

Received Date : 18-May-2016

Revised Date : 19-Aug-2016

Accepted Date : 24-Aug-2016

Article type : Primary Research Articles

**i. Title:** Stability in a changing world – palm community dynamics in the hyperdiverse western Amazon over 17 years

**ii. Running headline:** Stable climate and palm community dynamics

**iii. List of authors:** [Ingrid Olivares](#)<sup>1,2</sup> • Jens-Christian Svenning<sup>1</sup> • Peter M. van Bodegom<sup>3</sup> • Renato Valencia<sup>4</sup> • Henrik Balslev<sup>1</sup>

**iv. Origin:** <sup>1</sup>Section for Ecoinformatics and Biodiversity, Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Ny Munkegade 114, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

<sup>2</sup>Current address: Institute of Systematic Botany, University of Zurich, Zollikerstrasse 107, 8008 Zurich, Switzerland

<sup>3</sup>Institute of Environmental Sciences CML, Leiden University, Einsteinweg 2, 2333 CC Leiden, The Netherlands

<sup>4</sup>Laboratorio de Ecología de Plantas, Escuela de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/gcb.13494

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**v. Author for correspondence:** Henrik Balslev, telephone: +458715 6568, E-mail:

henrik.balslev@bios.au.dk

**vi. Key words:** Arecaceae, biodiversity, climatic records, community ecology, climate change, directional changes, forest dynamics, forest monitoring, global change, Yasuní National Park

**vii. Paper type:** Primary Research Article

### **Abstract**

Are the hyperdiverse local forests of the western Amazon undergoing changes linked to global and local drivers such as climate change, or successional dynamics? We analyzed local climatic records to assess potential climatic changes in Yasuní National Park, Ecuador, and compared two censuses (1995, 2012) of a palm community to assess changes in community structure and composition. Over 17 years, the structure and composition of this palm community remained remarkably stable. Soil humidity was significantly lower and canopy conditions were significantly more open in 2012 compared to 1995, but local climatic records showed that no significant changes in precipitation, temperature or river-level have occurred during the last decade. Thus, we found no evidence of recent directional shifts in climate or the palm community in Yasuní. The absence of changes in local climate and plant community dynamics in Yasuní contrasts with recent findings from eastern Amazon, where environmental change is driving significant changes in ecosystem dynamics. Our findings suggest that until now, local forests in the northwest Amazon may have escaped pressure from climate change. The stability of this rich palm community embedded in the hyperdiverse Yasuní National Park underlines its uniqueness as a sanctuary for the protection of Amazonian diversity from global change impacts.

## Introduction

Warming and seasonality have increased in central and eastern Amazon ([Malhi & Wright, 2004](#); [Gloor \*et al.\*, 2015](#)) and evidence for climate-driven changes exists even for the largest forested areas in the tropics ([Trumbore \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). Many tropical forests, including the Amazon basin, exhibit accelerated turnover and increased above-ground biomass of trees ([Phillips \*et al.\*, 1998, 2008, 2009](#)). Long-term records of forests dynamics demonstrated a replacement of moisture-adapted species by drought-tolerant species in Central American forests ([Condit \*et al.\*, 1996](#); [Enquist & Enquist, 2011](#)). In Amazonian plant communities, climate-generalists and drought-tolerant species increased in abundance ([Butt \*et al.\*, 2014](#)) and the combined effect of climatic changes and other factors like CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment and fragmentation in central and eastern areas are expected to cause an overall decline of the ecosystem's ability to store carbon ([Brienen \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). Other directional changes are currently taking place. For instance, productivity, mortality and recruitment have increased in forest fragments and interiors in the central Amazon as a result of a synergistic effect between climate change and CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment ([Laurance \*et al.\*, 2014](#)).

In contrast, climate change in the western Amazon has been of low intensity during the last decades, and in contrast to eastern areas, it is expected to cause less changes in the distribution, diversity and function of forests ([Olivares \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). The northwest Amazon is the only tropical rainforest area without a warming trend between 1960–1998 and there is no evidence for decreased precipitation during the same period ([Malhi & Wright, 2004](#); [Gloor \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). Concomitantly, the northwest Amazon harbors sites without negative trends in tree survivorship or forest productivity and biomass ([Brienen \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). However, there are surprisingly few studies on long-term forest dynamics for western Amazon forests ([Bass \*et al.\*, 2010](#)), limiting our ability to assess whether such persistence is a general phenomenon for this region. Such studies are urgently needed because this area is crucial for the survival of thousands of plant and animal species ([Bass \*et al.\*, 2010](#)).

