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Hidden in plain sight: species richness and habitat characterisation of sublittoral pebble beds

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Abstract

Sublittoral pebble beds are generally considered to be impoverished, but the physical and biological characteristics of these habitats are poorly known. We characterised nineteen pebble bed sites in the Maltese Islands, providing detailed habitat data for Mediterranean sublittoral pebble beds for the first time. Nearly 40,000 individuals belonging to 332 taxa were recorded in all, with total richness estimated to reach 440 taxa; molluscs, crustaceans and polychaetes were the most diverse faunal groups. This high diversity is likely due to the structural complexity of the pebble beds, which had a vertically stratified arrangement of sediment particles that is likely maintained through periodic physical disturbance. Variation in the biotic assemblage from site to site was correlated with changes in the quantity of sand

and silt, with the area of the pebble bed, with water depth, and with the thickness of the pebble layer. This indicates that pebble-bed macrofaunal assemblages are sensitive to changes in hydrodynamic conditions and sediment loading, to alterations to the stratification of the pebble beds, and to fragmentation of the habitat patches. These results contradict assertions that sublittoral pebble beds are impoverished, instead showing that they can be highly diverse habitats supporting biotic assemblages that respond to a complex set of environmental variables. The present findings enable better understanding of the ecological importance of pebble beds and of the potential impacts that may be caused by anthropogenic disturbance, thereby enabling more informed decisions for habitat conservation and management.

Keywords: Biodiversity, Conservation, Cobble bed, Community composition, Habitat, Malta, Mediterranean

Introduction

The 1992 Rio de Janeiro Convention on Biological Diversity heralded the “era of biodiversity” (Boero 2010) where exploration of diversity patterns and their environmental correlates became more imperative than ever. Nonetheless, to date the spatial patterns of marine benthic diversity remain poorly known for many habitats (Costello et al. 2010). Sublittoral cobble and pebble beds are a case in point. Quantitative descriptions of cobble or pebble biota are rare, possibly because conventional sampling methods such as cores or grabs are not suitable for these habitats (Linnane et al. 2003). We are aware of only five studies published in the mainstream literature that looked at the entire macrofaunal assemblage of

these habitats, based on sites in Canada, England, Ireland, France (Atlantic coast) and Norway (Scheibling and Raymond 1990; George et al. 1995; Linnane et al. 2003; Ringvold et al. 2015; Foveau and Dauvin in press). The few other studies that have been undertaken on these habitats focused exclusively on specific groups such as macrophytes (Lieberman et al. 1979, 1984; Davis and Wilce 1987a, 1987b; Scheibling et al. 2009a, 2009b), sessile biota (Osman 1977; Balazy & Kuklinski 2003, 2007), or decapods (Robinson and Tully 2000a, 2000b; Linnane et al. 2001). Of these, only Robinson and Tully (2000a) investigated the spatial variability in community structure in relation to substratum characteristics, but they also included areas that consisted predominantly of coarse sand or bedrock amongst their five sites.

Consequently not much is known about the physical or biological characteristics of sublittoral pebble and cobble habitats. These habitats are generally considered to be faunally impoverished (Connor et al. 2004; Foveau and Dauvin in press), a view possibly extrapolated from intertidal cobble and pebble habitats which have been described as “intertidal deserts” where macrobiota are absent (Little 2000). Accordingly, habitat classification systems used for marine conservation and management assume that there is little of interest in ecosystems comprising pebbles and cobbles. Yet this view does not appear to have been borne out by empirical studies, since the limited information available indicates that these habitats may not be so depauperate. For instance, between 15 and 32 decapod species were recorded from each of six shallow-water cobble sites in Norway, England, Ireland and Italy (Robinson and Tully 2000b; Linnane et al. 2001; Ringvold et al. 2015), while the faunal descriptions of another three sites in England, France and Ireland included a total of 382, 140 and 132 taxa respectively (George et al. 1995; Linnane et al. 2003; Foveau and Dauvin in press).

A similar situation is found in the Mediterranean Sea, where pebble bed habitats are also considered to be faunally impoverished (Bellan-Santini et al. 1994, 2002) despite the paucity of biological information on these assemblages (Bellan-Santini et al. 2002; Relini and Giaccone 2009). Given the presumption that cobble and pebble beds are depauperate, these habitats were not included in the reference list of Mediterranean marine habitats of conservation interest produced in connection with Barcelona Convention (UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA 2006a). Yet in 2006, a population of the Maltese top-shell *Gibbula nivos*a was discovered from a pebble bed in Marsamxett, Malta (Evans et al. 2010, 2011). This is a critically endangered species endemic to Maltese waters, which has been afforded protection through the Bern Convention, the Barcelona Convention, and the European Union's 'Habitats Directive' (as an Annex II species) due to its risk of extinction (Evans et al. 2011). Subsequent work confirmed the importance of shallow-water cobbles and pebbles as a habitat for *G. nivos*a (Evans and Schembri 2014), indicating that pebble beds can be of conservation interest and highlighting the need for characterisation studies of these habitats.

