Priority effects determine how dispersal affects biodiversity in seasonal metacommunities

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Abstract

The arrival order of species frequently determines the outcome of their interactions. This

phenomenon, called the priority effect, is ubiquitous in nature and determines local community

structure, but we know surprisingly little about how it influences biodiversity across different

spatial scales. Here, we use a seasonal metacommunity model to show that biodiversity

patterns and the homogenizing effect of high dispersal depend on the specific mechanisms

underlying priority effects. When priority effects are driven by a numeric advantage, diversity

measurements are highly sensitive to initial conditions and high dispersal homogenizes

communities. However, when local priority effects arise from phenological shifts that alter

species interaction strength (trait-mediated priority effects), local, regional, and temporal

diversity are higher and are surprisingly robust to variation in dispersal and initial conditions,

given spatiotemporal variations in phenology. Our results highlight that accounting for the

mechanisms underlying priority effects is fundamental to understanding the maintenance of

regional biodiversity.

Introduction

Dispersal promotes the exchange of individuals between communities and thus links local population and community dynamics to regional patterns of species distributions. As a consequence, dispersal can play a key role in shaping biodiversity patterns at both local and regional scales (Kerr et al. 2002; Cadotte 2006; Grainger and Gilbert 2016). However, the relationship between dispersal and biodiversity patterns is also shaped by local conditions and processes, including biotic interactions (e.g. Kneitel and Miller 2003; Shurin et al. 2004; Altermatt et al. 2011; Carrara et al. 2012; Vanschoenwinkel et al. 2013; Catano et al. 2017). Although recent studies identify local competitive interactions as a major contributor to dispersal-diversity relationships (Pu and Jiang 2015; Lu 2021; Miller and Allesina 2021), one ubiquitous biotic process in metacommunities, the temporal sequence of community assembly, has been largely neglected.

Communities are not assembled all at once; instead, species arrive at different times and differences in the sequence of arrival times can alter the outcome of species interactions and thereby also community composition. Such priority effects (or historical contingencies) are widespread in nature and occur in systems ranging from microbes through plants and vertebrates (Alford and Wilbur 1985; Drake 1991; Kardol et al. 2013; Fukami 2015). In a metacommunity context, priority effects become important because they can alter the fate of immigrating individuals into a patch. For instance, with early arriver advantage, individuals that arrive at a patch may either successfully establish themselves if they arrive first, or they could perform poorly and even be excluded by earlier arriving competitors. By altering the outcome of local competitive interactions, priority effects have the potential to shape the relationship between dispersal and diversity patterns at local and regional scales. Although

several theories predict that priority effects could affect how regional dispersal shapes

biodiversity (e.g. Shurin et al. 2004; Fukami 2015; Grainger and Gilbert 2016; Miller and

Allesina 2021), few have incorporated the diverse mechanisms that can generate priority

effects in natural systems. Yet accounting for these mechanisms may be key to explaining the

often-unexpected dispersal-diversity relationships found in different systems.

Priority effects can be generated by at least two fundamentally different mechanisms,

broadly categorized as "numeric" or "trait-mediated" (Rudolf 2019; Zou and Rudolf 2020).

Numeric priority effects arise from the positive frequency dependence of the species with

higher abundance (Ke and Letten 2018). As one species arrives early, it is more likely to

establish a numeric advantage over late arrivers and maintain this advantage through a positive

feedback. On the other hand, trait-mediated priority effects assume that per-capita interactions

between species change with their relative arrival times (Rudolf 2019). In nature, this occurs

through altered traits that could affect species interactions, such as size and behavior, or

modified environment from the difference in arrival times (Poulos and McCormick 2014;

Rasmussen et al. 2014; Rudolf 2018; Blackford et al. 2020). These changes in interacting traits

often result in a change of species' competitive interactions that correlate with their relative

arrival times (Rudolf 2019; Zou and Rudolf 2020). Therefore, if trait-mediated priority effects

occur, the competitive outcome of early and late arrivers are not only determined by their

numeric difference but also their relative arrival times.

Differences in local community dynamics between different types of priority effects also

have the potential to alter local and regional dispersal-diversity relationships. With numeric

priority effects, positive frequency dependence could enable the more abundant early arriver to

spread over the landscape through dispersal and competitively exclude late arrivers. High

dispersal will therefore decrease both local and regional diversity because one or a few

regionally dominant species will eventually establish and maintain a numeric advantage in all

patches, similar to the classic prediction that dispersal homogenizes (Tilman 1994; Mouquet

and Loreau 2003; Leibold et al. 2004; Vanoverbeke et al. 2016; Fodelianakis et al. 2019).

