THE EVOLUTION OF ANIMAL SOCIETIES:
MONOGAMY, GROUP-LIVING AND CONFLICT
IN A CORAL-DWELLING FISH

Thesis submitted by
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January 2007

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Marine Biology
within the School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture
James Cook University
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Marian Y.L. Wong
ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental goals of behavioural ecology is to understand the evolution of mating systems and determine how they influence the formation, structure and stability of animal societies. Monogamous mating systems are particularly challenging to understand, since one sex generally has a higher potential reproductive rate than the other and should therefore be selected to mate multiply. In addition, monogamous mating systems often occur within the context of social groups. The presence of other group members and hence potential mates makes the evolution of monogamy even more perplexing, since an individual’s immediate opportunities for polygamy are greatly enhanced. Monogamy within the context of social groups also poses problems for understanding why other group members tolerate group-living, given that they are excluded from reproduction, and how conflict over reproduction between group members is resolved if groups are to be stable. In this thesis, I investigated the ecological determinants of the evolution of monogamy and its consequences for the formation, structure and stability of social groups in a coral-dwelling goby, *Paragobiodon xanthosomus* (Gobiidae).

In chapter 2, I quantified the social structure of natural groups and determined the mating system of *P. xanthosomus*. Regardless of group size, groups consisted of one mature male and female plus several smaller immature females that were organised into a size-based dominance hierarchy. Observations of breeding behaviour confirmed that *P. xanthosomus* exhibits a monogamous mating system in which only the mature male and female breed at the expense of the other female group members. To address the evolution of monogamy despite the immediate availability of multiple females within groups, I used field and aquarium experiments to test whether competition between females over limiting nest sites, food or paternal care constrained
males to monogamy. Supplemental feeding increased the fecundity of breeding females, suggesting that food is a limited resource for reproduction. Supplemental feeding did not however result in the maturation of other female group members. This suggests that monogamy has evolved because dominant females suppress the reproduction of subordinate females because they are competitors for limited food. Finally, males in pairs that received supplemental food exhibited a diminishing ability to care for enlarged clutches laid by similarly-sized breeding females. This suggests that constraints on paternal care provide additional benefits for females from maintaining a monogamous mating system.

In chapter 3, I investigated the consequences of the monogamous mating system on the maintenance of group-living in *P. xanthosomus*. Specifically, I applied cooperative breeding theory to determine the factors promoting group-living by non-breeding subordinates given that they obtain no current reproduction within groups due to the monogamous mating system. Using field and aquarium experiments in which coral saturation, costs of movement between corals and the size of available corals was manipulated, I demonstrated that non-breeding group members tolerate group-living because of high costs of movement and benefits from inheriting a territory of high quality. In contrast, coral saturation and position in the hierarchy appeared to have no effect on the occurrence of subordinate dispersal.

In chapter 4, I investigated the mechanisms involved in resolving conflict over rank between group members, and thus promoting the stability social groups given the unequal distribution of reproduction between group members due to the monogamous mating system. Specifically, I tested whether the combination of punishment by dominants in the form of eviction from the group, and cooperation by subordinates in the form of growth regulation had evolved as a means of conflict resolution. Firstly, I conducted a removal experiment in the field and showed that non-breeding subordinate group members form size-based queues in which they
wait to inherit dominant breeding status. Conflict over reproduction should be particularly intense in queues since subordinates gain no reproduction while they wait and face the prospect of dying before inheriting a breeding position. Detailed quantification of size ratios between individuals of adjacent rank in groups revealed a prevalence of a specific size ratio between individuals, and analysis of individual growth rates in the field demonstrated that the specific size ratio is maintained over time via the regulation of subordinate growth rates. Staged contest experiments in aquaria between individuals of adjacent rank revealed that the specific size ratio represents a threshold above which subordinates can evict their immediate dominant from the group, but are much more likely to be evicted by their immediate dominant themselves. This suggest that threshold size ratios are being maintained by subordinates as a form of cooperation whereby they avoid becoming a threat to their immediate dominants, and that such cooperation arises in response to the threat of punishment by dominants. Societies in *P. xanthosomus* are therefore being stabilised as a result of punishment and cooperation acting in concert to promote the resolution of conflict over rank between group members.

