
‘Macroecology’ is a non-experimental, statistical investigation of species’ ecology and evolution, or in simple terms a search for patterns in nature, primarily achieved by mining existing large-scale data sets (Brown 1995). Bafflingly, the first widely available paper to use what was undoubtedly a ‘macorecological’ approach (Southwood 1961) is not even cited by Brown. Southwood’s question was: “Why do some species of plants host more species of insects than others?” In 1960 he had attempted to answer the question for Hawaiian trees, and then applied the same ideas to UK trees and their associated insects in 1961. Using existing species-lists he argued that the number of insects associated with a tree is proportional to the tree’s recent abundance, and offered a theoretical explanation based on ‘encounter rates’ over evolutionary time (for a succinct summary of his ideas see Southwood 1973). By modern standards of statistical rigour these early, pioneering forays into macroecology can easily be criticised. What cannot be criticised is Southwood’s vision for an approach to ecology that did not become fashionable for another 30 years.

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