



**ASSESSING THE ECOLOGICAL STATUS IN SPECIES-POOR SYSTEMS: A
FISH-BASED INDEX FOR MEDITERRANEAN RIVERS**

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3 ASSESSING THE ECOLOGICAL STATUS IN SPECIES-POOR SYSTEMS: A FISH-
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5 BASED INDEX FOR MEDITERRANEAN RIVERS.
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24 Running Head: Assessment of Mediterranean river's health
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3 ABSTRACT
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7 The assessment of the ecological status of freshwater ecosystems is a key issue for many
8 international laws as the Water Framework Directive in light of the actual impoverished status
9 of such ecosystems. Different multimetric approaches have been successfully developed all
10 around the world in different freshwater environments. However multimetric indices are
11 difficult to apply in Mediterranean rivers basins, where freshwater fish communities feature
12 very low species richness per site and high number of endemics with generalist and
13 opportunistic life strategies. A site-specific approach was followed to develop an adaptation of
14 the multimetric concept in the Index of Community Integrity. The presence-absence of ten
15 native freshwater fish species was modeled and used to assess the deviation of the observed and
16 expected community composition at reference condition. These deviations were transformed
17 into probabilities to belong to a reference site and species by species measures were then
18 integrated in a final score. The use of presence-absence only data reduces the possible errors
19 associated to incorrect estimations of species' abundance and its seasonal changes. The index
20 was sensitive to both habitat and biotic disturbances while irresponsible to natural sources of
21 variation. To our concern, this is the first index specifically tested to be responsible to biotic
22 perturbations, which traditionally have been *forgotten pressures* in Indices of Biotic Integrity.
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34 KEYWORDS: ANNA, bioassessment, community, freshwater fish, invasive species, site-
35 specific indices, type-specific indices, integrity.
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INTRODUCTION

Assessing the ecological status of freshwater ecosystems has been a key issue in freshwater management for the last decades as a consequence of their poor conservation status. The importance of these ecosystems to human culture, welfare and development has lead them to a poor status (Malmqvist & Rundle, 2002). Five main sources of perturbations are responsible for this situation: i) species introductions and translocation, ii) impoundment of rivers and water abstraction, iii) water quality deterioration (pollution or eutrophication), iv) habitat degradation and fragmentation and v) overexploitation (Allan & Flecker, 1993; Collares-Pereira & Cowx, 2004; Prenda et al., 2006). As a consequence, many freshwater fish species have become extinct or are highly endangered. This situation is particularly worrying in rivers of arid and semi-arid regions (Collares-Pereira & Cowx, 2004). To face this serious situation many international laws as the Clean Water Act in the US or the European Water Framework Directive (WFD, E.C., 2000) try to address the problem requiring the protection and restoration of biological integrity as part of water quality standards.

According to the WFD the present status of all European rivers must be assessed and classified to five predefined levels of ecological integrity based on four biotic elements including freshwater fish. This bioassessment should help to evaluate the potential problems affecting rivers and to lead them to a good ecological status before 2015 by imposing effective corrective plans.

Many efforts have been devoted to the development of efficient tools to measure the ecological status of these systems based on freshwater fish. Karr (1981) originally designed an Index of Biotic Integrity (IBI) for north-eastern American rivers that followed a multimetric approach. The index was originally composed by twelve metrics reflecting important components of community ecology: taxonomic richness, habitat and trophic guild composition, individual health and abundance which were summed up in a final score. Following this multimetric approach many other indices have been developed throughout the world and adapted to specific conditions and requirements (Roset et al., 2007). Two different trends can be distinguish within recent European efforts: spatially-based or type-specific methods (Melcher et al., 2007; Schmutz et al., 2007) and site-specific methods (Oberdorff et al., 2002; Pont et al., 2007) both based on the original Karr's multimetric index and the reference condition approach (Hughes et al., 1986; Reynoldson, 1997, Bailey et al., 1998). These methods compare an ecosystem potentially exposed to a stress against a similar ecosystem free from any perturbation or in the best possible condition (its maximum ecological potential or reference conditions), but differ in the way they find the reference conditions for a given site. The type-specific approach relies on grouping techniques to cluster reference sites in a set of homogeneous landscape or biological groups. Then a given site only has to be compared against the reference conditions of the group

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3 in which it is included, which are normally referred as the characteristics of the best preserved
4 sites within each group. The site-specific approach does not require any classification and it
5 simply finds specific reference conditions for every new given site according to its
6 environmental characteristics. A site-specific index was the option selected for the development
7 of the European Fish Index (EFI) which arose from the European FAME project (FAME, 2004)
8 and is being applied to most of European rivers.

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10 Type-specific predictive methods have been developed for other taxonomic groups, such as
11 RIVPACS (Clarke et al., 2003) or AUSRIVAS (Simpson and Norris, 2000) on benthic
12 macroinvertebrate communities. Instead of relying on elaborated metrics as the multimetric
13 approaches do, these methods directly compare the observed and expected communities using
14 presence-absence only data. However they have received little attention in freshwater fish
15 indices (Hawkins, 2006; Kennard et al., 2006a; Carlisle et al., 2008).

