**DIETARY OVERLAP AND FOOD RESOURCE PARTITIONING AMONG FISH SPECIES OF A TROPICAL ESTUARY IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL**

Adna Ferreira da Silva Garcia1 and Ana Lúcia Vendel2\*

1 Programa de Pós-Graduação em Biologia de Ambientes Aquáticos Continentais, Universidade do Rio Grande. Av. Itália, km 8, Carreiros. 96201-900, Rio Grande, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil.

2 Curso de Ciências Biológicas, Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Campus V, Rua Horácio Trajano de Oliveira S/N, Cristo Redentor, João Pessoa, Paraíba, 58020-540, Brasil. \*analuciavendel@gmail.com

**Short Title**

**DIETARY OVERLAP AND FOOD RESOURCE PARTITIONING AMONG TROPICAL FISH**

**Abstract -** The current work investigates dietary overlap and food partitioning among nine abundant carnivorous fishes caught in the shallow waters of the Paraíba do Norte river estuary, Paraíba State, Brazil. Fishes were sampled with a beach seine net between January and December 2008 and a total of 958 specimens had their stomach content analyzed. Crustacea was the dominant food resource for *Lutjanus alexandrei*, *L*. *jocu* and *Bathygobius soporator*, whereas Telostei were consumed mainly by *Centropomus undecimalis* and *C*. *parallelus*. In contrast, Polychaeta were preyed upon mainly by *Diapterus rhombeus*, *Eucinostomus argenteus*, *Sciades herzbergii* and *S*. *parkeri*. Although most species consumed similar food items, they did that in varying proportions and amounts. Overall, the niche overlap among species was low (< 0.60), but there were several cases where pair of species had their feeding niche highly overlapped (between 0.72 and 0.97). These findings corroborate the hypothesis that food resource partitioning determines species coexistence in estuarine tropical environments.

**Keywords:** juvenile fish, trophic ecology, carnivorous, shallow waters, Paraíba do Norte river estuary.

**Sobreposição alimentar e partição de recursos alimentares entre espécies de peixes de um estuário tropical no Nordeste do Brasil**

**Resumo -** Foram estudadas a sobreposição alimentar e a partilha de recursos entre nove espécies de peixes carnívoros capturados em águas rasas do estuário do rio Paraíba do Norte, Paraíba, Brasil. Os peixes foram amostrados com rede de arrasto de praia, entre janeiro e dezembro de 2008. Ao todo, foram analisados 958 estômagos. Crustacea foi o recurso alimentar dominante para *Lutjanus alexandrei*, *L*. *jocu* e *Bathygobius soporator*, enquanto Telostei foram consumidos principalmente por *Centropomus undecimalis* e *C*. *parallelus*. Em contraste, Polychaeta foram predados principalmente por *Diapterus rhombeus*, *Eucinostomus argenteus*, *Sciades herzbergii* e *S*. *parkeri*. Embora a maioria das espécies faça uso de itens alimentares semelhantes, elas o fazem em diferentes proporções e quantidades. No geral, a sobreposição de nicho entre as espécies foi baixa (< 0,60), mas houve casos em que duas espécies tiveram nicho alimentar altamente sobreposto (entre 0,72 e 0,97). Estes resultados corroboram a hipótese de que a partilha de recursos alimentares determina a coexistência de espécies em ambientes tropicais estuarinos.

**Palavras-chave:** juvenis, ecologia trófica, carnívoros, águas rasas, estuário do rio Paraíba do Norte.

**La sobreposición alimentaria y particionamiento de recursos alimentares entre especies de peces en estuarine ambientes, Noreste de Brasil**

**Resumen -** La sobreposición alimentaria y la división del alimento fueron estudiados entre nueve especies de peces carnívoros capturados en aguas someras del río Paraíba do Norte, Paraíba, Brasil. Los peces fueron colectados con red de arrastre de playa entre enero y diciembre del 2008. En total, fueron analizados 958 estómagos. Crustacea fue el recurso alimentario dominante para *Lutjanus alexandrei*, *L. jocu* y *Bathygobius soporator*, mientras que Telostei fue consumido principalmente por *Centropomus undecimalis* y *C. parallelus.* En contraste, Polychaeta fue predado principalmente por *Diapterus rhombeus*, *Eucinostomus argenteus*, *Sciades herzbergi* y *S*. *parkeri*. A pesar de que la mayoría de las especies consuma ítems alimentarios similares, éstos son consumidos en proporciones y cantidades diferentes. En general, la sobreposición del nicho entre las especies fue baja (< 0.60), sin embargo, se observó sobreposición de nicho alimentario para dos especies en varios casos (entre 0.72 y 0.97). Estos resultados corroboran la hipótesis de que el particionamiento de recursos alimentares determina la coexistencia de especies en ambientes tropicales estuarios.

