**Fishery closures, more than predator release, increased resilience of nearshore fish and invertebrates to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill**

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Abstract (219/250 words)

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill released approximately 210 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Despite clear evidence of exposure and toxicity, there was little evidence of population-level declines of most nearshore fish and invertebrate populations, and in some cases, brief increases were observed. Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this apparent paradox. Two possibilities include a fishing moratorium following the spill and changes in predation pressure following predator die offs. Using food web models, we quantified population sensitivity to changes in fishing pressure and predator mortality. Predicted population increases of a magnitude much greater than that observed indicate evidence for that specific compensatory mechanism. We found the fishing moratorium to be a potential mechanism for resilience of panaeid shrimp, menhaden, and blue crabs while dolphin mortality may explain the resilience of small scianids. Increased seabird mortality did not lead to major changes in any functional group we examined. Considering indirect trophic pathways supported wide range of possible population responses, especially responses to increases in predator mortality. Food web resilience to oil spills is not unique to Deepwater Horizon, and this work tests two possible mechanisms. Broadly, this work shows that oil spills are one driver of population dynamics within a broader socioecological system, and understanding oil spill impacts on populations requires consideration of this complexity.

Keywords (4-6)

Food web model, oil spill, saltmarsh, Gulf of Mexico, resilience

Introduction

Unexpected responses after a high-intensity low-duration stressor can arise because focal populations are embedded in a larger ecosystem of human and ecological interactions. Toxicological studies alone that focus on single species are often insufficient to predict population or community level impacts. More than a decade after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Macondo well blowout, we are developing a clearer picture of the impact of the oil spill on saltmarsh ecosystems. For marsh fishes and large-bodied invertebrates (i.e., crabs and shrimp), there has been a largely consistent finding of significant impacts at the individual- or organismal-level but, unexpectedly, no impact at the population-level (Fodrie et al. 2014). Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this apparent paradox. First, even small-bodied marsh fishes are capable of detecting and dispersing away from patches of crude oil (Martin 2017). Second, short generation times of small-bodied marsh fishes and high intrinsic rates of population increase translate to a potential for rapid recovery (Vastano et al. 2017; Jensen et al. 2019). Third, many fish and invertebrates are caught as target species or bycatch in commercial and recreational fisheries, and temporary closure of these fisheries may have offset mortality from the oil spill (van der Ham and de Mutsert 2014). Finally, fishes and invertebrates may have experienced predatory release as some of their important predators, such as picivorous birds and dolphins, were impacted by the spill (Short et al. 2017). While the first two hypotheses have received much devoted research, the final two remain largely untested across a diversity of saltmarsh taxa.

The nearshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico contain extremely productive fisheries, with commercial and recreational catches exceeding all other areas in the United States (Chesney et al. 2000; Adams et al. 2004; Lellis-Dibble et al. 2008). Valuable fisheries in Gulf Coast estuaries drive local economies and are deeply embedded in local culture (Jacob et al. 2013; Savolainen et al. 2014). Commercial species such as oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*), various species of Penaeid shrimps, blue crabs (*Callinectes sapidus*), and gulf menhaden (*Brevoortia patronus*) are harvested and exported globally, while abundant recreationally-important species such as red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), and flounders (*Paralichthys* spp.) promote thriving tourism revenues for Gulf residents.

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, however, had negative impacts on local and regional fishing communities that may have been strong enough in turn to impact population dynamics of fished species. Two weeks following the collapse of the drilling platform, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) initiated closures of nearshore fishing to prevent human ingestion of oil-contaminated seafood. These closures ranged from around 17,000 km2 (approximately the area of Connecticut) in May 2010 to more than 88,000 km2 later in June 2010 (approximately the area of Maine), representing over a third of Gulf of Mexico federal waters (Lubchenco et al. 2012). Despite the capping of the wellhead in July and the gradual reduction in closure area, the spill has been implicated in commercial losses of $4.9 billion and recreational losses of $3.5 billion in the years following the spill (Sumaila et al. 2012). However, the indirect, ecological consequences of this cessation of fishing remain uncertain and may mask any negative impact due to oil’s toxicity (Schaefer et al. 2016).

