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The natural history of scavenging in vertebrates

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Abstract

Scavengers existed in the past and they exist now. Often under appreciated. Three main habitat types considered: land, air and sea. Different drivers in these areas. Review looks at these

Introduction

Scavenging is a widespread behaviour amonng vertebrates. Most vertebrate carnivores act as facultative scavengers. It is recognised that scavengers have an important role in keeping energy flows at a higher trophic level in food webs than decomposers because they consume relatively more carrion (DeVault et al. 2003). Scavengers also provide useful ecosystem services by acting as barriers to the spread of disease by quickly consuming rotting carcasses which have often died from illness (Ogada et al. 2012). Despite this, scavengers are a seriously understudied group (Sekercioglu 2006, Selva and Fortuna 2007, Wilson and Wolkovich 2011). DeVault et al. (2003) propose that this is due to both human disgust at carrion itself and the difficulty in determining if an ingested prey item was killed or scavenged. The latter point means that studying the natural history of this behaviour is particulalry problematic. Indeed, even data on the proportion of carrion in the diet of extant species are sorely lacking (Benbow et al. 2015).

One avenue to infer scavenging from palaeontological data can be achieved by determining if a prey item was simply too big for the carnivore to have tackled in cases where tooth marks are found (Pobiner 2008). Comparative analysis can also allow us to ascertain which morphologies and physiologies are likely to have been found in scavenging species in the past (Ruxton and Houston 2004b).

Our review is divided up into three sections, namely the land, air and sea. These are then subdivided into three geological eras the Cenozoic, Mesozoic and Palaeozoic. Each of these environments has a distinct phyiscal character that affects how a species forages for food which has obvious relevance for an animal searching for carrion. However, there is some commonality to a scavenger's environment and the problems in finding food that one would encounter. Notably, the resource environment of a scavenger is a patchily distributed one, because it is difficult to predict both when and where a carcass is produced. As a result of this, any animal existing as a scavenger must maximise its detection capabilities and minimise its locomotory costs (Ruxton and Houston 2004b). Exploring which groups are likely to have moved towards these traits and thus existed as sccavengers over palaentological time forms the basis of this work.

1 Terrestrial Scavengers

As noted above the ease with which natural selection pushes an animal towards the optima of cheap locomotion and large detection capabilities is dependent on the environment the species is in. Land-based scavengers can be thought of as existing in a 2-dimensional plane while foraging for carrion directly. The range at which they can detect carcasses is thus defined by the radius of their sensory organs, usually the visual and olfactory senses.

Cenozoic

Among terrestrial African carnivores, hyenas, jackals, lions and leopards all take sizable proportions of carrion in their diet. In the case of the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) it can be as high as 99% (Benbow et al. 2015). Yet, no contemporary terrestrial vertebrate exists as an obligate scavenger. The selective pressures that push mammals and reptiles towards scavenging do not seem to undermine their ability to hunt, perhaps explaining the absence of obligate scavengers in these groups (Ruxton and Houston 2004b).

There is a long running debate on the tendency of human ancestors to scavenge. Some recent studies have found "that passive scavenging from abandoned larger felid kills could have been a high-yield, though potentially dangerous, foraging strategy for early hominins even without considering within-bone nutrients" (Pobiner 2015).

Osteophagy is known across a range of terrestrial carnivores. Some fat-rich mammalian bones have an energy density (6.7 kJ/g) comparable with that of muscle tissue, making skeletal remains an enticing resource (Brown 1989). Hyenas have a bite force capable of breaking open bones and early hominins had the ability to craft tools for this purpose (Hone and Rauhut 2010, Blasco et al. 2014). In light of this, the skeletal remains of carrion may act as trove of food to carnivores who can access it.

Ruxton and Houston (2004b) in a theoretical study suggested that "a 1 tonne mammal or reptile, in an ecosystem yielding carrion at densities similar to the current Serengeti, could have met its energy requirements if it could detect carrion over a distance of the order of 400–500 m."

Mesozoic

In a recent publication a modelling approach found that theropods between 27 kg and 1044 kg would have gained a significant energetic advantage over individuals at both the small and large extremes of theropod body mass through their scavenging efficiency. This humped pattern is the result of the disparity between the scaling of energetic cost which scales according to an exponent of 0.91 and energy input that scales according to a cubic polynomial that initially scales according to an exponent of 1.07 but plateaus after 1000kg. The polynomial behaviour of energy input is itself the result of the limitations imposed by gut capacity and the overall availability of carcasses after competition.

