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C. de Michele, F. Accatino, R. Vezzoli, R.J. Scholes. Savanna domain in the herbivores-fire parameter space exploiting a tree-grass-soil water dynamic model. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 2011, 289, pp.74. 10.1016/j.jtbi.2011.08.014 . hal-00739263

HAL Id: hal-00739263

<https://hal.science/hal-00739263>

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Author's Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S0022-5193(11)00409-7
DOI: doi:10.1016/j.jtbi.2011.08.014
Reference: YJTBI6586

www.elsevier.com/locate/jtbi

To appear in: *Journal of Theoretical Biology*

Received date: 17 February 2011
Revised date: 4 August 2011
Accepted date: 13 August 2011

Cite this article as: C. De Michele, F. Accatino, R. Vezzoli and R.J. Scholes, Savanna domain in the herbivores-fire parameter space exploiting a tree-grass-soil water dynamic model, *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, doi:[10.1016/j.jtbi.2011.08.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtbi.2011.08.014)

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Savanna domain in the herbivores-fire parameter space exploiting a tree-grass-soil water dynamic model

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Abstract

The tree-grass co-existence in savannas involves multiple and sometimes connected biogeophysical conditions. The savanna domain, its boundaries, and transitions (gradual or abrupt) to other vegetation types (i.e., grassland or forest) are fundamental for the management of ecosystems, and for preserving the biodiversity in present conditions and in future changing scenarios. Here we investigate the savanna domain within grazers-fire and browsers-fire parameter planes through a simple ecohydrological model of tree-grass-soil water dynamics. Stability maps allow to identify savanna domains, and to show the behavior of vegetation under increasing pressure of grazing and browsing. Stability maps shed light on the causes behind possible vegetation abrupt transitions (e.g., forest collapse and bush encroachment). An application to 15 African savannas sites is presented and discussed with the support of a local sensitivity analysis of the model's parameters.

Key words: herbivores, fire, savanna, state transition, gradient, model,

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sensitivity analysis

1 1. Introduction

2 The dynamics of vegetated ecosystems are controlled and driven by cli-
 3 mate, substrate and disturbances such as fire, herbivory and human activ-
 4 ities. Vegetated ecosystems whose dynamics are dominated by the climate
 5 are called *climate dependent ecosystems* (Bond et al., 2003), whereas in the
 6 cases where other perturbations such as fires or herbivores are prominent,
 7 they are labeled as *fire dependent ecosystems*, or *consumer controlled ecosys-*
 8 *tems* (Bond et al., 2003, Bond and Keeley, 2005).

9 Where do savannas - that are ecosystems co-dominated by trees and grass
 10 - fit in this classification?

11 Field observations (Sankaran et al., 2005, Bucini and Hanan, 2007) reveal
 12 a complex situation: savannas can be either *climate*, or *disturbance dependent*
 13 *ecosystems*, depending on the environment they occur in.

14 Early models of savannas emphasized the role of soil water availability,
 15 and inferred savannas to be *climate dependent*. Walter (1971) describes sa-
 16 vannas as ‘broad ecotones’ between grasslands and forests depending on the
 17 mean annual rainfall; Shmida and Burgess (1988) illustrate the *subtropical*
 18 *succession* (*desert* $\rightarrow$ *grassland* $\rightarrow$ *open savanna* $\rightarrow$ *closed savanna* $\rightarrow$ *for-*
 19 *est*) as the sequence of ecosystem types observed along a rainfall gradient.
 20 In general under these conceptual models, water scarcity permits the co-
 21 existence of trees and grasses by limiting the abundance of trees allowing
 22 grass to persist: this is a mechanism of *balanced competition* (Amarasekare,
 23 2003).

24 More recent works have considered the role of fire in permitting the tree-
 25 grass co-existence in savannas (Hanan et al., 2008, D’Odorico et al., 2006,
 26 Bond et al., 2003, Baudena et al., 2010, Accatino et al., 2010), indicating
 27 savannas as possible *fire dependent ecosystems*. In ecosystems where water
 28 scarcity already limits the tree density, and allows tree-grass co-existence, fire
 29 influences only the tree-grass ratio. On the other hand, if water is sufficient
 30 to support the growth of trees, fire can be a limiting factor for tree cover,
 31 permitting again the tree-grass co-existence, through a *bottleneck* mechanism
 32 in tree demography. Under these conditions, savannas can be viewed as fire
 33 subclimaxes of forests (Scholes and Walker, 1993).

34 Yet other studies have suggested a role for herbivores in maintaining
 35 savannas (Scholes and Archer, 1997, Bond and Keeley, 2005, Baxter and
 36 Getz, 2005, Holdo, 2007). Particular attention has been paid to elephants,
 37 which are able to ‘re-engineer’ the tree layer (Dublin, 1995).

38 Accatino et al. (2010), considering the joint role of rainfall and fire, have
 39 suggested that arid savannas are *climate dependent*, while moist savannas
 40 can be *fire dependent*.

41 In the savanna literature, tree-grass co-existence is often discussed in re-
 42 lation to the existence of multiple steady states. Bifurcation analyses (van
 43 Langevelde et al., 2003, Baudena et al., 2010, Accatino et al., 2010) have
 44 pointed out the possibility that savannas may represent a bistability con-
 45 dition with forest. Beyond the mathematical formalism, the existence of
 46 multiple steady states appears evident in field observations. Among the sev-
 47 eral cases that can be mentioned, we recall the macro-mosaics observable in
 48 tropical dry forests, where fire plays a fundamental role in the abrupt tran-

49 sitions from forest to savanna (Murphy and Lugo, 1986), the savanna-forest
 50 hysteresis cycle in the Amazon basin (da Silveira Lobo Sternberg, 2001), and
 51 the changes observed in the Serengeti-Maara vegetation due to variations
 52 in fire and grazing regimes during the rinderpest pandemic period (Dublin,
 53 1995). The key pieces of evidence offered in favor of multiple steady states
 54 are abrupt state transitions over time (hysteresis cycles) and space (macro-
 55 mosaics), bimodal state variable frequency or distribution, and the dual re-
 56 sponse to driving parameters (Schröder et al., 2005). The space variability
 57 plays an important role in maintaining savannas, and many spatial models
 58 were built in order to account the dynamics in space of the vegetation (see
 59 e.g., Klausmeier, 1999, Rietkerk et al., 2002, Gilad et al., 2007, Borgogno
 60 et al., 2009). However, in this work we point the attention on a spatially
 61 implicit model.

