Unveiling the Complexity of Food Webs: A Comprehensive Overview of Definitions, Scales, and Mechanisms

Tanya Strydom

Jennifer A. Dunne

Timothée Poisot

Andrew P. Beckerman

2025-10-22

Abstract

Food webs are a useful abstraction and representation of the feeding links between species in a community and are used to infer many ecosystem level processes. However, the different theories, mechanisms, and criteria that underpin how a food web is defined, and ultimately, constructed means that not all food webs are representing the same ecological process at the same scale. Here we present a synthesis of the different assumptions, scales, and mechanisms that are used to define the different ecological networks , leading to a revision of definitions for different types of networks. Additionally we explicitly link the different network representations to the broader methodological approaches (models) that are used to construct them. In explicitly outlining the assumptions, scales, and mechanisms of network inference allows for a formal categorisation of how to use networks to answer key ecological and conservation questions as wel as defining clear guidelines to prevent unintentional misuse or misinterpretation.

At the heart of modern biodiversity science are a set of concepts and theories about species richness, stability, and function [1]. These relate to the abundance, distribution, functions, and services that biodiversity provides. Network representations of biodiversity are increasingly argued to be an asset to understanding and predicting the impacts of multiple, simultaneous stress on these core components of biodiversity [2]. Documenting interactions between and among species is thus one of the fundamental building blocks of community ecology and provide a powerful abstraction and platform for mathematical and statistical modelling of biodiversity to make predictions, and to mitigate and manage threats [3].

However, there is a growing discourse around limitations to the interpretation and applied use of networks [4,5]. Against this, it is important to evaluate the value and the limitations of the various network conceptualisations of biodiversity [6]. In this perspective we aim to provide an overview of different **food web** representations, particularly how each representation embeds assumptions about the processes that determine interactions ([Section 2](#sec-process)) about the levels of organization at which this occurs (*i.e.* the biological, ecological, spatial/temporal scale) and and the way in which we construct the resulting networks ([Section 3](#sec-construct)). The differences among this tri-partite set of assumptions ultimately influence the nature and scope of inference that can be made from a given network [7].

Fundamentally, we are talking about an intersection of the type of data used to construct a network and the underlying theory as to what drives the resolution and occurrence of interactions between species in those data. We still lack a clear explanation of the different assumptions and scale dependent processes that underpin network construction alongside extensive discussions about the challenges relating to data collection and observation [*e.g.,* 6,8–13]. Such an understanding should deliver an acceleration in capacity to more effectively predict the impact of multiple stressors on biodiverse communities.

In their recent work, [14] showcased a 2+2 decomposition of networks around aggregated versus species level resolution of nodes and around potential and realised links among the nodes. Their review delivers valuable insight into the methodologies used to collect and manage data among the node and link differentiation. It also delivers an overview of the scale and types of questions that are associated with each category of differentiation.

Here we provide a complementary perspective focused on concepts, models, and theory, in contrast to the data driven breakdown in [14] (e.g. their Tables 1 and 2). Our approach delivers a hierarchical perspective on network construction based on a gradient from feasibility, capturing the concept of metawebs and Gauzen et al’s ‘potential’ webs, through to realised webs as in Gauzens’ et al. In contrast to their 2 + 2 decomposition (their Fig 1), our perspective showcases nested ecological scales and processes that derive from shifts in the assumptions and theories embedded along this gradient. This includes classic ecological ‘aggregations’ such as functional/phylogenetic groups through to species, populations and individuals, unique perspective on how space and time intersect with node and link resolution, refined insight into which networks are derived by induction vs. deduction and a revealing of a core transition between assumptions about how links are derived based on evolutionary vs. ecological theories.

In the following sections we provide a scene-setting review of nodes and edges (links) in networks before aligning various processes that determine interactions with the different network representations. Ultimately, we provide a unique perspective on the nested hierarchy of processes that govern transitions from meta-webs to realised webs. We finish with a refined and nuanced alignment of models/representations and key questions in biodiveristy science in the anthropocene.

# 1. Setting the Scene: The Not So Basics of Nodes and Edges

Networks in ecology have multiple uses, representing an ‘object’ from which inferences can be made. For example, a network is needed to make inference specifically about the structure of communities. The structure of networks - their topology - have a long history reflecting core theory about energy flow [Lindeman etc], function [REF] and even stability [REF]. Networks are thus required as the response variable in evaluating ecological theory and statistical models of ‘generative processes’ giving rise to such structure [REF]. Such structure is now commonly used to compare communities along environmental gradients [REF]. Networks and their topology are also used as a platform for evaluating ‘downstream’ responses to stressors such as evaluating patterns of secondary extinction [REF]. Finally, they are commonly used as a platform for implementing mathematical models of community dynamics [REF]; delivering inference about stability, function, invasive species, climate change, contaminants, and secondary extinction, to name a few applications [REF]. Against this backdrop of multiple research agendas, the definition of ‘edges’ and ‘nodes’, and the levels of organisation at which they are defined, take many forms [10,15], each of which encode a series of assumptions within a network. Here we introduce a perspective on these baseline assumptions.

## 1.1 How do we define a node?

Although this may seem elementary that a node should represent a (taxonomic) species, the reality is that nodes often represents non-taxonomic units such as a trophic species (*e.g.,* [16]; [17]), a feeding guild [*e.g.,* 18], or a segregation of species by life stages [*e.g.,* 19]. Such granularity and variation is often defined as aggregation. Such aggregation can limit the ability to make species (taxonomic) specific inferences (*e.g.,* does species eat species ?). It can also affect the estimates of degree distributions and more specifically generality and vulnerability in networks (in/out degree). These metrics are central to inference about the structure and complexity of networks[19,20]. Finally, aggregation makes it challenging to use networks in ‘downstream analyses’ of, for example, extinction or invasions as the identity of species and the consequences of their losses can be hidden. Despite these issues, there are justifications for representing nodes as aggregated units. Most prominent relates to when the distribution of the links between aggregated nodes may be more meaningful in terms of understanding or generalising about energy flow and distribution within the system [REF].

