

**Natural variability in hard bottom communities**

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# Natural variability in hard bottom communities and possible drivers assessed by a time-series study in the SW Baltic Sea: know the noise to detect the change

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## Abstract

In order to detect shifts in community structure and function associated with global change, the natural background fluctuation in these traits must be known. In a 6-yr study we quantified year to year variability of taxonomic and functional composition of benthic hard bottom communities in the Western Baltic. While taxonomic fluctuations were substantial, functionality of the communities seems preserved in most cases. Environmental conditions potentially driving these fluctuations are winter temperatures and current regimes. We tentatively define a confidence range of natural variability in productivity, composition and diversity a departure from which might help identifying an ongoing regime shift driven by global change. In addition, we propose a statistical procedure distinguishing directional shifts (“signal”) from natural fluctuations (“noise”).

## 1 Introduction

The structure of communities, i.e. the identity and functional characteristics of the constituent species, determines both their ecosystem functions and their stability or resilience over time (e.g. Solan et al., 2006; Harley et al., 2006; Wahl et al., 2011a). In many regions in all oceans, the structure of benthic communities is currently in a process of transformation as a consequence of global change (e.g Harley et al., 2006). Main drivers of this re-structuring are warming, acidification, desalination, hypoxia, sea level rise and/or bioinvasions (e.g. Jackson and McIlvenny, 2011; Lockwood and Somero, 2011; Merzouk and Johnson, 2011; Philippart et al., 2011), while the proximate responses are shifts in the behaviour and performance of organisms, changes in the relative abundance of species, local extinctions, range shifts and the ensuing re-structuring of communities (e.g. Gardner et al., 2005; O’Connor et al., 2007; Harley et al., 2006). Species are the bearers of ecological traits which determine their performance, their persistence, their function and, ultimately, the services of a community (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Bremner et al., 2006a,b). The loss or gain

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able to distinguish it from the background noise, i.e. natural variability in species abundances.

Natural fluctuations in the composition of benthic communities incorporate deterministic and stochastic elements (e.g. Frid et al., 1996; Spencer et al., 2011). The former include yearly rhythms reflecting the seasonal alteration of ephemeral species or decadal rhythms such as North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO) cycles. The latter comprise the random occurrence of disturbances/recovery cycles and the “lottery effect” of founder species identity (e.g. Greene and Schoener, 1982; Reise, 1991).

Assessing the background fluctuations is particularly important in species-poor, marginal systems like the Baltic Sea, because (i) abiotic variability is particularly pronounced due to the small size of the water body, to the highly variable wind-driven current system (Lehmann et al., 2011) and to the reduced buffer capacity of brackish water (Thomsen et al., 2009, 2010; BACC author group 2008), and because (ii) low species richness – especially when combined to low functional richness – makes communities more vulnerable to environmental shifts (e.g. Wahl et al., 2011a), since functional gaps caused by the decline of a species cannot always be filled by a functionally equivalent species (e.g. Frid, 2011).

The shallow water, hard bottom communities in the Western Baltic develop on granite boulders in an otherwise predominantly soft bottom habitat. Typically, in the course of a year some 60 sessile macrospecies can be found on shallow (1–3 m depth) hard substrata (own unpublished data) of which roughly half are macroalgae, the other half suspension feeders. These species represent 15 functional groups according to a classification scheme recently proposed (Wahl et al., 2011a) of which 11 are represented by 3 or less species and 5 just by one species (this study). According to the insurance hypothesis the functions combined in these 11 functional groups are particularly threatened by species loss (Frid, 2011).

Temporally repeated sampling for monitoring purposes often includes an element of spatial heterogeneity when the collection is not carried out at the identical spot. In these cases spatial and temporal variability in community composition may mask or amplify

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each other. Additional variance is added when 2 monitoring events sample two communities of different age, representing different stages in a successional process or are carried out in different seasons. In an effort to disentangle these different sources of variability, we have established a series of fixed monitoring stations along the German Baltic coast, where communities which develop for exactly one year on identical artificial substrata are collected every year in the same season. In this manner, we strive to analyse temporal fluctuation with a yearly resolution independently of other sources of variability.

Given this experimental set-up, the variability in community traits such as species composition or productivity is mainly driven by environmental factors such as temperature, salinity, nutrient concentrations, irradiation, intensity and quality of predation, and currents as vectors of resources and propagules. In this article, we try to quantify (i) the spatial variability of species composition among the stations at the scale of 10 s of km, (ii) the temporal year-to-year fluctuation of species composition within the stations and (iii) the associated shifts in community functioning, as well as (iv) the species and (v) the abiotic factors contributing most to these fluctuations. We tentatively define an interval of confidence within which compositional fluctuations of Western Baltic benthic communities are presumably “natural”, whereas outside which they could be indicative of an anthropogenic signal (e.g. intensifying pollution) or climate change. This zone of confidence will become more reliable when the duration of the monitoring grows. Additionally, we present a statistical procedure distinguishing between directional shift and random fluctuation. We will discuss the risk of not detecting change when already including its first signs into the defined zone of natural fluctuations.

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## 2 Materials and methods

### 2.1 Assessment of community variability

#### 2.1.1 Stations

Along the German Baltic Sea coast, in the Kiel and Lübeck Bights, seven permanent stations were selected for this long term programme to assess hardbottom community assemblage dynamics (Fig.1). The stations from NW to SE were Falshöft (P1), Boknis Eck (P2), Schönberg (P3), Fehmarn-NW (P4), Staberhuk (P5), Kellenhusen (P6) and Salzhaff (P7) (P6, see Table 1 for site characteristics). Among all stations, only Fehmarn-NW (P4) is exposed to the regionally most frequent strong winds from the SW to the NW. The remaining sites are exposed to the rarer storms from northern or easterly directions. The dominant current directions and speeds are given in Fig. 2.

#### 2.1.2 Deployment of settlement panels

At each station, eight 50 × 50 cm concrete slabs were deployed at 3 m depth, while the distance between slabs was approximately 5 m. Each slab was equipped with 2 vertical threaded stainless steel bars of 30 cm length. Each of these bars carried one horizontally orientated settlement panel (12 × 12 cm) made of roughened (60 grid) grey PVC. The panels were fixed 30 cm above ground with stainless steel nuts on either side. Panels were exchanged for new ones every September for the assessment of interannual variability in recruitment and community assemblage over the previous 12 months. The panels were harvested by unscrewing the upper nut of the support bar and transferring each panel individually into one ziplock bag already under water (SCUBA). On deck of a research vessel, the communities were fixed by adding buffered formalin (final concentration 4 %) to each ziplock bag.

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### 2.1.3 Characterization of communities

In the lab, the various components of the communities were identified to the lowest possible taxonomic level (species or genus) and their relative cover on the panel was estimated to the nearest 5%. Additionally, each genus or species was attributed to a functional group defined by the adult properties with regard to size, growth form, trophic type and modularity. Each species is attributed a 4-letter code that identifies which of the 16 traits in the 4 metrics apply (Table 2). This code is believed to define an ecological role of a species well (e.g. Wahl et al., 2011a). Thus, a barnacle (“MMSS”) ecologically resembles more closely a mussel (“MMSS”) than a hydrozoan (“LBSC”) or an encrusting red alga (“MEAS”). The functional characterization allowed assessing whether structural change in communities was accompanied by functional change.

Subsequently all organisms were scraped off the panel and dried to constant weight at 60°C to obtain the community dry weight, then burned at 500°C for 24 h to obtain the community ash weight.

