

Review

Functional Rarity: The Ecology of Outliers

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Rarity has been a central topic for conservation and evolutionary biologists aiming to determine the species characteristics that cause extinction risk. More recently, beyond the rarity of species, the rarity of functions or functional traits, called functional rarity, has gained momentum in helping to understand the impact of biodiversity decline on ecosystem functioning. However, a conceptual framework for defining and quantifying functional rarity is still lacking. We introduce 12 different forms of functional rarity along gradients of species scarcity and trait distinctiveness. We then highlight the potential key role of functional rarity in the long-term and large-scale maintenance of ecosystem processes, as well as the necessary linkage between functional and evolutionary rarity.

The Multiple Facets of Rarity

Rarity has fascinated ecologists and evolutionary biologists [1], and has become the cornerstone of many research fields, and especially of conservation biology [2–4]. Why do species become rare? Why are there so many rare species on Earth? Many studies have examined the biological characteristics of species with a view to explaining the reasons for their rarity (e.g., [5–9]) and the potential consequences of their extirpation [3,4]. Rare species perform different functions in ecosystems, some being redundant with those of many other rare and common species, while others are unique [10–13]. Surprisingly, few studies have investigated the rarity of functions (hereafter **functional rarity**; see [Glossary](#)) within communities and its importance for the functioning of ecosystems [12,14,15].

While human societies have often placed higher value on rare versus common ones, rarity and commonness remain generic and vague concepts. Indeed, some species can be commonly found at a large geographic scale while being locally rare within communities, such as apex predators. Others can be commonly found within communities but possess unique traits or genes. These examples point out that rarity and commonness have multiple facets [16,17]. Therefore, in the same way as definitions and estimates of biodiversity have been recently expanded to include spatial, phylogenetic, and functional dimensions [18–20], our definitions of rarity and commonness need to be revised in a broader quantitative framework that captures additional dimensions of biodiversity. The seminal paper of Rabinowitz [21] provided the foundation for such a framework that included seven forms of rarity based on three species characteristics: geographic range, habitat specificity, and local abundance. This typology of rarity is able to take into account the main aspects related to the spatial distribution of species, but it remains silent on species' functions. Given the increasingly important role of functional diversity in community ecology, biogeography, and conservation biology [22–26], there is an urgent need to develop a framework of functional rarity and associated metrics that directly combine **functional trait** information and species abundances across scales.

Trends

A framework for the definition and quantification of functional rarity is missing.

We define functional rarity using both species sparseness and trait distinctiveness.

We introduce 12 different forms of functional rarity.

We discuss the effect of each form of functional rarity on ecosystem function.

The necessary linkage between functional and evolutionary rarity is highlighted.

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Better characterizing functional rarity goes beyond the issue of the mere understanding of why species are rare or common; it can also be key to better understanding the relationship between biodiversity and ecosystem functioning (BEF). Growing consensus suggests that BEF relationships are driven by the diversity of functions carried out by species and their individuals within an ecosystem [27–29]. In parallel, the disproportionate effect of some rare species (e.g., keystone species) on ecosystem processes is increasingly reported [12,15,30]. This calls for a deeper integration of functional rarity in BEF studies, particularly to meet the challenge of maintaining multiple processes under global changes [31].

In this paper we propose a conceptual framework that builds on the classification of Rabinowitz to define and quantify functional rarity. For this we identify four cross-species scarcity–trait distinctiveness dichotomies and two geographic rarity categories (restricted vs widespread species), leading to 12 different forms of functional rarity. Next, we discuss the potential effect of each form of functional rarity on the functioning of ecosystems. As a perspective, we propose future directions, including the necessary linkage between functional and evolutionary rarity, which constitute an important avenue for both BEF research and conservation biology.

On the Importance of Functional Rarity

The maintenance of scarce and unique phenotypes in communities is a well-known phenomenon because lower frequency and greater distinctiveness limit both intra- and interspecific competition (negative frequency-dependence) [32]. It has also been described as a ‘strategy’ for a species to expand its niche width via a release of intraspecific competition or the exploitation of alternative resources [33]. In addition, both microbial experiments and theoretical studies have emphasized the positive role of rare phenotypes in the rescue of ecological communities in face of severe environmental stresses [34,35]. However this principle has not been tested over large scales where functional rarity needs to be well defined and assessed.

