

## **Final response of the authors to the discussion comments**

### **1. bgd-11-C6532-2014 1<sup>st</sup> Referee**

- Just check the typing of Altai or Altay:

We have changed the word to Altai everywhere in the manuscript

### **2. bgd-11-C9231-2015 3<sup>rd</sup> Referee**

- The primary information that is lacking in this manuscript is methodological detail on the satellite classification process and reporting on the associated error. Since the actual forest area, as determined by satellite classification, is at the root of the entire analysis, the omission of error reporting is an oversight, since single date image classification is impossible without significant error.

Answer: For checking the accuracy of the classification, we have performed a validation process by digitizing polygons of forest and none-forest area. These areas were identified by the air photos provided as basemaps “Imagery” and “Bing”. Although the basemaps served for both the classification and validation, we of course used different polygons at different places. We have added a confusion matrix as table 1 to the manuscript and mentioned the effect of the producer’s accuracy in the text.

- How were the training data collected?

Answer: The training area was manually digitized on the base of air photos, provided by ESRI’s basemaps “Imagery” and “Bing”. A 2<sup>nd</sup> control was done by checking the area in “google earth” and at least the polygons had to fit well to the Landsat Image.

- Were the classes simply forest v. non-forest?

Answer: Yes

- What were the errors of omission and commission?

Answer: For the determination of forest sites the error of omission is 11% and the error of commission is 0,5%. Around 6% of the forest area served for accuracy control. Further details are shown in the confusion matrix (new table 1).

- What are the implications of these errors on the determination of forest distribution patterns/area?

Answer: There can be an underestimation of forest area of up to 11%. This error depends on the spatial resolution of 30 x 30 m of the Landsat data and occurs predominately at the borders of the forest patches, where the classification depends on the quantity and density of trees in one pixel.

For answering the questions described above, we have changed the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph in the chapter 3 Methods as followed:

“The determination of the AFA in the investigation area was achieved based on a supervised maximum likelihood classification from multispectral satellite images (visible light and infrared channels) of Landsat 7/ETM+ of the 13th September 2000 (Fig. 3). Aerial photos provided as imagery and Bing basemaps by ESRI served for the detection of forest area reference sites for training and validation of the classifier. Two classes were built and manually digitised for the classification and validation process. One class represents the forest areas and the other class includes different kinds of no forest landscape. Depending on the ground resolution of 30 x 30 m one pixel covers the occurrence of several individual trees so that small clearings and aisles could have been disregarded. The confusion matrix in Table 1

shows a producer's accuracy of 89% for forest areas, where ~6% of the forest area were used for validation. This possible underestimation of the forest area of up to 11% mainly occurs at the borders of closed forest, where the classification depends on the quantity of trees inside of one Landsat pixel."

- We have completely adapted the proposed changes concerning cosmetic correction in the following comments of the referee. Therefore, we here give only detailed statements, where further explanation is necessary.

- Line 13: Unclear what is meant by "takes the same course."

Changed to: While the actual lower forest limit increases from 1,600 m asl (above sea level) in the northwest to 2,600 m asl in the southeast, the upper forest limit rises in the same direction from 1,800 m asl to 2,900 m asl.

- Lines 19-21: I agree that generally speaking the AFA is a minimum condition of the PFA, but there are notable exceptions to this rule, when the AFA is in fact greater than the PFA, due to forest management, forest encroachment, afforestation, etc.

Changed to: This often makes it difficult to differentiate between natural factors and human impact on the distribution of timbered areas. In general, human activity has reduced the forest area since prehistorical times so that the actual forest area (AFA) pattern mostly represent the minimum of the potential environmental distribution range. However, due to the possibility of anthropogenic forest management and afforestation during the last centuries forests may occur at sites less favourable for natural tree growth.

- Lines 8-9: Unclear the meaning of this sentence. Perhaps a word is missing? What is meant by "a transfer?"

Changed to: However, to identify potential forest sites based on those definitions, the geologic and soil properties have to be comparable.

- Figure 1: Why was this detailed study area selected? Please provide some context for this study area selection?

Text added: This closed mountain system was chosen for investigation because it provides excellent topographic preconditions to clearly indicate the lower and upper boundaries of forest distribution between the middle and central part of Asia. It is filling a gap of information about forest lines between regions of the Tien Shan mountains in the south and east, and the Altai mountains in the north (Fickert, 1998; Dai et al., 2013; Klinge et al., 2003).

- Line 16: Unclear what a "planation surface" is. Perhaps there is a more common term for this?

Answer: In geomorphology "planation surface" is a common known feature. However, in this study it is necessary to know that there is a flat surface building up the highest portions of the mountains. Therefore we changed the sentence as followed:

The highest peak is the Nebesnaja reaching 3,652 m asl. A high mountain plateau in ~3,400 m asl is dropping southward, while the north facing slopes are cut steeply by Pleistocene cirques. Today, no glaciation but permafrost occurs in the uppermost areas.

- Line 11: Change "Mai" to "May"; Unclear what is meant by "subordinate" in September. Does this mean that the precipitation minima occurs in Sept?

Changed to: The precipitation maxima occur in May, June, and with minor secondary maximum in September.

