

BioTIME: A database of biodiversity time series for the Anthropocene

Maria Dornelas¹  | Laura H. Antão^{1,2}  | Faye Moyes¹  | Amanda E. Bates^{3,4} | Anne E. Magurran¹  | Dušan Adam⁵ | Asem A. Akhmetzhanova⁶ | Ward Appeltans⁷ | José Manuel Arcos⁸ | Haley Arnold¹ | Narayanan Ayyappan⁹ | Gal Badihi¹ | Andrew H. Baird¹⁰ | Miguel Barbosa^{1,2} | Tiago Egydio Barreto¹¹ | Claus Bässler¹² | Alecia Bellgrove¹³ | Jonathan Belmaker¹⁴ | Lisandro Benedetti-Cecchi¹⁵ | Brian J. Bett³ | Anne D. Bjorkman¹⁶ | Magdalena Błazewicz¹⁷ | Shane A. Blowes^{14,18} | Christopher P. Bloch¹⁹ | Timothy C. Bonebrake²⁰ | Susan Boyd¹ | Matt Bradford²¹ | Andrew J. Brooks²² | James H. Brown²³ | Helge Bruelheide^{18,24} | Phaedra Budy²⁵ | Fernando Carvalho²⁶ | Edward Castañeda-Moya²⁷ | Chaolun Allen Chen²⁸ | John F. Chamblee²⁹ | Tory J. Chase^{10,30} | Laura Siegwart Collier³¹ | Sharon K. Collinge³² | Richard Condit³³ | Elisabeth J. Cooper³⁴ | J. Hans C. Cornelissen³⁵ | Unai Cotano³⁶ | Shannan Kyle Crow³⁷ | Gabriella Damasceno³⁸ | Claire H. Davies³⁹ | Robert A. Davis⁴⁰ | Frank P. Day⁴¹ | Steven Degraer^{42,43} | Tim S. Doherty^{40,44} | Timothy E. Dunn⁴⁵ | Giselda Durigan⁴⁶ | J. Emmett Duffy⁴⁷ | Dor Edelist⁴⁸ | Graham J. Edgar⁴⁹ | Robin Elahi⁵⁰ | Sarah C. Elmendorf³² | Anders Enemar⁵¹ | S. K. Morgan Ernest⁵² | Rubén Escribano⁵³ | Marc Estiarte^{54,55} | Brian S. Evans⁵⁶ | Tung-Yung Fan⁵⁷ | Fabiano Turini Farah⁵⁸ | Luiz Loureiro Fernandes⁵⁹ | Fábio Z. Farneda^{60,61,62} | Alessandra Fidelis³⁸ | Robert Fitt⁶³ | Anna Maria Fosaa⁶⁴ | Geraldo Antonio Daher Correa Franco⁶⁵ | Grace E. Frank³⁰ | William R. Fraser⁶⁶ | Hernando García⁶⁷ | Roberto Cazzolla Gatti⁶⁸ | Or Givan¹⁴ | Elizabeth Gorgone-Barbosa³⁸ | William A. Gould⁶⁹ | Corinna Gries⁷⁰ | Gary D. Grossman⁷¹ | Julio R. Gutierrez^{72,73,74} | Stephen Hale⁷⁵ | Mark E. Harmon⁷⁶ | John Harte⁷⁷ | Gary Haskins⁷⁸ | Donald L. Henshaw⁷⁹ | Luise Hermanutz³¹ | Pamela Hidalgo⁵³ | Pedro Higuchi⁸⁰ | Andrew Hoey¹⁰

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Gert Van Hoey⁸¹ | Annika Hofgaard⁸² | Kristen Holeck⁸³ | Robert D. Hollister⁸⁴ |
 Richard Holmes⁸⁵ | Mia Hoogenboom^{10,30} | Chih-hao Hsieh⁸⁶ |
 Stephen P. Hubbell⁸⁷ | Falk Huettmann⁸⁸ | Christine L. Huffard⁸⁹ |
 Allen H. Hurlbert⁹⁰ | Natália Macedo Ivanauskas⁶⁵ | David Janík⁵ | Ute Jandt^{18,24} |
 Anna Jazdzewska¹⁷ | Tore Johannessen⁹¹ | Jill Johnstone⁹² | Julia Jones⁹³ |
 Faith A. M. Jones¹ | Jungwon Kang¹ | Tasrif Kartawijaya⁹⁴ | Erin C. Keeley |
 Douglas A. Kelt⁹⁵ | Rebecca Kinnear^{1,96} | Kari Klanderud⁹⁷ | Halvor Knutsen^{91,98} |
 Christopher C. Koenig⁹⁹ | Alessandra R. Kortz¹ | Kamil Král⁵ | Linda A. Kuhn⁸⁹ |
 Chao-Yang Kuo¹⁰ | David J. Kushner¹⁰⁰ | Claire Laguionie-Marchais¹⁰¹ |
 Lesley T. Lancaster⁶³ | Cheol Min Lee¹⁰² | Jonathan S. Lefcheck¹⁰³ |
 Esther Lévesque¹⁰⁴ | David Lightfoot¹⁰⁵ | Francisco Lloret⁵⁵ | John D. Lloyd¹⁰⁶ |
 Adrià López-Baucells^{60,61,107} | Maite Louzao³⁶ | Joshua S. Madin^{108,109} |
 Borgþór Magnússon¹¹⁰ | Shahar Malamud¹⁴ | Iain Matthews¹ |
 Kent P. McFarland¹⁰⁶ | Brian McGill¹¹¹ | Diane McKnight¹¹² |
 William O. McLarney¹¹³ | Jason Meador¹¹³ | Peter L. Meserve¹¹⁴ |
 Daniel J. Metcalfe²¹ | Christoph F. J. Meyer^{60,61,115} | Anders Michelsen¹¹⁶ |
 Nataliya Milchakova¹¹⁷ | Tom Moens⁴³ | Even Moland^{91,98} | Jon Moore^{96,118} |
 Carolina Mathias Moreira¹¹⁹ | Jörg Müller^{12,120} | Grace Murphy¹²¹ |
 Isla H. Myers-Smith¹²² | Randall W. Myser¹²³ | Andrew Naumov¹²⁴ |
 Francis Neat¹²⁵ | James A. Nelson¹²⁶ | Michael Paul Nelson⁷⁶ |
 Stephen F. Newton¹²⁷ | Natalia Norden⁶⁷ | Jeffrey C. Oliver¹²⁸ |
 Esben M. Olsen^{91,98} | Vladimir G. Onipchenko⁶ | Krzysztof Pabis¹⁷ |
 Robert J. Pabst⁷⁶ | Alain Paquette¹²⁹ | Sinta Pardede⁹⁴ | David M. Paterson^{1,96} |
 Raphaël Pélissier¹³⁰ | Josep Peñuelas^{54,55} | Alejandro Pérez-Matus¹³¹ |
 Oscar Pizarro¹³² | Francesco Pomati¹³³ | Eric Post⁹⁵ | Herbert H. T. Prins¹³⁴ |
 John C. Prisco¹³⁵ | Pieter Provoost⁷ | Kathleen L. Prudic¹³⁶ | Erkki Pulliainen |
 B. R. Ramesh⁹ | Olivia Mendivil Ramos¹³⁷ | Andrew Rassweiler¹⁰⁰ |
 Jose Eduardo Rebelo¹³⁸ | Daniel C. Reed²² | Peter B. Reich^{139,140} |
 Suzanne M. Remillard⁷⁶ | Anthony J. Richardson^{141,142} | J. Paul Richardson¹⁴³ |
 Itai van Rijn¹⁴ | Ricardo Rocha^{60,61,144} | Victor H. Rivera-Monroy¹⁴⁵ |
 Christian Rixen¹⁴⁶ | Kevin P. Robinson⁷⁸ | Ricardo Ribeiro Rodrigues⁵⁸ |
 Denise de Cerqueira Rossa-Feres¹⁴⁷ | Lars Rudstam⁸³ | Henry Ruhl³ |
 Catalina S. Ruz¹³¹ | Erica M. Sampaio^{61,148} | Nancy Rybicki¹⁴⁹ | Andrew Rypel¹⁵⁰ |
 Sofia Sal¹⁵¹ | Beatriz Salgado⁶⁷ | Flavio A. M. Santos¹⁵² |

