

**Population Ecology of the Sydney Rock Oyster
Saccostrea Commercialis and the Pacific Oyster
Crassostrea Gigas in a New South Wales Estuary**

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that this thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Frederick Rudolf Krassoi

Abstract

The Sydney rock oyster *Saccostrea commercialis* is a dominant sessile organism of intertidal rocky shore and mangrove communities of Port Stephens, New South Wales. This study describes patterns of distribution and abundance of *S. commercialis* in these habitats, as well as those of the recently introduced Pacific oyster *Crassostrea gigas*. Observations drawn from these mensurative studies were used to formulate and test hypotheses concerning the importance of some ecological processes in structuring intertidal oyster communities.

A preliminary survey in the spring of 1990 revealed for the first time the presence of *C. gigas* among *S. commercialis* rocky shore and mangrove communities in the inner port of Port Stephens. However, few *C. gigas* were present in the definitive surveys performed 1-2 years later, demonstrating a failure of the 1990 recruits to survive. For the purposes of characterising the intertidal oyster communities, rocky shore and mangrove communities were divided into low, mid and upper intertidal zones. In both communities, the density of *S. commercialis* increased with intertidal height to above the mid tide level, although a comparison of sites within Port Stephens demonstrated that oyster densities were significantly different within each intertidal zone. The maximum density in the low and mid zone rocky shore plots was approximately 600m^{-2} . The size class structure of both communities was unimodal, with juvenile oysters poorly represented. This low density of juvenile oysters was despite an apparently abundant supply of *S. commercialis* larvae. Oysters were found to occur in abundance on mangrove pneumatophores, with the degree of aggregation and size of oyster clumps decreasing with intertidal height. Space was not limited, as most pneumatophores were unoccupied by oysters.

Recruitment onto experimental patches on a rocky shore and mangrove pneumatophore community was assessed over 1 year, and were examined biweekly during peak settlement times. Three to four episodes of recruitment were observed, with the first two suffering complete mortality over the summer period (December through March). Successful recruitment of *S. commercialis* occurred in autumn, although initial mortalities were high across all intertidal zones. The density of recruits decreased with increasing intertidal height in both communities. The presence of adult conspecifics or shells of conspecifics significantly enhanced the density of *S. commercialis* recruits onto model pneumatophores, but this was not always apparent on rocky shore plots. However, densities of recruits did not differ between treatments over time. The upper limit of intertidal distribution in

mangroves and on the rocky shore sites was similar. Recruitment of *C. gigas* was observed in July, but were few in number.

Thermal tolerances of larvae, 1 month-post settlement spat and adults of both *S. commercialis* and *C. gigas* were determined to assess the role of thermal stress in structuring oyster communities. The thermal tolerances of the larvae of the two species were similar. Oysters were more resistant to elevated temperatures with age, although *C. gigas* was less tolerant than *S. commercialis* over short exposures of elevated temperatures. The body temperatures of insulated model oysters were observed in some instances to exceed the thermal tolerances of spat, but not adults. Shading by mangroves reduced oyster body temperatures by up to 13.5°C, to below that where mortality may be expected in spat. The lower relative thermal tolerance of spat may explain the failure of recruits to survive the summer, and the low density of oysters in the upper intertidal zone.

The effect of intra and inter-specific density on survival, size, and shape was tested at low, mid, and upper intertidal zones at 3 sites within Port Stephens. In the upper intertidal zone, high mortalities and reduced growth rates prevented any competitive interactions with both species. However in the low and mid intertidal zones, the presence of both high and low densities of *C. gigas* induced significant mortalities, reductions in size, and changes in shape in *S. commercialis*. This experiment demonstrated the potential competitive pressure faced by *S. commercialis* if density of *C. gigas* recruitment was to increase.

