DISCUSSION

We surveyed a broad swathe of geomorphically similar rivers across south eastern Australia and found that functional diversity in riparian vegetation communities, as described by functional dispersion, exhibits strong relationships with local patterns of hydrology. We used an ecologically relevant set of quantitative functional traits to capture variation in ecological strategy within communities. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine relationships between hydrological conditions and the functional ecology of riparian vegetation communities using a quantitative trait dataset. The overarching pattern across these relationships can be summarised as “heterogeneous flows breed hetereogenous communities”.

This pattern fits within existing understanding of the processes which generate and maintain biological diversity in the riparian environment. Briefly stated, this paradigm holds that riparian biodiversity is a function of landscape complexity generated by hydrogeomorphic processes, overlaid by feedback interactions between these processes and biotic components of the riparian environment (Tabacchi *et al.* 1996; Naiman & Decamps 1997; Palmer & Poff 1997; Stromberg 2001; Corenblit *et al.* 2007; Bornette *et al.* 2008; Steiger & Corenblit 2012).

The sites surveyed in this study spanned a spectrum of flooding intensity: at the lower bound, the calculated 20 year average return interval (ARI) flood was just 18 times the mean daily flow for that river; at the upper bound, flows 210 times greater than the mean daily flow occur approximately every 20 years. Higher magnitude flow events such as this are likely to be geomorphically effective across a greater extent of the fluvial landscape (Huang & Niemann 2006). The strong positive relationship between functional diversity and 20 year ARI flood magnitude supports the supposition that disturbance retards competitive exclusion as a diversity limiting process (*sensu* Huston 1979). Notably, no significant relationships were found between functional diversity and metrics describing mean high flow conditions, whereas metrics describing variability had high explanatory power. Interannual variability in high flow magnitude showed the strongest relationship with functional diversity in this study. If a causal relationship exists, it could be because the average high flow magnitude determines what proportion (in terms of elevation above the main channel) of the riparian zone experiences flooding in a given year. Variability in high flow magnitude, combined with geomorphic heterogeneity, will produce variability in the time since last inundation (without significant disturbance), or combined inundation and disturbance, for a given patch of vegetation. Since flood flows also function as an important dispersal pathway for propagules (Merritt, Nilsson & Jansson 2010), variability in high flow magnitude should influence recruitment processes in a similar manner. Likewise, variability in the frequency of flood flows also results in variable time since last inundation or disturbance. Interannual variability in flood rise and fall rates was also positively associated with functional diversity. Flood rise and fall rates may determine entrainment of woody debris into the flood channel and subsequent bank deposition (Cadol & Wohl 2010). Debris entrainment in turn increases the erosive potential of floods, but its deposition provides structural heterogeneity, and resources for fungal and animal communities (Harmon *et al.* 1986). Overall, the combination of occasional high intensity flooding disturbance with year-to-year variability in patterning of high flow events results in a mosaic of bare, disturbed and colonised substrate. This environmental heterogeneity provides a broad range of niches, facilitating the success of a diversity of ecological strategies (Bornette *et al.* 2008).

We can extend this framework to account for the observed relationships between functional diversity and variability in seasonal water availability. Our sites were distributed across a gradient of flow seasonality: at one end, rivers exhibited weak but stable patterns of seasonality; at the other, rivers were characterised by high interannual variability and spiked, inconsistent temporal distributions of flow. Once again, communities with higher functional diversity tended to be located towards the ‘variable’ end of the spectrum. South eastern Australian plants do exhibit characteristic species-level responses to seasonality, although there is no mass coordination of growth and reproduction phenologies as in the northern hemisphere. Flowering times within the Myrtaceae (a dominant family in riparian plant communities of south-eastern Australia) are often staggered where species are sympatric (Beardsell, Obrien & Williams 1993). Often, growth and reproduction of riparian plants are associated with the arrival of favourable conditions (Woolfrey & Ladd 2001; Robertson 2001; Siebentritt, Ganf & Walker 2004). High coefficients of variation in seasonal mean daily flows may act to temporarily provide species with favourable conditions according to their seasonal biology. Exceptions to these patterns included the quadratic fit for variability in summer mean daily flows, with high values being associated with a reduction in functional diversity, and mean daily flow for summer, which was positively associated with functional diversity, and broke the trend of associations with seasonal means being either non-significant or negative. A meta-analysis of the effect of drought on riparian vegetation showed reduced species richness and a shift towards drought tolerant species following climate-induced increases in the intensity and duration of drought, and that this effect was exacerbated by high temperatures (Garssen, Verhoeven & Soons 2014). Higher mean daily flows, then, potentially alleviate the water stressed induced by hot summer weather. We did investigate whether sites at subtropical latitudes simply had higher functional diversity than temperate sites, according to well known latitudinal patterns of species richness (Willig, Kaufman & Stevens 2003), and found no relationship between latitude and FDis.

Two sites had anomalous values for FDis which do not fit within this conceptual model of disturbance and flow variability providing high niche heterogeneity and therefore functional diversity. These sites experience highly variable flows but had low functional diversity. We experimentally adjusted the abundances of dominant species at these sites, and the low values for FDis appear to result from dominance of a single species at each site (*Acmena smithii* at Mammy Johnson’s Creek, and *Ripogonum album* at Jilliby Creek). These sites may represent cases in which species with ‘variability’ specialist strategies have become dominant. *Acmena smithii* has a relatively large seed and is shade tolerant (Melick 1990), but once established, develops a lignotuber and is highly resistant to drought and disturbance (Ashton & Frankenberg 1976). *Ripogonum album* is a liana, and there is evidence to suggest that abundance lianas may be associated with disturbance (Laurance & Pérez-Salicrup 2001) and have a competitive advantage over trees in dry conditions (Swaine & Grace 2007; Cai, Schnitzer & Bongers 2009), although see Nepstad *et al.* 2007.

