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GlobalTreeSearch: The first complete global database of tree species and country distributions

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ABSTRACT

This article presents, for the first time, an overview of all known tree species by scientific name and country level distribution, and describes an online database—GlobalTreeSearch—that provides access to this information. Based on our comprehensive analysis of published data sources and expert input, the number of tree species currently known to science is 60,065, representing 20% of all angiosperm and gymnosperm plant species. Nearly half of all tree species (45%) are found in just 10 families, with the 3 most tree-rich families being Leguminosae, Rubiaceae, and Myrtaceae. Geographically, Brazil, Colombia, and Indonesia are the countries with the most tree species. The countries with the most country-endemic tree species reflect broader plant diversity trends (Brazil, Australia, China) or islands where isolation has resulted in speciation (Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia). Nearly 58% of all tree species are single-country endemics. Our intention is for GlobalTreeSearch to be used as a tool for monitoring and managing tree species diversity, forests, and carbon stocks on a global, regional, and/or national level. It will also be used as the basis of the Global Tree Assessment, which aims to assess the conservation status of all of the world's tree species by 2020.

KEYWORDS

Global tree assessment; GlobalTreeSearch; tree database; tree distribution; tree diversity; tree endemism

Introduction

Trees first evolved over 300 million years ago, and "woodiness" has evolved since that time in plant families across the taxonomic array (Fitzjohn et al., 2014; Kenrick & Crane, 1997). Trees provide us with food, timber, and medicine, and are major components of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on earth, including woodlands and forests (FAO, 2014). Individual tree species play crucial roles in their ecosystems, supporting a multitude of other species due to their position at the base of trophic pyramid (e.g., Kennedy & Southwood, 1984). In the climate change negotiations in Paris in 2015, the conservation of trees, the cessation of deforestation, and the sustainable management of forests were all recognized as activities that address climate change (Poorter et al., 2015). However, effective forest conservation requires species-specific action, as individual tree species face threats that are unique to that species.

Despite the importance of trees and their ecosystem services, there has until now not been an authoritative global list of trees. In fact, our knowledge of the number of tree

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species has remained surprisingly sparse at the national and international levels. In 1753, in *Species Plantarum*, Linnaeus described 9,000 species of plants and marked up the woody species with the symbol of Saturn (Simpson, 2010). Since the time of Linnaeus, botanical exploration and discovery has hugely expanded, but the precise number of plant species still remains uncertain, with current estimates suggesting there are 370,495 seed plants (Lughadha et al., 2016). Estimates of the number of tree species have ranged from 45,000 to 100,000 (Fine & Ree, 2006; Oldfield, Lusty, & MacKinven, 1998; Savolainen, 2000; Tudge, 2006), with reports suggesting there are 21,000 species in temperate regions (Hunt, 1996) and 40,000–53,000 in the tropics (Slik et al., 2015). Most of these figures are based on broad estimates or modeled numbers of trees; none of them have been derived from an authoritative global list of trees.

Here, for the first time, we present an overview of the complete list of all known tree species by scientific name and country level distribution, and we describe an online database, called GlobalTreeSearch (http://www.bgci.org/globaltree_search.php), that provides access to this information. GlobalTreeSearch has been designed as a tool for assessing, monitoring, and managing tree species diversity, forests, and carbon stocks on a global, regional, and/or national level.

Methodology

Definition of tree

As tree type growth habits have evolved many times across different plant families, there are many definitions of a tree. For the purposes of this project, we use the tree definition agreed by IUCN's Global Tree Specialist Group (GTSG): *a woody plant with usually a single stem growing to a height of at least two metres, or if multi-stemmed, then at least one vertical stem five centimetres in diameter at breast height*. We excluded cycads, tree ferns, tree-like Poaceae, Bromeliaceae, and Musaceae from our list. The World Checklist of Selected Plant Families (WCSP) and several other taxonomic databases use the Raunkiær system for categorizing life forms, with trees most often being categorized as phanerophytes. However, this system excludes smaller trees and also includes some larger shrubs. Efforts have been made to include the smaller trees by incorporating country level and regional tree lists in addition to WCSP species. Shrubs were removed manually on a species-by-species basis. Some plant species have variable life-forms, but all species that are recorded as growing naturally as a tree somewhere have been included.