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Table of Contents

Declaration.....	II
Abstract.....	III
Acknowledgments.....	V
Table of Contents	VI
List of Tables	IX
List of Figures.....	XVII
List of Photographic Plates.....	XXIII
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Comparative Morphology, Biology and Ecophysiology	5
1.3 Processes Influencing Oyster Communities.....	9
1.4 Aim of the Study.....	11
2. A DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY OF INTERTIDAL OYSTER POPULATION STRUCTURE	13
2.1 Introduction.....	13
2.1.1 General Introduction.....	13
2.1.2 The Description of Pattern.....	13
2.1.3 The Intertidal Distribution of Oysters.....	17
2.1.4 Introduction to Experiment.....	18
2.2 Methods and Materials.....	19
2.2.1 Preliminary Field Investigation.....	19
2.2.2 Assessment of Sample Unit Precision and Accuracy.....	22
2.2.3 Mangrove Descriptive Survey	23
2.2.4 Rocky Shore Descriptive Survey.....	24
2.3. Results.....	27
2.3.1 Preliminary Field Investigation.....	27
2.3.2 Assessment of Sample Unit Precision and Accuracy.....	28
2.3.3 Mangrove Descriptive Survey	31
2.3.4 Rocky Shore Descriptive Survey.....	43
2.4 Discussion.....	50
3. ASSESSMENT OF THE UPPER LIMITS OF DISTRIBUTION	53
3.1 Introduction.....	53
3.1.1 General Introduction.....	53
3.1.2 Introduction to experimental.....	54
3.2 Materials and Methods.....	55
3.2.1 Mangroves	55
3.2.2 Rocky Shores.....	56

3.3 Results.....	57
3.3.1 Mangroves.....	57
3.3.2 Rocky Shores.....	66
3.4 Discussion.....	72
4. ASSESSMENT OF RECRUITMENT, SURVIVAL AND GROWTH ON A ROCKY SHORE AND MANGROVE PNEUMATOPHORE COMMUNITY.....	75
4.1 Introduction.....	75
4.2 Materials and Methods.....	77
4.2.1 Experiment 1.....	77
4.2.2 Experiment 2.....	78
4.3 Results.....	79
4.3.1 Experiment 1.....	79
4.3.2 Experiment 2.....	105
4.4 Discussion.....	117
5. TEMPERATURE TOLERANCE OF OYSTERS.....	121
5.1 Introduction.....	121
5.1.1 General Introduction.....	121
5.1.2 Ambient and Body Temperatures of Intertidal Organisms.....	121
5.1.3 Temperature Tolerance.....	124
5.1.4 Temperature and Mortality.....	124
5.1.5 Temperature and Reproduction.....	125
5.2 Introduction to Experiment.....	126
5.3 Methods and Materials.....	127
5.3.1 Temperature Tolerance in Adults, Spat and Larvae.....	127
5.3.2 Effects of Shell Morphology, Size and Shading on Operative Temperature.....	134
5.4 Results.....	135
5.4.1 Temperature Tolerance in Adults, Spat and Larvae.....	135
5.4.2 Effects of Shell Morphology and Size on Operative Temperature.....	147
5.4.3 Operative Temperature Over the Tidal Cycle.....	151
5.5 Discussion.....	158
6. ASSESSMENT OF INTER AND INTRA-SPECIFIC DENSITY ON SURVIVAL AND GROWTH OF OYSTERS.....	163
6.1 Introduction.....	163
6.2 Methods and Materials.....	165
6.3 Results.....	169
6.4 Discussion.....	201
7. SYNTHESIS.....	205
7.1 Processes Influencing Intertidal Oyster Population Structure.....	206

7.2 Does the Pacific Oyster Pose a Threat to the Sydney Rock Oyster in its
Natural Habitat? 211

8. REFERENCES 213

List of Tables

Table 2.1. The values of ID, IC, and GI indices at maximum regularity, randomness and clumping.....	1 7
Table 2.2. Percentage of oysters identified as <i>Crassostrea gigas</i> among 3 intertidal zones during the preliminary survey in August 1990.....	2 8
Table 2.3. ANOVA of standardised (square root transformed) number of <i>S. commercialis</i> sampled from 'mid' zone of Taylors Beach mangrove community.....	2 9
Table 2.4. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of 'mid' zone Taylors Beach mangrove community using 3 quadrat sizes.....	2 9
Table 2.5. ANOVA of standardised number (square root transformed) of <i>S. commercialis</i> sampled from mid zone of Corlette Pt. rocky shore community.....	3 0
Table 2.6. The number and size of <i>C. gigas</i> found the mangrove study sites, pooled from ten 0.25 m ⁻² quadrats.....	3 2
Table 2.7. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance at 3 mangrove sites sampled from the 'low' intertidal zone.....	3 4
Table 2.8. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data from 3 mangrove sites sampled from the 'mid' zone.....	3 4
Table 2.9. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data from 3 mangrove sites sampled from the 'upper' zone.....	3 4
Table 2.10. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data at 3 mangrove sites from the 'low' zone.....	3 4
Table 2.11. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data at 3 mangrove sites from the 'mid' zone.....	3 5
Table 2.12. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests for the agreement between the observed frequency distribution of the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> per pneumatophore.....	3 9
Table 2.13. Estimates of 3 indices of dispersion determined from the frequency of <i>S. commercialis</i> per pneumatophore in 3 intertidal zones sampled from the mangrove community at Taylors Beach.....	3 9
Table 2.14. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance at 3 rocky shore sites sampled from the 'low' intertidal zone.....	4 5
Table 2.15. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance at 3 rocky shore sites sampled from the 'mid' intertidal zone.....	4 5
Table 2.16. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance at 3 rocky shore sites sampled from the 'upper' intertidal zone.....	4 5

