

An underwater photograph showing a large school of small, silvery fish swimming in clear blue water above a dark, rocky reef. Sunlight rays are visible at the top of the frame.

**Scienze per l'Ambiente Marino e Costiero**

**a.a. 2025-2026**

**GESTIONE E CONSERVAZIONE ECOSISTEMI MARINI -  
IMPATTI ANTROPICI E CONSERVAZIONE DELLA FAUNA  
MARINA**

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**The role of disturbance in marine  
community dynamics**

# Definition(s)

## Disturbance is...

Any discrete event able to determine killing / removal from the substratum of one or more individuals, with the consequence of providing direct or indirect opportunities to new individuals for settlement or development Sousa 1984



Before the event



After the event

Disturbance



(e.g., storm)

It refers to the damage itself, that is, the effect (impact) of some external agent or force.

Sousa 2001

# Definition(s)

## Disturbance is...

Any discrete event able to change the structure of ecosystems, communities, or populations, limiting resources, modifying the substrate or the environment.

Pickett & White 1985



Before the event



After the event



(e.g., storm)



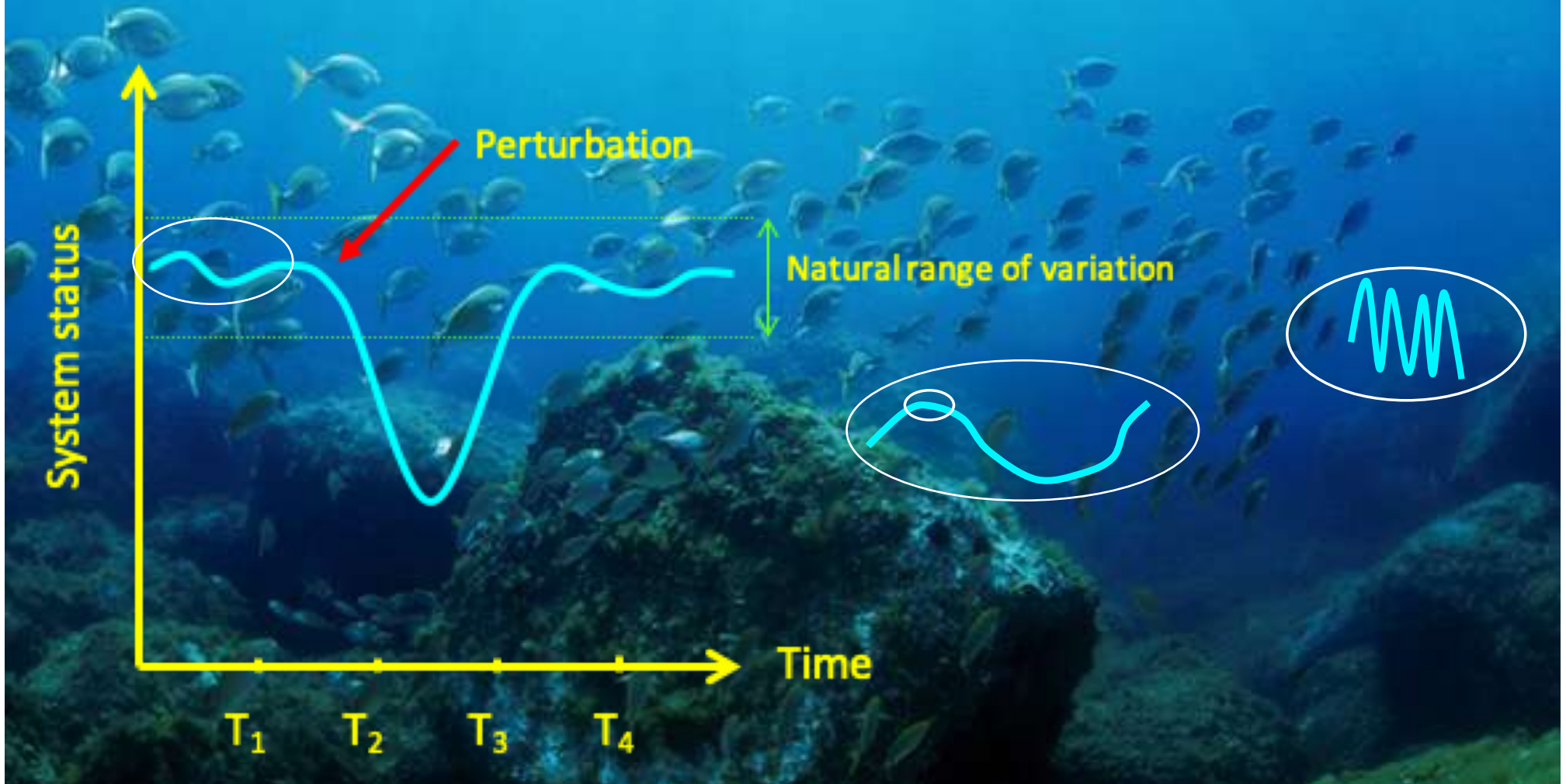
Disturbance

Disturbance is seen as a physical external force able to modify the system, for example removing organisms and opening patches. It refers to the physical agent that determine the biological consequences.

# Impacts

We intend disturbance as any event, which is caused by or originates from a physical, chemical or biological agent, able to produce directly or indirectly changes to the system or its components (typically opening patches)

A perturbation is any interference with processes and structure characterizing a given system that change the state beyond its natural variation (impact).



# The nature of disturbance

## Physical

Physical disturbance refers to physical agents. For instance, hydrodynamic forces from intense wave action.



## Chemical

Disturbance is caused by chemical agents or alteration in chemistry of the environment. For instance, pollution

## Biological

Biological disturbance is caused by organisms. For instance, the whiplash of large algae.



## Others?

In a wider sense, even predation could be considered as a disturbance, since it is able to remove large number of individuals and opens free space available for other organisms. However, it is internal to the system and someone tends to exclude it from disturbance array. But take in mind that predation can be altered by external forces, and abnormal rates of predation may lead to consequences not so different from strong physical external disturbance

# Types of disturbance

Sediments



Abrasion,  
burial  
Injuries,  
suffocation,  
death

Volcanic activity



Burning,  
burial  
direct  
killing,  
death



Storm wave and currents

Substrate  
modifications,  
physical action  
Killing,  
displacement

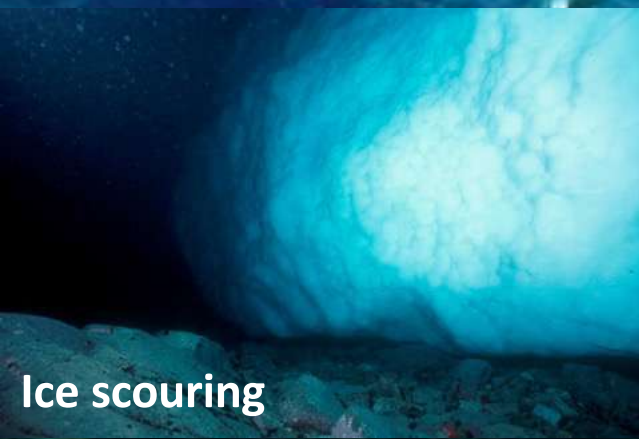
Temperature extremes

Salinity extremes

Anoxia



Oxygen  
depletion,  
osmotic and  
metabolic  
stress  
Killing,  
death



Ice scouring

Abrasion  
Killing, Injuries,  
death

Landslides



Abrasion,  
burial  
Killing,  
Injuries

# Types of disturbance

Bioturbation



Whiplash



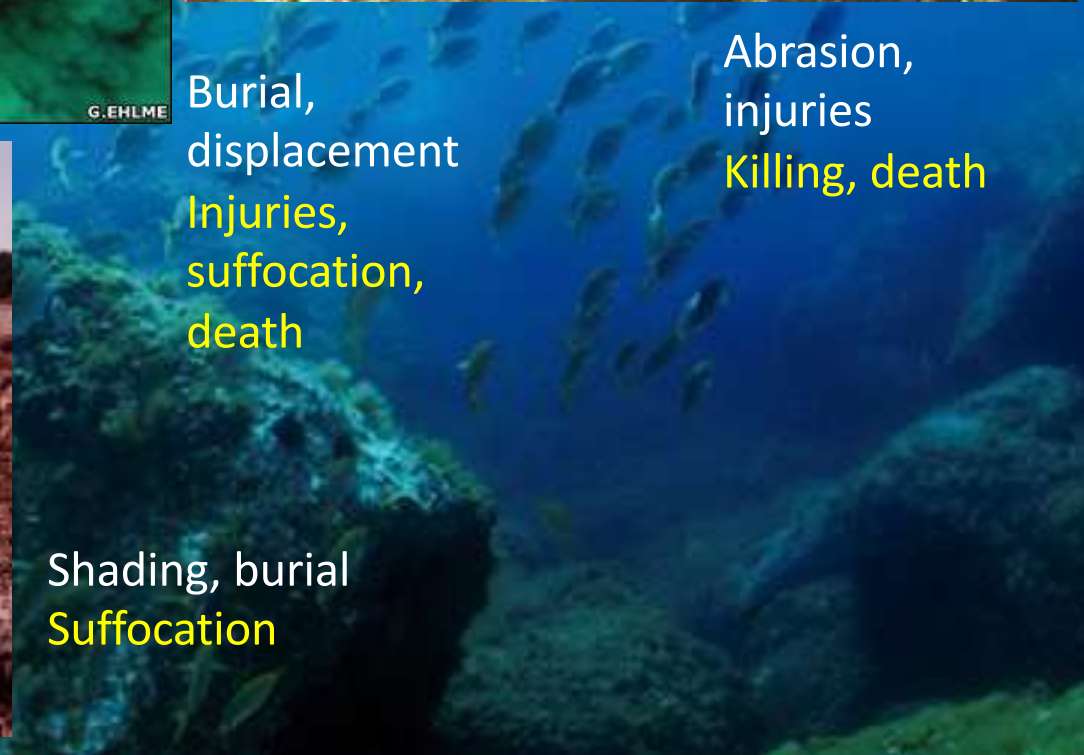
Debris accumulation



Burial,  
displacement  
Injuries,  
suffocation,  
death

Abrasion,  
injuries  
Killing, death

Shading, burial  
Suffocation

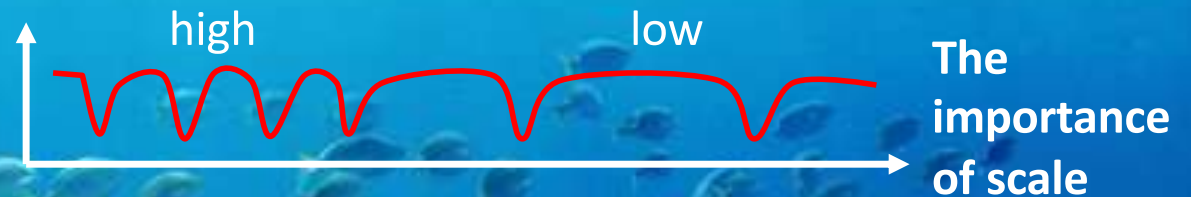


# Characteristics of disturbance

**Intensity:**  
the strength of disturbance



**Frequency:**  
the reoccurrence of disturbance



**Spatial variability:**  
Variations in the extent of areas affected and distribution of disturbance

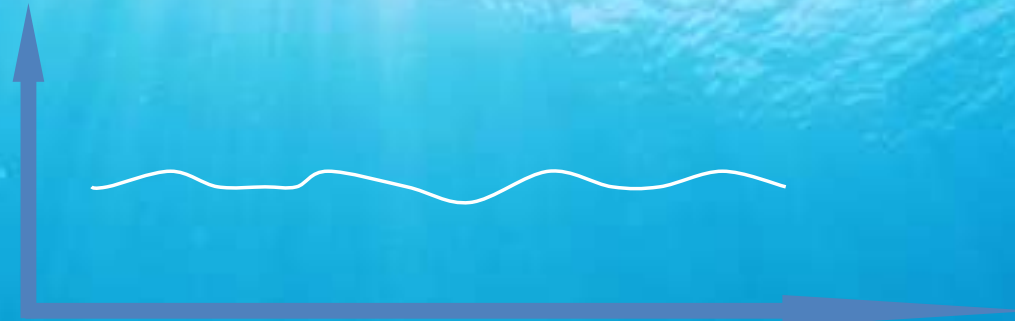


Ecological traits of organisms are important for the impact of disturbance and recovery potential

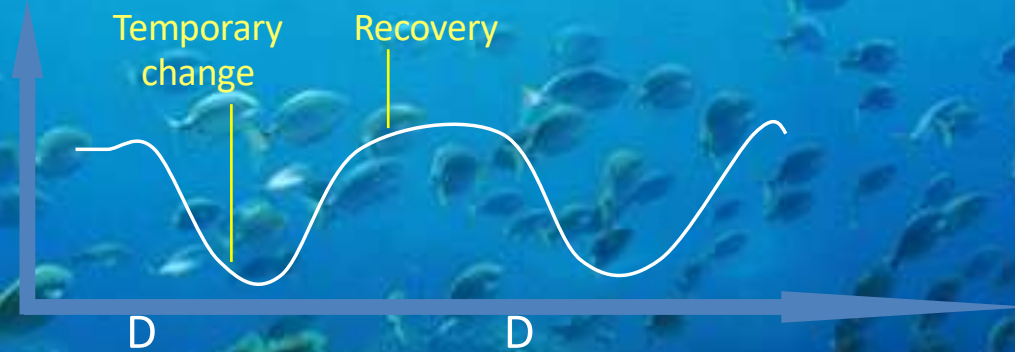
Regularity of disturbance – adaptation

# Expected effects under different scenarios

LOW-NO  
DISTURB.



