Hotspots within a global biodiversity hotspot - areas of endemism are associated with high mountain ranges

Jalil Noroozi1, Amir Talebi2, Moslem Doostmohammadi2, Sabine B. Rumpf2, Hans Peter Linder3 & Gerald M. Schneeweiss1

Conservation biology aims at identifying areas of rich biodiversity. Currently recognized global biodiversity hotspots are spatially too coarse for conservation management and identification of hotspots at a finer scale is needed. Here, we identify areas of endemism in Iran, a major component of the Irano-Anatolian biodiversity hotspot, and address their ecological correlates. Using the extremely diverse sunflower family (Asteraceae) as our model system, five consensus areas of endemism were identified using the approach of endemicity analysis. Both endemic richness and degree of endemism were positively related to topographic complexity and elevational range. The proportion of endemic taxa at a certain elevation (percent endemism) was not congruent with the proportion of total surface area at this elevation, but was higher in mountain ranges. While the distribution of endemic richness (i.e., number of endemic taxa) along an elevational gradient was hump-shaped peaking at mid-elevations, the percentage of endemism gradually increased with elevation. Patterns of endemic richness as well as areas of endemism identify mountain ranges as main centres of endemism, which is likely due to high environmental heterogeneity and strong geographic isolation among and within mountain ranges. The herein identified areas can form the basis for defining areas with conservation priority in this global biodiversity hotspot.

A major goal in conservation biology is to determine areas of rich biodiversity1. At the global scale, conservation priorities are well established as 34 biodiversity hotspots2, i.e. areas featuring exceptional concentrations of endemic species as well as experiencing extreme loss of habitat3. These hotspots are, however, at a spatial scale too coarse for conservation management and identification of hotspots at a finer scale, “hotspots-within-hotspots”1,4, is needed to allow comprehensive protection management1,4,5. Additionally, biodiversity hotspots are excellent areas to study drivers and processes of diversification. As endemic species are well suited to recognize biodiversity hotspots that also harbour highly threatened species3,6,7, identifying areas of endemism (AEs) is an essential part of planning regional conservation management.

AEs are fundamental entities of analyses in biogeography8 and are defined as areas of non-random distributional congruence among taxa9, whose biogeographical histories may have been affected by common factors, such as geological, ecological or evolutionary processes10. Whereas biogeographers and evolutionary biologists focus on explaining the causes for the occurrence of AEs11–13, ecologists are interested in centres of endemism due to their importance in devising conservation priorities14–17, which is valuable when financial resources for conservation are limited18,19. Despite the acknowledged importance of AEs, they remain under-investigated even in currently recognized biodiversity hotspots.

The Irano-Anatolian biodiversity hotspot, which mainly covers high elevations of central and eastern Turkey, Armenia, NE Iraq and Iran, is the only global biodiversity hotspot entirely inside South-West Asia (Fig. 1a). This region has a dry climate with a Mediterranean precipitation regime20. It is estimated that more than 40% of the plant species are endemic to this region1. Iran covers 54% of the surface area of the Irano-Anatolian hotspot.
(Fig. 1a), and harbours high plant and animal as well as landscape diversity. The Iranian flora comprises more than 8,000 vascular plant taxa, of which about 30% are endemics. Several studies have focused on patterns of endemism, chorology and distribution of vascular plants in Iran, providing hypotheses on the locations of putative AEs. For instance, ref. identified an Alborz distribution pattern (in the Alborz mountains), a Zagros
distribution pattern (in the Zagros mountains), and an Armeno-Kurdic distribution pattern (Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in north-western Iran, north-eastern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, and Armenia), all of which indicate regions that may, at least partially, constitute AEs. These have, however, never been investigated using a formal quantitative approach.

Here we analyse patterns of endemic richness and identify AEs and their environmental correlates in Iran, using the sunflower family (Asteraceae) as our model group. This family is particularly well suited for this analysis as its members (i) constitute a significant proportion of the Iranian flora in general (16%) and of the endemic flora in particular (23%)

(ii) collectively are distributed over the entire study region and occur in all major habitat types, and (iii) have their taxonomy and distribution well worked out in the Flora Iranica and the Flora of Iran. We applied endemicity analysis, which has been successfully used in many regions of the world and has been shown to outperform other commonly used methods of defining AEs, such as parsimony analysis of endemicity and biotic element analysis. We addressed the following questions: (1) Where are the main AEs (inferred from patterns of endemic taxon richness and from endemicity analysis) within the study region? Are these exclusively found within the Irano-Anatolian hotspot or also elsewhere? Are these congruent with areas identified previously in phytogeographical studies? (2) What are the major ecological and/or evolutionary factors affecting the distribution of endemics? Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that topographical heterogeneity is an important driver of species richness also positively affects endemic richness. Additionally, as geographic isolation is an important driver of speciation, we predicted that endemicity increases along an elevational gradient, as geographical isolation increases along this gradient. Finally, species richness decreases with increasing climatic stress and should therefore result in a hump-shaped pattern of (endemic) species richness along an elevational gradient due to high environmental stress at xeric lower and cold higher elevations.