Table 2.17. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data at 3 rocky shore sites from the 'low' zone.....	47
Table 2.18	47
Table 2.19. The number and size of <i>C. gigas</i> found in the rocky shore study sites, pooled from ten 0.25 m ⁻² quadrats.....	48
Table 3.1. The mean and standard deviation of the height of 5 (where possible) uppermost oysters occurring on each of 5 mangrove trees along 3 transects at Karuah River, Tilligerry Creek, and Taylors Beach.....	64
Table 3.2. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed upper tidal height data on 5 mangrove trees along 3 transects at 3 sites	64
Table 3.3. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed upper tidal height data on 5 mangrove trees (each along 3 transects) at 6 stations along the intertidal gradient at the Karuah River site	65
Table 3.4. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> upper limits data between stations along the tidal gradient at Karuah River site.	65
Table 3.5. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed uppermost oyster length data on 5 mangrove trees (each along 3 transects) at 6 stations along the intertidal gradient at the Karuah River site	65
Table 3.6. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> upper oyster length data between stations along the tidal gradient at Karuah River site.....	66
Table 3.7. The mean and standard deviation of the height of 10 uppermost oysters occurring on each of 3 rocky shore transects at Corlette Pt., Tanilba Bay, and Greenplay Pt.....	71
Table 3.8. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed upper tidal height data along 3 transects at 3 rocky shore sites.....	72
Table 3.9. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed upper oyster length data along 3 transects at 3 rocky shore sites.....	72
Table 4.1a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 11 December 1993.....	85
Table 4.1b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 29 January 1994.....	85
Table 4.2a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root+1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 29 January 1994.....	85

Table 4.2b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 29 January 1994.....	86
Table 4.3a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 12 February 1994.....	86
Table 4.3b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 12 February 1994.....	86
Table 4.4a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 25 February 1994.....	87
Table 4.4b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 25 February 1994.....	87
Table 4.5. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 13 March 1994.....	87
Table 4.6a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root+1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 26 March 1994.....	88
Table 4.6b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 26 March 1994.....	88
Table 4.7a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 23 April 1994.....	88
Table 4.7b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the interaction of the main effects 'treatment' and 'zone' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 23 April 1994.....	89
Table 4.8 ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 13 May 1994.....	89
Table 4.9. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 18 June 1994.....	89
Table 4.10a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 23 July 1994.....	90

Table 4.10b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the main effect 'treatment' on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² on 23 July 1994.....	90
Table 4.11. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 17 September 1994.....	90
Table 4.12. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 5 November 1994, n=24.....	91
Table 4.13. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on rocky shore treatments at mid and lower intertidal zones on 3 December 1994.....	91
Table 4.14. Regression of square root transformed density data of recruits at Corlette Point, from age 5 days post settlement.....	91
Recruitment of oysters in mangroves.....	106
Table 4.15. The size range and rate of growth of <i>S. commercialis</i> spat occurring on 3 model pneumatophore treatments over 3 intertidal zones in 1994.....	108
Table 4.16a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on model pneumatophore treatments at 3 intertidal zones on 29 January 1994.....	111
Table 4.16b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for interaction between zone and treatment on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per sample unit on 29 January 1994.....	111
Table 4.17a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on model pneumatophore treatments at 3 intertidal zones on 26 March 1994.....	112
Table 4.17b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for interaction between zone and treatment on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per sample unit on 26 March 1994.....	112
Table 4.18a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (square-root +1) number of recruits on model pneumatophore treatments at 3 intertidal zones on 13 May 1994.....	113
Table 4.18b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for interaction between zone and treatment on the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per sample unit on 13 May 1994.....	113
Table 5.1. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> untransformed survival data at six temperature treatments.....	137

