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Little samplers, big fleet: eDNA metabarcoding from commercial trawlers enhances ocean monitoring

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1 Little samplers, big fleet: eDNA metabarcoding from commercial trawlers 2 enhances ocean monitoring 3

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28 Abstract

29 The global need to monitor the status of marine resources is a priority task in marine management, but most
30 ocean surveys still rely on costly and time-consuming capture-based techniques. Here we test a novel, easy-to
31 use device to collect eDNA on board of bottom trawl fishing vessels, during normal fishing operations, quickly
32 and easily: custom-made rolls of gauze tied to a hollow perforated spherical probe (the ‘metaprobe’) that placed
33 inside the fishing net aims to gather traces of genetic material from the surrounding environment. We collected
34 six samples from three central Tyrrhenian sites. Using an established fish-specific metabarcoding marker, we
35 recovered over 70% of the caught species and accurately reconstructed fish assemblages typical of the different
36 bathymetric layers considered. eDNA metabarcoding data also returned a biodiversity ‘bonus’ of mostly
37 mesopelagic species, not catchable by bottom trawls. Further investigation is needed to upscale this promising
38 approach as a powerful tool to monitor catch composition, assess the distribution of stocks, and generally
39 record changes in fish communities across the oceans.
40

41 Keywords

42 Marine biodiversity; fish communities; fisheries; Mediterranean Sea; environmental DNA
43

44 1. Introduction

45 It is widely accepted that human activities and climate changes triggered by them are contributing substantially
46 to the loss of biodiversity worldwide (Bálint et al., 2011). In marine ecosystems, one of the main causes
47 affecting biodiversity and species distribution is unsustainable fishing activity, which has caused a steep
48 decline of wild populations at a global scale. While several management policies are being implemented to

49 reverse stock depletions, there is an increasing need to move towards more sustainable fishing practices, by
50 refining assessment methods, improving habitat protection spatially and temporally, reducing bycatch, and
51 strengthening enforcement (FAO, 2020). Long-term sustainability of fishery resources ultimately depends on
52 ecosystem health and the availability of powerful and accurate monitoring tools that can rapidly assess the
53 effects of human activities on the oceans (Bradley et al., 2019).

54 Data collection from the oceans represents a major logistic and financial challenge, hindering our
55 understanding of the spatial distribution of stocks, species, and key habitats. To maximise knowledge
56 acquisition, marine research also relies on fisheries-dependent information, which is still largely based on
57 traditional approaches, such as logbook data, visual inspection and sorting of species. These are usually
58 performed by fisheries observers or the fishers themselves and, given that they require time, are consequently
59 limited to subsets of the fleet, compromising the accuracy and representativeness of the results (Vilas et al.,
60 2019). Promisingly, technological innovations are offering solutions to update and modernize fishery data
61 collection (Bradley et al., 2019; Plet-Hansen et al., 2019). Among these, environmental DNA (eDNA)
62 metabarcoding is bound to establish itself as a primary source of biodiversity information in every habitat
63 (Sigsgaard et al., 2020; Thomsen and Willerslev, 2015; West et al., 2020); yet, collecting and concentrating
64 DNA from large water volumes can be challenging, especially in open seas and/or deep waters. To circumvent
65 these limitations, various sampling solutions have been proposed so far, which include automated underwater
66 high-tech vehicles and robots (Hansen et al., 2020; McQuillan and Robidart, 2017), passive and artificial
67 collectors (Bessey et al., 2021; Verdier et al., 2021), natural samplers (Mariani et al., 2019), and even marine
68 litter (Ibabe et al., 2020). These molecular detection approaches, however, have not found a significant place
69 in the context of monitoring fisheries activities. Building on recent evidence demonstrating that community
70 composition inferred from eDNA metabarcoding of water draining from the net cod end largely matched with
71 those retrieved by visual sorting of the catches (Russo et al., 2021), we devised an improved solution to
72 leverage commercial trawling activities. We designed a bespoke, low-cost, 3D-printed plastic probe that,
73 placed inside the trawl net, works as a container for rolls of gauze that are poised to capture DNA from the
74 surrounding environment during fishing operations. We compared eDNA metabarcoding results from the
75 probe with catch compositions from trawl hauls spanning depths of 600m along the continental slope in the
76 central Mediterranean Sea. Results strengthen the idea that eDNA-based biomonitoring can become embedded
77 in fishery-dependent surveys, at negligible additional cost and effort, to study catch composition and the
78 broader faunal features of the ecosystems that sustain commercial fishing.

79

80 **2. Material and Methods**

81 **2.1 Collection of samples**

82 Samples were collected between July and August 2020 from three sites in the central Tyrrhenian Sea (FAO
83 Geographical Sub Area 9 – Western Mediterranean Sea) (Fig. 1A), on board of a commercial bottom trawl
84 fishing vessel. Sampling locations covered two bathymetric layers: two deep slope hauls (H1 and H8), with
85 average depths of ~ 600m, and a shelf edge haul (H4), operating at ~130 m.

