

TROPICAL FOREST

Long-term thermal sensitivity of Earth's tropical forests

Martin J. P. Sullivan^{1,2*}, Simon L. Lewis^{1,3}, Kofi Affum-Baffoe⁴, Carolina Castillo⁵, Flávia Costa⁶, Aida Cuni Sanchez^{7,8}, Corneille E. N. Ewango^{9,10,11}, Wannes Hubau^{12,13}, Beatriz Marimon¹⁴, Abel Monteagudo-Mendoza¹⁵, Lan Qie¹⁶, Bonaventure Sonké¹⁷, Rodolfo Vasquez Martinez¹⁵, Timothy R. Baker¹, Roel J. W. Brienen¹, Ted R. Feldpausch¹⁸, David Galbraith¹, Manuel Gloor¹, Yadvinder Malhi¹⁹, Shin-ichiro Aiba²⁰, Miguel N. Alexiades²¹, Everton C. Almeida²², Edmar Almeida de Oliveira²³, Esteban Álvarez Dávila²⁴, Patricia Alvarez Loayza²⁵, Ana Andrade²⁶, Simone Aparecida Vieira²⁷, Luiz E. O. C. Aragão^{18,28}, Alejandro Araujo-Murakami²⁹, Eric J. M. M. Arets³⁰, Luzmila Arroyo³¹, Peter Ashton³², Gerardo Aymard C.³³, Fabrício B. Baccaro³⁴, Lindsay F. Banin³⁵, Christopher Baraloto³⁶, Plínio Barbosa Camargo³⁷, Jos Barlow³⁸, Jorcely Barroso³⁹, Jean-François Bastin^{40,41}, Sarah A. Batterman^{1,42,43,44}, Hans Beeckman¹², Serge K. Begne^{1,17}, Amy C. Bennett¹, Erika Berenguer^{19,38}, Nicholas Berry⁴⁵, Lilian Blanc⁴⁶, Pascal Boeckx⁴⁷, Jan Bogaert⁴⁸, Damien Bonal⁴⁹, Frans Bongers⁵⁰, Matt Bradford⁵¹, Francis Q. Brearley², Terry Brncic⁵², Foster Brown⁵³, Benoit Burban⁵⁴, José Luis Camargo²⁶, Wendeson Castro⁵⁵, Carlos Céron⁵⁶, Sabina Cerruto Ribeiro⁵⁷, Victor Chama Moscoso¹⁵, Jérôme Chave⁵⁸, Eric Chezeaux⁵⁹, Connie J. Clark²⁵, Fernanda Coelho de Souza¹, Murray Collins^{60,61}, James A. Comiskey^{62,63}, Fernando Cornejo Valverde⁶⁴, Massiel Corrales Medina⁶⁵, Lola da Costa⁶⁶, Martin Dančák⁶⁷, Greta C. Dargie¹, Stuart Davies⁶⁸, Nallaret Davila Cardozo⁶⁹, Thales de Haulleville^{12,48}, Marcelo Brilhante de Medeiros⁷⁰, Jhon del Aguila Pasquel⁷¹, Géraldine Derroire⁷², Anthony Di Fiore⁷³, Jean-Louis Doucet⁷⁴, Aurélie Dourdain⁷², Vincent Droissant⁷⁵, Luisa Fernanda Duque⁷⁶, Romeo Ekoungoulou⁷⁷, Fernando Elias⁷⁸, Terry Erwin⁷⁹, Adriane Esquivel-Muelbert⁸⁰, Sophie Fauset⁸¹, Joice Ferreira⁸², Gerardo Flores Llompazo⁸³, Ernest Foli⁸⁴, Andrew Ford⁵¹, Martin Gilpin¹, Jefferson S. Hall⁸⁵, Keith C. Hamer⁸⁶, Alan C. Hamilton⁸⁷, David J. Harris⁸⁸, Terese B. Hart^{89,90}, Radim Hédli^{91,92}, Bruno Herault^{47,93,94}, Rafael Herrera⁹⁵, Niro Higuchi⁶, Annette Hladik⁹⁶, Eurídice Honorio Coronado⁷¹, Isau Huamantupa-Chuquimaco⁹⁷, Walter Huaraca Huasco⁹⁷, Kathryn J. Jeffery⁹⁸, Eliana Jimenez-Rojas⁹⁹, Michelle Kalamandeen^{1,100,101}, Marie Noël Kamdem Djuikouo^{11,13,17,102}, Elizabeth Kearsley⁴¹, Ricardo Keichi Umetsu¹⁰³, Lip Khoon Kho¹⁰⁴, Timothy Killeen¹⁰⁵, Kanehiro Kitayama¹⁰⁶, Bente Klitgaard¹⁰⁷, Alexander Koch¹⁰⁸, Nicolas Labrière⁵⁸, William Laurance¹⁰⁹, Susan Laurance¹⁰⁹, Miguel E. Leal¹¹⁰, Aurora Levesley¹, Adriano J. N. Lima⁶, Janvier Lisingo¹¹, Aline P. Lopes²⁸, Gabriela Lopez-Gonzalez¹, Tom Lovejoy¹¹¹, Jon C. Lovett^{1,107}, Richard Lowe¹¹², William E. Magnusson¹¹³, Jagoba Malumbres-Olarte^{114,115}, Ângelo Gilberto Manzatto¹¹⁶, Ben Hur Marimon Jr.¹¹⁷, Andrew R. Marshall^{8,118,119}, Toby Marthews¹²⁰, Simone Matias de Almeida Reis^{14,19}, Colin Maycock¹²¹, Karina Melgaço¹, Casimiro Mendoza¹²², Faizah Metal¹²³, Vianet Mihindou^{124,125}, William Milliken¹⁰⁷, Edward T. A. Mitchard⁶¹, Paulo S. Morandi¹⁴, Hannah L. Mossman¹, Laszlo Nagy¹²⁶, Henrique Nascimento⁶, David Neill¹²⁷, Reuben Nilus¹²⁸, Percy Núñez Vargas⁹⁵, Walter Palacios¹²⁹, Nadir Pallqui Camacho^{1,95}, Julie Peacock¹, Colin Pendry⁸⁸, Maria Cristina Peñuela Mora¹³⁰, Georgia C. Pickavance¹, John Pipoly¹³¹, Nigel Pitman¹³², Maureen Playfair¹³³, Lourens Poorter⁵⁰, John R. Poulsen²⁵, Axel Dalberg Poulsen⁸⁸, Richard Preziosi², Adriana Prieto¹³⁴, Richard B. Primack¹³⁵, Hirma Ramírez-Angulo¹³⁶, Jan Reitsma¹³⁷, Maxime Réjou-Méchain⁷⁵, Zorayda Restrepo Correa¹³⁸, Thaiane Rodrigues de Sousa⁶, Lily Rodriguez Bayona¹³⁹, Anand Roopsind¹⁴⁰, Agustín Rudas¹³⁴, Ervan Rutishauser^{43,141}, Kamariah Abu Salim¹²³, Rafael P. Salomão^{142,143}, Juliana Schiatti⁶, Douglas Sheil¹⁴⁴, Richarley C. Silva^{57,145}, Javier Silva Espejo¹⁴⁶, Camila Silva Valeria³⁸, Marcos Silveira⁵⁷, Murielle Simo-Droissart¹⁷, Marcelo Fragomeni Simon⁷⁰, James Singh¹⁴⁷, Yahn Carlos Soto Shareva¹⁵, Clement Stahl⁵⁴, Juliana Stropp¹⁴⁸, Rahayu Sukri¹²³, Terry Sunderland^{149,150}, Martin Svátek¹⁵¹, Michael D. Swaine¹⁵², Varun Swamy¹⁵³, Hermann Taedoum^{154,155}, Joey Talbot¹, James Taplin¹⁵⁶, David Taylor¹⁵⁷, Hans ter Steege^{158,159}, John Terborgh²⁵, Raquel Thomas¹⁴⁰, Sean C. Thomas¹⁶⁰, Armando Torres-Lezama¹⁶¹, Peter Umunay^{162,163}, Luis Valenzuela Gamarra¹⁵, Geertje van der Heijden¹⁶⁴, Peter van der Hout¹⁶⁵, Peter van der Meer¹⁶⁶, Mark van Nieuwstadt¹⁶⁷, Hans Verbeeck⁴¹, Ronald Vernimmen¹⁶⁸, Alberto Vicentini⁶, Ima Célia Guimarães Vieira¹⁴⁵, Emílio Vilanova Torre¹⁶⁹, Jason Vleminckx³⁶, Vincent Vos^{170,171}, Ophelia Wang¹⁷², Lee J. T. White^{98,124,173}, Simon Willcock¹⁷⁴, John T. Woods¹⁷⁵, Virginia Wortel¹⁷⁶, Kenneth Young¹⁷⁷, Roderick Zagt¹⁷⁸, Lise Zemanho¹⁷, Pieter A. Zuidema⁵⁰, Joeri A. Zwarts^{133,167}, Oliver L. Phillips¹