1 - How was the accuracy assessment conducted? Was there a formal sampling  
2 protocol/accuracy assessment of the Landsat classification based on imagery? If so, what were  
3 the results?

4 Answer: This question was already answered in detail above. We added a table 1 with a  
5 confusion matrix and described the accuracy assessment in the manuscript.

6 - Lines 8-9: If 99% of the frequency distribution of the elevation parameter was used to  
7 delineate PFA, why does Figure 4a (the top panel with elevation) not depict the light versus  
8 dark green?

9 Answer: The 1% which is left is too small and cannot be shown clearly in the diagram.  
10 To make this point clearer, we have changed the caption of figure 4 as followed:

11 Figure 4: Frequency distribution of relief parameters in relation to actual forest area  
12 AFA (for the diagrams aspect, slope gradient, and solar radiation input: dark green = standard  
13 deviation 95%, light green = marginal value range excluded from PFA delineation) and total  
14 study area (TSA, brown).

15 - Results: Page 14678: Lines 12-14: I'm not sure that I follow the logic that the shallow left  
16 slope of the elevation parameter distribution is an indication of human impact. Wouldn't it be  
17 more plausible to suggest that a steep drop on the left side of this distribution would reflect  
18 something other than a biophysical driver?

19 Answer: Human impact on forest reduction is less controlled by the parameter  
20 "elevation", it is more controlled by logistic approach of the nomads and woodcutters. At less  
21 accessible land like steep sloped places forest may occur while there is no potential forest  
22 around riverside and main paths of the nomads along the valleys. These are places which are  
23 subject to more grazing pressure by the livestock. In contrast, climate control is working in a  
24 more regional scale. Therefore this parameter, which has a strong influence on growth of  
25 large trees, is especially indictable by the sharp dependence on elevation limits. For a better  
26 explanation of this idea we added the following sentences to the results of the manuscript:

27 Nomads and woodcutters approach to forest transformation by logistic problems of  
28 access in the relief, which reduces the pure signal of elevation in the data. Climate controls  
29 environmental conditions in a coarser regional scale and is creating sharper elevational  
30 boundaries. The curve of the parameter elevation has a shallow left and a steep right slope,  
31 which indicates human impact on forest distribution at the lower boundary. The lower forest  
32 lines start at 1,575 m asl and the upper forest lines exceed 2,900 m asl so that the maximal  
33 vertical distance of the forest limits for the entire investigation area is 1,325 m (Table 2).

34 - Line 25: Not clear what is meant by the term "luv-side". Please clarify.

35 Changed to: This is explaining the steep gradient of the upper forest line at the windward  
36 side of the mountain ridges.

37 - Page 14682: Lines 16-17: The wording of this sentence implies that human impacts  
38 influence the elevation parameter. Clearly, this is not the case. Suggest rewording the  
39 sentence to imply that human impacts are most easily recognized by evaluation of the  
40 elevation parameter, or something along those lines.

41 Answer: You are right, in that way the sentence is misleading. We have changed it as  
42 followed:

43 Human impact is recognized by the evaluation of the parameter elevation.  
44

### 3. Additional changes of the manuscript:

- A new table “confusion matrix” is inserted as no. 1 into the manuscript. There the numbers of the following change +1.

**Table 1:** Confusion matrix showing the accuracy report of the supervised maximum likelihood classification (area in ha), **Table 2:** Statistical values of the relief parameters related to the forest distribution., **Table 3:** Comparison between of the modelled area values of single relief parameter classes and of the combination of all four relief parameters. (AFA = Actual forest area, PFA = Potential forest area)

- One literature source was added: Gerlitz et al 2014.

# Modelling forest lines and forest distribution patterns with remote sensing data in a mountainous region of semi-arid Central Asia.

Michael Klinge<sup>1)</sup>, Jürgen Böhner<sup>2)</sup>, Stefan ~~Erasm~~<sup>3)</sup>Erasm<sup>1))</sup>

<sup>1)</sup>Institute of Geography, University of Göttingen, Goldschmidtstr. 5, D-37077 Göttingen, Germany, [mklingle1@gwdg.de](mailto:mklingle1@gwdg.de)

<sup>2)</sup>Institute of Geography, University of Hamburg, Bundesstraße 55, D-20146 Hamburg, Germany, [boehner@geowiss.uni-hamburg.de](mailto:boehner@geowiss.uni-hamburg.de)

Correspondence to: M. Klinge ([mklingle1@gwdg.de](mailto:mklingle1@gwdg.de))

## Abstract

Satellite images and digital elevation models provide an excellent database to analyse forest distribution patterns and forest limits in the mountain regions of semi-arid Central Asia at the regional scale. For the investigation area in the northern Tien Shan a strong relations~~hip~~ between forest distribution and climate conditions could be found. Additionally areas of potential human impact on forested areas are identified at lower elevations near the mountain border based on an analysis of the differences of climatic preconditions and present occurrence of forest stands.

