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# **Plant Ecology, Herbivory, and Human Impact in Nordic Mountain Birch Forests**

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With 69 Figures, 21 Tables, and CD-ROM

 Springer

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*Cover illustration:* Scheme after an idea of F.E. Wielgolaski. Background photo by H. Bylund (see Fig. 12.1)

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## Preface

In Fennoscandia and Iceland, large parts of particularly elevated areas are treeless. Below these areas there is often a belt of Nordic mountain birch trees, now often called *Betula pubescens* ssp. *czerepanovii*. In Fennoscandia, this plant is also common in a zone north of the coniferous trees and is found in small forests in the southwestern-most parts of Greenland and more locally in other parts of Europe.

Before the begin of the International Biological Programme (IBP) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, only minor fractions of these ecosystems had been studied. Therefore, alpine and subalpine systems were chosen as the main areas of study in this first, larger interdisciplinary and integrated project in natural science across national borders and, in this way, they made an important contribution to such research in the Nordic countries. In addition to an interdisciplinary steering committee in each country, a Nordic administration was also established for the so-called IBP “Tundra Biome” studies in the region (although permafrost is not common in most of the region). At the end of the IBP, many results from this research in alpine, subalpine and northern Fennoscandian mountain birch forests were published in two early volumes of the Ecological Studies Series (Wielgolaski 1975a, b).

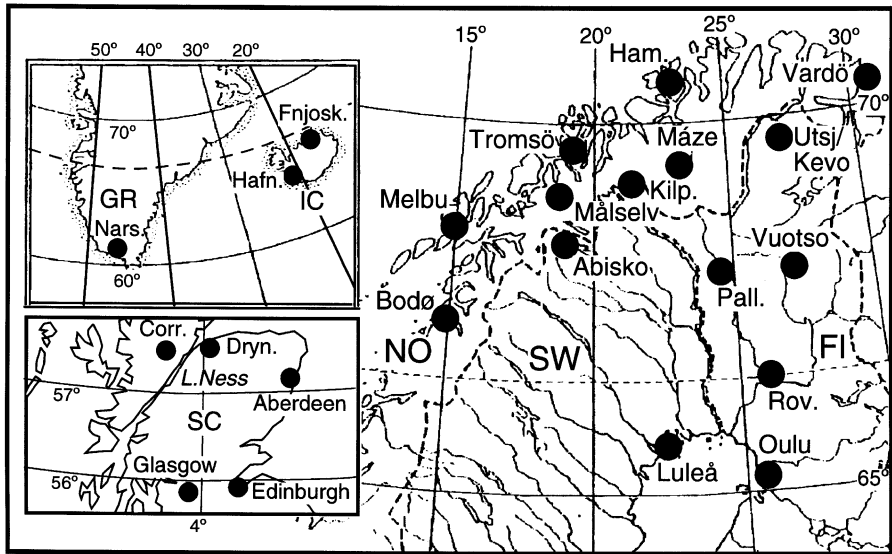
As is common at the end of scientific projects, many questions were not really answered, and this was also the case after IBP. However, the project showed the good collaboration within the Nordic countries. Therefore, in the late 1970s, it was decided to establish a “Nordic Subalpine–Subarctic Ecology” network project (NSSE) across the national borders within the Nordic mountain birch ecosystem at a lower intensity level, as only very limited funding was available for this cooperation after the IBP. In Finland, after some years, this project was accepted as a Man and Biosphere (MAB) network, resulting in a better status of the project in that country than elsewhere. This made it also possible to obtain results from the joint Nordic mountain birch studies more than 20 years after the IBP published their findings in a volume in the UNESCO-MAB Series (Wielgolaski 2001).

Within the EU, international scientific projects, including several European member countries and associated EU countries, are recognized as important to increase the knowledge and cooperation in Europe. Particularly important are natural science projects that also relate to man and socio-economy. Therefore, the 3-year project “Human Interactions with the Mountain Birch Ecosystem: Implications for Sustainable Development” (HIBECO) was funded by the EU from the year 2000. Here, results from new mountain birch studies in the Nordic countries including Greenland are added to older ones concerning both the growth of the birch itself, and the use and limitations of these forests by animals and man, with the objective of finding the best sustainable management for mankind in this ecosystem. Furthermore, Scotland was included in this project because of the good knowledge from earlier projects there on the influence of grazing, e.g. by sheep in their mountain birch regions. The results of this EU project are summarized in this volume.

What has changed in the Nordic mountain birch ecosystem in a long- or short-term perspective? In the short term, a possible increment of the forests in elevation by global climate change may be included, either induced by man or not. In Iceland, large areas of the original birch forests were cleared by man. Later, strong sheep grazing prevented resprouting of the trees and caused heavy erosion (Aradottir and Arnalds 2001). A similar development has, to some extent, taken place in the birch zone of southern Greenland. In addition, in Fennoscandia, the mountain birch forests have been suppressed in sub-alpine districts due to sheep grazing. In later years, however, this sheep-grazing pressure was lower in those areas. This may be another reason for the recent increased elevation of the upper birch tree line in the region, in addition to climate change. In northern Fennoscandia, the birch forests are strongly influenced by reindeer grazing and trampling, as reported in several chapters.

