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Transplantation assessment of degraded *Posidonia oceanica* habitats: site selection and long-term monitoring

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Abstract

A model developed for *Zostera marina* was adapted and used to select suitable areas for *Posidonia oceanica* transplantation in the Gulf of Palermo, where recent rehabilitation programmes have reduced human pressure. This model consists of three steps: (1) habitat selection, by calculation of the Preliminary Transplant Suitability Index (PTSI); (2) field assessments and test-transplanting, to evaluate site suitability and to estimate the effects of tearing on transplant units (about 50%); (3) identification of suitable restoration sites, by calculation of the Transplant Suitability Index (TSI). A new parameter was added to the literature model: the number of grids detached, which is linked to factors (hydrodynamic regime, anchoring, fishing) that have a potentially significant effect on the final outcome of the transplant. Only one site (TSI = 16) in the Gulf of Palermo was indicated as potentially suitable for restoration with *P. oceanica*. At this site, a transplant of 40 m² was implemented. From 2008 to 2014, transplant effectiveness was evaluated in terms of establishment, detachment and mortality of cuttings and shoot density. Long-term monitoring (6 years) allowed us to detect changes in the structural conditions of the transplanted meadow and to identify the possible turning point in *P. oceanica* recovery (2 years after transplanting). Moreover, 6 years after transplantation, the transplant shoot density of the *P. oceanica* meadow is about 16% greater, with a mean and a maximum value of 11.6 and 17 shoots per cutting, respectively.

Keywords: Seagrass, restoration, *Posidonia oceanica*, site selection, transplant, Mediterranean Sea.

Introduction

Seagrasses are a crucial element of coastal ecosystems due to their different roles, namely, primary producers, substrata for many species, water quality indicators, shoreline erosion protectors (Hemminga & Duarte, 2000) and long-term carbon store (Kennedy & Bjork, 2009). Since 1990, a global seagrass loss of 7% yr⁻¹ has been estimated (Waycott et al., 2009), compared to 0.5% yr⁻¹ for tropical forests (Achard et al., 2002; Duarte, 2008), and this represents a major loss of natural carbon sinks for the biosphere (Duarte et al., 2010). This seagrass decline is imputable to both natural disturbances and human activities (Boudouresque et al., 2009). However, human population expansion is currently the most serious cause of seagrass habitat loss, as it has led to an increase in anthropogenic input to coastal waters (Short & Wyllie-Echeverria, 1996).

In the Mediterranean Sea, the endemic seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* (L.) Delile forms dense, wide meadows from the surface down to 45 m and covers 2-4% of the seabed in the basin (approximately 38,000 km²; Pergent et al., 1997). This species is a valuable biotic component of the littoral zone and contributes significantly to primary production, with about 3,500 million tons of carbon produced annually (Pergent et al., 1997). *P. oceanica* is the only marine planerogam able to form matte, a biogenic structure resulting from the growth of plagiotropic and orthotropic rhizomes intertwined with roots and autochthonous and allochthonous detritus (Boudouresque & Meinesz, 1982). Moreover, *P. oceanica* beds are considered to be good indicators of water quality (Pergent-Martini et al., 2005).

Despite their importance, over recent decades, many *P. oceanica* meadows have disappeared or have been altered (Boudouresque et al., 2009). Due to coastal human activities, between 13% and 50% of the beds have markedly regressed in terms of areal extent or have disappeared since the seventies, and the remaining ones have suffered density and coverage reductions in the last 20 years (Marbà et al., 2014). Thus, recovery planning is required to arrest and reverse the predicted decline of the species by the middle of this century (year 2049 ± 10, Jordà et al., 2012). Seagrass habitat recovery involves identifying and limiting and/or eliminating the causes of degradation (Hobbs & Norton, 1996). The natural recovery of seagrass can lead to restoration of the original environmental conditions of a seabed. However, seagrasses such as *P. oceanica* are so notoriously slow-growing that natural recovery may take anywhere from dozens to hundreds of years (González-Correa et al., 2005). Moreover,
low flowering (Díaz-Almela et al., 2006) and high rates of fruit abortion and predation (Balestri & Cinelli, 2003) further limit the resilience of this species.

