

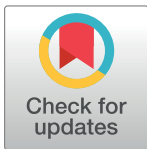
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influence of environmental factors on macrofouling assemblages on moored buoys in the eastern Arabian Sea

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Abstract

Factors governing the distribution of organisms in the pelagic ocean are understudied. In this paper we describe environmental parameters and macrofouling assemblages on 11 buoys deployed in the Arabian Sea for an average duration of 322 days. Macrofouling on all the mooring components extending from the sea-surface to a depth of 1800–4300 m were documented. Role of temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen, biological productivity and zooplankton community in governing the macrofouling distribution are described. Species composition, vertical zonation and wet biomass exhibited significant spatial variations. *Lepas anatifera* constituted more than 90% of fouling wet biomass on all moorings. Assemblages in the southeastern (SEAS), east-central (ECAS) and northeast (NEAS) regions were distinct. Density of *L. anatifera* on surface buoys were low in SEAS (0.2 ± 0.09 no./cm²), high in ECAS (0.32 ± 0.11 no./cm²) and moderate in NEAS (0.23 ± 0.04 no./cm²). Macrofouling was observed up to a depth of 75 m in SEAS, 130 m in ECAS and 120 m in NEAS. The depth profile of macrofouling assemblages on moorings could be related to the prevalent hypoxic condition. Vertical profiles of wet biomass on all moorings exhibited subsurface maxima at depth ranging from 10 to 20 m, consequent to the abundance of *L. anatifera* in a thermally stable depth of water column, wherein diurnal and semidiurnal temperature variability was minimal. We attribute the observed variation in fouling assemblages to dissolved oxygen levels, salinity and diurnal variability in temperature and salinity.

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Citation: Martin MV, Venkatesan R, Beyline M, Limna Mol VP, Divya L (2020) Influence of environmental factors on macrofouling assemblages on moored buoys in the eastern Arabian Sea. PLoS ONE 15(1): e0223560. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223560>

Editor: Marcos Rubal García, CIIMAR Interdisciplinary Centre of Marine and Environmental Research of the University of Porto, PORTUGAL

Received: July 11, 2019

Accepted: September 23, 2019

Published: January 30, 2020

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files. Ocean subsurface data for two stations cannot be shared due to legal restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Defense of the Government of India, but the authors affirm that these data are not part of the minimal data set necessary to reproduce the results of this study.

Introduction

Gaining insight into factors that govern patterns of assemblages is a fundamental objective in ecology. Assemblages are shaped by biotic and abiotic stresses in their respective environments. Mobile and sessile organisms respond differently to the stresses. While the mobile organisms could survive a stressful condition by retreating to a favorable environment, the survival of a sessile organism is determined by tolerance to stresses[1]. The study of sessile assemblages may provide information on the habitat and health of the ecosystem. When compared to terrestrial assemblages, sessile assemblages in marine environments are relatively