

## **On the role of urban tropical tree collections in carbon allocation: expanding their functions beyond cultural and biodiversity conservation**

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## 1 Abstract

2 Trees support key processes in both natural and managed ecosystems. In highly  
3 intervened urban environments, trees have been generally associated with benefits such  
4 as air quality, microclimate regulation, and biodiversity conservation. University  
5 campuses contain diverse and well-managed tree collections that provide local functions  
6 such as education, conservation, research, and landscaping. However, little has been  
7 discussed about these collections in the general urban setting and how they relate to  
8 other urban ecosystem processes, such as carbon cycling. This is particularly evident in  
9 tropical regions where no current urban forest carbon sequestration estimations are  
10 available. In this work, we present the results of a pilot estimation of the carbon storage  
11 function of the university tree collection at the Universidad de Antioquia (Medellín,  
12 Colombia) through a bounding calculation that combines tree inventory data and  
13 allometric equations. Our results show that, on average, the university tree collection  
14 (including palms) sequesters 3.4 Mg C/ha/year ( $4.2 \times 10^{-2}$  Mg C/tree/year). Remarkably,  
15 our results are comparable to natural tropical forests, particularly in locations with  
16 similar climatic and biophysical conditions. When compared to other urban studies, our  
17 estimation ranges between 1.2-20.8 times larger than cities and other urban areas with  
18 similar estimations. We present a novel integrative method for estimating carbon  
19 storage and sequestration that can be widely applied in information-limited tropical  
20 contexts. We discuss how management practices of these urban forests contribute to  
21 improving their capacity to store carbon more efficiently and effectively participate in  
22 other urban ecosystem processes that derive benefits to society. More generally, our  
23 results highlight the role of universities and other similar urban tree collections (i.e.  
24 botanical gardens and urban parks) in local and regional ecosystem functions and their  
25 potential contribution to global carbon cycling.

26 **Keywords:** university tree collection, carbon sequestration, biomass, urban ecosystems,  
27 allometric equations, urban ecology, tropical tree collections

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## 2 1. Introduction

3 Natural forests contain approximately 80% of the continental biodiversity and are  
4 key to the functioning of the biosphere, while only covering approximately a third of the  
5 world's continental area (Aerts & Honnay, 2011). However, other types of ecosystems,  
6 such as planted forests and particularly urban forests have been also recognized for their  
7 ecological value that extends beyond ornamental and aesthetic functions (Carreiro,  
8 2008; Niemelä, 1999; Sukopp, 2002). Extensive research illustrates the growing interest  
9 on the social, economical and environmental benefits of urban tree collections (Clark &  
10 Matheny, 2009; Dobbs *et al.*, 2014; Sarajevs, 2011), including benefits related to their  
11 nature and function, such as environmental cooling via reductions in urban heat island  
12 effect (Rosenzweig *et al.*, 2009), partial and psychological reduction of noise pollution  
13 (Clark & Matheny, 2009), UV filtering (Grant *et al.*, 2002), reduction of atmospheric  
14 pollution and carbon storage (Nowak *et al.*, 2006), among others documented in the  
15 literature.

16 The carbon storage function is particularly relevant in the context of global change,  
17 particularly in relation to atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases and their  
18 relation to current and future climate (Solomon *et al.*, 2009). Several national and  
19 international programs have directed their efforts to promote urban forestation, as a  
20 mechanism to reduce air pollution in general, as well as to contribute to greenhouse gas  
21 assimilation (Jo & Mcpherson, 1995; Pincetl *et al.*, 2013). Multiple studies have  
22 assessed the potential for carbon storage in these ecosystems (Mcpherson *et al.* 2006;  
23 Nowak *et al.*, 2006). Managed urban forests, especially in highly productive areas such  
24 as the tropics, can represent an important focus for carbon assimilation and storage. Yet,  
25 lacking are quantifications of carbon sequestration potential in tropical urban forests,  
26 potentially associated with limitation on monitoring and observation of tree growth in  
27 these areas.

28 In this communication, we present a pilot estimation of the potential carbon  
29 assimilation of an urban forest to the tree collection of the University of Antioquia –  
30 (UdeA) Medellín, Colombia. We propose a methodology that uses a combination of  
31 empirical measurements with theoretical growth relationships to estimate tree growth  
32 and carbon sequestration. We contrast our results with available studies in both natural  
33 tropical forests and other urban forests (including university tree collections) from  
34 different latitudinal and altitudinal locations (mostly in temperate and subtropical areas).  
35 We discuss how the diversity of species, ages and the spatial layout of the collection, in  
36 combination with efficient maintenance could explain its high potential for carbon  
37 sequestration. In addition, we highlight the importance of preserving and expanding  
38 these urban forests and to expand their context (educational and ornamental) to  
39 additional regulation benefits derived from their function.

## 40 2. Methods

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## functions beyond cultural and biodiversity conservation

### 1 2.1 Location

2 Our study was developed in the campus of the University of Antioquia, in Medellín  
3 – Colombia (6° 16' 2.7" N, 75° 34' 6.2"). The city is located in a narrow intermountain  
4 valley (Aburrá valley) at approximately 1560 meters above sea level, mean annual  
5 temperature is 24°C and mean annual precipitation is 1571 mm (Alcaldía-de-Medellín,  
6 2006). The city's population density is approximately 2556 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, mostly  
7 concentrated in the downtown area, where the university campus is located. The 23.75-  
8 hectare University campus is recognized locally as an important biodiversity hotspot, as  
9 well as heat island mitigation area (Appendix Fig. 1).

