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2 **Disturbance and stress: different meanings in ecological**  
3 **dynamics?**

4 **Gábor Borics · Gábor Várbiro · Judit Padisák**

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7 **Abstract** There is an increasing frequency of papers  
8 addressing disturbance and stress in ecology without  
9 clear delimitation of their meaning. Some authors use  
10 the terms disturbance and stress exclusively as  
11 impacts, while others use them for the entire process,  
12 including both causes and effects. In some studies, the  
13 disturbance is considered as a result of a temporary  
14 impact, which is positive for the ecosystem, while  
15 stress is a negative, debilitating impact. By developing  
16 and testing simple theoretical models, the authors  
17 propose to differentiate disturbance and stress by  
18 frequency. If the frequency of the event enables the  
19 variable to reach a dynamic equilibrium which might  
20 be exhibited without this event, then the event (plus its  
21 responses) is a disturbance for the system. If frequency  
22 prevents the variable's return to similar pre-event  
23 dynamics and drives or shifts it to a new trajectory,  
24 then we are facing stress. The authors propose that  
25 changes triggered by the given stimuli can be evalu-  
26 ated on an absolute scale, therefore, direction of

change of the variable must not be used to choose one 27  
term or the other, i.e. to choose between stress and 28  
disturbance. 29

**Keywords** Terminology · Frequency scale · 30  
Disturbance · Perturbation · Stress 31

**Introduction** 33

Ecosystems are changing throughout time. However, 34  
depending on the scale of observation, they may show 35  
characteristics that correspond to a relatively stable, 36  
equilibrium state (Wiens, 1989). Equilibrium states 37  
are vulnerable: they might change abruptly or grad- 38  
ually due to repetitively, stochastically or continu- 39  
ously acting events. 40

Disturbance, perturbation and stress are the terms 41  
that denote to these events in ecological studies. 42  
Application of the term disturbance goes back as far as 43  
the beginning of the last century (Cooper, 1926). The 44  
term perturbation has also been used since the early 45  
ages of ecology as synonym of disturbance (Rykiel, 46  
1985). After Selye (1936) published the physiological 47  
stress concept, it became popular in other fields of 48  
science, e.g. psychology (Lazarus, 1966) sociology 49  
(Baker & Chapman, 1962), or ecology (Barrett, 1968; 50  
Esch et al., 1975). Based on the Web of Knowledge 51  
(ISI) database, the term disturbance occurred 144 times 52  
in the title of articles between 2000 and 2005, while 53  
1,245 times between 2006 and 2011. The occurrences 54

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55 of the term stress were 89 and 153 for these periods.  
 56 Despite the increasing number of papers addressing  
 57 disturbance and stress in ecology, the use of these terms  
 58 remained ambiguous. In the scientific literature 'dis-  
 59 turbance' generally refers to an important factor  
 60 affecting community structure and dynamics (Pickett  
 61 et al., 1989) preventing its self-organization towards an  
 62 ecological equilibrium (Reynolds et al., 1993). Many  
 63 authors use this term for destructive events, e.g. storms  
 64 (Connell, 1978), floods (Biggs, 1995), fire or insect  
 65 outbreaks (Johnson, 1992).

66 The use of the term stress is much less consistent  
 67 across studies. Definitions depend on the background  
 68 of the researchers and the research objects (Otte,  
 69 2001). The terminological inconsistency is clearly  
 70 illustrated by the following stress definitions:

