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Canopy Area of Large Trees Explains Aboveground Biomass Variations across Nine Neotropical Forest Landscapes

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Abstract

Large tropical trees store significant amounts of carbon in woody components and their distribution plays an important role in forest carbon stocks and dynamics. Here, we explore the properties of a new Lidar derived index, large tree canopy area (LCA) defined as the area occupied by canopy above a reference height. We hypothesize that this simple measure of forest structure representing the crown area of large canopy trees could consistently explain the landscape variations of forest volume and aboveground biomass (AGB) across a range of climate and edaphic conditions. To test this hypothesis, we assembled a unique dataset of high-resolution airborne Light Detection and Ranging (Lidar) and ground inventory data in nine undisturbed old growth Neotropical forests. We found that the LCA for trees greater than 27 m (~25–30 m) in height and at least 100 m^2 crown size in a unit area (1 ha), explains more than 75 % of total forest volume variations, irrespective of the forest biogeographic conditions. When weighted by average wood density of the stand, LCA can be used as an unbiased estimator of AGB across all sites ($R^2 = 0.78$, RMSE = 46.02 Mg ha^{-1}, bias = 0.76 Mg ha^{-1}). Unlike other Lidar derived metrics with complex nonlinear relations to biomass, the relationship between LCA and AGB is linear. A comparison with tree inventories across the study sites indicates that LCA correlates best with the crown area (or basal area) of trees with diameter >50 cm. The spatial invariance of the LCA–AGB relationship across the Neotropics suggests a remarkable regularity of forest structure across the landscape and a new technique for systematic monitoring of large trees for their contribution to AGB and changes associated with selective logging, tree mortality, and other types of forest disturbance and dynamics.

Keywords

Lidar, biomass, tropical forest, large trees, crown area, wood density

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1 Introduction

In humid tropical forests, tree canopies contribute disproportionately to the exchange of water and carbon with the atmosphere through photosynthesis (Goldstein et al., 1998; Santiago et al., 2004). From a physical standpoint, canopies are rough interfaces formed by crowns of emergent and large trees, regularly disturbed by wind thrusts and gap dynamics. This structurally complex boundary layer is challenging for scaling of biogeochemical fluxes and modeling of vegetation dynamics (Baldocchi et al., 2003). Large canopy trees are among the first to be impacted by storms or heavy precipitation (Espírito-Santo et al., 2010), drought stress (Nepstad et al., 2007; Saatchi et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2009), and fragmentation (Laurance et al., 2000), potentially leading to tree death and formation of large canopy gaps (Denslow, 1980; Espírito-Santo et al., 2014). Several studies suggest that forest canopies can show fractal properties that tend to evolve from a non-equilibrium state towards a self-organized critical state, involving gap formation and recovery (Pascual and Guichard, 2005; Solé and Manrubia, 1995), with crowns preferentially growing towards more sunlit parts of the canopy (Strigul et al., 2008).

Over the past decade, stand level canopy metrics have been increasingly derived using small footprint airborne Lidar systems (ALS), a widely used remote sensing technique to study the structure of forests (Kellner and Asner, 2009; Lefsky et al., 2002). Lidar derived mean canopy height (MCH) is a good predictor of tropical forest aboveground carbon content and its spatial variability (Jubanski et al., 2013), but it does not provide information on the presence of large trees that are important when monitoring changes of forest biomass from logging and small scale disturbance (Bastin et al., 2015). Moreover, different forests with the same MCH may differ in their stem density, notably of large trees, and in stand mean wood density, two aspects that are important in constructing a robust model to infer AGB from lidar data (Asner et al., 2012;

Mascaro et al., 2011). Ground observations suggest that stem density, basal area, height and crown size of large tropical trees may all be good indicators of forest AGB (Clark and Clark, 1996; Goodman et al., 2014). This implies that including information on crown area of individual large trees should improve carbon stock assessments, as confirmed in temperate and boreal regions (eg. Packalen et al., 2015; Popescu et al., 2003; Vauhkonen et al., 2011, 2014). In tropical forests, identifying and delineating crowns of large trees is a difficult and time consuming process due to the layered structure of the forest canopy and overlapping crowns (Zhou et al., 2010, but see Ferraz et al., 2016).

Here, we explore how the fractional area occupied by crowns of large trees in a forest stand can be used as a reliable indicator of forest biomass across a wide range of forest structure, climate and edaphic geographic variations. We define large tree canopy area (LCA) as a metric capturing the cluster of crowns of large trees within a forest patch using height and crown area measured by high resolution airborne Lidar measurements. Precisely, LCA is the number of pixels in the canopy height model above a reference height, and excluding the pixel clusters smaller than a reference area. Since this metric quantifies the proportional presence of large trees, it can be used to estimate AGB and monitor changes associated with the disturbance of large trees from mortality events and selective logging. We first explore the properties of LCA across a range of landscapes in the Neotropics. Next, we hypothesize that LCA is a good predictive metric of the spatial variations of AGB over a wide range of old growth forests.

To this end, we assembled a collection of airborne Lidar measurements and ground inventory data at nine sites in old growth Neotropical forests. The Lidar data provide variations in canopy height and distribution of large trees that allow us to address the following questions: 1) is there

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a unique definition of LCA at the landscape scale across different sites? 2) does LCA metric capture variations of AGB?

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Study sites

We studied the canopy structure at nine old growth lowland Neotropical forest sites that span a broad range of climatic and edaphic conditions (Fig. S1, Table 1). All sites are located in low elevation areas (less than 500 m above sea level) but have small scale surface topography that may influence the distribution of crown formations and gaps. These forests are for the most part undisturbed *terra firme* forests. Tapajós, Antimary and Cotriguaçu get the least rainfall, with approximately 2000mm yr^{-1}, while La Selva and Chocó both receive more than 4000 mm yr^{-1} (Table 1).

Permanent forest inventory plots were available for all sites except Cotriguaçu (Table 1). Sites where tree level inventory data were available were used to estimate the stand level aboveground biomass, thereafter referred to as AGB_{inv}: BCI (50 plots of 1 ha each), Chocó (42 plots of 0.25 ha each), La Selva (11 plots of 1 ha each), Manaus (10 plots of 0.25 ha each), Nouragues (7 plots of 1 ha each) and Tapajós (10 plots of 0.25 ha each). In these plots, all trees with a diameter at breast height (DBH) ≥10 cm have been mapped, measured and identified to the species. Trees with irregularities or buttresses were measured higher on the bole. Total tree height measurements were available for a subset of these trees. The method for calculating AGB_{inv} from forest inventories at 1 ha scale is reported in S.1 of the supplementary information. Stand averaged wood density of each site was calculated and is reported in Table 1. Additional plot level data (AGB_{inv} and mean wood density) were provided for Antimary (50 plots of 0.25 ha each), Nouragues (27 plots of 1 ha each) and Paracou (85 plots of 1 ha each).

