Predation on Ocean Krill

In developing the hypothesis that "high-density demersal layers" of krill (*Meganyctiphanes norvegica*) at the bottom of submarine canyons are a major prey of fishes on Georges Bank, Greene *et al.* (*1*) may be missing a major facet of the trophic interactions among these organisms. According to their hypothesis, the fishes make descents into deep water next to the Bank, where, it is suggested, there is advantage in feeding on these vertical migrators when they are in their normal daytime aggregations. But this is not how the interactions proceed in what probably are similar situations elsewhere.

It has been widely reported (*2–4*) that fishes which inhabit relatively shallow banks or shelves feed heavily by day on organisms that, like *M. norvegica*, make extensive diel vertical migrations in adjacent deep water. The reports have come from the continental shelves of North America (*2*) and Australia (*3*), as well as from a central Pacific atoll (*4*); and in addition to various species of krill, the vertically migrating prey have included copepods and myctophid fishes. In the reported cases, however, the predatory fishes do not descend from the shelf or bank into the adjacent depths to take prey from the concentrations that form there by day. Rather, they feed on individuals that, after having been carried by currents (or swimming) over the shelf-bank while in the surface waters at night, are trapped by the relatively shallow shelf-bank when in the morning they descend toward their normal daytime depths. Apparently these organisms are especially vulnerable to predators in this setting, which is very different from their normal daytime habitat.

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Response: In our paper (*1*), we hypothesized that squid and demersal fish production attributed to Georges Bank might be subsidized by the exploitation of krill from the submarine canyons and other deep waters surrounding the Bank. At present, the evidence for such a subsidy is circumstantial; krill are an important but variable dietary component of the Bank's commercially important squid and demersal fish stocks, and many of these stocks seasonally move off the Bank (as defined by the 200-meter isobath) into the surrounding deep waters where the high-density krill demersal layers are found. Unfortunately, little is known about the behavior and diets of these species when they move into deeper water. As we stated, closer examination of the spatial and temporal coupling between predator and prey populations will be essential to determine the validity of our hypothesis.

Hobson (*2*) raises a valid point with regard to the spatio-temporal coupling between predator and prey populations. If krill are the missing link in the Georges Bank food chain, then they must move onto the Bank either through vertical migration and advection by currents (or active swimming), as Hobson suggests, or the squid and fish stocks must descend into deeper water and feed, as we implied. Initially, we favored the mechanism hypothesized by Hobson, since there is ample evidence for such events occurring on other banks (*3*) and seamounts (*4*) around the world. However, extensive zooplankton and micronekton surveys on Georges Bank (*5*) indicate that krill rarely intrude on the shallower portions of the Bank, and thus the circumstantial evidence for Hobson's hypothesis does not appear to exist. On the other hand, fishery surveys on and around Georges Bank (*6*) indicate that many squid and demersal fish stocks move off the Bank seasonally into the deeper waters, where high-density krill demersal layers have been observed. Therefore, we chose to emphasize the latter hypothesized mechanism for the trophic linkage rather than the one Hobson suggests. So little is

known that neither hypothesis should be given preference. A considerable amount of work by oceanographers and fishery scientists must be done before the role of krill in the Georges Bank food chain can be fully appreciated.

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