Species or genus identity as well as relative abundance were used to describe and analyse the compositional properties of a panel community. Dry weight (DW) and ash free dry weight (AFDW) were obtained to describe the panel communities’ productivity as biomass accumulation over 12 months. While community composition was assessed only on the upward facing side of the panel to include all primary producers, biomass was recorded from both panel sides and was standardized per 100 cm<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.2 Environmental variability

### 2.2.1 Hydrodynamic model

To provide habitat information in terms of temperature, salinity and ocean currents, a comprehensive database was created containing the temporal development of the hydrographic conditions at each of the individual stations (Fig. 1). For this purpose, a three-dimensional hydrodynamic model was used to simulate the hydrographic

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conditions and their variations in space and time (Kiel Baltic Sea Ice-Ocean Model-BSIOM; Lehmann and Hinrichsen, 2000; Lehmann et al., 2002). The model domain comprises the entire Baltic Sea including the Gulf of Bothnia, Gulf of Finland, Gulf of Riga as well as the Belt Sea, Kattegat and Skagerrak. The horizontal resolution of the coupled sea ice-ocean model is at present 2.5 km, with 60 vertical levels specified. The coupled sea ice-ocean model is forced by realistic atmospheric conditions taken from the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI Norrköping, Sweden) meteorological database (L. Meuller, personal communication, 2013) which covers the whole Baltic drainage basin on a regular grid of  $1 \times 1^\circ$  with a temporal increment of 3 h. The database consists of synoptic measurements interpolated on the regular grid by using a 2-D uni-variate optimum interpolation scheme. This database, which for modeling purposes is further interpolated onto the model grid, includes surface pressure, precipitation, cloudiness, air temperature and water vapor mixing ratio at 2 m height and geostrophic wind. Wind speed and wind direction at 10 m height are calculated from geostrophic winds in consideration of different roughness at the open sea and near the coastal area (Bumke et al., 1998). Forcing functions of BSIOM such as wind stress, radiation and heat fluxes were calculated according to Rudolph and Lehmann (2006). Physical properties simulated by the hydrodynamic model agree well with known circulation features and observed physical conditions in the Baltic Sea (e.g. Hinrichsen et al., 1997; Lehmann et al., 2002).

### 2.2.2 Drift model

Simulated three-dimensional velocity fields were extracted from daily mean property fields provided by the hydrodynamic model in order to develop a database for particle tracking. This data set offers the possibility to derive Lagrangian drift routes by calculating the advection of “marked” water particles through space and time. The three-dimensional trajectories of the simulated drifters were computed using a 4th order Runge-Kutta scheme (Hinrichsen et al., 1997). In order to consider the particle drift in relation to its spatial and temporal variability, particles were seeded for the time period

2005 to 2009 at the panel locations every 5 days from July 1 to August 30, resulting in 13 different release dates. The latter is based on the duration of the maximum dispersal and recruitment of many locally abundant species (Thomsen et al., 2010).

The experimental design required the determination of the origins of individual particles which settled during the prime settlement period (late May to August, Thomsen et al., 2010) at the panel positions (Fig. 1). Thus, particles were inserted into the simulated flow fields at the sea surface at the different panel positions and their drift was back-calculated for a 40 days drift period. For each of the different particle release dates, 175 drifter were seeded on a regular spaced grid around the panel positions. The employed particle tracking technique allowed backward calculation of drift trajectories by simply reversing the temporal sequence of the three-dimensional flow fields and by inverting the sign of the horizontal components of the velocity vector (Hinrichsen et al., 1997).

### 2.2.3 Statistical parameters of original particle distributions

The model runs described in the previous section proved to be sufficient to determine the initial start distributions of particles which were back-calculated for a 40 days drift period from the panel positions. Spatial characterization of the backward-calculated particle distribution patterns was performed by the calculation of simple statistical parameters including Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The PCA of a bivariate data set (i.e. latitudes and longitudes of backward-calculated particle distribution areas) is based on the calculation of its variance and covariance of the distribution around a mean position along a set of directions other than those of the horizontal and the vertical axis of the diagram (Preisendorfer, 1988). By utilising this approach we have quantitatively estimated the extension of backward-calculated particle distribution areas by calculating their dispersal kernels (Edwards et al., 2007) in terms of variance ellipses, i.e., we employed the dispersal kernel method to explore inter-annual differences of the geographic origin and extension of particles. Similar to Edwards et al. (2007) we calculated three parameters of the initial spatial distributions of particles:

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(1) the major and (2) minor axis and (3) the principal angle of the orientation of the major axis. The identification of the dispersal scale is given by the size of the variance ellipse calculated from the major and minor axes lengths

Variability of the sea surface environmental variables such as current direction, current velocity, salinity and temperature were quantified as the mean Bray-Curtis dissimilarities between consecutive years.

## 2.2.4 Statistics for community analysis

Data processing. The majority of analyses presented in this study, except the assessment of community biomass, were exclusively performed on the biota that established on the upward facing surface of the settlement panels. Furthermore, we only considered sessile and hemi-sessile (such as tube-dwelling gammarids of the genus *Corophium*) species and ignored all components of the associated motile fauna, which were not caught quantitatively in the ziplock bags used for sampling. Since not all of the organisms encountered on the panels could be identified on the species level, the genus was used as the highest level of taxonomic resolution for all analyses.

Data analyses. Statistical comparisons between stations with regard to the means of single response variables were made by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). We tested for the assumptions of ANOVA (normality of errors, homogeneity of variances) with the graphical diagnostics provided by the free statistical computing software R (R Development Core Team 2010). Correlations between single variables were either Pearson's (if data were normal) or Spearman's Rank (if data were not normal) correlations.

All multivariate analyses were done with the PRIMER (Plymouth Routines in Multivariate Ecological Research) 6.0 software package (Clarke and Gorley, 2006; Clarke and Warwick, 2001). We used Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to identify the most relevant species, i.e. those that were responsible for the bigger part of the temporal and spatial variation in community structure during the observation period. For this, only genera which showed  $\geq 10\%$  cover on at least one of the sampled settlement panels

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were selected. PCA was performed on the untransformed data with a maximum of 5 principal components.

To assess the temporal (year to year) dynamics in community composition at the seven study sites, we calculated either the similarity (MDS plots) or the dissimilarity (variability graphs, SIMPER analysis) between assemblages that established at the same location in two subsequent years. For this, species abundance data were averaged across all eight replicates that were sampled at each site in one year, and then the Bray-Curtis (dis-)similarity for all of the 35 possible pairings (7 sites, 6yr) was calculated on the basis of these data. We tested for the presence of a serial pattern in community change over time (directional shift) using the RELATE procedure in PRIMER (Clarke and Gorley, 2006; Clarke and Warwick, 2001). For these analyses, data were not transformed nor standardized. SIMPER (Similarity Percentage) analyses quantified the contributions of single species to the dissimilarity between a given pair of communities.

We ran simple linear regressions (if residuals were normal) or Spearman's Rank Correlations (if residuals were not normal) for each month of the year to elucidate the relationship between the abundances of *Mytilus edulis*, *Amphibalanus improvisus* and *Polysiphonia* sp. (sampled in September of each year) and the average monthly temperatures (derived from the hydrodynamic model described earlier) of the preceding 12 months (from September of the previous year to August of the same year) in order to identify potential drivers of recruitment patterns. For the analysis, we pooled all data without stratifying them by station or year. Abundance and biomass data were averaged across all replicates that we sampled at a given station in a given year. We tested for normality of errors as well as homogeneity of variances using the graphical diagnostics in R.

