# On Theory in Ecology

Pablo A. Marquet
Andrew P. Allen
James H. Brown, et al.

SANTA FE INSTITUTE

# On theory in ecology

by

Pablo A. Marquet[1,2,3,4], Andrew P. Allen[5], James H. Brown[6], Jennifer A. Dunne[3,7], Brian J. Enquist[3,8], James F. Gillooly[9], Patricia A. Gowaty[10,11], Jessica L. Green[12], ‚John Harte[13], Steve P. Hubbell[10,11], James O´Dwyer[14], Jordan G. Okie[15], Annette Ostling[16], Mark Ritchie[17], David Storch[18,19], and Geoffrey B. West[3]

[1] Departamento de Ecología, Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Alameda 340, C.P. 6513677, Santiago, Chile. E-mail: pmarquet@bio.puc.cl
[2] Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity (IEB), Casilla 653, Santiago, Chile.
[3] The Santa Fe Institute, 1399 Hyde Park Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501, USA.
[4] Instituto de Sistemas Complejos de Valparaíso (ISCV), Subida Artillería 470, Valparaíso, Chile.
[5] Department of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.
[6] Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA.
[7] Pacific Ecoinformatics and Computational Ecology Lab, 1604 McGee Ave., Berkeley, CA 94703, USA
[8] Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Arizona, BioSciences West, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.
[9] Department of Biology, University of Florida, Room 223 Bartram Hall, PO Box 118525, Gainesville, FL 32611-852
[10] Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology and Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA.
[11] Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute
[12] Institute of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, 335 Pacific Hall, 5289 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403, USA.
[13] University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720
[14] Department of Plant Biology, University of Illinois, Urbana IL USA.
[15] School of Earth and Space Exploration, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA.
[16] Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Michigan 2005 Kraus Natural Science Building, 830 North University Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1048, USA.
[17] Department of Biology, Syracuse University, 108 College Place, 122 Lyman Hall, Syracuse NY 13244, USA.
[18] Center for Theoretical Study, Charles University of Academy  Sciences of the CR, Praha, Czech Republic
[19] Department of Ecology, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Praha, Czech Republic

Corresponding author: Pablo A. Marquet
E-mail: pmarquet@bio.puc.cl

**Abstract**

We argue for expanding the role of theory in ecology to accelerate scientific progress, enhance ability to address environmental challenges, foster the development of synthesis and unification, and improve design of experiments and large-scale environmental monitoring programs. To achieve these goals it is essential to foster the development of what we call "efficient" theories, which have several key attributes. Efficient theories 1) are grounded in first principles, 2) are usually expressed in the language of mathematics, 3) make few assumptions and generate a large number of predictions per free parameter, 4) are approximate, and 5) their predictions provide well understood standards for comparison with empirical data. We contend that the development and successive refinement of efficient theories provide a solid foundation for advancing environmental science in the era of Big Data.

**Keywords** Theory unification; Metabolic Theory; Neutral Theory of Biodiversity; Maximum Entropy Theory of Ecology; Big Data.

*"The grand aim of all science is to cover the greatest number of empirical facts by logical deduction from the smallest number of hypotheses or axioms."*
Albert Einstein

## Introduction

Science aims to deepen our understanding of the natural world. Progress in science arises from the tension between induction and deduction, empiricism and theory. Data gathered via observation and experimentation provide clues about the structure and function of the natural world, and theory organizes existing data and new ideas into a cohesive conceptual framework to both explain existing observations and make novel predictions. Theory reduces the apparent complexity of the natural world, because it captures essential features of a system, provides abstracted characterizations, and makes predictions for as-yet unobserved phenomena that additional data can test.

There are many ideas about the nature of theory in science and in philosophy (Nagel 1961, NRC 2008). In ecology, there is currently no consensus regarding the definition, role, and generality of theories, as discussed in several essays (e.g. Pickett et al. 1994, Scheiner and Willig 2011). It is not surprising that ecologists use the label 'theory' to refer to many things. Theory meanings range from highly specific to very general, from hypotheses (e.g., the hypothesis of clutch overlap, or the intermediate disturbance hypothesis) to conceptual frameworks for complete fields or research programs (e.g., macroecology, conservation biology). A survey of the ecological literature finds reference to 78 theories (see Supporting Material Table S1). Almost half of which have been mentioned in more than two publications (Figure 1, Supporting Material Table S1), suggesting that ecology is awash with theories.  But, is ecology theory rich?  Are there different types of theories in ecology, with different precepts and goals? What theories constitute a foundational conceptual framework for building a more predictive, quantitative, and useful science of ecology? A field with a large and diverse number of theories may be a healthy one, but this can also hamper progress, stifle innovation and lead to inadequate policy to manage, mitigate and adapt to undesirable environmental impacts. A discussion of the different types of theories in ecology is a timely and necessary exercise.

Here we define a theory as a hierarchical framework that contains clearly formulated postulates, based on a minimal set of assumptions, from which a set of predictions logically follows.  Theory is inherently deductive.  Advances in data stimulate theory, and new theory refines, expands and replaces old theory thereby correcting flaws, explaining and predicting phenomena in the domain in which they apply. As such, the evolution of a successful theory is for it to become more general, leading to detailed models that apply the theory to a more focused class of phenomena in a more restricted domain.

## Is ecology theory rich?

The richness of theories in ecology is to some degree illusory. As mentioned above, several "theories" (see Supporting Material Table S1) are actually specific hypotheses or models. Ecologists and other scientists often use the terms "model" and "theory" indistinguishably (e.g., Leijonhufvud 1997; Ginzburg and Jensen 2004), but "model" and "theory" are fundamentally different. Models usually aim to 1) increase our understanding or

solve a particular problem in a particular domain (e.g., the role of nutrient additions to lake ecosystems) or 2) explore the consequences of relaxing one or more assumptions of a theory (e.g., inclusion of Allee effects in Metapopulation Theory). "Since models are simplified, partial statements of theories, several models may belong to the same theory, designed to elucidate different aspects of it" (Leijonhufvud (1997). Some models, if repeatedly tested and supported, can eventually give way to a theory, but they are not theories by themselves.

Discovery of new empirical statistical patterns and statistical relationships often leads to theoretical advances. However, the inductively revealed patterns do not themselves constitute a theory, and neither do statistical representations of data or model fitting exercises. Some ecologists consider a statistical regression model a theoretical construct (e.g. Peters 1991), but regression fails to meet our definition of theory. Although regression can test a theory by evaluating predicted relationships among variables, it does not constitute theory in itself. Statistical analyses may lead to the creation and refinement of theory; however, theory goes further to provide understanding of the processes that give rise to the relationships, independent of the statistical fit.

Notwithstanding the apparent richness of theories in ecology (Figure 1, Supplementary Material Table S1), there seems to be a general trend that the use and importance of theory is declining in biology as a whole (NRC 2008). Biologists appear to increasingly underappreciate the role that theory can play. The fact that so called "model organisms" are used in the majority of research in molecular biology and biomedicine implies that biologists are searching for general trends and unified principles, but there is seemingly little motivation to organize new findings into a rigorous hierarchical framework expressed in the language of mathematics. This may be, in part, because we are overwhelmed and overly impressed by the vast amount of data that can be obtained from the natural world. The era of Big Data or data deluge (e.g., Bollier and Firestone 2010) has fostered the proliferation of giant databases, data mining, machine learning, and other inductive approaches. Some have suggested that theories are irrelevant in the big data era – that correlations are sufficient to build a vigorous science (Anderson 2008).

We disagree. We argue that data are fundamentally necessary and important but not sufficient; healthy productive science needs both theory and data to feed the continuous interplay between induction and deduction. No matter how much data one can obtain from social, biological and ecological systems, the multiplicity of entities and interactions among them means that we will never be able to predict many salient features of their structures and dynamics. To discover the underlying principles, mechanisms, and organization of complex adaptive systems and to develop a quantitative, predictive, conceptual framework ultimately requires the close integration of both theory and data.

