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1 Strapline: Special Paper

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3 **Structural bias in aggregated species-level variables driven by**  
4 **repeated species co-occurrences: a pervasive problem in community**  
5 **and assemblage data**

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46

47 **ABSTRACT**

48 **Aim** Species attributes are often used to explain diversity patterns across  
49 assemblages/communities. However, repeated species co-occurrences can generate spatial pattern  
50 and strong statistical relationships between aggregated attributes and richness in the absence of  
51 biological information. Our aim is to increase awareness of this problem.

52 **Location** North America

53 **Methods** We generated empirical species richness patterns using two data structures: (i) birds  
54 gridded from range maps and (ii) tree communities from the US Forest Service Forest Inventory  
55 and Analysis. We analysed richness using linear regression, regression trees, generalized additive  
56 models, geographically weighted regression and simultaneous autoregression, with ‘random  
57 intrinsic variables’ as predictors generated by assigning random numbers to species and  
58 calculating averages in assemblages. We then generated simulations in which species with  
59 cohesive or patchy distributions are placed with respect to the North American temperature  
60 gradient with or without a broad-scale richness gradient. Random intrinsic variables are again  
61 used as predictors of richness. Finally, we analysed one simulated scenario with random intrinsic  
62 variables as both response and predictor variables.

63 **Results** The models of bird and tree richness often explained moderate to large proportions of the  
64 variance. Regression trees, geographically weighted regression and simultaneous autoregression  
65 were very sensitive to the problem; generalized additive models were moderately affected, as was  
66 multiple regression to a lesser extent. In the virtual data, the variance explained increased with  
67 increasing species co-occurrences, but neither range cohesion, a richness gradient nor spatial

68 autocorrelation in predictors had major impacts. The problem persisted when the response  
69 variable was also a random intrinsic variable.

70 **Main Conclusions** Repeated species co-occurrences can generate strong spurious relationships  
71 between richness and aggregated species attributes. It is important to realize that models utilizing  
72 assemblage variables aggregated from species-level values, as well as maps illustrating their  
73 spatial patterns, cannot be taken at face value.

74  
75 Key words: **community structure, community weighted means, geographical ecology,**  
76 **intrinsic variables, spatial analysis, species composition, species co-occurrence, species**  
77 **richness gradients, trait analysis**

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79 Running title: Structural bias in assemblage/community analysis

80

## 81 INTRODUCTION

82 Community ecology, geographical ecology, ecological biogeography and some aspects of  
83 macroecology and macroevolution frequently utilize metrics generated across communities or  
84 assemblages. One fundamental pattern shared across all of these fields is spatial variation in  
85 species richness, which can be quantified in grains ranging from small plots, for many ecological  
86 questions, to entire continents, for biogeographical and macroevolutionary questions. Beginning  
87 in the 1960's (Pianka, 1967), analyses of non-insular, broad-scale diversity gradients primarily  
88 focused on quantifying relationships with components of the environment, which depending on  
89 the grain/extent of the analysis and the taxon, normally included one or more measures of climate,  
90 often supplemented with non-climatic variables such as, inter alia, area, topography, productivity,  
91 soil or water properties, distance from source pools, or geological history (see Field *et al.* [2009]  
92 for a compilation of case studies and the variables that have been considered). A major concern  
93 of these analyses has been ranking the 'importance' of potential drivers of diversity, generally by  
94 comparing regression coefficients or the relative statistical explanatory power of predictors.  
95 Irrespective of the specific metrics, most analyses utilized extrinsic predictor variables, defined as  
96 variables generated independent of the species in the plots, transects or grid cells. The majority of  
97 the environmental predictors, particularly climatic variables, also contain strong spatial structure,  
98 which were presumed to directly or indirectly generate the species richness patterns. There is a  
99 very extensive literature associated with the analysis of such spatially structured data (e.g. Ripley,  
100 1981; Haining, 2003; Dale & Fortin, 2014).

101 Recently, there has been increased interest in the analysis of intrinsic variables, defined as  
102 variables calculated from attributes of the species known or assumed to be present in each  
103 assemblage or community. Two that have been used for some time as response variables in

104 assemblage-based analyses include body size (with particular reference to Bergmann's Rule;  
105 Blackburn & Hawkins, 2004; Diniz-Filho *et al.*, 2007; Olalla-Tárraga *et al.*, 2010; Slavenko &  
106 Meiri, 2015) and range size (with reference to Rapoport's Rule; Stevens, 1989; Hawkins & Diniz-  
107 Filho, 2006; Morin & Lechovicz, 2011). Other intrinsic variables, such as metrics generated  
108 using the position of each species in a phylogeny, have also been correlated with species richness  
109 patterns, often in combination with extrinsic predictors (Kerr & Currie, 1999; Hawkins *et al.*,  
110 2005; Svenning *et al.*, 2008; Belmaker & Jetz, 2015). However, with the development of  
111 community phylogenetics (Webb *et al.*, 2002) and trait-based approaches to studying community  
112 size and structure (Shipley, 2010), the use of intrinsic variables as both response and predictor  
113 variables in assemblage/community analyses is rapidly expanding (e.g., Swenson & Enquist,  
114 2007; Jansson & Davies, 2008; Mayfield *et al.*, 2010; Swenson *et al.*, 2012, 2016; Dubuis *et al.*,  
115 2013; Stuart-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Hawkins *et al.*, 2014; Leingärtner *et al.*, 2014; Albouy *et al.*,  
116 2015; Belmaker & Jetz, 2015; Blonder *et al.*, 2015; Enquist *et al.*, 2015; Finegan *et al.*, 2015;  
117 Godoy *et al.*, 2015; Honorio Coronado *et al.*, 2015; Lima-Mendez *et al.*, 2015; Seymour *et al.*,  
118 2015; Šimová *et al.*, 2015; Stevens & Gavilanez, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2015; Biswas *et al.*, 2016;  
119 Boucher-Lalonde *et al.*, 2016; González-Maya *et al.*, 2016; Kimberly *et al.*, 2016; Marin &  
120 Hedges, 2016; Pfautsch *et al.*, 2016; de la Riva *et al.*, 2016). The assumption or hypothesis  
121 underlying all such analyses is that species attributes sort geographically according to their  
122 responses to the abiotic and biotic environment. Here we show that these biologically meaningful  
123 assumptions cannot be evaluated from standard statistical associations of intrinsic variables  
124 measured at the community or assemblage level.

125         Patterns of species richness are by their nature spatial, which raises a number of statistical  
126 and inferential issues. The issue of spatial autocorrelation has been known to ecologists at least

127 since Legendre (1993), as has the problem that collinearity among predictors can be driven by a  
128 joint environmental driver. However, a third ubiquitous and potentially serious analytical issue  
129 related to the use of intrinsic variables in spatial analysis appears to have largely escaped notice.  
130 We illustrate through the use of bird range maps, plot data for trees, and biologically plausible  
131 simulated data sets an analytical problem associated with the use of intrinsic variables in  
132 assemblage- and community-focused analyses conducted in a spatial context. The problem arises  
133 whether the intrinsic variables are predictor or also as response variables, although our primary  
134 focus is on analyses of species richness as the response variable.

