Migrating distance sampling projects from Distance for Windows to the Distance R package

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Introduction

The Distance software (Thomas et al., 2010) has been downloaded >40,000 times in its 20-year history. Much of the underlying machinery is written in R. For some users, there may be benefits to performing the analysis with the underlying R code, rather than working with the graphical user interface (GUI).

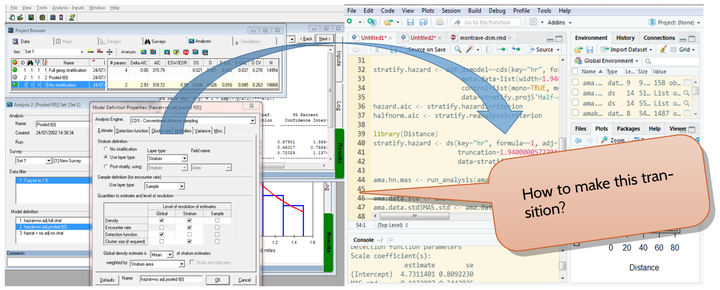

Fig. 1: Traditional Distance for Windows interface (left) and distance sampling analysis in R (right).

Challenges hindering the transition between analysis with the GUI and analyses in R are two-fold:

- Legacy data reside in Distance (GUI) projects, unavailable for importing into R, and
- Analyses that are easily described using the GUI may be difficult to specify, particularly if analyst is not proficient in R.

How to bridge between the two?

Distance GUI projects contain essential information necessary to conduct an analysis. The fundamental purpose of the `readdst` package is to access this information and place it into R objects for further scrutiny.

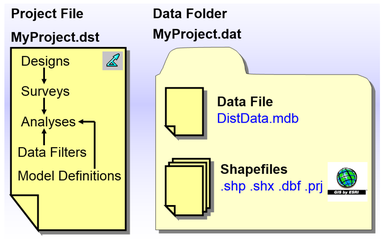

Figure 1: Database structure of a Distance project.

The elements of a distance sampling analysis are contained inside Distance project files in the form of an Access database.

1. Data
2. model definitions
3. analysis results

Mining information from tables within the database, via either `RODBC` (Windows) or `mdb-tools` (Macs). Then it is a matter of performing the following three steps.

- Trick is to extract contents of (2) and translate into R code
- Target the results of previous step to contents of (1) the data
- Perhaps contrast results of R analysis with results stored in the Access database

Applications–Legacy projects

- We try to do this. what?
- we try to do that.

Learning structure of R interface

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Fig. 3: The organisation for which we work

Comparative analysis of difficult data

- We try to do this. what?
- we try to do that.

Caveats

`readdst` is not able to translate all GUI analyses into R code. Current limitations are inability to translate

- analyses using the `dsm`, `mads` and `Dssim` engines,
- analyses using post-stratification and
- bootstraps for variance estimation.

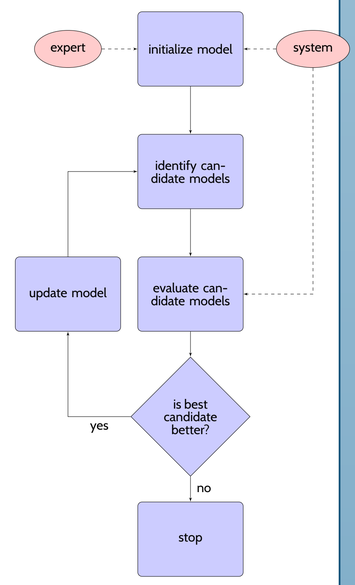

Fig. 4: Workflow for converting and analysing Distance project.

Workflow

A standard use of the package is to convert and dataset and set of analyses from a Distance GUI project and re-run the analyses in R. This is done using the workflow at left, based around the use of the `convert_project()` function in concert with `run_analysis()`

Additional information