

# Re-evaluation of the extent of *Caulerpa taxifolia* development in the northern Mediterranean using airborne spectrographic sensing

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**ABSTRACT:** There has been significant concern over development of the tropical green alga *Caulerpa taxifolia* in the Mediterranean Sea. Reports dating back to 1991 predicted that the species would expand exponentially on all types of substrata and displace major components of the coastal benthic flora, in particular the dominant native seagrass *Posidonia oceanica*. A pilot study of the Bay of Menton, SE France, where *C. taxifolia* has been established since at least 1989, indicated that these predictions might not be correct and that more sophisticated methods might be needed to gain a better estimate of the alga's abundance. We thus surveyed 44 % of the total area reportedly colonized by *C. taxifolia* to a depth of 20 m on the south coast of France by compact airborne multispectral imaging and validated our maps by an extensive underwater survey. Our data indicate that the cover of *C. taxifolia* has been overestimated by at least 1 order of magnitude and that *C. taxifolia* has not substantially impacted the cover of *P. oceanica*. They also indicate that exponential expansion of the alga is only likely to have occurred on substrata situated in the vicinity of sewage outfalls and storm water drains, suggesting that it principally occupies partially vacant niches in stressed environments. In the light of these results, we consider that the risk to most endemic species should be considerably lower than formerly predicted.

**KEY WORDS:** *Caulerpa taxifolia* · *Posidonia oceanica* · Airborne sensing · Spectra · Surface cover · Underwater survey

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## INTRODUCTION

Species invasions pose a significant threat to the biodiversity of natural ecosystems, and the increasing frequency of their occurrence is associated with worldwide growth in commerce and tourism (Boudouresque et al. 1994, Farnham 1997, Carlton 1999). On any given day, between 3000 and 6000 species are estimated to be in transit in the ballast tanks of ships (Carlton 1999, S. Gollasch, Chairman of the ICES Working Group on Introductions and Transfers of Marine Organisms,

pers. comm.). Marine species introductions also occur via detachment from the fouled hulls or anchor chains of boats, via migration through manmade waterways (e.g. the Suez Canal) and by deliberate or accidental release from aquaria or mariculture facilities (Por 1978, Boudouresque et al. 1994, Farnham 1997).

Proliferation of introduced species such as the European zebra mussel, European shore crab, North American comb jellyfish, green alga *Codium fragile*, brown alga *Sargassum muticum* and toxic dinoflagellates has stimulated international action plans to combat the

threat posed by biological invasions. In many instances, however, the introduction of a foreign species has little measurable impact upon native communities (Nolan 1994, Reise et al. 1999). Responsibility thus rests with the scientific community to provide decision-makers with accurate data that allow for appropriate allocation of human effort and public funds.

One of the best known species invasions in recent times has been that of the green alga *Caulerpa taxifolia* Vahl C. Agardh in the Mediterranean Sea. It is presumed that *C. taxifolia* was introduced in 1984 (Meinesz & Hesse 1991). Reports dating back to 1991 claim exponential expansion of the alga (Meinesz et al. 1991, Belsher et al. 1993, Meinesz et al. 1997), culminating in an estimated surface cover of more than 6000 ha by 2000 (Jousson et al. 2000) and 30 000 ha by 2002 (Withgott 2002). Proliferation on substrata adjacent to beds of the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* L. Delile gave rise to predictions that the alga would displace this keystone species of the Mediterranean coastal flora (Meinesz & Hesse 1991, de Villèle & Verlaque 1995) that stabilizes fine sediments, limits beach erosion, and underpins the trophic web (Pérès & Picard 1975, Pergent et al. 1995).

