

## **Human effects on ecological connectivity in aquatic ecosystems: integrating scientific approaches to support management and mitigation**

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**Highlights:**

- 40
- Human effects on ecological connectivity in aquatic ecosystems are reviewed.
  - Threats include: habitat loss, altered hydrology, invasive species, climate change.
  - Case studies show improved understanding from multi-disciplinary approaches.
  - Data on autecology, population structure, movement and physiology are critical.
  - Planning requires data synthesis across life histories and temporal/spatial scales.

45

## **Abstract**

Understanding the drivers and implications of anthropogenic disturbance of  
50 ecological connectivity is a key concern for the conservation of biodiversity and  
ecosystem processes. Here, we review human activities that affect the movements  
and dispersal of aquatic organisms, including damming of rivers, river regulation,  
habitat loss and alteration, human-assisted dispersal of organisms and climate change.  
Using a series of case studies, we show that the insight needed to understand the  
55 nature and implications of connectivity, and to underpin conservation and  
management, is best achieved via data synthesis from multiple analytical approaches.  
We identify four key knowledge requirements for progressing our understanding of  
the effects of anthropogenic impacts on ecological connectivity: autecology;  
population structure; movement characteristics; and environmental  
60 tolerance/phenotypic plasticity. Structuring empirical research around these four  
broad data requirements, and using this information to parameterise appropriate  
models and develop management approaches, will allow for mitigation of the effects  
of anthropogenic disturbance on ecological connectivity in aquatic ecosystems.

65 **Keywords:** fragmentation; dispersal; migration; meta-population; source-sink;  
climate change

## 1 Introduction

70 Animal populations and ecosystems are connected via a range of physical, biological  
and biochemical pathways. These connections influence biodiversity, productivity,  
energy fluxes, species assemblage compositions and food web dynamics (Taylor et  
al. 1993; Lowe & Allendorf 2010), and define the spatio-temporal scales at which  
management and conservation initiatives will be most effective (Pringle 2001;  
75 Lindenmayer et al. 2008).

Understanding the drivers and implications of altered ecological connectivity has  
become a key concern with respect to biodiversity conservation. Globally, few  
terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems remain unaffected by anthropogenic fragmentation  
and the resulting loss of connectivity among populations and habitats (Pringle 2001;  
80 Lindenmayer & Fischer 2006). Humans are fundamentally changing connections  
within and between ecosystems over a wide range of spatial scales and habitat types.  
The effects of human activities are not unidirectional, and may result in either  
increased or decreased levels of connectivity. Such changes can pose direct threats to  
biota, but may also create novel environments that alter the evolutionary trajectories  
85 of populations and species (Allendorf et al. 2013).

In this review, we examine the effects of anthropogenic activities on ecological  
connectivity as it pertains to the movement and dispersal of aquatic organisms. We  
recognise, however, the critical importance of other forms of connectivity in aquatic  
ecosystems that are not specifically considered - for example, the flow of nutrients  
90 and energy across space, whether mediated by organisms or physical processes (Polis

et al. 2004). Our primary aim is to identify and describe the main anthropogenic effects on ecological connectivity in aquatic ecosystems, and to explore their consequences for biota both within and between populations. A series of case studies illustrates how integration of multiple methodological approaches can increase our understanding of the potential effects of human activity on connectivity in aquatic ecosystems. Based on these considerations, we propose a series of key knowledge requirements for future research in this area.

### ***1.1 Movement and dispersal in aquatic ecosystems***

Aquatic ecosystems encompass a diverse array of physical configurations, ranging from ‘open’ systems like oceans, to isolated waterholes in arid landscapes. Based on the spatial structure and physical characteristics of marine, freshwater and estuarine habitats, one might expect different ‘rules’ for ecological connectivity among ecosystems. The oceans and seas that cover around 70% of the earth’s surface provide considerable possibilities for variability in the direction and extent of movement, although factors such as oceanic currents, bathymetry, land boundaries and seabed type can exert strong influences on the movements of many species (Gaspar et al. 2006). Freshwater systems, conversely, cover only ~0.8% of the earth’s surface and are typically organised into networks of hierarchically branching streams and rivers, occasionally punctuated by lakes and wetlands (Grant et al. 2007). The complex structure of freshwater ecosystems can create isolation among populations at much smaller spatial scales than would be expected in marine systems; for example, when nearby populations occupy habitats that are not connected via the river network (Hughes et al. 2009). Four general models of ecological connectivity have been

proposed to describe the unique constraints imposed by hierarchical network structure  
115 in freshwater ecosystems (Text box 1).

**Text box 1**

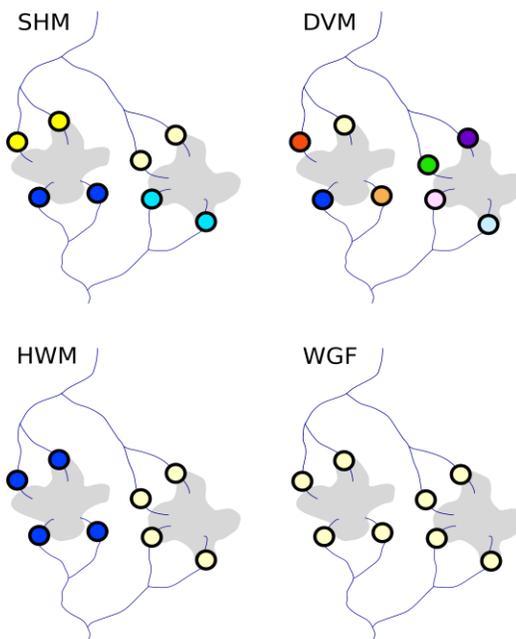
**Models of ecological connectivity in streams**

120 The **stream hierarchy model** (SHM, Meffe & Vrijenhoek 1988) predicts that freshwater  
125 species will be connected in a way that reflects the dendritic nature of the stream network.  
Sites within the same stream will be most connected, sites sharing the same  
subcatchment will be more connected than those in other subcatchments, and so on  
following the hierarchically branching nature of streams. Under the SHM, zero connectivity  
130 would be expected between sites occupying completely isolated stream networks (such as  
opposite sides of a continental divide). The SHM can apply to animals such as fish, many  
of which are highly mobile within the water column but have no capacity to move outside  
135 of the water column.