## 1.2 What is captured by an edge?

In order to break down the definitions of an edge, it is important to introduce the concept of *potential* versus *realised* links: potential links reflect feasibility while realised links are connected to flux of some currency (typically energy; see below for more detail). Links within food webs are thus a representation of either potential links between species or fluxes within a system *e.g.,* energy transfer or material flow as the result of the feeding links between species [[21]; [7]][23]. Edges can thus correspond to different ‘currencies’ [14]. There is also a myriad of ways in which the links themselves can be specified. Links between species can be treated as present or absent (*i.e.,* binary), may be defined as probabilities [24,25] or by continuous functions which further quantify the strength of an interaction [26]. How links are specified thus requires intersecting both the currency being modelled and their specification. For example, feasibility is unlikely to accommodate flux, but does align with binary or probability representations. Taking a food web that consists of links representing feasible interactions among a collection of species will be meaningless if one is interested in understanding the flow of energy through the network as the links are not environmentally/energetically constrained.

## 1.3 Network representations

Against these definitions of nodes and edges, networks fall into two major ‘types’: metawebs, traditionally defined as all the *potential* interactions for a specific species pool [22]; and realised networks, which is the subset of interactions in a metaweb that are *realised* for a specific community at a given time and place. The fundamental differences between these two network representations are the spatial and temporal scale at which they are constructed, and the associated processes that are assumed to drive pattern at these scales.

A metaweb is, at its core, a list of *feasible* interactions between pairs of species. The feasibility for a given pair is derived from the complementarity (phylogenetic relationships) of their traits, typically aligned with feeding. Feasibility can be further refined by *co-occurrence* leading to the transition from a *global* to *regional metaweb*. Metawebs thus provide a means to identify evolutionarily plausible links, regionally plausible interactions, the set of ecologically possible, *i.e.,* forbidden, links [27], and ultimately a definition of the plausible *complete* diet of a species [28].

In contrast, realised networks are typically more localised in space and time, and the links between species are contingent on the co-occurrence of species, the role of the environment, and mechanisms of diet choice. Fundamentally this means that the presence/absence of a link is the result of the ‘behaviour’ of the species and even when the realised network is presented as a binary matrix, the edges imply a function is available to define the strength of an interaction. A realised network is therefore not simply the downscaling of a metaweb to a smaller scale (*e.g.,* moving from the country to the 1x1 km2 scale based on fine-scale species co-occurrence). Instead, realised webs capture processes that determine the realisation of an interaction and flows of energy in a community. Specifically, in realised webs, the definition of an edge shifts from being determined by feasibility to that of choices and consequences that centre around energy. If one were to take the same community of species and constructed both a metaweb and realised network the two networks might have the same species but would be structurally different, owing to the differences in the ‘rules’ constraining the presence of links. This distinction between metawebs and realised webs leads to a further insight. Links that are absent in a metaweb can conceptually (although not always practically) be treated as being truly absent. However, links that are absent in a realised network cannot be considered as truly absent but rather as absent due to the broader environmental/community context.

# 2. From Nodes and Edges to Process and Constraints

In the previous section we discussed how the definition of nodes and edges, representing different scales and processes, lead to the concept of a metaweb and a realised web. The fundamental take-homes are that nodes vary in their resolution, edges vary in what kind of process they represent and the intersection of these, defined by meta- vs. realised webs, underpins distinct lines of enquiry and constraints on the type of inference we can make with networks. Here we reveal five core constraints across evolutionary and ecological scales that further delineate the transition from meta- to realised webs, exposing processes that determine the nature of links among nodes: evolutionary compatibility, co-occurrence, abundance, diet choice, and non-trophic interactions [Figure 1](#fig-process).

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 1: Aligning the various processes that determine interactions (right column) with the different network representations (left column). First, we start with a **global metaweb** this network captures all possible interactions for a collection of species in the global context. However, within the global environment different species occur in different regions (region one = yellow and region 2 = orange), and it is possible to construct two different metawebs (**regional metawebs**) for each region by taking accounting for the co-occurrence of the difference species - as shown here we have two regions with some species that are found in both regions (blue) and others endemic to either region one (yellow) or region two (orange). However even within a region we do not expect all interactions to be realised but rather that there are multiple configurations of the regional metaweb over both space and time. The ‘state’ of the different **realised networks** is ultimately influenced not just by the co-occurrence of a species pair but rather the larger community context such as the abundance of different species, maximisation of energy gain, or indirect/higher order interactions. |

## 2.1 Processes that determine the feasibility of an interaction

Evolutionary compatibility and co-occurrence are the two principle processes that ‘act’ at the species pair of interest and define feasibility. The scale of inference and set of processes embodied in these two constraints typically combine to define a ‘list’ of interactions that are viable/feasible and defined strictly as present/absent. Reflecting on the previous section, nodes are typically species and rules defining edges are defined by trait complementarity (phylogenetic) and/or co-occurrence. Here we provide more insight into each process.

**Evolutionary compatibility**

This constraint is defined by shared (co)evolutionary history between consumers and resources [29–32] which is manifested as ‘trait complementarity’ between two species [33]. In this body of theory, the consumer has the ‘correct’ set of traits that allow it to chase, capture, and consume the resource. Interactions that are not compatible are defined as forbidden links [27]; *i.e.,* they are not physically possible and will *always* be absent within a network.

Networks do not properly arise from models based on this constraint. Instead, interacting species pairs are defined and these are represented as binary (possible vs forbidden) or probabilistic [24]. For example, in the metaweb constructed by [34] probabilities are quantified as the confidence of a specific being *possible* between two species. A network constructed on the basis of evolutionary compatibility is conceptually aligned with a ‘global metaweb’, and gives us information as to the global feasibility of links between species pairs despite the fact that they do not co-occur (see [Figure 1](#fig-process)).

**(Co)occurrence**

The co-occurrence of species in both time and space is a fundamental requirement for an interaction between two species to occur (at least in terms of feeding links). Although co-occurrence data alone is insufficient for building an accurate and ecologically meaningful representation of *feeding links* [35], it is still a critical process that determines the realisation of a feeding. Knowledge on the co-occurrence of species allows us to spatially constrain a global metaweb to reflect regional metawebs [36]. In the context of [Figure 1](#fig-process) this would be the metawebs for regions one and two.

We reinforce that these two constraints don’t deliver a network *per se,* but a list of feasible species pairs. Although it is possible to build a network from the list of interactions generated by these constraints, it is important to be aware that the structure of this network is not constrained by any community context: just because species are able to interact does not mean that they will [37,38].

