

Adequate indicators for environmental change in alpine river systems (Hohe Tauern NP, Austria) Preliminary results

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Abstract

Alpine rivers are among the most threatened ecosystems due to increasing human pressures and environmental/climate change. As a consequence, various effects on their function and structure have been suggested, cause-effect relationships have hardly been studied. Within the research project PROSECCO.ALPS we recorded abiotic parameters and collected water chemistry and macrozoobenthos samples at 18 sites in two high alpine catchments (Großglockner and Sonnblick region) three times in 2011. After sample analyses we tested more than 30 biological indicators on their applicability to assess ecological conditions in high alpine streams. Preliminary results showed distinct differences in the species communities, individual densities and diversity with decreasing environmental harshness. Although most tested indices were developed for lower altitudes, they have the potential to provide a comprehensive set on ecological information important for indicating environmental/climate change effects.

Keywords

biological assessment, Chironomidae, macrozoobenthos, monitoring

Introduction

Alpine rivers are among the most threatened ecosystems due to increasing human pressures and effects from climate/environmental change (HANNAH et al. 2007). These impacts strongly alter ecosystem structure and function (BROWN et al. 2009), nevertheless, cause-effect relationships have hardly been demonstrated in high alpine catchments (BROWN et al. 2006; FÜREDER 2007). Within the framework of the project *PROSECCO.ALPS* (*PRO*glacialStream *E*cology and *C*limate *C*hange over the *ALPS*), this study wants to i) assess faunal patterns along a gradient of environmental conditions, and ii) apply a comprehensive set of biological indices, in order to iii) find the most adequate ones for alpine lotic ecosystem condition and change.

Study sites and methods

We selected 18 study sites along a gradient of environmental harshness, 14 with (GAG1-4, KRP1, PAZ1-3, GBK1-2, GBK5-6, GBK9-10; Figure 1 & 2) and four without glacial influence (GAG5, GBK3, GBK4 and GBK8; Figure 1 & 2), in two alpine catchments (Sonnblick and Großglockner Group, Table 1).

Table 1: General information about the two investigated areas in the Hohe Tauern National Park, Austria within the framework of PROSECCO.ALPS

Facts about	Großglockner Group	Sonnblick Group
Coordinates	47°04'49"N 12°44'49"E	47°02'52"N 12°59'06"E
Area [km ²]	484.5	18.6
Altitude range [m a.s.l.]	2074-2627	2186-2359
Exposition	East & North	South & West
Sampling sites	1 without & 8 with glacial influence	3 without & 6 with glacial influence

Semi-quantitative macrozoobenthos samples were collected in three replicates at each sampling site, using a Euro-kick-net (100µm mesh size). Simultaneously water chemistry was measured with a multi-parameter probe and water was filtered for gaining the organic and inorganic content. In the laboratory all captured invertebrate larvae and pupae were sorted and, where possible, identified to the lowest taxonomic (species) level, using suitable identification keys: Chironomids (JANECEK 1998), Ephemeroptera (BAUERNFEIND & HUMPESCH 2001), Plecoptera (LUBINI et al. 2000) and Trichoptera (WARINGER & GRAF 1997). With these data more than 35 indicators were tested (Table 2) in order to find the most adequate for environmental change in alpine rivers.

In our presentation we present the results of one sampling occasion in July 2011.

Table 2: Tested indicators

Indicator Type	Index	
Abiotic Index	Chemical Index to Bach	
Biotic Index	Extended Trend Biotic Index	
	Longitudinal Zonation Index	
	Trent Biotic Index	
Diversity Index	Saprobic Index	
	Brillouin Diversity	
	Fisher's Alpha	
	Margalef Diversity	
	McIntosh Diversity	
	Menhinick Diversity	
	Shannon Wiener	
	Simpson Diversity	
	Strong's Diversity	
	Whittaker Bw	
	Cody Bc	
	Harrison 1	
	Harrison 2	
	Routledge Be	
	Routledge Bi	
	Routledge Br	
	Wilson & Shmida Bt	
	Brillouin Evenness	
	Camargo	
	McIntosh Evenness	
	NHC	
	Pielou J	
	Shannon Maximum/Minimum	
	Simpson Evenness	
	Gini	
	Functional Approach	Functional Feeding Groups
		RETI
Multimetric Approach	Index of Biotic Integrity	
	"Standorttypindex"	
Multivariate Approach	RIVPACS	
	SERCON	

Results

Preliminary results showed that besides KRP1, the Großglockner Group (Figure 1) was characterized by a quite uniform benthic community which was dominated by Diamesinae and other Chironomids.

The nine sampling sites of the Sonnblick Group (Figure 2) offer a more diverse species community. Both investigation areas show a similar trend. With decreasing environmental harshness (GAG1 to GAG4 and PAZ1 to PAZ3; GBK10 to GBK1), the benthic invertebrate abundance and Simpson diversity (SD) are increasing. Sampling sites without glacial influence (GAG5; GBK8, GBK4, GBK3) follow this trend but are characterized by comparatively higher individual density and diversity. Overall we evaluated 35 relevant indices of six indicator types (single parameter – multivariate/multimetric; Table 2) and grouped them according to their suitability and sensitivity. The most adequate indicators were applicable for: assessment of the overall situation (SERCON), assemblage changes along a stream (LZI), biodiversity (S&W, S, M), ecosystem health (SI, IBI, EBI, BMWP) and environmental harshness (Bach's CI).

