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► **To cite this version:**

Antoine Billard, Rodolphe Bauer, Frédéric Mothe, Francis Colin, Fleur Longuetaud. Wood Density Variations between Tree Components Should Be Considered to Correctly Estimate Tree Biomass Available for Different Uses. 21st International Nondestructive Testing and Evaluation of Wood Symposium, Sep 2019, Freiburg, Germany. hal-03010398

HAL Id: hal-03010398

<https://hal.science/hal-03010398v1>

Submitted on 17 Nov 2020

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Wood Density Variations between Tree Components Should Be Considered to Correctly Estimate Tree Biomass Available for Different Uses

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Abstract

Although biomass depends as much on volume as on density, in the case of trees, only the volume of the stem and the density at breast height have been studied quite extensively. The rare existing works and our preliminary analyses showed that, according to the species, the density could vary strongly between and within tree components.

There is a need to better know the forest resource in terms of wood density and biomass of the different tree components (clear wood, knots, bark, branches). Such work will contribute to refine biomass estimates to evaluate carbon sequestration in forests and to optimize the use of wood resource (lumber, pulp, panel, fuelwood, new utilisations such as extractives for chemistry), with a particular attention paid to the recovering of “waste” woods.

Wood samples of stem, knots and branches were X-rayed in oven-dried state with a medical CT scanner. For each type of sample, a specific image analysis procedure was developed under ImageJ software to measure wood density.

We present here our results for the stem and knot components for three major softwood species in France. This was done within the frame of a project about the development of a chemical industry. Knots are particularly rich in lignans, used in the cosmetics, medicine and nutrition industries. Knots have a much greater wood density than stem wood, whereas most wood density measurements, on which wood density databases are based, were performed at breast height. Depending on the species, it would be necessary to take into account these variations to estimate correctly the biomass of tree components.

Keywords: computed tomography, knots, extractives, forest resource

Introduction

Accurate and non-biased estimate of biomass is necessary to meet several objectives. It is for example usual to estimate carbon sequestration of forest trees directly from total tree biomass. However, in the context of sustainable development, it becomes necessary to optimize the use of our resources. To optimize the use of forest biomass, it is needed to better know how it is distributed between and within the different tree components (stem, bark, knots, and branches). This last point is important to know if there is a need and an opportunity to develop a wood chemistry industry based on waste wood recovery. Bark and knots contain an important quantity of extractives (Kebbi-Benkeder, 2017). In particular, knots are a source of lignans, which can be used in cosmetics, medicine and alimentation. Such chemistry industry must not interfere with the already existing wood industry.

Today, we are not able to estimate correctly the amount of biomass of the different tree components for two main reasons. We are not able to estimate the volume of some tree components due to a lack of available measurements. It is in particular the case for the knots. For all tree components, we have a lack of knowledge on the wood density variations (most density measurements were done at breast height and the number of trees per species in the databases is quite limited). Moreover the methods used for density measurements are often questionable (Williamson and Wiemann, 2010).

Recent studies (Repola, 2006; Nogueira and al., 2008; Wiemann, 2013; Wassenberg, 2015; Wiemann and Williamson, 2014; Bastin et al., 2015) have proved that it was important to consider the variability of the wood density within the tree to have a good estimation of the biomass

The density of knots was little studied. For spruce, Gartner (1995) showed that the knots are denser than the stem. A mean oven-dried density calculated from the article is 766 kg/m^3 in comparison with the wood density provided for this species by the Global Wood Density Database of 370 kg/m^3 (Chave et al. 2009, Zanne et al. 2009) for example. Lehtonen (1979) has studied pine and spruce of Finland. He found that the knots are denser than the stem of 351 kg/m^3 for pine and 490 kg/m^3 for spruce. Also, he found for pine that bigger is the knot, denser it is. It is the opposite for spruce. Boutelje (1966) obtained the same results for the density of the same species.