The four sites where 1 ha plots were available were used to compare the LCA metric and AGB, and are here referred to as "calibration sites" (BCI, La Selva, Nouragues and Paracou). Smaller plots have a higher probability of having the crown of large trees extend outside the plot boundary, which can introduce uncertainty in estimates of LCA because of edge effect (Meyer et al., 2013; Packalen et al., 2015). For this reason, all plots smaller than 1 ha were excluded from this analysis.

2.2 Lidar data

Lidar sensors scan the vegetation vertical structure and return a three dimensional point cloud derived from the time it took each pulse to return to the instrument. The Lidar datasets acquired over the study sites come from discrete return Lidar instruments and were gridded horizontally at a 1m resolution using the echoes classified as either vegetation or ground. They yield three products: digital surface model (DSM) corresponding to the top canopy elevation, digital terrain model (DTM) corresponding to the ground elevation, and canopy height model (CHM), which is the height difference between the DSM and the DTM. DTMs were interpolated from a Delaunay triangulation or comparable interpolation methods, after outliers have been removed. DSMs were created using the highest return within a cell. Lidar data over Paracou were acquired in last return mode, causing a bias of 50 cm on the CHM (Vincent et al., 2012). This bias is not addressed in this study because our height increment for the determination of optimal height thresholding is larger (1m) (see Sect. 4.3). Data were acquired between 2009 and 2013, using

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relatively similar sensors and acquisition configurations (Table 2). The potential differences between the Lidar datasets and their impact on the results are addressed in the Discussion.

For each site, we selected a 1x1 km (100 ha) area of old growth forest, oriented north-south, without any human disturbance to the extent possible. Topography derived from Lidar data within the selected 1 km^2 subset images provides information on landscape variations that may impact the forest structure. Data visualization was done using ENVI version 4.8 (Exelis).

Mean canopy height (MCH) is a good predictor of AGB provided that the regression model is calibrated locally. It was calculated by averaging all the canopy height model pixels falling in an area of interest. Here, we calculated an AGB map of each site from MCH using the following model form (Eq. (1), Asner and Mascaro, 2014).

$$AGB_{Lidar} = aMCH^b + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

where AGB_{Lidar} is the aboveground biomass estimation derived from Lidar data, a is a scaling constant, which is expected to depend significantly on forest type and stand level wood density, b is a power law exponent and $\epsilon \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$ represents the uncertainty in measurements. All coefficients are presented in Table S1. We inferred the model parameters directly for the sites where AGB_{inv} of 1 ha plots was available (La Selva, BCI, Paracou and Nouragues). For Chocó and Antimary, we developed models based on 0.25 ha plots and 50 m x 50 m pixels of Lidar data and after estimating AGB_{Lidar}, aggregated the image to 1 ha or 100 m pixels. For the remaining sites of the Central Amazon (Cotriguaçu, Manaus and Tapajós), we used a model based on existing data derived from airborne and spaceborne Lidar (Lefsky et al., 2007). This model may have larger uncertainty in estimating biomass compared to our site specific model, but we here assume that all 1 ha scale AGB_{Lidar} estimates have approximately similar uncertainties.

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2.3 Computing Large Canopy Area (LCA)

At each study site, we extracted the area of canopy that relates to total area of the canopy height model above a standard height (h) threshold, or LCA(h), and explored how this metric scales along two axes. First, we varied the threshold height h with increments of 1m, between 5m and 50m, in 100 m by 100 m subareas (100 subareas for each site). Second, to denoise the data, we excluded the clusters with less than a set number of 1m^2 pixels (50, 100, 150 or 200). We then prioritized the crown area of large trees, and filtered out pixels that could be related to outliers or to single branches. This method thus quantifies the area of large crowns covering a plot or larger landscape unit area, as a percentage of covered area.

LCA maps were produced at 1 ha resolution. Pixel clustering was based on the similarity of the four nearest neighbors (similar results were obtained with an eight neighbor model, results not shown here). Figure S2 summarizes the steps taken to go from the Lidar canopy height model to the final LCA map. Processing was conducted using the IDL software (Interface Description Language, Exelis).

We determined the optimal minimum crown size and canopy height threshold calculating the coefficient of correlation between AGB_{Lidar} and LCA. We also performed the same analysis using AGB_{inv} and LCA at the four calibration sites. This step allowed us to examine if optimal height thresholds differed from one site to the other. The goal was to find a single optimal height threshold and crown size that could be applied for LCA retrieval across closed canopy Neotropical forests.

2.4 Relating LCA to biomass

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We tested different models to infer AGB_{inv} from LCA, henceforth called AGB_{LCA}, at the four calibration sites, and explored if adding more parameters, such as mean wood density of a site, mean wood density of large trees (DBH ≥50 cm), mean canopy height or top percentiles of canopy height improved the predicting power of the model. The two models we retained are of the form of Eq. (2) and Eq. (3):

$$AGB_{LCA} = a\ LCA + b \qquad (2)$$

$$AGB_{LCA} = (a\ LCA + b) \times WD \qquad (3)$$

where WD is the mean wood density of a site or the mean wood density of trees >50 cm in DBH of a site.

We evaluated our results by applying a jackknife validation to our regression model, based on 1000 iterations of bootstrapping. We also compared AGB as derived from LCA (AGB_{LCA}) to the Lidar derived aboveground biomass (AGB_{Lidar}) in the nine 1km^2 images. Coefficients of correlation (R^2), root mean square error (RMSE) and bias are reported. We finally compared these results to a traditional model relying on MCH to estimate AGB. The analysis was performed using the R statistical software (R Core Team, 2014).

2.5 Detecting Changes of Selectively Logging

Forest degradation due to selective logging is difficult to detect with conventional remote sensing techniques due to small scale and minor impacts on the forest canopy and biomass compared to severe forest disturbances (e.g. fires, storms, or clearing). However, selective logging targets large trees (Pearson et al., 2014) and thus may be detectable using LCA. Here, we use the Antimary study site that was selectively logged after the 2010 Lidar acquisition to examine the use of LCA for detecting logging impacts on the forest canopy and AGB. We apply

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the large tree segmentation approach on both the 2010 and on a 2011 post-logging Lidar data (see Andersen et al., 2014 for details) to quantify the logging impacts in terms of the distribution of large trees removed from the forest and the loss of aboveground biomass.