Modern infrastructure is also very important for development in the Nordic mountain birch region. A denser road net makes a larger fraction of the birch forests accessible for firewood cutting. Similarly, increased tourism after road building may increase the tree cutting and reduce the birch forests. At the same time, in some districts, less forest is used for firewood, because many inhabitants, also from the mountain birch region, are going over to heating by electricity and oil. This shows how sustainable use of mountain birch depends on the political decisions taken in a district.

The main objectives of the various chapters in this volume are to give examples from different sites (see Fig. 1) in the Nordic countries (and Scotland) of the influence of climate change and human decisions on growth of birch and the understorey. It has been discussed how climate change through time may be of importance for the adaptation of the trees in various regions and how such changes may cause variations in attacks, e.g. by insects. Shifts in the grazing pressure, e.g. by sheep and reindeer, will be important for the



**Fig. 1.** Map of northern Fennoscandia (FI Finland, SW Sweden, NO Norway), Iceland (IC), southern Greenland (GR) and parts of Scotland (SC), showing sites used in connection with the HIBECO project and some towns in the regions (Rov Rovaniemi, Pall Pallasjärvi, Kilp Kilpisjärvi, Utsj/Kevo Utsjoki/Kevo, Ham Hammerfest, Fnjosk Fnjoskadalur, Hafn Hafnarskogur, Nars Narssarsuaq, Dryn Drynachan, Corr Corrimony). Broken line at 66°33'N denotes Arctic Circle. Provenance sites used in phenology studies are given in the Fig. 7.1

Nordic mountain birch ecosystem in the future, but probably the greatest change in this system will be the degree of tourism permitted in the region, as influenced by the future infrastructure.

The possibilities for sustainable use of the Nordic mountain birch ecosystem are evaluated in various models presented in the volume, giving answers based on the scenarios chosen. However, it is NOT the aim of the volume to present a preferred future in the Nordic mountain birch ecosystem. That is up to the politicians and other decision-makers to determine, but the chapters in this volume have been planned to make it possible to choose the best solutions in various countries and districts. However, it is recommended that decisions should be made in cooperation with the local people in a district, and should not be made SOLELY by the central authorities in the various districts.

It is very valuable for the Nordic scientists working in the mountain birch regions to present various results from an interdisciplinary and integrated project, including social scientific subprojects, all together in a new volume of the series Ecological Studies as a sort of continuation of the results pre-

sented partly from the same region in the same series about 30 years ago. The editor thanks the publisher for making this possible and is very glad to have all these Nordic mountain birch data presented in one place.

October 2004  
Oslo, Norway

*F. E. Wielgolaski*

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# Contents

## Section 1 History, Environment and Plant Science

<b>1</b>	<b>History and Environment of the Nordic Mountain Birch . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
	F.E. WIELGOLASKI	
1.1	History–Zonation–Taxonomy–Distribution . . . . .	3
1.2	Present Tree Line . . . . .	4
1.3	Climate . . . . .	7
1.4	Nutrient Conditions – Browsing . . . . .	12
	References . . . . .	15
<b>2</b>	<b>Soils and Nutrients in Northern Birch Forests: A Case Study from Finnmarksvidda, Northern Norway . . .</b>	<b>19</b>
	K.-D. MEIER, D. THANNHEISER, J. WEHBERG and V. EISENMANN	
2.1	Introduction . . . . .	19
2.2	Study Area . . . . .	20
2.3	Soil Classification . . . . .	21
2.4	Soil Distribution . . . . .	23
2.5	Soil Properties . . . . .	28
2.6	Conclusions . . . . .	31
	References . . . . .	32
<b>3</b>	<b>Vegetation of the Mountain Birch Forest in Northern Fennoscandia . . . . .</b>	<b>35</b>
	J. WEHBERG, D. THANNHEISER and K.-D. MEIER	
3.1	Introduction . . . . .	35
3.2	Study Site . . . . .	36

3.3	Dendrochronological Characteristics of the Northern Mountain Birch Forests in the Máze-Kautokeino Area . . . . .	36
3.4	Plant Sociological Studies . . . . .	40
3.4.1	The Communities of the Mountain Birch Forest on the Finnmarksvidda . . . . .	41
3.4.1.1	The Crowberry Birch Forest: <i>Empetro-Betuletum pubescentis</i> (Nordhagen 1943) . . . . .	44
3.4.1.2	The Lingonberry Birch Forest: <i>Vaccinio vitis-idaeae-Betuletum</i> (prov.) . . . . .	45
3.4.1.3	The Bilberry Birch Forest: <i>Vaccinio myrtilli-Betuletum</i> (prov.) . . . . .	46
3.4.1.4	The Dwarf Cornel Birch Forest: <i>Corno-Betuletum</i> (Aune 1973) . . . . .	46
3.4.1.5	The Meadow Birch Forest: <i>Geranio-Betuletum</i> (Nordhagen 1928, 1943 emend. Dierßen and Dierßen 1982)	47
3.4.1.6	The Cloudberry Birch Forest: <i>Rubo chamaemorei-Betuletum</i> (prov.) . . . . .	48
3.5	Mountain Birch Forests in Northern Fennoscandia . . . . .	49
3.6	Conclusions . . . . .	49
	References . . . . .	51
4	<b>Biomass and Production on a Landscape Level in the Northern Mountain Birch Forests</b> . . . . .	53
	H. TØMMERVIK, F.E. WIELGOLASKI, S. NEUVONEN, B. SOLBERG and K.A. HØGDA	
4.1	Introduction . . . . .	53
4.1.1	Live Aboveground Biomass Estimations . . . . .	55
4.1.2	Biomass and Leaf Area Index at Individual Tree or Stand Levels . . . . .	56
4.1.3	Biomass on Landscape and Regional Level Using Remote Sensing . . . . .	57
4.2	Methods . . . . .	58
4.3	Results . . . . .	61
4.3.1	Change in the Biomass Production on a Regional Level . . . . .	61
4.3.2	Biomass Estimations on a Landscape Level . . . . .	62
4.4	Discussion . . . . .	64
4.4.1	Biomass Changes . . . . .	64
4.4.2	Remote Sensing Data – Are They Robust? . . . . .	66
	References . . . . .	67