At this point, we have developed a conceptual base from which to discuss the high proportion of variance in FDis explained by the multiple regression model. First, however, we should investigate a couple of anomalously low FDis values for sites which experience high levels of disturbance and flow variability.

Outlier points

* Actually there is some competitive exclusion of strategies at two sites which were right at the ‘variable’ end of the spectrum.
* We experimentally adjusted abundances of dominant species at these sites, and the low values of FDis appear to be a result of of dominance by one species (Acmena smithii at Mammy J’s and Ripogonum album at Jilliby). When FDis is calculated using presence-absence data for these species the effect is mitigated.
* Perhaps there are ‘variability’ specialist strategies which are favoured.
* acmena smithii is relatively drought tolerant (more so than tristaniopsis which fills a similar niche)
  + *“A. smithii* is extremely shade-tolerant and regenerates readily under dense forest canopy and in gaps. The seed is easily killed by desiccation and is frequently decimated by birds and insects. Slow development of seedlings in the first year renders them susceptible to drought and browsing. After the second year they are extremely persistent owing to the development of a lignotuber. The litter fall is heavy and decays rapidly to form a mull humus on relatively fertile loams and poor podzolic soils. The shoots of *A. smithii* grow during the frost-prone seasons of the year. This characteristic is correlated with its restriction to low altitudes in a mild maritime environment. The problems of the dispersal and past distribution of *A. smithii* are briefly discussed.” (<http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/BT9760453>)
    - *So perhaps A smithii is good at competitive dominance if it can get established. That lignotuber is probably handy for resprouting after floods as well as tolerating drought.*
* Liana abundance associated with disturbance (in the Amazon…)
  + “Rain forest fragmentation and the structure of Amazonian liana communities.”
* Lianas may also use water more efficiently
  + (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00442-009-1355-4>, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11258-007-9319-4> but see http://www.esajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1890/06-1046.1)

Comparisons with other variables:

* Latitude, catchment area, elevation
* FDis independent of species richness & simpson diversity for species above 1% and included in the analysis but not actual richness including all identified species.
* Decoupling of species richness and functional diversity? Petchey, O. L. and Gaston, K. J. 2002. Extinction and the loss of functional diversity. – Proc. R. Soc. B 269: 1721 – 1727.
* Correlations with CWMs?

Multiple regression model:

* CVAnnHSNum + CVAnnHSPeak \* MDFMDFSummer
* CVAnnHSNum & CVAnnHSPeak: Variability between years in the frequency of high flow events, their intensity (disturb or inundate) and how much of the landscape they affect
* MDFMDFSummer: high summer temperatures combined with low mean flows may cause water stress, which would offset any stimulation of FD by environmental heterogeneity
* So environmental heterogeneity is good, but summer conditions can’t be too stressful.
* Negative coefficient for the CVAnnHSPeak \* MDFMDFSummer indicates that the combined effects of heterogeneity + a bit of extra water when it is needed… level off some point.

Synthesis:

We did actually identify the opposing trend mentioned in the introduction. “i.e. where functional diversity increases with environmental heterogeneity – would be a significant development for riparian functional ecology and conservation.”

* River modification reduces flow heterogeneity
  + Spout some figure about dams being everywhere from Nilsson.
  + Also may strip propagules from high flow events
  + Dams increase seasonal predictability of flows
  + Homogenise peak flows
  + It isn’t just dewatering that’s the problem (ala REFs), it’s reductions to natural flow variability
  + *Designers of environmental flow regimes need to take this into account*
* Climate change might also reduce functional diversity be changing flow seasonality
  + Lower average flows in summer may stress riparian communities and constrain functional diversity
  + We’ve shed some light on how hydrological processes influence community composition, but we should be careful. More functional diversity is not necessarily always a good thing. In conservation, we should be looking to maintain the characteristic functional diversity of the system we’re working in. To emphasise this point, climate change induced increases in flow variability in systems which are not naturally highly variable may open up niche space to favour opportunistic species and promote invasion. CATFORD 2014.
  + General coastal geebung.

Flood pulse (resource availability) and river wave concept – flood pulse might be related to seed dispersal?

Catford says that seedmass isn’t a useful indicator of dispersal for hydrochorous seeds, btw

Flooding disturbance

* AS20YrARI – wholesale geomorphic reworking, provides new substrate and promotes geomorphic heterogeneity. Competitive exclusion is retarded where communities are not able to reach ‘climax’.
* CVAnnHSPeak - in years when HSPeak is high, lots of the riparian zone gets flooded. In years where it is low, not much gets flooded. Combine this with geomorphic heterogeneity and you get variation in which patches get disturbed in a given year. HSPeak also determines whether patches get disturbed or where they merely get inundated. Remember flooding also distributes seeds / other propagules and reworks the seedbank, so seeds will be distributed variably. Flooding also provides nutrients (Flood pulse concept).
* CVAnnHSNum - Different times between last inundation favours different ecological strategies. Or different inundation freqyuency…
* CVAnnMRateRise/Fall – some years have flashy flows and some don’t. so there you have variability in the amount of debris that gets entrained and dumped on the banks. Debris in flood flows might increase mechanical disturbance, but perhaps promotes diversity in fungal or animal communities which interact with the vegetation.
* Put these all together and you get a geomorphically diverse environment (so lots of species in the immediate vicinity, despite the fact that we only sampled geomorphically homogenous plots), with associated patches of vegetation which are of different ages and experience different microhydrologies.
* Environmental heterogeneity creates a “high diversity of niches” and ensures that no one ecological strategy becomes dominant.
* Palmer 1997 actually the variance that matters in lotic studies