An alternative consideration for reconciling the conflicting individual- and population-level responses observed for marsh fishes and large-bodied invertebrates is a release from predation following high predator mortality (Fodrie et al. 2014). Specifically, exposure to crude oil released from the Deepwater Horizon induced substantial mortalities and dispersal of piscivorous predators including bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) (Venn-Watson et al. 2015), and seabirds, wading birds, and other marsh-associated shorebirds (Haney et al. 2014). In some cases, reduced survival rates were observed up to three years following the oil spill (Schwacke et al. 2013; McDonald et al. 2017). These species typically exert top-down control on coastal nekton communities and their reduced abundances potentially generated a degree of release from predatory controls. Predation release has already been attributed to the large Gulf Menhaden recruitment class observed following the spill (Short et al. 2017). However, translating reductions in predator biomass to changes in predation mortality and thus abundance of prey is challenging. In addition to the difficulties posed by natural variability there is the challenge of measuring change in prey and predator abundance at the appropriate scales and placing any measured changes in predator abundance within the broader context of total predation mortality for a prey species. For example, even large changes in predator abundance may not result in measurable changes in the size of prey populations if predation by that predator represents a small component of overall mortality for the prey species

Ecosystem models represent a powerful tool for disentangling multiple impact pathways as they allow us to integrate both the direct impacts of stressors and the indirect impacts of stressors that are mediated through food web interactions. In this respect, they have been used to study the impact of stressors such as oil spills (Cameron H. Ainsworth et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2021), hypoxia (de Mutsert et al. 2017), ocean acidification (Marshall et al. 2017), and fishing (Koehn et al. 2017) on populations and communities. The ability of ecosystem models to account for predator-prey interactions, population dynamics, fisheries, and, in some cases, biophysical forcing makes them valuable tools for strategic management and can give scientists and managers a high-level understanding of major risks and drivers in an ecosystem. Their ability to account for all food web interactions, including ones that may not be apparently influential, makes ecosystem models particularly useful for generating new hypotheses and ruling out implausible ones (Fulton et al. 2011). Ecosystem models that account for such indirect impacts are particularly essential to understand of the potential for chemical harm from stressors such as oil spills because indirect effects may confound laboratory-based ecological risk assessment by enhancing, masking, or spuriously indicating the direct effect of chemical contaminants (Fleeger 2020).

In this study we use mass-balance food web models coupled with a generalized equilibrium model to examine whether fishery closures, predator mortality, or both can plausibly explain the persistence of nearshore fish and invertebrates following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Furthermore, we explore this question by quantifying 1) only direct impacts of fisheries and predators and 2) both the direct impacts and impacts mediated through all food web interactions. This allows us to understand the added benefit of using the more holistic food web model to study these questions.

Methods

We developed a mass-balance food web model to quantify both the direct and indirect impacts of fishery closures and predator mortality on five major fish and invertebrate groups in Barataria Bay, Lousiana, USA: Panaeid shrimp; blue crabs; small scianids (Atlantic croaker, spot, and silver perch); red drum; and gulf menhaden. To explore direct impacts of fishery closures and predator mortality, we asked what proportion of total mortality of these five groups (both juvenile and adult life stages) came from 1) fisheries, 2) sea birds, and 3) dolphins. We then applied a generalized equilibrium model (Essington and Munch 2014) to explore the indirect effects that account for impacts of fisheries, sea birds, and dolphins on all food web interactions. This tool allows us to ask two important questions of our mass-balance model. First, “How much will the biomass of a prey species change from an X% change in the mortality of one (or several) of its predators?” and second, "How does this impact of changing predation mortality compare to changes in fishing mortality on the prey species?" While dynamic non-equilibrium food web models can also explore these indirect effects, they require extensive tuning of functional response parameters, which have little to no data available to inform parameter values. Because the generalized equilibrium models are fast to compute and are meant to be applied within a “neighborhood” of equilibrium, we can easily simulate many different flexible functional response scenarios to better understand a range of possible results.

