

1 **Testing the relative sensitivity of 102 ecological variables as indicators of woodland condition in**  
2 **the New Forest, UK**

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18  
19 **Abstract**

20 Forests globally are facing an increasing number of threats from modified disturbance regimes, novel  
21 stressors and changing environmental conditions. This has ultimately resulted in declines in the  
22 ecological condition of many forest and woodland ecosystems, leading to widespread tree mortality  
23 and stand dieback. Effective indicators of overall woodland ecological condition are therefore needed  
24 for environmental monitoring and to support management responses. To test the effectiveness of  
25 different variables that could potentially be used as indicators of woodland condition, 102 variables  
26 that describe woodland structure, composition, functioning, edaphic conditions and disturbance  
27 regimes were assessed along 12 replicate gradients of beech stand dieback. Results indicated that 35  
28 variables differed significantly between at least two stages of the dieback gradient, indicating their  
29 sensitivity to stand dieback. Seven of these indicators related to woodland species composition, two to  
30 functional processes, 20 to structural features, four to edaphic conditions, and two to disturbance  
31 regimes. These results demonstrate that effective indicators can potentially be identified for each of  
32 the ecological categories. Effective composition indicators included species richness of  
33 ectomycorrhizal fungi, ground flora and epiphytic lichens; functional indicators were soil respiration  
34 rate and net nitrification rate; edaphic conditions included soil Na:Ca ratio, sodium cation exchange  
35 capacity, total carbon, Ca:Al ratio, structural indicators included canopy openness, litter cover, sward  
36 height, and volume of deadwood, and for disturbance was *Equus* dung density. Other measures, such  
37 as shrub cover and species richness of carabid beetles and spiders, were not found to vary

38 significantly along the dieback gradients, and were therefore not identified as effective indicators.  
39 These results demonstrate the value of gradient analysis for evaluating indicators of woodland  
40 condition, but also highlight the need for multi-site studies to identify indicators with wide  
41 applicability.

42

### 43 **Keywords**

44 Indicators; temperate forest; effectiveness; forest ecological condition

45

### 46 **1. Introduction**

47 Forests globally are facing multiple threats related to changing climatic conditions, and to the  
48 intensification, interaction and proliferation of disturbance regimes and actors (Allen et al., 2015;  
49 Flower and Gonzalez-Meler, 2015; Trumbore et al., 2015; Jung et al., 2018; Ramirez et al., 2018).  
50 There is an increasing incidence of large-scale dieback of trees occurring in both tropical and  
51 temperate forests as a result of interacting factors such as drought (Allen, 2009; Breshears et al., 2009;  
52 Allen et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2016), storms (Csilléry et al., 2017), and the spread of invasive species  
53 and novel pests and diseases (van Mantgem and Stephenson, 2007; Sallé et al., 2014; Flower and  
54 Gonzalez-Meler, 2015). Such trends have been associated with declines in ecological condition  
55 (Gibbons and Freudenberger, 2006), which is defined as an overall product of forest structure,  
56 composition and functional processes. Loss of ecological condition is therefore associated with a  
57 simplification of forest structure (Noss, 1999), major losses in biodiversity, including native  
58 biodiversity (Gao et al., 2015) and/or rapid, detrimental changes in forest dynamic processes such as  
59 reduced nutrient cycling rates (Trumbore, 2015). These, in turn, lead to declines in the provision of  
60 ecosystem services to human society (MEA, 2005; Foley et al., 2007; Isbell et al., 2015; Trumbore et  
61 al., 2015). As a result of interacting pressures, many forest ecosystems are currently considered to be  
62 at risk of ecological collapse, which could lead to rapid and long-lasting changes in the state and  
63 dynamics of forest ecosystems (Lindenmayer et al., 2016). However, our understanding of the  
64 ecological processes occurring during the degradation and collapse of forest ecosystems is still  
65 limited, which limits our ability to detect change, recognise tipping points and develop appropriate  
66 management and policy responses as counter measures (Breshears et al., 2005; Woodall et al., 2009;  
67 Allen et al., 2010; Newton and Echeverría 2014; Lindenmayer et al., 2016).

68

69 To be able to maintain or improve forest condition by adopting appropriate management and  
70 conservation measures, it is important to determine the ecological condition of forests and how this  
71 might be altered as a result of environmental change or human interventions. However, measuring all  
72 dimensions of forest or woodland ecological condition is rarely possible owing to the cost and  
73 difficulty of collecting data for a large number of different metrics. For this reason, surrogate

74 measures are often used (Hyman and Leibowitz, 2001; Chirici et al., 2012). Rather than measuring  
75 ecosystems directly, surrogates can be used as proxies for different ecosystem components such as  
76 ecological processes and functions, environmental conditions, and the abundance or diversity of  
77 particular groups of species (Lindenmayer et al., 2014). Numerous different measures have been  
78 proposed in this context, including single keystone or umbrella species (e.g. Ozaki et al., 2006), taxa-  
79 based surrogates (Sabatini et al., 2015; Larrieu et al., 2018) and habitat-based surrogates including  
80 vegetation structure, environmental conditions and landscape patterns (Ludwig et al., 2004; Rodrigues  
81 and Brooks, 2007). Surrogate measures can relate to a single indicator or a set of multiple indicators  
82 derived from different broad categories, each of which can potentially be used to indicate different  
83 aspects of ecosystem condition (Noss, 1990; Gao et al., 2015).

84

85 A large number of indicators of forest and woodland condition have been developed in association  
86 with various national and international initiatives striving to develop criteria and indicators that reflect  
87 progress towards sustainable forest management (SFM) goals and implementing the Convention on  
88 Biological Diversity, as well as other intergovernmental policy initiatives (Higman et al., 2005; Gao et  
89 al., 2015). For example, a set of Pan-European Indicators for SFM was developed based on set of 34  
90 quantitative and 11 qualitative indicators (Forest Europe, 2015). Some of these indicators are relevant  
91 for assessing forest condition, such as soil condition, species diversity, dead wood and regeneration,  
92 and many of which have been integrated into National Forest Inventories (Chirici et al., 2012). A  
93 recent evaluation of the implementation of these indicators showed that they have made a positive  
94 contribution to standardising international reporting in the region, and in communicating what SFM  
95 comprises. However, their impact has been limited to date by a number of constraints, including a  
96 lack of evidence regarding their links with forest management activities, and a failure to define  
97 appropriate thresholds or trade-offs among individual indicators (Baycheva-Merger and Wolfslehner,  
98 2016). Other sets of indicators of forest condition variables are also widely used with varying degrees  
99 of success to support monitoring of forest biodiversity conservation initiatives, in managed and  
100 unmanaged woodlands (Gao et al., 2015; Dieler et al., 2017). For example in Europe, the NATURA  
101 2000 network of protected areas requires ecological monitoring to ensure that a favourable  
102 conservation status of the sites is maintained and this is pursued using specific forest condition  
103 indicators (Cantarello and Newton, 2008).

