

# Environmental and Sustainability Indicators

## The Stream Quality Index: A Multi-Indicator Tool for Enhancing Environmental Management

--Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Assessment of stream health is a function of the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of the water body. While monitoring of all three indicator types is common, combining them into a unified assessment of stream quality is rare. In this study, a unified index was developed that compares biological response to physical and chemical stressors for southern California wadeable streams using a scientifically rigorous, easy-to-understand tool intended to facilitate stream management. The Stream Quality Index (SQI) is based on a stressor-response empirical model that quantifies the expected likelihood that chemical and physical stressors will impact multiple components of biological condition. While the individual stressor and response components are quantitative and have similar meaning across a variety of environmental settings, the final SQI narrative assessment is categorical and designed to be directly actionable within a management context. The four narrative assessment categories are: (1) "healthy and unstressed" (i.e., unimpacted biology, no stressors); (2) "healthy and resilient" (i.e., stressed, but biological communities are healthy); (3) "impacted and stressed" (i.e., impacted biology from observed stressors); and (4) "impacted by unknown stress" (i.e., biology is impacted, but stressors are low). To facilitate adoption by managers, a web-based application was developed that not only maps overall SQI results, but also enables users to readily access underlying quantitative information for stressors and biological responses. This transparent design was intended; high-level output and foundational components of the SQI are relevant for different audiences and details are not sacrificed for accessibility.</p>
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**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COASTAL WATER RESEARCH PROJECT**  
*A Public Agency for Environmental Research*

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Dr. João Carlos Marques  
Editor-in-Chief  
Environmental and Sustainability Indicators

I am pleased to resubmit our manuscript, “The Stream Quality Index: A multi-indicator tool for enhancing environmental management community”, to be considered as an original research article in Environmental & Sustainability Indicators.

We greatly appreciate the comments provided by our reviewers and have fully considered them in our revision of the manuscript. Our line-by-line responses to each comment are provided below. In short, we have clarified many aspects of the technical foundation of the index to more clearly describe the purpose of the SQI. These include additions to the methods and detailed responses to specific reviewer comments where we felt clarifications were needed.

Our organization agrees to the open access policies of the journal and will submit the appropriate fees if the paper is published. All figures should be printed in color. Again, we appreciate the opportunity to publish our work in Environmental and Sustainability Indicators.

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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:

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*Response to reviewer comments on the manuscript “The Stream Quality Index: A Multi-Indicator Tool for Enhancing Environmental Management” by M. W. Beck, R. D. Mazor, S. Theroux, and K. C. Schiff. Submitted to Environmental and Sustainability Indicators.*

*We thank both reviewers for providing detailed and thoughtful comments on our manuscript. Our responses to these comments are below.*

Reviewer 1:

Title

1. We don't know why "For Enhancing Environmental Management Communication" should be placed in the title? What is the Environmental Management Communication? Is the purpose of this article for environmental management communication?

*The intent of the SQI is to synthesize complex biological, chemical, and physical data for communication of results to decision-makers. We feel this addresses a critical need for environmental management and we describe the need for such tools in the introduction, e.g., lines 32-38, 50-54. Further, the prospectus for this journal focuses on promoting “research on indicators as drivers for environmental management”. We have removed “communication” from the title to more closely align with the goals of the journal.*

Highlights

1. About five highlights, we think these are general procedures and it is not the highlight of this research. We recommend to compare the difference with other articles, and evaluate the contribution, importance and creativity into the highlights.

*The highlights were modified to emphasize results and what the SQI provides.*

- *The Stream Quality Index (SQI) integrates biological, physical, and chemical data*
- *The SQI was created for southern California but can be calibrated for other regions*
- *SQI categories summarized biological condition and likely vs. unlikely stressors*
- *Underlying data were preserved to help identify factors driving condition*
- *A web application was created to calculate SQI scores and access regional data*

Introduction

1. The introduction covers some references, however does not introduce the scientific problem. How will this study contribute beyond the current literature?

*This study contributes to the current literature by describing and applying an approach for synthesizing multiple lines of evidence for routine condition assessment. This addresses a critical need within the management community because assessment tools that combine multiple indicators into a unified index are exceedingly rare (line 50). We have added this sentence to the final paragraph of the introduction: “Our approach will contribute to the current literature by presenting a proof of concept for synthesizing multiple condition assessments in an easily communicated format, while retaining the individual components for follow-up analysis.”*

2. The motivation is not clear.

*Please see our response to the previous comment.*

3. Line 35-38, which shows that this article is an application purpose, not the purpose of scientific research.

*Yes, this article describes the technical foundation for the SQI that is intended for use in applied settings. We consider this both a scientific and applied exercise.*

2. Line 41-49, in addition to these indicators, it is recommended to quote some other important indicators.

*Additional citations were added: Rankin 1995, Karr 1999, Joy and Death 2002.*

3. Line 50-67, there are many integrated models or indicators. It is recommended to quote and explain the characteristics of other author's models and guide them to the scientific and academic motivation of this article.

*We believe that there are few integrated models or indicators that combine chemical, biological, and physical assessments. This was our primary motivation for this article. We welcome the reviewer to suggest any references that we may have missed.*

4. Line 66-67, is this the conclusion? This sentence suggests moving to the previous paragraph. What are the differences between the attempts and goals of this article, and the recommendations are guided. *The addition to the introduction to clarify how this work contributes to the current literature provides a context for this statement. The sentence was also revised: "This is a likely improvement over treating indicators as equivalent and simply "averaging" results to assess overall condition."*

## 2. Methods.

1. Line 74-76, why choose Southern California wadeable streams? It is recommended to increase the environmental background content.

*We use Southern California data to develop our proof of concept and emphasize that the framework can be applied in other regions. There is an immediate need in Southern California for an integrated index, as previously mentioned on lines 75-77 and 383-386. Considerations in applying the framework to other regions are described on lines 248-249, 464-466, and 499-501.*

2. Line 79, why only choose benthic macroinvertebrates, algae? others? fish and aquatic insects? other indicators?

*California has developed bioassessment methods for macroinvertebrates and algae and their inclusion in the SQI was appropriate. However, we suggest that alternative bioassessment response indicators could be included where they are available (e.g., alternative bioassessment endpoints, line 502). Our framework is flexible by design to include different indicators or stressor data that vary between regions or monitoring programs, as noted in our response to the previous comment.*

3. Line 81, why are there no other factors such as dissolved oxygen?

*We specifically chose TN, TP, and conductivity because they are widely measured in many monitoring programs and they are commonly associated with human land development gradients in other regions. These variables also act as surrogates for unmeasured water quality pollutants or their effects, such as low DO, which are difficult or expensive to quantify at large spatial scales. Please see lines 149-158. As mentioned in response #2, the SQI can be modified to incorporate the relevant stressors in other regions.*

4. The four narrative assessment categories? How to align with management processes? Management processes?

*Line 89 was revised for clarity: "The four narrative assessment categories were defined in a way that would align with management processes by describing biological condition and suggesting which stressors are associated with the condition. These categories provide a first indication of how biology*

*at a site responds to stressors, which could then be used to prioritize follow-up actions, such as causal assessment.”*

5. Line 117-123, this paragraph is important. But we don't know these definitions and criteria, such as the 1st, 10th, and 30th percentiles of scores?

*The sentence was revised for clarity and citations to Stoddard et al. 2006 and Ode et al. 2016 were added: “For both the CSCI and ASCI, the 1st, 10th, and 30th percentiles of scores at reference sites with minimal human disturbance [4,5] were used to categorize all sites as very likely to have altered biological condition...”*

6. Line 125-136, this paragraph is crucial. The paragraph tell us about the integrated process of the two organisms or indicators. Is there an objective approach? Also, if there are three species or more?

*We're not entirely sure what was meant by “objective approach”. If the comment relates to objectivity of the methods for how we integrated indicators, then are approach was guided by the independent applicability of each index (line 129). This allowed information from both indices to be objectively considered in the assessment of overall biological condition. The condition assessments provided by both indices were also based on percentile distributions of reference sites, as noted above, which are based on empirical results and implicitly objective. Given these two criteria, we feel the combination of the two indices is fairly objective. A similar approach could be applied to more than two indicators.*

*If the comment relates to the inclusion of the stakeholder group as potentially affecting our objectivity, please see are response to reviewer two (response to comment starting “An obscure aspect for me is...”).*

7. Line 144-148, the sentence is like the introduction and discussion.

*These sentences were removed.*

8. Line 157-158, the sentence is like the introduction and discussion. How to deal with similar problems or factors?

*This sentence is critical for describing our choice of water chemistry data for the SQI and also describes an important caveat. We have retained the content. Also please see our response to comments on lines 79 and 81.*

9. Line 165-170, About IPI and CRAM, our question is how to (fine sands, fines, or concrete, Shannon diversity of aquatic habitat types, Shannon diversity of natural Substrate types, evenness of flow habitat types, and riparian vegetation cover).

*We have added the following sentence for clarification: “Detailed descriptions of each metric, including how they are measured, are included in Rehn et al. (2018).”*

10. Line 210-212, this is the highlight of this article. Is there a statistical hypothesis?

*This equation describes how we defined the likelihood of observing altered biological condition from both physical and habitat stressors. It is a deterministic equation and not a statistical hypothesis test.*

11. Line 225-228, our question is the four possible combinations of biology (4 categories) and stressors (4 categories)? Should be  $4 \times 4 = 16$ ? How to reduce it to 4?

*These are summarized categories for the overall SQI that combine information from the separate biological and stressor categories. We have added a sentence for clarity: “A healthy/impacted condition could result from one or both biological indices and a stressed/unstressed condition could result from one or both stressor types.” Also, please see our response to the first comment from reviewer 2 where we have elaborated on the SQI condition categories.*

## Results

1. The paragraph of results seems to be a statistical text, it is inadequate and should be strengthened. In particular, it is recommended to write the contents of ecological phenomenon and meaning.

*Our study presents a tool for communicating multiple indicators in a synthesized format to environmental managers. This information is empirically combined following well-described stressor-response relationships for aquatic biota, with appropriate citations describing the theory and understanding in the methods. Our results present the application of the SQI to southern California streams and the discussion describes how the SQI can be used in practice, including limitations and comparisons with existing tools. Although a detailed discussion of the ecological phenomenon for our specific results is not within the scope of this paper, we have included some text in the discussion to clarify some of the relationships reflected by the SQI:*

*“To properly capture relationships among indicators of stream quality in a way that is consistent with conceptual modeling of a healthy stream ecosystem, it was crucial to develop an index that accurately reflected biology’s role as a direct measure of condition, and that reflects physical and chemical indicators as measures of stress. These relationships were captured using the stressor-response model that reflected an empirical and ecological relationship between biology and stressors. Empirically, we quantified the likelihood of different sites having altered biology across stressor gradients. Ecologically, stream biota have documented and mechanistic responses to the in-stream or riparian stressors included in the SQI [2, 19, 25, 26]. These linkages were reflected in the separate categorical components of the SQI; altered biology was more often associated with high stressors. Detailed outputs provided additional information about ecological relationships. For example, some sites were altered for the ASCI and had high water chemistry stressors, whereas other sites were altered for the CSCI and had high physical habitat stressors. This reflects a potential difference in the sensitivity of algae to water chemistry and macroinvertebrates to physical habitat, highlighting the utility of using different assemblages to assess condition.”*

## Overall

1. The Stream Quality Index: A Multi-Indicator Tool for Enhancing Environmental Management Communication could be one of the original and rigorous studies of international importance.

## Reviewer 2:

The authors present a predictive index for stream quality (SQI) that looks to integrate biological, physical, and chemical status, but the main innovation is the attempt to relate biology to stressors, including as well a web application to calculate SQI scores from regional data with the purpose to involve managers and wider audiences. This index that compares observed benthic macroinvertebrate taxa and metrics at a site to those expected under near pristine conditions are based on models (logit link functions) that estimate the likely macroinvertebrate community from environmental parameters/indices.

I consider the present manuscript a valuable and original work where, nevertheless, I call the authors attention for some difficulties in different steps of the process, which should deserve, at least some observations in the discussion.