62 In particular, we extend the spatially implicit ecohydrological model of
 63 water dynamics in a tree-grass-soil system forced by rainfall and fire proposed
 64 by Accatino et al. (2010) to explicitly consider disturbances by herbivores,
 65 distinguishing grazers from browsers. By doing so, we are able to underline
 66 the different contributions of fire and herbivore disturbances to the tree-grass
 67 co-existence in savannas.

68 Then, we use stability maps in the grazers-fire and browsers-fire param-
 69 eter planes to identify savanna domains, and to show the behavior of vege-
 70 tation under an increasing pressure of grazing or browsing. In this way, we
 71 try to answer fundamental questions about the controls on savanna struc-
 72 ture and function and explore the causes of abrupt transitions in savanna
 73 ecosystems dynamics.

74 We discuss the theoretical results using observed data collected in 15
 75 savanna sites and characterized by particularly high or low values of fire
 76 occurrences and browsers density. The data are extracted by the database
 77 reported in Sankaran et al. (2005). The comparison between model outputs
 78 and observed data is commented with the help of a local sensitivity analysis
 79 of the model's parameters.

80 **2. The action of fire, grazing and browsing on savannas**

81 Fires and herbivores are 'direct' disturbances to the demography of veg-
 82 etated ecosystems (Hobbs and Huenneke, 1992). The interactions among
 83 rainfall, fire and herbivores in shaping the vegetation are sketched in Fig.
 84 1(a). Fires shape savanna structure by acting as a determinant of the tree
 85 layer composition (Frost et al., 1986, Bond and van Wilgen, 1996). The
 86 quantity of tree biomass is, in general, negatively correlated with the fire
 87 frequency (Scholes and Walker, 1993). The spread and intensity of fire is
 88 supported by the abundance of dead grasses (fuel load) during the dry sea-
 89 sons (Scholes and Archer, 1997, Govender et al., 2006). Fires seldom damage
 90 adult trees, but knock back or kill tree seedlings and saplings in the flame
 91 zone, the height of which is determined by the abundance of dead grass.
 92 Thus fires act as a demographic bottleneck, restricting the recruitment of
 93 small trees to the adult class.

94 Large mammal herbivores in African savannas form a continuum from
 95 eaters of grass only (grazers) to eaters of trees only (browsers) (McNaughton
 96 and Georgiadis, 1986). It is nevertheless useful to split them into two dis-
 97 crete classes, grazers and browsers, to evidence their different feedbacks on

98 fire via the quantity of dead grass (fire's fuel load). Grazers directly reduce
99 the quantity of dead grass which controls the spread and intensity of fires,
100 which in turn reduces tree recruitment (negative feedback of grazers on fire),
101 see Fig. 1(b). Browsers indirectly increase fuel load (positive feedback of
102 browsers on fire) reducing the competitive effect of trees on grass production
103 (Scholes and Archer, 1997, van Langevelde et al., 2003), see Fig. 1(c). The
104 decline of woodlands in presence of browsers has been widely documented,
105 e.g., in East Africa (Laws, 1970), in Ruaha National Park (Barnes, 1983),
106 in Botswana (Ben-Shahar, 1993, Skarpe et al., 2004), in Serengeti-Maara
107 (Dublin, 1995), and in Etosha National Park (de Beer et al., 2006). Among
108 browsers, the elephants *Loxodonta africana* have the most dramatic impacts
109 on the woody vegetation, leading to the so-called 'Elephant problem'. Ele-
110 phants impacts are more marked when they have been confined within a
111 remnant of a formerly wider range (Dublin, 1995).

Figure 1: Panel (a) sketches interactions among rainfall, fire, herbivores, soil moisture, trees and grass. Continuous (dashed) lines indicate positive (negative) interactions. Panels (b) and (c) show respectively feedbacks of grazers-fire and browsers-fire on trees and grass.

112 3. Ecohydrological model of tree-grass dynamics

113 We represent the tree-grass dynamics by a minimal ecohydrological model
 114 introduced by Accatino et al. (2010). This model implicitly considers trees
 115 as superior competitors for space (in the sense of Tilman, 1994) since they
 116 can overtop grass; while it explicitly models the competition between trees
 117 and grass for soil water within the root zone, and the differential disturbance
 118 action of fire on grass and trees. The model has been slightly modified to
 119 explicitly consider also the role of grazers and browsers on grass and trees
 120 respectively. The state variables are three: 1) the soil water content, S ,
 121 within the pore volume of a column of soil unitary area with depth equal to
 122 the root zone, 2) the fractions of area covered by trees, T , 3) the fractions
 123 of area covered by grass, G . All the state variables are dimensionless and
 124 range between 0 and 1 (a further condition is $0 \leq T + G \leq 1$). The tree-
 125 grass-soil water dynamics are mathematically described by the following set
 126 of differential equations:

$$\begin{cases} \frac{dS}{dt} = \frac{p}{w_1}(1 - S) - \epsilon S(1 - T - G) - \tau_T ST - \tau_G SG \\ \frac{dT}{dt} = \gamma_T ST(1 - T) - \delta_{T0}T - bT - \delta_F fGT \\ \frac{dG}{dt} = \gamma_G SG(1 - T - G) - \gamma_T STG - \delta_{G0}G - gG - fG. \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

127 The first row of Eq.(1) represents the soil water balance in the pore volume
 128 (w_1) having unitary area and as depth the root zone. The term p/w_1 is the
 129 rainfall input where p [mm/yr] is the mean annual rainfall, and $p/w_1 S$ is the
 130 leakage, modelled as linearly dependent on S to keep the model analytically
 131 tractable. The terms $\epsilon S(1 - T - G)$, $\tau_T ST$, $\tau_G SG$ are representative respec-