104

105 Although large numbers of indicators of forest and woodland ecological condition have been  
106 developed, many have proved to be impractical for implementation at the scale at which individual  
107 woodlands are managed (Franc et al., 2001; Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004). This is especially the  
108 case for those indicators developed to monitor forest biodiversity as an important component  
109 underpinning habitat condition (Newton et al., 2007; Chirici et al., 2012). In addition, the scientific  
110 validity of many woodland condition indicators is open to question, as they have not been adequately

111 tested or rigorously validated (Noss, 1999; Lindenmayer et al., 2006, 2014; Gao et al., 2015).  
112 According to Noss (1990), indicators of biodiversity should ideally be sufficiently sensitive to provide  
113 an early warning of change; capable of providing a continuous assessment over a wide range of  
114 disturbances; and relevant to ecologically significant phenomena (such as key ecological processes).  
115 Information is also needed specifically on how indicators respond to disturbance (Lindenmayer et al.,  
116 2000). Further, Simberloff (1997) noted the importance of being able to relate variation in a  
117 biodiversity indicator to chemical/physical changes in the environment. However, few indicators of  
118 woodland ecological condition have been assessed against these criteria, particularly at local scales.  
119 As a result, evidence is lacking on the relative effectiveness and workability of the different indicators  
120 that have been proposed (Mahanty et al., 2007; Alexander, 2013; Neupane et al., 2016), leading to a  
121 lack of robust guidance regarding how an appropriate group of indicators might best be selected  
122 (Niemi and McDonald, 2004; Lawley et al., 2016).

123

124 How might the suitability or effectiveness of a set of woodland ecological condition indicators  
125 therefore be tested? One potential approach is to compare woodland stands along gradients of  
126 disturbance (Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004). This would allow the criteria identified by Noss  
127 (1990) to be rigorously applied, for example by enabling the sensitivity of indicators to disturbance to  
128 be examined. Despite its potential promise, this approach has been relatively little used by  
129 researchers. Examples include studies by Liow et al. (2001) who examined bee diversity along a  
130 disturbance gradient in tropical lowland forests in South-east Asia; Jones et al. (2003) in South-East  
131 Asia who described the collapse of termite assemblages along a land-use intensification gradient in  
132 lowland central Sumatra, Indonesia; and Newton et al. (2007), who examined floristic diversity along  
133 anthropogenic disturbance gradients in fragmented forests of Latin America. However, we are not  
134 aware of any previous study that has evaluated the effectiveness of indicators along gradients of stand  
135 dieback. Such gradients enable some of the criteria identified by Noss (1990) to be directly addressed,  
136 by providing an opportunity to examine the performance of indicators in relation to a form of  
137 disturbance that is ecologically and societally very significant. Dieback gradients also provide a wide  
138 range of disturbance intensities over which to evaluate indicator performance. For example, any  
139 indicator that is insensitive to complete dieback of a forest stand clearly has little value for monitoring  
140 woodland ecological condition.

141

142 The aim of this research was therefore to test whether commonly- and easily-measured ecological  
143 variables of woodland ecosystem condition are a sensitive reflection of dieback at a stand scale, and  
144 could therefore potentially be used as indicators of shifts in ecological condition. To achieve this, we  
145 examined a range of potential indicators along a gradient of beech woodland dieback. 102 ecological  
146 variables were selected describing forest ecosystem composition, structure and functioning as well as  
147 edaphic conditions and primarily herbivore-related levels of disturbance (Noss, 1990; Gao et al.,

148 2015; Lawley et al., 2016). Examples of structural variables included canopy structure and cover;  
149 functional variables included measures of ecological processes, such as the rate of soil nutrient  
150 cycling; compositional variables related to the species richness and abundance of different taxonomic  
151 groups (Noss, 1990); edaphic conditions included soil structural and chemical properties; and levels  
152 of disturbance were assessed, for example, by browsing intensity and dung density. Therefore, our  
153 study was undertaken to test the hypothesis that compositional, functional, edaphic, structural, and  
154 disturbance variables could be used effectively at the stand scale as indicators for differentiating  
155 between the stages of woodland stand dieback. Our objective was also to identify which ecological  
156 variable(s) are most effective at highlighting declines in beech woodland condition.

157

## 158 **2. Methods**

### 159 2.1. Study area

160 We conducted this study in the New Forest National Park (NFNP), which covers an area of 57,100 ha  
161 in southern England (longitude: 1°17'59'' to 1°48'8'' W, Latitude: 50°42'19'' to 51°0'17'' N),  
162 and has annual means of 14.8°C (maximum temperature) and 835.2 mm (rainfall) (Met  
163 Office, 2015). The NFNP lies upon sedimentary clay and sandy soils, which form a mixture  
164 of base-poor acidic, and well-drained clay and loam soils. Continuously-waterlogged marshy  
165 bogs and mires are also present (Tubbs, 2001). All survey plots were located within the ancient  
166 native woodlands of the NFNP (Fig. 1). The canopies of these ancient woodlands are generally  
167 dominated by beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) interspersed with birch  
168 (*Betula pendula*), with yew (*Taxus baccata*) and holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) frequently present in the  
169 understorey (Tubbs, 2001). Collectively, these woodlands represent one of the most extensive areas of  
170 native, semi-natural woodland in England, and are characterised by a diverse structure with many  
171 ancient trees and large volumes of deadwood, providing habitat for a high diversity of invertebrates,  
172 ectomycorrhizal fungi (ECM) and lichens (Tubbs, 2001; Newton, 2010). The area is also  
173 characterised by high densities of large herbivores, including both livestock and deer, owing to its  
174 designation as a Royal Hunting Forest and as common land over which livestock are free to roam  
175 (Tubbs, 2001; Newton et al., 2013). We selected study areas that were all beech-dominated. These  
176 areas of beech woodland are currently undergoing moderate to significant stand dieback. The dieback  
177 appears to be related to a combination of changing climate conditions (specifically an increased  
178 incidence of summer droughts and winter waterlogging) and the action of fungal pathogens (Martin et  
179 al., 2015, 2017; Evans et al., 2017). The variation in levels of beech dieback throughout the NFNP  
180 provides a gradient of woodland dieback along which the relative sensitivity of 102 woodland  
181 ecological variables as indicators of beech woodland condition could be tested.