86 For the collection of DNA, we realized a bespoke 3D-printed hollow perforated plastic spherical probe (radius
87 8 cm), hereafter termed ‘metaprobe’. We built two custom-made rolls of gauze, rolling 1g of pharmacy
88 sterilized cotton in 3 10x10cm sterile gauzes compresses (mesh-size: 1mm). Gauze rolls were tightly fixed by
89 plastic cables tied inside the ‘metaprobe’ and dropped inside the fishing net at the beginning of each haul (Fig.
90 1B). At the end of fishing operations, during the sorting of catches, the ‘metaprobe’ was retrieved, and the rolls
91 of gauze were gathered and placed in separate 50ml sterile tubes containing 99% ethanol and silica gel grains,
92 respectively. Both were frozen on board then stored in the laboratory at -20°C until DNA extraction. At the
93 same time, we determined the qualitative species composition of each haul. Referring to dichotomic keys and
94 identification guides, individuals in the net were identified at the species or genus level by visual inspection of
95 external morphology.

96 **2.2 Laboratory procedures**

97 DNA extraction was performed following an extraction protocol for the recovery of extremely low
98 concentration fragmented DNA (Malmström et al., 2009) in a high containment room, specifically designed
99 for the management of small copy number DNA such as ancient DNA (De Angelis et al., 2021). Ethanol
100 preserved gauzes were blotted to dry before DNA extraction procedures. Half of each gauze roll was cut into
101 small pieces and then soaked in 400 µl of extraction buffer (0.5 M EDTA pH 8, 1 M Urea) with 20 µl of
102 proteinase K (100 µg/ml). Samples were incubated at 37°C for at least 8 h and centrifuged at 4000 rpm to
103 separate lysate from the residual sediment particles. The supernatant was transferred to an Amicon ultra-4 30K
104 centrifugal device to concentrate DNA. Subsequently, around 150 µl of solution was transferred into
105 QIAQuick Spin Columns and the DNA was purified by the QIAQuick PCR Purification Kit (Qiagen). Two
106 negative extraction controls (i.e. 400 µl of extraction buffer with 20 µl of proteinase K), one for each storage
107 method, were included to account for possible contamination linked with extraction procedures.

108 eDNA metabarcoding was performed using the fish-specific Tele02 primers which target a ~167 bp fragment
109 of the mitochondrial 12S ribosomal RNA gene and achieved >98% teleost species detection when tested *in*
110 *silico* (Taberlet et al., 2018). To ease sample demultiplexing and mitigate cross-contamination and/or tag
111 switching during sequencing, each sample was PCR amplified using the locus primers attached to a unique 8
112 bp tag shared by the forward and reverse primer. Each tag differed by at least three base pairs from other tags
113 and included 2-4 degenerate bases (Ns) at the beginning of the tag sequence to improve clustering during initial
114 sequencing. To monitor for possible contamination sources, both a positive and a negative control were
115 amplified along with all the other samples.

116 Each sample was PCR amplified in triplicate using 20 µl reactions consisting of 10 µl MyFi™ Mix (Meridian
117 Bioscience), 1 µl of each forward and reverse primer (10 µM, Eurofins), 0.16 µl of Bovine Serum Albumin
118 (20 mg/ml, Thermo Scientific), 5.84 µl of UltraPure™ Distilled Water (Invitrogen), and 2 µl of template DNA.
119 PCR was performed on a T100 Thermal Cycler (Bio-Rad Laboratories Ltd) with the following profile: 95°C
120 for 10 mins, followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 30 s, 60°C for 45 s, and 72°C for 30 s, and a final elongation
121 of 72°C for 5 mins. PCR products were stored at 4°C until replicates for each sample were pooled, and 1 µl of
122 pooled PCR product was added to 1 µl of Gel Loading Buffer (Invitrogen) for visualisation on 2% agarose
123 gels to ensure the amplification of the target fragment stained with SYBRsafe (Invitrogen), which were imaged
124 using Image Lab Software (Bio-Rad Laboratories Ltd). PCR products were stored at -20°C until they were
125 purified with Mag-Bind® TotalPure NGS magnetic beads (Omega Bio-tek Inc), following the double size
126 selection protocol established by Bronner et al., 2009. Ratios of 1x and 0.6x magnetic beads to 30 µl of PCR
127 product were used. Eluted DNA (20 µl) was stored at -20 °C until quantification using a Qubit™ 4.0
128 fluorometer with a Qubit™ dsDNA HS Assay Kit (Invitrogen). Samples ($N=8$) were normalised and pooled
129 in equimolar concentration alongside samples for another project (total $N = 121$).

