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STUDY ON COMPETITION AMONG LATE-SUCCESSIONAL  
TREE SEEDLINGS ACROSS A TOPOGRAPHIC CATENA OF A  
SRI LANKAN RAIN FOREST

BY

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**E.P.S.K. Ediriweera**

**ABSTRACT**

Lowland rain forests of southwest Sri Lanka have a canopy stratum dominated by tree species from close taxonomic assemblages at the genus level. Forest associations have been identified within the forest topography from valley to ridgetop. The canopy tree genera in these associations have common silvical characteristics in reproduction and regeneration establishment. The most important silvical characteristic common to these tree species is the apparent site specialization. Recent studies suggested that species belonging to same genera have different adaptations in relation to dominating edaphic or hypsographic factors.

For this study, four *Shorea* species (*Shorea disticha* (Thw.) Ashton, *Shorea trapezifolia* (Thw.) Ashton, *Shorea megistophylla* Ashton, *Shorea worthingtonii* Ashton), one *Dipterocarpus* species (*Dipterocarpus zeylanicus* Thw.), two *Mesua* species (*Mesua nagassarium* Kosterm. and *Mesua ferrea* L.) and two species of *Syzygium* (*Syzygium makul* Gaertn., *Syzygium rubicundum* Wight and Arn.) were selected. All coexist in the rain forest of southwest Sri Lanka. Experiments were designed to investigate competitive outcomes of those species in different light and soil moisture regimes. Each plot was 2.4 x 2.4 meters and planting distance was 0.2 meters. Planted seedlings were monitored in gaps and understory condition across different topographic positions (low elevation, valley, midslope, ridgetop and high elevation) from year 1998 to 2003. On each site one plot was placed in a natural canopy gap and

another plot was located in the adjacent forest understorey. Light quantity was recorded on sunny days of every year, and soil moisture was measured twice a month. Soil analysis was done for Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potassium, Calcium, Aluminium, and Magnesium in all canopy gaps and understorey in all topographic positions. After one year of seedling growth and mortality were recorded. At the end of four years leaf nutrients analysis was done for N, P, K, Ca, Al, and Mg.

Photosynthetic photon flux density was gradually increased from valley to ridge in both gap and understorey. Soil moisture was similar in both gap and understorey conditions while it decreased from valley to ridge top. Soil nutrients did not show clear differences among microsites and among topographic positions.

Results demonstrated that the total daily amount of light received was the main factor determining competitive growth performance with secondary effects in the variation of soil moisture of topographic positions. All seedlings showed greatest mortality and relatively slow growth rate in all understorey sites than gaps and mortality increased with elevation. The best growth of all species was observed in low elevation and midslope sites. All seedlings indicated a decline in growth performance and increased mortality with elevation.

Along with light and soil moisture gradient plant height growth, canopy expansion and foliar nutrient allocation provided the evidence to understand the competitive role played by species. *Shorea trapezifolia* and *Syzygium rubicundum* can be regarded as the most light demanding species with competitive superiors as judged by its height increment, leaf and branch increment, crown structure, root collar diameter and leaf nutrient allocation. At the other extreme are *Mesua ferrea* and *Shorea*



*worthingtonii*, which are the most shade tolerant and hence has the lowest competitive ability in the above group.

This study contributes to our understanding of canopy seedling responses to the influence of light, soil moisture, and soil nutrients in different topographic positions. Understanding this is critical towards the development of regeneration methods for the management of tropical lowland mixed species forest. Results of this study have facilitated the construction of a site classification system and light/drought tolerance indices for the important canopy trees within the forest. Further work is necessary to understand growth performance of these species and their niche specialization.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

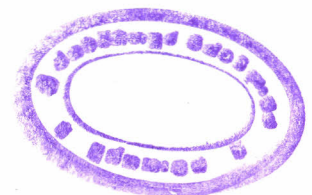
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	i
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF PLATES.....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ix
DEDICATION.....	xi
ABSTRACT.....	xii
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 General Introduction and Objectives.....	2
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW- Gap formation and their different microclimates in tropical lowland rain forests.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Species richness of tropical rain forests.....	11
2.1.1 Introduction.....	11
2.1.2 Tropical lowland rain forests in Sri Lanka.....	13
2.1.3 Canopy disturbance in lowland rain forest.....	15
2.1.4 Role of canopy gaps for seedling establishment and species composition.....	17
2.1.5 Characteristics of successional guilds.....	19
2.2 Microenvironment and seedling regeneration in lowland rainforest... 2.2.1 Introduction.....	22
2.2.2 Light environments.....	23
2.2.3 Characteristics of sun flecks and their importance for understory plants.....	26
2.2.4 Light and seedling growth and mortality.....	28
2.3 Soil moisture of tropical rain forests.....	29
2.3.1 Introduction.....	29
2.3.2 Effect of drought for seeding regeneration.....	31
2.3.3 Adaptations of tropical trees for drought.....	32
2.3.4 Soil moisture variation and seedling dynamics.....	34
2.4 Soil nutrients in lowland rain forests.....	35
2.4.1 Introduction.....	35
2.4.2 Important of nutrients for plant growth.....	37