3 Results

3.1 Intersite comparison of landscapes and MCH

Topographic variation ranged from about 4 m elevation gain in flat area of Tapajós to steep elevation gain of up to about 100 m in Cotriguaçu and Chocó (Fig. S3). Top canopy height reached up to 60m, but varies across sites, with Chocó having the lowest MCH (24.1 m) and Nouragues the highest (29.7 m). Forest height in Manaus was more homogeneous than in the other sites, with a standard deviation of 6.8 m for MCH, versus 10.3 m in Paracou. We found no relationship between topography and canopy height, which suggests that variability in forest structure may be due to other ecological and edaphic factors in each site.

3.2 Large canopy area index

The choice of the canopy height threshold impacted LCA more than the minimum number of pixels per cluster (Table S2). The difference due to the choice of the minimal cluster size threshold was on average 1.4 %, calculated as the mean of the difference between the smallest grain (50 pixels) and the largest one (200 pixels) across sites and height thresholds. Based on this analysis, we chose to define LCA using a minimum cluster size of 100 pixels (100 m^2 for crown area) in the remainder of this study. This corresponds to an area of at least 10 m x10 m or a circle of approximately 11m in diameter, consistent with the average crown diameter of large trees of the region (Bohlman and O'Brien, 2006; Figueiredo et al., 2016; Clark, unpublished results).

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In contrast, the canopy height thresholds markedly impacted the magnitude of LCA among sites (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, Table S2). As the height threshold increased, intra-site variation of LCA(h) became apparent, showing differences of LCA associated with differences of forest structure (Fig. 1). Tapajós and Nouragues stood out with more area of large trees at the height threshold of 30 m (LCA_{30m} = 51 and 48 %, respectively) , while Antimary and Chocó showed much lower LCA at this height threshold (LCA_{30m} = 21 %) (Table S2). The steepest slopes of the LCA(h) function corresponded to the highest sensitivity of LCA to height thresholds and the inflection in LCA was found between 24m in Antimary and 30m in Nouragues (Fig. 2). The average height of the steepest slope was about 27 m, a value that was used as the optimal threshold across all sites.

Regressing AGB_{Lidar} and LCA showed that the highest coefficients of correlation between the two metrics occurred between 23 m (Chocó) and 30 m (Tapajós) height thresholds (Fig. 3a), explaining more than 75 % of AGB variation in each site. The same analysis repeated using AGB_{inv} and LCA at the calibration sites (Fig. 3b) also confirmed the earlier results showing the best relationships corresponded to height thresholds are found to be between 27m (Nouragues and Paracou) and 28m (BCI and La Selva), with maximum coefficients of correlation ranging between 0.5 and 0.8. Based on these results, we defined LCA as the cumulative area of clusters of the canopy height model greater than 27 m height and each more than 100 m^2.

3.3 Variation of AGB derived from LCA

AGB_{inv} was found to depend linearly on LCA (Eq. 2), with a better coefficient of correlation and RMSE than other models, such as a power law fit (R^2_{linear} = 0.59, $RMSE_{linear}$ = 62.53 Mg ha^{-1}, vs. R^2_{power} = 0.54, $RMSE_{power}$ = 65.38). Although this model was unbiased (bias = 0.0 Mg, $bias_{cross\_val}$

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= 0.16 Mg), there were clear differences among study sites (Fig. 4, Table 3). These differences were largely explained by landscape scale differences in wood density, an important factor representing the influence of species composition on the spatial variation of AGB. To explore the contribution of wood density across the study sites, we computed the average wood volume as the ratio of AGB divided by the average wood density (Fig. 4b). The linear relationship between LCA and wood volume yielded an estimate of the average total volume of forests independently of the site characteristics, through Vol = a LCA + b (Table 3).

For AGB estimation, the model based on LCA weighted by WD gives the best result by bringing R^2 up to 0.78 and RMSE down to 46.02 Mg ha^{-1} (Fig. 4b, Fig. 5, Table 3, Eq. (3)), with AGB_{inv} and AGB_{LCA} falling around a one-to-one line in Fig. 5a. At all sites, RMSE values are between 20.87 and 42.22 Mg, except Nouragues, where RMSE remains large (71.21 Mg) due to high biomass and several outliers from the linear relation.

Finally, we applied the model from Eq. (3) to all 1km^2 areas and compared the derived AGB_{LCA} to AGB_{Lidar} (see Sect. 2.2), for which local models based on MCH were used (Fig. 5b). Global RMSE was found to be 34.72 Mg and RMSE per site varied between 20.79 Mg at BCI and 49.58 Mg at Manaus. Our ground calibrated LCA model defined by Eq. (3) had a similar performance as the MCH based AGB model (R^2_{MCH} = 0.79, $RMSE_{MCH}$ = 44.2 Mg, Table S3). These findings show that relying on a fraction of the Lidar information gives comparable results as using metrics depending on information from all pixels, such as MCH, highlighting the importance of large canopy trees to estimate biomass. The relationship between LCA and other metrics derived from ground data, such as Lorey's height or basal area, are presented in Table S4.

3.4 AGB changes from logging

The impacts of logging on the distribution of large trees and changes of AGB was detected by simply deriving the LCA index from pre and post-logging Lidar data acquired in 2010 and 2011 respectively in Antimary (Fig. 6). Difference in LCA between the two dates (2010–2011) (Fig. 6a) at 1 ha grid cell captured the areas of largest changes in the few months following logging (logging took place between June and November 2011, Lidar data were collected in late November 2011). The LCA approach was able to detect approximately a 17 % decrease in LCA, from a mean LCA of 34.8 % in 2010 to 29.2 % in 2011.

The changes were also captured in the frequency distribution of large canopy trees before and after logging (Fig. 6b) and the differences in the spatial distribution (Fig. 6c and 6d). These changes in LCA correspond to a biomass loss of 15.2 Mg ha^{-1} when integrated in equation (2) and were of the same magnitude of the planned selectively logging removal rate (12–18 Mg ha^{-1} or 10–15 m^3 ha^{-1} of timber volume) (Andersen et al., 2014). Difference in the Lidar index (ΔLCA) at the native resolution of 1 m (Fig. 6e) was able to capture both the location of all large trees removed from the forest stand and partial regeneration and gap filling that occurred in the forest between the two dates.