**Palabras clave:** juveniles, ecología trófica, carnívoros, aguas someras, estuario de rio Paraíba do Norte.

**Introduction**

Feeding habits constitute a clear example of how fishes are closely associated with its environment and are essential information towards a complete understanding of a fish’s life cycle (Gerking 1994). The diet of individuals depends on variables intrinsic to each species, such as trophic morphology (Fugi et al. 2001), nutritional requirements and capability to detect and to capture prey, and they can also vary within the same stage of life according to local availability of food resources (Kennish 1990). Understanding the species’ diet comprising a fish assemblage is crucial in order to identify different trophic guilds, the energy transfer within a system, mechanisms behind ecosystem stability (Gerking 1994) and to explain the inter relationships among the components of that community (Pasquaud et al. 2010). Prior studies based on the traditional method of stomach content analysis had revealed that fish play a major ecological role in the functioning of ecosystems (Windell and Bowen 1978; Winemiller 1990; Oumarou and Abe, 2009).

The coastal areas represent highly productive and valuable ecosystems, which provide numerous habitats for fish and support fundamental ecological links with other environments (Vasconcelos et al. 2010). Estuaries are essential for the life cycles of many fish species since they provide shelter and refuge from large fish predators (Scharf et al. 2000; Paterson and Whitfield 2000) and abundant food resources (Lugendo et al. 2006). Not surprisingly, these environments are considered important nursery grounds for juvenile fishes (e.g. Laegdsgaard and Johnson 1995; Blaber, 2000), harboring a highly abundant and diverse fish fauna (Day et al. 2012).

Overall, fish species exhibit different diets and feeding behaviors that help them to minimize niche overlap and interspecific competition for food estuarine resources (Alanara et al. 2001; Dantas et al. 2012). In estuaries, in particular, prior studies have shown that fish species commonly explore distinct food resources (Kanou et al. 2004; Dolbeth et al. 2008). These feeding patterns are usually view as adaptations that minimize niche overlap and, therefore, favor higher abundance and diversity (Wootton 1999). In this study, we investigate dietary overlap and food resources use in nine carnivorous fishes commonly found in a Brazilian tropical estuary, based on the working hypothesis that food partitioning determines species coexistence in estuarine tropical environments.

**Material and Methods**

*Study area*

 The study was carried out in the Paraíba do Norte river estuary, Northeastern Brazil (07°05'57"S, 34°53'41"W and 07°06'43"S, 34°54'13"W) (Fig. 1). This estuary is situated in the municipalities of Santa Rita, Bayeux, João Pessoa, Lucena and Cabedelo, so the largest portion of the estuary is located in urban areas and this mangrove area has been strongly impacted by anthropogenic projects. Geomorphologically, this estuary is part of the classical model of plain estuary coastal flooding. It has meander sand several islands in their upper portions, but the Restinga and Stuart are the greatest ones.

Insert Figure 1.

*Sampling*

 Samples were collected monthly from January to December 2008 in five locations of the Paraíba do Norte river estuary (Fig. 1) using a beach seine net (15 m long, 1.2 m high and with 16 mm mesh size). A total of two hauls were carried out at each site monthly, during daylight hours even at low tide. Each beach seine haul lasted for five minutes and were conducted in waters less than 1.2 m deep. Fish caught were immediately stored on ice and transported to the laboratory, where each individual was placed in buffered formalin, identified and measured in total length (mm) and weight (0.1g). To describe the hydrological conditions during field samplings, monthly values were determined for the following variables at each sampling site: water temperature, salinity and water transparency (Secchi disk). Samples were performed with the authorization of the environmental agency (ICMBio n° 18623-1).