The sensitivity of tropical forest carbon to climate is a key uncertainty in predicting global climate change. Although short-term drying and warming are known to affect forests, it is unknown if such effects translate into long-term responses. Here, we analyze 590 permanent plots measured across the tropics to derive the equilibrium climate controls on forest carbon. Maximum temperature is the most important predictor of aboveground biomass (−9.1 megagrams of carbon per hectare per degree Celsius), primarily by reducing woody productivity, and has a greater impact per °C in the hottest forests (>32.2°C). Our results nevertheless reveal greater thermal resilience than observations of short-term variation imply. To realize the long-term climate adaptation potential of tropical forests requires both protecting them and stabilizing Earth's climate.

The response of tropical terrestrial carbon to environmental change is a critical component of global climate models (1). Land-atmosphere feedbacks depend on the balance of positive biomass growth stimulation by CO₂ fertilization (i.e., β) and negative responses to warmer temperatures and any change in precipitation (i.e., γ). Yet the climate response is so poorly constrained that it remains one of the largest uncertainties in Earth system models (2, 3), with the temperature sensitivity of tropical land carbon

stocks alone differing by >100 Pg C °C^{−1} among models (2). Such uncertainty impedes our understanding of the global carbon cycle, limiting our ability to simulate the future of the Earth system under different long-term climate mitigation strategies. A critical long-term control on tropical land-atmosphere feedbacks is the sensitivity to climate of tropical forests (a key component of γ), where about 40% of the world's vegetation carbon resides (4).

The sensitivity to environmental change of tropical biomass carbon stocks, rates of production, and the persistence of fixed carbon can all be estimated by relating their short-term and interannual responses to variation in climate (5–7). These sensitivities are then used to con-

strain longer-term projections of climate responses (2). Such approaches typically find that higher minimum temperatures are strongly associated with slower tree growth and reduced forest carbon stocks, likely owing to increased respiration at higher temperatures (7–9). Tropical forest carbon is also sensitive to precipitation (10), with, for example, increased tree mortality occurring during drought events (11).

Yet the sensitivity of ecosystems to interannual fluctuations may be an unreliable guide to their longer-term responses to climate change. Such responses will also be influenced by physiological acclimation (12), changes in demographic rates (13), and shifts in species composition (14). For example, both respiration

Author affiliations are listed at the end of this paper.