Table 5.2. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> survival data at six temperatures.....	137
Table 5.3. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> untransformed survival data at six temperature treatments	137
Table 5.4. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>C. gigas</i> survival data at six temperatures.....	138
Table 5.5. ANOVA of arc sine transformed proportion of <i>S. commercialis</i> larvae to develop to D-veliger stage at six temperature treatments.....	138
Table 5.6. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> larvae which developed to D-veliger stage at six temperatures	139
Table 5.7. ANOVA of arc sine transformed proportion of <i>C. gigas</i> larvae to develop to D-veliger stage at six temperature treatments.....	139
Table 5.8. Matrix of Tukey HSD pairwise comparison probabilities of <i>S. commercialis</i> larvae which developed to D-veliger stage at six temperatures	139
Table 5.9. The LT50 and 95% confidence limits of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> spat at 2, 6, and 8 h exposures. nr refers to confidence interval being not reliable, given the absence of a temperature treatment with any partial mortality.....	145
Table 5.10. The LT50 ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) and 95% confidence limits of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> at 2, 6, and 8 h exposures. nr refers to confidence interval being not reliable, given the absence of a temperature treatment with any partial mortality.	148
Table 5.11. Mean and standard deviation of length, width and height of oyster shell (models and live oysters) used in shell morphology, size and shading experiments.....	150
Table 5.12 Tide and weather data for Sydney on the 8th and 9th of February, 1995	153
Table 5.13. The LT50 estimates for several oyster species, including those determined in this study for <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> , at various periods of exposure.....	163
Table 6.1 The proportions and densities of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in each of 9 experimental treatments to test the appropriate inter and intra-specific interactions.....	168
Table 6.2a Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone interaction of mortality in the 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> treatment.....	176
Table 6.2b Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone interaction of size of 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> treatment.....	176

Table 6.2c Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for site of the size in 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> treatment at 27 October 1990.....	177
Table 6.3a Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone interaction of mortality in the 10 <i>C. gigas</i> treatment.....	177
Table 6.3b Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone interaction of size of 10 <i>C. gigas</i> treatment.....	177
Table 6.3c Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone interaction of shape of 10 <i>C. gigas</i> treatment.....	179
Table 6.4 a ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (arc-sin) mortality data at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites	184
Table 6.4 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone*density interaction of mortality between the 3 <i>S. commercialis</i> intra-specific densities at each zone and site.....	184
Table 6.5. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> transformed (arc-sin) mortality data at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	185
Table 6.6 a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed oyster size (length x width, mm ⁻²) at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites	186
Table 6.6 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone*density interaction in size between the 3 <i>S. commercialis</i> intra-specific densities at each zone and site	186
Table 6.7 a. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> square-root transformed oyster size (length x width, mm ⁻²) at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	187
Table 6.7 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone*density interaction in size between the 3 <i>C. gigas</i> intra-specific densities at each zone and site	187
Table 6.8 a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed oyster shape (width/length) at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	188
Table 6.8 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for density on shape between the 3 <i>S. commercialis</i> intra-specific densities	188
Table 6.9 a. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> square-root transformed oyster shape (width/length) at 3 intra-specific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	189
Table 6.9 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for site*zone*density interaction on shape between the 3 <i>C. gigas</i> intra-specific densities at each zone and site.....	189
Table 6.10 a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> transformed (arc-sin) mortalities at 3 densities (10 <i>S. commercialis</i> only, 10 <i>S. commercialis</i>	

