

Coral reef fish abundance and diversity of seagrass beds in Kavaratti atoll, Lakshadweep, India

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ABSTRACT

The community organization of coral reef fishes in the seagrass sub-habitat of Kavaratti toll, Lakshadweep, India was studied during the period from January 1991 to June 1992. Twenty-seven families represented by 65 species were recorded by the visual censuses method. The community diversity for families and species was 2.49 and 3.14 respectively. Juveniles and sub-adults of the most adult reef fish, which inhabit other sub-habitats, were recorded here. The high species diversity in the seagrass beds is due to their roles as nurseries, shelter and foraging grounds for many species. Labridae, Chaetodontidae, Acanthuridae and Mullidae were the most speciose families. Occurrence of siganids was highly seasonal. The cover that seagrass canopy provides conceals many species and perhaps influenced counts. The occurrence of balistids could be related to the presence of interstitial and patches and abundant invertebrate food. Scorpaenids subsisted on abundant invertebrates and juveniles fishes. High counts and pronounced variations make seagrass beds unstable habitats. However, monsoon assemblages were relatively stable perhaps due to lack of excessive new recruits and a habitat shift by most species.

Introduction

Discrete population, small breeding pools, sedentary and non-migratory nature and association with specific habitats are striking characters of coral reef fishes. A variety of habitats found in coral reef areas may be rich or poor in species in each habitat or between differing habitats, supporting markedly different fish communities of which some may be cosmopolitan. Dependence on a particular food item, behavioral interactions and depths across reefs are

other factors known to limit reef fish distribution.

Although the study of the ecology of reef fishes is relatively recent, it is developing rapidly, with many workers at present active in the tropical western Atlantic and Caribbean, the Gulf of California, several centers in the vast Indo-West Pacific, and in the Red Sea (Sale, 1980). However, there is an overall paucity of knowledge on this subject from the Indian region, leaving gaps in reviews, which attempted to summarize

a global picture on reef fish community organization.

With the availability of limited facilities, the present investigation will form a basis on coral reef fish community organization which opens up understanding on patterns of numerical densities, species richness, species composition and their occurrence on each of the five sub-habitats classified on Kavaratti atoll and the reef slope in general. The present account deals with sand flats.

Materials and methods

Fish species enumeration and their distribution in the sea grass habitats of Kavaratti Atoll, were studied using the visual censuses technique from January 1991 to June 1992 (Vijayanand and Pillai, 2003).

Data collected from each census were grouped by species. These were transformed into a data matrix for the sub-habitat. Results obtained from the data matrix were used to study the following two aspects of the community organization of coral reef fishes:

1. **Community parameters:** Results of all censuses were combined to obtain the information mentioned below:

- a. Species composition of the particular region listed in the order of frequency of occurrence
- b. Frequency of occurrence
- c. Total abundance;
- d. Percentage abundance
- e. Shannon-Weiner diversity index (H').

2. **Seasonal variation in community parameters:** Results of all censuses were treated separately and were grouped into three distinct seasons

prevailing in Lakshadweep region, namely, pre-monsoon (January to April), monsoon (May to August) and post-monsoon (September to December). These seasons have been classified based on a definite change in wind direction in the middle of May (south-westerly) and its subsequent termination in August and replacement by north-easterly winds. The following information was obtained: a. Total number of individuals; b. Total number of species; c. Shannon-Weiner diversity index (H') and d. Evenness index (J').

Results

Community parameters: Table 1 depicts the community parameters of 65 different species found on the sub-habitat. *Acanthurus* spp. Recorded 111 individuals (2.69%) though it was present 15 times, while *Acanthurus triostegus* (173 nos.) occurred 14 times contributing to 4.20%. The diversity was 3.35 and 3.65 respectively. *Zebrasoma veliferum* (21 Nos.), *Acanthurus leucosternon* (14 Nos.) and *Naso unicornis* (22 Nos.) appeared 6 to 9 times with proportions and diversities ranging between 0.34 and 0.53% and 2.26% and 2.89% respectively.

Two species of apogonids, *Apogon fraenatus* (8 Nos.) and *A. taeniophorus* (6 Nos.) occurred only once. *Balistoides viridescens* (8 Nos.) and *Pseudobalistes flavimarginatus* (12 Nos.) were found 4 and 3 times respectively.

