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2 TROPHIC ECOLOGY OF BARRELFISH (*HYPEROGLYPHE PERCIFORMIS*) IN OCEANIC  
3 WATERS OFF SOUTHEAST FLORIDA  
4

5 Barrelfish Trophic Ecology

6 Justin J. Suca<sup>1,2\*</sup>

7 Joel K. Llopiz<sup>2</sup>  
8

9 1. Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, University of Miami, 4600  
10 Rickenbacker Causeway, Miami, FL, 33149

11 2. Biology Department, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 266 Woods Hole Rd  
12 MS#33, Woods Hole, MA, 02543

13 \*[<jsuca@whoi.edu>](mailto:jsuca@whoi.edu)  
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33 ABSTRACT

34 Deep-water demersal fishes represent an understudied but ecologically important group  
35 of organisms. Select species of demersal fishes rely on pelagic prey items, representing a direct  
36 transport of surface carbon to greater depths. Barrelfish *Hyperoglyphe perciformis* (Mitchell,  
37 1818), which inhabit deep slope waters, are a species that has been suggested to fill this role, as  
38 congeners consume primarily pelagic gelatinous zooplankton; however, there is a dearth of  
39 information on the trophic ecology of barrelfish. Stomach content and stable isotope analyses  
40 were conducted on barrelfish caught by recreational fishers off Miami, Florida to improve our  
41 understanding of the feeding of this species. *Pyrosoma atlanticum* (Péron, 1804), a pelagic,  
42 vertically migrating tunicate, represented 89% of the barrelfish diet by weight. Mesopelagic fish  
43 and shrimp contributed much smaller proportions. Standard ellipse areas corrected for sample  
44 size (SEA<sub>c</sub>) showed a substantially smaller isotopic niche width for barrelfish (0.606 ‰<sup>2</sup>) than  
45 dolphinfish (2.16 ‰<sup>2</sup>), king mackerel (3.04 ‰<sup>2</sup>), or wahoo (1.97 ‰<sup>2</sup>). Coupled with dependence  
46 on a singular prey item, the low SEA<sub>c</sub> of barrelfish suggests they occupy a limited trophic niche  
47 space. Overlap of barrelfish SEA<sub>c</sub> with dolphinfish (99.5% overlap) and king mackerel (100%  
48 overlap) indicate that the carbon sources as well as the number of trophic steps for barrelfish are  
49 similar to king mackerel and dolphinfish and are linked to surface waters. This trophic linkage  
50 suggests that barrelfish may play a role in carbon export and further study into their behavior and  
51 daily consumption rates is warranted for quantifying this role.

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57 TEXT

58 Pathways of carbon export have become an increasingly important area of research with  
59 the increased input of inorganic carbon into the ocean from anthropogenic activities (Sabine et  
60 al. 2004, Riebesell et al. 2007, Siegel et al. 2014). A primary interest in these pathways is the  
61 vertical transfer of carbon fixed by primary producers in the euphotic zone to deeper regions in  
62 the ocean basin (Ducklow et al. 2001). Key steps in understanding this process involve knowing  
63 the community structure of both primary producers and primary consumers (Steinberg et al.  
64 2000, Richardson and Jackson 2007, Laurenceau-Cornec et al. 2015, Siegel et al. 2016). While  
65 most research focuses on lower trophic levels, higher trophic levels such as fishes can play a  
66 significant role in the export and sequestration of carbon to deeper waters (Smith et al. 2009,  
67 Davison et al. 2013, Trueman et al. 2014).

68 Deep-water fishes are critical components of oceanic ecosystems as they are the most  
69 abundant group of fishes on earth, with recent estimates of biomass representing 10,000 million  
70 tonnes (Irigoien et al. 2014). These fishes are predominantly zooplanktivorous and often display  
71 diel vertical migrations that follow their prey items (Merrett and Roe 1974, Sutton and Hopkins  
72 1996, Pusch et al. 2004, Catul et al. 2011). However, significant consumption of vertically  
73 migrating species can occur by demersal fishes that do not migrate but live near the bottom and  
74 feed in the midwater (making them more benthopelagic), thus providing a means to export  
75 carbon through consumption of vertically migrating organisms (Mauchline and Gordon 1991,  
76 Trueman et al. 2014).

