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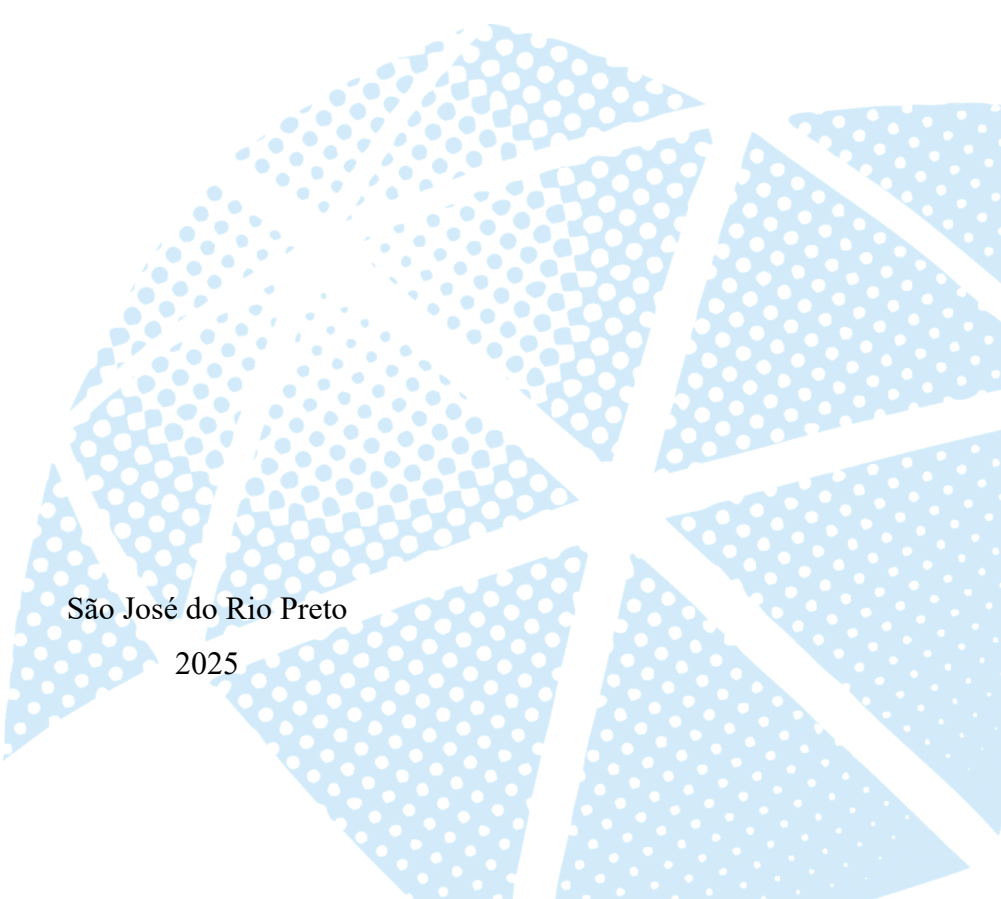
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**Environmental effects on the abundance and trophic ecology of
amazonian stream fishes**

São José do Rio Preto

2025



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amazonian stream fishes**

Tese apresentada à Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, São José do Rio Preto, para obtenção do título de Doutor em Biodiversidade.

Área de Concentração: Ecologia e Comportamento

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Lilian Casatti

Coorientadora: Jaqueline de Oliveira Zeni

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Dedico este trabalho à minha avó, Lurdes, e aos meus amigos, por tanto!

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*"Quem não vacila mesmo derrotado
Quem, já perdido, nunca desespera
E, envolto em tempestade, decepado
Entre os dentes, segura a primavera."*

— Secos & Molhados, 1973.

RESUMO

Mudanças ambientais associadas ao desmatamento e à fragmentação da paisagem amazônica constituem uma das principais ameaças à biodiversidade aquática. Nesse contexto, compreender como variáveis ambientais locais, espaciais e de paisagem influenciam a abundância e a ecologia trófica da ictiofauna é essencial para a conservação dos riachos amazônicos. Avaliamos como gradientes ambientais e de conectividade fluvial moldam a abundância e a ecologia trófica de espécies de peixes tetra (Characiformes) e da família Loricariidae. Foram amostrados 135 riachos nas bacias do rio Machado, Aripuanã e Juruena, que apresentam diferentes níveis de degradação ambiental. As variáveis locais (*i.e.*, instream), de paisagem (*i.e.*, cobertura florestal) e espacial (*i.e.*, distância fluvial) foram obtidas e integradas às informações de abundância e dieta das espécies, permitindo avaliar como diferentes filtros ambientais moldam a estrutura das assembleias. A análise mostrou que peixes tetra apresentam maior plasticidade ecológica e capacidade de dispersão, sendo influenciados por variáveis locais e de paisagem, enquanto os loricariídeos responderam de maneira mais restrita, fortemente associados à integridade do micro-habitat e à conectividade fluvial. Os resultados também evidenciaram que o desmatamento promoveu substituição funcional, favorecendo espécies generalistas e reduzindo a diversidade trófica em detrimento de especialistas. Esses padrões reforçam que a perda de heterogeneidade ambiental e de conectividade compromete a estabilidade ecológica das assembleias de peixes. Assim, a manutenção da floresta ripária, da conectividade fluvial e da integridade dos micro-habitats é fundamental para garantir a persistência da biodiversidade e do funcionamento ecológico nos riachos amazônicos.

