

# The dynamics of starvation and recovery

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The eco-evolutionary dynamics of species are fundamentally linked to the energetic constraints of its constituent individuals. Of particular importance are the tradeoffs between reproduction and the dynamics of starvation and recovery in resource-limited environments. To elucidate the consequences of this tradeoff, we introduce a minimal nutritional state-structured model that incorporates two classes of consumer: nutritionally replete consumers that reproduce, and undernourished, non-reproducing consumers that are susceptible to mortality. As a function of the transition rates between these two states that are determined by the abundance of resources, the consumer populations can either undergo cyclic dynamics or reach a steady state. We obtain strong constraints on starvation and recovery rates by deriving allometric scaling relationships between body size and a variety of traits and find that population dynamics subject to these constraints are typically driven to a steady state. Moreover, we find that these rates fall within a ‘refuge’ in parameter space, where the probability of extinction of the consumer population is minimized. Thus we identify a potential mechanism that may both drive and constrain the dynamics of animal populations. Our model provides a natural framework that predicts maximum body size for mammals by determining the relative stability of an otherwise homogeneous population to a mutant population with altered percentage of body fat. For body masses  $< 1.748 \times 10^7$  g, individuals with increased energetic reserves can invade resident populations, and vice versa for body mass  $> 1.748 \times 10^7$  g, thus providing a principled mechanism for a within-lineage driver of Cope’s rule.

foraging | starvation | reproduction

**Significance Statement** Energetic investment in somatic maintenance and growth vs. reproduction directly impacts the dynamics of populations among species. Here, we construct a Nutritional State-structured Model (NSM) to assess the population-level effects of starvation and recovery of a consumer population in a resource-limited environment, and use allometric scaling relationships for mammals to establish all timescales and rates. Our model: i. reveals that mammalian energetic rates minimize the probability of stochastic extinction, ii. establishes dynamic bounds on mammalian body size while providing independent theoretical support for the energy equivalence hypothesis, and iii. provides a mechanistic driver for the evolutionary trend towards larger body size known as Cope’s rule.

## Introduction

The behavioral ecology of all organisms is influenced by the energetic state of individuals, which directly influences how they invest reserves in uncertain environments. Such behaviors are generally manifested as tradeoffs between investing in somatic maintenance and growth, or allocating energy towards reproduction (1–3). The timing of these behaviors responds to selective pressure, as the choice of the investment impacts future fitness (4–6). The influence of resource limitation on an organism’s ability to maintain its nutritional stores may lead to repeated delays or shifts in reproduction over the course of an organism’s life.

The balance between (a) somatic growth and maintenance, and (b) reproduction depends on resource availability (7). For example, reindeer invest less in calves born after harsh winters (when the mother’s energetic state is depleted) than in calves born after moderate winters (8). Many bird species invest dif-

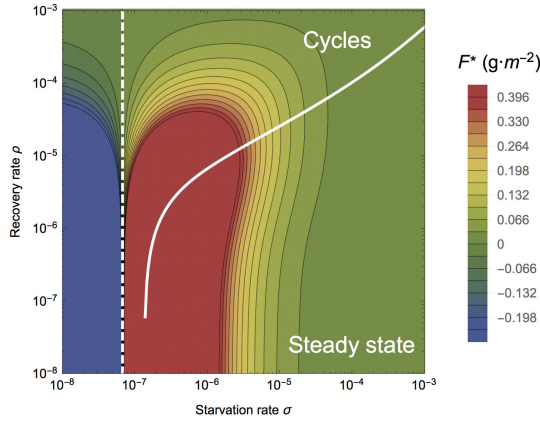
ferently in broods during periods of resource scarcity compared to normal periods (9, 10), sometimes delaying or even foregoing reproduction for a breeding season (1, 11, 12). Even freshwater and marine zooplankton have been observed to avoid reproduction under nutritional stress (13), and those that do reproduce have lower survival rates (2). Organisms may also separate maintenance and growth from reproduction over space and time: many salmonids, birds, and some mammals return to migratory breeding grounds to reproduce after one or multiple seasons in resource-rich environments where they accumulate nutritional reserves (14–16).

Physiology also plays an important role in regulating reproductive expenditures during periods of resource limitation. The data collected thus far has shown that diverse mammals (47 species in 10 families) exhibit delayed implantation, whereby females postpone fetal development (blastocyst implantation) until nutritional reserves can be accumulated (17, 18). Many other species (including humans) suffer irregular menstrual cycling and higher abortion rates during periods of nutritional stress (19, 20). In the extreme case of unicellular organisms, nutrition is unavoidably linked to reproduction because the nutritional state of the cell regulates all aspects of the cell cycle (21). The existence of so many independently evolved mechanisms across such a diverse suite of organisms highlights the importance and universality of the fundamental tradeoff between somatic and reproductive investment. However the general dynamic implications of these constraints are unknown.