REG.  
DISTURB.

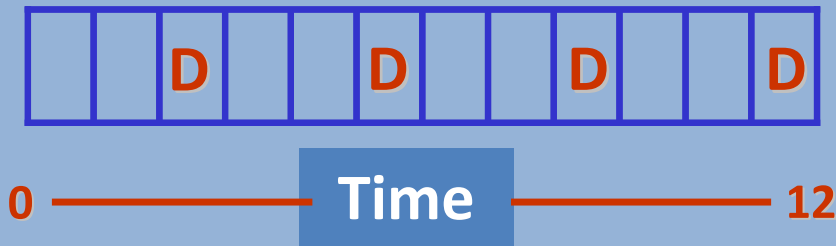


REP.  
DISTURB.



# Temporal variability

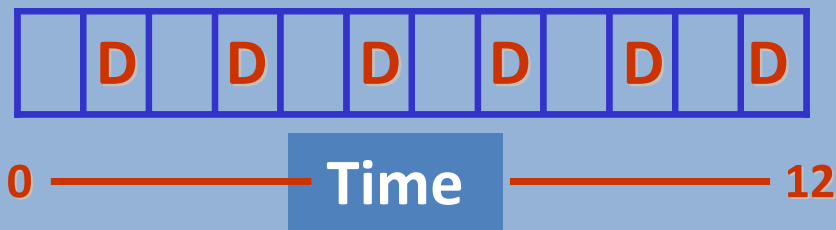
LOW  
FREQUENCY



Variations in timing of  
disturbance occurrence

$$F_L = 4/12$$

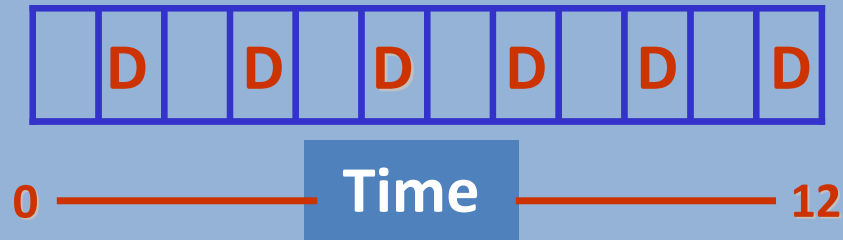
HIGH  
FREQUENCY



$$F_H = 6/12$$

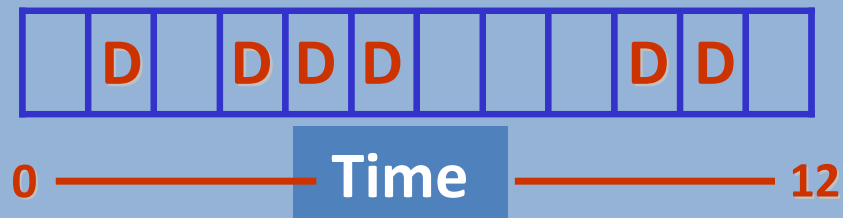
$I_L < I_H$

# LOW VARIANCE



$$F_L = 6/12$$

# HIGH VARIANCE



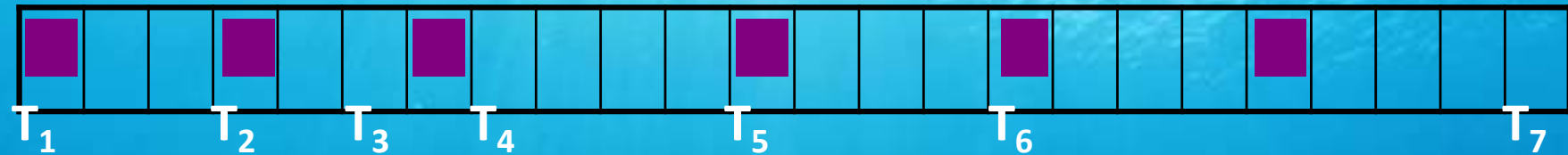
$$F_H = 6/12$$

$$I_L = I_H$$

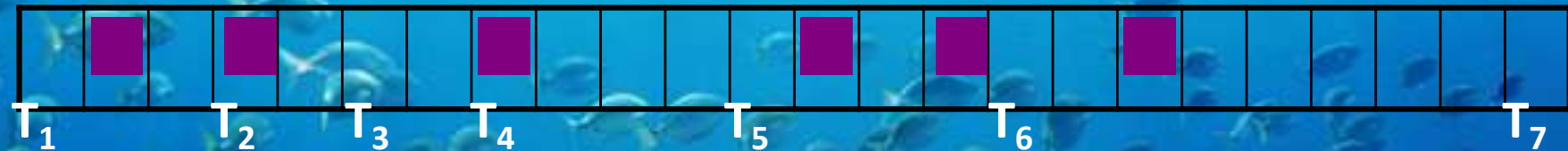
$$V_L < V_H$$

# Effects of temporal variance...

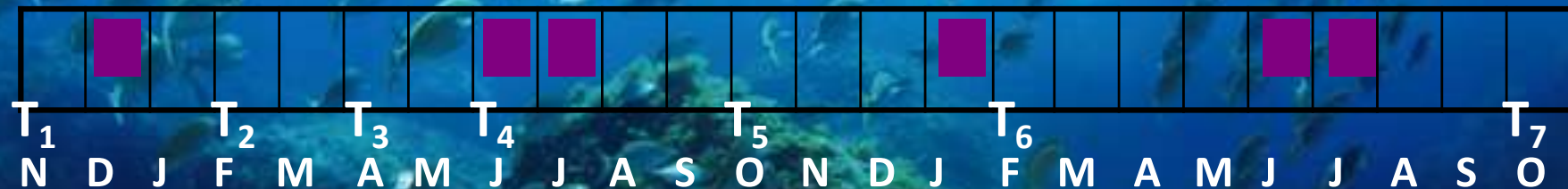
## LOW VARIANCE



## MID VARIANCE



## HIGH VARIANCE

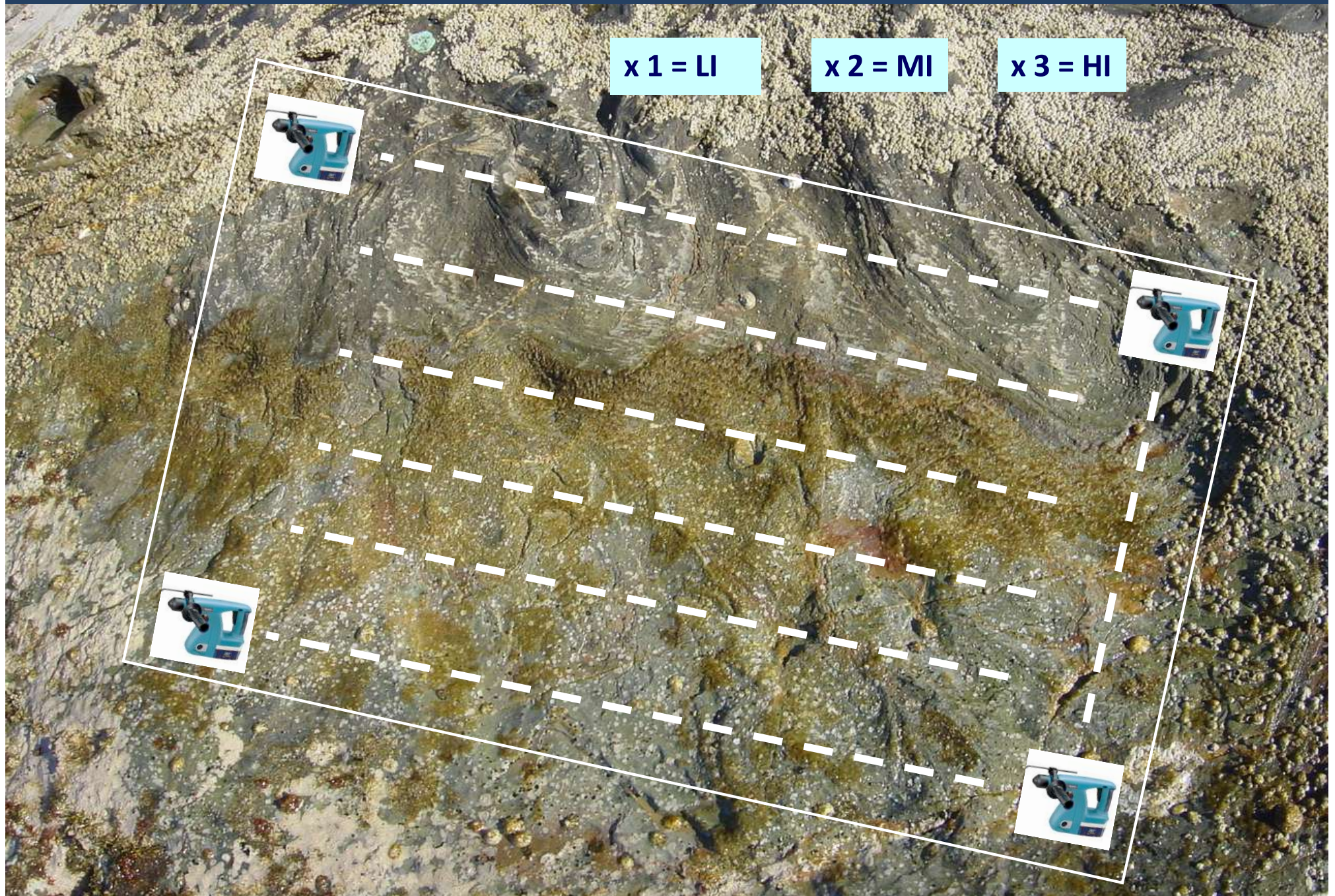


 = DISTURBANCE (6 / 24 m)