Study of the Bay of Menton, where *Caulerpa taxifolia* has existed since at least 1989 (Jaubert et al. 1999), showed that the alga had not spread as much as previously reported (Meinesz et al. 1997) and had not caused deleterious alterations in *Posidonia oceanica* beds (Jaubert et al. 1999). We thus decided to map the cover of *C. taxifolia* in the (reportedly) most heavily colonized areas of southern France to gain a better understanding of the alga's overall abundance. As in the Bay of Menton study (Jaubert et al. 1999), we used state-of-the-art airborne remote sensing technologies and conducted extensive underwater surveys to vali-

date the results. Airborne remote sensing technologies are able to survey large areas of the shallow seabed at high resolution in real time, thereby eliminating the need to extrapolate from small scale data sets obtained underwater (Mumby et al. 2001).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Compact airborne spectral imaging.** We mounted a CASI (Compact Airborne Spectrographic Imager, ITRES Research) aboard a Cessna Caravan seaplane equipped with advanced autopilot capabilities and obtained multispectral imagery over 44% of the total area reportedly affected by *Caulerpa taxifolia* between the depths of 0 and 20 m on the south coast of France (Meinesz et al. 2001; Fig. 1). Our methodology was similar to that implemented and described in Jaubert et al. (1999), Minghelli et al. (2002) and Mumby et al. (2001, in press). We acquired data with a ground spatial resolution of 1.0 to 2.5 m over 12 to 18 spectral bands that were effective in resolving the major classes of vegetation (*Caulerpa taxifolia*, *C. prolifera*, *Posidonia oceanica*, *Cymodocea nodosa* and mixed photophilic algae dominated by *Dictyota*, *Padina* and *Acetabularia*) and substratum (sand, mud, rock). The 2.5 m data were acquired at an altitude of 1875 m at the following spectral bands (nm):  $409 \pm 5$ ,  $425 \pm 8$ ,  $439 \pm 7$ ,  $454 \pm 6$ ,  $470 \pm 7$ ,  $485 \pm 8$ ,  $499 \pm 6$ ,  $536 \pm 20$ ,  $582 \pm 13$ ,  $614 \pm 13$ ,  $644 \pm 12$ ,  $675 \pm 13$ ,  $705 \pm 11$ ,  $734 \pm 11$ ,  $763 \pm 11$ ,  $792 \pm 11$ ,  $821 \pm 12$ ,  $849 \pm 12$ ; 1 m data were acquired at an altitude of 750 m at:  $467 \pm 8$ ,  $508 \pm 8$ ,  $523 \pm 8$ ,  $535 \pm 5$ ,  $544 \pm 5$ ,  $554 \pm 6$ ,  $565 \pm 5$ ,  $574 \pm 5$ ,  $585 \pm 6$ ,  $595 \pm 5$ ,  $644 \pm 5$ ,  $845 \pm 5$ . Spectral data were acquired in September 1999 and October 2000, when the bio-

