

Hydraulic diversity of forests regulates ecosystem resilience during drought

William R. L. Anderegg^{1,*}, Alexandra G. Konings², Anna T. Trugman¹, Kailiang Yu¹, David R. Bowling¹, Robert Gabbitas¹, Daniel S. Karp³, Stephen Pacala⁴, John S. Sperry¹, Benjamin N. Sulman^{5,6} & Nicole Zenes¹

Plants influence the atmosphere through fluxes of carbon, water and energy¹, and can intensify drought through land–atmosphere feedback effects^{2–4}. The diversity of plant functional traits in forests, especially physiological traits related to water (hydraulic) transport, may have a critical role in land–atmosphere feedback, particularly during drought. Here we combine 352 site-years of eddy covariance measurements from 40 forest sites, remote-sensing observations of plant water content and plant functional-trait data to test whether the diversity in plant traits affects the response of the ecosystem to drought. We find evidence that higher hydraulic diversity buffers variation in ecosystem flux during dry periods across temperate and boreal forests. Hydraulic traits were the predominant significant predictors of cross-site patterns in drought response. By contrast, standard leaf and wood traits, such as specific leaf area and wood density, had little explanatory power. Our results demonstrate that diversity in the hydraulic traits of trees mediates ecosystem resilience to drought and is likely to have an important role in future ecosystem–atmosphere feedback effects in a changing climate.

Water, carbon and energy exchanges from the land surface strongly influence the atmosphere and climate; these exchanges are dominated by plants in most ecosystems¹. Plant physiological responses to water stress influence these fluxes^{5,6}, and the resulting land-surface feedback effects influence local weather as well as the regional atmospheric circulation⁷. Furthermore, changes in vegetation physiology and cover can drive shifts in sensible and latent heat fluxes that intensify droughts^{2–4,8}. Anthropogenic climate change is expected to intensify the hydrological cycle globally, leading to more frequent and more severe droughts in many regions⁹. Therefore, understanding the drivers of land–atmosphere feedback effects during drought and simulating them in Earth system models is critical for robust future projections and assessment of climate change impacts.

Seminal work has shown that grassland plots with more species exhibit smaller declines in productivity during drought and recover productivity much faster following drought¹⁰, indicating that plant biodiversity—particularly functional diversity—may be important for capturing how the land surface interacts with the atmosphere during extreme events. Indeed, it is well-established that—just as a diversified stock portfolio is more likely to survive market turbulence¹¹—diversity can stabilize community function through multiple mechanisms¹². First, diverse communities are more likely to contain species with different traits that dictate how they respond to disturbances¹³. As a result, at least some species are likely to persist through any given disturbance¹⁴. Second, diverse communities are more likely to contain competitors that exhibit compensatory dynamics: when drought causes one species to decline in function, its competitor may increase in function and stabilize community function¹². Critically, diversity–stability effects are mostly absent in most global land-surface models, most of which represent each biome or plant functional type with a single set of functional traits¹⁵, partly owing to a lack of understanding of which functional traits are the most important at ecosystem scales.

Diversity in the water transport strategies of plants has been hypothesized to play a critical part in regulating the response of an ecosystem to drought^{16,17}. Plant water transport through the hydraulic continuum is mediated by a variety of traits^{18,19}, including xylem vulnerability to embolism, stomatal regulation and other characteristics²⁰. Thus, diversity of plant hydraulic strategies and traits could buffer an ecosystem against drought, as some species will curtail gas exchange and latent heat flux through transpiration before others. However, the physiological mechanisms that govern water transport through the hydraulic continuum do not correspond well with traditional plant functional types in land-surface models^{21,22}. This raises the prospect that land-surface models may be missing a critical component of functional diversity when simulating future climate scenarios with a more intense hydrological cycle.

Here we test whether plant trait diversity in forests can directly affect land–atmosphere interactions by mediating and buffering the response of latent heat fluxes to changes in water availability. We combine climate data, 352 site-years of eddy covariance data from 40 temperate and boreal forest sites across the globe (Extended Data Fig. 1 and Supplementary Table 1), and datasets of multiple plant functional traits at the species level. We test which site-level factors (for example, stand age) and plant traits are most associated with ecosystem flux variation in response to drought and whether diversity in response traits stabilizes fluctuations in ecosystem fluxes during drought periods.

We first examine which plant traits and site-level factors can best predict how eddy covariance measurements of daily latent energy exchange (a proxy for forest transpiration) vary in response to water availability. At each eddy covariance site, we quantified this drought response with two complementary metrics: the ‘drought coupling’ (model R^2) and the ‘drought sensitivity’ (standardized model coefficient values) of a multiple regression of latent energy as a function of vapour pressure deficit (VPD), soil moisture and their interaction (equation (1) in the Methods). All else being equal, forest sites with lower coupling and lower sensitivity will experience smaller variation (higher resilience) in latent energy fluxes explained by variations in VPD and soil moisture.

