

Template to prepare preprints and manuscripts using markdown and github actions

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Purpose: This template provides a series of scripts to render a markdown document into an interactive website and a series of PDFs.

Motivation: It makes collaborating on text with GitHub easier, and means that we never need to think about the output.

Internals: GitHub actions and a series of python scripts. The markdown is handled with pandoc.

1 Intro

2 Having a general solution for inferring *potential* interactions (despite the unavailability of interaction data)
3 could be the catalyst for significant breakthroughs in our ability to start thinking about species interaction
4 networks over large spatial scales. In a recent overview of the field of ecological network prediction,
5 Strydom *et al.* (2021) identified two challenges of interest to the prediction of interactions at large scales.
6 First, there is a relative scarcity of relevant data in most places globally – paradoxically, this restricts our
7 ability to infer interactions to locations where inference is perhaps the least required; second, accurate
8 predictions often demand accurate predictors, and the lack of methods that can leverage small amount of
9 data is a serious impediment to our predictive ability globally.

10 Following the definition of Dunne (2006), a metaweb is a network analogue to the regional species pool;
11 specifically, it is an inventory of all *potential* interactions between species from a spatially delimited area
12 (and so captures the γ diversity of interactions). The metaweb is, therefore, *not* a prediction of the food
13 web at a specific locale within the spatial area it covers, and will have a different structure (notably by
14 having a larger connectance; see *e.g.* Wood *et al.* 2015). These local food webs (which captures the α
15 diversity of interactions) are a subset of the metaweb's species and interactions, and have been called
16 “metaweb realizations” (Poisot *et al.* 2015). Differences between local food web and their metaweb are due
17 to chance, species abundance and co-occurrence, local environmental conditions, and local distribution of
18 functional traits, among others.

19 Because the metaweb represents the joint effect of functional, phylogenetic, and macroecological
20 processes (Morales-Castilla *et al.* 2015), it holds valuable ecological information. Specifically, it is the
21 “upper bounds” on what the composition of the local networks can be (see *e.g.* McLeod *et al.* 2021). These
22 local networks, in turn, can be reconstructed given appropriate knowledge of local species composition,
23 providing information on structure of food webs at finer spatial scales. This has been done for example for
24 tree-galler-parasitoid systems (Gravel *et al.* 2018), fish trophic interactions (Albouy *et al.* 2019), tetrapod
25 trophic interactions (O'Connor *et al.* 2020), and crop-pest networks (Grünig *et al.* 2020). Whereas the
26 original metaweb definition, and indeed most past uses of metawebs, was based on the presence/absence
27 of interactions, we focus on *probabilistic* metawebs where interactions are represented as the chance of
28 success of a Bernoulli trial (see *e.g.* Poisot *et al.* 2016); therefore, not only does our method recommend
29 interactions that may exist, it gives each interaction a score, allowing us to properly weigh them.

Yet, owing to the inherent plasticity of interactions, there have been documented instances of food webs undergoing rapid collapse/recovery cycles over short periods of time (Pedersen *et al.* 2017). The embedding of a network, in a sense, embeds its macro-evolutionary history, especially as RDPG captures ecological signal (Dalla Riva & Stouffer 2016); at this point, it is important to recall that a metaweb is intended as a catalogue of all potential interactions, which should then be filtered (Morales-Castilla *et al.* 2015). In practice (and in this instance) the reconstructed metaweb will predict interactions that are plausible based on the species' evolutionary history, however some interactions would/would not be realized due to human impact.

Dallas *et al.* (2017) suggested that most links in ecological networks may be cryptic, *i.e.* uncommon or otherwise hard to observe. This argument essentially echoes Jordano (2016): the sampling of ecological interactions is difficult because it requires first the joint observation of two species, and then the observation of their interaction. In addition, it is generally expected that weak or rare links would be more common in networks (Csermely 2004), compared to strong, persistent links; this is notably the case in food chains, wherein many weaker links are key to the stability of a system (Neutel *et al.* 2002). In the light of these observations, the results in fig. ?? are not particularly surprising: we expect to see a surge in these low-probability interactions under a model that has a good predictive accuracy. Because the predictions we generate are by design probabilistic, then one can weigh these rare links appropriately. In a sense, that most ecological interactions are elusive can call for a slightly different approach to sampling: once the common interactions are documented, the effort required in documenting each rare interaction may increase exponentially. Recent proposals suggest that machine learning algorithms, in these situations, can act as data generators (Hoffmann *et al.* 2019): in this perspective, high quality observational data can be supplemented with synthetic data coming from predictive models, which increases the volume of information available for inference. Indeed, Strydom *et al.* (2021) suggested that knowing the metaweb may render the prediction of local networks easier, because it fixes an “upper bound” on which interactions can exist; indeed, with a probabilistic metaweb, we can consider that the metaweb represents an aggregation of informative priors on the interactions.

