**Title:** Spatial dynamics of animal-mediated nutrients in temperate waters

**Running title:** Animals drive nutrient variability across scales

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EGL: Conceptualization (equal); formal analysis; investigation (lead); methodology (lead); visualization; writing – original draft preparation. CMA: Conceptualization (supporting); investigation (equal); methodology (equal). JMS: Funding acquisition (supporting); investigation (supporting); project administration (supporting). KDC: Conceptualization (supporting); funding acquisition (supporting); investigation (equal); methodology (equal); project administration (equal). KRK: Investigation (supporting). EJL: Investigation (supporting). BM: Investigation (supporting); methodology (supporting). ALB: Investigation (supporting). FJ: Funding acquisition (equal); project administration (supporting). IMC: Conceptualization (equal); funding acquisition (equal); methodology (equal); project administration (equal); supervision. All authors contributed to writing – review & editing.

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**Abstract**

Consumer-mediated nutrient dynamics (CND), through which animals’ metabolic waste products fertilize primary producers, drive variability in nutrient availability in tropical waters. This variability influences primary productivity and community functioning. Yet, examinations of CND as a driver of nutrient variability in temperate marine ecosystems are limited. Therefore, we assessed the existence and drivers of variation in CND in temperate waters at meso, small, and fine spatial scales. To do so, we quantified the occurrence of 48 fish and 92 macroinvertebrate taxa and measured in situ ammonium at 27 northeast Pacific rocky reefs for three years and 17 kelp forests of varying density for one year. Ammonium concentrations ranged from 0.01 to 2.5 uM across rocky reefs separated by tens of km. The relationship between animal abundance and ammonium among sites was mediated by water flow, where flood tides seemed to “wash away” the effect of nutrient regeneration by animals, although enrichment was possible on ebb tides. Ammonium was significantly higher within than outside of kelp forests, a difference that increased with kelp biomass, tide exchange, and to a lesser degree animal biomass. Caging experiments revealed that fine-scale (~2 m) ammonium variability and nutrient enrichment were only possible under low-flow conditions. Our results suggest that CND drives nutrient variability at scales ranging from two meters to over 20 km, acting on a finer scale than allochthonous nitrogen sources such as upwelling. Therefore, consumer-mediated nutrient dynamics are implicated as a previously overlooked driver of spatial variation in primary productivity in temperate marine systems.

**Introduction**

Variation in resource availability across spatial and temporal scales can drive substantial heterogeneity in the growth, biomass and composition of primary producers (Tilman 1984; Leibold 1991; Dayton et al. 1999; McInturf et al. 2019). In many marine ecosystems, community structure is regulated through bottom-up control, i.e., it depends on factors that generate variability in the resources available to lower trophic levels (Gruner et al. 2008). Although marine ecologists have historically focused on external, abiotic sources of nutrients (e.g., upwelling) as drivers of variability in nutrient availability, there is emerging evidence that consumers also contribute to bottom-up effects (Allgeier et al. 2017). Metabolic waste products (i.e., excretion and egestion) of animals fertilize primary producers via a process termed consumer-mediated nutrient dynamics (CND; Vanni, 2002). Consumers excrete metabolic waste in the form of ammonium (NH₄⁺), which is preferentially taken up by primary producers over other forms of nitrogen like nitrate and nitrite (Lobban and Harrison 1994; Phillips and Hurd 2004). However, the ecological importance of consumer-regenerated nutrients at varied spatial scales remains unclear. Therefore, identifying the extent to which biologically relevant variation in nutrient availability contributes to heterogeneity in primary productivity remains an active area of research (Allgeier et al. 2017).

Heterogeneity in consumer habitat use greatly influences spatial and temporal variation in nutrients supplied by animal waste (Uthicke 2001; Roman and McCarthy 2010; Benkwitt et al. 2019). For example, tropical coral reefs provide habitat, shelter, and food sources that attract dense aggregations of vertebrate and invertebrate consumers which regenerate nutrients (Archer et al. 2015; Shantz et al. 2015). On a meso scale, productivity increases with proximity to reefs with high densities of fishes (Layman et al. 2016), while on a fine scale, sheltering schools of fish increase nitrogen concentrations around individual heads of corals relative to neighboring uninhabited corals (Holbrook et al. 2008). Diurnal migrations are another source of temporal and spatial variation in consumer-regenerated nutrients, as some fishes travel away from reefs to forage at night, then return to excrete waste around their hiding spots during the day (Meyer and Schultz 1985; Francis and Côté 2018). At an even larger-scale, variation can arise from the migration of megafauna; for instance, whales transport and deposit nutrients across thousands of kilometers as they travel from their feeding to breeding grounds (Doughty et al. 2016). However, the current understanding of animal-driven spatio-temporal variability of nitrogen is drawn substantially from tropical ecosystems (Meyer et al. 1983; Holbrook et al. 2008; Allgeier et al. 2013), often overlooking productive temperate marine ecosystems.