### 10 2.2 Tree inventory

11 We used the 2010 university tree and shrub inventory (Vélez, 2010– internal  
12 University facilities management document) that includes a total of 2282 individuals.  
13 Among those, DBH (diameter at breast height – tree diameter measured at 1.3 meters  
14 above the surface) is reported for 1791 trees; and stem-height for 157 palms instead of  
15 DBH. When trees had multiple trunks, all trunks ≥10 cm were measured and considered  
16 an individual trunk; DBH peaked around 25 cm, with values ranging between 10 cm  
17 and > 200 cm (Fig 1A) for the larger trees (*Ficus benjamina*). In our study, we included  
18 all 1948 individuals with DBH≥10.

19 Our sample was composed mostly by angiosperms (1940 individuals in 41 families)  
20 and gymnosperms (8 individuals in two families). The most common families in the  
21 collection include: Anacardiaceae, Bignoniaceae, Arecaceae (among others presented in  
22 Fig. 1B), with the most common species being *Mangifera indica* (mango tree – non-  
23 native), *Fraxinus uhdei*, and *Psidium guajava* (guava tree), with over 100 individuals  
24 each (these and other common species are presented in Fig 1C). Most of these common  
25 species are common flowering and fruiting species that support a highly diverse array of  
26 fauna within the University campus.

### 27 2.3 Biomass and carbon sequestration estimations

28 The amount of carbon stored in the tree collection was estimated with the  
29 allometric equations proposed by Sierra *et al.* (2007). These equations have been  
30 validated for secondary forests in Colombia, with climatic and taxonomic distributions  
31 comparable to those found in the campus tree collection. The equations use DBH (in  
32 cm) to estimate aboveground biomass (AB; in kg – Equation 1) and belowground  
33 biomass (BGB; in kg – Equation 2). We report both components as well as an estimated  
34 wet Total Biomass (TB; in kg – Equation 3). Given the effects of management and site  
35 characteristic (particularly soil conditions) being different from natural forests, we did  
36 not consider fine root biomass or vines due to uncertainty in this estimation.

37  $AB = e^{(-2,232)} D^{2,422}$  *Equation 1* (From Sierra *et al.* (2007))

38  $BGB = e^{-4,394} D^{2,693}$  *Equation 2* (From de Sierra *et al.* (2007))

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$$1 \quad TB = AB + BGB \quad \text{Equation 3}$$

2 Palm tree biomass (PB; in kg – Equation 4) was also estimated from allometric  
3 equations proposed by Sierra *et al.* (2007), for aboveground biomass as a function of  
4 trunk height (H -in m) (Eq. 4)

$$5 \quad PB = e^{0,360} H^{1,2181} \quad \text{Equation 4 (From Sierra et al.(2007))}$$

6 To quantify carbon sequestration, it is necessary to estimate growth for a period  
7 of time. To do so, we used the inventory data described above in conjunction with  
8 scaling allometric relations proposed by Enquist *et al.* (2007). These equations estimate  
9 biomass change in time as follows (Eq. 5)

$$10 \quad M_A = \beta_G M^\theta \quad \text{Equation 5 (From Enquist et al. (2007))}$$

11 Where  $M_A$  is the annual production of biomass ( $\text{g year}^{-1}$ );  $\beta_G$  is an allometric  
12 constant corresponding to the net biomass production per unit foliar mass, and its values  
13 vary for angiosperms ( $2.43 \text{g}^{1/4} \text{year}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{IC}_{95\%}=0.44-11.92$ ) and gymnosperms ( $1.35 \text{g}^{1/4} \text{year}^{-1}$ ,  
14  $\text{IC}_{95\%}=0.41-4.42$ ), originally developed through integration of global plant trait  
15 databases (Enquist *et al.*, 2007 – Supplementary material);  $M$  corresponds to total tree  
16 biomass (from equations 3 and 4); and  $\theta$  is a metabolic scaling parameter, associated  
17 with the geometry and structural characteristics of trees, for which a value of  $3/4$  is  
18 assigned, according to metabolic scaling theory that provides a metabolic framework  
19 that can be generally applied to all tree forms (Enquist *et al.*, 2007). To convert biomass  
20 into carbon units, we use the factor of 0.42 for palms (Vlek *et al.*, 2005) and 0.45 to the  
21 other trees (Sierra *et al.*, 2007). A conceptual model of our overall methodology is  
22 presented in Appendix Fig 2.

23 To compare and contextualize our estimations, we searched in the existing literature  
24 carbon sequestration estimations for three types of conditions that included: (i) studies  
25 in tropical forests in general, (ii) studies in tropical areas with similar climate and  
26 altitudinal conditions, and (iii) other studies in urban settings, including cities and  
27 university campuses.

### 28 3. Results and Discussion

29 Total biomass in the University collection for 2010 tree inventory data was 3,751.66  
30 tons of Carbon (corresponding to 13,476.80 Mg  $\text{CO}_2$ ) with a sequestration of 80.87  
31 MgC/year (294.89 Mg  $\text{CO}_2$ /year) ( $\text{CI}_{95}=14.66-396.90$ ) (Table 1) and sequestration per  
32 unit of area of  $3.41 \text{Mg C ha}^{-1} \text{year}^{-1}$  ( $12.51 \text{Mg CO}_2 \text{ ha}^{-1} \text{year}^{-1}$ ). Most of the  
33 sequestration (89.4%) occurs in trees belonging to the 10 families in the collection (Fig  
34 2A), 8 of which are among the most common (Fig. 1A). More specifically, most of the  
35 sequestration occurs in individuals of the *Moreceae* family, which, although not the  
36 most common, includes individuals with the largest sizes in the collection (*Ficus*  
37 *benjamina*, *Ficus elastica* with diameters ranging from 0.34-2.00m and 0.37-3.98 m,  
38 respectively), This observation agrees with recent observations that larger/mature trees

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1 have greater potential for carbon sequestration than smaller trees (Stephenson *et al.*,  
2 2014). Conversely, total carbon sequestration was greater in small and medium size  
3 trees (DBH size class 0.1-0.9 m – Fig. 2B, because in these diametric classes can we  
4 find 95% of the trees.

