
Preface

In 2001 H.A.V. started a course for second-year undergraduate biology students at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam entitled Community Biology. This course has now been running successfully for 8 years. The course was obligatory for all biology students, and it differed from other courses in that it was multidisciplinary and provided the students with opportunities to perform their own research. The multidisciplinary was emphasized by the different disciplines of the teachers on the course: soil ecology, plant ecology, systems ecology, microbial physiology and theoretical biology. The important task of finding a textbook that could link all disciplines and encourage participating lecturers to deliver a unified course was solved by using *Community Ecology* by P.J.M. That book linked the different subjects of community ecology, and integrated the more theoretical parts on modelling with the empirical studies, including topics such as biodiversity and applied studies. Subsequently, H.A.V. and P.J.M. met at an international meeting on food webs, and discussed the possibility of participating in a similarly themed graduate-level course. And, thus, our current collaboration began. In The Netherlands PhD students from different universities are organized into interdisciplinary thematic groups, called research schools, that provide an intellectual support base for instruction and research. For example, students working in the field of socioeconomic and natural sciences of the environment belong to the Research School SENSE. In 2005, H.A.V., André de Roos, Claudius van de Vijver and Johan Feenstra organized a PhD course on Community Ecology for the SENSE PhD programme. During this 1 week course held in Zeist, leading researchers in the field of Community Ecology from Europe and the USA were asked to deliver lectures on recent and often unpublished developments in their areas of expertise. The lec-

turers were accompanied by some of their PhD students, creating an international group of community ecologists. The course was not intended to be encyclopaedic, but rather it focused on the areas of expertise of the invited speakers, many of which share the theme of patterns and processes emerging from ecological networks. Participants addressed the state of the art in theory and applications of community ecology, with special attention to topology, dynamics, the importance of spatial and temporal scale and the applications of community ecology to emerging problems in human-dominated ecosystems, including the restoration and reconstruction of viable communities. The course finished with speculations about future research directions. During the course, it became clear that this international group of students appreciated the information presented by the various lecturers, despite the fact that research topics exhibited great diversity. It was during this very stimulating course that the idea for this book took form. H.A.V. and P.J.M., the editors, convinced most lecturers to transform their lectures into book chapters, and asked other colleagues to fill in some gaps. The result captures much of the excitement about community ecology expressed during the course, and expands the coverage of topics beyond what we were able to discuss in an intensive week-long course. We recognize at the outset that certain sub-disciplines of community ecology are not covered here, and we do not claim otherwise. We know that the topics addressed here will be of interest to advanced students and practitioners of community ecology. Ultimately, 19 colleagues participated in writing this book. We thank them all for their important contributions. Writing book chapters, strangely enough, is less valued than writing articles for scientific journals in some academic circles. Still, like the multidisciplinary course mentioned

above, we find that the interactive writing that happens when people from different subdisciplines work together is a fascinating, synergistic and productive process.

We would like to thank friends and colleagues who were indispensable during the process of writing: H.A.V. thanks Nico van Straalen, who by writing his book *Ecological Genomics* for Oxford University Press acted as an instigator for this book. H.A.V. also thanks his colleagues who made the Community Biology course a success for so many years: Wilfred Röling, Bob Kooi, Matty Berg, Wilfried Ernst, Tanja Scheublin, Diane Heemsbergen, Stefan Kools, Marcel van der Heijden, Susanne de Bruin, Lothar Kuijper, Rully Nugroho and Henk van Verseveld. H.A.V. acknowledges colleagues who were directly involved in the organization of the PhD course: André de Roos, Claudius van de Vijver, Johan Feenstra and Ad van Dommelen. H.A.V. is very grateful to his critical friend, John Ashcroft (Durham), for supportive focusing.

P.J.M. thanks the many students who participated in the Zeist Community Ecology Course, as

well as the students who have taken the community ecology course that he has taught at Rutgers University since 1983. Their collective comments and feedback have helped to refine his perspectives about the nature of community ecology over the years. Thanks also go to participants in a recent seminar on Ecological Networks for critical feedback on some of the writing that appears here, including Mike Sukhdeo, Maria Stanko, Wayne Rossiter, Tavis Anderson, Faye Benjamin, Denise Hewitt, Kris Schantz and Chris Zambel.

H.A.V. and P.J.M. both thank Ian Sherman of Oxford University Press, who was immediately enthusiastic about this book project, and Helen Eaton, who as assistant commissioning editor played a crucial role in the development of the book.

H.A.V. thanks Emilie Verhoef, without whom this book probably would never have been produced. P.J.M. thanks Marsha Morin for her understanding and support during another extended writing project.

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