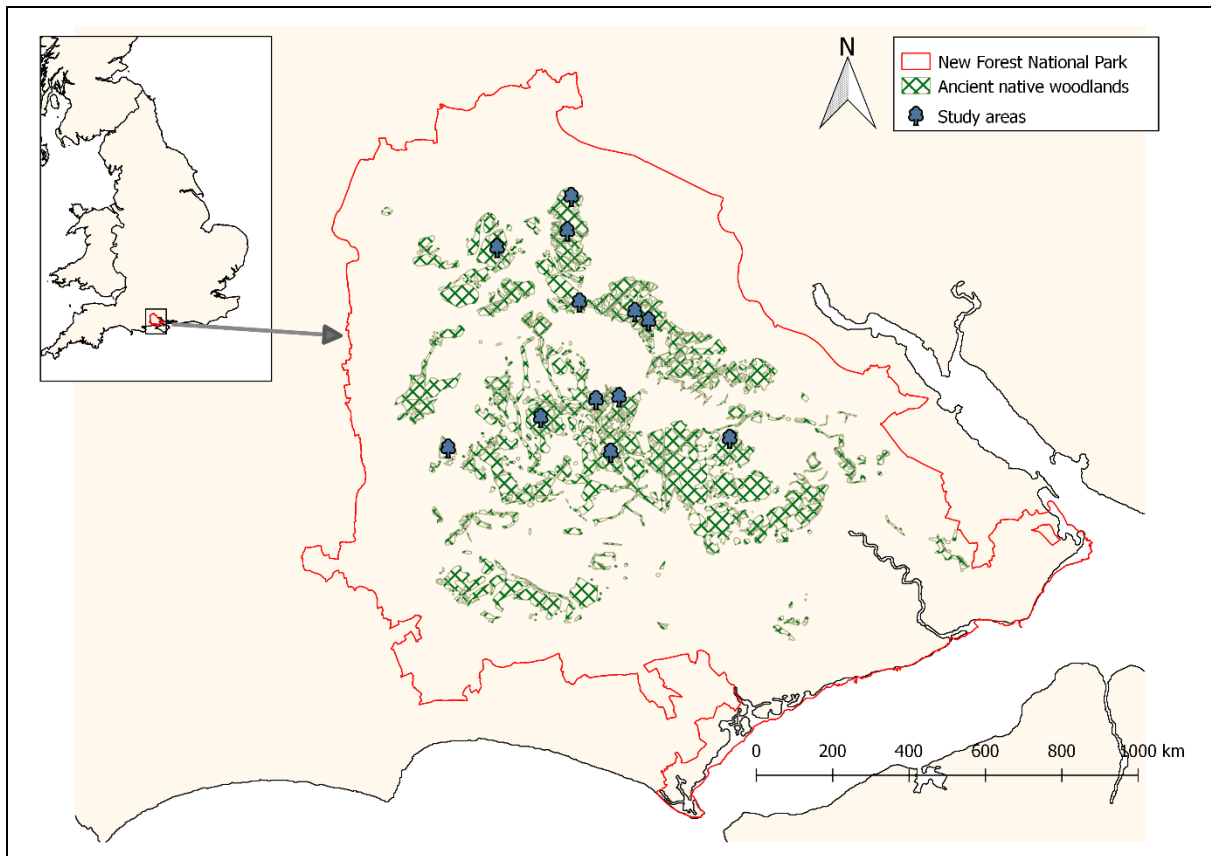
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## 2.2. Experimental design

We established survey plots along a gradient of beech woodland condition in twelve replicate woodland blocks. The gradient of beech woodland condition covered five stages of stand dieback ranging from Intact (i.e. a closed canopy beech stand) to Total dieback (where no living beech remained). All survey plots were assumed to have had a similar starting (i.e. closed canopy) density as they were all in ancient native woodlands. The stages of dieback were determined primarily by the basal area (BA) of living trees. However, essential secondary criteria for site selection included the presence of standing or lying dead wood, beech snag presence in the Total dieback stage, increased canopy openness associated with tree mortality, and degradation of the remaining beech crowns, following (Roloff, 1989). Any prospective survey plots, other than the Intact plot, which did not meet the secondary criteria as well as the primary criterion were not used. Survey plots were positioned to provide linear gradients of BA of the canopy dominant species (beech), as calculated by Cantarello and Newton (2008). The mean BA of 12 Intact beech stands was first calculated, then used to define the BA of four other stages along each gradient, namely Slight dieback (defined as 75% of the mean BA of Intact stands); Moderate dieback (50%), Major dieback (25%), and Total dieback (0%). For ease of reference, 1-5 represent the individual dieback stages in numeric form, with 1 indicating Intact stands and 5 indicating Total dieback. This provided 12 replicates of each gradient stage, totalling 60 survey plots overall, each of which was 20 x 20 m (0.04 ha) in area.

## 2.3. Ecological variables measured

We recorded 102 ecological variables in each of the 60 survey plots (Table 1). The variables included condition measures that have been found to be useful at multiple woodland locations and woodland types. For example, due to their utility, metrics relating to dead wood (e.g. Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004; JNCC, 2004; Rondeux and Sanchez, 2010), tree canopy health (Zarnoch et al., 2004; Gao et al. 2015), soil productivity (Amacher et al., 2007; Thiffault et al., 2011; Forest Europe, 2015), and browsing disturbance and regeneration (Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004; Forest Europe, 2015) have frequently been used in woodland condition assessments. Overall, the variables used in this study included 35 of stand composition, 4 of functional processes, 29 of edaphic (physical and chemical) conditions of the forest floor to a mineral layer depth of 15 cm, 22 measures of woodland stand structure, and 12 of environmental disturbances (e.g. herbivory). For the methods used, see the Methodology section in the Supplementary Material. The selection of ecological variables was based on variables that had been previously applied as indicators to describe an element of forest condition (see Noss, 1999; Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004; Cantarello and Newton, 2008; Thiffault et al., 2011; Forest Europe, 2015; Gao et al., 2015).



219

220 Fig. 1: Map of the New Forest National Park (red outline) the ancient native woodlands (green), in  
 221 Hampshire, UK, and the central location of each study area (blue trees). Map was produced using  
 222 QGIS 2.18.19.

223

#### 224 2.4. Statistical analysis

225 One-way ANOVAs were used to analyse each variable to identify significant differences between  
 226 mean values associated with the different stages of dieback. To test whether the data matched the  
 227 assumptions of ANOVA, Shapiro-Wilk tests were conducted to test the normality of each variable at  
 228 each stage over the gradient, and Levene's test was used to test for homogeneity of variance (Fox and  
 229 Weisberg, 2011; R 'car' package). Where the ANOVA assumptions were met, one-way factorial  
 230 ANOVAs were performed with the indicator as the response variable and the dieback stages as the  
 231 independent variable. When the homogeneity of variances assumption was not met, or the variables  
 232 had unequal sample sizes, Welch's one-way ANOVA was used. For variables that did not exhibit  
 233 normality, even after transformations, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used. If ANOVA  
 234 results calculated significant differences at a 0.05 level, Tukey's, Games-Howell (Games and Howell,  
 235 1976) or Dunn's (Dunn, 1964) post-hoc pairwise comparison tests were carried out for ANOVA,  
 236 Welch's ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests, respectively. To reduce the chance of a false positive (a  
 237 Type I error), Bonferroni-corrected p-values were calculated in addition to the standard p-values. All

238 statistical analyses were carried out using R (version 3.2.3; R Development Core Team, 2015,  
239 <http://www.r-project.org/>).  
240



