Comparison of Snag Dynamics in Four Forest Community Types of the Central Pine Barrens

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ABSTRACT

The Long Island Central Pine Barrens (CPB) contains a variety of threatened forest communities that require active management. To determine future management practices the Foundation for Ecological Research in the Northeast (FERN) has initiated a forest health-monitoring project to evaluate potential forest health indicators (e.g. amount of available habitat) in the CPB. Snags (standing dead trees) provide suitable habitat for a variety of forest wildlife. The goal of this research was to quantify the abundance of snags in four of the forest community types in the CPB, to determine which community has a greater amount of available habitat. Field data was collected at forty random plots (16 x 25 meters (m) 400m²), using the Monitoring Protocols for Central Pine Barrens Field Plots prepared by Michael (Mike) Batcher. The field data collected at the forty plots was analyzed to estimate the abundance of snags in the targeted community types and establish the average diameter at breast height (dbh) of snags in each community type. Data analysis shows that the community type with the greatest incidence of snags is coastal oak forest followed by oak-pine, pine-oak, and pitch pine, respectively. However more data is needed to increase the accuracy of the findings. The greatest average dbh exists in oak-pine forest, but when a standard deviation is applied to the data it shows there is no difference in the range of dbh’s in each community type. This research is ongoing and when the data presented here is linked with future data, they can be used to determine the health of the forest.

METHODS

All methods used to collect data came from the CPB forest health monitoring protocols by M. Batcher [3]. Field data was collected at forty random 16 x 25m plots, shown in figure 2, generated in Geographic Information System (GIS) by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), in the targeted forest community types in the core preservation area of the Long Island Central Pine Barrens. Each plot was then located using Global Positioning System (GPS) units and navigated to the Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinates generated in GIS. Once the plot was located the boundaries of the 16 x 25m plot were laid out using two 50-m tapes and chain pins. Then, using dbh tape all snags inside the plot were measured and their dbh was measured and recorded if it was >10cm at breast height. The reason data was only recorded for snags >10cm dbh is because they provide habitat for a more diverse amount of wildlife.

The field data collected at the fifty plots was entered into a Microsoft Access database created by M. Batcher. The data was then transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

RESULTS

The community types examined in this research follow a pattern of succession that generally starts with pitch pine forest, which is then succeeded by pine-oak forest, oak-pine forest, and finally reaches coastal oak, the climax community. In their natural state, the CPB communities are dependent on wildfires to convert them from a later stage, such as coastal oak forest, to an earlier stage, such as pine-oak forest [2]. Based on the fact that pitch pine forest exists as a result of disturbance by wildfires, and coastal oak forest exists as the result of a lack of disturbance by wildfires, we would expect to see the greatest abundance of snags in coastal oak forest. Consequently, we would expect that amount to decline in oak-pine forest, pine-oak forest and pitch pine forest, respectively.

The data clearly shows that the coastal oak forest community in the CPB contains the greatest abundance of available habitat in the form of snags. As expected that amount declines in oak-pine forest, pine-oak forest, and pitch pine forest. However, statistical analysis should be conducted to determine if we have sampled enough plots in each community type for the data to be statistically significant, and if we haven’t, further analysis is needed to determine the number of additional plots that need to be sampled in each community type to make the data statistically significant. Average dbh’s show that the oak-pine forest community contains the largest average dbh, although, as seen in Figure 3, when the standard deviation is applied to the data it shows there is no difference in the range of dbh’s in the different community types. Pitch pine forest and oak-pine forest, again, lack a sufficient number of plots to represent them in this research; there was only one snag in the five pitch pine forest plots, so a standard deviation could not be applied.

This research is the first step in an ongoing project to monitor the health of the CPB. The baseline data presented in this paper gives a general idea of the abundance and average densities of snags in the CPB, and when it is linked with data from future sampling it can be used as an indicator to help establish the health of the forest. When the data is complete research needs to be conducted on the cavity dependent species of the CPB to determine how snag/ha is optimal for each of those species to sustain a healthy population. Then, by overlapping the optimal amount snag/ha each species needs and comparing that to what’s available to them in the different community types the diversity of wildlife populations in those community types can be estimated and that information can be used to aid in the development of future environmental management plans for the CPB. To enhance future data it is suggested that modifications be made to future sampling protocols to include the condition of the snags as in [4,6,5], the number of foraging/nesting cavities as in [6], what species of animal, if any, is using the snag and for what purpose as in [6].

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

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REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Department of Energy, Office of Science and Brookhaven National Laboratory for the opportunity to take part in the CCI program. I would also like to thank the Foundation for Ecological Research in the Northeast for creating and funding my project, thanks to my mentor Dr. Timothy M. Green and Robert R. Anderson for their guidance and sharing their knowledge. I also thank, in no particular order, the rest of the FERN crew, Matt Kull, Miranda Davis, Kathryn M. Gutleber, Dana Tievsky, and Andrew Siefert for their partnership and friendship in the field and office, Noel Blackburn for always being there for me, Serena Johnson for her help with GIS and for always taking time for my questions, Frank “blank” Smith, Wendy “dorsal” Finn, Chris “macho” Camacho and Valerie Tinus for keeping me up nights, and my CCRI biology professors Dr. Jean Billebeek and Don Fontes for sharing their wisdom on my journey and constantly pushing me to see things differently.