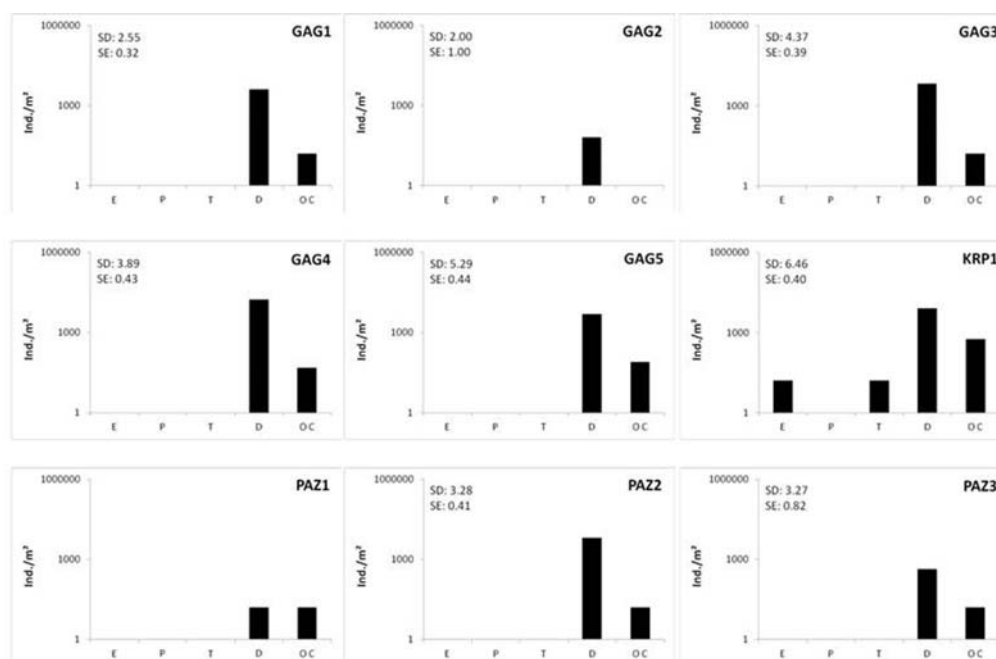


Figure 1: Abundance (individuals/m²) of the nine sampling sites in the Großglockner Group, Hohe Tauern National Park. SD – Simpson Diversity, SE – Simpson Evenness, E – Ephemeroptera, P – Plecoptera, T – Trichoptera, D – Diamesinae, OC – other Chironomids

Discussion

Our study showed that the paucity of information on the conditions and functions of alpine ecosystems can be compensated by applying sophisticated methodologies. Although most indices were developed for the implementation in river systems at lower altitudes, they still have the potential to provide a comprehensive set on ecological information. With the inclusion of recently elaborated knowledge (e.g. adaptations of biota, tolerances to harshness), we currently work on models for indicator modification and fine-tuning to unerringly evaluate and predict effects from environmental/climate change.

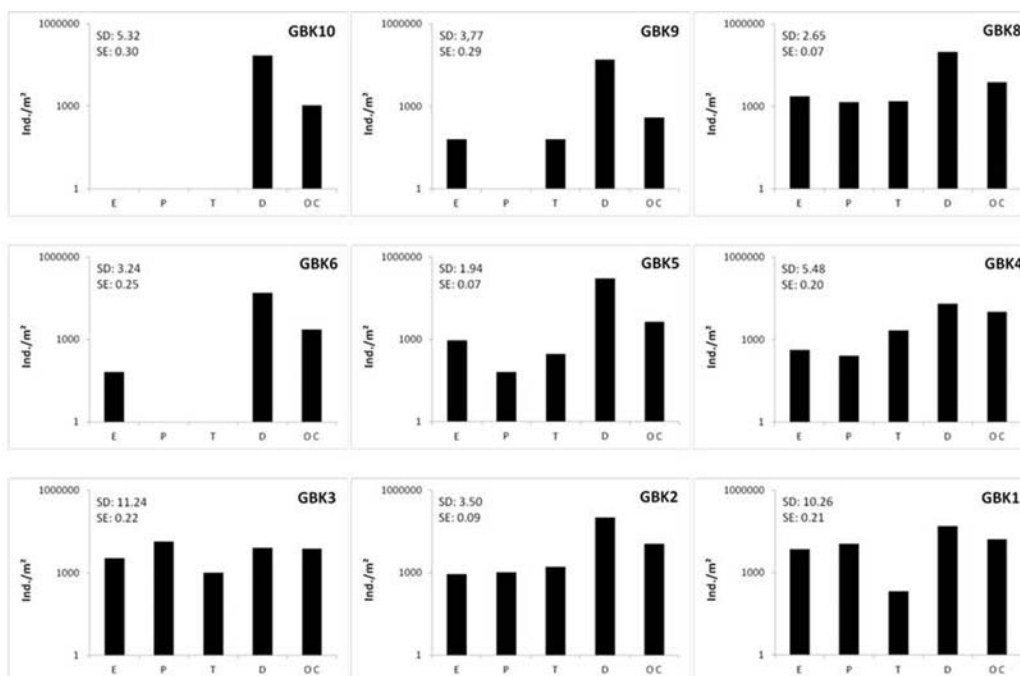


Figure 2: Abundance (individuals/m²) of the nine sampling sites in the Goldberg Group, Hohe Tauern National Park. SD – Simpson Diversity, SE – Simpson Evenness, E – Ephemeroptera, P – Plecoptera, T – Trichoptera, D – Diamesinae, OC – other Chironomids

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Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

Zeitschrift/Journal: [Nationalpark Hohe Tauern - Conference Volume](#)

Jahr/Year: 2013

Band/Volume: [5](#)

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Artikel/Article: [Adequate indicators for environmental change in alpine river systems \(Hohe Tauern NP, Austria\) Preliminary results 709-711](#)