



## BRACHYURAN CRAB DIVERSITY IN AN ISOLATED MANGROVE PATCH OF THE COCHIN BACKWATERS, CENTRAL KERALA, INDIA

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**Abstract:** The mangroves along the Kerala coast are patchy. The present study area is an isolated mangrove patch at Puthuvype in the Cochin backwaters of Ernakulum district, Kerala. The mangroves at Puthuvype are subjected to destruction due to various human-related activities, especially industrialization. Brachyuran crabs have been considered as ecologically important and are the conspicuous members of a mangrove ecosystem. Many reports on the marine fauna of the Cochin backwaters are available. Studies particularly related to the diversity and population structure of crabs in the Puthuvype area, however, are always in demand. We herein studied the brachyuran crab diversity of the Puthuvype mangrove patch using diversity indices and present the data on the population of each species. Altogether, 12 species of brachyuran crabs in four families (4 portunids, 3 grapsids, 3 sesarmids, and 2 ocyropodids) were encountered from the study area between February 2015 and January 2016. The population was highest for *Parasesarma plicatum* (Latreille, 1803) and lowest for *Pseudosesarma glabrum* Ng, Rani & Bijoy Nandan, 2017; both are sesarmids, and each requires specific ecological adaptations that might have influenced their distribution and abundance. Other species showed a limited population. The diversity of crabs was relatively high during monsoon and post-monsoon seasons and was low during pre-monsoon. Salinity variation might be responsible for the differences in crab diversity during these seasons. Generally, the crab diversity in the studied area seems to be rich and balanced. Conservation actions are required to protect the fauna of the Puthuvype area in general and the crabs in particular.

**Key words:** Abundance, Conservation, Crustacea, Decapoda, Diversity indices, Population

### INTRODUCTION

Kerala has a good growth of mangroves all along the coast but these forests are patchy, and some vegetation is subjected to destruction due to various developmental activities (Sreelekshmi *et al.*, 2018). Sreelekshmi *et al.* (2018) reported 18 species of true mangroves and many associates from Kerala. Mangrove patches along the Kerala coast (west coast of India) are less complex as compared to the dense complex networks of mangroves in the east coast of the country (Naskar and Mandal, 1999). The animal diversity in mangrove ecosystem of Kerala, however, was reported to be high (Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2006; Araty Sasikumar, 2009; Bhat and Sreekanth, 2018). On the other hand, studies on the diversity of brachyuran crabs from the mangrove ecosystems of Kerala are inadequate (Apreshgi, 2014).

Brachyurans are the most diverse group and 6793 marine brachyuran crabs were recorded throughout the world (Ng *et al.*, 2008). A total of 910 marine brachyuran crabs were reported from Indian waters (Trivedi *et al.*, 2018) and 183 species from Kerala. He also observed that the east coast of India has more diversity than the west coast. Reports on crab diversity of mangrove ecosystems of Kerala were meager and practically no authentic reports are available for true brachyuran mangrove crabs (Apreshgi, 2014). Crabs are the conspicuous members of any mangrove fauna and are ecologically significant (Macnae, 1968). The distribution of crabs is influenced by several ecological factors like vegetation, substratum, food, salinity, and the presence of other animals (Aspey, 1978; Icely and Jones, 1978; Rabalais and Cameron, 1985; Ewa-Oboho, 1993; Thurman, 1998; Caésar *et*

*al.*, 2005; Pandya and Vachharajani, 2010). True brachyuran crabs of this mangrove belt were not reported yet especially their population and diversity indices, instead reports were mainly diverse including estuarine (Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2006), marine (Trivedi *et al.*, 2018) and freshwater (Rajesh *et al.*, 2017) crabs.

Cochin backwaters are characterized by wide salinity gradient and varying habitat types like low lying swamps, tidal creeks and the mangrove patches, which support diverse flora and fauna, including the brachyuran crabs (Devi, 2015). From the Cochin backwater system alone, 11 species of true mangroves and 32 species of mangrove associates have been recorded (Sahadevan *et al.*, 2017). Many marine fauna also thrives in the Cochin backwaters, including brachyuran crabs (Devi, 2015; Sahadevan, 2016). While Apreshgi (2014) reported 14 species of brachyuran crabs from selected mangrove ecosystems of Kerala, Devi (2015) recorded 23 species in the Cochin backwaters alone.