Within this context, the present study was carried out to characterise the physical and biological features of sublittoral pebble beds in the Maltese Islands, thus providing detailed habitat data for Mediterranean sublittoral pebble beds for the first time, and enabling assessment of their species diversity. A second objective of this study was to identify correlations between the physical parameters and biotic components of the habitat. Recognition of such patterns is a necessary precursor for the formulation of hypotheses on the relationship between the physical nature of the pebble habitat and the species assemblage it supports (Underwood et al. 2000). Knowledge on the correlation between species assemblages and environmental characteristics is also vital for conservation efforts, since it

enables prediction of how these assemblages may change in response to environmental changes, including those associated with anthropogenic activities.

Methods

Study sites

A preliminary snorkelling survey was made along the low-lying coast of the Maltese Islands to map sublittoral pebble beds. Nineteen sites (Figure 1) were selected for further study, based on the following criteria: (i) the site consisted predominantly of pebbles (stones having a diameter of 2–10 cm following the UNEP-MAP-RAC/SPA [2006b] criteria), which lacked a covering of erect macrophytes; (ii) the site had an area of at least 25 m² of pebble habitat present at a depth of more than 0.5 m below chart datum. Areas with cobbles or small boulders that had a permanent cover of erect algae were excluded because they are considered to belong to a different assemblage – that of infralittoral algae (e.g. Bellan-Santini et al. 1994).

Sediment sampling and laboratory analysis

At each site, divers measured water depth using a digital depth gauge and estimated the dimensions of the pebble beds using fibreglass tape measures. Four replicate samples of the substratum were collected from each site; their position was selected at random, but no samples were collected within 2 m of the perimeter of the beds to avoid edge effects. A 0.1-m² circular sampler (modified from Borg et al. 2002) was pushed into the substratum to delineate the sampling area and prevent escape of motile invertebrates. Pebbles were then hand-collected and transferred to a 0.5-mm mesh bag, while a small hand net was used to

scoop the basal layer of finer granules into a separate 0.5-mm mesh bag. A suction sampler was simultaneously employed to collect highly-motile organisms, thus ensuring quantitative sampling of the whole assemblage. The thickness of the pebble layer was estimated by measuring the thickness of the exposed section in comparison with the adjacent undisturbed region. The 0.1-m² sampler allowed quantitative sampling of pebbles >8 mm, but not of finer sediments. Therefore an intact core sample (area: 0.0016 m²) of the granule layer and underlying fine sediments up to a depth of 5 cm was also collected for grain-size analysis. All fieldwork was carried out between July and September 2011.

Samples for biotic analysis were preserved in 10% formaldehyde in seawater. They were subsequently sorted for macrofauna (retained by a 0.5-mm sieve; e.g. Castelli et al. 2003), retaining all pebbles >8 mm for granulometric analysis. The biota were identified to the lowest taxon possible and enumerated to construct a taxon-abundance matrix and obtain estimates of number of taxa and abundance per sample.

For particle-size analysis, all pebbles >8 mm (collected using the 0.1-m² sampler) were manually sorted into size classes at half-phi intervals on the Udden-Wentworth scale using a gravel sizing template (Hydro Scientific Ltd.). Particles <8 mm (collected using the 0.0016-m² sampler) were treated with sodium hexametaphosphate, wet-sieved for the determination of silt content, then dried and separated into size classes at phi-intervals using a series of nested test-sieves (see Bale and Kenny 2005). Since the finer sediment was collected using smaller corers, the masses of the particle-size fractions <8 mm were scaled up using the ratio of the area of the two corers as the scaling factor. Grain-size data were analysed using the method of moments to obtain the geometric mean particle size, using the GRADISTAT program (Blott and Pye 2001). Since bimodal distributions were common, the mean particle

size for the gravel fraction (particles >2 mm) was calculated independently of any finer particles, which were then quantified separately in terms of the percentage sand and silt content.

Measurements of other sediment characteristics related to pebble shape and roughness were undertaken since these determine the way pebbles are ‘packed’ in a bed, and hence the shape and size of interstitial spaces (and therefore microhabitats) available. These measurements were made on subsamples consisting of ten pebbles randomly selected from each size fraction (>8 mm), for a total of 50 pebbles per subsample. Surface area was estimated from the maximum dimensions (L , W , H) of the particles according to the equation: $Surface\ Area = 1.15*(LW+LH+WH)$ (see Graham et al. 1988). Stone resistance to rotation was calculated as the moment of inertia of an ellipsoid ($I = m*(b^2+c^2)/5$; where m is the mass, and b and c are the lengths of the two minor semi-axes). Particle shape was characterised by: (i) form, in terms of elongation (W/L) and flatness (H/W) (Blott and Pye 2008); (ii) roundness, using a visual comparator (Blott and Pye 2008); and (iii) sphericity, as the square-root of the ratio of the largest inscribed circle diameter to the smallest circumscribed circle diameter (Riley 1941), averaged across the three dimensions of the pebbles. Percentage cover of encrusting and filamentous algae was also recorded.

