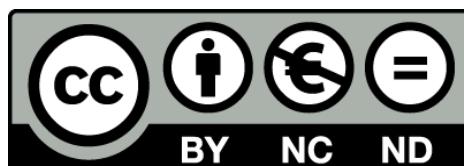




La construcció de les comunitats vegetals de maresma al delta del Llobregat

Gradients ambientals, trets funcionals
i interaccions biòtiques

Efrem Batriu Vila



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setembre de 2014



Departament de Biologia Vegetal

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i interaccions biòtiques

Memòria presentada per Efrem Batriu Vila per optar al grau de
Doctor de la Universitat de Barcelona

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Agraïments

Fa molt i molt temps que vaig acabar la carrera. En aquella època els telèfons mòbils només servien per trucar i els pantalons tapaven la roba interior. Eren els feliços anys dos mil. Per a qualsevol biòleg acabat de sortir de la universitat la millor opció laboral era dedicar-se al gremi de la construcció. Però a mi, durant la carrera, m'havia picat la mosca de la curiositat i volia aprendre més biologia, més ecologia i més botànica. Quin lloc millor per fer-ho que a la universitat? Així que aquell estiu vaig decidir fer una gira per tots els departaments de biologia vegetal de Catalunya. Armat amb el resguard del pagament del títol de llicenciat en una ma i en l'altra el currículum de mitja pàgina escrit a triple espai, vaig recórrer totes les universitats catalanes. Però l'estiu es va acabar sense que el meu periple hagués donat cap fruit. El gris hivern va caure sobre la plana de Bages. Vaig desar el meu resguard de títol al calaix i em vaig abrigar amb el meu currículum. La logística de mercaderies banals no semblava molt relacionada amb la biologia, però tampoc hi havia gran cosa més a fer. De sobte, per un cop de sort, vaig tenir a l'abast una oportunitat. M'hi vaig agafar tant fort com vaig poder i al final, ho vaig aconseguir. Una beca de segona categoria, només 3 anys per fer el doctorat. I què? Aquell era el millor regal que podia desitjar!! Estava a la Unitat de Botànica de la UB!! Faria el doctorat!!! No sabia gran cosa de les maresmes, mai no havia estat al delta del Llobregat i el simple soroll d'un mosquit em feia tornar boig. Però m'era ben igual perquè tenia l'oportunitat d'aprendre botànica! I, a fe de Déu, que n'he après. Com he après tantes altres coses com ecologia, estadística, edafologia, informàtica, filologia anglesa, bricolatge, jardineria i un llarg etc.. Aquesta tesi em serveix per posar un petit punt i seguit a la meva formació de biòleg. Miro endarrere i veig que des del dia que vaig recórrer tot xiulant els passadissos de Botànica fins avui, sou molts els que m'heu donat la maneta i m'heu acompanyat i guiat pels camins del saber. Alguns de vosaltres encara sou al meu costat, compartint coneixements i emocions amb mi; altres sou a l'exili i d'altres heu passat com una estrella fugaç. Però tots vosaltres heu estat importants i us vull donar el meu més sincer agraïment. Ja sabeu qui sou i no crec que faig falta posar els vostres noms.

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A l'Agnès

Ars longa, vita brevis

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Introducció

1. Introducció general

1.1 La construcció de les comunitats vegetals

La composició d'espècies d'una comunitat vegetal és el resultat de l'acció d'un conjunt complex de filtres (Keddy 1992), que a grans trets comprenen la disponibilitat local de propàguls, les condicions ambientals de l'indret (filtres abiotics) i les interaccions amb la resta d'espècies (filtres biòtics; figura 1). La composició de la comunitat pot ser, a més, variable al llarg de l'espai i el temps ja que tant les condicions abiotics com les biòtiques són canviants, i sovint sotmeses a l'atzar. Alhora, la capacitat d'una espècie concreta de superar tots aquests filtres pot venir determinada per un seguit de trets funcionals, tals com el tipus de propàguls que fa, la taxa de creixement, la capacitat de tolerar les pertorbacions, etc. Aquests trets, intrínsecos de cada espècie, modulen per tant la construcció de les comunitats afavorint o dificultant que diferents espècies acabin formant aquestes comunitats.

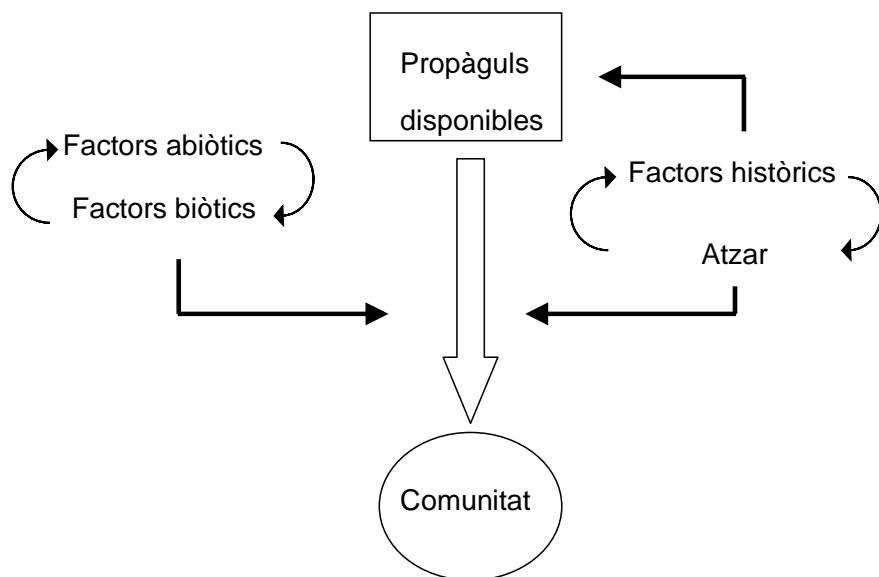


Figura 1. Esquema dels diferents condicionants i fluxos que intervenen en la construcció d'una comunitat vegetal.

Podem considerar que Diamond (1975) fou el primer en formular les regles de construcció de les comunitats (*community assembly*) en formular la hipòtesi que existien

un seguit de forces, anomenades posteriorment regles de construcció, que podrien generar, a partir d'un conjunt determinat d'espècies, un seguit de comunitats de composició i abundància específiques. Nou fou però fins a unes dècades després que aquestes regles o factors foren més clarament desenvolupades (Keddy 1992, Weiher et al. 1998). Segons aquests autors l'acció seqüencial d'un conjunt de filtres (dispersió, gradients ambientals i competència) al llarg del temps és la que forma la comunitat. Així les espècies que habiten un lloc han d'haver estat capaces d'arribar-hi, establir-s'hi i tolerar les interaccions amb altres organismes. Aquesta teoria integra l'idea de nínxol de Hutchinson, el principi d'exclusió competitiva de Gause i la importància dels processos de dispersió posada de manifest per diferents biogeògrafs, especialment MacArthur & Wilson (MacArthur & Wilson 1967). Contrastant clarament amb la teoria de les regles de construcció de comunitats, Hubbell (2011) formulà més recentment la teoria unificada de la neutralitat, segons la qual la composició i abundància de les espècies en una comunitat es deu purament a l'atzar i no a regles de construcció específiques. Aquesta teoria recull les contradiccions que suposa, pel principi d'exclusió competitiva de Gause, l'existència de comunitats on hi ha nombroses espècies equivalents, tal com ja havia estat arguït des de fa temps (Pielou 1977, Shmida & Ellner 1984). Tal i com posen mostren Leibold & McPeek (2006) ambdues teories (la teoria de les regles de construcció de comunitats i la teoria unificada de la neutralitat) són valides per explicar diferents tipus de comunitats o diferents aspectes d'una mateixa comunitat. Un exemple d'aquest punt de vista és la teoria estocàstica de la construcció de comunitats de Tilman (Tilman 2004), que incorpora l'atzar com un factor més a l'hora de formar les comunitats.

1.2 El nínxol ecològic

Un concepte clau en la visió més determinista de la construcció de les comunitats és el concepte de nínxol ecològic. El terme nínxol va ser inicialment encunyat en ecologia pel zoòleg Joseph Grinell (1917) per referir-se al lloc d'un determinat ecosistema on una espècie pot trobar el menjar que necessita i alhora fugir dels depredadors, i és el que actualment s'anomena nínxol d'hàbitat (Looijen 2000). Una dècada després Elton (1927) redefineix el concepte nínxol com el rol que una

espècie té en un determinat ecosistema, és a dir, l'hàbitat, el mode de vida i la posició a la xarxa tròfica que una espècie ocupa (Looijen 2000). Actualment a aquest tipus de nínxol se l'anomena nínxol funcional. Però potser la idea de nínxol que més ha marcat a l'ecologia és la de Hutchinson & Deevey (1949). Segons aquests autor, el nínxol ecològic és l'espai imaginari definit per múltiples factors biòtics i abiotícs on una espècie és capaç de sobreviure i prosperar. Aquests nínxol, anomenat posteriorment nínxol fonamental (*fundamental niche*), no té en compte les interaccions entre espècies, les limitacions de dispersió d'una espècie concreta o les condicions abiotíques no existents a la realitat (Colwell & Rangel 2009). Tot això es manifesta en la distribució real de les espècies, ja que aquesta no coïncideix amb el nínxol fonamental, sinó que mostra menys amplitud en diferents aspectes. El nínxol que es deriva de l'observació de la distribució real de les espècies s'anomena nínxol real (*realised niche*).

1.2 Gradients ambientals

D'altra banda, el concepte de nínxol ecològic s'ha vist condicionat per l'anàlisi dels anomenats gradients ambientals, que podem definir com variacions graduals en factors que determinen la presència i abundància de les espècies. En certa manera, la importància dels gradients ambientals és implícita a la concepció del nínxol ecològic de Hutchinson. Però no fou fins que Whittaker (1953) estudià la distribució de diferents espècies al llarg de gradients ambientals que aquests cobraren veritable importància en ecologia, fins el punt que, actualment, la idea de gradient és central en el desenvolupament de les teories de construcció de les comunitats (Økland 1992). Segons Austin & Smith (1989) podem distingir entre tres tipus de gradients ambientals: de recursos, directes i indirectes. Els primers són aquells on el factor abiotípic causant del gradient és consumit per les plantes per tal de créixer, e.g. aigua, nitrogen o llum, i per això defineixen l'anomenat nínxol tròfic (Looijen 2000). Els directes es deuen a un factor abiotípic que no és consumit per la planta, tot i que hi té un impacte fisiològic directe, com ara els paràmetres edàfics pH, salinitat o temperatura. Finalment, els indirectes són gradients complexos, sense una direccionalitat espacial clara o constant, ja que van associats a la variació de diferents gradients directes combinats, e.g. altitud, latitud o qualitat del sòl. Segons Austin & Smith (1989), no convé usar el darrer tipus de gradients en l'estudi de la distribució d'espècies, ja que la relació dels gradients

indirectes amb les espècies és local, de manera que no es pot extrapolar; depèn d'una correlació circumstancial entre gradients de recursos o directes. En aquest darrer punt és on hi ha més divergències en la comunitat científica. Per exemple, tot i estar d'acord amb la classificació posposada per Austin & Smith (1989), Økland (1992) mostra que a les mollerades el nivell freàtic és una variable indirecta que es correlaciona de forma constant amb altres variables directes crucials per a la vida vegetal a tota Fennoscàndia; demostrant així que el seu estudi és molt convenient i pràctic. Un altre exemple és la productivitat; alguns autors usen aquest gradient indirecte en la formulació de les seves teories ecològiques (Grime 1979, Tilman 1988, Wisheu & Keddy 1992) mentre que altres consideren que, al tractar-se d'un gradient indirecte, s'ha de ser extremament prudent en la seva utilització (Austin & Gaywood 1994).

1.3. Les interaccions biòtiques

Segons la teoria clàssica de la successió (Connell & Slatyer 1977), les diverses espècies poden presentar interaccions negatives (inhibició i competència), positives (facilitació) o neutres (tolerància) que poden modular la construcció de les comunitats vegetals. Pel que fa a les primeres, i basant-se en els seus experiments i en el model de competència interespecífica de Lotka-Volterra, Gause formulà el conegut principi d'exclusió competitiva (Gause & Witt 1935). Segons aquest principi dues espècies només poden coexistir si hi ha una segregació en el seu nínxol. Implícita a aquest principi, hi ha la idea que, donat un mateix ambient abiotíic, les comunitats d'organismes més diverses són aquelles on les espècies que la formen tenen una amplitud de nínxol més petita i que, per tant, poden coexistir sense que es produueixi un encavallament de nínxol. Tanmateix, tot i que s'admet que un dels principals condicionants de l'estructura i composició de les comunitats vegetals són les interaccions competitives entre plantes (Rebele 2000), en moltes comunitats trobem un alt grau d'encavallament de nínxol que, en certa mesura, contradiu el principi de l'exclusió competitiva. Els gradients ambientals, especialment els lligats als recursos per a la vida vegetal, i com aquests afecten les interaccions entre plantes, foren els primers factors assenyalats com a responsables d'aquesta aparent contradicció amb el principi d'exclusió competitiva. Segons Grime (1979) no hi ha plantes capaces de tolerar un fort estrès abiotíic i alhora tenir una taxa de creixement elevada. Això fa que, a

mesura que el gradient de recursos augmenta, la competència vegetal esdevé més important, mentre que quant augmenta l'estrès abiotic passa just el contrari (Grime 1979). Per tant, la coexistència amb encavallament de nínxols seria possible en situacions de molt estrès, ja que la capacitat d'exclusió competitiva que tindrien les espècies seria escassa. Per contra, Tilman (1988) defensa que la competència és constant al llarg del gradient ambiental de recursos (productivitat), i que el que canvia és el nivell on s'exerceix aquesta competència. Per Tilman (1988), la coexistència amb encavallament de nínxols s'explicaria no per l'abundància de recursos o l'estrès, sinó pels diferents requeriments de cada espècie. Encara que aquestes dues importants hipòtesis semblen molt contrastades, de fet són perfectament compatibles (Craine 2005) tenint en compte que Grime es refereix a la importància de la competència, i Tilman a la seva intensitat (Brooker & Kikividze 2008). Per bé que Tilman i Grime (loc. cit.) se centren en les interaccions de tipus competitiu, a mitjans dels anys noranta Bertness & Callaway (1994) posen l'èmfasi en la importància de les relacions positives o facilitatives entre plantes, en l'anomenada hipòtesi dels gradients d'estrès (SGH, per les sigles en anglès). Parcialment basada en les idees de Grime (Maestre et al. 2009), aquesta hipòtesi prediu que en les comunitats vegetals que viuen sota condicions abiotiques particularment dures són freqüents les interaccions positives entre plantes (Bertness & Callaway 1994) possibilitant així la coexistència (Soliveres et al. 2011). Aquesta idea ha estat àmpliament recolzada per experiments de camp realitzats en diversos ambients difícils per a la vida de les plantes, com ara maresmes, zones alpines o estepes àrides (Callaway 2007). No obstant això, alguns d'aquests experiments també reflecteixen que al llarg de la vida de les espècies que interactuen la intensitat i el signe de les seves interrelacions poden canviar (Callaway & Walker 1997) i que els processos de facilitació no sempre es poden extrapolar entre ambients semblants (Pennings et al. 2003). A més, nombrosos estudis en ambients àrids han posat de manifest que els efectes facilitadors poden disminuir o fins i tot desaparèixer quant l'estrès és extrem (Maestre & Cortina 2004). Això ha donat lloc a diferents reformulacions de la SGH que tenen en compte la facilitació a nivells d'estrés mitjà (Maestre et al. 2009, Holmgren & Scheffer 2010, Malkinson & Tielbörger 2010).

L'altre factor important que explica la coexistència d'espècies vegetals és el dinamisme del medi abiotic. Així, el règim de pertorbacions (Pierce et al. 2007), els equilibris entre les capacitats competitiva i de colonització de les espècies (Coomes &

Grubb 2003) i les diferents adaptacions als hàbitats canviants (Chesson 2000) permetrien la coexistència temporal d'espècies amb encavallament de nínxol.

1.4 El paper dels trets funcionals de les plantes

Els trets funcionals de les pròpies espècies modulen també la construcció de les comunitats vegetals (Weiher et al. 1998, Cornwell & Ackerly 2009). Hàbitats de condicions ambientals relativament semblants però geogràficament allunyats hostatgen plantes de llinatges evolutius molt distants que, no obstant, presenten morfologies i funcionalismes semblants. Raunkiaer (1934) creà un classificació de les plantes en funció de l'alçada de les gemmes en el l'època de repòs hivernal, coneguda com a sistema de formes vitals de Raunkiaer. Aquest sistema no és una mera classificació morfològica, sinó que inclou una interessant consideració funcional, ja que cada forma vital correspon, de fet, a una estratègia vegetal, el que explica el seu ús molt generalitzat en els estudis d'ecologia vegetal. Més endavant Grime (1979) agrupà les plantes en tres estratègies bàsiques (competitives, ruderals i tolerants a l'estrés) i quatre més d'intermèdies, en funció de les seves adaptacions a factors ambientals tals com la quantitat de recursos o la freqüència de pertorbacions. Així, les plantes de cadascun d'aquests grups responen de manera similar als factors externs, cosa que es manifesta en la presència d'un seguit de trets funcionals compartits; per això aquests grups reben el nom de grups funcionals de resposta (Lavorel & Garnier 2002, Cornelissen et al. 2003). En el fons, els trets funcionals de les plantes, especialment aquells que fan referència a les adaptacions a factors abiòtics, així com els grups funcionals de resposta, es poden considerar una aproximació grollera al nínxol de les espècies, donat que esperem que dues espècies amb el nínxol encavallat comparteixin molts trets funcionals (Baraloto et al. 2012).

1.5. Implicacions sobre el concepte de comunitat vegetal

Des de inicis del segle XX, els científics han basat els seus estudis de la vegetació en petites porcions d'aquesta que consideraven mostres de les diferents comunitats vegetals. Així, per caracteritzar una comunitat vegetal o tipus de vegetació, cal partir d'unes mostres concretes i reals de vegetació anomenades *phytocoenoses* (Van

der Maarel 2005) o inventaris (Braun-Blanquet 1979). En tot cas, però, la identificació i selecció d'aquestes mostres és inherent a la propia concepció de la comunitat vegetal, que pot ser entesa com un conjunt definit de plantes que creixen juntes de forma reiterada o simplement com una contingència espaciotemporal d'espècies (Lortie et al. 2004). Clements (1916) tenia una visió holística de la comunitat vegetal, segons la qual les interaccions entre les diverses espècies portaven al llarg del temps a la formació d'una comunitat clímax, amb una composició determinada i capaç d'autoperpeturar-se, com si d'un organisme viu es tractés. Per contra Gleason (1927) pensava que les espècies vegetals es comportaven de forma independent i que no es podia parlar de comunitats vegetals integrades ni de comunitats clímax. Les idees de Gleason quedaren força oblidades, i no fou fins més endavant que Whittaker (1953), mitjançant l'estudi sistemàtic de gradients ambientals, formulà la teoria del *continuum*, mostrant que les espècies responen de manera individual als factors abiotícs, i trencant així amb la idea de la comunitat vegetal tal com s'entenia fins llavors.

De totes maneres, tal i com passa amb altres controvèrsies en la ciència ecològica, tant la visió clementsiana com la gleasoniana de comunitat vegetal existeixen a la natura, tal i com mostraren Shipley & Keddy (1987). Així, en situacions en que les condicions ambientals canvien de forma més o menys brusca és fàcil distingir comunitats vegetals, i no tant quan les condicions ambientals canvien de forma més gradual. Sigui quina sigui la realitat a la que ens enfrontem, per a l'estudi de la vegetació es fa imprescindible simplificar la realitat en un sistema de classificació jeràrquic. Això no és pas incompatible amb la idea de *continuum* de Whittaker (1953). Un exemple clar d'això són els treballs de Ramensky (Sobolev & Utekhin 1978), un pioner en l'estudi de la vegetació que formulà les idees del *continuum* molt abans que Whittaker, però que tot i això fou capaç de crear un sistema d'ordenació de la vegetació. A l'Europa occidental, però, s'imposà el mètode de classificació fitosociològic, l'objectiu primer del qual ha estat classificar les comunitats vegetals a partir de la seva composició, en un sistema jeràrquic que reflecteixi llurs semblances i diferències florístiques (Braun-Blanquet 1979). La unitat bàsica d'aquest sistema és l'associació, una abstracció procedent d'un seguit de mostres de vegetació (inventaris) que comparteixen la presència d'un grup important d'espècies. Algunes d'aquestes tenen un alt poder indicador de la comunitat (espècies característiques), mentre que d'altres són espècies més ubiquistes (espècies companyants).

2. Les comunitats vegetals de les maresmes costaneres

2.1 Gradients abiòtics

Encara que al món existeixen multitud de maresmes fisiognòmicament diferents, en totes la distribució de les espècies vegetals està principalment condicionada per dos factors abiòtics: la salinitat i el grau d'humitat o d'inundació del sòl (Adam 1993). Concretament, la salinitat del sòl pot tenir tres tipus d'efectes adversos per la vida vegetal: (i) inhibició de l'absorció d'aigua; (ii) inhibició de l'absorció de nutrients; i (iii) toxicitat iònica (Adam 1993). En la majoria dels estudis ecològics de les maresmes, només se sol mesurar la concentració total de sal, al sòl o a l'aigua que l'inunda, encara que això només està relacionat directament amb el primer efecte pernicios dels esmentats. Treballs recents mostren que, per entendre correctament el funcionament de les plantes de les maresmes, cal tenir en compte la composició iònica de les sals, ja que té efectes clars en la vegetació (Álvarez Rogel et al. 2001). Pel que fa a la inundació, es tracta d'un factor que causa una forta reducció d'oxigen al sòl, el que afecta de dues maneres les plantes: n'impedeix la respiració de les arrels i fa que al sòl es generin compostos químics fitotòxics com ara el sulfat (Pezeshki 2001). Generalment, per tal d'avaluar la inundació s'han fet servir aproximacions com l'alçada del nivell freàtic o la durada de la inundació; però treballs actuals mostren que el grau d'oxidació-reducció del sòl (Sánchez 1998) o la presència d'alguns compostos fitotòxic com el sulfat (Chambers et al. 1998, Seliskar et al. 2004) són variables importants a tenir en compte.

2.2 Interaccions entre espècies

En les maresmes litorals sotmeses a marees s'han realitzat un bon nombre d'estudis encarats a clarificar la relació entre els gradients ambientals i les interaccions entre plantes (Snow & Vince 1984, Bertness 1991, Pennings et al. 1992). Fruit d'elles emergeix la idea que les plantes competitivament superiors ocupen la zona menys limitant de la maresma, i desplacen les plantes competitivament inferiors a les zones més desfavorables (Pennings et al. 2005). Aquest paradigma dels patrons de zonació de

les maresmes és convergent amb les idees generals de Grime (1977) segons el qual hi ha una relació inversa entre la capacitat competitiva i la de tolerar els estressos abiotícs. Tot i això, sent les maresmes costaneres hàbitats amb restriccions abiotíques particularment importants per a la vida vegetal tals com les derivades de la salinitat, ben aviat s'hi van detectar interaccions positives entre plantes, de manera que el seu estudi ajudà a la formulació de la SGH (Bertness et al. 1994). Així, la facilitació pot determinar la successió secundària (Castellanos et al. 1994), la coexistència d'espècies (He et al. 2011) i la diversitat (Hacker & Bertness 1999) de les comunitats vegetals a les maresmes. Per bé que pot semblar el contrari, la relació entre els gradients ambientals i les interaccions de les plantes a les maresmes està lluny de ser un tema d'estudi completament resolt, ja que estudis recents mostren com els patrons i paradigmes coneguts són molt dependents de les condicions macroclimàtiques (Bertness & Ewanchuk 2002) i del règim de marees (Costa et al. 2003).

2.4 Comunitats

La vegetació de les maresmes costaneres sovint presenta una aparença de mosaic on el canvi en el recobriment d'unes poques espècies amb gran tolerància als factors ambientals d'estrès defineix les unitats bàsiques de vegetació (Adam 1993). Això fa que les maresmes siguin un ecosistema ideal per l'estudi de gradients i de relacions entre plantes, com els anteriorment esmentats, si bé dificulta l'aplicació del mètode fitosociològic a l'hora de classificar les comunitats que hi trobem. En aquestes circumstàncies, les associacions de plantes es defineixen per combinacions d'espècies que coexisteixen en determinades circumstàncies, sovint sense que cap d'aquestes espècies pugui ser considerada característica o diferencial (Adam 1993). Tot i aquesta limitació, el mètode fitosociològic s'ha emprat per classificar la major part de la vegetació de les maresmes costaneres (Adam 1993, Rivas-Martínez et al. 2001).

2.5 Trets funcionals

Paral·lelament a l'estudi dels efectes dels gradients abiotícs sobre la distribució de les plantes a les maresmes costaneres, s'han estudiat els trets funcionals que possibiliten algunes plantes per tolerar les condicions que aquests gradients

imposen. Per exemple, és prou conegut l'alt valor adaptatiu de trets funcionals de resposta tals com les arrels amb aerènquia, la suculència de fulles i tiges, la capacitat de multiplicació clonal, l'excreció de sals o el tipus de via fotosintètica (Adam 1993). Per bé que la importància d'aquests trets en la composició i abundància de les espècies en les maresmes es pot induir dels nombrosos estudis de gradients fets, manquen estudis que hagin abordat aquesta qüestió de forma prou explícita i quantitativa. Igualment, tampoc hi ha gaires estudis que hagin valorat el paper dels trets funcionals més generals (forma vital, àrea foliar específica, etc.) a les maresmes (Minden & Kleyer 2011, Pavoline et al. 2011), i encara menys que hagin intentat establir el lligam entre els trets de resposta i els trets d'efecte (Minden & Kleyer 2011).

2.6 Construcció de comunitats

Les maresmes costaneres, en ser florísticament pobres (Adam 1993) i molt marcades pels forts gradients d'inundació i salinitat, ofereixen models senzills per l'estudi de la construcció de comunitats. Fruit dels estudis d'Erfanzadeh et al. (2010b) sabem que, en general, els factors estocàstics posats de manifest per Hubell (2011) en la construcció de comunitats només tenen certa importància en les comunitats de plantes anuals a les maresmes costaneres. Així, en una successió primària, les comunitats de maresma són altament predictibles en els primers estadis en funció sobretot de les condicions abiotiques i, més envant, de les interaccions entre espècies. De totes maneres, seguiments realitzats durant dècades en maresmes restaurades naturalment o artificialment mostren que, quant manquen propàguls d'alguna espècie clau, apareixen comunitats no esperades que poden tenir força persistència (Adam 1993, Klotzli & Grootjans 2001).

Objectius

L'objectiu general d'aquesta tesi és aprofundir en el coneixement de les regles de construcció de comunitats vegetals de les maresmes costaneres mediterrànies. Prenent com a cas d'estudi les maresmes del delta del Llobregat, aquest objectiu general es desgrana en diferents objectius específics, tractats als diversos capítols de la tesi. Aquests estan encaminats a determinar els gradients ambientals que condicionen la distribució de les espècies i les comunitats vegetals a les maresmes del delta del Llobregat, i com aquests afecten els balanços de les relacions interespecífiques i de trets funcionals de les plantes. Alhora, també hem intentat esbrinar com pot haver afectat l'ús passat del sòl la presència i l'abundància actuals de les espècies i les comunitats vegetals, a través dels trets funcionals.

Pel que fa a la distribució i l'abundància de les espècies dominants a les principals comunitats de maresma (capítol 1) els objectius específics han estat:

- i. Identificar els gradients abiotícs que afecten la distribució de les principals espècies a les maresmes del delta del Llobregat i modelitzar el nínxol real d'aquestes espècies en base als factors abiotícs identificats.
- ii. Analitzar comparativament l'encavallament de nínxol entre les espècies, per tal de detectar fenòmens de segregació de nínxol.

Pel que fa a la distribució de les principals comunitats de maresma (capítol 2), els objectius han estat:

- i. Estudiar fins a quin punt les classificació fitosociològica de les comunitats de maresma es relaciona amb els principals gradients abiotícs que condicionen la distribució de les espècies que les integren.
- ii. Avaluar el paper dels usos recents del sòl en la distribució de la vegetació actual.

Pel que fa al paper dels factors ambientals en la selecció dels trets biològics de les espècies (capítol 3), els objectius han estat:

- i. Analitzar el paper dels gradients abiotícs i dels factors històrics recents (història de l'ús del sòl) en la selecció de les espècies a les comunitats de maresma estudiades, a través dels seus trets funcionals
- ii. Verificar si les pertorbacions associades a canvis d'usos pretèrits condicionen la composició específica de les comunitats presents.

Pel que fa al paper de les interaccions biòtiques en la distribució de les espècies principals de la maresma (capítol 4), els objectius han estat:

- i. Determinar les interaccions interespecífiques entre *Phragmites australis* i *Juncus acutus* al llarg dels gradients ambientals clau, identificats al capítol 1, tot verificant si l'exclusió competitiva és responsable dels patrons de distribució d'ambdues espècies a les maresmes d'estudi.
- ii. Comprovar si hi ha fenòmens de facilitació entre ambdues espècies en nivells d'estrés intermedis, tal i com prediuen recents modificacions de la hipòtesi dels gradients d'estrès.

Sistema d'estudi

1. Àrea d'estudi: el delta del Llobregat

1.1 Medi i geologia

La vall del riu Llobregat travessa la serralada litoral catalana per una falla que la separa deixant el Garraf a ponent i la serra de Collserola a llevant. Així, prop de la desembocadura el riu es troba encaixonat per aquests dues formacions muntanyoses, que delimiten de forma clara els límits del delta. Només resta poc clar el límit NE entre el delta del Llobregat i el del Besòs, que passa per la plana que trobem entre la serra de Collserola i el massís de Montjuïc, anomenada plana de Barcelona (Marquès i Roca 1987).