Ana Paula Savassi-Coutinho¹⁵³ | Sara Scanga¹⁵⁴ | Jochen Schmidt³⁷ |
 Robert Schooley¹⁵⁵ | Fakhrizal Setiawan⁹⁴ | Kwang-Tsao Shao¹⁵⁶ |
 Gaius R. Shaver¹⁵⁷ | Sally Sherman¹⁵⁸ | Thomas W. Sherry¹⁵⁹ | Jacek Siciński¹⁷ |
 Caya Sievers¹ | Ana Carolina da Silva⁸⁰ | Fernando Rodrigues da Silva¹⁶⁰ |
 Fabio L. Silveira¹⁶¹ | Jasper Slingsby^{162,163} | Tracey Smart¹⁶⁴ | Sara J. Snell⁹⁰ |
 Nadejda A. Soudzilovskaia¹⁶⁵ | Gabriel B. G. Souza¹⁶⁶ | Flaviana Maluf Souza¹⁶⁷ |
 Vinícius Castro Souza⁵⁸ | Christopher D. Stallings¹⁶⁸ | Rowan Stanforth¹ |
 Emily H. Stanley⁷⁰ | José Mauro Sterza¹⁶⁹ | Maarten Stevens¹⁷⁰ |
 Rick Stuart-Smith⁴⁹ | Yzel Rondon Suarez¹⁷¹ | Sarah Supp¹⁷² |
 Jorge Yoshio Tamashiro¹⁵² | Sukmaraharja Tarigan⁹⁴ | Gary P. Thiede²⁵ |
 Simon Thorn¹²⁰ | Anne Tolvanen¹⁷³ | Maria Teresa Zugliani Toniato¹⁷⁴ |
 Ørjan Totland¹⁷⁵ | Robert R. Twilley¹⁴⁵ | Gediminas Vaitkus¹⁷⁶ |
 Nelson Valdivia¹⁷⁷ | Martha Isabel Vallejo⁶⁷ | Thomas J. Valone¹⁷⁸ |
 Carl Van Colen⁴³ | Jan Vanaverbeke⁴² | Fabio Venturoli¹⁷⁹ |
 Hans M. Verheye^{180,181} | Marcelo Vianna¹⁶⁶ | Rui P. Vieira³ | Tomáš Vrška⁵ |
 Con Quang Vu¹⁸² | Lien Van Vu^{183,184} | Robert B. Waide²³ | Conor Waldock³ |
 Dave Watts³⁹ | Sara Webb^{185,186} | Tomasz Wesołowski¹⁸⁷ |
 Ethan P. White^{188,189} | Claire E. Widdicombe¹⁹⁰ | Dustin Wilgers¹⁹¹ |
 Richard Williams¹⁹² | Stefan B. Williams¹³² | Mark Williamson¹⁹³ |
 Michael R. Willig¹⁹⁴ | Trevor J. Willis¹⁹⁵ | Sonja Wipf¹⁹⁶ | Kerry D. Woods¹⁹⁷ |
 Eric J. Woehler⁴⁹  | Kyle Zawada^{1,109} | Michael L. Zettler¹⁹⁸ 

¹Centre for Biological Diversity and Scottish Oceans Institute, School of Biology, University of St. Andrews, St Andrews, United Kingdom

²Department of Biology and CESAM, Universidade de Aveiro, Campus Universitário de Santiago, Aveiro, Portugal

³National Oceanography Centre, University of Southampton Waterfront Campus, Southampton, United Kingdom

⁴Department of Ocean Sciences, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

⁵Department of Forest Ecology, Silva Tarouca Research Institute, Brno, Czech Republic

⁶Department of Geobotany, Faculty of Biology, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

⁷UNESCO, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, IOC Project Office for IODE, Oostende, Belgium

