**Seasonal variation in juvenile growth and predators predict declining populations of freshwater gastropod**

N. T. Barrus1,2,4; ORCID: 0000-0001-7503-3120

M. I. Cook3,

and N. J. Dorn2,4 ORCID: 0000-0001-5516-0253

1 Corresponding Author: Nathan T. Barrus, nbarrus1@gmail.com

2 Institute of Environment and Dept. of Biological Sciences, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

3 South Florida Water Management District. West Palm Beach, FL, USA

4 Department of Biological Sciences, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA

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# Abstract:

1. Predicting the outcome of predator-prey interactions under varying environmental conditions is an important goal in community ecology, but theoretical frameworks have rarely been extended to natural settings.
2. To make predictions about the interactive effects of survival and development on population growth, we develop a zero-population growth isocline from a size-structured population model of a species of conservation concern (Florida Apple Snail; *Pomacea paludosa;* FAS) for two hydrologic regimes that affect reproduction. We then measure survival and development in experimental and reference wetlands with natural predator regimes and seasonal environmental variation in order to predict the long-term interaction effects (i.e., population growth) of the predator regimes on the FAS.
3. The isoclines indicated that with increased development populations could withstand lower survival. Increased reproduction associated with better hydrologic conditions shifted the isocline so that populations could withstand slower development and lower survival.
4. Daily survival rates of the FAS were size-dependent in the dry-season and size-independent in the wet-season, with juvenile snails 3-10 mm shell length (SL) being most responsible for the seasonal differences. The difference in seasonal juvenile snail survival was explained by seasonal differences in predator abundance, particularly Giant Water Bugs and Greater Siren.
5. Growth was faster in the wet season than the dry season which was consistent with temperature differences between seasons.
6. Consistent between the experimental and reference wetlands, dry season survival and development showed populations are declining, but wet season survival and development showed populations were either at replacement or increasing. Combined survival and development showed populations are declining in the experimental wetlands under both hydrologic scenarios that affect reproduction, but at the reference wetland populations are declining under the poor hydrologic reproductive conditions and at replacement under the good hydrologic reproductive conditions.

# **Key words:**

Predator-prey, size-dependent survival, Temperature, interaction strength, consumer-resource

# Introduction

Predicting the strength of predator-prey interactions is an important goal in community ecology. Theoretical and lab investigations indicate that short-term interaction strength (i.e., prey survival) between one predator and prey is a function of variable environmental conditions (Ma et al., 2021; Meehan et al., 2022; Pepi et al., 2018). Temperature (Davidson et al., 2021; Nunes et al., 2021) and resource variation (Brown et al., 2019; Davidson & Dorn, 2018; Jeyasingh & Weider, 2005) influence short-term interaction strength. In size- or stage- structured predator-prey interactions, the changing environment (e.g., variable temperature) can increase or decrease foraging rates of predators (Davidson et al., 2021; Nunes et al., 2021; Pepi et al., 2018), and can also affect growth rates of prey which alters the time prey remain vulnerable to the predator (Davidson & Dorn, 2018; McCoy et al., 2011; McPeek & Peckarsky, 1998). Therefore, the net short-term interaction strength depends on the direction and degree of asymmetry between the response of predator foraging rates and the response of prey growth to varying environmental conditions (Davidson et al., 2021; Pepi et al., 2018). Several studies have developed related models and tests of the model predictions in controlled experimental settings with single-predator-single prey systems focused on short-term interaction strength (Davidson et al., 2021; Nunes et al., 2021; Pepi et al., 2018). Few have translated these size- and environmental condition-dependent predation to unmanipulated field settings, and few scale up short-term impacts of natural predator assemblages (i.e., through consumption) on long-term interaction strength (i.e., prey limitation or effects on population growth; Osenberg and Mittelbach 1996).

Scaling up short-term predictions of interaction strength from changing environmental conditions in the lab to long-term predictions into natural settings is challenging. First, environmental conditions vary across space and time so it will be necessary to isolate distinct spatial or temporal contrasts to make meaningful predictions. Second, natural settings have multiple predators that respond differently to variation in environmental conditions, and these responses may include simultaneous changes in per-capita foraging rates and abundance. Finally, population growth is influenced by survival and reproduction, so to understand how growth and survival interact in size- or stage-structured populations, reproduction responses to environmental conditions need to be controlled to isolate the interaction of survival and growth. Quantifying both the impact of natural and varying assemblages of predators and the relative strength of specific predator-prey interactions (i.e., attributing losses) are perennially important matters for ecological understanding of recruitment variation and biotic resistance (Twardochleb et al. 2012, Roland and Embree 1995, Dorn and Cook 2015, cite).

Seasons represent distinct temporal changes in environmental conditions that can create natural experiments for understanding how the net change in interaction strength will strengthen or weaken under a changing environment and natural predation regimes. Understanding the net community level consumption rate on the prey across sizes is one method for overcoming the challenge of understanding varying responses of multiple predators to changing seasons. Therefore, if the larger predator emigrated while the smaller predator remained during a season, then the vulnerable size range of the prey would shrink. Isolating size-dependent prey survival rates (i.e., short-term interaction strength) to a small-time interval (i.e., daily) mitigates the influence of prey growth and shows how the net-community level consumption rates are changing across seasons. Lab experiments that have controlled predator abundance across treatments have shown that predator metabolic increases due to warmer temperature typically increase per-capita consumption. Thus, assuming predator composition and abundance do not change seasonally (likely a poor assumption in natural systems) the relationship of prey size on daily survival should not change (i.e., shape of the relationship), but the daily survival should decrease across all sizes in warmer-more productive seasons. If predator abundance changes seasonally, it is possible that declines in abundance could counteract increases in per-capita consumption and increase daily survival. Further, changes in predator composition may alter the shape of the size-dependent relationship (Soomdat et al., 2014). Thus, prey daily survival in natural settings will also depend on seasonal changes in predator composition or abundance. In contrast, prey growth should generally increase in the warmer- more productive season. Predictions of how combinations of size-dependent daily survival and growth interact to affect long-term interaction strength (i.e., recruitment/population) across seasons are unclear because long-term interaction strength will depend on the combination of growth and daily survival as well as the reproductive context.

Isoclines developed from stage- or size- structured population models have rarely been done but present a tool that could help understand the interactive effects of survival and development on long-term predator-prey interaction strength while controlling for reproductive context. Zero-population growth isoclines historically were used to predict how two interacting species can persist with variable parameters and environmental variation (MacArthur & Levins, 1964; Vance, 1985) in theoretical models. Isoclines identify thresholds of interacting parameters that split conditions into two or more qualitative conclusions (MacArthur & Levins, 1964; Vance, 1985). Models producing zero-population growth isoclines have been used to predict how two interacting species can persist with variable parameters and environmental variation (MacArthur & Levins, 1964; Vance, 1985). Combining stage-structured models and isoclines will help identify interactive effects of survival and development when exploring long-term interaction strength of a single size-structured prey population while controlling for reproductive context.

In this paper, we used a previously parameterized stage-structured model for a freshwater gastropod of conservation concern, the Florida Apple Snail (*Pomacea paludosa;* FAS) and identified theoretical combinations of juvenile-stage parameters predicting population stasis, growth, or decline. The isocline produced the expected relationship between juvenile growth and survival; faster juvenile growth begets greater resistance to mortality. We then quantified size- and season-dependent survival and growth in the field to 1) test predictions of size-dependent survival and 2) quantify the net effects growth and survival on population growth potential during the annual reproduction/recruitment period (spring vs early summer). The nature of the study also allowed us to identify putative predators responsible for the limitation and the recruitment periods/seasons of lowest survival. The FAS is the largest native gastropod in freshwaters of North America (Pennak 1953), inhabits shallow lakes and wetlands, and typically occurs at low adult densities (<<1/m2) in southern Florida (Gutierre et al., 2019). The FAS is a critical resource for the endangered Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*; Cattau et al., 2014), so understanding the conditions that can increase FAS population densities is imperative. Snails grow from 3-4 mm shell length (SL) at hatching to > 40 mm SL as large adults and do not live beyond 1.5 years (Hanning, 1979). Juveniles are prey for a diverse assemblage of ectothermic aquatic predators (see methods) while adult snails are prey for endotherms like Snail Kites and limpkins (*Aramus guarauna*). Survival was predicted to be strongly size-dependent as juveniles reach a size refuge from most aquatic predators (11-12 mm SL; Valentine-Darby et al. 2015). Reproduction occurs during both a cooler spring season (temps) with declining water depths and a warmer early summer (temps) with rising water levels (early wet season; Barrus et al., 2023; Hanning, 1979). We further predict that prey growth should increase in the warmer wet season enabling populations to withstand lower survival. Identifying the predators responsible for juvenile losses and the predicted net effects of juvenile loss and growth for population growth were unknown and unpredictable at the time of the study.

# Materials and methods

## System and study species

The Florida Everglades is a shallow, expansive (~915,000 ha), subtropical, oligotrophic wetland covering much of southern Florida (Richardson, 2010; Figure 1). Rainfall is seasonal with approximately 80% of rain falling from June-November (Gaiser et al., 2012) which produces intra-annual water depth fluctuations of ≥ 60 cm. The degree of water level recession and depth in the dry season is a function of rainfall and water management decisions. Historically, water flowed in a single shallow sheet from Lake Okeechobee at slow velocity across the spatial extent of the Everglades (i.e., sheet flow; Sklar et al., 2005), but flow was reduced or eliminated after compartmentalization and drainage. Drainage of the Everglades altered the hydrologic conditions by increasing water depths in some areas but decreasing depths in others. Within the Everglades, the ridge-slough landscape originally covered 55% of the Everglades (McVoy et al., 2011), but now covers ~44% (Richardson, 2010). In the ridge-slough landscape, ridges and sloughs differ slightly by elevation (~10-15 cm) which changes the likelihood of seasonal flooding and drying. The likelihood of seasonal flooding and drying differentiates distinct habitat/vegetation patches. The lowest elevation slough habitats dry to sediment surfaces every 3-10 years and are dominated by floating vegetation like lilies (*Nymphaea odorata*) or emergent spike-rushes (*Eleocharis* spp.). Sloughs are interspersed with higher elevation ridges dominated by sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) that dry most years (Zweig & Kitchens, 2008). Ongoing hydro-restoration of the Everglades ecosystem aims to restore hydro-patterns to improve conditions for wildlife and natural communities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine 2021).

The FAS experiences a wide range of predators besides endangered kites. At adult sizes, the FAS are prey for wildlife like alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), limpkins (*Aramus guarauna*), and soft-shell turtles (*Trionyx ferox;* Dalrymple, 1977; Snyder & Snyder, 1971). At sizes < 22 mm SL, laboratory experiments showed that apple snails are prey for crayfish (*Procambarus* spp; (Davidson & Dorn, 2018; Valentine-Darby et al., 2015), Redear Sunfish (*Lepomis microlophus*; Valentine-Darby et al., 2015), Mayan Cichlid (*Mayahero uropthalmus*; Valentine-Darby et al., 2015), African Jewelfish (*Hemicromis bimaculatus*; Valentine-Darby et al., 2015) (*Hemicromis bimaculatus*), Seminole Killifish (*Fundulus seminolis*; Valentine-Darby et al., 2015), Greater Siren (*Siren lacertina*, Valentine-Darby et al., 2015), and Turtles (*Kinosternon bauri* & *Sternotherus odoratus;* Valentine-Darby et al., 2015). Giant water bugs (Belostomatidae) may be predators of juvenile apple snail because they are known gastropod predators but have not been investigated (Kesler & Munns, 1989). Collectively, the effect of juvenile-stage predators on population growth has not been investigated in any natural wetland.

Our work was conducted in the Loxahatchee Impoundment Landscape Assessment (LILA) wetlands and two sites in the western portion of Water Conservation Area 3A (WCA3A; Figure 1) in Florida, USA. LILA consists of four 8 ha experimental wetlands (macrocosms M1-M4), that mimic the ridge and slough landscape of the Everglades (Figure 1B). The water levels in LILA are controlled by pumps and culverts that allow for landscape-scale hydrologic experiments. Wetlands M1 & M3 were managed for an unconstrained hydrologic treatment (higher wet season maximal depths; ~0.9 m) while M2 & M4 were managed for a constrained summertime depth (< 0.7 m). The unconstrained wetlands are generally deeper than constrained wetlands and depths rise faster in the wet season although wetlands reach the same low water levels in the dry season. Shallower water levels are generally favorable for FAS reproduction (Barrus et al., 2023), we refer to the deeper unconstrained hydrologic treatment as “poor reproduction” and the shallower constrained hydrologic as the “good reproduction” hydrologic treatment. The quality of the hydrologic conditions for reproduction is meant as a relative comparison between the two treatments and does not necessarily represent conditions that are naturally good or poor in the ridge-slough landscape. The depth flux in LILA are realistic conditions experienced within the natural Everglades landscape but their net effects on population growth are less clear than their impacts on reproduction. In addition to our work in LILA, we did work at two sites (WCA3A long-term monitoring sites 2 and 3; Ruetz et al. 2005) near the western boundary of WCA3A near Big Cypress National Park (Figure 1). These sites were chosen because they were near locations of historical Snail Kite nesting (Cattau et al., 2016).

## Zero-Population Growth Isocline

We used a published stage-structured population model (Darby et al., 2015) to create zero-population growth isoclines from combinatorial reassessments of two parameters, juvenile development and cumulative juvenile survival (survival of snails < 10 mm SL, CJS) under different hydrologic conditions important for reproduction (see SI; Figure 2). The isoclines graphically represent population state (i.e., growing, declining, or at replacement) under many juvenile growth and survival rates given the two hydrologic treatments in LILA (i.e., good and poor reproduction; Figure 2). The model was coded in R (little detail) other parameters in the published model were left unchanged (SI, Darby et al. 2015).

## Survival Rates

We conducted tethering experiments to 1) test for size-dependent survival, 2) test for differences in survival between seasons, and 3) measure CJS in LILA and in WCA3A each season to relate to the zero-population growth isocline. We tested size- and season-dependent survival in two wetlands in LILA by tethering snails across hatchling to adult sizes (3-30 mm shell length, SL) each season and measuring 24 h survival. To measure CJS in WCA3A, we only tethered juvenile snails (3-10 mm SL). Each tethering experiment was conducted by placing snails on two transects in the sloughs (Figure 3). The transects were arranged to capture potential spatial variation in survival and were arranged as “near” ridges (within 5 m of the ridge), “far” (15- 20 m from the ridge edge. Tethered snails within a transect were placed ≥2 m apart to increase spatial representation and independence (Figure 3). We included 5-10 replicates of 3-mm size increments (i.e., 3-6mm, 6-9mm, 9-12mm,12-15mm, 15-18mm, 18-21mm, and >21mm SL) on each transect in LILA and 10-15 replicates of each 3-mm size increment (i.e., 3-6mm, 6-9 mm, >9 mm) in the WCA3A wetlands. Snails were tethered by gluing 20 cm of either 2.4 lb (for smaller sizes) or 4 lb (for largeer sizes) monofilament line to the apex of the shell. The ends were attached to PVC poles pushed into the wetland soils (Figure 3). To obtain snails for tethering, FAS egg masses were collected from adjacent canals hatched, and snails were reared in aquaria or outdoor mesocosms to the desired lengths.

Tethering experiments were run for two-three days and snail status was checked daily. We checked snail status by prodding the operculum to incite movement, and we scored the status by five categories: (1) “missing” if the snail was removed from the tether, (2) “crushed/peeled” if the tether had shell fragments remaining on the tether, (3) “empty” if the soma from the shell had been removed, (4) “dead” if snails did not respond when prodded and (5) “alive” if snails responded when prodded. Using the snail status measures, snails that were “alive” were counted as survivals, while snails that were deemed “missing”, “crushed”, “dead”, or “empty” were counted as mortalities. Surviving snails were placed back onto PVC poles and mortalities were replaced with another tethered snail of the same size. To generalize measured survival to a larger area than the initial location where snails were set, tethers were moved two meters in a randomly chosen cardinal direction to obtain increased independence between nights. The fate of each snail-day combination was considered an independent measure of daily survival. We ran the tethering experiments to achieve ~ 30 daily observations of mortality per size class. To ensure that snails could not escape tethers, tethered snails within each size class were caged in LILA to exclude predators and observed for 72 hours. No snails escaped or died on tethers in the cages during 72 hours in the wetland.

We analyzed the tethering data from LILA that tethered the full-size range of snails using logistic regression to test for size and season dependence of daily survival. We modeled survival using length (SL mm), transect (“near” or “far”), wetland (“M2” or “M4”), and season (“wet” or “dry”) as covariates. We created a list of logistic models that included all possible combinations of these covariates and their two-way interactions. Higher order interactions were excluded. The resulting models were compared using AIC scores, the structure of models with ΔAIC < 4 were examined, and the most supported model (lowest AIC) was selected for interpretation and evaluation (Anderson, 2008). Logistic regression was fitted using the “glm” function in R v4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2019). To relate empirical survival to the zero-population isocline, we calculated survival and 95% confidence intervals of snails < 10 mm SL (i.e., CJS) at all sites and seasons. Finally, we measured CJS in *in situ* cages that excluded predators (1-mm mesh). We measured daily survival rates rather than survival probabilities across the duration of the experiment of snails reared in these cages (predator free) to compare to the survival from tethering (natural predator assemblages; see SI).

## Relative composition of predation from tethering remains and abundances

For the full tethering experiment in LILA, we used the conditions of shell remains for deceased snails and measures of predator abundance to identify the most likely predators removing juvenile snails from tethers. Crayfish use their mandibles to crush or peel the snail shell to remove the soma (Davidson & Dorn, 2018). In contrast, giant water bugs pierce the snail operculum then suck out and remove snail soma without damaging the shell (Kesler & Munns, 1989). We confirmed the artifactual differences by placing tethered snails in aquarium in the presence of predators. Tethers retained crushed/peeled shells when consumed by crayfish and empty shells when consumed by giant water bugs (Barrus, personal observation). The lab observations indicated that crayfish and giant water bugs did not break the glue and remove snails from tethers so we interpreted lost snails as vertebrate predation. We examined the stomach and fecal contents of Greater Sirens and Mayan Cichlids collected from trap-net monitoring to determine which vertebrate predators was likely to have removed snails from the tethers (see SI). The size range of snails found in Mayan Cichlids (snails < 3 mm SL) was typically smaller than hatchling apple snails (3 mm SL) whereas the size range of snails found in the diets of Greater Sirens overlapped the sizes of juvenile apple snails (3-10 mm SL; Figure S#). And juvenile apple snails were found in the diets of Greater Sirens but not Mayan Cichlids (Figure S#). From the laboratory and dietary observations, we interpreted a “crushed/peeled” shell as mortality caused by crayfish (Figure 4A), “empty” shell as mortality caused by giant water bugs (Figure 4A), a “missing” shell as caused by Greater Sirens (Figure 4A), and “dead” as a caused by something abiotic.

To determine the relative strength of predation by each juvenile predator between seasons, we explored three different aspects of predation. 1) We looked at the differences in the counts of the three artifacts related to predators (crushed/peeled, empty, missing) across seasons. 2) We looked at seasonal changes in abundance of the three predators (i.e., Giant Water Bugs, Crayfish, and Greater Sirens) that were most likely responsible for the artifacts. Predator abundance data was taken from small and large animals sampling in the dry and wet season of 2021 using throw traps and trap nets (i.e., fyke and hoop nets) under a protocol similar to Dorn & Cook, (2015) (see Sommer, 2021 and SI). 3) We divided the counts of the artifacts by the abundance of the different predators to measure per-capita predation rates.

## Prey Growth

We measured the development parameter (kgrowth) in LILA and in the reference sites to relate to the zero-population growth isocline. Prior to kgrowth calculation, we measured development using *in situ* cages and a regression that predicted development using total phosphorus levels of periphyton mats (i.e., composite samples of floating calcareous mats of algae, aquatic macrophytes, and other microbes; Barrus et al., 2023). For all cages, algae was allowed to accumulate on the surfaces of the cages two weeks prior to the experiment, and two liters of periphyton mat was placed inside the cages as a food source for hatchling snails (Barrus et al., 2023; Drumheller et al., 2022). Periphyton was examined prior to placement to remove other snails and predatory invertebrates. Four juvenile snails were individually marked with differing colors of nail polish and placed in cages to grow for four to five weeks in the wetlands. We placed 8 cages in LILA and 3 cages in WCA3A site 2 in the dry season only. For the wet season growth estimates in the WCA3A, we measured total phosphorus of metaphytic mats to predict FAS growth of using regression developed elsewhere (equation, R2, Barrus et al., 2023). We were only able to obtain wet season growth rates for the site 3 in WCA 3A because low dry season water depths made use of cage experiments impossible.

The population model used the following equation to model growth of FAS.

where time is the duration of development, and Sizeinitial is the initial length of the snail, Sizemax is the maximum length that an adult can reach (assumed to be 50 mm SL). Because we knew the Sizeintial, sizemax and time, we could then calculate kgrowth for each snail by rearranging the equation.

We calculated mean and 95% confidence intervals of kgrowth to compare our season-dependent snail growth to the zero-population growth isocline.

# Results

Zero-population growth isoclines created from the stage-structured population model produced descending isoclines consistent with an interaction between growth and survival (Figure 2). Populations with faster-growing juveniles could withstand lower survival and populations with slower-growing juveniles needed higher survival to persist (Figure 2). Better wetland hydrologic conditions for reproduction made the population more resilient to lower survival (e.g., withstanding 3.1% lower survival at development of kgrowth = 0.07) and/or lower juvenile growth (e.g., withstanding by 7.7% lower development at CJS of 0.80). The effect of better reproduction (i.e., the gap between good and poor reproductive isoclines) strengthenedwith higher growth and lower survival (Figure 2).

## Empirical Measures of Survival and Development

Overall, we observed a total of 759 independent observations of survival across two wetlands and two tethering seasons in LILA. After 24 hours, 654 snails survived, 43 snails were missing, 31 snails were empty, 19 snails died on tethers, and 12 snails were crushed/peeled. Daily survival across all sizes was 0.862. The daily cumulative survival for smaller juvenile snail size classes (< 10 mm) was slightly lower (0.821) than survival across all sizes (0.862). Daily survival in predator exclosure cages was high (cumulative mean = 0.997, se = 0.001, n = 49 days). Daily survival from predator exclosure cages in the dry season was not different (mean = 0.994, se = 0.002, n = 27 days) than the wet season (mean = 0.999, se = 0.001, n = 22 days; overlapping 95% confidence intervals; Figure S##). One of the cages was colonized by a single giant water bug and only empty shells were left by the end of the experiment.

In WCA3A, we observed a total of 276 independent observations of survival across the two sites and season. After 24 hours, 240 snails survived, 21 snails were left empty, 3 snails had been crushed/peeled, 3 snails died on tethers, and 2 were missing. Only small snails were tethered, and daily survival for these small sizes was higher (0.892) than those in LILA (0.821).

The size-dependency of FAS survival changed with seasons. The top four models (cumulative weight = 0.95) for predicting daily survival probability included SL, Season, and the interaction between Length and Season (Table 1). The top model did not include any additional variables, but the next three best models (ΔAICc ≤ 2.74) included combinations of spatial factors. The parameter values for the spatial factors appeared to provide little additional predictive capacity (parameter *p-values* ≥ 0.276) to survival, so we restricted interpretation to the size and season parameters (Figure 3). During the dry season, FAS daily survival probability increased with size (z = 2.667: *p* = 0.008; Figure 3), but in the wet season, daily survival probability was size independent (z = -0.902: *p* = 0.367; Figure 3). Small juvenile snails (< 10 mm SL) survived better in the wet season than the dry season (Figure 3).

*Predator identity*

lab observations of artefacts

The mortality artefacts of juvenile snails from LILA wetlands (i.e., shell conditions) indicated that there were more than 4 times as many juvenile predation events in the dry season than the wet season (Figure 4A; Table S3.1). Giant Water Bugs, Crayfish, and Greater Sirens were 3.4X , 4.8X, and 24 times percent less abundant in the wet season sampling than the dry season, respectively (Figure 4; Table S3.1). Except for Giant Water Bugs, per-capita predation (artefacts/abundance) increased in the warmer wet season. Although, predator abundance and per-capita predation rates were not explored in the WCA sites, the seasonal change in artefact counts in the WCAs were consistent with those found in LILA, except that most predation (X%) was by water bugs and vertebrate predation (missing artefacts) was were essentially absent.

## Seasonal Population-Level Effects

There was variation in the measured survival and development parameters across sites, seasons (Figure 5). Growth was higher in the warmer wet season than the dry season (Figure 5, Figure S1). High CJS from cages without natural predator assemblages in LILA predicted a growing population regardless of the season (Figure 5). With natural predator regimes, the dry season had lower survival and slower growth and when a applied to the model would predict decreasing populations regardless of wetland site (Figure 5). In contrast, the wet season had higher survival rates and higher growth; parameters which would result in replacement (LILA and WCA3A site 3) or even growing populations (WCA3A site 2; Figure 5). Snails in WCA3A sites had faster growth than those in LILA (Figure 5). The combined effects, weighted by seasonal differences in egg laying, resulted in annual mortality and growth parameters that predicted declining populations, except for WCA3A site 2 which had confidence intervals that slightly overlapped the zero growth isocline created with good hydrologic egg-laying conditions (Figure 5).

# Discussion

We used a stage structured population model to produce zero- population growth isoclines illustrating the interactive effects of development and survival for natural populations of a freshwater gastropod with size-dependent survival. The approach is potentially applicable to any size-structured predator-prey interaction. Snail populations are so sparse at these locations that testing the prediction of the model is challenged by our inability to get good estimates. Nevertheless, for the apple snail it provided vital rate target regions that might produce growing or declining populations. Independently measured parameters in field settings confirmed the size-dependent survival of the snail, uncovered a seasonal-dependency relationship, and identified responsible predators. The seasonal measurements allowed us to compare existing rates to the theoretical isocline and conclude that populations are static or declining when parameters are averaged over the reproductive season, but that survival and development parameters are particularly poor in the dry season (across both wetlands). The results produce novel hypotheses about environmental variation that might have historically sustained FAS in the Everglades.

*Seasonal FAS survival and growth*

Calculating size-dependent survival for small animals like freshwater invertebrates is challenging. Traditional techniques (e.g. mark-recapture, individual tracking) are problematic because juvenile apple snails are difficult to capture, cannot be individually and reliably tracked, and are typically found at exceedingly low densities in the Everglades (including LILA wetlands; Drumheller et al., 2022; Gutierre et al., 2019). Tethering is an experimental method to measure survival and could potentiallyinflate mortality estimates of prey but the concern is greatest for highly mobile prey for which tethers limit antipredator behaviors (Baker & Waltham, 2020). Tethering offered the only feasible method for determining juvenile FAS surival. In addition, tethering less mobile prey (e.g. snails) with limited antipredator escape behaviors should produce informative survival estimates. Further, tethering across field gradients reliably estimates encounter rates with relatively more mobile predators (Rochette & Dill, 2000; Ruehl & Trexler, 2015).

Our results supported our prediction that apple snail development would increase in the warmer wet season (Figure 5, Figure S1). Increases in prey development associated with the warmer wet season is consistent with many experimental manipulations of temperature in predator-prey studies including dragonfly-mosquito interactions (Davidson et al., 2021) and predatory ant-caterpillar interactions (Pepi et al., 2018). Further, increases in temperature are generally thought to increase development of ectothermic animals except for extreme thermal maxima (Kingsolver & Woods, 2016).

We predicted that if predator composition and abundances were constant between seasons, then survival rates would decrease across all sizes because of increased pre-capita foraging rates under warmer conditions in the summer season, but if predator composition changed between season, then prey size-dependent survival would depend on the changes in abundance of the different predators even with increased per-capita predation from warmer temperatures. Our results generally support our second prediction because: 1) we found that predator abundances decreased in the wet season, 2) juvenile FAS survival increased in the wet season, and 3) per-capita foraging rates of crayfish and salamanders appeared to increase in the wet season consistent with temperature dependent expectations . The declines in abundance of predatory crayfish and bugs are explained by phenology (Pintar et al., 2021; van der Heiden & Dorn, 2017) while declines in abundance of greater sirens are probably best explained by seasonal movement patterns. Greater Sirens emigrate out of the wetlands into the deeper adjacent habitats to escape the low water depths (< 10 cm) at the end of the dry season, and remained in the deeper water throughout the duration of our study in the wet season (Howell, 2023). Crayfish and Greater Sirens increased per-capita foraging rates in the warmer wet season which is consistent with current experimental evidence testing short-term interaction strength (i.e., prey survival) under warmer temperatures (Davidson et al., 2021; Pepi et al., 2018). And increases in temperature have been shown to increase per-capita foraging in Atlantic Reef fishes (Nunes et al., 2021).

Typically studies that explore environmental conditions effects on predator-prey interaction have controlled predator abundance experimentally, or statistically (Davidson et al., 2021; Davidson & Dorn, 2018; Jeyasingh & Weider, 2005; Ma et al., 2021; Pepi et al., 2018). But controlling predator abundance and size structure complicate scaling up predictions based on experiments to natural systems, because declines in predator abundances may counteract increases in per-capita foraging rates (Figure 4). Future work will be necessary to integrate current theoretical predictions under the context of varying predator abundances.

## Long-term Interaction Strength (Population Growth)

Studies examining effects of environmental variation on predator-prey interactions have typically focused on short-term interaction strength (i.e., prey survival; Davidson et al., 2021; Davidson & Dorn, 2018; Jeyasingh & Weider, 2005; Pepi et al., 2018). Tethering snails shortened the length by which we observed survival (i.e., only daily), but coupled with the population model demonstrated that seasonal variation in development and survival mediated long-term interaction strength (i.e. population growth). The model we used (Darby et al. 2015) had no good empirical measures for the juvenile growth so our findings provide more realistic estimates for the Everglades. The dry season parameters were worse than the wet season for population growth which seems counterintuitive because most egg-laying occurs during the dry season (spring) before the water reaches its annual minimum depth. This result suggests that improving dry season conditions for survival and growth of juvenile FAS may have a larger benefit for FAS populations than improving wet season conditions. Furthermore, the different hydrologic scenarios, affecting reproductive conditions, had relatively small effects on the isocline (conditions producing growth) relative to the natural spatial and seasonal variation in the two juvenile parameters.

In addition to seasonal variation in predation regimes, spatial variation in productivity (i.e., TP) may also mediate predator limitation. Within in the Everglades periphyton total phosphorus ranges between 30-1000 µg·g-1 with typical TP concentration between 110-400 µg·g-1 in the ridge-slough landscape (Gaiser et al., 2011). Development of juvenile apple snails depend on TP in the periphyton (Hansen et al. 2022, Barrus et al 2023), and previous experimental manipulations of phosphorus showed that higher TP increased development and juvenile apple snail survival in the presence of gape-limited crayfish (Davidson & Dorn, 2018). Our results build on this finding by indicating that TP can mediate the net community level effects of predators on population growth in the field. Periphyton total phosphorus levels were highest at WCA3A site 2 (Table S#), and it was the only site to have wet season development and survival that predicted an increasing population and when combined with dry season parameters it predicted slowly declining or static populations. From an ecological standpoint the parameters measured in the field across the sites indicated that growth and survival rates did not vary in counteracting fashion and that addresses an important point about spatial covariance of the two factors. In times and places with greater growth, we did not necessarily have higher mortality counterbalancing the benefit.

Within the Everglades the current paradigm for encouraging population growth of the FAS is to make hydrologic conditions more favorable for reproduction (Darby et al., 2015), but our results indicate that with the current levels of predation and individual growth, improving hydrologic conditions for reproduction at typical TP conditions in the Everglades can only maintain the already small populations of the FAS. This conclusion was strengthened when we set water level and temperature conditions constant to optimize reproductive conditions and population growth did not shift from replacement to increasing (Appendix A). For hydrologic variation to turn FAS population growth positive, either the predation rates would need to be decreased from current levels or development would need to increase in the spring (dry season). We offer hypotheses about the current and historical conditions for population of FAS in the Everglades. First, the predation rates in the Everglades might currently be higher than historical levels as a function of non-native fishes or hydrologic conditions that somehow encourage juvenile predators (e.g., invertebrates) in the sloughs. Some non-native fishes introduced to the Everglades have been mildly molluscivorous like Mayan Cichlids and African Jewelfish that have invaded the Everglades and could have increased predation, but our observations suggest that native predators (e.g., Crayfish, Giant Water Bugs, Greater Sirens) in LILA seem to be more responsible for survival patterns than non-native species. One option might be to study controls on giant water bug predation to identify hydrologic conditions reducing their abundances in the dry season. But the observed predator community includes native species existing across a wide range of the hydroperiod gradient so it remains unclear how hydrologic variation (i.e., floods or droughts) could fundamentally shift juvenile survival. The relation between the predators and hydro-patterns may require more work, but measurements of juvenile survival and development could also be repeated in time and space to measure variation in vital rates, especially survival, during particular windows of time that may produce good survival (e.g., depths of 10-15 cm). If net community-level predation has not changed from historical levels, then current hydrologic conditions could also be unfavorable for development of the FAS (moving to the right in Figure 5). Indeed, recent work has shown that increasing water flow velocity, increases development of non-native Pomacea apple snails through changes to microbial food quality (Hansen et al., 2022). Therefore, an Everglades restored with more discharge might possibly improve development of the juvenile FAS.

*Conclusion*

Studies of functional responses and environmental variation have developed complex predictions for the strength of short-term interaction strengths (cite), and have conducted elegant studies in the lab to test the predictions. Our study was an attempt to empirically bring together multiple sources of variation (i.e., predator assemblages, seasonal growth conditions) in the field to predict the net impact of size-mediated predation on population growth (predator limitation) using a population model. The effects of warmer seasonal conditions on the interaction strength, which partly increased per capita rates (cite), were counteracted by decreased abundances of predators and faster growth of the prey, effectively reducing size-dependent predation and net predator impacts in the warmer part of the season. Nevertheless, the higher production of juvenile (vulnerable) prey in the spring when growth was slow weighted the average parameters to predict strong predator limitation over the year. We encourage other researchers working on predator limitation, either of pests or species of conservation/management interest, to consider using size-structured models and field parameter estimates (see also Chockley et al. 2008) to scale-up their predator-prey work and study the net effects of predators on prey population growth.

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# Figures and Tables

Table 1: AIC model selection table for logistic regression predicting daily survival probability of apple snails (*Pomacea paludosa*) in two LILA wetlands. Daily survival was measured with snails (Length: X-X mm SL) on tethers during the dry and wet seasons on transects located closer and further from habitat edges in sloughs.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model description | AICc | ΔAICc | w |
| Length + Season + Length\*Season | 519.870 | 0.000 | 0.398 |
| Length + Season + Wetland + Length\*Season | 520.755 | 0.885 | 0.256 |
| Length + Season + Transect + Length\*Season | 521.482 | 1.612 | 0.178 |
| Length + Season + Wetland + Transect + Length\*Season | 522.387 | 2.517 | 0.113 |
| Length + Season | 527.249 | 7.379 | 0.010 |
| Season + Wetland | 527.993 | 8.123 | 0.007 |
| Transect + Season + Length | 528.705 | 8.835 | 0.005 |
| Length + Wetland + Season + Length\*Wetland | 528.824 | 8.954 | 0.005 |
| Transect + Wetland + Season + Length | 529.119 | 9.248 | 0.004 |
| Season + Wetland + Length + Season\*Wetland | 529.546 | 9.676 | 0.003 |
| Season | 529.576 | 9.706 | 0.003 |
| Wetland | 529.771 | 9.900 | 0.003 |
| Transect + Length + Transect\*Length | 529.844 | 9.973 | 0.003 |
| Length | 529.982 | 10.112 | 0.003 |
| Transect + Season | 530.487 | 10.617 | 0.002 |
| Transect + Wetland + Season | 530.704 | 10.834 | 0.002 |
| Length + Wetland | 531.284 | 11.413 | 0.001 |
| Season + Wetland + Season\*Wetland | 531.438 | 11.567 | 0.001 |
| Transect + Length | 531.829 | 11.959 | 0.001 |
| Transect + Season + Transect\*Season | 531.998 | 12.128 | 0.001 |
| Length + Wetland + Length\*Wetland | 532.028 | 12.158 | 0.001 |
| Transect + Wetland + Length | 533.135 | 13.265 | 0.001 |
| Length + Wetland + Season | 534.472 | 14.601 | 0.000 |
| Transect | 535.316 | 15.446 | 0.000 |
| Transect + Wetland | 535.997 | 16.127 | 0.000 |
| Transect + Wetland + Transect\*Wetland | 537.412 | 17.542 | 0.000 |

A collage of different views of land

Description automatically generated

Figure 1: A) Map and images of B) LILA impoundment #2 and C) WCA02 in Water Conservation Area 3A. Photo credits to B) Mark I. Cook and C) Nathan T. Barrus.

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Figure 2: A) The hydrologic treatments in LILA in 2020, and B) the zero-population growth isoclines of FAS as a function of juvenile (< 10 mm SL) survival and juvenile growth rates under two ydrologic treatments (good vs. poor egg laying conditions).

A close-up of a field

Description automatically generated

Figure 3: Field picture showing the transects of tethers in LILA wetlands used to estimate daily survival (photo credit: Brandon Güell). Daily survival probabilities stimated from logistic regression from tethering data. Shaded areas indicate standard error.

