Local human movement patterns and land use impact exposure to zoonotic malaria in Malaysian

Borneo

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Abstract: (150 max)

Human movement into insect vector and wildlife reservoir habitats determines zoonotic disease

risks; however, few data are available to quantify the impact of land use on pathogen transmission.

Here, we utilise GPS tracking devices and novel applications of ecological methods to develop fine-

scale models of human space use relative to land cover to assess exposure to the zoonotic malaria

Plasmodium knowlesi in Malaysian Borneo. Combining data with spatially explicit models of

mosquito biting rates, we demonstrate the role of individual heterogeneities in local land use in

disease exposure. At a community level, our data indicate that areas close to both secondary forest

and houses have the highest probability of human *P. knowlesi* exposure, providing quantitative

evidence for the importance of edge effects. Our results illustrate the role of human land use and

fine-scale movements in infectious disease transmission by intensifying interactions between

pathogens, insect vectors and people around habitat edges.

Keywords (min 3):

Disease ecology, spatial epidemiology, *Plasmodium knowlesi*, malaria, human movement, land use

Introduction:

Environmental change and human encroachment into wildlife habitats are key drivers in the emergence and transmission of zoonotic diseases (1, 2). Individual movements into different habitats influence exposure to disease vectors and animal reservoirs, determining risk and propagation of vector-borne diseases (3-5). Increased contact between these populations is theorised to drive increases of the zoonotic malaria *Plasmodium knowlesi* in Malaysian Borneo, now the main cause of human malaria within this region. *P. knowlesi* is carried by long- and pig-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis* and *M. nemestrina*) and transmitted by the *Anopheles leucospryphus* mosquito group, both populations highly sensitive to land use change (6). Although higher spatial overlap between people, macaques and mosquito vectors likely drives transmission, the impact of human movement and land use in determining individual infection risks is poorly understood (7).

The emergence of the zoonotic malaria *Plasmodium knowlesi* has been positively associated with both forest cover and historical deforestation (8, 9). However, out of necessity, statistical approaches to assess environmental risk factors for *P. knowlesi* and other infectious diseases typically evaluate relationships between disease metrics and local land cover surrounding houses or villages. While an individual may spend most of their time within the vicinity of their residence, this area does not necessarily represent where they are most likely to be exposed to a disease. This is supported by varying associations between *P. knowlesi* occurrence and landscape variables at different spatial scales, likely partially due to human movement into different surrounding habitats (8, 10). Although land cover variables describing physical terrestrial surfaces are frequently incorporated into disease models, land use, the purposes for which people use specific areas, is rarely quantified. Places with the similar types of land cover may be used very differently, with the activities and frequencies with which people visit these places determining the spatial distribution of disease (1).

Mathematical modelling studies have revealed the importance of spatial variation in contact rates

due to the movement of individuals through heterogeneous environments with varying transmission

intensity (11). A multi-species transmission model of *P. knowlesi* highlighted the role of mixing

patterns between populations in different ecological settings in determining the basic reproductive

rate and subsequent modelling studies illustrate the sensitivity of this disease system to population

densities of both people and wildlife hosts (7, 12). However, although mechanistic models have been

extended to explore the potential importance of these heterogeneities in disease dynamics, there

are inherent constraints on model complexity and most models make simplistic assumptions about

the habitat uses of different populations.

Empirical data on human population movement is increasingly available, allowing assessment of the

impact of mobility on infectious disease dispersion and risks (5). On larger spatial scales, mobile

phone data has revealed the role of human migration in the transmission of infectious diseases such

as malaria, dengue and rubella (13-15). Analysis of these data can provide insight into the creation of

sources and sinks of infection following long range movements of infected or susceptible

populations (16). However, spatial resolution of this data is limited, particularly in areas with poor or

no mobile coverage, such as forested areas, limiting the utility to assess movements across different

habitats (17). Alternatively, the advent of low-cost GPS tracking devices allows quantification of

movements on finer spatial scales, demonstrating marked heterogeneity in individual movement

and risk behaviours (3, 18). Combining these data with detailed data on land cover and vector

dynamics can provide new insights into how landscapes affect *P. knowlesi* transmission.

