

Revealing higher than expected meiofaunal diversity in Antarctic sediments

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1 **Revealing higher than expected meiofaunal diversity in Antarctic sediments: a metabarcoding**
2 **approach**

3
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25

26 **Abstract**

27

28 Although studies show that Antarctic mega- and macrofauna are highly diverse, little is known
29 about meiofaunal biodiversity in sediment communities, which are a vital part of a healthy and
30 functional ecosystem. This is the first study to analyse community DNA (targeting meiofauna)
31 using metabarcoding to investigate biodiversity levels in sediment communities of the Antarctic
32 Peninsula. The results show that almost all of the meiofaunal biodiversity in the benthic habitat has
33 yet to be characterised, levels of biodiversity were higher than expected and similar to temperate
34 regions, albeit with the existence of potentially new and locally adapted species never described
35 before at the molecular level. The Rothera meiofaunal sample sites showed four dominant
36 eukaryotic groups, the nematodes, arthropods, platyhelminthes, and the annelids; some of which
37 could comprise species complexes. Comparisons with deep-sea data from the same region suggest
38 little exchange of Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) between depths with the nematodes
39 prevalent at all depths, but sharing the shallow water benthos with the copepods. This study
40 provides a preliminary analysis of benthic Antarctic Peninsula meiofauna using high throughput
41 sequencing which substantiates how little is known on the biodiversity of one of the most diverse,
42 yet underexplored communities of the Antarctic: the benthos.

43

44

45

46 **Introduction**

47 Much recent effort has been expended into characterising Antarctic marine biodiversity and it is
48 clear that it is significantly higher than was thought in previous decades, particularly in relation to
49 marine invertebrates^{1,2}. An increasing number of cryptic species are being discovered³ and in some
50 invertebrate groups, such as pycnogonids and polychaete worms, Antarctica has significantly higher
51 diversity than the global averages⁴. However, even the most recent reviews of marine biodiversity
52 in Antarctica have concentrated on marine mega- and macrofauna with relatively little discussion
53 on endemic meiofauna, particularly those metazoans inhabiting marine sediments⁵. In a recent UN
54 Assessment of the State of the Ocean I (<http://www.worldoceanassessment.org/>), meiofauna and the
55 poles were highlighted as being of particular importance for future research. There is currently very
56 limited knowledge on polar meiofauna; the extent of their biodiversity and their contribution to
57 polar ecosystem functioning

58

59 Marine sediments are some of the most species-rich habitats on Earth. They are one of the main
60 contributors to ocean health and functioning, but one of the least studied habitats in the biosphere⁶.
61 Within marine sediments, the meiofauna (the microscopic taxa generally between 45-500µm) are
62 important members of the benthic ecosystem, playing a critical role in carbon transfer and nutrient
63 cycling⁶. They participate in ecosystem energy flows via the consumption of dissolved organic
64 carbon and from grazing on primary producers and bacteria⁷. In addition they play important roles
65 in the consumption of detritus and predation. They excrete nutrients which can be used by
66 phytoplankton, bacteria and associated meiofauna, but they also act as a food source for benthic
67 invertebrates and higher predators⁶. Thus, evaluations of benthic meiofauna biodiversity are of
68 critical importance for understanding ecosystem functioning, sustainability and resilience, as well as
69 understanding carbon cycling in the largest part of the World, the seabed⁶. In addition meiofauna
70 represent useful tools for studying change within an ecosystem and could be particularly useful for
71 understanding the effects of anthropogenic impacts and climate change⁶.

72

73 One region of particular note with respect to environmental change is the Western Antarctic
74 Peninsula, some areas of which, particularly in the north west, are regarded as experiencing the
75 most rapid rate of climate warming on the Antarctic continent⁸. However, the situation is complex
76 and exacerbated by the lack of high density measurements. Recent analyses suggest that the
77 atmospheric warming along the Peninsula has ceased⁹, but there is uncertainty whether this trend
78 will continue, what the drivers are, and whether this cessation of warming is reflected in
79 oceanographic data which is still showing changes in sea ice and retreat of glaciers¹⁰. What is clear
80 is that this is still a region in transition and highly vulnerable¹¹. Surface ocean temperatures rose by
81 more than 1°C in the second half of the 20th Century and the deeper layers have also warmed due to
82 increased upwelling of warm Upper Circumpolar Deep Water. Sea ice duration has reduced
83 significantly in the past few decades (by 100 days since 1978), which impacts not only on primary
84 production and water column stratification, but also on the frequency of iceberg scouring^{11,12}. About
85 80% of glaciers along the Peninsula are in retreat, which has increased the amount of sediment and
86 fresh-water in the system¹⁰. Given the huge uncertainty concerning climate trends in this region,
87 continued monitoring is vital, as is the evaluation of the potential impact on the endemic fauna. The
88 Southern Ocean fauna have evolved to life in freezing seas in relative isolation for the last 15Myr¹³
89 and as a consequence have evolved a series of physiological and biochemical adaptations to life in
90 the cold, are highly stenothermal and poorly adapted to rapid change¹⁴.

91

92 Advances in molecular and sequencing methodologies now enable us to evaluate biodiversity levels
93 from even the most remote habitats, in a way, not previously possible. Large-scale environmental
94 DNA (eDNA) approaches using high throughput sequencing (shortly referred to as metabarcoding)
95 have recently been applied to examine biodiversity levels at the poles. To date polar marker gene
96 studies have mainly focussed on microbial communities within soil, ice cores, microbial mats and
97 melt water^{15,16}, marine viruses¹⁷, freshwater picoplankton¹⁸ and more recently, microbial

98 biodiversity, on the shelf and the deep-sea^{19,20}. These studies have provided intriguing pilot data on
99 micro- and meiofaunal biodiversity in this largely understudied and extreme environment. Whilst
100 there is a long history of biological sediment analyses at research stations along the Peninsula, these
101 have been based on either taxonomic identification or stable isotope analyses²¹⁻²⁵. High throughput
102 sequencing of DNA derived from community environmental samples provides a powerful tool with
103 which to complement existing approaches and provides a timely opportunity to gain insight into
104 alpha and beta-diversity of Antarctic meiofauna and start to assess their likely resilience in the
105 context of climate change.

106

107 The first aim of this study was to provide a global description of marine Antarctic meiofaunal
108 diversity and community structure in shallow waters, using high throughput sequencing approaches
109 on community DNA. Secondly, to compare Antarctic shallow-water datasets with deep-sea samples
110 taken in the same area (both published and un-published) to identify general diversity trends in
111 freezing habitats and potential depth gradients. A third aspect was to compare the data generated
112 here with those of another metabarcoding study on meiofaunal samples from a mid-temperate
113 region using the same 18S rRNA region to identify relative levels of biodiversity and whether these
114 were markedly reduced in the Antarctic samples.

115

116

117 **RESULTS**

118 The total number of reads derived from the 454 FLX sequencing platform from the Antarctic
119 Peninsula sampled sites was 61,057; which was reduced to 49,655 reads after filtering and chimera
120 removal. This level of reduction in read numbers was comparable with previous 454 eDNA
121 studies^{26,27}. This particular chemistry introduces higher error rates than the Illumina platform within
122 homopolymer regions due to accumulated light intensity variation, but these reads can be identified
123 and removed *in silico*. Additional reads were removed as they were only present in singletons and

124 through the application of UCHIME, which is known to be a stringent filtering step²⁷. Metazoan
125 OTU numbers varied moderately between sample sites with a mean number of 90 OTUs in Hangar
126 Cove (stdv \pm 36.09), 48.7 OTUs in Rothera Point (stdv \pm 26.05), 87 OTUs in Islands (stdv \pm 60.65)
127 and South Cove with mean OTUs number of 47 (stdv \pm 24.24). A major proportion of the OTUs
128 from each site (16-31%) were not assigned to any annotated taxa in SILVA database (Table 1). In
129 terms of those taxa with matches in SILVA, the nematodes had the highest OTU numbers among
130 the main phyla, with 92 OTUs followed by the arthropods and platyhelminthes represented by 47
131 and 37 OTUs respectively (Figure 1). More detailed taxonomy assignments retrieved for each
132 clustered OTU (using a cut-off of 90% to any reference nSSU) showed that the majority (95-98%)
133 of platyhelminth, arthropod and nematod OTUs were not present in the SILVA database (Figure 1).
134 In total this represented 171 OTUs (30% of OTUs comprising 37671 individual sequences) which
135 may represent un-sampled diversity. The annelids and molluscs, however, had 23% and 50%
136 respectively, of their OTUs with a 100% identity to previously sequenced taxa. The Brachiopoda,
137 Echinodermata, Cnidaria, Gastrotricha and Bryozoa were grouped as BECGB with a total of 9
138 OTUs where 11% of which had 100% identity matches to previously annotated sequence data.
139 Sampling saturation profiles showed that the sequencing effort was not sufficient to determine the
140 full extent of the diversity for any of the four sampled sites (Figure 2). The slope of the OTU
141 rarefaction curves did not approach saturation at 97% cut-off for all the meiobenthic phyla and
142 more specifically for the nematodes, arthropods and even for the platyhelminthes which comprised
143 a low abundance phylum where rarefaction curves tend to converge and reach an asymptote²⁸
144 (Supplementary Figure S1) and therefore the data described here are underestimates.

145

146 Community composition by number of OTUs did not show significant differences between the
147 sites, with the nematodes totalling ca 30-50 OTUs (Kruskal-Wallis, $p=0.189$) followed by the
148 arthropods with ca. 20-30 OTUs (Kruskal-Wallis, $p=0.901$), the platyhelminthes with ca. 10-20
149 (Kruskal-Wallis, $p=0.494$), OTUs and the annelids with ca. 3-9 OTUS (Kruskal-Wallis, $p=0.110$),

150 found in the Antarctic meiobenthic samples (Supplementary Figure S2). In fact, the majority of the
151 samples showed that 90-100% of the OTUs were shared between sites, with the exception of one of
152 the triplicates of the Islands sample that had approximately 30% of unique OTUs (Figure 3). Whilst
153 all sites showed globally very similar communities, cluster analysis for taxonomic patterns of
154 meiofaunal communities based on Sørensen similarities of OTU presence/absence data for the
155 combined sites showed two well-defined groups within the Antarctic Peninsula sampling sites
156 (Supplementary Figure S3). The Islands and Hangar Cove were more similar to each other, sharing
157 approximately 20% more OTUs than with South Cove and Rothera Point (data not shown).

158

159 Graphical representation of community composition from all sample sites was visualized with the
160 Krona chart (Figure 4a). Here, the eukaryotic taxonomic composition of all sites combined showed
161 that the nematodes comprised 32% of the total eukaryotic OTUs. Followed by the arthropods,
162 platyhelminthes and annelids with 18%, 12% and 4% representing the total eukaryotic biodiversity,
163 respectively. Within the nematodes two taxonomic classes predominated: the Chromadorea (80%
164 OTUs) and the Enoplea (20% OTUs) (Figure 4b, Supplementary Table S1.1 – S1.3, Supplementary
165 Material S1). Within these two taxa, Monhysterida (37% OTUs) and Enoplida (19% OTUs)
166 comprised the major proportion of the identifications respectively (Figure 4b, Supplementary Table
167 S1.1 – S1.3). Copepoda dominated the arthropods with 87% of the identified OTUs. The
168 Harpacticoida were particularly abundant at 76% of the Copepoda (Figure 4b, Supplementary Table
169 S1.1 – S1.3, Supplementary Material S1). Outside of the crustaceans, the Acari represented 2% of
170 the arthropod OTUs. The platyhelminthes were mainly represented by with the Rhabditophora
171 (97%) with predominance of the orders Rhabdocoela (62%) and Macrostomida (31%) (Figure 4b,
172 Supplementary Table S1.1 – S1.3, Supplementary Material S1). The annelids were mainly
173 composed of the Polychaeta (85%) and the Haplotaxida (15%). The Polychaeta were dominated by
174 the subclass Palpata (31%) and infraclass Scolecida (54%). The Palpata comprised the Phylodocida
175 order (23%) and taxa with uncertain taxonomic position (Incertae Sedis) (8%). The Scolecida

176 covered five distinct families with the Spionida (15%), Orbibidae (15%), Terebellida (8%),
177 Ophellidae (8%) and the Capitellida (8%) (Figure 4b, Supplementary Table S1.1 – S1.3,
178 Supplementary Material S1), identifications which have been further substantiated by 18s rRNA
179 molecular barcoding of polychaete samples from shallow-water hard and soft sediment
180 communities near Rothera (Clark, unpublished data).

