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Haliotis tuberculata, a generalist marine herbivore that prefers a mixed diet, but with consistent individual foraging activity

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ABSTRACT

While population foraging behaviour of herbivores has been extensively studied, individual choice is still poorly understood. Very few studies have focused on the individual consistency of foraging behaviour in marine herbivores. Because marine ectotherms are strongly influenced by their environment and because a mixed diet is appropriate for herbivores, we hypothesized that *Haliotis tuberculata*, a large marine gastropod, would not exhibit significant individual consistency in foraging activity and would display generalist food choices. To test these hypotheses, the behaviour of 120 abalone was studied using a choice test of eight macroalgal species over 3-weeks, with video recording 24 hours a day. In addition, primary components, secondary metabolites and toughness of the eight algae were measured. At the population level, food choice was mainly related to the protein composition and the toughness of the macroalgae. We found that *H. tuberculata* is a generalist species feeding on a variety of algae ($IS = 0.64$), even if 21% of the individuals can be considered to be specialists. However, in contrast to our hypothesis, highly consistent between-individual variation was observed in foraging activity (ICC

52 = 0.81 for time spent feeding and ICC = 0.74 for number of feeding visits per day). The high
53 individual consistency of foraging activity has some ecological and evolutionary implications
54 currently not understood for this marine herbivore.

55 Keywords: intraclass correlation, proportion similarity index, food choice, marine herbivore,
56 foraging activity, mollusc, individual consistency

57

INTRODUCTION

Herbivores have to feed on items that are highly variable and often nutritionally much poorer than their own body (Sternern & Hessen, 1994). For herbivores with nutritionally poor prey items, foraging choices are complex, and a mixed diet is a good food choice strategy in terms of nutrition (Day & Cook, 1995). It has been suggested that food choice strategies of herbivores depend on four major components in plants: protein content, chemical defences (distasteful or toxic substances), chemical feeding stimulants (perhaps related to essential nutrients), and physical defences such as the toughness of plant tissue (Scheidel & Bruelheide, 1999). As plants contain much less protein than animals, protein content plays an important role in determining the preferences of herbivores (Mattson, 1980). Protein composition is highly variable between algal species (Jung, Lim, Kim, & Park, 2013; Mai, Mercer, & Donlon, 1994; Mai, Mercer, & Donlon, 1995) and between seasons and harvest sites (Renaud & Luong-Van, 2006; Schmid, Guiheneuf, & Stengel, 2014; Villares, Fernandez-Lema, & Lopez-Mosquera, 2013). Another important component determining food choices in abalone is the chemical defences of macroalgae. In marine gastropods, post-ingestive consequences of secondary metabolites have been evaluated in only a few cases, showing that growth is reduced by secondary metabolites in sea hares (Pennings & Carefoot, 1995) and abalone (Fleming, 1995b; Winter & Estes, 1992). The effect of a third potential determinant of feeding behaviour on marine herbivores, algae toughness, has been quite controversial. Some concluded this is of only minor importance (Shepherd & Steinberg, 1992) while others have observed important effects of such structural defences (Winter & Estes, 1992). However, neither the effectiveness of any single factor nor the interactions between them is yet fully understood. In addition, even if some food preferences can be determined at a population level, individual foraging strategies can nuance these preferences.

83 Consistency of foraging behaviour can be studied with different approaches, historically separate
84 but conceptually similar. One approach focuses on food resource use to determine if the
85 population and individuals can be defined as generalist or specialist (Mather, Leite, & Batista,
86 2012). The determination of individual specialisation is important because apparently generalized
87 species might be composed of individual specialists using only a small part of the population's
88 food niche (Bolnick et al., 2003). This variation within the population can be considered as
89 adaptive in itself (Valen, 1965) and can persist over time and across contexts (Toscano, Gownaris,
90 Heerhartz, & Monaco, 2016). Some tools have been developed which allow quantitative
91 assessment of within- and between-individual variation in resource use (Bolnick, Yang, Fordyce,
92 Davis, & Svanback, 2002). Because generalist behaviour might result in ingesting a more optimal
93 set of dietary components for an herbivore with low locomotion abilities, we hypothesized that
94 *Haliotis tuberculata* would display a generalist algal choice strategy at the population level with
95 non-specialized individual food choices.