## 2.2 Processes that realise networks

In contrast to the above, here we highlight three processes that influence the *realisation* of an interaction between species and thus form the conceptual basis for realised networks. As we show in [Figure 1](#fig-process), a ‘truly realised’ network is the product of properties of the community (**abundance** and **non-trophic interactions**) and the individual (**diet choice**). This represents a conceptual shift from considering the feasibility for species pairwise interactions to considering the edge as a representation of energy flow. Such a transition requires information about how the community, the environment and the individual *constrains* network topology as defined by consumer choice ([39], [Section 1.3](#sec-representation))

**Abundance**

Abundance as a realising process emerges from a null model for energy acquisition: organisms feeding randomly will consume resources in proportion to their abundance [40]. Here, abundance of different prey species influences the distribution of links in a network [41] by defining a preference linked to individuals among species meeting [24,37]. Abundance data, linked to a derived metaweb delivers a foundation ruleset that can define the distribution and strength of links. Of note, however, is that such abundance constrained interactions are not necessarily contingent on there being any compatibility between species [42–44].

**Diet choice**

It is well established that consumers make more active decisions than eating items in proportion to their abundance [40]. Ultimately, consumer choice is underpinned by an energetic cost-benefit framework centred around profitability and defined by traits associated with finding, catching, killing, and consuming a resource [45,46]. Energetic constraints are invoked to construct networks in a myriad of ways [*e.g.,* 20,47–49].

In contrast to metaweb ‘construction’ from a list of pairwise interactions, these methods deliver a realised web directly and as an emergent property of node behaviour. We also here make a distinction, developed below, with models like the Niche Model, where diet choice is implicit in it’s probabilistic network generating function, but it is working to replicate the *expected* structure of the network and this structure does not emerge from node-based rules. Note that we select diet choice as a term to capture rules linked to optimal foraging [50] and metabolic theory [51]; it is a sensible ‘umbrella concept’ for capturing the energetic constraint on of the distribution and strength of interactions.

**Non-trophic interactions**

We include non-trophic interactions [see 52] here not as a determinant of links, but a modifier of them - they are the community context above and beyond co-occurrence and abundance. Non-trophic interactions include competition for space, predator interference, refuge provisioning, recruitment facilitation as well as non-trophic effects that increase or decrease mortality. These interactions [53] specifically modify either the realisation or strength of trophic interactions [54–57] and represent direct (e.g., predator outcompetes predator ) and indirect (e.g., mutualistic/facilitative interactions) mechanisms. They operate on the realisation of a network by altering the fine-scale distribution and abundance of species and relative contributions of direct and indirect effects to biomass, persistence, stability and the functioning of the communities [52,58–60].

**are these strictly modifiers of realised networks? - because we class them as community context with co-occurrence, a modifier of feasible networks….**

# 3. Network construction

The above five processes are central to understanding the assumptions inherent in building different types of networks. Each of the processes, or combinations thereof, deliver a unique set of boundary conditions on what a network represents and can be used for. Here we build on the introduction of these five processes to further categorise the approaches to constructing networks. In doing so also introduce more detail on a variety of methodologies used to construct networks.

## 3.1 Why construct networks?

Networks are a representation of biodiversity. In a perfect world, we might know about all interactions. However, the empirical collection of interaction data is both costly and challenging to execute [27,61,62]. In the absence of robust empirical data, we construct models that facilitate interpolation and gap-filling of existing empirical datasets [*e.g.,* 63,64–66], predict the feasibility of interaction among pairs of species, or directly predict network structure [see 67 for a broader discussion].

They are unique in delivering more than just estimates of species richness. As note in the introduction, a network embodies the organising structure of biodiversity and allows numerous opportunities for ‘downstream’ analysis, including the comparison of structures, estimation of energy flux or extinction dynamics and ultimately form the structural inputs to dynamical systems models that facilitate ecological and conservation relevant inference about productivity-diversity-stability-function relationships [68] in space and time. But making such inferences requires careful attention to one or more of the processes discussed in [Section 2](#sec-process).

## 3.2 Construction through induction

Constructing feasible or realised networks can be framed as an ‘inductive reasoning’ process where insight and generalisation arises from a set of observations and relationships. Inductive reasoning as a foundation for network construction is implemented through node- and network levels. When applied at the node level, species specific networks are created and judge by their association with expected feeding interactions. When applied at the network level, networks are judged by their structural properties per se.

### 3.2.1 Species specific networks: construction through node level induction

Constructing feasible networks and facilitating the interpolation or gap-filling of existing empirical datasets on sets of species interactions can be framed as an ‘inductive reasoning’ process where insight and generalisation arises from a set of observations and relationships about feeding. All methods in this inference space rest on a set of three assumptions: there are a set of ‘feeding rules’ that underpin interaction feasibility [69]; these rules are phylogenetically conserved [31,70]; they can be specified by matching the traits between consumer and resource.

Evolutionary compatibility and co-occurrence constraints, the foundation theory for feasible networks, and have delivered insight in many ways. They have been critical to the construction of ‘first draft’ networks for communities for which we have no interaction data [34]. They are also central to interpolation in data poor regions and predicting interactions for ‘unobservable’ communities *e.g.,* prehistoric networks [71–73] or future, novel community assemblages [74]. Furthermore, they have the capacity to evaluate a role of interactions among species relative to their distribution by accounting for the role of the environment and the role of species interactions [75–77].There are substantial data requirements for these approaches including expert knowledge, species traits and phylogenetic relationships and/or interaction data on related species or communities.

Feeding rules are defined in multiple ways. The determination of the feeding rules can be defined *a priori* based expert knowledge opinions. Typically this is done on a ‘trait matching’ basis. An example are the paleo food web models of [78] and [79] that specify a series of rules for a set of traits and interactions are deemed feasible if all conditions are met. Alternatively the body size ratio between the consumer and resource is often used [*e.g.,* 80,81], with the idea that consumers will only utilise a resource with a body size is less than or equal to their own. However, work from [82] seems to suggest that adding morphological traits in addition to body size ratio improves model performance.

Rules are also defined by correlating real world interaction data with suitable ecological proxies for which data is more widely available (*e.g.,* traits) using some sort of binary classifier (see [83] for an overview). These include generalised linear models [*e.g.,* 84], random forest [*e.g.,* 85], trait-based k-NN [*e.g.,* 86], and Bayesian models [*e.g.,* 87,88].

