

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR****Open letter: There are more than just trees and forests to be conserved and restored****OPEN LETTER TO POLICYMAKERS AT THE 16TH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (COP 16, CALI, COLOMBIA, 2024)**

Tropical and subtropical grasslands and savannas have historically been neglected in global and local conservation policies. As a result, nearly half of their coverage has been lost. In 2023, the world's most biodiverse savanna (Brazilian Cerrado) lost 1.110.326 ha, increasing the rate of land conversion by 67.7% (MapBiomas, 2024). The resulting biodiversity and ecosystem service losses, including the ability to mitigate climate change, are profound and irreversible.

As scientists specialized in ecology, conservation, and restoration, from around the world, we call on policymakers at COP 16 to act decisively: *Tropical and subtropical grasslands and savannas matter for biodiversity protection, and the future of this planet relies on these ecosystems to the same extent it relies on forests.*

We urge the following commitments:

- Prioritize conservation and adequate management of grasslands and savannas.
- Establish mechanisms to reduce and halt land conversion in these ecosystems immediately.
- Promote conservation aligned with local economic activities, such as ecotourism and sustainable bioeconomic initiatives.
- Reject afforestation initiatives disguised as restoration efforts that harm these unique ecosystems.

Grasslands and savannas harbor an extraordinary biodiversity of light-loving fauna and flora, with up to 60 plants per square meter in some regions (Silva Menezes et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2012). Many of these species are endemic and at risk of extinction. These ancient ecosystems are home to an astonishing cultural legacy and diversity. They are not only crucial for species conservation but also water security and carbon storage. For example, most of the major rivers in the Amazon originate in montane grasslands in the Andes, the *Cerrado*, and the Guyana Plateau. Peat soils in South American savannas store more carbon belowground than tropical forests do aboveground.

These carbon stocks, some dating back 40,000 years, are at risk if inappropriate land use practices like soil drainage or large-scale tree planting disrupt natural water cycles.

Once open ecosystems are degraded, they rarely regain their original biodiversity and function. Effective restoration remains a challenge, while promising, restored open ecosystems rarely fully recover the complexity, diversity, or resilience of pristine ecosystems (Nerlekar & Veldman, 2020; Pilon et al., 2023; Zaloumis & Bond, 2011). This makes immediate conservation the most effective tool in mitigating biodiversity loss and maintaining ecosystem services.

**The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration is meaningless without a solid policy to reduce and stop land conversion.** Conserving the remaining tropical and subtropical grasslands and savannas is the only assurance that future generations will benefit from the services these ecosystems provide. We believe in the potential of restoration, but it cannot replace effective biodiversity protection. Robust environmental policies must be grounded in scientific evidence and prioritize both present and future societal well-being. As scientists and citizens, we emphasize the critical need to conserve what remains of these ecosystems. **While science works toward restoring what has been lost, conservation is our best defense against the biodiversity crisis and the loss of essential ecosystem services.**

**KEYWORDS**

biodiversity crises, conservation, COP 16, ecological restoration, open ecosystems

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Natashi Pilon, Franciele Peixoto, Rafael S. Oliveira, Ana Carolina C. Oliveira, and Giselda Durigan led the initiative and wrote the letter; all the 137 authors read and agreed with all the content of the letter.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

We declare no conflict of interest.
















**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

There are no data associated with the paper.

