Misconceptions about analyses of Australian seaweed collections

THOMAS WERNBERG1, BAYDEN D. RUSSELL2,3, COREY J.A. BRADSHAW3,4, C. FREDERICO D. GURGEL3,4,5, MADS S. THOMSEN1,6, ELVIRA POLOCZANSKA7 AND SEAN D. CONNELL2,3*

1UWA Oceans Institute & School of Plant Biology, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia 6009, Australia
2Southern Seas Ecology Laboratories
3The Environment Institute and School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia 5005, Australia
4South Australian Research and Development Institute, Henley Beach, South Australia 5022, Australia
5State Herbarium of South Australia, Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, GPO Box 1047, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia
6Marine Ecology Research Group, School of Biological Sciences, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand
7Climate Adaptation Flagship, CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research, Ecosciences Precinct, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia

ABSTRACT: One of the greatest impediments to detecting changes in species distributions in response to ocean warming is the lack of baseline data. In a recent article, we compared old (1940–1959) and new (1990–2009) herbarium records of Australian seaweeds and found a net southward shift in the latitude of northernmost collections of temperate species, implying a flora-wide poleward retreat over the past five decades. Huisman & Millar (2013) criticised our methods, contending that a comparison of herbarium records from different time periods cannot be used to infer changes in species distributions without field-based validation. However, our analysis compared the median position of extreme records of random species from random locations rather than focusing on particular species and their possible loss from specific sites. Hence, ground-truthing ‘extinctions’ are of limited value to the interpretation of our analysis. Moreover, subtidal ground-truthing over biogeographic scales is not logistically possible and even runs counter to entire disciplines (e.g. palaeontology, extinction biology and biogeography) that assess hypotheses of extinction and shifting distributions. Huisman & Millar also questioned the direction of biases in the data set. We show here that patterns of collection effort should have produced an apparent shift northward in the absence of a true shift southward. Even if herbaria were not designed for the purpose of detecting species’ range changes, we contend that such collections can contain useful information on the distribution of species across space and time.

KEY WORDS: Climate change, Collection bias, Global warming, Herbarium data, Macroalgae, Range shift

INTRODUCTION

Shifts in species distributions as a consequence of global climate change and long-term climate variability have been observed across all major biomes (Parmesan & Yohe 2003; Sorte et al. 2010; Chen et al. 2011). Detecting such changes requires knowledge of past distributions, yet such baseline information is rarely available. This is particularly true for the Southern Hemisphere and even more so for marine organisms (Richardson & Poloczanska 2008; Rosenzweig et al. 2008). The lack of planned baseline surveys necessitates the use of alternative data sources to quantify species’ past distributions (Sparks 2007; Connell et al. 2008).

In a recent article (Wernberg et al. 2011), we used a publicly available database (Australia’s Virtual Herbarium; AVH 2012) containing electronic herbarium records of Australian seaweeds to test if the most northerly geographical limits of temperate species have shifted poleward over the past 50 years, a period of intense warming in temperate Australia (Pearce & Feng 2007; Ridgway 2007). However, these findings were recently questioned (Huisman & Millar 2013). Huisman & Millar (2013) did not deny the main thesis of our article – that temperate seaweeds have shifted south – but they did criticise our methods because of ‘an inappropriate interpretation of herbarium records’, ‘the absence of ground-truthing to confirm extirpations’, ‘incorrect interpretation of collection effort’ and criteria for data inclusion. Here we show that Huisman & Millar misunderstood several important points in our article, and we explain why their criticisms do not challenge our original conclusions.

INTERPRETATION OF HERBARIUM RECORDS

Huisman & Millar (2013) contend that using herbarium records to assess historical change is ‘flawed’ because collections are unsystematic in space and time, and these data provide information on only presences, not absences. They aptly state that the presence of a species at a particular site in an early collection period followed by its absence at that site in a later collection period does not prove that the species has become locally extinct. However, this observation does not challenge our analysis or results because our inferences were not based on site- or species-specific
In conclusion, it is well established that herbarium and presence-only data can provide useful information to detect spatiotemporal changes to species distributions.