+10 <i>C. gigas</i> , and 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> +20 <i>C. gigas</i>), intertidal zones and sites.....	194
Table 6.10 b Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the zone*density interaction of mortality in <i>S. commercialis</i> subject 10 and 20 <i>C. gigas</i> , compared with 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> alone, at each zone	194
Table 6.11. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> transformed (arc-sin) mortalities at 3 densities (10 <i>C. gigas</i> only, 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +10 <i>S. commercialis</i> and 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +20 <i>S. commercialis</i>), intertidal zones and sites	195
Table 6.12 a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed oyster size (length x width, mm ⁻²) at 3 densities (10 <i>S. commercialis</i> only, 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> + 10 <i>C. gigas</i> , and 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> + 20 <i>C. gigas</i>), intertidal zones and sites.....	196
Table 6.12 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*zone*density interaction of the size of <i>S. commercialis</i> subject 10 and 20 <i>C. gigas</i> , compared with 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> alone, at each zone and site.....	196
Table 6.13 a. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> square-root transformed oyster size (length x width, mm ⁻²) at 3 densities (10 <i>C. gigas</i> only, 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +10 <i>S. commercialis</i> and 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +20 <i>S. commercialis</i>), intertidal zones and sites.....	197
Table 6.13 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the zone*density interaction of the size of <i>C. gigas</i> subject to 10 and 20 <i>S. commercialis</i> , compared with 10 <i>C. gigas</i> alone, at each zone	197
Table 6.14 a. ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> square-root transformed oyster shape (width/length) at 3 densities (10 <i>S. commercialis</i> only, 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> + 10 <i>C. gigas</i> , and 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> + 20 <i>C. gigas</i>), intertidal zones and sites.....	198
Table 6.14 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the zone*density interaction of the shape of <i>S. commercialis</i> subject 10 and 20 <i>C. gigas</i> , compared with 10 <i>S. commercialis</i> alone, at each zone	198
Table 6.15 a. ANOVA of <i>C. gigas</i> square-root transformed oyster shape (width/length) at 3 densities (10 <i>C. gigas</i> only, 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +10 <i>S. commercialis</i> and 10 <i>C. gigas</i> +20 <i>S. commercialis</i>), intertidal zones and sites.....	199
Table 6.15 b. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the zone*density interaction of the shape of <i>C. gigas</i> subject to 10 and 20 <i>S. commercialis</i> , compared with 10 <i>C. gigas</i> alone, at each zone	199
Table 6.15 c. Tukey HSD matrix of probabilities for the site*density interaction of the shape of <i>C. gigas</i> subject to 10 and 20 <i>S. commercialis</i> , compared with 10 <i>C. gigas</i> alone, at each site	199

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. Map of rocky shore and mangrove sampling sites in Port Stephens, NSW.....	2 1
Figure 2.2. Diagram of a mangrove community, typical of those in Port Stephens.....	2 5
Figure 2.3. Diagram of a rocky shore community, typical of those in Port Stephens.....	2 6
Figure 2.4. The precision of successive number of sample units sampled from the 'mid' zone of the Taylors beach mangrove community.....	2 9
Figure 2.5. The precision of successive number of sample units sampled from the 'mid' zone of the Corlette Pt. rocky shore community.....	3 1
Figure 2.6. Mean (± 1 standard deviation) of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data sampled from 3 intertidal zones from a) Taylors Beach, b) Karuah River and c) Tilligerry Creek.....	3 3
Figure 2.7. Power of the ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundances at 3 sites sampled in 3 zones to avoid a Type II error.....	3 5
Figure 2.8 a,b. Percent frequency of <i>S. commercialis</i> in various size classes in the a) Tilligerry Ck. and b) Karuah River mangrove community.....	3 7
Figure 2.10 a,b,c. Observed and expected frequency distributions based on the Poisson distribution series for the a) 'low' zone, b) 'mid' zone, and c) 'upper' zone of the Taylors Beach mangrove community.....	4 1
Figure 2.11 a,b,c. Observed and expected frequency distributions based on the negative-binomial distribution series for the a) 'low' zone, b) 'mid' zone, and c) 'upper' zone of the Taylors Beach mangrove community.....	4 2
Figure 2.12 a,b,c. Mean and standard deviation of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data sampled from 3 intertidal zones at a) Corlette Point, b) Tanilba Point, and c) Greenplay Point.....	4 4
Figure 2.13. The power ($1-\beta$) of the ANOVA of <i>S. commercialis</i> abundance data at 3 rocky shore sites sampled in 3 zones, to avoid a Type II error.....	4 7
Figure 2.14 a,b,c. Percent frequency of <i>S. commercialis</i> in various size classes in the a) Corlette Point, b) Tanilba Point, and c) Greenplay Point rocky shore communities.....	4 9
Figure 3.1. The vertical profile of the Karuah River mangrove community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	6 0