5 Our estimations are not predictive in nature, as there is uncertainty in both tree  
6 biometric measurements (i.e. not including buttress measurements in our estimations  
7 which could lead to underestimations of as much as 10% in DBH (Metcalf *et al.*, 2009),  
8 as well as uncertainty in biomass and tree growth calculations from allometric  
9 equations. For instance, we have used a single equation for palm tree growth, where  
10 other studies have shown that growth in this group can be species-specific (Goodman *et*  
11 *al.*, 2013). Similarly, by using general equations in both the estimation of carbon storage  
12 and sequestration, we may be overgeneralizing species (or family) specific ecological  
13 traits. However, we selected the most relevant allometric models to our study site,  
14 allowing us to limit uncertainty in the calculations. Our proposed method is useful to  
15 overcome data limitations in many environments (particularly the tropics) and provide  
16 an illustration of the necessity to incorporate urban forests into the global carbon  
17 dialogue.

18 In general, our results are comparable to other studies in natural tropical forests  
19 that have found similar amounts of carbon sequestration in tropical regions (Steininger,  
20 2000; Worbes & Raschke, 2012, Fig. 3A). Most of these studies calculated aboveground  
21 carbon sequestration, still comparable with our estimation of aboveground carbon  
22 sequestration, with greater amounts in lowland tropical forests (Bolivia and Brazil) and  
23 lower amounts in higher elevation and secondary forests. Notably, when compared to  
24 similar published studies in urban forests (Aguaron & Mcpherson, 2012; Liu & Li,  
25 2012; Velasco *et al.*, 2013) and university tree collections (Cox, 2012; De Villiers *et al.*  
26 2014) in temperate and subtropical regions of the world (Fig. 3B), our results indicate  
27 that our tree collection has the potential to incorporate as much as 1.2 to 20.8 times the  
28 amount in other similar urban tree collections. These results highlight the potential of  
29 tropical managed tree collections to be an important carbon sink. Carbon sequestration  
30 in both natural and urban forests depends directly on tree size and density (amount of  
31 trees per unit area); to account for these—and to make our results more comparable to  
32 other studies in urban systems—we calculated carbon storage per unit tree. When  
33 considered in a per unit tree basis (Fig. 3B left axis), our estimations indicate that our  
34 tropical tree collection can store from 2.5 to 56.7 times more carbon than similar urban  
35 forests.

36 The University campus is located in a highly urbanized area with high potential  
37 for air pollution associated with vehicle emissions, and recognized as one of the most  
38 critical areas in CO concentrations in the city (Daniels *et al.*, 2007). Although not  
39 considered in our study, other studies have shown that the high concentration of gases,  
40 in densely populated urban areas has the potential to enhance tree growth (Gregg *et al.*,  
41 2003; Keeling *et al.*, 1996). However, it is widely recognized urban trees may not be

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1 able to offset all emissions. In general, efforts to control gas emissions in cities should  
2 be devoted to decrease emission, while increasing the potential for mitigation through  
3 urban forestry (Brack, 2002).

4 Our estimations of carbon sequestration in the University tree collection are  
5 among the first attempts to estimate the potential role of tropical urban forests in carbon  
6 sequestration. Our results are an invitation to the research community to more explicitly  
7 consider the potential carbon benefits of tropical urban forests, along with the already  
8 recognized list of benefits from urban trees (Clark & Matheny, 2009; Sarajevs, 2011).  
9 Notably, we propose a novel approach based on existing data and allometric equations  
10 that can be generally used to provide estimations of carbon storage and sequestration in  
11 urban environments with limited available data.

12 Collectively, our results—which are intended to illustrate the potential of urban  
13 tropical tree collections for storing carbon—illustrate that the amount of carbon  
14 sequestration in tropical urban tree collections is comparable to other tropical  
15 environments, which in turn are significantly higher than estimations for other urban  
16 ecosystems in temperate regions. We hypothesize that these potential is associated with  
17 higher availability of solar radiation throughout the year (with no marked seasonality)  
18 and effective maintenance that compensates for potential nutrient limitations with  
19 fertilization (in our case made with in-situ composted material) as well as irrigation  
20 systems compensating for potential water limitations during the drier portions of the  
21 year. More generally, our results highlight the role of urban tree collections (i.e.  
22 university campuses, botanical gardens and urban parks) in local and regional, and  
23 potentially, global carbon cycling, along with their already recognized function in  
24 educational, cultural and biodiversity support services. We encourage the research  
25 community to collectively improve our ability to better characterize tropical urban  
26 forest function and to incorporate it into the global carbon management coordination as  
27 suggested by the recent 21<sup>st</sup> conference of the parties (COP21).

28

29 **Acknowledgements:** We thank Gladys Vélez for tree biometry data, Dirección de  
30 Gestión logística e infraestructura Universidad de Antioquia for logistical support,  
31 Grupo Aliados con el Planeta for conceptual discussion, Katerine Cárdenas, Ana  
32 Posada, Alejandro Montealegre, Andrés González, Jorge Giraldo and Kevin Pulgarín  
33 for field support. Financial support for this work was provided by Programa jóvenes  
34 investigadores Universidad de Antioquia 2012-2013, GIGA research group, and  
35 Estrategia de sostenibilidad 2014-2015 Universidad de Antioquia.