We considered site factors—stand age, species richness and gymnosperm fraction—and the mean and standard deviation of key functional traits expected to influence drought responses. We examined wood density, specific leaf area, maximum light-saturated photosynthetic rate (A_{\max}), the water potential at which 50% of stem xylem conductivity is lost (P_{50}), the minimum stem water potential typically experienced (Ψ_{\min}) and several estimates of the hydraulic safety margin^{18,23} (HSM; the difference between Ψ_{\min} and P_{50} in Fig. 1; alternative analyses in Supplementary Table 2). We compiled trait data for the dominant tree species at each site that make up more than 80% of the biomass (mean trait coverage: 91% of biomass). A strong influence of mean trait values indicates the importance of particular trait values in dictating community-wide responses to drought. By contrast, the influence of trait standard deviations suggests that it is the trait diversity per se that buffers communities²⁴. We used univariate regression with

¹School of Biological Sciences, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA. ²Department of Earth System Science, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. ³Department of Wildlife, Fish, and Conservation Biology, University of California, Davis, Davis, CA, USA. ⁴Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA. ⁵Program in Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA. ⁶School of Natural Sciences, University of California, Merced, Merced, CA, USA. *e-mail: anderegg@utah.edu

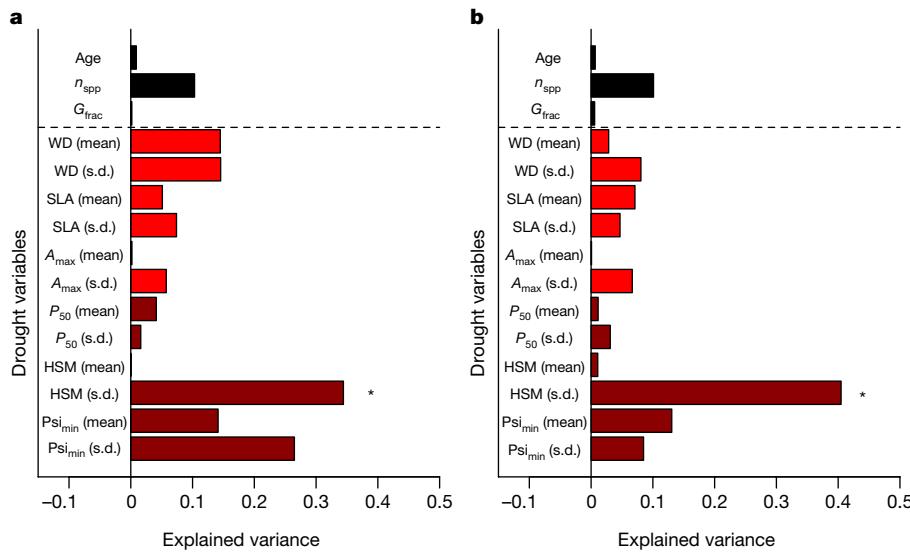


Fig. 1 | Variation in hydraulic traits mediates ecosystem flux response to drought. The percentage of explained variance (R^2) in an ordinary least-squares linear regression of community-weighted plant traits (dark red, hydraulic traits; red, other traits) and site metrics (black, above the dashed line) in explaining cross-site patterns in the coupling (a) and sensitivity (b) of latent energy exchange variation in response to drought variables. Site metrics include: forest age (Age), species richness (n_{spp}) and

individual traits, multivariate regression with model selection using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and a machine-learning algorithm (random forests) to identify the most critical traits or site factors.

Of the tested traits, the community-level variation in HSM was the most predictive of forest flux responses to drought (Fig. 1), explaining 41% and 34% of the cross-site patterns in univariate models of drought coupling and drought sensitivity, respectively ($P < 0.01$ and $P = 0.02$ after correction for multiple hypothesis testing). However, considerable variation in drought coupling and sensitivity existed at sites where the HSM variation was low. Model selection techniques on multivariate trait models showed that the standard deviation of HSM and mean maximum photosynthetic rate were the most parsimonious models for drought sensitivity ($R^2 = 0.45$, $P < 0.001$, $\Delta \text{AIC} < -2$ from all other models). The standard deviation of HSM alone was selected as the most parsimonious model for drought coupling ($R^2 = 0.41$, $P = 0.001$). Model selection further indicated that the remaining predictors had little effect on model performance. In addition, the machine-learning algorithm consistently indicated that the standard deviation of HSM was one of the most important predictor variables (Extended Data Fig. 2).