⁸SEO/BirdLife, Marine Programme, Barcelona, Spain

⁹Department of Ecology, French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry, India

¹⁰ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia

¹¹Laboratório de Ecologia e Restauração Florestal, Fundação Espaço Eco, Piracicaba, São Paulo, Brazil

¹²Bavarian Forest National Park, Grafenau, Germany

¹³School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Centre for Integrative Ecology, Deakin University, Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia

¹⁴School of Zoology, George S. Wise Faculty of Life Sciences, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

¹⁵Department of Biology, University of Pisa, Pisa, CoNISMa, Italy

¹⁶Section for Ecoinformatics and Biodiversity, Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

¹⁷Laboratory of Polar Biology and Oceanobiology, Faculty of Biology and Environmental Protection, University of Łódź, Łódź, Poland

¹⁸German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany

¹⁹Department of Biological Sciences, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts

- ²⁰School of Biological Sciences, The University of Hong Kong, Pok Fu Lam, Hong Kong
- ²¹CSIRO Land & Water, Ecosciences Precinct, Dutton Park, Queensland, Australia
- ²²Marine Science Institute, University of California, Santa Barbara, California
- ²³Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- ²⁴Institute of Biology/Geobotany and Botanical Garden, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Halle, Germany
- ²⁵Department of Watershed Sciences and the Ecology Center, US Geological Survey, UCFWRU and Utah State University, Logan, Utah
- ²⁶Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense (PPG-CA), Criciúma, Santa Catarina, Brazil
- ²⁷Southeast Environmental Research Center (OE 148), Florida International University, Miami, Florida
- ²⁸Coral Reef Ecology and Evolution Lab, Biodiversity Research Centre, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan
- ²⁹Anthropology, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia
- ³⁰Marine Biology and Aquaculture, College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Douglas, Queensland, Australia
- ³¹Memorial University, St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada
- ³²Environmental Studies Program, University of Colorado-Boulder
- ³³Center for Tropical Forest Science, Washington, District of Columbia
- ³⁴Biosciences Fisheries and Economics, UiT- The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway
- ³⁵Systems Ecology, Department of Ecological Science, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- ³⁶AZTI Fundazioa, Herrera Kaia, Pasaia, Spain
- ³⁷The National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, Auckland, New Zealand
- ³⁸Lab of Vegetation Ecology, Instituto de Biociências, Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), Rio Claro, Brazil
- ³⁹CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere Flagship, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia
- ⁴⁰School of Science, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Western Australia, Australia
- ⁴¹Department of Biological Sciences, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
- ⁴²Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Operational Directorate Natural Environment, Marine Ecology and Management, Brussels, Belgium
- ⁴³Marine Biology Research Group, Ghent University, Gent, Belgium
- ⁴⁴School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Centre for Integrative Ecology (Burwood Campus), Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia
- ⁴⁵Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Aberdeen, United Kingdom
- ⁴⁶Divisão de Florestas e Estações Experimentais, Floresta Estadual de Assis, Laboratório de Ecologia e Hidrologia Florestal, Instituto Florestal, São Paulo, Brazil
- ⁴⁷Tennenbaum Marine Observatories Network, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, District of Columbia
- ⁴⁸National Institute of Oceanography, Tel-Shikmona, Haifa, Israel
- ⁴⁹Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia
- ⁵⁰Hopkins Marine Station, Stanford University, Stanford, California
- ⁵¹Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
- ⁵²Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL
- ⁵³Instituto Milenio de Oceanografía, Universidad de Concepción, Concepción, Chile
- ⁵⁴CSIC, Global Ecology Unit CREA-FCI-UAB, Bellaterra, Catalonia, Spain
- ⁵⁵CREAF, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Catalonia, Spain
- ⁵⁶Migratory Bird Center, Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, National Zoological Park, Washington, , District of Columbia
- ⁵⁷National Museum of Marine Biology and Aquarium, Pingtung County, Taiwan
- ⁵⁸Laboratório de Ecologia e Restauração Florestal, Escola Superior de Agricultura "Luiz de Queiroz", Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- ⁵⁹Departamento de Oceanografia e Ecologia, Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Vitória, Espírito Santo, Brazil
- ⁶⁰Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes – cE3c, Faculty of Sciences, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal
- ⁶¹Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project, National Institute for Amazonian Research and Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Manaus, Brazil
- ⁶²Department of Ecology/PPGE, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- ⁶³School of Biological Sciences, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, United Kingdom
- ⁶⁴Botanical Department, Faroese Museum of Natural History, Torshavn, Faroe Islands
- ⁶⁵Instituto Florestal, Seção de Ecologia Florestal, São Paulo, Brazil
- ⁶⁶Polar Oceans Research Group, Sheridan, Montana
- ⁶⁷Alexander von Humboldt Biological Resources Research Institute, Bogotá DC, Colombia
- ⁶⁸Department of Biology, Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russia