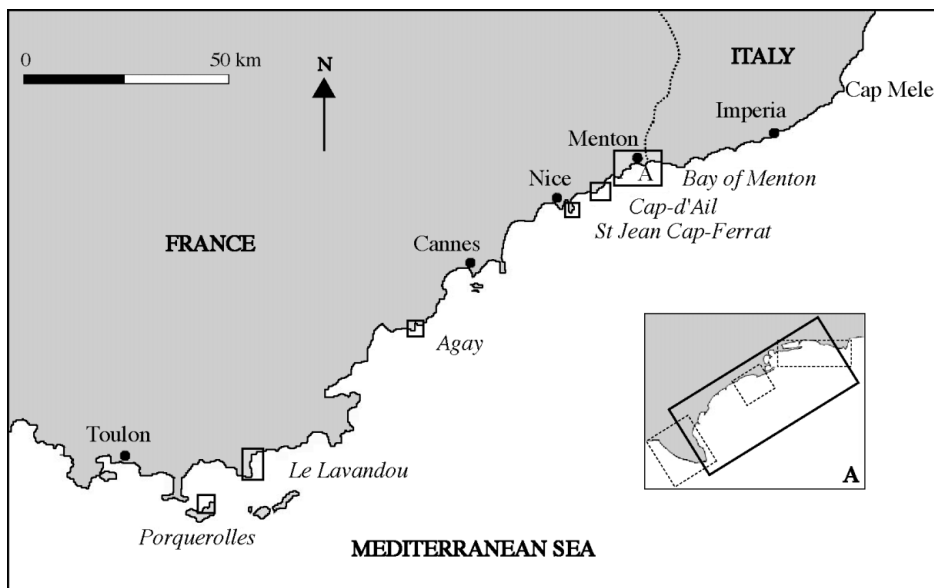


Fig. 1. Zones mapped by multispectral airborne sensing; insert A shows 3 areas mapped at 1.0 m ground spatial resolution in the Bay of Menton (dashed line boxes) and 1 area mapped at 2.5 m resolution (thick line box), all other zones were mapped at 1.0 m resolution

mass of *C. taxifolia* was close to its annual maximum, and at the beginning of June 2001, when the alga's biomass was close to minimum (Verlaque & Fritayre 1994). Imagery was acquired on cloudless days at sun angles below 45° to minimize sun glint.

We placed white, blue and green spectral reference sheets ( $\geq 16$  m<sup>2</sup> surface area) on beachheads in the flight path of the aircraft to determine atmospheric light attenuation. To determine water column light attenuation [ $k$  (m<sup>-1</sup>)] from the CASI imagery, we secured white spectral reference sheets to the seabed at depths of 5, 10 and 15 m. Also, simultaneously with the flights, we recorded vertical profiles of spectral downwelling irradiance in multiple locations with a rapid data-acquisition (200 ms) Profiling Reflectance Radiometer (PRR-800, Biospherical Instruments) and calculated the average diffuse spectral attenuation coefficient for downwelling irradiance for the water column in each of the imaged areas. We further used the PRR-800 to obtain multiple *in situ* spectral reflectance profiles for each dominant class of benthic vegetation and substratum ( $\geq 50$  per class) at 3 or more depths while diving with SCUBA. Recurring differences in the spectral reflectance profiles were subsequently used to discriminate between the major classes of vegetation and substratum (see below).

**CASI image analysis.** We corrected the CASI data for electronic offset, dark current, scattered light and frame-shift smear using the manufacturer's software (ITRES Research) and geo-referenced the imagery to the Universal Transverse Mercator using synchronously acquired Global Positioning System (GPS) data and PCI Easi/Pace software. We adjusted the spectral data for variation in downwelling irradiance (radiometric correction) by reference to measurements made with an Incident Light Sensor (ILS) mounted on the wing of the aircraft, coupled by fibre-optic cable to the CASI. We corrected for image distortion caused by angular deviation of the CASI sensor by reference to measurements made with a gyroscope (Fig. 2A).

Sun glint was reduced from the imagery by determining the linear relationship between near infrared and visible radiance over an area of water that was too deep for the seabed to have influenced the spectral radiance signature. Data were adjusted for atmospheric light attenuation by relating the CASI-determined radiances of the beachhead spectral reference sheets ( $R_s$ ) in each of the measured spectral bands ( $\lambda$ ) to their absolute reflectance ( $\rho_{s\lambda}$ ):

$$\rho_{s\lambda} = a_{\lambda}R_{s\lambda} + b_{\lambda} \quad (1)$$

where  $a$  and  $b$  are constants.

Pixel bathymetry was interpolated from a natural log-linear plot of green to red light reflectance from a reference surface (sand or a seafloor target sheet) over

a series of depth intervals (Philpot 1989). Reflectance of the seafloor ( $\rho_f$ ) was then calculated for every pixel in the imagery using:

$$\rho_{f\lambda} = [(\rho_{s\lambda} - \rho_{w\lambda})/e^{-2k_{\lambda}z}] + \rho_{w\lambda} \quad (2)$$

where  $\rho_w$  is the reflectance of the water in an area too deep for the seabed to be of influence (Maritorena et al. 1994, Fig. 2B) and  $z$  is the depth.