4 Discussion

4.1 Inter-site Comparisons

Cross-site studies on the structure of tropical forests have led to significant advances in our understanding of tropical forest ecology (Gentry 1993; Phillips et al., 1998; ter Steege et al., 2006). They have also yielded important insights on new techniques to predict carbon stocks across regions (eg. Asner and Mascaro, 2014). Comparison of sites in terms of MCH derived for the study sites confirms that there is a strong regional variations of AGB with respect to

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canopy height, and that East Amazonian sites tend to have much taller trees than Central and Western Amazonia sites. This was already apparent in the canopy height maps produced by the GLAS sensor (Lefsky, 2010; Saatchi et al., 2011; Simard et al., 2011). Comparing sites in terms of LCA showed a similar pattern of larger trees, being relatively more present in eastern Amazonia, notably in the French Guiana sites and Tapajos. Our most southwestern site was Antimary, in the state of Acre (Brazilian Amazon) and does not represent areas in the Peruvian Amazon and western Amazon-Andes gradients. The site in Chocó is also unique in its characteristics because of extremely wet condition and unknown disturbance history (e.g., selective logging). Additional lidar and ground measurements would be needed in western Amazonia to further validate the patterns observed in this study.

4.2 Physical Interpretation of LCA

In this study, we introduced a simple structural metric that captures the proportion of area covered by large trees over the landscape (> 1 ha) and explained the variation in average forest volume and biomass when weighted by wood density in nine sites of old growth Neotropical forests. LCA cannot separate the crown areas of individual trees. However, it is adapted for large scale monitoring of forest volume and biomass change, as it is a robust and readily accessible metric. For individual tree separation, complex and more computationally intensive approaches are available (Ferraz et al., 2016).

In estimating LCA from Lidar data, we examined the spatial clustering properties of LCA and found that the minimum cluster size was less important than the threshold of canopy height, as long as the analysis focused on the relative covered area instead of on the density of large trees. We found that using the percentage of the area covered by large canopy trees is an efficient way of overcoming the problem of individual crown segmentation in Lidar data. LCA is related to how trees reaching the forest canopy (above a certain height) fill the space and how this characteristic may follow a spatially invariant scaling across tropical forests (West et al., 2009).

4.3 Correlation between LCA and AGB

The distribution of R^2 between LCA and AGB for (Fig. 3) is such that the maximum difference in R^2 between a threshold of 25m and 30m is approximately 0.1, a negligible value. Hence, AGB retrieval by LCA is relatively insensitive to the height threshold. For most sites, except Antimary, we found a height threshold such that LCA explains about 80–90 % of the variation of AGB or total volume of the forests for each site (60–70 % when compared with ground plots). Using a height threshold of 27 m for all sites reduced the R^2 by 0.04 on average (max = 0.08) compared to the optimal height threshold for each site. Hence, the difference between the R^2 of Lidar and ground plots is due to the relative correlation between MCH used in Lidar derived biomass and LCA. Differences in Lidar characteristics for each site and differences in timing of Lidar observations and ground plots further amplify this problem. Finally, a limit to how much LCA can explain variation in AGB relates to forest structure and the AGB of small trees. Potential differences in MCH among sites are due to footprint size, scan angle and return density (Disney et al., 2010; Hirata, 2004; Hopkinson, 2007). However, these effects are generally smaller than the 1m increment that we used to determine the optimal height thresholds of LCA. As a result, LCA estimation, and therefore AGB inferred from LCA, should depend little on instrument, acquisition and processing (Table 2). This is an important finding given the increasing variety of airborne Lidar sensors, and also given the pre and post-processing methods available for monitoring tropical forest structure and aboveground biomass. However, determining whether the 27m threshold holds for LCA calculation across in the tropics would require a validation at more study studies across continents.

4.4 LCA Relation to Ground Measurements

The relation between LCA derived from Lidar and the ground measurements can be investigated by converting the 27 m height threshold into equivalent DBH values, using a height–diameter relationship. In the absence of a local DBH–height relation at each site, we made use of the following equation (Chave et al., 2014):

$$ln(H) = 0.893 - E + 0.760 \times ln(D) - 0.0340 \times (ln(D))^2 \quad (4)$$

where E is a measure of environmental stress for each site that potentially impacts the tree allometry. The corresponding DBH values fall around 35–55 cm, except for Chocó, where the best coefficient of correlation is reached with a DBH threshold of 29 cm (Fig. S4). The DBH estimation suggests that using a minimal DBH threshold of about 50 cm for large trees for old growth neo-tropical forests better represents the total AGB variations.

The lower range of biomass estimation for the LCA model, associated with the intercept for LCA equal to zero, ranged between 122 Mg ha^{-1} in La Selva and 192 Mg ha^{-1} in Paracou (Fig. 7a). This lower range identified with the intercept of the LCA–AGB linear model can be interpreted as the AGB associated with all trees smaller than 27 m and representing the smaller trees (approximately all trees with DBH <50 cm). Note that the differences between sites are only due to differences in their mean wood density and not the volume of trees (see Eq.(3) and Fig. 4). Similarly, the contribution of small trees to the total biomass in the ground inventory ranges between around 100 and 200 Mg ha^{-1}, except in Paracou (261 Mg ha^{-1}) (Fig. 7b). AGB estimation based on LCA in these sites cannot go under 100 Mg ha^{-1} or over 500 Mg ha^{-1}. This

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is not a limitation of the model because LCA is designed to provide AGB estimates for forests reaching at least 27 m in mean canopy height, and such forests generally exceed 100 Mg ha^{-1} in AGB. Also, the upper threshold of 500 Mg ha^{-1} is consistent with upper values found globally at 1 ha scale (Brienen et al., 2015; Slik et al., 2013). A recalibration of the method should be envisaged in secondary and highly degraded forests.

4.5 LCA as AGB Estimator

The correlation of LCA to AGB_{inv} suggests that a Lidar based approach can lead to the estimation of AGB at the landscape scale and give useful information on the presence of large canopy trees and their distribution, extending the analysis of large trees in plot level inventory based studies (Bastin et al., 2015; Slik et al., 2013).

Therefore, LCA can explain the variations of total forest volume without any ancillary data about the forest or the landscape. Any bias in conversion of LCA to AGB, however, can be corrected across landscapes and sites by scaling the LCA–AGB relationship with average wood density at the landscape scale.

Wood density has been shown to be a key element of allometric models of AGB estimation (Baker et al., 2004; Brown et al., 1989; Chave et al., 2004; Nogueira et al., 2007). If wood density is assumed to be constant across DBH classes, the mean wood density at the plot scale can readily be used to scale LCA to biomass. However, if the wood density of large trees is smaller or larger than the average wood density, (e.g. in BCI and Chocó: S.3, Fig. S5), the use of mean wood density to scale LCA may introduce a slight bias in biomass estimation. A difference in mean wood density of 0.1 g cm^{-3} would introduce a bias of ±10 % in the biomass estimation when using our model. We found that using mean wood density of large trees or basal area weighted wood density instead can give slightly better results and could circumvent the differences in size distribution of the wood density (S.3). Instead we could rely on the wood density of large trees only. This would make the collection of ground data easier and cost effective for biomass estimation, because trees ≥50 cm DBH only represent 5–10 % of the stems of a plot (S.3, Fig. S6). Focusing on the wood density of dominant or hyper dominant species could also be an alternative approach for future use of Lidar derived LCA for large scale biomass estimation (Fauset et al., 2015; ter Steege et al., 2013).

