Preface to Spatial and Temporal Reflections of Disturbances in Boreal and Temperate Forests

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Disturbances are a natural part of all ecosystems and they are important for the maintenance of biodiversity in forest ecosystems (Attiwill 1994). Periodicity and intensity of disturbances shape the structural characteristics and dynamics of forest landscape mosaics (Turner \textit{et al.} 2001). Natural disturbances increase habitat availability and diversity, particularly for early-successional species, and promote mechanisms of self-regulation which facilitate ecosystem regeneration after abrupt changes.

At a global scale, forest disturbances are closely linked with the climatic system (Dale \textit{et al.} 2001). Natural or anthropogenic disturbance events can set back or retard succession, or invoke phase transitions in forest ecosystems. Abrupt changes of climate can exacerbate these changes via environmental feedback loops (Bonan 2008). For example, higher evapotranspiration can push forests at marginal sites into a state of low growth and elevated risk to biotic disturbance agents. Heavier rainfall, combined with higher winds that will be likely present under a warming climate scenario, increases the area of forests prone to windthrow (Brassard & Chen 2006). More rapid transition between periods of adequate rainfall and drought will probably increase the incidence and intensity of forest health problems, where stressed ecosystems have not fully recovered from the last event before they are impacted by the next one.

As recognized in international agreements, ecological diversity is an important criterion for sustainable utilization of natural resources. For promoting ecological diversity human-caused disturbances can mimic natural disturbances to a lesser or higher degree (Esseen \textit{et al.} 1997, Perera & Buse 2004), but rarely in the exact manner and degree of impact. Therefore, it is important to estimate the consequences of human activity upon successional development of plant communities and upon natural disturbance processes (Jõgiste \textit{et al.} 2005).

The principles of forest ecosystem management are applicable not only to commercial use of the forest but also to conservation issues. Management activities that mimic natural disturbances are preferred under the ecosystem management concept (Frelich 2002) but more importantly are more likely to have a long-term impact with lesser inputs than management that works against ecosystem processes.

Climate change impacts include greater amplitudes in local and regional weather systems, which in turn increase the risk of disturbances. When taking the above into account, special attention should be paid to enhanced resiliency of forest ecosystems (Kremer 2007). Climate change is a first step in a regional and global disturbance cascade. We have observed the resulting shifts in growth trends at many trophic levels (Spiecker \textit{et al.} 1996). For exam-