

Trophic ecology of the juveniles of two jack species (*Caranx latus* and *C. hippos*) in contrasted tropical estuaries

Guazzelli Gonzalez Julio ^{1,2,*}, Darnaude Audrey M. ², Duarte-Neto Paulo J. ³, Le Loch Francois ⁴,
 Lima Mayara Constantino De ¹, Menard Frédéric ⁵, Ferreira Valdimere ¹, Fredou Flávia Lucena ¹,
 Munaron Jean-Marie ³, Frédoú Thierry ¹

¹ Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco, UFRPE, Departamento de Recursos Pesqueiros e Aquicultura, Rua Dom Manuel de Medeiros, s/n, Recife, PE, CEP: 52.171-900, Brazil

² MARBEC, Univ. Montpellier, CNRS, IRD, Ifremer, Montpellier, France

³ Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco, UFRPE, Departamento de Estatística e Informática, Rua Dom Manuel de Medeiros, s/n, Recife, PE, CEP: 52.171-900, Brazil

⁴ IRD, Univ Brest, CNRS, LEMAR, Ifremer, F-29280, Plouzane, France

⁵ Aix Marseille Univ, Univ Toulon, CNRS, IRD, MIO, UM110, Marseille, France

* Corresponding author : Julio Guazzelli Gonzalez, email address :
julio.guazzelli-gonzalez@etu.umontpellier.fr

Abstract :

Jacks are highly prized tropical marine fish. Most of them complete their whole life cycle at sea but some use estuaries at the juvenile stage before moving back to coastal waters and joining the adult exploited stocks. Little is known about jacks' trophic ecology in estuaries, although their juveniles' ability to successfully exploit available resources in these productive environments may strongly affect stock recruitment success in the species concerned. In this study, stomach content and stable isotope analyses were combined to investigate diet and food niche overlap of juveniles from two sympatric species of jacks (*Caranx latus* and *C. hippos*) in three contrasted estuaries (Suape, Sirinhaém and Santa Cruz) spread along the northeastern Brazilian coast. Overall, although the juveniles of *C. latus* exhibited a more piscivorous diet than those of *C. hippos*, the two species had very similar isotopic niches, with mean $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of $-19.35 \pm 2.10\text{‰}$ and $11.03 \pm 1.11\text{‰}$ and of $-19.10 \pm 1.82\text{‰}$ and $10.21 \pm 1.21\text{‰}$, for *C. hippos* and *C. latus* respectively. In all the estuaries sampled, both species mostly ate fish ($N_i = 20.1\text{--}46.2\%$, $W_i = 60.1\text{--}75.1\%$, essentially Gobiidae and Clupeidae) and crustaceans ($N_i = 26.0\text{--}65.9\%$, $W_i = 23.3\text{--}38.2\%$, mainly Penaeidae shrimps). As a result, the overlap between their global estuarine isotopic niches was $>68\%$. However, diet composition for the two species varied among estuaries, indicating that their juveniles partly adapt their food preferences to local prey availability. Notably, prey preferences differed significantly between the two species only in the Santa Cruz estuary, where $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values were the highest for both species. Conversely, interspecific differences in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ratios were greater in the Suape and the Sirinhaém estuaries, likely reflecting a wider diversity in the carbon sources sustaining local food webs. Thus, combined differences in juvenile diet and food web structure at each location resulted in much-reduced local isotopic niche overlaps between the two species (from 27% in Suape to 57% in Santa Cruz). These results have important implications for resource and ecosystem management in northeastern Brazil and call for systematic cross-site comparisons when evaluating fish ecology and resource partitioning within estuarine systems.

Highlights

► The trophic ecology of two jack species was described for three tropical estuaries. ► Both species mostly eat fish and crustaceans during their estuarine juvenile life. ► Their overall isotopic niches are very similar and the overlap between them is >68%. ► However, spatial changes in diet allow to reduce this latter to 27–57%. ► Food partitioning strategies between the two species differ among estuaries.

Keywords : Marine fish, Trophic relationships, Stomach content, Stable isotope analysis, Carbon, Nitrogen.

43 1. Introduction

44 Estuaries are highly exploited ecosystems a host a high number of fish species (Blaber 1997;
45 Vasconcelos et al., 2015), many of which colonize them during the juvenile stage seeking for protection
46 and favorable growth conditions (Nagelkerken et al., 2000; Beck et al., 2001; Dahlgren et al., 2006).
47 Although knowledge on the use of estuaries by tropical fishes has significantly grown in recent years
48 (Blaber, 2013), the information available concerns only a few estuarine systems so further research is
49 needed to assess the actual value of tropical estuaries as fish juvenile habitats (Blaber and Barletta, 2016).
50 Indeed, a variety of biological and physical factors might affect the physiology of fish and their resource
51 use in estuaries (Blaber, 2007). For instance, estuaries' morphology and spatiotemporal dynamics
52 modulate not only fish diversity (França et al., 2012; Vasconcelos et al., 2015), but also food web
53 structure and composition (Harrison and Whitfield, 2006, 2012; Silva-Júnior et al., 2017), resource
54 availability (Doi et al., 2009; Hoenighaus et al., 2011; Boucek and Rehage, 2013) and seascape
55 connectivity (Sheaves, 2009; Ogden et al., 2014). The degree to which each species benefits from
56 available food resources in these complex environments may also influence the survival and fitness of
57 fish juveniles (Le Pape and Bonhommeau, 2015; Yeung and Yang, 2017; Hiraoka et al., 2019). Therefore,
58 investigating species' resource use in contrasted estuarine juvenile habitats can not only improve the
59 knowledge and understanding of their ecology (*e.g.* Stevens et al., 2018) but also help defining local
60 management strategies (Sheaves et al., 2015). This is particularly true in tropical regions where the socio-
61 economic demand for coastal fish resources is growing (Barlow et al., 2018; FAO, 2018) and where
62 environmental awareness is only just emerging (Mitra and Zaman, 2016).

63 Species ecological niches play a central role in defining available resource use and interspecific
64 interactions at the community level (Van Valen, 1965; Ross, 1986). Among the many facets of the
65 ecological niche, the trophic niche is perhaps the easiest to evaluate (Ross, 1986). It can be studied using
66 empirical methods like stomach content analysis (SCA), which provides a snapshot of the items ingested
67 by the individuals (Hyslop, 1980; Pinnegar and Polunin, 2000), or through the use of natural tags such as
68 stable isotope analysis (SIA). This later approach, usually combines nitrogen ($\delta^{15}\text{N}$) and carbon ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$)
69 isotopic ratios (Fry, 2006) to provide an integrated image of the food resources assimilated by the
70 individuals over periods of time ranging from a few weeks to a few months (Herzka, 2005). The method
71 relies on the assumption that the isotope ratios of an organism reflect, in a predictive way, those of its
72 food sources (Fry, 2006). In general, the $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ is used as a proxy for organisms' trophic position in the

73 food chain (Post, 2002; Martínez Del Rio et al., 2009), while the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ allows identifying the main organic
74 matter source(s) supporting their growth (Fry, 2006; Layman, 2007). Combining SIA and SCA enables
75 better resolution of dietary patterns and accurate identification of the food sources sustaining animal
76 growth (Silveira et al., 2020). In this study, we applied these complementary methods to describe
77 variations in diet and compare strategies of estuary resource use in the juveniles of two sympatric species
78 of jacks along the northeastern coast of Brazil.

79 Jacks (*Caranx* spp.) are marine fish found both in inshore and offshore coastal environments
80 (Figueiredo and Menezes, 1980; Smith-Vaniz, 2002). Although these large predators are neritic and reef
81 associated when adult, some of them may use a mosaic of habitats along their life cycle and colonize
82 inshore estuaries as juveniles (Smith-Vaniz, 2002). This is the case for both the horse-eye jack (*Caranx*
83 *latus*, Agassiz 1831) and the crevalle jack (*Caranx hippos*, Linnaeus 1766), two highly exploited species
84 with a widespread distribution in the Atlantic Ocean (Figueiredo and Menezes, 1980). In Brazil, *C. latus*
85 and *C. hippos* represent almost 75% of the national landings for jacks, with more than 6.000 tons fished
86 annually between 2009 and 2011 (MPA, 2011). Yet, little is known about their life cycle and their
87 ecology at the juvenile stage. The yearlings of the two species are found in a broad range of inshore and
88 coastal habitats along the Brazilian coast (Figueiredo and Menezes, 1980; Paiva and Araújo, 2010), and
89 information regarding their trophic ecology in estuaries is particularly scarce (e.g. Vasconcelos Filho et
90 al., 2010; Medeiros et al., 2017).

91 Differences in resource use among juvenile habitats may affect fish early growth and body
92 condition (e.g. Isnard et al. 2015) and modulate recruitment success in exploited species (Gillanders et al.,
93 2015). To avoid competition for food and optimize energy acquisition, sympatric species usually tend to
94 partition resources at multiple scales (Schoener, 1974; Losos, 2000). However, *C. latus* and *C. hippos* not
95 only have similar body shapes and lengths, but they are also both reported to feed mainly on fish and
96 crustaceans (Hofling et al., 1998; Smith-Vaniz, 2002; Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2010). Therefore, they
97 might have similar uses of estuarine resources and their co-occurrence in certain estuaries might result in
98 an interspecific competition for food, with potentially high consequences in terms of local fisheries
99 production. To investigate this, we assessed variations in the diets and isotopic niches of their juveniles
100 among three neighboring Brazilian estuaries with contrasted morphological and biological features, and
101 where the relative densities for the juveniles of the two species differ markedly (Paiva and Araújo, 2010;

102 Silva-Júnior et al., 2017), which allowed exploring whether their feeding strategies change under different
103 degrees of potential competition.

