



Insecure Forest Regeneration Needs Sustained Management in Gauley River National Recreation Area

Introduction

Forests are a key part of the landscape and visitor experience in eastern parks. These ecosystems are facing many stressors, including non-native plants, invasive tree pests, overabundant deer, and altered fire regimes. These stressors diminish forest resilience, which is the ability of an ecosystem to experience disturbance and rebound to similar functions, structure, and composition. A lack of tree regeneration - seedlings and saplings of canopy-forming trees - is an early indicator of reduced resilience and potential for future forest loss.

Five NPS Inventory and Monitoring Networks assessed 10 regeneration metrics in 39 parks (Figure 1) containing about 1,500 permanent forest health monitoring plots sampled every four years (2008-2019). Here, we share results for Gauley River National Recreation Area (GARI). For more detailed information on the full study, see the source publication in the Resources section below.

Main Findings

On a four-category scale (Secure, Insecure, Probable Failure, and Imminent Failure), GARI has a forest regeneration status of **Insecure** (Figure 2). This means that the park currently lacks adequate saplings and seedlings, and generally has moderate deer browse impacts. The trends over time in tree, sapling, and seedling abundance by native canopy, subcanopy, and exotics are shown in Figure 3.

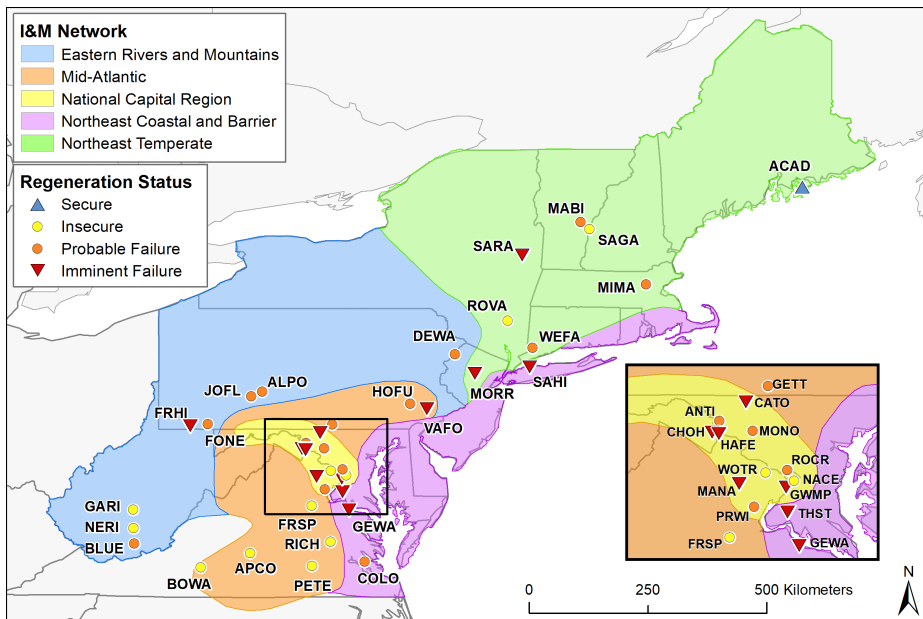


Figure 1. Map of parks included in regional regeneration project and forest regeneration status. Gauley River National Recreation Area is located in the Eastern Rivers and Mountains (ERMN) Inventory and Monitoring Network.

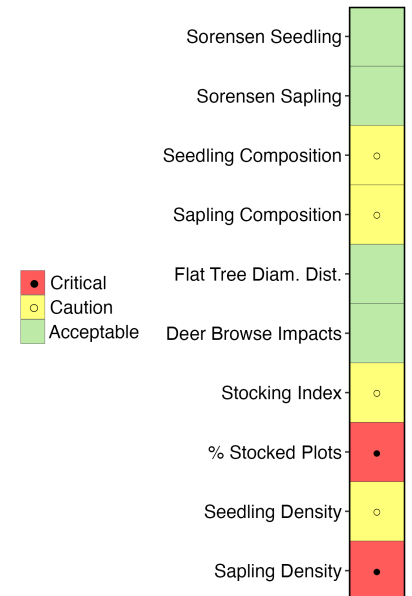


Figure 2. Regeneration status for each of the 10 metrics in Gauley River National Recreation Area.