132 tively of evaporation from bare soil fraction $(1 - T - G)$, water uptake from
 133 tree fraction, and grass fraction. The maximum water uptake parameters ϵ ,
 134 τ_T , and τ_G , all in units $[1/\text{yr}]$, are representative of the potential evapotran-
 135 spiration terms scaled by w_1 . The second and third rows in Eq.(1) describe
 136 the dynamics of trees and grass, respectively. Tree growth term $\gamma_T ST(1 - T)$
 137 is proportional to the fraction of soil not occupied by trees $(1 - T)$, i.e., trees
 138 can overtop grass, and grass growth term $\gamma_G SG(1 - T - G)$ is proportional to
 139 the bare soil fraction $(1 - T - G)$. The tree fraction is reduced by senescence
 140 $\delta_{T0}T$, browsing activity bT and fires $\delta_F fGT$, where fG is representative of
 141 the fuel load. The grass fraction is reduced by tree capability to displace
 142 grass $\gamma_T STG$, senescence $\delta_{G0}G$, grazing activity gG , and fires fG . In partic-
 143 ular, γ_T and γ_G represent the potential growth rate for trees and grass, δ_{T0}
 144 and δ_{G0} are the disappearance rates in the absence of fire and herbivores. For
 145 the trees equation, b is an additional removal rate representing browsing, or
 146 tree harvesting, while δ_F represents the tree vulnerability to fires. Similarly
 147 in the grass fraction equation, the additional removal rate is g and repre-
 148 sents grazing, while f is the fire frequency. All parameters of the second and
 149 third rows carry dimensions of $[1/\text{yr}]$ except δ_F that is dimensionless. All the
 150 parameters of Eq.(1) are positively defined.

151 Equation (1) admits five steady state solutions (i.e., $dS/dt = dT/dt =$
 152 $dG/dt = 0$), but only four satisfy the conditions $0 \leq T \leq 1$, $0 \leq G \leq 1$, and
 153 $0 \leq T + G \leq 1$. Of these, the first solution is characterized by the absence
 154 of vegetation, and we will refer to it as unvegetated, i.e. $T = 0$, $G = 0$. The
 155 second solution has grass only, i.e. (desert) grassland, $T = 0$, $0 < G \leq 1$.
 156 The third solution has trees only, i.e. forest, $0 < T \leq 1$, $G = 0$. The

fourth solution has a co-existence of tree and grass, i.e. savanna, $0 < T < 1$,
 $0 < G \leq 1 - T$. The steady states are available analytically (not reported
 here for brevity). A linear stability analysis of the steady states has been
 performed evaluating the eigenvalues of the Jacobian matrix associated to
 the model. In particular, if the real part of all the eigenvalues is strictly
 negative, the steady state is stable. For further details about the model and
 parameters' values see Accatino et al. (2010).

In the following section, we will assume as reference values for the pa-
 rameters: $p = 700$ [mm/yr] $w_1 = 345$ [mm], $\epsilon = 20$ [1/yr], $\tau_T = 30$ [1/yr],
 $\tau_G = 10$ [1/yr], $\gamma_T = 2$ [1/yr], $\gamma_G = 200$ [1/yr], $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [1/yr], $\delta_{G0} = 2$
 [1/yr], and $\delta_F = 0.35$, while b varies between 0 and 0.1 [1/yr] and g between
 0 and 10 [1/yr]. Note that the total removal terms, i.e., $\delta_{G0} + g$ and $\delta_{T0} + b$,
 may exceed the range indicated by Accatino et al. (2010), under conditions of
 a high level of disturbances - a situation of particular interest in the present
 work.

Annual rainfall, fire, and herbivores are environmental forcings treated
 here as constants. However, rainfall and fire are stochastic variables as prop-
 erly assumed by Fernandez-Illescas and Rodriguez-Iturbe (2003) for the rain-
 fall forcing, by D'Odorico et al. (2006), Hanan et al. (2008) for fire. Herbi-
 vores are more properly considered as dynamic state variables whose abun-
 dance depends on the resource availability as treated in May (1977), van de
 Koppel et al. (1997). The stochastic behavior of the environmental forcings,
 like rainfall and fire, could be considered through a statistical dynamical
 approach as outlined by De Michele et al. (2008) and Vezzoli et al. (2008).
 The dynamical behavior of herbivores could be treated by adding new state

variables to the present model. The deterministic variable-parsimonious approach, we have adopted here, provides results that can be easily extended in a more realistic dynamic-stochastic framework. This extension, however, is out the scope of the present work, and it will be considered in a future study.

4. Where are savannas in the herbivores-fire space?

Accatino et al. (2010) have investigated the existence and the stability of savannas with respect to rainfall and fire forcings (i.e., in the parameter plane $p-f$) showing that savanna is stable for low values of rainfall ($100 \leq p \leq 600$ [mm/yr]) and fire ($0.2 \leq f \leq 0.8$ [1/yr]). In this region, savannas are the result of a limited water availability, and are *climate dependent ecosystems*. Conversely, for high values of rainfall ($600 < p \leq 1100$ [mm/yr]) and fire ($f > 0.8$ [1/yr]), savanna is in bistability with forest. In this case, savannas are permitted by the frequent fire disturbances making them *fire dependent ecosystems*.

In the current work, the savanna domain is explored with respect to disturbances, herbivores and fire, with the aim of clarifying the savanna steady state stability with different types and levels of disturbances. In the following two subsections, the stability maps in the planes $g-f$ and $b-f$ are derived and presented in panels (a) of Figs. 2 and 3, respectively. Stability maps will be used to study the changes of the vegetation composition along gradients of grazing and browsing pressure. The change in the values of tree and grass fractions at a fire frequency level of $f = 0.5$ [1/yr] will be discussed in the light of savanna ecosystems transitions, e.g., pathways J-M and L-K

206 in panels (b) and (c) of Fig. 2 or pathways Z-X and Y-W in panels (b) and
207 (c) of Fig. 3.

208 In Fig. 2 the parameter g varies from 0 to 10 [1/yr] and browsing is
209 absent ($b = 0$ [1/yr]). In Fig. 3 the parameter b varies from 0 to 0.1 [1/yr],
210 and grazing is absent ($g = 0$ [1/yr]). The fire frequency, f , varies from 0 to
211 1.2 [1/yr] for both maps.