*Data analysis*

 In laboratory, stomachs were removed and fixed in 10% buffered formalin. They were later examined and each dietary item identified to the lowest possible taxonomic level, depending on the digestion level of each food item. Empty stomachs and unidentifiable material were excluded from the analysis. For each identified item, were estimated Frequency of Occurrence (%FO), the number of stomachs analyzed where a food item is found in relation the total number of non-empty stomachs analyzed and the Points Method (P), the proportion of points occupied by a food item spread over a grid paper in relation to the total number of points in the grid occupied by the entire food content (Hyslop 1980). These parameters were combined in the Index of Preponderance (IP), which described the relative contribution of food items in the diet (Natarajan and Jhingran 1961). Diet overlap was calculated using simplified Morisita’s Index (Krebs 1989), where overlap is generally considered to be biologically significant when the value exceeds 0.60 (Labropoulou and Eleftheriou 1997), also diet overlap was estimated using the IP of each prey found in the stomachs.

 The IP values were square root transformed and converted into a triangular matrix of similarities among all samples using the Bray-Curtis similarity (Schafer et al. 2002). This similarity measure was used due to low number of samples and because the influence of the dominant species/feeding items in diet patterns (Krebs 1989). A non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) procedure was employed to assess variation among the nine species. The Bray-Curtis matrix was also used to construct the clustering dendrogram, which used the group average method to identify species clusters. The nMDS and Cluster analysis procedures were performed with the PRIMER v.6 software package (Clarke and Gorley 2006).

**Results**

 Salinity and water transparency showed greater variation along the study than water temperature. Salinity values varied from 0 to 30 with an average value of 8.71 (±6.39 SD) and water transparency ranged from 5 to 95 and had an average value of 36.29 (±21.38 SD), whereas temperature ranged from 25.9 to 33.0ºC and showed an average value of 29.31 (±1.88 SD).

 A total of 1,665 fish representing 27 families and 55 species were recorded in Paraíba do Norte river estuary during this study. Among them, 958 individuals of nine species had their stomach content analyzed: *Sciades herzbergii*, *Sciades parkeri, Centropomus parallelus, Centropomus undecimalis, Lutjanus alexandrei*, *Lutjanus jocu*, *Diapterus rhombeus, Eucinostomus argenteus* and *Bathygobius soporator* (Table 1). These species constituted nearly 60% of the fishes caught in shallow waters during the study period.

 Overall, these fish species were carnivorous feeding mainly on benthic invertebrates or Teleostei. Crustacea was the main food category in the diet of *L. jocu*, *L. alexandrei* and *B. soporator*, being found in more than 85% of their stomachs, followed by Polychaeta (16%), Teleostei (17%) and Algae (19%). However, the Index of Preponderance (IP) showed contributions values different to Crustacea item: *L. jocu* (Brachyura crabs = 81.28%; Penaeid shrimps = 11.68%); *L. alexandrei* (Brachyura crabs = 97.06%; Penaeid shrimps = 0.79%) and *B. soporator* (Brachyura crabs = 85.82%; Penaeid shrimps = 0.80%) (Table 2; Fig. 2). In *C. parallelus* and *C. undecimalis*,Teleostei was the main food category in the diet, contributing with over 80% the stomachs analyzed. Crustacea made appreciable contributions with high IP values: in *C. undecimalis* was Brachyura crabs (IP= 7.50%), whereas *C. parallelus* was Penaeid shrimps (IP= 7.29%) (Table 2; Fig. 2).

The dominant prey category in Ariidae and Gerreidae was Polychaeta. This item was the most commonly food category in the *S. parkeri* (IP= 88.57%), *D. rhombeus* (IP= 78.29%), *S. herzbergii* (IP= 57.42%) and *E. argenteus* (IP= 53.0%). The next mostly consumed food category was Teleostei (IP= 15.20%) and Brachyura crabs (IP= 15.51%) to *S. herzbergii*; Teleostei to *S. parkeri* (IP= 2.59%); and Nematoda (IP= 13.05; 3.16%) to *E. argenteus* and *D. rhombeus*, respectively (Table 2; Fig. 2). The number of items in *S. herzbergii* (12) was much higher than in the other species (e.g., 5 in *D. rhombeus* and *E. argenteus*) (Table 2)*.* The *B. soporator* was the only species that consumed Rhodophyta (*Caloglossa leprieurii*, *C*. *ogasawaraensis*, *Bostrychia elegans*) and Ochrophyta algae (*Ectocarpus* sp.).

