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The nature and stability of frost flat
heathland/ forest ecotones in the
Central North Island, New Zealand

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the School of Biological Sciences,
University of Auckland, 2005

Acknowledgements

For help with permits, historical information, ideas, equipment, climate data and general enthusiasm I would like to thank Mark Smale, NIWA, Anthony Beveridge, Paul Cashmore, Nick Singers, Rod Warne, John Nicholls, Gretel Boswijk and Peter De Lange.

Thanks to Jonathon Boow, Sharon Fisher, Nga Tama, and Nichollette Brown for keeping all my little seedlings alive, and experiments running, in the various greenhouses during my long absences in the field.

The meandering path which this project has followed over the last 7 years has been made considerably more enjoyable by the good students and staff of the School of Biological Sciences. In particular I would like to thank Johnathon Boow, Eamon Ganley, Charlotte Hardy, Dave Clarke, Liam Anderson, Kevin Parker, Sandra Anderson, Dianne Brunton, Joshua Guilbert, Darryl Jefferies, Todd Dennis, Nichollette Brown, Yvette Wharton and Sharon Fisher, who all provided generous helpings of advice, motivation, friendship, and the odd kick in the backside (when I really needed it).

Thanks to my principal supervisor Dr. Shane Wright, who organized funding for this project, enticed me back to my ivory tower, and has spent many hours proof reading on the final run home. Thanks also to my co-supervisor Assoc. Prof. John Ogden for freely sharing his knowledge (and data) about the Whirinaki frost flats, advice, great suggestions on thesis re-structuring, and willingness to respond to silly questions.

Financial support was generously provided by the Department of Conservation and Forest and Bird (Waikato Branch).

The realization of this thesis has involved a great deal of data collection over the last five years. Numerous people have given their time in the field under often trying weather conditions. I would like to thank Jenny Lux, Ralph Johnson, Nicole Bishop, Selma Dancy, Ian Fraser, Darryl Jefferies, Martin Evans and Fleur Maseyk. Special thanks to Robyn Kyd, Garry Bishop and Laura Young whose service in the field on numerous occasions, loan of vehicles and love and support over many years went well beyond the call of duty.

Finally I'd like to thank my parents, Doug and Lynn Bishop (who surely must have wondered if I would ever finish) for providing a roof over my head for long periods of time, financial support, and for their love and unwavering belief in me. I couldn't have done it without them.

Abstract

This thesis examines the nature and stability of the ecotone between frost flat heathland (FFH) vegetation, and surrounding forest, in the Central North Island of New Zealand. FFH vegetation is found throughout the Central North Island, in locations where surrounding topography causes cold air to pool on clear, still nights. This increases frost severity and - due to the low frost tolerance of most woody New Zealand plant species - frosts are severe enough to prevent the establishment of most plant species which are common in the surrounding forest vegetation. The majority of work was carried out at four study sites. Rangitaiki is a large (c.2600 ha) remnant of FFH vegetation on a flat, pumice filled, basin. The other three study sites (Tahau, Waione and Pouakani) are much smaller (c.56 ha, c.35 ha, and c.61 ha respectively) basins where cold air is dammed by downstream river gorges. Vegetation change was examined along permanent transects established perpendicular to the FFH/ forest ecotone. Vegetation changed (over 10 - 20m) from a monoculture of *Dracophyllum subulatum* heathland (= FFH) to more diverse forest or scrub vegetation (= forest). A DCA ordination of the transect data showed that vegetation associations on either side of the ecotone diverged over time. That is, there was a more rapid change in the species composition of vegetation across the FFH/ forest ecotone in older sites. While seed rain density is low in FFH vegetation, it is sufficient, particularly around emergent focal trees, to allow forest to invade FFH. Frost severity increased dramatically across the ecotone in all seasons, at all sites, and the extreme ground frost minimums recorded suggest that it is low temperatures which exclude most forest species from FFH vegetation. Microclimate variation was high at all study sites, and locations with favourable microclimates in FFH vegetation were more likely to support (ephemeral) populations of forest tree seedlings. The most important determinants of variation in microclimate were overhead cover of vegetation and microtopography. The survivorship of 2,270 planted *Leptospermum scoparium* seedlings - a frost tolerant pioneer species which is important in forest vegetation at all study sites - was examined on transects perpendicular to the ecotone at three study sites. The most important determinant of seedling survivorship was distance from the ecotone, although the distance at which seedling survivorship dropped to zero was site and transect specific. Changes in seedling weight and height growth rate over the study period showed that many seedlings which survived the study period, would not have survived in the long term. There were no significant changes in soil profiles dug along transects perpendicular to the ecotone