135         A specific flavour of the problem was reported by Zelený & Schaffers (2012), who found  
136 that mean Ellenberg indicator values, an intrinsic community-based variable used in vegetation  
137 analysis, ‘inherited’ information about compositional similarity across communities, which then  
138 resulted in overestimates of explained variance in correspondence analyses as well as in  
139 regressions with species richness and inflated Type I error rates. They referred to this as a  
140 ‘similarity issue’ caused by the fact that the same species often occur in multiple communities.  
141 More recently, Peres-Neto *et al.* (2016) reported biased estimates of regression coefficients and  
142 inflated Type I error rates between intrinsic community-based mean trait values and  
143 environmental variables in the context of trait-environment analysis used in community ecology.  
144 The problem does not require that the community data have explicit spatial structure, only that  
145 some species occur in more than one community to the extent that some co-occurrences are  
146 repeated (hereafter referred to as the co-occurrence problem). However, we might expect a priori  
147 that the problem will be especially widespread in spatially structured assemblage data if there is  
148 any overlap of species distributions caused by species-level responses to environmental gradients,  
149 which will be rampant in datasets covering broad areas. To illustrate the severity of the problem



150 in two widely used types of data we first present analyses of the species richness patterns of North  
151 American birds in their breeding ranges derived from range maps and tree community richness in  
152 plots sampled by the United States Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA). The  
153 statistical models we generate use common linear, nonlinear, machine-learning and spatial  
154 regression methods to quantify the strengths of associations among cell/plot species richness as  
155 the response variable and sets of 'random intrinsic variables' as predictors, generated by assigning  
156 random numbers as species attributes and calculating their cell/plot means. These attributes could  
157 represent any quantitative physiological, morphological, ecological, behavioural or phylogenetic  
158 variable generated from any taxon-level assignment of values.

159 In a second set of analyses we explore four potential influences on the problem of  
160 particular relevance to ecologists and biogeographers, focusing on (i) levels of repeated species  
161 co-occurrences, (ii) the spatial coherence of those occurrences, (iii) the existence of a strong  
162 broad-scale richness gradient and (iv) the presence of spatial autocorrelation in the predictors.  
163 For this we develop a set of simulated North Americas occupied by virtual species, to which each  
164 species is given sets of random attributes as with the two data sets comprising real species. With  
165 these random intrinsic variables as predictors we model the case in which a strong species  
166 richness gradient is generated by species with cohesive ranges responding to the temperature  
167 gradient found on the continent, followed by the case in which species still respond to  
168 temperature but ranges lack coherence. Although less likely in real data of moderate to large  
169 geographical extent, we also generate data sets without broad-scale richness gradients using  
170 species with either cohesive or patchy ranges. Finally, we use the first of the simulated scenarios  
171 to analyze community-level metrics in which random intrinsic variables comprise both response  
172 and predictor variables. The latter analyses illustrate the potential extent of the problem when all

173 variables are intrinsic and generated from data containing repeated species co-occurrences.

## 174 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### 175 **North American birds**

176 Distribution maps were downloaded from BirdLife International

177 (<http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/info/spcdownload>, accessed in June, 2014), and breeding

178 ranges of the 1913 non-marine bird species in the region were extracted for analysis. The maps

179 were binned at a  $0.5^\circ \times 0.5^\circ$  grain in a grid extending from the northern tip of Greenland to

180 Panama, and the presence-absence matrix (PAM) of 14,662 grid cells each containing at least 15

181 bird species was created. As intrinsic predictors of species richness we generated random

182 intrinsic variables, created by first assigning a real number between 0 and 1 taken from a uniform

183 random distribution as a species attribute to each bird species. We then calculated means for each

184 cell in the grid by averaging these random species attribute values for the birds found in the cell.

185 This two-step process was repeated 100 times to generate a population of 100 random intrinsic

186 variables for potential inclusion in statistical models of richness. Range-map based patterns of

187 species richness and species co-occurrences invariably have strong spatial autocorrelation due to

188 the high cohesiveness of most range maps. Data of this type are common in ecological

189 biogeography and geographical ecology.

### 190 **Trees in the conterminous United States**

191 We also generated a PAM for the 304 gymnosperm and angiosperm species in 104,588 plots

192 (each 0.07 h) in the US Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis database

193 (<http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/>, accessed in January, 2012) that contained at least three species and

194 were in the conterminous USA. As with the birds, we generated 100 random intrinsic variables

195 by repeatedly assigning random species attributes to all species in the dataset and averaging their  
196 values for species present in each plot, and these random intrinsic variables were then used as  
197 predictors in statistical models of tree species richness. Because the data are plot-based counts,  
198 species ranges are non-cohesive and expected to generate a substantially noisier and less spatially  
199 autocorrelated richness pattern, although distributions are by no means random due to trees'  
200 responses to spatially structured environmental drivers operating across a range of scales. This is  
201 the data type used in community ecology, community phylogenetics and frequently in analyses of  
202 altitudinal diversity gradients.

### 203 **Virtual North America**

204 We simulated species distributions in North America by defining their tolerances to annual mean  
205 temperature (BIO 1 in WorldClim [Hijmans *et al.*, 2005]) within the 'virtualspecies' package in R  
206 (Leroy *et al.*, 2016). To generate a species distribution, we simulated a Gaussian response to  
207 temperature, defined by an optimum value and a thermal tolerance delimiting 99% of the area  
208 under the Gaussian curve. We used this response to temperature to project the probability of  
209 occurrence of the species in North America. Next, we converted probabilities of occurrence into  
210 presence-absence with a probabilistic conversion. Lastly, we applied dispersal limitation with  
211 two approaches: (i) a non-cohesive approach where a species distribution was limited to a defined  
212 number of single-pixel habitat patches across North America; and (ii) a cohesive approach where  
213 species distributions were limited to a cohesive range of size identical to its non-cohesive  
214 counterpart. We expected the statistical problem to be most severe in the presence of a richness  
215 gradient comprising species with cohesive ranges due to a higher level of repeated species co-  
216 occurrences.

217 To sample species' optimal temperatures, we defined two scenarios: (i) a scenario with a  
218 richness gradient (optimal temperatures more likely to be sampled at higher temperatures), and  
219 (ii) a scenario with no richness gradient (optimal temperatures were randomly sampled along the  
220 temperature gradient). Thermal tolerances were randomly sampled between 5° and 45°C for both  
221 scenarios. These two scenarios were designed to test the co-occurrence effect on models where  
222 there is a link between richness and a spatially structured environmental driver (temperature), and  
223 where there is no link between richness and the environment, although the latter case is highly  
224 unlikely in any real data set. For each scenario, we generated 2000 species, and we repeated the  
225 process five times with different numbers of suitable habitat patches each time (250, 500, 1000,  
226 2500 and 5000). We expected increases in numbers of available habitat patches to increase the  
227 degree of co-occurrence among species. We characterized co-occurrence patterns by estimating  
228 the C-score (Stone & Roberts, 1990) for each dataset/scenario. The C-score describes the average  
229 pairwise value of species associations in a PAM, ranging from a lower bound of 0 (maximum  
230 aggregation) to an undefined upper bound (Gotelli, 2000). Lower C-score values thus indicate  
231 higher average co-occurrence across all species pairs. Given that a particular C-score is specific  
232 to the PAM being analyzed, we used a modified version that normalizes the C-score according to  
233 a general maximum derived from the data and thus can be compared across datasets (Dormann *et*  
234 *al.*, 2008). To summarize, to facilitate interpretation of the results for the bird and tree data,  
235 neither of which is replicated, we simulated a total of 20 virtual North Americas (two richness  
236 scenarios × two range cohesiveness scenarios × five sizes of habitat patches).

237 As with the bird data, we generated a PAM for each scenario across the North American  
238 grid and generated 100 random intrinsic variables by assigning random numbers as species  
239 attributes and calculating assemblage means. These were selected as predictors of species

240 richness and for one scenario as the response variable as well.

