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PROCEEDINGS MSW 2006

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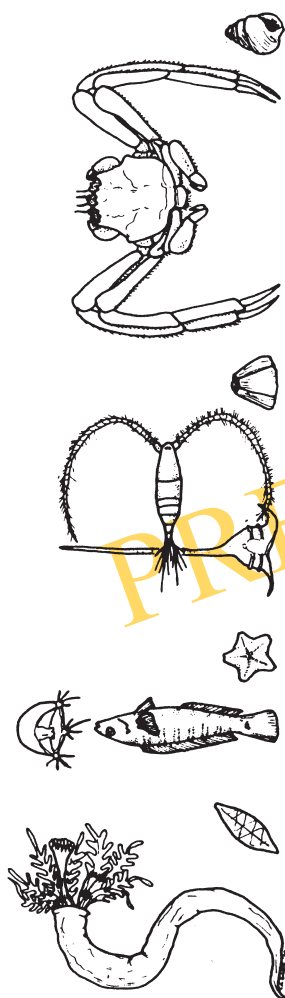
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SEAGRASS WORKSHOP 2006*

29 May - 4 June 2006, Marsascala, Malta

FOREWORD

The Mediterranean Seagrass Workshop 2006 was convened in response to the need to promote a periodic event that would host scientists interested in Mediterranean seagrasses, and international scientists who are involved in projects that are focused on the Mediterranean marine environment, to discuss current knowledge and present the findings of their latest research.

The concept of holding an international meeting originated during the International Seagrass Biology Workshop (ISBW6) held in 2004 in Queensland, Australia. In particular, one of the goals of ISBW6 was to identify key ecological issues and environmental trends within a number of geographical regions. This stimulated the idea of taking such topic to a higher level; the Mediterranean scale.

The Mediterranean Sea is a rare and vulnerable ecoregion, one of the planet's biodiversity hot spots, where many of the species present are endemic (around 20%). The Mediterranean Sea also has a millenarian history of human use of its coasts. However, the current exponential increase of human pressure on the coastal zone for living space, transportation, recreation and food production is expected to have dramatic long-term impacts on the Mediterranean marine environment. Being located in shallow coastal areas close to human settlement, seagrasses are bearing the brunt of disturbance from such anthropogenic activities, with the result that degradation and loss of seagrass habitats is widespread in the whole Mediterranean Sea. Thus, there is great concern that the functions which seagrasses have performed in the Mediterranean marine ecosystem will be weakened or, in some places, lost altogether.

Within the Mediterranean Sea, previous Workshops addressed aspects of the biology of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows (International Workshops on *Posidonia oceanica* beds in 1983 and 1985), as well as of world seagrasses in general (ISBW4 held in Corsica in 2000). Thus, the main goal for MSW 2006 was to focus primarily on all species present in the Mediterranean basin, but considering also those adjacent geographic areas where Mediterranean species are also present (e.g., Atlantic coast of Europe, including Canary islands).

Discussions on the scientific aspects of MSW 2006 were directed by the organizing Committee (Fig. 1) to promote closer links with seagrass biologists from North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, given that information on seagrasses from these regions is still largely insufficient or lacking. Therefore, efforts were initiated to identify potential sponsors to help participation of scientists from these regions. Thanks to funding kindly received from the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the Institute for Environment and Sustainability (IES) of the European Commission (EC), 4 young scientists from four North African and East Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey) were able to attend the workshop and present papers on their work.

The organizing Committee identified three main general themes for the Workshop which allowed inclusion of the majority of aspects on seagrass research:

- Seagrass Biology and Ecology;
- Ecosystem Services of Seagrass beds;
- Monitoring, Management and Restoration of Seagrass Habitats.

In addition, these themes were integrated with specific discussion topics,

addressed through Round Table sessions held as a relevant part of the Workshop:

- Use of seagrasses as bioindicators of the ecological status of coastal waters, in relation to implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD);
- New methodologies of ecosystem approach to seagrasses;
- Conservation of Mediterranean aquatic vegetation.

