Humans in the urban food web:
Emerging insights from Phoenix and Baltimore


SUMMARY. Little is known about how the most intense human activity, urbanization, alters food webs and trophic structure in biological communities. Experimental studies at the Central Arizona-Phoenix (CAP) LTER reveal surprising alterations in control of trophic dynamics in urban vs. desert settings (see Urban Food Web diagram, below). However, the nature of human provisioning and alteration of resources and predation varies within cities, according to our research at both CAP and BES LTER. For example, bird feeders appear more common in neighborhoods with moderate income and with more retired people. Perversely, birds show evidence of greater risk of predation with lower shrub density. We hope this will initiate further discussion on ways to integrate humans into our models of food webs.

Key areas of influence by HUMANS

Urban Food Web adapted from Faeth, Warren, Shochat, and Marussich 2005

Effects of Landscaping Decisions

Effects of Bird Feeders

Baltimore

Phoenix

Lifestyle variables (PRIZM market clusters) predict both presence of bird feeders and bird abundance.

Socioeconomic variables predict presence of bird feeders but not bird abundance.

Effects of Predators

Urban birds forage as though they are:
• under lower risk of predation
• in greater competition for food resources

Domestic cats depress bird foraging. Coyotes facilitate it.

Competition for food resources tends to increase with greater densities of bird feeders.

From E. Adley & P. Warren, in prep.


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