Results

The 626 endemic and subendemic Asteraceae taxa belonged to 57 genera. Of those, Cousinia was the largest genus in the dataset with 229 taxa, followed by Echinops (65 taxa), Centaurea (64 taxa), Jurinea (24 taxa), Scorzonera (24 taxa), Anthemis (22 taxa) and Tanacetum (21 taxa). Most of these species were distributed in the main mountain ranges of Iran. The range sizes of endemic taxa were between one and 51 cells. The endemic richness of cells ranged from zero to 102 taxa per cell (zero to 16.25% of total endemic richness; Fig. 1b). Endemic richness was significantly related to the mean elevation of a grid cell (Table 1). Thus, high richness was observed in high mountains (Fig. 2, Table 1), the highest endemic richness overall corresponding to Central Alborz (Fig. 1b).

The endemicity analysis identified 27 sets (candidate AEs), which were grouped into five consensus areas with maximum scores between 5.72 and 18.20 (Fig. 1b, S1.2, see Appendix S1 in Supporting Information). These five areas were associated with the major mountain ranges (t-test of mean elevation of grid cells belonging to AEs versus mean elevation of grid cells not belonging to AEs: df = 163, t = 7.34, p < 0.001) of the study area. All AEs were associated with the Irano-Anatolian region (Fig. 1).

Alborz: Containing three sets, it comprised 10 grid cells covering central and eastern Alborz (Fig. 1b, S1.2a). The endemicity scores of the area ranged from 6.52 to 11.72. The area was supported by 26 taxa contributing to the score, of which eight (31%) were from Cousinia.

Central Alborz: This area was embedded within the previous area, containing a single set only covering the high mountains of Central Alborz (Fig. 1b, S1.2b). Here, the overall highest endemicity score, 17.99, of all recognized areas was found. This area was supported by 24 taxa, which were mostly subalpine and alpine elements, thus restricted to above 2,500 m (Fig. 1.3). Ten of those taxa (41.5%) were from Cousinia.

Zagros: Being the biggest of the identified areas, it contained 17 sets covering 23 cells in the Zagros mountains (Fig. 1b, S1.2c). It had scores between 5.73 and 10.59 and was supported by 69 taxa, of which 31 (44.9%) were from Cousinia.

Azerbaijan Plateau: Containing four sets, it comprised 10 cells in NW Iran, thus covering the mountain ranges Sabalan, Sahand, Bozqush, Mishodagh and Belqes (Fig. 1b, S1.2d). It had scores between 7.98 and 8.73 and was supported by 17 taxa, of which seven (41%) were from the genus Cousinia.

Kopet Dagh-Khorassan: Containing two sets, it comprised eight cells in the Kopet Dagh and Khorassan mountains in NE Iran (Fig. 1b, S1.2e). The endemicity score ranged from 9.15 to 9.9 and was supported by 19 taxa, of which 10 were from the genus Cousinia (53%).

Endemic Asteraceae richness and AEs were associated with mountain ranges (Fig. 1), and both endemic richness and degree of endemicity (endemicity score) were positively related to topographical complexity (Fig. 3, Table 1). The proportion of total surface area at a certain elevation declined much more rapidly than

| Regression model | df | t-value | p-value | Slope ± SE | Intercept ± SE |
|------------------|----|---------|---------|------------|----------------|
| Endemic richness | Mean elevation [m a.s.l.] | qP | 193 | 9.99 | <0.001 | 1.37±0.14 | 0.61±0.23 |
| Endemic score | Elevational amplitude [m] | qP | 185 | 10.24 | <0.001 | 6.37±0.62 | −5.76±2.18 |
| Endemic score | Topographic complexity | qP | 185 | 8.28 | <0.001 | 21.18±2.56 | −20.36±2.65 |
| Endemic richness | Elevational amplitude [m] | qP | 185 | 12.14 | <0.001 | 7.52±0.62 | −0.83±0.18 |
| Endemic richness | Topographic complexity | qP | 185 | 9.17 | <0.001 | 24.01±2.62 | −22.09±2.71 |
| Percentage of endemic | Elevation [m a.s.l.] | li | 41 | 9.43 | <0.001 | 0.16±0.02 | 21.68±4.30 |