130 Sample pools were purified using the aforementioned ratios and elution in 25 µl, then concentrated using a 1x
131 ratio and elution in 45 µl. End repair, adapter ligation and PCR were performed using the NEXTFLEX® Rapid
132 DNA-Seq Kit 2.0 for Illumina® Platforms (PerkinElmer) according to the manufacturer's protocol. An Agilent
133 2200 TapeStation and High Sensitivity D1000 ScreenTape (Agilent Technologies) indicated secondary
134 product (e.g. primer dimers) remained, thus gel extraction was performed on each pool using the GeneJET Gel
135 Extraction Kit (Thermo Scientific) with elution in 20 µl. Each pool was quantified using quantitative PCR
136 (qPCR) on a Rotor-Gene Q (Qiagen) with the NEBNext® Library Quant Kit for Illumina® (New England
137 Biolabs), diluted to 1 nM, and 6 µl of each pool combined into one library. The final library and PhiX Control
138 were quantified using qPCR before the library was sequenced at 60 pM with 10% PhiX Control on an Illumina®
139 iSeq™ 100 using iSeq™ 100 i1 Reagent v2 (300-cycle) (Illumina Inc.).

140 **2.3 Bioinformatics: data pre-processing and taxonomic identification**

141 Bioinformatic procedures followed the OBITOOLS pipeline (Boyer et al., 2016). We first used FASTQC to assess
142 read quality and ILLUMINAPAIREDD to merge paired reads with a quality score >40. Samples were
143 demultiplexed based on their unique tags via NGSFILTER, allowing for a single base mismatch in each tag
144 sequence. We then used OBIGREP to length-filter sequences according to the expected range (129–209 bp) and

145 to eliminate singletons, and OBIUNIQ to dereplicate sequences. We removed chimaeras with UCHIME (Edgar et
146 al., 2011) and clustered the Molecular Operational Taxonomic Units (MOTU) using SWARM (Mahé et al.,
147 2015) setting a clustering threshold at $d = 3$. We assigned taxonomy with ECOTAG against a custom-made 12S
148 vertebrate reference database of 26,387 sequences obtained through *in silico* PCR (as implemented with
149 ECOPCR) from the overall EMBL vertebrate database (release 143).

150 Finally, we validated the taxonomic assignment and filtered out potential residual artefact (Clarke et al., 2014)
151 through three steps: (1) ambiguous (e.g. non-Mediterranean taxa) and poorly resolved MOTUs (i.e. MOTUs
152 that couldn't be unambiguously assigned to a genus or species level) were manually BLASTed against the
153 NCBI database to double check and validate the taxonomic assignment; (2) only sequences showing >98%
154 identity match were retained; (3) potential contamination noise was removed taking advantages of negative
155 controls with the DECONTAM package in R (Davis et al., 2018), using the prevalence method with a threshold
156 of 0.5.

157 **2.4 Data analysis and visualization**

158 Venn diagrams were used to compare the fish assemblages retrieved from eDNA metabarcoding of samples
159 stored in ethanol versus silica gel grains and to inspect the influence of preservation method. We built a second
160 Venn diagram to qualitatively compare the overall composition of taxa detected by eDNA metabarcoding
161 (combining data obtained with silica gel and ethanol preservation) and catch data. Species detections were
162 visualised using colouring to distinguish between pelagic and demersal taxa (Froese and Pauly, 2017), as we
163 expected eDNA detections to include an excess of pelagic taxa not detected in the trawl due to the journey of
164 the sampling probe across the pelagic realm as the net was deployed and subsequently hauled back. Both Venn
165 diagrams were calculated and drawn using the VENNDIAGRAM package in R (Chen and Boutros, 2011).

166 To assess and visualize qualitative differences in taxon composition among sampling sites and sources (i.e.
167 visual identification and eDNA metabarcoding), we implemented a nonmetric multidimensional scaling
168 (NMDS) based on Jaccard distances on a binary presence-absence dataset including all taxa identified to genus
169 or species level, detected by metabarcoding and catch data respectively. We tested differences among sampling
170 sites with a PERMANOVA test (1,000 permutations, function 'adonis') in the R package VEGAN (Oksanen et
171 al., 2018).

172 For metabarcoding data only, we evaluated the abundance pattern of detected taxa across sampling sites, by
173 visualizing the fourth root of the number of reads (i.e. a putative proxy for relative eDNA abundance and, in
174 turn, biomass (Clark et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2021; Stoeckle et al., 2021, Mariani et al., 2021)), as a heatmap.