The "four narrative assessment categories" of SQ are, in my opinion not very clear. E.g. "healthy and unstressed" or "healthy and resilient" are not easy to differentiate. The same difficulties arise between "impacted and stressed" and "impacted by unknown stress", especially when the authors insist with the



potential use by different audiences. The separate categorical outputs created for the biological condition and stressor condition are also very confusing: this is, the ones resulting from high/low CSCI and high/low ASCI.

*As reviewer one also points out, the explanation of the categorical outputs was somewhat confusing. We have added clarity to better explain the assessment categories (starting line 228): "A healthy/impacted condition could result from one or both biological indices and a stressed/unstressed condition could result from one or both stressor types. The first SQI category is typically assigned to pristine sites (healthy biology, low stress), whereas the fourth category is typically assigned to degraded sites (impacted biology, high stress). The second and third categories are assigned when biology and stressors provide different information. A healthy and resilient site has unaltered biology, but stressors are present (i.e., the biota are resilient to stress). A site that is impacted by an unknown stress has altered biology, but neither water chemistry nor physical habitat stress is observed (i.e., biology is likely impacted by other stressors not included in the SQI)."*

*Additional content was added to the following paragraph describing the separate biological and stressor categories:*

*Line 232: "An overall healthy condition for the SQI only occurs if both the CSCI and ASCI indicate healthy conditions, whereas an impacted biological condition is assigned to the overall SQI if one or both biological indices is/are impacted."*

*Line 238: "An overall unstressed condition for the SQI occurs if both chemistry and physical habitat stress are low, whereas a stressed condition is assigned to the overall SQI if one or both of the stressor types is/are high or the additive effects of both exceed the threshold."*

I also find the categories too narrow based on the percentiles of scores at reference sites. Is it possible to distinguish increasing degradation with SQI? This is, I doubt that the numeric values are in fact sensitive to assess differences between sites in marginal or extreme conditions...

*We certainly agree that the categorical outcomes reduce sensitivity of the index to distinguish sites along condition gradients. Our goal was to create a communication tool that synthesizes multiple indices in a unified format (i.e., lines 53, 58). As the reviewer correctly notes, synthesis comes at the cost of specificity. Thus, the SQI was developed as a high-level screening tool to quickly compare conditions between sites and to develop priorities accordingly. A rapid comparison of multiple biological indicators and stressor data is not possible using standalone indicators and the SQI was meant to address this need. We do encourage readers to consult the component indices of the SQI that are available on the website if more specificity is needed.*

An obscure aspect for me is also the need that the technical advisory committee "with representatives from local management institutions" may provide guidance on assigning these values. Don't they introduce too much noise in the process if they are not qualified? Does it not make very subjective the stress thresholds?.

*Inclusion of the technical advisory committee was critical in the development of the SQI. The individuals were selected based on their expertise and were also intended users of the finished product. We preferred not to develop the SQI in isolation of the management community, but rather to include them as contributors to develop a shared sense of ownership of the product. This promotes the likelihood that our intended audiences will actually use the SQI to make decisions about management priorities. Further, some decisions in the development process were not strictly scientific decisions (i.e., specific categorical thresholds for stressed/unstressed) and required feedback from the advisory committee. This provided an avenue to incorporate the scientific/technical components of the SQI (e.g., stressor-response models) with the needs of the management community (e.g., where on the spectrum do*

*we define an impact that has meaning for managers). Numerous studies have documented the inclusion of stakeholders as being critical in the application of science in decision-making (e.g., Pohjola and Tuomisto 2011, Env. Health 10:1-13).*

Another aspect that is not treated is how far this index may be influenced by the typological conditions? It has only a regional character or can be extended to other geographical regions?~

*Please see our response to reviewer 1 regarding application to locations outside of southern California (comments on lines 74-76 and 79).*

Anyway I think SQI is more important for managers to determine how different stressors influence relatively the biological condition than this idea of communication to high-level or to non-technical staff...

*The SQI addresses a specific need within the management community to synthesis multiple indicators into condition categories. This allows the results to be readily communicated, which will likely facilitate management action, as opposed to inaction or misguided responses if results are poorly communicated. The web app also allows for a detailed examination of differential and cumulative stressors that can easily be identified for follow-up action.*

Considering the structure, I think that chapter 2.3 has to be shortened since indices IPI and CRAM were previously published....

*Some details about IPI and CRAM were removed: lines 174 and 182.*

Fig.1 could be provided as a graphical abstract too...

*We have included a graphical abstract that includes a snapshot from the web application.*

Other aspects that need to be clarified/ discussed:

Line 53. It is considered that a single unified assessment is preferable when communicating stream health to non-technical managers, but I'm not sure about this combination: it integrates sets of stressors but probably that process makes the index more complex and less sensitive to specific stressors...

*Please see our response above to your general comment.*

Line 89. It is not possible to understand how the "four narrative assessment categories" were defined in a way that would align with management processes...

*This sentence was revised in response to similar comments from reviewer 1: "The four narrative assessment categories were defined in a way that would align with management processes by indicating biological condition and suggesting which stressor categories are associated with the condition. These categories provide a first indication of how biology at a site responds to stressors, which could then be used to prioritize follow-up actions, such as causal assessment."*

Line 105. The ASCI was developed as a response end point only for lower trophic levels: this aspect does not represents a constrain in higher disturbed levels?

*Yes, the ASCI describes algal condition with implications for nutrient-processing and effects on upper trophic levels. This was edited: "The Algal Stream Condition Index (ASCI, Theroux et al. in prep) was similarly developed as a biological response endpoint for primary production, with implications for ecosystem function."*

Line 142. I don't think that habitat is a responsive metric, but on contrary, it can be described by metrics...

*Revised: "Depending on the context, stream health or condition can be reflected by physical habitat as a response to external drivers"*

Line 308. I don't find it's interesting to distinguish patterns between ASCI and CSCI. In fact they should be analyzed together for SQI...

*The ASCI and CSCI are response endpoints that describe different components of the biological community. Because biota respond differently to stressors depending on their ecology and environmental needs, the ASCI and CSCI could be diagnostic of different drivers of stream health. Our technical advisory committee also supported the use of both indices in the SQI and describing differential outputs could be of use to managers.*

Line 402. There is a crucial question arising from this work: Why not then to integrate water and habitat quality in a more general ecological quality assessment?

*As noted above, our intent was not to create a general assessment tool that simply averages multiple indicators. There is potential value in simplifying information for communication, while respecting the independent applicability of each component index. There are many cases where biology does not reflect stressors and vice versa and our combined index sufficiently describes these exceptions.*

Line 408. The idea of categories implies that they are defined for a certain region and cannot be generalized or applied in other areas... This aspect is not present in the limitations of the SQI approach.. *Please see our responses above regarding application to other regions. Specific suggestions for applying the SQI beyond southern California are provided at several points in the text.*

- The Stream Quality Index (SQI) integrates biological, physical, and chemical data
- The SQI was created for southern California but can be calibrated for other regions
- SQI categories summarized biological condition and likely vs. unlikely stressors
- Underlying data were preserved to help identify factors driving condition
- A web application was created to calculate SQI scores and access regional data

# **The Stream Quality Index: A Multi-Indicator Tool for Enhancing Environmental Management**

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## Abstract

Assessment of stream health is a function of the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of the water body. While monitoring of all three indicator types is common, combining them into a unified assessment of stream quality is rare. In this study, a unified index was developed that compares biological response to physical and chemical stressors for southern California wadeable streams using a scientifically rigorous, easy-to-understand tool intended to facilitate stream management. The Stream Quality Index (SQI) is based on a stressor-response empirical model that quantifies the expected likelihood that chemical and physical stressors will impact multiple components of biological condition. While the individual stressor and response components are quantitative and have similar meaning across a variety of environmental settings, the final SQI narrative assessment is categorical and designed to be directly actionable within a management context. The four narrative assessment categories are: (1) “healthy and unstressed” (i.e., unimpacted biology, no stressors); (2) “healthy and resilient” (i.e., stressed, but biological communities are healthy); (3) “impacted and stressed” (i.e., impacted biology from observed stressors); and (4) “impacted by unknown stress” (i.e., biology is impacted, but stressors are low). To facilitate adoption by managers, a web-based application was developed that not only maps overall SQI results, but also enables users to readily access underlying quantitative information for stressors and biological responses. This transparent design was intended; high-level output and foundational components of the SQI are relevant for different audiences and details are not sacrificed for accessibility.

*Key words* Bioassessment, communication, stream health, stressors, synthesis, visualization

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Assessments of stream health are a function of monitoring the water body's physical, chemical, and biological integrity (33 USC §§ 1251, 1972). Monitoring physical habitat integrity facilitates determination of whether all necessary environmental niches (e.g., hydrology, riparian structure, in-stream substrate) are present to support a diverse aquatic community [1]. Monitoring chemical integrity facilitates determination of whether toxic compounds are present, as well as whether minerals are sufficiently balanced to support aquatic life [2,3]. Monitoring biological integrity, which is closest to the actual assessment of stream health, facilitates determination of whether unmeasured physical or chemical parameters are impacting otherwise balanced ecosystems [4,5], including any synergistic effects of measured and unmeasured parameters [6].

Tremendous effort is expended to monitor all three types of stream integrity indicators. Despite varying spatial scales and complexities, all monitoring programs share the challenge of how to effectively communicate physical, chemical, and biological data in a scientifically rigorous, repeatable, and readily understandable way to non-scientists [7]. Because most environmental managers are not scientists, and similarly, scientists may not understand the applied context for technical products, the communication of ecological data for decision-making can be challenging. Furthermore, ecological data are rarely black and white, leading to many

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<sup>1</sup> ASCI: Algal Stream Condition Index, BMI: Benthic Macroinvertebrate Index, CRAM: California Rapid Assessment Methods, CSCI: California Stream Condition Index, CWQI: Canadian Water Quality Index, IBI: Index of Biological Integrity, IPI: Index of Physical Habitat Integrity, PHAB: Physical Habitat, SMC: Stormwater Monitoring Coalition, SQI: Stream Quality Index

management decisions made in the “grey zone” [8]. This is particularly true when physical, chemical, and biological indicators are not in complete agreement with one another.

Multiple well-known tools exist for effectively assessing and evaluating different components of stream condition. Bioassessment tools include the Index of Biological Integrity [9,10], Observed to Expected ratios [11,12], and hybrids of the IBI and O/E [13]. Chemical assessment tools include the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) Water Quality Index [14,15]. Physical habitat assessment tools [16], which are less common, include the California Rapid Assessment Method [17,18] and the more recently developed Index of Physical Integrity [19]. These established tools are typically used to separately address chemical, physical, and biological components of the United States CWA and under the Porter-Cologne Act in the state of California.

An assessment tool that combines physical, chemical, and biological indicators into a single unified assessment is exceedingly rare [20]. Much more commonplace are instances where multiple indicators are individually simplified and presented as a group, leaving managers to decide which is most important [8]. However, a single unified assessment is preferable when communicating stream health to non-technical managers. A single scale provides straightforward context for comparing one site to another, for ranking sites for management actions, and for monitoring improvements at a site following implementation of management actions (or monitoring potential degradation where management actions are not implemented).

While such a unified assessment tool is possible to develop for use in a single environmental setting, it has long been a challenge to design a technically robust tool that produces assessments that have similar meanings in different environmental settings, that provides clues as to which stressor(s) is/are impacting biological indicator(s), and that can be replicated elsewhere. The goal



of this study was to develop a tool that meets all three criteria. Because biological indicators provide direct measures of aquatic life, while physical and chemical measures provide supporting information about the stressors that may affect aquatic life, this study sought to develop a method for combining the three indicators in a way that would preserve the types of information provided by each. Our approach will contribute to the current literature by presenting a proof of concept for synthesizing multiple condition assessments in an easily communicated format, while retaining the individual components for follow-up analysis. This is a likely improvement over treating indicators as equivalent and simply “averaging” results to assess overall condition.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 General Approach**

The conceptual approach used in this study is based on a stressor-response relationship between biology and the stream environment (Figure 1). Specifically, the underlying stressor-response relationships that define the final narrative categories for overall stream condition are based on empirical models that quantify an expected likelihood of chemical or physical stressors impacting the separate components of biological condition. Southern California wadeable streams were selected as the focus of this effort because of the extensive and varied levels of stress and biological impacts. Moreover, southern California is home to many environmental managers with a variety of backgrounds and experience in technical and policy issues.

