The Spatial and Temporal Domains of Modern Ecology

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Abstract

In order to properly understand ecological phenomena, it is necessary to quantify their behavior over the range of spatial and temporal scales at which they manifest. Ecology has been concerned with this need since the early 1990s, and the ability to collect multi-scaled ecological observations has grown rapidly since then. Characterizing the spatial and temporal domains of modern ecological observations can therefore provide important insight into the field's progress in understanding towards a more comprehensive understanding of ecosystem behaviour. To characterize these domains, we conducted a meta-analysis of recent (2004-2014) ecological studies, in which we quantified four primary dimensions of their

reported observations: plot resolution, sampling interval, effective duration (time between start and end of temporal replicates), and effective extent (area enclosed by spatial replicates). We also estimated the *actual* extent and duration, which respectively represent the summed area and time covered by spatial and temporal replicates. Replace this text with more specific summary of observed scales: Here we show that ecology remains a largely field-based discipline that makes observations within generally narrow spatial and temporal domains, despite the well-established literature on the importance of scale (*1–3*).

The scales at which ecosystems are observed plays a critical role in shaping our understanding of their structure and function (*1–3*). Ecological patterns emerge from temporal and spatial domains that may be coarser or finer than the processes that shape them, which means that investigation across multiple scales is the *sine qua non* for understanding ecological phenomena (*1*). This awareness has grown rapidly since the 1980s, accelerated by the need to understand how changes in the global climate, ocean, and land systems are affecting everything from individual populations (*4*) to entire biomes (*5*), while technological advances in areas such as remote sensing and genetics are making it ever-easier to quantify ecological features across a broad range of scales (*2, 6*).

Given this awareness of the centrality of scale to understanding ecology, and the growing ability to study ecological phenomena across a broad range of spatial and temporal scales, it is important to assess the scales at which current ecological research is conducted. To gain insight into this question, we quantified the spatial and temporal domains of empirical observations that were reported in a representative sample of studies published between 2004-2014 in the top 30 ecological journals (by impact factor). Empirical observations provide the necessary means for developing and testing the models that explain why ecological patterns vary in time and space (*1, 7*), thus it stands to reason that the temporal and spatial distributions of ecological observations may be indicative of modern ecology's progress towards achieving a holistic, predictive understanding of ecosystems (*1, 2*).

We characterized observational domains along two key spatial dimensions, resolution (grain) and extent, and their temporal corollaries, interval and duration (Table 1). Here resolution is the area of an individual spatial replicate, or the two-dimensional space in which all measurable features of a natural object(s) were recorded (as opposed to sub-sampled), while extent is the area enclosed by the outer-most spatial replicates, or, if the system or habitat being sampled was distinct from its surrounding matrix (e.g. forest patches in grassland habitats), the summed area of sampled patches (see SI for full definition). Interval refers to the average time elapsed between individual temporal replicates, and duration is the time elapsed between the first and last temporal replicates, or, in the case of temporally unreplicated observations, the estimated time spent collecting the observation (SI). We also calculated two additional metrics, the integrated area of spatial replicates (i.e. resolution multiplied by number of replicates) and the summed observational time of all temporal replicates. We estimated these additional dimensions to evaluate the degree to which the actual scales of ecological observations differ from those they ostensibly represent, and therefore refer to them as the *actual* extent and *actual* duration.

Table 1: The dimensions of ecological observations estimated in this meta-analysis.

Dimension	**Description**
Resolution	Area (m^2) of an individual spatial replicate (plot)
Extent	Area (ha) encompassed by all spatial replicates
Actual extent	Summed area (ha) of all spatial replicates
Interval	Time elapsed (days) between successive temporal replicates
Duration	Time elapsed (days) between first and last temporal replicates
Actual duration	Summed observational time (days) of all temporal replicates

We calculated these dimensions from 379 discrete observations reported within a 134 paper subset of 348 randomly selected articles (from 42,918 total). An additional 62 papers that were cited as the source of observations in the selected papers were also reviewed. We confined our analysis to observations made of "natural" (*7*), or non-experimentally manipulated, systems, given that the inclusion of experiments could have skewed our assessments towards the relatively fine scales at which such studies typically focus.