Finally, graph embedding uses the structural features of a known network to infer the position of species in an unknown network through the decomposition of the interaction onto the embedding space. This decomposition relies on a combination of ecological proxies **(e.g. ???)** in conjunction with known interactions to infer the latent values of species **What is a latent value of a species with respect to inferring interactions?**. See [28] for a detailed review of methods and [34] for a specific example.

### 3.2.2 Species agnostic networks: construction through structure induction

Networks in this category are generated rules that create non-random (**note that this is irritated by the Random models paragraph below; do we need that? The stochastic models are the ‘real’ version of this type of network?**) networks that reflect empirical knowledge of ecological network structures and evaluated by matching predictions to this *expected* structure of the network(s). The determination of links between species is only implicitly linked to properties of the nodes (**see ADBM 5 rules**). This means these networks are usually not species specific. Although these models are data input light, often requiring only species richness and an estimate of the number of expected links, they make clear assumptions regarding what the expectations are for network structure. These are some of the most commonly used network generation tools (e.g. the Niche model REF). There are two sub-categories of these species agnostic networks:

Random network models [*e.g.,* 89,90,91] represent a ‘process free’ model. These models are not explicitly tied to a process discussed in [Section 2](#sec-process), rather links are randomly distributed among nodes. Although these models lack real world tractability [92] they are often used as a ‘null hypothesis’ to ask questions about network structure [*e.g.,* 93,94].

Stochastic network models use a probabilistic rule-set about diet choice and niche breadth to reflect fundamental ideas of foraging biology. **RATHER THAN ALLESINA, I’D SUGGEST PRESENTING THE 5 RULES IN THE ADBM EXPLANATION OF THE NICHE MODEL** These models that are based on the compartmentation and acquisition of energy for species at different trophic levels [95,96] and that network structure can be determined by distributing interactions along single dimension [the ‘niche axis’; [97]]. Typically these models parametrise some aspect of the network structure [although see 95 for a parameter-free model]. These models include the most commonly used network generator, the Niche model [17], as well as the original Cascade model [98] and the derived Nested hierarchy model [99]. These models often form the basis for dynamic models *e.g.,* the allometric trophic network [100,101] and bioenergetic food web models [102].

## 3.3 Construction through deduction

In contrast to the above approaches centred on feasibility, relised networks via methods reflecting abundance and diet choice typically rely on deductive reasoning and have a unique agenda to those above. In contrast to the inductive methods, inference about a realise network follows from a set of premises defining generative processes, often referred to as mechanisms. Typically, models that embed abundance and diet choice constraints reference theory that allows inference about the distribution and strength of interactions. Such models are ‘network topology generators’ and have a strong representation in research comparing network structures along environmental gradients and delivering inference about extinctions and energy flux. They also provide the structural backbone for dynamical systems modelling to address questions about stability-structure-productivity-function relationships, secondary extinction dynamics, species invasion and climate change. There are two broad group of models in this deductive category.

### 3.3.1 Species-specific networks

These models capture the behaviour of the nodes by explicitly taking into account the properties of the different species in the community. Which means that there is a degree of variance in which links are predicted between species unlike the more ‘static’ predictions made by inductive models. However, these networks are ‘costly’ to construct in real world settings (requiring data about the entire community, as it is the behaviour of the system that determines the behaviour of the part) and also lack the larger diet niche context afforded by metawebs.

Neutral networks are built on the assumption that foraging decisions are tied *only* to the abundance of species within the community [103,104]. Here links are soley determined by the relative abundance of the different species in the community. Although it is highly unlikely that abundance is the only determaninant of interactions work by [44] showcases how these neutral processes can be used in conjunction with inductive models to construct more refined/localised networks.

There is a broader group of models that focus on determining interactions in terms of energetic constraints on diet breadth, often using the ratio of consumer-resource bodysize as a proxy for capturing the energetic constraints of feeding. Models such as those developed by [48] and [45] are similar to the mechanistic approaches discussed in [Section 3.2](#sec-construct-induct), however instead of determining interactions based on mechanistic feasibility it is rather constrained by the energetic cost of predation. Note that although these models do not place any explicit constraints on the expected structure of the network, the links should still be considered as ‘realised’ owing to the energetic constraint placed on links. A different subset of diet models [*e.g.,* 20,105] use a diet choice approach, however similar to the stochastic network models they also embed assumptions on network structure. Thus these models predict both interactions and network structure simultaneously, although they would benefit in being refined by more explicitly accounting for trait-based (*i.e.,* feasibility) paramterisation [106].

# 4. Making Progress with Networks

The motivation to leverage network ecology in conservation ecology, environmental risk assessment and natural resource managment stems from a shift away from species/populaiton specific measures of the effects of stress and distrubrance to community level metrics. These metrics, such as resilience and more generally stability, ecosystem function and biodiversity *per se*, are natural properties of networks. This suggests that modern conservation, risk assessment and resource management requires robust tools to support decision making.

This is also true in the discipline of ecology. Major questions remain about stability-diversity-productivity relationships and the impacts of multiple stressors operating at multiple ecological scales. The network approach to answering these questions specifically allows for questions about how direct and indirect effects among species in a complex community, shaped by their environment, deliver fundamental patterns and understanding of processes in the natural world. and theories that help define the abundance, distribution, functions and services that biodiversity provides [1]

In order to effectively use networks to aid us in answering questions about conservation/risk assessment/management and core ecological theorywe need to be mindful that we are mapping the *correct* network representation to the question of interest [14]. Notably, there are certain questions that cannot be answered using specific network representations as the scale of the question of interest is fundamentally misaligned with either the process captured by a specific network representation [Section 2.1](#sec-process-feasibility), the underlying data that is used to construct it [Section 3](#sec-construct) or both of these factors.