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- Natashi Pilon<sup>1</sup> 
- Franciele Peixoto<sup>2</sup>
- Rafael S. Oliveira<sup>1</sup> 
- Ana Carolina C. Oliveira<sup>1</sup>
- Julio Alquéres<sup>3</sup>
- Swanni Alvarado<sup>4</sup>
- Jose G. M. Angelo<sup>5</sup>
- Sally Archibald<sup>6</sup> 
- Mohammed Armani<sup>7</sup>
- Ludwig Baldaszti<sup>8,9</sup> 
- Sébastien Barot<sup>10</sup>
- Fernanda de V. Barros<sup>11</sup>
- Mario Barroso<sup>12</sup>
- Alessandra Bassani<sup>1</sup>
- Mariska te Beest<sup>13,14,15</sup>
- Juan Benavides-Tocarruncho<sup>11</sup>
- Lorena M. Benitez<sup>9</sup>
- Paulo N. Bernardino<sup>1,16</sup> 
- William J. Bond<sup>17</sup>
- Bowy den Braber<sup>18</sup>
- Nina Buchmann<sup>19</sup> 
- Elise Buisson<sup>20</sup> 
- Bruna H. Campos<sup>21</sup> 
- Claudia Campos<sup>5</sup>
- Josep Canadell (Pep)<sup>22</sup>
- Tristan Charles-Dominique<sup>23</sup> 
- Rachel Cohen<sup>24</sup>
- Anya Courtenay<sup>9</sup>
- Joris P. G. M. Cromsigt<sup>13,14,25</sup> 
- Gabriella Damasceno<sup>26,27</sup> 
- Vinicius L. Dantas<sup>28</sup>
- Balázs Deák<sup>29</sup>
- Michele Dechoum<sup>30</sup>
- Adam J. M. Devenish<sup>31</sup>
- Milton H. Diaz-Toribio<sup>32</sup>
- Brice Yannick Djiofack<sup>33,34</sup>
- Jason E. Donaldson<sup>35</sup>
- Larissa Doria<sup>1</sup> 
- Natalie Dudinszky<sup>36,37</sup>
- Lucas Durães<sup>5</sup>
- Susan E. Eshelman<sup>38</sup> 
- Marcos de Fialho<sup>5</sup>
- Manfred Finckh<sup>39</sup> 
- Jennifer L. Funk<sup>40</sup> 
- Rachael Gallagher<sup>41</sup> 
- T. Ganesh<sup>42</sup>
- Jacques Gignoux<sup>43</sup>
- Luiz Gustavo Gonçalves<sup>5</sup>
- Michelle Greve<sup>44</sup>
- Daniel Mark Griffith<sup>45</sup>
- Natalia Guerin<sup>24</sup> 
- Kenny Helsen<sup>24</sup>
- Gareth P. Hempson<sup>46</sup> 
- Ankila Hiremath<sup>42</sup>
- William A. Hoffmann<sup>47</sup>
- Sheila M. Holmes<sup>25</sup>
- Lindsay B. Hutley<sup>48</sup>
- Debbie Jewitt<sup>49</sup> 
- Arjun Kannan<sup>42</sup>
- Marie Noelle Keijzer<sup>24</sup>
- David A. Keith<sup>50</sup>
- Sarala Khaling<sup>42</sup>
- Kevin Kirkman<sup>51</sup>
- Rosana M. Kolb<sup>52</sup> 
- Foundiéré Koné<sup>53</sup>
- Alessandra R. Kozovits<sup>54</sup> 
- Christian Kull<sup>55</sup>
- Frank van Langevelde<sup>56</sup>
- R. Sedricke Lapuz<sup>57</sup> 
- Jean-Christophe Lata<sup>58</sup> 
- Soizig Le Stradic<sup>59</sup> 
- Caroline E. R. Lehmann<sup>8,9</sup> 
- Naïssa Luz<sup>60</sup>
- M. D. Madhusudan<sup>61</sup>
- Soro Nounfro Madjima<sup>62</sup>
- Iravatee Majgaonkar<sup>42</sup>
- Onildo J. Marini-Filho<sup>5</sup>
- Aklilu Negussie Mekuria<sup>24</sup>
- Paulina Meller<sup>63</sup> 
- Máximo M. Costa<sup>5</sup>
- Raoni Merisse<sup>5</sup>
- Cássia B. R. Munhoz<sup>64</sup> 
- Brett P. Murphy<sup>65</sup>
- Leena Naftal<sup>66</sup>
- Olinirina Prisca Nanjarisoa<sup>31</sup>
- Aya B. N'Dri<sup>67</sup> 
- Ashish N. Nerlekar<sup>68</sup> 
- Aristides S. G. Neto<sup>5</sup>
- Jesse B. Nippert<sup>69</sup>
- Sindiso Nkuna<sup>70</sup>
- Reed Noss<sup>71</sup>
- Imma Oliveras Menor<sup>72,73</sup> 
- Colin P. Osborne<sup>74</sup> 
- Gerhard E. Overbeck<sup>75</sup> 
- Giovanna Palazzi<sup>5</sup>
- Catherine Parr<sup>76</sup> 
- Juli G. Pausas<sup>77</sup> 
- R. Toby Pennington<sup>11</sup> 
- Valério D. Pillar<sup>75</sup> 
- Francis E. Putz<sup>78,79</sup> 
- Fitiavana Rasaminirina<sup>80,81</sup>
- Jayashree Ratnam<sup>82</sup>
- Diego Raymundo<sup>83</sup>
- Ana Ribeiro<sup>84</sup>
- Jess Rickenback<sup>8,9</sup> 
- Lucy Rowland<sup>11</sup> 

