

DO BENTHIC HABITATS RESPOND CONSISTENTLY TO PROTECTION?

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When no quantitative data before a Marine Protected Area (MPA) establishment are available, the effect of protection can be evaluated by investigating patterns of species and assemblages distribution at protected and unprotected sites. In this paper two benthic habitats (intertidal and shallow subtidal) have been investigated in a 'no-entry' zone and two control sites at Tavolara-Capo Coda Cavallo MPA (NE Sardinia) in September 2002 and September 2003. Samplings have been carried out in three areas at each site, and for each area ten replicates have been sampled. In each replicate percent cover of taxa has been estimated. Differences have been highlighted for assemblages at shallow subtidal habitat (5 m deep) while no overall differences were found for assemblages at intertidal algal turf habitat. Cover of encrusting algae has been found significantly higher at the protected site suggesting a possible higher grazing pressure. Possible causes underlying inconsistency of results obtained between habitats are discussed.