Previous studies of *P. knowlesi* have relied on questionnaire surveys, identifying self-reported travel

to nearby plantations and forest areas as a risk factor for *P. knowlesi* and other malaria infections

(e.g. (19-21)). However, the resultant spatial range and frequency of these movements remain

unknown and the definition of different habitat types is entirely subjective. Further, little is known

about differences in local movement patterns in different demographic groups. While infections in

male adults have been linked to forest and plantation work, it is unknown whether infections

reported in women and young children are likely to arise from exposure to similar environments

(22). The main mosquito vector in this area, *An. balabacensis*, is primarily exophagic and has been

identified in farm, forest and village areas near houses (23, 24). Macaque populations are reported

in close proximity to human settlements and molecular and modelling studies suggest transmission

remains primarily zoonotic in this area (7, 25, 26).

Key questions remain about where individuals are likely to be exposed to *P. knowlesi* and how

landscape determines risk. Reported presence of both vectors and macaques around households

suggests the possibility of peridomestic transmission and understanding the importance of these

habitats is essential to effectively design intervention strategies and predict impacts of future

environmental changes. Functional ecology approaches allow the modelling of distribution of

different populations based on biological resources and relate transmission to landscape and

environmental factors (27). By integrating methods to collect detailed GPS tracking data on human

movements with approaches developed to model resource utilisation in wildlife populations, fine-

scale patterns of human land use can be quantified and overlaid with spatiotemporal models of

mosquito distribution. This allows exploration how landscape composition, as well as configuration

and connectivity between habitats, impacts human exposure to *P. knowlesi* and other vector-borne

and zoonotic diseases.

To quantify the role of heterogeneity in land use on disease exposure, we conducted rolling cross-

sectional surveys in two study areas with on-going *P. knowlesi* transmission in Northern Sabah,

Malaysia (Matunggong and Limbuak (28)). Here, randomly selected people (age 8 and over) were

asked to carry a GPS tracking device for two-week periods. We aimed to characterise local

movement patterns and identify individuals and locations associated with increased *P. knowlesi*

exposure risks by: 1. analysing individual movement patterns and developing predictive maps of

human space use relative to spatial and environmental factors, 2. modelling biting rates of the main

vector *An. balabacensis*, and 3. assessing exposure risks for *P. knowlesi* based on predicted mosquito

and human densities. Integrating these three approaches allowed a uniquely spatially explicit

examination of disease risk.

Methods

Study site

This study was conducted in two rural communities in Northern Sabah, Malaysia: Matunggong,

Kudat (6°47N, 116°48E, population: 1260) and Limbuak, Pulau Banggi (7°09N, 117°05E, population:

1009). These areas were the focus for integrated entomology, primatology and social science studies

for risk factors for *P. knowlesi* (http://malaria.lshtm.ac.uk/MONKEYBAR), with clinical cases and

submicroscopic infections reported from both sites and *P. knowlesi* sero-prevalence estimated as

6.8% and 11.7% in Matunggong and Limbuak respectively (28). Demographic data and GPS locations

of primary residences were collected for all individuals residing in these areas.

GPS tracking survey

A minimum of 50 participants per site were targeted in a rolling cross-sectional survey (29). During

pre-defined two week intervals, randomly selected participants were asked to carry a QStarz BT-

QT13000XT GPS tracking device (QStarz, Taipei, Taiwan) programmed to record coordinates

continuously at one minute intervals for at least 14 days. Individuals were excluded if they were not

primarily residing in the study area, under 8 years old or did not consent. Trained fieldworkers

visited the participant every two days to confirm the device was functioning, replace batteries and

administer questionnaires on locations visited and GPS use. Fieldworkers recorded whether the

device was working and if the individual was observed carrying the GPS device to assess compliance.

Individuals were excluded from analysis if insufficient GPS data were collected (less than 33% of

sampling period) or individuals were observed not using the device for two or more visits.