at all study sites. This suggests that edaphic factors are not the cause of the current ecotone position. The size-age structure of *L. scoparium* and *D. subulatum* stems in FFH and forest vegetation was examined using basal disks (n=627) collected on transects perpendicular to the ecotone. These data suggest that the current ecotone position was set soon after the large scale disturbances which initiated vegetation associations at the four study sites. A short section of the site perimeter at the Waione study site has not been disturbed as recently as the other sites, and age structure data suggests that the ecotone at this location has been stable for at least 100 years. Transect position has no influence on the diameter growth rates of *L. scoparium* stems, which suggests that it is frost mortality, rather than a growth rate limitation due to lower temperatures, which is preventing this species colonising FFH vegetation. Stem age data also suggested that the scattered *L. scoparium* shrubs which manage to colonise FFH vegetation are killed by severe irregular climatic events, the most recent of which occurred in the summer of 1972/73. The same events probably also affected the species composition in forests surrounding the FFH study sites. Historical meteorological data suggests the most likely cause of the 1972/73 climatic disturbance was a severe summer drought, combined with a series of moderately severe summer frosts. A severe winter frost in 1978 had no observable effect on indigenous vegetation at the four study sites. The restricted distribution of two key cold tolerant indigenous woody species – due to increased fire frequency - has almost certainly resulted in a longer term dominance of some sites by FFH vegetation. *Phyllocladus alpinus* (not present at any of the study sites) and *Halocarpus bidwilli* (very restricted distribution at one study site only) have cold tolerances and life history characteristics that allow them to invade FFH. The preceding results suggest that the composition and structure of both FFH, and surrounding forest vegetation, is a direct result of the unique abiotic environment and vegetation history of each site. Protecting vegetation covering the widest possible range of variation in edaphic and environmental conditions should therefore ensure greatest variation in different plant communities, and genotypes of different plant species, is conserved. The ecotone transitions studied in this thesis are clearly identifiable, and appear to represent the true distributional limits of most indigenous woody forest species. FFH/ forest ecotones may therefore be useful as sites for monitoring the future effects of climate change on plant communities. The varied responses of vegetation at the four study sites to the 1972/73 climatic event suggests that monitoring transects should be established at as many different sites as possible, and at different locations within each study site.

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION 13

1.1 THESIS ORGANIZATION	13
1.2 NON-FOREST VEGETATION IN NEW ZEALAND	16
1.3 ECOTONES	17
1.4 TEMPERATURE MEDIATED ECOTONES	21
1.5 UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF FFH SITES	25
1.5.1: RESISTANCE TO FROST TEMPERATURES	25
1.5.2: NATURAL FIRE AND HUMAN BURNING	25
1.5.3: EDAPHIC DRYNESS AND DROUGHT	27

CHAPTER TWO: ORIGIN OF FROST FLAT HEATHLAND COMMUNITIES AND SITE INTRODUCTION 29

2.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE CENTRAL NORTH ISLAND	29
2.1.1: CLIMATE AND GEOLOGY	29
2.1.2: PRE-HUMAN VEGETATION	31
2.1.3: HUMAN HISTORY	33
2.2 INTRODUCTION TO INDIVIDUAL STUDY SITES	39
2.2.1: TAHAU AND WAIONE	40
2.2.2: RANGITAIKI	43
2.2.3: POUAKANI	45
2.2.4: OTHER FFH SITES	46
2.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND ORIGINS OF FFH VEGETATION AT STUDY SITES	47