140 The **Death Valley model** (DVM, Meffe & Vrijenhoek 1988) describes extreme isolation  
experienced by animals that are similarly restricted to aquatic habitat but are confined to  
small patches of disconnected habitat. Under the DVM, habitat patches are extremely  
isolated either physically, due to a permanent lack of hydrological connectivity (e.g. springs  
145 in a desert), or functionally, due to a high degree of habitat specialisation for a sparsely  
distributed habitat type within a river network (e.g. cold headwater streams).

150 The **headwater model** (HWM, Finn et al. 2007) describes a pattern of ecological connectivity that is  
essentially opposite to the SHM. The HWM applies to animals that specialise on a particular  
habitat type, often associated with small headwater streams in a river network, but have  
some capacity to disperse terrestrially, typically by crawling or weak flight. Animals following  
the HWM pattern typically disperse readily among nearby headwater streams, whether or not  
155 these streams are physically connected in a river network.

**Widespread gene flow** (WGF) occurs in species that either have a highly mobile terrestrial phase (e.g.  
many aquatic beetles, Coleoptera) or are adapted to have temporary associations with highly  
mobile terrestrial animals (e.g. zooplankton attached to birds' legs, Maguire 1963). For  
freshwater animals following the WGF pattern, the geometric structure of the river network  
155 has little influence on potential ecological connectivity.



*The four models can be visualised as above, with dots of the same colour representing connected populations. Populations occupy four sub-catchments with headwaters in two higher-altitude headwater regions (the grey areas).*

*(Colour figure print and electronic)*

160 Whilst the different physical attributes of aquatic ecosystems place limitations on the  
movements of resident organisms, their behavioural responses are not always  
intuitive with respect to the apparent openness of the environment. For many years,  
the pelagic larval stages of marine organisms were considered as passive particles  
that disperse widely under the influence of oceanic currents. This assumption led to a  
165 long-held paradigm in which local populations were considered highly mixed and  
demographically open (Jones et al. 2009). However, more recent studies have  
demonstrated high levels of larval retention and natal homing for many marine  
species, even though there appear to be no physical impediments to more widespread  
dispersal (Jones et al. 1999; Swearer et al. 1999; Gerlach et al. 2007).

170 In addition to the influence of individual behaviour, morphological and physiological  
factors across the life-history are major drivers of movement and dispersal. Many  
aquatic species undergo physical metamorphoses that strongly influence their  
dispersal characteristics. For example, it is common for aquatic organisms to have a  
larval stage that is vulnerable to displacement by physical forces, such as river flows  
175 or oceanic currents. This passive displacement of larvae acts as an important dispersal  
mechanism for many species, although this is not always the case. As mentioned  
above, retention and natal homing by the larvae of some marine species limits their  
dispersal away from natal habitats. Similarly, many riverine macroinvertebrates and  
fish undertake 'compensatory' upstream movements at later life-history stages that  
180 result in recolonisation of the natal habitat by recruits (Williams and Williams 1993;  
Mallen-Cooper & Brand 2007). The capacity of aquatic organisms to move  
independently increases with ontogenetic development of locomotory and sensory

function, thus reducing the importance of passive dispersal as a driver of ecological connectivity later in the life history (Montgomery et al. 2001).

185 Directed migration is another important aspect of the life-history of many aquatic species, and is often associated with sexual development and reproduction (Lucas et al. 2001). ‘Diadromous’ species, for instance, migrate between fresh water and the sea to complete their life cycles: some reproduce in freshwater but require marine habitats for growth (‘anadromy’, ‘amphidromy’), while others reproduce in marine  
190 habitats but spend most of their lives in fresh water (‘catadromy’) (McDowall, 1988). The catadromous migration of up to 6,000 km undertaken by eels (Family Anguillidae) from freshwater rearing habitats to oceanic spawning grounds is a famous example of diadromy (Tesch 2003). Large-scale migrations are also undertaken by many species within marine and freshwater biomes (e.g. trans-oceanic  
195 migrations of bluefin tuna, [Block et al. 2001]; upstream migrations by giant Mekong catfish *Pangasianodon gigas* [Hogan et al. 2004]).

Movement over relatively small spatial scales is also critical for many aquatic organisms. Among its many functions, small-scale movement facilitates alternation between shelter and feeding habitats, access to temporarily or seasonally available  
200 resources, avoidance of predators and competitors, and colonisation of new habitat (Lancaster 1999; Lucas et al. 2001). For example, inshore coastal habitats such as tidal flats and mangroves are highly connected through diel and tidal feeding migrations (Igulu et al. 2013), many fishes move between main channels and inundated floodplains of river systems to forage and breed (Junk et al. 1989; Copp

205 1989), and the larval stages of many aquatic insects disperse longitudinally within streams via downstream drifting behaviour (Brittain & Eikeland 1988).

Patterns of movement and dispersal by individual organisms throughout their life-history, as influenced by the physical and biotic characteristics of the environment, ultimately determine the population structure of a species. Many aquatic species exist  
210 as “metapopulations” consisting of spatially separated populations linked by dispersal (Fagan 2002; Shima et al. 2010). One of the most important functions of such connectivity is to facilitate the movement of individuals between source populations (net exporters of recruits) and sink populations (net importers of recruits), thus preventing demographic decline and extirpation of sink populations (Brown &  
215 Kodric-Brown 1977; Gotelli 1991). Populations that are connected by dispersal are also likely to possess and maintain higher levels of genetic variability through gene flow, which enhances their long-term viability (Allendorf et al. 2013).

Activities that reduce connectivity in such situations present clear threats to the persistence and genetic integrity of populations and species. However, there are also  
220 situations in which artificially increased connectivity may result in deleterious outcomes. For instance, initiating connectivity between populations (e.g., via translocation or stocking) that have been isolated over evolutionary time may result in the loss of genetic variants uniquely adapted to their local environment or create hybrids with reduced fitness (Allendorf et al. 2001). Given the nuanced outcomes of  
225 altered ecological connectivity, a thorough understanding of natural patterns of connectivity - and how they are affected by human activity - is necessary to ensure the long-term viability of populations of aquatic fauna (Fullerton et al. 2010). In the

following sections, we examine the key threats posed by human activities with regards to ecological connectivity in aquatic ecosystems.