Human space use

Biased random bridges (BRBs) were used to calculate individual utilisation distributions (UDs), the

probability of an individual being in a location in space within the sampled time period (30). UDs are

typically calculated using kernel smoothing methods, smoothing observed locations of individuals or

species to estimate average probabilities of use per grid cell to create a probability density function

(31). BRBs improve on these methods by estimating the UD as a time-ordered series of points, taking

advantage of the autocorrelated nature of GPS tracks to bias movement predictions towards

subsequent locations in a time series (30). Within this study, large proportions of GPS fixes were

missed due to technical issues with batteries and GPS tracking; BRBs were used to interpolate

between known locations and adjust for missing data. UDs were calculated separately for each

individual for all movement and night-time only movements (6pm – 6am) (Supplementary

Information). Estimates of the core utilisation area (home range) were based on the 99th percentile,

representing the area with a 99% cumulative probability distribution of use by the sampled

individual.

To assess relationships between space use and environmental factors and develop predictive maps

of community space use, we fit resource utilisation functions, regression models in which the UDs

are used as the response variable, improving on models using raw GPS count points as the response

when there is location uncertainty and missing data (32). The probability density function (UD) per

individual was rasterised to 30m^2 grid cells and environmental and spatial covariates extracted for

each grid cell. Potential environmental covariates included distance to the individual's own house,

distance to closest house, distance to roads, land use class (forest, agriculture, cleared or water),

distance to forest edge, elevation and slope (Supplementary Information, Table S1). Resource

utilisation was modelled as a Bayesian semi-continuous (hurdle) model with two functionally

independent components, a Bernoulli distribution for presence/absence of individual j in a specific

grid cell i (z_i) and a gamma distribution for the UD in grid cells visited (y_i) (33, 34). We defined

absences as grid cells with a UD of less than 0.00001 and randomly sampled equal numbers of

absences within the study site for each presence point for each individual (35). Occurrence was

defined as:

$$z_{ij} = \begin{Bmatrix} 1 & \text{if } y_{ij} > 0 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{Bmatrix}$$

184   The utilisation distribution for grid cells visited was defined as:

$$y_{ij} = \begin{Bmatrix} \text{NA} & \text{if } z_{ij} = 0 \\ y_{ij} & \text{otherwise} \end{Bmatrix}$$

187   The full model was specified as:

$$z_{ij} \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\phi_{ij})$$

$$y_{ij} \sim \text{Gamma}\left(\frac{\mu_{ij}^2}{\sigma^2}, \frac{\sigma^2}{\mu_{ij}}\right)$$

190   With the linear predictor for the Bernoulli model specified as:

$$\text{logit}(\phi_{ij}) = \beta_0 + X_{ij}^T \beta_i + \gamma_j$$

193   Where β_0 represents the intercept, $X_{ij}^T\beta_i$ represents a vector of covariate effects and γ_j represents

194   the additive terms of random effects for individual. For the Gamma component, σ^2 is the variance

195   and the linear predictor μ_{ij} is specified as:

$$\log(\mu_{ij}) = \alpha_0 + X_{ij}^T\alpha + \gamma_j$$

With α_0 representing the intercept, $X_{ij}^T\alpha$ representing a vector of coordinates and γ_j representing

the random effects. Weakly informative normal priors specified as *Normal* (0,0.01) were used for all

intercepts and coefficients. Bayesian inference was implemented using integrated nested Laplace

approximation (INLA) (36). This approach uses a deterministic algorithm for Bayesian inference,

increasing computational efficiency relative to Markov chain Monte Carlo and other simulation-

based approaches (33). We did not explicitly include spatial autocorrelation as several distance-

based covariates were included (e.g. distance from own house) and multicollinearity between

covariates and spatial structure has been shown to decrease performance of resource utilisation

functions (32). Models were limited to land areas within 5km of households included in the study

site and separate models were fit for each site.

Exposure to infected vectors

To estimate vector biting rates, we assembled data from 328 nights of entomological surveillance

activities conducted with 5km of the Matunggong study site while GPS tracking was on-going,

including: monthly longitudinal surveillance (23), investigations surrounding households of cases and

controls (24), and environmentally stratified outdoor catches (37). We limited this data to counts of

An. balabacensis, the primary *knowlesi* vector which comprises over 95% of *Anopheles* caught in this

region. Plausible environmental covariates were assembled, including land use type, slope, aspect,

elevation, topographic wetness index, enhanced vegetation index (EVI), population density and

average monthly temperature and rainfall. A Bayesian hierarchical spatiotemporal model was fit

with *An. balabacensis* counts as the outcome and the log number of person nights per catch as an

offset, including month as a random effect (Supplementary Information).