<b>5</b>	<b>Mountain Birch Growth in Relation to Climate and Herbivores</b> . . . . .	<b>71</b>
	P.S. KARLSSON, M. WEIH and C. BORG	
5.1	Introduction . . . . .	71
5.2	Seedling Establishment and Growth . . . . .	72
5.2.1	Abiotic and Biotic Environment During the Growing Season . . . . .	72
5.2.2	Winter Conditions . . . . .	74
5.2.3	Genetic Aspects . . . . .	74
5.3	Sapling Growth . . . . .	75
5.4	Mature Trees . . . . .	76
5.4.1	Tree Growth and Climate . . . . .	76
5.4.2	Effects of <i>Epirrita</i> Defoliation on Tree Growth . . . . .	77
5.5.	Forest Structure, Stand Biomass and Productivity . . . . .	79
5.6.	Effects of Changing Climate on Mountain Birch Growth . . . . .	81
5.6.1	Empirical Evidence . . . . .	81
5.6.2	Model Predictions . . . . .	82
5.7	Conclusions . . . . .	82
	References . . . . .	83
<b>6</b>	<b>Responses of Temperature Changes on Survival and Growth in Mountain Birch Populations</b> . . . . .	<b>87</b>
	O. SKRE, J. NILSEN, M. NAESS, B. IGELAND, K. TAULAVUORI, E. TAULAVUORI and K. LAINE	
6.1	Introduction . . . . .	87
6.2	Results and Discussion . . . . .	89
6.2.1	Field and Greenhouse Experiments at Different Temperatures . . . . .	89
6.2.2	Winter Temperature and CO <sub>2</sub> Experiments . . . . .	93
6.2.3	Dormancy and Frost Hardiness in Mountain Birch Provenances as Influenced by Winter Temperatures . . . . .	94
6.3	Conclusions . . . . .	96
	References . . . . .	96

<b>7</b>	<b>Phenology and Performance of Mountain Birch Provenances in Transplant Gardens: Latitudinal, Altitudinal and Oceanity–Continentality Gradients . . . . .</b>	<b>99</b>
	J. OVASKA, J. NILSEN, F.E. WIELGOLASKI, H. KAUHANEN, R. PARTANEN, S. NEUVONEN, L. KAPARI, O. SKRE and K. LAINE	
7.1	Introduction . . . . .	99
7.2	Material and Methods . . . . .	101
7.3	Results and Discussion . . . . .	101
7.3.1	Transplantation Stress and Seedling Survival . . . . .	101
7.3.2	Spring Phenology (Bud Burst) . . . . .	103
7.3.3	Autumn Phenology . . . . .	106
7.3.4	Growth Forms and Growth Rates . . . . .	108
7.4	Conclusions and Future Prospects . . . . .	113
	References . . . . .	114
<b>8</b>	<b>Synthesis Section 1: A Dynamic Forest in a Changing Environment . . . . .</b>	<b>117</b>
	P.S. KARLSSON and F.E. WIELGOLASKI	
	References . . . . .	121
	<b>Section 2 Herbivory</b>	
<b>9</b>	<b>Forest Defoliation Risks in Birch Forests by Insects Under Different Climate and Land Use Scenarios in Northern Europe . . . . .</b>	<b>125</b>
	S. NEUVONEN, H. BYLUND and H. TØMMERVIK	
9.1	Introduction . . . . .	125
9.2	Geometrid Outbreaks on Birch in Fennoscandia . . . . .	126
9.3	Monitoring (Detecting/Quantifying) Insect Outbreaks in Mountain Birch Woodlands . . . . .	127
9.4	Modelling the Outbreak/Defoliation Risks . . . . .	129
9.4.1	Population Dynamics of Geometrid Moths . . . . .	129
9.4.2	Modelling the Regional and Topographic Patterns in Outbreaks Risks . . . . .	131
9.5	Forest Defoliation Risks Under Different Climatic Scenarios and Their Relationships to Land Use . . . . .	134
	References . . . . .	136

