Unstratified forests dominate the tropics especially in regions with lower fertility or higher temperatures

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Abstract – The stratified nature of tropical forest structure had been noted by early explorers, but until recent use of satellite-based LiDAR (GEDI, or Global Ecosystems Dynamics Investigation LiDAR), there has been no way to quantify stratification across all tropical forests. Understanding stratification is important because by some estimates, a majority of the world's species inhabit tropical forest canopies. Stratification can modify vertical microenvironment, and thus can affect a species' susceptibility to global warming. A better understanding of structure could also improve predictions of biomass across the tropics. Here we find that, based on analyzing each GEDI 25m diameter footprint in tropical forests (after screening for human impact), most footprints (60-90%) do not have multiple layers of vegetation. This result is highly scale dependent, but with a 25m footprint, the most common forest structure has a minimum plant area index (PAI) at ~40m followed by an increase in PAI until ~15m followed by a decline in PAI to the ground layer (described hereafter as a one peak footprint). However, there are large geographic patterns to forest structure within the Amazon basin (ranging between 60-90% one peak) and between the Amazon (79±9sd) and SE Asia or Africa (72±14 v 73±11). The number of canopy layers is significantly correlated with tree height (r^2=0.12), forest biomass (r^2=0.14), maximum temperature (T_{max}) (r^2=0.05), vapor pressure deficit (VPD) (r^2=0.03) and soil fertility proxies (e.g. total cation exchange capacity -r^2=0.01). Certain boundaries, like the Pebas Formation and Ecoregions, clearly delineate continental scale structural changes. More broadly, deviation from more ideal conditions (e.g. lower fertility or higher temperatures) leads to shorter, less stratified forests with lower biomass.

Introduction

Early Western visitors describe tropical forests as *horror vacui* (nature abhorring a vacuum) since vegetation was "anxious to fill every available space with stems and leaves", which was a change from more open temperate forests (Richards, 1952). However, a closer examination of tropical forests revealed structure or stratification with "a discernible, though complicated, arrangement in space" (Richards, 1952). Halle et al 1980 built on this with their influential work identifying twenty-three unique tree architecture types and delving into the drivers of forest architecture (Halle, Oldeman and Tomlinson, 1980). They recognized that because tropical forests had fewer hydraulic or cold temperature constraints, the tropics was a good place to study the potential for trees to fill vertical space. They developed theories using detailed 20 by 30m vertical profiles of old growth canopies where "trees of the present" occupy space in the upper canopy as well as in a second layer of increased light at 15-20m where sunflecks converge. This old growth forest architecture would result in a stratified or layered forest (artistically rendered in Figure 1) unlike younger pioneer forests with a single upper canopy strata. We define a stratified or multilayer forest as having two or more peaks (e.g. overstory and midstory in Fig 1) with a lower amount of vegetation between them. Others have quantified stratification in different ways and found both temperate and tropical forests commonly have 2-3 tree layers (Baker and Wilson, 2000). However, tropical forest stratification has not been addressed previously at high spatial resolutions at the global scale.

More recently, the Global Ecosystems Dynamic Investigation (GEDI) on the International Space Station (ISS)-based LiDAR instrument (Dubayah *et al.*, 2020), allows us for the first time to peer into the structure of tropical forests in unprecedented resolution at a global scale. Prior to GEDI, there were other satellite lidar instruments (e.g. GLAS on ICESAT-1) used for measuring vegetation structure at large scale (Tang *et al.*, 2016; Tang and Dubayah, 2017), but these were lower resolution, much more sparse, and focused on polar regions. At a more regional scale, aircraft and terrestrial lidar have shown detailed individual tropical forest tree architectures. For instance, aircraft lidar in tropical Peru found that tree architecture or shape (height of peak canopy volume (P) divided by canopy height) was highly correlated with canopy height (Asner *et al.*, 2014) and in Panama others successfully predicted the tree size distributions with airborne lidar (Taubert *et al.*, 2021). At a global scale, Ehbrecht et al 2021 scaled up terrestrial laser scanning to show that forest structural complexity is a function of annual precipitation and precipitation seasonality (Ehbrecht *et al.*, 2021). Both simulation and sensitivity analysis suggest that high-quality GEDI data is able to provide measurements of similar accuracy in the tropics when compared to aircraft and terrestrial lidar (Marselis *et al.*, 2018, 2020). We can now use these different lidar tools (from individual tree to global) to understand how forest stratification changes across the tropics globally.

Forest stratification may be due to genetic constraints evolved over time (floristics) or trees not achieving their genetic heights (environmental or soil constraints). The debate about what sets the upper limits of tree height largely involves either hydraulic limitation (Koch et al 2004), mechanical limitation, or environmental factors such as wind speed (Jackson *et al.*, 2021).

Forest height and structure are also driven by genetics, and evolutionary forces such as the need to overtop competitors or disperse seeds encourages height and complex structure while risks such as hydraulic failure and vulnerability to wind discourage it. Environment alone could also directly impact tree height and structure, with hydraulic limitations, carbon deficiencies, or wind regimes causing trees to not being able to achieve their genetic height. There is a literature describing how the environment (soils or climate) impacts the species composition in tropical forests. For instance, Amazonian species composition may follow a south-west/north-east soil fertility gradient and a north-west/south-east precipitation gradient (ter Steege *et al.*, 2006). Soil cation concentrations are the primary driver of floristic variation for Amazonian trees (Tuomisto *et al.*, 2019) with climate being of secondary importance. However, in central African forests, climate is considered to be the driving factor of floristic patterns (Réjou-Méchain *et al.*, 2021).

Structure matters because it can give us new insights into forest biomass, which is the primary goal of GEDI. Currently the L4A product for tropical forests uses relative height (RH) RH98 and RH50 to predict a median AGBD of 300 Mg Ha^{-1} for tropical forests (0.66 r^2 and RMSE of 10.4) (Duncanson *et al.*, 2022). Ecological theory suggests that a stratified forest with more large emergent trees is indicative of an older forest (Halle, Oldeman and Tomlinson, 1980), which generally has higher biomass and carbon content. Therefore, incorporating canopy layers may improve prediction of tropical forest biomass.

Finally, understanding tropical forest structure matters, because prior to GEDI, detailed pan-tropical structural data did not exist and is therefore understudied, and yet it is where the bulk of the world's species exist (Stork, 2018) including over 75 % of all vertebrates and 60 % of neotropical mammal species (Kays and Allison, 2001). Structure is indicative of use: for example, tall canopies were a strong predictor of habitat use by Baldfaced saki monkeys (*Pithecia irrorata*) in the Peruvian Amazon (Palminteri and Peres, 2012) and structure data are increasingly being used in species distribution models (Burns *et al.*, 2020). Stratification has been hypothesized to increase rates of pollination and dispersal, optimize light use, increase inter-canopy CO_2 concentrations, reduce leaf, fruit and flower predation, and increase forest structural integrity (Smith, 1973). Overall, structure also creates the habitat for all other forest dwelling species (Terborgh, 1992). For instance, figure one shows animals both impacting and being impacted by forest structure.

The structure of forests is also a principal factor in determining not just the mean environment experienced by forest-dwelling organisms, but also the diversity, extent, and variability of microenvironments. The extent and diversity of microenvironments directly affects the niches available to organisms, and hence the diversity of forest-dwelling organisms. For instance, Oliveira and Scheffers (2019) proposed an 'arboreality hypothesis' where species have increased ranges because they can take advantage of changing microclimates in different canopy layers as temperatures shift due to elevation and latitude. They further suggested that future warming may push arboreal species towards the cooler ground layer (Oliveira and Scheffers, 2019). Another study suggested that climate change may cause arboreal species in hot sparse canopies towards greater ground use(Eppley *et al.*, 2022). Detailed models now exist to predict canopy microclimate with forest structure as a possible input (Maclean and Klinges, 2021).

Therefore, forest structure and related microhabitats becomes even more critical as climate change progresses.

Here we use GEDI to understand tropical forest structure and address the following hypotheses:

H1 – Most tropical forests (when measured at spatial resolutions of ~25m diameter) exhibit structure or multi-layered canopies.

H2 – The spatial distribution of canopy structure is controlled by soils (e.g. total cation exchange capacity) and/or environment (e.g. maximum temperature).

Methods

GEDI data – We used the vertical forest structure (L2A and L2B, Version 2) and biomass (L4A – see below) products from the GEDI instrument (Dubayah *et al.*, 2020) based on the ISS between 2019.04.18 and 2021.02.17 for tropical forest regions (Amazonia, Central Africa, and SE Asia). We principally used the Plant Area Volume Density (PAVD) profile, defined as the Plant Area Index (PAI – which incorporates both leaf and wood) separated into 5-meter vertical bins (which can reduce vertical uncertainty). We applied a number of data filters to ensure quality such as: degrade flag = 0 (e.g. not in degraded altitude), L2A and L2B quality flags = 1 (simplified metric to only use highest quality data based on energy, sensitivity, amplitude, and real-time surface tracking quality), sensitivity >= 0.95, power beams during night and day and coverage beams during night only (nights are generally better to remove the negative impact of background solar illumination). To ensure accuracy, we compared GEDI height to TanDEM-X (Krieger *et al.*, 2007)(a satellite that employs SAR (synthetic aperture radar) to determine an object's height above ground) and only used areas where canopy height < 100 m, and elevation difference from GEDI is between +/- 100 m. To ensure that the footprints were in tropical forest regions, we applied four additional filters:

1. Treecover % >90% in the year 2010, defined as canopy closure for all vegetation taller than 5m (Hansen *et al.*, 2013).
2. Forests with heights >10m (but vary this number in a sensitivity study 15, 20, and 25m - Fig S1) using the relative height metric 98% which was calculated as the height relative to ground elevation under which 98% percentage of waveform energy has been returned.
3. The GEDI footprint was classified as Plant Functional Type (PFT) Broadleaf Evergreen Tropical based on MODIS MCD12Q1v006 Product from 2021 (Friedl et al 2019). Values follow the Land Cover Type 5 Classification scheme.
4. We compared an index of forest integrity as determined by degree of anthropogenic modification https://www.forestintegrity.com/ (Grantham *et al.*, 2020) to maps of the % one peak (see below – Fig S2).

If the GEDI footprint passed these filters, we analyzed each PAVD profile in a 0.1 by 0.1 degrees size gridcell. Using the Matlab (Mathworks) function "islocalmax", we identified local maxima (change in first derivative) in each PAVD profile. We first classified the footprint by the number of local maxima (hereafter: peaks) (1-3). If it had two peaks, we then classified the profile whether the first (lower to the ground) or second peak has more PAVD. We then use the following equation to determine if the peaks are even or if one is much lower than the other:

Equation 1 – PAVD_diff = abs((PAVD Peak 1 – PAVD Peak 2)/ PAVD Peak 1)*100;

We classified each profile separately if PAVD_diff is >50 or <50. We classified vertical space between peaks (>10 m between peaks or less). For instance, for a profile, if two peaks are found, if the first peak is higher with less than 50% difference between the peaks, it is classified as red (2p_eq_high) (Figs 2-3), if more than 50% difference it is classified as magenta (2p_eq_low). If the second peak is higher with less than 50% difference, it is classified as green (2p_uneq_high), if more than 50% difference yellow (2p_uneq_low). If the distance between the peaks is less

than 15m it is black (2p_even). To calculate the percentage of one peak PAVD profiles, we sum the number of one peak profiles divided by all profiles measured in a 0.1 by 0.1 degree pixel.