104

105 **2. Material and Methods**

106 *2.1. Study area*

107 The three tropical estuarine systems selected for this work (Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém, Fig.
108 1) are located in the western South Atlantic Ocean, along the coast of the Pernambuco state, on the
109 northeastern coast of Brazil. In this area, the climate is sub-tropical, with annual temperatures ranging
110 from 18 to 32°C, around an annual mean of 24°C (CPRH, 2003; 2003a). Rainfalls occur all year round
111 along the shore but they are more intense in the late autumn and winter (May to August). The driest
112 period of the year is late spring and early summer (from October to December) due to the northward
113 displacement of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ICTZ) in the Atlantic and the occurrence of stronger
114 southeast trade winds (CPRH, 2003; 2003a; Hounsou-gbo, et al. 2015). The local climate is influenced
115 both by seasonal (displacement of the ICTZ) and by inter-annual (*e.g.* El Niño Southern Oscillation –
116 ENSO) meteorological phenomena, which results in a highly variable weather and precipitation patterns
117 among years (Hastenrath, 2012).

118 Although relatively close to each other, the Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém estuaries exhibit
119 distinct morphological and biological features and are subject to different freshwater inputs and degrees
120 of anthropogenic pressures (Table 1). Located in the north of the Pernambuco state, the estuarine complex
121 of Santa Cruz is the largest estuary of the three, and one of the most important fishery ground of the state
122 (Medeiros et al., 2001). It consists in a shallow U-shape channel that receives continental inputs from six
123 rivers (draining three hydrological basins) and is connected to the sea by two large entrances (Silva et al.,
124 2011). Because the seawater inflow is high, the estuary is under a strong marine influence (Flores Montes
125 et al., 1998; Figueiredo et al., 2006). Furthermore, the reduced current velocity in the inner part of the
126 main channel results in a predominance of muddy substrates along the estuary (CPRH, 2003), where
127 hypersaline conditions prevail during the driest months of the year (Medeiros and Kjerfve, 1993). The
128 local fauna comprises a large number of marine and estuarine invertebrates and fish that use this estuary
129 at different stages of their life (Vasconcelos-Filho and Oliveira, 1999). The fish assemblage is diverse,
130 with numerous species with distinct morphologies, as illustrated by the presence of bottom-associated
131 species like gobies (Silva-Júnior et al., 2017; Ferreira et al., 2019).

132 The estuaries of Suape and Sirinhaém, both situated in the south of the Pernambuco state, are
133 smaller (Table 1). Because the annual rainfall in the state increases southwards (CPRH, 2003a), they
134 receive higher freshwater inputs, especially Sirinhaém (Table 1). The Suape estuary is formed by two
135 rivers, which flow into a shallow brackish lagoon with limited connection to the sea. It can be classified
136 as euryhaline and exhibits the lowest primary productivity of the three estuaries studied (Silva et al.,
137 2019; Table 1). The estuary of Sirinhaém is the smallest estuary studied, but that with the highest
138 percentage of mangrove cover (Table 1). Located within two marine protected areas (CPRH, 2003a), it
139 gathers a variety of interconnected lagoons and channels that spread on the shallow flood plain around the
140 main bed of the Sirinhaém river, which constitutes its sole connection to the sea (CPRH, 2003a). This
141 particular configuration intensifies the effects of the watershed dynamics, with salinities ranging from
142 nearly 0 at low tide to up to 30 at high tide (Silva et al., 2009). The fish assemblages of the Sirinhaém and
143 Suape estuaries are similar, with a common dominance of pelagic species (Bezerra Junior et al., 2011).
144 Moreover, both estuaries exhibit much lower densities of *C. hippos* than those observed in Santa-Cruz
145 (Silva-Júnior et al., 2017).

146

147 2.2. Fish sampling and diet composition

148 The *Caranx latus* and *C. hippos* juveniles used for this work were captured over five successive
149 years (2015-2019), using both beach seines (20 x 1.9 m, mesh 20 mm), trawled along the river banks, and
150 block nets (350 x 2.9 m, mesh 70 mm) set close to mangrove creeks. Although sampling design was not
151 even among years and estuaries, sampling surveys in each estuary were carried out for all months and
152 always included the same locations (Fig. 1). To account for potential changes in feeding habitat
153 preferences according to the season or increasing fish size, juvenile jacks were systematically sampled in
154 all the main types of habitat they occupy in each estuary. These habitat types were determined according
155 to local fishermen's knowledge on *Caranx* sp. occurrence in the estuaries and confirmed by prior
156 exploratory surveys. They comprise main foraging grounds for the two species, within and outside the
157 shore-fringed mangroves that predominate in the three estuaries. In all three estuaries, both the mudbanks
158 below fringing mangrove and the adjacent river banks, of maximum 1.5 m depth, were sampled at low
159 tide. However, in the larger and deeper Santa Cruz estuary, juvenile jacks were also systematically
160 collected within the central channel of the estuary, where water depth remains above 5 m at low tide. On
161 the river banks and in the Santa Cruz central channel, sediments are composed of a mix of thin sand and

162 silt, and mangrove litter and macroalgae occasionally found on the bottom. Depending on the size and
 163 geomorphology of the estuary, fish juveniles were collected at 2 to 5 sites per habitat type for each
 164 sampling date. This allowed covering most of the spatiotemporal variability in juvenile distribution, and
 165 associated diet variation, between and within estuaries for the two species.

166 Upon collection, all juveniles were identified following specific literature (Figueiredo and
 167 Menezes, 1980; Smith-Vaniz, 2002), measured (standard length – SL in mm) and stored frozen until
 168 further analysis. Their stomach contents were assessed under a stereomicroscope until 70 non-empty
 169 stomachs per species and estuary could be gathered. As densities for the two jack species are rather low in
 170 estuaries during the wetter months of the year (Vilar et al., 2011; Silva-Júnior et al., 2017; da Silva et al.,
 171 2018), fish from different years had to be pooled to reach a minimum number of 10 non-empty stomachs
 172 for both the dry (September to March) and the rainy (April to August) seasons in the area (CPRH, 2003;
 173 2003a), and a maximum of 30 individuals per year for each estuary. Prey items in all stomachs were
 174 identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible, depending on their degree of digestion. All identified
 175 prey items were counted and weighed (g) and well-preserved ones, *i.e.* those only slightly digested, were
 176 measured (total length, in mm).

177 For both species, global diet composition was characterized using the frequency of occurrence (F_i)
 178 and the relative percentage in number (N_i) and in weight (W_i) of each prey item. F_i corresponds to the
 179 number of individual stomachs containing the prey item i divided by the total number of stomachs
 180 containing food. N_i and W_i represent the relative number or weight of the prey item i divided by the total
 181 number or total weight of prey in the stomachs, respectively. In order to account for the uncertainty
 182 associated to these indexes and provide a confidence interval (95%) for each prey item, a bootstrap
 183 procedure based on 5000 re-sampling trials was used (Tirasin and Jorgensen, 1999). The importance of
 184 each prey item in the diet was estimated using the alimentary coefficient (Q) proposed by Hureau (1970):

$$185 \quad Q = N_i \times W_i.$$

186 According to Hureau (1970), prey items should be considered preferential when $Q \geq 200$, secondary when
 187 $20 \leq Q < 200$, and occasional ($Q < 20$). All dietary indexes were calculated both using major taxonomic
 188 groups (*e.g.* Teleostei) and applying the lowest possible identification levels, down to family.

189

190 2.3. Stable isotope analyses (SIA)

191 For each species, 10 to 30 juveniles from each estuary were selected for SIA. As the minimum size
192 for both species in our samples was 35 mm SL, these fish were chosen to measure at least 60 mm in size
193 (SL) to ensure that the isotopic compositions from their local prey were incorporated within the tissue at
194 the time of capture (Herzka 2005). Fish were collected in 2015, 2018 and 2019 during both the dry and
195 the rainy seasons (APAC, 2019), so their isotopic ratios should accurately reflect the temporal (inter and
196 intra-annual) variabilities in fish diet and food web composition at each estuary. Basal estuarine organic
197 matter sources, *i.e.* the main benthic algae (*Sargassum* spp., *Ulva* spp., *Gracilaria cervicornis*), the
198 microphytobenthos, the mangrove trees (rotten leaves from *Rhizophorae mangle*), and the organic matter
199 present in the surface sediment (SOM) and in the water column (POM), were collected in each estuary in
200 2015, both during the dry (January to March) and the rainy (July to September) seasons (APAC, 2019).
201 Mangrove tree leaves and algae were collected manually at low tide. POM was obtained by filtering water
202 (0.5 – 1 L) on precombusted fiberglass filters (0.75 μm), whereas SOM was sampled from the 2 mm
203 surface layer of the sediment. Benthic microphytobenthos was collected from the sediment surface at low
204 tide and extracted in the laboratory following Riera and Richard (1996). Other potential organic matter
205 sources for the three estuaries studied, such as marine POM and SOM from the adjacent coastal zone
206 were also collected, at two locations: one near the entrance of the Santa Cruz estuary and one further
207 south, near the mouths of the Sirinhaém and Suape estuaries.

208 For fish specimens, white muscle was extracted and rinsed with distilled water while, for organic
209 matter sources, samples were analyzed whole. Samples were dried in an oven at 60°C for 48 hours and
210 ground into a fine powder with a mortar and pestle. For all POM and SOM samples, a subsample was
211 acidified to remove the inorganic carbon prior $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ analysis, while the remaining material was used
212 directly for $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ analyses (Pinnegar and Polunin, 1999). Carbon and nitrogen isotope ratios were
213 analyzed with a mass spectrometer (Thermo Delta V+) coupled to an element analyzer (Thermo Flash
214 2000, interface Thermo ConFio IV) at the Pôle de Spectrométrie Océan (PSO - IUEM, Plouzané, France).
215 Carbon and nitrogen isotopic ratios are reported as $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values (in ‰), respectively, derived
216 from the formula:

$$217 \quad \delta X = [(R_{\text{sample}} / R_{\text{standard}}) - 1] \times 10^3$$

218 where δX corresponds to $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ or $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ and R to the $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$ or $^{15}\text{N}/^{14}\text{N}$ ratios of the sample and a known
219 standard, for carbon or nitrogen, respectively. The standards used for $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ were the Pee Dee
220 Belemnite (PDB) limestone and atmospheric nitrogen, respectively. The analytical precisions of the

221 analyses, monitored through the repeated analysis (every six samples) of an internal standard (Thermo –
222 Acétanilide), was of 0.10‰ and 0.07‰ for carbon and nitrogen isotopes, respectively.