In this study we measured the wood density of stem and knots for three softwood species (Norway spruce, silver fir and Douglas fir). We also estimated biomass for the knot component in our trees and compared our results with what would be done with breast height density measurement on our trees or with the usual wood density databases.

Materials and methods

Three softwood species were studied: *Abies alba*, *Picea abies* and *Pseudotsuga menziesii*. Each species was sampled in different experimental forests in France.

Eight trees per species were harvested: four in an intensive thinning plot and four in a control plot which was not thinned. Trees were chosen in different diameter classes. The girth at 1m30 and the height of the crown base (the first whorl with at least 3/4 of living branches) were measured.

For each tree, 15 stem discs were sampled along the stem avoiding knots. The height of the first three discs was fixed at 0.3m, 0.8m and 1.3m. The 12 other discs were evenly spaced along the stem. Radial cut was done within each disc for avoiding cracks. Seven short logs containing each a whorl of knots were sampled in addition. Five were taken above the crown base and two below the crown base.

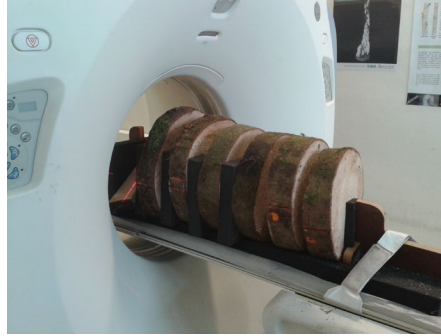


Figure 1 - Stem discs in the X-ray CT scanner

A medical CT scanner at INRA Grand Est-Nancy was used for all density measurements.

The stem discs were scanned in green and oven-dried states. CT images were produced and grey levels corresponding to Hounsfield numbers were converted into wood density (Freyburger et al. 2009). The method described by Longuetaud et al. (2016) was used to obtain the oven-dried density and the basic density of stem discs.

This method requires a good matching between CT images in green and oven-dried states. This is obtained by using the radial cut as a starting point and by manually recording the boundary between wood and bark. The discs were then divided into sectors.

The sectors including knots (even if knots were avoided by the choice of stem discs along the stem) were removed in order to compute wood densities in clear of knots areas.

For each tree, basic density of the clear of knots stem wood component was computed as the mean basic density of the 15 stem discs weighted by the wood volume of the clear of knots stem disc.

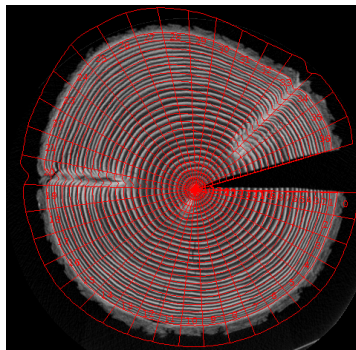
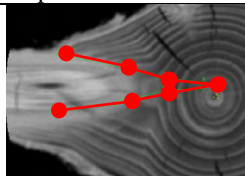


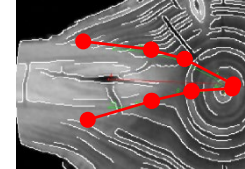
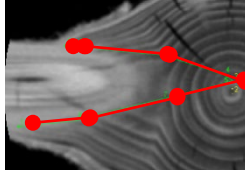
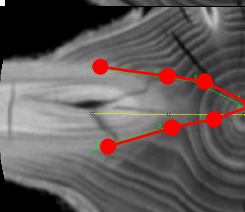
Figure 2 - Sectorisation on a Douglas fir stem disc

The short logs containing each a whorl of knots were scanned only in oven-dried state. Only one of the eight Douglas-fir trees and six of the eight Norway spruce trees were scanned at this stage.

All the knots were manually segmented in each log by placing markers along the stack of CT images with a plugin developed for ImageJ called Gourmand (Colin et al., 2010). The segmentation results were visually checked thanks to a 3D viewer (Figure 3). In a preliminary step, four methods for guiding the manual segmentation were tested (Table 1).