For the assessment of the influence of the interannual variability in hydrographical conditions during the period of maximum recruitment (June to August) on the interannual variability in community composition the oceanographic variables used were the June-July-August-averages in sea surface salinity, temperature, current velocity

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and current direction at each station. Main current velocities and directions were site-dependent, thus the recruitment depends not only on the inter-annual variability of the atmospheric conditions but also on the site characteristics (Fig. 1). Histograms of daily surface velocities distributed over 30°-segments velocity directions were extracted from BSIOM for the period 2005–2010 (Fig. 2). Those sites where the flow is of retentive character show small current velocities and nearly equal distribution of current directions (e.g. P2 and P6), those which are of dispersive character show stronger current velocities and specific current directions (e.g. P3 and P4). It should be noted that for Salzhaff (P7) currents would most probably be overestimated because of the limited model resolution. Dissimilarities between consecutive years were calculated for each site using PRIMER. Oceanographic and biological dissimilarities between two consecutive years form the statistical pairs analyzed graphically and by multiple regression. To identify the minimal adequate model, we subsequently removed non-significant terms from the maximal model and verified the legitimacy of each simplification step using the anova function in R (Crawley 2007). The maximal model contained four predictors: (1) Mean monthly water temperatures at the seven sampling sites from June to August of each year. (2) Mean monthly salinity from June to August. (3) Mean monthly direction of the water currents from June to August. (4) Mean monthly velocity of the water currents from June to August. In addition to the main effects, we included all possible interactions as well as four quadratic terms in the model.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Site characteristics

Generally, for the backward-calculated particles initially released at the different stations in the Western Baltic (Fig. 1), sizes and orientations of the variance ellipses indicate interannual variability of the potential backward-calculated origins of drifters as well variations among stations (Fig. 3). Largest horizontal extensions (ellipse area

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sizes) for most of the drifter origins occurred for the years 2006 and 2007, while the extensions in other years (2005, 2008 and 2009) are relatively small. Marked differences in drift patterns can be recognized when comparisons are made between simulations for the different stations. For the panel locations P1, P2, P6 and P7, all drifters tended to originate from areas relatively small in size, indicating a general dominance of retention, i.e. the origins of particles were located relatively close to their final panel positions. The variance ellipses of the most north-western station Falshöft (P1) yielded the highest variation in north-south direction, while for the panels P2 to P5 the orientation of the ellipses indicates extension of backward-calculated origin of drifters mainly varying in east-west direction. Different patterns emerged for the location P3 to P5, which could be characterized by dispersal. These locations are properly influenced to a higher degree by particles originating in the Lübeck and Mecklenburg Bight as well as in the Arkona Basin, likely as a consequence of currents induced by prevailing weak to moderate winds of eastern direction. Obviously, largest drift distances were obtained for those time periods and locations, if the stations were located outside the variance ellipses. The latter was mainly observed in 2006 at stations located east of 10° E.

### 3.2 Community traits

#### Taxonomic and functional composition

A total of 60 sessile species/genera were found in all stations and years. Of these, 11 were considered common, i.e. on average over all stations and years they contributed at least 1 % to the panel coverage. These were the macroalgae *Cladophora* sp., *Callithamnion* sp., *Dasya baillouviana*, *Hildenbrandia rubra*, *Ceramium* spp. and *Polysiphonia* spp. and the sessile animals *Electra pilosa* (bryozoan), *Corophium volutator* (mud tube building amphipod), *Polydora ciliata* (mud tube building polychaete), *Amphibalanus improvisus* (barnacle) and *Mytilus edulis* (mussel) (Fig. 4). All taxa (hereafter called by their genus names) could, at least occasionally, be found at all stations. Some conspicuous trends, however, were apparent: *Dasya*, *Cladophora* and

*Amphibalanus* tended to decrease from NW to SE, while *Mytilus* and *Electra* showed the opposite trend. *Polysiphonia* and *Corophium* were most abundant in the centre of the salinity gradient that the monitoring programme covers (Fig. 4). PCA identified the blue mussel *Mytilus*, the barnacle *Amphibalanus* and red algae of the genus *Polysiphonia* as the ones that contributed most to temporal and spatial variability in community structure.

The 60 observed taxa belonged to 15 functional groups (as used in this study). 16 species were large, 28 medium and 16 small. A filamentous growth form was realized by 29 species, a massive growth by 25 and an encrusting growth by 6 species. 24 algal species and 26 animal species were assessed, of which 50 were solitary and 10 colonial. All of the animal species were suspension feeders since only sessile species were taken into account.

The 5-yr mean of genera richness on the settlement panels at all stations varied between 4 (P6) and 7 (P4) without showing a pronounced spatial pattern (Table 3). The richness of functional groups closely followed this trend (Table 3). Both, regional genera richness (the sum of genera found on all panels in all years at a given station) and regional number of functional groups, tended to be reduced at the eastern stations (P6 and P7).

Within one year of recruitment, the upper sides of the panels were on average covered to between 57 % ( $\pm 11.3$  % SE) in Staberhuk (P5) and 103 % ( $\pm 10$  % SE) in Kellenhusen (P6). The two sites east of Fehmarn (Kellenhusen (P6), Salzhaff (P7)) showed generally more cover than the sites on Fehmarn (Fehmarn-NW (P4), Staberhuk (P5)) and west of it (Falshöft (P1), Boknis Eck (P2), Schönberg (P3), data not shown). Productivity expressed as accrual of ash free dry weight (AFDW) over 12 months differed among the sites (ANOVA  $F = 6.9$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Fig. 5). It tended to increase from NW to SE with the exception of the western-most site, Falshöft (P1), where it was intermediate (Fig. 5). Lowest productivity was found in Boknis Eck (P2) and highest in Salzhaff (P7) with 0.39 ( $\pm 0.05$  SE) and 2.46 ( $\pm 0.76$  SE) g per 100 cm<sup>2</sup> and year, respectively. At the 3 western most stations Falshöft (P1), Boknis Eck (P2) and Schönberg (P3)

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community productivity was realized to almost equal parts by hetero- and autotrophs, but from Fehmarn-NW (P4) southeastward the contribution of heterotrophs continuously increased to reach over 90 % in Salzhaff (P7) (Fig. 6). The production of AFDW correlated positively with the prevalence of heterotrophs ( $r = 0.816$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## 5 Interannual variability in community structure

The communities that assembled on the panels over 12 months differed between consecutive years by 30 % to 75 % (Bray-Curtis dissimilarity based on genera richness). At most stations the interannual shifts in community structure (or function) do not seem to follow a directional trajectory, i.e. their dissimilarity to the initial structure in 2005 did not increase over time (Fig. 7a, b). In Kellenhusen (P6) the community composition was most stable over time. In Falshöft (P1), Schönberg (P3), Fehmarn-NW (P4) and Salzhaff (P7) community composition seems to move randomly around some virtual center. In contrast to this, a tendency towards a directional shift might be detected in Boknis Eck (P2) and Staberhuk (P5) (Fig. 7a). However, according to the RELATE procedure we employed to detect directional change in community structure over time, none of the trajectories shown in Fig. 7a, including Boknis Eck (P2) and Staberhuk (P), showed a significant temporal seriation. Falshöft (P1) seems to oscillate between a *Dasya*-dominated and a *Mytilus*-dominated status (Figs. 4 and 7). Boknis Eck (P2) shifted from a *Cladophora/Ceramium* community via a *Corophium* community towards *Hildenbrandia/Polydora* community. Schönberg (P3) moved from a *Ceramium/Amphibalanus* community via a *Ceramium/Mytilus* status towards a *Corophium/Ceramium* community. Fehmarn-NW (P4) was in almost all years dominated by *Polysiphonia* and *Amphibalanus*, while communities in Staberhuk (P5) and Kellenhusen (P6) were always shaped by *Mytilus*. Only in Staberhuk (P5) we observed a shift in sub-dominant species from *Ceramium* over *Amphibalanus* to *Electra*. Salzhaff (P7) started as a *Mytilus/Amphibalanus* community, showed an intermediate status with much *Ceramium*, *Polydora* and *Corophium* besides the dominant *Mytilus* and featured an even more marked *Mytilus* dominance with associated *Electra* in the