In addition to classifying these vertical profiles, for each 0.1 by 0.1 degree subregion, for all tree heights (RH98) that pass our filters, we create a histogram, and the peak of the histogram is classified as median rh98 tree height. For each 0.1 by 0.1 degree subregion, we estimate the total plant area index (PAI) as a proxy for commonly used metrics like leaf area index (LAI). We downloaded the GEDI L4B above ground biomass density (AGBD) product from DAAC (https://daac.ornl.gov/cgi-bin/dsviewer.pl?ds_id=2017) and averaged it for each 0.1 by 0.1 degree pixel.

Plot data –To ground validate our GEDI stratification results, we estimated crown area using measured individual tree height and DBH for plots in six diverse regions of the Amazon basin (Caxiuana 4 ha – 2250 trees >10cm DBH, Tambopata 2ha – 1367 trees>10cm DBH, Iquitos 2ha 1165 trees>10cm DBH, Tapajos – 18ha- 1036 trees>25cm DBH, Bolivia 2ha 974 trees>10cm DBH, Tanguro 1 ha – 366 trees>10cm DBH)(Doughty *et al.*, 2015). Plot locations are shown as black dots in Figure 2. For each plot, we used tree height in each 5-meter tree height bin (5-35m) to estimate crown diameter following Asner et al 2002, shown below as Eq 2 where DBH is the diameter at breast height (cm) and crown diameter is in meters.

Equation 2 - Crown diameter (m) = 9.3*ln(DBH (cm)) -22.2;

We estimate crown area to ground area ratio for all trees in the plots (e.g. Iquitos 2 ha = 1165 trees>10 cm DBH) and on a subset of groups of 50 trees to better approximate the 25 m size of a GEDI footprint, as this is an approximate average number of trees >10cm DBH per 25m diameter circle in the tropics. For instance, a typical one hectare tropical forest plot would contain between 500-1000 trees with DBH>10cm (Malhi *et al.*, 2021) (~20 GEDI footprints if evenly spaced – which would not happen in practice) and each footprint, therefore, might contain 25-50 trees (with DBH>10cm). We then use the same "peak" procedure (Eq 1 - described above) to estimate % one peak as a percentage for each region. We estimate crown area to ground area for each 5-meter bin and vertically area summed. We also show median and maximum tree height for the plots.

For a broader range of plots in the GEM network (listed in Table 1) (Malhi *et al.*, 2021), we found the PAVD profile for the footprint closest to the plot as well as all footprints within a 0.03° grid around the plot coordinates. Most of these plots had in situ leaf traits measured to account for 70-80% of the basal area (of trees >10cm DBH) of 1 ha plots. Plant leaf traits have been related to plot level architecture in the tropics and predicted with leaf spectral data (Doughty *et al.*, 2017). We therefore hypothesized that optically derived leaf trait predictions may predict structure at the landscape scale. Based on the above described field campaigns, (Aguirre-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021) used Sentinel-2 to create remotely sensed canopy trait maps for P=phosphorus %, WD = wood density g.cm^{-3}, and SLA=specific leaf area m^2 g^{-1}. We then compared the GEDI profile (% one peak) to the trait value predicted by those maps to that footprint.

Other data layers – We compared % one peak to several other climate, soils, and ecoregion maps listed below for the Amazon basin. We currently focus on the drivers of structure and validating GEDI for the Amazon region in this paper, but follow on papers may do a similar analysis for Africa and SE Asia. Each dataset had its own resolution, which we standardized to 0.1 by 0.1 degrees.

Ecoregions - Ecoregions reflect the distributions of a broad range of fauna and flora across the entire planet and we use them as a proxy for plant biogeography https://www.sciencebase.gov/catalog/item/508fece8e4b0a1b43c29ca22 - (Olson *et al.*, 2001).

Soils – We used data from soilgrids https://www.soilgrids.org/ (Batjes, Ribeiro and van Oostrum, 2020). We focused on total cation exchange capacity at pH 7 from 0-5cm in units of mmol(c)/kg as previous studies had suggested this to be an important variable to explain floristic composition (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2018).

Climate – We averaged TerraClimate (Abatzoglou *et al.*, 2018) https://www.climatologylab.org/terraclimate.html data between 2000 and 2018 for Climatic water deficit (CWD) (the difference between monthly reference evapotranspiration calculated using the Penman Monteith approach and actual evapotranspiration), Vapor Pressure Deficit (VPD in kPa), Mean Monthly Precipitation (mm/month), potential evapotranspiration (PET) and maximum and minimum temperature (°C). These data were originally based on CRU Ts4.0 data and modified by Abatzoglou et al 2018.

Statistical analysis – For comparison of either single or multiple variables to percent one peak we used the matlab function "fitlm" to fit linear models and "fitnlm" for the non-linear models. The P values listed are for the *t*-statistic of the two-sided hypothesis test.

Results

Most individual GEDI footprints in tropical forests do not have multiple layers (as in Fig 1) and instead have a single peak in vegetation density at ~15m, but this ranged geographically (regionally and between continents) between 60 to 90% (Figs 2-3). Within the Amazon basin (Figure 1), the broad geographic patterns were a large central region with low stratification, surrounded by another broad region with greater stratification bordered to the west by the Pebas formation (Higgins et al 2011), to the east by the Tapajos River, and the South at ~12°S. Another region of lower stratification occurred towards the southeast in the "arc of deforestation" and savanna transition zones. River floodplains also tended towards increased stratification. The Congo basin showed a broadly similar spatial orientation with a central area with lower stratification surrounded by regions with greater stratification. The floodplains again were areas with greater stratification. Southeast Asia, composed of mainly islands, showed greater stratification towards the island center. The island of New Guinea had increasing stratification moving northward.

A low PAI peak (e.g. ~15m) may also indicate forest disturbance due to selective logging or other human impact. For instance, there was selective logging in parts of Borneo (Riutta *et al.*, 2018) and this impacted structure by increasing the dominance of shorter pioneer one-peak forests (i.e. Bornean logged plots are 78 % one peak versus 44% for old growth forests). However, the filters we used (tree height, MODIS PFT, logging product) should remove most human impact (although there may be older legacy effects we cannot account for). We tested this by increasing the minimum tree height (between 15, 20 and 25m) and did not see a big impact on the broader results, although there were minor changes at the 25m threshold (Fig S1). We also show comparisons of percentage of one peak to a forest disturbance product (Grantham *et al.*, 2020), which showed large regions dominated by one peak forests in areas of minimal human disturbance (Fig S2).

On a subset of the Amazon (5 by 5° black box regions chosen to represent the broader region in Fig 2 and 3), we averaged the vertical profile for each footprint in each of six structural categories (see methods) and found "one peak" forests peaked in PAVD at 15m with a fairly linear decline going upwards until ~40m (Figure 2 blue line). The next most common profile type (Figure 2 red line -2p_eq_high) in the Amazon, in the region of interest, was a "2 peak" forest (at ~5% of the results), with an initial peak in PAI at 15m and a second lesser peak in PAI at 30m and a local minimum at 20m. Average forest height of this forest type exceeded the one peak forests with a maximum height at ~45m versus 40m. This forest type ranged between 1 to 10% of forest pixels and was more abundant in the Southeast and Northwest of the Amazon (Fig 6 – similar figure for Central Africa is Fig S3 and SE Asia Fig S4). The third most common forest structure (represented by the black line (2p_even) at 3.2%) had two close peaks at 15 and 25m, with a small nadir at 20m. This forest type had a PAI peak at 25m and was followed by a steep drop at ~40m. This forest type ranged between 1 and 5% across the Amazon and was widely dispersed throughout the Basin. The next most common 2-peak structure (magenta (2p_eq_low) in Fig 2) at ~3.2% of forest types with a peak at 15 m followed by a much weaker

peak with less than 50% of the PAVD at 30m. This had a similar distribution to the "red (2p_eq_high)" line, but with an additional hotspot in the Southeast that was not present in the "red (2p_eq_high)" (Fig 6). The remaining forest types had greater PAVD in the upper canopy with peaks at ~30m.

To ground truth our results, for six locations (shown as black dots in Fig 2), we used DBH, tree height, and a canopy diameter model (Asner et al 2002) to estimate that total vertically summed crown area/ground area averaged 1.8 $m^2.m^{-2}$ (0.96-2.3 min max). Averaging all the structure for trees >10cm DBH (>25cm for the Tapajos) in the plots (size ranging between 2 ha to 18 ha) showed a single peak that averaged 20m (between 17.5-22.5m) in crown area/ ground area (thick lines in Figure 4). This 20m height may be taller than the GEDI mean of 15m due to the absence of smaller 0-10cm DBH trees measured at the plots. We then subsampled 50 trees from each plot (a better approximation for the GEDI footprint size) and more stratification resulted. For these subsets, we calculated one peak/all data and found a low in Tambopata of 56% one peak to a high of 95% one peak in the Tapajos with the other sites ranging between 73 to 77% one peak, which is a good approximation of percentage one-peak across the Amazon basin (~79%) (Figure 2). The Tapajos results must be viewed with caution because only large trees (>25cm DBH) were recorded, which led to a very high percentage one peak. According to Fig 2, Tambopata and the Tapajos are near regions divided between areas of high and low structure and most other plots are in areas of less structure (Figure 2).

How representative is the structure in plot networks compared to the broader Amazon? To answer this, we compare GEDI footprints (closest footprint and all footprints averaged within 0.03° radius of the plots) to a well-studied plot network (GEM - (Malhi *et al.*, 2021) in tables 1 and 2) and found the GEDI footprint nearest to the plots showed a gradient from the Western Amazon (90% one peak), Eastern Amazon (85%), Gabon (80%), to Borneo (50%). Averaging all nearby footprints showed similar (except for Gabon), but generally lower trends: Western Amazon (84%), Eastern Amazon (79%), Gabon (54%), and Borneo (61%). In Table one, we show data for each individual plot along with remotely sensed trait data (Aguirre-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021) calibrated from in situ measurements at the plot network, and we found a significant relationship between structure and SLA (r^2=0.12, P<0.05, %one peak=-68*SLA+1.4) but not with wood density and %P. However, this is a global analysis, and the signal is dependent on low SLA values along an elevation gradient where GEDI is less accurate because of difficulty in discerning the ground layer. In Borneo, the GEM plot network (Riutta *et al.*, 2018) is along a logging gradient with a clear change in structure (78 % one peak for logged plots versus 44% one peak for old growth forests). We found a significant increase in SLA (P<0.05) with disturbance and a close to significant increase in %P with disturbance (P=0.06).

We compared the average PAVD profiles from the entire Amazon to the average PAVD profiles for the entire SE Asia and Africa (average continental scale 0.1 by 0.1 degree pixels and not just the black boxes in figs 2 and 3). On average, the Amazon had greater percent of one peak forests (79±9sd) than either SE Asia or Africa (72±14 v 73±11). Median tree height (rh98) was lower in the Amazon at 25.6m than in Africa at 28.5m or SE Asia at 28.7m. In the black box regions shown in Fig 3 for Africa and SE Asia, one peak forests were most abundant (~70%)

with a similar peak at 15m (Figure 5). In both the Africa and SE Asia subplots, both red (2p_eq_high) and magenta (2p_eq_low) structure types were much more common forest structures than in the Amazon, accounting for >20% of forest types vs <10% in the Amazon. The average curves changed shape with Amazon having more PAVD in the mid-canopy ~20m and Africa and SE Asia having more PAVD in the upper canopy ~30m. The less represented green and yellow structures increased by an absolute 3-4% over the Amazon and had much more PAVD (~0.05 increased PAVD) in the upper canopy (at ~30m height). River basins throughout the tropics had similar structural properties.