96 A second approach to study foraging behaviour consists in studying individual behavioural
97 consistency and personality. Consistency of individual behavioural patterns across time and
98 between different contexts has been reported in taxa ranging from fish to mammals, with most of
99 the studies done on insects, and focusing on mate preference and courtship (Bell, Hankison, &
100 Laskowski, 2009). Foraging types can be an important factor in determining community dynamics,
101 with a spatial structuration of behavioural type (Griffen, Toscano, & Gatto, 2012). Individual
102 consistency can also be used as a rough estimate of the heritability of a trait (Dohm, 2002;
103 Falconer & Mackay, 1996). As suggested by the lower heritability of morphological traits for
104 ectotherms in comparison to endotherms (Mousseau & Roff, 1987), we expected the heritability
105 and thus indirectly the consistency of foraging activity would be low in abalone. To our

106 knowledge, only a few experiments have been performed on the consistency of foraging behaviour
107 in marine ectotherms, with most of them done on predators (Koteja, Carter, Swallow, & Garland,
108 2003; McHuron, Hazen, & Costa, 2018; Missoweit, Engels, & Sauer, 2007; Morgan, Hassall,
109 Redfern, Bevan, & Hamer, 2019; Patrick et al., 2014; Toscano & Griffen, 2014), but none of them
110 performed on marine herbivores.

111
112 To test these hypotheses, the foraging behaviour of *Haliotis tuberculata*, a large marine herbivore
113 common in European sublittoral environments, was studied with three objectives: 1) to understand
114 the food choices at a population level in relation to important components of potential prey algae
115 (primary, secondary metabolites and toughness) and diurnal rhythm 2) to evaluate the prevalence
116 of individual specialisation in the population and 3) to evaluate the consistency of foraging activity
117 at the individual level.

118
119 MATERIAL AND METHODS

120
121 Animal origin and maintenance

122
123 Behavioural experiments were carried out at the France *Haliotis* organic abalone farm facilities
124 (48°36'46N; 4°33'30W) in Plouguerneau, France, between December 2011 and March 2012.
125 Chemical analyses of macroalgae were performed in the Marine Environmental Sciences
126 Laboratory (LEMAR, Brest, France) for phenolic compounds, proteins, lipids and carbohydrates;
127 in the University of Western Brittany (UBO, Brest, France) for nuclear Magnetic Resonance
128 HRMAS analyses (to detect phenolic compounds).

129

130 Adult *Haliotis tuberculata* (65-70 mm total shell length, 4 years old) were reared from systematic
131 mating between wild and farmed broodstocks, mainly to avoid inbreeding. From the age of 1 year
132 until the start of the experiment, they were reared in a cage-structure placed in the subtidal zone.
133 The abalone were randomly harvested from the structure without removing them from the black
134 plastic oyster seed collectors used to provide crevices for them (diameter: 140 mm). They were
135 transported to the land-based laboratory in a 50 L seawater tank. Once in the laboratory, eight
136 abalone were randomly assigned to each experimental tank. A reflective tag was gently glued to
137 each individual with cyanoacrylate glue, without removing the animal from the collectors, to
138 minimize any stress. The tags were designed to allow us to recognize each individual abalone in a
139 tank. Abalone were allowed to acclimate to the experimental tanks for 2 weeks before the start of
140 the experiment.

141

142 Materials

143

144 The six experimental tanks were grey, flat, square tanks with rounded corners, made of
145 epoxy painted fibreglass (1.10 x 1.10 x 0.20 m, water volume = 100 L), with rough plastic strips
146 on the inside edges to prevent abalone escaping. Each tank held 75 L.h⁻¹ of 3 µm mechanically
147 filtered and temperature regulated seawater (12.0 ± 0.5 °C), and was provided with an aeration
148 system. Eight pairs of plastic oyster seed collectors were uniformly distributed along the edges of
149 each tank to be used as hiding places. Eight plastic feeders (7 x 7 x 3 cm) were fixed onto the floor
150 at the center, at equal distances from the eight hiding places, to ensure equal access to each algal
151 species (Figure 1). Five of the tanks contained abalone. The last tank was used as a control to
152 follow natural degradation of the algae. The light:dark regime was 10:14 h (Light: 0830 to 1830
153 hours; Dark: 1830 to 0830 hours). To avoid stressful conditions during light changes, a transition

154 of light level was programmed over 30 minutes during dawn (0800 to 0830 hours) and dusk (1830
155 to 1900 hours) using a dimmer (Gold Star, Besser Elektronik, Italia). Tanks were cleaned twice a
156 week using a hose and water filters were changed every day. All tanks were continuously
157 videotaped by five digital cameras (TS-WD6001HPSC, Sygonix GmbH, Germany) linked to a 24h
158 recording device (TVVR 40021, Abus, Germany).