Following this premise, alpha diversity is likely highest at intermediate dispersal while beta

and gamma diversity likely decreases with dispersal (Mouquet and Loreau 2002; 2003; Cadotte

2006). However, regional diversity may be retained even under high dispersal if priority effects

are driven by trait-mediated mechanisms, such as when early arrivers alter the environment or

rapidly adapts to the habitat (Shurin et al. 2004; Fukami 2015; Grainger and Gilbert 2016;

Leibold et al. 2019; Miller and Allesina 2021). In these cases, competitive outcomes are not

only driven by relative abundances but also relative arrival times. Early arrivers therefore will

not be excluded even if other species are more abundant. This effect of relative arrival times

should be particularly important in systems with periodic species assembly ("seasonal"

communities), as the frequent assembly of local communities creates many opportunities for

spatial and temporal variations in arrival orders (Sheriff et al. 2011; Diez et al. 2012; Theobald

et al. 2017; Carter et al. 2018; Rudolf 2019). In these seasonal systems, trait-mediated priority

effects and natural variations in species phenology could lead to high temporal turnover of

local and regional community composition despite the homogenizing effect of dispersal. Thus,

local priority effects and variations in phenology should strongly shape the dispersal-diversity

relationship in seasonal metacommunities, but the specific relationship should depend on the

mechanism of priority effects.

Here, we use a spatially implicit, multispecies metacommunity model to reveal how

different mechanisms of priority effects interact with dispersal to shape biodiversity at local

and regional scales in competitive metacommunities. We modeled the system with realistic

spatial and temporal variations in phenology and compared the observed dispersal-diversity

relationships with numeric and trait-mediated priority effects across different initial

distributions of population. We asked the following questions: (1) How will different

mechanisms of priority effects change dispersal-diversity relationships? (2) When will local

and regional diversity be maintained under high dispersal? (3) How sensitive are patterns of

biodiversity to initial heterogeneity in population sizes among local communities?

Methods

Model Setup

We modeled natural habitats with seasonal disturbance, such as annual grassland or

ephemeral ponds, in which species survive periodic, unfavorable environments (e.g., winter,

droughts) and reemerge at the beginning of the next season. We define a season as the growth

period between a previous disturbance to the next disturbance. For instance, a "season" for

annual plants would start with the emergence in spring or summer and end with senescence in

fall or winter, while a "season" for ephemeral ponds would be when they hold water. At the

beginning of the season, each species emerges from dormancy in a patch at an assigned time.

Patches are homogeneous throughout the landscape and are not spatially structured. The

average time of emergence in a season ($\bar{p}$, for phenology) is fixed for each species, but the

exact emergence time is randomly determined at each patch by drawing from a uniform

distribution centered around the species-specific average time of emergence (Figure 1).

Therefore, despite fixed average times of emergence, the exact order of arrival in the model

varies among patches and between seasons. This reflects variations in the phenology of co-

occurring species arising from species-specific responses to environmental stochasticity across

space and time in natural systems (Sheriff et al. 2011; Diez et al. 2012; Theobald et al. 2017;

Carter et al. 2018).

Within each season, local population dynamics in a given patch are determined with a

modified Beverton-Holt model (Rudolf 2019):

$$N_i(t + 1) = \frac{\lambda_i N_i(t)}{1 + \sum_{j=1}^{n} \alpha_{ij} \lambda_i N_j(t)} + s_i N_i(t) \text{ (Eqn. 1)}$$

where the population of the next season, $N_i(t + 1)$, is determined by population growth of

species i, $\lambda_i N_i(t)$, which negatively scales with densities of all species with respective

competition coefficients α_{ij}, and the proportion surviving to the next season, $s_i N_i(t)$. All

interspecific competitions are pairwise.

