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MARINE SHELLED MOLLUSCS FROM TWO LOCATIONS IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS – A CHECKLIST

SUMMARY

Climate change and manifold other anthropogenic influences are the main driving factors for changes in marine ecosystems. Characterising these changes is of great interest and can be made possible through the adoption of marine shelled mollusca as bioindicators. Malta is renowned for its rich diversity of mollusc species, including rare and endemic ones. So, we analysed mollusc shell grit from two locations (St. Pauls Island/Selmunett Island and Marsaxlokk) to provide a species baseline list for future investigations. We identified a total of 7662 parts of marine shelled mollusca. 115 species were found at St. Pauls Island and 45 species at Marsaxlokk, belonging to a total of 60 families (16 at both locations). To make both samples comparable, despite differences in sampling efforts, we formulated an individual-based species extrapolation curve for each location. With this, we calculated an estimated total species number of 134 at St. Pauls Island and of 49 at Marsaxlokk, for a set threshold of 6000 individuals, indicating a considerably lower mollusc diversity at the second location, putatively the result of higher human disturbance levels at the same location. The substantial differences in mollusc species composition between the two localities, despite the small geographical distance between the two, further underscores the importance of further related research.

Key words: Biodiversity, community composition, Mediterranean sea, microshells, species inventory, species richness

RIASSUNTO

Molluschi marini provvisti di conchiglia in due siti delle isole Maltesi – Una checklist. I cambiamenti climatici e un numero di altre influenze antropogeniche sono i principali fattori principali dei cambiamenti osservati recentemente negli ecosistemi marini. Caratterizzare questi cambiamenti è di grande interesse e può essere reso possibile attraverso l'uso di molluschi marini provvisti di conchiglia come bioindicatori. Un numero elevato di specie di molluschi è noto di Malta, comprese specie rare ed endemiche. Abbiamo analizzato individui di micro-molluschi spiaggiati in due località (isola di San Paulo/Selmunett Island e Marsaxlokk) per fornire una lista di riferimento per le ricerche future. Abbiamo identificato un

totale di 7662 frammenti di molluschi marini da questi due siti, equivalente a 115 specie nell'isola di San Paulo e 45 specie a Marsaxlokk, appartenenti a un totale di 60 famiglie (16 in entrambe le località). Per rendere entrambi i campioni confrontabili, nonostante le differenze negli sforzi di campionamento, abbiamo formulato una curva di estrapolazione del numero massimo di specie presenti ad ogni sito basata sul numero di individui campionati. Con questo, abbiamo calcolato un numero totale di specie stimato a 134 e 49 per l'isola di Sa Paolo e per Marsaxlokk, rispettivamente, calcolato su un campionamento ipotetico di 6000 individui di molluschi. Questo indica una diversità di molluschi notevolmente inferiore nel secondo sito, probabilmente il risultato di un livello di disturbo umano più elevato in tale sito. Le differenze sostanziali nella composizione delle specie di molluschi tra le due località, nonostante la modesta distanza geografica, sottolinea ulteriormente l'importanza di ulteriori ricerche in tale campo.

Parole chiave: Biodiversità, ricchezza di specie, Mediterraneo, composizione comunitaria, micro-molluschi, inventario di specie

INTRODUCTION

Climate change, microplastic and coastal transformation are some of the myriad anthropogenic impacts bring exerted on marine habitats worldwide (HOEGH-GULDBERG & BRUNO, 2010; ANDRADY, 2011; ROMANO & ZULLO, 2014). Impacts from these drivers are especially visible in shallow waters (GORMAN *et al.*, 2017). This in turn further stresses the importance of comparative studies with baselines drawn for coastal biotic communities. Since molluscs are in many cases considered to be important bioindicators, both by virtue of their ubiquity in the marine environment but also due to the ease with which they are collected and due to their sensitivity to environmental change, they can provide important environmental health information, reflected in temporal variations in species composition and abundance data (SOUSA *et al.*, 2018; REGUERA *et al.*, 2018).

The Maltese islands are located in the centre of the Mediterranean, just 96 km south of Sicily, 290 km from North Africa, 1836 km from Gibraltar, and 1519 km from Alexandria Egypt, making them one of Europe's southernmost outposts (SCHEMBRI, 1993). The Maltese archipelago is made up of three major inhabited islands: Malta, the largest; Gozo (Għawdex) and Comino, the smallest (Kemmuna). The total surface area of the Maltese islands is 316 km². The Maltese Islands represent an interesting test case since they combine both a well-studied and highly diverse marine gastropod community (e.g. EVANS *et al.*, 2018) as well as the ubiquitous impact of human activities (JONES, 2017). Thus, regular monitoring of components of the Maltese marine environment, including mollusc assemblages (rather than populations of individual species) might represent a useful paradigm which assists in the monitoring of impacts operating at larger scales.