To explain the spatial patterns in the distributions of % one peak forests, we compared maps of percent one peak to a variety of datasets such as tree height (rh98), ecoregions, GEDI L4A AGBD, plant area index, number of footprints, climate (CWD, VPD, MMP, T_{min}), and total soils cation exchange capacity (Figure 7 – similar figure for Africa is Fig S5 and SE Asia Fig S6). The strongest correlations were with tree height and AGBD, with biomass a slightly better predictor for one peak forests (0.12 vs 0.14 r^2 respectively) (Figure 8). The AGBD L4A product is driven by tree height, so the similar strength of the correlations is not surprising, but there is a question of whether structure or tree height is a better predictor of biomass, which we discuss later. We compared meteorological data for VPD, PPT, CWD, PET, T_{max} and T_{min} to percent one peak and all were highly significant ($P<0.001$) but explained relatively little variance in the data. T_{max} explained the most at 5% of the variance, followed by VPD at 2.5% and the others explaining ~0.01 of the variance. Likewise, total cation exchange capacity was highly significant but again explained only about 1% of the variation (Figure 8). Other variables such as number of footprints was not related ($r^2<0.01$), but PAI explained ~4% of variance, which is again, likely related to tree height. We then combined all climate and soil variables which explained ~9% of variance and the key parameters were T_{max}, VPD followed by total cation exchange capacity.

Ecoregions, which may be a good proxy for floristics, delineated structure well for particular ecoregions. For instance, ecoregion 68 (Figure 7) had boundaries similar to boundaries of our structure dataset with a lower average value of percent one peak (75% vs 80%) than surrounding ecoregions. Another ecoregion with the boundary of the Pebas formation also delineated the structure data quite well. There were some regions that were partially delineated well but not entirely. For instance, even ecoregion 68 (Figure 7) had a sharp boundary in structure in the south not accounted for in the ecoregion.

Discussion

There are large changes in forest structure within the Amazon basin (60-90% one peak) and between the Amazon (79±9sd) than SE Asia and Africa (72±14 v 73±11 respectively). We are confident that the spatial patterns of structural changes are not mainly due to modern human influence, because we carefully screened for human influence using several independent remote sensed products (MODIS PFT (Friedl et al 2019), a Landsat based deforestation product (Hansen *et al.*, 2013) and GEDI tree height itself from GEDI (Dubayah *et al.*, 2020). Plot data from undisturbed regions (Doughty *et al.*, 2015) (DBH and tree height) showed similar structural trends in old growth plots (Figure 4). Human influence, as measured through forest integrity (Grantham *et al.*, 2020), also did not explain our geographic patterns of structure (Fig S2). The finding that the majority of GEDI footprints had a single PAI peak at ~15m was initially surprising. However, several tropical aircraft lidar campaigns showed similar shape for the lowland tropics (a single peak when averaged over ~1 ha) but a slightly higher peak in PAI at ~20m (Asner and Mascaro, 2014; Asner *et al.*, 2014). We hypothesize that the difference in the height of peak PAI may be due the difference in "energy return" profiles or how to correct for the reduced energy reaching the understory and the difficulty of laser pulses in the lower canopy returning due to an abundance of plant material. Full waveform information from GEDI can help correct for this energy return. In addition, prior work comparing TLS, LVIS and simulated GEDI data has found high-quality GEDI profiles on average to be accurate (Marselis *et al.*, 2018, 2020). Finally, we are confident that the bulk of structural differences across the tropics are of natural origin because on top of the filters applied, some regions of the Amazon very far from human influence still had the dominance of one peak forests, such as the broad region north of Manaus in the Amazon (although there may be ancient legacy effects that we do not account for) (Fig S2).

The classic paradigm of "old growth" tropical forest architecture (visually represented in Fig 1 and figures in Halle et al 1980) is a generally closed upper canopy with large emergent trees at ~30-35m where PAI peaks followed by a second peak at 15m with slightly lower PAI. These PAI peaks at ~15 and 30m are occupied by "trees of the present" taking advantage of increased light cells (top of canopy and a second area of increased light at ~15m where lightflecks converge) (Halle, Oldeman and Tomlinson, 1980). This "classic paradigm" implies a stratified canopy that might be best represented by the green (2p_uneq_low) or yellow (2p_uneq_high) lines in Figs 2-5, but we find that this forest structure is relatively uncommon across the tropics making up just 3-6% of tropical forest area. In contrast, by far the most common PAVD profile across the tropics has a single peak in PAI density at 15m and this forest type likely reflects the absence of a closed upper canopy. In our color scheme (Figs 2-3), we can think of a gradually increasing proportion of vegetation percent in the upper canopy going from the highest PAI at the top with yellow (2p_uneq_high) (0.5% of total footprints), green (2p_uneq_low) (2%), red (2p_eq_high) (5%), magenta (2p_eq_low) (3%), and the lowest at blue (1 peak)(86%). Overall, these results show that a "stratified" forest with higher upper canopy closure is relatively rare across tropical forests.

Our structure maps broadly matched results from plot-based methods (Fig 4). We also found strong correlations between our structure maps and detailed maps of structure, floristics, climate and soils for a broad region of Central Africa from Fayolle et al 2014 where old growth *celtis* forest is associated with regions with more vertical layers (~60% 1 peak) while more degraded or young *celtis* forests with more pioneer species is associated with less structure (70% one peak) (Fayolle *et al.*, 2014). A floristic map for all of central Africa also showed correlations with our structure map (Réjou-Méchain *et al.*, 2021) with, for instance, north (more structure) to south (less structure) gradients in Central Africa (Figure 3) that match a transition in their figures from PCA 1, where floristics was controlled by a transition between cool, light-deficient forests and forests with high evapotranspiration rates, to PCA 2, where floristics were controlled more by seasonality and maximum temperature. In S.E. Asia, we compared our structure results to a logging gradient (Riutta *et al.*, 2018) with known structural changes and found GEDI footprints near Danum valley, where the tallest trees were found, also had some of the highest stratification (44% one peak) versus logged (78 % one peak) which gives further confidence in the results. Broadly, old growth forests in SE Asia have the highest levels of stratification and this may be partially due to the presence of Dipterocarps which are the tallest tropical trees (Shenkin *et al.*, 2019; Jackson *et al.*, 2021).

Most of our independent datasets of soils or climate (as well as our combined model) did not strongly capture the spatial patterns of forest structure in the Amazon basin (Figure 7). Tree height and AGBD did match these patterns (Figure 8), but those variables cannot be considered independent of structure. However, patterns shown in Figure 4c in Figueiredo et al 2018 are similar to the one we highlight in this study (Fig 1) (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2018). Figueiredo et al (2018) created species distribution models for 40 species across the Amazon basin using 19 bioclimatic variables, 19 soil variables, and four remote sensing variables (including GLAS derived canopy height (Simard *et al.*, 2011)). Overall, for most species, a combination of soils and climate variables explain most variance (similar to (Tuomisto *et al.*, 2019)) but single-variable models did poorly with an average of less than 8% of the variance explained. This broadly reflects our attempts to model structure with single variables. There was a tight correlation between regions with less structure (e.g. higher percentage of one peak) and areas where soils are the limiting factor to species occurrence, and regions with greater structure (i.e. lower percentage of 1peak) to areas where climate is the limiting factor to species occurrence. Perhaps deeper, more fertile soils allow for taller (either species or trees reaching their genetic height) and higher canopy closure forest types. Canopy height from the GLAS was the second most important variable for explaining species distributions, so it is possible that the Figueiredo et al (2018) map shows similar patterns to Fig 2 due to the inclusion of the height metric (a strong predictor of structure). A global study of forest structure based on upscaling terrestrial lidar with WorldClim2 datasets showed some correlations with our structure maps but also missed many of the regional changes (Ehbrecht *et al.*, 2021).

Ecoregions delineated boundaries in structural composition in a few key areas of the Amazon basin like the Pebas formation (Higgins *et al.*, 2011) and the Tapajos region in Para, Brazil (Figure 7). Higgins et al (2011) found a strong east-west gradient with an almost complete floristic turnover and an order of magnitude change in soil cation exchange capacity associated

with the presence of the Pebas formation (Higgins *et al.*, 2011). This line marking the boundary of the Pebas formation also seems to strongly delineate forest structure with one peak forest more abundant east of this line with lower cation exchange capacity and two peak forests more abundant to the west with higher cation exchange capacity. There is a further boundary delineated by the very wide (12-16 km) Tapajos River with forests to the west having a higher percentage one peak vs the eastern forests. Interestingly, some ecoregions (like 68) matched well with boundaries of vegetation structure, except for a few key areas (like in the south of region 68 – fig 7). This may indicate that forest structure could be used in the future to improve upon current ecoregion boundaries.

What causes the dominance of one peak forests in the tropics and the spatial changes in these patterns? A forest with a fully closed emergent canopy layer would have canopy layers, but most forests likely lack a fully closed upper layer, leading to the dominance of the one peak forests. Rephrasing the initial question, we can instead ask: Is the rarity of a closed upper layer canopy (or relative rareness of large emergent trees) due to the environment (soils or climate) or floristics (species composition)? In practice it is difficult to disentangle the floristic and environmental and there is a large literature describing how the environment (soils or climate) impacts the species composition. For instance, Amazonian species composition may follow a south-west/north-east soil fertility gradient and a north-west/south-east precipitation gradient (ter Steege *et al.*, 2006). Soil cation concentrations is the primary driver of floristic variation for trees (Tuomisto *et al.*, 2019) with climate being of secondary importance at regional scales. Environment alone could also directly impact tree height and structure, with hydraulic limitations or nutrient deficiencies causing trees to not being able to achieve their genetic height. Soil depth can impact structure as shallow soils can cause stunted root growth leading to a thinner upper canopy structure (Halle, Oldeman and Tomlinson, 1980).

What may explain the continental scale differences in structure between the Amazon and other tropical regions? Previous authors have noted large continental scale differences in AGBD and tree height (Borneo>Central Africa>Amazon) that broadly match the trends we show in structure (Feldpausch *et al.*, 2011; Lewis *et al.*, 2013). For instance, the Congo basin had average AGB values of 429 Mg ha^{-1}, similar to Bornean forests (445 Mg ha^{-1}), and much higher than the Amazon (289 Mg ha^{-1}) (Lewis *et al.*, 2013). We show similar broad trends with the Amazon at 79±9sd % one peak and 25.6m height, SE Asia 72±14 and 28.7m height and Central Africa 73±11 and 28.5m. Lewis et al 2013 had hypothesized that AGBD differences between Amazon and Africa were due to different biomass residence times, the differences between Africa –Borneo differences were possibly due to NPP differences. However, tree height and biomass are structural attributes and do not explain the difference in continental structure.

To fully understand structural gradients across the Amazon, it is helpful to have higher resolution aircraft lidar. Asner et al 2014 flew aircraft lidar along an elevation and nutrient gradient in Peru and found that canopy height and shape (height of peak canopy volume divided by canopy height) had a high, negative correlation with gap density (Asner *et al.*, 2014). Perturbation, either up an elevation gradient or from high soil fertility to low, led to shorter forests with more gaps and a peak canopy volume at a lower height in the canopy. These changes

are broadly correlated with our maps of percentage of one peak, with perturbation (up elevation gradients or fertility gradients) increasing percentage of one peak forests. We found canopy stratification decreased as T_{max} increased and soil fertility decreased (Fig 8). Therefore, our results support this paradigm that a movement away from ideal conditions may result in less structural complexity. Climate change will increase T_{max}, but it is unclear whether this would further reduce structural complexity of tropical forests in the future.