Physico-chemical characterisation of the water

Sampling was undertaken at monthly intervals over a period of one year (July 2011 – June 2012). Temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen and turbidity were measured using an *in situ* meter (YSI 6820 multiparameter sonde) deployed just above the seafloor and two replicate seawater samples were collected from just above the pebble habitat using a Van Dorn water sampler. Nitrate and phosphate levels were determined using an automated continuous flow

analyser (Skalar SAN++ coupled with an SA1000 autosampler). Annual average concentrations for these parameters were calculated following standard practises in water quality monitoring (E.C. 2009). While physico-chemical parameters are not properties of the pebble beds *per se*, they were also taken into consideration since some of the study sites were within a harbour area (Sites 6–11; see Figure 1) and likely receive higher nutrient inputs and therefore have higher productivity, while Site 5 was situated close to a thermal effluent which could also affect its biota.

Statistical analyses

Univariate indices of diversity were calculated for each site, and for the pebble-bed assemblage as a whole (across all sites). These included: observed taxon richness (S_{obs}), estimated total richness (S_{est}), total abundance (TA), diversity (Hill diversity 1D), evenness (${}^1D/S_{\text{obs}}$) and relative evenness (Pielou J'). The *Chao1* estimator (Chao 1984) was used to estimate S_{est} (see Foggo et al. 2003), while choice of evenness measures was based on the rationale of Jost (2010). Since functionally redundant species tend to be taxonomically related (Clarke and Warwick 1998), indices that take species' relatedness into account provide a broader view of biodiversity that potentially also includes functional aspects (Somerfield et al. 2008). Thus, taxonomic diversity (Δ), taxonomic distinctness (Δ^*) (Warwick and Clarke 1995) and average variation in taxonomic distinctness (Δ^+) (Clarke and Warwick 2001) were also estimated.

Multivariate analyses were carried out using the PRIMER v6 software (Clarke and Gorley 2006) with PERMANOVA+ v1 add-on (Anderson et al. 2008). For biotic data, analyses were based on a Bray-Curtis similarity resemblance matrix calculated on square-root transformed taxon-abundance data. The taxa that were characteristic of the pebble-bed assemblage were

determined using SIMPER analysis (Clarke 1993), while nMDS ordination was performed to visualise the community pattern. The BVStep routine was subsequently used to find the smallest possible subset of taxa that together describe most of the among-site variation observed in the full dataset, using the “peeling” procedure as described in Clarke and Warwick (1998). The ordination pattern of sites based on physical attributes was visualised through PCA. Correlations between the similarity matrices obtained using the physical data (based on Euclidean distance) and biotic data (based on Bray-Curtis) were tested using a non-parametric form of the Mantel test (RELATE).

Distance-based multiple regression and redundancy analyses (DistLM and db-RDA; McArdle and Anderson 2001) were then used to identify the physical variables correlated with variation in the biotic assemblage. The analyses were made using the entire faunal dataset, and then repeated for sub-sets consisting of mobile and non-mobile fauna analysed separately. Non-mobile fauna included taxa that are either sedentary or permanently attached; parasitic taxa were omitted from these analyses. Although the DistLM/db-RDA routines do not require the assumption of multivariate normality, predictor variables should not be heavily-skewed or contain extreme outliers (Anderson et al. 2008). Therefore, prior to these analyses, Shapiro-Wilk normality tests were run and, where necessary, Box-Cox normalising transformations were applied (see Sokal and Rohlf 1995). Since abiotic variables were measured on different measurement scales they were also standardised to unit variance to bring them to a common scale (Legendre and Legendre 1998). DistLM was carried out using the transformed environmental variables after checking for multi-collinearity (no variables were removed since Pearson’s r was <0.9 in all cases). Forward sequential fitting was used to select those variables with the highest explanatory power according to the adjusted- R^2 selection criterion. A db-RDA plot was subsequently produced to allow visualization of the

sites' ordination according to the multivariate regression models previously generated via DistLM. An unconstrained ordination plot was produced via non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) for comparison with the constrained db-RDA plot.

Results

Physical characterisation

A summary of the various physical parameters quantified for the pebble-bed sites is provided in Table 1. Seven sites occurred at a water depth <2.5 m, while the rest were found at a water depth of 5–12 m. Most of the pebble beds covered a relatively small area (25–500 m²) although two extensive beds (>3000 m²) were present in Marsamxett Harbour. In all cases, the pebble bed had a layered structure, with an upper stratum of pebbles and a lower stratum of granules and sand that became progressively finer with sediment depth; a basal silty layer was also present in the deeper sites (Figure 2). The upper pebbly stratum consisted of around two to three layers of pebbles with an overall thickness of ca. 5–10 cm. These pebbles mostly fell within the 16–32 mm or 32–64 mm size classes, although some variation in mean pebble size was evident between sites. The six sites located within Marsamxett Harbour had the highest proportion of sand and silt and the highest algal cover, while shallower sites had the lowest content of fine sediment and the lowest algal cover. Shallow sites also had the highest total surface area, reflecting the slightly thicker pebble beds present at these sites.

