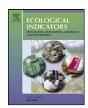
FISEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Ecological Indicators

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ecolind



Letter to the Editor

Extrapolation and biodiversity indicators: Handle with caution!

In recent years, there has been growing interest among researchers, governmental agencies, resource managers and environmental conservation groups in elaborating and testing synthetic indicators of biodiversity in both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Such indicators are designed as surrogates for species richness and are often intended to evaluate the outcome of conservation actions. Indicators may be based on "indicator species". i.e. species whose presence and abundance are related to global biodiversity (Lindenmayer et al., 2000), or based on the species richness of one or several groups of organisms. These indicators are referred to as "species" or "direct" indicators (Maes and Van Dyck, 2005). Alternative or complementary biodiversity indicators are structure-based indices that rely on local and/or landscapelevel features of ecosystems deemed correlated with overall species richness (Dauber et al., 2003; Lindenmayer et al., 2000). They are also referred to as "habitat" or "indirect" indicators. "Species" indicators highly depend on the taxonomic groups considered and on the taxonomic resolution. They have led to contrasted results (Prendergast and Eversham, 1997; Similä et al., 2006). "Habitat" indicators are highly sensitive to the spatial scales at which habitat is described as well as to the habitat or landscape descriptors themselves (Rossi and van Halder, 2010). Finally, the performances of "species" indicators are severely limited by a general lack of covariation between species richness among different taxa (Heino, 2010; Wolters et al., 2006), whereas those of "habitat" indicators are impeded by the great variability of species responses to environmental heterogeneity (Araújo et al., 2001; Similä et al., 2006). Because predicting the richness of a large range of different taxonomic groups (e.g. vascular plants, birds, butterflies. . .) has proven very difficult (if ever possible), a more pragmatic approach often prevails: biodiversity indicators often deal with a single or a very limited number of taxa. Another important point is that historical information about species often lack. This impedes the establishment of indicator baselines and the interpretation of the condition and changes of biodiversity (Niemelä, 2000).

The present letter focuses on the domain of application of indicators of biodiversity based on one or a few taxa and is illustrated by a recent paper dealing with indicators of biodiversity in a plantation forest (Brin et al., 2009). Emphasis is given to the risk of using such indicators to predict general levels of biodiversity. Plantation forests are highly managed systems and there is a need for indicators that may help monitoring biodiversity and defining sustainable management options. Brin et al. (2009) surveyed the relationship between saproxylic beetle species richness and deadwood volume or diversity in a maritime pine plantation. The work was intentionally limited to specialist saproxylic species of coleoptera associated with pine wood despite the fact that data comprised many more taxa (Section 2.3 and 3.1 in Brin et al., 2009). Although demonstrating the value of deadwood as an indicator of saproxylic species

richness may sound like a truism, Brin et al. (2009) showed the cost effectiveness of a "habitat" over a "species" indicator.

The main point is that such indicators have a narrow scope. In the example, deadwood can only provide information on saproxylic species and extrapolating this relationship to other elements of biological diversity is, at the very least, misleading. Problems arise when authors suggest that their "habitat" indicator provides a suitable sustainable forest management indicator allowing to evaluate new management options (Section 4.3 in Brin et al., 2009). Such conclusions are probably true with regard to saproxylic beetles but are risky extrapolations regarding all other taxa. Consequently, any generalisation would be simplistic and any application might be erroneous. Indicators based on a limited number of taxa cannot be interpreted or used as biodiversity indicators as long as their correlation to general levels of diversity is not properly demonstrated and documented. Not only semantic, these considerations have both fundamental and practical implications. A single taxon based indicator may be a very useful management tool for that taxon but its value as an indicator is restricted to the taxon for which it has been elaborated and should not be extrapo-

Since the relationships between the diversity of different taxa often appear idiosyncratic, extreme caution is needed when indicators based on a limited number of taxa are intended to appraise the success or failure of management regimes to sustain biological diversity.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments on earlier versions of this note.

References

Araújo, M.B., Humphries, C.J., Densham, P.J., Lampinen, R., Hagemeijer, W.J.M., Mitchell-Jones, A.J., Gasc, J.P., 2001. Would environmental diversity be a good surrogate for species diversity? Ecography 24, 103–110.

Brin, A., Brustel, H., Jactel, H., 2009. Species variables or environmental variables as indicators of forest biodiversity: a case study using saproxylic beetles in maritime pine plantations. Ann. For. Sci. 66, 306.

Dauber, J., Hirsch, M., Simmering, D., Waldhardt, R., Otte, A., Wolters, V., 2003. Land-scape structure as an indicator of biodiversity: matrix effects on species richness. Agric. Ecosyst. Environ. 98, 321–329.

Heino, J., 2010. Are indicator groups and cross-taxon congruence useful for predicting biodiversity in aquatic ecosystems? Ecol. Indicat. 10, 112–117.

Lindenmayer, D.B., Margules, C.R., Botkin, D.B., 2000. Indicators of biodiversity for ecologically sustainable forest management. Conserv. Biol. 14, 941–950.

Maes, D., Van Dyck, H., 2005. Habitat quality and biodiversity indicator performances of a threatened butterfly versus a multispecies group for wet heathlands in Belgium. Biol. Conserv. 123, 177–187.

Niemelä, J., 2000. Biodiversity monitoring for decision-making. Ann. Zool. Fenn. 37, 307–317.

Prendergast, J.R., Eversham, B.C., 1997. Species richness covariance in higher taxa: empirical tests of the biodiversity indicator concept. Ecography 20, 210–216.

Rossi, J.-P., van Halder, I., 2010. Towards indicators of butterfly biodiversity based on a multiscale landscape description. Ecol. Indicat. 10, 452–458.

Similä, M., Kouki, J., Mönkkönen, M., Sippola, A.L., Huhta, E., 2006. Co-variation and indicators, of species diversity: can richness of forest-dwelling species be

predicted in northern boreal forests? Ecol. Indicat. 6, 686–700.

Wolters, V., Bengtsson, J., Zaitseva, A.S., 2006. Relationship among the species richness of different taxa. Ecology 87, 1886–1895.

J.-P. Rossi* INRA, UMR1202 BIOGECO, 69 Route d'Arcachon, F-33612 Cestas, France

* Present address: INRA, UMR CBGP (INRA/IRD/Cirad/Montpellier SupAgro), Campus International de Baillarguet, CS 30016, F-34988 Montferrier-sur-Lez cedex, France. Tel.: +33 04 30 63 04 30; fax: +33 04 99 62 33 45. E-mail address: Jean-Pierre. Rossi@supagro.inra.fr

> 1 March 2010 Available online 30 October 2010