Transplantation is considered a possible option for speeding up seagrass habitat restoration (Fonseca et al., 1994). Since the 1970s, restoration with *P. oceanica* in the Mediterranean Sea has been carried out to assess various transplanting and seeding techniques. Transplant success was found to be influenced by the nature of the substrate, with dead *matte* habitat showing higher survival and growth rates than sand, pebble and rock (Terrados et al., 2013). Also, horizontal rhizomes showed higher survival and growth rates than their vertical counterparts (Molenaar et al., 1993; Piazzi et al., 2000). The use of vegetative fragments as planting units has proved more effective than seeds, which are less available (Balestri & Cinelli, 2003; Diaz-Almela et al., 2006; Terrados et al., 2013). Transplant donor populations of *P. oceanica* with the highest genetic variability showed the best growth performance (Procaccini & Piazzi, 2001).

A number of studies have revealed the great importance of careful habitat selection for seagrass transplantation (Fonseca et al., 1998; van Katwijk et al., 2009). Geomorphological factors such as sediment features, nearshore hydrodynamics, and nature of the substrate are very important for the selection of seagrass transplantation sites. Several studies investigated the complex interaction between these factors and both the architecture and the state of health of *P. oceanica* meadows (De Falco et al., 2000; Folkard, 2005; Infantes et al., 2009, 2011; Manca et al., 2010; Vacchi et al., 2012, 2014), but no model has ever been set up taking them into account for the realization of a *P. oceanica* transplant. Recently, qualitative and quantitative models have been developed to assess both the suitability of the area to recover and the potential for successful transplantation with *Posidonia australis* J. D. Hooker (Campbell, 2002) and *Zostera marina* Linnaeus (Short et al., 2002). In particular, the model developed by Short et al. (2002) synthesizes the available historic and literature-based information, reference data and simple field measurements to identify and prioritize locations for large-scale *Z. marina* restoration.

Another focal point of marine restoration projects is monitoring of transplant performance. The main objective of many restoration activities is to establish system resilience (Thom et al., 2012). For several authors “a restoration process re-establishes a dynamically stable ecosystem that is fully developed structurally and functionally and is resistant and resilient to disturbances” (Thom et al., 2012 and references therein). However, although establishing a resilient habitat is a goal implicit in many restoration plans, only a few seagrass system restoration projects have considered a long enough monitoring period to assess system recovery after implementation; most published projects had short monitoring periods (<1 year) (Cunha et al., 2012).

In this context, this study had two main aims: i) to select a suitable site for *P. oceanica* transplanting in a previously degraded habitat using the modelling approach; ii) to achieve a medium-scale implant of *P. oceanica* within the selected area and apply a long term monitoring programme to evaluate its performance.

Materials and Methods

**Study area**

The study area is the Gulf of Palermo, along the northwestern coast of Sicily (Fig. 1). Since 1950, the coastal zone near Palermo has been exposed to multiple pollution sources due to chaotic city planning, improper disposal of waste and untreated wastewater. A trophic alteration and high concentrations of P-PO₄ (3-45 mmol l⁻¹) and chlorophyll a (2-35 mg l⁻¹) were recorded during the summer season (Calvo et al., 1994). As a consequence, the *P. oceanica* meadow growing in this area regressed and residual patches were detected from 11 to 21 m depth (Tomasello et al., 2007). In recent years, there has been a marked improvement in water quality in the Gulf of Palermo with TRophic IndeX (TRIX) levels from good to high (ARPA Sicilia & Università degli Studi di Palermo, 2006). This was due to reconstruction work in the entire metropolitan area, focused mainly on purification, proper wastewater disposal, and rehabilitation and stabilization of the rubble landfills along the coast.

**Site selection**

In order to identify suitable areas for *P. oceanica* seagrass transplants in the Gulf of Palermo, we used the model proposed by Short et al. (2002) for *Z. marina*. This model consists of three steps: (1) habitat selection; (2) field assessments and test-transplanting; (3) identification of suitable restoration sites.

**Habitat selection**

The first step of the site-selection model, namely, identification of a potential seagrass habitat, involves calculating the Preliminary Transplant Suitability Index (PTSI) (Short et al., 2002). This is a multiplicative index based on environmental information from literature sources or, if these are not available, from field observations. In this study, most of the parameters and relative ratings for PTSI calculation were according to Short et al. (2002) (Table 1). However, some modifications were made, relating to the characteristics of *P. oceanica* and the Mediterranean habitat in which it grows. In particular, unlike *Z. marina*, *P. oceanica* is able to form *matte* (Boudouresque & Meinesz, 1982), to grow on different types of substrata (Hemminga & Duarte, 2000) and is a slow-growing species (González-Correa et al., 2005).

