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# Connecting Earth Observation to High-Throughput

## Biodiversity Data

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## 54 **Preface**

55 There is much interest in using Earth Observation (EO) technology to track biodiversity,  
56 ecosystem functions, and ecosystem services, understandable given the fast pace of  
57 biodiversity loss. However, because most biodiversity is invisible to EO, EO-based  
58 indicators could be misleading, which can reduce the effectiveness of nature  
59 conservation and even unintentionally decrease conservation effort. We describe an  
60 approach that combines automated recording devices, high-throughput DNA  
61 sequencing, and modern ecological modelling to extract much more of the information

62 available in EO data. This approach is achievable now, offering efficient and near-real-  
63 time monitoring of management impacts on biodiversity and its functions and services.

## 64 **Meeting the Aichi Biodiversity Targets**

65 From Google Earth to airborne sensors, the Copernicus Sentinels, and cube satellites,  
66 Earth Observation is undergoing a rapid expansion in capacity, accessibility, resolution,  
67 and signal-to-noise ratio, resulting in a recognised shift in our capability for using  
68 remote-sensing technologies to monitor biophysical processes on land and water<sup>1-3</sup>.  
69 These advances are motivating calls to use Earth Observation products to manage our  
70 natural environment and to track progress toward global and national policy targets on  
71 biodiversity and ecosystem services<sup>4-6</sup>. Foremost among these policies are the Strategic  
72 Plan for Biodiversity and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, which were adopted in 2010 by  
73 the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to "take effective and urgent  
74 action to halt the loss of biodiversity in order to ensure that by 2020 ecosystems are  
75 resilient and continue to provide essential services..."<sup>7</sup>. The United Nations Sustainable  
76 Development Goals<sup>8</sup> now include some of the Aichi Targets, and the 2015 Paris  
77 Agreement has reiterated the commitments of the UN Framework Convention on  
78 Climate Change to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation

79 (REDD+) and to securing non-carbon benefits, which include biodiversity and ecosystem  
80 services<sup>9</sup>.

81 However, we have struggled to track and report progress toward the Aichi Targets in a  
82 standardised and comprehensive way<sup>10</sup>. Although almost two-thirds of the CBD Parties  
83 have updated their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans to reflect the 2010  
84 revisions, many still do not contain measurable indicators on the state of biodiversity, let  
85 alone ecosystem services. This lack of quantification conceals the impacts of policy and  
86 management interventions on biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services<sup>11</sup>. The  
87 difficulty of designing indicators<sup>12-14</sup> has prompted an international consortium of  
88 biodiversity scientists called GEO BON (Group on Earth Observations' Biodiversity  
89 Observation Network) to propose a framework of Essential Biodiversity Variables<sup>15</sup>, with  
90 the aim of setting minimum standards of coverage to ensure informativeness and to  
91 harmonise disparate local measures so that biodiversity and ecosystem data can be  
92 compared over space and time. The Essential Biodiversity Variables thus measure the  
93 'state of biodiversity' at multiple levels: genetic composition, species populations,  
94 species traits, community composition, ecosystem structure, and ecosystem function<sup>15</sup>.

95 Although it was originally envisioned that most of the variables (genetic to community  
96 composition) would be scaled up from "intensive *in-situ* measurements"<sup>15</sup> taken on the

97 ground, such measurements are costly and difficult because they are traditionally  
98 gathered by visual and aural detection of plants and animals in the wild (preceded by  
99 months or years of observer practice) and by mass collection of organisms (followed by  
100 months of identification from morphology), so that data collection is slowed by human-  
101 caused bottlenecks in sampling and taxonomy<sup>16</sup>.

102 As a result, attention is now being focused on designing 'Satellite Remote Sensing-  
103 Essential Biodiversity Variables' (SRS-EBVs) to enable cost-effective and global-scale  
104 monitoring<sup>5,6,12</sup>. The problem here is that only a few Earth Observation products can be  
105 mapped directly to Essential Biodiversity Variables and then to Aichi Targets, because  
106 these products primarily measure gross vegetation and landscape metrics, such as land  
107 cover and phenology<sup>4</sup>. For example, Pettorelli et al.<sup>12</sup> found only two Earth Observation  
108 products (net primary productivity and fire incidence) that could serve as Essential  
109 Biodiversity Variables for the Sahara, despite this biome's suitability for remote sensing  
110 due to its visible biodiversity hotspots, remoteness, and availability of long time series.  
111 Many of the Aichi Targets require data with species-level resolution, either because some  
112 species are direct policy targets (e.g. Target 9: "invasive species controlled or eradicated")  
113 or because species compositional data define the metric (e.g. Target 11: "protected areas  
114 are ecologically representative and conserved effectively").

Clearly, a radically new approach is required if progress towards the Aichi Targets is to be accelerated, one that is robust, widely affordable, and can record stocks and changes in biodiversity and ecosystem services consistently, continuously, and at high resolution over large geographic scales. Here, we present such an approach in a framework that exploits recent efficiency gains and analytical breakthroughs in sensors, computation, ecology, taxonomy, and genomics (**Figure 1, Box 1**).

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### **Box 1. Inferring a Hidden Ecosystem Function from Space**

Large-bodied Amazonian monkeys are responsible for a key ecosystem function: they are the primary dispersers of large seeds, which are associated with more carbon-dense tree species. Peres et al.<sup>17</sup> have proposed that this function boosts forest carbon storage. The idea can be tested by using Earth Observation data and public records to map human settlements and transport corridors and predict where monkey populations have declined through hunting<sup>17,18</sup>. We can then use on-the-ground sampling and airborne sensors to test whether forests that have had longer exposure to hunting lack monkey populations and have more low-carbon-density tree species dispersed by wind and birds. In short, by combining Earth-Observation-derived maps of human activity with empirical observations of the response of primate populations to that activity, it should be



possible to map and track an ecosystem function (large-seed dispersal) that is invisible to satellites but contributes to an important ecosystem service (climate regulation).

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## From Point Samples to Continuous Maps

Instead of trying to map Earth Observation (EO) products directly to biodiversity, as encapsulated by SRS-EBVs<sup>4-6,12</sup>, we propose to extract more information from EO data by interpolating biodiversity point samples to build continuous landscape maps of species distributions (**Figure 1**)<sup>19</sup>. Because it is species that are mapped, it then becomes possible to layer on the vast biological knowledge that we have collectively built up over decades of research, including historical distributions, phylogenetic relationships, and knowledge of species traits and interactions to infer, map, and track the distributions of ecosystem functions and services (**Box 1**). This approach, which we call here **CEOBE** (Connecting Earth Observation to Biodiversity and Ecosystems), is possible because of (1) major advances in EO sensitivity and capacity, (2) more efficient techniques to collect biodiversity data on the ground, and (3) modern community-analysis models from statistical ecology. We now review each of these advances, with additional detail in Supplementary Information.

## **The New Era of Earth Observation**

There are ten times as many satellites in operation now as there were in the 1970s, a result of increasing sensor longevity and a six-fold increase in launches<sup>20</sup>. Spatial resolution has improved to less than 1 m in both optical and radar sensors. Data continuity is also being maintained, most directly by the launch of NASA's Landsat 8 in 2013, which extends and technically enhances the 40-year Landsat record of medium-resolution, multispectral surface observations<sup>21</sup>. Data continuity is a key factor in understanding changes in biodiversity, as threats to biodiversity impact at a range of scales and often across lengthy timespans<sup>22</sup>.

The long-term Landsat record is being enhanced by new satellite systems and multiple sensors in a global network, a 'virtual constellation' that may help overcome problems in terrestrial monitoring from single sensors<sup>2</sup>. As part of the Copernicus program, the ESA Sentinel satellites are the latest addition to the global network. With six missions planned and the first three launched, the Sentinels have radar, optical sensors, radiometers, and spectrometers with different goals<sup>23</sup>. Sentinel-1, the radar satellite, and Sentinel-2, the superspectral high-resolution mission, are of particular interest to biodiversity monitoring, with long-term continuity of measurements, global coverage, and quick revisit times<sup>24,25</sup>.

