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Gap regeneration and forest dynamics in a
lowland podocarp-broadleaved forest
remnant, Keeble's Bush, Manawatu.

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Massey University, Palmerston North.

“New Zealand’s protected natural areas are more than just museum pieces, a window into the past. They are a source of hope, because within these areas is an abundant source of seeds, the genetic material which could be used to recreate and restore each region’s distinctive forest heritage.”

The living forests of New Zealand - Cobb *et al.*, 1992.

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Abstract

Gap phase regeneration and forest dynamics were investigated in a lowland podocarp-broadleaved forest remnant, Keeble's Bush, Manawatu, in order to assess its ecological integrity. To this end the seed rain (*i.e.*, viability and diversity of fresh seed input), seedling diversity and survival, and soil seed bank composition were all assessed.

A total of 40 different species were trapped in the seed rain, contributing a total of 2398 seeds/m²/yr. A high coefficient of variation for seed number and diversity was recorded between traps, illustrating the spatial heterogeneity of the seed rain. Strong seasonal patterns were recorded in the fruiting phenology of the species trapped. A lack of red-arilled viable seeds suggested that 1992 was not a mast year for rimu.

Most of the seeds likely originated from individuals less than 50 m from the seed traps, reflecting the paucity of native frugivores to disperse seeds further, particularly those less than 10 mm in size. Virtually all the adventive species trapped were herbaceous with most having wind dispersed seeds. All of them were local in origin; *i.e.*, already present within the gaps at the time of trapping.

The total number of seedlings, and the seedling densities in the two gap sites studied were very similar in both 1992 and 1993. Despite the flux of seedlings into and out of the populations at each site seedling numbers remained stable. Species diversity and number of species/m², varied between gaps, with the species population in Gap Two species poor compared with that in Gap One (10 species were shared, with 9 exclusive to Gap One, and 3 present only in Gap Two). Seedling mortality in Gap One fitted the well documented phenomenon of huge mortality during the initial period of establishment and growth. Seedlings in Gap Two, however, showed equal probability of mortality in all height classes. Competition (both above and below ground), browsing by exotic herbivores, drought stress, and litter burial all likely contribute to seedling mortality. The results suggest that the seedling populations in gaps differ between those gaps within the forest interior (Gap One), and those at the forest margin (Gap Two).

Seedlings from 36 species emerged and were identified from the sampled soil seed bank, contributing a total of 821 seedlings. Herbs were the most important life-form in the soil seed bank, making up 77.5% of the total seedlings. Adventive species accounted for 16 of the 36 species, 14 of which were herbaceous. Seedlings of primary forest trees contributed only 1.2% of the seedlings, and emerged from only three of the eight sampling sites. Germination was rapid with the first seedlings emerging from the soil samples within seven days of the start of the experiment; over 86% of the seedlings emerged within the first month. Adventive species dominated the seedlings emerging for the first five weeks.

The number of species and individuals which germinated decreased with soil sample depth. The highest number of seedlings and species occurred in the top 2 cm of soil, with 80% of the seedlings within the top 4 cm. The soil seed banks of the gaps were more diverse, with greater numbers of species and seedlings, compared with sites beneath intact canopy. The results of the longevity experiment suggest tawa and titoki may maintain a short-term transient seed bank, if the seeds are buried rapidly. Kawakawa seeds appear to suffer high predation/decomposition and are likely to last for a shorter period in the soil. Radiata pine does not maintain a seed bank in the soil.

Management implications for Keeble's Bush were discussed, and directions for future research suggested.

| | |
|------------------------|-------------|
| Contents | Page |
| Acknowledgments | iii |
| Abstract | v |
| List of figures | xi |
| List of tables | xiii |

Chapter 1 Introduction

| | |
|--|---|
| 1.1 Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1.1 Regeneration gaps and forest dynamics in New Zealand forests | 3 |
| 1.1.2 Exotic modifying influences | 4 |
| 1.1.3 Landscape fragmentation | 5 |
| 1.2 Aim of study and thesis plan | 6 |