For historical seagrass distribution, we used available *P. oceanica* and/or dead *matte* distribution maps, as they provide clear evidence of the past presence of meadows (Leriche et al., 2004; Table 1).

The parameter of proximity to a natural seagrass bed

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takes into account the maximum distance at which the plant could naturally recolonize the area (Short et al., 2002). The distance estimated for *P. oceanica* is 70 m (Migliaccio et al., 2005). Thus, only potential transplant sites located more than 70 m from an existing meadow were considered.

The highest PTSI score for the sediment parameter was assigned to “sand with *Cymodocea nodosa*”, this being described as a pioneer species, which creates consolidated organic matter on the sediment for later colonization by *P. oceanica* (Molinier & Picard, 1952). In contrast, seagrasses grow with difficulty on silt because of poor anchoring and possible increase in water turbidity. Although *P. oceanica* is also able to grow on rock (Di Maida et al., 2013), rock was excluded from the model because it is very difficult to anchor cuttings on this type of substratum.

The water depth parameter was rated by identifying local upper and lower depth limits for seagrass beds in the Gulf of Palermo (ARPA Sicilia & Università degli Studi di Palermo, 2006). Average bed depth in the area was estimated at 14 m.

We characterized water quality by detecting TRIX

![Gulf of Palermo](image_url)

*Fig. 1: The Gulf of Palermo.*

Table 1. Parameters and corresponding ratings used for calculation of PTSI. Data sources are in brackets.

| Parameter                                      | PTSI rating                                                                 | References of general model                      | References of present study                        |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Historical *P. oceanica* distribution          | 1 = previously unvegetated                                                  | Short et al., 2002; Leriche et al., 2004          | Ministero dell’Ambiente, 2002                     |
| (distribution maps)                           | 2 = previously vegetated or dead matte presence                             |                                                   |                                                   |
| Current *P. oceanica* distribution             | 0 = currently vegetated                                                     | Short et al., 2002                                | Ministero dell’Ambiente, 2002                     |
| (distribution maps)                           | 1 = currently unvegetated                                                   |                                                   |                                                   |
| Proximity to natural *P. oceanica* bed        | 0 for < 70 meters                                                           | Migliaccio et al., 2005                           |                                                   |
| (distribution maps)                           | 1 for > 70 meters                                                           |                                                   |                                                   |
| Sediment                                       | 0 = rock and silt                                                           | Molinier & Picard, 1952                          | Ministero dell’Ambiente, 2002                     |
| (distribution map)                            | 1 = sand                                                                    |                                                   |                                                   |
|                                               | 2 = sand with *Cymodocea nodosa*                                           |                                                   |                                                   |
| Water depth (map and GIS calculation)         | 0 = deeper than lower limit or shallower than upper limit of local beds*   | ARPA Sicilia & Università degli Studi di Palermo, 2006 |
|                                               | 1 = between the upper limit and the average depth – s.d. of local beds*    |                                                   |                                                   |
|                                               | 2 = average depth ± s.d. of local beds*                                    |                                                   |                                                   |
|                                               | 1 = between the lower limit and the average depth + s.d. of local beds*    |                                                   |                                                   |
| Water quality (distribution map or GIS        | 0 = poor                                                                    | Vollenweider et al., 1998; D. Lgs 152/99          | ARPA Sicilia & Università degli Studi di Palermo, 2006 |
| calculation)                                  | 1 = average                                                                 |                                                   |                                                   |
|                                               | 2 = high                                                                    |                                                   |                                                   |

* Measurements at local natural *P. oceanica* beds
Field assessments and test-transplanting

The second step of the model involved obtaining site-specific data. A number of potential seagrass habitat sites in the Gulf of Palermo, determined by PTSI scores in the first step, were evaluated for one year to assess the practicability of restoration with *P. oceanica*. According to Short et al. (2002), areas with high boat traffic were identified and excluded as possible transplant sites (e.g. harbours). Eventually, five sites inside the Gulf of Palermo, allocated in areas with PTSI scores of more than 4, were considered. According to the transplanting guidelines of Calumpong & Fonseca (2001) “donor plants should be recruited from populations in comparable environments” thus, a *P. oceanica* meadow at Solanto, near the far eastern end of the Gulf of Palermo (Fig. 1), was selected as the donor bed. In July 2007, about 700 shoot cuttings growing on sand, at a depth of 16 m, were collected according to harvesting guidelines introduced by Boudouresque et al. (1995) and standardized by Díaz-Almela & Duarte (2008) in order to minimize damage to the donor bed. In particular, material suitable for transplanting, consisting of terminal plagiotropic cuttings with three leaf bundles (Molenaar et al., 1993; Piazzi et al., 1998; Fig. 2), was selected.

