

**The Ecological Significance of Body Size
in Tropical Wrasses
(Pisces : Labridae)**

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in June 2003

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture
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Abstract

Among terrestrial organisms, body size exhibits predictable relationships with many characteristics including growth rate, mortality rate, longevity, reproductive traits, abundance, species richness and habitat use. However, the majority of studies identifying such relationships have looked at a limited range of terrestrial taxa, in particular mammals, birds and beetles. These patterns have received much less attention among marine organisms and consequently their generality is questionable. Factors influencing growth of organisms in terrestrial and marine environments may be fundamentally different. This variation could result in considerable differences in growth processes among marine and terrestrial organisms and influence constraints on body size among species in these environments. The principal aim of this study was to identify whether numerous body size-related patterns observed in terrestrial taxa were repeated in a group of coral reef fishes, and assess reasons for differences when predicted relationships were not detected.

This study employed a multispecific comparative approach to examine life history and ecological correlates of body size in coral reef fishes of the wrasse family (Pisces: Labridae), a group in which species range in length from 4cm to over 2m. To account for the influence of evolutionary history of species on the patterns observed, a working hypothesis for a wrasse phylogeny was derived for the sampled species. This phylogeny was integrated into the analyses for Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

The study comprised four main data chapters examining relationships between body size and a range of life history traits and other ecological characteristics. In Chapter 2, the relationships between maximum body size of species and growth rate, mortality rate and longevity were examined among ten species of wrasses which encompassed a ten-fold size range. Based on current theory it was predicted that there should be a positive relationship between maximum size of species and maximum age and a corresponding negative relationship between maximum species size and mortality rate. Both of these relationships were detected for the wrasses studied here. Conceptual models indicating ways in which differences among body sizes of fish species can arise were developed and tested. It was found that in some species larger size was simply attained by growing at the same rate as smaller species but for a longer period of time. In other species faster growth enabled the attainment of larger body size but at the cost

of shortened life-span. There was limited evidence that by growing faster individuals became larger and less susceptible to predation sooner, resulting in larger body sizes and longer life spans. A further idea was that smaller species are smaller because they have determinate growth and stop growing sooner than larger species. Wrasse species studied here exhibited the range from indeterminate to determinate growth but there was no apparent relationship between maximum body size of species and growth strategy.

In Chapter 3 covariation between maximum size of species and reproductive characteristics was explored. It was predicted that smaller species should mature and change sex at a smaller proportion of maximum size and proportionally earlier in life than larger species. They were also expected to have greater reproductive effort than larger species. Despite this, none of these relationships between maximum species size and reproductive traits were evident. Relationships between maximum size and size at maturity and sex change were in fact opposite to those expected as smaller species matured and changed sex at a greater proportion of maximum size than larger species. Similarly, short-lived species matured and changed sex proportionally later in life than long-lived species. In general, body size appeared more important than age in determining when maturation and sex change occurred both among and within species. Energy invested per reproductive episode was not significantly related to species body size.

In Chapter 4, covariation among body size, growth rate, longevity, reproductive effort and size/age at maturity and size/age at sex change was examined in the wrasse *Halichoeres melanurus*. Individuals were sampled at four locations along a latitudinal cline. Consistent with patterns identified to date it was predicted that with an increase in latitude there should be a decrease in growth rate, and an increase in body size and longevity. Initial growth rate was slightly slower at the two higher latitude locations and the maximum body size and maximum age of individuals within populations did tend to increase with an increase in latitude. It was also considered that an increase in latitude should be associated with an increase in the proportion of adult size and age attained before maturation and sex change, and an increase in reproductive effort. However, there was no consistent relationship between the latitude at which individuals were sampled and the proportion of maximum size/age attained at maturity or sex change. In addition reproductive effort of individuals did not vary predictably as latitude increased. Individuals collected at the Palm Islands matured relatively earlier, exhibited greater

reproductive effort and changed sex proportionally earlier in life than those collected at Kimbe Bay, Lizard Island and Heron Island.