We found that higher diversity in the HSMs of the species in an ecosystem significantly buffers ecosystem latent heat flux response to drought ($P_{\text{sens}} = 0.003$, $P_{\text{coup}} = 0.001$; Fig. 2). All else being equal, forest communities with higher hydraulic diversity (defined as a higher standard deviation in HSM) experienced smaller variation in latent energy fluxes explained by VPD and soil moisture. This pattern was generally robust, especially for the drought coupling metric, to the method of data processing including: (1) adjustment of measured latent energy exchange to correct for energy balance non-closure ($P_{\text{coup}} = 0.007$); (2) using both standardized (z -score) and raw drought variables ($P_{\text{coup}} = 0.001$); (3) alternative estimates of the HSM (Supplementary Table 2 and Extended Data Fig. 3); and (4) accounting for other potentially confounding factors such as forest age (Methods).

We found here that plant trait variation, particularly hydraulic diversity, has a critical role in the response of temperate and boreal forests to drought. The importance of trait variation metrics (Fig. 1), as opposed to trait mean metrics, highlights a critical role of compensatory dynamics among species in how functional diversity mediates ecosystem responses to climate extremes (Supplementary Information). We acknowledge, however, that our analysis is limited to 40 flux sites

fraction of forest composition that is gymnosperm species (G_{frac}). Traits include the community-weighted mean and standard deviation (s.d.) of: wood density (WD), specific leaf area (SLA), A_{max} , P_{50} , HSM and Ψ_{min} . For sample sizes for each trait, see Supplementary Table 3. Asterisks indicate statistically significant regressions ($P = 0.001$ (a) and $P = 0.02$ (b) after correction for multiple hypothesis testing).

and the examined traits do not capture all the important elements of the drought-response strategies of each species. More traits, particularly rooting depth and allometric differences (for example, leaf-to-sapwood ratios), will probably help to explain some of the remaining variations in ecosystem resilience. Furthermore, our sites generally do not include droughts that are severe enough to trigger tree mortality or changes in species composition, which may be important processes that influence the long-term response of an ecosystem to drought²⁵.

Recent advances have shown that plant hydraulics can be used to predict stomatal responses to changing environmental conditions^{19,26} and the simulation of plant hydraulic transport in Earth-system models

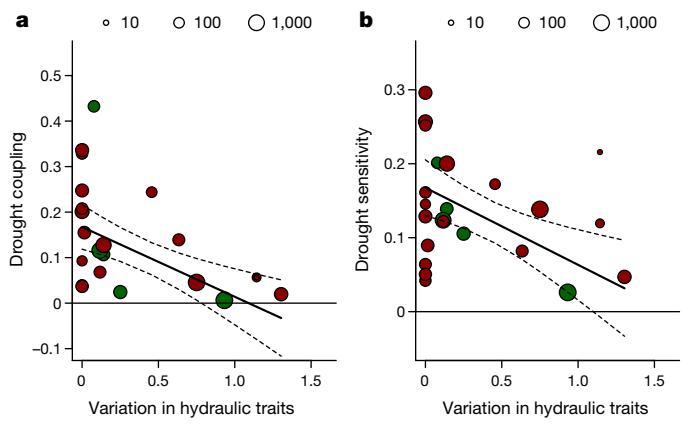


Fig. 2 | Ecosystem sensitivity to drought as a function of community variation in hydraulic safety margin. a, Drought coupling is expressed as the percentage of explained variation (R^2). b, Drought sensitivity is expressed as the summed absolute values of standardized coefficients of drought variables regressed against latent energy (LE) exchange as a function of daily VPD, soil moisture (SM) and their interaction (regression: $\text{LE} = f(\text{VPD}, \text{SM}, \text{VPD} \times \text{SM})$). Hydraulic variation is expressed as the community-weighted standard deviation in the HSM of each species. Colours indicate biomes of deciduous broadleaf (green) and needleleaf (red) forests. The size of the dot indicates the number of days included for each flux site. The solid black line is the best-fit ordinary least-squares linear regression and dashed lines are the 95% confidence interval of the regression fit ($n = 23$ independent sites).