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## On the role of urban tropical tree collections in carbon allocation: expanding their

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## functions beyond cultural and biodiversity conservation

### 1 Tables

2

	Mean value	CI <sub>95%</sub> Lower limit	CI <sub>95%</sub> Higher limit
Angiosperms* (C Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	80.48	14.57	395.44
Angiosperms* (CO <sub>2</sub> Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	294.89	53.40	1448.98
Gymnosperms (C Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	0.08	0.02	0.26
Gymnosperms (CO <sub>2</sub> Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	0.30	0.09	0.97
Palms (C Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	0.33	0.06	1.19
Palms (CO <sub>2</sub> Mg year <sup>-1</sup> )	1.19	0.22	4.37

3 Table 1. Carbon and CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration in Angiosperms and Gymnosperms.

4 \*Angiosperms were divided up into palms and other angiosperms, as allometric  
5 equations to calculate carbon sequestration for both groups were different.

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# On the role of urban tropical tree collections in carbon allocation: expanding their

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## functions beyond cultural and biodiversity conservation

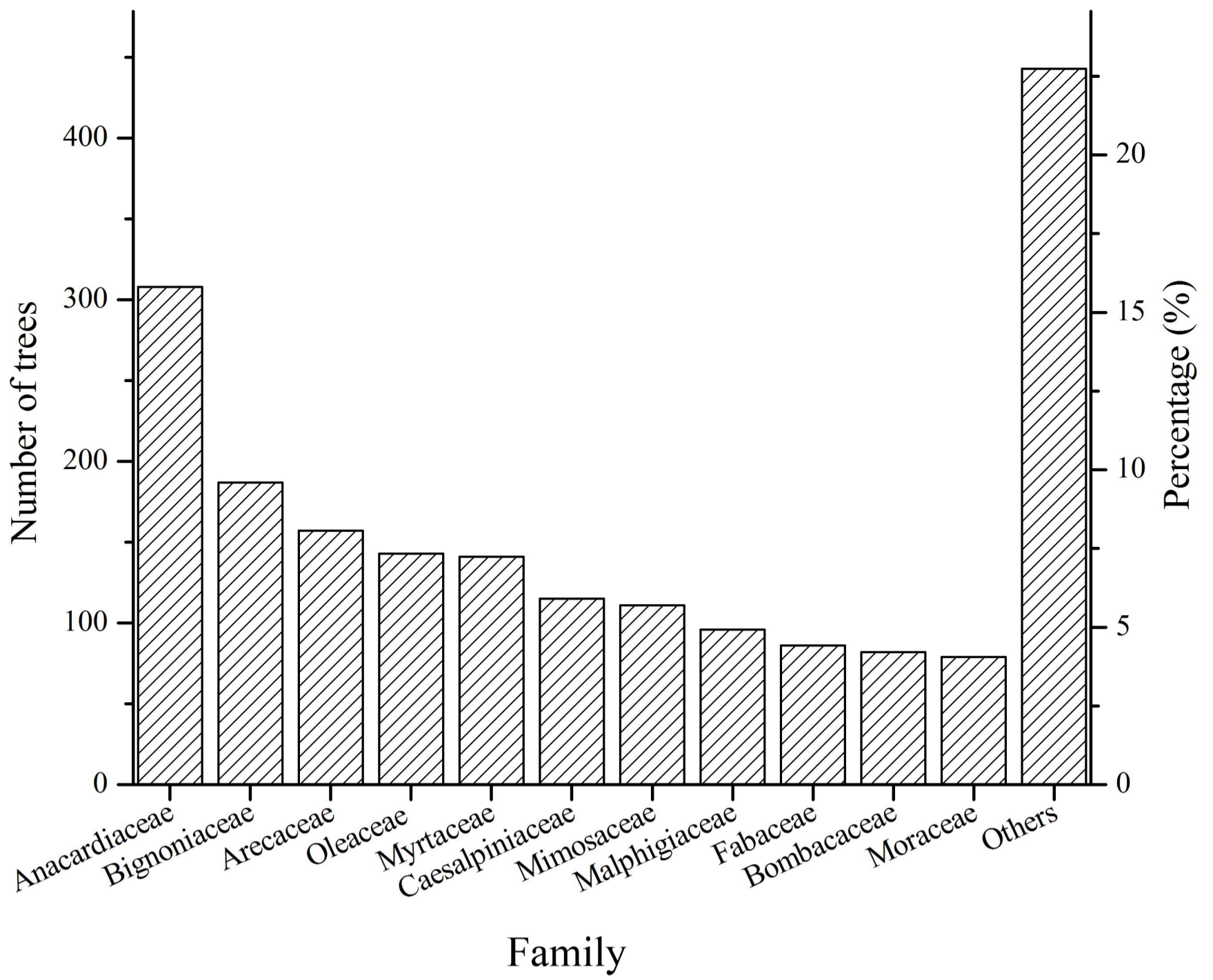
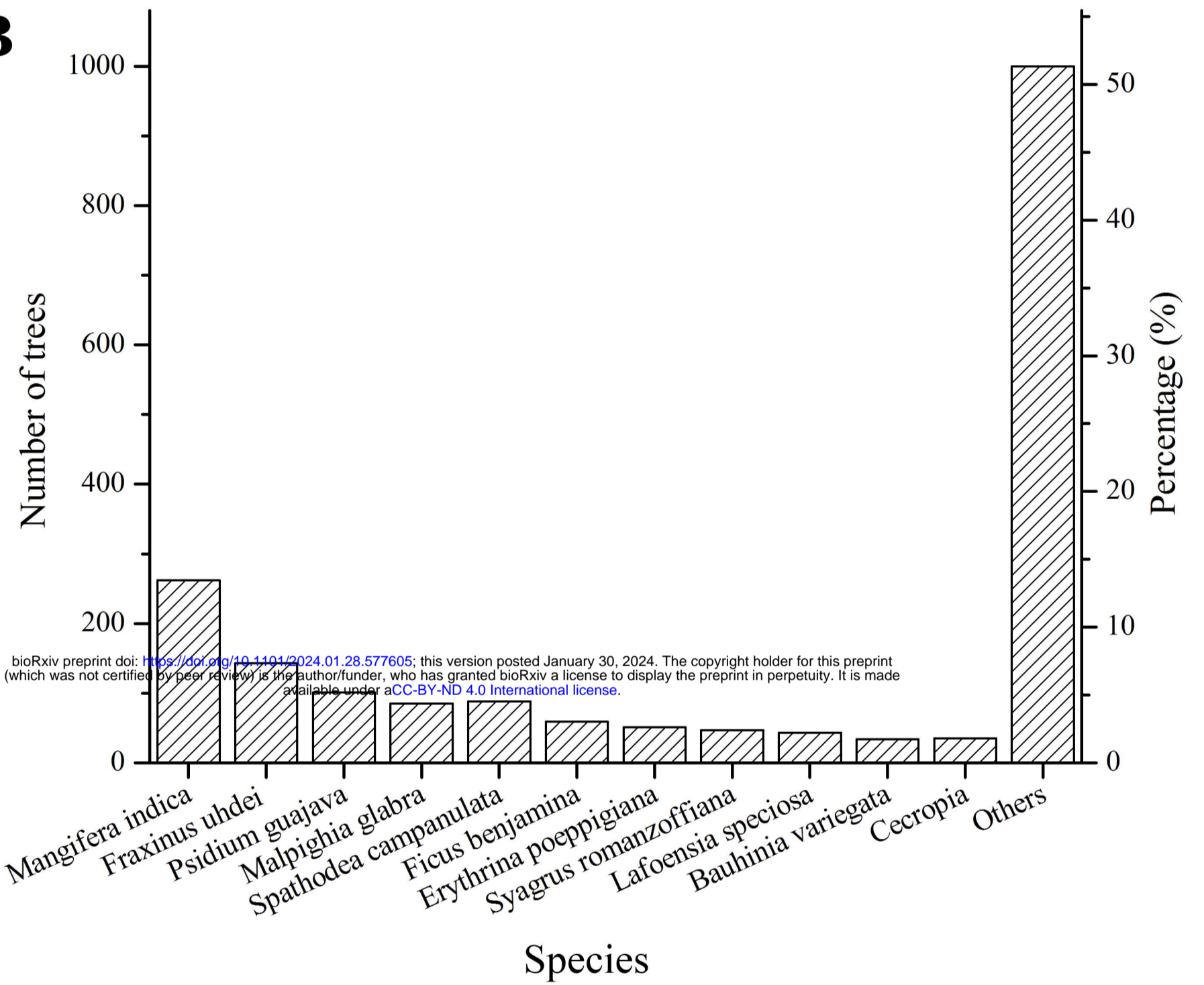
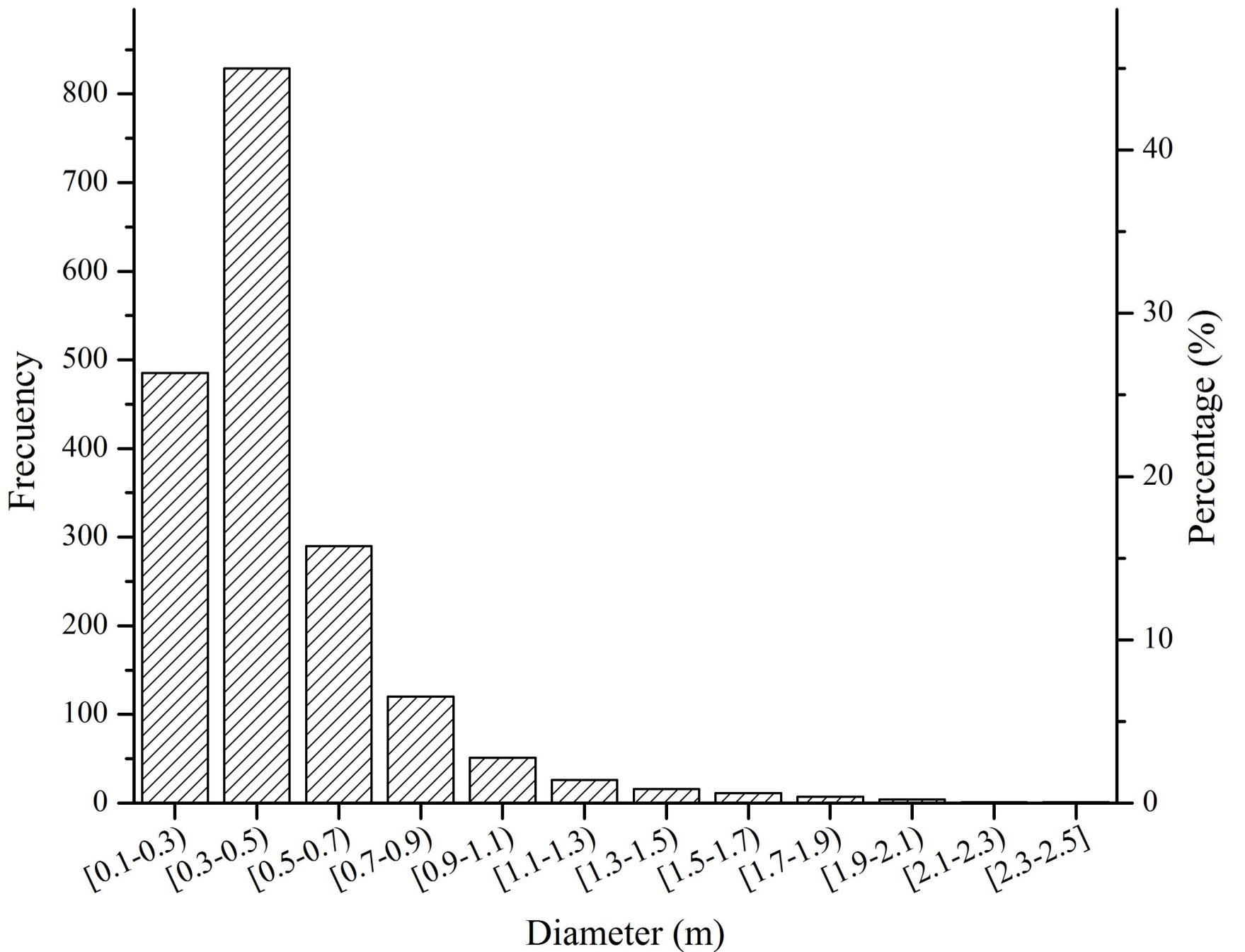
### 1 **Figure legends**