212 They show five regions, three of them are characterized by one stable
213 state: grassland (G), savanna (S), and forest (F), while the remaining ones
214 by two alternative stable states (regions of bistability): savanna/forest (S/F)
215 and grassland/forest (G/F). The qualitatively symmetrical behavior of the
216 stability maps in the parameter space $g - f$, Fig. 2(a), and $b - f$, Fig.
217 3(a), derives from the use of the same functional form to represent grazers
218 ($-gG$) and browsers ($-bT$) effects respectively on the state variables G and
219 T , as underlined in Figs. 1(b) and 1(c). If grass removal rate g increases,
220 the possibility of trees to completely displace grass is enhanced. Conversely,
221 if trees removal rate b is increased, the grass competitiveness for space is
222 enhanced, thus savanna and grassland ecosystems appear for high values of
223 b . A similar symmetrical behavior is expected drawing the stability maps in
224 $\gamma_G - f$ and $\gamma_T - f$ parameter spaces.

225 4.1. Stability map in the grazers-fire space

226 In the plane $g - f$, Fig. 2(a), savanna is stable in the bottom-left side of the
227 panel (region S) within the domain $0 \leq f \lesssim 0.9$ [1/yr] and $0 \leq g \lesssim 2$ [1/yr],
228 where the last upper limit depends on the right boundary of the region. In
229 this region the co-existence mechanism is the balanced competition, because
230 the tree growth is limited by the water scarcity and grass (provided that the

231 grazing off-take is sufficiently low) is still able to grow. Moreover, the light
232 grazing allows the accumulation of dead grass which fosters more frequent
233 and severe fires further limiting the tree fraction.

234 Grassland is stable in the top-left side of the panel (region G), for $f \gtrsim 0.9$
235 [1/yr] and $g \lesssim 1$ [1/yr]. Here the high fire frequency and the low grazing
236 level lead to the exacerbation of balanced competition mechanisms causing
237 the absence of trees. Thus, at low grazing pressure, fire is fundamental in
238 maintaining grasslands (Zimmermann et al., 2009).

239 The vegetation change from an herbaceous environment to a mixed tree-
240 grass landscape, observed at the time of the rinderpest pandemic (late 19th
241 century) in Masai Mara, can be discussed using the grazers-fire plane. As
242 described in Dublin (1995), at the end of 19th century, the ecosystem was a
243 grassland under high levels of grazing and human induced fires. When the
244 rinderpest virus began to spread, cattle and wild herbivores died, the human
245 population declined, having as consequence a reduction in grazing activity
246 and human induced fires. Thus, trees appeared and spread converting the
247 ecosystem into a savanna state - a shift from region (G) to region (S) in Fig.
248 2(a).

249 Forest state is stable in the bottom-right side of the panel (region F).
250 Grazing pressure is so high that, though the tree fraction may be at its
251 bioclimatic limit as imposed by the water scarcity, grass does not have any
252 chance to survive. Within this region the tree fraction is independent of the
253 fire frequency (f) and the grazing level (g).

254 The bistability region (G/F) located in the top-right side of the panel,
255 presents grassland and forest as potential states. Similarly region (S/F)

256 presents two alternative steady states: savanna and forest. The bistability
 257 implies that a small perturbation of the environmental forcings can provoke
 258 an abrupt transition from one state to another, resulting in changes in the
 259 landscape at the macro-scale. In both bistability regions, grass can survive
 260 because fires prevent the tree domination, causing a bottleneck in tree de-
 261 mography. Thus, these are *fire dependent ecosystems*. On the other side, the
 262 achievement of the forest state is possible thanks to the feedback illustrated
 263 in Fig. 1(b).

264 Panels (b) and (c) of Fig. 2 represent respectively the steady states of
 265 tree and grass fractions along a grazing gradient at fire frequency $f = 0.5$
 266 [1/yr]. Starting from point A (savanna), increasing the grazing level, first the
 267 point K is reached, and thence the abrupt transition K-L occurs leading the
 268 system to the forest state (point L). Transitions like K-L (i.e., the invasion of
 269 woody species into the grass stratum) are widely encountered in the savanna
 270 literature under the name of *bush encroachment* (Skarpe, 1990, Prins and
 271 van der Jeugd, 1993, Smit, 2004, Wiegand et al., 2005, Coetzee et al., 2008,
 272 among others). Bush encroachment has been associated with periods of
 273 high rainfall (O'Connor, 1995), following after periods of drought during
 274 which there was high grazing pressure by domestic livestock (Moleele and
 275 Perkins, 1998, Roques et al., 2001). Grazers would promote the dominance
 276 of trees over grass, directly, by removing grass and, indirectly, by reducing
 277 the amount of available fuel load (dead grasses). Moleele and Perkins (1998)
 278 report that in a non-grazed zone fires are more frequent than in adjacent
 279 encroached zones, probably because of the reduced presence of dead grass in
 280 the latter.

281 Transitions like M-J can characterize also other phenomena able to in-
282 crease the overall tree removal rate (e.g. harvesting for timber or domestic
283 fuel) that facilitate the grass presence and the tree-grass co-existence. This
284 condition is widespread in the most densely-settled rural savanna regions.

Figure 2: Type of vegetation in the grazers-fire parameter plane. Panel (a) gives the stability map in the plane $g-f$. Panels (b) and (c) provide changes in vegetation structure over the grazing gradient A-B at fire frequency $f = 0.5$ [$1/\text{yr}$]: panel (b) shows grass fraction, while panel (c) the tree fraction. Transitions K-L and M-J are described at the end of the *Stability in the grazers-fire space* paragraph. The parameters values are $p = 700$ [mm/yr], $w_1 = 345$ [mm], $\epsilon = 20$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\tau_T = 30$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\tau_G = 10$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\gamma_T = 2$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\gamma_G = 200$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\delta_F = 0.35$, $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $b = 0$ [$1/\text{yr}$], $\delta_{G0} = 2$ [$1/\text{yr}$].

