

# Fish bite rates of individual 'focal' herbivorous fishes within and outside of canopies at Lameshur Bay, St John, USVI, Feb- Mar 2016

**Website:** <https://www.bco-dmo.org/dataset/826253>

**Data Type:** Other Field Results

**Version:** 1

**Version Date:** 2020-10-08

## Project

» [Ecology and functional biology of octocoral communities](#) (VI Octocorals)

» [Collaborative Research: Pattern and process in the abundance and recruitment of Caribbean octocorals](#) (Octocoral Community Dynamics)

Contributors	Affiliation	Role
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## Abstract

Fish bite rates of individual 'focal' herbivorous fishes within and outside of canopies at Lameshur Bay, St John, USVI, February and March 2016.

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## Coverage

**Spatial Extent:** N:18.3167 E:-64.7188 S:18.3092 W:-64.7299

**Temporal Extent:** 2016-02 - 2016-03

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## Dataset Description

Fish bite rates of individual 'focal' herbivorous fishes within and outside of canopies at Lameshur Bay, St John, USVI, February and March 2016.

These data were used to test hypothesis 2 in Tsounis et al. Coral Reefs (2020): Figure 4: the recruitment niche in mediating post-settlement success.

These data are a continuation of BCO-DMO project 562086 (<http://www.bco-dmo.org/project/562086>) and BCO-DMO project 752508 (<https://www.bco-dmo.org/project/752508>).

## Acquisition Description

The data presented in this file have been published in: Tsounis, G., Steele, M. A., & Edmunds, P. J. Elevated feeding rates of fishes within octocoral canopies on Caribbean reefs. *Coral Reefs* (2020) 39:1299-1311, doi: 10.1007/s00338-020-01963-1.

Surveys were conducted at octocoral communities in St John, US Virgin Islands, in February and March 2016. Building on our previous studies on the environmental impact of octocoral community structure (Tsounis and Edmunds 2017; Tsounis et al. 2018), the present study was conducted at East Cabritte, Europa Bay, and East Tektite, within the Virgin Islands National Park, along the south shore of St. John.

Hypothesis (2) was tested: the role of the recruitment niche in mediating post-settlement success.

Methods: A "focal individual" sampling technique was used to quantify the bite rate of individual herbivorous fishes as a function of proximity to octocoral colonies. In this approach, the behavior of a haphazardly selected focal fish (belonging to one of two important and abundant groups, surgeonfishes and parrotfishes) was recorded until either it was lost from view or the observation period ended (5 min duration). During the observation period, the number of bites on benthic surfaces by the focal fish was counted and summed by location relative to the nearest octocoral colony of at least average size at each site (> 19.5 cm at Europa Bay and East Tektite; > 31.8 cm at East Cabritte, hereafter referred to as "large" colonies). Sizes of colonies were estimated by eye.

Proximity to the nearest octocoral colony was categorically distinguished as "close" or "far" based on distances estimated by eye to the nearest 0.1 m, with these categories determined by the average colony height for the site (i.e., close was within ~20 cm at Europa Bay and East Tektite; and ~32 cm at East Cabritte). Consequently distances between fish and large octocorals were considered far if they were > 20 cm at Europa Bay and East Tektite; and > 32 cm at East Cabritte.

## Processing Description

### BCO-DMO Processing Notes:

- data submitted in Excel file "Tsounis 2020 data archive.xls" sheet "Focal fish foraging" extracted to csv
- added conventional header with dataset name, PI name, version date
- modified parameter names to conform with BCO-DMO naming conventions
- joined lat/lon coordinates from dataset 765328: [http://dmoserv3.bco-dmo.org/jg/serv/BCO-DMO/Octocoral\\_Community\\_Dynamics...](http://dmoserv3.bco-dmo.org/jg/serv/BCO-DMO/Octocoral_Community_Dynamics...)