223

224 2.3. Data analysis

225 All statistical analyses were made with the R software (R Core Team, 2019), using the packages
226 *vegan* (Oksanen *et al.*, 2017), *boot* (Canty and Ripley, 2020) and *SIBER* (“Stable Isotope Bayesian
227 Ellipses in R” (Jackson and Parnell, 2016)). Only the prey items observed more than once within the
228 stomachs analyzed were kept for SCA data analyses.

229 Because body size modulates the type and size of the prey consumed by an organism (Shelton *et*
230 *al.*, 1977), potential differences in the size (SL in mm) of the fish used for SCA were investigated, among
231 estuaries and between species. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for this, as the assumptions of data
232 normality and homoscedasticity were not met. Then, the relationship between fish size and prey length
233 was assessed for each species using covariance analyses (ANCOVA). Differences in prey length
234 according to the species and the sampling location were also tested, using Kruskal-Wallis tests as data did
235 not meet the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. Lastly, differences in diet composition
236 according to fish size were evaluated for both *C. latus* and *C. hippos*, using two non-parametric
237 permutational multivariate analyses of variance (PERMANOVA), one per species. The PERMANOVA
238 procedure performs a sequential test of terms based on distance matrices and allows for hypotheses
239 testing between predictor variables (Anderson, 2001).

240 PERMANOVA tests were also applied to investigate differences in diet composition between
241 species (*C. latus*/ *C. hippos*), among estuaries (Santa Cruz/ Suape/ Sirinhaém) and between the two
242 species in each estuary. *Post-hoc* comparisons were applied only for variables with a significant effect on
243 the diet ($p < 0.05$). The distance matrices were based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarity computed from
244 $\log(x+1)$ transformed data of prey relative weight for each individual fish. In addition, two dietary
245 matrixes were used separately to assess the effect of prey identification on the analyses: one including all
246 prey items and the other with only the prey items identified at least to the order level.

247 Potential differences in the size (SL in mm) of the juveniles used for SIA and in their isotopic
248 ratios (both for carbon and for nitrogen, separately) were tested between locations and fish species using
249 separate ANOVA models. *Post-hoc* Tukey’s tests were applied on variables with significant effects in the

250 isotopic composition of jacks ($p < 0.05$). The trophic positions of the juveniles of the two jack species
251 were compared by evaluating the areas occupied by their isotopic niches, computed using the corrected
252 standard ellipses area (SEA_C) method, which measures the space occupied by a species in a bi-
253 dimensional plane, here $\delta^{13}C$ vs. $\delta^{15}N$ (Jackson et al., 2011). This approach is less sensitive to variations
254 in sample size than other conventional metrics (Jackson et al., 2011; Syväranta et al., 2013), and provides
255 insightful information on predators' resource use by incorporating both the variance in the isotopic ratios
256 of local basal food sources and the difference in the energy pathways that their prey rely on (Bearhop et
257 al., 2004). Indeed, although a considerable part of the variation in predator isotopic niches can be
258 attributed to diet, it may also reflect differences in prey isotope ratios and in the organic matter sources
259 sustaining food webs (Newsome et al., 2007; Flaherty and Ben-David, 2010). Therefore, the percentage
260 of overlap between the isotopic niches (SEA_C) of the two species was used to measure the degree to
261 which they may rely on similar food resources. In order to account for the uncertainty associated to SEA_C
262 overlaps, a Bayesian approach was applied to assess the mean and 95% credible intervals ($CI_{95\%}$) of
263 isotopic niche overlaps between the two species (Jackson et al., 2011).

264

265 3. Results

266 Although the total sample of juvenile jacks gathered over the five years of survey was more than
267 satisfactory ($n = 439$ of $SL = 35 - 157$ mm), the numbers and the sizes of the juveniles varied between
268 species and estuaries. For example, while total abundances were comparable at all locations for *C. latus*,
269 *C. hippos* juveniles were 2- to 3-fold less common in Sirinhaém and Suape (Fig. 2). As a result, the total
270 number of juveniles collected was higher for *C. latus* ($n = 266$) than for *C. hippos* ($n = 173$). In turn,
271 although the juveniles of *C. latus* ($SL = 105 \pm 25$ mm) were consistently bigger ($p < 0.001$) than those of
272 *C. hippos* ($SL = 88 \pm 26$ mm), patterns of size variation between estuaries were similar for the two
273 species, with consistently bigger juveniles ($p < 0.001$) in Suape and smaller ones ($p < 0.001$) in Sirinhaém
274 (Fig. 2). These differences were considered during fish sub-sampling for both stomach content analysis
275 and SIA, in order to reduce bias in our conclusions and provide a realistic overview of the global trophic
276 ecology of the two species.

277 Among the 394 fish selected for stomach content analysis, few had empty stomachs (33% for *C.*
278 *latus* and 6% for *C. hippos*). Relative numbers and size distributions in the 338 remaining ones (207 *C.*
279 *latus* and 131 *C. hippos*) were similar to those observed in the total catches, with slightly higher mean SL

280 values for *C. latus* than for *C. hippos* in every estuary, and larger juvenile sizes in Suape for both species
 281 (Table 2). Muscle samples from 112 juvenile fish (60 *C. latus* and 52 *C. hippos*) were analyzed in SIA
 282 (Table 2). To allow for muscle signature to reflect the diet in the estuaries, the minimum size of the fish
 283 selected for the SIA was 65 mm (SL). Altogether, the distribution of SIA juvenile sizes was similar for
 284 the two species ($p = 0.905$), however it varied between estuaries ($p < 0.001$), reflecting the differences in
 285 sizes observed in the field. As for SCA, this sub-sample contained a larger number of individuals from
 286 Santa Cruz in order to reflect the higher abundance of juvenile jacks at this estuary.

287

288 3.1. Diet composition

289 Overall, diet composition was not significantly different between the two jack species ($p = 0.089$)
 290 which both mainly ate fish and crustaceans ($Q > 1205$, Table 3). All other prey items were found to be
 291 occasional ($Q < 20$), irrespective of the species (Table 3). However, when considering only the prey items
 292 identified to at least the order level, the two species did show significant differences in diet composition
 293 ($p = 0.010$). Although fish remains in the stomachs were often too digested to be identified, fish prey
 294 belonged to at least nine different families for *C. latus*; six for *C. hippos* (Table 3). Fish (Teleostei) were
 295 the main prey of the juveniles of *C. latus* ($Q = 3252$), whereas *C. hippos* fed on fish ($Q = 1205$) and
 296 crustaceans ($Q = 2537$) in similar proportions (Table 3). Fish dominated the diet of both species in terms
 297 of occurrence and weight, but crustaceans prevailed in number in the diet of *C. hippos* (Table 3). For both
 298 species, most of the fish prey identified were Gobiidae ($F_i = 19.0$ to 23.6 ; $N_i = 4.3$ to 7.5 ; $W_i = 33.2$ to
 299 39.9%), but their consumption was higher in *C. latus* ($F_i = 23.6$; $N_i = 7.5$; $W_i = 39.9\%$). Decapods, in
 300 particular Penaeidae shrimps, were the main crustacean prey found in the stomachs of the juveniles of the
 301 two species (Table 3). However, mysids also contributed significantly to their diet, especially for *C.*
 302 *hippos*, in which they were the most abundant crustacean prey ($N_i = 36.6\%$).

303 Overall diet composition was found to be similar across the full size-range of the juveniles studied
 304 irrespective of the species (*C. latus*: $p = 0.089$; *C. hippos*: $p = 0.193$) and, when considering only the prey
 305 items identified to at least the order level, significant differences in diet according to fish size were found
 306 solely for *C. latus* ($p = 0.034$). Even then, only a slightly higher contribution in weight of fish prey was
 307 observed in *C. latus* juveniles larger than 60 mm (SL). The standard length of the juveniles did not have
 308 any significant effect on the sizes of their two main prey, namely fish (adjusted $r^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.591$) and
 309 shrimps (adjusted $r^2 < 0.01$, $p = 0.376$). The size of these later were similar in all estuaries (Fish, $p =$

310 0.292; Shrimps, $p = 0.839$) and for both jack species (Fish, $p = 0.184$; Shrimps, $p = 0.515$)
 311 (Supplementary Fig. S1).

312 The diet of both species varied according to the estuary, regardless the level of prey identification
 313 applied ($p < 0.002$). Specifically, differences between estuaries were found only for Suape (Suape – Santa
 314 Cruz: $p < 0.015$; Suape – Sirinhaém: $p < 0.027$). In this estuary, *C. hippos* presented the most different
 315 diet, composed mainly of fish prey ($F_i = 60.0$; $N_i = 33.8$; $W_i = 81.4\%$). The diets of the two species were
 316 similar between Santa Cruz and Sirinhaém, either when considering all prey items ($p = 0.060$) or only
 317 those identified to at lowest taxonomic level ($p = 0.204$). Moreover, interspecific differences in diet
 318 composition were only significant in Santa Cruz, independently of the level of prey identification applied
 319 ($p < 0.025$). In this estuary, Gobiidae fish prevailed in the diet of *C. latus* and decapod shrimps in that of
 320 *C. hippos* (Supplementary Table S1). Although the two species had similar overall diets in the two
 321 remaining estuaries (Suape: $p > 0.236$; Sirinhaém: $p > 0.113$), they presented slight spatial variations in
 322 their prey preferences. In Suape, the diet of the two species only differed in terms of the type of fish
 323 consumed, with higher contributions of Clupeidae and Engraulidae for *C. hippos*, and of Gobiidae and
 324 Gerreidae for *C. latus* (Supplementary Table S2) while, in Sirinhaém, significantly higher proportions of
 325 crustaceans (Penaeidae shrimps) were found in the diet of *C. hippos* than in that of *C. latus*
 326 (Supplementary Table S3).

