Accurate Simulation of Both Sensitivity and Variability for Amazonian Photosynthesis: Too Much to Ask

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Key Points:

- Regression logic is cause to doubt predictions whose variability is unrealistically high.
- A suite of models poorly reproduce tower estimates of Amazon rainforest gross primary productivity.
- Highly seasonal models predict stronger GPP reactivity to meteorology than is likely to be true.

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Abstract

Causes of climate predictions' uncertainty include wide spread in modeled gross primary productivity (GPP) for evergreen broadleaf forests. Deterministic predictions inherently lack the portion of variability that a regression's error term summarizes. Omitted predictors' contribution to error represent simulations' necessary underestimation of real variability. Earth system model outputs with high variability relative to reference data warrant skeptical examination. We compare three statistical and 15 process models to site-level means, seasonal amplitude and driver responsiveness of GPP as calculated at six Amazon eddy covariance (EC) towers. Current month's weather determines only 12% of the variability in EC GPP, implying that models whose predicted GPP's variability approaches that of EC GPP probably are substantially hypersensitive to weather drivers. Roughly half the models have stronger seasonal GPP variability than ECs show, and inaccurately identify the timing of annual minimum GPP. Responses to temperature and light for some highly seasonal models are of the opposite sign as EC GPP's. Strongly seasonal models' deepest dip in photosynthesis both occurs later in the dry season and is more severe than EC estimates. Excessive reactivity to drivers appears to cause the high simulated variability of the strongly seasonal models.

1 Key Words

Amazon

model benchmarking

gross primary productivity (GPP)

Multi-Scale Synthesis and Terrestrial Model Intercomparison Project (MsTMIP)

outliers

tropical rainforest

regression

seasonality

Simple Biosphere Model (SiB)

variability

2 Plain Language Summary

Global climate models must accurately represent many processes, including the pace at which plants convert sunlight, water and CO_2 into sugar. The Amazon rainforest is enormous and extremely biologically productive, so the region strongly influences the world's cycling of CO_2. Measurements from instruments on towers in the Amazon, despite imperfections, seem to be the most accurate estimates of rainforest plant productivity rates that exist. We compare "tower" estimates to 18 global models, focusing on rainforests' subtle dry v. wet seasons.

Modeled monthly plant productivity poorly matches tower estimates. About half the models have more seasonal variation than the towers and half have less. Simple equations that use current month's temperature, light, and rainfall describe model output quite closely, especially for the weakly seasonal models.

Reality is more variable than are mathematical model predictions that accurately describe the results of a particular change in inputs. Why, then, do some models have stronger seasonal swings than tower estimates? One cause is using a descriptive equation that overlooks models' non-linear responses to weather. But the main reason is that when weather changes, tower estimates of plant productivity change less than it do predictions from models with strong seasonal swings.

3 Introduction

Modeling tropical plant productivity accurately is important to the accuracy of global climate predictions because rainforests are so large and productive that their gross primary productivity (GPP) represents about 34% of the terrestrial total [*Beer et al.*, 2010]. Rainforest productivity largely drives interannual variability in global CO_2 concentrations [*Bousquet et al.*, 2000; *Rödenbeck et al.*, 2003; *Wenzel et al.*, 2014]. Positive feedbacks to change in rainforest productivity amplify change in CO_2 [*Christoffersen et al.*, 2014; *Harper et al.*, 2014; *Zemp et al.*, 2017].

The spread in simulations of current rainforest productivity [*Ardö*, 2015; *Malhi et al.*, 2009] is wide, and typically greater than for other biomes [*Anav et al.*, 2015; *Beer et al.*, 2010; *Cavaleri et al.*, 2015; *Friedlingstein et al.*, 2006; *Jung et al.*, 2020; *Mystakidis et al.*, 2016], shows of the need for better modeling for tropical rain forests. Cross-model differences represent material uncertainty about future rainforest productivity. Large differences in tropical GPP persist even after removing model differences in simulated precipitation [*Malhi et al.*, 2009; *Poulter et al.*, 2010a].

3.1 Predictions tend to have lower variance than source data.

For assessing a non-stochastic model's responses to climate change, it is helpful to consider a trade-off between accurate responsiveness to drivers and accurate variance of predicted outcomes. A model's sensitivity, or responsiveness, can be characterized as marginal change in outcome per unit change in a predictor [*Friedlingstein et al.*, 2006; *Hamby*, 1994]. In a regression, responsiveness corresponds to the slope coefficients. For models of GPP, large slopes imply stronger responses to changing climate. Tropical GPP sensitivity is critical because it describes the extent to which climate will continue to alter rainforest activity and even its viability.

In a model, a simplification by definition, omitted drivers cause some of any outcome's real variability. Predictions cannot include the variability that this portion of random error contributes because the model has no information about the missing drivers. For a regression, if modeled responses to included drivers, or sensitivities, are accurate and other sources of model error modest, omitted variables will still make variability of the predictions unrealistically low. We label the inherent tendency for predicted outcomes to have lower variability than true outcomes as "flattening".

An idealized illustration explains why predictions have low variability. Posit a regression that predicts its outcome y_i as a response to one predictor, x_i. The model is perfectly accurate, meaning that its responsiveness, β, exactly equals the true responsiveness of y_i to x_i. The model's only source of error is omitted predictors, which account for the random error term ϵ_i. There is no uncertainty due to imperfections of measurement, sampling, or specification. Variance of the predictions from this nearly perfect regression is necessarily smaller than the source data's variance.

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{sampled real world observation}: \; y_i &= \beta x_i + \epsilon \qquad (1) \\ \textit{regression prediction}: \; \hat{y}_i &= \beta x_i \end{aligned}$$

The error term adds variance only to the source data but not to predicted values (Equation 1, [*Greene*, 2012, Chapter 3]). Text S1 expresses the argument formally.

The regression could describe for a particular model the responsiveness of rainforest GPP to temperature.

$$\widehat{GPP}_i = \beta * temperature_i + intercept \quad (2)$$

If the GPP model is based on enzyme kinetics, there is no internal β for temperature, but instead a variety of other calculations involving temperature. For example, one parameter could be Q10, the exponent for a rate multiplier to rubisco carboxylation per increase of 10°C. The value of Q10 may be derived from bench or field research. The parameter is not estimated directly for rainforest due to lack of source data, and because in theory Q10 is constant for all chlorophyll [but see *Alster et al.*, 2020]. Other steps within the model may further affect GPP's temperature responsiveness. The temperature to which Q10 is applied may be modified from ambient to account for degree of shading. There may be adjustments for each plant functional type's (PFT's) optimum temperature. Temperature may affect GPP indirectly through vapor pressure deficit. The descriptive regression summarizes as a linear approximation the effects of the process model's more complex underlying calculations.

As a thought experiment, assume that the net result of imperfections in the GPP model is that effective rainforest temperature sensitivity, or the descriptive regression's only β, is twice the true sensitivity. A consequence is higher variance of the $\hat{y}_i$'s. As shown in Equation 3, exaggerating the regression coefficient by a factor of two quadruples the predictions' variance.

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{y} &= 2\beta x + intercept \\ \sigma^2_{\hat{y}} &= \frac{1}{n-1}\sum_{n=1}^{i}(2\beta x_i - \overline{2\beta x})^2 = \frac{4}{n-1}\sum_{n=1}^{i}(\beta x_i)^2 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

More generally, when the slope of a regression with one predictor changes by a multiplied constant, the variance of predictions made from the same x-values used to fit the model changes by the squared amount of the multiplier. A slope multiplier larger than one increases predictions' variance, and a multiplier smaller than one decreases variance.

If only because models by definition simplify reality, every regression model has a non-zero error term. While error due to omitted variables embodies real-world variability, measurement error, sampling error, and misspecification of mathematical form represent the data and model's uncertainty about included aspects of the real world [*Vicari et al.*, 2007]. More statistical noise from any source increases ϵ and causes more flattening, or less variability of predicted outputs.

There is a trade off between accurate responsiveness of $\hat{y}_i$ to x_i and accurate variance of predicted outcomes. Either deliberately or inadvertently, changing the regression slope can adjust variance to any level including to equal observed variance. But deviations from the optimal regression fit to the data carry a cost of less accurate modeled responsiveness to change in the observed driver(s). The right answer as measured by accurate variability of outcomes may result from the wrong reason of excessive model sensitivity.

A model can predict only what it "knows" about. Numeric calculations simulate the processes for which equations are included, and the consequences of the influences for which driver data are provided. If the model's sensitivities are accurate, outputs have only as much variability as the included processes and drivers create. The maximum portion of true outcome variance that a model whose responsiveness to drivers is perfectly accurate can simulate is the portion that the included processes and drivers in fact determine. The more completely a model with accurate driver responsiveness includes all true determinants of its outcome, the larger and closer to correct will be its predictions' variance.

The variability that model errors contribute and that otherwise is missing from deterministic predictions can be added back in directly. If random statistical noise is added, then predictions can have both realistic variance and accurate reactivity to predictors. If instead the introduced noise is correlated with drivers, such as by drawing predictions from a probability distribution at calculated percentiles, then effective driver slope(s) will be altered as described in Equation 3. Stochastic modeling has computational and other complications, and is rare in full earth system models (ESMs).