Species composition	Functional process	Edaphic conditions	Stand structure	Disturbance intensity
• Ant species richness	• Net ammonification per month	• Ammonium concentration (mineral layer)	• Aboveground woody tree biomass	• Bare ground and moss cover
• Beech sapling density	• Net N mineralisation	• Ammonium concentration (organic layer)	• Average height of beech trees	• Cervus dung density (proportional)
• Beech seedling density	• Net nitrification	• Ca/Al ratio	• Beech biomass	• Cervus dung density (total)
• Beech tree density	• Soil respiration rate	• Clay percentage of soil	• Beech tree canopy discolouration	• Debarking of trees
• Bracken cover		• Electrical conductivity	• Beech tree leaf loss	• Dung density (proportional)
• Carabid beetle species richness		• Loss on ignition (mineral layer)	• Beech tree structural canopy loss	• Dung density (total)
• Click beetle species richness		• Loss on ignition (organic layer)	• Canopy openness	• Equus dung density (proportional)
• ECM species richness		• Moisture content (mineral layer)	• Live wood to dead wood ratio	• Equus dung density (total)
• Grass cover		• Moisture content (organic layer)	• Living biomass of holly	• Holly shrubs browsed
• Ground flora species richness		• Nitrate concentration (mineral layer)	• Lying dead wood volume (all species)	• Palatable tree browseline
• Ground-dwelling invertebrates species richness		• Nitrate concentration (organic layer)	• Lying dead wood volume of beech	• Rubus sp. eaten by herbivores
• Holly sapling density		• Organic soil depth	• Mean (quadratic) diameter at breast height of beech	• Unpalatable tree browseline
• Holly seedling density		• Potentially mineralisable N (mineral layer)	• Sward height	
• Holly shrub cover		• Potentially mineralisable N (organic layer)	• Total C in stand	
• Holly tree density		• Sand percentage of soil	• Understorey openness	
• Large beech trees (68.32 cm < DBH < 74.97 cm) density		• Silt percentage of soil	• Unhealthiness of beech trees	

- Lichen richness on holly
- Lichen richness on non-holly and non-beech trees
- Lichen species richness on beech
- Litter cover
- Oak seedling density
- Palatable seedling density
- Rove beetle species richness
- *Rubus* sp. ground cover
- Seedling and ground flora species richness
- Small beech trees (10 cm < DBH < 59.59 cm) density
- Spider species richness
- Total lichen species richness
- Total sapling density
- Total tree seedling density
- Tree seedling species richness
- Tree species richness
- Very large beech trees (74.97 cm < DBH < 103 cm) density
- Weevil species richness
- Woodlouse species richness

- Soil exchangeable aluminium
- Soil available phosphorus
- Soil bulk density
- Soil C/N ratio
- Soil exchangeable calcium
- Soil exchangeable iron
- Soil exchangeable magnesium
- Soil exchangeable manganese
- Soil Na/Ca ratio
- Soil pH
- Soil exchangeable potassium
- Soil exchangeable sodium
- Total N in soil
- Volume of lying holly dead wood
- Volume of lying oak dead wood
- Volume of standing beech dead wood
- Volume of standing dead wood
- Volume of standing holly dead wood
- Volume of standing oak dead wood

242 Table 1: Ecological variables measured split into five different categories. DBH is the diameter at breast height.

243

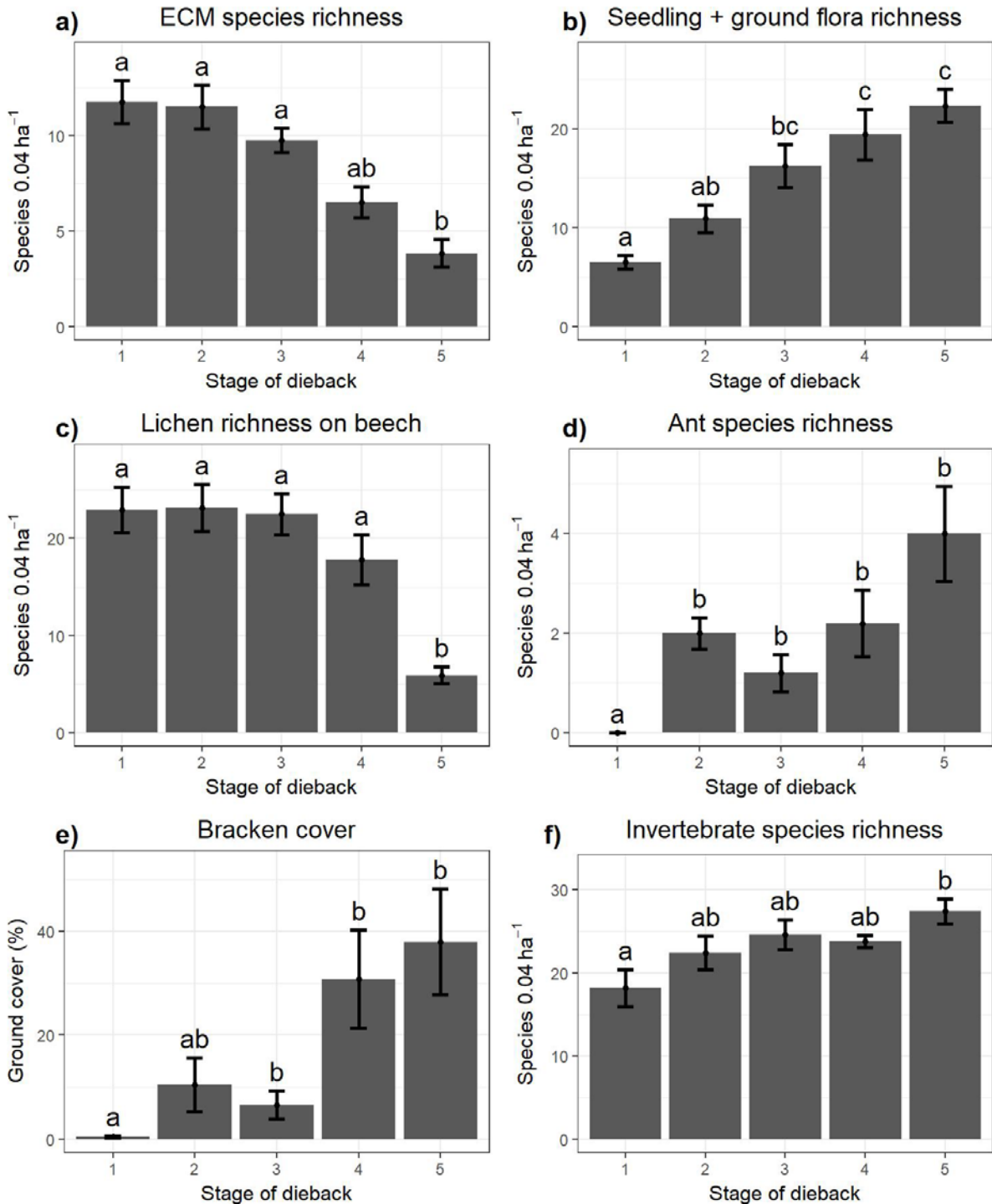
### 244 3. Results

245 35 of the 102 measured ecological variables differed significantly between at least two stages of the  
246 beech dieback gradient. All five categories of ecological variables tested (i.e. compositional, structural  
247 etc) had at least two variables that showed a significant response to beech decline (Table 2).