327

328 3.2. Stable isotopes analysis

329 The juveniles from the two species had very variable $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values irrespective of their
 330 estuary of capture, ranging from -24.36 to -15.73‰ and from 8.00 to 13.66‰, respectively (Table 2; Fig.
 331 3). Due to this variability, $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values were not significantly different among estuaries ($p = 0.088$) nor
 332 between species, with average values of $-19.10 \pm 1.82\%$ for *C. latus* and $-19.35 \pm 2.10\%$ for *C. hippos*.
 333 Differences in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values between the two species were not significant either within each given estuary
 334 ($p = 0.147$). Conversely, significant differences in $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ were found according to both the estuary ($p <$
 335 0.001) and the species ($p < 0.001$). Indeed, although $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values for both species did not differ
 336 significantly between Suape and Sirinhaém ($p = 0.790$; Fig. 3), they were consistently higher in Santa
 337 Cruz ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, although the $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of the two species were similar within each estuary
 338 ($p = 0.804$; Fig. 4), the juveniles of *C. hippos* exhibited higher $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values in overall ($11.03 \pm 1.10\%$)
 339 than those of *C. latus* ($10.21 \pm 1.21\%$) due to differences in spatial distribution among them.

340 The global trophic (isotopic) niches of the two species were similar in size, with areas (SEA_C) of
 341 7.3 and 7.0 ‰² for *C. latus* and *C. hippos* respectively. They largely overlapped, with 68.4% ($CI_{95\%}$ 54.1
 342 – 82.6%) of their total area in common. However, both the SEA_C sizes and their overlaps varied
 343 according to the estuary (Fig. 3). Juvenile *C. latus* exhibited slightly wider isotopic niches than *C. hippos*
 344 in both Santa Cruz ($SEA_C = 5.6\%{}^2$ for *C. latus* and $4.5\%{}^2$ for *C. hippos*) and Sirinhaém ($SEA_C = 7.9\%{}^2$
 345 for *C. latus* and $7.1\%{}^2$ for *C. hippos*), with high isotopic niche overlaps at both sites (57.5%, $CI_{95\%}$ 40.1 –
 346 73.8%, in Santa Cruz and 54.3%, $CI_{95\%}$ 32.3 – 77.4%, in Sirinhaém). Conversely, in Suape, where the two
 347 species had the most different isotopic niches, niche area was much wider in *C. hippos* ($SEA_C = 9.5\%{}^2$)
 348 than in *C. latus* ($SEA_C = 2.7\%{}^2$). At this particular site, juvenile niche overlap between the two species
 349 was only of 27.13% ($CI_{95\%}$ 11.5 – 45.0%), but the isotopic niche area (SEA_C) of *C. hippos* covered up to
 350 94.6% of that of *C. latus*. In the two remaining estuaries (Santa Cruz and Sirinhaém), the two species
 351 shared between 63 to 87% of their isotopic niche areas.

352 $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{15}N$ values for the organic matter sources at the base of the food webs ranged from -
 353 29.25 to -14.50‰ and from -1.03 to 10.11‰, respectively, in the estuaries studied (Supplementary Table
 354 S4, Fig. 4). However, the variability in C and N isotopic ratios in the estuarine food webs depended
 355 greatly on the location: for example, the range in $\delta^{15}N$ values for organic matter source was the widest,
 356 but that in $\delta^{13}C$ values the lowest, in Santa Cruz (Fig. 4).

357

358 4. Discussion

359 While differences in resource use within estuarine fish assemblages are thought to be largely
 360 modulated by species' functional traits (Albouy et al., 2011), closely related species are expected to
 361 display contrasted diets to allow their populations to co-exist in the wild (Ross, 1986). However, very few
 362 cross-sites comparisons were carry out so far to investigate diet plasticity for closely related fish species
 363 co-occurring in diverse biotic and environmental settings (e.g., Mariani et al. 2011). Our results bring new
 364 insights on this matter, by revealing site-related variations in the trophic ecology of the juveniles of two
 365 commercially important species from the *Caranx* genus with similar ecological features. Indeed, *Caranx*
 366 *latus* and *C. hippos* not only have similar shapes and growth trajectories (Viana et al., 2016), but also
 367 reproduce on deep reefs along the shelf (Heyman and Kjerfve, 2008), and mostly colonize estuaries as
 368 juveniles, before moving to deeper waters when adults (Smith-Vaniz, 2002). In the estuaries, their
 369 juveniles have been similarly reported to feed on a broad diversity of fish and crustaceans (Vasconcelos

370 Filho et al., 2010; Medeiros et al., 2017), including key species in estuarine food webs (Ferreira, 2018;
371 Lira et al., 2018). The present study however showed that, although gobies and decapod shrimps are the
372 main food items ingested by both species, *C. latus* juveniles have a more piscivorous diet than those of *C.*
373 *hippos*. These benthic prey represent a substantial part of the diet of juvenile jack species in general
374 (Blaber and Cyrus, 1983; Smith and Parrish, 2002; Figueiredo and Pessanha, 2015; Medeiros et al., 2017)
375 and are commonly eaten by other estuarine fish (Blaber, 1986; Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2003; Lira et al.,
376 2017). The juveniles of the two species were also found to largely prey on pelagic fish like engraulids and
377 clupeids in the three estuaries studied, as already reported from visual census studies in these ecosystems
378 (Cermak, 2002). This indicates that, at least in estuaries, *C. latus* and *C. hippos* juveniles forage both at
379 mid-water and directly above the substrate, feeding on a mix of pelagic and benthic prey.

380

381 4.1. Variation in food sources during juvenile life

382 Body size plays a central role in determining the type and size of the prey consumed by fish
383 (Shelton et al., 1977), particularly in species like jacks that display schooling behaviors (Figueiredo and
384 Menezes, 1980; Graham and Castellanos, 2005). Although a marked increase in piscivory has been
385 reported for jacks at sizes above 200 mm SL (Blaber and Cyprus, 1983; Sudekum et al., 1991; Smith and
386 Parrish, 2002), in this study, significant changes in diet composition due to increasing body size were
387 only found for juvenile *C. latus*, and only consisted in small differences in the prey species ingested. The
388 relatively low taxonomic precision for prey identification in the stomachs (particularly for small fish
389 prey) may have hampered the power of our analysis. Yet, for both species, juvenile fish size did not seem
390 to significantly be related to the size of the prey ingested. The diet of the two species thus seems to be
391 fairly stable over the size range studied here (35 – 157 mm SL). However, as major morphological
392 changes in fish take place between the post-larval and juvenile stages (Nunn et al., 2012), dietary shifts in
393 the two species might occur in smaller fish, *i.e.* before and during estuary colonization (Cocheret de la
394 Morinière et al., 2003; Usmar, 2012). These dietary shifts can reflect either an increase in fish foraging
395 ability as they grow, or changes in prey availability (Nunn et al., 2012). They probably also take place in
396 larger fish, when they move towards offshore habitats (Cocheret de la Morinière et al., 2003).

397 Differences in environmental characteristics are also a major source of variation in the diet of fish,
398 as they influences both the type and the availability of local food resources (Dineen et al., 2007; Jensen et
399 al., 2008; Evangelista et al., 2014). Given the differences in food web structure and fish assemblages

400 among the three estuaries studied, we expected the juveniles of the two species to display different food
401 preferences and isotopic ratios among locations (Merigot et al., 2017; Silva-Júnior et al., 2017). However,
402 although their prey preferences and isotopic niches varied from one estuary to the other, spatial
403 differences in diet composition were surprisingly small, with only a greater consumption of fish
404 (particularly of the Clupeidae and Engraulidae families) by *C. hippos* in Suape. As fish from different
405 years and seasons were pooled in this work and because inter and intra-annual variations in food web
406 composition and food availability may be significant in estuaries (e.g. Garcia et al. (2012) and Boucek
407 and Rehage (2013)), seasonal processes might partly bias the results presented here, especially regarding
408 the average isotopic compositions of jacks at each location. However, the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values observed
409 are within the ranges reported in other tropical estuaries, both for primary producers and for juvenile jacks
410 (Abrantes et al., 2014; Claudino et al., 2015; Dolbeth et al., 2016). Their high variabilities suggest that the
411 amplitude in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ isotopic compositions of the jacks at each estuary largely reflects those at the
412 base of local food chains. Thus, in Suape and Sirinhaém, the wide range of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values observed for
413 organic matter sources is reflected in a greater range of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for the two jack species. Similarly,
414 the higher $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ ratios of the juvenile jacks in Santa Cruz may partly reflect the incorporation of enriched
415 ^{15}N organic matter from coastal marine sources into the food web in this estuary, which has important
416 connections with the marine realm (Flores Montes et al., 1998), although we cannot rule out this could
417 indicate slightly higher trophic levels. Other sources may contribute to the local ^{15}N enrichments such as
418 agricultural and domestic wastes (Morris et al., 2015) given the proximity in the region of highly
419 urbanized areas (CPRH, 2003).