170 There have also been developments in hyperspectral sensors with EnMAP, HypsIRI,  
171 PRISMA, and FLEX imaging spectrometer missions planned<sup>1</sup>. In addition, airborne data  
172 collection using high-resolution 3D airborne laser scanning is complementing spectral  
173 information with structure<sup>26</sup>. Swarms of commercial cube satellites and the use of drones  
174 to carry sensors are additional significant steps that complement these large-scale  
175 programs (**Supplementary Note 1** "Earth Observation technology").

176 The increase in spatial resolution in the new sensors implies greater precision because  
177 reference measurements taken within meter-scale plots on the ground can be matched  
178 directly to meter-scale pixels<sup>27</sup>. This in turn improves the ability of EO to recognise  
179 spatial gradients and boundaries.

180 Two additional factors affect the utility of remote sensing data for understanding  
181 biodiversity change (**Supplementary Note 2** "Biodiversity and ecosystem information in  
182 EO data"): affordability and access<sup>22</sup>. There has been a cultural shift, with free open  
183 access on the rise. The opening of the Landsat archive in 2008 was a monumental  
184 development<sup>28</sup>, with ESA's Copernicus program following suit. Data access also refers to  
185 the ability of users to retrieve, manipulate, and extract value from EO data. Cloud  
186 computing and toolboxes are making these processes manageable, even with large data  
187 archives.

The availability of copious EO data that have been shown in multiple studies to correlate closely with on-the-ground measures of ecosystem structure, habitat condition, and even animal communities (**Supplementary Note 2**) might suggest that remote sensors can be used directly to define environmental indicators, but we must acknowledge that we are still in the early stages of understanding how biodiversity delivers ecosystem functions and services, and how they all respond to exogenous change. Directly observing functional diversity is a partial solution but only with visible biodiversity such as vegetation<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the challenge is to find ways to exploit the high efficiency and information content of EO data while not falling prey to *reification fallacy* (**Box 2**), which can arise when convenient but incomplete indicators are made available<sup>29,30</sup>. Our institutions and reporting systems then retain the option to add and respond to new knowledge.

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## **Box 2. The Perils of Convenient Indicators**

If we rely too directly on EO data, we run the risk of *reification fallacy*, in which a mere indicator of a policy target itself ends up the target. Reification fallacy can reduce or narrow conservation effort<sup>31</sup> and can crowd out future discoveries<sup>32</sup>. For example, while remote sensing is an efficient and direct way to measure forest *cover* (Aichi Target 5:

reducing the loss rate of natural habitats), using forest cover and phenology to measure the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks (Target 15)<sup>4</sup> would ignore taxa invisible to satellites and could thus result in policymakers failing to exert the additional effort that is required to conserve saprotrophic fungal diversity, seed-dispersing mammals, and the seemingly inconsequential isopod, all of which have been implicated in boosting carbon storage<sup>17,33,34</sup>. More generally, land-cover class, which is a common EO-indicator, is a highly error-prone way to map and assess the complex processes supporting ecosystem services<sup>35</sup>. In short, convenient EO products could lead policymakers to focus only on that portion of biodiversity and ecosystem services that is directly observed by remote sensing, ignoring the rest.

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## High-Throughput Biodiversity Measurement

Most biodiversity, whether animal, fungal, plant, or microbial, and its many functions and services, is invisible to EO and will remain so for some time. But a growing number of efficient technologies are available for detecting and identifying biodiversity on the ground<sup>36,37</sup> (**Supplementary Note 3** “Biodiversity technology”). Automated bioacoustic and camera-trap recording devices (ARDs) can run continuously for weeks and accumulate thousands of records of invertebrates, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and

mammals, and thus allow extended sampling of large areas at low workloads<sup>38-42</sup>.

Alternatively, high-throughput DNA sequencers can be used in metabarcoding or metagenomic pipelines to detect and identify anywhere from one to thousands of species at a time from mass-collected, bulk samples of organisms (e.g. 'biodiversity soups'<sup>43</sup>), or from 'environmental DNA,' which is DNA liberated into the environment in the skin, hair, mucous, saliva, sperm, eggs, exudates, faeces, urine, blood, spores, root fragments, leaves, fruit, pollen, or rotting body parts of their original owners<sup>44,45</sup> (**Figure 2, Supplementary Note 3**). Multiple studies have now shown that metabarcode datasets reflect high-quality, morphologically identified biodiversity datasets sufficiently closely to allow correct management decisions, given best-practice protocols and controls<sup>46-51</sup>.

The taxonomic identities, phylogenetic affinities, functional genes<sup>52</sup>, spectral properties (of visible vegetation<sup>26,53,54</sup>), and/or co-occurrence patterns<sup>55</sup> of the detected species can be used to parameterise process-based production functions for ecosystem services<sup>56-58</sup> (**Figure 1**). For instance, the species identities and biomasses of wild bees identified metagenomically from bulk samples<sup>59</sup> could be combined with flower-use observation data<sup>60</sup> and detailed vegetation classification from EO to infer the availability and nature of local pollination services. Metagenomic data matched to identified species can be particularly powerful when the impacts of species loss on ecosystem function are not

243 random, evidence that has previously relied on intensive field sampling, e.g. in tropical  
244 freshwater<sup>61</sup> and marine benthic communities<sup>62</sup>.

## 245 **Statistical Modelling as the Bridge**

246 Earth Observation technology can produce large-scale, fine-resolution maps and dense  
247 time series of a wide range of biophysical variables (**Supplementary Note 1 and 2**), but  
248 it is difficult to translate the biophysical variables into biodiversity information. In  
249 contrast, ARDs and DNA sequencing are capable of generating large amounts of  
250 biodiversity information at species- or even individual-level resolution<sup>63,64</sup>, but only from  
251 point samples (**Supplementary Note 3**). Modern methods of statistical modelling allow  
252 us to interpolate these point samples to build continuous species maps and to estimate  
253 emergent metrics such as richness and dissimilarity<sup>65-68</sup>, potentially also including  
254 estimates of species abundance or biomass, depending on the sampling and analytical  
255 methods used (**Supplementary Note 4** "Statistical modelling").

256 The three approaches with immediate potential are *Joint Species Distribution Models*<sup>69-72</sup>  
257 (including *Latent Variable Models*), *Community Occupancy-Detection Models*<sup>73</sup>, and  
258 *Generalised Dissimilarity Models*<sup>65,74</sup> (**Figure 3, Supplementary Note 4**). Each approach  
259 starts with a site-by-species matrix, from data that have been collected by ARDs or been  
260 generated via metabarcoding or metagenomics (**Figure 2, Supplementary Note 3**), plus

any existing species distribution data. If some species are not detected, repeat sampling can be used to infer missing occurrences<sup>73</sup>. The site-by-species matrix is then paired with a corresponding site-by-environmental-covariate matrix, generated from continuous EO data plus any relevant geographical layers, and the two datasets are combined statistically to infer the joint distributions of multiple species across entire regions (Figure 3, Supplementary Note 4). All three approaches also provide a rigorous framework for quantifying sources of uncertainty and have already been applied successfully to conventionally acquired datasets (Box 3).

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### Box 3. Current Practice in Community Modelling

Ovaskainen et al.<sup>71</sup> used a joint species distribution model to predict the distributions of 55 butterfly species scored for presence/absence on a grid of 2609 10 X 10-km cells across Great Britain that had been sampled from 1995-1999 in a large citizen-science project. The model was successfully parameterised with a training dataset of just 300 cells and four environmental covariates (degree-days and three types of vegetation cover), plus spatially structured latent variables. Latent variables use observed species subgroupings to detect the effects of unmeasured environmental filters or species interactions such as competition. The parameterised model was used to predict butterfly



280 communities in the testing dataset, which consisted of the remaining 2309 grid cells.