**Are there different types of theories in ecology?**

Many of the theories listed in Figure 1 comply with the definition of theory given above, but some theories are more efficient than others. To understand the importance of efficiency, it is instructive to revisit the remarks of the British statistician George E.P. Box (Box 1976, p. 792) who said, "Since all models are wrong the scientist cannot obtain a "correct" one by excessive elaboration. On the contrary following William of Occam he should seek an

economical description of natural phenomena." We claim that the same is true for evaluating alternative theories that purport to explain the same phenomena. As pointed out by the philosopher of science Larry Laudan, the evaluation of theories is a comparative matter (Laudan 1977) and one important criterion for comparison is efficiency. A theory is more efficient than its rivals if it can make more and better explanations and predictions with the same number of free parameters or constructs (Laudan 1977).

Here we describe our emerging strategy for developing efficient theories in ecology. Our strategy is not normative. Specifically, we do not imply that this is the only way to advance ecological understanding, especially under a post-modern scientific framework (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993, Allen et al. 2001). In the following discussion it is useful to bear in mind that theory, etymologically, comes from the ancient Greek *theōria* that means contemplation or looking at. In that sense, a theory is a way of looking at the world and not necessarily a way of knowing how the world is. Our main claim is that efficient theories provide a particular way of looking at the world that can be particularly insightful and useful. Building efficient theories is of fundamental importance as we think it will allow for a faster advancement of our field.

We do not suggest that all ecologists should be theoreticians. We recognize the value of pluralistic approaches. We do believe that a healthy and advancing science of ecology needs some appropriate balance between empiricists and theoreticians. Such a balanced science will not only contribute to the development of a quantitative and predictive science of ecology, it also will contribute to the application of ecological science to address pressing climate, societal and health challenges. We hope that our reflections will contribute to better understanding of the role of theory in ecology and explain why we think the development of theory in ecology is such an important pursuit.

In what follows, we provide a detailed account of what we think the salient characteristics of efficient theories are in ecology.

**What constitutes an efficient theory?**

*(i) First principles ground efficient theories.* – Efficient theories should be built, as much as possible, on first principles. First principles are the bedrock of science: that is, quantitative law-like postulates about processes underlying a given class of phenomena in the natural world with well-established validity, both theoretically and empirically (i.e. core-knowledge). They are not just descriptions of observed phenomena (see Scheiner and Willig 2008). First principles are the building blocks of efficient theories. They serve two functions. First, they allow unifying connections across the entire realm of science, so for example between ecology and chemical stoichiometry or thermodynamics. Second, their application and consequences, as articulated by the theory, lead logically to the structure of the theory and to *a priori* predictions.

*(ii) The language of mathematics usually (but not always) expresses efficient theories.* – Mathematically formulated theories are preferable generally because the logic is more transparent, less subject to alternative interpretations, and more amenable to rigorous empirical testing. Increasing the number of imprecise, qualitative terms and meanings will do

little to advance ecology, but using mathematics to reduce ambiguity will. Nevertheless, we are not denying the importance of verbal theories. Darwin and Wallace for example, clearly articulated the foundational idea of modern biological theory – evolution by natural selection – in words only. However, verbal theories can become enriched by mathematical formulation, as is the case of Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection, which was further refined through the mathematical formulation of the process of evolution and adaptation as expressed in Fisher's fundamental theorem and Sewall Wright's adaptive landscapes. Given the role of mathematical formulations in efficient theories, it is likely that their role in biological sciences will increase (e.g., Cohen 2004, Krakauer et al. 2011) and become as important in biology as they were for physics during the last century (Wigner 1960). Mathematics is indeed the salient feature of XX century science and the appropriate vehicle to generate knowledge of things in the world *a mente concipere* according to Heidegger (1977). To understand its role in the generation of scientific knowledge one must bear in mind the Greek notion of mathematics, which comes from *ta mathēmata*, or what can be learned and at the same time what can be taught (Heidegger 1977). Mathematics as the driver of learning and teaching about the world helps reduce ambiguity in communication and prediction.

*(iii) Efficient theories entail as few assumptions and free parameters as possible.* – Theories come in all guises in ecology; they differ in how many assumptions they make, how many free parameters they have, and how many predictions they make. A free parameter is a number that usually cannot be derived from the theory, but whose value is required to make predictions. The best theories are those that explain/unify the greatest number of phenomena and generate the most predictions based on the fewest assumptions and free parameters. If a theory needed to account for all the details of a system to yield predictions about its future behavior, gathering sufficient data to evaluate its predictions would require an inordinate amount of work. Such a theory would be inefficient, and as complex as the system it was attempting to describe. Theories should aim to yield a compressed description of the system or phenomenon under study, thereby reducing its complexity. The property of reducing complexity through theory compression is an important, often neglected, attribute of good (i.e. efficient) theory.

*(iv) Efficient theories are usually approximate.* – A theory does not have to be a precise faithful description of the phenomenon under study: we should value approximations. In physics, there are many approximate theories that make approximate predictions, which are essential to the refinement of theory and progress in our efforts to understand the nature of the phenomenon under analysis. Examples include Newtonian mechanics and Newtonian gravity, which are now thought of as approximations to Special and General Relativity, respectively. In turn, many physicists expect General Relativity and the field theories that describe particle physics to be approximations to a more fundamental, unified theory, the details of which are the subject of ongoing research. This iterative procedure is essential for evaluating what approximate theories can and cannot explain, and for exposing where we might appropriately focus new work.

We should appreciate the value of approximate predictions. It is common in ecology to claim that a theory is wrong because "my specific observation disagrees with your theory". However, when empirical observations deviate from theory predictions, we are alerted to the

possibility that we have not been taken into account other important processes.

  *(v) Efficient theories help provide standards for comparison.* Efficient theories in ecology provide a known standard against which to measure natural phenomena. By a standard, we mean a prediction of how the world would work if only the first principles of the theory are at work; they are true by definition and do not need to be tested as they follow logically from the action of first principles. Without standards, no deviations, or gaps in knowledge would be apparent, and so there would be no need for theory refinement and increasing understanding, leading to scientific stagnation. A historical example will help to clarify this point. In 1908 R.C. Punnett was invited to read a paper at the Royal Society of Medicine where he presented evidence on the importance of Mendelian inheritance for understanding human diseases such as Brachydactyly. During the discussion that this paper engendered the British statistician Udny Yule objected to the importance of Mendelian inheritance on Brachydactyly stating that if it were a dominant character it would tend to increase in the human population. The same year the great British mathematician GH Hardy in a letter to the editor of *Science* showed that Yule´s statement was groundless, since under the assumption of random mating there is not a tendency for dominant characters to increase or for recessive ones to die out in populations, as they remain fixed after one generation. This is the well-known Hardy-Weinberg principle. When alleles occur in frequencies different from Hardy-Weinberg expectations, we do not conclude that the H-W principle is falsified; rather we conclude that other processes such as drift and selection, as well as non-random mating, also influence the between-generation gene frequencies. The Hardy-Weinberg principle is akin to a neutral model showing us what to expect in the absence of drift, mutation, or selection. It provides a standard against which patterns in nature can be compared, unexplained deviations identified, and whose explanation would require refinement and further testing. The end result would be an increase in our understanding of the phenomenon under study. Further, as seen in this example, the fact that Mendel´s theory of inheritance was amenable to mathematical analyses led to the discovery of the Hardy-Weinberg principle, which in turn increased our understanding of factors affecting micro-evolutionary change, thus furthering theory development.

## Some Examples of Efficient Theories

Several deductive frameworks, which fit our description of efficient theory, have emerged in ecology and evolutionary ecology. In this section, we review and compare some of these theories to orient readers to key characteristics of deductive theory that we consider highly efficient and useful. From these comparisons, we argue that efficient theory in ecology is simple, parsimonious, derived from first principles, quantitative and mathematical, with few inputs and many predictions.

  *Fisher's Sex Ratio Theory* – This theory says that the reproductive value to the parents of sons versus daughters is equal to the selection pressure favoring production of sons versus daughters. The assumptions of the theory include that parents determine the sex of their offspring and the definition of reproductive value. Fisher (1930) defined reproductive value in the context of populations with age structure, so that, given that an individual survives to age $x$, its expected reproduction from age $x$ onward is $v_x$. This quantity is calculated in the discrete case as $\sum_{y=x} l_y m_y / R$, and in the continuous case as $\int_{y=x} l_y m_y \, dy / R$, where $l_x$ is the probability of surviving from age 0 to age x, $m_x$ is the average number of

offspring produced by an individual of age $x$, and $R$ is the net reproductive rate of the population. Fisher's canonical example assumed a non-growing population in a species in which each offspring had a mother and a father. In this case, the predicted equilibrium sex ratio is parity. When we observe deviations from a one-to-one sex ratio in species with two parents, we do not claim to have falsified Fisher's theory. Rather, we ask if the reproductive value of daughters and sons is indeed equal. Thus, failure to match prediction and observation suggests follow-up hypotheses about sources of differential reproductive value of each sex of offspring (e.g., Gowaty and Lennartz 1985 ).