420 Potential biases in diet composition obtained from SCA may arise from the caveats inherent to the
421 technique. In particular, differences in digestion rates among prey and the difficulty to identify some of
422 them when partly digested can lead to an over-estimation of the contribution of the food items with low
423 digestion rates and to greater proportions of unidentified prey in the diet of carnivorous species (Hyslop,
424 1980). This could partly be the case in our study, as fish and crustaceans (*i.e.* relatively big prey with hard
425 skeletons) are less easily digested than soft-bodied organisms (Buckland, et al., 2017). Moreover,
426 sampling for SCA requires to match predators' local feeding strategies across time and space in order to
427 produce a realistic image of their diets. Although this is yet to be demonstrated, feeding in juvenile jacks
428 might also take place at times of the day not sampled during our survey. This would explain the high level
429 of prey digestion in some of the stomachs analyzed and might have contributed to bias our results, by

430 further precluding identification of the prey items with high digestibility. Within estuarine systems, the
431 types and abundances of the prey available for foraging fish strongly vary according to habitat type
432 (Svanbäck and Eklöv, 2002; Lecomte and Dodson, 2005; Cardozo et al., 2020), which partly contributes
433 to diet changes in the predators exhibiting seasonal or size-related shifts in habitat use (Stevens et al.,
434 2007; Ferreira et al., 2016; 2019). However, juvenile jacks are highly mobile within estuaries, using a
435 wide diversity of estuarine habitats irrespective of their age (Medeiros et al., 2017). Moreover, the
436 sampling design in this study attempted to capture most of the spatial and temporal variation in habitat
437 use by the two species, by capturing juvenile jacks in all their main estuarine habitats (*e.g.* mangrove
438 creeks, river banks) at each date, over multiple seasons and years. Because our sub-sampling strategy for
439 SCA accounted for spatiotemporal differences in the abundances of the two species, among and within
440 locations, the image of the global diet provided here should be rather realistic. Indeed, it reflects their
441 habitat use but also the inter-annual and inter-seasonal variations in food source availability and food web
442 structure in the three estuaries sampled, which are also likely to modulate fish diet composition (Boucek
443 and Rehage, 2013; Garcia et al., 2017; Possamai et al., 2018).

444 4.2. Possibility for trophic competition

445 In estuaries, physico-chemical gradients (*e.g.* in salinity) drive food web structure and determine
446 habitat suitability for fish (Barletta et al., 2008; da Silva et al., 2018). However, food abundance also
447 modulates interactions between potential competitors (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2017; Costa-Pereira et
448 al., 2019). As a result, co-existing species tend to either share abundant food resources or differ in one or
449 more dimensions of their environmental niche (Ross, 1986). One major caveat when evaluating resource
450 partitioning between coexisting species is the measurement of only one dimension of their ecological
451 niche (Costa-Pereira et al., 2019). With this regard, stable isotope analysis is a valuable complementary
452 approach to common dietary methods (Silveira et al., 2020), calculating the isotopic niche as a proxy of
453 the trophic niche (Newsome et al., 2007). However, although the position and the size of the isotopic
454 niche of a species are primarily driven by variations in its diet, they can be influenced by its biology and
455 physiology (Gorokhova, 2018; Karlson et al., 2018), and by habitat-driven differences in the isotope
456 ratios of local food webs (Flaherty and Ben-David, 2010). In this study, SCA and SIA presented opposing
457 results, especially in the Santa Cruz estuary where the greater difference in diet between the two species
458 did not result in a reduction in their isotopic niche overlap. Moreover, the variability in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for
459 both species at each site largely followed that of the organic matter sources present in the estuary. This

460 suggests that the position and size of the isotopic niches for juvenile jacks in our study area largely reflect
461 local variation in the isotopic signatures of their prey caused by local differences in food web structure.
462 This confirms that the isotopic niche approach should be interpreted with caution, and does not
463 necessarily provide accurate information to evaluate food partitioning between co-existing species
464 (Flaherty and Ben-David, 2010; Petta et al, 2020; Shipley and Matich, 2020). Because tropical estuaries
465 often exhibit a wide variety of organic matter sources and consumers, isotopic signals may be mixed
466 along their food webs (Layman, 2007). Therefore, the isotopic niche approach might prove less valuable
467 in these complex environments than in lakes or on land, where its application has been successful in
468 elucidating biological processes at inter and intraspecific scales within food webs (Pettitt-Wade et al.,
469 2015; Mumby et al., 2018; Sheppard et al., 2018; Costa-Pereira et al., 2019).

470 Resource partitioning has been reported for many fish species, and in diverse types of estuaries,
471 including tropical ones (Pimentel and Joyeux, 2010; Le Loc'h et al., 2015; Moulton et al., 2017; Stevens
472 et al., 2020). In the three estuaries studied here, although the two jack species had very similar prey and
473 isotopic niches in overall, they exhibited slight spatial differences in their diet composition, which
474 contributed to reduce the actual overlap in their niches at each studied location. This supports the idea that
475 juvenile jacks adapt their feeding strategies to local food resources' availability in order to reduce trophic
476 competition among them. This seems to occur in different ways though, depending on local
477 environmental conditions. Indeed, although prey abundance was never directly assessed in any of the
478 three estuaries studied, previous work concluded that Santa Cruz is that with the greatest fauna
479 biodiversity in the area (Silva-Júnior et al., 2017). In particular, it sustains a wide variety of secondary
480 consumers (Vasconcelos Filho et al., 2010; Ferreira, 2018), many of which are prey for juvenile jacks. In
481 this rich environment, both *C. latus* and *C. hippos* juveniles occur at higher densities than in other
482 estuaries (Paiva and Araújo, 2010, Silva-Júnior et al., 2017). They exhibit the most contrasting diets, but
483 surprisingly also the most similar isotopic niches. Because the high diversity of secondary consumers in
484 Santa Cruz allows many carnivores to feed upon both pelagic and benthic prey (Vasconcelos Filho et al.,
485 2003), the local similarity in juvenile jacks' isotopic niches likely reflects the isotopic ratios of their fish
486 and crustacean prey, as most of these are small predators feeding on both food chains. Thus, it appears
487 that, when the diversity and availability of food is high like in Santa-Cruz, the juveniles of the two species
488 avoid trophic competition by exploiting different prey, matching their respective diet preferences.
489 Nonetheless, they apparently have to adapt these later and partially compete for food in less favorable

490 environments. Indeed, in the Suape and Sirinhaém estuaries, where the diversity of available prey is
491 limited, the two species focus on the same food resources. The greatest variability in their $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ratios at
492 these sites indicates that they rely on a broader number of food chains though, including those based on
493 allochthonous sources of organic matter, like freshwater inputs (Abrantes and Sheaves, 2010). This
494 diversification of carbon sources can be seen as an ecological response to reduce competition between
495 species (Lecomte and Dodson, 2005). It might allow *C. latus* and *C. hippos* to co-exist in Suape and
496 Sirinhaém in spite of their similarities in diet. The fact that the abundances of both *C. latus* and *C. hippos*
497 juveniles are lower in these two estuaries suggests that the higher trophic niche overlap observed at these
498 sites result in an increased competition for food among them. However, further information on the
499 temporal fluctuations in prey abundance and the timing of their consumption is needed before one can
500 conclude about the actual intensity of this phenomenon. First, trophic competition between fish species
501 with similar global diets can be reduced when these later largely reflect an opportunistic use of seasonal
502 peaks in the abundances of the most shared prey (Lucena et al., 2000; Boucek and Rehage, 2013). This
503 might very well be the case here, especially as this kind of opportunistic feeding behavior would explain
504 the variability in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ratios observed for both species. Differences in feeding rhythms between *C. latus*
505 and *C. hippos* may also reduce the intensity of the trophic competition among their juveniles at the daily
506 scale, as already observed for other jack species (Blaber and Cyrus, 1983). Lastly, competition for food is
507 also often avoided through differences in the periods for juvenile occurrence in the estuaries, as observed
508 in local snook species with similar diets but distinct spawning periods (Stevens et al., 2020). However,
509 this does not really apply here as *C. latus* and *C. hippos* in northeastern Brazil both are expected to spawn
510 from April to June (Heyman and Kjerfve, 2008), and their juveniles are mostly fished in local estuaries
511 during the late summer (McBride and McKown, 2000; Vilar et al., 2011; da Silva et al., 2018).

512

513 **Conclusion**

514 This study contributes to better understanding the drivers of juvenile trophic ecology and its
515 variation in tropical estuaries. Although the two close species of jacks studied here apparently globally
516 rely on similar prey during their juvenile estuarine life, our results revealed some plasticity in their
517 resource use, supporting the idea that resource partitioning processes between sympatric species are
518 locally dependent (Costa-Pereira et al., 2019). Such plasticity in resource use according to local food web
519 structure may not only favor the coexistence of a larger number of species but also provide greater

520 stability for estuarine food webs (Kondoh, 2003). In order to evaluate it, cross-sites comparisons should
521 be systematically undertaken when investigating the trophic ecology of sympatric fish species,
522 particularly in tropical estuaries that show a high diversity of food sources (Layman, 2007). As spatial
523 variation in the trophic ecology of predators like *C. latus* and *C. hippos* may not only influence the
524 growth and survival of their juveniles, but also modulate their respective roles in the functioning of
525 estuarine food webs, such cross-sites comparisons could be key for evaluating the implications of
526 different co-existence scenarios, not only on the maintenance of coastal fish stocks but also on the
527 composition and functioning of estuarine systems. This should be undertaken keeping in mind that both
528 anthropic pressures and Climate Change may displace the environmental boundaries of estuaries or alter
529 the composition and productivity of their food webs (Araújo et al. 2016, Chevillot et al. 2019), thereby
530 affecting the way fish species exploit estuarine resources and modifying their roles in food webs.

531

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- 926

927 **Figure Captions**

928

929 **Fig 1** Study area in northeastern Brazil, showing sampling locations within the Santa Cruz (a.), Suape (b.)
930 and Sirinhaém (c.) estuaries (black dots). For each estuary, mangrove cover is indicated in dark grey.

