Insect Herbivory and Leaf Disease in Natural and Human Disturbed Habitats: Lessons from Early-Successional Heliconia Herbs

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ABSTRACT

The interaction of plants with insect herbivores and fungal pathogens can affect community dynamics, but there is little information on how this antagonistic interaction may be altered in human-disturbed tropical systems. We examined whether the amount and quality of foliar damage on the pioneer herbar Heliconia latispatha and Heliconia collinsiana are distinct on road edges and secondary riparian vegetation compared with natural gaps in continuous forest (controls) in Mexico. We also investigated some physical and biological mechanisms that may jointly explain such differences. The overall insect damage in H. latispatha was similar between road edges and natural forest gaps (8.0% vs. 7.2% of leaf area). Damage by caterpillars, however, decreased from 4.2 percent in forest gaps to 0.5 percent on road edges, whereas damage by leaf-cutting ants increased from 0 to 5.8 percent. In secondary riparian vegetation, where none of the leaves sampled were attacked by ants, overall herbivore damage in H. collinsiana was less than half that observed in forest gaps (3.0% vs. 6.7%), and driven mainly by differences in caterpillar damage (2.5% vs. 6.2%). By contrast, attack by leaf fungal pathogens was two to three times greater in both human-disturbed habitats than in gaps (8.2–9.6% vs. 3.7–4.2%). Potential mechanisms underlying these differences involved human-induced shifts in air and soil temperature driven by greater light availability, as well as changes in relative humidity, leaf toughness, foliar condensed tannins, and local abundance of herbivores. Our results indicate that human disturbance alters insect herbivory and may increase proliferation of leaf disease.


Key words: biotic interaction; forest disturbance; pathogens; rain forest; riparian corridor; road effect.

The canopy of tropical rain forests is continuously changing as trees recruit into it and eventually fall due to windstorms, senescence, and lightning (Whitmore 1989). Treefall gaps help to maintain local species diversity in tropical rain forests by creating microenvironmental conditions that allow the growth and reproduction of species that cannot complete their life cycle under the shady conditions of old-growth forests (Brokaw 1985, Schnitzer & Carson 2001). Large-scale human disturbance of tropical rain forests is qualitatively and quantitatively different in its effects on natural ecosystems (Laurance et al. 2009). Road openings change vegetation structure, act as dispersal routes for some organisms (e.g., invasive species) and as barriers for others, and also promote further human colonization and hunting (Laurance et al. 2009).

Current research on human-modified landscapes has mostly focused on forest remnants, with particular attention to edge and area effects (Malcolm 1994, Murcia 1995, Laurance et al. 2002, Harper et al. 2005). It is increasingly recognized, however, that the secondary vegetation that regenerates in the matrix abutting forest remnants is critical for biodiversity conservation in human-dominated tropical rain forest landscapes (Food and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations 2009, Gardner et al. 2009).

These novel forests are expected to protect soils, cycle nutrients, support wildlife, store carbon, maintain watershed function, and possibly mitigate species extinction (Lugo 2009), but our understanding about their ecology is still in its infancy. A major question is to what extent key biotic interactions are altered in these increasingly common secondary forests (Laurance 2005).

Among the most common interactions in tropical forests are those between plants, insect herbivores, and leaf fungal pathogens (Gilbert & Hubbell 1996; García-Guzmán & Dirzo 2001, 2004; Benítez-Malvido & Lemus-Albor 2005, 2006). Folivorous insects and leaf fungal pathogens may reduce growth, survival, and reproductive success of their hosts, alter plant population structure, and influence successional pathways (see reviews by Coley & Barone 1996, Gilbert 2002, Marquis 2005, Burdon et al. 2006 and references therein). Plant-herbivore and plant-pathogen interactions should be altered in human-disturbed habitats for at least three reasons. First, microclimatic conditions tend to be unsuitable for many organisms and physical factors drive fungal disease development and transmission (Agrios 2005). In addition, shifts in microclimate may prevent insect eggs from hatching, alter physical and chemical characteristics of the leaves, and favor the proliferation of pioneer plant species that are poorly defended against herbivores (Coley & Barone 1996, Laurance et al. 2002). Second, isolation in space may prevent dispersal and colonization to new areas by many plants, insects, and fungi (Burdon 1993, Fäveri et al. 2008). Finally, human disturbance is usually more diverse, frequent, intense, and lasting in secondary forests than in primary forest, which impedes forest recovery and may disrupt plant-herbivore and plant-pathogen interactions (Uhl 1982, Benítez-Malvido & Lemus-Albor 2006).

