Describing Habitat Utilization and Life History Characteristics of Deep-Water Snappers Targeted by the Deep-Water Snapper Fishery in Puerto Rico

EFP Final Report



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Introduction

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries lab in Panama City, FL was awarded funding to conduct a project titled, "A comprehensive US Caribbean Fishery-Independent Survey utilizing stereo video and hook and line methods to assess the deep water snapper-grouper complex in Puerto Rico" through the Cooperative Research Program. This project's goal was to complete a year of research utilizing a working relationship with commercial fishermen to develop and use low cost methods to gain information regarding the deep-water habitats and the deep-water fishery in Puerto Rico. A scientific and technical consulting service, HJR Reefscaping, provided a commercial fishing vessel and accompanying fishery observers to conduct the fieldwork in Puerto Rico, which operated from March-August, 2021.

This project built upon the results and recommendations of two prior fishery-independent surveys conducted over the course of five years by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science in Puerto Rico. These joint projects utilized GoPro video and hook and line fishing to characterize the deep-water snapper-grouper complex from 50-450 m depths. Previous video sampling methods did not encompass the full depth range of the targeted deep-water snapper species due to limits on sampling gear. This project's intent was to extend the sampling range from 100-650 m, to explore possible maximum depth ranges of species within the snapper-grouper complex and reduce sampling bias. This was done by implementing an optimized fishery-independent survey design, including advanced technologies, which improved our ability to track changes in fish size and abundance through time and assess the status and trends of deep-water fishery species. The project developed and trialed a stereo-baited remote underwater video (S-BRUV) array, which utilized the addition of optical imagery in the form of custom-built, paired, deep-water stereo-video cameras, which allowed for the collection of non-destructive size composition data, to 650 m depths (Figure 1). The S-BRUV array frame was constructed out of stainless steel, in a tripod formation. The cameras were mounted to the top of the tripod, via a stainless steel platform. The platform allowed the cameras to be permanently mounted in place, to not to compromise the stereo calibrations completed prior to the start of field sampling. An aluminum rod was secured through the middle of the tripod, and served as a mounting point for the lights, stereovideo battery housing, temperature depth sensor (TDR), and float (Figure 1). Wavelength modified LED lights were developed and include on the S-BRUV to reduce bias of deep-water fishes not approaching the array.

Stereo imagery, coupled with biological sampling from hook and line fishing, provided us with data for age, growth, and reproductive studies on data poor, deep-water species in the US Caribbean such as silk snapper (*Lutjanus vivanus*), queen snapper (*Etelis oculatus*), blackfin snapper (*Lutjanus buccanella*), and black snapper (*Apsilius dentatus*), and catch per unit effort indices for both target and other species in the snapper-grouper complex. These data will be of great benefit to upcoming stock assessments in Puerto Rico. The creation of a deep-water stereo camera system provides size and abundance data for data-poor species, diversity indices, as well as providing groundtruthing for multibeam mapping data. Deep-water stereo-video systems have never been implemented in the US Caribbean, and as such, the design of the system alone is providing us with technology that is directly transferable to other organizations and regions, where it can be reproduced at low cost to gather data on distribution, abundance, and length composition for species of interest.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this survey were as follows:

- 1. Develop fishery-independent sampling methods utilizing stereo-video imagery and wavelength modified LED lights that reduce bias and provide non-destructive data.
- 2. Deploy S-BRUV array and hook and line fishing gear at a maximum of 100 survey stations.
- 3. Generate non-destructive length estimates utilizing stereo-video for exploited reef fishes.
- 4. Provide groundtruthing for multibeam mapping efforts via habitat classification from video.
- 5. Develop species richness and a diversity index for both recorded video and catch data.
- 6. Estimate abundance indices (e.g., catch-per-unit effort and video minimum counts)

- 7. Generate length composition of principal exploited snapper species, including queen snapper (*Etelis oculatus*), silk snapper (*Lutjanus vivanus*), blackfin snapper (*Lutjanus buccanella*), vermilion snapper (*Rhomboplites aurorubens*), black snapper (*Apsilus dentatus*), wenchman snapper (*Pristipomoides aquilonaris*), and cardinal snapper (*Pristipomoides macrophthalmus*).
- 8. Provide biological samples (paired otoliths, gonads, and eye lenses) from queen, silk, blackfin, and black snapper to fill data gaps in ongoing growth predictions, age validation, and reproductive studies in order to give the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC) more insight into management for these species.