There is contrasting evidence about the importance of rare species for ecosystem functioning [13,36]. An intuitive line of reasoning assumes that rare species have very little impact on ecosystems according to the ‘mass ratio hypothesis’ [37]. This common belief lies in the long tradition of using total biomass or productivity as a proxy for ecosystem functioning, where dominant species have strong effects while rare species have marginal influence. However, the need to deal with ecosystem multifunctionality, resilience or resistance across time, and disturbances or dependence upon some keystone species challenges this simplistic view [13,30]. For instance, even at low abundance, predators can have disproportionate impacts on ecosystem functioning through top-down control along the trophic chain and the associated energy fluxes. Because predators are often among the most endangered [38,39], their loss will likely have strong effects on ecosystems. A good example is given by the giant moray eel (*Gymnothorax javanicus*) that hunts at night within the labyrinth of coral reefs. This species possesses distinct functional characteristics (elongated shape and strong olfactory capacities), and has no equivalent in its ability to prey on hard-to-access dead or weak animals, thus accelerating nutrient cycling in oligotrophic ecosystems [40]. The influence that the giant moray eel has on ecosystem functioning appears irreplaceable, as suggested by its very unique combination of traits. Despite the potential importance of functional rarity on ecosystem functioning, only a handful of studies in the literature address this issue [10,12,40]. This is certainly due in part to that lack of a framework for estimating functional rarity across scales.

We propose here an **ecology of outliers** dedicated to understanding better (i) how to define and identify those outliers given their local or regional abundances and trait distinctiveness, (ii) the consequences of the persistence of those outliers for the structure and dynamics of communities and ecosystems, and (iii) the distribution of these outliers across the tree of life.

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Functional Rarity: A Conceptual Framework

The definition of functional rarity is the most crucial conceptual point before making significant progress in this new ecology of outliers.

For decades ecological rarity has been estimated at the species level using three main characteristics ultimately related to extinction risk [41]: geographical range, habitat specificity, and local abundance. The combination of these three characteristics defines seven forms of species rarity [21], with the rarest species having small range, a high level of habitat specificity, and locally low abundance. Our proposed facets of functional rarity are partly based on these basic forms (for instance local abundance in Figure 1 of Box 1). Complementing this, quantifying functional rarity must include the extent to which species traits, used as proxies to represent functions, trophic links, and niche axes [42–47], are more or less distinct or redundant within local communities or larger-scale species assemblages [40,48,49] (Box 1).

Using a set of dichotomies for species characteristics related to their frequencies and their traits, we propose to introduce the different facets of functional rarity. For the distribution of species we follow the steps of Rabinowitz [21] with two levels of rarity across scales. At the local scale (e.g., at the community scale) we discriminate scarce versus abundant species, while at the regional level we define restricted versus widespread species (Table 1). In the same vein, we propose to differentiate the rarity versus commonness of species traits compared to a given pool at the local and the regional levels. At the local scale we choose to define functionally distinct species as those having traits dissimilar from those of other species, and functionally redundant species as those having the traits that are most abundant at local scale. At the regional scale a dichotomy can be made between species possessing unique traits, in other words traits that are not shared by any other species in the pool, and species possessing shared traits. Based on these four crossed dichotomies we can define 16 potential forms of functional rarity. Of these 16, four are never met because species cannot be functionally redundant at the local scale while being unique at the regional scale (Table 1). We therefore end

Box 1. From the Rarity of Species to the Rarity of Functions

As the use of functional traits rapidly expands, the question of which traits, or combinations of traits, can be the most informative is crucial because particular traits may reveal different information about the functional distinctiveness of a species. Moreover, if the selected traits are highly correlated with each other, then the ‘true’ functional distinctiveness, which may become evident if other traits or combinations of traits were considered, can be obscured. It is also important to note that, although trait databases have emerged in many different kingdoms [83–86], they are often biased towards traits measured on common species [87–89], and this can impede an accurate assessment of functional distinctiveness.

When selecting and analyzing functional trait information for the identification of functionally distinct species, researchers would do best to identify traits which can have implications for multiple ecological functions [29]. Given this complexity, three main approaches have emerged. The first is to use a few traits where the functional consequences are well understood. If the ecological consequences of traits are ambiguous, a second approach is to use a multitude of traits as a way to capture overall ecological distinctiveness. The third approach is a hybrid option, where well-understood traits are either analyzed separately or are combined with ambiguous traits to assess how trait inclusion alters the interpretation of functional distinctiveness.