Table 1. Relations between endemism and environmental variables. aqP, generalized linear model with quasi-Poisson distribution and logarithmic link function; li, linear model. bDegrees of freedom.
the proportions of both non-endemic taxa (percent non-endemism; t-test, df = 637, t = 12.14, p < 0.001) and endemic taxa at this elevation (percent endemism; t-test, df = 623, t = 22.90, p < 0.001; Fig. 4a,b). Moreover, the elevational distribution of the percent endemism was significantly higher than that of the percent non-endemism (t-test, df = 1254, t = 8.34, p < 0.001; Fig. 4a,b). Proportional surface area and endemic richness were not congruent across the elevational gradient (Fig. 4a). While both distributions were hump-shaped, the surface area peaked between 900 and 1,100 m a.s.l., and endemic richness at 1,900 m a.s.l. Specifically, relative to surface area, endemic taxa were underrepresented in lowlands (−26–1,400 m a.s.l.), proportionally represented in mid-elevations (1,400–2,100 m a.s.l.), and overrepresented in high elevations (>2,100 m a.s.l.; Fig. 4a,b). As a corollary, the percentage of endemic taxa increased along the elevational gradient to reach 100% in the subnival zone (Fig. 4c, Table 1). A qualitatively similar distribution was found for non-endemic richness, yet less strongly pronounced than for endemic taxa, i.e. a less severe underrepresentation at lower elevations and a weaker overrepresentation at high elevations (Fig. 4a,b).

Discussion
Using data from Asteraceae endemic to Iran, we identified five AEs (Fig. 1b). These were exclusively found in the high mountain regions of Iran and were all associated with the Irano-Anatolian hotspot (Fig. 1), thus representing “hotspots-within-hotspots”. The lack of any identified AE outside the Irano-Anatolian hotspot, although it only covers about half of the study area, supports the recognition of this global hotspot. Endemism was correlated with environmental heterogeneity, measured as topographic complexity and elevational amplitude (Fig. 3, Table 1). Whereas the diversity of both endemic and non-endemic Asteraceae peaked at mid elevations, resulting in a hump-shaped distribution of diversity along the elevational gradient (Fig. 4a,b), the percentage of endemic taxa increased continuously with elevation (Fig. 4c).

AEs in Iran. Of the five identified AEs, four correspond to previously recognized phytogeographic units or distribution patterns. Specifically, the Alborz distribution pattern26,31,39 is reflected by the Alborz AE; the Zagros distribution pattern25,26,29–31,60,61 and the Kurdo-Zagrosian phytogeographic subprovince60 are reflected by the Zagros AE; the Armeno-Kurdic distribution pattern26,30,60,61, although extending beyond the borders of our study region, is reflected in the Azerbaijan Plateau AE; the Kopet Dagh-Khorassan phytogeographic province35,60 is reflected by the Kopet Dagh-Khorassan AE. The fifth identified AE, the Central Alborz AE, is geographically embedded within the Alborz AE and as such has not been identified as separate unit before, emphasizing the importance of using methods, such as endemity analysis, capable of detecting nested AEs. The Central Alborz has many alpine and subnival habitats and almost 70% of the taxa supporting the Central Alborz AE have high elevation species (optimum elevation above 2,500 m; Fig. S1.3).

As the program used for endemity analysis, NDM/VNDM, does not evaluate and score single cells as putative AEs48, putative AEs that are too small relative to grid cell size will remain undetected. This is the case for the high mountains of Yazd-Kerman (35 taxa in one cell of the Hezar-Lalezer Mts. and 27 taxa in the Shirkuh Mts.; Fig. 1b; see also ref.42), where most of the endemic taxa are only recorded from one or a few cells. Additional data (including also taxa from other families) as well as alternative approaches (using smaller grid cell size and/or other algorithms, such as sympatry networks)63 would help getting a more detailed description of AEs in this region.

High mountains are centres of endemism. Both patterns of endemic richness as well as AEs inferred via endemity analysis (Fig. 1b) identify mountain ranges as main centres of endemism in Iran. This is consistent with theory that predicts both increased speciation and reduced extinction rates for mountains64. There are many
known cases of clades rapidly diversifying in mountains⁵⁵, but this does not prove that endemism in mountains is higher than in the lowlands. Although there is no global compilation to test whether endemism in montane areas is higher than in the surrounding lowlands, there are several case studies demonstrating such a pattern. For example, ref.⁶⁶ showed that the endemism of Mexican monocot geophytes was highest in montane regions, ref.⁶⁷ demonstrated that the New Zealand angiosperm species level endemism is highest in the mountains of South Island. The restriction of narrow-range endemics to mountains appears to be even better developed in the Iberian Peninsula⁶⁸. The Iranian pattern, with the endemic species largely restricted to mountains, is yet another case study consistent with what is probably a global pattern⁶⁶–⁶⁸.

Topographic heterogeneity is a key environmental predictor of species richness⁵²–⁵⁵. As increased topographic heterogeneity and complexity is expected to result in increased environmental heterogeneity⁵⁵,⁶⁹,⁷⁰ the observed pattern is in line with previous hypotheses. High topographic complexity likely causes high habitat diversity and thus a large local niche space⁷¹,⁷². This is expected to foster adaptation to different niches (i.e., ecological speciation)⁷³ and in situ speciation as suggested for Irano-Turanian high mountain ranges⁷⁴ as well as to create local refugia for species during climatic fluctuations reducing extinction risks⁷⁵,⁷⁶.

