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Effect of wastewater treatment plant effluent inputs on planktonic metabolic rates and microbial community composition in the Baltic Sea

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Abstract:

The Baltic Sea is the world's largest area suffering from eutrophication-driven hypoxia. Low oxygen levels are threatening its biodiversity and ecosystem functioning. The main causes for eutrophication-driven hypoxia are high nutrient loadings and global warming. Wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) contribute to eutrophication as they are important sources of nitrogen to coastal areas. Here, we evaluated the effects of wastewater treatment plant effluent inputs on Baltic Sea planktonic communities in four experiments. We tested for effects of effluent inputs on chlorophyll α content, bacterial community composition, and metabolic rates: gross primary production (GPP), net community production (NCP), community respiration (CR) and bacterial production (BP). Nitrogen-rich dissolved organic matter (DOM) inputs from effluents increased bacterial production and decreased primary production and community respiration. Nutrient amendments and seasonally variable environmental conditions lead to lower alpha-diversity and shifts in bacterial community composition (e. g. increased abundance of a few cyanobacterial populations in the summer experiment), concomitant with changes in metabolic rates. An increase in BP and decrease in CR could be caused by high lability of the DOM that can support secondary bacterial production, without an increase in respiration. Increases in bacterial production and simultaneous decreases of primary production lead to more carbon being consumed in the microbial loop, and may shift the ecosystem toward heterotrophy.

Keywords: eutrophication-driven hypoxia, planktonic communities, chlorophyll α content, gross primary production, respiration, dissolved organic matter, wastewater treatment