

CONSERVATION OF POLYCHAETE BIODIVERSITY WITHIN THE PORT STEPHENS-GREAT LAKES MARINE PARK



By

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

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Cover photos from left-right: *Dendronephthya australis* taken by David Harasti, Port Stephens, Australia and *Nephtys triangula* n. sp.

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my late grandfather

James 'Jim' Dixon

You will be forever missed

This is also dedicated to my loving parents and husband

I truly couldn't have made it through without your love and support

DISCLAIMER

This thesis is not considered to be conforming to the requirements of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature for publication of new species names. New species names used in this thesis are not to be cited prior to their formal publication [see ICZN Chapter 3, Article 8. <http://iczn.org/iczn/index.jsp>].

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Table of Contents

DISCLAIMER	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	xi
Abstract	1
Chapter 1. Introduction	5
Chapter 2. Polychaete biodiversity: relationship to environmental variation and conservation needs	11
2.1 Background	12
2.2 Conservation of marine invertebrates	12
2.3 Conservation value	20
2.4 Macrobenthic biodiversity	22
2.5 Polychaetes	24
2.6 Improved taxonomic understanding	32
2.7 Conclusions	33
Chapter 3. Effectiveness of habitat classes as surrogates for biodiversity in marine reserve planning ¹	35
Abstract	36
3.1 Introduction	37
3.2 Methods	39
3.3 Results	45
3.4 Discussion	57
Chapter 4. The conservation value of soft coral (<i>Dendronephthya australis</i>) beds on unvegetated seabed ²	64
Abstract	65
4.1 Introduction	66
4.2 Methods	70
4.3 Results	76
4.4 Discussion	86
4.5 Conclusion	96
Chapter 5. Temporal variation in measures of conservation value within an estuarine environment ³	97

Abstract.....	98
5.1 Introduction.....	99
5.2 Methods.....	102
5.3 Results.....	107
5.4 Discussion.....	126
Chapter 6. One new species of <i>Nephtys</i> Cuvier, 1817 and two new species of <i>Micronephthys</i> Friedrich, 1939 (Polychaeta: Phyllodocida: Nephtyidae) from eastern Australia with notes on <i>Aglaophamus australiensis</i> (Fauchald, 1965) ⁴	134
Abstract.....	135
6.1 Introduction.....	136
6.2 Materials and methods.....	137
6.3 Systematics.....	138
6.4 Discussion.....	168
Chapter 7. General discussion and conclusions.....	187
7.1 Introduction.....	188
7.2 The use of habitat classification schemes to select marine protected areas.....	189
7.3 Ecosystem engineers and Marine Park conservation planning.....	190
7.4 Temporal variation in conservation.....	191
7.5 Identification of new species.....	192
7.6 Future research.....	192
Bibliography.....	195
Appendix A: Polychaete Species Categorisations.....	236
Appendix B: Location of the study sites in the Port Stephens–Great Lakes Marine Park, NSW, Australia.....	262
Appendix C: Polychaete Data May 2009 Sampling Period.....	264
Appendix D: Sediment Data May 2009 Sampling Period.....	316
Appendix E: Polychaete Data February 2011 Sampling Period.....	320
Appendix F: Polychaete Data October 2011 Sampling Period.....	335
Appendix G: Sediment Data 2011 Sampling Period.....	357