- 71 – 'perturbation (stressor) applied to a system' (Bar-  
 72 rett et al., 1976);
- 73 – 'stress, consists of factors that place prior restric-  
 74 tions on plant production' (Grime, 1979);
- 75 – 'unfavorable deflections' (Odum et al., 1979);
- 76 – 'detrimental or disorganizing influence' (Odum,  
 77 1985);
- 78 – 'external force or factor, or stimulus that causes  
 79 changes in the ecosystem', (Rappport et al., 1985);
- 80 – 'external constraints limiting the rates of resource  
 81 acquisition, growth or reproduction of organisms'  
 82 (Grime, 1989);
- 83 – 'Any environmental factor which restricts growth  
 84 and reproduction of an organism or population'  
 85 (Crawford, 1989);
- 86 – 'exposure to extraordinarily unfavourable condi-  
 87 tions' (Larcher, 1991),
- 88 – 'environmental influences that cause measurable  
 89 ecological changes' (Freedman, 1995);
- 90 – 'conditions that cause an aberrant change in  
 91 physiological processes resulting eventually in  
 92 injury' (Nilsen & Orcutt, 1996).
- 93 – 'Stress is evoked in organisms living at the edges  
 94 of their ecological niches, where environmental  
 95 conditions may exceed the ranges required for  
 96 normal growth and development'. (Roelofs et al.,  
 97 2008).

98 Reading these examples it can be concluded that  
 99 there is no clear difference between definitions used  
 100 for disturbance and stress and attempts at discrimina-  
 101 tion of these terms are rare (Stenger-Kovács et al.,  
 102 2013). An additional difficulty is that some authors use

the terms disturbance and stress exclusively as stimuli, 103  
 while others use them for the entire process, including 104  
 both causes and effects. In some studies, the distur- 105  
 bance is considered as temporary setback, which is 106  
 positive for the ecosystem, while stress is a negative 107  
 debilitating impact (Rappport & Whitford, 1999). What 108  
 is common in the definitions can be summarised as 109  
 follows: due to some (external or internal) stimulus 110  
 one (or several) of the system attributes change(s) con- 111  
 siderably. Rykiel (1985) overviewed the semantic and 112  
 conceptual problems of the terms and made a proposal 113  
 for working definitions of perturbations, stress and 114  
 disturbance, but these did not become generally 115  
 accepted. (Partly, because his concept did not fit into 116  
 other models, e.g. Grime's well-known CSR theory). 117

118 The lack of consensus on definitions leads to  
 119 semantic confusion and conceptual ambiguity, which  
 120 results in difficulties in finding connections between  
 121 various models used in ecology.

122 The aim of this study is to propose model-based  
 123 definitions for stress and disturbance.

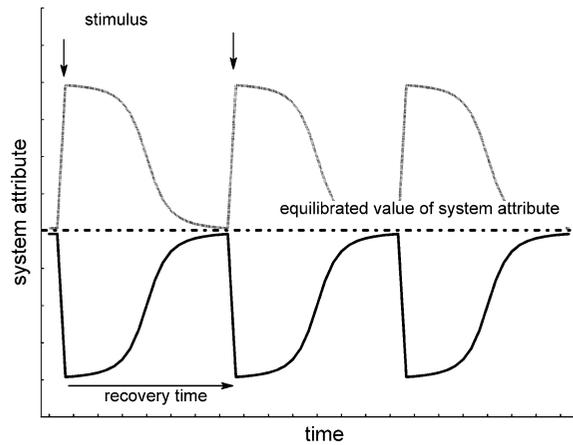
## 124 Theory

125 Our definitions rest upon four basic principles. First,  
 126 both terms (stress and disturbance) imply the whole  
 127 process, that is, the impact, the system impacted and  
 128 response of the system. The second, direction of the  
 129 changes in the system attributes is irrelevant. The  
 130 third, frequency of the impact is of basic importance.  
 131 The fourth, we supposed that in equilibrium state the  
 132 system attribute remains constant.

133 The above principles serve as a basis for distin-  
 134 guishing disturbance and stress. Supposing that the  
 135 impact is decisive, behaviour of the ecosystem can be  
 136 represented in an  $x$ - $y$  plane, where  $x$ -axis corresponds  
 137 to time, while  $y$ -axis corresponds to an arbitrary  
 138 system attribute (Fig. 1).

139 Ideally, we suppose that the ecosystem is in an  
 140 equilibrium state when the given state variable  
 141 statistically does not change through time. As a result  
 142 of an impact, the value of the system attribute changes  
 143 (into positive or negative directions) and this is  
 144 followed by recovery and return to unimpacted state.  
 145 Time needed for the system to reach the basic level is  
 146 defined as recovery time (RT later in the text) (Fig. 1).