## 230 **2 Human effects on aquatic ecological connectivity**

### *2.1 Dams and weirs*

It has long been recognised that the abstraction of water for agricultural, industrial and domestic use has wide-ranging effects on aquatic biota (Petts 1984; Dynesius & Nielsen 1994). Nevertheless, construction and planning of new dams proceeds apace, particularly in developing regions of the world [e.g. Yangtze River, China (Xie 235 2003); Lower Mekong Basin, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia (Baran & Myschowoda 2009)]. Dams and weirs, and the impoundments they form, function as physical and behavioural barriers to longitudinal movement. This fundamentally alters patterns of ecological connectivity in affected river ecosystems (Pringle et al. 2000) and, in many 240 cases, leads to local extinctions of migratory organisms (Warren & Pardew 1998). According to a recent analysis, nearly 50% of freshwater eco-regions across the world are affected by large and medium sized dams (Liermann et al. 2012; Fig. 1a). In contrast to terrestrial and marine ecosystems - where multiple pathways for movement exist - the linear or dendritic characteristics of rivers and streams amplify 245 the effects of artificial barriers on the movement of aquatic organisms (Gotelli & Taylor 1999; Fagan 2002). As a consequence, minor barriers such as small weirs, road crossings, culverts, and even light from street lamps (Perkin et al. 2011) can significantly constrain the movement of biota in rivers and streams. Small instream barriers are extremely common in many regions of the world. In the Murray-Darling 250 Basin, Australia, for example, there are more than 4,000 licensed weirs and numerous

unlicensed weirs and other barriers (Fig. 1b). Whilst much management emphasis is placed on mitigating the effects of large dams, the sheer number of small artificial barriers suggests that, collectively, they will have effects on ecological connectivity at least as significant as larger dams.

255 Fish passage infrastructure ('fish ladders') is commonly incorporated into the design and construction of dams and weirs to maintain or restore connectivity between upstream and downstream habitats. However, such structures are typically effective only for allowing upstream passage of a sub-set of fish species (Agostinho et al. 2007), and are generally ineffective at facilitating downstream movement  
260 (Baumgartner et al. 2006; Schilt 2007). Thus, even barriers fitted with fish ladders are likely to exert strong effects on ecological connectivity in rivers and streams. There has been a great deal of research devoted to the design of fish passage infrastructure in recent years (Williams et al. 2012). If appropriately implemented, such designs have the potential to reduce the negative effects of dams and weirs for at least some  
265 species.

## ***2.2 River flow regulation***

Changes to river flows associated with consumptive human use (potable water supply, irrigation, stock and domestic) can fundamentally alter the nature of hydrological and ecological connectivity in rivers (Bunn & Arthington 2002). Flow  
270 regimes in regulated rivers are characterised by reduced overall discharge, and often have pronounced alterations in flow variability and seasonality due to water storage during periods of high-rainfall and subsequent release during periods of low-rainfall (Maheshwari et al. 1995).

Unnaturally long periods of low flow can sever hydrological connections between  
275 critical habitats (e.g., pools), reducing the likelihood of movement by individual  
organisms between source and sink populations and increasing rates of mortality due  
to habitat loss and desiccation (Bunn et al. 2006; Scharbert & Borcharding 2013;  
Bond et al. *in press*). By decreasing the magnitude of high flow events, flow  
regulation can also reduce the frequency and extent of connections between the main  
280 channel and floodplain (Ward & Stanford 1995). Many fishes and other organisms  
move onto inundated floodplains to breed and/or forage. The transport of assimilated  
energy and nutrients associated with these movements provides an energetic  
'subsidy' that is a critical driver of in-channel secondary productivity in many rivers  
(Junk et al. 1989; Jardine et al. 2012).

285 Releases of stored water during periods of low rainfall can artificially increase  
hydrologic connectivity, rendering naturally ephemeral systems perennial, with  
resultant effects on the composition on aquatic fauna and the extent of connectivity  
within meta-populations (Bond et al. 2010). Flow regulation for hydro-electric power  
can also strongly affect ecological connectivity, with extreme variation in river flow  
290 for power generation ("hydro-peaking") creating rapid oscillations in hydrological  
connectivity. Critical habitats, such as riffles, are often successively inundated and  
dewatered over short periods (i.e., hours). This can result in a loss of access to critical  
habitat, as well as stranding of organisms in dewatered habitats (Cushman 1985;  
Irvine et al. 2009).

295 Species inhabiting estuaries and coastal marine habitats are not immune to the effects  
of altered river flows. Estuaries are the dynamic transition zone between freshwater

and marine biomes, where productivity and biodiversity are strongly influenced by the salinity gradient formed by the mixing of inflowing fresh water and seawater. In many systems, sand bars are deposited during low flow periods at the mouth of the estuary, resulting in truncation of the salinity gradient and periodic severing of the connection between freshwater and marine biomes (Potter et al. 2010). Such estuaries rely on high riverine discharge to breach the sand bar and re-establish the freshwater-marine connection and the progressive increase in salinity from river to ocean. Anthropogenic reductions in river discharge can result in unnaturally extended periods of estuary mouth closure and reduced flushing of estuaries (Potter et al. 2010; Lloyd et al. 2012). This reduction in connectivity between freshwater habitats and the sea has obvious implications for diadromous species, and may also affect marine species that utilise estuaries as breeding or nursery grounds (Gillanders et al. 2003). A wide range of management responses have been implemented to mitigate the effects of river flow regulation on ecological connectivity (see Tharme 2003; Arthington et al. 2006). For example, release of ‘environmental flows’ from impoundments that augment natural high flow events have been used to restore connectivity between main channel and floodplain habitats (King et al. 2010). Similarly, water releases may be used to restore longitudinal connectivity by providing sufficient depth for passage of organisms over riffles and other shallow habitats (Arthington et al. 2010) or prevent the accumulation of sand and resultant formation of sand bar barriers across estuary mouths (Lloyd et al. 2012).

### ***2.3 Habitat alteration and loss***

Although damming of rivers is the most obvious anthropogenic disruption of  
320 connectivity in aquatic ecosystems, the most ubiquitous effects result from physical  
alteration and loss of habitats. In freshwater, estuarine, and coastal marine  
ecosystems, large swathes of habitat have been lost or modified by industrial,  
agricultural, forestry, and urban development (Bunn & Arthington 2002). Worldwide,  
many rivers and streams have been leveed, straightened and lined with concrete or  
325 stone, thus removing habitat complexity (pool-riffle sequences, in-stream wood) that  
is essential to support diverse ecological communities (Rabeni & Jacobson 1993).  
Many lakes, estuaries, coastal wetlands and mangroves have been supplanted by  
coastal development of harbours and ‘reclaimed’ residential areas, with man-made  
structures and materials replacing natural ones at the water’s edge (Fig. 2). These  
330 physical alterations to catchment land use, topography, hydrodynamics, riparian  
vegetation and benthic substrates are often accompanied by increased sediment loads  
and terrestrially-derived chemical pollutants and nutrients (Drinkwater & Frank,  
1994; Allan 2004).

