
The natural vegetation of Mt. Makiling Forest Reserve (MFR): Potential source of native planting materials for urban landscaping

Albert A. Piñon¹

aapinon@up.edu.ph

Zenaida C. Galingan²

Madonna P. Danao²

Abstract

The Makiling Forest Reserve comprises over 2000 native species of trees and plants. Apart from the natural distribution of wildlings that can be used as potential sources of planting materials for urban greening, this study characterizes the natural mixture of vegetation that comprise the various canopy layers at different elevations. Transect method was used to establish a total of seven 10 m x 10 m sampling plots and documented the vegetation and existing biophysical conditions. Cross-sectional representations were drawn to illustrate the relative locations of these vegetations. Results of the analysis on biophysical characteristics revealed an increasing temperature and light intensity with increasing elevation from 160 masl to 351 masl. Different plots have varying topographical characteristics that range from relatively flat to steep, with the concentration of understorey vegetation at the lowest portions. We identified a total of 42, 43, and 28 species of trees and plants that comprised the dominant and co-dominant (>10 cm dbh), intermediate (<10 cm dbh), and understorey (wildlings, shrubs, vines) layers, respectively. Swietenia macrophylla – an introduced and fast-growing tree species was found the most dominant at the topmost canopy layer in over 85% of sampling plots assessed followed by Arenga pinnata, and Diplodiscus paniculatus. Meanwhile, Celtis luzonica, and A. pinnata comprised the large portions of the intermediate canopy layer, while the understorey vegetation was found to be dominated by Strombosia philippinensis and S. macrophylla. Finally, the study identified some native trees with the potential for urban greening such as the Alphonsea philippinensis, Ficus variegata, and Phaeanthus ebracteolatus, among others.

Keywords: Makiling Forest Reserve, native trees, urban landscaping, canopy layer

I. Introduction

The Makiling Forest Reserve (MFR) with about 4,244 ha is located in the southern part of Metro Manila, Luzon Island Philippines (**Figure 1**) (Combalicer et al., 2011). It has the highest peak reaching 1,090 masl (Vergara et al., 2019). The MFR, which is classified as a national park and among the critical watersheds of the country is under the jurisdiction of the University of the Philippines at Los Baños (UPLB) by virtue of the Republic Act No. 6967 in 1990 (Vallesteros, 2002). In 2005, some 2,038 species of plants and trees have been reported growing naturally at MFR (Pulhin & Tapia, 2005).

MFR has three major land cover classifications such as forest, agroforestry, and special use (forest buffer-zone) but now with a mosaic of land uses that include patches of residual forests, plantations, and agricultural lands (Combalicer et al., 2011). Accordingly, forests comprised high-vegetation areas such as primary, secondary, regenerating, and tree plantations. Agroforestry is areas with a mixture of forest trees, fruit trees, agricultural crops, and livestock (Nair, 1993). While Special use zones or forest buffer-zone are areas outside the boundaries of the identified protected areas that need special development control (Ahmad et al., 2011). Interestingly, while a decrease in mixed vegetation is observed, an increase in forest area has been reported in MFR (Vergara et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, despite the existence of Proclamation 1257, s. 1998 which regulates human activities inside a declared protected area, researchers revealed a drastic increase of built-up areas by 17% within the buffer zone of MFR (Soriano et al., 2019). This urban sprawl expansion that gradually encroaches on the MFR is increasing the pressure and threat to the conservation and continued proliferation of the natural vegetation in the area. As the MFR holds a

¹Albert A. Piñon is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Renewable Natural Resources, College of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of the Philippines, Los Baños, Laguna (IRNR, CFNR, UPLB). He is teaching various courses on Silviculture and Forest Influences such as Arboriculture and Landscape Gardening, Urban Forestry, Tree Health and Risk

Assessment of Tropical Trees in the Urban Landscape among others.

²College of Architecture, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City

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tremendous tree diversity (Malabrigo et al., 2016), conserving these species to ensure their existence is critical not only to sustain the biodiversity but a source of propagules for native species that can be used as planting materials to revegetate the deforested areas and nearby urban landscapes. Also, previous study revealed the negative effect of *S. macrophylla* in the growth and survival of associated native species (Galano & Rodriguez, 2021), which were seemingly one of the reasons for their dominance in the present study. However, while more recent studies have proved the positive influence of exotic tree plantations to the diversity and regeneration of native trees and plants compared to the natural forest (Tulod et al., 2017), the “bio-invasive” characteristics of this fast-growing tree species has been reported since 2003 (Baguion et al., 2003). Such exotic species invasion appears more common in relatively small areas with limiting site resources – a common condition in many urban environment (Galindon et al., 2017; Nowak & Dwyer, 2010). Hence, careful study must be considered if one is still interested in using this species as urban trees. Finally, since not all tree species are suitable for urban tree planting, determining the natural arrangement of trees and other associated vegetation within a certain forest area are essential to give experts (e.g., urban planners, landscape architects, etc.) some clues of their arrangement that can be considered in urban landscape designing to ensure better growth and survival and to maximize their environmental services.