List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Location of the study in the Port Stephens–Great Lakes Marine Park, NSW, Australia. ...	41
Figure 3.2: Species richness (a) and total abundance (b) of polychaetes recorded at sites within habitats in the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park (P/Z <i>Posidonia/Zostera</i> mix). Sites are identified by the numbers within each habitat class. Values for each site are mean±standard error (n=5)	48
Figure 3.2 (cont.): (c) the mean number of species recorded and (d) mean total abundance recorded in each habitat.....	49
Figure 3.3: Unconstrained PCO plot of the spatial structure of polychaete assemblages in the Port Stephens estuary. The habitats sampled are represented by the different symbols, and each point represents a site within a habitat. The vector overlays represent species with a Pearson correlation of at least 0.6 with the PCO axes.....	50
Figure 3.4: dbRDA ordination plot showing the structural arrangement of polychaete assemblages in Port Stephens estuary overlaid with the vectors of the environmental variables that explained significant amounts of variation in the assemblages. Vectors represent the direction and magnitude of the Pearson correlation of each variable with the dbRDA axes. Symbols are explained in Figure 3.3.	54
Figure 3.5: Proposed revised bio-geomorphic scheme for the Port Stephens – Great Lakes Marine Park, NSW, Australia.	56
Figure 4.1: <i>Dendronephthya australis</i> habitat, Port Stephens, Australia. Images supplied by David Harasti.	69
Figure 4.2: Location of study sites within each habitat in the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens–Great Lakes Marine Park, NSW, Australia (see Appendix B for site numbers). The area in red indicates the location of <i>Dendronephthya australis</i> habitat in the Port Stephens estuary (area of <i>D. australis</i> habitat from Poulos <i>et al.</i> 2013).....	72
Figure 4.3: MDS ordination plot depicting variation in polychaete assemblages among sites (depicted by the replicate symbols) within four habitats in the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park in February and October 2011. Ordination based on data of mean abundance of each species in each site.	78
Figure 4.4: Total abundance (a) and species richness (b) of polychaetes in replicate sites within the <i>Dendronephthya australis</i> and other habitats in the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park. Values for each site are mean+standard error (n=5). Sampling occurred in February 2010 (black) and October 2010 (white).	80
Figure 4.5: MDS ordination plot depicting variation in multivariate composition of the physical characteristics of habitats (depicted by the replicate symbols) within the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park.....	82
Figure 4.6: Comparison of the physical attributes of the <i>Dendronephthya australis</i> habitat and the current physical attributes of the other habitats tested in the Port Stephens estuary, Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park from October 2011. The variables shown are: sediment particle size (a, b, c), CaCO ₃ content (d), total organic carbon content (e) and depth (f).	83
Figure 5.1: Total polychaete abundance of each site (from summing the abundance in n=5 replicate samples) in each habitat sampled in a) February 2011 and October 2011 and b) May 2009 and October 2011. The two bars in each habitat represent the two sites.	113
Figure 5.2: Pairwise scatterplots of species richness in (a) February and October 2011 (short-term data set), and (b) May 2009 and October 2011 (long-term data set). The values shown are the Spearman rank correlation coefficients (ρ) and their <i>P</i> -values.....	114

Figure 5.3: Pairwise scatterplots of total abundance of polychaetes in (a) February and October 2011 (short-term data set), and (b) May 2009 and October 2011 (long-term data set). The values shown are the Spearman rank correlation coefficients (ρ) and their P -values.....	115
Figure 5.4: nMDS ordination plots depicting polychaete assemblages in Port Stephens estuary for the short-term data set, in February 2011 (upper panel), and October 2011 (lower panel). Clusters of sites that are at least 30% similar in their assemblage structure are enclosed by ellipses. Labels represent unique site identification codes, with sites representing the following habitats: 1 and 4 <i>Posidonia</i> ; 2 and 5 <i>Zostera</i> ; 26 and 27 Sand; 29 and 32 Mud; 30 and 33 Muddy/sand. Assemblages are based on total abundance of each species in each site with abundance data: untransformed (a, d); square-root transformed (b, e); and transformed to presence/absence (c, f).	117
Figure 5.5: nMDS ordination plots depicting polychaete assemblages in Port Stephens estuary for the long-term data set, in May 2009 (upper panel), and October 2011 (lower panel). Clusters of sites that are at least 30% similar in their assemblage structure are enclosed by ellipses. Labels represent unique site identification codes, with sites representing the following habitats: 1 and 4 <i>Posidonia</i> ; 2 and 5 <i>Zostera</i> ; 26 and 27 Sand; 29 and 32 Mud; 30 and 33 Muddy/sand. Assemblages are based on total abundance of each species in each site with abundance data: untransformed (a, d); square-root transformed (b, e); and transformed to presence/absence (c, f).	118
Figure 5.6: Pairwise scatterplots of summed irreplaceability values of sites in (a) February and October 2011 (short-term data set), and (b) May 2009 and October 2011 (long-term data set). Values shown are Spearman rank correlation coefficients (ρ) and their P -values.	121
Figure 5.7: Results of the reserve selection process for each sampling period in (a) the short-term data set, and (b) the long-term data set. The graphs show the % species accumulated from the progressive reservation of sites, with the order of sites determined by the reserve selection process. All sites were not required to achieve the conservation goal in February 2011 and May 2009.....	123
Figure 5.8: Maps showing the order in which sites were selected by a reserve selection process to achieve the conservation goal of each species being represented at least once in a reserve for: a) February 2011 sampling period; b) October 2011 sampling period. Sites labeled 0 were not required to achieve the conservation goal. The top-3 ranking sites are enclosed by circles.....	124
Figure 5.9: Maps showing the order in which sites were selected by a reserve selection process to achieve the conservation goal of each species being represented at least once in a reserve of conservation priority of each site using short term polychaete assemblage structure of each site for: a) May 2009 sampling period; and b) October 2011 sampling period. The site labeled 0 was not required to achieve the conservation goal. The top-3 ranking sites are enclosed by circles.	125
Figure 6.1: Stereo microscope montage image of prostomium and anterior dorsum of <i>Micronephthys aurantiaca</i> n. sp. (AM W41472).	147
Figure 6.2: a–f <i>Micronephthys aurantiaca</i> n.sp. (AM W43574) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 20; b: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 20; c: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 20; d: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 30; e: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 30; f: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 40.	148
Figure 6.3: a–f <i>Micronephthys aurantiaca</i> n. sp. (AM W41518) a: Parapodia of chaetiger 20 and 21; b: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 20; c: Lyrate chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 20; d: Lyrate chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 21; e– f: Lyrate chaete of notopodium of chaetiger 35.....	149