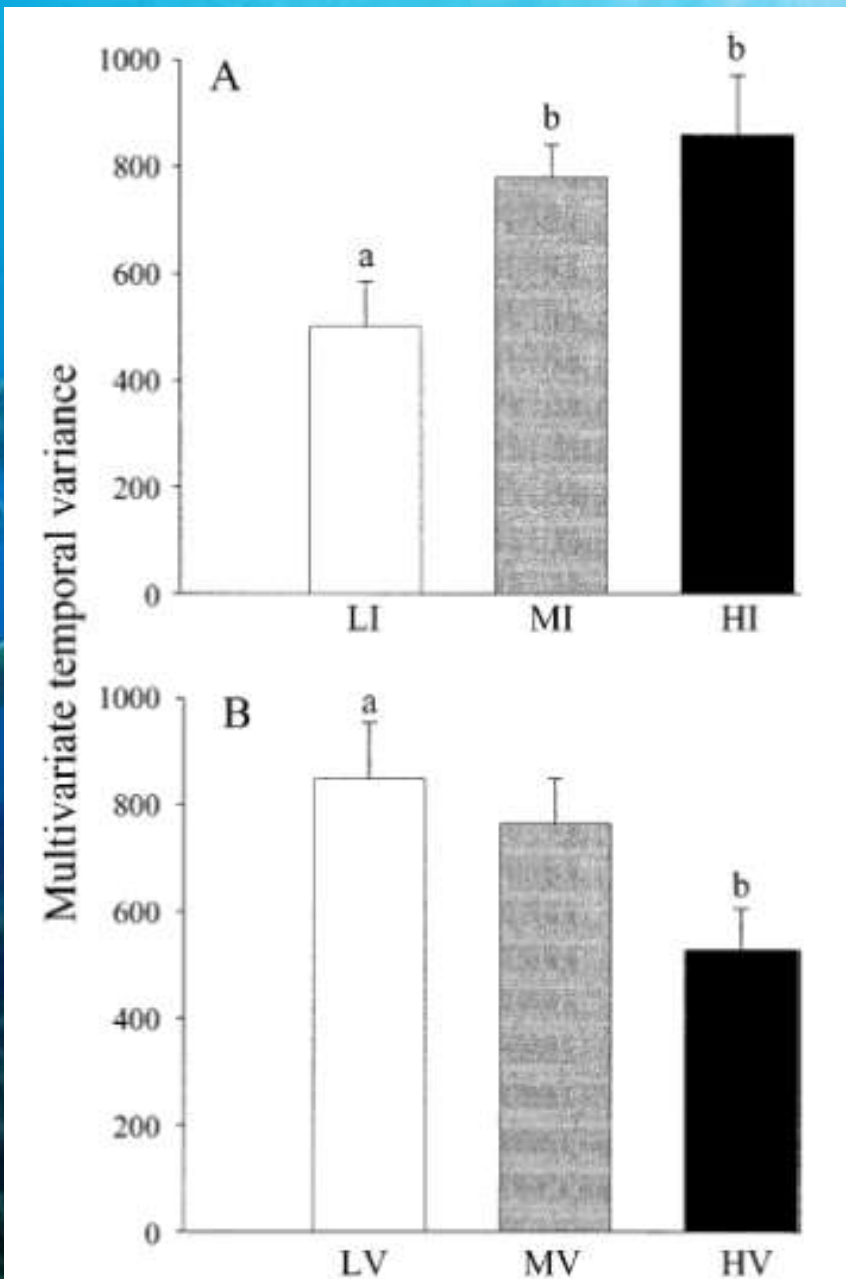
T<sub>1</sub>-T<sub>7</sub> = Sampling dates (!)



# ...and intensity



# Results



## Changes in temporal variability

- a) increasing intensity lead to increasing temporal variability in assemblage structure
- b) Increasing variance in disturbance lead to decreasing temporal variability

**Recovery dynamics are affected differently by intensity and variance**

# Effects of temporal variance and intensity

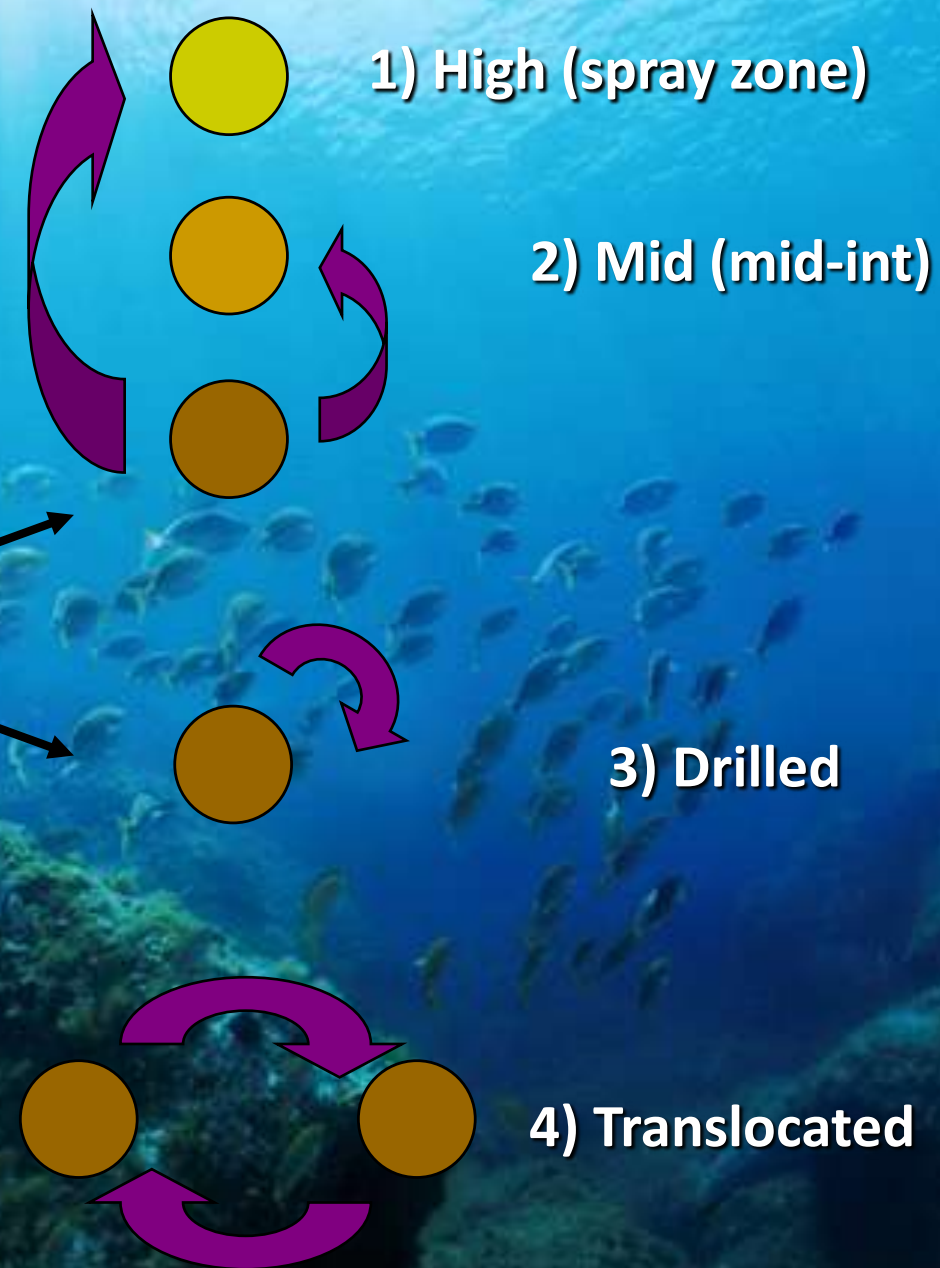
Manipulative  
transplanting experiment



Drilling



T  
R  
A  
N  
S  
P  
L





# Experimental design

**TRANSPLANT.:**

Mid

High

Drill.

Transl

**VARIANCE:**

Low

High

Low

High

**Repl.:**

1

2

3

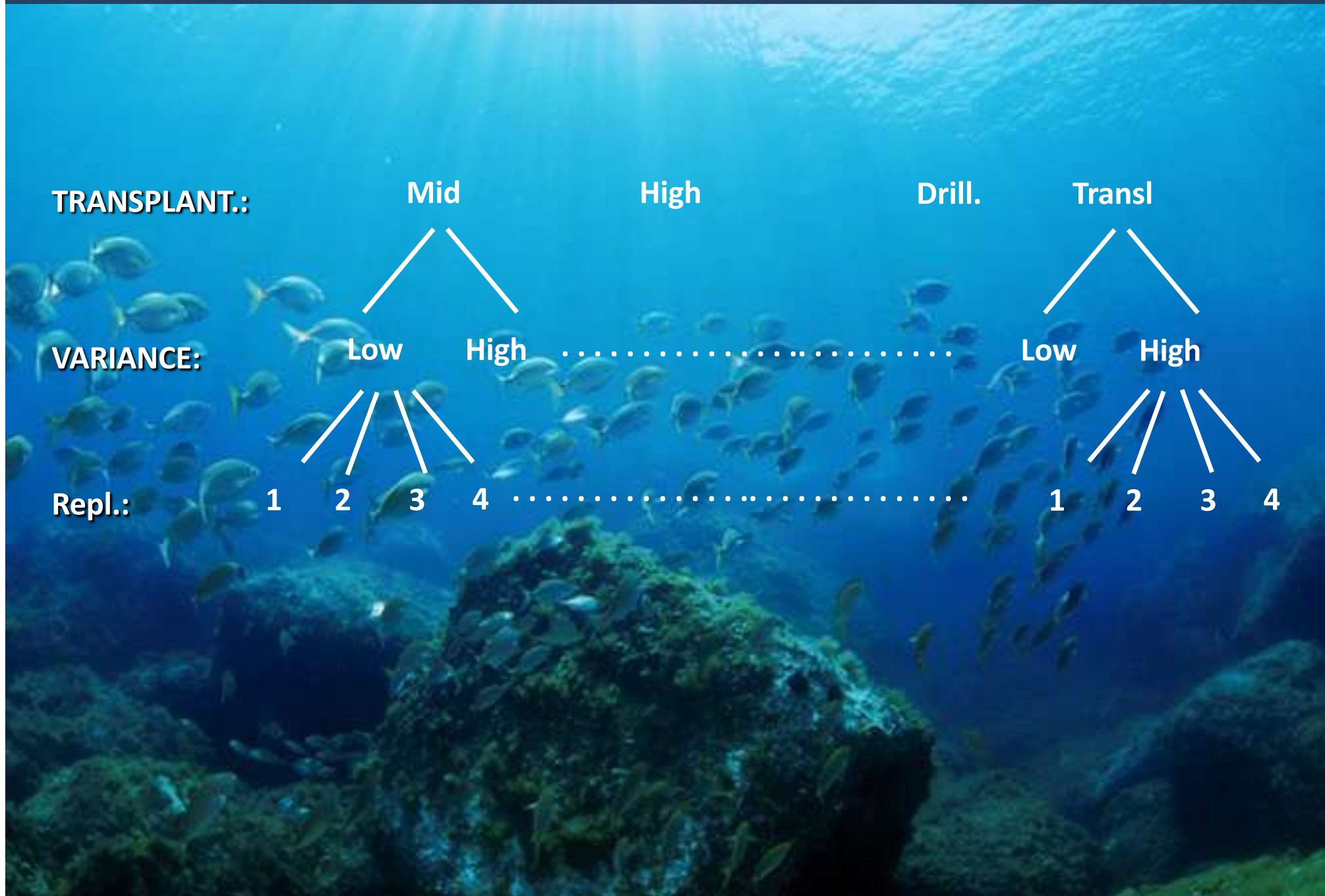
4

1

2

3

4



# Timing of manipulation

## LOW VARIANCE

New habitat

Original position



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Months

## HIGH VARIANCE

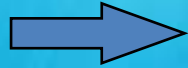
New habitat

Original position



# Results

+ Aerial exposure  
- Temp. variance  
(+ variance)



+ barnacles + ECR  
(drastically decrease)



Filamentous algae  
C. branched algae

- Aerial exposure  
- Temp. variance  
(+ variance)



Reduced effects



Enhanced by high  
variance  
Irrespective of  
intensity, whereas  
regular disturbance  
decrease cover

**Temporal variance may drastically change  
the effect of disturbance intensity**

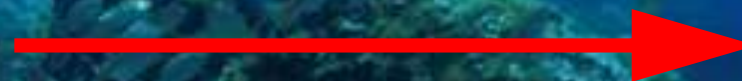
# IDH

The intermediate disturbance hypothesis was formulated by S.J. Connell (1978) to explain the high diversity of rain forests and coral reefs.