GROUND-TRUTHING

Huisman & Millar (2013) criticise the lack of field validation of purported extirpations. As we have stated, our study did not identify local extinctions of specific species from specific sites, but it identified a shift in the median position of extreme records from assemblages of temperate species (Wernberg et al. 2011). Within this analytical framework, each individual range shift represents a random sample from a temperate flora. The accuracy of each of these random samples is associated with an unknown error, but collectively they will be distributed around the mean for the flora on average following the central limit theorem. Importantly, this implies that identifying unique errors in any of these range shifts would not invalidate our analysis of the means (or medians) and, therefore, that ground-truthing is not necessary to support our conclusion. Moreover, field validation of the nature suggested by Huisman & Millar theoretically requires observations that rule out each and every possible occurrence. Logically, this is not possible, and advocating ‘ground-truthing’ as a prerequisite to establish extinction runs counter to the entire disciplines of palaeontology, extinction biology and biogeography because few extinctions are ever observed directly given the miniscule probability of sampling individuals from declining populations at low densities (Brashaw et al. 2012).

Other related studies that also illustrate the usefulness of natural history collections for historical analyses have not been undermined by the difficulty of acquiring field validations. For example, Delisle et al. (2003) used herbarium records alone to determine changes in distribution of six invasive wetlands species in Canada during the 20th Century. Similarly, Last et al. (2011) used a range of anecdotal and collections data to document poleward shifts in fish distributions over the past 100 years in eastern Australia, and Case et al. (2007) used herbarium records to document 150 years of nationwide declines in abundance of American ginseng (Panax quinquefolius Linnaeus) in the United States. In some circumstances, we do see the value in attempts to identify whether specific species have gone locally extinct or changed their distributions. For example, intensive surveys for one species listed in our appendix, the fucoid Scytothalia dorycarpa (Turner) Greville, has revealed recent extirpation and a 100-km range contraction in Western Australia (Smale & Wernberg 2013), which is consistent with the trends reported in our original article (Wernberg et al. 2011). In conclusion, ground-truthing is not a necessity for the interpretation of changes to species distributions from natural history collection data.

COLLECTION EFFORT

One of the key criticisms from Huisman & Millar (2013) relates to ‘an incorrect interpretation of collection effort’. Collection effort is important because it is proportional to...
the likelihood of sampling a target species if it is present and because several studies have demonstrated how uneven collection effort in space and/or time can bias estimates of changes in distribution in the direction of oversampling (Skelly et al. 2003; Shoo et al. 2006; Hassall & Thompson 2010; Feeley 2012). In other words, the likelihood of detection will be greatest where there are more collections.

Huisman & Millar (2013) suggest that the most meaningful gauge of collection effort would refer to the sites of historical range limits. We recognize that this can be important if the analyses aim to identify species-specific local extirpations (e.g. Phillips & Blackshaw 2011), but it makes less sense in our analysis in which we focused on florawide shifts in distribution across a broad geographic gradient. Specifically, focusing only on specimens collected around the site of the previously known range limit would not help identify a shift per se, and it would introduce the problem of ‘assumed absences for nondetection’ (Shaffer et al. 1998). Neither would it take into account that some species could move in the opposite direction (e.g. if geographical limits are not influenced mainly by climate), which turns out to be a common observation (Hickling et al. 2006; Lima et al. 2007; Zuckenberg et al. 2009; Sorte et al. 2010). We argue that in a study like ours, effort should encompass the entire area of interest, including sites outside the species’ current distribution where they could conceivably be found.

