Biodiversity responses to global changes

1. The keys of adaptation to change

Since Darwin, we have known that species change over time as a result of **natural selection**, which sieves the fittest individuals within the populations, or more precisely those who better transmit their biological characteristics (with their genes) to new generations. This process of evolution and adaptation allows species to respond to the usual variations in their living conditions, on different time scales.

Research in ecology and evolution has confirmed for the past sixty years that species are adapted to the **variability of the living conditions** usually encountered by individuals, on the one hand, but also to the relative frequency of "catastrophic" events [1] encountered by the populations. Let us see how.

1.1. Niche width and 'phenotypic' plasticity

According to Hutchinson [2], any species or population may be characterized by its "**ecological niche**", which may be defined as the "place" occupied by this species in an ecosystem, *i.e.* by the set of its physical, chemical and biological requirements. As products of natural selection, these ecological requirements evolve over generations, with the physiology and behaviour of the species. Thus, the "width" of the ecological niche of each species is adapted to the variations in living conditions usually encountered by individuals, in time and space (see Focus From niche construction to the destruction of ecosystems).

Figure 1. Populating estuaries, lagoons and Mediterranean coastlines, jumping mullets (Liza saliens) tolerate wide fluctuations of water salinity. [Source: Ray eye, CC BY-SA 2.5, via Wikimedia Commons]

For example, pelagic *(i.e.* open ocean) fish and invertebrate species are often **stenohaline** because the salinity of the water off the coast varies very little (around 32 g/l); estuarine species, on the other hand, are necessarily **euryhaline**, as they are adapted to wide fluctuations in salinity.

Thus, natural selection prepares the individuals for the usual variations in their living conditions, whether long-lasting or recurrent, by favouring morphological, physiological and/or behavioural modifications adapted to these variations. Individuals then show a certain adaptability, or so-called "**phenotypic**" **plasticity**, which can be implemented during their development (and therefore be irreversible), or continue throughout life, accompanying or preceding environmental variations.

Among the **irreversible** phenotypic adaptations, let us quote the formation of a protective helmet in daphnia, conditioned by the presence of predatory fish in their initial habitat [3]; or the caste determinism in social insects (social bees, ants, termites, ..), whose larvae become workers, soldiers (in termites) or reproducers according to the diet given to them by the workers of the colony.

When environmental variations are recurrent or cyclical, the plasticity of individuals can be **reversible**. Thus, the **phenology** of species is set to the rhythm of daily (nycthemeral cycle) and seasonal variations of their habitats. In temperate regions, deciduous trees are sensitive to day length, or **photoperiod**. Each autumn, they shed their leaves, produce buds and go dormant for the winter.

Figure 2. As an adaptation to the annual cyclic changes of their environment, alpine marmots (Marmota marmota) build up ample fat reserves in late summer, before lining their burrows with dry grass and locking themselves in as a family for the winter. [Source: David Monniaux, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons]

They accompany many animal species, especially insects and terrestrial vertebrates (mammals, reptiles and amphibians, but not birds) that take refuge in a shelter to face the winter in a state of torpor (hibernation, winter lethargy, diapause...). Among birds, warm-blooded organisms incapable of hypothermic change, some species such as jays, nuthatches and nutcrackers stock up on seeds at the end of the summer, which will feed them in winter, while others (insectivores in particular, such as swifts and swallows) stock up on fat and migrate to milder latitudes, before coming back to nest in the summer.

Similarly, the 24-hour activity cycle (circadian cycle) of all vertebrates, punctuated by the secretion cycle of a brain hormone, melatonin, is an adaptation to the length of the days - and the alternation of day and night - on our planet.

Figure 3. Tobacco plant. When its leaves are attacked by a predator, like many other plants, the tobacco plant defends itself by synthesizing phenolic compounds that are toxic to herbivores. In addition, like Alder, Wormwood or Sugar Maple, it emits an alarm pheromone (volatile compound) that induces the same synthesis in nearby plants of the same species. [Source: Forest & Kim Starr, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons]

However, organisms are not simple automatons, programmed to feed, defend, and reproduce in an environment of predictable and controlled variations: most are also capable of responding to unexpected environmental variations with appropriate behavior, revealing a certain **behavioral elasticity**.

Plants are not to be outdone. Plants can react to daily, not only cyclical (light intensity, temperature...) but also unpredictable (predation, infection, competition...) variations of their local environment by adapted behaviors. We may observe, for example, the orientation and/or opening of flowers according to their exposure to light, the synthesis of toxic anti-predator compounds, the emission of attractive pheromones for allied species or alarm pheromones intended for neighbouring plants of the same species, in case of aggression.

Figure 4. Common octopuses are known for their propensity to explore and 'manipulate' new objects, their excellent visual memory and their learning abilities. [Source: Albert Kok at Dutch Wikipedia (Original text: Albert Kok), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons]

While it exists in plants, which have no real sense organs, behavioral plasticity is a general property of animals. It increases with their **learning** capacities (cognitive and practical abilities), as well as with their **sociality** (complexity of social groups) and **mobility**. It has been observed in some social invertebrates, such as the Honey Bee, and in non-social invertebrates, such as the common octopus, and peaks in mammals and birds, which have high cognitive capacities, high energy requirements and often complex social systems [4].

Physiological tolerance, morphological or physiological adjustments and behavioural flexibility are three types of mechanisms that allow individuals to respond adaptively to habitual variations in their environment. These mechanisms contribute to the **adaptive potential** of species to changes in their habitats and living conditions, whether these are caused by other "actors"-humans, in the case of most current environmental changes - or by their own activities (see Focus on From niche construction to the destruction of ecosystems).