181

182 The shallow-water comparisons with deep-water samples taken from along the Antarctic Peninsula
183 showed very different community compositions (Supplementary Figure S4). Although the annelids
184 and nematodes were found at both depths, they were particularly dominant in the deep-water
185 samples. Shallow-water samples had a much higher percentage of arthropods (or more precisely,
186 copepods). The Nemertea and Hemicordata were essentially only found in the deep samples, with
187 the Cnidaria, Echinodermata and Mollusca more common in the shallows. The difference in
188 community composition was further substantiated by pairwise comparisons of the number of shared
189 OTUs between the different deep-water samples with the combined shallow samples, with the
190 shallow-water sites sharing on average ca. 15% of OTUs with the different deep-water sites
191 (Supplementary Figure S5). It should be noted that comparisons of two of the deep-water sites taken
192 at a similar depth (CTD, 515m and Laubeuf, 500m) showed only 20.4% shared OTUs, indicating
193 the patchiness of distributions (similar shallow-water comparisons between the Islands (13m) and
194 Rothera Point (15m) showed 26.7% shared OTUs) (data not shown).

195

196 **DISCUSSION**

197 This study shows interesting insights into levels of meiofaunal biodiversity in Antarctic sediments,
198 suggesting similar levels of meiobenthic diversity when compared to other marine studies carried
199 out in more temperate regions using the same nSSU gene region²⁶, which is higher than expected.
200 Such evidence emerges when comparing the incomplete slopes of the rarefaction curves and OTU
201 numbers obtained here with a previous study on a Scottish temperate benthic ecosystem²⁶ using an

202 identical 18S rRNA gene region, a 97% identity cut-off and the same number of replicates, showing
203 both sites to be very similar (e.g. 540 Antarctic and 650 Scottish meiofauna total OTUs). This
204 evidence is not in line with paradigms of reducing diversity with latitude²⁹. It also suggests that
205 Antarctic meiofaunal biodiversity could be as rich and diverse as that found in temperate areas.

206

207 This preliminary study reveals that almost all of the main meiobenthic biodiversity is yet to be
208 described, particularly with regard to taxonomic identification and development of associated
209 barcodes, since only 1-4% of our taxa had a full taxonomy match against public databases (Figure
210 1). Such low levels of taxonomy assignments are almost certainly the result of the lack of Antarctic
211 species in eukaryotic sequence databases, limited and patchy sampling regimes and the almost total
212 absence of knowledge of Antarctic meiobenthic biodiversity in many taxa³⁰. Studies on the benthos
213 around the Antarctic Peninsula have found more than 20% of new families, genera and species,
214 which emphasizes that these habitats contain not only new species records but previously
215 undescribed taxa^{3,31}. For example, more than half of the known gastropods and bivalve mollusc
216 species in the Antarctic have only been found once or twice³⁰. Although this level of novelty might
217 seem atypical for such an extensive but harsh environment, it is somehow reasonable that a
218 topographically complex and remote area such as the Antarctic would be bound to contain new
219 species due to the long period of biogeographic isolation via the Antarctic Circumpolar Current,
220 especially if some of these areas have been little or never sampled before³².

221

222 In this study, the phylogenetic analysis and the taxonomic assignments retrieved from the SILVA
223 database produced four dominant taxonomically distinct metazoan groups, the nematodes,
224 arthropods, platyhelminthes and the annelids (Figure 4a and b, Supplemental Material S1). These
225 results are supported by previous studies showing that nematodes and Harpacticoid copepods
226 dominate the Antarctic benthos^{33,34}. Additionally, very few studies describe platyhelminthes living
227 within Antarctic sediments possibly because they are commonly known to live in the sea-ice and

228 feed on sea ice diatoms³⁵ but may also be explained by a likely high destruction rate of their soft
229 bodies when sampled for physical taxonomic studies. Most annelids found in this study, were
230 dominated by the polychaetes, which tend to be transient meiofauna associated with Antarctic
231 sediments³⁶. These data are supported by a macrofaunal (>1mm) taxonomic study in the same
232 region, which showed a predominance of Arthropods and Annelids (polychaete worms) in the
233 sediments³⁷. The more fragile nematode samples were largely identified using molecular
234 techniques, which showed them to be the dominant microtaxa, followed by Arthropods and
235 Platyhelminthes³⁷. In our study there were also some identified phyla with very few assigned OTUs
236 (Mollusca, Brachiopoda and Echinodermata). However, given the size fractionation methodology
237 used in this study (<500µm, >45µm), these low abundant OTUs would be either traces of larval or
238 very early post-settlement stages or more likely, gut contents of detritivores, cell debris, faeces,
239 pieces of dermis etc. from adult benthic colonisers. Indeed the macrofaunal study showed that
240 molluscs were highly represented, particularly by *Mysella charcoti* and *Aequiyoldia eightsi*, which
241 would have been largely excluded in meiofaunal fractionation³⁷. Taxonomy studies in the Southern
242 Ocean^{1,2} have described a greater number of species than presented in this data set here (for
243 example 524 nematode species compared with our estimate of 140 OTUs). However the fact that
244 we identified such a number of OTUs in shallow waters at four sampling sites, some of which are
245 geographically close (rather than the whole of the Southern Ocean for the 524 species²)
246 (Supplementary Figure S2) validates the conclusion that there is still much to discover, especially in
247 the sediments.

248

249 While, the four meiobenthic phyla described here are the main representatives found in the benthos
250 anywhere in the world, there will be taxonomic differences in community structures at the species
251 level. This is reflected in trophic features and reproductive strategies, which in the case of the
252 shallow-water meiofauna in Antarctica are adjusted to a cold, highly disturbed and food limiting
253 environment. Stable isotope analyses of meiofaunal communities in Potter Cove, Antarctic

254 Peninsula (latitude -62.235, longitude -58.663) have shown relatively small food webs, based
255 mainly on non-selective deposit feeders, epistrate feeders and a higher proportion of predators²².
256 This was substantiated in our study where the taxonomic assignment within the nematodes were
257 dominated by the *Neochromadora*, *Desmolaimus* and *Sabieteria* genera, suggesting that nematode
258 assemblages were mainly composed of deposit feeders and epistrate feeders, which can minimize
259 interspecific competition. There was also a proportion of Enoplea nematodes that are known to be
260 predators/omnivores. Such different feeding strategies will alleviate species competition to
261 available food^{38,39}. Molecular analyses, such as metabarcoding used here, allow the identification of
262 previously unknown levels of biodiversity²⁰ and enable studies that would otherwise not be possible
263 in such detail using other methodologies. In this study, for each of the main meiobenthic phyla
264 (nematodes, arthropods, platyhelminthes and annelids) (Supplemental Material S1) there were some
265 well-supported clades, particularly in the nematodes and nematodes, where OTUs assigned to the
266 same genus, could potentially comprise species complexes. However without further molecular and
267 taxonomic analysis, these would be difficult to define, but would be highly likely⁴⁰.

268

269 Clustering of sites according to community composition similarity revealed two well-defined
270 groups (Supplementary Figure S3). The first composed of South Cove (8m depth) and Rothera
271 Point (15m depth), represented virtually adjacent sites and thus their clustering confirmed the
272 similarity of their meiobenthic community assemblages. The second cluster was comprised of
273 Hangar Cove (18m depth) and the Islands (13m depth). This is substantiated by the macrofaunal
274 study which showed significant patchiness and differences between different coves³⁷. South Cove
275 and Rothera Point are more exposed areas with smaller levels of sediment than Hangar Cove or the
276 Islands and likely subject to different current patterns within Ryder Bay and also increased iceberg
277 scour. Generally, replicates of each ecological location always clustered together and thus the
278 combined replicate meiobenthic samples accurately reflected alpha diversity from the Antarctic
279 Peninsula, as shown previously in similar studies in more temperate areas^{41,42}. Meiobenthic

280 community composition can be extremely variable even within small spatial scales^{21,26,43-46}. Local
281 patchiness and structure within these communities is probably a consequence of a combination of
282 several biotic and abiotic factors^{41,42}. Similar to global observations, sediment type and grain size
283 play large roles in structuring Antarctic communities^{21,23,37}, with the additional factors of food
284 supply, which influences species richness and ice disturbance²³. Glacial retreat, ice shelf collapse
285 and the increasing frequency of iceberg scour are significantly impacting the Antarctic benthos,
286 particularly the more shallow waters^{12,21-23,47}. Species return is largely dictated by motility, with the
287 three main methods of return being locomotion, advection by storms and larval re-colonisation⁴⁸.
288 Overall, only the most resilient animals (probably r-selection species) are able to regularly resist
289 such local impacts and prosper in these harsh environments⁴⁹. Studies on Antarctic sediments have
290 shown that nematodes are able to resist and survive in such harsh conditions, namely after ice
291 disturbance nematode communities are very little impacted³³, which again reflects their dominance
292 within the benthos described here.

293

294 The shallow-water data were also compared to six deep sea samples from the Peninsula region
295 (Supplementary Figures S4 and S5). There was a clear difference in phyla composition with the
296 deep sea sites dominated by nematodes and the shallow by both nematodes and arthropods (or more
297 specifically copepods). These data confirm existing published information on the differences
298 between shallow and deep meiofauna and fit with previous analyses showing biodiversity patterns
299 associated with sediment type and grain size. The shallow samples comprised coarser grains, which
300 are a more favourable habitat for copepods, whilst the deeper sites comprised more fine sediments
301 (mud) suitable for nematodes, as noted in previous studies^{20,23,37}. What was interesting to note was
302 the relatively small overlap in shared OTUs between the shallow and deep samples (Supplementary
303 Figure S5). Because of the way the OTUs were clustered at 97% similarity, “same OTU” in these
304 comparisons may represent the same genus or family, but is unlikely to be the same species in all
305 OTUs^{50,51}. However, the 97% cut-off for OTU clustering is a known proxy for most meiofaunal

306 studies. Although the physical processing of the shallow and deep samples was slightly different,
307 the rest of the process was identical (primers used in the initial amplification reactions and
308 processing of the data such as removal of non-metazoan OTUs from the comparisons between the
309 two studies) and contributed to standardising the data comparison. Moreover, the higher sensitivity
310 for extracellular DNA of the methods used in the deeper sediments should have actually increased
311 the amount of overlap between shallow and deep due to sedimentation, yet very limited overlap was
312 observed.

313

314 This lack of overlap between shallow and deep sites is particularly interesting as the deep CTD
315 samples were quite close to all the shallow sites (Figure 5) and the CTD sampling site was at the
316 bottom of the Marguerite Bay trough. One could expect all the OTUs from the shallow sites to
317 passively sink/disperse to the deepest point and this clearly does not happen or the conditions at
318 depth select against shallow dwelling species. This depth zonation has been shown previously^{20,34}
319 and as yet, there is not a clear answer as to whether there is true depth zonation of meiofauna or
320 whether the shallow DNAs are simply too diluted or degraded by the time they reach the deep.
321 Further to this, more sampling effort would be needed to clarify meiofauna zonation patterns since
322 the rarefaction curves for the sampled Antarctic areas remained incomplete and thus community
323 composition and diversity levels are yet to be determined. The question of faunal exchange between
324 deep and shallow waters is the subject of much debate and may vary according to species ecology,
325 but is a clear area for further research²³. Interestingly even after five years, the meiofaunal
326 communities of the innermost embayments of Larsen B (at 242-427m depth) were still much more
327 similar to those from the deep sea (800-4000m), than shallow shelf communities suggesting that
328 perhaps such zonation does exist. In addition these data show that recolonisation and restructuring
329 of meiofaunal communities is not rapid and less likely to be subject to the rapid shifts as seen in
330 motile megabenthic communities^{21-23,52}. Because they are less motile, they may be forced to adapt
331 and thus the signals of change may be clearer in these smaller species⁶. However, what is clear in

332 both shallow and deep-sea Antarctic samples is the high levels of undiscovered taxa and potentially
333 high levels of biodiversity, in what are often described as species-poor regions of the globe.

