

Governance and Data Property Rules of the sPlot Consortium



a project of  iDiv

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Approved: Steering Committee of sPlot
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1. Objectives

sPlot is a collaborative global vegetation-plot database aiming to support the analysis of plant communities across the world's biomes by offering (i) vegetation-plot data combined with (ii) a taxonomic backbone and (iii) a hub to the TRY plant trait database. sPlot was created by the sDiv Working Group on “Global Plant Trait-Environment Relationships”, which started its activities in March 2013. Since 2017, sPlot is a research platform of the German Centre of Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig.

2. sPlot Consortium

(a) The sPlot Consortium comprises (i) personal members and (ii) institutional members (databases), having the same rights and duties. The current list of all members is made available through the sPlot website.

(b) Further personal or institutional members can join the sPlot Consortium upon invitation of the sPlot Steering Committee if they (i) agree on these Rules and (ii.a) provide technical (IT) or analytical expertise to sPlot activities (in the case of personal members) or (ii.b) deliver data for sPlot as requested by the sPlot Steering Committee. The sPlot Steering Committee is free to accept or decline any applications to join the sPlot Consortium.

(c) Membership in the sPlot Consortium is terminated when a personal member wishes to leave the sPlot Consortium or an institutional member withdraws his/her data entirely. Membership can also be terminated by a two-thirds decision of the Steering Committee if a Consortium member has seriously violated these Rules or if a personal member has been inactive or unresponsive for a long period.

(d) The task of the sPlot Consortium is to take all practical and scientific steps required for a global synthesis of plant assemblages at local scale (plots) considering taxonomic, functional and/or phylogenetic diversity, environmental drivers, ecosystem processes and/or other relevant descriptors. The sPlot Consortium agrees on these Governance and Data Property Rules and can change them following the procedure reported in the Article 8. The sPlot Consortium elects the sPlot Steering Committee (see Article 3.a).

(e) Decisions of the sPlot Consortium are made with simple majority of votes in electronic ballots extending over one month. Normally, each member has one vote, but the sPlot Steering Committee

is free to implement a regulation that gives institutional members contributing particularly big databases up to three votes based on the number and size of contributed datasets.

3. sPlot Steering Committee

(a) The sPlot Consortium elects a Steering Committee consisting of five sPlot members. Elections take place for 2-year renewable terms in the last quarter of even years by means of an electronic ballot extending over one month. The five candidates with the highest numbers of votes are elected; in case of a tie for the fifth position, all persons with the same number of votes are elected. The Steering Committee determines one of its members as Chairperson.

(b) The Steering Committee is responsible for overseeing the everyday business of sPlot and for handling any issues not specifically assigned otherwise in these Rules. In particular, the Steering Committee shall represent the sPlot Consortium towards the relevant iDiv bodies and the scientific public, appoint and supervise researchers working for sPlot, decides on the invitation of data contributors as well as additional IT specialists and data analysts to join the sPlot Consortium, supervise the technical development of the sPlot platform and the handling of data requests and organize electronic ballots and votes among the Consortium members as specified in these Rules.

(c) The Steering Committee can assign specific duties, except decisions on exclusions from Consortium membership, to researchers working for sPlot or to ad-hoc committees established upon its own discretion.

4. Procedures of data contribution

(a) Data can be contributed to sPlot only upon invitation by the Steering Committee or an authorized representative of the Steering Committee. It is upon the discretion of the Steering Committee which databases to invite. When a potential contributor of vegetation-plot data has approved these Rules and provided data in the amount and quality as agreed with the Steering Committee or its representative, this database becomes an institutional member of the sPlot Consortium.

(b) In the sPlot Consortium, each database whose data are included in sPlot is represented by its owner (in case of a single natural person) or by a custodian (in case of an institutional or collaborative database). A custodian is an authorized representative of all contributors of a collective dataset (i.e. a dataset containing data contributed by more than one person). Institutional and collaborative databases nominate their custodians (and potentially deputy custodians) according to their internal regulations and are free to replace them at any time. In the case of institutional or collaborative datasets, sPlot will only deal with the custodians or, if they are temporarily unavailable, their deputies.

(c) If a larger set of national (or regional) databases is contributed to sPlot through an integrated supranational database (data aggregator), both the original databases and the integrated supranational database become members of the sPlot Consortium.

(d) All data contributed to the sPlot database remain intellectual property of data contributors and may be withdrawn at any time. This possibility does not affect data that have previously been released for specific analyses according to Article 5.

(e) In the case of collective datasets, it is the custodian's responsibility to solve intellectual property rights and authorship rules within the group of contributors before the data set is contributed to sPlot. sPlot will not take any responsibility for data mishandling on the part of the custodians.

(f) Contributing plot data to sPlot does not affect the rights of individual dataset owners or custodians to use the data in parallel for other purposes. sPlot expects that its contributing databases (national and regional plot databases as well as supranational data aggregators) will remain in place and continue their activities of data acquisition, editing and use for various purposes. It is further expected that data updates and corrections will be done in the original databases, and such updates from the original databases will periodically be sent to sPlot to replace previous, outdated versions.

5. Procedures of data use

(a) The sPlot database can only be used by sPlot Consortium members for specific research projects focusing on global- or at least continental-scale analyses. The sPlot Consortium is aware that the regional/national/local data contributors have their own objectives with which sPlot should not interfere. Thus, no member of the sPlot Consortium is allowed to use data retrieved from sPlot for any regional/national/local study. In case of the continental-scale analyses within Europe, the project leader has to make a parallel data request to the European Vegetation Archive (EVA) database according to the EVA Data Property and Governance Rules.