In temperate oceans, external sources of nutrients, such as upwelling and freshwater runoff, are generally considered the dominant drivers of nitrogen variability (Dayton et al. 1999; Lønborg et al. 2021). Due to the open nature of nearshore environments, high water flow from currents, tides, and wave action are believed to limit small-scale (1 to 100 m2) nutrient variation (Probyn and Chapman 1983). Therefore, research on intertidal and shallow subtidal ecosystems has traditionally focused on top-down trophic interactions as the drivers of community composition at small scales, while limiting considerations of resource limitation to large regional or continental scales (Paine 1986; Menge 1992). However, evidence suggests meso-scale (10 to 100 km; Broitman et al., 2001) variation in allochthonous nitrogen via upwelling may contribute to bottom-up control of marine communities (Menge et al. 1997; Nielsen and Navarrete 2004) and even weaken top-down control (Sellers et al. 2020). Consumer-mediated nutrient dynamics may also contribute to smaller scales of nutrient variability than previously assumed. For instance, abundance of intertidal mussel beds has been linked to variation in nitrogen concentrations along entire coastlines (Pfister et al. 2014), across 10s of meters (Aquilino et al. 2009), and among tidepools (fine-scale microhabitats; Bracken, 2004). Therefore, regenerated nitrogen may contribute substantially to meso-, small-, and fine-scale variation in nutrient availability, even in high-flow, upwelling-dominated nearshore coastal ecosystems.

Shallow subtidal rocky reefs and kelp forests are temperate nearshore habitats that attract dense aggregations of fishes and invertebrates, many of which are economically, ecologically, and culturally important (Steneck et al. 2002). Elevated NH₄⁺ excretion from the concentrated biodiversity and biomass of these communities may also contribute to nutrient hotspots on small to meso scales (Shrestha et al. 2024). Fast-growing canopy kelps, which form expansive underwater forests, may benefit from these excretions directly as a source of nitrogen (in the form of NH₄⁺), especially during low upwelling periods (Brzezinksi et al. 2013; Lees et al. 2024). These kelps, which comprise giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*) and bull kelp (*Nereocystis leutkeana*) in the northeast Pacific, also influence the hydrodynamics and hydrochemistry of seawater, both slowing water flow within the forests and generating gradients of carbon content, pH, alkalinity, and oxygen (Jackson and Winant 1983; Gaylord et al. 2007; Pfister et al. 2019). These modifications of the surrounding fluid environment by kelp forests could affect the productivity and community composition of other primary producers and contribute to small-scale spatial nutrient heterogeneity.

We aimed to quantify the contribution of animal-regenerated nitrogen to spatial variability of nutrients in a temperate, wave-swept upwelling region (Barkley Sound, British Columbia, Canada). This region is located on the traditional territories of the Huu-ay-aht Nation and comprises an archipelago of islands dotted with rocky reefs and kelp forests of heterogeneous structure. We hypothesized that animal-regenerated nutrients contribute to variability in resource availability across three distinct spatial scales. Specifically, we predicted that NH₄⁺ variation would be detectable at the meso-scale due to variation in animal abundance among sites. We also expected to observe variation in NH₄⁺ concentrations at small scales (within natural sites) and fine scales (between experimental cages), but only under conditions that allow for local enrichment (e.g., low tidal exchange). To test these predictions, we measured variation in NH₄⁺ concentrations among rocky reef sites (meso scale of ~10s of km), in and out of kelp forest sites (small scale of 5 m), and near experimentally caged consumers (fine scale of < 2 m, Fig. 1a–c). We quantified the abundance and diversity of fishes and invertebrates at each rocky reef and kelp forest site and measured kelp forest metrics and abiotic variables to explore potential drivers of variation in NH₄⁺ concentrations. By characterizing the scale at which animal-driven nutrients vary, we hope to uncover the extent to which consumers in temperate regions structure communities not only from the top down, but also the bottom up through CND.

**Methods**

*Site description*

Barkley Sound is located in an upwelling region on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada. Upwelling supplies nitrates in the spring and early summer, while storms flush riverine inputs into the nearshore in the winter and spring (Pawlowicz 2017). Due to the proximity of the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre (BMSC), this region has been a long-term focal area for studies seeking to document the response of kelps to marine heatwaves, establish ecological baselines, and unravel ecosystem dynamics (Tanasichuk 1998; Starko et al. 2022, 2024; Attridge et al. 2024). Subtidal fish communities in this region include at least 18 families including gobies, surfperches, rockfishes, greenlings, and sculpins (E.G. Lim, unpubl.). Macroinvertebrate assemblages, which are made up of over 49 families, are dominated by sea urchins, turban snails, sea stars, sea cucumbers, and abalone (E.G. Lim, unpubl.).

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**Figure 1.** Scales of study and site locations in Barkley Sound, British Columbia, Canada.(a) Meso-scale (among-site), (b) small-scale (within-site), and (c) fine-scale (microhabitat) schematics of the three spatial scales of variability investigated. (d) Rocky reefs (circles) surveyed for meso-scale ammonium variation, and kelp forests surveyed (triangles) for small-scale ammonium variation. Site colour indicates mean ammonium concentration found at each site across all three years, with darker points having higher concentrations of ammonium. (★) Indicates the location of the fine scale sea cucumber caging experiment and (\*) denotes location of the crab caging experiment.