The effects of physical and chemical alterations to ecosystems have been well  
335 documented across the full range of aquatic environments (Malmqvist & Rundle  
2002; Halpern et al. 2008), but the effects on ecological connectivity have only  
recently begun to be fully appreciated (Bunn & Arthington 2002; Rolls et al. 2014).  
Alteration or loss of habitat patches can have spatially extensive effects on meta-  
population and species assemblage dynamics by influencing rates of dispersal by  
340 organisms between interconnected patches (Fullerton et al. 2010).

In riverine ecosystems, the dendritic geometry of connectivity pathways strongly influences the outcomes of different types of habitat disturbance (Fagan 2002) (Fig. 3). Some disturbances operate within the river channel to reduce or block movement of organisms at discrete points in the river network. For example, channelisation and removal of instream habitat (e.g., woody debris) can create areas of unsuitable habitat that lead to the fragmentation of segments of river networks (Dodd 1990) (Fig. 3). Other disturbances, such as fire (Brown et al. 2001) and deforestation (Alexander et al. 2011), occur over areas of the landscape that are not constrained by the dendritic river network. Because the movements of obligate aquatic organisms are constrained to the river channel, these terrestrially based disturbances can lead to a mismatch between the geometry of dispersal pathways and the geometry of landscape disturbances (Fagan 2002). As a consequence, organisms living in habitat patches at the branch tips of the network may be remote from a connectivity perspective, but have a high correlation in their disturbance-related extinction risk due to their close proximity (Fagan 2002) (Fig. 3).

Organisms inhabiting marine and larger lentic systems are likely to be more resilient to localised habitat alteration than those inhabiting dendritic streams and rivers due to the existence of multiple possible routes for dispersal and migration. However, the existence of these alternative pathways does not necessarily preclude strong effects on ecological connectivity. For example, Puritz & Toonen (2011) found that point sources of storm and wastewater effluent into coastal waters off California reduced genetic connectivity among populations of the seastar *Patiria miniata*. There is also increasing evidence that many organisms in marine and lacustrine ecosystems utilise

habitat mosaics (rather than single habitat types) on a day-to-day basis, as well as  
365 throughout ontogeny (Zamora & Moreno-Amich 2002; Sheaves 2005; Verweij &  
Nagelkerken 2007). The availability of intact habitat mosaics at scales that match  
species' home ranges, as well as the maintenance of connectivity pathways within the  
mosaic, are essential to ensure that specific habitats can be effectively utilised by  
organisms to perform their ecological functions (e.g., as nurseries or foraging areas)  
370 (Sheaves 2005, 2009; Nagelkerken et al. 2015).

#### ***2.4 Human assisted spread of organisms***

A number of human activities facilitate movements of organisms that would not  
occur naturally, altering species assemblages and related ecological processes. Prime  
examples are the construction of shipping channels (Galil et al. 2007) and the transfer  
375 of water across river basin boundaries (Grant et al. 2012) (Fig. 4). Canals now link  
freshwater and marine water bodies worldwide and their use has increased along with  
the globalisation of economies and trade (Galil et al. 2007; Rahel, 2007). The Panama  
and Suez Canals, for example, have re-established links between basins that had been  
isolated for 3 and 10 million years, respectively (Lessios, 2008; McQuarrie et al.  
380 2003). More than 500 alien species have been recorded in the Mediterranean Sea; the  
majority originating from the Indo-Pacific or Indian Oceans following opening of the  
Suez Canal in 1869 (Galil 2009). Inter-basin transfers of freshwater are increasingly  
used to help address water supply problems, both in developing and developed  
countries (Ghassemi & White, 2007; Grant et al. 2012). These transfers of water often  
385 facilitate the movement of biota across ancient biogeographical barriers (e.g., Waters  
et al. 2002). In the U.S. state of Colorado alone there are 30 active inter-basin

diversions, artificially connecting major river basins on either side of the continental divide (Colorado Department of Natural Resources, 2014).

390 Aquatic taxa often have specific habitat requirements that create unconnected and genetically distinct populations within apparently continuous freshwater (Page & Hughes, 2014) and marine environments (Cadrin et al. 2005). As disparate areas are artificially linked via canals, inter-basin diversions and other human activities, previously restricted aquatic species can disperse to new areas, leading to a homogenisation in the species composition of aquatic biota, reduced local  
395 biodiversity, and the spread of noxious invasive species (Rahel, 2007). The invasions of the Great Lakes region in Northern America by the sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) and zebra mussel (*Dreissena polymorpha*) are graphic examples of the ability of invasive species to utilise artificial connectivity pathways, and the devastating consequences this can have on native biota and human values (Smith &  
400 Tibbles 1980; Johnson et al. 2006).

The wave of species invasions resulting from artificial connectivity pathways has been further bolstered by the direct translocation of organisms by humans, including the intentional stocking of exotic sport fishes, escapees from aquaculture (Kochmann et al. 2012), and spread of organisms via ship ballast water and hull fouling (Rahel,  
405 2007). Many of the organisms translocated directly by humans have resulted in major adverse ecological and economic outcomes. The deliberate translocation of the red king crab (*Paralithodes camtschaticus*) from the Bering Sea in the North Pacific Ocean to the Barents Sea in the North Atlantic Ocean during the 1960s, for example, was followed by rapid increases in the range and abundance of this species, and local

410 and regional reductions in the abundance and diversity of indigenous marine fauna  
(Falk-Petersen et al. 2011). In the freshwater realm, the common carp (*Cyprinus  
carpio*) has been introduced to all continents except Antarctica and is considered one  
of the world's most destructive invasive species due to its high rate of spread and  
negative effects on riverine habitats (Koehn 2004).

415 Once invasive species have become established in open systems such as the ocean,  
little can generally be done to manage connectivity pathways in order to limit their  
spread. In river networks, a series of management interventions is available, including  
the installation of artificial barriers at key locations (e.g. Pratt et al. 2009). However,  
the establishment of invasive species in river networks often creates a conundrum  
420 with regards to the management of ecological connectivity. This is particularly the  
case for populations in small, headwater streams where invasive predators have  
colonised downstream river reaches (Fig. 4) (Fausch et al. 2009). Small and isolated  
populations face an inherent extinction risk that could be reduced by removing  
barriers and re-establishing dispersal and gene flow throughout river networks.