147 If the frequency of the stimulus increases  
 148 (Fig. 2b, c) (i.e. the time between the periodic



**Fig. 1** Changes of an optional system variable ( $y$ ) through time ( $x$ ). Arrows indicate stimuli

149 events  $< RT$ ), the system variable sets back before  
150 complete recovery.

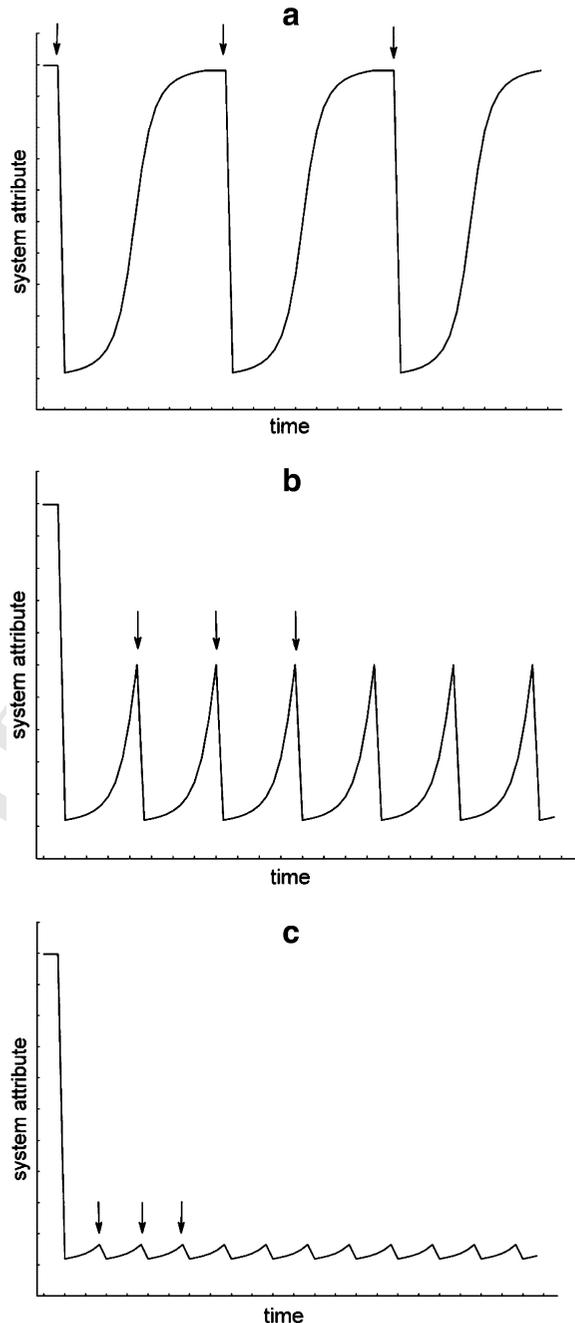
151 Frequently occurring events result in early setbacks,  
152 thus the system performs like those that are under the  
153 pressure of a continuously active agent (Fig. 2c).

154 Based on the possible scenarios shown above,  
155 disturbance is defined as occasionally occurring or  
156 periodic event (when the time between events  $> RT$ )  
157 that results in an abrupt change of the system, with the  
158 possibility of recovery (Fig. 2a).

159 Stress is defined as frequently occurring (time  
160 between events  $< RT$ ) or continuous event, when as a  
161 result of the impact the system does not recover,  
162 therefore, value of the system variable does not reach  
163 the basic level (Fig. 2b, c).

