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Trait Composition Explains Insect Community Responses to Environmental Change More Informatively Than Species Counts Alone

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ABSTRACT

Environmental change is altering insect communities, but interpretation based only on species richness and abundance can obscure selective changes in ecological strategies. This article develops a ecological framework proposing that trait composition provides complementary information by revealing how environmental pressures reorganize biological characteristics, response capacities, and potential functional consequences. The framework does not replace taxonomic or abundance monitoring; instead, it proposes a structured approach for integrating counts, traits, response–effect distinctions, environmental filtering, and functional redundancy. Evidence from insect studies indicates that taxonomic and functional dimensions can respond differently across landscapes, life stages, and environmental contexts. However, trait-based inference remains constrained by trait selection, measurement scale, data source, taxonomic coverage, and uncertainty in translating response traits into ecosystem consequences. A trait-based interpretation therefore requires explicit boundaries between observation, mechanism, and prediction. The proposed framework identifies conditions under which trait composition may reveal ecological change that species counts alone cannot resolve while maintaining the continued importance of conventional biodiversity metrics.

Keywords: Functional traits, Insect communities, Environmental filtering, Response traits, Effect traits, Functional redundancy

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Introduction

Insect community change is frequently quantified through changes in species richness, abundance, biomass, or species composition. These measurements remain essential because they describe whether communities are losing individuals, species, or taxonomic representation. However, environmental change may reorganize communities without producing equivalent changes across these dimensions. A decline in abundance, for example, does not necessarily indicate the same biological process as a shift toward species with different dispersal ability, body size, phenology, thermal tolerance, feeding strategy, or habitat association. Trait-based ecology was developed partly because organismal characteristics can provide a bridge between environmental conditions and ecological responses, allowing community change to be interpreted through biological properties rather than taxonomic identity alone [1].

The increasing concern about insect declines has intensified the need for interpretation methods that distinguish different forms of change. Evidence for insect decline is substantial but heterogeneous, with variation among

regions, taxa, habitats, and monitoring approaches [2]. Long-term and standardized studies have demonstrated that different biodiversity metrics can move in different directions, indicating that abundance, richness, biomass, and functional characteristics do not necessarily provide interchangeable descriptions of community change [3]. Therefore, the central problem is not that species counts are insufficient measurements, but that they answer different ecological questions from trait composition.

Current insect monitoring is also challenged by uncertainty in baselines, sampling design, geographic coverage, temporal resolution, and detection processes. These issues can influence whether observed changes represent biological responses, methodological artifacts, or interactions between both [4, 5]. A framework based on trait composition must therefore avoid presenting traits as a universal replacement for abundance or richness. Instead, it must define when trait information contributes additional ecological interpretation and where such interpretation remains uncertain.

This article proposes that trait composition can provide additional information when the scientific objective is to understand selective community reorganization rather than only quantify taxonomic loss. The framework developed here separates four analytical questions: which organisms are present, which traits characterize those organisms, which traits are associated with environmental response, and which traits influence ecological processes. These distinctions are necessary because response traits and effect traits are not always equivalent, functional redundancy is not identical to richness, and trait-based predictions remain dependent on scale and context.

Materials and Methods

Conceptual trait classification

This article is an ecological framework. It does not present a new dataset, experiment, or statistical analysis. The conceptual structure was developed by organizing approved evidence around the analytical problem of interpreting insect community responses to environmental change. The classification approach follows established trait-based ecological principles while separating evidence-supported relationships from proposed synthesis.

Functional traits are operational characteristics of organisms that influence ecological performance, environmental response, or interactions with other organisms. However, trait interpretation depends on how traits are measured, which organisms are sampled, and the ecological process being examined. Standardized protocols have demonstrated that trait measurement requires explicit definitions, attention to sampling procedures, and consideration of individual, population, and community-level variation [6].

Trait selection also requires alignment between the ecological question and the biological property being measured. Traits associated with environmental tolerance, movement, phenology, or morphology may describe responses to environmental conditions, whereas traits associated with feeding, interaction, or ecosystem processes may relate more closely to effects [7]. A trait is therefore not inherently a response trait or an effect trait independent of context.