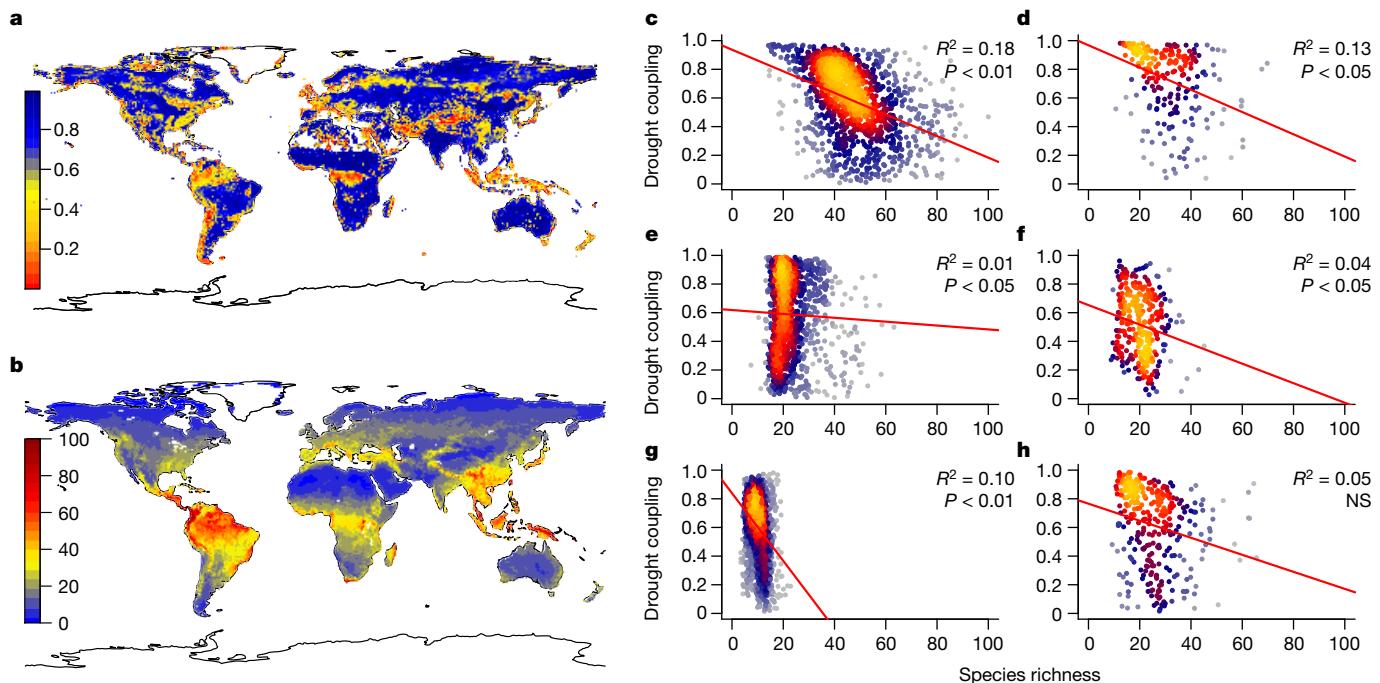


Fig. 3 | Forest ecosystem response to drought estimated from remote-sensing-derived vegetation water content variation is influenced by species richness. **a**, Drought coupling as the percentage of explained variation (R^2) in an ordinary least-squares linear regression by drought variables on an index of aboveground plant water content variation at midday (regression: vegetation optical depth at midday (VOD_{midday}) = $f(VOD_{night}, VPD)$). **b**, Native plant species richness (percentage of the maximum). Data available from <http://ecotope.org/anthromes/biodiversity/plants/data/>. **c–h**, Regressions between these two variables for six major biomes. **c**, Tropical and subtropical moist broadleaf forests.

is now possible²⁷. Current land-surface models largely do not simulate diversity in strategies in plant response to drought, nor do they currently include plant hydraulics, potentially leading to substantial carbon cycle uncertainty²⁸. Efforts are underway to develop and test functional trait-based models at the Earth-system scale¹⁵. Incorporating plant hydraulic diversity, especially through diversity in P_{50} and stomatal response to water potential (for example, HSM), will also improve the representation of related processes. For example, the loss of plant hydraulic transport is the key mechanism of drought-induced mortality²⁹ and can predict mortality risk among species in diverse communities³⁰.

Our broadly distributed temperate and boreal forest flux tower analyses suggest that drought resilience signals from biodiversity might be observable in satellite-based estimates of vegetation water content (Methods and Extended Data Figs. 4, 5). As a preliminary exploration, we examined covariation of the variability in vegetation water content with dominant tree species diversity across the continental United States and conducted a similar, more speculative analysis at global scales. Similar to the eddy flux tower findings, higher species diversity was associated with a more buffered response of vegetation water content to drought indicators across the United States ($P_{sens} = 0.0005$; $P_{coup} < 0.0001$; Extended Data Fig. 6) and globally within tropical moist ($P < 0.0001$), tropical dry ($P = 0.03$), temperate broadleaf ($P = 0.01$), temperate conifer ($P = 0.02$) and boreal ($P < 0.0001$) forest ecosystems, and was marginally associated in Mediterranean-type woodlands ($P = 0.07$) (Fig. 3 and Extended Data Fig. 7). Species richness was also an important predictor variable identified using the machine-learning algorithm (Extended Data Fig. 8), for which the complete model explained 27% of the variance in drought responses in global forests. The influence of diversity on ecosystem sensitivity showed strong biome-specific differences (Fig. 3). Across biomes, we observed a saturating relationship between the biodiversity and drought sensitivity of the ecosystems (Extended Data Fig. 9), although this appears to be driven by biome-level