Chapter 2 The study area

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| 2.1 Location and description | 9 |
| 2.1.1 The Manawatu | 9 |
| 2.1.2 Keeble's Bush | 10 |
| 2.1.3 Management of Keeble's Bush | 12 |
| 2.2 Climate | 14 |
| 2.3 Soils | 15 |
| 2.4 Description of study sites | 15 |
| 2.4.1 Gap One (G1) | 15 |
| 2.4.2 Gap Two (G2) | 16 |
| 2.4.3 Adjacent forest (AF) | 17 |
| 2.4.4 Blackberry Gap One (BG1) | 17 |
| 2.4.5 Blackberry Gap Two (BG2) | 17 |

Chapter 3 Seed rain

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| 3.1 Introduction | 22 |
| 3.1.1 Dispersal agents | 23 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 3.1.2 Frugivory in New Zealand forests | 25 |
| 3.1.3 Seed rain investigations overseas | 26 |
| 3.1.4 Seed rain investigations in New Zealand | 27 |
| 3.2 Methods | 28 |
| 3.2.1 Study sites | 28 |
| 3.2.2 Seed trapping | 29 |
| 3.2.3 Collection of traps contents and seed identification | 30 |
| 3.2.4 Nearest seed source | 31 |
| 3.2.5 Analysis | 31 |
| 3.3 Results | 32 |
| 3.3.1 Seed counts | 32 |
| 3.3.2 Seed rain heterogeneity | 33 |
| 3.3.3 Seed rain variability | 35 |
| 3.3.4 Seed viability | 36 |
| 3.3.5 Adventive invasion | 41 |
| 3.3.6 Nearest seed source | 42 |
| 3.3.7 Dispersal modes | 46 |
| 3.4 Discussion | 47 |
| 3.4.1 Patchiness/heterogeneity of seed rain over time | 48 |
| 3.4.2 Marked variability of the fruiting phenology | 48 |
| 3.4.3 Nearest seed source | 49 |
| 3.4.4 Adventive component | 51 |
| 3.4.5 Common species notably absent | 51 |

Chapter 4 Seedling growth and mortality

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.1 Introduction | 54 |
| 4.1.1 Factors effecting seedling survival | 54 |
| 4.1.2 Light requirements | 54 |
| 4.1.3 Seedling investigations within New Zealand | 55 |
| 4.2 Methods | 57 |
| 4.2.1 Seedling survival | 57 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.2.2 Titoki (<i>Alectryon excelsus</i>) seedling survival | 57 |
| 4.2.3 Analysis | 58 |
| 4.3 Results | 59 |
| 4.3.1 Seedling composition and survival: Gap One | 59 |
| 4.3.2 Seedling composition and survival: Gap Two | 63 |
| 4.3.3 Comparison of the two sites: Gap One and Two | 66 |
| 4.3.4 Titoki seedling survival | 67 |
| 4.4 Discussion | 70 |
| 4.4.1 Seedling composition and survival | 70 |
| 4.4.2 Mortality | 70 |
| 4.4.3 Competition | 71 |
| 4.4.4 Herbivory | 73 |
| 4.4.5 Drought stress | 74 |
| 4.4.6 Litter burial | 74 |
| 4.4.7 Comparison with the canopy and understorey of the surrounding forest | 75 |