Methods

Sampling was conducted following a stratified random statistical survey design. The randomly selected sites from each region were center points of 500 x 500 m boxes in a grid system. Two hundred sampling sites were selected at random for the W/NW coast of Puerto Rico, stratified by depth and rugosity scores as defined by University of Miami Rosenstiel Marine and Atmospheric Science (RSMAS) and National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) multibeam backscatter and bathymetry data. One hundred of two hundred sites were randomly selected to complete based on factors such as weather and sea state. The sampling procedure within a selected grid cell, termed the Standard Fishing Sample, is summarized in Table 1.

Deployment of the S-BRUV system and separate fishing line by commercial Captain and observer occurred at the provided coordinates on the site selection sheet. Deployment(s) at a site consisted of one exploratory line deployed with a weight to test the current speed and direction at depth, one S-BRUV deployment and retrieval, and one vertical hook and line deployment and retrieval (the latter in two, ten-minute intervals). The exploratory line with a weight was deployed first to test direction and speed of current at the bottom. This ensured that currents at the seafloor were conducive to a stable deployment and successful recovery of the S-BRUV. Upon retrieval of the exploratory line, the S-BRUV was baited with a combination of Loligo and tuna, and deployed at the selected coordinates for a bottom time of 30 minutes, once the system reached the seafloor. Upon retrieval of the S-BRUV, the baited (combination of Loligo and tuna) vertical hook and line was deployed at the same coordinates, with the Captain repositioning the vessel as necessary. The deployment of the fishing line was followed by a 20 minute 'Fishing Time', which began once the hook and line set reached the seafloor. The 'Fishing Time' was defined as the total elapsed bottom time for the gear, not including the time for deployment to the bottom, or retrieval. The Captain and observer were allowed to retrieve the hook and line, rebait, remove caught fish, and re-deploy once, at ten minutes of bottom time. After a total 'Fishing Time' of 20 minutes elapsed, the hook and line was retrieved. All fish caught on hook and line were identified and measured (total length, fork length). Fish were either: 1) tagged and kept in the cooler for further biological sampling on land (target snapper species), 2) retained by Captain if not a target species and within season, or 3) vented (if needed) and released. The exact latitude and longitude in decimal degrees was recorded at the exact time the S-BRUV was deployed from the boat, at the beginning of S-BRUV retrieval from the seafloor, the hook and lines(s) deployment from boat, and the retrieval of the hook and line(s) from seafloor.

Videos and field datasheets were downloaded at the end of a field day and uploaded to a shared Google Drive for review by principal investigator K. Overly. Uploaded videos are currently undergoing review. Videos are read for a total of 20 minutes and fish species are identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible on a high-resolution video monitor. Minimum counts (maximum number of fish observed in a single frame) will be recorded for each species. Habitat will be classified according to Coastal and Marine Ecological Classification Standards (CMECS), which was created with the intention of unifying classification efforts for integration and comparisons of data among organizations and surveys. Teleosts, elasmobranchs, and invertebrates will be measured at their respective minimum count to the nearest millimeter using stereo-video measurement software (SeaGIS).

Preliminary Results

Sampling methods were successfully trialed and the S-BRUV array continues to undergo minor changes to improve stability in the deep-water reef environments. A total of 83 videos were recorded and uploaded over the course of 29 sampling day (Figure 2). All videos are accounted for and have been prepped for fish and invertebrate identification, minimum counts, and habitat classification. Preliminary SeaGIS measurements have been computed, confirming that the calibrations for the stereo-video cameras are accurate and function in the deepwater environment (Figure 3). All field sampling data has been transcribed into the excel database.