159

160

161 Experimental procedure

162

163 Food choices of abalone were studied using 8 macroalgal species: *Asparagopsis armata*,
164 *Palmaria palmata* (Rodophyta), *Enteromorpha intestinalis*, *Ulva lactuca* (Chlorophyta),
165 *Saccharina latissima*, *Saccorhiza polyschides*, *Laminaria digitata* and stipes of *Laminaria*
166 *hyperborea* (Phaeophyta). Fresh algae were collected at Pors Grac'h beach (48°37'58 N; 4°32'57
167 W), Plouguerneau, France. The macroalga provided during the acclimation period was *Palmaria*
168 *palmata*. From one to four years of age during commercial growth conditions, the eight algae had
169 been provided to these abalone on a regular basis by France Haliotis, with *Palmaria palmata* and
170 *Laminaria digitata* being the most important in terms of quantity. After the acclimation period, *P.*
171 *palmata* was removed 3 days prior to the start of the experiment.

172 To determine wet biomass intakes of abalone, the eight macroalgal species were weighed after
173 drying them gently with paper towels and each alga was randomly allocated to one feeder position
174 in each tank. The quantities of algae provided were chosen to provide ad libitum access (at least
175 half of the initial quantity remaining at the end of the period). After 4 days, the remaining algae
176 were removed from each feeder, dried in the same way and wet weighed. Abalone were then
177 starved for 3 days after this food choice trial and the same procedure was repeated during two

178 more weeks to study the food choices and foraging activity over a 3-week period. However, in
179 each tank the algal species were allocated to the same feeder positions during the two subsequent
180 trials. The natural change in weight of algae was measured in the control tank. The quantity of
181 algae ingested by all the abalone in a tank was calculated by removing the change of weight in the
182 control tank from the reduction in weight of the algae in the tanks containing abalone. The 3-week
183 experiment was replicated three times (in total, $n = 15$ tanks with abalone, $n = 3$ tanks with only
184 algae).

185

186 Food choices and foraging activity analysis

187

188 Experimental tanks were filmed 4 days per week from 1830 hours on Monday to 0900 hours on
189 Friday during a 3-week period. The videos were analysed at 16x speed, slowed to 4x at the
190 beginning and the end of each food intake period. The researchers were blind to the alga used in
191 the feeders during video analysis.

192

193 Mean feeding bout duration was calculated by subtracting the start feeding time from the stop
194 feeding time for each visit to the feeder, and averaged per day. Total time spent feeding was the
195 sum of all feeding durations per day. The number of feedings was the number of feeder visits done
196 per day. Individual foraging activity was followed using individual reflective tags. These
197 behavioural variables were used for the ICC analysis (see Statistical Analysis for details). For algal
198 preference, variables were calculated per alga for each tank, using the three weeks of individual
199 foraging behaviour. The number of times the abalone chose each of the eight algae during the 3-
200 weeks was recorded, to calculate the proportional similarity index as well as the prevalence of
201 individual specialisation in the population (see Statistical Analysis for explanations).

Algal chemical analysis

Sample collection

Samples from all algal species were collected on the 6th of February and the 5th of March. These samples consisted of the same parts of the algal thalli as were available to the abalone during the food choice experiment. In total, six samples (three per collection day) of 200 g, representative of the algae distributed, were vacuum packed, immediately frozen and stored in a freezer at -20°C before lyophilisation at -55°C for 96h. Dried algae were then crushed, to be used in all the following tests except fatty acid analysis. For fatty acid analysis, samples of 2 g were frozen with liquid nitrogen and stored in a freezer at -80°C before crushing. Dry matter content of each species was determined by weighing the samples before and after freeze-drying.

Algal toughness

Algae were ranked from 1 to 8 according to their toughness (Steneck & Watling, 1982) and visual evaluation of their thickness : 1 being the thinnest and softest alga, and 8 the thickest and toughest alga (1 : *Asparagopsis armata* and *Enteromorpha intestinalis*, 3 : *Ulva lactuca*, 4 : *Palmaria palmata*, 5 : *Saccharina latissima*, 6 : *Laminaria digitata*, 7 : *Saccorhiza polyschides*, 8 : stipes of *Laminaria hyperborea*).

