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An Adventurous Physicist

Elisabeth Pain
 France
 13 June 2008

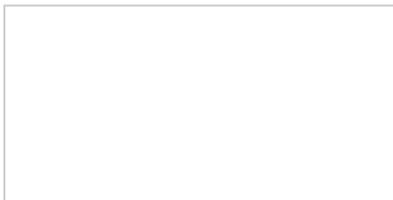
When Jérôme Chave stepped into a tropical forest for the first time, "I was even unable to identify a weed in my backyard at home, and the idea that hundreds of plant species were coexisting peacefully in tiny areas of forest astounded me," he says. The impact prompted Chave to leave theoretical condensed matter physics to focus on tropical forests. Ten years later, Chave, 35, runs his own forest ecology group at the [Laboratory for Evolution and Biological Diversity](#) in Toulouse, France.

Chave learned the ecology, molecular biology, and chemistry he needed by talking to colleagues, going to seminars, and reading papers.

bring a more synthetic view in their problems. We had a sense that we would have a model to study complex systems that would be a lot more fun than particle systems," Chave says.

Before he knew it, Chave was walking in a pristine rainforest in French Guiana designing a model of tree population dynamics. "I was blown away by the tremendous complexity and amazing diversity" of forests, he says. Starting in 1999, Chave did a postdoc in the [Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology](#) at Princeton University. There, he used computer modeling and field data to elucidate how forest ecosystems store and recycle carbon and to compare alternative theories for species coexistence.

Since coming back to France in 2001 to take a position at the [French National Center for Scientific Research](#), Chave has continued to cross disciplines. On his team, biologists and mathematicians work together on projects that encompass climate change, biodiversity, community phylogenetics, population genetics, and tropical-tree defenses.



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Chave learned the ecology, molecular biology, and chemistry he needed by talking to colleagues, going to seminars, and reading papers. Botany wasn't so easy. "I spent a long time in the field trying to learn my species. ... If you don't start at the age of 3, you don't know how to look at nature in the proper way."

Chave, who every year spends about 2 months in the field, learned how to live and work in tropical forests by doing. Still, doing botany in the tropics means climbing 50-m trees to collect leaves, as some of them cannot be identified from the ground. For someone who gets dizzy with height, "it was a big challenge," Chave says.

Once beyond the most adventurous aspects, "you realize how quiet it is to be in a tropical forest rather than in an urban area full of stressed people and telephones. You just enjoy the monkeys around and the birds. It's great."



Changing scales. Jérôme Chave left theoretical physics to study tropical forests.

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<p>Elisabeth Pain is contributing editor for South and West Europe.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor.</p>
<p>Images. Top: Getty Images. Middle: courtesy of Jérôme Chave</p>	<p>DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800089</p>

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