Higher diversity in mountain ranges is also expected as a result of allopatric speciation facilitated by strong geographic isolation. Based on dated molecular phylogenies, it has been suggested that the main uplift of the Iranian plateau and the formation of high mountains accelerated during the middle to late Miocene (15–5 Ma) promoted allopatric speciation⁷⁷–⁸⁰. Many species may have become geographically isolated in high mountains of the Irano-Turanian region during interglacial periods, resulting in disjunct distributions especially at high elevations⁵⁵,⁶⁹,³¹,³³, further fostering allopatric speciation⁸¹. Allopatric speciation and ecological speciation are not
mutually exclusive hypotheses, and likely both evolutionary processes have contributed to the high biodiversity of the Iranian high mountains.

The highest richness of both endemic as well as non-endemic taxa was found at mid-elevations (hump-shaped distribution). This pattern was first proposed by ref. [82]. Mid-elevation diversity peaks have also been found in a global analysis of geometrid moths [83] and of ferns [84]. The Iranian Asteraceae pattern suggests that high environmental stress at xeric lower and cold higher elevations causes diversity to peak at mid-elevations [58]. A diversity
peak at intermediate elevations has been identified previously for Central Alborz using standardized sample plot data. Although richness distributions for both endemic and non-endemic taxa are hump-shaped, the distribution of endemic taxa is significantly shifted towards higher elevations (Fig. 4a,b). This likely reflects the fact that the percentage of endemism continues to increase with increasing elevation (Fig. 4c). This is in line with observations in other regions and supports the hypothesis that increasing geographical isolation (not quantified here, but evidently increasing with increasing elevation) at higher elevations positively correlates with the degree of endemism.

Conservation implications. Although the high mountain ranges of the study area have already been identified as belonging to the Irano-Anatolian biodiversity hotspot, we could recognize hotspots-within-hotspots. The distribution of endemic taxa is significantly shifted towards higher elevations (Fig. 4a,b). This likely reflects the fact that the percentage of endemism continues to increase with increasing elevation (Fig. 4c). This is in line with observations in other regions and supports the hypothesis that increasing geographical isolation (not quantified here, but evidently increasing with increasing elevation) at higher elevations positively correlates with the degree of endemism.

Methods

Study area. Iran is topographically complex (Fig. 1a) due to its location at the interface between the Arabian and Eurasian plates. The elevation ranges from 26 m below sea level at the shore of the Caspian Sea to 5,671 m above sea level in Central Alborz. Being part of the Alpine-Himalayan orogenic system, the uplift of SW Asian mountain ranges took place between Late Oligocene and Late Miocene. Major mountain ranges in Iran include Zagros in the south-west, Azerbaijan Plateau in the north-west, Alborz in the north, Kopet Dagh-Khorassan in the north-east and east, the Yazd-Kerman massif in the south and the Makran and Baluchestan mountains in the south-east, jointly embracing the central Iranian high plateau (Fig. 1a). Rainfall ranges from less than 25 mm mean annual precipitation in the central deserts up to 2,000 mm in Hycranian forests at the northern slopes of Alborz. According to the Global Bioclimatic Classification System, there are three macrobioclimates in Iran: Mediterranean (major parts of Iran), tropical (southern Iran) and temperate (northern Iran). These macrobioclimates correlate with the Irano-Turanian, Sahara-Sindian and Euro-Siberian biogeographical regions (Fig. 1a), respectively. Pleistocene climatic fluctuations affected the flora and vegetation of the region, causing elevational shifts of vegetation belts or shifts in biomes as a consequence of modified climate zones, e.g., altered boundaries of the inter-tropical convergence zone in the south and south-east or variations in the relative strength of mid-latitude circulation systems. However, knowledge about the evolutionary impact of these climatic oscillations on the flora of this region is still limited.

We restricted the study area to the political border of Iran because floristic records from neighbouring countries are not available in sufficient density. This might introduce edge effects where similar habitats extend beyond the country border, such as lowland habitats in the north-east and east or mountainous habitats in the north-west. However, we argue that the introduced bias will be low, because the majority of Iranian endemic species are restricted to mountain habitats, where continuity with areas outside the study region is less extensive than for lowland habitats.