3.2 Flattening applies to Earth System Models.

Flattening occurs within parameterized ESM calculations. Many hard-coded model parameters are "essentially a smaller model within the larger model" [*Dahan*, 2010]. For example, in the Community Land Model (CLM5.0) each PFT's stomatal resistance parameter originated in a regression fitted to a global database of conductances [https://escomp.github.io/ctsm-docs/doc/build/html/tech_note/index.html section 2.9.3,

Table 2.9.1 of values from *De Kauwe et al.*, 2015]. Real variability in resistances caused by variables omitted from the source equation and subsequently from the ESM remains unexplained and unmodeled.

Climate models' inner workings are decisively more intricate than a single linear regression. But flattening is a tendency of any deterministic numeric prediction, including non-linear equations, transformations of variables (Text S1) and, like entire ESMs, complex combinations of equations with feedbacks. Inclusion of processes may be indirect, such as a model forced with satellite data that is a proxy for deciduous leaves' annual cycle. The driver data itself may be simulated, as weather is in fully-coupled ESM runs. In all of these situations, predictions from the model will lack the portion of real variance determined by omitted drivers and processes.

ESMs simulate systems so complex that omitted processes and drivers loom large. Because significant determinants of real variability are missing, the connection between the accuracy of predictions' variance and the accuracy of driver sensitivity provides a diagnostic tool. If the variance of a predicted outcome is higher than or even close to a benchmark's variance, offsetting excessive sensitivity to drivers could be a cause.

3.3 The Amazon is likely to become warmer, with more variable rainfall.

Change in tropical GPP as represented in ESMs depends largely on four environmental drivers: ambient CO_2, precipitation, temperature, and top of canopy insolation. Prediction accuracy depends on correctly simulating rainforest GPP responses to changes in the forcings. Like the rest of the world, rainforests are experiencing consistently increasing ambient CO_2. Models concur that the region's precipitation will become more variable [*Bathiany et al.*, 2018; *Chadwick et al.*, 2015; *Feng et al.*, 2013], a trend for which there already are observational indications at least on the drying side [*Fu et al.*, 2013; *Gloor et al.*, 2013; *Li et al.*, 2008; *Lopes et al.*, 2016]. The direction of change in rainforest mean rainfall rather than in its increasing variability is uncertain, however [*Gloor et al.*, 2012; *Li et al.*, 2006; *Poulter et al.*, 2010a].

Rainforest temperature is projected to rise and may already have changed measurably [*Corlett*, 2011; *Jiménez-Muñoz et al.*, 2013]. Temperature increases are likely to vary regionally within the basin [*Gloor et al.*, 2012]. Deforestation and temperature may have an amplifying feedback on GPP at landscape scales, with lower plant productivity causing more sunlight to become sensible rather than latent heat, and higher temperatures further reducing photosynthesis rates.

In the sometimes-cloudy tropics light can limit photosynthesis, especially for lower leaves in thick canopies. Amazonian surface insolation has increased slightly in recent decades due to reduced cloudiness [*Barkhordarian et al.*, 2017], though the trend's robustness is unclear [*Wielicki et al.*, 2002]. One likely cause of increased surface light, seasonal changes in the sizes of both Pacific and Atlantic Ocean warm pools, has an uncertain anthropogenic signal [*Arias et al.*, 2011]. Pollution and tropical fires on the other hand, reduce top of canopy insolation. Both reflect human behavior, an influence whose uncertainty increases the spread in trend predictions for most weather parameters.

This paper explores the fidelity of modeled Amazonian GPP to eddy covariance (EC) flux tower data, with an emphasis on the accuracy trade-offs that flattening presents. Credible representations of responsiveness to change in weather are especially important for climate models because they describe the direction and strength of trends in GPP in response to increasing concentrations of greenhouse gasses. If responsiveness is too weak, forecasts will be unreasonably reassuring. Excessively strong weather responsiveness will predict faster and more dramatic dieback of the rainforest [*Cox et al.*, 2013].

4 Methods

We compare EC GPP to 15 process models and three statistical models. Methods summarized in this section are described further in Text S2. The statistical models, Fluxcom, Wecann and VPM, each have fared well in global accuracy intercomparisons. SG3 runs for Multi-scale synthesis and Terrestrial Model Intercomparison Project's [MsTMIP; *Huntzinger et al.*, 2014; *Wei et al.*, 2014] 14 process models have common initial land cover maps, land use and land cover change, spin-up procedures, and atmospheric CO_2 and weather inputs. To MsTMIP we added SiB4 [*Haynes et al.*, 2019a,b], a recent major revision to the participating SiB3 model and which now has prognostic phenology.

To compare process models to statistical models that rely on satellite data, the evaluation period is limited to 2000 - 2010. Wecann starts in 2007 with the earliest satellite dataset for solar-induced fluorescence. Wecann is included only in basinwide comparisons because its shorter period for approximating seasonal cycles at tower sites would increase Wecann's apparent variability compared to all other models.

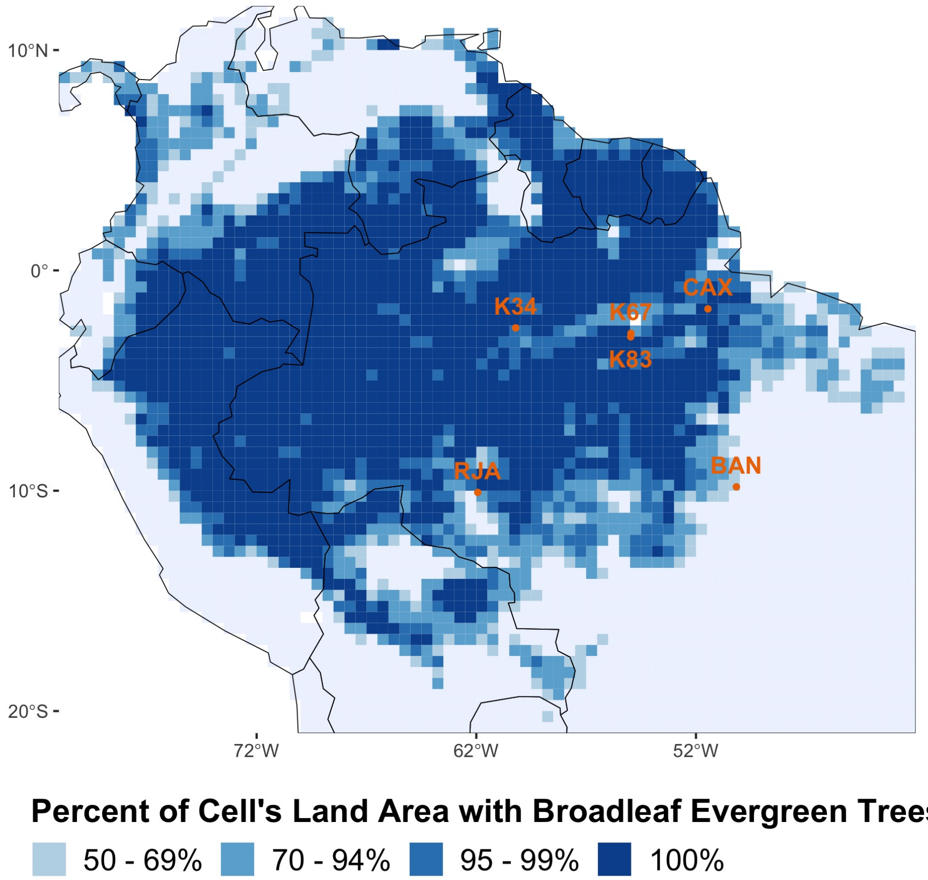

Figure 1: Study area, which includes all shaded cells. Orange dots are locations of eddy covariance towers. Based on MsTMIP's PFT classifications, a high proportion of the study area is almost pure rainforest. The land PFT distribution in 86% of study cells is at least 90% evergreen broadleaf forest.

For basinwide comparisons, the study area is northern South America, the world's largest rainforest that we refer as the Amazon although we do not use a strict watershed boundary. The study cells are limited to 42^{o} - 81^{o}W and 12^{o}N - 21^{o}S, excluding Central America both north of 7^{o}N and west of 77.5^{o}W. Selecting grid cells whose MsTMIP tiled PFTs are at least 50% evergreen broadleaf forest (EBF) limits the study to rainforest vegetation. Fig. 1 shows the portion of each study cell that MsTMIP codes as EBF.

We compare the process and statistical models to six EBF eddy covariance sites from the Large-scale Biosphere-Atmosphere Experiment in Amazonia: Rio Javaés-Bananal (BAN), Caxiuanã (CAX), Manaus Kilometer 34 (K34), Tapajos Kilometer 67 (K67), Tapajos

Kilometer 83 (K83), and Reserva Jaru (RJA) [*Restrepo-Coupe et al.*, 2013]. Fig. 1 maps the towers' locations. Each process or statistical model's GPP estimates for the grid cell containing a site are matched to the months for which data exists at each tower.

Eddy covariance towers are flawed benchmarks for GPP. Measured net ecosystem exchange is a small residual whose much larger offsetting components of GPP and ecosystem respiration must be modeled. A particularly thorny issue is lack of closure in energy budgets. Calculated energy fluxes leaving a site do not equal measured energy entering [*da Rocha et al.*, 2009; *Jung et al.*, 2019; *von Randow et al.*, 2004]. Where GPP seasonal variation is smaller than average, as in the tropics, closure corrections introduce more noise [*Clark et al.*, 2017; *Tramontana et al.*, 2016]. These weaknesses are serious. Nevertheless, and partly on faith, we take tower estimates to be the best reference data available, and their GPP responsiveness to individual drivers as true to the extent of being qualitatively strongly positive, strongly negative, or weak.