To account for uncertainty in the estimation of observational dimensions due to 1) unclear methodological description in the reviewed papers, and 2) observer interpretation, we conducted a resampling analysis (n=1000) in which scale values were randomly perturbed within the bounds of estimated inter-observer variation (SI). We constructed histograms for each dimension from the mean of the perturbed ensembles, and estimated 95% confidence intervals for each histogram bin (Fig. 1). We constructed kernel density estimates from the full resampled ensemble in order to assess observational distributions within different juxtapositions of the four space-time dimensions (Fig. 2).

In terms of resolution, the majority (67%) of observations were collected in plots of <1 m^2 resolution, 24% were collected within plots of 1 m^2 up to 1 ha, and the remaining 9% in plots of ≥ 1 ha (Fig. 1A). The extent of 19% of observations was <10 ha, 23% covered 10-1,000 ha, 42% 1000-1,000,000 ha, and 16% $>1,000,000$ ha (Fig. 1B).

In the temporal dimensions, 37% of observations were not repeated (Fig. 1C), 17% were repeated at short intervals (sub-second to daily), 20% at daily to monthly intervals, 18% at monthly to yearly intervals, and 8% at yearly to decadal intervals. Duration was one day or less for 31% of sampled observations, while 10% covered one day to one month, 23% lasted one month to one year, 27% covered 1-10 years, and 10% spanned a decade or more (including several paleoecological studies covering centuries to millennia; Fig. 1D).

Juxtaposing these observational dimensions provides further insight into the spatio-temporal distribution of ecological observations and the domains in which they are concentrated (Fig. 2). Contrasting resolution with interval reveals that the majority of temporally replicated observations