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## Related Publications

Tsounis, G., Steele, M. A., & Edmunds, P. J. (2020). Elevated feeding rates of fishes within octocoral canopies on Caribbean reefs. *Coral Reefs*, 39(5), 1299–1311. doi:[10.1007/s00338-020-01963-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00338-020-01963-1)  
*Results*

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## Parameters

Parameter	Description	Units
Site	site identifier	unitless
lat	latitude; north is positive	decimal degrees
lon	longitude; east is positive	decimal degrees
canopy	Locations within each of the three sites were defined as within canopy ("in") if at least two large octocoral colonies were present in the quadrat. Where this criterion was not met the area was categorized as outside of canopy ("out").	unitless
fish_number	Consecutive numbers for distinct fish individuals	fish
bites_min	Overall Number of grazing contacts (bites).	bites

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## Project Information

### Ecology and functional biology of octocoral communities (VI Octocorals)

**Website:** <http://coralreefs.csun.edu/>

**Coverage:** St. John, US Virgin Islands: 18.3185, 64.7242

The recent past has not been good for coral reefs, and journals have been filled with examples of declining coral cover, crashing fish populations, rising cover of macroalgae, and a future potentially filled with slime. However, reefs are more than the corals and fishes for which they are known best, and their biodiversity is affected strongly by other groups of organisms. The non-coral fauna of reefs is being neglected in the rush to evaluate the loss of corals and fishes, and this project will add on to an on-going long term ecological study by studying soft corals. This project will be focused on the ecology of soft corals on reefs in St. John, USVI to understand the Past, Present and the Future community structure of soft corals in a changing world. For the Past, the principal investigators will complete a retrospective analysis of octocoral abundance in St. John between 1992 and the present, as well as Caribbean-wide since the 1960's. For the Present, they will: (i) evaluate spatio-temporal changes between soft corals and corals, (ii) test for the role of competition with macroalgae and between soft corals and corals as processes driving the rising abundance of soft corals, and (iii) explore the role of soft corals as "animal forests" in modifying physical conditions beneath their canopy, thereby modulating recruitment dynamics. For the Future the project will conduct demographic analyses on key soft corals to evaluate annual variation in population processes and project populations into a future impacted by global climate change. This project was funded to provide and independent "overlay" to the ongoing LTREB award (DEB-1350146, co-funded by OCE, PI Edmunds) focused on the long-term dynamics of coral reefs in St. John. Note: This project is closely associated with the project "RAPID: Resilience of Caribbean octocorals following Hurricanes Irma and Maria". See: <https://www.bco-dmo.org/project/749653>. The following publications and data resulted from this project: 2017 Tsounis, G., and P. J. Edmunds. Three decades of coral reef community dynamics in St. John, USVI: a contrast of scleractinians and octocorals. *Ecosphere* 8(1):e01646. DOI: 10.1002/ecs2.1646 Rainfall and temperature data Coral and macroalgae abundance and distribution Descriptions of hurricanes affecting St. John 2016 Gambrel, B. and Lasker, H.R. *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 546: 85–95, DOI: 10.3354/meps11670 Colony to colony interactions *Eunicea flexuosa* interactions *Gorgonia ventalina* asymmetry Nearest neighbor surveys 2015 Lenz EA, Bramanti L, Lasker HR, Edmunds PJ. Long-term variation of octocoral populations in St. John, US Virgin Islands. *Coral Reefs* DOI 10.1007/s00338-015-1315-x octocoral survey - densities octocoral counts - photoquadrats vs. insitu survey octocoral literature review Download complete data for this publication (Excel file) 2015 Privitera-Johnson, K., et al., Density-associated recruitment in octocoral communities in St. John, US Virgin Islands, *J. Exp. Mar. Biol. Ecol.* DOI: 10.1016/j.jembe.2015.08.006 octocoral density dependence Download complete data for this publication

(Excel file) Other datasets related to this project: octocoral transects - adult colony height

