Treated and highly diluted wastewater impacts diversity and energy fluxes of freshwater food webs

Ioar de Guzman<sup>1</sup>, Arturo Elosegi<sup>2</sup>, Daniel von Schiller<sup>3</sup>, Jose González<sup>4</sup>, Laura Paz<sup>5</sup>, Benoit Gauzens<sup>6</sup>, Ulrich Brose<sup>7</sup>, Alvaro Antón<sup>8</sup>, Nuria Olarte<sup>8</sup>, Jose Montoya<sup>9</sup>, and Aitor Larrañaga<sup>1</sup>

April 16, 2024

## Abstract

The implementation of Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs) brought great improvement in river ecological status. However, WWTP effluents still contain a complex cocktail of pollutants whose environmental effects might go unnoticed, masked by other stressors in the receiving waters or by spatiotemporal variability. We conducted a BACI (Before-After/Control-Impact) ecosystem manipulation experiment to assess the effects of a well-treated and highly diluted effluent on diversity and food web dynamics in an unpolluted stream. Although effluent toxicity was low, it reduced diversity, increased primary production and herbivory, and reduced energy fluxes associated to terrestrial inputs. Altogether, the effluent decreased total energy fluxes in stream food webs, showing that treated wastewater can lead to important ecosystem-level changes, affecting the structure and functioning of stream communities even at high dilution rates. Our study highlights the need for further efforts to treat polluted waters to conserve aquatic food webs.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>University of the Basque Country Faculty of Science and Technology

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>University of Barcelona

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Rey Juan Carlos University

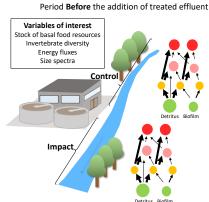
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>iDiv

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research Halle-Jena-Lepizig

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>University of the Basque Country

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique



## Period After starting the addition Hypotheses Biofilm biomass ↑ Invertebrate diversity ↓ and density ↑ Herbivory ↑ Total energy fluxes ↑ Energy transfer efficiency ↑ Control Impact