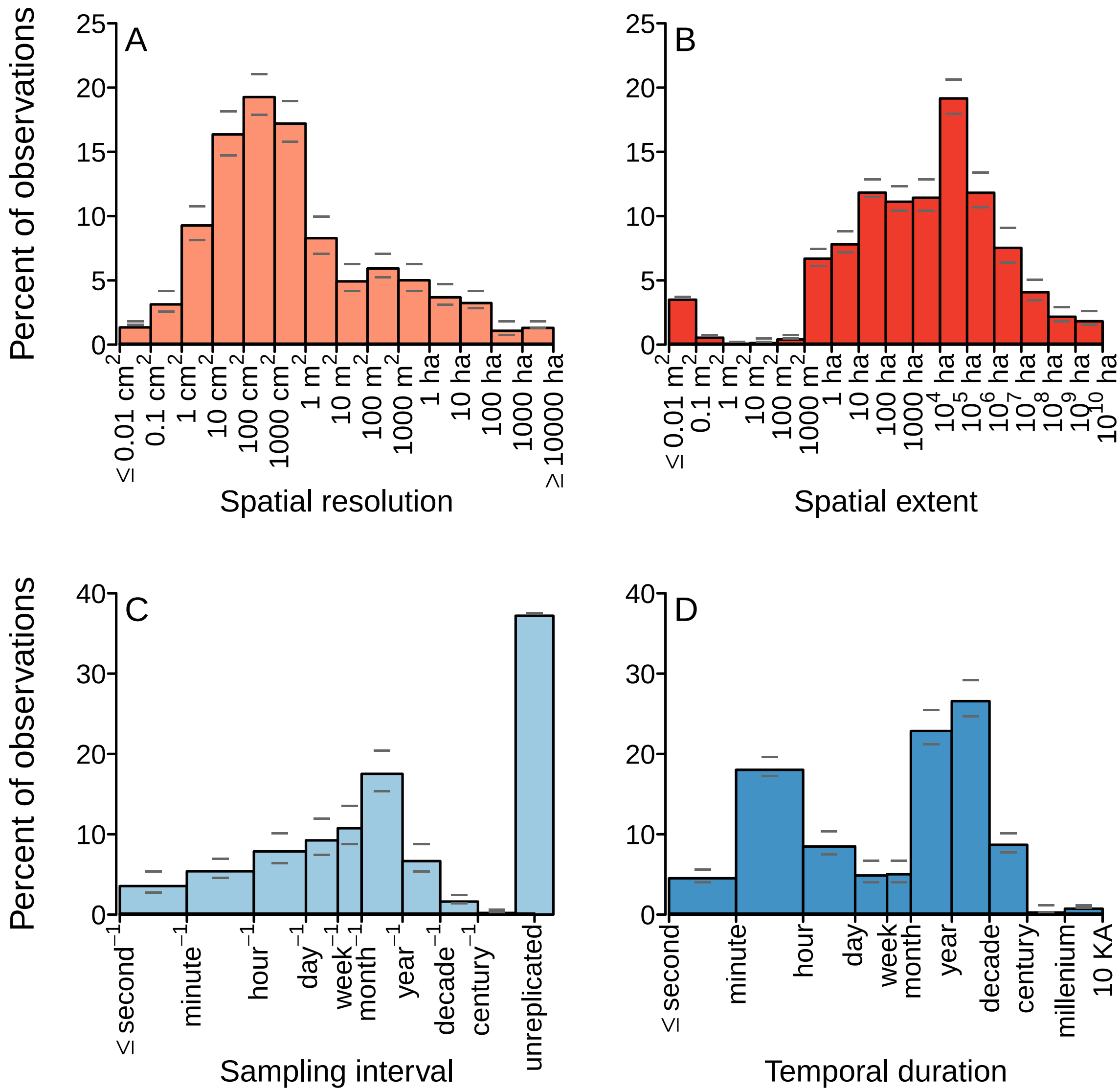

Figure 1: Histograms of the resolution (A), extent (B), interval (C), and duration (D) of observations collected from the surveyed ecological studies. Bars represent the average percentages for each bin realized after 1000 perturbed resamples, while grey bars indicate the 95% confidence interval.

(the 37% that were unreplicated were excluded because they lack interval values) had resolutions of 10 cm^2-1 m^2 and were revisited at daily to yearly intervals (Fig. 2A). A less dense, oblong concentration of observations bounded on the lower right by monthly to yearly observations at 100 m^2 and on the upper left by near-daily to monthly observations with 1-10 ha resolution is also evident. This lower right to upper left orientation reflects the tradeoff between resolution and interval that is typical of satellite imaging (*8*), and stands in contrast to the upper right to lower left line that stretches between this concentration and the high frequency (minute-hour intervals), high spatial resolution (0.1-100 cm^2) observations. This line demonstrates the opposite tradeoff that occurs with field-based observations, where larger plot sizes demand greater effort that in turn reduces sampling frequency (*9*).

Contrasting duration and extent (for all observations) reveals two primary domains of observational concentration. The first consists of observations spanning one month to one decade in time and 10-1000 ha in space, while the second is defined by observations of one year to several decades that cover 10,000 to 1,000,000 ha (Fig. 2B). Three other notable, but lesser areas of concentration are also evident, including small area observations (0.1-1 ha) covering one month to decade, and short duration, temporally unreplicated observations ($<$1 day) of either 1-10 ha or 10,000-1,000,000 ha.

Comparing the two spatial dimensions against one another (for all observations) shows a primary concentration of observations with 10 cm^2 to 100 m^2 resolution that have extents ranging between slightly over 1,000 to nearly 1,000,000 ha (Fig. 2C). The second-most prominent concentration consists of higher resolution (1 cm^2-1 m^2), smaller extent (10-1000 ha) observations, beneath which lies a third and fainter concentration of 1-1,000 cm^2 resolution, 1000 m^2 to $<$10 ha. These three concentrations suggest a tendency for observational extent to increase with resolution, which is a relationship that becomes more pronounced in the (less densely observed) portion of the domain where resolutions $\geq$100 m^2.