2.4.3 Adaptations of tropical plants to low nutrients .....	41
2.4.4 Soil fertility and plant species distribution.....	44
<b>CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW- Seedling growth performance and competition in different microenvironment.....</b>	<b>47</b>
3.1 Growth performance seedlings in lowland rain forest.....	48
3.1.1 Introduction.....	48
3.1.2 Seedling dynamic in tropical forest.....	49
3.1.3 Soil nutrients, light and soil moisture interaction and seedling growth.....	51
3.2 Above ground competition and niche differentiation.....	52
3.2.1 Introduction.....	52
3.2.2 Seedling morphology and resources allocation.....	53
3.2.3 Seedling morphology and above ground competition.....	58
3.2.4 Resources availability and seedling competition.....	60
3.2.5 Seedling competition and niche differentiation.....	61
<b>CHAPTER 4: STUDY DESCRIPTIONS.....</b>	<b>63</b>
4.1 Study objectives and hypotheses.....	64
4.2 Study site.....	64
4.3 Study species.....	67
<b>CHAPTER 5: METHODS AND MATERIALS.....</b>	<b>71</b>
5.1 Experimental design.....	72
5.1.1 Selecting of gaps and understories.....	72
5.1.2 Mapping and inventory.....	72
5.1.3 Seedling establishment.....	73
5.2 Seedling mortality and growth experiment.....	73
5.2.1 Seedling mortality.....	73
5.2.2 Above ground measurements.....	73
5.3 Micro-climate measurement.....	74
5.3.1 Light measurement.....	74
5.3.2 Soil moisture measurement.....	75
5.3.3 Soil nutrients Analysis.....	76
5.3.3.1 Soil sampling and preparation.....	76
5.3.3.2 Digesting and determination of Total N.....	76
5.3.3.3 Determination of available P.....	77
5.3.3.4 Determination of available K Ca Al Mg.....	77
5.3.3.5 Determination of soil pH.....	77
5.4 Leaf nutrients Analysis.....	78
5.4.1 Leaves sampling and preparation.....	78
5.4.2 Determination of leaf nutrients as N, P K Ca Al and Mg.....	78
<b>CHAPTER 6: RESULTS- Landscape variation and forest microclimate .....</b>	<b>79</b>
6.1 Landscape variation and forest microclimate.....	80



6.1.1 Canopy projection and inventory.....	80
6.1.2 Canopy gap projection.....	80
6.1.3 Data analysis.....	80
6.1.4 Results.....	80
6.1.5 Leaf Area Index (LAI) and stand basal area.....	81
6.1.6 Data analysis.....	81
6.1.7 Results.....	81
6.2 Microclimate measurement.....	82
6.2.1 Light (Photosynthetic photon flux density-PPFD).....	82
6.2.2 Data analysis.....	82
6.2.3 Results.....	82
6.2.4 Correlation between PPF and Gap Area Index (GAI).....	84
6.2.4.1 Data analysis.....	84
6.2.4.2 Results.....	85
6.3 Light (visible sky, and Global Site Factor (GSF)).....	87
6.3.1 Data analysis.....	87
6.3.2 Results.....	87
6.4 Soil nutrients status.....	89
6.4.1 Data analysis.....	89
6.4.2 Results.....	89
6.5 Soil moisture variation.....	91
6.5.1 Data analysis.....	91
6.5.2 Results.....	91
6.6 Summary: Landscape variation and forest microclimate.....	94

<b>CHAPTER 7: RESULTS- Mortality and growth performance of seedling in different topographic positions.....</b>	<b>96</b>
7.1 Seedling mortality.....	97
7.1.1 Data analysis.....	97
7.1.2 Results.....	97
7.2 Aboveground measurements.....	100
7.2.1 Data analysis.....	100
7.2.2 Results.....	100
7.2.1.1. Height increment.....	100
7.2.1.2. Leaf increment.....	101
7.2.1.3 Branches increment.....	102
7.2.1.4. Root collar diameter increment.....	103
7.2.3 Correlation between Photosynthetic photon flux density (PPF) and growth of seedlings.....	113
7.2.3.1. Data analysis.....	113
7.2.3.2. Results.....	113
7.3. Leaf nutrient analysis.....	117
7.3.1 Data analysis.....	117
7.3.2 Results.....	117
7.4 Summary- Mortality and growth performance of seedlings.....	121



<b>CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION</b> .....	122
8.1 Landscape variation with different topographic position.....	123
8.2 Variation of PPFD among microsites and across topographic positions.....	123
8.3 Variation of soil moisture among microsites and across topographic positions.....	126
8.4 Variation of Soil nutrients among microsites and across topographic positions.....	128
8.5 Survival and growth of seedling on different habitats.....	129
8.6 Above ground growth performance of species in different microhabitats.....	132
8.6.1 <i>Dipterocarpus zeylanicus</i> .....	132
8.6.2 <i>Mesua ferrea</i> .....	133
8.6.3 <i>Mesua nagassarium</i> .....	134
8.6.4 <i>Shorea disticha</i> .....	134
8.6.5 <i>Shorea megistophylla</i> .....	135
8.6.6 <i>Shorea trapezifolia</i> .....	136
8.6.7 <i>Shorea worthingtonii</i> .....	138
8.6.8 <i>Syzygium makul</i> .....	138
8.6.9 <i>Syzygium rubicundum</i> .....	139
8.7 Competitive attributes of late successional canopy species.....	140
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION</b> .....	144
9.1 Conclusions.....	145
11.2 Recommendations for further studies.....	146
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	147