*Optimal Foraging Theory* – OFT is concerned with understanding the decisions that individuals make while foraging in heterogeneous environments (e.g., MacArthur and Pianka 1966, Charnov 1976). This theory has been around for more that 50 years and continues to be refined and expanded (e.g., Beckerman et al. 2006). OFT attempts to understand the foraging behavior of animals by means of a quantitative theory based on the first principles of energy and mass balance and natural selection. By assuming that natural selection has molded the behavior of organisms so as to maximize fitness, it yields predictions on a variety of phenomena, including optimal diets, patch choice and how much time to spend foraging in a patch, as well as movement and visiting rates (e.g., Pyke 1984). One fundamental mathematical theorem within OFT is the Marginal Value Theorem (Charnov 1976), which states that the time a forager will stay in patch $i$, $T_i$, depends on the marginal rate of net energy intake $g_i(T_i)$ associated to the patch, and the average energy intake of the entire habitat, $E_n$, through the relationship $\dfrac{\partial g_i(T_i)}{\partial T_i} = E_n$. According to this theorem, a forager should leave a patch when the rate of energy intake drops below the average for the habitat. Departures from predicted patch residence times, rather than rejecting the theory, have paved the way to understanding the effects of other processes constraining energy intake and foraging decisions such as predation risk, competing activities (e.g., search for mates), and physiological state (e.g., Pyke 1984, Nonacs 2001). We know that the activities of animals in the natural world can be sub-optimal, the same as we know that species are not equal on a per capita basis and that demographic processes are not purely stochastic as assumed in neutral theory (Hubbell 2001). However, the mathematics of optimality and neutrality allow us to derive precise predictions that can be tested against data. The result of this confrontation of theory and data leads to refinement of the theory, prediction of new phenomena, guides data collection and increases our understanding of the natural world.

*The Metabolic Theory of Ecology* – MTE focuses on understanding how the interplay between physiological, ecological and evolutionary processes both affect and are affected by individual metabolic rate (Brown et al. 2004, West and Brown 2005, Sibly et al. 2012). An underlying premise of the theory is that metabolic rate is fundamental to ecology because it is through metabolism that organisms interact with their environments. Over the last ten years, MTE has yielded two general classes of models. The first predicts how two variables — body size and temperature — affect the metabolic rates of organisms (e.g., Spatz 1991, West et al. 1997, Gillooly et al. 2001). This focus on size and temperature is based on early work demonstrating that these variables are each primary determinants of metabolic rate across the diversity of life (Arrhenius 1889, Kleiber 1961, Robinson et al. 1983). The second class of models explores the consequences of metabolic rate at different levels of biological organization from genomes to ecosystems. Empirical data are generally consistent with

predictions of MTE that size and temperature constrain diverse rate processes, including DNA evolution (e.g., Gillooly et al. 2005), population growth (e.g., Savage et al. 2004), and ecosystem carbon flux (Enquist et al. 2003, Allen et al. 2005, López-Urrutia et al. 2006), through their effects on metabolic rate. Since MTE yields predictions on these diverse phenomena given only two parameters – body size and temperature – it represents an efficient theory in ecology. Importantly, however, the variance left unexplained by MTE models can be substantial, as noted in some critiques (e.g. Tilman et al. 2004). This variation likely reflects the effects of other traits or determinants of metabolic rate and of other ecological and evolutionary processes (e.g., Enquist et al. 2007, Marquet et al. 2004,, Lin et al. 2013, Rüger and Condit 2012). Thus, deviations of data from MTE predictions provide benchmarks for assessing the importance of variables other than body size and temperature in influencing biological rate processes (Enquist et al. 2009).

MTE provides a common frame of reference to make comparisons among organisms that, not withstanding their different evolutionary histories and ecological settings, obey the same first principles linked to metabolism, size and temperature. This is exemplified in the application of MTE to understanding variation in ontogenetic growth rates (West et al. 2001, Figure 2a). Specifically, MTE predicts a universal growth trajectory that all organisms obey, or collapse to, once put into the same reference frame (rescaled time and size), which is provided by the theory.

*The Maximum Entropy Theory of Ecology* – Information theory in the form of the MaxEnt inference procedure (Jaynes 1982) provides the foundation for the Maximum Entropy Theory of Ecology (METE), which predicts realistic functions describing major patterns in macroecology. Predictions of METE include the species-abundance distribution, the spatial distribution of individuals within species, the species-area and endemics-area relationships, and the distribution of metabolic rates over the individuals within and among species (Harte et al. 2008, 2009, Harte 2011). In analogy with thermodynamics, where the state variables pressure, volume, temperature and particle number characterize a system, in METE, knowledge of state variables $S_0$ (number of species), $N_0$ (number of individuals), $E_0$ (metabolic rate summed over individuals), and $A_0$ (area of system), provide the constraints that are used to derive predictions. And with the additional state variable, $L_0$ (number of trophic linkages in a network), MaxEnt predicts linkage distributions (Williams 2009). A noteworthy prediction of the theory is a universal 'scale collapse" of all species-area curves onto a universal curve (Harte et al. 2009). Specifically, if the local slope of the log(species richness) versus log(area) curve is plotted as a function of the ratio of average total abundance at that scale to average species richness at that scale, then METE predicts that all the data fall on a single declining curve (Figure 2b). This validated prediction is dramatically different from power-law behavior, in which different SARs would show up as horizontal lines, with intercepts varying from one ecosystem to another. While tests of METE using census data for plants, birds, and arthropods from a variety of habitats, and over spatial scales ranging from square meters to thousands of square kilometers, indicate that the theory predicts observed patterns without any adjustable parameters, some systematic discrepancies are noted for communities that are relatively rapidly-changing as for example following disturbance (Harte 2011). Patterns in the deviation from theory of rapidly changing systems may allow extension of METE from a static theory to a dynamic theory.

*The Neutral Theory of Biodiversity* – NTB focuses on understanding the role of stochastic demographic processes in controlling the structure and dynamics of communities at ecological to macroevolutionary time scales (Hubbell 2001). The theory yields a rich set of predictions on diverse phenomena including the frequency distribution of species abundance, species-area relationships, phylogenetic-tree structure, and the relationship of species richness to macroevolutionary rates of speciation and extinction (Hubbell 2001). Moreover, it does so using remarkably few parameters by assuming demographic equivalence among species with respect to per-capita (i.e. individual-level) rates of speciation, birth, death and dispersal (Volkov et al. 2005). Thus, NTB represents an efficient theory. It demonstrates how variation among species in relative abundance can arise due solely to simple, stochastic rules that apply to all species comprising a community, thus providing a useful baseline against which to compare empirical data (Hubbell 2001, Leigh 2007). This focus on species similarities, rather than species differences, represents a major challenge to the niche paradigm, which has predominated in community ecology since the sixties. Despite the simplicity of NTB models, they often exhibit remarkably good fits to species-abundance data (Volkov et al. 2005) and other ecological patterns (e.g., Rosindell and Cornell 2009, Halley and Iwasa 2011), although deviations from model predictions are also frequently observed (e.g., Gilbert and Lechowicz 2004). However, we would argue that the ability to falsify NTB represents a virtue of this theory, and efficient ecological theories in general, because it paves the way for more realistic models and a deeper understanding of ecological systems based on underlying dynamical processes. When efficient theories fail, they do so in informative ways. As Bateson (1908) says *"Treasure your exceptions! When there are none, the work gets so dull that no one cares to carry it further. Keep them always uncovered and in sight. Exceptions are like the rough brickwork of a growing building which tells that there is more to come and shows where the next construction is to be."* We contend that first and foremost, exceptions to efficient theories help the purpose of advancing scientific knowledge on a firm ground.