248

#### 249 3.1. Composition variables

250 Seventeen out of 35 composition indicators differed significantly across the dieback gradients (Table  
251 2). The density of beech trees ( $X^2(4) = 47.846, p < 0.001$ ) differed significantly in seven out of 10  
252 pairwise stages comparisons. ECM species richness ( $F(4,55) = 13.974, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 2a), total  
253 ground flora species richness ( $F(4,55) = 13.059, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 2b) and ground flora species  
254 richness excluding woody plants ( $F(4,55) = 14.542, p < 0.001$ ) differed significantly in five pairwise  
255 stages comparisons. Lichen species richness on beech ( $F(4,55) = 17.429, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 2c), grass  
256 cover ( $F(4,55) = 11.981, p < 0.001$ ), ant species richness ( $X^2(4) = 14.554, p = 0.006$ ) (Fig. 2d) and  
257 the density of palatable seedlings ( $X^2(4) = 14.322, p = 0.006$ ) differed significantly in four pairwise  
258 stages comparisons. Two indicators differed significantly in three pairwise stages comparisons,  
259 namely total lichen species richness ( $F(4,55) = 4.207, p = 0.005$ ) and density of beech seedlings ( $X^2$   
260 (4) = 10.046,  $p = 0.040$ ). Bracken cover ( $X^2(4) = 14.290, p = 0.006$ ) (Fig. 2e) differed significantly in  
261 two pairwise stages comparisons, while seedling species richness ( $F(4,55) = 4.003, p = 0.006$ ) and  
262 ground-dwelling invertebrate species richness ( $F(4,55) = 3.782, p = 0.019$ ) (Fig. 2f) differed  
263 significantly in one of the pairwise stages comparisons. Litter cover ( $X^2(4) = 40.496, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig.  
264 3a) differed significantly in six pairwise stages comparisons, as did the percent of bramble cover ( $X^2$   
265 (4) = 33.230,  $p < 0.001$ ).



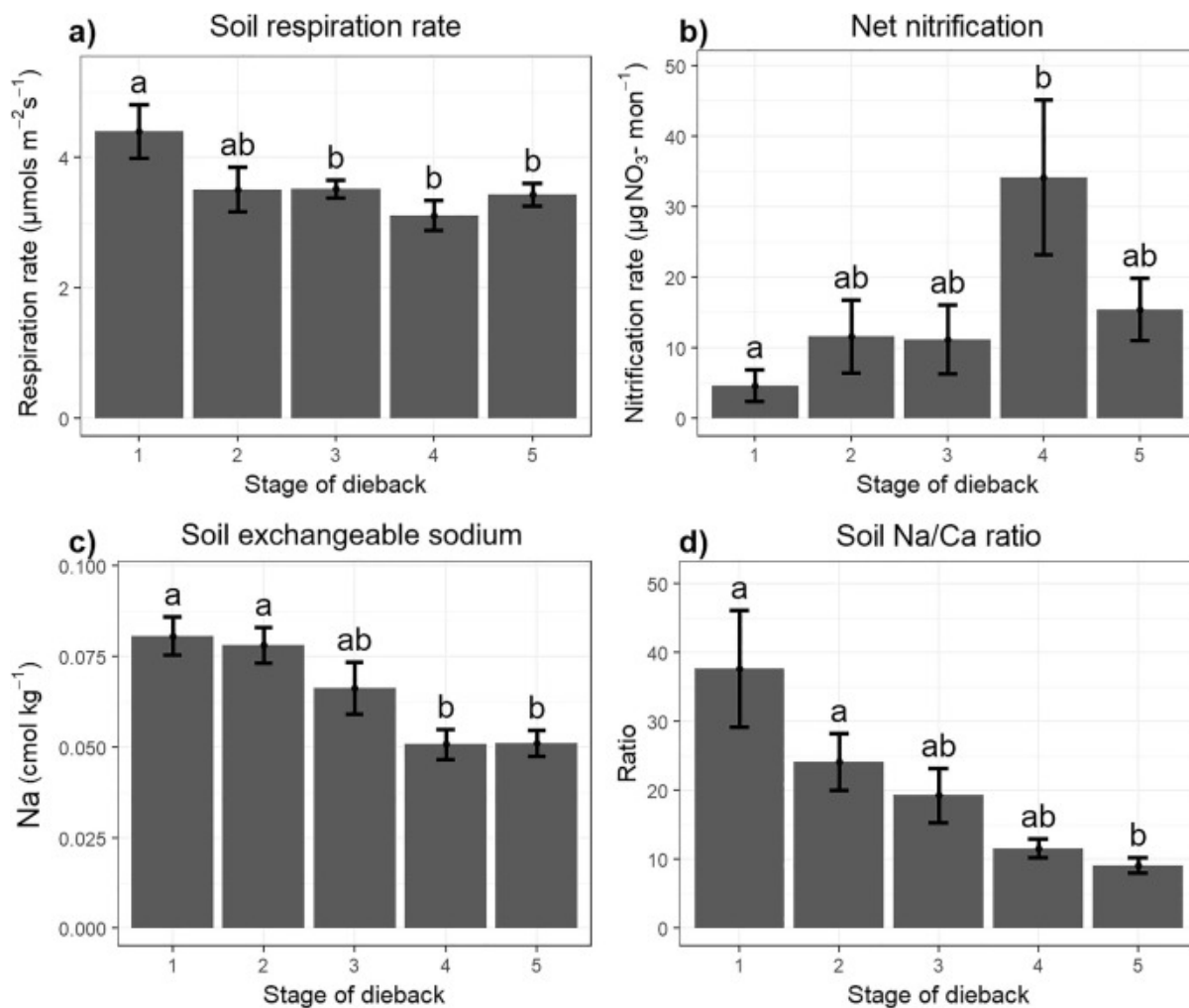
266 Fig. 2: Mean values of composition variables measured across the stages of dieback (1=Intact;  
 267 5=Total dieback). The black bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Means grouped by the same  
 268 letter are not significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ , Tukey HSD test or Dunn's test).  
 269

270

### 271 3.2. Functional process variables

272 Two out of four functional processes variables differed significantly over the dieback gradient. These  
 273 were the soil respiration rate ( $X^2(4) = 12.875, p = 0.012$ ) (Fig. 3a), which differed significantly in  
 274 three pairwise stages comparisons, and net nitrification ( $X^2(4) = 2.616, p = 0.046$ ) (Fig. 3b), which