<b>10</b>	<b>Birch Sapling Responses to Severity and Timing of Domestic Herbivore Browsing – Implications for Management . . . . .</b>	<b>139</b>
	A.J. HESTER, K. LEMPA, S. NEUVONEN, K. HØEGH, J. FEILBERG, S. ARNTHÓRSDÓTTIR and G. IASON	
10.1	Introduction . . . . .	139
10.2	Case Studies and Experimental Designs . . . . .	141
10.3	Birch Responses to Timing and Severity of Browsing Damage . . . . .	141
10.3.1	Severity of Browsing . . . . .	142
10.3.2	Timing of Browsing . . . . .	145
10.3.3	Locational Effects . . . . .	145
10.3.4	Implications for the Management of Herbivore Grazing Within Birch Areas of Northern Europe . . . . .	146
10.4	Theory Versus Reality: Case-Study Example of Sheep Impacts in Greenland . . . . .	147
10.4.1	Economics . . . . .	150
10.5	Current Activities to Improve Grazing Management in Birch Forest Areas . . . . .	151
10.6	Conclusions . . . . .	152
	References . . . . .	153
<b>11</b>	<b>Effects of Reindeer Grazing on Pastures in a Mountain Birch Ecosystem . . . . .</b>	<b>157</b>
	K. LEMPA, S. NEUVONEN and H. TØMMERVIK	
11.1	Introduction . . . . .	157
11.2	Climatic Variability . . . . .	158
11.3	Trends and Patterns in Reindeer Population Densities in Northern Fennoscandia . . . . .	159
11.4	Protection of Pastures in the Mountain Birch Zone . . . . .	160
11.4.1	Analysis and Synthesis of the Effects of Reindeer Grazing on Different Vegetation Components . . . . .	160
11.4.2	Northernmost Norway as a Case Study of the Overall Effects of Reindeer Grazing on Vegetation . . . . .	163
	References . . . . .	164

<b>12</b>	<b>Long-Term Influence of Herbivores on Northern Birch Forests</b> . . . . .	<b>165</b>
	O. TENOW, H. BYLUND, A.C. NILSEN and P.S. KARLSSON	
12.1	Introduction . . . . .	165
12.2	Lake Torneträsk–Abisko Valley Area: A Case Study . . . . .	166
12.2.1	Outbreak in a Heath Birch Forest . . . . .	166
12.2.2	Outbreak in a Meadow Birch Forest . . . . .	168
12.3	Northern Fennoscandia . . . . .	169
12.3.1	Forest Age and Outbreaks . . . . .	170
12.3.2	Forest Damage and Recovery . . . . .	170
12.3.3	Interaction with Reindeer and Sheep . . . . .	172
12.4	Generalization . . . . .	173
12.4.1	A Conceptual Model . . . . .	174
12.4.2	Forests Without Outbreaks . . . . .	175
12.4.3	Mountain Birch Forest Regeneration Cycles in a Warmer Future . . . . .	176
	References . . . . .	178
<b>13</b>	<b>Synthesis Section 2: Herbivory in Northern Birch Forests</b> . . . . .	<b>183</b>
	S. NEUVONEN and F.E. WIELGOLASKI	
13.1	Introduction . . . . .	183
13.2	Insect Outbreaks . . . . .	185
13.3	Mammalian Herbivores . . . . .	186
13.4	Implications for Sustainable Management . . . . .	187
13.5	References . . . . .	188
<b>Section 3 Human Impact</b>		
<b>14</b>	<b>Rates and Processes of Natural Regeneration in Disturbed Habitats</b> . . . . .	<b>193</b>
	B.C. FORBES, A. TOLVANEN, F.E. WIELGOLASKI and K. LAINE	
14.1	Introduction . . . . .	193
14.2	Processes of Regeneration . . . . .	195
14.3	Rates of Regeneration . . . . .	197
14.4	Conclusion . . . . .	199
	References . . . . .	199

<b>15</b>	<b>Recreation at the Tree Line and Interactions with Other Land Use Activities</b> . . . . .	203
	A. TOLVANEN, B.C. FORBES, S. WALL and Y. NOROKORPI	
15.1	Introduction . . . . .	203
15.2	Case Study Areas . . . . .	205
15.3	Monitoring Studies on the Impact of Recreation on the Environment in Lapland . . . . .	207
15.4	Interaction of Recreation with Other Land-Use Activities . .	209
15.4.1	Recreation vs. Nature Conservation . . . . .	210
15.4.2	Recreation vs. Forestry . . . . .	211
15.4.3	Recreation vs. Traditional Livelihoods . . . . .	211
15.4.4	Recreation vs. Recreation . . . . .	213
15.5	Sustainable Tourism . . . . .	213
	References . . . . .	214
<b>16</b>	<b>Economic Limits and Possibilities for Sustainable Utilization of Northern Birch Forests</b> . . . . .	219
	B. SOLBERG, H. TØMMERVIK, D. THANNHEISER and S. NEUVONEN	
16.1	Introduction . . . . .	219
16.2	Some Theoretical Aspects . . . . .	219
16.2.1	Goals . . . . .	220
16.2.2	Sustainable Utilization . . . . .	220
16.2.3	Identify Utilization Alternatives . . . . .	221
16.2.4	Select the Best Utilization (Management) Alternative . . . .	221
16.2.5	Implementation of the Best Alternatives . . . . .	221
16.3	Empirical Results . . . . .	222
16.3.1	Birch Area and Productivity . . . . .	222
16.3.1.1	Máze . . . . .	223
16.3.1.2	Målselv . . . . .	225
16.3.1.3	Other Areas . . . . .	225
16.3.2	Reindeer Husbandry . . . . .	226
16.3.3	Other Limiting Factors . . . . .	228
16.3.4	Profitability, Value Added and Markets . . . . .	228
16.4	Conclusions . . . . .	231
	References . . . . .	232

