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**Interactions amongst invertebrates,
epiphytes, and seagrasses in
tropical intertidal
meadows**

Thesis submitted by

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in October 2006

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture

James Cook University

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31 March 2009

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Thanks, first and foremost, must go to all those along the way who gave me the opportunity to follow my interests. This project had its genesis in my experiences working in a marine national park in Thailand. I was living near an intertidal seagrass meadow, and I was allowed to sample the invertebrates there, with few questions asked. I am not sure what people thought I was doing, but they were willing to let me do it. I especially thank CUSO (the Canadian volunteer organization) and DTEC (Thailand's Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation) for placing and supporting me in my work at Had Chao Mai National Park. I also wish to thank the officials and staff of Thailand's marine national parks, and especially all the people at the Marine National Park Supporting Center, as it was then called. After acquiring some experience, and a limited understanding of tropical seagrasses, it was my good fortune to be accepted at James Cook University to pursue my interests in a more academic environment. For that, I must especially thank my supervisors, John Collins and Marcus Sheaves, who recognized something in my application that others had not, then took me on, and allowed me to do the project I had wanted to do. I also got helpful inputs from Michelle Waycott and Joe Holtum at James Cook University. It was Joe who showed me how to use his spectrophotometer. Dipali Ayling came out several times to assist with the sampling at the Magnetic Island sites.

Contributions of others

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Matthew Knott and Basil Byrne sorted seagrass core samples from the plots at Picnic Bay and Cockle Bay.

Joe Holtum provided the spectrophotometer.

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Abstract

Interactions amongst invertebrates, epiphytes, and seagrasses were studied in intertidal meadows near Townsville, Australia. Data were collected to test the assumptions of the prevailing model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions. That model assumes that epiphytes have the potential to limit seagrass standing crop, but that invertebrate grazers limit epiphytes, and therefore indirectly benefit the seagrass. Furthermore, it is generally assumed that the community of epifaunal invertebrates is largely composed of epiphyte grazers, especially small gastropods and peracardian crustaceans, and that direct consumption of the seagrass is of minor importance.

One intertidal plot, 100 m² was established in each of three meadows; Shelly Beach, Cockle Bay and Picnic Bay. Samples of seagrass, invertebrates and epiphytic materials were taken at one to two month intervals over two years. Leaf samples were taken to estimate epifaunal invertebrate densities and epiphytic loads from the same leaves. The percent coverage of the leaves by epiphytic material was estimated, and the material was scraped from the leaves to estimate its ash-free dry weight (AFDW). The seagrass leaf area index (LAI), below ground dry weight (BGDW), and shoot or leaf density in each plot were estimated from core samples.

In June 2002, a sudden migration of the sea hare *Bursatella leachii* into the plot established at Shelly Beach was associated with a rapid reduction in epiphytic loads on *Halophila ovalis*, but not *Halodule uninervis*. Unexpectedly, the LAI of *H. ovalis* declined by two-thirds, while that of *H. uninervis* remained unchanged. It was hypothesised that the reduction in *H. ovalis* LAI was due to the sudden exposure of the leaves to high levels of irradiance, resulting in photodamage and photoinhibition. To test that hypothesis, a shading experiment was performed. Plots, 0.5 m², were shaded with 70% shade cloth over 29 days, to adapt the seagrass to low light conditions, and were then exposed to ambient light. Chlorophyll concentrations increased significantly under shade, then fell to control levels in 4-10 days of exposure in both *H. ovalis* and *H. uninervis*. However, the former species did not show any significant increase in chlorophyll per area of substrate under shading, but appeared to trade-off increased chlorophyll production with a decrease in LAI and leaf density. There were no

significant differences directly related to the treatments other than the changes in chlorophyll concentrations and an increase in leaf length due to shading of *H. uninervis*.

During two years of sampling, occasions of high epiphytic loads, AFDW >2.0 mg/cm², on *Halodule uninervis* were followed by declines in shoot densities, BGDW, and LAI in the plots at Shelly Beach and Cockle Bay. However, within plots there were positive correlations between epiphytic cover and LAI. Those relationships suggested that *H. uninervis* benefited from epiphytic cover, up to a threshold, possibly because of protective effects against high irradiance. There may also have been reciprocal effects, such that increases in the seagrass canopy promoted development of epiphytic cover, which may have acted as a density-dependent limiter of *H. uninervis* production.