Table 1 - Presentation of the different methods of manual segmentations of the knots

Method	Principe	Advantage/Drawbacks	Example
Regular	No instruction given to the operator	Unrepeatable results	

Canny Edge	The Canny edge detection algorithm is used to outline the contours in order to help the operator	No noticeable improvement in repeatability. Large variations in knot length measurements	
Triple points	The limit of the knot must be set at the triple points where bark meet normal wood and knot	More repeatable results. No triple point can be found in some cases	
Radius	The radius is estimated by looking at the stem above the deformation caused by the branch, then shifted at the knot end level to fix the length	Repeatable results but with underestimated knot length and volume	

Finally, we selected the “Triple points” method because it was repeatable and because Willför (2005) reported that a lot of extractives are present at the knot end (insertion bumper) that would be excluded in the volume given by the “Radius” method. The method was applied to measure the average density of knots for each tree.

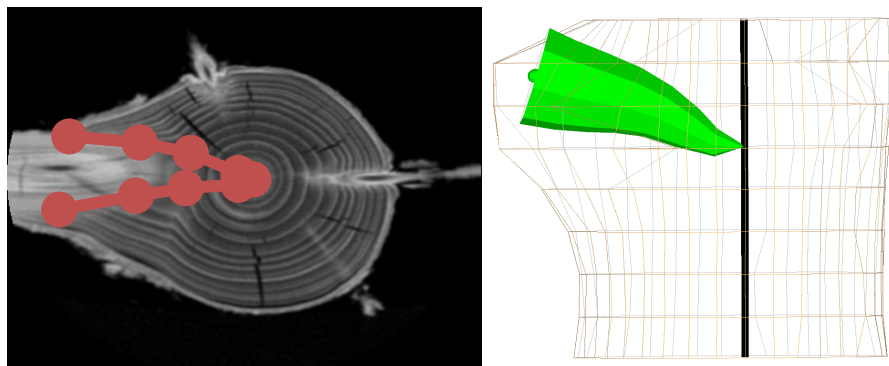


Figure 3 - Manual segmentation of a knot with the “triple point” method (left) and 3D representation with the Bil3D viewer (right)

To estimate the volume of knots, with the final objective to compute knot biomass in trees, we used another dataset issued from silver fir trees previously sampled in the same forest as the silver fir sampled for the present study. These trees were scanned integrally in logs of about 1.5 meter long. All the knots of the trees were manually segmented as described above. It was found that the knots represented 1% of the total stem volume measured over-bark. The same rate was used for Norway spruce and Douglas fir in the absence of other data.

As mentioned before, the knot logs were only scanned in the oven-dried state. We therefore used a linear relationship to convert the oven-dried density measured on the CT images into basic density. The following equation was fitted for each species by using oven-dry and basic densities measured on the stem discs:

$$BD = \alpha * D_0 + \beta$$

where BD is the basic density, D_0 is the oven-dried density and α and β are the parameters. Parameters of the equation are presented in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2 - Parameters of the linear relationship fitted using stem disc data to convert oven-dried density into basic density.

Species	β (kg/m ³)	α (Unitless)
Silver fir (<i>Abies alba</i>)	38 **	0.790 ***
Norway spruce (<i>Picea abies</i>)	67 ***	0.710 ***
Douglas fir (<i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i>)	- NS	0.879 ***

Results

Differences in the manual segmentation of knots made by two operators with the “Triple points” method and the effects on basic density, mean diameter and volume are presented in Fig. 4. Very few discrepancies between operators were observed. It confirmed that the “Triple point” method was repeatable and efficient for assessing knot wood density and volume.