<b>17</b>	<b>The Vegetation Changes and Recent Impact on the Mountain Birch Forest During the Last 40 Years . . .</b>	<b>235</b>
	D. THANNHEISER, H. TØMMERVIK and J. WEHBERG	
17.1	Introduction . . . . .	235
17.1.1	Research Areas . . . . .	236
17.1.2	Methodological Considerations . . . . .	236
17.2	Vegetation Changes in the Máze Region . . . . .	237
17.2.1	The Lichen-Rich <i>Empetrum</i> (Crowberry) Birch Forest ( <i>Empetro-Betuletum pubescentis</i> ; see Chap. 3) . . . . .	237
17.2.2	The Moss-Rich <i>Empetrum</i> (Crowberry) Birch Forest ( <i>Empetro-Betuletum pubescentis</i> , see Chap. 3) . . . . .	240
17.2.3	The Lichen-Rich <i>Myrtillus</i> (Bilberry) Birch Forest ( <i>Vaccinio myrtilli-Betuletum</i> ; see Chap. 3) . . . . .	240
17.2.4	The Moss-Rich <i>Myrtillus</i> (Bilberry) Birch Forest ( <i>Vaccinio myrtilli-Betuletum</i> ; see Chap. 3) . . . . .	241
17.2.5	The <i>Cornus-Myrtillus</i> (Dwarf Cornel-Bilberry) Birch Forest ( <i>Corno-Betuletum</i> ; see Chap. 3) . . . . .	241
17.2.6	Monitoring Vegetation Change in the Máze Region . . . . .	241
17.2.7	Monitoring Vegetation Change in Målselv . . . . .	244
17.2.8	Discussion . . . . .	246
17.3	Linear and Localized Development on the Finnmarksvidda . . . . .	250
	References . . . . .	252
<b>18</b>	<b>Sámi Approaches to Mountain Birch Utilization in Northern Sápmi (Finland and Norway) . . . . .</b>	<b>255</b>
	M.S. AIKIO and L. MÜLLER-WILLE	
18.1	Introduction: Control, Access and Sustainability of Mountain Birch Forests . . . . .	255
18.2	Human-Birch Relations: Holistic Approach to the Environment . . . . .	257
18.3	Knowledge and Values: The Meaning and Use of Mountain Birch . . . . .	259
18.3.1	Birch Firewood: Securing Heat and Warmth . . . . .	260
18.3.2	The Proper Mountain Birch Wood for Art and Handicraft . . . . .	262
18.4	The Human Factor: Future Management of Mountain Birch Resources . . . . .	264
18.5	Outlook: Prospects and Policy Recommendations . . . . .	266
	References . . . . .	268



**19 Sustainable Reindeer Herding in the Mountain Birch Ecosystem . . . . . 269**  
 K. LEMPA, S. NEUVONEN and H. TØMMERVIK

19.1 Introduction . . . . . 269

19.2 History . . . . . 269

19.3 Cultural Background . . . . . 270

19.4 Social and Economical Factors . . . . . 271

19.5 Suggestions . . . . . 272

References . . . . . 273

**20 Synthesis Section 3: Competition over Nature, Space, Resources, and Management in the Northern Mountain Birch Forest Ecosystem . . . . . 275**  
 D. THANNHEISER, L. MÜLLER-WILLE, F.E. WIELGOLASKI and K.-D. MEIER

**Section 4 Modelling Dynamics of Mountain Birch Forests, Management and Future**

**21 Landscape-Scale Model Relating the Nordic Mountain Birch Forest Spatio-temporal Dynamics to Various Anthropogenic Influences, Herbivory and Climate Change . . . . . 283**  
 A.O. GAUTESTAD, F.E. WIELGOLASKI and I. MYSTERUD