1 – when disturbance is rare (low frequency) and weak (low intensity), strong competitors win. Species richness is therefore reduced. (the assumption is that a hierarchy of competitors exists, and strong competitors occupy the space efficiently).

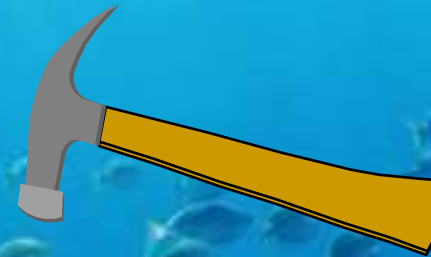
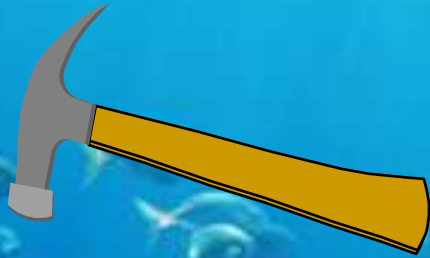


1	1	1	1	1	3
1	1	1	1	3	3
1	1	1	5	5	5
1	1	1	2	2	2
4	1	6	6	8	8
4	4	6	7	8	8



1	1	1	1	1	3
1	1	1	1	3	3
1	1	1	1	3	3
1	1	1	1	2	2
4	1	1	1	1	8
4	4	6	6	8	8

2 – when disturbance is very intense and frequent, strong competitors are reduced or excluded, and new settlers among weak competitors colonize the space. Species richness is again reduced because some species lack, and only few species tolerate high level of disturbance



1	1	1	1	1	3
1	1	1	1	3	3
1	1	1	5	5	5
1	1	1	2	2	2
4	1	6	6	8	8
4	4	6	7	8	8

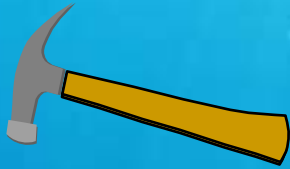


13	1	1	11	11	3
1	1	1	11	3	3
10	10	10	5	5	5
4	10	2	2	2	2
4	6	6	6	8	8
4	4	6	7	8	8



13	13	13	11	11	11
13	13	1	11	11	3
10	10	10	10	10	5
10	10	10	10	10	2
10	10	10	10	10	8
4	10	6	7	8	8

3 – finally, when disturbance regime has intermediate strength and frequency, strong and weak competitors coexist, since disturbance is not so high to cause the local extinction of the former, but sufficient to create patches available for the latter.



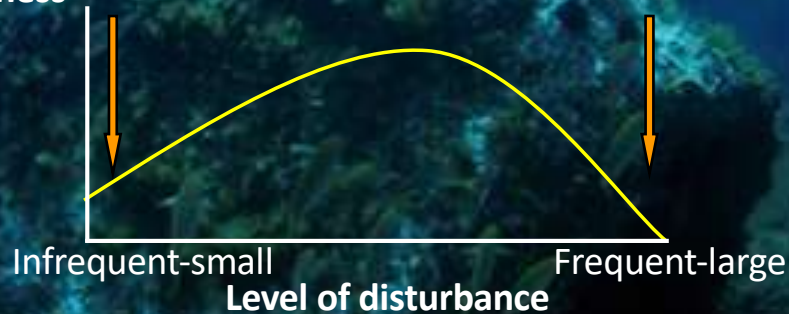
1	1	1	1	1	3
1	1	1	1	3	3
1	1	1	5	5	5
1	1	1	2	2	2
4	1	6	6	8	8
4	4	6	7	8	8

Competitive exclusion

High stress Extinction

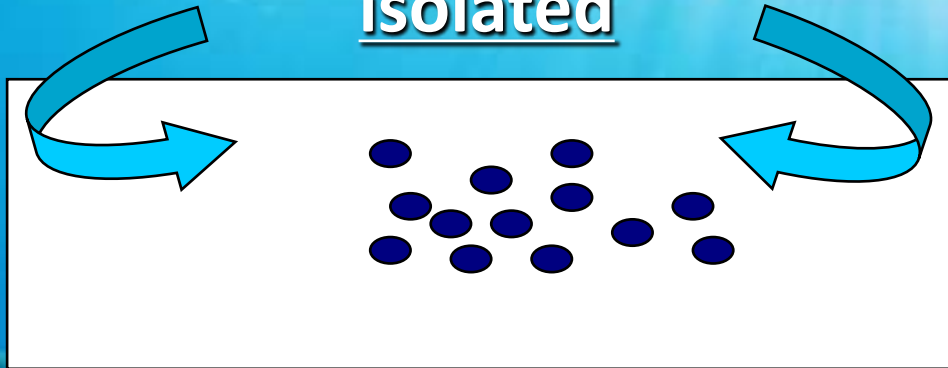
13	1	1	11	11	3
1	1	1	11	3	3
10	10	10	5	5	5
4	10	2	2	2	2
4	6	6	6	8	8
4	4	6	7	8	8

Richness

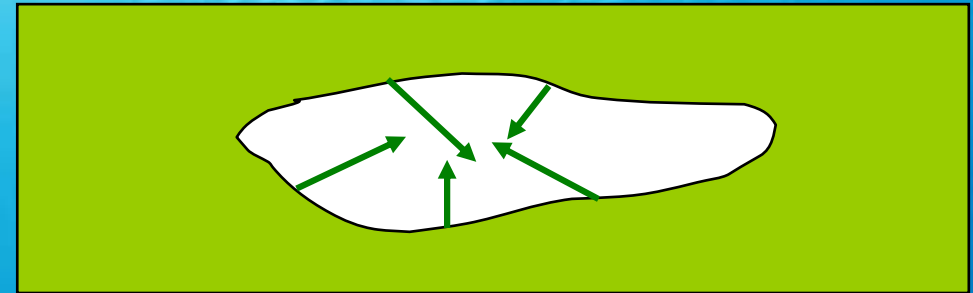


# Patch dynamics

isolated



non-isolated



Recolonization: Arrival of drifting propagules from the water column

Recolonization: Vegetative growth from neighbours

discrete pieces of substratum that were surrounded by water (isolated patches), and areas that were cleared within a background of other sessile organisms (nonisolated patches).

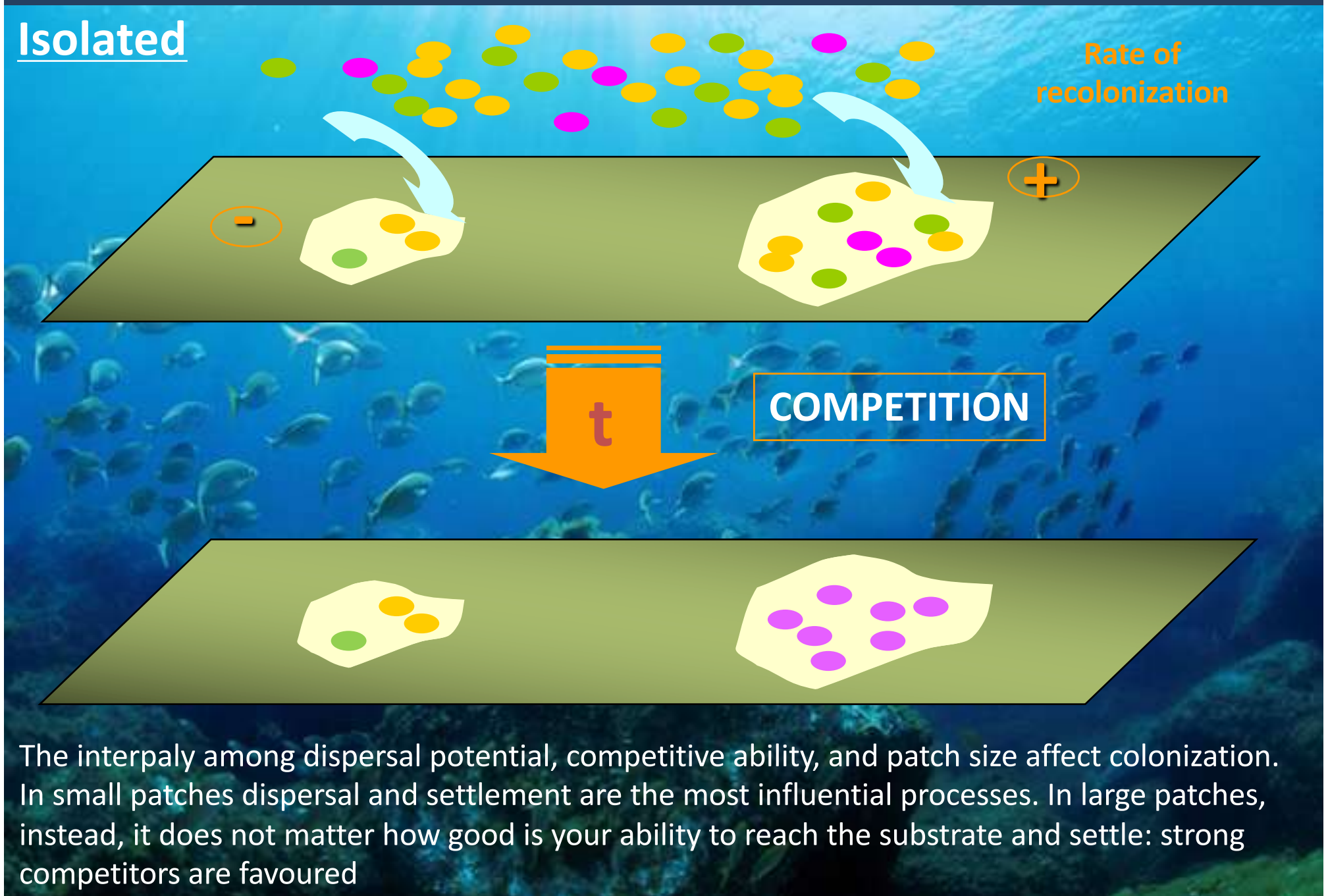
Non-isolated

Rate of  
recolonization



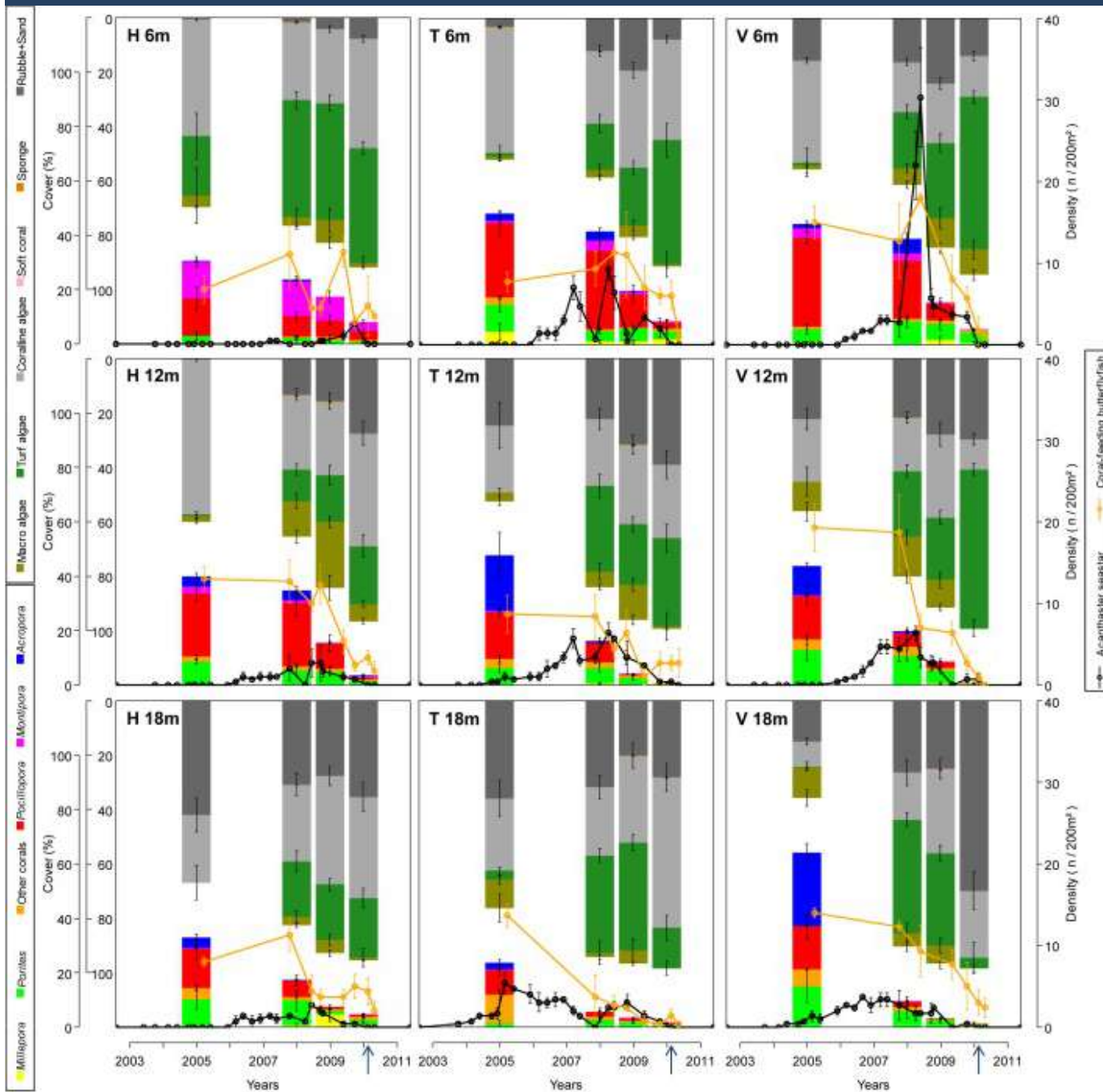
# Isolation and size

Isolated



The interplay among dispersal potential, competitive ability, and patch size affect colonization. In small patches dispersal and settlement are the most influential processes. In large patches, instead, it does not matter how good is your ability to reach the substrate and settle: strong competitors are favoured

# Interactions with biological processes

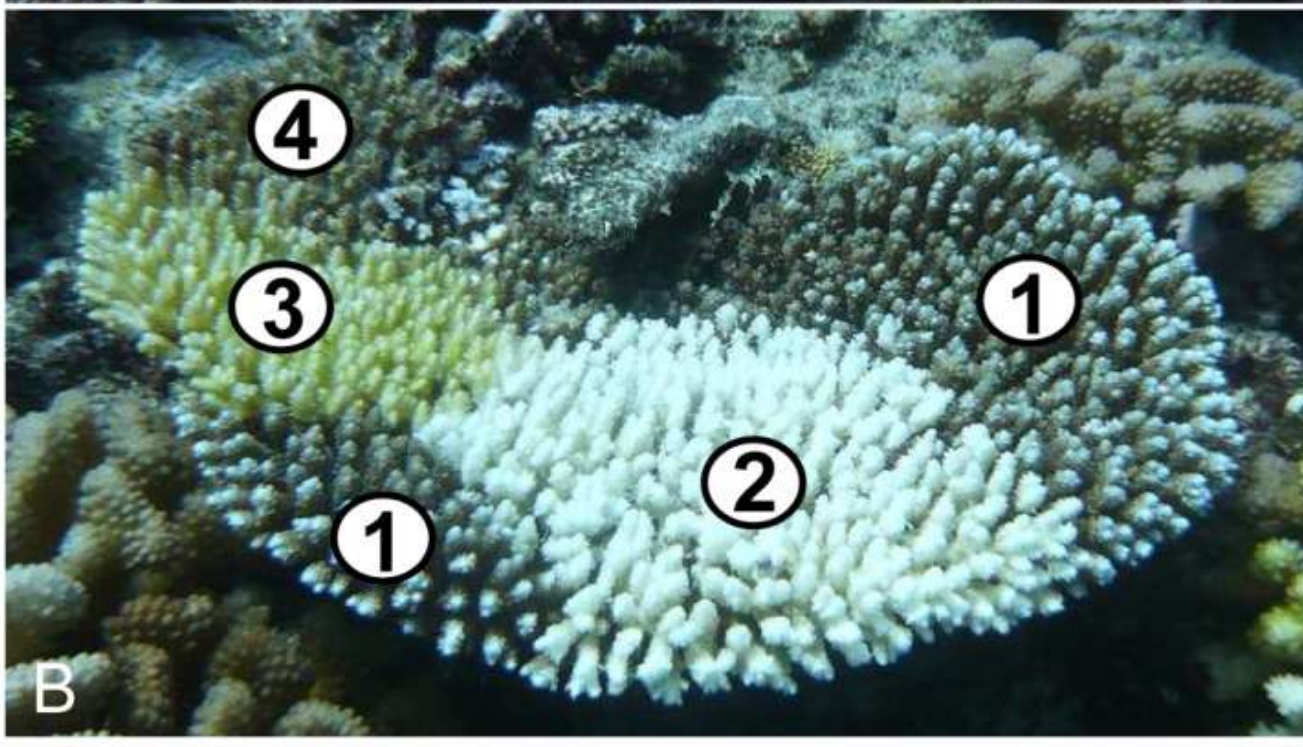


Three sites  $\times$  three water depths (6, 12, 18 m). Y-axes on the left indicate cover values (mean  $\pm$  SE) of the sessile communities: reef-building corals and other benthic components. Y-axes on the right indicate densities (mean  $\pm$  SE) of coral-predators: populations of the outbreaking seastar *Acanthaster* and butterfly fish assemblages. Arrows on the x-axes indicate the occurrence of the tropical cyclone Oli.

Kayal et al 2012

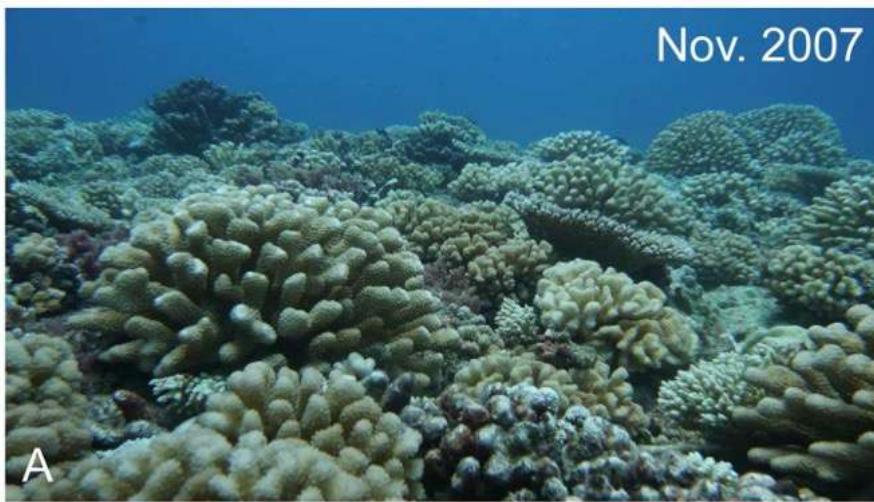


(A) An *Acanthaster planci* observed on a living tabular coral from the genus *Acropora*.



(B) A partially-killed coral from the genus *Acropora* bearing feeding-scars left by successive predation events by *Acanthaster*:

- 1) live portion of the colony bearing the pigmented coral tissue,
- 2) freshly killed portion of the colony deprived of its pigmented living tissue (<1 day post-predation),
- 3) recently killed portion of the colony covered by early colonizing algae and cyanobacteria (~10 days post-predation),
- 4) dead portion of the colony killed long ago and covered by turf algae (>3 weeks post-predation).



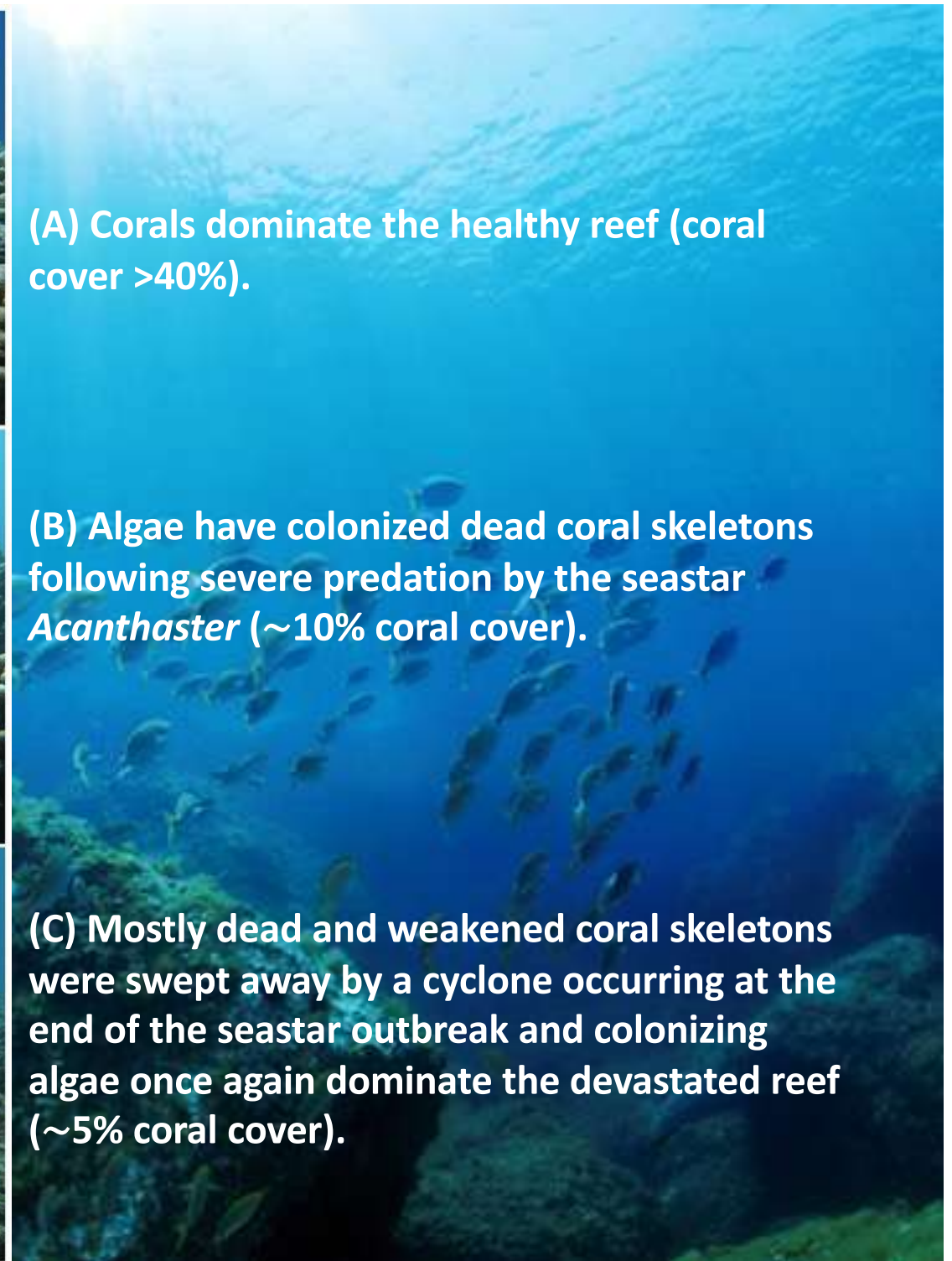
(A) Corals dominate the healthy reef (coral cover >40%).



(B) Algae have colonized dead coral skeletons following severe predation by the seastar *Acanthaster* (~10% coral cover).