Amongst 8 species of chaetodontids, *Chaetodon auriga* was recorded 18 times (101 Nos.) contributing to 2.45% of fishes recorded with a diversity of 3.94, *C. melannotus* (312 Nos.) *C. xanthocephalus* (33 Nos.) and *Heniochus acuminatus* (25 Nos.) showed diversity values of 3.00, 2.12 and 2.70 respectively, accounting to less than 1%. Other species occurred only once with individuals ranging from 2 to

TABLE 1: Frequency of occurrence (FO), total abundance (TA), percentage abundance (%) and diversity index (H') for each species recorded in the seagrass sub-habitat of Kavaratti atoll

SPECIES	FO	TA	%	H'
ACANTHURIDAE				
<i>Acanthurus</i> spp.	15	111	2.69	3.35
<i>Acanthurus triostegus</i>	14	173	4.20	3.65
<i>Zebrasoma veliferum</i>	9	21	0.51	2.89
<i>Acanthurus leucosternon</i>	6	14	0.34	2.26
<i>Naso unicornis</i>	6	22	0.53	2.38
<i>Naso brevirostris</i>	2	5	0.12	0.97
APOGONIDAE				
<i>Apogon fraenatus</i>	1	8	0.19	0.00
<i>Apogon taeniophorus</i>	1	6	0.15	0.00
BALISTIDAE				
<i>Balistoides viridescens</i>	4	8	0.19	1.91
<i>Pseudobalistes flavimarginatus</i>	3	12	0.29	1.19
<i>Rhinecanthus aculeatus</i>	1	1	0.02	0.00
BELONIDAE				
<i>Tylosurus</i> spp.	4	38	0.92	1.77
BLENNIDAE				
<i>Omnobranchus</i> spp.	4	42	1.02	1.98
BOTHIDAE				
<i>Bothus pantherinus</i>	6	11	0.27	2.56
CHAETODONTIDAE				
<i>Chaetodon auriga</i>	18	101	2.45	3.94
<i>Chaetodon melannotus</i>	9	37	0.90	3.00
<i>Chaetodon xanthocephalus</i>	7	33	0.80	2.12
<i>Heniochus acuminatus</i>	7	25	0.61	2.70
<i>Chaetodon citrinellus</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
<i>Chaetodon collare</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
<i>Chaetodon kleinii</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
<i>Chaetodon trifasciatus</i>	1	5	0.12	0.00
DIODONTIDAE				
<i>Diodon histrix</i>	9	17	0.41	2.90
FISTULARIIDAE				
<i>Fistularia petimba</i>	11	149	3.61	2.73
KUHLIDAE				
<i>Kuhlia mugil</i>	3	143	3.48	1.18
LABRIDAE				
<i>Halichoeres scapularis</i>	20	332	8.05	3.75
<i>Stethojulis albobittata</i>	17	167	4.05	3.85
<i>Stethojulis strigiventer</i>	16	183	4.44	2.73
<i>Cheilio inermis</i>	15	84	2.04	3.52
<i>Crois gaimard</i>	8	18	0.44	2.73
<i>Hologymnosus doliatus</i>	7	13	0.32	2.66
<i>Anampses caeruleopunctatus</i>	3	9	0.22	1.39
<i>Chelinus undulatus</i>	1	4	0.10	0.00
<i>Gomphosus coeruleus</i>	1	1	0.02	0.00
<i>Halichoeres marginatus</i>	1	1	0.02	0.00
<i>Thalassoma amblycephalum</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
<i>Thalassoma hardwicki</i>	1	1	0.02	0.00

LETHRINIDAE				
<i>Monotaxis gradoculis</i>	2	4	0.10	0.81
MALACANTHIDAE				
<i>Malacanthus latovittatus</i>	1	1	0.02	0.00
MONOCANTHIDAE				
<i>Alutera scripta</i>	11	28	0.68	3.35
<i>Cantherinus paradalis</i>	4	5	0.12	1.91
MUGILIDAE				
<i>Crenemugil crenilabis</i>	2	6	0.15	0.92
MUGILOIDAE				
<i>Parapercis hexophthalma</i>	2	5	0.12	0.97
MULLIDAE				
<i>Parupeneus macronema</i>	13	81	1.97	3.50
<i>Mulloides flavolineatus</i>	12	115	2.79	3.45
<i>Parupeneus barberinus</i>	11	69	1.67	3.25
<i>Parupeneus bifasciatus</i>	9	52	1.26	2.83
<i>Parupeneus pleurostigma</i>	7	36	0.87	2.53
<i>Parupeneus cyclostomus</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
NEMIPTERIDAE				
<i>Scolopsis bilineatus</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
OSTRACIIDAE				
<i>Lactoria cornuta</i>	2	2	0.05	1.00
<i>Ostracion meleagris</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
POLYNEMIDAE				
<i>Polynemus spp.</i>	3	19	0.46	1.08
POMACENTRIDAE				
<i>Abudefduf sexfasciatus</i>	8	40	0.97	2.79
SCARIDAE				
<i>Scarus spp.</i>	18	1752	42.50	4.21
SCORPAENIDAE				
<i>Pterois miles</i>	7	15	0.36	2.79
<i>Dendrochirus zebra</i>	2	3	0.07	0.92
SIGANIDAE				
<i>Signanus stellatus</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
SPHYRAENIDAE				
<i>Sphyraena spp.</i>	3	38	0.92	1.15
TETRAODONTIDAE				
<i>Tetraodon nigropunctatus</i>	5	6	0.15	2.25
<i>Canthigaster margaritatus</i>	1	2	0.05	0.00
THERAPONIDAE				
<i>Therapon jarbua</i>	1	4	0.10	0.00
ZANCLIDAE				
<i>Zanclus canescens</i>	6	19	0.46	2.33

