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**The influence of pelagic life history on the quality of
tropical goatfish (family Mullidae) at settlement**

by
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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department
of Marine Biology at James Cook University of North Queensland,
in December 1992

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ABSTRACT

High variability in the replenishment of coral reef fish populations by pelagic larvae has been extensively documented. Little is known of the mechanisms underlying this variability or the processes within the plankton that determine the growth and developmental rates of larval fish. Ultimately, these processes will not only influence numerical abundance but also the quality of the recruiting larvae. A common assumption is that fish settle to a reef with similar probabilities of survival and success. The physical condition (e.g. size, biochemical composition and muscle development) of the settling reef fish, and how that interacts with their performance (e.g swimming speed), may influence which individuals survive to join the reproductive population. This study examines how processes within the pelagic life stage influence the quality of newly settling reef fish and explores the ramifications of variable quality to the dynamics of reef fish populations.

The ecology of the pelagic life-stages of goatfish (family Mullidae) was investigated from samples collected in the Lizard Island section of the northern Great Barrier Reef (GBR) (1986 - 1991). A plankton-mesh purse seine was used to collect pelagic stage fish from around small aggregation rafts (1 x 1m). Patterns of distribution around the Lizard Island fringing reef and across the GBR lagoon were examined. Five species were caught, the most abundant being *Upeneus tragula* and *U. moluccensis*. Pelagic stage mullids were found to form large schools (1000+ individuals) that comprised of a number of species (as many as 5), each with a broad size distribution. The largest individuals of each species caught were usually competent to settle.

A distinct metamorphosis accompanied settlement to the reef. Fish changed pigmentation from their silvery pelagic colouration to a mottled cream. Over the same 6 - 12 h period, major restructuring occurred to the barbel sensory system. These are outgrowths of the gustatory system, consisting of batteries of tastebud cells, and are important for the detection and capture of prey items after settlement. Barbel length abruptly increased (up to 52 %) as did mean taste-bud size (up to 100%). Barbels were found to vary markedly in their state of development at settlement.

Age, size and body mass at settlement were examined for goatfish, *Upeneus tragula*, among five stations across the GBR lagoon, over time periods ranging from days to three years. Larval durations and fish length showed equally high levels of variability (ranges: 25 - 37d, 19 - 31 mm standard length respectively). Significant differences in age, length and weight at settlement were found at all spatial and temporal scales. Growth rates averaged over the whole larval period ranged from 0.55 - 1.0 mm/d. Similarly high levels of variability were found in the biochemical composition of newly settled *U. tragula* over ten samples collected over two summers (1990/91, 1991/92). Relationships of nine commonly used measures of fish condition with fish length were very poor. Maximum non-sustainable

swimming speed and biochemical composition were particularly poorly correlated with fish size ($r \leq 0.2$).

Two experiments examined the extent to which food availability and water temperature during the late larval stages influenced the high levels of variability in age and body characteristics of *U. tragula* at settlement. Feeding history influenced size, age, muscle development and body composition of fish at settlement. Water temperature (25 - 30 °C range) significantly influenced only age at settlement. These experiments suggested that the processes of growth and differentiation for late pelagic stage fish dissociated from one another under certain environmental conditions. Over a natural range, water temperature did not dissociate growth and developmental rates. Food availability strongly influenced the relationship between these processes and ultimately governed the age and condition of the fish at metamorphosis. Differences in the temperature regime and feeding history within the pelagic life-stage accounted for much of the variability in growth characteristics among samples.

Two preliminary experiments examined whether the size or body condition at which a fish settled biased the probability of it surviving the initially high predation pressure. Results suggest that predation by the lizardfish, *Synodus variegatus*, was random with respect to both size and biochemical composition of the newly settled goatfish, *U. tragula*. This suggests that the influence of the pelagic life history will extend well into the post-settlement stages and may ultimately influence which individuals join the reproductive population.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. General Introduction

1.1 Background	1
1.2 Thesis outline	4
1.3 Terminology	6

Chapter 2. Late pelagic-stage goatfishes: distribution patterns and inferences on schooling behaviour

2.1 Synopsis	7
2.2 Introduction	8
2.3 Materials and Methods	
Sampling gear and species identification	9
Methodological comparison	10
Species selectivity	10
Sampling design	11
School structure	13
2.4 Results	
Methodological comparison	14
Species selectivity	14
Spatial and temporal abundance around Lizard Island	15
Cross shelf abundance patterns	16
School structure	17
2.5 Discussion	19

Chapter 3. Development and changes at settlement in the barbel structure of the reef fish, *Upeneus tragula*

3.1 Synopsis	24
3.2 Introduction	25
3.3 Materials and methods	
Collection	26
Barbel development	26
Variability in taste-bud size at settlement	27
Effect of food availability and water temperature on barbel development	27
Histology	28
Analysis	28
3.4 Results	
Morphological description	29
Barbel development	30
Variability in taste-bud size at settlement	32
Feeding and temperature experiments	32
3.5 Discussion	34

Chapter 4. Variability in age and size at settlement in a reef fish: how much is there and what can it tell us about the process of settlement?

4.1 Synopsis	38
4.2 Introduction	39

4.3	Materials and methods	
	Sampling	41
	Ageing	42
4.4	Results	
	Overall size, age and weight distributions	43
	Spatio-temporal variation in size, age and weight	45
	Growth rates	46
	Increment spacing and the otolith/fish size relationship	47
4.5	Discussion	48
Chapter 5. Quality of the reef fish, <i>Upeneus tragula</i>, at settlement		
5.1	Synopsis	55
5.2	Introduction	56
5.3	Materials and methods	
	Sampling	58
	Variability in the quality of newly settled fish	58
	Measurement of burst speed	58
	Effect of feeding history on burst speed at settlement	59
	Comparison of measures of condition	59
5.4	Results	
	Variability in the quality of newly settled fish	60
	Effect of food quantity on burst speed at settlement	61
	Comparison of measures of condition	62
5.5	Discussion	63
Chapter 6. Effects of feeding history on the growth characteristics of the reef fish, <i>Upeneus tragula</i>, at settlement		
6.1	Synopsis	67
6.2	Introduction	68
6.3	Materials and methods	
	Sampling and experimental design	69
	Variables measured	70
	Analysis	71
6.4	Results	
	Morphometrics	72
	Age at settlement	73
	Muscle development	74
	Body constituents	74
	Feeding behaviour	75
6.4	Discussion	76
Chapter 7. Effects of temperature during the pelagic life stage on the growth characteristics of the reef fish, <i>Upeneus tragula</i>, at settlement		
7.1	Synopsis	81
7.2	Introduction	82
7.3	Materials and methods	
	Water temperature	83
	Temperature experiment	83
	Analysis	85

7.4 Results	
Water temperature	85
Morphometrics from the temperature experiment	86
Age at settlement	86
Muscle development	88
Body constituents	88
Feeding rates	89
7.5 Discussion	89
Chapter 8. General Discussion	
8.1 Major findings	95
8.2 Is fish quality important at settlement?	99
8.3 Conclusions	101
Literature cited	
Appendix 1	
Appendix 2	