The distribution of spruce (*Picea schrenkiana*) forests is hydrologically limited by a minimum annual precipitation of 250 mm and thermally by a minimum monthly mean temperature of 5 °C during the growing season. While the actual lower forest limit increases from 1,600 m asl (above sea level) in the northwest to 2,600 m asl in the southeast, the upper forest limit ~~takes the same course rises in the same~~ direction from 1,800 m asl to 2,900 m asl. In accordance with the main wind directions, the steepest gradient of both forest lines and the greatest local vertical extent of the forest belt of 500 to 600 m and maximum 900 m occur at the northern and western mountain fronts.

The forests in the investigation area are strongly restricted to north facing-slopes, which is a common feature in semi-arid Central Asia. Based on the presumption that variations in local climate conditions are a function of topography, the potential forest extent was analysed with regard to the parameters slope, aspect, solar radiation input and elevation. All four parameters showed a strong relationship to forest distribution, yielding a total potential forest area that is 3.5 times larger than the present forest remains of 502 km<sup>2</sup>.

## 1 Introduction

The latitudinal and elevational variation of distinct plant associations and geomorphologic landscape units has been used for a long-time to deduce regional environmental and climatic conditions in geosciences (e.g. Humboldt, 1845-1862; Troll, 1973a, b; Hövermann, 1985). Image classification and GIS-modelling of remote sensing data are standard methods to map landscape elements and their distribution in remote areas, which are poorly accessible due to logistic or political difficulties. Satellite analysis based on automated image processing offers a quick and beneficial alternative to field mapping or manual digitalisation from aerial image (Mayer and Bussemer, 2001). While satellite images like Landsat-data provide excellent information to delineate the spatial forest distribution (Hansen et al., 2013), SRTM- (Shuttle Radar Topography Mission) data can be used to examine relief dependent distribution patterns with a digital terrain model (DTM). The combination of these two data sets enables high resolution mapping at regional to local scale.

The geoecologic and climatic environmental settings control the natural distribution of forest stands (Holtmeier, 2000; Körner, 2012; Miehe et al., 2003). In addition, the actual situation can strongly be influenced by human activities like logging, fire clearing and animal grazing, which decreases the potential natural forest area (PFA). This often makes it difficult to differentiate between natural factors and human impact on the distribution of timbered areas. In general, human activity has reduced the forest area since prehistorically times so that the actual forest area (AFA) pattern mostly represents the minimum of the potential environmental distribution range. However, due to the possibility of anthropogenic forest management and afforestation during the last centuries forests may occur at placesites which are less favourable for natural tree growth.

Due to the highly continental, cold and semi-arid climate in ~~semi-arid~~ Central Asia, tree growth is mostly determined ~~restricted to by~~ topography parameters. Forest stands beyond groundwater favoured sites are predominantly limited to north-facing slopes in the mountains with an upper and lower forest limit (Dulamsuren et al., 2014; Hilbig, 1995; Klinge et al., 2003; Treter, 1996, 2000).

Different definitions have been used for tree- and forest lines (Körner, 2012; Körner and Paulsen, 2004). The treeline ecotone covers three main boundary lines at the upper limit of forest distribution ~~limit~~. The highest is the tree species line, where tree seedlings occur but no adult trees. The treeline is the maximum elevation where patches of forest can exist at topographic favoured places. In our investigation we refer to the forest line, which is defined as the limit of closed forest at the upper (timberline) and lower boundary of forest distribution.

For the region of northern Tien Shan in China, Dai et al. (2013) state an upper forest line beginning with 2,900 m asl in the west, which decreases eastward down to 2,500 m asl and then rises again to 2,900 m asl in the east. In the north-western Tien Shan Fickert (1998) reports an upper forest line of 2,900 and 2,850 m asl and a lower forest line of 2,400 m and 2,500 m asl, respectively for the Sailijski-Alatau and Kungeij-Alatau. In the Altai Mountains Klinge et al. (2003) found upper forest

lines increasing eastward from 1,800 m asl to 2,600 m asl and lower forest lines concurrently increasing from 1,000 m asl to 2,200 m asl while the vertical extension of the forest belt varies between 400 and 1,200 m.

Tree growth in high mountains is generally restricted by temperature conditions (Haase et al., 1964; Holtmeier, 2000; Jobbagy and Jackson, 2000; Körner, 2012). The upper forest line is a thermally determined distribution boundary that is generally defined by the mean July temperature (Walter and Breckle, 1994) or the warmest month isotherm of 10 °C. According to Körner (2012) and Körner and Paulsen (2004) this parameter is not suitable in all parts of the world. This can be seen in Fickert (1998), who shows that the upper forest line in the northern Tien Shan coincides well with the 10 °C July-isotherm, while further south in NW-Himalaya and NW-Karakorum it is connected to the July-isotherms of 16 °C and 12 °C, respectively. For the eastern side of the northern Tien Shan Dai et al. (2013) report a mean temperature of the warmest month of 10.5 °C at the mean position of the alpine forest line. Also the mean annual air temperature (MAAT) is weakly correlated to the forest line because it includes temperatures from the non-growing season which play a minor role for tree growth (Jobbagy and Jackson, 2000; Körner, 2012).