334

335 **Conclusions**

336 Our results suggest that meiofaunal biodiversity in the shallow waters of the Antarctic is at least
337 similar to that of temperate regions. The Antarctic comprises ca. 10-11% of the World's
338 continental-shelf-area and the total number of validated marine species (mega- and macrofauna)
339 described for the Southern Ocean exceeds 8,000 species, with at least as many more expected^{1,2}.
340 Antarctic meiofaunal descriptions are relatively few to date and have concentrated on taxonomic
341 characterisation. Taxonomically classification of all species is often not practical due to the lack of
342 suitably qualified taxonomists and the sheer volume of work required, thus environmental high
343 throughput sequencing enables faster surveys into understanding biodiversity, albeit providing a
344 slightly different type of data. It also facilitates studies that would otherwise be impossible
345 particularly when applied to bulk environmental samples containing small and easily damaged taxa
346 obtained from inhospitable regions²⁷. The study described here showed that much of the Rothera
347 meiofaunal biodiversity is yet to be described, as no plateau was reached from the rarefaction
348 curves and most OTUs could not be annotated with confidence using the public databases. It also
349 shows that the genomic variability of the 18S rRNA gene can effectively be used to reflect the high
350 but also intangible level of biodiversity even in such a relatively small dataset used in this study and
351 that the methodology is highly tractable for more detailed samplings in the future. These will enable
352 us to gain a more accurate understanding of patchiness and adaptation of meiobenthic communities
353 to different environments. This approach may be particularly useful for detecting molecular
354 taxonomic signatures of response to climate change not only in terms of gradual sea warming and
355 acidification, but also the emergence of new habitats resulting from anthropogenic change.

356

357 **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

358

359 **Sample collection**

360 Sediment samples were collected in triplicate at different depths in four different sites near Rothera
361 Station, Adelaide Island on the Antarctic Peninsula (Figure 5). Sampled areas comprised the Islands
362 (67°35.6' S, 68°15.1' W, 13m depth), Hangar Cove (67°33.8' S, 68°07.6' W, 18m depth), South
363 Cove (67°34.2' S, 68°07.9' W, 8m depth) and Rothera Point (67°34'19'S, 68°6'44'W, 15m depth).
364 Samples were collected using a standard corer methodology. All samples were immediately fixed in
365 500 ml storage pots containing 300 ml of DESS (20% DMSO and 0.25 M disodium EDTA,
366 saturated with NaCl, pH 8.0)⁵³. The meiofaunal size fraction was mechanically separated from the
367 sand and concentrated by decanting five times with filtered tap water through a 45 µm filter.
368 Subsequent separation from fine silt was achieved by repetitive centrifugation in 1.16 specific
369 gravity (sg) LUDOX-TM solution⁵⁴. Following centrifugation, each sample was retained on a
370 distinct mesh sieve which was then folded, sliced and placed in a 15 ml falcon tube and kept at -
371 80°C until DNA extraction. Samples were lysed overnight at 55°C in lysis buffer (100 mM Tris-
372 HCl, pH7.5; 100 mM NaCl; 100 mM EDTA; 1% SDS, 500 µg/ ml proteinase K), assisted by
373 spinning wheel mixing, and DNA extracted with the QIAamp DNA Blood Maxi Kit (Qiagen)
374 following the manufacturer's protocol²⁶.

375

376 **Primer design and PCR**

377 Due to the extreme sensitivity of this methodology, all PCR and DNA extractions were carried out
378 in separate rooms and recommended eDNA practices were applied to avoid cross-contamination
379 between samples. The primers were SSU_F04 primer (GCTTGTCTCAAAGATTAAGCC) and
380 SSU_R22mod (5'- CCTGCTGCCTTCCTTRGA -3') were used to amplify approximately 450 bp of
381 the V1–V2 regions of the nuclear small subunit rDNA (18S rDNA)²⁰. Fusion primers, PCR
382 amplification and 454 Roche sequencing were performed as described previously^{26,27}. Specifically,
383 PCR amplification of the specified nSSU region was performed using 1 µl of genomic DNA

384 template (1:500 dilutions) in 3x40 μ l independent reactions with Pfu DNA polymerase (Promega).
385 PCR conditions involved a 5 min denaturation at 95 °C, then 35 cycles with 1 min at 95 °C, 45 s
386 57 °C, 3 min 72 °C and a final extension of 10 min at 72 °C. Negative controls (ultrapure water
387 only) were included for all amplification reactions. Subsequently, triplicates of PCR products were
388 visualized and the expected 450 bp fragment was purified (QIAquick Gel Extraction Kit, Qiagen) in
389 an agarose gel and quantified using the Agilent Bioanalyser 2100. All purified PCR products were
390 diluted to the same concentration, pooled together to create one metagenetic sample/ library and
391 sequenced in one direction (A-Amplicon) on half a plate of a Roche 454 GSFLX platform (2x250
392 bp) at the Centre for Genomic Research, Liverpool. For full details of replicated PCRs and
393 associated MID tags, see Supplementary Table S2.

394

395

396 **Data analysis and generation of OTUs**

397 Raw sequence reads were filtered and denoised using FlowClus⁵⁵. The filtering criteria included
398 truncating reads prior to the first ambiguous base, the reverse primer, or a window of 50bp whose
399 average quality score was less than 25.0. Any reads shorter than 200bp or longer than 600bp were
400 eliminated. For the denoising step, in which pyrosequencing errors were corrected by clustering the
401 flowgrams, a constant value of 0.50 was used for the denoising distance⁵⁶. After denoising, PCR
402 chimeras were removed using UCHIME⁵⁷ (Supplementary Table S2). The remaining reads were then
403 analysed using QIIME⁵⁸. They were clustered into OTUs at 97% sequence similarity using
404 UCLUST⁵⁹ (pick_otus.py), and taxonomic assignment was performed using the Silva 111 database⁶⁰
405 (assign_taxonomy.py), which uses uclust. The uclust consensus taxonomy assigner retrieves the
406 maximum assigned matches for each query sequence. It then assigns the most specific taxonomic
407 label that is associated with at least min_consensus_fraction of the matches. It is acknowledged that
408 the threshold used for the OTU clustering at 97% similarity might cluster genus or family from the
409 same taxa, as intra-specific variability will differ across many taxa/ species. However, this cut-off is

410 known as proxy for most meiofauna species⁵⁰, but cut-offs such as 99% have also been justified as a
411 proxy for some nematode species in more targeted studies⁵¹. For direct ecological comparisons among
412 samples with different read numbers, the percentage of reads in each sample was used instead of read
413 counts and downstream analyses targeted main representatives within meiofauna phyla occupying
414 the Antarctic Peninsula sediment habitats⁴².

415

416 **Data Deposition:** All sequence reads have been deposited in the European Nucleotide Archive
417 (ENA) with accession number ENA: PRJEB1952.

418

419 **Diversity and community analysis**

420 Rarefaction curves were generated with EstimateS 8.2.0 software⁶¹ using the Chao1 richness
421 estimator; nonetheless other richness estimators were tested (ACE, Chao1, Jackknife1 and
422 Bootstrap) and yielded similar results. Sørensen's similarity coefficient among samples was
423 computed based on a presence/absence similarity matrix and was used to create cluster
424 dendrograms with 50 random starts, using primer 6⁶². Using the same software, a similarity profile
425 ('SIMPROF') permutation test, was performed on group-average cluster analysis to test whether the
426 meiobenthic samples differ from each other. In order to further test for significant differences in
427 community composition among sampling sites, a permutational multivariate analysis of variance
428 ('PERMANOVA') was performed. Analyses were based on Sørensen's similarity coefficient on
429 untransformed data of an OTU presence/absence matrix over the four sampled sites, with 1000
430 permutations. Further comparisons between the Antarctic and a Scottish study²⁶ were performed to
431 illustrate possible differences between the numbers of meiofauna OTUs found per phyla in the two
432 habitats. In order for the two studies to be as comparable as possible, all analysis were performed
433 using triplicated samples, similar 18S gene regions and using the same OTU clustering threshold of
434 97%. Antarctic eukaryotic OTUs retrieved from the data analysis were used in a Neighbour-Joining
435 (NJ) phylogeny reconstruction to confirm the taxonomic assignments (Supplemental material S6).

436 Taxonomic contributions using total OTU proportions were visualized using Krona graphs, plotted
437 using the Krona web interface software⁶³ and a non-parametrical statistical test was performed
438 (Kruskal-Walis) to check if number of OTUs per replicated sample site were significantly different
439 Taxonomic assignment for this purpose was also performed using SILVAngs 1.5 database at
440 <https://www.arb-silva.de/ngs/>.

441

442 **Comparison with deep sea samples**

443 Comparisons of OTUs were made with deep sea meiofaunal data from samples taken along the
444 Antarctic Peninsula²⁰ and comprise SED 415 (Laubeuf Fjord) (500m) (67°52.583S 68°5.842'W),
445 SED 390 and SED 410 (duplicate CTD samples at the same site and depth) (515m) (67°35'6.57S
446 68°12'17.38W), SED385 (390m) (67°35'6.16''S 68°8'35.42''W), SED395 (off Anchorage Island)
447 (290m) (67°36'5.23''S 68°13'29.75''W) with an additional sample denoted Adria2 (1120m)
448 (74°29'.00S 104°25'.00W) kindly provided by Holly Bik and Adrian Glover (data unpublished)
449 (Figure 5). Published data were obtained from direct extractions of minimal amounts of frozen
450 sediments²⁰ while the data from the additional sample “Adria2” was processed using the same
451 methodology (DESS fixed samples, meiofauna isolated from sediments and then DNA extraction)
452 as the shallow-water data presented here.

453

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467

468 **Author Contributions**

469 VGF performed most of the shallow-water bioinformatics analyses, interpreted the data and wrote
470 the first draft of the paper. FS was involved in collecting the samples, advised on the bioinformatics
471 analyses, supplied the deep-sea data, performed the deep-sea analyses and contributed to the paper.
472 JMG and CQ both performed some of the shallow-water bioinformatics analyses and provided
473 bioinformatics advice. SC jointly conceived the project with LSP, supervised sample collection and
474 the molecular extractions, provided metagenomics advice and contributed to the paper. DMP
475 supervised the biological interpretations and the production of the manuscript. LSP jointly
476 conceived the project with SC, managed the Antarctic fieldwork, provided advice on Antarctic
477 ecology and contributed to the paper. MSC supervised the project and the analyses and wrote the
478 final draft of the paper.

479

480 **Competing Financial Interests**

481 The authors state that they have no conflicts of interest.

482

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645

646 **Figure Legends**

647

648 **Figure 1** - Percent identity to known sequences and number of OTUs found for the main meiofauna
649 phyla retrieved from the Antarctic Peninsula sampled sites. The red full line represents the total
650 number of OTUs found per phyla and the blue bar represents the percentage identity BLAST match
651 against the SILVA 111 nucleotide database. OTUs percentages of BLAST match identity against
652 SILVA database are shown black (100% BLAST), dark to light grey (100-97% BLAST), light to
653 dark blue (97-93%) and light to dark orange (93-90% BLAST). BECGB: Brachiopoda,
654 Echinodermata, Cnidaria, Gastrotricha, Bryozoa.

655

656 **Figure 2** - Operational taxonomic unit saturation profiles at 99% sequence similarity level, for the
657 Antarctic samples collected. Hangar Cove (HC), Islands (I), Rothera Point (RP) and South Cove
658 (SC), where 1- 3 represent each sample replicate.

659

660 **Figure 3** – Venn diagram depicting OTUs that are shared or unique to each of the four
661 sampling sites found in the Antarctica meiofaunal shallow waters. Numbers in the diagram
662 represent the number of total OTUs found in the different samples, South Cove (blue), Islands
663 (Red), Rothera Point (yellow) and Hangar Cove (green).