In addition to tree height, remotely sensed leaf traits were also related to structure near some of our plots. Increased stratification (lower percentage of one peak) was significantly correlated ($P<0.05$) with increases in SLA, but this was almost entirely driven by low SLA values in high elevation plots and removing these plots removed the significant correlation (Malhi *et al.*, 2021). Along a logging gradient in Borneo (Riutta *et al.*, 2018), less stratification as logging increased was significantly correlated with an increase in SLA and foliar concentrations of phosphorus, similar to other studies (Baraloto *et al.*, 2012) (Carreño-Rocabado *et al.*, 2016). However, Both et al 2019, a nearby field study, found a contrary result when comparing SLA along the forest gradient (Both *et al.*, 2019) . Furthermore, Swinfield et al 2019 used high resolution aircraft hyperspectral data to predict SLA across the Bornean landscape (Swinfield *et al.*, 2019), but unlike most early studies (Doughty *et al.*, 2017) did not predict SLA accurately. Overall, we have reasons for caution for how well SLA can predict structure in tropical forests, but our abilities may improve in the future with hyperspectral satellites which could more accurately predict leaf traits at a global scale.

The primary goal of GEDI is to improve global predictions of biomass and incorporating structure could aid this goal. GEDI L4B was correlated ($r^2 = 0.12$ and 0.14) with both tree height (rh 98) and structure (% one peak). The GEDI algorithm uses tree height (rh 98) as a metric to predict biomass, and since tree height is correlated with structure, the similar strength of the correlations is not surprising (Duncanson *et al.*, 2022). However, there is a question of whether structure in addition to tree height can be used to improve biomass predictions. The dominance of one peak forests likely indicates more open upper canopy forests and Asner and Mascaro (2014) have shown these forest types make biomass prediction more challenging (Asner and Mascaro, 2014). The plot data used to calibrate GEDI for tropical regions were not widely distributed throughout Amazonia, especially in the regions where height and structure diverge (Fig 2). Understanding why height and structure diverge in these regions may be key towards understanding whether structure can improve biomass predictions in the future.

Overall, over the majority of tropical forest area the upper canopy may be more open and tropical forest stratification is simpler than previously expected and this has important implications for predicting biomass. Furthermore, our results indicate that tropical forest canopies may be more open than previously thought which may expose animals to greater climate change related heat stress and require modifications to their behavior (Oliveira and Scheffers, 2019; Eppley *et al.*, 2022).

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Table 1 – Structure and trait data for regions surrounding plots from the GEM network (Malhi *et al.*, 2021). The columns are global region, RAINFOR plot code, plot structure classification for the footprint closest to the plot coordinates and the height of this footprint (highest vertical bin). Next is the average % one peak for footprints within 0.03° of the coordinates surrounding the plot and the average height of area. The last three columns are regionally averaged remotely sensed trait data (P=phosphorus=%, WD = wood density g cm^{-3}, and SLA=specific leaf area - m^2 g^{-1})(Aguirre-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021).

Region	Rainfor code	Plot classification	height	% 1 peak near plot	Ave height	P	WD	SLA
SE Asia	DAN-04	magenta	80	0.21	60.75	0.1	0.61	0.01
SE Asia	DAN-05	blue	35	0.22	60	0.1	0.61	0.01
SE Asia	LAM-01	magenta	50	0.56	44.65	0.09	0.6	0.0105
SE Asia	LAM-02	magenta	50	0.44	50.55	0.1	0.59	0.0104
SE Asia	MLA-01	magenta	55	0.78	40	NaN	NaN	NaN
SE Asia	SAF-01	blue	45	0.88	42.65	0.1	0.58	0.0103
SE Asia	SAF-02	blue	40	0.71	44.2	0.1	0.59	0.0101
SE Asia	SAF-03	blue	40	0.8	44.2	0.1	0.58	0.0105
SE Asia	SAF-04	3-peak	95	0.53	61.9	0.1	0.6	0.0106
SE Asia	SAF-05	Blue	35	1	38.05	0.1	0.58	0.0102
W. Amazon	ALP11	yellow	45	0.82	40.8	0.1	0.61	0.01
W. Amazon	ALP30	blue	40	0.8	40.75	0.1	0.6	0.01
W. Amazon	SPD02	blue	45	0.78	46.95	0.1	0.6	0.009
W. Amazon	SPD01	blue	60	0.8	46.25	0.1	0.6	0.0091
W. Amazon	TRU08	blue	40	0.81	46.85	0.1	0.6	0.0089
W. Amazon	TRU07	blue	50	0.79	48.75	0.1	0.6	0.0089
W. Amazon	ESP01	blue	40	0.88	38.2	0.12	0.62	0.0075
W. Amazon	WAY01	blue	45	0.87	43.15	0.12	0.62	0.0074
W. Amazon	TRU03	blue	50	0.98	38.2	0.11	0.62	0.0076
W. Amazon	ACJ01	blue	30	0.89	39.25	0.12	0.62	0.0078
E. Amazon	CAX-03	blue	40	0.82	37.75	0.09	0.61	0.0102
E. Amazon	CAX-06	black	35	0	35	NaN	NaN	NaN
E. Amazon	STB-08	blue	45	0.69	44.55	0.09	0.61	0.0104
E. Amazon	STD-05	blue	40	0.81	35.2	0.08	0.65	0.0108
E. Amazon	STD-10	blue	40	0.94	38.45	0.09	0.62	0.0101
E. Amazon	STD-11	blue	30	0.85	38.7	0.08	0.61	0.0102
E. Amazon	STN-02	yellow	40	0.43	42.4	0.09	0.64	0.0104
E. Amazon	STN-04	blue	25	0.9	34.15	0.09	0.64	0.0103
E. Amazon	STN-06	blue	35	0.8	36.25	0.09	0.64	0.0102
E. Amazon	STN-09	blue	40	0.95	32.55	0.09	0.63	0.01
E. Amazon	STO-03	blue	45	0.7	44.1	0.08	0.66	0.0106
E. Amazon	STO-06	blue	35	0.89	43.55	0.08	0.65	0.0106
E. Amazon	STO-07	blue	40	0.73	43.75	0.08	0.66	0.0108

Gabon	IVI-01	blue	40	0.6	43.95	0.09	0.64	0.011
Gabon	IVI-02	blue	35	0.57	45.9	0.09	0.65	0.0109
Gabon	LPG-01	black	45	0.57	43.5	NaN	NaN	NaN
Gabon	LPG-02	blue	50	0.33	55.55	NaN	NaN	NaN
Gabon	MNG-04	blue	25	0.63	42	NaN	NaN	NaN

Table 2 – Percent one peak forest of all GEDI footprints closest to the GEM plots and within a 0.03° radius around the plot coordinates. Same as results from Table one, but averaged by continental region.

	W. Amazon	**E. Amazon**	**Gabon**	**SE Asia**
Nearest to plot	90%	85%	80%	50%
Close to plot	84%	79%	54%	61%

Figures

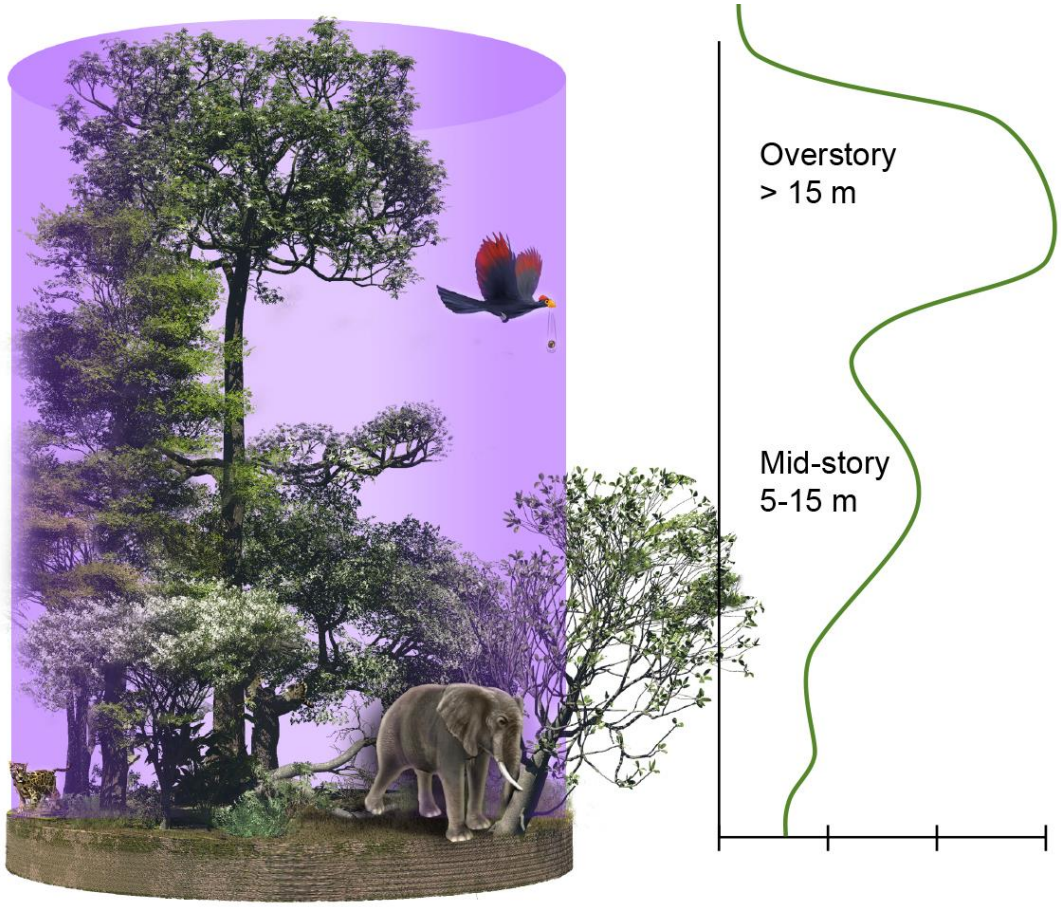

Figure 1 – Artistic rendition of a "typical" stratified tropical forest with the forest on left within a 25m diameter GEDI pulse and the expected layered return of the profile on the right. Animals in figure show how animals both impact and are impacted by canopy structure.

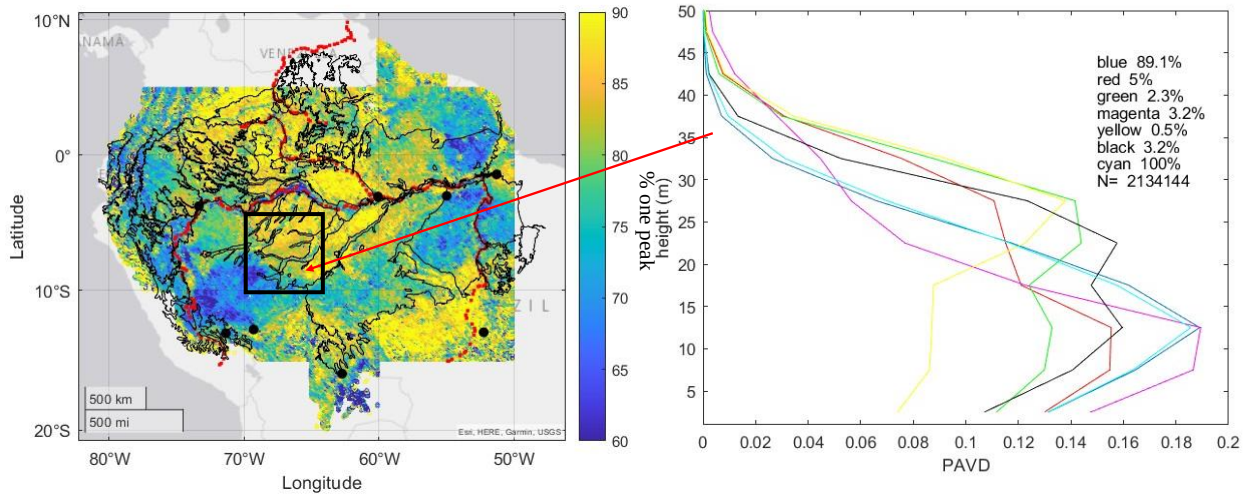

Figure 2 – (left) Each pixel represents the number of one peak footprints divided by total number of GEDI footprints in a 0.1 by 0.1 degree region for Amazonia. Black lines are ecoregions for the Amazon region. Red lines are rivers and black dots are field plots used in Figure 4. (right) Average waveforms for the region in the black box. We give the total number of individual footprints analyzed and the percentage for each type. PAVD is plant area volume density. Cyan is the average waveform for all data (100%) in the black box.