As these vectors are rarely reported indoors (24) and human landing catches were primarily

conducted outside, we excluded areas within houses for calculations of exposure risks. Spatially

explicit exposure risks were calculated as derived quantity from human resource utilisation and

mosquito biting rate models, using a beta distribution for *P. knowlesi* sporozoite rates parameterised

using available infection data from this area. Individual risk was explored using a simple exposure

assessment model where an individual's risk of exposure is the sum of the probability of exposure to

an infected vector across all locations visited, with the risk of individual *i* being exposed to an

infected vector in month *t* as:

Eq. 1

$$r_{it} = \sum_{j=1}^{J} y_{ij} a_{jt} Z_j$$

Where *j* indexes the grid cells visited, y_{ij} is the utilisation distribution, a_{jt} is the number of bites per

individual in that cell and month, and Z_j is the proportion of infectious mosquitoes in that cell (4). As

these vectors are rarely reported indoors and human landing catch data was not available for inside

houses, we excluded areas inside houses. To evaluate places associated with exposure for the entire

community, we calculated the number of infectious bites per grid cell each month as:

Eq. 2

$$r_{jt} = \sum_{i=1}^{I} Y_{ij} a_{jt} Z_j$$

Where Y_{ij} is the predicted utilisation distribution for all individuals within the community per grid cell

j. All analyses were conducted in R version 3.5, with Bayesian models implemented using Integrated

Nested Laplace Approximation (INLA) (36). Model fit was assessed using deviance information

criteria (DIC) and area under the receiver operating curve (AUC) or root mean square error (RMSE)

(Supplementary Information).

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Medical Research Sub-Committee of the Malaysian Ministry of

Health and the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants or parents or guardians and assent

obtained from children under 18.

Results:

Between February 2014 and May 2016, 285 consenting people participated in the GPS tracking study

with 243 included in the final analysis (109 in Limbuak and 134 in Matunggong). The most commonly

reported occupation was farm or plantation work (n=74), primarily conducted within the immediate

vicinity of the house. A total of 3,424,913 GPS points were collected, representing 6,319,885 person-

minutes of sampling time. Median sampling duration was 16.27 days (IQR 13.72 – 19.97), with points

recorded for a median of 59.1% (IQR: 46.9% - 71.1%) of the sampling duration. Maximum distances

travelled ranged from no travel outside the house to 116km, with a median distance travelled of

1.8km. Utilisation distributions (UDs), the probability of an individual being in a location in space

within a given time, varied by gender and occupation. Individuals at the more rural Limbuak site

covered larger distances (Supplementary Information, Table S2). Although substantial differences

were reported in all movements (24 hour sampling) between seasons, no seasonal differences were

observed in human movements during peak *Anopheles* biting times (6pm-6am).

For both study areas, we developed a model of community space use during peak mosquito biting

hours (6pm – 6am), in the form of resource utilisation functions, i.e. predictions of time- and space-

specific presence (UDs) on the basis of spatial and environmental variables (31). During these times,

human space use (UDs) was mostly predictable and negatively correlated with distance from the

individual's house, other houses, roads and slope. The AUC for presence/ absence models was 0.936

for Matunggong and 0.938 for Limbuak and RMSE for the overall model was 0.0073 and 0.0043 for

Matunggong and Limbuak respectively. While individuals were more likely to use areas further away

from forests in the Matunggong site, human space use was positively correlated with proximity to

forests in the Limbuak site (Table 1). Despite marked differences between different demographic

groups and seasons observed during 24 hour movements, these factors did not improve the

predictive power of the model for movements between 6pm and 6am.