Within the hyperdiverse Amazon region, palm species are iconic elements and are abundant in most forest types ([Gentry, 1988](#); [Henderson \*et al.\*, 1995](#); [Kahn & de Granville, 2012](#)). The understory is occupied by small *Geonoma* and *Chamaedorea* species, while tall palms like *Iriartea deltoidea* and *Oenocarpus bataua* dominate the canopy. Notably, the most abundant tree species across the Amazon basin is a palm, *Euterpe precatoria* ([ter Steege \*et al.\*, 2013](#)). Another palm, *Iriartea deltoidea*, is the most common tree in the western Amazon basin ([Pitman, 2000](#); [Macía & Svenning, 2005](#)). It thus follows that studying palm communities is important to understand the dynamics of Amazonian forests.

The distribution and diversity of palms can change rapidly in response to increasing drought ([Condit \*et al.\*, 1996](#); [Walther \*et al.\*, 2007](#)), because many are sensitive to water availability, as also seen in their strong links to precipitation patterns at continental scales ([Bjorholm \*et al.\*, 2005](#)) and topographic-hydrological gradients at local scales ([Kahn & de Castro, 1985](#); [Svenning, 1999](#); [Kahn & de Granville, 2012](#)). Even the absence of climatic change in northwest Amazon does not guarantee that forest dynamics is not affected. Palms are highly dependent on frugivorous birds and mammals for their dispersal ([Zona & Henderson, 1989](#)) and several studies have documented strong effects of defaunation on palm abundance and recruitment ([Galetti \*et al.\*, 2006, 2013](#); [Fadini \*et al.\*, 2009](#); [Sica \*et al.\*, 2014](#)). Hence, deforestation caused by oil concessions and the construction of new roads ([Finer \*et al.\*, 2014](#)), widespread defaunation ([Espinosa \*et al.\*, 2014](#); [Ghanem & Voigt, 2014](#)) and changes in indigenous population densities and land use ([Pitman, 2000](#)) might be affecting palm community dynamics in the western Amazon. Moreover, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels continue to increase ([Keeling & Whorf, 2005](#)), with potential effects on plant communities. It is thus important to better understand the response of the region's palm communities to these ongoing global changes.

Developing an understanding of tropical rainforest ecosystem dynamics in an era of global change requires both experimental and observational approaches. Observational approaches lack the control of environmental factors that experimentation provides, but natural forest areas include rich and intricate networks of interactions that may shape biological responses and are difficult to capture in experiments. Thus, long-term forest monitoring is important for assessing the processes that

determine ecosystem responses. Using this approach, we analyzed the climatic record at Yasuní Scientific Station, Ecuador, and combined data from a 1995 census and a 2012 re-census of the palm community near the station to address two main questions: (i) Were there changes in precipitation, temperature or river-level over the period 1995–2012? (ii) Were there differences in palm species richness and number of individuals recorded at each census?

We use null models of community structure and composition to determine if observed current and previous patterns of community assembly reflect directional changes. We define stable community dynamics as the absence of significant changes in species composition and abundance ([McGill \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). This is, to our knowledge, the first long-term monitoring study of palm community dynamics in the Amazon basin.

## Materials and Methods

*Study site* – Data were collected in the western Amazon basin in the Yasuní National Park (0°40'29''S, 76°23'51''W) in eastern Ecuador. Low piedmont hills at 100–300m above sea level and small floodplains shape the landscape. The area has been disturbed by oil exploration, and a road that crosses the park since 1994 has facilitated the establishment of indigenous settlements in formerly unoccupied parts and has increased the possibilities for bush-meat hunting. Nevertheless, specific locations where sampling was done are all old-growth forest. *Terra firme* forest is the main habitat in Yasuní, while periodically inundated bottomlands and permanent swamps also occur ([Pitman, 2000](#)). Rainfall and temperature data spanning the last decade have been gathered at Yasuní Scientific Station. Although there have been years without data (including the period between 2011–2015 for rainfall and temperature, and 2012–2015 for river level), these gaps do not affect the overall record (Fig. 1). The level of the Tiputini river at the Yasuní Scientific Station was measured as the distance between the water surface and a fixed arbitrary point in the river-bank. The climate in Yasuní is perhumid and hot; mean annual precipitation is c. 3000 mm with a peak of rainfall during May-June. The mean annual temperature is 26–28°C ([Svenning, 1999](#)).