As such, documentation of vegetation including the existing biophysical condition of selected sites within the MFR was carried out to characterize and determine the natural vegetation of this protected area.

II. Materials and Methods

A. Study Site

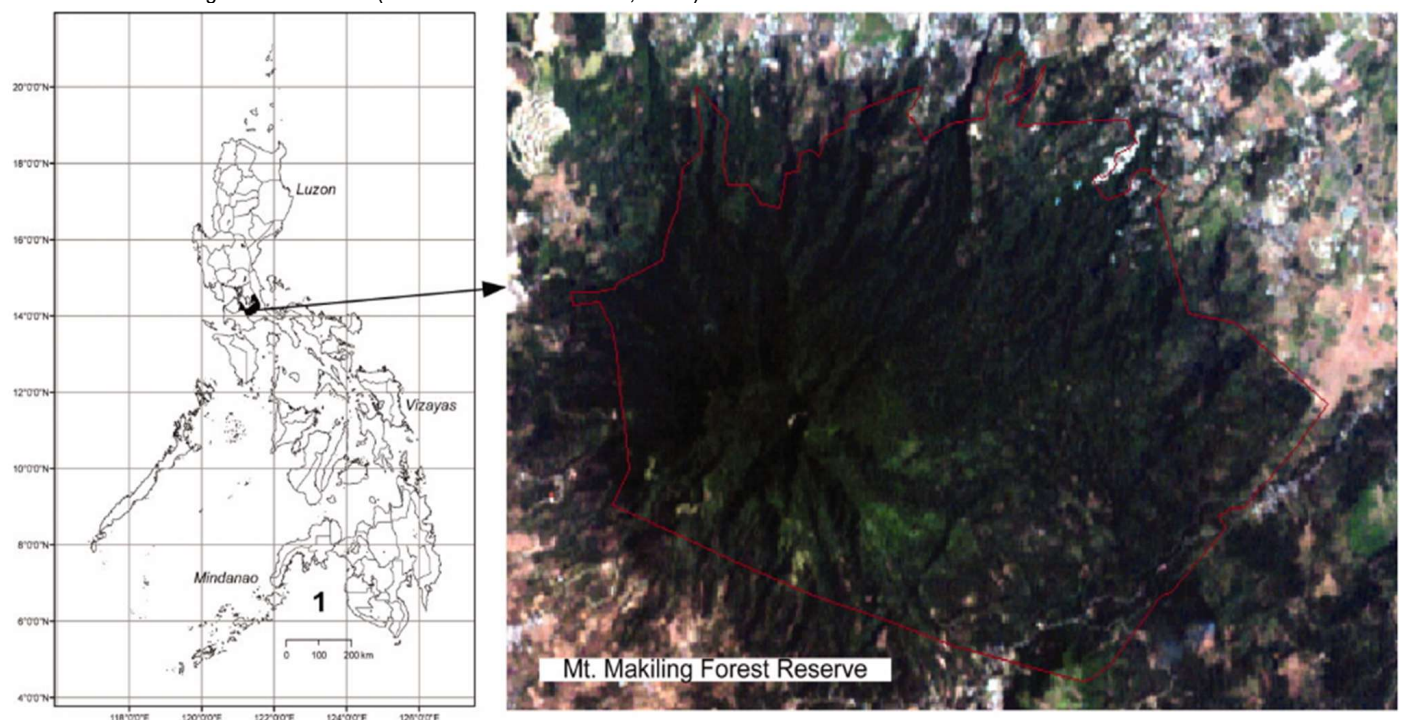
To see the natural transition and arrangement of the vegetation with increasing elevation, the study was conducted from the College of Forestry and Natural Resources campus towards station 5 going to peak 2 within the MFR. Species of trees and understory vegetation were documented. While cross-sectional representations per plot were drawn to illustrate the relative locations of large trees and concentrations of wildlings with respect to the existing topography. Relevant information was also recorded to assess the influence of species composition and varying elevations with the existing microclimate conditions such as the temperature and light intensity.