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In this study, we focused on the folivorous insects and leaf fungal pathogens that attack the foliage of two early-successional perennial herbs of the genus Heliconia (Heliconiaceae), H. latispertha and H. collinsiana, which thrive in high light environments of forest gaps and human-disturbed Neotropical areas (Stiles 1975, Berry & Kress 1991). Our aim was to investigate whether the amount and quality of biotic damage on the foliage of H. latispertha and H. collinsiana are distinct on road edges and in secondary riparian vegetation compared with natural gaps in continuous forest and, if so, whether this is due to changes in microclimatic conditions (i.e., air and soil temperature, air relative humidity, and light incidence), host availability and quality (i.e., shoot density, leaf toughness, and foliar condensed tannins), and/or local abundance of key folivorous insects (i.e., hispine beetles and caterpillars).

METHODS

STUDY AREA.—We conducted this study in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve (REBIMA in Spanish), state of Chiapas, southern Mexico, and the adjacent communal lands of the Ejido Chajul (16°08′ N, 90°55′ W). The REBIMA, created in 1978, is 330,000 ha in area and constitutes the main remnant of the Mesoamerican biodiversity hotspot (Myers et al. 2000, Figueroa et al. 2009). The primary vegetation type is lowland tropical rain forest, attaining 40 m in canopy height in alluvial terraces along main rivers (Siebe et al. 1995). Maximum and minimum annual temperatures are 31.8°C (April–May) and 18°C (January–February), respectively. Annual precipitation averages 3000 mm, with < 60 mm/mo from February through April, and more than 200 mm/mo from May to October (Benitez-Malvido & Lemus-Albor 2005). The REBIMA is bounded to its south by the Lacantun River, a 100–200 m wide watercourse that separate REBIMA’s vast tracts of pristine old-growth forests from the severely fragmented landscape in which the Ejido Chajul is embedded. Forest conversion to cattle pastures and croplands in the region started in the mid-1970s. Today, a mosaic of small forest fragments, secondary vegetation, human settlements, croplands, pastures, and roads composes the landscape.

For this study, we selected three habitat types in an early-successional stage (< 5-yr old): (1) road edge, (2) secondary riparian vegetation, and (3) forest gap (Fig. S1). Road edge constituted a 5-km section of the Fronteriza freeway edges (< 20 m from the road) and its paved access to the Ejido Chajul. Road edges were 3–6 km away from the nearest primary continuous forest; they were mostly surrounded by pastures and asphalt and dominated by early-successional shrubs and herbs (no arboreal vegetation), including H. latispertha. Secondary riparian vegetation represented a 4-km section of narrow (< 50 m wide) secondary riparian corridors along the human-modified margin of the Lacantun River (in front of the REBIMA). It was surrounded by a mix of subsistence croplands and water and characterized by a discontinuous canopy of pioneer trees (e.g., Ficus spp., Cecropia spp.). Heliconia collinsiana was particularly abundant in the open areas of these altered riparian zones. Forest gaps were represented by 19 large (> 100 m²), naturally formed young gaps embedded in a 3.5 km² area of the REBIMA, which were used as experimental controls. Thus, H. latispertha was sampled in forest gaps and on road edges and H. collinsiana was sampled in forest gaps and riparian vegetation. Road edges and secondary riparian vegetation are referred in the text as human-disturbed habitats, and forest gaps as natural-disturbed habitats.

NATURAL ENEMIES.—There are three major groups of insects that attack mature and immature leaves of Heliconia in the Neotropics: hispine beetles, caterpillars, and leaf-cutting ants. Our field experience with the eight Heliconia species in the region of Chajul (Santos et al. 2009) confirmed that many species of these three major groups of insects attack both H. latispertha and H. collinsiana (Table S1). Hispine beetles are small chrysomelids (ca 1–2 cm in length) that feed exclusively on Zingiberales; those of the Arescini tribe (four genera) are specialist on Heliconiaceae, while those of the Cephaloliini tribe also feed on other Zingiberales families (Strong 1977a). Larvae feed from the surface of the host plant by dragging the mandibles reciprocally across the leaf surface while crawling slowly forward, leaving a feeding scar and a trail of frass (Strong 1977b, Wilf et al. 2000). The mechanics of feeding is similar for adults; often adult feeding produces small ellipsoid holes at the margin of the rolled young leaves (Strong 1977b).