Finally, using the maximum likelihood approach, data were classified according to the shortest Mahalanobis distances between the measured *in situ* spectra of the vegetation and substratum classes and the spectra of the image pixels using the software package ENVI v. 3.4 (Research Systems) according to the methods given in Jaubert et al. (1999, Fig. 2C; see e.g. Mumby et al. 1998, Hochberg & Atkinson 2000, Mumby et al. 2001, in press).

**Field survey.** The thematic maps were validated by making a large number of underwater observations in different field locations, particularly when we had identified in our imagery areas where the spectral reflectance from the seabed was altered due to sun glint at the sea surface or was too weak. This was mostly where water depths approached 20 m. Within these areas, we extracted the position, in real world coordinates, of groups of pixels that were assigned to different benthic classes according to our classifications. We then positioned ourselves at those locations in a small boat with the aid of a portable differential GPS (Trimble NT200D; accuracy  $\pm 3$  m) and dived with SCUBA to determine whether the subject classes had been correctly identified. We also used an underwater positioning system (acoustic interferometer PLSM Instrumentation AQUA-METRE D100) to determine (accuracy  $\pm 3$  m) the locations of multiple patches of *Caulerpa taxifolia*, *Posidonia oceanica*, *C. taxifolia* mixed with *P. oceanica* and sand at depths of 2 to 20 m. To do this, we referenced our acoustic positioning system to the real world by measuring fixed positions on either side of the emitting antenna with the same differential GPS. We then compared the locations and identities of these benthic features with those represented on our thematic maps. In total, we verified 305 benthic subjects.

## RESULTS

Comparison of our classified imagery with published data on the cover of *Caulerpa taxifolia* in the same localities revealed major quantitative discrepancies (Fig. 3). We estimated the total cover of the alga in the areas mapped to be 65 ha, compared with the most conservative published estimate of 751 ha (Table 1). *Posidonia oceanica* covered an area 11.6× larger

