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Local environment modulates whole-transcriptome expression in the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* under warming and nutrients excess

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Local environment modulates whole-transcriptome expression in the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* under warming and nutrients excess / Pazzaglia J.; Santillan-Sarmiento A.; Ruocco M.; Dattolo E.; Ambrosino L.; Marin-Guirao L.; Procaccini G. - In: ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION. - ISSN 0269-7491. - STAMPA. - 303:(2022), pp. 119077.119077-119077.119077. [10.1016/j.envpol.2022.119077]

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/941625> since: 2023-09-13

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2022.119077>

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Pazzaglia J.; Santillan-Sarmiento A.; Ruocco M.; Dattolo E.; Ambrosino L.; Marin-Guirao L.; Procaccini G.: *Local environment modulates whole-transcriptome expression in the seagrass Posidonia oceanica under warming and nutrients excess*

ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION VOL. 303 ISSN 0269-7491

DOI: 10.1016/j.envpol.2022.119077

The final published version is available online at:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2022.119077>

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Environmental Pollution

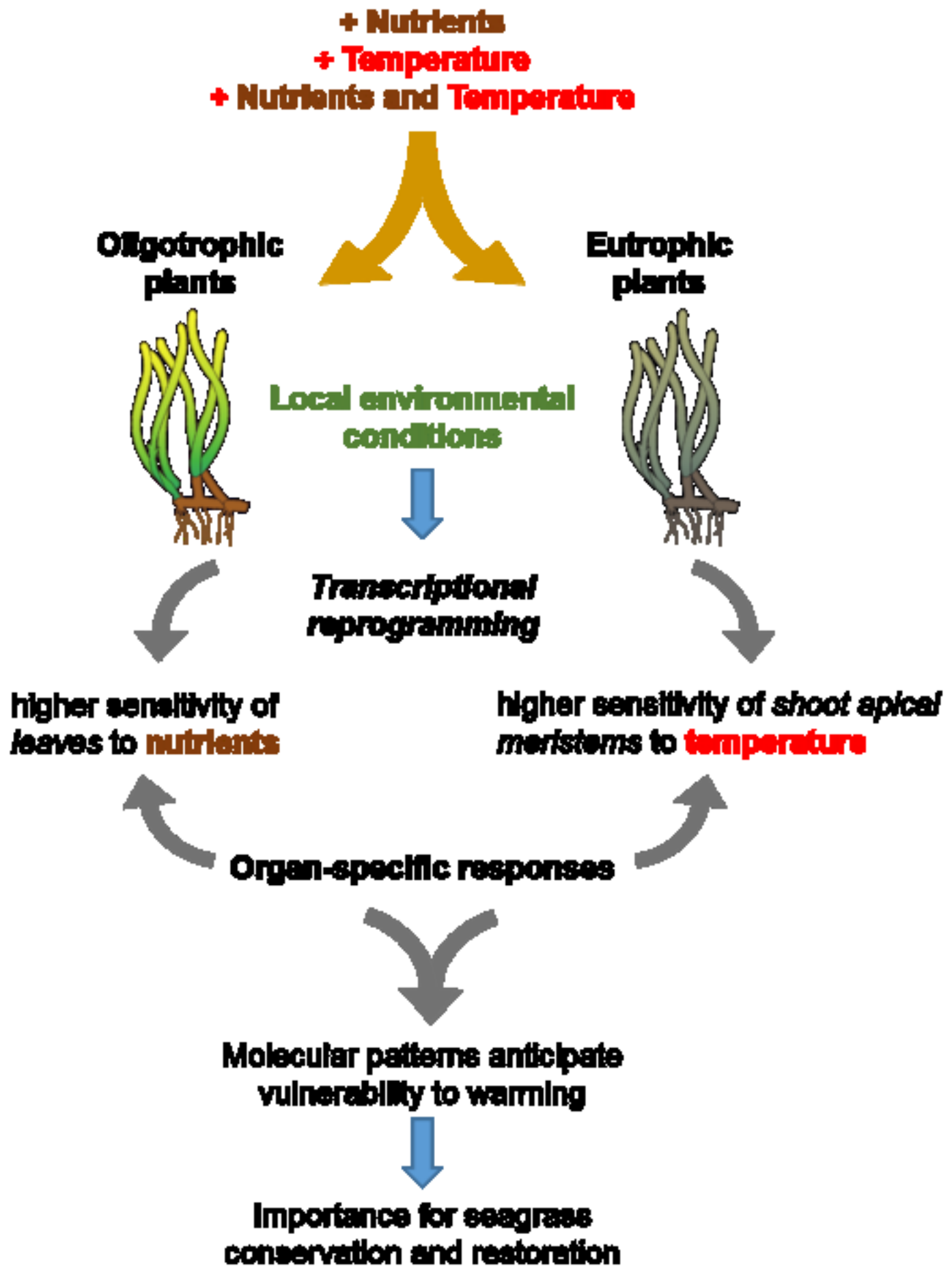
Local environment modulates whole-transcriptome expression in the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* under warming and nutrients excess

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	ENVPOL-D-21-08918R1
Article Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Seagrasses; multiple stressors; Global Warming; eutrophication; gene expression; epigenetics
Corresponding Author:	Gabriele Procaccini ITALY
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Abstract:	<p>The intensification of anomalous events of seawater warming and the co-occurrence with local anthropogenic stressors are threatening coastal marine habitats, including seagrasses, which form extensive underwater meadows. Eutrophication highly affects coastal environments, potentially summing up to the widespread effects of global climate changes. In the present study, we investigated for the first time in seagrasses, the transcriptional response of different plant organs (i.e., leaf and shoot apical meristem, SAM) of the Mediterranean seagrass <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> growing in environments with a different history of nutrient enrichment. To this end, a mesocosm experiment exposing plants to single (nutrient enrichment or temperature increase) and multiple stressors (nutrient enrichment plus temperature increase), was performed. Results revealed a differential transcriptome regulation of plants under single and multiple stressors, showing an organ-specific sensitivity depending on plants' origin. While leaf tissues were more responsive to nutrient stress, SAM revealed a higher sensitivity to temperature treatments, especially in plants already impacted in their native environment. The exposure to stress conditions induced the modulation of different biological processes. Plants living in an oligotrophic environment were more responsive to nutrients compared to plants from a eutrophic environment. Evidences that epigenetic mechanisms were involved in the regulation of transcriptional reprogramming were also observed in both plants' organs. These results represent a further step in the comprehension of seagrass response to abiotic stressors pointing out the importance of local pressures in a global warming scenario.</p>
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Response to Reviewers:	

- Local pressure influence plants' transcriptional responses to stress
- Plants in eutrophic sites will be more impacted by seawater temperature increase
- Organ-specific vulnerability to single and multiple stresses
- Potential epigenetic regulation of transcriptional responses to stress



1 **Local environment modulates whole-transcriptome expression in the seagrass *Posidonia***
2 ***oceanica* under warming and nutrients excess**

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15

16 **Abstract**

17 The intensification of anomalous events of seawater warming and the co-occurrence with local
18 anthropogenic stressors are threatening coastal marine habitats, including seagrasses, which form
19 extensive underwater meadows. Eutrophication highly affects coastal environments, potentially
20 summing up to the widespread effects of global climate changes. In the present study, we investigated
21 for the first time in seagrasses, the transcriptional response of different plant organs (i.e., leaf and
22 shoot apical meristem, SAM) of the Mediterranean seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* growing in
23 environments with a different history of nutrient enrichment. To this end, a mesocosm experiment
24 exposing plants to single (nutrient enrichment or temperature increase) and multiple stressors
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26 transcriptome regulation of plants under single and multiple stressors, showing an organ-specific
27 sensitivity depending on plants' origin. While leaf tissues were more responsive to nutrient stress,
28 SAM revealed a higher sensitivity to temperature treatments, especially in plants already impacted in
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30 biological processes. Plants living in an oligotrophic environment were more responsive to nutrients
31 compared to plants from a eutrophic environment. Evidences that epigenetic mechanisms were
32 involved in the regulation of transcriptional reprogramming were also observed in both plants'
33 organs. These results represent a further step in the comprehension of seagrass response to abiotic
34 stressors pointing out the importance of local pressures in a global warming scenario.

35

36

37

38 **Keywords:** *Seagrasses, multiple stressors, global warming, eutrophication, gene expression,*
39 *epigenetics*

41 **Introduction**

42 Coastal marine environments are among the most threatened marine habitats (Worm et al., 2006).
43 The continuous increase of human urbanization along the coastline, with the extensive use of marine
44 resources and services, has amplified the number and diversity of anthropogenic stressors. Among
45 different local pressures, eutrophication due to nutrient inputs from human activities (e.g., agriculture,
46 urban/industrial development and aquaculture) is one of the greatest concerns for coastal habitats,
47 especially for environments characterized by dense urbanization such as most of the Mediterranean
48 basin (Liquete et al., 2016). The dominant components of nutrient inputs are nitrates and phosphorus,
49 which are considered the main nutrient sources intensifying water hypoxia and acidification, as a
50 consequence of phytoplankton and microbial proliferation (Gobler and Baumann, 2016).
51 Additionally, different indirect effects are linked to nutrient increase such as the reduction of light
52 penetration along the water column, which compromises biological performances of photosynthetic
53 organisms and in general the benthic production (Touchette and Burkholder, 2000). In an era of global
54 warming, the effects induced by these local disturbances can be much more complex depending on
55 their interaction with ongoing climate changes, which are globally threatening marine ecosystems
56 (He and Silliman, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). The intensification of anomalous events of seawater
57 warming and the increase of sea surface temperature at unprecedented rates can induce synergic or
58 antagonistic effects when more eutrophic conditions occur (Ceccherelli et al., 2018; Paerl and Scott,
59 2010). Thus, local pressures may have the potential to exacerbate or buffer the effects of climate
60 change on marine habitats (Bowler et al., 2020). Understanding how marine organisms can overcome
61 the potential cumulative impacts by multiple stressors is becoming of fundamental importance
62 especially for sessile organisms such as marine plants (Micheli et al., 2013).