The caterpillar species that attack the foliage of Heliconia vary in body size and diet breadth. The most common and specialized are those of the genera Caligo and Opisophanes (Nymphalidae), which are among the largest caterpillars of the Neotropics (up to 20 cm in length) (De Vries 1987). These ‘giant’ caterpillars feed mostly on Heliconiaceae and Musaceae, and to a limited extent, on Marantaceae, Arecaceae, and Cylanthaceae (De Vries 1987, Watanabe 2007). Smaller, more generalist caterpillars such as Antichloris eriphia (Arctiidae), Tarchon felderii (Apatelodidae), and Sibine apicalis (Limi-codidae) also have been recorded feeding on Heliconia leaves (Auerbach & Strong 1981, Assis et al. 2002, B. A. Santos, pers. obs.). In initial instars, the small mouthparts of larvae allow them to only scrape the underside of the leaf (Auerbach & Strong 1981, Assis et al. 2002). As they grow up, however, they cause defoliation either from the edge to the center of the leaf (e.g., Caligo or Opisophanes damage) or throughout the leaf blade, leaving elongated holes usually perpendicular to the leaf central vein (e.g., Antichloris damage) (Assis et al. 2002).

Leaf-cutting ants belonging to the tribe Attini are among the most important generalist insect herbivore in the Neotropics (Rico-Gray & Oliveira 2007). They cut leaves of monocots and dicots from the edge to the center of the leaf, always in a half-moon shape, causing total defoliation in some cases (Assis et al. 2002). Because each insect group produces characteristic feeding marks, we could estimate the relative damage caused by each of them with high certainty. This procedure, however, cannot be repeated with the leaf fungal pathogens because infection by different pathogens may cause similar symptoms (see Sewake & Uchida 1995, Assis et al. 2002, Lins & Coelho 2004, Hennen et al. 2005, Serra & Coelho 2007 for a list of major pathogens attacking Heliconia and the symptoms they cause). Pathogen damage was indicated by leaf spots or ‘blotching’ that varied in size, color, and shape.

STANDING LEVELS OF BIOTIC DAMAGE.—To estimate the standing levels of foliar damage associated with leaf herbivores and pathogens
of *H. latispatha* and *H. collinsiana,* in December 2008 we randomly sampled ten clumps of *H. latispatha* along road edges, ten clumps of *H. collinsiana* in secondary riparian vegetation, and ten clumps of each species in forest gaps (clumps are a group of shoots that sprout from the same rhizome). In all habitats, sampled clumps were at least 50 m away from the nearest conspecific clump; *H. latispatha* and *H. collinsiana* co-occurred in only one of the 19 forest gaps sampled. To control for differences in clump size across habitats, only small clumps (3–10 shoots) were examined.

We randomly collected and photographed ten fully expanded leaves from each clump using a 10-megapixel digital camera (Nikon Coolpix P80) and a blue background panel. Photographs were taken with a macro lens (maximum focal length 84.2 mm) when leaves were flattened on the blue panel to avoid distortion. They were further processed using the image analysis software ASSESS (Lamari 2002) to quantify total leaf area and estimate the percentage of leaf area damaged by hispine beetles, caterpillars, leaf-cutting ants, unknown herbivores, and leaf-fungal pathogens. A 2.5 cm × 2.5 cm scale was affixed to the blue panel for image calibration and the subsequent leaf area quantification. We used percentage of leaf area damaged as a response variable instead of the absolute leaf area damaged because mean leaf area was smaller in human-altered habitats (Table S2). We averaged foliar attack and damage levels of shoots per clump for the purposes of the analyses.

**Microclimatic conditions.** To characterize the microclimate along road edges and in secondary riparian vegetation and forest gaps, we installed two HOBO® data loggers model U12 per habitat type in zones where the two study species of *Heliconia* were present. The location of the data loggers was determined by randomly selecting two of the ten replicates (clumps) of each habitat. Data loggers were positioned at 1.3 m above the ground and set to record hourly measures of air temperature, air relative humidity, light incidence, and soil temperature (at 5 cm depth). Microclimatic data recording started on 27 September 2009 at 1000 h and ended 5 d later on 2 October 2009 at 0900 h, resulting in 120 observations per microclimatic variable per site. According to the HOBO manual, accuracy of measurements is ±0.35°C for temperature and ±2.5 percent for relative humidity (up to 80% of relative humidity); accuracy is not provided by the manufacturer for light measurements in outdoor conditions, however.