We define 'site' as an eddy covariance location. 'EC' refers more specifically to measurements made at a tower site and their derivatives. Unless noted, the weather driver data used to assess modeled GPP's responsiveness is MsTMIP's. Precipitation is monthly total in mm. Light is monthly mean top of canopy short-wave radiation under all sky conditions, in Wm^{-2}. Mean monthly temperature is measured in ^{o}C, and GPP in $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$.

5 Results

5.1 Modeled GPP mean and variance grossly differ from EC estimates.

An optimistic hypothesis that each model's simulated GPP mean and variance match EC estimates is easily rejected. The lines in Fig. 2 enclosing the EC mean and variance mark wide 99^{th} percentile bootstrapped confidence intervals. Averaged across the six sites and all months of each tower's operation, nearly all model estimates are outside the ECs' confidence intervals. The EC variance reflects only calculated mean monthly GPP, however, and does not include the considerable additional uncertainty from EC modeling and measurements.

For individual sites, at least one model severely underestimates mean GPP and at least one model's mean is more than twice EC GPP (Fig. S7). On average one or two models' means are credible matches to EC data. The variance of two process models' simulated GPP is higher than EC variance for all sites, while one is too low for every site. No model's variance is within target range for every site. One statistical model is credible for five of six sites.

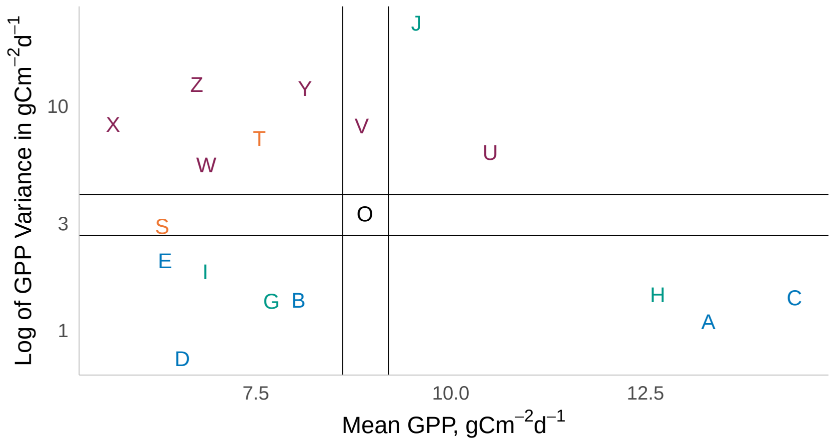

Figure 2: Comparison of EC GPP to process and statistical model means and variances across all site-months. Variance, on the y-axis, has a $\log_{10}$ scale. Model "O" is EC GPP. Names of other lettered models are shown in Fig. 3. Lines bracketing EC estimates are 99th percentile confidence bounds. For all but two models both means and variances fall outside the confidence bounds.

Which models are outliers differs across sites, and some models have very different relative performance among sites. For example, model J's variance is an outlier in Fig. 2 due to its puzzling GPP close to zero for several grid cells near K67, while its GPP is well above average at most other sites.

Correlations with EC GPP are remarkably low. Individual models' average across all sites ranges from -0.16 to 0.45, with a grand mean of only 0.12 (range across sites: -0.32 - 0.66, Fig. S8). Overall correlations with EC GPP for four models are statistically indistinguishable from zero. CAX and K67 have especially weak matches, with negative correlations for 12 and 14 of the 17 models respectively. The most closely simulated site is RJA, where EC GPP is especially variable and average correlation across all models is 0.66.

Data with larger magnitudes tend to have larger variance than data with smaller magnitudes, which tends to make GPP variance of mildly responsive models lower for strongly responsive models. But most models in Fig. 2 show the opposite pattern, with higher variance and lower mean GPP than the EC towers or the opposite. Means with large absolute values do not correspond to large variances. The opposing tendencies mean that for these GPP models, whatever causes differences in means does not explain variability. The causes of differences in variance need to be considered directly. Based on the logic of flattening, we hypothesize that high variance models may be overly sensitive to drivers. Before an exploration of model responsiveness, in the next section a more robust descriptor of model variability is assigned.

5.2 Seasonal cycle amplitude characterizes a model's GPP variability.

To explore the connection between flattening and sensitivity, and to compare models to EC GPP based on the relative variance of their predictions, one possibility is to rank the models based on variances in EC estimates. An alternative metric of variability that is more closely related to the biology being simulated is the amplitude of a model's seasonal cycle. Unlike a variance calculation, it takes into account the sequencing of observations. A Fourier series approximation smooths a site's GPP across outliers, uneven numbers of observation years per month and missing data. Earth's annual insolation cycle is sinusoidal, giving Fourier transformations inherent good fit for some ecological cycles. Characterizing seasonal cycles of GPP with four pairs of Fourier terms is a compromise between overfitting versus forcing unrealistic simplification. The first pair can be thought of as creating an annual cycle, the second allows for asymmetric shoulders, and the third and fourth provide for limited shaping of the annual peak and trough.

We label the difference between maximum and minimum months of a site's mean annual Fourier cycle as seasonal amplitude. In Fig. 3 and elsewhere, models are listed in increasing order of their seasonal amplitude averaged across the EC sites and indicated with black dots. Colors indicate how a model's amplitude compares to the EC amplitude, both averaged across all sites. The nine 'mild' models with weaker mean seasonal cycles than ECs are shown in blue or green. The eight 'lively' models whose cycles are stronger are colored red or orange. The intensity distinctions for dark blue or red break at one standard deviation from the EC mean. Most notable is how widely the seasonal swings differ across models, by a factor of 8.2. The difference means roughly that model Z's simulated trees vary in productivity eight times as much during a year as do model A's. The only model that would switch between the categories of mild versus lively if rankings were determined by variance instead is Model J, whose very high variance (Fig. 2) is due to anomalous GPP at one site.

ECs are a benchmark for model seasonality, albeit one with arguable accuracy. The mildest model varies during the year a third (0.35) as much as does EC GPP. The most strongly responsive model's mean site amplitude is almost triple (2.9 times) that of the ECs.

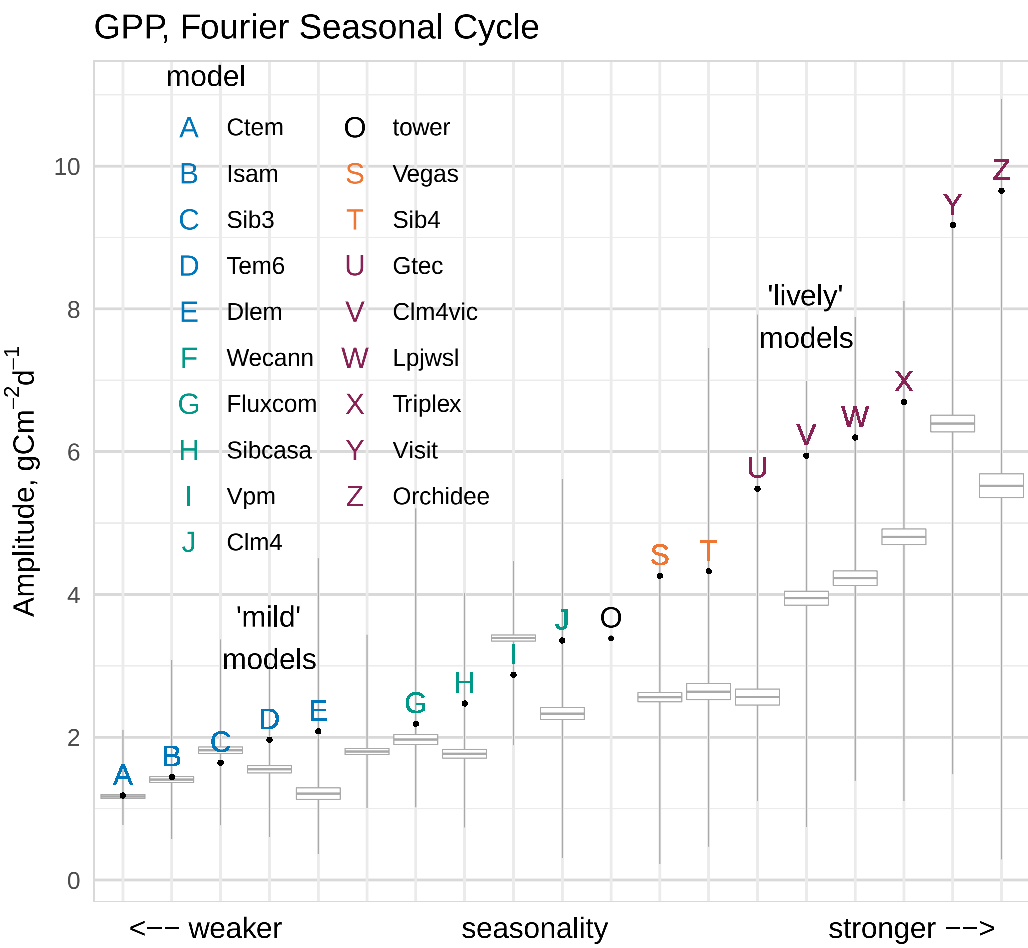

Figure 3: GPP's seasonal amplitude, with models' means across six sites ranked on the x-axis and marked by black dots labeled with colored letters. Grey boxes show a model's amplitude tendency across all rainforest cells in the Amazon. For both sites and basin-wide, the range in seasonal amplitude across models approaches an order of magnitude.

