

Planning For Microcomputers In Higher Education: Strategies For The Next Generation

Trends in Ecology & Evolution

CellPress

Opinion

Next-Generation Global Biomonitoring: Large-scale, Automated Reconstruction of Ecological Networks

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We foresee a new global-scale, ecological approach to biomonitoring emerging within the next decade that can detect ecosystem change accurately, cheaply, and generically. Next-generation sequencing of DNA sampled from the Earth's environments would provide data for the relative abundance of operational taxonomic units or ecological functions. Machine-learning methods would then be used to reconstruct the ecological networks of interactions implicit in the raw NGS data. Ultimately, we envision the development of autonomous samplers that would sample nucleic acids and upload NGS sequence data to the cloud for network reconstruction. Large numbers of these samplers, in a global array, would allow sensitive automated biomonitoring of the Earth's major ecosystems at high spatial and temporal resolution, revolutionising our understanding of ecosystem change.

Bioindicators for Change in Ecosystem Functioning

Environmental change is increasingly reshaping biodiversity and the provision of ecosystem processes and services across local to global scales [1,2]. Yet, we are poorly equipped to measure these relationships and rely on judgements drawn from proxies or **biomonitoring indicators** (see Glossary). Chemical indicators can evaluate some environmental stressors [3], but often these are transient and hard to measure directly and so biotic indicators are used to gauge impacts and responses [4,5]. Biomonitoring underpins many areas of policy [6] and, in the case of "charismatic" indicator species, have considerable value for the public. In almost all cases, however, biomonitoring suffers from at least one of three key problems: (i) limited accuracy, because indicators are simple proxies that cannot capture the full range of complex ecological phenomena; (ii) high costs that limit the scale of coverage, especially in the majority of systems that rely on human labour for sampling rather than automation; and (iii) limited generality, because most are bespoke designs focused on specific systems and individual stressors. Most biomonitoring schemes use methods developed in the middle of the 20th century and not the approaches that have since appeared. Consequently, biomonitoring of the full diversity of species and their interactions within an ecosystem is rarely, if ever, attempted. We foresee that a new generation of biomonitoring will be needed in the next decade, to complement indicator-based approaches, which detects systemic change in any ecosystem more accurately, cheaply, and generically at local to global scales.

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Next-generation sequencing (NGS) can be used to sample nucleic acids in the environment for the presence of species and ecological functions.

Machine-learning software can search for "the ghosts of interactions past" in the raw NGS data to reconstruct the networks of ecological interactions.

NGS data and machine-learning in the cloud could be combined in the next generation of global biomonitoring. Autonomous NGS samplers would sequence and upload data for ecological network reconstruction, to detect ecosystem change accurately, cheaply and generically.

Reconstruction of highly replicated networks of ecological interaction, using the next generation of biomonitoring, would provide general ecological information for ecosystem comparison and a revolution in the breadth of our understanding of the ecology of ecosystem change.

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emergence of the global higher education economy could well act as a catalyst Indeed, it is fair to say that the fourth generation of distance education is only just development strategy appropriate to the ethos of their particular institution. . Relations Manager, and the Commercial Planning Officer (a new position).

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