Improved timber harvest techniques maintain biodiversity in tropical forests

Jake E. Bicknell[1], Matthew J. Struebig[1], David P. Edwards[2], and Zoe G. Davies[1]

[1]Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE), School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NR, UK

[2]Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, UK

Corresponding author: J.E.Bicknell; jb563@kent.ac.uk

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Tropical forests are selectively logged at 20 times the rate at which they are cleared, and at least a fifth have already been disturbed in this way [1]. In a recent pan-tropical assessment, Burivalova et al. demonstrate the importance of logging intensity as a driver of biodiversity decline in timber estates [2]. Their analyses reveal that species richness of some taxa could decline by 50% at harvest intensities of 38 m^3 ha^{-1}. However, they did not consider the extraction techniques that lead to these intensities. Here we conduct a complementary meta-analysis of assemblage responses to differing logging practices: conventional logging and Reduced-Impact Logging (RIL). We show that biodiversity impacts are markedly less severe in forests that utilise RIL, compared to those using conventional logging methods. While supporting the initial findings of Burivalova et al., we go on to demonstrate that best practice forestry techniques curtail the effects of timber extraction regardless of intensity and, therefore, that harvest intensities are not always indicative of actual disturbance levels resulting from logging. Accordingly, forest managers and conservationists should advocate practices that offer reduced collateral damage through best practice extraction methods, such as those used in RIL. Large-scale implementation of this approach would lead to improved conservation values in the 4 million km^2 of tropical forests that are earmarked for timber extraction [3].

Selective logging is the removal of specific timber trees from a forest stand, resulting in patchy canopy openings and extensive road networks, with associated negative impacts on biodiversity [4]. Forest damage can be minimised by employing techniques such as pre-harvest inventories, planned logging road networks, directional felling and winching, all of which are key components of RIL (Fig.S1a) – for further details see [5]. Consequently, RIL improves forest sustainability and ecosystem service provision [6, 7]. Indeed, the adoption of RIL across production forests globally would cut carbon emissions by an estimated 160 million tonnes per year, equivalent to ca.10 percent of carbon emissions from deforestation [8]. While RIL has received growing attention (Fig. S1b), few studies have directly compared the biodiversity impacts of this selective logging practice with those of conventional selective logging (CL), making it difficult to build a strong evidence-base to inform conservation management and forestry policy.

Here we address this knowledge gap via a pan-tropical meta-analysis that utilises species abundance information to examine the relative consequences of contrasting logging regimes. All available logging effect studies that compared primary tropical forest with CL and/or RIL forests were included in our analyses, amounting to 3474 comparisons from 41 studies (see Experimental Procedures in Supplemental Information). Tropical ecologists have reported both increases and decreases in diversity in response to selective logging at almost equal frequency [2], so we assess assemblage change to better account for shifts in the balance between generalist and specialist species that are expected following disturbance.

Our analyses revealed the effects of RIL to be consistently lower than those of CL, with smaller shifts in species abundance after logging under RIL (mean Hedge's g±95% CI: CL=0.476±0.03; RIL=0.393±0.05; Fig.1). This finding could be attributed to differences in harvest intensity, logging practices, or both. To control for intensity, we repeated effect size calculations to include only those CL studies with comparable harvest levels to those of RIL ($\leq$30 m^3 ha^{-1}), and the pattern remained the same (Fig.1). Considering different taxonomic groups separately, our dataset revealed smaller detrimental effects under RIL for birds, arthropods and mammals (Fig.1), especially bats (Fig.S2a). There were insufficient data to compare amphibians among logging techniques. Similarly, we could not examine the data grouped by geographic region, as no suitable RIL studies exist outside of the Neotropics. However, within this region, RIL still resulted in smaller effect sizes (Fig.S2b).

Although, like Burivalova et al., our meta-regression showed an association between logging intensity and effect sizes (CL and RIL combined: Q_{model}=4.75, p=0.03), when partitioned by extraction method, a further important result is evident. Restricted to CL, there is no relationship (Q_{model}=0.44, p=0.51), even when considering only extraction intensities comparable with RIL (CL≤30 m^3 ha^{-1}: Q_{model}=0.45, p=0.500; Fig.1 inset). Conversely, effect sizes under RIL are positively related to logging intensities (Q_{model}=27.6, p<0.001; Fig.1 inset). Reported harvest intensities under CL are thus not closely related to levels of collateral damage, whereas they are under RIL. This may be expected because harvest levels are recorded as the amount of commercial timber extracted, but this metric fails to account for the actual levels of stand disturbance associated with factors that are mitigated under RIL (e.g., falling timber crushing non-harvest trees, indiscriminate use of bulldozers etc.). Meta-regressions of time since logging showed no effect under CL (Q_{model}=1.18, p=0.277) or RIL (Q_{model}=1.60, p=0.206), demonstrating that differences in forestry practices rather than time since disturbance are primarily driving biodiversity change. Consequently, solely considering harvest intensities puts the conservation value of production forests at risk of continued poor extraction practices.