Data compilation and management

Tree species data were accessed from a range of sources including: the World Checklist of Selected Plant Families (WCSP, 2016), Flora of China (Wu Zhengyi, Raven, & Hong Deyuan 1994–2013), African Plant Database (Conservatoire et Jardin Botaniques Ville de Genève, 2017), FloraBase (Western Australian Herbarium, 1998), Plants of Southern Africa (SANBI, 2014), The PLANTS database (USDA, 2016), Brazilian Flora 2020 (Rio de Janeiro Botanical Garden, 2016), and Tropicos (Missouri Botanical Garden, 2016).

In addition to these major published sources, we extended the call for information to the botanical community and contacted over 80 experts in the GTSG and member institutions of

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), receiving a wide range of regional, taxonomic, and country-specific tree checklists. Over 500 published sources were consulted, all of which are referenced in the Database Reference Sources listed in the Appendix. Collation and compilation of the data has taken over two years of full-time work.

Database description

The GlobalTreeSearch database was compiled in Microsoft Access and consists of four interlinked tables. The first table of taxon names contains all of the names received during the compilation of GlobalTreeSearch. This table currently contains 180,000 entries. Each unique tree taxon name links by ID number to the source of that name. This long list of tree names has been refined only to contain the names of accepted tree species names (i.e., the 60,065 final tree species). For this refined list of accepted tree species, we recorded associated geographic information. Each country occurrence for each species has its own unique source. This table currently contains over 195,500 entries.

Taxonomy

All taxon names received were recorded, but only taxonomically accepted names (or unresolved names) are included in the published GlobalTreeSearch. The current version of GlobalTreeSearch focuses on species names and does not contain infraspecific taxa. The taxonomic opinion follows the WCSP for its published families. Families that are not included in WCSP follow The Plant List (TPL, 2013). Other regional sources (Euro+Med, Reflora) and taxonomic sources (ILDIS) have been consulted when required. As The Plant List (TPL, 2013) was last updated in May 2012, any species published since then have been provisionally accepted on our list unless found to be synonymous with species from other more recent published sources, such as in a published monograph. In such cases, the source of the taxonomic status is recorded, allowing for updates as taxonomic opinion evolves.

Distribution information

The country-level distribution information was recorded following the ISO 3166 country names standard. Distribution data were sourced from various published references including the nomenclatural sources mentioned above, as well as additional monographs, checklists, and floras, some electronically and others through manual review. Distribution information has been recorded to country level for all taxa, with distribution in certain countries (Brazil, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and China) recorded to state or province. These countries were chosen as they are geographically expansive, and the distributions at sub-country level were generally easily obtained.

The country distributions were also matched to eight biomes (Oceania, Neotropical, Nearctic, Afrotropical, Antarctic, Palearctic, Australasia, Indo-Malay), following Olson et al. (2001). For the purpose of our analysis, Indonesia is considered entirely within the Indo-Malay biome and China within the Palearctic biome.

Expert review

GlobalTreeSearch has been reviewed by more than 30 experts chosen for their taxonomic or regional expertise. These experts reviewed the list of omitted taxa and amended distribution data where necessary. However, GlobalTreeSearch is not a static entity, which is to say that additions, taxonomic revisions, and deletions will continue to be carried out to ensure the list remains the most comprehensive and up-to-date list of the world's tree species. The database will be maintained and managed by BGCI through its website http://www.bgci.org/globaltree_search.php. An e-mail address will be set up to allow people to suggest revisions which will be verified through expert review before modification. In addition, if a suggested revision cannot easily be verified or resolved, then a comments field will record the nature of the query received.

Results

There are 60,065 tree species recorded worldwide. Based on current taxonomic knowledge and levels of botanical exploration, we believe that this compilation represents the best available record of the total number of tree species and a sound basis for conservation planning.

