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TITLE: Occurrence of the seagrass *Halophila stipulacea* (Hydrocharitaceae) in the southern Mediterranean Sea

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ABSTRACT:

Abstract *Halophila stipulacea* is a dioecious seagrass that colonised the Mediterranean basin probably following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. We investigated its occurrence in the southern Mediterranean. This was done by conducting targeted surveys in two countries (Tunisia and Libya) and compiling existing information from former research. Four new meadows of *H. stipulacea* were found in the study area: Al-wahesh Lagoon and Tobrouk Bay in Libya, and Kerkennah Island-Allama and Cap Monastir in Tunisia. The new record in Cap Monastir (Tunisia) documents a displacement of approximately 150 km north of the previous limit of *H. stipulacea* 's distribution 3000 km west along the coast from the site of first colonisation at the mouth of the Suez Canal in Port Said. In the Cap Monastir meadow, the shoot density (\pm SD) was $9900\pm3509\text{ m}^{-2}$ and the leaf area index was $3.15\pm0.5\text{ m}^2\text{ m}^{-2}$. In Libya, a small meadow of *H. stipulacea* was documented for the first time in Tobrouk Bay, with an estimated shoot density of $476\pm83\text{ m}^{-2}$.

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