285 4.2. Stability map in the browsers-fire space

286 In the plane $b - f$ of Fig. 3(a), savanna is stable in the bottom-right side
 287 of the panel within the domain defined by a line from $(b = 0.001, f = 0)$
 288 to $(b = 0.01, f = 0.9)$ on the left, and a line from $(b = 0.01, f = 0.9)$ to
 289 $(b = 0.1, f = 0.6)$ on the top. In this domain the tree-grass co-existence is
 290 due to the balanced competition: trees are limited by water scarcity, fire and
 291 browsing pressure. Note that in this region the savanna state is stable also
 292 in absence of fire, $f = 0$ [1/yr]. In other words, the presence of browsers is
 293 sufficient to prevent the formation of a woodland (Scholes and Archer, 1997).

294 In region (G) of Fig. 3(a), grassland is stable in the top-right side for
 295 $b \gtrsim 0.01$ [1/yr] and the upper boundary of savanna region. This is due to the
 296 high fire frequency that enhances the browsing-fire feedback shown in Fig.
 297 1(c). In region (F), forest is stable in the bottom-left side for small values of
 298 f ($\lesssim 0.6$ [1/yr]) and b varying between 0 and 0.004 [1/yr]. In this case the
 299 browsing level is not enough to balance the competitive pressure of trees on
 300 grass for space and water.

301 In region (S/F) of Fig. 3(a), characterized by $0.6 \lesssim f \lesssim 0.9$ [1/yr] and
 302 $b \lesssim 0.01$ [1/yr], savanna and forest are the alternative stable states. In this
 303 region, fire is sufficient to prevent the closure of the tree canopy, whereas
 304 browsing pressure alone is insufficient. In region (G/F), characterized by
 305 $f \gtrsim 0.9$ [1/yr] and $b \lesssim 0.01$ [1/yr], fire can cause the extinction of trees.
 306 Savannas and grasslands found in these bistability regions are *fire dependent*
 307 *ecosystems*.

308 Panels (b) and (c) of Fig. 3 represent respectively the steady states of
 309 grass and tree fractions respectively along a browsing gradient at $f = 0.5$

310 [1/yr]. Moving along the browsing gradient from point C (forest) to point
 311 D (savanna), the bistability region (S/F) is crossed, and the steady state
 312 is dependent on the initial condition. If the initial state is forest (point
 313 C) grasses remain absent as long as the browsing pressure is below 0.006
 314 [1/yr], (line C-X-Y in Fig. 3(b)). For further increases of b , the tree-grass
 315 co-existence is possible (line W-D in Figs. 3(b) and 3(c)) and the savanna
 316 state is reached. The transition between forest (point Y) and savanna (point
 317 W) is abrupt. Conversely, if the initial state is savanna, point D in panels
 318 (b) and (c) of Fig. 3, a browsing pressure above 0.0011 [1/yr] supports
 319 the savanna state (line D-W-Z in Fig. 3(b)), while for $b < 0.0011$ [1/yr]
 320 grasses disappear and only trees are present at the equilibrium (line X-C).
 321 The transition between savanna (point Z) and forest (point X) is also abrupt.
 322 An example of the hysteresis cycle Y-W-Z-X may be the cyclic elephants-
 323 vegetation dynamics hypothesized by Caughley (1976). Elephants can cause
 324 a forest/woodland collapse (transition Y-W). The recovery of the woody
 325 fraction (transition Z-X) is possible only reducing the browsers pressure,
 326 e.g., when the elephants move to a different place.

Figure 3: Vegetation type in the browsers-fire parameter plane. Panel (a) gives the stability map in the plane $b-f$. Panels (b) and (c) provide changes in vegetation structure over the browsing gradient C-D at fire frequency $f = 0.5$ [1/yr]: panel (b) shows grass fraction, while panel (c) the tree fraction. Transitions X-Y and Y-W are described at the end of the *Stability in the browsers-fire space* paragraph. The other parameters values are $p = 700$ [mm/yr], $w_1 = 345$ [mm], $\epsilon = 20$ [1/yr], $\tau_T = 30$ [1/yr], $\tau_G = 10$ [1/yr], $\gamma_T = 2$ [1/yr], $\gamma_G = 200$ [1/yr], $\delta_F = 0.35$, $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [1/yr], $\delta_{G0} = 2$ [1/yr] and $g = 0$ [1/yr].

327 5. Case studies

328 Here we examine a set of 15 sites contained in the Sankaran et al. (2005)
329 database, which includes 854 savanna sites from all over the African conti-
330 nent. For each of the 854 sites, measurements of mean annual rainfall, fire
331 frequency, and woody cover are available, but information on the biomass of
332 herbivores is available only for 129 of the sites; in particular, we are concerned
333 with information on browsers.

334 For this reason, we selected 15 sites characterized by particularly high or
335 low values of browsers biomass ($\mathcal{B}$) and fire frequency (f). Specifically, we
336 mean for ‘low’ fire frequency values of $f < 0.05$ [1/yr], and ‘low’ browsing
337 density $\mathcal{B} < 100$ [kg/km²]; whereas for ‘high’ fire frequency values of $f \geq 0.5$
338 [1/yr] and ‘high’ browsing density $\mathcal{B} \geq 900$ [kg/km²].

339 Consequently, we examine four disturbance regimes: i) low browsing and
340 low fire frequency (hereinafter referred to as L-L and indicated with $\bullet$ in Figs.
341 4-7); ii) high browsing and low fire frequency (H-L, $\circ$); iii) high browsing and
342 high fire frequency (H-H, $\diamond$); iv) low browsing and high fire frequency (L-H,
343 $\blacklozenge$). Figure 4 gives the geographical location of the 15 sites. Four of them are
344 in Ivory Coast (region A), five in Kenya (region B) and six in South Africa
345 (region C). Table 1 reports the main information about the 15 sites and
346 indication of the disturbances regime.

Figure 4: Location of the 15 African sites considered in Ivory Coast (A), Kenya (B), and South Africa (C). Sites symbology is representative of the disturbances regime: L-L (●), H-L (○), H-H (◇) and L-H (◆).

Table 1: Values of the main variables in the 15 African sites, after Sankaran et al. (2005). Sites labeled as A are in Ivory Coast, B in Kenya and C in South Africa. The acronymous CNP stands for Comoé National Park, MRC for Mpala Research Center, KNP for Kruger National Park.