The littorid gastropod *Alaba virgata* was the commonest epifaunal epiphyte-grazer, especially at Shelly Beach. Its densities were negatively correlated with epiphytic cover. The positive relationship between epiphytic cover and *H. uninervis* LAI suggested that *A. virgata* was likely to have an indirect negative impact on the seagrass, contrary to the prevailing model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions. Likewise, the commonest amphipod, *Ericthonius*, had densities that were negatively correlated with epiphytic cover at Cockle Bay and Picnic Bay, but appeared most likely to have a negative impact on the seagrass.

The epifaunal communities were numerically dominated by suspension feeders; including the amphipods *Ericthonius* and *Podocerus*; the bivalve *Electroma*, and Anemones. Total epifaunal abundance was negatively correlated with seagrass LAI in each plot. Those relationships likely reflected a negative impact of the seagrass canopy on water flow, and thus food resources for suspension feeders. Therefore, epifaunal abundance and epiphytic cover had inverse relationships to seagrass LAI. A path analysis showed that a bottom-up model with separate effects from seagrass LAI to total epifaunal abundance and to epiphytic cover fit the data well. That analysis used data from all plots in a multigroup design, and suggested that the same processes were occurring in each of the plots despite other major differences among them.

There was conspicuous evidence of damage by invertebrate herbivores to the leaves of *Halophila ovalis*. The areas damaged were measured using image analysis techniques on leaf samples. Those animals found to be consuming seagrass included; a nerite gastropod, *Smaragdia souverbiana*; an undescribed species of sacoglossa; an amphithoid amphipod, *Cymadusa* sp.; and the sphaeromatid isopods *Cymodoce* spp. *H. ovalis* declined at Shelly Beach during the course of the study, and *Halodule uninervis* became more abundant, in a pattern suggesting successional change. However, changes in *H. ovalis* LAI and BGDW were correlated with measures of damage that were most likely caused by crustacean feeding.

The prevailing model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions does not provide a suitable description of those interactions in the intertidal meadows studied near Townsville. There was little evidence that epiphyte grazers would benefit the seagrass by removing epiphytic cover. On the contrary, there was evidence of negative impacts by exposing the leaves to high levels of irradiance, which are commonly experienced in tropical intertidal habitats. Suspension feeders, not epiphyte grazers, dominated the epifaunal community, which therefore had a very different relationship to the seagrass and its epiphytic cover from that anticipated in the current literature. Also unanticipated, consumption of seagrass appeared to play an important role in successional development. From this study, new models are proposed that will hopefully provide a better understanding from which to test and analyse interactions amongst invertebrates, epiphytes and seagrasses in tropical intertidal meadows.

Contents

Statement of Access	ii
Statement on Sources	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Contributions of others	v
Abstract	vi
Contents	ix
List of figures	xii
List of tables	xix
Chapter 1 General introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.1.1 The prevailing model of interactions	2
1.1.2 Invertebrates as consumers of seagrass	6
1.1.3 Limitations of support for prevailing model	10
1.2 Objectives	13
Chapter 2 General methods	15
2.1 Study area	15
2.2 Sampling plots	16
2.3 Sampling seagrass	18
2.4 Sampling invertebrates	19
2.5 Measuring epiphytic loads	22
2.6 Calculating leaf areas	24
2.7 Estimating herbivore damage	26
2.8 Abiotic parameters	30
2.8.1 Tidal exposure	30
2.8.2 Water and weather conditions	30
2.8.3 Sediment particle-size	30
2.9 Project design	31
2.10 Statistical analysis	32
2.10.1 Univariate	32
2.10.2 Multivariate	33
2.11 Definitions and abbreviations	33
Chapter 3 The impact of epiphyte grazing by sea hares on <i>Halophila ovalis</i>	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 Results	36
3.2.1 Sea hare abundance	36
3.2.2 Epiphytic loads	38
3.2.3 Seagrass	39
3.3 Discussion	43
3.3.1 Changes in epiphytic material	43
3.3.2 Response of <i>Halophila ovalis</i>	44
3.4 Conclusions	48
Chapter 4 Seagrass epifauna and their relationships to epiphytic materials	49
4.1 Introduction	49
4.2 Methods	50
4.2.1 MDS and ANOSIM	50
4.3 Results	52
4.3.1 Epifaunal communities	52