B. Experimental Layout

We adopted the transect method using a 10 m x 10 m sampling plot with minor modifications used in evaluating the plant species diversity and assessment in Quezon Protected Landscape to come up with a representation of the existing vegetation and their biophysical characteristics in the study area (Paclibar & Tadosa, 2020). Modifications include the non-establishment of 5 m x 5 m plots within the 10 m x 10 m plot, instead, we used a 1 m x 1 m plot that was randomly selected and established for each 10 m² plot to assess the understory vegetation, particularly wildlings. The layout of the sampling plots is presented in **Figure 2**. A total of seven (7) 10 m x 10 m plots were established at quincunx design on both sides of the road at the selected area from the CFNR campus towards the mudspring of MFR. All trees (including palms) of less than (<10 cm) and greater than (>10 cm) diameter at breast height growing

Figure 1

The Mt. Makiling Forest Reserve (Source: Combalicer et al., 2011).



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within each 10 m² plot were counted and taxonomically identified. While understory vegetation (e.g. grasses, shrubs, wildlings, and vines) growing within the randomly selected and established 1 m x 1 m plots were also counted and identified. Unfamiliar species were characterized based on the general traits that resemble the genus and family and denoted using “miscellaneous” as a temporary name. Their true identity was later confirmed using various publications (online and offline) and with the help of taxonomy experts as members of the Philippine Native Tree Enthusiasts (PNTE).

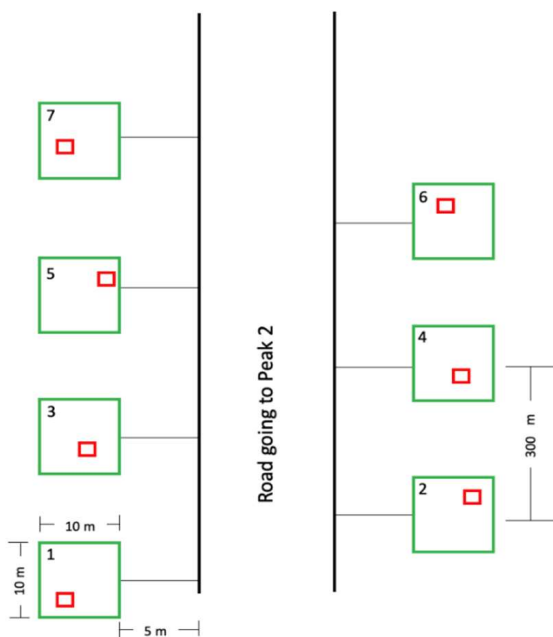
Phase factor (8.1) was used to establish the 10 m x 10 m plots with around 300 m intervals, while a tape measure was used for 1 m x 1 m plots. A 1 m² plot was established within each of the 10 m² plots by tossing a ballpen randomly. All biophysical characteristics (temperature, light intensity, and elevation) were estimated using available mobile applications, while topography was characterized qualitatively. Finally, photo documentation was undertaken using mobile phones with a built-in camera.

C. Data Analysis

All data collected were encoded and organized using the Microsoft Excel 365 spreadsheet. The same computer program was used to process and analyze the data collected. While cross-sectional representations for each plot were drawn using *Krita* drawing applications and Microsoft PowerPoint 365. Taxonomic identifications such as scientific names and family names were determined and confirmed using the Plants of the World Online | Kew Science (n.d.) and Co’s Digital Flora of the Philippines (CDFP) by Pelser et al. (2011).

Figure 2

Sampling layout of the study plots. Big green quadrants represent the 10 m x 10 m plots, while small red



III. Results and Discussion

A. Biophysical Characteristics

Table 1

Biophysical information of the study site.

Plot No.	Elev. (masl)	Temp. (Degree Celsius)	Light Intensity (Lux)	Slope
1	-	-	-	RF
2	160	23		FR
3	191	28.5	330	SS
4	274	28.5	114	S
5 ^a	297	28	884	MS
6	325	28.8	637	S
7 ^b	351	29	1,230	FR

Note. a – Mahogany plantations; b – near the intermittent creek; RF – relatively flat; FR – flat to rolling; SS – slightly sloping; S – steep; MS – moderately sloping.