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last years (Figs. 4 and 7a). Repeating the analysis with Bray-Curtis dissimilarity based on functional richness reveals similar patterns for the different stations (Fig. 7b) and again no indication for a significant directional change over time at any of the stations (Fig. 7b) was detected by RELATE. The shift patterns in taxonomic and functional composition of the communities behave quite similarly since the respective rho-values of the RELATE analyses correlate positively ( $R^2 = 0.77$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Interestingly, the interannual variability in taxonomic composition decreased from NW to SE almost linearly from over 70 % mean dissimilarity between subsequent years in Falshöft (P1) and Boknis Eck (P2) to around 30 % in Kellenhusen (P6) and Salzhaff (P7) (Fig. 8). Only a handful of taxa were responsible of most (71 %) of all compositional variance (SIMPER analysis): *Mytilus edulis* (14 %), *Amphibalanus improvisus* (11 %), *Ceramium* spp. (11 %), *Polysiphonia* spp. (8 %), *Polydora ciliata* (7 %), *Callithamnion* sp. (6 %), *Corophium volutator* (6 %), *Hildenbrandia rubra* (5 %), and *Dasya baillouviana* (4 %). The compositional variability pattern was closely matched by a similar pattern in the variability of functional groups (Fig. 8). However, the most important functional traits (medium to large body size for biomass accrual and longevity; autotrophy for primary production; suspension feeding for pelago-benthic coupling, see Frid et al., 2008) were almost always represented redundantly in a panel community. Medium to large forms are represented by at least one species in all 277 communities, and redundantly so (by 2 or more species) in 98 % of these communities. Suspension feeding is represented by at least one species in 97 % of the communities and redundantly so in over 80 % of these. Autotrophy is represented by at least one species in 90 % of the communities and redundantly so in 72 % of these.

### 3.3 Potential drivers

#### Influence of total abiotic variability (current regimes, salinity, temperature)

The abiotic variables with potentially the most important influence on recruitment and successional dynamics of shallow-water hardbottom communities in the region we

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monitored are temperature, salinity, and current regime (e.g. Harley et al., 2006). pH as well as its shifts and fluctuations do not seem to have a major impact on Baltic biota (e.g. Havenhand, 2012). Temperature has effects on the physiological rates of adults, larvae and recruits as well as on phenology (e.g. Harley et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2007; Gardner et al., 2011; Sommer et al., 2012). Salinity is a major structuring factor in the Baltic in general and also correlates closely with various community properties (e.g. composition, diversity, productivity) along the NW-SE gradient sampled in this study (e.g. Ojaveer et al., 2010). Direction and velocity of currents are paramount for the transport of water masses, prey and propagules (e.g. BACC author group, 2008).

Total abiotic variability between consecutive years tended to be higher in the western as compared to the eastern part of the range assessed (Fig. 9a). This was mainly due to differences in the variability of the current regime since salinity and temperature were quite similar in time (less than 7 % and 5 % dissimilarity between consecutive years). The modeled area of provenance of the propagules (Fig. 9b), i.e. the variance ellipse area sizes (see Fig. 3) representing the variability of current directions weighted by their velocity vector sizes, was most variable in the center of the geographical range, i.e. around the island of Fehmarn (P4, P5) (Figs. 3 and 9b). The mean abiotic dissimilarity between the summer months (June–August) of consecutive years (mean of the Bray-Curtis dissimilarities in current direction and velocity, salinity and temperature) related positively with the biotic dissimilarity between consecutive years (Bray-Curtis dissimilarity of species composition) (Fig. 10). However, due to the large variance, especially of the abiotic variables, this relationship was only marginally significant ( $p = 0.057$ ), but abiotic variance explained about 55 % of biotic variance.

In contrast to the summer SST, the winter temperatures seemed to have some effect on the composition of the communities. The monthly mean temperatures of the preceding 12 months affected the 3 target species to variable degrees. Warm winters (November through February) favoured the barnacles weakly, but the mussels quite strongly, while both, warm winters and warm summers, disfavoured the filamentous red algae (Fig. 11).

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Monthly mean salinity did not affect substantially the 3 target species, which drove the bulk of the biotic dissimilarity among consecutive years.

#### 4 Discussion

We found that along the German Baltic coasts of Kiel Bight and Lübeck Bight species and functional group richness decreased slightly along the gradient of decreasing salinity (from NW to SE), while the prevalence of heterotrophs (mostly *Mytilus*) increased in the same direction what was accompanied by an increase of annual biomass production and a decrease of interannual variability of community composition. Much of this variance was found to be due to abundance changes of a few “driver” species, mainly *Mytilus*, *Amphibalanus* and *Polysiphonia*.

The mean year-to-year dissimilarity of hydrographical summer conditions, i.e. current direction and velocity, SST and salinity at the different stations in June to August, related positively to the dissimilarity between years in the composition of communities. Abiotic variability explains 55 % of the biological variability found during the five years of monitoring. However, breaking down “abiotic variability” into its components produces a diverse picture: Salinity dissimilarity between consecutive years, which was on average between 4 and 6 %, does not contribute to the compositional dissimilarities measured. Long-term fluctuations in salinity, presumably, represent a minor stress to all those species which were primarily responsible for compositional variability, because none of them is, in the Western Baltic, close to its lower salinity tolerance limit (e.g. Bonsdorff, 2006, Schubert et al., 2011). All of these species occur at all stations that we sampled in Kiel and Lübeck Bight which are dissimilar with regard to salinity by up to 22 %. In contrast to this, temperature does affect the abundance of the aforementioned “driver” species which cause most of the structural change among consecutive years. The most common autotroph, *Polysiphonia*, for example, suffers from warm summers. For the time being, we do not know whether reproduction, growth or physiological performance of the algae are directly affected by warm conditions or whether

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detrimental interactions with parasites, pathogens, foulers, competitors or consumers intensify under warmer conditions (e.g. Harley et al., 2006; Wahl et al., 2011b). Furthermore, the dominant heterotrophs, *Amphibalanus* and – particularly so – *Mytilus*, benefit from warm winters. These species settle mainly in summer (June through August) and their larva are released 3–4 weeks prior to settlement. Hence, warmer winter temperatures might rather enhance the reproductive success of the parent population. At first glance this seems counterintuitive: warm winter temperatures should be stressful since they increase the metabolic rate of poikilotherms in times of low planktonic food availability. However, a warmer winter could also lead to earlier spring blooms (if not consumed by overwintering zooplankton: Sommer and Lewandowska, 2011) improving the trophic situation for mussels and barnacles in spring/early summer, i.e. when gonads mature, gametes are released and larvae develop. The causal chain between mild winter temperatures and enhanced mussel and barnacle recruitment in the following may be indirect and tortuous – if it is not just a correlated covariance.

Interannual dissimilarity in the taxonomic composition of communities was closely followed by a dissimilarity in the composition of functional groups ( $r^2 = 0.87$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). However, in this approach functional groups are defined by the combination of 4 functional traits describing a species' properties at the adult stage with regard to body size, growth form, trophic type and modularity. A difference in only one of these traits is sufficient to classify two functional groups as distinct in our analysis of dissimilarity. This linkage is justified if we assume that it makes a difference whether suspension feeding is carried out by a large, branching and colonial organism or a medium sized, solitary organism of massive growth form. The body size of solitary organisms has been regarded as a proxy for longevity and an indication of low metabolic rates, while growth form may determine competitiveness for resources including light and substratum (e.g. Woodward et al., 2005; Hillebrand, 2004; Micheli and Halpern, 2005). When, however, we focus on the absence or presence of a certain service (e.g. benthic-pelagic coupling, primary production, habitat engineering) in the community, we may consider the traits singly, i.e. disregarding the other three traits of its bearer. Under this perspective, the

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substantial interannual variability in the composition of functional groups is not accompanied by a similar variability in the combination of ecological traits in the communities. In fact, essential services like primary production, suspension feeding or provision of structure were provided by at least one species in nearly all communities and by more than one species (i.e. redundantly) in the great majority of communities. Thus, as a general rule that follows from our analyses, despite a substantial interannual variability in functional group composition, the essential services of the shallow-water hardbottom communities in the Western Baltic were warranted. It should be noted at this point, that by exclusively considering the sessile components of the assemblages on the settlement panels, the trophic diversity of animals was essentially reduced to one trait: suspension feeding.