As we discussed for the case of Cenozoic carnivores, osteophagy could be extremely beneficial to a scavenger. In Mesozoic systems some extremely large theropod dinosaurs had a morphology which suggests an ability to process bone e.g. the robust skull and dentition of *Tyrannosaurus rex*. There is direct evidence that *T.rex* did this in the form of distinctive wear marks on its tooth apices (Farlow and Brinkman 1994, Schubert and

Ungar 2005) and the presence of bone fragments in its coprolites (Chin et al. 1998). The animal also had an enormous bite force, with one estimate putting it at 57000 Newtons (Bates and Falkingham 2012). This is noted as being powerful enough to break open skeletal material (Rayfield et al. 2001). Osteophagy may have been even more viable during this era because the body mass distribution of herbviores tended to be skewed towards larger sizes (O'Gorman and Hone 2012). When we couple this with the fact that skeletal mass scales greater than linearly with body mass (Prange et al. 1979) there would have been a lot of bones to consume in the environment provided an animal had the biology to process it.

Allosaurus tooth marks on a hadrosaur in the Late Jurassic (Chure and Fiorillo 1997). Late Triassic scavenging on a prosauropod by basal carnivorous archosaurs (Hungerbühler 1998).

Palaeozoic

Synapsids Sprawling gait

2 Aerial Scavengers

Species capable of flight have effectively added an extra spatial dimension, i.e. the vertical component, to their sensory environment. This allows them to look down on a landscape where they are unencumbered by obstacles that would obstruct the view of a terrestrial scavenger. Moreover, flight is a cheaper means of locomotion than running (Tucker 1975). Thus, it appear that would-be scavengers have a distinct advantage by taking flight.

Cenozoic

Birds are the dominant vertebrate fliers today and include the best known scavengers on Earth, the vultures. These birds consist of two convergent groups, old world and new world vultures and represent the only example of obligate vertebrate scavengers. They have a suite of adaptations that allow them to flourish as obligate scavengers. Vultures extend the energetic advantage of flight further by engaging in soaring instead of flapping flight, which is even cheaper (Hedenstrom 1993). Their efficiency is illustrated by cases of predators like bears and wolves benefiting by taking more carrion in their diet in areas bereft of vultures through competitive release (DeVault et al. 2003). In flight, birds possess a huge advantage over any terrestrial obligate scavenger. Flight affords them the ability to range over a much larger area and detect carrion from an elevated vantage point. Pennycuick (1972) conservatively estimated that a Gyps vulture could identify activity at a carcass 4 km away.

Many other bird species take a significant amount of carrion in their diet notably the eagles, storks and corvids. Although, none of them are obligate scavengers.

Mesozoic

In ancient ecosystems, the volant pterosaurs have also been postulated as existing in a vulture-like niche (Witton and Naish 2008). Certain clades of these animals could reach enormous sizes (e.g. Azhdarchids) and look to have engaged in soaring flight. However, the inflexibility of their necks and straight, rather than hooked jaw morphology argues against their existing as obligate scavengers (Witton and Naish 2008). As yet, no one has ever attempted an energetics approach for this group which is likely due to the many uncertainties over their biology (Witton and Habib 2010).

Palaeozoic

The absence of flying vertebrates in the Palaeozoic may have permitted terrestrial forms to take in a higher proportion of carrion in their diet.

3 Aquatic Scavengers

The existence of an obligate scavenger in a marine setting also remains hypothetical (Britton and Morton 1994, Smith and Baco 2003, Ruxton and Houston 2004a, Ruxton and Bailey 2005). Carrion in this environment is produced by dead flesh and marine organisms when their carcasses descend to the sea floor. This low-light environment means animals detect resources through chemo- and mechanoreception (Ruxton and Houston 2004a). Detection distances are far lower than they would be in the air (< 100 m) as a result. However, water is a medium that is conducive to low-cost movement (Tucker 1975) and so may be able to support a small obligate scavenging fish (Ruxton and Houston 2004a, Ruxton and Bailey 2005). Although, for the time being this remains conjectural.

Cenozoic

A likely instance of scavenging between a 4-million-year-old white shark (*Carcharodon*) and mysticete whale from Peru (Ehret et al. 2009). Bite marks on early Holocene Tursiops truncatus fossils from the North Sea indicate scavenging by rays (Chondrichthyes, Rajidae) (van Netten and Reumer 2009). Possible scavenging on a juvenile fur seal from the Late Neogene (Boessenecker and Perry 2011).

Mesozoic

Evidence of scavenging in a Cretaceous shark species *Squalicorax* whereby remains of a mosasaur and a hadrosaur were discovered with embedded shark teeth (Schwimmer et al. 1997).

Palaeozoic

Evolution of sharks, known scavengers. Evidence of vertebrate scavenging dates back to the early Permian approximately 300 MYA (Reisz and Tsuji 2006).

Results

Discussion

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