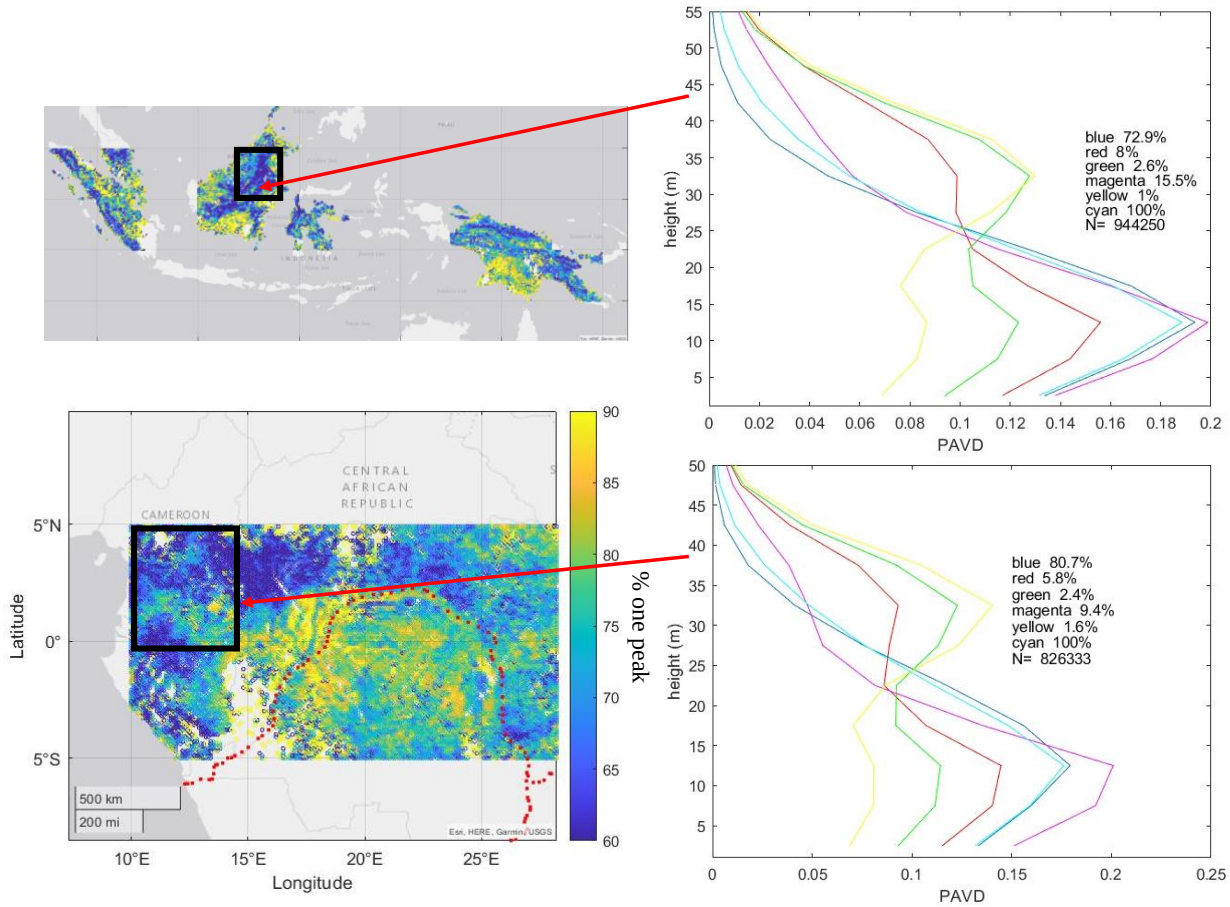

Figure 3 – (left) Each pixel represents the number of one peak footprints divided by total GEDI footprints in a 0.1 by 0.1 degree region for SE Asia (top) and Central Africa (bottom). Red lines are major rivers. (right) Average vertical footprints for the region in the black box. For each type we give the percentage and the total number of individual footprints analyzed. Averages representing <1% were removed. PAVD is plant area volume density. Cyan is the average waveform for all data (100%) in the black box.

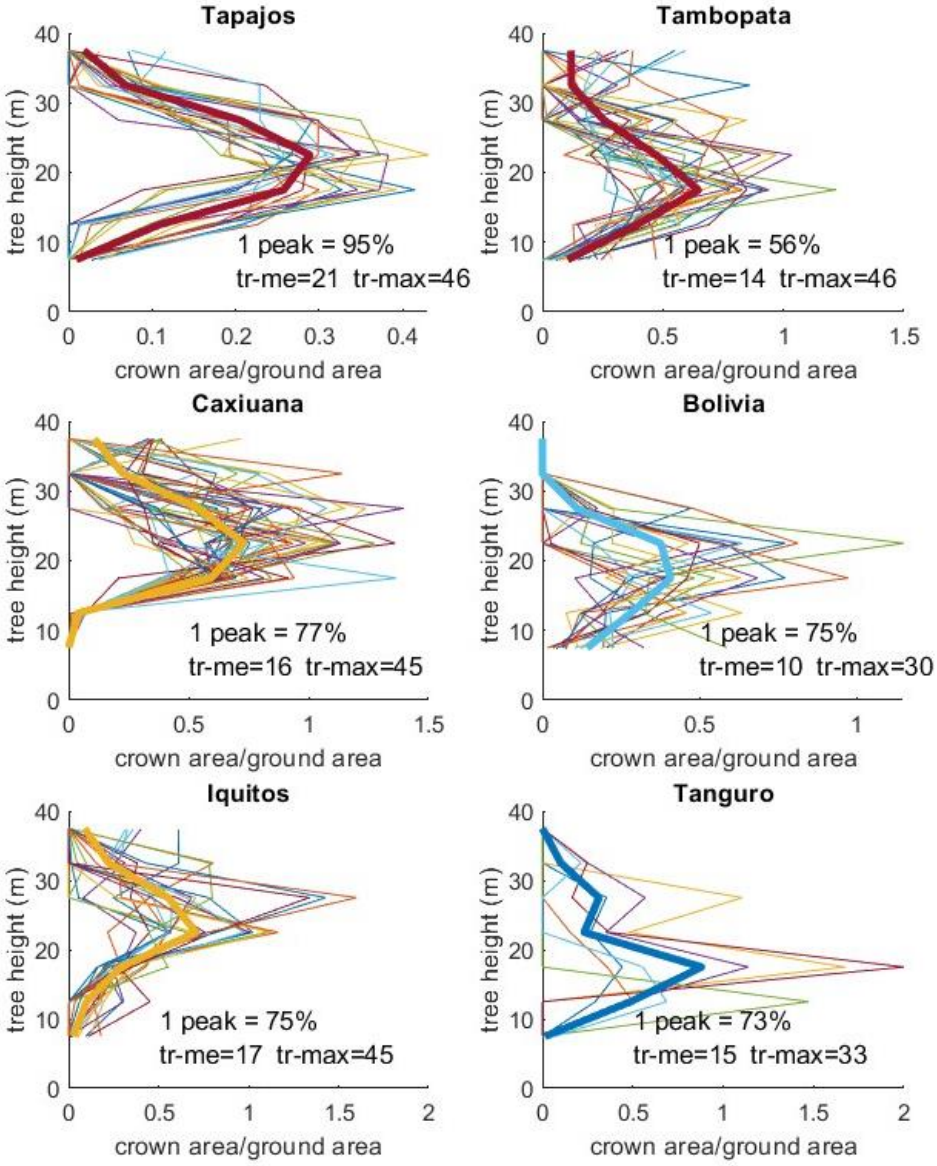

Figure 4 – Tree height versus crown area/ground area as estimated with plot level tree DBH and tree height for six regions as shown in Figure one (Tapajos – 18ha, Caxiuana 4 ha, Tambopata 2 ha, Iquitos 2 ha, Bolivia 2 ha, Tanguro 1 ha). Thin lines are groups of 50 trees and the bold line is the plot average. For each 5-meter tree height bin we estimate crown diameter following Asner et al 2002. We then use the same "peak" procedure as with GEDI data to estimate one vs two peak forests and show this as a percentage. We also show median (tr-me) and maximum tree height (tr-max) for the plots. Results from the Tapajos are for trees >25cm DBH only.

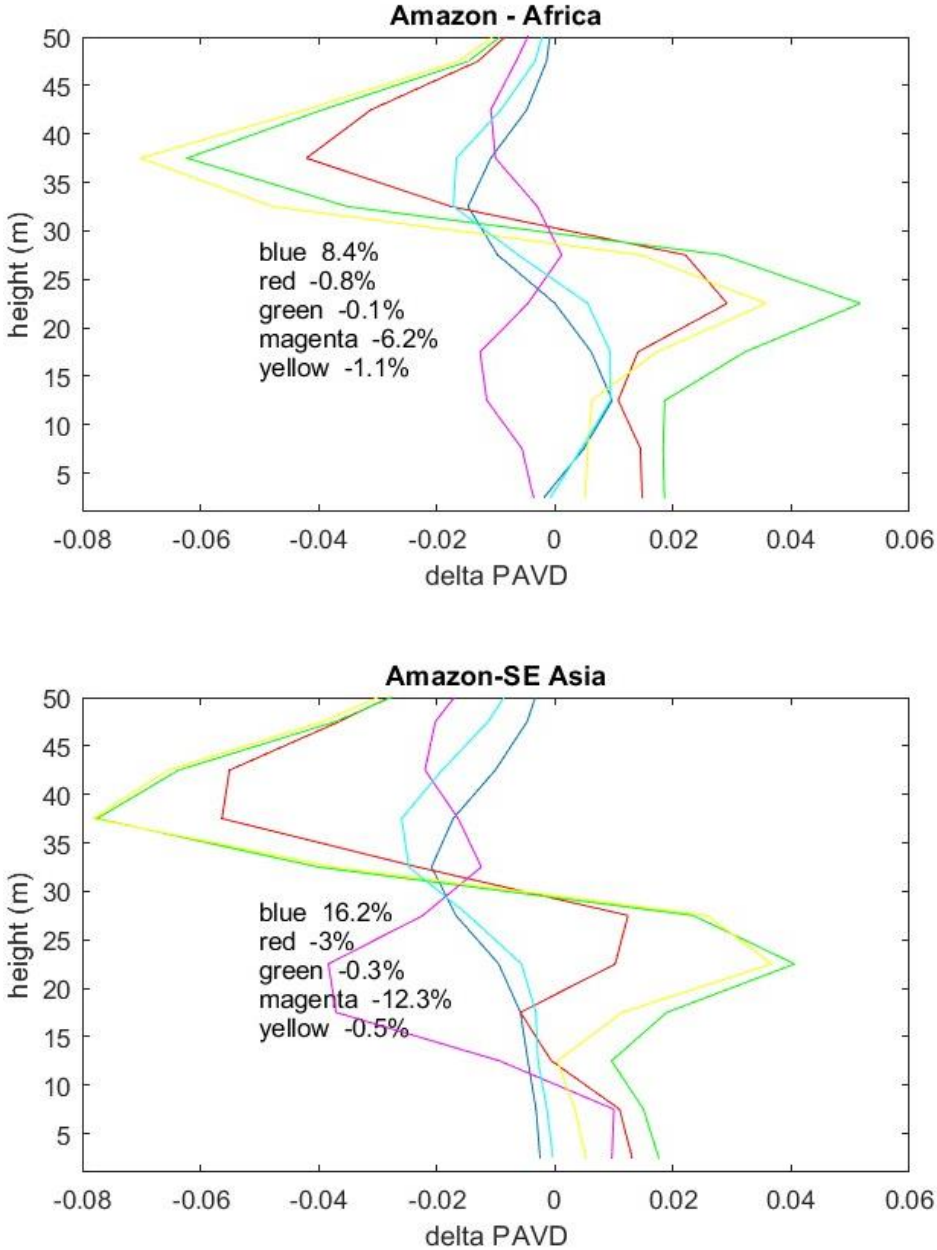

Figure 5 – The change in the average forest structure between the Amazon and Africa (top) and the Amazon and SE Asia (bottom) for the regions highlighted in black in Fig 2-3. The numbers are the listed differences in the percentage abundance.