664

665 **Figure 4** – Krona graphical representation of the relative taxonomic contributions (OTU

666 percentages) of the main eukaryotic (a) and meiofauna representatives (b) found at Rothera
667 Peninsula sampled sites, using taxonomic assignment from SILVAngs 1.5 database at
668 <https://www.arb-silva.de/ngs/>. Depicted are also OTU percentages of four of the main meiofauna
669 phyla found, the nematodes, arthropods, platyhelminthes and the annelids.

670

671

672 **Figure 5** – Map showing the main sampling sites along the Antarctic Peninsula, with finer detail of
673 the deep-water sites in Ryder Bay. SED 385 is closest to Rothera Research Station and the sites of
674 the four shallow-water sediment-sampling sites (not shown at this scale). Maps made in-house at
675 BAS using ArcGIS v10.1 by the Mapping and Geographical Information Centre (MAGIC).

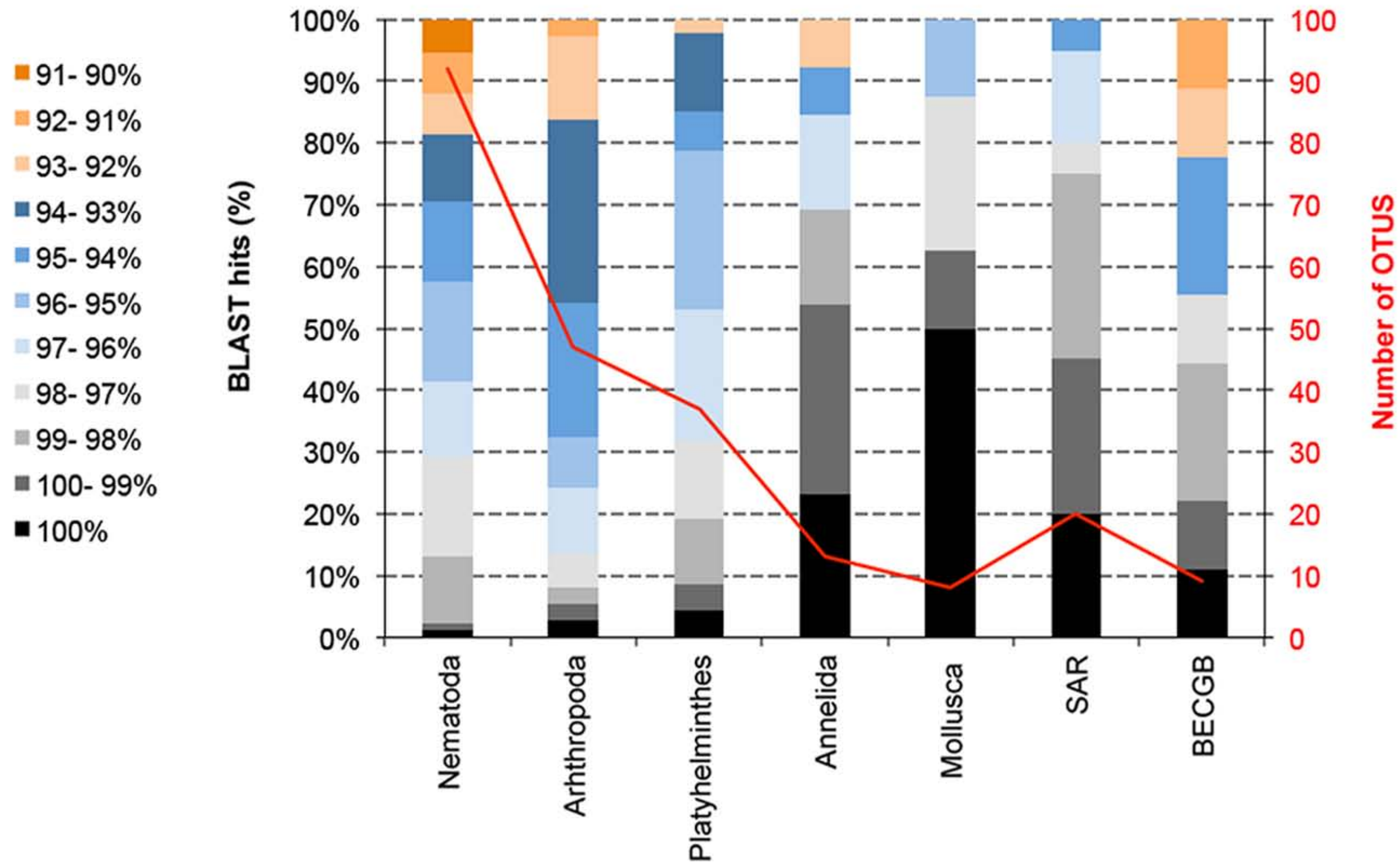
676 **Table 1:** Summary data for the sampled areas Hangar (HC), Rothera point (RP), Islands (I) and
 677 South Cove (SC) at Rothera in the Antarctic Peninsula. The number of reads before (No reads) and
 678 after denoising (QC/CC): QC: quality score; CC: chimera check) and total OTU numbers are
 679 shown. OTUs numbers were taxonomically assigned to the eukaryotes and unknown. The latter
 680 samples comprised both sequences with no matches in the SILVA reference database and also
 681 matches to unannotated environmental samples.

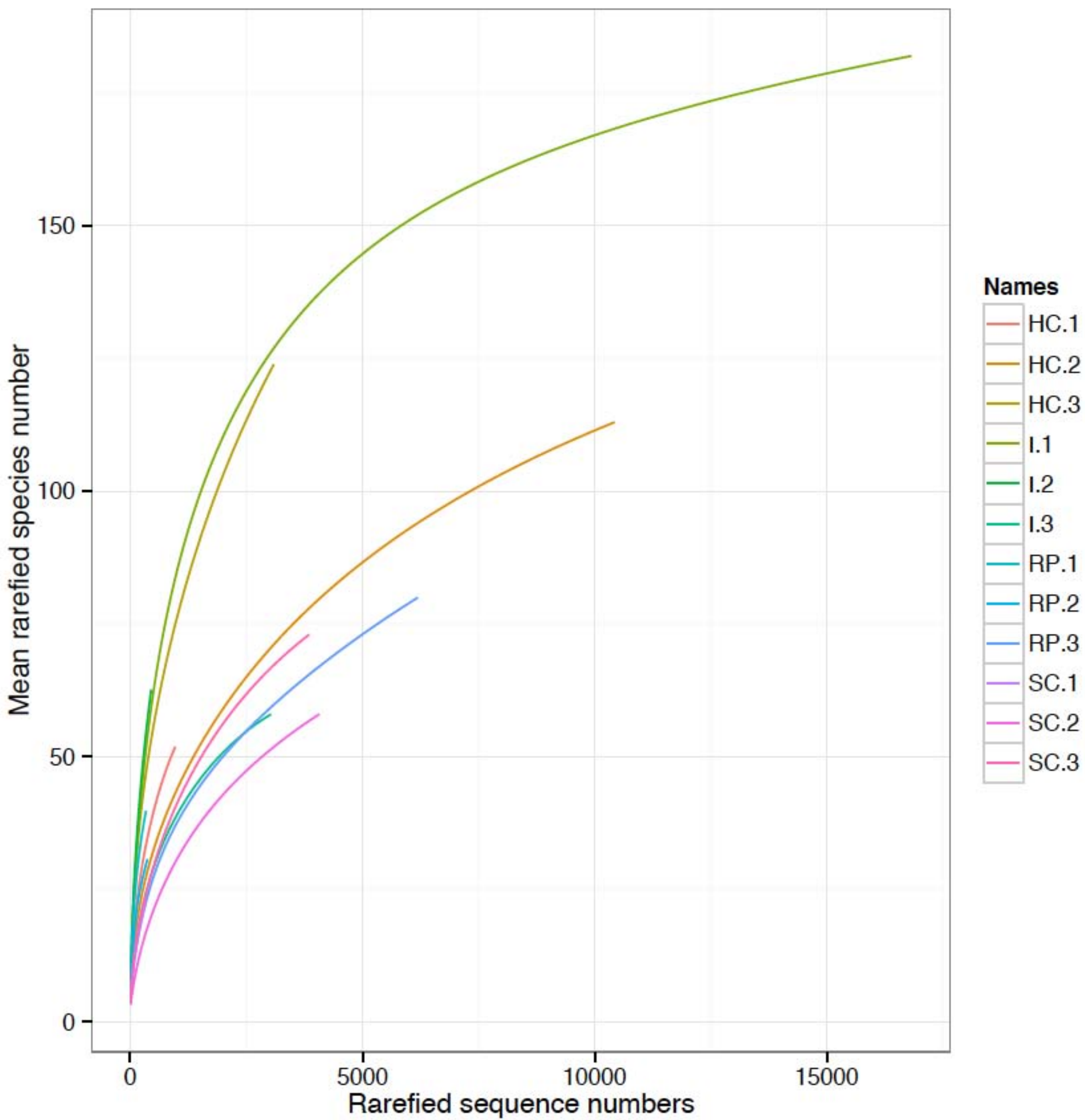
682

683

Location	Depth (m)	No Reads	QC/CC	Number of OTUs		
				Eukaryote	Unknown	Total
Hangar	18	18391	14445	116	43	159
Rothera Point	15	8110	6898	85	16	101
Islands	13	23882	20109	127	58	185
South cove	8	5740	8203	76	19	95