Distributional data. We selected Asteraceae as our target group because it is the most diverse family in the Iranian flora: it has the largest number of genera, and is exceeded in species richness only by Fabaceae, mainly because of the single genus Astragalus with approximately 800 species. About 40% of the Iranian Asteraceae taxa are endemic and are found in all environments across all elevational zones. The data set comprises 626 of these endemic and subendemic taxa (552 species, 48 subspecies, 26 varieties; Table S1.1). Using information from available floristic literature, we defined a taxon as endemic if it does not occur outside Iran and as subendemic if more than 80% of its range is situated within Iran with additional occurrences only in neighbouring countries. Distribution data were taken from the Flora Iranica and the Flora of Iran, supplemented by data on new species and new records published after these two floras (Table S1.2). A total of 5,970 records were geo-referenced with a precision of at least 0.25 × 0.25 degrees. Additionally, records on the elevational distribution have been collected for both endemic and non-endemic Asteraceae taxa, allowing the comparison of their distribution along the elevational gradient.

Data analyses. AEs were identified using endemicty analysis, formalized by refs. as implemented in the program NDM/VNDM. Briefly, for each putative AE (i.e., set of grid cells) an endemicity score is calculated as the sum of the endemicity scores of each constituent species. The endemicity score for each species in an AE varies between 0 (non scoring: no record inside the AE) and 1 (species found in all cells of the AE, and in no cell outside the AE); for more details see ref. Therefore, the endemicity score of an area is affected both by the number of species supporting an area and the endemicity scores of these species. One of the advantages of this approach is its ability to recognize overlapping AEs. These may be independent if defined by different sets of species, and are to be expected when different environments are found in the same cell.

When analysing a dataset, NDM/VNDM converts the given geographic coordinates of a species into presence/absence data per grid cell. The data were analysed with a cell size of one degree longitude and latitude (approx. 90 × 110 km in the study area) resulting in 192 cells; this is only slightly larger than the optimal grid size of 0.98 × 0.98 determined from point density data by the program (option “autogrid”). The advantage of this relatively large cell size is that the effects of sampling bias in the original point records are reduced. Heuristic searches for AEs consisted of 100 replicates, temporarily saving sets within 0.99 of the score of the set being swapped.
(see ref.\textsuperscript{99} for further details). Sets identified by this search were retained only if they had at least 10 contributing species and an endemicity score of at least 2. The threshold of 10 species was chosen empirically as the number at which delimitation of AEs became stable. Swapping was done one cell at a time and overlapping subsets were kept if 30% of the species were unique, whereas suboptimal sets were not retained. In order to reduce the level of redundancy in the inferred AEs, consensus areas were constructed\textsuperscript{101}. To this end, we used the loose consensus rule (considered sufficiently detailed for large-scale studies)\textsuperscript{101}, i.e., areas are added when each area shares at least 25% of its defining species with at least one, but not necessarily all, of the other areas in the consensus. The list of taxa contributing to the score of identified AEs is given in Table S1.3.

The relationship between endemic richness (i.e., number of endemic taxa) and mean elevation as well as the relationships between endemic richness and degree of endemicity (i.e., maximum endemicity score) on one hand and topographical complexity and additional elevation parameter on the other hand were tested using generalized linear models with quasi-Poisson distributions and logarithmic link functions as implemented in the function\texttt{glm()} of the programming environment R\textsuperscript{102} version 3.0.1. Topographic complexity was calculated as the ratio between the surface area, extracted from a digital elevation model with a resolution of approximately 119 × 119 meters, and the planimetric area of each grid cell\textsuperscript{105}, using the extension DEM Surface Tools for ArcGIS\textsuperscript{104,105} in ArcGIS 10 (Esri, Redlands, CA, USA).

The relationship between endemism and elevation was assessed visually by plotting planimetric area against the optimal distribution of species over the elevational amplitude. To this end, we calculated the proportion of pixels of the digital elevation model within 100 meter elevational belts. Species’ elevational optima were defined as the average elevation (in meters) of all records of a given species. The relation between endemism (as the percentage of endemism) and elevation (in bins of 100 m) was tested using linear models as implemented in the function\texttt{lm()} of the programming environment R.