Biological response components were selected based on bioassessment indices developed for California wadeable streams (i.e., benthic macroinvertebrates, algae). Water chemistry stressors

were selected that are strongly associated with biological condition in perennial streams (i.e., nutrients, conductivity). Physical habitat indices were selected that quantify flow, channel, and riparian condition observed at a site. Specific justification for the chosen stressors and their relationship to biology is described below. In short, the conceptual stressor-response model reflected by our choice of indicators is generally described as the habitat requirements for biological organisms and the alteration (i.e., response) in the structure and function of these communities along stressor gradients as habitat quality declines. These relationships establish the foundation of many bioassessment methods [4,9,10] and our stressor-response model reflects these principles.

The four narrative assessment categories were defined in a way that would align with management processes by indicating biological condition and suggesting which stressor categories are associated with the condition. These categories provide a first indication of how biology at a site responds to stressors, which could then be used to prioritize follow-up actions, such as causal assessment. The SQI web-based application was designed in a way that would give users easy access to descriptions of the biological, chemical, and physical components that underlie the unified assessment, depending on the desired level of information within the stressor-response paradigm.

## **2.2 Biological response components of the SQI**

### **2.2.1 Characterizing biological condition**

To characterize biological condition, a pair of quantitative bioassessment indices – for benthic macroinvertebrates (BMI) and algal communities, respectively – were used that have been

developed for California streams [13,21]; the indices were treated as complementary assessment tools in the SQL.

The California Stream Condition Index (CSCI, [13]) is a predictive index that compares observed benthic macroinvertebrate taxa and metrics at a site to those expected under least disturbed reference conditions (sensu [4]). Expected values at a site are based on models that estimate the likely macroinvertebrate community relative to factors that naturally influence biology [22,23].

The Algal Stream Condition Index (ASCI, [21]) was similarly developed as a biological response endpoint for primary production, with implications for ecosystem function; the ASCI is a non-predictive multi-metric index (i.e., it uses a uniform, statewide reference expectation) that incorporates both diatoms and soft-bodied algae. Scores for both the CSCI and ASCI can range from 0 to ~ 1.4, with a score of 1 at sites in reference condition and lower values indicating biological degradation. Both communities are used as standard assessment measures for perennial wadeable streams in California.

Index scores were compared to the distribution of scores at reference sites statewide to identify biological condition classes that described the likelihood of biological alteration. For both the CSCI and ASCI, the 1st, 10th, and 30th percentiles of scores at reference sites with minimal human disturbance [4,5] were used to categorize all sites as very likely to have altered biological condition (scores less than the 1st percentile), likely altered (scores between the 1st and 10th percentile), possibly altered (scores between the 10th and 30th percentiles), and likely intact (scores greater than the 30th percentile) (Table 1). This produced four classes for each index, such that each site had two categories describing separate measures of the likelihood of biological alteration in the benthic macroinvertebrate and algal communities. Both response

endpoints were jointly considered in the calculation of the SQI for evaluating overall biological condition, described below. Analysis of multiple assemblages provides a more comprehensive assessment of biological condition that can confirm overall stream health, and may also provide additional diagnostic information about stressors (as different communities may respond to different characteristics of stream habitat).

### **2.2.2 Integrating multiple measures of biological condition**

The assigned biological condition categories for each index were combined using a ranking system to create a single numeric value that represented an overall condition reflected by both biological indices. A technical advisory committee with representatives from local management institutions provided guidance on assigning these values in accordance with two principles. First, the two indices should be independently applicable, so that a measure of good health in one index cannot negate measures of poor health in the other. Second, the numeric values should be sensitive to differences between sites in marginal or extreme conditions. For example, the numeric value for a sample where both indices suggest likely intact biological communities will be higher than for a sample where one index suggests likely intact and the other suggests possibly altered. This sensitivity improves detection of small changes in condition. The final numeric values ranged from -6 to +5 (Table 1). All negative values suggest impacted conditions for one or both biological indices.

## 2.3 Stressor components

### 2.3.1 Characterizing stress

Water chemistry and physical habitat measurements, which were used to describe stressors associated with low CSCI and ASCI scores [21,24], are strongly linked to the structure and function of both invertebrate and algal assemblages [2,25,26]. Depending on the context, stream health or condition can be reflected by physical habitat as a response to external drivers. However, physical habitat herein is considered a stressor that can affect biological condition at different taxonomic levels within the stressor-response model.

The water chemistry indicators consisted of nutrients - specifically, total nitrogen (mg/L) and total phosphorus (mg/L) - and specific conductivity ( $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ ). Nitrogen, phosphorus, and conductivity are widely measured in many regional and statewide monitoring programs. These variables are commonly associated with development gradients present in the study region (e.g., urbanization, [27,28]). Additionally, these variables can act as surrogates for unmeasured or alternative water quality pollutants at a site related to eutrophication [29]. Although other contaminants that can affect aquatic organisms are sometimes measured (e.g., metals, pesticides, pharmaceuticals), observations can be sparsely distributed in the study region [24].

Eutrophication is a more ubiquitous issue in the study region, although we acknowledge that other stressors not captured by the SQI may affect biological condition.

Physical habitat conditions at a site were quantified using two indices of habitat condition developed for California water bodies: the Index of Physical Integrity (IPI, [19]) and the California Rapid Assessment Method (CRAM) for riverine wetlands [17,18]. Although IPI and CRAM scores can be correlated, the individual metrics that establish each index provide unique

information about specific components of the physical habitat. Moreover, IPI scores specifically describe instream condition, whereas CRAM scores describe riparian condition.

The IPI is an O/E index [11] based on physical habitat metrics (PHAB, [19]) that collectively characterize five components of in-stream habitat quality: percent sands, fines, or concrete, Shannon diversity of aquatic habitat types, Shannon diversity of natural substrate types, evenness of flow habitat types, and riparian vegetation cover. All five metrics are positively associated with physical habitat integrity, such that an increase in each was generally considered an improvement in site condition (percent sands, fines, or concrete is inversely scored). All physical data used to calculate these metrics were collected using standard field protocols described in [30], which are derived from protocols used in national assessments [31]. As with the CSCI, the IPI is a predictive index, and values for most metrics are compared to site-specific expectations appropriate for the stream's environmental setting. Detailed descriptions of each metric, including how they are measured, are included in [19].

In contrast to the IPI, CRAM is based on qualitative assessments of four attributes of riparian wetland function: buffer and landscape condition, hydrologic condition, physical structure, and biotic structure. Whereas the data for the IPI is derived from numerous quantitative measurements of physical habitat components collected along several transects, CRAM attributes are assessed on a whole-reach scale through visual observation. In general, CRAM characterizes larger-scale processes affecting stream condition both within and adjacent to the stream corridor, whereas the IPI focuses more narrowly on in-stream conditions. The CRAM component for buffer and landscape condition was not included further because it describes stress at scales much larger than the riparian corridor, i.e., it is a direct measure of land use and not as directly relevant for describing proximate stressors affecting or associated with biology.

### 2.3.2 Integrating multiple measures of stress

The combined impact of habitat or chemistry stressors on biological condition was evaluated by developing stress-response models that calculate the probability of observing poor biological conditions given observed levels of chemical or habitat stress. This approach eliminates the need to identify potential thresholds for identifying high levels of stress while also accounting for their combined impacts.

For both types of stress, a generalized linear model [32] was fit to calibration data for Southern California streams to quantify associations for each separate water quality or physical habitat measure with binomial categories for altered or unaltered biology (i.e., negative or positive values in Table 1). Two models were developed:

$$pChem: p(bio) \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 TN + \beta_2 TP + \beta_3 cond \quad (1)$$

$$pHab: p(bio) \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 CRAM_{hy} + \beta_2 IPI_{PCT\_SAFN} + \beta_3 IPI_{XCMG} \quad (2)$$

where  $p(bio)$  is the probability of biological alteration in equations (1) and (2) given the indicators for each chemistry or physical habitat variable. The probability of alteration is modelled using a logit link function for binomial variables, as  $\log(p/(1 - p))$ , where  $p$  defines the presence or absence of altered biology described above. Both models were created by screening collinear predictors by removing those with variance inflation factors (VIF) greater than three [33]. The most parsimonious model was then identified using backward and forward selection to minimize Akaike Information Criterion [34,35]. The selected variables for each model are shown above (equation (1), TN: total nitrogen, TP: total phosphorus, cond: specific

conductivity; equation (2),  $CRAM_{hy}$ : CRAM hydrologic structure,  $IPI_{PCT\_SAFN}$ : IPI % sands and fines,  $IPI_{XCMG}$ : IPI riparian cover).

An overall likelihood of biological alteration from both chemistry and physical habitat stressors was also estimated as a multiplicative function for  $pChem$  and  $pHab$ :

$$pOverall: p(bio) \sim 1 - ((1 - pChem) \times (1 - pHab)) \quad (3)$$

The inverse of the likelihoods was used to represent an additive effect of both chemistry and physical habitat stressors. Equations (1), (2), and (3) provided the empirical estimates of biological alteration that were used to define the categorical outputs of the SQI, defined below.

## **2.4 Combining stress and response measures into the final SQI assessment**

The empirical framework for the binomial models and combined biological condition categories established a basis for the categorical descriptions from the SQI output. These descriptions linked the quantitative data to management actions, such that the results were easily interpreted with a measure of biological condition and the relevant stressors which may or may not be related to condition. For the components in Figure 1, categorical outputs are provided by the index for the overall SQI, the biological condition, and the stress condition (Figure 2). The categorical outputs were created from a matrix combination of the respective inputs.

The overall SQI assessment categories describe four possible combinations of biology and stressors at a site from the binary categories of altered/unaltered biology and stressed/unstressed conditions: (1) healthy and unstressed, (2) healthy and resilient, (3) impacted by unknown stress, and (4) impacted and stressed. A healthy/impacted condition could result from one or both



biological indices and a stressed/unstressed condition could result from one or both stressor types. The first SQI category is typically assigned to pristine sites (healthy biology, low stress), whereas the fourth category is typically assigned to degraded sites (impacted biology, high stress). The second and third categories are assigned when biology and stressors provide different information. A healthy and resilient site has unaltered biology, but stressors are present (i.e., the biota are resilient to stress). A site that is impacted by an unknown stress has altered biology, but neither water chemistry nor physical habitat stress is observed (i.e., biology is likely impacted by other stressors not included in the SQI).

Separate categorical outputs were also created for the biological condition and stressor condition categories. The four possible outputs for the biological categories were based on the four outcomes from the combinations of high/low CSCI and high/low ASCI: (1) healthy, (2) impacted for CSCI, (3) impacted for ASCI, and (4) impacted for both. An overall healthy condition for the SQI only occurs if both the CSCI and ASCI indicate healthy conditions, whereas an impacted biological condition is assigned to the overall SQI if one or both biological indices is/are impacted. The possible stressor condition categories for a site were based on the four outcomes of the combinations of high/low chemistry stress and high/low physical habitat stress: (1) low stress, (2) stressed by chemistry, (3) stressed by habitat, (4) stressed by both, and (5) stressed by low levels of chemistry and physical stress. The fifth stress category was possible based on the additive effects of chemical and physical stressors when both were low (i.e., if *pOverall* exceeded the threshold even though *pChem* and *pHab* did not). An overall unstressed condition for the SQI occurs if both chemistry and physical habitat stress are low, whereas a stressed condition is assigned to the overall SQI if one or both of the stressor types is/are high or the additive effects of both exceed the threshold.