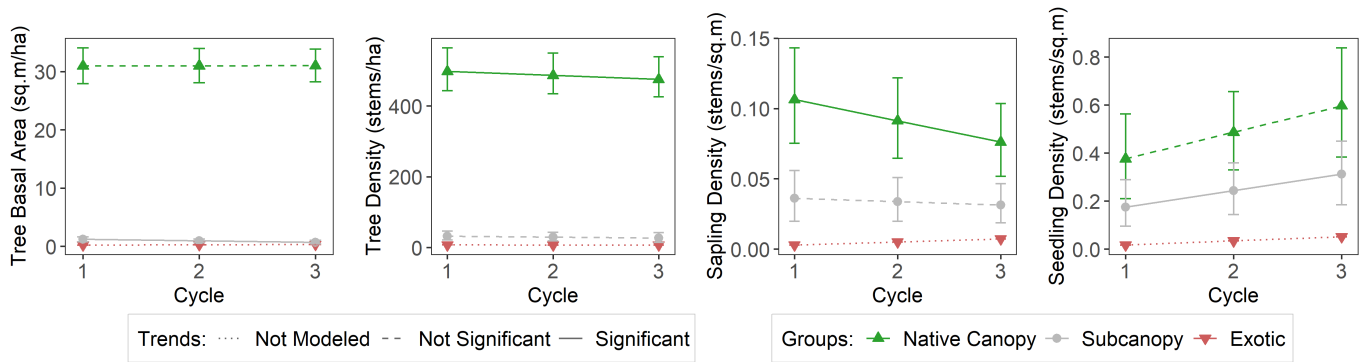


Figure 3. Trends in tree, sapling, and seedling abundance by species group. Trends are based on change over time across three complete survey cycles: Cycle 1 (2008 – 2011), Cycle 2 (2012 – 2015), and Cycle 3 (2016 – 2019).

Management Recommendations

Eastern national parks need a sustained commitment to reducing deer browse impacts, managing invasive plants, and enhancing forest structural complexity and diversity to secure sufficient regeneration and avoid future forest loss. We suggest that managers of GARI:

- continue to reduce invasive plants through early detection and rapid response, release of approved biological controls, and strategic invasive plant management in high priority habitats.
- assess forest stands at risk or already impacted by pests / pathogens and prioritize invasive plant management in stands where canopy gaps have increased or may soon increase light to the forest floor.
- use prescribed burning in dry, fire-adapted forests to promote canopy tree regeneration.
- promote native tree regeneration by increasing light to the forest floor through thinning less desirable subcanopy trees only in areas with minimal impacts from deer, forest pathogens, and invasive plants.
- promote increased deer hunting within the park through partnerships to protect forest regeneration from browse impacts and maintain ecologically-sustainable deer numbers.

These management efforts are important for GARI to maintain future forest cover. Conditions are changing rapidly across parks, therefore continued monitoring and reassessment of management actions is necessary to avoid future forest loss in the park. Please refer to the source publication for more information on management strategies and reach out to the contact below for further assistance.

Resources

Source Publication: Miller, K.M., Perles, S.J., Schmit, J.P., Matthews, E.R., Weed, A.S., Comiskey, J.A., Marshall, M.R., Nelson, P. and Fisichelli, N. (2023). Overabundant deer and invasive plants drive widespread regeneration debt in eastern United States national parks. *Ecological Applications*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eap.2837>

Contact: Stephanie Perles, ERMN Plant Ecologist (stephanie_perles@nps.gov)

Links:

[Managing Resilient Forests Initiative for Eastern National Parks](#)

To see more park briefs, visit this link: <https://schoodicinstitute.org/park-forests>

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