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# **NEIGHBOURS AT WAR: AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND SPATIAL RESPONSIVENESS IN THE ANEMONE, ACTINIA TENEBROSA.**

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This thesis is completed in part of a Masters of Conservation Biology Degree.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Ehara taku toa ite toa takitahi, engari he toa takimano.

My success is not that of my own, but the success of many”

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my supervisors Dianne Brunton and David Aguirre. Thank you for all of your guidance, for taking an idea that I had and helping make a project out of it. Thank you for giving up your time to read and analyse my work and for always keeping me on point. For helping me to define what I really wanted to study and trekking all over Auckland to find these little blobs of jelly stuck to the rocks. David, your brilliant mathematical and analytical mind has enhanced my writing, so thank you, without you I would have been lost. This would never have been finished without both of your input!

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Georgina Tehei Pourau and Iain Balfour. Your endless support, strength and enormous belief in what I do and who I am has guided me to this point. Thank you for scouting prospective sites and getting up early to collect anemones with me. Thank you for everything you do, have done and will do in the future. Lastly, thank you for enabling me to follow my dreams and for taking an interest in something I am so passionate about. Arohanui.

Next, I would like to acknowledge Julia Kim. Thank you for monitoring my anemones, keeping them alive and healthy when I couldn't and accompanying me on scouting and collection trips. Also, thank you for caring as much about these crazy little creatures as I do.

I would like to acknowledge my amazing support system. My parents, Paula, Ian, Kara, Scott and Hilde Parkin, Bella, Myra, Des, Jenni, Wilbur, Leilana Pourau and Hemi Leef. Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me even when times were tough. I drew from your strength and determination to get me through this writing process. Thank you for putting up with me when I was stressed and helping me to realise what was important. For always being there if I needed you, weather it was studying with me, collecting anemones, taking my mind of my stress or simply being available to talk things through. I am truly so blessed to have so many wonderful people in my life, so thank you all!

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Norah and Oscar Brymo Parkin, Reece and Tanesha Pourau, Te Whanake and Sidney Leef and Katelyn Hill. I can always count on you guys to put a smile on my face. Thank you for all the hugs and laughter. Knowing that you love me unconditionally always keeps my spirits high! I hope this inspires you to follow your dreams, I have every faith you can all do anything you put your mind to.

This thesis is dedicated to Te Rangitaupua Ngatai, Hori George Pourau, Patricia Balfour, Noel Balfour and William Te Whanake Pourau.

Ever present in everything I do, even though you no longer stand beside me.

## GENERAL ABSTRACT:

Habitable space is precious and animals have developed a wide variety of mechanisms to acquire and defend favourable space. Aggression is considered any animal behaviour that involves actual or potential harm to another animal of either the same or different species. Agonistic behaviours must also be considered as it is any social behaviour related to fighting. Both aggressive and agonistic behaviours are observed in many animal species as resources including light exposure, nutrients and mates are often limited. Although agonistic behaviour varies among species, agonistic interactions can be partitioned into three specific types of behaviours: threat, aggression, and submission or avoidance. While any one of these behaviours can be observed in isolation, in an interaction between two animals, there is normally a sequence of behaviours which can culminate in combat. Anemones have unique adaptations such as clubs, fighting tentacles, bundles of stinging cells, sweeper tentacles and acrorhagi that allow them to defend themselves from competitors. Previous research also suggests that anemone populations are a collection of clusters of genetically similar which assemble via limited dispersal and locomotion. In chapter two I examined the effect of aggression on individuals at varying distances and predicted that those anemones that are initially located in closest proximity (<1 centimetre) in the field will be less aggressive towards each other than those anemones found further away from each other. Overall, my results suggest that *Actinia tenebrosa* have an obvious sequence of aggressive behaviours, and that indeed, aggressive behaviours were less common and less severe between nearest neighbours than among individuals sampled at greater distances. My results also show that aggressive behaviours are typically only expressed when individuals are within close proximity of each other <10cm. This behaviour is important to understand as it aids in fully understanding how aggressive behaviours determine dominance hierarchies and the spatial arrangement in *A. tenebrosa*. In chapter three, I investigated whether there was evidence for an ideal spatial arrangement of individuals in the field by testing whether individuals return to a similar spatial arrangement if randomised. The results from this chapter suggest that there is no single ideal spatial arrangement of individuals but rather individuals will find a spatial arrangement that is stable. I also observed that there appears to be an acclimation between individuals that resulted in a favourable position within the cluster. Lastly, I observed that

instead of trying to return to a specific aggregation, individuals acclimate each other and move relative to those individuals surrounding them, much like stars in the sky. The results from this study would suggest that spatial structure of individuals in the field is dependent on intraspecies interactions and the recognition of individuals.

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