Our observation that interannual variability in the taxonomic composition of Western Baltic hard-bottom communities decreases from NW to SE, which was paralleled by a shallow decrease in species richness, should not be interpreted as an inverse relationship between diversity and stability as shown by Valdivia and Molis (2009) for similar communities. First, the “disturbance” (replacement of the panels) was complete and its intensity unrelated to diversity. Second, the pattern of recruitment, or “recovery” from the disturbance was to a large extent influenced by the abiotic conditions, mainly currents and temperature, during the recruitment phase. If we consider the annual panel replacement as a patch disturbance within a larger meta-community and the recruitment onto the new panels over the next 12 months as patch re-colonization, we could ask whether taxonomically more diverse stations show less variation in the recovery process even under variable abiotic conditions. It was postulated earlier that taxonomic diversity favors resistance to environmental change in functionally poor but not in functionally rich systems (Wahl et al., 2011a). This hypothesis, however, cannot be examined here, because the stations did not differ enough with regard to functional diversity.

In this study we have pursued a double aim: we attempted to quantify the ecological year-to-year “noise” in the composition of one-year old Western Baltic hard-bottom

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communities, and we tried to identify some possible causes for the observed biotic variability. While the study has some strengths it also features certain limitations. Here we consider as strong points that the quantification of compositional variability was not confounded by community age, spatial variability, substratum type, sampling procedure, or season, all of which were kept constant. On the other hand, the recruitment and succession process was arrested at the age of 12 months and the interannual dissimilarity of communities could diverge or converge thereafter. Another limitation is that we only assessed sedentary species and ignored the variability of motile consumers. A further weakness will certainly decrease with the continuations of this project: while one of our major goal was to distinguish noise (natural fluctuations) from the signal of global change (directional shifts), we cannot be sure whether the signal is not already included in the noise. A signal would be detectable by an MDS trajectory (such as those shown in Fig. 7) over time that does not return to previous points. At this point in time, in only two cases, i.e. Boknis Eck (P2) and Staberhuk (P5), we observed that the youngest point is furthest away from the oldest. It is well known, however, that climate change is overlain by local fluctuations and decadal oscillations (e.g. Parker et al., 2007; Frid, 2011) and it is therefore advisable to assess communities' compositional variability on decadal scale before tempting to quantify the range of "natural" background variability as the ecological noise. Also, this should only be undertaken if the MDS trajectory does not indicate a tendency for directional change. Furthermore, the Western Baltic Sea, the transition zone between brackish Baltic and saline North Sea waters, is known as an area of very high variability of oceanographic conditions (very noisy). Further to the east, in the Baltic Proper, hydrographic conditions are more stable (less noisy) so that directional shifts due to climate change would be easier to detect. These points in mind, our results about natural noise in the composition of Western Baltic hard-bottom communities should be considered with some caution while the on-going program continuously solidifies this knowledge base.

The noise, i.e. the dissimilarity of community compositions between years, decreases from NW to SE along the decreasing salinity gradient and with the increasing

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prevalence of heterotrophic organisms. While in Kiel Bight the communities vary structurally by, on average, 70 % between consecutive years, this variability averages around only 40 % in Lübeck Bight. In addition, the confidence interval of the interannual fluctuations includes the range between 55 % and 85 % in Kiel Bight and between 15 % and 45 % in Lübeck Bight. We assume that this apparently higher stability of community structure in the eastern stations is caused by reduced abiotic variability and the high prevalence of the competitively extremely dominant mussels. A signal for a severe disturbance or a regime shift might be identified when the composition of communities recruited under the conditions described here leaves this confidence interval. Such a signal could be detected more easily in the less fluctuating communities of the eastern part of the salinity gradient studied here. Directional shift over time, which might signal a change driven by climate change, can be distinguished from a more random oscillation of community structure (or functional composition) using the RELATE procedure. This tool may prove useful to detect climate change signals when a time series of biological samples covering a decade or more is available. The close correlation between taxonomic and functional rho's in the RELATE analyses seems to indicate that any shift in species composition is associated with a shift in functional group composition. This is probably due to low redundancy of functional groups in this species-poor system. However, a shift in functional group composition is not necessarily associated with a loss (or gain) of functional traits or services in the community, as discussed above, but it bears the potential for such a loss or gain. It remains to be investigated whether RELATE is restricted to the detection of steady change in community composition or community functioning, and whether more abrupt shifts, i.e. abrupt regime shifts jeopardize its suitability.

We have seen that community composition is affected by the current regime in summer and the temperatures in winter. Both are expected to change in the coming decades (BACC author group, 2008).

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**Table 1.** Coordinates and habitat characteristics of the stations sampled during this survey.

Name	Code	N	E	Dominant habitats
Falshöft	P1	54° 46.935′	09° 57.325′	Sandy ground with dense stands of the sea grass <i>Zostera marina</i>
Boknis Eck	P2	54° 32.942′	10° 01.788′	Boulders covered with diverse macroalgae
Schönberg	P3	54° 24.272′	10° 27.047′	Sandy with dense sea grass stands
Fehmarn-NW	P4	54° 32.147′	11° 04.621′	Sandy without macrophytes
Staberhuk	P5	54° 24.096′	11° 17.798′	Mixed sand and boulder ground with seagrass on the former and blue mussels <i>Mytilus edulis</i> on the latter
Kellenhusen	P6	54° 11.803′	11° 05.901′	With very large and dense mussel beds
Salzhaff	P7	54° 02.372′	11° 31.559′	Muddy ground with mixed macrophyte communities dominated by the seagrass <i>Zostera marina</i> and the pondweed <i>Potamogeton</i> sp.

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**Table 2.** Functional traits used for grouping. The metrics used are considered ecologically relevant and they can be surrogates for other traits. Thus, body size correlates closely with longevity or metabolic rate, growth form determines the species' strategy for exploiting resources such as substratum or light, etc. Ecosystem services associated with these and similar traits are discussed in Bremner et al. (2006) and Wahl (2009).

Adult body size	Growth form	Trophic type	Modularity
S < 1 mm	E encrusting	A autotroph	S solitary
M 1–10 mm	M massive	P predator	C colonial
L 10–100 mm	B bushy	S suspension feeder	
XL 100–1000 mm	F filamentous	D deposit feeder	
XXL > 1000 mm		G grazer	

