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Puzzling out the ecological niche construction for nitrogen fixers in a coastal upwelling system
--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Puzzling out the ecological niche construction for nitrogen fixers in a coastal upwelling system
Article Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	biological nitrogen fixation; ecological niche; upwelling bays; NW Iberia upwelling; nitrogen limitation; nutrient trapping; diazotrophy
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Abstract:	Diazotrophs are a diverse group of microorganisms that can fertilize the ocean through biological nitrogen fixation (BNF). Due to the high energetic cost of this process, diazotrophy in nitrogen-replete regions remains enigmatic. Here we identify the environmental drivers that promote BNF in the upwelling region off NW Iberia, a highly productive region characterized by wind-driven intermittent upwelling and the presence of bays. The main diazotroph detected (UCYN-A2) was more abundant and active during summer and early autumn. The optimum niche for nitrogen fixers in this system occurred at relatively high temperatures ($>16^{\circ}\text{C}$), concurrent with low nitrogen:phosphorus ratios (N:P <0.45) and a large contribution of ammonium ($>75\%$) to the total inorganic nitrogen available. Furthermore, nutrient amendment experiments showed that BNF is detectable when phytoplankton assemblages are limited by nitrogen availability. Seasonally recurrent biogeochemical processes driven by hydrography create the ecological niche for nitrogen fixers in this system. During the spring-summer upwelling period, non-diazotrophs accumulate organic matter inside the bays and promote the drawdown of nitrate. Thereafter, the combined effect of intense remineralization on the shelf and sustained positive circulation within the bays in late summer-early autumn conveys enhanced ammonium content and excess phosphate into the warm surface layer. The low N:P ratio confers a competitive advantage to diazotrophs since they are not restricted by nitrogen supply. This process may be key to support diatom growth at the end of the productive season. The extent to which similar processes occur in other upwelling regions requires further investigation.
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Dear Editors,

I am pleased to submit the manuscript titled “**Puzzling out the ecological niche construction for nitrogen fixers in a coastal upwelling system**” for consideration as an original research article in *The ISME Journal*. I believe that this global influence journal is the best choice to maximize the implications of our research.

This study unravels a long-standing mystery in planktonic ecology: how nitrogen fixers – microbes able to use the large pool of atmospheric nitrogen - succeed in nitrogen-rich environments where they are not expected to show activity due to the high energetic cost of nitrogen fixation. By integrating molecular genetics tools in plankton studies, with biogeochemistry and oceanography information, we have developed a novel comprehensive framework that explains how and when nitrogen fixers thrive in the upwelling region off NW Iberia, one of the most productive coastal regions in Europe characterized by the presence of bays. The construction of this ecological niche could provide the necessary nitrogen to extend the productive season further. These results help to explain why the upwelling bays are more productive compared to the upwelled offshore waters, as this process is likely at play in other temperate upwelling regions traditionally overlooked for nitrogen fixation.

Only through a multidisciplinary approach linking microbial ecology and oceanographic processes have been possible to solve the puzzle. The findings will interest readers studying microbial contributions to biogeochemical cycles, community assembly, and coastal ecosystems in a changing ocean. I believe *The ISME Journal* is the ideal platform to reach the diverse microbial ecology community with these findings.

I confirm that this manuscript is original research, not under consideration elsewhere, and all authors have approved the submission. We declare no conflict of interest.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Marcos Fontela on behalf of the coauthors,


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Puzzling out the ecological niche construction for nitrogen fixers in a coastal upwelling system

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Competing Interests statement: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Keywords: biological nitrogen fixation, ecological niche, upwelling bays, NW Iberia

20 upwelling-nitrogen limitation

21

22 **Abstract**

23 Diazotrophs are a diverse group of microorganisms that can fertilize the ocean through
24 biological nitrogen fixation (BNF). Due to the high energetic cost of this process, diazotrophy
25 in nitrogen-replete regions remains enigmatic. We use multidisciplinary observations to
26 propose a novel framework for the ecological niche construction of nitrogen fixers in the
27 region off NW Iberia— one of the most productive regions in Europe, characterized by weak,
28 and intermittent wind-driven upwelling and the presence of bays. The main diazotroph
29 detected (UCYN-A2) was more abundant and active during summer and early autumn,
30 coinciding with relatively high temperatures ($>16^{\circ}\text{C}$), low nitrogen:phosphorus ratios (N:P
31 <0.45), and a large contribution of ammonium ($>75\%$) to the total inorganic nitrogen
32 available. Furthermore, nutrient amendment experiments showed that BNF is detectable
33 when phytoplankton assemblages are nitrogen limited. Seasonally recurrent
34 biogeochemical processes driven by hydrography create the ecological niche for nitrogen
35 fixers in this system. During the spring-summer upwelling, non-diazotrophs autotrophs
36 produce organic matter inside the bays and promote nitrate drawdown. Thereafter, the
37 combined effect of intense remineralization on the shelf and sustained positive circulation
38 within the bays in late summer-early autumn, conveys enhanced ammonium content and
39 excess phosphate into the warm surface layer. The low N:P ratio confers a competitive
40 advantage to diazotrophs since they are not restricted by nitrogen supply. These results
41 could help to explain why the upwelling bays are more productive compared to the upwelled
42 offshore waters, as this process could be at play in other temperate upwelling regions
43 traditionally overlooked for BNF.

44

45 **Introduction**

46 Nitrogen (N) is a key element in the biosphere which limits the growth of primary producers
47 in marine and land ecosystems[1]. Despite being very abundant in the atmosphere, it is only
48 available for a reduced group of organisms, termed diazotrophs, able to reduce atmospheric
49 dinitrogen (N_2) gas into biologically assimilable forms, through biological nitrogen fixation
50 (BNF). The traditional focus on archetypal marine N_2 -fixers (filamentous cyanobacteria and
51 diatom-diazotroph associations) has been expanded to include unicellular cyanobacteria
52 and multiple groups of heterotrophic bacteria and Archaea[2]. While the BNF activity of some
53 of these groups is still uncertain or reduced[3], the small diazotrophic cyanobacteria
54 *Candidatus Atelocyanobacterium thalassa* (hereafter UCYN-A) has emerged as a key player
55 in the marine nitrogen cycle[4], showing characteristics of a N_2 -fixing organelle, or
56 "*nitroplast*"[5].

57 Despite decades of intense research, the control factors of diazotrophy remain enigmatic. It
58 was traditionally assumed that the ability to access the vast atmospheric N_2 pool gives
59 ecological advantage to diazotrophs where and when fixed N concentrations are low,
60 whereas BNF would be irrelevant at enhanced availability of combined N resources[2].
61 However, energetically, fixing N_2 is only marginally (~25%) more costly than using nitrate[6],
62 and recent studies have expanded diazotroph global distribution to N-enriched regions[7–10],
63 including subpolar and polar waters[11–14], coastal zones [15–17], upwelling ecosystems
64 [18–20], and even the aphotic ocean[21].

65 Methodological approaches to investigate the relevance of control factors on diazotrophy
66 include modeling studies[22, 23], nutrient addition experiments in the lab or with natural
67 populations [6, 24, 25], and database analyses to explore relationships between
68 environmental variables and the presence or activity of diazotrophs[10]. However,
69 deciphering the independent effect of environmental properties on the distribution and

70 activity of diazotrophs is not trivial. First, because environmental conditions are correlated
71 to each other, and second because nutrient concentration does not necessarily inform about
72 nutrient availability, since low concentrations can be the result of phytoplankton
73 consumption[26]. Few studies have investigated the drivers of diazotrophy in N-enriched
74 regions, revealing correlations with temperature, chlorophyll-a (*Chla*) and inorganic nutrient
75 content[9, 18, 27]. Whether these relationships are circumstantial or the result of control
76 mechanisms for diazotrophy, remains enigmatic.

77 The coastal upwelling region off the western Iberian Peninsula marks the northern limit of
78 the Canary Current Upwelling Ecosystem, characterized by coastal embayments known as
79 Rías[28]. In this area, upwelling is weak and intermittent, and the Rías are considered an
80 extension of the shelf[29]. The predominance of along-shore northeasterly winds in
81 spring/summer causes seasonal upwelling and positive circulation— surface waters from
82 the Rías moves towards the ocean, while deeper, nutrient-rich oceanic waters flow into the
83 Rías [30, 31]. These nutrient inputs, enhanced by remineralization within the Rías and on
84 the shelf[32], drive, among other factors, high phytoplankton production, which supports one
85 of the most important blue economies in Europe [33]. During early spring, when nutrient
86 availability is high, the phytoplanktonic community is dominated by large diatoms and
87 autotrophic nanoflagellates[34], while smaller diatoms and heterotrophs coexist during
88 summer, as regenerated nutrients become more significant [35]. From October to March,
89 prevailing southerly winds promote downwelling events[30, 31] and negative circulation —
90 where surface waters flow into the Rías while deeper waters are expelled - associated with
91 low phytoplankton growth conditions[36].

92 Knowledge about diazotrophy in this region is limited to a few observations. Relatively low
93 BNF rates, mainly attributed to UCYN-A, were reported in the shelf off Ría de Vigo in
94 summer of 2009[37, 38]. Ten samplings carried out between February 2014 - December

95 2015 at the shelf off Ría de A Coruña confirmed relatively low BNF rates in the region, which
96 were higher (up to $0.095 \text{ nmol N L}^{-1}\text{d}^{-1}$) in surface waters during summer upwelling and
97 relaxation[20]. Under these conditions the diazotroph community was dominated by UCYN-
98 A2, whereas with downwelling non-cyanobacterial diazotrophs (i.e. heterotrophic Bacteria
99 and Archaea, hereafter NCD) were dominant[19]. Despite these insights, the factors driving
100 BNF in this system remain unknown, as the limited temporal resolution of previous studies
101 does not allow to reconstruct the environmental conditions accompanying the variability in
102 diazotrophic composition and activity. Here, using a large data set of multidisciplinary
103 observations, we describe in detail the ecological niche construction of nitrogen fixers in the
104 upwelling region off NW Iberia.