Collectors group very small shelled Mollusca, "micro-mollusca", without any further taxonomic detail. So-called shell grit samples consisting of specimens (or fragments of) from micro-mollusca, however, reflect the entire spectrum of species, and not just of the very small species, since the larger species

are also represented within shell grit as juvenile shells. This type of community has, to date, received very little scientific attention so far, although one can find very high numbers of individuals within these samples (POPPE & GOTO, 1991), with the elucidated species composition giving a good overall representation of the habitats from where the species originated. Furthermore, shell grit sampling can be used as standardized shell sampling method and so serves as a good possibility to integrate samples from different investigations over a longer period of time. Summarized we want to get an actual species list of beached marine shelled molluscs at Malta and check for differences in two locations of the Maltese coast viz. Marsaxlokk and St. Pauls Island. The locations were chosen because Marsaxlokk is a heavily anthropogenic influenced location whereas St. Pauls Island is a near natural one. This situation offers a wide amount of later analysis. E.g. the repetition of the samples provides not only a comparison of species number and composition. One could also calculate if and how an anthropogenically influenced location changes more or less than a natural one.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A checklist of Mollusca was drawn up for two coastal locations (Fig. 1) on the island of Malta – St. Pauls Island (= Selmunett Island; 35°57'57.64"N,



Fig. 1 — Geographic location of the two sampled sites cited in this study.

14°24'8.91"E) and Marsaxlokk (35°50'19.00"N, 14°32'56.57"E), hereafter referred to as 'SPI' and 'MSL' - recorded through the collection of beached shell grit samples. The two locations are sited at a distance of about 20 km from each other. The SPI site is characterised by a gravel seabed and has largely been spared by tourism, as it is an uninhabited island. The MSL site is characterised by a sandy and muddy seabed, which is heavily influenced by human activities but which still supports seagrass beds. Beached surface shell grit was collected at the SPI and MSL sites, in the form of 3500 g (SPI) and 1300 g (MSL) of sediment collected on the 10.V.2012 at the mean sea level of both sites, respectively. The samples were cleaned and the taxonomic identity of all marine shelled Mollusca was determined where possible. Single valves of Bivalvia and incomplete/damaged shells of Gastropoda were counted as individuals. The individuals were classified taxonomically down to species level, wherever possible. Doubtful species determinations were denoted with "cf.". If individual species could not be exhaustively determined due to their shell condition, they were listed as a species complex, denoted by "spp.". If taxonomic identification to species level was not possible, on the exercise was truncated at genus level, whilst congeneric species which were difficult to distinguish were listed collectively – for e.g. Calliostoma laugieri/zizyphinum (Payraudeau 1826/L. 1758). Small-sized individuals of Cerithium vulgatum (Bruguière 1792), which are easy to confuse with related species, were cross-checked by Alberto Cecalupo (a specialist for Cerithiidae). The latest classification conventions were extracted from WORMS (World Register of Marine Species) (www.marinespecies.org, last visited: 6.II.2019) and from the Check List of European Marine Mollusca (CLEMAM) from Museum Nátional d'Histoire Naturelle (Department of Systematics and Evolution) (https://biotaxis.fr/clemam/index.clemam.html, last visited: 6.II.2019).

The individual-based rarefaction statistical technique (GOTELLI & COLWELL, 2011), based on extrapolation theory, using a standard baseline of 6000 mollusc individuals, was deployed to estimate the total number of mollusc species at each of the two sampled sites. The analysis was conducted through the application of the iNEXT software (CHAO *et al.*, 2016).

RESULTS

In total, we analysed 7662 fragments of marine shelled Mollusca from both locations, 2916 fragments from the SPI site and 4746 fragments from the MSL site, representing a total of 141 species and 60 families. For the SPI site,

51 families and 115 species were listed, while at the MSL site, there were 24 families and 45 species (Tab. I, II).

At SPI, only one species belonging to the class Scaphopoda and one species belonging to the class Polyplacophora were found. 95 species within

Tab. I. Species list of SPI in taxonomic order.