Table 1. Numerical abundance (n), biomass (g) and size range (minimum and maximum total length, mm) of nine fish species who had their stomach contents analyzed in the Paraíba do Norte river estuary from January to December 2008.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Family** | **Taxon** | **Abundance (n)** | **Biomass (g)** | **Size range (mm)** |
| Ariidae | *Sciades herzbergii* (Bloch, 1794) | 413 | 2126.1 | 46 – 305 |
|  | *Sciades parkeri* (Traill, 1832) | 65 | 278.6 | 41 – 285 |
| Centropomidae | *Centropomus parallelus* Poey, 1860 | 12 | 120.5 | 47 – 145 |
|  | *Centropomus undecimalis* (Bloch, 1792)  | 29 | 324.9 | 80 –186 |
| Lutjanidae | *Lutjanus alexandrei* Moura & Lindeman, 2007 | 42 | 2306.3 | 40 – 115 |
|  | *Lutjanus jocu* (Bloch & Schneider, 1801) | 121 | 1128.8 | 35 – 185 |
| Gerreidae | *Diapterus rhombeus* (Cuvier, 1829) | 107 | 581.2 | 20 – 124 |
|  | *Eucinostomus argenteus* Baird & Girard, 1855 | 92 | 703.8 | 25 – 244 |
| Gobiidae | *Bathygobius soporator* (Valenciennes, 1837)  | 77 | 560.4 | 50 – 103 |
| Total  |  | 958 | 8,130.6 |  |

|  |
| --- |
| Table 2. Frequency of Occurrence (%FO) and Points Method (P) of the stomach contents for nine abundant species collected in Paraíba do Norte river estuary.  |
| Species | *Sciades**herzbergii* | *Sciades**parkeri* | *Centropomus**parallelus* | *Centropomus**undecimalis* | *Lutjanus**alexandrei* | *Lutjanus**jocu* | *Diapterus**rhombeus* | *Eucinostomus**argenteus* | *Bathygobius**soporator* |
| **Food Items** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** | **FO** | **P** |
| Nematoda | 5.3 | 3.5 | 1.6 | 1.0 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 8.6 | 12.2 | 46.8 | 17.8 |  |  |
| Polychaeta | 48.9 | 34.3 | 64.1 | 60.3 |  |  | 12.0 | 3.1 | 13.5 | 1.8 | 29.9 | 2.3 | 53.4 | 48.6 | 85.5 | 39.6 | 16.7 | 9.3 |
| Bivalve | 1.2 | < 0.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 1.7 | 0.6 |  |  |  |  |
| Gastropoda | 2.4 | 4.5 | 1.6 | 0.2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Copepoda |  |  |  |  | 10.0 | 1.0 |  |  | 2.7 | 0.3 | 13.4 | 3.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Isopoda | 4.6 | 2.4 |  |  | 10.0 | 1.0 |  |  | 18.9 | 2.6 | 12.4 | 1.2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Caprellidea | 12.3 | 2.1 | 3.1 | 2.0 |  |  |  |  | 10.8 | 1.9 | 1.0 | < 0.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Gammaridea | 0.2 | < 0.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 8.1 | 3.2 | 2.1 | 0.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Brachyura crabs | 32.0 | 14.2 | 15.6 | 6.7 | 20.0 | 4.9 | 4.0 | 13.3 | 83.3 | 81.2 | 76.6 | 60.9 |  |  |  |  | 66.7 | 56.6 |
| Penaeid shrimps | 1.5 | 0.5 |  |  | 20.0 | 11.6 | 24.0 | 1.2 | 10.8 | 5.2 | 45.4 | 14.6 |  |  | 4.8 | 1.9 | 9.5 | 3.7 |
| Insecta | 8.0 | 1.2 | 4.7 | 0.5 |  |  | 4.0 | 0.3 | 2.7 |  | 2.1 | 0.2 |  |  | 6.5 | 0.8 | 4.8 | 0.8 |
| Teleostei | 23.0 | 19.3 | 9.4 | 12.1 | 40.0 | 62.2 | 48.0 | 81.1 | 5.4 | 1.3 | 17.5 | 9.7 |  |  |  |  | 9.5 | 8.0 |
| Algae |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 19.0 | 13.8 |
| Plant material | 21.8 | 3.9 | 10.9 | 4.4 |  |  |  |  | 13.5 | 1.5 | 15.5 | 1.0 | 1.7 | 0.3 |  |  | 2.4 | 0.3 |
| Sediment | 15.0 | 0.2 | 17.2 | 7.1 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 1.0 | < 0.1 | 8.6 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 0.1 | 2.4 | 1.3 |
| Nº stomachs  | 413 | 65 | 12 | 29 | 42 | 121 | 92 | 107 | 77 |
| Empty stomachs | 87 | 01 | 02 | 04 | 05 | 24 | 34 | 45 | 35 |

Insert Figure 2.

