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1 **Patterns of tree species composition at watershed-scale in the Amazon ‘Arc**
2 **of Deforestation’: implications for conservation**

3

4 Paulo Sérgio Morandi^a, Beatriz Schwantes Marimon^{a,f}, Pedro V. Eisenlohr^b, Ben
5 Hur Marimon-Junior^a, Claudinei Oliveira-Santos^a, Ted R. Feldpausch^c, Edmar
6 Almeida de Oliveira^a, Simone Matias Reis^a, Jon Lloyd^d and Oliver L. Phillips^e

7

8 ^aUniversidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Campus de Nova Xavantina, BR 158,
9 km 655, Caixa Postal 08, 78690-000, Nova Xavantina, MT, Brazil.

10 ^bUniversidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, Campus de Alta Floresta, MT 208, km
11 147, Caixa Postal 324, 78580-000, Alta Floresta, MT, Brazil.

12 ^cCollege of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX4
13 4RJ, United Kingdom.

14 ^dImperial College London, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Department of Life
15 Sciences, SW7 2AZ, London, United Kingdom.

16 ^eUniversity of Leeds, School of Geography, LS2 9JT, Leeds, United Kingdom.

17 ^fCorresponding author: biamarimon@unemat.br, phone (+55-66-3438-1224)

18

19 E-mail addresses: morandibio@gmail.com (P.S. Morandi),

20 biamarimon@unemat.br (B.S. Marimon), pedrov.eisenlohr@gmail.com (P.V.

21 Eisenlohr), bhmjunior@gmail.com (B.H. Marimon-Junior),

22 claudineisantosnx@gmail.com (C. Oliveira-Santos), edmardinei@gmail.com (E.A.

23 Oliveira), T.R.Feldpausch@exeter.ac.uk (T.R. Feldpausch),

24 simonematiasreis@gmail.com (S.M. Reis), jonathan.lloyd@imperial.ac.uk (J.

25 Lloyd), O.Phillips@leeds.ac.uk (O.L. Phillips).

26 **6984 words**

27

28 **SUMMARY**

29 The loss of biodiversity in transitional forests between the Cerrado and Amazonia,
30 the two largest neotropical phytogeographic domains, is an issue of great concern.

31 This extensive region is located within the zone of the 'arc of deforestation' where
32 tropical forests are being lost at the fastest rate on the planet, but floristic diversity
33 and variation among forests here is still poorly understood. We aimed to
34 characterize the floristic composition of forests in this zone and explore the degree
35 and drivers of differentiation within and across Araguaia and Xingu watersheds. In
36 ten sites we identified all trees with diameter ≥ 10 cm; these totaled 4,944
37 individuals in 257 species, 107 genera and 52 families. We evaluated the data for
38 multivariate variation using TWINSpan and DCA to understand the species
39 distribution among sites. There was a larger contribution from the Amazonian flora
40 (169 species) than that of the Cerrado (109) to the transitional forests.
41 Remarkably, 142 species (55%) were restricted to only one sampling site, while 29
42 species (> 16%) are endemic to Brazil, suggesting a high risk for biological
43 conservation, and the disappearance of species and forests with unique floristic
44 composition with loss and fragmentation of large areas. Watersheds may be a
45 critical factor driving species distribution among forests in the Amazonian-Cerrado
46 transition zone, and quantifying their role can provide powerful insight into devising
47 better conservation strategies of the remaining forests.

48 **Keywords:** endemic species; floristic connections; Araguaia; Xingu; watersheds;
49 species distribution.

50

51

52 INTRODUCTION

53 Between the two major tropical domains of the South America, Amazonia
54 and Cerrado, there are transitional zones (Ackerly et al. 1989) where a mosaic of
55 various forest and savanna communities exists (Staver et al. 2011; Murphy and
56 Bowman 2012). The transition forests have lower density, height, basal area,
57 biomass and species richness than the forests located in the core region of
58 Amazonia (Ivanauskas et al. 2004a; Balch et al. 2008) and represent the
59 Amazonia advancing front on the Cerrado (Marimon et al. 2006).