Class	Family	Species	Number
Polyplacophora	Chitonidae	Chiton olivaceus (Spengler 1797)	35
Gastropoda	Patellidae	Patella caerulea (L. 1758)	12
Gastropoda	Patellidae	Patella rustica (L. 1758)	4
Gastropoda	Fissurellidae	Diodora gibberula (Lamarck 1822)	115
Gastropoda	Fissurellidae	Emarginula huzardii (Payraudeau 1826)	1
Gastropoda	Fissurellidae	Emarginula octaviana (Coen 1939)	12
Gastropoda	Haliotidae	Haliotis cf. tuberculata (L. 1758)	5
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Clanculus cruciatus (L. 1758)	20
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Jujubinus exasperatus (Pennant 1777)	43
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Jujubinus gravinae (Dautzenberg 1881)	18
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Jujubinus striatus (L. 1758)	30
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Gibbula ardens (Salis Marschlins 1793)	37
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Steromphala umbilicaris (L. 1758)	17
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Steromphala varia (L. 1758)	13
Gastropoda	Calliostomatidae	Calliostoma laugieri / zizyphinum (Payraudeau 1826 / L. 1758)	14
Gastropoda	Calliostomatidae	Calliostoma sp.	2
Gastropoda	Chilodontaidae	Danilia tinei (Calcara 1839)	1
Gastropoda	Colloniidae	Homalopoma sanguineum (L. 1758)	1
Gastropoda	Skeneidae	Skenea catenoides (Monterosato 1877)	1
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia pullus (L. 1758)	34
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia punctura (Gofas 1993)	1
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia speciosa (Megerle von Mühlfeld 1824)	21
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia tenuis (Michaud 1829)	1
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia tingitana (Gofas 1982)	16
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia sp.	1
Gastropoda	Neritidae	Smaragdia viridis (L. 1758)	
Gastropoda	Neritidae	Neritidae sp.	1
Gastropoda	Cerithiidae	Bittium lacteum (Philippi 1836)	18

Class	Family	Species	Number
Gastropoda	Planaxidae	Fossarus ambiguus (L. 1758)	2
Gastropoda	Triphoridae	Metaxia metaxa (Delle Chiaje 1828)	9
Gastropoda	Triphoridae	Triphoridae spp.	82
Gastropoda	Eulimidae	Melanella lubrica (Monterosato 1890)	2
Gastropoda	Eulimidae	Parvioris ibizenca (Nordsieck 1968)	11
Gastropoda	Littorinidae	Melarhaphe neritoides (L. 1758)	16
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa auriscalpium (L. 1758)	10
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa similis (Scacchi 1836)	10
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa variabilis (Megerle von Mühlfeld 1824)	50
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa violacea (Desmarest 1814)	5
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa sp.	2
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Pusillina cf. philippi (Aradas & Maggiore 1844)	71
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Setia sp.	1
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania cimex/mamillata (L. 1758 / Risso 1826)	122
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania discors (T. Allan 1818)	30
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania lineata (Risso 1826)	19
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania subcrenulata (Bucquoy, Dautzenberg & Dollfus 1884)	926
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania weinkauffi jacobusi (Oliverio, Amati & Nofroni 1986)	2
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania sp.	37
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Manzonia crassa (Kanmacher 1798)	1
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoina bruguieri (Payraudeau 1826)	31
Gastropoda	Caecidae	Caecum auriculatum (de Folin 1868)	9
Gastropoda	Caecidae	Caecum trachea (Montagu 1803)	10
Gastropoda	Tornidae	Tornus subcarinatus (Montagu 1803)	10
Gastropoda	Vermetidae	Vermetus triquetrus (Bivona-Bernardi 1832)	1
Gastropoda	Vermetidae	Vermetidae sp.	10
Gastropoda	Calyptraeidae	Crepidula unguiformis (Lamarck 1822)	2
Gastropoda	Triviidae	Trivia mediterranea (Risso 1826)	5
Gastropoda	Muricidae	Muricopsis cristata (Brocchi 1814)	5
Gastropoda	Cystiscidae	Gibberula oryza (Lamarck 1822)	15
Gastropoda	Cystiscidae	Gibberula spp.	163
Gastropoda	Marginellidae	Granulina melitensis (Smriglio, Mariottini & Rufini 1998)	16
Gastropoda	Mitridae	Episcomitra cornicula (L. 1758)	12