105 Materials and methods

106 Sampling and hydrography

107 The dataset comprises 79 one-day sampling events within a period of ~4.5 years (2014-
108 2018). All samples belong to four different locations (Fig. S1). There were 10 samplings from
109 the northern limit of the upwelling system, taken in the adjacent shelf off Ría de A Coruña
110 ($43.42^\circ \text{ N}, 8.44^\circ \text{ W}, 80 \text{ m depth}$) between February 2014 and December 2015
111 (NICANOR[20]). Next, there were 55 samplings with almost weekly resolution at a central
112 station in the inner Ría de Vigo ($42.24^\circ \text{ N } 8.78^\circ \text{ W}, 40 \text{ m depth}$) between March 2017 and
113 April 2018 (REMEDIOS-seasonal[39]). Finally, there were 14 samplings along two weeks of
114 summer 2018 with daily resolution (REMEDIOS-cruise[40]). Among them, 10 samples were
115 taken inside the Ría de Pontevedra ($42.36^\circ \text{N } 8.78^\circ \text{W}, 30 \text{ m depth}$) and 4 from the outer shelf
116 ($42.30^\circ \text{N } 9^\circ \text{W}, \sim 19.6 \text{ km apart}, 100 \text{ m depth}$). During each sampling profiles of temperature,
117 salinity and fluorescence were acquired with a SBE25plus CTD (SeaBird Electronics).
118 Surface samples (1-3 m) were collected to determine dissolved inorganic nutrients

119 (ammonium NH₄, nitrite NO₂, nitrate NO₃⁻, phosphate PO₄), chlorophyll a (*Chla*), primary
120 production (PP), BNF and DNA and RNA samples.

121 Samples for the determination of dissolved inorganic nutrients and total *Chla* were collected
122 and frozen at -20°C [41, 42]. The fluorescence emitted by the *Chla* was measured from
123 pigments extracted in 90% acetone at 4°C overnight using the spectrofluorometric
124 method[20], and a Turner designs Trilogy fluorometer [43]. Seawater samples were spiked
125 with 2–10 µCi of NaH¹⁴CO₃ and incubated during 2-3 h starting at noon (REMEDIOS and
126 nutrient addition experiments) or 24 h (NICANOR) in refrigerated incubators simulating the
127 corresponding *in situ* irradiance. More detailed methodological procedures along with
128 comprehensive hydrographic descriptions for each of the sites and conditions can be found
129 in[20, 39, 40]. Since biological samples were restricted to surface, the environmental
130 parameters included as factors in subsequent statistical analysis are the median value of
131 the first 5 meters of the water column. Inorganic nutrient information has also been
132 interpreted in terms of the Redfield normalized N:P ratio:

133
$$\text{N:P ratio} = (\text{NO}_3^- + \text{NO}_2 + \text{NH}_4) / 16^*\text{PO}_4$$

134 A N:P ratio = 1 denotes the fulfillment of Redfield stoichiometry[44]. Deviations from this
135 ratio provide insights into the nutrient availability: N:P>1 denotes excess nitrogen over
136 phosphorus availability, whereas N:P<1 indicates potential nitrogen limitation and excess
137 phosphate. The fraction of NH₄ in total dissolved inorganic nitrogen DIN [%NH₄=NH₄/ (NO₃⁻
138 + NO₂ + NH₄)], expressed as percentage, was the variable informing about nitrogen
139 speciation.

140 **Biological nitrogen fixation rates**

141 Estimates of BNF activity at surface (1-2 m) are available for 34 sampling dates (43% of
142 total samplings). BNF rates were determined with the ¹⁵N₂ bubble addition technique[45].
143 The bottles were sealed with silicone septa caps and 3 mL of ¹⁵N₂ (98 atom%, Cambridge

144 Isotope Laboratories, Lot #I-16727 and #I-19168) were injected with a gas-tight syringe. The
145 bottles were gently mixed, and incubated for 24 hours simulating *in situ* conditions of
146 temperature and light with running-surface water and neutral-mesh shading to mimic surface
147 irradiance. After incubation, each sample was filtered through pre-combusted (4h, 450°C)
148 25 mm Whatman GF/F filters, (0.7 µm nominal pore size) using low vacuum (<100mmHg),
149 and filters were stored frozen (-20°C). A time-zero bottle was also filtered to calculate the
150 initial natural abundance of N isotopes in the particulate material. Before analysis, filters
151 were thawed, dried (60°C, 24-48 h) and pelletized in tin capsules. Particulate organic
152 nitrogen and carbon (PON and POC) content, as well as the relative abundance of stable
153 nitrogen isotopes ($^{15}\text{N}/^{14}\text{N}$) were determined with a continuous-flow isotope-ratio mass
154 spectrometer MAT253 (Thermo Finnigan) coupled to an elemental analyser EA1108 (Carlo
155 Erba Instruments) through a Conflo III interface (Thermo Finnigan). During analysis, a set
156 of international reference materials were analyzed for $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ calibration (USGS 40,
157 USGS41a USGS-25, IAEA-N-1, and IAEA-N-2). An analytical measurement error of \pm
158 0.15‰ was calculated for $\delta^{15}\text{N}$; the error estimate was obtained from replicate assays of
159 the laboratory standard acetanilide interspersed between sample analysis. Detection limits
160 and error propagation were evaluated[46].

161 **Nutrient addition experiments with natural planktonic communities**
162 Four nutrient addition experiments were performed (coinciding with different climatological
163 seasons of 2017) along with the *in situ* sampling of natural planktonic communities at the
164 inner part of Ría de Vigo (Fig. S1). Experimental design included a control (no additions
165 performed) and two addition treatments: i) NO_3^- treatment, amended with 10-15 µM NO_3^-
166 and ii) NH_4^+ treatment, amended with 10-15 µM NH_4^+ . Besides, 1 µM of phosphate (PO_4^{3-}),
167 and a mix of organic nutrients (5 µM glucose and 5 µM amino acids) were included in both
168 addition treatments. A detailed description of the experimental setup is available in Text S1.

169 Experiments lasted 3 days and samples were taken every 24 h to monitor changes in *Chla*
170 and PP. Samples for RNA and BNF rates were collected after 24 h incubation. The
171 magnitude of the responses was estimated as response ratios (RR) between the time-
172 integrated value of the variable over the incubation time in the amendment treatment (AT)
173 and the control (C), AT/C. In the case of biomasses, time-averaged values were used.

174 Bulk DNA sampling, extraction, nested-amplification of the *nifH* gene
175 and Illumina sequencing

176 For 71 sampling dates (90% of total) surface water was sampled for DNA collection.
177 Between 7.5 and 10 L of seawater per replicate (4 replicates) were collected and filtered
178 using silicone tubes and peristaltic pumps through sterile STERIVEX 0.22 µm pore size
179 filters (Millipore, USA). Summer samples of July 2018 were prefiltered with a 200 µm mesh
180 filter. Filters were preserved with 1.8 mL of lysis buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.3, 40 mM
181 EDTA pH 8.0, 0.75 M sucrose), immersed in liquid nitrogen and subsequently stored at -80
182 °C until further analysis. DNA was extracted using the PowerWater® DNA Isolation Kit
183 (Mobio, Carlsbad, CA, USA.), quantified and quality-checked (according to the A260/A280
184 ratio) using a spectrophotometer NanoDrop 2000TM (Thermo Fisher Scientific).
185 Amplification of *nifH* gene and sequencing of the amplicons were performed following [47,
186 48]. The PCR reactions were run on a T100TM Thermal cycler (BIO-RAD)[19]. The amplified
187 products were purified using PCR Extract Mini Kit (5PRIME) and quantified using a
188 spectrophotometer NanoDrop 2000™ (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Prior to sequencing, an
189 additional PCR amplification of 10 cycles with custom barcoded *nifH1* and *nifH2* primers
190 was carried out. After purification and library preparation from the barcoded PCR products,
191 paired-end sequencing was performed using the MiSeq® reagent kit with V2 chemistry (500
192 cycles) at the facilities of IMGM Laboratories GmbH (Germany) on the Illumina MiSeq® Next
193 Generation Sequencing technology (Illumina Inc.).

194 RNA extraction, cDNA generation and *nifH* gene quantification
195 For 14 sampling dates (18% of total) surface water was sampled for RNA collection following
196 the same procedure described for DNA. Total RNA extraction from Sterivex® filters was
197 performed by using 200 µm Low binding Zirconium beads (OPS diagnostics) and QIAGEN
198 RNeasy Mini Kit (Cat.no 74104) and RNase-Free DNase Set (Cat.no 79254). DNase
199 treatment was done with AMBION Turbo DNA free Kit (Invitrogen, Cat.No: AM1907). First-
200 strand cDNA synthesis was done with SuperScript® III First-Strand Synthesis System for
201 RT-PCR, and total RNA concentration was quantified by Nanodrop & Qubit. To quantify *nifH*
202 genes and expression of key diazotrophs identified in the amplicon libraries, 69 and 14
203 samples were amplified and quantified by quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR)
204 and reverse transcription qPCR (RT-qPCR), respectively, using Taqman primer probe sets
205 (PrimeTime qPCR Assays, Integrated DNA Technologies) (see details in[20]). Briefly, the
206 qPCR assays targeted the *nifH* gene of three common diazotrophic strains, namely UCYN-
207 A2[49], UCYN-A1[50], and γ-Proteobacterium affiliated phylotype γ-24774A11[51] (Table
208 S2). The PrimeTime® Gene Expression Master Mix (IDT), DNA/cDNA template, and
209 primers-probe set (0.5 and 0.25 µM final concentrations, respectively) were combined with
210 PCR grade water (Sigma-Aldrich) to create a final reaction volume of 20 µL. Thermal cycling
211 conditions for the qPCR assay consisted of a 3-minute incubation at 95°C, followed by 45
212 cycles of 15 seconds at 95°C and 1 minute at 60°C. Each qPCR run included nine 10-fold
213 serial dilutions of standards that contained the targeted *nifH* fragments (gBlocks® Gene
214 Fragments, IDT), and samples were run in triplicate, while standards were run in duplicate.
215 Reactions were performed in a MyiQ2™ Real-Time PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad
216 Laboratories). Amplification efficiencies were always greater than 90%. We performed
217 inhibition test by several dilutions at certain random samples and we concluded that our
218 samples were not inhibited. The limit of detection (LOD) was 9 *nifH* copies L⁻¹, and the
219 detected but not quantified (DNQ) limit was 87 *nifH* copies L⁻¹ for UCYN-A2 and UCYN-A1

220 and 86 *nifH* copies L⁻¹ for Gammaproteobacteria. Abundances below LOD were assigned 0
221 *nifH* copies L⁻¹, whereas measurements higher than the LOD but less than the DNQ were
222 assigned 1 *nifH* copies L⁻¹.