60 Different environmental factors may determine transitions between
61 phytogeographic domains, depending on the scale being considered. Tropical
62 forests generally occur in regions with wetter climate (Schwartz and Namri 2002)
63 and lower precipitation seasonality in comparison with savannas (Staver et al.
64 2011). The climate variation acts at broad scales, determining the differentiation of
65 vegetation patterns, as one can see in both Amazonia and Cerrado domains
66 (Ab'Saber 2003; Staver et al. 2011; Lehmann et al. 2011).

67 The rainfall seasonality also shapes forest and savanna distribution
68 patterns, but this factor is most evident in Africa than in Australia and South
69 America (Lehmann et al. 2011). In regions with intermediate rainfall (1,000 to
70 2,500 mm) and average seasonality (<7 months), forest and savanna coexist as
71 alternative stable states, depending on fire frequency (Staver et al. 2011; Murphy
72 and Bowman 2012). At smaller scales, edaphic factors play a greater role in
73 determining the species composition of plant communities (Askew et al. 1970;
74 Veenendaal et al. 2015). Additionally, fire, resource availability and species traits
75 can influence the occurrence of certain vegetation types (Hoffmann et al. 2012).
76 Topographic features, such as the groundwater level, also determine the
77 occurrence of forest or savanna (Murphy and Bowman 2012; Silva 2015). Here,

78 we investigate floristic diversity and variations in a transition zone at a large scale,
79 between phytogeographic domains.

80 In the large contact region between Cerrado and Amazonia there are
81 different tree-dominated vegetation types, including semideciduous forests (Araujo
82 et al. 2009; Mews et al. 2011), monodominant forests of *Brosimum rubescens*
83 Taub. (Marimon et al. 2001a), evergreen seasonal forests (Ivanauskas et al.
84 2008), deciduous forests (Pereira et al. 2011), cerrado sensu stricto and cerradão
85 (Marimon et al. 2014). This transition zone hundreds of kilometres wide with a
86 sinuous total length of more than 6,000 km following the complex inter digitation of
87 Amazonia and the entire Cerrado domain around the southern Brazilian Amazon
88 Basin (Ackerly et al. 1989; Marimon et al. 2014; Ratter et al. 1973), has high
89 biodiversity, forming a vegetation mosaic (Ratter et al. 2003; Marimon et al. 2006;
90 Torello-Raventos et al. 2013), which contributes to the fauna diversity (Sick 1955;
91 Lacher and Alho 2001; Oliveira et al. 2010; Rocha et al. 2014).

92 The loss of biodiversity of the Amazonia-Cerrado transition forests is of
93 great concern, mainly because it is located within the region known as the 'arc of
94 deforestation'. Here land-use change is progressively removing most of the natural
95 forest vegetation (Fearnside 2005), and deforestation for agriculture is the main
96 threat (Araujo et al. 2009; Ivanauskas et al. 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore,
97 anthropogenic fires (Fearnside 2005) and the severe drought events of the last
98 decade in this region (e.g., Lewis et al. 2011; Marengo et al. 2011) have also been
99 linked to floristic and structural changes (Marimon et al. 2014; Phillips et al. 2009),
100 and to the rate of deforestation itself (Davidson et al. 2012). Stronger seasonal
101 droughts may also be linked to anthropogenic climate change and most global
102 climate model simulations for the 21st century show a markedly increase drought
103 risk for southern Amazonia (e.g., Fu et al. 2013). Wherever species are restricted

104 to only one area or region they are vulnerable to extinction as a result of human
105 disturbance (Peterson and Watson 1998; Werneck et al. 2011) and large-scale
106 environmental changes such as [drought and fire](#).