Here we will discuss and map different the different network representations shown in [Figure 1](#fig-process) the the appropriate research questions and agendas [see also [Table 1](#tbl-questions)], as well as highlighting some of the key methodological challenges that limiting our conceptualisation of a ‘network’ as well as the effective practical application of them in real world settings.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1: Table Caption   | Network Representation | Research Question | | --- | --- | | Global Metaweb | How will novel communities interact *e.g.* invasion and rewilding | |  | Diet-based conservation | |  | Rewiring capacity of species | |  | Ecology-Evolutionary dynamics | | Regional Metawebs | Applied use potential of questions highlighted for global metawebs at the management scale *e.g.,* a protected area | |  | Refinement of species distributions | | Realised webs | Multiple stressor allocation across networks | |  | Temperature threshold to community collapse | |  | Extinction and persistence after perturbation | |  | Stability-diversity-function | |  | Ecosystem level processes | |  | Meta communitites and the idea of meta-network-communities | |

## 4.1 Key Eco-Evo-Conservation Questions

### 4.1.1 Global Metawebs

As the interactions in global metawebs are not constrained by the realisation of specific community assemblages (or species co-occurrence) they can provide valuable insights as to what interactions *could* occur between species or the *entire* diet breadth of a specific species. Fundamentally this allows us to ask questions about *hypothetical* communities and interactions, such as thinking about novel communities in future climate change scenarios, or the potential ‘position’ of an invasive (or re-introduced) within a network [107] or the rewiring capacity of species, and how this may help inform on the potential persistence of species within new community assemblages [108]. Finally because metawebs are often built on some proxy of the evolutionary lineages there is scope to deeper interrogate the role of ecological-evolutionary dynamics and the role that both the evolutionary history as well as plasticity influences and shapes the diet breadth of species.

### 4.1.2 Regional Metawebs

As regional metawebs are conceptually a spatially constrained global metaweb they could conceptually be used to answer similar questions to those raised above and because they represent a ‘real’ community are probably more meaningful in the applied space. Regional metawebs have also been used as a way to help refine and constrain species distributions giving us more refined range maps [18] or community composition under climate change scenarios, even at global scales [109]. However it should be clear that the links in these regional metawebs are only being constrained by feasibility and species co-occurrence and we must exercise a high degree of caution to not assume that changes/differences between different regional webs in structure (link distribution) are being driven by *e.g.,* environmental factors. At minimum if one is interested in comparing regional metawebs across environmental scales or gradients we need to assert that structural differences are independent from species turnover.

### 4.1.3 Realised networks

Realised network are perhaps the most representative of what comes to mind when people think of networks, and more specifically how we can use them to help inform on larger biogeographic processes [110]. This is because they represent a shift in the ‘currency’ that determines interactions that is constrained by a broader community and environmental context that allows us the opportunity to ask questions that revolve around community stability, diversity, function, and complexity. Specifically we are in a position to explicitly link network structure to ecosystem function. The dynamic nature of realised webs mean that they allowing us to think about the propagation of change (across both time and space) which allow us to ask questions about the persistence of communities and how they respond to perturbations or stressors (at both the level of the node as well as modification of links). Although the recent boom in the availability of long-term observation data is allowing us to unpack decades of insights arrived at for stability-diversity-productivity relationships for more complex communities [68] or to evaluate the impacts and efficacy of re-introductions [111] we need to be mindful that empirical interaction data is typically accumulated over time and so it compresses the dynamic component of the interactions between species [12]. Thus we need to apply a degree of caution when using empirical data to construct realised networks - however there is scope to think about developing methods that will allow us to modify metawebs in such a way that their structures become more aligned with realised webs (see the next section).

## 4.2 Key methodological challenges

**Transitioning between metawebs and realised webs:** Currently most approaches to modelling realised networks fail to explicitly account for any form of evolutionary constraint (although [82] and [45] have added traits to more ) and we need to develop either an ensemble modelling approach [112,113] or. tools that will allow for the downsampling of metawebs into realised networks, [*e.g.,* 114]. Importantly we need to think critically how the creation of either an ‘ensemble network’ or downsampled metaweb might change the underlying ‘currency’ of a nework and thus the underling defintiion of the edge *e.g.* the downsampling approach developed by [114] structually constrains the network to structurally look like a realised web, but the links to not represent prey choice *per se*.

**The validation of network structure:** Progress has been made to assess how well a model recovers pairwise interactions [67,115], but we still lack clear set of guidelines for benchmarking the ability of models to recover structure [97]. This makes it challenging to assess if models are capturing network structure accurately, especially if we are interested developing ways in which we can begin to downsample metawebs.

**Making networks more tractible in applied spaces:** There is a disconnect when it comes to effectively using networks in applied spaces [116]. We need to make an effort to more efficiently map the from (structure) of a network to its function as well as identify how this can effectively be integrated into policy to make it meaningful and actionable. Additionally we also need a firmer grasp as to what defines a ‘network’ as a unit, are the logical (environmental) boundaries between networks and how do these relate to ‘management’ units and scales [117].

**Understanding what emperical data represents:** What does it mean when we ‘observe’ an interaction be that directly (predator actively feeding on prey) or indirectly *e.g.,* gut or isotope analysis. A netwrok constructued with emperical data will most liekley still represents an ‘accumulation’ of feeding data and this is conceptually more closely aligned with idea of a metaweb. Something about how this is a challenge if we want to use empirical networks to test or ask questions in the realised space.

# 5. Concluding remarks

Having a clear understanding of the interplay between network representations and the processes that they are capable of encoding is critical if we are to understand exactly which networks can be used to answer which questions. As we highlight in Box 1 the different network representations have different potential uses and it should be clear that there is no ‘best’ network representation but rather a network representation that is best suited to its intended purpose. In providing a formalisation regards to the assumptions and mechanisms that need to be explicitly taken into consideration when deciding to use (and construct) networks we hope to prevent the unintentional misuse or misinterpretation of networks as well as provide a starting point from which we can develop a better framework for the applied use of networks to answer questions that are not only pressing within the field but also within broader biodiversity science.

# References

1. Loreau, M. and de Mazancourt, C. (2013) [Biodiversity and ecosystem stability: A synthesis of underlying mechanisms](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.12073). *Ecology Letters* 16, 106–115

2. Simmons, B.I. *et al.* (2021) [Refocusing multiple stressor research around the targets and scales of ecological impacts](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-021-01547-4). *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 5, 1478–1489

3. Windsor, F.M. *et al.* (2023) [Using ecological networks to answer questions in global biogeography and ecology](https://doi.org/10.1111/jbi.14447). *Journal of Biogeography* 50, 57–69

4. Dormann, C.F. (2023) The rise, and possible fall, of network ecology. In *Defining Agroecology – A Festschrift for Teja Tscharntke*, pp. 143–159., Tredition

5. Blüthgen, N. (2010) [Why network analysis is often disconnected from community ecology: A critique and an ecologist’s guide](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.baae.2010.01.001). *Basic and Applied Ecology* 11, 185–195