425 However, artificial barriers can prevent invasive predators and/or competitors from  
interacting with isolated native populations in headwaters (Rahel 2013) (Fig. 4).  
Consequently, management decisions must weigh the invasion threat against the  
demographic and genetic risks of isolation of native populations (Fausch et al. 2009).

### ***2.5 Climate change***

430 Climate change driven by emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases from  
anthropogenic sources has created widespread and continuing change to the global  
climate system (IPCC 2013). These changes are shaping global trends for air and

water temperature, oceanic pH, sea level, polar ice cap extent, precipitation (total and seasonal) and extreme events like drought, flood and storms (IPCC 2013). The  
435 implications of climate change for ecological connectivity are pervasive across ecosystems and spatial scales (Krosby et al. 2010).

### *2.5.1 Hydrologic connectivity*

Climate change will significantly alter the hydrology of rivers principally through direct and indirect changes to rainfall, temperature, evapotranspiration rates and soil  
440 moisture content (Kundzewicz et al. 2007). In broad terms, changes in hydrology will be most strongly driven by changes in patterns of precipitation and snow/ice melt, and through the strong structural effects of extreme events like droughts and floods (Aldous et al. 2011, Arnell & Gosling 2013). Whilst changes in precipitation are not unidirectional globally (i.e., some places will get wetter and others will get drier), it is  
445 likely that the future climate will promote increased variability in river flows, both through extended periods of low flows and through more frequent and larger flood events (Aldous et al. 2011).

In terms of ecological connectivity, the outcomes of extended periods of low or zero flows due to climate change are likely to be similar to those associated with water  
450 abstraction for consumptive use (see Section 2.2 above). That is, reduced longitudinal connectivity within the river network, increased physiological stress and mortality of biota due to changed physicochemical conditions (e.g., lower dissolved oxygen), and reduced frequency and extent of connectivity between river channels and their floodplains. In contrast, more frequent and extreme flooding events may connect  
455 habitats and communities that have been isolated from each other for extended

periods of time (Bunn et al. 2006). This increase in connectivity may benefit some organisms (Ilg et al. 2009), but only if the floods are not so frequent and extreme as to be damaging to the newly connected habitats (Sousa et al. 2012). Indeed, because flood flows shape and restructure riverine environments, ecological communities may effectively become less stable and more variable as a consequence of more frequent and extreme flood events (Ilg et al. 2009). The interplay between species traits and adaptability to large and abrupt changes in connectivity is likely to shape the way that aquatic ecosystems and species respond to future climate change (Hadwen & Arthington 2011).

#### 465 2.5.2 *Species range shifts*

Climate change will also affect connectivity by changing the spatial distribution of populations and species. It has been proposed that species distributions are shifting in a generally polewards direction in response to climate change, as the geographic distributions of optimal thermal regimes change with increasing global temperatures (Parmesan & Yohe 2003). Shifts in the spatial distributions and movement pathways of animals have broad-ranging ecological consequences (Walther et al. 2002). For example, the composition of species assemblages, and ecological interactions (competition, predation, parasitism, etc.) among component species, will be significantly altered (e.g., Winder & Schindler 2004).

475 In oceanic regions showing pronounced increases in temperature, numerous range shifts of biota have already been reported (Perry et al. 2005; Last et al. 2011; Large & Yeager, 2012; Jung et al. 2014). For example, fishes with southern affinities have been reported for the first time in northern areas of the northern hemisphere (Beare et

al. 2004), whilst changes in the ranges of 72% of species in the North Sea have been  
480 linked to increases in sea temperature (Simpson et al. 2011). Ocean warming also has  
the potential to decrease connectivity in some species. The larval stages of marine  
organisms tend to develop faster at higher temperatures, leading to reduced pelagic  
larval duration (Munday et al. 2009) and earlier settlement to benthic habitats. This  
can increase local retention of pelagic larvae, weaken connectivity between  
485 populations, and potentially reduce the replenishment of distant habitats and  
populations (Figueiredo et al. 2014). It is also likely that changes in the temporal and  
spatial distributions of food resources will decouple interactions among species  
within food webs, resulting in perturbations to the flow of energy from lower trophic  
levels to top order predators (Winder & Schindler 2004; Fraser & Hoimann 2003;  
490 Fernandes et al. 2013).

In addition to the direct effects of altered thermal regimes, climate-related changes in  
global topography strongly influence patterns of ecological connectivity. Long-term  
reductions in Arctic sea-ice cover are increasing the connectivity between the Pacific  
and Atlantic Oceans. Regular satellite monitoring of sea-ice extent shows that, since  
495 2010, the minimum and maximum seasonal extents have been at or close to the  
lowest recorded values (National Snow and Ice Data Center 2014). The Northeast  
and/or Northwest Passages between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans have opened  
regularly for part of the summer since 2005 and 2007 respectively (Fig. 5). The  
observed trends in ice cover are expected to continue, exacerbated by the presence of  
500 younger and thinner ice (Maslanik et al. 2007).

Increases in the exchange of fauna between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans - ranging from phytoplankton to marine mammals - have been reported in recent decades. The discovery of the Pacific diatom *Neodenticula seminae* in the North Atlantic, an area where it had been extinct for approximately 800,000 years, is believed to be linked to sea-ice retreat from the coasts of Alaska and Canada in the late 1990s (Reid et al. 2007). In the Northwest Passage, Heide-Jørgensen et al (2012) recently documented the overlap between Atlantic and Pacific bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*). A grey whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) was also sighted in the Mediterranean Sea in 2010, when the species had not been recorded in the North Atlantic since the 1700s. Scheinina et al. (2011) concluded that this whale was most likely a member of the large North Pacific grey whale population that crossed the Arctic Ocean in the summer months following sea ice retreat. As more species move between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans with sea-ice retreat, it is reasonable to expect that a proportion of these species will flourish in their new environments, with potential ramifications for ecosystem structure and function. In this respect, the effects of sea-ice retreat are analogous to those of the artificial connectivity pathways created by shipping canals and inter-basin water diversions (see Section 2.4).