4.3.1.1 Epifauna of <i>Halodule uninervis</i>	52
4.3.1.2 Comparison with <i>Halophila ovalis</i>	56
4.3.1.3 MDS and ANOSIM.....	57
4.3.2 Epiphytic material.....	58
4.3.2.1 Adjustments to AFDW measurements.....	58
4.3.2.2 Plot SB.....	58
4.3.2.3 Plot CB.....	61
4.3.2.4 Plot PB.....	63
4.3.3 Relationships between epiphytic loads and invertebrate densities.....	64
4.3.3.1 Plot SB.....	64
4.3.3.2 Plot CB.....	65
4.3.3.3 Plot PB.....	65
4.3.4 Comparisons among plots.....	66
4.4 Discussion.....	67
4.4.1 <i>Alaba virgata</i>	68
4.4.2 Amphipoda.....	70
4.4.3 <i>Electroma</i>	72
4.4.4 Anemones.....	72
4.4.5 Relationship to seagrass species and leaf morphology.....	73
4.4.6 Predatory interactions.....	74
4.5 Conclusions.....	76
Chapter 5 Standing crop of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in relation to epiphytic materials.....	78
5.1 Introduction.....	78
5.2 Results.....	82
5.2.1 Plot SB.....	82
5.2.2 Plot CB.....	86
5.2.3 Plot PB.....	89
5.2.4 Comparisons among plots.....	92
5.3 Discussion.....	93
5.3.1 Light deprivation by high epiphytic loads.....	94
5.3.2 High irradiance as a limiter of seagrass standing crop.....	96
5.3.2.1 Photoinhibition and photodamage.....	96
5.3.2.2 Desiccation.....	97
5.3.3 Interactions.....	98
5.4 Conclusions.....	99
Chapter 6 Interactions between <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and its epifauna.....	101
6.1 Introduction.....	101
6.2 Statistical methods – path analysis.....	102
6.3 Results.....	105
6.3.1 <i>Alaba virgata</i>	105
6.3.2 <i>Erichthonius</i>	106
6.3.3 Total invertebrates.....	107
6.3.4 Overview.....	111
6.4 Discussion.....	112
6.5 Conclusions.....	117
Chapter 7 Herbivory and succession.....	118
7.1 Introduction.....	118
7.2 Results.....	119
7.2.1 Seagrass standing crop and epiphytic cover.....	119
7.2.2 Herbivory.....	121

7.2.2.1 Observations of feeding	121
7.2.2.2 Measurements of herbivore damage	123
7.3 Discussion	126
7.3.1 Herbivory	126
7.3.2 Succession	131
7.3.3 The role of invertebrate herbivores in seagrass ecosystems	133
7.4 Conclusions	135
Chapter 8 Abiotic factors	136
8.1 Introduction	136
8.2 Statistical methods – regression tree analysis	137
8.3 Results	138
8.3.1 Tidal exposure	138
8.3.2 Water and weather conditions	139
8.3.3 Regression trees.....	142
8.3.3.1 Plot SB.....	142
8.3.3.2 Plot CB	144
8.3.3.3 Plot PB.....	144
8.4 Discussion	147
8.5 Conclusions	150
Chapter 9 Shading experiment on the impact of high irradiance on intertidal seagrasses	151
9.1 Introduction	151
9.2 Methods	152
9.2.1 Design.....	152
9.2.2 Chlorophyll concentrations	153
9.2.3 Seagrass measurements	155
9.2.4 Epiphytic loads	156
9.2.5 Invertebrates	156
9.2.6 Statistical analysis	157
9.3 Results	157
9.3.1 Chlorophyll concentrations	157
9.3.2 Seagrass measurements	160
9.3.2.1 <i>Halophila ovalis</i>	160
9.3.2.2 <i>Halodule uninervis</i>	162
9.3.3 Epiphytic loads.....	164
9.3.4 Invertebrates	167
9.3.4.1 <i>Alaba virgata</i>	167
9.3.4.2 Herbivores	167
9.3.5 Interactions	169
9.4 Discussion	172
9.5 Conclusions	181
Chapter 10 General conclusions.....	183
10.1 New perspectives.....	183
10.2 Future directions.....	187
References	190
Appendix A: Epifaunal abundance tables	214
Appendix B: Comparison of invertebrate sampling techniques: coring versus leaf cutting.....	226
Appendix C: Changes in leaf morphology	228
Appendix D: Sediment characteristics	231