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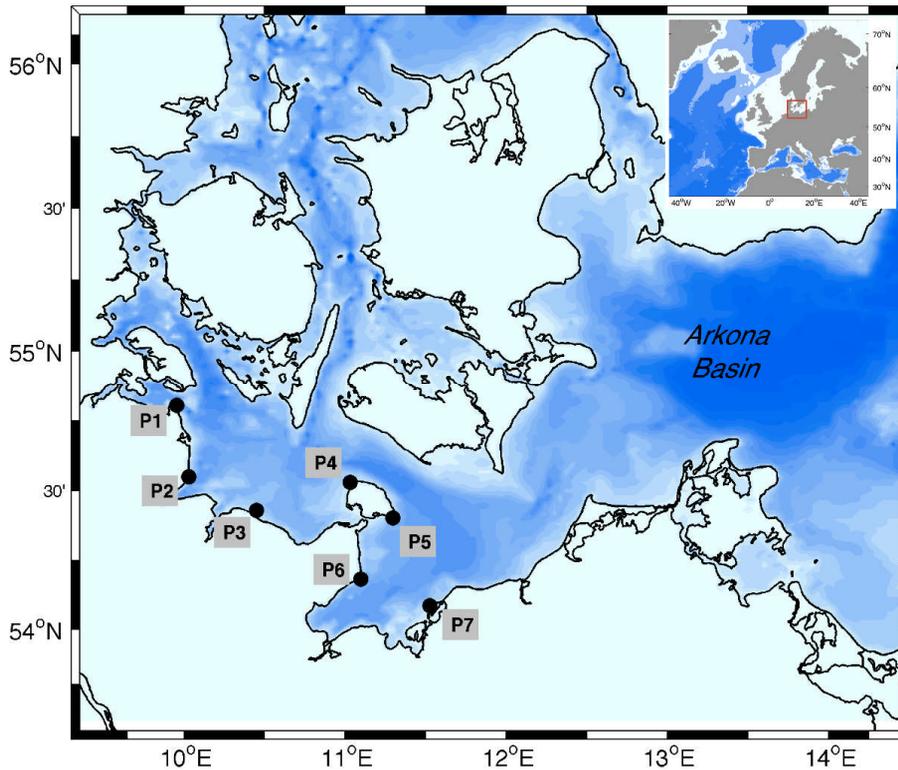
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**Table 3.** Species richness and Functional Group richness averaged over all years at the various stations. “alpha” = mean richness and SD per panel, “gamma” = total richness on all panels at a given station averaged over all years, SD = standard deviation.

	Species richness				Functional group richness			
	Alpha		Gamma		Alpha		Gamma	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Falshöft (P1)	6.0	2.7	11.0	3.7	3.7	1.1	6.0	0.6
Boknis Eck (P2)	6.0	2.6	10.5	2.5	4.0	1.6	5.3	1.6
Schönberg (P3)	5.5	2.4	11.0	2.1	3.8	1.3	6.2	1.5
Fehmarn-NW (P4)	5.8	2.2	12.5	3.6	4.2	1.4	7.3	1.9
Staberhuk (P5)	5.0	2.0	10.2	3.0	3.5	1.2	6.0	1.5
Kellenhusen (P6)	3.6	1.8	7.0	2.3	2.5	1.2	4.5	1.4
Salzhaff (P7)	4.6	2.0	9.2	2.7	3.5	1.3	5.7	1.8

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**Fig. 1.** Chart giving the position of the seven stations in Western Baltic sampled in this survey.

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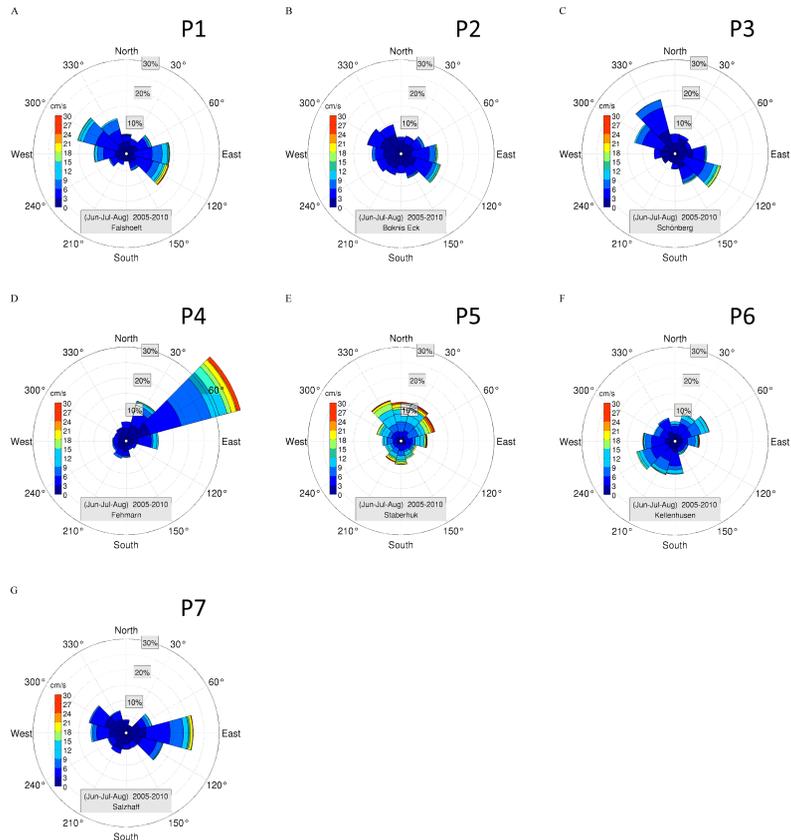
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**Fig. 2.** Prevalence of current regimes at the seven stations, averaged over all six years of the survey. Degrees indicate the current directions (by segments of 30°), percentages give the prevalence of a given current segment direction, the colour coding indicates the average speed of currents in a given directional segment. (A–G) are the summer current regimes at the different stations P1 through P7.

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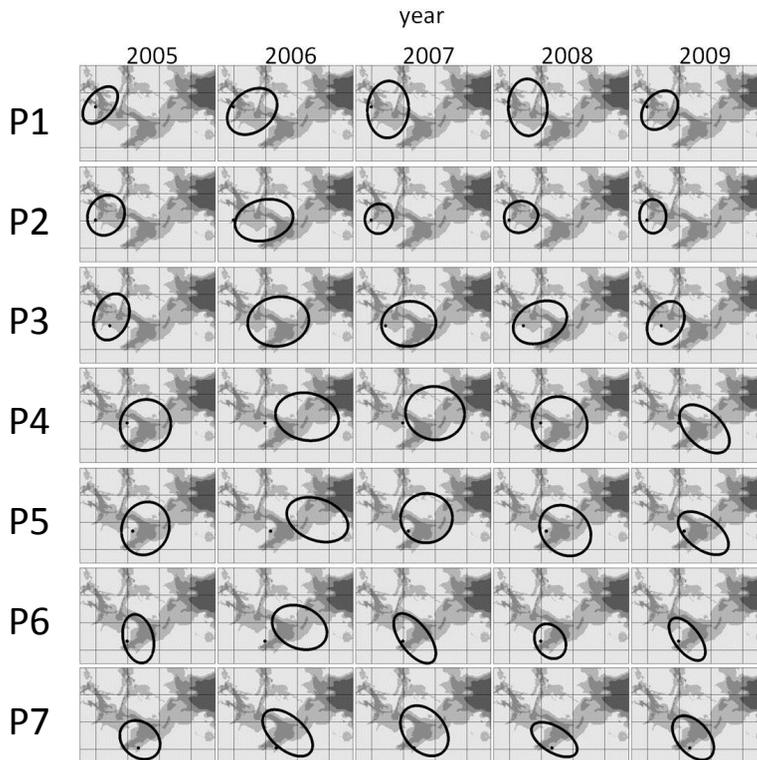
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**Fig. 3.** Dispersal kernels describing the back-calculated origins of drifting particles released at the different platform locations (black dots), 1st to 7th row represent the locations (1) Falshött (P1), (2) Boknis Eck (P2), (3) Schönberg (P3), (4) Fehmarn-NW (P4), (5) Staberhuk (P5), (6) Kellenhusen (P6), and (7) Salzhaff (P7).

