## Functional diversity in aquatic ecosystems yields enhanced nutritional benefits

## Abstract

While food provisioning is one of the most widely acknowledged ecosystem services provided by aquatic ecosystems, the role of seafood as a source of valuable micronutrients scarce in the human diet is often overlooked. The ecological mechanisms responsible for a nutritionally diverse set of seafood species are not well understood, despite heavy research emphasis on the ecological mechanisms responsible for fisheries productivity. A primary challenge in linking ecological processes to human well being is identifying comparable metrics for ecological properties and human benefits. For nutritional value, one metric that facilitates comparisons is the nutrient content in an edible portion relative to daily reference intake values (DRI). We used dietary food composition data to analyze the relationship between ecological structure and the nutritional value of aquatic species in terms of DRI. We find that there is a high degree of variability in nutrient profiles across taxa, and that increasing functional diversity contributes to increased nutritional diversity. For example, filter-feeding molluscs represent a nutritionally distinct and valuable source of minerals (ie. calcium, iron and zinc), which are not present at equivalent levels in other functional groups. Finally, we test whether functional traits explain species’ nutritional value to human consumers for 430 species of fish from all major oceanic and freshwater eco-regions. We find that an ecological trait-based approach is effective at simplifying the complexity of aquatic food webs into a few key axes that strongly control the composition of micronutrients in fish assemblages. For some, but not all, nutrients we analyzed (e.g. Ca, Hg, EPA, DHA), the nutrient content of edible portions varied predictably among species with latitude and body size, consistent with the physiological functional roles of micronutrients in fish. Our results suggest that the availability of micronutrients in fish assemblages may depend on geography and functional composition of the catch. Our approach integrates ecological variation and patterns in the human consumption of species to explicitly link ecological structure with one metric of human well-being to suggest that a diverse fish assemblage can support a more nutritious diet to local seafood consumers.

**Introduction**

1. **Many coastal human communities rely on wild harvests from local aquatic ecosystems to meet requirements for a wide range of macro- and micronutrients, such as vitamins and minerals (Kuhnlein and Receveur 2007, Kuhnlein et al. 2009, Kawarazuka and Bene 2011). The ecology of food security, an important ecosystem service, is not just about predicting yields, it is about understanding the ecological conditions that lead to a stable supply of nutritionally diverse foods.**
2. **A primary challenge of linking ecological processes with human well being is finding comparable units and metrics for ecological properties and human benefits.** In the context of human nutrition, one metric that facilitates comparisons is the nutrient content in an edible portion relative to dietary reference intake values (DRI).
3. **Here, we synthesize fish nutritional content data to quantify variation in nutritional quality among aquatic taxa and test whether aspects of ecological structure (such as functional group diversity, and individual level variables such as body size and trophic position) are related to variation in nutritional profile from the perspective of a human diet.** First, we review the importance of nutrition as an ecosystem function or service. Then, we present a newly synthesized database of fish nutritional content and traits from X species of fish from all ocean regions. We analyzed this database to characterize the range of variability in fish tissue nutrient content among fish species consumed around the globe, and test whether nutrient profiles of commonly consumed fish species are related to species’ traits, including body size, trophic position and habitat associations, which are broadly related to the function and form of species in aquatic systems (Woodward et al. 2005, other ref?). Given that fish is known to be a high quality source of essential micronutrients, but fish consumption may be limited to a small number of portions per week (reference?), we sought to identify which species are the most nutrient dense and contribute at least 25% of DRI in a single portion.

4. While the nutritional value of seafood has been widely recognized, the ecological mechanisms responsible for a nutritionally diverse set of seafood species are not well understood. **This study is an important advance because it explicitly integrates well-established metrics of nutritional value (i.e. DRI) and ecological variation (i.e. functional group diversity, body size) to characterize the relationship between ecological structure and human well-being.**

**Nutrition as an ecosystem function and service**

Despite its clear links to human well being, the role of aquatic assemblages in provisioning of essential micronutrients has been under-represented in marine ecosystem service concepts. For both human and non-human consumers, the nutritional quality of prey species plays a fundamental role in ecosystem function. Food webs characterized by nutritionally valuable prey support higher consumer and predator biomass and have higher trophic transfer efficiencies (Hecky 1984, Muller Navarra et al. 2000, Brett et al. 2009). Changes in forage fish communities from lipid-rich to lipid-poor fish in the Pacific Ocean have caused predatory marine birds and mammals to shift their diet to less nutritionally valuable lipid-poor fish and suffer population declines (Rosen and Trites 2006; Romano et al. 2006, Osterblom et al. 2008).

For human consumers, fish are a good source of high quality protein, a range of micronutrients and essential fatty acids (Tacon and Metian 2013). In 2009, aquatic species accounted for 16.6% of the global total supply of animal protein, providing more than three billion people with almost 20% of their average per capita intake of animal protein (FAO ref). However, the role of fish as a source of essential micronutrients may be even more important than as a source of protein (Allison et al. 2007). Fish is important in the diets of many poor populations suffering from vitamin and mineral deficiencies (Roos et al. 2007, Tacon and Metian 2013). In many vulnerable communities around the world, fish consumption plays an important role in combating micronutrient deficiencies (Kawarazuka and Bene 2011). For example, in rural Bangladesh, some of the poorest communities are heavily dependent on small fish from capture fisheries to meet their micronutrient needs. Consumption of small indigenous fishes contributes 40% and 31% of the total recommended intakes of vitamin A and calcium, respectively, at household level in the peak fish production season (Roos et al. 2007). Locally caught seafood contributes significantly to micronutrient intakes in Arctic Canadian Indigenous populations (Kuhnlein and Receveur 2007, Johnson-Down and Egeland 2010).

**Dietary Reference Intakes as a metric of nutritional value**

A primary challenge in linking ecological processes with human well-being is finding comparable units and metrics for ecological properties and human benefits. The value of a fish species in terms of human nutrition benefits can be quantified as the nutrient content in an edible portion relative to Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) values. The DRI is the daily intake level of a nutrient that is considered to be sufficient to meet the requirements of 97–98% of healthy individuals in every demographic (National Academies of Sciences 2011). Fish species vary widely in their concentration of essential nutrients (USDA 2011). For example, assuming a serving size of 85g of fish, sardines (1.9 g DHA per 100 g tissue) and Pacific herring (0.83 g DHA/100g) provide the recommended level of 1.0g/day EPA and DHA in a single serving, while pink salmon, canary rockfish and surf smelt would require 1.2-1.5 servings, while pacific hake (0.15g/100g DHA) and pollock (0.24 g DHA/100g) would require 4-5 servings to meet the recommended daily requirements (Hyuhn and Kitts 2009). Thus, not all species are equally nutritionally valuable. This variability in essential fatty acid (EFA) content per serving size is related to the total fat content of the fish: the characteristically lean fish like pollock and hake have relatively low contents of EFAs, while the more lipid-rich fish have higher EFA contents.