

Highest Treeline in the Northern Hemisphere Found in Southern Tibet

Authors: Miehe, Georg, Miehe, Sabine, Vogel, Jonas, Co, Sonam, and La, Duo

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 27(2) : 169-173

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.0792>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Georg Miehe, Sabine Miehe, Jonas Vogel, Sonam Co, and La Duo

Highest Treeline in the Northern Hemisphere Found in Southern Tibet

169



Three new records of the highest treelines in the northern hemisphere are presented here, based on the definition of a "tree." The tree species with the highest treeline in the northern hemisphere is *Juniperus*

tibetica Kom. The highest forest stand is located at 4900 m in southeast Tibet. The highest tree stands of *Juniperus indica* Bertol. in the Himalaya were found in northern Bhutan at 4750 m. Information from such observations is decisive for the development of hypotheses on the limits of tree growth. We compare the present findings with findings on highest treelines in other mountain areas worldwide and draw some conclusions.

Keywords: Highest treeline; *Juniperus* spp.; Himalaya; Tibet.

Peer reviewed: December 2006 **Accepted:** March 2007

Introduction

Determining the upper treeline is certainly one of the most interesting research challenges in comparative high mountain research. Careful compilations (Hermes 1955; von Wissmann 1961; Schickhoff 2005) have documented that the highest treelines in the northern hemisphere are found on the eastern declivity of the Tibetan Highlands. However, regional and global synopses of upper treeline altitudes can only be useful sources when information on growth form and habitat structure as well as data on human impact are provided. Therefore, all available compilations admittedly compare data of differing reliability. Inconsistencies result from different definitions of what constitutes a tree, or from failure to take account of human interference (Troll 1948; Figure 1).

Material and methods

According to Raunkiaer (Mueller-Dombois and Ellenberg 1974), trees are scapose woody phanerophytes, no matter how tall they are. The UNESCO classification by Mueller-Dombois and Ellenberg (1974) gives 5 m as a minimal height; Körner (1999) and Körner and Paulsen (2004) suggest 3 m. Although a height of 3 m would allow the inclusion of more mountain forests than the threshold of 5 m, it is questionable whether it is meaningful to amalgamate a classification based on qualitative criteria with a quantitative scale. The inadequacy of such an approach becomes evident if we ask whether it would be appropriate to delimit *humans* by a height of 1.8 m. Extended treeline surveys in Africa and High

FIGURE 1 The timberlines in the asymmetrical vegetation belts of the world; based on Troll (1948) as modified by Miehe and Miehe (2000) and changed for the present paper. Sources: Bendix and Rafiqpoor 2001; Bykov 1978; Chen 1987; Ellenberg 1996; Finsterwalder and Jordan 1987; Gorchakovskiy and Shiyatov 1978; Hermes 1955; Herzog 1931; Hildebrand-Vogel and Vogel 1995; Hoch and Körner 2005; Holtmeier 1995; Jordan 1983; Kessler 1995; Klötzli 1975; Laegaard 1992; Lauer and Klaus 1975; Miehe 1991; Miehe 1994; Miehe and Miehe 1994; Pérez 1994; Ruthsatz 1977; P. Sklenár, personal communication 14.12.1998; Troll 1939; Walter 1974; Walter and Breckle 1994; Walter and Medina 1969; Wardle 1974; Werdecker 1955.