List of figures

- Fig. 1.1 A simple model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions. Light is reduced by water depth and turbidity. Epiphytic material on the leaf surface further reduces light. The impact of light is positive, as it is light used for photosynthesis. Epiphytes always have a negative impact, but epiphyte grazers limit that impact. .5
- Fig. 2.1 Map showing location of study sites near Townsville, Queensland, Australia. 17
- Fig. 2.2 An example of the estimation of gastropod damage to a *Halophila ovalis* leaf. The 8-bit colour image (A) was converted to grayscale (B), then thresholded at a level that distinguished the pigmented areas with one or two layers of cells in black (C). That area was measured at 36.3 mm². The missing area was painted (D) and the total area corresponding to the area of the undamaged leaf was measured at 42.2 mm². The area of 2-layer damage is therefore the difference, 5.9 mm². The density slice option was then used to identify the intermediate level of grey representing the area of 1-layer damage in red (E). Extra red pixels representing thin tissue at the edge of the leaf were erased. The desired area was selected (F), and the red pixels measured at 8.1 mm². The percentage area of the leaf damaged by gastropods was therefore estimated at $((5.9 + (0.5 \times 8.1)) / 42.2) \times 100 = 23.6\%$ 28
- Fig. 2.3 Summary of the biological parameters measured from core samples and cut leaf samples. 29
- Fig. 3.1 Mean estimates (\pm s.e.) of the density of sea hares (A) from quadrat samples, and the AFDW (B), DW (C), and ratio AFDW:DW (D) of epiphytic material on leaves of *Halophila ovalis* and *Halodule uninervis* from June to September 2002. 37
- Fig. 3.2 Mean estimates (\pm s.e.) of leaf area index (LAI) and below ground dry weight (BGDW) of *Halophila ovalis* and *Halodule uninervis* in cores (n=10) from June to September 2002. 40
- Fig. 3.3 Mean estimates (\pm s.e.) of the leaf area index (LAI) from cores (n=5), and AFDW of epiphytic material on *Halodule uninervis* leaves from June to September 2003. Also showing the approximate period when sea hares were active in the study plot. 41
- Fig. 3.4 Mean densities and sizes (\pm s.e.) of *Halophila ovalis* leaves in core samples (n=10) from plot SB from June to September 2002. 42
- Fig. 3.5 Relationship between AFDW of material on *Halophila ovalis* leaves and leaf area per gram of below ground dry weight. Regression line fitted for the period August 2002 to December 2003 (solid line, n=15, R²=0.27, p<0.05), excluding June and July 2002 (circled), and extrapolated (dashed line) to level of AFDW recorded in June 2002. 42
- Fig. 3.6 A modification of the model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions (Fig. 1.1) to illustrate the impact of sea hare grazing on *Halophila ovalis*. In this case, light has a negative impact on the leaves. Epiphytic cover has a positive impact because it reduces damage by irradiance. Sea hares have a direct negative impact on epiphytes, but an indirect negative impact on the seagrass. 48