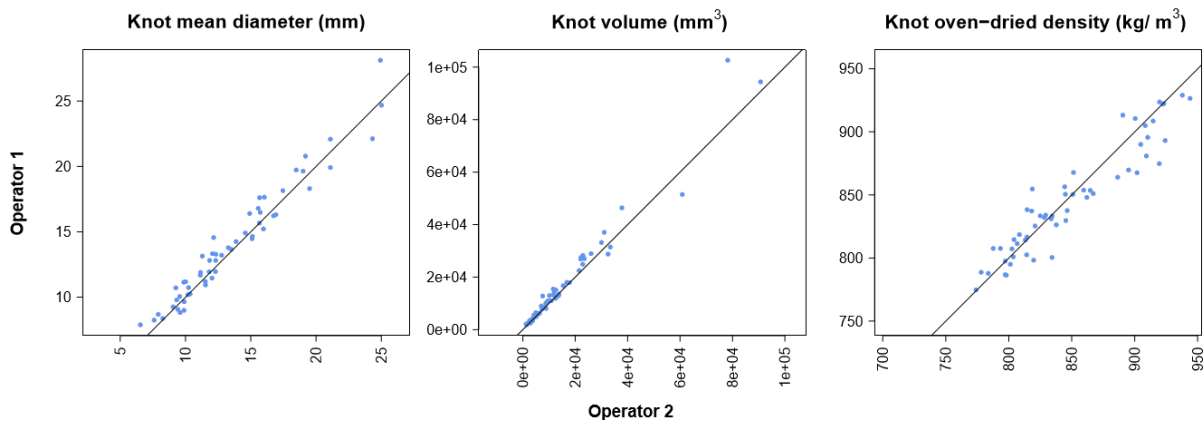


Figure 4 – Mean diameters, volumes and oven-dried densities of knots obtained by two operators. The black line is the “y=x” line.

The basic density of knot wood and clear wood is represented for each species in Figure 5. It appears that the density of knots is much higher than the normal stem wood. In average, the basic density of knots was 685 kg/m³ for silver fir, 676 kg/m³ for Norway spruce, and 705 kg/m³ for Douglas fir whereas the density of normal stem wood was 374 kg/m³, 353 kg/m³, and 430 kg/m³, respectively. Moreover, it would appear that there is no influence of the knot diameter on the knot basic density.

The effects of diameter at breast height and silvicultural treatment were assessed independently on the wood density of stem and knot components with regression and t-test, respectively. No effect of DBH was found. Only the effect of the treatment was statistically significant for silver fir with a greater density for thinning plot. The biomass values were computed by using the measured density of each component and compared with the biomass that would have been obtained with the basic density measured at 1m30. Table 3 shows the difference between both values. For the three species, applying the density of normal wood measured at 1.30 m to the knots would lead to underestimate by more than 60 % the available quantity of knot extractives.

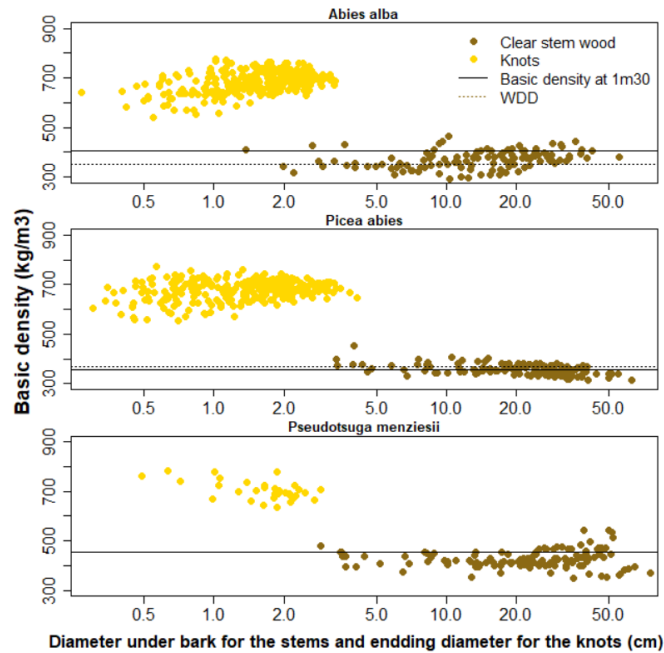


Figure 5 - Basic density of knot wood (yellow) and clear of knot stem wood (brown) as a function of the diameter of knots and stem discs, respectively. Each point represents the mean density of a knot or a stem disc. The solid black line indicates the mean basic density of the trees at 1m30 for each species. The dotted black line indicates the mean basic density of each species from the Global Wood Density Database (Chave et al. 2006).

