

Effects of a glyphosate-based herbicide on *Fucus virsoides* (Fucales, Ochrophyta) photosynthetic efficiency[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Herbicides are increasingly recognised as sources of water pollution. Glyphosate-based herbicides (GBHs) are widely used because of their low cost and high effectiveness. By measuring the photosynthetic efficiency of *Fucus virsoides* fronds exposed to a GBH (Roundup® Power 2.0), we investigated the effect of a continuous exposure (6 days) and the potential of recovery after a short exposure (24 h). Both experiments were carried out combining GBH with and without nutrient enrichment, simulating a runoff event. A factorial experimental design allowed us to assess the potential of interactions between GBH and nutrients, which are likely to co-occur in coastal areas. Our results show deleterious effects of GBH at low concentration on *F. virsoides*, independently from the duration of exposure and the presence of nutrients.

1. Introduction

The understanding of land-sea interactions is a major challenge for the conservation and management of coastal marine systems (Halpern et al., 2008; Claudet and Frascchetti, 2010). Ecosystem Based Management (EBM) and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) require the transition from the traditional management of threats in single ecosystem compartments to large-scale management strategies (Mercurio et al., 2014). Recognizing the effects of land-based activities is urgently needed to identify major drivers of change in coastal marine systems, to guide specific legislation instruments, and to set appropriate monitoring approaches (Friberg et al., 2011).

Herbicides are widely used in agriculture, forestry, invasive species management, and ready-to-use products for the home and garden (Annette et al., 2014; Castro et al., 2015). Glyphosate-based herbicides (GBHs) are the most widely used to eradicate terrestrial plants and aquatic weeds because of their low cost and high

effectiveness (Gaupp-Berghausen et al., 2015). Glyphosate was developed in 1974 and GBHs are sold in more than 750 formulations according to the surfactant used to facilitate plant uptake (Newton, 2013). Surfactants can exacerbate the toxicity of the glyphosate on non-target species (Annette et al., 2014). The use of GBHs rose almost 15-fold since the introduction of “Roundup Ready” genetically engineered glyphosate-tolerant crops, in 1996 (Benbrook, 2016). Outfalls, wastewater treatments, washout from the ground, agriculture and urban runoffs, erosion and drainage are considered responsible for transporting GBHs from the land to the coastal marine system (Solomon and Thompson, 2003; Sasal et al., 2015). Although soluble in water, glyphosate is readily ionized and adsorbed into sediments and soils, and degrades in both terrestrial and aquatic systems, predominantly via microbial processes (Maycock et al., 2010). However, quantitative studies on these pathways and their spatio-temporal variability are scarce (Lefrancq et al., 2017). Once in the sea, information on patterns of GBHs’ degradation in the water column and/or sediments is not conclusive: many factors such as light, pH, and nutrients may affect the concentration of GBHs (Barceló and Hennion, 2003; Solomon and Thompson, 2003). However, there is evidence that extensive applications of GBHs and their relatively long half-life (7–315 days,

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most commonly 45–60 days) can lead to their constant presence in coastal waters (Mercurio et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). In addition, long-distance transport and persistence in the environment through sediment and particulate binding have been hypothesized (Solomon and Thompson, 2003).

Worldwide, some regulatory bodies approved the use of GBHs (Dill et al., 2010), but the assessment of their human and environmental toxicity has resulted in different policies (e.g. USA monitoring programs disregard GBHs, whereas El Salvador banned GBHs since 2013, and Sri Lanka, Bermuda, and Colombia since 2015). The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) recognised GBHs as toxic to aquatic life, but these are not included in most monitoring programs and their concentrations remain poorly documented in marine systems (Stachowski-Haberkorn et al., 2008). On December 2017, the EU Commission renewed the approval of glyphosate use for five years (<https://ec.europa.eu/food/plant/pesticides/glyphosate/en>).

Up to 2% of herbicides of urban and agricultural origin are estimated to reach coastal waters (Kemp et al., 1983), and GBHs have been already shown to cause significant changes in biomass, leaf growth, chlorophyll content and photosynthetic yield in macrophytes such as *Ruppia maritima* (Castro et al., 2015; Kittle and McDermid, 2016). However, despite macrophytes and macroalgae are expected to be one of the most sensitive groups (Cedergreen and Streibig, 2005), data on GBHs toxicity are very limited (Burridge and Gorski, 1998; Pang et al., 2012; Kittle and McDermid, 2016), and their impact on algae with a complex morpho-anatomical structure has never been assessed.