In terms of particle-shape characteristics, the pebbles from all sites classified as “slightly elongate”, “slightly flat”, “rounded” and “moderately spherical”, according to Blott and Pye's (2008) classification systems. There was minimal variation in annual mean values for

salinity, dissolved oxygen, turbidity and phosphate content between sites. Similar temperature values were also recorded at the different sites except at site 5, where the presence of a power station thermal effluent close to the pebble bed resulted in temperature being around 3°C higher. Some variation in levels of nitrate were also noted, with shallow sites having the highest values overall, although all values were within the expected range for Maltese inshore waters (Axiak 2004).

Biotic characterisation

A total of 39,993 individuals belonging to 332 macrofaunal taxa were recorded. Of these, 34,035 individuals (313 taxa) were recorded from the upper pebble stratum while 5,958 individuals (187 taxa) were found in the underlying layer of granules and finer sediments. The most diverse groups were the Mollusca (134 taxa), Crustacea (93 taxa) and Polychaeta (77 taxa). Spirorbinae spp. accounted for 45% of all individuals and 88% of the polychaetes, with nearly half of the spirorbids being recorded from a single site (Marsaxlokk; Site 4 in Figure 1). Polychaeta was the most abundant faunal group overall, but non-spirorbid polychaetes comprised only 6% of the total fauna (Figure 3). Other faunal groups included the Echinodermata, Cnidaria, Sipuncula, Nemertea, Tunicata and Actinopterygii which together accounted for only 1.5% of the total abundance. A larger richness of mobile fauna (246 taxa) was recorded compared to non-mobile fauna (82 taxa), but the total abundances of the two functional groups were very similar (49% mobile; 51% non-mobile).

The gradient of a taxon accumulation plot for the sampled sites (Figure 4) decreased after the fifth site, but did not reach an asymptote, with *Chao1* estimating a total taxon richness of 440 taxa across all 19 sites. The actual number of taxa recorded per site ranged from 37 to 125, with an overall mean of 81 taxa. Sites located at depths <2.5 m had approximately half the

number of taxa (mean: 49 taxa) as those found in waters >5 m deep (mean: 96 taxa), but a higher abundance was recorded from the shallower sites. This was mainly due to high abundance values of one or two dominating taxa at the shallower sites. Evenness values were overall low ($\max {}^1D/S_{\text{obs}} = 0.4$). Values of taxonomic diversity and distinctness were generally similar for all sites, with the exception of taxonomic diversity recorded from site 4 which was much lower ($\Delta = 6.8$) than that recorded elsewhere ($\Delta > 40$). The mean, minimum and maximum values of these univariate diversity indices recorded from the 19 sites are indicated in Table 2.

The taxa identified as main contributors to similarity between the 19 sites are shown in Table 3; these are considered to be characteristic of the studied pebble-bed assemblages and include representatives of all three major taxonomic groups (Crustacea, Mollusca, Polychaeta) and one Echinodermata. These taxa were all recorded from at least 13 of the 19 sites, but only *Chondrochelia savignyi* and *Xantho pilipes* were found at all sites. The smallest subset of taxa that still captured the sample relationships seen in the full community pattern (BVStep using a cut-off of Spearman's $\rho > 0.95$) consisted of the following 16 taxa: *Alvania mamillata*, *Amphipholis squamata*, *Ampithoe ramondi*, *Athanas nitescens*, *Bittium latreillii*, *Bittium reticulatum*, *Calcinus tubularis*, *Cerithium renovatum*, *Columbella rustica*, *Gibbula varia*, *Ischnochiton rissoi*, *Lysianassa costae*, *Maera grossimana*, *Melita hergensis*, *Microdeutopus* spp. and *Spirorbinae* spp. Several of these were in common with the list of taxa contributing to similarity between sites identified through SIMPER analysis. Excluding these 16 taxa and repeating the BVStep analysis did not yield another subset of taxa that could attain the Spearman's $\rho > 0.95$ criterion, but resulted in a subset of 35 taxa that still closely matched the overall multivariate pattern (Spearman's $\rho = 0.94$). The next iteration yielded a subset of 39 taxa with Spearman's $\rho = 0.90$; subsequent iterations failed to identify

another subset that could adequately describe the overall multivariate pattern (Spearman's $\rho < 0.80$).