CHAPTER THREE: SITE VEGETATION AND VEGETATION CHANGE ACROSS ECOTONES. 49

3.1 INTRODUCTION	49
3.2 METHODS	51
3.2.1 VEGETATION SAMPLING	51
3.2.2 DATA TRANSFORMATION AND ANALYSIS	53
3.3 GENERAL VEGETATION PATTERN OF STUDY SITES	54
3.3.1 WAIONE	54
3.3.2 TAHAU	55
3.3.3 RANGITAIKI	56
3.3.4 POUAKANI	58
3.4 VEGETATION CHANGE ACROSS ECOTONES	59
3.4.1 DENSITY AND BASAL AREA ESTIMATES	59
3.4.2 CHANGES IN PLANT COMMUNITY COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE	60
3.4.3 CHANGES IN DENSITY AND COMPOSITION OF WOODY SEEDLING POPULATIONS	67
3.5 DISCUSSION	69
3.5.1 GENERAL SITE CHARACTERISTICS	69
3.5.2 VEGETATION CHANGE ACROSS EXTANT ECOTONES	71
3.5.3 LONGER TERM CHANGES IN VEGETATION ACROSS ECOTONES	71
3.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	74

CHAPTER FOUR: PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT OF FROST FLATS. 75

4.1 INTRODUCTION	75
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4.1.1: FROST DAMAGE AND THE COLD TOLERANCE OF WOODY NEW ZEALAND PLANT SPECIES	76
4.1.2: STOCHASTIC KILLING FROST EVENTS	79
4.1.3 THE INFLUENCE OF TOPOGRAPHY ON TEMPERATURE	81
4.1.4 THE INFLUENCE OF DROUGHT ON FFH VEGETATION	82
4.1.5 THE INFLUENCE OF SOIL STRUCTURE ON FROST FLAT VEGETATION	82
4.2 METHODS	84
4.2.1: CHARACTERISING MICROCLIMATIC VARIATIONS IN TEMPERATURE AT FROST FLAT STUDY SITES	84
4.2.2: CORRELATION OF THE TEMPERATURE AT FROST FLAT STUDY SITES WITH LOCAL CLIMATE STATIONS	86
4.2.3: CHANGE IN SOIL PROFILES ACROSS THE FFH/ FOREST ECOTONE	87
4.3 RESULTS	88
4.3.1: GENERAL CLIMATE AT THE FOUR STUDY SITES.	88
4.3.2: TEMPERATURE CHANGE ACROSS THE FFH/FOREST ECOTONE.	90
4.3.3: THE INFLUENCE OF TOPOGRAPHY AND VEGETATION ON MICROCLIMATE.	92
4.3.4: HISTORICAL CLIMATE FROM SURROUNDING CLIMATE STATIONS.	94
4.3.5: CHANGES IN SOIL PROFILES ACROSS THE ECOTONE.	95
4.4 DISCUSSION	98
4.4.1: FROST FREQUENCY AND SEVERITY	99
4.4.2: FROST FLAT PLANTS	102
4.4.3: SPATIAL VARIATION IN TEMPERATURE MINIMUMS AT FROST FLATS	103
4.4.4: PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF FROST TEMPERATURES	105
4.4.5: INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL EXTREME CLIMATE EVENTS	105
4.4.6: CHANGES IN SOIL PROFILES ACROSS THE ECOTONE	107
4.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	108

CHAPTER FIVE: SEED DISPERSAL INTO FROST FLAT VEGETATION **110**

5.1 INTRODUCTION	110
5.2 METHODS	111
5.3 RESULTS	113
5.4 DISCUSSION	115
5.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	117