- ⁶⁹USDA Forest Service, 65 USDA Forest Service, International Institute of Tropical Forestry, San Juan, Puerto Rico
- ⁷⁰Center for Limnology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin
- ⁷¹The Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia
- ⁷²Departamento de Biología, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad de La Serena, La Serena, Chile
- ⁷³Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Zonas Áridas (CEAZA), La Serena, Chile
- ⁷⁴Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity (IEB), Santiago, Chile
- ⁷⁵U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Research and Development, National Health and Environmental Effects Research Laboratory, Atlantic Ecology Division, Narragansett, Rhode Island
- ⁷⁶Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon
- ⁷⁷The Energy and Resources Group and The Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, University of California, Berkeley, California
- ⁷⁸Cetacean Research & Rescue Unit, Banff, United Kingdom
- ⁷⁹U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Laboratory, Corvallis, Oregon
- ⁸⁰Laboratório de Dendrologia e Fitossociologia, Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil
- ⁸¹Department of Aquatic Environment and Quality, Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Oostende, Belgium
- ⁸²Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, Trondheim, Norway
- ⁸³Department of Natural Resources and Cornell Biological Field Station, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
- ⁸⁴Biology Department, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan
- ⁸⁵Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire
- ⁸⁶Institute of Oceanography, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan
- ⁸⁷University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California
- ⁸⁸EWHALE lab- Biology and Wildlife Department, Institute of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska
- ⁸⁹Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, Moss Landing, California
- ⁹⁰Department of Biology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- ⁹¹Institute of Marine Research, His, Norway
- ⁹²Department of Biology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
- ⁹³College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon
- ⁹⁴Wildlife Conservation Society Indonesia Program, Bogor, Indonesia
- ⁹⁵Department of Wildlife, Fish, and Conservation Biology, University of California, Davis, Davis, California
- ⁹⁶Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG), St Andrews, United Kingdom
- ⁹⁷Faculty of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resource Management, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway
- ⁹⁸Department of Natural Sciences, Faculty of Engineering and Science, Centre for Coastal Research, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway
- ⁹⁹Florida State University Coastal and Marine Laboratory, St Teresa, Florida
- ¹⁰⁰Channel Islands National Park, U. S. National Park Service, California, Ventura, California
- ¹⁰¹Zoology, Ryan Institute, School of Natural Sciences, NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland
- ¹⁰²Forest and Climate Change Adaptation Laboratory, Center for Forest and Climate Change, National Institute of Forest Science, Seoul, Republic of Korea
- ¹⁰³Department of Biological Sciences, Virginia Institute of Marine Science, The College of William & Mary, Gloucester Point, Virginia
- ¹⁰⁴Département des sciences de l'environnement, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and Centre d'études nordiques, Québec, Canada
- ¹⁰⁵Department of Biology, Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- ¹⁰⁶Vermont Center for Ecostudies, Hartford, Vermont, USA
- ¹⁰⁷Museu de Ciències Naturals de Granollers, Catalunya, Spain
- ¹⁰⁸Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Kaneohe, Hawai'i, USA
- ¹⁰⁹Department of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- ¹¹⁰Icelandic Institute of Natural History, Garðabær, Iceland
- ¹¹¹School of Biology and Ecology, Sustainability Solutions Initiative, University of Maine, Orono, Maine
- ¹¹²INSTAAR, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado
- ¹¹³Stream Biomonitoring Program, Mainspring Conservation Trust, Franklin, North Carolina
- ¹¹⁴Department of Biological Sciences, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho
- ¹¹⁵Ecosystems and Environment Research Centre (EERC), School of Environment and Life Sciences, University of Salford, Salford, United Kingdom
- ¹¹⁶Terrestrial Ecology Section, Department of Biology, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

- ¹¹⁷Laboratory of Phytoresources, Kovalevsky Institute of Marine Biological Research of RAS (IMBR), Sevastopol, Russia
- ¹¹⁸Aquatic Survey & Monitoring Ltd. ASML, Durham, United Kingdom
- ¹¹⁹Ceiba Consultoria Ambiental, Bragança Paulista, Brazil
- ¹²⁰Field Station Fabrikschleichach, University of Würzburg, Rahenebrach, Germany
- ¹²¹Department of Biology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
- ¹²²School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
- ¹²³Biology Department, Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- ¹²⁴Zoological Institute, Russian Academy Sciences, St Petersburg, Russia
- ¹²⁵Marine Scotland, Marine Laboratory, Scottish Government, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
- ¹²⁶Department of Biology, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana
- ¹²⁷BirdWatch Ireland, Kilcoole, Wicklow, Ireland
- ¹²⁸University of Arizona Health Sciences Library, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona
- ¹²⁹Center for Forest Research, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Montreal, Quebec, Canada
- ¹³⁰UMR AMAP, IRD, CIRAD, CNRS, INRA, Montpellier University, Montpellier, France
- ¹³¹Subtidal Ecology Laboratory & Center for Marine Conservation, Estación Costera de Investigaciones Marinas, Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Casilla, Chile
- ¹³²Australian Centre of Field Robotics, University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- ¹³³Department of Aquatic Ecology, Eawag: Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Switzerland
- ¹³⁴Resource Ecology Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands
- ¹³⁵Department of Land Resources and Environmental Sciences, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana
- ¹³⁶Entomology, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona
- ¹³⁷Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, Cold Spring Harbor, New York
- ¹³⁸Ichthyology Laboratory, Fisheries and Aquaculture, University of Aveiro, Aveiro, Portugal
- ¹³⁹Department of Forest Resources, University of Minnesota, St Paul, Minnesota
- ¹⁴⁰Hawkesbury Institute for the Environment, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia
- ¹⁴¹CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere, Queensland, BioSciences Precinct (QBP), St Lucia, Brisbane, Qld, Australia
- ¹⁴²Centre for Applications in Natural Resource Mathematics, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia
- ¹⁴³Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Gloucester Point, Virginia
- ¹⁴⁴Metapopulation Research Centre, Faculty of Biosciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
- ¹⁴⁵Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences, College of the Coast and Environment, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- ¹⁴⁶Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research, Davos Dorf, Switzerland
- ¹⁴⁷Departamento de Zoologia e Botânica, Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP, Câmpus São José do Rio Preto, São José do Rio Preto, Brazil
- ¹⁴⁸Department of Animal Physiology, Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany
- ¹⁴⁹National Research Program, U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, Virginia
- ¹⁵⁰Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Center for Limnology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin
- ¹⁵¹Department of Life Sciences, Imperial College London, Ascot, Berkshire, United Kingdom
- ¹⁵²Departamento de Biologia Vegetal, UNICAMP, Campinas, Brazil
- ¹⁵³Departamento de Ciências Biológicas, Escola Superior de Agricultura 'Luiz de Queiroz', Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- ¹⁵⁴Department of Biology, Utica College, Utica, New York
- ¹⁵⁵Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois
- ¹⁵⁶Biodiversity Research Center, Academia Sinica, Nankang, Taipei, Taiwan
- ¹⁵⁷Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, USA
- ¹⁵⁸Maine Department of Marine Resources, Bangor, Maine
- ¹⁵⁹Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana
- ¹⁶⁰Environmental Sciences Department, Federal University of São Carlos, Sorocaba, Brazil
- ¹⁶¹USP/WSAOBIS, São Paulo, Brazil
- ¹⁶²Department of Biological Sciences, Centre for Statistics in Ecology, Environment and Conservation, University of CapeTown, Rondebosch, South Africa
- ¹⁶³Fynbos Node, South African Environmental Observation Network, Claremont, South Africa
- ¹⁶⁴Coastal Finfish Section, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Marine Resources Research Institute, Charleston, South Carolina