Thresholds for biological indices that defined altered/unaltered condition for the SQI categories were based on the tenth percentile distribution of scores at reference sites for each index (those in Table 1). Thresholds for high/low stress categories were based on a 90% likelihood of observing a biological impact from the empirical models. The stress threshold was identified by a technical advisory group and was chosen to provide a relatively even distribution of sites in the high/low stress categories. The threshold is reflective of the distribution of observations in the calibration dataset that had many sites in poor biological condition and was chosen strictly to create a more useful distribution of stress categories (i.e., as opposed to categorizing all sites as stressed if using a lower threshold). The final stress categories are therefore reflective of the observed stressor gradients that occur in the study region. Alternative thresholds should be used when applying the model in regions with different or diminished stressor gradients.

Finally, the use of a predictive model to identify healthy/impacted biology and the use of biology as a component of the index (i.e., the categorical outputs) may seem circular. However, we note that the empirical models in equations (1), (2), and (3) define the likelihood of alteration that relates stress to biology to define the overall SQI output (e.g., healthy and impacted). The biological categories as a component of the index are the modelled response endpoints in the models, but also serve as standalone endpoints that describe biological condition in the absence of the stressor-response model.

## **2.5 Calibration and validation of the SQI**

All data used to calibrate and validate the SQI were from the Southern California Stormwater Monitoring Coalition (SMC) regional watershed monitoring program in coastal southern California ([24], Figure 3). The SMC dataset represents the most comprehensive source of

wadeable stream data in southern California. Most streams in the region are non-perennial, but available data suggests the CSCI and ASCI can provide meaningful measures of stream health if sites are visited during normal sample periods when baseflow is sufficient. Because the SQI requires synoptic biological, chemistry, and physical habitat data, the final dataset used for model calibration represents only the subset of the SMC dataset where all three components were simultaneously collected. Made up of 266 sites – 75% of which were used for model calibration – this subset includes sampling dates ranging from 2009 to 2016, with relatively even distribution of samples between years. These dates were selected solely on the requisite data for calculating the SQI, i.e., the subsample of all sites monitored by the SMC that included all data needed for the SQI within each year from 2009 to 2016. Most sample events occurred between May and June following standard protocols for perennial stream surveys [30]. Only one sample event for each site was considered. Further, although the existing bioassessment methods (i.e., ASCI, CSCI) were recently developed, existing data predating the development of each index were used to estimate scores for previous years. These data were collected following sampling protocols that were sufficient for calculating each index.

The SQI was evaluated for precision (i.e., how well the underlying empirical model described the likelihood of biological alteration) and sensitivity (i.e., how sensitive the model output is to changing thresholds that define the categorical conditions). The first analysis evaluated precision in the validation dataset to determine agreement between the model and actual stress and biological conditions. For the second analysis, two critical decision points that affected the model output and categorical results of the SQI were varied to evaluate changes on overall site counts in each final SQI category. In Table 1, all sites with combined values greater than or equal to zero were considered healthy and those less than zero were considered impacted. The

effect of varying the cutoff point for healthy and impacted biology was analyzed by comparing changes in the SQI assessment categories at different levels from -6 (all healthy) to 6 (all unhealthy). Changes in the stressor thresholds for the likelihood of observing altered biology that defined the categorical results were also evaluated.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 SQI patterns**

Among all sites, the overall SQI categorized a majority of sites as having altered biology under high stress conditions (impacted and stressed, 72% of sites, Table 2). Almost 18% of sites were in the opposite category of unaltered biology in low stress conditions (healthy and unstressed). For the remaining two categories of the overall SQI, only 5% had unaltered biology but were under high stress conditions (healthy and resilient), whereas 6% sites had altered biology not related to physical or chemical stressors (impacted by unknown stress).

For the biological condition category, sites with altered conditions were more often altered for both CSCI and ASCI scores (50%) than the other categories (i.e., altered for only one index). For sites with one low-scoring index, more sites were altered for the ASCI (16%) than the CSCI (11%). Less than a quarter of all sites had unaltered biology (23%).

For stress conditions, 38% of sites were stressed by both chemistry and physical habitat stressors. More sites were stressed by water chemistry (24%) than physical habitat degradation (6%) if only one stressor was present. Over 23% of sites had low stress, and 9% of sites were stressed by the additive effect of both low chemistry and physical habitat stressors.

Spatial patterns among SQI categories in southern California generally followed elevation and land use gradients (Figures 3, 4). More altered biological communities and high stress conditions were observed toward coastal areas at lower elevation where urbanization is highest (e.g., Los Angeles, Orange County, Ventura, San Diego). Sites with altered biological condition showed similar spatial patterns as the overall SQI, although sites altered only for the ASCI were more often observed at mid-elevation across the study region, whereas sites altered only for the CSCI were more common at higher elevation areas in central and northern areas of the study region. Stress condition patterns were similar to biology, although low stress conditions also occurred at higher elevation areas in each watershed. This produced a handful of sites that had altered biology under low stress conditions at mid-elevation ranges (i.e., impacted by unknown stress, Table 2).

## 3.2 Model precision

The distinction between healthy and impacted biological communities was well-described by the estimated likelihood of biological alteration provided by the empirical models (Figure 5). Relatively good separation was observed between sites designated as healthy or impacted in the validation (dark grey boxes) data for the three stressor-response models. Slightly larger differences between the likelihood of alteration for healthy and impacted communities were observed for the chemistry model compared to the physical habitat model, suggesting an improved fit for the former (for healthy/impacted communities at validation sites,  $t = 5.6$ ,  $df = 15.97$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for *pChem*;  $t = 3.78$ ,  $df = 18.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for *pHab*). For the overall likelihood of biological alteration (*pOverall*), more sites were greater than 90% likely to be altered in the impacted category as compared to the separate *pChem* and *pHab* models. For all cases (*pChem*,

*pHab*, *pOverall*), there were no systematic differences in model results between calibration and validation datasets both qualitatively (similar distribution in the boxplots) and quantitatively ( $p > 0.05$  for models describing likelihood of alteration between site types as calibration or validation).

The underlying empirical models provided insight into instream characteristics that were related to the likelihood of biological alteration (Figures 6, 7). About 79% of sites ( $n = 212$ ) had greater than 50% likelihood of biological alteration from water chemistry stressors, and 83% ( $n = 222$ ) had greater than 50% likelihood of biological alteration from physical habitat stressors (Figure 6). Collectively, 94% ( $n = 251$ ) of sites had greater than 50% likelihood of biological alteration from the overall stress of both chemistry and physical habitat stressors.

Water chemistry and physical habitat predictors included in the empirical response models for *pChem* and *pHab* (equations (1), (2)) explained a substantial portion of variability among sites related to the occurrence of biological alteration (Table 3). The *pChem* model explained 65% of the variation among sites, whereas the *pHab* model explained 48%. All variables in the *pChem* model had VIF values less than 3 and were also included in the final set of predictors after model selection. All predictors in the *pChem* model were significantly and positively associated ( $p < 0.05$ ) with the occurrence of biological alteration, except total nitrogen which was marginally significant ( $p = 0.08$ ). For the *pHab* model, two predictors were removed that had VIF values greater than three (diversity of natural substrate and biological structure). Predictors included in the final *pHab* model after variable selection were hydrologic structure, percent sands, fines, or concrete, and riparian cover. All predictors were negatively and significantly associated with the likelihood of biological alteration, except riparian cover ( $p = 0.15$ ).

Figure 7 demonstrates how the individual components for each stressor model were related to likelihood of alteration. These partial dependency plots were created by estimating the likelihood of alteration across a range of values for each predictor, while holding other predictors constant. For each plot, the variables in each model (equations (1), (2)) not on the x-axis were held at approximate values that were associated with low stress to better understand how biological alteration may be related to each predictor. For water chemistry stressors, all were positively associated with likelihood of alteration, particularly conductivity which had the steepest per-unit increase in likelihood. Associations of biological alteration with physical habitat predictors were also as expected, except that decreases in likelihood of biological alteration were observed with increases in the three predictors (all are indicators of habitat integrity or low physical habitat stress). The strongest relationship was observed with increases in CRAM hydrologic structure, where likelihood of alteration decreased sharply with scores greater than 50.

### **3.3 Model sensitivity to biological decision points**

Results in Figure 8 show changes in the categorical SQI results based on different decision points that defined biological condition. As a general trend, lowering the cutpoint for healthy/impacted to designate more sites as healthy (-6) resulted in an increase in the number of sites designated as “low stress” for the stress condition. For the overall SQI, lowering this cutpoint also increased the number of sites designated as “healthy and unstressed” or “impacted by unknown stress”. Conversely, increasing the cutpoint for healthy/impacted to designate more sites as impacted (6) caused an increase in the number of sites designated as “stressed by chemistry and habitat” for the stress condition and sites as “impacted and stressed” or “healthy and resilient” for the overall SQI.

Changing the threshold for the likelihood values that defined stressed biology (dotted lines in Figure 6) also affected the categorical results (Figure 9). Higher thresholds shifted the number of sites to low stress conditions, whereas lower thresholds had the opposite effect of assigning more sites to high stress conditions. The number of sites that were stressed by low levels of both water chemistry and habitat conditions were relatively unchanged with different thresholds. The overall SQI categories were less affected by changing thresholds for the stress condition than for changing the cutpoint that defined healthy/impacted biology. However, higher thresholds shifted some sites from the impacted and stressed category to the impacted by unknown stress category and from the healthy and resilient category to the healthy and unstressed category.

## **4. Discussion**

The Stream Quality Index offers a solution for watershed managers seeking to synthesize large amounts of physical, chemical, and biological data about stream health. Using the SQI, users can both recognize large-scale patterns in data from multiple indicators, and improve how the data are communicated to high-level, non-technical environmental managers. This need is particularly pressing in regions like southern California, where large-scale landscape alteration and competing demands for water usage require managers to prioritize limited resources and management actions. As shown by the application of the SQI to stream data from the southern California, this tool could be used to prioritize sites for management activities on a large scale. Conversely, the SQI can be used as a valuable communication tool to highlight areas where biological objectives are not being met, which could provide a context for identifying specific stressors in a more rigorous framework (see supplemental material, Figure S1).



While the simplest way to synthesize indicators would be to treat them equivalently and simply “average” the results, this approach would mask the types of information provided by each, and ultimately could not characterize situations where these indicators disagreed – a common situation in the SMC data set. Dobbie and Clifford [36] evaluated sources of uncertainty for an integrative index of estuarine health that was based on averaging separate water quality components across different spatial units. By their own admission, averaging indicators raised concerns about the consistency and validity of interpretation and their results showed that the composite index was indeed sensitive to the parameters for averaging. This is particularly relevant when biology and stressors provide different or unexpected information about stream condition. In other words, a finding of good water chemistry should not obscure or distort an indication of poor biology, and vice versa.

To properly capture relationships among indicators of stream quality in a way that is consistent with conceptual modeling of a healthy stream ecosystem, it was crucial to develop an index that accurately reflected biology’s role as a direct measure of condition, and that reflects physical and chemical indicators as measures of stress. These relationships were captured using the stressor-response model that reflected an empirical and ecological relationship between biology and stressors. Empirically, we quantified the likelihood of different sites having altered biology across stressor gradients. Ecologically, stream biota have documented and mechanistic responses to the in-stream or riparian stressors included in the SQI [2,19,25,26]. These linkages were reflected in the separate categorical components of the SQI; altered biology was more often associated with high stressors. Detailed outputs provided additional information about ecological relationships. For example, some sites were altered for the ASCI and had high water chemistry stressors, whereas other sites were altered for the CSCI and had high physical habitat stressors.

429 This reflects a potential difference in the sensitivity of algae to water chemistry and  
430 macroinvertebrates to physical habitat, highlighting the utility of using different assemblages to  
431 assess condition.

432 As a categorical index, the SQI provides a readily interpretable description of stream conditions  
433 that is easily accessible through a web-based application. The four condition categories defined  
434 by the index (i.e., healthy and unstressed, healthy and resilient, impacted and stressed, impacted  
435 by unknown stress) can be understood by a general audience that may not need the underlying  
436 data and tools used to analyze them. In contrast, numeric indices require a benchmark or other  
437 appropriate context to interpret scores; without this information, it can be difficult to identify  
438 which values of a numeric index correspond to healthy conditions that could warrant protection,  
439 and conversely, which values correspond to impacted conditions that may be in need of  
440 intervention. Defining the condition categories from empirical models that are ultimately linked  
441 to continuous data provided a quantitative link between the two.