CHAPTER SIX: SURVIVAL OF PLANTED MANUKA (*LEPTOSPERMUM SCOPARIUM*) SEEDLINGS IN FROST FLAT VEGETATION **118**

6.1: INTRODUCTION	118
6.2 METHODS	119
6.2.1 GERMINATION TRAYS	119
6.2.2 MANUKA SEEDLING PLANTINGS – GENERAL INFORMATION	120
6.2.3 PLANTING EXPERIMENT ONE SET-UP (PLANTED IN JUNE 1999)	122
6.2.4 PLANTING EXPERIMENT TWO SET-UP (PLANTED IN DECEMBER 1999)	123
6.2.5 EXPERIMENT THREE SET-UP (PLANTED IN WINTER 2000)	124
6.2.6 DATA ANALYSIS	126
6.3 RESULTS	127
6.3.1 GERMINATION TRAYS	127
6.3.2 PLANTING EXPERIMENT ONE – SURVIVORSHIP DATA	127
6.3.3 PLANTING EXPERIMENT TWO – SURVIVORSHIP DATA	128
6.3.4 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE – SURVIVORSHIP DATA	130
6.3.5 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE - CHANGES IN SEEDLING HEIGHT	132
6.3.6 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE - THE EFFECT OF COVER	135

6.3.7 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE – CHANGES IN SEEDLING WEIGHT	136
6.3.8 GENERAL CLIMATE DURING THE STUDY PERIOD	138
6.3.9 SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF PLANTING EXPERIMENTS ONE, TWO AND THREE	139
6.4 DISCUSSION	140
6.4.1 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSECT POSITION	140
6.4.2 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE: OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES OF SEEDLING MORTALITY	142
6.4.3 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE: INFLUENCE OF VEGETATION COVER	144
6.4.4 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE: POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENT PATTERN OF SEEDLING SURVIVORSHIP AT RANGITAIKI	145
6.4.5 PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE: EFFECT OF SEEDLING HEIGHT AND AGE	146
6.4.6 COMPARING THE RESULTS OF PLANTING EXPERIMENT THREE WITH PLANTING EXPERIMENTS ONE AND TWO.	146
6.4.7 GERMINATION TRAYS	149
6.4.8 THE INFLUENCE OF ADDITIONAL NUTRIENTS ON SEEDLING MORTALITY	150
6.4.9 LONG TERM SURVIVORSHIP	151
6.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	153

CHAPTER SEVEN: AGE STRUCTURE AND SUCCESSION OF FFH AND FOREST VEGETATION. **154**

7.1 INTRODUCTION	154
7.2 METHODS	155
7.2.1 TRANSECT DATA	155
7.2.2 SMALLER SCALE STUDIES	157
7.3 RESULTS	158
7.3.1 RECENT VEGETATION CHANGE	158
7.3.2 CURRENT AGE STRUCTURE – TRANSECT STUDIES	161
7.3.3 CURRENT AGE STRUCTURE – SMALL PATCH STUDIES	164
7.3.4 DIAMETER GROWTH RATES	166
7.3.5 VERTICAL GROWTH RATES	168
7.4 DISCUSSION	168
7.4.1 PHYSICAL DISTURBANCES: THE INITIATION OF FFH AND FOREST COMMUNITIES AT EACH SITE	168
7.4.2 EVIDENCE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DISTURBANCE	171
7.4.3 GROWTH RATES IN FROST FLAT VEGETATION	176
7.4.4 SPECIAL NATURE OF ‘FOREST’ VEGETATION THAT SURROUNDS FFH SITES	178
7.4.5 STABILITY OF EXTANT FFH/ FOREST ECOTONES AT THE STUDY SITES	179
7.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	181