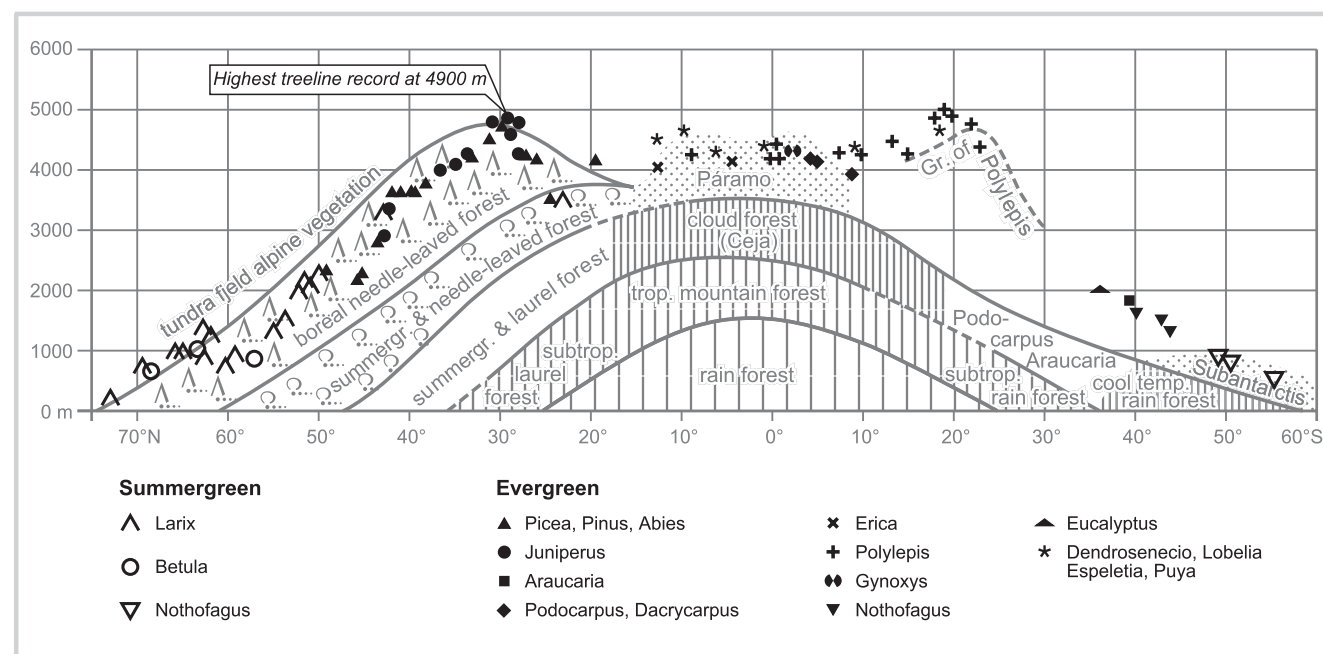




FIGURE 2 Highest forest stand of *Juniperus tibetica* in southeastern Tibet, located at 4900 m (29°42' N / 96°45' E Gr). (Photo by Georg Miehe, 17 September 2004)

Asia (Miehe and Miehe 2000) confirm widely accepted evidence that the upper limit of the forest belt is not a line but an ecotone (Körner 1999). The 'highest tree-line' therefore designates an imaginary line connecting scapose phanerophytes. In most humid mountain ranges, single or multi-stemmed woody perennials become increasingly less abundant, forming a pattern that shifts from a closed crown-interlocking forest to isolated individuals. Simultaneously, their heights gradually decrease until they barely emerge from a closed layer of shrubs (Miehe and Miehe 2000).

All the highest treelines in High Asia consist of *Juniperus* species, and all records above 4850 m refer to *Juniperus tibetica* Kom. (Farjon 2005). The latter species is only known in southern and southeastern Tibet (Xizang Autonomous Region, China) and is mainly restricted to southern exposures and rocky open substrates. Nearly all sites are within reach of humans and their cattle, and even remote stands have been interfered with due to demand for timber (Miehe et al 2003). Specifically, junipers of the same taxon become small, stunted, and multi-stemmed with increasing altitude, to the point where distinction between tree and shrub becomes difficult.

However, the sites described here contain trees matching the minimum height required according to Körner's definition of a tree (1999). Our barometric altitude measurements rely on map-adjusted readings of Thommen altitude meters.

Results and discussion

Site 1 is situated in the upper Kyi Chu catchment north of Lhasa in Pando County, above the Reting Monastery,

at 4850 m (30°18' N / 91°31' E Gr). The single-stemmed *Juniperus tibetica* tree, 2 m in height, has a crown diameter of 1.5 m and a diameter at breast height (DBH) of 5 cm. The tree grows in isolation on a SE-facing slope at the upper western limit of Reting Forest—the sacred forest most worshiped by Buddhist Tibetans—in an open shrub layer consisting of *Juniperus pingii* var. *wilsonii*, *Potentilla fruticosa*, *Lonicera* spp., and *Caragana* spp.