If the community is driven by trait-mediated priority effects, interspecific competition is a

function of the relative time of emergence:

$$\alpha_{ij}(\Delta p) = \frac{B}{1 + e^{(d - \Delta p)/c}} \text{ (Eqn. 2)}$$

where Δp is the relative time of emergence between species i and j, calculated as $t_j - t_i$, and B, d

and c are constants that determine the asymptotic maximum, midpoint (when two species

emerge simultaneously), and shape of the sigmoidal function. This nonlinear competition-

phenology function assumes an early arriver advantage and has been validated by several

empirical studies in animal and plant systems (Shorrocks and Bingley 1994; Rudolf 2018;

Blackford et al. 2020). If the community is only driven by numeric priority effects, the

interspecific competition does not depend on the relative time of emergence, and Δp is

effectively 0. In this scenario, the interspecific competition becomes a constant: $\alpha_{ij}(0) = \frac{B}{2}$.

We modeled the dispersal process as follows: first, D emigrating patches are randomly

selected, and emigrating populations of each species are determined by the number of

successes of a binomial draw with n trials and probability r; n is the population of that species

in that patch (Thompson et al. 2020). Emigrants are then pooled by species and redistributed to

D randomly selected patches; D is hereafter termed patches with dispersal. This spatially

implicit method has been widely used in empirical studies that often manually transfer

individuals between patches (Grainger and Gilbert 2016) and theoretical models (e.g.

DeMalach et al. 2021) and assumes that dispersal is not affected by distance or patch choice.

After dispersal, the season ends with a disturbance event, in which an end-of-season survival

rate (s_i in Eqn. 1) determines the proportion surviving to the next season.

Model Simulations

Although our model can be extended to any number of species and patches, we simulated

metacommunities with 5 competing species and 50 patches. This number of species allows for

a competitive hierarchy and meaningful values for species richness while still being tractable.

Each simulation was run for 100 seasons, long enough for us to discern population dynamics

driven by competition, as patterns such as extinction and dominance qualitatively stabilized

within 25-50 seasons, and we confirmed these observed patterns by simulating each set of

parameters 50 times. In our model, dispersal is dependent on both dispersal rate (r) and patches

with dispersal (D). Therefore, we varied them independently across a wide range (Table S1) to

ensure that we observe the full range of possible dynamics under biologically realistic

scenarios. We considered these two parameters as separate processes since they reflect different

aspects of dispersal. The proportion of population being dispersed under the lowest

combination of dispersal parameters ($r = 0.001$, $D = 10$) is approximately 1%-2%, while this

proportion is 20-30% under the highest combination ($r = 0.1$, $D = 40$).

We created a competitive hierarchy across all five species by differentiating intraspecific

competition (intensity of self-limitation), with species 1 having the highest and species 5

having the lowest intraspecific competition coefficient. We set the average order of emergence

time in reverse order to the competitive hierarchy, where species 1 emerges the earliest and

species 5 the latest. Additional simulations show whether the competitive hierarchy matches

with the order of emergence does not qualitatively change results. Note that with trait-mediated

priority effects interspecific competition (and thus competitive hierarchies) also depend on the

order of emergence (Eq. 2). We chose intraspecific competition coefficients that are smaller

than baseline interspecific competition coefficients ($\frac{B}{2}$) to promote numeric priority effects, but

our results are not sensitive to higher intraspecific competition strengths, which promote

coexistence as shown by additional simulations. We assumed that each season consists of one

generation, dispersal happens once at the end of a season, all species have equal dispersal rates

(r), and no patch undergoes extinction. To determine the robustness of observed patterns, we

relaxed each of the assumptions and did not find a qualitative change in observed differences in

population dynamics and dispersal-diversity relationships between mechanisms of priority

effects. Specific model parameters are listed in Table S1.

All simulations were performed in R version 4.1.1 (R Core Team 2021). Simulation code

is available at GitHub (https://github.com/hengxingzou/Zou2022bioRXiv) during the peer

review process and will be archived to an online repository upon acceptance.

Measuring Biodiversity

We examined dispersal-diversity relationships by calculating local species richness (# of

species in each patch; alpha diversity), dissimilarity in community composition among patches

(beta diversity), and regional species richness (# of species in the metacommunity; gamma

diversity) at the end of simulations. Alpha diversity was averaged among all patches within

each repetition. We quantified beta diversity (dissimilarity in community composition based on

numeric abundances of species) by averaging all pairwise Bray-Curtis distances between

patches using the R package *vegan* (Oksanen et al. 2013).

We also calculated temporal beta-diversity to quantify changes in metacommunity

composition over time using the R package *adespatial* (Dray et al. 2018). Specifically, we

calculated the dissimilarity (*D* metric in Legendre 2019) in species composition of a

metacommunity between consecutive time steps separated by 10 seasons. A high dissimilarity

index indicates that relative abundances of species vary greatly over time.

