**Title:**

Functionalizing ecological integrity: using functional ecology to monitor animal communities

**Running head:**

Animals in ecological integrity monitoring

**Author list:** Ana Miller-ter Kuile1,2, Jamie S. Sanderlin1, Jessalyn Ayars3, Helen Chmura4, Melissa Dressen5, Jessie D. Golding6, Gavin M. Jones3, Rebecca Kirby7, Kari E. A. Norman3, Zachary L. Steel8, Valerie Stein Foster9\*

1 USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Flagstaff, Arizona, USA

2 Northern Arizona University School of Informatics, Computing, and Cyber Systems, Flagstaff, Arizona, USA

3 USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

4 USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Missoula, Montana, USA

5 USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region, Lakewood, Colorado, USA

6 University of Arizona, School of Natural Resources and the Environment, Tucson, AZ USA

7 USDA Forest Service Southwestern Region, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

8 USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

9 USDA Forest Service, Flagstaff, Arizona, USA

**Corresponding Author:**

Ana Miller-ter Kuile

ana.miller-ter-kuile@nau.edu

ana.kuile@usda.gov

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**Abstract**

Ecological integrity, or the ability of an ecosystem to support the structure, composition, diversity, function, and connectivity within its natural range, has been a guiding principle in ecosystem monitoring around the world. However, in terrestrial ecosystems, ecological integrity monitoring often excludes animal communities, even though they are critical drivers of integrity. We are at a moment when methodological advances in monitoring and data science have made it easier to document animal communities. We highlight examples of these advances and how they can remove barriers to adopting animal-specific integrity metrics. We then illustrate how describing animal communities in terms of functional ecology, which has also undergone significant developments in past decades, can provide a generalizable approach to incorporating animal community metrics into integrity-based monitoring across taxa and ecosystems. Incorporating animal communities into ecological integrity monitoring is a vital step in understanding how human-driven change, restoration, and conservation shape ecosystems worldwide.

**In a nutshell**

* Ecological integrity, which encompasses the structure, composition, diversity, function, and connectivity of an ecosystem, is an important guiding principle for ecosystem monitoring
* Ecological integrity monitoring for land management has historically not included animal communities
* New advances in monitoring technology, data availability, statistical methods, and computation power have removed historical barriers to monitoring animal communities
* Using functional traits linked to ecology, such as diet, habitat, behavior, and body size, provides a biologically meaningful way to generalize across animal communities and ecosystems
* Combining modern monitoring technologies and functional ecology allows us to incorporate animal communities into ecological integrity monitoring

**1 Monitoring ecological integrity: where we are and where we could go**

Ecological integrity is an important guiding concept for ecosystem assessment and monitoring globally. In both conservation and management contexts, ecological integrity provides a cohesive framework for assessing whether ecosystems support diversity, structure, and function within a natural or expected range (Parrish *et al.* 2003). The concept has and continues to be applied across agencies and environments worldwide, sometimes as one cohesive “integrity score” for an ecosystem (Faber-Langendoen *et al.* 2006; Woodley 2010) and sometimes to describe a set of desirable or target conditions (e.g., a combination of metrics depending on management or conservation goals, such as forest stand structure, size, and species composition; Carter *et al.* 2019; Nordman *et al.* 2021). At its core, the concept of ecological integrity aims to describe how an ecosystem looks and functions relative to a goal condition or range of conditions.

Because of its broad definition describing many aspects of ecosystems, monitoring ecological integrity has looked different across environments and organizations as a concept to guide monitoring. For example, in land management, the emphasis of ecological integrity monitoring has been on the structure and composition of vegetation (e.g., trees, Nordman *et al.* 2021); in aquatic ecosystems, the emphasis of monitoring is on indicator species of pollution and land use (e.g., macroinvertebrates and fish; Karr 1981; Carter *et al.* 2019). The variety of applications is based on several factors, from historical or current agency-specific mandates for monitoring to historical establishment of standardized protocols (e.g., Karr 1981). Due to the variety of applications, it has been challenging to create generalizable metrics across ecosystems, taxa, and agencies.