A suitable way to describe the temperature environment at the upper forest line is a minimum threshold value for the mean air temperature during the growing season which is defined as the period of monthly mean temperatures above 5 °C (Dai et al., 2013; Körner, 2012; Körner and Paulsen, 2004). Based on the strong correlation between soil and air temperatures, Körner and Paulsen (2004) state a global range of 5.5 to 7.5 °C for minimum mean air temperature during the growing season. Paulsen and Körner (2014) developed a climate-based model for treeline prediction by defining the growing season as days with mean temperature above 0.9 °C and a mean temperature of more than 6.4 °C during that time. For the upper forest line between 2,750 and 2,920 m asl in the Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan Körner (2012) found a mean temperature of 6.5 °C during the 155 days of the growing season (late April until late September).

The forest expansion into dry regions is controlled by precipitation and soil water supply (Dulamsuren et al., 2010, 2014; Kastner, 2000; Klinge et al., 2003). Between the more humid mountain regions and the arid basins of Central Asia a lower limit of forest distribution occurs which is termed the lower forest line. According to Walter and Breckle (1994) this forest distribution boundary coincides with an annual precipitation of at least 300 mm, while Holdridge (1947) proposes 250 mm and Miehe et al. (2003) found *Juniperus* trees in southern Tibet growing in regions with annual precipitation between 200 and 250 mm. Dulamsuren et al. (2010) state an annual precipitation between 230 and 400 mm at lower elevations for larch forests in northern and central Mongolia. In western Mongolia Dulamsuren et al. (2014) found coniferous forests existing at annual precipitation near 120 mm, which are explained by soil water benefits due to the occurrence of permafrost ice in the soil.

1 Everywhere in mountainous areas of the semi-arid Inner Asian forest-steppe coniferous forests are  
2 restricted to north facing slopes. While the north-facing slopes are dominated by larch trees (*Larix*  
3 *sibirica*) in Mongolia, spruce trees (*Picea schrenkiana*) occur in the Tien Shan Mountains (Dai et al.,  
4 2013; Fickert, 1998; Liu et al., 2013; Wang 2005, 2006). Thus the restriction of conifers to north-  
5 facing slopes in the Inner Asian forest-steppe is not bound to certain tree species but rather to the  
6 environmental settings.

7 The semi-arid climate conditions generate an overall deficiency of moisture which considerably  
8 influences the elevational forest distribution and may even control the upper forest limit (Liang et al.,  
9 2012; Liu et al., 2013; Miehe et al., 2008). A specific relief position is combined with particular  
10 climate conditions like temperature, precipitation, evaporation and insulation, which are similar at  
11 comparable sites in the surroundings. For this reason the relief parameters elevation, aspect, slope  
12 angle and solar radiation input can be used to define topoclimatic conditions in mountain regions  
13 (Miehe et al., 2003). However, ~~a transfer of to~~ identify potential forest sites based on those definitions,  
14 the geologic and soil properties have to be comparable.

15 The impact of human activity on vegetation and especially on the forest since prehistorically times is a  
16 permanent question that needs to be proofed to clarify the environmental significance of any actual  
17 forest line (Miehe and Miehe, 2000). Dulamsuren et al. (2014) found a considerable anthropo-  
18 zoogenic influence on the actual lower forest line in the Mongolian Altai. For northern Mongolia  
19 Schlütz et al. (2008) showed that the present vegetation pattern in the mountain taiga where steppes  
20 occur on south-facing slopes is caused by climate conditions and relief, and is not originating from  
21 human activities.

22 Human impact on natural forests in Kazakhstan goes back to prehistoric times with nomadism and  
23 animal grazing as lifestyle adapted to the natural framework of the steppe (Karger, 1965; Giese, 1981,  
24 1983). During summertime the alpine meadows and mountain steppes in the upper mountains were  
25 regularly used as pastures for the livestock. Even during Soviet times in Kazakhstan the nomadic  
26 movements were generally adopted by the Sowchos-System. ~~Until Even~~ today the alpine pastures are  
27 still in use. Extensive animal grazing prohibits the rejuvenation of trees and nomads may expand the  
28 grassland by fire setting.

29 Spatial models, which are able to predict the climatically induced forest distribution and especially the  
30 upper forest line on a global scale by exclusively using spatial climate data already exist (Paulsen and  
31 Körner, 2014). However, a clear method to empirically distinguish the actual forest distribution and its  
32 elevational limits for small areas covering a single mountain system and to simultaneously proof the  
33 potential human impact is lacking. In this investigation we introduce a procedure to solve this problem  
34 based on medium resolution remote sensing data. In addition, spatially explicit climate data and tree  
35 growth limiting climate parameters serve to differentiate potential human impact from natural  
36 conditions in the forest distribution.