$n = 1,380$ grid cells. **d**, Tropical and subtropical dry broadleaf forests. $n = 241$ grid cells. **e**, Temperate broadleaf and mixed forests. $n = 1,289$ grid cells. **f**, Temperate coniferous forests. $n = 318$ grid cells. **g**, Boreal forests. $n = 1,784$ grid cells. **h**, Mediterranean-type forests, woodlands and shrubs. $n = 319$ grid cells. Each point represents an individual grid cell from the map and redder colours indicate a higher density of points. Red lines show ordinary least-squares regression lines of best fit. Numbers in the upper right of panels indicate the linear generalized least-squares regression R^2 and P values indicate statistical significance of that regression after accounting for spatial autocorrelation.

differences in sensitivity. Although this initial exploration should be treated with caution before a more detailed observational validation is performed, it provides a starting point for global analyses of how forest diversity regulates ecosystem resilience during drought that is consistent with conclusions drawn from flux tower analysis.

We have documented a fundamental effect of trait variation on ecosystem stability that directly influences the atmosphere and climate system. Temperate and boreal forest ecosystems with higher hydraulic diversity are more buffered to changing drought conditions. Owing to the paucity of eddy covariance sites and physiological trait measurements at tropical forest sites, additional measurements are needed to test these diversity–stability patterns in more diverse forests. Our initial analysis suggests that satellite measurements of canopy water content may be promising for overcoming some of the scarcity barrier of limited eddy covariance sites for scaling and testing drought responses at continental scales. Our results provide evidence that hydraulic diversity is a critical element of biodiversity for next-generation land-surface models to include to improve simulations of carbon, water and energy fluxes in a rapidly changing climate.

Online content

Any methods, additional references, Nature Research reporting summaries, source data, statements of data availability and associated accession codes are available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-018-0539-7>.

Received: 16 November 2017; Accepted: 14 August 2018;
Published online: 19 September 2018

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Acknowledgements We thank M. Beninati, R. O'Dell and J. Gallafent for assistance with trait compilation. W.R.L.A. acknowledges funding from the University of Utah Global Change and Sustainability Center, NSF Grant 1714972 and 1802880 and the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Agricultural and Food Research Initiative Competitive Programme, Ecosystem Services and Agro-ecosystem Management, grant no. 2018-67019-27850. A.T.T. acknowledges funding from USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture Postdoctoral Research Fellowship grant no. 2017-07164. This work used eddy covariance data acquired and shared by the FLUXNET community, including these networks: AmeriFlux, AfriFlux, AsiaFlux, CarboAfrica, CarboEuropeIP, CarboItaly, CarboMont, ChinaFlux, Fluxnet-Canada, GreenGrass, ICOS, KoFlux, LBA, NECC, OzFlux-TERN, TCOS-Siberia and USCCC. The ERA-Interim reanalysis data are provided by ECMWF and processed by LSCE. The FLUXNET eddy covariance data processing and harmonization was carried out by the European Fluxes Database Cluster, AmeriFlux Management Project and Fluxdata project of FLUXNET, with the support of CDIAC and ICOS Ecosystem Thematic Center and the OzFlux, ChinaFlux and AsiaFlux offices.

Reviewer information *Nature* thanks D. Baldocchi, S. Delzon, S. Jansen and the other anonymous reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

Author contributions W.R.L.A. designed the study with all authors providing input. A.G.K., K.Y., R.G. and N.Z. contributed data and assisted with data collection. W.R.L.A., A.G.K. and A.T.T. analysed the data. W.R.L.A. wrote the paper with all authors providing input.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Extended data is available for this paper at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-018-0539-7>.

Supplementary information is available for this paper at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-018-0539-7>.

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to W.R.L.A.