Palavras-chave: amazônia; characiformes; ictiofauna; riachos; loricariidae.

ABSTRACT

Environmental changes triggered by deforestation and fragmentation of the Amazonian landscape are one of the main threats to aquatic biodiversity. In this context, understanding how local environmental, spatial, and landscape variables influence the ichthyofauna abundance and trophic ecology is critical for the protection of Amazonian streams. We evaluated how environmental and fluvial connectivity gradients affect the abundance and trophic ecology of tetra-like fish species (Characiformes) and the Loricariidae family. We sampled 135 streams in the Machado, Aripuanã, and Juruena river basins, which have different levels of environmental degradation. Local (*i.e.*, instream), landscape (*i.e.*, forest cover), and spatial (*i.e.*, fluvial distance) variables were obtained and integrated with species abundance and trophic data, allowing us to evaluate how different environmental filters determine assemblage structure. The analysis showed that tetra-like fish have increased ecological plasticity and dispersal capacity, being influenced by local and landscape variables, while loricariids responded in a restricted way, being strongly associated with microhabitat integrity and fluvial connectivity. The results also reveal that deforestation leads to functional substitution, which favors generalist species instead of specialists and reduces trophic diversity. These patterns reinforce that the loss of environmental heterogeneity and connectivity compromises the ecological stability of fish assemblages. Therefore, maintaining riparian vegetation, stream connectivity, and microhabitat integrity is essential to ensure the persistence of biodiversity and ecological functioning in Amazonian streams.

Keywords: amazon; characiformes; ichthyofauna; streams; loricariidae.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Neotropical region hosts an exceptionally high diversity of fish, accounting for more than 6,000 of the world's estimated 18,915 freshwater species (Fricke *et al.*, 2025). A significant portion of this diversity, around 2,700 species, is concentrated in the Amazon basin (Pouilly *et al.*, 2003; Winemiller *et al.*, 2016). This abundance is likely attributed to the region's vast diversity of habitats (Cilleros *et al.*, 2016) and its long history of colonization and diversification (Miller & Román-Palacios, 2021; Cassemiro *et al.*, 2023). As a result, evolutionary processes like morphological variation and speciation, along with ecological factors (*e.g.*, habitat use and foraging behaviors), play crucial roles in determining the abundance and distribution of fish in aquatic environments (Evangelista *et al.*, 2014; Gelwick; McIntyre, 2017).

Among several aspects of fish ecology, trophic patterns are shaped by both intrinsic species traits (*i.e.*, evolutionary adaptations) and extrinsic environmental factors (*i.e.*, ecological processes). Functional traits influence how fish acquire and process food, determining their access to specific resources (Delariva & Agostinho, 2001; Zuluaga-Gómez *et al.*, 2016). However, resource availability can modulate these patterns, either restricting or expanding trophic opportunities (German *et al.*, 2010; Black & Armbruster, 2022). Resource availability can influence the nutritional choices of trophic generalist fish (Ceneviva-Bastos & Casatti, 2007) or even determine the presence of trophic specialists (Lujan *et al.*, 2012). However, studies exploring how environmental factors affect the trophic ecology of stream fish remain necessary (Delariva & Agostinho, 2001; Villares-Junior *et al.*, 2016; Bonato *et al.*, 2017; Baldasso *et al.*, 2019).

The absence of fundamental understanding regarding species-environment interactions is especially troubling considering the rapid and intense anthropic pressure that are transforming natural ecosystems (Abell *et al.*, 2008). Environmental degradation, including deforestation, river damming, and pollution in South America, particularly in the southern Amazon basin, threatens aquatic species (Amigo *et al.*, 2020; Leal *et al.*, 2020; Sayer *et al.*, 2025). In the Amazon region, deforestation in Brazil has increasingly penetrated deeper into the forest interior over the past decade, driven by logging and the expansion of agriculture (Candino *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, in recent decades the expansion of pastures, along with illegal mining and predatory agriculture, has led to the loss of 55 million hectares of natural vegetation. This impact is particularly strong in Rondônia state and the northern region of Mato Grosso state, where approximately 40%

of the native forest has been lost due to the expansion of cattle ranching (MapBiomas, 2023).