Figure 6.4: Stereo microscope montage image of prostomium and anterior dorsum of <i>Micronephthys derupeli</i> n. sp. (AM W41732).	154
Figure 6.5: a–f <i>Micronephthys derupeli</i> n.sp (AM W43573) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 4; b: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 4; c: Chaetae of notopodium of Chaetiger 4; d: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 8; e: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 8. f: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 21	155
Figure 6.6: a–d <i>Micronephthys derupeli</i> n.sp (AM W43573) a: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 21; b: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 21; c: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 40; d: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 40.....	165
Figure 6.7: a–f <i>Micronephthys derupeli</i> n. sp. (AM W41549) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 4; b– c: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 4; d: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 8; e: Branchiae of neuropodium of chaetiger 8; f: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 8.....	157
Figure 6.8: a–f <i>Micronephthys derupeli</i> n. sp. (AM W41549) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 20 b: Chaetae of neuropodium chaetiger 20; ci: Branchiae of neuropodium chaetiger 20; d: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 40; e–f: Chaetae of notopodium of chaetiger 40.....	158
Figure 6.9: Stereo microscope montage image of prostomium, everted pharynx and anterior dorsum of <i>Nephtys triangula</i> n. sp. (AM W24763).	164
Figure 6.10: a–f <i>Nephtys triangula</i> n.sp. (AM W43573) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 3; b: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 3; c: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 20; d: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 20; e: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 40; f: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 70.	165
Figure 6.11: a–f <i>Nephtys triangula</i> n. sp. (AM W24763) a: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 3; b: Branchiae of neuropodium of chaetiger 3 that are present from chaetiger 3 and continue to posterior end; c– d: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 3; e: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 20; F: Branchiae of neuropodium of chaetiger 20.....	166
Figure 6.12: a–f <i>Nephtys triangula</i> n. sp. (AM W24763) a: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 20; b: Noto- and neuropodia of chaetiger 40; c: Chaetae of neuropodium of chaetiger 40; d: Branchiae of neuropodium of chaetiger 40; e: Noto- and neuropodia of posterior end; f: ornamental chaetae of neuropodium of posterior end.	167

