Spatial occupancy models for data collected on stream networks

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To monitor streams and rivers biodiversity, we need to quantify species distribution. To do so, occupancy models allow distinguishing the non-detection of a species from its actual absence. Occupancy models can account for spatial autocorrelation, but are not suited for streams and rivers because of their spatial structure in networks. Here I propose spatial occupancy models for data collected on stream and river networks. I present the statistical developments of the model, then I illustrate the approach on a semi-aquatic mammal. Overall, spatial stream network occupancy models provide a formal approach to assess biodiversity in streams and rivers.

Keywords: Bayesian statistics, Spatial stream network models, Occupancy models, Spatial autocorrelation, Wildlife monitoring

Introduction

Streams and rivers provide essential habitats for numerous species of animals and plants, many of which are endemic (Dudgeon et al. 2006, Reid et al. 2019). The ecological health of these freshwater ecosystems is paramount not only for the biodiversity they harbor but also for the ecosystem services they provide, which are indispensable to both wildlife and human populations (Vári et al. 2021). However, human activities are altering the natural conditions of streams, rivers and their associated riparian habitats, jeopardizing the persistence of these ecosystems (Albert et al. 2020).

In that context, species distribution models (SDMs) are essential tools in understanding and preserving biodiversity (Elith and Leathwick 2009). SDMs predict the distribution of species, helping scientists and conservationists identify critical habitats and biodiversity hotspots. SDMs also inform strategies aimed at mitigating impacts of climate and land-use changes, manage invasive species or enhancing habitat connectivity in freshwater ecosystems (Domisch et al. 2015).

SDMs are known to be affected by two main issues, namely imperfect detection and spatial autocorrelation (Guélat and Kéry 2018). First, a species present in a given area may go undetected during surveys due to various factors such as observer experience, species behavior, and environmental conditions. Ignoring *imperfect detection* can lead to biased estimates of species distribution, and flawed inference about the relationship between species presence and environmental factors (Kéry and Schmidt 2008, Lahoz-Monfort et al. 2014), potentially misinforming conservation strategies and habitat management decisions. To address this issue, occupancy models are SDMs that rely on repeated visits of spatial sampling units for inferring distribution (MacKenzie et al. 2017). These models have been widely used in freshwater ecosystems for various taxa (Hamer et al. 2021, Preece et al. 2021, Charbonnel et al. 2022, Wedderburn et al. 2022). Second, SDMs rely on the assumption of independent residuals,

which may be violated if sampling sites that are close together tend to have similar probabilities

of species presence. Ignoring *spatial autocorrelation* can lead to biased estimates of species

distribution, and can inflate the probability of erroneously detecting the effect of environmental

covariates (Dormann et al. 2007). Several extensions of occupancy models have been proposed

to account for spatial autocorrelation, building on the spatial statistics literature,

e.g. conditional autoregressive models (Johnson et al. 2013, Broms et al. 2014) and geoadditive

models (Rushing et al. 2019). However, these models rely on the Euclidean distance between

the spatial sampling units, which does not acknowledge the spatial structure in networks of

streams and rivers.

Here I propose spatial occupancy models that allow spatial autocorrelation structured

according to stream flow and flow connectivity (Peterson et al. 2013). I build on the linear

mixed modelling approach proposed by (Peterson and Hoef 2010, Ver Hoef and Peterson 2010),

which allows considering a mixture of distance-based spatial correlation structures (Euclidean

or not) in a single model. I plug-in this variance component approach into occupancy models

using a Bayesian approach. I present the statistical developments of the model, and I illustrate

the approach on a semi-aquatic mammal in French streams and rivers.

Methods

Occupancy models

To account for imperfect detection, I use occupancy models that allow inferring the actual

species distribution (MacKenzie et al. 2017). We assume the monitoring of a species occurs over

S spatial sampling units, or *sites*. If detection was perfect, the state z_i of a site i would be a

Bernoulli random variable taking value 1 with *occupancy probability* ψ_i if the site was occupied,

and 0 otherwise with probability $1 - \psi$. However, the ecological process of state occupancy z_i is

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only partially known, because the species may go undetected whereas actually present of that site i. Therefore we need to consider the observation process, also a Bernoulli random variable, on top of the ecological process. When the species is detected on site i, say $y_i = 1$ with *detection probability p*, then that site is occupied, whereas if the species goes undetected with probability $1 - p$, i.e. $y_i = 0$, we simply do not know whether the site is occupied or not. Both parameters, ψ and p, can be modeled as functions of explanatory spatial variables, in the spirit of generalized linear models and logistic regressions. The only requirement to separately estimate the occupancy and detection probabilities is to collect data in at least two independent visits in time for a number of sites, and this temporal replication should be over a short period so that sites remain in the same state.