The models' degree of seasonality differs strongly also at individual sites. At no site is a mild model's mean amplitude larger than four gCm^{-2}d^{-1} (Fig. S9), while few of the most responsive models, shown in red, have a seasonal amplitude below four gCm^{-2}d^{-1} at any site. As climate parameters that affect productivity shift over time, a lively model is likely to predict greater change in rainforest carbon fixation per unit area than a mild model.

Each mean amplitude summarizes only six data points, so the mean EC GPP, 3.4 gCm^{-2}d^{-1} has large uncertainty. Based on a t-test, only the liveliest model's amplitude is outside a 95% confidence interval around the EC mean. K34 and K67 are located close enough to each other to have somewhat similar climate. With four degrees of freedom rather than five to reflect possible pseudoreplication, no model is outside the credible interval. There are too few data points to tighten the confidence interval by bootstrapping.

ECs' differing periods of operation preclude a temporally exact comparison between a model's basinwide and site tendencies. Fig. 3 shows in grey a box plot of a 95% confidence interval around the mean seasonal amplitude for all Amazon rainforest cells in all months. Whiskers on the grey boxes represent the tenth and ninetieth percentiles of cell amplitudes. The 20% of each model's cells that are outliers are not shown. As explained in the methods section, there is no EC mean for model F, whose ranking is an approximation. For the most mild models, shown in blue, EC amplitudes are roughly representative of the entire basin. For all the strongly lively red models but one, EC sites have moderately stronger seasonality than do basin-wide means. The extent to which the ECs are typical of the Amazon as a whole decreases with model seasonal amplitude.

Comparing seasonal amplitudes to interannual variability (Fig. S10) reinforces how strong the consequences of seasonal cycles are for simulated GPP. The difference between highest and lowest year's mean GPP from 2000 to 2010 for individual models ranges from 0.1 to 1.2 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$. The models' mean basin-level seasonal amplitude ranges are several times larger, from 1.3 to 6.0 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$. The range in seasonal cycle amplitudes across models, 1.2 to 9.7 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$, approximately equals the grand mean of monthly GPP across all models, 8.9. For GPP in the Amazon, understanding what drives variation within a year explains much more about a model's tendencies than do determinants of its interannual variability.

5.3 EC GPP barely responds to current weather.

Compared to many temperate locations, rainforests are always moist, always warm and always green. But even the wettest tropical forests have subtle annual cycles in rain, temperature and light. Our null hypothesis is that a simple linear combination of these three drivers largely describes monthly mean GPP. If so, weather's cycles might logically also set the timing of the simulated annual GPP cycle. Importantly, the drivers' individual influences on GPP could be parsed and evaluated [*Hamby*, 1994]. With differing trends expected for each driver, a model with retrospectively credible responsiveness to each is more likely to predict reliably.

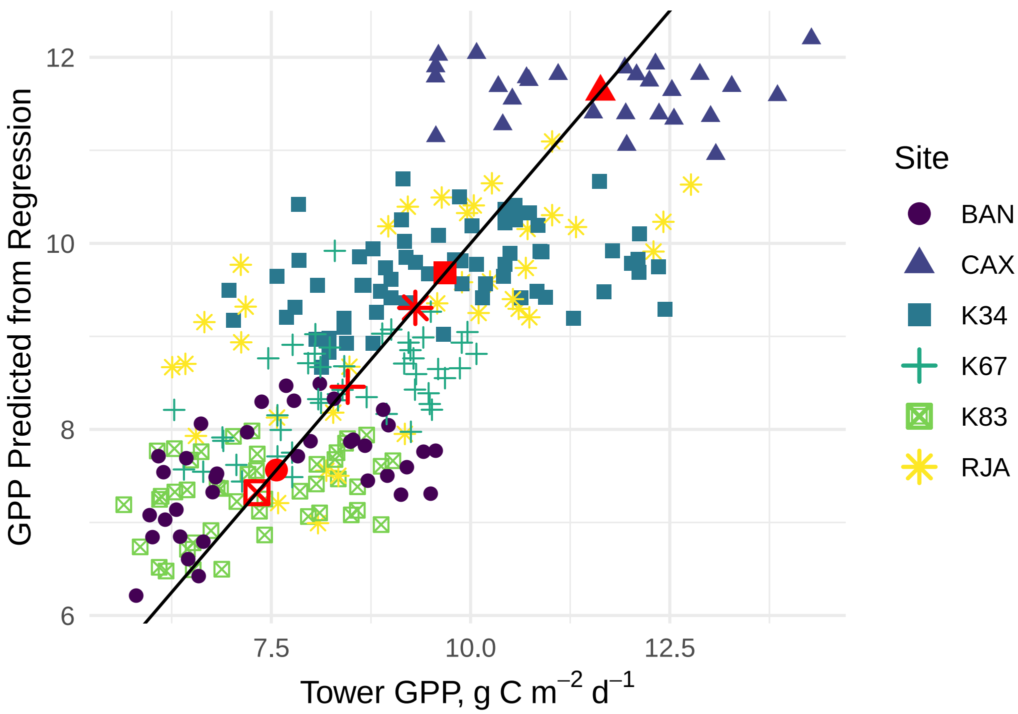

Figure 4: Monthly GPP for each eddy covariance tower compared to paired values predicted from a regression on MsTMIP rain, light, and temperature with site intercepts. Individual intercepts force each site's mean predicted value to equal the mean EC value, indicated with red symbols. Differences between sites are the main source of the prediction's power, with minimal EC GPP responsiveness to weather.

To judge models' responsiveness requires EC benchmarks. A linear regression with only current month's rain, temperature and light explains a small 12% of the variability in EC GPP (not shown). Rain's coefficient but no other is statistically significant.

GPP varies substantially between sites (Fig. 4). Individual cell intercepts, or fixed effects, segregate out the undetermined sources of location-specific differences that cause a particular site's outcome to differ by a consistent increment over time. For process models of GPP, potential underlying causes of site differences include soil depth and fertility, species assemblage in the spectacularly diverse tropics, herbivory, tree age distribution that reflects disturbance history, local geology that affects flooding and subsurface hydrology, and others. Most of these causes for site differences are impossible to parameterize globally, and therefore from an ESM perspective constitute impenetrable statistical noise. Site intercepts represent differences between locations that may or may not be modeled accurately, and if not, are apt to involve omitted variables. But separate intercepts allow a focus on how consistently the three weather drivers cause GPP to change at all locations even if site characteristics significantly influence long-term baseline productivity.

Equation 4 predicts monthly mean EC GPP from MsTMIP weather, with site intercepts added.

$$GPP = Intercepts \ + \ 0.0054 * Rain \ + \ 0.019 * Light \ + \ 0.52 * Temperature \tag{4}$$
$$P\text{-}values : Rain = 0.00; \ Light = 0.01; \ Temperature = 0.00$$
$$Adjusted \ R^2 = 0.59; \quad Residual \ standard \ error = 1.2; \quad n = 260$$

Fig. 4 compares EC GPP on the x-axis to paired predictions from Equation 4 on the y-axis. Site intercepts account for most of the spread in the EC dataset. Due to the weak predictive power of the weather variables, paired values for individual sites in Fig. 4 do not otherwise cluster near the 1:1 black line of perfect prediction. As measured by the adjusted r^2, the regression terms determine 59% of the variability. Site-level differences account for 81% of the regression's predictive power [*Chevan and Sutherland*, 1991], leaving 19% of explained variability, or only 12% of total variability, predicted by the current month's environmental attributes. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, current weather has little influence on EC GPP.

Each site's predicted values are flattened, with less variability on the y-axis than the source values on the x-axis. While the EC GPP data points have a variance of 3.3, the variance of matched but flattened predictions is 2.0, or 61% as large.

If EC meteorology for the comparable cell is used rather than MsTMIP weather, the regression fit with site effects degrades slightly ($r^2 = 0.54$). The only terms whose p-value is $\leq .10$ are four site intercepts and the slope for rain. GPP is statistically unrelated to either light or temperature. Why site-specific weather should be less predictive than regional weather is unclear. Perhaps soil moisture is influential, reflects regional recharge, and overwhelms highly localized rainfall differences. Also, conceivably a geographically broader weather summary more accurately represents conditions across ECs' full footprints than does weather at point locations chosen to represent the upwind area. The unexpectedly weaker fit with site weather is convenient, however. Errors in representing the true values of the drivers cause attenuation bias in regression coefficients, or weaker sensitivity. If MsTMIP weather were a worse fit than site weather, comparisons of EC driver sensitivities to model sensitivities would be less straightforward.