Macroalgal communities (Ochrophyta: Laminariales and Fucales) can thrive in both intertidal and subtidal rocky habitats. These valuable marine habitats (Thibaut et al., 2005) are showing a significant regression on a global scale (Strain et al., 2014). Due to their role in supporting biodiversity and food webs, their depletion is leading to a decline in ecosystem services, such as fisheries (Cheminée et al., 2013). The observed loss of macroalgal canopies has been linked with sediment runoff (Gorman et al., 2013) and metals pollution (Mayer-Pinto et al., 2010) while nutrient enrichment seems to exert either positive (Falkenberg et al., 2012) or negative effects (Gorman et al., 2009).

In this study, we addressed this issue with two laboratory experiments to test the effects of a GBH (i.e. Roundup® Power 2.0) on the photosynthetic performance of *Fucus virsoides* J. Agardh (Fucales, Ochrophyta), a glacial relict endemic of the Adriatic Sea living in the intertidal fringe, potentially exposed to herbicides carried at sea by runoff, erosion, and drainage from land. In the last five years, *F. virsoides* almost disappeared from the Adriatic Sea (Falace et al., 2010; Orlando-Bonaca et al., 2013; Battelli, 2016). Currently, it is no longer present along the Slovenian coasts (Battelli, 2016) and just one small patchy population persists in the Gulf of Trieste (Italy). By assessing the chlorophyll-fluorescence of photosystem II, we tested: 1) the toxic effect of a continuous exposure (6 days) to GBH in factorial combination with nutrient enrichment; 2) the potential of recovery after a short exposure (24 h) to GBH simulating a runoff event, with and without nutrient enrichment. A factorial experimental design allowed us to assess the potential of interactions between GBH and nutrients, which are likely to co-occur in coastal areas.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Laboratory experimental setting

Healthy apical fronds of *F. virsoides* were collected in October 2017 during the low tide in the Gulf of Trieste-Northern Adriatic (45° 46' 25.67" N, 13° 31' 52.31" E) and transported in insulated

containers under dark, cold conditions to the laboratory, within 1 h of collection. Specimens were quickly cleaned with a brush and rinsed with filtered ambient seawater, to remove epibionts and sediment. Temperature (19 °C) and photoperiod (11 L:13 D) were selected to reflect natural conditions at the sampling site. Light irradiance, provided by LED lamps (AM366 Sicce USA Inc., Knoxville, USA), was set at 100 $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ and measured with a LI-COR LI-190/R Photometer (LICOR-Biosciences, Lincoln, NE, USA).

Two experiments were carried out to test the effect of a 6 days exposure to GBH, with and without nutrient enrichment (Experiment 1); and the recovery of *F. virsoides* after a short exposure event (24 h) to GBH, with and without nutrient enrichment (Experiment 2).

In Experiment 1, the following conditions were considered: GBH-NU- (control medium), GBH+NU+ (GBH and nutrient addition), GBH+NU- (GBH addition only), GBH-NU+ (nutrient enrichment only). In Experiment 2, since the aim was to investigate the recovery potential of *F. virsoides* from GBH exposure, the same experimental conditions were included, without the condition GBH-NU+ (nutrient enrichment only). After 24 h of exposure to GBH (day 0), culture mediums containing GBH (i.e. GBH+NU+ and GBH+NU-) were renewed with media without GBH (i.e. GBH-NU+ and GBH-NU-). In both experiments, each condition was replicated in three aquaria (5L), each containing 40 apical fronds. The position of the aquaria in the temperature and light regulated room was randomized. Constant aeration in the aquaria was provided using air pumps to keep conditions homogeneous.