## 2 Study Area

The detailed investigation area Uzynkara ridge or Ketmen mountain range is located in the northernmost part of the Tien Shan Mountains in Central Asia at the border between Kazakhstan and China ( $79^{\circ}$ - $81^{\circ}$ E /  $42^{\circ}45'$ - $43^{\circ}45'$ N) (Fig. 1). This closed mountain system was chosen for investigation because it provides excellent topographic preconditions to clearly indicate the lower and upper boundaries of forest distribution between the middle and central part of Asia. It is filling a gap of information about forest lines between regions of the Tien Shan mountains in the south and east, and the Altai mountains in the north (Fickert, 1998; Dai et al., 2013; Klinge et al., 2003). The main cities in the region are ~~Main cities are~~ Shonzy and Kegen. The complete mountain range is part of the catchment area (CA) of the Ili river in the north. While the northern mountain side is directly drained to the Ili river, the Kegen river in the southern intermountain basin first flows westward and then turns as Sharyn river into a northern direction, and the Tekes river in the southernmost part runs eastward to Chinese territory. The mountain system is structured by two main ridges, a northern front range (NFR) and a southern mountain range (SMR), which converge in the east and enclose an intermountain basin in the west. The highest peak is the Nebesnaja reaching 3,652 m asl. A high mountain plateau in ~3,400 m asl is dropping southward, planation surface occurs in 3,400 m asl, and the highest peak is the Nebesnaja reaching 3,652 m asl. North-, while the north facing slopes are cut steeply by Pleistocene cirques, are cut into the high mountain plateau, where tToday, no glaciation but permafrost occurs in the uppermost areas.

The mountain border is tectonically clearly accentuated against the alluvial fans and fanglomerats in approximately 1,500 m asl in the North and in 2,000 m asl in the southern intermountain basin following west to east trending fault lines. The mountains mainly consist of metamorphic and volcanic Carboniferous and Devonian rocks including several Palaeozoic granite bodies. Locally also Permian, Silurian and Jurassic rocks are distributed.

The MAAT in Almaty (848 m asl) is  $8.7^{\circ}\text{C}$  and in Karakol (1,744 m asl) which is situated south of the investigation area  $6.3^{\circ}\text{C}$ , respectively (Fickert, 1998). According to Medeu (2010) the mean air temperature is between  $-8$  and  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  in January and between  $20$  and  $24^{\circ}\text{C}$  in July. In wintertime the Siberian anticyclone produces weather conditions with cold air masses in the basins and warmer air temperatures above the inversion layer between 1,000 and 1,550 m asl (Giese, 1973).

The majority of precipitation in Kazakhstan comes along with air masses from western and southwestern directions. In the mountains of northern Tien Shan mainly convective rainfall occurs in spring and autumn. Additionally cold air masses from northern directions bring precipitation to the northern Tien Shan in summertime (Böhner, 2006; Lydolp, 1977). According to Giese (1973) the annual precipitation in the basins of the foreland lies between 100 and 300 mm, in the lower mountains and in the intermountain basin it is between 300 and 400 mm. In the mountains it increases to more than 800

mm. The precipitation maxima occur in May, June, and ~~with minor secondary maximum subordinate~~ in September.

The foreland, basins, and treeless mountain areas are covered by steppe vegetation with forb and bunch grass (Medeu, 2010). To the drier regions in the north it changes to grassland, sagebrush desert, saltwort, and sedge vegetation. The forest belt mainly consists of spruce trees (*Picea schrenkiana*). In the westernmost part aspen trees (*Populus tremula*) and in the northeastern part birch trees (*Betula pendula*) additionally occur. On the southern slopes shrub areas exist also.

The soils are distributed according to the climate conditions and the vegetation zones (Medeu, 2010). In the foreland desert soils occur. In the lower front ranges and in the intermountain basin mountain steppe soils of castanozem and chernozem type are distributed. In the forest belt dark chernozems which are locally bleached and podzolized occur under forest and pheaozem soils exist at meadow steppe sites. In the high elevations alpine and subalpine soils occur with mountain meadows and meadow steppes.

Arable land in eastern Kazakhstan is located in front of the mountain ranges on the alluvial fans in the basins and on the foothills in lower elevation. In this transition zone between the pediments and mountain ranges the soils are improved by a content of Pleistocene loess (Giese, 1983; Karger, 1965; Machalet et al., 2006). In front of the mountain border, the rivers spend the water for irrigation cultivation on the pediments. On the foothills agriculture is supported by sufficient rainfall as the so-called “Bogar”-Cultivation (Giese, 1983). According to these requirements the settlements are located along main valleys at the mountain boundary. Around the settlements wood-cutting is pronounced for construction and fuel.

### 3 Methods

A schematic workflow of the GIS-analysis procedure with input data, intermediate data, and output data is presented in Fig. 2. The analysis is divided into two main processes: The first is working on the relief parameters to estimate the PFA and the second conducts the delineation of the upper and lower forest lines. The forest lines are defined as the distribution boundaries of closed forest stands with areas larger than 0.5 ha, disregarding single trees which may represent special environmental places or remnants of former forests. Trees near the rivers of the valley bottoms were excluded from the examination because these are groundwater favoured sites which are mostly occupied by deciduous trees.

The determination of the AFA in the investigation area was ~~performed by as achieved based on a supervised maximum likelihood classification by the maximum likelihood method based on a from~~ multispectral satellite images (visible light and infrared channels) ~~from of~~ Landsat 7/ETM+ of the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2000 (Fig. 3). Aerial photos provided as imagery and Bing basemaps by ESRI served for ~~the detection of forest area reference sites for training and validation of the classifier. accuracy control.~~

Two classes were built and manually digitised for the classification and validation process. One class represents the forest areas and the other class includes different kinds of no forest landscape. Depending on the ground resolution of 30 x 30 m one pixel covers the occurrence of several individual trees so that small clearings and aisles could have been disregarded. The confusion matrix in Table 1 shows a producer's accuracy of 89% for forest classification quality areas, where ~6% of the forest area served were used for validation. This possible underestimation of the forest area of up to 11% mainly occurs at the borders of closed forest, where the classification depends on the quantity of trees inside of one Landsat pixel.