The target snapper species caught each field-sampling day were processed by the fishery observer and delivered to Wilson Santiago (contracted by the DNER Fisheries Research Lab) where they were recorded and shipped to University of South Carolina Aiken, and the NOAA Fisheries Labratory in Panama City, FL for further processing in ongoing age, growth and reproductive studies. Of the target snapper species, a total of 32 queen snapper, 15 silk snapper, 3 blackfin snapper, and 1 black snapper were caught and processed. Otolith samples will be sectioned, and undergo age estimation. The eye lens cores will be extracted from the eyes for use in bomb radiocarbon chronometer age validation. Gonad samples will be processed and staged, and sex will be confirmed microscopically.

Pictures were taken of incidental catch for preliminary identification at sea, and a tissue sample was collected for processing if the species was unknown. Tissue samples taken from incidental catch will be utilized to ensure correct species identifications, provide new information regarding the biodiversity and taxonomic richness of deep-water habitats around Puerto Rico, and to identify unknown specimens. To date, tissue samples have been taken from several deep-water shark species, eels, and various other incidental catch. Incidental catch species outside of the deep-water snapper-grouper complex that have been identified include: tilefishes (Caulolatilus spp.) beardfish (Polymixia nobilis), flagfin (Aulopus filamentosus), lizardfish (Synodus spp.), lanternbelly (Synagrops spp., Verilus sordidus), squirrelfish (Ostichthys trachypoma), tattler (Serranus notospilus), eels (Gymnothorax spp., Ophichthus rex, O. spp.), and several shark species (Carcharhinus spp., Centrophorus spp., Mustelus spp., Scyliorhinus spp., Squalus clarkae, S. spp.).

All sampled survey sites and their associated general habitat classification are listed in Appendix A, alongside their corresponding region, depth and coordinates. One station was sampled in federal waters in the exempted fishing area of Bajo de Sico during the month of May; however, no fish were caught at this station (Figure 2). No fish were caught during seasonal closures, which was a direct result of delayed sampling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. No protected species were encountered during the duration of this EFP.

Total catch, range of lengths (mm), and average length (mm) for all species caught on hook and line gear is summarized in Table 2. Within the snapper-grouper complex, species caught starting with the highest frequency included: queen snapper (n=32), silk snapper (n=15), wenchman snapper (n=15), vermilion snapper (n=9), cardinal snapper (n=7), blackfin snapper (n=3), black snapper (n=1), snowy grouper (n=1), misty grouper (n=1), and red hind (n=1). Fewer target species were caught under this permit when compared to the previous EFP held from 2018-2020, which is likely due to an increase in maximum sampling depth (from 450 m to 650 m) where species in the snapper-grouper complex do not commonly reside. Catch per month of each species is summarized in Table 3. Deposition of all species caught on hook and line fishing is recorded in Table 4.

One S-BRUV array was lost during deployment due to the vessel's prop cutting the line. Following the equipment loss, preventative measures were discussed and implemented with the Captain and onboard observer. The Captain moved the electronic fishing reel that was used in deployment towards the bow of the vessel to assist with keeping the line clear of the prop as the S-BRUV array descends. Additionally, as the observer wrote down deployment data, they served as an extra set of eyes on the line if the Captain needed to reposition the vessel as the S-BRUV was deployed. The Captain began to announce aloud when he was repositioning the vessel, so both the deckhand and observer could monitor the line. Lastly, if there was any risk of the S-BRUV line coming near the prop, the

Captain turned the engines off immediately at the notice of the deckhand and observer.

Data collected in this study is providing critical information on data-poor, deep-water snapper life history and habitat associations to improve management and conservation of this deep-water fisheries resource. Analyzing habitat utilization and the distribution will not only add to our limited knowledge regarding habitat preference, but results could also be incorporated into spatial planning under ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM).