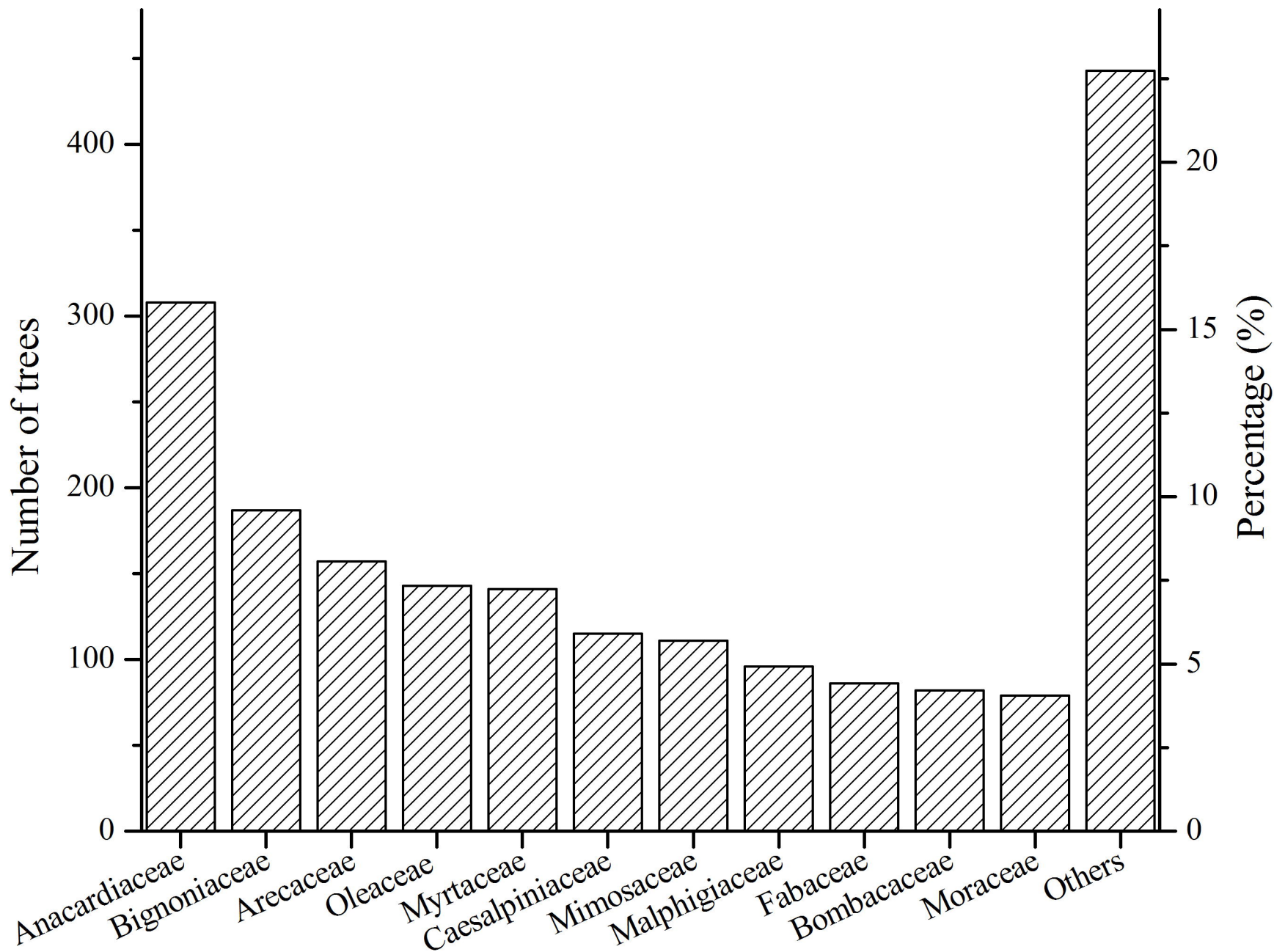
2 Figure 1. General biometric and taxonomical characteristics of the University tree  
3 collection. (A) DBH (diameter at breast height) size distribution. (B) Common families  
4 and (C) Species in the university tree collection.