*Surveys of meso-scale (among-site) variation*

To explore meso-scale variation in animal-regenerated nutrients among rocky reefs, we measured ammonium (NH₄⁺) concentrations and surveyed fish and invertebrate communities at 27 subtidal sites ranging from 0.06 – 24 km apart in Barkley Sound (Fig. 1d). We used a globally standardized method (i.e., Reef Life Survey, RLS) at each site to estimate fish and invertebrate abundance and collected subtidal NH4+ samples during each survey. We conducted our surveys in the spring (April-May) for three years (2021-2023), with all annual surveys occurring within two weeks of each other (Supplemental Material; Table S1.1). A full explanation of the Reef Life Survey method is available online (http://www.reeflifesurvey.com/methods) and provided by Edgar and Stuart-Smith (2009) and Edgar et al. (2020). Briefly, at each rocky reef site, a pair of RLS-trained SCUBA divers assessed fish and invertebrate abundance and diversity along each side of a 50 m transect line. First, fishes in the water column were counted and sized (total length, in various size class categories) within 5 m on either side of the transect line (500 m2), and then benthic cryptic fishes (also sized) and large mobile invertebrates (> 2.5 cm) were counted within 1 m on either side of the transect line (100 m2).

Immediately following each RLS survey, we collected three 60 mL subtidal seawater samples at 0, 25, and 50 m along the transect, 0 – 2 m above the substrate, and stored the syringes in sealed plastic bags upon collection to prevent contamination. Seawater samples were filtered into opaque amber bottles in the field and frozen for a maximum of two weeks before NH4+ analysis. We confirmed that freezing samples for this duration did not affect NH4+ concentration (E. G. Lim unpubl.). In 2021 and 2022, we followed the fluorometric method using 40 mL seawater samples (Holmes et al. 1999), and in 2023, we followed the fluorometric standard-additions protocol II (Taylor et al. 2007). These methods produce similar results, although the Holmes single spike method is associated with higher variability in measurements (Taylor et al. 2007). The three NH₄⁺ samples collected during each survey were averaged to determine the mean NH₄⁺ concentration for each site.

*Surveys of small-scale (within-site) variation*

To investigate small-scale variation of animal-regenerated nutrients, we measured NH4+ concentrations inside and outside kelp forests and surveyed the resident biological communities as potential moderators of this variation. Our 16 sites comprised forests of varying densities dominated by giant kelp or bull kelp, and two no-kelp control sites. We conducted surveys from July to September 2022 (Table S1.2). First, divers conducted RLS surveys (as above) along 50 m transect lines parallel to the edge of the kelp forest to quantify the abundance and biodiversity of fish and invertebrate communities associated with each kelp forest. Next, divers ran four 5 m-long transects perpendicular to the RLS transect (5 m apart) into the kelp forest to assess kelp density, canopy height, and kelp biomass (Fig. S1.1). Divers then counted the number of canopy kelp individuals (bull or giant kelp) within 0.5 m on either side of each kelp transect to measure kelp density. To estimate canopy height, we measured the length of five randomly selected kelp individuals per kelp transect; for bull kelp we measured the total length from holdfast to pneumatocyst in situ, but for giant kelp, we collected five random individuals to measure the length from holdfast to the tip of the apical meristem on dry land. To quantify bull kelp biomass, we measured the sub-bulb circumference (15 cm below the bottom of the bulb) of the same five bull kelps per transect in situ and calculated individual biomass using a quadratic diameter to biomass formula for Barkley Sound (C. M. Attridge unpubl.). For giant kelp biomass, we weighed (to the nearest 1 g or less) the same five individuals per transect that were collected for total length measurements. We multiplied the mean biomass estimate for each kelp species by the species density to calculate a biomass/m2 estimate for each kelp transect, which we then averaged over the four transects per forest to estimate overall mean forest biomass/m2. We estimated total forest area by swimming around the perimeter of the forest on the surface with a Garmin GPSMAP 78SC, which we used to calculate total forest biomass (kg).

Finally, to compare NH₄⁺ concentrations inside vs outside each kelp forest, we collected paired 60 mL syringes of seawater immediately outside the kelp forest within 0 – 2 m above the substrate, and 5 m into the kelp forest at the same depth. We collected three paired NH₄⁺ samples from each site, which were spaced 5 m apart, by matching them with the first three kelp transects. Outside each kelp forest, we also filled a plastic Ziplock bag with seawater to create standards. Samples and standards were filtered into amber bottles in the field and stored on ice for transportation back to the laboratory, at which point we measured NH4+ concentration in each sample bottle following the fluorometric standard-additions protocol II for 40 mL samples (Taylor et al. 2007). For each paired inside and outside kelp forest NH₄⁺ sample, we calculated ∆NH₄⁺ = inside NH₄⁺ - outside NH₄⁺.