Once traits have been selected for the whole set of species, the functional distances between all pairs of species can be quantified (Figure 1). Several metrics are classically used depending on trait categories and potential missing values [58,59]. The functional distinctiveness of a given species can then be assessed using its functional distance to the rest of the community (Box 2).

The last step is to combine species rarity, for instance based on local abundance (Figure 1), and trait distinctiveness into an index of functional rarity: the functionally rarest species have low abundance and the most distinct traits (species A in Figure 1), while the functionally commonest species are those with highest abundances and the least distinct traits (species C in Figure 1).

Glossary

Ecology of outliers: a research area that studies how and why species (or organisms) are outliers given their local or regional abundances and trait distinctiveness, and the consequences of the persistence of those outliers for the structure and dynamics of communities and ecosystems.

Functional distinctiveness (or trait distinctiveness): local-scale characteristics of a species (or an organism) having traits dissimilar from those of other species (organisms) in the community. A metric of functional distinctiveness assesses whether a species (or an organism) is more or less functionally close to the rest of the community.

Functional rarity (or trait rarity): feature of a species (or an organism) that integrates both functional distinctiveness and taxonomic scarcity at the local scale, or both functional uniqueness and taxonomic restrictedness at the regional scale. Functionally rare species are ecological outliers. They possess the highest functional rarity value in the community (local scale) or in the regional pool (regional scale).

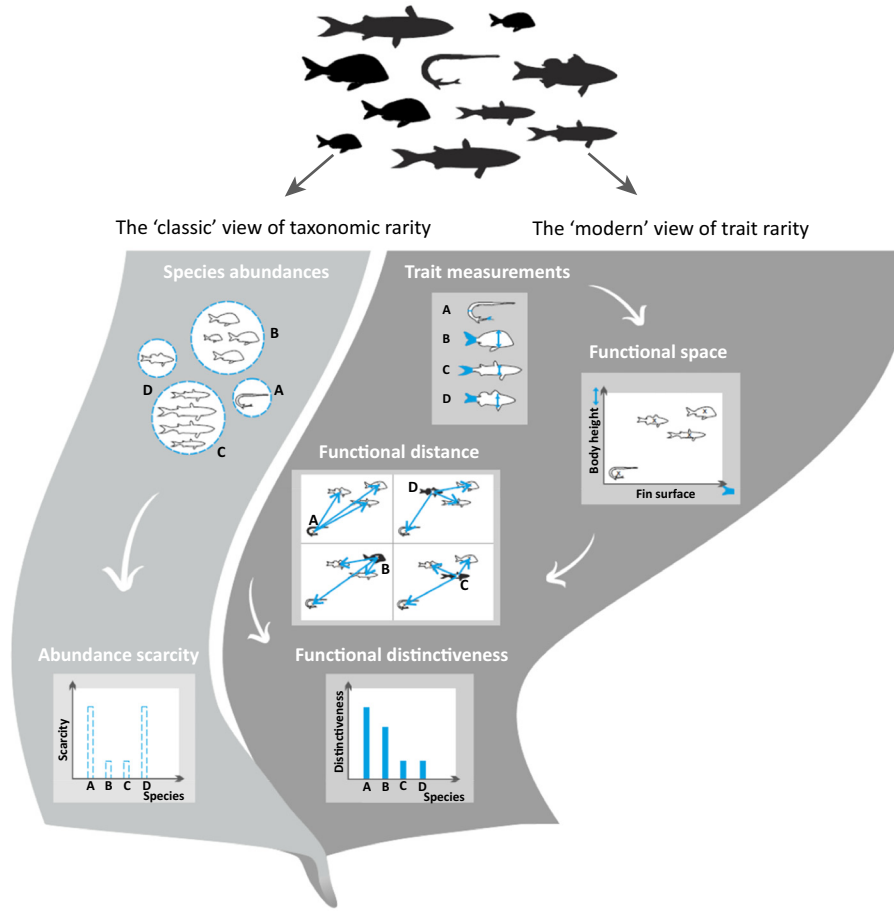
Functional trait: any fitness-related morphological, physiological, phenological or behavioral feature measurable at the individual level.