21.1 Introduction . . . . . 283

21.2 Complexity Aspects in the Northern Birch Forest Ecosystem 284

21.2.1 Aspect 1: Challenges from Quantity of Interactions – System Complexity . . . . . 284

21.2.2 Aspect 2: Processes in Linear Superposition – Scale-Specific Spatio-Temporal Interactions . . . . . 285

21.2.3 Aspect 3: Beyond Superposition – Spatio-Temporal Effects from Non-Linear Responses . . . . . 288

21.3 The HIBECO Model . . . . . 289

21.3.1 The Model Arena . . . . . 290

21.3.2 Implementation of Landscape Heterogeneity . . . . . 291

21.3.3 Management Regimes and Perturbations . . . . . 292

21.3.4 Climate Change Scenarios . . . . . 293

21.4 Simulation Examples . . . . . 295

21.5 Discussion and Conclusions . . . . . 298

References . . . . . 299

<b>22</b>	<b>Scenarios for Future Development of the Mountain Birch Ecosystem . . . . .</b>	<b>301</b>
	A.O. GAUTESTAD, F.E. WIELGOLASKI, B. SOLBERG and I. MYSTERUD	
22.1	Introduction . . . . .	301
22.2	Logging Practices and the Shifting Forest Mosaic . . . . .	302
22.3	Scenarios for Various Long-Term Management Practices . . . . .	305
22.4	Discussion and Conclusion . . . . .	310
	References . . . . .	311
<b>23</b>	<b>Managing the Mountain Birch Ecosystem: Local Communities and the State in Finland's Forestry . . . . .</b>	<b>313</b>
	L. MÜLLER-WILLE, M.S. AIKIO and V. LUHTA	
23.1	Introduction: Resource for Wood and Energy . . . . .	313
23.2	Forests and Wood: Issues of Power and Control . . . . .	316
23.3	Current Practices and Perceptions of Mountain Birch Utilization . . . . .	317
23.3.1	Management and Production of Private Birch Woodlots . . . . .	319
23.3.2	Management and Production of Public Birch Forests . . . . .	320
23.3.3	Perception and Assessment of Mountain Birch Forest Management . . . . .	322
23.4	The Mountain Birch – A Resource in the Future? . . . . .	324
	References . . . . .	326
<b>24</b>	<b>Policies and Developing Plans Towards Sustainability of Mountain Birch Ecosystems in Scandinavia . . . . .</b>	<b>327</b>
	L. BÄCK, B. SOLBERG, H. TØMMERVIK and F.E. WIELGOLASKI	
24.1	Introduction . . . . .	327
24.2	Suggestions for Sustainable Reindeer Management . . . . .	328
24.3	The Mountain Birch Forest from a Multi-User Perspective . . . . .	329
24.4	The Human View on Mountain Nature . . . . .	333
24.5	Visitor Frequency in Nature . . . . .	334
25.6	Different Planning Strategies for Sustainable Development in the Mountains . . . . .	334
24.7	The Need for Scientific Pluralism . . . . .	336
24.8	Suggestions for Sustainable Forest Management . . . . .	338
	References . . . . .	339

**Section 5 Integration and Conclusion**

**25 The Nordic Mountain Birch Ecosystem-Challenges to Sustainable Management . . . . . 343**  
 F.E. WIELGOLASKI, P.S. KARLSSON, S. NEUVONEN,  
 D. THANNHEISER, H. TØMMERVIK and A.O. GAUTESTAD

25.1 Introduction . . . . . 343

25.2 Man and Mountain Birch Forest Interactions  
 in the Perspective of a Changing Climate . . . . . 345

25.3 Considerations for Sustainable Mountain  
 Birch Forest Management . . . . . 347

25.4 Considerations for a Sustainable Reindeer Management . . 353

25.5 Final Remarks . . . . . 354

References . . . . . 355

**Subject Index . . . . . 357**

**CD-ROM** containing additional material to Chapters 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 18, 21, and 22 enclosed at the end of the book

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## **Section 1**

### **History, Environment and Plant Science**



# 1 History and Environment of the Nordic Mountain Birch

F.E. WIELGOLASKI

## 1.1 History-Zonation-Taxonomy-Distribution

Birch is an old inhabitant of the Nordic countries as shown both by palynology and radiocarbon dating of subfossil birch remnants. Woody vegetation, not very different from the present-day mountain birch trees/shrubs in subalpine and northern Fennoscandia, migrated rapidly into the region after the last glacial period, probably first into southwestern Norway 12,000 B.P. (Aas and Faarlund 2001), and to the northernmost part of the region (ca. 71°N) approximately 1000 years later (however, cf. Chap. 2).

The upper and northern tree line has varied with the climate through the centuries ever since. The historical highest tree line in southern Fennoscandia, about 500 m above today's limit, has been dated back to more than 10,000 B.P., using mega-fossil evidence and radiocarbon dating (Kullman and Kjällgren 2000), only about 1000 years after birch had reached northernmost Fennoscandia. In the boreal chronozone about 8500 B.P., birch also reached high elevations (Moe et al. 1978).

The Nordic tree line zone is mainly dominated by what we normally call the northern mountain birch today (Wielgolaski 2002), and generally covers the ecotone between the coniferous forest zone and the treeless areas in the Nordic countries. It is most often referred to as the subalpine zone, which also forms a substantial part of the northern boreal zone (Moen 1999). The zone was first described by Wahlenberg (1812) and includes both the area with birch towards the northern or arctic tree line and towards the maritime tree line mainly to the west, in addition to the tree line towards the alpine zone in the mainly N-S running mountain chain almost throughout the length of the Nordic countries. Similar limits for Nordic mountain birch forests apply today (Hämet-Ahti 1963), particularly in Finland, also called the upper oroboreal zone (Ahti et al. 1968; Haapasaari 1988). However, the delimitation of western and northern Fennoscandia is complicated in places by the local climatic diversity, due to greatly varying topography of the mountain areas and the

fjords along the coast. Together with edaphic variations, these conditions are responsible for the often diffuse character of the limits of the Nordic birch zone (Haapasaari 1988).

The taxonomy of Nordic mountain birch is difficult and unclear. In its typical form this birch is dominant in the eastern Kola Peninsula and throughout subalpine regions of the Fennoscandian mountain chain. Genes from the dwarf shrub *Betula nana* L. are strongly involved in the Nordic mountain birch (Thórsson et al. 2001), and are sometimes visually shown by small leaves and bright red autumn colours (Nilsen and Wielgolaski 2001). Today, this often polycormic birch is treated as a subspecies of *B. pubescens* Ehrh. called ssp. *czerepanovii* (Orlova) Hämet-Ahti (often also called *B.p.* ssp. *tortuosa* auct. or even *B. tortuosa* Led., a name which today is usually limited to a birch growing in the Altai mountains).