Though straightforward conceptually, incorporating the energetic dynamics of individuals (22) into a population-level framework (22, 23) presents numerous mathematical obstacles (24). An alternative approach involves modeling the macroscale relations that guide somatic versus reproductive investment in a consumer-resource system. For example, macroscale Lotka-Volterra models assume that the growth rate of the consumer population depends on resource density, thus implicitly incorporating the requirement of resource availability for reproduction (25).

In this work, we adopt an alternative approach in which we explicitly account for resource limitation and the subsequent effects of starvation. Namely, only individuals with sufficient energetic reserves can reproduce. Such a constraint leads to reproductive time lags due to some members of the population going hungry and then recovering. Additionally, we incorporate the idea that reproduction is strongly constrained allometrically (3), and is not generally linearly related to resource density. As

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**Fig. 1:** The transcritical (dashed) and Hopf bifurcation (solid) as a function of the starvation rate  $\sigma$  and recovery rate  $\rho$  for a 100g consumer. These bifurcation conditions separate parameter space into unphysical, cyclic, and steady state dynamic regimes. The colors show the steady state densities for the energetically replete consumers  $F^*$ , (warmer colors denote higher densities).

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{dF}{dt} &= \lambda F + \xi \rho R H - \sigma (1 - R) F, \\ \frac{dH}{dt} &= \sigma (1 - R) F - \xi \rho R H - \mu H, \\ \frac{dR}{dt} &= \alpha (1 - R) R - (\rho R + \delta) H - \beta F \end{aligned} \quad [1]$$

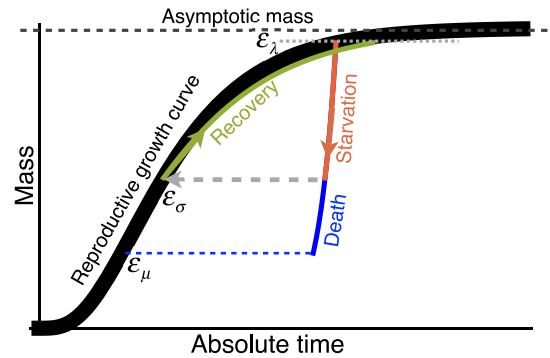
This system of nondimensional equations follows from a set of first-principle relationships for resource consumption and growth (see SI for a full derivation and the dimensional form). Notice that the total consumer density  $F + H$  evolves according to  $\frac{dF}{dt} + \frac{dH}{dt} = \lambda F - \mu H$ . This resembles the equation of motion for the predator density in the classic Lotka-Volterra model (30), except that the resource density does not appear in the growth term. As discussed above, the attributes of reproduction and mortality have been explicitly apportioned to the full and hungry consumers, respectively, so that the growth in the total density is decoupled from the resource density.

Equation [1] has three fixed points: two trivial fixed points at  $(F^*, H^*, R^*) = (0, 0, 0)$  and  $(0, 0, 1)$ , and one non-trivial, internal fixed point at

$$\begin{aligned} F^* &= (\sigma - \lambda) \frac{\alpha \lambda \mu^2 (\mu + \xi \rho)}{A (\lambda \rho B + \mu \sigma (\beta \mu + \lambda (\delta + \rho)))}, \\ H^* &= (\sigma - \lambda) \frac{\alpha \lambda^2 \mu (\mu + \xi \rho)}{A (\lambda \rho B + \mu \sigma (\beta \mu + \lambda (\delta + \rho)))}, \\ R^* &= (\sigma - \lambda) \frac{\mu}{A}. \end{aligned} \quad [2]$$

where  $A = (\lambda \xi \rho + \mu \sigma)$  and  $B = (\beta \mu \xi + \delta \lambda \xi - \lambda \mu)$ . The stability of this fixed point is determined by the Jacobian matrix  $\mathbf{J}$ , where each matrix element  $J_{ij} = \partial \dot{X}_i / \partial X_j$  when evaluated at the internal fixed point, and  $\mathbf{X}$  is the vector  $(F, H, R)$ . The parameters in Eq. [1] are such that the real part of the largest eigenvalue of  $\mathbf{J}$  is negative, so that the system is stable with respect to small perturbations from the fixed point. Because this fixed point is unique, it is the global attractor for all population trajectories for any initial condition where the resource and consumer densities are both nonzero.

From Eq. [2], an obvious constraint on the NSM is that the reproduction rate  $\lambda$  must be less than the starvation rate



**Fig. 2:** The growth trajectory over absolute time of an individual organism as a function of body mass. Initial growth follows the black trajectory to an energetically replete reproductive adult mass  $m = \epsilon_\lambda M$ . Starvation follows the red trajectory to  $m = \epsilon_\sigma \epsilon_\lambda M$ . Recovery follows the green curve to the replete adult mass, where this trajectory differs from the original growth because only fat is being regrown which requires a longer time to reach  $\epsilon_\lambda M$ . Alternatively, death from starvation follows the blue trajectory to  $m = \epsilon_\mu \epsilon_\lambda M$ .

we shall show, these constraints influence the ensuing population dynamics in dramatic ways.

