

## Has land use pushed terrestrial biodiversity beyond the planetary boundary? A global assessment

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1 **Title: Has land use pushed terrestrial biodiversity beyond the planetary**  
2 **boundary? A global assessment**  
3

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24 **One Sentence Summary:** Land use has reduced biosphere intactness below safe limits across  
25 most of the terrestrial surface, especially in grassland biomes.

26 **Abstract:** Land use and related pressures have reduced local terrestrial biodiversity, but it is  
27 unclear how the magnitude of change relates to the recently proposed planetary boundary ('safe  
28 limit'). We estimate that land use and related pressures have already reduced local biodiversity  
29 intactness – the average proportion of natural biodiversity remaining in local ecosystems –  
30 beyond its recently-proposed planetary boundary across 58.1% of the world's land surface,  
31 where 71.4% of the human population live. Biodiversity intactness within most biomes  
32 (especially grassland biomes), most biodiversity hotspots, and even some wilderness areas, is  
33 inferred to be beyond the boundary. Such widespread transgression of safe limits suggests that  
34 biodiversity loss, if unchecked, will undermine efforts towards long-term sustainable  
35 development.

36 **Main Text:**

37 Land use and related pressures have been the main drivers of terrestrial biodiversity change  
38 (1) and are increasing (2). Biodiversity has already experienced widespread large net losses (3),

39 potentially compromising its contribution to resilient provision of ecosystem functions and  
40 services, such as biomass production and pollination, that underpin human wellbeing (4–7).  
41 Species-removal experiments suggest that loss of ecosystem function accelerates with ongoing  
42 species loss (5), implying there may be thresholds beyond which human intervention is needed to  
43 ensure adequate local ecosystem function (8, 9). The loss of 20% of species – which affects  
44 ecosystem productivity as strongly as other direct drivers (5) – is one possible threshold, but it is  
45 unclear by which mechanism species richness affects ecosystem function, and whether there are  
46 direct effects or only effects on resilience of function (6, 7). Whereas this proposed safe limit  
47 comes from studies of local ecosystem health, the Planetary Boundaries framework (8, 9)  
48 considers longer-term maintenance of function over much larger (biome to global) scales. At  
49 these temporal and spatial scales, the maintenance of function depends on functional diversity –  
50 the ranges and abundances of the functional traits of the species present (8, 10). As direct  
51 functional trait data are lacking, the Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII: the average abundance of  
52 originally present species across a broad range of species, relative to abundance in undisturbed  
53 habitat; (11)) is suggested as the best metric (8, 9). The safe limit is placed at a precautionary  
54 10% reduction in BII, but it might be as high as a 70% reduction (9).

55 A key uncertainty when estimating safe limits concerns the value of species not present in  
56 the undisturbed ecosystem. Such species could benefit ecosystem functioning, have no effect (as  
57 assumed by the BII), or even impair it (12–15). Most models estimating net human impacts on  
58 biodiversity (3, 16) treat novel and originally-present species as functionally equivalent, whereas  
59 experimental studies manipulate species originally present (17).

60 Given the possibly severe consequences of transgressing safe biodiversity limits, global  
61 assessments of relevant metrics are needed urgently. Data limitations have hampered efforts to  
62 date: BII has so far only been estimated, from expert opinion, for seven southern African  
63 countries (11). More recently, we combined global models linking land-use pressures to local  
64 biodiversity with global land-use maps. We estimated that net reductions in local species  
65 richness exceeded 20% across 28% of the world's land surface by 2005, while 48.7% of land had  
66 seen net reductions in total abundance of  $\geq 10\%$  (3). However, our projections of net effects did  
67 not account for any reductions of originally-present diversity that were offset by influx of novel  
68 species (18), as well as being at too coarse a scale ( $\sim 50 \text{ km}^2$ ) to be relevant for local ecosystem  
69 functioning and decision making. Furthermore, we did not analyze the spatial distribution of the  
70 transgression of proposed safe limits.

