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4     RRH: Pre-dispersal Seed Predation by Insects

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9     **Do pre-dispersal insect seed predators contribute to maintaining tropical forest plant**  
10    **diversity?**

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25    **Abstract**

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UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS BEHIND THE EXTRAORDINARY LEVELS OF PLANT DIVERSITY  
observed in many tropical forests is a key aim in tropical ecology (*e.g.*, Wright 2002, Leigh *et al.* 2004). What allows hundreds of tree species (Valencia *et al.* 1994) and a substantial number of liana species (Schnitzer *et al.* 2012) to co-occur locally in these forests? Among the many and mutually non-exclusive mechanisms proposed (Wright 2002), the role of natural enemies has received particular attention.

According to the Janzen-Connell hypothesis (Janzen 1970, Connell 1971), the coexistence – and the consequent high alpha diversity – of plant species in tropical forests is promoted by specialised natural enemies such as pathogens and insect herbivores that cause density- and/or distance-dependent patterns of plant survival. By making individuals more prone to enemy-attack when surrounded by conspecifics, plants will tend to fare better when conspecific density in the neighbourhood is low, thereby enhancing diversity at the community level. Many studies have documented distance- and density-dependence in the survival of seeds and seedlings in line with these predictions (for a recent meta-analysis, see Comita *et al.* 2014). Although it is often not clear what types of enemies contribute to observed patterns of plant mortality, data have slowly started to accumulate (*e.g.*, Bell *et al.* 2006, Mangan *et al.* 2010, Bagchi *et al.* 2014, Fricke *et al.* 2014).

The current literature on the role of enemies in plant diversity maintenance is dominated by studies assessing conspecific density and distance effects at relatively small spatial scales and focusing on seedlings or seeds that have already dispersed from the mother plant (*e.g.*, Harms *et al.* 2000, Bagchi *et al.* 2014). However, as noted by Gillett (1962), enemy-inflicted plant mortality with implications for diversity can also involve pests attacking seeds that are still attached to the mother plant. This idea was reiterated by Janzen (1970), who suggested that host-

specific pre-dispersal enemies can enhance diversity if they destroy a particularly large proportion of the seed crop where multiple reproductive conspecifics grow close to each other. However, in an alternative line of reasoning (see Fig. 2 and 3 in Janzen's publication), Janzen also illustrates how pre-dispersal enemies – regardless of their specificity – may in fact have the potential to *erode* plant diversity. According to this argument, the reduction in seed crop sizes caused by pre-dispersal enemies will truncate seed dispersal kernels, since with fewer seeds the probability of long-distance dispersal will decrease. This will inevitably decrease the distance between conspecific adults unless offset by foraging patterns of post-dispersal enemies and/or negative density-dependence acting across larger spatial scales. Almost 50 years on, while some aspects of Janzen's predictions have been hugely influential on empirical research, the pre-dispersal element has been largely neglected. As I argue below, pre-dispersal insect seed predators fulfil several criteria for being important diversity-enhancing plant enemies; yet they have been summarily ignored by ecologists interested in Janzen-Connell effects. Here I propose a research agenda for rectifying this.

CURRENT EVIDENCE. – Pre-dispersal insect seed predators have the potential to influence the ecological and evolutionary dynamics of their hosts (Kolb *et al.* 2007). Several lines of evidence suggest that they may also be important for plant diversity maintenance in tropical forests:

***A large proportion of plant species are attacked by pre-dispersal seed predators and the number of seeds killed can be substantial.*** – Since Janzen's pioneering work on bruchid beetles in Costa Rica (1980), several studies have assessed patterns of insect seed predation in tropical forest plant communities in different parts of the world (Table 1). The results from these studies suggest that insect seed predation is common: a substantial proportion of surveyed plant species

were observed to be attacked by at least one species of insect seed predator, many of which are likely to have attacked the seeds while they were still attached to the mother plant. Only some of the studies in Table 1 attempted to quantify the proportion of seeds falling victim to predators through seed dissection or experimental manipulations. Where assessed, seed predation rates varied widely among species. While some authors (*e.g.*, Civrtecka *et al.* 2014) have concluded that their focal seed predator taxa are too rare to contribute to plant diversity maintenance, care should be taken in extrapolating such conclusions to other contexts and systems. It is worth noting that seed predation rates obtained through rearing or visual examination of seeds could severely underestimate the true impact of insect seed predators (Andersen 1988), for example where seed predators do not leave any clear feeding marks on their hosts. True seed predation rates are therefore likely to be higher than those reported in the literature.