## Some examples of not efficient theories

For the sake of clarity, we think that it should be useful to highlight some theories that are not efficient. We do not imply that they should be dismissed as of limited value for understanding, but they do not fit some of the characteristics used to define efficient theories.

*R\* or Resource –Ratio Theory*– This body of work, which has stimulated an enormous amount of research was first proposed by MacArthur and Levins (1964) then expanded by Tilman (1982) to yield predictions on competition among consumer species for limiting resources. Under competition for a single homogenously distributed limiting nutrient, R\* theory predicts the winner to be the species that maintains a positive population growth rate at the lowest concentration of the limiting nutrient. It also predicts coexistence of two species when the growth rate of each species is limited by a different nutrient. When resources are heterogeneous distributed in space and/or time, the number of species can outnumber the number of limiting resources, thereby resolving Hutchinson's "paradox of the plankton". R\* theory is a conceptual advance over previous phenomenological competition theories such as Lotka-Volterra, because it predicts the outcome of competition experiments before they are performed. However, it has proven difficult to test because it has a large number of free parameters (a minimum of 3 parameters per species-resource

combination, in addition to death rates and resource supply rates), which must all be measured to yield predictions. This explains why most of the tests have been restricted to laboratory or experimental microcosms using species with short generation times (usually primary producers in freshwater ecosystems) (Miller et al. 2005). Although the theory is based in the first principles relating population growth to resource supply and consumption, it is not efficient due to its large number of free parameters, which restricts it scope of application as well as the possibility of field testing. Nonetheless, it has proven to have heuristic value giving raise to several extensions (Leibold 1995, Daufresne and Hedin 2005).

*Dynamic Energy Budget Theory (DEB)*. This theory aims at understanding the life history of organisms in an environment with a given amount of resources based on a mathematical description of the rates at which individuals assimilate and use energy and materials from resources to sustain the processes of maintenance, growth reproduction and development. DEB is based on the first principles dictated by the kinetics and thermodynamic of energy and material fluxes, but is data demanding and rich in free parameters (see Kooijman et al. 2000). According to Nisbet et al. (2000) to apply the theory to a growing organism requires estimating fifteen parameters; DEB, like the R* theory, is rich in parameters and most of them are species specific, which hinders the generation of general predictions.

Throughout our paper we have emphasized the importance of theory in the inductive-deductive cycle. There are situations, however, where the complexity of the system under study and the lack of adequate theories hinder progress in understanding. In this situation, the use of simulations or individual (agent) based models (e.g. Railsback and Grimm 2012) can be the only tool at hand. Agent based models, which are parameter rich and rest on massive simulations, can be powerful in generating hypotheses and in helping to test alternative ones for patterns seen in nature (e.g. Arim et al. 2010), especially when field or laboratory tests are not an option (but see May 2004). However, we see this approach only as a stage in the process of understanding that may lead to the identification of first principles and eventually to the development of efficient theories.

**On theory synthesis and unification**

Deductive, quantitative theories based on first principles continually expand and in so doing may come close to, or overlap with, the domain of other theories, thereby increasing the potential for synthesis and unification. While understanding biodiversity from a theoretical perspective clearly represents a formidable challenge (e.g., Simberloff 2004), we are optimistic that significant progress can be made using simple quantitative, predictive theories grounded in first principles.

Efficient theories based on first principles foster synthesis and unification. For example, despite the fact that the MTE and NTB focus on different aspects of ecological complexity – energy versus stochasticity – they share a fundamental point of contact that affords opportunities for synthesis. Specifically, each theory postulates that ecosystems are governed by universal principles and processes that operate at the level of the individual organism, and therefore transcend species identities in shaping patterns of biodiversity. MTE, for example, yields predictions on the size-dependence of metabolic rate by assuming that organisms are constrained by generic properties of biological distribution networks

(West et al. 1997). Similarly, NTB derives predictions on the frequency distribution of species abundance by assuming demographic equivalence among species with respect to per-capita (i.e. individual-level) rates of speciation, birth, death and dispersal (Volkov et al. 2005).

There are several ways in which the potential for unification among these theories could be realized. For example, one of the key assumptions of NTB is that all individuals have identical demographic rates, independent of their size. This assumption is biologically unrealistic, and contrary to the predictions of MTE, but may be relaxed by integrating the effects of demographic stochasticity with size-dependent demographic rates (O'Dwyer et al. 2009). The size-dependence of birth, mortality and growth rates may then be taken as inputs from MTE (Savage et al. 2004), and the resulting range of intertwined predictions is much broader than those of either NTB or MTE alone. For example, the integration of both theories allows for the prediction of `alternative currency' distributions like the Species Biomass Distribution (e.g., Morlon et al. 2009) alongside the traditional Species Abundance Distribution.

## Concluding remarks

Advances in science are largely due to the iterative process of induction and deduction, prediction and testing. We believe that greater recognition of the positive role of this interplay in discovery will significantly enhance scientific progress in biology and ecology in particular. Almost fifty years ago, John Platt (1964) embraced the interplay between induction and deduction and enjoined scientists to pursue a program that he dubbed *strong inference*, which directly links data acquisition to well-posed hypotheses. Strong inference entails following a simple but rigorous protocol of experimental science, efficiently designed to falsify alternative hypotheses. Platt's paper had a tremendous impact on the practice of experimental science and more recently in modeling (e.g. Beard and Kushmerick 2009, Railsback and Grimm 2012, Gowaty and Hubbell 2013). A clarifying discussion of theory types and their roles in discovery, as we have attempted here, may have a similar effect on ecology.

The pre-eminence of inductive approaches in biology, and ecology in particular, is reflected in the fascination with gathering information about the world, as if we were to find understanding in its accumulation. This trend is becoming even more acute in recent times due to technological breakthroughs that are providing unprecedented quantities and varieties of information about organisms, from microbes to trees, and about environments, from local to global scales. The emergence of new subdisciplines such as bioinformatics and ecoinformatics, along with monumental scientific efforts currently underway such as the sequencing of complete genomes and metagenomes and the establishment of large-scale and long-term ecological monitoring networks (e.g. NEON), clearly represent important and valuable scientific progress. However, we believe that for such efforts to fully bear fruit, they will need to be both guided by and more directly coupled to development of efficient theory. Data is of great importance, but without theory we have only phenomenology and correlation, and we lose the opportunity to yoke the complexity of ecological systems based on simple, quantitative principles; as suggested by Harte (2002), we need a better integration of Newtonian and Darwinian worldviews. With efficient theories, we can harness the potential of empirical data to make more effective progress in our discipline and provide

more informed answers to the pressing problems facing humanity, such as understanding health, disease and dysfunction in humans (West 2012). As clearly stated by the Nobel laureate Sydney Brenner (Brenner 2012) "Biological research is in crisis,…...... Technology gives us the tools to analyse organisms at all scales, but we are drowning in a sea of data and thirsting for some theoretical framework with which to understand it. Although many believe that 'more is better', history tells us that 'least is best'. We need theory and a firm grasp on the nature of the objects we study to predict the rest." In a similar vein, it can be said that "Big data without a "big theory" to go with it loses much of its potency and usefulness" (West 2013).

Understanding biodiversity from a theoretical perspective clearly represents a formidable challenge (e.g., Simberloff 2004), but we are optimistic that by aiming at developing efficient theories significant progress can be made. We think that efficient theories provide a solid foundation for advancing science in the Big Data era.

In this paper, we argued for clarifying and expanding the role of theory in ecology to accelerate scientific progress, enhance our ability to address environmental challenges and foster the development of synthesis and theory unification. We focused on the need for developing more "efficient" theories in ecology, and for the application of such theories to inform experimental design and large-scale environmental monitoring programs. Our primary goal is to identify characteristics of ecological theories that lead to more rapid advancement. We showed that more efficient theories tend to make fewer, simpler, and more fundamental assumptions and generate a greater number of testable predictions per free parameter than less efficient theories. Finally, we argue that ecology will advance much faster if ecologists embrace efficient, approximate theories, and improve upon them through a process of successive refinements. The development of efficient theories, we contend, provides a robust epistemological framework to foster progress and synthesis in ecology.

