

Current Report

Introduction

This report presents zooplankton annual and seasonal abundance indices and distribution trends from 1974 through 2020 for the most common copepods, cladocera, rotifers, and mysids of the upper estuary.

Trends

Since the implementation of the Zooplankton Study in 1974, a significant decrease in the overall abundance of zooplankton has been detected in the estuary (Figure 70). Only the abundance of cyclopoid copepods increased in the region during this period, driven by the invasion and spread of *Limnoithona tetraspina*. The overall decrease in zooplankton abundance in the estuary can be attributed to a series of invasions into the estuary, most notably that of the Asian clam *Potamocorbula amurensis* in the mid-1980s (Kimmerer, Gartside, and Orsi 1994; Carlton et al. 1990). The spread of *P. amurensis* throughout SFE has had significant impacts on planktonic abundance in the upper estuary due to its high filtration feeding rates on phytoplankton and copepod nauplii. Not only has abundance decreased for most of the zooplankton groups, but dramatic shifts in the composition of these communities have been detected during the study period. These changes have been driven by the introduction and spread of non-native zooplankton species throughout the estuary, compounded with changes to the abiotic and biotic environments.

Calanoid copepods

While overall calanoid copepod abundance has declined slightly over the study period, community composition has shifted dramatically (Figure 70A). When the study began in the early 1970s the copepods *Eurytemora affinis* and *Acartia* spp. dominated the calanoid community. The

non-native *E. affinis* was once the primary prey item of the endangered Delta Smelt, but its abundance has declined to a fraction of what it once was, forcing fish to prey switch to more recently introduced calanoids like *Pseudodiaptomus forbesi* (Moyle et al. 1992; Slater and Baxter 2014). One of the first recorded introduced calanoid copepods was *Sinocalanus doerrii*, a freshwater species native to China that invaded the estuary in 1978 and became the most dominant calanoid species in the estuary for a decade (Orsi et al. 1983). Then in 1987, after the invasion of *P. amurensis*, the calanoid *Pseudodiaptomus forbesi* was introduced and first detected in the region, competing with the abundant *E. affinis* (Orsi and Walter 1991). *P. forbesi* quickly became the numerically dominant calanoid in the upper estuary and remains the most abundant to this day. Another introduction occurred in 1993, when the predatory calanoid copepod *Acartiella sinensis* quickly became the second most abundant calanoid in the upper estuary, dominating the low-salinity zone in Suisun and the West Delta (Orsi and Ohtsuka 1999). This invasion was hypothesized to have narrowed the range of *P. forbesi* and calanoid copepods towards the freshwater zone of the estuary (Figure 71A), as predation on *P. forbesi* nauplii by *A. sinensis* has been recorded (Kayfetz and Kimmerer 2017).

In general, calanoid copepod abundance is highest in the estuary during the summer and fall months, with lowest abundances during the winter (Figure 72A). While calanoid copepod abundance peaked in the summer of 2017 at a nearly 20 year high, 2018 through 2020 abundance returned to levels comparable to the previous two decades. In 2020 the distribution of calanoids throughout the estuary was similar to the last two years, with *P. forbesi* the most abundant in summer and fall in most of the upper estuary (Figure 72A). The predatory *Acartiella sinensis* was seen in highest densities in the summer and fall mostly in the Suisun Marsh and Suisun Bay regions, similar to 2018 and 2019. In fall 2020, *A. sinensis* was the most abundant calanoid in Suisun, where it co-occurred with high densities of one of its primary prey items *Limnoithona tetraspina* (Figure 72B), while *P. forbesi* was most abundant to the east of Suisun Bay. *Acartia* spp. was the only native calanoid copepod commonly found in 2020, but it was restricted to Suisun Bay and San Pablo Bay in the lower reaches of the estuary. *Eurytemora affinis* was most dominant calanoid upriver of Suisun Bay estuary in the spring of 2020, similar to seasonal distribution patterns of the last two decades.