Scenarios and Results

The heterogeneity in initial population densities among patches strongly affects measured

dispersal-diversity patterns (Grainger and Gilbert 2016; Lu 2021) and priority effects are likely

to further amplify these differences. Therefore, we set three scenarios that varied in initial

relative abundances of species within and across patches and compared the resulting

biodiversity measures with and without trait-mediated priority effects.

Scenario 1: Initial populations are separated across patches

We first consider a simple baseline scenario in which each patch is initially colonized by

only one species and each species colonized the same number of patches. Therefore, the initial

alpha diversity is low (one species per patch), while beta and gamma diversities are high.

Results of this scenario immediately highlight the difference between dynamics with and

without trait-mediated priority effects. With numeric priority effects, the initial resident

remains dominant in a given patch for low and medium levels of dispersal since the number of

immigrants is small compared to the resident's population (Figure 2A, 2C). This pattern only

changes when dispersal (dispersal rate, r, and patches with dispersal, D) is high enough to boost

immigrant populations to a size that allows them to overcome the numeric advantage of the

resident species (Figure 2E). The difference in final population size between species simply

reflects species-specific differences in strength of intraspecific competition (Figure 3A, 3C),

except when high dispersal homogenizes the metacommunity (Figure 3E). In contrast, with

trait-mediated priority effects, immigrants can successfully invade and even achieve dominance

in new patches (Figure 2B, 2D). This invasion is possible because the relative timing of

emergence (and not initial densities) determines per-capita effects and thus competitive

dominance. Therefore, metacommunities with trait-mediated priority effects show a clear

hierarchy of final population and regional dominance, reflecting early-arriver advantage

(Figure 3B, 3D, 3F).

These differences in patch dynamics between both types of priority effects (numeric vs.

trait-mediated) strongly affect the local and regional dispersal-diversity relationships. Alpha

diversity shows a clear hump-shaped relationship with total dispersal (combined effect of r and

D) in metacommunities with numeric priority effects (Figure 4A). At a lower dispersal rate ($r =$

0.001) alpha diversity increases with higher D (more patches with dispersal) but decreases with

higher D at the highest dispersal rate ($r = 0.1$; Figure S6-8A). In contrast, alpha diversity

monotonically increases with dispersal (both r and D) in metacommunities with trait-mediated

priority effects (Figure 4B; Figure S6-8A).

With numeric-mediated priority effects, beta diversity decreases with higher dispersal

(both D and r), indicating that dispersal homogenizes the metacommunity and leads to regional

dominance of a single species (Figure 5A; Figure S6-8D). This negative dispersal-diversity

relationship is present but weaker in systems with trait-mediated priority effects (Figure 5B).

Furthermore, the overall dissimilarity is lower with trait-mediated compared to numeric

priority effects, as patches quickly gain species from the initial monoculture (Figure 5A-B;

Figure S6-8D). Gamma diversity remains high in metacommunities with numeric priority

effects, as some species are locally extinct, but no species goes extinct regionally unless overall

dispersal is very high (r=0.1, D=40, or 80% of all patches; Figure S5A, S6-8G). With trait-

mediated priority effects, no regional extinction occurs, and gamma diversity is always at

maximum even under high overall dispersal (Figure S5A, Figure S6-8G).

Scenario 2: Initial populations are equal across all patches

We next explored a scenario where all five species start with equal population sizes in all

patches. This starting condition is often used in lab experiments (Grainger and Gilbert 2016).

Similar to Scenario 1, we found a striking difference in population dynamics with and without

trait-mediated priority effects. With numeric priority effects, the competitively superior species

(species 5) dominates most patches, and the dominance is promoted by dispersal, although in

rare cases other species can rise to dominance as well (Figure S1C). With trait-mediated

priority effects, the observed pattern is very similar to that of Scenario 1: all species coexist,

the dominant species in a patch changes quickly over time, but the species with the earliest

time of emergence on average (species 1) still has the largest total population (Figure S1, S3).

