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DO HABITAT CORRIDORS INCREASE LANDSCAPE CONNECTIVITY? A LARGE SCALE, EXPERIMENTAL TEST

Douglas J. Levey

Department of Biology, University of Florida, Gainesville, EEUU

Habitat corridors are strips of habitat that connect otherwise isolated patches of the same habitat. They are believed to facilitate movement of organisms in fragmented landscapes, thereby increasing gene flow and reducing the likelihood of local extinctions. Empirical support for their effectiveness, however, is mixed. Furthermore, most studies are either conducted on very small spatial and temporal scales or are non-experimental and poorly replicated. I present results from a 10-year study of a large-scale experimental test of habitat corridors. My colleagues and I created 8 replicate sets of five habitat patches. Each patch is approximately 1ha in size and consists of regenerating longleaf pine savannah embedded in a matrix of mature forest. Some patches in each replicate are connected to each other by a corridor; others are equidistant but unconnected. We studied movement of both plants and animals among patches. Likewise, we documented corridor effects on plant-animal interactions and on biodiversity. We found that corridors facilitated movement of most organisms, increased the strength of plant-animal interactions, and increased species richness of native plant communities. All of these results strongly support current theory about the role of corridors in maintaining landscape connectivity.