*Surveys of fine-scale (microhabitat) variation*

To quantify the ability of animals to affect the NH₄⁺ concentration in their immediate vicinity we conducted two caging experiments in situ near Bamfield. We used California sea cucumbers (*Apostichopus californicus*) in the first caging experiment because they are a large, abundant invertebrate with a high excretion rate (Bray et al. 1988). The first experiment occurred May 27 – 28, 2021 at Scott’s Bay (48°50'05.2"N, 125°08'49.3"W), a wide, exposed bay that opens into Trevor Channel (Fig. 1d). We constructed 18 wire cages (26 x 26 x 26 cm), which we covered in 2 mm plastic mesh. These cages were spaced 3 m apart along two weighted lines (9 cages per line) and deployed at 3 to 5.8 m depth. We collected adult California sea cucumbers from the site via SCUBA, measured contracted sea cucumber length and girth, and immediately placed them into the cages in randomly assigned densities of 0, 1, or 2 sea cucumbers (*n* = 6 replicates per density). After 24 hours, we returned to collect water samples from each cage in situ. While underwater, we minimized water movement by reducing our fin and hand movements while opening the mesh lids, which were secured with wire and just wide enough to collect a 60 mL syringe of seawater. Once at the surface, we filtered 40 mL of each sample into amber bottles and transported them on ice to the lab, where we measured NH4+ using the fluorometric method (Holmes et al. 1999).

We used red rock crabs (*Cancer productus*) in the second caging experiment to see if a species with an even higher individual-level excretion rate could produce fine-scale nutrient variation. The second experiment occurred over nine days from June 10 – 19, 2023 in Bamfield Inlet (48°49'53"N 125°08'11"W), a narrow, sheltered inlet (Fig. 1d). We replicated this experiment from June 19 – 28, 2023 following the same methodology. We collected red rock crabs from the site using crab traps and kept them at BMSC in flow-through sea tables for 2 – 10 days. Crabs were fed salmon every 2 – 4 days, and all crabs were fed the night before each experiment started. We constructed 12 cages from clear plastic (40 x 28 x 17 cm), with two 15 x 9 cm windows covered in a dual layer of 10 mm plastic mesh and 1 mm mesh to allow for water flow. The cages were randomly distributed every 2 m along a lead line anchored with cement blocks 0.8 m below chart datum. Each cage contained either one large crab (carapace 15.0 – 15.9 cm), one medium crab (11.6 – 14.4 cm), or a control (i.e., a small rock, scraped clean, so weight was similar across all cages) (*n* = 4 replicates per experiment). During both experiments, we replaced the crabs after 4 days with freshly fed, similar-sized crabs, at this point, we re-randomized the order of the cages along the line to minimize any effect of cage location. We measured seawater NH₄⁺ concentration via snorkel at low tide at the beginning, middle, and end of each nine-day experiment by drawing water samples using a 60 mL syringe and a fixed narrow rubber tube that began in the centre of the cage and extended several inches outside the mesh window. We filtered 40 mL of each sample into amber bottles, which were stored on ice before NH₄⁺ analysis via fluorometric standard-additions protocol II (Taylor et al. 2007).

*Statistical analyses*

All statistical analysis were conducted in R (v4.1.2, R Core Team, 2019) using RStudio (v1.3.1093, RStudio Team, 2016). We used tidyverse packages for data manipulation and visualization (Wickham et al. 2019), ‘glmmTMB’ for all modelling (Brooks et al. 2017), and DHARMa to check model fit (Hartig 2022). We ensured all models met assumptions by inspecting residuals using the DHARMa simulateResiduals function and checked for collinearity between variables using the vif function from the car package with a cutoff value of 2.

For each Reef Life Survey conducted, we calculated fish biomass from fish length following the formula:

W is fish weight, L is the fish length, a and b are species-specific constants from FishBase (Froese et al. 2014). All mobile invertebrates were counted, but only sunflower sea stars (*Pycnopodia helianthoides*) and economically important species (abalone [*Haliotis kamtschatkana*] and scallops [*Crassadoma gigantea*]) were sized. We used published length–weight relationships to calculate wet weight from length for these three species. For all other invertebrates, we used published wet weights to estimate biomass for each taxon. We used shell-free wet weight for species with large shells, such as hermit crabs and snails. When biomass information was unavailable for a species, we used estimates from the closest relative or most similarly sized species available (Table S1.3). Animal abundance per m2 was calculated as the total number of fishes and invertebrates counted on each survey (divided by 500 m2 for pelagic fishes and by 100 m2 for cryptic fishes and macroinvertebrates), and we used the ‘vegan’ package to calculate Shannon and Simpson diversity indices (Oksanen et al. 2022). We calculated the tide exchange by computing the percent change of the tide height every minute, averaged over the hour-long survey.

Meso-scale (among-site) variation

To explore meso-scale variation in NH₄⁺, we constructed generalized linear mixed-effect models (GLMMs) with NH₄⁺ concentration as the response variable, and animal abundance, tide exchange, an interaction between abundance and tide, Shannon diversity, and survey depth as predictors, and random effects of site and year. All predictors were scaled and centered around the mean using the scale function. We used a gamma distribution (link = ‘log’). To test the robustness of our modelling approach, we considered animal biomass as a predictor instead of abundance, and Simpson’s diversity instead of Shannon diversity; alternative models including these predictors were not better supported by AIC (Table S1.4). We ran additional models considering the effect of only the most abundant families of fishes and invertebrates, which are fully described in Supplemental Material Section 2.