442 The SQI also addresses the challenge of synthesizing large amounts of information about stream  
443 condition without losing the individual components, which are readily available to the user for  
444 more in-depth exploration because the index is hierarchical. This provides a critical service by  
445 allowing users to identify likely reasons behind the categorical classification for a given site. In  
446 other words, users can determine which biological indicators account for a stream's health rating,  
447 along with which stressors may or not be associated with biological condition. Users also can  
448 identify presence or absence of physical and/or chemical stressors included in the empirical  
449 model, and which components in equations (1) and (2) may be linked to their respective stressor  
450 categories. Further, physical habitat measures (i.e., CRAM and IPI) include component metrics  
451 that can serve as additional diagnostic information to describe physical conditions (e.g., percent

sands, fines, or concrete, shading, diversity of natural substrates, etc.). An evaluation of component metrics for sites that are stressed by physical habitat may reveal which stream characteristics could be prioritized to improve condition (e.g., reduce bank erosion or increase riparian cover).

Tools that are similar to the SQI have been developed, although key differences exist. The Canadian Water Quality Index (CWQI, [14,15]) evaluates the scope, frequency, and amplitude of water quality objective exceedances for numerous parameters, resulting in a numeric value that ranges from 0 (poor) to 100 (excellent). This approach is appropriate for assessing compliance with regulatory criteria at sites where monitoring covers many parameters and occurs at regular intervals (i.e., at selected sites of interest, such as below discharge points or at mass-emission stations). In contrast, the SQI is better suited for ambient monitoring programs (e.g., [24,31]) that typically sample many sites with little or no replication and that focus on just a few indicators broadly indicative of water chemistry conditions rather than a large suite of potential stressors. Our approach is also applicable to indicators where thresholds are unavailable (e.g., CRAM or IPI), but where the relevance for measuring aquatic life support is maintained even when it has less bearing on regulatory compliance than with other approaches, such as the CWQI. Finally, the SQI approach can be directly interpreted without familiarity of established benchmarks because the empirical stress models in the SQI are expressed as probabilities of degrading biological condition, rather than discrete thresholds that may not have context.

## **4.1 Limitations of the approach**

Our theoretical framework for the SQI is not without drawbacks. The index as designed cannot accommodate additional or fewer indicators of stream condition/stress without recalibration - a

contrast to the CWQI that can include any number of available parameters. Missing data (e.g., lost samples or incomplete coverage of required data at a site) prevent calculation of the complete SQI, and the index cannot be estimated without recalibration to include or exclude individual components. However, partial output for the SQI can be obtained if, for example, only stressor data are available. The overall SQI category cannot be assigned to a site for incomplete data, but the sub-categories (e.g., biological condition category or stressor condition category) can still be obtained where the data are available.

At the same time, the initial SQI described herein was purposefully restricted to a limited number of parameters to focus on developing the foundation of the index, as we were aware that a broader scope could preclude many sites from analysis. For example, CSCI and ASCI scores for the biological components of the SQI are available at over 1,000 sites in southern California, but combining these data with the required chemical and physical stressor data reduced the total number of sites where all components were available to 267 sites. An additional concern is our choice of predictors that were purposefully limited to the most relevant and ubiquitous data for describing eutrophication (water quality) and instream/riparian condition (physical habitat) in the study region. We realize that these variables are proxies and may also be correlated with other variables (e.g., stream temperature). Thus, causation can only be partially inferred with our models and more rigorous follow-up work would be needed to identify specific stressors. Similarly, recalibration of the model and choosing appropriate thresholds for defining categorical output would be required if the framework were applied in a different setting or context (e.g., different regions or stressor gradients). This may also apply to the current dataset as new observations become available to best describe regional conditions.

## 4.2 The SQI web application

A web application was developed to make the SQI - and all of the foundational data for the overall SQI assessment - accessible to a broad user base, that in turn can readily share findings with high-level, non-technical managers and other stakeholders ([https://sccwrp.shinyapps.io/sqi\\_shiny](https://sccwrp.shinyapps.io/sqi_shiny)). The web interface uses an open source software program developed in R [37,38] to automate batch calculation of the SQI at large numbers of sites [39]. This allows the index and web application to be easily updated as new data become available for sites already in the database.

The web app's visualization features also support exploration of the data at both regional and site scales, encouraging users to explore results in different spatial contexts. Scores for each index component are provided alongside the option to view the underlying data that were used for the empirical stress models and categorical outcomes. A map allows for rapid comparison of sites of interest to the region as a whole, as well as county- or watershed-level summaries. With this information, managers can prioritize follow-up actions to identify causes of biological impacts (e.g., wildfire, bank erosion, or other sources) or pursue other appropriate management actions (e.g., formal causal analysis or site restoration). As such, the web application provides a screening tool to rapidly assess condition and identify potential stressors that may be impacting condition – insights that would be more difficult to identify via traditional research products (e.g., tabular data).

## 4.3 Conclusions

An integrated stream health index that synthesizes physical, chemical and biological indicators could be a powerful tool to support watershed management. The SQI accurately captures our understanding of the roles that physical, chemical and biological indicators play in describing stream health. Furthermore, the SQI not only combines the data into a single, managerially relevant categorical classification, the tool also preserves the data underlying the integrated assessment, enabling managers to readily access this information as they work to better understand the reasons behind the overall assessment.

The SQI is a viable approach for managers that need to synthesize large amounts of data, assign priorities based on this synthesis, and communicate these decisions to a broad range of high-level managers and other stakeholders who may lack familiarity with bioassessment and/or watershed science. In particular, the SQI could be used to convey critical insights for routine watershed assessments, permit reporting, and environmental report cards. Although the SQI is calibrated and validated specifically for southern California, USA, the approach could be applied anywhere with sufficient data. Many national and international monitoring programs that have collected data for several years could easily apply the SQI framework with alternative biological endpoints or stressor data.

## Supplement 1

SQI results for two case study sites were explored in detail to provide a narrative description of how the index can be used to inform management of water quality in perennial streams. The first example describes SQI results in an urban channel with impacted biology (County of Orange) to

complement a previous causal assessment study to identify potential stressors of low CSCI scores. The second example describes a natural channel with impacted biology but low stress that is highlighted in a [draft regional basin plan](#) for biological objectives for the San Diego region. Both examples demonstrate how the SQI can be used in the context of existing, site-specific information to support management.

## Supplement 2

An interactive website is available for viewing results of the SQI: [https://sccwrp.shinyapps.io/SQI\\_Shiny](https://sccwrp.shinyapps.io/SQI_Shiny) [40]. An R package is also available for calculating SQI scores: <https://github.com/SCCWRP/SQI> [39].

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556 Coalition (San Juan Creek).



## Figures

*Figure 1: Flowchart representation of the Stream Quality Index (SQI). The overall SQI is a function of the likelihood of observing degraded biological condition given the stressors at a site. Biological condition is assessed using macroinvertebrate (California Stream Condition Index, CSCI) and algal (Algal Stream Condition Index, ASCI) indices and stressors are evaluated based on water quality measures (total nitrogen, total phosphorus, conductivity) and physical habitat (California Rapid Assessment Method, CRAM; Index of Physical Integrity, IPI). Stress condition is empirically linked to biological condition by separate probability functions for chemistry (pCHem) and physical habitat (pHab).*

*Figure 2: Categorical site descriptions that are possible from the Stream Quality Index (SQI). The overall SQI is described as the possible outcomes from biological and stress conditions. The biological conditions are described by the possible outcomes from the CSCI and ASCI. The stress conditions are described by the possible outcomes from the chemistry and habitat stressors. A fifth stress category is possible because stress from both chemistry and habitat was additive.*

*Figure 3: Land cover and elevation gradients in the study region in southern California, USA.*

*Figure 4: Categorical site descriptions for the Stream Quality Index (SQI) at monitoring sites in Southern California. The overall SQI (top) is described as the possible outcomes from biological (middle) and stress conditions (bottom). The biological conditions are described by the possible outcomes from the CSCI and ASCI. The stress conditions are described by the possible outcomes from the chemistry and habitat stressors.*

*Figure 5: Boxplot distributions of the modelled likelihood of biological alteration relative to water chemistry (pChem, eqn. (1)) and physical habitat variables (pHab, eqn. (2)) and the additive overall stress as the product between the two (pOverall, eqn. (3)). Groups are separated into healthy or impacted biological condition at each site (Table 1) as the response measure for each model and by calibration/validation datasets (3:1 split). Model precision can be evaluated by comparing the differences between the boxplots for the validation data for healthy and impacted categories, whereas model bias can be assessed by comparing the distributions between calibration and validation data among biological state and models. Points show the four possible categorical outcomes from the overall SQI.*

*Figure 6: Relationship between stress models for water chemistry (pChem, eqn. (1)) and physical habitat (pHab, eqn. (2)). Stress models for water chemistry and physical habitat were created based on the likelihood of biological alteration for the observed stress measures. The overall stress measures (pOverall, eqn. (3)) is the product of both stress models shown in the left plot. Points represent estimated stress at a single site, with shapes showing the biological condition. The right plot shows the same points but colored by the stress condition categories that are defined by thresholds from the dotted lines.*

*Figure 7: Modelled likelihood of biological alteration from water quality (top) and physical habitat stressors (bottom). Curves are the binomial likelihood (+/- standard error) of biological condition being altered (as measured by macroinvertebrate and algal indices) across the range of observed values for water quality and physical habitat stressors on the x-axes. The water chemistry and physical habitat stress plots are derived from equations (1) and (2). Other variables in each model not on the x-axis for each plot are held constant at values for low stress*

conditions. Biological condition for observations in each stressor model is shown as rug plots on the x-axes, with healthy sites on the bottom and impacted on the top. Note that IPI metrics are positively associated with physical habitat integrity, e.g., an increase in the % sands and fines metric suggests higher physical integrity and lower observed sands and fines.

Figure 8: Changes in stress condition (left) and overall SQI categories (right) for different cut points that define healthy or impacted biology. Lower cutpoints mean more sites are designated as healthy, whereas higher cutpoints mean more sites are designated as impacted. The healthy/impacted categories are those modelled by equations (1), (2), and (3) that relate stress measures to biology. The cut point definitions are shown in Table 1.

Figure 9: Changes in stress condition (left) and overall SQI categories (right) for different thresholds defining the stress categories. Lower thresholds mean more sites are designated as high stress, whereas higher thresholds mean more sites are designated as low stress. Sites are designated as low/high stress using the continuous likelihoods from the fitted models in equations (1), (2), and (3) that relate stress measures to healthy/impacted biology. The dotted lines in Figure 6 show stress thresholds set at 90%.