As Herbert (1965) rightfully pointed out, “[y]ou can’t draw neat lines around planet-wide problems”; in this regard, our approach (and indeed, any inference of a metaweb at large scales) must contend with several interesting and interwoven families of problems. The first is the limit of the metaweb to embed and transfer. If the initial metaweb is too narrow in scope, notably from a taxonomic point of view, the

60 chances of finding another area with enough related species to make a reliable inference decreases; this
61 would likely be indicated by large confidence intervals during ancestral character estimation, but the lack
62 of well documented metawebs is currently preventing the development of more concrete guidelines. The
63 question of phylogenetic relatedness and dispersal is notably true if the metaweb is assembled in an area
64 with mostly endemic species, and as with every predictive algorithm, there is room for the application of
65 our best ecological judgement. Conversely, the metaweb should be reliably filled, which assumes that the
66 S^2 interactions in a pool of S species have been examined, either through literature surveys or expert
67 elicitation. Supp. Mat. 1 provides some guidance as to the type of sampling effort that should be
68 prioritized. While RDPG was able to maintain very high predictive power when interactions were missing,
69 the addition of false positive interactions was immediately detected; this suggests that it may be
70 appropriate to err on the side of “too many” interactions when constructing the initial metaweb to be
71 transferred. The second series of problems are related to determining which area should be used to infer
72 the new metaweb in, as this determines the species pool that must be used.

73 In our application, we focused on the mammals of Canada. The upside of this approach is that
74 information at the country level is likely to be required by policy makers and stakeholders for their
75 biodiversity assessment, as each country tends to set goals at the national level (Buxton *et al.* 2021) for
76 which quantitative instruments are designed (Turak *et al.* 2017), with specific strategies often enacted at
77 smaller scales (Ray *et al.* 2021). And yet, we do not really have a satisfying answer to the question of
78 “where does a food web stop?”; the current most satisfying solutions involve examining the spatial
79 consistency of network area relationships (see *e.g.* Galiana *et al.* 2018, 2019, 2021; Fortin *et al.* 2021),
80 which is of course impossible in the absence of enough information about the network itself. This
81 suggests that an *a posteriori* refinement of the results may be required, based on a downscaling of the
82 metaweb. The final family of problems relates less to the availability of data or quantitative tools, and
83 more to the praxis of spatial ecology. Operating under the context of national divisions, in large parts of
84 the world, reflects nothing more than the legacy of settler colonialism. Indeed, the use of ecological data is
85 not an apolitical act (Nost & Goldstein 2021), as data infrastructures tend to be designed to answer
86 questions within national boundaries, and their use both draws upon and reinforces territorial statecraft;
87 as per Machen & Nost (2021), this is particularly true when the output of “algorithmic thinking” (*e.g.*
88 relying on machine learning to generate knowledge) can be re-used for governance (*e.g.* enacting
89 conservation decisions at the national scale). We therefore recognize that methods such as we propose

90 operate under the framework that contributed to the ongoing biodiversity crisis (Adam 2014), reinforced
91 environmental injustice (Choudry 2013; Domínguez & Luoma 2020), and on Turtle Island especially,
92 should be replaced by Indigenous principles of land management (Eichhorn *et al.* 2019; No'kmaq *et al.*
93 2021). As we see AI/ML being increasingly mobilized to generate knowledge that is lacking for
94 conservation decisions (*e.g.* Lamba *et al.* 2019; Mosebo Fernandes *et al.* 2020), our discussion of these tools
95 need to go beyond the technical, and into the governance consequences they can have.

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