63 Seagrasses are marine angiosperms belonging to the order *Alismatales*, representing a unique group
64 of higher plants that re-colonized marine environments, forming extensive underwater meadows (Les
65 et al. 1997). These habitat-forming species provide important services and benefits to ecosystems and
66 human livelihoods (Nordlund et al., 2018). Similarly to their terrestrial counterpart, seagrasses have
67 a high carbon storage capacity, which underlines their potential contribution to climate change
68 mitigation (Duarte et al. 2013; Gattuso et al. 2018). Despite their importance, seagrasses are declining
69 globally at alarming rates (Waycott et al., 2009). New projections estimate a massive reduction of
70 marine habitat-forming species as a consequence of global warming by the end of 2050, stressing that
71 environmental changes are occurring too fast, preventing their capacity to react properly (Trisos et
72 al. 2020).

73 The evolutionary success of marine plants derives from their extraordinary adaptation capacity, which
74 allowed them to colonize heterogeneous environments including temperate and tropical regions with
75 different environmental conditions (Short et al., 2007). Single species display peculiar strategies from
76 physiological to gene expression rearrangements for adapting along wide bathymetric and latitudinal
77 gradients (Dattolo et al., 2017; Jahnke et al., 2019). These emerging plastic properties that
78 characterize some seagrass species are at the basis of the appearance of different phenotypes
79 according to local environmental settings (Bergmann et al., 2010; Franssen et al., 2011; Pazzaglia et
80 al., 2020; Soissons et al., 2017). Among seagrasses, *Posidonia oceanica* (L.) Delile is an iconic
81 species widely distributed in the Mediterranean basin, forming large meadows across the photic zone
82 (Telesca et al., 2015). Featuring among the oldest living genotypes on our planet, due to the prominent
83 clonal propagation, *P. oceanica* is an ideal target species for studying plasticity of phenotypic
84 response to environmental changes (Arnaud-Haond et al., 2012).

85 Molecular signatures at the basis of phenotypic responses to single stressors have been explored in
86 seagrasses, especially in relation to different light and thermal regimes (e.g., Dattolo et al., 2017;
87 Marín-Guirao et al., 2016; Massa et al., 2011; Ruocco et al., 2021). In general, large-scale gene
88 expression studies in response to abiotic stresses have revealed the regulation of specific stress genes
89 that modulate different phases of the cellular stress response, such as protein folding and degradation
90 (Franssen et al., 2011; Reusch et al., 2008; Traboni et al., 2018). Particularly, warming can induce
91 oxidative stress, enhancing the accumulation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) able to damage
92 membranes, proteins and DNA. Under such conditions, seagrasses activate their antioxidant system,
93 which includes key ROS-scavenging enzymes (Franssen et al., 2014; Purnama et al., 2019; Traboni
94 et al., 2018; Tutar et al., 2017; Winters et al., 2011). Additionally, photosynthesis is one of the most
95 heat-sensitive processes and the modulation of genes encoding for crucial enzymes of the
96 photosynthetic apparatus is part of the machinery that regulates primary metabolism under heat stress
97 (Marín-Guirao et al., 2017; Ruocco et al., 2019a; Wang et al., 2018). In seagrasses, the analysis of
98 transcriptional profiles in populations experiencing diverse thermal regimes in their home
99 environments has revealed differential responses, reflecting the contribution of local adaptation to
100 gene expression divergence (e.g., Franssen et al., 2011). Thus, plants living in more dynamic and
101 variable environments (e.g., southern regions and/or shallow intertidal waters) showed higher thermal
102 tolerance and can be more resilient to environmental changes than plants living in more stable
103 environments such as the tropics (Ashander et al., 2016; Botero et al., 2015; Chevin and Hoffmann,
104 2017; Pazzaglia et al., 2021; Tomasello et al., 2009).

105 While modulation of gene expression in seagrasses under thermal stress has been extensively
106 investigated (for a review see Nguyen et al., 2021), considerably less emphasis has been given to
107 gene-expression changes in response to high nutrients conditions. Most of the literature is focused on
108 nutrient assimilation and physiology, pointing out the importance of leaf tissues in nutrient uptake
109 (Touchette and Burkholder, 2000). Direct effects induced by the excess of nutrients on growth and
110 survival have been shown in seagrasses (Burkholder et al., 2007), while the mechanisms behind
111 nutrient toxicity and gene expression regulations are still unclear.

112 NH_4^+ is the primary form of nitrogen that can be assimilated by seagrasses, through high- or low-
113 affinity transporters, depending on external nutrient concentrations. Since the assimilation of
114 nutrients differs among above- and below-ground tissues, this is also reflected in the regulation of
115 specific responsive genes that tend to be activated earlier in the leaf in respect to below-ground tissues
116 (Pernice et al., 2016). In *P. oceanica*, the regulation of genes playing a key role in nutrient assimilation
117 is influenced by the co-occurrence with other types of stressors, such as herbivory (Ruocco et al.,
118 2018) and acidification (Ravaglioli et al., 2017). All this highlights that interactions among different
119 stressors and local disturbances need to be considered for a complete understanding of the effects of
120 global changes on seagrasses. However, only a few studies have investigated the effects of nutrients
121 in a global warming scenario, focusing mainly at plant physiological responses (Artika et al., 2020;
122 Campbell and Fourqurean, 2013; Mvungi, 2011; Pazzaglia et al., 2020).

123 Epigenetic mechanisms, such as chromatin modifications, have recently been recognized to play a
124 crucial role in gene regulation in response to abiotic stressors (Bhadouriya et al., 2021; Lindermayr
125 et al., 2020). Chromatin accessibility can be regulated by the exclusion or inclusion of different
126 histone variants and various histone modifications (e.g., acetylation/deacetylation,
127 methylation/demethylation) can be influenced by environmental variations. In plants, chromatin
128 modifications induced by specific environmental stress can regulate the transcriptional machinery at
129 somatic level (within the same generation), and have the potential to be stored or memorized for
130 future reoccurring events (Bäurle and Trindade, 2020; Dai et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2017; Tasset et

131 al., 2018). While epigenetic changes have been extensively investigated in terrestrial plants, they
132 remain mostly unexplored in seagrasses. Indeed, only few studies have recently analysed epigenetic
133 responses to abiotic stressors, especially DNA methylation marks (*P. oceanica*, Greco et al., 2012;
134 Greco et al., 2013; Ruocco et al., 2019b; Entrambasaguas et al., 2021; *Zostera marina*, Jueterbock et
135 al., 2019; *Posidonia australis* and *Zostera muelleri*, Nguyen et al., 2020).

136 The present study aims to investigate the transcriptome rearrangements occurring in *P. oceanica*
137 plants with a different history of nutrient loads and exposed to single and multiple stressors. Starting
138 from previous physiological assessments (Pazzaglia et al., 2020), here we proceeded with a further
139 step, exploring the whole transcriptome profile of leaf and shoot-apical meristem (SAM) in plants
140 with a different origin, and provided a functional characterization of biological processes activated in
141 response to temperature increase, nutrients addition, and their combination. In general, the SAM is
142 considered the most sensitive plant organ with the lowest tolerance threshold, playing a crucial role
143 in the maintenance of growth and survival under abiotic and biotic stresses (Fulcher and Sablowski,
144 2009). Recently, a gene expression study performed on SAM revealed the activation of an early
145 molecular response in respect to the leaf, besides a much more complex and specific response
146 (Ruocco et al., 2021). We hypothesize that leaves and SAMs of plants growing in environments with
147 a different history of nutrient loads would show a divergent gene expression signature and the
148 activation of specific biological processes in response to the same stress conditions. We also expect
149 different effects induced by nutrients and thermal stressors, which should modulate the transcriptional
150 profile of *P. oceanica* plants. Furthermore, since epigenetic mechanisms are involved in gene
151 regulation, we also predict a differential activation of related processes. Overall, we aim to assess
152 plant response in a future scenario of local human-driven pollution and global increase of seawater
153 temperature.

154

155 **2. Methods**

156 *2.1 Plant collection and experimental design*

157 The sampling sites and the experimental design for this study are the same of Pazzaglia et al. (2020).
158 Briefly, large fragments of *P. oceanica* bearing 10-20 vertical shoots were collected by SCUBA
159 diving on May 15 – 16th 2019 from shallow-water meadows growing in two locations with different
160 history of nutrient loads: Spiaggia del Poggio (Bacoli) in the Gulf of Pozzuoli (Italy, 40°47.9300 N;
161 14°05.1410 E), and Castello Aragonese in the Island of Ischia (Italy, 40°44.1140N; 13°57.8660 E). The
162 former (Bacoli) is considered an impacted site as it is close to a highly urbanized area with more
163 eutrophic conditions in respect to the latter site (Ischia), which is in a marine protected area (for a
164 comprehensive description of sampling sites see Pazzaglia et al., 2020). The N leaf content value
165 which is an indicator of the nutrient status, in fact, was almost twice in Bacoli (%N leaves = 1.89 %
166 \pm 0.2; C/N ratio = 16.7 \pm 0.9) than in Ischia (%N leaves = 0.97% \pm 0.2; C/N ratio = 33.2 \pm 2.4,
167 supplementary data in Pazzaglia et al., 2020). Additionally, nutrients concentrations measured in the
168 sediment pore water revealed almost double values in the Bacoli site than the Ischia site (DIN [μ M]
169 = 47.9 \pm 4.4 in Bacoli, and 26.7 \pm 8.9 in Ischia site; PO₄ - [μ M] = 4.3 \pm 1.0 in Bacoli, and 2.1 \pm 0.4
170 in Ischia. As plants growing in the two sites were exposed to different anthropogenic pressures, here
171 we refer to plants collected in Bacoli as relatively eutrophic (Eu plants), and plants collected in Ischia
172 as relatively oligotrophic (Ol plants). After sampling, plants were exposed to multiple stressors in an
173 indoor mesocosm facility at Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn (SZN, Naples, Italy) (Ruocco et al.
174 2019b) following a multi-factorial design, including four treatments: Control (C), Nutrients (N),
175 Temperature (T) and Nutrients + Temperature (NT). The experimental set-up consisted of 12 glass

176 aquaria (500 L) filled with natural seawater. Two plant fragments for each Eu- and Ol- plants were
177 allocated in the same tank using a basket filled with coarse sediment. Stress levels were set according
178 to a previous mesocosm experiment and different environmental observations at the sampling sites
179 (Pazzaglia et al., 2020). The temperature treatments (T and NT) consisted in the gradual increase (0.5
180 °C day⁻¹) of temperature from control conditions (measured during the sampling, 24°C) to 30°C,
181 which is 4–5 degrees above the summer average. The nutrient treatments (N and NT) consisted in the
182 increase of nutrient concentrations adding a stock solution (170 mM total nitrogen) that was prepared
183 using Osmocote Pro fertilizer pellets (6 months release: 19% N – 3.9% P – 8.3% K, ICL Specialty
184 Fertilizers). The solution was added every week in order to maintain a nutrient enrichment condition
185 in N and NT treatments (DIN = 26.8 ± 4.0 mM).