Linking physical and biological patterns

The resemblance matrices produced based on environmental parameters and taxon-abundance data were significantly correlated (RELATE: Spearman's $\rho = 0.47$; $p = 0.002$) indicating that the measured physical variables may be important factors structuring the biotic assemblage. When considering predictor variables individually, the multivariate multiple regression made using the entire macrofaunal dataset indicated that the sand and silt content was the physical parameter that accounted for the highest variance in species data, followed by coverage of the pebble beds, percentage cover of algae on the pebbles, and depth of the beds (Table 4). When the environmental factors were added sequentially to build a parsimonious model correlated to the variation in biotic composition, the first chosen factor was the percentage sand and silt content. This was followed by patch area, depth and layer thickness, with the four factors explaining 50.6% of the variation in assemblage structure (Table 5). Almost identical results were obtained when mobile and non-mobile taxa were analysed separately, with the main difference being the inclusion of nitrate concentration in the parsimonious model for non-mobile taxa (Tables 4 and 5). The nMDS (unconstrained) and db-RDA (constrained) ordination plots of the sites based on the full biotic dataset are shown in Figure 5. Only the physical factors selected in the DistLM models were included in the db-RDA plot; the first two axes account for 80% of the fitted variation, and 40% of the total variation in assemblage structure.

Discussion

325

326 A total sampling area of 7.6 m² of pebble habitat yielded 332 different macrofaunal taxa and
327 just under 40,000 individuals. These numbers contradict previous assertions that sublittoral
328 pebble beds are species poor and depauperate habitats (e.g. Bellan-Santini et al. 1994). The
329 percentage abundance values of faunal groups recorded from the Maltese pebble beds was
330 comparable to those reported by Linnane et al. (2001) from cobble beds found at similar
331 depths (7–17 m) in Norway, England and Italy, where crustaceans were the dominant motile
332 fauna followed by molluscs and polychaetes; in contrast, molluscs were dominant at an Irish
333 cobble site (Linnane et al. 2001, 2003). These authors provide estimates for the number of
334 decapod species, ranging between 15–32 species (with sampling areas of 7–20 m²), similar to
335 the 17 decapod species recorded by Robinson and Tully (2000a) from a different location in
336 Ireland (depth 6–12 m; sampled area 5 m²), to the 23 species recorded by George et al. (1995)
337 from Norfolk, England (depth 10–18 m; sampled area 7.3 m²), and to the 28 decapod species
338 recorded from Maltese pebble beds (present work). Notwithstanding the wide geographical
339 separation of these locations, a number of decapod taxa including *Athanas nitescens*, *Pisidia*
340 spp. and *Xantho pilipes*, were common to several sites, and are therefore seemingly
341 associated with pebble/cobble habitats.

342

343 The species richness recorded in the present study is comparable to that found in other
344 Mediterranean habitats which are considered to be highly diverse, such as seagrass meadows
345 and maerl beds. For instance, 244 macroinvertebrate species were recorded from a maerl bed
346 in Maltese waters (sampling area = 4.8 m²; Sciberras et al. 2006), while a similar study on
347 motile macroinvertebrates associated with *Posidonia oceanica* meadows recorded 315
348 species (sampling area = 3.7 m²; Borg et al. 2010). Overall, it is clear that while pebble-bed
349 habitats are generally held to be species poor, the few studies that have been made on these

habitats indicate that this is not the case; they are overlooked and under-studied habitats, but not necessarily impoverished ones. In addition, the number of species reported from cobble and pebble substrata is likely an underestimate of the total macrobenthic richness of these habitats, since none of the studies undertaken took habitat edges into account (George et al., 1995; Linnane et al. 2001, 2003; Robinson and Tully, 2000a; present study). Habitat edges may support a different suite of fauna, possibly having additional species beyond those occurring in the habitat centres. On the other hand, the edge species richness will also depend on the identity and richness of the adjacent habitats.

In the present study, species rich assemblages were recorded both at the level of individual sites and, when considering the entire habitat, across all sites. The high within-site diversity may be due to an intermediate disturbance regime (Osman 1977), or to the physically complex nature of the substratum (Robinson and Tully 2000a, 2000b) that incorporates interstitial spaces of various dimensions providing microhabitats and refugia from predators for animals of different sizes (Linnane et al. 2003; Liversage et al. 2017). Physical disturbance via wave action is probably the major cause of pebble overturn during winter months, but may play a minor role during prolonged periods of calm weather that occur in summer, especially in sheltered sites. Field observations made during the present sampling indicated that bioturbation, especially by the striped red mullet *Mullus surmuletus*, may be an important cause of disturbance in the deeper sites. The lack of erect algae on the surface of the pebbles, even during the calmer summer months, suggests that the pebbles are unstable and do overturn regularly.

Physical disturbance may itself increase the habitat complexity by leading to stratification (as observed in the present study) through vertical winnowing, which involves loss of fine

material to the subsurface by passing down through the interstitial cavities between the pebbles as these are disturbed by water motion or bioturbation (Parker and Klingeman 1982). Stratification may also be partly due to the selective fine particle entrainment, since this renders the surface layer coarser than the subsurface material. Such mechanisms enable the pebbles to persist in an unburied state (Parker and Klingeman 1982). Stratification can have important biological consequences since benthic community structure is often related to sediment textural characteristics (Anderson 2008), which could lead to different species groups being present in the different strata at a given site, thus increasing species diversity.