El delta del Llobregat està format per sediments quaternaris que descansen sobre una capa de materials terciaris, majoritàriament del Pliocè (Marquès i Roca 1987). Aquests sediments comencen allà on la vall del Llobregat s'obre al mar i s'estenen sota les aigües marines fins uns 15 km enllà de l'actual línia de costa (Gámez et al. 2009). En els materials quaternaris poden diferenciar-se quatre complexos de sedimentació, corresponents a quatre cicles de transgressió/regressió marina associats a les glaciacions del Würm. Segons estimacions recents, els més antics d'aquests materials submergits podrien tenir uns 40.000 anys, mentre que l'edat dels emergits és d'uns 10.000 anys (Gámez et al. 2009). De totes maneres, des de finals del Pleistocè (aproximadament fa 12.000 anys) fins fa uns 4.000 anys, la taxa de sedimentació va ser molt baixa, ja que el nivell del mar va ascendir de forma molt ràpida (Gámez et al. 2005). Així, en ple segle III la línia de costa encara se situava aproximadament a l'alçada de San Boi de Llobregat (Ferret Pujol 2012). A partir del segle VI i fins al segle XIV la taxa de sedimentació augmentà de forma molt important, de manera que en ple segle XIV el delta arribà a ocupar una superfície molt semblant a l'actual (Marquès i Roca 1987, Gámez et al. 2005). En aquest ràpid creixement hi tingué molt a veure la desforestació antropogènica de gran part de la conca del Llobregat, així com també un període àrid que tingué lloc entre els segles XI i XIV (Gámez et al. 2005). Aquests fenòmens

incrementaren notablement l'erosió, i per tant l'aportació de sediment riu avall. Al segle XVIII, associat a la revolució industrial, hi ha un nou increment de la taxa de sedimentació (Gàmez et al. 2005) que fa que a finals del segle XIX la línia costanera del delta aconsegueixi el seu màxim històric (Panareda & Sans 2002, Ferret Pujol 2012). Després, ja al segle XX, la creació d'embassaments a tota la conca del Llobregat reduí dràsticament l'arribada de sediments al delta (Panareda & Sans 2002). Alhora, la creació dels dics del Port de Barcelona modificà els corrents marins canviant així els patrons de sedimentació (Panareda & Sans 2002). Així, a la darreria del segle XX el delta estava en clara regressió prop de la desembocadura, mentre que cap a les costes de Castelldefels creixia (Milagro 1987). Actualment el sistema deltaic ha patit noves modificacions dràstiques com el canvi d'ubicació de la desembocadura i l'ampliació del port de Barcelona, que és probable que afectin els processos de sedimentació. Pel que fa a la llera, gràcies a documents històrics sabem que al segle V el riu desembocava prop de l'actual Hospitalet de Llobregat i que des d'aquí la llera va anar canviant de lloc a mesura que el delta creixia, fins que als voltants del segle XIII ocupà la seva posició definitiva (Ferret Pujol 2012). Vestigis de lleres pretèrites són les actuals llacunes de la Murta, la Roberta, el Remolar i la Ricarda.

1.2 Clima

Segons les dades climàtiques de l'estació meteorològica de l'aeroport de Barcelona-El Prat, situat al bell mig del delta del Llobregat i amb un registre que va des del 1971 fins a l'actualitat, la precipitació mitjana anual és de 640 mm. El juliol és el mes més sec (20 mm) mentre que el més plujós és l'octubre (91 mm). La temperatura mitjana anual és de 15,5 °C, sent el mes més càlid l'agost (20 °C) i el més fred el gener (4,4 °C). Segons Bolòs & Vigo (1984-2001) aquest clima correspondria a un tipus mediterrani marítim subhumit amb període subhivernal acusat. Segons la classificació de Rivas-Martínez & Rivas-Saénz (2009) el clima seria de tipus mediterrani oceànic amb pluviositat estacional.

Com tota la costa mediterrània, el delta del Llobregat no presenta marees fortes ni regulars. Tot i que s'hi produeixen marees astronòmiques, la seva amplitud mareal és poc important (Barrera Tomàs 2004). Més importants són les marees

meteorològiques, ocasionades pels vents i pels canvis de pressió atmosfèrica, que quan es combinen amb l'efecte astronòmic arriben a produir increments en el nivell marí de fins 53 cm (Barrera Tomàs 2004). Aquestes situacions de marees altes són freqüents des de setembre fins a gener, mentre que durant el febrer i tots els mesos d'estiu les marees tenen els seus nivells mínims (Barrera Tomàs 2004).

1.3 Ocupació

Com es pot deduir de la seva formació recent, l'ocupació del delta fou més aviat tardana, per bé que els poblements humans sempre hi foren propers, ja que al massís del Garraf i al seu samontà es coneix la presència de l'home des del 6000 aC. Així, en ple segle XIII la part occidental del delta romanía totalment despoblada, mentre que al delta oriental i central el poblament era en forma de masies disperses; no hi aparegué un poble fins el segle XV, el Prat de Llobregat (Panareda & Sans 2002). Fins a inicis del segle XIX el delta no havia patit cap gran transformació. És durant aquest segle quan, gràcies a la creació del canal de la Infanta (l'hemicelte nord) i del canal Dret (l'hemicelte sud) arriba l'agricultura extensiva de regadiu, que modificarà notablement el paisatge deltaic (Panareda & Sans 2002). Aquesta transformació fou ràpida a l'hemicelte nord, i més lenta a l'hemicelte sud. En ambdós casos les desamortitzacions incentivaren molt els canvis, ja que possibilitaren l'arribada de nous propietaris, bàsicament burgesos barcelonins amb prou recursos econòmics per afrontar els costos de drenar i aplanar les maresmes (Marquès i Roca 1987, Panareda & Sans 2002). Al segle XX, especialment a la segona meitat, el delta pateix la seva transformació paisatgística més important. S'hi estableixen nombroses indústries (metal·lúrgiques, químiques i de la construcció) alhora que els seus pobles augmenten notably d'habitants a conseqüència dels fluxos migratoris (Marquès i Roca 1987). Les conseqüències d'això són especialment dramàtiques a l'hemicelte nord, que a finals del segle XX es troba pràcticament tot cobert de ciment o quitrà. Seguint el contrast històric, l'hemicelte sud encara conserva un marcat caràcter agrari.

1.4 Flora i vegetació

El delta del Llobregat, com moltes altres zones deltaïques, concentra en poca àrea ambients on les condicions de vida per a les plantes són força extremes i alhora molt diferents, entre ells les sorres de la platja, les maresmes salines litorals, les llacunes dulciaqüícoles, etc. La flora que trobem en aquests ambients és molt particular i sovint exclusiva. Per això, i també degut a la proximitat del delta a Barcelona, els botànics han visitat aquest indret des de ben antic. La primera campanya florística de què es té constància fou el llunyà 1626, i tingué per protagonista Joan Salvador i Boscà. Des de llavors, i per ordre cronològic, visitaren i herboritzaren el delta Antoni Cebrià Costa, Manel Llenas, el Frère Sennen, Pius Font i Quer, Antoni de Bolòs i Oriol de Bolòs (Seguí et al. en premsa). Les troballes d'aquest autors, a part de conservar-se en diferents herbaris barcelonins, quedaren paleses en cadascuna de les flores que publicaren ells mateixos, coetanis seus o autors posteriors (Cadevall 1913-1915, Costa 1864, Bolòs 1962, Bolòs & Vigo 1984-2001). En temps recents, aquest coneixement s'ha ampliat i actualitzat amb la realització de catàlegs florístics d'indrets concrets del delta (Seguí 1998, Del Hoyo & González 2001, Panareda & Sans 2002, López Vinyallonga et al. 2006, Valverde et al. 2006, Batriu et al. 2010). Aquestes noves fonts de coneixement han quedat parcialment recollides en el Banc de Dades de la Biodiversitat de Catalunya (Font 2013). Tot i això, encara ens manca la publicació d'un catàleg florístic de tot el delta del Llobregat, que abordi la distribució de les espècies de forma detallada i amb un tractament taxonòmic modern. Per sort, actualment la Flora del delta del Llobregat està en la seva fase final d'elaboració (Seguí, com. pers.). Des de la primera herborització de Joan Salvador i Boscà al segle XVII fins a l'actualitat el delta ha patit molts canvis en l'ús dels sòls i en l'ocupació del territori, que han afectat a la flora. Si bé és molt difícil saber com ha anat canviant l'abundància i l'àrea ocupada per les diferents espècies a través de les flores i els plecs d'herbari, la comparació del coneixement pretèrit amb l'actual mostra que hi ha un conjunt d'espècies d'hàbitats molt específics que probablement s'han extingit (Bolòs & Vigo 1984-2001, Seguí et al. en premsa). Alhora, fruit de les diferents transformacions paisatgístiques i del creixent flux de persones i mercaderies, han entrat al delta un contingent important d'espècies al·lòctones (Seguí et al. en premsa).

Des de l'inici de l'estudi de les comunitats vegetals a Catalunya, la vegetació del delta ha cridat l'atenció dels fitosociòlegs. Ja en la pionera visita a Catalunya dels botànics europeus pertanyents a la *Station Internationale de Géobotanique Méditerranéene et Alpine* (SIGMA) van visitar el delta del Llobregat (Braun-Blanquet et al. 1936). Ara bé, els treballs més específics no arribaren fins uns quants anys més tard, quant primer Bolòs (1950) i després Bolòs (1962) feren un estudi força detallat de la vegetació deltaica emmarcada dins l'entorn de Barcelona. Aquest coneixement s'ha anat actualitzant periòdicament a mesura que els canvis associats a la industrialització i la creació de grans infraestructures han alterat la fisiognomia de delta (Camarasa et al. 1979, Soriano & Busquets 1993, Pino 2000). Ja des del treball de Bolòs (1962) es disposava d'una cartografia esquemàtica i interpretativa de la vegetació. Però amb cada nova actualització el detall i la precisió han anat millorant i actualment disposem d'un mapa de vegetació a l'escala 1:2.500 (Pino 2000).

1.5 Comunitats estudiades i disseny experimental

Segons un estudi previ als importants canvis d'ús de sòl recents (derivats de l'anomenat Pla Delta que implicà l'ampliació del port i l'aeroport i el desenvolupament de diverses infraestructures viàries i ferroviàries), a l'hemicelta nord els espais naturals eren merament testimonials mentre que a l'hemicelta sud només recobrien el 13,4% de la superfície, equivalent a 625,1 ha (Pino 2000). D'aquestes, aproximadament la meitat, concretament 330,6 ha, eren maresmes costaneres que fisiognòmicament es poden dividir en jonquieres, canyissars i vegetació halòfila (figura 2).

Dins el terme fisiognòmic jonquieres s'hi inclouen les jonquieres de *Juncus maritimus*, *Juncus acutus*, *Juncus subulatus* i *Scirpus holoschoenus*, així com els espartinars de *Spartina versicolor*. Tot i que l'espartina no té una fisiognomia estrictament junciforme, les seves formacions s'inclouen dins les jonquieres perquè ocupen un hàbitat molt semblant. Cal esmentar que de tots aquests tipus de jonquieres només les comunitats de *J. acutus*, *J. maritimus* i *Spartina* ocupen superfícies importants al delta del Llobregat. És per això que en la present tesi ens hem centrat en aquests tipus de jonquieres, que fitosociològicament es poden incloure dins l'aliança *Juncion maritimii* Br.-Bl. 1931.

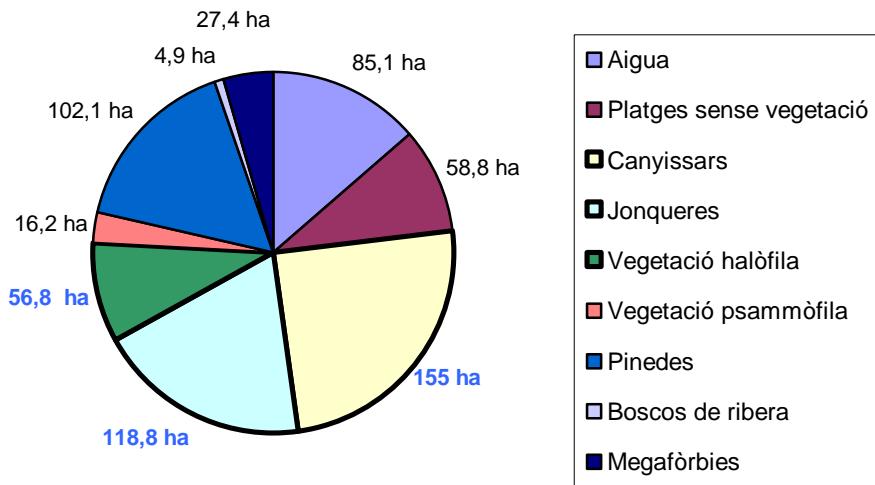


Figura 2. Distribució de la superfície d'espais naturals de l'hemicàrtol sud en classes fisiognòmiques de vegetació.

Pel que fa als canyissars, hi incloem totes les formacions dominades pel canyís (*Phragmites australis*), que poden trobar-se permanentment inundades o no. Fitosociològicament són atribuïbles a l'aliança *Phragmition australis* W. Koch 1926, per bé que no sempre clarament. Com en altres zones litorals dels Països Catalans (Bolòs & Vigo 1984-2001) al delta del Llobregat conviuen dues subespècies de canyís, subsp. *australis* i subsp. *chrysanthus*. Per bé que no hem obviat la presència d'aquesta darrera subespècie, en la present tesi ens centrem en els canyissars on domina la subespècie típica.

Finalment, dins la vegetació halòfila s'hi inclou un seguit de comunitats vegetals prou diverses, tals com les de soses i salats anuals, les de donzell marí, els tamarigars, els prats de *Plantago crassifolia* o els salicornars. De totes aquestes, l'única que ocupa una superfície destacable són els salicornars d'*Arthrocnemum fruticosum*. És per això que ens hem centrat en aquest tipus de formacions halòfiles, que fitosociològicament són atribuïbles al *Salicornion fruticosae* Br.-Bl. 1933.

Els factors històrics, recents o remots, poden ser crucials a l'hora d'explicar la vegetació actual. Pino et al. (2006) van realitzar una classificació dels hàbitats del delta en funció del seu grau d'alteració en els darrers 50 anys, separant aquells hàbitats que

han romès relativament inalterats (“estables”) dels que han estat originats a partir de l’abandonament recent de conreus i pastures, o de la recuperació d’hàbitats degradats (“semiestables”). Aquesta informació ens ha permès tenir en compte part dels factors històrics d’un passat recent.

Tota aquesta informació cartogràfica recent i històrica va ser la base per a l’establiment del disseny experimental bàsic de la tesi doctoral. Simplificant els resultats de Pino et al. (2006), varem escollir quatre localitats, que són La Ricarda i la Magarola (municipi del Prat de Llobregat), can Sabadell i Reguerons (totes dues del municipi de Viladecans). Els Reguerons i can Sabadell corresponen a àrees antigament cultivades, i abandonades al llarg dels darrers 50 anys. En canvi, la Magarola i la Ricarda són àrees que ja fa 50 anys mostraven una grau de naturalitat elevat. En un altre aspecte, la Ricarda i la Magarola són localitats costaneres, amb forta influència marina, mentre que els Reguerons i can Sabadell són localitats allunyades uns 2,5 km del mar (figura 3). A totes quatre localitats hi trobem superfícies extenses de jonqueres, canyissars i salicornars (excepte als Reguerons, on manca aquesta darrera comunitat).



Figura 3. Situació de les localitats d'estudi. 1, Reguerons; 2, can Sabadell; 3, la Ricarda i 4, la Magarola.

En el conjunt d'aquestes quatre localitats vam instal·lar 45 punts de mostreig repartits de forma més o menys equivalent entre les tres comunitats seleccionades per a l'estudi: canyissars, jonqueres i salicornars arbustius (vegeu la taula 1). En cadascun d'aquests punts vam clavar verticalment un tub de PVC d'1,5 m de llarg, perforat lateralment a fi que un cop clavat hi entrés l'aigua freàtica. Els tubs estaven folrats amb una gasa fina per impedir que es reblissen de sediments. Al voltant de cada tub vam realitzar un inventari fitosociològic, restringit a la superfície definida per un cercle 2 m de radi centrat en el tub (figura 4).

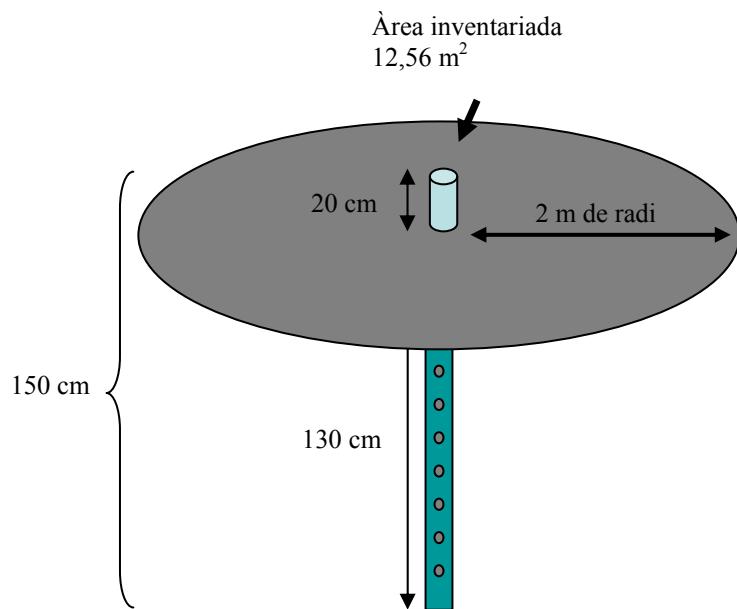


Figura 4. Esquema d'un punt de mostreig, centrat en un tub clavat verticalment al sòl, i que té en compte la vegetació d'un cercle de 2 m de radi.

Aquesta xarxa de punts ha estat utilitzada tant per les analisis de paràmetres relativament estables (composició de la vegetació, textura del sòl, etc.), com per les de paràmetres més dinàmics (nivell freàtic, qualitat de l'aigua).

Taula 1. Distribució dels punts de mostreig per localitats i per comunitats.

	Magarola	Ricarda	can Sabadell	Reguerons	Subtotals
Canyissars	2	4	2	3	11
Jonqueres	11	6	3	3	23
Salicornars	6	2	3	0	11
Subtotals	19	12	8	6	Total: 45

Informe dels directors de la tesi

Els Drs. Josep Maria Sugrañes i Joan Pino Vilalta, com a co-directors de la tesi que porta per títol ‘Construcció de comunitats vegetals de maresma al delta del Llobregat. Gradients ambientals, trets funcionals i interaccions biòtiques’, que ha dut a terme el doctorand Efrem Batriu Vila, emeten el següent informe relatiu a l’impacte científic i a la participació del doctorand en cadascun dels articles inclosos en la memòria de l’esmentada Tesi.

A tots quatre apareix com a primer autor, el que reflecteix el seu paper principal a totes les fases d’elaboració dels mateixos, i molt especialment en el mostreig de camp, el tractament de mostres i dades, la preparació dels manuscrits, i la gestió del procés de publicació.

Article 1: Environmental control of plant species abundance in a microtidal Mediterranean saltmarsh, d'E. Batriu, J. Pino, P. Rovira & J.M. Ninot. Publicat a la revista *Applied Vegetation Science* el 2011, amb índex d’impacte de 1,678, i situada en la posició 74 de 190 en la categoria ‘Plant Sciences’. Correspon a una experiència en què s’analitza la resposta de les espècies dominants a les maresmes als gradients abiotícs. El disseny fou conjunt amb els dos co-directors, i el doctorand va realitzar la part principal de totes les tasques (des del mostreig, fins a l’edició de l’article). L’altre coautor va participar en les analisis edàfiques i en la interpretació de resultats.

Article 2: Plant communities partially reflect environmental gradients in humanized landscapes: a case study in the Llobregat delta marshes, d'E. Batriu, J.M. Ninot, P. Rovira & J. Pino. Publicat a la revista *Phytocoenologia* el 2013, amb índex d’impacte (2012) d’1,00, i situada en la posició 117 de 197 en la categoria *Plant Sciences*. En aquest treball es presenta i discuteix el paper que tenen els factors abiotícs i la història d’usos del sòl en la presència de les diferents comunitats vegetals en el paisatge de maresmes. El rol dels diferents coautors és similar al de l’article precedent.

Article 3: Filtering of plant functional traits is determined by environmental gradients rather than by past land use in a Mediterranean coastal marsh, d'E.

Batriu, J.M. Ninot & J. Pino. Sotmès a la revista *Journal of Vegetation Science*, on es troba en procés avançat d'edició (tercera revisió, pendent de canvis menors); amb índex d'impacte de 3,372, i situada en la posició 27 de 196 en la categoria *Plant Sciences*. Aquí s'analitza la vegetació a través dels trets funcionals de les espècies, com a resposta a l'ambient i al règim de pertorbacions. Es deu al doctorand des del mostreig i la detinguda anàlisi de les mostres, fins a l'edició de l'article, i als co-directors el plantejament general i col·laboració en l'elaboració de les dades i en l'acabat del manuscrit.

Article 4: Interactions between transplants of *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus* in Mediterranean coastal marshes: the modulating role of environment, d'E. Batriu, J. Pino & J.M. Ninot. Sotmès a la revista *Aquatic Botany*, amb índex d'impacte d'1,471, i situada en la posició 93 de 196 en la categoria *Plant Sciences*. S'estudien les interaccions entre dues espècies dominants i sovint co-ocurrents a través d'una experiència manipulativa de trasplantament, seguida durant dos anys. També aquí el doctorand ha realitzat la major part de totes les tasques, i els altres coautors han participat en el disseny i mostreig de camp, i en la interpretació dels resultats i en la preparació del manuscrit.

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Discussió global i conclusions

Discussió

Aquest treball analitza i interpreta els principals gradients ambientals que determinen la distribució i abundància de les principals espècies i comunitats de les maresmes costaneres mediterrànies. També aporta informació sobre el paper modulador d'aquests gradients sobre la selecció dels trets funcionals de les plantes que conformen aquestes comunitats, i sobre les relacions de competència i facilitació entre algunes d'aquestes espècies. Atès que el treball es centra al delta del Llobregat, un territori d'innegable interès natural, aquests resultats poden ser de gran interès als tècnics i gestors per tal de conservar i gestionar les maresmes dominants a les reserves naturals del delta.

1.1 Gradients abiòtics

Pel que fa a la distribució d'espècies i comunitats de maresma els resultats dels capítols 1 i 2 encaixen perfectament amb el model clàssic, segons el qual la salinitat i el grau d'inundació defineixen els principals gradients abiòtics que afecten la distribució de les espècies i les comunitats vegetals a les maresmes d'arreu del món (Ranwell 1972, Adam 1993). Així es preveia també en les descripcions fitosociològiques d'aquests ambients, com ara la de Bolòs (1962). Tot i això, tal i com han demostrat altres treballs fets en maresmes mediterrànies (Álvarez Rogel et al. 1997, Molina et al. 2003), els resultats d'aquests capítols emfasitzen el paper clau del balanç iònic del sòl, sent aquest factor més important que la concentració total de sals al sòl.

Si observem els nínxols reals de cada espècie (capítol 1) modelitzats a partir dels gradients de salinitat (conductivitat de l'aigua freàtica i balanç iònic del sòl) i d'inundació (profunditat del nivell freàtic), veiem que el d'*Arthrocnemum fruticosum* està clarament esbiaixat cap als ambients salins, alhora que inclou qualsevol grau d'inundació. No és d'estranyar, ja que *A. fruticosum* es considera un veritable halòfit (Ranwell 1972), tal com mostra el comportament de germinació de les seves llavors

(Pujol et al. 2000, Redondo et al. 2004). Així els salicornars (Al. *Salicornion*), la comunitat on domina *A. fruticosum*, són un bon indicador d'ambients salins (capítol 2). *Juncus maritimus*, tot i no ser un veritable halòfit ni un helòfit, disposa de mecanismes fisiològics per tolerar alhora nivells força elevats de salinitat i d'anaerobiosi (Schat 1984, Adam 1993). Justament són aquestes condicions les que defineixen el seu nínxol real, tal i com altres autors han apuntat (Álvarez Rogel et al. 2006). D'altra banda, i fins allà on sabem, aquesta és la primera vegada que s'investiga l'ecologia de *Spartina versicolor*. Contràriament a les seves congèneres (*S. maritima*, *S. alterinflora*) que viuen en maresmes sotmeses a marees importants, *S. versicolor* sembla incapaç de tolerar condicions d'entollament, o com a mínim de fer-ho i no ser exclosa competitivament. A més a més, al delta del Llobregat és l'espècie estudiada que mostra un nínxol real més restringit. Tot i que *Juncus acutus* pot arribar a viure en condicions de salinitat i inundació tant elevades com *J. maritimus* (Yoav 1972, Batriu et al. 2011), l'òptim del seu nínxol real correspon a situacions de sequera i de salinitat lleus. Les comunitats on viuen les tres espècies anteriorment esmentades (*J. acutus*, *J. maritimus* i *S. versicolor*) són les jonqueres (Al. *Juncion maritimi*) i ocupen, coherentment amb els nínxols reals de les espècies que hi dominen, els nivells intermedis en el gradient de salinitat i d'inundació, on coincideixen amb la comunitat de canyís (Al. *Phragmition*). Pel que fa a *Phragmites australis*, els nostres resultats confirmen que el seu nínxol és molt ampli pel que fa als gradients de salinitat i d'inundació (Romero et al. 1999). De totes maneres, el seu nínxol real està centrat en ambients no gaire secs i moderadament salins, tal i com era d'esperar, ja que el canyís es considera un glicòfit (Hootsmans & Wiegman 1998, Mauchamp et al. 2001, Greenwood & MacFarlane 2006). Tot i ser la comunitat que pot viure en situacions de més inundació, els canyissars (Al. *Phragmition*) no són un bon indicador d'aquest gradient (capítol 2), ja que podem arribar a trobar canyissars en situacions on el nivell freàtic està per sota d'un metre de profunditat (Haslam 1970).

Com era d'esperar segons els treballs de Minden & Kleyer (2011) i Minden et al. (2012), els gradients ambientals que més afecten la distribució de les espècies a les maresmes del delta del Llobregat (capítol “espècies”) també estan fortament correlacionats amb la presència i abundància de certs trets funcionals de les plantes. Concretament, el balanç iònic del sòl (SAR) està correlacionat de forma negativa amb el valor d'àrea foliar específica (SLA). En ambients on sobresurt un tipus d'estrés, com per exemple els ambients salins, les plantes tendeixen a presentar valors baixos d'aquest

tret, cosa que correspon a notables inversions en l'estructura de la fulla, com ara lignificació o desenvolupament de cutícules més gruixudes (Cornelissen et al. 2003). Aquesta relació causal no és bona en plantes amb fulles crasses, degut a la importància que té el parènquima aquífer en les seves fulles (Vendramini et al. 2002). Això podria desdibuixar els nostres resultats, ja que moltes de les Quenopodiàcies típiques de les maresmes costaneres mediterrànies són crasses (Adam 1993). Però no afecta la tendència general degut a la presència de plantes que tenen valors de SLA particularment baixos (*J. acutus* i *J. maritums*) i que poden viure en ambients força salins. En aquest cas, l'estratègia que mostren els jones per suportar l'estrès és una lignificació important de les fulles i de les tiges fotosintètiques. Igual que el balanç d'ions del sòl, el nivell del freàtic (inundació) també causa un descens en els valors de SLA. Intuïtivament aquesta relació pot semblar contradictòria, ja que en situacions de nivell freàtic alt, les plantes no tenen limitacions d'aigua i per tant no haurien de mostrar una estructura foliar important per prevenir l'excés de transpiració. De fet, segons Mommer et al. (2006) en situacions d'inundació com en les que viuen els hidròfits els valors de SLA són molt alts per tal de millorar l'intercanvi de gasos sota l'aigua. La clau de la qüestió, però, rau en el fet que les plantes de maresma són helòfits i no hidròfits, per tant tenen les arrels dins l'aigua, però no les fulles. En aquestes circumstàncies les plantes poden patir sequera, ja que les condicions anòxiques de les arrels impedeixen absorbir aigua als nivells que la transpiració foliar demana (Poorter et al. 2009). Finalment, també hem detectat una relació negativa entre la conductivitat de l'aigua freàtica (salinitat) i el pes de les llavors. Segons Shumway & Bertness (1992) les plantes de les maresmes costaneres es poden englobar sobretot en dos grups funcionals: plantes perennes amb capacitat d'expansió lateral, i herbes amb un comportament fugitiu. Les plantes perennes tendeixen a dominar els estadis finals de la successió vegetal de els maresmes. En aquests estadis la reproducció sexual juga un rol menor, ja que la dinàmica de la comunitat depèn de la capacitat de persistència i de creixement clonal (Shumway & Bertness 1992). Els halòfits es poden associar a un comportament fugitiu, ja que els costos inherents de la tolerància a la salinitat fan que siguin poc competitius fora dels ambients salins (Adam 1993). Per tant, tal i com mostra Erfanzadeh et al. (2010a), aquestes espècies es veuen forçades a produir grans quantitats de llavors per tal de poder colonitzar els nous hàbitats salins disponibles enmig d'una matriu d'ambients no tant salins.