Trait databases and published trait values can also influence interpretation. Studies of butterflies have shown that conclusions may depend on the source and structure of trait information used in analyses [8]. Similarly, species-average values can conceal variation among individuals, populations, or environments. In bees, within-species variation in body size may alter interpretation of community-level patterns because changes within species and among species can occur in different directions [9].

However, intraspecific variation should not automatically be assumed to dominate ecological interpretation. Research on ants has demonstrated that some measured traits may show relatively limited within-species variation under particular conditions [10]. Consequently, a proposed trait classification framework must treat variation within species as an empirical question rather than a universal assumption.

Trait interpretation is further affected by spatial scale. A meta-analysis of bee responses demonstrated that local and landscape variables can influence trait-based conclusions differently, limiting the usefulness of single traits as universal predictors [11]. Multidimensional approaches combining taxonomic, functional, and phylogenetic information can therefore provide a more complete description of community change than any single metric considered independently [12].

Results and Discussion

Species richness and abundance remain fundamental indicators of biodiversity change, but they represent only specific dimensions of community structure. A community can maintain similar richness while losing species with particular ecological characteristics, or it can undergo functional reorganization without an equivalent taxonomic signal. Evidence from aquatic insect communities demonstrates that landscape variables may influence taxonomic and trait composition differently, indicating that these metrics capture distinct ecological information [13].

Functional homogenization provides another example of change that may not be fully represented by richness alone. In aquatic insect assemblages, disturbance has been associated with changes in functional structure, showing that communities can become more similar in trait composition even when taxonomic responses do not fully describe the ecological shift [14].

Urban insect communities also demonstrate that biodiversity metrics are not interchangeable. Studies of bees have shown that urbanization can influence species diversity and functional diversity differently, meaning that one metric cannot automatically substitute for another [15]. Similarly, saproxylic beetle research indicates that higher taxonomic richness does not necessarily ensure greater functional resilience, because species-rich communities may differ in the degree to which remaining species occupy overlapping ecological roles [16].

Abundance monitoring nevertheless remains indispensable. Long-term standardized monitoring of moths and aphids in Great Britain revealed complex temporal patterns, including differences among taxa and periods, demonstrating that abundance data provide information that cannot simply be replaced by trait composition [17]. Therefore, the proposed interpretation is complementary: species counts identify demographic and taxonomic change, whereas traits may clarify the ecological characteristics associated with that change.

Response traits versus effect traits

Environmental change can alter communities through selective pressures that favor some biological characteristics over others. Traits associated with survival, dispersal, reproduction, or environmental tolerance may therefore function as response traits because they describe how organisms respond to altered conditions. However, traits associated with ecosystem processes, interactions, or functions represent effect traits because they describe consequences of organisms for ecological processes.

The distinction is important because a trait associated with environmental response does not automatically determine ecological function. Experimental and modelling work with ground beetles has shown that trait matching and phylogeny can improve predictions of predator–prey interactions within defined systems [18]. However, pollinator studies have demonstrated that traits useful for predicting responses to land-use change may not consistently predict functional contribution [19].

Some traits can operate as both response and effect traits, but this overlap is process-dependent. Dung beetle research has shown that traits influencing environmental response may also relate to ecosystem multifunctionality, while still depending on the specific process examined [20]. Therefore, the relationship between response and effect traits should not be represented as a fixed equivalence.

The following table addresses the central analytical problem of this section: how can trait information be interpreted without assuming that environmental response automatically predicts ecological consequence?