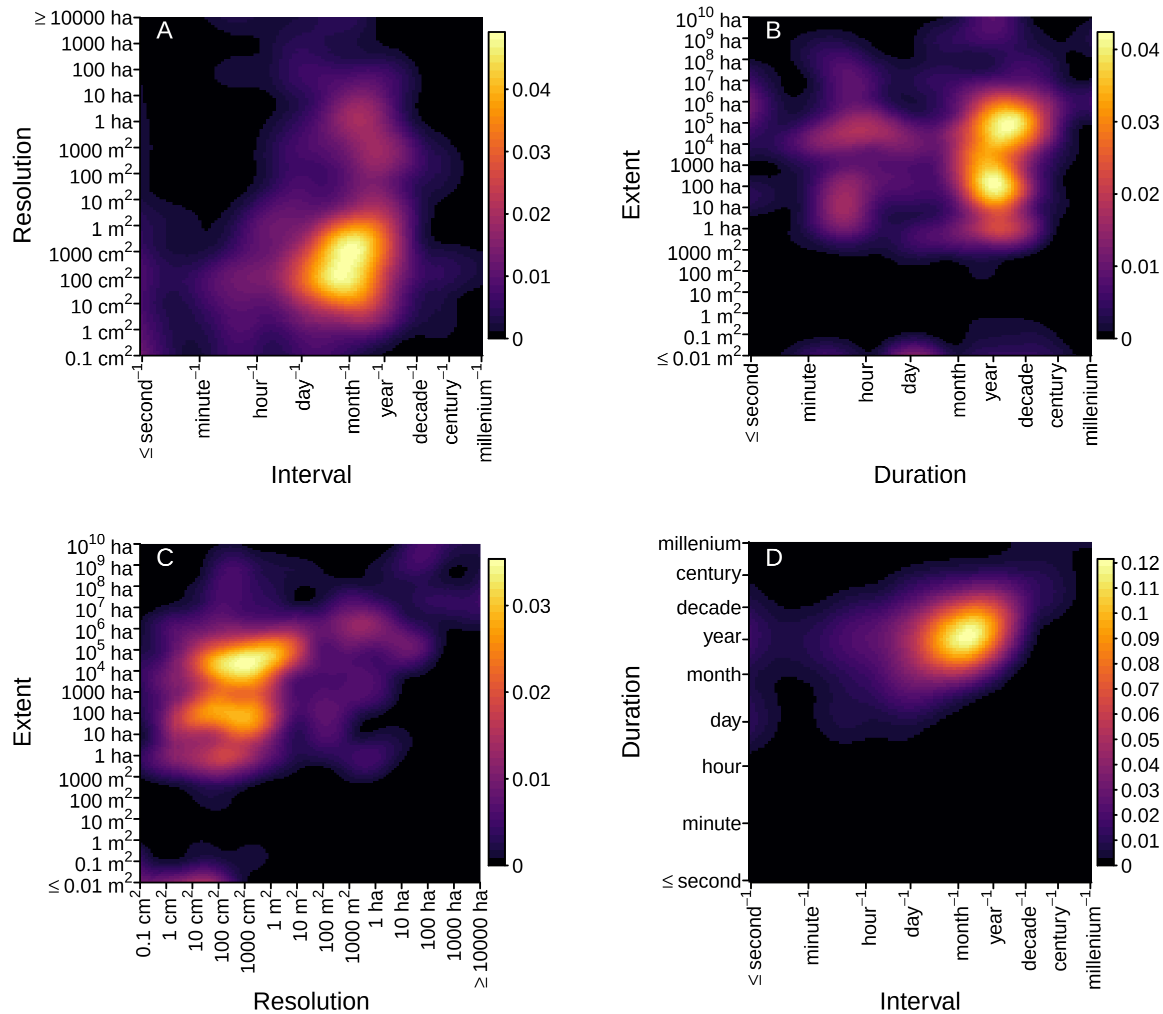

Figure 2: Two-dimensional kernel density estimates of observational densities within the domains defined by A) interval and resolution (of temporally replicated observations only), B) duration and extent, C) resolution and extent, and D) interval and duration (of temporally replicated observations). Density estimates were applied to the log-transformed values of each observational dimension, and density estimates are rescaled to represent percentages.

A similar tendency for duration to increase with interval was also evident amongst temporally replicated observations (Fig. 2D), where the majority of observations were repeated at daily to decadal intervals and spanned $\geq$ 1 month to $<$100 years. The orientation of this concentration shows that observations lasting one year to one decade tend to have corresponding intervals, while those lasting one month to one year have daily to monthly intervals. This suggests that most long-duration observations have just a single temporal replicate. The fainter densities of observations having sub-daily intervals shows that relatively few high frequency, long duration ecological measurements are undertaken.

Uncertainties in quantifying observational scales

This analysis did not necessarily quantify the scales *represented* by ecological observations (SI). Observations that were non-continuous in time or space (e.g. point-based field measurements) may effectively represent larger scales than our estimates suggest, due to phenomenon-dependent factors such as autocorrelation and representativeness of the sampling scheme (***?***, *10–13*). From a spatial perspective, this concern does not apply to contiguous sampling schemes, which were primarily based on remote sensing and cover the largest area, thus the net effect is that this analysis may underestimate the effective areas of smaller observational extents. From a temporal perspective, our analysis likely underestimates the effective duration of many observations, particularly those where instantaneous, repeated measures of slow-changing ecological features were made. Snapshots in time may be sufficient to capture the temporal dynamics of such phenomena (e.g. changes in vegetation cover (*14*)), and for these the total time elapsed between the first and last measurements (the span of observation) may more closely approximate effective duration. However, many studies focused on more dynamic phenomena, and for these long periods of continuous observation may be more important for understanding dynamics than frequent repeats. For example, wildfire extent and duration can be mapped by daily return satellites (*15, 16*), but the instantaneous nature of the imaging means that it cannot be used to directly measure fire behavior (*17*), except patterns resolving themselves at scales greater than 12-24 hours. For this reason, and to provide a consistent standard for estimating duration, we recorded actual duration.