Total protein content

Total protein was calculated from total nitrogen content of the samples by Kjeldahl's method, as modified by Connan (2004). The homogenized samples (150 mg) were digested by boiling for 40 min in concentrated sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄), with a catalyst (K₂SO₄+CuSO₄+Se). The end product is

226 an ammonium solution. Excess base (NaOH) was added to the product to convert NH_4^+ to NH_3 .
227 After distillation in a Büchi (Büchi 323, Büchi Labortechnik, Switzerland), dissolved NH_3 was
228 recovered in 25 ml boric acid (H_3BO_3) solution containing Tashiro's indicator. Titration was
229 performed with sulfuric acid at 0.01M. Analysis of a blank was run in parallel to the analysis of
230 samples. The protein content (%) of the samples was calculated according to the following
231 formula: $((V_s - V_b) * 28 * F) / W$

232 Where:

233 V_b = mL titrant for the blank

234 V_s = mL titrant for the sample

235 W = Weight of sample in milligrams

236 F = Factor used to convert nitrogen percentage in a sample to percent protein, its value was 6.25

237

238

239 Total carbohydrate content

240 Total carbohydrate content (%) was measured by the spectrophotometric orcinol-sulfuric method,
241 using glucose as a standard. Algal powder (5 mg) was diluted in distilled water (5 mL) and
242 vortexed before sampling. Samples (200 μL , 3 replicates) were introduced into glass test tubes,
243 then 400 μL of orcinol-sulfuric reagent (1.5%) and 3 mL H_2SO_4 (60%) were added. The test tubes
244 were placed in a shaking water bath for 20 min at 80°C. The reaction was stopped by placing the
245 test tubes in an ice bath for 2 min and storing them in a dark room for 45 min. The absorbance of
246 all samples was measured at 510 nm using a spectrophotometer (Perkin Elmer).

247

248 Total lipid content and fatty acid analysis

249 Lipid extraction was conducted on 150 to 200 mg of algal powder. Aliquots were transferred in

250 glass test tubes previously heated for 6 h at 450 °C and containing 6 mL of a chloroform/methanol
251 mixture (2/1, v/v), in accordance with the Folch et al. (1957) method. The method is described in
252 detail in Roussel et al. (2019). Quantitative fatty acid spectra obtained by gas chromatography
253 were used to calculate the molar content of each fatty acid in the samples. Depending on the
254 number of double bonds they display, fatty acids (FA) were classified into three groups: saturated
255 FA (SFA, no double bond), monounsaturated (MUFA, only one double bond) and polyunsaturated
256 (PUFA, two or more double bonds). FA could also be differentiated by the position of the first
257 double bond from the terminal carbon: n-3 (omega 3) or n-6 (omega 6). The results used in the
258 PCA were: total lipid content (μg FA / mg dry matter), n-3/n-6 ratio, MUFA content (% of total
259 FA), PUFA content (% of total FA) and SFA content (% of total FA).

260
261 Phenolic compounds analysis
262 NMR HRMAS analysis was performed first to detect the presence of phenolic compounds.
263 Phenolic compound analysis was conducted only on three algal species where phenolic
264 compounds were detected: *Asparagopsis armata* (Rhodophyta), *Enteromorpha intestinalis*
265 (Chlorophyta) and *Saccharina latissima* (Phaeophyta). Extraction of phenolic compounds was
266 conducted in triplicate for each algal species by putting algal powder (400 mg) in an ethanol/water
267 solution (40 mL) for 3 h at 40°C in a shaking water bath. The amount of total phenolics in the 3
268 species extracts was determined using the Folin-Ciocalteu reagent following the method of
269 Slinkard and Singleton (1977) using gallic acid as a standard for *Asparagopsis armata* and
270 *Enteromorpha intestinalis* and phloroglucinol as a standard for *Saccharina latissima*. Samples (20
271 μL , 3 replicates for each extract) were introduced into microtiter plate wells, and then 10 μL of
272 Folin-Ciocalteu reagent, 40 μL NaCO_3 (7.5%), and 130 μL H_2O were added. The absorbance of all
273 samples was measured at 765 nm using a spectrophotometer (Labsystems multiskan MS) after

274 incubating at 70°C for 10 min. Results were expressed as milligrams gallic acid equivalent (GAE)
275 / g fresh algae sample for *Enteromorpha intestinalis* and *Asparagopsis armata* or milligrams
276 phloroglucinol equivalent (PE) / g fresh algae sample for *Saccharina latissima* per gram of fresh
277 weight.