The major mangrove patch in the Cochin backwaters is found along the Puthuvype area, and the isolated mangrove patch in Puthuvype is mainly located towards the north of the industrial development site. Although several reports on the mangrove fauna of the Cochin backwaters are available (e.g., Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2006; Sahadevan, 2016), brachyuran crabs of the mangrove belt in Puthuvype area were not dealt yet, especially for their study on diversity and population structure. Some systematic studies, however, were recently conducted on the brachyuran crabs near this area (Ng *et al.*, 2017). Apreshgi *et al.* (2016) were studied the DNA barcoding of two fiddler crabs *Uca annulipes* and *Uca perplexa* from Puthuvype mangroves, Cochin backwaters. The measurement of biological diversity is important from the conservation point of view (Humphries *et al.*, 1995). Based on these above facts, the present study is carried out to know the diversity of brachyuran crabs using diversity indices from the isolated mangrove patch at Puthuvype of the Cochin backwaters, central Kerala, India.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Study area

The study area, Puthuvype (9°59'20.73" N and

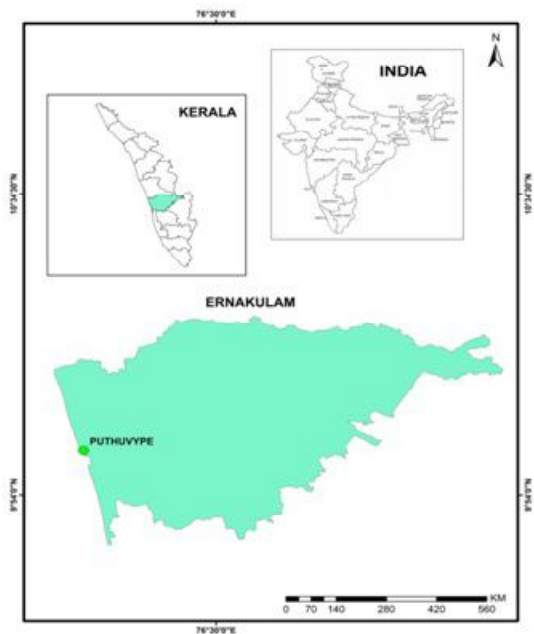
76°13'25.23" E), is a part of Vypeen (or Vypin) island (Fig. 1), which is an upcoming major industrial area and falls under the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) in Kochi city, Ernakulam district of Kerala (see Sahadevan *et al.*, 2017). Vypeen is an isolated island with Kodungallur strait in the north, Cochin backwaters and Cochin Port in the south (where the Periyar River debouches), Kochi city in the east, and the Arabian Sea in the west. The mangrove cover of the study area can be divided into three categories: 1) moderately dense vegetation; 2) interspersed vegetation with settlements; 3) vegetation under degradation due to developmental activities.

### Data collection

Crab specimens were collected every month by hand-picking or using stick and twine or using traps at night from the study area during February 2015 and January 2016. The study area consists of three different sites. Crabs were collected only from a marked area of 25 m<sup>2</sup> at each of these sites throughout the study period. Most of the crabs, especially undamaged and berried females, were released back to their natural habitat after data collection. Only a few specimens (4 or 5 specimens of each abundant species and 1 or 2 individuals of each rare species) were preserved and brought to the laboratory for photography and confirmation of identification. The identification was done using available identification keys and systematic literature (Pillai, 1951; Sakai, 1976; Sethuramalingam and Ajmal Khan, 1991; Dev Roy and Das, 2000). The validity and systematic position of each species were verified from Ng *et al.* (2008, 2017), with an update from the database of the World Register of Marine Species (WoRMS Editorial Board, 2018).

### Data analysis

The annual mean abundance (individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) of each species was calculated based on the total number of specimens gathered over the study period (February 2015 to January 2016). For the diversity analysis, three prominent seasons were considered, viz., pre-monsoon (February–May), monsoon (June–September), and post-monsoon (October–January). For a species, the mean abundance of the respective months of each season was used for diversity analysis. The diversity analysis was carried out using different indices.



**Fig. 1.** Map of the study area (Puthuvype, Cochin backwaters, Ernakulum district, Kerala, India).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The isolated mangrove patch at Puthuvype in the Cochin backwaters is home to 12 species of brachyuran crabs under four families: *Scylla olivacea* (Herbst, 1796), *S. serrata* (Forskål, 1775), *S. tranquebarica* (Fabricius, 1798), and *Thalamita crenata* (Rüppell, 1830) (Portunidae); *Metopograpsus latifrons* (White, 1847), *M. messor* (Forskål, 1775), and *M. thukuhar* (Owen, 1839) (Grapsidae); *Neosarmatium malabaricum* (Henderson, 1893), *Parasesarma plicatum* (Latreille, 1803), and *Pseudosesarma glabrum* Ng, Rani & Bijoy Nandan, 2017 (Sesarmidae); *Austruca annulipes* (H. Milne Edwards, 1837) and *Austruca perplexa* (H. Milne Edwards, 1852) (Ocypodidae) (Fig. 2).