 MDS analysis based on the Index of Preponderance revealed marked differences in the diet of the studied species (Fig. 3A). In general, individuals of the nine abundant species were segregated in four groups: samples of *D. rhombeus* and *E. argenteus* located on the right side of the diagram, samples of *S. herzbergii* and *S. parkeri* were located in center of the diagram, *L. alexandrei*, *L. jocu* pooled in the left side, and *B. soporator* in the lower and *C. parallelus* and *C. undecimalis* in the upper portion of the diagram (Fig. 3 A). Similarly, cluster analysis based on the Index of Preponderance also showed the formation of four groups of species with similar diet (Fig. 3B): group 1 formed by *L. alexandrei*, *B. soporator* and *L. jocu*, which consumed mainly Crustacea (Table 2, Fig. 2)*;* group 2 composed by *C. undecimalis* and *C. parallelus*, which had a diet based mainly on Teleostei; group 3 comprised of the catfish *S. herzbergii* and *S. parkeri*, which had a diet comparatively more diverse in number of main food items like Polychaeta and Decapoda and group 4 formed by *E. argenteus* and *D. rhombeus*, which had diet based mainly on Polychaeta and Nematoda (Table 2, Fig. 2).

Insert Figure 3.

 Dietary overlap values among fish species were, in general, low (<0.60), but some pair of species showed high (> 0.60) dietary overlap in their diet (Table 3). As expected, the greatest values (> 0.90) in diet overlap were observed between pair of species belonging to the same group revealed by the cluster analysis, such as *B.* soporator, *Lutjanus jocu* and *L. alexandrei* (group 1), *Centropomus undecimalis* x *C. parallelus* (group 2) and *Eucinostomus argenteus* x *Diapterus rhombeus* (group 4) (Table 3).

|  |
| --- |
| Table 3. Simplified Morisita’s index of dietary overlap for the nine abundant species collected in Paraíba do Norte river estuary, PB. See Fig. 2 for species abbreviations. |
| Species | SCHE | SCPA | LUJO | LUAL | BASO | CEUN | CEPA | EUAR |
| SCPA | 0.85 | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| LUJO | 0.85 | 0.76 | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| LUAL | 0.29 | 0.12 | 0.94 | - |  |  |  |  |
| BASO | 0.48 | 0.29 | 0.94 | 0.90 | - |  |  |  |
| CEUN | 0.43 | 0.23 | 0.29 | 0.17 | 0.27 | - |  |  |
| CEPA | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.28 | 0.20 | 0.23 | 0.92 | - |  |
| EUAR | 0.72 | 0.76 | 0.09 | 0.02 | 0.17 | 0.03 | 1.19 | - |
| DIRH | 0.76 | 0.86 | 0.08 | 0.02 | 0.17 | 0.03 | 0.15 | 0.97 |

**Discussion**

The dominance of carnivores in this estuary was evident and items such as Brachyura crabs, Penaeid shrimps, Polychaeta and Teleostei were commonly found in most stomachs. The higher consumption of such preys is presumably related to their availability in the estuary and often within the mangrove canopy. The dominance of carnivorous over other groups has been reported in estuaries in temperate latitudes (Sá et al. 2006), in Caribbean mangroves (McDonald et al. 2009) and in demersal fish assemblages of coastal areas (Abdurahiman et al. 2010).

Prior studies have shown that differences in composition and feeding activity can occur among fish species, which reduces overlap in the supposed partitioning of resources and promotes co-existence and use of their habitats (Zahorcsak et al. 2000; Denadai et al. 2012). The results obtained in the present study demonstrated that dietary compositions of the species within the same family were particularly similar. The proximity of the sampling sites and the fact the individuals were preserved on ice immediately after capture, associated with quick digestion of the food items, probably contributed to the great similarity among the diets of the studied species. Moreover, the identification of items in broad food categories probably contributed to the high level of similarity observed in the cluster dendrogram.