The mean leaf length of the shoot cuttings (45.7±10.6 cm) was initially estimated in a sub-sample of 40 shoots. Cuttings were then stored in large coolers with small amounts of sea water to prevent desiccation during transport to the planting sites. Subsequently, cuttings were fixed on galvanized electro welded iron wire mesh (Molenaar et al., 1993). Grids were 1×1 m with a mesh of 5 cm, and 39 cuttings (∼117 shoots) were positioned per grid. Within 12 h from sampling, a test transplant, consisting of 3 grids, was performed at each of the five sites. In addition, three grids were transplanted at one control site (procedural control) close to the donor bed, in order to evaluate the effect induced by cutting transplantation itself. The grids were anchored on sand, the same substratum as the donor bed, using 70 cm long iron spikes and at a lower depth (14 m) than the donor bed, as previous studies have shown that plants from deeper meadows exhibit higher survival rates when implanted on shallower sites (Piazzi et al., 1998). Monitoring of cutting establishment and grid number for the test transplants was carried out bimonthly for one year (July 2007 - July 2008).

Identification of suitable restoration site

The Transplant Suitability Index (TSI) score was calculated for each site on the basis of the PTSI and the results from field assessments. TSI ratings of PTSI and estuarine environments should be recruited from populations in comparable environments thus, a P. oceanica meadow located inside the Gulf (Fig. 3) were used as a reference for the variables measured.

Cuttings were transplanted at one control grid (procedural control) close to the donor bed, in order to evaluate the effect induced by cutting transplantation itself. The grids were anchored on sand, the same substratum as the donor bed, using 70 cm long iron spikes and at a lower depth (14 m) than the donor bed, as previous studies have shown that plants from deeper meadows exhibit higher survival rates when implanted on shallower sites (Piazzi et al., 1998). Monitoring of cutting establishment and grid number for the test transplants was carried out bimonthly for one year (July 2007 - July 2008).

In addition, in summer 2007, light measurements (photosynthetically active radiation, PAR) were taken just below the surface and just above the sediment using an underwater spherical (4x) quantum sensor (Li-Cor LI193SA). Collected data were then expressed as a percentage of surface light (Dennison et al., 1993). In July 2008, five *P. oceanica* shoots per grid from each test transplant and from the donor bed were collected for laboratory analyses.

Biometric analysis on shoot leaf bundles was carried out according to Giraud (1977) and Pergent-Martini et al. (2005). In particular, lengths and number of all leaves on each shoot were measured. Data from a *P. oceanica* meadow located inside the Gulf (Fig. 3) were used as a reference for the variables measured.

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tablishment factors were assigned according to Short et al. (2002) and, for P. oceanica leaf variables and light, the same rating as for Z. marina growth variables was adopted but considering the limits in relation to P. oceanica (Table 2). In addition, the number of detached grids obtained during monitoring of test transplants was taken into account, as this parameter is linked to other factors (hydrodynamic regime, anchoring, fishing) with potentially important effects on the final outcome of the transplant. TSI was calculated according to the following formula:

$$\text{TSI} = \text{PTSI} \times \text{Establishment} \times \text{Leaf length} \times \text{Leaf number} \times \text{Light} \times \text{Detached Grids}.$$  

Statistical analysis

In order to verify whether establishment rates varied between sites, the Chi-square test was used with a set at 0.05 (Siegel, 1956). In particular, this test checks the null hypothesis that there is equality in the frequency distribution of a contingency table. In our case, the contingency table was generated by crossing the number of not established with the number of established cuttings one year after transplantation at different sites. Differences in leaf biometry among test transplants were assessed by linear model (LM) (Underwood, 1997). Residual homoscedasticity was assessed using the Levene test (Glaser, 1983). When heteroscedasticity of residuals was present, the response variable was transformed to fit the assumptions of linear models. In the parameterization used for LM, all results referred to the intercept, a baseline conventional category (Tomasello et al., 2009a) that, in this case, was set with the procedural control site. All statistical data analyses were performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) ver. 15.0.