107 The [vegetation](#) of the Amazonia-Cerrado transition region is gradually being
108 revealed, but not enough is known yet to evaluate the threat to biodiversity posed
109 by the elimination of the transition forests. For example, [in](#) an evergreen seasonal
110 forest of the Xingu River Basin, [there are many](#) species (94%) with Amazonian
111 distribution ([Ivanauskas et al. 2004b](#); Lista de Espécies da Flora do Brasil 2012).
112 One explanation for the high contribution of Amazonian flora to these transitional
113 forests could be the high number of streams distributed across a general flat relief,
114 which reduces water stress compared to that encountered in other seasonal
115 forests of the Central Highlands of Brazil in similar climate ([Ivanauskas et al. 2008](#);
116 [Oliveira-Filho and Ratter 1995](#)).

117 Phytogeographic studies should consider the varied causes and
118 mechanisms potentially involved in species turnover across space. One 'null'
119 explanation for species turnover is simply that it is influenced by geographic
120 distance ([Hubbell 2001](#)). Space will be an important factor influencing the
121 separation of communities if all individuals of the same trophic guild are equivalent
122 competitors and have limited dispersal ability - this scenario results in a decreased
123 similarity between communities with increasing geographic distance ([Hubbell](#)
124 [2001](#)). However, other mechanisms, such as physical barriers (e.g., watersheds),
125 also act to control species distribution ([Francis and Currie 1998](#)) and may
126 determine the variation in floristic composition between communities ([Bell 2001](#);
127 [Condit et al. 2002](#)). Thus, species migration may be favored by corridors shaped
128 by the forests accompanying streams and rivers, constituted into networks of
129 dendritic connections between waterways in a basin ([Oliveira-Filho and Ratter](#)

130 1995). Based on this hypothesis, watersheds should form links between major
131 forested biomes (here, Atlantic and Amazonian forests), acting as routes of
132 species dispersal and hence genetic linkages connecting floras (Oliveira-Filho and
133 Ratter 1995) and faunas (Costa 2003; Ribas et al. 2011).

134 In addition to the above mentioned factors that can influence the distribution
135 of taxa, environmental condition also affects the occurrence of the species. Thus,
136 the presence of a particular species at a site is favored by adaptations of this
137 species to a range of environmental conditions and resources available there, in
138 which the species has a range of tolerances and requirements, that is, the
139 ecological niche (Hutchinson 1957). Thus, we expected that areas under similar
140 environmental conditions would share more species than areas under different
141 environmental conditions (Gurevitch et al. 2009).

142 This work was intended to inform conservation decisions by quantifying the
143 contributions made by species endemic to Brazil and, more specifically, endemic
144 to Cerrado and Amazonia domains. We addressed two questions. 1) Does the
145 Amazon and/or the Cerrado flora dominate the composition of the sampling site?
146 We expected a greater contribution of Amazonian flora because, despite the
147 region having a markedly seasonal climate, locally enhanced water availability
148 favors the occurrence of Amazonian species (Ivanauskas et al. 2008). 2) How do
149 the forests vary in distribution and floristic composition? We expected to find
150 signatures of both 'neutral' and habitat-driven phytogeographic variation. Thus,
151 closer sites, independent of the watershed in which they happen to be located
152 (Xingu River or Araguaia River), should have higher floristic similarity than more
153 distant areas because species turnover typically increases with geographic
154 distance (Hubbell 2001) and among different habitat types (e.g., Condit et al.
155 2002).

156

157 **METHODS**

158 **Study sites**

159 In the transition zone between the Cerrado and Amazonian domains in
160 Brazil we sampled 10 sites, five located in [the](#) Xingu River Basin and five in [the](#)
161 Araguaia River Basin. These sampling sites were distributed over a distance of up
162 to 606.4 km (Table S1, see supplementary material as
163 [Journals.cambridge.org/ENC](https://journals.cambridge.org/ENC)) and all within the central part of the 'arc of
164 deforestation' (Fig.1). The climate, according to the Köppen classification, is Aw
165 (tropical with a dry winter) (Alvares et al. 2013), with highly seasonal annual
166 average rainfall between 1,500 and 1,740 mm (Table 1). We selected primary
167 forests with no obvious sign of [human actions](#). According to IBGE (2012), all
168 studied forests [were](#) Evergreen Seasonal, the five located in the Araguaia River
169 Basin [being](#) Evergreen Seasonal of the Lowlands (Floresta Estacional Sempre-
170 Verde das Terras Baixas), and the five [of the](#) Xingu River Evergreen Seasonal
171 Submontane (Floresta Estacional Sempre-Verde Submontana).