**References Cited**

Allen AP, Gillooly JF, Brown JH. 2005. Linking the global carbon cycle to individual metabolism. Functional Ecology 19: 202-213.

Allen TFH, Tainter JA, Pires JC, Hoekstra TW. 2001. Dragnet Ecology-"Just the Facts, Ma'am": The Privilege of Science in a Postmodern World. BioScience 51: 475-485.

Anderson C. 2008. The end of theory: The data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete. Wired, June 23, 2008, http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory.

Arim M, Abades SR, Laufer G, Loureiro M, Marquet, PA. 2010. Food web structure and body size: trophic position and resource acquisition. Oikos 119: 147-153.

Arrhenius S. 1889. Über die Reaktionsgeschwindigkeit bei der Inversion von Rohrzucker durch Säuren. Zeitschrift für physikalische Chemie 4: 226-248.

Bateson W. 1908. The Methods and Scope of Genetics. Cambridge University Press.

Beard DA, Kushmerick MJ. 2009. Strong inference for systems biology. PLoS Computational Biology 5: e1000459.

Beckerman AP, Petchey OL, Warren PH. 2006. Foraging biology predicts food web complexity. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 103: 13745-13749.

Bollier D. Firestone CM. 2010. The promise and peril of big data. Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program, Washington, DC..

Box GE. 1976. Science and statistics. Journal of the American Statistical Association 71: 791-799.

Brenner S. 2012. Life's code script. Nature 482: 461.

Brown JH, Gillooly JF, Allen AP, Savage VM, West GB. 2004. Toward a metabolic theory of ecology. Ecology 85: 1771–1789.

Charnov EL. 1976. Optimal foraging: The marginal value theorem. Theoretical Population Biology 9: 129-136.

Cohen JE. 2004. Mathematics is biology's next microscope only better; Biology is mathematics' next physics, only better. PLoS Biology 2: e439.

Daufresne T, Hedin LO. 2005. Plant coexistence depends on ecosystem nutrient cycles: extension of the resource-ratio theory. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 102: 9212-9217.

Enquist BJ, West GB, Brown JH. 2009. Extensions and evaluations of a general quantitative theory of forest structure and dynamics. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106: 7046-7051.

Enquist BJ, Kerkhoff AJ, Stark SC, Swenson NG, McCarthy MC, Price CA. 2007. A general integrative model for scaling plant growth, carbon flux, and functional trait spectra. Nature 449: 218-222.

Enquist BJ, Economo EP, Huxman TE, Allen AP, Ignace DD, Gillooly JF. 2003. Scaling metabolism from organisms to ecosystems. Nature 423: 639-642.

Fisher RA. 1930. The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection. Oxford. Clarendon Press.

Funtowicz SO, Ravetz, JR. 1993. Science for the post-normal age. Futures, 25: 739-755.

Gilbert B, Lechowicz MJ. 2004. Neutrality, niches, and dispersal in a temperate forest understory. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 101: 7651–7656.

Gillooly JF, Brown JH, West GB, Savage VM, Charnov EL. 2001. Effects of size and temperature on metabolic rate. Science 293: 2248-2251.

Gillooly JF, Allen AP, West GB, Brown JH. 2005. The rate of DNA evolution: Effects of body size and temperature on the molecular clock. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 102: 140-145.

Ginzburg LR, Jensen CX. 2004. Rules of thumb for judging ecological theories. Trends in Ecology and Evolution 19: 121-126.

Gowaty PA, Hubbell SP. 2013. The evolutionary origins of mating failures and multiple mating. Entomologia Experimentalis et Applicata 146:11-25.

Gowaty PA, Lennartz MR.1985. Sex ratios of nestling and fledgling red-cockaded woodpeckers (*Picoides borealis*) favor males. American Naturalist 126: 347-353.

Halley JM, Iwasa Y. 2011. Neutral theory as a predictor of avifaunal extinction after habitat loss. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 108: 2316-2321.

Harte J. 2002. Toward a synthesis of the Newtonian and Darwinian worldviews. Physics Today, 55: 29-34.

Harte J. 2011. Maximum Entropy and Ecology: A Theory of Abundance, Distribution, and Energetics. Oxford University Press.

Harte J, Zillio T, Conlisk E, Smith A. 2008. Maximum entropy and the state-variable approach to macroecology. Ecology 89: 2700–2711.

Harte J, Smith A, Storch D. 2009. Biodiversity scales from plots to biomes with a universal species-area curve. Ecology Letters 12: 789–797.

Heidegger M. 1977. Modern science, metaphysics, and mathematics. Pages 247-282 in Krell DF, ed. Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings. Harper & Row.

Hubbell SP. 2001. A Unified Theory of Biodiversity and Biogeography. Princeton University Press.

Jaynes ET. 1982. On the rationale of Maximum Entropy methods. Proceedings of the IEEE. 70: 939-952.

Kleiber M. 1961. The Fire of Life. An Introduction to Animal Energetics. John Wiley & Sons, New York.

Kooijman, SALM. 2000. Dynamic energy and mass budgets in biological systems. Cambridge University Press.

Krakauer DC. Collins JP, Erwin D, Flack JC, Fontana W, Laubichler MD, Prohaska SJ, West GB, Stadler PF. 2011. The challenges and scope of theoretical biology. Journal of Theoretical Biology 276: 269-276.

Laudan L. 1977. Progress and its problems: towards a theory of scientific growth. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Leigh EG. 2007. Neutral theory: a historical perspective. Journal of Evolutionary Biology 20: 2075–2091.

Leibold MA. 1995. The niche concept revisited: mechanistic models and community context. Ecology 76: 1371-1382.

Leijonhufvud A. 1997. Models and theories. Journal of Economic Methodology 4:193-198.

Lin Y, Berger U, Grimm V, Huth F, Weiner J. 2013. Plant interactions alter the predictions of metabolic scaling theory. PloS one 8: e57612.

López-Urrutia A, San Martin E, Harris RP, Irigoien X. 2006. Scaling the metabolic balance of the oceans. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 103: 8739-8744.

MacArthur R, Levins R. 1964. Competition, habitat selection, and character displacement in a patchy environment. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 51:1207-1210.

MacArthur RH, Pianka ER. 1966. On optimal use of a patchy environment. American Naturalist 100: 603-609.

Marquet PA, Labra FA, Maurer BA. 2004. Metabolic ecology: linking individuals to ecosystems. Ecology 85: 1794-1796.

May RM. 2004. Uses and abuses of mathematics in biology. Science 303.5659 (2004): 790-793.

Miller TE, Burns JH, Munguia, P, Walters EL, Kneitel JM, Richards PM, Mouquet, N, Buckley HL. 2005. A critical review of twenty years' use of the resource-ratio theory. American Naturalist 165: 439-448.

Morlon H. et al. 2009. Taking species abundance distributions beyond individuals. Ecology Letters 12: 488–501.

Nagel E. 1961. The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation. Harcourt, Brace & World.

National Research Council (NRC). 2008. The Role of Theory in Advancing 21st-Century Biology: Catalyzing Transformative Research, Washington, DC.

Nisbet RM, Muller EB, Lika K, Kooijman SALM. 2000. From molecules to ecosystems through dynamic energy budget models. Journal of Animal Ecology 69: 913-926.

Nonacs P. 2001. State dependent behavior and the Marginal Value Theorem. Behavioral Ecology 12: 71-83.

O'Dwyer JP, Lake JK, Ostling A, Savage VM, Green JL. 2009. An integrative framework for stochastic, size-structured community assembly. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA) 106: 6170-6175.

Peters RH. 1991. A Critique for Ecology. Cambridge University Press.

Pickett STA, Kolasa J, Jones CG. 1994. Ecological Understanding. The Nature of Theory and the Theory of Nature. Academic Press.

Platt JR. 1964. Strong inference. Science 146: 347-353.

Pyke GH. 1984. Optimal foraging theory - a critical-review. Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics 15: 523-575.

Railsback SF, Grimm V. 2012. Agent-based and individual-based modeling: a practical introduction. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Robinson W, Peters RH, Zimmermann J. 1983. The effects of body size and temperature on metabolic rate of organisms. Canadian Journal of Zoology 61: 281-288

Rosindell J, Cornell SJ. 2009. Species–area curves, neutral models and long distance dispersal. Ecology 90: 1743–1750.