Two publications in preparation that include samples collected in Puerto Rico:

- Overly, K.E. and V. Lecours. 2021 (in prep). Mapping Queen Snapper (Etelis oculatus) Suitable Habitat in Puerto Rico Using Ensemble Species Distribution Modeling
- Overly, K.E., W.F. Patterson III, and V.R. Shervette. 2021 (in prep). Caribbean deep-water snappers: novel application of the radiocarbon chronometer in understanding aspects of ecology and life history

Table 1. Standardized fishing method followed by commercial fishermen in the western region of Puerto Rico for the duration of this project.

Category	Item	Specification	
Gear Specifications	Туре	Vertical Hook-Line, Electric Reel	
	Number of Lines Fished Per Site (Hook and Line set)	1 (split into two, 10 minute bottom times)	
	Number of Hooks (Hook and Line set)	12	
	Hook Type, Size (Hook and Line set)	Circle, #9	
	Length of Leader Line Attaching Hooks to Main Line (Hook and Line set)	6"	
	Spacing between Leaders/Hooks Along Main Line (Hook and Line set)	18"	
	Weights on end of Main Line (Hook and Line set)	5-10 lbs (specify amount on datasheet; left to Captain's judgement)	
	Bait (S-BRUV and Hook and Line Set)	S-BRUV bait arm: California Squid (Loligo) AND tuna (Thunnus) combined in S-BRUV bait box; Four Loligo and four 2"x2"x2" chunks of Tuna.	
		Hook and Line: bait with Loligo and tuna, with a differing bait everyone other hook.	
Fishing Sample	Site Coordinates (Provided by NOAA)	Decimal degrees	
	Bottom Time for Equipment At Each Site	30 min bottom time for S-BRUV; 20 min total bottom time for hook and line	
Daily Trip	Trip Duration (Dock to Dock Time)	10-12 hrs	
	Maximum Distance from Port	12 nautical miles	
	Estimated Average Sites per Trip Day	3-5	

Table 2. Quantity, range of lengths in millimeters, and average length in millimeters of all species obtained from hook and line sampling.

Species	Count	Range TL (mm)	Average TL (mm)	Range FL (mm)	Average FL (mm)
Apsilus dentatus	1	545	545	501	501
Aulopus filamentosus	1	293	293	259	259
Carcharhinus spp.	2	850-900	875	730-760	745
Cauloltaus spp	1	340	340	325	325
Centrophorus spp	1	1020	1020	900	900
Epinephelus guttatus	1	213	213	205	205
Etelis oculatus	32	272-877	421	215-725	343
Gymnothorax spp	3	530-705	602		
Hyporthodus mystacinus	1	465	465		
Hyporthodus niveatus	1	280	280		280
Lutjanus buccanella	3	245-375	300	227-340	275
Lutjanus vivanus	15	235-430	314	250-395	287
Mustelus spp	6	480-800	574	430-680	502
Ophichthus rex	4	750-960	885		
Ophichtus spp	1	620	620		
Ostichthys trachypoma	1	20	200	180	180
Polymixia nobilus	2	210-240	225	180-200	190
Pristipomoides aquilonaris	15	200-265	239	141-221	198
Pristipomoides maculatus	7	303-423	334	262-360	288
Rhomboplites aurorubens	9	239-350	293	215-310	263
Scyliorhinus spp	1	500	500		
Serranus notospilus	1	222	222	207	207
Squalus clarkae	12	240-570	447	245-500	393
Squalus spp	25	410-705	527	345-620	452
Synagrops spp	1	242	242	215	215
Synodus spp	2	375-455	415	332-407	370
Verilus sordidus	4	332-375	359	297-340	323

Table 3. Quantity of fish caught per month obtained from hook and line sampling.