In this scenario, we also found a weak hump-shaped pattern between alpha (Figure 4C;

Figure S6-8B), beta (Figure 5C; Figure S6-8E), and gamma (Figure S5, S6-8H) diversity and

overall dispersal in metacommunities with numeric priority effects. However, alpha diversity of

metacommunities with trait-mediated priority effects consistently increases with higher

dispersal (Figure 4D; Figure S6-8B). This results in a concurrent decrease in beta diversity

(Figure 5D; Figure S6-8E), although the change of both diversity values is small compared to

that with numeric priority effects. Finally, gamma diversity remains constant since no regional

extinction occurs with trait-mediated priority effects (Figure S5C; Figure S6-8H).

Scenario 3: Initial populations vary randomly across patches

Finally, we consider a scenario where populations of each species vary among patches,

which is often the case in field experiments with heterogeneous starting conditions (Kneitel

and Miller 2003; Howeth and Leibold 2010a; 2010b). We simulated this heterogeneity in initial

conditions by allowing all five species to occupy all patches, but their initial population is

randomly drawn from a normal distribution with a mean of 50 (initial population used in

Scenario 1 and 2) and a standard deviation of 10.

In metacommunities with numeric priority effects, the species with an initial numeric

advantage may be able to maintain its dominance in a given patch, but increasing dispersal

(high D or r) also allows competitively stronger species to replace the initially most abundant

species over time (Figure 2E). When r or D is small, the final total population of each species

reflects their initial population and strength of intraspecific competition (Figure S4A, C), but

higher dispersal quickly homogenizes the metacommunity (Figure S4E). In contrast,

metacommunities with trait-mediated priority effects again display very similar patterns to

those in Scenarios 1 and 2, with highly variable dynamics over time regardless of spatial

dispersal (Figure S2) and species 1 (earliest emergence) having the highest local dominance

(Figure S4).

With numeric priority effects, alpha diversity displays a unimodal relationship with

dispersal (Figure 4E), while it consistently increases with dispersal with trait-mediated priority

effects (Figure 4F). Higher dispersal contributes to more regional extinction and thus reduced

gamma diversity with numeric priority effects (Figure S5E). In contrast, gamma diversity

remains at maximum with trait-mediated priority effects, even under high dispersal levels

(Figure S5F). Metacommunities with both numeric and trait-mediated priority effects show

decreasing beta diversity with higher dispersal, although the change is much more obvious for

those with numeric priority effects, indicating that they have received a stronger homogenizing

effect from dispersal (Figure 5E-F; Figure S6-8F).

Temporal Turnover of Metacommunity

The difference between local population dynamics of numeric and trait-mediated priority

effects is further reflected by the temporal turnover of metacommunities. The initial decrease of

dissimilarity index in all cases is due to the stabilization process of local communities (see

Figure 2). In metacommunities with numeric priority effects, the temporal trend of beta

diversity depends on the dispersal rate r and initial scenarios (Figure 6; Figure S9-10). Under

Scenario 1, low dispersal results in little (but nonzero) temporal turnover (Figure 6A) after the

initial drop. This indicates the persistent but extremely low turnover brought by dispersal,

while intermediate and high dispersal results in higher turnover due to a higher population flow

in and out the patch (Figure 6C, 6E). Note that even when the metacommunity is dominated by

a single species (as in Figure 2E), its population still fluctuates frequently due to high dispersal

rates, leading to relatively high temporal turnover (Figure 6E). However, with trait-mediated

priority effects, metacommunities show a consistently high temporal beta diversity under low,

medium, and high dispersal rates and across all initial scenarios (Figure 6; Figure S9-10).

Under Scenario 1, even with the lowest dispersal rate, the temporal turnover is still higher than

with numeric priority effects only (Figure 6A, 6B). This observation corresponds to the high

species turnover observed in population dynamics regardless of initial conditions. Overall,

these temporal trends are consistent with the observed local population dynamics and highlight

the importance of the specific mechanism that produces priority effects for biodiversity

patterns across all spatial and temporal scales.

Discussion

Priority effects are ubiquitous in natural systems, yet their role in shaping biodiversity

patterns is still poorly understood (Fukami 2015). Here we show that priority effects can play a

key role in shaping local and regional biodiversity of seasonal communities and how they are

influenced by dispersal. However, the shape of this dispersal-diversity relationship depends on

the mechanisms underlying the priority effects, i.e., whether they are generated by numeric or

trait-mediated effects. When relative arrival times (phenological differences) vary across space

and time, metacommunities with numeric priority effects are highly sensitive to the initial

conditions and become homogenized at high levels of dispersal with low local and regional

diversity. In contrast, trait-mediated priority effects promote local and regional species

coexistence even under very high levels of dispersal and the patterns are highly robust to

variation in initial conditions. Together, these results provide novel insights into how priority

effects shape the dispersal-diversity relationships in nature and highlight the importance of

considering the seasonal nature of local community assembly to predict regional patterns.