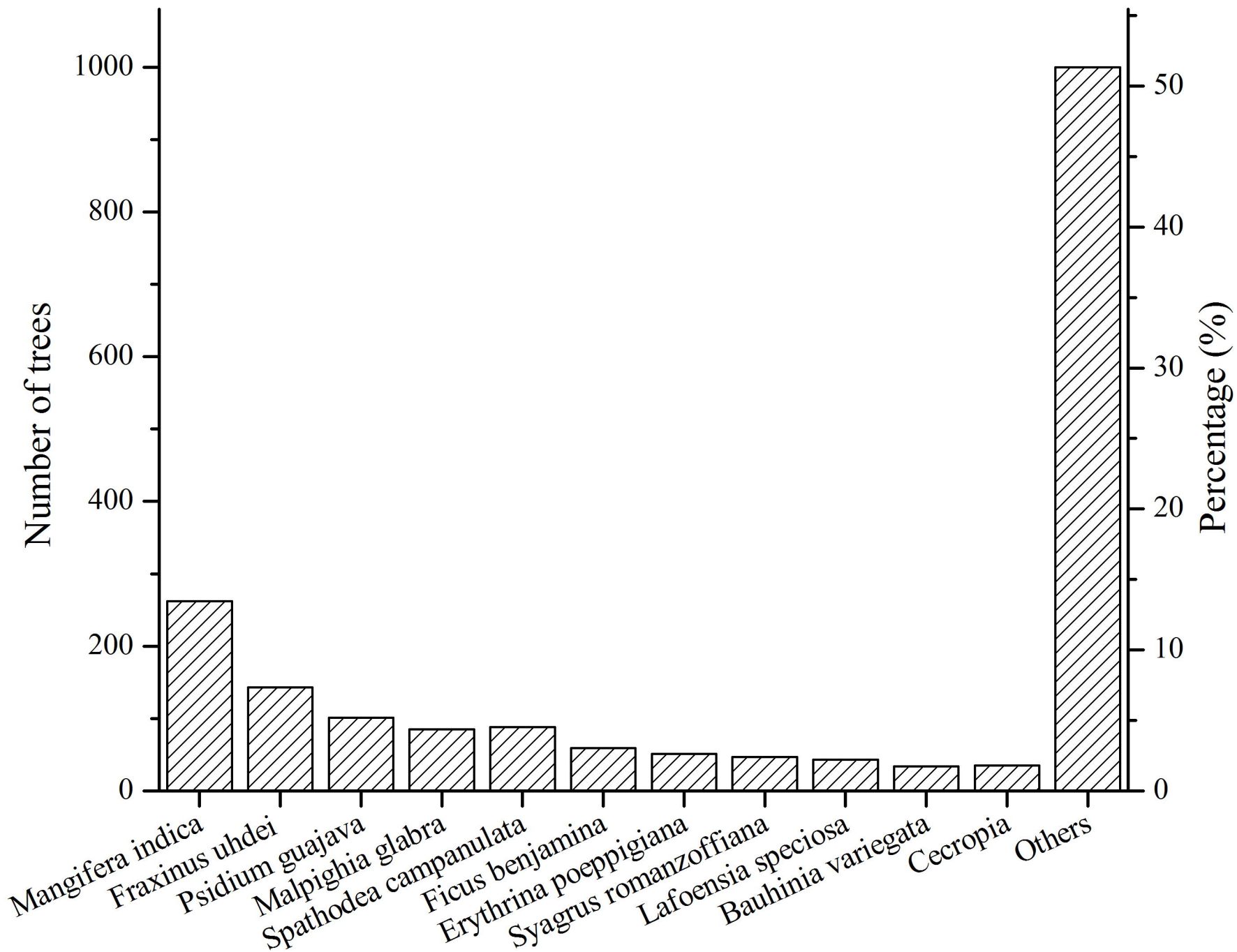
5  
6 Figure 2. Carbon sequestration per family per year (left axis) and as a percentage from  
7 the total sequestration (80.87 Mg C per year) in the collection (right axis), including the  
8 ten families with the largest amounts of carbon sequestration.

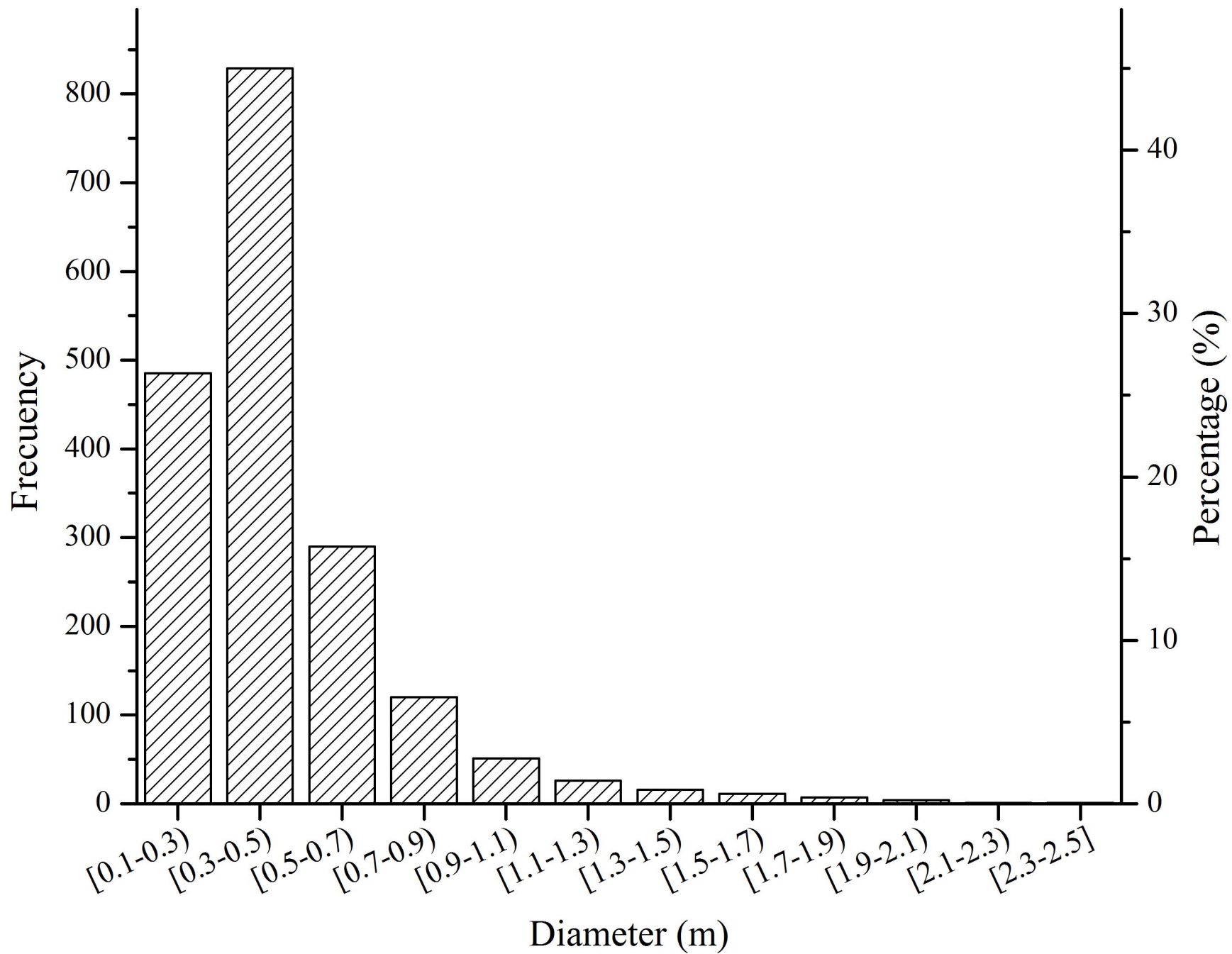
9  
10 Figure 3. Carbon sequestration in the University tree collection in comparison with (A)  
11 tropical forests (data from Steininger, 2000; Worbes & Raschke, 2012) and (B) other  
12 urban forests, including city and University tree collections (data from Aguaron &  
13 Mcpherson, 2012; Liu & Li, 2012; Velasco *et al.*, 2013; Cox, 2012; De Villiers *et al.*  
14 2014)