**HOST AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY.** We assessed host-plant availability in December 2008 by counting the number of conspecific shoots in a 10-m radius from clumps sampled for standing levels of biotic damage. In September 2009, a 20 cm × 10 cm segment of three undamaged, fully expanded leaves (second, third, and fourth leaf) was collected from ten same-aged, nonreproducing shoots in each habitat type (one shoot per clump). Leaf segments without the leaf central vein were then processed in laboratory to quantify the absorbance of condensed tannins following Waterman and Mole (1994); absorbance was read in the spectrophotometer Thermo® Genesis 20 at 550 nm wavelength. Although absorbance does not provide a precise measure of tannin concentration, it gives a readily comparable index of the amount of tannins in our samples (Fáveri et al. 2008). We used a 3-mm diameter rod to measure leaf toughness as the force necessary to perforate the leaf blade (Boege 2005; force was expressed in g/cm²).

We perforated the middle section of ten fully expanded leaves randomly selected from ten small clumps of each species in each habitat (10 leaves per clump). All chemical and physical foliar characteristics were averaged per clump for the purposes of the analyses.

**Herbivore abundance.** To assess if anthropogenic disturbance alters the local abundance of folivorous insects associated with *Heliconia,* in September 2009 we randomly selected another set of ten clumps of *H. latispatha* along road edges, ten clumps of *H. collinsiana* in secondary riparian vegetation and ten clumps of each species in forest gaps. We collected all chrysomelids (larvae and adults) and caterpillars found on *Heliconia* shoots: including the pseudostem, leaf blade, petiole, and inflorescence when present. Insects were placed in plastic pots containing alcohol (70%) and subsequently identified to the lowest possible taxonomic level.

**Statistical analyses.** For each *Heliconia* species separately, we used a split-plot analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the levels of herbivory by distinct insect groups between habitats. The split-plot ANOVAs had habitat type set as the whole-plot factor, insect group as the subplot factor, and clump as the blocking variable (Potvin 2001). There were two levels of the whole-plot factor (road edges and forest gap for *H. latispatha* and riparian vegetation and forest gap for *H. collinsiana*), four levels of the subplot factor ‘insect group’ in the *H. latispatha* model (hispine beetles, caterpillars, leaf-cutting ants, and unknown herbivores), and only three in the *H. collinsiana* model (hispine beetles, caterpillars, and unknown herbivores), given that this species was not attacked by leaf-cutting ants (see ‘Results’). One-way ANOVAs were used to test for differences in overall pathogen damage, density of conspecific shoots, absorbance of condensed tannins, leaf toughness, and local abundance of herbivores between habitats. Percentages of herbivore and pathogen damage were arcsine-square-root transformed and local abundance of herbivores and density of conspecific shoots were log-transformed (log (x + 1)) before analyses.

We used generalized linear mixed models (GLMM) to test for differences in microclimatic conditions among habitats. Habitat type (between-subject factor), hour of the day (within-subject factor), and their interaction was set as fixed effect and site (subject) was set as random effect (von Ende 2001). We adopted this procedure rather than other methods traditionally used to analyze repeated measures (i.e., repeated-measure ANOVA, MANOVA, and profile analysis) because mixed models can handle many levels of the repeated measure factor and can be performed assuming different forms of the variance–covariance matrix (von Ende 2001). We ran GLMMs in JMP 7 (SAS Institute Inc.) using the restricted maximum likelihood method to separate the variance of fixed effects from that of the random effect. Relative humidity and light data were arcsine-square-root and log-transformed before analyses, respectively. All figures show untransformed data.