Table 1. Distinguishing response signals from effect interpretations in insect trait-based community analysis

Analytical distinction	Environmental response trait	Effect-related trait	Shared response/effect trait	Trait mismatch
Biological setting	Insects experiencing habitat or climate change	Insects contributing to ecological processes	Systems where the same characteristic influences both response and process	Cases where response traits fail to predict effects
Evidence · Interpretive consequence	Trait association with occurrence, abundance, or community turnover Indicates characteristics associated with environmental sensitivity	Trait relationship with interaction or ecosystem process measurements Indicates potential functional contribution	Empirical overlap between response and function May connect community change with ecological consequences	Weak or inconsistent predictive relationships Prevents automatic functional interpretation

Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Association does not establish mechanism Validate across taxa and environments	Process-specific rather than universal Link traits to measured functions	Depends on process and context Test whether overlap persists across systems	Trait selection and scale limitations Compare alternative trait sets
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Trait filtering under environmental change

Environmental change does not affect all insect species equally. Instead, ecological filters may favor or disadvantage organisms possessing particular combinations of traits. Trait filtering therefore describes selective changes in community composition rather than simply the reduction of species number.

Butterfly studies have shown that habitat quality and surrounding landscape structure can influence trait distributions, demonstrating that environmental conditions may reorganize communities through selective associations between traits and habitats [21]. Experimental evidence from grasslands further indicates that management practices can produce trait-specific responses. In mowing experiments, larval and phenological characteristics revealed responses that were not necessarily represented by richness changes alone [22].

Climate-related filtering involves multiple interacting pathways. Studies of butterflies have linked climatic conditions, drought, thermal buffering, and host-plant dynamics with phenotypic responses, but these relationships do not establish evolutionary adaptation [23]. Similarly, bee phenology is influenced by climatic variation and functional traits, with responses differing among phenological phases and species [24].

Thermal ecology provides another example of conditional trait interpretation. Butterfly studies have shown associations between thermoregulatory characteristics and population trends, but these relationships remain context-dependent and do not demonstrate that thermal traits alone determine decline [25]. Agricultural management studies likewise indicate that functional diversity responses depend on both management and landscape context rather than a single environmental factor [26].

A trait-based interpretation of environmental change therefore requires preserving uncertainty between environmental association, biological mechanism, and population consequence.

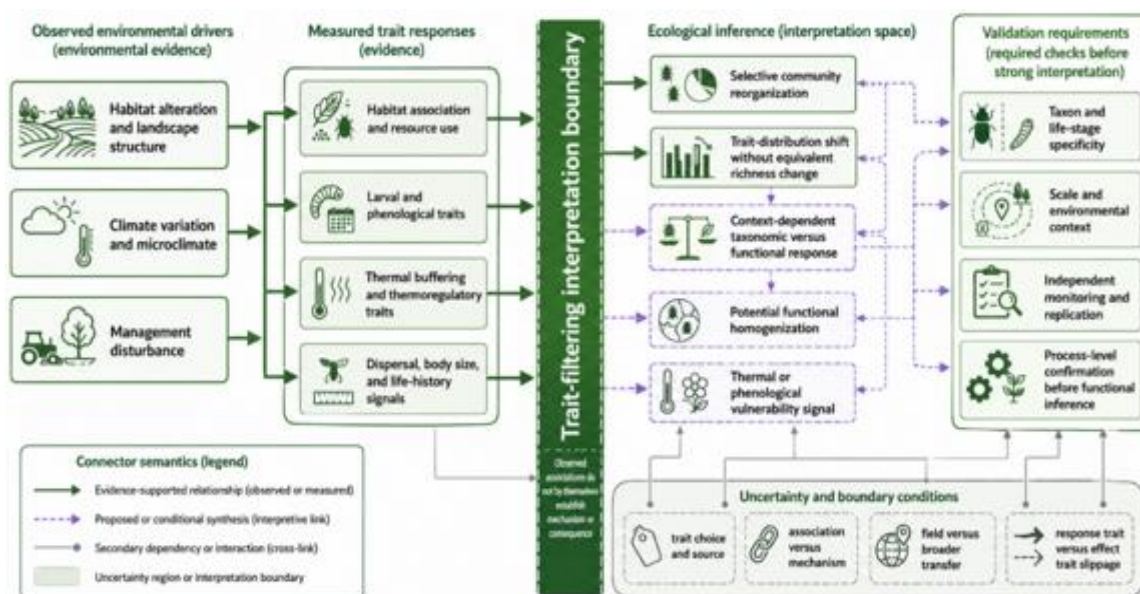


Figure 1. Evidence boundaries connecting environmental filtering, trait responses, and interpretation of insect community change

Functional redundancy and community reorganization

Trait composition becomes particularly informative when community change is interpreted through functional redundancy rather than species number alone. Functional redundancy refers to the extent to which multiple organisms share ecological roles, but the ecological meaning of redundancy depends on the process being examined. A community containing many species is not necessarily functionally redundant if those species occupy similar or irreplaceable roles, while a less species-rich community may retain substantial overlap among remaining ecological strategies.