Number of species recorded = 65

5 times contributing to less than 0.50% in each case except *C. trifasciatus* which contributed to 0.12%.

Diodon histrix (17 Nos.), *Fistularia petimba* (149 Nos.), *Kuhlia mugil* (143

Nos.), *Monotaxis grandoculis* (4 Nos.) and *Malacanthus latovittatus* (one) were single species representing respective families. Of these, *F. petimba* and *K. mugil* accounted for significant numbers on the habitat contributing to 3.61 and

3.48% respectively.

Fourteen labrid species were recorded. *Halichoeres scapularis* (332 Nos.) abundantly occurred (20 times) forming 8.05% of fishes recorded with a diversity of 3.75. *Stethojulis albobittata* (167 Nos.) and *S. strigiventer* (183 Nos.) were conspicuous on seagrass beds forming 4.05 and 4.44% accounting for diversities of 3.85 and 3.49% respectively. *Cheilio inermis* (84 Nos.) was recorded 15 times, accounting to 2.04% with a diversity of 3.52. All other species recorded formed percentages less than 0.50. Of these, *Coris gaimard*, *Hologymnosus doliatus* and *Anampses caeruleopunctatus* recoded 18, 13 and 9 individuals respectively.

Alutera scripta (28 Nos.) was common on seagrass beds occurring 11 times with a diversity of 3.35. *Cantherinus paradalis*, *Crenemugil crenilabis* and *Parapercis hexophthalma* were found 2 to 4 times with either 5 or 6 individuals. Of the 6 species of mullids recorded, *Parupeneus macronema* (81 Nos.), *Mulloidies falvolineatus* (115 Nos.), *P. barberinus* (69 Nos.) were common with diversities of 3.50, 3.45 and 3.25 accounting to 1.97, 2.79 and 1.67% respectively. Though *Parupeneus bifasciatus* and *P. pleurostigma* occurred only 7 and 9 times, they recorded 52 and 36 individuals respectively. *P. cyclostomus* occurred only once.

Scolopsis bilineatus and *Ostracion meleagris* were encountered only once while *Lactoria cornuta* was found twice. All three species registered low percentages. 19 individuals represented the genus *Polynemus*, thrice. A single species of pomacentrid, *Abudefduf sexfasciatus* (40 Nos.) occurred 8 times. Scarid were the most abundant group (1752 Nos.) on seagrass beds forming 42.50% of the fishes recorded with a

diversity of 4.21. Scorpaenidae and Tetradontidae recorded the presence of 2 species each. Of these, *Pterois miles* (15 Nos.) was found 7 times while *Tetraodon nigropunctatus* occurred 5 times. *Dendrochirus zebra* and *Canthigaster margaritata* were rare. *Siganus stellatus* (2 Nos.), *Sphyræna* spp. (38 Nos.), *Therapon jarbua* (4 Nos.) and *Zanclus canecens* (19 Nos.) were single species that represented respective families.

Seasonal variation in community parameters: Total counts during pre-monsoon of '91 varied between 72 (April 7) and 310 (March 4). Other samples recorded counts between 185 and 228 (Table 2 A). In '92, the fluctuation during pre-monsoon was to a lesser magnitude (139 to 204 Nos.) with most of the counts ranging between 139 and 171 Nos. (Table 2 D). Variation in monsoon was also significant with a minimum (90 Nos.) in June 3 and a maximum in May 1 (203 Nos.). Two samples taken in May 1 and June 2 of '92 recorded 56 and 59 individuals respectively. A fluctuating trend was also seen during post-monsoon. Two samples in October 3,4 (52, 64 Nos.) and one in December 7 (63 Nos.) recorded low counts, while the highest (350 Nos.) was found in September 2 (Table 2 C).