77 An example of such benthopelagic fishes are members of the *Hyperoglyphe* genus, which  
78 are known to consume vertically migrating gelatinous zooplankton. These fishes are poorly  
79 understood with most studies focused on *Hyperoglyphe antarctica* (Carmichael, 1919), the blue-

80 eye trevalla, in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Winstanley 1978, Bolch et al. 1993, Robinson et  
81 al. 2008, Fay et al. 2011). Barrelfish *Hyperoglyphe perciformis* (Mitchell, 1818) are an  
82 understudied congener present throughout the slope waters of the western central Atlantic Ocean  
83 (Filer and Sedberry 2008, Goldman and Sedberry 2011). Barrelfish, much like the blue-eye  
84 trevalla, are a demersal/benthopelagic fish that are caught at depths ranging from 200 to 400 m,  
85 grow slowly, reach maturity at six years of age, and may live as long as 85 years (Filer and  
86 Sedberry 2008). The diet of barrelfish has been examined along the Charleston Bump region (off  
87 South Carolina) where they primarily consume the tunicate *Pyrosoma atlanticum* (Péron, 1804;  
88 Goldman and Sedberry 2011). These pyrosome tunicates are an example of a gelatinous  
89 zooplankter that has substantial potential as a vector for carbon export. With filtering rates of 35  
90  $l\ hr^{-1}$ , pyrosomes can graze a considerable amount of primary productivity and return it to depth  
91 ( $\sim 400$  m) during daylight hours (Andersen and Sardou 1994, Perissinotto et al. 2007).  
92 Furthermore, pyrosome tunicates have one of the highest carbon contents of gelatinous  
93 organisms, enhancing its potential as a mechanism for carbon transport (Lebrato and Jones  
94 2009). Large concentrations of pyrosomes can occur but are very patchy in time and space  
95 (Cowper 1960, Lebrato et al. 2013). These pyrosome “falls” can contribute substantially to  
96 carbon export, as the sinking of moribund pyrosomes are often consumed by benthic organisms  
97 (Lebrato and Jones 2009). Consumption of live tunicates by barrelfish may provide a means to  
98 export carbon outside of these falls but our understanding of this mechanisms is still limited.

99         This study employs diet and stable isotope analysis to better understand the trophic  
100 ecology of barrelfish. The analysis of stomach content here provides improved geographic  
101 resolution to diet studies of this species, accounting for the second diet study ever completed on  
102 this species, while our analysis of the stable isotope signatures of barrelfish is the first for the

103 species. Stable isotope analysis was employed to compare carbon source and trophic level of  
104 barrelfish to that of epipelagic species in the same region, specifically the ubiquitous dolphinfish  
105 *Coryphaena hippurus* (Linnaeus, 1758), the oceanic wahoo *Acanthocybium solandri* (Cuvier,  
106 1832), and the more coastal king mackerel *Scomberomorus cavalla* (Cuvier, 1829).

107 A total of 29 barrelfish, 46 dolphinfish, 18 king mackerel, and 14 wahoo were collected  
108 from fishers at Crandon Park Marina on Key Biscayne, Florida from November 2014 to  
109 November 2015. Each specimen was kept on ice after capture, and upon returning to shore, fork  
110 length, standard length, and sex were recorded. The gut cavity of each fish was opened and an  
111 incision was made at the base of the throat to remove the stomach and intestine from the fish.  
112 From this, the stomach was separated from the intestine through incisions made at the pyloric  
113 sphincter.

114 Upon returning to the lab, the stomach contents were immediately placed in 95%  
115 ethanol. Later, the stomach contents were identified to the lowest possible taxonomic unit and  
116 the mass of each item was recorded (tunicates were treated as one prey item despite being a  
117 colonial organism and often being broken into multiple pieces). These data were then used to  
118 calculate an index of relative importance (IRI) for each prey item using the formula

$$IRI = (%N + \%W) * \%F$$

119 where %N represents the numerical percentage of individuals of a particular prey type in relation  
120 to the total number of prey items. %W represents the percentage by weight of a particular prey  
121 type in relation to the total weight of all prey. %F represents the percent frequency that a prey  
122 type occurred in the total number of stomachs analyzed. The percentage of total IRI for each  
123 species was then calculated:

$$124 \%IRI_i = \frac{100 * IRI_i}{\sum_{i=1}^n IRI_i}$$

125 Where  $i$  represents a particular prey type and  $n$  represents the total number of unique prey types  
126 for a predator species.