Selective logging is the least detrimental disturbance faced by tropical forests [9], and logging estates are increasingly considered important to global conservation [4]. Although our study shows that best practice forestry estates should not be considered equal in conservation value to primary forests, our analyses suggest that implementing RIL more widely would result in substantial gains for biodiversity compared to the status quo. Focusing on reduced logging intensity alone could result in larger expanses of primary forest being logged to meet timber demand. This may be incompatible with forestry economics as it would likely reduce profits. Furthermore, expanding the logged area would be unfavourable for conservation, as more biodiversity is retained where high harvest intensities are combined with the sparing of primary forest reserves, rather than universally harvesting at lower intensities [10]. By contrast, our study suggests that even at high harvest intensities, RIL will result in lower impacts than CL, providing strong justification to improve logging practices. Unfortunately, uptake of RIL has remained slow with conventional practices continuing to dominate the industry [3], so action is required among governments of tropical timber producer and consumer states to insist on best practice forestry.

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FIGURE

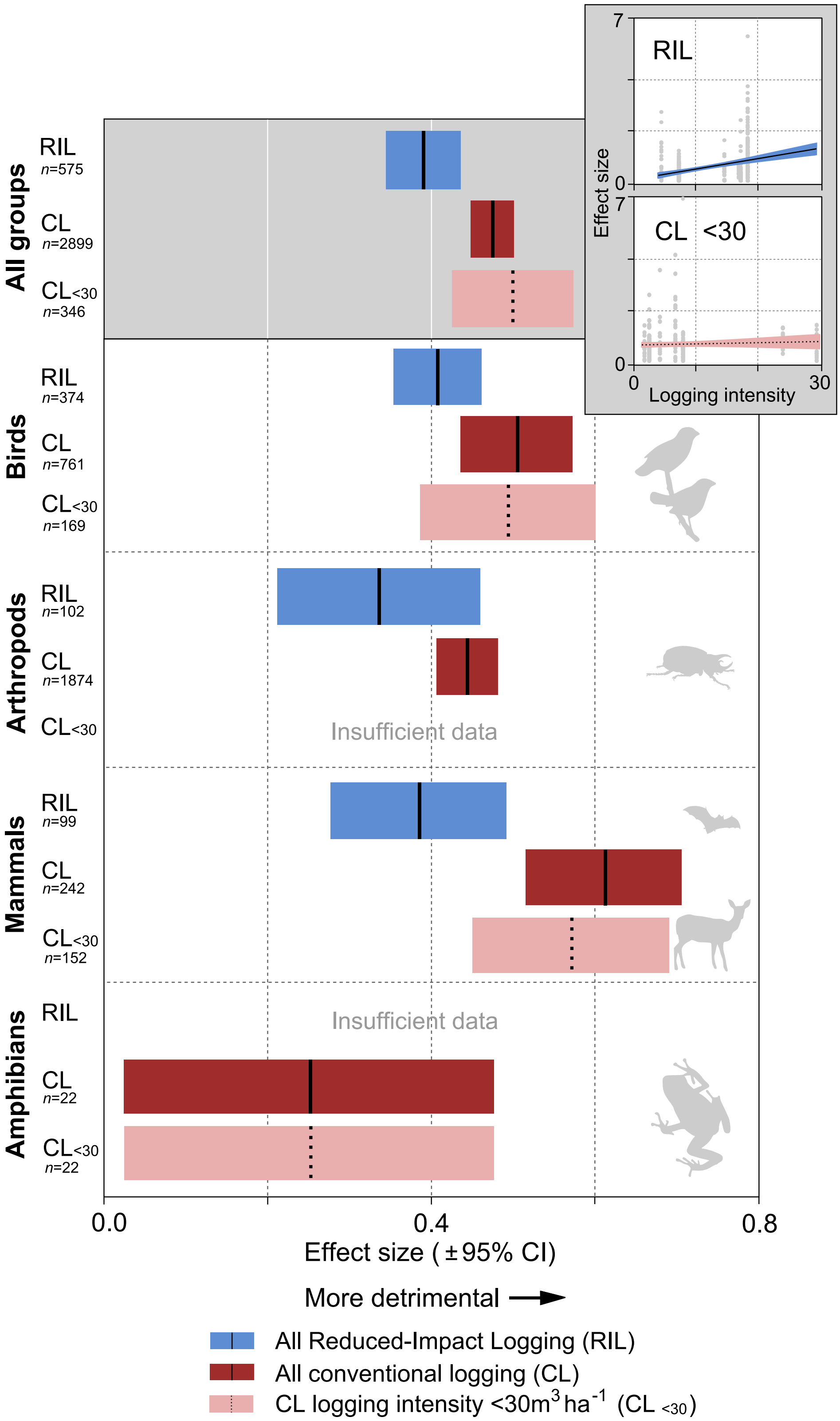
All groups
RIL
n=575
CL
n=2899
CL<30
n=346
Birds
RIL
n=374
CL
n=761
CL<30
n=169
Arthropods
RIL
n=102
CL
n=1874
CL<30
Insufficient data
Mammals
RIL
n=99
CL
n=242
CL<30
n=152
Amphibians
RIL
Insufficient data
CL
n=22
CL<30
n=22
0.0
0.4
0.8
Effect size (±95% CI)
More detrimental
Effect size
7
RIL
0
7
CL <30
0
0
30
Logging intensity
All Reduced-Impact Logging (RIL)
All conventional logging (CL)
CL logging intensity <30m3 ha-1 (CL <30)