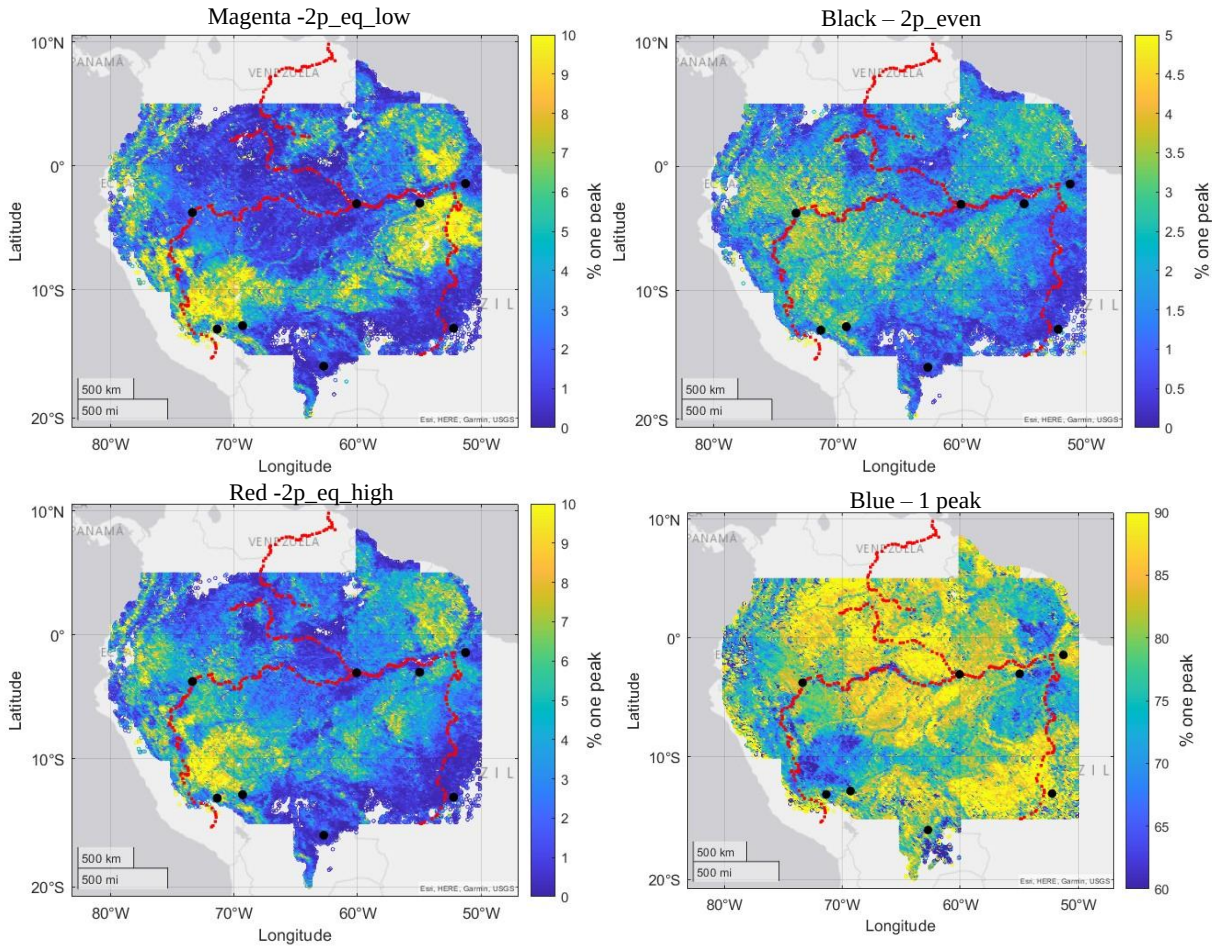

Figure 6 – Spatial distributions for the Amazon basin for different types of the "2 peak" forests. The color labels are associated with the colors of the lines in Figs 2-3. The colorbar scales are different between panels.

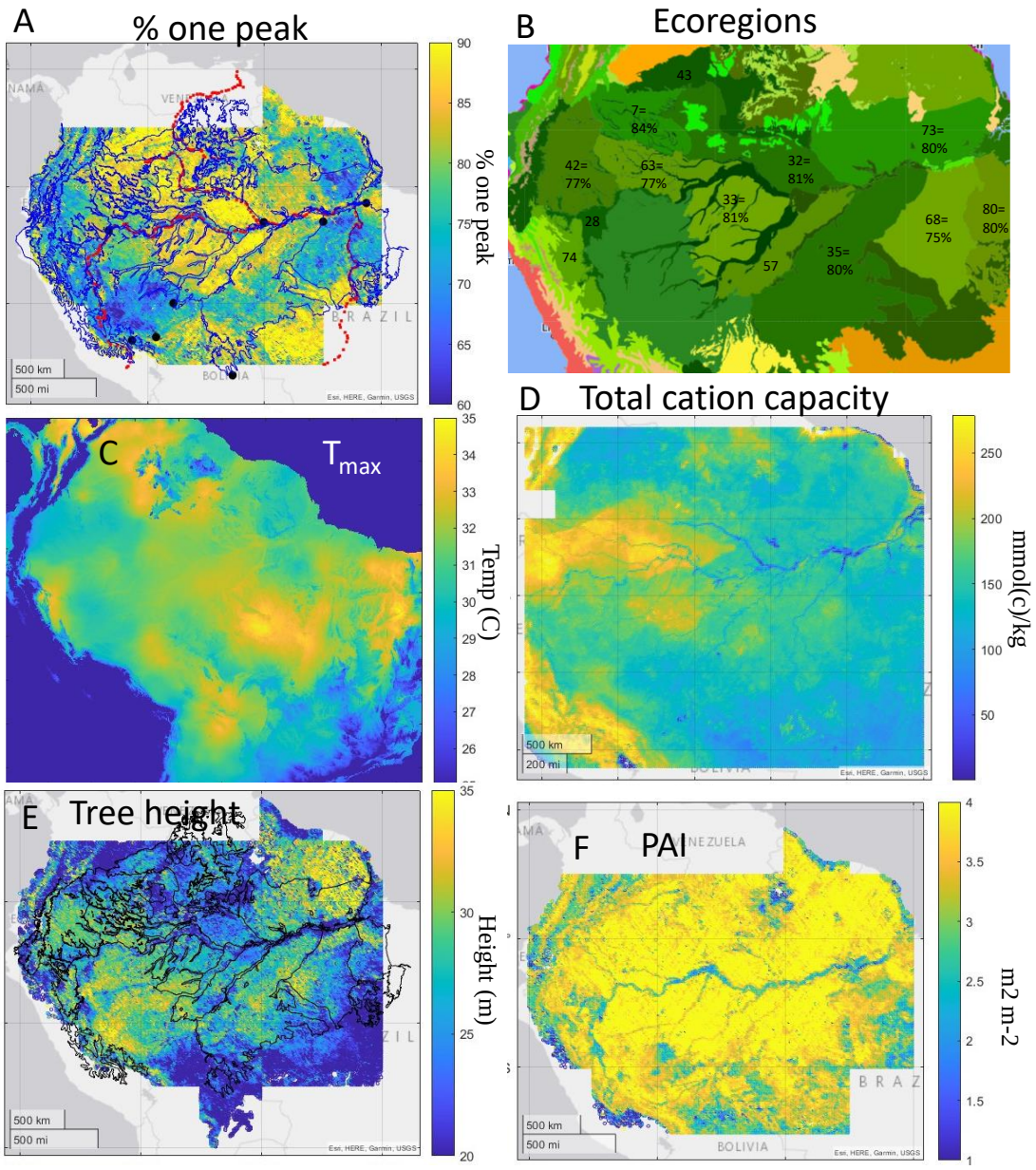

Figure 7 – Different data layers that were used for comparison with the percent one peak dataset. (A) Spatial distribution of the percentage of one peak forests (same as figure 1) with the ecoregions of the Amazon basin overlaid (Olsen et al 2001). (B) A map of the ecoregions alone shown above for clarity with percent one peak for each ecoregion. (C) Max temperature - T_{max} (°C), (D) total cation exchange capacity (mmol(c)/kg, (E) median tree height from rh98 GEDI with ecoregions, and (F) plant area index from GEDI.