**RESULTS**

**Standing levels of herbivore damage.** Herbivore attack was observed in 90 percent of *H. latispatha* leaves (95% in forest gaps and
84% on road edges). The most frequent damage was by hispine beetles (75% of the leaves), followed by caterpillars (21%), leaf-cutting ants (19%), and unknown herbivores (6%). Overall, insects removed similar percentages of leaf area in forest gaps (7.2% ± 1.0% mean ± SE) and road edges (8.0% ± 3.4%) (F1,18 = 0.02; P = 0.884). However, the relative damage owing to each insect group clearly depended on habitat type (F3, 54 = 11.13; P < 0.0001). While caterpillars reduced their average damage from 4.2 percent in forest gaps to 0.5 percent on road edges, foliar attack by leaf-cutting ants increased from 0 to 5.8 percent (Fig. 1A). Hispine beetle damaged around 2.1 percent of leaf area irrespective of habitat type (Fig. 1A), indicating that attack by beetles was very common but did not cause much damage.

Similar to H. latispatha, herbivore attack was very common in the foliage of H. collinsiana, as 84 percent of the leaves showed some kind of insect damage (88% in forest gaps and 80% in secondary riparian vegetation). The most frequent damage was by hispine beetles (54% of the leaves), followed by caterpillars (46%), and unknown herbivores (28%). Heliconia collinsiana leaves were not attacked by leaf-cutting ants during our study. The overall herbivore damage was halved in secondary riparian vegetation compared to forest gaps (7.2% vs. 3.7%; F1,18 = 3.79; P = 0.067). As observed in H. latispatha, the relative contribution of distinct herbivores varied with habitat type (F2, 36 = 3.56; P = 0.038), especially because caterpillar damage decreased from 6.2% ± 1.8% in forest gaps to 2.5% ± 1.0 percent in secondary riparian vegetation (Fig. 1B).

STANDING LEVELS OF PATHOGEN DAMAGE. —Leaves of H. latispatha and H. collinsiana showed several necrotic lesions variable in color, form, and size. Most lesions were small, dark-brown, irregular, with a yellow halo measuring 1–2 mm; they coalesced in some leaves to form large necrotic areas, suggesting pathogenic fungi such as Bipolaris, Cylindrocladium, or Cladosporium as potential causal agents. Cercospora and Puccinia-like damage were also observed, as some leaves showed olive-green to brown lesions frequently clustering along veins, as well as oval chlorotic spots with reddish-brown centers on the adaxial leaf surface.

About 65 percent of the H. latispatha leaves were damaged by pathogens (60% in forest gaps and 69% on road edges). Pathogen damage was associated with insect damage, as 91 percent of the infected leaves were concurrently attacked by herbivores (96% in forest gaps and 86% on road edges). There was great variation in the leaf area damaged by fungal pathogens among clumps (Fig. 2A). Also, on average, the percentage of leaf area infected was greater on road edges than in forest gaps (8.2% ± 2.4% vs. 4.2% ± 1.0%; Fig. 2A), but this difference was not statistically significant (F1,19 = 1.89; P = 0.186).

A similar trend was observed in the leaves of H. collinsiana. Most leaves (70%) showed symptoms of foliar disease (67% in forest gaps and 72% in secondary riparian vegetation), and 87 percent of the infected leaves were also damaged by insects (94% in forest gaps and 81% in secondary riparian vegetation). Likewise, disease severity was very variable among clumps and was greater in secondary riparian vegetation than in forest gaps (9.6% ± 4.1% vs. 3.7% ± 1.9%; Fig. 2B), though the effect of habitat type on pathogen damage was not significant (F1,19 = 2.19; P = 0.156).

MICROCLIMATIC CONDITIONS. — Daily patterns of microclimatic conditions were very similar between secondary riparian vegetation and forest gaps, but road edges clearly showed a different microclimate regime characterized by greater amplitudes of variation (Fig. 3). The differences among road edges and the other habitats depended on the hour of the day, as indicated by the significant effect of the habitat × time interaction in all analyzes (Table 1). The among-habitat disparity occurred mostly between 1000 h and 1800 h, when road edges showed higher air and soil temperature, higher light incidence, and lower air relative humidity, compared with forest gaps and secondary riparian vegetation. Road edges also had warmer soils over the night (Fig. 3).

HOST AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY. —The density of H. latispatha shoots was about fourfold greater on road edges than forest gaps.
The density of *H. collinsiana* shoots was tenfold greater in secondary riparian vegetation than in forest gaps (*F*$_{1,18}$ = 16.4; *P* < 0.001; Fig. 4D). Absorbance of condensed tannins did not differ between habitats (*F*$_{1,18}$ = 0.14; *P* = 0.705; Fig. 4E), whereas leaf toughness of *H. collinsiana* was on average 17 percent greater in secondary riparian vegetation than in forest edges (*F*$_{1,18}$ = 15.7; *P* < 0.001; Fig. 4F).