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17 Despite the EFI was not validated for Mediterranean rivers (Pont et al., 2007) and no similar
18 index is available for this area, scarce efforts have been focused on the adaptation of an IBI to
19 this area (Ferreira et al., 1996; De Sostoa et al., 2004; Ferreira et al., 2007). Mediterranean fish
20 communities share common problems with other warm-water streams which make difficult to
21 establish IBIs as a reduced number of species per site, a high number of endemisms per basin
22 and high spatial and temporal changes in fish communities (Moyle and Randall, 1998; Moyle
23 and Marchetti, 1999). Moreover, Mediterranean freshwater fish species have evolved in harsh
24 environments (e.g. facing severe droughts and floods) and have generally developed short
25 lifespans, generalist habitat use, opportunistic feeding strategies, high fecundity and early sexual
26 maturity (e. g. Velasco et al., 1990; Vila-Gispert and Moreno-Amich, 2002). All these
27 drawbacks may impose serious limitations to the development of an effective index in
28 Mediterranean rivers, at least in its traditional approach, as in other similar environments even
29 with richer freshwater fish communities (Shields et al., 1995; Harris and Silveira, 1999). All the
30 previous attempts to the development of a bioassessment tool in the Mediterranean region
31 followed a type-specific approach (e. g. Ferreira et al., 2007) while a site-specific has never
32 been tried in this complex environment.

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34 For all these reasons, in this study we develop a new approach to the assessment of the
35 ecological status in Mediterranean rivers. A mix of site-specific and multimetric approaches was
36 made to overcome the drawbacks commonly associated to them in scientific literature. Special
37 care was put in the evaluation of the sensitivity of the index to biotic disturbances since, though
38 they suppose a major recognized threat to the conservation of native communities it has
39 traditionally received little attention.

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Study area

The Guadiana River basin is located in the South-Western Iberian Peninsula draining a total area of 67039 Km² to the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 1). It features a typical Mediterranean climate, with high intra and interannual discharge variation, with severe floods and droughts. Mean air temperature ranges from 13 to 18.1 °C, with a strong intra-annual variation in extreme temperatures. Mean annual precipitation ranges from 350 to 1200 mm (with a mean of 450 mm).

Although it is a sparsely populated area (28 hab/Km²), landscape has been deeply transformed during the last century by agricultural activities. Almost a half of the basin (49.1%) is currently being used for agriculture (30.6% occupied with intensive agriculture as irrigated lands and 18.5% occupied with extensive agriculture, like olive groves or fruit trees). As a consequence, about 13000 Hm³ of water is retained in 88 big reservoirs (>1 Hm³) and more than 200 small ones (<1 Hm³) for water supply. Other common human perturbations are related to river channel modifications due to river channelization and degradation and even completely depletion of the riparian forest.

Fish community and habitat characterization

Fish community was characterized in 241 localities through the basin, using electrofishing (Fig. 1). Sampling was conducted once at each location without block-nets along 100 m long stretches. This sampling effort has been proved to be sufficient to capture most species present, except for non-wadable rivers, as Filipe et al. (2004) suggest. This was not a major problem since no more than 2% of sites were non-wadable. Alternative methodological approaches similar to that used in other European countries for this kind of environments (Kestemont and Goffaux, 2002) were followed. All fish were released after we identified the individuals to species level.

Habitat was characterised through 38 environmental variables, covering three different spatial scales: site, reach and basin. These measures could be split in two categories: a) predictors that described the natural habitat variability in the basin and b) descriptors of human perturbation (Table 1). Two approaches were used in this characterization: *in situ* or remote measures, which described micro and mesohabitat characteristics in each locality, and GIS measures used to record variables from digital maps (Table 1). All the variables were checked for normality and transformed when necessary prior to analysis.

The original data was divided in two independent sub-sets: a reference data set used for building and calibrating the predictive model and a test data set used in conjunction with the reference to establish quality classes. Reference sites were characterised by low urban or agricultural land uses within the whole basin and at the reach scale (500 m around the sampling point).

Furthermore, bank and channel structure as well as the riparian zone should be in natural

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3 condition (Pont et al., 2007). To ensure that reference sites were not impacted by invasive fish,
4 all sites where exotic species accounted for more of 5% of total fish abundance were also
5 discarded (Kennard et al., 2006b).
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9 10 Development of the Index of Community Integrity.