1.2 Interaccions entre espècies al llarg dels gradients ambientals

Tal com mostrem al capítol 1, les espècies estudiades, a excepció de *A. fruticosum*, presenten una segregació parcial de nínxols reals al llarg dels principals gradients ambientals. *Arthrocnemum fruticosum* és l'espècie que posseeix una amplitud de nínxol real més gran, ja que no sembla condicionat pel gradient d'inundació, però alhora aquest nínxol està clarament esbiaixat cap als ambients més salins on no s'encavalla amb cap altra espècie estudiada. Els costos fisiològics inherents a la capacitat de tolerar la salinitat fan que els halòfits siguin exclosos competitivament pels glicòfits quan conviuen en ambients no salins (Adam 1993). Així doncs, tot i que per parlar d'exclusió competitiva fan falta més evidències (Silvertown 2004), tot sembla indicar que *A. fruticosum* és exclòs competitivament dels ambients més favorables, com també passa amb les espècies més tolerants als estressos abiòtics a les maresmes costaneres sotmeses a marees (Pennings et al. 2005). La resta d'espècies presenten una segregació de nínxol real moderada, i per tant haurien de mostrar més coexistència que la que s'observa al camp. Aquesta discrepància podria ser deguda tant als factors històrics recents (e.g. pertorbacions, ordre d'arribada de les espècies) com a l'efecte de la competència passada. Per tal d'escatir aquest dubte vam realitzar un experiment de competència al llarg de dos dels tres gradients ambientals principals (conductivitat de l'aigua freàtica i alçada de l'aigua freàtica) que ens han permès modelitzar el nínxol real de les espècies fent servir les dues espècies que soLEN coexistir més (*P. australis* i *J. acutus*).

Els resultats d'aquest experiment (capítol 4) mostren que les interaccions entre *P. australis* i *J. acutus* al llarg dels gradients abiòtics només afecten el seu creixement, però no la mortalitat. En certa mesura això és un xic sorprenent, ja que a la majoria d'experiments de competència on es té en compte mortalitat i creixement per separat, les interaccions, especialment les positives (facilitació), tenen efectes més importants sobre la mortalitat que sobre el creixement (Schiffers & Tielbörger 2006). Però cal tenir en compte que aquests estudis soLEN mesurar les interaccions entre dues espècies de cicle anual (Schiffers & Tielbörger 2006), una espècie adulta i l'altra en fase de plançó (Callaway & Walker 1997) o bé dues espècies adultes (Liancourt et al. 2005). En el nostre cas, es tracta de dues espècies en un estat de desenvolupament inicial assimilable a un estat de plançó, cosa que podria explicar part dels resultats obtinguts.

Tal i com es desprèn de la consideració dels nínxols reals (capítol 1), els resultats del capítol 4 mostren que *P. australis* és capaç d'excloure *J. acutus* quan la salinitat és baixa i el sòl està inundat. Per contra, si la salinitat augmenta i el nivell freàtic segueix alt, passa el contrari. Entremig d'aquestes dues situacions es dóna un fenomen de facilitació entre ambdues espècies. Tot i que totes dues es consideren glicòfits (Adam 1993), *J. acutus* pot tolerar de forma competitiva nivells més elevats de salinitat que *P. australis*, tal i com hem mencionat al capítol 1. Un dels mecanismes fisiològics que utilitza per fer-ho és l'absorció de sals a través de les arrels (Boscaiu et al. 2007), cosa que disminueix la salinitat de la rizosfera. Wang et al (2006) documenten aquest mecanisme, quan verifiquen que la presència de *Spartina alterniflora* (espècie capaç d'absorbir sals del sòl) facilita el creixement de *P. australis* en ambients salins. Encara que el nostre disseny experimental del tipus de les sèries de reemplaçament no ens permet afirmar-ho amb certesa (Jolliffe 2000), tot fa pensar que, en la relació de facilitació estableerta entre *P. australis* i *J. acutus*, la primera espècie és la beneficiària i la segona la benefactora. Segons indiquen altres estudis fets en maresmes (Hacker & Bertness 1999, He et al. 2011), la facilitació sol produir-se als extrems del nínxol fonamental de l'espècie facilitada. En el nostre cas, si considerem aquella part dels gradients on ambdues espècies presenten una mortalitat inferior al 75% com una aproximació al seu nínxol fonamental, observem que el fenomen de facilitació es dóna a un nivell d'estrés mitjà-alt, però no al final del nínxol fonamental de *P. australis*. Aquesta facilitació en condicions d'estrés mitjà ja havia estat observada en ambients àrids, on el gradient considerat (la humitat de sòl) es un gradient de tipus recurs (Maestre et al. 2006). En canvi, pel que fa a gradients que no són recursos, la idea de la facilitació en una situació d'estrés mitjà només havia estat mencionada de forma teòrica (Holmgren & Scheffer 2010, Malkinson & Tielbörger 2010).

Pel que fa al balanç de les interaccions entre *P. australis* i *J. acutus* al llarg del gradient d'inundació, els resultats obtinguts són més inesperats. Per una banda, en condicions de baixa salinitat i d'inundació mínima, *J. acutus* i *P. australis* experimenten interferència mutua, ja que ambdues viuen millor en poblacions interespècífiques. Tot i que en aquesta coexistència *J. acutus* mostra un lleuger avantatge competitiu, els resultats contraduien el que esperàvem segons el patró dels nínxols reals del capítol 1. És més, si el nivell freàtic es manté baix, però el sòl esdevé més salí, *P. australis* exclou

competitivament *J. acutus*. Tot i que no hi ha informació al respecte, això pot deure's a una diferència de profunditat d'arrelament de les dues espècies. *Phragmites australis*, degut a la seva forma de creixement rizomatosa, podria mantenir unes arrels més superficials fora del freàtic salí, mentre que *J. acutus* tindria un sistema radical més profund, i per tant més sensible a un freàtic salí i profund.

Alguns treballs realitzats amb espècies de maresmes i en hivernacles han demostrat que el balanç de les seves interaccions pot dependre de la textura del sòl (Huckle et al. 2000, Wang et al. 2006). Per això, tot i que el contingut d'argiles no és una variable important en el nostre cas a l'hora de condicionar la distribució de les espècies (capítol 1), vam decidir incloure aquesta variable a l'estudi de competència. Però les nostres hipòtesis inicials respecte a aquesta variable no es van complir, emfasitzant la idea de Barbour et al. (1998) que els resultats d'experiments fets en condicions de laboratori sovint són difícils de repetir al camp. En el nostre cas, això es deu al fet que el gradient d'argiles al sòl és un gradient complex. Normalment, en les maresmes els sòls argilosos s'associen a condicions salines, ja que l'elevada CIC (Capacitat d'Intercanvi Catiònic) de les argiles dificulta el rentat de sals al sòl (Gobat et al. 2003). Alhora, les argiles confereixen al sòl una estructura que facilita l'ascensió de les sals per evaporació superficial i capilaritat (Gobat et al. 2003). És per això que una de les nostres hipòtesis inicials del capítol 4 era que *J. acutus* seria capaç d'excloure *P. australis* en sòls argilosos i amb una aigua freàtica salina. En els sòls estudiats, a més, el percentatge d'argiles està associat a sòls més fèrtils (baix índex Carboni orgànic/Nitrogen). Pel que sabem, *P. australis* està ben adaptat per créixer en sòls rics en nutrients (Romero et al. 1999, Nakamura et al. 2010). Segons Lissner et al. (1999) l'estrès salí no redueix l'adquisició de nitrogen de *P. australis*. A més a més, els mecanismes fisiològics que permeten de tolerància a la salinitat són actius (per tant energèticament dependents). Per tant, es probable que per *P. australis* el contingut de nutrients dels sòls argilosos equilibri els possibles inconvenients derivats de la retenció de sals. En els sòls argilosos la circulació d'aire és pitjor, i per tant els efectes de l'anaerobiosi derivats de l'entollament s'agreugen. Per això esperàvem que *P. australis* fos capaç d'excloure *J. acutus* en sòls argilosos i amb el nivell freàtic alt. La producció d'arrels adventícies és una mecanisme per tolerar l'entollament en plantes de maresmes salines (Colmer & Flowers 2008). Aquest tipus d'arrels s'han documentat en *J. maritimus* (Schat 1984) i també l'hem observada personalment en *J. acutus*. No es

coneixen amb detall els mecanismes fisiològics de producció d'arrels adventícies en aquestes dues espècies, però és probable que la fertilitat n'estimuli la seva producció.

1.3 Factors històrics

Els factors històrics recents, entesos en sentit ample, condicionen la composició actual de les comunitats vegetals (Chase 2003), ja que han seleccionat aquelles espècies que presenten uns trets funcionals més adequats per sobreviure i prosperar en cada context històric particular.

Els factors històrics recents no són un tema central en cap capítol de la nostra tesi, però els hem tingut en compte a tots d'una forma o altra. Així, el nostre treball posa de manifest la importància d'aquests factors històrics que, associats a l'atzar, tindrien un paper important en la distribució present de les plantes i les comunitats de maresmes del delta del Llobregat. Aquest fenomen ja havia estat mencionat en altres maresmes no sotmeses a marees fortes (Costa et al. 2003), però és el primer cop que això es posa de manifest en maresmes mediterrànies. Les principals evidències del pes dels factors històric són recollides als capítols 1 i 4. L'encavallament dels models de nínxol real del capítol 1 s'ajusta molt bé als fenòmens d'exclusió competitiva predicts pels models del capítol 4. Ara bé, ambdós models prediuen una coexistència més gran que la realment observada. Especialment suggeridor és el fet que la coexistència predicta en el capítol 4 és, en certa mesura, força inestable, ja que es deu a fenòmens de facilitació o d'exclusió mútua. Aquests equilibris poden canviar fàcilment amb qualsevol fluctuació ambiental inesperada (Rebele 2000), a mesura que les espècies creixen (Callaway & Walker 1997), o senzillament amb un canvi en l'ordre d'arribada de les espècies.

Per altra banda, també és remarcable que el nínxol fonamental de *J. acutus* estimat en el capítol 4 sigui més estret pel que fa al gradient de salinitat que el nínxol real del capítol 1. En les maresmes costaneres, l'establiment dels plançons és una fase crítica, ja que aquests són molt més sensibles a la salinitat o a la inundació que els adults (Adam 1993). A més a més, aquesta diferència de tolerància entre adults i plançons es més forta en el cas de *J. acutus*, ja que les llavors tenen una mida molt petita (Moles et al. 2004). Així, en el cas que ens ocupa, *J. acutus* té una població en

condicions extremes d'inundació i salinitat que probablement marquen el límit del seu nínxol real (capítol 1), però on els joves plançons no són capaços de sobreviure (capítol 4).

Una altra evidència del pes dels factors històrics en la vegetació del delta del Llobregat es recull al capítol 2. En aquest cas, i des de l'aproximació que ofereixen les unitats fitosociològiques de vegetació, observem que tant l'aliança *Juncion maritimi* (jonquieres) com l'aliança *Phragmition* (canyissars) tenen el seu hàbitat molt encavallat pel que fa al gradient ambiental d'inundació. En la zona d'encavallament d'aquest gradient la presència d'una de les dues comunitats està fortament determinada per la història recent de la localitat. Així, observem a nivell de comunitat allò que en el capítol 4 hem observat a nivell d'espècie.

Finalment, també cal destacar que l'erència atribuïble a l'ús pretèrit del sòl condiciona (ja sigui per les pertorbacions passades o pels canvis ambientals associats al abandonament) la freqüència i la rellevància d'alguns trets en la vegetació de les maresmes del delta del Llobregat (capítol 3). Així, tal i com esperàvem, trets biològics com la el contingut de biomassa seca foliar (LDMC) o la capacitat d'expansió lateral són condicionats per l'ús pretèrit agrícola del sòl. El LDMC es una forma de mesurar la densitat del teixit foliar, i tendeix a ser inversament proporcional a la SLA (Cornelissen et al. 2003). De totes maneres, la SLA és més dependent del gruix de les fulles que el LDMC, cosa que fa aquest darrer tret un millor indicador del gradient de nutrients (Wilson et al. 1999). En el nostre cas les localitats amb un ús passat del sòl agrícola mostren uns nivells de fertilitat edàfica més elevats. Així doncs, el diferent comportament d'aquests dos índexs en relació al gruix de les fulles explica perquè als l'LDMC està relacionat amb la l'ús passat del sòl, mentre que la SLA ho està amb els gradients naturals (salinitat i inundació). L'altre efecte atribuïble a l'ús passat del sòl és una disminució de les plantes amb elevada capacitat d'expansió lateral. Això s'havia observat prèviament en altres hàbitats com pastures (Wesuls et al. 2012), prats (Klimešová et al. 2008) i ambients agraris (Kleyer 1999) i s'ha associat al fet que un règim de pertorbacions freqüent, com aquell que tenen les zones agràries o ramaderes, dificulta la presència de plantes amb capacitat d'expansió lateral.

En tot cas, els resultats del capítol 3 no confirmen totes les nostres hipòtesis inicials basades en treballs generalistes (Cornelissen et al. 2003, Díaz et al. 2007). Així, la distribució a les comunitats vegetals d'altres trets com l'alçada de les plantes, la forma vital, el pes de les llavors, la producció de llavors i l'àrea foliar específica no reflecteixen l'ús pretèrit de sòl. Pot ser que l'efecte de la pertorbació històrica que estem mesurant sigui massa antic per haver deixat rastre o que hagi estat atenuat pels canvis ambientals posteriors a l'abandonament dels usos ramaders i agraris. Pensem que la causa principal del baix pes del llegat de l'ús del sòl en aquests trets funcionals de la vegetació obedeixen a característiques intrínseques de les plantes de les maresmes costaneres. Així, esperaríem que en els llocs antigament perturbats dominin les espècies amb llavors petites i abundants (Lavorel & Garnier 2002, Cornelissen et al. 2003). Aquest efecte es contrarresta pel fet que els halòfits són grans productors de llavors, i que les plantes de maresmes estables tenen patrons de producció i mida de llavors variables, ja que la dinàmica poblacional no depèn de la reproducció sexual (Shumway & Bertness 1992). Com que tant els gradients ambientals com els factors històrics recents actuen de forma conjunta i no totes les combinacions de trets funcionals són viables degut a restriccions fisiològiques i a la idiosincràsia de les espècies de maresmes, els efectes de la pertorbació pretèrita no es manifesten en tots els trets funcionals de la forma esperada inicialment.

Conclusions

En aquesta tesi hem identificat quins són els principals gradients ambientals que condicionen la distribució de les espècies vegetals a les maresmes del delta del Llobregat, i com aquests afecten els balanços de les relacions interespecífiques i la presència i abundància de trets funcionals de les plantes a les comunitats vegetals. A més a més, també hem estudiat com la classificació fitosociològica de la vegetació reflecteix aquests gradients. Finalment, també hem intentat esbrinar com l'ús pretèrit del sòl d'algunes maresmes condiciona la presència i abundància actual dels trets funcionals de les espècies i les comunitats vegetals. A continuació exposem breument les principals conclusions a les que hem arribat.

Fent síntesi dels resultats obtinguts en els diferents capítols, entenem que les comunitats de maresmes del delta del Llobregat, sovint monospecífiques, són fruit d'un model de construcció de comunitats semblant al proposat per Weiher & Keddy (1995) en aiguamolls dulciaquícoles, i també al proposat per Tilman (2004). Així, en el nostre cas, el principal filtre operant serien els gradients abiòtics de salinitat i inundació, que permeten l'establiment d'una espècie o una altra en funció de llur nínxol fonamental. Allà on els nínxols d'aquestes espècies s'encavallen, entren en joc les relacions interespecífiques. Així trobem tant relacions competitives, complint-se la idea que les plantes competitivament superiors desplacen les tolerants a l'estrés als hàbitats més extrems, com també relacions de facilitació, que permeten la convivència entre espècies, com a mínim temporalment. És justament en aquestes zones d'encavallament de nínxols on entren en joc els filters imposats per la capacitat de dispersió de cada espècie, la història particular de cada lloc, i l'atzar. Tal i com mencionen Weiher & Keddy (1995), tot i que la composició final de els comunitats és altament predictable en funció dels gradients abiòtics, el component estocàstic és innegable.

Llistem a continuació les conclusions específiques del treball, corresponents als quatre capítols:

Capítol 1:

- La profunditat i la concentració de sals de l'aigua freàtica, així com el balanç iònic del sòl, defineixen els principals gradients ambientals que expliquen la distribució de les espècies vegetals a les maresmes del delta del Llobregat.
- En funció d'aquests gradients, es pot modelitzar el nínxol real de les espècies més abundants de les maresmes: *Juncus acutus*, *Juncus maritimus*, *Spartina versicolor*, *Phragmites australis* i *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*.
- *Arthrocnemum fruticosum* mostra una segregació clara respecte de la resta d'espècies mencionades pel que fa al nínxol real. Aquesta segregació és típica d'espècies tolerants als forts estressos abiòtics com els halòfits, i encaixa perfectament amb el paradigma d'exclusió competitiva observat per espècies semblants en altres maresmes.
- Entre la resta d'espècies, la segregació de nínxol és moderada. De totes maneres, la coexistència que prediu l'encavallament de nínxols és molt més important que la que observem a la realitat. Això es deu probablement a un efecte combinat dels factors històrics i de les interaccions interespecífiques.

Capítol 2:

- La classificació fitosociològica de les principals comunitats de maresmes del delta del Llobregat en tres aliances reflecteix parcialment els gradients ambientals que condicionen la distribució de les espècies vegetals. Concretament respon al gradient de salinitat (en les seves components de balanç iònic i concentració total de sals a l'aigua freàtica) però no al gradient d'inundació.
- Els salicornars (Al. *Arthrocnemion*) són un bon indicador de condicions d'elevada salinitat. Per contra, les jonquieres (Al. *Juncion maritimi*), degut a la seva heterogeneïtat florística interna, i els canyissars (Al. *Phragmition*), degut a la seva ubiqüïtat no reflectida en la composició florística, no són bons indicadors de les condicions de salinitat ni d'inundació.

Capítol 3:

- A les maresmes del delta del Llobregat, els gradients ambientals i l'ús passat del sòl condicionen la presència i l'abundància de les plantes que formen la vegetació, a través dels avantatges que els confereixen certs trets funcionals, independentment de les seves relacions filogenètiques.

- Les relacions entre gradients ambientals i trets funcionals són: balanç iònic del sòl i àrea específica foliar (SLA); nivell freàtic i SLA; i conductivitat de l'aigua freàtica i pes de les llavors. En canvi, la pertorbació passada està relacionada amb el contingut de matèria seca foliar (LDMC) i l'alta capacitat d'expansió lateral.

- Per bé que en la distribució i l'abundància de les espècies vegetals els factors històrics tenen un paper crucial, no hem detectat gran part de les relacions esperades entre pertorbacions pretèrites i trets funcionals de les plantes. Això és degut a les característiques intrínseques de composició i a la dinàmica poblacional particular de la vegetació de les maresmes.

Capítol 4:

- La supervivència dels transplants de *Phragmites australis* i *Juncus acutus* es veu afectada pels gradients ambientals (salinitat, inundació i textura del sòl), però no per les interaccions interespècifiques. En canvi, la producció de biomassa aèria d'aquestes dues espècies sí que es veu afectada per les interaccions interespècifiques i pels dos gradients ambientals majors (salinitat i inundació).

- Així, al llarg dels dos principals gradients ambientals hem detectat que quant l'aigua freàtica es troba prop del nivell del sòl i és poc salina, *Phragmites australis* sembla capaç d'excloure competitivament *J. acutus*. Si la salinitat augmenta la relació passa a ser inversa, i *J. acutus* seria capaç d'excloure *P. australis*. Entre una situació i l'altra, i també en salinitat alta però amb nivell freàtic mitjà, s'estableix una zona de coexistència deguda a la facilitació, on segurament *J. acutus* és l'espècie benefactora. En canvi, quant la salinitat és baixa i el nivell freàtic també, trobem coexistència deguda a que cap de les dues espècies és capaç d'excloure competitivament l'altra.

- Les relacions de facilitació no es donen a l'extrem del nínxol fonamental de l'espècie facilitada (*P. australis*) sinó a la part mitjana d'aquest. Encara que això és freqüent quant el gradient és un recurs, com la humitat del sòl en ambients àrids, no és tant habitual quan el gradient és un factor d'estrès com la salinitat.

Recerca futura

En resum, la tesi pretén contribuir al coneixement del procés de construcció de les comunitats vegetals de maresma mediterrànies i del paper que hi juguen alguns factors biòtics i abiotícs. Tanmateix, els resultats obtinguts plantegen una sèrie d'interrogants que caldria abordar en el futur, amb una ampliació de la recerca feta fins ara. Algunes de les qüestions plantejades i el procediment per a abordar-les són:

- Quin paper juguen les interaccions entre totes les espècies dominants en la seva distribució i abundància? En aquest cas creiem interessant extendre els experiments de competència realitzats amb *P. australis* i *J. acutus* a la resta d'espècies dominants no estudiades (*J. maritimus*, *Spartina versicolor* i *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*). Aquests estudis haurien d'incloure gradients amplis de salinitat i inundació, des de situacions d'estrès per les plantes fins a situacions de confort, per tal de detectar fenòmens de facilitació i de veure en quina part del gradient es produueixen. Així mateix creiem interessant reproduir els experiments de competència realitzats al camp en condicions més controlades, per tal de clarificar alguns resultats obtinguts.

- Quin paper juga l'ordre d'arribada de les espècies i l'historial de pertorbacions en la construcció de les comunitats de maresma? Tot i que aquests factors s'estudien de forma indirecta en aquesta tesi, a través de l'efecte del canvi d'usos del sòl, caldria estudiar-los amb experiments *ad hoc*, que reproduueixin l'entrada de les diverses espècies en moments diversos, i sota règims de pertorbació contrastats.

- Quin paper juga l'estructura poblacional de les espècies clonals en la construcció de les comunitats? Gran part de les espècies estudiades formen extensos clons i rarament s'estenen per mitjà de la reproducció sexual. Estudiar la diversitat genètica de les seves poblacions ens pot ajudar molt a entendre com s'han format les comunitats actualment presents. Especialment interessants poden ser el casos de *S. versicolor* i *P. australis*. Al delta del Llobregat, *S. versicolor* produueix molt poques llavors viables i la seva presència es troba restringida en hàbitats no alterats els darrers 50 anys. Pel que fa a *P. australis*, és interessant estudiar la seva diversitat clonal en

relació als gradients ambientals, ja que sovint diversos clons tenen una tolerància als factors ambientals molt diferent.

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Publicacions

Capítol 1

Environmental control of plant species abundance in a microtidal Mediterranean saltmarsh

Els factors ambientals com a determinants de l'abundància de les espècies en una maresma mediterrània micromareal

Efrem Batriu, Joan Pino, Pere Rovira & Josep M. Ninot

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Resum:

Fins a quin punt els factors ambientals abiotícs són els principals determinants de l'abundància de les espècies vegetals a les maresmes mediterrànies? Per respondre aquesta pregunta vam establir 43 punts de mostreig al delta del Llobregat. Aquests pertanyien a quatre tipus de comunitat de maresma i estaven distribuïts en quatre localitats diferents. En cada punt de mostreig realitzarem un inventari de vegetació, i mostrejarem periòdicament variables del sòl i l'aigua freàtica. Mitjançant una anàlisi canònica de correspondències (CCA, en anglès), i tenint en compte la localitat i la posició espacial de cada inventari, vam relacionar l'abundància de les espècies dominants amb les variables del sòl i l'aigua freàtica. Per obtenir una aproximació al nínxol real, vam modelitzar, mitjançant models linears generalitzats (GLM, en anglès), l'abundància de les espècies en funció dels dos primers eixos del CCA. Finalment compararem l'encavallament de nínxols, segons els models obtinguts, amb la coexistència real als punts de mostreig. Segons els resultats obtinguts, les variables de l'aigua freàtica i el sòl eren més importants a l'hora d'explicar la variació en l'abundància d'espècies que la localitat o la posició espacial. Concretament, la mitjana del nivell freàtic, el valor màxim de la conductivitat de l'aigua i la relació d'adsorció del sodi (SAR, en anglès) al sòl, resumits en els dos primers eixos del CCA, explicaven el 23,8% de la variació de l'abundància de les espècies. En el conjunt dels punts de mostreig les espècies dominants eren *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*, *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*, *Juncus acutus*, *Spartina versicolor* i *Juncus maritimus*. L'encavallament de nínxols obtingut a través dels models realitzats amb GLM era moderat, excepte en el cas d'*A. fruticosum*. De tota manera, les correlacions entre la coexistència predicta segons els models i la coexistència real foren fonamentalment negatives o insignificants, indicant així una baixa coexistència entre les espècies o fins i tot segregació. Per tant, l'abundància de les espècies dominants a les maresmes estudiades només s'explica parcialment pels gradients ambientals estudiats. Caldria doncs aprofundir en el paper d'altres factors com les interaccions interespecífiques (competència i facilitació) i l'efecte fundador, per tal de conèixer millor els factors que determinen l'abundància d'aquestes espècies.



Environmental control of plant species abundance in a microtidal Mediterranean saltmarsh

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Keywords

halophytes; helophytes; realized niche; soil vegetation relationships; water table

Abbreviations

SAR, Sodium Adsorption Ratio; CCA, Canonical Correspondence Analysis; GLM, Generalized Linear Model

Nomenclature

Bolòs et al. (2005)

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Abstract

Question: To what extent are environmental factors the main determinants of species abundance in Mediterranean coastal marshlands?

Location: The Llobregat delta, Barcelona, Spain.

Methods: Vegetation relevés were performed and a set of water table and soil variables were periodically monitored in 43 sampling points randomly distributed in four marsh areas (sites) along a coastal-inland gradient. A canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) was performed to identify the primary water and soil correlates of species cover, after considering the effect of site and point spatial location. The realized niches of dominant species were modeled through GLMs performed on the first two axes of CCA. Niche overlapping among these species was compared with their coexistence, assessed through pairwise correlations of relative species cover in each sampling point.

Results: Water and soil variables explained more of the variation in species' abundance than site and spatial position. Mean water table level, maximum water conductivity and sodium adsorption ratio (SAR), summarized in the two first CCA axes, explained 23.8% of the variability in species' cover. *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*, *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*, *Juncus acutus*, *Spartina versicolor* and *Juncus maritimus* dominated the vegetation stands. Niches obtained from GLM response curves showed moderate overlapping among all these species except for *A. fruticosum*. However, pairwise correlations were mainly negative or non-significant, indicating low coincidence, and even segregation, between species' cover.

Conclusions: The abundance of dominant plants in Mediterranean marshes is only partly explained by the environmental gradients summarized in niche models. The role of other factors such as facilitation or competition between species and random recruitment should be explored.

Introduction

Vegetation stands in coastal marshes are commonly species-poor and dominated by a single or few species (Day et al. 1988; Adam 1993). Identifying the factors that determine the distribution and abundance of these dominant species might, therefore, improve the management of the diverse marsh vegetation types, and this will ultimately help to preserve marshland biodiversity and ecological services.

Soil properties and gradients of salinity and moisture have been identified as the main environmental factors that constrain plant distribution in all salt marsh environ-

ments (Ranwell 1972; Adam 1993). Experimental studies have also indicated the importance of competitive exclusion processes in the distribution of wetland plants along these gradients in macrotidal salt marshes (Snow & Vince 1984; Bertness 1991; Pennings & Callaway 1992). However, this has not been observed in Mediterranean coastal marshes owing to: (1) a irregular microtidal regime (Costa et al. 2003); (2) micro-scale variations in soil salinity and moisture in both space (Adam 1993; Silvestri et al. 2005) and time (Álvarez Rogel et al. 2001); and (3) a long history of human-driven disturbance (Curcó et al. 2002). All these factors interact and may determine, in turn, a

heterogeneous distribution of plant species in the landscape, which could favor species coexistence.

The mechanisms that enhance or limit this coexistence have been a main focus of interest for ecologists (McCann et al. 1998; Chesson 2000; Bastolla et al. 2005; Wilson 2011). As dictated by Gause's competitive exclusion principle, classical theories assume that it is primarily mediated by a differentiation in ecological niches (Tilman 1988, 2004). However, the coexistence of presumably competing species seems to be more common in real ecosystems than expected under the competitive exclusion principle owing to a number of stabilizing and equalizing mechanisms (Rohde 2005; Wilson 2011).

Modeling the species' responses to environmental gradients is a common approach to study species' niches, either fundamental or realized. Niches are conceived as a set of overlapping response curves (Austin & Smith 1989) such that in a particular portion of space certain species have a relative performance advantage over other species, representing niche segregation.

In this study we analysed the environmental factors determining the distribution of the dominant plants in a Mediterranean coastal marshland. Our hypotheses were that the distribution of dominant plant species results from diverse soil properties and aspects of the hydrologi-

cal regime, and that this results in niche segregation among species. Using both CCA (Canonical Correspondence Analysis) and GLM (Generalized Linear Models), we evaluated the relationship between species composition and site, and soil and water characteristics for a set of marsh vegetation stands in order to: (1) identify the main factors that affect the distribution of species; (2) model the realized niche of the dominant species using these factors; and (3) evaluate niche overlapping versus species' coexistence through their relative abundance.

