**Long-term changes in Puget Sound shrimp abundance**

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**Abstract**

In 2013 through 2016, a severe marine heatwave in the North Pacific coupled with a strong El Niño event caused widespread changes to the Pacific coast of North America. Dubbed ‘The Blob’, the marine heatwave has allowed researchers to explore how marine communities change in response to a rapidly warming ocean surface. We used yearly trawl data from 1999–2019 in central Puget Sound to study long-term trends in the abundance of pink shrimp (*Pandalus Jordani*), spot shrimp (*Pandalus Platyceros*), and Northern Crangon shrimp (*Crangon Alaskensis*). In contrast to past El Niño events and warm-phases of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) when pink shrimp abundance declined, shrimp abundance increased dramatically in 2013–2015 concurrent with strong El Niño conditions in 2014 - 2016. Time series analysis demonstrated that annual changes in the catch per unit effort of shrimp was related to a combination of PDO and El Niño signals, but that the relationship is weak, with other environmental factors also controlling population dynamics. The cool-phase Pacific Decadal Oscillation immediately prior to the latest El Niño event may have mitigated the expected negative response of several species of shrimp to warmer surface waters from the El Niño and warm blob.

**Introduction**

In Washington State, shrimp are an important commercial and recreational fishery (Wargo et al. 2016). Recreational shrimping for several species takes place throughout Puget Sound and across the outer coast of Washington, while a large, stable, and long-term commercial fishery for *Pandalus jordani* (pink shrimp) has existed on the coast of Washington since the 1950’s (Wargo et al. 2016; Groth and Hannah 2018). The pink shrimp fishery is viewed locally as extremely productive and sustainable, with a population driven largely by environmental conditions (Groth and Hannah 2018). There have been record pink shrimp landings in recent years, with the largest landings in the history of the fishery occurring in 2014 and 2015 (Wargo and Ayres 2016).

A marine heatwave in 2014 and 2015 coupled with a strong El Niño caused an increase in surface water temperatures of the North Pacific up to 3.9 degrees Celsius warmer than the historical average (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2019a), causing large-scale shifts in the marine community (Brodeur et al. 2019). Historically, periods of strong El Niño conditions were followed by large declines in pink shrimp abundance, because warm surface water conditions are not favorable for larval shrimp development (Rothlisberg and Miller 1983). The reasons why shrimp appear to have responded differently to the latest strong El Niño are not well understood (Morgan et al. 2019), but are important to identify, so that fisheries managers can anticipate and prepare for rapidly changing ocean conditions.

On the Washington Coast, population trends of pink shrimp are well studied (Wargo et al. 2016). However, within Puget Sound, population trends of shrimp species are not well understood, with survey data patchy and incomplete (Don Velasquez WDFW, personal communication). To address this data gap, we set out to study how several key shrimp populations in Puget Sound have changed over time, and if those changes were related to El Niño or PDO cycles. To do so, we capitalized upon a unique, 20-year trawl dataset collected by students and faculty at the University of Washington in central Puget Sound, combined with environmental data to answer the following questions:

1. Have the abundances of pink, spot and Crangon shrimp changed systematically over time in central Puget Sound?
2. Are changes in shrimp abundance within central Puget Sound related to El Niño or PDO conditions?

**Methods**

Study Area

Puget Sound is a complex and highly productive ecosystem within the Salish Sea, consisting of several large, environmentally distinct sub-basins (Ruckelshaus et al. 2007). Our data come from Port Madison, a small bay located on the west/central shore of Puget Sound along the Northern shore of Bainbridge Island (Figure 1). Within Port Madison, depth varies greatly, with average depth decreasing rapidly across a relatively short distance.

Sample Collection

Benthic trawl surveys were conducted in Port Madison between 1999 and 2019 by students and faculty from the University of Washington School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences. The intent of the trawl surveys was to collect a snapshot of the community composition of nearshore fishes and invertebrates. Surveys were conducted over the course of two days in mid-May of each year, with depths of 10, 25, 50, and 70 meters sampled. Within the two-day annual sampling effort, a survey boat conducted trawls in five shifts a few hours apart to quantify any diel vertical migration of target species: “afternoon”, “evening”, “night”, “early morning”, and “mid-morning”. Each shift conducted four trawls in the same approximate locations: one at each depth of 10 m, 25 m, 50 m, and 70 m.