(b) All data owners and custodians in the sPlot Consortium who have contributed data at the time of paper preparation can become co-authors of any publication whose main focus is describing the content of the sPlot database ("database papers") unless they wish not to be listed as co-authors (opt-out paper).

(c) Each member of the sPlot Consortium (including contributors to member databases that have been nominated by the respective custodian) has the right to propose analytical or other papers using sPlot data. The responsibility for using the data according to the sPlot rules rests with both the members and non-members involved in a proposal. Such sPlot paper proposals are to be sent by the lead author to the Chairperson of the sPlot Steering Committee. The proposal should contain (i) the applicant's name and address, (ii) the names of all intended co-authors from inside (non-obligatory) and outside (obligatory) the sPlot Consortium, (iii) envisaged publication with a preliminary title, (iv) a brief description of aims and methods of the study, (v) the estimated time of manuscript submission, (vi) a specification of the data needed, (vii) an explicit statement that the applicant agrees with these Rules.

(d) Each proposal will be considered by the sPlot Steering Committee, which will check whether (i) the applicant is eligible to use sPlot data according to these Rules, (ii) there is a reasonable link between the aims, expected outputs and data requested, (iii) there is no conflict with ongoing publication projects using the sPlot database and (iv) these Rules are respected. If these conditions are met, the Steering Committee will approve the project and the requested data will be provided. The titles of approved projects, together with the names of their applicants, will be published on the sPlot website. If there is no evidence of progress in a project within two years after its approval, the lead author needs to ask the sPlot Steering Committee for renewal; otherwise the project and the right to use sPlot data expires.

(e) If the proposal concerns derived data only, the SC can apply a simplified procedure compared to (5d). Derived data in this case are those that do not include or make use of co-occurrence information or inform geographical locations of plots or species, and thus, do not involve providing access to the sPlot database. Examples for derived data are frequency data in large geographical grid cells for a limited number of species, part of the phylogeny or the range in environmental space for limited number of species. If only such derived data are requested, the SC can decide not to send the proposal to the full sPlot Consortium and further can make an agreement with the proponent that fewer or no sPlot representatives are offered co-authorship than in regular proposals. All other regulations are the same as in regular proposals.

(f) In any publication making use of sPlot data, the applicants are obliged to give appropriate credit to sPlot and to the funding by iDiv and DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). Details of the required acknowledgements are specified by the sPlot Steering Committee. Upon publication, the applicants are requested to send the paper(s) based on the sPlot data to the sPlot Steering Committee. Links to these papers can be added to the sPlot website. The applicants are encouraged to report any errors found in the data to the sPlot Steering Committee.

(g) Under no circumstances can data received via the sPlot database be circulated to other people, even to co-authors who are not listed in the proposal, or posted online to publicly accessible sites (including electronic supplements to publications). Exceptions are subsets of the data on whose publication all involved contributing databases have agreed as well as aggregated data that do not allow the extraction of individual plot data. In any case intended publication of subsets of data or aggregated data requires the approval of the sPlot Steering Committee.

(h) Permission to use trait data is granted through the TRY initiative (www.try-db.org), according to TRY rules. If requested, sPlot can provide trait data in a usable form, matched to a common sPlot/TRY taxonomy, and, if desired, aggregated at the species and/or plot level. Requesting these matched TRY data via sPlot additionally invokes the co-authorship mechanism of TRY.

6. Authorship arrangements

(a) Simultaneously with the delivery of the data to project proponents (rule 5d), the sPlot Steering Committee will send approved paper proposals to all members of the sPlot Consortium (or in case of institutional members to their representatives) and inform them which amount of data of which databases is supposed to be used in the respective analyses. Personal Consortium members as well as persons nominated by the custodians of institutional members can then declare their willingness to join the paper project as active co-authors during a period of one month (opt-in papers). The lead author is obliged to accept one such offer from each database whose data he/she is planning to use, but is free to decline additional offers or offers of non-contributing sPlot Consortium members.

(b) It is a responsibility of the lead author to circulate the first paper draft upon completion and the final manuscript at least two weeks before submission and to invite, at each of these stages, all agreed co-authors to give intellectual input.

(c) Custodians representing collective databases/datasets should handle any offer of co-authorship received via sPlot according to the internal rules or established practices of their database, for instance, by proper allocation of the opportunity of co-authorship to the person(s) who contributed from their database most of the data used for the particular project.

(d) sPlot adheres to established good practices on scientific publication. In case of opt-in papers, significant intellectual input and/or significant data input together with an agreement on being accountable for all aspects of the work should lead to co-authorship. In case of uncertainty on the co-authorship arrangements, inclusive rather than exclusive principles should be applied. In case of dispute about co-authorship arrangements, each sPlot Consortium member can appeal to the sPlot Steering Committee to ensure a solution in accordance with the spirit of these Rules.

7. Statement of consent

If a data owner or database custodian has officially submitted data for inclusion in the sPlot database to the sPlot Steering Committee, this is considered an implicit agreement with these Governance and Data Property Rules. Potential members also agree on having their personal data (name, affiliation, contact information) stored in sPlot repository. These data will be used for sPlot internal management only, stored for the whole duration of the membership, and treated in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 ("GDPR"). Members also agree on having their names published in sPlot's member list published in sPlot website. Members have the right to be cancelled from receiving sPlot's newsletter.

8. Versions and amendments of these Rules

Modifications of the sPlot Rules can be proposed by a majority of the sPlot Steering Committee or a minimum of 10% of the sPlot Consortium members. A vote on proposed changes is conducted by electronic means over a period of one month, and the proposed changes are accepted if they are supported by the majority of votes.