281 Together, the measured and latent variables explained an average of 42% of the variance

282 in species occurrence (with medium-prevalence species more accurately predicted), and

283 the two most dominant latent variables revealed a north-south gradient in species

284 composition, with especially distinct communities in the southeast and northwest.

285 Species richness per grid cell was accurately predicted, and the model's ability to

286 discriminate presence and absence was high (mean AUC = 0.91).

287 Kéry and Royle<sup>75</sup> used community-occupancy modelling to analyse the 2001 Swiss

288 breeding-bird survey while accounting for variation in detectability due to season, site,

289 and species effects. The dataset consisted of 254 1-km<sup>2</sup> grid cells, each visited three

290 times. The fitted model predicted each species' probability of occurrence as a function of

291 site elevation and forest cover, as well as variance in the uncertainty of occurrence

292 estimates, making it possible to estimate species distributions across the landscape and

293 confidence in those estimates. Parameter estimates were naturally less precise for rare

294 species, but information could be 'borrowed' from data-rich species to increase the

295 precision of predictions for rare species. These procedures were able to compensate for

296 the fact that only 134 total bird species had been detected in the survey, which is less

297 than the true total of 163 species known to breed regularly in Switzerland, plus 22

occasional residents (the testing dataset). The occupancy-corrected model estimated that between 1 and 11 species had been overlooked per grid cell and thus, that the true total in 2001 was 169 species.

Mokany et al.<sup>76</sup> applied Generalised Dissimilarity Modelling (GDM) to a dataset of 2330 expert surveys of New Zealand land snails, which recorded 845 of 998 known species. The GDM was parameterised with a training dataset of 2280 surveys and fourteen environmental variables and explained 57% of the variation in beta diversity. In addition, a generalised additive model parameterised on the training dataset explained 27% of the variation in species richness (after scaling the 20 x 20-m survey quadrats to match the area of modelling units (200 x 200-m); see discussion of scaling in **Supplementary Note 4**). Finally, the outputs were combined using a procedure called DynamicFOAM to assign snail species to communities across New Zealand. Error was assessed by predicting compositions in a testing dataset of 50 sites that had been held out of the model. On average, the model was able to predict half the species that had been observed in each cell, and the predicted total occupancy area per species was highly correlated with the number of quadrat occurrences (Pearson's  $r = 0.902$ ). When quadrats were pooled into groups of 3 to 400 to reduce sampling stochasticity, predicted species richnesses almost perfectly explained observed richnesses ( $R^2 = 0.99$ ).

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318 By mapping species distributions as the primary output, we do not lock ourselves into an  
319 arbitrary set of convenient indicators, and ongoing discoveries on the relationship  
320 between biodiversity and function, which are typically carried out at the species level, can  
321 be added. As an illustration, the species diversity of wood-decaying fungi in natural  
322 forests is notoriously difficult to assay but can be predicted in part by the volume and  
323 species diversity of the stock of dead wood on the ground<sup>77</sup>, and these environmental  
324 covariates are partially quantifiable via airborne LiDAR sensors (**Supplementary Note**  
325 **1**)<sup>78</sup>, thus allowing EO-based inference of the distribution and level of wood-decaying  
326 fungal diversity. Subsequent and unrelated research has suggested that pieces of dead  
327 wood inhabited by a higher diversity of fungal species decompose more slowly, possibly  
328 due to more intense interference competition<sup>34</sup>. Combining the two results suggests that  
329 an EO-derived map of fungal species diversity could be used to contrast landscape  
330 management options for how well they conserve saprotrophic fungal biodiversity and  
331 thus enhance carbon storage.

332 Two further reasons for focusing on species-resolution maps as the primary output are  
333 that the regional species pool (*gamma diversity*) and the biological dissimilarity of sites

(*beta diversity*) could contribute to maintaining functional stability<sup>58,79,80</sup> and that species-

resolution outputs retain the option of aggregation to represent different aspects of

biodiversity, including higher-taxonomic, functional, and phylogenetic groupings<sup>81</sup>.

Many methods are also available to predict *individual* species ranges, and EO can help

improve their accuracy, as shown by an example<sup>82</sup> combining MODIS satellite data with

environmental DNA to map an invasive diatom over a watershed [Target 9, invasive

species pathway identified] (**Supplementary Figure 3.1**). However, ecosystem functions

and services are rarely delivered by only one species, and simply summing the outputs of

individual models to simulate communities is computationally inefficient, statistically

flawed, and does not account for species interactions<sup>83</sup>.

## **From CEOBE to Aichi**

In essence, our argument is that new technologies make the new community-modelling

approaches (**Box 3, Figure 3**) widely feasible, especially in biodiversity hotspots, where it

is particularly difficult to generate large datasets. Larger numbers of environmental

covariates and species together increase explanatory power by providing a greater

breadth of predictors, and by exploiting latent variables and letting rare species 'borrow'

information<sup>42,75,84</sup>, respectively. As a result, continuous streams of EO data can be more

powerfully interpreted to track biodiversity status and trends (**Figure 1**).

The predictive performance of fitted models can be cross-validated by rounds of comparison with testing datasets that were either split from the model-training dataset<sup>71,76</sup> or derived from historical and expert knowledge<sup>75</sup>, and thus, the adequacy of the input data and sampling design, or conversely the degree of model uncertainty, can be assessed *post hoc* (**Box 3**). The regularly updated biodiversity maps that are the primary outputs of the CEOBE approach (**Figure 1**), plus the quantified uncertainty in those maps, can then be incorporated into a larger process of structured decision making and adaptive management<sup>85-87</sup> to (1) identify likely consequences of proposed actions by observing natural experiments that mimic those actions, (2) compare observed results of management interventions against objectives, and (3) help identify and tackle sources of uncertainty.

An early example of the CEOBE approach is given by Sollmann et al.<sup>42</sup>, who used community-occupancy modelling to connect environmental covariates from the 5-m-resolution RapidEye satellite to point-sample data from camera traps in three tropical-forest logging concessions in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, one of which has been managed to reduced-impact-logging standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council (Aichi Target 7, sustainable management under forestry). The dataset consisted of detection events for 28 mammal species at 166 camera-trap stations, each station scored using EO data for

370 distance to water, distance to oil-palm plantation, and forest condition. Estimated  
371 relationships between species occurrence and the three covariates were used to predict  
372 species occurrence across the three reserves, with rare mammal species borrowing  
373 information from more common ones. Species richness was estimated to be higher in  
374 the FSC-certified reserve, particularly for threatened species (Target 12, improved  
375 conservation status of threatened species). The percentage of area occupied, which could  
376 indicate larger population sizes, was also estimated to be higher in the FSC-certified  
377 reserve for the majority of species, including for some highly endangered species like the  
378 Sunda pangolin *Manis javanica*. Finally, the modelled species richness maps were found  
379 to correlate strongly with EO-estimated aboveground biomass at the large spatial grain  
380 of whole reserves, but not at a finer resolution (potentially due to hunting at reserve  
381 borders), further demonstrating the critical contribution of ground-level point samples  
382 for linking pure-EO data to biodiversity.

383 The major remaining components of uncertainty relate to generalisability, because only a  
384 single FSC-certified reserve was sampled; the applicability of results to arboreal species,  
385 which tend to be detected more frequently in forests with disturbed canopy but are not  
386 necessarily more widespread in these forests; and wide confidence intervals around  
387 parameter estimates for some species as a consequence of sparse data and a fairly

388 complex hierarchical model. This example serves as a proof of concept that camera  
389 trapping and occupancy modelling can be used to assess biodiversity conservation based  
390 on species maps, and the approach has been incorporated in the ten-year forest  
391 management plan and wildlife monitoring strategy for the FSC-certified area. Repeated  
392 surveys will help to narrow uncertainties in the model, and a future power analysis is  
393 planned to estimate the sampling effort required to detect trends and/or provide  
394 estimates with a desired level of certainty<sup>88</sup>.