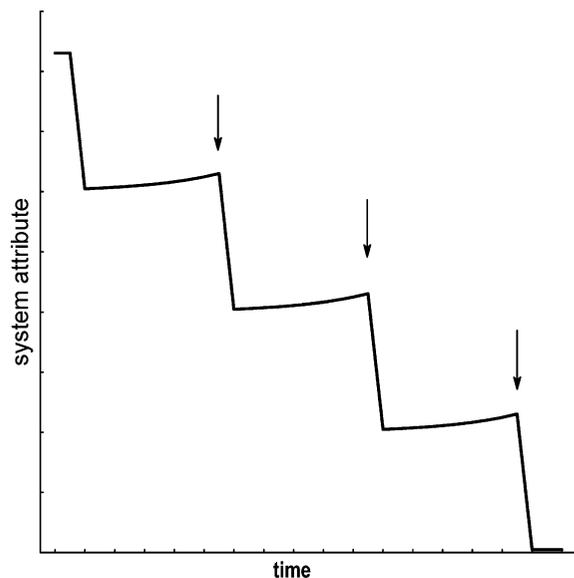
## 164 Integration of the terms in ecological models

165 When new definitions are proposed it is worth  
166 elucidating their relationship with existing models  
167 and phrasings. In case of the CSR theory (Grime,  
168 1974), which is developed to classify adaptive strategies  
169 in terrestrial plant species, stress is defined as  
170 'external constraints limiting the rates of resource  
171 acquisition, growth or reproduction of organisms'  
172 (Grime, 1989). Based on this criterion, nutrients, water  
173 and heat are considered as stressors. In most of the  
174 cases these resources act continuously on macro-  
175 phytes, therefore, based on our proposed definitions,  
176 these are also stressors. But Grime's definitions  
177 cannot be applied to well-known phenomenon like



**Fig. 2** Changes of an optional system variable ( $y$ ) through time ( $x$ ) at low (a), at medium (b) and at high frequency stimuli (c)

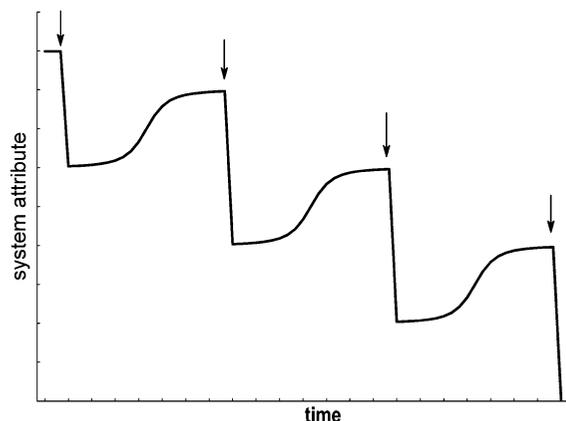
178 eutrophication, since the nutrient enrichment increases  
179 the rate reproduction and growth of plants. Thus, we  
180 argue that Grime's stress definition cannot be consid-  
181 ered as generally accepted approach, which can be  
182 applied for all situations. In our opinion none of the  
183 environmental constraints can be declared as stressor



**Fig. 3** Changes of a system variable (calculating with a constant setback) leads to stress of fatal consequences

184 or disturbance-creating impact without considering  
 185 the frequency of the impact and resilience of the  
 186 recipient system. As to the intermediate hypothesis  
 187 (IDH), based on our definitions both high and inter-  
 188 mediate disturbances are considered as stress event for  
 189 the system because frequency of the impact does not  
 190 allow the system to reach the low diversity state which  
 191 should ensue from the Hardin's competitive exclusion  
 192 theory (Hardin, 1961).

193 Analysis of shallow lakes' phytoplankton time  
 194 series records serve as an example for both disturbance  
 195 and stress events. Padišák (1993) demonstrated that  
 196 wind-induced disturbances of intermediate frequency  
 197 ( $\sim 3\text{--}5 \times$  generation time) resulted in characteristic  
 198 periodic changes in phytoplankton diversity in Lake  
 199 Balaton, while at low disturbance frequency diversity  
 200 diminished. Wind-induced mixing of high frequency  
 201 ( $\sim$  daily) in the large, very shallow Neusiedlersee rolls  
 202 back euplanktic taxa and contributes to the develop-  
 203 ment of a unique meroplankton dynamics (Padišák &  
 204 Dokulil, 1994), during which large size diatoms of  
 205 benthic origin predominate in the turbid water. These  
 206 examples demonstrate that different frequencies of  
 207 otherwise identical influences lead to different  
 208 responses. Based on the reasonings of the previous  
 209 paragraph, low disturbance events at Lake Balaton are  
 210 typical disturbances, while events of intermediate and



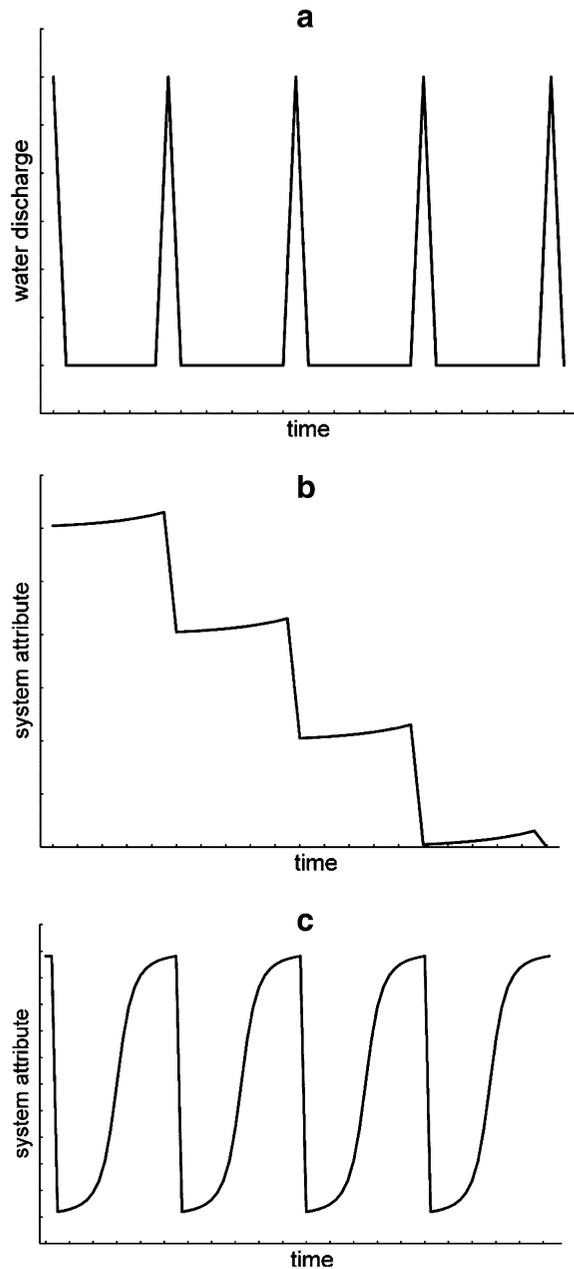
**Fig. 4** Changes of a system variable (calculating with a constant setback) results in fatal disturbance

high frequency are considered as stress for the lake's  
 phytoplankton.

Occasionally, both disturbance and stress might  
 have serious or fatal consequences. Figure 3 illustrates  
 the situation where the measure of the stimulus (and  
 the system response) is constant. In case of stress the  
 value of the system variable decreases step by step,  
 does not stabilise at a certain level and finally reaches  
 the  $Y = 0$  value. (This process is responsible for the  
 extinction of sensitive taxa during pollution).

Fatal disturbances can also develop when complete  
 recovery of the system cannot be accomplished. The  
 process is similar to that shown in Fig. 2a, but needs a  
 reasonably longer period of time. This process can be  
 observed in nature when periodic floods wash out  
 species from pools or streambeds (Fig. 4).

In the examples shown above the impacts were  
 physical processes, while diversity was used as  
 response variable. Nevertheless disturbance and stress  
 can be induced by various other agents and both  
 subsume a variety of ecological manifestations. Rap-  
 port & Whitford (1999) classified the impacts into four  
 main groups: physical restructuring; discharge of  
 waste residuals; introduction of exotic species; and  
 overharvesting. That the given impact results in a  
 disturbance or stress cannot be prognosticated without  
 the knowledge of the temporal and spatial character-  
 istics of the stimulus and characteristics of the  
 ecosystem affected. For example, recurrent floods  
 (Fig. 5a) are perceived as stress for fish (Fig. 5b)  
 and are perceived as disturbance for benthic algae  
 (Fig. 5c).



**Fig. 5** Impact of flood events **a** on different communities. Community needs longer **(b)** and shorter **(c)** recovery time

## 243 Adaptations

244 Changes of the environment evoke adaptational  
 245 responses at various timescales and at different levels  
 246 of biological organisation. Frequency of changes of  
 247 the environment basically influences the level of

response. Continuous and high frequency impacts 248  
 might generate physiological, population-level and 249  
 community-level adaptational mechanisms. Adapta- 250  
 tion of phytoplankton to low incident light intensity 251  
 serves as an example for multi-level adaptation. 252  
 Microalgae are capable of adapting to reduced photon 253  
 flux densities individually by increasing the cellular 254  
 pigment content or changing the pigment composition 255  
 (Richardson et al., 1983). In low light conditions the 256  
 selection acts continuously upon functionally related 257  
 traits, favouring those, which utilize the light most 258  
 efficiently within the population. 259

Community level adaptation is manifested as a 260  
 change in species composition favouring algae that are 261  
 capable for chromatic adaptation and/or have elon- 262  
 gated form; therefore, considered as strong light 263  
 competitors (Reynolds, 2006). 264

Adaptational responses require that individuals and 265  
 populations be exposed to changes for a longer period 266  
 of time; therefore, individuals or populations cannot 267  
 adapt to abrupt events like disturbances. Neverthe- 268  
 less fatal disturbance might select the most sensitive 269  
 taxa, but this process takes place at higher levels of 270  
 organisation (community and ecosystem level) and 271  
 operates at longer (evolutionary) time scale. These 272  
 kinds of disturbances e.g. huge fish kills (Borics et al., 273  
 2000), storms (Scheffer, 1998) frequently occur in 274  
 nature and are responsible for shifting of ecosystems 275  
 between alternative stable states (Beisner et al., 2003). 276

After the organisms or populations adapted to the 277  
 new conditions, these conditions cannot be regarded as 278  
 stressful anymore (Otte, 2001). In this case the lack of 279  
 the continuously acting impact means disturbance or 280  
 stress for the system. Chorus (2003) demonstrated that 281  
 in continuously mixed lakes the intermittent calm 282  
 phases would represent a disturbance for the phyto- 283  
 plankton adapted to turbid conditions. She applied 284  
 the term 'intermediate quiescence' for this kind of 285  
 situation. 286

It is important to note here that a number of 287  
 simplifications were applied during development of 288  
 the above models. For example, we disregarded that 289  
 disturbances are in principle stochastic, unpredictable 290  
 events (c.f. Reynolds et al., 1993), or that in lack of 291  
 disturbance competitive exclusion will occur that, 292  
 itself, results in change of the level of the system 293  
 attribute (for example, diversity decreases; c.f. Connell, 294  
 1978). Furthermore, though it is inevitably important, 295  
 we did not consider effects of intensity of impacts. 296

297 These considerations can be incorporated into more  
298 complex models.

## 299 Conclusions

300 We proposed here to differentiate the terms distur-  
301 bance and stress by their frequency. If the frequency of  
302 the event enables the variable to reach a dynamic  
303 equilibrium which might be exhibited without this  
304 event, then the event (plus its responses) is considered  
305 as disturbance for the system. If frequency prevents  
306 the variable's return to similar pre-event dynamics and  
307 drives or shift it to a new trajectory, then the event  
308 considered as stress. Thus, the use of the terms  
309 depends on the relationship between the frequency of  
310 the impact and resilience of the system variable.

311 The authors think that changes triggered by the  
312 given impact can be evaluated on an absolute scale.  
313 From terminological point of view there should not be  
314 good or bad changes, just changes. Thus, subjective  
315 judgement of ecosystems' changes (e.g. good or bad)  
316 should be avoided when disturbance and stress are  
317 defined.

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