***Seed predators show remarkable levels of host-specificity.*** – For the Janzen-Connell mechanism to contribute to diversity maintenance, enemies need to be relatively specialised (Sedio & Ostling 2013, Stump & Chesson 2015). Several studies have assessed host specificity of internally feeding insect seed predators (*e.g.*, Janzen 1980, Civrtecka *et al.* 2014). An overall pattern to emerge is that these insects typically feed on one or a few closely related species and tend to be more specialised than other feeding guilds (Novotny *et al.* 2010; but see Sam *et al.* 2017). Less is known about the specificity of other guilds of seed-eating insects (*e.g.* sap-suckers and external feeders), but there is no doubt that at least the internally feeding seed predators are good candidate enemies in the context of plant diversity maintenance.

***There is high potential for landscape-level density-dependence in pre-dispersal seed predation rates.*** – Studies testing for density-dependence of insect seed predation and/or seed survival over large spatial scales remain scarce (but see *e.g.* Visser *et al.* 2011). In one of the few

studies involving pre-dispersal seed predators, Jones and Comita (2011) assessed premature fruit abscission caused by a hymenopteran seed predator on *Jacaranda copaia* in the 50-ha forest dynamics plot on Barro Colorado Island (Panama). In line with Janzen's predictions, seed predation rates increased with increasing fruit densities. Nevertheless, this increase was not large enough to cancel out the positively density-dependent fruit set (a likely result of pollination success being highest in parts of the forest where there are many fruiting conspecifics). It is plausible that landscape-level density dependence in seed predation rates might occur in other species as well: The patchy distribution of host plants across the forest landscape (Condit *et al.* 2000) may impose spatial structure in insect abundances through behavioural responses of insects to local resource abundances. Studies of host-specific folivorous insect herbivores associated with trees in temperate regions have shown that the degree of host tree isolation can be an important determinant of landscape-level patterns of insect distribution (*e.g.*, Gripenberg *et al.* 2008, Tack *et al.* 2010). Spatially-structured populations driven by – and in turn potentially influencing – tree distributions may be particularly prevalent in species-rich tropical forests, since the low abundance of individual tree species will make their distributions patchy. Since the area as well as the isolation of habitat patches is key to influencing incidence and abundance in spatially-structured populations (*e.g.* Hanski 1994), it seems possible that any positive effects of landscape-level tree densities on seed predator incidence, abundance, and attack rates may be particularly pronounced in relatively small-sized tree species, where the small size of host individuals could lead to higher patch-level extinction rates.

WHAT NEXT? – Pre-dispersal seed predators cannot be dismissed as potentially important agents of diversity maintenance, but we are still a long way from answering the question of whether

they do indeed facilitate coexistence of plant species in tropical forests. The logistical challenges of studying seed predation in the canopy are substantial and community-level manipulations of pre-dispersal enemies analogous to those that have been done for post-dispersal enemies (Bagchi *et al.* 2014) will be unfeasible. To answer the question of whether pre-dispersal insect seed predators promote the coexistence of plant species in tropical forests a combination of multiple approaches (experiments, field observations, modelling) will therefore be needed. Below I identify a few starting points for moving the research field forward:

First, manipulative experiments excluding seed predators from selected plant individuals could yield important insights into the ecological role of pre-dispersal insect seed predators in tropical forests. These experiments could focus on single plant species, although it would be helpful to conduct experiments across a range of species to assess the generality of patterns observed. In addition to allowing us to quantify levels of seed predation, manipulative experiments could verify that pre-dispersal insect seed predators are indeed causing additional seed mortality: If, as has been suggested (Ghazoul & Satake 2009), trees sometimes initiate more seeds than could possibly be brought to maturity and then selectively abort insect-infested seeds, seemingly high levels of seed infestation rates recorded in observational studies may have little effect on plant fitness. In the context of plant diversity maintenance, it would be particularly interesting to assess the effects of seed predator exclusion on seed dispersal kernels and seedling recruitment curves (see Fig. 2 and 3 in Janzen, 1970), and to use sensitivity analyses to determine what levels of pre-dispersal seed predation would influence diversity through alternations in dispersal kernels. While experiments on single species do not answer the question of what happens in the wider community following seed predator exclusion, the community-level implications could be assessed by inputting results of individual species experiments to