Recovery design

In November 2008, a P. oceanica transplanting was performed in the Gulf of Palermo in order to assess definitively the suitability of the area and plan restoration at larger scale. The transplanting site was chosen in accordance with the outcomes of the site selection model. At this site, 20 grids of galvanized electro welded iron wire meshes (1x1m) were placed in an area of about 40 m² at a depth of 14m. The grids were anchored to the substratum using 70 cm long iron spikes. On the upper part of each grid, about 20 P. oceanica cuttings, collected from the same donor bed as that of the model (Solanto) and with the same modality, were fixed, giving a total of 1313 shoots positioned with a mean density of 66 shoots m⁻². Transplant monitoring was carried out from 2008 to 2014 to assess establishment, detachment and mortality of cuttings and shoot density.

Results

Site selection

Habitat selection

PTSI index values calculated for the Gulf of Palermo were only 0, 8 and 16 (Fig. 3). Hence, according to the size of the areas, the five established test transplants were positioned as follows: in the areas with PTSI = 0, being potentially unsuitable because of natural or anthropogenic factors, no test was allocated; instead, four tests were placed inside the suitable area (PTSI = 8) and one within the highly suitable area (PTSI = 16). Finally, the procedural control site was situated close to the donor bed (Solanto) (Fig. 3).

Table 2. Parameters and corresponding ratings used for calculation of TSI. Data sources are in brackets.

| Parameter                  | TSI rating | Reference                  |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| PTSI                       | 0 for PTSI = 0–1 |
|                            | 1 for PTSI = 2–4 |
|                            | 2 for PTSI = 8–16 | Short et al., 2002 |
| Establishment (test transplants) | 0 for <20% |
|                            | 1 for 20–40% |
|                            | 2 for >40% |                             |
| Leaf length (test transplants) | 1 for < mean – 1 SD or no dataa |
|                            | 2 for ≥ mean – 1 SDa |
| Leaf number (test transplants) | 1 for < mean – 1 SD or no dataa |
|                            | 2 for ≥ mean – 1 SDa |
| Light (field data) | 0 for <10% surface irradiance |
|                            | 1 for ≥10% surface irradiance or no data |
|                            | 2 for irradiance > local P. oceanica bed |
| Grids detached (test transplants) | 0 for n grids detached > 0 |
|                            | 2 for n grids detached = 0 | Present study |

a Measurements at local P. oceanica beds
Field assessments and test-transplanting

At each site, the specific PTSI rating was calculated (Table 3). Thus, at the time of transplant implementation all sites were unvegetated, at a distance greater than 70 m from a natural seagrass bed, at depths of 13 to 15 m and with high water quality. Only at two sites (Ficarazzi and Vergine Maria) the past presence of *P. oceanica* was ascertained and only one (Ficarazzi) was characterised by an exclusively sandy sediment, while *Cymodocea nodosa* was also present at the other sites.

During test transplant observations, the cuttings showed variable establishment patterns among sites (Fig. 4), with significant differences in their frequency distribution at the end of the monitoring year ($\chi^2 = 146.4$ with d.f. = 4, $P<0.0001$). After any initial mortality, the percentage of established cuttings at the Ficarazzi and Bandita sites (PTSI = 8) remained stable for the rest of the observation period, yielding 52.6±1.3% and 57.2±2.3%, respectively. In contrast, the cuttings planted at the Aspra and Eleuterio sites (PTSI = 8) died progressively because of a burial process during the observation period, until their total death in May at the Eleuterio site, where complete burial of cuttings occurred. The Vergine Maria site (PTSI = 16) showed the highest cutting establishment rate (94.0±0.9% after four months). However, the grids could not to be found after just two months. In the procedural control, an average of 75.7±1.3% of established cuttings were recorded at the end of the monitoring period.

Linear Model results indicated that the intercept (procedural control) estimated for average leaf length was 26.5±3.4 cm ($t$-value = 7.8, $p <0.001$) (Table 4). Only the donor bed showed significant statistical differences from the procedural control, as estimated leaf length was 49.8 cm, with an increment of 23.3±4.9 cm. As regards the number of leaves, estimated as 7±1.8 leaves/shoot in the procedural control, the linear model did not reveal any significant differences from other sites (Table 4). All sites had irradiance values higher than the local seagrass bed (15±0.6% SI), except for the Bandita site (11.2±1.8% SI) (Fig. 5). In particular, all values were above the minimum limit for *P. oceanica* growth survival (Ruiz & Romero, 2001).