Fig. 4.1 Mean (\pm s.e.) densities of <i>Electroma</i> and <i>Alaba virgata</i> on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves in plot SB.....	54
Fig. 4.2 Mean (\pm s.e.) densities of <i>Erichthonius</i> sp. and anemones on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves in plot CB.	55
Fig. 4.3 Mean (\pm s.e.) densities of Amphipoda on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves in plot PB.	56
Fig. 4.4 Comparison of the mean densities of major taxa as a proportion of the total density of animals on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves over 18 dates in plot SB and 6 dates in plot CB on which both seagrass species were sampled.....	57
Fig. 4.5 Non-metric multidimensional scaling of invertebrate communities on 79 sample dates among three plots (CB, PB, SB) and two seagrass species (Hu= <i>Halodule uninervis</i> , Ho= <i>Halophila ovalis</i>). Vector lengths and angles correspond to the coefficients of correlations between the transformed abundance of the specified invertebrate taxa in each sample and the sample's value on the coordinate axes.	59
Fig. 4.6 Mean AFDW and percent cover (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on <i>H. uninervis</i> leaves from plot SB. Epiphytic material was sampled twice in June 2002, 11 days apart. Two samples in November 2002 are early and late in the month.	60
Fig. 4.7 Mean AFDW and percent cover (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on <i>H. ovalis</i> leaves from plot SB. Epiphytic material was sampled twice in June 2002, 11 days apart. Two samples in November 2002 are early and late in the month.	61
Fig. 4.8 Mean AFDW and percent cover (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on <i>H. uninervis</i> leaves from plot CB.....	62
Fig. 4.9 Mean AFDW and percent cover (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on <i>H. ovalis</i> leaves from the plot CB.....	63
Fig. 4.10 Mean AFDW and percent cover (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on <i>H. uninervis</i> leaves from plot PB.	64
Fig. 4.11 Mean (\pm s.e.) densities of <i>Alaba virgata</i> and mean percent cover of epiphytic material on <i>H. uninervis</i> leaves from plot SB. Samples were taken twice in June 2002, 11 days apart. Two samples in November 2002 are early and late in the month.....	65
Fig. 4.12 Mean (\pm s.e.) densities of <i>Erichthonius</i> and mean percent epiphytic cover on <i>H. uninervis</i> leaves in plot PB.....	66
Fig. 4.13 AFDW of epiphytic material on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves calculated as 3-point moving averages in each plot.....	67
Fig. 5.1 Graphic representation of hypothesised changes in seagrass standing crop with changes in epiphytic cover (increasing to the left) and irradiance exposure (increasing to the right). The shape of the curve is taken from typical plots of photosynthetic rates versus irradiance (P-I curves) for plants with a photoinhibitory response, such as that shown by Drew (1979) for <i>Halophila stipulacea</i>	80
Fig. 5.2 Mean LAI and BGDW (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in core samples, n=10 from June to September 2002, n=5 thereafter, from plot SB.	82

Fig. 5.3 Mean maximum lengths (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in cut leaf samples, n=10, and mean densities (\pm s.e.) of <i>H. uninervis</i> shoots in core samples, n=10 from June to September 2002, n=5 thereafter, from plot SB.	83
Fig. 5.4 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI plotted against the mean AFDW (\pm s.e.) of epiphytic material on leaves in plot SB.	84
Fig. 5.5 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> shoot density and hours of tidal exposure of plot SB between 900 h and 1600 h over 14 days prior to sampling, following the methods in chapter 2 (section 2.8.1).	84
Fig. 5.6 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI and hours of tidal exposure between 900 h and 1600 h over 14 days prior to sampling of plot SB.	85
Fig. 5.7 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI and mean percent epiphytic cover (\pm s.e.) of leaves in plot SB.	86
Fig. 5.8 Relationship between <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI lagged forward one date and percent epiphytic cover over two years in plot SB.	86
Fig. 5.9 Mean LAI and BGDW (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in core samples, n=10, from plot CB.	87
Fig. 5.10 Mean densities (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> shoots in core samples, n=10, from plot CB.	87
Fig. 5.11 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI, epiphytic AFDW (\pm s.e.), and anemone densities per leaf area in plot CB.	88
Fig. 5.12 Relationship between <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI and percent epiphytic cover from June 2002 to July 2003 in plot CB, n=11.	89
Fig. 5.13 Mean LAI (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> in cores from plot PB, n=5.	90
Fig. 5.14 Mean BGDW (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> in cores from plot PB, n=5.	90
Fig. 5.15 Mean densities (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> shoots in cores from plot PB, n=5.	91
Fig. 5.16 Relationship between <i>Halodule uninervis</i> BGDW and percent epiphytic cover over two years in plot PB.	92
Fig. 5.17 Relationship between combined LAI of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> , and percent epiphytic cover over two years in plot PB.	92
Fig. 5.18 Changes in LAI values calculated as 3-point moving averages in each plot. Total LAI in plot PB is the sum of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> . In plots SB and CB, only <i>H. uninervis</i> (<i>H. u.</i>) LAI is presented. Other similar seagrass species, <i>Zostera muelleri</i> and <i>Thalassia hemprichii</i> , in plots SB and CB respectively, made a minor contribution to the total LAI in those plots.	93
Fig. 5.19 A modified model of interactions among invertebrates, epiphytes, and the standing crop of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> . Light, as modified by the amount of epiphytic cover, may have both positive and negative impacts on the seagrass, but the leaf area of seagrass has a positive impact on epiphyte development.	100
Fig. 6.1 Path diagram representing the prevailing model of seagrass-epiphyte-grazer interactions.	103