In freshwater and estuarine ecosystems, there are fewer examples of species range shifts that can be attributed directly to the effects of climate change (Booth et al. 2011). However, as mentioned above, the potential effects of altered hydrological regimes (e.g., increased frequency of drought) and higher temperatures are well documented, and are likely drivers of change in species distributions. Statistical models linking historical and current distributional information to hydro-climatic and

catchment data in freshwater ecosystems have predicted general shifts in species  
525 distributions towards higher altitudes and higher latitudes (e.g., Bond et al. 2011).  
This has serious implications for high-altitude endemic species, as their habitat  
diminishes and potential competitors and predators invade from lower altitudes  
(Dirnböck et al. 2011).

In comparison to more open oceanic environments, the complex topography of  
530 freshwater and estuarine ecosystems restricts the pathways through which species  
range shifts can occur. For example, optimal temperatures for growth of golden perch  
*Macquaria ambigua* in south-eastern Australia are predicted to shift southwards  
under the effects of climate change, yet a range shift via natural dispersal is not  
possible for this species due to the presence of a large mountain range that forms a  
535 major biogeographic barrier (Morrongiello et al. 2011). Whilst the effects of climate  
change on the distributions of freshwater and estuarine fauna are likely to be  
considerable, the complexity of dispersal pathways, coupled with strong interactions  
among species, makes accurate prediction of future range shifts particularly difficult  
in freshwater and estuarine ecosystems (Heino et al. 2009; Booth et al. 2011;  
540 Gillanders et al. 2011).

### **3. Towards an operational understanding of the outcomes of altered connectivity**

Scientific understanding of the movement behaviours, dispersal patterns, and genetic  
structuring of populations of aquatic organisms has increased greatly over recent  
decades, as has our knowledge of the spatial arrangement and dynamics of aquatic  
545 habitats (Kool et al. 2013) (Text box 1). However, while we can point to specific  
impacts of altered connectivity for particular systems (e.g. extirpation of diadromous

species above dams), information on the broader effects on ecosystem processes and population viability is often lacking. This makes it difficult to assess the efficacy of potential mitigation activities and often results in sub-optimal management responses  
550 (Fullerton et al. 2010).

Stream restoration activities, for example, rarely apply a network based perspective, but often focus instead on small scale projects (Hermoso et al. 2012a) that enhance structural complexity at isolated stream reaches (e.g., by adding wood, boulders, etc.) or remove physical barriers (e.g., weirs). Removal of barriers has been effective for  
555 restoring migration of many fish species (Bednarek 2001), but will only be successful in the long-term if colonising organisms can find suitable habitats for feeding, breeding and refuge. Similarly, restoration projects that increase habitat complexity may fail to show significant improvement in stream biodiversity if planning and implementation do not account for the protection of migration routes, availability of  
560 source areas for recolonisation, and habitat conditions outside the focal reach (Lepori et al. 2005; Palmer et al. 2010).

A wide spectrum of logistical and technical challenges must be overcome to gain operational understanding of the effects of anthropogenic alterations to ecological connectivity (see Kool et al. 2013). Nonetheless, rapid methodological advances are  
565 meeting these challenges. The range of relevant techniques includes methods to elucidate the movements of individuals over relatively short time frames (i.e., within individual lifetimes), such as mark-recapture, acoustic and radio telemetry, micro-chemical analysis of hard body parts (e.g., fish otoliths, mollusc shells), and stable isotope analysis of soft tissues. Over longer time frames, molecular genetic

570 techniques have been widely used to infer population connectivity from  
intergenerational (e.g., parentage analysis) to evolutionary (e.g., phylogenetic  
analysis) time scales.

Rather than being limited by the available technology, we contend that the greatest  
impediment to our understanding is the fact that the outcomes of altered connectivity  
575 are influenced by behavioural, developmental, physiological and environmental  
factors that act - and often interact - simultaneously over a wide range of spatial and  
temporal scales (Cowen et al. 2000; Anderson et al. 2010). In contrast, empirical  
aquatic research to date has often focused on discipline- or method-specific  
approaches capable of addressing one or two factors at limited temporal and spatial  
580 scales. Integration of information from methods that can be applied across multiple  
spatial and temporal scales is the most promising way forward for understanding  
ecological connectivity (Fullerton et al. 2010; Kool et al. 2013). But how does this  
look in practice? In the following section, we use three case studies to demonstrate  
how the integration of complementary methods can increase the inference available  
585 from research on connectivity in aquatic ecosystems.

### ***3.1 The Australian grayling***

The Australian grayling *Prototroctes maraena* (Fig. 6) is a threatened species of  
diadromous fish found in coastal rivers and streams in south-eastern Australia. The  
only other member of the genus, the New Zealand grayling *P. oxyrhynchus*, became  
590 extinct in the 1920s or 1930s, possibly due to predation by introduced brown trout  
*Salmo trutta* and habitat degradation (McDowall 2006). The distribution and  
abundance of Australian grayling have declined substantially since European

settlement of Australia and, given the rapid extinction of its sister species, there is a very strong focus on management actions to prevent further decline (e.g. Backhouse  
595 et al. 2008).

Anecdotal observations of migration by Australian grayling were reported in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Saville Kent 1885). However, its diadromous habits were only revealed by systematic field surveys in the 1970s (Bishop & Bell 1978; Berra 1982). Berra (1982) observed spent adults in freshwater river reaches and noted the appearance of  
600 juveniles in freshwater 4-6 months after spawning, whereas larvae were never collected in freshwater, despite considerable effort. Subsequent laboratory experiments demonstrated that newly hatched larvae failed to develop in freshwater, but survived in saline water (Bacher & O'Brien 1989). An otolith chemistry study later confirmed that all individuals spend their early life in saline water and suggested  
605 that populations from different rivers share a common marine recruitment source (Crook et al. 2006). This latter finding was subsequently supported by an analysis of inter-population variability in microsatellite and mitochondrial DNA, which reported complete genetic mixing among river systems separated by more than 400 km of coastline (Schmidt et al. 2010). Most recently, acoustic telemetry and larval drift  
610 sampling showed that adults undertake large-scale migrations from freshwater reaches to spawn in the lower reaches immediately upstream of the estuary (Koster et al. 2013).