Data gathered on the biophysical characteristics of the site is presented in **Table 1**. Results revealed an elevation reaching 351 masl with sampling plots characterized by topography that ranges from relatively flat to steep (**Figure 3**). The average temperature within the 10 m x 10 m plots was around 27.63 °C which ranges between 23 to 29 °C. Interestingly, an increasing temperature was recorded from plots 2 to 7. Similar trends were recorded in terms of light intensity with overall mean values of 639 lux with plot 7 recorded the greatest light intensity while the lowest in plot 4. In contrast, a declining air temperature regardless of the canopy positioning (open canopy or under canopy) with increasing elevation were observed in other studies, especially during wetter months, where high elevation forest structure may be able to buffer the microclimate from climatic moisture disturbances better than the lower elevation forest structure (Van Beusekom et al., 2023). In the case of the MFR, it reflects the relative influence of *S. macrophylla* in controlling the microclimate condition of the study site. This species is characterized by thick and dense foliage that may control the microclimate condition from increasing (Kriniwati et al., 2011). However, during the actual data collection, majority of these trees, particularly those few towering mature trees showed signs that recently undergone “leaf abscission” - the natural phase of plant development where leaves separate from the mother plant by activating the abscission zone (Kozłowski & Pallardy, 1997). In fact, most of the large *S. macrophylla* trees have newly sprouted leaves with pale color (purplish to yellow green) and a thick layer of leaves on the forest floor. This would indicate that most trees of this species just shed off their leaves, hence creating some canopy openings, that generates high values of both the temperature and light intensity measurements, particularly in plot 5 (884 lux) (**Figure 4**). These observations were consistent with the drawn cross-sectional representations of each plot, showing the presence of *S. macrophylla* in over 85% of the sampled plots (**Figure 9**). However, while these findings may provide some useful insights regarding the natural arrangement of trees and indication of the forest influences to microclimate condition, further studies using modern

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environmental equipment with certain degree of accuracy and precision coupled with strong statistical tools should be considered to come up with clearer and more useful findings. This is important especially when considering the inclusion of native trees in the urban landscapes.

Figure 3

Portions of the plots 1 to 7 showing the topographical characteristics of the site.



Figure 4

Portion of the *S. macrophylla* plantation (a). Note the thick layer of the leaves accumulated at the forest floor (b) and pale color of the leaves with canopy openings (c).



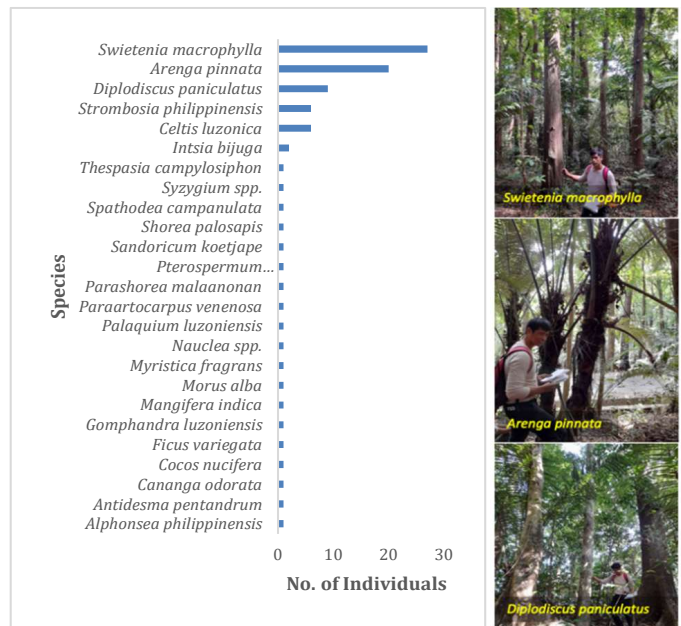
B. Vegetational Characteristics

Dominant and Co-dominant

A vegetation survey in seven sampled plots showed the dominance of *S. macrophylla* of Meliaceae family among 26 species of plants and trees identified (Figure 5 and Appendix Table 1). It was followed by Kaong (*Arenga pinnata*) – a palm species of the family Arecaceae. While Balobo (*Diplodiscus paniculatus*) of the family Malvaceae garnered third among dominant trees across 7 sampling plots assessed. This result affirms the fast-growing ability, phenological advantage, competitiveness, and wide ecological range of the *S. macrophylla*, hence seemingly the most dominant species, particularly at the lower and

Figure 5

Species of trees and palm identified with >10 cm diameter at breast height.