278

279 Statistical Analysis

280

281 To study the general foraging activity of the population, the total number of feeder visits was
282 calculated over all the abalone in each tank during the day and night periods over the 3 weeks (N =
283 15 tanks in total). To compare the number of day versus night feeding visits, a Wilcoxon signed
284 rank test for paired data was used because the conditions to use a parametric test were not fulfilled.
285 In addition, the total number of feeding bouts initiated in each 2-hour period of the 24-hour cycle
286 was calculated per tank.

287

288 To study the population food choices, a Friedman two-way analysis of variance by ranks was
289 used. Behavioural variables were calculated per alga for each tank over the three weeks. This non-
290 parametric analysis was proposed by Lockwood (1998) and Siegel and Castellan (1988) for
291 multiple-choice feeding preference experiments. A rank of 1 corresponded to the algae eaten in
292 largest quantity while a rank of 8 corresponded to the algae eaten in the smallest quantity (Table
293 1). Post-hoc comparisons were performed with the method proposed by Siegel and Castellan
294 (1988).

295

296 Spearman correlations with adjusted p-value (Holm's correction) were performed to study the
297 relationships between the foraging behaviour per algae for each tank over the three weeks and the

298 chemical variables.

299

300 For each individual, the consistencies of their mean feeding bout duration, their total time spent
301 feeding per day and their number of feeding bouts per day, were studied over the three weeks. The
302 four daily values ($k = 4$ days per week) were averaged per week and per individual. Prior to
303 calculating repeatability statistics, the data were log-transformed when non-normality of residuals
304 was detected (Shapiro's test) or when variances were found to be significantly different (Levene's
305 test) to satisfy the assumption that there is a common population (residual) variance (Biro &
306 Stamps, 2015). Thereafter, ICC estimates for the transformed foraging variables and their 95%
307 confidence intervals were calculated using the psych package in R (Revelle, 2018), based on a
308 mean-rating ($k = 4$), consistency-agreement, 2-way mixed-effects model (weeks are considered
309 fixed effects but individuals are treated as random effects) with 120 individuals.

310

311 A proportional similarity index (PS) was calculated for each individual as well as the prevalence
312 of individual specialisation in the population (IS) using the RInSp R package (Zaccarelli,
313 Mancinelli, & Bolnick, 2013) to study whether abalone consistently act as specialists or generalists
314 with respect to algal choice. Abalone which did not feed at least four times during the 3-week
315 experiment (18 abalone out of 120) were not used for this individual specialisation analysis.

316

317 Ethical Note

318

319 Manipulation of individuals involved food limitation and diet modification. At the end of the
320 experiment, the abalone were removed from the tanks and placed in another farm husbandry
321 structure.

RESULTS

Nocturnal foraging activity

The abalone foraging behaviour varied between the day and night: the total number of feeder visits was much higher during the night than during the day periods (night vs day period: 91 ± 9.4 vs 13 ± 2.4 visits per tank over the 3-week period, Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired data, $N = 15$, $P < 0.001$) (Figure 2).

Food choices of the population

The total quantity ingested varied between algal species (Freidman two-way analysis of variance by ranks, $Q = 48.4$, $N = 15$, $P < 0.001$) (Figure 3): *Enteromorpha intestinalis* was the most ingested alga, followed by *Asparagopsis armata*. On the other hand, *Laminaria digitata* and stipes of *Laminaria hyperborea* were the algae ingested in the smallest quantities. *Ulva lactuca*, *Saccharina latissima*, *Saccorhiza polyschides* and *Palmaria palmata* were ingested in intermediate quantities, not significantly different from the most ingested alga or the least ingested alga.

The Freidman two-way analysis of variance by ranks showed that there were significant differences between algal species in the number of feeding visits per day ($Q = 45.7$, $N = 15$, $P < 0.001$), the total time spent feeding each day ($Q = 42.4$, $N = 15$, $P < 0.001$) and the mean feeding bout duration ($Q = 36.7$, $N = 15$, $P < 0.001$) (Figure 3). However, the ranks for the algae were different depending on the variable (Figure 3): for example, *Enteromorpha intestinalis* was the alga ranked first in terms of quantity ingested and for the number of visits, but was ranked fifth for the mean feeding duration; while *Saccharina latissima* was ranked respectively fourth and fifth for

the quantity ingested and number of feeding visits, but second for the mean feeding bout duration.