Spatial autocorrelation for stream networks

How is spatial autocorrelation accounted for in occupancy models? The usual way is to write the probabilities of occupancy $\boldsymbol{\psi} = (\psi_1, \ldots, \psi_S)$ on some scale, say the logit scale, as a function of explanatory variables gathered in a matrix $\mathbf{X}$ with corresponding regression parameters $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ to be estimated, and add a random effect $\boldsymbol{\epsilon}$ to capture spatial autocorrelation (Guélat and Kéry 2018):

$$\text{logit}(\boldsymbol{\psi}) = \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\epsilon}.$$

The random effect $\boldsymbol{\epsilon}$ can be structured using a conditional autoregressive models and its extensions (Johnson et al. 2013) or geoadditive models (Rushing et al. 2019). Whatever the method, the proximity among sites is assessed using the Euclidean distance, which fails to adequately capture complex spatial dependencies in streams and rivers. Specifically, we are interested in flow connectivity and stream and river topology (Peterson et al. 2013). Following (Peterson and Hoef 2010, Ver Hoef and Peterson 2010), I consider two sites as being

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flow-connected when water flows from an upstream site to a downstream site, and

flow-unconnected when they share a common confluence downstream but do not share flow.

Then I parameterize occupancy by rewriting the random effect as a mixture of four components

as follows:

$$\text{logit}(\boldsymbol{\psi}) = \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\tau}_{tu} + \boldsymbol{\tau}_{td} + \boldsymbol{\tau}_{eu} + \boldsymbol{\epsilon}$$

where $\boldsymbol{\tau}_{tu}$ is a random effect with spatial covariance between flow-connected sites that can

occur in the same direction of the river flow (*tail-up*, think of organisms that move passively

like, e.g., mussels), $\boldsymbol{\tau}_{td}$ is a random effect with spatial covariance between flow-connected and

flow-unconnected sites that can occur with or against the direction of the flow (*tail-down*, think

of organisms that move actively like, e.g., semi-aquatic mammals), $\boldsymbol{\tau}_{eu}$ is a random effect with a

spatial covariance independent of the network topology (generated by, e.g., air temperature or

precipitation), and $\boldsymbol{\epsilon}$ is a random effect which variance, often called the nugget, can absorb

extra-variability. Writing these covariance components is described in details elsewhere:

Appendix B in (Peterson and Hoef 2010), (Isaak et al. 2014). I provide an example in the next

section.

Case study

To illustrate the new approach, I investigated the effect of human disturbance on the European

otter (*Lutra lutra*) occupancy in France. The otter is a semi-aquatic mammal that went almost

extinct in the 20th century in France due to heavy hunting for its fur. Thanks to the banning of

hunting and its protection, the species is now recolonizing the country, and the ecological

question is to assess its current distribution. Detection and non-detection data were collected in

2003-2005 in the Midi-Pyrénées region (see panel a) in Fig. 1). Observers searched for signs of

otter presence at a small river catchment scale which was considered as a spatial sampling

units. These data were analyzed in (Couturier et al. 2023) who found an effect of human density and the proportion of cultivated area on occupancy. I consider here a subsample of this dataset covering $S = 56$ sites in the Lot, Aveyron and Cantal counties that were visited 3 times (see panel b) in Fig. 1). I used human population density as a proxy for human disturbance. It was calculated as the number of inhabitants per km2 in a 200-m buffer area surrounding each stream (see panel c) in Fig. 1). I also considered the proportion of cultivated areas as an explanatory variable.

I use tail-down only. Exponential structure, with decreasing correlation with increasing distance. Ecrire le modèle ici avec l'exponentielle:

$$\text{Cov}(\epsilon_i, \epsilon_j) = \begin{cases} \sigma^2 \exp(-d_{ij}/\theta), & \text{if sites } i \text{ and } j \text{ are connected} \\ \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Expliquer les paramètres d, s et theta. S'assurer que ce sont les mêmes que je donne dans les résultats, et la figure des posterior distributions.