175

176 **3. Results**

177 After bioinformatic analysis, the eight samples (two per each of the three sampling stations, plus two blanks)
178 yielded 241,673 reads (mean per sample = $37,164 \pm 7,955$ SE), which allowed the detection of 63 taxa: 58
179 teleosts and 5 elasmobranchs. Of these, 55 taxa (50 teleosts and 5 elasmobranchs) passed the first filtering step
180 in which we retained only sequences showing >98% of identity match. The analysis of negative blanks using
181 the DECONTAM algorithm detected five Tyrrhenian taxa as possible contaminants among samples – *Helicolenus*
182 *dactylopterus*, *Micromesistius poutassou*, *Molva* sp, *Scomber scombrus*, and *Zeus faber* – which were
183 conservatively removed from the final dataset. We further removed two more taxa (Argentinidae and Triglidae)
184 because they could only unambiguously be assigned to the family rank.

185 All but two taxa were shared between silica gel and ethanol-preserved samples (Fig. S1), hence suggesting
186 consistency between preservation methods.

187 The comparison between metabarcoding and visual inspection revealed 34 taxa (56%) found by both methods;
188 14 (23%) were recovered only by eDNA metabarcoding and 13 (21%) only by catches (Fig. 2). Interestingly,
189 pelagic taxa prevailed in the group of taxa that were exclusive to metabarcoding (57%), compared to the two
190 other groups (29% pelagic taxa shared between catch and metabarcoding; 8% in catch only), even though with
191 no statistical support (Fisher's exact test: $p = 0.10$ for shared taxa, $p = 0.25$ for only catch taxa), likely because
192 of the small sample size.

193 The NMDS analysis showed an intra-site affinity and a coherent bathymetric distribution: samples were
194 differentiated according to their sampling origin, and the 600m deep slope (H1 and H8) were clearly separated
195 from the 130m shelf edge (H4) along the first NMDS axis (Fig. 3). This was supported by PERMANOVA
196 results where differences between sampling sites accounted for 68.6% of the variance ($p = 0.001$).
197 As expected, the heatmap (Fig. 4; Table S2) depicted some differences between deep (H1 and H8) and shallow
198 (H4) sites with respect to both taxa occurrence and their putative abundance (read counts).

199

200 **4. Discussion**

201 The progress of our society towards a sustainable use of resources depends on our ability to monitor the
202 conditions of marine ecosystems, with an emphasis on species and habitats that are most affected by human
203 activities. Effective large-scale monitoring is also essential to direct our management strategies in a timely
204 manner. This is especially true for trawl fisheries, which are the most impacting fishing activities worldwide
205 (Amoroso et al., 2018). Environmental DNA metabarcoding is expected to play an increasingly substantial
206 role in this research field, but the process of sampling and storing samples remains a challenge, as upscaling
207 through fishery-dependent surveys necessitates the avoidance of complex workload during fishing operations.
208 The use of passively filtering membranes (i.e. positively charged nylon and non-charged cellulose ester) for
209 eDNA collection from the water has already been successfully tested: Bessey et al., 2021 showed that passive
210 filters gather DNA as effectively as active eDNA filtration. Our results demonstrate that simple and low-cost
211 rolls of gauze encapsulated in hollow perforated spherical probes that are passively dragged within a trawl net,
212 efficiently collect DNA from the water. Despite their non-specificity that could lead to a lower binding affinity
213 for eDNA fragments compared with the passive filtering membranes, the gauze rolls afford a level of
214 operational simplicity and robustness that neither capsule nor passive filters could guarantee in a context of
215 the jolts and instability of commercial trawling operations.

216 Both tested storage methods appeared suitable for DNA preservation until extraction in the laboratory and can
217 thus be conveniently employed to temporarily store collected samples on board. In fact, only two species
218 (*Crystallogobius linearis* and *Lesueurigobius suerii*) were not shared by silica and ethanol datasets (Fig. S1).
219 Both species were not caught by the fishing net and showed a very low number of reads. This suggests that
220 they likely reflect traces of DNA in the surrounding environment that led to very rare templates being
221 stochastically amplified in PCR (Alberdi et al., 2018).

222 By applying a standard eDNA metabarcoding pipeline and filtering procedure, we were able to molecularly
223 identify 50 taxa based on their 12S barcode, 39 to species level, 9 to genus level, and 2 to family level. Of the
224 five taxa conservatively removed by the DECONTAM algorithm, some (i.e. *Helicolenus dactylopterus* and
225 *Micromesistius poutassou*) are demersal species, common in the examined sampling area, which were also
226 detected in the catch – their presence in negative controls could be due, for instance, to cross-contaminations
227 during extraction and/or amplification and tag jumping. Their exclusion was due to their proportional read
228 count in the negative controls. A more extensive sampling effort in the future would allow a more nuanced
229 spatial analysis of these detections.