*Developing a mass-balance model*

We parameterized our food web model using the Rpath package (Lucey et al. 2020), an implementation of the Ecopath (Christensen and Pauly 1992) modeling framework in R (R Core Team 2020). Ecopath models are snapshots of food webs that assume equilibrium mass balance; that is, all biomass produced from the net result of consumption and respiration equals all mortality from predation, fisheries, and other sources. We did not include migration or biomass accumulation in our model. Food web dynamics in Ecopath are governed by a master equation:



In equation (1), *Bi* is the biomass of functional group *i*, *PBi* is the production to biomass ratio of group *i* (under mass balance, this is equal to total mortality), *EEi* is the ecotrophic efficiency or proportion of total production removed by predators and fisheries within the model domain, *Ci* is the fisheries catch (including bycatch and discards), *QBj* is the consumption to biomass ratio for predator *j*, *DCji* is the diet composition, or proportion by mass of prey *i* in the diet of predator *j*, and *n* is the total number of functional groups. A functional group is a species, species life stage, or group of species, that have similar life history characteristics and roles in the ecosystem. All biomasses are in g/m2 (equivalent to metric tons/km2) and all rates are annual. Ecopath is able to solve the resulting system of *n* linear equations for *n* unknowns, which means that the user leaves one parameter undefined for each functional group. In practice, this is often the ecotrophic efficiency (*EE*).

Ecopath also allows for separation of functional groups into more than one life history stage, referred to as “stanzas.” In this case, the user defines the production to biomass ratio for all life stages, the von Bertalanffy growth rate parameter, and the consumption to biomass ratio and biomass for a single “leading” stanza that is best informed by data. Ecopath then fills in the remaining parameters by assuming a stable age distribution and a cubic relationship between length and biomass.­

Our mass-balance model is based on Barataria Bay (Fig. 1). Most parameters are based on de Mutsert et al. (2017) which described the estuarine waters around the Mississippi Delta and was, importantly, parameterized for a baseline prior to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. However, a new assessment of resident dolphins in Barataria Bay has since been completed indicating dolphins are over an order of magnitude more abundant than originally thought (McDonald et al. 2017). In addition, we included several more predatory species in our model than de Mutsert et al. (2017): gars, stingrays, and diving birds (previous seabird densities were based only on pelicans) based on other nearby Ecopath models for survival of consumption rates and a mix of the other models and expert judgement for biomasses.

Changes in the species groups above unbalanced the original de Mutsert et al. (2017) model because production of some prey fish species was insufficient to meet predator demand. This mismatch is likely due to predator biomasses being based on population assessments, which are close to a full census, while fish biomasses were based on fishery-independent surveys conducted by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) with much lower catchabilities. In order to balance the model, we increased biomasses of the leading stanza for the seatrout, sheepshead, pinfish, and menhaden functional groups from de Mutsert et al. (2017).

*Direct impacts of fishing and predation*

We first quantified the fraction of total mortality for each of our five functional groups (both juvenile and adult stanzas for: Panaeid shrimp; blue crabs; small scianids; red drum; and gulf menhaden) attributable to 1) fishing, and predation by 2) dolphins, 3) pelicans, and 4) diving birds (generally gulls, terns, and frigate birds). We chose these five key prey functional groups because research has shown that the abundance of these fish and invertebrate groups was relatively steady following the oil spill and they represent some of the most important functional groups in the system, both ecologically and socially (Fodrie et al. 2014; Ward et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2020). If fishing or predation is a key component of mortality for these groups, we would expect these fish and invertebrate populations to increase in abundance following the substantial declines in fishing effort and predator abundance that resulted from the DWH oil spill. If fishing or predation is a key component of mortality for these groups, the lack of observed population increases following the spill despite a reduction in these mortality sources is evidence that oil-induced mortality did occur, but was simply compensated for by temporary release for other mortality sources.

The mortality rate of group *i* from fishing is calculated as: . The mortality rate of group *i* induced exclusively by predation from group *j* is calculated as: . Because each fish and invertebrate group has a different natural productivity, we standardized these mortality rates by dividing by *PBi*. This gave us a metric for the total proportion of annual mortality arising from each source. Throughout, we refer to this as the analysis on direct mortality, as it does not account for indirect energy pathways in the food web.

*Generalized equilibrium model*

The previous analysis provided a coarse examination of how populations may respond directly to changing fishing and predation patterns, but we also wanted to take advantage of the food web model which allowed us to consider indirect pathways, as well. For example, lower marine mammal abundance may benefit small-bodied fishes due to reduced predation, but if marine mammals also consume larger mesopredators of small-bodied fishes, the net result of lower marine mammal abundance becomes unclear.

Rather than project a single possible manifestation of the food web forward through time with high uncertainty, we instead focused on how the food web would respond to perturbations within the neighborhood of its current assumed equilibrium. We did this assuming uncertainty in 1) predator-dependence of the feeding functional response, 2) prey-dependence of the feeding functional response, and 3) density-dependence of the mortality not captured by fishing or predation. We note that in Ecosim, the standard process for projecting Ecopath models through time, users do not have the option to define all of these terms.

To overcome this limitation, we used our Ecopath model to parameterize the generalized equilibrium model described in Essington & Munch (2014). We calculated the derivative of biomass of each fish or invertebrate functional group with respect to total fishing mortality and the derivative of biomass with respect to the per capita growth rate of each predator group. The generalized model describes a system near equilibrium (total biomass produced equals total mortality), so we can quantify how populations may respond to perturbations. The generalized equilibrium model assumes that the per capita rate of population change of group *i*, *ri*,as a function of the vector of biomass for all functional groups, ***B***,is:

In equation (2), the first term describes biomass gains from consumption, the second term describes biomass loss from predators, and the third term is other mortality (not fishing or predation). *GCEi* is the gross conversion efficiency of group *i*, or the production to consumption ratio (*GCEi = PBi*/*QBi*). The parameter *γi* dictates the density-dependence of the other mortality (e.g., disease, predation and fishing outside model domain, senescence) and is drawn from a random distribution (Table 1). *M0,i* scales the other mortality and is solved for using the Ecopath biomass and mortality rate accounted for by the ecotrophic efficiency term. Notably, the generalized equilibrium model described by equation (2) does *not* include a dynamic relationship between juvenile and adult functional groups. To address this, we ran a second set of simulations with juvenile and adult stanzas combined into one homogenous functional group, weighted by biomass and consumption rates of the stanzas. These two endpoint configurations bracket the true level of population connectivity among stanzas of a given functional group. For a more detailed explanation of the generalized equilibrium model and derivation of the quantities we calculated, see supplemental materials.

We use the generalized equilibrium model to report the change in biomass per 10% change in fishing effort or predator productivity, to balance 1) the fact that the quantities we calculate are to be interpreted within a “neighborhood” of equilibrium with 2) the major proportional changes observed following the oil spill, particularly with respect to fishing (100% decline lasting one year).

Results

Our Ecopath model contains five functional groups for primary producers, 31 functional groups for consumers, (14 of which are broken up into juvenile and adult life stages), and one detrital group (Table 2, Fig. 2). Trophic levels ranged from one (primary producers) to 3.86 (adult sharks) with a mean trophic level across all living groups of 2.46 and a biomass-weighted mean of 1.47. Total biomass of consumers is 42.8 g/m2 and total annual consumer production is 227 g/m2.

Fishing was a major source of direct mortality for the adult stanza of the menhaden (62.9%), blue crab (44.4%), and panaeid shrimp (3.6%) functional groups (Fig. 2). While the fishing mortality rate on the federally managed stock of panaeid shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico is much higher than represented in our model (Hart 2017; Hart 2018), the bulk of the Gulf shrimp fishery occurs farther offshore than the estuarine waters modeled here. This also means that the heavy bycatch mortality rates many fish species experience as a result of the Gulf shrimp fishery are also outside the domain of this model.

Only dolphins exerted a significant amount of direct predation mortality on the five prey functional groups we examined (Fig. 2). Dolphins were particularly important predators of the small scianids functional group, accounting for nearly half of the mortality of both the adult (44.1%) and juvenile (43.2%) life stages of these prey species. Dolphins also represented an important mortality source for adult menhaden (13.5% of mortality) and juvenile red drum (3.9% of mortality).

While the focal functional groups represent important diet items for some seabird species, the total abundance of seabirds in the model area is insufficient to exert substantial mortality on prey populations. The functional group most impacted by seabird predation was menhaden. Pelicans accounted for 1.5% of adult mortality and 1.8% of juvenile mortality. Diving birds were slightly less influential mortality sources at 1.1% (adults) and 0.9% (juveniles). Menhaden composed a similar diet fraction for both seabird groups; however, the higher biomass of pelicans in the model more than overcame the higher consumption rate of diving birds.

The more integrative generalized equilibrium model confirmed the high magnitude results from the direct mortality sources, and when functional groups were combined, these high magnitude impacts dominated. Adult blue crab and adult menhaden showed large positive responses to reductions in fishing effort, and adult panaeids showed small positive responses, all with relatively low uncertainty (Fig. 4a). When juveniles and adults were aggregated into one functional group, these patterns held (Fig. 4b). The results are consistent with those from the analysis on only direct mortality from the Rpath model. Adult and juvenile small scianids, as well as their aggregated group, showed large positive responses coincident with reductions in dolphin survival, though there was more uncertainty associated with functional responses (Fig. 4). This was also in alignment with the Rpath analysis on direct mortality. Menhaden, which experienced a larger fraction of mortality from seabirds than other focal groups, responded positively to increased seabird predation. Although the 50% intervals did not cross zero, the responses were muted to the point of not being visually perceptible (Fig. 4). Thus, when direct impacts are substantial, they tended to dominate over indirect impacts, and quantifying only direct impacts was a useful first-order exploration.

Uncertainty in functional responses led to high uncertainty in how groups less impacted by direct mortality would respond to oil spill-induced changes in the ecosystem. Six functional group stanzas surprisingly had negative median responses to reduced fishing pressure (juvenile blue crab, juvenile menhaden, juvenile panaeids, juvenile red drum, and both stanzas of small scianids; Figs. 4a, S1). However, juveniles generally experienced less direct fishing effort, and in the case of blue crab, menhaden, and panaeids, when functional groups were combined, the expected negative response of adults dominated. Also surprisingly, for seven functional group stanzas (all *except* juvenile menhaden and both small scianid groups), the median response to decreased dolphin survival was actually a decrease in biomass, presumably due to release of mesopredators (Fig. 4a, S1). When functional groups were combined, results were consistent with those of the separated stanzas, with aggregated menhaden responding positively to a decrease in dolphin survival (Fig. 4b, 5). In addition, for many of these groups (juvenile menhaden, juvenile panaeids, juvenile red drum, adult small scianids), the 50% simulation interval includes positive responses. The highest magnitude indirect impact from seabirds was a *decrease* in juvenile and combined red drum biomass in response to increases in seabird mortality.

The responses from the generalized equilibrium model were highly variable across functional response configurations. With respect to fishing, only blue crabs (adult and combined), menhaden (adult and combined), and adult red drum had 80% simulation intervals (not plotted because the wide range obscures bar heights) that did not overlap zero, with all responding positively to decreases in fishing. The 80% simulation interval contained zero for all ten functional group stanzas and all five combined functional groups across all three predators with the exception of a slight positive response of adult menhaden to increases diving bird mortality and a positive response of the combined small scianid group to increases in dolphin mortality. Thus, while some particular parameter combinations simulated qualitatively substantial responses to changing fishing pressure or predator productivity, these responses were highly variable and depended on the particular set of functional responses.

Directly comparing the responses to fishing versus predation from the generalized equilibrium model showed fishing was more important for more functional groups, the simulated range of responses often includes both positive and negative values, and dolphins were the most influential predator (Fig. 5, S1). For blue crab, menhaden, and panaeids, fishing was much more influential on biomass than any predator (point clouds below the 1:1 line). For small scianids, dolphin predation was more influential, and the overall response to a decrease in fishing was slightly negative due to indirect pathways. For red drum, the responses were largely centered about zero. Increases in dolphin mortality led to a wider range of responses, both positive and negative, than increases in mortality of either seabird group.

Discussion

Both predator release and fishery closures have potential to contribute to compensatory responses of certain nearshore fish and invertebrate populations to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Although both factors likely helped mask oil-induced mortality on these populations, our results suggest that fishery closures were the more significant factor for most focal groups we examined. Based on the direct mortality analysis, fishing and consumption by top predators both individually accounted for up to ~50% of mortality among the five prey groups that we examined. However, the generalized equilibrium model that integrates over all food web linkages demonstrated that equilibrium biomass is more sensitive to small perturbations in fishing effort than small changes in predation mortality, and that the responses to changes in predation mortality are highly dependent on functional responses. Furthermore, we assessed the impact of comparable changes in fishing effort and predator mortality, but the oil spill caused dramatic changes in fishing effort (100% reduction for x months), whereas the increases in predator mortality were less substantial. Thus, we conclude that, while both mortality sources may be responsible for some compensatory responses of fish and invertebrate populations to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, fishing likely played a stronger role for more species we examined.

The panaeid shrimp fishery in the region has a strong impact on target and bycatch populations, as well as the ecosystem as a whole. The commercial gulf shrimp fishery mainly operates farther offshore than the domain of our model, leading to relatively low values of fishing mortality within the model domain on both shrimp and the suite of species associated with the fishery’s high bycatch rates, as compared to stock assessment estimates (Hart 2017; Hart 2018). However, small-scale shrimp trawling is ubiquitous in Barataria Bay, and such operations are notoriously hard to track. Thus, we consider our fishing mortality values, and as a result the perceived impact of fishing on functional groups heavily impacted by shrimp trawling (panaeids, small scianids, menhaden) to be lower bounds. Indeed, an empirical study that focused on shrimp over a broader geographic range also concluded that the cessation of fishing was a key component to the resilience of the populations (van der Ham and de Mutsert 2014). The shrimp fishery also impacts species in the ecosystem beyond shrimp and bycatch targets. Trawling modifies the local habitat by stirring up benthos, and thus species inhabiting the benthos may have benefited from fishery closures (Wells et al. 2008). These impacts may have indirectly impacted our focal functional groups, particularly benthic oriented groups like small scianids blue crabs, and shrimp themselves. On the other hand, other species, especially seabirds and scavengers, benefit from the high concentration of discards around boats, and these species may have lost a consumption pathway while fishing was paused (Ramsay et al. 1997; Jodice et al. 2011). Of particular note for our study, the lost consumption pathway could have exacerbated the increase in both pelican and diving bird mortality.

In our model, dolphins exerted the strongest top-down control on small scianids, and the decrease in survival and reproduction of dolphins may have played a role in the resilience of small scianids. These fish were the most common prey item in dolphin stomachs recovered following the oil spill, making up over one-third of all items (Bowen-Stevens et al. 2021). In our model, small scianids made up over two-thirds of dolphin diet by mass. The Barataria Bay dolphin population experienced a range of physiological impacts from the oil spill, many of which went on for years (Schwacke et al. 2013). Some evidence even points to either continued exposure or cross-generational impacts of maternal exposure on dolphins born after the oil spill (De Guise et al. 2021). Unfortunately, estimating the total loss of predatory biomass is hampered by the resolution of surveys and a lack of direct measurements of the mortality processes. Thus, any attempts to do so likely underestimate the total. This is because indirect effects that may decrease lifespans and reproductive potential are difficult to quantify, but impart considerable pressures on individuals and populations (Peterson et al. 2003). For this reason, we did not rely on actual estimates of dolphin (or seabird) mortality, but instead looked at sensitivity to decreases in predator population productivity. Our results indicate that any significant dolphin mortality event may have impacted small scianid populations, dolphins’ principal prey resource.

Contrary to our results, one study based on population modeling concluded that release from seabird predation was key to the unusually strong recruitment of menhaden near the Mississippi River following the oil spill (Short et al. 2017). This divergence in results is likely in part because: 1) we assumed a much lower seabird diet fraction to be from menhaden and 2) we assumed a much lower seabird consumption rate. Unfortunately, both of these quantities are extremely difficult to estimate reliably. Interestingly, consumption from seabirds was a larger source of mortality for menhaden than any other focal functional group we examined. For juvenile menhaden, mortality from seabird predation was greater than that from both dolphin predation and fishing. However, the importance of seabird predation was much less consequential once we accounted for indirect trophic pathways in the generalized equilibrium model, indicating an investigation at the population scale may have missed some important dynamics of the larger system.