931

932 **Fig 2** Number of individuals (n) and length frequency distributions of the *Caranx latus* and *C. hippos*
933 juveniles sampled in the estuaries of Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém.

934

935 **Fig 3** Carbon ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) and nitrogen ($\delta^{15}\text{N}$) isotope ratios of the two jack species, *Caranx latus* and *C.*
936 *hippos*, in three contrasted estuaries of northeastern Brazil (Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém). Ellipses
937 represent the isotopic niche (SEAc) for both species. Pie charts present the global diet of each species
938 based on prey relative weights (W_i , see Table 3).

939

940 **Fig 4** Carbon ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) and nitrogen ($\delta^{15}\text{N}$) isotope ratios (mean \pm standard deviation) of *Caranx latus* and
941 *C. hippos* and the main available organic matter sources in three contrasted estuaries of northeastern
942 Brazil (Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém). Isotopic signatures for the organic matter sources sampled in
943 the estuaries and in adjacent coastal zones are represented by black and grey squares, respectively. Light
944 grey polygons show the range of isotopic ratios of all estuarine organic matter sources except mangrove
945 trees (*R. mangle*). Arrows in the bottom left corner of each panel illustrate the average isotopic
946 enrichment per trophic level ($+ 0.47 \pm 1.23 \text{ ‰}$ for $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $+ 2.54 \pm 0.11 \text{ ‰}$ for $\delta^{15}\text{N}$) usually applied in
947 aquatic environments (Vander Zanden and Rasmussen, 2001; Vanderklift and Ponsard, 2003). Pie charts
948 present the local diets of each species based on prey relative weights (W_i , see Supplementary Tables S1,
949 S2 and S3).

950

951 **Tables**

952

Characteristics	Estuary		
	Santa Cruz	Suape	Sirinhaém
Type	Ria	Coastal lagoon	Coastal plain
Human pressures	Aquaculture, agricultural, industrial and domestic waste	Industrial harbour, industrial and agriculture waste	Industrial and domestic waste
Vegetated area (km ²) [†]	48.0	23.1	17.0
Water surface area (km ²) [†]	25.5	6.6	1.7
Mean depth (m)	3.0	3.1	2.6
Max. depth (m)	20	5	5
N of marine entrances	2	1	1
Width of marine entrances (km, mean and range) [†]	0.9 (0.5 - 1.3)	0.3	0.4
Pelagic productivity (mgCm ⁻³ h ⁻¹)	14.7	2.0	34.2
Temperature (°C, mean± SD) [‡]	28.5 ± 1.1	27.1 ± 1.1	27.2 ± 2.4
Salinity (mean± SD) [‡]	31.1 ± 2.9	17.7 ± 2.4	9.5 ± 3.6
Pluviometry (mm, mean± SD)	1517 ± 122	1869 ± 367	2053 ± 699
References	Medeiros and Kjerfve, 1993; Medeiros et al., 2001; Neuman-Leitão et al., 2001; CPRH, 2003, 2003a; Borges, 2011; Silva, 2009; Guimarães et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2011; APAC, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2019		

953

Type, geomorphological classification on the type of estuary according to Pritchard's classification. Human pressure, existent anthropogenic activity with potential impact on the estuary. Vegetated area, area of mangrove cover vegetation. Max. depth, maximum depth during the high tide, usually near the estuary's entrance. N of marine entrances, number of connections to the sea. Pelagic productivity, mean annual phytoplankton productivity. Temperature, water surface temperature. Pluviometry, annual rainfall between 2014 and 2018.

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Table 1 Summary of morphological characteristics, environmental settings and anthropogenic activities

958

of the three estuaries (Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém) along the coast of Pernambuco, northeastern

959

Brazil

960

Estuary	Species	Stomach content analysis [†]		Stable isotopes analysis			
		n	SL (mm)	n	SL (mm)	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰)	$\delta^{15}\text{N}$ (‰)
Santa Cruz	<i>C. latus</i>	70	98 ± 17 [50 – 135]	30	109 ± 18 [80 – 138]	-18.85 ± 1.59 [-23.4 – -16.5]	10.89 ± 1.09 [8.6 – 13.0]
	<i>C. hippos</i>	70	82 ± 24 [36 – 131]	30	111 ± 17 [82 – 142]	-18.94 ± 1.66 [-22.3 – -16.3]	11.61 ± 0.87 [10.4 – 13.7]
Suape	<i>C. latus</i>	67	129 ± 18 [82 – 157]	15	113 ± 16 [86 – 141]	-18.65 ± 1.45 [-21.9 – -16.6]	9.38 ± 0.73 [8.0 – 10.2]
	<i>C. hippos</i>	20	112 ± 29 [49 – 156]	10	114 ± 29 [65 – 145]	-20.25 ± 2.77 [-23.6 – -15.7]	10.28 ± 1.00 [8.8 – 12.0]
Sirinhaém	<i>C. latus</i>	70	79 ± 16 [35 – 116]	15	90 ± 20 [70 – 124]	-20.07 ± 1.08 [-24.4 – -15.9]	9.34 ± 1.16 [8.2 – 11.6]
	<i>C. hippos</i>	39	73 ± 12 [47 – 98]	12	87 ± 27 [65 – 138]	-19.64 ± 2.39 [-23.6 – -16.1]	10.22 ± 0.86 [8.7 – 11.7]

[†] Fish with non-empty stomachs only.

961

962 **Table 2** Number of individuals (n), their mean standard length (SL ± S.D.) and isotopic ratio mean values
 963 (± S.D.) for carbon ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) and nitrogen ($\delta^{15}\text{N}$) of *Caranx latus* and *C. hippos* analysed for stomach
 964 content and stable isotopes compositions, in the three estuaries (Santa Cruz, Suape and Sirinhaém).
 965 Minimum and maximum values of each variable are between brackets.

Item	Species							
	<i>Caranx latus</i> (n = 207; 102±27 mm)				<i>Caranx hippos</i> (n = 131; 84±25 mm)			
	F_i (%)	N_i (%)	W_i (%)	Q	F_i (%)	N_i (%)	W_i (%)	Q
ALGAE	12.08 [7.7 – 16.9]	4.19 [2.4 – 6.6]	0.29 [0.1 – 0.7]	0.82	2.90 [0.8 – 6.1]	0.86 [0.1 – 2.2]	0.18 [0 – 0.6]	0.14
Chlorophyta (Unidentified)	0.97 [0 – 2.4]	0.40 [0 – 1.1]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01	-	-	-	-
Unidentified Algae	11.11 [7.2 – 15.5]	4.87 [2.6 – 7.9]	0.28 [0.1 – 0.7]	1.36	3.05 [0.8 – 6.1]	1.00 [0.1 – 2.6]	0.18 [0 – 0.6]	0.18
FORAMINIFERA (Unidentified)	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.08 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	-	-	-	-
	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01				
NEMATODA (Unidentified)	5.31 [2.4 – 8.7]	1.11 [0.5 – 1.8]	<0.01	0.01	2.90 [0.8 – 6.1]	0.48 [0.1 – 1.1]	<0.01	0.01
	5.31 [2.4 – 8.7]	1.39 [0.6 – 2.3]	<0.01	0.01	3.05 [0.8 – 6.1]	0.56 [0.1 – 1.3]	<0.01	0.01
BIVALVIA (Unidentified)	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.32 [0 – 1.0]	<0.01	0.01	0.72 [0 – 2.3]	0.10 [0 – 0.4]	<0.01	0.01
	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.40 [0 – 1.3]	<0.01	0.01	0.76 [0 – 2.3]	0.11 [0 – 0.4]	<0.01]	0.01
GASTROPODA (Unidentified)	2.90 [1.0 – 5.3]	1.26 [0.3 – 2.6]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01	-	-	-	-
	2.90 [1.0 – 5.3]	1.59 [0.3 – 3.3]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01				

Table 3 Frequency of occurrence (F_i), relative abundance (N_i) and weight (W_i) and alimentary coefficient (Q) of prey items of *Caranx latus* and *Caranx hippos* in northeastern Brazil estuaries. Dietary indexes estimate for major taxonomic groups are shown in bold. Confidence interval estimates (95%) for dietary indexes are displayed between square brackets. The number of fish specimens (n) and their mean standard length (SL, \pm SD) are presented for each species.

POLYCHAETA (Unidentified)				0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.08 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	1.45 [0 – 3.8]	0.57 [0 – 1.7]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01
				0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	1.53 [0 – 3.8]	0.67 [0 – 1.9]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01
OLIGOCHAETA (Unidentified)				0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.08 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	2.17 [0 – 17.1]	0.29 [0 – 0.7]	<0.01	0.01
				0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	2.29 [0 – 5.3]	0.33 [0 – 0.9]	<0.01	0.01
CRUSTACEA				49.28 [42.5 – 56.0]	26.07 [19.7 – 33.3]	23.30 [14.2 – 34.6]	705.34	60.87 [51.9 – 68.7]	65.97 [51.7 – 75.4]	38.22 [22.8 – 60.3]	2537.20
Cirripedia (Unidentified)				0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.60 [0 – 2.0]	<0.01	0.01	0.76 [0 – 2.3]	0.78 [0 – 2.9]	<0.01	0.01
Copepoda (Unidentified)				1.45 [0 – 3.4]	1.79 [0 – 4.6]	<0.01	0.01	7.63 [3.1 – 12.2]	2.12 [0.8 – 2.1]	<0.01	0.01
Malacostraca	Decapoda	Brachyura	Portunidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.10 [0 – 0.4]	0.01	1.53 [0 – 3.8]	0.22 [0 – 0.6]	0.05 [0 – 0.2]	0.01
			Sesarmidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.05 [0 – 0.2]	0.01	-	-	-	-
			Unidentified Brachyura	0.97 [0 – 2.4]	0.70 [0 – 2.1]	0.14 [0 – 0.5]	0.09	1.53 [0 – 3.8]	0.33 [0 – 1.0]	0.32 [0 – 1.2]	0.10
		Caridea	Alpheidae	4.83 [1.9 – 8.2]	1.99 [0.7 – 3.9]	1.56 [0.1 – 4.7]	3.10	1.53 [0 – 3.8]	0.22 [0 – 0.6]	1.22 [0 – 4.8]	0.26
			Unidentified Caridea	2.90 [1.0 – 5.3]	0.99 [0.7 – 2.0]	1.38 [0.3 – 2.9]	1.36	-	-	-	-
		Dendrobranchiata	Aristeidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.20 [0 – 0.7]	0.06 [0 – 0.2]	0.01	-	-	-	-
			Penaeidae	11.59 [7.2 – 15.9]	4.87 [2.6 – 7.7]	14.60 [7.8 – 23.5]	71.10	20.61 [13.7 – 27.5]	8.37 [3.8 – 15.4]	19.26 [9.9 – 33.3]	161.20
		Unidentified Decapoda		15.46 [10.6 – 20.3]	8.84 [4.6 – 15.0]	4.86 [2.2 – 8.6]	42.96	23.66 [16.8 – 31.3]	15.07 [7.9 – 15.4]	10.56 [4.0 – 22.2]	159.13
		Isopoda (Unidentified)		2.90 [1.0 – 5.3]	0.79 [0.2 – 1.6]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01	3.82 [0.8 – 7.6]	0.56 [0.1 – 1.2]	0.06 [0 – 0.2]	0.03

