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In situ oxygen dynamics and carbon turnover in an intertidal sediment (Skallingen, Denmark)

Eva Walpersdorf1, Michael Kühl2,3, Bo Elberling1, Thorbjørn J. Andersen1, Birger U. Hansen1, Morten Pejrup1, Ronnie N. Glud4,5,6,*

1Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Øster Voldgade 10, 1350 Copenhagen K, Denmark
2Marine Biological Laboratory, University of Copenhagen, Strandpromenaden 5, 3000 Helsingør, Denmark
3Plant Functional Biology and Climate Change Cluster, University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, NSW 2007, Australia
4University of Southern Denmark, Institute of Biology and Nordic Center for Earth Evolution (NordCEE), Odense M, Denmark
5Department of Ocean and Environmental Sciences, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, 4-5-7 Konan, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8477, Japan
6Scottish Association for Marine Science, Dunstaffnage Marine Laboratory, PA37 1QA Dunbeg, UK

ABSTRACT: Intertidal areas are considered to be productive habitats, but due to the challenging and dynamic environment, in situ assessments of their performance remain scarce. Here, we aimed to quantify the production and turnover of organic material in an intertidal sediment across several consecutive diel/tidal cycles and to evaluate the importance of key drivers affecting the community performance. Time-series measurements of the oxygen (O2) microdistribution across 2 sites at a silty sandflat documented extreme variability, which was mainly driven by light availability and flow conditions. Diffusion dominated the interstitial solute transport, but advective porewater transport was observed during 15% of the 9 d study period. Photosynthetic activity never exhibited light inhibition and average daytime net photosynthesis ranged between 1.01 and 11.15 mmol m−2 d−1 depending on the daily light availability, while the assessed gross primary production was ∼80% higher. When irradiance exceeded 17.2 mol photons m−2 d−1, daytime net autotrophy more than balanced the heterotrophic activity during the night (average night-time respiration, ERn: −4.01 mmol m−2 d−1). However, despite intense primary production, the integrated activity during the target autumn period was net heterotrophic with an average net ecosystem metabolism of −2.21 (span: −7.93 to 1.48) mmol O2 m−2 d−1. This study highlights the extreme temporal and spatial variation of intertidal sediments and the importance of accounting for natural in situ dynamics to correctly assess their performance and contribution to system production.

KEY WORDS: In situ O2 dynamics · Transecting microprofiler · Benthic primary production · P/E relation · Flow · Net ecosystem metabolism · Intertidal

INTRODUCTION

Sand- and mudflats represent productive transition zones at the land–sea interphase and provide important ecosystem services (Lotze et al. 2005, Reise 2005). In both settings, microphytobenthos (MPB) are the key primary producers and their activity regulates a range of biogeochemical processes and functions (Cammen 1991, Middelburg et al. 2000, Sundbäck et al. 2000). This includes modulating O2 availability, the sediment redox status, and sediment stability and permeability through production of exopolymeric substances (Paterson 1989, Andersen et al. 2010), which are all factors that influence rates and pathways for nutrient regeneration and carbon turnover (De Wit et al. 1989, Risgaard-Petersen 2003, Bar-
toli et al. 2003). However, intertidal sediments are also very dynamic due to highly fluctuating environmental conditions, where inundation, light, temperature, salinity, and particle redistribution can change on timescales of minutes to months depending on diurnal, tidal, and seasonal cycles. In high-energy coastal settings, tidal sediments are dominated by sand and advective porewater transport that facilitate efficient biocatalytic transformation of trapped organic material (Ehrenhauss & Huettel 2004, Ehrenhauss et al. 2004, Cook et al. 2007, Anschutz et al. 2009). In more protected areas, the tidal flats are dominated by diffusion-controlled silty sediments with high carbon content.

A major challenge working in these complex heterogeneous and dynamic environments is to determine primary production and respiration without altering the environmental controls. Reliable measurements have to account for spatial and temporal variations in light, temperature, inundation, hydrodynamics, and biological factors that are all responding to phase-shifted diel and tidal cycles. Most studies quantifying the carbon turnover of intertidal flats have employed sediment enclosure approaches that are bound to affect many of the controls regulating benthic activity, and which have difficulties in capturing the activity over complete tidal cycles (e.g. Spilmont et al. 2007, Migné et al. 2009). Therefore, carbon budgets for intertidal environments are often based on measurements conducted under artificial settings without accounting for natural variability. Only few integrative and non-invasive in situ studies of intertidal sediments have been conducted in either highly permeable sands (e.g. de Beer et al. 2005, Werner et al. 2006) or in muddy sediments (Denis & Desreumaux 2009, Denis et al. 2012). But even these detailed investigations have only partly been able to determine the metabolic state of their respective settings, and it is still not clear whether intertidal sediments are sources or sinks for CO₂ (e.g. Cook et al. 2004, Klaassen & Spilmont 2012). In the present study, we applied an autonomous transecting profiling instrument equipped with an array of microelectrodes to quantify the in situ microscale O₂ distribution in silty sandflats over a series of consecutive diel and tidal cycles. This approach enabled us to quantify benthic activity during concurrent ambient changes in inundation, light availability, temperature, flow conditions, and bed level. The data were used to non-invasively quantify the production and mineralization of organic material at in situ conditions, and to evaluate the relative importance of key controls for the benthic O₂ dynamics of intertidal silty sands. Findings are discussed in the context of available studies on carbon turnover in temperate intertidal sediments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site and sediment characteristics