Rüger N, Condit R. 2012. Testing metabolic theory with models of tree growth that include light competition. Functional Ecology 26: 759-765.

Savage VM, Gillooly JF, Brown JH, West GB, Charnov EL. 2004. Effects of body size and temperature on population growth. American Naturalist 163: 429-441.

Scheiner SM, Willig MR. 2008. A general theory of ecology. Theoretical Ecology 1:1874-1738.

Scheiner SM, Willig MR. eds. 2011. The Theory of Ecology. The University of Chicago Press.

Simberloff D. 2004. Community ecology: is it time to move on? American Naturalist 163:787–799.

Sibly RM, Brown JH, Kodric-Brown, A. eds. 2012. Metabolic Ecology. A scaling approach. Wiley-Blackwell.

Spatz H-C. 1991. Circulation, metabolic rate, and body size in mammals. Journal of Comparative Physiology B 161: 231-236.

Tilman D. 1982. Resource Competition and Community Structure. Princeton University Press.

Tilman D, Hille Ris Lambers J, Harpole S, Dybzinski R, Fargione J, Clark C, Lehman C. 2004. Does metabolic theory apply to community ecology? It's a matter of scale. Ecology, 85: 1797-1799.

Volkov I, Banavar JR, He F, Hubbell SP, Maritan A. 2005. Density dependence explains tree species abundance and diversity in tropical forests. Nature 438: 658-661.

West GB. 2013. Wisdom in numbers. Scientific American 308: 14.

West GB. 2012. The importance of quantitative systemic thinking in medicine. Lancet 379: 1551–1559.

West GB, Brown JH, Enquist BJ, 1997. A general model for the origin of allometric scaling laws in biology. Science 276: 122–126.

West GB, Brown JH, Enquist BJ. 2001. A general model for ontogenetic growth. Nature 413: 628-631.

West GB, Brown JH. 2005. The origin of allometric scaling laws in biology from genomes to ecosystems: towards a quantitative unifying theory of biological structure and organization. Journal of Experimental Biology 208: 1575-1592.

Wigner EP. 1960. The unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences. Communications in Pure and Applied Mathemathics 13: 1-14.

Williams R. 2009. Simple MaxEnt models explain food web degree distributions. Journal of Theoretical Ecology 3:45-52.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Examples of theories in ecology that have been named so in the ISI Web of Knowledge Data Base, and based on queries specified in Supporting Material Table S2. Bars are proportional to the number of times each theory has been mentioned.

Figure 2.  Scale collapse in ontogenetic growth trajectories (a) and species-area curves (b) as predicted by the Metabolic Theory of Ecology and the Maximum Entropy Theory of Ecology respectively (after West et al. 2001 and Harte et al. 2009 respectively). Scale collapse means that when different systems are brought into the same frame of reference, which is accomplished by rescaling, different realizations of the same phenomenon (as shown in the insets) can be shown to obey the same universal relationship as predicted by theory. In (a) the theory allows for a rescaling of time and size into dimensionless variables, which shows that ontogenetic trajectories corresponding to 13 different species, identified by different symbols, follow the same general law. Four of these species are plotted in the inset. In (b) plot is shown of how the slope of different species area curves change as a function of the ratio between total number of individuals (N) and species richness (S) observed at a particular area. The inset shows three particular cases of how the number of species (y axis) changes with area (x axis).
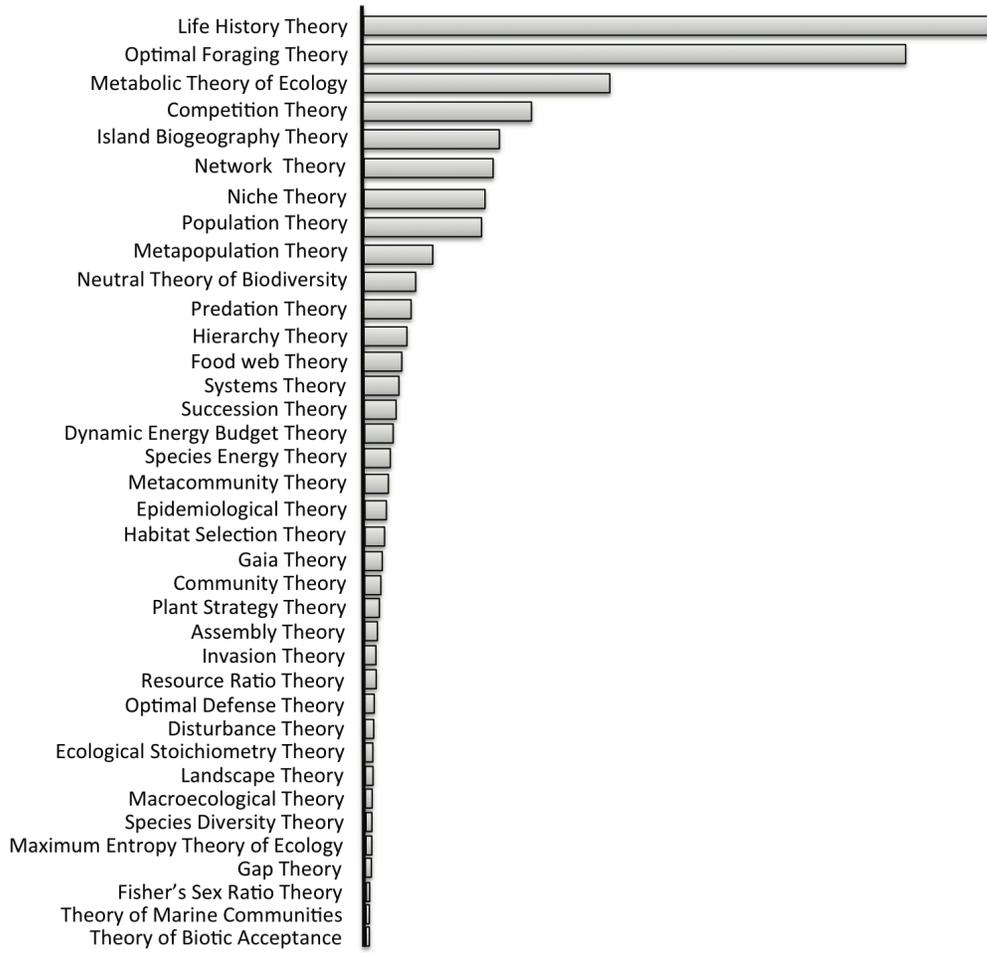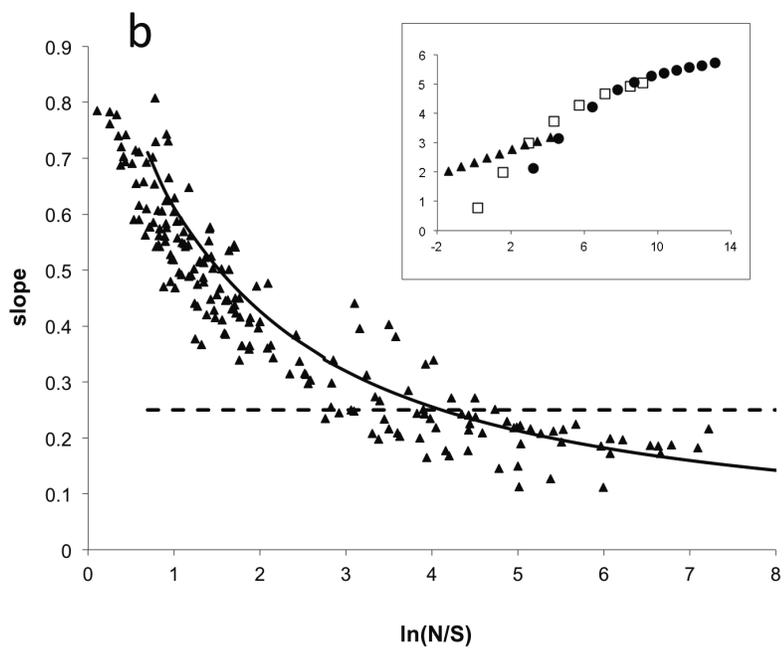
Marquet Figure 2a
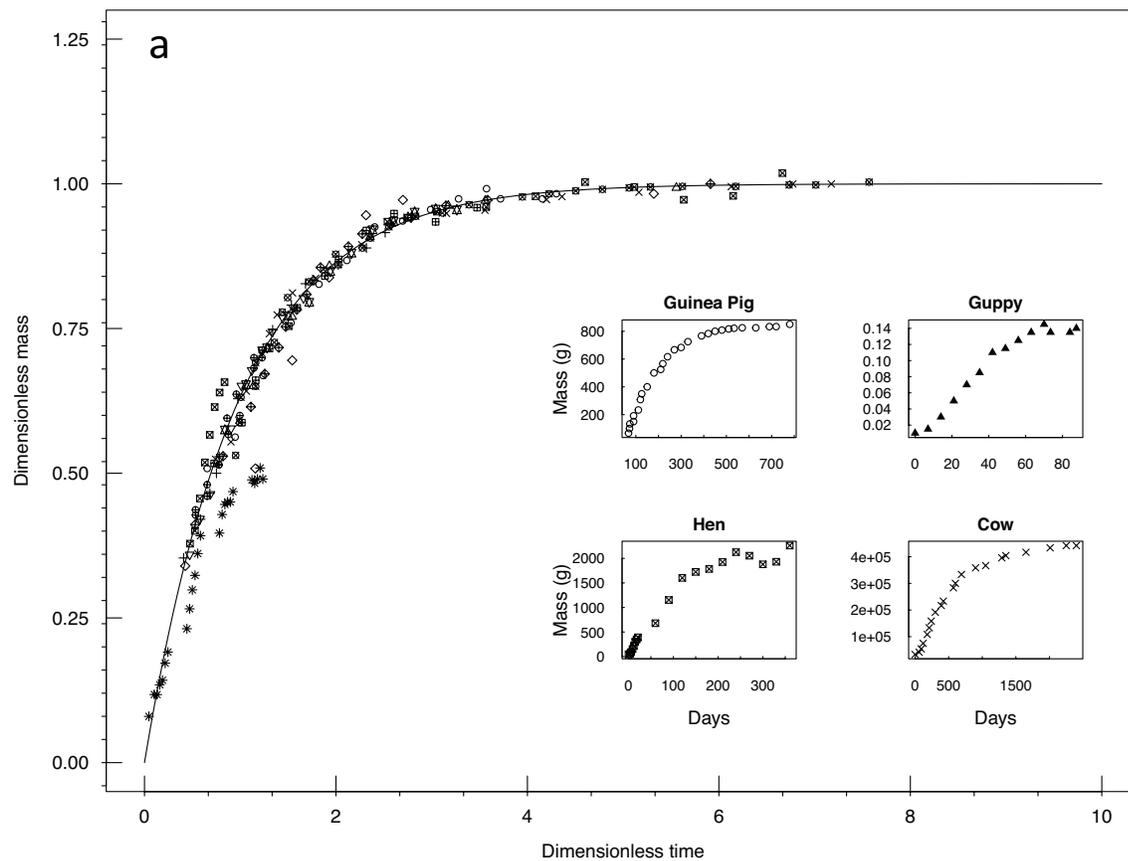
Marquet Figure 2b