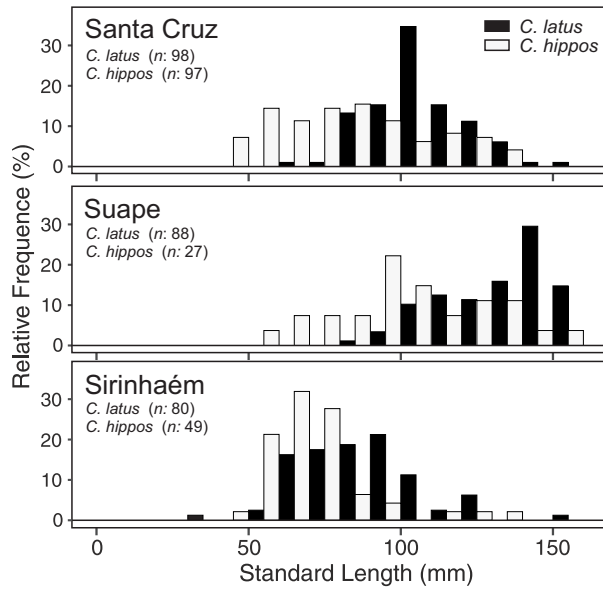
Table 3 Continued.

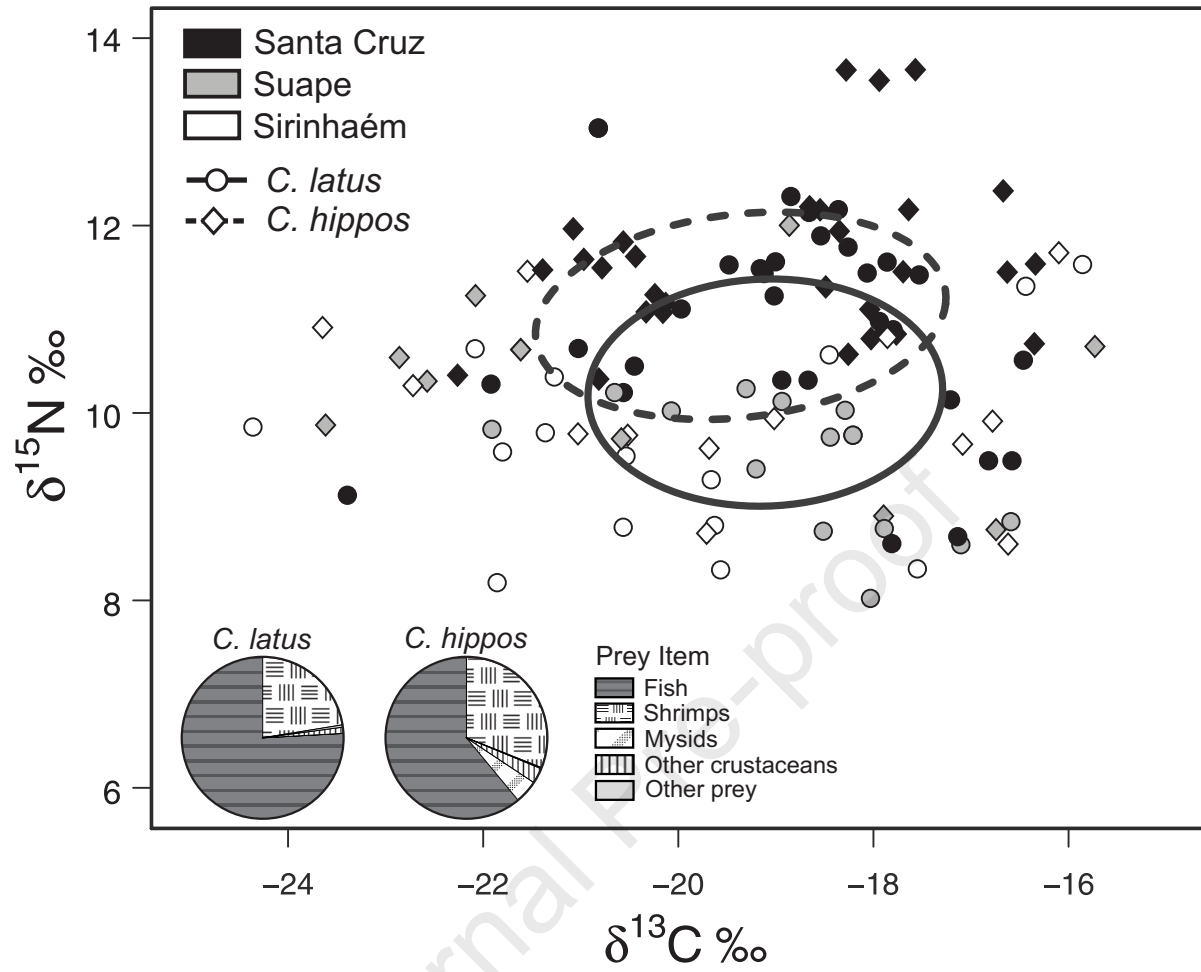
	Mysida (Unidentified)		1.93 [0.5 – 3.9]	0.79 [0.1 – 1.7]	0.01 [0 – 0.1]	0.01	7.63 [3.1 – 12.2]	36.61 [12.7 – 53.9]	4.67 [0.9 – 11.1]	170.96	
	Stomatopoda (Unidentified)		-	-	-	-	0.76 [0 – 2.3]	0.11 [0 – 0.4]	0.03 [0 – 0.1]	0.01	
	Ostracoda (Unidentified)		4.35 [1.9 – 7.2]	2.78 [0.8 – 5.6]	<0.01	0.01	1.53 [0 – 3.8]	0.56 [0 – 1.5]	<0.01	0.1	
	Unidentified Crustacea		14.98 [10.1 – 19.8]	8.34 [4.5 – 13.2]	0.90 [0.4 – 1.7]	7.50	9.92 [5.3 – 15.3]	9.49 [2.9 – 17.9]	2.61 [0.2 – 6.9]	24.76	
HEXAPODA			0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.08 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01	-	-	-	-	
	Unidentified Insecta		0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	<0.01	0.01					
VERTEBRATA			84.06 [78.8 – 88.9]	46.29 [37.7 – 54.9]	75.10 [63.5 – 84.4]	3252.60	71.74 [64.1 – 79.4]	20.17 [13.8 – 29.1]	60.13 [37.9 – 76.0]	1205.15	
	Thaliacea	Salpida	Salpidae	0.97 [0 – 2.4]	0.20 [0 – 0.5]	0.09 [0 – 0.3]	0.01	-	-	-	
	Teleostei	Clupeiformes	Clupeidae	1.93 [0.5 – 3.9]	0.70 [0.1 – 1.6]	2.61 [0 – 6.8]	1.82	2.29 [0 – 5.3]	0.89 [0 – 2.5]	7.18 [0 – 19.5]	6.39
			Engraulidae	4.35 [1.9 – 7.2]	1.59 [0.5 – 3.1]	2.46 [0.4 – 5.7]	3.91	3.05 [0.8 – 6.1]	0.45 [0.1 – 1.0]	4.43 [0.6 – 9.9]	1.99
		Gobiiformes	Eleotridae	1.45 [0 – 3.4]	0.30 [0 – 0.7]	0.44 [0 – 1.1]	0.13	0.76 [0 – 2.3]	0.11 [0 – 0.4]	0.90 [0 – 3.4]	0.09
			Gobiidae	23.67 [17.9 – 29.9]	7.55 [5.3 – 10.4]	39.99 [19.7 – 57.6]	301.92	19.08 [12.2 – 26.0]	4.35 [2.4 – 7.3]	33.28 [7.4 – 57.7]	144.76
		Perciformes	Carangidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.16 [0 – 0.6]	0.01	2.29 [0 – 5.3]	2.01 [0 – 5.9]	0.74 [0 – 2.6]	1.48
			Gerreidae	9.66 [5.8 – 14.0]	4.37 [2.0 – 7.8]	2.73 [0.6 – 6.0]	11.93	0.76 [0 – 2.3]	0.11 [0 – 0.4]	0.08 [0 – 0.3]	0.01
			Scianidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.24 [0 – 0.9]	0.02	-	-	-	-