## **Collaborative Research: Pattern and process in the abundance and recruitment of Caribbean octocorals (Octocoral Community Dynamics)**

**Coverage:** St. John, US Virgin Islands

NSF abstract: Coral reefs are exposed to a diversity of natural and anthropogenic disturbances, and the consequences for ecosystem degradation have been widely publicized. However, the reported changes have been biased towards fishes and stony corals, and for Caribbean reefs, the most notable example of this bias are octocorals ("soft corals"). Although they are abundant and dominate many Caribbean reefs, they are rarely included in studies due to the difficulty of both identifying them and in quantifying their abundances. In some places there is compelling evidence that soft corals have increased in abundance, even while stony corals have become less common. This suggests that soft corals are more resilient than stony corals to the wide diversity of disturbances that have been impacting coral reefs. The best coral reefs on which to study these changes are those that have been studied for decades and can provide a decadal context to more recent events, and in this regard the reefs of St. John, US Virgin Islands are unique. Stony corals on the reefs have been studied since 1987, and the soft corals from 2014. This provides unrivalled platform to evaluate patterns of octocoral abundance and recruitment; identify the patterns of change that are occurring on these reefs, and identify the processes responsible for the resilience of octocoral populations. The project will extend soft coral monitoring from 4 years to 8 years, and within this framework will examine the roles of baby corals, and their response to seafloor roughness, seawater flow, and seaweed, in determining the success of soft corals. The work will also assess whether the destructive effects of Hurricanes Irma and Maria have modified the pattern of change. In concert with these efforts the project will be closely integrated with local high schools at which the investigators will host marine biology clubs and provide independent study opportunities for their students and teachers. Unique training opportunities will be provided to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as a postdoctoral researcher, all of whom will study and work in St. John, and the investigators will train coral reef researchers to identify the species of soft corals through a hands-on workshop to be conducted in the Florida Keys. Understanding how changing environmental conditions will affect the community structure of major biomes is the ecological objective defining the 21st century. The holistic effects of these conditions on coral reefs will be studied on shallow reefs within the Virgin Islands National Park in St. John, US Virgin Islands, which is the site of one of the longest-running, long-term studies of coral reef community dynamics in the region. With NSF-LTREB support, the investigators have been studying long-term changes in stony coral communities in this location since 1987, and in 2014 NSF-OCE support was used to build an octocoral "overlay" to this decadal perspective. The present project extends from this unique history, which has been punctuated by the effects of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, to place octocoral synecology in a decadal context, and the investigators exploit a rich suite of legacy data to better understand the present and immediate future of Caribbean coral reefs. This four-year project will advance on two concurrent fronts: first, to extend time-series analyses of octocoral communities from four to eight years to characterize the pattern and pace of change in community structure, and second, to conduct a program of hypothesis-driven experiments focused on octocoral settlement that will uncover the mechanisms allowing octocorals to more effectively colonize substrata than scleractinian corals on present day reefs. Specifically, the investigators will conduct mensurative and manipulative experiments addressing four hypotheses focusing on the roles of: (1) habitat complexity in distinguishing between octocoral and scleractinian recruitment niches, (2) the recruitment niche in mediating post-settlement success, (3) competition in algal turf and macroalgae in determining the success of octocoral and scleractinian recruits, and (4) role of octocoral canopies in modulating the flux of particles and larvae to the seafloor beneath. The results of this study will be integrated to evaluate the factors driving higher ecological resilience of octocorals versus scleractinians on present-day Caribbean reefs. This award reflects NSF's statutory mission and has been deemed worthy of support through evaluation using the Foundation's intellectual merit and broader impacts review criteria.

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## Funding

Funding Source	Award
<a href="#">NSF Division of Ocean Sciences (NSF OCE)</a>	<a href="#">OCE-1332915</a>
<a href="#">NSF Division of Ocean Sciences (NSF OCE)</a>	<a href="#">OCE-1756381</a>

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