			Mo	nth			
Species	March	April	May	June	July	August	Total
Apsilus dentatus			1				1
Aulopus filamentosus					1		1
Carcharhinus spp.	1		1				2
Cauloltaus spp		1					1
Centrophorus spp		1					1
Epinephelus guttatus	1						1
Etelis oculatus	3		7	2	14	6	32
Gymnothorax spp					3		3
Hyporthodus mystacinus					1		1
Hyporthodus niveatus			1				1
Lutjanus buccanella	2		1				3
Lutjanus vivanus	1	3	2	5	4		15
Mustelus spp		4	1		1		6
Ophichthus rex	4						4
Ophichtus spp			1				1
Ostichthys trachypoma	1						1
Polymixia nobilus				2			2
Pristipomoides aquilonaris	2	1	1	2	8	1	15
Pristipomoides maculatus	1	1			3	2	7
Rhomboplites aurorubens		1			6	2	9
Scyliorhinus spp		1					1
Serranus notospilus					1		1
Squalus clarkae	3	5	3		1		12
Squalus spp		15		5	5		25
Synagrops spp						1	1
Synodus spp					2		2
Verilus sordidus					4		4
Total Per Month	19	33	19	16	54	12	153

Table 4. Final deposition of each species caught using hook and line fishing methods.

Species	Count	Total Kept	Total Disposed
Apsilus dentatus	1	1	0
Aulopus filamentosus	1	1	0
Carcharhinus spp.	2	0	2
Cauloltaus spp	1	1	0
Centrophorus spp	1	0	1
Epinephelus guttatus	1	0	1
Etelis oculatus	32	32	0
Gymnothorax spp	3	0	3
Hyporthodus mystacinus	1	1	0
Hyporthodus niveatus	1	1	0
Lutjanus buccanella	3	3	0
Lutjanus vivanus	15	15	0
Mustelus spp	6	0	6
Ophichthus rex	4	1	3
Ophichtus spp	1	0	1
Ostichthys trachypoma	1	0	1
Polymixia nobilus	2	0	2
Pristipomoides aquilonaris	15	15	0
Pristipomoides maculatus	7	7	0
Rhomboplites aurorubens	9	9	0
Scyliorhinus spp	1	0	1
Serranus notospilus	1	1	0
Squalus clarkae	12	0	12
Squalus spp	25	0	25
Synagrops spp	1	1	0
Synodus spp	2	0	2
Verilus sordidus	4	0	4
Total	153	89	64

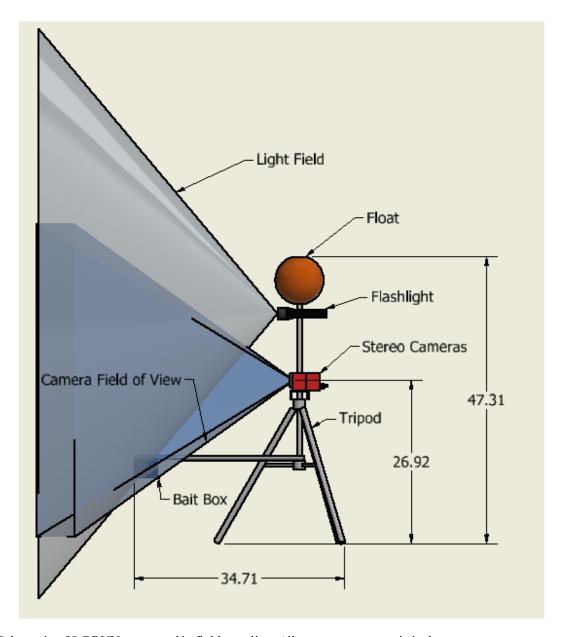


Figure 1. Schematic of S-BRUV array used in field sampling. All measurements are in inches.