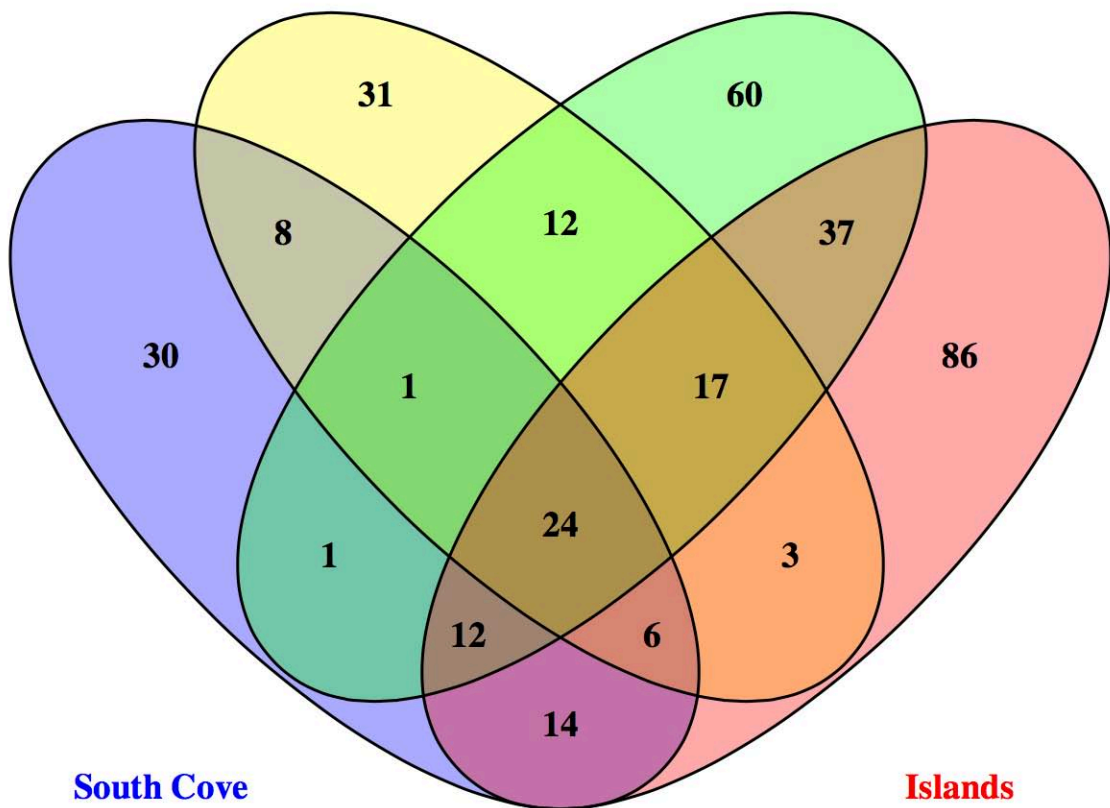
684





Rothera Point

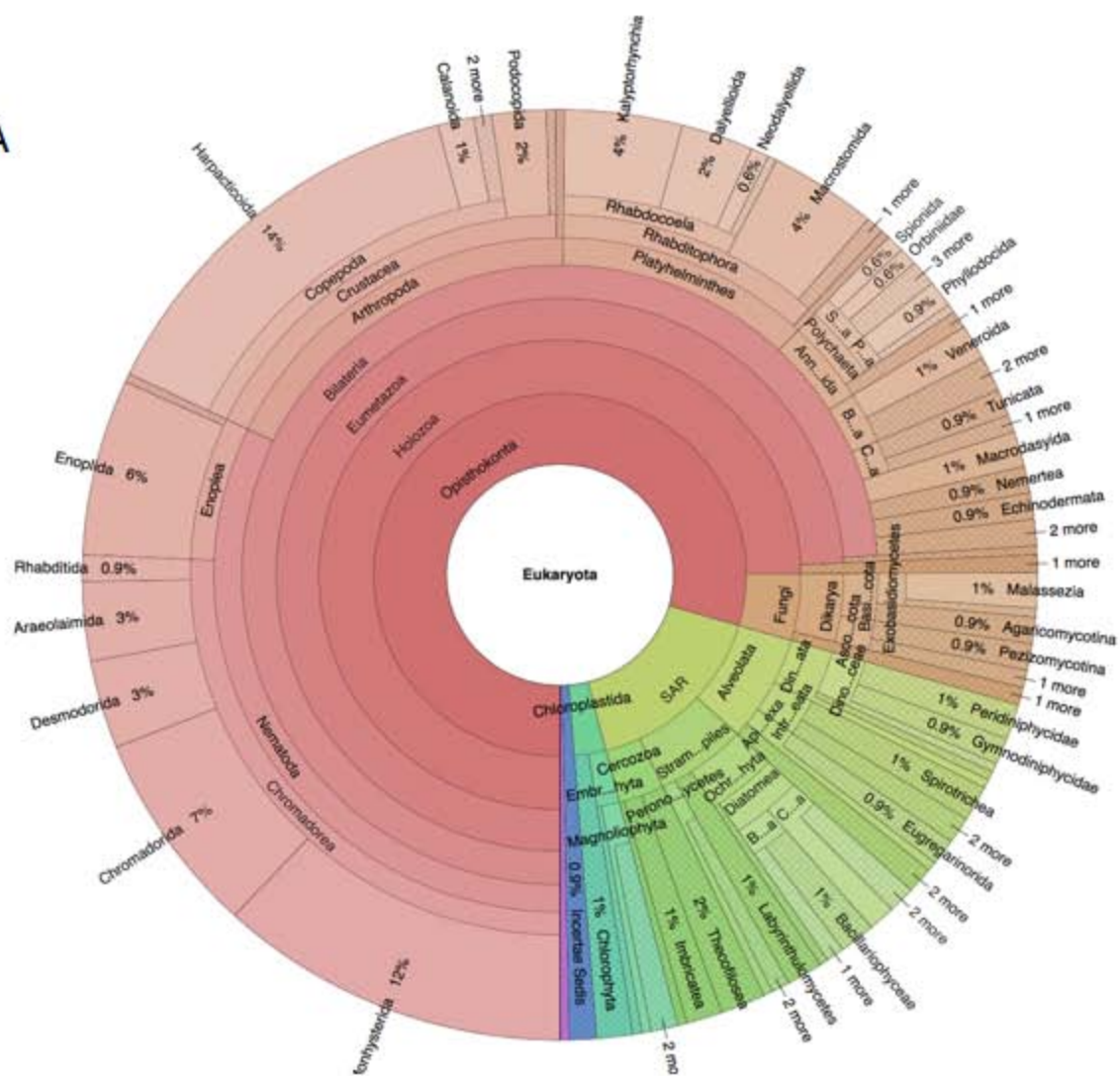
Hangar Cove



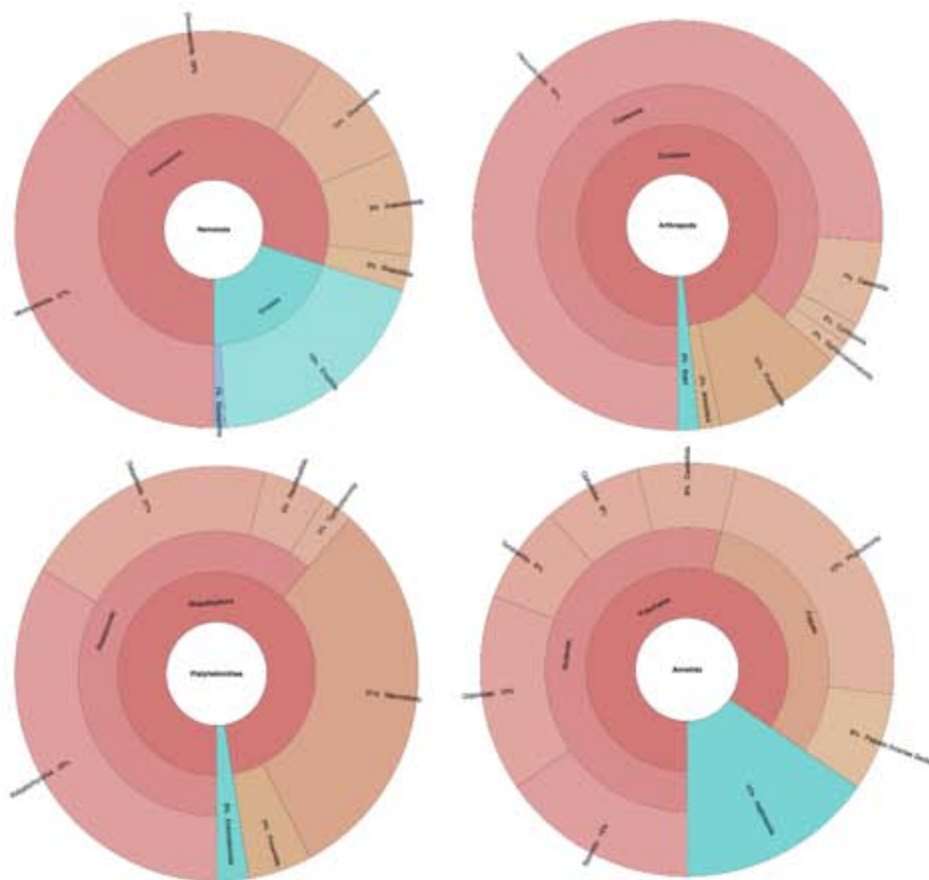
South Cove

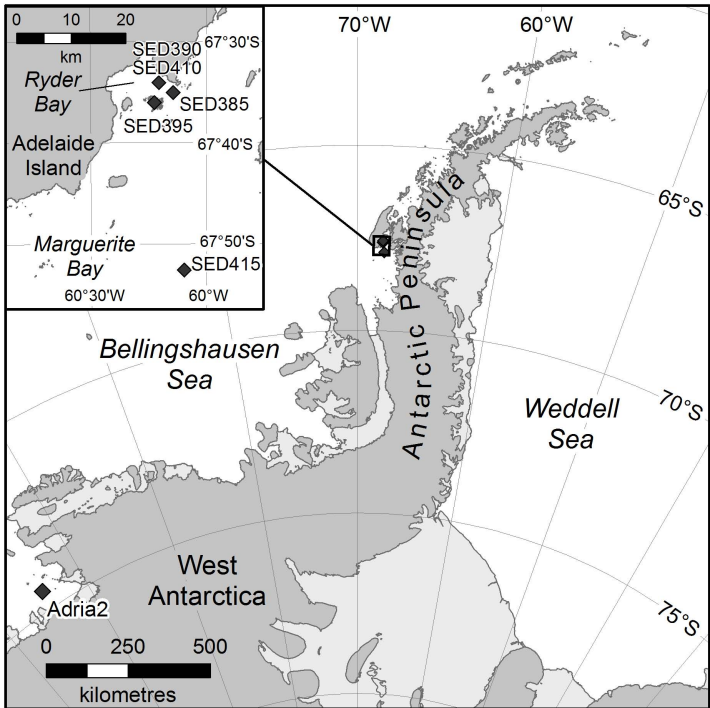
Islands

A



B





Revealing higher than expected meiofaunal diversity in Antarctic sediments: a metabarcoding approach