Methods

Study site

The study was performed in the delta of the Llobregat River, a microtidal wetland area of 7000 ha currently included in the Barcelona conurbation (Catalonia, NE of Iberian Peninsula; Fig. 1). The climate is typically humid Mediterranean with maritime influence, showing an annual rainfall of 640 mm with minimum peaks in summer and winter, and a mean annual temperature of 15.5 °C with hot summers and mild winters (International Airport of Barcelona, period 1971–2000). Natural habitats, dominated by marshlands, account for only 13% of the delta. Salt marshes belong to the dry coastal type

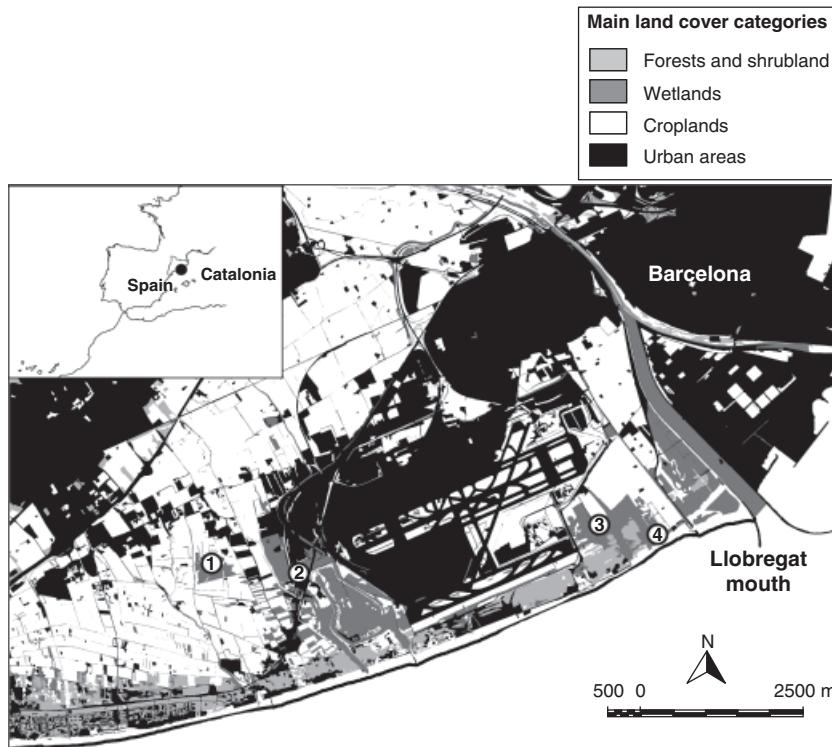


Fig. 1. The study area showing the main land cover categories and the four study sites (circles): (1) Reguerons; (2) Can Sabadell; (3) Ricarda; (4) Magarola.

(Adam 1993), and are dominated by reedbeds (*Phragmites australis*), rushbeds (*Juncion maritimi*), and halophytic scrublands (*Arthrocnemion fruticosi*) of variable conservation status (Pino et al. 2006).

Field sampling

We sampled 43 points within the four most preserved marshland remnants in the delta (sites thereafter) placed along an inland–coastal gradient (Fig. 1). Points were randomly selected on a recent vegetation map and located in the field by GPS (mean error < 5 m). Phytosociological vegetation relevés were performed within a circle of 2 m radius (12.56 m²) in each sampling point. Plant species cover was estimated following the Braun-Blanquet (1979) scale (+, < 5%; 1, < 10%; 2, 10–25%; 3, 25–50%; 4, 50–75%; 5, > 75%).

Bolòs et al. (2005) distinguished two reed subspecies in the study zone: *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis* (widespread), and *Phragmites australis* subsp. *chrysanthus* (less frequent but sometimes dominating the edge of water bodies). Because of their panicle morphology, both subspecies were easily identified in the field, and they were recorded separately because of their contrasting ecology. However, we considered that in the literature, when no reed subspecies was indicated, reference was being made to the cosmopolitan subspecies *australis* (the subspecies *chrysanthus* is restricted to the Mediterranean coast).

We sunk a PVC pipe, 1.5 m long and 32 mm in diameter, to a soil depth of 1.3 m in the center of each relevé. The pipe walls were drilled (holes of 2 mm in diameter) to allow water inflow, and they were covered with filter gauze to prevent soil infilling. These pipes were used to monitor the water table level and the electrical conductivity of pore water, which are known to be primary correlates of the distribution and abundance of marsh plants (Adam 1993). Measurements were recorded at monthly intervals from Dec 2004 to Dec 2006, using a WTW TetraCon 325 sensor (WTW, Weilhem, DE).

Every 4 months from Jan 2005 to Jan 2006, two soil samples were obtained from the relevé area of each sampling point, using a corer of 2.6 cm diameter and 20 cm length, thus sampling the soil layer where seedling establishment takes place and most fine roots occur. At each sampling date, the two soil samples at each point were mixed, air-dried and passed through a 2-mm mesh sieve.

Soil analyses

Soil properties, both physical (texture, organic matter) and chemical (carbonates, pH, C, N, ionic composition, etc.), have also been proposed as primary correlates for the distribution of plant species in Mediterranean marshes (Álvarez-Rogel et al. 1997; Molina et al. 2003).

Soil samples obtained in the first sampling date (Jan 2005) were used to determine a set of soil properties which were expected to remain relatively constant over the study: (1) particle size distribution, by the pipette method after destruction of organic cement by hydrogen peroxide and dispersion by sodium hexametaphosphate; (2) total carbonate, by the Bernard calcimeter method (Lamas et al. 2005); (3) pH, from a 1:2.5 water dilution; (4) total C and N, using a ThermoQuest analyzer (San José, CA, US); and (v) organic carbon, by removing the carbonate-C from the total C.

Samples collected from Apr 2005 to Jan 2006 were used to periodically evaluate soil conductivity and ionic contents. At each sampling date, we obtained a saturation extract (Bower & Wilcox 1965). The conductivity of the saturation extract was measured using a WTW TetraCond 325 sensor and the ionic concentration in the extracts obtained was determined as follows: Ca⁺, Mg⁺, Na⁺ and K⁺ using ICP-OES (optic emission spectroscopy with inductive plasma), Cl⁻ by precipitation with Ag, using an automatic titrimeter, and SO₄²⁻ using high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). The sodium adsorption ratio (SAR) was calculated (Richards 1974).

Niche segregation versus coexistence of dominant species

To model the species' ecological niches from abundance data one must face the problem of choosing an adequate function to estimate the shape of the response curve with respect to a given factor. Both GLM and CCA, which assume unimodal shapes, are the most widely used approaches. A CCA provides a broad view of ecological gradients and GLM is commonly applied to fit specific species' response curves (Guisan et al. 1999). Thus, we used CCA to identify the study variables that most greatly influenced species' cover.

Braun-Blanquet categories of the relevés were transformed to the mean value of the corresponding cover interval (Leps & Smilauer 2003). All species were included except those occurring in only one relevé. The initial pool of explanatory variables ($n > 40$) comprised the soil properties evaluated at the commencement of the study and the minimum, mean and maximum values of each water and soil property evaluated periodically. In order to reduce the number of variables, pairwise $|rl| > 0.8$ was used to determine unacceptable collinearity between these variables. Then, from each pair of variables, we eliminated the variable less correlated with the rest or that with less biological sense according to previous literature. The variables finally included in the CCA were: mean level and maximum conductivity of water table, and percentage of clay, total carbonates, pH, organic C/total N

ratio, mean $[K^+]$, mean SAR, mean K^+/Na^+ ratio, mean Ca^{2+}/Na^+ ratio and mean SO_4^{2-}/Cl^- ratio in soil.

First, the effect of water and soil variables, sites and Universal Transverse Mercator coordinate system (UTM) coordinates on species' cover was assessed through partition of variance analyses using CCA (Leps & Smilauer 2003). A new CCA limited to environmental variables was then performed using sites and UTM coordinates as covariables. Monte Carlo permutation tests were used as forward stepwise procedure to select the significant correlates ($P < 0.05$) of species' cover. Permutations followed a split-plot design and were restricted within sites. All CCA were performed using CANOCO (v.4.5; Plant Research International, Wageningen, the Netherlands).

An abundance–dominance curve was plotted to identify dominant species from the mean percentage cover of each species in the relevés. Once identified, we estimated their abundance (i.e. the percentage cover) from the CCA axes using GLMs through R (v. 2.12; R Development Core Team, <http://www.r-project.org/>, January 2011). The two first CCA axes and their quadratic terms without interactions were used as explanatory variables; thus only monotonic and unimodal responses were allowed. The GLMs were fitted using a Poisson errors model (Leps & Smilauer 2003) and were simplified using a stepwise procedure (Crawley 2007). The association between the explanatory variables and dominant species' cover was tested for significance using the Wald test. To assess the degree of fit of the GLMs, we calculated the percentage of

deviance explained by the model using D^2 (Guisan et al. 2002). Finally, coexistence between dominant species was assessed through pairwise Spearman correlations on the relative cover of these species in each sampling point.

Results

Environmental correlates of species cover

Partition of variance showed that environmental (soil and water) variables explained more variation in species cover (37.6% of variance) than site and UTM coordinates (11.6%). However, according to Monte Carlo tests (see the Supporting Information, Appendix S1), species' cover was significantly related to only three environmental variables: mean water table level, maximum conductivity of water table and mean SAR. The first and second axes of CCA limited to environmental variables explained 16.1% and 7.7% of variability in species' cover, respectively. The first axis was mainly associated with salinity (Fig. 2), as it was positively correlated with the maximum conductivity of the water table ($r=0.8$; $P < 0.001$) and mean SAR ($r=0.75$; $P < 0.001$). The second axis was correlated with the mean water table level ($r=0.57$; $P < 0.01$) and, secondarily, with the maximum conductivity of the water table ($r=0.27$; $P < 0.05$).

Niche models of the selected species

The abundance–dominance curve of the 41 plant species recorded in the relevés showed an exponential trend

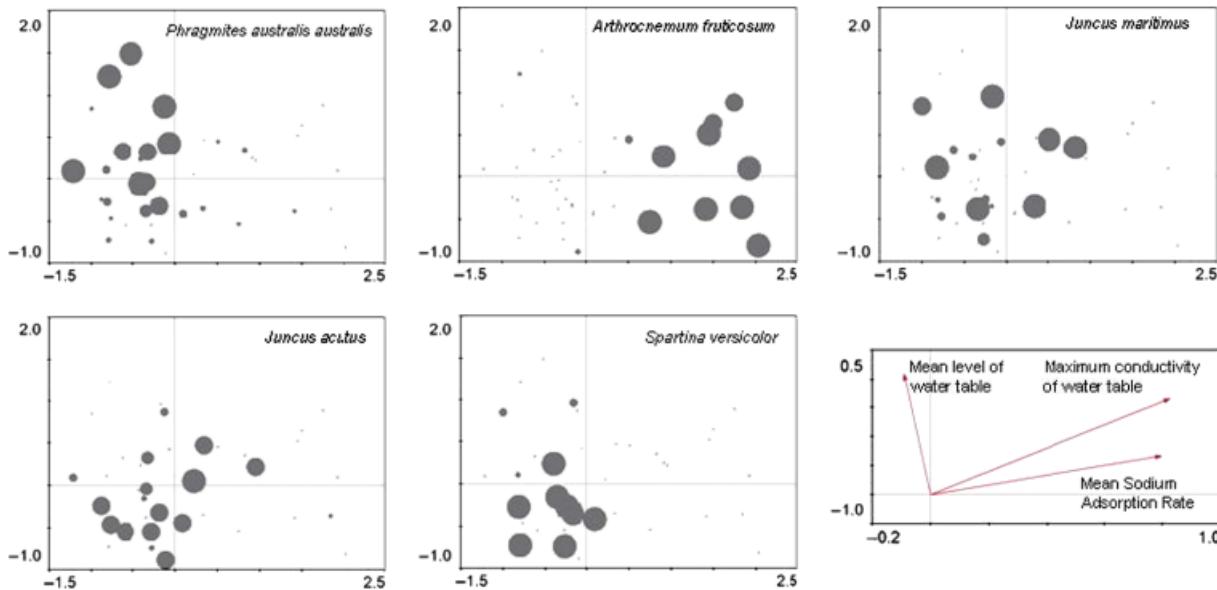


Fig. 2. Distribution and abundance of the dominant species in the environmental gradients studied summarized through canonical correspondence analysis (CCA). Circle centers correspond to the position of each relevé on the first two CCA axes, and size indicate cover of each species in each relevé according to seven categories: 87.5%, 62.5%, 37.5%, 17.5%, 5%, 0.1% and 0%. The bottom right plot summarizes the environmental variables significantly related to species cover according to Monte Carlo tests. Arrow angle stands for dispersion and arrow length for the weight of each variable.

Table 1. Frequency and abundance of plant species in the relevés, and their distribution across the main studied environmental gradients summarized through CCA. The table shows the species found in more than one relevé, their cover (both absolute and relative to total plant cover in the relevé) and the number of relevés where found. The range of CCA values in axes 1 and 2 in which each species occurs also are provided. The associated abundance–dominance curve obtained from total cover shows an exponential trend ($r=0.902$; $F=170.308$; $P < 0.0001$), with a gap between the five most abundant species (in bold) and the rest, in terms of cover percentage.

Taxa	Absolute cover (%, mean)	Relative cover (%, mean \pm SD)	Relevés (n)	Range of CCA values (minimum, maximum)	
				Axis 1	Axis 2
<i>Phragmites australis</i> ssp. <i>australis</i>	18.7	21.2 \pm 32.7	27	(−1.54, 1.53)	(−1.56, 2.81)
<i>Juncus acutus</i>	16.6	18.8 \pm 27.5	20	(−1.54, 2.14)	(−1.45, 1.02)
<i>Arthrocnemum fruticosum</i>	15.9	18.1 \pm 33.8	13	(−0.95, 2.35)	(−1.45, 2.52)
<i>Spartina versicolor</i>	15.2	16.7 \pm 31.2	15	(−1.26, 0.16)	(−1.56, 1.38)
<i>Juncus maritimus</i>	14.7	4.5 \pm 17.0	6	(−1.26, 1.12)	(−1.35, 1.38)
<i>Elymus pungens</i> ssp. <i>campestris</i>	4.0	3.5 \pm 16.2	2	(−1.54, 0.42)	(−1.45, 0.47)
<i>Paspalum vaginatum</i>	3.1	2.4 \pm 10.1	5	(−0.95, −0.87)	(−0.73, −0.23)
<i>Juncus subulatus</i>	2.1	1.2 \pm 5.8	5	(−0.95, 2.35)	(−0.04, 2.52)
<i>Suaeda vera</i> ssp. <i>vera</i>	1.1	1.1 \pm 5.8	5	(−0.8, 2.14)	(−1.45, 0.77)
<i>Phragmites australis</i> ssp. <i>chrysanthus</i>	1.0	1 \pm 5.8	3	(−0.81, −0.38)	(−0.36, 2.81)
<i>Calystegia sepium</i>	0.9	0.5 \pm 2.8	4	(−1.54, −0.47)	(−0.73, 2.52)
<i>Atriplex prostrata</i>	0.5	0.5 \pm 2.8	3	(−0.38, 0.57)	(−0.24, 0.43)
<i>Galium aparine</i> ssp. <i>aparine</i>	0.5	0.5 \pm 2.8	2	(−0.38, 0.57)	(−1.22, 0.43)
<i>Brachypodium phoenicoides</i>	0.5	0.4 \pm 2.7	3	(−1.06, −0.34)	(−1.56, −0.55)
<i>Inula crithmoides</i>	0.3	0.4 \pm 2.7	5	(−0.95, 1.11)	(−0.73, 0.77)
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	0.2	0.4 \pm 2.7	3	(−1.54, −0.18)	(−1.22, 2.52)
<i>Aster squamatus</i>	0.2	0.3 \pm 1.3	2	(−0.87, 0.42)	(−1.22, −0.24)
<i>Scirpus maritimus</i>	0.2	0.2 \pm 1.1	2	(−0.69, 1.9)	(0.95, 2.81)
<i>Atriplex portulacoides</i>	0.2	0.2 \pm 1.1	2	(1.82, 2.35)	(−0.04, 0.79)
<i>Sonchus maritimus</i> ssp. <i>maritimus</i>	0.2	0.2 \pm 1.1	2	(−1.06, −0.34)	(−1.56, −0.55)
<i>Dorycnium pentaphyllum</i> ssp. <i>gracile</i>	0.2	0.2 \pm 1.1	2	(−0.34, −0.23)	(−0.55, −0.06)
<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>	0.2	0.2 \pm 1.1	2	(−1.06, −0.34)	(−1.56, −0.55)

($r=0.902$; $F=170.308$; $P < 0.001$), with a gap between the five most abundant species and the rest. These five species were, in decreasing abundance, *P. australis*, *Juncus acutus*, *A. fruticosum*, *Spartina versicolor* and *J. maritimus* (Table 1).

The distribution of *A. fruticosum* was skewed to the highest values of the first axis (corresponding to the most saline soils) but much broader on the second axis associated to water table (Fig. 2). *Phragmites australis* showed the highest values in CCA axis 2 (i.e. in the most waterlogged soils) and was more restricted to negative values in CCA axis 1 (i.e. in non-saline environments). *Juncus acutus* stands were skewed to negative values of both axes, although the species was also present in some saline points. *Spartina versicolor* was more restricted to dry and non-saline areas than *J. acutus*, and *J. maritimus* was the species most concentrated in the central values of both CCA axes.

The GLMs (Table 2) explained a variable percentage of deviance in species' cover, from 72% in *A. fruticosum* to 18% in *J. maritimus*. *P. australis* subsp. *australis* showed an unimodal response skewed to low values of CCA axis 1, with significant association with linear and quadratic terms of this axis, and a monotonic (linear) and positive association with CCA axis 2. In *J. acutus*, cover monotonically increased with decreasing values of both CCA

axes, and it was significantly associated to CCA axis 2 and only marginally to axis 1 ($P=0.0501$). In *A. fruticosum*, species cover showed a unimodal response significantly associated with CCA axis 1 and its quadratic term. In *S. versicolor*, the model also was unimodal, with a significant association of species cover with both CCA axes and their quadratic terms. For *J. maritimus* we obtained a similar model to that of *S. versicolor*, but maximum species cover was close to the origin of CCA coordinates, and was significantly related only to the CCA axis 2 and the quadratic terms of both axes.

Contrasting with the overlapped distribution of the study species in the first two CCA axes (Fig. 2), pairwise correlations between relative species' cover were mostly negative or non-significant. Thus, *A. fruticosum* showed a marginally significant, negative association with *J. acutus* ($r=-0.26$, $P=0.081$) and negative associations with *J. maritimus* ($r=-0.35$, $P=0.018$), *P. australis* subsp. *australis* ($r=-0.53$, $P < 0.001$) and *S. versicolor* ($r=-0.37$; $P=0.014$); *J. acutus* was negatively correlated with *J. maritimus* ($r=-0.44$, $P=0.003$) and not correlated with *P. australis* subsp. *australis* ($r=-0.23$, $P=0.14$) or with *S. versicolor* ($r=-0.24$, $P=0.12$); *P. australis* subsp. *australis* was not significantly associated to *J. maritimus* ($r=0.19$,

Table 2. Response of the dominant species to the studied environmental gradients summarized through canonical correspondence analysis (CCA). The table shows the results from the simplified GLM models for species cover as response to the two first CCA axes and their quadratic terms. (D^2 , percentage of deviance explained by the models; z, statistic of Wald test; significance of the test: $^{ns}P \geq 0.05$, $*P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$).

Species	D^2	Parameters	Coefficients	z
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>australis</i>	0.4416	Intercept	0.858	5.695***
		Axis 1	-0.717	-3.618***
		(Axis 1) ²	-0.500	-2.608**
		Axis 2	0.284	3.167**
<i>Juncus acutus</i>	0.2576	Intercept	1.0729	6.474***
		(Axis 1) ²	-0.352	-2.671**
		Axis 2	-0.495	-2.537*
		(Axis 2) ²	-0.469	-2.358*
<i>Arthrocnemum fruticosum</i>	0.7258	Intercept	-0.913	-2.673***
		Axis 1	2.540	4.737***
		(Axis 1) ²	-0.598	-2.845**
<i>Spartina versicolor</i>	0.3137	Intercept	0.132	0.553 ^{ns}
		Axis 1	-1.904	-2.922***
		(Axis 1) ²	-1.34	-2.351*
		Axis 2	-0.387	-2.505*
<i>Juncus maritimus</i>	0.1825	Intercept	0.950	5.621***
		(Axis 1) ²	0.518	-3.205**
		Axis 2	0.643	3.298***
		(Axis 2) ²	-0.321	-2.603**

$P=0.21$) or with *S. versicolor* ($r=0.09$, $P=0.55$); *J. maritimus* and *S. versicolor* were the only species that were positively associated ($r=0.34$, $P=0.027$).

Discussion

The conservation of marsh vegetation, which is commonly dominated by a reduced set of species, clearly benefited from identifying the factors that determine the distribution and abundance of these dominant plants. Our study contributes in two ways to this goal in Mediterranean salt marshes: (1) by improving the knowledge about the realized ecological niches of the species studied, based on soil and hydrological parameters, and (2) by showing that the observed niche differences between species do not justify their segregation in space.

Main gradients and niche models

The best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has successfully modeled the abundance of dominant plant species in Mediterranean marshlands. We used small-scale predictors associated with soil and water table properties, in contrast to other work that used proxies of large-scale gradients (e.g. tidal regime; Silvestri et al. 2005). Our results are consistent with the general rule that flooding and salinity are the main physical factors

affecting the distribution of marshland species (Ranwell 1972; Adam 1993). In accord with other works (Álvarez-Rogel et al. 1997; Molina et al. 2003), we also highlight that some ions such as Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} (summarized in SAR) play a significant role in the distribution of species in Mediterranean marshes.

Arthrocnemum fruticosum is considered a true halophyte, thus dominating saline or hypersaline marshes (Ranwell 1972), as corroborated by the biased response towards saline environments observed in our study (Fig. 2, Table 1). Seeds can remain dormant and germinate after long-term exposure to salinity (Pujol et al. 2000; Redondo et al. 2004). The enforced dormancy of seeds under hypersaline exposure distinguishes halophytes such as *A. fruticosum* from glycophytes, and is a key factor allowing halophytes to occupy the most saline environments (Ungar 2001). In contrast, there is a lack of literature quantifying the response of *A. fruticosum* to waterflooding *per se*. Nevertheless, a decreasing response of *A. fruticosum* cover might be expected as the mean water table increases, because soil ions are frequently washed in waterlogged soils.

The remaining species occupy less skewed positions in the flooding and salinity gradients. Our results confirm the broad ecological niche of *P. australis* subsp. *australis* in water table and salinity reported by other authors (Romero et al. 1999). Indeed, tolerance of *P. australis* to soil salinity varies greatly (from 5 to 60%) at local and regional scales throughout the world, thus suggesting local adaptations of reed clones (Lissner & Schierup 1997). However, high water table salinity generally inhibits seed germination (Mauchamp & Mesleard 2001; Greenwood & MacFarlane 2006), seedling survival (Hootsmans & Wiegman 1998), and tiller growth, and this may explain the absence of *P. australis* subsp. *australis* from clearly saline environments in the Llobregat Delta. Water level is another primary driver of *P. australis* distribution. Helophytes such as the common reed are particularly abundant in water-saturated soils, but an excessively high water level inhibits seed germination, seedling survival and growth (Armstrong et al. 1999), and clonal growth (Bodensteiner & Gabriel 2003; Dienst et al. 2004). Our model showed a decline in reed cover as the soil became drier, but we failed to detect the upper water table threshold which inhibits the species growth, probably because of a lack of sampling points in the highest part of the water table gradient.

Few studies have addressed the response of *J. acutus* to environmental variables, despite the broad distribution of the species over diverse salt marshes (Greenwood & MacFarlane 2006). According to Yoav (1972), this rush can thrive in highly saline areas, whereas Greenwood & MacFarlane (2009) found a negative relationship between soil salinity and the species biomass, and Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2006) observed low tolerance to salinity in its seeds. Our results agree with the relatively

low tolerance to salinity and also show that species cover responded negatively to increasing water table level.

Juncus maritimus occupies similar environments to those of *P. australis* (Sánchez et al. 1998). However, we have found that *J. maritimus* is more tolerant to salinity than *P. australis* but less tolerant to waterlogging. Despite some related adaptive traits (e.g. accumulation of polyol compounds and improvement of germination after seed exposure to salinity), tolerance of *J. maritimus* to salinity is limited (Adam 1993). Our results, like those of Álvarez-Rogel et al. (2006), showed that *J. maritimus* mainly occurs in a combination of moderate waterlogging and saline stress.

No previous ecological information was available for *S. versicolor*. Our results show that this species is very restricted to soils with low salinity. Dense belts of *Spartina* spp. are typical of marshland areas where macrotidal or mesotidal regimes reduce the salinity of the low marsh zone (Adam 1993; Curcó et al. 2002). The position of *S. versicolor* on axis 2 of the CCA and the model indicates that, unlike its congeners, it does not tolerate waterlogged conditions.

Niche overlapping and species distribution of dominant marsh plants

It can be concluded that there is some niche segregation of the study species along the main environmental gradients in Mediterranean marshlands, as they can be split into two groups: *A. fruticosum* and the remaining species. *Arthrocnemum fruticosum* shows one of the broadest niches of the study species (Fig. 2) yet it is clearly skewed towards saline environments. For the remaining species, niche differentiation along the main environmental gradients is not total but moderate. Nevertheless, pairwise correlations on the relative species' covers indicate that the distribution of these species along the environmental gradients is highly segregated. This means that the monospecific stands frequently observed in Mediterranean salt marshes cannot be solely explained by environmental niche segregation.

Although the aim of our study does not include determining these alternative mechanisms affecting species' abundance, we can contribute in some points. Saline tolerance does not exclude *per se* *A. fruticosum* occurring in non-saline sites, but the constitutive physiological costs inherent to halophyte specialization might lead to a low competitive capacity against glycophytes when coinciding in non-saline soils (Adam 1993). For the other dominant species, selective herbivory (the marshes studied were regularly grazed by sheep until recent times) and the founder effect could be responsible for their distribution patterns. While no specific data are available, both factors might be implicated by the noticeable amount of variation

in species distribution explained by site and UTM coordinates. The overlapping ecological niches match with founder effects playing a primary role in plant species distribution in several irregularly flooded marshes (Costa et al. 2003). Disentangling the role of founder effects and biotic interactions on species distribution in Mediterranean coastal marshlands is an avenue for future research that must be addressed by performing specific field experiments.

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Appendix S1

Table 1. Pearson's correlations of the study variables with the two first CCA axes, and results of Monte Carlo tests assessing the association of these variables with species cover. Variables: maximum conductivity of water table (MCWT), mean level of the water table (MLWT), percentage of clay in soil (SClay), soil pH (SpH), mean soil conductivity (SCond), percentage of CO_3^{2-} ($\text{S}_{\text{CO}_3^{2-}}$), ratio between organic C and total N ($\text{C}_{\text{org}}/\text{N}_t$), mean K^+ concentration ($[\text{K}^+]$), mean SAR value in soil (SAR), mean K^+/Na^+ value in soil (K^+/Na^+), mean $\text{Ca}^{2+}/\text{Na}^+$ value of soil ($\text{Ca}^{2+}/\text{Na}^+$), and mean $\text{SO}^{2-}/\text{Cl}^-$ in soil ($\text{SO}^{2-}/\text{Cl}^-$); Significance of the correlations: ns $p \geq 0.05$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

	Pearson's correlations		Monte Carlo tests	
	Axis 1	Axis 2	F	p
MCWT	0.834***	0.230*	5,941	0,002
SAR	0.753***	0.137ns	2,751	0,01
MLWT	-0.085ns	0.573**	2,501	0,014
SpH	0.398**	-0.434**	1,524	0,088
K^+/Na^+	-0.475**	-0.341*	1,401	0,224
$[\text{K}^+]$	0.526***	0.252 ns	1,203	0,274
SCond	0.650***	0.332**	1,134	0,346
$\text{S}_{\text{CO}_3^{2-}}$	0.467**	0.027 ns	0,764	0,582
$\text{C}_{\text{org}}/\text{N}_t$	-0.083ns	0.142 ns	0,773	0,602
$\text{Ca}^{2+}/\text{Na}^+$	-0.617***	0.152 ns	0,881	0,624
$\text{SO}^{2-}/\text{Cl}^-$	-0.272ns	-0.037 ns	0,845	0,708
SClay	-0.032ns	0.165 ns	0,419	0,934

Capítol 2

Plant communities partially reflect environmental gradients in humanized landscapes: a case study in the Llobregat delta marshes

Les comunitats vegetals reflecteixen parcialment els gradients
ambientals en una paisatge antròpic: un cas d'estudi a les maresmes
del delta del Llobregat

Efrem Batriu, Josep M. Ninot, Pere Rovira & Joan Pino

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Resum;

El delta del Llobregat, degut en part a la seva proximitat a Barcelona, presenta un paisatge vegetal en mosaic. Les maresmes costaneres que hi trobem són principalment de dos tipus, les naturals i aquelles que provenen de fenòmens de restauració espontània gràcies a l'abandonament de l'explotació agrícola o ramadera. Per realitzar aquest treball vam inventariar 45 comunitats de maresma distribuïdes en quatre localitats diferents (dues amb maresmes naturals i dues amb maresmes espontàniament restaurades). A més a més, en cada punt de mostreig mostrejarem periòdicament variables del sòl i l'aigua freàtica. Segons els estudis previs de la vegetació de maresma en ambients mediterranis, els 45 inventaris pertanyien a tres aliances diferents (*Phragmition communis*, *Salicornion fruticosae* i *Juncion maritimi*). Aquesta classificació fou verificada estadísticament usant una anàlisi de components principals (PCA, en anglès). A més a més, mitjançant l'ús de models mixtos linears generalitzats (GLMM, en anglès), també vam estudiar com aquesta classificació dels inventaris en tres aliances explicava els principals gradients ambientals que condicionen la distribució de les espècies de maresmes a delta del Llobregat (la mitjana del nivell freàtic, el valor màxim de la conductivitat de l'aigua i la relació d'adsorció del sodi al sòl). Segons els resultats del PCA, tant *Phragmition* com *Salicornion* incloien comunitats florísticament homogènies i fàcilment separables. En canvi, *Juncion* era una unitat força més heterogènia. Un PCA posterior usant només el inventaris pertanyents a aquesta darrera aliança revelà que aquesta heterogeneïtat es deu al diferent recobriment de tres espècies potencialment dominants (*Juncus acutus*, *J. maritimus* i *Spartina versicolor*). Pel que fa als GLMM, les diferents aliances reflecteixen parcialment els gradients ambientals principals. Concretament reflecteixen molt bé el gradient de salinitat però no el gradient d'inundació, ja que les diferents comunitats presenten valors molt dispersos de nivell freàtic en funció de les diferents localitats on es troben. Això fa pensar que, en algun moment, la capacitat de dispersió i l'efecte fundador poden haver tingut un paper clau en la dinàmica de restauració natural d'aquestes maresmes costaneres.



Plant communities partially reflect environmental gradients in humanized landscapes: a case study in the Llobregat delta marshes

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with 4 figures, 3 tables and 1 electronic appendix

Abstract: This study took place in a vegetation mosaic of the Llobregat delta (near Barcelona, Spain), which includes both natural and spontaneously restored coastal marshes. We used a dataset comprising vegetation relevés, soil parameters and water table conditions, and explored their correlation. More precisely, we classified the relevés into three phytosociological alliances (namely *Phragmition communis*, *Salicornion fruticosae* and *Juncion maritimi*) combining the previous information available and the use of PCA ordinations. We studied whether these alliances reflect the main operating environmental gradients (conductivity, sodium absorption rate and water table dynamics) using a GLMM (generalized linear mixed model). The PCA reflected a fair distinctiveness of *Salicornion* and *Phragmition*, whereas *Juncion* was a more heterogeneous unit, related to the varying dominance of different plant species. The three alliances exhibited significant differences in environmental variables and therefore the phytosociological ordination reflected at least partially the main operating environmental gradients. However the assemblage of alliances over the gradients varied between locations, suggesting that the initial species pool or plant dispersal capacity to some extent shapes the dynamics of spontaneous restoration in these marshlands.

Keywords: Alliances, environmental gradients, *Juncion maritimi*, Mediterranean coastal marsh, *Salicornion*, salinity, *Phragmition*, water table

Abbreviations: GLMM = Generalized Linear Mixed Model; SAR = Sodium Adsorption Rate; PCA = Principal Component Analyses

Introduction

The vegetation growing at a particular site reflects how selection from the available flora, by the action of abiotic and biotic factors, gives a species assemblage capable of co-existing under the prevailing conditions (ADAM 1993). In traditional ecological interpretations the outcome of these environmental conditions is reflected by the spatial variation in the vegetation in terms of species composition. At the same time, variation in species composition can be classified into a hierarchical system (e.g., through the phytosociological method) that reflects floristic similarities and dissimilarities (BRAUN-BLANQUET 1979). Phytosociological syntaxa have been shown to reflect variation in environmental conditions in different habitat types such as meadows (HÁJEK & HÁJKOVÁ 2004; RODRÍGUEZ-ROJO & SÁNCHEZ-MATA 2006), forests (BERGMIEIER 2002; TSIRIPIDIS et al. 2007), wetlands (HAJKOVÁ et al. 2006) and mires (CASANOVAS POCH 1996; HRIVNAK et al. 2008). Thus, beyond their major objective of classifying plant communities (WILLNER 2006), phytosociological units can provide a sound basis for understanding the relationships between vegetation variation and environmental gradients.

Classical views in community ecology focused on the importance of competition for resources, and assumed

that populations and communities typically exist under equilibrium conditions in habitats saturated with both individuals and species (ROHDE 2005). However, much evidence contradicts these assumptions and it is likely that non-equilibrium situations are much more widespread than formerly perceived. Indeed, there is increasing evidence of the influence of the founder effect (the initial pool of species) and stochastic factors on the composition of plant communities (KÖRNER et al. 2008; POSCHLOD & BIEWER 2005).

In coastal marshes, the main gradients determining species occurrence and frequency are soil salinity and moisture (ADAM 1993; RANWELL 1972; BATRIU et al. 2011). Waterlogging is a limiting factor for root respiration and causes a decrease in redox soil conditions, which in turn may promote the production of particular toxic substances (PEZESHKI 2001). Salinity has three types of adverse effects on plants: (i) lowered external water potential, (ii) direct toxic effect of chloride and sodium, and (iii) interference with the uptake of nutrients (ADAM 1993). The last two effects depend on the relative proportions of Ca^{2+} , K^+ , Mg^{2+} and Na^+ in the soil (GRATTAN & GRIEVE 1992). Significant differences in soil salinity or moisture have been found between phytosociological alliances (ALVAREZ ROGEL et al. 2001; MOLINA et al. 2003) and associations (BOUZILLE et al. 2001; SÁNCHEZ et al.

1998). Other authors showed the importance of biotic factors such as facilitation (CALLAWAY & PENNINGS 2000; PENNINGS et al. 2005; RUBIO-CASAL et al. 2001) and competition (PENNINGS et al. 2005) in the distribution of coastal marsh vegetation. These studies indicate that marshland communities are in equilibrium with their environment. In contrast, other studies highlight the importance of historic factors for coastal marsh vegetation assemblages (BERTNESS & ELLISON 1987; COSTA et al. 2003). Mediterranean coastal marshes are characterized by a long history of human activity, which in the past has led to a large reduction in their extent (CURCÓ et al. 2002). However, there are also recent examples of spontaneous restoration after agricultural abandonment (PINO et al. 2009), although restored wetlands typically exhibit differences in their environmental conditions compared with longstanding natural sites (BRULAND & RICHARDSON 2005; LU et al. 2007). This may condition their suitability for some species included in the original vegetation. Moreover, some studies emphasize the importance of the initial pool of species in restoration processes (POSCHLOD & BIEWER 2005). These initial assemblages may lead to unexpected stable vegetation formations that can persist over time (KLÖTZLI & GROOTJANS 2001). According to PINO et al. (2009), the land-use legacy in our study area might affect the species composition of marshland communities, though the reasons for different species assemblages within similar habitats are not always clear.

The study of vegetation dynamics in disturbed environments offers an exceptional opportunity to clarify ecological processes, according to MARGALEF (in TERRADAS 2001). We focused our study on the Llobregat delta, where a long history of human colonization has led to a mosaic of coastal marsh communities that include both natural and restored stands (PINO et al. 2006). Using a set of vegetation relevés with ancillary information on soil and water table conditions monitored for at least one year, we use a phytosociological approach to answer the following questions: i) to what extent do the phytosociological units reflect the main operating environmental gradients? and ii) what is the weight of particular site conditions such as land-use legacy or location?

Material and methods

Study sites and dataset

The Llobregat delta is a microtidal wetland area currently included in the Barcelona conurbation. Climate data obtained from the International Airport of Barcelona (located in the middle of the delta) give an average annual precipitation of 640 mm for the period 1971–2000, with a mean minimum rainfall in July (20 mm) and a mean maximum rainfall in October (91 mm). The mean annual temperature is 15.5 °C, with a highest mean maximum in

August (28 °C) and a lowest mean minimum in January (4.4 °C). The area is thus under a Mediterranean pluviseasonal-oceanic bioclimate. Coastal marshes in the Llobregat delta belong to the dry coastal type (ADAM 1993).

The study was conducted in the southern hemi-delta of the Llobregat river (Llobregat delta hereafter), south of the city of Barcelona (Catalonia, NE Spain; Fig. 1). This area (7,000 ha) has undergone major land transformations during the last 50 years, including both ecosystem degradation and natural restoration. Marshlands and fixed dunes account for only 13% of the total land cover.

We created a sampling network comprising 43 sampling points distributed across four sites in the Llobregat delta marshes: Magarola, Ricarda, Can Sabadell and Reguerons (Fig. 1). According to PINO et al. (2006) Magarola and Ricarda are stable sites (longstanding natural areas) and Can Sabadell and Reguerons are semi-stable sites (abandoned and spontaneously restored since 1956). Ricarda and Magarola also share a similar position, since both are located close to the shoreline, although the former has important freshwater inputs whereas the latter is more heavily influenced by seawater. Can Sabadell and Reguerons are located 2 km away from the shoreline; the former includes some patches of saline soil, while the latter may be considered mesohaline.

In each site we set up 6–18 sampling points randomly distributed among the three main vegetation types (reedbeds, rushbeds and halophytic shrubs). Distance between points was at least 20 m. At each sampling point we recorded the species composition and abundance in one circular area of 2 m radius (12.56 m²), using the Braun-Blanquet method (BRAUN-BLANQUET 1979). Species were identified according to BOLÒS et al. (2005). Each sampling point was equipped with a vertically sunk PVC pipe, of 1.5 m in length (reaching 1.3 m in depth) and 32 mm in diameter. In order to monitor the hydrologic conditions, the level and the conductivity of the water table were measured monthly at each point from December 2004 to December 2006. During 2005, samples were also taken every 3 months from the top 20 cm of soil, in order to monitor soil variables.

This gave a dataset of 45 relevés, each with precise information on hydrological and edaphic conditions and their yearly dynamics. In order to obtain a balanced design suitable for the statistic analyses detailed below, 8 of these sampling points were discarded using a random selection process within the overrepresented communities. For more details on sampling and analytical methods see BATRIU et al. (2011).

Phytosociological and statistical analyses

The relevés were classified to alliance level according to previously published information from vegetation studies dealing with the Llobregat delta (BECH & HERNÁNDEZ

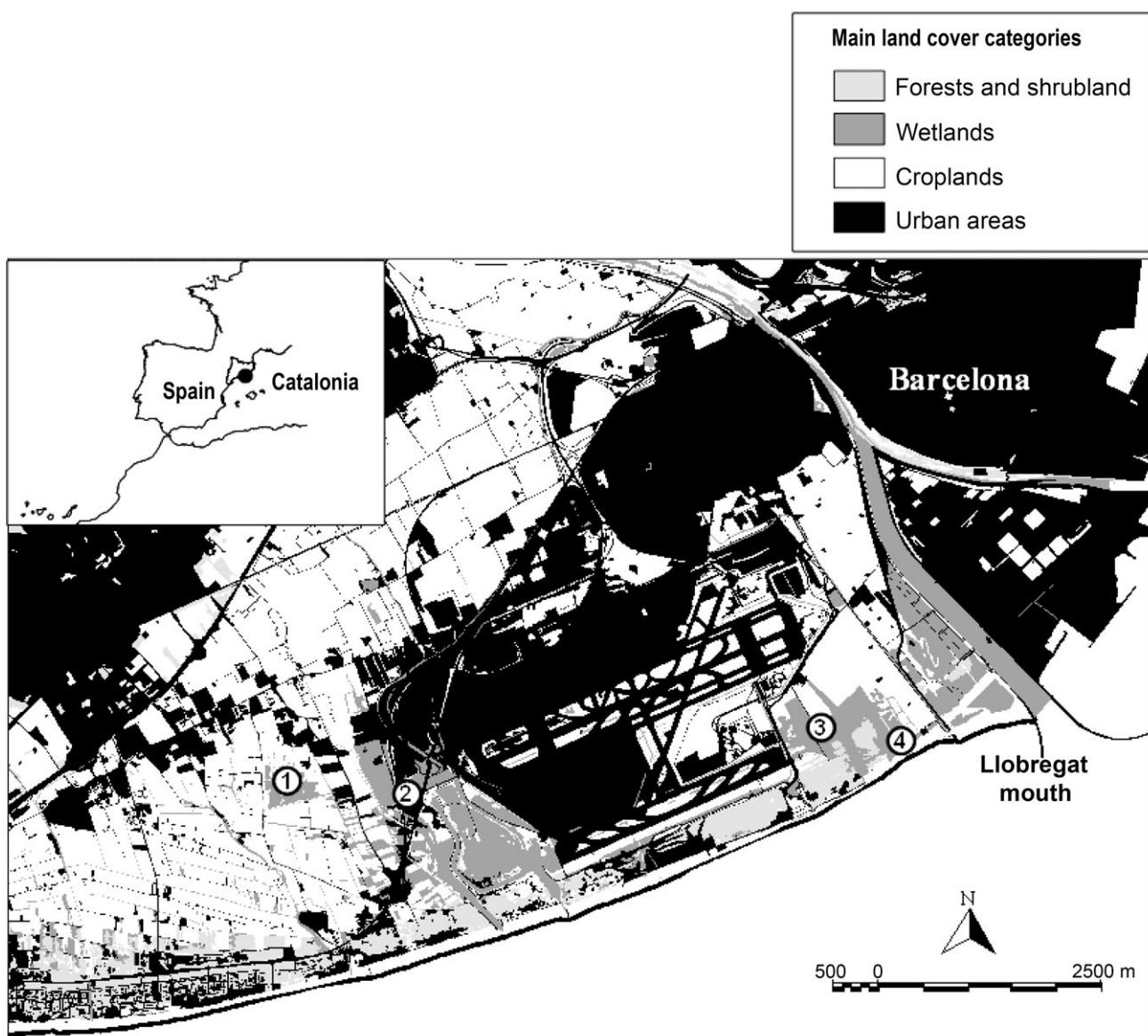


Fig. 1. Map of the study area showing the main land cover categories and the four study sites (circles): 1, Reguerons; 2, Can Sabadell; 3, Ricarda; 4, Magarola.

1976; BOLÒS 1962) or with nearby coastal marshes such as the Ebre delta (CURCÓ 2003) and Empordà marshes (GESTI 2006). The phytosociological scheme and nomenclature follows RIVAS-MARTÍNEZ et al. (2001).

Once classified, principal component analyses (hereafter PCA) were performed on the relevés to assess the reliability of the classification obtained (LEGENDRE & GALLAGHER 2001). We transformed the abundance/dominance 6-grade values of the species using the ordinal transformation described by VAN DER MAAREL (1979). The resulting matrix was distance-emulating transformed (LEGENDRE & GALLAGHER 2001) using the Hellinger distance in order to avoid the effect of null abundance in the PCA ordination. All the above analyses were performed using the GINKGO package (DE CÁCERES et al. 2007).

We performed a generalized linear mixed model (hereafter GLMM) using a gaussian error, taking the alliance type as the fixed factor and site as the random factor. The environmental variables used were those identified as being most important for plant distribution by BATRIU et al. (2011) using the same dataset, namely mean level of the water table (hereafter water table), maximum conductivity of the water table (hereafter conductivity), and mean Sodium Adsorption soil Ratio (hereafter SAR). To test the importance of alliance type as predictor of environmental variables that determine plant distribution, we compared the full model with a model without any fixed factor but only site as random effect. These comparisons were done through an ANOVA test using Chi squared distribution as recommended by CRAWLEY (2007). To as-

sess the importance of site factor in environmental variables we calculated the percentage of variance explained for this factor. Finally, to compare alliances between them, these vegetation types were used as *a priori* contrast in the models analyzed thought GLMM. For the effects of *a priori* contrast, $|t| > 2$ was considered significant at any degree of freedom (CRAWLEY 2007). We performed all these statistical analyses using R 2.4.1 (R DEVELOPMENT CORE TEAM 2009), and GLMM using the function lmer of the package lme4 version 0.99375-31 (BATES et al. 2008).

Results

According to previously published phytosociological information, the relevés belonged to three different alliances, each included in a distinct vegetation class (Table 1, Appendix). These alliances were: Phragmition communis Koch 1926 (reed beds, hereafter Phragmition) from Phragmito-Magnocaricetea Klika 1941, Salicornion fruticosae Br.-Bl. 1933 (halophytic shrubby formations, hereafter Salicornion) from Salicornietea fruticosae Br.-Bl. et Tüxen ex A. et O. Bolòs 1950 and Juncion maritimi Br.-Bl. ex Horvatic 1934 (rush beds, hereafter Juncion) from Juncetea maritimi Br.-Bl. 1952.

The first three axes of the PCA ordination explained 60.2% of the variance found in the floristic relevés. These three axes were mainly correlated with the abundance of five species: *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*, *Juncus maritimus*, *Phragmites australis*, *Spartina versicolor* and *Juncus acutus* (Fig. 2). Axis 1 was mainly correlated with *A. fruticosum*, *P. australis* and *J. maritimus* and explained 29.2% of variance; axis 2 was mainly correlated with *J. acutus* and *A. fruticosum* and explained 20.2% of variance; and axis 3 was mainly correlated with *S. versicolor* and *P. australis* and explained 10.8% of variance. According to these three axes, the Salicornion and the Phragmition relevés formed two relatively well delimited groups, whereas the Juncion relevés formed a more disperse, apparently heterogeneous group. A further PCA of the Juncion plots showed the main role played in this distribution by three potentially dominant species, namely

Juncus acutus, *J. maritimus* and *Spartina versicolor* (Fig. 3).

In the GLMM, the majority of the water table variance was associated with site (Table 2). In contrast, the percentage of explained variance of conductivity and SAR values associated with site were 36% and less than 1% respectively (Table 2). Alliance factor had a significant ($p < 0.05$) effect on the residual variance of all three variables, and significant differences between alliances were also observed (Table 3). Conductivity and mean SAR were significantly higher in the Salicornion stands than in the Phragmition or Juncion ones, and the Phragmition stands had a higher water table than the Juncion and Salicornion stands (Table 3, Fig. 4).

Discussion

Vegetation units and environmental gradients

The hierarchy of phytosociological classification allows formal vegetation generalizations and comparisons. However, according to WEBB (in ADAM 1993) the relationships between communities would be best expressed in a multidimensional classification reflecting a number of floristic (and, by implication, environmental, biotic or historic) gradients. It may be argued that it is not the aim of the phytosociological method to reflect environmental gradients. However, clear differences in environmental conditions between distinct phytosociological units have been noted in many vegetation types, as previously stated.

Previous studies have associated Salicornion with high values of soil conductivity (ALVAREZ ROGEL et al. 2001; MOLINA et al. 2003), Juncion with intermediate values (MOLINA et al. 2003) and Phragmition with low ones (BURDICK et al. 2001; MOLINA et al. 2003). Our results partially agree with this pattern, since Salicornion stands had clearly higher values of conductivity and SAR than Juncion and Phragmition stands. However, the range of conductivity and SAR exhibited by Juncion stands overlapped with that occupied by those of Phragmition. Thus only Salicornion can be used as a reliable predictor of high water table conductivity and adverse ionic soil conditions.

In terms of the water table, the predictive value of alliances was significant in our case, although we cannot rule out the possibility that most of the variation in this factor was due to the site factor. According to MOLINA et al. (2003) Phragmition stands are widespread over lagoons and irrigation ditches, where they experience a longer flooding period than Juncion maritimi and Salicornion communities. However, HASLAM (1970) reported that *Phragmites* stands (attributed to Phragmition) can also thrive in places where the depth of the water table exceeds 1 m. Our results encompass these two contrasting situations. So, although the mean level of

Table 1. Distribution of the points sampled according to sites and vegetation alliances.

	Alliance			
	Salicornion	Phragmition	Juncion	Total
Magarola	4	2	6	12
Ricarda	2	3	6	11
Can Sabadell	3	2	3	8
Reguerons	0	3	3	6
Total	9	10	18	37

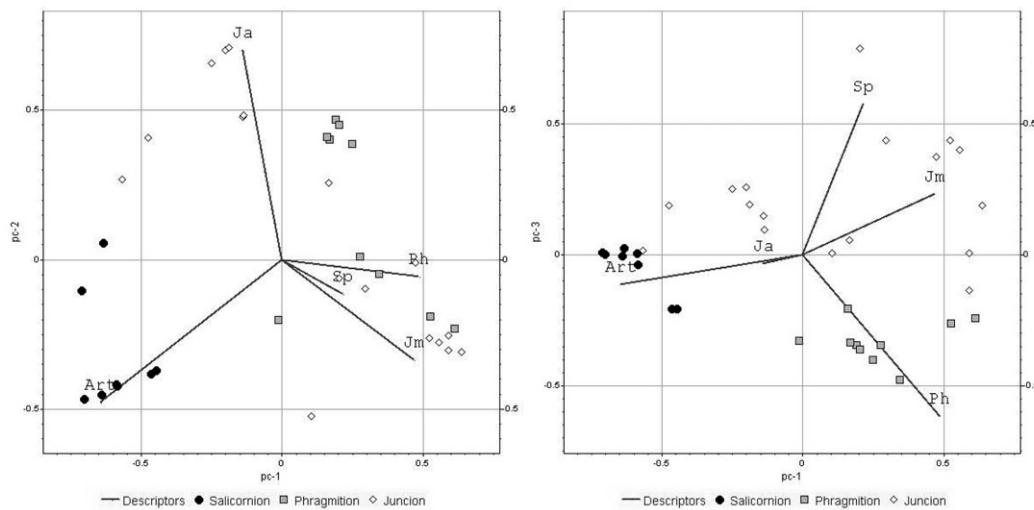


Fig. 2. Position of the relevés on the three first axes of PCA. Grey lines represent the dispersion (line angle) and weight (line length) of species. Emulating distance method using Hellinger distance was applied to the original relevés matrix. Species codes: Art, *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*; Ja, *Juncus acutus*; Jm, *Juncus maritimus*; Ph, *Phragmites australis*; Sp, *Spartina versicolor*.

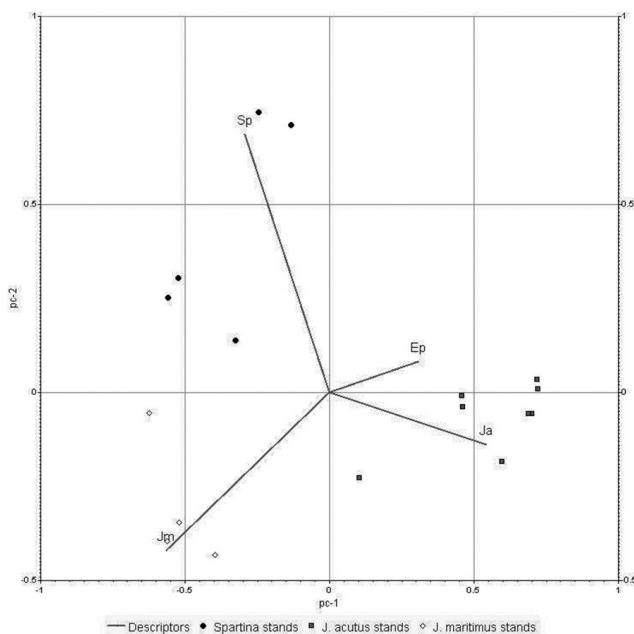


Fig. 3. Position of Juncion maritimi relevés on the two first axes of a PCA. Grey lines represent the dispersion (line angle) and weight (line length) of species. Emulating distance method using Hellinger distance was applied to the original relevés matrix. Species codes: Ep, *Elymus pungens* subsp. *campestre*; Ja, *Juncus acutus*; Jm, *Juncus maritimus*; Sp, *Spartina versicolor*.

water table was significantly higher in Phragmition than in the other alliances studied, the site factor had a strong effect upon this parameter in areas in which the Phragmition stands were found. Thus, a given Phragmition stand cannot be used as a good predictor of the water table level.

Table 2. Effect of the factor alliance tested through ANOVA between a GLMM with alliance as the fixed factor and site as the random factor, and a GLMM only with site as the random factor. The two last columns show the percentage of variance of site factor, and the residual percentage of the simplified GLMM (+ percentage of variance < 0.001%, * p < 0.05, *** p < 0.001).

Variable	Effect of alliance		Model % of variance	
	Chi Sq	p	Site	Residual
Mean water table	68.999	0.03175*	74%	26%
Max conductivity	35.697	0.00000002***	36%	64%
SAR	21.161	0.00003***	+	100%

Table 3. Results of *a priori* contrast, with alliance as the fixed factor, of those variables with a significant effect on the site factor (* p < 0.05, at any degree of freedom). Alliance codes: S, Salicornion fruticosae; Ph, Phragmition communis; J, Juncion maritimi.

Variable	Contrast	St error	t Value
Mean water table	Salicornion vs Phragmition	2.738	2.741*
	Salicornion vs Juncion	2.319	-1.067
	Phragmition vs Juncion	2.099	2.377*
	Salicornion vs Phragmition	4.065	-4.063*
Max conductivity	Salicornion vs Juncion	3.462	-4.354*
	Phragmition vs Juncion	3.129	-0.231
SAR	Salicornion vs Phragmition	3.403	-3.093*
	Salicornion vs Juncion	2.976	-2.487*
	Phragmition vs Juncion	2.675	-0.584

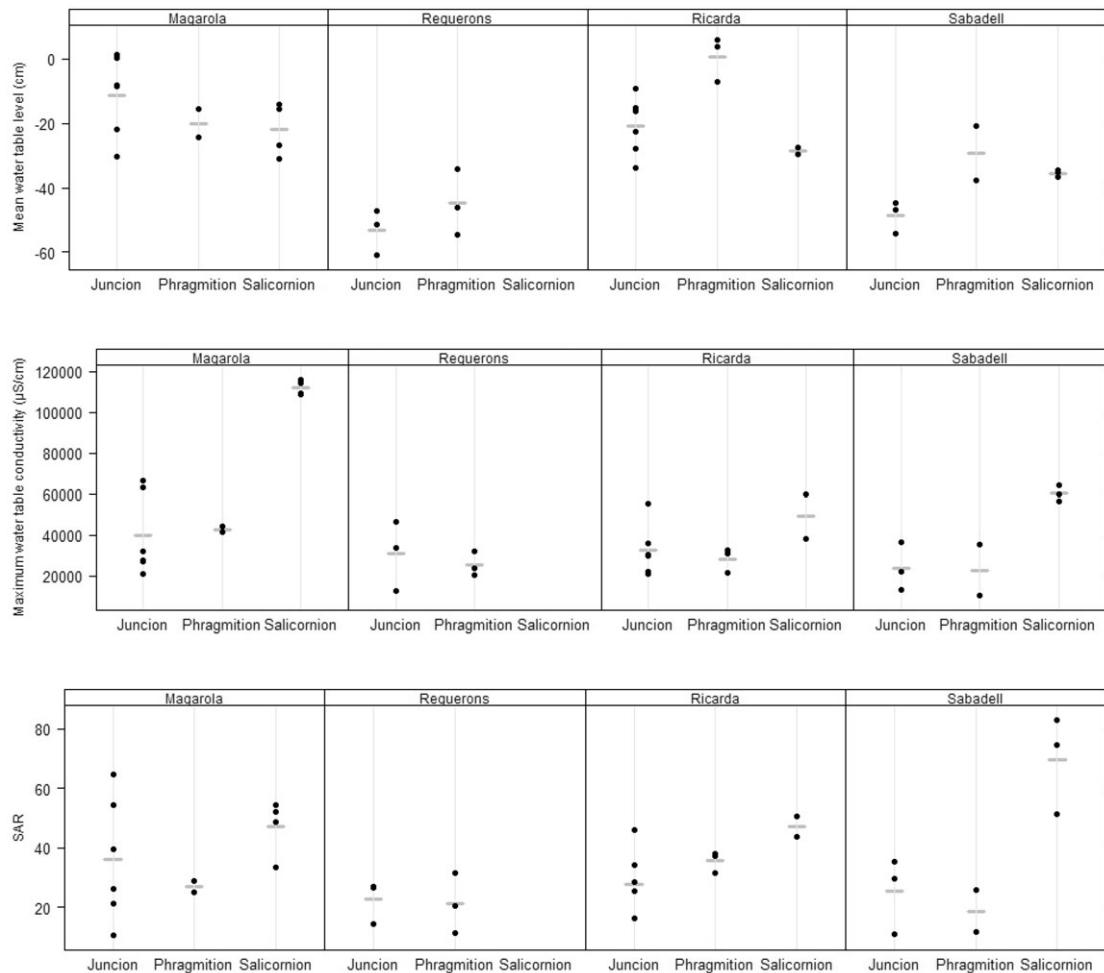


Fig. 4. Plot of the mean water table level (top), maximum water table conductivity (medium) and mean soil SAR ratio (bottom), according to sites and alliances. Black dots indicate sampling points values and grey lines indicate means for each group of sampling points.

Implications for understanding vegetation

The substantial percentage of variance related to site factor in some ecological variables means that the distribution of vegetation units along some ecological gradients may be a consequence of historical factors. Although determining the relationship between these historical aspects and vegetation composition was beyond the capacity of our experimental design, we have a number of related comments, as discussed below.

The importance of the site factor for the saline gradient was negligible, as shown by the clear association between the upper part of this gradient and the Salicornion stands. This may imply that the setting of these stands is not affected by the surrounding Phragmition or Juncion stands, but depends on diaspore availability and the further development of Salicornion species.

Unlike the saline gradient, the response to the water table gradient was greatly affected by the site factor, with Phragmition and Juncion exhibiting the most varia-

tion along this gradient. Given the noticeable overlap between these alliances on the water table gradient, one may ask why Phragmition and Juncion stands occupied such different niches at different sites at similar points on this gradient.

P. australis exhibits a low level of floral fertility and seedling establishment (ISHII & KADONO 2002), although this does not seem to restrict its capacity for colonization (PINO et al. 2009). This species is able to re-colonize gaps that arise through disturbance events thanks to its clonal growth. It creates a canopy that shades other marsh plants and also modifies the habitat by increasing the accumulation of plant litter and by altering the physico-chemical conditions of the soil (MEYERSON et al. 2000; MINCHINTON et al. 2006; SELISKAR et al. 2004). Thus, the common reed is in most cases able to engineer the environment to exclude other species that would otherwise be highly competitive. This phenomenon is considered a positive feedback mechanism, and is common in spontaneous succession and restoration processes (KLÖTZLI &

GROOTJANS 2001). This mechanism of competitive exclusion may produce almost monospecific stands in distinct environmental conditions (e.g. contrasting ranges of water table level). In these cases phytosociology cannot find distinct units in varying environments because of the lack or scarcity of differential taxa. The same limitation applies in other plant communities dominated by clonal species such as *Juncus subnodulosus*, *J. effusus*, *Carex fusca* and *Molinia coerulea* (e.g. RODWELL 1991, GRABHERR & MUCINA 1993).

As previously stated, Juncion stands exhibit floristic divergence, which makes them a heterogeneous group (Fig. 3). This is primarily due to the varying degrees of dominance of *J. acutus*, *J. maritimus* and *S. versicolor*, which is associated with different levels of water table (BATRIU et al. 2011). In fact, some of these differences have been described for different phytosociological ranks. *J. maritimus* and *S. versicolor* stands belong to Spartino-Juncetum maritimi O. Bolòs 1962, an association including two subassociations defined by the dominant species (spartinetosum O. Bolòs 1962, dominated by *Spartina versicolor*; and Juncetosum maritimi O. Bolòs 1962, dominated by *Juncus maritimus*). Stands dominated by *J. acutus* are frequently difficult to attribute to any phytosociological association and even alliance, because this rush is a rather ubiquitous species; they are mostly included in Juncetalia maritimae, but in some cases they have been linked to Holoschoenion. According to GESTI & VILAR (2003) our *J. acutus* stands may belong to the association Spartino-Juncetum maritimi, thus being considered a consequence of disturbance in *J. maritimus* stands, or may belong to the association Elymo curvifolii-Iridetum spuriae (Rivas-Martínez) Cirujano 1981, a rush formation that occupies less waterlogged soils than *J. maritimus* stands. Our *J. acutus* stands certainly appeared to be associated with disturbance because they were found as dominant formations in semi-stable localities, but these localities also had a lower water table. So in this case, as in *P. australis* stands, both environmental and historical factors may be responsible for the presence of *J. acutus* stands. However, in contrast to reed stands, *J. acutus* stands exhibited some species divergence from the other Juncion stands. They can thus be distinguished as a subassociation within Spartino-Juncetum maritime, based on vegetation dynamics.

The three alliances considered herein are relatively similar in various aspects, at least within the study area. All are related to one or another stress factor, are characterized by a few species, and show equivalent distribution patterns in the landscape. For these reasons, and according to the assumption that the alliance level corresponds to a particularly good ecological descriptor (TERRADAS 2001), these alliances could be expected to reflect the main operating ecological gradients relatively well. However, as in other hierarchical classification

methods, the diversity of communities within the units of the same phytosociological level (i.e. alliance) is not always equally balanced. In our case study, the Juncion alliance is floristically more diverse and heterogeneous across sites. Thus, unlike Salicornion and Phragmition, our Juncion stands can be divided into distinct lower vegetation units, which thrive under different abiotic conditions.

Moreover, most phytosociological sampling and the described vegetation units reflect semi-natural, relatively well-preserved habitats (PINO et al. 2009), while strongly altered landscapes are now widespread. The case discussed herein reflects a few of the problems with which phytosociology has to deal when applied to man-altered landscapes. In many cases phytosociology states an eventual monoclimax after facilitation succession models like those of Connell and Slatery (KREBS 2001). However, a polyclimax approach seems more realistic in most altered landscapes, according to the climax pattern hypothesis of Whittaker (KREBS 2001). In this approach communities are viewed as the product of multiple circumstances, including historic factors such as disturbance events, lottery effects in colonization, and inhibitory processes from established dominant species. This is particularly true in coastal marshes where unexpected stable plant formations appear during succession (ADAM 1993; KLÖTZLI & GROOTJANS 2001). In our case study, the alliances overlapping along some segments of the environmental gradients may be understood as polyclimax phenomena in these segments.

Concluding remarks

Within a given landscape, the phytosociological classification at the alliance level partially reflects the most important operating gradients in the area studied, i.e. the salinity gradient and associated effects. However, this hierarchical system cannot reflect other operating gradients, mainly because of (i) the different floristic diversity between different alliances, and (ii) the inability to differentiate distinct vegetation units from near-monospecific stands of the same species, thriving in different environments.

Both problems are intrinsic limitations of the method, but the system could be improved if more attention were paid to dominant vegetation formations in disturbed areas, through accurate sampling of traditional relevés together with ecological data. Although studying the mechanisms operating in vegetation dynamics was beyond the scope of this work, we conclude that these factors cannot be ignored in any vegetation study or restoration planning and monitoring. In our case, the initial species pool or the plant dispersal capacity of some vegetation types (e.g. Phragmition or Salicornion) seem to have driven the vegetation dynamics in the spontaneous restoration of marshlands on the Llobregat delta.

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Electronic appendix

Appendix. Alliance tables with the relevés taken from the four sites.

Appendix data associated with this article can be found in the online version at
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Appendix. Alliance tables with the relevés taken from the four sites (Ma, Magarola; Ri, Ricarda; Sa, Can Sabadell; Re, Reguerons; see Figure 1 for location).

	Juncion maritimi Br-Bl ex Horvatic 1934																						
	Ma2	Ma5	Ma6	Ma13	Ma15	Ri4	Ri6	Ri10	Ma3	Ma7	Ma14	Ma17	Ri2	Ri7	Ri11	Ma16	Ma18	Sa2	Sa7	Sa8	Re1	Re3	Re4
<i>Juncus acutus</i>	1			2	1			1								4	4	4	4	5	4	4	
<i>Spartina versicolor</i>	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	2	2	1												
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>australis</i>	2	1	1	2	2		1	1	+	+	2	+	1	1	3	+							
<i>Juncus maritimus</i>			2		1	+	2	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	2							
<i>Elymus pungens</i> subsp. <i>campestre</i>						+											3	5	4	+			
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>							+											+				1	
<i>Arthrocnemum fruticosum</i>													2			2					1		
<i>Aster squamatus</i>																1				1		+	

Taxa with less than 3 occurrences:

Phragmites australis subsp. *chrysanthus* in Ma2 (+)
Sonchus maritimus in Ma6 (1) Ri4 (1)
Brachypodium phoenicoides in Ma6 (1) Ri4 (2)
Dorycnium pentaphyllum subsp. *gracile* in Ri4 (1)
Ri6 (1)
Schoenus nigricans in Ri4 (1)
Calystegia sepium in Ma2, Ma15 (+)
Oenanthe lachenalii in Ma18 (1)
Carex extensa in Ma18 (1)
Inula crithmoides in Ma18 (1)

Paspalum vaginatum in Ma18 (5)
Suaeda vera in Sa2 (1) Sa8 (3)
Atriplex prostrata in Re1 (1) Re4 (2)
Plantago crassifolia in Re3 (2)
Bromus racemosus in Re3 (+)
Dipsacus fullonum subsp. *fullonum* in Re3 (+)
Festuca arundinacea in Re3 (2)
Galium aparine in Re3 (+) Re4 (1)
Asparagus officinalis in Re3 (+)
Beta vulgaris in Re4 (1)

Cirsium vulgare in Re4 (+)
Bromus madritensis in Re4 (+)
Hordeum marinum in Re4 (+)
Sonchus asper in Re4 (1)
Torilis arvensis in Re4 (+)

Salicornion fruticosae Br-Bl 1933

	Ma1	Ma8	Ma10	Ma11	Ri1	Ri5	Sa1	Sa4	Sa5
<i>Arthrocnemum fruticosum</i>	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5
<i>Juncus subulatus</i>	2	1	1						
<i>Atriplex portulacoides</i>		1	1						
<i>Suaeda vera</i>					1	1	+	+	
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>australis</i>						+	+		
<i>Juncus acutus</i>							+	2	

Taxa with less than 2 occurrences:

Scirpus maritimus in Ma1 (1)

Scirpus cernuus in Ma8 (1)

Aster tripolium in Ri1 (+)

Inula crithmoides in Sa4 (1)

Phragmiton australis Koch 1926

	Ma9	Ma12	Ri3	Ri8	Ri12	Sa3	Sa6	Re2	Re5	Re6
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>australis</i>	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5
<i>Juncus acutus</i>	4	3					2		3	2
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>chrysanthus</i>		1	1		3					
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>							+	1		
<i>Calystegia sepium</i>							1	3		

Taxa with less than 2 occurrences:

Atriplex prostrata in Ma12 (+)

Cynanchum acutum in Ma12 (2)

Scirpus maritimus in Ri3 (1)

Juncus maritimus in Ri8 (1)

Aeluropus littoralis in Sa3 (+)

Arthrocnemum fruticosum in Sa3 (+)

Aster tripolium in Sa3 (+)

Juncus subulatus in Sa3 (3)

Oenanthe lachenalii in Sa3 (+)

Elymus pungens subsp. *campestre* in Sa6 (1)

Avena barbata in Re2 (1)

Bromus madritensis in Re2 (+)

Galium aparine in Re2 (2)

Lepidium draba in Re2 (+)

Capítol 3

Filtering of plant functional traits is determined by environmental gradients rather than by past land use in a Mediterranean coastal marsh

Els gradients ambientals són més importants que l'ús passat del sòl alhora de determinar els trets funcionals de les maresmes costaneres mediterrànies

Efrem Batriu, Josep M. Ninot & Joan Pino

Sotmès a *Journal of Vegetation Science*

Resum:

Quin és l'efecte de l'ús passat del sòl i dels gradients ambientals en els trets funcionals de les plantes que viuen en les comunitats de maresma costanera? Per respondre aquesta qüestió vam partir de la informació prèvia que teníem sobre 45 mostres de vegetació de maresma al delta del Llobregat. Per cada mostra disposàvem de: inventari florístic, seguiment temporal de diferents variables del sòl i de l'aigua freàtica, i història del canvi d'usos de sòl els darrers 55 anys (pertorbació passada absent o present). Per a cada una de les espècies detectades en el conjunt del inventaris vam obtenir els valors o estats dels següents trets funcionals: alçada de la planta, contingut de matèria seca foliar, àrea foliar específica, producció de llavors, pes de les llavors, forma vital i capacitat d'expansió lateral. Per avaluar l'efecte del biaix filogenètic en la diversitat dels trets funcionals vam construir l'arbre filogenètic ultramètric de les 40 espècies més importants i vam testar l'efecte d'aquest biaix. La relació dels gradients ambientals (conductivitat i nivell de l'aigua freàtica, balanç iònic de sodi al sòl) i la pertorbació passada, amb la distribució dels trets funcionals la vam comprovar mitjançant l'anàlisi RLQ. Els resultats indicaren que de tots els trets analitzats només el pes de les llavors mostrava un biaix filogenètic. Així doncs, l'esquema filogenètic realitzat no va ser inclós en la anàlisi RLQ. Pel que fa a les relacions entre gradients ambientals i trets, la conductivitat de l'aigua freàtica estava correlacionada de forma negativa amb el pes de les llavors; mentre que el nivell de l'aigua freàtica i el balanç iònic de sòl estaven negativament correlacionats amb l'àrea foliar específica. Pel que fa a la pertorbació passada, estava correlacionada negativament amb el contingut de matèria seca foliar i amb la capacitat d'expansió lateral. En conclusió, els trets funcionals de les plantes de les maresmes costaneres del delta del Llobregat es troben actualment més condicionats pels gradients ambientals que per la pertorbació passada associada a l'ús passat del sòl. El balanç iònic del sòl i el nivell de l'aigua freàtica serien dues variables clau a l'hora de controlar un tret funcional tant important com és l'àrea foliar específica. Aquesta troballa reforça la idea que el balanç iònic del sòl és una variable molt important a l'hora de condicionar la vida vegetal a les maresmes costaneres mediterrànies. Pel que fa als efectes de la pertorbació passada, cal tenir en compte que poden estar associats també als canvis en les condicions ambientals derivats del canvi d'usos, i no directament a la pertorbació pretèrita.

Filtering of plant functional traits is determined by environmental gradients rather than by past land use in a Mediterranean coastal marsh

Abstract

Question: What is the effect of past land use and environmental gradients on plant functional traits within coastal marsh plant communities?

Location: Mediterranean microtidal marshes in the Llobregat Delta (NE Spain; 41°N 2°E).

Methods: We used a dataset collected previously comprising 45 vegetation plots with associated soil parameters, water table conditions, and past land use. For each species we obtained the values or states for a set of plant functional traits: plant height, leaf dry matter content, specific leaf area, seed production, seed weight, life form and lateral expansion. To account for the effect of phylogeny we evaluated trait diversity skewness by means of an ultrametric phylogenetic tree specifically constructed for the species studied. The association between both environmental gradients and past disturbance, and plant functional traits was tested by means of RLQ analysis.

Results: Of all the traits, only seed weight showed a phylogenetic bias; consequently phylogeny was not included in the RLQ analysis. Conductivity was negatively correlated with seed weight, whereas water table conditions and soil ionic balance were negatively correlated with specific leaf area. Past disturbance was negatively correlated with leaf dry matter content and with lateral expansion. However, these effects might be partially determined by changes in environmental conditions due to past land use.

Conclusions: Plant traits of Llobregat Delta coastal marsh communities are conditioned by environmental gradients rather than by past land use. Soil ionic balance and water table conditions determine key plant functional traits such as specific leaf area. This finding also corroborates the importance of soil ionic balance as a plant life driver in microtidal Mediterranean marshes. The effect of land use on species traits might be partially constrained by the strong environmental gradients and by the effect of past (agricultural) land use on these environmental conditions that in turn affect species traits.

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Keywords: plant functional traits, coastal marshes, past land use, salinity, waterlogging, RLQ.

Nomenclature:

Bolòs et al. (2005)

Introduction

The vegetation in a particular area reflects the selection, through environmental and biotic filters, from the flora available of those species capable of co-existing under the prevailing conditions (Keddy 1992). Plant species thus selected will exhibit some convergent traits that, in turn, determine ecosystem functions such as biogeochemical cycling or response to disturbance (Lavorel et al. 2002). Consequently, exploring the relationship between environment and species traits might help us to understand the response of organisms and ecosystems to environmental constraints at different levels (Lavorel et al. 2002, Wesuls et al. 2012).

In coastal marshes, salinity and moisture gradients have been identified as the main natural factors that constrain plant distribution (Champman 1974). Only a few lineages of vascular plants have developed plant traits such as succulence, a photosynthetic pathway, or aerenchymatous roots that allow them to inhabit coastal marshes (Adam 1993). Except in the upper marsh zone, most plant communities in coastal marshes are species-poor and dominated by a few closely related species that share many of their physiological traits (e.g. Bertness et al. 1992, Costa et al. 2003, Pennings et al. 2003). Since one mechanism that permits plant coexistence is trait differentiation, coastal

marshes offer an interesting context in which to study the complex associations between environmental gradients, plant community composition and plant traits. However, few studies have addressed this issue (Minden & Kleyer 2011, Minden et al. 2012) especially in terms of accounting for phylogenetic signal (Pavoine et al. 2011). According to the research that has been published, key environmental factors such as waterlogging and salinity might promote changes in plant species traits in coastal marshes; despite evidence still being limited and inconclusive. For example, waterlogging and salinity might increase (Minden & Kleyer 2011) or decrease (Minden et al. 2012) the frequency and abundance of plants with a low specific leaf area (SLA) in these habitats.

Although costal marshes have traditionally been drained for sanitary reasons and reclaimed for agricultural use, their conservation and restoration have become common in Europe over the last few decades, following increasing concern for the conservation of their natural values. It is known that disturbance affects plant traits in certain ways, as widely reported for arable fields and pasture, after cropping and grazing cessation (Kahmen et al. 2004, Kleyer 1999, Louault et al. 2005, Pakeman 2004, Purschke et al. 2012), as well as for other types of vegetation (Cornelissen et al. 2003, McIntyre et al. 2003). Those studies report that disturbance commonly favours species with high SLA, low leaf dry matter content (LDMC), high seed production and low seed weight. These effects could be interpreted in a successional context yet modulated by intrinsic and climate factors (Pakeman 2004, De Bello et al. 2005, Díaz et al. 2007). To our knowledge, the relationship between level of disturbance and plant traits in coastal marshes has only been studied for a reduced number of traits (Benot et al. 2011, Dupré et al. 2001, Pino et al. 2009). Those studies suggest that disturbance reduces plant height and the abundance of both geophytes and plants with high lateral expansion (Dupré et al. 2001). In contrast, the effect of past disturbance (i.e. associated with contrasting changing histories of land use) on plant species traits has not been taken into account, despite land use legacy affecting current species distribution in these marshes (Domènec et al. 2005; Pino et al. 2009). There is increasing evidence that past land use leaves a historical signal on current plant species distribution (e.g. Jackson & Sax 2011, Cristofoli et al. 2010) and also on species traits (Lindborg 2007, Purschke et al. 2012, Bagaria et al. 2013).

Here we study the relationship between both environmental gradients and past land use, and the distribution of plant functional traits in an area of Mediterranean coastal marshes. The research focuses on a coastal marsh with a complex history of changing land use (Batriu et al. 2011), where we have recorded species abundances at 45 sampling points. We hypothesize the existence of combined effects of environmental factors and past land use on the distribution of plant functional traits. Despite the effects of environmental factors scarcely being known, we expect that salinity and flooding affect traits related with species growth and reproduction. We also expect that disturbance associated with past land use promotes attributes of pioneer species (high SLA and seed production) but penalizes those more frequent in late-successional species (i.e. large plant size; high levels of expansion, persistence and clonality; and increased LDMC and seed weight). We have built a database of relevant biological and ecological plant traits, with regard to species persistence and reproduction (Weiher et al. 1999), and we use a single, three-table ordination analysis (RLQ) to explore the roles of species abundances, and environmental and past land use variables on the distribution of species traits, after testing for the phylogenetic signal on these traits (Pavoine et al. 2011).

Methods

Study area

The study was conducted in the southern hemi-delta of the River Llobregat (Llobregat Delta hereafter), south of the city of Barcelona (Catalonia, NE Spain). The Llobregat Delta is a microtidal wetland area currently included in the Barcelona conurbation. Climate data obtained from Barcelona International Airport (located in the middle of the delta) record an average annual precipitation of 640 mm for the period 1971–2000, with minimum rainfall in July (20 mm) and maximum in October (91 mm). The mean annual temperature is 15.5°C, with the highest mean maximum in August (28°C) and the lowest mean minimum in January (4.4°C). The area is thus under a Mediterranean pluviseasonal–oceanic bioclimate. Coastal marshes in the Llobregat Delta are dominated by reedbeds (*Phragmites australis*), rushbeds (*Juncion maritimi*), and halophytic scrubland (*Arthrocnemion fruticosi*).

Environmental gradients and species

We randomly selected 45 sampling points distributed among the four best-preserved marshland remnants in the delta (sites hereafter) situated along an inland–coastal gradient and with different past and present land uses. These sites are: Magarola Ricarda, Can Sabadell and Reguerons (for details of their locations see Batriu et al. 2011). All the sites occupy at least 18 ha and have such diverse vegetation types as grasslands, coastal marsh communities, coastal pine forest and dune vegetation. At each site we set up 6–19 sampling points, depending on marsh vegetation cover, randomly distributed among the three main coastal marsh vegetation types (reedbeds, rushbeds and halophytic shrubs). The distance between the points was at least 20 m and the distance between the points and roads was at least 50 m. Ricarda and Magarola are located close to the shoreline; although the former has substantial freshwater input, whereas the latter is more heavily influenced by seawater. Can Sabadell and Reguerons are located 2 km from the shoreline; the former includes some patches of saline soil, whereas the latter may be considered mesohaline. According to Pino et al. (2006) Magarola and Ricarda are stable sites (longstanding natural areas) while Can Sabadell and Reguerons are semi-stable sites (abandoned and spontaneously restored since 1956). The four sites represent two different past land use situations that were codified by a two-value variable hereafter called past disturbance (0 = stable sites since at least 1956; 1 = disturbed sites in 1956).

At each sampling point we recorded the species composition and abundance in a circular area of 2 m radius (12.56 m^2), using the Braun-Blanquet method (Braun-Blanquet 1979). Species were identified according to Bolòs et al. (2005) and taxonomy was later corrected to fit current phylogenetic criteria (see below). The Braun-Blanquet cover-abundance scale was transformed following the Dagnelie (1960) transformation, that is: + (< 5%, few individuals), 0.2; 1 (< 5%, abundant), 1; 2 (5%–25%), 2; 3 (25%–50%), 3; 4 (50%–75%), 4 and 5 (> 75%), 5.

Each sampling point was marked with a vertically sunk PVC pipe, 1.5 m in length (reaching 1.3 m in depth) and 32 mm in diameter. The water level (in cm) and conductivity (in $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$) were measured monthly at each pipe from December 2004 to December 2006 using a WTW TetraCond 325 sensor. From April 2005 to January 2006, two soil samples were taken from the top 20 cm at each sampling point every three

months. From these samples we obtained a saturation extract following Bower & Wilcox (1965). The concentrations of Ca^{+2} , Mg^{+2} , Na^+ and K^+ of this saturation were determined using ICP-OES (optic emission spectroscopy with inductive plasma). The balance between the concentrations of Na^+ , Mg^{2+} and Ca^{2+} ions, called the SAR (sodium adsorption ratio), was calculated following Richards (1974).

Traits

We obtained the values of seven plant traits for each of 40 species occurring in the relevés, namely: plant height, LDMC, SLA, seed production, seed weight, capacity for lateral expansion and life form. These traits indicate the responses of plants to their environmental challenges (Weiher et al. 1999). SLA, LDMC and plant height were measured according to the recommended sample sizes given in Cornelissen et al. (2003): ten individuals for plant height and five leaves from two different individuals for SLA and LDMC. However, the collected leaves were pooled to form a whole sample to obtain a single measure. Moreover, for six species, the SLA and LDMC data were obtained from the LEDA traitbase (Kleyer et al. 2008). Seed production was specifically measured according to Sera & Sery (2004); with the exception of one species (*Galium aparine*), for which the value was obtained directly from Sera & Sery (2004). Seed weight was obtained from the Seed Information Database (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew 2008) except for eight species not in that database which were sampled according to Cornelissen et al. (2003): using a minimum of five seeds from three different individuals. In our case, however, the seeds were air dried instead of oven dried, based on the protocol used by the Seed Information Database (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew 2008). We assigned the Raunkiaer life forms according to Bolòs et al. (2005), except that chamaephytes and phanerophytes were merged into a single category. To assess capacity for lateral expansion, we considered the four categories described in the LEDA standards (Kleyer et al. 2008): no lateral spread (mainly therophytes), low lateral spread (<0.001 m/year), moderate lateral spread (0.01-0.25 m/year; mainly plants that adopt a phalanx strategy *sensu* Grime 1979), and high lateral spread (>0.25 m/year, mainly plants that adopt a guerrilla strategy, Grime 1979). The species were classified as one of these four categories according to personal observations and descriptions in standard floras (mainly Bolòs et al. 2005). Life form

and lateral expansion were transformed into dummy nominal variables. All the trait variables showed pairwise Spearman correlation, $|r| < 0.75$, for all the study species.

Phylogeny

Phylogenetically related species may share more plant traits than expected by chance (Cahill et al. 2008). That being so, any study dealing with the relation between plant traits and gradients should first test this effect, i.e. check for phylogenetic bias. If there is such a bias, the results cannot be completely attributed to environmental filtering, but must also be partially attributed to phylogenetic relations. To check for a phylogenetic signal, we constructed a tree topology using the topology of the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group (2009) classification as the basic structure. For families with more than one species, we completed this basic tree using specific studies. We then used the TimeTree database (Hedges et al. 2006) (www.timetree.org) to obtain the molecular age of 20 nodes dated in recently published studies. For more details of the tree topology resolution and node dating see Appendix 1.

To test for the presence of phylogenetic bias, we used the skewness test devised by Pavoine et al. (2010). The method involves decomposing trait diversity among the nodes of a phylogenetic classification tree. The value attributed to a node is a function of the trait diversity among the clades descending from it. Species traits show a phylogenetic bias if the trait diversity is biased to the root or to the tip of the phylogenetic tree. The skewness test was performed using R (R Development Core Team, 2012) and the R scripts provided by Pavoine et al. (2010). For more details of this test see Appendix 1.

Overall, neither trait diversity nor any trait (except for seed weight) showed significant skewness towards the root or the tips of the phylogenetic tree ($p > 0.05$). Based on this, we did not incorporate phylogeny into the RLQ analysis.

Statistical analysis

For the study we considered past land use and three selected variables that are representative of the main environmental gradients in coastal marshlands: maximum water table conductivity (hereafter conductivity), mean water table level (hereafter

water table) and mean soil SAR. These variables were identified as the most important factors that constrain species distribution in costal marsh plant communities in the Llobregat Delta through a CCA analysis and showed a pairwise Spearman correlation, $|r| < 0.75$ (Batriu et al. 2011).

Quantitative traits (plant height, LDMC, SLA, seed production, seed weight) and environmental variables were tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, and all variables with $p < 0.1$ were log transformed. All variables except seed production fulfilled the normality condition. Then, all trait and environmental quantitative variables were standardized (mean = 0, sd = 1).

We assessed the association between environmental variables and plant traits by means of an RLQ analysis. According Kleyer et al. (2012), the method provides an excellent overview of the trait–environment relationships at the species level. RLQ is an extension of co-inertia analysis that searches for a combination of traits and environmental variables of maximal covariance, which is weighted by the abundances of the species in the plots. To perform the RLQ analysis, we first performed a Correspondence Analysis on the species relevé matrix (L matrix), then we performed Principal Components Analysis on the species traits (Q matrix) and also on the environmental factors (R matrix) using the species weights from the Correspondence Analysis previously performed on the L matrix as row weights. Finally, the RLQ analysis was performed using the Correspondence Analysis and both Principal Components Analyses. The overall significance of the RLQ analysis was tested using a Monte-Carlo permutation test with 999 repetitions.

The significance of the correlation between each environmental variable and each trait was tested using two models of permutations detailed in Dray & Legendre (2008). In the first model we used a permutation of the site vectors in the L-table that tests whether species assemblages are dependent on environmental gradients (permutation 2 in (Dray et al. 2008)). In the second model we used a permutation of the species vectors of the L-table that tests whether the distribution of species depends on the traits of these species (permutation model 4 in (Dray et al. 2008)). In accordance with Dray & Legendre (2008), we combined the two models in order to attain the correct Type I error level.

The permutations were performed using a Monte Carlo permutation test with 999 repetitions.

All the analysis were performed using the package ade4 (Dray et al. 2007) from R (R Development Core Team 2012) and the R scripts provided by Kelyer et al. (2012).

Results

The RLQ test was significant ($p = 0.02$) and its first two axes explained almost all the total co-inertia (97.4%). The first axis explained 88.5% of the co-inertia, and it was positively correlated with past disturbance and negatively correlated with water table, conductivity and SAR (Fig. 1). As for traits, the first axis was negatively correlated with LDMC, high lateral expansion capacity (guerrilla strategy) and chamaephyte life form; and positively correlated with seed weight, therophyte life form and no lateral expansion capacity. Based on the hypotheses we outlined in the introduction, the plots that occupied higher values on this axis could be characterized as past disturbed communities where the magnitude of stress caused by salinity and flooding was low. Species with a low LDMC, no lateral expansion capacity, therophyte life form and high seed weight were common in this ecological situation. The second axis explained only 8.9% of the total co-inertia. It was mainly negatively correlated with water table; and to a minor degree positively correlated with conductivity and negatively correlated with SAR. It should be noted that in high positions on axis two, the plots have a low water table that has high conductivity and in this situation roots do not tend to be exposed to salinity stress. In terms of traits, the second axis was positively correlated with seed production, high lateral expansion capacity (guerrilla strategy) and SLA; and negatively correlated with seed weight, no lateral expansion capacity, therophyte life form and plant height. This second axis has to be understood as an axis that reflects both waterlogging and high soil SAR gradients (Fig. 1). In plots where waterlogging or soil SAR are high, most plants showed high seed production, high lateral expansion capacity, high SLA, low seed weight and low height.

RLQ permutations revealed five significant ($p < 0.05$) negative correlations between environmental variables and plant traits. These are the relations between past disturbance and high lateral expansion capacity (guerrilla strategy); past disturbance and

LDMC; conductivity and seed weight; water table and SLA; and SAR and SLA (Table 2).

Discussion

Environmental gradients

We found a significant relationship between environmental gradients and plant traits in Mediterranean coastal marshlands. First, we found significant effects of water table and salinity on SLA. According to previous studies, the effects of the salinity–flooding gradient on SLA might be negative (Minden & Kleyer 2011) or positive (Minden et al. 2012). This apparent contradiction may be caused by succulent species, which sometimes are abundant in highly saline conditions. The particular leaf anatomy of succulent plants gives high SLA values, which conflicts with the expected trend of lower SLA values in species growing in stressful environments (Vendramini et al. 2002). Environmental gradients in our case study were not as mixed as those reported by Minden & Kleyer (2011) and Minden et al. (2012) in macrotidal salt marshes, due to the absence of a tidal regime; thus better disentangling the effects of salinity and flooding. Mediterranean coastal marshes are characterized by dominant succulent Chenopodiaceae in highly saline habitats (Adam 1993). However, other plant types can also overcome osmotic water stress thanks to noticeable lignification of the leaves or photosynthetic stems, as seen in rushes (*Juncus acutus* and *Juncus maritimus*). The presence of species using this strategy explains the negative association between salinity and SLA observed in our study. The salinity effect is due to the balance between Na^+ , Mg^{2+} and Ca^{2+} (SAR) in soil. This is consistent with the identification of soil SAR as an important environmental driver in vegetation composition in microtidal Mediterranean coastal marshes (Álvarez Rogel et al. 2001, Batriu et al. 2011, Molina et al. 2003). According to Mommer et al. (2006), flooding promotes plants with high SLA values. Under the water gases enter the leaf through the cuticle and epidermal cells, therefore thin leaves can improve gas exchange in this circumstance. However, in most of the species thriving in high water table conditions in our study, only the root system was underwater and most of the leaves were out of the water. In these circumstances, plants may suffer drought stress as anoxic soil conditions reduce root water uptake, while the evaporative demand of leaves remains constant (Poorter et al. 2009). This effect explains the negative relation observed between water table and SLA.

Shumway & Bertness (1992) identified two types of plant functional groups in temperate coastal marshes: the perennial turfs (persisting through dense clonal growth) and the fugitive herbs (without clonal growth capacity). Perennial turfs dominate in late-successional stages, where the slow dynamics is dependent on clonal growth and persistence, and sexual recruitment plays only a minor role (Shumway & Bertness 1992). Strong saline-tolerant plants can be associated with fugitive behaviour, since constitutive physiological costs inherent to halophyte specialization lead to a low competitive capacity against less tolerant species when growing in less saline soils (Adam 1993). Thus, as Erfanzadeh et al. (2010) showed, saline-tolerant species are forced to be good seed producers and dispersers in order to colonize new available high saline gaps within the less saline matrix. This would explain the negative relation between conductivity and seed weight.

Coastal marshes are one of the central European vegetation types that exhibit a high proportion of clonal species (Sosnová et al. 2010). However, in the case of Mediterranean dry salt marshes, halophytic shrubs with a low capacity for lateral expansion play an important role in highly saline conditions (Adam 1993). For instance, the dominating species in the most saline conditions of the Llobregat Delta marshes is *Arthrocnemum fruticosum*, a sub-shrub with no capacity for lateral spread. Therefore, a clear negative correlation between conductivity or SAR and lateral expansion might be expected along a pronounced salinity gradient ranging from highly saline to very low saline conditions. However, semi-stable sites found mainly on non-saline soils promoted annual species without the capacity for lateral spreading, which buffered the expected trend.

Past land use

Our study also detected a significant negative effect of historical disturbance associated with past agricultural use on two species traits: lateral expansion capacity and LDMC. Previous studies also detected a significant association between past land use and species traits, suggesting that these traits might mediate plant response to land-use change (Verheyen et al. 2003, Kolb & Diekmann 2005, Adriaens et al. 2006, Lindborg 2005, Bagaria et al. 2005). In our case, the effect on traits might be partially masked by

changes in environmental conditions determined by the previous land use. Indeed, post agricultural soils tend to have high resource availability (Knops et al. 2000), and past agricultural use might have determined an increase in the soil fertility of semi-stable marshlands compared with stable ones, as suggested by their mean values of the organic C:N ratio (Table 1). So, species growing in semi-stable marshlands might show higher SLA and lower LDMC than those in stable marshlands as these traits are known to be related with high resource availability (Cornelissen et al. 2003, Lavorel et al. 2002). However, we only found this association for the case of LDMC; a trait related to the average density of leaf tissue and relatively opposed to SLA (Cornelissen et al. 2003). The strong dependence of SLA on leaf thickness (Wilson et al. 1999) seems to make LDMC a better proxy for nutrient availability than SLA in the case of marshland plants, as suggested by our results.

The negative association between past disturbance and capacity for lateral expansion detected in our study has also been observed in grazed pastures (Wesuls et al. 2012), agrarian landscapes (Kleyer 1999) and managed meadows (Klimešová et al. 2008). Again, however, the potential effect of past land use on current environmental conditions should be taken into account. Indeed, soil moisture gradient is a key factor determining the abundance of plants with lateral expansion (Klimešová et al. 2008), and this factor might have been affected by historical agricultural use (e.g. through field drainage) as suggested by the low water table of semi-stable sites compared with that of stable ones (Table 1).

The rest of the plant attributes studied did not show any association with past land use, contrary of our expectations. Indeed, Raunkiaer life forms were conceived to reflect the persistence of plant species in relation to climate, but they also partially reflect the capacity to respond to disturbance (Cornelissen et al. 2003). Plant height is expected to increase with decreasing disturbance intensity (Kleyer 1999, Lavorel et al. 2002). Seed mass and seed production commonly show significant but opposite trends with disturbance (Cornelissen et al. 2003, Lavorel et al. 2002). Seedlings from larger seeds better survive in stable, competitive habitats than those from smaller seeds (Leishman 2001). So, late-successional species tend to have large seeds but low seed production, due to the known trade-off between these components (Leishman 2001). In contrast, pioneer species dominating in disturbed habitats show high colonization capacity due to

high seed production but seeds are commonly small and seedlings cannot establish themselves in crowded conditions (Burke et al. 1996, Leishman 2001). The lack of association of any of these traits with past land use indicates that the species reaction to land use change has probably been rapid enough to ensure that no historical signal persists in present marshland communities. Moreover, the flora and vegetation dynamics of costal marshlands has some intrinsic characteristics that may make it difficult to detect some typical relations between disturbance and traits. That is, halophyte plants thriving on undisturbed marshlands have high seed production and low seed mass; or stable marshland communities are usually dominated by geophytes. The historical landscape has also been identified as determinant of plant species traits in present-day grasslands (Puschke et al. 2012) due to its effects on species colonization. More information on the landscape history of the study area, especially on grazing pressure, and more quantitative information on key reproductive traits such as autogamy, seed production and seed bank fertility, would help to better assess the role of plant land use in species trait distribution in the Mediterranean marshlands studied, as in other changing habitats (Lindborg 2007, Bagaria et al. 2013).

Concluding remarks

In the strongly human-altered microtidal Mediterranean coastal marshes, environmental gradients rather than past land use are the main factors determining species composition through functional plant traits and independently of species phylogeny. Regarding environmental gradients, conductivity affects seed production, seed weight and SAR, whereas water table determines SLA. These results diverge from those observed in macrotidal coastal marshes in that soil ion balance (SAR) and water table determine key plant functional traits such as SLA, due to the weak tidal regime and the existence of a dry summer season. In contrast, past disturbance only affects LDMC and capacity for lateral expansion. The effect of land use on species traits might be partially constrained by the strong environmental gradients and by the effect of past (agricultural) land use on these environmental conditions that, in turn, affect species traits.

From a conservation point of view, our results may help in predicting vegetation changes in these marshes, driven by shifts in plant functional traits directly or indirectly caused by habitat alterations. As Mediterranean coastal marshes have a long history of

human transformation that continues today (Curcó et al. 2010), changes in the disturbance regime but also in some environmental factors (e.g. through human induced alterations of marshland hydrological regimes) are expected. This might affect key plant functional traits which, in turn, affect ecosystem processes (Lavorel et al. 2002), such as changes in the dead biomass accumulation observed in central European saltmarshes due to changes in the SLA of dominating species (Minden & Kleyer 2011).

Tables and figures

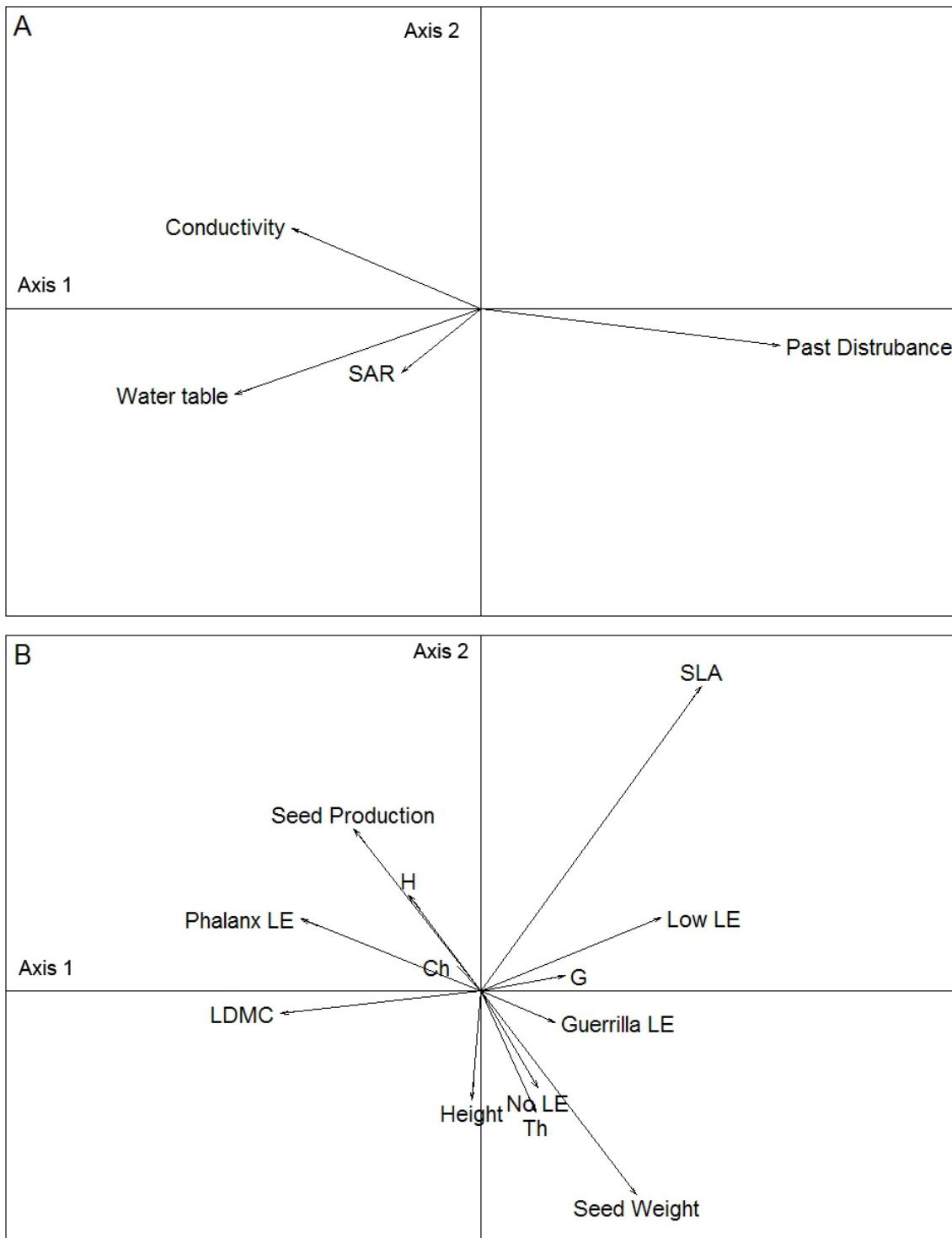
Table 1. Water table, soil and land use characteristics of the study sites. Water table and soil variables are characterized by mean and standard deviation values. Site codes: Ma, Magarola; Ri, Ricarda; Sa, Sabadell; Re, Reguerons.

Site	Stable sites		Semi-stable sites		
	Ma	Ri	Sa	Re	
Water table	-14.66 ± (cm)	10.93	-14.42 ± 14.4	-38.86 ± 10.02	-49.04 ± 9.07
Max.					
conduct.	57425 ± (µS/cm)	35633	33108 ± 12939	37269 ± 21242	28215 ± 11777
Sodium					
Adsorption					
Rate	36.07 ± 2.52 13.24 ±	33.76 ± 3.12	40.26 ± 0.95	21.88 ± 0.84	
orgC/N	15.11	13.56 ± 10.85	8.82 ± 27.03	9.36 ± 7.84	
Land use in 1956	Marshland	Marshland	Cropland/pasture	Cropland/pasture	
Land use in 2012	Marshland	Marshland	Marshland	Marshland	

Table 2. Pearson correlations between traits and environmental variables obtained through permutation models 2 and 4 detailed in Dray & Legendre (2008). (* p < 0.05). Variable and trait codes: Sar, sodium adsorption rate; SLA, specific leaf area; LDMC, leaf dry mass content; Ch, chamaephyte life form; H, hemicryptophyte life form; G, geophyte life form; Th; therophyte life form.

	Past disturbance	Max. conduct.	Water table	SAR
Plant height	0.004	-0.036	0.06	0.021
LDMC	-0.265*	0.162	0.233	0.075
SLA	0.238	-0.087	-0.358*	-0.181*
Seed production	-0.176	0.18	0.109	-0.04
Seed weight	0.204	-0.254*	-0.09	-0.04
Life form expansion	Ch	-0.055	0.017	-0.003
	H	-0.127	0.075	0.05
	G	0.133	-0.036	-0.103
	Th	0.113	-0.07	-0.001
	No	0.11	-0.066	-0.01
	Low	0.211	-0.14	-0.243
	Phalanx	0.149	-0.04	-0.03
	Guerrilla	-0.28*	0.156	-0.158
				-0.048

Figure 1. Position of the environmental variables (A) and traits (B) in the space defined by the first two RLQ axes. Variable codes: Sar, sodium adsorption rate; SLA, specific leaf area; LDMC, leaf dry mass content. Trait codes: Ch, chamaephyte life form; H, hemicryptophyte life form; G, geophyte life form; Th; therophyte life form; LE; lateral expansion capacity.



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Appendix S1. Supplementary information on the phylogeny construction.

Tree topology was constructed using the topology of Angiosperm Phylogeny Group classification (Group 2009) as the basic structure. For families with more than one species we completed this basic tree using the following studies: for Amaranthaceae we used Kadereit et al. (2003, 2010, 2006) and Kapralov et al. (2006); resolution of Apiaceae followed Downie et al. (2000); the general phylogenetic tree of Asteraceae followed Torices (2010); Sonchus genus followed Kim et al. (2007); Aster genus followed Li et al. (2012); Juncaceae followed Drábková & Vlcek (2009) and Roalson (2005); Poaceae followed Bouchenak-Khelladi et al. (2010); for the Bromus phylogeny we used Saarela et al. (2007); and Cyperaceae were assessed according to Musaya et al. (2009).

We used the timetree database (Hedges et al. 2006) (www.timetree.org) to obtain the molecular age of 20 nodes dated in recently published studies. Most of ages came from the study of Arakaki et al (2011), for more details see Table 1-1 and in Figure 2-1, where nodes, their age and references are shown. We used the bladj algorithm to estimate the tree branch lengths of non-dated tree fragments. Tree construction and dating were performed using the program Phylocom v. 4.2 (Webb et al. 2008).

To test for the presence of phylogenetic bias we used the test developed by Pavoine et al. (2010). To do so we built a matrix of pairwise phylogenetic distances among species using the square root of the sum of branch lengths along the shortest path that connects species, which provides Euclidean distances (Pavoine et al. 2010). We also constructed matrices of pairwise trait distances among species, trait by trait, and also pooled together. Euclidean distances were applied on both dummy-transformed nominal and quantitative traits. We then applied the skewness with 999 Monte Carlo simulations for each matrix. This test was done using R (R Development Core Team, 2012) and the R scripts provided by Pavoine et al.(2010).

This methodology decomposes trait diversity among the nodes of a classification. The value attributed to a node is a function of the trait diversity among the clades descending from it. The objective is to highlight main among-clade differences in the trait states of the species that contribute significantly to the total trait diversity of the

species considered. Species traits show a phylogenetic bias if trait diversity is biased to the root or to the tip of the phylogenetic tree.

Only seed weight showed clear skewness ($p < 0.05$) towards the root of the phylogenetic tree, meaning that the maximum diversity of this trait is found in the first tree dichotomies. None of the remaining traits or all traits tested together showed any significant skewness towards the root or the tips of the phylogenetic tree ($p > 0.05$) (Table S1-2).

Table S1-1. Estimated age and source for the 20 dated nodes.

Node	Estimated age (Mya)	Reference
1	134.1	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
2	119.7	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
3	112.5	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
4	110.6	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
5	86.5	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
6	77.2	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
7	32	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
8	27.5	(Kim et al. 2005)
9	24.4	(Liu et al. 2002)
10	75.4	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
11	71	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
12	70	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
13	78	(Kadereit et al. 2003)
14	65	(Bremer et al. 2004)
15	102.7	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
16	113	(Janssen et al. 2004)
17	88	(Janssen et al. 2004)
18	31.6	(Arakaki et al. 2011)
19	17.9	(Inda et al. 2008)
20	15.4	(Inda et al. 2008)

Figure S1-1. Phylogenetic tree of the plant species. Dated nodes are numbered in the tree and their estimated ages are given in Table S1-1.

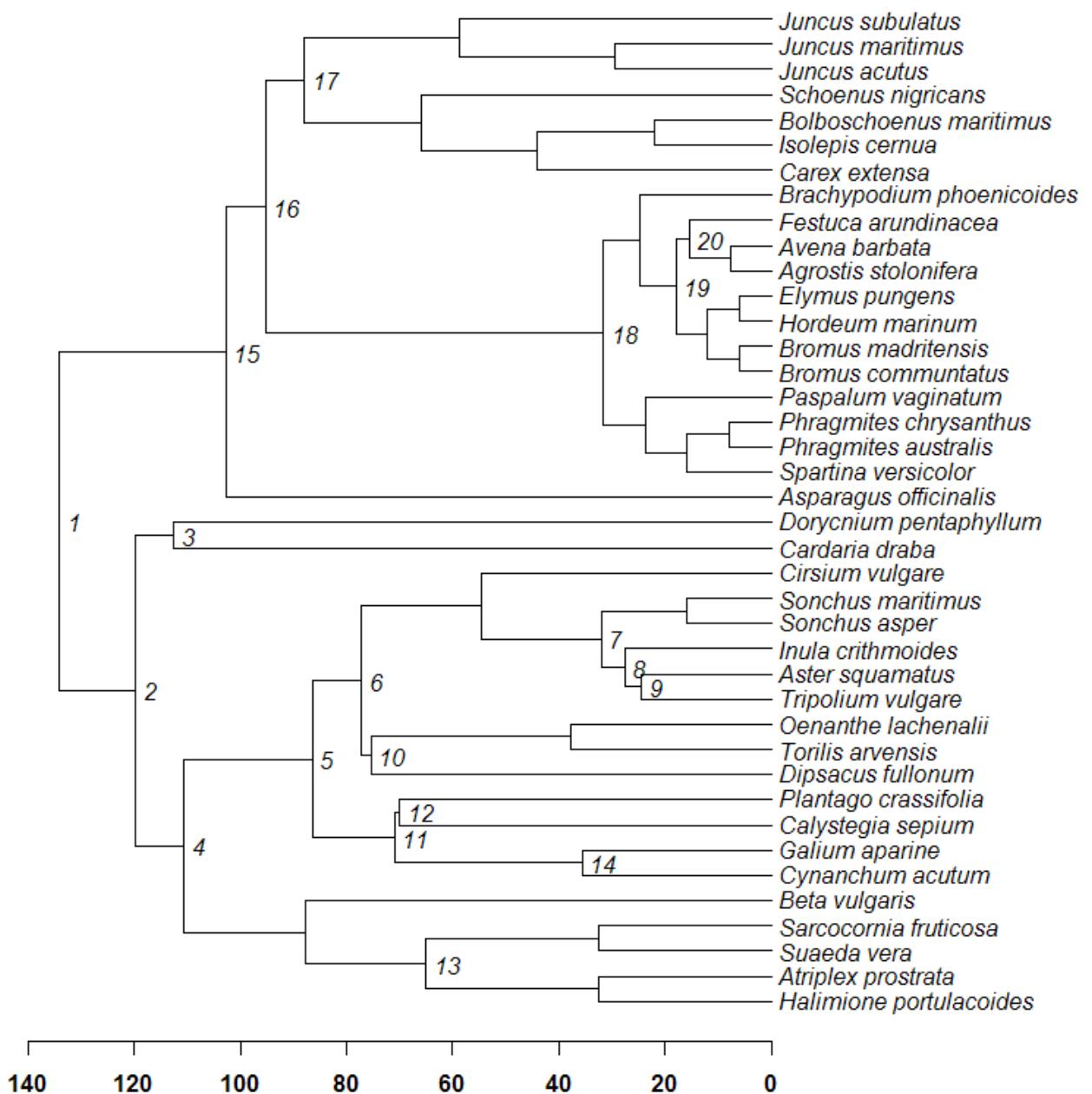


Table S1-2. Results of Skewness test of trait diversity towards the root or the tips of the phylogenetic tree constructed with all species found in relevés. Test was performed using a MonteCarlo permutation procedure (* p<0.05).

	Skewed towards	
	Root	Tips
All traits	0.366	0.621
Plant height	0.521	0.506
LDMC	0.483	0.536
SLA	0.759	0.268
Seed production	0.073	0.906
Seed weight	0.048*	0.957
Life form	0.571	0.41
Lateral expansion	0.881	0.21

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Appendix 2. Plant traits

Table 2-1. Compilation of values or states of plant traits for all species treated. Taxonomy follows Bolòs et al. (2005) with a few exceptions. For quantitative traits all values come from our own measurements, except those marked with: * (Kleyer et al. 2008); [®] (Sera et al. 2004); + (Kew 2008)). Life form and lateral expansion come from Bolòs et al. (2005) with some modifications (e.g. Phanerophytes were merged together with Chamaephytes) and our own observations. Units used are: Plant height in cm; Leaf Dry Mass Content (LDMC) in mg/g; Specific Leaf Area (SLA) in mm²/mg of dry weight; Seed production in seeds/m²; Seed weight in g per 1,000 seeds.

Taxon	Plant height	LDMC	SLA	Seed production	Seed weight	Life form	Lateral expansion
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	44.3	359.68	22.78	577,688	0.06 ⁺	H	Phalanx
<i>Asparagus officinalis</i>	142.5	280.26*	10.95*	1,166	26.12 ⁺	G	Low
<i>Aster squamatus</i>	99.1	172.23	21.49	285,757	0.1 ⁺	Ch	No
<i>Atriplex portulacoides</i>	43.5	176.46	13.49	155,533	1.31 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Avena barbata</i>	80	237.66*	24.96*	9,917	9.27 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Beta vulgaris</i>	86.3	88.97	17.04	218,080	15.4 ⁺	H	Low
<i>Bolboschoenus maritimus</i>	87.2	275.10	12.46	9,898	2.3 ⁺	G	Phalanx
<i>Brachypodium phoenicoides</i>	51.2	405.63	12.87	3,820	3.2 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Bromus commutatus</i>	70	235*	25.48*	63,150	4.64 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Bromus madritensis</i>	28	173.94*	35.64*	87,891	3.3 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Calystegia sepium</i>	281	150.84	33.84	158	25.58 ⁺	G	Low
<i>Cardaria draba</i>	37.6	161.67*	20.5*	209,851	2.04 ⁺	H	Low
<i>Carex extensa</i>	59.8	257.96	12.35	45,878	1.15 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	116.8	120.67*	17.16*	5,704	2.91 ⁺	H	Low
<i>Cynanchum acutum</i>	281	177.19	23.76	567	10.41 ⁺	G	Low
<i>Dipsacus fullonum</i>	158.8	167*	22.3*	291,897	2.26 ⁺	H	No
<i>Dorycnium pentaphyllum</i>	73.7	247.86	14.79	28,143	2.8 ⁺	Ch	No
<i>Elymus pungens</i>	80.6	437.03	8.51	26,057	4.84 ⁺	H	Phalanx
<i>Festuca arundinacea</i>	42.4	254.56	18.55	36,869	2.4 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Galium aparine</i>	95.7	140*	34.68*	25,180 [®]	8.9 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Halimione portulacoides</i>	28.9	117.32	9.89	16,646	3.03 ⁺	Ch	Guerrilla

<i>Hordeum marinum</i>	11.6	324.68	31.6	67,800	2.16	Th	No
<i>Inula crithmoides</i>	74.7	136.73	26.74	250,929	0.37 ⁺	Ch	No
<i>Isolepis cernua</i>	6	143.86	20.41	600,000	0.13 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Juncus acutus</i>	162.7	381.41	2.63	630,601	0.08 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Juncus maritimus</i>	115.5	408.51	3.88	663,627	0.03 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Juncus subulatus</i>	97.2	286.70	10.34	8,060,467	0.02 ⁺	G	Guerrilla
<i>Oenanthe lachenalii</i>	106	206.11	8.18	108,699	0.9 ⁺	H	Low
<i>Paspalum vaginatum</i>	24.4	248.07	23.59	142,626	0.16	Ch	Phalanx
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>australis</i>	223	446.66	13.12	47,707	0.11	G	Phalanx
<i>Phragmites australis</i> subsp. <i>chrysanthus</i>	281	413.35	10.95	42,643	0.04	G	Phalanx
<i>Platago crassifolia</i>	9.2	152.34	6.51	16,371	0.26	H	Low
<i>Sarcocornia fruticosa</i>	90	131.21	12.10	532,374	0.14	Ch	No
<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>	82.5	431.54	5.25	2,396	0.6 ⁺	H	Guerrilla
<i>Sonchus asper</i>	70.5	123.67*	24.97*	221,593	0.28 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Sonchus maritimus</i>	91.6	103.82	21.65	17,369	0.33	H	Low
<i>Spartina versicolor</i>	116.4	329.87	8.54	1.4	0.5	Ch	Phalanx
<i>Suaeda vera</i>	92.4	149.50	8.53	120,703	0.33	Ch	No
<i>Torilis arvensis</i>	35.5	267.44	20.29	53,507	2.1 ⁺	Th	No
<i>Tripolium vulgare</i>	93.5	124.34	10.39	90,569	0.43 ⁺	Th	No

Capitol 4

Interactions between transplants of *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus* in Mediterranean coastal marshes: the modulating role of environmental gradients

Interaccions entre transplants de *Phragmites australis* i *Juncus acutus* en una maresma costanera mediterrània: el rol modulador dels gradients ambientals

Efrem Batriu, Joan Pino & Josep M. Ninot

Sotmès a Aquatic Botany

Resum:

En aquest treball hem investigat les interaccions entre dues espècies que viuen a les maresmes costaneres (*Phragmites australis* i *Juncus acutus*) al llarg de tres gradients ambientals representats per combinacions de salinitat, nivell d'aigua freàtica i textura del sòl. Per fer-ho hem realitzat un experiment de trasplants emprant un disseny en sèries de reemplaçament. El nostre principal objectiu era explorar les relacions de facilitació en situacions de poc estrès abiótic, i també clarificar el paper de les interaccions competitives en la distribució de les espècies a les maresmes costaneres micromareals. Per mesurar l'efecte de les interaccions, al final de l'experiment hem mesurat la mortalitat i la biomassa aèria de cada espècie. La resposta d'aquestes variables al gradients naturals i al tractament de competència els vam analitzar usant models mixos lineals generalitzats. Segons els resultats obtinguts, la mortalitat d'ambdues espècies era deguda totalment als gradients naturals. Concretament, la salinitat alta i els sòls rics en argiles augmentaren la mortalitat d'ambdues espècies, mentre que el nivell d'aigua freàtica alt incrementà la supervivència de *P. australis*. El creixement d'ambdues espècies (resumit en la variable biomassa aèria) estava controlat pels gradients naturals i també per les relacions interespecífiques. Segons els models que vam obtenir, quant ambdues plantes creixen en ambients on l'aigua freàtica és poc salina i profunda, totes dues s'interfereixen mútuament, però *J. acutus* té un lleuger avantatge competitiu sobre *P. australis*. Quant l'aigua freàtica es troba a nivells superficials i no és salina *P. australis* pot excloure *J. acutus*, mentre que quan l'aigua és superficial però salina *J. acutus* pot excloure *P. australis*. Entre aquestes dues situacions, totes dues espècies experimenten facilitació, ja que creixen millor en barreges interespecífiques. De totes maneres, en gran part d'aquestes situacions de facilitació *P. australis* té un lleuger avantatge competitiu sobre *J. acutus*. El nostre estudi aporta les primeres evidències de facilitació en situacions de poc estrès abiótic en maresmes costaneres. Comparant les diferències entre les prediccions dels nostre model i la distribució actual de les espècies, podem concloure que les relacions competitives són importants però no són totalment responsables de la distribució d'aquestes espècies. Això posa de manifest la importància d'altres factors com l'efecte fundador o d'herbivorisme pretèrit.

Interactions between transplants of *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus* in Mediterranean coastal marshes: the modulating role of environmental gradients

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Abstract

Plant interactions between two coastal marsh plants (*Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus*) were investigated along three natural gradients of various combinations of salinity, water table and soil texture, using a replacement series design of field transplants. Our aim was to explore the facilitation effect of mild stress and to clarify the role of competitive interactions on species distribution in microtidal coastal marshes. Mortality and relative yield index of aerial biomass were determined to assess the outcome of interactions. The responses of these variables to the natural gradients and to a competition experiment were analyzed with Generalized Linear Mixed Models. Mortality was entirely driven by natural gradients. Specifically, higher salinity and soil clay contents increased mortality in both species, whereas high water table increased survival only in *P. australis*. Growth was controlled by plant interactions and by natural gradients. According to the model where soil is neither waterlogged nor saline, species experience mutual interference but *J. acutus* has competitive advantage over *P. australis*. Moreover, *P. australis* can exclude *J. acutus* in waterlogged and non saline conditions, whereas *J. acutus* can exclude *P. australis* in waterlogged and saline conditions. Between these two situations, both species shows facilitation because they perform better in intergeneric mixtures, having *P. australis* has some competitive advantage over *J. acutus*. This is the first evidence of mild stress facilitation in coastal marshes.

Differences between model predictions and actual field distribution patterns of both species show that competitive interactions are not fully responsible for plant distribution in microtidal coastal marshes, and highlight the role of other factors such as past herbivory or founder effect.

Keywords

Stress Gradient Hypothesis, Coastal Marshes, Competition, Facilitation, Salinity, Waterlogging

1. Introduction

Although interactions among plants are a dominant driver of the dynamics and structure of natural plant populations and communities (Malkinson & Tielbörger, 2010) there is a lack of knowledge about how they change with biotic or abiotic factors (Agrawal et al., 2007). Based on the classical Gause's competitive exclusion principle, ecological research has traditionally focused on negative interactions. However, since the stress gradient hypothesis (hereafter SGH) was formulated(Bertness & Callaway, 1994), there has been a growing acknowledgement of the importance of facilitative interactions. This hypothesis suggests that competition is less intense and plant-plant interaction becomes facilitative in communities growing under high abiotic stress or high herbivory pressure. Several empirical studies carried out in stressful environments such as coastal marshes (Bertness & Ewanchuk, 2002), alpine areas (Callaway et al., 2002), dry calcareous grasslands (Liancourt et al., 2005) or arid steppes (Pugnaire & Luque, 2001) support the SGH. However, studies carried out in arid environments indicate that facilitative interactions cease at the limits of the stress gradients (Maestre et al., 2006). This controversy lead to different theoretical reformulations of the SGH (Holmgren & Scheffer, 2010; Maestre et al., 2009; Malkinson & Tielbörger, 2010) that account for this effect.

Plant communities in coastal marshes are commonly species-poor and dominated by a single or a few species (Adam, 1993; Day et al., 1988; Weiher & Keddy, 1995). It is generally agreed that soil salinity and moisture are the main environmental gradients that condition species distribution in these habitats (Adam, 1993). Thus, coastal marshes provide a simplified system to study the importance of plant interactions. The first community ecologists studying macrotidal coastal marshes focused on the role of competitive interactions as drivers of species distribution (Bertness, 1991; Pennings & Callaway, 1992; Snow & Vince, 1984). The emerging paradigm includes a clear niche segregation along environmental gradients, where the most competitive plants occupy the least stressful zone of the coastal marsh and

displace the least competitive plants to more stressful zones (Pennings et al., 2005). This paradigm agrees with Grime's hypothesis about the inverse relationship between competitive ability and stress tolerance. Moreover, since coastal marshes are stressful habitats for plant life, positive interactions according to the SGH were early detected there (Bertness et al., 1994). After specific research has built up, it has been proved that facilitation determines secondary succession (Castellanos et al., 1994), plant diversity (Bertness et al., 1994) and distribution of non dominant plants (Crain, 2008; He et al., 2011) in macrotidal coastal marshes. In contrast, little is known on the effect of competitive exclusion and SGH in the case of irregularly flooded or microtidal coastal marshes. In these marshes, waterlogging patterns are primarily driven by variations in rainfall and wind direction, therefore salinity and water table level are not easily predictable (Curcó et al., 2002).

This study has the double aim to improve the present SGH and to clarify to which extent the competitive exclusion paradigm may be applied to Mediterranean coastal marshes. According to Brooker et al.(2008) and Malkinson & Tielbörger(2010), present studies dealing with the SGH must account for several co-occurring stress factors and several levels within each stress factor, and they need to evaluate the effect of plant interactions on survival (Brooker et al., 2008). To fulfill these requirements, we have examined the effect of plant interactions on survival and growth of two species, *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus*, planted along three natural gradients of various combinations of salinity, water table depth and soil texture. We used a new methodological approach suggested by Williams & McCarthy (2001), based on a replacement series design within multivariate gradients.

Both *J. acutus* and *P. australis* form vast monospecific stands in coastal marshes of the Llobregat delta and share a substantial part of their realized niche(Batriu et al., 2011). However, *J. acutus* can thrive better under dry and/or saline conditions than *P. australis*, whereas the latter can tolerate waterlogging better than the former. In accordance with these niche differences,we expected that the outcome of interactions along salinity and waterlogging gradients would be as follows: in dry and/or saline situations, *J. acutus* would outcompete *P. australis*, whereas in wet, non saline situations *P. australis* would outcompete *J. acutus*. Soils with a high clay content can be more stressful for plants because they tend to increase salinity and waterlogging.

Therefore we expected that: under similar salinity levels, *J. acutus* would outcompete *P. australis* in clayish soils; whereas under similar high water table levels, *P. australis* would outcompete *J. acutus* in clayish soils. Finally, according to the present SGH reviews by Malkinson & Tielbörger (2010) and Holmgren & Scheffer (2010), we expected that facilitation interactions, if they occurred, would be relevant under mild stress situations (mild salinity stress in our case) and would cease under the most stressful conditions (high salinity in our case).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study site

The study was performed in the delta of the Llobregat River, a microtidal wetland area of 7000 ha in the Barcelona metropolitan area. The climate is typically Mediterranean with maritime influence, showing a mean annual rainfall of 640 mm with minimum peaks in summer and winter, and a mean annual temperature of 15.5 °C with hot summers and mild winters (data obtained from the International Airport of Barcelona, located in the delta, for the 1971-2000 period).

The Llobregat delta microtidal system is formed by a complex mosaic of coastal marsh communities that are not arranged in the typical zonation of macrotidal systems due to the lack of strong tidal waterlogging gradient. Instead, the overall communities distribution is controlled by a combination of local factors such as topography and salinity. Moreover, the Llobregat delta has undergone major land transformations over the last 50 years, with an overall expansion of urban and industrial areas together and abandonment of former agricultural areas. Part of these abandoned fields experienced spontaneous restoration, and forms the present marsh mosaic. The most abundant coastal marsh plant communities are reedbeds (*Phragmites australis*), rushbeds (*Juncion maritimi*), and halophytic scrublands (*Arthrocnemion fruticosi*).

2.2. Species

Reed (*P. australis* s.l.) is a cosmopolitan perennial rhizomatous grass able to grow in a wide range of ecological conditions (Romero et al., 1999) and usually forming almost monospecific stands. This is mostly due to its highly competitive performance over other marsh plants, as observed in North America coastal marshes, where reed stands are aggressively expanding and replacing other marsh communities (Chambers et al., 1999; Minchinton et al., 2006). Lateral clonal growth is the main competitive mechanism of reed, which creates a dense canopy and a long, branched rhizome that prevents establishment of other marsh plants. Moreover, it modifies its habitat by increasing the accumulation of plant litter and altering the physico-chemical conditions of soil (Meyerson et al., 2000; Minchinton et al., 2006). *Juncus acutus* is a perennial tussock rush with a broad geographic distribution that is able to grow in a wide range of ecologic conditions within coastal marshes. Moreover it has an invasive behavior in Australia, where it is able to exclude other native *Juncus* species (Greenwood & MacFarlane, 2009). Thus, both species exhibit a noticeable capacity to outcompete other co-occurring species.

2.3. Experimental design

We performed a field competition experiment based on replacement series (de Wit, 1960), using 20 different locations that represented a complex natural gradient of waterlogging, salinity and soil texture (Fig. 1). In each experimental square of 50 cm x 50 cm, we planted six plant cuttings (short segments of rhizome with developing leaves), in a regular pattern. The replacement series consisted in one pure square per species, and three squares with 33%, 50% and 66% proportions of each one. In each location there were five competition treatments (two squares with only one of each species, and three squares with both species) and 30 plants (15 of each species).

The locations were selected from a data set of 45 natural marsh stands in the Llobregat delta from which some edaphic parameters from the upper 20 cm were known (texture, percentage of organic matter, etc.), as well as the hydrologic conditions over the previous three years (conductivity and level of water table) (for more information see Batriu et al., 2011). From this data set, we selected 10 locations in order to obtain a

wide gradient of three environmental variables: (i) mean water table level, (ii) mean conductivity of the water table, and (iii) soil texture. Ten further 10 locations were randomly selected from the remaining locations. Each location was equipped with a buried vertical PVC pipe (1.5 m long) in order to monitor the water table level during the experiment.

During spring of 2007 we cut off all the vegetation within a 1.5m radius circle around the pipe, in each location. Within each square, all the rhizomes and regenerative roots from the top 25cm of soil were removed. Where herbivory was expectable (from visual evidences of grazed vegetation, excrements, etc.) we fenced the location with an open top iron cage. The five experimental squares for the replacement series were set within 1m radius circle centered in the monitoring pipe.

In winter 2007, approximately 600 young rhizome segments of each species were collected from a mesohaline Llobregat delta marsh. We obtained 4-8 cm long rhizome segments of *P. australis* each with two buds from which new shoots could emerge and originate a new plant. *Juncus acutus* rhizome segments were 20 - 24 cm long, each with two buds and two photosynthetic stems. These rhizome fragments were grown in pots with standard organic substrate in a greenhouse, during spring 2007. In June 2007, 300 living plants of each species were randomly selected and transferred to the 20 experimental locations. We watered the plants once a week for one month, to avoid the transplant shock. During this period, plants showing signs of transplant shock were replaced with plants from the greenhouse.

Every two months, we monitored the water table level and conductivity in each location, from August 2007 to October 2008. For conductivity measurements, a WTW TetraCond 325 sensor was used. During this period, each experimental square was kept clean of plants other than those transplanted, and the surrounding vegetation was periodically cut in order to prevent light reduction. In October 2008 both mortality and growth were assessed. To assess growth all the aboveground plant biomass was collected and oven-dried at 60 °C until constant weight. The belowground biomass was not collected due to technical difficulties in root and rhizome extraction in the field, as discussed by Cahill (2002).

The clay content of the 20 cm top soil (hereafter clay) was obtained from Batriu et al. (2011) data, assuming that it does not change over short periods of time. Both mean water table level (hereafter water table) and mean water table conductivity (hereafter conductivity) were calculated using the current monitoring data set (from August of 2007 to October of 2008). Mortality of plants was calculated as the proportion of dead individuals at the end of the study relative to the planted individuals, in each treatment. To evaluate growth, dry biomass was used as the main variable.

2.4. Statistical analyses

The effects of the environmental gradients and the competition treatment on mortality and dry aboveground biomass of transplanted individuals were tested separately. In both cases we used a GLMM (Generalized Linear Mixed Model) because the data were nested, with 20 sampling points within five competition treatments. Environmental variables (water table, conductivity and clay) and competition (expressed as competition treatment proportions 0.33, 0.5, 0.66 and 1) were used as explanatory variables, whereas location was used as a random variable. Mortality data were processed as a contingency table and therefore a binomial error distribution was used. Models were simplified using a manual stepwise backward selection, and then were compared using a likelihood ratio test, as Crawley (2007) recommended. For each variable in the model, *p* values were obtained comparing the likelihood ratio with and without the given variable.

To test the effects of gradients and competition treatment on dry biomass we used a Relative Yield Index (hereafter RY). According to Williams & McCarthy(2001), RY is a very versatile index, it is meaningful, and it can be plotted on a RY space to illustrate the outcome of competitive interactions. To calculate RY we included only those locations where at least one individual from each plant competition treatment remained alive at the end of experiment (n=14)., Except for the fact that we used dry biomass per living individual because mortality was assessed independently, RY was calculated following Williams& McCarthy(2001), as expressed below:

$$Y_{alive} = Y_{total}/N_{alive}$$

$$RY = Y_{alive\ mix}/Y_{alive\ mono}$$

Y = Yield

Y_{alive} = Yield per living individual

N_{alive} = Number of living individuals per competition treatment

Y_{total} = Yield per competition treatment

$Y_{alive\ mix}$ = Yield per living individual in mixture competition treatment

$Y_{alive\ mono}$ = Yield per living individual in monoculture competition treatment

RY = Relative Yield Index

For species A competing with species B , $RY_A > 1$ means that intraspecific competition is stronger than interspecific competition, $RY_A = 1$ means that intraspecific competition equals interspecific competition, and $RY_A < 1$ means that intraspecific competition is weaker than interspecific competition. According to Williams& McCarthy (2001), the combination of the indexes of species A and B determines the outcome of interactions as follows: if $RY_A < 1$ and $RY_B > 1$, then species A is competitively suppressed; if $RY_A > 1$ and $RY_B < 1$, then species B is competitively suppressed; where $RY_A < 1$ and $RY_B < 1$, both species are suppressed in a mixture crop; and if $RY_A > 1$ and $RY_B > 1$, then both species experience facilitation, as they perform better in mixture plots.

RY were assessed using GLMM simplified as previously mentioned, but using a Gaussian error distribution. Significance of t value of each variable was obtained through the highest proportion density (HPD) confidence intervals, which in turn were obtained using a Markov Chain Monte Carlo sampling of each model. To calculate the thresholds between $RY < 1$ and $RY > 1$, that is, the point where intraspecific competition exceeds interspecific competition, we used the model predictions. All the statistical analyses were performed using R 2.4.1 (R Development Core Team, 2012). To perform GLMM, Markov Chain MonteCarlo and HPD intervals, we used the package lme4 version 0.99375-31 (Bates et al., 2009).

3. Results

The experiment showed no effect of the competition treatments on the survival of either *J. acutus* or *P. australis*. In both species mortality increased with increasing conductivity and soil clay content ($p<0.025$), and was significantly affected ($p<0.025$) by the interaction of conductivity and water table (table 1). As a consequence, the negative effects of conductivity increased dramatically with increasing water table or soil clay content (fig 2). The difference between the *J. acutus* and *P. australis* mortality models was the effect of water table. While in *P. australis* an increase in water table level significantly ($p<0.025$) reduced mortality, in *J. acutus* this effect was not significant ($p>0.05$; table 1).

RY of *J. acutus* was modulated by conductivity and water table gradients. Conductivity had a positive significant effect ($p<0.05$) on RY. The effect of water table was not significant, while the interaction of water table and conductivity was significant ($p<0.05$; table 2). This means that the combination of conductivity and water table determines the threshold between $RY<1$ and $RY>1$, that is, the point where intraspecific competition exceeds interspecific competition. According to the model predictions, when water table is less than 40 cm deep, conductivity values higher than 10,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ determine a change from $RY<1$ to $RY>1$ (fig 3). With a water table deeper than 50 cm, RY remains < 1 regardless of conductivity. No significant effects of competition were detected, and the initial proportion of *J. acutus* planted did not affect the outcome of competition. Clay content had no significant effect on RY of *J. acutus*.

The model for *P. australis* RY was a little more complex than for *J. acutus* (table 2). RY of *P. australis* was significantly ($p<0.001$) affected by water table. Conductivity had not a significant negative effect, while its interaction with water table was significant ($p<0.0001$). Moreover, competition had a significant effect ($p<0.025$) as well as the interaction of this factor with conductivity ($p<0.001$). According to the model predictions, when the water table is more than 30 cm deep and conductivity is higher than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ there is a shift from $RY>1$ to $RY<1$. When the water table is deeper than 30 cm, the effect of the conductivity threshold around 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ is the

opposite, and RY changes from <1 to >1. Competition, i.e. *P. australis* proportion, had a positive significant effect ($p<0.05$) on RY. The interaction of competition and conductivity also affected the RY of *P. australis* significantly ($p<0.001$). Hence, when conductivity is higher than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ an increase in *P. australis* proportion causes an increase in RY. In contrast, when conductivity is lower than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ an increase in *P. australis* proportion has the opposite effect. Clay content did not significant affect the RY of *P. australis*.

In our case, the predicted thresholds where RY changes from <1 to >1 of both species can be plotted against the conductivity and water table (fig. 3) to highlight the outcome of their interactions along these two environmental gradients. When water table is high (less than 30 cm deep) there are three possible situations, depending on conductivity. If water conductivity is lower than 8,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$, *J. acutus* is competitively suppressed by *P. australis*. If conductivity is between 8,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ and 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$, facilitation *sensu* Williams & McCarthy (2001) occurs since both species have $\text{RY}>1$ (i.e. both are subject to less interspecific than to intraspecific competition). However it is important to note that in most part of this facilitative coexistence zone *P. australis* has competitive advantage because its RY higher advantage than those of *J. acutus*. Where conductivity is higher than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$, *P. australis* is competitively suppressed by *J. acutus*. With deeper water table (more than 30 cm deep) there are three possible situations. If conductivity is lower than 10,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$, both species experience mutual interference and coexistence occurs because they cannot exclude each other. In this zone of mutual interference *J. acutus* has competitive advantage over *P. australis* because its RY higher. Where conductivity is greater than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ and water table is between 30 cm and 50 cm of depth, facilitative coexistence occurs again and in most part of this zone *P. australis* has competitive advantage. If conductivity is higher than 15,000 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ and water table is deeper (below 50 cm) *J. acutus* is competitively suppressed by *P. australis*.

4. Discussion

4.1. Plant interactions

Although plant interactions may largely affect species survival, mortality is rarely measured in experimental studies (Aarssen & Keogh, 2002). Moreover, in coastal marshes, studies dealing with this issue focus on nurse effect (Castellanos et al., 1994; Egerova et al., 2003). When species used have the same size, studies focus on annual plants (Aarssen & Keogh, 2002) and results coming from this kind of studies suggest that positive neighbor effects may be more evident on survival than on growth (Schiffers & Tielbörger, 2006). However, our study revealed that mortality of *J. acutus* and *P. australis* was entirely driven by natural gradients.

Although tolerance of *P. australis* to salinity varies greatly at local and regional scales throughout the world (Lissner & Schierup, 1997), negative effects of salinity on reed growth, seedling survival, and seed germination are largely documented (Burdick et al., 2001; Greenwood et al., 2006; Hootsmans & Wiegman, 1998). Recent works show that *J. acutus* does not tolerate salinity (Greenwood et al., 2009; Martinez-Sanchez et al., 2006), although its capacity to overcome saline stress exceeds that of most *P. australis* clones (Batriu et al., 2011). Accordingly, we expected that *J. acutus* would outcompete *P. australis* under high water conductivity, independently of the water table level. However, in our study this effect was only true with high water table, since with a deep saline water table, *P. australis* outcompeted *J. acutus*, independently of soil texture. This was surprising because it contradicted our initial expectations. It is important to understand that conductivity is a very good surrogate for rhizosphere salinity only when the water table is high. With a low water table, salinity of the rhizosphere is controlled by salt ascent and leaching, which in turn depend on soil texture. We hypothesize that deviation from our expectation was due to different root architectures. *Phragmites australis* forms long lateral rhizomes and sparse root systems, whereas *J. acutus* forms tussocks, mostly of shortly branched rhizomes and a set of lateral adventitious roots. Although this has not been properly checked with field measurements, *J. acutus* roots are expected to penetrate deeper in the soil than those of *P. australis*. Therefore when water is depth and saline, root architecture will confer some competitive advantage to *P. australis*.

Between the zones where both species can exclude each other, there are zones where both species performs better in mixtures, although *P. australis* has some competitive advantage over *J. acutus*. According Williams & McCarthy (2001) these kinds of situation correspond to a facilitation process. Results from replacement series in plant competition studies reflect both interspecific and intraspecific interactions, and it is not possible to determine the specific magnitude of each of them (Jolliffe, 2000), however they can be successfully used to explore facilitative and competitive interactions (i.e. Greenwood & MacFarlane, 2009). Wang et al. (2006) reported that *Spartina alterniflora* enhances *P. australis* performance under high salinity conditions, and they argued that its capacity to selectively absorb salt by roots might reduce the interstitial salinity of the rhizosphere of *P. australis*. In our case, *J. acutus* is also known to absorb salt through the roots (Boscaiu et al., 2007). We think that, under moderate salinity stress, *J. acutus* also enhances the environmental conditions for *P. australis*.

Concerning the water table gradient the prediction that the common reed would competitively suppress *J. acutus* under low saline waterlogging conditions was corroborated. We also expected that *J. acutus* would outcompete *P. australis* when water table was low. Although in this situations *J. acutus* has competitive advantage over *P. australis*, results point that is not able to suppress *P. asutralis*. Because *J. acutus* is a slow growing species than common reed and previous information indicates that *J. acutus* is less sensitive to drought than *P. australis* (Batriu et al., 2011) it is feasible to think that with more time of experimentation *J. acutus* would show the expected results. However we cannot neglect that common reed clones can tolerate dry conditions as well as we initially expected.

Some greenhouse studies have shown that soil texture can affect the competition between coastal marsh species (Huckle et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2006). But according to Barbour et al. (1998),experimental results obtained under highly controlled greenhouse conditions are often difficult to reproduce in the field. Properties of substrates used in greenhouses experiments are tightly controlled, while natural soils are complex systems with properties that are mutually correlated and often affected by historical factors. In our case, there is a negative correlation between soil clay content and organic C/N (Batriu et al., 2011) that should be related to the past agricultural use

of some areas in the Llobregat delta. *Phragmites australis* is well adapted to nutrient-rich soils (Nakamura et al., 2010; Romero et al., 1999). *A priori* we expected that the combination between saline conditions and clay abundance in soil would give *J. acutus* a competitive advantage. However, common reed probably tolerates salinity levels above the expected threshold. Our hypothesis is that soil fertility could be causing this unexpected effect. According to Lissner et al.(1999), salinity does not reduce N acquisition in *P. australis*. Bearing in mind that salt tolerance mechanisms of reed are active (Lissner et al., 1999), plants growing on fertile soils could tolerate salinity better than we initially expected. We also found that the combination of waterlogging and clay did not give a clear competitive advantage to *P. australis*, contrarily to our expectations. In coastal marsh plants, a general mechanism to overcome waterlogging is to produce adventitious roots (Colmer & Flowers, 2008). Such roots are well known for the closely related species *J. maritimus* (Schat, 1984) and have been personally observed in *J. acutus* during this study. As far as we know, the physiology and regulation mechanisms of adventitious roots production in *J. acutus* have not been studied in detail, but it might be favored by improved nutrition conditions. This effect would explain our results.

4.2. Plant zonation in microtidal coastal marshes – ecological implication

“Stress” is species-specific and relative, the high extreme of a stress gradient being defined as the harshest environment that a given organism can tolerate or the physical limit of its fundamental niche over a specific study area/habitat type (Bruno et al., 2003; Maestre et al., 2009). In our study, the tolerance limits of salinity stress were reached for *P. australis* and *J. acutus*. According to the mortality patterns of both species, we concluded that they partly share their fundamental niche along this gradient. We detected facilitation process at medium-high salinity stress levels, but not at the extreme level of tolerance of both species. Thus we provide a first evidence of facilitation under mild stress in coastal marshes, since previous studies only revealed facilitation effects under stressful conditions within the fundamental niche of the beneficiary species (Hacker & Bertness, 1999; He et al., 2011). This agrees with our initial predictions based on Malkinson & Tielbörger (2010) and Holmgren & Scheffer (2010) that highlight the effect of mild stress on facilitation.

Plant interactions might vary through life stages of the interacting species (Callaway et al., 1997) and rare events cause abrupt changes on these interactions (Rebele, 2000). Shoot biomass growth is a good proxy for long-term plant performance, although modeling actual communities on the basis of experimental studies measuring shoot growth must be made with caution (Cahill, 2002). However, plant interactions inferred from transplant experiments satisfactorily explain actual vegetation patterns in macrotidal coastal marshes (Pennings et al., 2005), thus reflecting the competitive exclusion paradigm in these habitats. One of the main objectives of this work was to verify to what extent the competitive exclusion paradigm can be applied to microtidal coastal Mediterranean marshes. Using similar gradients and ranges of those used in our study, Batriu et al. (2011) found that both species shared almost half of their realized niches, however in the field coexistence was only detected in 50% of the expected cases. Our model predictions agree with those results by showing that one species can suppress the other in half of their coexisting niches and in most part of the coexistence zones (facilitation or mutual interference) some species has some competitive advantage over the other. Another remarkable outcome is that *P. australis* could exclude *J. acutus* under high saline stress when the water table is high. The field survey and the realized niche approach of both species suggest the opposite pattern (Batriu et al. 2011); in fact, the experimental locations where this occurred were former *J. acutus* stands..These differences highlight the strength of other factors such as past herbivory or founder effect, which may partially explain the occurrence of vast monospecific stands of *P. australis* or *J. acutus* in the Llobregat delta. This result highlights, as those of Costa et al. (2003), that competitive exclusion paradigm (Pennings et al., 2005) is not as important in microtidal coastal marshes as in macrotidal ones. Consequently, additional specific research has to be done to clarify the processes determining plant distribution microtidal systems.

5. Conclusions

We conclude that mortality of *P. australis* and *J. acutus* transplants in the Llobregat delta marshes was mainly linked to environmental gradients. Once settled, plants interacted and the outcome of their relations depended on salinity and waterlogging gradients, but not on soil texture. According to RY predictions, *P. australis* can exclude *J. acutus* in waterlogged, non saline soils, whereas the opposite pattern

occurs in waterlogged, saline soils. Between these two situations, coexistence is possible through facilitation processes, with *J. acutus* being the benefactor of *P. australis*. When soil is neither waterlogged nor saline, both species coexist because they cannot exclude each other. Where the water table is saline but remains deep, *P. australis* can exclude *J. acutus*. Differences between these results and the actual field distribution patterns of both species (Batriu et al. 2011) suggest that factors such as past herbivory or founder effect might contribute to explain the occurrence of vast monospecific stands of *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis* or *Juncus acutus* in the Llobregat delta.

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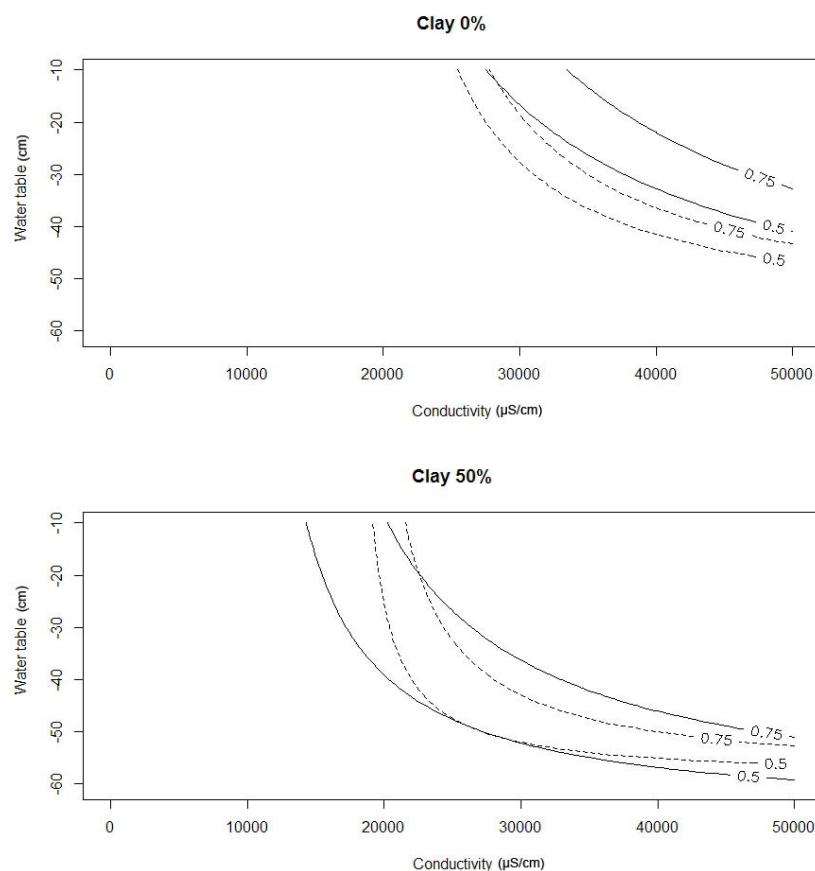


Figure 1. Mean conductivity and water table level in the 20 experimental locations. Circle diameters are proportional to the clay content of the local soil, according to Batriu et al.(2011).

Variable	<i>J. acutus</i> relative yield			<i>P. australis</i> relative yield		
	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Estimate	Std. Error	t value
(Intercept)	0.6845	0.379	1.806 ns	1.82	-1.974	0.922 ns
Cond	0.000051	0.000024	2.12 *	-0.000066	0.000118	-0.562 ns
Wt	-0.004605	0.00887	-0.519 ns	0.1177	0.0395	2.978 **
Prop				4.924	2.061	2.387 *
Cond × Wt	0.000001	0.000001	1.945 *	-0.000008	0.000002	-3.423 **
Cond × Prop				0.000331	0.000098	-3.219 **

Figure2. Mortality thresholds of 0.5 and 0.75, predicted by the mortality models of *J. acutus* (solid lines) and *P. australis* (dashed lines), plotted against conductivity and water table depths and two clay percentages of soil, 0% and 50%.

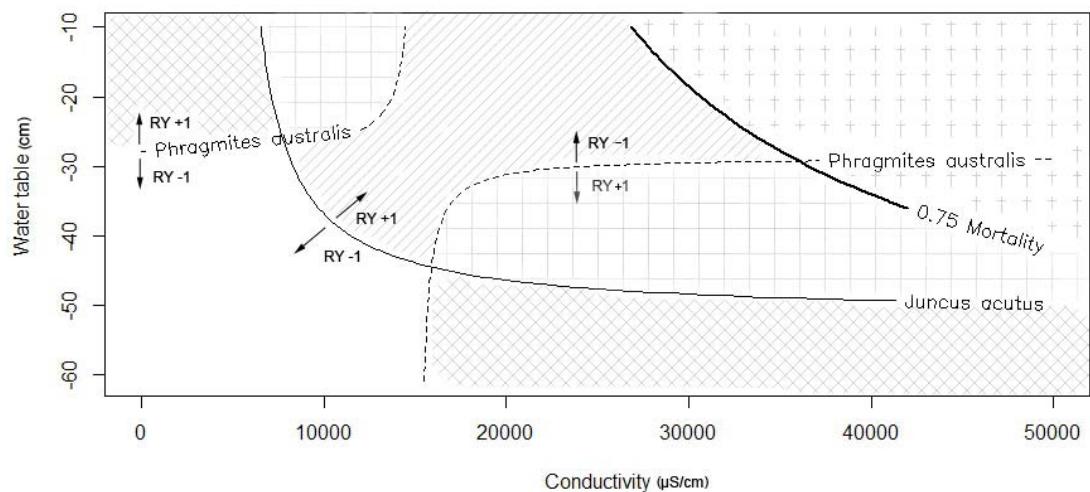


Figure3. Relative yield of *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus acutus* plotted against water table level and conductivity, fitted to the modeled predictions. The solid thin line (*J. acutus*) and the dashed lines (*P.australis*) mark the threshold between $RY>1$ and $RY<1$. The thick black line marks the mortality threshold exceeding 75% for both species, considering a soil with 25% of clay content. Shaded areas indicate the outcome of competitive interactions. Fine diagonal lines, *J. acutus* suppresses *P.australis* (*J. acutus* $RY>1$ and *P. australis* $RY<1$); fine diagonal mesh, *P.australis* suppresses *J. acutus* (*J. acutus* $RY<1$ and *P. australis* $RY>1$); large squared mesh; facilitative coexistence (both species $RY>1$); unshaded area, both species coexist because they cannot exclude each other, (both species $RY<1$) but *J. acutus* have competitive advantage (*J. acutus* $RY > P. australis$ RY), cross marks; mortality exceeds 75% in both species.

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