223 **Bioinformatics and phylogenetic**

224 Paired-end reads were merged, selected and quality filtered, chimera were removed, and
225 Amplicon Sequence Variants (ASVs) were determined with the *dada2* pipeline[52].
226 Sequences with stop codons or with frameshift errors were excluded from the analysis. Non-
227 *nifH* sequences were filtered out against the database compiled in [53] using the HMMER
228 algorithm. The remaining sequences were aligned to a reference alignment, in the
229 “genome879” *nifH* database (<https://wwwzehr.pmc.ucsc.edu/Genome879/>). The
230 phylogenetic affiliation of the translated ASVs into the canonical *nifH* clusters defined by [54]
231 was performed by BLASTx[55] using genome-derived sequences from the updated and
232 curated *nifH* database[56] as references. Finally, ASVs were sorted according to their
233 closest affiliation in the BLASTp database (>96% cutoff)[54]. Following BLASTp matching
234 at Genus level, diazotrophs were categorized in 9 taxonomical groups (Class level) for
235 subsequent analytical purposes (Table S1). Rarefaction curves (rarefy function in vegan
236 package[57]) showing a plateauing trend (Fig. S2) confirmed that DNA extraction,
237 sequencing and bioinformatics were appropriately implemented for most samples, and only
238 4 DNA samples out of 79 were discarded. We established that the diazotrophic community
239 at each individual sample was dominated by Cyanobacteria when UCYN-A relative
240 abundance met two criteria: i) it was the most abundant ASV and ii) it represented
241 individually more than a third (33%) of total relative abundance. Otherwise, we considered
242 the community dominated by non-cyanobacterial diazotrophs (NCD) (Fig. S3).

243 **Statistical analysis**

244 All statistical analyses were done in R (v4.1.2; R Core Team 2021). The community
245 composition of diazotrophs was investigated by Principal Coordinates Analysis (PCoA,

246 vegan package) with an ordination based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarity distances matrix. The
247 environmental parameters were fitted onto the PCoA ordination and represented as vector
248 overlays when their contribution to the observed differences was relevant (*envfit* function in
249 vegan package, p-value <0.001).

250 Then, we assessed the degree of niche overlap among diazotroph taxonomical groups with
251 respect to those relevant environmental drivers identified from the PCoA (sea surface
252 temperature and N:P ratio). Niche overlap analysis is based on nonparametric kernel density
253 estimation[58, 59]. Based on a null model analysis, the difference in niche overlap between
254 groups was considered statistically significant at a p-value<0.01.

255 Finally, we investigated if those environmental drivers determined ASV's relative
256 abundance. The *corncob* method is based on beta-binomial count regression for correlated
257 observations and is suited for modeling microbial abundances based on high throughput
258 sequencing data[60]. For each individual ASV, a regression model of relative abundance
259 versus environmental data tested the differential abundance across the existent N:P ratio,
260 fraction of NH₄ in total DIN and surface water temperature conditions, also controlling the
261 effect of these environmental drivers on the dispersion. A False Discovery Rate of <0.5%
262 was selected as threshold.

263 Results

264 **Diazotrophic community composition and biological nitrogen fixation**
265 A total of 7030 ASVs were identified based on *nifH* sequencing. The 9 categorized
266 taxonomical groups represented 97.6% of the total ASVs, with *Cyanobacteria* and
267 *Proteobacteria* jointly being 81.6% (45% and 36.6%, respectively) (Fig 1A). The relative
268 abundance of cyanobacterial diazotrophs was large in summer/early autumn while NCD
269 were more relevant in winter/spring, when *Cyanobacteria* were almost absent and the
270 diazotrophic community was more diverse (Fig. S4). UCYN-A2 was the main UCYN-A

271 ecotype and the most abundant ASV. *Deltaproteobacteria* was the second taxa in relative
272 abundance, followed by *Gammaproteobacteria*. The temporal variability of relative
273 abundance based on *nifH* sequencing was coherent with the pattern attained by absolute
274 quantification by qPCR (Fig. 1A, C). Frequently, the quantification of UCYN-A2 was two
275 orders of magnitude larger than UCYN-A1. *Gammaproteobacteria* was below detection limit
276 in more than half of the samples, and their mean absolute abundance was low (708 ± 1600
277 *nifH* gene copies L⁻¹).

278 The mean BNF for all samples was 0.92 ± 1.1 nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹ (n = 34), from 0.025 nmol N L⁻¹
279 d⁻¹ to 3.17 nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹ (Fig 1B), and it was below detection (i.e, zero) in 11 samples. BNF
280 rates were higher during summer and early autumn in Ría de Vigo and Ría de Pontevedra
281 (2017-2018), whereas there were in general lower in the northernmost location sampled at
282 the shelf off Ría de A Coruña (2014-2015). Higher BNF rates coincided with relatively high
283 *Cyanobacterial* diazotroph gene abundance, whereas NCD dominated the diazotrophic
284 community when BNF rates were undetectable (Fig.1).

285 The abundance of UCYN-A2 *nifH* transcripts (measured by qPCR based on cDNA) exhibited
286 a close, positive linear relationship with BNF rates at rates lower than 1 nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹ (Fig.
287 2). Above this threshold, a saturation relationship was observed. Transcription of *nifH*
288 associated to UCYN-A2 also scaled linearly along BNF rates, while no relationship was
289 found between BNF rates and UCYN-A1 *nifH* gene copies or transcripts (Fig. 2).

290 Environmental control of diazotroph community structure

291 PCoA analysis confirmed the existence of two groups of samples according to diazotroph
292 community composition (Fig. 3). The first PCoA axis separated samples in which
293 cyanobacterial diazotrophs dominate the community (cyan circles, UCYN-A) from those in
294 which NCD dominated the community (orange squares, NCD). The lower dispersion
295 observed in the UCYN-A group suggests a less diverse phylogenetic community. On the

296 other hand, the larger dispersion of the NCD group[3] suggest higher phylogenetic diversity
297 at the community level. This is confirmed with alpha diversity metrics (Fig. S5). The
298 environmental parameters that most contributed to this community differences are in situ
299 temperature, the fraction of NH₄ in total dissolved inorganic nitrogen (%NH₄), NO₃⁻, N:P ratio
300 and PO₄ (in that order, complete list of environmental variables and the model fitting
301 coefficients available in Table S3). The N:P ratio, NO₃⁻ and PO₄ were negatively associated
302 with temperature and %NH₄ in the ordination space. The dominance of UCYN-A in the
303 community was associated with higher temperature and %NH₄ concurrent with low N:P ratio.

304 Kernel density estimates were used to assess the niche overlap of taxonomical
305 groups in terms of temperature, %NH₄ in DIN, and N:P ratio (Fig. 4A-C, Table S3).
306 *Cyanobacteria* peaked at 16°C, and they were present at the warmest temperature
307 registered (19-20°C), whereas NCD groups like *Bacteroidia* and *Proteobacteria* (*Gamma*-,
308 *Epsilon*- and *Betaproteobacteria*) peaked around 13°C (Fig. 4A). The fraction of ammonium
309 in total dissolved inorganic nitrogen (DIN) was also a differential parameter for cyanobacteria
310 (more present at higher NH₄ proportions, >75%) and NCD (which showed higher abundance
311 at low NH₄ proportions, 25%, Fig. 4B). Finally, *Cyanobacteria* occurred preferentially at low
312 N:P ratio conditions (0.45), when there was potential N limitation and excess P, whereas
313 NCD groups have their peak of occurrence at N:P ratios>1 (Fig. 4C).

314 Additional statistical support at ASV level with beta-binomial count regression
315 models identified 25 ASV differentially-abundant with regard to temperature, 13 ASVs with
316 regard to the fraction of NH₄ in DIN, and 10 ASVs that are differentially-abundant across the
317 N:P ratio (out of the 7030 ASV tested, Fig 4D). Only UCYN-A2 has a significant differential
318 abundance related to the three environmental drivers. UCYN-A2 was the only
319 *Cyanobacteria* ASV with a temperature-mediated response, as well as the only ASV with a

320 positive coefficient for the relevance of NH₄ in the total DIN, and a negative coefficient for
321 the N:P ratio.

322 **Biological nitrogen fixation is driven by inorganic nitrogen availability**
323 We performed controlled nitrogen amendment experiments to assess whether BNF activity
324 occurs when the phytoplankton standing stock is N-limited, across four seasons (winter,
325 spring, summer and autumn) in the inner Ría de Vigo. As reported previously (Fig. 1),
326 amendment experiments showed higher in situ (natural environment) BNF rates (0.025 nmol
327 N L⁻¹d⁻¹ to 3.17 nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹) in summer and autumn, whereas they were below detection
328 limit in winter and spring (Fig. 5A). A significant (ANOVA, p-value <0.05, Fig. 5A) positive
329 response of PP and Chl a to nitrogen additions (i.e. phytoplankton standing stock was N-
330 limited) was observed in summer and autumn experiments, coinciding with higher BNF in
331 the field (Fig. 5B). In all seasons with measurable BNF activity, BNF rates were inhibited
332 and significantly reduced when ammonium and nitrate were added, respectively (ANOVA,
333 p-value <0.05, Fig. 5A).