### References

1. Cañadas, E. M. \textit{et al.} Hotspots within hotspots: Endemic plant richness, environmental drivers, and implications for conservation.\textit{ Biol. Conserv.} 170, 282–291 (2014).
2. Mittermeier, R. A. \textit{et al.} Hotspots revisited: Earth’s biologically richest and most endangered terrestrial ecoregions (Conservation International, 2005).
3. Myers, N., Mittermeier, R. A., Mittermeier, C. G., da Fonseca, G. A. B. & Kent, J. Biodiversity hotspots for conservation priorities.\textit{ Nature} 403, 853–858 (2000).
4. Harris, G. M., Jenkins, C. N. & Pimm, S. L. Refining biodiversity conservation priorities.\textit{ Conserv. Biol.} 19, 1957–1968 (2005).
5. Murray-Smith, C. \textit{et al.} Plant diversity hotspots in the Atlantic coastal forests of Brazil.\textit{ Conserv. Biol.} 23, 151–163 (2009).
6. Orme, C. D. L. \textit{et al.} Global hotspots of species richness are not congruent with endemicity or threat.\textit{ Nature} 436, 1016–1019 (2005).
7. Possingham, H. P. & Wilson, K. A. D. Biodiversity: turning up the heat on hotspots.\textit{ Nature} 436, 919–920 (2005).
8. Morro, J. J. Evolutionary biogeography: an integrative approach with case studies (University Press, 2008).
9. Morro, J. J. On the identification of areas of endemism.\textit{ Syst. Biol.} 43, 438–441 (1994).
10. Harold, A. S. & Mooy, R. D. Areas of endemism: definition and recognition criteria.\textit{ Syst. Biol.} 43, 261–266 (1994).
11. Nelson, G. & Platnick, N. Systematics and biogeography (Columbia University Press, 1981).
12. Major, J. Endemism: a botanical perspective in Analytical biogeography (eds Myers, A. A. & Giller, P. S.) 117–146. (Chapman & Hall, 1988).
13. Anderson, S. Area and endemism.\textit{ Q. Rev. Biol.} 69, 451–471 (1994).
14. Crosby, M. J. Mapping the distributions of restricted range birds to conserve global conservation priorities in Mapping the diversity of nature (ed Miller, R. J.) 145–154. (Chapman & Hall, 1994).
15. Calvo, G., Rodríguez, P. & Medellín, R. A. Assessing conservation priorities in megadiverse Mexico: mammalian diversity, endemicity, and endangerment.\textit{ Ecol. Appl.} 8, 6–17 (1998).
16. Linder, H. P. On areas of endemism, with an example from the American Restionaceae.\textit{ Syst. Biol.} 50, 892–912 (2001).
17. Jetz, W., Rahbek, C. & Colwell, R. K. The coincidence of rarity and richness and the potential signature of history in centres of endemism.\textit{ Ecol. Lett.} 7, 1180–1191 (2004).
18. Margules, C. R. & Pressey, R. L. Systematic conservation planning.\textit{ Nature} 405, 243–253 (2000).
19. Brooks, T. M. \textit{et al.} Global biodiversity conservation priorities.\textit{ Science} 313, 58–61 (2006).
20. Djamali, M., Brewer, S., Breckle, S. W. & Jackson, S. T. Climatic determinism in phytogeographic regionalization: a test from the Irano–Turanian region, SW and Central Asia.\textit{ Flora} 207, 237–249 (2012).
21. Zohary, M. The phytogeographical foundation of the Middle East in Plant life of south-west Asia (eds Davis, P. H., Harper, P. C. & Hedge, I. C.) 43–52 (Botanical Society of Edinburgh, 1971).
22. Frey, W., Kürschner, H. & Probst, W. Flora and vegetation, including plant species and larger vegetation complexes in Persia in\textit{ Encyclopaedia Iranica} (ed. Yarshater, E.) 43–63 (Maad Publishers, 1999).
23. Firouz, E. The complete fauna of Iran (I. B. Tauris, 2005).
24. Noroozi, J., Moser, D. & Esf. F. Diversity, distribution, ecology and description rates of alpine endemic plant species from Iranian mountains.\textit{ Alp. Bot. 126}, 1–9 (2016).
25. Wendelbo, P. Some distributional patterns within the Flora Iranica areas in Plant life of south-west Asia (ed. Davis, P. H., Harper, P. C. & Hedge, I. C.) 29–41 (Botanical Society of Edinburgh, 1971).
26. Hedge, I. C. & Wendelbo, P. Patterns of distribution and endemism in Iran.\textit{ Notes Roy. Bot. Gard. Edinburgh} 36, 441–464 (1978).
27. Freitag, H. Notes on the distribution, climate and flora of the sand deserts of Iran and Afghanistan.\textit{ Proc. Roy. Soc. Edinburgh Sect. B Biol. Sci.} 89, 135–146 (1986).
28. Hedge, I. C. Labiatae of South-West Asia: diversity, distribution and endemism.\textit{ Proc. Roy. Soc. Edinburgh Sect. B Biol. Sci.} 89, 23–35 (1986).
29. Akhani, H. A new spiny, cushion-like\textit{ Euphorbia} (Euphorbiaceae) from south-west Iran with special reference to the phytogeographic importance of local endemic species.\textit{ Bot. J. Linnean Soc.} 146, 107–121 (2004).