395 Another example of the CEOBE approach is the use of Generalised Dissimilarity  
396 Modelling to connect EO-derived metrics of habitat degradation and fragmentation<sup>89,90</sup>  
397 to over 300 million records of more than 400,000 species from the Global Biodiversity  
398 Information Facility ([www.gbif.org](http://www.gbif.org)) and the Map of Life ([mol.org](http://mol.org))<sup>91</sup>. The GDM models  
399 spatial turnover in biodiversity composition at 1-km-resolution globally, and by invoking  
400 the assumption that terrestrial biodiversity declines according to the classical species-  
401 area power function, the GDM estimates the proportion of biodiversity that has been  
402 retained in each grid cell after habitat loss, based on the proportion of similar habitat  
403 remaining unimpacted within the landscape<sup>92</sup>. This metric thus tracks whether rates of  
404 loss, degradation, and fragmentation of natural habitats are being reduced (Aichi Target  
405 5). Further, by combining this approach with a global database of protected-area

406 coverage ([www.protectedplanet.net](http://www.protectedplanet.net)), it is possible to report progress against Target 11,  
407 which aims for protected areas to cover areas of particular importance to biodiversity  
408 and ecosystem services and to be ecologically representative and connected (see also  
409 Ref. 93). An important caveat is that the biodiversity data in this case are historical in  
410 nature and thus contain the taxonomic and sampling biases and constraints of the past  
411 (**Box 2**). Ideally, the biodiversity data will transition to up-to-date, properly sampled, and  
412 more taxonomically comprehensive point samples.

413 Of course, CEOBE outputs cannot contribute to all Aichi Targets, namely those that are  
414 focused on policy, planning, and funding reform (Targets 2, 3, 4, 20), the conservation of  
415 genetic cultivars (Target 13), the alleviation of climate-change pressures on coral reefs  
416 (Target 10), benefits sharing (Target 16), and the integration of traditional knowledge  
417 (Target 18). It also remains to be seen how well or poorly EO data reflect biodiversity in  
418 aquatic ecosystems (Targets 6 and 11), although environmental DNA on its own is a  
419 highly promising source of data on aquatic biodiversity. On the other hand, the efficient  
420 production of biodiversity maps and open access to analytical pipelines will help to  
421 disseminate the science base and technologies related to biodiversity (Target 19), and  
422 could contribute to public awareness of efforts to conserve biodiversity (Target 1) and  
423 improve the efficiency of national biodiversity planning (Target 17).



## Conclusions

It is extremely difficult to identify all the species present in a location (*the Linnaean challenge*), to delimit the geographic distributions of species (*the Wallacean challenge*), and to quantify their responses to natural and anthropogenic environmental change (*the Hutchinsonian challenge*)<sup>94</sup>. A synergy of Earth Observation, automated recording devices, high-throughput DNA sequencing, and modern statistical modelling can meet these challenges by making it possible to scale up from data-rich but finite sets of point samples to spatially continuous biodiversity maps, which are more informative than a few convenient indicator species but still let us generate summary statistics to communicate trends to decision-makers and the general public. The use of formal statistical frameworks lets us quantify error, identify gaps in our understanding, objectively rank the most likely pressures on biodiversity from multiple candidates, and increase the robustness of change detection. Adding information on species interactions and functions helps link biodiversity to ecosystem functions and services (**Box 1, Figure 1**) in a process-based approach<sup>56</sup>, rather than relying on crude estimates from land classes<sup>35</sup>. Finally, as DNA-based technologies mature, the same samples could track population-genetic diversity<sup>64,95,96</sup>.

441 A global, multi-resolution monitoring network is thus within our reach but will still  
442 involve a number of challenges associated with technical capacity, computation and data  
443 storage, and data standardisation. For every ecologically distinct region, there will be an  
444 initial cost to collect data for model parameterisation, followed by a low level of  
445 continuous sampling, which will be necessary for updating models and for surveillance  
446 monitoring of environmental drivers that are invisible to EO, such as broad-spectrum  
447 insecticides. The initial costs are probably best borne by governments, as part of their  
448 commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and there is great promise in  
449 using citizen-science networks to collect standardised, bulk biodiversity samples over  
450 large areas. A laudable example is the School Malaise Trap Program that recruited  
451 hundreds of secondary-school science classes to collect arthropods across Canada  
452 ([malaiseprogram.com](http://malaiseprogram.com)). Initial investment could also come from existing monitoring  
453 budgets with the expectation that additional information content will compensate for  
454 reduced sample numbers within existing programs<sup>82</sup>. The follow-up continuous sampling  
455 requires steady funding streams, and the standardisation of the CEOBE approach meets  
456 the needs of international certification schemes, such as REDD+, Climate, Community &  
457 Biodiversity Standards, Forest Stewardship Council, and the Roundtable on Sustainable  
458 Palm Oil, which all require the continuous monitoring of biodiversity and ecosystem

459 services. Biodiversity-offset payments to mitigate the impacts of development and  
460 carbon emissions are also expected to provide funding streams, and standardised  
461 assessments are needed to ensure that offsetting results in biodiversity net gain<sup>97</sup>.

462 The CEOBE approach also depends on institutional support for the multidisciplinary  
463 collaborations needed to generate, combine, analyse, and act upon data from disparate  
464 disciplines (EO, ARDs, genomics, taxonomy and systematics, ecosystem functions and  
465 services, statistics, and decision science), expertise that no single individual has<sup>12,30,98</sup>.

466 Identifying causal determinants of species distributions needs a clear understanding of  
467 phylogenetic structure and functional diversity, the ecological processes involved, and  
468 what EO sensors can and cannot observe<sup>99</sup>. Expert knowledge will also contribute to  
469 sampling design and covariate selection so that the full breadth of environmental  
470 conditions is captured, especially those not visible to EO.

471 On the other hand, collaborations need not be global. Political and social interests will  
472 vary by region, and agencies should be encouraged to trial CEOBE within their  
473 jurisdictions where there are clear opportunities to improve management, while also  
474 enforcing the publication of primary data and analytical pipelines<sup>27,100</sup>. The  
475 Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) could play an  
476 important role as a global coordinating institution.

477 Resources for environmental management are always likely to be limited, but by doing  
478 more with our expensively gained field data, we can take action more efficiently and  
479 effectively. What is required now is leadership by governments and international  
480 organisations to stimulate integrated research and to endorse the use of comprehensive  
481 biodiversity information<sup>6</sup>.

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## 486 **Author Contributions**

487 BC and HB led the sections on Earth Observation technology. KB and DWY led the  
488 sections on Biodiversity technology. AB led the sections on Statistical modelling. AB, RS,  
489 AW, OO, and DWY led the sections on case studies (Box 3 and CEOBE to Aichi). CM led  
490 the Conclusions section. Figures were created by KB, AB, CC, and AZ. All authors  
491 contributed to multiple rewrites, with a large contribution by DR. AB and DWY wrote the  
492 first draft and supervised the work.

## 493 **Additional Information**

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## Competing Interests

DWY and AV are co-founders of a private company that provides commercial metabarcoding services.