Food choice in relation to algal characteristics

The quantity of algae ingested per day as well as the number of feeding visits per day were significantly correlated to the protein content of the algae (respectively, $r_s = 0.40$ and $r_s = 0.54$) and negatively correlated to algal toughness (respectively, $r_s = -0.50$ and $r_s = -0.51$) (Table 1). In addition, the number of visits per day was positively correlated to total lipid content ($r_s = 0.35$), n-3/n-6 ratio ($r_s = 0.35$) and negatively correlated to MUFA content ($r_s = -0.34$). No correlation was observed between the mean feeding bout duration and any of the algal chemical components. The total time spent feeding was correlated to the total protein content ($r_s = 0.39$) and to the total lipid content ($r_s = 0.33$).

Individual and population specialisation

The *H. tuberculata* population consumed resources in a similar way, with a specialisation index IS of 0.64 ($p < 0.001$). However, 21% of the individuals had a PS < 0.50 (Figure 4)

Individual foraging activity consistency

Very high consistency of individual foraging activity was observed for the total time spent feeding per day ($ICC = 0.81$, $F_{119,238} = 5.2$, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = 0.74 – 0.86), as well as for the number of feeder visits per day ($ICC = 0.74$, $F_{119,238} = 3.8$, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = 0.64 – 0.81, log transformed data) and for the mean feeding bout duration ($ICC = 0.74$, $F_{119,238} = 3.8$, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = 0.65 – 0.81, log transformed data).

370

371 DISCUSSION

372 The aim of the experiment was to understand the foraging strategy of *H. tuberculata*, a marine
373 herbivore at both a population and an individual level. The food choices of *H. tuberculata* are
374 mainly correlated to the protein composition and the toughness of the macroalgae at the population
375 level. The population was composed mostly of generalist individuals with a few specialist
376 individuals. Surprisingly, foraging activity of individuals is highly consistent.

377

378 Nocturnal foraging activity

379

380 Foraging activity was mainly observed at night. Foraging activity was intense soon after sunset
381 and progressively increased until 22:00 to reach a stable level between 22:00 and 02:00. Nocturnal
382 feeding and movement has also been reported for other abalone species in laboratory studies
383 (Momma & Sato, 1970; Tahil & Juinio-Menez, 1999) and field conditions (Day & Branch, 2000;
384 Shepherd, 1973; Wood & Buxton, 1996). Even if light intensity is probably the main cue to
385 coordinate abalone circadian behaviour (Morikawa & Norman, 2003), a circatidal clock due to
386 tides cannot be excluded (Wilcockson & Zhang, 2008). There was no obvious sign of tidal
387 variation however, during this laboratory experiment.

388

389 Food choices of the population

390 Although local algal abundances may be the overriding factor determining the diet of abalone in
391 a particular area in the wild (Tutschulte & Connell, 1988; Wood & Buxton, 1996; Zeeman,
392 Branch, Peschak, & Pillay, 2012), as in many laboratory studies, the abalone we studied preferred
393 some algae over others. *Enteromorpha intestinalis*, with *Ulva lactuca* and *Asparagopsis armata*

394 were the preferred algae in term of quantity of algae ingested and numbers of feeding visits.
395 *Laminaria hyperborea* stipes were the least attractive. However, the total time spent feeding and
396 the mean feeding duration give additional information on abalone feeding behaviour. For example,
397 *Asparagopsis armata*, the second most ingested algae in terms of quantity, is at the sixth position
398 for the total time spent feeding and at the seventh position for the mean feeding duration. It is
399 clearly easily consumed.