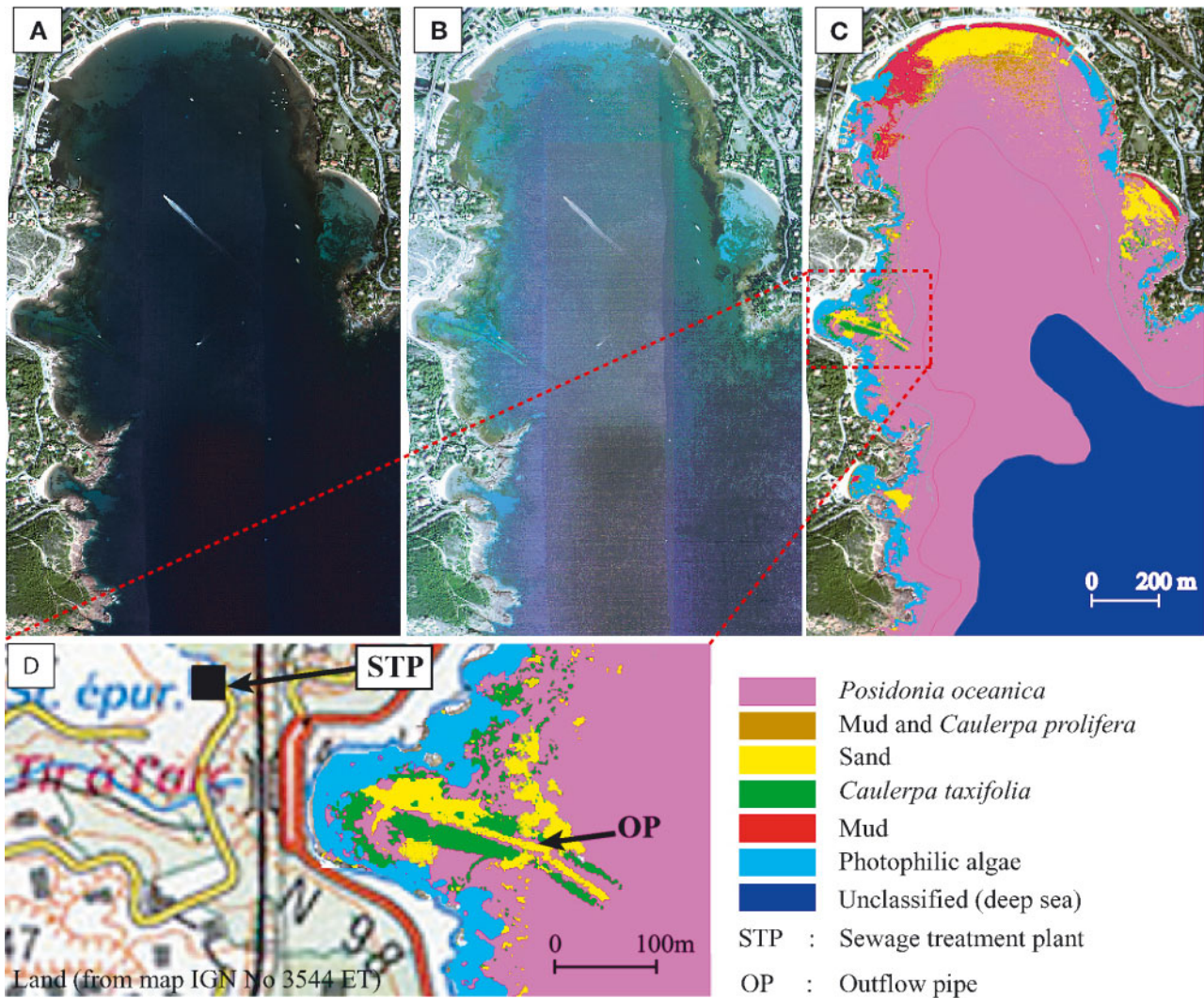


Fig. 2. Sequence of analytical steps performed on compact airborne spectrographic imagery (CASI) obtained for the Bay of Agay, culminating in production of a thematic map of vegetation and substrata. (A) Mosaic of raw images; (B) imagery corrected for atmospheric and water column light attenuation after determination of pixel bathymetry; (C) thematic map; (D) expanded section (red box), juxtapositioned with IGN map No 3544 ET, showing that *Caulerpa taxifolia* is principally localized close to the outfall of a sewage treatment plant

Table 1. *Posidonia oceanica* and *Caulerpa taxifolia*. Seabed cover (ha) obtained over the depth interval 0 to 20 m in this study, compared with the surface cover of *C. taxifolia* over the same depth interval by transect survey (Meinesz et al. 2001). Difference calculated as  $([B-A]/A) \times 100$

	Bay of Menton	Cap d'Ail	St Jean Cap-Ferrat	Agay	Lavandou	Porquerolles	Total
<b>This study</b>							
Area mapped	219.8	100.6	99.7	144	418.5	240	1222.6
<i>Posidonia oceanica</i>	88.8	82.2	91	114.4	212.1	167.3	754
<i>Caulerpa taxifolia</i> (A)	47.7	5.3	2	1.8	2.1	6	65
<b>Meinesz et al. (2001)</b>							
<i>Caulerpa taxifolia</i> (B)	310.7	136.8	38.3	52	2.2	211	751
<b>Difference (%)</b>	<b>551</b>	<b>2461</b>	<b>1838</b>	<b>2738</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3396</b>	<b>1055</b>