Over 45% (27,203) of tree species are found in just 10 families (Figure 1). The family with the most tree species is the Leguminosae with 5,405 tree species, followed by Rubiaceae (4,827), and then Myrtaceae (4,330).

The most diverse tree genera are *Syzygium* (1,069 species), *Eugenia* (884 species), and *Eucalyptus* (747 species), all in the family Myrtaceae (Figure 2). *Ficus* (Moraceae), *Diospyros* (Ebenaceae), and *Psychotria* (Rubiaceae) are the fourth, fifth, and sixth largest genera, respectively.

The country with the most diverse tree flora is Brazil, with 8,715 tree species, followed by Colombia (5,776 spp.) and Indonesia (5,142 spp.) (Figure 3). Nearly 58% of all tree species (34,575) are single country endemics. The countries with the most endemic trees

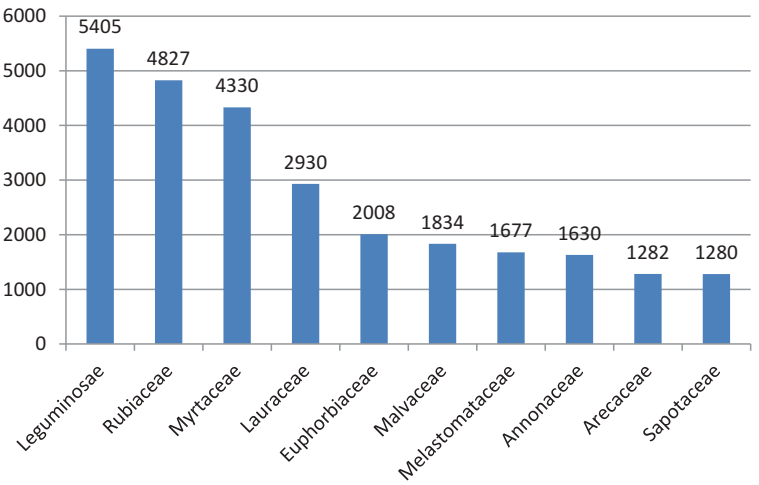

Figure 1. Top ten families with the most tree species.

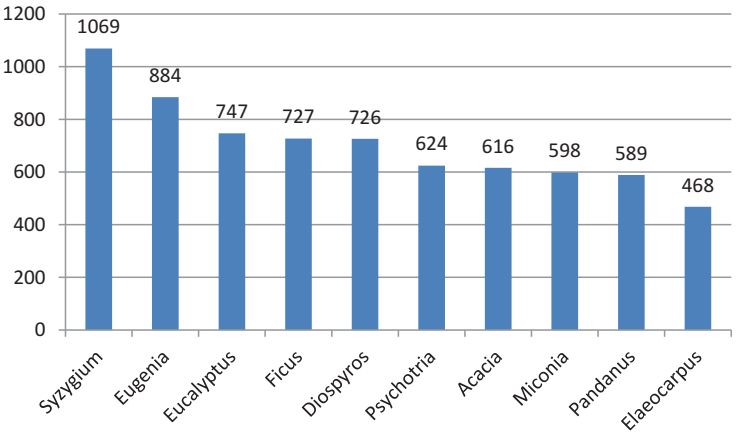

Figure 2. Top ten genera with the most tree species.