Adding to our motivation to record actual observational scales was the fact that most studies provided insufficient methodological detail to judge whether sampling schemes were suitable matched to and representative of the phenomena they were measuring. The observational scales were not clearly reported in many studies, such that we had to estimate spatial resolution and extent in 62% and 68% of cases, respectively, and temporal interval and duration in 40% and 86% of cases. Although the confidence intervals around our scale estimates (Fig. 1) suggests that our findings are robust to this level of uncertainty, it would have likely confounded efforts to estimate effective scales.

Insights into the scales of modern ecology

Despite these caveats, our results provide valuable insight into the spatial and temporal domains being addressed by modern ecological research. Our results show that most observations are collected at small spatial scales, are either unrepeated or relatively infrequent ($\geq$1 month interval), and in aggregate cover relatively narrow periods of time ($\leq$1 month). Very little research is conducted at high spatial and temporal resolutions over large areas or for long time periods, indicating that, despite the well-established understanding of the importance of multi-scale assessments for understanding ecological patterns and processes (*1, 3*), efforts focused on larger scales are still relatively sparse within the discipline (*1, 3*). Furthermore, the unclear documenting of observational scales implies that scale is not a primary concern in much ecological research (*2, 18*). Taken together, this narrowness and poor documentation (a tendency that is also evident in the geographical sciences (*19*)) suggests that the ecological understanding drawn from many of these observations may have limited generalizability (*3, 18, 19*), a concern that has been previously noted due to ecology's geographical bias towards anthropogenically undisturbed and temperate ecosystems (*20*).

The generally small spatial scales of observation is a consequence of the continued dominance of field-based research, and the limited use of methods that allow larger areas to be comprehensively observed, such as remote sensing. Despite early and repeated calls for ecologists to use remote sensing because it provides a synoptic view that field measurements cannot (*21–23*), and subsequent demonstration of its importance for multi-scale studies (*24, 25*), our results indicate this method has not yet been widely adopted in ecological research. Two reasons lie behind this slow uptake. First, remote sensing can be a challenging method for ecologists to learn, many of whom may not have access to appropriate training (*23*). Second, satellite observations typically have lower information content than field measurements for a given location, and in many cases only provide proxy measures for the ecological features of interest, such as forest understorey structure (*26*), thereby making ecologists less inclined to use the technology (*21*).

In contrast to remote sensing, ecologists have made broader use of technologies that increase the temporal resolution of observations. Automated sensors were used to record 12% of all observations, and accounted for most very high frequency measurements (intervals $\leq$1 hour). As with spatial data, finely resolved temporal data can be aggregated to facilitate multi-scale analyses (and many of the reviewed studies that used automated sensing aggregated the resulting observations before analyzing them), whereas longer-interval data (e.g. annual biomass accumulation) cannot be disaggregated into shorter interval measurements (e.g. weekly biomass accumulation) without interpolation, which turns data into modeled, rather than direct, observations.

In the coming years, rapid technological advances should increase the concentration of ecological observations in currently under-represented domains. The growing numbers of high-resolution satellite sensors, together with new analytical platforms that provide free access to large volumes of pre-processed data and computational power (*27*), will lower technical barriers that have so far prevented ecologists from adopting this observational technology (*23*). Similarly, the advent of unmanned systems offers the ability to measure ecological features at high spatial and temporal frequencies over large areas (*28*), which were scales that were previously impractical to access. The ever-falling cost of sensor technology and the ubiquity of cell phones also means that ecologists, together with a growing army of citizen-scientists, have the unprecedented ability to make spatially dense, high frequency observations over large areas (*29–32*). A greater attentiveness to scale in general, including more meticulous documentation of observed dimensions, may help to facilitate the spread of ecological research to sparsely studied scales, while improving transferability of knowledge within the discipline.

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Acknowledgements This work was supported by funds from the Princeton Environmental Institute Grand Challenges program and the NASA New Investigator Program (NNX15AC64G). Erle Ellis, Jason Chang, and Labeeb Ahmed of the GLOBE Project (http://globe.umbc.edu) were supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation (1125210).