Finally in chapter 5, I used a supplemental feeding and removal experiments to explicitly test whether: (1) disproportional acquisition of food resources as a result of differential competitive ability contributed to the maintenance of size differences between individuals within size-based queues, and (2) subordinates are capable of regulating their own growth to avoid inflicting costs on dominants. Supplemental feeding resulted in elevated growth rates of subordinates in both the presence and absence of the breeding female, suggesting that food limitation on subordinates due to competitive exclusion by dominants promotes the maintenance of size differences within size-based queues. Feeding of rank 4 subordinates resulted in some restraining their own growth by reducing their food intake, demonstrating that subordinates are capable of regulating their own growth to avoid breaching the threshold size ratio. The remaining
rank 4 subordinates grew in breach of the threshold size ratio and were consequently evicted from the group, suggesting that food availability may also influence the stability of queues. Taken together, both competition over food and subordinate growth restraint in response to the threat of eviction appear to be important in regulating subordinate growth rates and in maintaining well-defined size differences within size-based queues, although social regulation is likely to be the primary factor ensuring the stability of *P. xanthosomus* societies over time.

In summary, this thesis represents a quantitative and systematic investigation into the mechanisms responsible for, and the links between, the evolution and maintenance of monogamy, social groups, and conflict resolution in a monogamous, group-living fish. In so doing, it provides a comprehensive picture of the mechanisms underlying the formation, structure and stability *P. xanthosomus* societies, and contributes to a greater understanding of the processes governing the evolution and maintenance of animal societies in general.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of access.................................................................2
Abstract..................................................................................3
Table of contents.................................................................7
List of figures..........................................................................9
Statement of sources.........................................................13
Acknowledgements............................................................14

Chapter 1: General Introduction.............................................16


  2.1. Abstract.................................................................33
  2.2. Introduction............................................................34
  2.3. Methods.................................................................40
  2.4. Results.................................................................50
  2.5. Discussion.............................................................67

Chapter 3: Experimental tests of the constraints and benefits of group-living in a coral-dwelling fish.

  3.1. Abstract.................................................................78
  3.2. Introduction............................................................79
  3.3. Methods.................................................................84
Chapter 4: The threat of punishment promotes cooperation and stabilises size-based queues in a coral-dwelling fish.

4.1. Abstract

4.2. Introduction

4.3. Methods

4.4. Results

4.5. Discussion

Chapter 5: The effects of food limitation and social regulation on the stability of size-based queues in a coral-dwelling fish.

5.1. Abstract

5.2. Introduction

5.3. Methods

5.4. Results

5.5. Discussion

Chapter 6: General Discussion

References: Habitat patch size, facultative monogamy and sex change in a coral-dwelling fish, Caracanthus unipinna
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Photographs of study species, *Paragobiodon xanthosomus* (Gobiidae) showing side and front view ………………………………………………………………………………………………………31

Figure 1.2 Photographs of a colony of *Seriatophora hystrix* (Pocilloporidae) (top) and its branches (bottom)…………………………………………………………………………………………….32

Figure 2.1 Map of lizard island showing research station and reefs where field observations, experiments and collections were conducted. Dotted lines demarcate reef zones; Solid lines demarcate land zones…………………………………………………………………………………………57

Figure 2.2 Nest site (N) of *P. xanthosomus* found at the base of a coral branch (C), consisting of eggs (E) laid onto a patch of algae (A) that covers the nest site……………………………………….58

Figure 2.3 Experimental set-up for the paternal care constraints experiment. Treatments A and B were simultaneously used to test whether the fecundity of the breeding female was food limited (‘Food limitation’ section). Treatments C and D were used to test whether males were capable of caring for an enlarged clutch……………………………………………………………………59

Figure 2.4a-d Sex cell allocation of *P. xanthosomus*. a) Cross section of a testis lobe from a mature male showing spermatozoa (SZ); b) Detail of an ovarian lobe from a mature female showing pre-vitellogenic (PO) and vitellogenic oocytes (VO); c) Ovarian structure from an immature female, showing only pre-vitellogenic oocytes (PO); d) Ovarian structure from a
‘maturing’ female containing primarily pre-vitellogenic oocytes (PO) and one vitellogenic oocyte (VO)…………………………………………………………………………………….60

**Figure 2.5** Mean body sizes ± S.E. of group members in relation to their size rank within the group…………………………………………………………………………………….61

**Figure 2.6** Relationship between the body sizes of breeding males and females………………..62

**Figure 2.7** Relationship between coral size and social group size……………………………63

**Figure 2.8** Mean percentage ± S.E. of agonistic displays by female (striped bars) and male (filled bars) residents towards intruders of the same and opposite sex……………………………………64

**Figure 2.9** Percentage frequency of trials in which female intruders were evicted by dominant, breeding females in relation to the reproductive status and size of the female intruders………..65

**Figure 2.10** Mean clutch sizes ± S.E. laid by females (circles) and hatched by males (squares) in unfed and fed treatments………………………………………………………………………66

**Figure 3.1** Experimental set up for the habitat choice experiment…………………………..90

**Figure 3.2** Proportions of subordinates that dispersed to unsaturated (diagonal lines) and saturated (filled) coral colonies that were placed either 10cm or 100cm away from their home coral…………………………………………………………………………………..96
Figure 3.3 Relationship between the difference in coral size and the percentage of subordinate females choosing to form groups and delay breeding on the larger coral.