Evidence from insect systems demonstrates that richness and redundancy can diverge. Research on saproxylic beetles has shown that higher taxonomic richness does not necessarily guarantee greater functional resilience because remaining species may differ in the extent to which they maintain functional roles [16]. This distinction is important because species loss, trait loss, and functional-process loss represent different analytical outcomes. Redundancy is also process-dependent. Studies of natural enemies indicate that landscape simplification can reduce functional redundancy associated with biological control processes, demonstrating that redundancy should be evaluated relative to a defined ecological service rather than interpreted as a universal property of biodiversity [27].

This distinction creates a major boundary for trait-based interpretation. A shift in trait composition may indicate reduced overlap among ecological strategies, but it does not by itself establish reduced ecosystem functioning. Functional consequences require direct linkage between traits and measured processes.

The relationship between functional redundancy and community reorganization therefore requires separating three questions: whether species identities change, whether trait distributions change, and whether ecological processes are altered. These questions may overlap, but they are not interchangeable.

The following table addresses the analytical problem of identifying how different forms of community reorganization should be interpreted without assuming that richness, traits, and ecosystem processes represent the same biological dimension.

Table 2. Interpreting functional redundancy when insect communities reorganize through trait-selective change

Community state or inference scenario	Article-specific dimension	Scientific content
Richness retained with trait restructuring	Biological setting · Evidence	Species replacement without equivalent trait replacement Change in trait distribution despite limited richness change
	Interpretive consequence	Suggests ecological reorganization beyond species counts
	Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Functional consequence requires process measurement Measure trait turnover and ecological functions separately
Richness decline with retained functional overlap	Biological setting · Evidence	Loss of species sharing similar roles Reduced taxonomic diversity but maintained trait space
	Interpretive consequence	Indicates possible persistence of some ecological capacities
	Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Redundancy depends on the process considered Test role-specific redundancy
Functional homogenization	Biological setting · Evidence	Disturbance-associated convergence of trait composition Increasing similarity among communities
	Interpretive consequence	Indicates reduced differentiation among communities
	Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Does not automatically demonstrate ecosystem-function decline Link homogenization to processes
Reduced functional redundancy	Biological setting · Evidence	Loss of overlapping ecological strategies Decline in process-related trait overlap
	Interpretive consequence	May indicate increased vulnerability to further change
	Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Context and ecosystem service determine meaning Validate with experimental or observational function measures
Trait-based reorganization without demonstrated functional change	Biological setting · Evidence	Environmental filtering producing trait shifts Community trait redistribution
	Interpretive consequence	Reveals biological response patterns
	Limits and uncertainty · Research or test	Mechanism and consequence remain separate Avoid inferring resilience or collapse without validation

Trait-based interpretation framework

The evidence reviewed above supports a proposed framework in which trait composition is interpreted as an additional layer of ecological information rather than a replacement for traditional biodiversity metrics. The framework begins with a distinction between observation and inference.

Species counts answer questions about taxonomic persistence: which species remain, disappear, increase, or decline. Trait composition addresses a different question: whether the biological characteristics represented within

a community are being selectively reorganized. These two forms of information may converge, but they may also diverge.

Trait interpretation must also retain distinctions among response traits, effect traits, dispersal characteristics, interaction traits, and historical signatures. Climate-change assessments have emphasized that different trait categories answer different ecological questions and should not be combined without specifying their intended interpretation [28].

Environmental history adds another layer of complexity. Current communities may reflect previous land-use conditions rather than only present environmental characteristics. Multi-trophic evidence indicates that historical land use can influence contemporary functional diversity, suggesting that trait composition may contain information about environmental legacies [29].