Functional uniqueness (or trait uniqueness): regional-scale feature of a species (or an organism) possessing unique traits, in other words traits that are not shared by any other species in the regional pool. A metric of functional uniqueness assesses the extent to which a species (or an organism) has no functional equivalent in the regional pool.

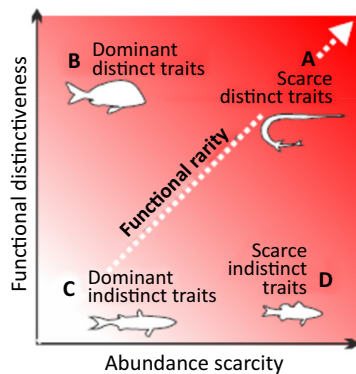
Taxonomic restrictedness (or species restrictedness): regional-scale characteristics of a species being geographically restricted (e.g., small extent of occurrence or small area of occupancy).

Taxonomic scarcity (or species scarcity): local-scale feature of a species with low relative abundance (in terms of number of individuals or biomass) in the community.

A community of four species and 10 individuals



The 'integrated' view of functional rarity



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Figure 1. Functional Rarity Types in Local Communities Are Assessed in Both Abundance and Trait Space by Combining the Classical View of Taxonomic Rarity and the Modern View of Trait Rarity. Using a 10-individual community of four species, we highlight different facets of functional rarity integrated into a single framework. The four species correspond to archetypal situations at the extremes of the abundance scarcity and functional distinctiveness gradients, species A being the ecological outlier (highest functional rarity value) in the community, while species C is the ecological norm (lowest functional rarity value).

Table 1. The 12 Forms of Functional Rarity

			Species frequency			
			Geographically restricted		Geographically widespread	
			Locally scarce	Locally abundant	Locally scarce	Locally abundant
Species traits	Geographically unique	Locally distinct	Rare traits irrespective of the scale and the species pool	Specialized traits supported by few species	Widespread traits supported by few scarce species	Traits supported by few common species
		Locally redundant	Impossible	Impossible	Impossible	Impossible
	Geographically shared	Locally distinct	Traits supported by many rare species that do not co-occur	Specialized traits supported by many species	Traits supported by many widespread but locally sparse species that do not co-occur	Traits supported by many common species that do not co-occur
		Locally abundant	Traits supported by many common species	Specialized traits supported by many species	Traits supported by many widespread but locally sparse species	Traits supported by many common species
		Locally redundant	Traits supported by many rare species	Specialized traits supported by many species	Traits supported by many widespread but locally sparse species	Common traits irrespective of the scale and the species pool

up with 12 potential forms of functional rarity among which we identify two extremes: rare traits, exhibited by a few scarce, range-restricted species, and common traits, supported by many widespread and locally abundant species.

At each spatial scale we can also visualize functional rarity versus commonness with a biplot based on relative species frequencies and trait differences (illustrated at the local scale in Figure 1 of Box 1). Category A corresponds to rare traits while category C is for common traits in a community. Because scarce species and redundant traits tend to be the most frequent within communities [40], we expect to find a majority of species belonging to category D, whereas species from category B, in other words those dominating communities and possessing distinct traits, may be the least frequent [17,50]. Given the heterogeneous distribution of species richness among these categories, we suggest defining the bounds of each category with quantile values. To better discriminate rare versus common traits, an alternative is to use the 5% most-extreme values as a cut-off.

Although this framework is focused on defining functional rarity at the species level, it can be easily applied to a variety of taxonomic and population-level scales. For example, the recent awareness that intraspecific functional variability can have important impacts not only on local adaptation but also on community assembly and ecosystem functioning [51–53] has led to increased measurement of traits of individuals within species at different locations [54], as well as the development of new diversity metrics [55,56]. Our framework can be easily extended to include intraspecific variability because functional rarity can be calculated at the individual level [48]. This can also be further extended to include lower levels of integration such as genotypes, genes, or transcriptomes.

Measuring Functional Rarity

For over three decades a myriad of metrics have been developed to quantify many facets of biodiversity [57–63]. However, this prolific field has poorly integrated the measurement of functional rarity versus commonness.