Fig. 6.2 Path model of <i>Alaba</i> effects on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in plot SB, n=21. *p<0.05.	106
Fig. 6.3 Path model of <i>Erichthonius</i> effects on LAI, calculated as the combined value of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> in plot PB (n=17), and <i>H. uninervis</i> in plot CB from June 2002 to June 2003 (n=10). †0.05<p<0.10, *p<0.05, ** p<0.01.....	107
Fig. 6.4 Relationships between epifaunal abundance and LAI (untransformed) in plots PB (r=-0.78, p<0.001), CB (r=-0.64, p<0.05), and SB (r=-0.64, p<0.005). LAI in plot PB is the combined value of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> , but in other plots is only <i>H. uninervis</i> . The relationship in plot CB was calculated for the period June 2002 to June 2003 (solid circles) only. Note the differences in the scale of LAI among the plots.	109
Fig. 6.5 Relationships between percent epiphytic cover and LAI (both untransformed) in plots PB (r=0.53, p<0.05), CB (R ² =0.80, p<0.005), and SB (r=0.44, p<0.05). LAI in plot PB is the combined value of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea</i> <i>serrulata</i> , but in other plots is only <i>H. uninervis</i> . The quadratic function in plot CB was calculated for the period June 2002 to July 2003 (solid circles) only. Note the differences in the scale of LAI among the plots. Plots PB and CB redrawn from Fig. 5.12 and Fig. 5.17.***	110
Fig. 6.6 Path model of effects of LAI on the total density of epifauna and epiphytic cover (all variables transformed) in a multigroup analysis. LAI calculated as the combined value of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> in plot PB (n=17), and <i>H. uninervis</i> in plot SB (n=21) and plot CB from June 2002 to June 2003 (n=10). †0.05<p<0.10, *p<0.05, ** p<0.01. *** p<0.001.	111
Fig. 6.7 Schematic diagram representing interactions among <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI, and cover by epiphytic material and epifauna. Coverage by epiphytic material or epifauna increases to a maximum that forces a fall in LAI, represented by the arrows. At maximum epiphytic cover, a fall in LAI results in a decrease in epiphytic cover, and an increase in epifauna. At maximum epifaunal cover, LAI falls to zero.	115
Fig. 7.1 Mean LAI (± s.e.) of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> in core samples from plot SB, n=10 from June to September 2002, n=5 thereafter. Letters A to D correspond to points of reduced <i>H. ovalis</i> LAI, as referred to in text. Percent epiphytic cover of leaves as in Fig. 4.7, with data for June and July 2002 estimated from regression relationship with AFDW.	120
Fig. 7.2 Patterns of change in LAIs of seagrass species in plot SB expressed as 3-point running averages.	121
Fig. 7.3 <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves showing various types of damage. Leaves collected from plot SB for epiphytes and epifauna on dates A to D as in Fig. 7.1.....	122
Fig. 7.4 <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf showing damage typical of isopod feeding.	123
Fig. 7.5 Percent surface (± s.e.) of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves damaged by gastropods in samples collected to estimate epiphytic loads and epifaunal abundances in plots SB and CB. Letters A to D as in Fig. 7.1.	124
Fig. 7.6 Proportion of expected <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf area missing in core samples from plot SB. Letters A to D as in Fig. 7.1.	125