## Nutritional state-structured model (NSM)

We begin by defining a minimal Nutritional State-structured population Model (NSM), where the consumer population is partitioned into two states: (a) an energetically replete (full) state  $F$ , where the consumer reproduces at a constant rate  $\lambda$  and does not die from starvation, and (b) an energetically deficient (hungry) state  $H$ , where the consumer does not reproduce but dies by starvation at rate  $\mu$ . The underlying resource  $R$  evolves by logistic growth with an intrinsic growth rate  $\alpha$  and a carrying capacity  $C$ . The rate at which consumers transition between states and consume resources is dependent on their overall abundance, the abundance of resources, the efficiency of converting resources into metabolism, and how that metabolism is partitioned between maintenance and growth purposes. In the supplementary information (SI) we provide a fully mechanistic model for each of these dynamics and constants, and show that the system produces a simple non-dimensional form which we describe below.

Consumers transition from the full state  $F$  to the hungry state  $H$  at a rate  $\sigma$ —the starvation rate—and also in proportion to the absence of resources  $(1 - R)$ . Conversely, consumers recover from state  $H$  to state  $F$  at rate  $\xi \rho$  and in proportion to  $R$ , where  $\xi$  represents a ratio between maximal resource consumption and the carrying capacity of the resource. Resources are eaten by the hungry consumers at rate  $\rho R + \delta$ , that accounts for their somatic growth  $(\rho R)$  and maintenance  $(\delta)$ . Full consumers eat resources at a constant rate  $\beta$  that accounts for maximal maintenance and somatic growth (see SI for mechanistic derivations of these rates from resource energetics). The NSM represents an ecologically motivated fundamental extension of the idealized starving random walk model of foraging, which focuses on resource depletion, to include reproduction and resource replenishment (26–28), and is a more general formulation than previous models incorporating starvation (29).

In the mean-field approximation, in which the consumers and resources are perfectly mixed, their densities evolve according to the rate equations

172  $\sigma$ , so that the consumer and resource densities are positive. 173 The condition  $\sigma = \lambda$  thus represents a transcritical (TC) bi- 174 furcation (31) that demarcates a physical from an unphysical 175 regime where all steady-state densities become negative after in- 176 tersecting the trivial fixed point  $(F^*, H^*, R^*) = (0, 0, 0)$ . The 177 biological implication of the constraint  $\lambda < \sigma$  has a simple 178 interpretation—the rate at which a macroscopic organism loses 179 mass due to lack of resources is generally much faster than the 180 rate of reproduction. As we will discuss below, this inequality 181 is a natural consequence of allometric constraints (3) for organ- 182 isms within empirically observed body size ranges.

183 In the physical regime of  $\lambda < \sigma$ , the fixed point [2] may ei- 184 ther be a stable node or a limit cycle (Fig. ). In continuous-time 185 systems, a limit cycle arises when a pair of complex conjugate 186 eigenvalues crosses the imaginary axis to attain positive real 187 parts (32). This Hopf bifurcation is defined by  $\text{Det}(\mathbf{S}) = 0$ , with 188  $\mathbf{S}$  the Sylvester matrix, which is composed of the coefficients of 189 the characteristic polynomial of the Jacobian matrix (33). As 190 the system parameters are tuned to be within the stable regime, 191 but close to the Hopf bifurcation, the amplitude of the tran- 192 sient cycles becomes large. Given that ecological systems are 193 constantly being perturbed (34), the onset of transient cycles, 194 even though they decay with time in the mean-field description, 195 can increase the extinction risk (35–37).

196 When the starvation rate  $\sigma \gg \lambda$ , a substantial fraction 197 of the consumers are driven to the hungry non-reproducing 198 state. Because reproduction is inhibited, there is a low steady- 199 state consumer density and a high steady-state resource den- 200 sity. However, if  $\sigma/\lambda \rightarrow 1$  from above, the population is 201 overloaded with energetically-replete (reproducing) individuals, 202 thereby promoting transient oscillations between the consumer 203 and resource densities (Fig. ). If the starvation rate is low 204 enough that the Hopf bifurcation is crossed, these oscillations 205 become stable over time. This threshold occurs at higher values 206 of the starvation rate as the recovery rate  $\rho$  increases, such that 207 the range of parameter space giving rise to cyclic dynamics also 208 increases with higher recovery rates.

## 209 Role of allometry

210 While there are no a priori constraints on the parameters in 211 the NSM, most organisms correspond to restricted portions of 212 the parameter space. Here we use allometric scaling relations 213 to constrain the covariation of rates in a principled and biologi- 214 cally meaningful manner. Allometric scaling relations highlight 215 common constraints and average trends across large ranges in 216 body size and species diversity. Many of these relations can be 217 derived from a small set of assumptions and below we describe 218 our framework to determine the covariation of timescales and 219 rates across the range of mammals for each of the key param- 220 eters of our model (cf. ref. 38). We are thereby able to define the 221 regime of dynamics occupied by the entire class of mammals, 222 along with the key differences between the largest and smallest 223 mammals.