### 241 **Statistical analyses**

242 A range of linear and non-linear modeling methods exist for analyzing assemblage/community  
243 data focused on patterns of diversity, from which we selected five that have been commonly used  
244 or are coming into common usage: ordinary least squares linear regression (MR), regression trees  
245 (RT), generalized additive models (GAM), geographically weighted regression (GWR) and  
246 simultaneous autoregression (SAR). These methods vary considerably in their underlying  
247 assumptions and their ability to capture non-linear/non-stationary relationships, both of which are  
248 widespread in broad-scale ecological datasets (Bini *et al.*, 2009) including our real and virtual  
249 data. Because of the non-stationarity in the data, we selected geographically weighted regression  
250 as our primary choice of a spatially explicit method, as it is explicitly designed to describe  
251 spatially varying relationships among variables. Even so, because SAR is used by many workers  
252 we evaluated its sensitivity to the co-occurrence problem using the bird data, the most strongly  
253 spatially autocorrelated of the data sets. When evaluating the results using this method it should  
254 be remembered that the coefficients are also sensitive to non-stationarity of the relationships  
255 independent of repeated species co-occurrences (see Fotheringham *et al.* [2002], Bini *et al.*  
256 [2009], Beale *et al.* [2010] and Hawkins [2012] for discussion of the assumptions underlying this  
257 class of spatially explicit methods), so interpretation of the results contains some ambiguity.

258 The utilization of geographically weighted regression is also compromised by the fact that  
259 we focused on a single bandwidth in the bird and tree data sets, 250.6 and 100.4, respectively;  
260 generated by a preliminary evaluation of the method in the Geographically Weighted Regression  
261 module in the SPATIAL ANALYSIS IN MACROECOLOGY program  
262 (<https://www.ecoevol.ufg.br/sam/>). Model outputs are sensitive to the bandwidth, and selection

263 of appropriate bandwidths is itself a complex statistical issue (Cho *et al.*, 2010). Thus, changing  
264 model parameters will change the results independently of the underlying structure of the data,  
265 and the results presented here represent one of many possible outcomes. Even so, it provides a  
266 warning that the method may be sensitive to the problem we describe in this paper.

267 Our rationale for selecting multiple modeling approaches was to evaluate the extent to  
268 which the existing literature is likely affected by the co-occurrence problem. If the analytical  
269 methods we evaluate are affected, it is likely that many other regression methods are affected as  
270 well. At the very least we cannot rule out that possibility without examining all known methods,  
271 which is beyond the scope of this paper. Zelený & Schaffers (2012) have already demonstrated  
272 that correspondence analysis and correlation are sensitive to the problem.

273 For the real data sets (birds and trees) we generated sets of regression models of richness  
274 using combinations of random intrinsic variables as predictors. Models using each method were  
275 generated with one, three or five predictors, which is within the range of the number of predictors  
276 evaluated by researchers. The sample size of the birds comprised the 14,662 cells containing at  
277 least 15 species. For the trees computational limitations required randomly sampling 25,000 plots  
278 supporting at least three species. The models of varying complexity were generated 100 times,  
279 except in the case of the regression trees, for which 200 trees were generated in each case. Model  
280 iterations used each random intrinsic variable in the one-predictor models or randomly selected  
281 combinations of variables in the three- and five-predictor models. Evaluation of model fit  
282 comprised coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ), or the model average  $R^2$  in the case of  
283 geographically weighted regression. We do not explicitly evaluate regression coefficients for four  
284 of the five regression types, as they have no biological meaning with respect to sets of random  
285 predictors and not all of the methods generate them. The exception is the SAR models, since they

286 are designed to account for the spatial autocorrelation in data and can generate high coefficients  
287 of determination irrespective of the nature of the predictors; further, it is the more precise  
288 coefficients generated by the method that justify its use (Beale *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, for  
289 the SARs we determined how many of the coefficients across the models were significantly  
290 different from 0. If the models often generate spurious coefficients it indicates that controlling for  
291 spatial autocorrelation in the data does not remove the bias generated by the co-occurrence  
292 problem. This also would represent one line of evidence that the problem we are evaluating in  
293 this paper is not simply due to the spatial autocorrelation in the data, and we must look elsewhere  
294 for an explanation.

295         Analysis of the 20 virtual scenarios comprised first fitting randomly selected sets of five  
296 random intrinsic variables to species richness. Given the extremely strong fits found using  
297 geographically weighted regression of the bird data and the large number of spurious regression  
298 coefficients in the simultaneous autoregression models (see Results section), making the  
299 sensitivity of both methods to the problem obvious, we excluded them from the analysis of the  
300 simulated data. As before, each model was repeated 100 times using random combinations of  
301 random intrinsic variables, and coefficients of determination were tallied.

302         The final analysis used one random intrinsic variable as a response variable and five  
303 random intrinsic variables as predictors, derived from data in the 5000-patch, cohesive-ranges  
304 scenario with a strong richness gradient. We repeated the analysis ten times with arbitrarily  
305 chosen response variables, each replicated 100 times with random combinations of predictors.  
306 Here we present the ‘best case’ and ‘worst case’ results, those with the lowest and highest mean  
307 coefficients of determination among the sets of models of the 10 repetitions. Running models for  
308 all 100 random intrinsic variables as response variables would expand the range of possible

309 results, but the results for 10 are sufficient to illustrate the potential severity of the problem when  
310 using intrinsic variables derived from species presences as response variables in  
311 assemblage/community analysis with strong spatial structure.

312

## 313 **RESULTS**

### 314 **Bird species richness**

315 The richness gradient generated by the breeding range maps is strongly spatially patterned (Fig.  
316 1a), as is already well known (e.g., Cook, 1969; Orme *et al.*, 2005; Hawkins *et al.*, 2006).

317 Further, means generated from random attributes can contain obvious spatial structure across  
318 multiple scales, as illustrated using three examples (Fig. 1b-d). Although the details of the spatial  
319 patterns varied among the random intrinsic variables, they tended to share a common structure of  
320 positive autocorrelation at small spatial scales and negative autocorrelation at very large scales, as  
321 did the species richness gradient (Fig. 2). Further, statistical models of richness had moderate to  
322 strong explanatory power across the model types (Table 1). Geographically weighted regression  
323 was especially sensitive to covariation between random predictors and richness, and even a single  
324 predictor variable generated very strong model fits. Simultaneous autoregression similarly  
325 showed evidence of strong sensitivity; all 100 models generated at least one coefficient significant  
326 at  $P < 0.01$ , and in 26 cases all five coefficients were significant (Appendix S1 in the Supporting  
327 Information). Because of their ability to capture non-linear relationships, regression trees and  
328 generalized additive models generated moderate to very strong models, despite the complete lack  
329 of biological information in the predictors. Linear regression, due to the constraint of fitting  
330 linear relationships, generated the weakest models on average, but even a single random predictor  
331 could sometimes explain over half of the variance in richness (maximum  $r^2 = 0.518$ ).



332 **Tree species richness**

333 The richness pattern for FIA plots is also spatially patterned, albeit noisy (Fig. 1e), as expected.  
334 The range of richness values is low, also expected from the very small plot size (0.07 ha). At  
335 least some of the random intrinsic variables also contain obvious spatial structure (Fig. 1f-h), and  
336 all contain at least some small-scale positive autocorrelation with low to moderate levels of  
337 broad-scale structure in many of them (Fig. 2b). Single predictor models of richness are in all  
338 cases weaker than for the bird data, but regression trees and generalized additive models were  
339 sensitive to the co-occurrence problem irrespective of the number of predictors (Table 2).  
340 Geographically weighted regression was not as strongly impacted as for the bird data, but  $R^2$ s  
341 remained fairly high. In contrast, linear regression models were reasonably robust, perhaps only  
342 because they are constrained to describe linear relationships. Our general finding is that although  
343 both data sets are affected by the co-occurrence problem there are differences with respect to their  
344 sensitivity, and these differences could at least potentially reflect that the plot data have (i) a  
345 weaker broad scale species richness gradient, (ii) lower levels of spatial autocorrelation, and (iii)  
346 lower levels of species co-occurrences (see next section). We explore these issues with the virtual  
347 scenarios.