Supplementary Information

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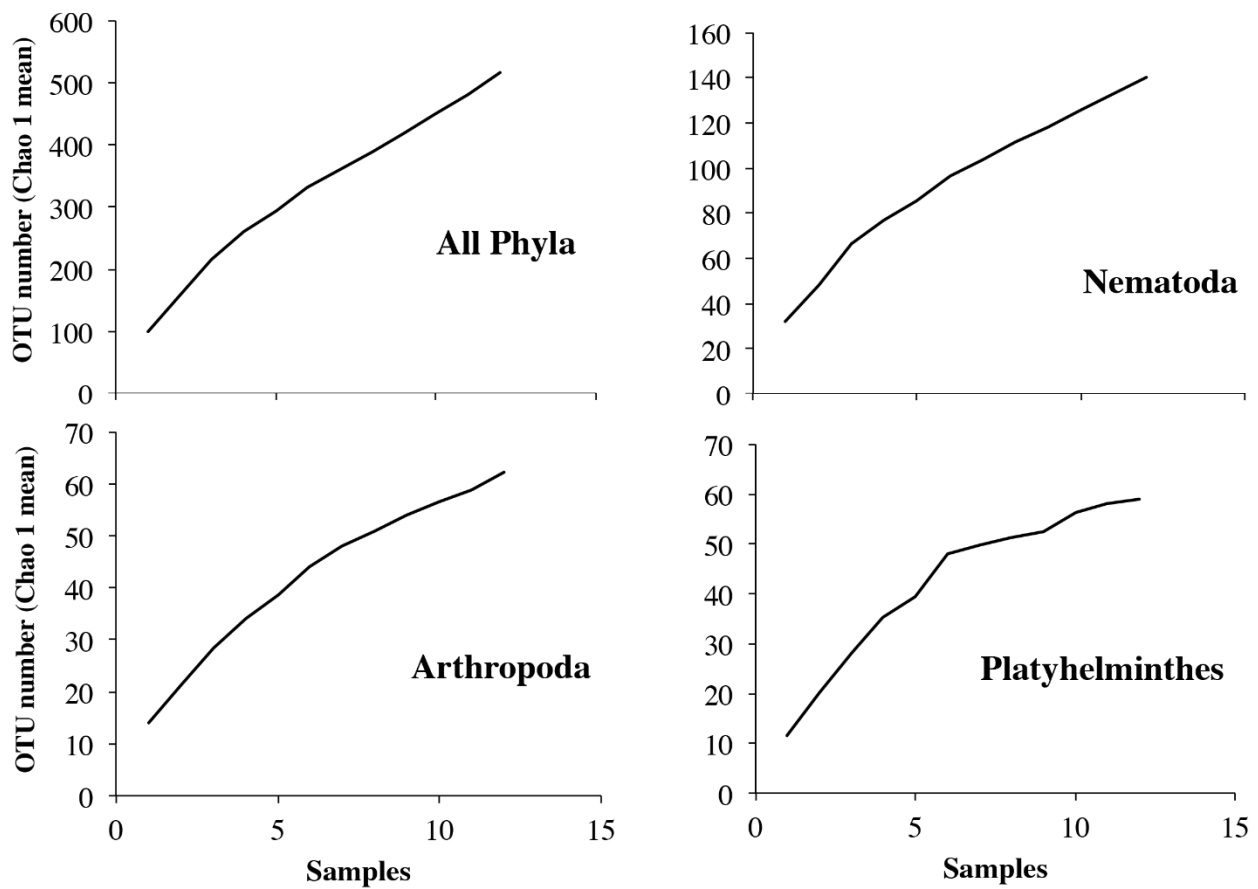
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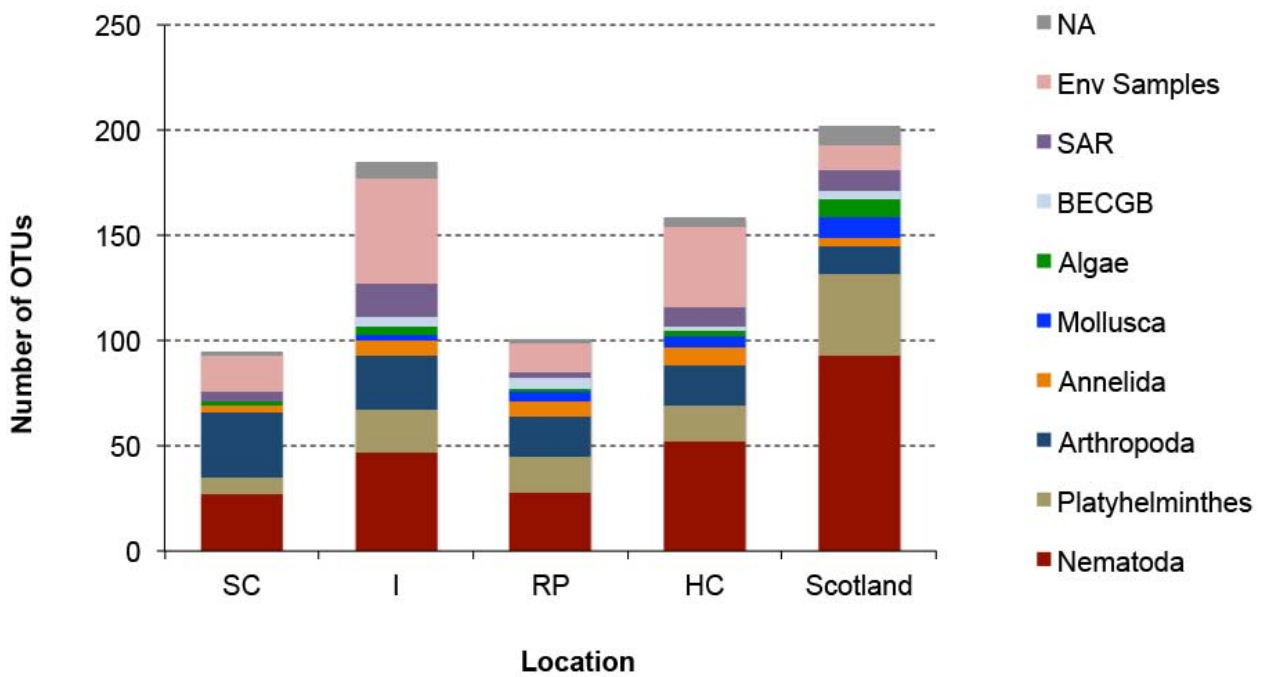
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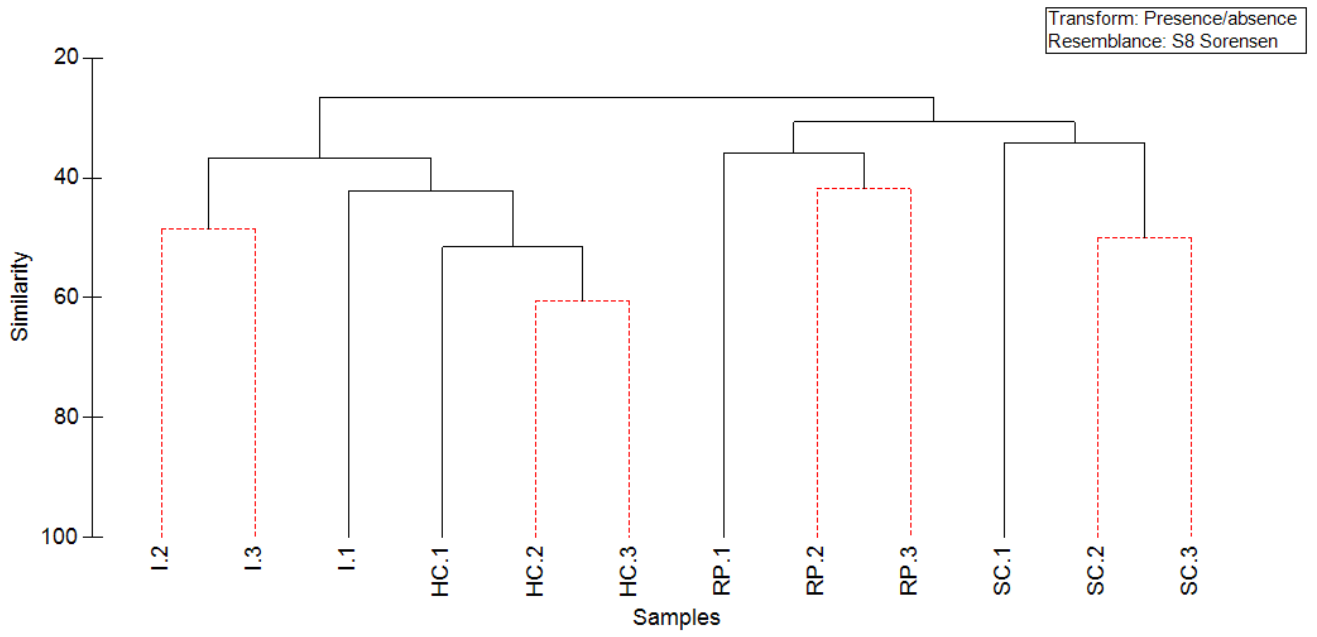
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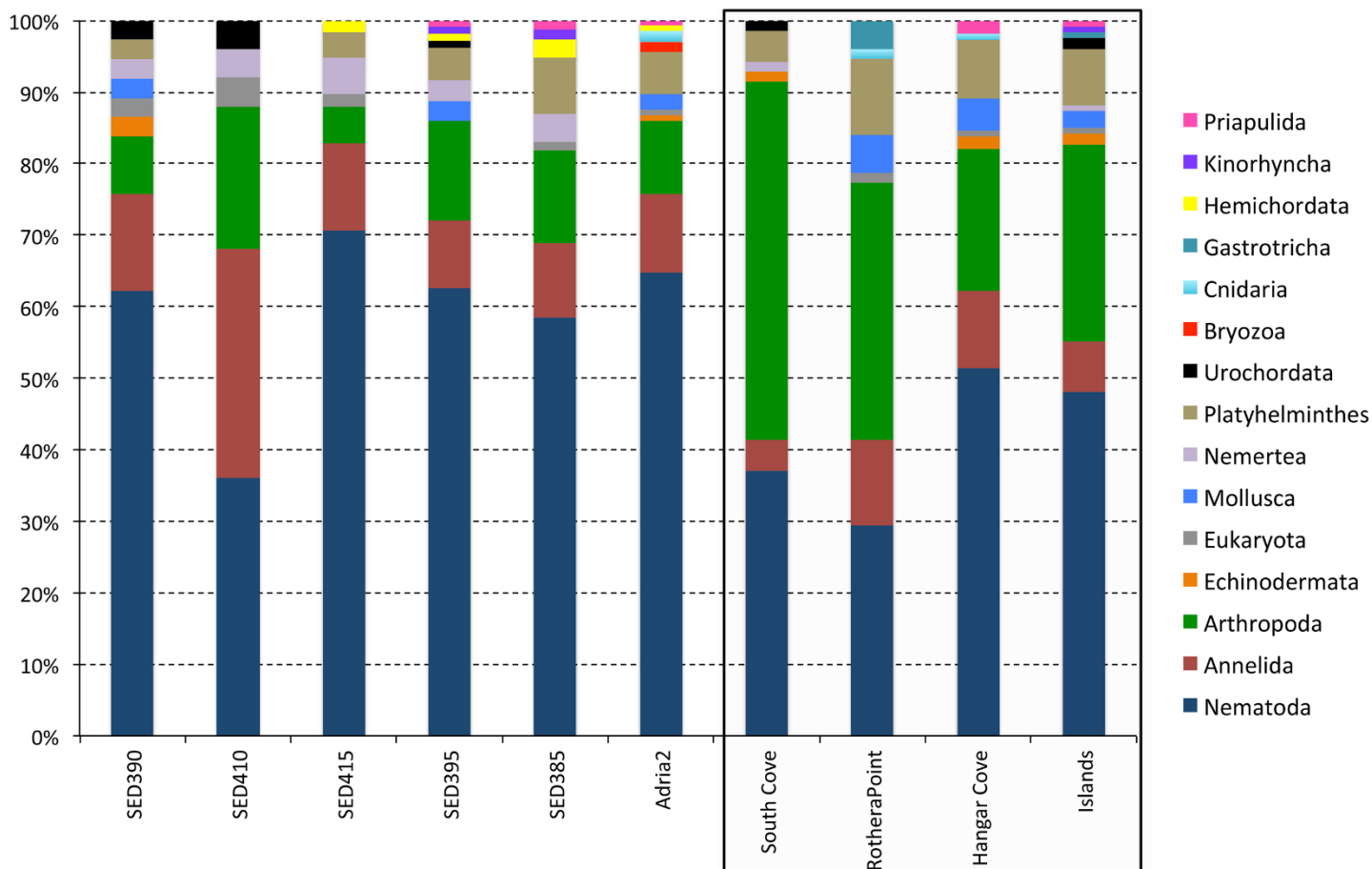
Supplementary Figure S1: Rarefaction curves of the Chao 1 diversity estimator. Plots are shown for all phyla, Nematoda, Arthropoda and Platyhelminthes at 97% identity OTU cut-off for all the Antarctic Peninsula sampled sites samples. Curves were estimated from 100 randomizations, without replacement, using EstimateS, version 8.2.0.



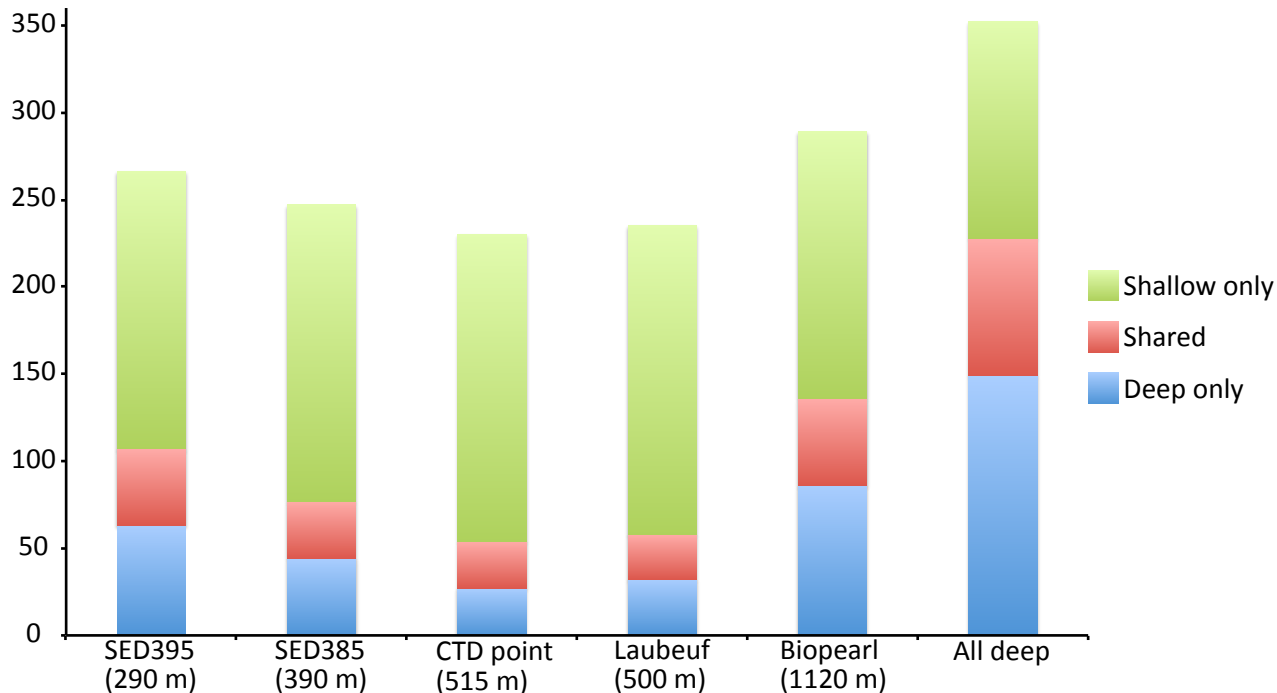
Supplementary Figure S2: Community composition for the Antarctic sampled areas Hangar Cove (HC), Rothera Point (RP), Islands (I), South Cove (SC) and also for the Scottish sampled site²⁶. Taxonomy assignment was performed using the SILVA database and the number of total OTUs for each sample site is shown (triplicates were merged per sample site).