30. Akhani, H. Diversity, biogeography, and photosynthetic pathways of\textit{ Argusia} and\textit{ Heliotropium} (Boraginaceae) in South-West Asia with an analysis of phytogeographical units.\textit{ Bot. J. Linnean Soc.} 155, 401–425 (2007).
31. Noroozi, J., Akhani, H. & Breckle, S. W. Biodiversity and phytogeography of the alpine flora of Iran.\textit{ Biodivers. Conserv.} 17, 493–521 (2008).
32. Mahmodi, M., Masaoudi, A. A. & Hamzeh’ee, B. Geographical distribution of\textit{ Astragalus} (Fabaceae) in Iran.\textit{ Rostanlhia} 10, 112–132 (2009).
33. Noroozi, J., Pauli, H., Grabberr, G. & Breckle, S. W. The subalpine–nival vascular plant species of Iran: a unique high–mountain flora and its threat from climate warming.\textit{ Biodivers. Conserv.} 20, 1319–1338 (2011).
34. Sales, F. & Hedges, I. L. C. Generic endemism in South-West Asia: an overview. Rostanglia 14, 22–35 (2013).
35. Memariani, E., Akhani, H. & Jogharchi, M. R. Endemic plants of Khurassan-Kopet Daghi floristic region in Irano-Turanian region: diversity, distribution patterns and conservation status. Phytotaxa 249, 31–117 (2016).
36. Memariani, F., Zarinpour, V. & Akhani, H. A review of plant diversity, vegetation, and phytogeography of the Khorassan-Kopet Daghi floristic province in the Irano-Turanian region (northeastern Iran–southeastern Turkmenistan). Phytotaxa 249, 8–30 (2016).
37. Rechinger, K. H. Flora Iranica (Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt & Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Graz & Wien, 1963–2015).
38. Assadi, M., Khatamsaz, M., Maassoumi, A. A. & Mozaffarian, V. Flora of Iran (Research Institute of Forests & Rangelands, Tehran, 1989–2015).
39. Szumik, C. A., Cuezzo, F., Goloboff, P. A. & Chalup, A. E. An optimality criterion to determine areas of endemism. Syst. Biol. 51, 806–816 (2002).
40. Martínez-Hernández, F. et al. Areas of endemism as a conservation criterion for Iberian gypsophilous flora: a multi-scale test using the NDM/VNDM program. Plant Biosyst. 149, 483–493 (2015).
41. Mendoza-Fernández, A. J. et al. Areas of endemism and threatened flora in a Mediterranean hotspot: Southern Spain. J. Nat. Conserv. 23, 35–44 (2015).
42. Szumik, C. A. & Goloboff, P. A. Higher taxa and the identification of areas of endemism. Cladistics 31, 568–572 (2015).
43. Elias, C., D. V. & Aagesen, L. Areas of vascular plants endemism in the Monte desert (Argentina). Phytotaxa 266, 161–182 (2016).
44. Hoffmeister, C. H. & Ferrari, A. Areas of endemism of arthropods in the Atlantic Forest (Brazil): an approach based on a metaconsensus criterion using endemism analysis. Biol. J. Linnean Soc. 119, 126–144 (2016).
45. Weirauch, C. Areas of endemism in the Nearctic: a case study of 1339 species of Miridae (Insecta: Hemiptera) and their plant hosts. Cladistics 33, 279–294 (2016).
46. Zhang, D.-C., Ye, J.-Y. & Sun, H. Quantitative approaches to identify floristic units and centres of species endemism in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, south-western China. J. Biogeogr. 43, 2465–2476 (2016).
47. Díaz Gómez, J. M. Endemism in Liolaeus (Iguana: Liolaeidae) from the Argentinian Puna. South Am. J. Herpetol. 2, 59–68 (2007).
48. Carine, M. A., Humphries, C. J., Guma, I. R., Reyes-Betancort, J. A. & Santos Guerra, A. Areas and algorithms: evaluating numerical approaches for the delimitation of areas of endemism in the Canary Islands archipelago. J. Biogeogr. 36, 593–611 (2009).
49. Escalante, T., Szumik, C. A. & Morrone, J. J. Areas of endemism of Mexican mammals: reanalysis applying the optimality criterion. Biol. J. Linnean Soc. 98, 468–478 (2009).
50. Casagrande, M. D., Täher, I. & Szumik, C. A. Endemcity analysis, parsimony and biotic elements: a formal comparison using hypothetical distributions. Cladistics 28, 645–654 (2012).
51. Hausdorff, R. & Hennig, C. Biotic element analysis in biogeography. Syst. Biol. 52, 717–723 (2003).
52. Qi, Y. & Yang, Y. Topographic effect on spatial variation of plant diversity in California. Geog. Inf. Sci. 5, 39–46 (1999).
53. Cobleantz, D. D. & Rütters, K. H. Topographic controls on the regional-scale biodiversity of the south-western USA. J. Biogeogr. 31, 1125–1138 (2004).
54. Stein, A., Gerstner, K. & Kreft, H. Environmental heterogeneity as a universal driver of species richness across taxa, biomes and spatial scales. Ecol. Lett. 17, 866–880 (2014).
55. Irl, S. D. H. et al. Climate vs. topography – spatial patterns of plant species diversity and endemism on a high-elevation island. J. Ecol. 103, 1621–1633 (2015).
56. Steinbauer, M. J. et al. Topography-driven isolation, speciation and a global increase of endemism with elevation. Glob. Ecol. Biogeogr. 25, 1097–1107 (2016).