6. Blüthgen, N. and Staab, M. (2024) [A Critical Evaluation of Network Approaches for Studying Species Interactions](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-ecolsys-102722-021904). *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics* 55, 65–88

7. Proulx, S.R. *et al.* (2005) [Network thinking in ecology and evolution](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2005.04.004). *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 20, 345–353

8. Brimacombe, C. *et al.* (2023) [Shortcomings of reusing species interaction networks created by different sets of researchers](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3002068). *PLOS Biology* 21, e3002068

9. Brimacombe, C. *et al.* (2024) [Publication-driven consistency in food web structures: Implications for comparative ecology](https://doi.org/10.1002/ecy.4467). *Ecology* n/a, e4467

10. Moulatlet, G. *et al.* (2024) [The scaling of trophic specialization in interaction networks across levels of organization](https://doi.org/10.22541/au.172977303.33335171/v1)Authorea

11. Pringle, R.M. and Hutchinson, M.C. (2020) [Resolving Food-Web Structure](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-ecolsys-110218-024908). *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution and Systematics* 51, 55–80

12. Polis, G.A. (1991) [Complex Trophic Interactions in Deserts: An Empirical Critique of Food-Web Theory](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2462536). *The American Naturalist* 138, 123–155

13. Saberski, E. *et al.* (2024) [The impact of data resolution on dynamic causal inference in multiscale ecological networks](https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-024-07054-z). *Communications Biology* 7, 1–10

14. Gauzens, B. *et al.* (2025) Tailoring interaction network types to answer different ecological questions. *Nature Reviews Biodiversity* DOI: [10.1038/s44358-025-00056-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s44358-025-00056-7)

15. Poisot, T. *et al.* (2016) [Describe, understand and predict: Why do we need networks in ecology?](https://www.jstor.org/stable/48582345) *Functional Ecology* 30, 1878–1882

16. Yodzis, P. (1982) [The Compartmentation of Real and Assembled Ecosystems](https://doi.org/10.1086/284013). *The American Naturalist* 120, 551–570

17. Williams, R.J. and Martinez, N.D. (2000) [Simple rules yield complex food webs](https://doi.org/10.1038/35004572). *Nature* 404, 180–183

18. García-Callejas, D. *et al.* (2023) [Non-random interactions within and across guilds shape the potential to coexist in multi-trophic ecological communities](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.14206). *Ecology Letters* 26, 831–842

19. Clegg, T. *et al.* (2018) [The impact of intraspecific variation on food web structure](https://doi.org/10.1002/ecy.2523). *Ecology* 99, 2712–2720

20. Beckerman, A.P. *et al.* (2006) [Foraging biology predicts food web complexity](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0603039103). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103, 13745–13749

21. Lindeman, R.L. (1942) [The Trophic-Dynamic Aspect of Ecology](https://doi.org/10.2307/1930126). *Ecology* 23, 399–417

22. Dunne, J.A. (2006) The Network Structure of Food Webs. In *Ecological networks: Linking structure and dynamics* (Dunne, J. A. and Pascual, M., eds), pp. 27–86, Oxford University Press

23. Pringle, R.M. (2020) [Untangling Food Webs](https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691195322-020). In *Unsolved Problems in Ecology*, pp. 225–238, Princeton University Press

24. Banville, F. *et al.* (2025) [Deciphering Probabilistic Species Interaction Networks](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.70161). *Ecology Letters* 28, e70161

25. Poisot, T. *et al.* (2016) [The structure of probabilistic networks](https://doi.org/10). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 7, 303–312

26. Berlow, E.L. *et al.* (2004) [Interaction strengths in food webs: Issues and opportunities](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8790.2004.00833.x). *Journal of Animal Ecology* 73, 585–598

27. Jordano, P. (2016) Sampling networks of ecological interactions. *Functional Ecology* DOI: [10.1111/1365-2435.12763](https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2435.12763)

28. Strydom, T. *et al.* (2023) [Graph embedding and transfer learning can help predict potential species interaction networks despite data limitations](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.14228). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 14, 2917–2930

29. Segar, S.T. *et al.* (2020) [The Role of Evolution in Shaping Ecological Networks](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2020.01.004). *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 35, 454–466

30. Gómez, J.M. *et al.* (2010) [Ecological interactions are evolutionarily conserved across the entire tree of life](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature09113). *Nature* 465, 918–921

31. Dalla Riva, G.V. and Stouffer, D.B. (2016) [Exploring the evolutionary signature of food webs’ backbones using functional traits](https://doi.org/10.1111/oik.02305). *Oikos* 125, 446–456

32. Rossberg, A.G. *et al.* (2006) [Food webs: Experts consuming families of experts](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtbi.2005.12.021). *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 241, 552–563

33. Benadi, G. *et al.* (2022) [Quantitative Prediction of Interactions in Bipartite Networks Based on Traits, Abundances, and Phylogeny](https://doi.org/10.1086/714420). *The American Naturalist* 199, 841–854

34. Strydom, T. *et al.* (2022) [Food web reconstruction through phylogenetic transfer of low-rank network representation](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.13835). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 13, 2838–2849

35. Blanchet, F.G. *et al.* (2020) [Co-occurrence is not evidence of ecological interactions](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.13525). *Ecology Letters* 23, 1050–1063

36. Dansereau, G. *et al.* (2024) [Spatially explicit predictions of food web structure from regional-level data](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2023.0166). *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 379

37. Poisot, T. *et al.* (2015) [Beyond species: Why ecological interaction networks vary through space and time](https://doi.org/10.1111/oik.01719). *Oikos* 124, 243–251

38. Caron, D. *et al.* (2024) [Trait-matching models predict pairwise interactions across regions, not food web properties](https://doi.org/10.1111/geb.13807). *Global Ecology and Biogeography* 33, e13807

39. Quintero, E. *et al.* (2024) [Downscaling mutualistic networks from species to individuals reveals consistent interaction niches and roles within plant populations](https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.02.02.578595)bioRxiv, 2024.02.02.578595

40. Stephens, D.W. and Krebs, J.R. (1986) [*Foraging Theory*](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvs32s6b), 1, Princeton University Press

41. Vázquez, D.P. *et al.* (2009) [Uniting pattern and process in plant–animal mutualistic networks: A review](https://doi.org/10.1093/aob/mcp057). *Annals of Botany* 103, 1445–1457

42. Canard, E. *et al.* (2012) [Emergence of Structural Patterns in Neutral Trophic Networks](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0038295). *PLOS ONE* 7, e38295