Supplementary_Figure_S3: Cluster analysis for taxonomic patterns of meiofaunal communities based on Sørensen similarities of OTU presence/absence data for the combined sites. In the dendrogram, black solid lines represent samples sharing a significant similarity profile with a SIMPROF analysis.



Supplementary Figure S4: Community composition for the shallow and deep-water samples. The shallow-water samples are highlighted within a border. Taxonomy assignment was performed using the SILVA database with the percentage of OTUs per phyla shown in all sample sites.



Supplementary Figure S5: Overlap of metazoan OTUs between merged shallow samples and deep samples (individual and merged). Values are based on presence/absence data, with a total of 203 distinct metazoan OTUs found in all shallow samples and between 54 and 136 distinct OTUs in each of the deep samples for a total of 228 different deep metazoan OTUs.

Supplementary Material S1:

Fonseca et al. “**Revealing higher than expected meiofaunal diversity in Antarctic sediments: a metabarcoding approach**”

Supplementary analysis

Method

All Eukaryotic OTUs retrieved from the data analysis were used to confirm the taxonomic position and community composition within the main eukaryotic metazoan found, using a Neighbour-Joining (NJ) phylogeny reconstruction, 500 bootstrap replications and the Kimura 2-parameter pairwise distance model. The analysis was performed using the software Mega7 (Kumar *et al.*, 2016) and illustrated via a phylogenetic tree produced using the Interactive Tree of Life iTOL tool (Letunic & Bork, 2007).

Result

Phylogenetic analysis of the total Eukaryotic OTUs further confirmed the presence of five taxonomically distinct phyla groups, the Nematoda, Arthropoda, Platyhelminthes, Annelida and the SAR supergroup (Starmenopiles, Alveolata and Rhizaria) and all phylogenetic clusters were supported by strong to moderate bootstrap values (Figure S1). OTUs assigned to Fungi were removed from the analysis and the Chloroplastida OTUS (ALGAE) were used as an out-group (Figure S1). The Arthropoda cluster had a strong bootstrap support but it also showed a smaller independent cluster comprised mainly of the Ostracoda class (Figure S1). Here, three Echinodermata OTUs, two Kynorincha OTUs and one Mollusca OTU also sub-clustered. The Mollusca (7 OTUs) and Gastrotricha (4 OTUs) clustered inside the Annelida phyla. Within the SAR supergroup the Rhizaria (Cercozoa) also showed an independent phylogenetic sub-cluster, whereas the Stramenopiles and Alveolata clustered concurrently (Figure S1).

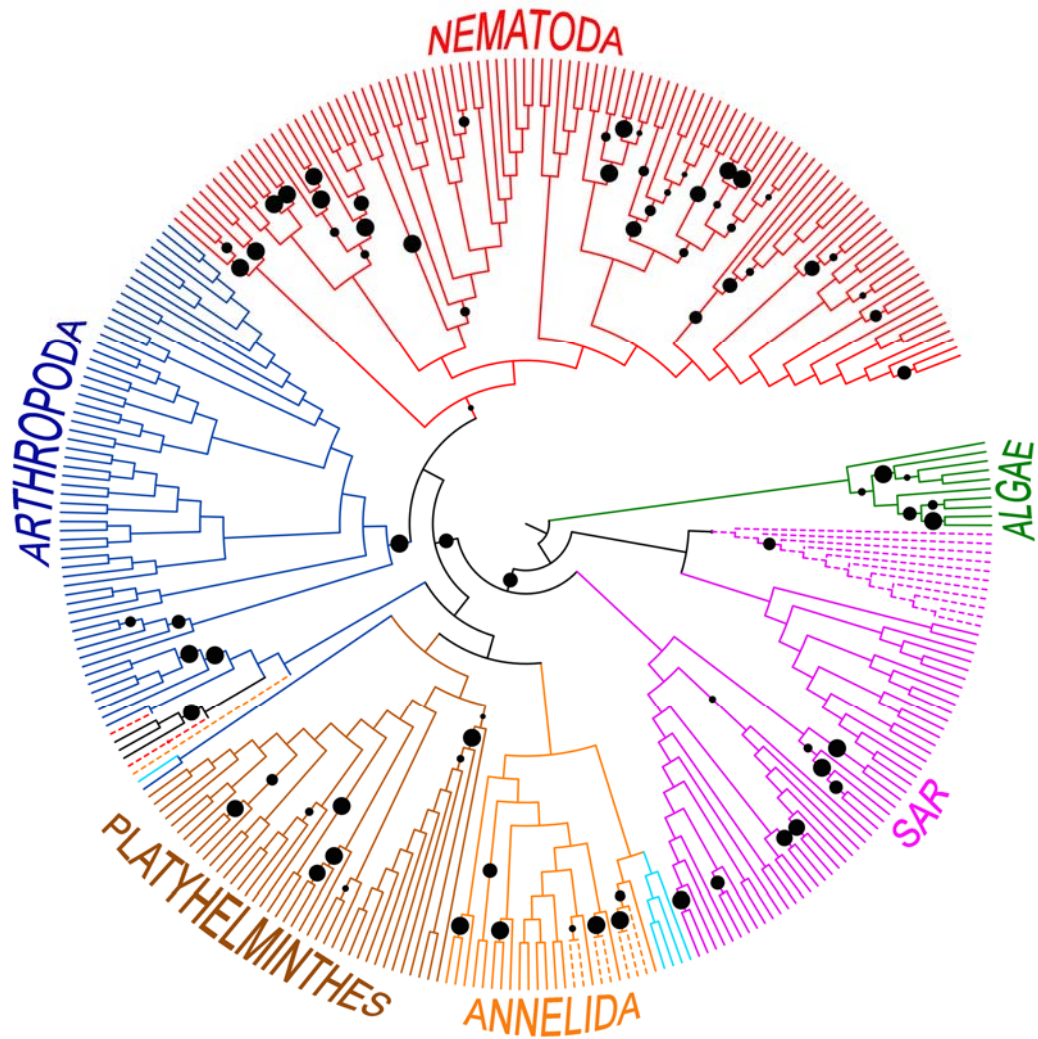


Figure S1- Phylogenetic tree of all Eukaryotic OTUs using a Neighbour-Joining analysis based on the Kimura 2-parameter model. Black symbols at nodes represent the corresponding range of bootstrap support values, from the smallest (75% support) to the largest (100% support). Five main distinct phylogenetic groups were formed the Nematoda, Arthropoda, Platyhelminthes, Annelida and the SAR supergroup (Starmenopiles, Alveolata and Rhizaria). The Rhizaria from the SAR supergroup is depicted in dash-purple. Other phyla are also clustered, the Mollusca (dash-orange), Kynorincha (dash-red), Gastrotricha (light blue) and Echinodermata (solid black). The outgroup is the ALGAE green cluster. SILVA database was used for OTU taxonomy classification.

Supplementary Table S1.1- Closest BLAST matches of Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) retrieved from Rothera sample sites, assigned to Nematoda, up to genus or species levels (Description) using SILVA 1.11 database. Depicted are the public accession numbers (AcNumber), BLAST identity percentage against SILVA (BLAST % ID), Phylum and other Taxa ranking.

OTU#	AcNumber	BLAST % ID	Phylum	Taxa Rank	Description
denovo208	gb AY593940.1	94,5	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Achromadora cf terricola
denovo219	emb AJ966473.1	91,17	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Anaplectus sp.
denovo150	gb HM564638.1	98,53	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Anticoma sp.
denovo169	gb HM564638.1	96,19	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Anticoma sp.
denovo46	gb JN968252.1	100	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Aporcelaimellus sp.
denovo165	gb KF935309.1	96,99	phylum: Nemertea	class: Enopla	Argonemertes australiensis
denovo166	gb FJ040461.1	96,03	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Axonolaimus sp.
denovo310	gb FJ040461.1	92,36	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Axonolaimus sp.
denovo88	emb AJ966476.1	92,68	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Bathylaimus assimilis
denovo159	gb AY854218.1	94,44	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Calomicrolaimus parahonestus
denovo160	gb AY854218.1	94,97	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Calomicrolaimus parahonestus
denovo294	gb AY854218.1	98,14	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Calomicrolaimus parahonestus
denovo281	gb JN968284.1	90	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Calomicrolaimus sp.
denovo336	gb JX678599.1	95,62	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Camacolaimus sp.
denovo93	gb EF591327.1	97,94	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Camacolaimus sp.
denovo170	gb HM564544.1	98,83	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Chaetonema sp.
denovo38	gb JN968217.1	91,88	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Daptonema sp.
denovo298	gb JN968217.1	91,91	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Daptonema sp.
denovo304	gb EF591333.1	95,53	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo275	gb EF591333.1	97,63	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo138	gb EF591333.1	95,79	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo65	gb EF591333.1	96,59	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo184	gb EF591333.1	97,63	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo267	gb EF591333.1	94,23	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo75	gb EF591333.1	97,63	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo8	gb EF591333.1	94,74	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo195	gb EF591333.1	94,47	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo178	gb EF591333.1	95,01	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo321	gb EF591333.1	93,79	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Desmolaimus sp.
denovo76	gb FJ182217.1	97,63	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Draconema japonicum
denovo168	gb AY854193.1	98,66	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Enoploides brunettii
denovo42	gb HM564545.1	98,49	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Halalaimus sp.
denovo330	gb HM564479.1	98,5	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Halalaimus sp.
denovo84	gb FJ040458.1	93,18	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Leptolaimus sp.
denovo209	gb FJ040458.1	93,18	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Leptolaimus sp.
denovo97	gb FJ040458.1	93,07	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Leptolaimus sp.
denovo81	gb FJ040458.1	90,84	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Leptolaimus sp.
denovo124	gb FJ040458.1	94	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Leptolaimus sp.
denovo149	gb JF293035.1	98,45	phylum: Nemertea	class: Anopla	Lineus torquatus
denovo231	gb EF591337.1	92,86	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Linhomoeidae sp.
denovo314	gb JN968218.1	93,88	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Metadesmolaimus sp.
denovo110	gb AY854210.1	97,89	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo299	gb AY854210.1	97,36	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo328	gb AY854210.1	96,31	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo198	gb AY854210.1	96,57	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo252	gb AY854210.1	98,29	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo133	gb AY854210.1	95,51	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo60	gb AY854210.1	97,63	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo10	gb AY854210.1	95,78	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo193	gb AY854210.1	95,51	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo48	gb AY854210.1	93,95	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora
denovo333	gb JN968246.1	94,72	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo207	gb JN968246.1	93,14	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo78	gb JN968246.1	96,31	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo197	gb JN968246.1	92,61	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo154	gb JN968246.1	95,78	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo194	gb JN968246.1	94,74	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo261	gb JN968246.1	93,44	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo25	gb JN968215.1	95,25	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo96	gb JN968215.1	91,6	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Neochromadora sp.
denovo66	gb FJ040459.1	97,6	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Odontophora sp.
denovo139	gb FJ040459.1	94,43	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Odontophora sp.
denovo289	gb AY854196.1	96,32	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Odontophora sp.
denovo300	gb FJ040499.1	96,55	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Oxystomina sp.
denovo277	gb FJ040499.1	95,78	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Oxystomina sp.
denovo274	gb FJ040499.1	96,55	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Oxystomina sp.
denovo57	gb KJ638035.1	95,89	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Paracanthochus sp.
denovo258	gb KF591743.1	92,73	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Pomponema sp.
denovo0	gb JF293023.1	98,73	phylum: Nemertea	class: Enopla	Prosorhochmus americanus
denovo316	gb JN968227.1	90,81	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Punctodora ratzeburgensis
denovo117	gb JN968228.1	98,43	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria pulchra
denovo19	gb JN968228.1	91,95	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria pulchra
denovo141	gb JN968228.1	97,45	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria pulchra
denovo183	gb JN968221.1	97,97	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria sp.
denovo43	gb JN968221.1	92,15	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria sp.
denovo101	gb JN968221.1	97,38	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria sp.
denovo113	gb JN968221.1	94,5	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sabatieria sp.
denovo68	gb EF591321.1	95,26	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Setostephanolaimus spartinae
denovo29	gb JN968264.1	95,36	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sphaerolaimus hirsutus
denovo180	gb JN968239.1	91,6	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Sphaerolaimus hirsutus
denovo21	gb JN968216.1	99,44	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Spirinia parasitifera
denovo31	gb JN968216.1	95,24	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Spirinia parasitifera isolate
denovo54	gb FJ040468.1	97,87	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Synonchiella sp.
denovo23	gb AY284683.1	90,89	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Teratocephalus terrestris
denovo69	gb JN968231.1	93,99	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Theristus sp.
denovo89	gb JN968231.1	97,14	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Theristus sp.
denovo128	gb JN968231.1	95,56	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Theristus sp.
denovo129	gb AY763130.1	96,89	phylum: Nematoda	environmental samples	Uncultured nematode
denovo115	gb AY854198.1	97,62	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Viscosia viscosa
denovo100	gb AY854198.1	94,97	phylum: Nematoda	class: Enoplea	Viscosia viscosa
denovo9	gb KC920423.1	93,97	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Zygonemella striata
denovo272	gb KC920423.1	90,62	phylum: Nematoda	class: Chromadorea	Zygonemella striata