Table 1. Estimated coefficients for fixed effects of resource utilisation functions

	Matunggong			Limbuak		
	Mean	SD	95% CI	Mean	SD	95%CI
Probability of presence/ absence						
Intercept	3.383	0.839	3.218, 3.547	3.571	0.104	3.368, 3.775
Distance from own house (km)	-0.954	0.006	-0.966, -0.942	-0.543	0.003	-0.548, -0.539
Distance from forest (km)	5.997	0.177	-5.650, 6.344	-1.845	0.050	-1.944, -1.746
Distance from road (km)	-5.552	0.057	-5.663, -5.441	-3.656	0.019	-3.694, -3.618
Distance from houses (km)	-0.504	0.030	-0.563, -0.444	0.176	0.007	0.162, 0.189
Elevation (100 MSL)	-0.710	0.025	-0.759, -0.662	-1.268	0.037	-1.340, -1.197
Slope (degrees)	-0.0244	0.002	-0.028, -0.021	-0.009	0.001	-0.012, -0.006
Utilisation distributions for locations present						
Intercept	-6.846	0.866	-8.549, -5.147	-5.676	1.017	-7.673, -3.681
Distance from own house (km)	-0.583	0.004	-0.590, -0.576	-0.308	0.002	-0.311, -0.305
Distance from forest (km)	12.012	0.199	11.621, 12.403	-1.771	0.049	-1.868, -1.675
Distance from road (km)	-0.833	0.054	-0.939, -0.728	-1.532	0.011	-1.554, -1.511
Distance from houses (km)	-0.819	0.023	-0.864, -0.773	-0.239	0.006	-0.249, -0.228
Elevation (100 MSL)	0.664	0.027	0.610, 0.718	-0.297	0.003	-0.303, -0.297
Slope (degrees)	-0.021	0.002	-0.024, -0.018	-0.034	0.001	-0.036, -0.031

Data on mosquito biting rates were assembled from contemporaneous human landing catches

conducted in the Matunggong site (Supplementary Information, Table S4). Between August 2013

and December 2015, 4814 *An. balabacensis* were caught from 328 sampling nights in 155 unique

locations. The median biting rate was 2.1 bites per night per person, ranging from 0 – 28 bites per

person per night. Although no associations were identified between land classification and vector

density in this site, models identified positive relationships with enhanced vegetation indices (EVI)

and negative associations with distance to forest and human population density (Supplementary

Information, Table S7). Despite monthly variation, no significant time lags or seasonal patterns in

mosquito biting rates were identified (Supplementary Information, Figure S4). Of 1524 mosquitoes

tested for *Plasmodium* sporozoites, 4 were positive for *P. knowlesi*, giving a median sporozoite rate

of 0.24%.

Table S6. Posterior rate ratio estimates and 95% Bayesian credible interval (BCI) for model 4

Covariate	95% BCI Rate Ratio		
	Mean	2.5%	97.5%
Population density	0.963	0.916	1.004
EVI	3.185	1.185	8.532
Distance to forest (100m)	0.926	0.871	0.976
Spatial range (km)	3.120	0.514	6.926

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For individuals included in the GPS tracking study in Matunggong, where both human movement

and entomology data was available, we calculated exposure risks as a derived quantity from

utilisation distributions and mosquito biting rate models (Methods, Eq. 1). Exposure varied markedly

between individuals, with an overall 150-fold difference in predicted mean probabilities of infected

bites per night (range: 0.00005-0.0078). No clear differences were observed between genders, age

groups or occupations of individuals sampled (Supplementary Information, Figure S5) and there was

no association between risk and distance travelled (R^2= 0.0032, p = 0.24).

Using the resource utilisation function with demographic and spatial data for all individuals in

Matunggong, we predicted community-wide space use (Figure 3) and estimated exposure to

infected mosquitoes (Methods, Eq. 2) (Figure 1). The predicted number of person nights per grid cell

for the entire community ranged from 0 to 12.79 (median: 0.01, IQR: 0.0004 − 0.99), with the mean

probability of a community member exposed to an infected bite per grid cell of 0.00082 (IQR:

0.00001, 0.00050). Although over 43% of the study site is forest and relatively high biting rates were

predicted in forests during the study period (mean: 1.94, range: 0.04 − 12.59), this habitat was rarely

used by people in the evenings, with less than 8% of predicted person-nights in forests. Due to these

space use patterns, over 91% of predicted infected bites were predicted within 500m of houses.