Site	Location	MAP	Woody Cover	Fire return period	Browsers biomass	Disturbance regime
		[mm/yr]	[%]	[yr]	[kg/km ²]	
A1	Lamto	1163	5.5	1	88	L-H
A2	Lamto	1163	14.7	1	88	L-H
A3	Lamto	1163	40.1	1	88	L-H
A4	CNP	943	30	1	1035	H-H
B1	MRC	469	41.3	>20	0	L-L
B2	MRC	469	29.2	>20	4768	H-L
B3	MRC	530	45	>20	0	L-L
B4	MRC	530	29.8	>20	4768	H-L
B5	MRC	366	40.1	>20	0	L-L
C1	Klaserie	465	41	>10	1000	H-L
C2	Klaserie	500	35	>10	2000	H-L
C3	KNP	485	19.55	>50	907	H-L
C4	KNP	497	6.14	1	943	H-H
C5	KNP	510	1.7	1	1016	H-H
C6	KNP	435	51.9	22.25	38	L-L

347 The four sites, hereinafter referred as A1, A2, A3 and A4, in Ivory Coast
 348 (region A) are characterized by a tall grass savanna ecosystem. The sites
 349 A1, A2, and A3, located in Lamto Research Station, are characterized by a
 350 mean annual rainfall of about 1160 [mm/yr] and the vegetation is a mosaic
 351 of grass, shrub, and tree savannas on the edge of rain forests (Abbadie et al.,
 352 2006). The fourth site, A4, is located at the Comoé National Park, and is
 353 characterized by a mean annual rainfall of about 950 [mm/yr], high browsers
 354 density (about 1035 [kg/km²]), and a fire return period of 2 years, Sankaran
 355 et al. (2005). The Comoé National Park vegetation is a mosaic of dense
 356 shrubby savanna, forest islands, and gallery forests along the main rivers.
 357 The ‘climax’ vegetation of this area would be semi-deciduous forest, but its
 358 development is prevented by fires (Hovestadt et al., 1999).

359 The five sites, B1 to B5, are located at Mpala Research Centre in Kenya
 360 (region B), and are characterized by a mean annual rainfall varying from
 361 north to south between 366 [mm/yr], B5, and 530 [mm/yr], B3 and B4, and
 362 a fire return period greater than 20 years, see Table 1. A bushland community
 363 covers 99% of the landscape consisting of a discontinuous layer of perennial
 364 grasses and a shrub layer. The remaining 1% of the landscape is dominated
 365 by short-grasses (Augustine and McNaughton, 2006).

366 The South African sites (region C), C1 to C6, are located in the north-
 367 east ‘lowveld’, two of them, C1 and C2 are in the Klaserie reserve adjacent
 368 to Kruger National Park where are located sites C3, C4, C5, and C6. From
 369 north to south the mean annual rainfall varies between 435 [mm/yr] (site
 370 C6) and 510 [mm/yr] (site C5). The site C6, in the Kruger National Park,
 371 is characterized by a browsers density of 38 [kg/km²] and a fire frequency of

0.04 [1/yr]. The sites C1 and C2 are in the Klaserie reserve, with a browsers density of 1000 and 2000 [kg/km²] and a fire frequency of 0.1 [1/yr], and site C3 is in Kruger National Park with browsers density equal to 907 [kg/km²] and a fire return period of about 50 years (Biggs et al., 2003). The sites C4 and C5, both in Kruger National Park, are characterized by a browsers density of about 1000 [kg/km²] and a fire return period of 1 year (Sankaran et al., 2005).

Figure 5 shows the 15 sites in the *mean annual rainfall - woody cover* plane, where the line represents the piecewise linear regression on the 99th quantile as in Sankaran et al. (2005). The upper limit of woody cover is approximately linearly dependent on the mean annual precipitation when is below 650 [mm/yr], and independent above this value. The piecewise linear regression is representative of the maximum woody cover attainable for a given mean annual rainfall in the absence of disturbances. Ecosystems close to this limit are *climate dependent*. An ecosystem represented by a point below the piecewise linear regression is a site where disturbances allow a tree cover different from the one expected considering the climate conditions only. In this case the ecosystem is denominated *disturbance dependent* (*fire dependent* is one example). Conversely, if the action of fire and herbivores induces on the vegetation only small modifications with respect to the state predicted by the climate conditions, we refer to this ecosystem as *perturbed climate dependent*.

Figure 5 shows that the 15 sites are located around two values of mean annual rainfall, 400-500 [mm/yr] (L-L, H-L, and H-H sites) and 1160 [mm/yr] (L-H sites), except for Mpala research center, site B5, with a mean annual

rainfall of 360 [mm/yr] and Comoé National Park, site A4, that presents a mean annual value of about 950 [mm/yr]. Using the stability maps given in Fig. 6, we compare the observed ecosystem composition with the steady state derived by the model. The stability maps in the $b-f$ parameters space are drawn at $p = 500$ [mm/yr] in Fig. 6(a), and at $p = 1160$ [mm/yr] in Fig. 6(b). Stability maps in Fig. 6, are obtained using the following values of the parameters: $w_1 = 345$ [mm], $\epsilon = 20$ [1/yr], $\tau_T = 30$ [1/yr], $\tau_G = 10$ [1/yr], $\gamma_T = 2$ [1/yr], $\gamma_G = 200$ [1/yr], $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [1/yr], $\delta_{G0} + g = 2$ [1/yr] and $\delta_F = 0.35$.