Figure 1. Effect sizes and meta-regressions of Reduced-Impact Logging and conventional logging.

Main: Mean effect size (Hedge's g ± 95% CI) of Reduced-Impact Logging (RIL: blue) and conventional logging (CL: reds) impacts on tropical forest biodiversity. Black vertical lines indicate means, and box width shows the confidence intervals. Lighter reds with dashed mean include only CL studies with timber harvest intensities comparable to RIL ($\leq 30m^3$ ha^{-1}). Top (dark grey section) comprises comparison across all taxonomic groups combined. Bottom (white) is partitioned by taxonomic group: birds, arthropods, mammals and amphibians. *n* gives the number of species-level comparisons used in the calculation of effect sizes. Inset: meta-regression (shaded area ± 95%CI) of RIL and CL effect sizes against logging intensity (m^3 ha^{-1}) at levels lower than 30 m^3 ha^{-1}.

Supplemental Information

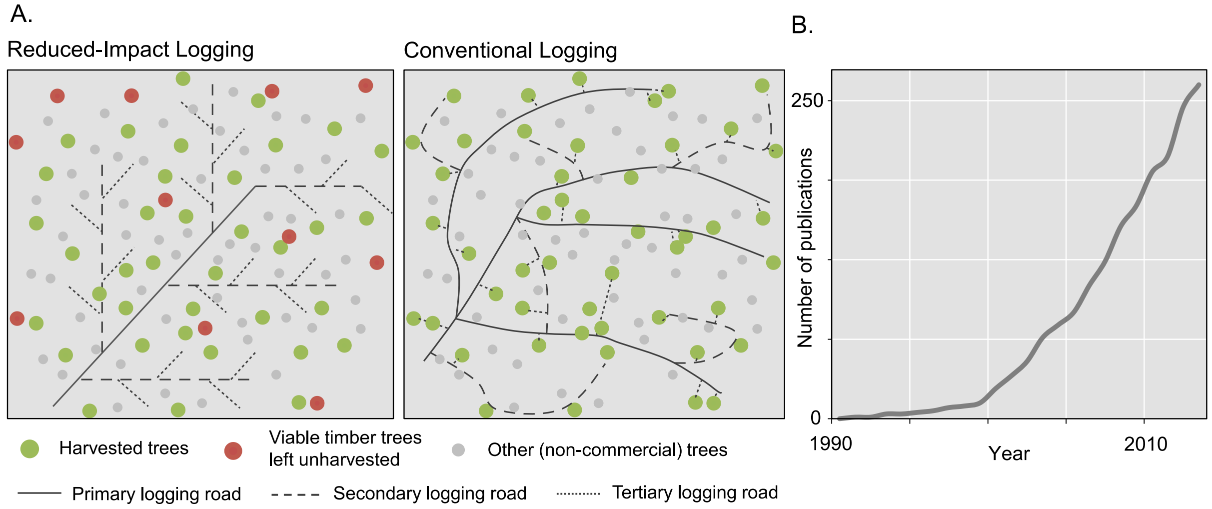

Figure S1. A. Example aerial view of logging road layout for Reduced-Impact Logging (RIL) and conventional logging (CL) in tropical forests. Logging roads under RIL are planned after a forestry inventory, and typically result in 20% less total logging road area. Minimum felling diameters and distances between extracted trees are used. Trees felled under RIL are winched to logging roads (reducing the overall road lengths), and directional felling and vine cutting are used to minimise damage to adjacent trees (vine cutting prevents connected trees from being dragged down during felling). RIL guidelines vary by context and country, and include many other treatments and technologies (e.g. reducing soil compaction, mitigating impacts to watercourses, setting of maximum operational slopes, use of specialised tree hauling equipment). RIL is economically viable and can result in greater profits than CL over the long-term [1]. There is freely available financial modelling software to enable a rapid assessment of the economic viability of RIL under specific contexts (RILSIM: http://blueoxforestry.com). B. RIL has received increasing interest in recent years, as evidenced by the cumulative number of studies published with “Reduced-Impact Logging” in the title, keywords, or abstract from 1990 – 2013 (ISI Web of Science).

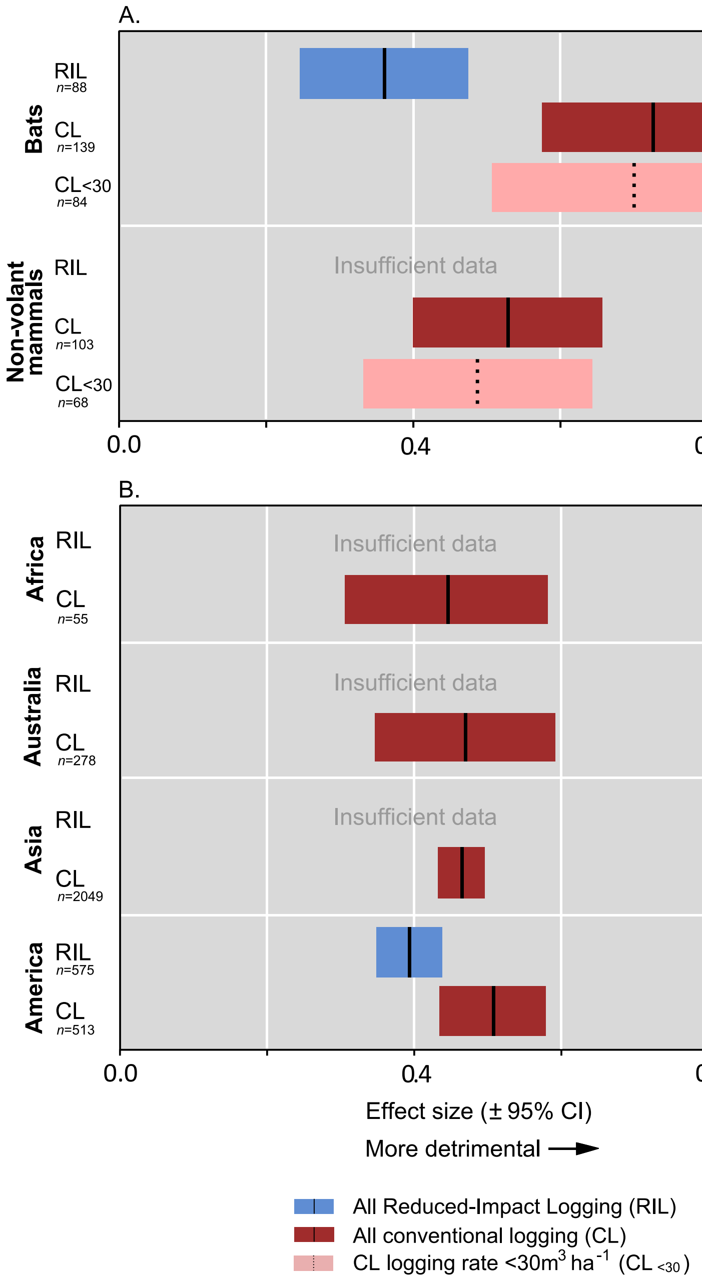

Figure S2. Mean effect size (Hedge's g ± 95%CI) of Reduced-Impact Logging (RIL: blue) and Conventional Logging (CL: reds) impacts on tropical forest biodiversity. Black vertical line shows the mean, and the box width indicates the confidence intervals. Lighter reds with dashed mean include CL studies where the logged sites were harvested at levels comparable to RIL ($\leq$30 m^3 ha^{-1}). *n* gives the number of comparisons used in the calculation of effect sizes. A. Partitioned by bats and non-volant mammals. B. Partitioned by continent; America includes tropical South and Central America.