CHAPTER EIGHT: WEED AND PEST (RABBIT AND HARE) THREATS TO FROST FLAT VEGETATION. **183**

8.1 INTRODUCTION	183
8.2 METHODS	183
8.3 RESULTS	185
8.3.1: HARE AND RABBIT BROWSE	185
8.3.2: WEEDS	186
8.4 DISCUSSION	187
8.4.1: HARE AND RABBIT BROWSE	187
8.4.2: WEEDS	189
8.4.3: FROST TOLERANCE OF <i>COPROSMA PROPINQUA</i> SEEDLINGS	190
8.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	191

9.1 THESIS AIMS	192
9.1.1: AIM # 1.	192
9.1.2: AIM # 2.	192
9.1.3: AIM # 3.	193
9.1.4: AIM # 4.	195
9.1.5: AIM # 5.	196
9.1.6: AIM # 6	198
9.1.7: AIM # 7.	198
9.1.8: AIM # 8.	200
9.2 A DESCRIPTION OF FFH/ FOREST ECOTONE FORMATION	201
9.2.1: GENERAL MODEL	201
9.2.2: SITE SPECIFIC FACTORS AT RANGITAIKI	206
9.2.3: SITE SPECIFIC FACTORS AT POUAKANI	208
9.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSING SPECIES	208
9.4 CONSERVATION OF FROST FLAT VEGETATION	209
9.5 THE USE OF FROST FLAT SITES TO MONITOR THE EFFECT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON INDIGENOUS VEGETATION	211
REFERENCES	212
APPENDICES	228

List of Figures

Chapter two

- Figure 2.1: General map of the Central North Island.
- Figure 2.2: General photographs of Kaingaroa Plateau.
- Figure 2.3: Location map of the four main study sites.
- Figure 2.4: Topography surrounding Tahau and Waione frost flats.
- Figure 2.5: Aerial view of Tahau and Waione frost flats.
- Figure 2.6: Topography surrounding Rangitaiki frost flat.
- Figure 2.7: Aerial view of Rangitaiki frost flat.
- Figure 2.8: Historical vegetation of the Whakataua Block.
- Figure 2.9: Topography surrounding Pouakani frost flat.
- Figure 2.10: Aerial view of Pouakani frost flat.

Chapter three

- Figure 3.1: Plan diagram of a vegetation sampling transect.
- Figure 3.2: Vegetation of Waione frost flat.
- Figure 3.3: Vegetation of Tahau frost flat.
- Figure 3.4: Vegetation of Rangitaiki frost flat.
- Figure 3.5: Vegetation of Pouakani frost flat.
- Figure 3.6: Total number of different woody plant and fern species recorded at each site.
- Figure 3.7: Average number of different woody plant and fern species recorded at each site.
- Figure 3.8: DCA ordination of cover abundance data. Transect data.
- Figure 3.9: DCA ordination of cover abundance data. Half transect data.
- Figure 3.10: Physical data summary.
- Figure 3.11: Changes in total cover abundance values along vegetation transect lines perpendicular to the FFH/forest ecotone.
- Figure 3.12: Changes in the average cover abundance of plant species groups along vegetation transects.
- Figure 3.13: Changes in the percentage composition of general species groupings along vegetation transects.
- Figure 3.14: Average axis one ordination scores at different transect positions.
- Figure 3.15: Average axis two ordination scores at different transect positions.
- Figure 3.16: Diversity, density and frequency of woody seedlings.

- Figure 3.17: Density of established woody seedlings at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 3.18: Size class frequency of the most important seedling species at frost flat sites.
- Figure 3.19: Change in cover of selected species across the stable section of ecotone at Waione.
- Figure 3.20: Re-presentation of Figure 3.9 data.