Class	Family	Species	Number
Gastropoda	Costellariidae	Pusia ebenus (Lamarck 1811)	10
Gastropoda	Costellariidae	Pusia savignyi (Payraudeau 1826)	3
Gastropoda	Costellariidae	Pusia tricolor (Gmelin 1791)	13
Gastropoda	Buccinidae	Euthria cornea (L. 1758)	1
Gastropoda	Buccinidae	Chauvetia sp.	27
Gastropoda	Pisaniidae	Pisania striata (Gmelin 1791)	1
Gastropoda	Pisaniidae	Aplus scaber (Locard 1891)	76
Gastropoda	Nassariidae	Tritia cuvierii (Payraudeau 1826)	1
Gastropoda	Columbellidae	Columbella rustica (L. 1758)	48
Gastropoda	Columbellidae	Mitrella scripta (L. 1758)	4
Gastropoda	Columbellidae	Mitrella svelta (Kobelt 1889)	1
Gastropoda	Mitromorphidae	Mitromorpha columbellaria (Scacchi 1836)	5
Gastropoda	Mitromorphidae	Mitromorpha olivoidea (Cantraine 1835)	83
Gastropoda	Mangeliidae	Mangelia taeniata (Deshayes 1835)	12
Gastropoda	Mangeliidae	Mangelia vauquelini (Payraudeau 1826)	4
Gastropoda	Raphitomidae	Clathromangelia granum (Philippi 1844)	6
Gastropoda	Raphitomidae	Raphitoma sp.	4
Gastropoda	Conidae	Conus ventricosus (Gmelin 1791)	34
Gastropoda	Cornirostridae	Tomura depressa (Granata-Grillo 1877)	2
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Parthenina emaciata (Brusina 1866)	5
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Folinella excavata (Philippi 1836)	5
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Chrysallida interstincta (J. Adams 1797)	1
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Chrysallida sp.	6
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Odostomella doliolum (Philippi 1844)	22
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Eulimella cerullii (Cossmann 1916)	1
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Megastomia conoidea (Brocchi 1814)	7
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Auristomia fusulus (Monterosato 1878)	2
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Ondina vitrea (Brusina 1866)	1
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Pyrgostylus striatulus (L. 1758)	1
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Turbonilla pumila (G. Seguenza 1876)	1
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Turbonilla sinuosa (Jeffreys 1884)	5
Gastropoda	Pyramidellidae	Turbonilla sp.	1
Gastropoda	Bullidae	Bulla striata (Bruguière 1792)	
Gastropoda	Siphonariidae	Williamia gussoni (O.G. Costa 1829)	4
Gastropoda	Trimusculidae	Trimusculus mammillaris (L. 1758)	4

Class	Family	Species	Number
Bivalvia	Nuculidae	Nucula sp.	2
Bivalvia	Nuculanidae	Lembulus pella (L. 1758)	1
Bivalvia	Arcidae	Arca noae (L. 1758)	31
Bivalvia	Arcidae	Barbatia barbata (L. 1758)	33
Bivalvia	Noetiidae	Striarca lactea (L. 1758)	43
Bivalvia	Mytilidae	Mytilidae sp. 1	2
Bivalvia	Mytilidae	Mytilidae sp. 2	5
Bivalvia	Pectinidae	Pectinidae spec.	3
Bivalvia	Spondylidae	Spondylus gaederopus (L. 1758)	5
Bivalvia	Limidae	Lima lima (L. 1758)	14
Bivalvia	Limidae	Limaria hians (Gmelin 1791)	1
Bivalvia	Lucinidae	Ctena decussata (O.G. Costa 1829)	18
Bivalvia	Chamidae	Chama gryphoides (L. 1758)	31
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Cardita calyculata (L. 1758)	71
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Glans trapezia (L. 1767)	45
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Parvicardium scriptum (Bucquoy, Dautzenberg & Dollfus 1892)	9
Bivalvia	Veneridae	Venus verrucosa (L. 1758)	2
Bivalvia	Veneridae	Irus irus (L. 1758)	10
Scaphopoda	Dentaliidae	Antalis vulgaris (da Costa 1778)	1

Tab. II. Species list of MSL in taxonomic order.