127 Dorsal muscle samples were also collected from fish specimens, and were stored on ice  
128 for approximately 30 minutes until they could be placed in a  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  freezer. Samples were dried  
129 at  $50^{\circ}\text{C}$  in a drying oven for 48 hours, or until adequately dry for processing. Subsamples (1.2-  
130 1.5 mg) were then analyzed with an Isoprime isotope ratio mass spectrometer (IRMS; GV  
131 Instruments, Manchester, UK), which yielded carbon to nitrogen ratios (C:N) and the isotopic  
132 ratios for both carbon ( $^{13}\text{C}:^{12}\text{C}$ ) and nitrogen ( $^{15}\text{N}:^{14}\text{N}$ ) in each sample. Values reported use the  $\delta$   
133 notation (e.g. Fry 2006) and are relative to the standards PeeDee belemnite (carbon) and  
134 atmospheric nitrogen. Using the C:N values from the mass spectrometry results, a lipid  
135 correction curve was applied to each sample following Logan et al. (2008):

$$136 \quad \delta^{13}\text{C corrected} = \delta^{13}\text{C} + (7.489 - (7.489 * 3.097) / (\text{C:N}))$$

137 Muscle isotope ratios were successfully attained from 26 barrelfish, 36 dolphinfish, 17  
138 king mackerel, and 12 wahoo. Isotopic niche widths for each species were compared using  
139 standard ellipse areas with a sample size correction. The standard ellipse is the bivariate  
140 equivalent of standard deviation and the standard ellipse area is calculated using the variance and  
141 covariance of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  values, encompassing 40% of the data for each species (Batschelet  
142 1981, Ricklefs and Nealen 1998). The area of this ellipse is then corrected through the following  
143 equation:

$$144 \quad \text{SEA}_c = \text{SEA} * (n-1) / (n-2)$$

145 Where SEA is the standard ellipse area,  $\text{SEA}_c$  is the sample size corrected ellipse area, and  $n$  is  
146 the number of samples for a species (Jackson et al. 2011, Jackson et al. 2012) while  $\text{SEA}_c$   
147 values allow a comparison of isotopic niche breadth, comparisons in the overlap of these ellipses

148 quantifies the overlap in isotopic niche space between two species (Jackson et al. 2012). Further,  
149 Bayesian inference was used to create credible intervals around the Bayesian standard ellipse  
150 areas ( $SEA_B$ ). Details of this method are described in Jackson et al. (2011), but, briefly, vague  
151 normal priors are assigned to the means and an Inverse-Wishart prior is used as the covariance  
152 matrix of isotope values for each species. The isotope data are then used to form likelihood  
153 values, which are then combined with the priors to form posterior distributions (in this case the  
154 posterior estimate of the covariance matrix is simulated using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo  
155 method). From these posterior distributions, a set of 4000 estimates of the standard ellipse area  
156 are calculated to provide the mode of the Bayesian standard ellipse areas and credible intervals.

157 Over 90% of the barrelfish's diet IRI was attributed to a single species, *P. atlanticum*  
158 constituting 89% of the biomass of the barrelfish's diet and 47% of the diet by number (Table 1).  
159 Other organisms consumed consisted of ruby red shrimp (Solenoceridae, IRI: 1.6%) and  
160 mesopelagic fishes (Stomiidae, IRI: 2.5%; Sternoptychidae, IRI: 0.4%; Tetragonuridae, IRI:  
161 0.1%). It is likely that some or all of the items identified as squid (IRI: 4.1%) were bait used by  
162 fishers.

163 Analysis of standard ellipses for each species revealed substantial differences in the  $SEA_c$   
164 values and substantial isotopic niche overlap of barrelfish with the three epipelagic fishes  
165 studied. The  $SEA_c$  values were much lower for barrelfish ( $0.606 \text{ ‰}^2$ ) than dolphinfish, king  
166 mackerel, and wahoo ( $2.16 \text{ ‰}^2$ ,  $3.04 \text{ ‰}^2$ ,  $1.97 \text{ ‰}^2$ , respectively), with the isotopic niche of  
167 barrelfish occupying an area less than a third the size of each of the other species. This was  
168 bolstered by substantial differences in the  $SEA_B$  values between barrelfish and the three  
169 epipelagic species, with little difference in  $SEA_B$  among the epipelagic species (Figure 1).  
170 Further, the  $SEA_c$  for barrelfish overlapped with the epipelagic fishes, most prominently with

171 king mackerel, showing 100% of barrelfish's isotopic niche overlapping with that of king  
172 mackerel (Figure 2). This was closely followed by overlap with dolphinfish (99.5%) but much  
173 less overlap with wahoo (26%).

