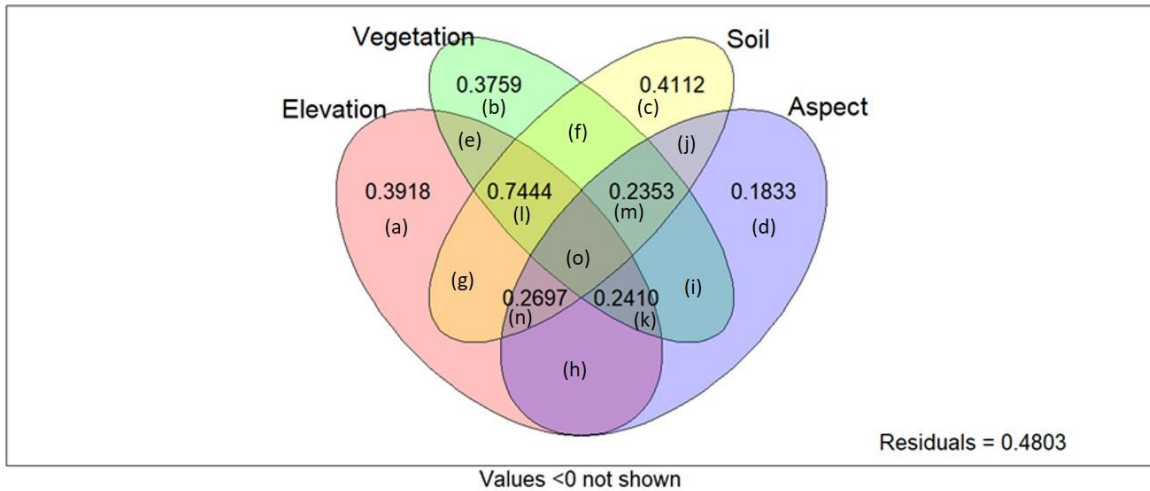
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845 **Fig. 11.** CCA ordination diagram of tree species (red) among the study sites (black) to analyze
 846 the major gradients among the combination of explanatory variables. The length of vectors in
 847 the ordination diagram represents the strength of the correlation, while the angle between two
 848 vectors shows the degree of correlation among variables with each axis. Species abbreviations
 849 are mentioned in Figure S2.

850



851

852 **Fig. 12.** A Venn diagram showing the partitioning of variation according to four groups of
 853 independent variables, Elevation, Vegetation (Density, Basal area and Species Richness), Soil
 854 properties (Moisture content, Texture and soil nutrients) and Slope aspect. The rectangle
 855 corresponds to the total variation in the dependent (species regeneration) data. Each area of
 856 overlap of the four ellipses is representative of the intersection of the four groups in terms of
 857 their explained variation. The area of the rectangle (total variation) that the four ellipses do not
 858 cover represents the unexplained variation (residuals) (refer to Table S2 for negative adjusted
 859 R-square values of each class).

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