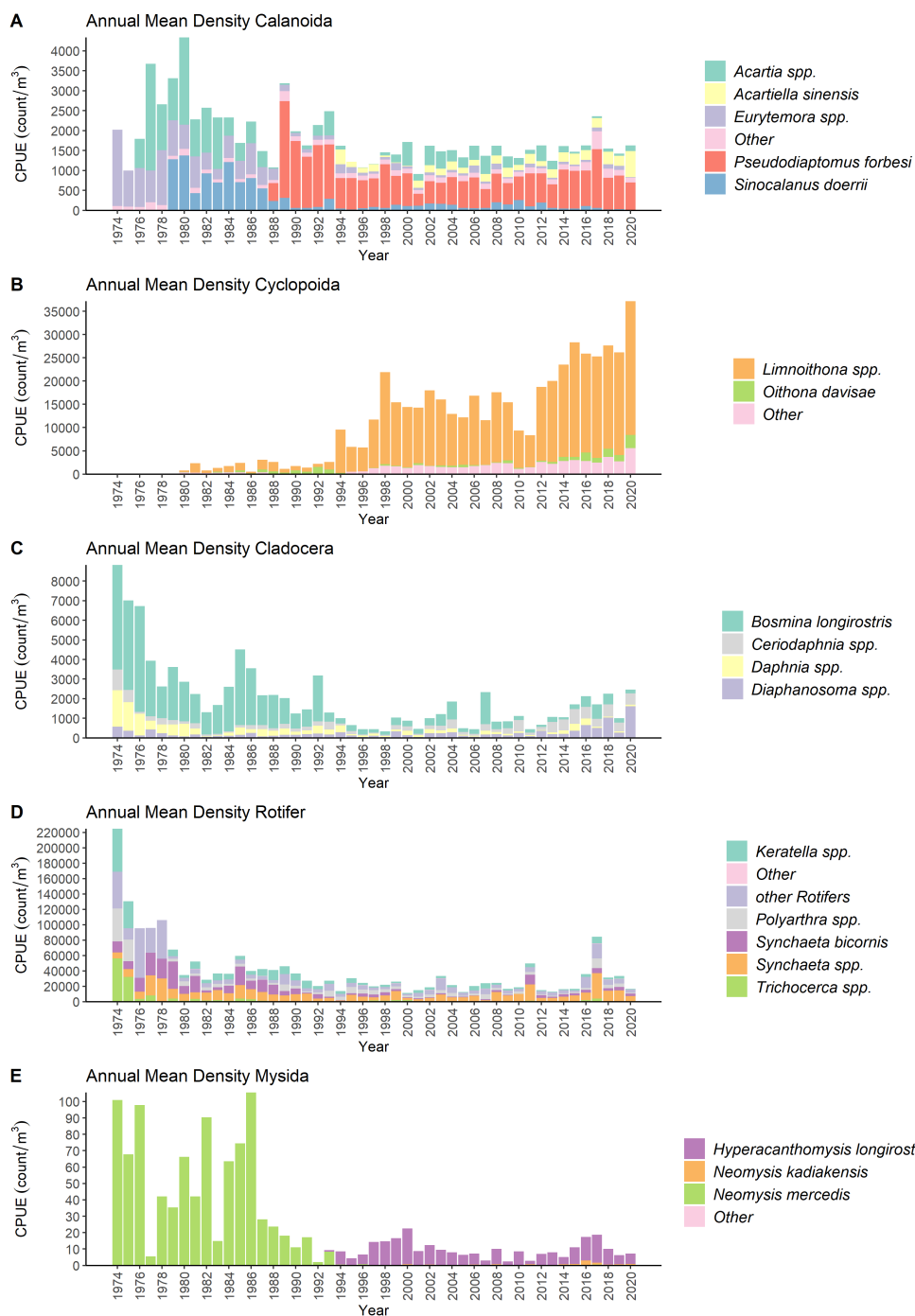


Figure 70: Annual (Mar-Nov) mean zooplankton CPUE for A) Calanoid CPUE in the CB net, B) Cyclopoida CPUE in pump samples, C) Cladocera CPUE in the CB net, D) Rotifer CPUE in pump samples, and E) Mysid CPUE in the mysid net.