Most of the characteristic species of Maltese pebble beds were included in the smallest subset of taxa that still adequately described the among-site variation observed in the full dataset. This suggests that differences between the 19 study sites are partly driven by changes in abundance of these main taxa. Nonetheless, an element of structural redundancy (*sensu* Clarke and Warwick 1998) was also present, given that two other species subsets that included a total of 74 taxa between them also closely matched the overall multivariate pattern. In addition, several taxa were rare, with over half of the taxa being recorded from only one to three sites. Due to their rarity, such taxa may not have contributed substantially to the overall multivariate pattern but they are important contributors to the overall diversity of the pebble-bed assemblages.

The environmental parameters and taxon-abundance data were significantly correlated, indicating that at least some of the measured physical variables may be important factors structuring the biotic assemblage. One of the main factors which was highly correlated with biotic variation was the sand and silt content, probably because it is a good proxy for the hydrodynamic regime present at a site and may also influence food availability. Other

physical variables included in the parsimonious models were patch area, depth, pebble layer thickness. Depth can be a proxy for several other factors, including wave energy, light intensity and phytoplankton concentration, all of which may have an influence on benthic assemblages. The pebble layer thickness is a measure of habitat complexity. On its own, this factor explained less than 10% of the biotic variation but could explain almost 7% of the variation over and above that accounted for by the other parameters already in the model. The inclusion of coverage in the models is interesting given that the pebble patches are essentially habitat islands surrounded by other habitat types and, according to the classic theory of island biogeography, island area is one of the main factors influencing the occurrence and abundance of species in islands (MacArthur and Wilson 1967). This may be due to patch area *per se*, but can also result from its correlation with other factors that directly regulate the community structure (Ricklefs and Lovette 1999).

In conclusion, the present study shows that claims that sublittoral pebble beds are impoverished do not stand up to scrutiny, especially in the case of beds found deeper than a couple of metres. This misconception is likely due to the absence of detailed studies on these habitats. Indeed, a recent study on mobile gravels and pebbles in north-western France (25–66 m depth) reached a similar conclusion that these habitats support a “surprisingly diversified macrofauna” (Foveau and Dauvin in press). The presence of unique or rare species within pebble beds would further enhance their conservation value, but this can only be ascertained through detailed comparative studies of the species assemblages found in different habitats, which was beyond the scope of the present work. On the other hand, pebbles beds may still represent unique assemblages with different functionality, even if none of their component species occur solely in pebble beds.

Our results indicate that sublittoral pebble beds can be highly diverse, with the biotic assemblage responding to a complex set of environmental variables. In such a situation, changes to the physical environment can lead to a significant impact on the assemblage structure and composition. In particular, the results of this study indicate that pebble-bed macrofaunal assemblages are sensitive to changes in hydrodynamic conditions and sediment loading, to alterations to the stratification of the pebble beds, and to fragmentation of the habitat patches. This information will enable better understanding of the ecological importance of pebble beds and of the potential impacts that may be caused by anthropogenic disturbance, thereby enabling more informed decisions for habitat conservation and management. In the case of the Maltese Islands, live populations of the critically endangered endemic top-shell *Gibbula nivos*a have only been recorded from cobble and pebble habitats since the rediscovery of this species in 2006 (Evans et al. 2010, 2011; Evans and Schembri 2014; this study). Since *G. nivos*a is included in Annex II of the European Union's 'Habitats Directive' (species whose conservation requires designation of protected areas), infralittoral pebble beds should actually be considered as priority habitats when formulating conservation management plans and designating protected areas in Maltese coastal waters.

Compliance with ethical standards

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450

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454

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Tables

Table 1

Mean ($\pm$ SD), minimum and maximum values of various physical parameters recorded from sublittoral pebble beds at 19 sites in the Maltese Islands.