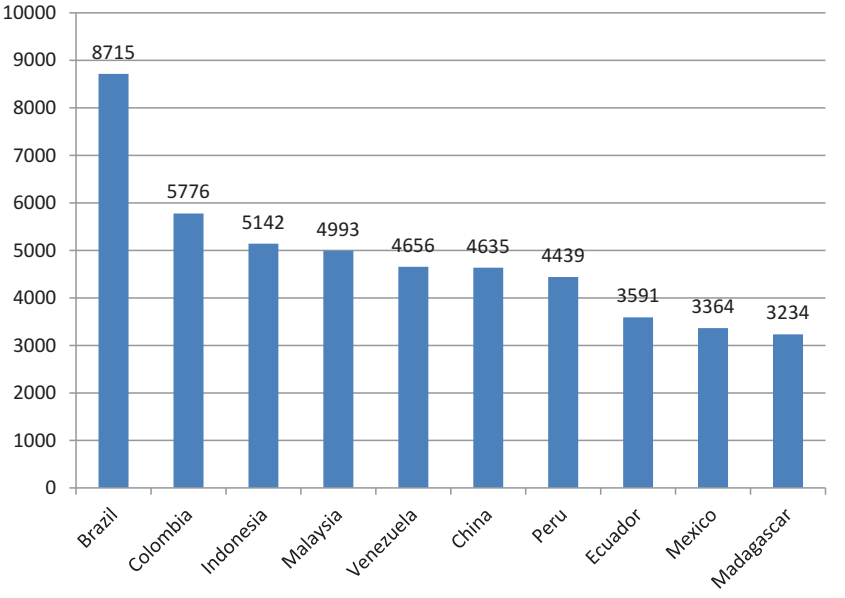

Figure 3. Top ten countries with most tree species.

are Brazil (4,333 spp.), Madagascar (2,991 spp.), Australia (2,584 spp.), and China (2,149 spp.) (Figure 4).

Matching country distributions to biomes (Figure 5), the biome with the largest number of trees is the Neotropic biome with over 23,000 tree species, followed by the other tropical biomes, the Indo-Malay biome and the Afrotropic biome. There are no trees occurring in the Antarctic biome, and the next lowest diversity is in North America in the Nearctic biome, with fewer than 1,400 species. The most diverse tree genera reflect different centers of diversity. More than half of the species in the genus *Syzygium* (615) are found in the Indo-Malay biome, over 731 *Eugenia* species are found in the Neotropics, and almost all of the *Eucalyptus* genus is found in Australasia.

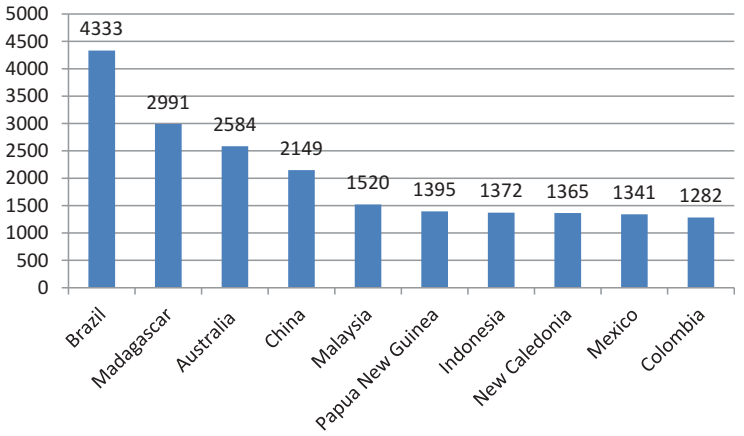

Figure 4. Top ten countries with the largest number of endemic species.

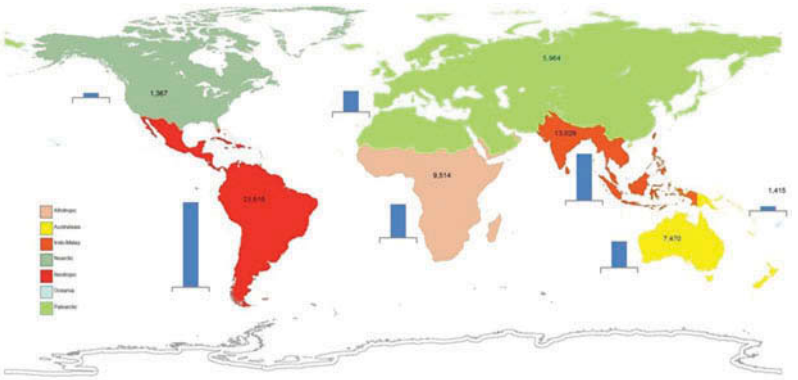

Figure 5. Tree species numbers by biome.