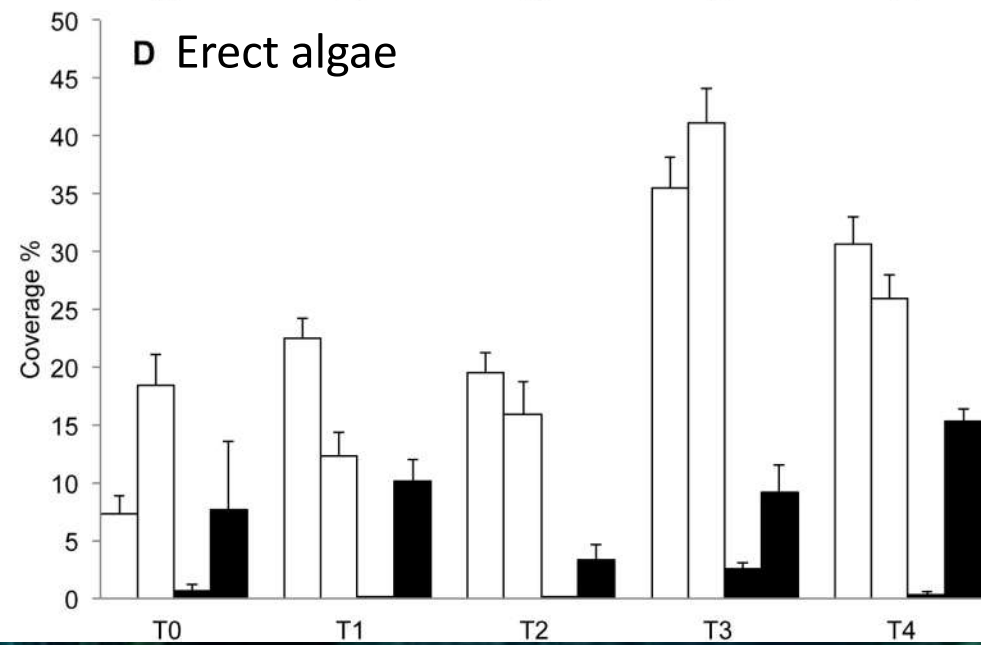
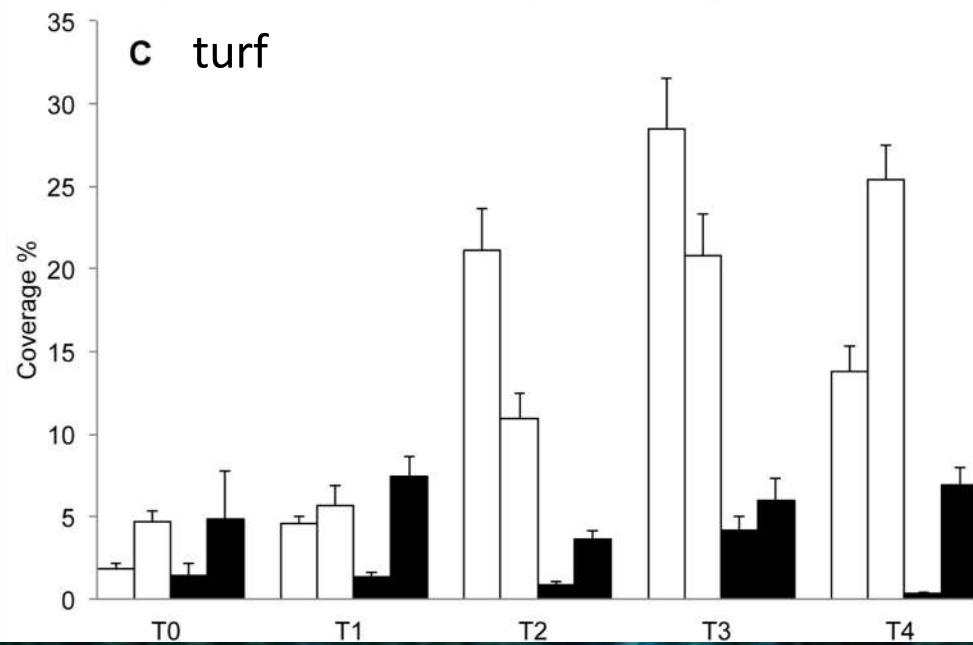
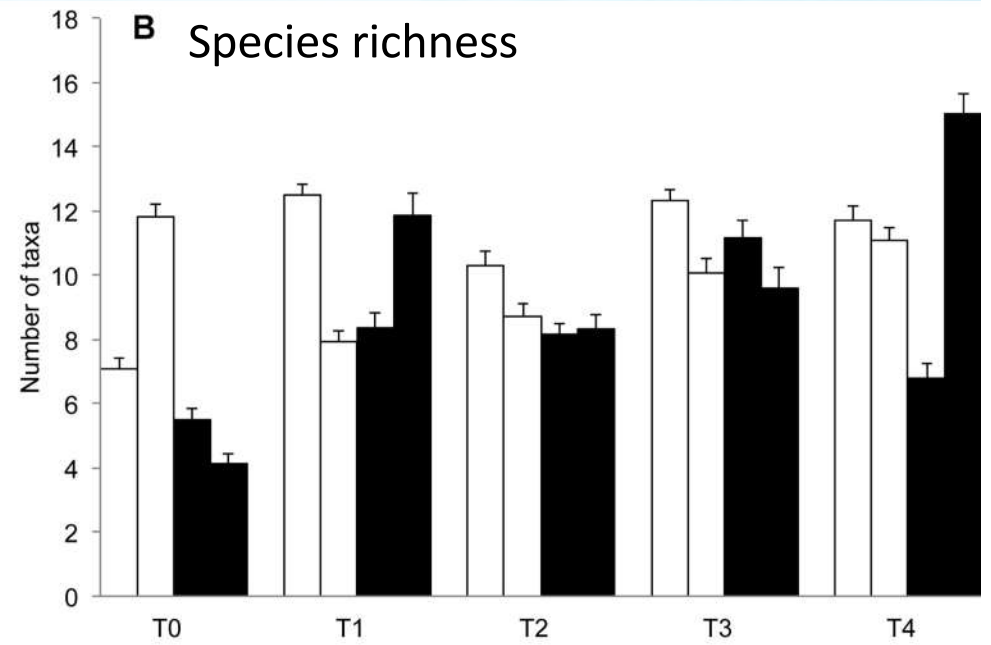
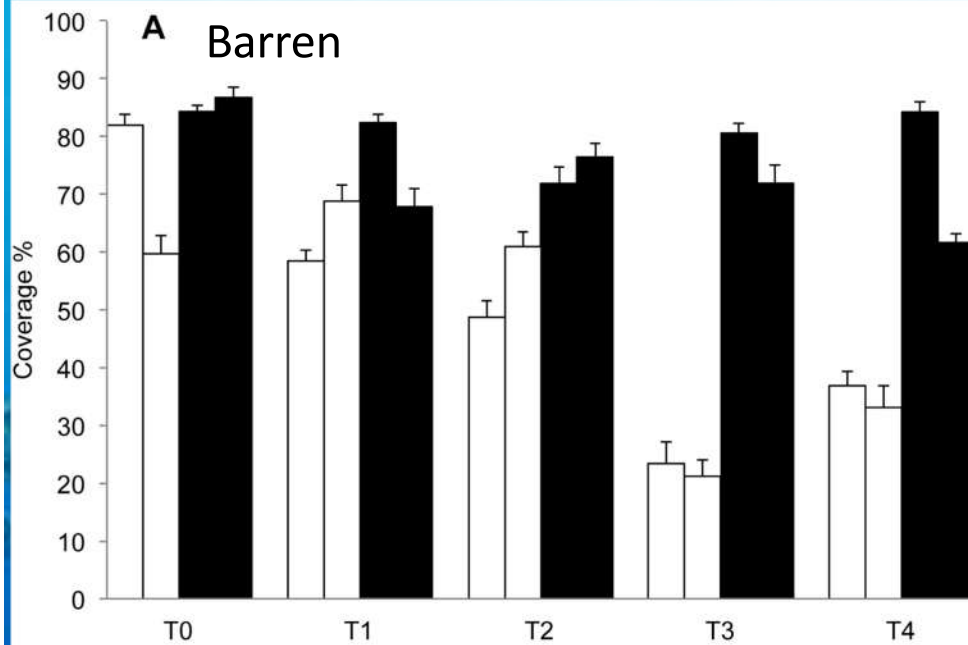


(C) Mostly dead and weakened coral skeletons were swept away by a cyclone occurring at the end of the seastar outbreak and colonizing algae once again dominate the devastated reef (~5% coral cover).



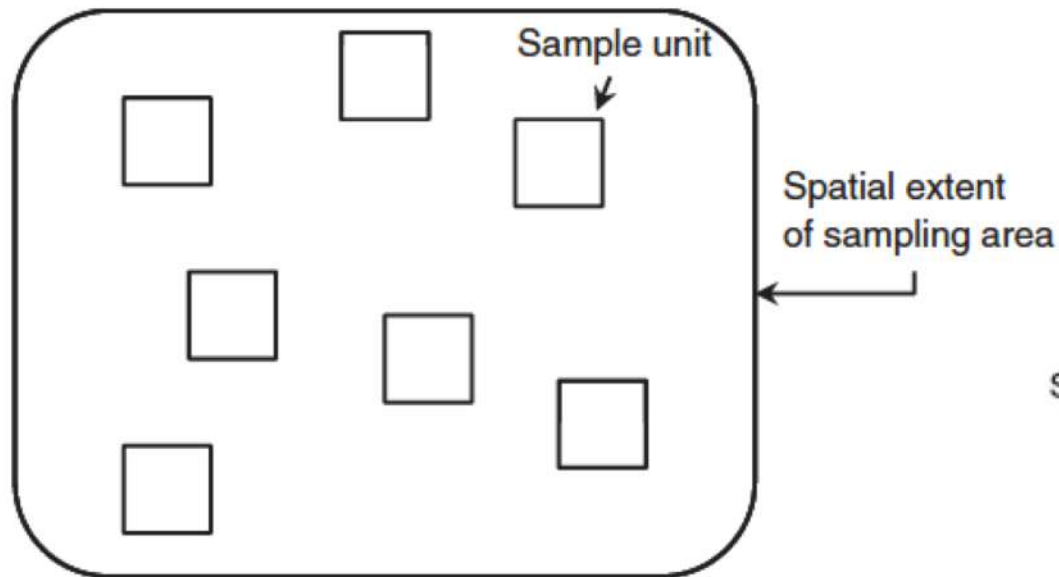


# Interactions with biological processes

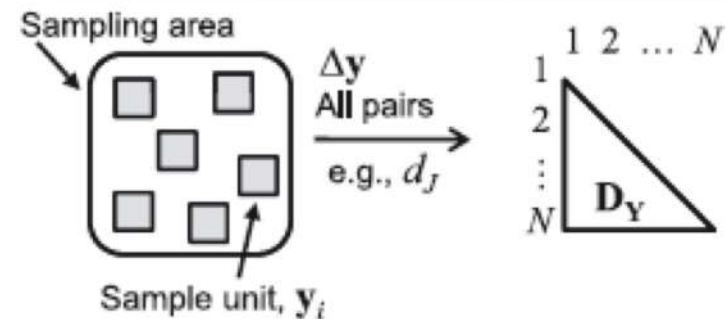


# Disturbance effect on mean and variation

(b) Variation in community structure (non-directional)

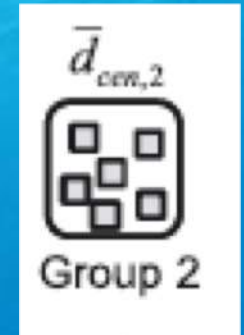
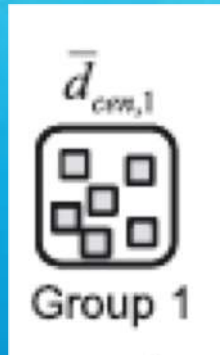


V1. Measure variation among communities from a set of samples.