The removal of structural components such as logs, leaf litter, and marginal roots caused by deforestation has reduced habitat quality within stream interiors, diminishing environmental heterogeneity (Zeni *et al.*, 2019). Also, deforestation can negatively impact the abundance and diversity of food resources available in these habitats (Abelha *et al.*, 2001; Lorion; Kennedy, 2009; Castello *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, the fish fauna has experienced substantial alterations, with specialized species being supplanted by ones exhibiting more general traits (Castello *et al.*, 2013; Silva; Virgílio, 2019). In Neotropical streams, deforestation acts as a significant environmental filter, altering habitat quality and the functional traits of fish communities (Zeni *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, species respond differently to deforestation (Brejão *et al.*, 2018), with these responses being shaped by the complex interaction of evolutionary and ecological processes that influence their adaptability to environmental disturbances.

The fish community in the Amazon basin is predominantly composed of species from the orders Characiformes and Siluriformes (Albert *et al.*, 2011). Among these groups, the most morphologically, taxonomically, and ecologically diverse species belong to the Loricariidae family and tetra-like families (Spintherobolidae, Stevardiidae, Characidae, and Acestrorhamphidae) (Claro-García *et al.*, 2013; Nelson *et al.*, 2016; Melo *et al.*, 2024; Fricke *et al.*, 2025). These species exhibit high variation in habitat use and dietary preferences. Generally, tetra-like fish exhibit a wide range of feeding strategies and significant trophic plasticity. They are characterized as generalist and opportunistic nektonic species that forage in the water column and at the surface of water (Abelha *et al.*, 2001; Brejão *et al.*, 2013). Brejão *et al.* (2013) investigated amazonian streams and identified two functional trophic groups among Neotropical tetras: those that forage and scavenge near the mid-channel surface and those that do so along the edges of the channel. The feeding habits of these organisms are influenced by factors such as local environmental conditions (Zeni; Casatti, 2014), the riparian forest (Ceneviva-Bastos *et al.*, 2010), and the surrounding landscape (Ceneviva-Bastos; Casatti, 2007). These variations in the feeding biology of tetra-like fishes may be attributed to their relatively generalized oral and gastrointestinal morphology (Abelha *et al.*, 2001).

Loricariids primarily occupy lower trophic levels, predominantly feeding on algae due to their specialized sucker mouths and scraping teeth (Uieda, 1984; Lujan *et al.*, 2012). The occurrence patterns of these fish act as bioindicators of environmental

degradation, particularly in regions lacking natural C4 plants, such as riparian forests (Martinelli *et al.*, 2024). Their ecological role is critical in freshwater ecosystems, which are currently experiencing a biodiversity crisis, with about 25% of species at risk of extinction (Sayer *et al.*, 2025). Although loricariids primarily consume algae, they demonstrate dietary flexibility by also feeding on plant detritus and small invertebrates (Abelha *et al.*, 2001; Delariva; Agostinho, 2001; Lujan *et al.*, 2011; Silva *et al.*, 2025). For loricariids with more specialized morphologies, dietary shifts in response to environmental changes and resource availability are unlikely (Delariva; Agostinho, 2001; Lujan *et al.*, 2011). In this context, dietary variations among species are closely related to the morphology of their oral structures, suggesting that their diets are fundamentally dependent on intrinsic structural characteristics (Abelha *et al.*, 2001; Prado *et al.*, 2016; Silva *et al.*, 2025).

The extensive connectivity of Amazonian River ecosystems makes them highly vulnerable to anthropogenic impacts, such as deforestation, at both local (instream) and regional (landscape) scales (Castello *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, the relaxation of Brazilian environmental regulations, particularly since the introduction of the New Forest Code (Lei Nº. 12.651 de 25 de Maio, 2012), which includes the reduction (from 30 to 15 meters) of Permanent Preservation Area (APP) widths for small watercourses, has made areas adjacent to these water bodies more susceptible to landscape changes due to land use (Brasil, 2012). Therefore, there is an urgent need for innovative integrative ecological studies that combine explanatory variables of different types (*e.g.*, geographical, local, landscape) with biological factors (*e.g.*, ecological traits). Such approaches are particularly important for stream environments, which host many endemic species, predominantly small-sized, that have strong connections to the adjacent habitat (Santos *et al.*, 2019; Fricke *et al.*, 2025). This is especially relevant in the southern Amazon basin (Rondônia state and northern Mato Grosso state) which has been experiencing intense deforestation due to the expansion of agricultural frontiers over the forest, rapidly converting the natural matrix into pasture (Casatti *et al.*, 2012; MapBiomas, 2023).