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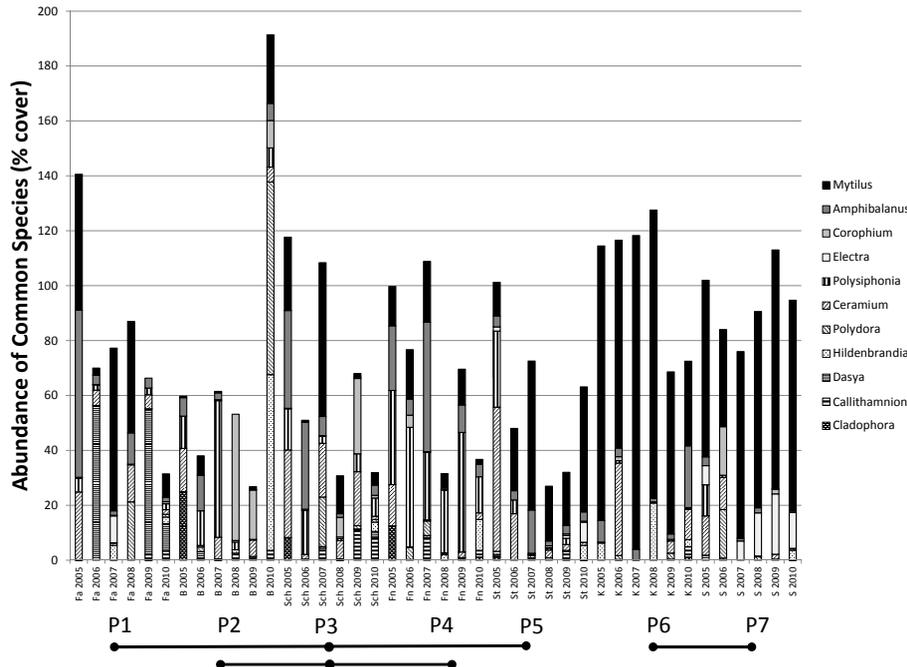
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**Fig. 4.** Mean cover (%) of the more common species at the seven station and in the 6 yr of surveillance. Stations connected by lines at the base of the graph do not differ significantly in community composition.

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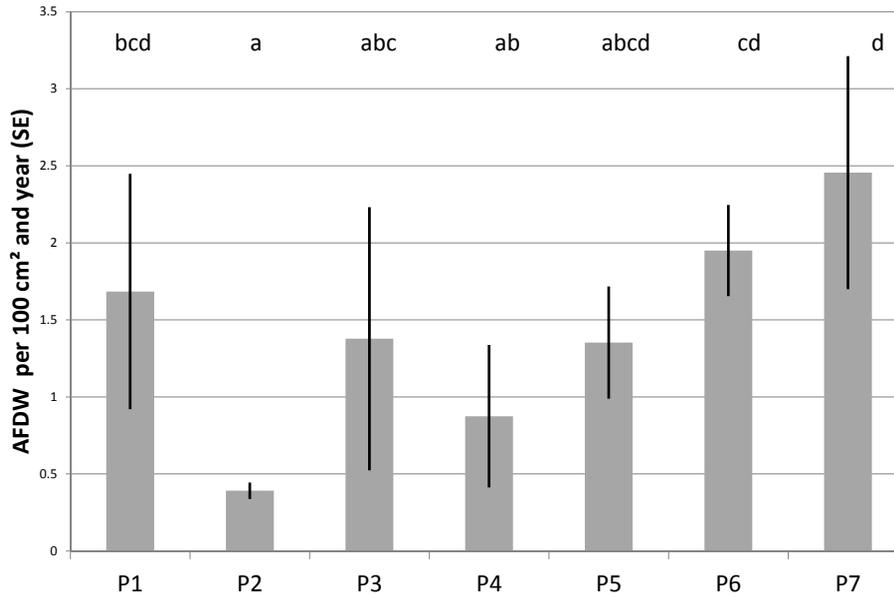
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**Fig. 5.** Mean yearly productivity at the various stations expressed as ash free dry weight (AFDW) accrual per 100 cm<sup>2</sup> and year. Stations not sharing a letter in the top of the graph differ significantly in productivity.

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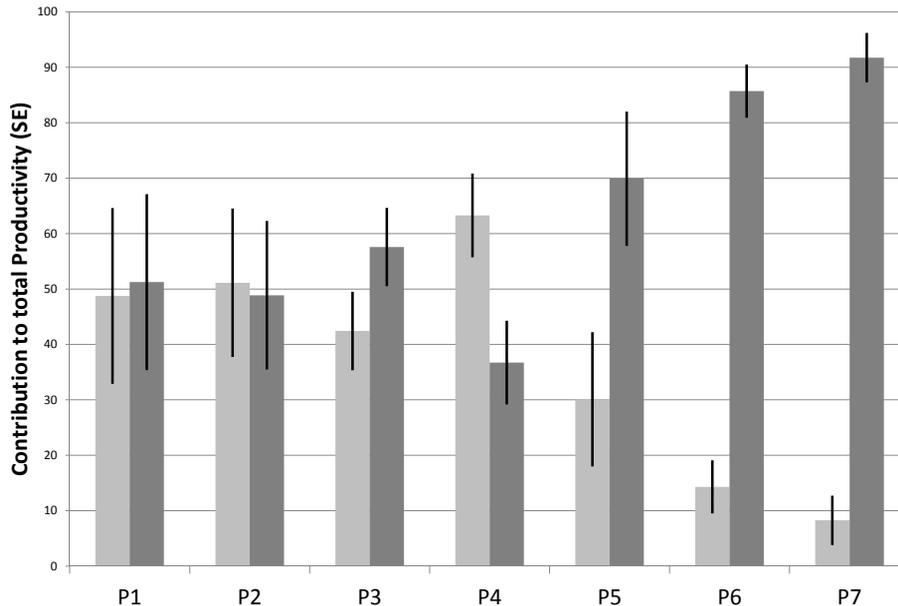
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**Fig. 6.** Mean relative contribution of macroalgae (“autotrophs”, light grey bars) and sessile animals (“heterotrophs”, dark grey bars) to the total annual productivity of a panel community (averaged over all panels and years for each station).

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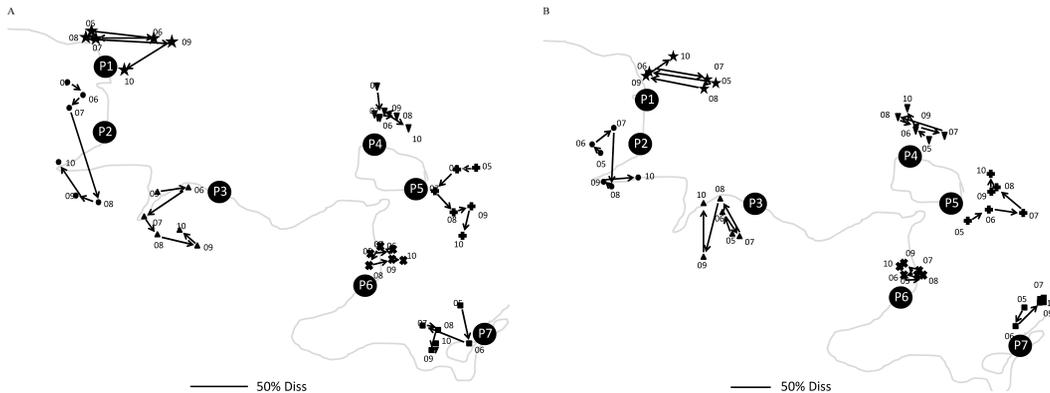
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**Fig. 7.** MDS trajectories between consecutive years for taxonomic **(A)** and functional **(B)** composition of the panel communities. The station codes (P1–P7) are placed on the approximate position of the site relative to the coast line in light grey. Within, but not between, compositional categories (species **(A)**, functional groups **(B)**) are all plots drawn to scale, i.e. same lengths and directions of trajectories correspond to an equivalent amount of dissimilarity between consecutive years. A scale bar indicating the “50 % dissimilarity” distance is given in each plot.