225 Nearly all of the rates described in the NSM are determined 226 by consumer metabolism, which can be used to describe a vari- 227 ety of organismal features (39). The scaling relation between an 228 organism's metabolic rate  $B$  and its body mass  $M$  at reproduc- 229 tive maturity is known to scale as  $B = B_0 M^\eta$  (40), where the 230 scaling exponent  $\eta$  is typically close to 2/3 or 3/4 for metazoans 231 (e.g., ref. 39), and has taxonomic shifts for unicellular species 232 between  $\eta \approx 1$  in eukaryotes and  $\eta \approx 1.76$  in bacteria (3, 41).

233 Several efforts have shown how a partitioning of  $B$  be- 234 tween growth and maintenance purposes can be used to derive 235 a general equation for both the growth trajectories and growth 236 rates of organisms ranging from bacteria to metazoans (3, 42– 237 45). This relation is derived from the simple balance condition 238  $B_0 M^\eta = E_m \dot{m} + B_m m$ , (3, 42–45) where  $E_m$  is the energy

239 needed to synthesize a unit of mass,  $B_m$  is the metabolic rate 240 to support an existing unit of mass, and  $m$  is the mass of the 241 organism at any point in its development. This balance has the 242 general solution (3, 46)

$$\left(\frac{m(t)}{M}\right)^{1-\eta} = 1 - \left[1 - \left(\frac{m_0}{M}\right)^{1-\eta}\right] e^{-a(1-\eta)t/M^{1-\eta}}, \quad [3]$$

243 where, for  $\eta < 1$ ,  $M = (B_0/B_m)^{1/(1-\eta)}$  is the asymptotic mass, 244  $a = B_0/E_m$ , and  $m_0$  is mass at birth, itself varying allometri- 245 cally (see SI). We now use this solution to define the timescale 246 for reproduction and recovery from starvation (Fig. ; see (43) 247 for a detailed presentation of these timescales). The time that 248 it takes to reach a particular mass  $\epsilon M$  is given by the timescale

$$\tau(\epsilon) = \ln \left[ \frac{1 - (m_0/M)^{1-\eta}}{1 - \epsilon^{1-\eta}} \right] \frac{M^{1-\eta}}{a(1-\eta)}, \quad [4]$$

249 where we will define values of  $\epsilon$  to describe a set of rates within 250 our model. For the time to reproduce,  $t_\lambda = \tau(\epsilon_\lambda)$ , where  $\epsilon_\lambda$  251 is the fraction of the asymptotic mass where an organism is 252 reproductively mature and should be close to one (typically 253  $\epsilon_\lambda \approx 0.95$ ; 42). The growth rate is then given by  $\lambda = \ln(v)/t_\lambda$  254 where  $v$  is the number of offspring produced, and for any con- 255 stant value of  $\epsilon_\lambda$ , this rate will scale as  $\lambda \propto M^{\eta-1}$  for  $M \gg m_0$  256 (3, 42–45).

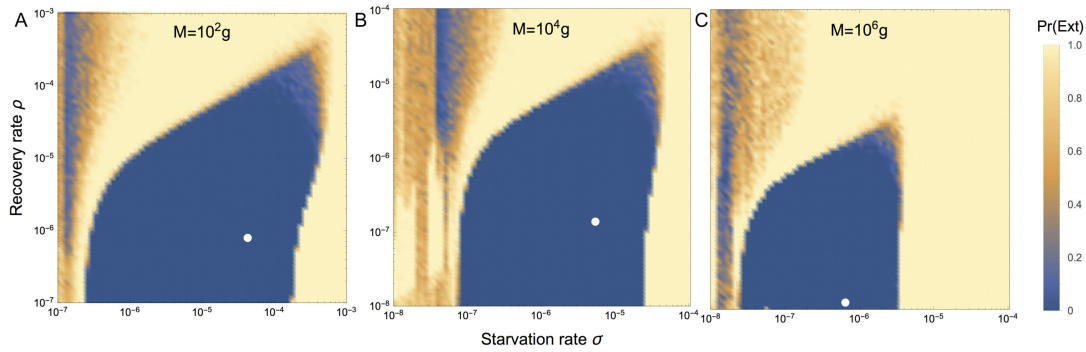
257 The rate of recovery  $\rho = 1/t_\rho$  requires that an organism 258 accrues sufficient tissue to transition from the hungry to the 259 full state. Since only certain tissues can be digested for energy 260 (for example the brain cannot be degraded to fuel metabolism), 261 we define the rates for starvation, death, and recovery by the 262 timescales required to reach, or return from, specific fractions 263 of the replete-state mass (Fig. ??; see SI, Table I for parameter- 264 izations). We define  $m_\sigma = \epsilon_\sigma M$ , where  $\epsilon_\sigma < 1$  is the fraction 265 of replete-state mass where reproduction ceases. This fraction 266 will deviate from a constant if tissue composition systematically 267 scales with adult mass. For example, making use of the obser- 268 vation that body fat in mammals scales with overall body size 269 according to  $M_{\text{fat}} = f_0 M^\gamma$  and assuming that once this mass 270 is fully digested the organism starves, this would imply that 271  $\epsilon_\sigma = 1 - f_0 M^\gamma/M$ . It follows that the recovery timescale,  $t_\rho$ , 272 is the time to go from  $m = \epsilon_\sigma \epsilon_\lambda M$  to  $m = \epsilon_\lambda M$  (Fig. ). Using 273 Eqs. [3] and [4] this timescale is given by simply considering 274 an adjusted starting mass of  $m'_0 = \epsilon_\sigma \epsilon_\lambda M$ , in which case

$$t_\rho = \ln \left[ \frac{1 - (\epsilon_\sigma \epsilon_\lambda)^{1-\eta}}{1 - \epsilon_\lambda^{1-\eta}} \right] \frac{M^{1-\eta}}{a'(1-\eta)} \quad [5]$$

275 where  $a' = B_0/E'_m$  accounts for possible deviations in the 276 biosynthetic energetics during recovery (see SI). It should be 277 noted that more complicated ontogenetic models explicitly han- 278 dle storage (45), whereas this feature is implicitly covered by 279 the body fat scaling in our framework.

280 To determine the starvation rate,  $\sigma$ , we are interested in the 281 time required for an organism to go from a mature adult that 282 reproduces at rate  $\lambda$ , to a reduced-mass hungry state where re- 283 production is impossible. For starving individuals we assume 284 that an organism must meet its maintenance requirements by 285 using the digestion of existing mass as the sole energy source. 286 This assumption implies the following simple metabolic balance 287  $\dot{m} E'_m = -B_m m$  or  $\dot{m} = -a' m/M^{1-\eta}$  where  $E'_m$  is the amount 288 of energy stored in a unit of existing body mass, which differs 289 from  $E_m$ , the energy required to synthesize a unit of biomass 290 (45). Given the replete mass,  $M$ , of an organism, the above en- 291 ergy balance prescribes the mass trajectory of a non-consuming 292 organism:  $m(t) = M e^{-a't/M^{1-\eta}}$ . The timescale for starvation 293 is given by the time it takes  $m(t)$  to reach  $\epsilon_\sigma M$ , which gives

$$t_\sigma = -\frac{M^{1-\eta}}{a'} \ln(\epsilon_\sigma). \quad [6]$$



**Fig. 3:** Probability of extinction for a consumer with (A)  $M = 10^2$ g, (B)  $M = 10^4$ g, and (C)  $M = 10^6$ g as a function of the starvation rate  $\sigma$  and recovery rate  $\rho$ , where the initial density is given as  $(XF^*, XH^*, R^*)$ , where  $X$  is a random uniform variable in  $[0, 2]$ . Note the change in scale for  $M = 10^4$  and  $M = 10^6$ g. Extinction is defined as the population trajectory falling below  $0.2\times$  the allometrically constrained steady state. The white points denote the allometrically constrained starvation and recovery rate.

The starvation rate is then  $\sigma = 1/t_\sigma$ , which scales with replete-state mass as  $1/M^{1-\eta} \ln(1 - f_0 M^\gamma / M)$ . An important feature is that  $\sigma$  does not have a simple scaling dependence on  $\lambda$  (Fig. ??), which is important for the dynamics that we later discuss.

The time to death should follow a similar relation, but defined by a lower fraction of replete-state mass,  $m_\mu = \epsilon_\mu M$  where  $\epsilon_\mu < \epsilon_\sigma$ . Suppose, for example, that an organism dies once it has digested all fat and muscle tissues, and that muscle tissue scales with body mass according to  $M_{\text{muscle}} = u_0 M^\zeta$ . This gives  $\epsilon_\mu = 1 - (f_0 M^\gamma + u_0 M^\zeta) / M$ . Muscle mass has been shown to be roughly proportional to body mass (47) in mammals and thus  $\epsilon_\mu$  is merely  $\epsilon_\sigma$  minus a constant. The time to go from starvation to death is the total time to reach  $\epsilon_\mu M$  minus the time to starve, or

$$t_\mu = -\frac{M^{1-\eta}}{a'} \ln(\epsilon_\mu) - t_\sigma, \quad [7]$$

and  $\mu = 1/t_\mu$ .

Although the rate equations [1] are general, here we focus on parameterizations for terrestrial-bound endotherms, specifically mammals, which range from a minimum of  $M \approx 1$ g (the Etruscan shrew *Suncus etruscus*) to a maximum of  $M \approx 10^7$ g (the early Oligocene Indricotheriinae and the Miocene Deinotheriinae). Investigating other classes of organisms would simply involve altering the metabolic exponents and scalings associate with  $\epsilon$ . Moreover, we emphasize that our allometric equations describe mean relationships, and do not account for the (sometimes considerable) variance associated with individual species.

### Stabilizing effects of allometric constraints

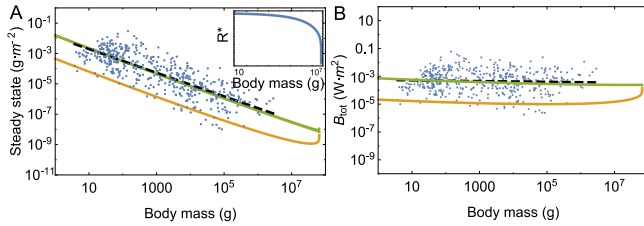
As the allometric derivations of the NSM rate laws reveal, starvation and recovery rates are not independent parameters, and the biologically relevant portion of the phase space shown in Fig. 3 is constrained via covarying parameters. Given the parameters of terrestrial endotherms, we find that the starvation rate  $\sigma$  and the recovery rate  $\rho$  are constrained to lie within a small region of potential values (Fig. ??) for the known range of body sizes  $M$ . We thus find that the dynamics for all mammalian body sizes are confined to the steady-state regime of the NSM and that limit-cycle behavior is precluded. Incorporating uncertainty in allometric parameters (20% variation around the mean; Fig. ??), we find that, for larger  $M$ , the distance to the TC and Hopf bifurcation decreases. These results suggest that small mammals are marginally less prone to population oscillations—both stable limit cycles and transient cycles—than mammals with larger body size. However, starvation and recovery rates across all values of  $M$  fall squarely in the steady

### Extinction risk

Within our model, higher rates of starvation result in a larger flux of the population to the hungry state. In this state, reproduction is absent, thus increasing the likelihood of extinction. From the perspective of population survival, it is the rate of starvation relative to the rate of recovery that determines the long-term dynamics of the various species (Fig. 3). We therefore examine the competing effects of cyclic dynamics vs. changes in steady-state density on extinction risk, both as functions of  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$ . To this end, we computed the probability of extinction, where we define extinction as a population trajectory falling below one fifth of the allometrically constrained steady state at any time between  $t = 10^8$  and  $t = 10^{10}$ . This procedure is repeated for 50 replicates of the continuous-time system shown in Eq. 1 for organisms with mass ranging from  $10^2$  to  $10^6$  grams. In each replicate the initial densities are chosen to be  $(XF^*, XH^*, R^*)$ , with  $X$  a random variable that is uniformly distributed in  $[0, 2]$ . By allowing the rate of starvation to vary, we assessed extinction risk across a range of values for  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$  between ca.  $10^{-7}$  to  $10^{-3}$ . As expected, higher rates of extinction correlate with both high values of  $\sigma$  if  $\rho$  is small, and high values of  $\rho$  if  $\sigma$  is small. For low values of  $\sigma$  and high values of  $\rho$ , the increased extinction risk results from transient cycles with larger amplitudes as the system nears the Hopf bifurcation (Fig. 3). For high values of  $\sigma$  and low values of  $\rho$ , increased extinction risk arises because of the decrease in the steady-state consumer population density (Figs. B, 3). This interplay creates an ‘extinction refuge’, such that for a constrained range of  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$ , extinction probabilities are minimized.

We find that the allometrically constrained values of  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$  fall squarely within the extinction refuge across a range of  $M$  (Fig. 3A-C, white points). These values are close enough to the Hopf bifurcation to avoid low steady-state densities, and far enough away to avoid large-amplitude transient cycles. The feature that allometric values of  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$  fall within this relatively small window supports the possibility that a selective mechanism has constrained the physiological conditions that drive starvation and recovery rates within populations. Such a mechanism would select for organism physiology that generates appropriate  $\sigma$  and  $\rho$  values that serve to minimize extinction risk. This selection could occur via the tuning of body fat percentages, metabolic rates, and biomass maintenance efficiencies. We also find that as body size increases, the amount of low extinction risk parameter space becomes smaller (Fig. 3A-C),





**Fig. 4:** (A) Consumer steady states  $F^*$  (green) and  $H^*$  (orange) as a function of body mass. Inset: Resource steady state  $R^*$  as a function of consumer body mass. (B) Total energetic use  $B_{\text{tot}}$  of consumer populations at the steady state as a function of body mass. The data are from Damuth (56) and have been converted to total population metabolism using the allometric relationships for metabolic rate (please see SI and Refs. 42, 43, 45).

suggesting that the population dynamics of larger organisms are more sensitive to smaller changes in physiological rates controlling starvation and recovery. To summarize, our finding that the allometrically-determined parameters fall within this low extinction probability region suggests that the NSM dynamics may both drive—and constrain—natural animal populations.

#### Dynamic and energetic barriers to body size

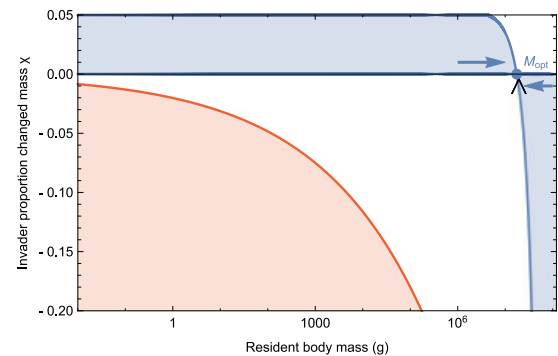
Metabolite transport constraints are widely thought to place strict boundaries on biological scaling (39, 48, 49) and thereby lead to specific predictions on the minimum possible body size for organisms (50). Above this bound, a number of energetic and evolutionary mechanisms have been explored to assess the costs and benefits associated with larger body masses, particularly for mammals. One important such example is the *fasting endurance hypothesis*, which contends that larger body size, with consequent lower metabolic rates and increased ability to maintain more endogenous energetic reserves, may buffer organisms against environmental fluctuations in resource availability (51). Over evolutionary time, terrestrial mammalian lineages show a significant trend towards larger body size (known as Cope's rule) (52–55), and it is thought that within-lineage drivers generate selection towards an optimal upper bound of roughly  $10^7$  grams (52), a value that is likely limited by higher extinction risk for large taxa over longer timescales (53). These trends are thought to be driven by a combination of climate change and niche availability (55); however the underpinning energetic costs and benefits of larger body sizes, and how they influence dynamics over ecological timescales, have not been explored. We argue that the NSM provides a suitable framework to explore these issues.

The NSM correctly predicts that species with smaller masses have larger steady-state population densities (Fig. 3A). Moreover, we show that the NSM provides independent theoretical support for the energy equivalence hypothesis and Damuth's Law (56–58). The energy equivalence hypothesis argues that the total energy use,  $B_{\text{tot}}$ , of a population is constant independent of species size (56–58). This hypothesis is based on observations showing that the steady state abundance,  $N^*$ , of a species is proportional to the inverse of individual metabolism, such that  $N^* \propto M^{-3/4}/B_0$  (57, 58). This relationship implies that  $B_{\text{tot}} = N^*B(M) = Q$ , where  $Q$  is a constant, and has been shown to hold in both mammalian and vascular plant communities (56–58). Figure 3A shows that both  $F^*$  and  $H^*$  scale as  $M^{-\eta}$  over a wide range of organism sizes and Figure 3B shows that  $F^*B$  is nearly constant over this same range. This result is remarkable because it illustrates that the steady state values of the NSM combined with the derived timescales natu-

rally give rise to energy equivalence. Our model shows that the equivalence breaks down at the maximum observed body sizes for mammals, suggesting that this maximum is a hard limit where deviations outside of this range are energetically suboptimal. In the framework of our model, the total metabolic rate of  $F$  and  $H$  becomes infinite at a finite mass, and occur at the same scale where the steady state resources vanish (Fig. 3). This asymptotic behavior is governed by body sizes at which  $\epsilon_\mu$  and  $\epsilon_\lambda$  equal zero causing the timescales to become infinite (see Equation 7) and the rates  $\mu$  and  $\lambda$  to equal zero. The  $\mu = 0$  asymptote occurs first when  $f_0M^{\gamma-1} + u_0M^{\zeta-1} = 1$ , and corresponds to  $(F^*, H^*, R^*) = (0, 0, 0)$ . This point predicts a strong upper bound on mammalian body size and occurs at  $M_{\text{max}} = 6.54 \times 10^7$ . Moreover,  $M_{\text{max}}$ , which is entirely determined by the population-level consequences of energetic constraints, is close to the maximum body size observed in the North American mammalian fossil record (52), as well as the mass predicted from an evolutionary model of body size evolution (53). It should be noted that the asymptotic behavior and predicted upper bound depend only on the scaling of body composition and are independent of the resource parameters. We also note that the prediction of an asymptotic limit on mammalian size parallels work on microbial life where an upper and lower bound on bacterial size, and an upper bound on single cell eukaryotic size, is predicted from similar growth and energetic scaling relationships (3, 59).

We contend that the NSM provides a mechanistic understanding of the energetic dynamics that give rise to both observed limitations on mammalian body size, as well as the observed trend towards larger body size over evolutionary time. The NSM predicts that the steady state resource density  $R^*$  decreases with increasing body size of the consumer population (Fig. 3C), and classic resource competition theory predicts that the species surviving on the lowest resource abundance will outcompete others (60–62). Thus, the combined NSM steady-state dynamics and allometric timescales predict that larger mammals have an intrinsic competitive advantage given a common resource, but does not offer a within-lineage mechanism by which larger body sizes are selected for.