186

187 2.2 RNA extraction and 3' Tag sequencing

188 After two weeks from the initial exposure to stress conditions (T2), three samples per treatment of *P.*
189 *oceanica* leaf and shoot-apical meristem (SAM) were collected ($n = 3$). A portion of 6 cm of the
190 second leaf was cleaned from epiphytes and immediately submerged in RNA later© tissue collection
191 solution (Ambion, life technologies). Leaf samples were kept at 4 °C overnight to let the solution
192 penetrate into the tissue, and finally stored at - 20 °C. The first most apical 0.5 cm of the rhizome tip,
193 containing the SAM, were also collected from the same shoots and preserved in liquid N₂, since
194 previous trials demonstrated that RNA later solution does not permeate appropriately in the meristem
195 tissue. Total RNA was extracted with the Aurum™ Total RNA Mini Kit (BIO- RAD). RNA purity
196 and concentration was assessed by using NanoDrop (ND-1000 UV–Vis spectrophotometer;
197 NanoDrop Technologies) and 1% agarose gel electrophoresis, while RNA integrity was assessed by
198 means of 2100 BioAnalyzer (Agilent). Twenty-four libraries (3 replicates × 4 treatments × 2 different
199 plant conditions) were constructed for each tissue (24 leaf and 24 SAM) with the QuantSeq 3' mRNA-
200 Seq Library Prep Kits (Lexogen) and sequenced using Ion Torrent technology (Ion Torren
201 GeneStudio). The QuantSeq protocol produces only one fragment per transcript, generating reads
202 towards the poly (A) tail. In contrast to the traditional RNA-Seq, TagSeq approach directly reverse
203 transcribed cDNAs from the 3' end of the mRNAs, without a fragmentation step. It represents a cost-
204 effective approach applicable to model species and it has also been successfully applied to non-model
205 species for which reference transcriptomes are available (Marx et al., 2020; Moll et al., 2014).
206 Hereinafter, we refer to leaf and SAM of Ol plants as 'Ol leaf' and 'Ol SAM', respectively, and to
207 leaf and SAM of Eu plants as 'Eu leaf' and 'Eu SAM', respectively.

208 2.3 Data filtering and functional annotation

209 Raw reads were quality checked using FASTQC (Andrews, 2010) and then subjected to a cleaning
210 procedure using Trimmomatic (Bolger et al. 2014), setting the minimum quality per base at 15 phread
211 score and minimum length of the read after cleaning at 50bp. All cleaned reads were then mapped,
212 independently, on the reference transcriptome of *P. oceanica* (Ruocco et al., 2021) using the Bowtie2
213 aligner (default settings, Langmead and Salzberg, 2012). Reads count and FPKM (fragments per
214 kilobase of exon model per million reads mapped) calculation per transcript for each replicate were
215 performed using the eXpress software (Roberts et al., 2011). Functional annotation of the reference
216 transcriptome was carried out through sequence similarity search against the Swiss-Prot database
217 using the BLASTx software (Camacho et al., 2009), setting as minimum *E*-value threshold 1e⁻³ and
218 getting only the best hit detected.

219

220 2.4 Differentially Expressed Genes (DEGs) and Gene Ontology (GO) enrichment analysis

221 DEGs analysis was performed using two tools implementing two different statistical approaches:
 222 DESeq2 (Love et al., 2014) and edgeR (Robinson et al., 2010). For each transcript, the mean of the
 223 \log_2 fold change values (Log_2FC) obtained with the two tools was calculated. The thresholds for the
 224 DEGs calling were $\text{FDR} \leq 0.05$ or $P\text{-adjusted} \leq 0.05$, and Log_2 fold change $\leq |1.5|$. Differential gene
 225 expression profiles resulted from the comparison between all treatments (N, T and NT) *vs* control in
 226 both organs and plant conditions. A graphical representation of shared and unique DEGs across
 227 samples was obtained using DiVenn 2.0 interactive tool (Sun et al., 2019). DEGs-related GO-terms
 228 were retrieved by using InterProScan (version 5.33, Jones et al., 2014) and GO enrichment analysis
 229 was performed using the Ontologizer software (Bauer et al., 2008). The threshold used to identify
 230 significantly enriched functional terms was $P \leq 0.05$. DEGs and GO enrichment results are discussed
 231 separately for leaf and SAM, comparing Ol and Eu plants. GO enriched terms for both Ol and Eu
 232 plants are reported in Tables S3 and S4. Additionally, GO enriched terms related to epigenetic
 233 mechanisms (epi-GOs) were screened for leaf and SAM independently from the treatments, and
 234 unique/shared biological processes and molecular functions for Ol and Eu plants are described
 235 separately.

236 3. Results

237 3.1 General overview of transcriptomic responses

238 Different transcriptomes obtained for both organs of *P. oceanica* plants collected in different
 239 environmental conditions (Ol leaf, Ol SAM, Eu leaf and Eu SAM) showed a comparable number of
 240 transcripts and significantly matched to Swiss-Prot database (**Table 1**). Full DEGs results are
 241 included in **Table S1**, whereas GO terms associated with biological processes, cellular components
 242 and molecular functions obtained for all treatments are reported in the **Table S2**.

243 **Table 1.** Summary description of the number of transcripts within each dataset (N = Nutrients, T =
 244 Temperature, NT = Nutrients + Temperature). The % of annotated transcripts for each dataset via BLASTx is
 245 also shown.

Unique datasets	N. transcripts				Annotated transcripts	% of annotated transcripts
	N	T	NT	Tot.		
Ol leaf	108,022	108,594	110,649	124,077	70,722	57.0
Ol SAM	110,119	112,831	112,163	125,401	71,380	56.9
Eu leaf	102,831	105,067	105,329	112,473	66,909	59.5
Eu SAM	107,489	108,442	107,724	121,807	70,599	58.0

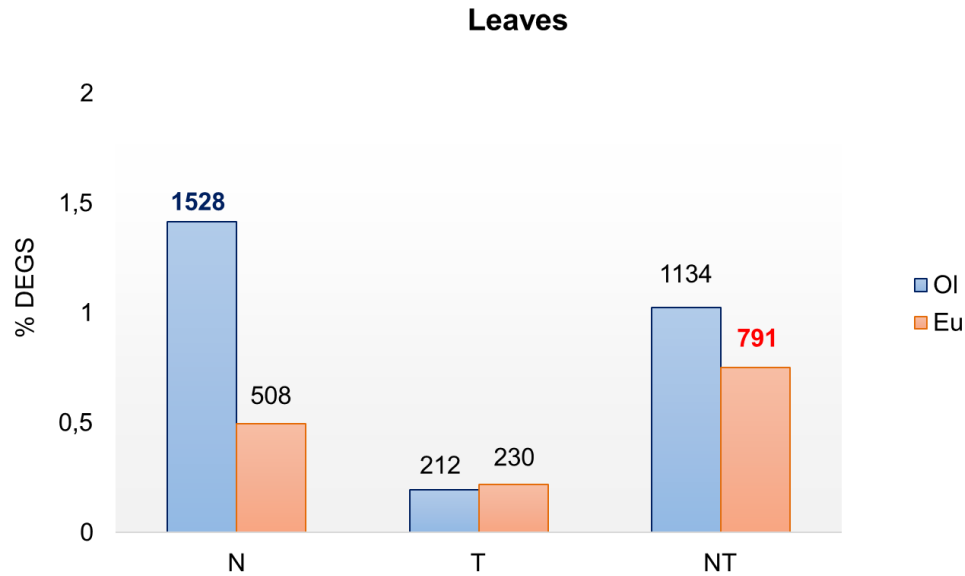
246

247 3.2 Leaf-specific transcriptomic responses

248 3.2.1 Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) and GO enrichment analysis

249 Leaf showed the largest transcriptomic response in treatments with nutrients addition (N and NT),
 250 whereas a less severe effect was observed under the increase of only temperature (T), which is similar
 251 between Ol and Eu plants (**Fig. 1**). However, while Ol leaf showed the highest percentage of DEGs
 252 in N treatment, Eu leaf appeared more responsive to NT (**Fig. 1**). The comparison of up and down-
 253 regulated DEGs among treatments, highlighted a larger and unique transcriptome rearrangement
 254 occurring in the leaf under nutrients addition, in particular in Ol plants exposed to N (Fig. 2 and Fig.
 255 3), where most of the unique DEGs were up-regulated (**Fig. 2a; Table S1**). Contrarily, T treatment
 256 induced only a limited and less specific response (**Fig 2a**). Eu leaf displayed a distribution pattern of

257 DEGs similar to Ol leaf, with higher number of unique DEGs under N and NT (higher in NT), in
 258 comparison to T treatment (**Fig. 2b, Table S1**).



259

260 **Figure 1.** Percentages of DEGs (down- and up-regulated) over the total number of transcripts counted for
 261 each unique dataset (Ol leaf and Eu leaf). The total n° of DEGs is shown on the top of each histogram. The
 262 greatest n° of DEGs are highlighted in bold with different colours for Ol (blue) and Eu plants (red).