11 The Index of Community Integrity measures the general deviation of the observed community
12 composition from an expected community in total absence of any source of perturbation (human
13 or biotic) following the reference condition approach (Hughes et al., 1986; Reynoldson et al.,
14 1997; Bailey et al., 1998). The index summarizes the partial evaluations made species by
15 species for each site to be a reference site.
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18 We first built and validated a predictive model describing the presence-absence of 10 native
19 species in relation to environmental variables not affected by human perturbations (Table 1)
20 only in reference sites. These set of non perturbed environmental variables were used to match
21 test sites with the most similar environmental reference sites allowing site-specific predictions
22 of expected taxonomic composition. An ANNA model (Linke et al., 2005) was used for this
23 purpose which showed the best performance in our data in previous studies (data not shown).
24 ANNA is a whole community predictive model (like RIVPACS) allowing the prediction of rare
25 species which should be discarded in other traditional predictive methods like logistic
26 regression. Logistic regression needs the number of presences-absences to be balanced and the
27 number of predictors that can be used is highly limited by the number of available cases (e.g.
28 Filipe et al., 2004). That makes the development of predictive models for species with very low
29 prevalence impossible. In ANNA even rare species can be modelled following a continuous
30 approach as a solution to the drawbacks of artificial grouping strategies (see Linke et al., 2005
31 for more details on ANNA models).
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34 The ANNA model was built on a set of 70 reference sites and validated in an independent data
35 set of 20 reference sites (calibration data set). Since the original number of reference sites found
36 in the study area ($n=55$ sites) was not sufficient for both model construction and validation,
37 some reference sites were also chosen from adjacent basins in the same biogeographical region
38 (Tinto, Odiel and Guadalquivir basins). Although all these basins share most of their native
39 species we introduced the variable basin as an additional predictor. Model performance was
40 assessed through different tests carried out in the calibration data set. First, the slope and
41 intercept of the O/E line was not different from 1 and 0 respectively ($b=1.063$, t-test, $p=0.58$ and
42 intercept= 0.058, $p=0.95$). Second, the prediction success measured as the area under the curve
43 (AUC=0.79) of the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) (Fielding and Bell, 1997) and the
44 Standard Deviation of the O/E values ($SD_{O/E}=0.39$), which improved that displayed by the null
45 model ($SD_{null}=0.45$) and set close to the best possible model ($SD_R=0.38$) according to Van
46 Sickle et al. (2005). These two analyses showed the model to be valid and accurate enough to be
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3 used in the index minimizing the probability of committing type I and II statistical errors
4 according to Linke et al. (2005). Once the model was validated, independent sub-models were
5 built to predict the expected fauna in the reference localities used in the model construction to
6 allow their inclusion in the index. To avoid pseudo-replication errors in these predictions each
7 reference site used for building the model was run through it, without itself.

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11 The basic unit used to construct the index was the probability of a given site to be a reference
12 site, which depends on the deviation of the observed and the expected community composition
13 from a reference site with similar environmental characteristics. The deviation of the observed
14 presences-absences against the expected probabilities in absence of perturbations (O-E) was
15 measured for each species in each site (referred as residuals hereafter). Note that since the index
16 compares the community composition species by species we had ten different residuals for a
17 given site. Negative values indicate species loss (the species was predicted to be present with a
18 certain probability but it was absent). The lower the residuals, the higher the probability of
19 presence unconfirmed hence. In the opposite extreme, positive residuals owe to observed
20 presences with low predicted probabilities. These residuals were standardized to a (0,1) normal
21 distribution (x -mean/SD in the reference data set) and then transformed into probabilities to
22 belong to a reference site (Fig 1). Since we assumed that residuals decreased with disturbance,
23 we used only one-tailed evaluations for probabilities' calculations. With this approach we
24 assumed all the 10 native species to be sensitive to any source of perturbation according to
25 previous studies on species tolerances (data not shown). The probability of a site to be a
26 reference site having a standardized residual x is obtained from the cumulative normal
27 distribution function corresponding to that x value [$\text{pnorm}(x)$, according to Pont et al. (2007)].
28 Each species measure was then summed up in the final index score. It ranged between 0 (the site
29 has a null probability to be a reference site according to all the partial species' evaluations) and
30 10 (the site has a high probability to be a reference site according to all the partial species'
31 evaluations) (Fig 2).
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47 Scoring and validating the Index

48 To validate the index and to establish the cut-off points between quality classes we checked its
49 relationships with impairment gradients and its response vs. other accepted indices.

50 A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was carried out on the environmental matrix (Table 1)
51 to identify a set of independent gradients representative of the main sources of environmental
52 variation in the study area. The first three Principal Components (PC) accounted for the 37% of
53 the original variance recording a longitudinal headwater-mouth gradient (PC1), a habitat
54 impairment gradient (PC2) and a biotic perturbation gradient (PC3) (Table 2). As a first
55 approach, the effects of these gradients on the index scores were explored through a General
56 Linear Model (GLM), where each gradient was used as independent variables and the index
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3 score as dependent. The limits between quality classes were established to maximize the
4 difference among the perturbation gradients while not responding to the longitudinal gradient
5 (to avoid the effects natural variability) and reducing the risk of committing Type I (inferring
6 impairment when it does not exist) and Type II (not detecting impairment when it does exist)
7 errors. Statistical differences among quality classes along the gradients were tested through
8 ANOVA analysis. Once established, quality classes were tested for concordance with other
9 widely used indices measuring human disturbances in freshwater ecosystems. The Iberian
10 Biomonitoring Working Party (IBMWP, Alba-Tercedor et al., 2002) is an index specially
11 designed to measure water quality based on benthic macroinvertebrate communities. The QBR
12 index (Munné et al., 2003) is used to evaluate the quality of riparian forest and riparian-zone
13 habitats. Final scores of both indices were used in this analysis instead of their respective
14 quality classes since we mainly aimed to explore concordant responses of the present classes in
15 other indices' scores despite an intercalibration. An ANOVA analysis was used for this purpose.
16 Although intercalibration exercises between the quality classes for different indices (ensuring
17 concordance in the assignation of quality classes within different indices) are highly
18 recommended (Sandin and Hering, 2004; Birk and Hering, 2006) this it is not the aim of this
19 study. Significant differences in the scores of both indices among the Community Integrity
20 Index quality classes would be expected if a good concordance between them existed and
21 similar information was offered.
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35 RESULTS