During a survey of isolated juniper groves in southern Tibet (Miehe et al 2007), more records at corresponding altitudes were collected, including the westernmost *Juniperus tibetica* tree, which was found 650 km west of the actual forest border at 4850 m. This suggests that vast areas of now treeless southern Tibet were once forested (Miehe et al 2003, 2006).

Site 2 (Figure 2) is located at 29°42' N 96°45' E at 4900 m above a side valley of the roughly south-north oriented Salween-Yarlung Zhangbo Watershed in southeastern Tibet (Xizang Autonomous Region, Baxoi County). The W-exposed slope has a gradient of 28° and is covered with coarse boulders. The female and male *Juniperus tibetica* trees attain a height of slightly more than 3 m in the center of the grove, and have interlocking crowns. The largest individuals have a DBH of 0.25 m. The grove is the highest single-stemmed juniper site containing distinct trunks. Further up the slope at an elevation of 4930 m, the junipers are gnarled and multi-stemmed, and carry more than 30% deadwood. Below the grove, a *Juniperus tibetica* forest covers the slope with trees 4 to 6 m in height. Larger trees have apparently been felled.

The relief situation, the known atmospheric circulation, and weather observations during the fieldwork



FIGURE 3 Probably undisturbed treeline ecotone in southern Ethiopia: *Erica* thicket disintegrates into isolated spherical individuals. The soil is completely shaded with a thicket of 30 to 50 low scrambling *Alchemilla haumannii*. Bale Mountains, Wasama, 6°55' N / 39°46' E, 4080 m. (Photo by Georg Miehe, 11 January 1990)

(21 August, 16–19 September 2004) suggest that this valley is a wind channel for strong and dry southerly winds. Since the radiative forcing at the site is certainly very different from that recorded at the nearest climate stations, it is doubtful whether any conclusions about the climatic conditions at the local treeline can be drawn, as the climatic causes of treelines are still under-investigated (Körner and Paulsen 2004).

Further south in the rain shadow of the Inner Himalaya of northern Bhutan (28°06' N 90°17' E), the highest juniper trees were found at 4750 m (3 m, single-stemmed *Juniperus indica* Bertol.; Miehe 2004) on a steep SE-exposed 35° slope. On the neighboring slopes at 4650 m, trees 6 m high can be found.

All sites mentioned are normal habitats in the sense that no particular site conditions provide an advantage for tree growth. Our findings surpass the detailed records of Frenzel et al (2003) by 130 to 180 m. It does not seem feasible to establish climatological measurement units at these sites, as they may possibly be deconstructed in due course. However, soil temperature measurements should be made to contribute to the global network of soil temperature measurements directed by Christian Körner (Körner and Paulsen 2004).

Conclusion

Since Earth is a forested planet, the treeline assumes a special significance. It is particularly conspicuous in high mountains, owing to the steepness of the gradient between treed and untreed formations. Surprisingly, the debate surrounding treelines of the world has been

overshadowed in the past by 2 misunderstandings that have hindered the development of hypotheses as to their origin: one is rooted in terminological confusion, the other in a lack of precise field observations. Körner and Paulsen (2004) addressed the first question, while Holtmeier (2005) contributed a wealth of detailed habitat types from various mountain ranges of the Holarctic.

Since forests are made up of trees, the outermost sentinels acquire the role of chief witness. This can serve as the justification for providing the present observations. Information from such observations is decisive for the development of hypotheses on the limits of tree growth. It is true of the highest treelines in both hemispheres that the highest trees grow in isolation and become smaller with increasing elevation, decreasing in size from 3 m to 1 m within a 100-m elevation zone. This has been described for Cerro Sajama (Ellenberg 1996; Purcell et al 2004; Hoch and Körner 2005) and is also applicable to the Tibetan treeline. Both *Polylepis tarapacana* and *Juniperus tibetica* are rooted in open substrates that are not shaded by a surrounding herb or shrub layer or neighboring trees. This is also true of the highest-elevation occurrences of arborescent *Erica* on the East African mountain massifs (Bale Mountains, southeastern Ethiopia, 7°10' N / 40° E). Whether the absence of shade over the roots is limiting for tree growth or not is questionable, given the tree group in Figure 2 and the record of a tree near Reting surrounded by a closed stand of knee-high shrubs. Similar structures are known on the moister slopes of the Bale Mountains (Figure 3) and the rainshadow areas of the inner Himalayas of Bhutan (Figure 4). At both sites the