Birch is the only native tree species commonly growing in Iceland. It is also treated as a Nordic mountain birch by most authors today, although it is clearly a specific ecotype compared to the Fennoscandian mountain birch (see e.g., Wielgolaski and Nilsen 2001). Väre (2001) reported that the birch in Iceland has appeared independently of the formation in Fennoscandia, but it is likely the mountain birch has a polytopic history in both regions with introgressive hybridization of *B. nana* where this flowers more or less simultaneously with the other.

The typical *B. pubescens*, often called ssp. *pubescens*, has few, if any, genes from *B. nana*. The subspecies is normally found in richer soil at lower elevation, e.g., in valley bottoms, and at lower latitudes, commonly with only one stem (monocormic). This is generally the type found in Scotland. Sometimes the closely related birch growing in southwestern Greenland is also treated as a Nordic mountain birch, although there is often strong hybridization with the American *B. glandulosa* Michx.

Birch is also found east of the Kola Peninsula, but the taxonomy is very unclear, and many taxa may be involved. Low temperature is suggested to reduce the genetic incompatibility between various birch taxa (Hagman 1971). In this volume, the mountain birch from Fennoscandia, Iceland, Greenland and Scotland is discussed. *B. pendula* Roth. is most common in the southern parts of the region and hybridizes with the Nordic mountain birch, however, it is not included in this project.

## 1.2 Present Tree Line

Today, the upper mountain birch tree line is above 1200 m a.s.l. in central southeastern Norway (Fig. 1.1), but it is lower in all directions moving away from that district, strongly lower towards the southwest coast of Norway (ca. 500 m a.s.l.), and eastwards in Sweden at similar latitudes (900–800 m a.s.l.).



**Fig. 1.1.** Map of the upper climatic tree line in Fennoscandia as given by hypsogrammetric curves in solid lines. (Aas and Faarlund 2001)

The birch tree line is also lower to the north, but in inner Scandinavia, at the Arctic Circle, it may still be 700–800 m a.s.l. (Aas and Faarlund 2001). Near the sea in the far north of Fennoscandia it descends dramatically, nearly to sea level at about 71°N, (however, cf. Chap. 2).

Presently, there are several indications for slowly increasing Nordic mountain birch tree lines in the region (Sonesson and Hoogesteger 1983; Kullman 2000, 2002), which are at least partly attributable to a general climate change, but also to human use of the mountain birch forests, particularly reduced grazing by domestic animals. In many places, it has been observed that the mountain birch forest near the forest line grows more vigorously than just a few decades ago (own unpubl. observ.). This is also the case above the height reached for browsing by animals. The tree crowns seem to be considerably denser than they were earlier. This could be a consequence of a better climate for birch tree growth (cf. Kullman 2000). It has also been noted that the extended birch forest towards the tree line is surprisingly even-aged. Could this be because seedlings suddenly were strong

enough to survive in a better climate and could grow above the winter snow cover?

Both historically and more recently, man has strongly influenced the presence of birch by logging, e.g. for fuel and by strong animal grazing. On the Faroe Islands native birch has totally disappeared, probably due to the disturbance by man (Aas and Faarlund 2001). In Iceland there has been a strong degradation of birch forests due to anthropogenic influence (Aradottir and Arnalds 2001) since the Viking settlements late in the ninth century. It is, therefore, difficult to define the climatic tree line of Iceland today. Thorhallsdottir (1997) reported that it may be close to 300 m in coastal regions, but up to about 550 m elevation in inland areas, particularly in the northeast.

It has often been discussed why birch is the main tree line species in the Nordic countries (e.g. Oksanen 1995), while in most regions of the world the tree line is formed by coniferous species (e.g. Walter 1974). Ahti and Hämet-Ahti (1969) stressed that timberline forests dominated by birches and other mesomorphic deciduous trees are typical for high-latitude areas adjacent to ice-free oceans. This indicates that the degree of oceanity plays a role in why birch is the main tree line species in the Nordic countries. The author has found in phenology studies in western Norway that high humidity favours the time of leaf bud break more in birch than in most other deciduous trees studied (Wielgolaski 2003).

In the southeastern districts of the Caledonian mountain chain in Scandinavia, which are the most continental parts of the region, there are pockets of spruce at the tree line (own observ.). Again, this indicates humidity as one factor of importance for which tree species dominates the tree line. However, there is also a possibility that strong grazing has caused the upper birch tree line to be depressed. On the other hand, this should also favour coniferous trees at the tree line in more humid districts and in inner, relatively continental districts of northern Fennoscandia, which is generally not found (Oksanen 1995). The last author has presented various hypotheses for the development of certain species to be dominant at the tree line. He suggested that rain shadow areas relatively close to open oceans might be characterized by a mixture of oceanic and continental factors maximally disadvantageous for evergreens, leading to respiratory losses in winter and soil frost-induced drought stress in spring. However, he also followed the hypothesis by, e.g. Fægri (1950), that a dispersal barrier prevented spruce from reaching all areas that otherwise would have fitted the species, and that this is a possibility for the lack of spruce in some Fennoscandian mountain areas. Oksanen (1995) further mentioned the possibility that spruce may have problems defending positions obtained for instance in northernmost Fennoscandia during the historical hypsithermal period and expanding the range under current climatic conditions. On the other hand, elevationally increased tree lines are documented also for coniferous trees at increased temperature by global change (Hofgaard 1997; Kullman 2000, 2002).