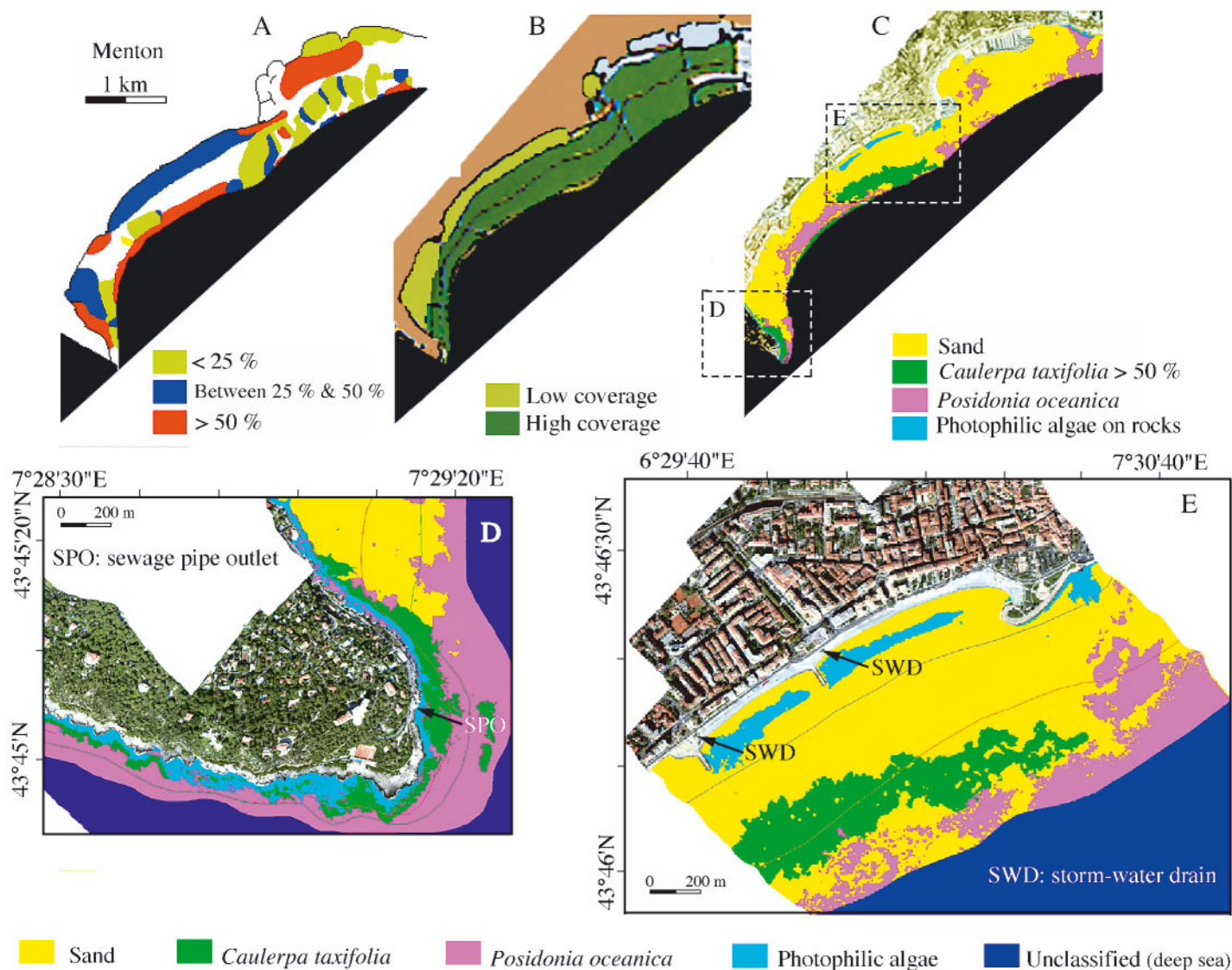


Fig. 3. Comparative thematic maps of the distribution of *Caulerpa taxifolia* in the Bay of Menton, illustrating differences in cover. (A) Available on the internet site of IFREMER ([www.ifremer.fr](http://www.ifremer.fr)); (B) a pamphlet made by A. Meinesz and collaborators (LEML-UNSA 2000), commissioned by the Agence de l'Eau Rhône Méditerranée Corse, the Conseil Régional Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and the Ministère de l'Aménagement du Territoire et de l'Environnement, for distribution to the public as part of an interdepartmental action plan to combat the spread of *C. taxifolia*; (C) this study, from multispectral airborne imagery acquired in September 1999 at a ground spatial resolution of 2.5 m; (D,E) expanded sections showing that *C. taxifolia* is principally localized near the 2 major storm-water catchments that drain the city of Menton and near the outlet of the overflow pipe of the buffer tank of a domestic sewage plant that opens at the tip of Cap-Martin