A generalist feeding strategy was observed in some of the studied fish in the present work. For instance, the sea catfish (*S*. *herzbergii*) showed the tendency to have a generalist trophic strategy, with a wide range of prey occurring in its diet. Similar results were reported to *S*. *herzbergii* in the Curuçá estuary, Pará (Giarrizzo and Saint-Paul 2008). This feeding strategy was also observed in other Ariidae species, which fed on a great variety of items, including small fishes, crabs, amphipods, isopods, copepods, and polychaeta e.g. *Cathorops spixii* (Le Bail et al. 2000), *Aspistor luniscutis* and *Genidens genidens*. In this study, diets of both catfishes (*S. herzbergii* and *S. parkeri*) were dominated by Polychaeta and Brachyura crabs. Studies elsewhere on Ariidae species with a similar size range also found a pattern of dominance of the diet by two benthonic preys (Mendoza-Carranza and Vieira 2008), which suggest that the two catfish species forage on or just above the substratum (Krumme et al. 2008). This conclusion is consistent with observations that catfishes frequently swim close to the substratum surface browsing for benthonic preys. Moreover, anatomical features of catfishes, such as a large mouth gape, allow them to capture entire preys, including those associated with the substrate. Similarly with *Sciades herzbergii* and *S*. *parkeri*, the diets of *E. argenteus* and *D. rhombeus* were also comprised of infauna species, such as Polychaeta and Nematoda, thereby implying these two species also feed on or just above the substratum.

The Gerreidae are mainly benthic feeders with highly protrusible mouths, which limit the extent of substratum penetration, and have been observed foraging for epifaunal invertebrates (Cyrus and Blaber 1983). The Polychaeta fragments found in the stomach content of the specimens probably originated from prey captured in the water column or larval stages on the substratum surface (Kerschner et al. 1985), since the Gerreidae protrudes its feeding apparatus directly above the prey (Cyrus and Blaber 1982). These items were also reported as important in diet of Gerreidae species in other ecosystems, such a bays (Denadai et al. 2012), beaches (Teixeira and Helmer 1997) and coastal waters (Cyrus and Blaber 1984).

Although shallow waters have been not considered a habitat for large piscivorous fish in estuaries (Paterson and Whitfield 2000), we found two piscivorous species (*C. parallelus* and *C. undecimalis*) in our studied system. Acurate vision and prey attacking techniques are two factors considered important when capturing very active swimming organisms such as fishes and shrimps (Hajisamae 2009), which were items with higher frequency of occurrence in the diet of the studied species. The presence of piscivorous along the estuaries, especially in the mangroves, may be related to the fact that the spatial heterogeneity created by the mangrove roots provides a suitable place to stay in ambush (McDonald et al. 2009).

**Conclusion**

 Our findings revealed that the nine studied carnivorous fishes feed on similar food items (mainly crustaceans, fish and polychaets), but in different amounts and proportions. The niche overlap among them was relatively low for most of the species, although there were several cases of highly overlapped food niches (e.g., 0.97 between *E. argenteus* and *D. rhombeus*; 0.94 between *L. alexandrei* and *L. jocu*, *B. soporator* and *L. jocu*; 0.92 between *C. parallelus* and *C. undecimalis*). These findings contribute to an understanding of how resource partitioning could determine species coexistence in estuarine tropical environments and highlights the need for further studies to evaluate the effect of partitioning on space and time in this ecosystem. Future investigations are needed to evaluate if competitive exclusion principle does occur or how much it influences on fish estuarine assemblages.

**Acknowlodgements:** This study received financial support from the Universidade Estadual da Paraíba (UEPB/PROPESQ 153/2008) and the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq: PIBIC 2007/2008 and 2008/2009).

**References**

Abdurahiman KP, Naya TH, Zacharia PU and Mohamed KS. 2010. Trophic organization and predator-prey interactions among commercially exploited demersal finfishes in the coastal waters of the southeastern Arabian Sea. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.**, 87: 601-610.

Alanara A, Burns MD and Metcalfe NB. 2001. Intraspecific resource partitioning in brown trout: the temporal distribution of foraging is determined by social rank. **J Anim Ecol.**, 70:980-986.

Blaber SJM. 2000. **Tropical Estuarine Fishes: Ecology, Exploration and Conservation**. Quensland, Blackwell Science. 372p.