We identified differences in collection effort (volume) north and south of the tropical–temperate transition (31°S), and we identified differences between the early and late sampling periods for both coastlines (fig. 1A in Wernberg et al. 2011). Huisman & Millar (2013) show (their fig. 1) that on the west coast, much of the northern effort in the late period (1990–2009) was located north of 25°S. We included these records in our original analysis because they fell within our defined limits for the west coast and because we did not want to exclude (and therefore bias) the possibility of northward shifts for temperate species originally restricted to 25–27°S. Importantly, the northward collection bias persists even if we exclude specimens collected north of 25°S, with more than double the effort in the late compared to the early period (Fig. 1). The bias depends on the difference in northern collection effort between early and late collection periods (Shoo et al. 2006) and not the difference between northern and southern effort within each period as Huisman & Millar erroneously have argued. That is, by increasing the collection effort in the northern region in the later period (relative to the early period), the likelihood of resampling a species if it is in the northern region is increased. Therefore, this bias in collection effort is more likely to cause an apparent northward shift, which contrasts with the net poleward shift we detected. It also means that it is incorrect when Huisman & Millar claim that our figure (fig. 1A in Wernberg et al. 2011) does not support a northward collection bias on the east coast. Finally, the collection effort reported by Huisman & Millar (2013; fig. 1) does not contradict the patterns we reported, in part because they report only collection effort from the later collection period and in part because their 30–33°S latitudinal band encompasses effort both north and south of 31°S.

Collection effort can be defined as the total number of specimens collected (collection volume; e.g. Delisle et al. 2003; Fuentes et al. 2008), although the number of collection events (collection frequency) might also be a useful measure of effort. For our west coast data set, patterns of collection volume and frequency (Fig. 1) were similar (r = 0.93, P < 0.0001, n = 12), and for both measures there was a strong positive correlation between effort and collection of target species (r = 0.93, P < 0.001, and r = 0.72, P = 0.042, n = 8, for collection volume and frequency south of 25°S, respectively). This correlation supports the idea that total collection volume is a reasonable proxy for effort (probability of sampling) relating to temperate species.

Huisman & Millar (2013) also note that many records from the west coast in the later collection period (1990–2009) were from the Houtman Abrolhos Islands (~ 50 km off the mainland around 28–29°S) and so should be discounted because many species at the islands have tropical affinities. However, Huisman (1997) previously reported that ‘the algal flora of the islands includes a mixture of typically temperate species along with many species usually found at more northern latitudes’. Moreover, based on the absence of herbarium specimens of tropical species from the mainland, Phillips & Huisman (2009) found that the islands were characterised by the unusual presence of tropical species, not the absence of temperate species, and they concluded that ‘some temperate species, at least, are found at comparable latitudes to the Houtman Abrolhos Islands on the mainland’. We therefore argue that it would be unreasonable to discount these records as part of the overall collection effort because these records represent collection effort from sites where temperate species are commonly found. In conclusion, both our original (Wernberg et al. 2011) and our additional analysis of collection effort (Fig. 1) demonstrate conservative interpretations of changes to species ranges.

**CRITERIA FOR DATA INCLUSION**

Huisman & Millar (2013) also argued that our focus on temperate species is an ‘idiosyncrasy’ that causes an apparent southward shift in our analysis. Our range analysis focused on temperate species with a distribution limit north of 31°S (tropical–temperate transition zone) in the early period (1940–1959) because the inclusion of widespread species – and species where poleward shifts would be constrained by the east–west orientation of the south coast – would not be informative (Hassall & Thompson 2010). Many studies have limited range analyses to taxa in which change can be expected because of their affinity and distribution limits within a study region (e.g. Hickling et al. 2006; Feeley 2012). On the basis of Huisman & Millar’s argument, a negative relationship between the northernmost latitude of collection in the early period (1940–1959) and the recorded range shift would be expected (i.e. the closer the record to the ‘true’ northern range limit, the greater the expected shift). Yet we found no evidence for such a relationship. The northernmost latitude of collection in the early period explains less than 2% of the observed range shift (r² = 0.018, P = 0.374, n = 45). In addition, the purported ‘idiosyncrasy’ is inconsistent with
the findings that 15% and 44% of the species on the east and west coasts, respectively, shifted northward (Wernberg et al. 2011). It is possible that restricting species to those recorded north of the tropical–temperate transition zone in the early period could create an apparent southwards shift – not because the species are temperate per se but because it restricts the analyses to species with a more accurate estimation of the ‘true’ limit in the early period; whereas, it does not impose the same restriction on species from the later period. However, our additional criterion for at least five records in the later period counters a potential southward bias and instead created a northward bias because it increases the likelihood of capturing the ‘true’ range limit in the late period (Shoo et al. 2006). This is reflected in the rapidly decreasing probability of generating the observed range shift by chance with increasing recording requirements in the late period (N2, Fig. 2). That is, in contrast to the observed poleward shift in range limits, a net northward shift would be anticipated in the absence of any climatic forcing or changes to distribution patterns.