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## Figure legends

### **Figure 1. CEOBE – Connecting Earth Observation to Biodiversity and Ecosystems. Top**

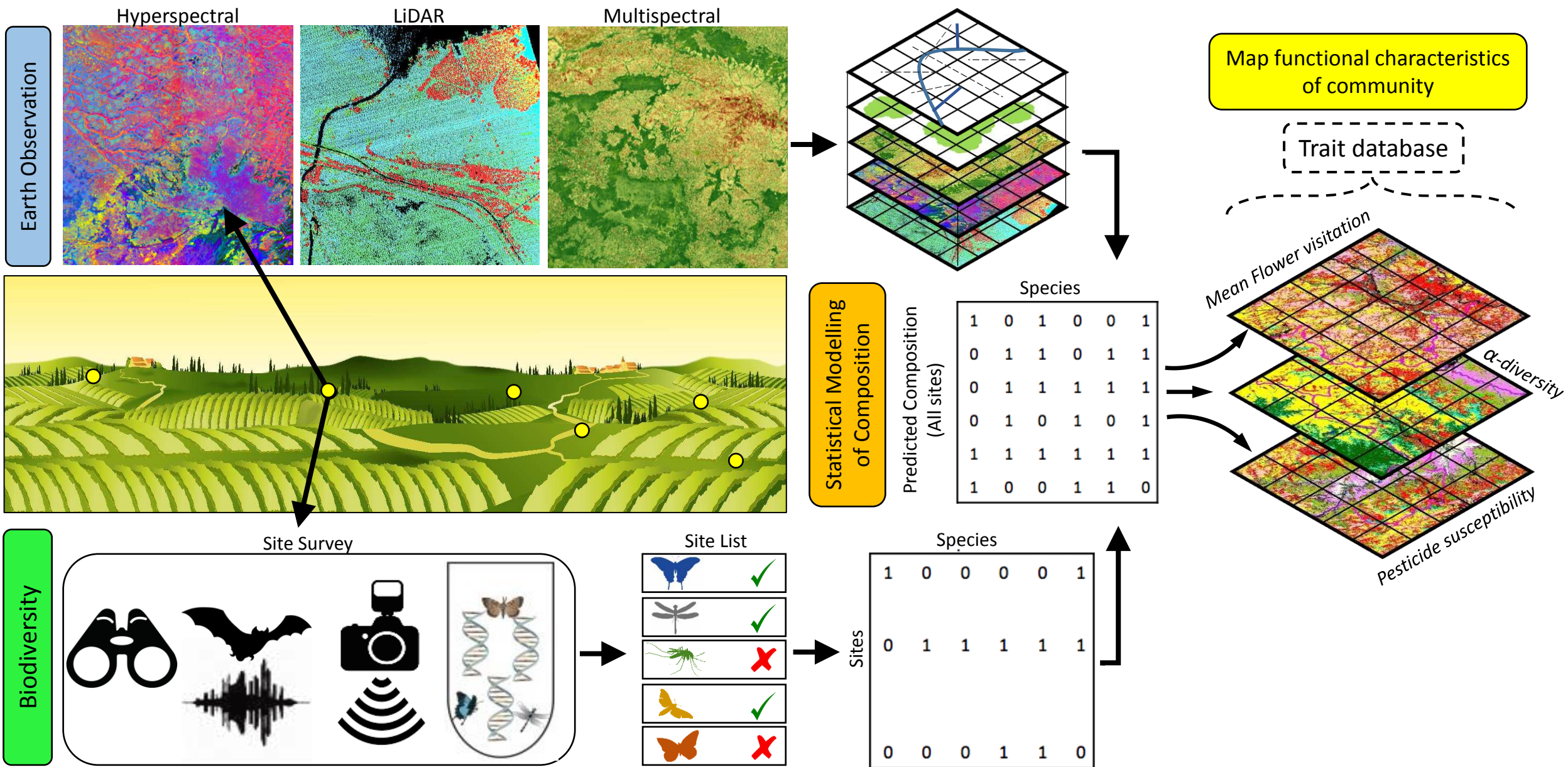
**row left:** EO data and other geographical datasets are used to generate spatially continuous maps of biophysical data (**S1, S2**). **Middle row left:** A real landscape with point-sample locations indicated by yellow dots. **Bottom row left:** Biodiversity is recorded manually using traditional methods, automated audio or image recording devices, or metabarcoding or metagenomic pipelines to generate a site X species table (**Figure 2, S3**). However, most of the landscape is not sampled (empty rows in the table). **Right side:** The point samples are combined statistically with continuous biophysical maps to predict biodiversity composition over the whole landscape (**S4**). In combination with ancillary data like trait databases, process-based models can then identify the functional composition of any location and map the expected distributions of ecosystem functions and services.

### **Figure 2. Metabarcoding and metagenomic processing pipelines for high-throughput**

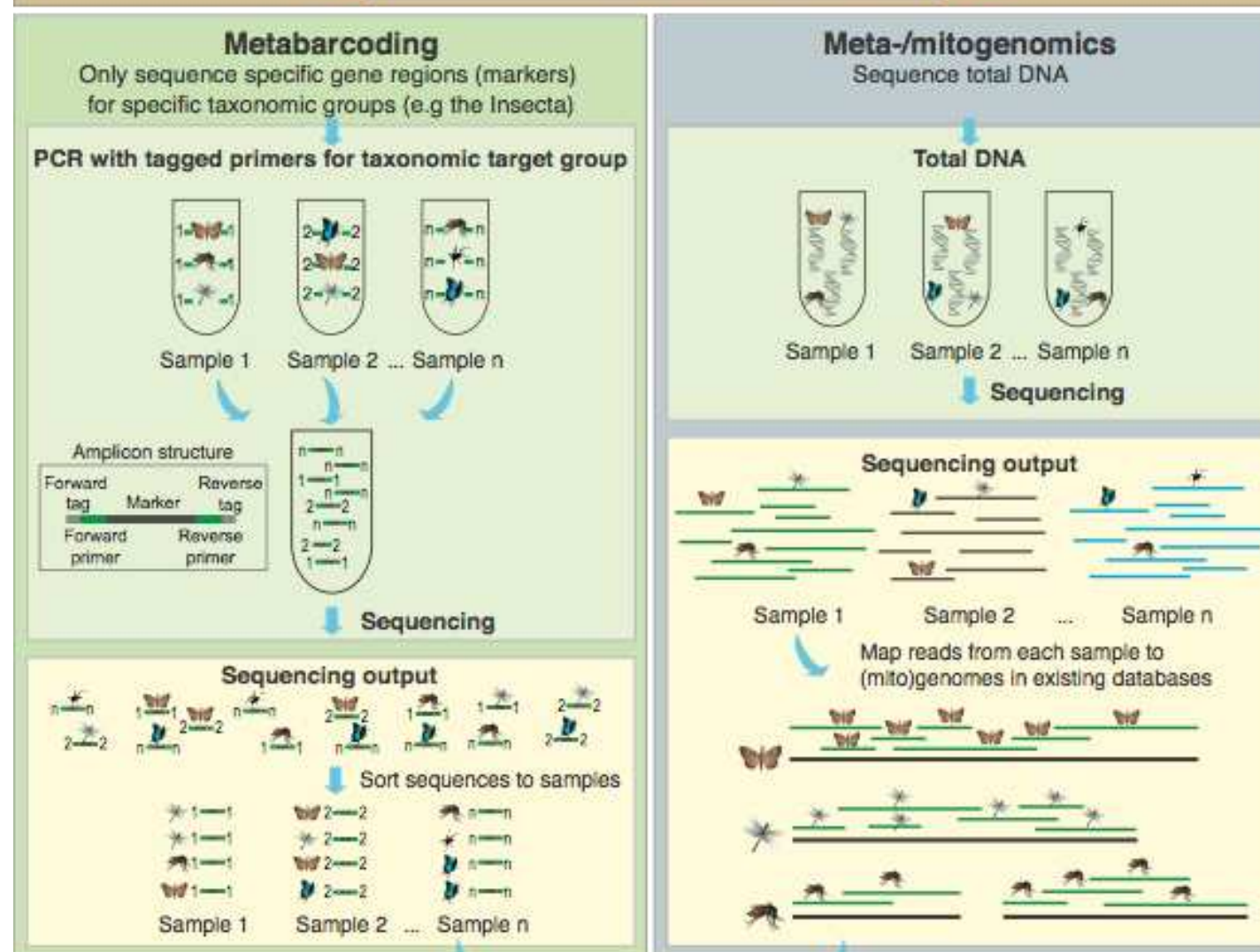
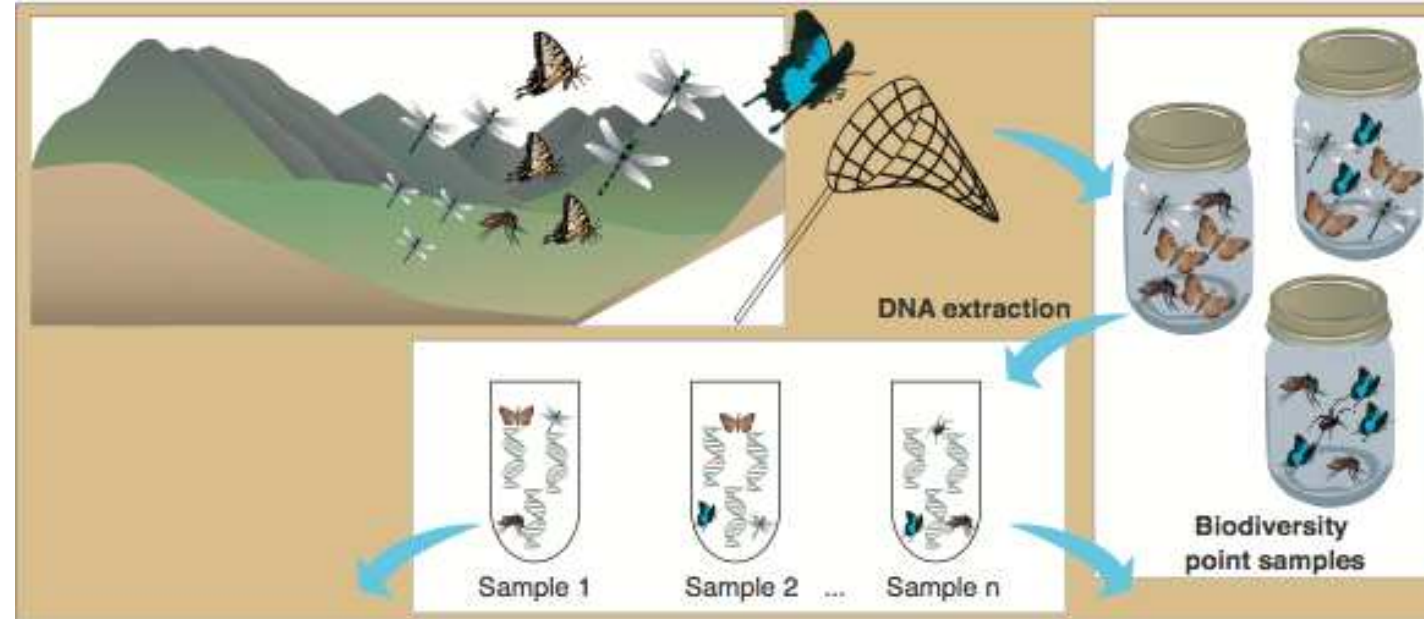
**biodiversity surveys. Top row:** Point locations across a landscape are sampled for biodiversity, and DNA is separately extracted from each sample. Three common sample types are (i) bulk samples of arthropods (depicted here), (ii) environmental DNA (eDNA)

