EVEN THE SMALLEST GAPS FACILITATE THE INVASION OF THE TREE OF HEAVEN (*AILANTHUS ALTISSIMA*) IN HUNGARY'S MOUNTAIN FORESTS.

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The invasion of *A. altissima* has recently extended towards the interiors of Hungary's mountains. In the South Börzsöny Mts. I t is increasingly appearing even in gaps with a diameter of one tree length. In our research, we aimed to identify which factors are hindering or facilitating its spread. A field survey was carried out in altogether 150 gaps in 2022 and 2024 using a multiple of biotic and abiotic variables. Data were analysed using multivariate methods and GLMMs. According to our results several factors affect the abundance of *A. altissima*. Abundance was explained by the position within the gap, the species became more abundant towards the interior of the gap and in a north-western orientation. Native woody vegetation played a defensive role, but this was also counteracted by game browsing. Increased game pressure on native vegetation led to higher *A. altissima*. The abundance increased with gap size and decreased with altitude. The highest numbers occurred in semi-dry oak stands and the lowest in the submontane beech stands. Between the two years, a large increase occurred in blackberry cover, which also explained *A. altissima* abundance. This may be indirectly due to the shrub's negative impact on native sapling growth. However, in the best models, these variables explained only 20-30% of the variance, while random factors (gaps and quadrats) explained as much as 80%. Further spread of *A. altissima* is highly likely and therefore preventive measures, such as changes in forest management and selective treatments, should be taken.