*Corresponding author. Email: m.j.sullivan@leeds.ac.uk

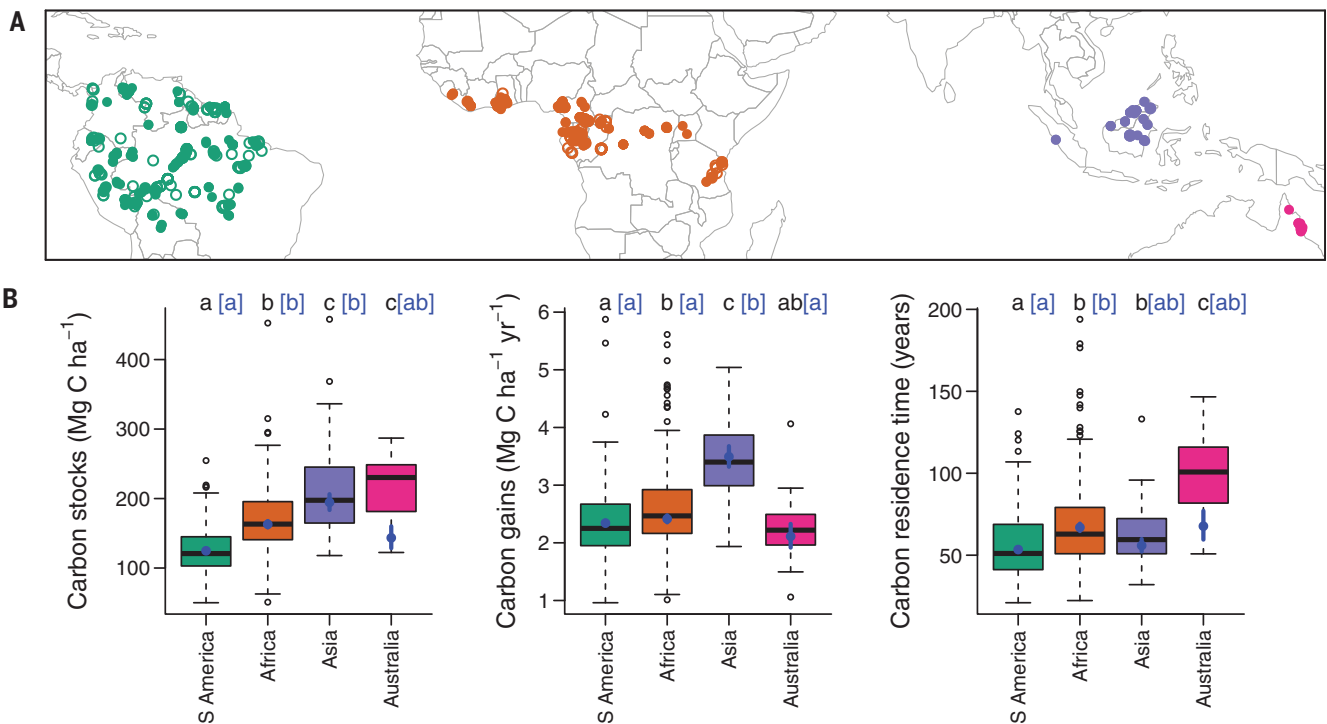


Fig. 1. Spatial variation in tropical forest carbon. (A) The RAINFOR (South America), AfriTRON (Africa), T-FORCES (Asia), and Australian plot networks. Filled symbols show 590 multicensus plots used in the main analysis; open symbols show 223 single-census plots used as an independent dataset. Symbol color indicates the region: green, South America; orange, Africa; purple, Asia; and pink, Australia. (B) Variation in carbon among continents. Boxplots show raw variation, whereas blue points show estimated mean values (\pm SE) after accounting for environmental variation. Letters denote statistically significant differences between continents ($P < 0.05$) based on raw data (black) or after accounting for environmental effects (blue in brackets).

and photosynthesis can acclimate under sustained temperature increases (15–17), tropical trees exhibit physiological plasticity (18), and shifts in species composition occur (14) under sustained drought. These processes could mean that tropical forests are less sensitive to climate than estimates derived from interannual variability imply. An alternative, complementary approach to assessing sensitivity to climate is to measure and analyze spatial variation in tropical ecosystems across climate gradients as a space-for-time substitution. Such biome-wide spatial variation in forest carbon stocks, fluxes, and persistence offers a distinctive and largely unexplored window into the potential equilibrium sensitivity of tropical forest vegetation to warming, because it captures real-world vegetation responses that allow for physiological and ecological adaptation (12).

To assess the long-term climate controls on tropical forest growth and carbon stocks, we assembled, measured, and analyzed a pantropical network of 590 permanent, long-term inventory plots (Fig. 1; see figs. S1 and S2 for ability to capture biome climate space). Our analysis combines standardized measurements from across South American, African, Asian, and Australian tropical lowland forests (273, 239, 61, and 17 plots, respectively). For every plot, we calculated aboveground carbon stocks

(19). Then, to better assess the dynamic controls on aboveground carbon stocks, we also computed the rate of carbon gained by the system (aboveground woody carbon production, calculated as tree growth plus newly recruited trees, in $\text{Mg C ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$) and the carbon residence time in living biomass (calculated as the ratio of living carbon stocks to carbon gains, in years).

We found considerable variation in biomass carbon among continents, with lower stocks per unit area in South America compared with the Paleotropics, even after accounting for environmental variables (Fig. 1). Continents with high carbon stocks had either large carbon gains (Asia) or long carbon residence times (Africa) (Fig. 1). Because of these differences among continents, which are potentially due to differences in evolutionary history (20), we analyzed the environmental drivers of spatial variation in carbon stocks while accounting for biogeographical differences. We fitted linear models with explanatory variables representing hypothesized mechanistic controls of climate on tropical forest carbon (table S1). We also included soil covariates, continent intercepts, and eigenvectors describing spatial relationships among plots to account for other sources of variation (21).

Forest carbon stocks were most strongly related to maximum temperature [Fig. 2; -5.9%

perature in the warmest month with a 95% confidence interval (CI) = -8.6 to -3.1% , which is equivalent to $-9.1 \text{ Mg C ha}^{-1} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$ for a stand with the mean carbon stock in our dataset, $154.6 \text{ Mg C ha}^{-1}$] followed by rainfall (Fig. 2; $+2.4\%$ per 100-mm increase in precipitation in the driest quarter with a 95% CI = 0.6 to 4.3% , equivalent to $0.04 \text{ Mg C ha}^{-1} \text{ mm}^{-1}$ for a stand with the mean carbon stocks in our dataset), with no statistically significant relationship with minimum temperature, wind speed, or cloud cover (Fig. 2). The effects of maximum temperature and precipitation are also evident in an analysis considering a wider suite of climate variables than those tied to hypothesized mechanisms (fig. S3) and in an additional independent pantropical dataset of 223 single-census plots (for which carbon gains and residence time cannot be assessed, fig. S4).

The negative effect of maximum temperature on aboveground carbon stocks mainly reflects reduced carbon gains with increasing temperature (-4.0% per 1°C , 95% CI = -6.2 to -1.8% ; Fig. 2), whereas the positive effect of precipitation emerges through longer carbon residence times with increasing precipitation in the driest quarter (3.3% per 100 mm, 95% CI = 0.9 to 5.7% ; Fig. 2). Carbon residence time also increased with the proportion of clay in the soil (Fig. 2). The additive effects of precipitation and temperature on carbon stocks

were modified by an interaction between them [change in Akaike information criterion (Δ AIC) = 15.4 comparing the full linear model with or without interaction], with temperature effects more negative when precipitation is low (fig. S6). The interaction was through shortening carbon residence time (Δ AIC = 11.9) rather than reducing carbon gains (model without interaction performed better, Δ AIC = 1.4).

An alternative analysis using decision-tree algorithms (22) also showed maximum temperature and precipitation to be important (fig. S7). This decision-tree approach, which can capture complex nonlinear relationships (22), indicated potential nonlinearity in the relationships between carbon stocks and both temperature and precipitation, with the positive effect of increasing dry-season precipitation on residence times strengthening when precipitation was low and the negative effect of maximum temperature intensifying at high temperatures (fig. S7).

We further investigated nonlinearity in the temperature relationship using breakpoint regression (supported over linear regression based on lower AIC, Δ AIC = 15.0), which revealed that above 32.2°C (95% CI = 31.7° to 32.6°C), the relationship between carbon stocks and maximum temperature became more negative (cooler than breakpoint, $-3.8\% \text{ } ^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$, and warmer than breakpoint, $-14.7\% \text{ } ^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$; Fig. 3). By partitioning carbon stocks into their production and persistence, we found that this nonlinearity reflects changes to carbon residence time (Δ AIC = 10.6) rather than gains (Δ AIC = 1.7). Overall, our results thus indicate two separate climate controls on carbon stocks: a negative linear effect of maximum temperature through reduced carbon gains and a

nonlinear negative effect of maximum temperature, ameliorated by high dry-season precipitation, through reduced carbon residence time.