The investigations were carried out from 26 September to 4 October 2007 (autumn) on an intertidal sandflat in the northern part of the Danish Wadden Sea in the shelter of the Skallingen barrier spit...
(Fig. 1). Freshwater input from the river Varde resulted in salinity variations between 23 and 30 at high tide. The area is microtidal, and maximum water depths ranged between 0.3 and 0.9 m depending on tidal stage and wind impact. Inundation time varied between 3.5 and 7 h, but even during low tide the surface sediment remained water-saturated and covered with a thin layer of water. A climate station was set up to provide data on local weather conditions. Irradiation at the site was recorded from the afternoon of 1 October onwards throughout the field measurements, while irradiance data for the preceding period were taken from a nearby climate station (15 km). The recorded downwelling short-wave irradiance (in W m$^{-2}$) was converted into photosynthetically active radiation (PAR; 400 to 700 nm) in units of µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ by calibration against parallel light measurements taken with a light meter (LI-250; LiCor) equipped with an underwater photon irradiance sensor (LI 192A; LiCor) positioned at the sediment surface. Measurements were conducted at 2 locations, 8 and 24 m from the marsh edge (Stn A: 32U 0453592, 6154129 and Stn B: 32U 0453609, 6154099; UTM coordinate system) to assess any potential mesoscale difference in sediment performance. The sediment at both stations consisted of slightly muddy (~5% silt and clay), fine to medium well-sorted silicate sand grains with a mean grain size (geometric mean, method of moments) of 194 to 271 µm in the upper 15 cm (determined using forward laser scattering by use of a Malvern Mastersizer/E, 1 core, 10 cm diameter). A total of 2 cores station$^{-1}$ (3.6 cm diameter) were taken for the determination of porosity and total organic carbon (TOC). Porosity was calculated from the weight loss of wet sediment after drying and the measured sediment density. Sediment permeability was not measured during the campaign, but the site was revisited in August 2010 and sediment permeability was quantified by the constant head approach (Klute & Dirksen 1986) and amounted to 1.0 × 10$^{-12}$ ± 2.5 × 10$^{-13}$ m$^2$ (n = 3) and 3.8 × 10$^{-12}$ ± 6.3 × 10$^{-13}$ m$^2$ (n = 3) at Stns A and B, respectively. The sediments were therefore characterized by relatively low permeability (Forster et al. 2003).

Sediments for the analysis of TOC were freeze-dried, ground, and acidified with 1 mol l$^{-1}$ HCl to remove inorganic carbon. Subsequently, TOC was determined in sediment washed and dried at 105°C using a LECO TruSpec carbon nitrogen determinator. Samples for chlorophyll $a$ (chl $a$) were taken with cutoff syringes (1.9 and 2.8 cm inner diameter), sliced immediately in the field and stored frozen until analysis. Chl $a$ was determined by extraction in 96% ethanol for 24 h and spectrophotometry (Biochrom Libra S12) at 665 and 750 nm and again 2 to 3 min after acidification with 1 mol l$^{-1}$ HCl to degrade all chlorophyll into phaeopigments. Chl $a$ and phaeopigment content was calculated according to Lorenzen (1967). Macrofauna present in the upper 10 cm of the sediment was sampled in a 10 cm diameter core at each site to give a qualitative impression of the community composition only. The fauna, retained on a 500 µm sieve, was dominated by Hydrobia ulvae and nematodes, but at Stn A small juvenile polychaetes (Nereis sp. and Scolelepis sp.) and a few bivalves (Macoma sp.) of variable sizes were also observed. Sediment characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

### Hydrodynamics and bed level change

The 3-dimensional (3D) flow velocity at Stn B was measured in a 0.25 cm$^2$ water volume situated 6.5 cm above the bed by a SonTek/YSI 10 MHz acoustic Doppler velocimeter (ADV) at 10 Hz; average data from periods of 30 s were stored every 10 min. Water depth, salinity, temperature, and turbidity were measured with an Aanderaa RCM9 current meter with sensors placed 10 cm above the bed.

### Table 1. Selected sediment characteristics of the study site. Numbers represent single determinations (grain size) or the average of 2 measurements, standard deviation is given for chl $a$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth (cm)</th>
<th>Stn A</th>
<th>Stn B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean grain size* (µm)</td>
<td>0−1</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mud (%)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porosity</td>
<td>0−0.5</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5−1</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOCb (%)</td>
<td>0−0.5</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5−1</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlorophyll a (µg g$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>0−0.2</td>
<td>14.4$^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.2−0.4</td>
<td>12.2$^c$</td>
<td>16.0 ± 1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aGeometric mean as calculated by the method of moments
bTotal organic carbon, salt free dry weight
c114−117 mg chl $a$ m$^{-2}$ (range, n = 2) in total contained in the upper 4 mm at Stn A
**In situ sensor measurements of dissolved oxygen**

*In situ* measurements of O$_2$ concentration versus depth profiles in the sediment were done with a transecting microprofiler (Glud et al. 2009a). The instrument was placed on the tidal flat during low tide with the microsensors initially positioned 0.5 to 1 cm above the sediment surface. The profiling module was equipped with 2 or 3 O$_2$ sensors and a custom-made 2-wire resistivity sensor (1 mm tip diameter) for detection of the sediment surface position. The O$_2$ sensors were Clark-type microsensors (Revsbech 1989) with a sensing tip diameter of ~10 µm, a $t_{90}$ (the time it takes for the sensor signal to reach 90% of the final value) response time of <2 s, and a stirring sensitivity <2% (Gundersen et al. 1995). The microsensor response was linearly calibrated from sensor readings in the overlying water (sampled over the duration of the inundation period), and in the anoxic part of the sediment. