**Temporal effectiveness of biodiversity surrogates in**

**coral reefs in the British Virgin Islands**

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Biological and Environmental Sciences

MS Thesis Proposal

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of different taxonomic groups (sponges, corals, and reef fishes) as proxies for overall biodiversity in a tropical coral reef system. In addition to testing whether proxies are comparable among sites, I will test if they change similarly over time in response to natural and anthropogenic forces. I will compare the effectiveness of surrogates that can be surveyed in the field: recognizable taxonomic units (RTU’s) and functional groups. I will use data collected from reef monitoring in the British Virgin Islands from 1992 to 2017.

**Introduction**

Biodiversity changes and declines associated with increasing levels of anthropogenic stress disrupt community dynamics and are of great concern because biodiversity contributes to ecosystem function (Emmett Duffy, 2009; Staudinger et al., 2013; Stork, 2010). However, true biodiversity often cannot be known in natural environments because detection is imperfect (Kéry et al., 2009). As a result, proxies such as species richness, evenness, and diversity indices have been developed that provide ways to estimate different aspects of biodiversity in the field. Richness is the count of species in a given area. Evenness is a measure of whether or not the number of individuals of each species is equivalent and may provide information about dominance-related patterns. There is contention over evenness in that it may be affected by trophic level, required resources/space, and reproductive frequency (i.e. just because there are more individuals than others doesn’t mean that the system is imbalanced)Diversity indices express both richness and evenness at the same time.

measured directly, proxies are often used. Proxies like diversity indices and species richness are useful when learning about changes in the species composition aspect of biodiversity (Hamilton, 2005). Unfortunately, these proxies that attempt to include all species require large expenditures of time, effort, and taxonomic expertise, and are therefore often prohibitively expensive (Magierowski & Johnson, 2006).

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Surrogates are specific abiotic or biotic indicators/indicator groups that provide an estimate of a component of biodiversity (Lambeck, 1997). An effective surrogate takes less time, money, and experience to measure than the target. In addition, a good surrogate meets the assumptions that the target-surrogate relationship remains constant over time and space. Many studies have investigated the effectiveness of surrogates, with mixed results. For example, percent canopy cover was found to be a poor surrogate for bird richness in different geographic regions (Pierson, Mortelliti, Barton, Lane, & Lindenmayer, 2016). In contrast, mollusk diversity served as a good surrogate to estimate community diversity on the rocky shores of a marine park in Australia (Smith, 2005) and mycorrhizal fungal diversity was a good surrogate for plant diversity in lab and field experiments (Van Der Heijden et al., 1998).

Most surrogate studies to date have investigated the effectiveness of surrogates at different spatial scales, perhaps because of their widespread use to identify priority conservation areas (Margules, Pressey, & Williams, 2002; Sarkar & Margules, 2002) and sites for designation as marine reserves (T. Ward, Vanderklift, Nicholls, & Kenchington, 1999). For example, hedgerow bird communities act as surrogates for landscape quality at a broad scale and for landscape structure at a local scale, which helps define appropriate indicators for restoration efforts (Padoa-Schioppa, Baietto, Massa, & Bottoni, 2006).

Although the spatial assumption of surrogate effectiveness has been frequently investigated, many authors have noted a lack of studies that investigate the temporal effectiveness of surrogates (Bevilacqua, Mistri, Terlizzi, & Munari, 2018; Lewandowski, Noss, & Parson, 2010; Magierowski & Johnson, 2006; McArthur, Brooke, Przeslawski, Ryan, & Lucieer, 2010; Mellin et al., 2011; Rubal, Veiga, Vieira, & Sousa-Pinto, 2011). The few examples have produced mixed results. For example, a study greater than 10 years found percent canopy cover was a poor surrogate for bird population trends (Pierson, Mortelliti, Barton, Lane, & Lindenmayer, 2016). In contrast, a group of 35 biodiversity surrogates defined using a 5-year pilot data set successfully detected changes in the species assemblage structure over a subsequent 5-year test period in a temperate brackish system (Bevilacqua et al., 2018).