Implementation

For all analyses, I used the statistical language R (R Core Team 2023). I used the openSTARS (Kattwinkel et al. 2020) and SSN (Hoef et al. 2014) packages to build and characterize the network and calculate hydrological distances. I fitted models in the Bayesian framework by specifying weakly informative priors (Northrup and Gerber 2018), implementing a marginalized likelihood (Clark and Altwegg 2019) and using the rstan (Stan Development Team 2023) package. I ran two chains for a total of 15,000 iterations with a burn-in of 5,000 iterations. I assessed model convergence on R-hat values (< 1.05), effective sample size (> 100), and visual inspection of the trace plots. I provide additional information in the Supporting information.

Results

Detection was < 1. When spatial autocorrelation is ignored, we found a negative effect of human density on occupancy probability. However, when we accounted for spatial autocorrelation using our new model, human density had no longer an effect on occupancy. Provide density of posterior distributions.

With: slope agricultural 0.60 (-0.67, 1.96), pop density -0.96 (-2.24, 0.17), p 0.71 (0.59, 0.80)

Without: slope pop density -1.10 (-1.99, -0.34)

Discussion

Ecological results

The effect size of human density increases when spatial autocorrelation is ignored.

The most likely explanation is that of a bias due to an omitted variable. Human density is spatially correlated, and its effect size is inflated. This bias is controlled when spatial autocorrelation is included. There is probably a difference in occupancy according to another variable that would need to be accounted for.

Our results showed that the proportion of cultivated area has a strong negative impact on both initial otter occupancy and colonization for areas that lack connectivity. In our study area, cultivated areas mainly consist of highly productive field crops (e.g. cereals, oilseeds) and to a lesser extent orchards and vineyards. These crops are locally managed with a high level of intensity (Rega et al., 2020). We thus assume that the proportion of cultivated area is a good proxy of intensification of land management in our study area.

We also found a negative effect of human density on initial occupancy probability in areas highly connected to otter-occupied catchments, suggesting that in the core area of their

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distribution, otter populations are negatively impacted by human disturbance. The impact of human disturbance on otter populations has also been shown in several European areas. Human density can lead to direct disturbance of otters, as well as indirect disturbance through simplification of riparian vegetation, habitat reclamation for urbanized areas, roadkilling etc. (Ottaviani et al., 2009; Dettori et al., 2021). More unexpectedly, we found a positive relationship (but with high confidence intervals) between human density and initial occupancy probability where occupied sites were isolated. Instead of ecological reasons, we suspect this result to be linked to spurious correlations or other methodological artefacts.

Ecologically, omitted bias variable. Check in Couturier which one it could be. Citer quand même le papier de Hodges sur spatial confusion. Citer aussi les échanges avec Jay VerHoef pour la difficulté in estimating le sill parameter. Mais ok pour covariate et prediction de l'occupancy.

Perspectives

1. Extension à dynamic occupancy models. Colonization function of distance to features that hamper movement of individuals. Citer les papier de Chandler, Morin et celui à paraître de Kervellec. L'idée est qu'on pourrait regarder la question de la connectivité dans river et stream network. Pas super compliqué, le papier du portuguais a paved the road. Extending to dynamic occupancy to write the probability of colonization as a function of distance to landscape features that might hamper movements, and therefore assessing connectivity. (Kervellec et al. 2023)

2. Application à eDNA. Alors besoin peut-être d'autres termes spatiaux comme tail-up, et euclidean. Ici on a utilisé que tail-down car on s'interesse aux otters. eDNA important pour monitor biodiv in freshwater and marine realms. If false positives wored out (voir work de E. Matechou), resste à proprement prendfre en compte spatial autocorrelation.

Conclusion

From paper by Johnson. By exploiting autocorrelation when present, one can potentially decrease the number of visits to specific survey units within a study area, instead relying on spatial dependence to take the place of some temporal replication. ALSO. The issue of spatial confounding is relatively new in the statistics literature. As Hodges and Reich (2010) state, it is a "rich area of research.'' Experienced spatial modelers might say that confounding is desirable as it allows an adjustment in fixed effects inference due to unmeasured (unknown), spatially correlated covariates. However, Hodges, Hodges and Reich (2010) and Paciorek (2010) illustrate bias and variance inflation depend on the structure of these unmeasured variables. Because the structure of these latent spatial variables is unknown, a spatial model may not account for them the way the researcher intends. Hodges and Reich (2010) note that without knowledge of the missing structure, purposefully adding spatial confounding is a haphazard adjustment that may bias the known fixed effects in unknown ways. There may be some middle ground, however, that is worth exploring (Paciorek 2010) and could be the topic of future research in the context of occupancy modeling and spatial modeling in general.