Experimental procedures

Inclusion criteria for studies used in the meta-analysis

Using ISI Web of Science and Scopus, we searched for all logging effect studies published between 1975 and May 2014. We used the terms “logging” OR “forestry” OR “timber” combined with “tropic*” AND “fauna” OR “wildlife” OR “biodiversity” OR “bird*” OR “bat*” OR “mammal*” OR “frog*” OR “amphibian*” OR “invertebrate*”. We also checked for further studies in the reference lists of papers identified by the search. In total, 1053 studies were located, which we filtered and retained if they met the following inclusion criteria: (i) reported the effects of industrial logging uncoupled from other anthropogenic disturbance in tropical forests (e.g. fragmentation, hunting, etc.); (ii) included measures of biodiversity abundance at sites in both primary and logged forests to allow calculation of effect sizes; and, (iii) indicated that the primary forests had not been subject to human disturbance. We also added data from our own study in Guyana (Bicknell et al. in review) which met these criteria. Where studies did not report the raw data or the variability of abundance estimates, we contacted the authors for this information. In some cases the authors had misplaced the data, and in others we received no response, so these studies were excluded. Where the same data were published in more than one study, we used them only once, utilizing the data from the most recent publication. To account for the spatial heterogeneity of logging impacts across production landscapes, all studies included in the analysis had a minimum of two independent samples across the study area. In most cases, these were randomly distributed. A small set of studies targeted specific interventions (e.g., gaps, logging roads/skid trails, etc.), and were only included if they also sampled the wider logged landscape.

Data extraction

To ensure that each effect size calculation was produced from a properly replicated sample, where a study sampled multiple sites from one forest patch, we took the mean of these, rather than drawing comparisons from potentially non-independent samples [2]. We excluded measures of richness, as under low impact disturbance such as selective logging, the number of species does not sufficiently represent changes in species composition, as logged forests regularly hold similar richness to neighbouring undisturbed forests for most taxonomic groups [3]. Additionally, richness metrics do not take account for the community becoming dominated by generalist species, alongside the loss of some specialists. Indeed, similar numbers of selective logging studies have reported decreases in biodiversity as have reported increases [4], thus obscuring the signal. We therefore included all pairwise effect size comparisons of abundance for every species in each study to represent changes in community composition. Each comparison was classified by logging type, logging intensity, time since logging, taxonomic group, and geographic region. For studies that had been logged over more than one cutting cycle, we used the cumulative logging intensity from all cutting cycles. To directly compare CL with RIL at equal logging intensities we took the subset of CL studies that were logged at intensities ≤ 30 m^3 ha^{-1} as this was the maximum logging intensity under the RIL studies included. We also categorised region into continents (tropical Asia, Africa, South and Central America, Australia); and taxonomic group into birds, mammals, arthropods and amphibians. We further separated bats from non-volant mammals as these taxa use forest resources in different ways (Fig. S2). Our final dataset included studies from across the tropics, among multiple logging intensities and timeframes. Likewise, it comprised of data on bats, birds, terrestrial large and small mammals, primates, frogs and several groups of arthropods (e.g. butterflies, ants, bees, beetles, termites, spiders and flies).

Meta-analysis

For each pairwise measure of species abundance, we calculated the bias-corrected Hedges' g of the difference between primary and logged means, standardised by the pooled standard deviation following [5]. We used the random-effects model to calculate the mean effect size, where each study was weighted by the inverse of its variance, plus the inter-study variance. We calculated the effect size for RIL and CL separately, and for each categorical subgroup (logging intensity, taxonomic group and region). We tested the dataset for possible publication bias by visually examining a funnel plot of the effect size plotted against the standard error of the effect size. The symmetry of the points either side of zero, and the fact that small effect sizes were not published at a lower frequency, indicated that publication bias did not affect the dataset.

Data extracted from studies which did not report logging intensity were only used in the overall calculation of effect size for the entire dataset. Furthermore, because logging intensities in all of the RIL studies that met the inclusion criteria were ≤30 m^3 ha^{-1}, we repeated effect size calculations under comparable intensities of CL. All of the RIL suitable studies were from South and Central America and, therefore, we conducted a separate analysis partitioned by region. Where studies reported logging intensities as trees ha^{-1}, we converted this to m^3 ha^{-1} based on the mean conversion from other studies in the same geographic region that reported both tree and volume extraction intensities, as done by [4] and only affected <3% of the sample. Finally, we conducted meta-regressions of the effect sizes against logging intensities and time since logging for the entire dataset and separately for RIL and CL. Effect sizes and meta-regression were calculated in the programme Comprehensive Meta-analysis [6].

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