Identification of suitable restoration sites

On the basis of PTSI scores and the results obtained from test transplants at the end of the monitoring year (Ta-

| Parameter                        | Vergine Maria | Bandita | Ficarazzi | Eleuterio | Aspra |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Historical seagrass distribution | 2             | 1       | 2         | 1         | 1     |
| Current seagrass distribution    | 1             | 1       | 1         | 1         | 1     |
| Proximity to natural seagrass bed| 1             | 1       | 1         | 1         | 1     |
| Sediment                         | 2             | 2       | 1         | 2         | 2     |
| Water depth                      | 2             | 2       | 2         | 2         | 2     |
| Water quality                    | 2             | 2       | 2         | 2         | 2     |
| PTSI                             | 16            | 8       | 8         | 8         | 8     |
ble 5), the TSI index was calculated for each site (Table 6). Only the Bandita site produced a score that indicated suitability for *P. oceanica* transplantation in the Gulf of Palermo, with TSI = 16. All the other sites had a TSI = 0, mainly due to the loss of grids in their respective transplant.

**Transplantation in the Gulf of Palermo. Monitoring results.**

On the basis of the model, the *P. oceanica* implant site in the Gulf of Palermo with the maximum TSI value (TSI = 16) was chosen. The transplant area was located on a seabed dominated by dead *matte* structures (Tomasello *et al.*, 2009b) (Fig. 6), as some studies have shown that *matte* is a particularly suitable substratum for planting seagrass (Di Maida *et al.*, 2013; Terrados *et al.*, 2013).

Establishment showed a decreasing trend during the first 3 years of monitoring, followed by stationary values of about 32% in the final three years, while cuttings detached from the grids showed the opposite trend, reaching a final value of 61% (Fig. 7A). The increase in the percentage of cuttings found dead was lower, reaching a final value of less than 10%. The average density of the shoots decreased, starting from an initial value of 66 shoots m$^{-2}$ down to 35 shoots m$^{-2}$ (Fig. 7B). Afterwards, mean density of the transplant reached about 76 shoots m$^{-2}$. The number of shoots per cutting remained almost stable up to 2010, with mean values of 3.5 shoots (Fig. 7C), while it subsequently increased gradually to mean values of 11.6 shoots per cutting and a maximum value of 17 shoots per cutting in 2013.

**Discussion**

The site selection model developed in this study allowed us to identify potentially suitable areas for restoration with *P. oceanica*. Moreover, on the basis of model

**Table 4.** Results of the linear model for the response variables leaf length (cm) and number of leaves (n. leaves). The intercept refers to the procedural control site (Solanto). The effect is reported as the difference from the intercept. In brackets, the standard error of the estimates. The significance of the effects was tested on the natural logarithm of the leaf length variable (Levene test: df: 4; 119, F = 1.115, p = 0.4) and on the untransformed leaf number variable (Levene test: df: 4; 20, F = 1.211, p = 0.34).

| Factor      | Effect | t – value | Significance | Effect | t – value | Significance |
|-------------|--------|-----------|--------------|--------|-----------|--------------|
| cm          |        |           |              |        |           |              |
| Intercept   | 26.5 (3.4) | 7.8 | **          | 7.0 (1.8) | 3.8 | **          |
| Donor bed   | +23.3 (4.9) | 4.8 | ***         | -0.3 (1.9) | -0.2 | n.s.        |
| Aspra       | -1.1 (5.4) | -0.2 | n.s.        | -2.2 (2.0) | -1.1 | n.s.        |
| Ficarazzi   | +8.5 (4.9) | 1.7 | n.s.        | -0.8 (2.0) | -0.4 | n.s.        |
| Bandita     | +4.4 (5.4) | 0.8 | n.s.        | -2.8 (2.0) | -1.4 | n.s.        |

Significance levels: "***"<0.001 "**"<0.01 "*"<0.05; "n.s.">0.05
results, medium-scale seagrass transplantation and its monitoring were implemented for a relatively long time scale (6 years).

**Site selection model**

**Habitat selection and test transplanting**

The Preliminary Transplant Suitability Index (PTSI) results were validated through test transplants and monitored for one year at six sites to assess transplantation effects and their variability. Establishment patterns resulting from test transplants were partially in agreement with the pre-selection index prediction. In particular, at some sites the establishment of cuttings was higher than 50%, which fell within the range recorded for other transplantation experiments conducted in the Mediterranean Sea (Meinesz et al., 1992, 1993; Molenaar & Meinesz, 1995; Piazzì et al., 2000). At the end of the monitoring period, establishment of cuttings was nil or below 25% at two sites, due to excessive sedimentation, which buried rhizomes and partially buried leaf bundles. Plants exposed to different sediment rates are able to modulate their

*Fig. 5:* Average (± SD) sea surface irradiance at each site. Dotted line indicates minimum for *P. oceanica* growth survival.