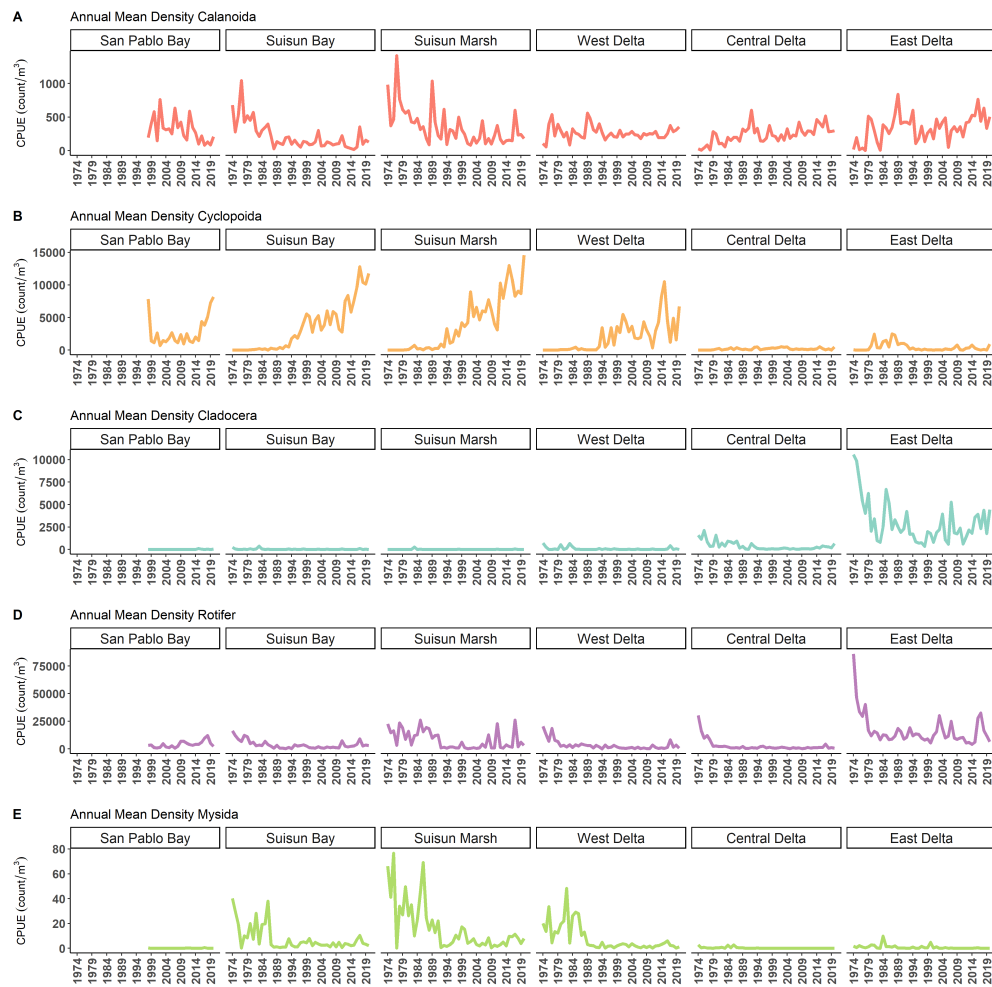


Figure 71: Annual (Mar-Nov) mean zooplankton CPUE by region and order for A) Calanoida CPUE in the CB net, B) Cyclopoida CPUE in pump samples, C) Cladocera CPUE in the CB net, and D) Mysid CPUE in the mysid net, from the EMP survey.