# Supplementary Material

Associated to the manuscript: **On theory in ecology**,

by: Pablo A. Marquet[1,2,3,4], Andrew P. Allen[5], James H. Brown[6], Jennifer Dunne[3,7], Brian J. Enquist[3,8], James F. Gillooly[9], Patricia A. Gowaty[10,11], Jessica L. Green[12], David Storch,[13,14] John Harte[15], Steve P. Hubbell[10,11], James O´Dwyer[16], Jordan G. Okie[17], Mark Ritchie[18], Annette Ostling[19], and Geoffrey B. West[3]

[1] Departamento de Ecología, Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Alameda 340, C.P. 6513677, Santiago, Chile. E-mail: pmarquet@bio.puc.cl

[2] Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity (IEB), Casilla 653, Santiago, Chile.

[3] The Santa Fe Institute, 1399 Hyde Park Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501 USA.

[4] Instituto de Sistemas Complejos de Valparaíso (ISCV), Subida Artillería 470, Valparaíso, Chile.

[5] Department of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.

[6] Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA.

[7] Pacific Ecoinformatics and Computational Ecology Lab, 1604 McGee Ave., Berkeley, CA 94703, USA

[8] Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Arizona, BioSciences West, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.

[9] Department of Biology, University of Florida, Room 223 Bartram Hall, PO Box 118525, Gainesville, FL 32611-852

[10] Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology and Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA.

[11] Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

[12] Institute of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, 335 Pacific Hall, 5289 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403, USA.

[13] Center for Theoretical Study, Charles University of Academy Sciences of the CR, Praha, Czech Republic

[14] Department of Ecology, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Praha, Czech Republic

[15] University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720

[16] Department of Plant Biology, University of Illinois, Urbana IL USA.

[17] School of Earth and Space Exploration, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA.

[18] Department of Biology, Syracuse University, 108 College Place, 122 Lyman Hall, Syracuse NY 13244, USA.

[19] Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Michigan 2005 Kraus Natural Science Building, 830 North University Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1048, USA.

Corresponding author: Pablo A. Marquet

E-mail: pmarquet@bio.puc.cl

Table S1. Ecological theories (n=78) that have been labeled as such in at least one publication in the ISI Web of Science Database. The theories were identified by going through the results of a search of all publications types between 1945 and 2014 that had the word "Theory" in the title and belong to the topic Ecology (TI: ("Theory") AND TS: "Ecology").

Aging Theory of Absolute Metabolic Scope
Assembly Theory
Behavioral Ecology Theory
Biodiversity-Ecosystem Function Theory
Biogeography Theory
Biological Invasion Theory
Bird Migration Theory
Circuit Theory
Coexistence Theory
Community Theory
Competition Theory
Competitive Exclusion Theory
Consumer-Resource Theory
Continuum Theory
C-S.R Triangle Theory
Demographic Theory
Diversity-Stability Theory
Disturbance Theory
Dynamic Energy Budget Theory
Ecological Network Theory
Ecological Stoichiometry Theory
Ecomorphology Theory
Ecosystem Theory
Epidemiology Theory
Evolutionary Game Theory
*Fisher's Sex ratio Theory*
Fitness Set Theory
Food Web Theory
Gaia Theory
Gap Theory
Habitat Selection Theory
Hierarchy Theory
Information Theory
Insular Biogeography Theory
Intraguild Predation Theory
Invasion Theory
Landscape Theory
Life History Theory
Macroecological Theory
Metabolic Theory of Ecology

Metacommunity Theory
Metapopulation Theory
Multiple Resource Limitation Theory
Neutral Theory of Biodiversity
Niche Theory
Niche-Width Theory
Optimal Defense Theory
Optimal Foraging Theory
Optimal Migration Theory
Population Ecology Theory
Plant Community Theory
Plant Strategy Theory
Predator Prey Theory
Red Queen Theory
Refuge Theory
Resource Ratio Theory
Resource Partitioning Theory
Restoration Ecology Theory
Scale Transition Theory
Scaling Theory
Sexual Selection Theory
Similarity Theory
Social Network Theory
Soil Fertility Theory
Species Diversity Theory
Species Energy Theory
Succession Theory
Survival Theory
Systems Theory
Theory of Biotic Acceptance
Theory of Conservation Biology
Theory of Clutch Overlap
Theory of Marine Communities
Theory of Mast Production
Trait-based Theory
Unified Biodiversity Theory
Unified Theory of Cooperative Breeding
Water-Energy Theory

Table S2. Some examples of ecological theories, shown in Figure 1 of our manuscript, that have been labeled as such in at least two publications. This number (shown in parentheses) was obtained by performing a query in the ISI Web of Science Database. The query included all publication types between 1945 and 2014 and is shown below each theory. Notice that each query may contain alternative synonyms for each theory and that for some theories the search had to be refined by restricting it to particular areas. This was the case of ecological theories that have been used outside of ecology, such as niche theory, or that were imported from the outside into ecology, such as network theory. The query for "Gap Theory" was particularly difficult to asses and had to be examined paper by paper to identify the exact number of publications.