**DISCUSSION**

**HABITAT DISTURBANCE AND BIOTIC DAMAGE.**—Our results indicate that the interaction of early-successional *Heliconia* species with their folivorous insects is altered in human-disturbed areas of Southern Mexico. This alteration seems to be caused by a combined effect of...
Changes in microclimatic conditions, host availability, host quality, and local abundance of herbivores. Although we have quantified standing levels of damage instead of herbivory rates (rates are more appropriate to estimate herbivory because damaged leaves can lose tissue at different rates), some general patterns emerged from our findings. First, the total amount of leaf area removed from Heliconia in human-disturbed habitats depended mostly on the presence of leaf-cutting ants: when ants were present (road edge) they offset the reduction in caterpillar damage, leaving total levels of foliage damage similar between anthropogenically and naturally disturbed habitats. When they were absent (secondary riparian vegetation), the compensation did not occur, so herbivory levels diminished in human-disturbed areas.

The activity of leaf-cutting ants is known to increase with anthropogenic disturbance (Wirth et al. 2007, 2008). In fragmented forests their density may increase by 10–100-fold and remain elevated over time due to the continuous proliferation of pioneer tree species and local extirpation of predators and parasitoids (Terborgh et al. 2001, Almeida et al. 2008, Meyer et al. 2009). Positive responses of leaf-cutting ants to the creation of roads have been also reported. In the Brazilian Cerrado, the number of colonization attempts is five to ten times greater on roads than in the adjacent vegetation, despite the elevated rates of foundress queen predation on roads (Vasconcellos et al. 2006). Because these insects are important agricultural pests (Rico-Gray & Oliveira 2007), they are removed from croplands by a variety of practices (from insecticides to fire). These abiotic pest control practices are currently used in our study area and may explain why leaf-cutting ants did not attack the palatable leaves of H. collinsiana in the secondary riparian vegetation, which was adjacent to many maize, bean, and chili crops (road edges were not).

The incidence of plant disease is expected to increase in human-modified landscapes due to at least four reasons (Benítez-Malvido & Lemus-Albor 2006). First, altered microclimatic conditions may favor certain pathogens and/or cause stress to plants that increase their susceptibility to disease. Second, poorly defended pioneer plants usually proliferate after anthropogenic disturbance, potentially increasing disease incidence at the community level. Third, exotic species, which become common in human-modified landscapes, may facilitate the introduction of novel pathogens. Finally, roads and vehicles

**FIGURE 4.** Host density, absorbance of foliar condensed tannins and leaf toughness (mean ± SE) of Heliconia latispatha (A–C) and Heliconia collinsiana (D–F) in forest gaps (FG), road edges (RE), and secondary riparian vegetation (RV) in the region of Chajul, southern Mexico. Different letters indicate significant differences between habitats (Tukey–Kramer HSD test, *P < 0.05*).

**FIGURE 5.** Local abundance of hispine beetles and caterpillars (mean ± SE) on the foliage of Heliconia latispatha (A–B) and Heliconia collinsiana (C–D) in forest gaps (FG), secondary riparian vegetation (RV), and road edges (RE) in the region of Chajul, southern Mexico. Different letters indicate significant differences between habitats (Tukey–Kramer HSD test, *P < 0.05*).
may also serve as vectors for some exotic pathogens. Our results corroborate this general prediction by demonstrating that clumps of Heliconia in human-altered habitats tended to have a greater proportion of leaf area damaged by pathogens than those in natural disturbed habitat. This trend was consistent for the two species examined, although not statistically significant.

**Microclimate and Biotic Damage.**—Microclimatic shifts are one of the first consequences of human disturbance in tropical rain forests. Most of the information generated so far on microclimate has been used to describe edge effects in forest remnants (e.g., Williams-Linera 1990, Camargo & Kapos 1995, Didham & Lawton 1999, Newmark 2001, Pohlman et al. 2007). Few studies have examined microclimatic conditions outside forest remnants despite their potential impact on species distribution and biotic interactions at the landscape level (Kapos et al. 1993, Williams-Linera et al. 1998). We observed significant microclimatic shifts on road edges, but not in narrow (< 50 m) secondary riparian corridors bordered by waterways and croplands. On one hand, this result indicates that a matrix of water may ameliorate harsh microclimatic conditions in disturbed landscapes, as do big trees scattered over a matrix of pastures (Williams-Linera et al. 1998). On the other hand, it emphasizes the strong negative edge effects of roads on microclimate (Delgado et al. 2007), especially when the road crosses highly deforested areas.