To ensure easy access to participants from Mediterranean countries and neighboring regions, it was decided to hold the MSW 2006 in Malta, located at the centre of the Mediterranean basin. Having joined the European Union in 2004, Malta is now the southernmost EU member state and is considered by many as a stepping stone between Europe and North Africa. Marine research has always been a priority for the Maltese scientific community, but there has been considerable interest in seagrass biology over the past 15 years. The Department of Biology at the University of Malta, kindly accepted to host the meeting, and the necessary organization procedures were activated, including the setting up of a web site (<http://events.um.edu.mt/msw2006/>). The Corinthia Jerma Palace Hotel, located in Marsascala, on the southeastern coast of mainland Malta, was chosen as the Workshop venue.

A total of 105 scientists comprising 47 students (from graduate to PhD level) and 58 non-student participants from 17 countries (see table of participants below) attended the Workshop.

Table 1. Number of MSW attendants according to country

| Country | Number of Participants |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Algeria | 1 |
| Belgium | 3 |
| Croatia | 2 |
| Egypt | 2 |
| France | 9 |
| Greece | 1 |
| Israel | 1 |
| Italy | 45 |
| Malta | 8 |
| The Netherlands | 2 |
| Portugal | 4 |
| Slovenia | 1 |
| Spain | 15 |
| Tunisia | 4 |
| Turkey | 1 |
| United Kingdom | 4 |
| United States of America | 2 |

Overall, about 100 contributions (oral communications and posters) were presented, 60 of which are included in these Proceedings, including the outcome of two of the three Round Table Sessions.

The Workshop attendance was very heterogeneous, in terms of topics presented, age classes and countries represented. This, as well as the high number

of students, made the Workshop particularly successful, with strong integration among people and across participating countries.

The meeting proceeded smoothly and attendance during all sessions (including the Round Table sessions) was very good. The weather was pleasant throughout the workshop, but because of strong Mistral winds, the planned boat trip and dives in the Malta-Comino Channel and Cirkewwa to visit deep-water seagrass beds, were cancelled. Marsascala, the small seaside resort where the hotel that served as venue for MSW 2006 was located, provided an ideal setting with its pretty seaside promenade, good restaurants and other essential commodities.



Fig. 1 - Members of the organizing Committee of the Mediterranean Seagrass Workshop 2006 at the closing ceremony in Malta. From left to right: Maria Cristina Gambi, Gabriele Procaccini, Maria Cristina Buia, Christine Pergent-Martini, Gerard Pergent, Giuseppe Di Carlo, Joseph A. Borg (the local conveyer).

Mediterranean Seagrass Association

The MSW 2006 provided the platform for launching the Mediterranean Seagrass Association. This will be achieved by modification of the existing Association “Seagrass 2000”, which was set up for the organization of ISBW4, held in Corsica in 2000. The idea of promoting the Association was raised during the

MSW 2006 and it was proposed to the audience and acclaimed. The Association will be in place by the first quarter of 2007. The Association has set a series of priority activities: increase awareness of seagrass issues by promoting and activating a number of initiatives, provide support for the organization of future MSW and local meetings, produce and maintain a web page for literature, facilitate exchange of data and information, and render support for conservation, monitoring, and educational issues linked to Mediterranean seagrass ecosystems.

The Association will liaise with the WSA (World Seagrass Association, www.worldseagrass.org), acting as an independent regional Association. The liaison with the WSA will result in joint newsletters and web site, containing data and literature for exchange among the scientific community. Moreover, the WSA and the MSA will strive to organize joint meetings (ISBW and MSW) to reach a larger audience inside and outside the seagrass research field.

Finally, we would like to thanks all MSW participants, as well all Authors of the papers included in these Proceedings. A special thank is due to all members of the Scientific Committee who gave their precious help in revising the papers, and to Prof. Giulio Relini (Genoa, Italy), Director of "Biologia Marina Mediterranea" and the President and the Directive of the Italian Society of Marine Biology (SIBM), who allowed to use the official Journal of the Society to host the Proceedings. Last but not least, we wish to thank the President of the Stazione Zoologica "A. Dohrn" of Naples, Prof. Giorgio Bernardi, for financial support in publishing the present volume, in the frame of the long tradition and history of the publications of the Institute.

