Vegetation plot data and databases in Europe: an overview

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Almost a century ago Josias Braun-Blanquet developed his phytosociological approach for vegetation field study, which was explained and demonstrated in his famous handbook Pflanzensoziologie. Grundzüge der Vegetationskunde of 1928. At that time, nobody could foresee what the impact of this methodology would be for vegetation science as well as for its application in nature conservation. Hundreds of thousands of so-called relevés (vegetation plot records) have been made, collected in field books, and many of them published afterwards in research reports, theses, standard and grey literature. Some twenty years ago, the software package TURBOVEG was developed by Stephan Hennekens for the input, storage and handling of vegetation data. Since then, many national and regional vegetation databases have been compiled, providing the basis for national and international classification overviews and other scientific studies. Within the framework of the European Vegetation Survey, the initiative was taken to get an insight in the amount of vegetation data that have been collected in Europe since the early 20th century and the amount of data that have been computerized. Based on the questionnaire sent out to the managers of individual databases and leading vegetation scientists of European countries, it is estimated that currently there are > 4.2 million relevés in Europe, including 1.8 million relevés already available in electronic dabatases. Of the computerized relevés 45 % are available in TURBOVEG format. The vegetation data will enable a better insight in the functioning and distribution of plant communities, and as such constitute a proper basis for evaluating the consequences of local and global changes, caused by (among other things) changes in land use and climate. Short notice is given to ecological information systems, for which computerized vegetation data may form a fundament.