	Mean $\pm$ SD	Range
Depth (m)	5.0 $\pm$ 3.4	0.7 – 12.0
Patch Area (m ²)	806 $\pm$ 1422	25 – 3900
Thickness (cm)	5.28 $\pm$ 1.65	2.0 – 8.8
Mean Pebble Size (mm)	30.7 $\pm$ 15.0	12.8 – 68.0
Sand & Silt content (%)	18.9 $\pm$ 12.8	0.0 – 40.8
Mean Moment of Inertia (g cm ²)	198 $\pm$ 419	6.8 – 1511
Total Surface Area (m ²)	0.54 $\pm$ 0.20	0.3 – 1.0
Mean Elongation	0.74 $\pm$ 0.02	0.7 – 0.8
Mean Flatness	0.66 $\pm$ 0.04	0.6 – 0.7
Mean Roundness	0.69 $\pm$ 0.05	0.6 – 0.7
Mean Sphericity	0.75 $\pm$ 0.01	0.7 – 0.8
Filamentous algal cover (%)	6.5 $\pm$ 4.3	0.0 – 13.9
Encrusting algal cover (%)	14.0 $\pm$ 19.7	0.0 – 55.2
Annual Mean Temperature (°C)	20.65 $\pm$ 0.76	19.9 – 23.6
Annual Mean Salinity (psu)	37.94 $\pm$ 0.13	37.6 – 38.1
Annual Mean Dissolved Oxygen (%)	107.2 $\pm$ 5.1	93.4 – 113.7
Annual Mean Turbidity (NTU)	0.52 $\pm$ 0.58	0.1 – 2.7
Annual Mean [Nitrate] (μ g L ⁻¹)	78.4 $\pm$ 115	15.7 – 513.5
Annual Mean [Phosphate] (μ g L ⁻¹)	2.6 $\pm$ 1.3	1.7 – 7.0

Table 2

Mean ($\pm$ SD), minimum and maximum values for various univariate diversity indices recorded from sublittoral pebble beds at the 19 study sites.

	Mean $\pm$ SD	Range
Observed taxon richness - S_{obs}	81 $\pm$ 27	37 – 125
Estimated taxon richness - S_{est}	122 $\pm$ 37	59 – 185
Total abundance - TA (ind. 0.4 m ⁻²)	2105 $\pm$ 1996	409 – 9279
Hill diversity - 1D	13.7 $\pm$ 9.1	1.3 – 38.8
Evenness - $^1D/S_{\text{obs}}$	0.2 $\pm$ 0.1	0.0 – 0.4
Relative evenness - J'	0.5 $\pm$ 0.2	0.1 – 0.8
Taxonomic diversity - Δ	65.2 $\pm$ 17.6	6.8 – 85.2
Taxonomic distinctness - Δ^*	88.6 $\pm$ 4.7	79.7 – 98.4
Average variation in taxonomic distinctness - Λ^+	318.0 $\pm$ 40.7	261.6 – 421.0

Table 3

Output from SIMPER analysis based on square-root transformed abundance data, identifying main taxa contributing to similarity in faunal assemblage present at the 19 study sites.

Taxonomic group	Species	Mean Abundance ($\sqrt{\text{ind. } 0.4 \text{ m}^{-2}}$)	Frequency of Occurrence (%)	Mean Similarity	Contribution to Similarity (%)
Polychaeta Sabellidae	Spirorbinae spp.	10.3	78.9	4.06	12.11
Crustacea Tanaidacea	<i>Chondrochelia savignyi</i>	5.5	100	3.11	9.27
Crustacea Amphipoda	<i>Gammarella fucicola</i>	3.0	94.7	1.39	4.14
Crustacea Decapoda	<i>Xantho pilipes</i>	1.7	100	1.04	3.11
Crustacea Amphipoda	<i>Ampithoe ramondi</i>	1.9	94.7	1.04	3.09
Mollusca Polyplacophora	<i>Ischnochiton rissoi</i>	2.1	84.2	0.99	2.95
Crustacea Amphipoda	<i>Microdeutopus</i> spp.	2.0	89.5	0.87	2.59
Crustacea Decapoda	<i>Athanas nitescens</i>	1.8	84.2	0.86	2.56
Crustacea Amphipoda	<i>Melita hergensis</i>	2.4	68.4	0.82	2.46
Polychaeta Nereididae	<i>Nereis rava</i>	1.4	84.2	0.74	2.19
Crustacea Amphipoda	<i>Maera grossimana</i>	2.0	68.4	0.73	2.18
Echinodermata Ophiuroidea	<i>Amphipholis squamata</i>	1.7	84.2	0.72	2.16
Mollusca Gastropoda	<i>Gibbula varia</i>	1.7	68.4	0.70	2.10

612 **Table 4**

613 Results of DistLM analysis identifying physical variables correlated to the variation in biotic composition, based on the adjusted-R² criterion for
 614 each variable taken individually (ignoring other variables), using (a) the entire macrofaunal dataset, (b) mobile taxa only, (c) non-mobile taxa
 615 only. Analyses were performed using Bray-Curtis similarity to measure variance in biotic data. % var: percentage of variance in species data
 616 explained by that variable; p-values lower than 0.05 are indicated in bold.