Clark KR, Gorley RN. 2006. **PRIMER v.6: User Manual/Tutorial**. PRIMER-E: Plymouth, WA.

Cyrus DP and Blaber SJM. 1982. Mouthpart structure and function and the feeding mechanisms of *Gerres* (Teleostei). **S Afr J Zool.** 17: 117-121.

Cyrus DP and Blaber SJM. 1984. The feeding ecology of Gerreidae (Teleostei) in the Kosi System, with special reference to their seasonal diet. Department of Zoology, University of Natal. **Lammergeyer**; 32: 35‑49.

Cyrus DP and Blaber SJM. 1983. The food and feeding ecology of Gerreidae, Bleeker 1859, in the estuaries of Natal. **J Fish Biol**. 22(4): 373-393.

Dantas DV, Barletta M, Ramos JAA, Lima and ARA, Costa MF. 2012. Seasonal diet shifts and overlap between two sympatric catfishes in an estuarine nursery. **Estuar Coast.** 36(2): 237-256.

Day JW, Kemp WM, Yáñez-Arancibia A and Crump BC. 2012. **Estuarine Ecology**. 2 ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 568p.

Denadai MR, Bessa E, Santos FB, Fernandez WS, Santos FMS and Feijó MM. 2012. Life history of three catfish species (Siluriformes: Ariidae) from southeastern Brazil. **Biota Neotrop**. 12 (4): 74-83.

Dolbeth M; Martinho F, Leita RO, Cabral H and Pardal MA. 2008. Feeding patterns of the dominant benthic and demersal fish community in a temperate estuary. **J Fish Biol**.72: 2500-2517.

Fugi R, Agostinho AA and Hahn NS. 2001. Trophic morphology of five benthic-feeding fish species of a tropical floodplain. **Rev brasil. Biol.** 61(1): 27-33.

Gerking SD. **Feeding Ecology of Fish**. 1994. Academic Press, San Diego. 416p.

Giarrizzo T and U Saint-Paul. 2008. Ontogenetic and seasonal shifts in the diet of the pemecou sea catfish *Sciades herzbergii* (Siluriformes: Ariidae), from a macrotidal mangrove creek in the Curuçá estuary, Northern Brazil. **Rev Biol Trop.** 56 (2): 861-873.

Hajisamae S.2009. Trophic ecology of bottom fishes assemblage along coastal areas of Thailand. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.** 82: 503-514.

Hyslop EJ. 1980. Stomach contents analysis, a review of methods and their application. **J Fish Biol**. 17(4): 411-430.

Kanou K, Sano M and Kohno M. 2004. Food habits of fishes on unvegetated tidal mudflats in Tokyo Bay, central Japan. **Fisheries Sci**. 70: 978-987.

Kennish MJ. **Ecology of Estuaries**. 1990. CRC Press, Boston, 391p.

Kerschner BA, Peterson MS, Gilmore R and Grant JR. 1985. Ecotopic and Ontogenetic Trophic Variation in Mojarras (Pisces: Gerreidae). **Estuaries.** 8(3): 311-322.

Krebs, CJ. **Ecological Methodology**.1989. Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 654p.

Krumme U, Brenner M and Saint-Paul U. 2008. Spring-neap cycle as a major driver of temporal variations in feeding of intertidal fishes: Evidence from the sea catfish *Sciades herzbergii* (Ariidae) of equatorial West Atlantic mangrove creeks. **J Exp Mar Biol Ecol**. 367: 91-99.

Labropoulou M and Eleftheriou A. 1997. The foraging ecology of two pairs of congeneric demersal fish species: importance of morphological characteristics in prey selection. **J Fish Biol.** 50: 324-340.

Laegdsgaard, P and Johnson CR. 1995. Mangrove habitats as nurseries: unique assemblages of juvenile fish in subtropical mangroves in eastern Australia. **Mar Ecol Prog Ser**. 126: 67-81.

Le Bail P-Y, Keith P and Planquette P. 2000. **Atlas des poissonsd’eau douce de Guyane. Tome 2, Fascicule II: Siluriformes**. Collection Patrimoines Naturels 43(II): 307p. Paris: Publications Scientifiques du Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle.