To guarantee controlled conditions during the whole experiment and in each aquarium, we used filtered seawater (0.22 μm filters membrane) with known concentration of nutrients and GBHs. Filtering seawater did not remove the organic matter (DOM), but eliminated its particulate component (POM), together with phytoplankton, zooplankton and bacterial communities, which could have affected the nutrient and GBH concentration during the experiments. The control medium (GBH-NU) was filtered seawater collected at the sampling site with a nutrient concentration of 17.5 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ N-NO₃ and 0.63 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ P-PO₄. For the nutrient enriched medium (NU+), NaNO₃ and Na₂HPO₄ • 12H₂O (Sigma-Aldrich) were added to the control medium to attain a final concentration of 364 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ N-NO₃ and 1.395 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ P-PO₄. These concentrations correspond to the higher mean annual values registered on the coasts of the Gulf of Trieste (data provided by ARPA FVG, 2009–2014). In GBH addition medium (GBH+), the commercial formulation Roundup® Power 2.0 (MONSANTO Europe S.A.) was mixed in a volumetric flask with the control medium to a final concentration of 2.5 mg l^{-1} . The concentration of glyphosate potassium salt in the solution was 882.5 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ (i.e. 35.3% of the Roundup® formulation). The remaining was surfactant (i.e. 6% of the formulation) and water. Glyphosate concentration used in Experiment 1 and 2 was identified after a pilot study exposing *F. virsoides* to 1.76, 17.6, 176.5 and 1765 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ of glyphosate. Deleterious effects were observed at 176.5 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$, while 1765 $\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ concentration resulted in the mortality of all the fronds after 3 days. The GBH and nutrient addition medium (GBH + NU+) was obtained by mixing the Roundup® Power 2.0 with the nutrient enriched seawater in a volumetric flask. In each aquarium the medium was renewed every day to minimize the effect of nutrient and herbicide limitation or degradation.

Stress effects on *F. virsoides* fronds were evaluated by measuring the chlorophyll-fluorescence of photosystem II (Maxwell and Johnson, 2000; Roháček, 2002; Ritchie, 2006), using a Handy PEA chlorophyll fluorimeter (Hansatech Instruments Ltd, Norfolk, UK). The time required for dark adaptation and irradiance were determined experimentally. To estimate the maximum fluorescence

yield $F_v/F_m = (F_m - F_o)/F_m$, the initial fluorescence F_o after 20 min dark adaptation was measured, followed by a saturating pulse of actinic light ($3500 \mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$) to induce maximal fluorescence (F_m). Standard values of F_v/F_m in unstressed thalli are usually between 0.7 and 0.8 (Maxwell and Johnson, 2000; Ritchie, 2006). Thus *F. virsoides* was considered to be in a healthy ecophysiological status if the ratio F_v/F_m exceeded 0.70 (Young et al., 2007); a decrease in this variable was considered as a measure for induced stress (Huppertz et al., 1990; Maxwell and Johnson, 2000). The F_v/F_m measured on 50 fronds after collection was consistent with a healthy, unstressed status for *Fucus* (i.e. $F_v/F_m = 0.7\text{--}0.8$).

F_v/F_m was measured 2 cm from the apex of each frond. To guarantee independency among replicates, at each sampling time, 7 randomly chosen apical tips were sampled in each of the three aquaria according to the experimental conditions. Different tips were sampled at each time.

In Experiment 1, F_v/F_m was measured after 1, 3 and 6 days of exposure. In Experiment 2, to assess trajectories of recovery F_v/F_m was measured at day 0 when exposed to GBH, and at days 1, 2, 3 and 6 after the short exposure.

2.2. Statistical analyses

Effects of a continuous exposure to GBH and nutrients on F_v/F_m (Experiment 1) were tested by means of analysis of variance (ANOVA). The model included four factors: GBH (fixed, with two levels), nutrients (fixed, with two levels, orthogonal to GBH), time (random, with three levels, orthogonal to GBH and nutrients), and aquarium (random, with three levels, nested in the interaction $\text{GBH} \times \text{nutrients}$ and orthogonal to time).

The recovery potential of F_v/F_m after short exposure to GBH (Experiment 2) in combination with nutrient enrichment was assessed with a three-way ANOVA, including factor treatment (fixed, with three levels), time (random, with 5 levels, orthogonal to treatment), and aquarium (random, with three levels, nested in treatment and orthogonal to time).

As no variability was associated to the term aquarium in isolation or in interaction with time, it was removed from the analysis and the model was simplified to the factorial combination of all other factors in both analyses. Cochran's C-test was used to check for homogeneity of variances. If heterogeneity of variances could not be removed by transforming the data, the level of significance was fixed at $\alpha = 0.01$, to minimize the probability of making a type II error. Student-Newman-Keuls (SNK) tests were used for the ranking of the means. Analyses were performed in R v3.4.3 (R Core Team, 2017) using the GAD package (Sandrini-Neto and Camargo, 2014).