43. Momal, R. *et al.* (2020) [Tree-based inference of species interaction networks from abundance data](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.13380). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 11, 621–632

44. Pomeranz, J.P.F. *et al.* (2019) [Inferring predator–prey interactions in food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.13125). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 10, 356–367

45. Wootton, K.L. *et al.* (2023) [Towards a modular theory of trophic interactions](https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2435.13954). *Functional Ecology* 37, 26–43

46. Smith, J.G. *et al.* (2021) [Behavioral responses across a mosaic of ecosystem states restructure a sea otter–urchin trophic cascade](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2012493118). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, e2012493118

47. Pawar, S. *et al.* (2012) [Dimensionality of consumer search space drives trophic interaction strengths](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature11131). *Nature* 486, 485–489

48. Portalier, S.M.J. *et al.* (2019) [The mechanics of predator–prey interactions: First principles of physics predict predator–prey size ratios](https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2435.13254). *Functional Ecology* 33, 323–334

49. Cherif, M. *et al.* (2024) [The environment to the rescue: Can physics help predict predator–prey interactions?](https://doi.org/10.1111/brv.13105) *Biological Reviews* 138

50. Pyke, G. (1984) [Optimal Foraging Theory: A Critical Review](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ecolsys.15.1.523). *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution and Systematic* 15, 523–575

51. Brown, J.H. *et al.* (2004) [Toward a Metabolic Theory of Ecology](https://doi.org/10.1890/03-9000). *Ecology* 85, 1771–1789

52. Miele, V. *et al.* (2019) [Non-trophic interactions strengthen the diversity—functioning relationship in an ecological bioenergetic network model](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1007269). *PLOS Computational Biology* 15, e1007269

53. Ings, T.C. *et al.* (2009) [Ecological networks–beyond food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2656.2008.01460.x). *The Journal of Animal Ecology* 78, 253–269

54. Golubski, A.J. and Abrams, P.A. (2011) [Modifying modifiers: What happens when interspecific interactions interact?](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2656.2011.01852.x) *Journal of Animal Ecology* 80, 1097–1108

55. Pilosof, S. *et al.* (2017) [The multilayer nature of ecological networks](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-017-0101). *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 1, 101

56. Staniczenko, P.P.A. *et al.* (2010) [Structural dynamics and robustness of food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2010.01485.x). *Ecology Letters* 13, 891–899

57. Kamaru, D.N. *et al.* (2024) [Disruption of an ant-plant mutualism shapes interactions between lions and their primary prey](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adg1464). *Science* 383, 433–438

58. Kéfi, S. *et al.* (2012) [More than a meal… integrating non-feeding interactions into food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2011.01732.x). *Ecology Letters* 15, 291–300

59. Kéfi, S. *et al.* (2015) [Network structure beyond food webs: Mapping non-trophic and trophic interactions on Chilean rocky shores](https://doi.org/10.1890/13-1424.1). *Ecology* 96, 291–303

60. Buche, L. *et al.* (2024) [Multitrophic Higher-Order Interactions Modulate Species Persistence](https://doi.org/10.1086/729222). *The American Naturalist* 203, 458–472

61. Jordano, P. (2016) [Chasing Ecological Interactions](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.1002559). *PLOS Biology* 14, e1002559

62. Poisot, T. *et al.* (2021) [Global knowledge gaps in species interaction networks data](https://doi.org/10.1111/jbi.14127). *Journal of Biogeography* 48, 1552–1563

63. Biton, B. *et al.* (2024) Inductive link prediction boosts data availability and enables cross-community link prediction in ecological networksEcoEvoRxiv

64. Stock, M. *et al.* (2017) [Linear filtering reveals false negatives in species interaction data](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep45908). *Scientific Reports* 7, 45908

65. Dallas, T. *et al.* (2017) [Predicting cryptic links in host-parasite networks](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1005557). *PLOS Computational Biology* 13, e1005557

66. Poisot, T. *et al.* (2023) [Network embedding unveils the hidden interactions in the mammalian virome](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2023.100738). *Patterns* 4, 100738

67. Strydom, T. *et al.* (2021) [A roadmap towards predicting species interaction networks (across space and time)](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2021.0063). *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 376, 20210063

68. Danet, A. *et al.* (2024) [Response diversity is a major driver of temporal stability in complex food webs](https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.08.29.610288)bioRxiv, 2024.08.29.610288

69. Morales-Castilla, I. *et al.* (2015) [Inferring biotic interactions from proxies](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2015.03.014). *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 30, 347–356

70. Bramon Mora, B. *et al.* (2018) [Identifying a common backbone of interactions underlying food webs from different ecosystems](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-05056-0). *Nature Communications* 9, 2603

71. Yeakel, J.D. *et al.* (2014) [Collapse of an ecological network in Ancient Egypt](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1408471111). *PNAS* 111, 14472–14477

72. Fricke, E.C. *et al.* (2022) [Collapse of terrestrial mammal food webs since the Late Pleistocene](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn4012). *Science* 377, 1008–1011

73. Dunhill, A.M. *et al.* (2024) [Extinction cascades, community collapse, and recovery across a Mesozoic hyperthermal event](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-53000-2). *Nature Communications* 15, 8599

74. Van der Putten, W.H. *et al.* (2010) [Predicting species distribution and abundance responses to climate change: Why it is essential to include biotic interactions across trophic levels](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0037). *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 365, 2025–2034

75. Higino, G.T. *et al.* (2023) [Mismatch between IUCN range maps and species interactions data illustrated using the Serengeti food web](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.14620). *PeerJ* 11, e14620

76. Pollock, L.J. *et al.* (2014) [Understanding co-occurrence by modelling species simultaneously with a Joint Species Distribution Model (JSDM)](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12180). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 5, 397–406

77. Gravel, D. *et al.* (2019) [Bringing Elton and Grinnell together: A quantitative framework to represent the biogeography of ecological interaction networks](https://doi.org/10.1111/ecog.04006). *Ecography* 42, 401–415

78. Shaw, J.O. *et al.* (2024) [A framework for reconstructing ancient food webs using functional trait data](https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.01.30.578036)bioRxiv, 2024.01.30.578036

79. Roopnarine, P.D. (2017) Ecological Modelling of Paleocommunity Food Webs. In *Conservation Paleobiology: Using the Past to Manage for the Future*, pp. 201–226, University of Chicago Press