Small-scale (within-site) variation

To determine whether NH₄⁺ concentration differed inside and outside of kelp forests, we used a linear mixed-effects model (LMM) with ∆NH₄⁺ as the response variable (*n* = 3 estimates per site), and kelp species, mean forest kelp biomass (per m2), tide exchange, animal biomass, survey depth, Shannon diversity, and interactions between kelp biomass and tide exchange, kelp biomass and animal biomass, and animal biomass and tide exchange as fixed effects. All continuous predictors were scaled and centered around the mean as above. We included site as a random effect (1|site) as each site contributed three estimates to the analysis and used a Gaussian distribution. As above, we chose our final set of predictors upon comparing AIC values of models with alternate predictors (Table S1.5). We then ran additional models considering the effect of only the most abundant families of fishes and invertebrates (Supplemental Material Section 2).

Fine-scale (microhabitat) variation

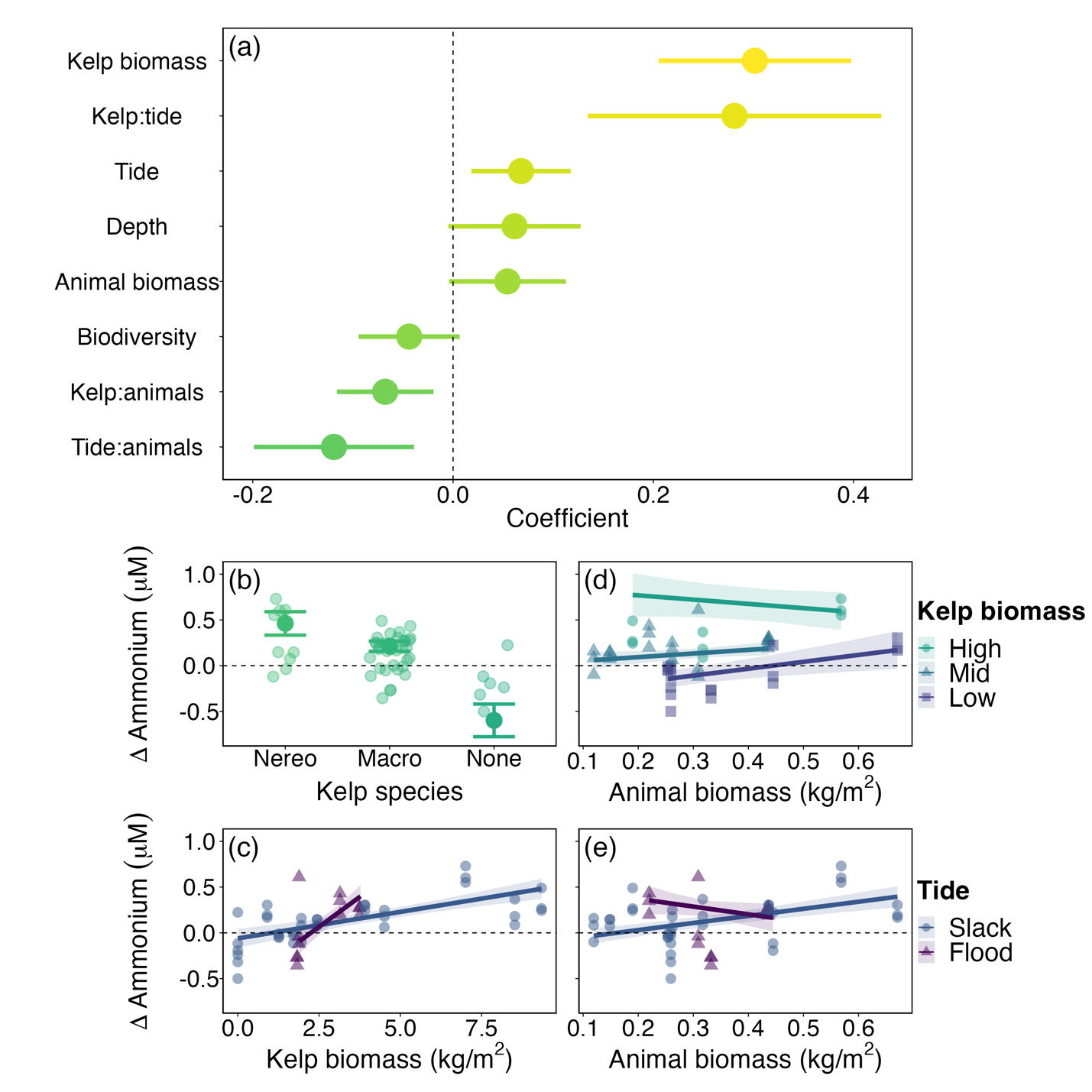
We constructed separate linear models for each caging experiment to quantify the impact of caged animals on adjacent NH₄⁺ concentration. For the sea cucumber experiment, we regressed cage NH₄⁺ concentration against the treatment (i.e., sea cucumber density: 0, 1, or 2 sea cucumbers) and cage depth (centered) using a Gaussian distribution. We calculated the NH₄⁺ excretion rate for each sea cucumber using a previously generated size-to-excretion relationship (Table S1.6). For the red rock crab experiment, we constructed a generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM) with cage NH₄⁺ concentration as the response variable and treatment (no crab, medium crab, or large crab) as the predictor variable with a gamma distribution (link = ‘log’). We included a random effect of sampling day because we measured NH₄⁺ three times per experiment, and a random effect of experimental week, because we replicated the whole experiment twice. We used a previously developed carapace-to-excretion relationship to calculate NH₄⁺ excretion rates for each crab (Table S1.7).