Highest exposure risks were consistently found near forest edges and in close proximity to

households, despite spatial and temporal heterogeneity and model uncertainty (Figure 2).

Discussion

This study highlights the importance of human movement and behaviour patterns and land use in

determining exposure to zoonotic and vector-borne diseases such as *P. knowlesi*. Although *P.*

knowlesi has previously been associated with forest exposure (e.g. (19)) and higher biting rates have

been reported in forest interiors (23), this novel approach incorporating both mosquito and human

space use data provides a new perspective on peri-domestic transmission, with more than 90% of

infectious bites predicted in areas surrounding households at forest edges. This study additionally

demonstrates the utility of ecological methods to understand human movement and identify

geographical areas associated with higher contact with disease vectors.

Within these communities, local movement patterns during peak vector times were largely

predictable and could be explained by spatial and environmental factors. However, despite this

finding, there was substantial variation in predicted exposure between individuals as a result of

heterogeneity in habitats used. No significant differences in exposure were predicted between men

and women, with individuals with high exposure risks identified across occupational and age groups.

Although this finding differs from clinical reports, a comprehensive survey within this community

identified equal proportions of men and women exposed to *P. knowlesi* as evidenced by specific

antibody responses and data on asymptomatic infections suggests higher numbers of non-clinical

infections in women (28, 38). While infrequent events (such as hunting trips) may contribute to

these differences in clinical cases, this analysis highlights the importance of routine movements into

local environments in shaping exposure risks.

This improved understanding of how local human land use is related to exposure risk has important

implications for surveillance and control programmes. Malaria control programmes often rely on

interventions within the house, such as insecticide treated bednets and indoor residual spraying;

however, movements outside during peak biting times highlight the importance of also targeting

outdoor transmission. Although initial *P. knowlesi* cases were primarily identified in adult men living

and working in forests (20), this study illustrates the potential importance of peri-domestic habitats

in transmission and provides quantitative insight on mixing between people and infected

mosquitoes in forest fringe areas. As Malaysia moves towards malaria elimination, surveillance

systems are incorporating novel focal investigation methods, including monitoring changes in local

land use and populations at risk likely to be affected by these movement patterns (39).

Even with the large and highly detailed movement dataset analysed, this study was limited by the

availability of mosquito data; as human landing catch data was assembled from other studies, there

was not uniform spatial and temporal coverage of the study site increasing uncertainty. The limited

mosquito data availability precluded development of mosquito biting rate models for Limbuak and

other outlying islands. An additional limitation to estimating mosquito biting rates was the difficulty

obtaining spatially and temporally resolute remote sensing data for predictors due to high cloud

cover (40). As few positive mosquitoes were identified, uniform estimates of sporozoite rates based

on available data were used across the Matunggong site; if further data was available, these models

could be refined to incorporate estimates of human and macaque density, mosquito biting

preferences in different habitats and infection levels in all hosts (41).

Despite these limitations, this is the first large-scale study to utilise GPS tracking data and ecological

methods to create fine-scale maps of exposure risk. This study highlights the importance of

incorporating heterogenous patterns of human space use into disease models, as the majority of

human exposure may occur in areas with lower vector biting rates but greater probabilities of

human use. Further, results quantitatively illustrate the importance of forest edges and local habitat

in *P. knowlesi* transmission and can inform understanding of other zoonotic and vector-borne

diseases.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Human movement relative to habitat. A. Example of GPS tracks from a 22-year-old male

plantation worker in Matunggong over aerial imagery, B. Individual utilisation distribution calculated

from GPS tracks

Figure 2. Mosquito biting rates. A. *An. balabacensis* biting rate per person-night from data collected

in Matunggong, B. Predicted mean *An. balabacensis* biting rates per month from spatiotemporal

models (Supplementary Information), C. Predicted number of bites for all individuals residing in

Matunggong by distance from secondary forest, and by D. Distance from households

Figure 3. A. Land use in Matunggong site, B. Predicted number of person- nights for entire

community per grid cell, C. Predicted mosquito biting rates, D. Predicted infected bites per grid cell

A.

B.

Utilisation Probability

Meters
0 10 20   40   80

○ Human movement

Boundary level