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Mesocosm experiments revealed variable effects of non-native crayfish on native crayfish and aquatic ecosystems

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**ABSTRACT**

***Keywords:***

**INTRODUCTION**

Freshwater crayfish are one of the most imperiled groups of aquatic invertebrates in North America ( ) with about 50% of them threatened with extinction (Taylor et al. 2007). Despite their very restricted distribution coupled with habitat loss, non-native crayfish impacts cause a serious threat to the existence of native crayfish (Taylor et al. 2007; Richmon et al. 2015). Non-native crayfish are typically much aggressive than native counterparts and may outcompete native species for limited food and shelter ( ). Additionally, non-native crayfish may degrade the quality of aquatic habitats, mainly due to removal of aquatic macrophytes and macroinvertebrates ( ), and also act as vectors for diseases such as crayfish plague ( ).

Paragraph elaborating population/community level impacts- Sujan.

Paragraph elaborating ecosystem level impacts, heavy on leaf litter decomposition and water quality

Previous laboratory experiments showed that non-native red-swamp crayfish (*Procambarus clarkii*) and virile crayfish (*Orconectes virilis*) could outcompete native Piedmont crayfish (*Cambarus sp. C*) due to aggressive interactions and cause a significant reduction of survival of the native species under sympatry (Hale et al. 2016).

Although laboratory experiments generate limited information due to simplicity of the experimental systems and conditions under the results were generated, they may provide important first insights to understand the potential impacts and may help designing experiments to gather more realistic data. One approach would be to employ field mesocosm experiments which allow native and invasive species to interact under semi-natural conditions, allow experimenters to include natural variation of environmental conditions, adjust animal densities according to natural conditions and also to include other potential prey and predators (Henkanaththegedara and Stockwell 2014, 2015). Hill and Lodge successfully used large mesocosms to assess crayfish competition for habitats (1994) and effects of predation on crayfish growth and mortality (1999).

**METHODS**

*Collection, acclimation and preparation of crayfish*

Invasive virile crayfish (*O. virilis*) were collected from Clinch River at Dungannon in Smith County, Virginia using seines and dip nets. The native Piedmont crayfish (*Cambarus sp. C*) were collected from a first order tributary of Buffalo Creek in Prince Edward County, Virginia using dip nets. All crayfish were collected in fourth week of May 2016 and kept with stream water in coolers during transportation. Subsequently, crayfish were acclimated in 1250 L plastic mesocosms for 24 hours before stocking.

*Mesocosm setup and Experimental design*

We conducted a mesocosm experiment using thirty 1250 L circular plastic tanks as experimental units. Tanks were setup in an outside field at Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia allowing us to include the effects of natural variation of environmental conditions (e.g. temperature and precipitation) and natural colonizers of water bodies. Mesocosms were filled with treated tap water up to 30cm (XXX L) and aged for two weeks before stocking crayfish. Each mesocosm was provided with 8 pieces of 7.5 cm PVC tubes as shelter for crayfish and covered with poultry fence to exclude predators. About 70% of the tank surface was covered with shade cloth to mimic the average shade of a typical crayfish habitat and to avoid excess direct sunlight (Figure 1). Our experimental design included two controls and three treatments with 6 replicates for each group. We stocked crayfish according to following scheme allowing us to assess density-dependent invasive crayfish effects on native crayfish.

Table 1: Experimental design

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Crayfish species** | **Native control** | **Invasive low-density** | **Equal density** | **Invasive high-density** | **Invasive control** |
| Native *Cambarus sp. C* | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Invasive *Orconectes virilis* | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 4 |
| Total crayfish | 4 | 6 | 8 | 10 | 4 |

All crayfish were weighed for wet biomass (to the nearest 0.1 g) using a digital scale, and carapace length was measured (to the nearest 0.1 mm) using dial calipers before stocking. We attempted to stock each mesocosm with at least one male and one female reproductively mature crayfish of each species (carapace length > XX mm). We selected additional crayfish to represent a range of sizes and sexes depending on the availability of crayfish. This allowed us to track individual crayfish growth assuming equal growth rates of individuals within the same species. Additionally, we stocked only intermolt individuals and attempted to match average body size of invasive crayfish with native crayfish to eliminate any biased results due to extremely large crayfish.

*Crayfish sampling*

Crayfish were sampled using dip nets at day 18 (midpoint) and at the conclusion of the experiment at day 35. Individual crayfish were weighed for wet biomass (to the nearest 0.1 g) using a digital scale, and carapace length was measured (to the nearest 0.1 mm) using dial calipers.

*Leaf litter decomposition rate*

*Water quality measurements*

The effect of crayfish community composition and density on leaf litter decomposition was measured using leaf packs made from senescent tulip poplar leaves (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). The leaves were collected in the fall of 2013 by gently tugging senescent leaves still attached to the tree. Only leaves that came off without resistance were collected. After collection, the leaves were air dried until use. Leaf packs were constructed by softening 1.5 g of leaves in deionized water for 5 minutes and then binding them at the petioles with a 19 mm metal binder clip. Prior to adding to the experimental mesocosms, the leaf packs were leached in deionized water for approximately 72 h. On June 3, 2016, after the leaching period, 3 leaf packs were randomly added to each of the experimental mesocosms, taking care to distribute them around the tank.

To determine the initial mass of the leaf packs after leaching and handling, a leaf pack was added to 11 randomly selected mesocosms and then immediately removed by gently lifting the leaf pack as a 1 mm mesh sieve was placed under the leaf pack and used to lift it from the water. We collected any leaf material retained by the sieve even if it was not attached to the binder clip. After removal from the mesocosm, the binder clip was removed and the collected leaves were placed into a paper bag, returned to the lab and dried at 50o C for 48 hours. The dried leaves were then homogenized with a mortar and pestle and ash free dry mass (AFDM) was determined by loss on ignition at 550o C for 4 h.

Leaf pack mass loss over time was determined by harvesting and processing a single haphazardly selected leaf pack from each mesocosm on days 3, 10, and 24 using the same methods described above. During collection each leaf pack was carefully scanned in the field for macroinvertebrate colonization, although none were ever found.

On June 2, June 16, June 30, July 22, and August 5, we measured the temperature, dissolved oxygen, percent oxygen saturation, and conductivity in each tank using a YSI SONDE NAME. On the same dates we collected a 500 ml water sample from approximately mid-depth in each tank by submerging an open wide-mouth plastic bottle. These water samples were returned to the lab where we measured pH using a PH METER and filtered (GFF) 10 and 30 ml samples for spectral absorbance profile and dissolved organic carbon and total nitrogen, respectively. We measured spectral absorbance using a 1 cm cuvette in a Nanospec ####. Dissolved organic carbon and total nitrogen were determined using a DOC METER after acidification with 2N HCl. After filtering the above samples, we clogged the filter with additional sample if necessary and extracted the filter in 90% acetone a -20o C for 24 hours. Chlorophyll a, corrected for phaeophyton by acidification with 0.1N HCl, was measured with a Turner Trilogy Fluorometer.

On August 6 we measured the Secchi depth of each tank.

*Data analysis*

**Results**

**Discussion**

**Acknowledgements**

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**TABLES**

**Figure Legends**

Figure 1: Mesocosm setup utilized for current experiments.