3. Results

Mean F_v/F_m of *F. virsoides* before exposure to GBH, after 24 h of acclimatization, was 0.759 ($\text{SE} \pm 0.002$, $n = 50$). In Experiment 1, exposure to GBH significantly reduced the F_v/F_m of *F. virsoides* (Table 1, Fig. 1). The deleterious effect of GBH varied through time, with a reduction of F_v/F_m from 62% (day 1) up to 95% (day 6). Nutrient enrichment did not affect F_v/F_m , either in isolation or in combination with GBH (Table 1).

Experiment 2 revealed no potential of recovery of *F. virsoides* despite the short exposure to GBH. Yet, F_v/F_m of *F. virsoides* fronds exposed to GBH significantly varied through time (Table 2, Fig. 2). F_v/F_m decreased to 62% of control condition immediately after exposure to GBH (day 0). On day 1, F_v/F_m increased 23% compared to the values measured at day 0. At day 3, F_v/F_m decreased again to mean values comparable to those observed immediately after exposure to GBH (Fig. 2). Similarly to Experiment 1, at the end of

Table 1

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the effects of GBH and nutrients on *F. virsoides* in terms of F_v/F_m during 6-day exposure to GBH in Experiment 1. *** $P < 0.0001$, ns = not significant.

Source of variation	df	MS	F
GBH (G)	1	22.50	63.53 ns
Nutrients (N)	1	0.01	8.57ns
Time (T)	2	0.33	30.93***
$G \times N$	1	0.01	9.00 ns
$G \times T$	2	0.35	33.02 ***
$N \times T$	2	<0.01	0.02 ns
$G \times N \times T$	2	<0.01	0.05 ns
Residual	240	0.01	
Cochran test	$C = 0.26$, $P < 0.001$		

Experiment 2, F_v/F_m decreased of 97%. Also in this case, no additional effect on recovery patterns was observed in thalli exposed to the combination of GBH and nutrient enrichment (Table 2). During both the experiments, starting from the first days, a chlorosis (i.e. chloroplast disruption) was also observed in the distal section of the fronds exposed to GBH (with and without nutrients) (Fig. 3). At the end of the experiment, we also recorded the exudation of brownish metabolites probably due to GBH-induced cell damage.

4. Discussion

This is the first study documenting the effects of GBHs on an Ochrophyta with complex morpho-anatomical structure. Previous investigations tested the effects of GBHs on macroalgae with simplified morphologies, as ephemeral epiphytic filamentous (i.e. *Neosiphonia savatieri*, *Rhizoclonium riparium*) or laminar thalli (i.e. *Gayralia oxysperma*, *Ulva intestinalis*) belonging to Rhodophyta and Chlorophyta (Pang et al., 2012; Kittle and McDermid, 2016). Only two larger fleshy Rhodophyta (i.e. *Pterocladia capillacea* and *Kappaphycus alvarezii*) have been examined (Pang et al., 2012).

Our results show a prompt response of *F. virsoides* to GBH exposure: after 24 h a 62% reduction in the photosynthetic performance and after 6 days exposure up to a 95% of reduction, accompanied by extensive chlorosis and harm to the tissues. Our findings also document the high vulnerability of *F. virsoides*, as the species was unable to recover from short term exposure to GBH (24 h). However, since we used a Roundup formulation, it is not possible to discriminate if the glyphosate, the surfactant or their combination are responsible for the observed effects on *Fucus* fronds.

Surfactants are declared inert diluents because they are not held to be directly responsible for the herbicide activity and are classified as confidential for regulatory purposes (Mesnage et al., 2015). At the regulatory level, glyphosate is tested alone, although it is always used as part of a mixture with adjuvants in commercial formulations. Surfactants and adjuvants may in some cases be more toxic than the glyphosate active ingredient itself, and eventually interact synergistically with glyphosate, thus enhancing its toxicity (Hanana et al., 2002; de Liz Oliveira Cavalli et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2013 and references therein; Cattani et al., 2014; de Brito Rodrigues et al., 2016). However, surfactants' toxicity greatly varies among different compounds, and detrimental effects have been exhibited also for marine microalgae (Hampel et al., 2001). As a result of this variability in the use of adjuvants, and since most of them are not compulsorily declared, GBH effects are complex and not always comparable (Mesnage et al., 2015). Because analyses are expensive and challenging, the result is a long-term deficiency in global datasets on environmental concentrations of surfactants and adjuvants used in GBHs. Nevertheless, the risk of agricultural

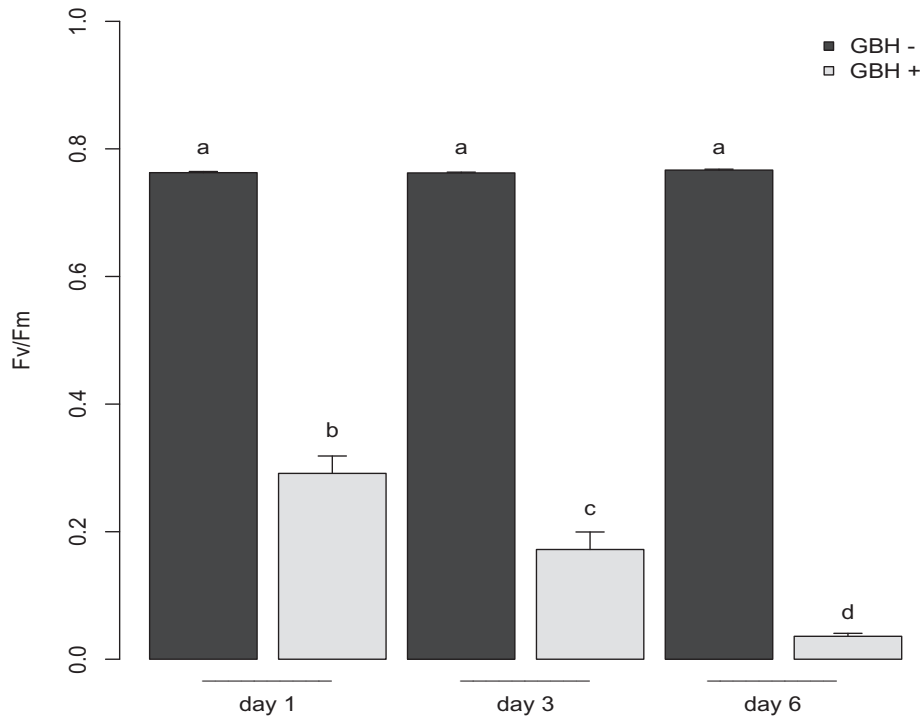


Fig. 1. Mean Fv/Fm (+SE, $n = 42$) of *F. virsoides* thalli in presence and absence of GBH during 6-day exposure to GBH in Experiment 1. Letters above the columns illustrate the ranking of the means from SNK test.

Table 2

Experiment 2, analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the recovery capability of *F. virsoides* in terms of Fv/Fm across treatment conditions (GBH- NU-, GBH+NU-, GBH+NU+) and time (at day 0 when exposed to GBH, and at days 1, 2, 3 and 6 after) in Experiment 2. *** $P < 0.001$, ns = not significant.

Source of variation	df	MS	F
Treatment	2	7.30	236.61 ***
Time	4	0.98	31.88 ***
Treatment \times Time	8	0.26	8.33 ***
Residual	300	0.03	
Cochran test	C = 0.12, ns		

practices using glyphosate, surfactants or their combination to aquatic biota is increasingly considered an issue (Bento et al., 2018), and despite the paucity of studies estimating their concentration in the marine environment, it has been suggested that seas could act as sink for these compounds, which have been detected in the water column and in marine sediments, where they can persist up to several weeks (NRA, 1996; Mann and Bidwell, 1999; Jackson et al., 2016).

The concentration of glyphosate tested ($883 \mu\text{g l}^{-1}$) is low if compared with those of previous studies on macroalgae ($121\text{--}300 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$) (Burridge and Gorski, 1998; Pang et al., 2012; Kittle and McDermid, 2016). Yet, direct comparison of our results with the literature is unpractical, since experiments were conducted on different taxa and with different GBH formulations, concentrations, and time of exposure. There is also evidence that algae with a diverse morpho-anatomy can have a different response to the same concentration of GBH, ranging from negligible changes to visible harm (Pang et al., 2012; Kittle and McDermid, 2016). Algae featured by simplified thalli (i.e. filamentous or monostriated) show a higher vulnerability to GBHs than algae with thick cortical layers perhaps because the herbicides cannot efficiently penetrate without longer exposure times and

concentrations. In particular, thalli with smaller surface area to volume ratios may be less susceptible to the toxicant at lower concentration (Burridge and Gorski, 1998). Toxicological studies on the marine flora showed that unicellular stages of growth (i.e. spores, gametes) are more sensitive than larger embryos and juveniles to exogenous compounds. *F. virsoides* showed significant responses at a concentration of glyphosate lower than the LC_{50} (i.e. concentration of a substance that kills 50% of cells exposed to it) of a kelp gametophyte ($4.56\text{--}84.4 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$) (R.J. Lewis, in Kittle and McDermid, 2016). Effects of the glyphosate tested in two Laminariales as inhibitor of zoospore germination and gametophyte mortality were observed at concentration $>10 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$ (Burridge and Gorski, 1998). Our experiments were carried out on adult specimens, more resistant to stress exposure than early life-history stages. Thus, if contamination peaks coincided with fertilization or germination times, recruitment could be adversely affected (Thursby and Steele, 1986; Burridge et al., 1995).

Unfortunately, in Italy systematic marine monitoring of GBHs is not carried out, so that quantitative data on herbicides degradation and concentration in the coastal seawater are not available. To set experimental concentration, GBH concentrations reported in the literature were taken into account. Wang et al. (2016) measured concentrations of glyphosate in seawater samples ranging from $13 \mu\text{g l}^{-1}$ to $1377 \mu\text{g l}^{-1}$. Milan et al. (2018) consider as “environmentally realistic” for the Northern Adriatic Sea glyphosate concentrations from 10 to $1000 \mu\text{g l}^{-1}$. The concentration we used falls within these ranges. Seawater contamination can also have an urban origin: storm waters may be contaminated by herbicides by the leaching of polluted urban surfaces (Botta et al., 2009; Zgheib et al., 2012). When heavy rain events or rivers overflows move large amounts of GBHs bounded to terrigenous sediments, little degradation of glyphosate is expected before sediments reach the marine environment.

In our experiments nutrients did not play any role in affecting the photosynthetic efficiency either alone or in combination with

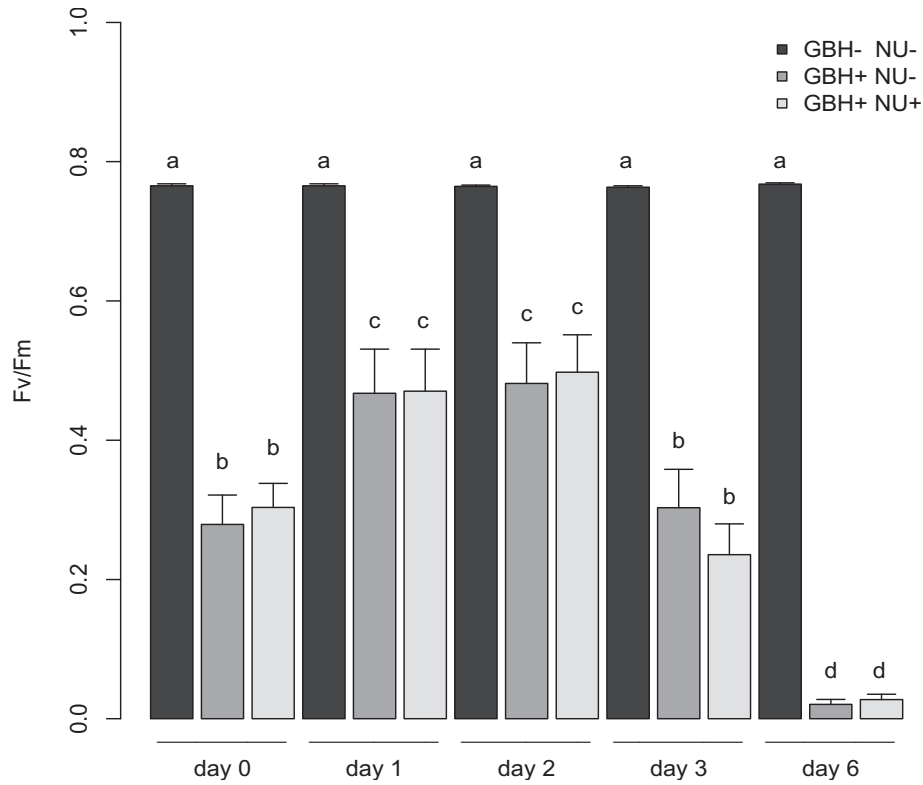


Fig. 2. Mean Fv/Fm (±SE, n = 21) of *F. virsoides* thalli in presence or absence of GBH and nutrients at day 0 when exposed to GBH, and at days 1, 2, 3 and 6 after the short exposure in Experiment 2. Letters above the columns illustrate the ranking of the means from SNK test.

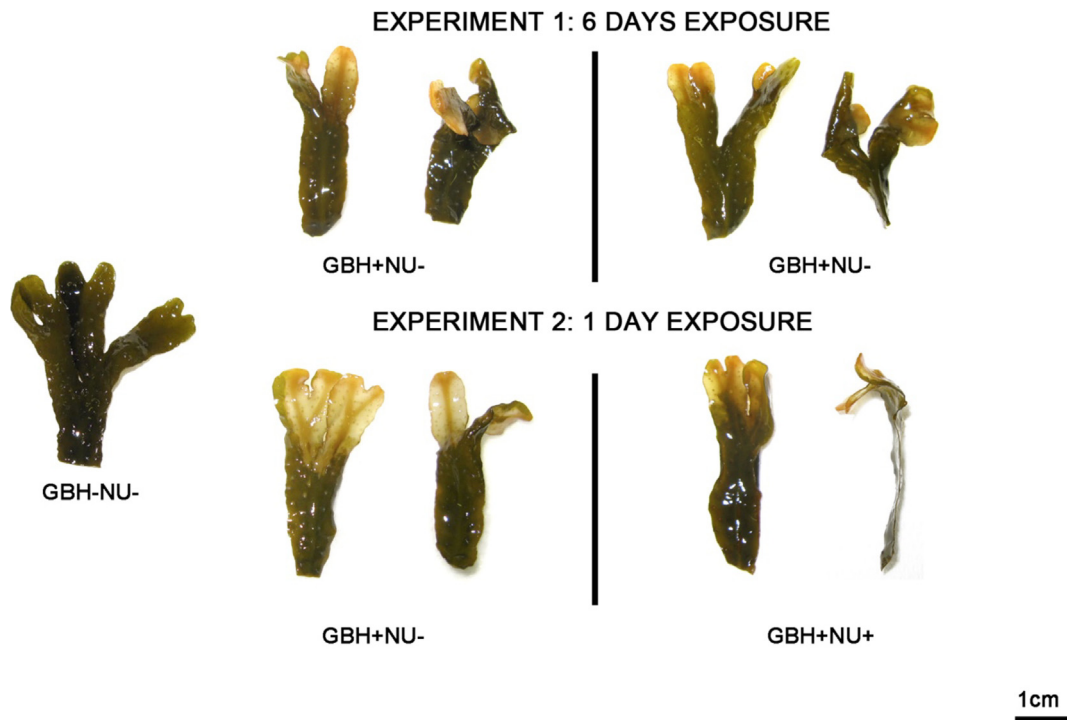


Fig. 3. Apices of *F. virsoides* with or without GBH and nutrients addition at day 6, in Experiments 1 and 2.

GBH, probably because *F. virsoides* shows high potential to withstand trophic changes, which are frequent in eutrophic waters (i.e. Lagoon of Venice). However, fertilization treatments are known to

exacerbate glyphosate bioavailability in the soil solution and in the eventual runoff, as PO_4^{3-} and glyphosate compete for soil adsorbing sites because of their chemical similarities (Gomes et al.,

2015). Very few researches have investigated the effects of GBHs in combination with other factors (Doddaiiah et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2016; Amid et al., 2017), but never on macroalgae. Yet, effects of PO_4^{3-} addition on glyphosate roots uptake have been observed in terrestrial plants (Clua et al., 2012; Gomes et al., 2015).

Our results highlight critical gaps in knowledge about the effects of GBHs on marine-coastal systems and call for the monitoring of underestimated threats originating on land and affecting the sea. A combination of laboratory experiments and field studies are needed to understand ecologically relevant limits to the indiscriminate loading of toxic agricultural compounds into the marine ecosystem. Existing management/monitoring instruments (e.g. Marine Strategy Framework Directive) and international directives (Ecosystem Based Management, Maritime Spatial Planning) could benefit from information about glyphosate impacts on seaweeds.

5. Conclusions

Our study highlights the detrimental impact that GBHs can exert in the marine environment on *Fucus virsoides*. This recognition is an opportunity to reconsider the importance of concretely incorporating land-sea connections in present environmental monitoring. Current gaps in knowledge about the environmental risks of GBHs demand an in-depth investigation of patterns of degradation, thresholds of change, species-specific responses and potential of interaction with other processes.

Declaration of interest

None.

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