400

401 Food choices based on primary compounds and toughness of algae

402

403 Optimal foraging theory implies that organisms should consume foods that maximize fitness by
404 selecting the most energy-rich and nutritional balanced items (Pyke, Pulliam, & Charnov, 1977).
405 The three most ingested algae, *Enteromorpha intestinalis*, *Ulva lactuca* and *Asparagopsis armata*
406 had the highest protein contents, while the lowest protein value was associated with the least
407 ingested alga, stipes of *Laminaria hyperborea*. This experiment shows that the total quantity of an
408 alga ingested and total number of feeding visits were correlated with total protein content but also
409 other parameters such as algal toughness. This is consistent with an emphasis on protein content in
410 abalone food choice and the lower importance of total carbohydrate (Fleming, 1995a). Energy in
411 the form of available carbon compounds is generally thought to be in ample supply in plants and
412 seaweeds because of photosynthesis, but this is not the case for nitrogen compounds, considered to
413 be a more limiting factor. Abalone species have a low lipid requirement (< 5% algal dry weight),
414 typical of herbivorous molluscs and fish (Viera et al., 2005). Total lipid content was only weakly
415 related to food choices. No correlation was found between the level of phenolic compounds and
416 *Haliotis tuberculata* food choices in our experiment, in contrast to the expected avoidance of algae
417 with phenolics (Shepherd and Steinberg 1992). This might be related to the very low phenolic

418 contents observed during this winter period, in the algal species analysed. Effects on feeding
419 behaviour might have been more important during spring or summer, when algae phenolic
420 contents are higher and probably would serve as feeding deterrents or inhibitors for abalone
421 (Fleming, 1995b; Stepto & Cook, 1996).

422 Algae toughness has been identified as a factor limiting seaweed consumption (Toth & Pavia,
423 2007). Some experiments have avoided this factor by mixing powdered algae with agar or
424 carrageenan, to remove its effect (Angell, Pirozzi, de Nys, & Paul, 2012; McShane, Gorfine, &
425 Knuckey, 1994). Abalone feed using a rasp-like radula, and the effectiveness of the radula teeth is
426 strongly influenced by the form and toughness of the food items. In our experiment, it seems that
427 the morphological structure of the *Haliotis tuberculata* radula allows them to graze more
428 effectively on filamentous and thinner algae such as *Asparagopsis armata* and *Enteromorpha*
429 *intestinalis* than on the less favoured thick and tough *Laminaria* leaves and stipes.

430

431 Consistent foraging activity

432 Highly significant foraging activity repeatability was observed during this experiment. Obtaining
433 accurate, reliable and repeatable phenotypic information is critical for better understanding of how
434 the personalities of individuals can be maintained under environments with different selective
435 pressures (Sih, Bell, & Johnson, 2004). At a population level, in contrast to our hypothesis,
436 foraging activity was very repeatable. In a meta-analysis performed on a wide range of species, the
437 average repeatability of behaviour was reported to be 0.37 (Bell et al., 2009). Foraging behaviour
438 repeatability was reported to be higher (Bell et al., 2009; McHuron et al., 2018) but nevertheless
439 ranged between 0.2 and 0.5 most of the time (Koteja et al., 2003; McHuron et al., 2018; Missoweit
440 et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2019). In our experiment, the high ICC value and narrow 95%
441 confidence interval for abalone were probably obtained because the mean values for four days per

442 week of a large number of individuals were analysed, sufficient to study repeatability with
443 precision (Wolak, Fairbairn, & Paulsen, 2012). This result highlights that high consistency of
444 individual foraging activity can be observed for abalone, indicating that this herbivore has a rigid
445 foraging activity, at least in winter. The number of feeding visits per day might be a foraging
446 variable related to intrinsic factors (such as active or passive “type” personality). The total time
447 spent feeding per day and mean feeding bout duration have a lower ICC and might be more
448 influenced by extrinsic factors, such as the toughness and other properties of the algal species
449 eaten.

450

451 Individual and population specialisation

452 *H. tuberculata* is a generalist that feeds on a variety of algae (IS = 0.64). Most individuals were
453 opportunistic, feeding on a large range of algae. But 21% of the individuals can be considered as
454 specialists. Based on our observation of the data, some specialist individuals might choose the
455 same algae because they have a greater appetite for some physical attribute (e.g. the most tender
456 algae such as *A. armata* and *E. intestinalis*) or chemical attribute (e.g. the richest in protein such as
457 *P. palmata*). However for others, no trend can be easily observed. Because some abalone have
458 homing behaviour, their choices might be related to the algae that are closest to their hiding place.
459 Each abalone presumably evaluated the food differently and made decisions to select a suitable
460 diet. Individual differences can result from intrinsic factors (metabolism or individual experience)
461 or extrinsic factors (intraspecific competition or predation). Because these herbivores were reared
462 in the same sea-cage for three years, their previous individual experiences in relation to their
463 rearing environment are probably similar. Metabolism might be an important factor influencing the
464 differences in feeding preference (Hawlena, Hughes, & Schmitz, 2011; Holtmann, Lagisz, &
465 Nakagawa, 2017). Components of the algae previously consumed are also likely to influence

466 future preferences, to gain nutrients lacking in the past diet (Day & Fleming, 1992). In addition, it
467 should be noted that this experiment was performed in a laboratory context with a simplified
468 environment. In the wild, individuals have far more complex decisions to take, depending of the
469 external situation such as the presence of predators or hiding places, algal composition and
470 quantity, etc...