Both MCH and LCA–AGB models performed relatively poorly in high biomass plots of the Nouragues study area, by underestimating biomass values >500 Mg ha^{-1} (Fig. 4 and 5). To explain the underestimation, we performed three tests: 1. We examined the differences in the ground estimated biomass values with and without tree height and found no significant impact in reducing the effect of underestimation. 2. We tested the hypothesis that the height threshold used for LCA estimation across sites was not suitable for the Nouragues study site and dismissed the hypothesis because 27 m was found to be the optimum threshold for Nouragues plots. 3. We examined the errors in the Lidar estimation of forest height and found that except for an extremely high AGB_{inv} of 617 Mg ha^{-1}, the four other high biomass outliers are all located in the 6 ha Pararé plot located on a very steep topography. The Lidar digital terrain model (DTM) of this area shows an average within plots elevation range of 90 m. Ground detection on steep terrain can be erroneous, depending on the Lidar point density and the view angle, causing large area interpolation errors for DTM development and significant error in canopy height measurements (Leitold et al., 2015). Other factors that may affect the underestimation of AGB by LCA or MCH in the Nouragues site may be due to the presence of forest patches with clusters of large trees and overlapping crown areas.

4.6 LCA and forest degradation

Although LCA and MCH may perform similarly in capturing the forest biomass variations and changes, the use of LCA in detecting forest degradation and logging is more straightforward because of its relation to large trees. The LCA approach was able to accurately detect changes in forests after logging by locating where the large trees are extracted. Our estimate of biomass change from the LCA approach was higher than the biomass loss of 9.1 Mg ha^{-1} reported by another study using the 25th percentile height above ground as the Lidar metric for biomass estimation (Andersen et al. 2014). It can be expected that relying on the 25th percentile height metric for biomass estimation would place more emphasis on the lower part of the canopy (understory) that is either less damaged or has gone through some level of regeneration after logging. Models based on LCA or MCH, on the other hand, may be more realistic for estimating AGB changes because they capture the changes in large trees and upper forest canopy structure that contain most of the biomass and are directly impacted by logging and biomass removal.

4.7 Future Applications of LCA

LCA definition in our study relies on the high resolution information on forest height, allowing for the detection of crown area of large canopy trees. Can a similar measure be derived from large footprint Lidar observations such as the future NASA spaceborne Lidar mission GEDI (Global Ecosystem Dynamic Investigation)? GEDI will not provide spatially continuous data

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on forest height, but its footprint size (~ 25 m) and dense sampling may be adequate to develop statistical indicators of large trees over the landscape.

Similarly, future spaceborne radar missions could also provide useful information to retrieve large canopy areas. The synthetic aperture radar (SAR) tomographical observations of the European Space Agency (ESA) BIOMASS mission will provide wall-to-wall imagery of canopy profile that could be converted to LCA over the landscape (Le Toan et al., 2011). Preliminary research based on airborne TomoSAR measurements has already shown that backscatter power at about 30 m above the ground, with sensitivity to the distribution of large trees, explained the variation of AGB over Nouragues and Paracou plots better than the backscatter power related to the lower part of the canopy (0–15 m) (Minh et al., 2016; Rocca et al., 2014). Future research on exploring the use of an equivalent radar index product from BIOMASS height or tomography measurements at a height threshold (e.g. 27 m) may provide a potential algorithm to map the area of large trees and estimate forest volume and biomass changes across the landscape.

5 Conclusions

We introduce LCA as a new Lidar derived index to capture the variations of large trees and total volume and biomass across landscapes that remain spatially and regionally invariant. The importance of LCA is in its relevance to the structure and ecological characteristics of large trees in filling the canopy space and their unique contribution in determining the total volume and biomass of forests. Unlike other Lidar derived metrics, LCA is linearly related to total aboveground biomass after being weighted by average wood density and this linear relationship remains unique across different forest types. The comparison of LCA index with ground plots suggests that DBH >50 cm is a more reliable threshold to quantify the number and distribution of large trees and in capturing the variations of the total aboveground biomass across landscapes and regions.

Author contribution

V. Meyer and S. Saatchi developed the model and designed the study. V. Meyer developed the model code and performed the analysis. J. Chave, G. Vincent, M. Keller, F. Espírito-Santo, D. Clark and M. d'Oliveira provided inventory data and derived metrics necessary to run the experiments. A. Ferraz contributed to the data processing. D. Kaki performed a preliminary analysis of the data. V. Meyer prepared the manuscript with contributions from all co-authors.

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Data accessibility

The BCI lidar and forest inventory dataset used in this research are publically available from the Office of Bioinformatics, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

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Table 1. Information on forest inventory plots. * indicates that a site has been used for the calibration of the LCA model. Sources: Antimary and Cotriguaçu: Fearnside, 1997; d'Oliveira et al., 2012, BCI: Center for Tropical Forest Science (CTFS) (Condit, 1998; Hubbell et al., 1999, 2005), Chocó: (bioredd.org), La Selva: Carbono project (Clark and Clark, 2000), Manaus and Tapajós: Espírito-Santo (unpublished results), Nouragues: Réjou-Méchain et al., 2015, Paracou: Gourlet-Fleury et al., 2004; Vincent et al., 2012.

Site	Data	Plots Size (ha)	N plots	Year	Mean WD (g cm^{-3})	Mean AGB (Mg ha^{-1})	Annual rainfall (mm yr^{-1})
Antimary (Brazil)	Plot level	0.25	50	2010	0.61	234	2000
BCI * (Panama)	Tree level	1	50	2010	0.56	235	2600
Chocó (Colombia)	Tree level	0.25	42	2013	0.60	224	10000
Cotriguaçu (Brazil)	Not available	-	-	-	0.60	-	2000
La Selva * (Costa Rica)	Tree level	1	11	2009	0.45	178	4000
Manaus (Brazil)	Tree level	0.25	10	2014	0.66	263	2200
Nouragues * (French Guiana)	Plot level Tree level	1 1	33 7/33	2012	0.66	424	3000
Paracou * (French Guiana)	Plot level	1	85	2009-10	0.71	353	3000
Tapajós (Brazil)	Tree level	0.25	10	2014	0.62	238	1900

Table 2. Information on Lidar data and locations of the 9 research sites.