172

173 **Table 1**

174

175 The data [were](#) curated within the ForestPlots database (Lopez-Gonzalez et
176 al. 2009, 2011), where each forest has a unique site code. In this study, we
177 [applied](#) new codes to reflect the vegetation differences (viz, XIN= Xingu River
178 Basin forest and ARA= Araguaia River Basin forest) (Table 1, Fig. 1).

179

180 **Figure 1**

181

182 **Data collection**

183 We sampled 1 ha in each sampling site, and identified all tree individuals
184 with diameter at breast height (DBH at 1.30 m above the ground) ≥ 10 cm. We
185 identified the species in the field by comparisons with herbarium (NX, UFMT, UnB
186 and IAN) material of known specific identity, and with the help of specialists. After
187 identification, the material was incorporated into the Herbarium NX, Mato Grosso,
188 Nova Xavantina (Coleção Zoobotânica James Alexander Ratter). We determined
189 the classification of families based on APG III (2009), and assigned species
190 names using the 'Flora of Brazil' database (Lista de Espécies da Flora do Brasil
191 2012). We used this same database to determine the occurrence of species in
192 different Brazilian phytogeographic domains and Brazilian endemic species.

193

194 **Data analysis**

195 We evaluated species distribution among forests based on a 'compound'
196 graph from the function `of` Landeiro et al. (2010) in R version 3.0.3 (R
197 Development Core Team 2014), *where* species and their abundances are
198 represented on the y axis, ordered according to the weighted average, with the
199 ecological gradient represented on the x axis. We analyzed the 48 most abundant
200 species (> 13 individuals) to help ensure confidence that results are not affected
201 by sampling issues of rarest taxa (see also Landeiro et al. 2010).

202 We also investigated the spatial patterns of species distribution by means of
203 Mantel tests in PASSaGE 2.0 (Rosenberg and Anderson 2011), using the
204 abundance species matrix. The distance coefficient used in this step was the
205 Czekanowski index (McCune and Grace 2002). The decision on the presence of
206 spatial autocorrelation was made after 999 permutations.

207 To classify the forests based on species composition and their respective
208 abundances, we used TWINSpan (Two-Way Indicator Species Analysis), using
209 the default option of the software PC-ORD 5.0 (McCune and Mefford 2006) to
210 define the cut off level of the 'pseudo species' (see McCune and Grace 2002).

211 We ordinated the plots based on a DCA (Detrended Correspondence
212 Analysis) in PC-ORD 5.0. We obtained the standardized length of the gradient,
213 assuming that a value greater than four standard deviations (SD) would indicate
214 complete replacement of species (Hill and Gauch 1980). Since the DCA is based
215 on chi-square distance, which is sensitive to rare species (McCune and Grace
216 2002), we removed these species, here understood as the singletons (species
217 with only one individual). The DCA, however, still showed excessive residuals in
218 the first axis, and therefore, we also eliminated species with only two individuals.
219 We submitted the reduced matrix (with 146 species) to a new DCA; here the
220 residuals were better distributed.