Alexandre Bonesso Sampaio<sup>85</sup>   
 Mahesh Sankaran<sup>82</sup>  
 Naomi B. Schwartz<sup>86</sup>   
 Seshadri Kadaba Shamanna<sup>42</sup>  
 Stefan Siebert<sup>87</sup>  
 Frances Siebert<sup>87</sup>  
 Desireé Cristiane Barbosa Silva<sup>5</sup>  
 Suelma Ribeiro-Silva<sup>5,88</sup>  
 Domingos Fortunato P. F. Silva<sup>89</sup>  
 Julliene S. G. Monteiro Silva<sup>90</sup>  
 Fernando A. O. Silveira<sup>91</sup>   
 Kimberley Simpson<sup>92</sup>   
 A. Carla Staver<sup>93</sup>   
 Bethina Stein<sup>94</sup>   
 Nicola Stevens<sup>6,95</sup>   
 Chris Still<sup>96</sup>  
 Caroline A. E. Strömberg<sup>97</sup>   
 Rima Mekdaschi Studer<sup>98</sup>   
 Anthony Swemmer<sup>99</sup>  
 Kyle Warwick Tomlinson<sup>100</sup>  
 Orsolya Valkó<sup>29</sup>  
 Renato Vanderlei<sup>101</sup>  
 Joseph W. Veldman<sup>102</sup>  
 Larissa Verona<sup>1</sup>   
 Susanne Vetter<sup>103</sup>   
 Ricardo A. G. Viani<sup>104</sup>  
 Maria S. Vorontsova<sup>105</sup>   
 Jakub D. Wiczorkowski<sup>8,9</sup>   
 Benjamin Wigley<sup>106,107</sup>  
 Amy Zanne<sup>16</sup>   
 Giselda Durigan<sup>21</sup> 

<sup>12</sup>The Nature Conservancy, Brasília, Brazil

<sup>13</sup>Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

<sup>14</sup>Centre for African Conservation Ecology, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, ZA, South Africa

<sup>15</sup>South African Environmental Observation Network, Grasslands-Forests-Wetlands Node, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

<sup>16</sup>Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, Millbrook, New York, USA

<sup>17</sup>Botany, Botany Department, UCT, Private Bag, Rondebosch, University of Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa

<sup>18</sup>Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Kobenhavn, Denmark

<sup>19</sup>ETH Zurich Department of Environmental Systems Science, Zurich, Switzerland

<sup>20</sup>Avignon Universite, Institut Méditerranéen de Biodiversité et d'Ecologie IMBE, CNRS, IRD, Aix-Marseille Université, Avignon, France

<sup>21</sup>Instituto de Pesquisas Ambientais, São Paulo, Brazil

<sup>22</sup>Global Carbon Project of Future Earth, Australia

<sup>23</sup>CNRS, Paris, France

<sup>24</sup>WeForest, Brussels, Belgium

<sup>25</sup>Department of Wildlife, Fish and Environmental Studies, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Umeå, Sweden

<sup>26</sup>German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany

<sup>27</sup>Institute of Biology, Geobotany and Botanical Garden, Martin Luther University Halle Wittenberg, Halle (Saale), Germany

<sup>28</sup>Institute of Geography, Federal University of Uberlandia, Uberlandia, Brazil

<sup>29</sup>HUN-REN Centre for Ecological Research Institute of Ecology and Botany, Lendület Seed Ecology Research Group, Vácrátót, Hungary

<sup>30</sup>Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianopolis, Brazil

<sup>31</sup>Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, London, UK

<sup>32</sup>Jardin Botánico Francisco Javier Clavijero, Institute of Ecology, Xalapa, Mexico

<sup>33</sup>Faculty of Bioscience Engineering, Department of Environment, Laboratory of Wood Technology (UGent-Woodlab), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

<sup>34</sup>Royal Museum for Central Africa, Service of Wood Biology, Tervuren, Belgium

<sup>35</sup>Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

<sup>36</sup>BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK

<sup>37</sup>Universidad Nacional del Comahue-CONICET, Grupo de Biología y Ecología de Animales Patagónicos, INIBIOMA, San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina

<sup>38</sup>School of Biological Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

<sup>39</sup>Institute of Plant Science and Microbiology (IPM), University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

<sup>40</sup>University of California Davis, Davis, California, USA

<sup>41</sup>Hawkesbury Institute for the Environment, Richmond, Western Sydney University Hawkesbury Institute for the Environment, Penrith, Australia

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Departamento de Biologia Vegetal, Instituto de Biologia, Centro de Ecologia Integrativa, Campinas, Brazil

<sup>2</sup>Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Centro de Ecologia Integrativa, Campinas, Brazil

<sup>3</sup>Carbon4412, São Paulo, Brazil

<sup>4</sup>Departamento de Biología, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogota, Colombia

<sup>5</sup>Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade, Brasília, Brazil