Chapter four

- Figure 4.1: Key climate parameters at meteorological stations closest to study sites.
- Figure 4.2: Correlation in extreme temperatures between climate stations and frost flat sites.
- Figure 4.3: Temperature changes at Waimihia frost flat over 10 days.
- Figure 4.4: The effect of transect position on temperature at all four study sites.
- Figure 4.5: Frost minimums recorded across the ecotone during summer, winter and shoulder season frosts at four study sites.
- Figure 4.6: Temperature change at three locations close to the FFH/forest ecotone during one frost event at Tahau.
- Figure 4.7: Vertical changes in frost severity at Waione frost flat.
- Figure 4.8: The influence of FFH vegetation cover on frost temperatures at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 4.9: The influence of forest vegetation cover on frost temperatures at two frost flat sites.
- Figure 4.10: Vertical variation in temperature beneath a FFH canopy.
- Figure 4.11: Frequency distribution of temperatures recorded at five minute intervals, during daylight hours, over one month at Waione.
- Figure 4.12: The influence of topography on extreme minimum ground temperature at Rangitaiki.
- Figure 4.13: Historical extreme grass minimum temperatures at climate stations closest to FFH study sites.
- Figure 4.14: Historical records of the number of days with ground frost at climate stations closest to FFH study sites.
- Figure 4.15: Historical rainfall records at climate stations closest to FFH study sites.
- Figure 4.16: Change in soil profiles across the FFH/forest ecotone at four study sites.
- Figure 4.17: Change in soil profiles along a long transect at Rangitaiki.
- Figure 4.18: Average depth of soil horizons and distance to the C horizon at four frost flat study sites.
- Figure 4.19: Comparing soil profiles around the ecotone at Rangitaiki with soil profiles dug near the centre of that frost flat.
- Figure 4.20: Predicted mean extreme grass minimum temperatures at FFH sites, using historical data from climate stations.

Chapter five

Figure 5.1: Arrangement of the traps used to collect seeds dispersed across the ecotone.

Figure 5.2: Seed rain composition in frost flat and forest locations.

Figure 5.3: Manuka seed rain across the ecotone.

Figure 5.4: Seed rain density across the ecotone.

Figure 5.5: Composition and density of seed rain along a long transect at Rangitaiki.

Figure 5.6: Composition and density of seed rain in paired seed traps around shrubs emergent above the frost flat heathland canopy.

Figure 5.7: Seasonal variation in seed rain at three frost flat sites.

Chapter six

Figure 6.1: Experimental set-up for manuka seed sowing experiments.

Figure 6.2: Map of experiment one planting locations at Rangitaiki.

Figure 6.3: Map of experiment one planting locations at Tahau and Waione.

Figure 6.4: Planting set-up for the first planting experiment.

Figure 6.5: Map of experiment two planting locations at all three sites.

Figure 6.6: Planting set-up for the second and third planting experiments.

Figure 6.7: Map of experiment three planting locations at all three sites.

Figure 6.8: Composition of frost flat vegetation surrounding third experiment planting transects.

Figure 6.9: Survivorship of first experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.10: Effect of planting site on the survivorship of first experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.11: Effect of age and planting treatment on the survivorship of first experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.12: Survivorship of second experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.13: Effect of transect position on the survivorship of second experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.14: Seasonal changes in the vigour index of second experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.15: Survivorship of third experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.16: Effect of transect position on the survivorship of third experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.17: Survivorship of third experiment manuka seedlings along long transects at Rangitaiki.

Figure 6.18: Effect of seedling age on the survivorship of third experiment seedlings.

Figure 6.19: Changes in the average vigour index of third experiment seedlings. Site differences.

- Figure 6.20: Changes in the average vigour index of third experiment seedlings. Results presented by site and transect position.
- Figure 6.21: Effect of age and transect position on the height growth of third experiment seedlings.
- Figure 6.22: Height growth rate of live, third experiment manuka seedlings by age, site and transect position.
- Figure 6.23: Effect of transect position on the proportion of third experiment manuka seedlings that lived and grew larger, lived but did not grow larger, and died.
- Figure 6.24: Effect of transect position on the height growth rates of individual manuka seedlings in the third experiment.
- Figure 6.25: Effect of transect position and age on the final weight of manuka seedlings in the third experiment.
- Figure 6.26: Effect of site, age and transect position on the final weight of manuka seedlings in the third experiment.
- Figure 6.27: Final weight of third experiment manuka seedlings, presented by transect distance and age.
- Figure 6.28: Effect of transect position on the the proportion of third experiment manuka seedlings that lived and grew heavier, lived but did not grow heavier, and died.