*Maria Cristina Gambi
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INDEX OF PAPERS

BIOLOGY AND ECOLOGY OF SEGRASSES

Invited paper:

S. BEER, L. AXELSON, M. BJÖRK

- Modes of photosynthetic bicarbonate utilisation in seagrasses, and their possible roles in adaptations to specific habitats 3

Research papers

S. ACUNTO, F. RENDE, R. COZZA, A.M. INNOCENTI

- State of health of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows along the northern tyrrhenian coast of calabria, italy..... 8

S. ALIANI, G.P. GASPARINI, C. MICHELI, A. MOLCARD, A. PEIRANO

- Can southern meadows of the Mediterranean seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* (L.) Delile supply northern ones? A multidisciplinary approach in the Ligurian sea..... 14

I. BLANCH, E. DATTOLO, G. PROCACCINI, R. HAROUN

- Preliminary analysis of the influence of geographic distribution and depth on the genetic structure of *Cymodocea nodosa* meadows in the Canary Islands 19

S. CABAÇO, A. ALEXANDRE, R. SANTOS

- Survival and growth of the seagrass *Zostera noltii* in different culture media 24

L. CASTELLANO, M. CAPRIOLO, G. GNONE, M. MONTEFALCONE, M. MATASSINI

- Ex situ* germination and growth of *Posidonia oceanica* (L.) Delile (Monocotyledonae, Posidoniaceae) seed 29

B. CELEBI, A. CEMAL GUCU, M. OK, S. SAKINAN, E. AKOGLU

- Hydrographic indications to understand the absence of *Posidonia oceanica* in the Levant sea (Eastern Mediterranean)..... 34

A. CHIAPPETTA, M. GRECO, M.B. BITONTI

- Cytophysiological features of embryos in *Posidonia oceanica* seeds..... 39

Y. FERNÁNDEZ TORQUEMADA, J.L. SÁNCHEZ LIZASO

- Effects of salinity on growth and survival of *Cymodocea nodosa* (Ucria) Ascherson and *Zostera noltii* Hornemann..... 46

C. LAFABRIE, G. PERGENT, C. PERGENT-MARTINI

- Memorization of mercury by the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* 48

| | |
|---|----|
| M. LENZI , R. ROFFILLI, M. DE PIRRO, P. MICARELLI, E. FRANCHI, F. BORGHINI, S. FOCARDI The meadows of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile along the Tuscany southern coast (Mt. Argentario - Chiarone river, Italy)..... | 51 |
| M. LORENTI, A. GERA, J. LASSAUQUE, F. MATTERA, M.C. BUIA Comparative <i>in situ</i> estimates of the photosynthetic activity of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> : RLC and maximum quantum yield measurements | 56 |
| A.M. MANNINO, A. SANTULLI, G. SARA' The shallow seagrass system in W-Sicily (Italy): a large reservoir of organic matter available to upper consumers | 60 |
| M. MIGLIACCIO, A. CAVALLINI, L. NATALI, G. PROCACCINI New genomic approaches on the seagrass <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile | 64 |
| H. MOLENAAR, A. MEINESZ, T. THIBAUT Competition between native <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> and invasive <i>Caulerpa taxifolia</i> | 68 |
| H.M. MOSTAFA Preliminary ecological survey of seagrass beds at Marsa Matrouh, west of Alexandria-Egypt | 72 |
| I. OLIVÉ, M.P. GARCÍA-SÁNCHEZ, J.J. VERGARA, J.L. PÉREZ-LLORENS Annual photosynthetic characterization of the seagrass <i>Cymodocea nodosa</i> along depth and within leaf gradients..... | 77 |
| M. POLIFRONE, M. ROSELL-FIESCHI, M. ABELARDO-GONZÁLEZ A comparative study of the structure of <i>Cymodocea nodosa</i> (Ucria) Ascherson meadows in Canary Islands (Spain, Atlantic ocean)..... | 82 |
| Y-R. SGHAIER, R. ZAKHAMA-SRAIEB, F. CHARFI-CHEIKHROUHA Status of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadows along the Eastern coast of Tunisia | 85 |
| I.A. SERRA, G. PROCACCINI, M.C. INTRIERI, M. MIGLIACCIO, S. MAZZUCA, A. M. INNOCENTI Comparative analysis of genetic diversity in <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile using ISSR and SSR markers..... | 92 |
| F. VALLERINI, E. BALESTRI Spatial variations in vegetative and reproductive shoot density in two co-occurring mediterranean seagrasses <i>Cymodocea nodosa</i> and <i>Zostera noltii</i> | 97 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| A. VELA, V. LEONI, G. PERGENT, C. PERGENT-MARTINI Relevance of leaf matter loss in the functioning of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> system..... | 102 |
|---|-----|