<sup>6</sup>School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>7</sup>Institute for Biospheric Studies, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

<sup>8</sup>Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Taxonomy and Macroecology, Edinburgh, UK

<sup>9</sup>School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

<sup>10</sup>IEES-Paris, IRD, Sorbonne Université, Paris, France

<sup>11</sup>Department of Geography, Faculty of Environment, Science and Economy, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

- <sup>42</sup>Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, India
- <sup>43</sup>Institute of Ecology and Environmental Sciences (iEESParis), CNRS, Paris, France
- <sup>44</sup>Natural and Agricultural Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
- <sup>45</sup>Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA
- <sup>46</sup>School of Biodiversity, Animal Health and Comparative Medicine, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
- <sup>47</sup>PMB, Dept. Plant Biology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA
- <sup>48</sup>Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Faculty of Science & Technology, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia
- <sup>49</sup>Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
- <sup>50</sup>Centre for Ecosystem Science, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
- <sup>51</sup>University of KwaZulu-Natal - Pietermaritzburg Campus, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
- <sup>52</sup>Faculdade de Ciências e Letras, Universidade Estadual Paulista Julio de Mesquita Filho, Assis, Brazil
- <sup>53</sup>Centre de Recherche en Écologie, Université Nangui Abrogoua, Abidjan Autonomous District, Côte d'Ivoire
- <sup>54</sup>Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, Ouro Preto, Brazil
- <sup>55</sup>University of Lausanne, Institute of Geography and Sustainability, Lausanne, Switzerland
- <sup>56</sup>Wageningen Universiteit en Research, Wageningen, the Netherlands
- <sup>57</sup>School of Biological Sciences, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong
- <sup>58</sup>Institute of Ecology and Environmental Sciences (iEESParis), Sorbonne Université, Paris, France
- <sup>59</sup>UMR BIOGECO, INRAE and Université de Bordeaux, Paris, France
- <sup>60</sup>Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil
- <sup>61</sup>National Centre for Biological Sciences, GKVK Campus, Bangalore, India
- <sup>62</sup>Laboratoire D'ecologie et de Developpement Durable, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
- <sup>63</sup>Landesamt für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Geologie M-V, Güstrow, Germany
- <sup>64</sup>Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Ciências Biológicas, Brasília, Brazil
- <sup>65</sup>Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia
- <sup>66</sup>Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), Windhoek, Namibia
- <sup>67</sup>Department of Natural Sciences (UFR SN), Laboratory of Ecology and Sustainable Development (LEDD) and Laboratory of Botany and Valorisation of Plant Diversity (LaBVDiV), Nangui Abrogoua University, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
- <sup>68</sup>Department of Plant Biology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA
- <sup>69</sup>Division of Biology Manhattan, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA
- <sup>70</sup>School of Life Sciences, Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
- <sup>71</sup>Southeastern Grasslands Institute, Southeastern Grasslands Institute, Melrose, Florida, USA
- <sup>72</sup>Universite de Montpellier, AMAP (Botanique et Modélisation de l'Architecture des Plantes et des Vegetations), CIRAD, CNRS, INRA, IRD, Montpellier, France
- <sup>73</sup>School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
- <sup>74</sup>School of Biosciences, Alfred Denny Building, Western Bank, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
- <sup>75</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto de Biociências, Porto Alegre, Brazil
- <sup>76</sup>University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
- <sup>77</sup>Centro de Investigaciones sobre Desertificación, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Universitat de València, Generalitat Valenciana (CIDE, CSIC-UV-GV), Valencia, Spain
- <sup>78</sup>Department of Biology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA
- <sup>79</sup>University of the Sunshine Coast, Forest Research Institute, Maroochydore, Australia
- <sup>80</sup>Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Richmond, UK
- <sup>81</sup>University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Antananarivo Province, Madagascar
- <sup>82</sup>National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, India
- <sup>83</sup>Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Juiz de Fora, Brazil
- <sup>84</sup>Forest Research Center, Associate Laboratory TERRA, School of Agriculture, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal
- <sup>85</sup>Centro Nacional de Pesquisa e Conservação em Biodiversidade e Restauração Ecológica - CBC/ICMBio, Brasília, Brazil
- <sup>86</sup>Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
- <sup>87</sup>Unit for Environmental Sciences and Management, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
- <sup>88</sup>Jardim Botânico do Rio de Janeiro, National School of Tropical Botany, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- <sup>89</sup>SEOSAW - Socio-Ecological Observatory for Studying African Woodlands, Angola
- <sup>90</sup>Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Biologia, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ecologia Campinas, Campinas, Brazil
- <sup>91</sup>Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
- <sup>92</sup>School of Biosciences, Alfred Denny Building, Western Bank, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
- <sup>93</sup>Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA
- <sup>94</sup>Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Biologia, Programa de Pós-graduação de Biologia Vegetal, Campinas, Brazil
- <sup>95</sup>School of Geography, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
- <sup>96</sup>Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA
- <sup>97</sup>Department of Biology, Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA
- <sup>98</sup>Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland
- <sup>99</sup>National Research Foundation, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>100</sup>Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Mengla, Yunnan, China