815 from soil, water, and air, and (iii) invertebrate collectors of vertebrate DNA (iDNA), such  
816 as mosquitoes, leeches, flies, dung beetles, and ticks. **Left column:** Metabarcoding –  
817 Each sample's DNA is amplified via PCR (polymerase chain reaction) for a particular  
818 marker gene that is taxonomically informative, the samples are pooled and sequenced  
819 on a high-throughput sequencer, and then sorted back to sample by the sample-specific  
820 tags added during PCR. The sequences are then clustered into Operational Taxonomic  
821 Units (OTUs), which are species hypotheses, and assigned taxonomies by matching  
822 against online databases. **Right column:** Meta/mitogenomics – Each sample's total DNA  
823 is sequenced, and the output DNA reads are matched to reference genomes, which are  
824 often mitochondrial genomes. **Bottom row:** The output of both processing pipelines is a  
825 'sample X species' table. Metabarcoding pipelines are useful for general biodiversity  
826 discovery and surveys because online barcode databases are more taxonomically  
827 complete, and even without taxonomic assignment, it is possible to calculate community  
828 metrics from OTUs only. Metagenomic pipelines are more costly, but advantageous when  
829 it is important to reliably identify particular sets of species and to a greater extent  
830 preserve relative biomass information. See **S3** for further details. Clip-art courtesy of the  
831 Integration and Application Network, University of Maryland Center for Environmental  
832 Science ([ian.umces.edu/symbols/](http://ian.umces.edu/symbols/)).

833 **Figure 3. Three statistical pathways to map community composition and summary**  
834 **metrics from the combination of biodiversity point samples and continuous Earth**  
835 **Observation (EO) maps.** Local diversity –  $\alpha$ , species turnover –  $\beta$ , and regional diversity –  
836  $\gamma$ . For clarity, the figure only considers models for species occurrence (OCC), not  
837 abundance. GAM: Generalised Additive Model. DynamicFOAM is described in Ref. 76.  
838 See **S4** for further details.







**Metabarcoding** is a targeted and cost-effective approach in which only short marker(s) for the taxonomic groups desired for a given biodiversity assessment are sequenced. It is more likely to detect low-biomass taxa than is mito-/metagenomics. Metabarcoding exploits existing reference databases, which are larger than reference database collections for whole (mito)genomes.

		Species									
Sample	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0
	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

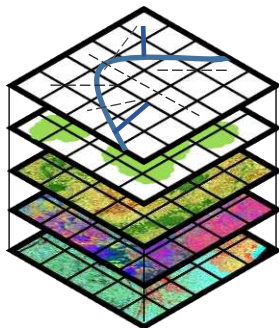
**Meta-/mitogenomics** requires deeper sequencing than metabarcoding because total DNA is sequenced, and only a small fraction of the sequencing output is used for detecting species. Meta-/mitogenomics relies on whole (mito-)genome reference databases, but when these are available, it has higher certainty of taxonomic assignment than does metabarcoding.

## Joint Species Distribution Models / Latent Variable Models

Biodiversity point samples

EO Spatial covariates

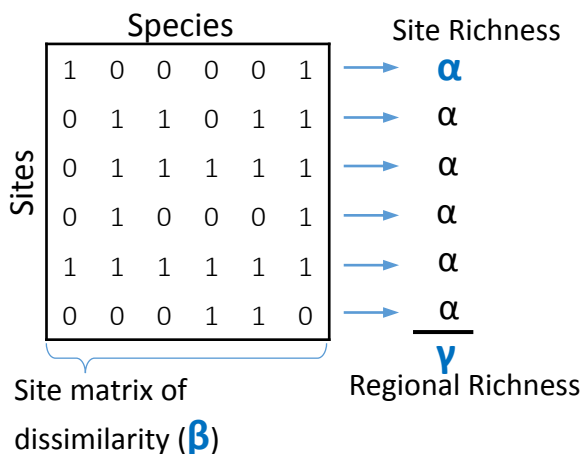
Sites	Species					
	1	0	0	0	0	1
	0	1	1	1	1	1
	0	1	0	0	0	1
	0	0	0	1	1	0



$$OCC = f(\text{Site covariates}) + f(\text{Latent Variables})$$

Species distributions are described as a function of unobserved latent factors as well as observed covariates. Account for species covariance, but do not easily account for differences in species detection.

**Predicted probabilities of species occurrences at all sites**

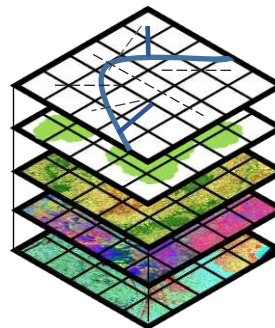


## Occupancy-Detection Models

Biodiversity point samples with repeated surveys

EO Spatial covariates

Sites	Species					
	1	0	0	0	0	1
	0	1	1	1	1	1
	0	1	0	0	0	1
	0	0	0	1	1	0



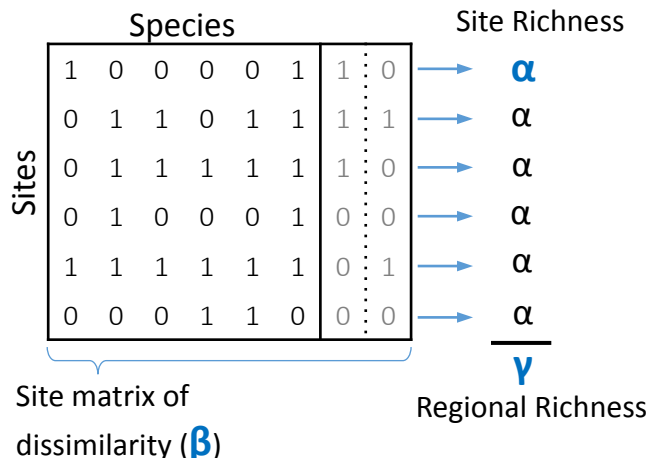
Site covariates

Survey covariates

$$OCC = \text{Occupancy.model} * \text{Detection.model}$$

Environmental covariates can describe both a species' distribution and how that distribution is observed, which itself can depend upon survey characteristics. Account for imperfect detection, but treat species independently.