Each trawl survey used a Southern California Coastal Water Research Program otter trawl measuring 3.5-m wide, 1-m high, with a 35-mm mesh size. For each tow, the otter trawl was deployed and towed on the seabed for approximately 370 m before being retracted. All captured fish and invertebrates were placed in live wells and were identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible, measured, and released. Metadata consisting of the tide, time of capture, capture depth, and date were recorded with every tow.

Data Analysis

Of the 25 species of shrimp sampled in Puget Sound, we selected three taxa that were sufficiently abundant (n ≥ 1,500) and for which observations spanned the entire time series. A total of 5,396 Northern Crangon shrimp (*Crangon alaskensis*), 8,354 pink shrimp (*Pandalus eous* and *P. jordani)*, and 4,464 spot shrimp (*Pandalus platyceros*) were caught in Puget Sound between 1999 and 2019. The species *Pandalus eous* and *Pandalus jordani* were not differentiated in the trawl data, and so were lumped together as “pink shrimp” for the purpose of this study.

We extracted the Oceanic Niño Index and Pacific Decadal Oscillation values from NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2019a) and NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Information (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2019b), respectively. Monthly Oceanic Niño Index and Pacific Decadal Oscillation values were averaged over the previous 12 months from each year’s sampling effort (i.e., May of year t-1 through April of year t).

We fit different forms of a random walk model to the time series of shrimp catches to examine 1) whether annual CPUE values had any systematic upwards or downwards trends; 2) whether any trends in shrimp CPUE were common among all species or unique to each genus; and 3) whether any trends over time were related to the ONI and PDO. We then evaluated the data support for each form of model using Akaike’s Information Criterion corrected for small sample size (AICc). All CPUE data were log-transformed prior to analysis to meet assumptions of normally distributed errors.

For a single time series *i*, we modeled the log-CPUE at time *t* (*xi*,*t*) as a biased random walk, whereby

*xi*,*t* = *xi*,*t*-1 + *ui* + *wi*,*t* (1)

and *ui* is the upward or downward bias (trend). We assumed that the errors were normally distributed, such that *wi*,*t* ~ N(0, *qi*). For models that included the ONI or PDO as drivers of abundance, the single bias term in equation (1) was replaced by the estimated effect (*bj*) of the specific covariate *j* at time *t* (*cj*,*t*), such that

*xi*,*t* = *xi*,*t*-1 + *bj* *cj*,*t* + *wi*,*t* (2)

The biased random walks given by (1) and (2) were then compared to a simple random walk where either *ui* = 0 or *bj* = 0.

Because our trawl data were an incomplete census of the true population size, we included an additional data model within a state-space framework to account for sampling (observation) errors. Specifically, we assumed that the estimated log-CPUE for genus *i* at time *t* (*yi*,*t*) was equal to the true log-CPUE plus an offset (*ai*) and some sampling error (*vi*,*t*), such that

*yi*,*t* = *xi*,*t* + *ai* + *vi*,*t* (3)

and the observation errors were independent and identically distributed with *vi*,*t* ~ N(0, *r*).

To evaluate whether any of the genera shared common trends in catches over time, or whether any bias in the trends was common to all genera, we fit multivariate forms of the models specified in equations 1-3. Specifically, the biased random walk is given by

(4)

where *C* denotes *Crangon* and *P* is for *Pandalus*. The model changes slightly when both genera are assumed to have the same bias, such that

(5)

The multivariate model with covariates is then

(6)

when the effects of the covariate are different for the two genera, or

(7)

when the effects of the covariate are the same for the two genera.

The observation model is given by

(8)

When the underlying state processes are assumed to be unique, or

(9)

When there is only one state process for all genera.