174 The stomach contents of barrelfish analyzed in this study suggest an obligate connection  
175 with *P. atlanticum*. The IRI value (91.2%) is also deflated by the percent number metric, which  
176 was a conservative estimate because it was not possible to determine individual pelagic tunicates  
177 in barrelfish stomachs due to the breakdown from stomach action and the pharyngeal bones of  
178 barrelfish. Goldman and Sedberry (2011) found *P. atlanticum* to have an IRI of 87% for  
179 barrelfish using similar methods of enumeration, suggesting that dependence upon *P. atlanticum*  
180 by barrelfish is not unique to the waters off southeast Florida. A congener, the blue-eye trevalla  
181 *Hyperoglyphe antarctica*, has also been shown to primarily consume pyrosomids, leading to the  
182 possibility that an obligate connection with pyrosomids may extend to other members of the  
183 *Hyperoglyphe* genus (Winstanley 1978).

184 The small isotopic niche of barrelfish substantiates that they are specialist consumers  
185 with a narrow range in their carbon source and trophic level. Their isotopic niche is also nearly  
186 entirely contained within the isotopic niche space of two of the epipelagic fishes, indicating that  
187 pyrosomes represent a vector of surface carbon to depth.  $^{13}\text{C}$  is often more labile, thus  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of  
188 particulate organic matter is often depleted during remineralization near the pycnocline and  
189 fluctuates with depth within 400 m of the surface, suggesting the  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  signature of barrelfish is a  
190 result of consuming carbon transported to depth from the euphotic zone by pyrosomids (Jeffrey  
191 et al. 1983, Drits et al. 1992, Druffel et al. 1992, Andersen and Sardou 1994, Perissinoto et al.  
192 2007). This is further supported by the consumption of epipelagic organisms by king mackerel  
193 and dolphinfish in this study (and others) and their rather limited vertical range, rarely exceeding



194 200 m in the case of dolphinfish (Table 1; Finucance et al. 1990, Oxenford 1999; Oxenford and  
195 Hunte 1999, Rudershausen et al. 2010, Tripp-Valdez et al. 2010, Merten et al. 2014a, Moore  
196 2014, Teffer et al. 2015). However, dolphinfish exhibit highly migratory behavior and king  
197 mackerel exhibit seasonal migrations in southeast Florida which may lead to the substantially  
198 broader range in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  in these epipelagic species when compared to barrelfish (Sutter III et al.  
199 1991, Schaefer and Fable Jr. 1994, Merten et al. 2014b, Merten et al. 2016).

200 Owing to the strong trophic coupling between barrelfish and *P. atlanticum*, fluctuations  
201 of *P. atlanticum* or barrelfish may affect the population of the other species. However,  
202 quantification of this coupling strength through incorporating barrelfish abundance, growth rates,  
203 rates of *P. atlanticum* consumption by barrelfish, and potential bottom up effects on barrelfish  
204 survival (manifested through changes in *P. atlanticum* growth) is necessary to determine if this  
205 interaction is excitable (oscillatory) or unstable, a result predicted by strong coupling strengths  
206 (Wootton 1997, McCann et al. 2011). Further, being a consumer of gelatinous zooplankton may  
207 have implications for carbon export, particularly with the consumption of a zooplankter known  
208 to have massive “falls” representing significant carbon export (Lebrato and Jones, 2009, Lebrato  
209 et al. 2013). While it is uncertain if there is enough top down pressure from barrelfish on *P.*  
210 *atlanticum* to affect *P. atlanticum* populations, this potential link warrants further study. More  
211 studies into diet seasonality and daily rations for barrelfish are also needed to estimate the  
212 biomass of *P. atlanticum* that barrelfish consume. Given the site fidelity of barrelfish to deep  
213 water structure and their presence below fast moving Gulf Stream waters, it seems unlikely that  
214 barrelfish partake in vertical migrations to the surface, resulting in the possibility that barrelfish  
215 can serve as a mode of carbon export through consumption of pyrosomes in the aphotic zone

216 (Goldman and Sedberry 2011). However, there is a dearth of data on the movement of barrelfish  
217 and further studies into their vertical movements are warranted.