5.4 Lively models respond more strongly to current weather than mild models.

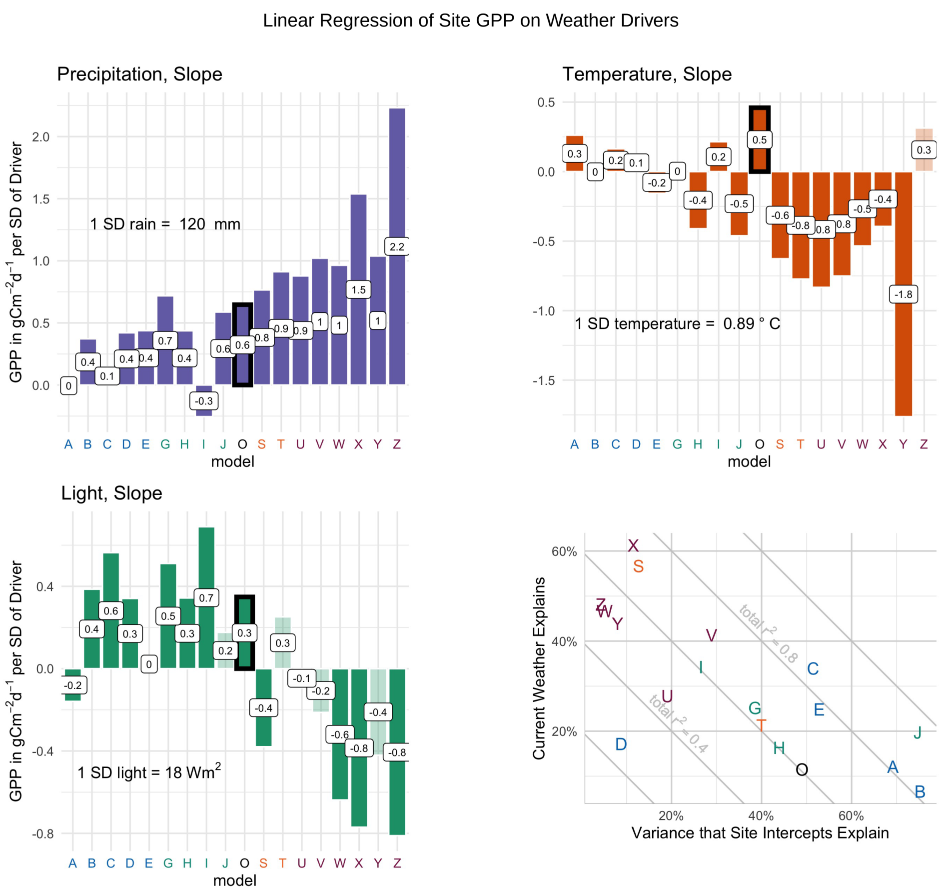

Figure 5: Linear regression slopes of GPP on current month's temperature, radiation, and precipitation for each model across six sites. Drivers are in units of standard deviation across all sites and months. Pale bars are coefficients whose p-value exceeds .05. EC slopes are outlined in black. The lower right panel shows the residual standard error and adjusted r^2 for each regression. Slopes, or driver responsiveness, range among models across an order of magnitude.

Whether flattening is as strong an influence on a model's simulations as on EC predictions depends on (a) whether current weather describes similarly little of the model's GPP variability, and (b) how reasonably a linear sum describes the mathematical form of current weather's relationship to modeled GPP. The three driver variables included in Eq. 4 describe EC GPP's weak but statistically significant responses to each. Based on the Akaike Information Criterion fit, all three drivers should be retained. All would be kept even if the full combination were less than ideal, however, in order to explore next each model's potentially differing emphases among the weather elements.

The vigor with which some models respond to rain, light and temperature contrasts sharply with EC GPP's weak responses. The regressions whose responsiveness slopes appear in Fig. 5 are simple additive models with site-specific intercepts, parallel to the characterization above of EC GPP. To facilitate comparison across drivers, environmental variables are shown in units of standard deviations. A regression slope of +0.5 in Fig. 5 indicates a tendency for a half $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$ increase in GPP to result from an increase of one standard deviation in the driver. Among the models, statistically significant coefficients for rain range from -0.26 to 2.2, for temperature from -1.8 to 0.26, and for light from -0.81 to 0.69. Ambient CO_2 is an insignificant predictor of historical site GPP in nearly all models (Fig. S11) and is not included in Fig. 5's regressions.

Among the GPP drivers, rain is the most consistent predictor across models. Its sign is positive for all but one model, and its influence statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) for all but one. The magnitude of rain responsiveness varies substantially, from 0.1 to 2.2 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$ of GPP per 120 mm increase in a month's precipitation. GPP increases with rain in all but 2 models. Models' rank for rain slopes almost matches that of seasonal amplitudes. The ECs' responsiveness to rain, outlined in black, sits solidly in the middle. For rain, the main difference among models is the response strength.

No environmental variable has a monopoly on GPP. Mean absolute slopes differ by less than a factor of two: 0.75 for rain, 0.46 for temperature, and 0.40 for light. Responses to temperature differ more than they do to rain. Temperature is statistically insignificant for four models. For the mildest models, temperature's influence is positive, as it is for EC GPP, and very weak. For the liveliest, GPP strongly declines. For light, statistically unreliable slopes exist across the range of slope magnitudes. On average mild models have nearly as strong a GPP response to light as do lively models but light's effect is in the opposite direction. For temperature and light, there is as much disagreement between models in what direction GPP responds as how strongly.

The descriptive regressions largely characterize GPP for all models. For the mild models as a group, residual standard error (RSE) averages 8% of site GPP and mean r^2 is 0.69 (Fig. S12). For the lively models, average RSE is 24% and mean r^2 is 0.58. GPP and current weather have an even closer linear connection for seasonally mild models than for livelier models.

Differences in mean cell GPP, or among intercepts, are substantial and influential. Except for one model, the range in intercepts as a percent of mean site GPP is 12 - 55%. The exception, model J, has intercepts that vary by more than 100% of mean GPP due to one outlier site. Given that site intercepts are largely a proxy for omitted variables, it is not surprising that they are relatively less influential on process models than on EC GPP. The wide range in site GPP compared to relatively modest slopes for driver values means that site means constitute most of the descriptive regression's explanatory ability, as they do for the ECs.

As shown in Fig. 5's lower right panel, for mild models site intercepts explain more of GPP's variance (mean = 49%) than does weather (mean = 21%). For lively models, site intercepts explain a smaller share (mean = 16%) than does weather (mean = 43%)

A model's responses to drivers in the six cells with eddy covariance towers are generally similar to its responses across the Amazon (Figs. S11 and S12), suggesting that assessing model responses for the Amazon by comparing them with EC estimates of GPP is a reasonable application of scarce benchmarking data. But the similar mean tendencies smooth across considerable spatial differences (Fig. S13). For percent of variance that a simple regression explains, the most striking spatial pattern is that for almost every model there are areas where a linear relationship of current environmental conditions plus site intercepts describes change in GPP almost completely, and other places where it explains little.

Weather's stronger influence on responsive model variability compared to the mild models is consistent with lively models' generally steeper slopes for each weather driver. The principle of flattening suggested, and the data summarized in Fig. 5 confirm, that models with high variance, the strongly seasonal models, are on average overly responsive to drivers.

5.5 Models' differing rainforest non-linearities are not benchmarked.

Compared to regressions that characterize reality, those that describe model output are unusually clean. All of the modeled values for the study period and area typically are accessible, yielding a census with no sampling errors nor errors in measuring outputs. Some or all of the inputs to the model's calculations may also be known exactly, as is MsTMIP weather. Only two sources of stochastic noise remain in the regressions that describe modeled GPP: omitted drivers and misspecification. This section considers alternative specifications, first interactions between weather drivers then non-linear responses.

Adding interaction terms to the regression that describes EC GPP minimally increases its total explanatory power, while diluting evidence of individual environmental drivers' influence. The same predictors as Equation 4 were used plus all possible crosses for the three weather drivers: rain times temperature, etc. The resulting regression has 5% more explanatory power than the model without interactions ($r^2 = 0.62$). But no single or combined weather driver has a significant slope.

Unfortunately, there are too few months of noisy EC data to resolve a non-linear regression form or assess the accuracy of flex points. It is possible that daily GPP estimates from the towers would better resolve non-linear responsiveness, or might share with monthly means having too much random uncertainty. Fig. 6 highlights differences in model responses to extreme temperatures. On the x-axes monthly mean temperatures are grouped by deciles basinwide. GPP on the y-axis is displayed as z-scores to remove model differences in mean and variability for each cell. What remains is the degree to which a model's response to extremes of temperature are anomalous compared to its responses to currently more typical temperatures.

The descriptive regressions with simple linear forms of the drivers do reliably indicate mean tendencies across the range of driver values for the EC months sampled. But as climate shifts, the models' responsiveness to more extreme values will be most relevant. For most models, responses have particularly strong deviation at high temperature from their mean responsiveness. GPP rises continuously with temperature in about a third of models. The rest eventually flex into declining plant productivity. Most of the mild models simulate that rainforest is more productive in the warmest of months, while lively models reach the opposite conclusion. Mild models H and J resemble the lively models in this respect, simulating their very lowest GPP at peak temperatures.