## Tables

*Table 1: Combined biological condition categories for the benthic macroinvertebrate (BMI) and algal indices. The combined categories were used to model the likelihood of biological alteration given observed physical and chemical habitat stressors. Sites with combined categories greater than or equal to zero were considered biologically healthy and those less than zero (in bold) were considered biologically impacted (i.e., response variable in equations (1) and (2)). Individual biological categories for the BMI and algal indices were based on percentile distributions of scores at reference sites (i.e., 1st, 10th, and 30th percentiles) as likely intact (> 30th), possibly altered (10th - 30th), likely altered (1st - 10th), and very likely altered (< 10th). The scores associated with the percentiles for each index (CSCI, ASCI) are in parentheses.*

	Algae likely intact: (ASCI > 0.93)	Algae possibly altered: (ASCI 0.83 - 0.93)	Algae likely altered: (ASCI 0.70 - 0.83)	Algae very likely altered: (ASCI < 0.70)
BMI likely intact: (CSCI > 0.92)	5	3	<b>-1</b>	<b>-2</b>
BMI possibly altered: (CSCI 0.79 - 0.92)	3	2	<b>-2</b>	<b>-4</b>
BMI likely altered: (CSCI 0.63 - 0.79)	<b>-1</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-3</b>	<b>-5</b>
BMI very likely altered: (CSCI < 0.63)	<b>-2</b>	<b>-4</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>-6</b>

626 *Table 2: Counts of sites in each of the categorical outputs from the SQI. For every SQI output*  
627 *(biological condition, overall SQI, stress condition), a site is categorized as one of four possible*  
628 *outcomes.*

SQI output	Category	Count (percent)
Overall SQI	Healthy and unstressed	47 (17.6)
	Healthy and resilient	13 (4.9)
	Impacted and stressed	192 (71.9)
	Impacted by unknown stress	15 (5.6)
Biological condition	Healthy	60 (22.5)
	Impacted for ASCI	43 (16.1)
	Impacted for CSCI	30 (11.2)
	Impacted for CSCI and ASCI	134 (50.2)
Stress condition	Low stress	62 (23.2)
	Stressed by chemistry and habitat degradation	101 (37.8)
	Stressed by chemistry degradation	65 (24.3)
	Stressed by habitat degradation	16 (6)
	Stressed by low levels of chemistry or habitat degradation	23 (8.6)

629

630 *Table 3: Summary of empirical stress models to quantify associations of water chemistry*  
631 *(pChem, eqn. (1)) and physical habitat (pHab, eqn. (2)) predictors with biological alteration.*  
632 *Generalized linear models were fit to predict the likelihood of both healthy benthic*  
633 *macroinvertebrate and algal communities at calibration sites (75% of n = 267 sites).*

	pChem	pHab
Constant	2.22 *	11.51 ***
	(0.97)	(2.08)
log(TN)	0.90	
	(0.51)	
log(TP)	2.46 ***	
	(0.64)	
Conductivity	0.00 ***	
	(0.00)	
CRAM hydrologic structure		-0.10 ***
		(0.02)
IPI riparian cover		-1.40
		(0.98)
IPI percent sands, fines, or concrete		-2.99 *
		(1.19)
N	200	200
AIC	109.73	146.53
BIC	122.92	159.72
Pseudo R2	0.65	0.48

\*\*\* p < 0.001; \*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05.

634

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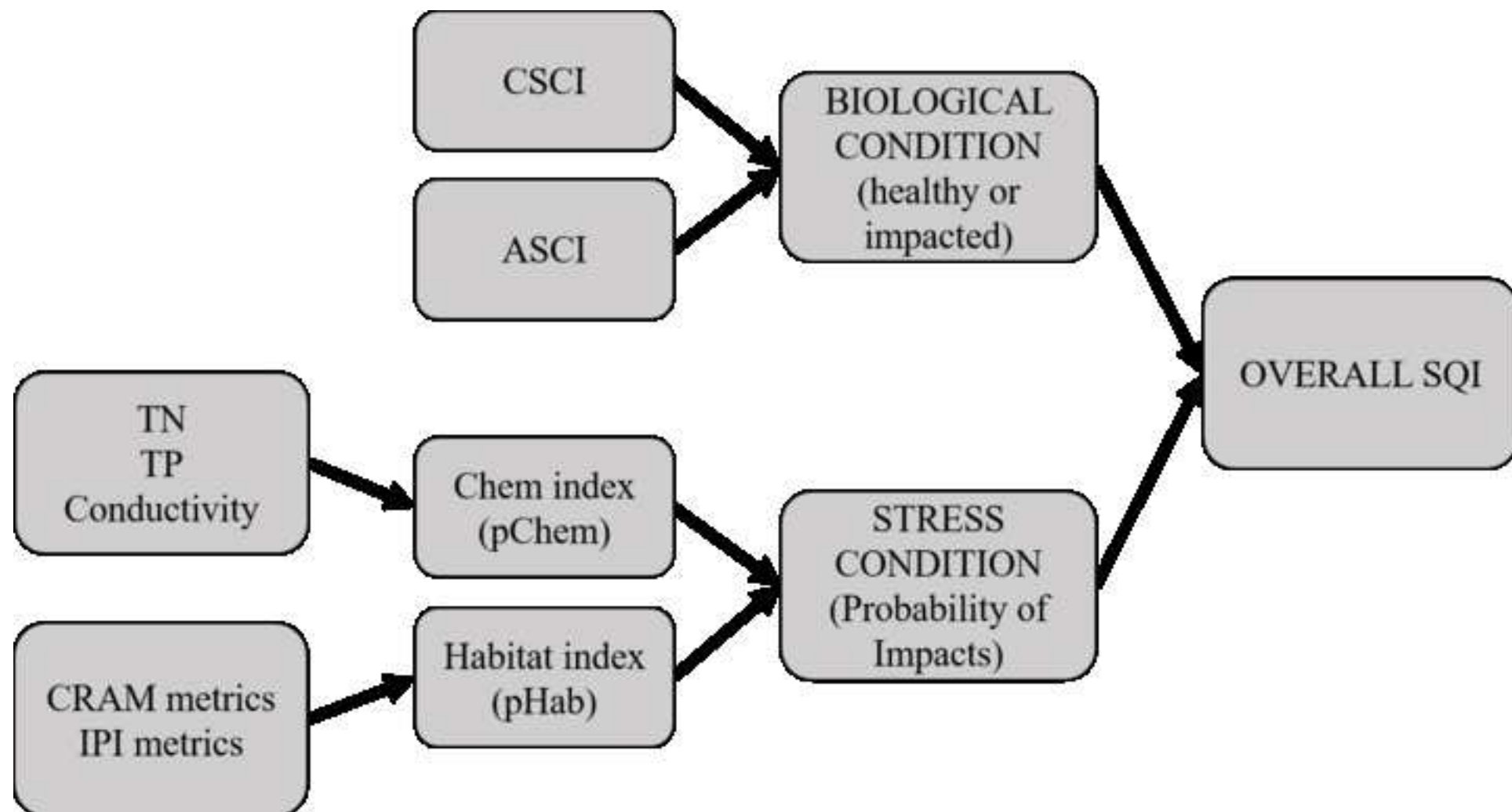
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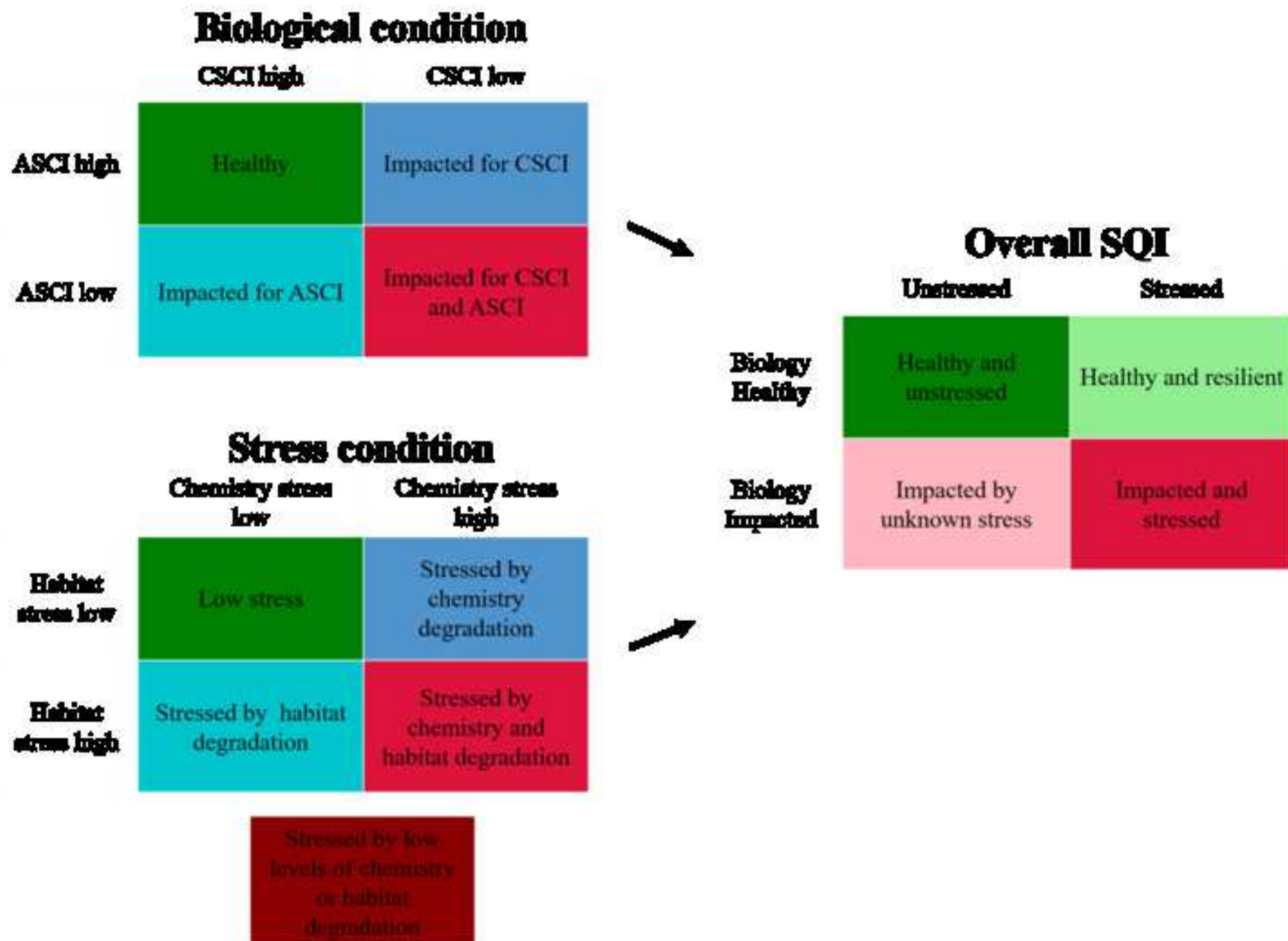
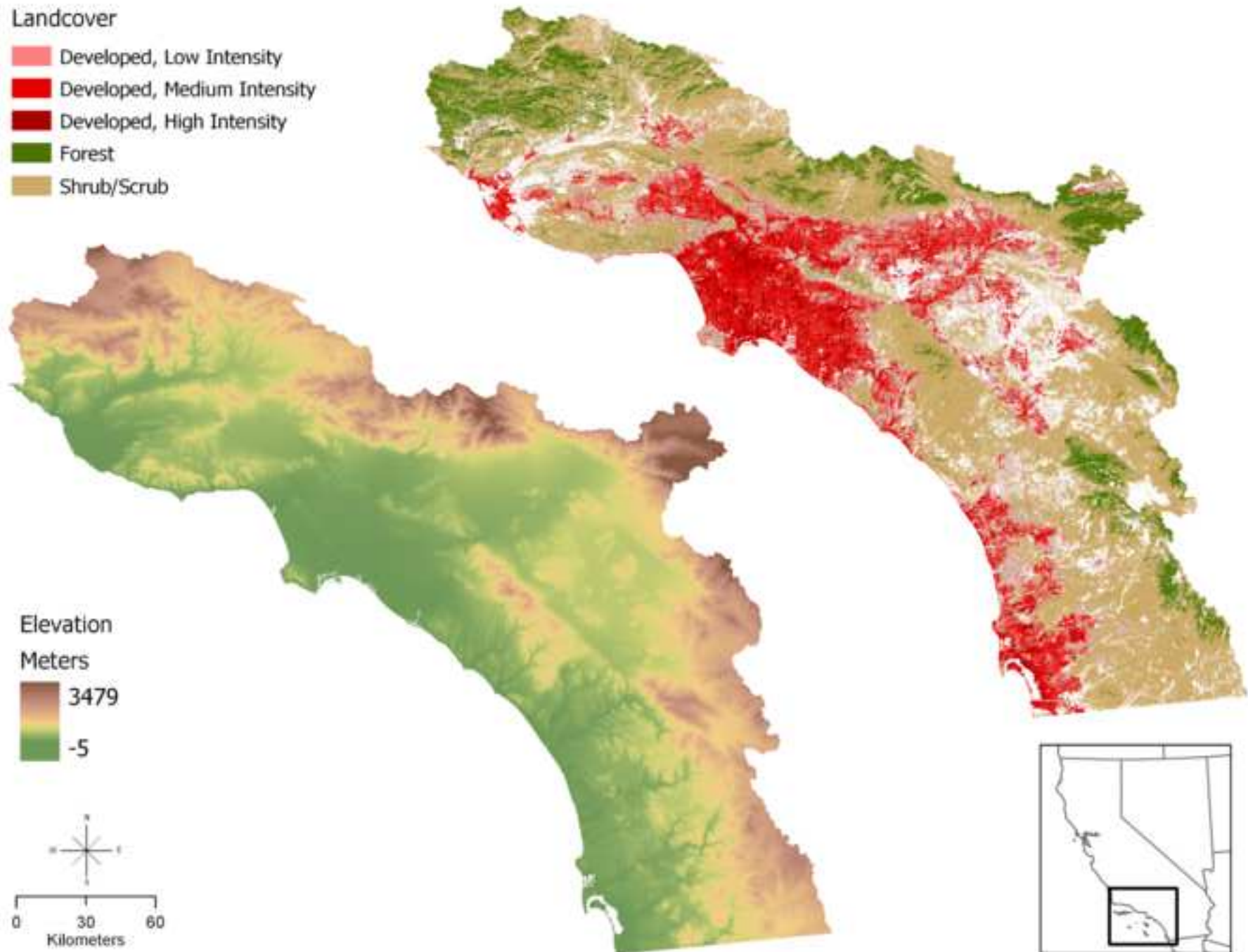


Figure3

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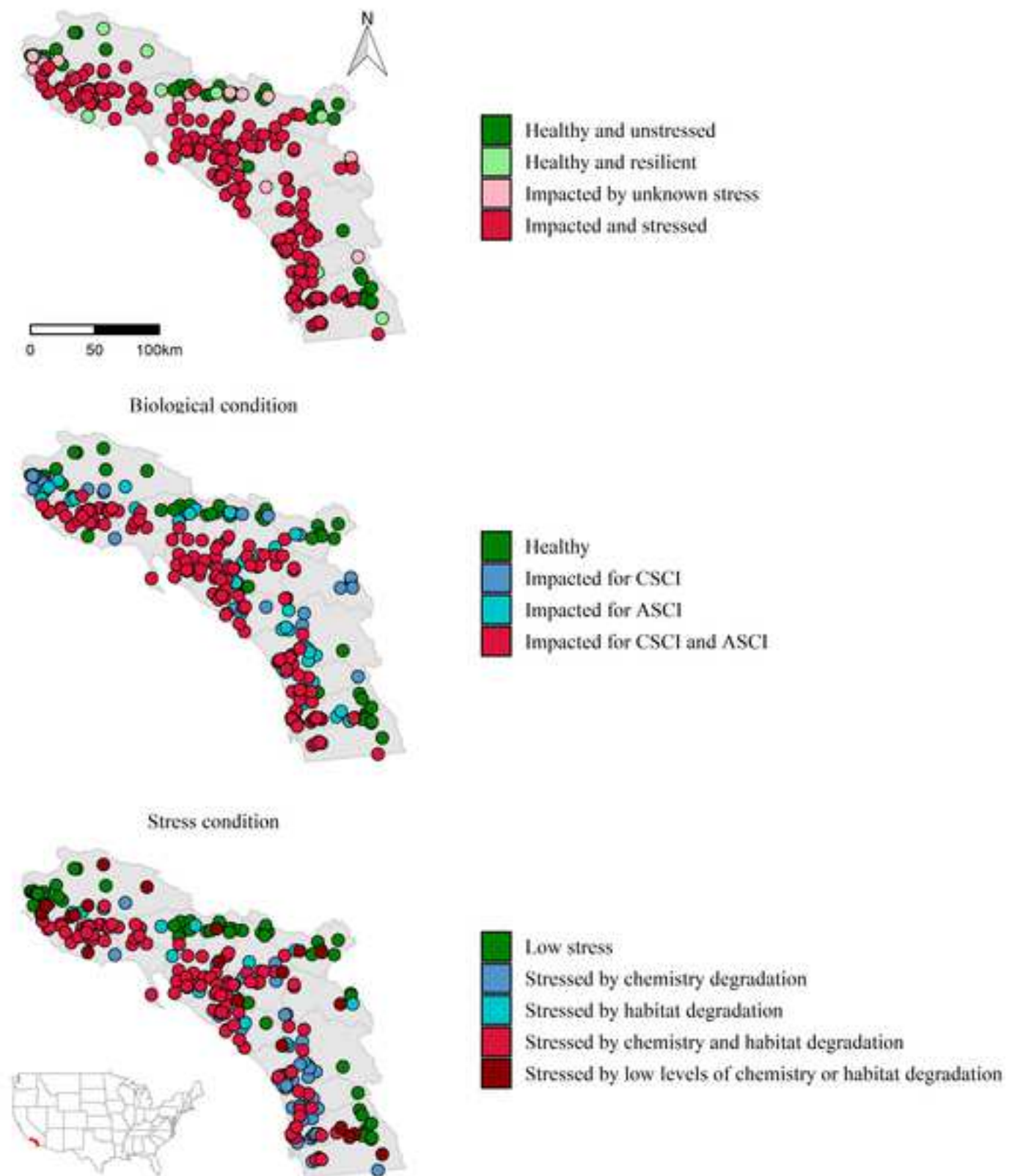
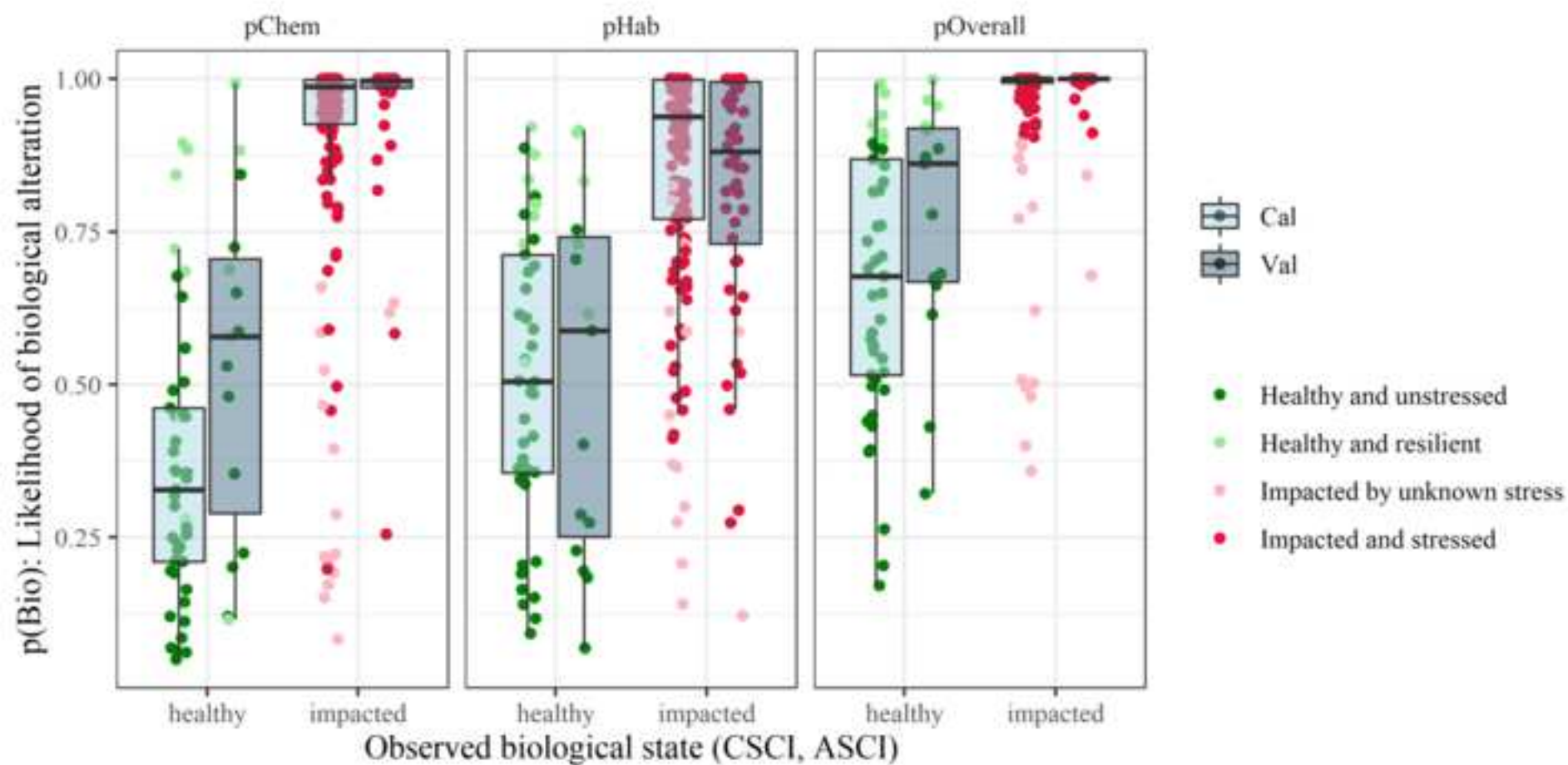
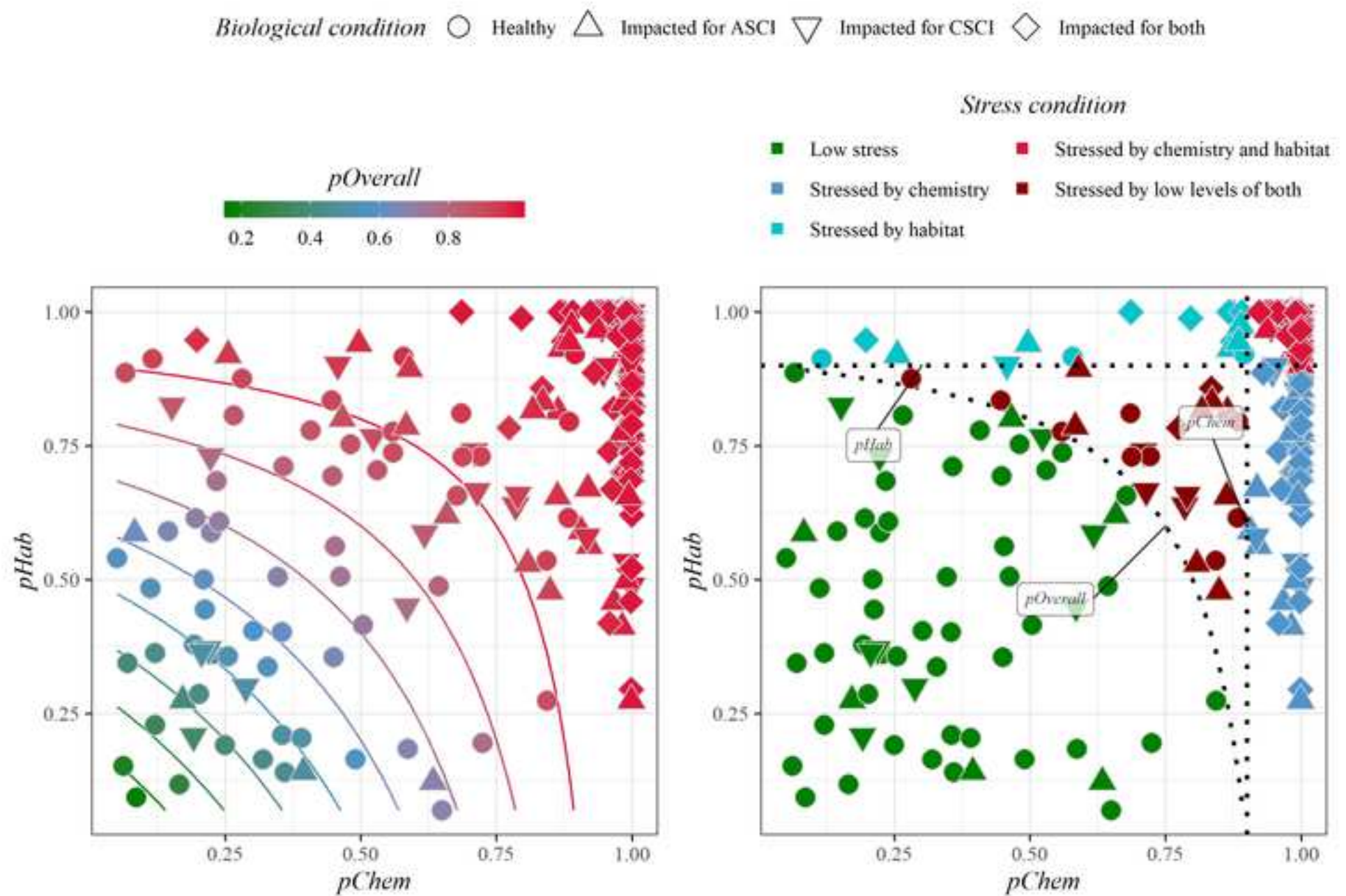


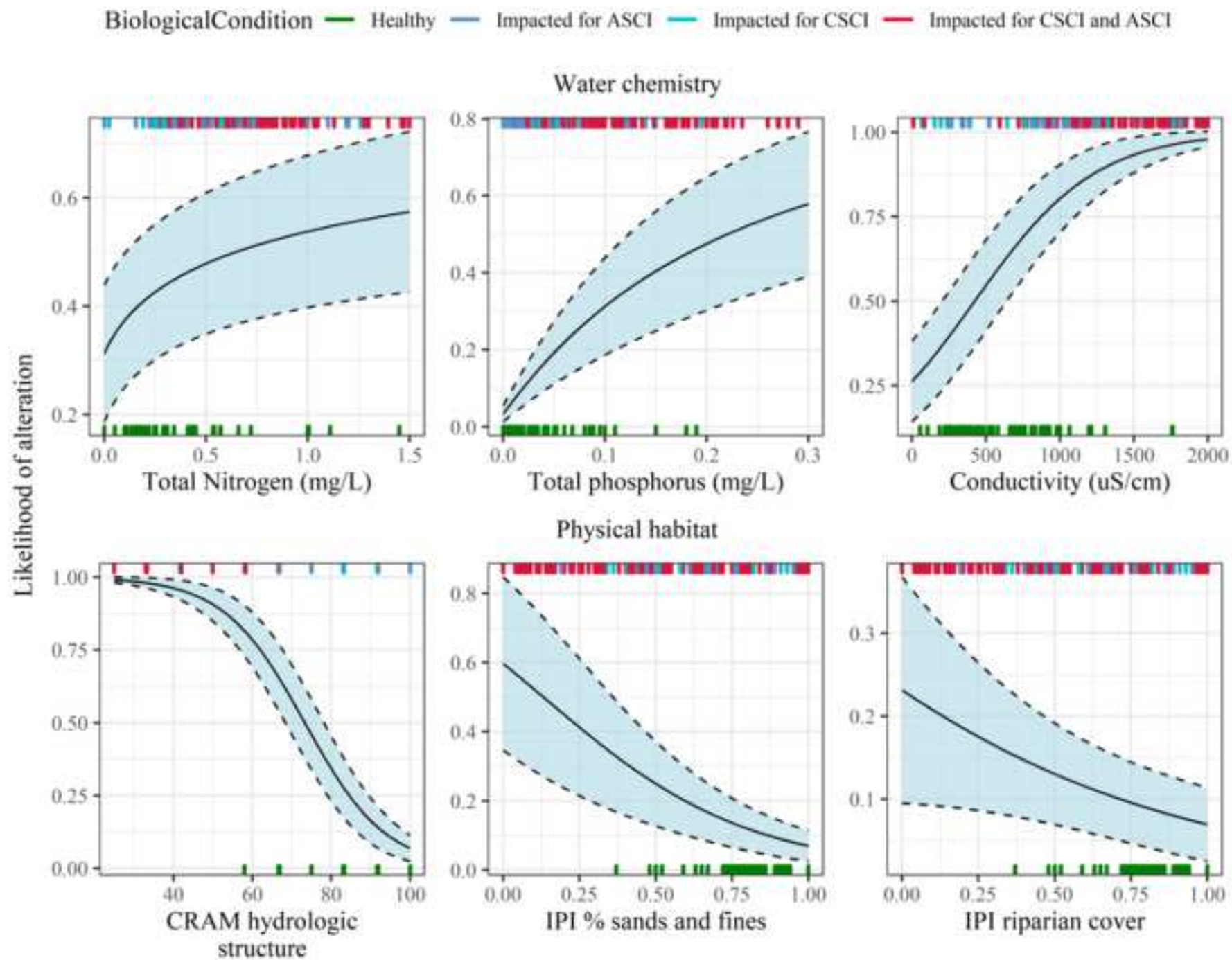


Figure5

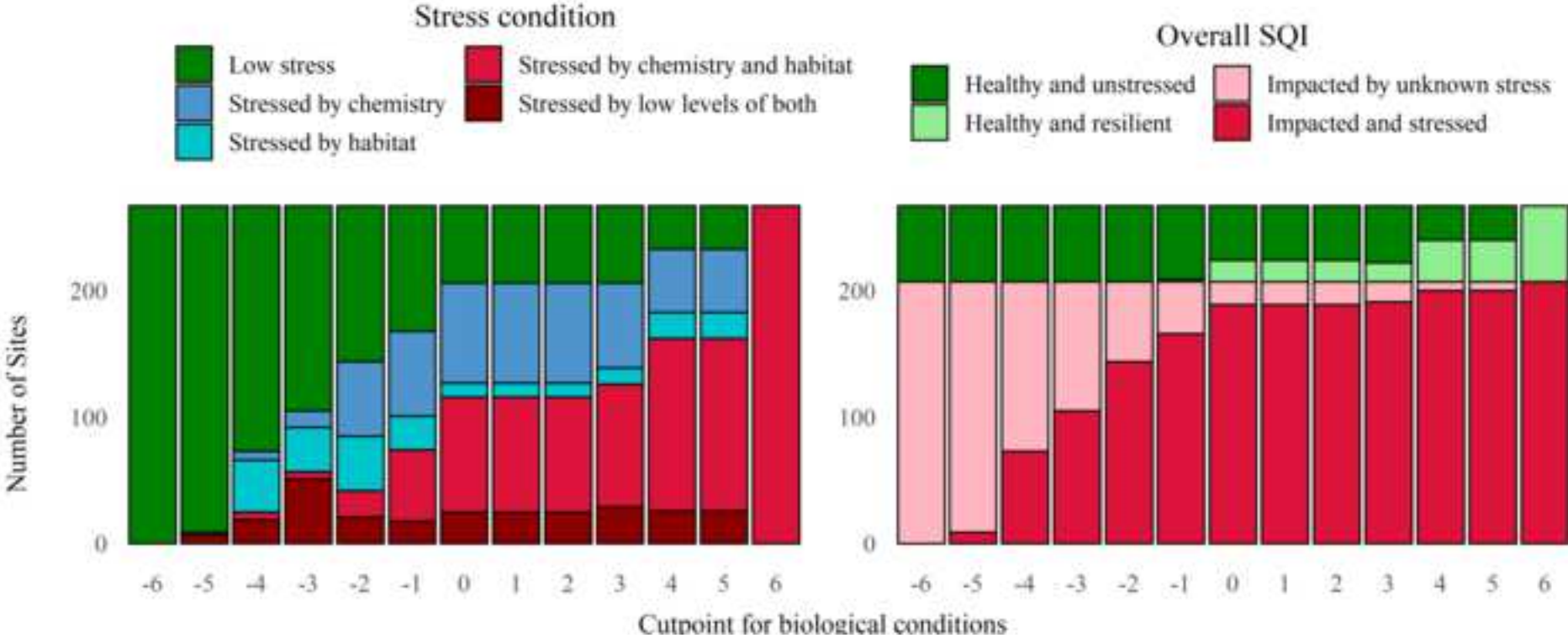
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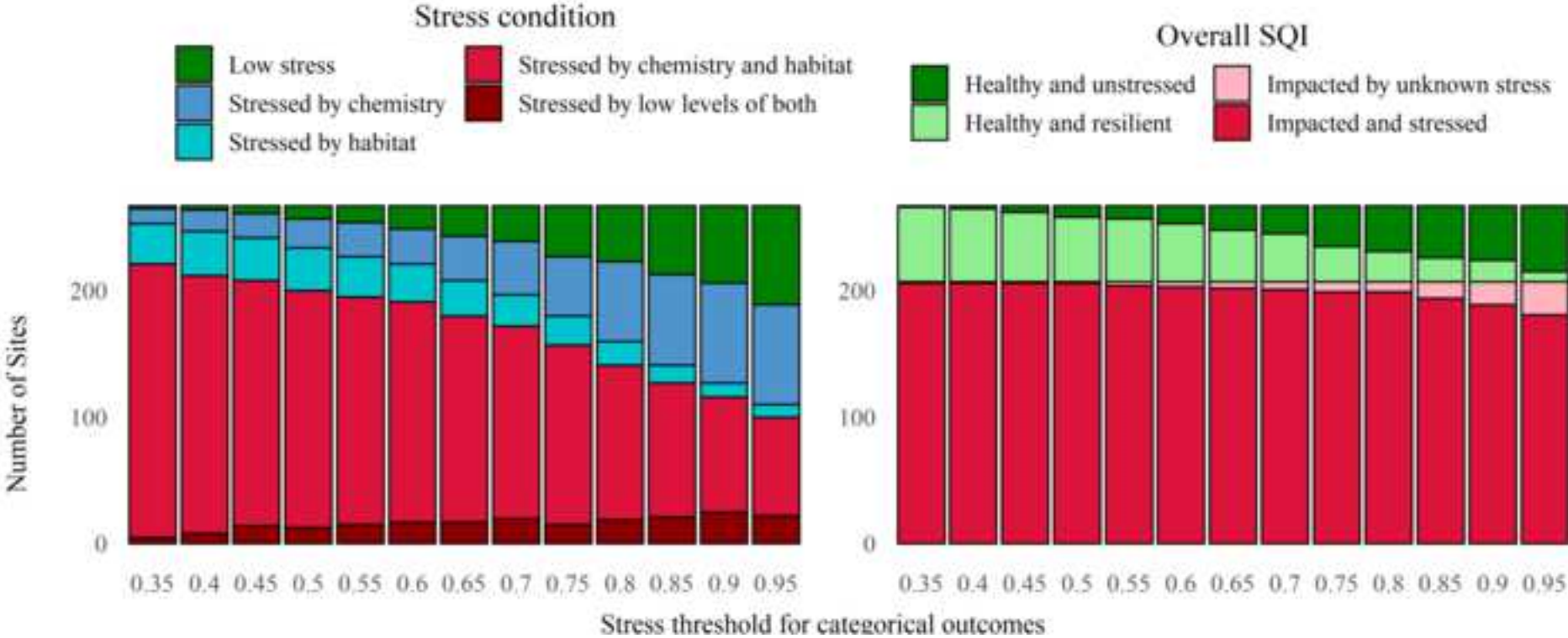
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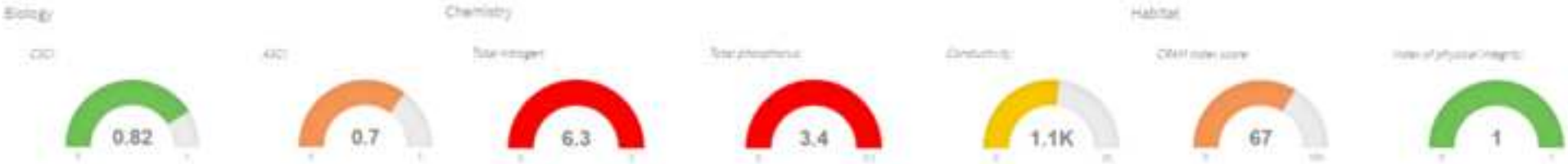




**Impacted and stressed**  
Overall

**Impacted for ASCI**  
Biological condition

**Stressed by chemistry degradation**  
Stress condition





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