One of the key gaps in applying ecological integrity to monitoring is the exclusion of animal communities in terrestrial monitoring (Figure 1, Carter *et al.* 2019). Animal communities provide additive information about ecological integrity frequently lacking from common indices based on abiotic factors and vegetation characteristics. For example, animal communities comprise multiple trophic levels, so including them in assessments of ecological integrity can help decipher top-down influences on ecosystem states (Karr 1981). When animals are considered in terrestrial systems, they are often evaluated with a habitat-proxy approach (Palmer *et al.* 1997) or through focal species monitoring (Runge *et al.* 2019). Although the habitat-proxy approach captures abiotic and vegetation structure metrics of ecological integrity well, both approaches are generally poor predictors of animal community response to change (Schwartz *et al.* 2015). This is for a variety of reasons, including that animal species and communities respond to a variety of landscape features in different ways across species and ages (Lee‐Yaw *et al.* 2022). It is well established that animal communities are not only influenced by the ecosystems they occupy, but that they also shape these ecosystems (Russo *et al.* 2023). Thus, the structure and composition of the animal community shapes ecological integrity directly.

We propose that we are at a pivotal moment for adopting animal community metrics of ecological integrity into terrestrial monitoring efforts for two reasons. First, current and growing technological advances in monitoring and data analysis have alleviated many real or perceived barriers to monitoring animal communities. Second, because ecological integrity is essentially a metric describing how functional an ecosystem is, we can adopt metrics for animal communities using functional ecology and functional traits (e.g., feeding, habitat, behavioral, and morphology traits) as a guiding principle because functional traits are generalizable and comparable across taxa and environments. Like monitoring, functional ecology has experienced significant advances in the past two decades, including theoretical (McGill *et al.* 2006) and technical advances (e.g., Frimpong and Angermeier 2009; Tobias *et al.* 2022). We highlight methodological and technological advances we find to be most promising in this endeavor as well as the literature demonstrating how a functional ecology approach allows for building general protocols, baselines, and understanding of ecological integrity of animal communities across systems, taxa, and monitoring schema.

**2 Growth in monitoring, data, and computation capacity**

Historically, animal communities have been difficult to integrate into ecological integrity monitoring because animal communities are challenging to monitor. For example, animals can move, are cryptic, and/or are rare on the landscape relative to stationary ecosystem components. However, new methods of data collection and analytics are making these barriers a relic of the past. New technology, such as acoustic recording units (ARUs), Motus Wildlife Tracking Systems (Motus), camera traps, environmental DNA (eDNA), and drones are allowing us to collect data on animal communities at much broader spatial and temporal scales (Rees *et al.* 2014; Steenweg *et al.* 2017; Wood *et al.* 2019). These and traditional data collection methods are contributing to a growing number of long-term monitoring programs (e.g., Breeding Bird Survey [Ziolkowski Jr. *et al.* 2023], NABat [Gotthold *et al.* 2024], LTER network) and databases (i.e., AVONET [Tobias *et al.* 2022], FishTraits [Frimpong and Angermeier 2009]) for diverse taxa across many ecosystems.

Technological advances and a growing amount of data, combined with advanced modeling and computational ability, further erode barriers to monitoring animal communities, and thus, incorporating animal communities into ecological integrity metrics. Modeling approaches such as multi-species occupancy models (Iknayan *et al.* 2014) and data integration (combining multiple data sources, including those collected by community scientists, e.g., eBird; Sullivan *et al.* 2009; Miller *et al.* 2019), can accommodate large datasets and help account for deficiencies in historical data collection (e.g., imperfect detection, biased sampling design, lack of temporal or spatial coverage). Advancements in methods have been paired with increased computational power for efficient analyses of community data (Yackulic *et al.* 2020). Thus, with analytical and technological advances, the time has never been better to integrate animals into ecological integrity monitoring (Figure 2).

Nevertheless, proposed changes to monitoring programs can be met with skepticism, and challenges will certainly confront efforts to integrate animals into ecological integrity monitoring. For example, many emerging sampling technologies (i.e., ARUs, camera traps, eDNA) are designed as multi-species sampling approaches that passively or non-invasively sample large areas. These methods may be more expensive or require more quantitative expertise during sampling design and data analysis than established single-species approaches. Where concerns exist about the additional cost of multi-species sampling, community-level monitoring could be simplified over time as part of optimal sampling approaches (i.e., Sanderlin *et al.* 2014). Alternatively, long-term datasets with high resolution for one or a few species could be augmented with more general sampling of animal communities to elucidate mechanisms driving changes in single-species trends (e.g., predation dynamics). And, as we discuss below, these decisions could be based on information about the species functional roles that most shape ecosystem integrity.