List of Tables

Table 3.1: Summary of univariate PERMANOVA results testing for differences among habitat classes and sites (habitat class) in mean species richness of polychaetes and mean abundance of polychaetes. P-values were calculated from permutation of residuals under a reduced model (n=9999 permutations). Also shown is the square-root of the components of variation (Var)....	47
Table 3.2: Summary of PERMANOVA results testing for differences in polychaete assemblages among habitat classes and among sites (habitat class), and pairwise tests for differences between habitat classes. P-values for both analyses were calculated from permutation of residuals under a reduced model (n=9999 permutations) and Monte Carlo P-values (i.e. P(MC)) were used for the pairwise tests because of the small numbers of unique permutations for some comparisons. Also shown is square-root of estimates of the components of variation (Var).	51
Table 3.3: Results of DISTLM showing the three environmental variables that are significant predictors of spatial variation in polychaete assemblages, the relative importance of each variable in the model linking these three variables to assemblage variation (fitted model) and the relative importance of each variable to total variation in the polychaete assemblages.....	54
Table 3.4: Values of Pearson correlations of the selected environmental variables with each of the dbRDA axes. The variables were distance to estuary entrance, ln (% sediment in 212 μ m fraction), and ln (depth).	55
Table 4.1: Summary of: a) PERMANOVA results testing for differences in polychaete assemblages among habitats, sites within habitats, and at different times (P-values were calculated from permutation of residuals under a reduced model, n=9999 permutations); b) pairwise t-tests among habitats.....	77
Table 4.2: Summary of SIMPER results showing the five most influential species responsible for dissimilarity in assemblage structure of polychaetes between the <i>Dendronephthya australis</i> soft coral habitat and other habitats.	79
Table 4.3: a) Summary of PERMANOVA results testing for differences among habitats, sites within habitats, and at different times, in total polychaete species richness and polychaete abundance. P-values were calculated from permutation of residuals under a reduced model (n=9999 permutations). Analyses were done on untransformed data (results of Cochran's C test are shown; b) results of pairwise t-tests for the time x site(habitat) interaction for differences in total abundance and species richness of sites (habitats) between the two sampling periods.	81
Table 5.1: Total number of polychaete species sampled in each site within each habitat during May 2009, February 2011 and October 2011, and in the short-term (February-October 2011) and long-term (May 2009-October 2011) data sets.....	109
Table 5.2: Temporal turnover in species composition for the short-term (February-October 2011) and long-term (May 2009-October 2011) data sets. The value shown for each site is the species temporal turnover (STT) index.	111
Table 5.3: Results of the Relate test for the two Bray-Curtis similarity matrices in the short-term (February and October 2011) and long-term (May 2009 and October 2011) data sets. Values shown are Spearman rank correlation coefficients (ρ) and their P-values.	119
Table 5.4: Summed irreplaceability values of sites (for the conservation goal of each species being represented at least once in a reserve) based on data from the May 2009, February 2011, and October 2011 sampling periods.	120
Table 6.1: All accepted species of the genus <i>Micronephthys</i>	171
Table 6.2: Records of the genus <i>Nephtys</i> from Australian and Indo-Pacific waters.	177

Abstract

Globally the world's oceans are threatened with loss in biodiversity due to pressures from fishing, habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution and global climate change. Marine protected areas (MPAs) are an effective approach, in concert with other management approaches, to protecting marine environments and their component biodiversity, sustaining productivity of marine resources, and managing multiple uses in coastal marine environments. With detailed information on the marine biodiversity of an area in which an MPA is proposed, the relative conservation value of different places within the area can be quantified by measures such as species richness, rarity, assemblage diversity, total abundance of organisms, and presence of critical habitats.

However, the lack of information on the distribution and abundance of marine biodiversity, and its temporal dynamics, is problematic for the selection and design of MPAs. To overcome this constraint, habitats are commonly used as a biodiversity surrogate for biodiversity in marine conservation planning to select MPAs and draw zone boundaries.

This research tested the validity of two habitat-based surrogacy schemes, and assessed the implications for assigning conservation value to sites from short- and long-term temporal variation in biodiversity. This research employed polychaete biodiversity as the object of biodiversity assessment and conservation. Polychaetes were used as they can comprise over one-third of species of benthic infaunal assemblages, they are the most frequent and abundant marine metazoans in benthic environments, and they are a reliable surrogate for other macrobenthic taxa. Despite the significance of polychaetes for estuarine biodiversity and ecological functioning, major gaps remain in their taxonomy. In this research, three new polychaete species have been described, contributing to Australia's marine species inventory and knowledge of Australia's endemism. This research was undertaken in the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park, New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

Surrogates are used in marine conservation planning when there is limited information on the distribution of biodiversity, and representation of species and assemblage diversity are conservation goals. With prior confirmation of their relationship to spatial variation in biodiversity, habitat classification schemes are a potentially useful surrogate. It was tested whether polychaete biodiversity differed among six estuarine habitat classes defined for conservation planning in the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park, New South Wales, Australia: subtidal sand, mud, muddy sand, and seagrass beds comprising *Posidonia australis*, *Zostera capricorni* and mixed *Posidonia/Zostera*. Polychaetes were sampled from replicate sites in each habitat and differences among habitat classes in species richness, abundance, and assemblage structure were examined. Several environmental variables, known to be important determinants of polychaete distribution, were also quantified at each site. Ninety-five species of polychaetes (belonging to 35 families) were identified. Species richness and abundance did not differ among the habitat classes. Polychaete assemblages of subtidal sand differed from assemblages in both mud and muddy sand, however, assemblages in all other habitats were not different. A combination of some of the measured environmental variables (distance to the estuary entrance, depth, sediment grain size) was a more important association of assemblage variation than the habitat classes. Using these predictors, an alternative bio-geomorphic scheme is proposed that differs to the scheme currently utilised in marine park planning. This study demonstrates the critical importance of testing assumptions about surrogacy and an approach for refining surrogates.