275 differed significantly in one pairwise stages comparison. The net ammonification rate and net N  
 276 mineralisation rate did not differ significantly.  
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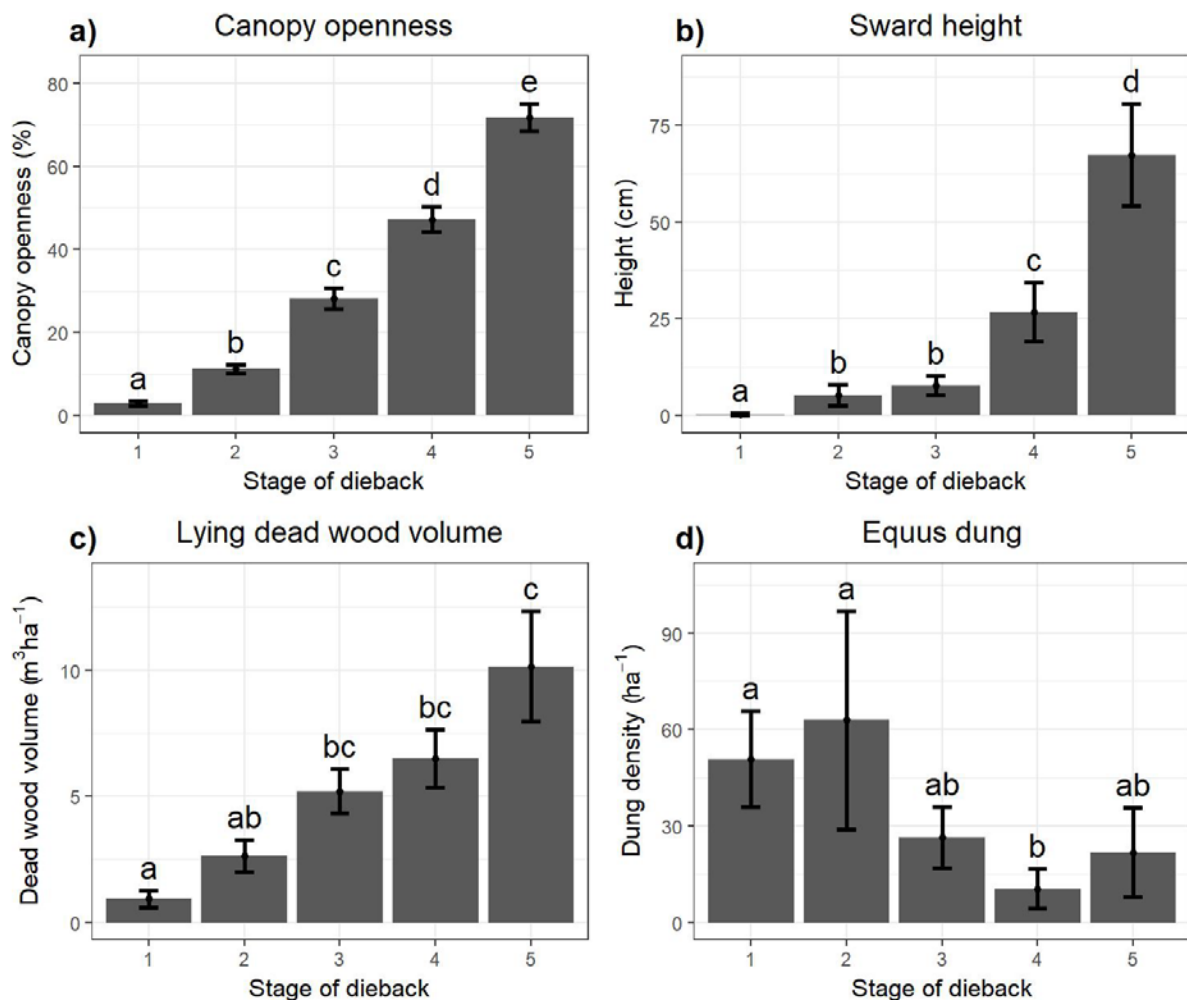
278  
 279 Fig. 3: Mean values of functional processes and edaphic variables measured across the stages of  
 280 dieback. The black bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Means grouped by the same letter are  
 281 not significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ , Tukey HSD test or Dunn's test).  
 282

### 283 3.3. Edaphic variables

284 Three out of 29 woodland edaphic condition variables differed significantly across the dieback  
 285 gradient (Table 2). Soil exchangeable sodium ( $F(4,55) = 8.307, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 3c) differed  
 286 significantly in four pairwise stages comparisons, and the sodium/calcium ratio ( $F(4,55) = 8.787, p <$   
 287  $0.001$ ) (Fig. 3d) and calcium/aluminium ratio each differed significantly in two pairwise stages  
 288 comparisons.  
 289

290 3.4. Structure variables

291 Ten out of 22 of the woodland structure variables differed significantly across the dieback gradients.  
 292 Aboveground woody tree biomass ( $F(4,55) = 11.748, p < 0.001$ ) and beech biomass ( $X^2(4) = 53.528,$   
 293  $p < 0.001$ ) differed significantly in all stages, as did canopy openness ( $F(4,55) = 193.434, p < 0.001$   
 294 (Fig. 4a). Sward height ( $X^2(4) = 37.566, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 4b), differed significantly in seven pairwise  
 295 stages comparisons. Understorey openness ( $X^2(4) = 19.516, p = 0.001$ ) differed significantly in five  
 296 pairwise stages comparisons. Total lying dead wood ( $F(4,55) = 11.755, p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 4c) and  
 297 beech dead wood volume ( $F(4,55) = 9.602, p < 0.001$ ) differed among four pairwise stage  
 298 comparisons. The other woodland structure indicators that varied significantly over the dieback  
 299 gradient were the density of large and small beech trees, and the amount of leaf loss from beech  
 300 (Table 2).  
 301



302  
 303 Fig. 4: Mean values of structure variables measured across the stages of dieback. The black bars  
 304 indicate the standard error of the mean. Means grouped by the same letter are not significantly  
 305 different ( $p < 0.05$ , Tukey HSD test or Dunn's test).  
 306

Variable	F-value	p-value		Variable	F-value	p-value
Ground flora species richness	14.542	< 0.001		Canopy openness	193.434	< 0.001
ECM species richness	13.974	< 0.001		Beech biomass	53.528	< 0.001
Seedling and ground flora species richness	13.059	< 0.001		Sward height	37.566	< 0.001
Beech tree density	47.846	< 0.001		Lying dead wood volume (all species)	11.755	< 0.001
<i>Rubus</i> sp. ground cover	33.23	< 0.001		Lying dead wood volume of beech	9.602	< 0.001
Grass cover	11.981	< 0.001		Aboveground woody tree biomass	11.748	< 0.001
Litter cover	40.496	< 0.001		Total C in stand	32.912	< 0.001
Lichen species richness on beech	17.429	< 0.001		Understorey openness	19.516	0.001
Total lichen species richness	4.207	0.005		Beech tree leaf loss	10.889	0.012