The annual mean abundance was highest for *P. plicatum* (211 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) followed by *A. annulipes* (201 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) and *A. perplexa* (211 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) whereas it was lowest for *P. glabrum* (6 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) followed by *M. latifrons* (8 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) (Table 1). The population of the remaining species was limited (annual mean abundance = 16–30 individuals. 25 m<sup>-2</sup>) in the studied area (Table 1). Most of the crabs showed low variation in population among the species

of the same family. It is only the sesarmid species that demonstrated an extreme variation as regards to their abundance. This could be due to the specific habit or habitat preferences of each species even if they coexist. For instance, *N. malabaricum* mainly inhabits elevated landward areas in order to avoid frequent tidal inundation and actively translocates fallen mangrove leaves into its burrows (cf. Davie, 1994; Shanij *et al.*, 2016a) whereas *P. plicatum* prefers feeding on leaf litter on the forest floor itself (Shanij *et al.*, 2016a) and shelters in exposed mangrove trunks during high tide rather than moving to elevated areas (Shanij *et al.*, 2016 b). The contrasting habitat preferences between these two species could be one of the factors influencing their distribution and abundance. On the other hand, *P. glabrum* is a recently described sesarmid species, and its ecological requirements are still to be explored in detail (see Ng *et al.*, 2017). *Pseudosesarma glabrum* is nevertheless abundant during the post-monsoon and mainly feeds on mangrove litter during the low tide when there is more freshwater inflow (Ng *et al.*, 2017).

The diversity and evenness indices of brachyuran crabs were highest during monsoon season and lowest during pre-monsoon whereas the dominance index showed a reverse trend (Table 2). Although the diversity of crabs during monsoon and post-monsoon seasons are rich and comparable, the relatively higher value of evenness index during monsoon season indicates that the crabs are more evenly distributed during monsoon than post-monsoon (Table 2). Salinity is known to affect crab diversity (Varadharajan *et al.*, 2013). Salinity rise in a mangrove ecosystem can affect its faunal diversity, including that of the crabs (Sandilyan *et al.*, 2010). The high crab diversity during monsoon and post-monsoon seasons could be attributed the presence of more number and variety of brackish water dependant species that are likely to disappear during the high saline periods (pre-monsoon). Soundarapandian *et al.* (2008) also observed high crab population during monsoon and post-monsoon from the Pichavaram mangroves on the east coast of India. Overall, the annual diversity of brachyurans at Puthuvype seems to be balanced, as indicated by the high evenness index and the low dominance index (Table 2).



**Fig. 2.** Dorsal habitus of brachyuran crabs collected from the mangroves at Puthuvype, Cochin backwaters: (1) *Scylla olivacea*, Herbst, 1796 (2) *Scylla Serrata*, Forskal, 1775 (3) *Scylla tranquebarica* Fabricius, 1798 (4) *Thalamita crenata*, Ruppell, 1830 (5) *Metopograpsus latifrons*, White, 1847 (6) *Metopograpsus messor*, Forskal, 1775 (7) *Metopograpsus thukuhar*, Owen, 1839 (8) *Neosarmatium malabaricum*, Henderson, 1893 (9) *Parasesarma plicatum*, Latreille, 1803 (10) *Pseudosesarma glabrum*, Ng, 2017 (11) *Austruca annulipes*, Milne Edwards, 1837 (12) *Austruca perplexa*, Milne Edwards, 1852. Scale bar-1cm

The mangroves of the Puthuvype area are under severe degradation from the rapid urban development and industrialization (Sahadevan *et al.*, 2017). Although previous reports on brachyuran crabs in and around the Puthuvype area are available (Apreshgi, 2014; Devi, 2015; Sahadevan, 2016; Ng *et al.*, 2017; Apreshgi and Abraham, 2018), the present study will serve as a baseline data on these

decapods for their conservation planning. Considering the faunal richness (including crabs) and ongoing industrial development near the isolated mangrove patch at Puthuvype in the Cochin backwaters, urgent conservation action should be taken to sustain the animal diversity by protection the existing mangroves through legislation and awareness programmes.

**Table 1.** Abundance of brachyuran crab in the mangroves at Puthuvype, Cochin backwaters

Family	Species	Annual mean abundance (individuals. 25 m <sup>2</sup> )
Portunidae	<i>Scylla olivacea</i>	20
	<i>Scylla serrata</i>	11
	<i>Scylla tranquebarica</i>	29
	<i>Thalamita crenata</i>	30
Grapsidae	<i>Metopograpsus latifrons</i>	8
	<i>Metopograpsus messor</i>	16
	<i>Metopograpsus thukuhar</i>	23
Sesarmidae	<i>Neosarmatium malabaricum</i>	21
	<i>Parasesarma plicatum</i>	211
	<i>Pseudosesarma glabrum</i>	6
Ocypodidae	<i>Austruca annulipes</i>	201
	<i>Austruca perplexa</i>	111

**Table 2.** Diversity indices of brachyuran crabs in the mangroves at Puthuvype, Cochin backwaters

Diversity indices	Pre-monsoon	Monsoon	Post-monsoon	Annual
Shannon-Weiner's diversity index	1.71	1.89	1.88	2.11
Simpson's dominance index	0.24	0.21	0.2	0.25
Shannon's evenness index	0.69	0.75	0.71	0.89

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