**3 Functional ecology as a general framework for monitoring animal ecological integrity**

The functional ecology of an animal community describes the traits that underpin the maintenance of ecological processes, making functional ecology a clear and simple approach to ecological integrity for animal communities. Functional traits, such as those related to diet, morphology, and habitat use, can be generalized across systems, taxa, and data collection methodologies (Carter *et al.* 2019). Animal communities provide important ecosystem services and functions such as nutrient cycling (Schneider *et al.* 2016) and seed and pollen dispersal (González‐Robles *et al.* 2021; Fricke *et al.* 2022). Composition of species within functional groups in an animal community determines how these processes shape ecosystems (e.g., Bello *et al.* 2015; Donoso *et al.* 2020). These functions and the animal traits that govern them can be generalized across ecosystems, thus, they provide a way to describe animal communities and ecological integrity across systems and taxa and to build predictions about the mechanisms that may shape ecosystems and ecological integrity (McGill *et al.* 2006).

Ecological integrity is often divided into four common components: 1) structure (e.g., canopy cover), 2) composition/diversity (e.g., species richness), 3) function (e.g., nutrient cycling), and 4) connectivity (e.g., corridors). Ideally, monitoring targets all of these through a combination of metrics. We can extend these and other aspects of ecological integrity to animal community monitoring using functional ecology and functional traits. These traits include trophic (e.g., trophic composition and diet breadth), habitat (e.g., feeding and nesting sites and geographic range), morphological (e.g., body size), and behavioral traits (e.g., migratory behavior, dispersal distances, and range size; Gonçalves‐Souza *et al.* 2023; SI Figure 1B). These traits describe animals in communities across taxa and environments and could be used to build a general set of ecological integrity metrics (e.g., Karr 1981). Further, many of these traits are already available through large databases (e.g., AVONET, FishTraits) and could be relatively easy to combine with monitoring data from current and growing monitoring methodologies (some described above). Below we highlight studies that demonstrate the benefit of using functional ecology for monitoring animal communities for ecological integrity (Figure 3).

*3.1 Structure*

The *structure* of animal communities includes the networks of biological interactions that shape all communities. Thus, monitoring animal community structure could include monitoring these networks or their component parts (e.g., primary producers, predators, or keystone species). Johnson and Ringler (2014) show that stream macroinvertebrate and fish assemblages in New York, USA respond to human-driven environmental change. Specifically, this study highlights that functional traits related to network *structure* (trophic composition, feeding guild, and diet breadth) are all influenced by human-driven environmental change, with key implications for ecosystem function. For example, the macroinvertebrate community is less even (more dominated by the three most common taxa) with increased urbanization, a shift that coincides with a dominance of a particular feeding guild (more ’collector-gatherers’ that focus on gathering filtered particles once they’ve fallen out of the water column versus filtering them out of suspension). Further, streams with lower dissolved oxygen (a result of intensified human use) are dominated by fish with a more generalized diet. Importantly, fish and macroinvertebrates respond differently to human-driven change, highlighting the importance of monitoring multiple groups of taxa as indicators of ecological integrity.

*3.2 Composition and diversity*

Measures of the *composition* of animal communities describe which groups or species are in a community, often with information about their absolute and relative abundances. *Diversity* measures include measures of composition as well as descriptions of the total number of species or groups in a community (e.g., richness). Alexandrino *et al.* (2017) developed a metric of ecological integrity based on the functional *composition* and *diversity* of the bird communities in the Brazilian Atlantic Forest. They computed and compared multiple abundance and richness-based metrics of species composition, splitting species up into a set of functional trait groups, including traits related to habitat associations (e.g., forest-dwelling), foraging habits (e.g., ground versus canopy), endemism, and threat level. From a set of candidate metrics, they selected seven that categorized functional community composition well along a human disturbance gradient, including richness and abundance of species in specific habitat associations and foraging guilds. They combined these into one ecological integrity index that better detected a gradient of human disturbance than taxonomic diversity metrics, such as total species richness or Shannon diversity.