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38 The Index of Community Integrity ranged between 1.7 and 8.3 and clearly discriminated between
39 reference and test sites (t-test, $t=5.5$ $p<0.001$). The GLM analysis showed that both perturbation
40 gradients (habitat and biotic) had significant effects on the scores of the index, but no effect was
41 found for the natural longitudinal gradient (Table 3). The cut-off points fulfilled the goals we
42 demanded. The limits for the bad-poor and high-good quality classes (Table 4) reduced the
43 probability of Type I and II errors minimizing the probability of labelling a reference site as *in*
44 *bad condition* and perturbed sites as *in high condition*. Different percentiles were used in both
45 extremes to maximize the discriminatory power. The mean index's scores in the reference data
46 set was used as limit between moderate-good quality classes, ensuring that only sites with a
47 score higher than an average reference site could be labelled as *in good condition*, while *in*
48 *moderate condition* otherwise. Similarly the limit between poor-moderate was set at the mean
49 value of the perturbed sites. In this way only sites in a condition higher than an average
50 perturbed site could be labelled as *in moderate condition* while *in poor condition* otherwise
51 (Table 4). There were no significant differences in the longitudinal gradient among quality
52 classes (ANOVA, $F=0.5$, $p=0.7$), while these were marginal in the habitat impairment gradient
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3 (F=1.8, p=0.1) (Fig. 3). Although this marginal statistical significance, mean habitat impairment
4 values followed a reasonable increasing tendency along the quality classes (Fig. 3). The values
5 of the biotic perturbation gradient were clearly different among quality classes (F=22.5,
6 p<0.001) (Fig. 2).
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10 The Index of Community Integrity showed a high concordance with the other two tested indices
11 (Fig. 2). A previous analysis proved no redundancy between both indices and the pressure
12 gradients used to calibrate the present index (Pearson's $r < |0.5|$ for all the relationships between
13 the gradients in Table 2 and the QBR and IBMWP), avoiding circularity effects in the
14 validation. There were significant differences in the scores of both alternative indices among
15 present quality classes (ANOVA, F=13.5, p<0.001 for IBMWP and F=4.6, p<0.001 for QBR).
16 This result not only validates the present index but also supports and enhances the slight
17 response it displayed when assessing the habitat quality impairment. Both QBR and IBMWP
18 are especially dedicated to the assessment of riparian forest-environment quality (physic habitat)
19 and water quality respectively. Given the high concordance they displayed we can ensure that
20 these two sources of habitat degradation can be correctly assessed through the Index of
21 Community Integrity, while co-variation issues between land uses and water quality could be
22 masking the response of the index to both sources of perturbation in the habitat impairment
23 gradient.
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34 DISCUSSION

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37 The Index of Community Integrity follows a site-specific comparison of community
38 composition based on the reference condition approach. The presence-absence of ten native
39 species was successfully modeled and used to evaluate the deviation between the observed and
40 expected community composition. Species by species probability measures of each site to be a
41 reference site were summed up in the final score of the index.
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44 The reference condition approach (Hughes et al., 1986; Reynoldson et al., 1997, Bailey et al.,
45 1998) in bioassessment defines biological integrity in terms of compositional similarity between
46 present and expected optimal situations so it is assumed that human and biotic impairment
47 affects the local community composition. Multimetric indices quantify the biological integrity
48 through several community attributes (as changes in guilds-based metrics) rather than
49 compositional comparisons. Since taxa are the basic unit of communities and hence aggregated
50 biological organizations, alterations in taxonomic composition may occur before changes at
51 other structural levels (Norris and Hawkins, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2000). Moreover, different
52 members of the same ecological aggregation may not respond in the same way to a given
53 disturbance showing independent responses to different types and degree of degradations
54 (Thiollay, 1992; Linder Mayer et al., 1999; Linder Mayer et al., 2000). This could make indices
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3 insensitive to specific disturbances. Additional problems have been linked to multimetric
4 approaches, such as circularity in the selection of sensitive metrics to conform the final index or
5 the tendency to make Type I errors associated also to metrics selection (Norris and Hawkins,
6 2000). In addition, the development of complex indices with numerous metrics in rivers with a
7 small number of native species, such as the Mediterranean rivers is difficult (Miller et al., 1988)
8 and a good knowledge on species basic ecology aspects is needed for developing multimetric
9 indices (Norris and Hawkins, 2000). However, this information is lacked at the moment and
10 most of the ecological classifications are based on expert judgment. As an example a half of the
11 species included in the European FAME project could not be correctly classified into different
12 guilds because missing information, according to Schmutz et al. (2007a). A predictive approach
13 which considers species composition instead of elaborated metrics seems a more efficient way
14 to face the assessment of the ecological status hence.