*Sampling design* – In 2012 we re-censused 18 transects of  $5 \times 500$  m (0.25 ha) originally established in 1995 in areas within 0.5–8 km of the Yasuní Scientific Station (Appendix S4 in Supporting information). Transects were located and measured following a standardized protocol ([Balslev et al., 2010](#)), the minimal distance between transects was 100 m, while the maximum distance was 12.5 km. Transects are dispersed in an area of more than 50 km<sup>2</sup> that covers the main topographic types of this Amazonian landscape: bottomlands (N=6), slopes (N=7), and ridges (N=5). Ridges and bottomland transects are areas with homogeneous physiography, without overlap of habitats. Ridge transects follow the highest points (200–300m above sea level) in well-drained upland *terra firme* forests. Bottomland transects are located in flat areas, periodically flooded by rivers or streams, some of them are well-drained areas, while others maintain high soil moisture throughout the year ([Balslev et al., 2010](#); [Kristiansen et al., 2011, 2012](#)). Slope transects are perpendicular to elevation curves and they combine environmental features from the *terra firme* and the bottomlands, and therefore have heterogeneous relief and moisture conditions.

*Hydrology and canopy structure* – In 1995, we recorded soil moisture and the presence of canopy gaps along each transect following a standardized protocol ([Balslev et al., 2010](#)). Soil moisture is an estimation of the persistence of water within the soil, and was recorded in three categories where 0 = dry soil, 1 = muddy soil and 2 = standing water. Gaps were defined as vertical openings extending from  $\leq 2$  m above the ground to the sky (Brokaw, 1982). In 2012, we re-censused soil moisture and the presence of canopy gaps using the same method, to assess if these environmental factors had changed between 1995 and 2012.

*Palm species inventory* – Within each transect and during both censuses (1995 and 2012) all palm individuals were counted and identified to species. Palm individuals were not tagged, but the transect areas were. In 1995 all transects were carefully tagged every five meters with 1 m vertical plastic tubes. In 2012 we found all tubes and delimited each transect total area with a rope before counting all palm individuals. Each individual was assigned to one of three categories; seedlings were individuals with undivided leaves, juveniles were individuals without evidence of reproduction and adults individuals with evidence of reproduction. One of the authors of this study (HB) participated in both

censuses and was responsible for the identification of species. For clonal and multi-stemmed species each ramet was counted as a separate individual. Voucher specimens were collected and deposited in herbaria in Aarhus (AAU) and Quito (QCA). Identification initially followed [Henderson \*et al.\* \(1995\)](#), but was subsequently updated to follow the latest taxonomic monographs and revisions ([Henderson, 2011a, 2011b](#)).

### **Data analyses**

*Environmental changes* – To investigate if there have been temporal changes in climatic conditions at Yasuní Scientific Station we used Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) models for time series spanning the years 2000–2010 (rainfall and temperature) and 1995–2011 (river level). We used the results from ARIMA models to forecast climatic trends within the next three years after the last year recorded. We tested the differences in soil moisture content and the number of canopy gaps from 1995 to 2012 using paired t-tests.

*Palm abundance data* – We performed all analyses using relative abundance values, i.e. the number of palm individuals –per species or per transect– found relative to the total number of palms in each census. We included all palm species found but we used only the total number of juvenile and adult individuals (hereafter also referred as abundance), excluding seedlings because they may exhibit ephemeral and divergent patterns in abundance relative to adults or juveniles ([Metz, 2012](#)).

*Changes in the number of palm individuals per transect from 1995–2012* – First, we used a paired t-test to assess the changes in total number of palm individuals per transect. As a confirmatory test we used an analysis of variance with repeated measures (RM-ANOVA). Three factors and their interactions were assessed (1) census: time of census 1995 and 2012 (2) habitat: bottomland, slope, ridge, and (3) life stage: juveniles and adults.

*Changes in the relative number of palm individuals per species from 1995–2012* – Using the net change or delta ( $\Delta$ ) for the relative number of individuals, we performed an analysis of variance for the 41 species recorded. To evaluate if the change in number of individuals differed among life stages

(juvenile or adult), growth forms (Small or Large palms) or habits (solitary or clonal) we assessed these factors and the interactions among life stage and the last two.