models that predict community patterns (e.g. changes in species abundance distributions through early ontogeny) and exploring how community-wide patterns deviate from the predictions based on these models. Conducting manipulative experiments at the whole-tree scale does not come without challenges, but excluding pre-dispersal seed predators from selected tree individuals using insecticides (Louda 1982) or bagging (Nakagawa *et al.* 2005) – combined with appropriate control procedures – might be feasible for selected understorey tree species, for species producing seeds in discrete clusters (e.g. palms), or for species that can be accessed through one of the canopy cranes available for canopy research (e.g. Parker *et al.* 1992).

Second, further observational studies assessing spatial and temporal patterns of pre-dispersal seed predation are needed before generalisations about ‘typical’ responses of seed predators to variations in resource abundances can be made. A primary aim of these studies would be to test if the positive landscape-level density-dependence in seed predation hypothesised by Janzen (which could serve as a stabilising factor promoting species coexistence) occurs, or if seed predators are more typically satiated under high seed abundances. Given the potential scale-dependence of density-effects (Schupp 1992, Xiao *et al.* 2017), sampling protocols should be designed to allow testing for density-responses across multiple spatial scales. Since temporal variation in seed predation rates may also have implications for coexistence (Chesson 1985), studies should ideally be conducted over several fruiting seasons. The seed and fruit monitoring schemes established at some permanent forest dynamics plots (e.g. Anderson-Teixeira *et al.* 2015) could provide opportunities for assessing long-term temporal variation in seed predation rates if combined with protocols for scoring insect damage. Ideally, observational studies on density-responses of seed predators would be followed by modelling studies to assess whether observed density responses (which may be positive at some spatial scales, negative at other) are



sufficient to act as a mechanism regulating plant population growth. One challenge is that studies need to be conducted over large spatial scales given the potentially high dispersal ability of insect seed predators. For many species, existing forest dynamics plots may be too small for this purpose. Newly developed remote sensing techniques might prove useful when identifying landscape-level variation in conspecific densities of canopy trees over larger areas (see Jansen *et al.* 2008). Another challenge in quantifying pre-dispersal seed predation rates through observations is removal of seeds from the canopy by dispersers. Obtaining accurate estimates might still be feasible for species with cupules or other structures that are not removed by seed dispersers.

Third, although the focus of this commentary is on pre-dispersal seed predation, it is important to remember that plant performance with potential implications for coexistence is likely to be the result of multiple processes. We know little about the role of other taxa influencing pre-dispersal seed mortality, and even less about the ways in which they potentially enhance or hinder the influence of each other. There is room for both field-based and theoretical work assessing the combined effects of processes such as pollination, seed dispersal, and mortality caused by various groups of pre- and post-dispersal enemies on plant diversity, as well as studies integrating mortality processes at different stages of the plant life cycle (Green & Harms 2018). For example, it is known that feeding by insects in the canopy can affect the vigour of seedlings, and therefore the plant's tolerance to hazards at later stages (Sousa *et al.* 2003, Bonal *et al.* 2007). If we focus our efforts too narrowly on one enemy group and/or one specific life stage – as is often the case in work done to date – there is a risk that we miss or greatly underappreciate crucially important interactions.

CONCLUSIONS – There is ample scope for interesting work on the diversity-enhancing effects of pre-dispersal enemies paralleling work that has been done on post-dispersal enemies. This work would not only be of academic interest but also of potential importance in the context of current environmental changes. With fruiting patterns possibly changing following climate change (see *e.g.* Wright & Calderon 2006), this could lead to disruptions in the pre-dispersal seed predation process. Unless we know the ecological role of this enemy group, we don't know what the consequences are going to be for the diversity of plants in tropical forests.

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