### 1.3 Climate

The growth of Nordic mountain birch is thus, like most other plants species in temperate regions, strongly dependent on temperature and heat sums above certain basic or threshold temperatures in the growing season (Wielgolaski 1999). Odland (1996) found the best correlation with the upper Nordic mountain birch forest line to be with the average maximum temperature isotherm 13.2 °C of the four warmest summer months (tetratherm), although this is not a vital survival limit for birch. The survival of browsing insects, however, is dependent on the minimum winter temperatures (see Chaps. 9 and 12). Hellingland (1912) already calculated the mountain birch tree line to follow the 7.3 °C tetratherm for the mean diurnal temperature and the coniferous tree line the tetratherm of 8.3 °C. If we compare the present birch tree line with calculated temperature normals near the birch forest limit, e.g. at Kvamskogen, Havgastøl, Fokstua, Bjørnfjell and Kilpisjärvi (Table 1.1), it seems that the birch forest limit is closer to the 8 °C tetratherm. However, mean temperature limits decrease in relatively continental areas with high day temperatures during summer (Wielgolaski 1975) and may increase in more oceanic districts, e.g. Kvamskogen (Tables 1.1–1.2).

Kullman (2000) stressed that the tree height growth increased markedly in the period 1988–1999 with slightly higher (0.3 °C) summer temperatures than the preceding period 1951–1987. He also observed that individual trees, which had been suppressed during the low temperatures in the last-mentioned period, responded by serious winter dieback at the approx. 2.6 °C increase in mean winter temperatures combined with the higher summer temperatures in 1988–1999. In the most probable global change temperature scenarios, meteorologists have suggested that temperatures in Fennoscandia will continue to increase in the period up to 2050 by about 0.4 °C per decade in the north (Hanssen-Bauer et al. 2000).

Although temperature is the most important climatic factor for growth of the Nordic mountain birch, humidity, as mentioned before, also has an influence. The annual precipitation varies greatly in Fennoscandia, from about 300 mm east of the Scandes (Table 1.2) to considerably more than ten-fold in coastal mountains of southwestern Norway. Particularly high precipitation is observed at higher elevations just west of the highest mountain massifs because of the uplift and cooling of the mainly southwesterly winds and cyclonic movements in Fennoscandia. The precipitation is somewhat lower close to the sea in the west and decreases to the far north. Even at the north-easternmost coast of Norway it is often less than 400 mm/year (e.g. Ekkerøy Table 1.2), but fog and drizzle are common.

In precipitation scenarios, the precipitation is normally supposed to increase in the Nordic mountain birch region up to year 2050 (Hanssen-Bauer et al. 2001). This has been estimated particularly for the northwestern coast

**Table 1.1.** Normal temperature (mean °C). (Kärenlampi 1972; Järvinen 1987; Alexandersson et al. 1991; Lippestad 2003)

Coordinates °N-S; °E-W	Height (m)	Site	Period March	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Year	Mean June-Sept.
60.5; 5.5	408	Kvamskogen	-0.8	2.0	7.0	10.9	11.9	11.6	8.4	4.1	10.7
60.5; 8.0	988	Haugastøl	-6.8	-2.8	2.9	7.8	9.8	9.2	5.2	-0.2	8.0
62.1; 9.3	952	Fokstua	-7.0	-2.9	3.8	8.4	10.0	8.9	4.4	-0.7	7.9
62.5; 12.1	680	Fjällnäs	-6.7	-2.4	4.0	9.0	10.5	9.4	5.2	-0.4	8.5
63.2; 12.0	642	Storlien	-4.6	-1.3	4.6	9.3	10.7	10.0	6.0	1.1	9.0
65.5; 16.5	652	Danasjö	-6.9	-2.5	3.6	9.4	11.2	9.5	4.7	-0.6	8.5
66.5; 16.3	500	Vuoggatjølme	-8.7	-2.7	3.4	9.0	11.4	9.9	5.3	-1.7	8.9
67.1; 18.2	530	Aktse	-7.8	-2.6	3.6	9.4	11.6	9.7	4.5	-1.4	8.8
68.3; 18.8	388	Abisko	-8.0	-2.7	3.2	8.4	11.0	9.7	5.2	-0.8	8.3
68.4; 18.1	512	Bjørnfjell	-8.5	-4.0	1.8	7.0	10.5	9.2	4.2	-1.6	7.7
68.5; 14.5	10	Melbu (Bø)	-0.8	1.6	5.2	9.3	11.5	11.5	8.0	4.1	10.1
69.0; 20.8	500	Kilpisjärvi	-10.0	-4.9	1.3	7.2	10.6	9.1	4.4	-2.6	7.8
69.0; 23.2	330	Kautokeno	-10.6	-4.1	2.9	9.7	12.4	10.2	4.8	-2.5	9.3
69.7; 27.0	110	Kevo	-11.0	-3.4	2.8	9.2	11.8	10.2	5.4	-2.4	9.2
70.2; 30.1	6	Vardø (Ekkerøy)	-4.9	-1.1	3.1	7.3	10.4	10.5	6.8	1.4	8.7