71 Here we present fine-scale ( $\sim 1 \text{ km}^2$ ) global estimates of how land-use pressures have  
72 affected the numbers of species and individuals found in samples from local terrestrial ecological  
73 assemblages (19). To explore different assumptions about novel species, we estimate both  
74 overall net change (correct if novel species contribute fully to ecosystems) and – using estimates  
75 of species turnover among land uses to exclude novel species – change in species originally  
76 present (correct if novel species play no role). We ask how much of the Earth's land surface is  
77 already 'biotically compromised' (i.e. exceeds the boundaries of 10% loss of abundance or 20%  
78 loss of species). We focus on results for the relative abundance of originally-present species  
79 (BII), because this is the measure suggested in the Planetary Boundaries framework (9). We  
80 estimate average losses per biome, because of the suggested importance of biomes for the  
81 functioning of the whole Earth System (8, 9), and to assess possible consequences for people –  
82 assuming that many biodiversity-regulated ecosystem services operate locally – we quantify the  
83 geographical congruence between biodiversity reduction and human population. We also assess  
84 the biotic integrity of areas identified as particularly important for conservation (although the

85 proposed planetary boundary in terms of BII may not always be relevant for areas much smaller  
86 than biomes, and probably needs to vary depending on the sensitivity of the biota). First,  
87 Conservation International's 'Biodiversity Hotspots' – areas rich in endemic species but with  
88 high levels of habitat loss – have been suggested as urgent conservation priorities (20). Because  
89 these areas were identified reactively (20) with a criterion of 70% loss of primary vegetation, we  
90 expect them to have lower biodiversity intactness than average. For comparison, we also  
91 estimate the biodiversity intactness of Conservation International's High Biodiversity Wilderness  
92 Areas, which also meet the criterion of high species endemism, but which retain 70% of their  
93 natural habitat and so present more opportunity for proactive conservation (20).

94 We modelled how sampled richness and abundance respond to land-use pressures using  
95 data from the PREDICTS (Projecting Responses of Ecological Diversity in Changing Terrestrial  
96 Systems) database (21). These data consisted of 2,382,624 records (Fig. S1; nearly twice as  
97 many as our earlier, coarser-scale analyses (3)) of the abundance (1,888,784 records) or else  
98 occurrence of 39,123 species at 18,659 sites. The hierarchical mixed-effects models we used  
99 considered four pressure variables – land use, land-use intensity, human population density and  
100 proximity to the nearest road – as fixed effects (Figs. S2-3), while random effects accounted for  
101 among-study differences in sampling (methods, effort and focal taxonomic groups) and for the  
102 spatial arrangement of sampled sites within studies (see Supplementary Methods). We had  
103 insufficient data to fit separate models for each biome or clade. Responses may vary  
104 taxonomically or geographically, although our earlier analyses (3) showed no significant  
105 differences among plants, invertebrates and vertebrates, and suggested limited variation among  
106 biomes. As more data become available, future analyses will be better able to reflect any  
107 differences in response. We combined the models of species richness and total abundance with  
108 models of species turnover among land uses (based on 24, but adapted to reflect asymmetric  
109 differences among land uses), to discount the fraction of species absent in non-primary habitat  
110 (see Methods for details). To map modelled responses, we used global pressure data for the year  
111 2005 at a resolution of 30 arc seconds (approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup>). We used land-use estimates for  
112 2005 (25), and estimated land-use intensity as in (3); human population (for the year 2000) came  
113 from (22) and proximity to nearest road from (23). Values of the response variables are always  
114 expressed relative to an intact assemblage undisturbed by humans, so do not rely on estimates of  
115 absolute abundance or species richness, which vary widely among biomes and taxa.

116 Our map of terrestrial BII (Fig. 1A; Fig. S4) suggests that the average local abundance of  
117 originally present species (11) globally has fallen to 84.6% (95% confidence interval: 82.2-  
118 91.6%) of its value in the absence of human land-use effects, probably below the value (90%)  
119 proposed as a safe limit (9). Considering net changes in abundance, as in (3), assuming that  
120 novel species contribute fully to ecosystem function, global average abundance has fallen to  
121 88.0% (95% CI: 83.5-94.8%) of its value before human effects.

122 Assuming that only originally present species contribute to ecosystem function, most of the  
123 world's land surface is biotically compromised in terms of BII (58.1% of terrestrial area; 95% CI:  
124 40.4-70.2%; Fig. 1A) and within-sample richness of originally present species (62.4%; 95% CI:  
125 20.0-72.7%; Fig. 1B). If the proposed boundaries are broadly correct, ongoing human  
126 intervention may be needed to ensure delivery of ecosystem functions across most of the world  
127 (5). The proposed planetary boundary for BII (9) had uncertainty ranging from 30% to 90%; the  
128 proportion of the land surface exceeding the boundary varies widely across this range (Fig. S5),  
129 highlighting the urgent need for better understanding of how BII relates to Earth-system  
130 functioning (9). Assuming that novel species contribute as much to ecosystems as originally

131 present species we estimate the safe limit for total abundance to have been crossed in 48.4%  
132 (95% CI: 30.9-66.5%) of land (Fig. 1C) and that for within-sample species richness in 58.4%  
133 (95% CI: 21.8-75.0%; Fig. 1D). Even assuming that novel species have no effect on ecosystem  
134 function will be optimistic if they actually impair it, an important question to test in future. Most  
135 people (71.4%) live in biotically compromised areas, as judged by BII (Fig. 2), although  
136 uncertainty in this result was high (95% CI: 8.7-92.4%). There is growing evidence that access to  
137 high-biodiversity areas benefits people's physical and psychological wellbeing (26, 27), although  
138 uncertainty remains over which aspects of biodiversity are important.

139 The biodiversity impact of land-use pressures varies among biomes (Fig. 3A; Table S2):  
140 grasslands are most affected, and tundra and boreal forests least. Our BII estimates suggest 9 of  
141 the 14 terrestrial biomes (95% CI: 4-12) have on average transgressed safe limits for biodiversity  
142 (Fig. 3A), although this number drops to seven (95% CI: 1-12) if novel species are included. The  
143 BII limit has been crossed in 22 of 34 terrestrial 'Biodiversity Hotspots' (28) (95% CI: 7-31; Fig.  
144 3B; Table S3); this figure falls to 12 (95% CI: 5-32) if novel species are included, again  
145 highlighting the need to understand their effects on ecosystem function. Given that Biodiversity  
146 Hotspots were identified partly based on widespread historical habitat loss (20), their low  
147 average BII is unsurprising, although our results suggest that at least some hotspots might stay  
148 within safe ecological limits if future land conversion is reduced. In contrast, three out of the five  
149 High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas, which were identified for conservation proactively because  
150 the habitat is still relatively intact (20), have not experienced average losses of local biodiversity  
151 (BII) that cross the planetary boundaries (95% CI: 2-4; Fig. 3C; Table S4; four out of five if  
152 novel species are included; 95% CI: 2-5). Results concerning which areas have crossed proposed  
153 planetary boundaries were generally consistent between the richness- and abundance-based  
154 biodiversity measures (Figure 3; Tables S2-4).

155 Our models suggest generally smaller impacts of land use on BII than a previous study  
156 (11). This might reflect differences in taxonomic coverage, but there are also two reasons why  
157 our results may overestimate BII. First, we ignore lagged responses. Second, our models use sites  
158 in primary vegetation as a baseline, because historical data are so rare (3, 11); these sites will  
159 often have experienced some human impact. Nevertheless, it is important to note that since our  
160 models are global, their baseline is not biome- or region-specific, and they do not rely on data  
161 from minimally impacted land use from heavily modified landscapes, where such conditions do  
162 not exist. Our data have good coverage of taxa and biomes (Fig. S1), but the density of sampling  
163 is inevitably uneven. Biomes that are particularly underrepresented, relative to their global  
164 ecosystem productivity, are boreal forests, tundra, flooded grasslands and savannas and  
165 mangroves (Fig. S1), meaning that less confidence can be placed in the results for these biomes.  
166 The data probably also under-represent soil and canopy species. The estimate of land area  
167 biotically compromised in terms of species richness is much higher than our previous assessment  
168 (58.4 vs. 28.4%, although the confidence intervals overlap), but the estimates based on total  
169 abundance are almost identical (48.4% vs. 48.7%; 3). The discrepancy for species richness is  
170 because of a stronger modelled interaction here between land use and human population density  
171 (Fig. S3), and because we include the effect of roads and the interaction between roads and land  
172 use, which were omitted from the projections in (3).

173 The Sustainable Development Goals adopted in September 2015 (29) aim to improve  
174 human wellbeing while protecting, restoring and sustainably using terrestrial ecosystems. Our  
175 results highlight the magnitude of the challenge. Exploitation of terrestrial systems has been vital  
176 for human development throughout history (30), but the cost to biosphere integrity has been

177 high. Slowing or reversing the global loss of local biodiversity will require preserving the  
 178 remaining areas of natural (primary) vegetation and, so far as possible, restoring human-used  
 179 lands to natural (secondary) vegetation. Such an outcome would be beneficial for biodiversity,  
 180 ecosystems and – at least in the long term – human wellbeing.

181

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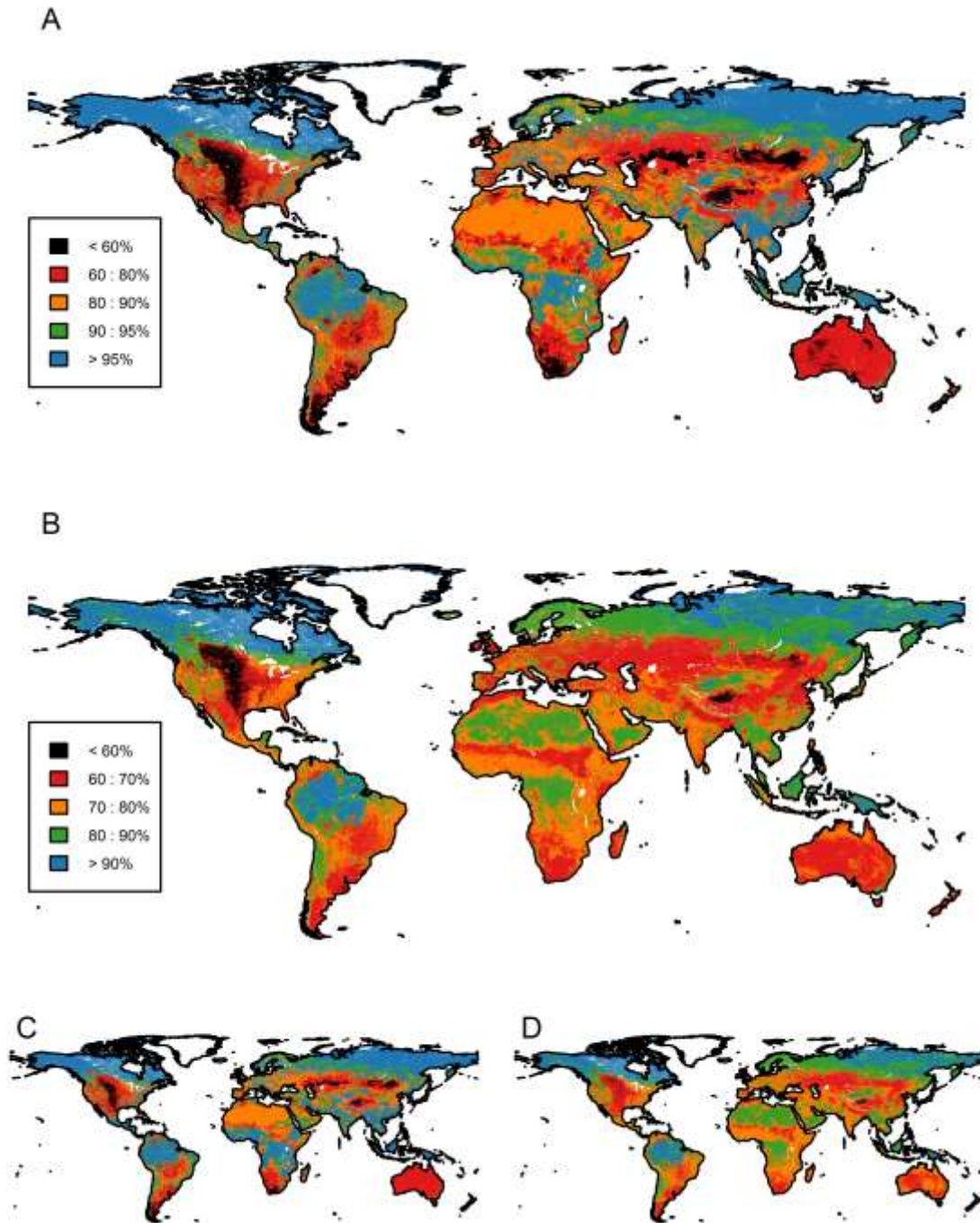
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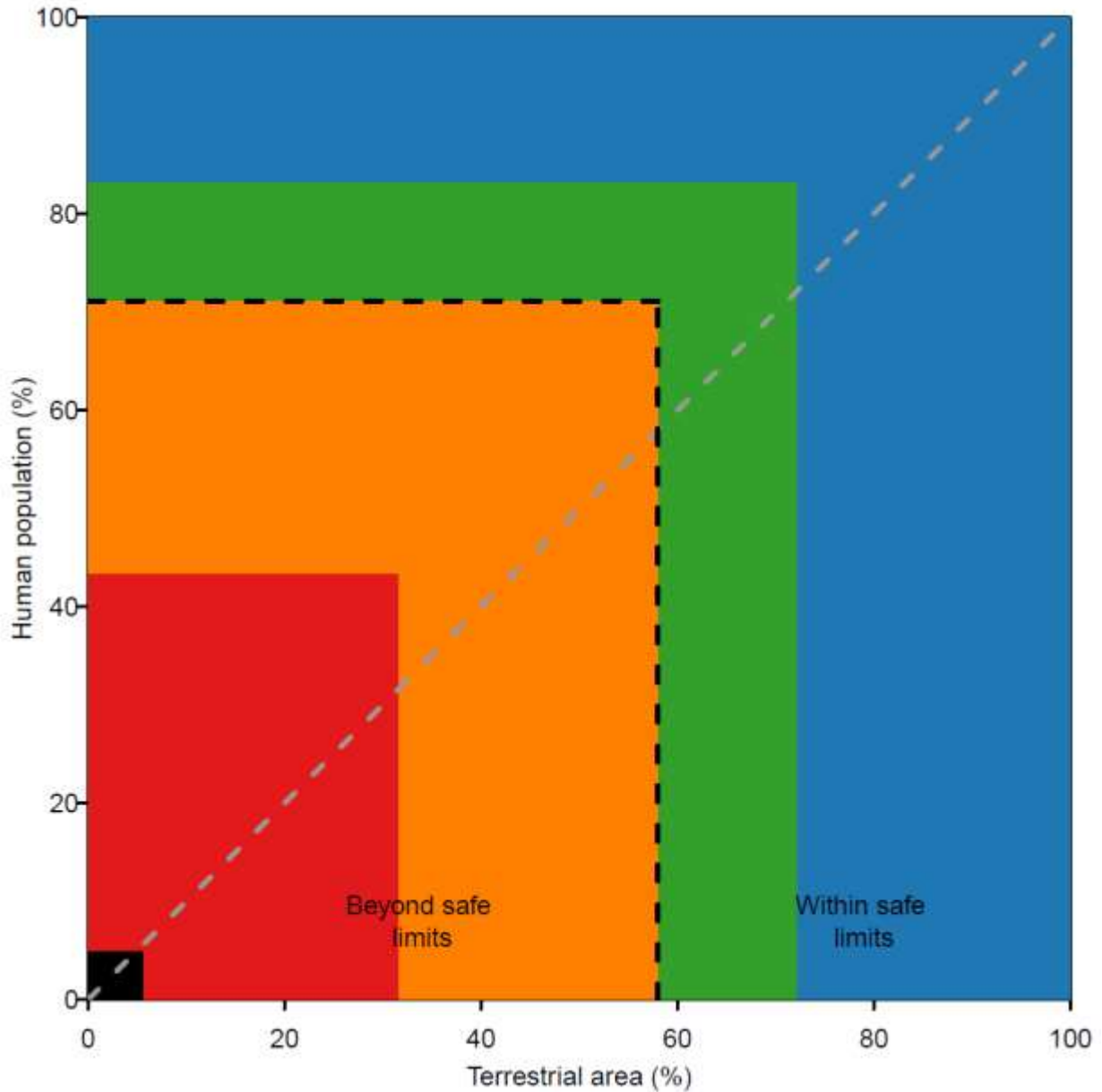
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**Fig. 1. Biodiversity intactness of ecological assemblages**, in terms of (A) total abundance of species occurring in primary vegetation (i.e. BII), (B) richness of species occurring in primary vegetation. Panels C and D correspond to A and B, respectively, and have the same legend values, but including species not present in primary vegetation.

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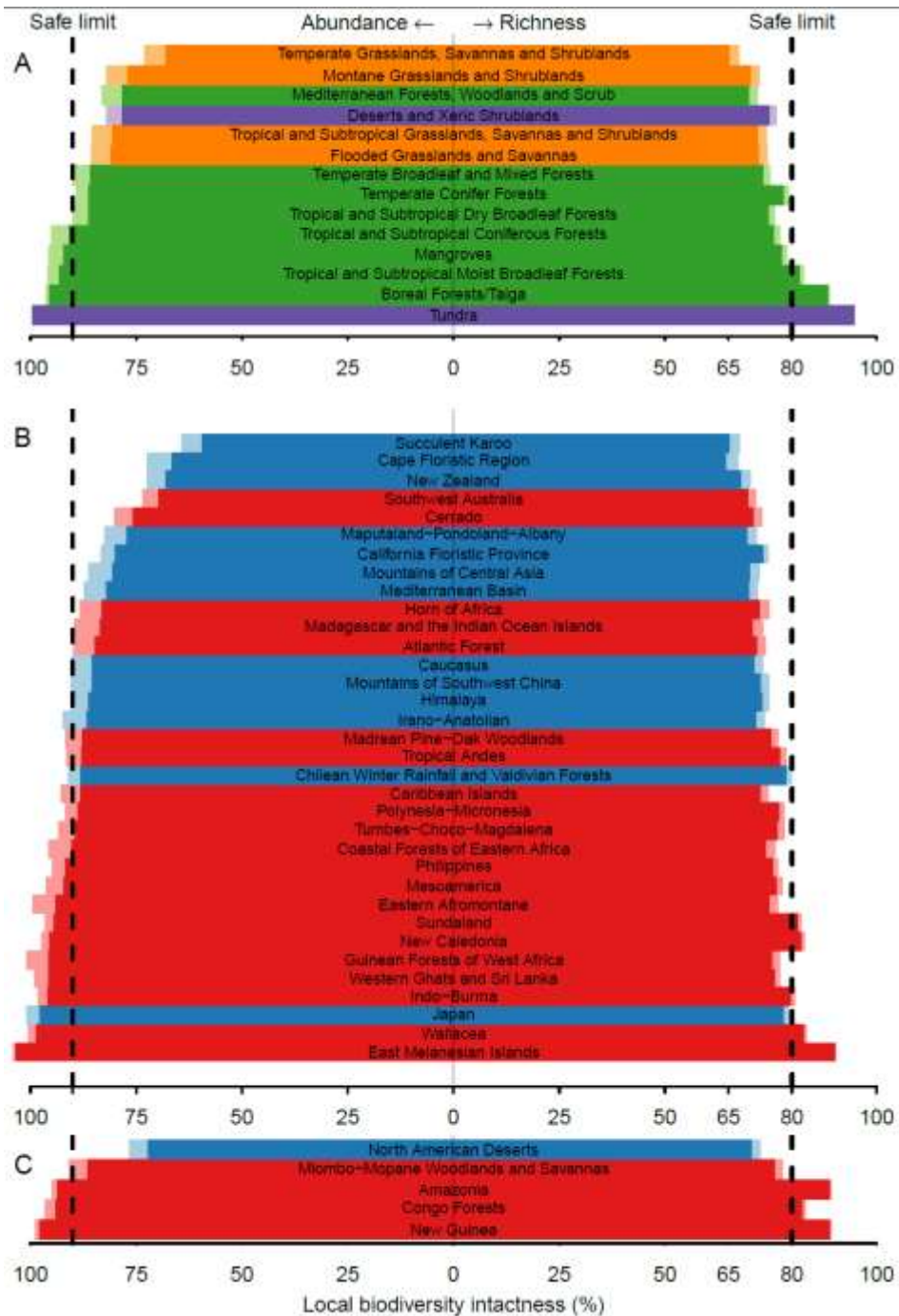
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**Fig. 2. Terrestrial area and human population at different levels of the Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII).** Biodiversity intactness increases from bottom-left to top-right, and has the same colour scheme as Fig. 1. The dashed black line shows the position of the planetary boundary (9): only areas to the right and human population above this line (shaded green and blue) are within the proposed safe operating space. If human population were distributed randomly with respect to BII, the corners of the boxes would align with the dashed grey line; the extent to which the corners lie above this line indicates the strength of the bias in human populations toward less intact areas.

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1325 **Fig. 3. Biodiversity intactness for biomes, Biodiversity Hotspots and High Biodiversity**1326 **Wilderness Areas.** Biodiversity intactness in terms of total abundance (BII; solid bars on left)

1327 and species richness (solid bars on right) in each of 14 terrestrial biomes (A), 34 Biodiversity

1328 Hotspots (B), and five High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas (C). Translucent bars show the

1329 corresponding relative biodiversity values if novel species are treated as equivalent to those

1330 originally present (these numbers can surpass 100% because gains may outnumber losses). Bars

1331 in (A) are coloured by major biome type (orange = grasslands, green = forests, purple = other),

1332 while bars in (B) and (C) are coloured according to whether they are in the temperate (blue) or

1332 tropical (red) realms.

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1335 **Supplementary Materials:**

1336 Materials and Methods

1337 Figures S1-S7

1338 Tables S1-S7

1339 References (31-457)