To combine the different facets of rarity (Table 1 and Box 1) into a single index, we propose an 'integrated' view of functional rarity that accounts for both the **functional distinctiveness/** uniqueness of a species (based on traits, Box 2) and its **taxonomic scarcity/restrictedness** (based on local and regional frequencies, Box 3). The functional rarity (FR) of species i can be expressed at the local scale as:

$$FR_i = f(D_i, S_i)$$

Box 2. Measuring Functional Distinctiveness and Uniqueness

The main difference between functional distinctiveness and uniqueness is the scale at which the rarity of species traits is assessed. At the local scale, functional distinctiveness takes into account all species within the community to measure whether species i is more or less functionally close to the rest of the community [40]. At the regional scale, functional uniqueness relies on the functionally nearest species to measure the extent to which species i has no functional equivalent (or redundancy) in the pool [90]. These two indices simply correspond to the mean pairwise distance (MPD) and the mean nearest taxon distance (MNTD) that measure the isolation (based on phylogenetic relationships) of each species from all the others and to its closest relative, respectively [91].

The functional distinctiveness D of species i is thus defined as the mean functional distance to the N other species:

$$D_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^N d_{ij}}{N-1} \quad (\text{Equation I})$$

where N is the number of species within the community and d_{ij} is the functional distance between species i and j . d_{ij} is scaled between 0 and 1 by dividing all functional distances between species by the maximum value among pairs within the community.

Functional distinctiveness D can also be weighted by species relative abundance Ab because a species is even more distinct if it does not share traits with the most abundant species within the community:

$$D_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^N d_{ij} \times Ab_j}{\sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^N Ab_j} \quad (\text{Equation II})$$

To avoid considering the abundance of focal species i in the calculation of functional distinctiveness, because it is already acknowledged to assess its local scarcity (Box 3), Ab_j is the relative abundance of species j among the $N-1$ remaining species.

D_i is low when species i is functionally close to many others and/or to the most-dominant species within the community (high Ab_j values). As an extreme case D_i tends to 0 when a species is hyper-dominant (Ab_i tends to 1, and the others to 0) and/or when all species are redundant with species i (d_{ij} tends to 0). At the opposite extreme D_i tends to 1 when the most-distant species j ($d_{ij} = 1$) is hyper-dominant (Ab_j tends to 1), or when all species have the maximum distance to species i within the community. D_i thus ranges between 0 and 1.

Functional uniqueness (U_i) is measured by the functional distance to the nearest neighbor (or to the k nearest neighbors) within the regional species pool as:

$$U_i = \min(d_{ij})_j = i^* \quad (\text{Equation III})$$

U_i is high when species i has a unique combination of traits compared to other species and more particularly has a high functional distance even with its closest species. At the opposite extreme, U_i is 0 when species i shares exactly the same traits as another species in the pool, in other words is perfectly redundant. U_i scales between 0 and 1 because d_{ij} scales between 0 and 1.

Box 3. Measuring Species Scarcity and Restrictedness

To measure species scarcity within communities we can simply use the inverse of relative abundance with two constraints: the index should range between 0 and 1 to have the same weight as distinctiveness in functional rarity measures (Box 2), and should have a pivotal value of 0.5 for a species with a relative abundance corresponding to $1/N$, N being the number of species in the community. When the relative abundance of species i (Ab_i) is higher than $1/N$ (expectation under the perfect even distribution of abundance among species) the species tend to be dominant while the species tend to be scarcer than expected when $Ab_i < 1/N$. We can thus express scarcity (Sc) as:

$$Sc_i = \exp[-N \times \ln(2) \times Ab_i] \quad (\text{Equation I})$$

A species with a very low abundance will have a Sc value close to 1 while dominant species (Ab_i close to 1) in species rich communities (N high) will tend to have low values. If $Ab_i = 1/N$ then $Sc_i = 0.5$.

At the regional scale we can measure species restrictedness R using the extent of occurrence or the area of occupancy, the most geographically restricted species have an R value of 1 while widespread species will tend to values close to 0. In this case there is no need to use the pivotal value of $1/N$ because species geographical extents (Ge) are independent. Instead we can use the Ge of the most widespread species to standardize R , which ranges from 0 to 1 [92].

$$R_i = 1 - \frac{Ge_i}{Ge_{\max}} \quad (\text{Equation II})$$

Other rarity indices with multiple cut-off points can also be used [93] to assess species restrictedness, but they are sensitive to species geographic range distributions.

where D_i is the functional distinctiveness of the species and S_i is the species scarcity within a given community. At the regional scale, the FR of species i is expressed as:

$$FR_i = f(U_i, R_i)$$

where U_i is the **functional uniqueness** of species i at the regional scale and R_i is its geographic restrictedness.