Fig. 7.7 <i>Halophila ovalis</i> LAI versus the proportion of leaves missing in core samples from plot SB.	126
Fig. 8.1 Hours of exposure of each plot by low tides, between 900 – 1600 h, over 14 days before sampling.	139
Fig. 8.2 Salinities of water samples taken at low tide in each plot.	140
Fig. 8.3 Cumulative rainfall over 14 days prior to sampling dates in each plot.	141
Fig. 8.4 Mean non-directional wind speed at 1500 h over 14 days prior to sampling dates in each plot.	141
Fig. 8.5 Water Temperatures in plots SB and CB during low afternoon tides. Complete data for plot PB are not available for the same time of day. Also shown are mean air temperatures at 1500 h over 14 days prior to sampling in plot SB. Similar air temperature curves were calculated for plots CB and PB, but are not shown.	142
Fig. 8.6 Regression trees of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI and BGDW in plot SB. BGDW means were measured as g·m ⁻² , temp. = temperature, invert. = invertebrates.	143
Fig. 8.7 Regression trees of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> LAI and BGDW in plot SB, where “missing” is the missing portion of <i>H. ovalis</i> leaves attributed to crustacean feeding, and <i>H. u.</i> = <i>Halodule uninervis</i>	144
Fig. 8.8 Regression trees of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> LAI and BGDW in plot PB, where exp. = exposure, Epi. = epiphytic, and “All- <i>Elect</i> ” is the total density of all invertebrates excluding <i>Electroma</i>	145
Fig. 8.9 Regression tree of total LAI, i.e. combine <i>Halodule uninervis</i> and <i>Cymodocea serrulata</i> LAI, in plot PB. Epi. = epiphytic, and “All- <i>Elect</i> ” is the total density of all invertebrates excluding <i>Electroma</i>	146
Fig. 9.1 A shaded plot at Shelly Beach	153
Fig. 9.2 Mean (\pm s.e.) concentrations of chlorophyll <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> , and the ratio chlorophyll <i>a:b</i> , per cm ² of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf from treatment and control plots, n=9, except after 1 day of exposure when 5 plot pairs were sampled. Sampling occurred on the day shades were applied to the treatment plots (days of exposure = -29), the day shades were removed (days of exposure = 0), and subsequent days of exposure as indicated.	158
Fig. 9.3 Mean (\pm s.e.) concentrations of chlorophyll <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> , and the ratio chlorophyll <i>a:b</i> , per cm ² of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf from 9 treatment and control plots from the day shade treatment plots were exposed to ambient light (days of exposure = 0).	159
Fig. 9.4 Mean (\pm s.e.) values of LAI (A), leaf density (B), leaf size (C), and BGDW (D) of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> in core samples from 9 paired control and treatment plots before shading, after 29 days of shading treatment, and after 29 days of exposure to ambient light.	161
Fig. 9.5 Mean (\pm s.e.) values of LAI (A), shoots density (B), and BGDW (C) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in core samples from 9 paired control and treatment plots before shading, after 29 days of shading treatment, and after 29 days of exposure to ambient light.	163
Fig. 9.6 Mean (\pm s.e.) length of leaves measured in the field (A), and mean (\pm s.e.) of the lengths (B) and mean breadths (C) in scanned images of leaves cut to sample	