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METHODS

Flux tower analysis. We used the FLUXNET2015 Tier 1 dataset of eddy covariance sites (<http://fluxnet.fluxdata.org/data/fluxnet2015-dataset/>) around the world to quantify ecosystem sensitivity to drought and the degree to which plant traits mediate ecosystem flux variation due to changes in environmental drivers. The FLUXNET2015 dataset provides a standardized set of fluxes of carbon, water and energy at over 210 sites and has undergone a standard set of quality assurance and quality control tests and gap-filling³¹. Using the biome classification from the International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme (IGBP) provided for the FLUXNET2015 sites, we selected sites that were forest or woodland ecosystems (deciduous broadleaf forest, evergreen needleleaf forest, evergreen broadleaf forest or mixed forest) and sites that had not experienced disturbance in at least 10 years before flux monitoring, to avoid sites with frequent disturbances or rapidly developing vegetation. This led to a list of 65 candidate sites. Because adequate on-site climate data are needed to determine drought sensitivity and knowledge of the functional traits of dominant canopy species, we further excluded sites that did not have on-site measurements of the vapour pressure saturation deficit of air (VPD, calculated from temperature and relative humidity and reported as a derived variable in the FLUXNET2015 dataset), soil water content of the top 30 cm, or sites that did not have adequate species coverage of functional trait measurements (see below) for at least two of our functional traits. This led to a final site list of 40 forest sites around the world (Supplementary Table 1 and Extended Data Fig. 1), covering 352 site-years of data.

We used a previously published method⁵ that was specifically designed to estimate drought sensitivity at a given eddy covariance site by focusing on days when water availability was most likely to control ecosystem fluxes (for example, screening out days when other meteorological drivers, such as radiation, were likely to be more important influences on fluxes). In brief, we used the daily-level records of latent energy exchange as dependent variables to quantify variation in water and energy fluxes. Latent energy is dominated by plant transpiration in forest ecosystems under certain conditions^{5,6} and thus variation in latent energy exchange is a major mechanism through which plants on the land surface affect the atmosphere. Following previous analyses⁵, we conservatively selected only days on which latent heat was dominated by transpiration, changes in leaf area were likely to be relatively minor, and flux variation was likely to be influenced by water availability. Thus, at each site, we restricted our analysis to days during the peak of growing season, quantified as days on which: (1) the average temperature was above 15°C; (2) solar radiation was high, quantified as days in which 24-h average photosynthetic photon flux density was greater than 500 $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$; and (3) sufficient evaporative demand existed to drive water fluxes, quantified as 24-h average VPD $> 0.5 \text{ kPa}$. For all analyses, we used both the 'LE' and 'LE.CORR' variables reported by the FLUXNET2015 database for latent energy exchange. LE.CORR reflects a correction factor, which assumes that the measured Bowen ratio is correct; this factor scales the energy fluxes with the measured Bowen ratio and is used to force energy balance closure at each flux site. Our results were robust to either variable. Following previous analyses⁵, we standardized the timeseries of latent energy by dividing by the mean latent energy at a given site where VPD was between 0.9 and 1.1 kPa and volumetric soil water content was >90 th percentile (considered to be well-hydrated conditions). This standardization allowed for cross-site comparison of latent energy sensitivity to climate conditions, by accounting for fixed extrinsic (for example, stand biomass or leaf area) drivers.

Once this subset of days was determined, we constructed a multivariate drought model for each site by performing a multiple linear regression of daily latent energy exchange (LE) as a function of daily VPD, soil moisture (SM) and their interaction, as has previously been done for cross-site comparisons in eddy covariance data^{5,6}:

$$\text{LE} = \beta_1 \text{VPD} + \beta_2 \text{SM} + \beta_3 \text{SM} \times \text{VPD} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

in which β_i indicates the regression coefficient for term i . Consistent with previous drought regression studies that focused on temperate forest eddy covariance sites across the United States^{5,6}, soil moisture in the top 30 cm was used because data for soil moisture from deeper layers are rarely available. We note that soil moisture is challenging to quantify across flux sites and absolute values of volumetric water content of soil should be treated with caution. This multivariate regression method has been used successfully in multiple temperate forest studies across the United States to quantify the sensitivity of ecosystems to the critical components of drought stress^{5,6} and performed relatively well at our flux sites (Extended Data Fig. 10).

The adjusted R^2 values of these regressions represent the degree to which ecosystem-level variation in latent energy exchange was controlled by VPD and soil moisture and was subsequently used as a dependent variable ('drought coupling' in the main text) in our cross-site analysis. In addition, we further performed all multiple linear regressions with standardized (z-score) VPD, soil moisture and their interaction, which enabled quantitative comparison of the regression

coefficients³². We summed the absolute values of the three coefficients to provide a metric of 'drought sensitivity' at each flux site.

From published literature, we compiled the species composition and, where possible, dominance of tree species at each flux site (Supplementary Tables 3, 4). Using a combination of the metadata and studies listed on the host site for each flux tower and targeted literature searches, we created a database of the dominant tree species in the footprint of each flux tower. For 22 of the 40 sites (Supplementary Tables 3, 4), we were able to acquire estimates of relative dominance of each species, typically through metrics of basal area or composition percentage, and we converted these metrics to the proportion of each species within the total plant community (that is, between 0 and 1). These values were used in a subsequent analysis to calculate community-weighted (for example, dominance-weighted) trait means and standard deviations.