Positioning Priority Effects in Current Dispersal-Diversity Framework

Classic models predict that the dispersal-diversity relationship should be maximized at

intermediate dispersal, while between-patch and regional diversity should constantly decrease

with dispersal (Mouquet and Loreau 2002; 2003). This prediction still qualitatively holds when

local dynamics are driven by numeric priority effects in our model, but with different

mechanisms. In classical models, diversity peaks at intermediate dispersal because species are

present in both source and sink habitats, and the population in the latter can be rescued by

immigration from the former (Leibold et al. 2004). Traditionally, source-sink dynamics are

expected to be driven by spatial heterogeneity in habitat conditions (Pulliam 1988). However,

source-sink dynamics are still possible with numeric priority effects, even in the absence of any

spatial heterogeneity in habitat quality because the numeric advantage of resident species poses

a barrier for rare immigrating species to establish themselves. These patches serve as sources

for numerically dominant species and sinks for all other (immigrating) species. At low to

moderate dispersal rates, numeric priority effects thus maintain high beta diversity within

metacommunities. This is especially visible under Scenarios 1 and 3, where each species is

initially numerically dominant in some patches.

This source-sink dynamic diminishes when dispersal is high enough for competitively

superior species to reach patches in large enough numbers to overcome the numeric priority

effects of residents and eventually exclude them both locally and regionally. Once this

threshold is reached, dispersal works as a homogenizing force that decreases local and regional

diversity (Mouquet and Loreau 2003; Grainger and Gilbert 2016; Catano et al. 2017).

Furthermore, we also found that the shape of this relationship is highly sensitive to initial

conditions (i.e., how species are distributed among patches) in metacommunities with numeric

priority effects. This result is not previously emphasized in theory (but see Lu 2021) and could

at least partly help explain why the diversity-stability relationship differs among studies that

use different initial settings (Grainger and Gilbert 2016).

On the contrary, diversity patterns in metacommunities with trait-mediated priority effects

are much less affected by dispersal or initial conditions. In these metacommunities, immigrants

may successfully colonize a patch regardless of their numeric disadvantage as their

colonization success is more dependent on the order of arrival (emergence). If a species arrives

early enough, its early arrival advantage (relative increase in interspecific competitive ability)

can overcome its numeric disadvantage and allow it to invade the resident species. Given the

temporal and spatial variation in arrival times (species phenology), trait-mediated priority

effects can therefore promote local and regional coexistence of species by preventing

competitive exclusion and homogenization at a high dispersal rate. This result agrees with a

recent study that models patch memory, which is similar to trait-mediated priority effects via

habitat modification (the previous resident modifies the habitat and therefore affects

colonization success of the late arriver): with priority effects, any number of species stably

coexist despite dispersal (Miller and Allesina 2021).

The trait-mediated priority effect in our model appears conceptually similar to processes

implemented by some previous models (e.g. biotic heterogeneity in Shurin et al. 2004;

monopolization effects by local adaptation in Vanoverbeke et al. 2016). Yet, they found that

positive feedback of early arrivers enables their regional dominance. This result represents

what we found in metacommunities with high dispersal and numeric, but not trait-mediated

priority effects. This discrepancy arises because we incorporated seasonality and realistic

spatial and temporal variations of arrival order in our model. These variations lead to a constant

reshuffling of competitive hierarchies across time and space that reduces or prevents local and

regional extinction, as predicted by previous theoretical results in non-spatial models (Rudolf

2019; Zou and Rudolf 2020). When aggregated on a spatial or temporal scale, this reshuffling

of competitive hierarchies can also lead to intransitive competition, which is predicted to

stabilize multispecies systems (Allesina and Levine 2011; Levine et al. 2017).