334 Discussion

335 UCYN-A2 is the main active N₂-fixer

336 We revealed through alternative approaches that the abundance of diazotrophs shows
337 seasonality in the NW Iberian upwelling system, with UCYN-A2 being most abundant and
338 active during summer and early autumn. High abundances of *nifH* UCYN-A2 transcripts
339 were concomitant with measurable BNF rates, supporting the link between the expression
340 pattern of UCYN-A2 with BNF rates. This agrees with the current knowledge that UCYN-A2
341 is more relevant in coastal waters than UCYN-A1[61, 62], and supports the recognition of
342 UCYN-A2 as the main active diazotroph in temperate upwelling regions[63]. UCYN-A2 was
343 also the dominant diazotroph, with comparable BNF rates to those in this study, peaking in
344 summer (ca. 2-3 nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹) in both North Atlantic coastal waters[10] and the Subarctic

345 North Pacific[14]. However, there are at least three lines of evidence that point to an
346 unknown additional group of diazotrophs fixing N in this system. First, the relationship
347 between BNF magnitude and the abundance of UCYN-A reaches a plateau at rates above
348 $1 \text{ nmol N L}^{-1}\text{d}^{-1}$. Second, when the quantified *nifH* transcript copies L^{-1} are combined with
349 published cell-specific N_2 fixation rates for UCYN-A2 ($\sim 55 \text{ fmol N cell}^{-1} \text{ d}^{-1}$,[64]), the
350 calculated BNF magnitude is much lower than observed (Fig. S7). And lastly: at the
351 controlled conditions of the experimental nutrient additions, there are no relationship
352 between the change in BNF rates and the absolute abundance of *nifH* transcript copies L^{-1}
353 quantified by qPCR for UCYN-A2 (Fig. S8). Diatom-diazotroph associations (DDA)[65] were
354 not detected within our DNA/RNA sequencing. This absence might be surprising, as this
355 coastal upwelling region is dominated by diatoms during the spring-summer productive
356 season [36]. Several diatom genera that are host of diazotrophs (like *Hemiaulus* or
357 *Rhizosolenia*) are commonly present[66, 67], including in our samples[68]. Although the
358 non-detection of DDA N_2 -fixation activity aligns with previous size-fractionated incubations
359 that attributed BNF rates on the shelf off Ría de A Coruña exclusively to small
360 diazotrophs[20], it remains uncertain whether this absence of DDA contribution is due to a
361 methodological bias in the DNA amplification technique[69], or represents a true absence of
362 diazotroph symbionts. To disentangle the contribution of DDA versus UCYN-A in this region,
363 a closer visual inspection of the host cells, a DDA targeted nanoSIMS approach, and/or size-
364 fractionated incubations should be implemented in the future.

365 **Low N content and high temperature are the environmental drivers.**
366 Our results point out to temperature and low nitrogen content (evaluated through the N:P
367 ratio) as the environmental parameters that drive diazotroph community composition and
368 abundance in this coastal upwelling system. The relative enrichment of phosphorus as
369 compared to nitrogen confers a competitive advantage to diazotrophs since they are not
370 restricted by the nitrogen supply. This outcome, confirmed at community, taxa and ASV

371 level, is consistent with previous results. Temperature and N:P ratio have been identified as
372 the main controlling factors of diazotroph abundance in the North Pacific Ocean[27]. Warm
373 temperature ($>16^{\circ}\text{C}$) and lower NO_3^- content have been suggested as drivers of UCYN-A2
374 abundances in the California upwelling region[18]. Additionally, summer observations
375 carried out in the temperate western North Atlantic revealed that diazotroph community
376 composition and BNF correlated positively with *Chla* and P availability[9].

377 In addition, the short-term increase in PP and *Chla* observed in our nutrient amendment
378 experiments during summer and autumn, when low N:P ratio exists (Fig. 5A), indicates that
379 the phytoplankton standing stock was nitrogen-limited, or at least responsive to nitrogen
380 supply[70]. Interestingly, BNF rates were not completely prevented after NO_3^- addition in the
381 nutrient amendment experiments. A possible explanation for this is that UCYN-A2 lives in
382 symbiosis with a prymnesiophyte algae (*Braaudosphaera bigelowi*) exchanging fixed N for
383 fixed carbon[62, 71]. Indeed, the genome of UCYN-A is so streamlined to fuel BNF that it
384 even lacks genes for carbon fixation, oxygen-evolving photosystem II or nitrate assimilation
385 genes, so it is an obligate N_2 -fixer[72, 73], or even a new organelle[5]. Thus, UCYN-A
386 symbiosis relies on N_2 fixation even in N-rich environments[25]. It can be hypothesized that
387 the BNF decreases after nitrogen addition in our microcosms experiments not because of
388 inorganic nutrient inhibition, but due to the eukaryotic host algae being outcompeted by other
389 phytoplankton. Groups such as diatoms, characterized by high maximum nutrient uptake
390 and growth rates[74], may outcompete the slow growing *Braaudosphaera*/UCYN-A symbiosis
391 after nutrient additions[75], resulting in decreased BNF.

392 Puzzling out the diazotrophs niche

393 Then, how is the diazotroph niche constructed in this coastal upwelling region? We propose
394 a novel framework connecting hydrography and ecology through biogeochemical
395 processes. The full-depth biogeochemical sequence and its connection with surface BNF is

396 shown at a central station at the Ria de Vigo at weekly resolution for the period spring 2017
397 – spring 2018 (Fig. 6). Starting with hydrography, a key feature of this upwelling system is
398 the bidirectional exchange flow with a two-layer structure[76, 77]. During summer, when
399 upwelling conditions prevail, a positive circulation occurs in the Rías: cold subsurface water
400 enters through the lower layer (Fig. 6A), in contact with the bottom, while warm surface
401 waters flow out toward the shelf[39]. The upwelling causes the uplifting of the relatively
402 young Eastern North Atlantic Central Water (ENACW), which has an N:P ratio above or
403 close to one (Fig. 6B, , [29]), and low ammonium content ($\text{NH}_4 < 0.5 \mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$, [78]).

404 Following with ecology, this region shows a rapid phytoplankton response to upwelling
405 pulses[40], as evidenced by the drawdown of inorganic nitrogen and the subsequent
406 chlorophyll accumulation (Fig. 6 B-D). After nitrogen drawdown through phytoplankton
407 uptake, a significant fraction of this fresh organic matter is remineralized within 1-2
408 weeks[78]. This recycling mechanism, also known as nutrient trapping, occurs when
409 particulate organic material sinks out of the photic zone but remains within the upwelling
410 system[78]. The signal of intense bottom remineralization that occurs over the shelf and
411 within the Rias is conveyed into the inner part of the bays, where nutrient trapping processes
412 magnifies, and then uplifts and exits in the surface outflow with the positive circulation[79].
413 The circulation outflow conveys a remineralization fingerprint that becomes more evident at
414 the surface as the upwelling-favorable season proceeds (Fig. 6B-C). This remineralization
415 fingerprint: (i) decreases the N:P ratio because P remineralization is quicker than that of
416 N[80–82], and (ii) accumulates ammonium regenerated within the Ria via ammonification
417 processes[83]. Evidence of cumulative remineralization is reflected in the seasonal evolution
418 of apparent oxygen utilization (AOU), a proxy for the net biological production or
419 consumption of oxygen, calculated as the difference between the observed dissolved
420 oxygen and its saturation concentration (Fig. 7). When AOU at the Ria de Vigo is assessed

421 with discrete samples of measured dissolved oxygen data from 1986-2018[84], it shows
422 lower negative values at the surface during spring and summer due to the oxygen production
423 linked to the synthesis of organic matter by autotrophs. Later, AOU reached its highest
424 positive values in deeper layers as oxygen was consumed during the breakdown of this
425 organic matter (Fig. 7).

426 We argue that in summer and early autumn, when BNF occurs, the signal from bottom
427 remineralization processes—following the sustained organic matter production during the
428 productive upwelling season—reaches the surface, conveyed by the positive circulation in
429 the Rías (sequential steps schematized in Fig. 8). This creates the optimum niche for BNF
430 in terms of temperature and inorganic nutrient content. The predominance of downwelling
431 conditions in late autumn/winter, which promote negative circulation in the Rías, combined
432 with low nutrient uptake by phytoplankton due to light limitation[29], and freshwater runoff
433 events reset the inorganic nutrient content in the surface layer to nitrogen replete conditions
434 (Fig. 6)[85], thereby disrupting the diazotroph niche and preventing BNF from occurring. It
435 is uncertain whether only an N:P ratio<1 is important, or the higher contribution of NH₄ over
436 NO₃⁻ to total inorganic nitrogen availability could also be a key factor in the formation of the
437 diazotroph niche. Higher temporal and spatial resolution data covering different
438 environmental conditions and/or multifactorial controlled experiments[86] are needed to
439 unravel the specific role of temperature and the contribution of NH₄.

440 The conceptual framework proposed in our study resembles the mechanistic niche
441 construction previously described in the eastern tropical North Atlantic Ocean [87], where
442 non-diazotrophs facilitate BNF by creating an environment with excess phosphate.
443 However, in our case, the trigger is the combination of predominant positive circulation within
444 the bays during the upwelling season, and the shorter turnover time of phosphorus
445 compared to nitrogen during organic matter remineralization [81]. The specific

446 characteristics of NW Iberia, such us the presence of elongated bays where upwelling is
447 relatively weak and intermittent[29], enable the ecological niche construction for diazotrophy.
448 Despite BNF representing a minor entry of new nitrogen into the euphotic zone compared
449 to other physical processes[20], it may be critical in supporting phytoplankton growth at the
450 end of the productive upwelling season. At this stage, the symbiosis between diatoms and
451 diazotrophs cyanobacteria could provide the necessary nitrogen to extend the productive
452 season further. Therefore, these results could help explain why the upwelling bays are more
453 productive compared to the upwelled offshore waters[32]. Future studies are needed to
454 investigate the specific role of diatom-diazotroph associations in the productivity of the
455 upwelling bays, and the extent to which similar processes occur in other coastal upwelling
456 regions.