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES OF SEAGRASSES

Invited paper:

| | |
|---|-----|
| C.F. BOUDOURESQUE, N. MAYOT, G. PERGENT The outstanding traits of the functioning of the <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> seagrass ecosystem | 109 |
|---|-----|

Research papers:

| | |
|---|-----|
| S. ACUNTO, D. BALATA, G. PARDI, I. PAPI, L. PIAZZI, M. BURGASSI, F. CINELLI Spatial variability in the epiphytic assemblages of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile beds around maltese islands..... | 114 |
|---|-----|

| | |
|---|-----|
| E. APOSTOLAKI, T. TSAGARAKI, M. TSAPAKIS, I. KARAKASSIS Fish farming effects on macrofaunal communities associated with Mediterranean seagrass meadows..... | 119 |
|---|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| M. BEN BRAHIM, A. HAMZA, A. BOUAIN Distribution and time variability of micro-epiphytes and phytoplankton in <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadows of the Kerkennah islands (Tunisia)..... | 122 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|---|-----|
| M. BEN BRAHIM, A. HAMZA, A. BOUAIN Spatio-temporal distribution of macro-epiphytic organisms in <i>Posidonia</i> <i>oceanica</i> leaves in the Gulf of Gabes (Tunisia)..... | 126 |
|---|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| M. DIMECH, J.A. BORG, P.J. SCHEMBRI Motile macroinvertebrate assemblages associated with submerged <i>Posidonia</i> <i>oceanica</i> litter accumulations | 130 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| A.M. FOLKARD Modelling hydrodynamics and suspended particle dispersion in fragmented seagrass meadows..... | 134 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| M.C. GAMBI, B. TRANI, M. CIGLIANO, V. ZUPO The “kriging” approach to study the relationships between <i>Posidonia</i> <i>oceanica</i> meadow structure and distribution of associated fauna: an example with borer polychaetes..... | 139 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| E. GIOVANNETTI, M. MONTEFALCONE, C.N. BIANCHI, C. MORRI, G. ALBERTELLI Structural variability of the epiphytic community in a <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadow (Ligurian sea, NW Mediterranean)..... | 145 |
| I. GUALA, S. SIMEONE, M.C. BUIA, S. FLAGELLA, M. BAROLI, G. DE FALCO <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> ‘banquette’ removal: environmental impact and management implications..... | 149 |
| M. LORENTI Isopod crustaceans inside Mediterranean seagrasses: borers, miners and intruders | 154 |
| K. MEZALI, V. ZUPO, P. FRANCOUR Population dynamics of <i>Holothuria (Holothuria) tubulosa</i> and <i>Holothuria</i> (<i>Lessonothuria</i>) <i>polii</i> of an Algerian <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadow | 157 |
| U. NESTI, D. BALATA, L. PIAZZI, F. CINELLI Two different approaches to detect spatial variability of epiphytic assemblages of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile: use of species and morphological groups | 163 |
| M. POLIFRONE, A. ABELARDO-GONZÁLEZ, V. QUEVEDO-DÍAZ Fish community and grazing pressure on meadows of <i>Cymodocea nodosa</i> (<i>Ucria</i>) Ascherson in Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain)..... | 167 |
| M. VETERE, N. NURRA, R. MUSSAT-SARTOR, D. PESSANI The molluscan community of the foliar stratum of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile meadow from punta Manara (eastern Ligurian sea). Zonation pattern in relation to depth and time..... | 170 |
| R. ZAKHAMA-SRAIEB, Y-R. SGHAIER, F. CHARFI-CHEIKHROUHA Is amphipod diversity related to the quality of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> beds? | 174 |

MONITORING, MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION OF SEAGRASSES

invited paper:

| | |
|--|-----|
| P.L.A. ERFTEMEIJER Managing the effects of dredging on seagrasses in the Mediterranean Sea. | 183 |
|--|-----|