Site (1km^2 images)	Sensor	Year	Returns m^{-2}	Flight Altitude (m)	Scanning angle (°)	Frequency (kHz)	NW corner lat	NW corner lon
Antimary	Optech ALTM3100EA	2010-2011	10-15	500	11	70	9°17'47.26"S	68°17'15.06"W
BCI	Optech ALTM3100EA	2009	8	1000	35	70	9°9'28.56"N	79°51'18.9"W
Chocó	Optech ALTM3033	2013	4	1000	20	33	3°57'5.71"N	76°49'10.31"W
Cotriguaçu	Optech ALTM3100EA	2011	10-15	850	11	60	9°27'8.87"S	58°51'51.22"W
La Selva	Optech ALTM3100EA	2009	4	1500	20	70	10°25'37.97"N	84°1'8.76"W
Manaus	Optech ALTM3100EA	2012	10-15	850 (max)	11	60	2°56'38.48"S	59°56'12.57"W
Nouragues	Riegl LMS-Q560	2012	12	400	45	200	4°3'10.0"N	52°42'19.95"W
Paracou	Riegl LMS-280i	2009	4	120-220	30	24	5°15'47.73"N	52°56'26.96"W
Tapajós	Optech ALTM3100EA	2011	10-15	850 (max)	11	60	2°50'53.41"S	54°57'44.53"W

Table 3. Coefficients, R^2, RMSE and bias for the models used to estimate AGB_{LCA} without and with wood density as a weighting factor (m_LCA) and m_LCA_wd, respectively).

Model	Equation	a	b	R^2	RMSE	Bias	R^2 cross-val	RMSE cross-val	Bias cross-val
m_LCA	AGB = aLCA + b (Eq. (2))	3.56	136.91	0.59	62.53	0.0	0.58	63.26	0.16
m_LCA_wd	AGB = (aLCA+b) × WD (Eq. (3))	4.47	270.27	0.78	46.02	-0.76	0.77	46.47	-0.63

Figure 1. Segmentation of the 1 km × 1 km images in each site using five canopy height thresholds. A minimum of 100 contiguous pixels was used as a segmentation threshold in all cases.

Figure 2 : LCA in function of height thresholds in the nine study sites. The steepest slopes are between 24 m (Antimary) and 30 m (Nouragues), with an average of 27 m across sites. Steepness of slope was obtained by calculating the derivative of the sigmoid models charactering each site.

Figure 3. Distribution of R^2 between tree height thresholds used to determine LCA and AGB_{Lidar} in the nine 1 ha subareas (a) and distribution of R^2 between tree height thresholds and AGB_{inv} in 1 ha inventory plots of the four calibration sites (b). All optimal thresholds are between 23 m and 30 m. The average maximal height threshold is 27 m.

Figure 4. Relationship between AGB_{inv} density and LCA (a) and AGB density normalized by averaged wood (b). Normalizing AGB by averaged wood density brings the data from different sites closer to a common fit.

Figure 5. AGB_{inv} density vs. AGB_{LCA} estimated with LCA_wd model (a). AGB_{Lidar} density from the 1km^2 images vs. AGB_{LCA} estimated with LCA_wd model (b). The black line represents the 1-to-1 line.

Figure 6. Detection of changes of forest structure from selective logging in the Antimary study area showing a) the difference between pre- and post- logging (2010–2011) Lidar derived LCA at 1 ha grid cells over the entire study area, b) the histogram of LCA for the two Lidar datasets showing the mean difference and the reduction of medium and large LCA areas from selective logging, c) 2010 Lidar LCA segmentation at 1 m resolution over a sample area in the north of the study site, d) same LCA segmentation for 2011 Lidar data, and e) difference of the two segmented areas showing the extent of the logging impact on large trees in addition to natural changes of forest structure from changes in canopy gaps from tree falls and tree growth.

Figure 7. Relationship between LCA and AGB_{LCA} (a) and relationship between AGB_{inv} of large trees (>50 cm DBH) and total AGB_{inv} (b). In both cases, the intercepts represent the contribution of small trees to total AGB. Note that Manaus and Nouragues overlap because they have the same mean wood density, as well as Chocó and Cotriguaçu.

Biogeosciences Discuss., https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-2017-547
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815 Figure 1