*Assembly Theory (39)*
> **TOPIC:** *("assembly theory")* Refined by: RESEARCH AREAS=(ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES ECOLOGY OR FORESTRY OR PLANT SCIENCES OR INFECTIOUS DISEASES OR ZOOLOGY OR PALEONTOLOGY OR MARINE FRESHWATER BIOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY)

Biotic Acceptance Theory (2)
> **TOPIC:** *("Theory of biotic acceptance")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Biotic acceptance theory")*

Community Theory (44)
> **TOPIC:** *("Community Theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of Community Ecology")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of ecological communities")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=( ECOLOGY OR OCEANOGRAPHY OR PLANT SCIENCES OR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR FORESTRY OR MICROBIOLOGY )

Competition Theory (291)
> **TOPIC:** *("Competition Theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of species competition")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(ECOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR ZOOLOGY OR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES OR BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES OR BIOLOGY OR DEMOGRAPHY OR MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCES OR GENETICS HEREDITY OR MARINE FRESHWATER BIOLOGY OR PLANT SCIENCES OR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES OR OCEANOGRAPHY OR ENTOMOLOGY OR LIMNOLOGY OR AGRONOMY OR FORESTRY OR SOIL SCIENCE OR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR FISHERIES OR MICROBIOLOGY OR ORNITHOLOGY )

Dynamic Energy Budget Theory (61)
> **TOPIC:** *("Dynamic Energy Budget theory")*

Disturbance Theory (25)
> **TOPIC:** *("Disturbance Theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of disturbance")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR ECOLOGY OR LIMNOLOGY OR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES OR FORESTRY OR MARINE FRESHWATER BIOLOGY OR PLANT SCIENCES OR OCEANOGRAPHY)

Ecological Stoichiometry Theory (22)
>   **TOPIC:** *("ecological stoichiometry theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("stoichiometry theory ") OR* **TOPIC:** *("biological stoichiometry theory")*

*Epidemiological Theory (50)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("epidemiology theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("epidemiological theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of epidemiology")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(ECOLOGY OR MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCES OR PARASITOLOGY OR MARINE FRESHWATER BIOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR TROPICAL MEDICINE OR MATHEMATICAL COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY OR INFECTIOUS DISEASES OR VETERINARY SCIENCES OR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES OR ANTHROPOLOGY OR GENETICS HEREDITY OR COMPUTER SCIENCE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPLICATIONS OR BIOLOGY OR DEMOGRAPHY OR MICROBIOLOGY OR ZOOLOGY OR ENTOMOLOGY OR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR FISHERIES OR STATISTICS PROBABILITY OR VIROLOGY )

*Food Web Theory (85)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("food web theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of food webs")*

*Fisher's Sex Ratio Theory*
>   **TOPIC:** *("Fisher's Sex ratio Theory")*

*Gaia Theory (45)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("Gaia theory")*

*Gap Theory (3)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("Gap Theory")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=( ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES OR ECOLOGY OR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES )

*Habitat Selection Theory (48)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("habitat selection theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of habitat selection")*

*Hierarchy Theory (96)*
>   **TOPIC:** *("hierarchy theory")* Refined by: RESEARCH AREAS=(ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES ECOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR FISHERIES OR MATHEMATICAL COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY OR MICROBIOLOGY OR OCEANOGRAPHY OR PALEONTOLOGY OR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR ZOOLOGY OR FORESTRY )

Invasion Theory (34)
>   **TOPIC:** *("invasion theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of biological invasions")*

Island Biogeography Theory (233)
>   **TOPIC:** *("island biogeography theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of island biogeography") OR* **TOPIC:** *("MacArthur and Wilson theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of insular biogeography") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of insular zoogeography")*

Landscape Theory (22)
>   **TOPIC:** *("Landscape theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of landscapes") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of ecological ecological landscapes")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR

GEOGRAPHY OR BIOLOGY OR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES OR ECOLOGY OR GEOGRAPHY PHYSICAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES )

Life History Theory (1207)
> **TOPIC:** *("life history theory")*

Macroecological Theory (17)
> **TOPIC:** *("macroecological theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of macroecology")*

Marine Community Theory (2)
> **TOPIC:** *("Marine community theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of marine communities")*

Maximun Entropy Theory of Ecology (4)
> **TOPIC:** *("Maximum Entropy Theory")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES OR METEOROLOGY ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCES OR GENETICS HEREDITY OR ECOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR GEOGRAPHY )

Metabolic Theory of Ecology (436)
> **TOPIC:** *("metabolic theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("metabolic scaling theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of metabolic scaling")*

Metapopulation Theory (151)
> **TOPIC:** *("metapopulation theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of metapopulations")*

Metacommunity Theory (53)
> **TOPIC:** *("metacommunity theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of metacommunities")*

*Neutral Theory of Biodiversity (108)*
> **TOPIC:** *("neutral theory of biodiversity")* OR **TOPIC:** *("neutral theory of ecology")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Unified neutral theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Neutral theory of ecology and biogeography")*

Network Theory (217)
> **TOPIC:** *("Network theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Ecological Network theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of ecological networks")* OR **TOPIC:** *("Theory of Networks")* Refined by: RESEARCH AREAS=(ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES ECOLOGY )

Niche Theory (206)
> **TOPIC:** *("niche theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("niche width theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of the niche")* OR **TOPIC:** *("niche overlap theory")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of niche overlap")* OR **TOPIC:** *("theory of niche width")* Refined by: RESEARCH AREAS=(ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES ECOLOGY OR DEMOGRAPHY OR VIROLOGY OR GENETICS HEREDITY OR FISHERIES OR LIFE SCIENCES BIOMEDICINE OTHER TOPICS OR PLANT SCIENCES OR ZOOLOGY OR EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY OR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION OR OCEANOGRAPHY OR MARINE FRESHWATER BIOLOGY OR MYCOLOGY OR MICROBIOLOGY OR FORESTRY OR BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES OR PALEONTOLOGY OR REMOTE SENSING )

Optimal Defense Theory (77)
> **TOPIC:** *("Optimal Defense Theory")*

*Optimal Foraging Theory (974)*
> **TOPIC:** *("Optimal foraging theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("foraging theory")*

Population Theory (192)
> **TOPIC:** *("population theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of populations")* Refined by: [excluding] RESEARCH AREAS=(NUTRITION DIETETICS OR ENGINEERING OR SOCIOLOGY OR BUSINESS ECONOMICS OR GENERAL INTERNAL MEDICINE OR SOCIAL ISSUES OR WOMEN APOS S STUDIES OR REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY OR GERIATRICS GERONTOLOGY OR HEALTH CARE SCIENCES SERVICES OR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION OR GOVERNMENT LAW OR AUTOMATION CONTROL SYSTEMS OR PSYCHOLOGY OR DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY OR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OR FAMILY STUDIES OR GASTROENTEROLOGY HEPATOLOGY OR HEMATOLOGY OR PEDIATRICS OR EDUCATION EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OR NEUROSCIENCES NEUROLOGY OR LEGAL MEDICINE OR PATHOLOGY OR MATERIALS SCIENCE OR CULTURAL STUDIES OR PSYCHIATRY OR METALLURGY METALLURGICAL ENGINEERING OR RELIGION OR PHARMACOLOGY PHARMACY OR OBSTETRICS GYNECOLOGY OR PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH OR SPECTROSCOPY OR SUBSTANCE ABUSE OR COMMUNICATION OR TRANSPORTATION OR SURGERY OR AREA STUDIES OR WOMEN S STUDIES )

Plant Strategy Theory (42)
> **TOPIC:** *("plant strategy theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of plant strategies")*

*Predation Theory (106)*
> **TOPIC:** *("Predation theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Theory of Predation") OR* **TOPIC:** *("Predator prey Theory")*

Resource Ratio Theory (31)
> **TOPIC:** *("resource ratio theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of resource ratios")*

Species Diversity Theory (8)
> **TOPIC:** *("species diversity theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of species diversity")*

Species Energy Theory (56)
> **TOPIC:** *("species energy theory")*

Systems Theory (72)
> **TOPIC:** *("Systems Theory")* Refined by: WEB OF SCIENCE CATEGORIES=(ECOLOGY )

*Succession Theory (62)*
> **TOPIC:** *("succession theory") OR* **TOPIC:** *("theory of succession")*