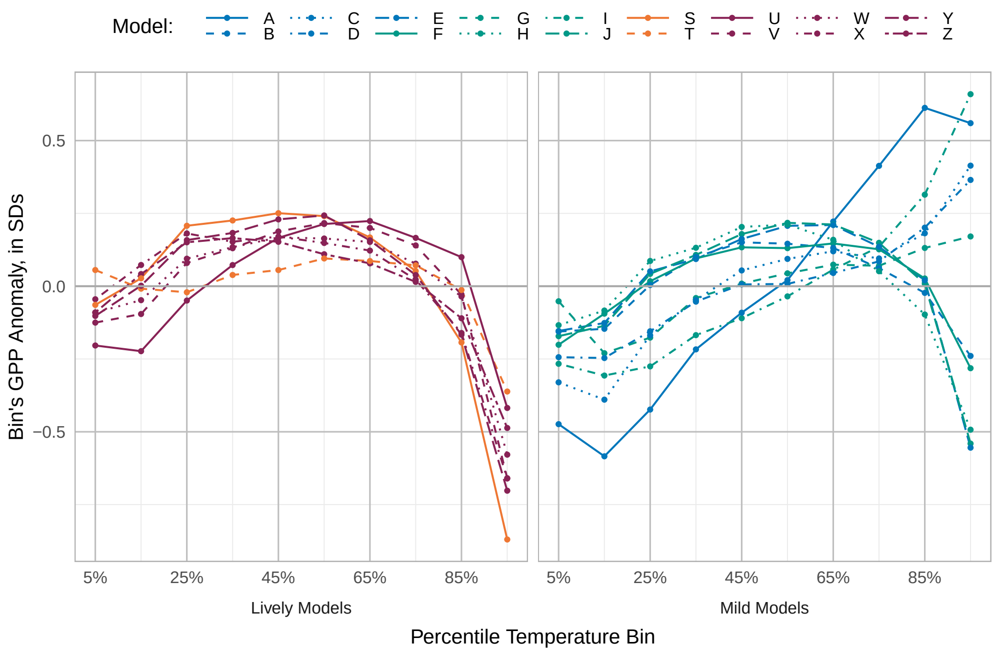

Figure 6: Non-linearity in modeled cell-level GPP responses to temperature across the Amazon basin. Monthly cell average temperature, on each panel's x-axis, is binned by deciles for all cells and months. GPP is scaled as the number of standard deviations from a particular model and cell's mean. Mild models are in the left panel and lively models in the right. At high temperature, GPP falls markedly in lively models, while the response of mild models varies widely.

Models' responses to rain and light also are non-linear (Text S4). Models with the strongest, steepest GPP response to increasing rain tend to have only modest response to increasing light and vice versa. Most lively models respond strongly to rain but have below-average GPP in the brightest months. In contrast, most of the mild models simulate their highest rainforest GPP with typical, middle decile rain amounts, and below-average GPP in the wettest months.

5.6 Lively models simulate strong, rapid drops in dry season GPP.

Responsiveness is a critical characteristic of GPP models because it describes how the model represents the consequences of climate change. An overly responsive model will predict more change than is realistic. The phase, or timing, of modeled GPP's seasonality is a corroborative assessment of responsiveness' accuracy that can be benchmarked. Seasonal timing may also suggest which model processes cause any mismatches. A slightly more re-

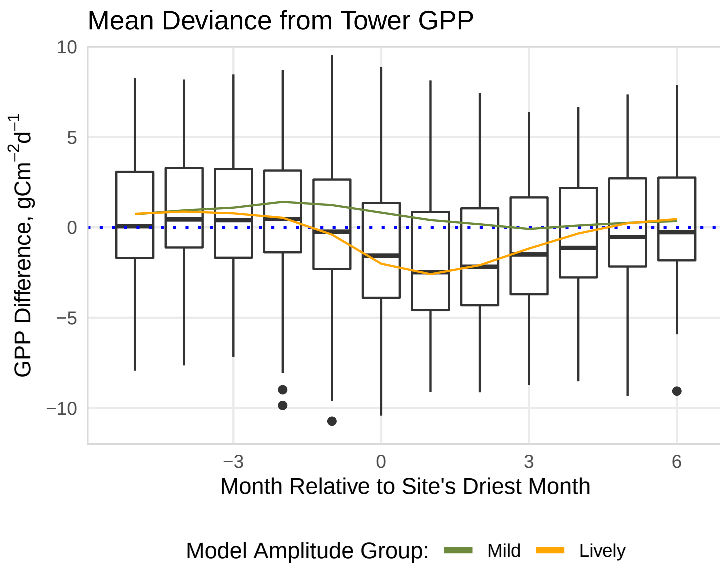

Figure 7: Seasonal deviations of GPP from EC estimates for models grouped by seasonal amplitude. On the y-axis, zero represents an exact match to EC GPP. Green and orange lines are mean deviances for mild and lively models respectively. Zero on the x-axis is the month at each EC tower with lowest average rainfall. Boxes show tendencies of all models as a group compared to ECs, with crossbars marking overall median deviations. Divergences are especially large for lively models in the latter half of the dry season.

cent version of Model J illustrates, for example, that an ESM's seasonal GPP timing can be correct in most of the world but have major inaccuracies in the world's wettest regions [*Collier et al.*, 2018, Fig. 5d].

One way to characterize seasonal timing focuses on the month of lowest GPP, as showing when the modeled forest experiences its greatest stress. Across all sites, the month with lowest modeled GPP is on average 2.6 months different from EC estimates (Fig. S3). Every model matches at least one site's time of minimum EC GPP to within one month. But with one exception, every model also is at least 5 months different from the EC estimate at one or more sites, or essentially has an opposite seasonal cycle.

Fig. 7 summarizes seasonal timing tendencies for models generalized by responsiveness group. Zero on the figure's x-axis is each site's long-term average driest month, with one month before the driest month shown as -1, two months after as +2, etc. Boxes for each month enclose the 25th and 75th percentiles of all models' GPP deviances from the EC estimates. Dots indicate outlier models. In months whose median value of the box plot is above zero, most models at most sites simulate higher GPP than EC estimates. Taller boxes late in the dry season show when the widest spread among models occurs.

Mild models on average, shown with the green line in Fig. 7, have relatively little systematic difference from EC estimates over the course of a year. Mildness is defined as a dampened seasonal cycle, not by similarity to EC GPP, so this result is not inevitable. Mild models tend to exceed EC estimates slightly in the two months before the driest month, or early in the dry season. A possible mechanism is insufficient modeled water stress. In contrast, lively models, whose average the orange line tracks, simulate lower GPP for 5 months starting with the driest month. For lively models, lack of plant available water during the dry season may more strongly curtail GPP than EC data suggest.

At individual sites, the mean differences between mild and lively models are sharper, with more variation in timing relative to the dry season (Fig. S14). But the overall patterning at individual sites is similar to the means (Fig. S4), with lively models on average differing more from EC estimates than mild models except at the K83 site. During transition months on either side of the dry season, boxes overlap the zero line, showing that on average the models simulate GPP close to EC estimates during the shoulder seasons. At the RJA site there is little seasonal pattern in differences between models and EC, and mild models match EC GPP more closely throughout the year. At other sites, both groups of models estimate lower GPP during the dry season than do ECs, and higher during the wettest months. The tendency for all models to simulate GPP that on average is lowest relative to EC estimates during the late dry season suggests challenges in modeling soil moisture.

6 Analysis

Flattening describes the tendency for the variance of predictions made from otherwise accurate equations with significant omitted variables or other statistical noise to be reduced. In light of flattening, this paper addresses the extent of modeled GPP's seasonal variability in Amazonian rainforest, how strongly current weather variables determine GPP at six eddy covariance sites, and the fidelity of seasonal timing. lively models are defined as those with higher seasonal amplitude than EC GPP, while mild models are less seasonal (Fig. 3).

6.1 Summary of Findings

Both process and statistical models struggle to reproduce EC estimates of Amazonian rainforest gross primary productivity. Mean and/or variance of all models' GPP falls outside of 99th percentile confidence intervals (Fig. 2). Flattening helps interpret benchmark comparisons of the variances. Flattening's degree of influence is a function of how completely a model's drivers determine predicted outcomes, leaving only a small error term in the descriptive regression. Model outcome variances that are similar to benchmark variance indicate model skill only if included drivers explain most of the variability in the reference outcomes. Otherwise, or worse if modeled variance exceeds its reference equivalent, excessive model sensitivity to drivers has overwhelmed flattening. Multiple metrics in this study suggest that lively models are overly responsive, while the mild models appear most likely to represent accurately the mean GPP consequences of climate shifts for rainforests.

The regression that predicts EC GPP might appear strong enough that process and statistical models' predicted GPP variance should be nearly as high. The regression for EC GPP that includes both weather and site-specific intercepts explains a total of 59% of variability (Equation 4). However, the descriptive regression treats intercepts as the fixed outcome of unspecified variables. With reference data for only six intercepts, this paper does not explore the important component of GPP accuracy that resides in site means and their drivers.

Separated from site effects, a linear combination of current month's rain, temperature and light explains only about an eighth (12%) of EC GPP's total variance, equal to 0.38 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$. Although there are severe difficulties in "measuring" GPP at a flux tower, the portion of variability explained is so low that qualitative conclusions seem warranted. Current month's weather is a weak linear determinant of rainforest GPP, and the amount of GPP variability due to weather is small. In terms of comparing modeled GPP variance to the eddy covariance estimates, flattening is a strong influence because included drivers do not largely explain EC GPP.

For the lively models, the weight of evidence favors excessive sensitivity to weather drivers. The models pass flattening's indirect test of hypersensitivity; GPP variability of all the lively models as measured by both simple variance (Fig. 2) and seasonal amplitude (Fig. 3) exceeds EC GPP variability. Direct comparisons of descriptive regression slopes are even stronger evidence of excessive sensitivity. Responsiveness to rain is stronger in every lively model than for EC GPP (1.17 average v. 0.48, Fig. 5). Perhaps in counterbalance, all statistically significant slopes for temperature and light for each lively model are of the opposite sign from EC GPP's. Finally, mismatched seasonal cycles also imply that lively models have excessive responsiveness to at least current rain. For highly seasonal models, the annual minimum in photosynthesis tends to be both later in the dry season than EC estimates, and more severe (Fig. 7).