Cyclopoid copepods

While overall zooplankton abundance has declined over the study period, the abundance of cyclopoid copepods exploded (Figure 70B). The native *Oithona* spp. and *Acanthocyclops* copepods were at low abundances when the study began, but with the introduction of *Limnoithona sinensis* in the early 1980s, and the later identification of the invasive *Limnoithona tetraspina* in 1993, cyclopoid indices have increased dramatically (Ferrari and Orsi 1984; Orsi and Ohtsuka 1999). Abundance indices for the two species of *Limnoithona* were reported together from 1980 through 2006 as *Limnoithona* spp., then separately since 2007 when they were identified and enumerated as *L. sinensis* and *L. tetraspina*. In 2020, *L. tetraspina* abundance was the highest observed for all copepods (Figure 70B).

Much smaller than calanoid copepods collected in the CB net, the *Limnoithona* cyclopoids are best retained in pump samples, which use a smaller mesh. Since the early 1990s, *Limnoithona* spp. abundance has been higher than calanoid copepod abundance, and the small *L. tetraspina* has become the most common zooplankton in the upper estuary. This increase in *L. tetraspina* abundance is likely due to a decline of Northern Anchovy in the upper SFE and subsequent decreased predation (Kimmerer 2006), as well as the cyclopoid's small size, high growth rate, and motionless behavior, making it very difficult for visual feeders to capture (Bouley and Kimmerer 2006; Greene et al. 2011). These characteristics may increase its ability to escape predation in a region where visual predation is most dominant among fish (Kimmerer 2006). The introduction of *L. tetraspina* is also linked to the reduction of the range of *P. forbesi* out of the low-salinity zone of the estuary, as high *L. tetraspina* densities may have fed and sustained larger populations of the predatory *A. sinensis*, which also fed on *P. forbesi* nauplii (Kayfetz and Kimmerer 2017).

Seasonally, *Limnoithona tetraspina* peaks in summer and fall (Figure 71B), with lower abundance in winter and spring. As in prior years, this cyclopoid was most abundant in the low-salinity zone of the estuary in Suisun Bay and the West Delta (Figure 72B). *Oithona davisae*, a native cyclopoid, was the most abundant cyclopoid in the higher-salinity San Pablo Bay in summer and fall (Figure 72B).

Cladocera

The cladoceran community of the upper estuary is composed of *Bosmina*, *Daphnia*, *Ceriodaphnia*, and *Diaphanosoma* species, whose populations have also substantially declined since the onset of the study (Figure 70C). These cladocera tend to be herbivorous, feeding primarily on phytoplankton, and were likely hard hit by the invasion of *P. amurensis* (Baxter et al. 2008; Kratina and Winder 2015). Cladocerans make up a significant portion in the diets of Delta Smelt, juvenile Chinook Salmon, and young-of-the-year Striped Bass throughout the upper estuary (Heubach et al. 1963; Slater and Baxter 2014; Goertler et al. 2018). The invasion and increase of available copepod prey such as *P. forbesi* and the decline in cladocera has created a shift in the nutritional content of the plankton community available for fish, with yet to be determined consequences (Kratina and Winder 2015).

While Cladocera abundance has declined overall since the study began, recent years abundance has been increased and in 2020 cladocera abundance was the highest observed since 1992 (Figure 71C). In the high outflow year of 2017 some cladocera, namely *Bosmina*, were found

downstream in Suisun and the West Delta, while in 2020 the highest densities of cladocera were found in the East Delta, with trace concentrations found in other regions of the estuary (Figure 72C).