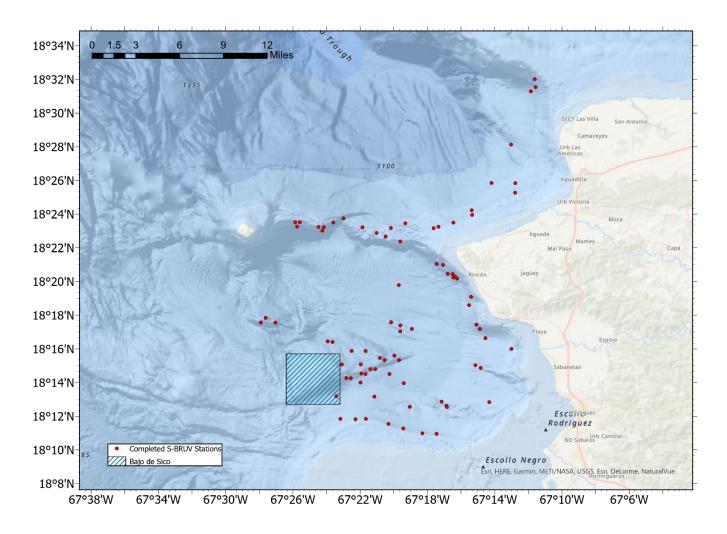


Figure 2. Map of sampling sites completed (red points) in 2021 with S-BRUV and hook and line fishing. The exempted fishing area of Bajo de Sico is depicted by the blue hatched square.

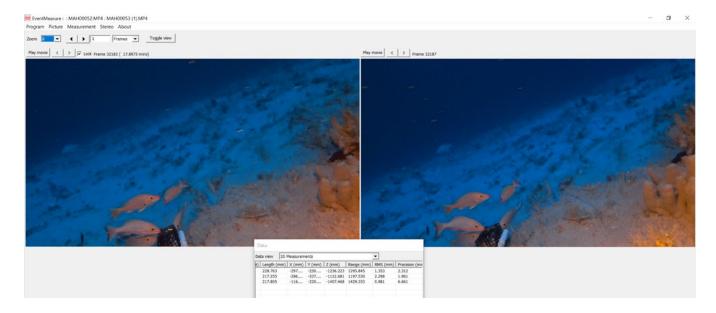


Figure 3. Length measurements of one blackfin snapper and two silk snapper using SeaGIS measurement software.

Appendix A

All survey sites (n=83) sampled across the west coast of Puerto Rico. Listed in each row is the site name, the associated region, sampling year, latitude and longitude in decimal degrees, recorded depth in meters, and the general habitat classification from S-BRUV video. General habitat classifications are listed in the order of most coverage to least when multiple classifications existed.

Site	Region	Year	Latitude	Longitude	Depth	General Habitat
4584	West	2021	18.21	-67.29	346	NA
4694	West	2021	18.21	-67.28	346	NA
3625	West	2021	18.25	-67.25	331	Sand
2944	West	2021	18.28	-67.24	307	Sand
43	West	2021	18.35	-67.29	408	Sand
1788	West	2021	18.39	-67.27	110	Rock, Sand, Epifauna
2189	West	2021	18.35	-67.28	260	Sand
1855	West	2021	18.39	-67.29	165	Epifauna, Sand
3249	West	2021	18.26	-67.36	397	Sand
3606	West	2021	18.25	-67.37	307	Epifauna, Sand
1692	West	2021	18.40	-67.38	476	NA
1846	West	2021	18.39	-67.34	337	Rock, Epifauna
1967	West	2021	18.38	-67.34	223	Rock, Epifauna
41	West	2021	18.29	-67.32	594	Sand
40	West	2021	18.28	-67.33	616	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
3369	West	2021	18.26	-67.33	465	Rock, Epifauna
1838	West	2021	18.39	-67.40	329	NA
44	West	2021	18.38	-67.40	446	NA
2021	West	2021	18.37	-67.33	187	NA
3602	West	2021	18.25	-67.38	194	Rock, Epifauna
4106	West	2021	18.23	-67.32	424	Sand
3731	West	2021	18.33	-67.33	481	Sand
31	West	2021	18.47	-67.22	604	Rock, Epifauna
1233	West	2021	18.43	-67.21	294	Sand
1312	West	2021	18.42	-67.21	181	Sand, Epifauna
3246	West	2021	18.26	-67.38	415	Sand
3472	West	2021	18.25	-67.00	221	Sand, Epifauna
3847	West	2021	18.24	42.00	296	Rock, Epifauna
4451a	West	2021	18.22	-67.39	296	Sand, Epifauna
4459	West	2021	18.22	-67.35	340	Sand
1906	West	2021	18.38	-67.35	358	Rock, Epifauna
886	West	2021	18.52	-67.20	357	Sand, Epifauna
918	West	2021	18.53	-67.19	366	Sand
847	West	2021	18.53	-67.19	225	Sand, Epifauna
1228	West	2021	18.43	-67.24	448	Sand
1548	West	2021	18.40	-67.26	269	Sand
1629	West	2021	18.40	-67.26	170	Sand, Epifauna, Rock
1856	West	2021	18.39	-67.29	113	Rock, Epifauna
1837	West	2021	18.39	-67.41	139	Rock, Epifauna