- ¹⁶⁵Conservation Biology Department, Institute of Environmental Studies, CML, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
- ¹⁶⁶Laboratório de Biologia e Tecnologia Pesqueira, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- ¹⁶⁷Instituto Florestal, Seção de Ecologia Florestal, São Paulo, Brazil
- ¹⁶⁸College of Marine Science, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, Florida
- ¹⁶⁹Ethica Ambiental, Vila Velha, Brazil
- ¹⁷⁰INBO, Research Institute for Nature and Forest, Brussels, Belgium
- ¹⁷¹Centro de Estudos em Recursos Naturais, Universidade Estadual de Mato Grosso do Sul, Dourados, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil
- ¹⁷²School of Biology and Ecology, University of Maine, Orono, Maine
- ¹⁷³Natural Resources Institute Finland, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland
- ¹⁷⁴Instituto Florestal, Divisão de Florestas e Estações Experimentais, Estação Experimental de Bauru, Bauru, Brazil
- ¹⁷⁵Department of Biology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway
- ¹⁷⁶GEOMATRIX UAB, Kaunas, Lithuania
- ¹⁷⁷Universidad Austral de Chile and Centro FONDAP en Dinámica de Ecosistemas Marinos de Altas Latitudes (IDEAL), Valdivia, Chile
- ¹⁷⁸Department of Biology, Saint Louis University, Saint Louis, Missouri
- ¹⁷⁹Escola de Agronomia, Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil
- ¹⁸⁰Department of Environmental Affairs, Oceans and Coastal Research, Cape Town, South Africa
- ¹⁸¹Department of Biological Sciences, Marine Research Institute, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
- ¹⁸²Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources, VAST, Hanoi, Vietnam
- ¹⁸³Vietnam National Museum of Nature, Hanoi, Vietnam
- ¹⁸⁴Graduate University of Science and Technology, VAST, Hanoi, Vietnam
- ¹⁸⁵Biology Department, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey
- ¹⁸⁶Environmental Studies Department, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey
- ¹⁸⁷Laboratory of Forest Biology, Wrocław University, Wrocław, Poland
- ¹⁸⁸Department of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
- ¹⁸⁹Informatics Institute, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
- ¹⁹⁰Plymouth Marine Laboratory, Plymouth, United Kingdom
- ¹⁹¹Department of Natural Sciences, McPherson College, McPherson, Kansas
- ¹⁹²Australian Antarctic Division, Channel Highway, Kingston, Tasmania, Australia
- ¹⁹³Department of Biology, University of York, York, United Kingdom
- ¹⁹⁴Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, Center for Environmental Sciences & Engineering, University of Connecticut, Mansfield, Connecticut
- ¹⁹⁵Institute of Marine Sciences, School of Biological Sciences, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom
- ¹⁹⁶Research Team Mountain Ecosystems, WSL Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research SLF, Davos, Switzerland
- ¹⁹⁷Natural Sciences, Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont
- ¹⁹⁸Leibniz Institute for Baltic Sea Research Warnemünde, Seestr. 15, D-18119 Rostock, Germany

Correspondence

Maria Dornelas, Centre for Biological Diversity and Scottish Oceans Institute, School of Biology, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, United Kingdom.
Email: biotimeproj@st-andrews.ac.uk

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Abstract

Motivation: The BioTIME database contains raw data on species identities and abundances in ecological assemblages through time. These data enable users to calculate temporal trends in biodiversity within and amongst assemblages using a broad range of metrics. BioTIME is being developed as a community-led open-source database of biodiversity time series. Our goal is to accelerate and facilitate quantitative analysis of temporal patterns of biodiversity in the Anthropocene.

Main types of variables included: The database contains 8,777,413 species abundance records, from assemblages consistently sampled for a minimum of 2 years, which need not necessarily be consecutive. In addition, the database contains metadata relating to sampling methodology and contextual information about each record.

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Spatial location and grain: BioTIME is a global database of 547,161 unique sampling locations spanning the marine, freshwater and terrestrial realms. Grain size varies across datasets from 0.0000000158 km² (158 cm²) to 100 km² (1,000,000,000,000 cm²).

Time period and grain: BioTIME records span from 1874 to 2016. The minimal temporal grain across all datasets in BioTIME is a year.

Major taxa and level of measurement: BioTIME includes data from 44,440 species across the plant and animal kingdoms, ranging from plants, plankton and terrestrial invertebrates to small and large vertebrates.

Software format: .csv and .SQL.

KEYWORDS

biodiversity, global, spatial, species richness, temporal, turnover

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1 | BACKGROUND

Quantifying changes in biodiversity in the Anthropocene is a key challenge of our time given the paucity of temporal and spatial data for most taxa on Earth. The nature and extent of the reorganization of natural assemblages are currently controversial because conflicting estimates of biodiversity change have been obtained using different methodological approaches and for different regions, time periods and taxa. Some reports suggest alarming and systematic biodiversity loss. For example, estimates of global extinction rates place global losses orders of magnitude above background rates (Pereira, Navarro, & Martins, 2012). In addition, estimates of population trends for vertebrates suggest average declines of the order of 60% in the past 30 years (Collen et al., 2009). Nonetheless, analyses based on spatial variation yield more modest declines in the range of 8% (Newbold et al., 2015). In contrast, some analyses of assemblage time series consistently detect no systematic trend in temporal α -diversity (such as species richness), on average, across local communities (Brown, Ernest, Parody, & Haskell, 2001; Dornelas et al., 2014; Vellend et al., 2013, 2016), but instead uncover substantial variation in composition (temporal β -diversity; i.e., temporal turnover), including both losses and gains of species (Dornelas et al., 2014; Magurran, Dornelas, Moyes, Gotelli, & McGill, 2015). Spatially structured gains and losses are also predicted from climate change projections (García Molinos et al., 2016). Some of these discrepancies are a result of differences in the temporal and spatial scales at which analyses were performed (McGill, Dornelas, Gotelli, & Magurran, 2014), whereas other differences may be attributable to the organizational level on which an analysis is focused (e.g., population vs. community). Clearly, more research is needed into how populations, communities and ecosystems are changing in the face of widespread human influence on the planet (Waters et al., 2016). Here, we introduce BioTIME, a curated database of biodiversity time series, with the goal of facilitating and promoting research in this area.