230 Our results also lend further support to the notion that eDNA metabarcoding, once optimized, can be efficiently
231 used as a monitoring technique for the composition of catches. Figure 2 shows that the DNA retrieved from
232 the probe is a good proxy of catch assemblages, mirroring 72% of the composition of commercial fishing
233 catch, consistent with recent results obtained analysing water dripping from the trawl net cod end (Russo et
234 al., 2021). Here we show that this process can be vastly streamlined by the use of low-cost, resistant, passive
235 sampling probes, which are robust to variation in preservation methods and do not significantly disrupt fishing
236 operations.

237 Additionally, 14 species detected by the metabarcoding probe and not by the visual inspection of the catch
238 likely represent a biodiversity ‘bonus’ that reflects the power of metabarcoding in detecting taxa that are not
239 otherwise catchable (Nguyen et al., 2020). These can be rare and cryptic species, part of specimens (e.g.
240 gamete, mucus, faeces, regurgitates, tissue scraps), or life stages (e.g. larvae) and/or too small/large taxa that
241 are not catchable by bottom-trawl fishing vessels. Remarkably, we recovered a substantial fraction (57.1%) of

242 meso- and bathypelagic species within taxa only detected by eDNA metabarcoding (Fig. 2). This is apparently
243 counterintuitive since bottom-trawl fisheries target mostly demersal species that live close to the sea bottom
244 (van Denderen et al., 2013). However, a possible explanation is that the metabarcoding probe can capture DNA
245 even from the pelagic domain. Specifically, gauze may have intercepted the DNA of pelagic species while the
246 fishing net was descending towards the sea bottom. Additionally, DNA from pelagic species sedimented on
247 the bottom floor may have been upwelled during net trawling and captured by the metaprobe. In any case,
248 further exploration on the time course of gauze binding capacity will be needed before this method can be
249 routinely applied. For instance, a logical extension would be investigating the relationship between the number
250 of pelagic taxa recovered and the time the net takes to get to the sea bottom.

251 On the other hand, 13 species were detected by visual inspection but not through eDNA metabarcoding;
252 though, considering that three of the five species removed after our conservative decontamination procedure
253 were found also in the catches, only 10 species were exclusive to the catch data. There are various non-mutually
254 exclusive explanations for non-detection by eDNA metabarcoding. First, the incompleteness of reference
255 databases may artifactually reduce the ability to detect some taxa, a well-known challenge in eDNA
256 metabarcoding (Weigand et al., 2019). Second, the 12S metabarcode has been proven to deliver lower
257 taxonomic resolution in some cases (Collins et al., 2019), as exemplified by the Argentiniformes in our data.
258 In the catches, two Argentinid species (*Argentina sphyraena* and *Glossanodon leioglossus*) were retrieved,
259 while in the eDNA metabarcoding dataset neither *A. sphyraena* nor *G. leioglossus* could be reliably
260 distinguished for sequence identity >98%, and hence they were pooled in the family Argentinidae. In support
261 of this explanation, the degree of mismatch between catch and metabarcoding assemblages decreased at a
262 lower taxonomic resolution (i.e., at the family level; Fig. S2).

263 Despite the low number of sampling sites, the DNA in the ‘metaprobes’ well represented the alpha- and beta-
264 diversity of the considered area both qualitatively and quantitatively (Figs. 3-4). The possibility of employing
265 (transformed) read counts obtained from eDNA metabarcoding as a measure of taxa abundances is still debated
266 (Deiner et al., 2017), yet several studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between frequencies of
267 occurrence and read abundance, pointing out the use of DNA abundance as a valuable proxy for relative
268 proportion of taxa among sampling sites (Mariani et al., 2021; Postaire et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2019).
269 Concerning eDNA metabarcoding applied to fisheries, Stoeckle et al. (2021) and Russo et al. (2021) revealed
270 a robust association between the number of sequence reads and species abundance in the catch as expressed
271 by biomass and number of individuals. Here we found a distribution of the most abundant species among
272 sampling sites generally coherent to expectations (Fig. 4). For instance, the European hake (*Merluccius*
273 *merluccius*), one of the key target species for demersal fisheries in the Mediterranean Sea (Russo et al., 2019),
274 appeared amongst the most abundant species in all the hauls according to sequence read data. Similarly, other
275 detected species showed a clear affinity with the corresponding depth layer: the shelf edge haul (H4) was
276 dominated by the typical target species of this bathymetric level (e.g. *Trachurus trachurus* and *T.*
277 *mediterraneus*, *Pagellus erythrinus*, *Spicara* spp., and *Mullus barbatus*). Conversely, the two deep slope hauls
278 (H1 and H8) mostly shared the more abundant taxa that are typical deep-sea fish species (e.g., *Phycis*
279 *blennoides*, *Gadiculus argenteus*, *Lepidorhombus whiffiagonis*, and *Hymenocephalus italicus*).