263 The GO enrichment analysis of the leaf revealed similar patterns in both Ol and Eu plants, activating
 264 more processes under nutrients addition (N and NT, **Fig. 3; Table S2**). However, unique GO enriched
 265 terms found in Ol leaf under N conditions were twice of those counted in Eu leaf for the same
 266 treatment (**Fig. 3a, Table S3**). In Ol leaf, different transcripts belonging to the transport category like
 267 *Nuclear transport factor 2B (NTF2)* and *Zinc transporter 4 (ZIP4)* were overexpressed in presence
 268 of nutrients (N and NT) (**Table S1**). One of the most significant GO enriched term in the N treatment
 269 was related to “protein kinase activity” including enzymes involved in protein degradation such as
 270 *Putative U-box domain- containing protein 50 (PUB50)* and the *RING-H2 finger protein (ATL13)*
 271 that were up- and down-regulated, respectively. Ol leaf activated also defence processes regulating
 272 e.g., *Leucine-rich repeat-like serine/threonine/tyrosine protein kinase (SOBIR1)* and the *Stromal cell-*
 273 *derived factor 2-like protein (SDF2)*. In addition, DEGs of NT and N treatments shared different GO
 274 terms including “photosynthesis”, pointing out the down-regulation of genes that play a crucial role
 275 in photosystem assembly and functions (*HCA6-Chlorophyll a-b binding protein CP26*, *PSBS-*
 276 *Photosystem II 22 kDa protein 1*). The presence of nutrients activated also processes related to
 277 metabolism like “nitrogen cycle metabolic process” and “reactive nitrogen species metabolic
 278 processes”, where key genes of nitrate assimilation were down-regulated (*NR2-Nitrate reductase*
 279 *[NADH] 2* and *NRT2.5-High affinity nitrate transporter 2.5*). Several transcripts within this category
 280 were also up-regulated in NT, including key enzymes involved in the lipid biosynthesis pathway like
 281 *Allene oxide synthase 1 (AOS)*, *Delta(8)-fatty-acid desaturase 2 (SLD2)* and *SNF1-related protein*
 282 *kinase regulatory subunit beta-1 (AKIN subunit beta-1)* (**Table S1**). In this treatment (NT), Ol leaf
 283 activated also processes related to flavonoid synthesis (i.e., *Chalcone and Squalene synthase*). The
 284 exclusive exposure to temperature (T) induced the lowest activation of specific biological processes
 285 (**Fig. 3a; Table S2**). In this case, Ol leaf regulated processes related to defence mechanisms and
 286 Ubiquitin-conjunctions (“regulation of biological quality”, “chaperone binding”) that include
 287 transcripts encoding for positive regulators of basal defence such as *Protein SGT1 homolog A and B*

288 that were down-regulated. In general, few processes were shared among all treatments, mostly
289 including categories related to metabolism (“oxidoreductase activity”, “small molecule metabolic
290 process”) and flavonoids (“flavonoid biosynthetic process” and “flavonoid metabolic process”).

291 Similarly, Eu plants showed the highest counts of GOs uniquely enriched in treatments with nutrients
292 addition, especially in the combined treatment (NT, **Fig. 3b**; **Table S3**). In this case, “structural
293 constituent of chromatin”, “oxidoreductase activity” and “generation of precursor metabolites and
294 energy” were the most significant categories (**Table S3**). Genes belonging to these terms are involved
295 in the modulation of chromatin structure (*HMGBs*, *high mobility group proteins*), mitochondrial
296 electron transport chain (*Cytochrome c oxidase subunit 1*, *COX1* and *Ubiquinol oxidase 1b*, *AOX1B*),
297 and starch synthesis (*Glucose-1-phosphate adenylyltransferase small subunit 1*, *AGPC*), and were
298 highly down-regulated. In contrast to Ol plants, in Eu leaf different processes related to transcriptional
299 regulation were also activated in the presence of only nutrients (N, “regulation of nucleobase-
300 containing compound metabolic process” and “transcription”). Different Transcription factors (TFs)
301 belonging to these categories were differentially regulated, including transcriptional activators such
302 as *WRKY22-transcription factor 22* and *MED16- Mediator of RNA polymerase II transcription*
303 *subunit 16* that were down-regulated, and the *SARD1- Protein SAR DEFICIENT 1*, which was up-
304 regulated. The exposure to T treatment induced a less pronounced response activating processes
305 involved in stress response and photosynthesis (“photosystem”, “phosphoprotein binding” and
306 “carbohydrate derivative binding”). Associated genes encoded for chaperone proteins (*HSP70-1-*
307 *Heat shock 70 kDa protein 1*) and photosystem proteins (*PSBS1-Photosystem II 22 kDa protein 1*).
308 Overall, treatments shared common processes related to transport and defence activities (“nitrate
309 transport”, “small molecule metabolic process”, “reactive nitrogen species metabolic process”) down-
310 regulating genes involved in the response to nitrate (*Protein NRT1/ PTR FAMILY 6.4*, *NIA2- Nitrate*
311 *reductase [NADH] 2*) and oxidation (*DOX1- Alpha-dioxygenase 1*).

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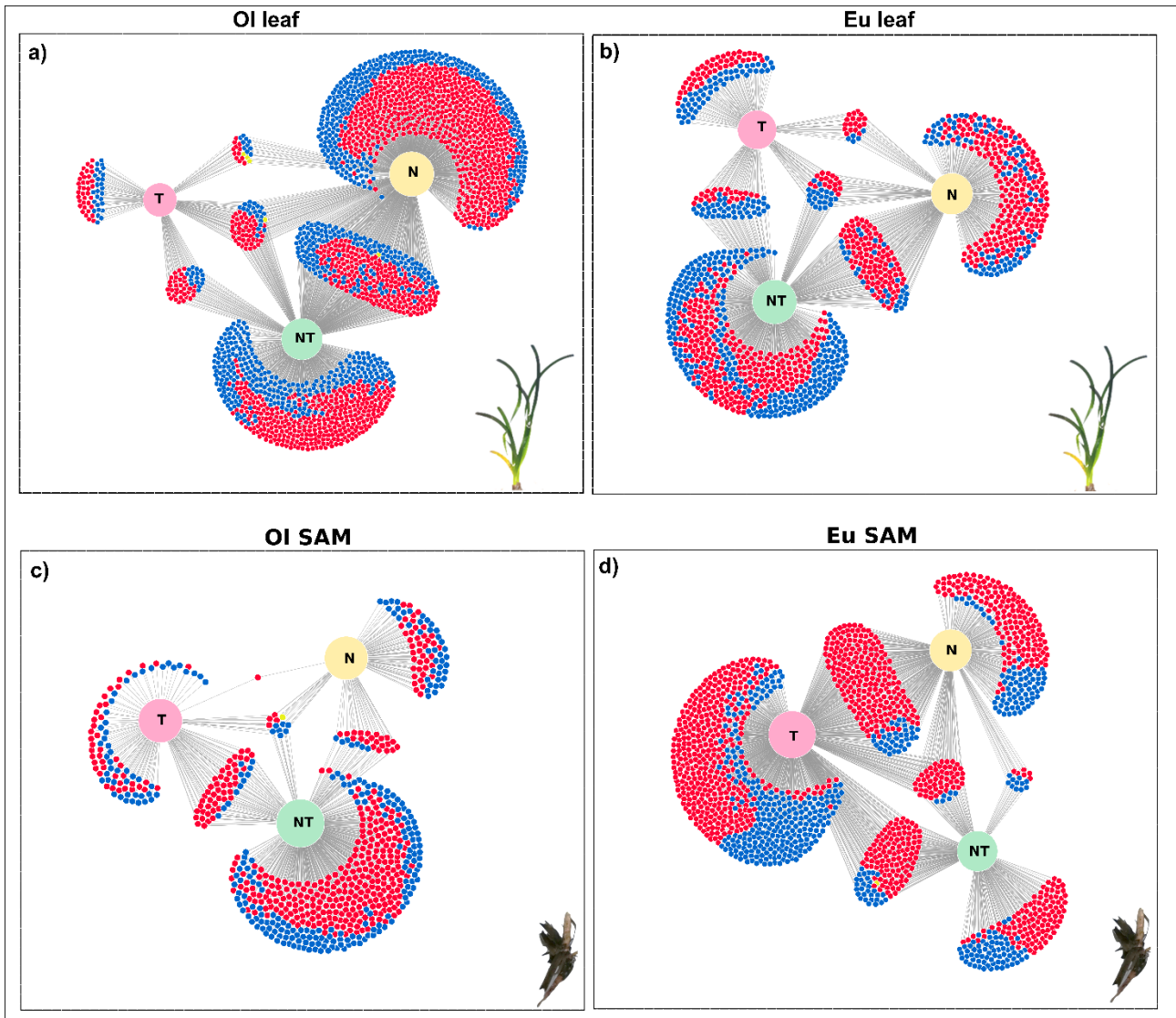
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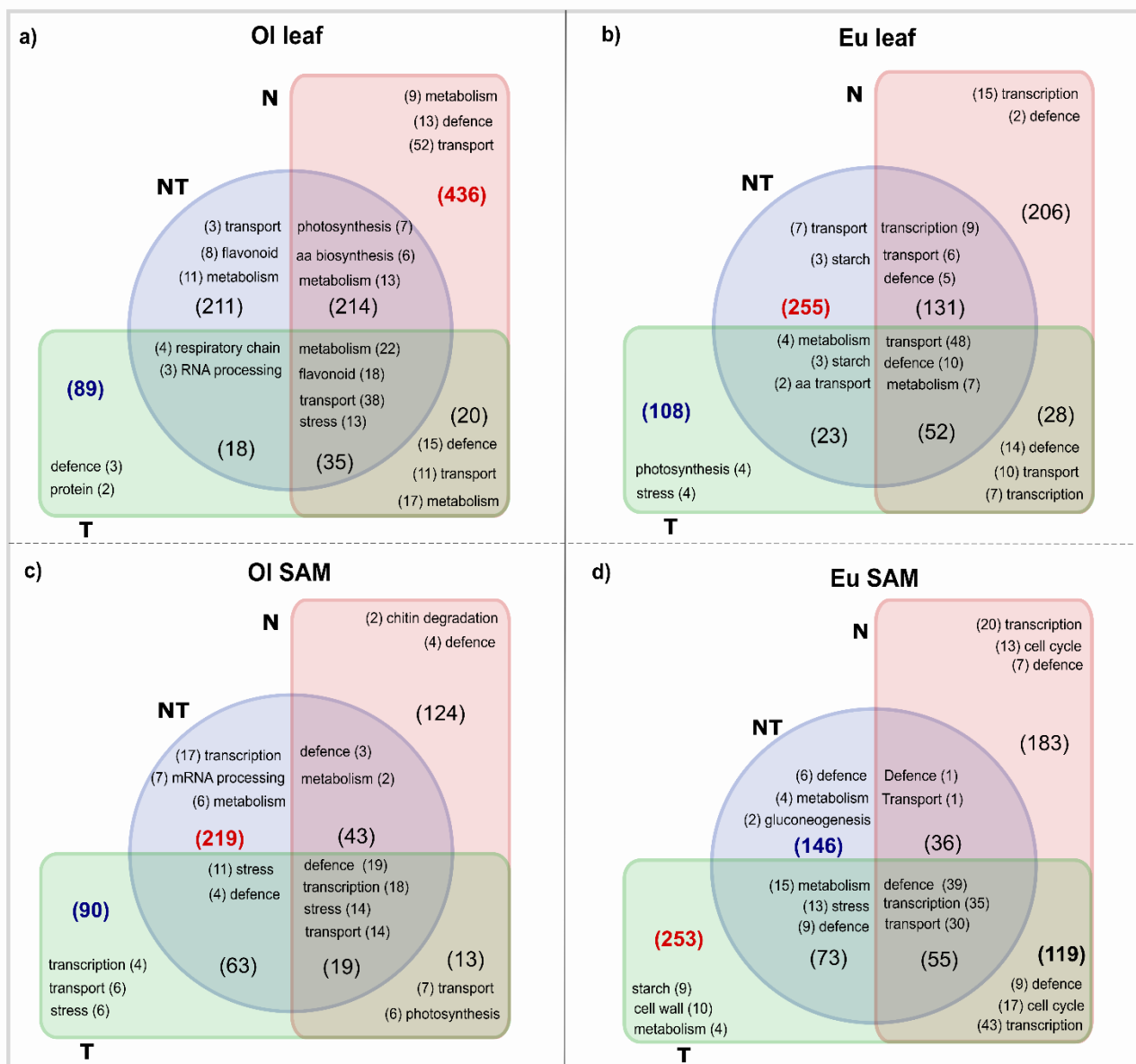
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324 **Figure 2.** DiVenn diagrams showing unique and shared differentially expressed genes (DEGs) among
 325 treatments (N = Nutrients, T = Temperature and NT = Nutrients + Temperature) in OI leaf (a), Eu leaf (b),
 326 OI SAM (c) and Eu SAM (d). Red and blue nodes refer to up- and down-regulated DEGs respectively,
 327 whereas yellow nodes refer to shared DEGs among treatments that were up-regulated in one sample but
 328 down-regulated in another one.