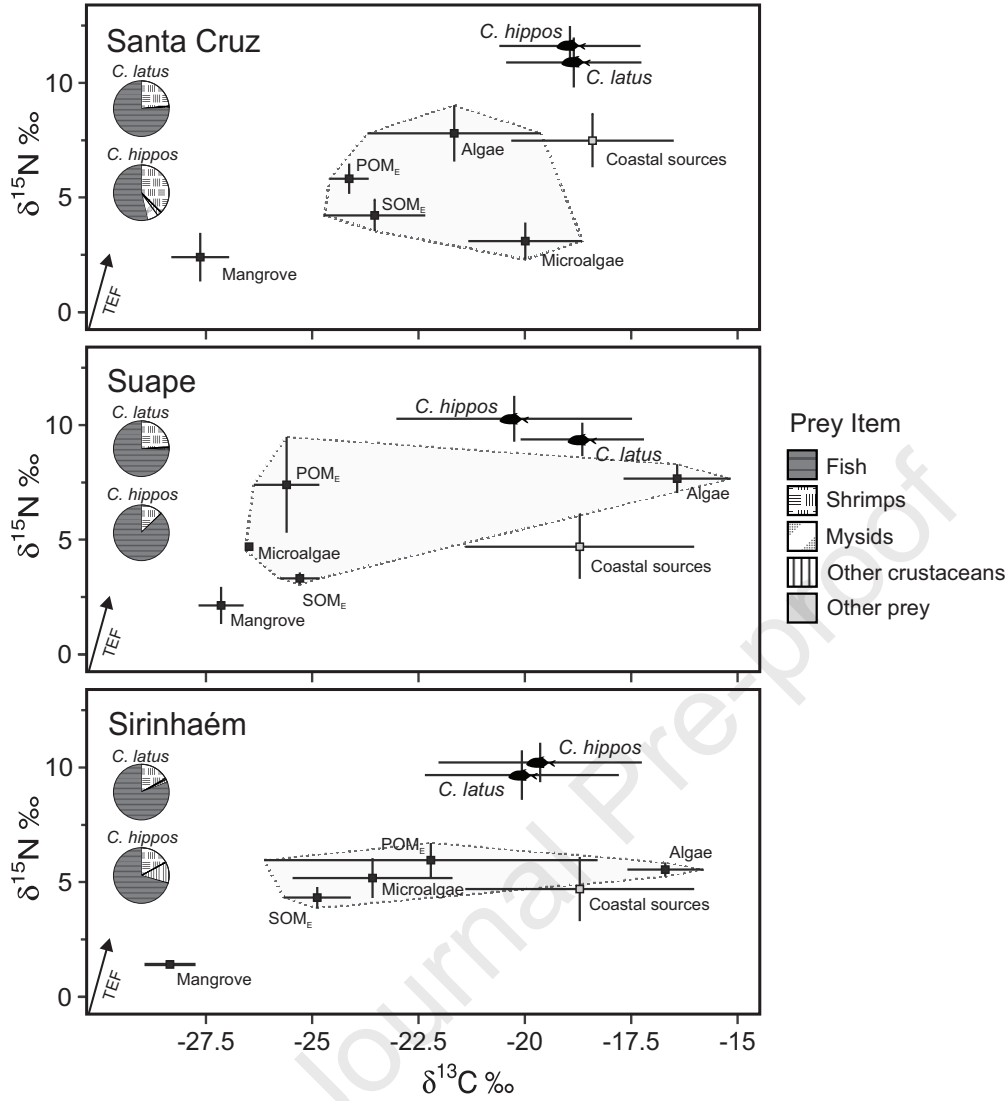
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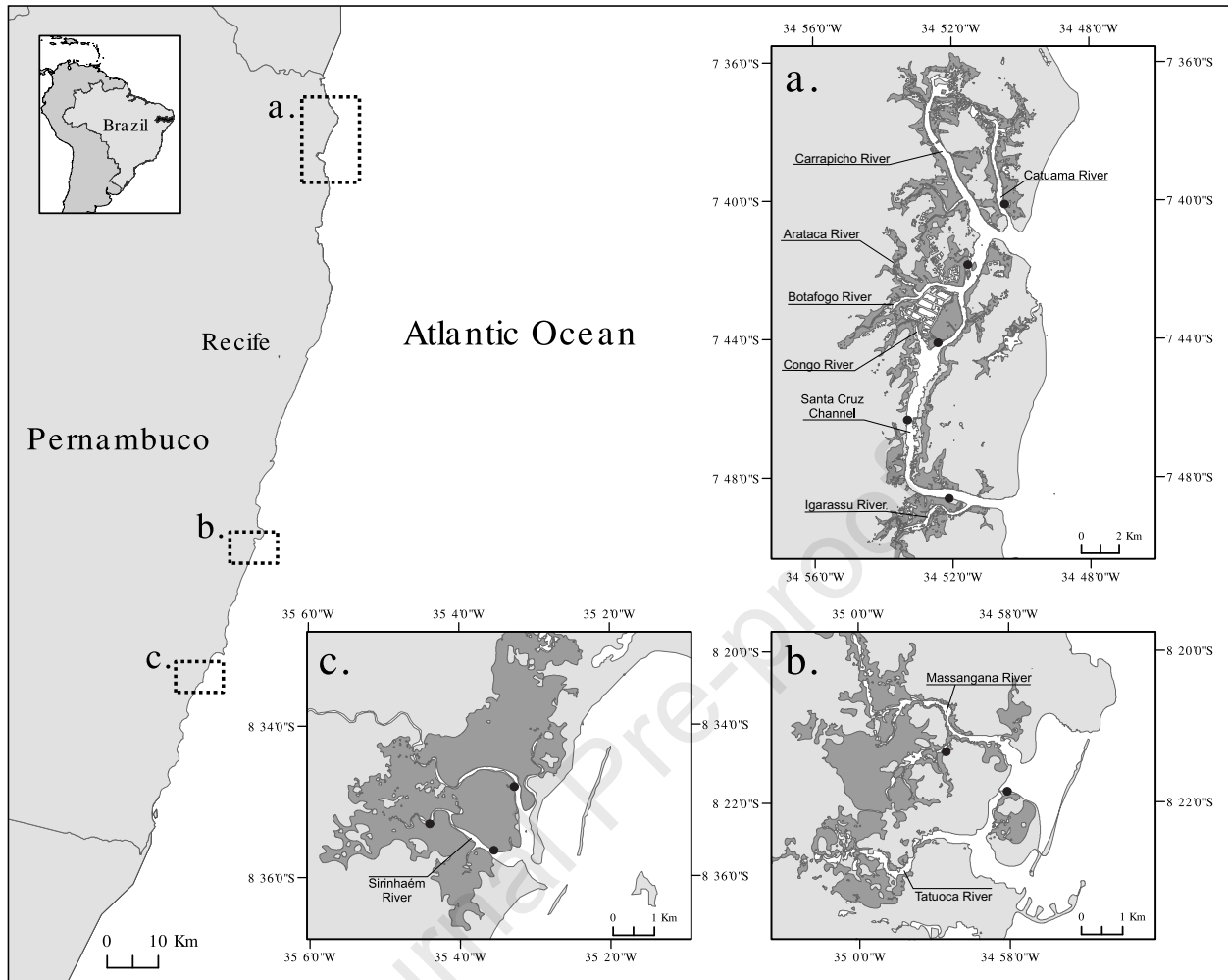
Pleuronectiformes	Cynoglossidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.14 [0 – 0.5]	0.01	-	-	-	-
	Paralichthyidae	0.48 [0 – 1.4]	0.10 [0 – 0.3]	0.04 [0 – 0.2]	0.01	-	-	-	-
Unidentified teleostei		60.39 [53.6 – 67.1]	43.00 [32.2 – 53.6]	27.12 [18.2 – 39.0]	1166.18	54.20 [45.8 – 62.6]	14.96 [9.4 – 23.5]	14.40 [8.4 – 24.0]	215.2
DEBRIS		29.47 [23.7 – 35.7]	20.46 [14.9 – 26.2]	1.30 [0.3 – 3.2]	-	33.59 [26.0 – 42.0]	11.64 [7.2 – 18.3]	1.46 [0.4 – 3.1]	-
Plastic debris		19.81 [14.5 – 25.6]	13.90 [9.3 – 18.8]	<0.01	-	18.12 [12.2 – 25.2]	6.50 [3.5 – 10.8]	<0.01	-
Unidentified organic matter and sediment debris		14.98 [10.1 – 19.8]	6.56 [3.5 – 10.2]	1.30 [0.3 – 3.2]	-	18.84 [12.2 – 26.0]	5.07 [2.7 – 8.8]	1.45 [0.4 – 3.1]	-

Table 3 Continued.









Highlights

- The trophic ecology of two jack species was described for three tropical estuaries
- Both species mostly eat fish and crustaceans during their estuarine juvenile life
- Their overall isotopic niches are very similar and the overlap between them is >68%
- However, spatial changes in diet allow to reduce this latter to 27-57%
- Food partitioning strategies between the two species differ among estuaries

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Júlio Guazzelli Gonzalez
Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco
Departamento de Pesca e Aquicultura
52171-900, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil
julio.guazzelli-gonzalez@etu.umontpellier.fr

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All co-authors have materially participated in the manuscript preparation (see below for more details) and all approved the present version of the manuscript.

Júlio Guazzelli Gonzalez: Sampling procedures, laboratorial analysis, data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Audrey M. Darnaude: Data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Paulo José Duarte-Neto: Data analysis and manuscript preparation.

François Le Loc'h: Data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Mayara Constantino de Lima: Sampling and laboratory analyses.

Frédéric Ménard: Data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Valdimere Ferreira: Sampling and laboratory analyses.

Flávia Lucena Frédou: Data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Jean-Marie Munaron: laboratory analyses.

Thierry Frédou: Sampling, data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Sincerely.

Júlio Guazzelli Gonzalez (on behalf of the authors)
Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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