**Predicted probability of species occurrence at all sites (including unobserved species)**

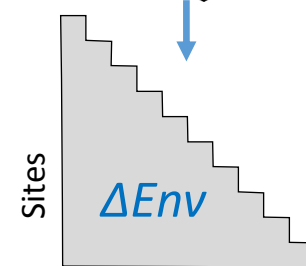
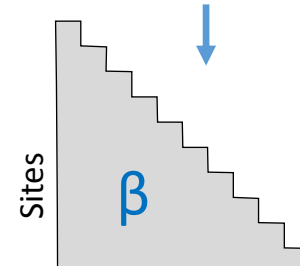
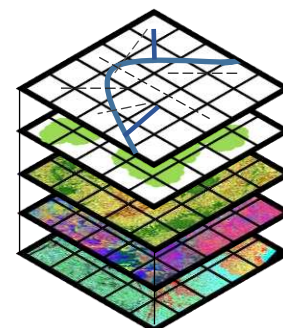


## Generalised Dissimilarity Models

Biodiversity point samples (high species diversity)

EO Spatial covariates

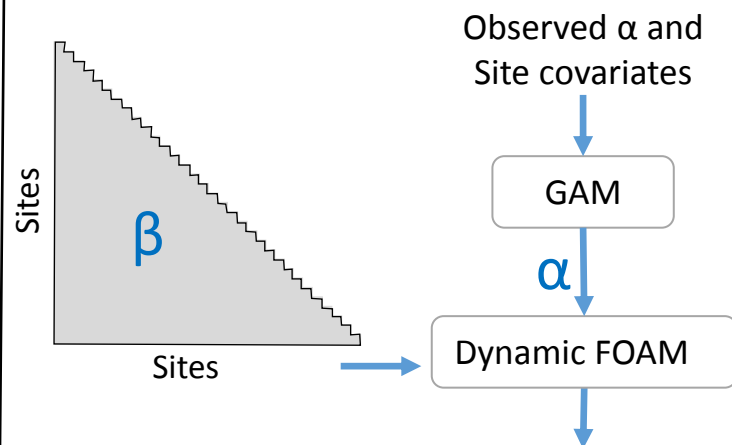
Sites	Species									
	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0



$$\beta_{ij} = f(|Env_i - Env_j|)$$

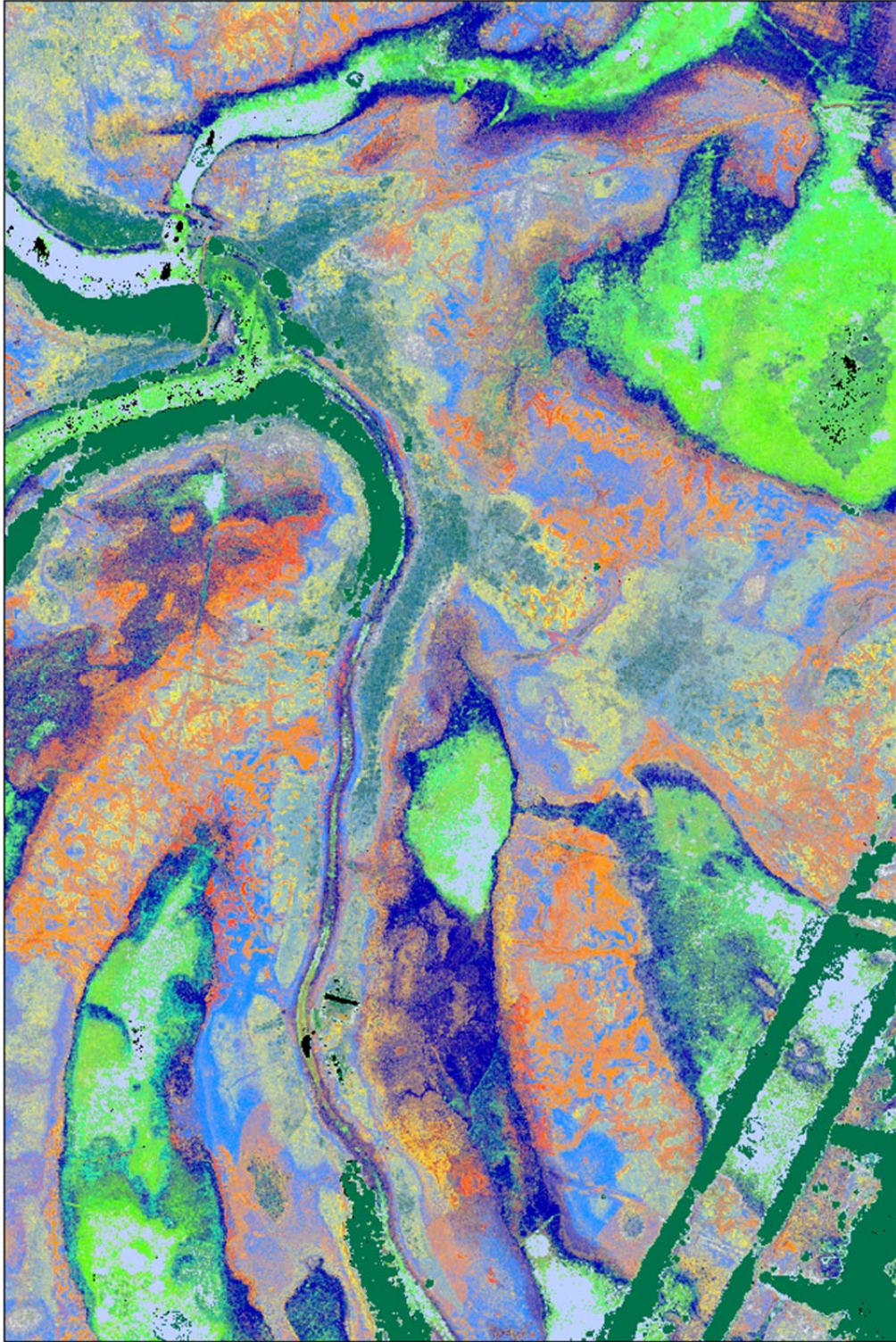
Compositional dissimilarity ( $\beta$ ) between each pair of sites ( $i$  and  $j$ ) is a function of the difference in environmental conditions ( $\Delta Env$ ).