Our findings also indicate that shifts in microclimatic conditions *per se* are not enough to predict changes in the interaction of Heliconia with their insect herbivores in the region of Chajul. Host availability and local abundance of hispine beetles and caterpillars varied between habitats with either contrasting (road edge vs. forest gap) or similar microclimate (secondary riparian vegetation vs. forest gap), suggesting that there are other factors regulating the Heliconia–insect interaction in the region of Chajul. For instance, the greater density of Heliconia shoots on road edges and in riparian vegetation is more likely to be a result of past coppicing in these areas, which favor the production of new shoots (Berry & Kress 1991). The unexpected high tolerance of hispines to the drier and hotter conditions of road edges (eggs are very subject to desiccation [Strong 1977b]) may be a response to the greater availability of shoots and associated rolled leaves in this habitat, which provide suitable microhabitat for their growth and reproduction (Strong 1977a, b; Seifert 1982). Finally, the low abundance of caterpillars in the secondary riparian vegetation also suggests that the microclimate *per se* does not regulate the Heliconia–insect system. In fact, the reduction in caterpillar abundance in human-altered areas might be associated with either higher predation pressure (Dyer et al. 2005) and/or dispersal limitation (Fáveri et al. 2008) in these habitats.

**Host Quality and Biotic Damage.**—Host quality may affect insect growth and fecundity and therefore influence plant–insect interactions (Awmack & Leather 2002). Our results indicate that Heliconia leaves in human-disturbed habitats became better defended physically but poorly defended chemically (especially *H. latisspatha*). The increase in leaf toughness, which is likely the best defensive strategy in the genus Heliconia (Dominy et al. 2008; Heliconia appear to have few secondary compounds [Gage & Strong 1981]), might be a plausible explanation for the decrease in caterpillar damage we observed. The magnitude of the human-induced increase in leaf toughness (41–84 g/cm²), however, was smaller than the difference naturally observed between the Heliconia species examined (96 g/cm²), suggesting that caterpillars could overcome the alteration in leaf toughness originated by human disturbance as they overcome the difference among the species they feed on (there is no caterpillar specialized on only one Heliconia species; see De Vries 1987). Similarly, many hispine beetles can feed on *Heliconia* species that differ considerably in foliage quality (Strong 1977a, b; Auerbach & Strong 1981).

**Conclusions**

In sum, levels of insect herbivory in the foliage of Heliconia may be altered in human-disturbed habitats mostly due to changes in the abundance of herbivores (i.e., proliferation of leaf-cutting ants and reduction in caterpillar abundance). Agricultural practices close to our study areas are likely to determine shoot availability and the presence of ant colonies in human-disturbed habitats, while potential higher predation pressure and/or dispersal limitation seem to limit local abundance of caterpillars in these habitats. The neutral response of hispines to human disturbance appears to be related to the higher availability of rolled leaves in human-altered habitats. While microclimatic and host quality shifts are important, they are apparently not critical for the maintenance of the entire Heliconia–insect system in our study area. More attention should be paid to the disease ecology of novel forests because leaf fungal pathogens tend to cause more damage in human-disturbed habitats. Further studies with other plant growth forms (e.g., trees and lianas) and their natural enemies (e.g., seed predators, obligate pathogens) will help us better understand plant–herbivore and plant–pathogen interactions in the novel tropical forests that increasingly characterize most tropical landscapes.

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**Supporting Information**

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:
TABLE S1. Heliconia herbivores recorded in forest edges, road edges and secondary riparian vegetation in the region of Chajul, southern Mexico.

TABLE S2. Structural and reproductive characteristics of 40 Heliconia clumps sampled for standing levels of biotic damage in forest gaps, road edges, and secondary riparian vegetation in the region of Chajul, southern Mexico.

FIGURE S1. Schematic diagram of the study area in Chajul, southern Mexico.

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LITERATURE CITED


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