**Results**

We found evidence of meso-scale variation in ammonium (NH₄⁺) concentrations, which ranged from 0.07 μM – 2.06 μM among rocky reefs in Barkley Sound (Fig. 1d). Overall, we found no evidence that NH₄⁺ concentration was correlated with animal abundance (GLMM, *p* = 0.57), tide exchange (*p* = 0.99), Shannon diversity (*p* = 0.41), or survey depth (*p* = 0.61; Fig. 2a). However, we did find a significantly negative interaction between animal abundance and tide exchange (*p* = 0.01; Fig. 2b), revealing a weakly positive effect of total animal abundance per m2 on NH₄⁺ concentration, but only at ebb tide. In the models considering only the abundance of one animal family at a time, we found evidence for a positive relationship between the abundance of greenlings (Hexagrammidae) and whitecap limpets (Acmaeidae) and NH₄⁺ (*p* = 0.03; Fig. S2.1). The single-family models did not reveal a significant effect of any other predictors (Fig. S2.1 and Table S2.1). **A comparison of different colored lines

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceFigure 2.** Ecological drivers of seawater ammonium concentration observed across 27 rocky reef sites (meso-scale) in Barkley Sound, British Columbia, Canada. (a)Model coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, and (b) model-generated predictions with shaded 95% confidence intervals of the effect of the interaction between animal abundance and tide exchange on among-site variation in ammonium concentration. The coefficients were generated from a generalized linear mixed-effects model with a gamma distribution (link = ‘log’), so coefficients are presented in log space. Continuous predictors were centred and scaled to compare effect sizes between predictors with varying units.

We also documented evidence of significant small-scale, within-site variation of NH₄⁺ (Fig. 3).; concentrations were 1.3x higher inside giant kelp forests and 1.6x higher inside bull kelp forests than outside (LMM, *p* < 0.001; Fig. 3b). The ‘excess’ NH₄⁺ concentration inside kelp forests increased with kelp biomass (*p* < 0.001; Fig. 3c), and tide exchange (*p* = 0.007; Fig. 3a). We found limited evidence for an effect of animal biomass (*p* = 0.07; Fig. 3a), survey depth (*p* = 0.07; Fig. 3a), and Shannon diversity on ∆NH₄⁺ (*p* = 0.09; Fig. 3a). There was a positive interaction between kelp forest biomass and tide exchange, whereby the positive effect of kelp biomass on ∆NH₄⁺ increased with tide exchange (*p* < 0.001; Fig. 3a,c). We also identified a negative interaction between kelp biomass and animal biomass (*p* = 0.006; Fig. 3a,d), and a negative interaction between tide exchange and animal biomass (*p* = 0.004; Fig. 3a,e). The change in NH₄⁺ was negative between samples taken 5 m apart at the no-kelp control sites (*p* = 0.003; Fig. 3b). For the single-family models, five families displayed significant relationships between biomass and ∆NH₄⁺, while the biomass of Gobiidae was negatively correlated with ∆NH₄⁺ (Fig. S2.2 and Table S2.2).



**Figure 3.** Drivers of variation in ammonium concentration inside vs outside kelp forests across 16 sites (small-scale) in Barkley Sound, British Columbia, Canada. (a) Model coefficients with 95% confidence intervals and (b-e) model-generated predictions with shaded 95% confidence intervals of the effects of significant drivers of within-site variation in ammonium concentration. Continuous variables were scaled and centered to facilitate comparisons between variables measured in different units. Nereo = *Nereocystis luetkeana*, Macro = *Macrocystis pyrifera*, None = no kelp control.

We found mixed evidence for animal-related fine-scale variability in NH₄⁺ concentration. For sea cucumbers, we found no effect of sea cucumber density on cage NH₄⁺ concentration despite a supply rate of 14 μM/h and 28 μM/h for the low and high treatments, respectively. Overall, the mean NH₄⁺ concentration was 0.92 ± 0.04 μM across all cages (LM, *p* > 0.75 for both treatments; Fig. 4a). However, we see a positive effect of cage depth, whereby NH₄⁺ increased by 0.38 ± 0.05 μM per m increase in depth (*p* < 0.001). For red rock crabs, both medium and large crabs significantly increased the cage NH₄⁺ concentration relative to control cages, by 8.7x and 12.1x respectively (GLMM, *p* < 0.001 for all; Fig. 4b). Medium crabs excreted on average 88 μM/h while large crabs excreted 150 μM/h.

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**Figure 4.** Fine scale effect of California sea cucumbers (*Apostichopus californicus*) and red rock crabs (*Cancer productus*) on ammonium concentration. Mean ammonium concentration in experimental cages containing (a) zero (control), one, or two California sea cucumbers (*n* = 6), and (b) zero (control), one medium, or one large red rock crab (*n* = 8 for control and medium, *n* = 7 for large). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

**Discussion**

We found evidence of variability of animal-regenerated nutrients from the largest to the smallest scale examined, although the strength of the signal varied. Ammonium (NH₄⁺) varied by up to 16x between rocky reef sites within a year, 1.9x inside vs outside kelp forests, and 40x between cages with and without crabs. Water flow (i.e., tidal exchange and wave exposure) mediated the capacity for animals to saturate the water column with nutrients. Among sites a flooding tide seemed to “wash away” the impact of animals on NH₄⁺ concentrations; in contrast, within sites, moving water made kelps’ ability to slow flow and trap animal-regenerated nutrients more pronounced. In the fine-scale caging experiments we only detected an effect when the nutrient providers were crabs – an effect that we attribute mainly to the low water flow in the protected inlet rather than to the taxa. Nevertheless, across all three scales, there was animal-mediated spatial heterogeneity in nutrient availability, which may contribute to bottom-up effects.

*Meso-scale (among-site) variation*

In rocky reef habitats, we detected a 16-fold difference in NH₄⁺ among sites with the lowest and highest concentrations. This difference is substantially greater than previous measurements of among-site variation in nitrate (3.7x and 6.5x) and ammonium (0.4x and 0.8x) from the same region (Druehl et al. 1989; Hurd et al. 2000). It is also larger than among-site NH₄⁺ differences measured in nearby Washington State (1.1x, Pfister et al., 2014). We had predicted that variation in NH₄⁺ concentration among sites would be driven primarily by animal abundance. We were partly correct since the only significant predictor of among-site differences in NH₄⁺ was a negative interaction between tide exchange and animal abundance, whereby animal excretions may enrich the seawater when the tide is ebbing or slack, but the effect of animal abundance is washed away when the tide comes in. Although marine species diversity sometimes covaries with animal abundance or biomass (Yee and Juliano 2007; Müller et al. 2018), we found no relationship between Shannon diversity and NH₄⁺. We did not quantify intertidal animals or microbial regeneration, which are additional sources of NH₄⁺ (Aquilino et al. 2009; Lowman et al. 2023), but these may be more important in shallower waters and soft-sediment areas than on the subtidal rocky reefs we studied. We conclude that CND likely contributes to meso-scale variation in NH₄⁺ in an unexpected, dynamic, tide-associated manner, which could drive among-site variation in primary productivity and thus bottom-up control.

*Small-scale (within-site) variation*

We found evidence of kelp-mediated nutrient variation on a smaller scale (5 m) than previously established. Although higher NH₄⁺ inside high-density kelp forests has been documented (e.g., Pfister et al., 2019), these studies compared nutrient samples taken from the middle of very large kelp forests to sites more than 50 m away from the forest edges (Stewart et al. 2009; Pfister et al. 2019; Traiger et al. 2022). By sampling inside and outside forests across a gradient of kelp densities we further demonstrate a positive relationship between kelp biomass and NH₄⁺ retention. The retention of NH₄⁺ observed is likely due to the dampening of flow within the kelp forest bed and subsequent flow acceleration around the edges (Gaylord et al. 2007; Rosman et al. 2007). Indeed, as predicted, we found the effect of kelp biomass on NH₄⁺ retention was more pronounced when the tide was rising (flood tide). Unfortunately, we never sampled on ebbing tides, and did not quantify water motion due to waves or currents, so we could only contrast slack and flooding tides. Nevertheless, it seems that water flow due to tidal exchange enhances NH₄⁺ variability within kelp forests instead of masking it.

We uncovered additional drivers of differences in NH₄⁺ concentration inside and outside kelp forests, namely kelp species and animal biomass. We found higher ∆NH₄⁺ (NH₄⁺ inside - NH₄⁺ outside) in bull kelp forests compared to giant kelp forests, which may be due to their different allocations of biomass in the water column and thus different alterations of water flow. Indeed, Traiger et al., (2022) found the effect of giant kelp forests on water chemistry was smaller than that of bull kelp forests, previously described by Murie and Bourdeau (2020). Somewhat surprisingly, at the no kelp sites, NH₄⁺ was lower in the “inside” samples, which were closer to shore, compared to the “outside” samples, which were taken 5 m farther from shore and often slightly deeper despite our efforts to maintain a consistent sampling depth. NH₄⁺ tends to *increase* with depth (Brzezinksi et al. 2013), which might explain this result. As we found the opposite trend at our kelp sites, where the “inside” kelp forest samples had more NH₄⁺ than the possibly deeper “outside” samples, we are confident this result is due to retention of NH₄⁺ by kelp, instead of an artifact of our sampling procedure.

Even though kelp forests attract dense aggregations of fishes and invertebrates, the positive effect of animal biomass on ∆NH₄⁺ was weak and mediated by water flow and kelp biomass. Shannon diversity was positively associated with both animal and kelp biomass (Fig. S1.2), but weakly negatively affected ∆NH₄⁺. The negative interactions between animal biomass and both tide and kelp biomass suggest a potentially saturating relationship among these variables. When animal biomass was low, increased kelp biomass or tidal exchange increased ∆NH₄⁺, whereas at high animal biomass, increasing kelp or flow had no effect. There may therefore be a threshold for how much animals can saturate and therefore increase ∆NH₄⁺ in kelp forest ecosystems. Beyond this point, increased water motion or kelp biomass no longer enhances NH₄⁺ inside kelp forests relative to the forest edge.

*Fine-scale (microhabitat) variation*

At the smallest scale of variability tested, we found evidence of variation in NH₄⁺ only in our cage experiments in the sheltered inlet, which may suggest that water motion mediates variation at this scale as well. Under laboratory conditions we confirmed that NH₄⁺ enrichment by animals declines with increasing flow rates (Fig. S1.3). Alternative or complementary explanations include a taxonomic effect and/or an experimental effect. The crabs in the sheltered cages excreted NH₄⁺ at a rate roughly 6x higher than the sea cucumbers caged in the more exposed location. This difference in NH₄⁺ production could have given us more scope to detect differences among treatments in the protected inlet. In addition, the crab cages were constructed with only two mesh windows, in contrast to the fully meshed cages of sea cucumbers, which could have promoted nutrient retention in the former. The experimental duration was also shorter for the sea cucumber experiment, but NH₄⁺ concentrations in the crab cages were consistent across the three sampling days (day one, four, and nine) so cumulative enrichment is unlikely.

Fine-scale NH₄⁺ enrichment by animals is nevertheless possible in wave-exposed conditions; for example, seawater above mussel beds had ~16x higher NH₄⁺ compared to neighbouring rock without mussels on the northern California coast (Aquilino et al. 2009). Our cage experiments were not designed to test why variation was found in one experiment and not the other, but rather to see whether fine-scale variation might arise at all. Therefore, we simply conclude that at least in sheltered conditions, variation on the scale of meters driven by animal biomass is possible.

*Implications for primary productivity*

Heterogeneity in primary productivity arises from variation in resource supply. Increased primary productivity has been seen with orders of variation (i.e., 1.3 – 9x) in NH₄⁺ (Uthicke and Klumpp 1998; Arzul 2001; Vinther and Holmer 2008; West et al. 2009), which is within the range of variation we observed at all three spatial scales considered here. Regardless of nitrate availability, NH₄⁺ is less costly for primary producers to use, and can even inhibit nitrate uptake (MacIsaac and Dugdale 1969, 1972). In nitrate-replete upwelling ecosystems of the west coast of North America, a 15.8x increase in NH₄⁺ (from 0.08 uM to 1.26 uM) was linked to increased tissue nitrogen and percent cover of an intertidal seaweed (Aquilino et al. 2009), while a 1.8x increase in NH₄⁺ increased growth in subtidal seaweeds (Druehl et al. 1989). Furthermore, the mismatch of timing between upwelling and the growing season at temperate latitudes leads to an increased reliance on NH₄⁺ over time as nitrate becomes depleted (Druehl et al. 1989; Brzezinksi et al. 2013).

Heterogeneity in NH₄⁺ availability likely influences primary productivity in Barkley Sound at each spatial scale studied. Although nitrate varies among sites at the meso-scale (Druehl et al. 1989; Hurd et al. 2000), external nutrient supply (upwelling) may not control primary productivity as strongly as local factors (Pawlowicz 2017). The meso-scale NH₄⁺ variability we documented may be one such local factor. At a small scale, nitrate from external sources (e.g., upwelling and run-off) becomes depleted or unchanged as it flows through a kelp forest (Pfister et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2009), in contrast to NH4+ which is continuously regenerated by animals within and around the forest and seemingly retained. As such, kelp forests effectively concentrate their preferred form of nitrogen. This likely facilitates not only the growth of these canopy kelps but also understory seaweeds and phytoplankton in the water column. As urchin overgrazing and climate change continue to degrade kelp forests, this important ecosystem function may be lost. At fine scales, invertebrates and fishes living in close contact with primary producers can enrich kelps directly. Many seaweeds are capable of surge uptake of NH₄⁺ (Cedeno et al. 2021), allowing them to maximize the benefit from animal excretion directly on their thalli. Indeed, given turnover rates of water and NH₄⁺ uptake rates, seaweeds in New Zealand were estimated to derive up to 79% of their needed nitrogen from direct epifauna excretion (Taylor and Rees 1998).

*Conclusion*

Despite the mixing forces of currents, tides and waves, spatial heterogeneity in NH₄⁺ concentration was detectable at meso, small, and fine spatial scales. Given the annual depletion of nitrates each summer (Druehl et al. 1989), primary producers’ preference for NH₄⁺ over nitrate (Phillips and Hurd 2004), and capacity for surge uptake of NH₄⁺ (Cedeno et al. 2021), it seems likely that the animal-driven variation in NH₄⁺ we observed could be contributing to heterogeneity in primary productivity. Our results disrupt the dominant paradigm that bottom-up effects in temperate waters are primarily driven by external sources of nutrients acting on large scales, while animals contribute to smaller-scale variation mainly through top-down, consumptive effects. Instead, animals in temperate waters likely drive bottom-up effects across multiple spatial scales while also contributing to top-down effects. Animal-driven spatio-temporal variability of nitrogen is known to drive bottom-up effects in the tropics, and our results suggest animal-regenerated nutrients also play a previously unappreciated role in shaping nutrient availability in temperate regions as well.

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**Data Availability Statement**

All datasets generated during the current study and code are available in the GitHub repository: <https://github.com/em-lim13/Ch2_Spatial_pee>.

**Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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