Large beech trees (68.32 cm < DBH < 74.97 cm) density	12.916	<b>0.005</b>		Unhealthiness of beech trees*	4.023	<b>0.019</b>
Ant species richness	14.554	<b>0.006</b>		Bare ground and moss cover	7.276	<b>0.001</b>
Tree seedling species richness	4.003	<b>0.006</b>		<i>Equus</i> dung density (proportional)	12.63	<b>0.013</b>
Palatable seedling density	14.322	<b>0.006</b>		Soil Na/Ca ratio	8.787	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>
Bracken cover	14.29	<b>0.006</b>		Soil exchangeable sodium	8.307	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>
Ground-dwelling invertebrates species richness	3.782	<b>0.019</b>		Ca/Al ratio	3.815	<b>0.022</b>
Beech seedling density	10.046	<b>0.04</b>		Soil respiration rate	12.875	<b>0.012</b>
Small beech trees (10 cm < DBH < 59.59 cm) density	8.072	<b>0.045</b>		Net nitrification	2.616	<b>0.046</b>

307 Table 2: Significant ANOVA results of the ecological variables tested as indicators across the stages  
308 of woodland stand dieback, sorted by ecological category. Bold values indicate significant results.

309 D.f. = 4 in each case, except where indicated (\*), where d.f. = 3 owing to there being no beech  
310 individuals present in the Total dieback survey plots. All ANOVA results are found in Table S3.  
311

### 312 3.5. Disturbance variables

313 Three of the 12 disturbance variables measured changed significantly over the gradient of dieback.  
314 These were the bare ground and moss cover ( $F(4,25) = 7.276, p = 0.001$ ), which differed significantly  
315 in three pairwise stages comparisons, and the related measures of total ( $X^2(4) = 11.614, p = 0.020$ )  
316 (Fig. 3d) and proportional *Equus* dung density ( $X^2(4) = 12.630, p = 0.013$ ).

## 318 4. Discussion

319 The results presented here support our initial hypothesis that a selection of ecological variables,  
320 representing a diversity of components of the woodland ecosystem (i.e. from edaphic conditions to  
321 species composition), can be used at the stand scale as indicators of woodland ecological condition  
322 (Noss, 1990; Gao et al., 2015; Lawley et al., 2016). We were able to show this based on their  
323 sensitivity to a gradient of stand dieback. We observed some ecological variables that changed  
324 systematically (either positively or negatively) across most of the sequential stages of dieback. In  
325 addition, some variables changed significantly between two or more stages, but not in a systemic way  
326 over the dieback gradient.

327  
328 Variables describing forest composition are often considered a key indicator of woodland condition.  
329 While they are included in the monitoring schemes of numerous national and international forest  
330 health monitoring programmes (e.g. EEA, 2012; the ICP framework (Michel and Seidling, 2016);  
331 National Forest Inventories (Chirici et al., 2012)), this is typically restricted to assessments of tree  
332 species composition due to the need for taxonomic expertise for other taxonomic groups. In this study,  
333 ecological variables demonstrating the strongest potential as condition indicators included the species  
334 richness of ECM fungi and epiphytic lichens, which both declined over the gradient of dieback,  
335 decreasing by 67% and 32%, respectively, by the final stage of the dieback gradient. Additionally, the  
336 species richness of vascular ground flora and ground-dwelling arthropods demonstrate potential as  
337 indicators as they increased with dieback, increasing by over 14 (420%) and nine (50%) species,  
338 respectively, by the Total dieback stage as canopy cover decreased (see Supplementary Material).  
339 Changes in ECM fungal species richness over spatial and temporal gradients of forest condition have  
340 also been explored by other authors. For example, Treu et al. (2014) found that ECM species richness  
341 declined as the BA of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia*) declined in Canadian forests,  
342 following a stand-destroying beetle attack. Other studies have highlighted a decline in ECM diversity  
343 over certain gradients, including temperature, nitrogen deposition and the health of individual trees  
344 (Power and Ashmore, 1996; Kovács et al., 2000; Lilleskov et al., 2002; Cox et al., 2010; Suz et al  
345 2014; van der Linde et al., 2018).

346  
347 Similarly, the occurrence of epiphytic lichen have been found to decline significantly along gradients  
348 of increasing forest disturbance in the form of management level, from 'natural' to 'very altered'

349 (Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss, 2004). In Romania, Ardelean et al. (2015) also found that management-  
350 induced disturbance significantly decreased lichen species richness in forest landscapes with long  
351 stand continuity. While the two aforementioned studies focused largely on management intensity  
352 gradients, the results from our study indicate that stand dieback has a similar effect. Thus, our results  
353 further support the suggestion made by Keddy and Drummond (1996) that epiphytic lichen  
354 communities can provide a useful indicator of the condition of temperate forest ecosystems.

355

356 Floristic diversity studies that examined light gradients in European and North American forests show  
357 similar trends to the findings in this study (Tinya et al., 2009; van Couwenberghe et al., 2011; Neufeld  
358 and Young, 2014; Sabatini et al., 2014); that is, observed increases in plant species richness are  
359 positively related to an increase in light availability.

360

361 Although some of ecological variables assessed in this study are potentially useful indicators of beech  
362 woodland dieback, none of these measures differed systematically between every dieback stage.  
363 Therefore, there may be a need to use a suite of indicators, rather than a single indicator in isolation  
364 (e.g. Ferris and Humphrey 1999; Aubin et al., 2013; Sabatini et al., 2016), a finding that has been  
365 found in other ecosystems subject to disturbance (Fournier et al., 2015). However, as recorded here,  
366 ECM and ground flora species richness exhibited negative and positive trends with dieback,  
367 respectively. These contrasting trends suggest that using combination measures of the two taxa in  
368 assessments may be of value in detecting changing woodland condition.

369

370 We show that some soil functional processes and edaphic condition variables properties are relatively  
371 sensitive to stand dieback and therefore could be used as indicators of condition. For example, the soil  
372 exchangeable sodium varied significantly across the dieback gradient, decreasing by 37% when  
373 comparing the Total dieback stage to the Intact stage. Similarly, the sodium/calcium ratio decreased  
374 by > 75% from Intact to Total dieback stages. Soil respiration rate was another variable that showed  
375 significant variation, decreasing by approximately a third between the Intact and Major dieback  
376 stages. However, while the soil variables measured here could potentially be used as indicators of  
377 woodland ecosystem condition, further research is required to verify the extent to which they are  
378 generally applicable. Previous research has demonstrated that soil respiration in temperate forest  
379 stands can be very variable (Priwitzer et al., 2013) and rates are influenced by a wide range of factors  
380 including soil moisture and temperature, as well as the species present (Smith and Johnson, 2004).