FIGURE 4 Black Mountains, Central Bhutan, 27°23' N / 0°42' E, 4250 m: probably undisturbed treeline ecotone of the southeastern Himalaya: in the treeline ecotone with a closed evergreen broadleaved rhododendron thicket, closed *Abies densa* forests disintegrate into isolated trees. (Photo by Georg Miehe, 16 October 1998)

highest vegetation layer disintegrates over a vertical distance of only 50 to 100 m into isolated *Erica* shrubs or *Abies densa* trees, emerging from a closed carpet of 30–50-cm tall *Alchemilla haumannii* in Africa, or a closed thicket of 1- to 2-m tall evergreen rhododendrons in the Himalayas.

The *Ericas* of southern Ethiopia and the firs of the eastern Himalayas have in common that they acquire a shorter growth habit before reaching their altitudinal limits. The firs seem unable to reduce their height indefinitely, while other treeline phanerophytes like *Erica* and *Juniperus* gradually reduce their height until they are dwarf shrubs.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the examples from different treeline ecotones have in common that trees decrease in height with increasing altitude; the majority of the treelines cited exhibit increasingly cae-

spitose growth forms and withdraw to the layer of air nearest to the ground. Moreover, all examples have in common that closed stands dissolve into loose assemblages of well-spaced individuals. In humid treeline ecotones, the area of the roots remains shaded, while in semiarid to subarid treeline ecotones the rooting area is fully exposed to the sun. It could possibly be concluded from this that the warming of the rooting zone is not a driving ecological factor. Beyond this possibility, it is an open question as to which limiting factors might be responsible for the hyperoceanic treelines of *Nothofagus*. Studies of root physiology (Hertel and Wesche 2007) and regeneration (Cierjacks et al 2007) could bring some clarity to this. Perhaps phanerophytes such as *Lobelia rhynchopetalum* or *Dendrosenecio* (Wesche 2004) deserve to be included in the treeline discussion as well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fieldwork was carried out with the support of the German Research Council (DFG). Special thanks are extended to Christiane Enderle for providing Figure 1, and to 2 anonymous reviewers who helped us improve the paper. Moreover, the authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Tibet-Norge Network for the Tibetan co-authors.

AUTHORS

Georg Miehe, Sabine Miehe, and Jonas Vogel

Faculty of Geography, University of Marburg, Deutschhausstrasse 10, 35032 Marburg, Germany.
miehe@staff.uni-marburg.de
sabine.miehe@gmx.net
mail@jonasvogel.eu

Sonam Co and La Duo

Department of Biology, Natural Science Faculty, Tibet University Lhasa, 36, Jiangsu Road, Lhasa, Xizang 850000, China.
Sonamtso@hotmail.com

La Duo

Ecological and Environmental Change Research Group, Department of Biology, 5007 Bergen, Norway.
lapager.duoje@student.uib.no