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16 However some predictive approaches based on species composition as RIVPACS or
17 AUSRIVAS (Simpson and Norris, 2000; Clarke et al., 2003) simplify the complex effects of
18 natural or perturbation induced changes on community composition through the use the O/E
19 species richness ratio as a synthetic measure of community integrity. Some important changes
20 in ecosystem structure or function may not be detected through this simplistic approach (Karr
21 and Chu, 2000; Norris and Hawkins, 2000). To overcome this drawback, changes at the whole
22 community were considered in this study through species by species comparisons making the
23 index more powerful and flexible according to Pont et al. (2006). Thus solutions to potential
24 problems in both multimetric and richness-based approaches have been faced and overcome in
25 this index.

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27 Presence absence data has been used as the basis for the comparison between the observed and
28 the expected communities. It could be expected these method to be insensitive to many
29 stressors, because individual populations of some species can suffer a considerable degradation
30 before going locally extinct. However, at the assemblage level, presence-absence data appears
31 to be sufficiently robust to allow the detection of reasonably subtle differences among sites
32 (Hawkins et al., 2000) and has widely been used in other common indices, such as RIPVPACS
33 (Clarke et al., 2003). Population densities are submitted to greater temporal (seasonal and inter-
34 annual) and spatial rates of change than presence-absence data even under natural conditions in
35 Mediterranean and other similar harsh environments (Meffe and Minckley, 1987; Matthews and
36 Marsh-Matthews, 2003; Magalhães et al., 2007). Species presences have been proved to be
37 more persistent than abundance through natural dramatic climatic events (frequent in this kind
38 of environments) as severe droughts or floods (Magalhães et al., 2007). This temporal
39 variability usually forces researchers to validate their indices through time series to account for
40 the effect of these natural changes (Pont et al., 2006; Collier, 2008). Although a temporal
41 validation of the index would be desirable, it seems of less concern in a presence-absence index
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3 than when using highly seasonal dependent metrics. Furthermore, the characterization of
4 species' abundances is largely more complex and difficult to standardize than the description of
5 species' presences-absences. Key issues in sampling methodologies like sampling effort or
6 methods have immediate consequences on bioassessment results (Lenat, 1993; Reynolds et al.,
7 2003), so the simplest the information needed the more confident the results. This also has
8 economic implications for the implementation of bioassessment programs, since the more
9 information needed the higher the cost of recording it while a cost-efficient method is always
10 desired (Schmutz et al., 2007a). Thus the use of presence-absence data supposes not only a
11 considerable simplification for the implementation of the index but also a way to overcome
12 other weakness related to the use of abundance data.

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The summing of metrics or measures to produce a final index score cannot be recommended
unless it could be demonstrated every single partial measure to vary in the same direction and
with the same magnitude of response to damage (Norris and Hawkins, 2000). The present index
fulfils this exigency since the residuals between the observed presences-absence and the
expected probabilities tend to decrease with human-biotic impairment. Sensitive species will
disappear at perturbed sites deriving high negative residuals in case of being predicted to be
present while tolerant species will remain at perturbed sites implying higher positive residuals.
Then all this partial evaluations are transformed into probabilities of a site to be a reference site
all ranging between 0-1. Every species' evaluations had the same weight within the final index
score since all their derived probabilities for the site to be a reference site were summed up
without any weighting given that every species was proved to be sensitive to any source of
perturbation in a previous study (data not shown). Even rare species with very low prevalence
were successfully modelled through the ANNA model and included in the index overcoming the
potential weakness of this no-multimetric predictive approach according to Pont et al. (2007).
They justify the use of elaborated metrics instead of real data due to the unfeasibility to model
rare species. The use of all the species with no weights and the wide range of environmental
conditions accounted for through data from the whole basin ensured the index to respond to a
broad range of perturbations.

The Index of Community Integrity showed to be sensitive to both human and biotic while not at
all to the natural spatial variation. The ability to distinguish between natural and impairment-
induced changes in community composition is a crucial point in bioassessment (Fausch et al.,
1990; Huges et al., 1998; Norris and Hawkins, 2000). The lack of concordance of the present
index and the longitudinal gradient was managed through the predictive model which accounted
for a substantial portion of the spatial variability of species' presence-absence making its scores
independent of natural variations. A site-specific approach was used in this study following the
river continuum concept (Vanote et al., 1980) avoiding artificial classifications and their derived
consequences on bioassessment. The effect of inaccurate *a priori* top-down landscape