We assume an allometric relation between the density of browsers, $\mathcal{B}$, in units of [kg/km²], and the removal coefficient, b , in units of [1/yr], mathematically defined by the power law function $b = a_b \mathcal{B}^{\alpha_b}$. This is supported by the existing allometric law between the body mass of mammals and the corresponding metabolic rate characterized by an exponent approximately equal to 0.7, (Schmidt-Nielsen, 1984, Dodds et al., 2001, White and Seymour, 2003, Kolokotronis et al., 2010). Here the parameters of the allometric equation are calculated as follows. The vegetation removal term $-bT$ causes a reduction of the tree extinction time, quantified in $\exp(-(\delta_{T0} + b)t)$. Thus if we assume that in presence of a ‘low’ browsers density, say of 100 [kg/km²], the trees extinction time is reduced of 33%, and a ‘high’ density, say of 900 [kg/km²], the reduction is of 66% (with a reference value of $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [1/yr]) then the corresponding estimates are $b = 0.01$ [1/yr] and $b = 0.04$ [1/yr]. These couples of b and $\mathcal{B}$ allow to estimate the parameters of the allometric relationships using the Least Squares Method: $a_b = 5.82 \cdot 10^{-4}$ [(km²/kg) ^{α_b} /yr] and $\alpha_b = 0.62$ dimensionless. The estimate of the exponent α_b (even though

an approximation) is not very different from the one used for the methabolic rate-mass law (≈ 0.7). Note that a similar relation could be obtained to link the grazers density with the removal coefficient g . The allometric relationship allows to convert the browsers densities observed in the 15 sites of interest into values of the removal coefficient b . Figure 6 gives the location of the sites in the $b - f$ plane.

The 15 sites considered have been located on the stability maps according to the observed values of mean annual rainfall, browsers density, and fire return period, see Table 1. Note that for sites where the fire return period is relatively long and not given specifically (i.e., given as disequalities > 10 , > 20 , > 50 years in Table 1), we have assumed $f = 0$ [1/yr].

Each site falls within a stability region according to the estimated parameters' values. Clearly, changes in the parameters' values can cause changes in the stability region to which a site pertains.

We have performed, for each site, a sensitivity analysis varying (increasing and decreasing) one parameter at the time until the stability region changes, obtaining a range of variability for each parameter.

This analysis allows to characterize, locally, which parameter is to be considered 'stiff' (i.e., a small variation in the parameter value causes a structural change in the stable steady state) and which 'sloppy' (i.e., a small variation of the parameter does not correspond a structural change of the steady state) in the sense of Gutenkunst et al. (2007).

According to the model, Eq.(1), and in order to reduce the number of parameters to be investigated, we have grouped together p and w_1 as p/w_1 , δ_{T0} and b as $\delta_{T0} + b$, and δ_{G0} and g as $\delta_{G0} + g$. Note that a parameter

could behave asymmetrically under increasing or decreasing of its value, i.e., a parameter could be sloppy on the right side (increasing its value) and stiff on the left side (decreasing its value). Here, for simplicity, we have classified a parameter as stiff in average if its range of variability normalized by the parameter value is below 3.5, otherwise it is considered sloppy. Here we have considered 10 as the maximum magnification factor of a parameter.

Figure 7 presents the results of the sensitivity analysis for some keyed sites: A1, B1, B2, C1, C2, C4 and C6. Site A1 is chosen as representative of all the L-H sites. The site B1 is representative of the behavior of the L-L sites B3 and B5, but not of the L-L site C6. The sites B2 and C4 are representative of the behavior of the sites B4 and C5 respectively. Figure 7 will be discussed in the light of the disturbance regimes in the next section where we examine separately the four different combinations of disturbances.

L-L sites

In Fig. 5 L-L sites ($\bullet$) are located close to the piecewise linear regression indicating that these are *climate dependent ecosystems*. The low level of browsing and fire disturbances makes the woody cover of these sites mainly dependent by the mean annual rainfall. In the stability map (Fig. 6(a)), obtained for $p = 500$ [mm/yr], sites B1 and B3 fall in the forest region and site C6 in the savanna region close to the boundary with the forest. The woody cover is 41.3% and 45% respectively in sites B1 and B3, and 51.9% in site C6, see Table 1 and Fig. 5. The fact that the sites B1 and B3, observed as savannas, fall within the forest stability region can be explained considering the results of the sensitivity analysis. From this, it is possible to observe that 1) the parameters $\delta_{T0} + b$ and γ_G are stiff for sites B1 and B3;

2) the stability region of these sites changes from forest to savanna if $\delta_{T0} + b$ or γ_G slightly increase. Concerning site C6, the stiff parameters are γ_T and $\delta_{G0} + g$, Fig. 7, and the stability region of C6 changes from savanna region to forest if small increases of γ_T or $\delta_{G0} + g$ occur, from savanna to grassland if γ_T decreases. These results are coherent with the position of these sites close to the boundary between forest and savanna in the stability map, Fig. 6(a).

H-L sites

H-L sites, namely B2, B4, C1, C2 and C3 (○ in Fig. 5) receive approximately the same mean annual rainfall of L-L sites, but have a lower woody cover. The high level of browsing pressure makes the ecosystems *perturbed climate dependent*. All the H-L sites belong to the savanna region, as expected, Fig. 6 (a).

The sensitivity analysis identifies ϵ , τ_G and $\delta_{T0} + b$ as stiff parameters for sites B2 and B4, γ_T and $\delta_{G0} + g$ for sites C1 and C3, and $\delta_{T0} + b$ for site C2. For sites B2 and B4 a small increase of one among ϵ , τ_G and $\delta_{T0} + b$ moves the equilibrium from savanna to grassland, while a decrease of $\delta_{T0} + b$ transforms the ecosystem in forest. A variation of γ_T induces a change in the stable region of sites C1 and C3: from savanna to forest if γ_T is increased, and to grassland if γ_T is decreased. An increase in $\delta_{G0} + g$ also causes a change from savanna to forest for sites C1 and C3. Site C2 belongs to grassland region when $\delta_{T0} + b$ is increased, and to forest if the parameter value is reduced.

494 *H-H sites*

495 Of the H-H sites, C4 and C5 ($\diamond$ in Fig. 5) have approximately a mean
 496 annual rainfall of 500 [mm/yr] with a low woody cover (1.7% and of 6.1%, re-
 497 spectively), and are the result of the browsers-fire synergy. These ecosystems
 498 are considered *perturbed climate dependent*. According to the parametriza-
 499 tion, these sites do not fall into savanna (as expected) but in grassland region
 500 (see Fig. 6(a)). This disagreement could be explained noting that the woody
 501 cover observed in the sites is very low, thus the ecosystems are more sim-
 502 ilar to a grassland than to a savanna. On the other hand, the sensitivity
 503 analysis indicates p/w_1 , γ_T and $\delta_{G0} + g$ as stiff parameters; thus a slight
 504 increase of parameters values p/w_1 and γ_T remap the sites into a savanna
 505 region. A small increase of $\delta_{G0} + g$ allocates the sites into the bistability
 506 region grassland/forest, as well as, a strong reduction in the values of $\delta_{T0} + b$
 507 or γ_g .