Whether mild models are overly sensitive is less clear. Net flattening does occur, which makes excessive driver sensitivity less likely. Mild models' seasonal GPP amplitudes and in most cases variances are below EC GPP's (Figs. 2, 3). However, it is possible that other flattening influences are sufficiently strong to counteract excessive driver responsiveness. Two main contributors to the flattening are likely. One is model misspecification noise due to non-linearity in responses to weather (Figs. 6 and S2). Non-linearities were assessed only qualitatively due to EC data limitations. The second likely cause of low variance in mild models' GPP predictions is low spread in site intercepts. The range in site means for EC GPP is 4.0 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$. Except for one outlier, the ranges of GPP site means for mild models all are smaller, 0.8 to 3.5. Both model misspecification and low sensitivity to site mean differences could flatten the GPP predictions.

Since excessive driver responsiveness in mild models could coexist with net flattening, the sensitivity needs to be assessed more directly. One test is whether weather predictors as a group explain an appropriate amount of mild model responsiveness. If model sensitivity to weather perfectly matched the ECs', weather would explain the same absolute amount of variability as it does for the towers, 0.38 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$. For mild models, the average variance that weather explains is 0.79 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$ (range across models = 0.09 - 4.60). Given the degree of uncertainty in EC GPP, this check seems at most suggestive that some mild models respond too weakly. Direct comparison of driver slopes indicates that the mild model group's sensitivities to weather is reasonable overall, although there is quite a bit of spread among models (Fig. 5). Average mild model responsiveness to rain and light is similar to that of EC GPP, while temperature responsiveness is lower but at least of the same sign.

6.2 Assessment of Findings

Our results are specific to the scales of time and space for which they are calculated: monthly means for 6 tower sites between 2000 and 2010. Driver strengths can vary with time integration. At the K67 flux tower, for example, vapor pressure deficit and total and diffuse light largely determined hourly averaged GPP, while a derived index that also included leaf area index was better at explaining monthly averages [*Wu et al.*, 2017]. A model that reproduces hourly photosynthetic fluxes well may still have substantial biases in annual totals [*Keenan et al.*, 2012]. Spatial amalgamation even more strongly affects variability [*Rödig et al.*, 2018]. Given the grossly finite mean annual amount of atmospheric water, even though precipitation may drive local variability of GPP, temperature largely determines global variability in net land:atmosphere carbon exchange [*Jung et al.*, 2017].

Our analysis agrees with prior studies that have found rainforest GPP in global vegetation models reacts excessively to weather [*Ahlström et al.*, 2017; *Baker et al.*, 2008; *Cleveland et al.*, 2015; *Huang et al.*, 2016; *Li et al.*, 2017; *Parazoo et al.*, 2014; *Piao et al.*, 2013; *Poulter et al.*, 2009; *Restrepo-Coupe et al.*, 2016; *von Randow et al.*, 2013; *Zhu et al.*, 2016]. Excessive rainforest GPP seasonality was reported for an earlier version of Model J at K67 [*Sakaguchi et al.*, 2011], and for Model I at a flux tower in Guyana [*Zhu et al.*, 2018]. However, we found also that a few mild models have weak responses to weather.

While future trends in Amazon light and rain are uncertain, temperature are expected to rise [*Jiménez-Muñoz et al.*, 2013]. This makes model responses to temperatures that currently are outliers particularly important [*Cavaleri et al.*, 2015]. Ten of the study models have a statistically significant negative response, consistent with *Huntingford et al.* [2013] and *Poulter et al.* [2010a]. The mismatch between EC and model responses to temperature is striking (Fig. 5). Not one is as welcoming of warmer temperature as EC GPP. Disproportionately strong responses to high temperature (Fig. 6) mean that differences between model predictions will increase as the climate warms.

Independent indicators of tropical plant response to higher temperatures are mixed. At La Selva, Costa Rica, the net of GPP and respiration fell strongly with increases over 12 years in daily minimum temperatures [*Clark et al.*, 2013]. Temperature appears to be a positive and stronger driver of net ecosystem exchange globally, and precipitation a weaker driver, than is represented in most dynamic global vegetation models [*Wang et al.*, 2013]. For some models, EBF's optimal temperature parameter is influential. *MacBean et al.* [2018] found that one MsTMIP model's temperature flex point (Fig. 6) seems too low. Optimal temperature for EBF is difficult to specify well including because the real value may vary among the Amazon's thousands of tree species.

Mismatches in GPP seasonal timing (Fig. 7, Text S5), consistent with *Poulter et al.* [2010b], suggest that during the dry season plants experience less water stress than modeled. An exploratory assessment of cumulative rain as a proxy for soil moisture (Text S6) shows that while at individual sites cumulative rain is an important predictor, no lag duration works well everywhere. GPP's site-specific dependence peaks at three months at CAX and eight at BAN. When the only lag durations whose cumulative rain predictor is statistically significant at all sites, six or seven months, is used at all sites, the regression has a worse fit than if only current month's rain is included. Sites' differing optimal lag periods cancel each other when generalized and blur the importance for GPP of seasonal drought.

6.3 A water- versus light-limitation dichotomy poorly characterizes the models.

GPP increases with light in mild models, and falls with light in lively models (Fig. 5). The lively models also respond more to light strongly. It is tempting to associate each group with either strong response to light at the expense of temperature sensitivity or vice versa. If more rain causes GPP to rise enough, and tropical rain clouds reduce radiation, then GPP necessarily would fall with increasing light.

Clouds' opposing consequences for photosynthesis of more rain but less light [*Huete et al.*, 2006; *Nemani et al.*, 2003] has been labeled as light-limited versus water-limited [*Arias et al.*, 2011; *Baker et al.*, 2013, 2019; *Myneni et al.*, 2007]. If a site is water-limited, GPP falls during sunny periods due to soil dryness. At light-limited sites water is more plentiful and GPP rises during sunny periods [*Graham et al.*, 2003]. Some observational evidence contradicts the hypothesis that light limitations and water limitations represent a trade-off in the tropics, however, and instead that GPP may have little response to variations in light [*Restrepo-Coupe et al.*, 2013]. For four of the nine mild models, GPP is lowest during a dark month for at least one site, but for at least one other site GPP is lowest during a dry month when light is likely to be stronger (Fig. S3).

The dichotomy requires that light and rain be anti-correlated, with a tendency for increases in tropical clouds both to reduce light and to increase rain. In the MsTMIP driver data rain explains only 3% of the variation in light, and the correlation of EC GPP and light is negative (-0.14). Neither in the MsTMIP driver data does low rainfall bring more sensible heat in presumed Bowen ratio response to drought stress; Rain explains similarly little (4%) of the variation in temperature. While the lively models do respond strongly to precipitation, as would be expected for modeling approaches that focus mostly on water limitations, there are few indications the mild models are strongly light-limited.

6.4 Hindcast GPP's weak responses to CO_2 do not reveal predicted responses to CO_2.

CO_2 was a significant predictor of GPP only for two especially mild process models (Fig. S11). The CO_2 slope for five models was statistically indistinguishable from zero Much more than for the other weather drivers, however, the effect of CO_2 is likely to differ in coming decades from either real or modeled responses for 2000-2010.

Over time CO_2 can overwhelm trends in other environmental drivers due to its persistence and much larger relative change [*Fisher et al.*, 2013]. And GPP responses to CO_2 are unlikely to be linear, mainly because multiple and sometimes conflicting components shape a net trade-off between CO_2 fertilization and increased water use efficiency [*Swann et al.*, 2016]. Land surface models differ substantially in how strongly they amplify atmospheric CO_2 increases [*Piao et al.*, 2013]. As an example, this study's model D, Tem6, simulates logarithmic increase [*Jain et al.*, 1994]. Other methods than comparison with this EC dataset will be needed to assess the accuracy of model sensitivity to CO_2 in rainforest vegetation.

6.5 Fluxcom GPP's low variance logically reflects flattening.

Statistical models of GPP derive from a limited set of core time series data: satellites, flux towers, and ground-based weather observations. The statistical models included in this study use all three. There is no fourth independent source data with which the statistical models can be benchmarked. Some tentative conclusions about each statistical model's accuracy for the Amazon still can be drawn from the comparisons made above to flux towers, however.

There is conspicuous absence of a Fluxcom (Model G) assessment that features rainforests even though rainforest is the most productive PFT on the planet and for climate perhaps the most important. One comparison of GPP from 53 eddy covariance towers to an early version of Fluxcom included EBF sites only in Australia and Italy [*Joiner et al.*, 2014].

The defining source for Fluxcom is EC data. Reassuringly, Fluxcom's gross fit with EC GPP is among the closest for this study's models. Only model B exceeds Fluxcom's overall correlation with EC GPP (r = 0.37, Fig. S8). While Fluxcom's mean GPP in site cells is, like all but one model, outside EC credible bounds, it is among the half-dozen models closest to the EC mean. Fluxcom's rain responsiveness slope is one of the closest to EC estimates (Fig. 5). Its scaled temperature slope, 0.006, is much shallower than the ECs' slope of 0.460. But so to some degree is every other model's. The sign of Fluxcom's slope for light matches that of the EC towers although its response is stronger by almost half. Fluxcom's month of peak GPP is within two months of EC estimates for all sites except RJA (Fig. S4), again among the best matching of models.

Fluxcom's complex algorithms resemble linear regression in ways that make flattening applicable. For example, in model tree ensembles, one of Fluxcom's options, machine learning stratifies spatially and temporally defined outcomes into bins but each simulated value is the prediction of a particular bin's regression. Predictions from regressions are systematically flattened, with lower variance than the underlying data.