Ecosystem engineers are organisms that create or modify habitat, altering the presence and distribution of species. Species can be considered engineers if they provide conditions not present elsewhere in the landscape and if other species are only able to live in the engineered patches. The conservation value of an area is enhanced by the occurrence of ecosystem engineers with restricted and patchy distributions. *Dendronephthya australis* (Nephtheidae), a geographically restricted

species of temperate soft coral, occurs patchily on unvegetated subtidal sediment in the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park, Australia. This study compared the polychaete biodiversity of this putative ‘soft coral habitat’ with three other unvegetated and uncolonised habitats in the Port Stephens estuary over two sampling periods in February and October 2011, with the aim of determining the distinctiveness of *D. australis* as a habitat. Abiotic attributes of all habitats were compared to determine whether they were affected by the presence of the soft coral. A total of 110 polychaete species were identified, including 69 species (29 families) and 87 species (33 families) identified in each sampling period. The family Poecilochaetidae occurred only within the soft coral habitat, and the families Goniadidae and Polynoidae were absent from this habitat and present in all other habitats. Polychaete assemblage structure of the *D. australis* habitat differed significantly from the unvegetated and uncolonised habitats in both sampling periods, and assemblages of the unvegetated and uncolonised habitats did not differ. High abundance of *Spio pacifica* (Spionidae) within the *D. australis* habitat, high abundance of *Lumbrineris cf latreilli* (Lumbrineridae) in sand habitat, and differences in the abundance of *Mediomastus australiensis* (Capitellidae) were responsible for the dissimilarity between the *D. australis* habitat and all other habitats. The multivariate set of physical habitat attributes did not differ among the four habitats. The *D. australis* ‘habitat’ was found to be occupied by a unique polychaete assemblage, compared to unvegetated habitats, and therefore has a high conservation value.

A critical consideration for conservation planning is the temporal stability of the conservation priority of candidate sites. A potential consequence of complex patterns of spatio-temporal variation in the biodiversity of dynamic environments (such as estuaries) is that conservation ranking of candidate sites may vary, depending on the time they were assessed. This study tested for the existence of significant temporal variation in several measures of conservation value (species richness, total abundance, assemblage diversity, summed irreplaceability) of sites across five

habitats in an estuary, using polychaetes as the indicator taxa. Conservation values of sites were compared over short- (8 months) and long-terms (approx. 2 yr). A total of 95, 69 and 87 species of polychaetes were recorded in May 2009, February 2011 and October 2011 respectively, with 139 species in total. Turnover in species composition was greater in the long-term data set. Site rankings in successive sampling periods for species richness were uncorrelated in the short-term data set, and correlated in the long-term data set. Site rankings in successive sampling periods for total abundance were uncorrelated in both the short- and long-term data sets. Spatial patterns in assemblage variation were uncorrelated over the short-term for three data transformations (no transformation, square root, presence/absence), and correlated over the long-term when abundance data was untransformed and square-root transformed data, but not when data was transformed to presence-absence. Site rankings in successive sampling periods based on summed irreplaceability were uncorrelated in the short-term and correlated in the long-term. A simulated reserve selection process found changes in the number of sites required to reach a conservation goal, and the % species progressively accumulated with each reserve added to a network, over the short-term but not long-term. The complex spatial and temporal dynamics of estuarine biodiversity, and the additional dynamics introduced by anthropogenic alterations, may be more effectively addressed by modeling-based approaches grounded in a more detailed understanding of the factors underlying temporal variation and their uncertainties.

There are currently 120 described species of Nephtyidae worldwide, with 16 species known from Australian waters belonging to four genera. Three new species are described, *Micronephthys aurantiaca* n.sp., *Micronephthys derupeli* n.sp., and *Nephtys triangula* n.sp., from Eastern Australia. Descriptions are provided for all species examined. Comments are given about the placement of *Nephtys australiensis* to *Aglaophamus*. A key to all Australian species of *Micronephthys* and *Nephtys* is provided.