The integration of both facets of rarity can be implemented in many ways. The simplest way is to build upon the additive framework that measures the evolutionarily distinct and globally endangered (EDGE) score [63,64]. By analogy, the functional rarity of species i , at a given scale can be estimated as the addition of D_i and S_i at the local scale, or U_i and R_i at the regional scale. This simple integration may be useful in a conservation perspective to provide a comprehensive picture of functional rarity. However, more-complex frameworks can be proposed to combine both facets of rarity to weight them differently or to give a low value if one of the two is low (multiplicative).

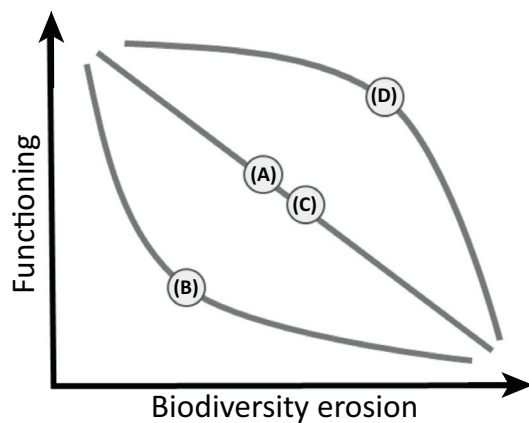
A crucial step is the choice of the traits to be included in the estimation of functional rarity (Box 1). Obviously this depends on the question being investigated. Trait-based theory has identified two types of species traits with respect to their potential functions [44]. 'Effect traits' determine the effect species have on ecosystem functioning, and these are distinguished from 'response traits' which determine the response of species to the environment [44]. This distinction has irrigated many fields of ecology [25] and helps to identify relevant response and effect traits related to the impacts of species on ecosystem functioning, on the one hand, and species persistence and coexistence on the other. From a conservation perspective, it is nevertheless unclear which traits should be accounted for.

Once traits have been chosen for a specific research objective, pairwise species functional distances can be calculated using the Euclidean distance if traits are quantitative (after trait standardization to give the same weight), or using the Gower distance if at least one trait is qualitative or if some values are missing [65]. Many ecological distinctiveness measures have been developed, most of them being designed within a phylogenetic perspective and based on tree branches linking species [66]. By analogy, we propose to measure functional distinctiveness (D) and uniqueness (U) using a functional space where species are placed according to their traits

(Figure 1 in Box 1). The main difference between these two measures is that D_i takes into account all species within the community and their abundances, whereas U_i is based on the distance to the functionally nearest species in the regional pool. In other words, distinctiveness assesses whether a species is more or less functionally close to the rest of the community, while uniqueness estimates the extent to which a species has no functional equivalent in the regional pool (Box 2). Box 3 develops how to measure species scarcity and restrictedness.

Functional Rarity and Ecosystem Functioning

Assessing the importance of functional rarity in BEF will require appropriate design to disentangle the effects of species functional distinctiveness and species scarcity. To this end, we propose hypothetical scenarios wherein the influence of biodiversity loss on the shape of BEF relationships (Figure 1) depends on species functional rarity according to the four categories identified at local scale in Figure 1. Indeed, if ecosystem functions such as productivity are expected to decrease with biodiversity loss [27], we hypothesize that the shape of this decline will depend on the traits of the first species that is extirpated from the community (Figure 1). When extirpated species support dominant but distinct traits (category B), the functioning will be strongly affected in the first stage of biodiversity decline because irreplaceable traits will be lost. Conversely, this initial impact will be limited when the first extirpated species bear scarce indistinct traits (category D) because the remaining species can perform the same functions. Intermediate relationships are expected when the extirpated species bear either scarce distinct or dominant indistinct traits (categories A and C). The long-term stability of ecosystem functioning [67] should also depend on the traits of species extirpated first, and on the type of traits. The response-effect trait framework has been especially useful for conceptualizing the maintenance (or resilience) of ecosystem functions. When extirpated species support dominant but indistinct (effect) traits (category C), the stability of ecosystem functioning will be strongly affected (loss of functional redundancy). Moreover, distinct (effect) traits (categories A and B) can become the common traits, thus contributing to the long-term assurance of ecosystem functioning [68]. When focusing on the long-term stability, the dynamics of communities is also at play [34], and accounting for response traits is thus of tremendous importance. The loss of species supporting scarce distinct (response) traits (category A) is expected to strongly impact on the long-term stability of ecosystem functioning. To summarize, it is less straightforward to