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3 classification and even *a posteriori* bottom-up biological classifications used in type-specific
4 approaches (Schmutz et al., 2007b; Melcher et al., 2007) on predictive model performance and
5 bioassessment results are being pointed out in Hermoso et al. (submitted). On the other hand
6 good responses were found for all the sources of perturbation tested. A strong response was
7 found for different sources of habitat perturbation given the concordance of this index with
8 other two commonly used indices to assess water quality and the status of the riparian forest and
9 the naturalness of the riparian zone. Is also remarkable the response showed to the biotic
10 disturbance measured as the relative dominance of exotic species within the whole fish
11 community. Attending to relative measures the effect of local species richness and abundance
12 were discarded. Exotics are considered one of the major threats to the conservation of native
13 fish communities and to the ecological status of rivers hence (Kaufman, 1992; Godinho and
14 Ferreira, 2000; Clavero et al., 2004). However it has not been extensively considered in recent
15 works (Oberdorff et al., 2002; Pont et al., 2007; Ferreira et al., 2007) while was emphasized as a
16 main issue to consider when assessing the ecological status (Pont et al., 2006). Moreover
17 impacts of exotic species on the ecological status are difficult to prove and assess through
18 physic-chemical habitat quality measures since exotics neither alter any other ecosystem
19 attribute besides from biotic communities nor may be related to other human impacts (a site in
20 very good physic-chemical condition may be completely dominated by exotics) though it is
21 difficult to distinguish between both sources of perturbation (Light and Marchetti, 2007). That
22 makes especially important for any index to be sensitive to biotic disturbances. Thus the present
23 index is capable to detect not only commonly measured habitat perturbations but also and more
24 important the degradation status of the native freshwater fish community. Furthermore the
25 relative weight of different factors can be assessed in a post-hoc diagnostic using each species
26 partial evaluations which may help to the development of efficient corrective plans to lead the
27 assessed freshwater ecosystems to a good ecological status as the WFD requires.

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44 The use of the present index in a broader area would not be a complicated task since the only
45 requisite needed is the development of accurate predictive models for local faunas. In this way
46 the Index of Community Integrity could be adapted and validated in other Mediterranean basins
47 which at the moment lack of efficient fish-based bioassessment tools. Through a site-specific
48 approach the limitations imposed by river types (the index is only applicable to a river
49 previously included within the same type) are overcome. Given the special characteristics of the
50 Mediterranean freshwater fish communities (high basin endemism) a basin approach seems to
51 be the best option for site specific predictive methods. A multi-species predictive approach is
52 highly recommended for other Mediterranean basins given the reduced distribution areas of
53 some endemics. Finally a deeper characterization of the different sources of perturbation would
54 allow to better study the index response and potential.

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Table 1. Environmental variables used to characterize the sampled sites. * Denotes human-biotic potentially perturbed variables and used to describe stressor gradients.

Scale	Variable	Method	Mean	Range
Site	Water depth (cm)	<i>In situ</i>	42.8	7.0-200
	Shelter availability (m ² of shelter/river width)	<i>In situ</i>	5.6	0.0-60.6
	Elevation (m)	GIS	384.1	7.1-974.9
	Relative position (dist. to the most headwater point/total length of the stream)	GIS	0.47	0.04-1.00
	Stream order (Strahler)	GIS	2.1	1.0-6.0
	Distance to headwater (Km)	GIS	68.1	3.6-1,036.1
	Distance to Guadiana River (Km)	GIS	58.2	0.0-196.0
	River width (m) *	<i>In situ</i>	10.8	1.4-123.0-1.4
	Substrate coarseness (Wentworth scale) *	<i>In situ</i>	5.3	1.0-9.0-1.0
	Riparian Quality Index (QBR, Mune et al. 2003) *	<i>In situ</i>	61.8	0-100
	NH ₄ ⁺ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	1.38	0.02-51.60
	NO ₂ ⁻ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	0.10	0.01-2.00
	NO ₃ ⁻ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	4.09	0.50-55.90
	PO ₄ ³⁻ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	1.00	0.05-23.20
	SO ₄ ²⁻ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	110.1	10.0-2380.0
	Cl ⁻ (mg/L) *	<i>In situ</i>	56.1	2.0-834.0
	Water temperature (°C) *	<i>In situ</i>	20.5	9.4-32.6
	Conductivity (µS/cm) *	<i>In situ</i>	624.7	38.0-3230.0
	pH *	<i>In situ</i>	7.84	2.21-10.63
	Annual precipitation (mm/m ²)	GIS	593.1	370.2-1114.5
	Solar radiation (10 KJ/m ² *dia*µm)	GIS	2033.9	1646-2227
	Average annual air temperature (°C)	GIS	15.85	13.0-18.0
	Distance to the nearest reservoir upstream (Km) *	GIS	41.1	0.0-196.0
	Distance to the nearest reservoir downstream (Km) *	GIS	25.9	0.2-115.8
	% Exotic abundance	<i>In situ</i>	39.6	0-100
	% Exotic species richness	<i>In situ</i>	36.1	0-100
	Reach (500 m)	Slope (‰)	GIS	5.92
Sinuosity		GIS	1.23	1.00-2.79
Land uses			1.0	0.0-36.0
Urban/Industrial (%) *		GIS		
Intensive agriculture (%) *		GIS	29.0	0.0-100.0
Extensive agriculture (%) *		GIS	7.0	0.0-100.0
Natural (%) *	GIS	63.0	0.0-100.0	
Basin	Basin area (Drainage surface in each site, 10 ³ Km ²)	GIS	260.1	0.9-5919.1
	Gravelius index	GIS	1.68	1.14-2.68
	Land uses		0.4	0.0-6.7
	Urban/Industrial (%) *	GIS		
	Intensive agriculture (%) *	GIS	22.5	0.0-97.0
	Extensive agriculture (%) *	GIS	11.0	0.0-89.1-0.0
	Natural (%) *	GIS	65.8	0.9-100.0
	Reservoir (%) *	GIS	0.32	0.0-21.2
Population density (Hab/Km ²)*	GIS	21.0	0.0-459.3	

Table 2. Principal Component Analysis carried out in the whole habitat-biotic variables data set listed in Table 1 except QBR. Only variables with loadings >0.6 in any Principal Component (PC) are shown. % of explained variance (in brackets) and eigenvalues are also shown.