Discussion

The compilation of GlobalTreeSearch has been a multidisciplinary effort, with data contributed from botanic gardens, museums, academia, NGOs, forestry organizations, and agricultural institutions. GlobalTreeSearch asserts the number of tree species to be at the lower end of previous estimates. Nevertheless, the GlobalTreeSearch database contains over 375,500 plant names and country entries, an indication of the scale of the task. Having an accurate number of tree species and their country level distributions will encourage extensive applications by a wide range of users, from conservation planning and action to sustainable forestry practices.

The tropical hotspots of tree diversity identified by this analysis are unsurprising, with countries in the Neotropic biome coming out on top as reported in more general assessments of the distribution of biodiversity (Giam, Bradshaw, Tan, & Sodhi, 2010; Heywood & Watson, 1995; Myers, Mittermeier, Mittermeier, Da Fonseca, & Kent, 2000). Other estimates of tree diversity hotspots (such as Slik et al., 2015) have reported that the

Indo-Pacific region, comprising the Australasian, Oceania, and Indo-Malay biomes as well as Madagascar, is of comparable species diversity to the Neotropics. Again, our analysis reflects this assertion. Similarly, countries with the highest levels of tree endemism reflect broader measures of plant diversity (e.g., Brazil, China, Australia) or islands where isolation has resulted in speciation (e.g., Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia). The preliminary analysis of tree distributions by country and biome represented in this article will be followed by more in-depth analyses in future publications.

Data availability was an important factor in developing this checklist. Several biodiverse countries have electronic online floras developed in response to the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation Target 1: An online flora of all known plants (Sharrock, Oldfield, & Wilson, 2014). For this reason, countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and China are likely to have more up-to-date data in the GlobalTreeSearch database. Other regions with diverse tree floras (e.g., Southeast Asia) have not been as extensively surveyed or have not compiled their data electronically. Although hard copy publications were used extensively in cases where floras are still incomplete (e.g., *Flora Malesiana*), there will still inevitably be data that are poorer for some areas. Projects are already under way to complete online floras on national, regional, and global scales, sources which will be utilized by GlobalTreeSearch when available.

The fact that Leguminosae is the most diverse tree family is not surprising given that Leguminosae is the third most diverse plant family after the (primarily herbaceous) families Asteraceae and Orchidaceae. Rubiaceae, the second most diverse tree family is the fourth most diverse plant family and is primarily tropical and woody. Myrtaceae is the third most diverse tree family and, interestingly, accounts for the top three tree genera *Syzygium, Eugenia*, and *Eucalyptus*. This reflects the fact that the family Myrtaceae is almost entirely woody, and it is characteristic of highly diverse subtropical and tropical zones.

GlobalTreeSearch is not a static database and it will incorporate both changes in taxonomy and increased availability of data. BGCI encourages submissions from regions where data may not be as readily available to improve the GlobalTreeSearch database. There is also scope for increasing the levels of regional data for countries other than those already included as new data become available. For example, island level data for countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines would be useful for conservation planning and forestry.

At the policy level, documenting trends in the conservation, sustainable use, and development of Forest Genetic Resources (FGR) has been undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. In 2014, FAO published the first State of the World's Forest Genetic Resources (SOWFGR) report (FAO, 2014). The purpose of this report was "[to build] the information and knowledge base required for action towards better conservation and sustainable management of FGR at national, regional, and international levels". Based on the preliminary, draft findings of this report, FAO noted that "very few countries have detailed tree species checklists that include species characteristics allowing distinction between different life forms" (FAO, 2014). As a result, the inventories submitted by the 86 countries that contributed to the report were inconsistent and incomplete. The completion of GlobalTreeSearch will greatly support the FAO in achieving the strategic priorities outlined in their "Global Plan of Action for the Conservation, Sustainable Use, and

Development of Forest Genetic Resources" (FAO, 2013). Specifically, the GlobalTreeSearch database will enable country checklists to be routinely produced and will constitute a comprehensive data set that can be used to measure trends in the conservation and use of FGR over time. Furthermore, production of tree species distribution maps is an essential step in conservation and management of FGR, though few countries have the resources to produce such maps. With the GlobalTreeSearch database, the production of country-level and precise location distribution maps for all tree species is achievable.

Mapping species is also an important step in assessing the conservation status of all of the world's tree species, an activity essential to ensure effective conservation and management of tree diversity. This is the aim of the Global Tree Assessment—a complete assessment of the conservation status of all trees by 2020 (Newton et al., 2015). The Global Tree Assessment is being made possible by the GlobalTreeSearch database, which will be used to prioritize species in need of conservation assessment. GlobalTreeSearch is used to develop a workflow to rapidly and accurately assess and map species not at risk of extinction ("Least Concern"), in conjunction with GBIF data, which in turn will enable subsequent activities to focus on the often less well-known species that are at risk of extinction. Tree red listing activities are already under way or completed for the Global Tree Assessment including assessment of European trees, assessment of various taxonomic groups (Magnoliaceae, oaks, Betulaceae, etc.), and initial assessment of the world's commercial timbers. To date, conservation status assessments of only around 20,000 of the trees with scientifically accepted names have been recorded in global, regional, or national red lists; that is, about a third of known tree species (BGCI, ThreatSearch, unpublished data). BGCI will build on this work by carrying out a gap analysis bringing in data from its ThreatSearch database (a compilation of plant conservation assessments), PlantSearch database (taxa in botanic garden collections), and GardenSearch database (location of botanic gardens worldwide) to identify where capacity is needed to prioritize tree conservation through red listing and to conserve trees both *in situ* and *ex situ*.

The Global Tree Assessment supports the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation and the broader Aichi Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity but is not simply a tool for tree conservation. GlobalTreeSearch and the Global Tree Assessment also support initiatives to improve sustainable forest management, for example through regulation of the international timber trade. FAO estimates that in 2006 the trade in timber products contributed some $468 billion annually to global GDP (FAO, 2009). A recently compiled working list of internationally traded timbers documented 1,575 timber taxa (Mark, Newton, Oldfield, & Rivers, 2014). The conservation status of many of these species is unknown, and this is even more the case for the thousands of species that are traded locally or regionally. The national inventories and conservation assessments provided by GlobalTreeSearch and the GTA will greatly assist national authorities in regulating unsustainable trade in the species concerned. The Global Tree Assessment will also support implementation of the UNFCCC, which aims to tackle greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation through the "REDD+" program. Recognizing the potential for social and environmental risks and benefits from REDD+, the UNFCCC has agreed on a set of broad safeguards that countries should promote and support, specifically focusing on the conservation of natural forests and biodiversity (Visseren-Hamakers, McDermmott, Marjanneke, & Cashore, 2012). Improved information on the

conservation status of tree species will help to focus REDD+ activities and enhance their conservation impacts.

Conclusions

It is perhaps surprising that it has taken until 2017 to compile GlobalTreeSearch, the first global, authoritative list of tree species. However, it is worth acknowledging that GlobalTreeSearch represents a huge scientific effort encompassing the discovery, collection, and description of tens of thousands of plant species. This is "big science" involving the work of thousands of botanists over a period of centuries, and the advent of digital checklists and databases over the past few decades has made the collation and refinement of so many data sources possible. Furthermore, GlobalTreeSearch is not a static list; it will continue to be refined, revised, and added to. Some geographic regions remain relatively unexplored botanically and, even where thorough fieldwork has been undertaken, there can be a substantial lag between discovery and publication. Similarly, plant taxonomy is constantly changing with new discoveries and taxonomic revisions augmenting our knowledge.

GlobalTreeSearch has both immediate value to a wide range of user communities and will allow for the assessment and monitoring of tree species diversity on a global, regional, and/or national level over time.

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Appendix

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