While each of these studies provides a partial picture of Australian grayling biology, the likely implications of altered connectivity only become apparent when results of  
615 the studies are considered collectively. The direct observations of Bishop & Bell

(1978), Berra (1982) and Bacher & O'Brien (1989) made it clear that connectivity between the freshwater adult habitat and the sea is essential to the viability of the species, whilst the observations of Koster et al. (2013) demonstrate the importance of maintaining connectivity between upstream adult habitats and the spawning grounds  
620 in the lower freshwater reaches. The whole-of-lifetime salinity histories inferred using otolith chemistry analysis confirmed that diadromy is obligatory, thus explaining why Australian grayling do not occur above major instream barriers (Gehrke et al. 2002). Finally, the population genetics analysis of Schmidt et al. (2010) showed that populations within coastal catchments are highly connected over large  
625 temporal and spatial scales via dispersal of larvae/juveniles in the sea, suggesting that a meta-population approach to management may be appropriate for this species.

### ***3.2 The giant water bug (*Abedus herberti*)***

The most ubiquitous animals in river networks are invertebrates. River macroinvertebrates are dominated numerically by insects in most regions, although  
630 crustaceans attain high biomass and diversity in many tropical streams. Most aquatic insects have a terrestrial adult stage, and many crustaceans and insects without specifically terrestrial life stages can survive in the terrestrial environment at least for brief periods during some life stages (e.g., Ponniah & Hughes 2006, Boersma & Lytle *in press*). When aquatic animals have the ability to move successfully outside of the  
635 aquatic environment, the concept of ecological connectivity changes (i.e., HWM/WGF versus SHM/DVM; Text box 1), but the strategy of integrating information from multiple methodologies still applies.

The giant water bug *Abedus herberti* (Fig. 6) is an indicator species of permanent aquatic habitat in arid regions of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico (Bogan and Lytle 2007). The species requires surface water to complete all life stages, and it lacks the ability to fly (Bogan & Boersma 2012). However, *A. herberti* is an adept crawler, and it can survive in the terrestrial environment for up to 2 days (Christine L. Goforth, personal communication), which is long enough to migrate overland several kilometres (Lytle 1999, Boersma & Lytle *in press*). Whilst drying of a local habitat patch is a cue for this species to crawl across terrestrial landscape, experimental manipulations of heavy “rainfall” (i.e., water sprayed from a hose onto stream pools, Lytle 1999, Lytle et al. 2008) suggest that *A. herberti* may also crawl on the land in order to escape impending flash floods. Hence, these experimental manipulations initially suggested that *A. herberti* populations occupying neighbouring, but hydrologically unconnected, streams could be ecologically connected via overland crawling.

Traditional population genetic methods confirmed that *A. herberti* tends to fit the headwater connectivity model (HWM, Text box 1) (Finn et al. 2007). This result is consistent with the experimental demonstration of rainfall response behaviour and the localisation of permanent aquatic habitat in headwater areas. Furthermore, a landscape genetics approach testing several models of spatial connectivity revealed that landscape concavity – including dry sections of streambed or gullies and low passes or saddles between drainages – was the best predictor of limited gene flow between populations (Phillipsen & Lytle 2013). This combination of autecological studies of the species’ basic biology, direct observations of movement behaviour,

application of genetics to determine population structure across the landscape, and finer-scaled genetic studies to infer movement pathways, provides a unified picture of natural connectivity patterns for *A. herberti*.

Based on this understanding of the species' dispersal patterns and population  
665 structure, the biggest threat to the long-term viability of *A. herberti* appears to be the reduction in total area of permanent aquatic habitat in the already arid environment. Increasing frequency and severity of drought due to climate change, and intensified groundwater pumping, are converting perennial habitat into intermittent aquatic habitat. Both direct long-term monitoring of *A. herberti* populations (e.g., Bogan &  
670 Lytle 2011) and genetic inference of population demographic stability (Finn et al. 2009) suggest that these changing conditions are driving bottlenecks and local extinctions. With decreasing habitat and more sparsely distributed populations, the already naturally low ecological connectivity will decrease further, perhaps leading to a shift from the HWM to the Death Valley model (DVM) for this species.

### 675 ***3.3 Native and invasive trout in western North America***

Research on the threatened bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) (Fig. 6) in the western USA illustrates how demographic and genetic methods complement one another to provide a full picture of the importance of connectivity for species persistence (Lowe & Allendorf 2010). In an Idaho watershed, analytical models based on a temporal  
680 sequence of redd (spawning nests laid in gravel) counts determined that isolated headwater populations were too small to prevent impending extinction (Rieman & McIntyre 1993). Furthermore, genetic analysis of five populations in the 220-km<sup>2</sup> watershed suggested that all populations were strongly isolated from one another

(Spruell et al. 1999). However, the total genetic diversity across populations was  
685 similar to healthy bull trout populations elsewhere in the species range, suggesting  
that increasing connectivity in this system could enhance long-term survival  
probability.

The invasive species of greatest concern across the bull trout's native range is the  
brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*; native to eastern North America). In the Idaho  
690 system, however, harmful effects of brook trout appear to be minimal, according to  
two key observations (Neraas & Spruell (2001). First, evidence from radio telemetry  
showed some bull trout juveniles from populations upstream of dams out-migrate  
through the dams to overwinter in downstream lakes (Swanberg 1997, Flatter 1998).  
As adults, many of these individuals return to congregate at the base of impassable  
695 dams in an upstream spawning migration, having successfully reached maturity in  
sympatry with downstream brook trout. Further, genetic analysis also demonstrated  
minimal hybridisation of bull and brook trout in this system (Neraas & Spruell 2001).  
These observations, achieved by a combination of methods, suggest that increasing  
connectivity is a worthy conservation objective for bull trout in this watershed.

700 In stark contrast to the Idaho system, reducing brook trout encroachment from  
downstream reaches was critical to the recovery of a bull trout population in Crater  
Lake National Park, Oregon. Buktenica et al. (2013) studied a remnant population of  
bull trout in Sun Creek, a second-order headwater stream, which was found to be  
threatened with extinction due to competition and hybridisation with brook trout. To  
705 save the bull trout population, managers used artificial barriers, electrofishing, and  
piscicide applications between 1992 and 2005 to remove brook trout from a 14.6 km

section of the stream and prevent further invasion from downstream reaches. Thanks to this multi-pronged effort, brook trout have not been detected in the study reach since 2005. By 2010, bull trout abundance had increased by tenfold and distribution had expanded from 1.9 km to 11.2 km of stream length. In combination, this body of work not only shows the value of multiple methods for assessing the role of connectivity in species conservation, but also for actively managing connectivity to promote recovery.