In addition to spatial effectiveness, surrogate studies often focus on taxonomic sufficiency (i.e., the taxonomic resolution required to maximize surrogate effectiveness) (Fontaine, Devillers, Peres-Neto, & Johnson, 2015; Musco, Mikac, Tataranni, Giangrande, & Terlizzi, 2011; Noss, 1990; Olsgard & Somerfield, 2000). Few studies have investigated the use of recognizable taxonomic units (i.e. RTU’s) or functional groups when identifying potential surrogates. RTU’s are taxonomic units defined by readily identifiable characteristics in the field (Sebek et al., 2012). Some surrogates identified using functional groups have been consistent with those using taxonomic designations (Rubal et al., 2011). However, functional and taxonomic diversity can provide different information when measured at different scales (Törnroos, Nordström, & Bonsdorff, 2013).

Because they are used as proxies to monitor specific aspects of biodiversity, surrogates are especially relevant when studying high-diversity ecosystems, such as coral reefs. Coral reefs are being progressively degraded by a suite of anthropogenic stressors (Habibi, Setiasih, & Sartin, 2007; Hughes et al., 2017; Stubler, Duckworth, & Peterson, 2015). Reef fishes, hard corals (Scleractinia), and sponges are dominant coral reef organisms that establish and maintain biodiversity by filling multiple functional roles in coral reef systems (Angelini, Altieri, Silliman, & Bertness, 2018). Reef fish richness has been found to be a better surrogate than coral richness for estimating the diversity of corals and fishes when deciding on areas to become marine reserves (Beger, Jones, & Munday, 2003). However, this finding was not investigated over time. Understanding whether these groups can be used as surrogates for other taxonomic groups, would provide valuable information to managers with limited monitoring resources.

I will use data collected from the British Virgin Islands (Forrester et al., 2015) to investigate the effectiveness of reef fishes, sponges, and corals as surrogates for biodiversity over space and time. I will test the hypothesis that reef fish richness will be a good surrogate for the richness of corals and sponges over time. Reef fish richness has been shown to be a more effective surrogate for the diversity of corals and fishes than coral richness (Beger et al., 2003). I hypothesize that total coral cover will be an effective surrogate for diversity of fishes, corals, and sponges because coral-dominated reefs have the potential for a greater diversity in structural and resource-based niches (David R. Bellwood & Hughes, 2001). More specifically I hypothesize that total coral cover will be inversely related to sponge diversity due to competitive interactions between sponges and corals (Powell et al., 2014) and that total coral cover will be an effective surrogate for fish diversity because larger reefs provide more habitat for fishes (Darling et al., 2017; Pratchett, Hoey, Wilson, Messmer, & Graham, 2011). Similarly, I will test the hypothesis that the diversity of coral morphological groups will be a good surrogate for fish diversity because of the greater variety in size and shape of available refugia (Darling et al., 2017). I hypothesize that the richness of trophic groups of reef fish will be an effective surrogate for fish richness (Halpern & Floeter, 2008). I hypothesize that *Acropora* coral cover will be a good surrogate for the estimated abundance of large reef fishes (≥20 cm total length) over time (Kerry & Bellwood, 2012, 2015). Because of their relationships with maintaining reef structure, I hypothesize that cover of *Acropora* and *Montastrea* (now *Orbicella*) will be effective surrogates for the diversity of coral morphological groups and that cover of *Pocillopora* and *Porites* will be inversely related to the diversity of coral morphological groups (Alvarez-Filip, Carricart-Ganivet, Horta-Puga, & Iglesias-Prieto, 2013; Perry et al., 2015). Finally, I hypothesize that surrogate performance will be consistent over successive years of monitoring.

**Methods**

*Field study design*

There were eight study sites around Guana Island in the British Virgin Islands (Fig. 1). All sites were similar in covering 0.6-1.0 hectares of fringing reef adjacent to the island at a depth of 8-10 m. Sites varied in exposure to prevailing weather; sites on the windward north side of the island are more exposed than those on the southern leeward side. Each site was surveyed annually from 1992-2017, except that sponges were not counted in 1996-1999, 2004, 1993 at Crab Cove, or in 2014 at Pelican Ghut. All surveys were conducted between June and August. Each year, fish densities, coral cover, and sponge abundance relief were measured using 3-12 transects (mean = 4.3) per site. Transects were 30 m long, and placed at selected locations within each site using a haphazard sampling approach.

*Census methods*

Corals, sponges, and fish were sampled using well-established methods. For corals, divers recorded percent cover for 27 recognizable taxonomic units (RTU’s) of hard corals (Forrester et al., 2015). They used the linear point-intercept method and recorded the substrate or coral group every 0.25 m along the 30-m transect. These point observations were converted to surface area estimates of percent cover (Ohlhorst, Liddell, Taylor, & Taylor, 1988). At the same sites, they also recorded counts for 58 RTU’s of sponges using a line intercept method (Forrester et al., 2015). Fishes were counted within a belt transect 30 m long x 1.5 m wide, and a T-shaped bar was used to determine the transect width. Fish counts were restricted to species that are amenable to visual survey, that is, day-active species that are relatively site-attached and reliably visible to divers. Nocturnal species, highly mobile groups such as mackerels (Scombridae) and jacks (Carangidae) that are transient visitors to the sites, and small cryptic groups like gobies (Gobiidae) and blennies (Blennioidei) that often hide in crevices were not surveyed. Newly recruited juvenile fishes (< 1 month on the reef) were also excluded because their abundance is strongly affected by lunar cycles, which complicates the detection of long-term trends.

Differences between observers can influence coral reef survey data, but are unlikely to influence the outcome of this study. Fish and sponge data were both collected by a single expert observer. Coral data were collected by three observers, but new observers’ species identifications and counts were intercalibrated with those of another observer during a training period of at least 15 dives before their data were incorporated into the study.

*Recognizable taxonomic units*

Fish, corals and sponges were identified to the most specific taxonomic group possible in the field. All fish were identified to species, while corals and sponges were identified as multi-species RTU’s (D. Ward & Stanley, 2004) rather than species for the following reasons: (1) taxonomists reassigned taxa thought to be different species to the same species after the study began, (2) taxonomists divided a single species into multiple species after the study began, and (3) several species are visually indistinguishable in the field. In all cases, the lowest resolution RTU was used. For example, in 1994 the coral *Montastraea annularis* was recognized to be three separate species (*M. annularis*, *M. faveolata*, and *M. franksi*) (Weil & Knowlton, 1989). Although the species can now be distinguished visually, and were counted separately after 1994, the aggregate was used because the study began in 1992 before the distinction was discovered.

*Functional groups*

Species will also be classified based on their functional role within the ecosystem because the diversity of functional groups has been shown to increase reef resilience (Nyström, 2006). For sponges, the major functional roles consist of erosion, stabilization (accretion), bentho-pelagic coupling, and associations with other organisms such as, settlement substrate for algae, habitat for microorganisms, and protecting bivalves from predation (Bell, 2008). Although not understood as well as the others, bentho-pelagic coupling may have significant impacts on the microhabitats available in the reef because some sponges have pumping rates of two times their own volume of water per hour (Bell, 2008). Coral functional roles will be defined by colony shape and morphology (D. R. Bellwood, Hughes, Folke, & Nyström, 2004), as well as life history strategy (Bak & Engel, 1979). Because fish influence the community primarily though their role as consumers, they will be classified by trophic group and maximum body size (Halpern & Floeter, 2008).

**Resources Required**

Coral dataset; Sponge dataset; Reef fish dataset; Program R; R Studio

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Figure 1. A map of Guana Island, British Virgin Islands, showing the eight study sites: (1) Grand Ghut, (2) Pelican Ghut, (3) Bigelow Beach, (4) Monkey Point, (5) White Bay, (6) Iguana Head, (7) Crab Cove, and (8) Long Point.