In Chapter 5, relationships between body size and ecological characteristics including local abundance, species richness, habitat use and depth range, were investigated among all wrasse species present at a range of locations. Based on patterns identified within both marine and terrestrial taxa it was predicted that the smallest species would not be the most abundant with abundances peaking in species of small to intermediate size. Very large species were expected to have low abundances. This relationship was expressed for the wrasse species examined here. In addition, the body size-species richness distribution of wrasses at a number of locations was log normal, with many species of small to intermediate size and low numbers of very small or very large species. Smaller reef fish species were expected to be associated with a smaller range of microhabitats than larger species, be more habitat specific and have smaller depth ranges than larger species. The small wrasse species examined here were found to use a small, intermediate or large diversity of available microhabitats, whereas the larger species consistently used a wide diversity of microhabitats. Depth ranges of small species lay on a continuum from very small to very large, whereas larger species consistently had large depth ranges.

Variation between some of the patterns observed in this study and those described in previous studies, demonstrates the need to replicate similar studies in a wide range of organisms inhabiting a wide range of habitats before their generality can be assessed. Repeating similar studies among species within a large range of reef fish families is crucial to determine the utility of species body size as a predictor of life history characteristics and other ecological variables in reef fishes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Geoff Jones and Dr. Julian Caley. Geoff provided support and encouragement throughout the project, consistently stimulated new ideas during our discussions, helped with field sampling and proof-read drafts of this thesis. Julian also gave feedback on chapter drafts and was always available to provide constructive advice about the study. His input considerably improved a number of aspects of the thesis. Valuable help with statistical analyses was provided by Tim Hancock, and Sean Connolly provided some important modelling insights. Mark Westneat aided the process of defining a working phylogeny for the wrasses studied. John Ackerman was always prepared to give a helping hand which was greatly appreciated. He gave me plenty of valuable advice, readily sharing his knowledge of otolith grinding/reading and discussing various methods of analysing growth data. I had numerous discussions with Bernardo Blanco-Martin over the course of the study. The majority of them involved events of the previous weekend but many others were about life history theory and the ideas presented in this thesis. His contributions and ideas were very constructive and he also proof-read early drafts of many of the chapters.

The expertise of Don Ross in the workshop and his help when preparing for field trips was invaluable. The research would also not have been possible without the many field volunteers that accompanied me on various field trips or helped with collections: Ameer Abdulla, Antoine Heald, Ashley Frisch, Corin Wills, David Campion, Henrietta Cobbald, Janelle Eagle, James Wicks, Karin Buechler, Maya Srinivasan, Peter Wruck, Philippa Mantel, Phil Munday, Krista Chin. I thank them all for their hard work, especially when conditions were not ideal and enduring the wind and rain was not the most appealing idea. I would also like to thank Line Bay and Shalan Bray for keeping my fish well fed while I was away. I am greatly indebted to the Northcote Trust for providing me with a scholarship to enable me to pursue this research for the last few years. The PADI Aware Foundation and the Australian Geographic Society also donated extra funds necessary to complete field trips. I send a big thanks to friends from all corners of the globe for making my time in Australia so enjoyable. In particular, I want to thank my family for love and encouragement, being so supportive of me during the Ph.D. and managing to resist any urges to grill me about the progress of this thesis.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	I
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Signed Statement of Sources	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures.....	x

Chapter 1: General Introduction

1.1 Body size and reef fish life histories - Implications for growth, mortality and longevity.....	4
1.2 Body size and reproduction in reef fishes – Inter-relationships among body size, maturation, reproductive effort and sex change.....	5
1.3 Relationships between body size, life history and latitude in a reef fish	6
1.4 Body size and the ecology of reef fishes - Implications for distribution, abundance and habitat use	7
1.5 Aims of the thesis	8
1.6 Structure of the thesis	10

Chapter 2: Body size variation in wrasses - Associations with growth, longevity and mortality

2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Materials and Methods.....	19
2.3 Results.....	29
2.4 Discussion.....	45

Chapter 3: Body size and its relationship to maturation, reproduction and sex change