We fit all models with version 3.11.3 of the MARSS package (Holmes et al. 2020) for the R software (R Core Team 2022). All data and code necessary to reproduce our analyses and results are available on GitHub at https://github.com/veggerk/Puget-Sound-shrimp-paper.

**Results**

*Crangon* shrimp abundance began to increase around 2010 and remained high through the end of the dataset in 2019 (Figure 2). Both pink shrimp and spot shrimp abundances increased dramatically in 2013 and remained high through the end of the dataset in 2019 (Figure 2). CPUE’s of spot shrimp have varied more since 2013, with 2015 abundance similar to pre-2013 levels. Abundance subsequently increased again, with 2019 spot shrimp abundance being the highest on record.

Model selection results showed equal data support for two models. The first model contained a single common state shared by all genera, a downward bias driven by the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, and an upward bias driven by the El Niño cycle (Table 1; Figure 3). When Pacific Decadal Oscillation values were negative (cool phase) shrimp abundance increased. Positive ONI values were associated with increasing shrimp abundance, with the trend largely being driven by the strong El Niño in 2014-2016 concurrent with a large increase in shrimp abundance that began in 2013 (Figure 2). The second model contained a common state shared by all genera, and an upward bias term with no added covariates (Table 1; Figure 3).

**Discussion**

The positive response of shrimp species within Puget Sound to warmer-than-average temperatures during 2014–2015 agree with the observations of Groth and Hannah (2018), who noted that Washington coast pink shrimp responded differently to this latest phase of warmer water compared to prior events where growth and abundance were depressed during warm periods. Previous analysis has indicated that warmer water from El Niño and/or warm phase PDO events can depress pink shrimp growth and abundance (Rothlisberg and Miller 1983). The specific mechanisms that caused shrimp to respond differently in 2014–2016 were previously unknown, but our data suggest that it may be related to different climate dynamics during the 2014–2016 El Niño compared to the previous significant El Niño events in 1982–1983 and 1997–1998 (Jacox et al. 2016; Groth and Hannah 2018) which occurred concurrently with a long-term warm phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation. The abundances of shrimp observed in Puget Sound have not returned to their pre-2013 levels as of 2019, even though the El Niño phase and The Blob ended in 2016, indicating that this may be an example of a long-term community shift. In fact, spot shrimp CPUE from 2019 was higher than the initial 2013 increase.

In contrast to the increases in abundance seen in this study, (Brodeur et al. 2019) observed a decrease in the abundance of krill and shrimp in the unusually warm surface and mid-waters in the California Current during the blob event. However, (Brodeur et al. 2019) noted that their trawl surveys were conducted in the warmer upper layers of water above the thermocline, and thus could not ascertain the community composition in deeper layers, which may have not been as affected by the blob since the largest temperature differences as a result of the blob occurred in the top 50–80m of water, with deeper temperatures remaining close to their long term mean along the Washington Coast (Peterson et al. 2017; Auth et al. 2018). Paired acoustic data from the same study showed anecdotal evidence of possible aggregations of euphausiids and other micronekton below the warmer surface layer of water (Brodeur et al. 2019), indicating possible changes in shrimp and krill diel vertical behavior in response to unfavorable temperatures near the surface.

Recently changing environmental conditions have resulted in shifts in special distribution and abundance of shrimp and other marine invertebrate populations elsewhere (Sakuma et al. 2016; Peterson et al. 2017; Brodeur et al. 2019). For example, the abundance of shrimp, krill, and other crustaceans declined in the surface and midwaters off the Washington coast during the 2014–2015 blob event, in conjunction with a dramatic increase in the abundance of warm-water gelatinous organisms (Sakuma et al. 2016; Brodeur et al. 2019), and a decline in marine biomass of salmon (Cheung and Frolicher 2020) associated with a lack of quality marine prey (Daly et al. 2017). The invertebrate community still has not returned to historical levels of abundance and composition, and the shift may be permanent (Brodeur et al. 2019). These changes may be due to a decline in absolute abundance, or a shift in habitat usage (Brodeur et al. 2019). For example, pink shrimp move up in the water column at night to feed but may have begun to avoid surface waters that were unfavorably warm (Brodeur et al. 2019).