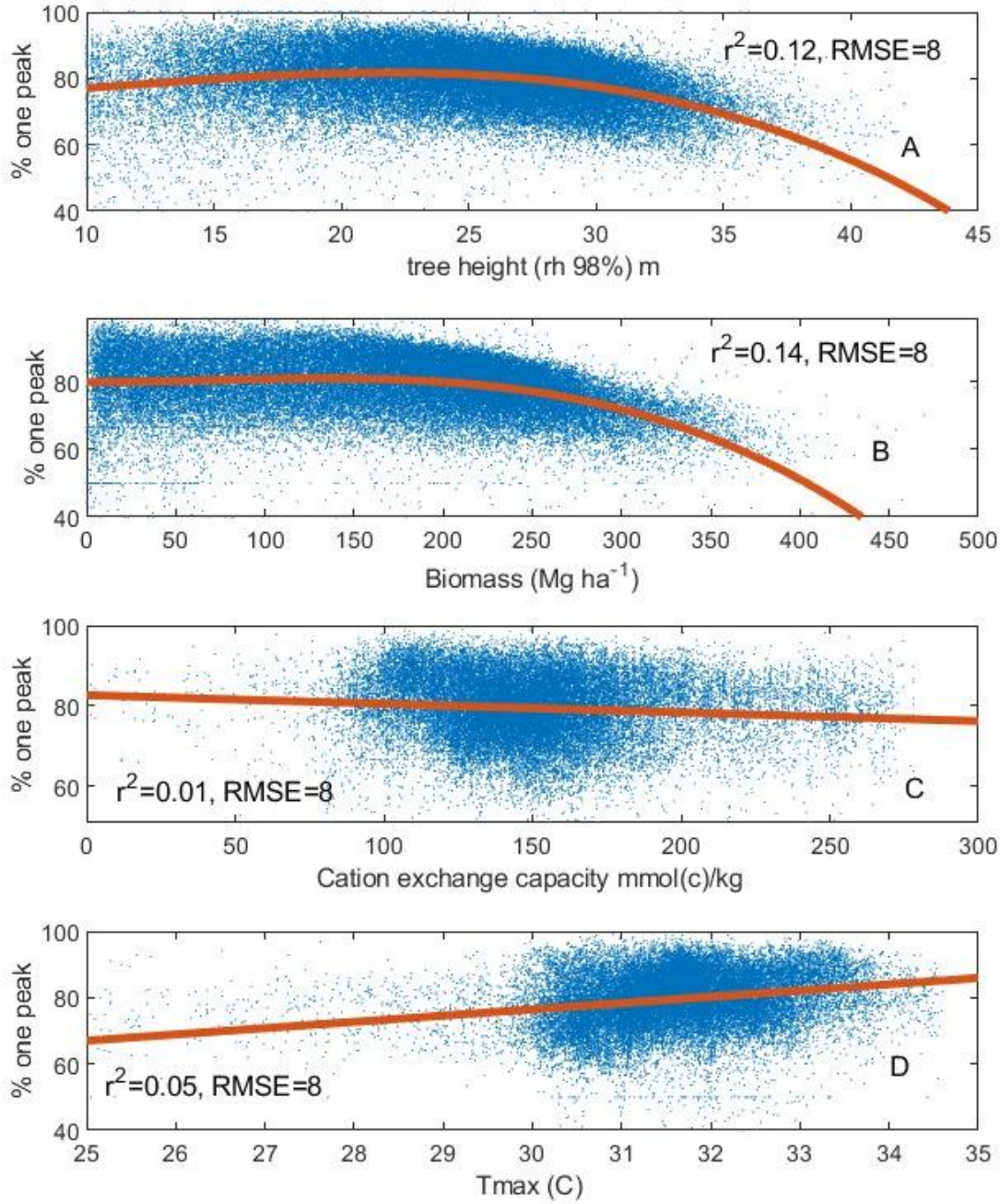

Figure 8 –(A) Tree height (rh98%), (B) AGBD from GEDI L4B, (C) cation exchange capacity (mmol(c)/kg and (D) T_{max} (°C) vs percent one peak forests for the Amazon basin. For each we show r^2 and RMSE.

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Supplementary Figures

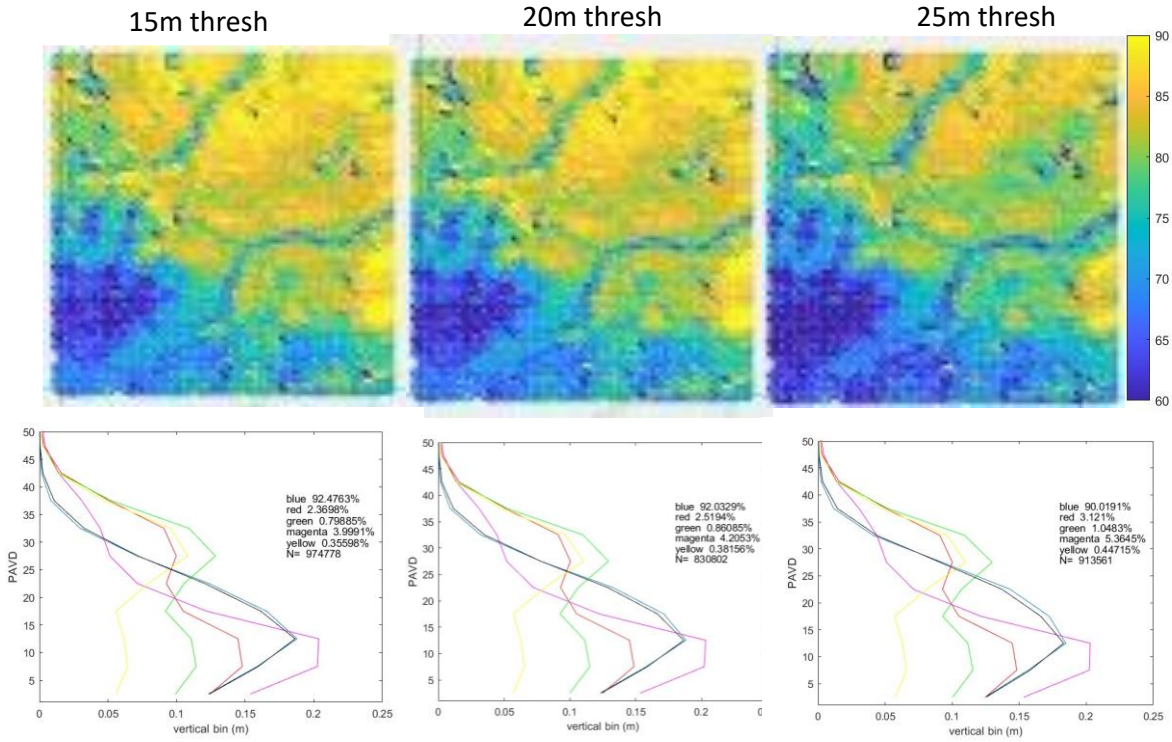

Figure S1 – (top) A map of % one peak forests in a 5 by 5 degree region of the Amazon where we modified our relative height metric 98% with a lower threshold of 15, 20, and 25m. (bottom) The different PAVD profiles for each threshold similar to fig 2.

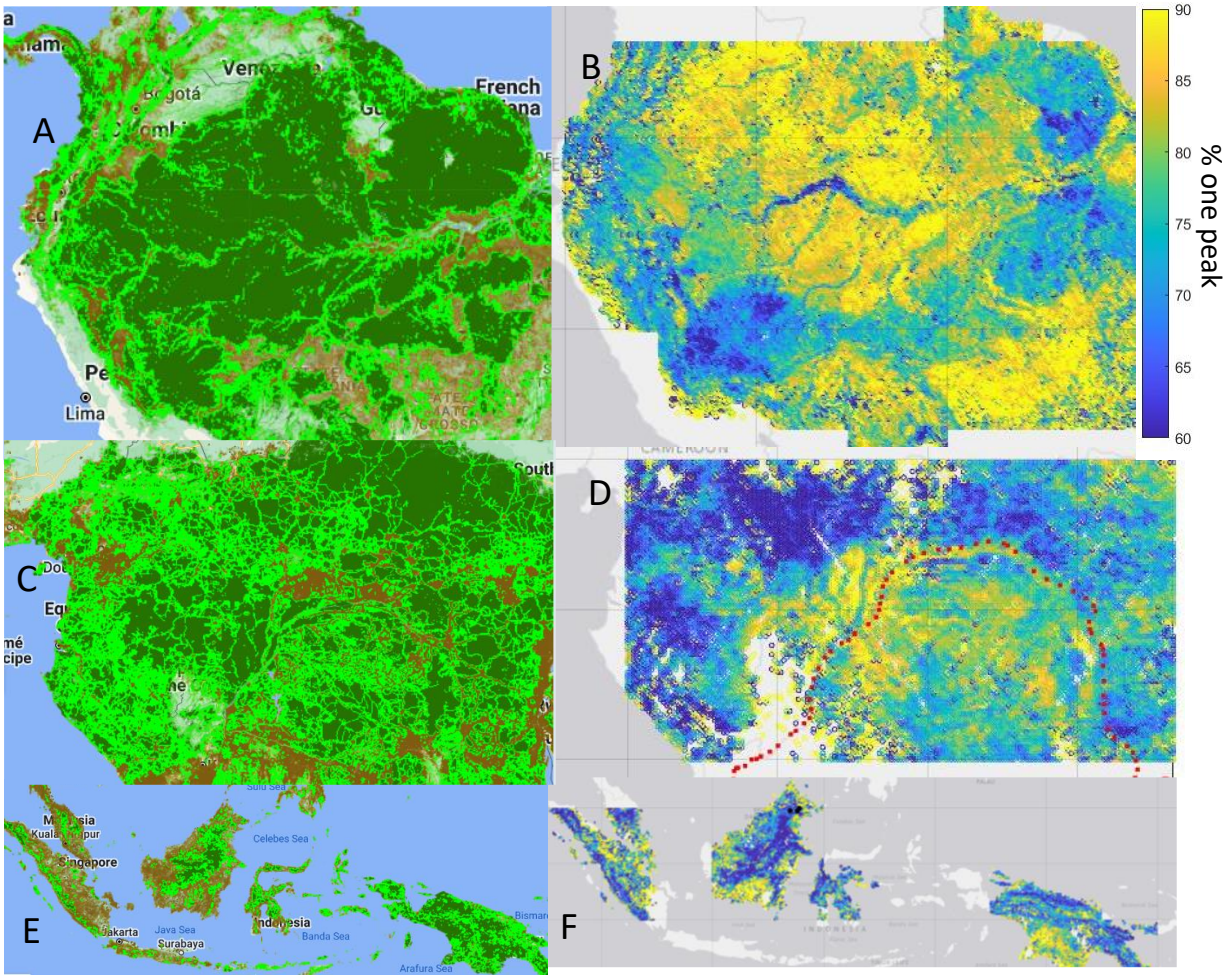

Figure S2 – A comparison of one peak forest types for (B) Amazonia, (D) Central Africa, and (F) SE Asia to an index of forest integrity as determined by degree of anthropogenic modification from https://www.forestintegrity.com/ (Grantham *et al.*, 2020) for (A) Amazonia, (C) Central Africa, and (E) SE Asia where the darkest greens are areas with the least human disturbance.

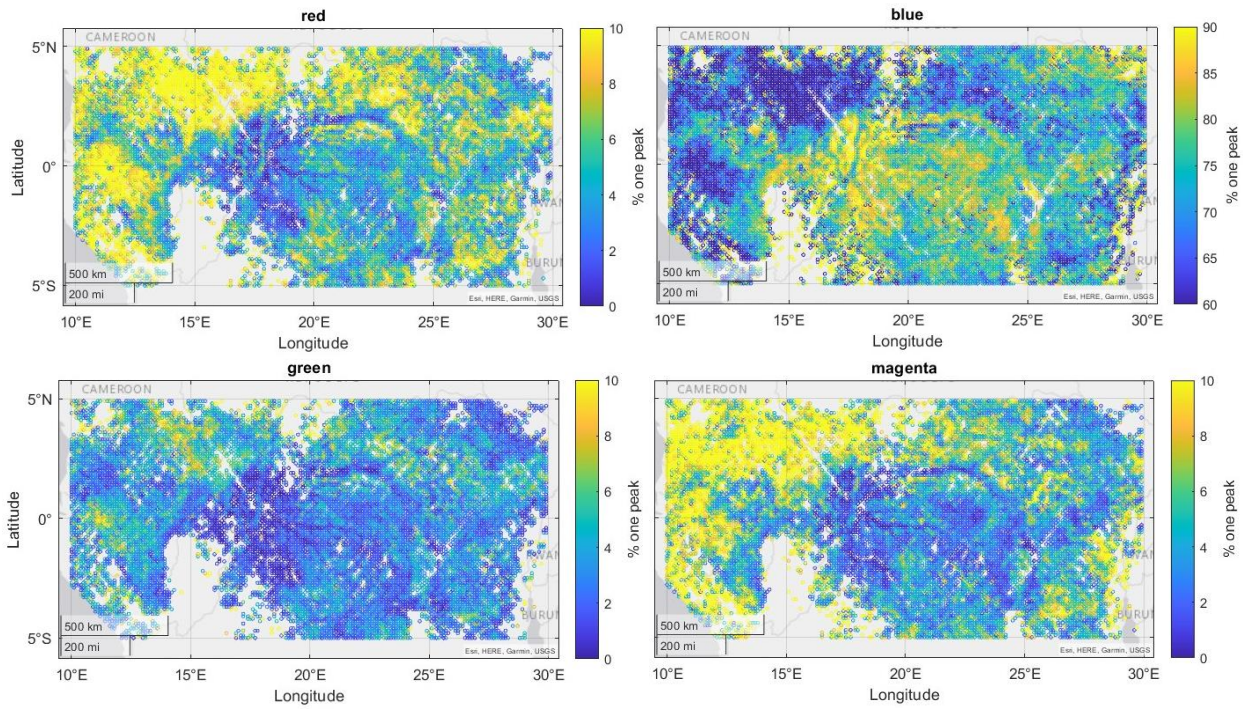

Figure S3 - Spatial distributions for different types of Central African "two peak" forests. The color labels are associated with the colors of the lines in Figs 2-3.