**Table 5.** PTSI scores and data (±SD) from test transplants for TSI calculation (± SD).

| Site         | PTSI | Establishment (%) | Leaf length (cm) | Leaves (N) | Light (% SI) | Grids detached (N) |
|--------------|------|-------------------|------------------|------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Vergine Maria| 16   | -                 | 19.6±14.9        | 3          |              | 19.6±14.9          |
| Bandita      | 8    | 57.2              | 30.9±14.2        | 4.2±1.3   | 11.2±1.8     | 0                 |
| Ficarazzi    | 8    | 52.6              | 35.0±18.5        | 6.2±1.9   | 15.1±0.8     | 1                 |
| Eleuterio    | 8    | 0                 | -                | -         | 18.4±5.1     | 0                 |
| Aspra        | 8    | 23.1              | 25.4±13.3        | 4.8±1.9   | 18.9±4.4     | 1                 |
| Local bed    | -    | -                 | 51.8±23.9        | 5.5±0.6   | 15.0±0.6     | -                 |

**Table 6.** TSI rating and scores of the potential restoration sites.

| Site name    | PTSI | Establishment | Leaf length | Leaves | Light | Grids detached | TSI SCORE |
|--------------|------|---------------|-------------|--------|-------|----------------|-----------|
| Vergine Maria| 2    | 0             | -           | -      | 2     | 0              | 0         |
| Bandita      | 2    | 2             | 2           | 1      | 2     | 0              | 16        |
| Ficarazzi    | 2    | 2             | 2           | 2      | 2     | 0              | 0         |
| Eleuterio    | 2    | 0             | -           | 2      | 0     | 0              | 0         |
| Aspra        | 2    | 1             | 1           | 0      | 2     | 0              | 0         |
growth to counteract leaf meristem burial (Manzanera et al., 2011). However, these authors indicated burial levels of 4 and 9 cm for partial or total mortality of P. oceanica shoots. In our case, plant ability to increase vertical rhizome elongation in response to higher sediment deposition may be reduced by transplantation stress.

Four months after installation, another site showed the highest values of cutting establishment among test transplants in the Gulf of Palermo (94%), in agreement with the PTSI index, which attributed this site with the highest chance of success for marine restoration (PTSI=16). However, no transplanted grids were found during the third inspection survey; thus, complete monitoring was not possible for this site. Grid loss generally affected most of the test transplants as, except in one case, at least one grid was lost. This additional source of disturbance for transplant tests may be due to the effects of local hydrodynamics or, very likely, to anchoring and traditional fishing activities, given that small fishing gear was found attached to remaining grids (Fig. 8).

In addition, data collected on P. oceanica bundles highlighted a number of biometric differences among plants transplanted at various sites. The leaves of the donor bed were double the length of the procedural control ones, which exhibited mean values that were statistically equal to the other sites, suggesting that most of the leaf length variability observed (about 50%) could be linked to stress due to tearing of cuttings and sediment removal rather than the different environmental conditions to which test transplants were exposed at the other sites. Cutting tearing inevitably broke clonal interconnections that are essential for supporting seagrass clonal expansion and growth (Marbà et al., 2002). Indeed, clonal interconnections are able to support seagrass growth by transferring nutrients, mainly nitrogen, from older to younger shoots (Marbà et al., 2002).

Identification of suitable restoration site

The final step of the model was the calculation of the Transplant Suitability Index (TSI), which indicated that only one site (TSI = 16) was potentially suitable for restoration with P. oceanica, whereas 80% of the sites exhibited an index value of zero. Since TSI is a multiplicative composite index, the occurrence of only one parameter equal to zero is sufficient to reset the final score. In our case, grid detachment, added as a new parameter to the model, was responsible for the fact that most of the sites were considered unsuitable for implementation of extensive P. oceanica transplantation. It was observed that detachment was mainly due to anchoring and caused especially by artisan fishing. In the Mediterranean Sea, several studies have assessed the impact of anchoring on P. oceanica meadows, particularly at sites that are highly
frequented by boaters (marine protected and coastal urbanized areas), suggesting that there may be direct, adverse effects on meadow cover and shoot density (Milazzo et al., 2004 and reference therein). For this reason, areas affected by these activities (e.g. harbours) were excluded a priori from our model. The impact of small-scale artisan fishing has not been documented extensively, perhaps because this activity is difficult to monitor, especially in unprotected areas. Therefore, transplant unit loss has been used as a proxy for anchorage and craft fishing pressure and it has been explicitly incorporated as a new parameter heavily weighted in our model, since the loss of one transplant unit makes a site unsuitable for restoration.