280 The approach illustrated herein embodies many of the features that the marine management community
281 anticipates as essential to upscale ocean monitoring. First, the ‘metaprobe’ method appears to better mirror the
282 catch contents: the proportion of taxa detected by both 12S metabarcoding and catches was 55.74% for
283 ‘metaprobes’ and 23.3% for the previous approach based on net ‘slush’ by Russo et al. (2021), who also used
284 COI metabarcoding to improve taxon detection. Second, the ‘metaprobe’ is a simpler, cheaper, and faster way
285 of collecting eDNA samples, even by non-technical operators, as compared to all other methods proposed to
286 date (Bessey et al., 2021; Stoeckle et al., 2021; Verdier et al., 2021). Third, the possibility to preserve rolls of
287 gauze both in ethanol and silica gel makes them a convenient solution for sample storage and shipping,
288 compared to the logistic constraints associated with freezing water collections aboard fishing vessels. All these
289 advantages are valuable prerequisites for the future application of this technique on commercial fishing vessels,
290 where the ‘metaprobe’ may establish itself as a complementary tool for stock assessment and ocean

291 biodiversity monitoring. As a last point, it is worth noting that most trawlers (i.e. vessels > 15 m) operating
292 worldwide are equipped with remote tracking devices such as the Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and/or
293 the Automatic Information System (AIS) (Amoroso et al., 2018; Russo et al., 2019). This offers the opportunity
294 to reconstruct, with great spatial and temporal accuracy, the origin of landings and/or catches (Russo et al.,
295 2018). It is therefore easy to foresee how the information provided by the ‘metaprobe’ could be integrated with
296 the fishing footprint of trawlers to obtain powerful reconstruction of marine biodiversity at different scales.
297 From changes in catches to whole-community composition patterns, including range shifts and invasive
298 species detection, marine management could soon leverage these nimble, low-effort innovations to obtain a
299 more comprehensive understanding of the distribution of species across the oceans, at speeds and scales that
300 have so far been perceived as unfeasible. The opportunity to associate these novel methods with the activities
301 of the fishers also provides a blueprint for a future where ocean stewardship is increasingly reflective of more
302 inclusive engagement across all sectors that depend on ocean health.

303

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447 **Figure captions**

448 **Figure 1** - Sampling with ‘metaprobe’ rolls of gauze: (A) Map identifying the three sampling sites in the
 449 central Tyrrhenian Sea (Geographic Sub Area 9); the bottom-left map indicate the geographic position of the
 450 study area (B) From left to right: model of the hollow perforated plastic spherical probe (the ‘metaprobe’) with
 451 rolls of gauze beside and inside it; loaded ‘metaprobe’ in the fishing net; rolls of gauze in the 50ml falcon tubes
 452 stored in 99% ethanol and silica gel grains; half roll of gauze on a petri dish prior to DNA extraction.

453

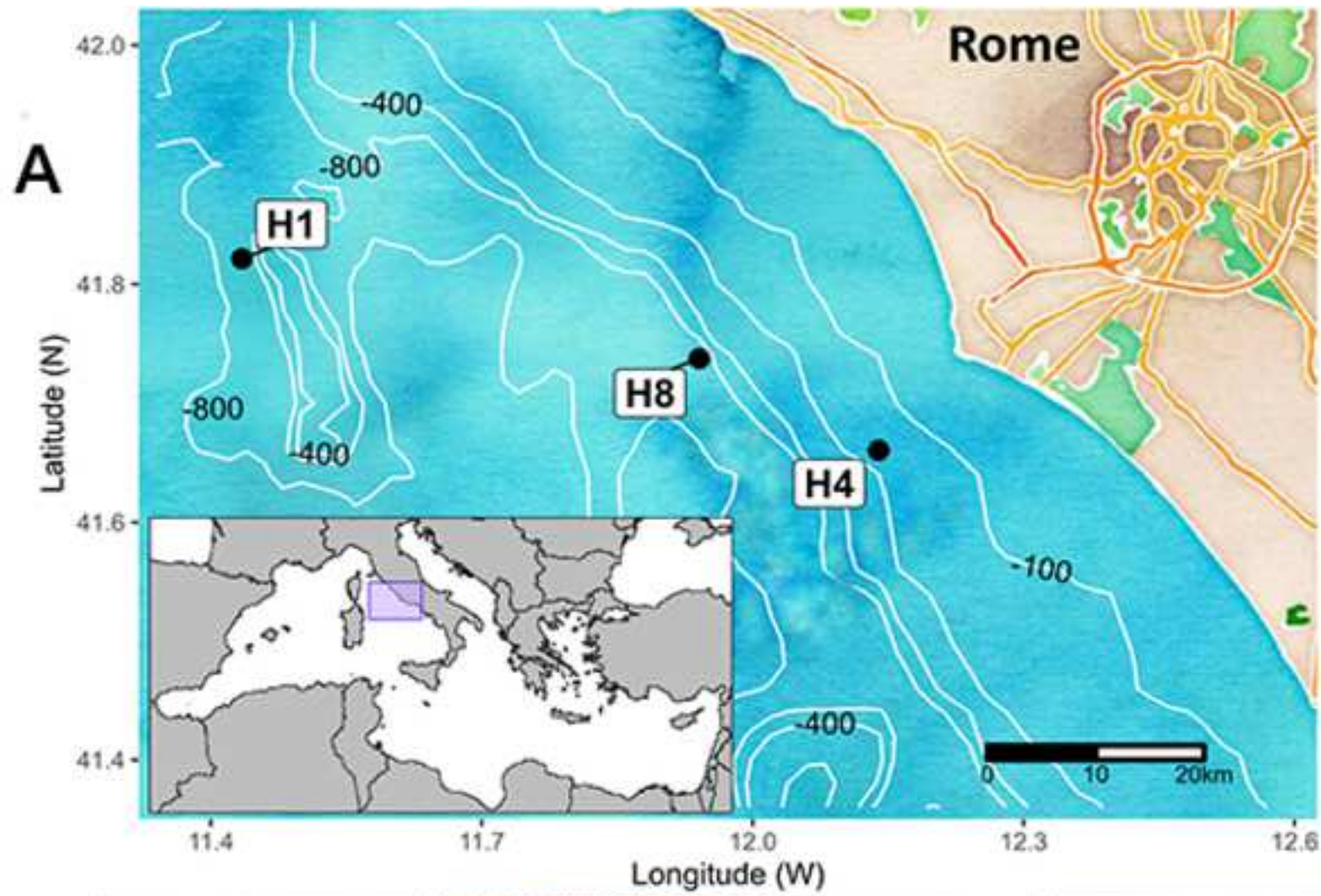
454 **Figure 2** - Venn diagram of the taxa detected through eDNA metabarcoding of 'metaprobe' and visual
455 inspection of catch. In blue are pelagic taxa, and in red are demersal taxa. See Table S1 for the names of taxa
456 denoted by numbers. Diagram areas are proportional to the number of taxa.