Finally, Huisman & Millar state that we did not validate our decision to focus on species with ≥5 records in the late period, but in the electronic appendix to our article, we presented additional analyses, repeating the calculations for six different subsets of species, imposing selection criteria of ≥5 and ≥10 records in the later period, within 10-, 20-, and 30-year time segments and for both the east and the west coast data sets (Wernberg et al. 2011). These sensitivity analyses demonstrated that our results were robust to the choices of records and time segments on two independent coastlines; compared to the median shifts of −0.46°S and −1.92°S reported in our article, the median shifts across these sensitivity tests were −0.38°S ± 0.09 SE (n = 6) and −1.89°S ± 0.27 SE (n = 5) on the west and east coasts, respectively (Wernberg et al. 2011).
To test the probability of generating a poleward shift of \( \geq 0.46^\circ \) latitude by chance alone, at different collection frequencies (number of records) in the early (N1, 1940–1959) and the late (N2, 1990–2009) periods. Arrows indicate species inclusion criteria applied in Wernberg et al. (2011). Probabilities generated by 10,000 repeated calculations of range shift for each N1 or N2. For each calculation, records were randomly assigned (without replacement) to species from the pool of records of temperate species with a maximum latitude of record north of 31\(^\circ\) N in the early period. The number of records in the early period (N1) has relatively little influence (because we focused only on temperate species north of 31\(^\circ\) S). Also, the probability of generating the observed range shift drops rapidly with an increasing number of records in N2, and the probabilities of generating such a pattern at random were low given the criteria we employed.

Fig. 2. Likelihood of generating a poleward shift of \( \geq 0.46^\circ \) latitude by chance alone at different collection frequencies (number of records) in the early (N1, 1940–1959) and the late (N2, 1990–2009) periods. Arrows indicate species inclusion criteria applied in Wernberg et al. (2011). Probabilities generated by 10,000 repeated calculations of range shift for each N1 or N2. For each calculation, records were randomly assigned (without replacement) to species from the pool of records of temperate species with a maximum latitude of record north of 31\(^\circ\) N in the early period. The number of records in the early period (N1) has relatively little influence (because we focused only on temperate species north of 31\(^\circ\) S). Also, the probability of generating the observed range shift drops rapidly with an increasing number of records in N2, and the probabilities of generating such a pattern at random were low given the criteria we employed.

CONCLUSION

We used herbarium records to test the hypothesis that temperate seaweed floras in Australia have shifted latitudinally over the past five decades of documented warming. We provided multiple lines of evidence (community, range, and sensitivity analyses from two independent coastlines) to demonstrate a net poleward shift. Huisman & Millar do not contest that temperate seaweeds might have retreated poleward (Brodie et al. 2009; Millar 2009; Huisman & Millar 2013), but they criticised our methods and argued that the assumption that herbarium data can reflect species distribution in space is ‘questionable at the best of times’ and over time become ‘untenable’ and need field verification (Huisman & Millar 2013). We reply by showing that we have carefully and comprehensively considered the issues of using herbarium and other natural history collection (presence-only) data to detect changes in distribution (reviewed in Shaffer et al. 1998; Tingley & Beissinger 2009). Our analysis of presence-only data uses the approach of comparing extreme records of random species from random locations (sensu Shaffer et al. 1998) rather than focusing on particular candidate species and their subsequent loss from specific sites. Hence, the need for ground-truthing of extinctions is of limited value to the interpretation of our analysis. Herbarium records and other natural history collections contain valuable historical information. The limitations of these data sources should not – and clearly have not – prevented a growing use of natural history collections as valuable baselines for detecting biological responses to climate change (reviewed in Shaffer et al. 1998; Tingley & Beissinger 2009).

Originally, herbaria and their collections were not intended for such purposes. However, if we cannot find ways to broaden the use of the data we collect and, in turn, encourage novel scientific approaches, then our discipline will not be able to evolve to explore difficult questions.

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REFERENCES


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