471 Choosing a mixed diet is probably the best compromise for large marine herbivores, consistent
472 with nutritional advantages and conferring significantly higher fitness than the average of single-
473 species diets, but not for the best single prey species (review by Lefcheck, Whalen, Davenport,
474 Stone, & Duffy, 2013). In a one-year experiment, we have confirmed the advantage of a mixed
475 diet foraging strategy on *Haliotis tuberculata*, showing that the mixed diet was the second best
476 strategy in terms of growth and reproductive development after a monospecific diet of the best
477 single alga, *P. palmata* (Roussel et al., 2019). In the wild, *P. palmata* is often likely to be
478 unavailable. By mixing different sources of algae, a multi-algal diet would allow the acquisition of
479 vitamins, essential fatty acids and amino acids present in different proportions in various algal
480 species. This result fits well the optimal diet theory in the sense that the mixed diet will produce
481 the highest fitness, even if the algae chosen do not have the highest energy value individually (Sih
482 & Christensen, 2001).

483

484 CONCLUSION

485

486 *H. tuberculata* is a generalist species in term of algal choice, with a small proportion of the
487 individuals being specialists and the majority being generalists. In addition, individual foraging
488 activity pattern was highly consistent over time, with some abalone feeding every night while
489 others fed only rarely. This study provides a new perspective on the foraging strategy of an

490 abalone species – a very widespread group of large herbivorous marine molluscs. Algal
491 preferences probably result from a compromise between the most useful algae from a nutritional
492 point of view, the physical ability of abalone to consume the food item and some individual
493 consistency. In a further study, it would be interesting to test the interaction of abalone personality
494 traits such as activity and exploration in a novel environment in addition to abalone food resource
495 use, to understand how variations among individuals contribute to patterns at the population level
496 (Toscano et al., 2016).

497

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Table 1: Correlation between the primary components, secondary metabolites and toughness of 8 algal and the foraging behaviour of 15 groups of 8 abalone. The correlation was performed on the average foraging value obtained per algae for each group of abalone four days per week during a 3-week period. Significant correlations are highlighted in bold

	Quantity of algae ingested per day (g / day)	Time spent		
		feeding per day (min / day)	Number of feeding visits per day	Mean feeding bout duration
Dry matter content %	-0.34 (p = 0.01)	-0.04	-0.15	0.05
Algal toughness (rank)	-0.50 (p < 0.001)	-0.28	-0.51 (p < 0.001)	-0.00
Total protein content (%)	0.40 (p < 0.001)	0.39 (p < 0.001)	0.54 (p < 0.001)	0.12
Total carbohydrate content (%)	-0.14	0.01	0.12	-0.10
Total lipid content (µg FA / mg dry matter)	0.10	0.33 (p = 0.01)	0.35 (p < 0.01)	0.18
n-3/n-6 ratio	0.13	0.24	0.35 (p < 0.01)	0.06
MUFA content (% of total FA)	-0.21	-0.12	-0.34 (p = 0.01)	0.10
PUFA content (% of total FA)	0.01	0.21	0.17	0.14
SFA content (% of total FA)	-0.05	-0.20	-0.09	-0.19
Total phenolics (mg GAE or PE / g fresh algae sample)	0.41 (p < 0.001)	0.14	0.26	0.02

683

684 Figure 1: Design of the experimental tank

685

686 Figure 2. Number of feeder visits initiated each 2-h period of the 24-hour cycle of *Haliotis*
687 *tuberculata*. Eight abalone per tank were observed for 4 days per week during a 3-week period in a
688 total of 15 tanks. Mean $\pm$ s.e.

689

690 Figure 3. Algal preferences of abalone. Foraging behaviour was followed four days per week
691 during a 3-week period in 15 tanks containing 8 abalone

692

693 Figure 4. Proportional similarity index (Psi) frequency in a population of 102 abalone studied
694 during 3 weeks. Abalone had the possibility to choose between eight different algae in a tank.

695

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