221

222 **RESULTS**

223 We sampled 4,944 trees, distributed in 257 species, 107 genera and 52
224 families in the 10 sampling sites (Table S2). Species diversity was concentrated in
225 a few families: 20% of the families contained 60% of the species, while on the
226 other hand 35% (18 families) were represented only by a single species (Table S2,
227 Table 2). In almost every sampling site, more than 50% of families were
228 represented by a single species, with the marginal exceptions of XIN-02 and ARA-
229 03 (48 and 45%) (Table 2). The richest families were Chrysobalanaceae (24
230 species), Fabaceae (22), Annonaceae (21), Melastomataceae (17), Moraceae
231 (14), Sapotaceae (13), Apocynaceae (11), Burseraceae and Myrtaceae (10 each)
232 and Lauraceae (9) (Table S2). The richest genera were Licania (13 species),

233 Miconia (12), Aspidosperma, Hirtella and Xylopia (10 each), Pouteria (9), Inga (8),
234 Ficus and Ocotea (7 each), Casearia, Cecropia, and Trichilia (5 each) (Table S2).
235 The proportion of genera with only one local species was also high ranging from
236 68 to 100% in each forest (Table 2).

237

238 **Table 2.**

239

240 **Contribution of Amazonian and Cerrado floras to transitional forests**

241 The species recorded in this transitional region also occur in four Brazilian
242 phytogeographic domains, with 169 species in the Amazonian domain, 109 in the
243 Cerrado, 88 in the Atlantic Forest and 49 in the Caatinga domain. All ten of our
244 sampling sites had more species from the Amazonian (from 71 to 100%) than the
245 Cerrado domain (42 to 85%). Still, the two forests (ARA-01 and ARA-02) located
246 further south, most distant from the Amazonian domain, showed the smallest
247 difference between the occurrence of the Amazonia and Cerrado species, while
248 the forests ARA-03 and ARA-04 located further north, closer to Amazonia, were
249 dominated by typical Amazonian species (Table 2). Twenty-nine of the sampled
250 species were endemic to Brazil, representing 16% of taxa identified to the species
251 level. Of these, seven occur only in the Amazonian and in the Cerrado domains
252 and seven in Amazonia (Table S2). Every sampling site plot included at least two
253 species that are endemic to Brazil (Table 2).

254

255 **Spatial distribution, watersheds, and floristic composition**

256 Considering the amplitude of species occurrence among sampling sites, 43
257 (17%) occurred in five or more sites, while 143 (55%) were restricted to just one
258 forest, especially ARA-02 (19 unique species), XIN-04 and ARA-04 (20 unique

259 species each) and ARA-05 (21 unique species) (Table S2, Table 2). The highest
260 degree of species sharing was observed in the plots close to the Araguaia River
261 Basin in Mato Grosso state (ARA-01 and ARA-02) (Table S2). However, the
262 progressive substitution of species across space is evident throughout the study
263 areas (Fig.2). Only 11 species were recorded with high abundance (> 70
264 individuals) in the forests of both Xingu and Araguaia watersheds: *Tapirira*
265 *guianensis* Aubl., *Pseudolmedia macrophylla* Trécul, *Trattinnickia glaziovii* Swart,
266 *Jacaranda copaia* (Aubl.) D. Don, *Sacoglottis guianensis* Benth., *Sloanea eichleri*
267 *K.Schum.*, *Protium pilossissimum* Engl., *Miconia pyrifolia* Naudin, *Amaioua*
268 *guianensis* Aubl., *Chaetocarpus echinocarpus* (Baill.) Ducke and *Cheilochlinium*
269 *cognatum* (Miers) A.C.Sm. (Fig.2). Overall, the most abundant species were
270 preferentially found in particular watersheds (i.e., abundant in either Rio Xingu or
271 Rio Araguaia watersheds, but rarely in both).

272

273 **Figure 2**

274

275 Two floristic groups emerge from TWINSPAN (Fig.3), the first composed of
276 seasonal forests of the Xingu River Basin (XIN-01, XIN-02, XIN-03, XIN-04 and
277 XIN-05), and the second of seasonal forests (ARA-01, ARA-02, ARA-03, ARA-04
278 and ARA-05) of the Araguaia River Basin (Fig.3). The first division (eigenvalue=
279 0.56) separated the Araguaia from the Xingu forests, while in the second division
280 (eigenvalue= 0.42) two new groups were revealed: one with XIN-01 and XIN-03
281 and the other by XIN-02, XIN-04 and XIN-05 (Fig.3). Only in the third division
282 (eigenvalue= 0.61), were the southern Araguaia forests (ARA-01 and ARA-02)
283 separated from the other Araguaia forests far to the north.