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330 **Figure 3.** Venn diagrams showing unique and shared GO enriched terms in Ol leaf (a), Eu leaf (b), Ol SAM
 331 (c) and Eu SAM (d). The number of unique and shared GOs is shown in brackets. Red and blue numbers
 332 identified the largest and lowest counts, respectively. The number of DEGs associated to the most significant
 333 GOs were also reported in brackets with the associated category, which corresponds to keywords derived by
 334 the Retrieve/ID mapping tool of UNIPROT database.

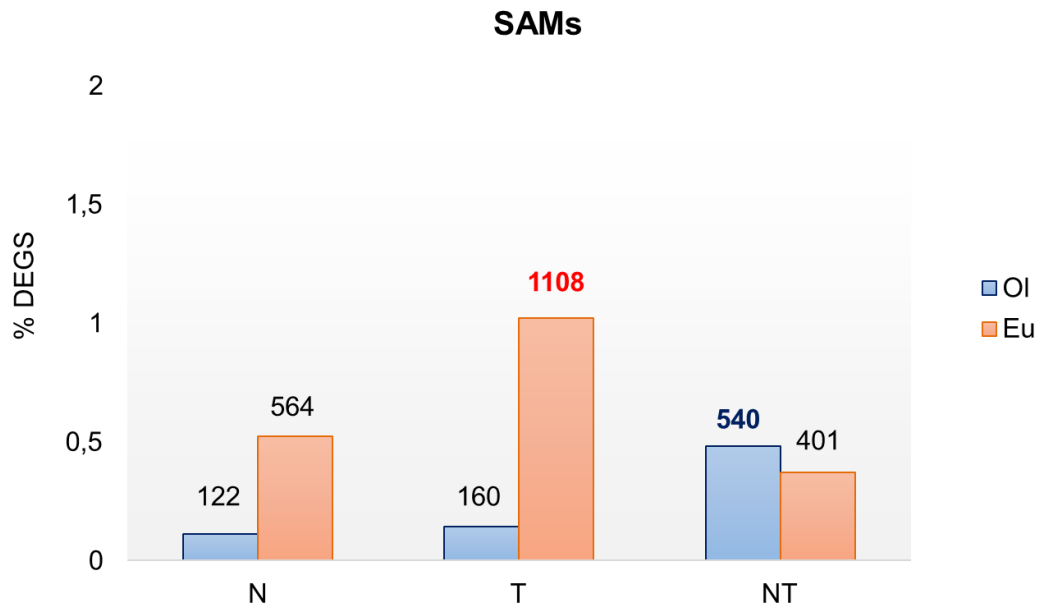
335 3.3 SAM-specific transcriptomic responses

336 3.3.1 Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) and GO enrichment analysis

337 Contrary to leaf, SAM showed a greater response to temperature treatments (T and NT) with clear
 338 differences between Ol and Eu plants (**Fig. 4**). While Ol plants showed the higher counts of DEGs
 339 under the combined treatment (NT), Eu plants revealed a huge gene activation under the exposure to
 340 only temperature (T), followed by N and NT treatments (**Table S1**). Differences in terms of DEG
 341 distributions among treatments in Ol and Eu plants were more evident for SAMs (**Fig. 2**).

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344 **Figure 4.** Percentages of DEGs (down and upregulated) normalized by the total number of transcripts counted
 345 for unique datasets (Ol SAM and Eu SAM). The total n. of DEGs is shown on the top of each histograms. The
 346 greatest counts of DEGs are underlined in bold with different colors for Ol (blue) and Eu plants (red).

347 Ol SAM showed a higher number of DEGs under NT treatment that were mostly up-regulated (**Fig.**
 348 **2c; Table S2**). On the other hand, T treatment induced the highest transcriptomic response in Eu
 349 SAM, sharing most of DEGs with N treatment (**Fig. 2d; Table S2**). Eu plants expressed a lower
 350 number of DEGs in the combined treatment (NT), that were mostly shared with T treatment.

351 Surprisingly, SAM response to treatments was less pronounced with respect to the leaf, with a general
 352 lower number of distinct enriched GOs terms (**Table S2**). However, GO terms and related processes
 353 in the SAM were significantly different between Ol and Eu plants (**Fig. 3; Table S2**). In detail, Ol
 354 SAM responses were more pronounced in treatments with nutrients (N and NT), highlighting the
 355 down-regulation of different transcripts mostly related to defense mechanisms, like *Alpha-*
 356 *dioxygenase (DOX1)* and *Nodulin-related protein 1 (NRP1)* (**Table S1**). In Ol SAM, “aminoglycan
 357 metabolic process”, “cell wall macromolecule metabolic process” and “chitinase activity” were the
 358 most significantly enriched terms in N treatment, where other similar processes related to nutrient-
 359 induced stress (“cellular response to nitric oxide”) were shared with NT treatment (**Fig. 3c; Table**
 360 **S3**). Notably, distinct processes related to transcription were activated in NT (“gene expression”)
 361 modulating TFs involved in gene expression regulation like *Transcription factor MYB7*, which was
 362 up-regulated, and *Protein LNK1* and *SWI/SNF complex component SNF12* that were repressed.
 363 Different processes related to stress response were also shared between NT and T treatments
 364 (“unfolded protein binding” and “heat shock protein binding”) with the expression of key genes
 365 encoding for chaperone proteins (*HSP83*, *HSP90-5* and *Chaperonin CPN60-1*). T treatment induced
 366 a less pronounced response, which is in contrast to Eu SAM where the presence of temperature alone
 367 showed the largest number of unique GO enriched terms (**Table S3**). Under these conditions, Eu
 368 SAM activated processes mainly related to starch synthesis (“glucose-1-phosphate
 369 adenylyltransferase activity” and “starch biosynthetic process”) and cell wall biogenesis (“cellular
 370 carbohydrate metabolic process”). DEGs related to these categories, all overexpressed, are key genes
 371 involved in starch synthesis (*AGPP-Glucose-1-phosphate adenylyltransferase small subunit 2*, *WAXY*
 372 - *Granule-bound starch synthase 1* and *ISA3-Isoamylase 3*) and cell wall construction (*XTH28-*

373 *Probable xyloglucan endotransglucosylase and CSLD5- Cellulose synthase-like protein D5*) (**Table**
374 **S1**). Contrarily to Ol SAM, Eu SAM shared most of the GO enriched terms with N treatment, where
375 the most representative categories were related to transcription (“protein-DNA complex”, “DNA
376 binding” and “chromatin”). Here, associated DEGs included different histone variants (*H2B*, *H3.2*,
377 *H3.3*) and several TFs belonging to different families (*MYBS2*, *BHLH35*, *NFYB5*, *HHO5*) (**Table**
378 **S1**).

379 3.4 Insights into epigenetic regulation

380 Different unique epigenetic-related GO terms (epi-GOs) were found in treatments with nutrients in
381 both Ol and Eu leaves (**Table 2**). In Ol plants, leaf and SAM activated unique epigenetic-related
382 functions (**Fig S1a** and **b**). In detail, Ol leaf regulated processes related to “RNA methylation activity”
383 and “methylated histone binding” that included the largest count of associated transcripts (**Table 2**).
384 Here, important chromatin remodelers and RNA methyltransferases were over-expressed, especially
385 under nutrient stress conditions (*Chromatin remodeling protein*, *Putative tRNA*
386 *(cytidine(32)/guanosine(34)-2'-O)-methyltransferase*). In Ol SAM, different unique epi-GOs related
387 to terms such as “chromatin organization” and “histone modification” were the most representative
388 biological processes, including the largest counts of transcripts (**Table 2**). Associated DEGs included
389 DNA methyltransferase (*DNA (cytosine-5)-methyltransferase DRM1*) and chromatin remodelers
390 (*CH5-Protein CHROMATIN REMODELING 5*), which were up-regulated under T treatment.

391 Contrarily to Ol plants, Eu leaf and Eu SAM shared several processes related to DNA binding
392 functions. Regulated genes in Eu leaf belonged to the category of “sequence-specific DNA binding”,
393 which showed the largest counts of transcripts (**Table 2**). In such a case, different DEGs involved in
394 transcription regulation were regulated in treatments with nutrients like *WRKY transcription factor*
395 *22* and *SARD1-Protein SAR DEFICIENT 1* that were highly overexpressed, and *ALKBH10B-RNA*
396 *demethylase*, which was repressed in the treatment with only nutrients (N, **Table S1**). In Eu SAM,
397 “chromatin binding” was the most representative molecular function considering the number of
398 associated transcripts (**Table 2**). Here, genes involved in transcription regulation were differentially
399 expressed such as *AHL16-AT-hook motif nuclear-localized protein 16*, which was overexpressed
400 under single treatments (N and T), and DNA methylation including *MET1-DNA (cytosine-5)-*
401 *methyltransferase*) that was up-regulated in N and NT (**Table S1**).

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Table 2. Unique and shared GO enriched terms related to epigenetic mechanisms in *Ol* plants (leaf – SAM) and *Eu* plants (leaf – SAM). The GO identification (GO ID), category (GO cat.), description, P value and the number of associated transcripts are reported.

Ol leaf					Eu leaf				
GO ID	GO cat.	GO description	P value	N. Transcripts	GO ID	GO cat.	GO description	P value	N. Transcripts
GO:0102741	MF	paraxanthine:S-adenosyl-L-methionine 3-N-methyltransferase	4.10E-08	6	GO:0031062	BP	positive regulation of histone methylation	2.42E-02	137
GO:0004161	MF	dimethylallyltranstransferase activity	9.65E-03	20	GO:0070989	BP	oxidative demethylation	9.51E-03	34
GO:0002128	BP	tRNA nucleoside ribose methylation	9.81E-03	37	GO:0070734	BP	histone H3-K27 methylation	3.03E-02	126
GO:1990258	BP	histone glutamine methylation	1.09E-02	9	GO:0061087	BP	positive regulation of H3-K27 methylation	4.42E-02	46
GO:0035064	MF	methylated histone binding	2.29E-02	192	GO:0031058	BP	positive regulation of histone modification	2.60E-02	203
GO:1990259	MF	histone-glutamine methyltransferase	2.39E-02	9	GO:0035513	BP	oxidative RNA demethylation	1.38E-04	28
GO:0008898	MF	S-adenosylmethionine-homocysteine S-methyltransferase	2.42E-02	43	GO:0043982	BP	histone H4-K8 acetylation	3.29E-02	22
GO:0008173	MF	RNA methyltransferase	3.96E-02	618	GO:0043565	MF	sequence-specific DNA binding	2.34E-04	4743
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0035515	MF	oxidative RNA demethylase activity	4.66E-04	28
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0043984	BP	histone H4-K16 acetylation	1.30E-02	14
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0080182	BP	histone H3-K4 trimethylation	4.02E-02	68
Ol SAM					Eu SAM				
GO ID	GO cat.	GO description	P value	N. Transcripts	GO ID	GO cat.	GO description	P value	N. Transcripts
GO:0016576	BP	histone dephosphorylation	1.58E-04	13	GO:0035404	BP	histone-serine phosphorylation	2.64E-02	16
GO:0006325	BP	chromatin organization	3.63E-03	2963	GO:0009008	MF	DNA-methyltransferase activity	2.65E-02	71
GO:0031498	BP	chromatin disassembly	4.52E-03	6	GO:0003682	MF	chromatin binding	9.49E-03	946
GO:0032986	BP	protein-DNA complex disassembly	5.04E-03	7	GO:0006342	BP	chromatin silencing	5.39E-04	273
GO:0140658	MF	ATP-dependent chromatin remodeler activity	5.49E-03	361	GO:0000819	BP	sister chromatid segregation	3.22E-02	515

GO:0009008	MF	DNA-methyltransferase activity regulation of DNA metabolic process	1.33E-02	71	GO:0061712	MF	tRNA (N(6)-L-threonylcarbamoyladenosine(37)-C(2))-methylthiotransferase DNA methylation-dependent heterochromatin assembly protein-DNA complex subunit organization	9.00E-05	15
GO:0051052	BP	regulation of DNA recombination	1.56E-02	645	GO:0006346	BP	tRNA methylthiolation	4.86E-02	51
GO:0000018	BP	DNA modification	2.17E-02	204	GO:0071824	BP	histone serine kinase activity histone pre-mRNA 3'end processing complex	1.57E-03	776
GO:0006304	BP	S-methyltransferase activity	2.71E-02	663	GO:0035600	BP	protein-DNA complex assembly	2.72E-04	18
GO:0008172	MF	histone modification	2.95E-02	67	GO:0035174	MF	heterochromatin organization chromatin organization involved in regulation of transcription	3.99E-02	14
GO:0016570	BP	covalent chromatin modification DNA (cytosine-5)-methyltransferase activity	2.98E-02	1628	GO:0071204	CC	chromatin	4.23E-02	16
GO:0016569	BP	Heterochromatin	3.48E-02	1649	GO:0065004	BP	DNA methylation regulation of chromatin silencing at telomere	1.34E-04	617
GO:0003886	MF	-	3.50E-02	47	GO:0070828	BP	DNA (cytosine-5)-methyltransferase activity	1.98E-02	204
GO:0000792	CC	-	3.14E-02	114	GO:0034401	BP	-	1.51E-02	441
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0000785	CC	-	8.92E-03	1910
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0006306	BP	-	4.39E-02	509
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0031938	BP	-	9.09E-03	1
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0003886	MF	-	3.50E-02	47
-	-	-	-	-	Eu Leaf – Eu SAM				
-	-	-	-	-	Go ID	GO cat.	GO description	P value	N. Transcripts
-	-	-	-	-	GO:1903231	MF	mRNA binding - posttranscriptional gene silencing	1.92E-02	5
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0044815	CC	DNA packaging complex	7.35E-04	239
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0032993	CC	protein-DNA complex RNA binding - posttranscriptional	1.32E-02	471
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0150100	MF	gene silencing	1.23E-02	5
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0003677	MF	DNA binding chromatin assembly or	3.92E-02	11285
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0006333	BP	disassembly	1.07E-02	431
-	-	-	-	-	GO:0030527	MF	structural constituent of chromatin	2.58E-07	16

408 4. Discussion

409 Here we describe, for the first time in seagrasses, the whole-transcriptome response of different
410 organs (leaf and shoot apical meristem) of *P. oceanica* plants living in two contrasting environments
411 with a different history of nutrient loads and exposed to single and multiple stressors. Our
412 comparative transcriptomic analysis provides clear evidence for an effect of the local (native)
413 environment in determining/influencing the ability of the species to cope with global stress factors,
414 in agreement with previous physiological and morphological evidences (Pazzaglia et al., 2020). The
415 exposure to single and multiple stressors differentially affected plants' transcriptomic response and
416 highlighted an organ-specific vulnerability of plants depending on their origin. Leaf was more
417 responsive in presence of nutrients whereas SAM showed more vulnerability to temperature
418 treatments. Below, the principal outcomes from leaf and SAM analyses are discussed separately,
419 considering the effects of treatments and plant origin.

420 4.1 The effects of local environment in driving differential responses to stress

421 4.1.1 Leaf vulnerability to stress conditions

422 A large transcriptomic reprogramming was observed in leaves of plants coming from both
423 oligotrophic (Ol) and eutrophic (Eu) environments, when exposed to high nutrient loads alone or in
424 combination with warming (Fig. 5). The exposure to only warming, induced instead a less pronounced
425 response, which is in line with physiological responses reported in Pazzaglia et al. (2020), where the
426 presence of nutrients induced the greatest effects on both Ol and Eu *P. oceanica* plants. This is
427 probably due to the high nutrient affinity of leaves, which bear the primary responsibility for the
428 assimilation of dissolved inorganic nitrogen (e.g., NH_4^+ and NO_3^-) in the species (Lepoint et al.,
429 2002; Romero et al., 2006). Contrary to terrestrial plants, seagrasses live in more oligotrophic
430 environments and the maintenance of high productivity through high nutrient incorporation is
431 operated by Na^+ -dependent nitrate, phosphate and amino-acids transport systems that favour nutrient
432 assimilation from the surrounding environments, regulating plants' nutrient budget (Alcoverro et al.,
433 2000; Rubio et al., 2018). In our study, transcriptomic responses to nutrient enrichment also differed
434 in plants according to their origin. Thus, leaves of plants from oligotrophic conditions (Ol) showed a
435 more complex transcriptome reprogramming under nutrient enrichment than leaves from eutrophic
436 conditions (Eu). The number of DEGs was indeed more than four times higher in Ol leaves than in
437 Eu leaves.

438 Ol plants required a considerably higher level of transcriptome regulation in treatments with nutrients,
439 activating processes related to transport activities to cope with the new stress condition. These plants
440 down-regulated high-affinity nitrate transporters (NRTs and NIAs), which can be interpreted as a
441 need to prevent the excess of nutrient assimilation. Similar strategies have already been observed in
442 terrestrial plants, where the excess of nutrients modulated the assimilation of nitrate through an
443 inhibitory mechanism that temporally blocks its activity, favouring the subsequent adaptation to
444 stressful conditions (Reyes et al., 2018; Stitt et al., 2002). Moreover, different modulation of NRTs
445 has already been observed in *P. oceanica* plants exposed to different temporal regimes of nutrient
446 loading (Ravaglioli et al., 2017; Ruocco et al., 2018). Ruocco et al. (2018) showed that the leaves of
447 plants under discrete/pulse nutrient addition enhanced the activity of genes involved in nitrate uptake
448 and reduction (NRT2 and NR); while the leaves of plants chronically exposed to nutrient additions
449 repressed the expression of these genes. This regulatory mechanism allowed plants to take advantage
450 of pulse nutrient events, while their down-regulation was considered as a strategy adopted by plants
451 to avoid excessive nitrogen uptake and assimilation. Other low-affinity nitrate transporters were
452 overexpressed in both Ol and Eu leaves, which could explain the higher nitrogen content previously

453 measured at the end of the experiment (Pazzaglia et al., 2020). The excessive assimilation of nitrates
454 by Ol leaf induced the modulation of processes related to reactive nitrogen species, activating defence
455 mechanisms that are typically involved in plant responses to abiotic stresses. Genes functioning as
456 E3 ubiquitin ligase like PUB50 and ATL13 were up- and down-regulated, respectively, under high
457 nutrient conditions. These genes are reported to participate in many cellular functions, playing a role
458 in the regulation of abiotic and biotic stressors and in the modulation of hormone signalling (Seo et
459 al., 2012; Sharma and Taganna, 2020; Yee and Goring, 2009). In addition, Ol leaf specifically
460 regulated processes related to flavonoid synthesis that are representative of stress-induced conditions
461 in *P. oceanica* plants (Migliore et al., 2007). In this experiment, leaves exposed to the combination
462 of nutrients addition and temperature increase showed an up-regulation of Squalene and Chalcone
463 (CHL) synthases, which could reveal a different degree of sensitivity by leaves in comparison with
464 the exposure to only nutrients. Chalcones are key enzymes of the flavonoid biosynthesis pathway in
465 angiosperms (Heglmeier and Zidorn, 2010; Hu et al., 2019; Mannino and Micheli, 2020). They play
466 important roles in plant defence against biotic and abiotic stress factors (e.g., UV light and pathogens;
467 Dao et al., 2011). The induction of CHLs expression depends on environmental stimuli resulting in
468 the accumulation of secondary metabolites (Besseau et al., 2007). The over-expression of these genes
469 suggests the presence of an altered natural metabolism in Ol plants that could be the result of the
470 accumulation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) (Fini et al., 2011). In line with this evidence, high
471 nutrient levels impaired the photosynthetic performance of Ol plants, down-regulating components
472 of light harvesting complexes (e.g., LHCA6) and subunits of the photosystem II (e.g., PSBS). For
473 these genes, a differential regulation was already observed in *P. oceanica* plants from meadows with
474 different light regimes and exposed to reciprocal light conditions (Dattolo et al., 2017). In that case,
475 the variation in light availability induced plants to adopt contrasting photo-acclimatory strategies to
476 improve the utilization of the available light, maintaining a high photosynthetic efficiency (Dattolo
477 et al. 2014, 2017). Ultimately, Ol plants experiencing for the first time acute eutrophic conditions,
478 suffered more than Eu plants that have faced direct and indirect effects of eutrophic waters during
479 their life history (Pazzaglia et al., 2020).

480 By contrast, leaves of Eu plants were less responsive to the presence of only nutrients, while the
481 largest transcriptome modulation was observed in the combined treatment. Since these plants already
482 experienced nutrient stress conditions in their local environments, they appeared more vulnerable
483 when nutrients were combined with temperature increases, and thus in the presence of a new stress
484 typology that required a large transcriptomic response. However, the variation in nutrients availability
485 induced a substantial transcriptomic reprogramming of different transcription factors, as already
486 reported in model plant species (Brumbarova and Ivanov, 2019). On the other hand, in the combined
487 treatment, Eu leaf regulated processes related to the generation of precursor metabolites and energy,
488 where a key gene involved in starch synthesis (AGPC) was down-regulated. This gene synthesizes
489 ADP-glucose from glucose 1-phosphate and ATP, which is required as a glucose donor for starch
490 synthesis in the plastid (Patron et al., 2004). Starch synthesis plays an important role in plant
491 metabolism supporting growth and productivity under abiotic stresses (Thalmann and Santelia, 2017).
492 The regulation of starch biosynthesis observed in Eu leaf suggests that these plants instead of
493 activating large metabolic processes to counteract stress from nutrient excess modulated their
494 energetic reserves to provide more energy for sustaining growth (Marín-Guirao et al., 2018;
495 Krasensky and Jonak, 2012). Eu leaf also regulated genes with oxidoreductase activity (COX1 and
496 AOX1) under the combined treatment. In *P. oceanica* plants, heat stress modulated the expression of
497 Alternative oxidase 1a (AOX1), which plays a key role in the maintenance of the redox homeostasis
498 in the mitochondrial respiratory chain (Marín-Guirao et al., 2017; Ruocco et al., 2019a; Tutar et al.,
499 2017). Furthermore, other transcripts involved in the regulation of salicylic acid (SARD1), which is

500 a defence hormone for local and systemic acquired resistance in plants (Zhang et al., 2010), were up-
501 regulated in the presence of nutrients. All these evidences support the existence of regulatory defence
502 machineries in plants that had already experienced stress conditions in their local environments,
503 giving prominence to different strategies adopted by plants to counteract stress conditions previously
504 observed in Pazzaglia et al. (2020).

505 **4.1.2 SAM response to single and multiple stressors depends on plants' origin**

506 The transcriptomic response of shoot apical meristems (SAMs) was less pronounced and differed
507 substantially from the response of leaves in the experimental treatments, which contrasts with the
508 pattern observed for the same species under severe light limitation (Ruocco et al., 2021). In addition,
509 while the leaf transcriptomic response was mostly triggered by nutrients, the SAM mainly responded
510 to warming with differences between Ol and Eu plants (Fig. 5). Eu SAM was more responsive to
511 temperature alone, while in Ol SAM the strongest transcriptomic response was observed in the
512 combined treatment (NT). Transcriptional profiles followed opposite patterns in Ol SAM and Eu
513 SAM, especially in terms of activated processes. While Ol SAM was more responsive to NT, showing
514 a lower vulnerability to T, Eu SAM showed a huge activation of specific processes in T, whereas NT
515 induced the lowest response.

516 Stress categories related to chaperon activities (“unfolded protein binding” and “heat shock protein
517 binding”) were among the most representative ones in Ol plants under temperature treatment, and in
518 Eu plants under both T and NT treatments, where also metabolic processes were highly differentially
519 regulated. In Ol SAM, temperature induced the over-expression of Heat shock proteins (HSPs) that
520 are a group of highly conserved proteins involved in the protection of cells against harmful
521 consequences of a diverse array of stressors (Beere, 2004). This evidence is in line with previous
522 studies performed on *P. oceanica*, where HSPs were upregulated in response to heat stress (Marín-
523 Guirao et al., 2016; Ruocco et al., 2021; Ruocco et al., 2019b; Traboni et al., 2018). Different HSPs
524 were also regulated in Eu SAM as a stress response shared between N and T treatments. Particularly
525 in this case, more transcripts encoding for HSPs were highly regulated, confirming the higher
526 vulnerability to temperature increase of Eu plants. Although heat stress signals are particularly
527 evident in Eu plants, important processes related to cell wall construction and starch metabolism
528 appeared to be modulated under warming conditions. In Eu SAM, different enzymes involved in
529 starch metabolism were over-expressed (e.g., AGPC, ISA3 and WXY). Their regulation in Eu
530 plants suggests that these plants were energetically active to contrast thermal stress and therefore they
531 modulated carbohydrate metabolism to provide more energy. This evidence could also explain
532 carbohydrate modulation previously observed at the rhizome level only in Eu plants (Pazzaglia et al.,
533 2020).

534 In agreement with the above evidence, Eu SAM also overexpressed key genes involved in cell wall
535 biogenesis and organization, including Cellulose synthase (CSLD5) and Xyloglucan
536 endotransglucosylase/hydrolase (XTH28). In terrestrial plants, these genes have a fundamental role
537 in load-bearing cell wall framework, showing also different regulations to environmental stimuli
538 (Sasidharan et al., 2014; Xu and Huang, 2000; Yan et al., 2019). In fact, the integrity of cell wall
539 provides important mechanical strengths to counteract abiotic stresses (Kesten et al. 2017). These
540 findings support the fact that Eu plants were metabolically active, especially in the presence of a new
541 stress factor. However, this strategy probably implied large energetic costs, especially under chronic
542 exposure to stress conditions that could explain the huge increase of shoot mortality observed in the
543 T treatment several weeks later, at the end of the experiment (-40%, Pazzaglia et al. 2020). Stress
544 responses observed in SAMs also confirmed the high sensitivity of the shoot apical meristem to acute

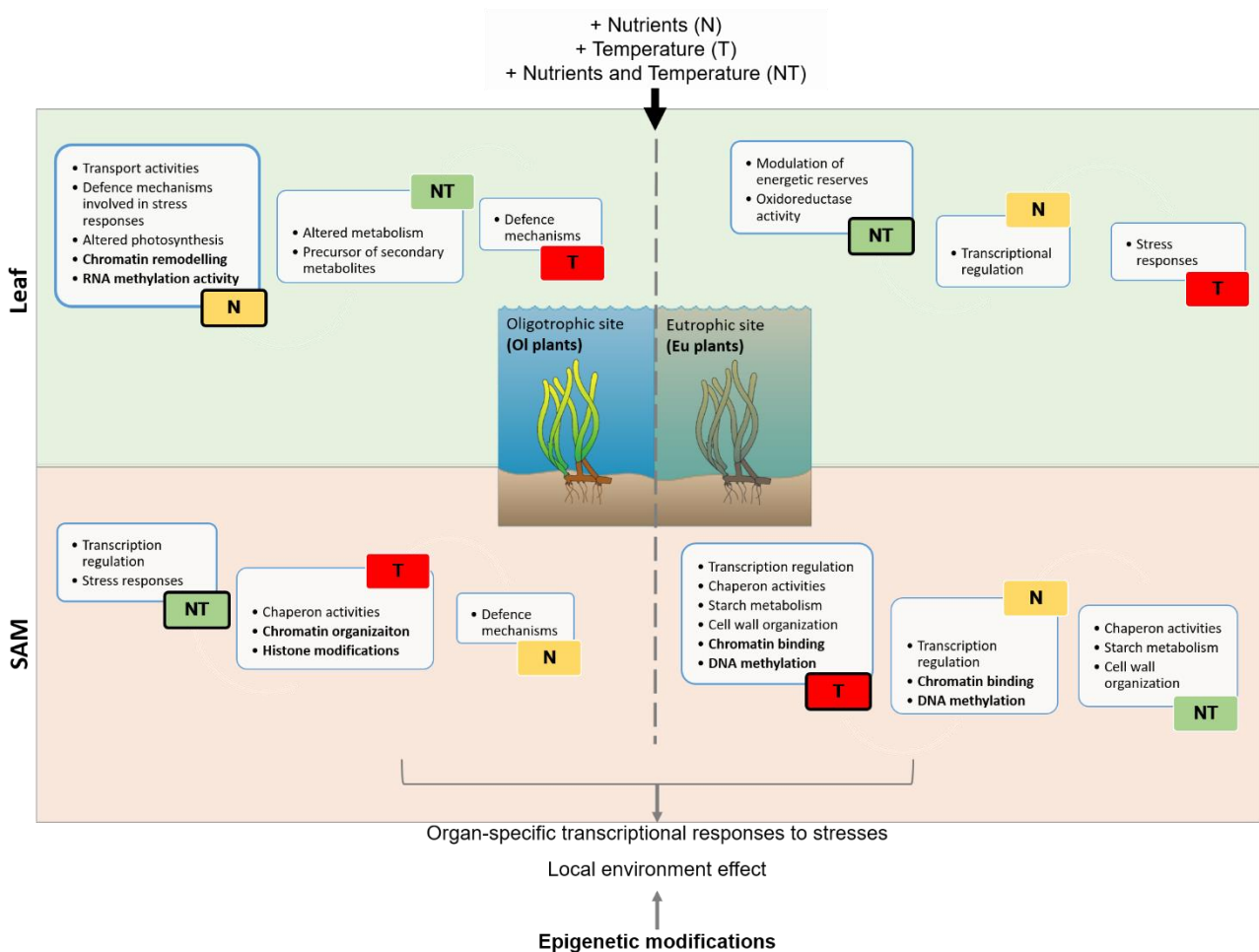
545 stresses already detected in *P. oceanica* under different experimental conditions (Ruocco et al., 2021).
546 Furthermore, the transcriptomic profiles of the SAMs observed in the present study revealed different
547 levels of response, which depends on the stress typology. The molecular pattern observed after two
548 weeks from the initial exposure to stresses may also be considered as an anticipatory signal of
549 physiological and morphological responses observed at the end of the experiment. Similarly, the
550 altered expression of stress-related genes anticipated morphological changes and population collapse
551 in *P. oceanica* under eutrophication and burial stress (Ceccherelli et al., 2018).