1.2. Habitat stability and demogenetic strategies

On a larger time scale, covering **several generations**, the biological characteristics of species can also evolve in response to fluctuations in the environment that cannot be predicted at the individual level.

The mechanisms of long-term adaptation of species to variations in their habitats are not only **demographic** but also **genetic**, since they rely on the diversity and genetic evolution of populations. Research in evolutionary ecology has confirmed since the pioneering work of Mac Arthur and Wilson [5] in this field that the "**demogenetic strategies"** (both demographic and genetic) of species are adapted to the relative frequency of catastrophic-type events, inflicting high mortality on populations.

Figure 5. The demographic strategies r and K summarize the adaptations of species to either colonize temporary habitats (left side of the diagram) or compete in predictable and saturated habitats (right side of the diagram). They correspond respectively to the initial stages and the saturation plateau of the logistic relation Nt = K / [1+exp(-rt)], which describes the dynamics of occupation of a habitat by a population over time t. With Nt: number of individuals; K: carrying capacity of the habitat for the considered species; r: intrinsic growth rate of the population. Left: newly hatched 'firebugs' (Pyrrhocoris apterus) larvae before dispersal [Source: © Anne Teyssèdre]. Right: Burchell's Zebra in the savannah, Zimbabwe [Source: © Sébastien Barot].

Depending on the magnitude and predictability of the environmental changes, spread over several generations, two main demogenetic strategies may be schematically distinguished (see Figure 5):

one, based on "**quantity**", of rapid multiplication of individuals (known as "**r**", for reproduction) and random dispersal, in temporary habitats that are unpredictable at individual scale

the other, based on "**quality**", with late and limited but competitive reproduction (known as "**K**"), in more predictable and saturated habitats.

According to Pianka [6], the main life traits favored by **r-type selection** are:

reproduction at an **early** age, associated with a **short lifespan** and **small size**,

high fecundity,

early **dispersal** of offspring (seeds, eggs, larvae...), by passive or active mobility.

And the life traits associated with the "K" strategy are:

late reproduction, correlated with a **long life span** and **large size**,

low fecundity,

care of juveniles, in animals [7], [8], [9]

Furthermore, the genetic diversity of species increases with the number of individuals; thus, it increases with the area of favorable habitats, with their connectivity, and with the **intrinsic growth rate** of populations.

The 'r' strategy, in response to episodic decimation

Figure 6. Colonization of nutrient-rich nectarines by microscopic fungi known as 'moulds'. [Source: Roger McLassus 1951 assumed (based on copyright claims), CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons]

This is the usual strategy of **microorganisms** - such as bacteria, protists, fungi... and viruses! - inhabiting temporary habitats (animal or plant hosts, seasonal habitats, organic waste...), as well as of macroscopic algae and fungi, able to quickly colonize any new favorable habitat.

Taking advantage of the fecundity and mobility of individuals, rather than of their adaptations and skills in terms of local survival, the “r” strategy (of rapid multiplication and dispersal) allows **small prolific species** to rebound after local decimation. Random migration and genetic mutation accelerate their genetic evolution and adaptation to the diversity (and unpredictable spatial distribution) of their potential habitats. The “**random dispersal**” of large numbers of close related individuals following the “r” strategy favours the discovery and exploitation of new resources (e.g. a new host species) by some of them, and thus the adaptation to new living conditions. These characteristics increase the **probability of long-term survival** of species (metapopulations) **adapted to unstable habitats** [10].

In plants, this 'r' strategy is used by many **annuals and grasses**, which disperse pollen and seeds in large quantities over good distances (*via* wind or animal transport) and rapidly colonise open habitats before being browsed, trampled, burnt, wilted or replaced by other, more competitive and long-lived species.

Figure 7. Foreshore. Like most marine 'invertebrates', mussels, periwinkles, cuttlefish and cirripedes are highly fecund 'r' species. [Source: © A. Teyssèdre]

In animals, this strategy is adopted by most **insects and other 'invertebrates'** with early maturity, high fecundity and great dispersal capacities of eggs, larvae or adults. **Fish**, often with high fecundity and subject to high predatory pressures, may also follow this strategy to a lesser extent. Less radical in birds and mammals, all of which provide care for their young and whose females have limited fecundity, the 'r' strategy is shown by many species of small mammals that are subject to wide fluctuations in their population numbers, such as rodents.

This **capacity for resilience and rapid evolution** of populations, which increases with their intrinsic growth rate and **genetic diversity**, seems to be a strength of microorganisms and other prolific species in the face of current global changes. This is how bacterial strains resistant to certain antibiotics, fungal lines resistant to antifungals, herbicide-resistant messicolous plants and insecticide-resistant "pest" insects appear from time to time and then flourish (see Focus on The demogenetic strategy of bees).

The 'K' strategy, poorly adapted to the disruption of habitats

Figure 8. Female hippo and her calf. Like most large ungulates (antelopes, bighorn sheep, horses, rhinoceroses, ..), female amphibian hippos reach sexual maturity between 4 and 7 years of age and give birth to a single calf after a long gestation period (8 months) - at a rate of one calf every two or three years in their case. [Source: Jnissa, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons]

In contrast to the 'r' strategy, the demogenetic ('K') strategy is that of **long-lived, low-fertility mammals**, such as ungulates,

marine mammals, and great apes, which raise at best one calf per year in relatively small populations (low genetic diversity). This strategy can **penalise** them in the face of upheavals in their living conditions (see Focus on Adaptations to climate change on the dynamics of mammals). The survival of populations then depends on the intensity of local and regional upheavals, as well as on the physiological and behavioural plasticity of individuals.

It should be noted, however, that the fecundity of sexual species varies, among other factors, with the capacity of females to invest time and energy in the survival and reproduction of each of their offspring. **In the absence of parental care, natural selection favours the most fertile females**.