381

382 Effective structural woodland condition indicators identified in this study included stand biomass,  
383 sward height, canopy openness and the volume of lying dead wood. The biomass of beech was very  
384 sensitive to dieback and declined sequentially at each stage over the gradient, while lying dead wood  
385 increased positively with dieback. However, owing to the spatial variability in dead wood volume,

386 only the Total dieback stage was found to be associated with significantly higher values when  
387 compared to the other stages. Increases in dead wood volume and canopy openness have obvious  
388 links to mortality of canopy dominant tree species, and are therefore closely associated with dieback  
389 (Anderegg et al., 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that these variables increased with stand dieback  
390 and were therefore found to be effective indicators of condition. It has previously been observed that  
391 both dead wood volume and canopy openness often correlate with biodiversity measures (Gao et al.,  
392 2014, 2015), making them consistently important aspects of forest and woodland condition  
393 assessments (Noss, 1999; Hagan and Whitman, 2006; Rondeux and Sanchez, 2010). This is especially  
394 true for dead wood, which provides habitats for many forest-dwelling species, including invertebrates  
395 (Jabin et al., 2004), lichens (Humphrey et al., 2002) and wood-inhabiting fungi (Nordén and Paltto,  
396 2001; Penttilä et al., 2004). However, as pointed out by Rondeux and Sanchez (2010) in their review  
397 of commonly-used biodiversity indicators, while dead wood volume is a useful measurement, it often  
398 displays greater variability than other structural forest metrics. Site-specific information may therefore  
399 be required to support its effective use as an indicator.

400

401 It is also pertinent to consider those variables that did not vary significantly across the dieback  
402 gradient. These included a number of composition variables, including total density of tree seedlings,  
403 species richness of invertebrate groups such as spiders and carabid beetles, and density of oak or  
404 beech saplings. The lack of any significant impact on carabids and spiders is particularly surprising, as  
405 previous research in conifer plantations in the UK and Canada identified a significant negative  
406 relationship between carabid diversity and canopy cover (Spake et al., 2016), and spider diversity and  
407 harvesting amount (Aubin et al., 2013). However, both these studies used a trait-based approach,  
408 which is different to the approach taken here. Furthermore, the reason for carabid beetle trends  
409 observed in this study is possibly due to different carabid species favouring different levels of canopy  
410 cover (e.g. Taboada et al., 2006), which cannot be analysed using species richness measures.

411

412 Interpretation of these results should consider the particular characteristics of the field site examined  
413 here; as a Royal Hunting Forest that is also used for livestock 'commoning' (the right to release  
414 animals into the forest), herbivore pressure is universally high (Newton et al., 2013), and  
415 consequently both seedling and sapling densities were very low throughout the dieback gradients.  
416 Interestingly, based on dung counts, woodland dieback was associated with an increase in browsing  
417 by horses (*Equus* sp.) but not by deer (*Cervus* sp.); *Equus* dung decreased by almost 80% by the  
418 Major dieback stage. However, the dramatic decrease may be due to increased decomposition rates in  
419 areas with less canopy cover; to determine how much of an effect decay rates have, studies are needed  
420 to be carried out in the specific ecosystem first (Zabek et al., 2016). Many functional measures also  
421 did not vary significantly along the gradients, including net N mineralisation, soil C/N ratio, nitrate  
422 concentration, soil pH or electrical conductivity. Examples of structural variables that did not vary

423 significantly included understorey cover, soil bulk density, soil organic matter content, and mean tree  
424 height. This indicates that some of those variables that are standard measures of woodland  
425 ecosystems, such as canopy height and shrub cover (Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss 2004), are not  
426 necessarily effective as indicators. Again, however, the particular characteristics of this field site need  
427 to be borne in mind when interpreting the results; for example soil bulk density values were relatively  
428 high throughout the dieback gradients, reflecting the pervasive influence of trampling by large  
429 herbivores.

430

431 While this investigation has demonstrated that degradation of woodland condition can be identified  
432 using a number of ecological variables that are sensitive indicators of dieback, and the potential value  
433 of using gradients of forest and woodland condition to test the effectiveness of different indicators, the  
434 results should clearly be interpreted with caution. Limitations of the study included the choice of  
435 measurement variables; although a large number of variables were included, additional potentially  
436 highly sensitive ecological variables along a woodland dieback gradient could potentially have been  
437 selected. Comparison with lists of indicators proposed by Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss (2004) and  
438 Keddy and Drummond (1996) show a close correspondence with those measured in this study, but  
439 these lists included populations of specialised vertebrates (e.g. bat and woodpecker species) and  
440 epiphytic bryophytes, which were not considered here. A further limitation relates to replication.  
441 While twelve replicate beech dieback gradients were surveyed in the current study, these were all  
442 located within a single protected area; application of the results obtained here to other geographical  
443 areas would require additional verification. Previous multi-site comparison of indicator performance  
444 has highlighted pronounced variation between areas. For example, in their evaluation of forest  
445 biodiversity indicators across a range of European sites, Angelstam and Dönz-Breuss (2004) found  
446 that only two indicators gave consistent results across all sites, namely the amount of dead wood and  
447 the frequency of occurrence of uprooted trees. Similarly, in an examination of forest disturbance  
448 gradients in four study areas in Latin America, Newton et al. (2007) found contrasting responses in  
449 different areas. For example, in the Highlands of Chiapas in Mexico, highly significant correlations  
450 were obtained between BA and both soil organic matter content and bulk density, but no such  
451 correlations were found in two of the other study areas, supporting the results of the current  
452 investigation. With respect to floristic species richness, a significant correlation with BA was found in  
453 only one of the four areas. Such variation implies that individual indicator sets may need to be  
454 adapted and tested for each individual forest area of interest.

455

## 456 **5. Conclusion**

457 This original work indicates which ecological variables changed significantly over a specific gradient  
458 of declining woodland condition, enabling the detection of important changes at and between different  
459 stages of degradation. The major findings suggest that several different structural, functional and

460 compositional variables could all be used as indicators of woodland condition. However, focusing on  
461 variables which are not typically closely associated with dieback and therefore the primary criterion  
462 of BA change (e.g. beech biomass), it is the composition variables, most notably ECM fungi and  
463 ground flora species richness, which could be used as condition indicators, as these variables  
464 demonstrated large significant declines over the dieback gradient. Functional variables including the  
465 soil respiration rate, Na/Ca soil ratio and net nitrification also all changed significantly over the  
466 dieback gradient and therefore could also be used as indicators of condition.

467

468 When developing monitoring plans in order to achieve effective woodland management and  
469 conservation strategies, results here suggest that at least ECM fungi and ground flora species richness  
470 should be recorded, together with a few cheap-to-measure structural indicators that changed  
471 significantly over the gradient, such as canopy openness. With additional resources, measuring soil  
472 function and content as well could yield a fuller evaluation of condition. Other things which are  
473 important to note for inclusion in future plans are that the results here detail changes in the ecological  
474 condition of the forest without any management interventions, and that the cost and time requirements  
475 and difficulty of continued measurement need to be considered (see sections 2 and 3 in  
476 Supplementary Material for more detail). This research could be further enhanced in future by using  
477 complementary studies or a greater range of indicators, such as additional measures of faunal diversity  
478 (Gao et al. 2015).

479

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495

496 **Declarations of interest**

497 None

498

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