508 *L-H sites*

509 L-H sites, namely A1, A2, and A3 ($\blacklozenge$ in Fig. 5) are characterized by an
 510 observed woody cover of about 5.5%, 14.7%, and 40.1%, respectively, lower
 511 than the ones (about 80%) expected by the model for a mean annual rainfall
 512 of about 1160 [mm/yr], see Fig. 5. The abundance of water combined with
 513 a low browsing pressure ($\mathcal{B} = 88$ [kg/km²]) would favour a forest state, but
 514 the high fire frequency (in average one event/year) causes the reduction of
 515 the woody cover. According to this combination of environmental forcings,
 516 the model locates these savanna sites in the bistability region savanna/forest,
 517 see Fig. 6(b). This result is supported by the geographical location of sites
 518 A1, A2, and A3: they are close to the edge of the rainforest (Abbadie et al.,

Figure 5: Representation of the 15 African sites in the *mean annual rainfall - woody cover* plane. Sites are represented according to the disturbances regime: L-L (●), H-L (○), H-H (◇), and L-H (◆).

519 2006). This is an example of bistability in space between savanna and forest
520 (Schröder et al., 2005).

521 For L-H sites, the sensitivity analysis shows that all the parameters, ex-
522 cept for τ_T , are stiff, see Fig. 7: this is coherent with the hypothesis that
523 these savannas are fragile, and their vegetation structure can be completely
524 modified by small environmental variations.

Figure 6: Representation of the 15 African sites in the *herbivores - fire* plane. Panel (a) shows the points in the stability map $b - f$ for $p = 500$ [mm/yr]; Panel (b) gives the points in the stability maps $b - f$ for $p = 1160$ [mm/yr]. The other parameters values are $w_1 = 345$ [mm], $\epsilon = 20$ [1/yr], $\tau_T = 30$ [1/yr], $\tau_G = 10$ [1/yr], $\gamma_T = 2$ [1/yr], $\gamma_G = 200$ [1/yr], $\delta_{T0} = 0.02$ [1/yr], $\delta_{G0} + g = 2$ [1/yr], $\delta_F = 0.35$. Sites are represented according to the disturbances regime: L-L (●), H-L (○), H-H (◇), and L-H (◆).

Figure 7: Scaling factor for each of the parameters in order to realize a change of the stable equilibrium, for the sites: A1, B1, B2, C1, C2, C4, C6. Values of the scaling factor > 1 indicate a magnification of the parameter, while values < 1 a reduction. Note that the sensitivity analysis for f (and consequently for δ_F) at B1, B2, C1, and C2, has not been represented because for these sites the fire occurrence is ≈ 0 [1/yr]. Symbols at the end points of each line stand for L-L (●), H-L (○), H-H (◇), and L-H (◆) sites.

525 6. Conclusions

526 We have investigated the conditions for the existence and the stability
 527 of the savanna domain in the herbivores-fire parameter space, distinguishing
 528 between browsing and grazing disturbances. This analysis is based on a
 529 minimal ecohydrological model and shows how depending on the level of
 530 disturbances savanna can be stable, or bistable with the forest.

531 In particular, when the innate tendency of trees to overtop grasses is
 532 weakened by fire and/or browsing, and grasses are favored by low grazing
 533 pressure, the existence of a savanna is mainly due to balanced competition
 534 mechanisms. This happens when water is scarce and browsing pressure or
 535 harvesting of trees is high. In this situation fire is not fundamental for the
 536 tree-grass co-existence and the savanna stability. The system is a *climate*
 537 *dependent* or a *perturbed climate dependent ecosystem*.

538 When the water availability and the grazing pressure are high and the
 539 browsing pressure is low, savannas are maintained by fire, creating a demo-
 540 graphic bottlenecks in tree population recruitment. In this case, savannas
 541 are in bistable condition with forests, and must be considered a *disturbance*
 542 *dependent ecosystem*, more precisely *fire dependent ecosystem*. Bistability
 543 implies that, under certain conditions, a small variation of a parameter (such
 544 as grazing and browsing parameters) can cause macroscopic changes in the
 545 vegetation. These transitions can be sometimes irreversible.

546 This analysis suggests that the tree-grass co-existence in savanna is pos-
 547 sible as a *climate dependent ecosystem*, or a *disturbance dependent ecosystem*
 548 (classification introduced by Bond et al., 2003), or a *perturbed climate de-*
 549 *pendent ecosystem*. However it is important to point out that a *disturbance*

550 *dependent savanna* is a more fragile ecosystem than a *climate dependent sa-*
 551 *vanna*, because the presence of bistability can induce abrupt transitions to
 552 other vegetated states.

553 The analysis of data available in 15 African sites (referring to particularly
 554 high or low values of fire occurrence and browsers density) helps to illustrate
 555 the theoretical findings. Since the comparison between model and data is
 556 conditioned by the uncertainty associated to parameters' estimates, we have
 557 discussed and commented the results of the comparison within the framework
 558 of a local sensitivity analysis of the parameters. This type of analysis is
 559 fundamental in order to 1) quantify the reliability of the model predictions,
 560 and 2) understand what happens if modifications in a parameter value occur.

561 **Acknowledgments**

562 The research was funded by Comune di Milano through BIO-DESCESA
 563 project(BIODiversity and DEsertification SCEnarios in South Africa under
 564 climate change projections).

565 **References**

566 **References**

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Paper reference: YJTBI 6586

Editorial reference: YJTBI_JTB-D-11-00169

To be published in: Journal of Theoretical Biology

Highlights of the manuscript

- We investigate the existence and stability of savannas in the herbivores-fire space
- The analysis is based on a spatially implicit ecohydrological model
- The results show the types of savannas as function of the disturbance levels
- An application is discussed with the help of a local sensitivity analysis
- The comparison between model and data supports the theoretical findings