Figure 3.2. The vertical profile of the Taylors Beach mangrove community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	6 2
Figure 3.3. The vertical profile of the Tilligerry Creek mangrove community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	6 3
Figure 3.4. The mean and standard error of the uppermost height of <i>S. commercialis</i> at stations 6 to 11 at the Karuah river site, expressed in cm above ISLW.....	6 6
Figure 3.5. The mean and standard error of the shell lengths of the uppermost <i>S. commercialis</i> at stations 6 to 11 at the Karuah river site.....	6 7
Figure 3.6. The vertical profile of the Corlette Point rocky shore community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	6 8
Figure 3.7. The vertical profile of the Tanilba Bay rocky shore community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	6 9
Figure 3.8. The vertical profile of the Greenplay Point rocky shore community, with the mean upper limit of distribution of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i>	7 0
Figure 3.9 The mean and standard error of the intertidal height of the uppermost <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> at 3 rocky shores sites.....	7 3
Figure 3.10 The mean and standard error of the oyster length of the uppermost <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> at 3 rocky shores sites.....	7 3
Figure 4.1 The mean and standard error of the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits 0.03 m ⁻² when first observed post-settlement.....	9 3
Figure 4.2 The mean and standard error of the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² in the low intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994.....	9 4
Figure 4.3 The mean and standard error of the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² in the mid intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994,	9 5
Figure 4.4 The mean and standard error of the number of <i>S. commercialis</i> recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² in the upper intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994	9 6
Figure 4.5 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m ⁻² in the 'bare rock' treatment of the low intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm).	9 7

Figure 4.6 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+shell' treatment of the low intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm).....98

Figure 4.7 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+oysters' treatment of the low intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm).....99

Figure 4.8 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'bare rock' treatment of the mid intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 100

Figure 4.9 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+shell' treatment of the mid intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 101

Figure 4.10 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+oysters' treatment of the mid intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 102

Figure 4.11 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'bare rock' treatment of the upper intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 103

Figure 4.12 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+shell' treatment of the upper intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 104

Figure 4.13 The mean number of recruits per 0.03 m⁻² in the 'rock+oysters' treatment of the upper intertidal zone from 11 December 1993 to 3 December 1994, by size class (mm)..... 105

Figure 4.14. The median (± range) of *S. commercialis* shell length found in rocky shore experimental plots at Corlette Point 106

Figure 4.15 The number of *S. commercialis* spat in various size classes..... 114

Figure 4.16 The number of *S. commercialis* spat in various size classes on 5 a)'model pneumatophore', b)'model+shell' and c)'model+oyster' experimental models in the mid intertidal zone from 29 January to 23 July, 1994 115

Figure 4.17 The number of *S. commercialis* spat in various size classes on 5 a)'model pneumatophore', b)'model+shell' and c)'model+oyster' experimental models in the upper intertidal zone from 29 January to 23 July, 1994. 116

Figure 4.18 The mean and standard error o the total number of *S. commercialis* recruits observed on 5 experimental units in the a)low, b)mid and c)upper intertidal zone from 29 January to 23 July, 1994..... 117

Figure 5.1. Mean and standard error of survival to 48 h of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> larvae mL ⁻¹ at six temperature treatments.....	140
Figure 5.2. Correlation of <i>S. commercialis</i> 48hr larval survival against temperature treatments 15 ^o to 24 ^o C, and 24 ^o to 30 ^o C	140
Figure 5.3. Correlation of <i>C. gigas</i> 48hr larval survival against temperature treatments 15 ^o to 24 ^o C, and 24 ^o to 30 ^o C	141
Figure 5.4. The percent of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> larvae developed to prodisoconch I D-veliger stage at 48 h over six temperature treatments.....	142
Figure 5.5. Air and <i>S. commercialis</i> spat soft body temperature recorded in the 38o temperature treatment.....	143
Figure 5.6. Mortalities of <i>S. commercialis</i> spat exposed to six temperatures over 2, 6 and 8 h.....	144
Figure 5.7. Mortalities of <i>C. gigas</i> spat exposed to six temperatures over 2, 6 and 8 hr.....	144
Figure 5.8. Comparison of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> spat mortalities over an 8 hr exposure to 38oC.....	145
Figure 5.9. Air and <i>S. commercialis</i> soft body temperature recorded in the 38o temperature treatment.....	146
Figure 5.10. Mortalities of <i>S. commercialis</i> exposed to six temperatures over 2, 6 and 8 h.	147
Figure 5.11. Mortalities of <i>C. gigas</i> exposed to six temperatures over 2, 6 and 8 h.....	147
Figure 5.12. Comparison of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> mortalities over an 8 hr exposure to 44 ^o C.	148
Figure 5.13 The mean and standard error of temperature measurements of model oysters (Te) and real oysters from mid intertidal zone.	149
Figure 5.14. The mean and standard error of the Te measured from model oysters with shells from low, mid and upper intertidal zone.....	150
Figure 5.15. Comparison of the operative temperature (Te) of adult and spat mid tidal zone models.	151
Figure 5.16. The effect of different shading regimes on the operative temperature (Te) of adult oysters.	152
Figure 5.17 The temperature of a model oyster measured hourly over 48 h in the upper intertidal zone attached to a pneumatophore and resting on silt in an unshaded area cleared of mangroves.	154
Figure 5.18 Comparison of body temperature of mangrove shaded and unshaded model oysters in the upper intertidal zone, on the 8th and 9th of February 1995.....	155