(Table 1). In the study area, all of the large dense populations of *C. taxifolia* are situated in the vicinity of domestic sewages and/or storm-water drains, and/or in some cases they are associated with substrata affected by mechanical perturbations. In the Bay of Menton these populations are respectively situated (1) in front of the major storm-water collectors that drain the city and the surrounding hills (Fig. 3E), (2) along the shore of Cap-Martin, at the tip of which the outlet of the overflow pipe of a domestic wastewater tank opens

(Fig. 3D), and (3) at greater depth on a seabed situated below the outlet of the city's sewage (Jaubert et al. 1999). The eastern half of the bay, situated upstream of these sources of pollution with regard to the dominant current, harbors only a few scattered small spots of *C. taxifolia* (Jaubert et al. 1999). Similar circumstances characterize all of the areas where the alga has proliferated and, in this regard, the situation that prevails around the Island of Porquerolles is particularly demonstrative. This pristine area harbors only 1 large

and well-delimited *C. taxifolia* population that covers a dead mat situated where the wreckage of a large French warship and explosions have killed a large portion of a dense *Posidonia* bed. According to Meinesz et al. (1997), the *Posidonia* mat around the wreck was dead when the alga started to colonize it in 1995.

According to a field-verification survey, we obtained the following errors: 1.7% false positive results, where *Caulerpa taxifolia* was identified on the imagery but none was present on the seabed, and 14.5% false negative results, where the alga was present on the seabed but not on the imagery. The numbers and locations of samples giving rise to these results are given in Table 2. The false negative results were distributed as follows: 4% where dense cover of *C. taxifolia* ( $\geq 50\%$ ) was present on the seabed, but none was apparent on the imagery; 8.1% where sparse to moderate cover of *C. taxifolia* ( $< 50\%$ ) was present on the seabed, usually mixed with other types of vegetation, but none was apparent on the imagery; and 2.4% where a mixture of *C. taxifolia* and *Posidonia oceanica* was present on the seabed, but not on the imagery.

## DISCUSSION

There has been considerable concern about the rapid spread of *Caulerpa taxifolia* in the western Mediterranean and Adriatic seas over the last 2 decades, and about the impact that extensive growth of this alga is having on native biota. However, this is not an isolated phenomenon. Episodes of *Caulerpa* sp. proliferation have occurred in many parts of the world over the last century, e.g. *C. prolifera* in the western Mediterranean during the 1920s (Ollivier 1929) and within the Levant Basin during much of the first half of the 20th century (Rayss 1941, Doumenge 1995); *C. filiformis* and *C. scalpelliformis* in SE Australia in the mid 1970s (May 1976) and 1990s (Davis et al. 1997), respectively; *C. racemosa* in Greece (Panayotidis & Montesanto 1994) and Florida during the 1990s (Lapointe et al. 1994); *C. verticillata* and *C. brachypus* in Florida at present (Lapointe & Barile 2003). In several instances, the *Caulerpa* species involved proliferated rapidly then, after varying periods of time and for reasons that are not well understood, disappeared or declined appreciably in abundance. A similar process of regression is likely occurring in the first reported site of *C. taxifolia* outbreak in the Mediterranean, below the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco (authors' unpubl. data).

Our data show that the alga appears to be 1 to 2 orders of magnitude less abundant than is commonly believed from the sea surface to a depth 20 m, which is the depth interval over which the most extensive populations are generally found (Meinesz et al. 2001).