**Posidonia oceanica transplantation**

In this study, further focal results were obtained by extending the area and lengthening the monitoring period of *P. oceanica* transplantation.

Transplanting on the site chosen by the TSI model for *P. oceanica* showed, for the same temporal interval, an even higher establishment percentage (65.0±4.1%) than that measured for the corresponding test transplant of the model (57.2±2.3%). The small difference is possibly due to the fact that transplantation was carried out on dead matte, confirming this substratum as the most suitable for *P. oceanica* planting (Di Maida et al., 2013; Terrados et al., 2013). Such outcomes also increase the effectiveness of these kinds of models for *P. oceanica*. Our results clearly demonstrated that only one year of monitoring is insufficient to predict transplant performance, since a non-linear trend was detected, with percentage of cutting establishment decreasing below 50%, followed by an increase. Early transplant monitoring carried out for other seagrasses also showed low growth and structural seagrass performance in the first year after planting, because of planting stress (Bastyan & Cambridge, 2007; Bell et al., 2008). Again, some loss of cuttings observed during the first months after planting was, in our opinion, likely due to intense fishing in the area, although previous test transplanting did not exhibit any loss. A larger sized transplant unit is necessary in order to obtain better information about the intensity of fishing activity on the seabed.

In the last two years (2012-2014), transplant stabilization was observed, which was likely due to an increase in the root structures, constituting direct evidence of real rooting that was already underway in the first year after implantation (Meinesz et al., 1992).

However, the low establishment of cuttings detected does not necessarily entail lower efficacy in the entire transplant, since mortality or detachment may be offset in time by elongation and branching of the remaining cuttings (Calumpong & Fonseca, 2001). Seagrass clonal growth continuously speeds up space occupation; in fact, for several seagrass species, the space occupied by a seagrass clone increases exponentially in time, to the third power (Marbà & Duarte, 1998; Borum et al., 2004; Sintes et al., 2005). Much attention should be drawn to the final three years of *P. oceanica* transplantation monitoring, when an increase in shoot number per cutting was observed, which more than doubled, in situ, to distinguish one cutting from the other. Ramification mean rate of cuttings was 36% with a maximum value of about 50% in 2013, comparable with those recorded for plagiotropic cuttings by Molenaar et al. (1993). This caused an increment of about 16% in

![Fig. 7: Mean (± SE) percentages of establishment, detachment and mortality of cuttings (A), shoot density (B) and number of shoots per cutting (C) of the transplant (N=20).](http://epublishing.ekt.gr)
transplant shoot density, which compensated the initial loss of cuttings.

Approximately two years after planting, stabilization of planted cuttings and an increase in the number of shoots was observed. As _P. oceanica_ is a long-living species, its natural recovery is very slow (Duarte _et al._, 2006; Pergent _et al._, 2012) and the timeframe for understanding its resilience is often much longer than the conventional one to three years of most ecological studies (Hughes _et al._, 2005; Cunha _et al._, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The application of a site selection model, including historic and literature-based information, reference data and field measurements, is helpful in choosing suitable coastal areas for restoration with _P. oceanica_. Moreover, this model also helps us to control fishing and anchoring activities in the selected areas in order to reduce the risk of transplant failure. Limiting anchorage and craft fishing to protect transplants, at least until their stabilization, combined with more effective systems for fixing cuttings could considerably reduce the number of detached cuttings and increase transplantation success. Besides, to the best of our knowledge, our work is the first that provides quantitative data on the effects of tearing of cuttings itself and we believe that this will contribute to minimizing evaluation errors during transplantation monitoring. Finally, based on our findings, we advise that a monitoring period should last at least 3 years for the selection model outcome and at least 6 years for evaluating the effectiveness of restoration projects. Further lengthening of post-implementation monitoring would allow estimation of the actual recovery of the transplanted system. Documented seagrass restoration could provide strong evidence of the improvement in water quality in a degraded coastal system.

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