552 4.2 Evidence of gene-expression regulation due to epigenetic mechanisms

553 In seagrasses, little is known about the role that epigenetic mechanisms have in driving gene
554 expression responses to environmental stimuli. Only few studies have suggested that epigenetic
555 mechanisms are involved in the regulation of stress responses in marine plants, pointing out their
556 potential role in the regulation of phenotypic plasticity to environmental changes (Entrambasaguas et
557 al., 2021; Jueterbock et al., 2019; Marín-Guirao et al., 2017, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pazzaglia
558 et al., 2021; Ruocco et al., 2019b). Additionally, epigenetic marks could also be linked to the ability for
559 creating a stress-memory in plants pre-exposed to stress (Nguyen et al., 2020), and different
560 epigenetic states exist among different plant tissues, as well as among portions of different age of
561 the same tissue (Ruocco et al., 2019b). Here, Ol and Eu plants showed a substantial regulation of
562 processes related to chromatin modifications in both leaf and SAM. In particular, epigenetics
563 mechanisms were mostly activated in organs where Ol and Eu plants showed the largest
564 transcriptomic modulation, suggesting a potential epigenetic regulation of gene expression responses.

565 Ol leaf mainly regulated genes involved in the modification of the chromatin structure. Chromatin
566 remodelling complexes are conserved proteins that harbour ATPase/helicase of the SWITCHING
567 DEFECTIVE2/SUCROSE NON-FERMENTING2 (SWI2/SNF2) to control DNA accessibility
568 regulating gene expression (Clapier and Cairns, 2009). Recently, these complexes were also found to
569 regulate nitrate responsive genes in maize (Meng et al., 2020). In that case, the core subunit of the
570 SWI/SNF-type ATP-dependent chromatin remodelling complex interacted with high affinity nitrate
571 transporters repressing their expression in the presence of nitrate supply. Similarly, Ol leaf increased
572 the expression of transcripts encoding for chromatin remodelling proteins under high nutrient
573 conditions. As mentioned above, an excess of nutrients induced the greatest transcriptomic response
574 in Ol leaf and most of the genes involved in epigenetic modifications were differentially expressed
575 under such conditions. Although it is hard to find a functional relation between gene expression
576 changes and epigenetic variations, this study provides new insights into the potential key role played
577 by chromatin modifications in the regulation of target genes under environmental disturbances.
578 Likewise, different GO enriched terms related to chromatin remodelling and modifications were also
579 observed in Eu plants. These plants showed a great transcription regulation under stress conditions,
580 especially in the SAM, where different transcription factors were shared between N and T treatments.
581 Notably, processes related to protein-DNA binding and chromatin modifications were modulated in
582 response to single stressors. In this case, the gene encoding for AT-hook motif nuclear localization
583 (AHL) proteins, which belongs to a family of transcription factors, was overexpressed in N and T.
584 The AT-hook motif is a small DNA-binding motif, which recognizes specific DNA structures
585 activating or inhibiting the expression of different genes (Nagano et al., 2001). In plants, it is over-
586 expressed under various abiotic stresses, including drought, salinity and temperature (Zhou et al.,
587 2016). Furthermore, in Eu SAM, different histone variants were mostly regulated under single
588 stressors (H2B, H3.2, H3.3), where a larger number of DEGs was observed. In *Arabidopsis thaliana*,
589 histone proteins, especially H3.3 was found to be preferentially enriched in the 3' end of the
590 transcribed regions, which was also related to gene body methylation (Wollmann et al., 2017). Further

591 observations revealed that the recruitment of these complexes induced transcriptional reprogramming
 592 during the differentiation of plant cells in response to biotic and abiotic stresses (Tripathi et al., 2015).
 593 In this study, eutrophic (Eu) plants activated transcriptional reprogramming to contrast nutrient stress
 594 for counteracting also the negative effect induced by the exposure to a new stress factor, which was
 595 temperature. A similar regulation involving physiological, genetic and epigenetic responses was
 596 previously observed in *P. oceanica* plants during warming (Marín-Guirao et al., 2019). In that case,
 597 plants showed altered expression levels of genes involved in epigenetic modifications that are at the
 598 intersection between stress tolerance and flowering processes. As stated by the authors, this regulation
 599 could be related to different response mechanisms adopted by plants to survive warming conditions.
 600 Moreover, it is worth underlining that stable epigenetic states regulating phenotypic variations can be
 601 inherited across generations favouring stress memorization (Bruce et al., 2007). Since plants
 602 previously exposed to stress stimuli can store stress information to be primed and more active to cope
 603 with the reoccurrence of stress events (Bäurle and Trindade 2020; Friedrich et al., 2019), this study
 604 provides epigenetic signatures that could suggest the existence of a transcriptional memory in plants
 605 that had already experienced stressful conditions due to local pressures.



606
 607 **Figure 5.** Summary description of main results for leaf and SAM in Ol and Eu plants exposed to single
 608 (nutrients addition and temperature increases) and multiple stressors (nutrients addition plus temperature
 609 increase). In the leaf of Ol plants, N induced the greatest transcriptomic reprogramming followed by NT and
 610 T, contrary to the SAM, where NT induced the larger transcriptomic regulation. In Eu plants, leaf showed a
 611 greatest reprogramming under NT followed by N and T, while the SAM showed a larger transcriptomic
 612 regulation in T. Transcriptomic data revealed an organ-specific vulnerability to stressors, which depends on
 613 local environmental conditions, with the potential role of epigenetic regulation (see the main text for more
 614 detail).

615

616 **5. Conclusions and perspectives**

617 The present work represents a further step in the comprehension of *P. oceanica* responses to single
618 and multiple stressors. The transcriptomic profiles of plants under single and multiple stress
619 conditions provide a valuable playground for further studies and future insights on the response of
620 marine plants to realistic and complex scenarios, as those already occurring under the framework of
621 climate change. Local pressures experienced by plants in their home environment have a marked
622 influence on plants' transcriptional responses under unprecedented stress conditions, influencing their
623 ability to withstand current and future challenges. This study also highlighted an organ-specific
624 vulnerability to stress, with a higher sensitivity of the leaf to high nutrients addition, in contrast to
625 SAM, which was more responsive to temperature increase. This contrasting
626 sensitivity/responsiveness opens the possibility to improve our ability to manage and protect seagrass
627 meadows by monitoring the response of appropriate plant organs with specific responsiveness to
628 particular stressful conditions. Plants that experienced for the first time eutrophic waters needed to be
629 more active to cope with the nutrient excess conditions expressing different genes related to
630 metabolic, detoxification and photosynthesis processes, contrary to plants pre-exposed to eutrophic
631 waters that only required the activation of basic processes to withstand high nutrient levels. In the
632 latter, the activation of specific processes related to starch synthesis and its degradation and cell wall
633 organization suggests that eutrophic plants invested energy to counteract the exposure to a new stress
634 condition (i.e., high temperature), increasing shoot mortality in the case of a chronic stress exposure.
635 The pre-exposure to local environmental conditions influences the degree of transcriptomic responses
636 of the SAM to single and multiple stressors. In this case, plants already experiencing local pressures
637 at their home site resulted more vulnerable to temperature increases. In a global warming scenario,
638 these results suggest that meadows that are already impacted by local pressures (e.g., eutrophic
639 conditions) will be compromised by future temperature increases.

640 Chromatin remodelling seems to be involved in plant responses to different stressors, since a different
641 regulation of epigenetic-related genes was observed among plants and treatments. However, more
642 studies on chromatin modifications are required to better understand the function of epigenetic
643 changes in driving stress responses in seagrasses and to identify specific "actors" involved in the
644 process. This could also provide new insights into the mechanisms that regulate the transcriptional
645 memory of the SAM, which is fundamental for understanding seagrass survival to future
646 environmental changes. Moreover, the molecular pattern observed in the SAM differed according to
647 the stress typology and plants' origin, and anticipated the high shoot mortality observed several weeks
648 later after chronic exposure to warming, suggesting its strong potential as a sentinel-organ to monitor
649 seagrass meadows under direct and indirect human pressures. Since *P. oceanica* is widely distributed
650 along the Mediterranean coasts, from pristine to highly disturbed sites, it is important to bear in mind
651 that local conditions could play an important role in their ability to withstand regional and global
652 climate change-related stressors. In the framework of the UN decade of ecosystem restoration, similar
653 studies are necessary to improve conservation and restoration management of seagrasses and marine
654 natural resources in general.

655 **Acknowledgements**

656 This work was partially supported by the project SEA-Stress (Israeli-Italian Scientific and
657 Technological Cooperation, MAECI, Italy), by the project Marine Hazard, PON03PE_00203_1,
658 (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, MIUR), and by the project Assemble Plus
659 (EU-H2020, Grant No. 730984). JP Ph.D. fellowship was funded by the University of Trieste and the

660 Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn (SZN). We thank the Molecular Biology and Sequencing and the
661 Bioinforma Services of the SZN for transcriptome sequencing and bioinformatics analysis. We also
662 thank the Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT) for
663 allowing AS taking part of this project.

664

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: