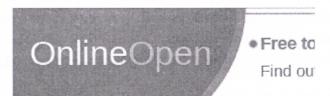
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Productivity and management of *Phytelephas aequatorialis* (*Arecaceae*) in Ecuador

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Abstract

Phytelephas aequatorialis is endemic to western Ecuador. Vegetable ivory (tagua, the hard endosperm) and leaves for thatch (cade) are harvested from the palm and commercialised. Export of vegetable ivory from Ecuador reached a value of 14 million US\$ in 2011, making it the second most important product from native palms in the country. Vegetable ivory and leaves are harvested mainly from the wild, although the palm is occasionally cultivated. Most seeds harvested for vegetable ivory are collected from the ground. In times of high demand, however, some harvesters collect immature infructescences; these young seeds are of inferior quality and unsuitable for the fabrication of tagua discs for export. Premature harvest reduces the amount of fully mature, high-quality seed leading to resource limitation for the processing industry that already is unable to satisfy international demand. Fruit production in lowland agroforestry systems strongly correlates to the level of exposure to light. The development of infructescences takes 3 years in the lowlands (≤93 m a.s.l.) and over 4 years on the Andean slopes at around 1400 m a.s.l. Data from 365 tagged individuals show that male palms produce

significantly more leaves than female palms and palms growing in the shade produce fewer, but longer and higher quality leaves for thatch. Leaf harvest has little impact on leaf production, but substantially reduces fruit production. Natural regeneration of *Phytelephas* populations in pastures is negatively affected, rendering the survival of these populations problematic. Sustainable use and commercialization of the two partially exclusive and locally competing products *tagua* (vegetable ivory) and *cade* (leaves for thatch) must be carefully designed. Application of unsustainable practices in the harvest of seeds and leaves, population decline in pastures, and resource limitation in the processing industry represent the main challenges in the sustainable use of this valuable palm species in the future.

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