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Applying Ecological Theory to Understand Biological Diversity, Anthropogenic Disturbance, and Disease among Terrestrial Small Mammals in Western Uganda

By

Johanna S. Salzer

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

Population Biology, Ecology, and Evolution

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B.A., Florida State University, 2003

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An abstract of

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**Abstract**

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Through the study of disease ecology, we seek to understand the mechanisms driving the complex interactions occurring among parasites, their hosts, and their environment. Ecologists dissect these complex ecological interactions through generalized principles, theories, and hypotheses. In order to understand the applicability and universality of these concepts, they must be applied to investigations conducted in natural systems. The aim of my dissertation was to test the generality of several ecological theories in a complex natural system. These studies were conducted in and around Kibale National Park, which is located in forested western Uganda. I examined terrestrial small mammal assemblages, consisting of members of the Order Rodentia (rodents) and Soricomorpha (shrews). These small mammals were collected from natural habitats experiencing varying intensities of anthropogenic disturbance. Additionally, I investigated the parasites they harbor, specifically poxviruses, *Trypanosoma* spp., *Giardia* spp., *Cryptosporidium* spp, and ectoparasites, which included fleas, lice, ticks, and mites. My work contributes to the field of disease ecology by exploring ideas and theories primarily restricted to less complex study systems. The four studies contained within my dissertation represent the successfully application of several foundational theories and novel ideas to improve our knowledge of how parasites are impacted by habitat disturbance and alterations in host community structure. My findings provide empirical evidence of the value and pitfalls of using generalized principles, theories, and hypotheses to understand host and disease dynamics in a complex natural system.

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**TABLE of CONTENTS**

**CHAPTER 1**  pg. 1

*Introduction:* *Ecological theory and practice at the interface of biological diversity, anthropogenic disturbance, and disease*

1.1 Theory and its role in disease ecology pg. 5

1.2 Examining the theory pg. 14

1.3 References pg. 17

**CHAPTER 2** pg. 23

*Effects of habitat disturbance on African small mammal communities*

2.1 Summary pg. 23

2.2 Introduction pg. 24

2.3 Materials and Methods pg. 26

2.4 Results pg. 32

2.5 Discussion pg. 36

2.6 Figures pg. 44

2.7 Tables pg. 47

2.8 References pg. 49

**CHAPTER 3** pg. 53

*Effects of anthropogenic and demographic factors on patterns of parasitism in African small mammal communities*

3.1 Summary pg. 53

3.2 Introduction pg. 54

3.3 Materials and Methods pg. 55

3.4 Results pg. 61

3.5 Discussion pg. 62

3.6 Figures pg. 66

3.7 Tables pg. 68

3.8 References pg. 70

**CHAPTER 4** pg. 74

*Effects of anthropogenic disturbance on native and invasive trypanosomes of rodents in forested Uganda*

4.1 Summary pg. 74

4.2 Introduction pg. 75

4.3 Materials and Methods pg. 77

4.4 Results pg. 81

4.5 Discussion pg. 84

4.6 Figures pg. 91

4.7 Tables pg. 93

4.8 References pg. 94

**CHAPTER 5** pg. 98

*Serologic evidence for circulating orthopoxviruses in peridomestic rodents*

*from rural Uganda*

5.1 Summary pg. 98

5.2 Introduction pg. 99

5.3 Materials and Methods pg. 100

5.4 Results pg. 104

5.5 Discussion pg. 106

5.6 Figures pg. 110

5.7 References pg. 112

**CHAPTER 6** pg. 115

*Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusions*

6.1 Key Findings and Strengths pg. 116

6.2 Limitations pg. 119

6.3 Future Direction and Next Steps pg. 122

6.4 References pg. 124

**TABLE of FIGURES**

**Figure 1.1:** Complex interactions among the environment, pg. 3

host, and pathogens.

**Figure 2.1:** Map of Kibale National Park and surrounding areas. pg. 44

**Figure 2.2:** Comparison of the composition of small mammal communities pg. 45

in and around Kibale National Park.

**Figure 2.3:** Rarefied species richness of small mammals. pg. 46

**Figure 2.4:** Relationship between species richness and coexistance. pg. 46

**Figure 3.1:** Examining associations between habitat, host species, and parasite pg. 66 communities.

**Figure 4.1:** Relative abundance of small mammals across various habitats. pg. 91

**Figure 4.2:** Prevalence of *Trypanosoma varani* and *T. lewisi* pg. 92

**Figure 5.1:** Map of Uganda. pg. 110

**Figure 5.2:** Orthopoxvirus Western Blot assay results. pg. 111

**TABLE of TABLES**

**Table 1.1:** List of relevant ecological concepts, their graphical pg. 4

expression, and basic equations.

**Table 2.1:** Small mammals collected in and around Kibale National Park. pg. 47

**Table 2.2:** Classification of species as forest-dwelling, grassland, pg. 48

and/or peridomestic.

**Table 3.1:** Hosts and parasites collected from various habitats in pg. 68

western Uganda.

**Table 3.2:** Relationships between parasite prevalence pg. 69

and environmental factors.

**Table 4.1:** Prevalence of trypanosomes among host species. pg. 93