Chapter seven

- Figure 7.1: Location of sample dendrochronology sample transects at Tahau.
- Figure 7.2: Location of sample dendrochronology sample transects at Waione.
- Figure 7.3: Location of sample dendrochronology sample transects at Rangitaiki.
- Figure 7.4: Location of sample dendrochronology sample transects at Pouakani.
- Figure 7.5: Changes in the vegetation at Tahau over 38 years.
- Figure 7.6: Changes in the vegetation at Waione over 38 years.
- Figure 7.7: Changes in the vegetation at Pouakani over 49 years.
- Figure 7.8: Within site variation in the age range of collected manuka at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.9: The effect of transect position on the age of manuka stems at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.10: Schematic diagram showing subjective ecotone placement during sampling.
- Figure 7.11: Age structure of manuka stems at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.12: Age structure of manuka stems <30 years old at Rangitaiki, Tahau and Waione.
- Figure 7.13: Age structure of monoao stems at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.14: Age structure of monoao and manuka stems along a short transect at Pouakani frost flat.
- Figure 7.15: Age structure of monoao and manuka stems in a recently disturbed patch of vegetation at Pouakani frost flat.

- Figure 7.16: Age structure of manuka and *Pseudopanax crassifolius* stems beneath a high kanuka canopy at Waione frost flat.
- Figure 7.17: The influence of transect position on the age and growth rate of *Pittosporum tenuifolium* at two study transects, Pouakani frost flat.
- Figure 7.18: The influence of transect position on the diameter growth rate of manuka stems.
- Figure 7.19: Average diameter growth rate of manuka, kanuka and monoao at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.20: Correlation between age and horizontal growth rate of forest manuka stems at four frost flat study sites.
- Figure 7.21: Re-presentation of Figure 7.20 data, with Rangitaiki plotted separately.
- Figure 7.22: The effect of transect position on the age and diameter growth rate of monoao stems at Rangitaiki frost flat.
- Figure 7.23: Change in soil profiles between a gully bottom and the surrounding flat areas at Rangitaiki.
- Figure 7.24: Average vertical growth rate of manuka stems from forest vegetation at four frost flat sites.
- Figure 7.25: Comparing the average vertical growth rate of manuka stems between forest and frost flat vegetation at four study sites.
- Figure 7.26: Comparing the average vertical growth rates of different aged manuka stems. Data from all four frost flat study sites combined.
- Figure 7.27: Areas of vegetation at Waione frost flat initiated in different disturbance events.

Chapter eight

- Figure 8.1: Cause of death in caged and uncaged *Coprosma propinqua* seedlings planted at Rangitaiki, Tahau and Waione.
- Figure 8.2: Frequency distribution of the height growth rates of planted *Coprosma propinqua* seedlings at Rangitaiki, Tahau and Waione.
- Figure 8.3: Percentage survivorship of planted *Coprosma propinqua* seedlings by transect.
- Figure 8.4: Cover abundance of adventive species recorded on the chapter three vegetation transects.

Chapter nine

- Figure 9.1: Typical locations where manuka are able to establish in frost flat vegetation.
- Figure 9.2: Probability of survival, and survival and positive growth, of planted manuka seedlings at Rangitaiki, Tahau and Waione.
- Figure 9.3: Vegetation change across the ecotone at Whenuakura frost flat, compared with vegetation change across the ecotone at the four study sites used in this thesis.

List of Tables

Chapter one

Table 1.1: Different agencies responsible for plant ecotones.

Chapter two

Table 2.1: General characteristics of the four study sites.

Table 2.2: Significant remnants of monoao dominated FFH vegetation in the northern Central North Island.

Chapter three

Table 3.1: General characteristics of the four study sites.