Total number of species observed during both the years in pre-monsoon were between 13 and 17. March 4 ('91) recorded a highest of 20 species while a maximum of 10 and 12 species were found in February 2 and March 3 in '92 (Table 2 A&D). Species numbers were relatively stable in the monsoon recording 14 to 17 species (Table 2 B&E), while the variation was relatively high in post-monsoon with a range of 8 to 17 species (Table 2 C).

High species diversity (3.44, 3.00 and

3.38) was found in March 4,5 and April 7 respectively (Table 2 A) in pre-monsoon of '91, while other samples showed diversities above 2.00. During the same season in '92, a minimum (1.89) was observed in March 4 (Table 2 D) while other samples had diversities above 2.00. Species diversity in monsoon in both years was generally high (3.10 to 3.41) except in one sample taken in May 1 ('91) where it was 2.81 (Table 2 B&E). A relatively high variation (1.71 to 3.47) was seen during post-monsoon. Low

values (1.93 and 1.71) were registered in September 1 and November 5 (Table 2 C).

Evenness in species distribution varied greatly in pre-monsoon (0.61 to 0.91) in '91 while it was generally uneven (0.50 to 0.67) in '92 (Table 2 A&D). Distribution was most even (0.91) in April 7. In general, the variation was high in monsoon (0.69 to 0.90) and post-monsoon (0.51 to 0.91). In '91, an even distribution (0.90) was observed in May

TABLE 2 : Total number of individuals (I), number of species (S), diversity index (H') and evenness (J) for each census in different seasons on the seagrass sub-habitat of Kavaratti atoll

Sample No.							
A . PRE-MONSOON							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	J	F	F	M	M	A	A
I	201	185	190	310	228	205	72
S	16	13	14	20	17	16	13
H'	2.45	2.51	2.64	3.44	3.00	2.73	3.38
J'	0.61	0.68	0.69	0.80	0.86	0.68	0.91
B. MONSOON							
	MY	MY	JN	JY	AG		
I	203	114	90	102	129		
S	17	14	14	15	15		
H'	2.81	3.41	3.33	3.41	3.10		
J'	0.69	0.90	0.87	0.87	0.79		
C. POST-MONSOON							
	S	S	O	O	N	N	D
I	148	350	52	64	146	173	63
S	13	13	8	14	10	17	11
H'	1.93	2.39	2.65	3.47	1.71	2.51	2.99
J'	0.52	0.65	0.88	0.91	0.51	0.61	0.86
D. PRE-MONSOON 1992							
	J	F	M	M	A	A	
I	204	154	163	139	171	151	
S	13	10	12	14	16	13	
H'	2.24	2.22	2.08	1.89	2.37	2.04	
J'	0.61	0.67	0.58	0.50	0.59	0.55	
E. MONSOON							
	M	J					
I	56	59					
H'	3.38	3.22					
J'	0.89	0.85					
S	14	14					

2. Two samples, each taken in May and June ('92) had a stable distribution (0.89 and 0.85 respectively). During post-monsoon, October 4 (0.91) accounted for an even distribution (Table 2 C).

Discussion

Labridae, Chaetodontidae, Acanthuridae and Mullidae were the most speciose families on seagrass beds. Among labrids, though *Halichoeres scapularis* showed lower H' value (3.75) it was numerically dominant. The cover that seagrass canopy provides conceals many species and perhaps influenced counts. Its association with seagrass beds was recorded by Randall (1983). *Stethojulis albobittata* and *S. strigiventer* replaced other species on the list. With H' 3.85 and 3.49 respectively, they indicated strong preference towards seagrass beds. *Cheilodactylus inermis* occurred on sand flats but its main preference was seagrass beds. These species mentioned above emerged as typical dependents on seagrass beds. Hobson (1974) observed *Coris gaimard* to be abundant where the reef was interspread with sand patches from where they excavate buried organisms. Similar conditions offered by seagrass beds could determine its presence on the habitat. A similar explanation holds good for *Hologymnosus doliatus*. Other species were rare, but occur on the habitat for food and shelter. Most labrids, observed were sub-adults. Larger individuals of labrids and other benthic feeding fishes avoid areas of increased algal cover (Choat and Ayling, 1987).

Chaetodon auriga dominated seagrass beds ($H'=3.94$). All other species were occasional or rare. All individuals observed were juveniles except adult *Heniochus acuminatus* which were associated with cement pilings of the jetty. *Chaetodon kleinii* is found on reefs

with sandy coral bottom and feeds on plankton while *C. melannotus* was more abundant at places with soft coral cover (Anderson *et al.*, 1981). *C. kleinii* could obtain plankton from seagrass beds while it appeared that juvenile *C. melannotus* was more abundant at places with soft coral cover (Anderson *et al.*, 1981). *C. kleinii* could obtain plankton from seagrass beds while it appeared that juvenile *C. melannotus* were either omnivores or herbivores. Ontogenic feeding behaviour change was observed in *C. aurigai* (Vijay Anand, 1990). Most juvenile chaetodontids perhaps had this habit, hence their association with grass beds. Bouchon-Navaro (1981) observed juvenile/sub-adult chaetodontids on grass beds.