617

Variable	(a) All Fauna			(b) Mobile Fauna			(c) Non-mobile Fauna		
	% var	Pseudo-F	P	% var	Pseudo-F	P	% var	Pseudo-F	P
Depth	16.3	3.302	0.004	16.8	3.435	0.003	12.5	2.429	0.027
Layer Thickness	9.0	1.674	0.071	9.0	1.689	0.055	8.4	1.550	0.117
Patch Area	23.3	5.167	0.001	22.0	4.806	0.001	24.3	5.467	0.001
Mean Pebble Size	7.4	1.360	0.160	8.1	1.501	0.105	4.7	0.840	0.537
Sand & Silt content	24.3	5.447	0.001	22.4	4.912	0.001	24.6	5.536	0.001
Mean Elongation	2.9	0.504	0.983	3.4	0.596	0.910	2.7	0.480	0.929
Mean Flatness	5.3	0.951	0.463	5.5	0.990	0.445	4.4	0.777	0.623
Mean Roundness	6.5	1.181	0.257	5.5	0.992	0.420	7.9	1.453	0.151
Mean Sphericity	6.2	1.125	0.276	7.1	1.303	0.189	4.6	0.814	0.587
Mean Moment of Inertia	10.6	2.017	0.031	10.9	2.083	0.023	8.7	1.615	0.122
Total Surface Area	11.1	2.131	0.031	11.7	2.252	0.012	8.9	1.662	0.096
Filamentous Algal cover	16.7	3.404	0.001	16.4	3.325	0.001	15.6	3.150	0.006
Encrusting Algal cover	19.0	3.989	0.001	17.7	3.650	0.002	21.5	4.661	0.001
Annual Mean Temperature	6.6	1.207	0.216	8.3	1.547	0.065	4.0	0.708	0.692
Annual Mean Salinity	4.5	0.801	0.656	5.0	0.904	0.547	3.3	0.574	0.857
Annual Mean Dissolved Oxygen	6.5	1.173	0.248	6.2	1.128	0.302	5.5	0.991	0.409
Annual Mean Turbidity	6.5	1.185	0.237	6.6	1.197	0.250	6.8	1.248	0.237
Annual Mean Nitrate concentration	12.4	2.402	0.010	10.0	1.887	0.041	15.9	3.211	0.009
Annual Mean Phosphate concentration	14.9	2.971	0.004	14.7	2.932	0.002	15.0	3.008	0.006

Table 5

Results of DistLM analysis identifying physical variables correlated to the variation in biotic composition, based on the adjusted- R^2 criterion with forward-selection of variables, where the amount explained by each variable added to the model is conditional on variables already in the model (i.e. those variables listed above it), using (a) the entire macrofaunal dataset, (b) mobile taxa only, (c) non-mobile taxa only. Only variables up to the first highly non-significant p -value (>0.09) are included in sequential fitting. Analyses were performed using Bray-Curtis similarity to measure variance in biotic data. % var: percentage of variance in species data explained by that variable; cum. %: cumulative percentage of variance explained; p -values lower than 0.05 are indicated in bold.

Variable	(a) All Fauna			
	% var	cum %	Pseudo-F	P
Sand & Silt content	24.3	24.3	5.447	0.001
Patch Area	9.6	33.8	2.312	0.001
Depth	7.2	41.0	1.826	0.013
Layer Thickness	6.3	47.2	1.665	0.039
Mean Pebble Size	5.3	52.6	1.452	0.093
Variable	(b) Mobile Fauna			
	% var	cum %	Pseudo-F	P
Sand & Silt content	22.4	22.4	4.912	0.001
Patch Area	9.6	32.0	2.262	0.002
Depth	8.3	40.3	2.077	0.007
Mean Pebble Size	6.0	46.3	1.565	0.054
Layer Thickness	5.3	51.6	1.421	0.128
Variable	(c) Non-mobile Fauna			
	% var	cum %	Pseudo-F	P
Sand & Silt content	24.6	24.6	5.536	0.001
Layer Thickness	11.1	35.7	2.775	0.003
Patch Area	9.3	45.0	2.524	0.005
Annual Mean Nitrate concentration	6.7	51.7	1.935	0.043
Annual Mean Phosphate concentration	4.4	56.1	1.302	0.208

Figures with legends

Figure 1 Map of the Maltese Islands indicating the location of the 19 sampling sites used in the present study. Inset shows enlarged view of Marsamxett Harbour.

Figure 2 Diagrammatic pebble-bed profile showing vertical stratification, with an upper layer of pebbles and a lower layer of granules and sand; a basal layer of silty sand was typically present in harbour environments.

Figure 3 Percentage abundance of major faunal groups recorded from sublittoral pebble beds at the 19 study sites.

Figure 4 Taxon-accumulation plot showing cumulative number of taxa recorded from infralittoral pebble beds at the 19 study sites; the *Chao1* richness estimator indicated that the plot should reach an asymptote at a taxon richness of 440.

Figure 5 (a) Unconstrained non-metric multidimensional scaling ordination plot, where sites are positioned according to their similarity in biotic assemblage only. (b) Distance-based RDA ordination, where the ordination based on biotic data is constrained by their correlation with environmental variables, with vector projections of the physical factors selected by the DistLM routine; the length and direction of the vectors represent the strength and direction of the relationship between the variation in biotic assemblage and the physical variables. Both ordinations were performed using Bray-Curtis similarity of square-root transformed species counts.