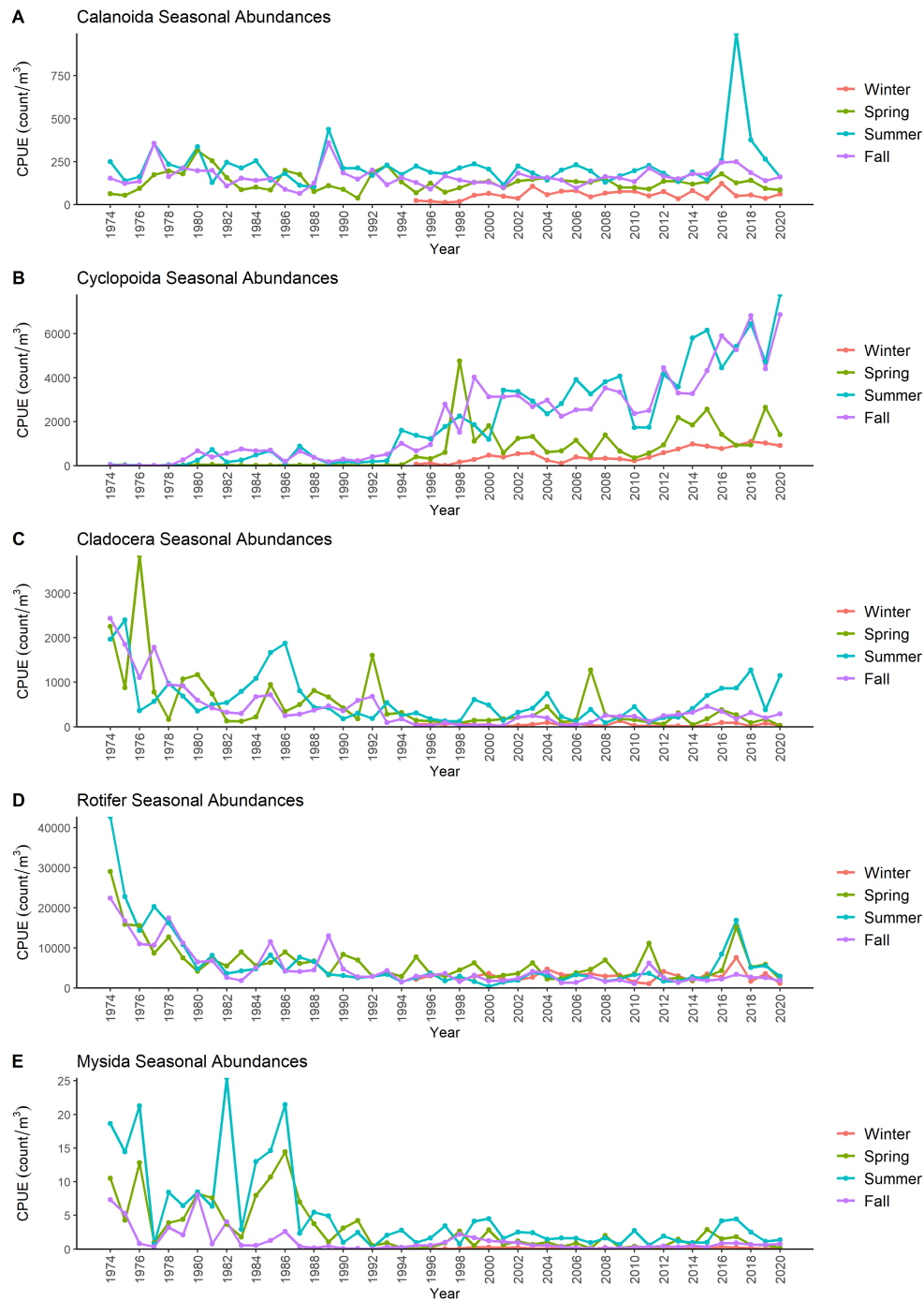


Figure 72: Seasonal mean zooplankton CPUE. Spring, summer, and fall are reported for 1974-2018, winter is reported for 1995-2019. A) Calanoid CPUE in the CB net. B) Cyclopoida CPUE in pump samples. C) Cladocera CPUE in the CB net. D) Rotifer CPUE in pump samples. E) Mysid CPUE in the mysid net

Rotifer

While they are the most abundant zooplankton in the estuary, long-term sampling of rotifers using the pump system shows a dramatic decrease in their annual abundance in the estuary since the beginning of this study (Figure 70D). Several species of rotifers make up the community: most abundant being the *Polyarthra*, *Synchaeta*, and *Keratella* genera. Interestingly, the decline of rotifer abundance beginning in the late 1970s preceded the invasion of *P. amurensis* in the estuary (Cloern and Jassby 2012).