REFERENCES

- Bendix J, Rafiqpoor MD.** 2001. Thermal conditions of soils in the Páramo of Papallacta (Ecuador) at the upper tree line. *Erdkunde* 55:257–276.
- Bykov BA.** 1978. The upper boundary of the forest in the Tien Shan, USSR. *Arctic and Alpine Research* 10:423–424.
- Chen C.** 1987. *Standörtliche, vegetationskundliche und waldbauliche Analyse chinesischer Gebirgsnadelwälder und Anwendung alpiner Gebirgswaldbau-Methoden im chinesischen fichtenreichen Gebirgsnadelwald*. Austria no. 30, Dissertation. Vienna: Universität für Bodenkultur in Wien.
- Cierjacks A, Rühr NK, Wesche K, Hensen I.** 2007. Altitude, as opposed to animal activity, affects *Polylepis* regeneration along a treeline in South America. *Plant Ecology*. Available from isabell.hensen@botanik.uni-halle.de.
- Ellenberg H.** 1996. Páramos und Punas der Hochanden Südamerikas, heute größtenteils als potentielle Wälder anerkannt. *Verhandlungen Gesellschaft Ökologie* 25:17–23.
- Farjon A.** 2005. *A Monograph of Cupressaceae and Sciadopitys*. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, United Kingdom: Kew Publishing.
- Finsterwalder R, Jordan E.** 1987. *Cordillera Real Nord (Illampu)* 1:50.000. Munich: DAV [Deutscher Alpenverein].
- Frenzel B, Bräuning A, Adamczyk S.** 2003. Possible last-glacial forest-refuge areas within the deep valleys of eastern Tibet. *Erdkunde* 57:182–198.
- Gorchakovskiy PL, Shiyatov, SG.** 1978. The upper forest limit in the mountains of the boreal zone of the USSR. *Arctic and Alpine Research* 10:349–363.
- Hermes K.** 1955. *Die Lage der oberen Waldgrenze in den Gebirgen der Erde und ihr Abstand zur Schneegrenze*. Kölner Geographische Arbeiten 5. Cologne, Germany: Geographisches Institut der Universität zu Köln.
- Hertel D, Wesche K.** 2007. Tropical moist *Polylepis* stands at the treeline in East Bolivia: The effect of elevation on stand microclimate above and below-ground structure, and regeneration. Trees. Available from karsten.wesche@botanik.uni-halle.de.
- Herzog T.** 1931. Baum-(Wald-) und Schneegrenzen in den Kordilleren von Südamerika. *Mitteilungen der Geographischen Gesellschaft Thüringen* 38:72–89.
- Hildebrand-Vogel R, Vogel A.** 1995. Evergreen broad-leaved forests of southern South America. In: Box EO, Peet RK, Masuzawa T, Yamada I, Fujiwara K, Maycock PF, editors. *Vegetation Science in Forestry. Global Perspective Based on Forest Ecosystems of East and Southeast Asia*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Kluwer, pp 125–140.
- Hoch G, Körner C.** 2005. Growth, demography and carbon relations of *Polylepis* trees at the world's highest treeline. *Functional Ecology* 19:941–951.
- Holtmeier KF.** 1995. Waldgrenzen und Klimaschwankungen. *Geoökodynamik* 16:1–24.
- Holtmeier KF.** 2005. *Mountain Timberlines. Ecology, Patchiness and Dynamics*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Jordan E.** 1983. Die Verbreitung von *Polylepis*-Beständen in der Westkordillere Boliviens. *Tuexenia* 3:101–116.
- Kessler M.** 1995. *Polylepis-Wälder Boliviens: Taxa, Ökologie, Verbreitung und Geschichte*. Dissertationes Botanicae 246. Berlin and Stuttgart, Germany: J. Cramer.
- Kessler M.** 2000. The "Polylepis problem". Where do we stand? *Ecotropica* 8:97–110.
- Klötzli F.** 1975. Zur Waldfähigkeit der Gebirgssteppen Hoch-Semiens (Nordäthiopien). *Beiträge naturkundlicher Forschung Südwest-Deutschland* 34:131–147.
- Körner C.** 1999. *Alpine Plant Life*. Berlin: Springer.
- Körner C, Paulsen J.** 2004. A world-wide study of high altitude treeline temperatures. *Journal of Biogeography* 31:713–732.
- Laegaard S.** 1992. Influence of fire in the grass páramo vegetation of Ecuador. In: Balslev H, Luteyn JL, editors. *Páramo. An Andean Ecosystem under Human Influence*. New York: Academic Press, pp 151–170.