The relief parameters elevation, aspect, slope gradient, and total solar radiation input were derived from a DTM based on SRTM-data (Rabus et al., 2003), which was converted to an UTM-zone 44 North projection with a spatial resolution of 90 to x 90 m. The polygons of the delineated forest stands were intersected with the relief parameters in order to investigate the relief dependent spatial distribution of forest sites in the study area. In addition, the statistics of all relief parameters were computed for the total study area (TSA) to indicate the potential impact of topography on the spatial distribution of forest stands (Fig. 4). The PFA was then identified based on the assumption of confidence ranges that at those places where for all four relief parameters are within a distinct range, which was found responsible for forest distribution, the PFA was identified. This range was defined by the standard deviation (95% confidence interval) from single frequency distribution of the relief parameters aspect, slope gradient, and sum of solar radiation input during the mean growing season (March to November). While these parameters are not systematically influenced by human impact, the vertical distribution may have been changed by forest clearing at the lower and upper boundary. Therefore 99% of the frequency distribution of the elevation parameter was chosen in this case.

Baseline climate data sets for Central Asia, comprising monthly radiation, temperature and precipitation data in a horizontal resolution of 0.5 arc seconds (approximately 1,200 m in longitudinal and 850 m in latitudinal direction) are provided by Böhner (2006). The regular-grid climate layers were estimated using an empirical modelling approach, which basically integrates statistical downscaling of coarse resolution atmospheric fields (NCAR / NCEP-CDAS reanalyses series) and GIS based surface parameterization techniques, to sufficiently account for the topographic heterogeneity of the target area. A comprehensive description of data bases and modelling techniques is given in Böhner (2006) and Böhner and Antonic (2008, 2009). The suitability and precision of the modelling approach is discussed in Gerlitz et al. (2013; 2014) and Soria-Auza et al. (2010).

The frequency distribution of selected climate parameters related to the AFA and the TSA shown in Fig. 5 was calculated in the same way as described above. In contrast to the high resolution of the SRTM-data the climate data has a resolution about 10 times lower which leads to a generalisation and coarser scale of relief positions, where climatic differences between slope aspects inside the valleys are averaged. The climate data related to the forest stands is analysed by the climatic limitation values

for forest development to detect potential human impact on the forest distribution patterns when obvious discrepancies occur.

To outline the actual forest lines it is initially necessary to segment the relief into small CAs, which represent small side-valleys or slope niches divided by convex ridges. This is done by computing the surficial hydrology regime from the DTM. The size of a CA is given by the threshold value for the stream definition function, which assigns the minimum number of cells to discharge into a specific cell to start a depth contour. In this study a value of 200 was found practical for the lower forest line and a value of 100 was suitable for the upper forest line. The single CAs generally consist of a part from the left and right side of a valley. Having different aspects in one segment is expedient to receive a general forest line value for one valley section.

After combining the catchment polygons with the forest polygons it is possible to determine the maximum and minimum elevation values for forests inside a single CA. The calculated values are spatially allocated as points to the position of those pixels which have the determined forest line value. To eliminate the preconditions on the lower forest line given by the elevation limits of the relief only those minimum values of forest stands were chosen, which are more than 50 m higher as the total minimum value of the CA. The distance between the highest forest stands and the crest line above has a special influence on the upper forest line which is called the “summit syndrome” by Körner (2012). Near the summits the local climate conditions strongly suppress tree growth by stronger wind, reduced temperature and snow drift. To receive a reasonable value for the climatic upper forest line and to eliminate preconditions by relief height, only those maximum forest values were chosen which lie more than 100 m below the total maximum elevation of the catchment. Finally, the forest lines were calculated from the remaining points by a natural neighbour interpolation method.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Relief parameterisation

The total AFA in the investigation area is 502 km<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 3). Frequency distributions of relief parameters for the AFA are shown in Fig. 4. The slope gradient and solar radiation of the forest stands show a normal distribution. The values with maximum distribution are 28° for slope gradient and 1,075 kWh/m<sup>2</sup> for the sum of solar radiation input (Table 4.2). Less than 5% of the forests exist on southern slopes (SE-S-SW). The curve of the parameter aspect has a steeper left slope and a maximum value in the north-western direction (315°), which is strongly related to the diurnal air temperature trend caused by insolation and heating processes on different slope directions. This underlines the fact that the strong relation of forest distribution to slope aspect is caused by natural environmental conditions. Nomads and woodcutters approach to forest transformation by logistic problems of access in the relief, which reduces the pure signal of elevation in the data. Climate controls environmental conditions in a coarser regional scale and is creating sharper elevational boundaries. The curve of the parameter elevation has a shallow left ~~slope~~ and a steep right slope, which ~~may~~ indicates human

1 impact on forest distribution ~~by wood-cutting~~ at the lower boundary. The lower forest lines start at  
2 1,575 m asl and the upper forest lines exceed 2,900 m asl so that the maximal vertical distance of the  
3 forest limits for the entire investigation area is 1,325 m (Table 12).