Trait analysis. We compiled trait data for dominant tree species that comprised $>80\%$ of the biomass and/or composition at all sites (mean across all sites: 91%), which enabled capturing first-order effects of functional traits on ecosystem water fluxes. For sites for which biomass and/or composition data were not available, we assumed that all 'dominant' species listed in the publication had equal composition. We used the Global Wood Density Database^{33,34} to compile wood density data for species. We used a previously published dataset³⁵ to compile the traits of each species for light-saturated maximum photosynthetic rate and specific leaf area (SLA). Traits related to photosynthetic rates and SLA are prominent traits that are typically considered as inputs for next-generation 'trait-based' models, and SLA is often related to leaf metabolic rates and lifespan in these models. We used the Xylem Functional Traits database³⁶ to compile the water potential at 50% loss of hydraulic conductivity (P_{50}) and the HSM, defined as the difference between P_{50} and the minimum water potential experienced (see alternative definitions in Supplementary Table 2), for each species. The HSM has previously been observed to be a critical predictive trait¹⁸, because it provides an integrative assessment of species 'riskiness' during drought, integrating both hydraulic vulnerability to water potential and stomatal responses²² and/or potentially diversity in the rooting strategies of each species. We then calculated the mean and standard deviation of each trait for each site as the community-weighted mean and standard deviation. Supplementary Table 3 describes the proportion of species composition at each site for which we had adequate trait data and sites were dropped from trait-level analyses if they had insufficient trait data.

Using the drought correlation and drought sensitivity of flux sites as dependent variables, we used three complementary approaches to determine which site factors and functional traits were most important. First, we performed univariate ordinary least-squares regressions between functional traits and the drought response metrics (Fig. 1). Because this involved multiple hypothesis testing, we implemented the Bonferroni correction to adjust P values for multiple comparisons. Because the hydraulic trait P_{50} can be sensitive to method artefacts, we repeated this analysis with alternative values for the few ($n =$ around 6–8) potentially problematic species (Supplementary Table 5) and observed that our results were robust. Second, we used models of multiple traits, determining the most parsimonious model through model selection procedures. Because variable importance estimates can be biased by collinear predictor variables, we used a matrix of pairwise correlations and removed any variable with high correlations ($R > 0.5$) with other predictor variables. Each pairwise correlation was performed and the variable with the lower correlation with the dependent variable was removed³⁷. With this reduced set of predictor variables, we then used both forward and backward stepwise model selection via AIC, with ΔAIC values of < -2 used as a criterion to drop variables³⁸. This technique provides a rigorous estimate of the most parsimonious model, and the coefficients of the (previously standardized to z-score) predictor variables that remain can be compared directly. Because the quantity of data available across sites was highly variable (range 10–1,200 days that met the above criterion) and thus the variable statistical insight that can be drawn from each site varied based on this sample size (that is, a regression that covers 20 days should be down-weighted relative to a regression that covers 800 days), we weighted each site by the number of days for which data were available. For plotting Fig. 2, one site with adequate HSM data was classified 'mixed forest' by the FLUXNET2015 database and for simplicity we plotted it as an 'evergreen needleleaf forest', because it was dominated by gymnosperm species.

Finally, we used a machine-learning algorithm of random forests³⁹ to estimate the variable importance on the non-collinear traits identified as above. We chose this algorithm because it (1) performs well among machine-learning algorithms; (2) makes no assumptions about the distribution (for example, normality) of the input data; (3) makes no assumptions on the functional form of the relationship between independent and dependent variables (for example, linear, nonlinear, and so on); and (4) can handle interactions between independent variables. We examined variable importance using the total decrease in node impurities for each variable. **Satellite estimates of drought-driven variation in vegetation water content.** We tested spatial patterns of variations in drought sensitivity using ecosystem-scale

estimates of vegetation water content from microwave radiometry-derived vegetation optical depth (VOD). We used VOD from the land parameter data record, which was retrieved from the X-band (10.7 GHz) observations of the advanced microwave scanning radiometer–earth observing system (AMSR-E) based on simultaneous retrieval of atmospheric water vapour, surface soil moisture, VOD and the canopy scattering albedo. Measurements across a variety of ecosystem types have previously shown that VOD is proportional to plant water content⁴⁰ and therefore also to leaf water potential⁴¹, although additional research is needed to determine how the relationship between VOD and plant water potential varies across ecosystems. Full retrieval algorithm details can be found in previously published studies^{42–44}. Rainy days were filtered from the record to avoid contamination from intercepted water on the leaves affecting the AMSR-E observations. Data for which the land-surface temperature (derived from higher-frequencies of the AMSR-E radiometer) was below 273 K were assumed to represent frozen soil conditions for which the VOD retrieval algorithms are not valid, and were also removed from the dataset. We used data from January 2003–December 2010 (the AMSR-E failed in 2011). Rain was determined based on data from the Global Precipitation Climatology Project⁴⁵. We compared daily midday VOD estimates to the total daily latent energy fluxes at our flux tower sites and found that the two were linearly related despite each VOD observation representing an area 2–3 orders of magnitude greater than the flux tower fetch ($P < 0.0001$, Extended Data Fig. 4), indicating that both captured the broad-scale ecosystem response to water availability. Furthermore, we observed that hydraulic diversity was correlated with tree species richness in the United States ($R^2 = 0.65$; $P = 0.04$, Extended Data Fig. 5).