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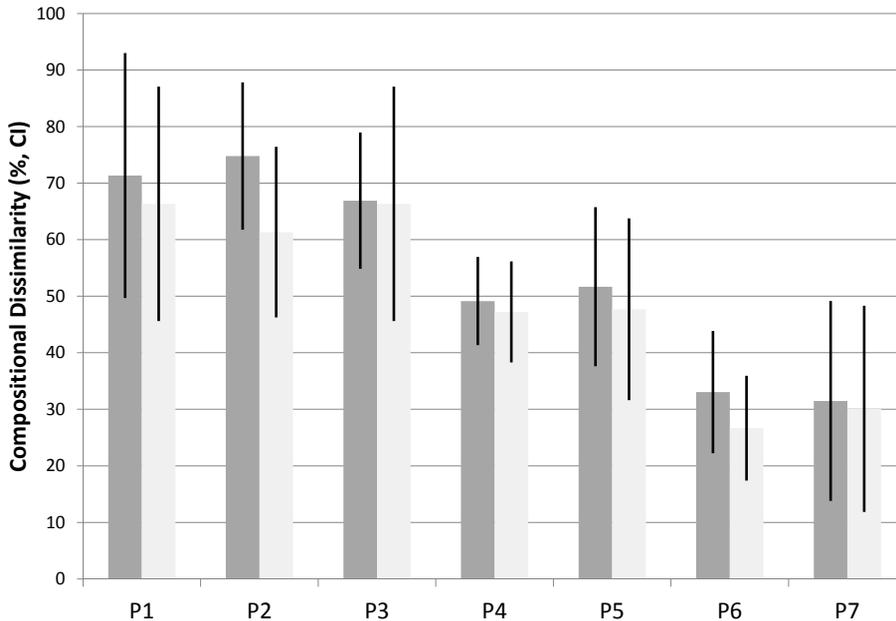
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**Fig. 8.** Interannual variability in taxonomic (dark grey bars) and functional composition (light grey bars). The confidence interval defines the zone of interannual variability considered the natural background “noise” (based on the 6-yr surveillance).

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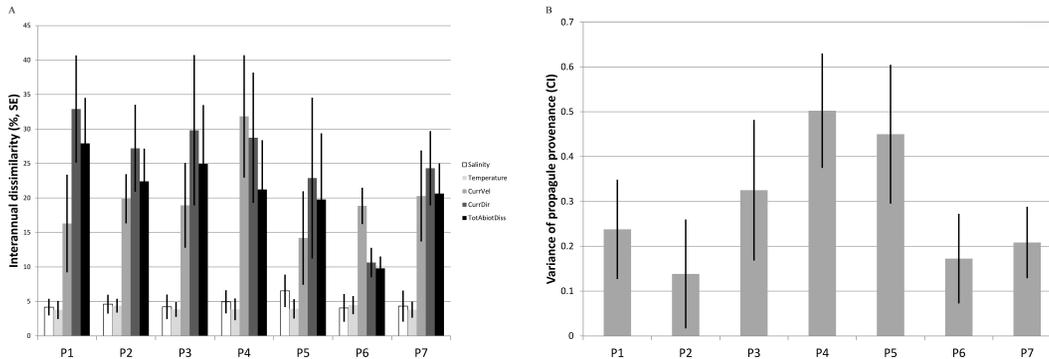
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**Fig. 9. (A)** Mean dissimilarity between consecutive years in salinity (white), temperature (light grey), current velocity (medium grey), current direction (dark grey) and of all these four variables together (black) averaged over the months of June, July, August and over the 6 yr of surveillance. **(B)** Variance of the propagule origin (area of the dispersal kernels of Fig. 3) averaged over the 6 yr of surveillance (with CI).

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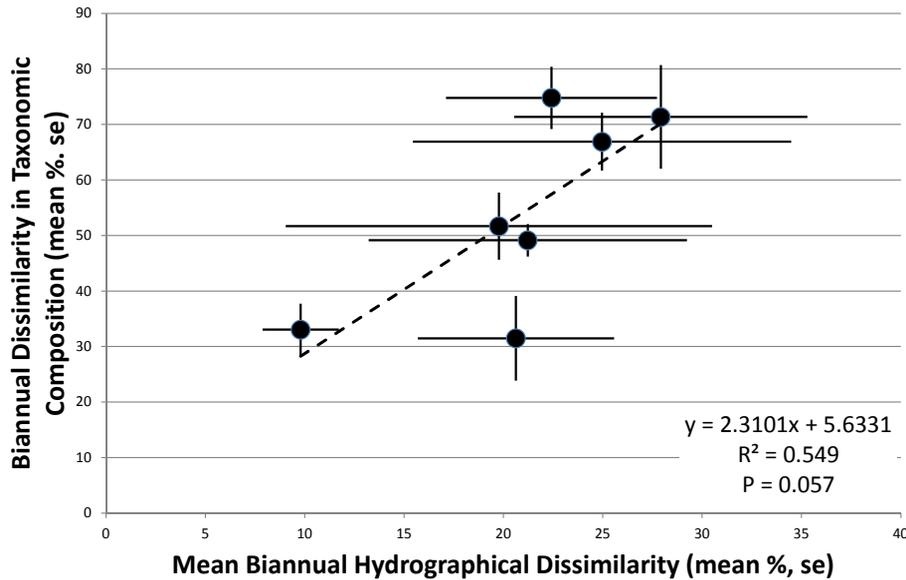
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**Fig. 10.** Relationships (marginally significant) between taxonomical dissimilarity of communities between consecutive years and the dissimilarity of hydrographical conditions (direction and velocity of currents, salinity, temperature) among the same pairs of years.

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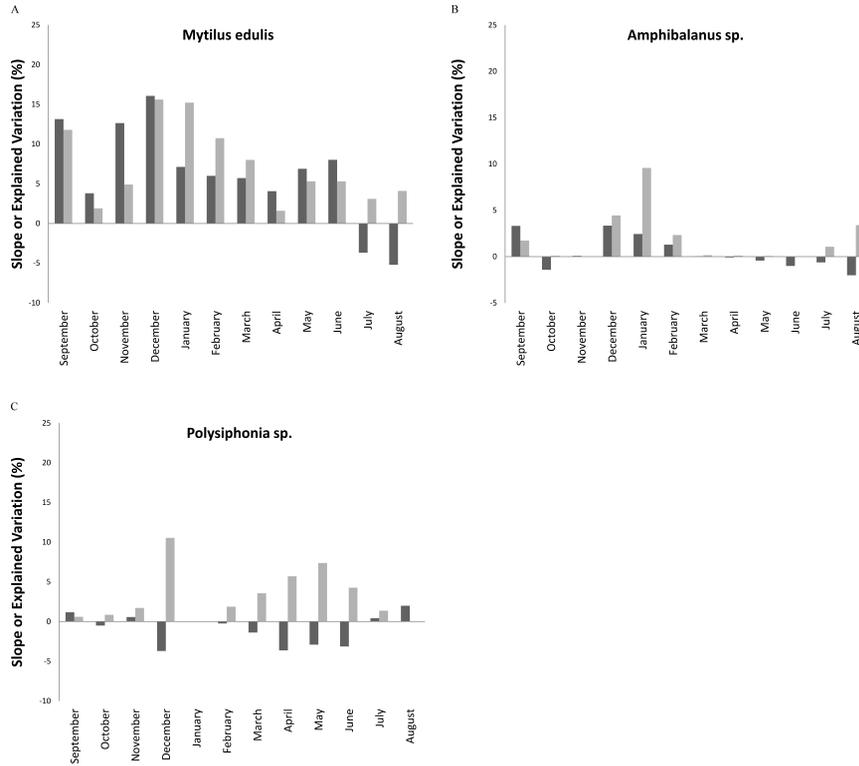
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**Fig. 11.** Relationship between monthly mean SST and the prevalence of **(A) *Mytilus***, **(B) *Amphibalanus*** and **(C) *Polysiphonia*** in the communities establishing on the panels. Dark grey bars give the slope (effect strength), light grey bars the  $R^2$  (explained variation) of the relationships.