Chapter 5 The soil seed bank

| | |
|---|----|
| 5.1 Introduction | 76 |
| 5.1.1 Transient and persistent soil seed banks | 77 |
| 5.1.2 Seasonal variation/spatial heterogeneity | 78 |
| 5.1.3 Role of soil seed banks in regeneration/following disturbance | 79 |
| 5.1.4 Seed longevity | 79 |
| 5.1.5 Temperate and tropical rainforest soil seed banks | 80 |
| 5.1.6 Soil seed bank investigations in New Zealand | 80 |
| 5.2 Methods | 82 |
| 5.2.1 Soil seed bank experiment | 82 |
| 5.2.2 Analysis | 83 |
| 5.2.2 Seed longevity experiment | 83 |
| 5.3 Results | 85 |
| 5.3.1 Soil seed bank composition | 85 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 5.3.2 Timing of emergence | 87 |
| 5.3.3 Differences in relation to depth | 89 |
| 5.3.4 Comparison of the soil seed bank of gap and forest sites | 90 |
| 5.3.5 Seed longevity | 91 |
| 5.4 Discussion | 98 |
| 5.4.1 Soil seed bank composition | 99 |
| 5.4.2 Adventive species | 100 |
| 5.4.3 Timing of emergence | 101 |
| 5.4.4 Seed longevity | 101 |
| | |
| Chapter 6 General summary | |
| 6.1 Introduction | 104 |
| 6.2 Conclusions | 104 |
| 6.2.1 Seed rain diversity | 104 |
| 6.2.2 Seedling diversity and survival within Gaps One and Two | 106 |
| 6.2.3 Podocarp regeneration within Keeble's Bush | 108 |
| 6.2.4 Soil seed bank | 109 |
| 6.3 Management implications | 111 |
| 6.4 Directions for future research | 112 |
| | |
| References | 114 |
| | |
| Appendices | |
| Appendix 1 List of scientific and common names used in the text. | 130 |
| Appendix 2 Seed rain: total number of seeds intercepted by each trap. | 133 |
| Appendix 3 Numbers of surviving titoki seedlings in the two study areas, at each measurement date. | 137 |
| Appendix 4 Seed bank: total number of seedlings which emerged from soil samples taken at each site. | 138 |
| Appendix 5 Summary of results on survival of buried tawa, titoki, kawakawa and radiata pine seeds in two replicates. | 140 |

List of figures

Figure

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 2.1 | Location of Keeble's Bush. | 13 |
| 2.2 | Location of study sites within Keeble's Bush. | 19 |
| 2.3 | Gap One - Map of the distribution of trees and shrubs >1.5 cm d.b.h. in a permanent plot around Gap One. | 20 |
| 2.4 | Gap Two - Map of the distribution of trees and shrubs >1.5 cm d.b.h. in a permanent plot around Gap Two. | 21 |
| 3.1 | <i>a & b</i> Positions of the seed traps in and around Gaps One and Two. | 28 |
| 3.2 | One of the seed traps used in this study. | 29 |
| 3.3 | Total number of species caught in each trap during the sampling period (Dec. 1992-Dec. 1993). | 33 |
| 3.4 | The number of species unique to, and shared between the three traps in Gap One (A, B, C), and in Gap Two (F, G, H) are illustrated. Both C and H were positioned under closed canopy outside the Gaps. In both cases the traps shared seven species. | 34 |
| 3.5 | The total number of seeds which fell in each month, for the nine most abundant species (Table 3.1). | 35 |
| 3.6 | <i>a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i</i> These graphs illustrate the proportions of germinated, intact, and damaged seed, and the temporal distributions of the eight most abundant species in the seed rain. | 39 |
| 3.6 | <i>j</i> This graph illustrates the proportions of germinated, intact, and damaged titoki seed and its temporal distribution in the seed rain. | 40 |
| 3.7 | <i>a</i> The distribution of the nearest individuals that contributed seed to the three traps in Gap One. | 44 |
| 3.7 | <i>b</i> The distribution of the nearest individuals that contributed seed to the three traps in Gap One. | 45 |
| 4.1 | The percentage mortality for different height classes of seedlings in Gap One; 1992-1993. | 59 |