From Rushing paper. The distributions of most species are characterized by complex and dynamic variation in occurrence. Species distribution modeling seeks to relate this variation to environmental covariates and extrapolate these relationships to unsampled sites and times. Because habitats and species-habitat relationships change across both space and time, conventional GLM-based models rarely capture the inherent complexity of species distributions, especially when inferences are made across large spatial or long temporal scales. Here, we demonstrate a novel occupancy-based SDM that combines environmental predictors with a spatial GAM to model covariate relationships and complex, non-linear spatial variation in occupancy probability while accounting for imperfect detection.

Acknowledge similar approach for count data by (Lu et al. 2024).

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Ethics and Integrity statements

Data availability statement

Data and code are available at

https://github.com/oliviergimenez/spatial-stream-network-occupancy-model.

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Conflict of interest disclosure

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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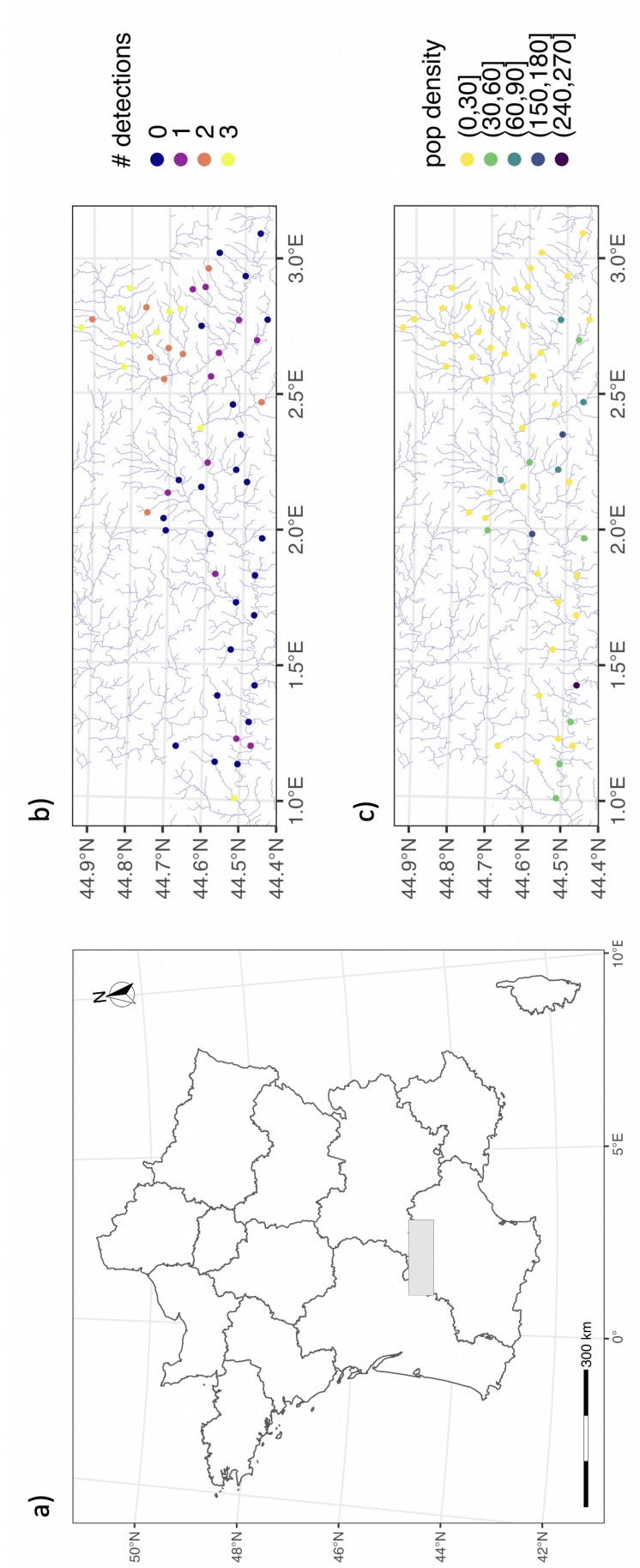
Figure 1: Second figure in landscape format.