Lugendo BR, Nagelkerken I, Van der Veldeand G, Mgaya YD. 2006. The importance of mangroves, mud and sand falts, and seagrass beds as feeding áreas for juvenile fishes in Chwaka Bay, Zanzibar: gut content na stable isotope analysis. **J Fish Biol**. 69: 1639-1661.

McDonald JA, Shahrestani S and Weis JS. 2009. Behaviour and space utilization of two common fishes within Caribbean mangroves: implications for the protective function of mangrove habitats. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.** 84: 195-201.

Mendoza-Carranza, M and Vieira JP. 2008. Ontogenetic niche feeding partitioning in juvenile of white sea catfish *Genidens barbus* in estuarine environments, southern Brazil. **J Mar Biol Assoc U.K.** 89 (4): 839-848.

Natarajan AV and Jhingran AG. 1961. Index of Preponderance a Method of Grading the Food Elements in the stomach Analysis of Fishes. **Indian J Fish.** 8(1): 54-59.

Oumarou N and Abe J. 2009. Editors. Ecosystem-based fisheries management with emphasis on fish diet. **User's Guide. Guinea Current Large Marine Ecosystem** (GCLME) Project. 23p.

Pasquaud S, Pillet M, David V, Sautour B and Elie P. 2010. Determination of fish trophic levels in an estuarine system. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.** 86: 237-246.

Paterson AW and Whitfield AK. 2000. Do shallow-water habitats functions as refuge for juveniles fishes? **Est Coast ShelfSci.** 51: 359-364.

Sá R, Bexiga C, Vieira P and Erzini K. 2006. Feeding ecology and trophic relationships of fish species in the lower Guadiana River Estuary and Castro Marim e Vila Real de Santo António Salt Marsh. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.** 70(1-2): 19-26.

Schafer LN, Platel ME, Valesini FJ and Potter IC. 2002. Comparisons between the influence of habitat type, season and body size on the dietary compositions of fish species in nearshore marine waters. **J Exp Mar Biol Ecol**. 278: 67-92.

Scharf FS, Juanes F and Rountree RA. 2000. Predator size - prey size relationships of marine fish predators: interspecific variation and effects of ontogeny and body size on trophic-niche breadth. **Mar Ecol Prog Ser.** 208: 229-248.

Teixeira RL and Helmer JL. 1997. Ecology of young mojarras (Pisces: Gerreidae) occupying the shallow waters of a tropical estuary. **Rev brasil. Biol.** 57: 637-646.

Vasconcelos RP, Reis-Santos P, Maia A, Fonseca V, França S and Wouters N. 2010. Nursery use patterns of commercially important marine fish species in estuarine systems along the Portuguese coast. **Est Coast Shelf Sci.** 86: 613-624.

Windell JT and Bowen SH. 1978. Methods for study of fish diets based on analysis of stomach contents. In: Bagenal T (Ed.) **Methods for assessment of fish production in fresh waters**. 3rded. (IBP Handbook No 3). Blackwell Scientific. Oxford, UK: 219-223.

Winemiller KO. 1999. Spatial and temporal variation in tropical fish trophic networks. **Ecol Monogr.** 1990, 60: 331-367.

Wootton RJ. **Ecology of teleost fishes.** Chapman and Hall Ltd., London, 2nded, 399p.

Zahorcsak PM, Silvano RA and Sazima I. 2000. Feeding biology of guild of benthivorous fishes in a sandy shore on south-eastern Brazilian coast. **Rev brasil. Biol**. 60(3): 511-518.

**Figure legends:**

Figure 1. Map of the study area showing the sampling locations of the Paraíba do Norte river estuary, Brazil.

Figure 2. Index of Preponderance (IP) values for nine abundant fish species collected in Paraíba do Norte river estuary. Numbers above the columns indicate number of non-empty stomachs examined. (SCHE = *Sciades herzbergii*; SCPA = *Sciades parkeri*; CEPA = *Centropomus parallelus*; CEUN = *Centropomus undecimalis*;LUJO = *Lutjanus jocu*; LUAL = *Lutjanus alexandrei*; DIRH = *Diapterus rhombeus*; EUAR = *Eucinostomus argenteus* and BASO = *Bathygobius soporator*).

Figure 3. n-MDS (A) and cluster dendrogram (B) plots showing similarities in the diet (based on Index of Preponderance, IP) of the nine abundant fish species collected in Paraíba do Norte river estuary, PB. See Figure 2 for species abbreviations.