The effect of temperature on carbon residence time only emerges when dry-season precipitation is low; this is consistent with theoretical expectations that negative effects of temperature on tree longevity are exacerbated by moisture limitation, rather than being independent of it and only due to increased respiration costs (23). This could occur through high vapor pressure deficits in hot and dry forests increasing mortality risk by causing hydraulic stress (23, 24) or carbon starvation due to limited photosynthesis as a result of stomatal closure (23). Notably, the temperature-precipitation interaction we found for aboveground stocks is in the opposite direction to temperature-precipitation interactions reported for soil carbon (25). In soils, moisture limitation suppresses the temperature response of heterotrophic respiration, whereas in trees, moisture limitation increases the mortality risks of high temperatures.

The negative effects of temperature on biomass carbon stocks and gains are primarily due to maximum rather than minimum temperature. This is consistent with high daytime temperatures reducing CO_2 assimilation rates, for example, owing to increased photorespiration or longer duration of stomatal closure (26, 27), whereas if negative temperature effects were to have increased respiration rates, there should be a stronger relationship with minimum (i.e., nighttime) temperature. Critically, minimum temperature is unrelated to aboveground carbon stocks both pantropically and in one continent, South America, where maximum and minimum temperature are largely de-

coupled [correlation coefficient (r) = 0.33; fig. S8]. Although carbon gains are negatively related to minimum temperature (fig. S9), this bivariate relationship is weaker than with maximum temperature and disappears once the effects of other variables are accounted for (Fig. 2). Finally, in Asia, the tropical region that experiences the warmest minimum temperatures of all, both carbon stocks and carbon gains are highest (Fig. 1 and fig. S11).

Overall, our results suggest that tropical forests have considerable potential to acclimate and adapt to the effects of nighttime minimum temperatures but are clearly sensitive to the effects of daytime maximum temperature. This is consistent with ecophysiological observations suggesting that the acclimation potential of respiration (15) is greater than that of photosynthesis (17). The temperature sensitivity revealed by our analysis is also considerably weaker than short-term sensitivities associated with interannual climate variation (7–9). For example, by relating short-term annual climate anomalies to responses in plots, the effect of a 1°C increase in temperature on carbon gains has been estimated as more than threefold our long-term, pantropical result (28). This stronger, long-term thermal resilience is likely due to a combination of individual acclimation and plasticity (15–17), differences in species' climate responses (29) leading to shifts in community composition due to changing demographic rates (12), and the immigration of species with higher performance at high temperatures (12).

Our pantropical analysis of the sensitivity to climate of aboveground forest carbon stocks, gains, and persistence shows that warming reduces carbon stocks and woody productivity. Using a reference carbon stock map (30) and applying our estimated temperature sensitivity (including nonlinearity) while holding other variables constant leads to an eventual biome-wide reduction of 14.1 Pg C in live biomass (including scaling to estimate carbon in roots) for a 1°C increase in mean daily maximum temperature in the warmest month (95% CI = 6.9 to 20.7 Pg). This compares with a large range of projected sensitivities in coupled climate carbon cycle models that report vegetation carbon (1 to 58 Pg $\text{C } ^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$), although these models have not been run to equilibrium (see supplementary methods).

Our results suggest that stabilizing global surface temperatures at 2°C above preindustrial levels will cause a potential long-term biome-wide loss of 35.3 Pg C (95% CI = 20.9 to 49.0 Pg, estimates with alternative baseline biomass maps of 24.0 to 28.4 Pg; fig. S12). The greatest long-term reductions in carbon stocks are projected in South America, where baseline temperatures and future warming are both highest (Fig. 4 and fig. S13). This warming would push 71% of the biome beyond

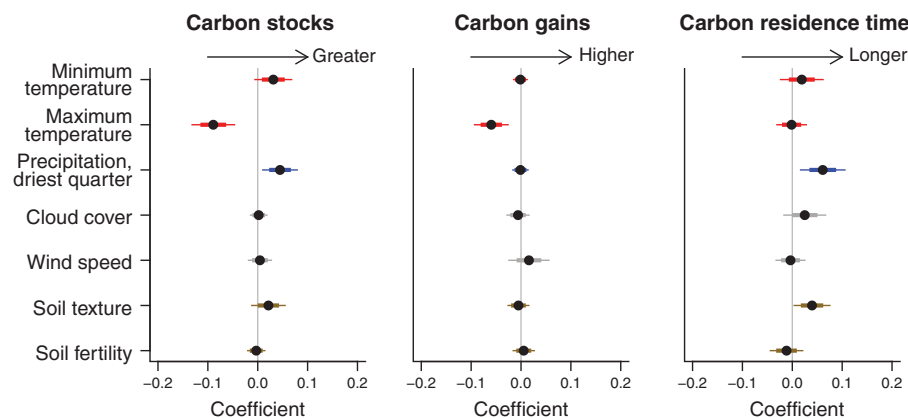


Fig. 2. Correlates of spatial variation in tropical forest carbon. Points show coefficients from model-averaged general linear models. Variables that did not occur in well-supported models are shrinkage-adjusted toward zero. Coefficients are standardized so that they represent change in the response variable for one standard deviation change in the explanatory variable. Error bars show standard errors (thick lines) and 95% confidence intervals (thin lines); error bar color is for illustrative purposes to reflect the category of variable. Soil texture is represented by the percentage clay and soil fertility by cation exchange capacity. The full models explained 44.1, 31.4, and 30.9% of spatial variation in carbon stocks, gains, and residence time, respectively. Coefficients are shown in table S2. Results are robust to using an alternative allometry to estimate tree biomass (fig. S5).

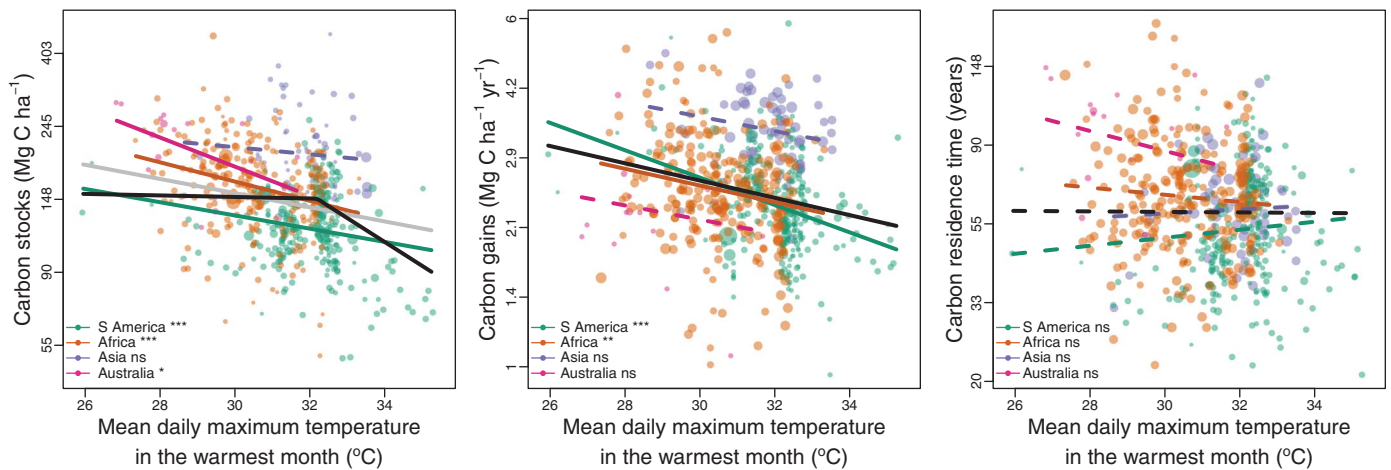


Fig. 3. Temperature effects on tropical forest carbon stocks, carbon gains, and carbon residence time. Black lines show the best pantropical relationships accounting for environmental covariates. The gray line additionally shows the linear pantropical relationship for carbon stocks. Colored lines show bivariate relationships within each continent, as identified in the legend. Statistically significant relationships are shown with solid lines; nonsignificant relationships are shown with dashed lines. The y axis is on a log scale. Symbol point size is proportional to weights used in model

fitting based on plot size and monitoring length; see supplementary materials and methods. For stocks and gains, linear and breakpoint pantropical relationships are all statistically significant ($P < 0.001$) as are better-sampled continents. For carbon residence time, relationships with temperature are nonsignificant (ns), but there is a statistically significant interaction between maximum temperature and precipitation in the driest quarter (fig. S6). Relationships with other variables are shown in figs. S8 to S10. *** $P < 0.001$; ** $P < 0.01$; * $P < 0.05$; ns, $P \geq 0.05$.

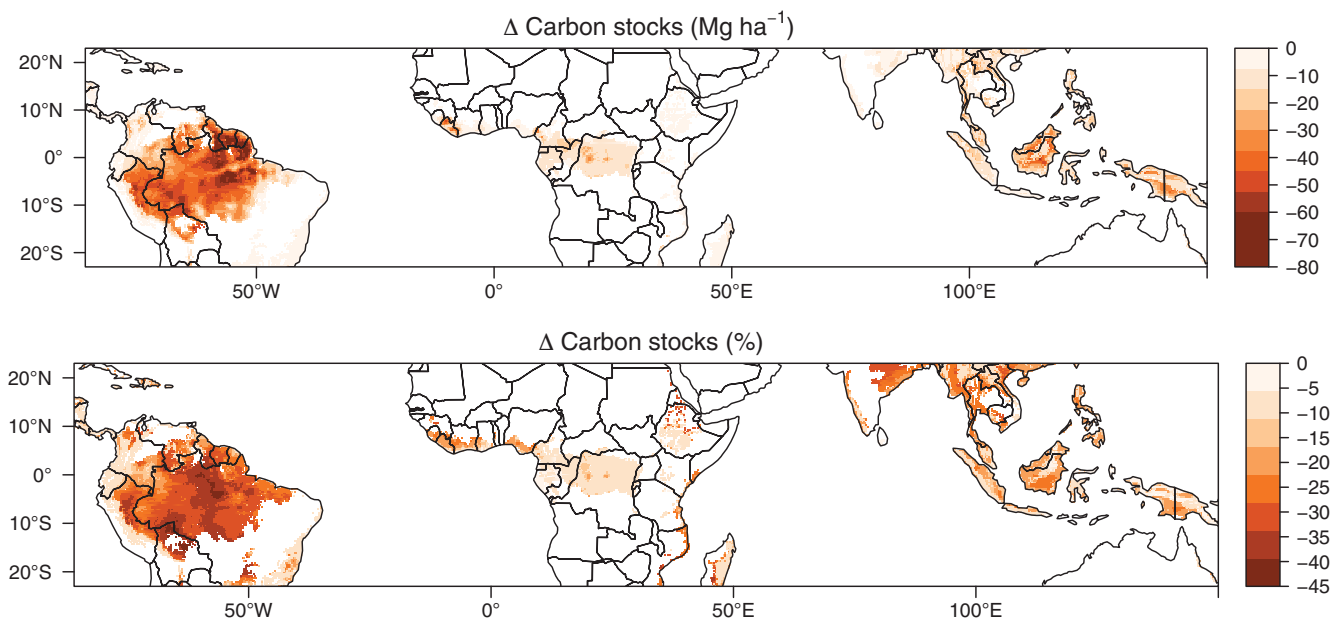


Fig. 4. Long-term change in carbon stocks due to temperature effects alone for global surface air temperature warming of 2°C. Maps show the predicted absolute and relative change in tropical forest carbon stocks. Parts of the biome become warmer than observed now in our dataset (fig. S14). See fig. S12 for predictions using alternative carbon reference maps. Predictions are based on temperature alone and do not include precipitation changes (for which future patterns of change are uncertain) or moderation by increased CO_2 . (See fig. S15 for analysis incorporating this.)

the thermal threshold—a maximum temperature of 32.2°C—where larger long-term reductions in biomass are expected (fig. S14). Of course, growth stimulation by carbon dioxide (31) will partially or wholly offset the effect of this temperature increase, depending on both the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide that limits warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels and the fertilization effect of this carbon dioxide on tropical trees. Although

CO_2 fertilization will reduce temperature-induced carbon losses from biomass across the tropics (table S3), our analysis indicates that CO_2 fertilization will not completely offset long-term temperature-induced carbon losses within Amazonia (fig. S15), consistent with a recent decadal-scale analysis of inventory data (32).

The long-term climate sensitivities derived from our pantropical field measurements

incorporate ecophysiological and ecological adaptation and so provide an estimate of the long-term, quasi-equilibrium response of tropical vegetation to climate. This thermal adaptation potential may not be fully realized in future responses because (i) the speed of temperature rises may exceed species' adaptive capabilities, (ii) habitat fragmentation may limit species' ability to track changes in the environment, and (iii) other human impacts

such as logging and fire can increase the vulnerability of forest carbon stocks to high temperatures. Although many tropical forests are under severe threat of conversion, our results show that, in the long run, tropical forests that remain intact can continue to store high levels of carbon under high temperatures. Achieving the biome-wide climate resilience potential that we document depends on limiting heating and on large-scale conservation and restoration to protect biodiversity and allow species to move.

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¹School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

²Department of Natural Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK. ³Department of Geography, University College London, London, UK. ⁴Mensuration Unit, Forestry Commission of Ghana, Kumasi, Ghana. ⁵Embrapa Roraima, Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA), Brasília, Brazil. ⁶Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia (INPA), Manaus, Brazil. ⁷Department of Ecosystem Science and Sustainability, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA. ⁸Department of Environment and Geography, University of York, York, UK. ⁹DR Congo Programme, Wildlife Conservation Society, Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. ¹⁰Centre de Formation et de Recherche en Conservation Forestière (CEFRECOP), Epulu, Democratic Republic of Congo. ¹¹Faculté de Gestion de Ressources Naturelles Renouvelables, Université de Kisangani, Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo. ¹²Service of Wood Biology, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. ¹³Department of Environment, Laboratory of Wood Technology (Woodlab), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium. ¹⁴UNEMAT - Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Nova Xavantina-MT, Brazil. ¹⁵Jardín Botánico de Missouri, Oxapampa, Peru. ¹⁶School of Life Sciences, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK. ¹⁷Plant Systematics and Ecology Laboratory, Higher Teachers' Training College, University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon. ¹⁸Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK. ¹⁹Environmental Change Institute, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ²⁰Faculty of Environmental Earth Science, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan. ²¹School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. ²²Instituto de Biodiversidade e Florestas, Universidade Federal do Oeste do Pará, Santarém - PA, Brazil. ²³Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Cáceres - MT, Brazil. ²⁴Escuela de Ciencias Agrícolas, Pecuarias y del Medio Ambiente, National Open University and Distancia, Bogotá, Colombia. ²⁵Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. ²⁶Projeto Dinâmica Biológica de Fragmentos Florestais, Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia, Manaus, Brazil. ²⁷Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, SP, Brazil. ²⁸National Institute for Space Research (INPE), São José dos Campos, SP, Brazil. ²⁹Museo de Historia Natural Noel Kempff Mercado, Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno, Santa Cruz, Bolivia. ³⁰Wageningen Environmental Research, Wageningen, Netherlands. ³¹Dirección de la Carrera de Biología, Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno, Santa Cruz, Bolivia. ³²Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA. ³³Programa de Ciencias del Agro y el Mar, Herbario Universitario, Guanare, Venezuela. ³⁴Departamento de Biología, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, Manaus, Brazil. ³⁵UK Centre of Ecology and Hydrology, Penicuik, UK. ³⁶International Center for Tropical Botany, Department of Biological Sciences, Florida International University, Miami,

FL, USA. ³⁷Centro de Energia Nuclear na Agricultura, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil. ³⁸Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK. ³⁹Centro Multidisciplinar, Universidade Federal do Acre, Cruzeiro do Sul, AC, Brazil. ⁴⁰Institute of Integrative Biology, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland. ⁴¹Department of Environment, Computational and Applied Vegetation Ecology (CAVELab), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium. ⁴²Priestley International Centre for Climate, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. ⁴³Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Panama, Panama. ⁴⁴Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, Millbrook, NY, USA. ⁴⁵The Landscapes and Livelihoods Group, Edinburgh, UK. ⁴⁶UR Forest and Societies, CIRAD, Montpellier, France. ⁴⁷Isotope Bioscience Laboratory (ISOFS), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium. ⁴⁸Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium. ⁴⁹UMR Silva, INRAE, Nancy, France. ⁵⁰Forest Ecology and Forest Management Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, Netherlands. ⁵¹CSIRO Land and Water, Australia. ⁵²Congo Programme, Wildlife Conservation Society, Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. ⁵³Woods Hole Research Center, Falmouth, MA, USA. ⁵⁴INRAE, UMR EcoFoG, CNRS, CIRAD, AgroParisTech, Université des Antilles, Université de Guyane, 97310 Kourou, French Guiana. ⁵⁵Programa de Pós-Graduação Ecologia e Manejo de Recursos Naturais, Universidade Federal do Acre, Rio Branco, AC, Brazil. ⁵⁶Herbario Alfredo Paredes, Universidad Central del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador. ⁵⁷Centro de Ciências Biológicas e da Natureza, Universidade Federal do Acre, Rio Branco, AC, Brazil. ⁵⁸Laboratoire Évolution et Diversité Biologique, UMR 5174 (CNRS/IRD/UPS), CNRS, Toulouse, France. ⁵⁹Rougier-Gabon, Libreville, Gabon. ⁶⁰Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London, UK. ⁶¹School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK. ⁶²Inventory and Monitoring Program, National Park Service, Fredericksburg, VA, USA. ⁶³Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA. ⁶⁴Proyecto Castaña, Made de Dios, Peru. ⁶⁵Universidad Nacional de San Agustín de Arequipa, Arequipa, Peru. ⁶⁶Instituto de Geociências, Faculdade de Meteorologia, Universidade Federal do Para, Belém, PA, Brazil. ⁶⁷Faculty of Science, Department of Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Palacký University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czech Republic. ⁶⁸Center for Tropical Forest Science, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Panama, Panama. ⁶⁹Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Universidad Nacional de la Amazonía Peruana, Iquitos, Peru. ⁷⁰Embrapa Genetic Resources and Biotechnology, Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA), Brasília, Brazil. ⁷¹Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonia Peruana, Iquitos, Peru. ⁷²Cirad, UMR EcoFoG (AgroParisTech, CNRS, INRAE, Université des Antilles, Université de Guyane), Kourou, French Guiana. ⁷³Department of Anthropology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. ⁷⁴Forest Resources Management, Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium. ⁷⁵AMAP, Université de Montpellier, IRD, CNRS, CIRAD, INRAE, Montpellier, France. ⁷⁶Socioecosistemas y Cambio Climático, Fundación con Vida, Medellín, Colombia. ⁷⁷School of Forestry, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, China. ⁷⁸Institute of Biological Sciences, Universidade Federal do Pará, Belém, PA, Brazil. ⁷⁹National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA. ⁸⁰School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK. ⁸¹School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK. ⁸²Embrapa Amazônia Oriental, Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA), Brasília, Brazil. ⁸³Universidad Nacional Jorge Basadre de Grohmann (UNJBG), Tacna, Peru. ⁸⁴Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (FORIG), Kumasi, Ghana. ⁸⁵Smithsonian Institution Forest Global Earth Observatory (ForestGEO), Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Washington, DC, USA. ⁸⁶School of Biology, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. ⁸⁷128 Busbridge Lane, Godalming, Surrey, UK. ⁸⁸Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK. ⁸⁹Lukuru Wildlife Research Foundation, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. ⁹⁰Division of Vertebrate Zoology, Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, CT, USA. ⁹¹Institute of Botany, Czech Academy of Sciences, Brno, Czech Republic. ⁹²Department of Botany, Palacký University in Olomouc, Olomouc, Czech Republic. ⁹³CIRAD, UPR Forêts et Sociétés, Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. ⁹⁴Institut National Polytechnique Félix Houphouët-Boigny, INP-HB,

- Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. ⁹⁵Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (IVIC), Caracas, Venezuela. ⁹⁶Département Hommes, Natures, Sociétés, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturel, Paris, France. ⁹⁷Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cusco, Cusco, Peru. ⁹⁸Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK. ⁹⁹Instituto IMANI, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Leticia, Colombia. ¹⁰⁰Living with Lakes Centre, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Canada. ¹⁰¹Department of Plant Sciences, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. ¹⁰²Faculty of Science, Department of Botany and Plant Physiology, University of Buea, Buea, Cameroon. ¹⁰³PELD, Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Nova Xavantina-MT, Brazil. ¹⁰⁴Tropical Peat Research Institute, Malaysian Palm Oil Board, Selangor, Malaysia. ¹⁰⁵Agteca, Santa Cruz, Bolivia. ¹⁰⁶Graduate School of Agriculture, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan. ¹⁰⁷Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Richmond, London, UK. ¹⁰⁸Department of Earth Sciences, University of Hong Kong, Pok Ful Lam, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China. ¹⁰⁹Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science (TESS) and College of Marine and Environmental Sciences, James Cook University, Douglas, QLD, Australia. ¹¹⁰Uganda Programme, Wildlife Conservation Society, Kampala, Uganda. ¹¹¹Environmental Science and Policy, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA. ¹¹²Botany Department, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ¹¹³Coordenação da Biodiversidade, Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia (INPA), Manaus, Brazil. ¹¹⁴cE3c – Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes / Azorean Biodiversity Group, Universidade dos Açores, Angra do Heroísmo, Azores, Portugal. ¹¹⁵LIBRe – Laboratory for Integrative Biodiversity Research, Finnish Museum of Natural History, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. ¹¹⁶Laboratório de Biogeoquímica Ambiental Wolfgang C. Pfeiffer, Universidade Federal de Rondônia, Porto Velho - RO, Brazil. ¹¹⁷Faculdade de Ciências Agrárias, Biológicas e Sociais Aplicadas, Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Nova Xavantina-MT, Brazil. ¹¹⁸Tropical Forests and People Research Centre, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, QLD, Australia. ¹¹⁹Fleming Land Ltd., North Yorkshire, UK. ¹²⁰UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Wallingford, UK. ¹²¹School of International Tropical Forestry, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. ¹²²Escuela de Ciencias Forestales, Unidad Académica del Trópico, Universidad Mayor de San Simón, Sacta, Bolivia. ¹²³Faculty of Science, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei. ¹²⁴Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux, Libreville, Gabon. ¹²⁵Ministère de la Forêt, de la Mer, de l'Environnement, Chargé du Plan Climat, Libreville, Gabon. ¹²⁶Institute of Biology, University of Campinas, Campinas, SP, Brazil. ¹²⁷Facultad de Ingeniería Ambiental, Universidad Estatal Amazónica, Puyo, Pastaza, Ecuador. ¹²⁸Forest Research Centre, Sabah Forestry Department, Sepilok, Malaysia. ¹²⁹Carrera de Ingeniería Forestal, Universidad Técnica del Norte, Ibarra, Ecuador. ¹³⁰Grupo de Ecosistemas Tropicales y Cambio Global, Universidad Regional Amazónica Ikiam, Tena, Ecuador. ¹³¹Public Communications and Outreach Group, Parks and Recreation Division, Oakland Park, FL, USA. ¹³²Keller Science Action Center, Field Museum, Chicago, IL, USA. ¹³³Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS), Paramaribo, Suriname. ¹³⁴Instituto de Ciencias Naturales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Leticia, Colombia. ¹³⁵Department of Biology, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA. ¹³⁶Institute of Research for Forestry Development (INDEFOR), Universidad de los Andes, Mérida, Venezuela. ¹³⁷Bureau Waardenburg, Culemborg, Netherlands. ¹³⁸Socioecosistemas y Cambio Climático, Fundación Con Vida, Medellín, Colombia. ¹³⁹Centro de Conservación, Investigación y Manejo de Áreas Naturales, CIMA Cordillera Azul, Lima, Peru. ¹⁴⁰Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development, Georgetown, Guyana. ¹⁴¹Carboforexpert, Geneva, Switzerland. ¹⁴²Universidade Federal Rural da Amazônia/CAPES, Belém, PA, Brazil. ¹⁴³Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, Belém, PA, Brazil. ¹⁴⁴Faculty of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resource Management, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway. ¹⁴⁵Instituto Federal do Acre, Rio Branco, AC, Brazil. ¹⁴⁶Universidad de San Antonio Abad del Cusco, Cusco, Peru. ¹⁴⁷Guyana Forestry Commission, Georgetown, Guyana. ¹⁴⁸Departamento de Biogeografía y Cambio Global, Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (MNCN-CSIC), Madrid, Spain. ¹⁴⁹Sustainable Landscapes and Food Systems, Center for International Forestry Research, Bogor, Indonesia. ¹⁵⁰Faculty of Forestry, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. ¹⁵¹Department of Forest Botany, Dendrology and Geobiocoenology, Mendel University in Brno, Brno, Czech Republic. ¹⁵²Department of Plant and Soil Science, School of Biological Sciences, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK. ¹⁵³Institute for Conservation Research, San Diego Zoo, San Diego, CA, USA. ¹⁵⁴Department of Plant Biology, Faculty of Sciences, University of Yaounde 1, Yaoundé, Cameroon. ¹⁵⁵Bioversity International, Yaoundé, Cameroon. ¹⁵⁶UK Research and Innovation, Innovate UK, London, UK. ¹⁵⁷Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore. ¹⁵⁸Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, Netherlands. ¹⁵⁹Systems Ecology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands. ¹⁶⁰Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada. ¹⁶¹Universidad de los Andes, Merida, Colombia. ¹⁶²Wildlife Conservation Society, New York, NY, USA. ¹⁶³Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA. ¹⁶⁴School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK. ¹⁶⁵Van der Hout Forestry Consulting, Rotterdam, Netherlands. ¹⁶⁶Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, Velp, Netherlands. ¹⁶⁷Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands. ¹⁶⁸Data for Sustainability, Axel, Netherlands. ¹⁶⁹School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, OR, USA. ¹⁷⁰Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado, La Paz, Bolivia. ¹⁷¹Universidad Autónoma del Beni José Ballivián, Riberalta, Bolivia. ¹⁷²School of Earth Sciences and Environmental Sustainability, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA. ¹⁷³Institut de Recherche en Ecologie Tropicale, Libreville, Gabon. ¹⁷⁴School of Natural Sciences, University of Bangor, Bangor, UK. ¹⁷⁵University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia. ¹⁷⁶Forest Management, Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS), Paramaribo, Suriname. ¹⁷⁷Department of Geography and The Environment, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. ¹⁷⁸Tropenbos International, Wageningen, Netherlands.
- †Present address: College of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Cumbayá, Ecuador.
‡Present address: Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Long-term thermal sensitivity of Earth's tropical forests

Martin J. P. Sullivan, Simon L. Lewis, Kofi Affum-Baffoe, Carolina Castilho, Flávia Costa, Aida Cuni Sanchez, Corneille E. N. Ewango, Wannes Hubau, Beatriz Marimon, Abel Monteagudo-Mendoza, Lan Qie, Bonaventure Sonké, Rodolfo Vasquez Martinez, Timothy R. Baker, Roel J. W. Brienen, Ted R. Feldpausch, David Galbraith, Manuel Gloor, Yadvinder Malhi, Shin-Ichiro Aiba, Miguel N. Alexiades, Everton C. Almeida, Edmar Almeida de Oliveira, Esteban Álvarez Dávila, Patricia Alvarez Loayza, Ana Andrade, Simone Aparecida Vieira, Luiz E. O. C. Aragão, Alejandro Araujo-Murakami, Eric J. M. M. Arets, Luzmila Arroyo, Peter Ashton, Gerardo Aymard C., Fabrício B. Baccaro, Lindsay F. Banin, Christopher Baraloto, Plínio Barbosa Camargo, Jos Barlow, Jorcely Barroso, Jean-François Bastin, Sarah A. Batterman, Hans Beeckman, Serge K. Begne, Amy C. Bennett, Erika Berenguer, Nicholas Berry, Lilian Blanc, Pascal Boeckx, Jan Bogaert, Damien Bonal, Frans Bongers, Matt Bradford, Francis Q. Brearley, Terry Brncic, Foster Brown, Benoit Burbank, José Luis Camargo, Wendeson Castro, Carlos Céron, Sabina Cerruto Ribeiro, Victor Chama Moscoso, Jérôme Chave, Eric Chezeaux, Connie J. Clark, Fernanda Coelho de Souza, Murray Collins, James A. Comiskey, Fernando Cornejo Valverde, Massiel Corrales Medina, Lola da Costa, Martin Dancák, Greta C. Dargie, Stuart Davies, Nallaret Davila Cardozo, Thales de Haulleville, Marcelo Brilhante de Medeiros, Jhon del Aguila Pasquel, Géraldine Derroire, Anthony Di Fiore, Jean-Louis Doucet, Aurélie Dourdain, Vincent Droissant, Luisa Fernanda Duque, Romeo Ekoungoulou, Fernando Elias, Terry Erwin, Adriane Esquivel-Muelbert, Sophie Fauset, Joice Ferreira, Gerardo Flores Llampazo, Ernest Foli, Andrew Ford, Martin Gilpin, Jefferson S. Hall, Keith C. Hamer, Alan C. Hamilton, David J. Harris, Terese B. Hart, Radim Hédl, Bruno Hérault, Rafael Herrera, Niro Higuchi, Annette Hladik, Eurídice Honorio Coronado, Isau Huamantupa-Chuquimaco, Walter Huaraca Huasco, Kathryn J. Jeffery, Eliana Jimenez-Rojas, Michelle Kalamandeen, Marie Noël Kamdem Djuikouo, Elizabeth Kearsley, Ricardo Keichi Umetsu, Lip Khoon Kho, Timothy Killeen, Kanehiro Kitayama, Bente Klitgaard, Alexander Koch, Nicolas Labrière, William Laurance, Susan Laurance, Miguel E. Leal, Aurora Levesley, Adriano J. N. Lima, Janvier Lisingo, Aline P. Lopes, Gabriela Lopez-Gonzalez, Tom Lovejoy, Jon C. Lovett, Richard Lowe, William E. Magnusson, Jagoba Malumbres-Olarte, Ângelo Gilberto Manzatto, Ben Hur Marimon Jr., Andrew R. Marshall, Toby Matthews, Simone Matias de Almeida Reis, Colin Maycock, Karina Melgaço, Casimiro Mendoza, Faizah Metali, Vianet Mihindou, William Milliken, Edward T. A. Mitchard, Paulo S. Morandi, Hannah L. Mossman, Laszlo Nagy, Henrique Nascimento, David Neill, Reuben Nilus, Percy Núñez Vargas, Walter Palacios, Nadir Pallqui Camacho, Julie Peacock, Colin Pendry, Maria Cristina Peñuela Mora, Georgia C. Pickavance, John Pipoly, Nigel Pitman, Maureen Playfair, Lourens Poorter, John R. Poulsen, Axel Dalberg Poulsen, Richard Preziosi, Adriana Prieto, Richard B. Primack, Hirma Ramírez-Angulo, Jan Reitsma, Maxime Réjou-Méchain, Zorayda Restrepo Correa, Thaianne Rodrigues de Sousa, Lily Rodriguez Bayona, Anand Roopsind, Agustín Rudas, Ervan Rutishauser, Kamariah Abu Salim, Rafael P. Salomão, Juliana Schiatti, Douglas Sheil, Richarly C. Silva, Javier Silva Espejo, Camila Silva Valeria, Marcos Silveira, Murielle Simo-Droissart, Marcelo Fragomeni Simon, James Singh, Yahn Carlos Soto Shareva, Clement Stahl, Juliana Stropp, Rahayu Sukri, Terry Sunderland, Martin Svátek, Michael D. Swaine, Varun Swamy, Hermann Taedoumg, Joey Talbot, James Taplin, David Taylor, Hans ter Steege, John Terborgh, Raquel Thomas, Sean C. Thomas, Armando Torres-Lezama, Peter Umunay, Luis Valenzuela Gamarra, Geertje van der Heijden, Peter van der Hout, Peter van der Meer, Mark van Nieuwstadt, Hans Verbeeck, Ronald Vernimmen, Alberto Vicentini, Ima Célia Guimarães Vieira, Emilio Vilanova Torre, Jason Vleminckx, Vincent Vos, Ophelia Wang, Lee J. T. White, Simon Willcock, John T. Woods, Virginia Wortel, Kenneth Young, Roderick Zagt, Lise Zemagho, Pieter A. Zuidema, Joeri A. Zwarts and Oliver L. Phillips

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Thermal sensitivity of tropical trees

A key uncertainty in climate change models is the thermal sensitivity of tropical forests and how this value might influence carbon fluxes. Sullivan *et al.* measured carbon stocks and fluxes in permanent forest plots distributed globally. This synthesis of plot networks across climatic and biogeographic gradients shows that forest thermal sensitivity is dominated by high daytime temperatures. This extreme condition depresses growth rates and shortens the time that carbon resides in the ecosystem by killing trees under hot, dry conditions. The effect of temperature is worse above 32°C, and a greater magnitude of climate change thus risks greater loss of tropical forest carbon stocks. Nevertheless, forest carbon stocks are likely to remain higher under moderate climate change if they are protected from direct impacts such as clearance, logging, or fires.

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