Conference Abstract

Using Unsupervised Artificial Neural Networks to Detect Sibling Species: A case in Myxomycetes

Francisco Pando[‡], Ignacio Heredia[§], Lara Lloret[§]

‡ Real Jardin Botanico -CSIC, Madrid, Spain
§ Insituto de Fisica de Cantabria - CSIC/UC, Santander, Spain

Corresponding author: Francisco Pando (pando@rjb.csic.es)

Abstract

Species distribution modelling (SDM) --i.e. the prediction of species potential geographic distributions based on correlations between known presence records and the environmental conditions at occurrence localities-- is one of the most freqently cited developments in recent years in the realm of biodiversity studies (Web of Science 2019). The reasons for the explosion in SDM studies reside in: a) the pressure to know species distributions (under both present and future climate change scenarios) with precision to satisfy scientific as well as societal objectives; b) the impossibility of knowing every occurrence of all but the most conspicuous and/or special interest species; c) the availability of primary occurrence and environmental data in unprecedented amounts, thanks to initiatives like the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF); and d) the development of algorithms and software, along with the computing power, which allow inference of species distribution models from the available data.

The standard methods to produce such models are based on environmental feature vectors, and some well-established algorithms such as distance-based machine learning, regression or a combination of these (Tsoar et al. 2007).

In this presentation, we explore deep learning techniques (LeCun et al. 2015), particularly how those developed in recent years could contribute to the study of species distribution (see also Botella et al. 2018; Deneu et al. 2018). In this contribution we aim to

identify sibling species on the basis of their ecological preferences. In this exercise, we prepare an image-based environmental representation space using an unsupervised classification approach, instead of a set of environmental feature vectors. For our case study, we chose a well-known cosmopolitan myxomycete (i.e., mycetozoan) species: *Hemitrichia serpula* (Scop.) Rostaf., whose ecological preferences --involving several biomes-- may suggest that it could comprise several sibling species.

Keywords

deep learning, species distribution, ecological niche modelling, sibling species, Myxomycetes

Presenting author

Francisco Pando

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