284

285 **Figure 3**

286

287 In the DCA (Eigenvalues: Axis 1= 0.59032; Axis 2= 0.33288) we captured
288 similar trends as recorded in TWINSPAN. Here, ARA-01 and ARA-02 were
289 floristically disconnected from ARA-03, ARA-04 and ARA-05 on the second axis
290 (Fig.4), but these geographically distant plot groups still scored closer to one
291 another than did either to the Xingu Basin forests which geographically lie between
292 the southernmost and northernmost Araguaia forests. The DCA also confirmed the
293 high species replacement indicated by the 'compound' graph, because both the
294 length of the gradient (> 4 SD) and the eigenvalues for the first two axes were
295 high. Geographic distance had no effect on species replacement, since there was
296 no significant correlation between floristic composition and geographical distances
297 (Mantel test, $r = -0.0633$; $p = 0.5360$).

298

299 **Figure 4**

300

301 **DISCUSSION**

302 Our results reveal the influence of both, the Amazonia and the Cerrado
303 domains on the composition of transitional forests, but confirmed our expectation
304 that the contribution of the Amazonian flora is greater, which probably is related to
305 the fact that the environmental conditions are more favorable to Amazonian
306 species. We also detected an apparent large-scale role that watersheds play in
307 structuring regional forest composition. Thus, while there was a signature of
308 potentially neutrally-driven phytogeographic variation, because closer forests
309 tended to be more similar, very distant pairs of forests in the Araguaia watershed

310 were actually more similar to one another than were either to geographically-
311 intermediate Xingu sites.

312

313 **Influence of phytogeographic domain on floristic composition**

314 The families *Chrysobalanaceae*, *Fabaceae*, *Annonaceae* and *Sapotaceae*,
315 the species-richest in this study, are common in Amazonia (Oliveira-Filho and
316 Ratter 1995). These are among the pan-Amazon dominant groups (ter Steege et
317 al. 2006), being also among the most speciose in Amazonian upland 'Terra Firme'
318 forests 1,000 km to the north of our sites and more than 2,000 km to the west
319 (Lima-Filho et al. 2004; Oliveira and Amaral 2004; Oliveira et al. 2008; Phillips et
320 al. 2003), as well as in seasonal forests (Ivanauskas et al. 2004a; Kunz et al.
321 2008; Marimon et al. 2006), and *savanna woodland* (Marimon-Junior and
322 Haridasan 2005; Marimon et al. 2006) at the southern edge of the Amazonian
323 domain. *Fabaceae*, in particular, though, also have high richness in the Cerrado
324 domain (Sano et al. 2008). *Sapotaceae*, *Burseraceae* and *Moraceae* are typical of
325 the Amazonian domain, and *Melastomataceae*, *Myrtaceae* and *Lauraceae*, are
326 more speciose in Atlantic moist forests, with *Annonaceae* featuring strongly in both
327 domains (Pinto and Oliveira-Filho 1999). The occurrence of the humid tropical
328 forest flora in seasonally-dry Central Brazil, as in this study, would be favored by a
329 dendritic network of rivers that acting as bridges, allowing species from Amazonian
330 and Atlantic domains to migrate deep into areas that would otherwise be
331 climatically challenging for such taxa (Oliveira-Filho and Ratter 1995). These
332 findings therefore reinforce the transitional aspect of the study sites, and confirm
333 the ecological importance of these key families in the composition and
334 characterization of the transitional zone flora.