457

458 **Figure 3** - Pattern of species composition of the three sampling sites from visual sorting of catches and eDNA
459 metabarcoding of 'metaprobe', as returned by the nonmetric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) based on
460 Jaccard distance. The colours of the sites reflect their bathymetric layer: dark blue for the deep slope hauls (H1
461 and H8), and light blue for the shelf edge haul (H4). The fish drawn represent typical species from each
462 sampling site. From left to right and from the top to the bottom: *Chimaera monstrosa*, *Hymenocephalus*
463 *italicus*, *Lepidorhombus whiffiagonis*, *Gadiculus argenteus*, *Mullus barbatus*, *Trachurus trachurus*.

464

465 **Figure 4** - Quantitative composition of taxa in terms of read counts for each sampling site, depicted by a
466 heatmap representing the fourth-root of the number of reads of the overall taxa detected in the metabarcoding
467 dataset.



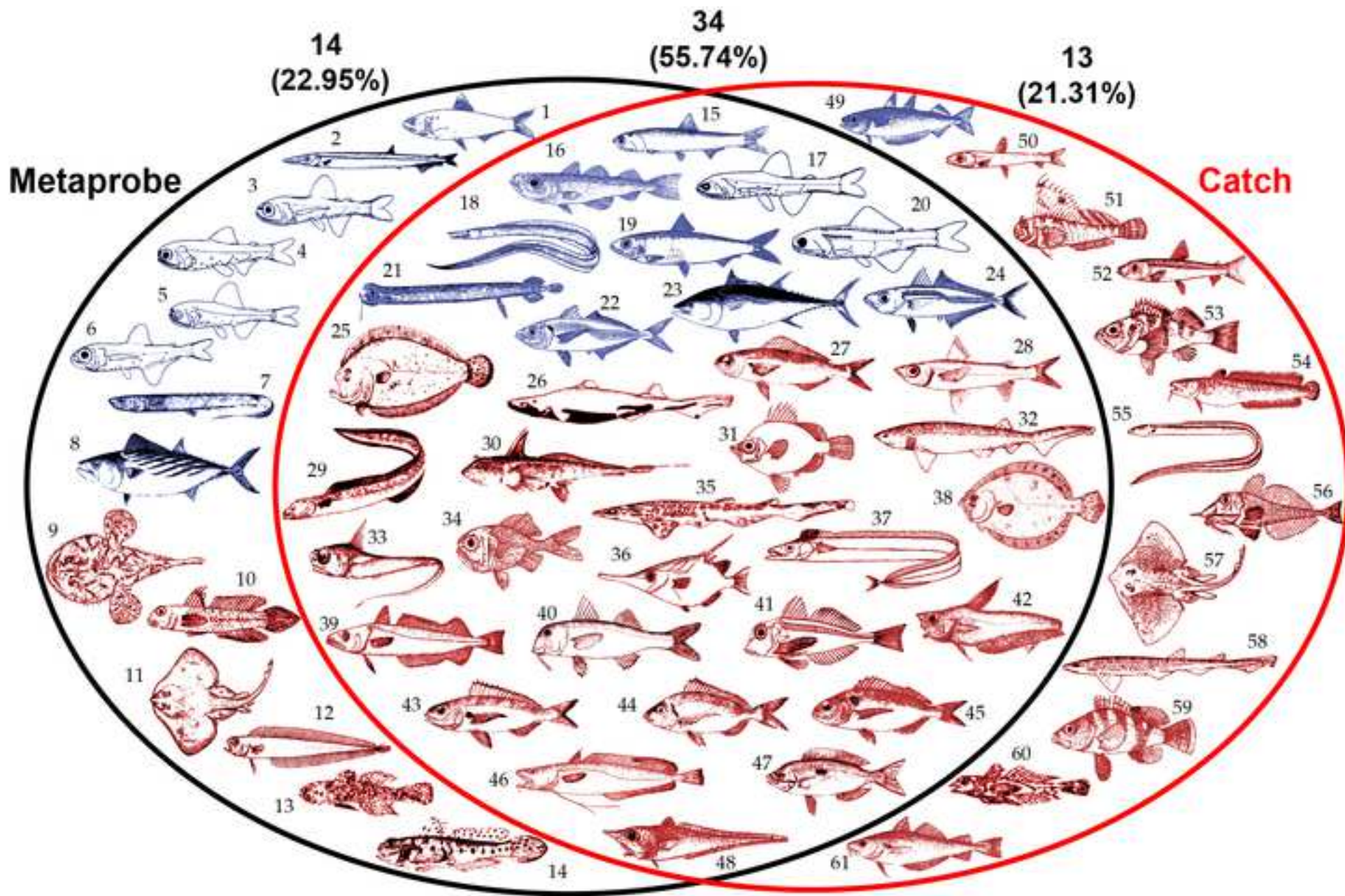
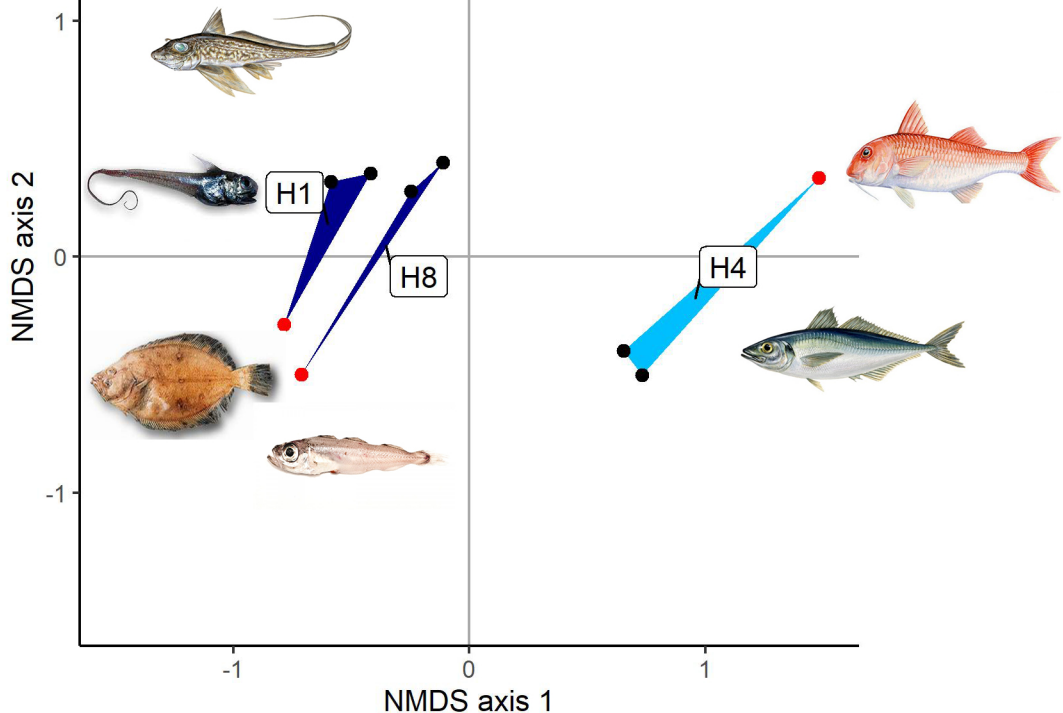


Figure 3 - NMDS

[Click here to access/download;Figure;Fig_3.pdf](#)



Stress: 3%



Source ● Catch ● Metaprobe Staz ■ H1 ■ H4 ■ H8