H' values indicate that *Acanthurus* spp. and *A. triostegus* were consistent in occurrence. Most acanthurids were again juveniles or sub-adults in small schools except *Zebrasoma veliferum* and *A. leucosternon* that were non-schooling. Harmelin-Vivien (1989) observed juvenile acanthurids concentrated in shallow waters. *Naso unicornis* I and *N. tuberosus* fed on larger algal species (Choat, 1991). In the present study, *N. unicornis* and *N. brevirostris* perhaps inhabited grass beds for macroscopic algae as food. Acanthurids were observed to have more species and individuals on reef crests and in lagoons (Russ, 1984) but species richness on seagrass beds were not significant. Apart from scarids that formed almost 50% of fish recorded, siganids are also expected to be dominant herbivores. However, only a single species, *Siganus stellatus* was recorded once. It appears that occurrence of siganids is highly seasonal as sudden summer peaks in recruitment were observed.

Many apogonids and holocentrids

were collected during night time fishing and these species probably remain concealed during day time. A similar reasoning holds good for *Bothus pantherinus* and *Parapercis hexophthalma* but these species were diurnally active. Certain balistid species were observed to feed on seagrasses (Ogden and Zieman, 1977). The association of *Baliostoides viridescens*, *Pseudobalistes favlimarginatus* and *rhinacanthus aculeatus* with sand patches was recorded by Hiatt and Strasburg (1960). In the present study, the occurrence of these species on seagrass beds could be related to the presence of interstitial sand patches and abundant invertebrate food. Other species visiting grass beds for prey procurement from sand were *Monotaxis grandoculis*, *Malacanthus latovittatus*, *Crenemugil crenilabis* and *Scolopsis bilineatus*. Bell and Pollard (1989) stated that Monacanthidae and Scorpaenidae were among dominant families on seagrass beds, while Bell *et al.* (1978) observed monacanthids to be omnivores that acts as herbivores and consume encrusted fauna and flora on seagrass blades. Monacanthids in the present study did not form a dominant group but dependence for food may be in accordance in case of *Alutera scripta* which was the only dominant species. Scorpaenids perhaps depended on the region for food in the form of abundant invertebrates and juveniles fishes, while other species were rare (Harmelin Vivien and Bouchon, 1976). Observations in the present study were in accordance with those of Bell and Pollard (1989) who summarized major characteristics of seagrass beds as nurseries for reef fish, shelter and abundant food source. Several species make use of this zone as juveniles but occur as adults on nearby reefs (Ogden and Zieman 1977;

Weinstein and Heck, 1979; Shulman, 1985). Free moving species belonging to Belonidae, Kuhlidae, Mugilidae, Polynemidae and Sphyracnidae posed problems in censusing but were characteristically of sand flats and seagrass beds.

In contrast to sand flats and other habitats, high counts and pronounced variations make seagrass beds unstable habitats. Pollard (1984) did not find significant seasonal differences and stated that high H' values are due to high species richness and evenness of distribution. But in the present study, monsoon assemblages were relatively stable perhaps due to lack of excessive new recruits and a habitat shift by most species. Lack of new recruits could result, through seasonal variations in spawning. Spawning activity has been selectively modified to match favourable oceanographic conditions for larval survival and dispersal (Johannes, 1978) and such a mechanism possibly explains low rates of settlement on to the 'seagrass nurseries'. Adult fishes, however seem to avoid the area due to unfavourable conditions on the shallow habitat. Seagrass beds contain juveniles of several species that occur in the adult fauna of neighbouring reefs (Ogden and Zieman, 1977) while many species use seagrass beds for short or long durations (Bell and Pollard, 1989; Sheppard *et al.*, 1992). Recruitment of temporary residents was found to be a principal cause of seasonal variation in fish abundance on seagrass beds (Middleton *et al.*, 1984). A higher variation in other seasons (pre-monsoon and post-monsoon) could be explained by the reverse mechanism where new recruits and fishes that use grass beds for the abundant food it stores, migrated from other habitats. The information generated by the present study

identifying habitats that are species rich based on fish species diversity, provides information on species association with seagrass beds which in turn helps to direct fishing operations to such areas with suitable gear.

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