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ecodive: Parallel and Memory-Efficient R Package for Ecological Diversity Analysis

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Summary

Characterizing the composition of biological communities is a fundamental task in ecology, but the calculations involved can be computationally prohibitive when applied to large datasets. `ecodive` is an R package that addresses this challenge by providing highly optimized implementations of 50 ecological metrics for alpha-diversity (within-sample richness and evenness) and beta-diversity (between-sample dissimilarity). These metrics can incorporate species counts, relative abundances, and evolutionary relationships, providing a multi-faceted view of ecological structure. By leveraging a compiled C library with pthreads for parallelization, `ecodive` delivers substantial performance gains in both speed and memory usage, enabling researchers to analyze large datasets quickly and efficiently.

Statement of Need

A primary challenge in large-scale ecological analysis is the computational complexity of beta diversity calculations. These algorithms exhibit $O(n^2)$ complexity, meaning their computational cost scales quadratically with the number of samples (n). As microbiome and ecological studies grow to include thousands of samples, this quadratic scaling creates a significant bottleneck, demanding immense processing time and memory.

A second challenge is the fragmentation of diversity metrics across numerous R packages. Researchers often need to install and manage a suite of dependencies to access the full range of metrics required for a comprehensive analysis, leading to potential version conflicts and a disjointed workflow.

`ecodive` addresses both of these critical needs. First, it provides a highly optimized, parallelized C-based engine that dramatically reduces the time and memory required by these algorithms, enabling the analysis of much larger datasets. Second, it consolidates a vast collection of alpha and beta diversity metrics into a single, dependency-free package. By solving the dual problems of computational inefficiency and methodological fragmentation, `ecodive` empowers researchers to push the boundaries of large-scale ecological analysis.

Comparison to Existing Packages

To evaluate its performance, ecodive was benchmarked against numerous R packages that provide their own implementations of diversity metrics, including `abdiv` (Bittinger, 2020), `adiv` (Pavoine, 2020), `ampvis2` (Andersen et al., 2018), `ecodist` (Goslee & Urban, 2007), `entropart` (Marcon & Herault, 2015), `GUniFrac` (Chen et al., 2023), `labdsv` (Roberts, 2025),

parallelDist (Eckert, 2022), philentropy (HG, 2018), phyloregion (Daru et al., 2020), phyloseq (McMurdie & Holmes, 2013), picante (Kembel et al., 2010), tabula (Frerebeau, 2019), and vegan (Oksanen et al., 2025). The results, conducted using the bench R package, are summarized in Figure 1 and demonstrate ecodive's superior speed and memory efficiency for each of the metrics tested.