Biodiversity is a multifaceted concept, which can be measured in many different ways. Similar to the approach of essential biodiversity variables (Pereira et al., 2013), we focus on assembling data that maximize the number of metrics that can be calculated. Specifically, BioTIME is composed of species abundance records for assemblages that have been sampled through time with a consistent methodology. The focus on assemblages

differentiates BioTIME from population databases, such as the Global Population Dynamics Database (<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/cpb/gpdd2/secure/login.aspx>) and the Living Planet Index database (<http://www.livingplanetindex.org/home/index>), and enables users to quantify patterns at different organizational levels, including both the assemblage and the population level. BioTIME complements the PREDICTS database (<http://www.predicts.org.uk/>) in providing time series rather than space for time comparisons. Moreover, most previous databases have been either terrestrial (e.g., vertebrates, GPDD; vegetation, sPlot; multiple taxa, PREDICTS) or marine (e.g., OBIS), whereas BioTIME includes marine, freshwater and terrestrial realms; hence, it facilitates comparisons across realms. Finally, previous databases are not specifically focused on temporal assemblage data, which means that BioTIME fills an important gap in allowing spatial and temporal comparisons. In addition, coupling BioTIME with additional information will allow analyses of temporal change in phylogenetic diversity and trait diversity alongside taxonomic diversity.

The goals of the BioTIME database are as follows: (a) to assemble and format raw species abundance data for assemblages consistently sampled through time; (b) to encourage re-use of these data through open-source access of standardized and curated versions of the data; and (c) to promote appropriate crediting of data sources. These goals are in line with best practice in promoting maximal use of ecological data (Costello et al., 2014; White et al., 2013) and highlight data gaps to funding agencies. In addition, we hope that BioTIME will engage ecologists in the collection, standardization, sharing and quality control of assemblage-level species abundance data, particularly in poorly sampled parts of the world, and highlight the value of such data to funding agencies.

2 | METHODS

The BioTIME database is composed of 11 tables: a main table containing the core observations (records), and 10 tables that provide contextual information as described below and in Supporting Information Figure S1. There are five main levels of organization: record, sample, plot, site and study. A record is our fundamental unit of observation of the abundance of a species in a sample. A sample includes all the records that belong to the same sampling event; for example, a quadrat on the seashore, a single plankton tow or a bird transect. A sample is

defined by a single location and a single date. If the exact location has been repeatedly sampled through time, then all the samples that correspond to that location belong to the same plot. Multiple samples and plots can be located in the same area, which we term a site. Finally, the highest observational unit is a study, which is defined by having a regular and consistent sampling methodology. Sources of data in which the sampling methodology changed during the course of the study were classified as separate studies. Every organizational level has contextual variables that are kept either in dedicated tables or are part of the main table (see Supporting Information Figure S1 for a complete list of the fields in each table). In addition, the database also includes tables with information relating to the sampling methodology, and treatments associated with some samples when applicable, citation information, contacts and licenses for each study, and the curation steps performed on each study before it was entered in the database.

2.1 | Data acquisition

Searches began in 2010, and data were acquired from a variety of sources: literature searches, large databases [specifically, OBIS (www.iobis.org/), GBIF (www.gbif.org/) and Ecological Data Wiki (<https://ecological-data.org/>)], through personal networking and through broadcasted data requests at conferences and on social media. We have used four main criteria for data inclusion on BioTIME: (a) abundance observations come from samples of assemblages where all individuals within the sample were counted and identified (i.e., assemblage rather than population data); (b) most of the individuals were identified to species; (c) sampling methods were constant through time; and (d) the time series spans a minimum of 2 years. The last condition was changed relative to the initial criteria because it became apparent that it would allow better spatial representation given the many locations that have been surveyed historically and then resurveyed. Each study is kept separate within the database and has a specific license from the CC spectrum, whose terms must be observed (<https://creativecommons.org/>). A static version of the database is released with this publication (<http://biotime.st-andrews.ac.uk> and <https://zenodo.org/record/1095627>). However, data entry and curation is ongoing (<http://biotime.st-andrews.ac.uk/contribute.php>), and we expect the database to keep growing in the foreseeable future. We plan to release static updates of the database periodically.

2.2 | Data curation and quality control

Before inclusion in the database, data were subjected to standardization in a curation process described specifically for each study in the curation table of the database. Specifically, these were checked for the presence of the following: duplicates within each study and against the entire database; species with zero abundance; and non-organismal records, all of which were removed. Abundances of zero for a particular population can be inferred from their absence from samples in the study. Additionally, species names were checked for typographic errors and misspellings, and a standardized notation was used for records of morphospecies and species complexes. Most records were included as provided and may not always conform to the latest nomenclature. Furthermore, latitudes and longitudes were checked for their location

relative to other descriptors (e.g., country or marine vs. terrestrial). Finally, the grain and extent of each study were calculated from information in the methods where available, or by applying a convex hull algorithm to locations of the samples.