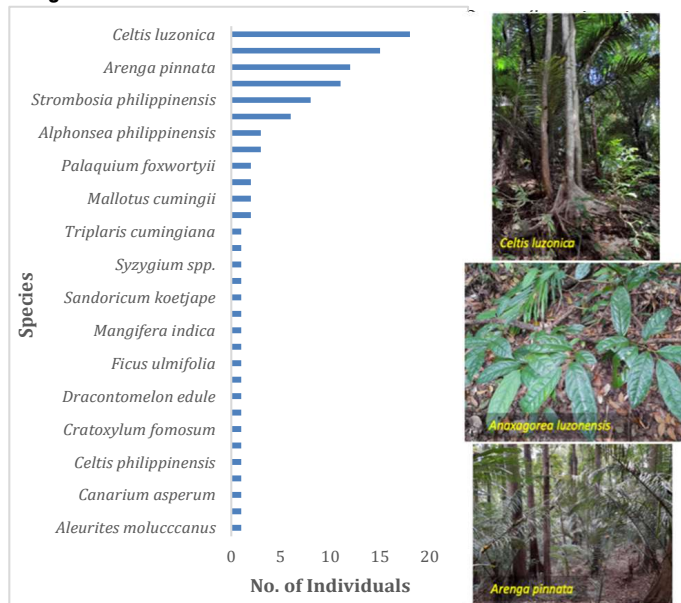


middle elevation of the MFR (Krisnawati et al., 2011; Galano & Rodriguez, 2021).

Intermediate

Among 34 species of trees and plants, Magabuyo (*Celtis luzonica*) of the Cannabaceae family dominates the intermediate canopy, followed by Bagang-aso (*Anaxagorea luzonensis*) of Annonaceae, and Kaong (*Arenga pinnata*) from the family of Arecaceae (Figure 6 and Appendix Table 2). These observations are consistent with the floristic survey undertaken in the permanent plots established at selected sites within the MFR (Malabrigo et al., 2016). This further suggests that the MFR is home to numerous unexplored and untapped native species of trees and plants with the potential to be used and mass-propagate for urban landscape designing purposes.

Figure 6

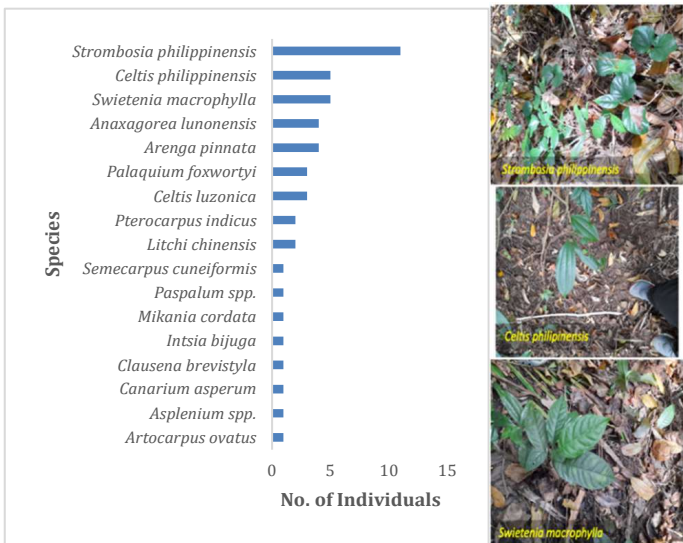


Understorey

Out of 21 species identified, Tamayuan (*Strombosia philippinensis*) of the family Olacaceae was the dominant wildling that grows naturally on the forest floor of the MFR (Figure 7 and Appendix Table 3). Malaikmo (*Celtis philippinensis*) was found the second most dominant followed by wildlings of *S. macrophylla*. Such observations imply that these species of trees are currently at flowering and fruiting, hence they tend to dominate the understorey layer. Interestingly, we also found quite several wildlings of native species under the *S. macrophylla* plantation (see Table 1 and Appendix Table 3). This observation might put some claim regarding the toxicity of the leaves of Big-leaf Mahogany in question, which apparently kills the understorey vegetation. For instance, it was reported that *S. macrophylla* leaf litter is suppressing the growth of wildlings in the Philippines (Galano & Rodriguez, 2021). However, in a study that analyzed the seedling recruitment of indigenous tree species within the *S. macrophylla* plantation in the MFR, they recorded a total of 44 species belonging to 20 families and 29 genera of indigenous species (Sarmiento, 2019). This suggests that further studies are warranted to confirm the degree of toxicity of the *S. macrophylla* leaf litter.

Figure 7

Species of trees and plants identified in 1 m x 1 m plots.



Some Trees with the potential for urban landscaping

This fieldwork proved the huge amount of untapped native genetic reserves within the MFR on trees and across canopy layers. Examples of these species include bolon (*Alphonsea philippinensis*), kaong (*Arenga pinnata*), tangisang-bayawak (*Ficus variegata*), kalimatas (*Phaeanthus ebracteolatus*), balobo (*Diplodiscus paniculatus*), and Lamog (*Planchonia spectabilis*) (Figure 8). There is increasing popularity in the use of native trees in various cities for urban green spaces worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2018). Perhaps, it's high time that both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation strategies should be considered not only to promote the use of native trees in urban areas but also to

increase the knowledge and awareness of the remaining indigenous species of the Philippines.

Figure 8. Some forest trees and palm identified within the MFR with potential for urban landscaping.