Based on these observations, this article proposes a trait-based interpretation architecture with five sequential analytical questions:

1. What changed?
Taxonomic, abundance, biomass, or trait-level observations define the detected pattern.
2. Which biological characteristics changed?
Trait distributions identify whether environmental change is associated with selective shifts among ecological strategies.
3. What type of trait information is being interpreted?
Response traits describe environmental association; effect traits describe possible ecological consequences.
4. What boundary conditions constrain interpretation?
Taxon, life stage, geography, trait source, scale, and temporal context determine transferability.
5. What requires validation before ecological prediction?
Trait-based hypotheses require confirmation through independent monitoring or process-level measurements.

This framework is proposed rather than empirically validated as a complete decision system. Existing studies provide support for its components, but no approved source has tested this exact integration across insect communities globally.

Table 3. Prediction and validation boundaries within a trait-based interpretation framework for insect community change

Interpretation state	Research or test	Interpretive consequence · Limits and uncertainty	Biological setting · Evidence
Taxonomic change detected	Add trait assessment where relevant	Confirms community change Does not identify ecological strategy change	Any insect assemblage Species richness, identity, abundance, biomass
Trait filtering detected	Test causal pathways experimentally	Suggests selective ecological reorganization Association does not prove mechanism	Communities exposed to environmental gradients Trait distribution shifts associated with conditions
Response–effect linkage supported	Replicate across contexts	Allows cautious functional interpretation Limited transfer between systems	Defined process and taxon Trait relationship with measured interaction or function
Vulnerability signal identified	Validate models independently	Supports prioritization hypotheses Not equivalent to prediction certainty	Monitored taxa with trait information Trait associations with population trends
Integrated interpretation proposed	Conduct comparative validation studies	Provides a structured synthesis Framework performance remains untested	Multiple evidence dimensions Combination of counts, traits, context, and boundaries

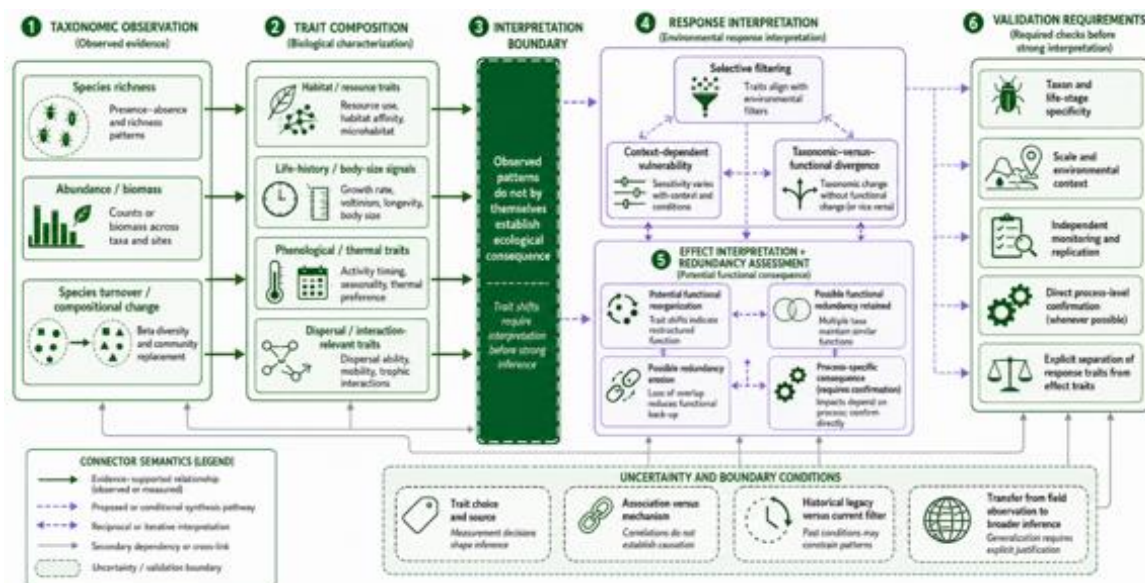


Figure 2. Trait-state reconciliation between community composition, ecological interpretation, and validation requirements

Conservation predictions and monitoring applications

Trait composition has potential value for conservation monitoring because environmental change may alter ecological strategies before complete taxonomic replacement becomes evident. However, trait-based applications should be interpreted as screening or hypothesis-generating approaches unless validated for the specific taxon and management context.

Long-term moth research demonstrates that ecological traits can be associated with population trajectories, supporting the possibility that traits may contribute to vulnerability assessments [30]. However, such relationships should not be interpreted as universal predictive rules because model performance depends on the species, traits selected, environmental context, and validation approach.

Comparative work in Odonata further illustrates this limitation. Traits associated with extinction risk may differ among taxonomic groups, demonstrating that vulnerability indicators require taxon-specific evaluation rather than universal application [31].

Conservation planning therefore requires integrating trait information with monitoring design, habitat context, and ecological objectives. Broad conservation syntheses emphasize that insect conservation requires multiple locally appropriate strategies rather than a single universal intervention [32].

A trait-informed monitoring approach should therefore prioritize four questions:

- Are the measured traits relevant to the environmental pressure being assessed?
- Are the traits associated with response, ecological effect, or both?
- Does the trait signal remain consistent across spatial and temporal scales?
- Has the interpretation been validated independently?

These questions prevent trait composition from becoming another simplified indicator detached from ecological context.

The central contribution of this framework is not the replacement of species counts with traits. Instead, it proposes that insect community interpretation improves when taxonomic and functional information are considered as complementary evidence streams.

Species counts remain essential because abundance and richness provide direct evidence of demographic and taxonomic change. Long-term monitoring demonstrates that abundance trajectories contain ecological information that cannot be reconstructed from traits alone [17]. Similarly, methodological critiques of insect decline assessments emphasize that reliable interpretation depends on robust monitoring design, appropriate baselines, and careful treatment of uncertainty [5].

Trait composition adds value when the ecological question concerns selective reorganization. Environmental change may favor some combinations of dispersal ability, thermal strategy, body size, phenology, or habitat

association while disadvantaging others. However, trait-based interpretation is constrained by trait selection, data quality, and transferability. Studies have demonstrated that trait sources can influence conclusions, that single traits may have limited predictive power, and that response traits may not consistently predict functional contribution [8, 11, 19].

Biological scale is another important limitation. Within-species variation, life-stage differences, and phenological responses demonstrate that trait interpretation can change depending on whether analysis occurs at the individual, species, population, or community level [9, 10, 23, 24]. Consequently, trait composition should not be interpreted without specifying the biological level represented.

The relationship between traits and conservation prediction also requires caution. Functional redundancy, vulnerability indicators, and trait-based forecasts may provide useful hypotheses, but their ecological meaning depends on validation within the relevant system. Studies of biological control redundancy and vulnerability modelling illustrate both the potential and the limitations of trait-based inference [27, 30, 31].

A further limitation is that trait composition does not independently identify causal mechanisms. Trait shifts may result from environmental filtering, species interactions, historical land use, dispersal constraints, or unmeasured factors. Historical landscape effects demonstrate that present communities may reflect environmental legacies rather than only current conditions [29].

Future research should therefore test whether integrated trait-and-count approaches improve ecological interpretation under defined conditions. Validation should compare trait-based predictions with independent population monitoring, experimental manipulation, and direct ecosystem-process measurements. The proposed framework should be treated as a conceptual structure for organizing these tests rather than as an already validated predictive model.

Conclusion

Trait composition can provide ecological information that species counts alone cannot always reveal, particularly when environmental change selectively reorganizes insect communities according to biological characteristics. However, traits do not replace abundance, richness, or taxonomic monitoring. Their value depends on the ecological question, trait selection, biological scale, environmental context, and validation strategy.

A more informative interpretation of insect community change therefore requires integration rather than substitution: counts describe demographic and taxonomic outcomes, while traits provide additional insight into ecological strategies and potential consequences. The proposed framework offers a way to organize these dimensions while maintaining explicit boundaries between evidence, interpretation, and future testing.

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