348 **Virtual North America**

349 The simulations provided evidence that all data likely to be analyzed by biogeographers are  
350 sensitive to some extent to the co-occurrence problem, at least for the analytical methods we  
351 examined (Fig. 3). It made rather little difference in the average model  $R^2$ s whether the data were  
352 derived from cohesive or patchy ranges (cf. Fig. 3a and c) or if they contained a broad-scale  
353 species richness gradient (cf. Fig. 3a and b). The only data structure that did not generate  
354 spurious models in at least some cases was when they are derived from patchy species

355 distributions in the absence of a richness gradient (Fig. 3d), a very unlikely structure in data  
356 collected across any moderately strong environmental gradient.

357         Two consistent patterns in the virtual scenarios were that multiple regression models are  
358 less strongly impacted than regression trees or generalized additive models, and the problem  
359 becomes increasingly more severe with increasing levels of repeated species co-occurrences for  
360 all analytical methods and three of four data structures (Fig. 3a,b,c.). We also note that the levels  
361 of co-occurrence in some of the virtual scenarios were very similar to those found in both the bird  
362 (Fig. 3a) and tree (Fig. 3c) data, and higher levels of co-occurrence are found in the bird than in  
363 the trees, undoubtedly due in part to the cohesive ranges in the former.

364         Despite the results from the simultaneous regressions, it is possible that the spatial  
365 autocorrelation found in all real data is at least part of the problem. We examined this by  
366 quantifying the spatial patterns of the response and predictor variables in the virtual scenarios of  
367 cohesive versus patchy ranges with C-scores near 0.79 (see Fig. 3a and c). If spatial  
368 autocorrelation is the root of the problem, we expect both data sets to contain broadly similar  
369 spatial patterning given that matched model fits (percent of variance explained) are similar in both  
370 data sets despite the fact that the ranges that underlie the variables are structurally quite different.

371         Unsurprisingly, cohesive ranges generated similar patterns of spatial autocorrelation  
372 between species richness and many of the random intrinsic variables (positive short-distance and  
373 negative long-distance autocorrelation, Fig. 4a), so it is perhaps not surprising that model fits  
374 were very high (Fig. 3a). However, using patchy ranges to generate a richness gradient  
375 effectively removed the spatial pattern in the random intrinsic variables across all scales without  
376 affecting the pattern in richness (Fig. 4b). Despite the almost complete spatial decoupling of  
377 patterns in richness and the predictors, model fits remained high (Fig. 3c). Therefore, the

378 analytical problem can exist independent of any spatial autocorrelation in the predictors. On the  
379 other hand, spatial patterning in the broad sense must have a role to play when groups of species  
380 respond similarly to an environmental gradient, as the models are minimally impacted when  
381 species do not respond to a spatially structured environmental gradient and are patchily  
382 distributed (Fig. 3d).

### 383 **Traits as response variables**

384 The co-occurrence problem persists when the focus of an analysis is itself an intrinsic variable,  
385 although not as severely (Fig. 5). In the subset of random intrinsic variables selected as response  
386 variables both multiple regression and generalized additive models were moderately impacted,  
387 whereas regression tree models remained very strong even though none of the variables in the  
388 analysis, including the response variable, carry meaningful information.

## 389 **DISCUSSION**

390 Following Zelený & Schaffers (2012), we find that the community-focus widely used in ecology,  
391 biogeography and macroecology suffers from a potentially severe structural problem with obvious  
392 ramifications. First and foremost, any metric, whether physiological, morphological, behavioural,  
393 functional, phylogenetic, or ecological, that is generated at the assemblage/community level by  
394 assigning values to species and averaging them for the species present within a cell/plot can have  
395 internal statistical relationships of no biological significance across communities. Thus, the  
396 problem is likely to be widespread in community-based analyses in which species share multiple  
397 sites. Most worrying in our context is that the statistical bias generated by repeated species co-  
398 occurrences among sites is not slight in most biologically plausible scenarios, especially when  
399 multiple intrinsic variables are involved. That sets of intrinsic variables derived from random

400 numbers can sometimes generate >90% explanatory power in statistical models of species  
401 richness in spatially structured assemblages/communities suggests that no result using actual traits  
402 or other attributes can be trusted, however strong the model may be. It also follows that it is not  
403 possible to compare with confidence goodness-of-fits, regression coefficients or other measures  
404 of variable importance or rank in analysis involving multiple intrinsic predictors. In some  
405 situations, where levels of co-occurrence are low, multiple regression appears to be robust, but  
406 without detailed analysis it is not possible to know why because of the multiple problems with  
407 linear regression that have been identified when used to analyze spatially structured data  
408 (Fotheringham *et al.*, 2002; Grace & Bollen, 2005; Bini *et al.*, 2009; Hawkins, 2012). We are  
409 unable to address this complex set of statistical issues here.

410         Secondly, we expected range cohesion to exacerbate the analytical problem by generating  
411 potentially spurious spatial autocorrelation among intrinsic predictor variables that would then  
412 link to the underlying spatial autocorrelation in richness. If true this would identify results based  
413 on range map data as being particularly unreliable, whereas the plot data normally generated by  
414 community ecologists would be less impacted due to lower levels of autocorrelation. However,  
415 our virtual data indicate that strong spurious relationships can occur in plot data without spatial  
416 autocorrelation in the intrinsic predictors as long as richness itself is spatially structured (see Fig.  
417 4b). Although it was possible to generate data with minimal apparent impact on the three  
418 statistical methods (see Fig. 3d) few real data sets will have this structure, and so no data should  
419 be considered a priori to be immune to the problem, and the presence or absence of spatial  
420 autocorrelation is not definitive evidence that no problem exists, as long as some level of repeated  
421 species co-occurrence exists across communities/assemblages.

422            Yet another ramification of the co-occurrence problem is that although spatial structure in  
423 intrinsic variables is not required for co-occurrences to be an issue in statistical analysis and  
424 ecological inference, spatially autocorrelated data are often used to generate maps showing  
425 aggregated assemblage/community trait values at the sub-continental, continental or global extent  
426 (Hawkins & Diniz-Filho, 2006; Morin & Lechowicz, 2011; Jetz *et al.*, 2012; Swenson *et al.*,  
427 2012; Hawkins *et al.*, 2014; Šímová *et al.*, 2014; Belmaker & Jetz, 2015). The patterns in such  
428 maps can be visually striking and yet at least potentially biologically uninformative. Thus, if  
429 repeated species co-occurrences contain spatial structure, which they will if multiple species  
430 respond similarly to the environment, it is not surprising that climate or other spatially structured  
431 environmental variables could generate relatively strong regression models when trait values are  
432 response variables. It does not follow that such patterns must be artefactual if the trait of interest  
433 actually drives the species distributions; the problem is that any trait can contain spatial structure  
434 due to the co-occurrence problem even if it is distributed independently of the environment (see  
435 Fig. 1 for examples).

436            We are aware of two published solutions to the impact of repeated species co-occurrences  
437 on community-level metrics. One is the permutation method proposed by Zelený & Schaffers  
438 (2012) to correct the inflated Type I error. Their modified permutation test first calculates  
439 observed test statistics (like Pearson's  $r$  coefficients for correlation or  $F$ -values for regression or  
440 ANOVA) of relationships between cell/plot mean species attributes and sample attributes. Then,  
441 these observed statistics are compared with the null distribution of expected test statistics,  
442 calculated between cell/plot means of randomly permuted species attributes and sample attributes.  
443 Note the difference of this approach and the use of null models in evaluating functional or  
444 phylogenetic diversity indices (e.g. Mason *et al.*, 2013, with community weighted means being

445 one of them) based on calculating standardized effect sizes (SES, or  $z$ -scores). However, while  
446 SES is devised to correct for the effect of species richness influencing the absolute values of these  
447 indices, it does not solve the problem of repeated co-occurrences, which is not directly related to  
448 species richness. The modified permutation test of Zelený & Schaffers (2012) does correct for  
449 inflated Type I error but also does not correct regression coefficients or model fits. Whereas  
450 accurate significance testing may be necessary and sufficient for many ecological applications, it  
451 is of limited value for broad-scale analyses, particularly of diversity gradients, in which the focus  
452 is typically on ranking the relative contributions of potential explanatory variables to compare  
453 potential underlying processes. The challenge of distinguishing strong and weak predictors of  
454 species richness gradients has generated much of the discussion in the ecological literature  
455 evaluating methods for estimating regression coefficients for spatially structured data (e.g.,  
456 Lennon, 2000; Diniz-Filho *et al.*, 2003; Dormann *et al.*, 2007; Hawkins, 2012; Kühn & Dormann,  
457 2012). Uncertainty about ranking potential ‘effects’ of predictors makes disentangling the  
458 contributions of the many hypothesized influences on diversity gradients difficult, and species co-  
459 occurrences add yet another layer of difficulty for evaluating intrinsic variables.