**Predicted compositional dissimilarity between any pair of sites ( $\beta$ )**



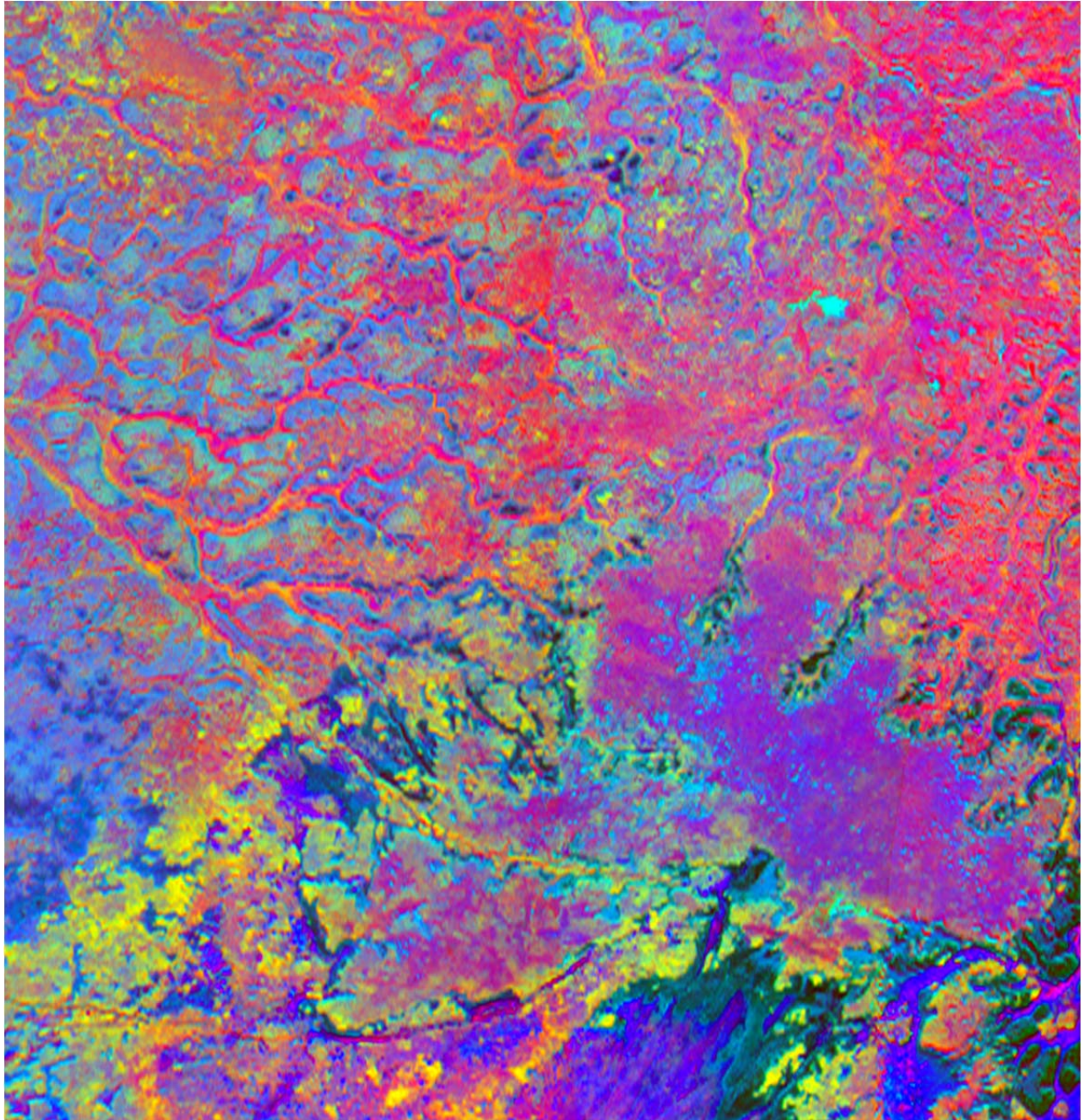
**Predicted composition of all sites consistent with patterns of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$**





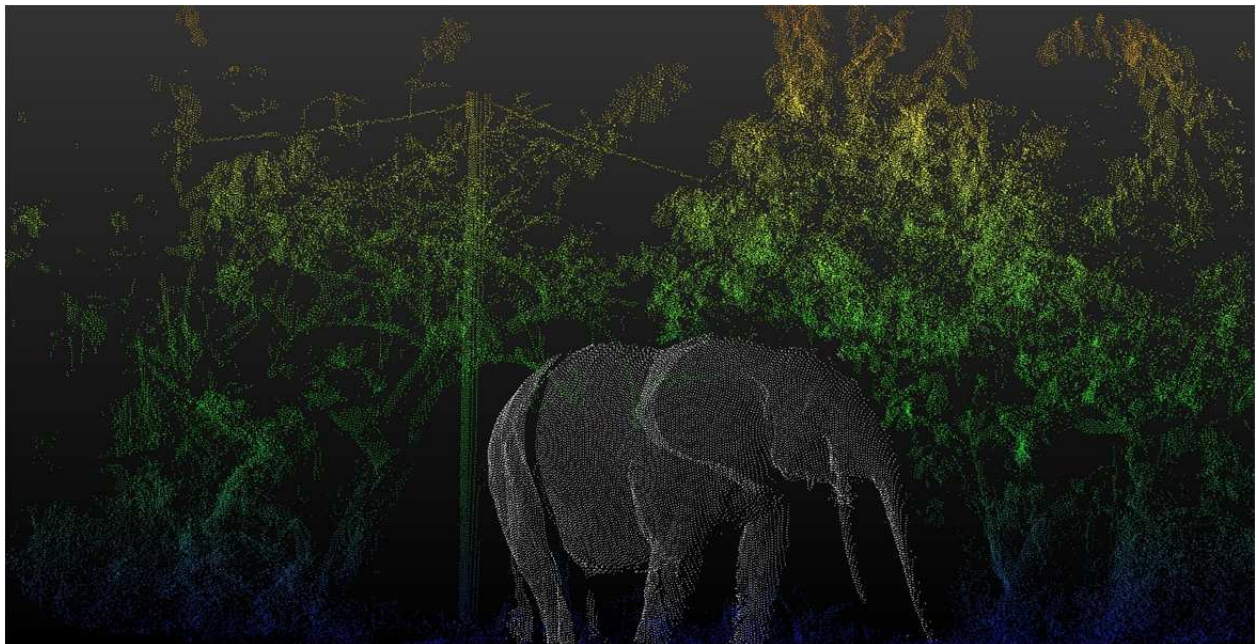
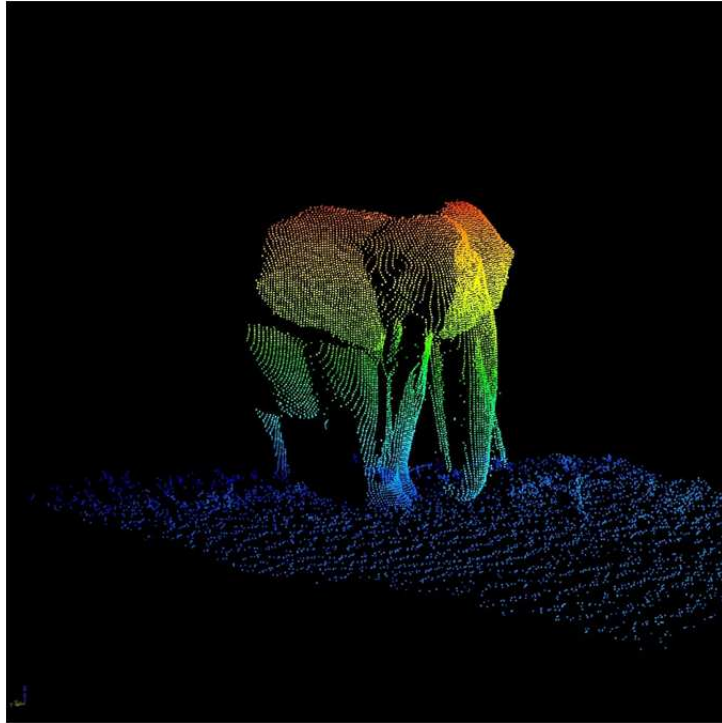
Fuzzy classification of grassland vegetation in an alkaline grassland in Püspökladány, Hungary, based on airborne LIDAR. Colours represent the weighted probability for a given vegetation class in each cell (0.5m<sup>2</sup>) (photo credit: András Zlinszky).





Vegetation composition of a peatland using Partial Least Square Regression models on a hyperspectral image. The image is a false colour composite showing the predicted abundance of Graminoids (Red), Shrubs (Green), and Bryophytes (Blue) (photo credit: Beth Cole).





A forest elephant “scanned” during a terrestrial laser-based measurement of a tropical rainforest in Gabon 2013 (photo credit: Kim Calders).