1762	West	2021	18.39	-67.43	247	Rock, Epifauna
1761	West	2021	18.39	-67.43	256	Rock, Epifauna
5250	West	2021	18.18	-67.29	165	Sand
5247	West	2021	18.18	-67.30	104	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
3853	West	2021	18.24	-67.34	439	NA
4594	West	2021	18.21	-67.24	218	Sand
2858	West	2021	18.27	-67.22	132	Sand, Epifauna
2778	West	2021	18.29	-67.25	218	Sand, Epiradia Sand
3488	West	2021	18.26	-67.34	430	Sand
3726	West	2021	18.25	-67.35	419	Rock, Epifauna
3725	West	2021	18.25	-67.36	337	Sand, Epifauna
36	West	2021	18.29	-67.34	640	Sand, Epirauna Sand Dunes
35 2709	West West	2021	18.29 18.29	-67.33 -67.25	615 165	Sand Eniforms
					476	Sand, Epifauna
3491	West	2021	18.26	-67.33		Rock, Epifauna
4097	West	2021	18.23	-67.37	368	Sand, Epifauna
5157	West	2021	18.19	-67.32	152	Sand
5069	West	2021	18.19	-67.34	124	Sand, Epifauna, Rock
4973	West	2021	18.20	-67.36	115	Sand, Epifauna, Rock
2641	West	2021	18.30	-67.46	369	Sand, Rock, Epifauna
2698	West	2021	18.29	-67.47	346	Sand Dunes, Epifauna
2701	West	2021	18.29	-67.45	384	Sand
4968	West	2021	18.20	-67.39	188	Sand
4971	West	2021	18.20	-67.37	126	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
2406	West	2021	18.32	-67.26	183	Sand
2241	West	2021	18.34	-67.28	320	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
2021	West	2021	18.37	-67.33	188	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
1778	West	2021	18.39	-67.32	353	Sand, Epifauna
2266	West	2021	18.34	-67.27	344	Sand, Epifauna
3969	West	2021	18.24	-67.38	207	Sand Dunes, Epifauna
3970	West	2021	18.24	-67.38	260	Sand
3848	West	2021	18.24	-67.36	384	Sand Dunes
2267	West	2021	18.34	-67.27	276	Rock, Sand, Epifauna
3028	West	2021	18.27	-67.40	512	Sand
3029	West	2021	18.27	-67.39	483	Sand
1840	West	2021	18.39	-67.36	430	NA
1749	West	2021	18.39	-67.39	329	Rock, Epifauna
45	West	2021	18.39	-67.43	452	NA
Site-01	West	2021	18.21	-67.32	338	Sand, Epifauna
Site-02	West	2021	18.21	-67.28	320	Rock, Epifauna, Sand
Site-03	West	2021	18.25	-67.25	291	Rock, Epifauna
Site-04	West	2021	18.34	-67.27	267	Sand
Site-05	West	2021	18.34	-67.28	256	Sand
Site-06	West	2021	18.31	-67.26	293	Sand
Site-07	West	2021	18.26	-67.35	320	Rock, Sand, Epifauna
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^aDenotes the site sampled in Bajo de Sico.