4 The TSA as equal positions for forests in the mountains were inferred from the forest lines and  
5 represent the total elevation belt from 1,500 and 2,900 m asl. Except for the slope gradient diagram,  
6 the flat slope positions  $<5^\circ$  were additionally excluded from the TSA. The resulting TSA area is  
7 approximately 4,975 km<sup>2</sup>. In regard to the independent frequency distribution curves of the relief  
8 parameters in Fig. 4 between forest stands and the total TSA no statistical influence of the main  
9 topographic pattern on the forest distribution is detectable.

10 From the statistical point of view all four relief parameters control the forest distribution. Therefore, it  
11 is necessary to check the modelling accuracy of the PFA received from one single relief parameter  
12 against the combination of all four relief parameters (Table 23). Comparing the modelled PFA and the  
13 AFA four different classes can be built: 1.) PFA with AFA and 2.) no PFA without AFA are  
14 representing the mapped situation, 3.) PFA without AFA, and 4.) no PFA with AFA are representing  
15 the differences between modelling and mapping. To receive a statistical background for the evaluation  
16 of the modelling quality of the delineated PFA, it is once related to the sum (FA<sub>AP</sub>) of AFA and the  
17 PFA and twice referred to the total mountain area (TMA) of 8,126 km<sup>2</sup>, when the mountain boundary  
18 to the pediments of the foreland is generally defined by the changeover line of the slope gradient at  
19 2.5°. From all four single relief parameters the modelling based on the slope aspect coincides best with  
20 the actual situation, but anyway the combination of all four parameters obviously enhances the  
21 prediction accuracy (Table 23). The PFA calculated from all 4 relief parameters is 1,825 km<sup>2</sup> and  
22 therefore 3.5 times larger than the AFA. Fig. 3 shows the spatial differences between the AFA and  
23 PFA. In relation to the AFA the PFA generally extends to the lower and upper elevations.

#### 24 4.2 Forest line patterns

25 Fig. 6 shows the lower forest line in the investigation area starting at 1,600 m asl in the northwest and  
26 increasing to 2,600 m asl in the southeast. Values for the lower forest line mostly are derived from the  
27 lower CAs but there are also many CAs in the higher elevations of the NFR, where the forest stands do  
28 not reach the valley bottom. This phenomenon may be caused by the local relief of tree free flat valley  
29 bottoms, which would be rather a climate than a topographic signal. But regarding the lower forest line  
30 in the second mountain range southeast of the intermountain basin and behind the NFR the lower  
31 forest line remains at a higher elevation around 2,400 m asl. Here the high lower forest line position is  
32 obviously caused by the drier ~~climate~~ conditions of the rain shadow position, which may also be true  
33 for the upper valleys in the NFR.

34 The upper forest line distribution and the area above the forest line are shown in Fig. 7. In the NFR the  
35 upper forest line at the mountain border starts in 1,800 m asl in the west and increases to 2,200 m asl  
36 in the east maintaining a vertical distance of 200 m to the lower forest line. From the mountain border

1 in the north to the crest line the upper forest line rises to 2,800 m asl and crossing the intermountain  
2 basin it lies in an elevation between 2,400 and 2,800 m asl in the SMR. The local vertical distance of  
3 the forest belt reaches its maximum value of more than 900 m at the northern side of the NFR. On the  
4 southern side and in the SMR the forest belt is very narrow with vertical distances between 50 and 400  
5 m.

#### 6 **4.3 Climate environmental conditions**

7 The environmental conditions were analysed in terms of frequency distribution of climate parameters  
8 for the AFA (Fig. 5) and were mapped together with the AFA (Fig. 8-10). The diagrams in Fig. 5  
9 show the differences between AFA and TSA for all climate parameters except for the MAAT, which  
10 was already excluded as significant forest limitation parameter.

11 The lowest value class of forest stands for annual precipitation is 250 mm, while the highest potential  
12 evapotranspiration is up to 1,100 mm/a. ~~The difference between annual precipitation and~~  
13 ~~evapotranspiration is an index for the potential water balance (pWB).~~ One third of the AFA lies in  
14 areas with a negative potential water balance (pWB, i.e. the difference between annual precipitation  
15 and potential evapotranspiration, cf. Fig. 5) ~~pWB with values below 0 mm/a (Fig. 5)~~ but with a  
16 precipitation amount between 300 and 700 mm/a (Fig. 8). These areas are specially situated at the  
17 westernmost edges and on the southern slopes of the mountain ranges. While the westernmost sites are  
18 exposed to the westerlies which transport most of the humidity, the southern slopes lie in the rain  
19 shadow but at a higher elevation and therefore the lower forest line is around 600 m higher than on the  
20 northern side of the NFR.

21 In the eastern part of the northern side of the NFR the AFA belt is very small and concurrently the  
22 lower forest line increases to 2,000 m asl, 400 m higher than in the western part of the NFR. Here the  
23 lower forest line occurs at precipitation of 700 mm and at positive pWB of 150 to 300 mm/a, while the  
24 PFA extends more into the lower slope positions which corresponds to the mean values of the regions  
25 described above. This is an indication for a non-natural distribution and points to greater human  
26 influence on forests in this region.