Studies in the Machado, Aripuanã, and Juruena river basins reveal highly diverse fish assemblages, where tetra-like and Loricariidae families are structurally dominant. In the Machado basin (Rondônia), these groups comprise 42 and 12 species, respectively, out of a total of 140. Small tetras like *Serrapinnus* and *Hemigrammus collettii* constituted over half of all individuals identified (Casatti *et al.*, 2013). A similar pattern was found in the Aripuanã and Juruena basins (Mato Grosso), which host 43 tetra-like and 22

loricariid species out of 130, also with a strong numerical dominance of small tetras, though many taxa await precise taxonomic identification (Casatti *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, most studies on amazonian stream fish ecology tend to focus on a single process that may influence communities, such as the effect of riparian vegetation removal acting as an environmental filter in trophic structuring (Lobón-Cerviá *et al.*, 2016) or the impact of dispersal on community dynamics (Mazonni *et al.*, 2018). In this context, we analyze the influence of spatial and environmental factors (*i.e.*, local and landscape gradients) on the abundance of fish species in amazonian streams (chapter 1) and evaluate how deforestation gradients and spatial factors influence diet patterns among fish species, identifying shifts in trophic strategies and resource use across varying environmental conditions (chapter 2). This study investigates how evolutionary and ecological processes influence the diet and abundance of fish species in Brazil's highly threatened and biodiverse regions (Fig. 1). By focusing on tetra-like and loricariid species as models, the research highlights a wide range of taxonomic and ecological diversity found in Amazonian streams (Claro-García *et al.*, 2013; Nelson, *et al.*, 2016; Fricke *et al.*, 2025). The findings provide crucial insights into how these species respond to anthropogenic impacts, offering valuable information for the conservation of these ecosystems. All chapters were prepared according to the *Neotropical Ichthyology* guidelines for authors.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The results obtained have direct implications for the conservation of ichthyofauna in Amazonian streams. The loss of forest cover, structural simplification of habitats, and landscape fragmentation promote predictable trophic changes, favoring generalist species and reducing the presence of specialists (Rand & Tschardt, 2007; Martinson & Fagan, 2014; Morante-Filho *et al.*, 2015; Anderson *et al.*, 2019). This functional substitution compromises the ecological integrity of assemblages and weakens the resilience of systems against disturbances (Olden *et al.*, 2004; Mouillot *et al.*, 2013). Maintaining riparian vegetation is essential to ensure the supply of allochthonous resources, the physical and chemical stability of the water, and the structural complexity of habitats. These elements support both the food resources of tetra-like fish and the substrates necessary for Loricariidae. Stream connectivity is also key, especially for species with low dispersal ability, such as benthic loricariids. In addition, the results suggest paths for ecological restoration programs that should go further than just restoring canopy cover. It is necessary to preserve and restore the structural heterogeneity of instream habitats and reestablish hydrological connectivity between streams. Such measures are essential to maintain functional diversity and the ecological processes that support the Amazonian food webs.

From an environmental management perspective, these ecological findings reinforce the importance of public policies like the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm) and the National Plan for the Recovery of Native Vegetation (PLANAVEG). Research shows that the PPCDAm was initially highly effective, reducing deforestation by 84% between 2004 and 2012 through measures such as municipal-level enforcement prioritization (Bizzo & Farias, 2017; Reis & Corazza, 2025). However, its impact waned over time due to inconsistent enforcement and delayed policy updates (Bizzo & Farias, 2017; Mello & Artaxo, 2017). Furthermore, restoration efforts face significant implementation challenges, with 71% of properties failing to meet legal reserve restoration deadlines (Fernandes Correa *et al.*, 2023), jeopardizing Brazil's commitment to restore twelve million hectares by 2030. Integrating functional and trophic metrics into monitoring programs could enhance environmental quality assessments and help guide more effective, ecologically informed conservation strategies.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that tetra-like fish, with greater ecological plasticity and dispersal capacity, tend to persist under degraded conditions, while

Loricariidae are strongly dependent on microhabitat integrity and highly vulnerable to deforestation and fragmentation. Simplification of habitats leads to functional homogenization, reduces trophic diversity, and weakens the ecological integrity of assemblages. Maintaining environmental complexity, riparian vegetation, and fluvial connectivity is therefore fundamental to ensure the resilience and long-term sustainability of Amazonian aquatic ecosystems in the face of increasing anthropogenic pressures (Fig. 1).

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