Table 2. Ground verification of thematic maps performed at the indicated locations by comparing the true identities of 305 subjects observed on the seafloor (field) with those of different classes identified by classification of imagery (imagery). False negative results (in dark grey cells) are counted where classes of *Caulerpa taxifolia* found on the seabed have not been identified on the imagery and false positive (in light grey cells) where classes of *C. taxifolia* identified on the imagery have not been found on the seabed

		Field	
		<i>C. taxifolia</i>	Other
<b>Italian border</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	1	0
	Other	0	7
<b>Bay of Menton</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	40	0
	Other	3	58
<b>Cap-Martin</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	10	0
	Other	4	6
<b>Cap-Ferrat</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	31	0
	Other	2	46
<b>Bay of Agay</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	17	3
	Other	7	50
<b>Lavandou</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	7	0
	Other	2	11
<b>Total</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	106	3
	Other	18	178
<b>Total in %</b>			
Imagery	<i>C. taxifolia</i>	85%	1.7%
	Other	14.5%	98%

Based on the *Caulerpa taxifolia* cover we have measured and the reported time of the alga's first arrival (see Meinesz et al. 1998), we suggest that exponential expansion could only have taken place in localized zones adjacent to human population centers, generally on substrata exposed to wastewater pollution in the vicinity of sewage or storm-water outlets (Chisholm et al. 1997). Very often, this occurred where beds of *Posidonia oceanica* had died prior to the alga's arrival (Jaubert et al. 1999).

The existence of a correlation between domestic pollution and the proliferation of algae belonging to the genus *Caulerpa* is well documented. Towards the beginning of the last century, Ollivier (1929) suspected that increasing domestic pollution had triggered the proliferation of *Caulerpa prolifera* in the French Riviera. Similar observations were made by May (1975) about the spread of *C. filiformis* in Botany Bay near Sydney, Australia. Meinesz (1976, 1977) noticed that *C. prolifera* could quickly cover substrata heavily polluted by decomposing organic matter, and was planting this species in the French Riviera to restore habitats damaged by organic pollution (Meinesz 1976, 1977). In Florida, recent blooms of *C. verticillata* and *C. brachypus* in coastal ecosystems are supported by domestic pollution (Lapointe & Barile 2003).

These facts support the hypothesis that *Caulerpa taxifolia* proliferation is limited to substrata containing substances from which the alga derives nutrients (Chisholm et al. 1996). It is still unclear which substance(s) is or are responsible for this proliferation, and more research is needed to determine the respective roles of high nutrient loads (Ceccherelli & Cinelli 1997) partly composed of domestic pollutants (Chisholm et al. 1997, Fernex et al. 2001) and also perhaps to identify other substances, which may play an important role.

Our results suggest that *Caulerpa taxifolia* principally occupies partially vacant niches in stressed environments (Giaccone 1997, Occhipinti-Ambrogi et al. 2003), as do some other invasive species (Lüning 1990, Colinvaux 1993, Marino et al. 1999). This concurs with observations that the alga has not measurably impacted the pre-existing cover of *Posidonia oceanica* (Jaubert et al. 1999) and conflicts with the results of shorter-term experiments (de Villèle & Verlaque 1995, Ceccherelli & Cinelli 1997, 1998). Overall, our data provide a realistic perspective of the spread of *C. taxifolia*, indicating that the risk posed by the alga to major endemic species is much lower than was formerly predicted.

**Acknowledgements.** We are indebted to Prince Khaled bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia and the Living Oceans Foundation for providing us with the services of the motor yacht 'Golden Shadow', her seaplane, and her captain, offi-

cers and crew. The Principality of Monaco and the Council of Europe additionally supported the work. We thank D. Cadot, L. Mangialajo, M. Monti, G. Passeron-Seitre, S. Pournier, S. Purkis, S. Reynaud-Vaganay, F. Seguain, K. Woods and M. Zeichen for assistance in the field.

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Editorial responsibility: Otto Kinne (Editor), Oldendorf/Luhe, Germany

Submitted: November 12, 2002; Accepted: October 30, 2003  
Proofs received from author(s): November 19, 2003