epiphytic material from 9 pairs of control and treatment plots after 29 days of shading, and after 29 days of exposure.	164
Fig. 9.7 Mean (\pm s.e.) AFDW of epiphytic material per cm ² of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf from 9 pairs of control and treatment plots after 29 days of shading, and after 29 days of exposure.	165
Fig. 9.8 Mean (\pm s.e.) AFDW of epiphytic material per cm ² of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf from 9 pairs of control and treatment plots after 29 days of shading and exposure, and from 4 pairs of plots after 4 days of exposure.	166
Fig. 9.9 Treatment plot four days after removal of shade. The dark material on seagrass surrounding the plot is epiphytic algae.	166
Fig. 9.10 Mean (\pm s.e.) number of <i>Alaba virgata</i> per cm ² on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves sampled to estimate the epiphytic loads in 9 pairs of control and treatment plots after 29 days of shading and exposure, and from 4 pairs of plots after 4 days of exposure.	167
Fig. 9.11 Estimated percent damage (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf surface areas by gastropods. Leaves sampled to estimate epiphytic loads in 9 paired control and treatment plots after 29 days of shading, and after 29 days of exposure.	168
Fig. 9.12 The estimated leaf surface area of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> missing as a proportion of the expected surface area (\pm s.e.) of leaves in core samples from 9 paired control and treatment plots before shading, after 29 days of shading treatment, and after 29 days of exposure to ambient light.	169
Fig. 9.13 Plot of the values of the contrast due to shading treatment effects on LAI versus the difference between treatment and control plots in chlorophyll <i>a</i> concentrations in <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves after 29 days of shading. Positive values on y-axis represent increases in LAI in shade plots relative to controls after shading.	170
Fig. 9.14 Plot of the values of the contrast due to exposure treatment effects on LAI versus the difference between treatment and control plots in chlorophyll <i>a</i> concentrations in <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves after 29 days of exposure. Positive values on y-axis represent increases in LAI of shade plots relative to controls after exposure.	171
Fig. 10.1 A modified model of interactions among invertebrates, epiphytes, and the standing crop of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> . Herbivores have a negative impact that can be modified by epiphytes. Light may have either a negative or positive impact, and the amount of light reaching the leaves is reduced by epiphytes.	186
Fig. 10.2 A modified model of interactions among invertebrates, epiphytes, and the standing crop of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> . The seagrass has a positive effect on epiphytes, but a negative impact on suspension feeders, both of which may reduce light reaching the leaves.	188
Fig. B.1 Mean number (\pm s.e.) of Amphipoda per cm ² <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf in cut leaf and core samples in plots PB and plot CB (non-transformed data).	227
Fig. B.2 Mean number (\pm s.e.) of <i>Electroma</i> per cm ² <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf in cut leaf and core samples in plots SB (non-transformed data).	227

Fig. C.1 Mean densities and mean size (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaves in cores from plot SB. Data from the first four sampling dates are also presented in Fig. 3.4. Letters A to D as in Fig. 7.1.	228
Fig. C.2 Mean maximum lengths and mean breadths (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> in cut leaf samples (n=10) from plot SB. Mean maximum lengths are also presented in Fig. 5.3.	229
Fig. C.3 Mean LAI values (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves <1.5 mm and >1.5 mm wide in core samples (n=5) from plot PB.	229
Fig. C.4 Mean maximum length (\pm s.e.) of <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves >1.5 mm wide in cut samples from plot PB.	230
Fig. D.1 Weight of material retained on sieves of different mesh sizes expressed as a proportion of the dry weight of sediment samples.	231

List of tables

Table 1.1 Studies reporting experimental manipulations of epiphyte grazers on seagrass. In all studies, treatments with grazers had significantly reduced epiphyte biomass and/or chlorophyll <i>a</i> concentrations compared to treatments without grazers. Some also reported increases in measurements of seagrass abundance, growth, or productivity. Studies that also manipulated nutrients are indicated **. Invertebrates are identified as Gastropoda (G), Amphipoda (A), Isopoda (I), or Decapoda (D).	4
Table 4.1 Summary of the mean densities of major invertebrate taxa averaged over all sampling dates, presented as the number of animals per 100 cm ² of leaf surface. Note that data from plot SB includes two sampling dates 11 days apart in June 2002. For more details see Appendix A.	53
Table 4.2 Mean measures of epiphytic load on <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaves over the course of the study.....	67
Table A.1 Mean number of invertebrates per 100 cm ² <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf surface in plot SB, n=10 on each sampling date. Part 1 of 2.	215
Table A.2 Mean number of invertebrates per 100 cm ² <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf surface in plot SB on each sampling date. Part 1 of 2.	217
Table A.3 Mean number of invertebrates per 100 cm ² <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf surface in plot CB, n=10 on each sampling date. Part 1 of 3.....	219
Table A.4 Mean number of invertebrates per 100 cm ² <i>Halophila ovalis</i> leaf surface in plot CB, n=5 on each sampling date.	222
Table A.5 Mean number of invertebrates per 100 cm ² <i>Halodule uninervis</i> leaf surface in plot PB, n=10 on each sampling date. Part 1 of 3.	223