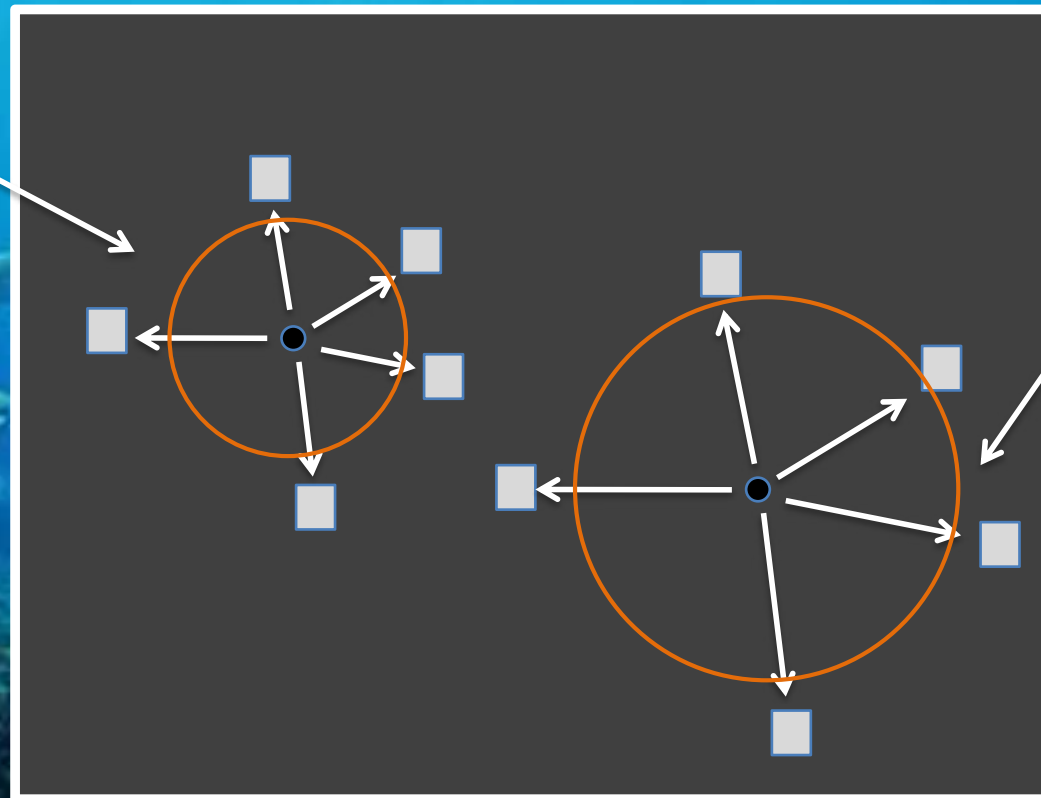
Changes occurring in community structure among a set of sample units within a given spatial, temporal, or environmental extent

# Multivariate dispersion as a measure of heterogeneity



Multivariate space

Different distance  
metric = different  
meaning

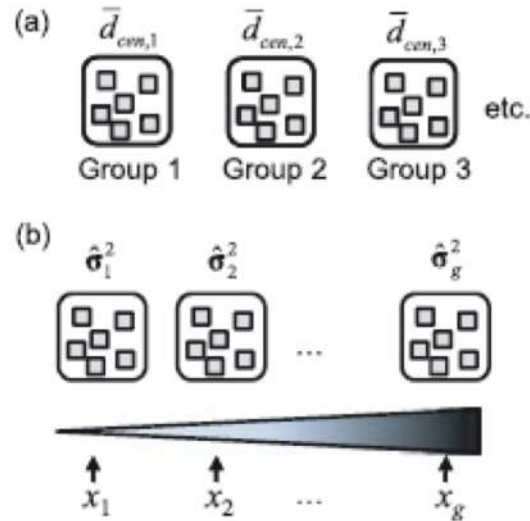


Average distance to centroids

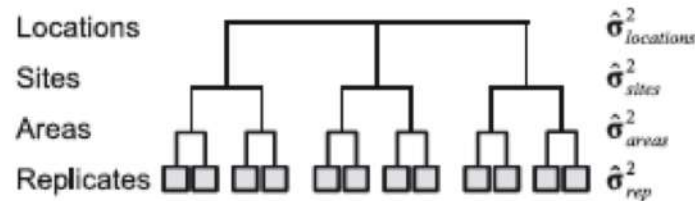
From Anderson, 2006

# Modelling $\beta$ -diversity as variation

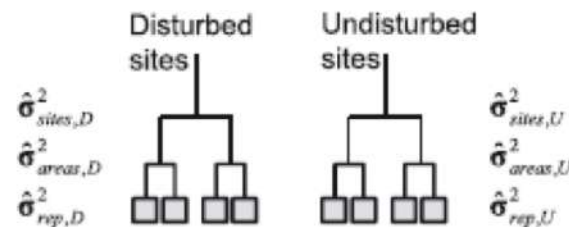
V4. Compare variation either  
 (a) among *a priori* groups or  
 (b) along a continuous gradient.



V5. Partition variation according  
 to a series of hierarchical  
 spatial (or temporal) scales.



V6. Compare components  
 of variation or effect sizes  
 across levels of another factor  
 or for different groups of taxa  
 (V7).

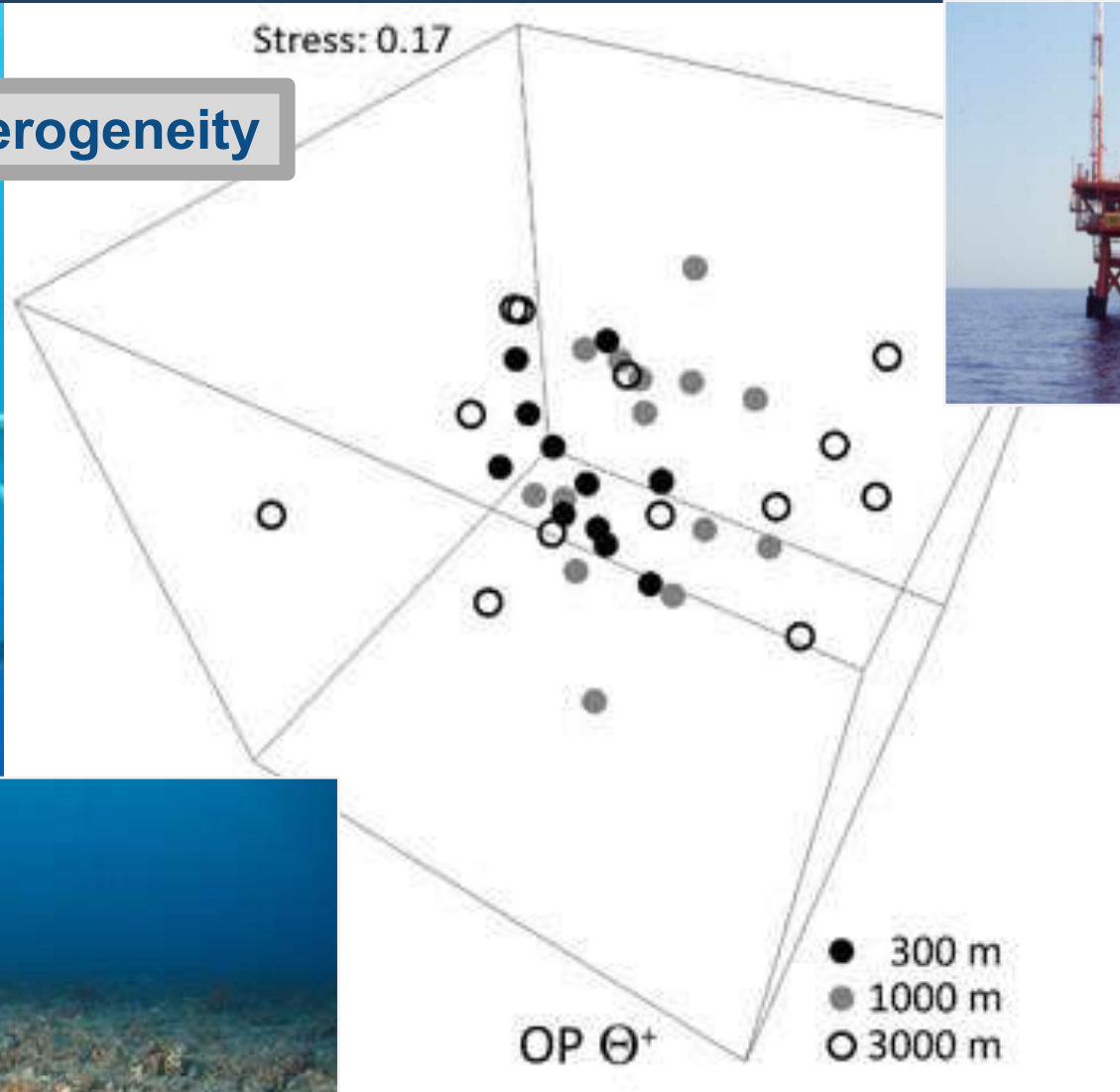


Comparing dispersion  
 among communities,  
 groups of communities,  
 or according to spatial  
 and temporal scales, or  
 other factors.

From Anderson et al., 2011

# Case studies on impacts and heterogeneity

Decreased heterogeneity



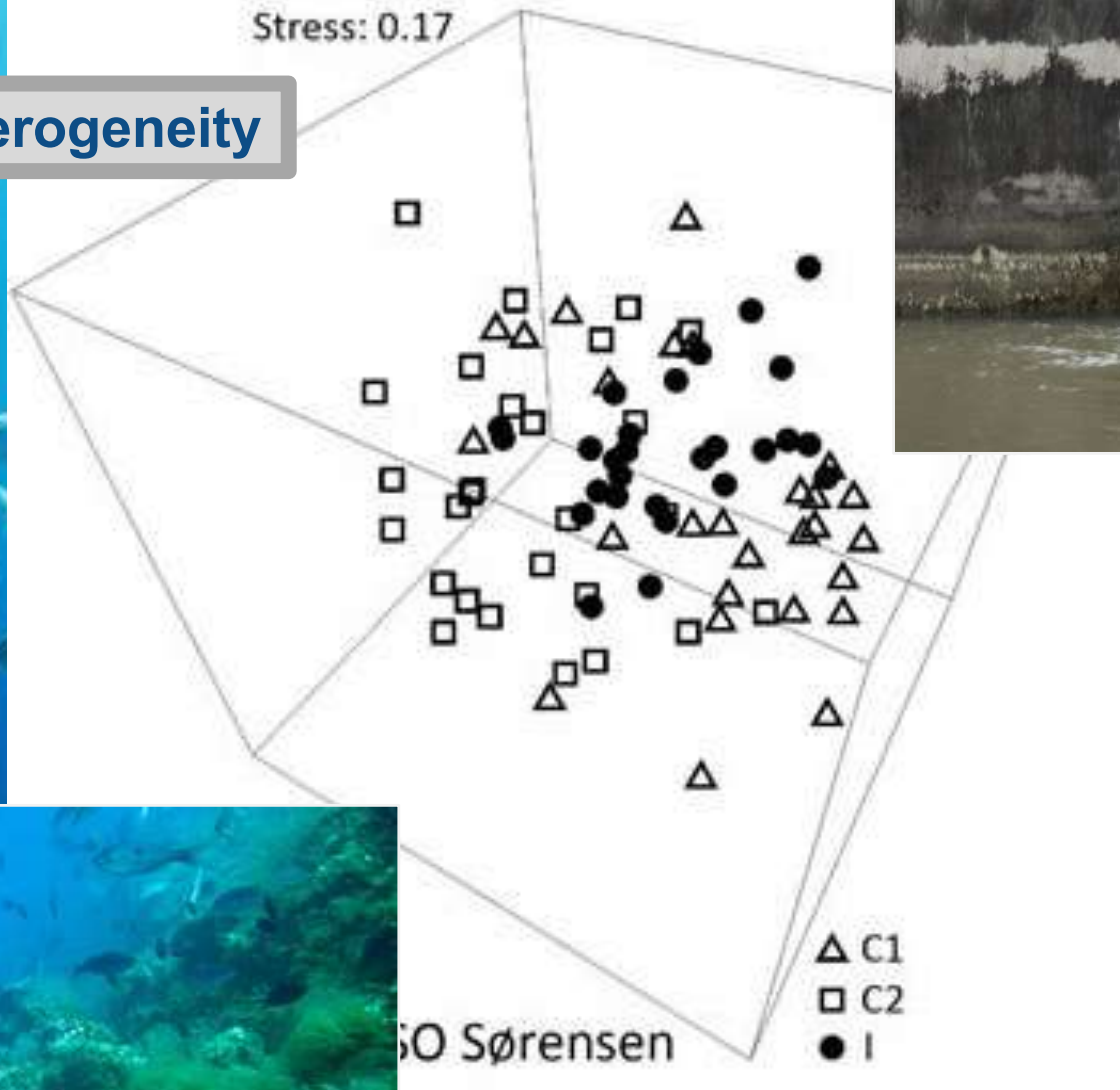
Comparable community structure  
Comparable alpha diversity  
Different beta-diversity ( $I <$ )

From Bevilacqua et al., 2012

# Case studies on impacts and heterogeneity

Decreased heterogeneity

Stress: 0.17

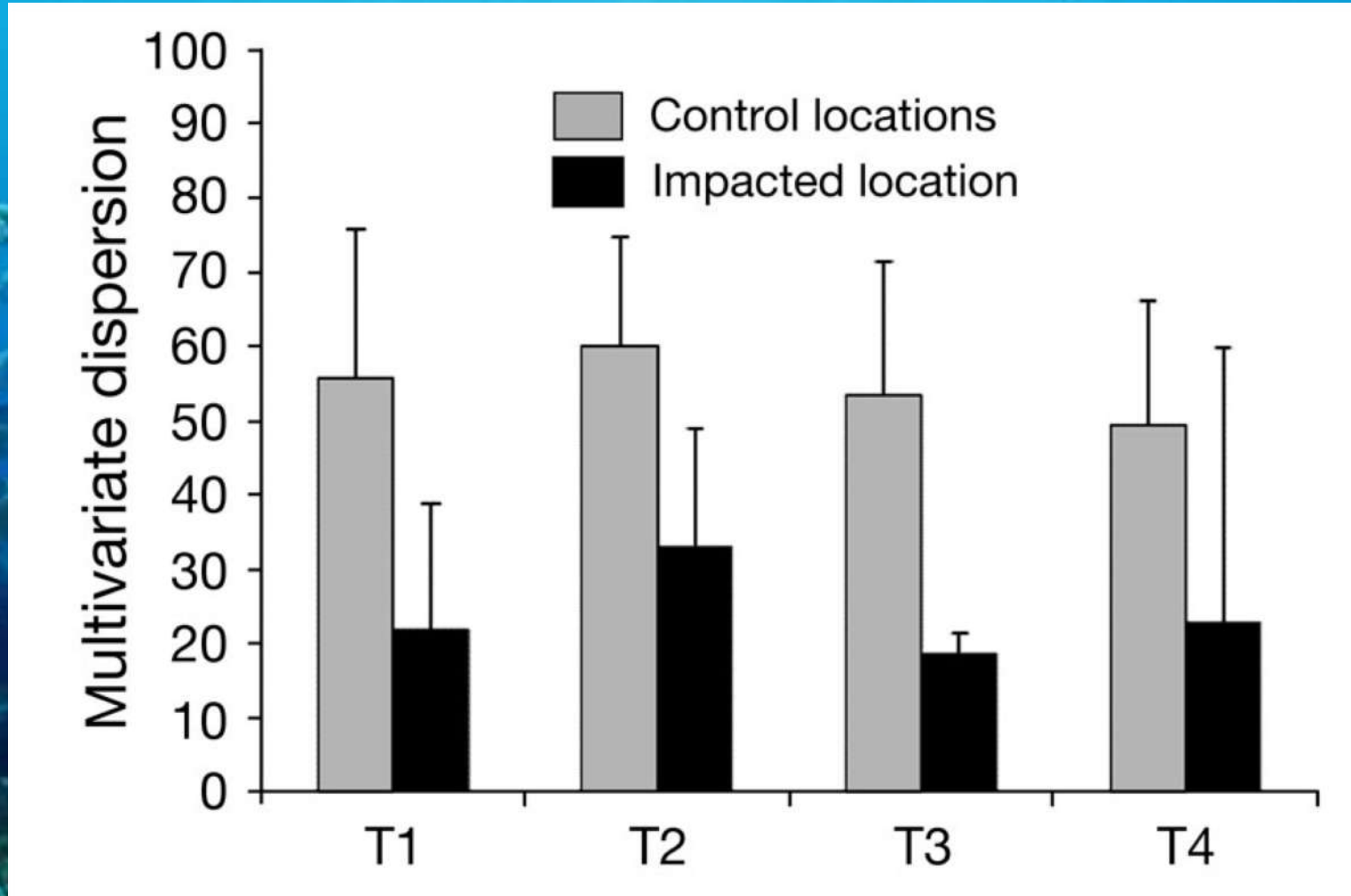


Different community structure  
Different alpha diversity ( $I <$ )  
Different beta ( $I <$ )

From Bevilacqua et al., 2012

# Case studies on impacts and heterogeneity

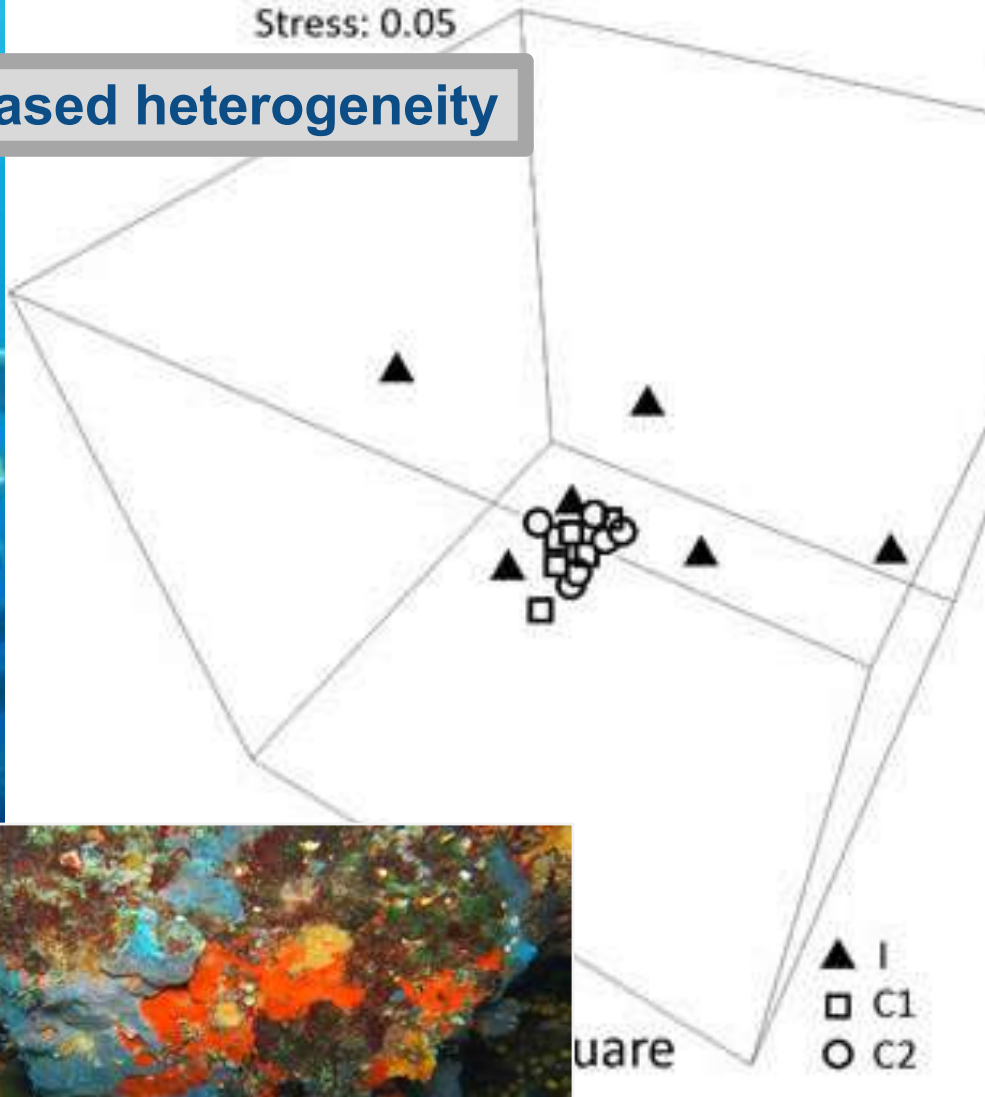
## Decreased heterogeneity



# Case studies on impacts and heterogeneity

Increased heterogeneity

Stress: 0.05

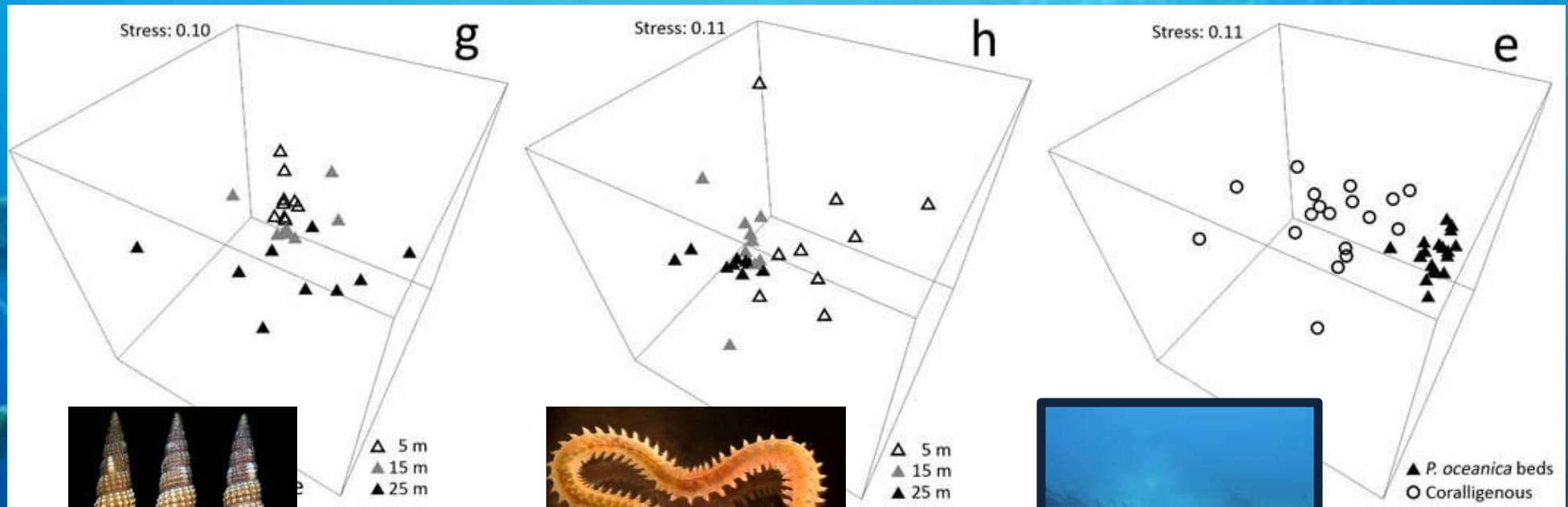


Comparable community structure  
Different alpha diversity ( $I <$ )  
Different beta diversity ( $I >$ )



From Bevilacqua et al., 2012

# Changes in heterogeneity depends on habitats, geography and taxonomic group



Same gradient  
Different groups  
Opposite patterns of beta



Same group  
Different habitat  
Different beta

# Summary

- Disturbance is an important factor interacting with biological processes such as competition and predation in shaping marine community assembly
- Disturbance begets spatial, temporal and environmental heterogeneity, and this sustain biodiversity within certain levels
- Effects of disturbance depend on its features, such as intensity and frequency, but spatio-temporal variance of disturbance plays also a crucial role
- Recovery after disturbance, and sometimes the effect of disturbance itself, are strongly related with biological and ecological traits of species composing disturbed assemblages or the available diversity pool
- Biological processes, such as predation, though not being proper disturbance, act similarly and may interact with disturbance
- Recovery after disturbance is related to size of disturbed patches and the potential mechanisms of recolonization or reoccupation