The distribution and abundance of rotifers were similar in 2020 to previous years, with abundances similar to those found since the invasion of *P. amurensis*. Overall rotifer abundance peaked in the summer and spring (Figure 71D). *Keratella* and *Polyarthra* tend to be most abundant in the freshwater and low-salinity zone of the estuary, while *Synchaeta* species occur most in the higher-salinity areas of San Pablo Bay and Suisun (Figures 3D and 4D)(Winder and Jassby 2011). A spatial and temporal split was discernable between *Synchaeta* and other rotifers, with *Synchaeta* having highest densities in the low-salinity zone Bay during the spring, and other rotifers being most abundant in the East Delta in summer.

Mysida

Not only have mysid abundances declined significantly since the 1970s, but the community has also shifted from being composed almost entirely by the native *Neomysis mercedis*, to being dominated by the non-native *Hyperacanthomysis longirostris* (formerly *Acanthomysis bowmani*) (Figure 70E). The first significant decline in *N. mercedis* occurred during the 1976-1977 drought, likely caused by food limitation from an absence of diatoms due to very low river discharges (Siegfried et al. 1979; Cloern et al. 1983). The populations of *N. mercedis* were able to rebound after the years of drought and stayed at high densities in the Suisun Bay region of the upper estuary until the introduction of *P. amurensis* in the mid-1980s, after which their numbers crashed.

In 1993 the introduced *H. longirostris* was first detected by this study, shortly after the decline of *N. mercedis*, and it quickly became the most common mysid in the system. However, overall mysid abundances have not returned to their pre-clam invasion levels (Modlin and Orsi 1997, Figure 70E). Mysids have always peaked in the spring and summer months, fluctuating with the higher productivity in the estuary during those seasons (Figure 71E). Historically mysids have been of critical importance in the diets of many fish species in the SFE including Delta Smelt, Longfin Smelt, Striped Bass, and Chinook Salmon (Moyle et al. 1992; Feyrer et al. 2003; CDFG 2009; Goertler et al. 2018). However, the decline of mysids in the upper estuary has resulted in a

significant decrease in their presence in the diets of fishes of the region (Feyrer et al. 2003). This general decline in abundance continued in 2019, even though 2016 and 2017 had a modest peak in mysid abundances (Figure 70E), and the distribution and timing of peaks stayed similar over the last two decades (Hennessy 2018). *Hyperacanthomysis longirostris* was again the most common mysid in the estuary during all seasons, while the once common and native *Neomysis mercedis* continued to be almost imperceptible in the region. This has been the overall trend in the estuary's mysid communities since 1994. As in prior years, mysids in 2019 were most abundant during the summer and fall (Figure 71E), and highest concentrations occurred in the low-salinity zone of Suisun Bay and Marsh (Figure 72E).