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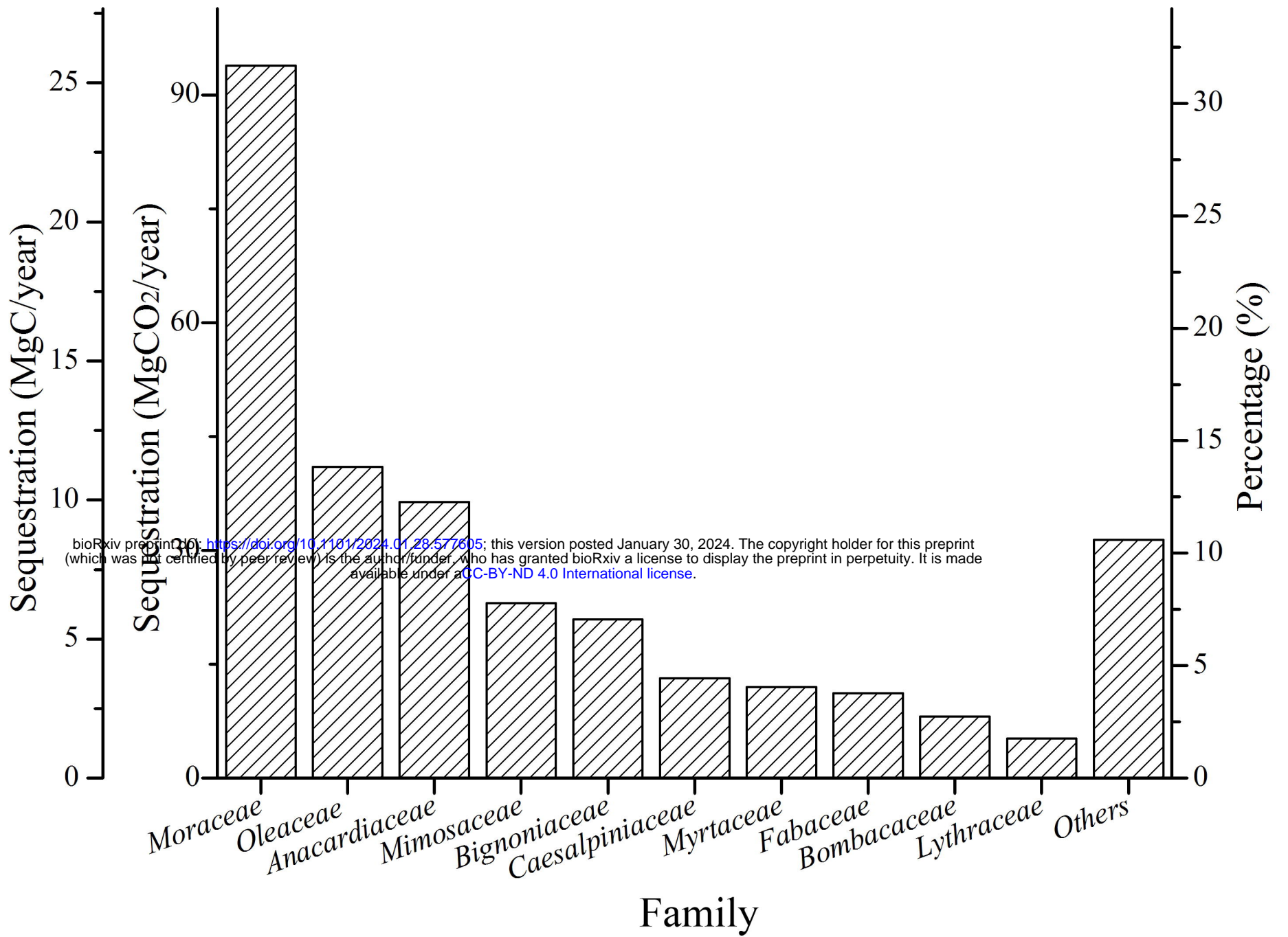
**A****B****C**









**A****B**