*3.3 Function*

Animal community *function* metrics describe how the animals in an ecosystem shape how that ecosystem functions, from processes such as nutrient cycling to carbon storage. Gómez *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that functional trait space (a measure of the breadth of many different traits represented in a community) decreased for a bird assemblage in the Andes of Colombia over a century of increased human use. Most of this change in functional diversity was caused by traits related to body size, dispersal ability, and habitat breadth. Specifically, average body size and diet specialization of birds in the community decreased over time while dispersal ability increased. These changes have implications for ecosystem *functions* such as seed dispersal, carbon storage, and habitat connectivity (Bello *et al.* 2015; Donoso *et al.* 2020; González‐Robles *et al.* 2021; Fricke *et al.* 2022).

*3.4 Connectivity*

Animal community metrics of *connectivity* describe how connected different patches of a habitat are, either for species or for communities (e.g., food webs). Understanding measures of connectivity for animal communities can help explain patterns of genetic diversity in populations of moving animals and the other organisms they can help transport (e.g., seeds) and can shape how food webs are structured across habitat patches. Rocha-Ortega *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that the average body size of dragonfly and damselfly communities (together referred to as “Odonates”) tracked past and current land use in Mexico. Specifically, large-bodied species, which can fly over greater distances to more disparate patches, do better with land use intensification. Communities with greater dispersal abilities overall alter the *connectivity* of patches across the landscape and increase the potential for biotic homogenization and loss of patches with distinct biodiversity (Juen and De Marco 2011). Importantly, in this study, single species’ abundances and total species richness did not track land use intensification.

**4 The future of ecological integrity monitoring includes animal communities**

In conservation and restoration, there is a growing awareness that even actions that are meant to improve the resiliency and integrity of an ecosystem have ripple effects that lead to positive, negative, and neutral outcomes for a variety of interconnected ecosystem components (Miller‐ter Kuile *et al.* 2021; Pearson *et al.* 2022). In this piece, we have highlighted two reasons that we are at a key moment where we can reconsider how we are quantifying ecological integrity, especially for land management. We are in a new era of methodological and computational advances that can allow us to better monitor how management, restoration, and conservation efforts shape ecosystems. Tracking communities in terms of their functional traits is a unifying way in which we can document the ecological integrity of animal communities. In an applied context, trait-based approaches can employ current and new monitoring approaches (e.g., field surveys, ARUs) combined with information from trait databases (e.g., AVONET, FishTraits) and a growing number of computational options for combining historical and modern sampling (e.g., data integration models). Expanding ecological integrity monitoring to include animal community metrics will help us better understand how communities are structured and how conservation and management actions shape ecosystems, without disregarding crucial players in ecosystems.

**Open Research Statement**

Data and code (Miller-ter Kuile and Jones 2024) for the literature review and generation of figures can be found on Zenodo: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13308531

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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**Figure Captions**

Figure 1: Number of papers in a literature review about ecological integrity in Ecological Indicators, Biological Conservation, Ecological Applications, Conservation Biology, and Forest Ecology and Management. In (A), the colors represent the cumulative number of papers through time that a) are about ecological integrity (lightest orange), b) are about ecological integrity and calculate one or more metrics (medium orange), and c) include animal communities in these metrics (dark orange). Panel (B) shows the breakdown by environment for those papers that included animal communities in integrity metrics. \* “Multiple” environments were the interface between an aquatic and riparian or marine and estuary environment.

Figure 2: Three concurrent technological advances provide the ideal moment for inclusion of animal communities into monitoring ecological integrity, including monitoring technology, data availability, and computation capacity. All three feed into using functional ecology as a general framework to describe animal communities in terms of their integrity.

Figure 3: Examples of using animal community functional ecology to track the ecological integrity of ecosystems across the globe. We highlight examples from four common integrity components, including structure, composition, function, and connectivity. For these and other studies monitoring integrity with functional traits, authors use field-measured traits and trait databases (e.g., AVONET, FishTraits) in conjunction with other standard monitoring protocols. Images from Wikimedia Commons (Copyright CC-0).