Table 3.2: Transformed cover values used in the analysis.

Table 3.3: Density and basal area summary from Point Centred Quarter (PCQ) samples.

Table 3.4: Summary table for the species groups graphed in Figure 3.12 and 3.13.

Table 3.5: Age of FFH and forest vegetation at the four study sites.

Chapter four

Table 4.1: Mean annual air temperatures, and mean air temperatures in the coldest and warmest months, at selected coastal cities in the northern and southern hemispheres.

Table 4.2: The temperature at which frost damage has been recorded, in leaf and stem tissues, of plant species common in FFH vegetation and surrounding forest.

Table 4.3: Location and record details of climate stations closest to FFH study sites.

Table 4.4: Extreme grass minimum temperatures ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) recorded at FFH study sites used in this thesis.

Table 4.5: General climate at stations close to FFH sites, compared with the climate at Lake Tekapo.

Table 4.6: Extreme ground minimum temperatures recorded during past severe frost events at Minginui climate station, and the predicted ground minimums during the same frost events at Tahau FFH study site.

Table 4.7: General summary of temperature (by season) in the Central North Island during the main FFH study period.

Chapter five

Table 5.1: Summary table of the different time periods for which seed rain data were collected.

Chapter six

- Table 6.1: Hardening site and planting data for the three manuka planting experiments.
- Table 6.2: Planting pattern used in the winter 1999 planting experiment.
- Table 6.3: The effect of transect, age and planting method on the survivorship of manuka seedlings from December 1999 to September 2002.
- Table 6.4: Four-way ANOVA of the percentage change in height of manuka seedlings from June 2000 to December 2001.
- Table 6.5: Spearman's rank correlation co-efficients for the relationship between vegetation in a 1 m radius surrounding manuka gardens and the growth rates of seedlings planted there.
- Table 6.6: Three-way ANOVA of the end weight (g) of one year old (at planting) manuka seedlings from eight locations on five transect lines at five different frost flat sites, Central North Island.
- Table 6.7: Three-way ANOVA of the end weight (g) of six month old (at planting) manuka seedlings from eight locations on five transect lines at five different frost flat sites, Central North Island.
- Table 6.8: General summary of weather conditions (by season) in the Central North Island during manuka seedling planting and seed germination experiments.
- Table 6.9: The proportion of planted manuka seedlings still alive at the end of the study period in experiment two (summer) and experiment three (winter) at each transect position.

Chapter seven

- Table 7.1: Major species collected for age and growth rate work.
- Table 7.2: Site location and methods for the four small scale dendrochronology experiments.
- Table 7.3: Age estimate for canopy stems in FFH and forest vegetation at the four study sites.
- Table 7.4: The influence of the severe climate event in 1972/73 on manuka in different vegetation types at different sites.
- Table 7.5: Other possible environmental disturbances recorded in smaller scale studies at Pouakani.

Chapter eight

- Table 8.1 Experimental set up in hare/rabbit browsing studies.

List of Plates

- Plate one:** Disturbed section of Waione frost flat study site.
- Plate two:** Waione frost flat study site. General view.
- Plate three:** Waione frost flat study site. Close-up view of one section of ecotone.
- Plate four:** Tahau frost flat study site. General view.
- Plate five:** Tahau frost flat study site. Close-up view of one section of ecotone.
- Plate six:** Rangitaiki frost flat study site. General view.
- Plate seven:** Rangitaiki frost flat study site. View of ecotone.
- Plate eight:** Pouakani frost flat study site. General view.
- Plate nine:** Soil profile examples from all four study sites.
- Plate ten:** Seed rain traps and Rangitaiki frost flat.
- Plate eleven:** Multi-leadered manuka in a severe frost hollow at Pouakani.
- Plate fourteen:** FFH vegetation at Rangitaiki following a fire.
- Plate fifteen:** FFH vegetation at Rangitaiki one year after a fire.
- Plate sixteen:** Growth form of a typical young manuka at Rangitaiki.