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 4.2 | The percentage mortality for different height classes of seedlings in Gap Two; 1992-1993. | 63 |
| 4.3 | Survivorship curves for the 100 titoki seedlings tagged in Gap Two (G2) and Adjacent Forest (AF), May 1993-July 1995. | 67 |
| 4.4 | Half-lives (time taken to reach 25 seedlings) indicated for the titoki seedlings in Gap Two (G2) and Adjacent Forest (AF). | 68 |
| 4.5 | Presumed fate of the 92 titoki seedlings which died during the study period. | 68 |
| 5.1 | Total number of seedlings which emerged from all soil samples. | 87 |
| 5.2 | The proportion of native and adventive seedlings which emerged from the sampled soil (all sites inclusive) from weeks one to eleven. | 87 |
| 5.3 | <i>a, b & c</i> The seedling emergence pattern of herbaceous (native <i>a)Cardamine</i> sp. and adventive <i>b) black nightshade</i>), native shrub (<i>c) kawakawa</i>) and tree (<i>d) cabbage tree</i>) species from all soil samples. | 88 |
| 5.4 | Frequencies of life-forms at each soil depth (all samples inclusive). | 89 |
| 5.5 | The total number of species unique to, and shared by the gap and forest sites (all samples inclusive). | 90 |
| 5.6 | The number of seedlings which germinated from the different sample depths, from the Gap and Forest sites ($\chi^2=12.23$; $df=3$; $p=0.0066$). | 91 |
| 5.7 | One of the predated tawa seeds from the 0 cm (6 months) treatment. A large hole has been bored into the testa, perhaps by <i>Cryptasasma querula</i> (Knowles and Beveridge, 1982), and the seed is empty. | 92 |
| 5.8 | A buried tawa seedling following exhumation from the soil (5 cm depth) after 6 months. Note the swollen plumules with scale like reddish cataphylls, and a short radicle broken at the point where it passes through the mesh. | 93 |
| 5.9 | <i>a & b</i> A comparison of titoki seedlings. <i>a)</i> is a buried titoki seedling exhumed from the soil (10 cm depth) after 9 months. Note the yellow cotyledons still held within the testa, and the swollen reddish radicle with several lateral roots. <i>b)</i> is a titoki seedling which established on the soil surface (0 cm) after nine months. Note the 'normal'/un-swollen radicle, green cotyledons and first true leaves. | 95 |

List of tables

Table

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 3.1 | Species represented by >50 seeds in the seed rain, Dec. 1992- Dec. 1993. | 33 |
| 3.2 | Total number of species caught by each trap during the sampling period (Dec. 1992-Dec. 1993). The percentages of seed identified and those that remained unknown are also shown. | 34 |
| 3.3 | Adventive species present in the seed rain, Dec. 1992-Dec. 1993. | 41 |
| 3.4 | The mean and range of distances from the seed traps to the nearest mature fruiting individual in the surrounding forest (30x30 m plot) are shown. The number of tree and shrub species present in the seed rain and in the 30x30 m plot are also given. | 43 |
| 3.5 | Dispersal modes of the identified species in the trapped seed rain. | 46 |
| 3.6 | Proportions of different colours represented in the bird dispersed aril/fruit/seeds collected in the seed rain. | 46 |
| 4.1 | Gap One: Seedling numbers in 1992, survivorship from 1992-1993, those seedlings which established in the intervening year and seedling numbers in 1993. | 61 |
| 4.2 | Percentages of the four most abundant seedling species within Gap One, in 1992 and 1993, compared with their abundance in the surrounding forest (tree and shrub species >1.5 cm d.b.h.; 30x30 m plot). | 62 |
| 4.3 | Gap Two: Seedling numbers in 1992, survivorship from 1992-1993, those seedlings which established in the intervening year and seedling numbers in 1993. | 64 |
| 4.4 | Percentages of the seven most abundant seedling species within Gap Two, in 1992 and 1993, compared with their abundance in the surrounding forest (tree and shrub species >1.5 cm d.b.h.; 30x30 m plot). | 66 |
| 5.1 | The numbers of species and seedlings (identified and unidentified) which germinated from soil samples from the eight different sites. | 85 |

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 5.2 | The life-form composition of the seeds which germinated from the soil samples collected from all sites (identified seedlings only). | 86 |
| 5.3 | The total number of seeds, their percentage of the total, and the total number of species recorded at the four sample depths (all sites inclusive). | 89 |
| 5.4 | Mean germination rate for those tawa seeds recovered during the burial experiment. | 92 |
| 5.5 | Mean germination rate for those titoki seeds recovered during the burial experiment. | 94 |
| 5.6 | Mean germination for those kawakawa seeds recovered during the burial experiment. | 96 |
| 5.7 | Mean germination rate of those radiata pine seeds recovered during the burial experiment. | 97 |