335 The finding that families with most species also have the highest
336 abundance of individuals is not unexpected (e.g., Campbell et al. 1986;
337 Ivanauskas et al. 2004a). Families richer in species and/or more abundant than
338 others are capable of better exploit the environment, because they have adaptive
339 characteristics (Tello et al. 2008). The large number of families and genera
340 represented by only one species in each community on the other hand highlights
341 the great taxonomic diversity of the studied forests.

342 Licania, Miconia, Pouteria, Inga and Ocotea, among the richest genera in
343 this study, are well represented in different vegetation types of the transition zone
344 (Araujo et al. 2009; Kunz et al. 2008; Marimon et al. 2006) and also in the distant,
345 terra firme forests of central Amazonia growing in much wetter climates (Oliveira et
346 al. 2008). This overlapping of genera from different vegetation sources further
347 confirms the transitional aspect of southern Amazonia (Oliveira-Filho and Ratter
348 1995). The fact that most species belong to the Amazonian domain confirms our
349 expectation that transitional forest tree floristics are more strongly influenced by
350 the Amazon than by the Cerrado domain, especially for forests that occur in the
351 northern portion of the studied area.

352 This information is not new to ecology, but it is new for the vegetation of the
353 study sites and has an important consequence for conservation measures. An
354 approach on genera is important because this taxa level helped reinforce which
355 biome has greater contribution in species composition, and also confirmed the
356 change in species diversity between areas, as in other studies (Condit et al. 2005;
357 Qian 1999).

358

359

360 **Spatial separation and watersheds**

361 The third division of TWINSPAN and the second axis of DCA show that
362 there may be a **spatial** effect in the dissimilarity between the communities,
363 especially in the Araguaia Basin. However, **this effect was not a clear pattern; if it**
364 **had been** we expected that ARA-01 and ARA-02 would be more similar to the
365 forests of the Xingu Basin, because they are closer to each other, **but this was not**
366 **the case**. Thus, we emphasize on the results of the first division of TWINSPAN
367 and the first DCA axis.

368 The Mantel test **showed further that** geographic distance does not drive the
369 spatial turnover of species and the floristic dissimilarity between these sites,
370 **suggesting** that factors associated with habitat type appear to be involved (Condit
371 et al. 2002; Gurevitch et al. 2009). Why though should the abundant species in the
372 forests of Mato Grosso State also be shared with those of the forests of southern
373 Pará, given the great geographic distance **among** the sites? These data suggest
374 that other geographical processes have allowed these taxa to overcome dispersal
375 limitation. Thus, and in support of Oliveira-Filho and Ratter (1995) in discussing
376 the origin of the forests of Central Brazil, it appears that it is the north-south
377 hydrological network associated with the Araguaia River Basin that provides the
378 ultimate explanation for the greater floristic similarity between these distant forests
379 than that which exists between any of them and much geographically-closer
380 vegetation in the Xingu River Basin.

381

382 **Conservation**

383 Conservation of the transition zone vegetation is of paramount importance
384 for three reasons. First, on-going land-use processes have already destroyed most
385 natural vegetation here (Marimon et al. 2014). Second, both Amazonian and

386 Cerrado vegetation are highly diverse (Castro et al. 1999; Fiaschi and Pirani 2009;
387 Gentry 1988). And third, this transitional region connects the floras of the Cerrado,
388 the Atlantic Forest, and Amazon Rainforest (Méo et al. 2003; Oliveira-Filho and
389 Ratter 1995; see also study on fauna: e.g. Costa 2003), and thus can potentially
390 provide critical habitat space and corridors for the migration that could help to
391 partly mitigate the great biological challenge that global climate change poses for
392 communities of the neotropics (Loarie et al. 2009).