Our results provide a theoretical basis for interpreting many empirical results, especially

those explicitly considering the role of priority effects. For instance, experiments in freshwater

protists found that community composition in homogeneous patches was strongly correlated to

the temporal sequence of assembly despite dispersal (Pu and Jiang 2015). Our results suggest

that this counterintuitive pattern can be easily explained by trait-mediated priority. Consistent

with this prediction, Pu and Jiang (2015) reported changes in interspecific competition based

on arrival orders of species, indicating the presence of trait-mediated priority effects. Our

observations also corroborate the result that local priority effects in nectar microbial

communities help maintain beta diversity (Vannette and Fukami 2017), although we do not

observe an increase of beta diversity with higher dispersal, as in the experiment. Additionally,

Toju et al. (2018) found a persistent numeric advantage of initially abundant species after

prolonged dispersal in nectar microbial communities. This may indicate that dispersal in this

empirical study was not high enough to homogenize all local patches or priority effects

initiated by numeric advantage were maintained in other trait-mediated ways, such as habitat

modification.

Empirical Implications and Future Directions

Phenology and priority effects are key factors that structure population dynamics and

coexistence patterns in natural communities. Although the importance of priority effects is

increasingly recognized (Fukami 2015; Rudolf 2019), they are rarely studied in an explicitly

spatial context. Our model indicates the need to consider specific mechanisms of priority

effects when studying spatial dynamics of metacommunities and vice versa. For instance,

systems that display robust diversity measurements regardless of dispersal might be more

influenced by trait-mediated processes. In these systems, considering specific trait-mediated

mechanisms of priority effects may help to understand otherwise unexpected patterns (e.g. Pu

and Jiang 2015; Vannette and Fukami 2017; Toju et al. 2018). Conversely, metacommunities

with species known to display trait-mediated priority effects (e.g. amphibians, Rudolf 2018;

dragonflies, Rasmussen et al. 2014; plant communities, Kardol et al. 2013; Blackford et al.

2020) may show different dynamics at a regional scale compared to metacommunities with

numeric priority effects. Yet, few studies have considered this aspect when studying dispersal-

diversity relationships in these systems, although many metacommunities are driven by

stochastic processes that promote priority effects (e.g. Chase 2007).

Our model predicts that seasonal metacommunities under spatial and temporal variations

in phenology may behave differently based on the mechanism of priority effects. This is

relevant to many systems in nature, including ephemeral ponds, nectar microbiome, pitcher

plant inquilines, rocky intertidal pools, and any other periodic communities where such

variations could occur (Berlow and Navarrete 1997; Kneitel and Miller 2003; Chase 2007;

Sheriff et al. 2011; Theobald et al. 2017; Vannette and Fukami 2017). Although recent studies

of these systems indicate that phenology can vary considerably between communities (Sheriff

et al. 2011; Diez et al. 2012; Theobald et al. 2017; Carter et al. 2018), few have addressed the

local and regional level consequences of these variations. As climate change exacerbates

phenological variation (Parmesan 2006; Diez et al. 2012; Wolkovich et al. 2014; Pearse et al.

2017), the arrival order of species may differ greatly over space and time, leading to increasing

opportunities for priority effects. Understanding how metacommunities respond to this

increasing reshuffling of arrival order (and likely competitive hierarchy) in the long term could

help evaluate responses of biodiversity to climate change.

We have extensively investigated different forms of dispersal and incorporated variations

in phenology, but the influence of another aspect of spatial communities, environmental

heterogeneity, remains unexplored. Heterogeneous patches could serve as a spatial refuge for

some species, promoting regional coexistence (Shurin et al. 2004). Environmental

heterogeneity may also induce trait-mediated priority effects, leading to monopolization effects

(Urban and De Meester 2009; De Meester et al. 2016) or legacy effects (Miller and Allesina

2021) in local patches. Furthermore, environmental heterogeneity could covary with other

factors that are coupled with another process, such as spatial variation of arrival time (e.g.,

species may arrive early in warmer patches), leading to more complex dynamics. Collectively,

our results emphasize that the temporal sequence of community assembly is a critical process

shaping biodiversity in spatial communities. Mechanistic understanding of this process is

fundamental to our knowledge of how biodiversity responds to critical environmental

processes in a changing world.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Basic processes of the metacommunity model. In the hypothetical metacommunity each patch is occupied by one species and the season starts when species emerge in patches (step 1). Emergence time can vary across seasons and patches within a given species-specific range. After emergence, species compete locally (step 2) according to competition coefficients that either: (A) do not depend on the relative time of emergence (scenarios with numeric priority effects), or (B) depend on the pairwise difference in relative time of emergence (Δp) (scenarios with trait-mediated priority effects) and determine subsequent population dynamics in a given patch. These local patch dynamics together determine regional patterns (step 3) at the end of the season. Finally, the season ends with dispersal (step 4) and end-of-season disturbance.