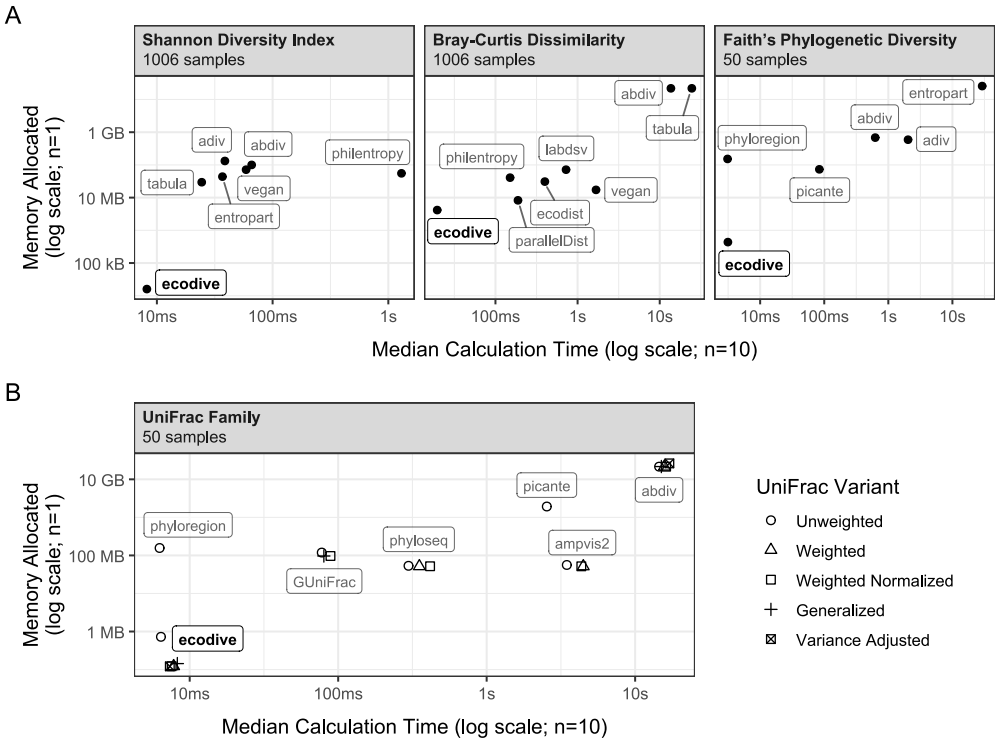

Figure 1: Figure 1: ecodive performance benchmarks. Each point represents an R package, plotted by median calculation time (x-axis) and memory consumption (y-axis) from ten trials. (A) Benchmarks for Shannon Diversity Index, Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity, and Faith's Phylogenetic Diversity. (B) Benchmarks for the UniFrac family of metrics, with different variants distinguished by point shape. Not all packages implement every metric, but ecodive is consistently the fastest and most memory-efficient across all tested metrics, often by several orders of magnitude.

Crucially, the benchmark suite also confirms these performance gains do not come at the cost of accuracy, as ecodive produces numerically identical output to the other packages. Beyond its computational advantages, ecodive has zero external R dependencies. This makes it a lightweight, stable, and secure backend, minimizing installation conflicts and simplifying long-term maintenance for developers who build upon it. The complete benchmark code and results are available in the package vignette (`vignette('benchmark')`) and online.

Implemented Metrics

ecodive stands out by offering an extensive and diverse collection of 50 metrics for both alpha and beta diversity analysis, making it a uniquely comprehensive tool. It provides researchers with a wide array of both traditional and phylogeny-aware algorithms in a single, high-performance package. The suite of alpha diversity metrics includes staples like the Shannon Diversity Index (Shannon, 1948) and Chao1 (Chao, 1984), important estimators such as the Abundance-based Coverage Estimator (ACE) (Chao & Lee, 1992) and Fisher's Alpha (Fisher et al., 1943), and key phylogeny-aware metrics like Faith's Phylogenetic Diversity (Faith, 1992), offering robust

ways to assess within-sample richness and evenness. For assessing between-sample dissimilarity, `ecodive` implements essential beta diversity metrics widely used in microbial ecology, including Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity (Bray & Curtis, 1957; Sorenson, 1948), the complete UniFrac family (Q. Chang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2012; C. A. Lozupone et al., 2007; C. Lozupone & Knight, 2005), and the Aitchison distance (Aitchison, 1982) for compositional data analysis. This extensive collection allows for a thorough and multi-faceted analysis of community structure.

For the most up-to-date list and detailed descriptions, please refer to the official `ecodive` documentation at https://cmmr.github.io/ecodive.

Programmatic Use and API

Beyond interactive analysis, `ecodive` is engineered for programmatic use, making it an ideal backend for applications like R Shiny web apps (W. Chang et al., 2024). The package includes a `list_metrics()` function that allows developers to dynamically filter and present available diversity metrics based on specific criteria. For instance, metrics can be programmatically selected if they are phylogeny-aware, abundance-weighted, capable of handling non-integer counts, or are "true metrics" that satisfy the triangle inequality. This powerful API simplifies the integration of `ecodive` into other software, enabling developers to build sophisticated tools that offer users tailored diversity analysis options based on their dataset and analytical needs.

Example Usage

`ecodive` is designed for ease of use and integrates seamlessly with existing bioinformatics workflows, such as those using `phyloseq` objects. For example, calculating weighted UniFrac distances is straightforward:

```
data(esophagus, package = 'phyloseq')
ecodive::weighted_unifrac(esophagus)
#>          B         C
#> C 0.1050480
#> D 0.1401124 0.1422409
```

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