#### 715 **4. Key knowledge requirements**

As the above discussion and case studies demonstrate, the effects of human-altered connectivity are numerous, complex, and often highly specific to the species and environment of concern. Despite rapid advances in methodologies for data gathering and modeling, there is unlikely to ever be a single approach for effective mitigation of these effects. Even when ‘umbrella’ or ‘focal species’ approaches are employed to direct conservation strategies (e.g., Lambeck 1997; Roberge and Anglestam 2004), each situation will require a specific integration of the most pertinent available evidence. Nonetheless, we suggest that there are four key areas of knowledge that are generally necessary, regardless of taxon, environment or methodological approach:

##### 725 *Autecology*

Whilst autecological research may struggle to attract the interest of funding agencies and editors of high-impact journals, empirical information on the interactions between individual species and their habitats (e.g., habitat requirements, reproductive behaviour, spatial patterns in demography) is nonetheless essential for providing the building blocks upon which the taxon-specific and assemblage-level implications of

altered connectivity can be explored. As a case in point, it is impossible to predict how the meta-population dynamics of a species will be affected by the destruction of habitat (e.g., mangroves in coastal areas, Fig. 2) without a thorough knowledge of their habitat requirements across the life history. Similarly, our understanding of the spatial distributions of species within river networks - and thus how they will respond to changes in connectivity - is highly dependent on knowledge of species-specific habitat preferences in relation to the availability of habitat across the riverscape.

#### *Population structure*

Information on the spatial arrangement of populations, and the degree to which they are connected over space and time, provides the spatial template upon which alterations to pathways of ecological connectivity can be interpreted. This is traditionally the domain of population genetics research (and increasingly genomics), but is also informed by species distribution data, habitat suitability modeling, and other types of spatially explicit information. Studies of population structure have underpinned the development of conceptual models of ecological connectivity in river networks, including the Stream Hierarchy and Death Valley models (Text box 1). Information on population structure is also critical for examining the genetic implications of linking populations via translocation and artificial connectivity pathways. For example, genetic analyses found that artificial translocation of shrimp (*Paratya australiensis*) between subcatchments resulted in the extinction of a monophyletic lineage of the species in the receiving subcatchment within 7 years (Hughes et al. 2003). This effect was attributed to a mating preference by all females

(resident and translocated) for translocated males and low viability of crosses between resident females and translocated males (Hughes et al. 2003).

755 *Movement characteristics*

Movement of individual organisms is the mechanism that drives connectivity at population/meta-population scales. Without understanding when, why and how individuals move, it is difficult to develop targeted strategies to mitigate the effects of altered ecological connectivity (Lowe & McPeck 2014). Conceptual and quantitative  
760 models utilising information on movement characteristics have been widely used to explain and/or predict changes in species distributions resulting from altered ecological connectivity. For example, a range of quantitative models have been used to predict the invasion trajectory of zebra mussels in the Great Lakes of North America (e.g., Bossenbroek et al. 2001) and rates of change in species dispersal  
765 characteristics resulting from ocean warming (e.g., O'Connor et al. 2007). As the Australian grayling case-study shows, even very basic information on movement requirements - such as whether diadromous migration is obligate - can provide critical information on the likely outcomes of altered connectivity.

*Environmental tolerances/phenotypic plasticity*

770 Information on the environmental tolerances of animals and the degree to which they are able to alter their physiology, morphology and behaviour in response to environmental change (i.e., phenotypic plasticity) is crucial for predicting their responses to altered ecological connectivity. Species with limited dispersal potential and low resilience to changing environmental conditions are particularly vulnerable  
775 to human disturbance (Crook et al. 2010). For example, in streams subject to

increased drought frequency or high levels of water abstraction, species with limited ability to rapidly disperse or withstand desiccation (e.g., the giant water bug) are prone to population bottlenecks and localised extinctions (Finn et al. 2009). On the other hand, many invasive species (e.g., common carp) have very wide physiological tolerances, flexible behaviours and high dispersal ability. Such species tend to be powerful invaders of newly available habitat and often dominate in heavily disturbed environments (Koehn 2004).

## 5. Conclusions

By structuring empirical research around these four broad data requirements, then using this information to parameterise appropriate models and develop management approaches (e.g., spatially explicit individual based models, Perry & Bond 2009; graph theory networks, Erős et al. 2011, 2012; systematic conservation planning, Hermoso et al. 2012b), the field of aquatic ecology can deliver the information required to mitigate anthropogenic disturbance of ecological connectivity. Ideally, this would proceed via a strategic approach to research, with *a priori* objectives specifically designed to fill the most significant knowledge gaps as they emerge. In practice, the scientific process is more haphazard than this, with researchers collecting relevant data for reasons that may or may not relate to ecological connectivity, and with their own preferred methods.

Given the strong culture of individualism in science, we see integration of empirical information from multiple methodologies (telemetry, genetics, otolith chemistry, stable isotope analysis, etc.) as the most promising way to develop an empirical understanding of ecological connectivity across temporal and spatial scales (Kool et

al. 2013). However, as our case studies show, the relevant data are often scattered  
800 throughout the scientific literature and must be actively assembled into coherent  
conceptual and quantitative frameworks. Putting the pieces of the puzzle together to  
develop such frameworks represents a difficult challenge - but one with exciting  
possibilities into the future.

### **Acknowledgments**

805 This paper resulted from a workshop held in January 2013 on North Stradbroke  
Island, Queensland, Australia, organised by the Australian Rivers Institute and the  
Australian Centre for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (ACEAS). ACEAS is a  
facility of the Terrestrial Ecosystem Research Network ([www.tern.org.au](http://www.tern.org.au)) funded by  
the Australian Government's National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy  
810 (NCRIS). We thank Alison Specht and other ACEAS personnel for all of their  
support and encouragement. The following organisations/funding sources are  
acknowledged for their financial support during the preparation of this paper:  
Northern Australia Hub of the National Environmental Research Program (DAC);  
OTKA K104279 grant and the Bolyai János Research Fellowship of the Hungarian  
815 Academy of Sciences (TE); the Prometeo Project of the Secretariat for Higher  
Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation of the Republic of Ecuador (DSF);  
Australian Research Council grants FT120100183 (IN) and FT100100767 (BMG);  
U.S. National Science Foundation grants DEB-1050459 and DEB-1258203 (WL and  
FA).

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