Figure 2. Example of population dynamics of one randomly selected patch under Scenario 1 (each patch is initially occupied by a single species with the same starting population density) with different dispersal rates and mechanisms of priority effects. The left column (A, C, and E) shows dynamics with numeric priority effects, and the right column (B, D, and F) shows dynamics with trait-mediated priority effects. Each row shows results for low (0.001), medium (0.04), and high (0.1) dispersal rates (r). Each line of the same color in a panel represents the population dynamics of that species from one out of 50 simulations. All population densities are log-transformed. All simulations were run with 40 dispersal patches ($D = 40$; 80% of all patches). See Table S1 for other parameters used.

Figure 3. The regional final population of all species among all 50 simulations under Scenario

1, with different dispersal rates and mechanisms of priority effects. The left column (A, C, and

E) shows dynamics with numeric priority effects, and the right column (B, D, and F) shows

dynamics with trait-mediated priority effects. Each row shows results with low (0.001),

medium (0.04), and high (0.1) dispersal rates (r). All population densities are log-transformed.

All simulations were run with 40 dispersal patches ($D = 40$; 80% of all patches). See Table S1

for other parameters used.

Figure 4. Relationship of alpha diversity (local species richness) and dispersal in

metacommunities with numeric vs. trait-mediated priority effects for three scenarios that differ

in initial conditions. Axes are parameters that determine dispersal; the x-axis is dispersal

patches (D), shown in percentage of overall patches ($P = 50$), and the y-axis is dispersal rate (r).

The color of the shaded region indicates local richness averaged among all patches and 50

simulations. The left column (A, C, and E) shows dynamics with numeric priority effects, and

the right column (B, D, and F) shows dynamics with trait-mediated priority effects. Rows show

differences in initial conditions of species distributions: A-B, Scenario 1 (one species per

patch); C-D, Scenario 2 (equal abundance of species in all patches); E-F, Scenario 3 (different

species abundances across patches). For specific distribution of alpha diversity values over

dispersal patches, see Figure S6-8, panels A-C. See Table S1 for other parameters used.

Figure 5. Relationship of beta diversity (dissimilarity between patches) and dispersal in

metacommunities with numeric vs. trait-mediated priority effects for 3 scenarios that differ in

initial conditions. Axes are parameters that determine dispersal; the x-axis is dispersal patches

(*D*), shown in percentage of overall patches ($P = 50$) and the y-axis is dispersal rate (*r*). The

color of the shaded region indicates dissimilarity averaged among 50 simulations. The left

column (A, C, and E) shows dynamics with numeric priority effects, and the right column (B,

D, and F) shows dynamics with trait-mediated priority effects. Rows show differences in initial

conditions of species distributions: A-B, Scenario 1 (one species per patch); C-D, Scenario 2

(equal abundance of species in all patches); E-F, Scenario 3 (different species abundances

across patches). For specific distribution of alpha diversity values over dispersal patches, see

Figure S6-8, panels D-F. See Table S1 for other parameters used.

Figure 6. Temporal turnover calculated from one randomly selected simulation under Scenario

1 with different dispersal rates and mechanisms of priority effects. The left column (A, C, and

E) shows dynamics with numeric priority effects, and the right column (B, D, and F) shows

dynamics with trait-mediated priority effects. Rows show results with low (0.001), medium

(0.04) and high (0.1) dispersal rates (*r*). The number of patches with dispersal (*D*) is shown as a

percentage of total patches and represented by different shades of color. The dissimilarity index

was calculated from metacommunities between consecutive time steps separated by 10 seasons.

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End-of-Season Disturbance, then Next Season

# of Patches with Dispersal (D) = 6

Δp

Species 1
Species 2
Species 3
Species 4
Species 5

Time of Emergence
Average Emergence Time
Range of Possible Emergence Time

Time

Emergence order: 1-3-2-5-4
Average Emergence order: 1-2-3-4-5

4. Dispersal

1. Emergence

3. Regional Pattern

2. Local Dynamics

Competition Coefficients

Population Dynamics

A. Numeric Priority Effects

α

α_{12}
α_{21}

Δp

N

N_2
N_1

Time within Season

B. Trait-mediated Priority Effects

α

α_{21}
α_{12}

Δp

N

N_1
N_2

Time within Season