Supplementary Table S1.2- Closest BLAST matches of Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) retrieved from Rothera sample sites, assigned to Arthropoda, Annelida and Mollusca up to genus or species levels (Description) using SILVA 1.11 database. Depicted are the public accession numbers (AcNumber), BLAST identity percentage against SILVA (BLAST % ID), Phylum and other Taxa ranking

OTU#	AcNumber	BLAST % ID	Phylum	Taxa Rank	Description
denovo224	dbj AB076626.1	99,74	phylum: Arthropoda	superfamily: Cytheroidea	Howeina sp.
denovo64	dbj AB076628.1	95,61	phylum: Arthropoda	superfamily: Cytheroidea	Cytheropteron subuchioi
denovo295	dbj AB076628.1	96,38	phylum: Arthropoda	superfamily: Cytheroidea	Cytheropteron subuchioi
denovo36	dbj AB076644.1	98,71	phylum: Arthropoda	superfamily: Cytheroidea	Robustaurilla salebrosa
denovo200	gb DQ538499.1	94,78	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Siphonostomatoida	Kroyeria sp.
denovo322	gb DQ538499.1	93,77	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Siphonostomatoida	Kroyeria sp.
denovo238	gb EU380295.1	99,22	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Dactylopusia sp.
denovo326	gb AY627016.1	96,08	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bradya sp.
denovo297	gb EU380302.1	93,83	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Parasthenelia sp.
denovo103	gb EU380309.1	96,87	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo257	gb AY627016.1	97,39	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bradya sp.
denovo53	gb KC815328.1	96,86	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Amphiascoides atopus
denovo162	gb AY627015.1	93,23	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bryocampus pygmaeus
denovo334	gb AY627016.1	98,44	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bradya sp.
denovo233	gb EU380309.1	95,3	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo105	gb AY627016.1	97,13	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bradya sp.
denovo201	gb EU380309.1	97,65	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo303	gb EU380306.1	98,17	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Argestigens sp.
denovo163	gb EU380285.1	98,69	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Harpacticus sp.
denovo172	gb AY692343.1	96,86	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Tisbe furcata
denovo273	gb EU380309.1	95,05	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo338	gb EU380309.1	95,06	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo176	gb EU380309.1	93,01	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo265	gb KC815328.1	97,38	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Amphiascoides atopus
denovo210	gb AY627016.1	96,43	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Bradya sp.
denovo144	gb EU380309.1	95,83	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo228	gb EU380306.1	97,38	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Argestigens sp.
denovo119	gb EU380300.1	95,05	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Paramenophia sp.
denovo234	gb EU380309.1	96,87	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo332	gb EU380297.1	95,4	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Diarthodes sp.
denovo324	gb EU380309.1	97,14	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo1	gb EU380309.1	93,75	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo11	gb EU380309.1	94,27	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo132	gb EU380309.1	93,99	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo12	gb EU380303.1	98,69	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Ameira scotti
denovo77	gb EU380299.1	96,08	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Sewellia tropica
denovo121	gb EU380306.1	96,82	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Argestigens sp.
denovo135	gb EU380295.1	95,04	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Dactylopusia sp.
denovo190	gb EU380309.1	96,72	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo212	gb EU380309.1	94,26	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo226	gb EU380309.1	92,72	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo229	gb EU380295.1	95,34	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Dactylopusia sp.
denovo291	gb EU380295.1	95,48	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Dactylopusia sp.
denovo305	gb EU380297.1	95,09	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Diarthodes sp.
denovo307	gb EU380309.1	95,6	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Harpacticoida	Itunella muelleri
denovo280	gb AY118078.2	100	phylum: Arthropoda	order: Calanoida	Ctenocalanus citer
denovo99	gb FJ372639.1	93,75	phylum: Arthropoda	infraclass: Paraneoptera	Saldula sp.
denovo2	emb AJ238061.1	100	phylum: Arthropoda	genus: Artemia	Artemia franciscana
denovo283	gb JQ000095.1	99,22	phylum: Arthropoda	family: Glycyphagidae	Marsupialichus brasiliensis
denovo179	gb GU902153.1	100	phylum: Annelida	Clitellata	Grania sp.
denovo206	gb AF411887.1	99,74	phylum: Annelida	Clitellata	Heronidrilus gravidus
denovo157	gb JN936459.1	99,23	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Tharyx sp.
denovo309	gb AF448150.1	98,73	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Apistobranchnus typicus
denovo6	gb JN852836.1	100	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Neopolynoe paradoxa
denovo329	gb GU179368.1	100	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Aglaophamus trissophyllus
denovo158	gb EU418858.1	98,74	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Polycirrus sp.
denovo331	gb JF509728.1	96,34	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Capitella teleta
denovo182	gb AY525627.1	94,85	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Eulalia viridis
denovo192	gb AF508126.1	96,15	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Scoloplos johnstonei
denovo104	gb DQ153064.1	99,74	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Polygordius jouinae
denovo259	gb AY532362.1	92,33	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Phylo michaelsoni
denovo145	gb KF511823.1	99,74	phylum: Annelida	class: Polychaeta	Ophelina sp.
denovo73	gb KC984696.1	100	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Yoldia eightsi
denovo127	gb KC429382.1	100	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Cyamiomacra laminifera
denovo164	gb JQ611498.1	100	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Pecten jacobaeus
denovo111	dbj AB714767.1	97,69	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Nipponomontacuta actinariophila
denovo312	gb KC429372.1	99,74	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Mysella charcoti
denovo56	gb KC429331.1	100	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Mytilus edulis
denovo40	gb KC984695.1	95,66	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Neilonella whoii
denovo221	gb KC429382.1	97,49	phylum: Mollusca	class: Bivalvia	Cyamiomacra laminifera

Supplementary Table S1.3- Closest BLAST matches of Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) retrieved from Rothera sample sites, assigned to Platyhelminthes, up to genus or species levels (Description) using SILVA 1.11 database. Depicted are the public accession numbers (AcNumber), BLAST identity percentage against SILVA (BLAST % ID), Phylum and other Taxa ranking.

OTU#	AcNumber	BLAST % ID	Phylum	Taxa Rank	Description
denovo47	emb AJ012531.1	95,84	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo230	emb AJ012531.1	93,54	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo34	emb AJ012531.1	93,75	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo74	emb AJ012531.1	93,51	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo262	emb AJ012531.1	92,45	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo260	emb AJ012531.1	93,51	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo14	gb KC869790.1	94,59	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Macrostomum sp.
denovo79	emb AJ012531.1	92,99	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo94	emb AJ012531.1	93,77	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo175	emb AJ012531.1	94,06	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo243	emb AJ012531.1	93,01	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Macrostomida	Paromalostomum fuscum
denovo218	gb KC529506.1	96,13	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Pogaina sp.
denovo50	gb KC602396.1	94,85	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Acrorhynchides robustus
denovo67	gb KJ887470.1	95,03	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Uncinorhynchus flavidus v
denovo33	gb KC529411.1	96,34	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Neodalyelliida	Proxenetes puccinellicola
denovo16	gb KC529435.1	93,93	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Neodalyelliida	Byrsophleps delamarei
denovo186	gb AY775738.1	97,91	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Stradorhynchus sp.
denovo203	gb AY775741.1	94,04	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Mesorhynchus terminostylus
denovo340	gb KJ887440.1	98,95	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Odontorhynchus aculeatus
denovo7	gb KJ887470.1	97,9	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Uncinorhynchus flavidus
denovo17	emb AJ012507.1	91,67	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Cheliplana cf. orthocirra
denovo61	gb KJ887445.1	94,52	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Opisthocystis goettei
denovo282	gb KC529506.1	94,07	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Pogaina sp. 3
denovo98	gb KC529523.1	95,63	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Dalyellioida sp.
denovo279	gb GU936108.1	93,19	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Schizorhynchidae sp.
denovo239	gb KJ887448.1	94,79	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Thylacorhynchus conglobatus
denovo320	gb KC602396.1	93,56	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Acrorhynchides robustus
denovo41	gb KC602396.1	93,04	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Acrorhynchides robustus
denovo63	gb AY775746.1	100	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Kalyptorhynchia	Schizochilus choriurus
denovo107	gb KC529518.1	93,79	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Wahlia macrostyliifera
denovo146	gb KC529521.1	92,98	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Typhloplanoida	Austradenopharynx sp.
denovo185	gb KC529506.1	96,66	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Pogaina sp.
denovo271	gb KC869833.1	92,54	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Baicalellia canadensis
denovo290	gb KC869833.1	96,39	phylum: Platyhelminthes	suborder: Dalyellioida	Baicalellia canadensis
denovo313	gb U70077.1 ARU70	92,23	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Proseriata	Archiloa rivularis
denovo268	gb AY775733.1	99,74	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Proseriata	Cirrifera sopotthelersae
denovo199	gb AY222124.1	94,72	phylum: Platyhelminthes	order: Plagiorchiida	Enenterum aureum

Supplementary Table S2: Overview of the Antarctic sampled sites *in silico* statistics for the NGS of 18S rRNA gene region used. Each replicated sampled site had a 8 nucleotide multiplex-identification tag (MID), depth in meters (m), abbreviated description of the sample, post-quality control and chimera checked number of reads and total number of OTUs at the 97% threshold.

Location	MIDTag	Depth (m)	Description	No Reads	QC/ Chimera check reads	Total OTUs
Hangar_1	TCGTCTAC	18	HC.1	1224	970	49
Hangar_2	AGACAGAC	18	HC.2	13007	10399	104
Hangar_3	CTGTTCAC	18	HC.3	4160	3076	117
Rothera Point_1	AGTCAGAG	15	RP.1	402	341	37
Rothera Point_2	TCAGCTCT	15	RP.2	478	376	30
Rothera Point3	ACTCAGAC	15	RP.3	7230	6181	79
Islands_1	CTAGTCCT	13	I.1	19716	16730	157
Islands_2	CAGTTGAC	13	I.2	549	455	54
Islands_3	TAGGTTGC	13	I.3	3617	2924	50
South cove_1	TCTGCTCA	8	SC.1	424	337	21
South cove_2	ATCGTAGC	8	SC.2	4767	4034	51
South cove_3	CATGTGCA	8	SC.3	549	3832	69