This work fills a gap in our understanding of how food webs responded to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill by evaluating evidence for two key pathways of resilience of the nekton community. A simpler less quantitative network model showed that blue crabs are a critical component of the food web and of intermediate oil sensitivity (McCann et al. 2017). However, other studies did not find major shifts in blue crab populations (Ward et al. 2018). We provide evidence that release from heavy fishing pressure may have been partially responsible, and thus buffered the rest of the food web. Similar network models showed that the nektonic food web in coastal Alabama and Mississippi, just to the east, is flexible to disturbance and likely has redundant energy pathways, which may explain some of the ecosystem resilience observed (Lewis et al. 2021). This is likely an additional pathway responsible for the resilience, on top of the two top-down pathways we explored. A much more complex spatial end-to-end ecosystem model of the whole Gulf of Mexico found very strong impacts of the oil spill on demersal and reef fish populations, and little impact from fishery closures. This model covered a much broader domain than our study, and also attempted to directly model the oil’s impacts on growth and mortality based on toxicological studies. However, these studies have shown to be poor predictors of population impacts in real-world situations, both in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, as well as other spills (Fodrie et al. 2014; Shelton et al. 2017). This growing body of research at varying levels of model complexity indicates pathways for resilience, as we demonstrated, as well as pathways for major population scale impacts, depending on model assumptions and domain (C.H. Ainsworth et al. 2021).

Three important caveats to this study relate to habitat effects, non-stationarity of populations following the spill, and the wide response intervals from the generalized equilibrium model. First, our model does not explicitly consider the impact of the oil spill on marsh habitats. The oil spill has been implicated in intense erosion of oiled marsh directly following the spill, and we did not capture these impacts on species that rely on marsh habitat for food, predator avoidance, or nesting (Silliman et al. 2012; Silliman et al. 2016). While our five focal functional groups do not rely on marsh vegetation directly, they do benefit from the protection it provides from waves and tides, and some of their food resources rely on the marsh more directly. A spatially explicit ecosystem model (e.g., de Mutsert et al. 2021) would be necessary to account for this process. However, we do not expect this loss of marsh to impact the relative importance of changes in fishing versus predation. Second, the generalized equilibrium model measures the change in *equilibrium* biomass to perturbations in fishing effort and predation mortality, yet the period immediately following the oil spill was an inherently non-stationary period, and the populations themselves are highly dynamic. We believe this analysis is still a good first pass at comparing the relative impacts of these two different mortality sources within a single quantitative framework that integrates across all food web linkages. Finally, the simulation intervals for the generalized equilibrium model were quite wide. In general, this was caused by individual model configurations that had extreme results across all functional groups. When we saved only models with responses in the middle 95% for all 40 predator/fishing – focal prey combinations, we only excluded one third of all models (Fig. S1), whereas if extremeness had been independent across predator/fishing – focal prey combinations we would have *retained* only 13% (0.9540). Thus, we attribute the wide intervals to random unrealistic model configurations, and consider the medians plotted in Fig. 4 and center of point clouds in Fig. 5 to be reliable estimates of anticipated outcomes.

Population responses to stressors can often yield unexpected results when we do not consider linkages between the focal population and the food web in which it is embedded, as well as the dynamics of the broader socioecological system. We evaluated evidence for two possible pathways of resilience of nekton populations to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill arising from the broader socioecological system. However, none of these pathways are mutually exclusive, and they are likely to have operated concurrently. For species that are targets of major fisheries (menhaden, blue crab, shrimp), fishing cessation likely played a key role in resilience because it is a major component of total mortality. Even when accounting for impacts of fishing cessation across the food web, which could, for example, lead to increases of predator biomass, the groups still exhibited strong positive responses in our models. Small scianids likely benefitted from negative impacts to dolphins during and following the spill. Although menhaden were more impacted by seabirds than any other group we investigated, the response was still muted, especially once all food web linkages were accounted for. It is also notable how responses can be very different depending on the construction of the food web and how predators respond to changes in prey abundance. More food web modeling and empirical work will continue disentangling impacts of this oil spill and others on populations, ecosystems, and the broader human-natural system. Sensitivity analyses will be key, as scaling individual impacts of these stressors up to population scales remains challenging. In addition, it is crucial to explore a range of hypotheses, both within and across studies. Conducting studies at a range of scales of model complexity and ecological organization will be necessary; full integrative pictures emerge best over a large body of work employing a diversity of methods. Barataria Bay and the nearshore habitats of the northern Gulf of Mexico more broadly are complex heavily modified systems, and only through a concerted collective effort will we continue to make progress untangling their natural history, how we have impacted them to date, and how we might expect them to change in the future.

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