3 | DESCRIPTION OF DATA

In total, the version of BioTIME released with this paper includes 8,777,413 records, across 547,161 unique locations, gathered from 361 studies (Figure 1; see Appendix for a full list of citations). These observations span the Poles to the Equator, from depths of c. 5,000 m to elevations of c. 4,000 m above sea level, and include the terrestrial, freshwater and marine realms. The database includes records spanning 21 out of 26 ecoregions [WWF; (<http://www.worldwildlife.org/biomes>)]. Nonetheless, there are spatial biases in the distribution of sampling locations, with most studies occurring in Europe, North America and Australia. This geographical bias has persisted despite the growth of the database. For example, a comparison between Supporting Information Figure S2 and the data included in the study by Dornelas et al. (2014) displays only small differences, despite the database having more than tripled its size in the interim. It is our hope that this geographical bias will decrease over time via targeted searches and data recruitment.

There are 44,440 taxa in BioTIME. The majority of these (88.8%) are species, but some organisms are identified only to coarser taxonomic levels, such as genus. BioTIME includes assemblages across the animal and plant kingdoms, ranging from mammals to microscopic plankton. As with the spatial distribution, there are also taxonomic biases in the data in BioTIME (Figure 2). Almost 70% of records fall into one of four categories: terrestrial plants, birds, fish and marine invertebrates, with fish accounting for 28% of the total database.

BioTIME records span 118 years (from 1874 to 2016), with the longest time series having 97 years and an average duration of 13 years. In more detail, 56.5% of studies contain up to 10 years of data, 42% between 10 and 50 years and 1.4% > 50 years.

4 | USAGE NOTES

Version 1.0 of the BioTIME database can be downloaded from <https://zenodo.org/record/1095627> or from <http://biotime.st-andrews.ac.uk/>. The use of data contained in BioTIME should cite original data citations in addition to the present paper. There is considerable variation in the spatial and temporal grain and extent among studies, which must be considered in any analysis of BioTIME data. Moreover, the number of samples was often not constant through time within studies; consequently, we recommend the use of sample-based rarefaction and provide R code to query the database, implement sample-based rarefaction and calculate a suite of biodiversity metrics. Specifically, we provide a tutorial guiding users to interact with both formats of the database (.csv and .sql; Allaire et al., 2015; Becker, Wilks, & Brownrigg, 2014; Oksanen et al., 2013; Ooms, James, DeBroy, Wickham, & Horner, 2015; R Development Core Team, 2013; Wickham, 2009; Wickham & Francois, 2015). Please note that for interacting with the .sql version of the database, users will have to set up a connection with

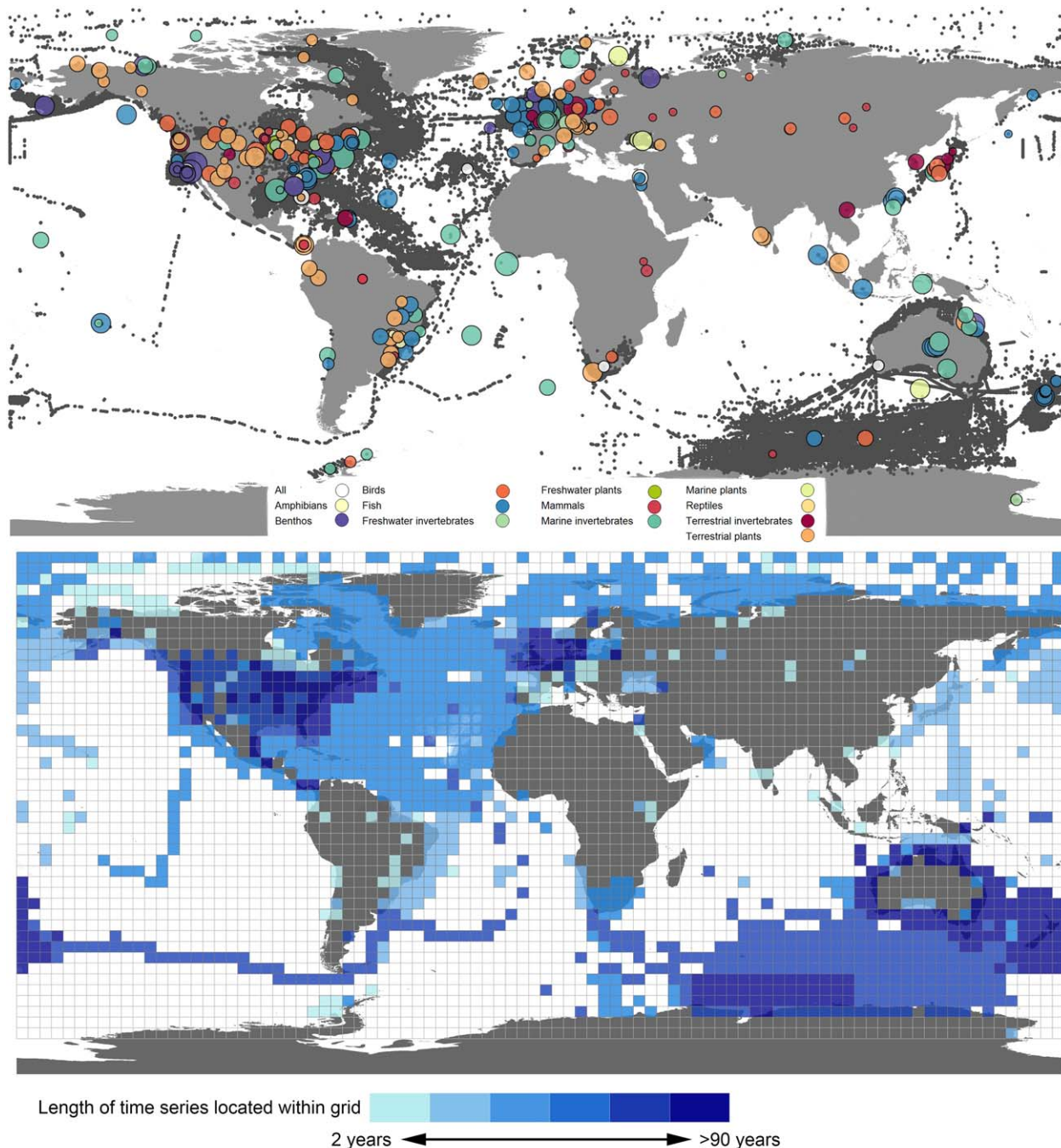


FIGURE 1 Top: Geographical locations of all the records included in BioTIME in dark grey, with central points per study shown as circles of different colour and size, according to taxa and number of species. Bottom: Map overlaid with $\sim 4^\circ$ grid cells coloured by the length of the full or partial time series contained within each cell

the server where they have installed the SQL database. For interacting with the .csv version, users have to download both the data and the metadata csv files, making sure that all the paths to these files are modified accordingly.