- Lauer W, Klaus D.** 1975. Geoeological investigations on the timberline of Pico de Orizaba, Mexico. *Arctic and Alpine Research* 7:315–330.
- Miehe G.** 1991. Khumbu Himal (Mt. Everest-Südabdachung, Nepal). Vegetationskarte 1:50.000 und Kommentar. *Mitteilungen der Bundesforschungsanstalt für Forst- und Holzwirtschaft Hamburg* 169:1–137.
- Miehe G.** 2004. Himalaya. In: Burga CA, Klötzli F, Grabherr G, editors: *Gebirge der Erde*. Stuttgart, Germany: Ulmer, pp 325–348.
- Miehe G, Miehe S.** 2000. Comparative high mountain research on the tree-line ecotone under human impact. *Erdkunde* 54:34–50.
- Miehe G, Miehe S, Koch K, Will M.** 2003. Sacred forests in Tibet: Using Geographical Information Systems for forest rehabilitation. *Mountain Research Development* 23:14–18.
- Miehe G, Miehe S, Schlütz F, Kaiser K, La Duo.** 2006. Palaeoecological and experimental evidence of former forests and woodlands in the treeless desert pastures of Southern Tibet (Lhasa, A.R. Xizang, China). *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 242:54–67.
- Miehe G, Miehe S, Will M, Opgenoorth L, La Duo, Tsering Dorgeh, Liu Jianquan.** 2007. An inventory of forest relics in the pastures of Southern Tibet (Xizang A.R., China). *Plant Ecology*. Available from Georg Miehe.
- Miehe S.** 1994. Humidity-dependent sequences of altitudinal vegetation belts in the Northwestern Karakorum. In: Zheng D, Zhang Q, Pan Y, editors. *Proceedings of International Symposium on the Karakorum and Kunlun Mountains*. Beijing: China Meteorological Press, pp 347–363.
- Miehe S, Miehe G.** 1994. *Ericaceous Forests and Heathlands of the Bale Mountains in South Ethiopia. Ecology and Man's Impact*. Hamburg, Germany: Traute Warnke Reinbek.
- Mueller-Dombois D, Ellenberg H.** 1974. *Aims and Methods of Vegetation Ecology*. New York: Wiley.
- Pérez FL.** 1994. Geobotanical influence of the tallus movement on the distribution of caulescent Andean rosettes. *Flora* 189:353–371.
- Purcell J, Brelsford A, Kessler M.** 2004. The world's highest forest. *American Scientist* 92:454–461.
- Ruthsatz S.** 1977. *Pflanzengesellschaften und ihre Lebensbedingungen in den andinen Halbwüsten Nordwest-Argentiniens*. Dissertationes Botanicae 39. Vaduz, Liechtenstein: J. Cramer.
- Schickhoff U.** 2005. The upper timberline in the Himalayas, Hindu Kush and Karakorum: A review of geographical and ecological aspects. In: Broll G, Keplin B, editors. *Mountain Ecosystems. Studies in Treeline Ecology*. Berlin: Springer, pp 275–354.
- Troll C.** 1939. Das Pflanzenkleid des Nanga Parbat. *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Museums für Länderkunde zu Leipzig N.F.* 7:149–193.
- Troll C.** 1948. Der asymmetrische Vegetations- und Landschaftsaufbau der Nord- und Südhalbkugel. *Göttinger Geographische Abhandlungen* 1:11–27.
- von Wissmann H.** 1961. Stufen und Gürtel der Vegetation und des Klimas in Hochasien und seinen Randgebieten. *Erdkunde* 15:19–44.
- Walter H, Breckle S-W.** 1994. *Ökologie der Erde*. Volume 3. 2nd edition. Stuttgart, Germany: Ulmer.
- Walter H, Medina E.** 1969. Die Bodentemperatur als ausschlaggebender Faktor für die Gliederung der subalpinen und alpinen Stufe in den Anden Venezuelas (vorläufige Mitteilung). *Berichte der Deutschen Botanischen Gesellschaft* 82:275–281.
- Walter H.** 1974. *Die Vegetation Osteuropas, Nord- und Zentralasiens*. Stuttgart, Germany: Fischer Verlag.
- Wardle P.** 1974. Alpine timberlines. In: Ives JD, Barry RG, editors. *Arctic and Alpine Environments*. London: Methuen, pp 371–402.
- Werdecker J.** 1955. Beobachtungen in den Hochländern Äthiopiens auf einer Forschungsreise 1953/54. *Erdkunde* 9:305–317.
- Wesche K.** 2004. Die tropisch-alpine (afroalpine) Stufe in Afrika. In: Walter H, Breckle S-W, editors. *Ökologie der Erde*. Volume 2, 3rd edition. Munich: Spektrum, pp 147–156.