457

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- 694

695 **Figure legends**

696 **Figure 1. Diazotrophic abundance and community composition, and biological**
697 **nitrogen fixation.** Temporal variability of **A)** *nifH* amplicon-based sequencing community
698 composition (relative abundance %) for the most abundant taxa, ordered from top to bottom
699 in increasing abundance. Blank gaps are discarded samples due DNA extraction issues or
700 unacceptable rarefaction curves. **B)** Nitrogen fixation rate ($\text{nmol N L}^{-1}\text{d}^{-1}$) measurements.
701 When values were below detection limits, they are represented with a red border. Error bars
702 represents triplicate measurements (if not visible, they are not larger than the dots). Note
703 the square root transformation on the y-axis (not linear to help in the visualization of small
704 values). **C)** quantitative *nifH* gene copy abundance (qPCR, *nifH* gene copies L^{-1}) data for
705 UCYN-A2, UCYN-A1 and *Gammaproteobacteria* 24774A11. Note that the color scale is
706 logarithmic. UCYN-A2 abundance on 22nd June 2017 exceeded the scale's range by an
707 order of magnitude ($1.7 \pm 0.7 \times 10^6 \text{ nifH transcripts copies} \cdot \text{L}^{-1}$), and it was replaced by a black
708 triangle for visualization purposes. The same figure without this visual solution can be seen
709 in Fig. S6. Climatological season is represented in the inner colored band. The x-axis is
710 shared for the three graphs, sampling dates (format: year/month/day) colored according to
711 location (color code for the locations in Fig. S1). Times when nitrogen amendment
712 experiments were performed are indicated with orange crosses in the upper margin of B).

713

714 **Figure 2. UCYN-A *nifH* gene abundance and expression.** Relationship between BNF
715 ($\text{nmol N L}^{-1}\text{d}^{-1}$) and the abundance of UCYN-A ecotypes (A1 and A2). Quantification of *nifH*
716 gene copies/L by qPCR from DNA (circles) and *nifH* gene transcripts/L by RT-qPCR from
717 cDNA (triangles). Note that the y-scale is logarithmic. Error bars in the y-axis represent
718 standard deviation from three replicates per sample (if not visible, they are not larger than
719 the dots). Uncertainty in N_2 -fixation rates is represented in the x-axis with gray horizontal

720 bars spanning the triplicates measurements (only for UCYN-A2). Samples with positive BNF
721 and non-detection by qPCR are included on the x-axis with red bordering.

722 **Figure 3. Taxa dominance is related with environmental conditions.** Principal
723 Coordinates Analysis (PCoA) based on Bray-Curtis dissimilarity matrix illustrating the
724 differences between samples dominated by UCYN-A (cyan circles) and non-cyanobacterial
725 diazotrophs (NCD, orange squares). Sample group centroids for each dominance situation
726 and confidence ellipses displaying the standard deviation of centroid locations are also
727 represented. The environmental factors (%NH₄, N:P ratio, in situ temperature, NO₃⁻ and
728 PO₄) that contributed most to the community differences observed between these
729 dominance situations were fitted through significant ($p < 0.001$) vector overlays (black color)
730 onto the PCoA ordination. The first axis of the PCoA (x-axis) explains 29.4% of the variance,
731 and the second axis (y-axis) 5.1%.

732 **Figure 4. Temperature and inorganic nitrogen conditions are niche descriptors of the**
733 **diazotrophic community.** A) Kernel density estimates for the taxonomical groups and the
734 niche descriptors inorganic nutrient content, (N:P ratio, A; % of NH₄ in total DIN, B) and
735 temperature (°C, C) separated by cyanobacterial (cyan) and non-cyanobacterial diazotrophs
736 (orange). The red vertical line in A) at N:P ratio=1 delimits apparent nitrogen limitation
737 conditions (when the ratio is <1, left side of the graph). Deviations from N:P ratio=1 (red
738 dashed line in Fig. 4A) separate conditions when there is phosphorus in excess (on the left
739 side of the plot) from conditions of nitrogen surplus (on the right side). The y-axis represents
740 the probability density function for the kernel density estimation. B) Coefficients of models
741 after beta-binomial regression for the environmental parameters inorganic nutrient content
742 (N:P ratio, left column; % of NH₄ in total DIN, mid) and temperature (right column). Only
743 significant models ($p \leq 0.05$) from the whole diazotroph community (7030 ASVs) are shown.
744 The coefficient estimate indicates positive or negative responses to the parameter and is

745 shown with a 95% confidence interval. Specie identification in the y-axis label is only shown
746 when BLASTp result is >=95% (percentage in parentheses). For these ASVs, a detailed
747 table with taxonomy info and complete *nifH* sequence is available as supporting info table.
748 The color code is shared at taxa level for both panels.

749 **Figure 5. Biological nitrogen fixation (BNF) decreases with inorganic nitrogen**
750 **additions when the plankton community is N-limited.** Response of BNF, primary
751 production rates and *chl a* after nutrient amendment microcosm experiments through each
752 climatological season (n= 4) **A)** BNF (nmol N L⁻¹d⁻¹) at in situ conditions (natural
753 environment), inside the microcosm setting ("Control") and the response after 24 hours in
754 the nitrate (+NO₃⁻) or ammonia (+NH₄) amendment treatments. Red dashed horizontal line
755 represents the methodological limit of detection for each triplicate of measurements (black
756 dots). **B)** Response ratio defined as the change in absolute value with regard to initial
757 conditions after 24 hours for N₂-fixation, and after 72 hours for *Chl a* and/or Primary
758 Production (PP). Values below 1 (red dashed line) are mean reductions and values above
759 1 mean increases.

760 **Figure 6. Hydrographic full-depth variability at weekly resolution at the central Ria de**
761 **Vigo during spring 2017 – spring 2018.** Time-series of the full-depth vertical distribution
762 of A) temperature (°C). The white solid line represents the isotherm of 16 °C. B) N:P ratio.
763 The green and black solid line represents the isoline of 0.45 and 1, respectively. C) % of
764 NH₄ in DIN. The white solid line represents the isoline of 75%. And D) Chlorophyll a (Chl a)
765 concentration (mg·m⁻³). Dots represent sample vertical resolution. Surface black circles
766 represents nitrogen fixation rate measurements. When values were below detection limits,
767 they are represented with a red border. Climatological season is represented in the top
768 colored band. The hydrographic conditions with respect to upwelling (blue), downwelling
769 (red), and transition (gray) in the low colored band following[39].

770 **Figure 7. Annual variability of apparent oxygen utilization (AOU, $\mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$), a proxy of**
771 **the biological production and consumption of oxygen, at the Ria de Vigo.** It includes
772 discrete samples of measured dissolved oxygen data from 1986-2018[84] and the shelf/Ría
773 separation criteria (panels left and right) was considered at 9°W longitude (westernmost
774 location 9.5°W). Depth bands grouped each 10 m, from surface (0 m) to bottom (40 m,
775 maximum depth of central Ria de Vigo station) have been modelled with a locally weighted
776 polynomial regression (LOESS). Oversaturation of oxygen due biological production (AOU
777 $<0, \mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$) and undersaturation due respiration (AOU $>0, \mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$) are separated by
778 the red-dashed line. The vertical solid lines represent the onset of climatological seasons.

779 **Figure 8. The sequential steps of the mechanistic biogeochemical niche construction**
780 **process for nitrogen fixers.** (A) At the beginning of the upwelling season, sea surface
781 temperature (SST) is still cold. Upwelled ENACW brings nutrients upwards, into the ría,
782 sustaining an elevated N:P ratio and low content in the form of NH_4^+ . (B) Phytoplankton grow
783 within the surface layer due to the previous nutrient input and the necessary irradiance.
784 Subsequently, (C) organic matter produced by phytoplankton is exported to the outer part
785 of the ría, where it sinks. (D) This organic matter is remineralized near the bottom, where P
786 content rapidly increases, lowering N:P levels. There, inorganic nitrogen is mostly in the form
787 of NH_4^+ . (E) Further into the upwelling season, upwelled waters are mixed with the
788 remineralized P-rich waters, and positive upwelling circulation transports them towards the
789 surface. (F) At the end of the summer upwelling season, SST has increased ($> 16^\circ\text{C}$) and
790 nitrogen fixers can take an advantage of it, in combination to the low N:P conditions.

791

792 Acknowledgements

793 MF was funded by Juan de La Cierva Formación (FJC2019-038970-I, Ministerio de Ciencia
794 e Innovación, Spanish Government). Additional funds for molecular analysis were coming
795 from Axencia Galega de Innovacion (agreement GAIN-IEO) and GRC-EPB Plankton
796 Ecology and Biogeochemistry Research Group (ref. IN607A2018/2). This research was
797 funded by project REMEDIOS (CTM2016-75451-C2-1-R) to BM-C from the Spanish Ministry
798 of Economy and Competitiveness. Bioinformatic analysis were partially run at the Centro de
799 Supercomputación de Galicia (CESGA). We thank E. Teira, E. Fernández, A. Fuentes, M.
800 Pérez, E. Peláez and S. Vieitez, M. J. Pazó, V. Vieitez, C. Rodríguez, J. Valencia, R. Alba-
801 Salgueiro for their assistance during field experiments and lab analysis. We thank X. A.
802 Álvarez-Salgado for her helpful comments on an early version of the draft.

803

804 Data Availability Statement

805 Source datasets supporting the current study are available in
806 https://figshare.com/collections/Mixing_and_Phytoplankton_Growth_in_an_Upwelling_System/5604209 and <https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/pm4r2pyy3/2>. *nifH* sequences are
807 deposited in SRA with accession number PRJNA1184991
808 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/bioproject/PRJNA1184991>. Code and data to reproduce the
809 results is publicly available in https://github.com/mfontela/nifH_niche

811

812

Figure 1

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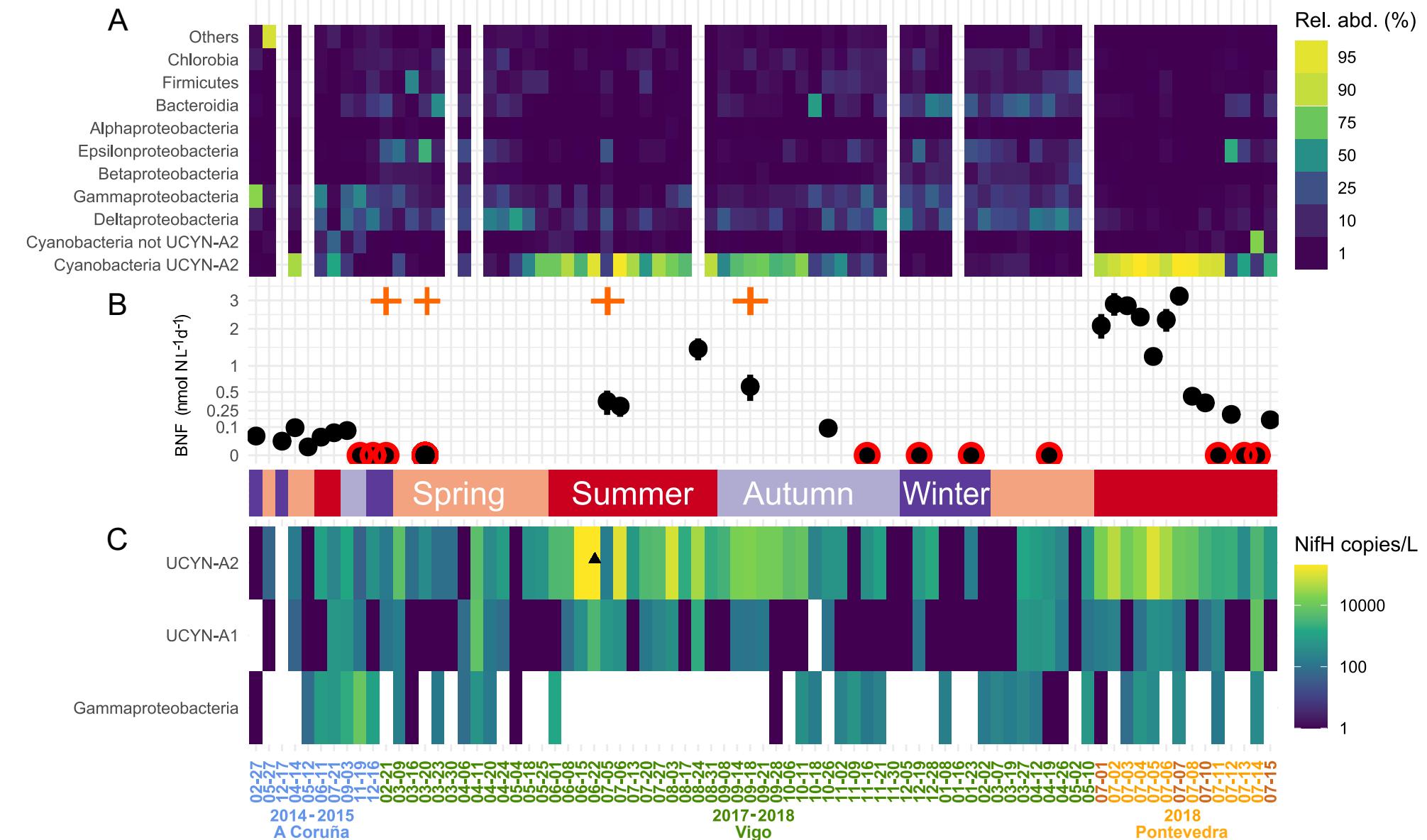


Figure 2

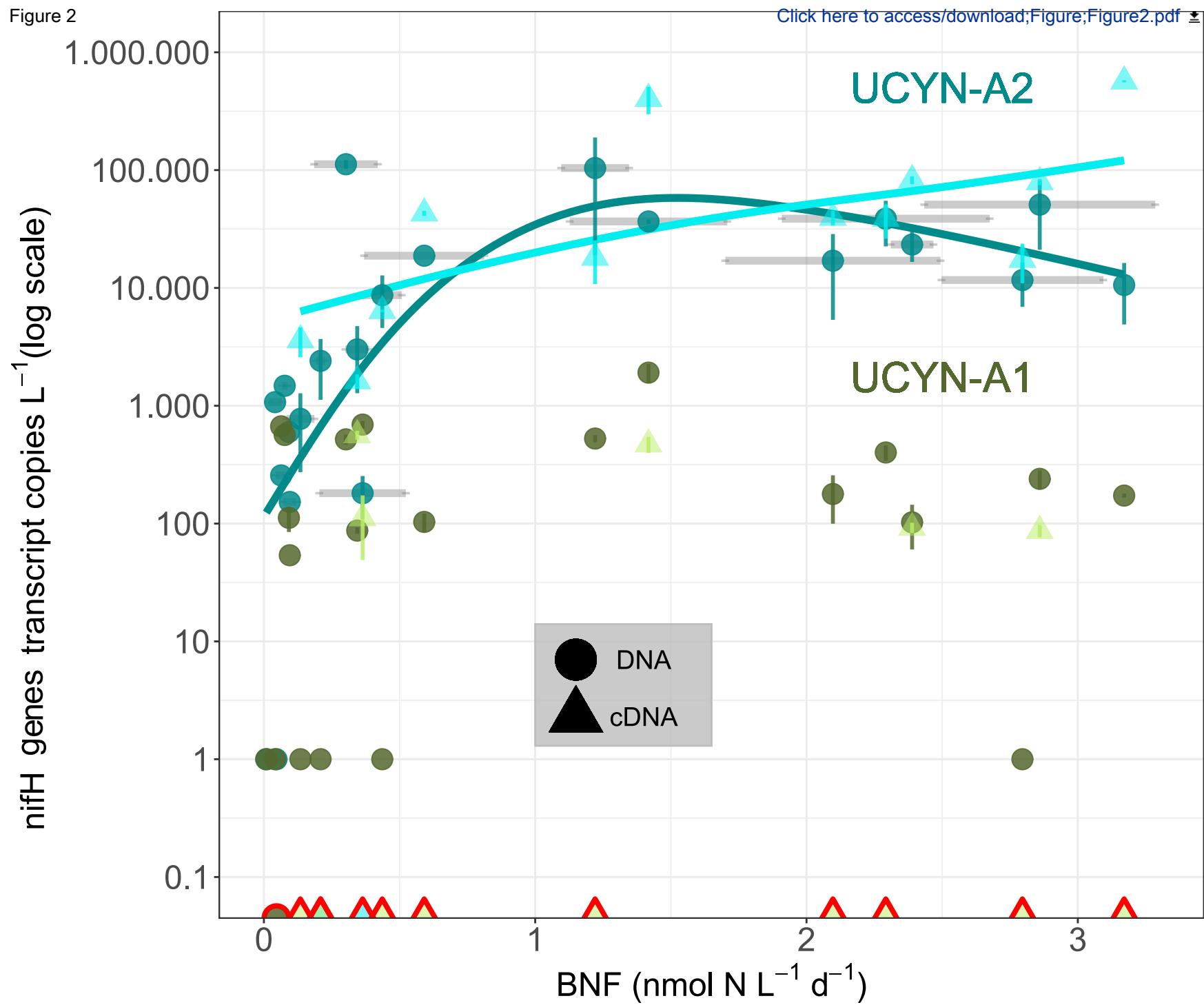
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Figure 3

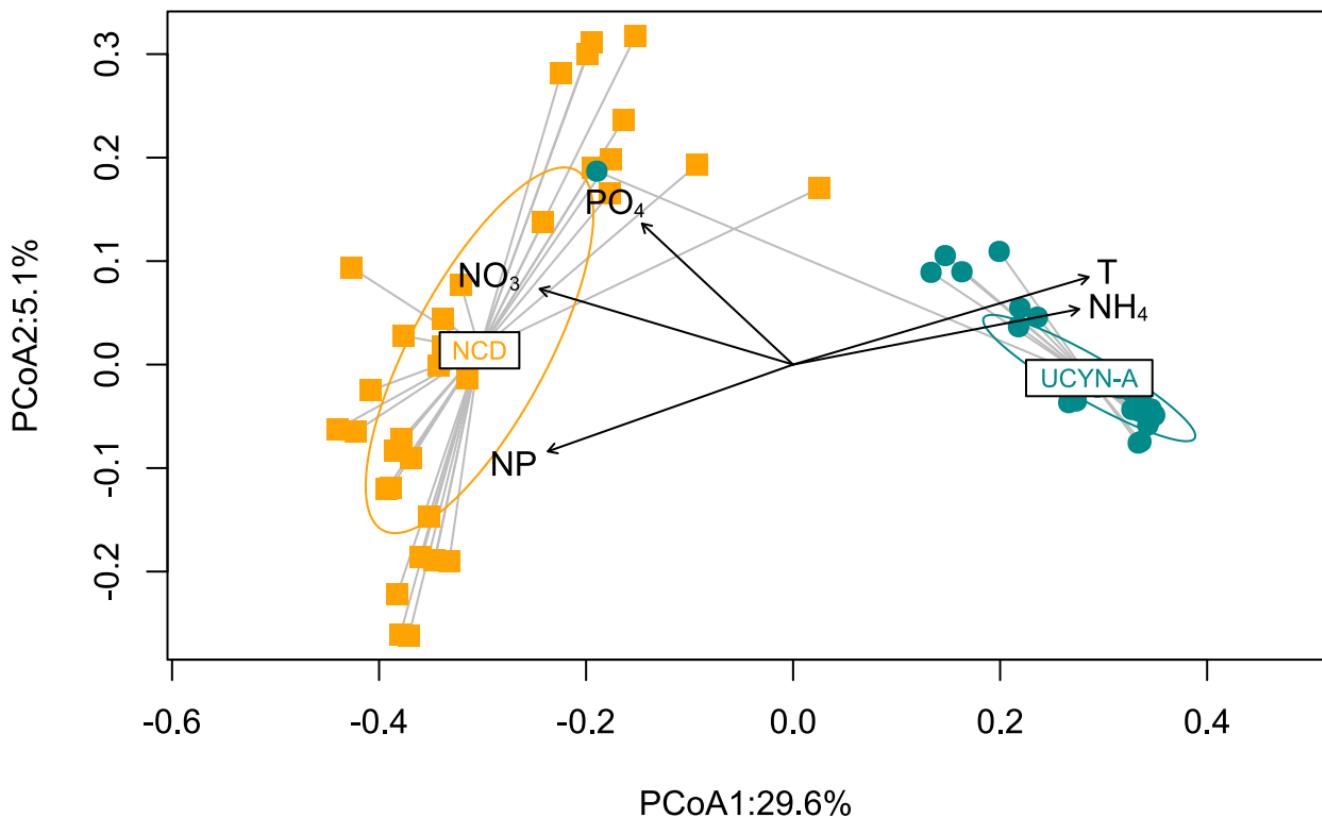
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Figure 4

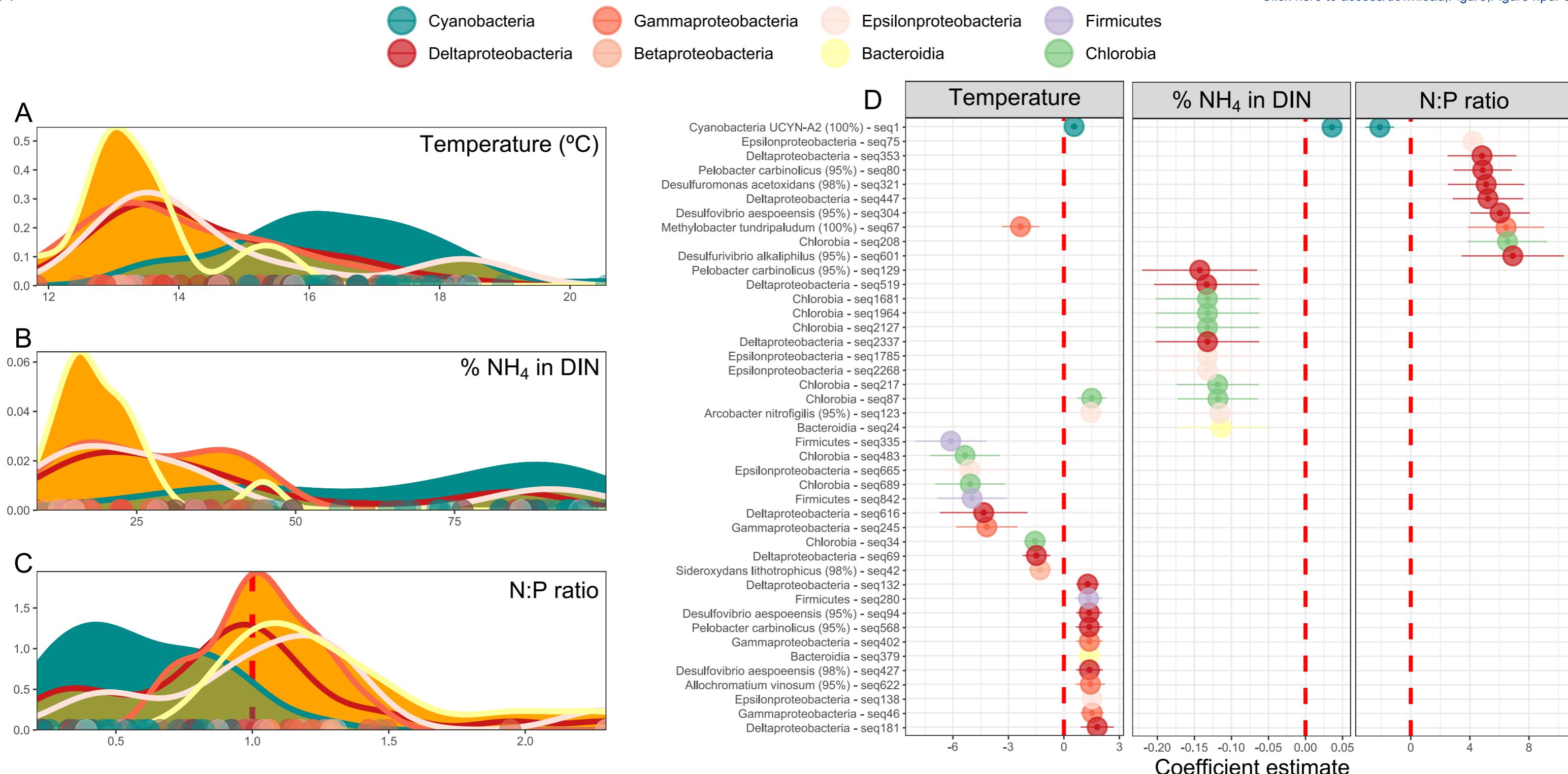
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Figure 5

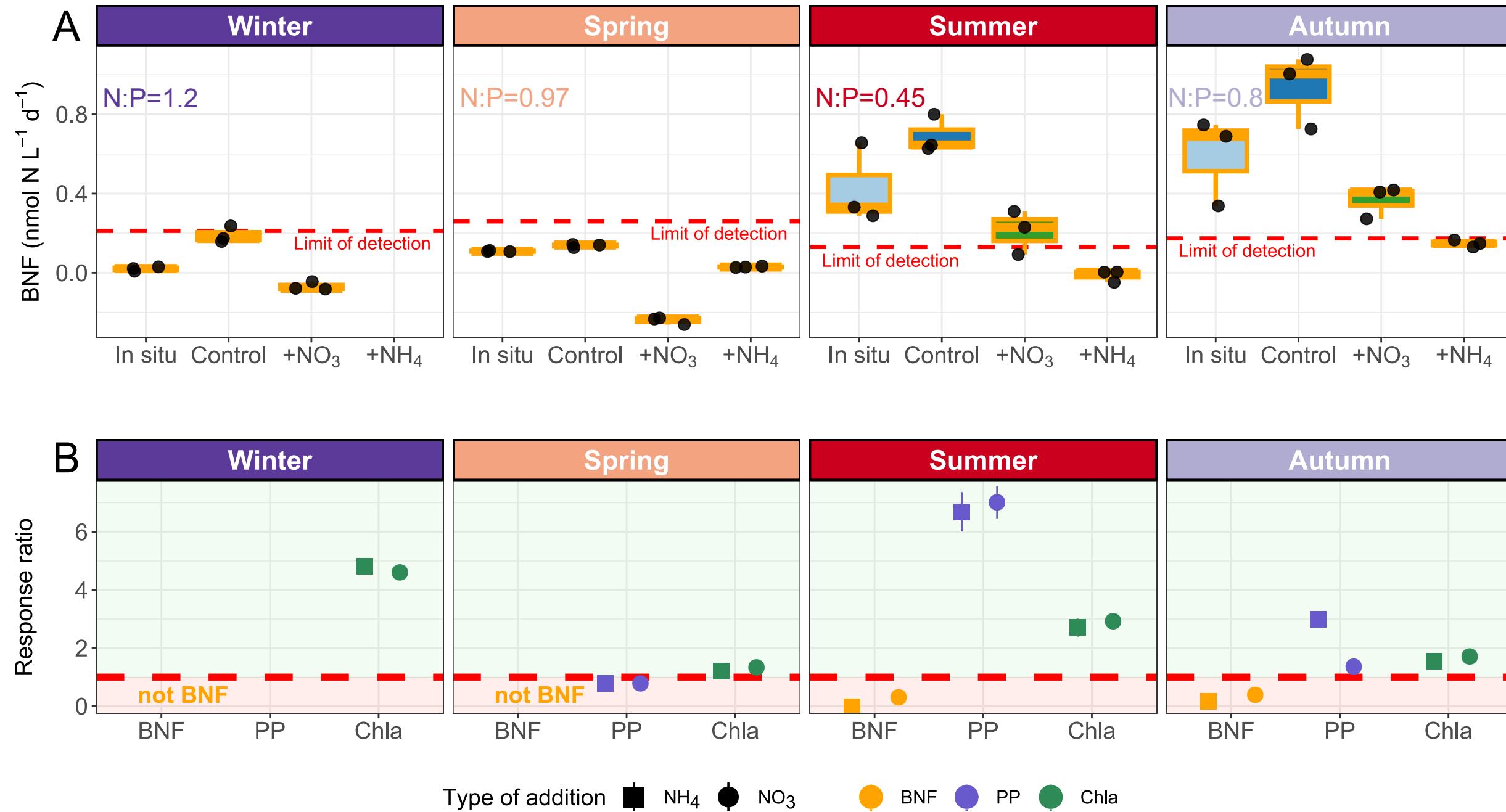
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Figure 6