The data included in the present paper represent the subset of data within the BioTIME database for which we were able to secure licences to republish. The additional studies held in the full database have been obtained from publicly available data and are listed in

Supporting Information Table S1. In total, BioTIME currently holds 387 studies, containing 12,623,386 records from a total of 652,675 distinct geographical locations, and 45,093 species. These records span a total of 124 years from 1858 to 2016 inclusive. We will continue to interact with data providers in order to increase data availability and to recruit additional data. Instructions on how to contribute to future releases can be found here (<http://biotime.st-andrews.ac.uk/contribute.php>).

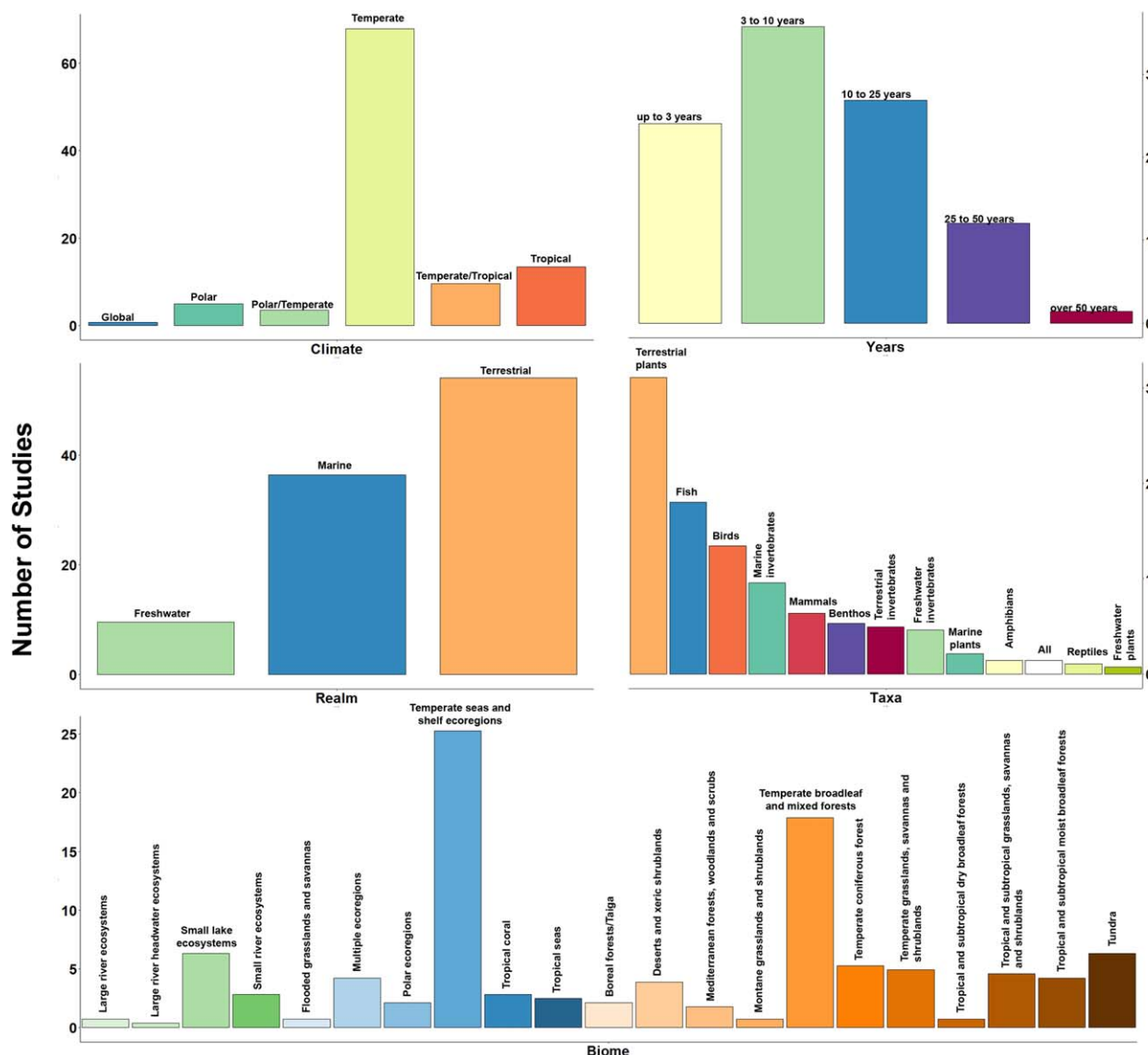


FIGURE 2 Proportion of studies that fall into the different classifications of: Climate, number of years sampled, realm, taxa and biome

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DATA ACCESSIBILITY

The BioTIME database is accessible through the BioTIME website (<http://biotime.st-andrews.ac.uk>) and through the Zenodo repository (<https://zenodo.org/record/1095627>).

ORCID

Maria Dornelas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2077-7055>

Laura H. Antão  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6612-9366>

Faye Moyes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9687-0593>

Anne E. Magurran  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0036-2795>

Eric J. Woehler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1125-0748>

Michael L. Zettler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5437-5495>

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BIOSKETCH

The **BioTIME** consortium emerged from the ERC project BioTIME in 2010. The consortium currently includes 271 authors distributed among 35 countries engaged in collecting biodiversity time series data

and committed to sharing it for wider use. We hope that the BioTIME database allows analysis of large-scale patterns of biodiversity change and contributes to giving credit to the data collectors, without whom synthesis would not be possible.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

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