Class	Family	Species	Number
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Clanculus jussieui (Payraudeau 1826)	4
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Jujubinus exasperatus (Pennant 1777)	5
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Jujubinus striatus (L. 1758)	2
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Gibbula ardens (Salis Marschlins 1793)	23
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Steromphala adansonii (Payraudeau 1826)	257
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Steromphala rarilineata (Michaud 1829)	2
Gastropoda	Trochidae	Steromphala umbilicaris (L. 1758)	
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia pullus (L. 1758)	
Gastropoda	Phasianellidae	Tricolia speciosa (Megerle von Mühlfeld 1824)	
Gastropoda	Cerithiidae	Bittium cf. latreillii (Payraudeau 1826)	
Gastropoda	Cerithiidae	Bittium reticulatum (da Costa 1778)	33
Gastropoda	Cerithiidae	Cerithium vulgatum (Bruguière 1792) 3699	
Gastropoda	Potamididae	Pirenella conica (Blainville 1829) 53	

Class	Family	Species	Number
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa sp.1	1
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Rissoa sp.2	1
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Setia maculata (Monterosato 1869)	3
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania discors (T. Allan 1818)	1
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania mamillata (Risso 1826)	6
Gastropoda	Rissoidae	Alvania sp.	1
Gastropoda	Truncatellidae	Truncatella subcylindrica (L. 1767)	2
Gastropoda	Vermetidae	Vermetidae sp.	2
Gastropoda	Naticidae	Naticarius hebraeus (Martyn 1786)	1
Gastropoda	Naticidae	Natica sp.	8
Gastropoda	Muricidae	Hexaplex trunculus (L. 1758)	12
Gastropoda	Costellariidae	Pusia ebenus (Lamarck 1811)	1
Gastropoda	Nassariidae	Tritia cuvierii (Payraudeau 1826)	48
Gastropoda	Nassariidae	Tritia neritea (L. 1758)	1
Gastropoda	Columbellidae	Columbella rustica (L. 1758)	33
Gastropoda	Columbellidae	Mitrella scripta (L. 1758)	3
Gastropoda	Mangeliidae	Mangelia striolata (Risso 1826)	1
Gastropoda	Conidae	Conus ventricosus (Gmelin 1791)	119
Gastropoda	Bullidae	Bulla striata (Bruguière 1792)	2
Bivalvia	Nuculidae	Nucula sp.	1
Bivalvia	Arcidae	Arca noae (L. 1758)	2
Bivalvia	Arcidae	Barbatia barbata (L. 1758)	2
Bivalvia	Glycymerididae	Glycymeris glycymeris (L. 1758)	1
Bivalvia	Anomiidae	Anomia ephippium (L. 1758)	1
Bivalvia	Lucinidae	Loripes orbiculatus (Poli 1795)	323
Bivalvia	Carditidae	Cardites antiquatus (L. 1758)	33
Bivalvia	Carditidae	Glans trapezia (L. 1767)	8
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Cardiidae sp.	2
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Cerastoderma glaucum (Bruguière 1789)	5
Bivalvia	Cardiidae	Parvicardium exiguum (Gmelin 1791)	5
Bivalvia	Tellinidae	Gastrana fragilis (L. 1758)	4
Bivalvia	Veneridae	Polititapes aureus (Gmelin 1791)	5

37 families were present for the class Gastropoda and 18 species within 12 families were present within the class Bivalvia (Tab. 3). The most abundant family at the SPI site was the Rissoidae one, with 1317 sampled individuals

Class	Family	Species	Individuals
Scaphopoda	1	1	1
Polyplacophora	1	1	35
Gastropoda	37	95	2554
Bivalvia	12	18	326
Total	51	115	2916

Tab. III. Number of families, species and individuals found at SPI

(belonging to 15 species). The most abundant species was *Alvania subcrenulata* (Bucquoy, Dautzenberg & Dollfus 1884), with 926 individuals. Besides Rissoidae, Pyramidellidae was anoher abundant family, with 58 individuals (13 species) being recorded. A hypothetical maximum of 134 (\pm 14) species was estimated by presuming a sampling total of 6000 individuals for the SPI site (Fig. 2).

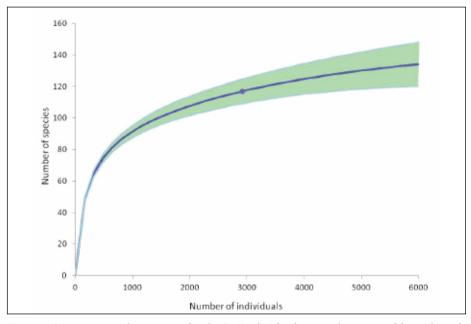


Fig. 2 — Species extrapolation curve for the St. Pauls Island site, with upper and lower bounds (shaded areas), generated through the individual-based rarefaction technique. The blue point marks the observed number of individuals and species and so the full set of collected data.