460         The second approach to the problem of which we are aware is an adaptation of the fourth-  
461 corner method by Peres-Neto *et al.* (2012, 2016), which claims to be immune to both the bias in  
462 regression coefficients and inflated Type I error rate. This method is in fact a special case of  
463 correlation between cell/plot means of species attributes (traits) and sample attributes, in which  
464 both species and sample attributes are standardized, and the correlation itself is weighted by row  
465 sums of the species composition matrix. These row sums represent the sum of species abundances  
466 in the cells/plots, which in the case of presence/absence species composition data equal species  
467 richness. This method may be suitable for community data relating species traits to

468 environmental variables, which is sometimes done by the original fourth-corner method.  
469 However, in our opinion its current formulation cannot be used in the context of the analysis of  
470 species richness, since using correlation weighted by species richness to analyze the relationship  
471 between species richness and one or more intrinsic variables has no theoretical justification.  
472 Further development of this approach may lead to a solution to the problem we address here, but  
473 it is not obvious to us how to accomplish this.

474         Although not a solution per se, a relatively straight-forward approach to evaluate if  
475 repeated co-occurrences might be a problem in a data set would be to conduct a separate set of  
476 regressions using cell/plot means calculated from repeatedly re-randomized trait values. If 100 or  
477 more iterations of such regressions always generate very low coefficients of determination it  
478 suggests that patterns of repeated co-occurrences are not generating serious structural bias for the  
479 statistical method being evaluated. On the other hand, if at least some models using repeatedly  
480 randomized trait values are moderate to strong, confidence in the results will have to be limited  
481 until a formal analytical solution is devised.

482         To conclude, there is clearly a potentially serious analytical problem with community-  
483 based metrics as predictors of species richness gradients, but a methodological solution to the co-  
484 occurrence problem with respect to understanding diversity patterns is not yet available. Until it  
485 is, workers should be aware that inferences from maps of assemblage/community-level metrics  
486 for any class of attribute, as well as analyses based on them using commonly used statistical  
487 methods, can be much less certain than they appear.

488

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490

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502



503 **Table 1** Means (and SD) of coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) of four types of statistical models  
 504 of the species richness of North American birds (see Fig. 1) across 14,462 cells in a continental  
 505 grid including one, three or five ‘random intrinsic variables’ as predictors. Each predictor  
 506 variable represents mean cell values of random numbers taken from a uniform distribution  
 507 between 0 and 1 and assigned to species. LR = linear regression, RT= regression trees, GAM =  
 508 generalized additive models, GWR = geographically weighted regression.

---

509	No. of				
510	Predictors	LR	RT	GAM	GWR
511					
512	One	0.145	0.321	0.304	0.936
513		(0.143)	(0.087)	(0.159)	(0.004)
514	Three	0.310	0.702	0.584	0.952
515		(0.148)	(0.061)	(0.126)	(0.004)
516	Five	0.437	0.853	0.732	0.964
517		(0.114)	(0.032)	(0.074)	(0.003)

---

518

519 The requisite numbers of predictors were randomly selected from a population of 100 random  
 520 intrinsic variables. Each model type was run with 100 combinations of predictors, or each  
 521 predictor once in the one-predictor models. The regression tree values were calculated from 200  
 522 component trees in random forest models generated in the ‘randomForest’ package in R. The  
 523 simple and multiple regression models comprise linear terms of predictors with no interactions,  
 524 and the degrees of freedom for the smooth terms in the GAMs were estimated using the

525 Generalized Cross Validation criterion (for details see the `gam` function in the ‘`mgcv`’ R package).

526 See the text for the details of the GWR models.

527

528 **Table 2** Means (and SD) of coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) of four types of statistical models  
 529 of the species richness of trees in US Forest Service Forestry Inventory and Analysis plots (see  
 530 Fig. 1) including one, three or five ‘random intrinsic variables’ as predictors. Each predictor  
 531 variable represents mean plot values of random numbers taken from a uniform distribution  
 532 between 0 and 1 and assigned to species. LR = linear regression, RT = regression trees, GAM =  
 533 generalized additive models, GWR = geographically weighted regression. Modelling details as in  
 534 Table 1.

535 No. of				
536 Predictors	LR	RT	GAM	GWR
538 One	0.021	0.146	0.184	0.443
	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.036)	(0.006)
540 Three	0.058	0.444	0.441	0.465
	(0.034)	(0.021)	(0.038)	(0.010)
542 Five	0.084	0.593	0.542	0.495
	(0.042)	(0.020)	(0.030)	(0.012)

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727

728 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

729 Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

730

731 **Appendix S1** Results for SAR models.

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734 **DATA ACCESSIBILITY**

735 The bird range maps are available at (<http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/info/spcdownload>, and the

736 FIA data are available at (<http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/>. All scripts used for the simulations are

737 available at <https://github.com/Farewe/CooccurrenceIssue>.

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741 **BIOSKETCH**

742 **Bradford A. Hawkins** is interested in ecological and phylogenetic patterns across a range of

743 spatial scales, with a focus on linking local and biogeographical processes.

744

745 Editor: Jens-Christian Svenning

746 FIGURE LEGENDS

747 **Figure 1** Species richness pattern of (a) North American bird species derived from maps of  
748 breeding ranges gridded at a  $0.5^\circ \times 0.5^\circ$  grain, and (e) trees in 0.07 h plots recorded by the US  
749 Forest Service Forest Inventory and Analysis. (b-d, f-h) Three examples of cell/plot means  
750 (random intrinsic variables) in which random values between 0 and 1 were assigned to each  
751 species of bird or tree. All colour schemes are in the natural-jenks scale from ArcGIS 10.3.

752  
753 **Figure 2** Spatial autocorrelation structure (Moran's  $I$ ) of (a) the North American bird species  
754 richness pattern (black line) and 100 random intrinsic variables (gray lines), and (b) US tree  
755 richness pattern and 100 random intrinsic variables. Note difference in scale of axes.

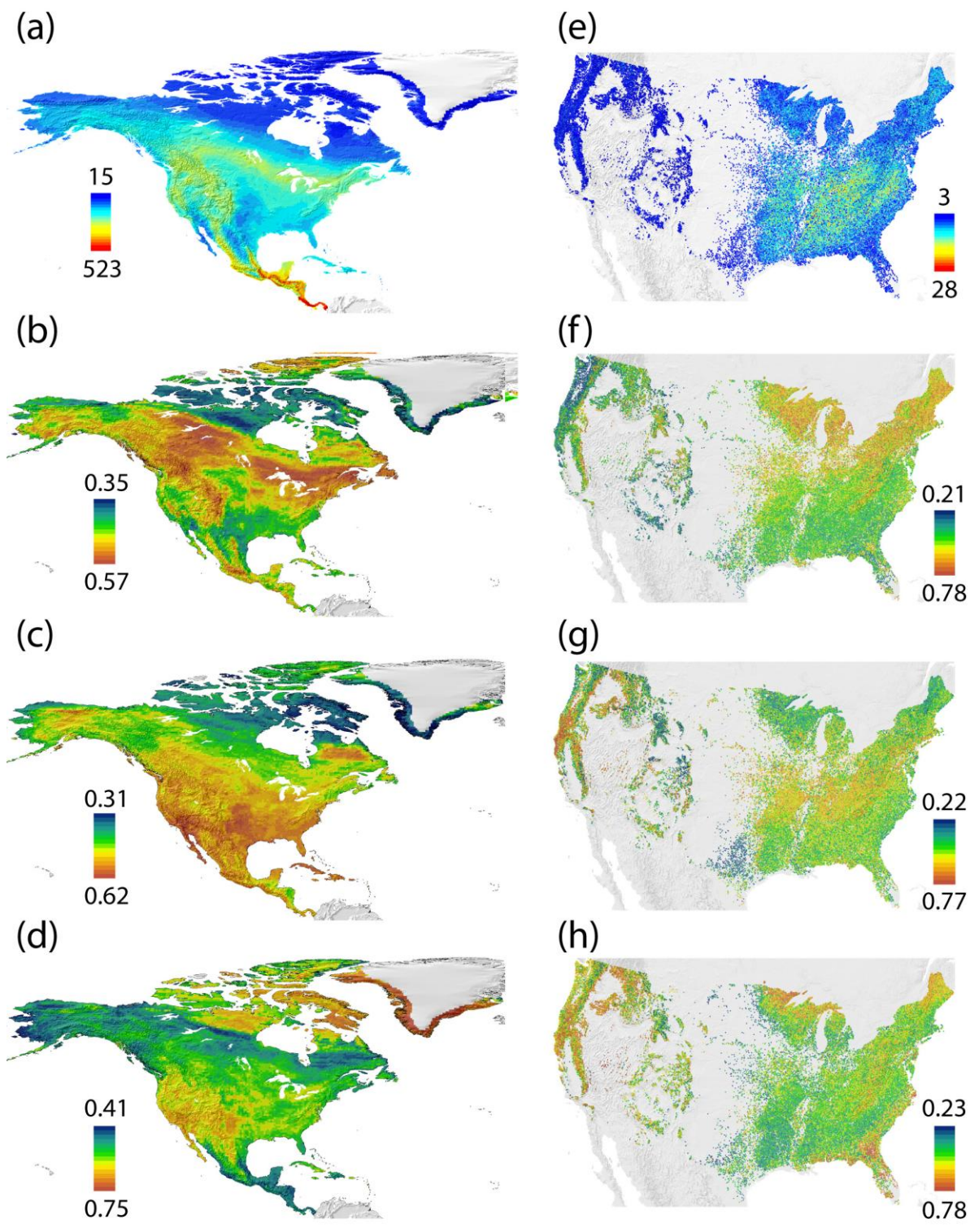
756  
757 **Figure 3.** Mean ( $\pm 1$  SD) coefficients of determination of three types of five-predictor statistical  
758 models of species richness for four simulated North American scenarios plotted against a measure  
759 of species co-occurrences (C-score) calculated for five range size distributions: (a) data containing  
760 a strong species richness generated by species with cohesive ranges, (b) no broad-scale richness  
761 gradient generated by species with cohesive ranges, (c) a broad-scale richness gradient generated  
762 by species with patchy (non-cohesive) ranges, and (d) data with no broad-scale richness gradients  
763 generated by species with patchy ranges. Within each scenario C-scores vary depending on the  
764 average realized range size of the species, which is influenced by the number of available patches  
765 species can occupy. For comparison, C-scores and model fits (data from Tables 1 and 2) for birds  
766 and trees are shown in the scenarios to which their data correspond. Model types are regression  
767 tree (RT), generalized additive models (GAM) and multiple linear regression (MR).

768

769 **Figure 4** Spatial autocorrelation structure (Moran's  $I$ ) of simulated data under the scenarios in  
770 which the data contain a broad-scale species richness gradient generated by species with (a)  
771 cohesive or (b) non-cohesive, 1000-patch distributions. Black lines describe the spatial structure  
772 of richness and gray lines describe structure of 100 random intrinsic variables in each scenario.

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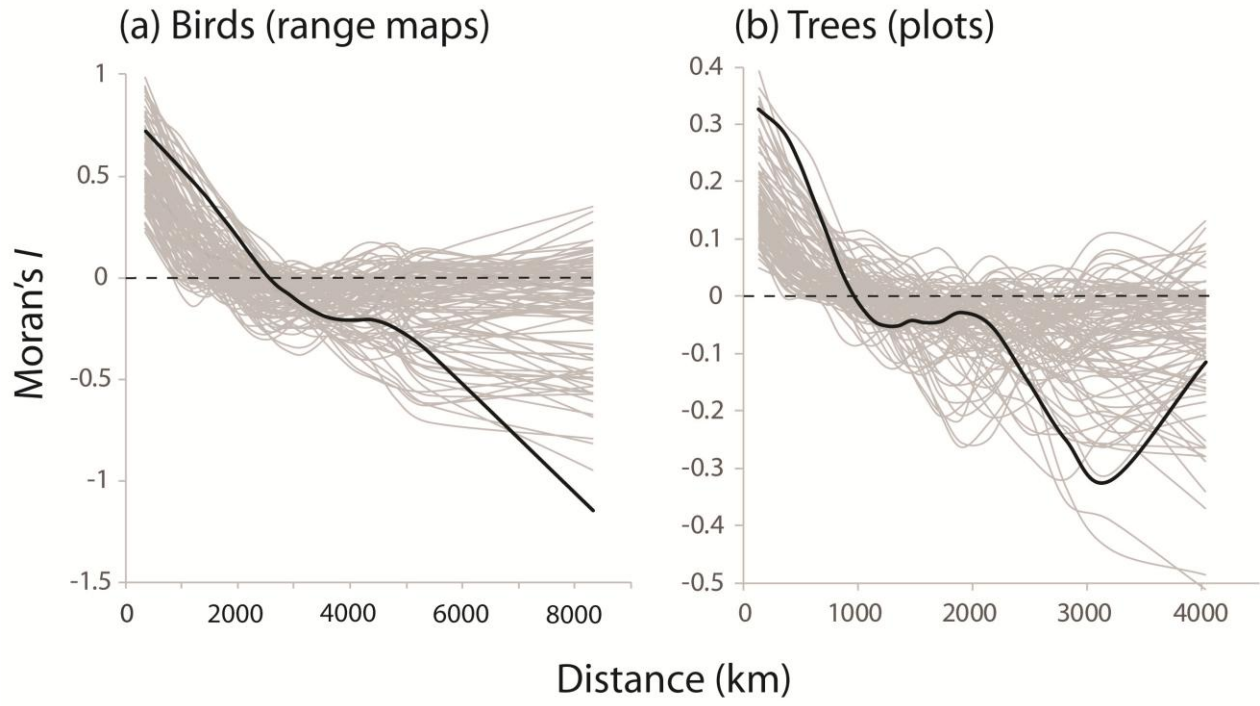
773  
774 **Figure 5** Frequency distributions of coefficients of determination from three types of statistical  
775 models generated using five random intrinsic variables as predictors against one random intrinsic  
776 variable as the response variable, in a simulated North American scenario with a broad-scale  
777 richness gradient generated by species with cohesive ranges. Each model type was iterated 100  
778 times using random selections of predictors from a population of 99 random variables excluding  
779 the variable used as the response. (a, c, e) The weakest models (best case) and (b, d, f) strongest  
780 models (worst case) selected from analyses of 10 arbitrarily selected response variables. Vertical  
781 dashed lines identify mean values.



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Figure 1



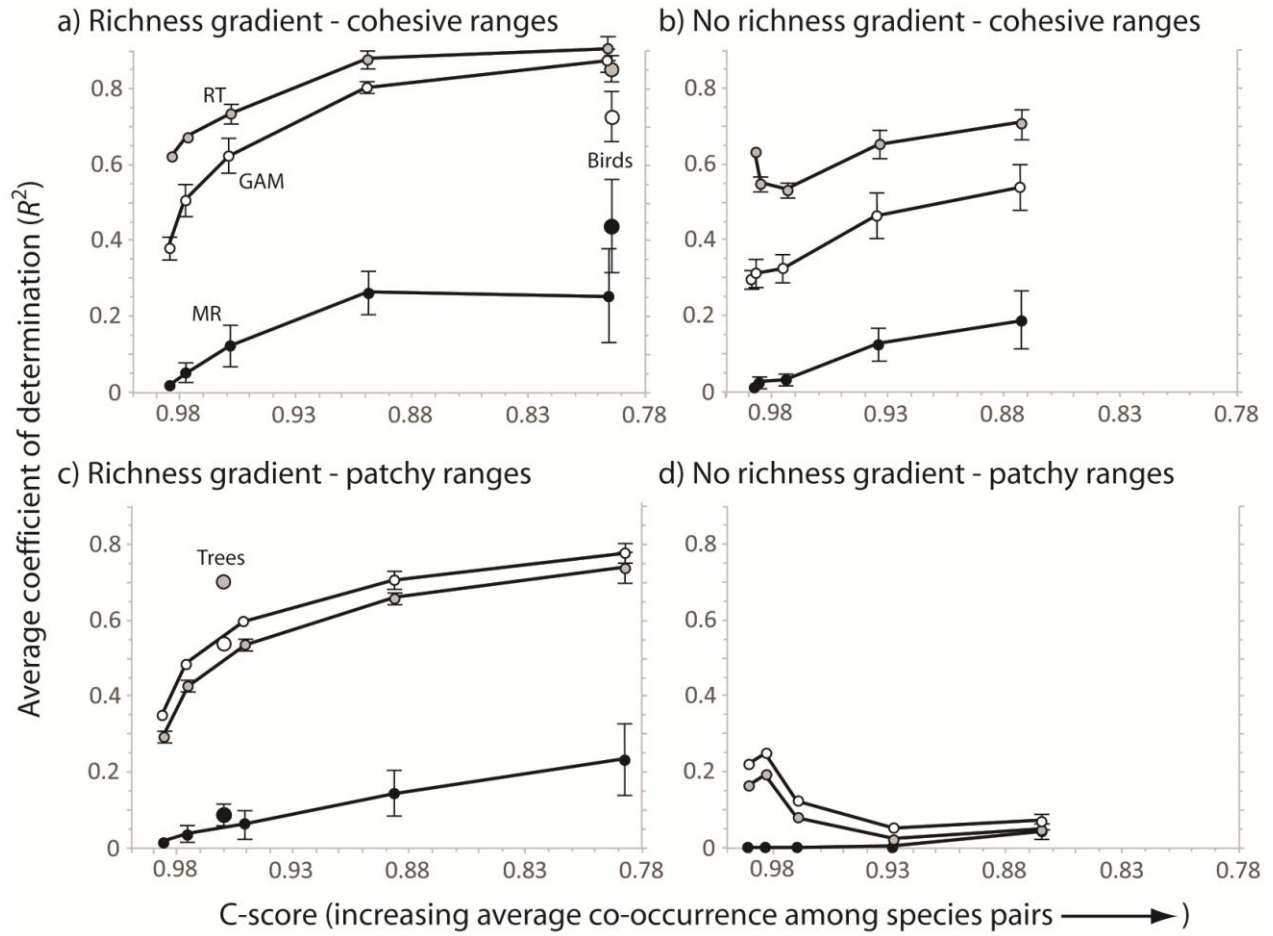
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Figure 2



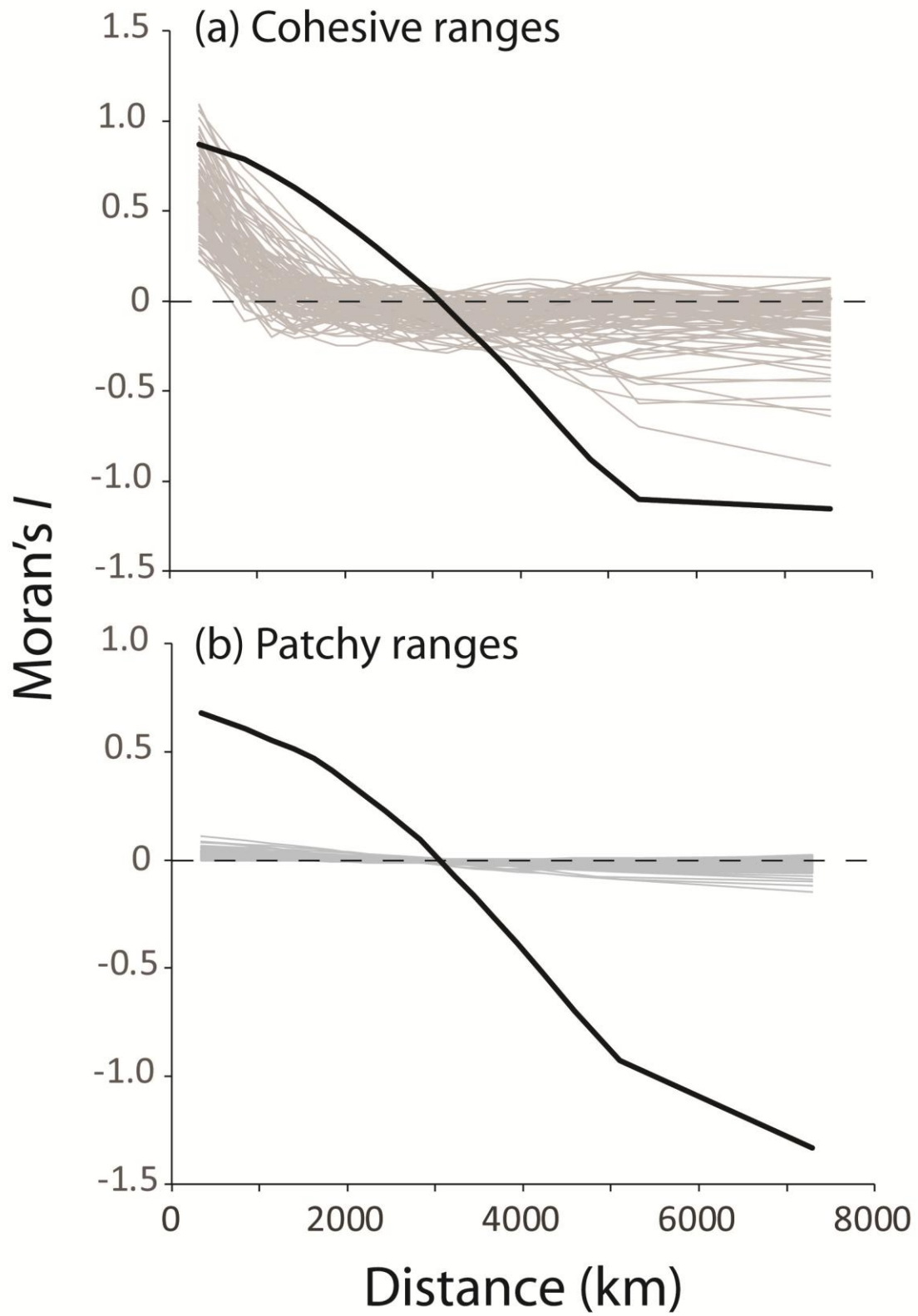


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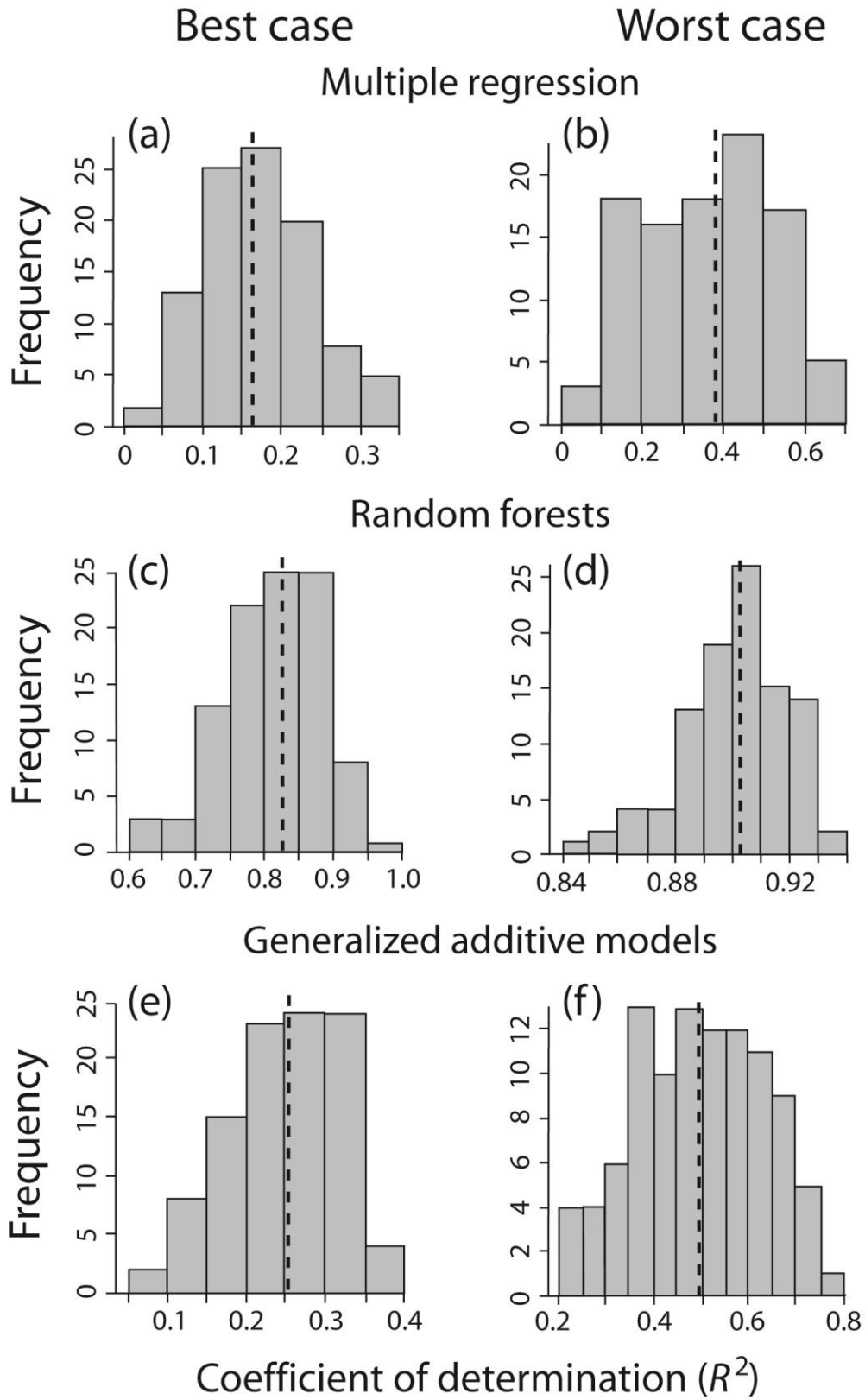
Figure 3



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Figure 4



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Figure 5

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

796 **Structural bias in aggregated trait variables driven by repeated**

797 **species co-occurrences: a pervasive problem in community and**

798 **assemblage data**

799

800 Bradford A. Hawkins, Boris Leroy, Miguel Á. Rodríguez, Alexander Singer, Bruno Vilela,

801 Fabricio Villalobos, Xiangping Wang and David Zelený

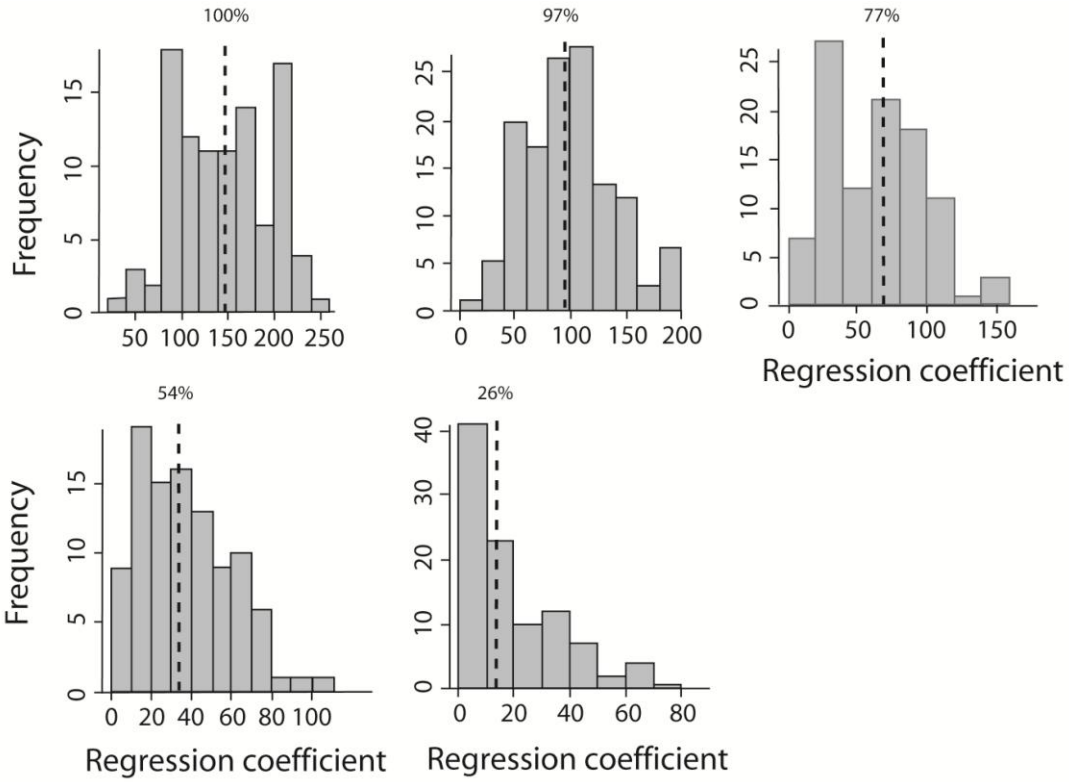
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803 **Appendix S1** Frequency distributions of ranked regression coefficients (absolute values) of  
804 simultaneous autoregressive (SAR) models of the species richness pattern of North American  
805 birds in 14,662 grid cells, with five random intrinsic variables as predictors. The models were  
806 iterated 100 times using randomly selected combinations of predictors from a population of 100  
807 random intrinsic variables. The coefficients of determination of all iterations were extremely high  
808 (mean = 0.980, SD = 0.001). The sensitivity to the co-occurrence problem was evaluated based  
809 on the number of significant ( $P < 0.01$ ) non-zero regression coefficients. For illustrative purposes  
810 the five coefficients from each iteration have been ranked and the frequency distributions across  
811 models of the strongest to weakest are plotted (dashed line = mean; note decreasing values from  
812 top left to bottom right). The percentage of the 100 coefficients in each distribution that were  
813 significant is provided above each panel.

814 The analyses were conducted using the `spautol()` function of the R package ‘Spdep’. We  
815 used the sparse matrix decomposition method (Monte Carlo), which can handle large data sets  
816 with thousands of observations. We used the `knearneigh()` function to create the matrix with the  
817 indices of points belonging to the set of the  $k$  ( $k = 4$ ) nearest neighbours. The matrix was

818 converted to a neighbours list with spatial weights using the knn2nb () and nb2listw () functions,  
819 which were then used in the SAR models.

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