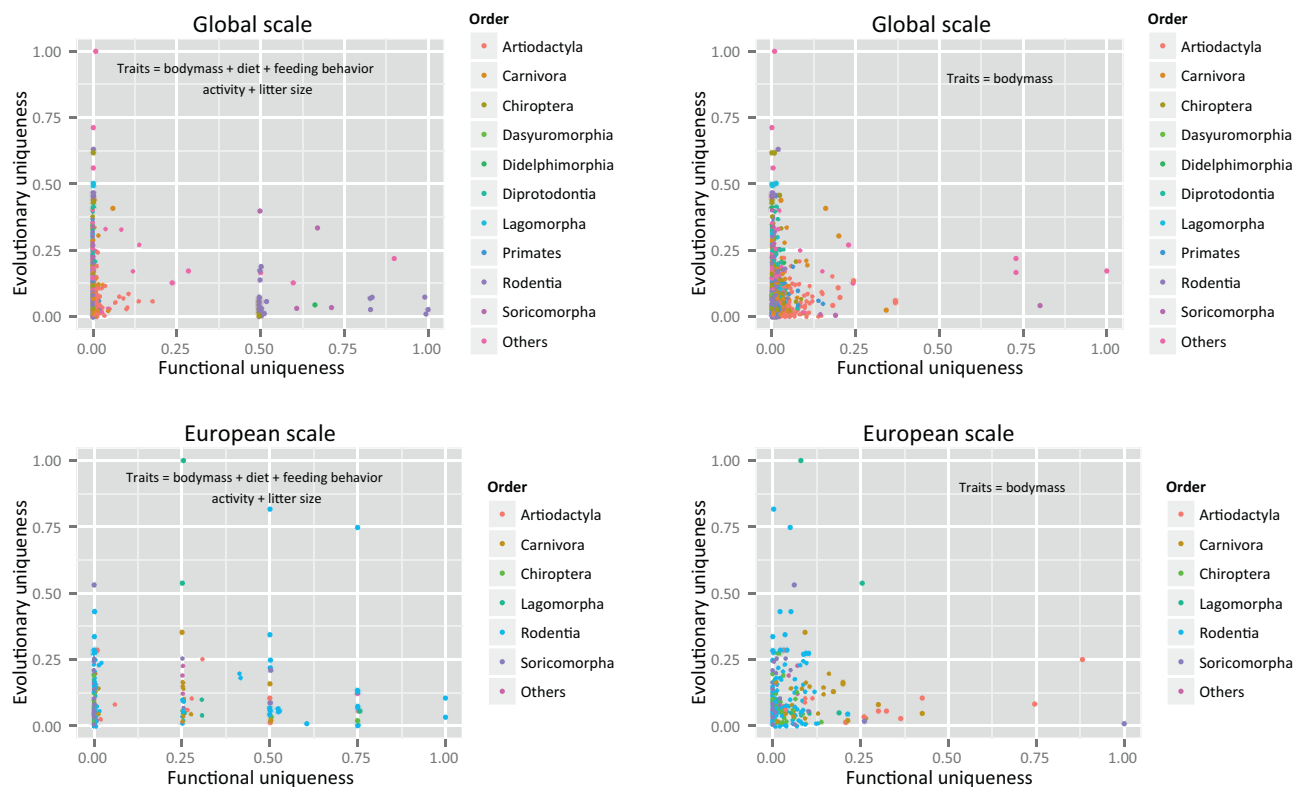
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Figure 1. Hypothetical Consequences of Biodiversity Loss on Local Ecosystem Functioning for the Four Scenarios of Functional Rarity (i.e., when species of each group are extirpated first as biodiversity declines). The letters correspond to the categories on the distinctiveness–scarcity biplot at the local scale, as described in Figure 1 of Box 1.

make qualitative predictions for the stability of ecosystem functioning because response and effect traits are both involved. We encourage ecologists to explore these scenarios theoretically and experimentally. This can come for example from experiments with microorganisms using a dilution protocol where the rare species are lost first [69,70].