Flattening could help explain *Piao et al.* [2013]'s finding that Fluxcom's GPP is less variable than any of ten DGVMs'. In our study, Fluxcom's GPP variance (1.4 v. ECs' 3.3 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$) and seasonal amplitude for site cells (2.2 v. 3.4 $gCm^{-2}d^{-1}$) are about half as variable. Fluxcom and Wecann are less accurate for evergreen broadleaf forests (EBF) than their global average [*Alemohammad et al.*, 2017; *Badgley et al.*, 2019]. Reasons for the poor performance include the dearth of both eddy covariance towers and clear satellite retrievals in the tropics [*Tramontana et al.*, 2016; *Jung et al.*, 2020]. Fluxcom would thus likely have especially well-smoothed tropical predictions.

Fluxcom's globally low GPP variability has been called "undersampled" [*Piao et al.*, 2013], "poorly captured" [*Tramontana et al.*, 2016], underestimated for reasons that are not fully clear [*Jung et al.*, 2020], and, on the product's website, "too small" (https://www.bgc-jena.mpg.de/geodb/projects/Data.php). The tendency bears consideration when using Fluxcom. But in light of flattening, we disagree that Fluxcom's mildness is necessarily a weakness. The low variance appears instead to be an inherent consequence of omitted drivers and flattening, and suggests theoretically good potential for relatively accurate driver responsiveness globally.

Wecann's (Model F's) temporal span prevents reasonable direct comparisons to the EC towers used in this study. In each comparison across the Amazon basin, Wecann resembles Fluxcom (Text S3 and Figs. 6, S2, S10, S11, and S12). GPP differs at the warmest decile

(Fig. 6). Wecann is slightly less sensitive to light than is Fluxcom and more so to CO_2 (Fig. S11). Current weather explains less of the variance. But the models' residual standard errors (Fig. S12), which tend to indicate the extent of mismatch in a cycle's phase [*Taylor*, 2001], are similar. The detailed nature of these differences reinforce Wecann and Fluxcom's overall similarity.

While source data for Fluxcom and Wecann feature eddy covariance towers, VPM (Model) emphasizes satellite sources. It uses especially tight coupling and straightforward equations to merge remotely sensed products. VPM's unusual spatial pattern of rain responsiveness in the Amazon (Fig. 1, Model I) corresponds to likely seasonal trends in cloud contamination of satellite data retrievals. Cloud cover and therefore scarcity of acceptable satellite retrievals globally tends to peak in the tropics and during the wettest months. Gap-filled or missing data therefore overlap heavily with periods of high greenness and potentially of peak rainforest GPP. Photosynthetically active radiation from the NCEP II weather reanalysis is the model's multiplicative component that cloudiness is most likely to skew. Radiation from weather reanalyses was specifically omitted as an input to another statistical model due to the product's high uncertainty [*Gentine et al.*, 2019; *Jung et al.*, 2011].

VPM is more strongly anticorrelated with EC GPP than any other model (r = -0.19). It is the only model for which rain's linear regression slope is negative. GPP falls with increasing precipitation for all but the driest decile (Fig. S2). VPM's response to light also is an outlier, increasing at every decile with no inflection point (Fig. 6). In terms of the month with lowest GPP at each site, while other models' average timing difference from ECs ranges from 1.5 to 3.3 months, VPM averages 4.5 months (Fig. S3). The phase of VPM's seasonal cycle is nearly opposite that of EC GPP at most sites. At no site does VPM simulate minimum GPP during a dry season month. While VPM's GPP estimates are unrepresentative of the best reference data available for the Amazon, a logically underlying reason of cloud contamination applies most strongly to the tropics and could have little effect on VPM's accuracy elsewhere.

In summary, Fluxcom's match with EC GPP is weak. Their correlation is 0.37. But the fit is better than for almost all process models. Wecann compares similarly. The fidelity does not establish Fluxcom's or Wecann's veracity, merely their anticipated conformity with EC GPP in all its imperfections. Of this study's models, Fluxcom and Wecann appear to be the best currently available wall-to-wall estimates of mean Amazon GPP.

6.6 Flattening has practical implications for ESMs.

Flattening certainly does not mean that ESM outputs necessarily have low variability. GPP in the Amazon is a case in point. For many ESM subprocesses, other sources of model uncertainty and imperfection remain large enough to obscure and/or overwhelm flattening due to omitted random variables.

Flattening is likely to be a dominant problem for models privileged to have high accuracy (modest RSE) combined with low precision (low r^2). These models suffer little from uncertainty about included predictors' responsiveness but lack some key drivers. Currently it is flattening's side effects that are most pertinent to ESMs. As described below, they affect studies of climate outliers; intermediate model calculations; trade-offs in the development, assessment, and use of models; and consequences of increasing model complexity.

There is enormous practical value in understanding change in the frequencies of droughts, wildland fires, heat waves, floods, and tropical cyclones [*Katz and Brown*, 1992]. Studies of climate outliers' consequences often base predictions on driver change or z-scores [*Abatzoglou and Williams*, 2016, for example] rather than on the variability of predictions directly, sidestepping any bias in variance of predictions that results from flattening. A conceptually similar option is to build model predictor metrics from simulated history [*Camargo*, 2013] rather than from observed driver history [*Westerling et al.*, 2011].

Feedbacks mean that variability internal to a model can affect mean outcomes. Precipitation intensity in the Amazon rainforest is an illustration. In typical ESM runs, rainfall depth is spread uniformly across a grid cell and can simulate overabundant frequency and duration of light mist [*Baker et al.*, 2019]. Rain reaching the soil is a step function that breaks when rain exceeds the depth that leaf surfaces can store. Modeled rainforest foliage remains wet far longer than it actually does after the region's legend cloudbursts. So much water evaporates from leaves that soil recharge is weak, in turn reducing GPP. Cloud superparameterization distributes rain among and within virtual sub-cells rather than spreading it uniformly, improving representation of soil moisture. Greater variability in rainfall intensity within each cell was required for simulating accurate mean rates of plant processes. But the superparameterization adjustment creates new inaccuracies in modeled global precipitation patterns [*Phillips*, 2019].

When variance of intermediate outputs needs to be similar to actual variability, feasible workarounds may be scarce. Theoretically they include explicit addition of statistical noise in the form of deterministic or random draws from exogenous distributions [*Pelletier*, 1997; *Khodaparast et al.*, 2008], finer temporal or spatial scaling, and ensemble modeling of probabilistic outcomes. An example of the first is LPJmL's semi-stochastic distribution of monthly rainfall to individual days [*Poulter et al.*, 2010a]. Fuzzy parameters can be used to address not uncertainty in parameter estimates [*Hoffman and Miller*, 1983; *Ersoy and Yünsel*, 2006] but as a proxy for statistical noise due to omitted variables.

Driver sensitivity affects both trends and variability of outcomes [*Nijsse et al.*, 2019]. As long as models lack some influential real drivers, optimizing the predicted variance of predictions can compromise the accuracy of responsiveness to drivers and vice versa. Ideally the trade-offs are deliberate and publicly documented. The short list of diagnostics to which the Max Planck Institute's ESM was finely-tuned for CMIP5 included both means and variabilities [*Mauritsen et al.*, 2012]. Especially when omitted variables are known to be highly influential, conversations about the relative importance of sensitivity versus variance for specific equations, models or applications may be fruitful. For example, flattening may affect benchmark selection; Fluxcom appears likely to be reasonable if noisy reference data for GPP's driver sensitivity.

Weather sensitivity describes, by definition, the consequences of a changing climate. It is important to focus at least as much on the accuracy of sensitivity as on predictions' variance despite possibly less certain benchmark data. Accuracy of outcome variances already is integral to ILAMB *Collier et al.* [2018] and to many model intercomparison projects [*Houghton et al.*, 2001; *Jupp et al.*, 2010; *Li et al.*, 2019]. Responsiveness to drivers tends to be more difficult to benchmark than the variance of outputs. But inadvertently prioritizing spread over responsiveness in accuracy assessments can be counterproductive.

As ESMs become increasingly accurate for the processes and drivers they include, and incorporate more of the drivers that cause real variability, simulated variance will tend to rise. Processes and drivers added over time to the ESMs in IPCC's Comprehensive Assessment Reports have done little to reduce uncertainty around mean temperature trends but higher complexity has increased the accuracy of simulated variability [*Dahan*, 2010]. There are practical limits to adding global drivers to climate models, however.

7 Conclusions

We compared 15 process models and three statistical models to GPP estimates from six eddy covariance towers in the Amazon rainforest. Models split almost equally between weaker and stronger responsiveness than EC data to the environmental drivers of current month's rain, temperature, and light. Most striking about the wide spreads across modeled GPP's means, responsiveness to drivers, and amplitude of the annual cycle is how little virtually every model resembles EC estimates. Similarity to Amazon flux towers is one of many important ESM accuracy metrics. Models that poorly replicate driver responsiveness in tropical rainforest may do very well by other criteria. The implication, provided EC GPP is somewhat realistic, is that lively models overreact to rain and have opposite signs of response for light and temperature. Since temperature is likely to rise and rain to become more variable, the liveliest models may substantially exaggerate the Amazon's future change and peril.

As this article's title asserts, accurate deterministic simulation of both sensitivity to drivers and variability for Amazonian GPP is unattainable. The reason is that weather explains so little of EC GPP variability that flattening is a strong influence. Of wider relevance is the role of omitted processes and uncertainty due to other sources of modeling error in reducing the variability of model predictions. It is generically appropriate to be more skeptical of too much variability than of too little. In the interest of accurate sensitivity, low variance of predictions relative to a benchmark may sometimes deserve acclaim.

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