Figure 4.1 Bar graph illustrating the body-size measurement bias, showing counts of first decimal places for original data with measurement error (black), and counts of first decimal places for original data with correction for measurement error (grey).

Figure 4.2a Frequency distributions of size ratios between group members of adjacent rank. The graph illustrates the observed relative frequency distribution (mean ± S.D.) of ratios between individuals of adjacent rank after correction for measurement error (bars), and the expected relative frequency distribution of ratios generated under a null model by a Monte Carlo procedure (line).

Figure 4.2b Cumulative frequency distributions of Kolmogorov-Smirnov P-values. The observed distribution of p-values generated from the comparison of 10 observed and 10 expected size ratio frequency distributions (solid line) was compared to a uniform cumulative frequency distribution of p-values (dashed line).

Figure 4.3 Percentage increase in standard length of subordinates per day (filled circles) and dominants (open circles) in relation to the initial size ratio between themselves and their immediate dominant or subordinate respectively.
Figure 4.4: Percentage frequency of dominant (black bars), subordinate (white bars) and any evictions (grey bars) occurring in relation to the size ratio between contestants in staged contests.

Figure 5.1: Flow diagram illustrating the two potential mechanisms promoting the resolution of conflict over rank between group members and hence the stability of size-based queues over time.

Figure 5.2: Specific predictions relating to the effects of each experimental treatment (1, 2, 3, 4) on the growth rates of subordinates if a) food limitation, b) social regulation, or c) both mechanisms influence subordinate growth rates.

Figure 5.3: Growth rates (percent change in SL / day) of subordinates in unfed (circles) and fed (squares) treatments, with or without the presence of the breeding female.

Figure 5.4: Mean ± S.E. body-size ratios at the start (initial) and end (final) of the supplemental feeding and female removal experiment. a) Treatment 1 where subordinates (ranks 3-5) were unfed in the presence of the breeding female, b) treatment 2 where subordinates were fed in the presence of the breeding female, c) treatment 3 where subordinates were unfed in the absence of the breeding female and d) treatment 4 where subordinates were fed in the absence of the breeding female.

Figure 5.5: Mean size ratios ± S.E between ranks 3 and 4 at the start (striped bars) and end (filled bars) of 21 days supplemental feeding of rank 4 fish.
STATEMENT OF SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work that has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references given.

9 / 03 / 2007

Marian Y.L. Wong
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisors, Drs. Philip Munday, Geoff Jones, Peter Buston and Lynne Van Herwerden for their amazing mentoring throughout the PhD. I am indebted to them for their continued guidance, dedication and support.

Special thanks to the Northcote Trust, U.K. for funding my PhD at James Cook University without which it would not have been possible.

Thanks to my friends, Jennifer Donelson, Bryan Murphy, Jean-Paul Hobbs, Annika Persson, Andy MacNee and Adrian Cardoni, who have been such wonderful slaves in the field. I will not forget your great enthusiasm, initiative and company.

Thanks to the staff at Lizard Island Research Station for all their help over the years. A Lizard Island Doctoral Fellowship and funding from James Cook University supported my field work at Lizard Island.

Thanks to colleagues who have reviewed and made helpful comments on my research, particularly Drs. Sean Connolly, Ken Clifton, Mike Cant, Jordi Bascompte, Elizabeth Tibbetts, James Dale Simon Robson, Bob Warner and Nick Davies. Thanks also to the crew at the ISBE conference 2006 for interesting and thought-provoking discussions.
Thanks to Dr. Craig Syms for help with statistics, and to Quentin Huys for helping me with matlab. Also thanks to those who have provided assistance with laboratory work, including Sue Reilly for histology and Will Robbins and Vanessa Hernamen for otoliths.

Special thanks to my parents for their love and support during my PhD, and to Ross for his love, understanding and ridiculously good humour throughout.

Last but not least, I thank *Paragobiodon xanthosomus* for living such fascinating lives.