80. Gravel, D. *et al.* (2013) [Inferring food web structure from predator–prey body size relationships](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12103). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 4, 1083–1090

81. Rohr, R.P. *et al.* (2010) [Modeling Food Webs: Exploring Unexplained Structure Using Latent Traits.](https://doi.org/10.1086/653667) *The American Naturalist* 176, 170–177

82. Van De Walle, R. *et al.* (2023) [Arthropod food webs predicted from body size ratios are improved by incorporating prey defensive properties](https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2656.13905). *Journal of Animal Ecology* 92, 913–924

83. Pichler, M. *et al.* (2020) [Machine learning algorithms to infer trait-matching and predict species interactions in ecological networks](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.13329). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 11, 281–293

84. Caron, D. *et al.* (2022) [Addressing the Eltonian shortfall with trait-based interaction models](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.13966). *Ecology Letters* 25, 889–899

85. Llewelyn, J. *et al.* (2023) [Predicting predator–prey interactions in terrestrial endotherms using random forest](https://doi.org/10.1111/ecog.06619). *Ecography* 2023, e06619

86. Desjardins-Proulx, P. *et al.* (2017) [Ecological interactions and the Netflix problem](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.3644). *PeerJ* 5, e3644

87. Eklöf, A. *et al.* (2013) [Secondary extinctions in food webs: A Bayesian network approach](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12062). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 4, 760–770

88. Cirtwill, A.R. *et al.* (2019) [A quantitative framework for investigating the reliability of empirical network construction](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.13180). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 10, 902–911

89. Erdős, P. and Rényi, A. (1959) On Random Graphs I. *Publicationes Mathematicae* DOI: [10.5486/PMD.1959.6.3-4.12](https://doi.org/10.5486/PMD.1959.6.3-4.12)

90. Fortuna, M.A. and Bascompte, J. (2006) [Habitat loss and the structure of plant-animal mutualistic networks: Mutualistic networks and habitat loss](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2005.00868.x). *Ecology Letters* 9, 281–286

91. Bascompte, J. *et al.* (2003) [The nested assembly of plant-animal mutualistic networks](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1633576100). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100, 9383–9387

92. Bascompte, J. (2007) [Networks in ecology](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.baae.2007.06.003). *Basic and Applied Ecology* 8, 485–490

93. Banville, F. *et al.* (2023) [What constrains food webs? A maximum entropy framework for predicting their structure with minimal biases](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1011458). *PLOS Computational Biology* 19, e1011458

94. Strydom, T. *et al.* (2021) [SVD Entropy Reveals the High Complexity of Ecological Networks](https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2021.623141). *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 9

95. Allesina, S. and Pascual, M. (2009) [Food web models: A plea for groups](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2009.01321.x). *Ecology Letters* 12, 652–662

96. Krause, A.E. *et al.* (2003) [Compartments revealed in food-web structure](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature02115). *Nature* 426, 282–285

97. Allesina, S. *et al.* (2008) [A General Model for Food Web Structure](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1156269). *Science* 320, 658–661

98. Cohen, J.E. *et al.* (1990) *Community Food Webs: Data and Theory*, Springer-Verlag

99. Cattin, M.-F. *et al.* (2004) [Phylogenetic constraints and adaptation explain food-web structure](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature02327). *Nature* 427, 835–839

100. Brose, U. *et al.* (2006) [Allometric scaling enhances stability in complex food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2006.00978.x). *Ecology Letters* 9, 1228–1236

101. Schneider, F.D. *et al.* (2016) [Animal diversity and ecosystem functioning in dynamic food webs](https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms12718). *Nature Communications* 7, 12718

102. Delmas, E. *et al.* (2017) [Simulations of biomass dynamics in community food webs](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12713). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 8, 881–886

103. Canard, E.F. *et al.* (2014) [Empirical Evaluation of Neutral Interactions in Host-Parasite Networks.](https://doi.org/10.1086/675363) *The American Naturalist* 183, 468–479

104. Krishna, A. *et al.* (2008) [A neutral-niche theory of nestedness in mutualistic networks](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0706.2008.16540.x). *Oikos* 117, 1609–1618

105. Petchey, O.L. *et al.* (2008) [Size, foraging, and food web structure](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0710672105). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, 4191–4196

106. Curtsdotter, A. *et al.* (2019) [Ecosystem function in predator–prey food webs—confronting dynamic models with empirical data](https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2656.12892). *Journal of Animal Ecology* 88, 196–210

107. Hui, C. and Richardson, D.M. (2019) [How to Invade an Ecological Network](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2018.11.003). *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 34, 121–131

108. Marjakangas, E.-L. *et al.* (2025) [Fundamental Interaction Niches: Towards a Functional Understanding of Ecological Networks’ Resilience](https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.70146). *Ecology Letters* 28, e70146

109. Hao, X. *et al.* (2025) [Global Projection of Terrestrial Vertebrate Food Webs Under Future Climate and Land-Use Changes](https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.70061). *Global Change Biology* 31, e70061

110. Thuiller, W. *et al.* (2024) [Navigating the integration of biotic interactions in biogeography](https://doi.org/10.1111/jbi.14734). *Journal of Biogeography* 51, 550–559

111. Wooster, E.I.F. *et al.* (2024) [Australia’s recently established predators restore complexity to food webs simplified by extinction](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2024.09.049). *Current Biology* 34, 5164–5172.e2

112. Becker, D.J. *et al.* (2022) [Optimising predictive models to prioritise viral discovery in zoonotic reservoirs](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-5247(21)00245-7). *The Lancet Microbe* 3, e625–e637

113. Terry, J.C.D. and Lewis, O.T. (2020) [Finding missing links in interaction networks](https://doi.org/10.1002/ecy.3047). *Ecology* 101, e03047

114. Roopnarine, P.D. (2006) [Extinction Cascades and Catastrophe in Ancient Food Webs](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4096814). *Paleobiology* 32, 1–19

115. Poisot, T. (2023) [Guidelines for the prediction of species interactions through binary classification](https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.14071). *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 14, 1333–1345

116. Dansereau, G. *et al.* (2024) Overcoming the disconnect between interaction networks and biodiversity conservation and management

117. Fortin, M.-J. *et al.* (2021) [Network ecology in dynamic landscapes](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2020.1889). *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 288, rspb.2020.1889, 20201889