393 To emphasize the relevance of conserving the communities and
394 ecosystems of the transition zone, it is important also to take into account the high
395 faunal diversity of the region. On the banks of the tributaries of the Mortes River
396 (Araguaia Basin) 81 species of birds living in forests and cerrado (Sick 1955), 238
397 species of birds and 57 species of non-flying mammals were recorded in some
398 forests of the Xingu Basin (Oliveira et al. 2010). Forests of the Araguaia basin
399 have been considered as shelters and food source for several species of small
400 mammals (Rocha et al. 2014), and the mosaic of habitats generated by the
401 Amazonia-Cerrado contact may determine species diversity in this region (Lacher
402 and Alho 2001; Oliveira et al. 2010; Rocha et al. 2014). Thus, conservation of the
403 vegetation becomes more urgent and necessary as it will also benefit the rich
404 fauna of this important transitional area (Sick 1955; Lacher and Alho 2001; Oliveira
405 et al. 2010; Rocha et al. 2014).

406 Our eco-floristic results reinforce the need for serious conservation action
407 here. We found that one in six of the species identified in these forests are
408 endemic to Brazil, and that most of these endemic species are also endemic to the
409 two phytogeographic domains (Cerrado and Amazonian). We also conclude that
410 most of the species must be either very rare, have restricted distribution, or both,
411 as almost three-fifths of the tree taxa were only found in one of the 10 studied

412 sites, suggesting the existence of a large and heterogeneous mosaic of plant
413 communities in the Amazonia-Cerrado transition. The removal and fragmentation
414 of large areas due to agricultural activities may therefore already be leading to the
415 disappearance of species and unique assemblages, before they can even be
416 adequately documented.

417 Furthermore, our finding that the taxonomic coherence within watersheds
418 trumps effects of geographic proximity highlights the importance of considering
419 whole watersheds in conservation efforts. As a simple but important example,
420 establishing a single large reserve around the Xingu watershed may be less
421 effective in conserving maximal tree diversity than would ensuring that the same
422 size of area captures vegetation lying within both the Xingu and Araguaia
423 watersheds.

424 Tree composition in this complex transition zone appears to be partly driven
425 by subtle environmental patterns at the watershed scale, suggesting that the
426 biogeography of the major neotropical domains has still to be well understood.
427 Further investigations should focus on better understanding of how environmental
428 factors determine the species composition and distribution across the transitional
429 regions. This information will help improve the ability of conservation efforts to
430 protect floristic and structural diversities in the communities of the vast Amazonia-
431 Cerrado contact zone. This is especially important in light of the intense threat
432 facing this region due to its close alignment with the ‘arc of deforestation’.

433

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448

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704 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

705 **Figure 1** Amazonia-Cerrado transition zone and the 'arc of deforestation' in Brazil.

706 The right box indicates the study area and dashed line indicates the boundary
707 between the watersheds of the Xingu River and the Araguaia River. ARA=
708 Araguaia River Basin forest, states of Mato Grosso and Pará and XIN= Xingu
709 River Basin forest, states of Mato Grosso.

710 **Figure 2** 'Compound' graph of species distribution (relative abundance) based on
711 the weighted average according to the site in the Amazonia-Cerrado transition
712 zone, Brazil. At the top of the graph, from left to right, the first two and last three
713 bars are Araguaia River Basin forest (ARA); other bars are Xingu River Basin
714 forest (XIN). Sites plotted in a latitudinal gradient (from left: southern forests,
715 nearest the Cerrado domain, to right: northern forests, near the Amazonian
716 domain).

717 **Figure 3** Floristic classification of the 10 studied forests in the Amazonia-Cerrado
718 transition zone, based on the TWINSpan method. ARA= Araguaia River Basin
719 forest and XIN= Xingu River Basin forest.

720 **Figure 4** Ordination by DCA summarizing the floristic patterns of 10 forests in the
721 Amazonia-Cerrado transition zone, Brazil. ▲ARA-01, ▼ARA-02, ◆ARA-03,
722 ●ARA-04 and ■ARA-05: Araguaia River Basin forests; ○XIN-01, ◇XIN-02,
723 □XIN-03, △XIN-04 and ▽XIN-05: Xingu River Basin forests.

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