Functional Rarity Across the Tree of Life

An evolutionary perspective on functional rarity can shed light on the processes that are at the origin of functional rarity across the tree of life and allow its maintenance. Although no work has been done so far following our suggested framework, there is a long tradition in evolutionary biology to investigate how ecological specializations evolves (e.g., [71,72]). Pioneering work by Futuyma and Moreno [73] has focused on specialization for resource in terms of diet and feeding behavior. However the general hypotheses around a framework to investigate the evolution of functional rarity still need to be developed [74]. Proposing a theoretical evolutionary approach to the integrated view of functional rarity (Figure 1) is a long-term perspective. Indeed, both species abundance and trait rarity (functional distinctiveness or uniqueness) are at play. Complex eco-evolutionary models will thus be necessary to answer this question. Examining the phylogenetic signal of trait rarity is a first key step. For instance, the question of whether specialist species or functionally distinct species are also phylogenetically distinct is poorly known (but see [75]). In other words, is there any correlation between functional and



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Figure 2. Relationship Between Evolutionary and Functional Uniqueness of Mammals at both Global and European Scales Calculated with Two Different Sets of Traits. All mammals for which both traits and phylogenetic information were available (4616 species) were included. Functional uniqueness was calculated without accounting for abundance. The global mammal functional distance matrices (Gower distance for multiple traits and Euclidean distance for log-transformed body-mass) together with the phylogenetic distances were extracted from [81]. The list of mammal species for Europe was extracted from [82]. Colors represent the 10 and the six most-frequent orders at global and European scales, respectively. The remaining orders (e.g., Monotrema) are grouped into the Others category.

phylogenetic distinctiveness or uniqueness? When examining the global evolutionary and functional uniqueness of mammals, we did not find species that were both evolutionary and functionally unique (Figure 2). The species pool under study is obviously critical in such relationships, as is the set of traits used to estimate species functional uniqueness (Figure 2, global vs Europe). Interestingly, the shape of the relationship remained stable whether we restricted the analysis to the scale of Europe or to body mass as the sole trait (Figure 2). This can have tremendous consequences for conservation biology [76] in cases where a geographical mismatch between taxonomic, phylogenetic, and functional rarity hotspots is found (see Outstanding Questions). If such pattern is confirmed at the community scale, this will also prevent using phylogenetic distinctiveness as a proxy for functional rarity in BEF research [77], and this will urge functional ecologists to better understand why phylogenetic diversity or dissimilarity matters for ecosystem functioning [78].

Concluding Remarks

Our framework for measuring functional rarity paves the way for an ecology of outliers, which allows a deeper understanding of the role of individuals, genotypes, or species bearing distinct trait values within populations, ecosystems, or biomes. A conservation strategy for ecological outliers can also emerge beyond the identification of areas where functional and evolutionary distinctiveness tend to aggregate [79]. For instance, the effectiveness of protected areas for ecological outliers is still untested, while the conditions (environment, human pressure) under which populations of ecological outliers can persist are unknown. This framework can also contribute to bridging the gap between evolutionary biology and ecology (see Outstanding Questions). A combination of theoretical, observational, and experimental work across the Tree of Life will help to explore this framework and identify the level at which functional rarity should be considered. This work is urgently needed because rare taxa will be the first victims of what is now called the 6th extinction crisis [80].

Acknowledgments

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Outstanding Questions

What are the ecological drivers of the maintenance of functional rarity in communities? Elucidating the drivers of functional rarity requires consideration of the effects of both niche-based and neutral community assembly processes [94–97] on both functional distinctiveness and **taxonomic scarcity**. Indeed, niche-based processes affect functional diversity [22,98] – and thus functional distinctiveness – whereas neutral processes influence taxonomic diversity patterns by affecting species demography [99] – and thus relative abundances of species.

Which evolutionary forces generate functional rarity? Future work should not only focus on the relationship between phylogenetic distinctiveness and functional distinctiveness across different clades and regions (Figure 2 for an example), but also investigate the mechanisms that generate such patterns. Focusing on the extremes, it will be fundamental to understand through the lens of evolutionary processes why some old clades could emerge as functionally distinct/unique whereas others do not.

Is there a geographic congruence (or mismatch) of hotspots of taxonomic, functional, and phylogenetic rarity? Mapping functional rarity at a global scale should be a primary objective of functional biogeography [24]. Potential mismatches between the geographic distributions of the different facets of rarity can help to refine priority conservation areas (e.g., [100]).

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