Denomination denotes the name for each PC in the text.

Variable	PC1_Alt (13.0%) Eigenv. 5.4	PC2_Alt (13.0%) 5.4	PC3_Alt (11.0%) 4.5
Denomination	Longitudinal gradient	Habitat impairment	Biotic perturbation
<i>Basin area</i>	0.9		
<i>Distance to headwayer</i>	0.9		
<i>River order</i>	0.9		
<i>River width</i>	0.8		
<i>Gravelius Index</i>	0.6		
<i>Water depth</i>	0.6		
<i>Reach Int. Agr.</i>		-0.9	
<i>Basin Int. Agr.</i>		-0.9	
SO_4^{2-}		-0.9	
NO_3^-		-0.8	
<i>Substrate coarseness</i>		-0.6	
<i>Basin Natural land</i>		0.6	
<i>Precipitation</i>		0.9	
<i>Reach Natural land</i>		0.9	
<i>% Exotic Richness</i>			-0.9
<i>% Exotic Abundance</i>			-1.0

Table 3. Effect of natural and perturbation gradients summed up in Table 2 on the Index of Community Integrity. Sum of squares (SS), F and associated p values are given for all the independent variables used in the General Linear Model (GLM). The model displayed a global $R^2_{\text{multiple}}=0.35$, $p<0.001$. Significant effects are characterized by $p<0.05$.

	SS	d. f.	F	p
Intercept	1526.08	1	2228.03	<0.001
<i>Longitudinal gradient</i>	0.04	1	0.06	0.81
<i>Habitat impairment</i>	3.23	1	4.71	0.03
<i>Biotic perturbation</i>	53.37	1	77.92	<0.001
Error	108.22	158		

Table 4. Quality classes for the Community Health Index. The cut-off points were established to maximize the index response to habitat and biotic impairment and reduce the risk of Type I and II errors.

Quality class	Cut-off point	Aim	Interval
HIGH	Percentil 95 Perturbed sites	Less than 5% of Perturbed sites are misclassified as in high condition (Reduced Type II error)	(6.46-10]
GOOD	Mean Reference sites	Only sites with a score higher than the mean scores within sites in Reference condition are classified as Good	(5.51-6.46]
MODERATE	Mean Perturbed sites	Only sites with a score higher than an average perturbed site are classified as Moderate	(3-4.36]
POOR	Percentil 1 Reference sites	Less than 1% of Reference sites are misclassified as in bad condition (Reduced Type I error)	[0-3]

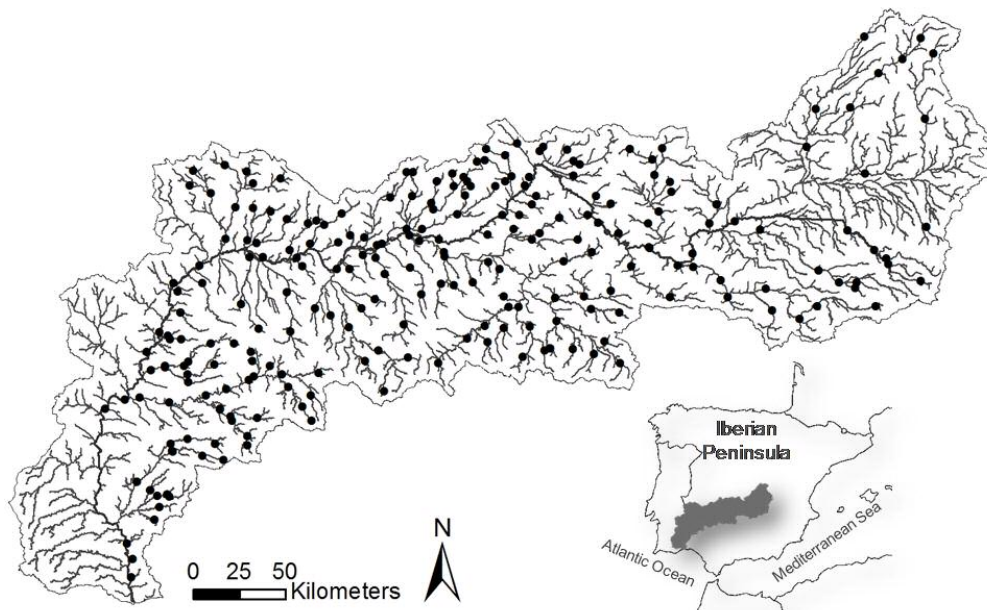


Figure 1. Guadiana River basin and location of sampling sites.