To examine whether the NSM could provide such a mechanism, we begin by noting that a theoretical upper bound on mammalian body size is given by  $\epsilon_\sigma = 0$ , where mammals are entirely composed of metabolic reserves, and this occurs



**Fig. 5:** Invasion feasibility for organisms with a proportional change in mass  $\chi$  against a population with a resident body mass  $M$ . The blue region denotes proportions of modified mass  $\chi$  resulting in successful invasion. The red region denotes values of  $\chi$  that result in a success that is below the starvation threshold and are thus infeasible. Arrows point to the predicted optimal mass from our model  $M_{\text{opt}} = 1.748 \times 10^7$ , which may serve as an evolutionary attractor for body mass. The black wedge points to the largest body mass known for terrestrial mammals (*Deinotherium* spp.) at  $1.74 \times 10^7$  g (54).

at  $M = 8.3 \times 10^8$ , or 120 times the mass of a male African elephant. Next we examine to what extent a more realistic upper bound to body mass may serve as an evolutionary attractor, thus providing a suitable within-lineage mechanism for Cope's rule. We directly assess the susceptibility of an otherwise homogeneous population to invasion by a mutated subset of the population (denoted by  $\chi$ ) where individuals have a modified proportion of body fat  $M' = M(1 + \chi)$ . For the allowable values of  $\chi$  the adjusted mass should exceed the amount of body fat,  $1 + \chi > \epsilon_\sigma$ , and the adjusted time to reproduce must be positive, which given Equation 4, implies that  $1 - \epsilon_\lambda^{1-\eta} (1 + \chi)^{1-\eta} > 0$ . Together these conditions imply that  $\chi \in (-f_0 M^{\gamma-1}, 1/\epsilon_\lambda - 1)$  where the upper bound approximately equals 0.05. The modified mass adjusts our model via the altered rates of starvation  $\sigma(M')$ , recovery  $\rho(M')$ , and the maintenance of both starving  $\delta(M')$  and full consumers  $\beta(M')$ . Importantly,  $\epsilon_\sigma$ , which determines the point along the growth curve that defines the body composition of starved foragers, is assumed to remain unchanged for the invader population (see SI for detailed derivations of invader rates).

To assess the susceptibility of the resident population to invasion, we determine which consumer has a lower steady-state resource density for a given value of  $\chi$ , again with the expectation that populations able to survive on lower resource densities have a competitive advantage (60). We find that for  $M \leq 1.748 \times 10^7$ g, having additional body fat ( $\chi > 0$ ) results in a lower steady state resource density ( $R^* < R^*$ ), such that the invader has an intrinsic competitive advantage over the resident population. However, for  $M > 1.748 \times 10^7$ g, leaner individuals ( $\chi < 0$ ) have lower resource steady state densities, switching the advantage for higher values of  $M$ .

The observed switch in susceptibility as a function of  $\chi$  at  $M_{\text{opt}} = 1.748 \times 10^7$ g thus serves as an attractor, such that the NSM predicts organismal mass to increase if  $M < M_{\text{opt}}$  and decrease if  $M > M_{\text{opt}}$ . This value is close to but smaller than the asymptotic upper bound for terrestrial mammal body size predicted by the NSM, however it is remarkably close to independent estimates of the largest land mammals, the early Oligocene *Indricotherium* at ca.  $1.5 \times 10^7$ g and the late Miocene *Deinotherium* at ca.  $1.74 \times 10^7$ g (54). Additionally, our calculation of  $M_{\text{opt}}$  as a function of mass-dependent physiological rates is similar to theoretical estimates of maximum body size (53), and provides independent theoretical support for the observation of a 'maximum body size attractor' for North American mammals outlined by Alroy (52). While the state of the environment, as well as the competitive landscape, will determine whether specific body sizes are selected for or against (55), we propose that the dynamics of starvation and recovery described in the NSM provide a general within-lineage mechanism for the evolution of larger body size among terrestrial mammals.

The energetics associated with somatic maintenance, growth, and reproduction are important elements that influence the dynamics of all populations (11). The NSM is a minimal and general model that incorporates the dynamics of starvation and recovery that are expected to occur in resource-limited environments. By incorporating allometric relations between the rates in the NSM, we found: (i) different organismal masses have distinct population dynamic regimes, (ii) allometrically-determined rates of starvation and recovery appear to minimize extinction risk, and (iii) the dynamic consequences of these rates may introduce additional drivers and hard boundaries on the evolution of maximum body size. We suggest that the NSM offers a means by which the dynamic consequences of energetic constraints can be assessed using macroscale interactions between and among species. Future efforts will involve exploring the consequences of these dynamics in a spatially explicit framework, thus incorporating elements such as movement costs and

spatial heterogeneity, which may elucidate additional tradeoffs associated with the dynamics of starvation and recovery.

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