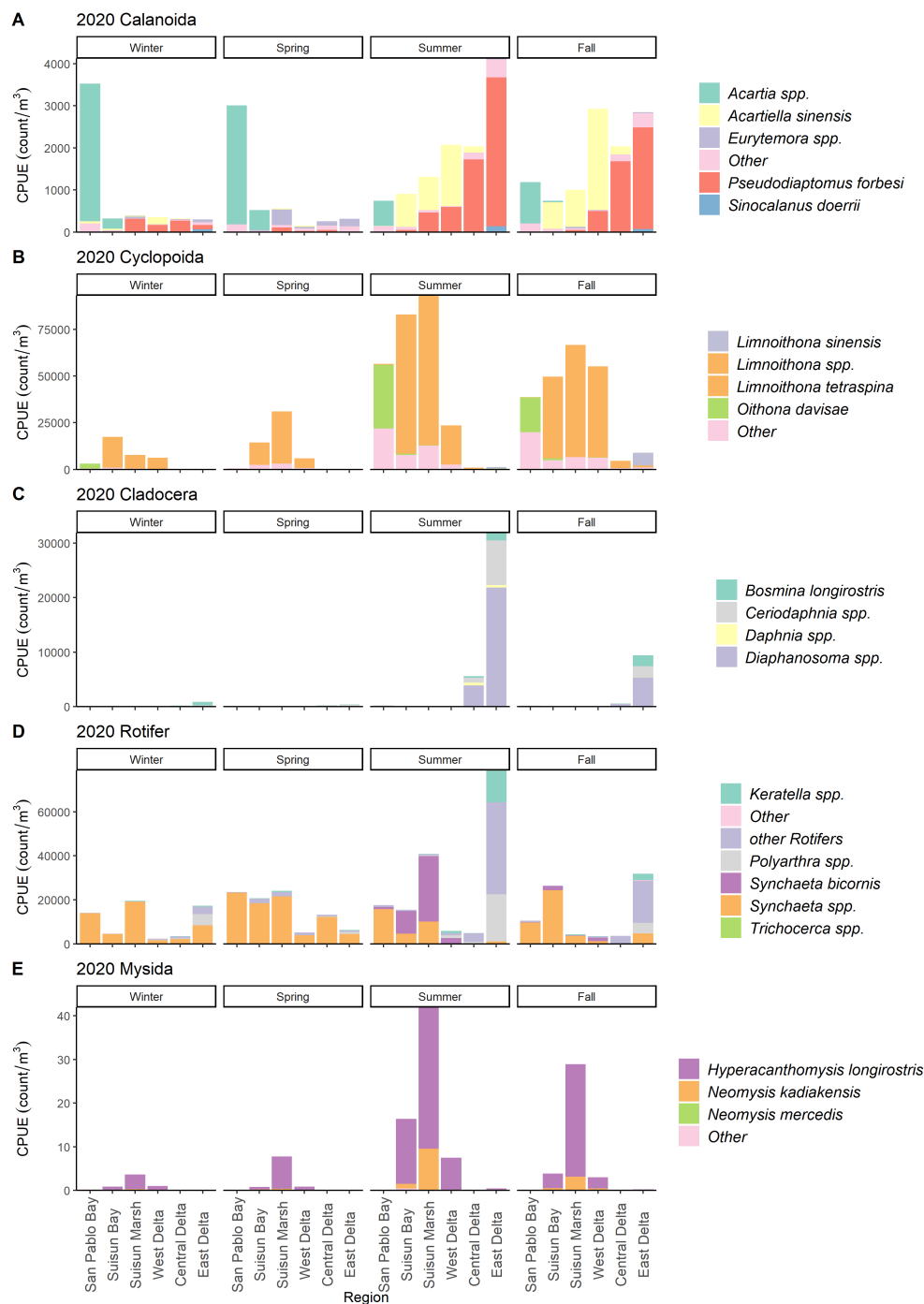


Figure 73: Seasonal mean zooplankton CPUE for reporting year by region for A) Calanoid CPUE in the CB net, B) Cyclopoida CPUE in pump samples, C) Cladocera CPUE in the CB net, D) Rotifer CPUE in pump samples, and E) Mysid CPUE in the mysid net.

Conclusion

In 2019 the Zooplankton Study recorded the abundances of calanoids, cladocera, rotifers, and mysids at lower densities comparable to other recent years and consistent with the downward historic trends in the estuary. Calanoid and cyclopoid copepod abundance peaked in fall, whereas cladocera, rotifers, and mysids peaked in summer. The small, abundant *Limnoithona tetraspina* was again the most abundant copepod in the upper estuary. This multi-decade zooplankton study has enabled researchers and managers to track the shifts in zooplankton abundances and community composition across the estuary for nearly 5 decades. The Zooplankton Study has documented the introduction and dominance of *Pseudodiaptomus forbesi*, *Limnoithona tetraspina*, and *Hypercanthomysis longirostris*, as well as the community's response to the invasive clam *Potamocorbula amurensis*. Understanding these dynamics and how they have fundamentally changed trophic interactions is critical to assessing food resources for fish and conservation strategies in the San Francisco Estuary.

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Data and Contact Info

Data available on the [Environmental Data Initiative portal](#) or the [CDFW FTP site](#).

For questions related to EMP's zooplankton data sets, please contact Arthur Barros at arthur.barros@wildlife.ca.gov.