All data analysis were performed using the software R 3.2.2, (2015) (<http://www.r-project.org/>)

## Results

*Environmental changes* – There has not been any changes in total monthly rainfall, mean temperature and mean river level per month during the last decade in Yasuní. Residuals of the ARIMA models for each variable were randomly distributed and there were no significant lags at 95% confidence interval (results not shown); thus, the models obtained (Fig. 1) provide the best fit to the data. Model-based forecasts for the following three years reflected that there are no directional climatic trends (Fig. 1). Still, in 2012, soils were significantly drier ( $t = 4.2162$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.0006$ ) and there were more canopy gaps ( $t = -6.3785$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 6.9e-06$ ) than in 1995.

*Changes in total number of species and individuals* – In 1995, we recorded 42 species and 24496 palm individuals. In 2012, we found 37 species and 17934 palm individuals (Table S1). In our analyses we included only juvenile and adult individuals, which translated into 9854 individuals from 41 species recorded in 1995 and 10199 individuals from 37 species recorded in 2012. One species, *Mauritia flexuosa*, was excluded from the analyses for 1995 because only 2 seedlings were recorded.

Between 1995 and 2012, the palm community did not experience significant changes in the number of individuals (paired t-test =  $-0.7562$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.4599$ ; Fig. 2). This was confirmed by the RM-ANOVA, which showed differences among life stages and habitat, but not among censuses (Table 1). In both years juveniles were more abundant than adults and bottomlands had the highest abundance of palms (Table S1 and S2).

*Changes in the number of palm individuals per species from 1995–2012* – The absence of change in the number of individuals held for each of the 37 palm species found in both censuses independently of life stage, growth form and habit (Table S3). Juveniles and adults of four species were not recorded in 2012 namely, *Bactris schultesii* (11 individuals in 1995), *Desmoncus orthacanthos* (6 indiv), *Geonoma interrupta* (5 indiv), *Geonoma triglochis* (3 indiv). The abundance of these species



represented less than 0.001% of the total number of individuals found in 1995 and therefore their absence did not emerge as any major change. Overall, no significant 1995 to 2012 census changes occurred in any of the species in this palm community of Yasuní (Fig. 3).

## Discussion

Over 17 years since the mid-1990s, a palm community in Yasuní National Park has not undergone any significant change at the landscape scale. We did not find changes between 1995 and 2012 in the total number of individuals or for any single palm species. Even the abundance of a dominant species like *Iriartea deltoidea*, which is highly sensitive to drought ([Pallqui et al., 2014](#)), remained constant. This stability (*sensu* [McGill et al., 2015](#)) coincided with constant patterns in temperature, rainfall and river-level over this multi-decadal period. The higher frequency of canopy gaps and decrease in soil moisture likely reflect inter-annual fluctuations rather than directional climatic changes. The high density of individuals observed in both life stages (juveniles and adults) and across all habitat types (Table S2) indicates ongoing recruitment and consistent adult performance.

Our results underscore that the studied landscape in Yasuní has remained stable in terms of environmental conditions and palm community dynamics over the last two decades. Palms are good indicators of Amazonian forests dynamics because they are common throughout the entire region, and their floristic patterns are similar to other common groups like melastomes and pteridophytes ([Vormisto et al., 2000](#)). The family is particularly abundant in the western Amazon ([Montufar & Pintaud, 2006](#)), representing 10% of all trees > 10 cm DBH in several 1 ha ([Pitman, 2000](#)) and 25 ha inventories ([Valencia et al., 2004](#)) of forest in Yasuní. Amazonian palm genera are widespread but species are usually constrained by soil and hydrological gradients. Thus, at local scales, different species characterize each topographical unit ([Svenning, 1999](#)) and at the regional scale, all Amazonian forest types contain specific palm representatives ([Balslev et al., 2011](#)). Further, palms are morphologically diverse, and most Amazonian forest harbor small and large palm species that occupy most forest strata (Henderson, 1995). A variety of Amazonian life forms exists, including clonal or solitary palms with subterranean, aerial or climbing stems, and with simple or divided leaves of

various lengths from a few centimeters to several meters (Henderson, 1995). This study captured all the variation of this representative plant group in the hyperdiverse forests of Yasuní. Our findings should therefore be considered as a robust example of the current stability in the forest communities of the northwestern Amazon.

Interestingly, our results contrast with those from central, east and southern Amazon, where climate change (Malhi & Wright, 2004; Gloor *et al.*, 2015) and deforestation (Soares-Filho *et al.*, 2006) are stronger. For instance, Laurance *et al.* (2014) monitored 69 1-ha permanent plots in forest edges and preserved forest interiors in the central Amazon from 1980–2012. They showed that mortality and recruitment of trees and lianas in edge and forest interiors have accelerated over time. Here, however, we show that palms abundance has not changed at the landscape scale in the western Amazon. While our study did not explicitly determine dynamics rates (e.g., mortality, productivity), the stability in abundance for palms overall and per species was highly consistent for all transects, and hence serves as robust indicator of community stability in this tropical forest landscape. This lack of change coincides with results from an analysis of the 25 ha permanent plot at Yasuní, where there is no evidence that trees  $\geq 1$  cm DBH have changed in density or biomass between 1995 and 2003 (Valencia *et al.*, 2009). Given the stability in climate in the western Amazon compared to its southern and eastern counterparts, this pattern is expected to hold under future climate scenarios (Cook & Vizy, 2008).

At the local scale, eastern Amazonian forests are able to maintain their photosynthetic capacity after long periods of soil drought (Rowland *et al.*, 2015), and reestablish low mortality rates after extreme drought events (Laurance *et al.*, 2001). However, a major issue in the eastern Amazon is the combined effect of extreme droughts and high fragmentation, which increases the frequency of fire events (Brando *et al.*, 2014). Fire is a factor that can transform Amazonian forests' structure and composition in short periods of time (Nepstad *et al.*, 1999) and at large scales (Cochrane & Laurance, 2002). Western Amazon forests are instead more humid (Malhi & Wright, 2004) and less fragmented (Bonilla-Bedoya *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, they should be less susceptible to changes in biomass and productivity.

Despite the fact that climate in this part of Yasuní has not changed, the area is under the influence of other factors such as road building, increasing CO<sub>2</sub> levels and defaunation. All these are factors that threaten forest ecosystem functioning and could have driven palm community changes. In this regard, the palm community might be even resistant to changes in CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment and defaunation or they might cause lag effects (e.g. [Osuri \*et al.\*, 2016](#)). If such a resistance or lag effects exist, their specific mechanisms should be tackled in further community dynamic studies.

Unfortunately, up to now, local studies monitoring western Amazon forests in the long term have been almost non-existent. Data from a few permanent plots have been gathered during the last decade, but instead of being analyzed at the local or landscape scale, like in central and eastern Amazon, their findings have been mostly reported as part of regional analyses (e.g. [Brienen \*et al.\*, 2015](#)), limiting our ability to discern the scale-specific dynamics. Clearly needed studies include a spatial analysis that evaluates the effect of road distance on the abundance of palms, and others that compare the dynamics of palms in less defaunated areas of Yasuní.

The observed stability in community composition and environmental conditions in this Yasuní forest landscape is important as it indicates that western Amazonian forests can still be maintaining their structure and functioning despite the ongoing global changes. Western Amazon forests encompass exceptional biological richness ([Bass \*et al.\*, 2010](#)) and act as corridors between low and highland areas, strongly needed for the climate-tracking migrations of many species in the region ([Feeley, 2012](#)). Furthermore, these forests play a key role in the carbon balance of the whole basin, because they assimilate and fix larger amounts of carbon than those in the east ([Malhi \*et al.\*, 2006](#); [Aragao \*et al.\*, 2014](#)). Our study adds to evidence that large areas of well-preserved forests in western Amazonia may so far have been less exposed to the ongoing global changes than other areas have suffered from, further highlighting their conservation importance. If northwestern forest communities are preserved, they are expected to withstand the impact of global changes due to their stable climatic conditions ([Olivares \*et al.\*, 2015](#)). Avoiding fragmentation in Yasuní is likely paramount to avoid the negative cascading effects that the central and eastern areas of the Amazon are already facing.

## Acknowledgements

We thank [Mayra Ninazunta](#), [Nikolas Balslev](#), [Frederik Bonde](#), [Jairo Zambrano](#), [Anelio Loor](#) and [Javier Cuadros](#) for their fieldwork assistance. HB was supported by a grant from the Danish Natural Science Research Council (10–083348), and the fieldwork was funded by the FP7 PALMS project (contract # 213631 to HB). JCS was supported by the European Research Council (ERC-2012-StG-310886-HISTFUNC).

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## Tables and figures

**Table 1.** RM-ANOVA for the determinants of palm abundance in 18 transects in the rainforest of Yasuní National Park in 1995 and 2012. Three effects and their interactions were assessed to test for abundance changes: (1) census: time of census (1995 and 2012); (2) habitat: bottomland, slope, ridge; (3) life stage: juveniles and adults. Significance: \*\* P<0.01, \*\*\* P<0.001

	<b>Df</b>	<b>Sum Sq</b>	<b>Mean Sq</b>	<b>F-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Habitat</b>	2	292931	146466	7.5074	0.001231**
<b>Life Stage</b>	1	867464	867464	44.4636	9.186e-09***
<b>Census</b>	1	1653	1653	0.0847	0.771985
<b>Habitat: Life Stage</b>	2	6783	3391	0.1738	0.840859
<b>Census: Habitat</b>	2	19174	9587	0.4914	0.614213
<b>Census: Life Stage</b>	1	3570	3570	0.1830	0.670344
<b>Census: Habitat: Life Stage</b>	2	10378	5189	0.2660	0.767367
<b>Residuals</b>	60	1170571	19510		

**Figure 1. Climatic time-series for the last decade at Yasuní Scientific Station.** Time-series plots show the observed (gray lines) and ARIMA fitted (black lines) values for rainfall (a); temperature (b); and river level (c); boxplots show the monthly variation in river level height (d). Fitted models indicate that all climatic variables remained constant during the previous decade and no directional trends were expected during the following three years after last measurements (80% and 95% confidence intervals shaded in dark and light grey respectively).

**Figure 2. Relative palm abundance change.** Comparison of the relative palm abundance (percentage number of individuals with respect to the total) in 1995 vs. 2012 for 18 transects in the rainforests of Yasuní National Park. Each mark corresponds to one transect. Marks falling on the 1:1 line indicate no change in palm abundance for that transect. Marks falling either above or below the line indicate transects with increasing or decreasing palm abundance, respectively, but none differed from random expectations.

**Figure 3. Changes in the relative number of individuals from 1995 to 2012 for 41 palm species in Yasuní National Park.** The abundance change in juveniles and adults is shown for each species, values correspond to the relative change with respect to the total palms found in each census. No significant changes occurred for any species (see Table S3 for ANOVA results). Dotted lines show the average percentage of abundance change for all adults (in black) and all juveniles (in gray) from 1995 to 2012. 1=*Aiphanes ulei*; 2=*Ammandra decasperma*; 3=*Aphandra natalia*; 4=*Astrocaryum chambira*; 5=*Astrocaryum urostachys*; 6=*Attalea butyracea*; 7=*Attalea insignis*; 8=*Attalea maripa*; 9=*Bactris concinna* var. *concinna*; 10=*Bactris corosilla*; 11=*Bactris maraja* var. *juruensis*; 12=*Bactris maraja* var. *maraja*; 13=*Bactris schultesii*; 14=*Bactris simplicifrons*; 15=*Chamaedorea pauciflora*; 16=*Chamaedorea pinnatifrons*; 17=*Desmoncus giganteus*; 18=*Desmoncus mitis* subsp. *mitis*; 19=*Desmoncus orthacanthos*; 20=*Desmoncus polyacanthos*; 21=*Euterpe precatória*; 22=

*Geonoma aspidiifolia*; 23=*Geonoma brongniartii brongniartii*; 24= *Geonoma interrupta*; 25=  
*Geonoma macrostachys var. acaulis*; 26=*Geonoma macrostachys var. macrostachys*; 27=*Geonoma*  
*maxima subsp. multiramosa*; 28= *Geonoma stricta subsp. arundinacea*; 29=*Geonoma stricta subsp.*  
*stricta*; 30=*Geonoma stricta var. trailli*; 31=*Geonoma supracostata*; 32=*Geonoma triglochis*;  
33=*Hyospathe elegans*; 34=*Iriartea deltoidea*; 35=*Oenocarpus bataua*; 36=*Oenocarpus minor*;  
37=*Phytelephas tenuicaulis*; 38=*Prestoea schultzeana*; 39=*Socratea exorrhiza*; 40=*Syagrus sancona*  
41=*Wettinia maynensis*

### **Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

**Table S1** *Environmental variables and palms data recorded in 1995 and 2012*

**Table S2** *Palm species and total number of individuals per life stage and for each census*

**Table S3.** *Analysis of variance of palm abundance change for 21 species and three species attributes.*

**Appendix S4.** *Map of the study area within Yasuní National Park, Ecuador.*

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