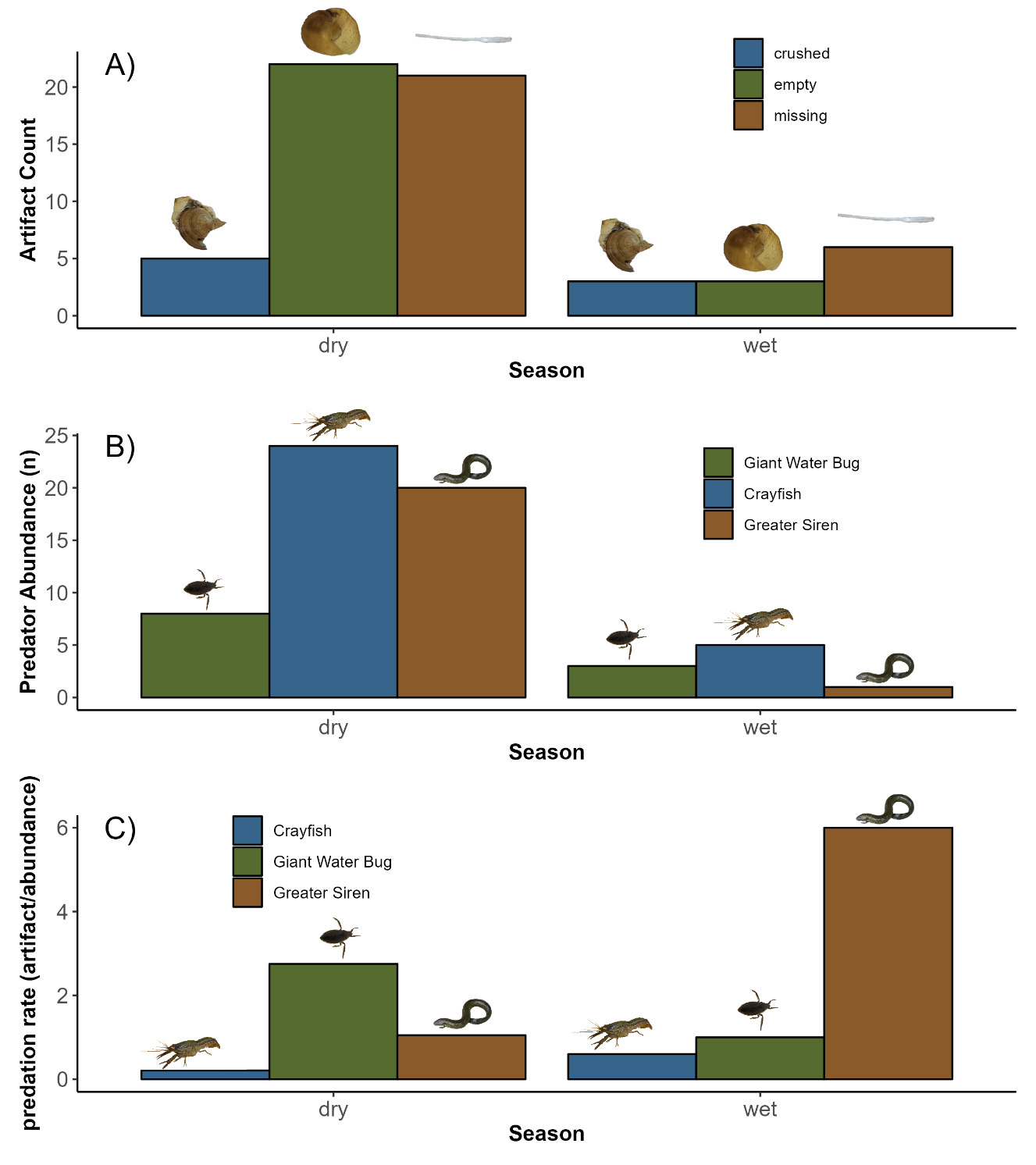


Figure 4: A) Counts of artifacts of biotic factors causing mortality of snails (< 10 mm SL) in the two seasons in the LILA wetlands, and B) seasonal abundance of predators of juvenile snails from throw-trap samples (Crayfish and Giant Water Bug), and from standard sets of trap nets (Greater Siren). Sampling effort was equal in each season. C) Per-capita predation rate from the different predators in the two seasons.

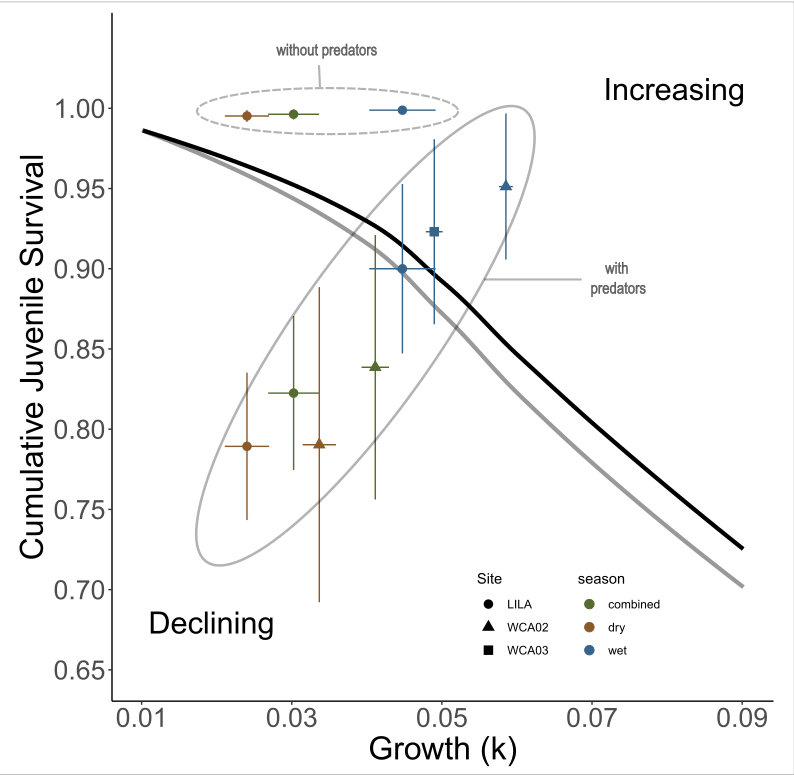


Figure 5: Isoclines illustrating the bivariate effects of juvenile development and survival that produce zero net annual population growth for a size-structured model of a freshwater gastropod (*Pomacea paludosa*) under different hydrologic regimes that affect reproduction. The black isocline and gray isoclines represent two hydrologic scenarios producing better (Grey) and worse (Black) reproductive conditions. Mean cumulative juvenile survival (snails < 10mm SL) and development (kgrowth) quantified in LILA and WCA3A are plotted on each panel with seasonal and combined parameters. The combined parameters were calculated by a weighted average reflecting greater juvenile snail production in the dry season.