To calculate drought coupling, we first conducted a similar analysis to equation (1) by calculating the R^2 for each grid cell of the regression of VOD at midday versus VOD at night and daily VPD, although without the interaction term present in equation (3). The night-time (01:30) VOD was used because it is representative of root-zone soil moisture variation, given pre-dawn equilibrium between root-zone soil water potential and leaf water potential. This R^2 was used to measure drought coupling (coefficient of determination) at global scale. To quantify drought sensitivity, we used estimates of ecosystem ‘anisohydricity’ derived from the same VOD data. Anisohydricity is a measure of leaf water-potential response to soil drying and increases in VPD, as influenced by stomatal closure and xylem loss of conductivity. The anisohydricity was calculated as previously published²² based on the slope of the relationship between midday (13:30 local time) overpass VOD and midnight (01:30 local time) overpass VOD, for which—at the latter time—leaf and soil water potential are assumed to be in equilibrium owing to night-time refilling. Higher values indicate more anisohydric or less drought-sensitive ecosystems, although prolonged droughts may still lead to a reduction in growth⁴⁶.

For the US-based analysis, we used the richness of dominant tree species from a previous study⁴⁷ to compare to hydraulic diversity of our eddy covariance sites. Globally, we used the previously published dataset⁴⁸ that provides spatial patterns of plant diversity based on species-area relationships and ground plots. We converted this dataset to a raster with 1×1 degree resolution and then used the previously published biome map⁴⁹ at the same resolution to determine the biome of each grid cell. We examined only grid cells that were dominated by one of six forest biomes (moist tropical forest, dry tropical forest, broadleaf temperate forest, coniferous temperate forest, boreal forest or Mediterranean-type forest/woodland). We further screened grid cells to remove cells with $>25\%$ human impact (typically croplands) based on a previous study⁵⁰.

We converted the vegetation water content variation metrics (correlation and sensitivity to drought variables) to the same resolution using bilinear interpolation. For each biome, we examined the relationship between species richness and water content variation using linear mixed-effects models to account for spatial auto-correlation. Per standard practice⁵¹, we included the latitude and longitude coordinates of each grid cell in the regression and tested the following spatial correlation structures—linear, quadratic ratio, exponential, spherical and Gaussian—selecting the most likely and parsimonious model using $\Delta AIC < -2$ or more. The quadratic correlation structure was most parsimonious for all biomes. We further checked that the effect of species richness was not due to patterns in biomass and/or productivity alone by including models that had both richness and the mean pixel VOD over the whole record, which is strongly related to aboveground biomass. Using stepwise model selection using AIC, the most parsimonious model included both mean VOD and species richness, indicating that richness is important beyond average biomass/productivity. Finally, we performed a similar random forest analysis and variable importance as conducted for the flux tower analysis and included species richness, mean VOD, canopy height⁵² (to account for potential successional and/or land use effects) and biome.

Statistics. No statistical methods were used to predetermine sample size. All statistical analyses were performed in the R computing environment⁵³. Model selection was performed using the stepAIC function in the MASS package⁵⁴. Statistical

assumptions of linear models were verified by examining residual and quantile plots of the models and transformations were applied as needed. All maps were generated using the raster⁵⁵ and rworldmap⁵⁶ packages and spatial autocorrelation was modelled using the gls function in the nlme package⁵⁷. The generalized additive model in Extended Data Fig. 9 was performed using the gam function in the mgcv package⁵⁸. Random forest analyses were performed using the randomForest and ranger packages.

Reporting summary. Further information on research design is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this paper.

Data availability

Eddy flux data are available at <http://fluxnet.fluxdata.org/data/fluxnet2015-dataset/>; community trait data are available at <http://www.anderegglab.net/data/trait-data/>; detailed trait data are available in Extended Data Figs. 1–10 and at <https://datadryad.org//handle/10255/dryad.235>, <https://datadryad.org//handle/10255/dryad.80340> and from a previous publication¹⁸.

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