Spring

Summer

Autumn

Winter

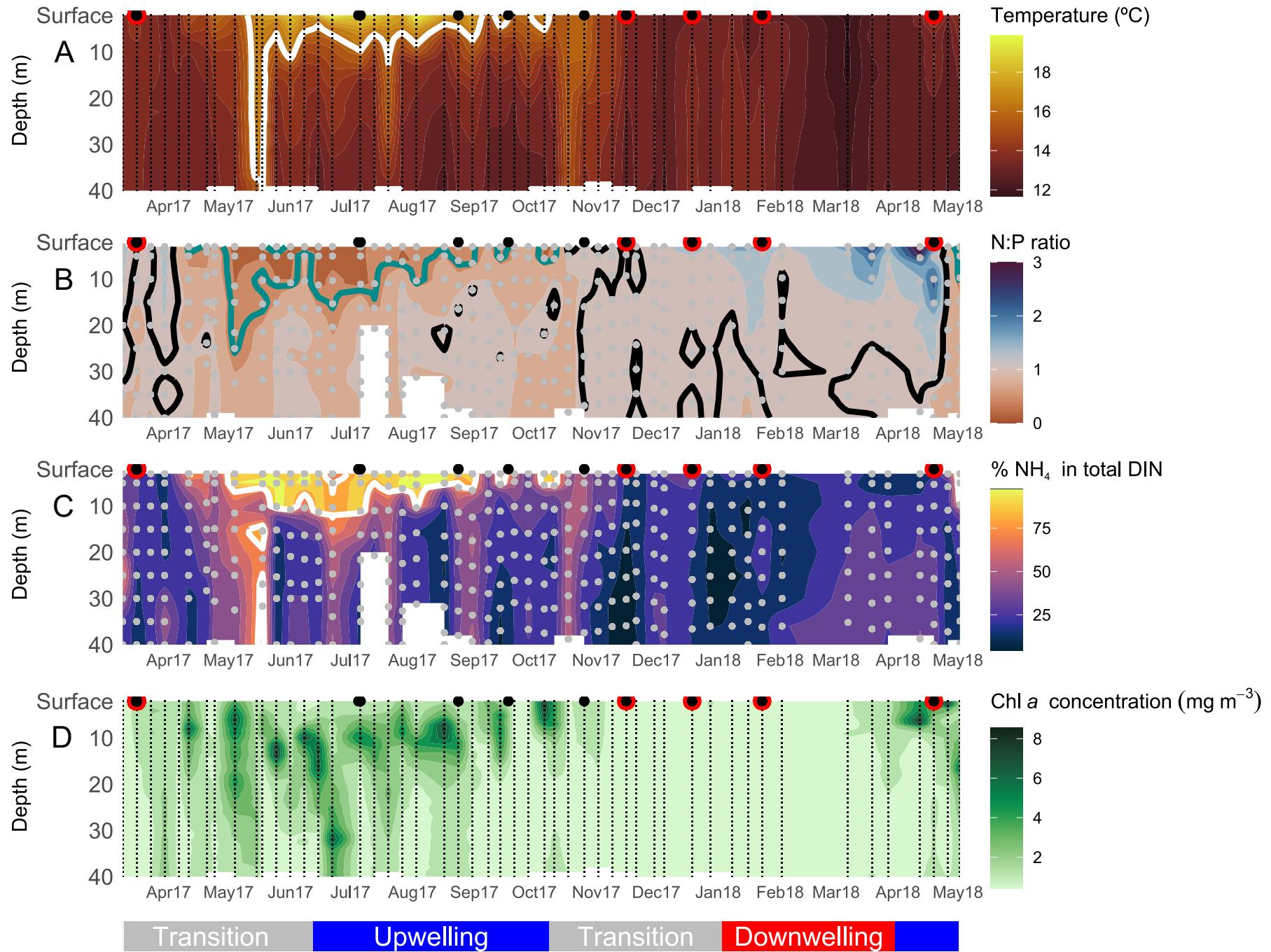
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Figure 7

Shelf, west of 9°W

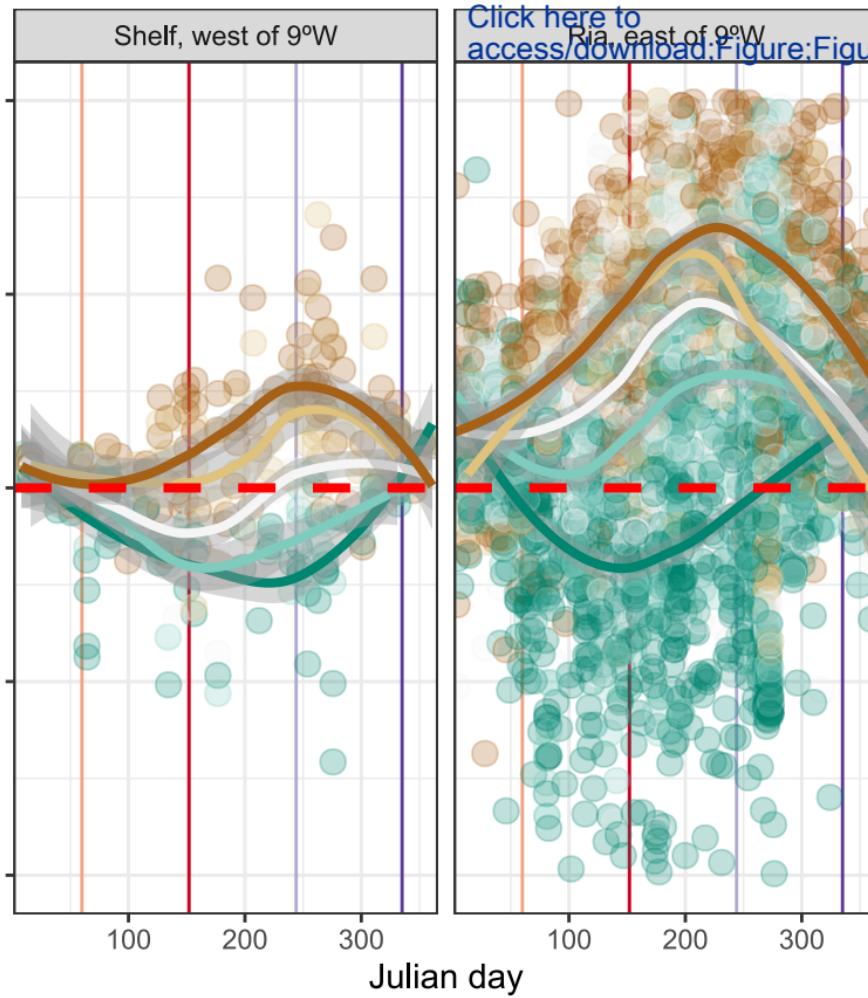
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Ria, east of 9°W

Apparent Oxygen Utilization (AOU, $\mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$)100
50
0
-50
-100

100 200 300

Julian day

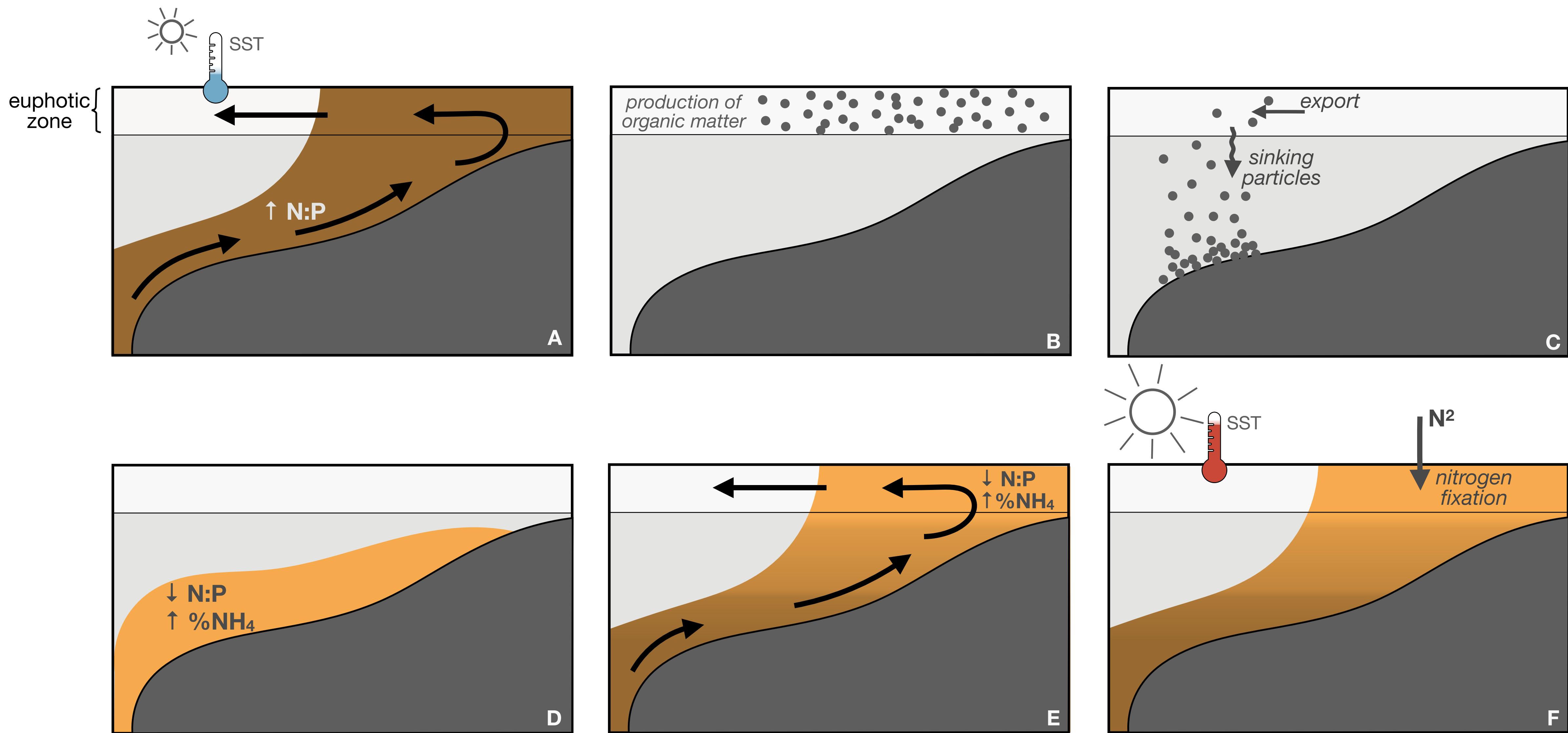


Depth



Figure 8

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