218         Observations from this study that barrelfish rely largely on a single prey item bolsters the  
219 connection between the *Hyperoglyphe* genus and pyrosome tunicates, representing a form of  
220 benthic-pelagic coupling near the shelf edge. Specifically, this insight into the strong connection  
221 between a demersal fish and a vertically migrating filter feeder—and thus potential implications  
222 for carbon export—provides a basis for learning more about such interactions and their role in  
223 carbon export in shelf break waters.

224

#### 225 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

226         Supplies for this study were provided by the Rosenstiel School of Marine and  
227 Atmospheric Science (RSMAS) Undergraduate program through L Merly and G Hitchcock.  
228 Stable isotope analysis was done through the L7 laboratory at the University of Miami Biology  
229 Department with assistance from L Sternberg. Funding was provided to JJS from a Small  
230 Undergraduate Research Grant Experience (SURGE). JKL was supported as a Cooperative  
231 Institute for the North Atlantic Region fellow with funds from NOAA. Special thanks to D Olson  
232 of RSMAS and L Rasmuson of the National Marine Fisheries Service for scientific guidance and  
233 S Mahanes for sample processing assistance. Thank you to C Hernandez for writing style  
234 suggestions and A Solow for discussions on statistical methods. Additional thanks to the fishers  
235 at Crandon Park Marina, particularly Capt. N Martinez of Top Gun Charters, Capt. J David of  
236 L&H Sportfishing, and Jesús of Sonny Boy Charters.

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Table 1: Prey items (to family level) and diet metrics of barrelfish and dolphinfish. %F represents the frequency that a prey type occurred in the total number of stomachs analyzed. %N represents the number of items of a prey type in relation to the total number of prey items. %W represents the percentage by weight of a prey type in relation to the total weight of all prey types. %IRI represents the index of relative importance of a prey type expressed as a percentage of the sum of IRI values for all prey types. UNID = unidentifiable

<b>Consumer Species</b>	<b>Prey Family</b>	<b>%F</b>	<b>%N</b>	<b>%W</b>	<b>%IRI</b>
Barrelfish (n=29)	Pyrosomatidae (Pelagic tunicate)	85.7	47.4	89.4	91.2
	Stomiidae (Viperfishes)	23.8	13.2	0.5	2.5
	Solenoceridae	19	10.5	0.4	1.6
	Sternoptychidae (Hatchetfishes)	4.8	10.5	0.9	0.4
	Tetragonuridae (Squaretail)	4.8	5.3	0.1	0.2
	UNID Squid	23.8	13.2	8.8	4.1
Dolphinfish (n=46)	Exocoetidae (Flying fishes)	29	14	28.7	28.6
	Carangidae (Jacks)	16.1	8.1	11.5	7.3
	Clupeidae (Sardines and herrings)	16.1	8.1	8.6	6.2
	Belonidae (Needlefishes)	9.7	3.5	21.4	5.6
	Scombridae (Atl. chub mackerel)	12.9	12.8	0.9	4.1
	Nomeidae (Man-o-war fish)	3.2	10.5	4	1.1
	Hemiramphidae (Ballyhoos)	6.5	2.3	4.4	1.0
	Balistidae (Triggerfishes)	6.5	2.3	2.6	0.7
	Lobotidae (Tripletail)	3.2	1.2	3.7	0.4
	Diodontidae (Porcupinefishes)	3.2	1.2	0	0.1
	UNID Fish	51.6	31.4	5.7	44.2
	UNID Squid	3.2	1.2	8.5	0.7

FIGURE LEGENDS:

Figure 1: Density plot of Bayesian standard ellipse areas ( $SEA_B$ ) for barrelfish and three epipelagic species. Black dots represent the mode of posterior distribution of  $SEA_B$  values with grey boxes presenting 50, 75, and 95% credible intervals.

Figure 2: Stable isotope values ( $\delta^{13}C$  and  $\delta^{15}N$ ) of barrelfish and three epipelagic species, along with each species' standard ellipse.