3.1 Introduction.....	53
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3.2	Materials and Methods.....	59
3.3	Results.....	66
3.4	Discussion.....	80
Chapter 4: Latitudinal variation in life history traits of the coral reef fish <i>Halichoeres melanurus</i> (Pisces: Labridae)		
4.1	Introduction.....	91
4.2	Materials and Methods.....	95
4.3	Results.....	102
4.4	Discussion.....	116
Chapter 5: Body size and the ecology of reef fishes - Implications for local abundance, species richness and habitat use		
5.1	Introduction.....	124
5.2	Materials and Methods.....	128
5.3	Results.....	135
5.4	Discussion.....	148
Chapter 6: General Discussion.....		157
References		163
Appendices		183

List of Tables

Chapter 2: **Body size variation in wrasses - Associations with growth, longevity and mortality**

2.1	Wrasse species sampled.....	21
2.2	Maximum size and age data collated for fourteen temperate wrasses.....	27
2.3	Relationships between length and mass.....	34
2.4	Percentage error for repeat counts of daily and annual rings.....	34
2.5	Parameters derived from von Bertalanffy growth functions fitted to size-at-age data for each species.....	40
2.6	Results of data analysis using a non-phylogenetic comparative method, and two phylogenetic comparative methods: Felsenstein's independent contrasts and the phylogenetic generalised least-squares approach.....	44

Chapter 3: **Body size and its relationship to maturation, reproduction and sex change**

3.1	Wrasse species sampled.....	59
3.2	Criteria used to identify developmental stage of oocytes of wrasse species.....	61
3.3	Estimates of von Bertalanffy growth parameters used to predict size at maturity for four species.....	63
3.4	Results of data analysis using a non-phylogenetic comparative method, and two phylogenetic comparative methods: Felsenstein's independent contrasts and the phylogenetic generalised least-squares approach.....	81

Chapter 4: **Latitudinal variation in life history traits of the coral reef fish *Halichoeres melanurus* (Pisces: Labridae)**

4.1	Significance of the linear and quadratic term in describing the relationship between age and size at sampled locations.....	100
4.2	Absolute and early growth (percent of maximum size attained after 20% of life-span) at the sampled locations.....	105

4.3 Summary of ANOVA and Tukey’s post-hoc comparison for residual size of *Halichoeres melanurus* among locations 107

4.4 Summary of ANOVA, Tukey’s post-hoc comparison and Kruskal Wallis test for residual age of *Halichoeres melanurus* among locations 108

4.5 Estimates of size and age at maturity for each location 111

4.6 Summary of ANOVA and Tukey’s post-hoc comparison test for square root-transformed gonadosomatic indices of female *Halichoeres melanurus* at the sampled locations 112

4.7 Size and age at sex change of *Halichoeres melanurus* at four locations 116

Chapter 5: Body size and the ecology of reef fishes – Implications for local abundance, species richness and habitat use

5.1 Mean parameter values derived from fitting the power curve $W=aL^b$ to the relationship between fork length and mass of seven wrasse species 131

5.2 The different categories into which microhabitats were divided 134

5.3 Number of individuals observed within species at each location 135

5.4 Least-squares regressions for lower and upper bound slopes describing the relationship between log body size and log abundance at four locations 137

List of Figures

Chapter 1: General Introduction

1.1	Log-transformed size frequency distribution of species within the wrasse family	12
1.2	Wrasse species sampled in this study	13

Chapter 2: Body size variation in wrasses - Associations with growth, longevity and mortality

2.1	Five conceptual models indicating ways in which species can attain large body sizes.....	20
2.2	Map of study locations.....	23
2.3	Working phylogeny for the wrasse species studied.....	25
2.4	Least-squares regressions of otolith weight versus age	31
2.5	Validation of periodicity of increment deposition in otoliths of <i>Halichoeres melanurus</i>	32
2.6	Sectioned otoliths of species with annual rings	33
2.7	Log-transformed plot of maximum species size versus maximum age for tropical and temperate wrasses	35
2.8	Size of species at 0.5 and 1 year of age	37
2.9	von Bertalanffy growth functions fitted to size-at-age data.....	39
2.10	Superimposed von Bertalanffy growth functions	40
2.11	Growth of species relative to maximum age and asymptotic length	42
2.12	Relationship between maximum size of species size and early growth of wrasses (percent of asymptotic length reached after 20% of life-span).....	42
2.13	Relationship between maximum size of species and instantaneous mortality rate.....	43
2.14	Comparison of the relationship between species size and instantaneous mortality rates obtained for wrasses and that obtained for other coral reef fishes.....	50