57. Whittaker, R. J., Willis, K. J. & Field, R. Scale and species richness: towards a general, hierarchical theory of species diversity. J. Biogeogr. 28, 453–470 (2001).
58. Lamolinha, M. V. Elevation gradients of species-density: historical and prospective views. Glob. Ecol. Biogeogr. 10, 3–13 (2001).
59. Klein, J. C. Endémisme à l’étage alpin de l’Alborz (Iran). Flora Vegetato Mundis 9, 247–261 (1991).
60. Takhtajan, A. Floristic regions of the world (University of California Press, 1986).
61. Assadi, M. Distribution patterns of the genus Acantholimon (Plumbaginaceae) in Iran. Iran. J. Bot. 12, 114–120 (2006).
62. Noroozi, J., Ajani, Y. & Nordenstam, B. A new annual species of Senecio (Compositae-Senecionaceae) from subnival zone of southern Iran with comments on phytogeographical aspects of the area. Composstaete Newslett. 48, 43–62 (2010).
63. Dos Santos, D. A., Cuezzo, M. G., Reynaga, M. C. & Domínguez, E. Towards a dynamic analysis of weighted networks in biogeography. Syst. Biol. 61, 240–252 (2012).
64. Hoorns, C., Moshbrugger, V., Mulch, A. & Antonelli, A. Biodiversity from mountain building. Nat. Geosci. 6, 154 (2013).
65. Hughes, C. E. & Atchison, G. W. The ubiquity of alpine plant radiations: from the Andes to the Hengduan Mountains. New Phytol. 207, 275–282 (2015).
66. Sosa, V. & Loera, I. Influence of current climate, historical climate stability and topography on species richness and endemism in Mesoamerican geophyte plants. PeerJ 5, e3952 (2017).
67. Millar, T. R., Heenan, P. B., Wilton, A. D., Smissen, R. D. & Brettiwieser, I. Spatial distribution of species, genus and phyllogenetic endemism in the vascular flora of New Zealand, and implications for conservation. Aust. Syst. Bot. 30, 134–147 (2017).
68. Buira, A., Aedo, C. & Medina, L. Spatial patterns of the Iberian and Balearic endemic vascular flora. Biodivers. Conserv. 26, 479–508 (2017).
69. Irl, S. D. H. et al. An island view of endemic rarity-Environmental drivers and consequences for nature conservation. Divers. Distributions 23, 1132–1142 (2017).
70. Scherrer, D. & Körner, C. Intra-red thermometry of alpine landscapes challenges climatic warming projections. Glob. Change Biol. 16, 2602–2613 (2010).
71. Scherrer, D. & Körner, C. Topographically controlled thermal-habitat differentiation buffers alpine plant diversity against climate warming. J. Biogeogr. 38, 406–416 (2011).
72. Hortal, J. et al. Species richness can decrease with altitude but not with habitat diversity. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 110, E2149–E2150 (2013).
73. Steinbauer, M. J., Dolos, K., Field, R., Reineking, B. & Beierkuhnlein, C. Re-evaluating the general dynamic theory of oceanic island biogeography. Front. Biogeogr. 5, 185–194 (2013).
74. Nosil, P. Ecological speciation (Oxford University Press, 2012).
75. Haberla, D., Bauch, S., Staedler, Y. M. & Conti, E. Visions of the past and dreams of the future in the Orient: the Irano-Turanian region from classical botany to evolutionary studies. Biol. Rev. 92, 1365–1388 (2016).
76. Ashcroft, M. B., Golian, J. R., Warton, D. I. & Ramp, D. A novel approach to quantify and locate potential microrefugia using topoclimate, climate stability, and isolation from the matrix. Glob. Change Biol. 18, 1866–1879 (2012).
77. McArdle, S. & McPherson, J. S. The ecological and evolutionary implications of microrefugia. J. Biogeogr. 41, 837–841 (2014).
78. López-Vinyallonga, S., Mehtegan, I., García-Jacas, N. & Kaderett, J. W. Phylogeny and evolution of the Atrichum-Cosinia complex (Compositae, Cardueae-Carduiaceae). Taxon 58, 153–1711 (2009).
79. Ahmadzadeh, F. et al. Cryptic Speciation Patterns in Iranian Rock Lizards Uncovered by Integrative Taxonomy. PLoS One 8, e60563 (2013).
Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Zahra Asgarpour for geo-referencing parts of the data and Sara Manafzadeh for her useful comments on previous versions of the manuscript. This study was financially supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF project 28489-B29 to G.M.S.).

Author Contributions
J.N. and G.M.S. conceived the ideas; J.N., A.T. and M.D. collected the data; J.N. and S.R. analyzed the data; J.N., H.P.L. and G.M.S. led the writing with all co-authors contributing.

Additional Information
Supplementary information accompanies this paper at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-28504-9.

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

Publisher’s note: Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

© The Author(s) 2018