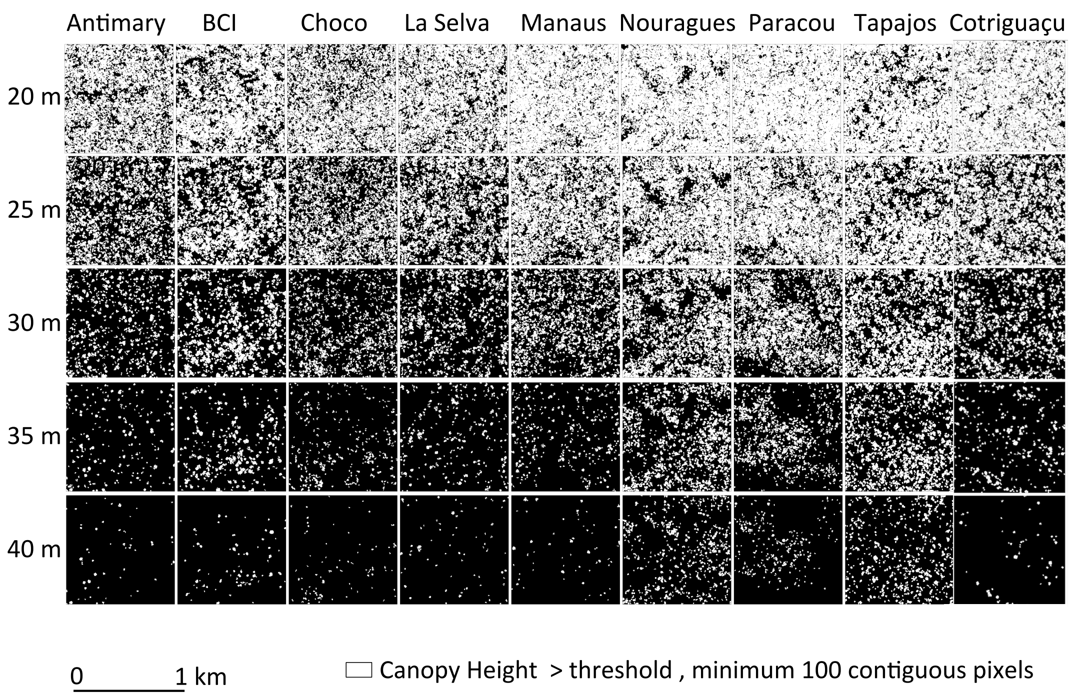

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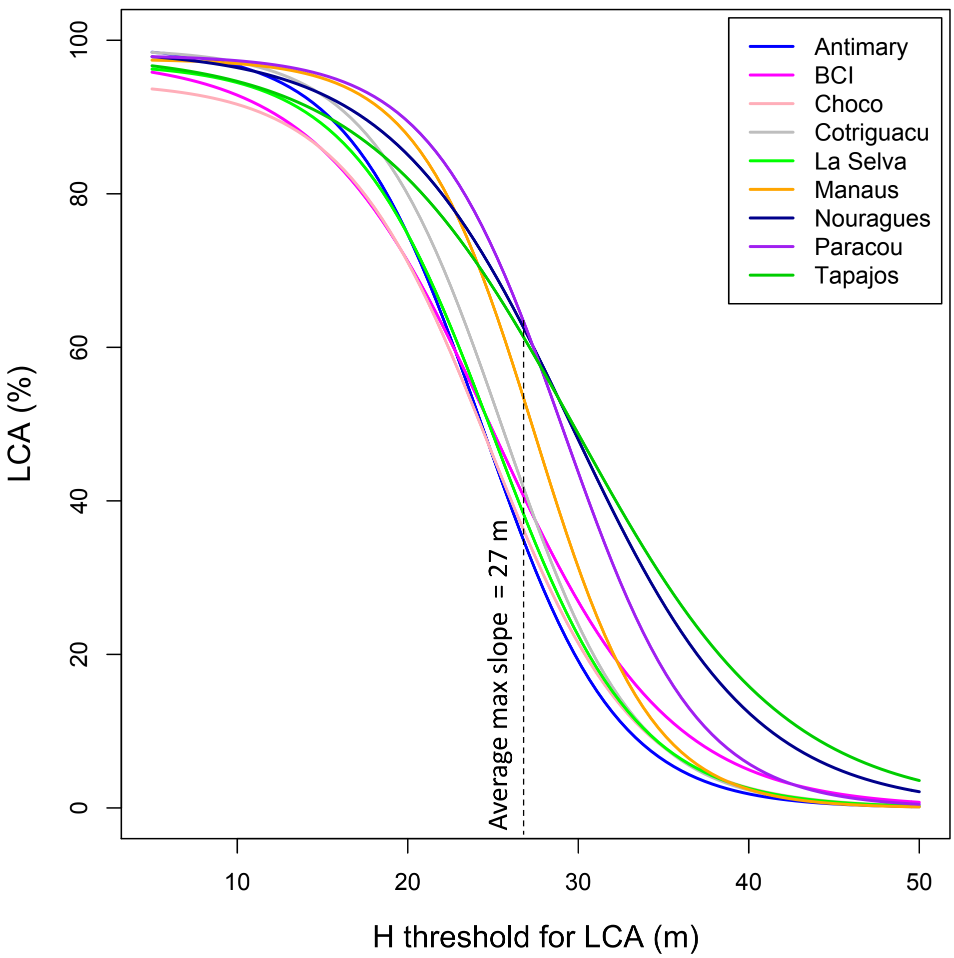
Figure 2



Biogeosciences Discuss., https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-2017-547
Manuscript under review for journal Biogeosciences
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821 Figure 3

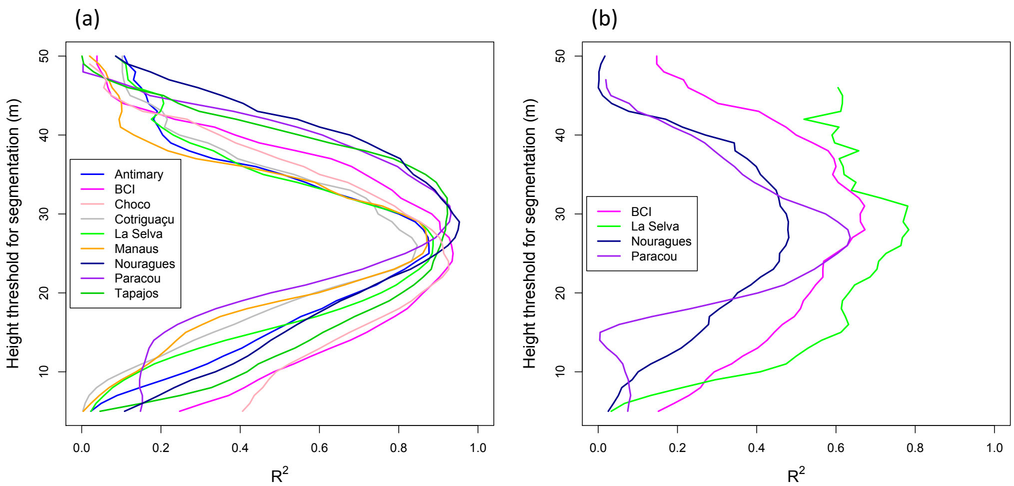

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Figure 4

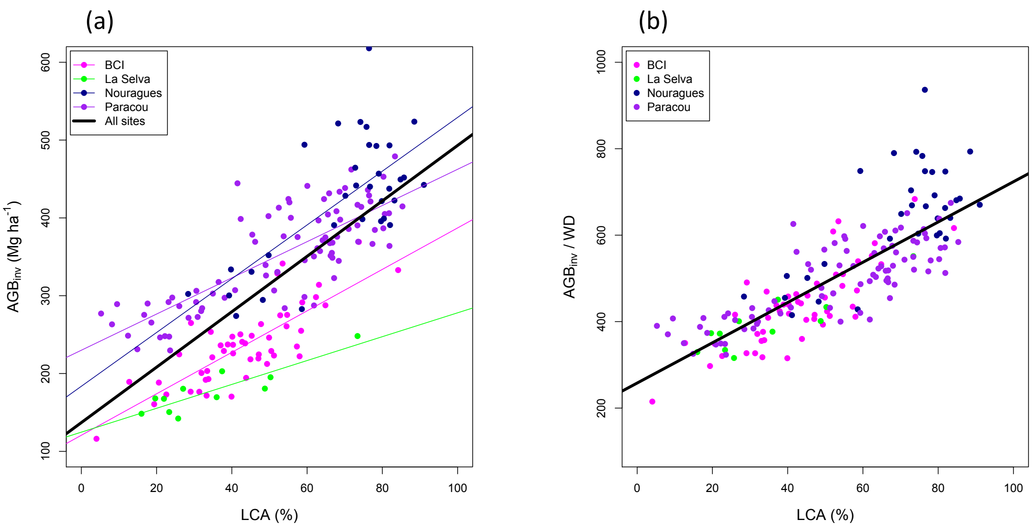
(a)
BCI
La Selva
Nouragues
Paracou
All sites
AGB_{inv} (Mg ha^{-1})
LCA (%)
(b)
BCI
La Selva
Nouragues
Paracou
AGB_{inv} / WD
LCA (%)