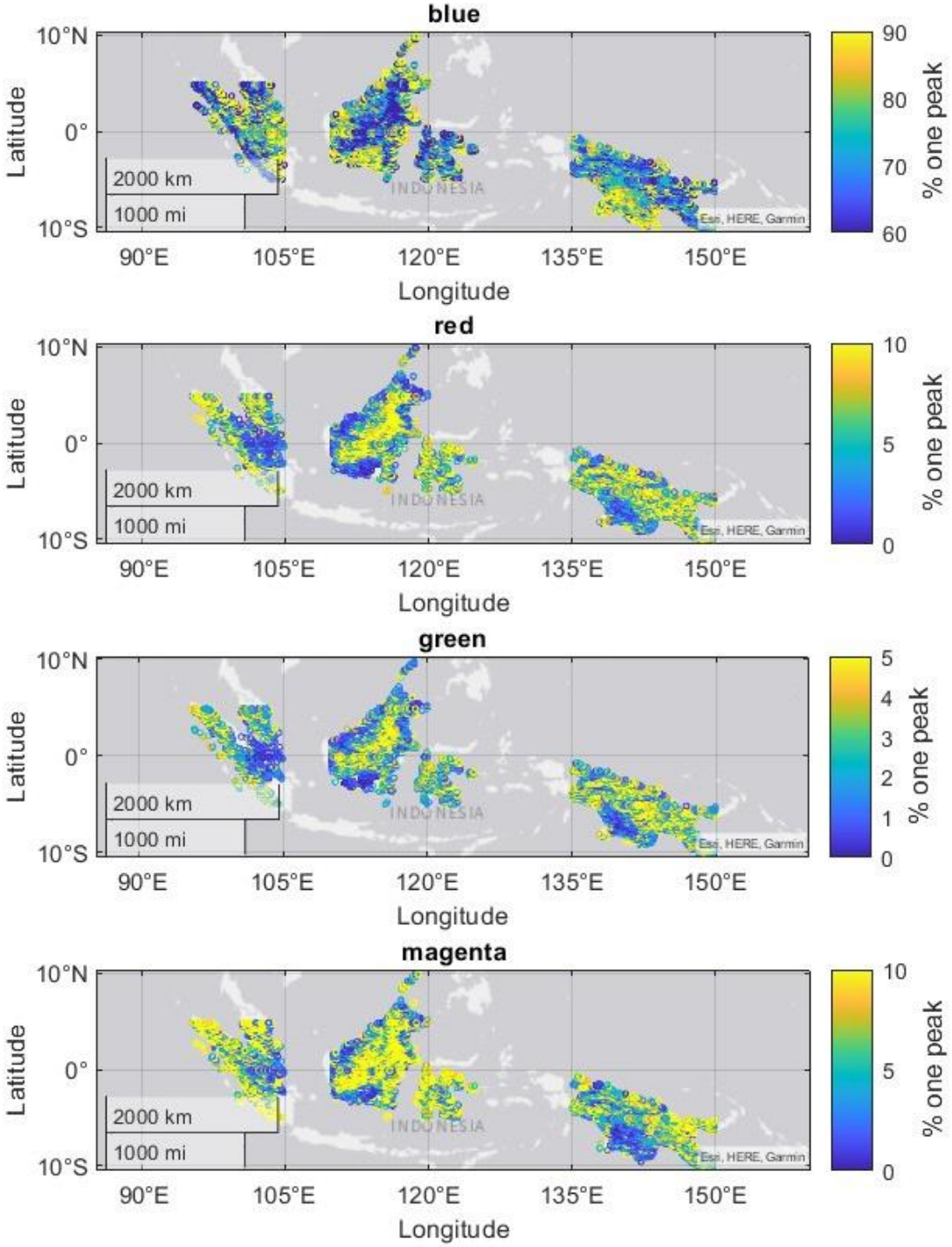

Figure S4 - Spatial distributions for different types of SE Asian "two peak" forests. The color labels are associated with the colors of the lines in Figs 2-3.

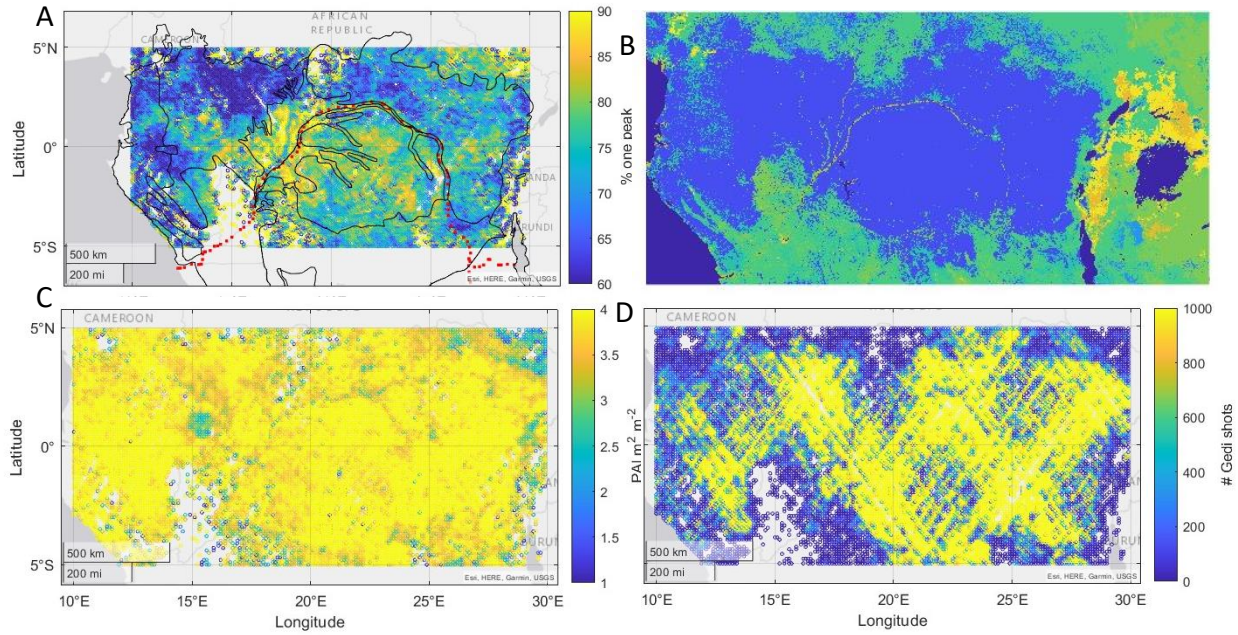

Figure S5 - Different data layers for Central Africa. (A) Spatial distribution of the percentage of 1 peak forests (same as figure 3) with ecoregions overlaid. (B) MODIS PFT classification with the light blue representing broadleaf tropical evergreen PFT. (C) Plant area index from GEDI and (D) # of GEDI shots per 0.1 by 0.1 pixel.

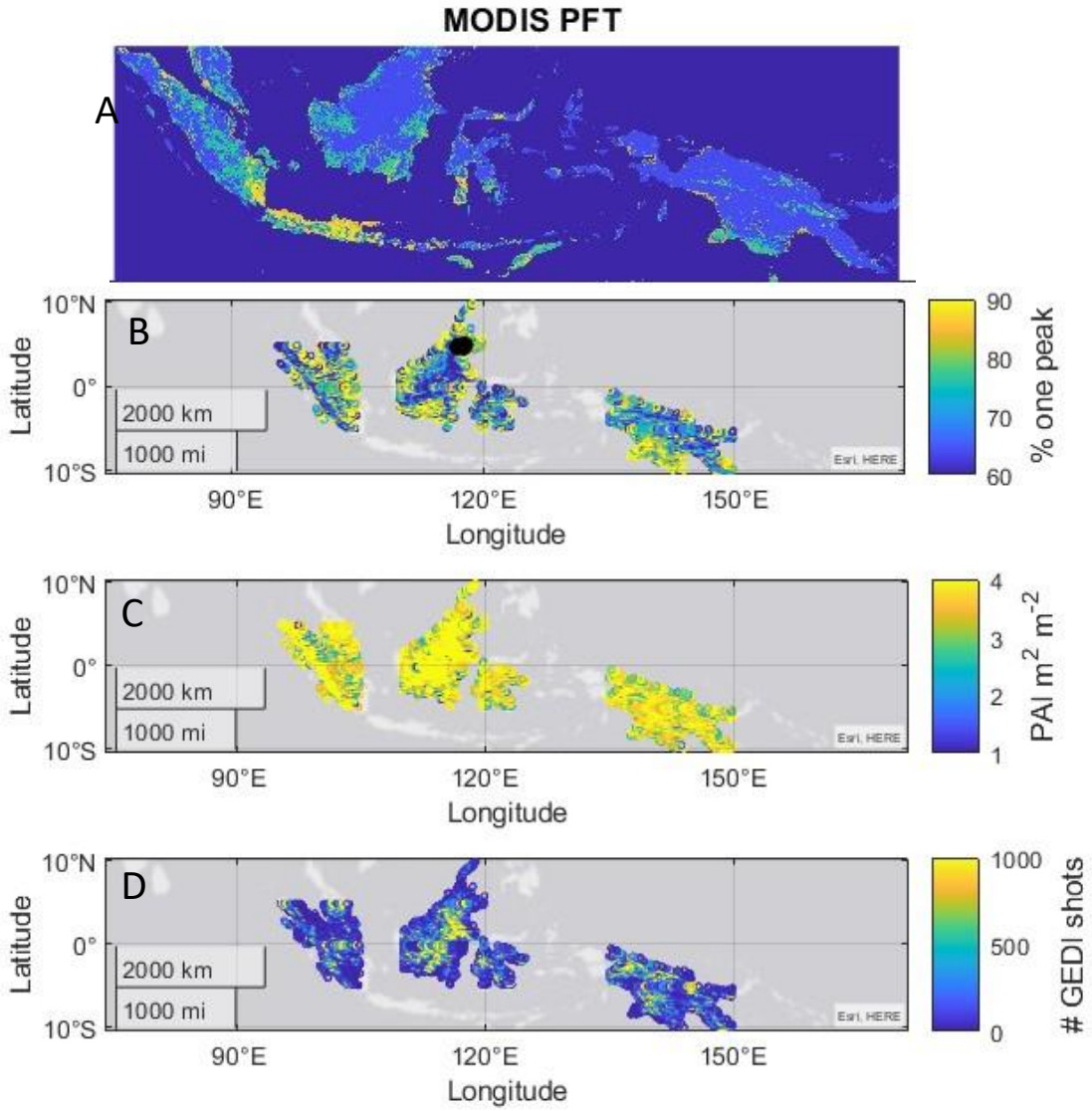

Figure S6 - Different data layers for SE Asia. (A) MODIS PFT classification with the light blue representing broadleaf tropical evergreen PFT. (B) Spatial distribution of the percentage of 1 peak forests (same as figure 3). (C) Plant area index from GEDI and (D) # of GEDI shots per 0.1 by 0.1 pixel.