Chapter 3: Body size and its relationship to maturation, reproduction and sex change

3.1 Conceptual models illustrating predicted covariation between body size of species and reproductive traits..... 58

3.2 Body size-frequency distributions of mature females and estimated size at maturity of five wrasse species 67

3.3 Age-frequency distributions of mature females and estimated age at maturity of five wrasse species 68

3.4 Relationship between maximum size of species and absolute size at maturity 70

3.5 Relationship between maximum size of species and proportion of maximum size at which maturity is attained..... 70

3.6 Relationship between maximum age of species and absolute age at maturity 71

3.7 Relationship between maximum age of species and proportion of maximum age at which maturity is attained 71

3.8 Maximum female body size versus estimates of mean and maximum gonadosomatic indices for sampled species 72

3.9 Sex-specific size frequencies 73

3.10 Sex-specific age frequencies..... 75

3.11 Maximum size of species versus mean size at sex change 78

3.12 Relationship between maximum size of species and proportion of maximum size at which sex change occurs 78

3.13 Maximum age of species versus mean age at sex change..... 79

3.14 Relationship between maximum age of species and proportion of maximum age at which sex change occurs 79

3.15 Size-specific fecundity curves indicating how variation in fecundity schedules of males and females can influence the proportion of maximum size at which sex change occurs among species 87

Chapter 4: Latitudinal variation in life history traits of the coral reef fish *Halichoeres melanurus* (Pisces: Labridae)

4.1 Conceptual models indicating predicted variation in growth characteristics and reproductive traits along a latitudinal cline 96

4.2 Locations at which *Halichoeres melanurus* individuals were sampled 97

4.3 Relationship between mean annual seawater temperature and latitude of locations at which *Halichoeres melanurus* was sampled 98

4.4 Initial (female) and terminal (male) phase colour patterns of *Halichoeres melanurus* 99

4.5 Quadratic regressions fitted to size-at-age data for individuals at four locations 103

4.6 Superimposed growth curves for *Halichoeres melanurus* 104

4.7 Growth of *Halichoeres melanurus* relative to maximum life-span and maximum body size at each location 105

4.8 Box plot indicating size distributions of *Halichoeres melanurus* individuals..... 107

4.9 Box plot indicating age distributions of *Halichoeres melanurus* individuals..... 108

4.10 Gonadosomatic indices for females at different developmental stages for each location..... 110

4.11 Maximum and mean gonadosomatic indices for *Halichoeres melanurus* females at each location 111

4.12 Size frequencies of males, females and transitional phase individuals..... 113

4.13 Age frequencies of males, females and transitional phase individuals..... 114

4.14 Size and age range over which sex change occurred at each location 115

Chapter 5: Body size and the ecology of reef fishes – Implications for local abundance, species richness and habitat use

5.1 Conceptual models illustrating predicted relationships between body size and abundance, species richness, habitat use and depth range 129

5.2 Log maximum body weight versus log abundance of wrasse species..... 136

5.3 Histograms illustrating the percentage of wrasse species found in different size classes (log body length) 139

5.4 Histograms illustrating the total number of wrasse species found in different size classes (body length) 140

5.5 Maximum body size of species versus the total number of microhabitat categories used..... 141

5.6 Maximum body size of species versus diversity of microhabitats used 143

5.7 Maximum body size of species versus evenness of microhabitat use 144

5.8 Mean of the total number of microhabitats used and mean diversity and evenness indices for species within different size classes at four locations 145

5.9 Relationship between maximum body size and depth range of species 147

Chapter 6: General Discussion

6.1 Inter-relationships among aspects of growth, reproduction and other ecological traits 160