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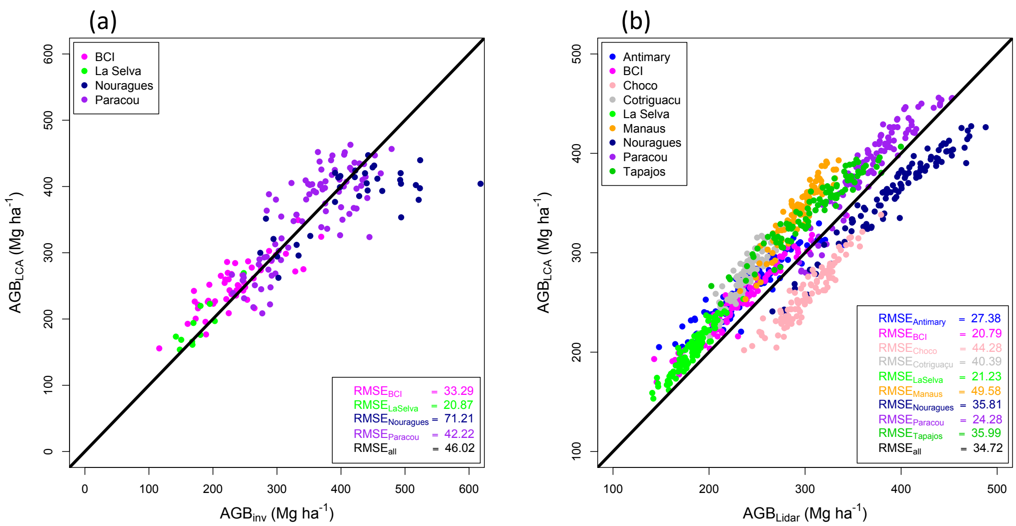
Figure 5



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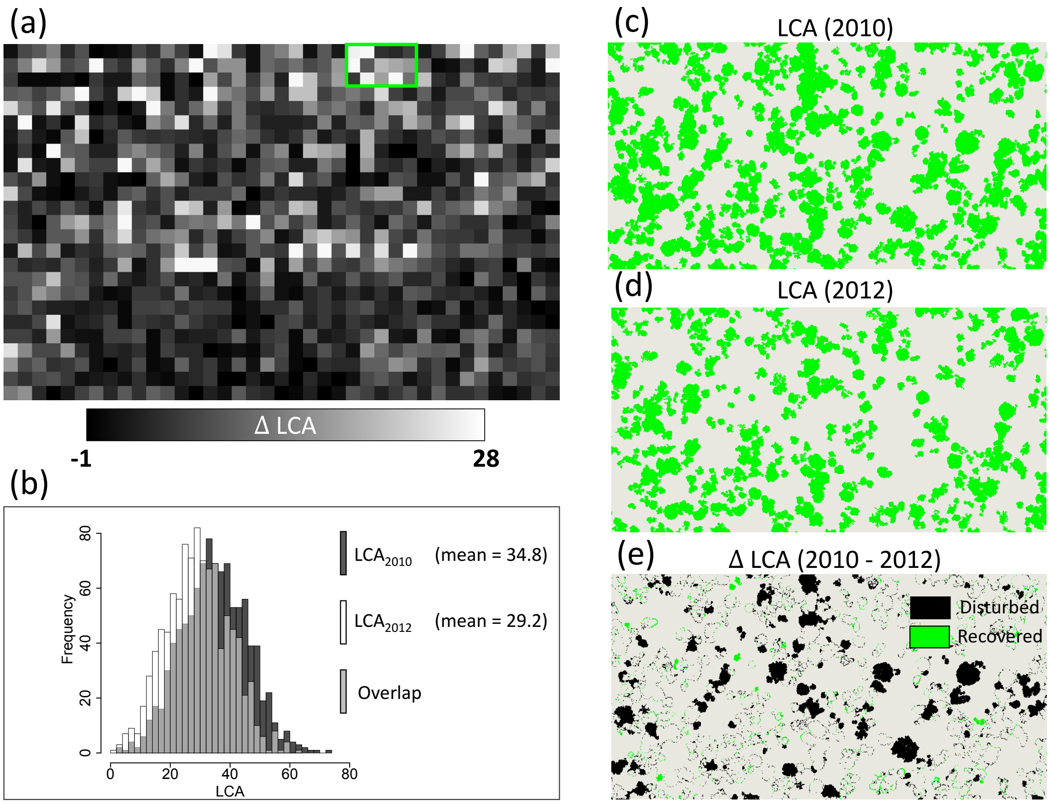
831 Figure 6



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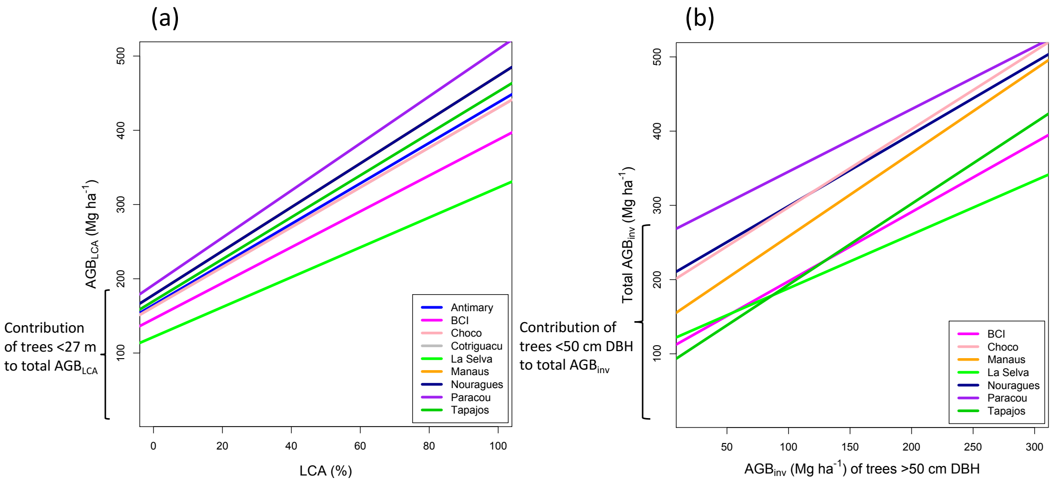
834 Figure 7



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