At the MSL site, no Scaphopoda nor Polyplacophora individuals were recorded. Gastropoda were represented by 32 species belong to 15 families. For Bivalvia, 13 species within 9 families were recorded (Tab. 4). Cerithiidae

Class	Family	Species	Individuals
Gastropoda	15	32	4354
Bivalvia	9	13	392
Total	24	45	4746

Tab. IV. Number of families, species and individuals found at MSL

were by far the most frequently-recorded family (3736 sampled individuals belonging to 3 species). The most frequently recorded species was *Cerithium vulgatum*, with 3699 individuals. The individual-based extrapolation exercise for a hypothetical total of 6000 sampled individuals gave an estimated species number of 49 (± 5) species at the MSL site (Fig. 3).

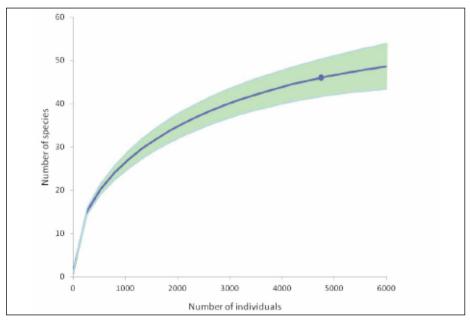


Fig. 3 — Species extrapolation curve for the Marsaxlokk site, with upper and lower bounds (shaded areas), generated through the individual-based rarefaction technique. The blue point marks the observed number of individuals and species and so the full set of the collected data.

Furthermore, the following terrestrial mollusc species were recorded within our samples: 10 individuals of *Tudorella* cf. *melitense* (Sowerby 1847) (SPI site) and 1 individual of *Cepaea* sp. (MSL) that could not be fully identified due to the poor state of preservation.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides insight into the number of mollusc species and families at the Maltese locations SPI and MSL. We can say now that both locations are fundamentally different with regard to the composition of marine shelled Mollusca as well as in their sampled and estimated number of species. One could hypothesize that differences in the degree and intensity of anthropogenic disturbance at the two sites could be the major reason behind the observed differences in mollusc assemblage species number for the two sampled sites, although site-specific differences (e.g. degree of benthic habitat heterogeneity, wave exposure values, granulometric properties of the sediment) could be shaping the same assemblages. Consequently, further research concerning the composition of the marine shelled Mollusca assemblage in Maltese nearshore waters is highly recommended, especially in identifying the sensitivity and response of different mollusc species to different human impacts. Such trait-based investigations would also be useful in identifying habitat and food preferences.

Shell grit sampling has - besides its suitability as a standardized mollusc sampling method - some disadvantages. Unidentifiable remnants of shell grit are one of these. In our case, especially at the SPI site, there were numerous indeterminate mollusc individuals or shell fragments in the rest of the grit, with a definite taxonomic identification not being possible due to the condition of these remains. Another problem is the probable under-representation of species having very thin shells that break easy, such that they cannot be identified any longer.

The occurrence of a particular mollusc species is being inferred from the occurrence of empty, beached shells. The latter does not conclusively indicate that the listed species are still present in the contiguous marine area since long-distance transport of the recorded shell might have occurred (especially by virtue of intense storm action). Differences in the abundance of shells beached for different species may also reflect real differences in such abundance values.

Additional physical factors (e.g. seasonal hydrodynamic fluctuations, as for sea current direction and intensity) will affect the composition of the beached micro molluscs. The prevailing direction of the sea currents might determine the point of accumulation of the shell grit. The size and weight of the shells are another source of variability, since large and heavy ones are not as easily washed ashore as small ones. The slope and profile, as well as the sediment grain properties of a coastal zone also play an instrumental role in shaping the composition of the beached micro mollusc assemblage.

The present study provides a baseline or benchmark for future micro-

mollusc assemblage monitoring by proposing a simple and streamlined protocol to hypothesize total species richness at a given location, which can overcome differences in sampling effort between locations. Additional correlation analyses, linking the intensity of a number of anthropogenic activities operating at a site with the total hypothesized number of species occurring at the same site, might enable the adoption of changes in micro mollusc assemblage as a proxy for the degree of environmental change within a coastal area. Such an analysis needs to be applied over a broader spectrum of coastal sites representing different degrees of anthropogenic disturbance besides different geomorphological (e.g. wave dynamics, sediment parameters) variables.

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