Cross-sectional Representation

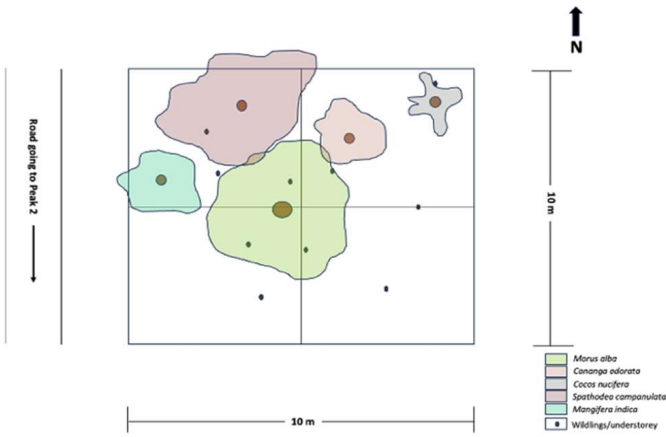
Both the top and horizontal views of each sampled plot are shown in Figure 9. Interestingly, *S. macrophylla* was found in more than 85% of the plots assessed. This observation reaffirms the dominance of this species in lower and middle elevation areas of the MFR due to its ecological advantage, high seed viability and germination rate, and wide distribution range (Krisnawati et al., 2011; Galano & Rodriguez, 2021). These representations also highlighted the relative locations of large trees in a mixture of species in a secondary forest, which can be used as a guide in setting up the urban green space with a plan to establish an aggregation of various species in one place. This is essential as large trees are considered keystone structures in urban parks as they influence the continuous existence of other associated biodiversity (e.g. birds and small mammals) and habitat (e.g. understorey plants) (Stagoll et al., 2012).

Apart from canopy and species distribution, the cross-sectional representations also show the relative location of wildlings and understorey vegetation concentration per plot. Apparently, as the degree of steepness increases, the concentrations of the seedlings or wildlings tend to increase at the lowest part of each plot. This suggests that while canopy openings usually triggered the germination of seeds stored on the forest floor, the topography may also influence the concentration of seedlings within the natural forest (Raich & Khoon, 1990). This information is important, particularly during the seedling collection in the wild.

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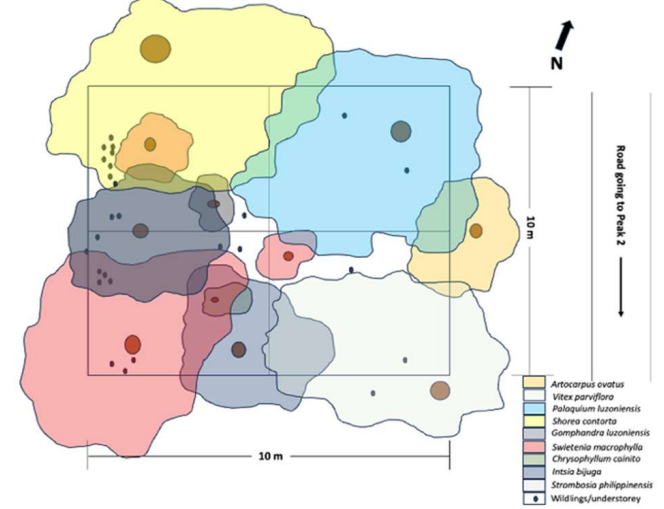
Figure 9
Cross-sectional representations of the seven sampled plots.

Plot 1



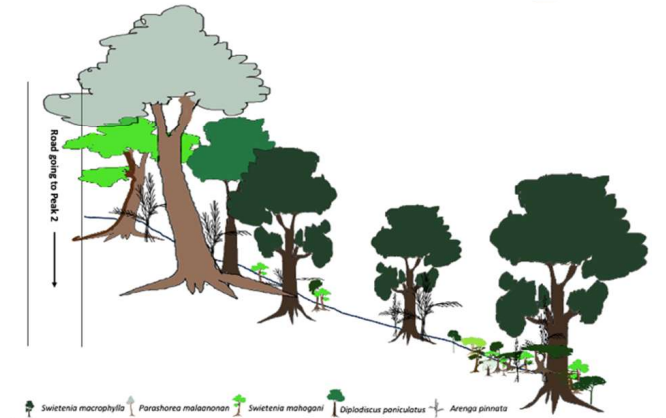
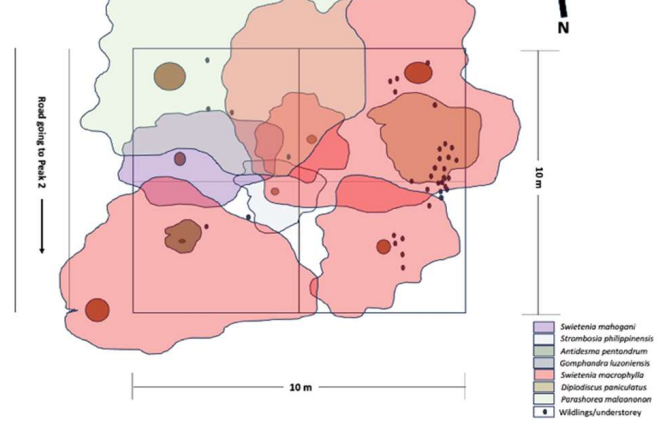
Morus alba *Spathodea campanulata* *Cananga odorata* *Cocos nucifera* *Musa sapientum*