254x165mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Review

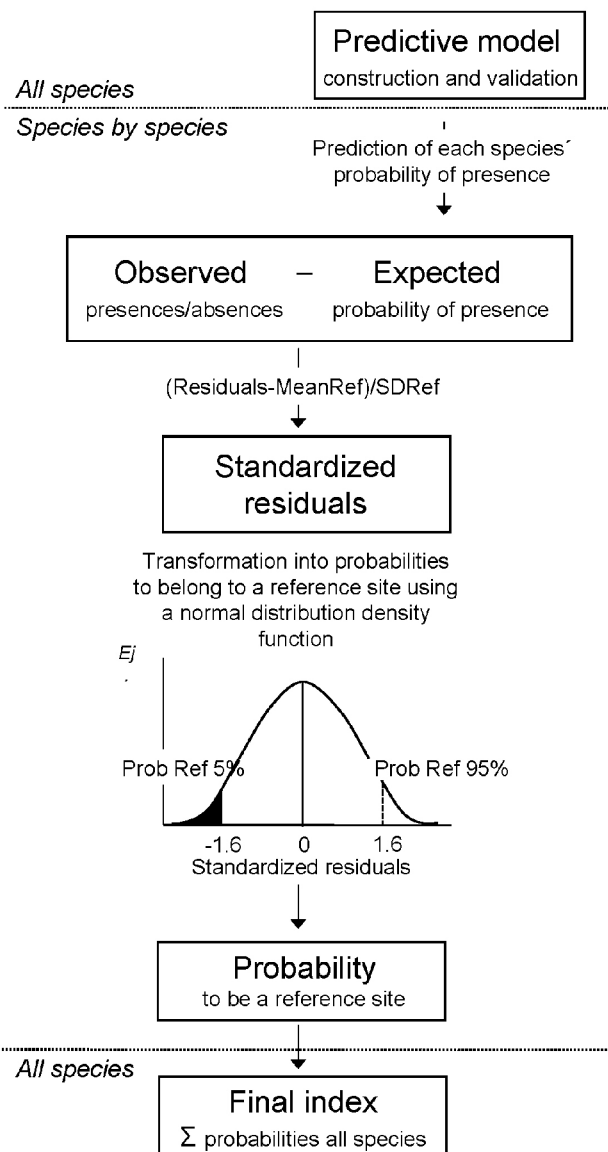


Figure 2. Flowchart for the development of Community Health Index. An example of the transformation of the standardized residuals into sites' probabilities to be a Reference site is shown. The accumulated probability for a low residual (-1.6) is very low (5%) while for a large one (1.6) is high (95%). Dotted lines separate steps where the whole community (all species) or partial evaluations (species by species) are used.

147x274mm (200 x 200 DPI)

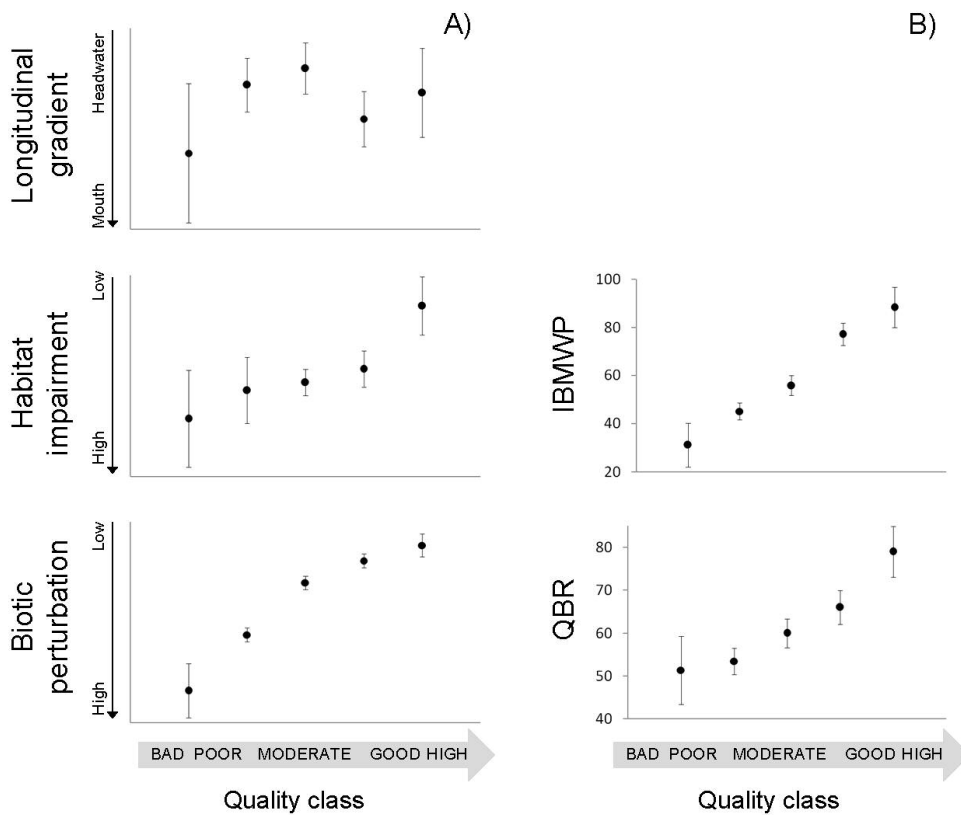


Figure 3. Index of Community Health scoring A) and validation B). For the scoring process the Principal Components detailed in Table 2 were used. The response of the index vs. other two common indices was used for validating its ability to give at least the same information. Mean \pm SE values are shown. F and p values from ANOVA analysis are also given.

253x210mm (129 x 129 DPI)