27 The forest distribution related to mean air temperature in July ranges between 7 and 17 °C, with a  
28 maximum around 11 to 12 °C (Fig. 5). Comparing the AFA and PFA with the July-isotherms (Fig. 9),  
29 ~~it can be seen~~shows that the upper AFA is mainly bordered by the 10 °C July-isotherm, but also  
30 extends to the 8 °C July-isotherm at many places. ~~The upper PFA is generally combined with the 8 °C~~  
31 ~~July isotherm aligned to the 8 °C July-isotherm.~~ Fig. 10 shows the distribution of the monthly mean  
32 air temperature 5 °C isotherm during the growing season and the AFA. Except at the westernmost part  
33 the 5 °C isotherm is above the AFA between June and September and the upper AFA boundary  
34 coincides well with the 5 °C isotherm of September. The PFA at the upper forest boundary extends up  
35 to the position of 5 °C isotherm in June, where the growing season obviously becomes very short at



these high elevated places. As shown in Fig. 9 and 10 the PFA at the upper limit is overestimated and the upper AFA boundary generally has a natural limitation.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

It was shown that the AFA and the forest lines coincide well with the local climate conditions. At the lower limit forests are restricted to a minimum annual precipitation of 250 mm. The upper forest line is combined to the 10 °C July-isotherm in most places and to the minimum monthly mean temperature of 5 °C for the period between June and September. In the more humid parts of the investigation area at the western and northern slopes of the NFR both forest lines have a steep gradient and the forest belt has its greatest vertical extension between 500 and 600 m and locally up to 900 m. This fits well to the findings of increasing vertical forest extension concurrent with increasing humidity and vice versa by Fickert (1998), Dai et al. (2013), and Klinge et al. (2003) in the surrounding regions. Besides temperature, rainfall influences the upper forest line because clouds reduce the air temperature by shadowing and reflection of solar insulation. This is explaining the steep gradient of the upper forest line at the ~~low~~-windward side of the mountain ridges.

The comparison of the AFA with climate data reveals a strong relation between the distribution patterns at the upper boundary but divergences occur at the lower boundary. This indicates human impact on the forests at the mountain borders modifying the lower forest line, while the upper forest line represents the natural condition. Accordingly the PFA derived from relief parameters at lower elevations indicates additional area for more potential natural forest. The PFA at the upper boundary is overestimated by highest forest stands occurring at few climate favoured places, because we used the total vertical distance of forest distribution as a relief parameter instead of the standard variation presuming that extensive logging may also occur in the alpine meadow pastures. GIS-analysis combined with multispectral satellite images and DTM is well suited to determine forest lines and potential forest areas for semi-arid regions in a local to regional scale. For forest line delineation it is necessary to eliminate elevation values which are restricted by the relief conditions and do not represent climatic limitations. DTM-derived relief parameters slope aspect, gradient and solar radiation serve well as indicators for the climatic environment in the investigation area and help to transfer environmental settings to other places in the broader study area. Human impact ~~influences mainly by~~ is recognized the evaluation of the parameter elevation. Therefore a forest line evaluation with respect to the general climatic conditions has to be performed before the parameter elevation is incorporated into the spatial delineation process of the PFA. In conclusion, the proposed workflow is a helpful method for the evaluation of the potential forest distribution and the delineation of human impact. It can be used to indicate local climate variability, for landscape analysis and for effective reforestation planning.

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1 **Table 1:** Confusion matrix showing the accuracy report of the supervised maximum likelihood  
 2 classification (area in ha)

|                           | <u>classification data</u> |                  | <u>sum</u>          | <u>producer's</u> | <u>omission</u> |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                           | <u>forest</u>              | <u>no forest</u> | <u>reference</u>    | <u>accuracy</u>   | <u>error</u>    |
| <u>reference</u>          | <u>forest</u>              | <u>2,696.7</u>   | <u>333.6</u>        | <u>3,030.3</u>    | <u>0.890</u>    |
| <u>data</u>               | <u>no forest</u>           | <u>14.7</u>      | <u>76,426.2</u>     | <u>76,440.9</u>   | <u>0.110</u>    |
| <u>sum classification</u> | <u>2,711.4</u>             | <u>76,759.8</u>  | <u>total sum of</u> | <u>overall</u>    |                 |
| <u>user's accuracy</u>    | <u>0.995</u>               | <u>0.995</u>     | <u>test data</u>    | <u>accuracy</u>   |                 |
| <u>commission error</u>   | <u>0.0054</u>              |                  | <u>79,471.2</u>     | <u>0.996</u>      |                 |

1   **Table 12:** Statistical values of the relief parameters related to the forest distribution.

2   **Table 23:** Comparison between of the modelled area values of single relief parameter classes and of

3   the combination of all four relief parameters. (AFA = Actual forest area, PFA = Potential forest area)

4   **Figure 4:** Frequency distribution of relief parameters in relation to actual forest area AFA (for

5   the diagrams aspect, slope gradient, and solar radiation input: dark green = standard deviation

6   95%, light green = marginal value range excluded from PFA delineation) and total study area

7   (TSA, brown).

8