Plot 2



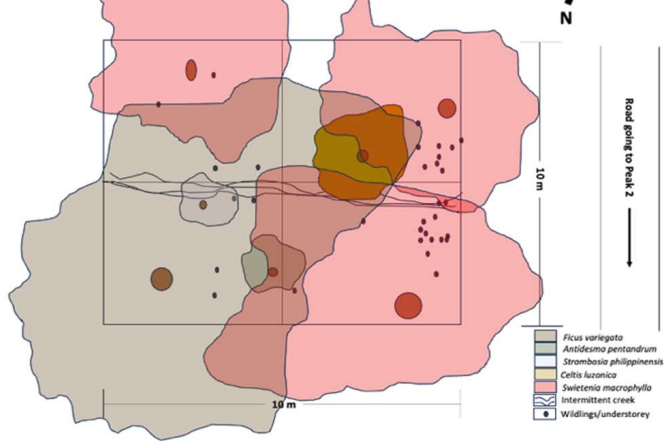
Gomphandra luzoniensis *Swietenia macrophylla* *Palaquium luzoniensis* *Arenga pinnata* *Artocarpus ovatus*

Plot 3

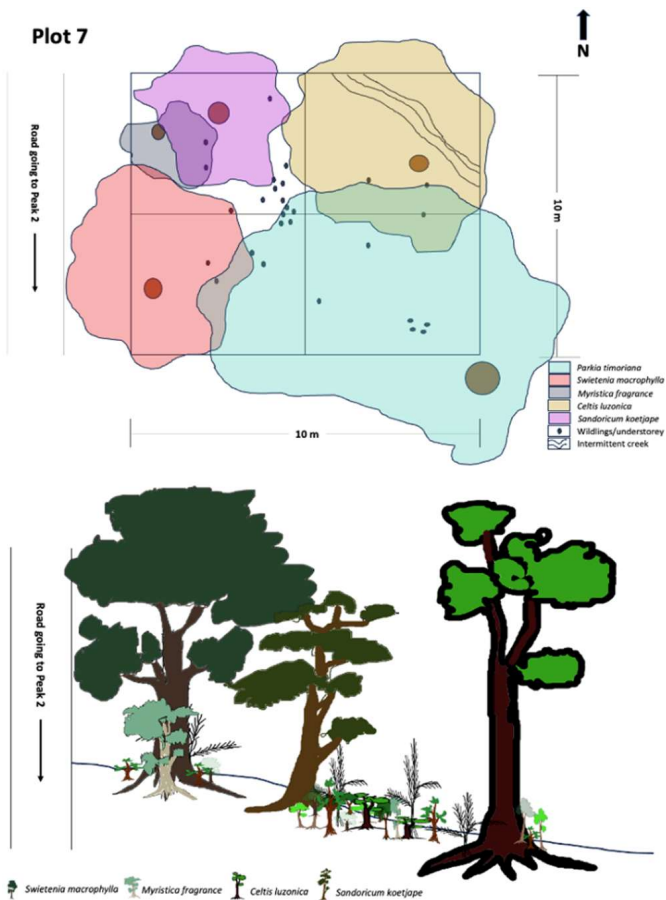
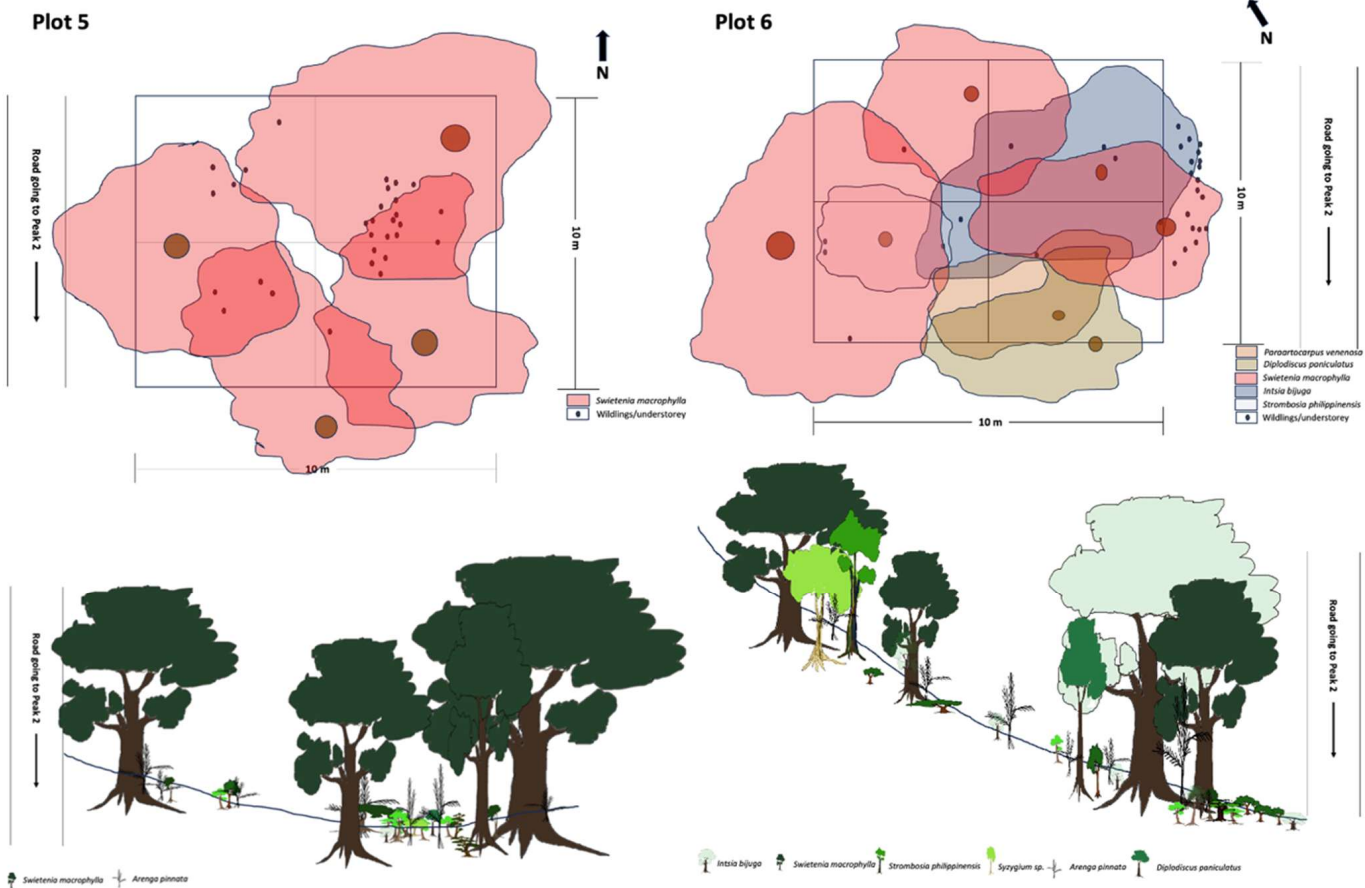


Swietenia macrophylla *Parashorea malanonan* *Swietenia mahagoni* *Diplodiscus paniculatus* *Arenga pinnata*

Plot 4



Ficus variegata *Swietenia macrophylla* *Celtis luzonica* *Strrombosia philippinensis* *Syzygium sp.* *Arenga pinnata*



IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

Results of the fieldwork, analysis, and cross-sectional representations within the MFR revealed a diverse genetic resource of indigenous trees and plants despite being dominated by *S. macrophylla* – an exotic, fast-growing, and apparently invasive tree species. Such high concentrations of genetic reserve in MFR could be used as potential sources of planting materials to restore the native vegetation of various urban green spaces in nearby towns and cities. A natural mixture of trees and plants found in the MFR can also be used as a guide if one is interested to mimic the natural aggregation of vegetation and forest structure in the urban landscape. Perhaps, this can be adapted to the establishment of a Miyawaki forest. This urban greening technique has long been used in various cities globally, like Japan, India, and China. As opposed to exotic and introduced species, native trees and plants could be more suitable to our local site condition, implying a greater chance of survival and less maintenance cost. Perhaps, it is high time that similar strategies should also be considered in the Philippines. Finally, further study is suggested to understand the natural dynamics of vegetation in vertical and horizontal dimensions at various sites within the MFR.

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