In our models for the temporal dynamics of shrimp CPUE, the Pacific Decadal Oscillation and El Niño signals were associated with increases in shrimp abundance. The Pacific Decadal Oscillation was generally in a cool phase from 1998 to 2014 and reached its lowest coolest phase value since the 1950’s in 2012 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2019b). This cool phase Pacific Decadal Oscillation also roughly coincided with a strong La Niña in 2010 to 2011 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2019a). Given that pink shrimp mature in 1–2 years, the overlapping strong La Niña and strong cool phase Pacific Decadal Oscillation in 2010 and 2011 likely created ideal conditions and was partly responsible for the massive increase in adult shrimp observed 2 years later in 2013. Shrimp abundance remained elevated through the following El Niño in 2014-2016, with the random walk model predicting a positive relationship between shrimp abundance and El Niño conditions. This surprising result was mainly driven by this 2014-2016 El Niño concurrent with high shrimp abundance. However, the effects of PDO and ENSO were somewhat weak, suggesting there are other, unmeasured environmental factors that also mediate shrimp abundance.

As environmental conditions shift over the coming decades, there will be winners and losers among species (Fabricius et al. 2011). Those that can tolerate or even thrive in warmer, more acidic waters may expand their ranges and increase in abundance (Hendriks et al. 2010). Although the species studied here showed a positive response in abundance during periods with warmer than average temperature, previous responses of Pink Shrimp to El Niño and Pacific Decadal Oscillation have been negative, possibly due to longer warm phases of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation concurrent with El Niño. It is also important to note that temperature is not the only aspect of the marine environment predicted to change in the coming decades. Predicted changes in ocean acidity under future climate change scenarios (Caldeira and Wickett 2005; Orr et al. 2005; Cao and Caldeira 2008; Steinacher et al. 2009) could offset or reverse the trends seen in this study, as acidic water hampers shell formation of calcifying organisms (Orr et al. 2005).

Pink and spot shrimp are an important resource for recreational and commercial fisheries. Interest in both the commercial and the recreational fishery is increasing as the value of shrimp has gone up, with catch quotas usually reached in recent years (Don Velasquez WDFW, personal communication). Although the ultimate effect of climate change on these species is unclear, judging by the negative responses to increased average water temperatures during concurrent warm phase Pacific Decadal Oscillation periods and El Niño, a shift in abundance will likely occur in the coming decades as average sea surface temperatures begin to mirror what currently would be considered above average or extreme. In particular, periods of warm phase Pacific Decadal Oscillation patterns will likely be correlated with a reduction in shrimp abundance. This study provides a brief analysis of possible environmental driver of shrimp abundance, as well as 21 years of time series data on abundance of three common shrimp species in Puget Sound in an area where previous survey data is limited or non-existent.

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**Data availability**

All data used in this study is available online at zenodo.org, DOI: insert DOI here when paper is submitted.

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Map

Description automatically generated

Figure 1. Map of Puget Sound with study area highlighted.



Figure 2. Catch per unit effort (CPUE) over time of the primary three species of shrimp found in Puget Sound trawls from 1999 to 2019.



Figure 3. (A) Time series of standardized shrimp log-CPUE (colored points) and the most parsimonious best fit model that contained only a bias term to explain drivers of change over time (black line). (B) Time series of standardized shrimp log-CPUE (colored points) and the best fit model that included the Pacific Decadal Oscillation and ONI as drivers of change over time (black line).

Table 1. Ranking of top candidate models based upon delta AICc of < 2.0. The bias column indicates whether or not there was a bias term in the model, and if so, whether it was unique to each genera or shared between them. The state column indicates whether there were three states unique to each genera or one common state.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Bias** | **State** | **Covariate(s)** | **ΔAIC** |
| shared | shared | none | 0 |
| none | shared | PDO & ONI | 1.1 |