Table 3 - Difference between biomasses computed with the specific density of each component and biomass computed with the average density of our trees at 1.30m

Species	Clear of knots stem wood	Knot wood
Silver fir (<i>Abies alba</i>)	-7.8 %	68.9 %
Norway spruce (<i>Picea abies</i>)	-0.9 %	89.9 %
Douglas fir (<i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i>)	-5.1 %	64.1 %

Discussion and conclusion

The mean basic density of knots was found to be 83% above normal wood for silver fir, 92 % for Norway spruce and 64 % for Douglas fir. In table 3, the negative value of the clear of knots stem wood basic density can be explained by the fact that the basic density at DBH is higher than the rest of stem. So, the mean basic density of the stem is little than the DBH mean.

The results are in agreement with the literature. For knot wood of spruce, a mean oven-dried density calculated from Gartner (1995) was 766 kg/m³ and that is equivalent, when applying the conversion equation presented above, to a basic density of 611 kg/m³, in the same order of magnitude than our value of 676 kg/m³ for spruce. A mean oven-dried density calculated from Boutelje (1966) was 1040 kg/m³, which is equivalent to a basic density of 805 kg/m³. In both studies, density of knot wood was found to be much higher than density of clear wood. Moreover, Lehtonen (1979) found for spruce that dense knots are little and it would appear that it is not validate in this study.

The volume of knots was not measured. Based on measurements performed on six silver fir trees from another study (not published yet), it was fixed in this paper to 1% of the total stem volume over-bark whatever the species. Up to now, no data are available for Douglas fir and Norway spruce. According to the bibliography, the knot rate varies between 0 and 4% (Polge et Illy, 1967; Andersson 1987 in Lula 2017; Pinto et al. 2002; Fredriksson, 2012). Most of these studies focused on pine.

In this study, it was considered that the knot volume can be entirely used for the chemical extraction process. In reality, all the knots will not be used because the wood of knots is usually not separated from

normal wood in the industrial process (except in paper industry). Moreover, it was shown that the boundary between wood and knots is not clearly defined. This is probably not a serious problem, since in the case where knot extraction would be performed for feeding a chemical process, the wood around the knot would certainly be included into the extracted volume. The “Gourmand” plugin makes it possible to modify the diameter of the manually segmented knots to compute density with including more or less wood framing knots.

Other tree components (bark and branches) will be analysed in a further study. Until now, the analyses were mainly descriptive, but in the future we intend to model the density of each component as a function of tree characteristics. The density variations within tree components will also be studied.

In conclusion, the lack of volume data of the knots and the utilisation of the stem wood density for the knots make it hard to have a good estimation of the basic density of the knots and underestimate the biomass of knots.

Acknowledgments

SILVA laboratory is supported by a grant overseen by the French National Research Agency (ANR) as part of the “Investissements d’Avenir” program (ANR-11-LABX-0002-01, Lab of Excellence ARBRE). Antoine Billard’s PhD is funded by ADEME and Région Grand-Est. This work was done in the framework of the ExtraFor Est project coordinated by Francis Colin. We would like to thank Christine Deleuze (ONF) for her help in achieving this study, Vincent Rousselet, Frédéric Bordat, Loïc Dailly and Adrien Contini for the sampling in the forest and measurements at the laboratory, part and Charline Mola for the CT scanner acquisitions. Also, we thank Chloé Agro, Lucie Heim and Leopold Bergé who worked during their Master thesis on basic density and volume of knots, and Anaëlle Rajaonarivo, Léa Bissieux and Bernard Poirot for the manual segmentation of knots. Finally, thanks to the LERMAB laboratory for the yield of extractives.

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