<sup>101</sup>Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

<sup>102</sup>Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

<sup>103</sup>Botany Department, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

<sup>104</sup>Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Araras, Brazil

<sup>105</sup>Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives, Richmond, UK

<sup>106</sup>Nelson Mandela University School of Natural Resource Management, George Campus, George, South Africa

<sup>107</sup>Savanna Node, Scientific Services, SANParks, Skukuza, South Africa

### Correspondence

Pilon, Natashi, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Biologia, Departamento de Biologia Vegetal, Campinas, SP, Brazil.

Email: [npilon@unicamp.br](mailto:npilon@unicamp.br)

### ORCID

Natashi Pilon [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7985-5842) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7985-5842>

Rafael S. Oliveira [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6392-2526) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6392-2526>

Sally Archibald [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2786-3976) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2786-3976>

Ludwig Baldaszti [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0548-8503) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0548-8503>

Paulo N. Bernardino [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9226-3160) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9226-3160>

Nina Buchmann [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0826-2980) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0826-2980>

Elise Buisson [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3640-8134) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3640-8134>

Bruna H. Campos [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4028-539X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4028-539X>

Tristan Charles-Dominique [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5767-0406) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5767-0406>

Joris P. G. M. Cromsigt [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8632-9469) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8632-9469>

Gabriella Damasceno [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5103-484X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5103-484X>

Larissa Doria [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3479-211X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3479-211X>

Susan E. Eshelman [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0883-2392) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0883-2392>

Manfred Finckh [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2186-0854) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2186-0854>

Jennifer L. Funk [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1916-5513) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1916-5513>

Rachael Gallagher [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4680-8115) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4680-8115>

Natalia Guerin [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9545-7729) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9545-7729>

Gareth P. Hempson [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8055-4895) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8055-4895>

Debbie Jewitt [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0964-692X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0964-692X>

Rosana M. Kolb [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3841-5597) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3841-5597>

Alessandra R. Kozovits [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7312-0076) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7312-0076>

R. Sedricke Lapuz [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5072-2306) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5072-2306>

Jean-Christophe Lata [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1094-4625) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1094-4625>

Soizig Le Stradic [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2643-3544) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2643-3544>

Caroline E. R. Lehmann [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6825-124X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6825-124X>

Paulina Meller [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6711-4385) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6711-4385>

Cássia B. R. Munhoz [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7990-6715) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7990-6715>

Aya B. N'Dri [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6333-6279) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6333-6279>

Ashish N. Nerlekar [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-882X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-882X>

Imma Oliveras Menor [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5345-2236) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5345-2236>

Colin P. Osborne [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7423-3718) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7423-3718>

Gerhard E. Overbeck [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8716-5136) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8716-5136>

Catherine Parr [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1627-763X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1627-763X>

Juli G. Pausas [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3533-5786) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3533-5786>

R. Toby Pennington [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8196-288X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8196-288X>

Valério D. Pillar [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6408-2891) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6408-2891>

Francis E. Putz [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0051-6675) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0051-6675>

Jess Rickenback [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5803-7728) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5803-7728>

Lucy Rowland [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0774-3216) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0774-3216>

Alexandre Bonesso Sampaio [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3010-4607) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3010-4607>

Naomi B. Schwartz [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3439-2888) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3439-2888>

Fernando A. O. Silveira [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9700-7521) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9700-7521>

Kimberley Simpson [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6673-227X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6673-227X>

A. Carla Staver [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2384-675X) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2384-675X>

Bethina Stein [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9749-2739) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9749-2739>

Nicola Stevens [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0693-8409) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0693-8409>

Caroline A. E. Strömberg [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0612-0305) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0612-0305>

Rima Mekdaschi Studer [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5098-0241) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5098-0241>

Larissa Verona [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3476-9868) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3476-9868>

Susanne Vetter [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2063-5615) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2063-5615>

Maria S. Vorontsova [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0899-1120) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0899-1120>

Jakub D. Wieczorkowski [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2128-5925) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2128-5925>

Amy Zanne [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6379-9452) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6379-9452>

Giselda Durigan [ID](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0693-3154) <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0693-3154>

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