Research papers:

| | |
|---|-----|
| G. CASAZZA, C. LOPEZ ROYO, C. SILVESTRI Seagrasses as key coastal ecosystems: an overview of the recent EU WFD requirements and current applications..... | 189 |
|---|-----|

| | |
|---|-----|
| A. COSSU, F. RAGAZZOLA, S. DEMELAS Distribution and ecological conditions of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile meadows in La Maddalena national park | 194 |
| G. COSTANTINO, F. MASTROTOTARO, R. CARLUCCI, A. MATARRESE, M. PANZA First data on meadow structure of a large <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> bed along the Southern Tyrrhenian coast (Mediterranean Sea) | 199 |
| S. DEBONO, J.A. BORG Use of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> as a bioindicator of ecological status for Maltese coastal waters | 206 |
| G. DI CARLO, F. BADALAMENTI, A. TERLIZZI Recruitment of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> on rubble mounds: substratum effects on biomass partitioning and leaf morphology | 210 |
| S. FLAGELLA, I. BORRIELLO, M.C. GAMBI, M.C. BUJA Responses of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> to environmental disturbance | 215 |
| I. GATTORNA, P. PANZALIS, A. NAVONE, R. CATTANEO-VIETTI, M. MONTEFALCONE, C. MORRI, C.N. BIANCHI Preliminary survey of the health state of the <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> bed at Spalmatore di terra, Tavolara-punta Coda Cavallo marine protected area (Sardinia, western Mediterranean)..... | 220 |
| Y.A. GENEID, H.H. EL-HADY Distribution, biomass and biochemical contents of the seagrass species of lake Bardawil, Mediterranean sea, Egypt | 225 |
| S. GOBERT, G. LEPOINT, R. BIONDO, J-M. BOUQUEGNEAU <i>In situ</i> sampling of pore waters from seagrass meadows..... | 230 |
| M. GOSSELIN, J-M. BOUQUEGNEAU, G. PERGENT, C. PERGENT-MARTINI, S. GOBERT Use of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> sheaths as a biomonitor of metal pollution.... | 235 |
| E.L. JACKSON, S.C. GLANFIELD, J. DELACRUZ, O. LANGMEAD, C. ARVANITIDIS, M.J. ATTRILL, H. TYLER-WALTERS, L. MEE An objective approach to defining loss of seagrass in the Mediterranean: causal chain analysis and scenario predictions..... | 240 |
| R. LASAGNA, M. MONTEFALCONE, C.N. BIANCHI, C. MORRI, G. ALBERTELLI Morphology of a <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadow under altered sedimentary budget | 245 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| N. MAYOT, C-F. BOUDOURESQUE, E. CHARBONNEL Changes over time of shoot density of the Mediterranean seagrass <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> at its depth limit..... | 250 |
| C. MIFSUD, F. CINELLI, S. ACUNTO, D. BALATA, E. LANFRANCO, S.A. MICALLEF, L. PIAZZI, D.T. STEVENS, S. CALVO The distribution and state of health of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> (L.) Delile meadows along the Maltese territorial waters..... | 255 |
| M. MONTEFALCONE, C.N. BIANCHI, C. MORRI, A. PEIRANO, G. ALBERTELLI Lower limit typology and functioning of six <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadows in the Ligurian sea (NW Mediterranean)..... | 262 |
| M. RUIZ DE LA ROSA, N. GARCÍA, M. ZARRANZ, P. MANENT, R. DOMÍNGUEZ, M. GRIMÓN, G. LOUZARA, N. GONZÁLEZ Preliminary results of experimental evaluation about different methods of transplanting <i>Cymodocea nodosa</i> in the Canary Islands..... | 267 |
| F.T. SHORT, E.W. KOCH, J.C. CREED, K.M. MAGALHAES Seagrassnet monitoring of habitat change across the Americas | 272 |
| F. SILVESTRE, G. IACONO, L. TIBERTI, M.C. BUIA <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> data warehousing..... | 277 |
| R. TURK, L. LIPEJ Research on seagrasses off the Slovenian coast (Northern Adriatic) – state of the art..... | 282 |
| <i>Round table papers:</i> | |
| G. CASAZZA, A. S. HEISKANEN, S. DEBONO Use of <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> as a bioindicator of water quality in relation to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive..... | 287 |
| P.L.A. ERFTEMEIJER, M.C. GAMBI, C. PERGENT-MARTINI Conservation of Mediterranean marine vegetation | 290 |