Figure 5.19 Comparison of body temperature of mangrove shaded model oysters in the upper, mid, and low (unshaded) intertidal zone, on the 8th and 9th of February 1995.....	156
Figure 5.20. Comparison of body temperature of unshaded model oysters in the low, mid, and upper intertidal zone, on the 8th and 9th of February 1995.....	157
Figure 5.21. The maximum temperatures recorded daily from model oysters in the low (unshaded), mid (shaded by mangrove), and upper (shaded by mangrove) intertidal zones from the 7th to the 21st February, 1995.....	158
Figure 5.22. The maximum temperatures recorded daily from mangrove shaded and unshaded model oysters in the upper intertidal zone from the 7th to the 21st February, 1995.....	158
Figure 5.23. The maximum temperatures recorded daily from mangrove shaded and unshaded model oysters in the mid intertidal zone from the 7th to the 21st February, 1995.....	159
Figure 6.1 Map Port Stephens NSW, indicating experimental sites.....	170
Figure 6.2 a,b. The relationship between size (length x width) and weight (whole oyster).....	174
Figure 6.3. The percent mortality in low density monospecific treatments of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> at 3 intertidal sites and zones.	180
Figure 6.4. The size (length x width) of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in low density monospecific treatments at 3 intertidal sites and zones.....	181
Figure 6.5. The shape (width/length) of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in low density monospecific treatments at 3 intertidal sites and zones.....	182
Figure 6.6. The mean and standard error of % mortalities of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in 3 monospecific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	190
Figure 6.7. The mean and standard error of the size of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in 3 monospecific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	191
Figure 6.8. The mean and standard error of the shape of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> in 3 monospecific densities, intertidal zones and sites.....	192
Figure 6.9 The mean and standard error of the % mortality of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> subject to 0, +10 and +20 of the other species (ie, total densities of 10, 20, and 30 respectively), at 3 intertidal zones and sites.	200
Figure 6.10 The mean and standard error of the size of <i>S. commercialis</i> and <i>C. gigas</i> subject to 0, +10 and +20 of the other species (ie, total densities of 10, 20, and 30 respectively), at 3 intertidal zones and sites.....	201

Figure 6.11 The mean and standard error of the shape of *S. commercialis* and *C. gigas* subject to 0, +10 and +20 of the other species (ie, total densities of 10, 20, and 30 respectively), at 3 intertidal zones and sites..... 202

List of Photographic Plates

Plate 1.1 a,b. Communities of <i>Saccostrea commercialis</i> in Port Stephens NSW.....	2
Plate 1.2. Morphological features which distinguish <i>Saccostrea commercialis</i> and <i>Crassostrea gigas</i>	6
Plate 1.3. Various ecomorphic forms of mature <i>S. commercialis</i> commonly found within Port Stephens.....	6
Plate 3.1. Photograph of graduated hardwood stake and water-level hose used to determine intertidal height of oysters in mangrove communities.....	56
Plate 5.1. Photographs of paraffin wax filled model Sydney rock oysters used to measure operative temperature (Te) from a) oyster shell types collected from the low, mid and upper intertidal zones, b) spat and adult oyster shell types, and c) oysters with dataloggers used to record temperatures in the field.....	131
Plate 6.1. Photographic examples of experimental plates at the start of the experiment with a) 10 density, b) 20 density, and c) 30 density treatments of <i>S. commercialis</i>	170
Plate 6.2. Examples of experimental oysters grown in the monospecific low density treatments after 18 months in the field at Salamander Bay, at a) low, b) mid, and c) upper intertidal zones.....	171
Plate 6.3. Examples of experimental oysters grown in the high density treatment (20 <i>C. gigas</i> + 10 <i>S. commercialis</i>) after 18 months in the field at Salamander Bay, at a) low, b) mid, and c) upper intertidal zones.	172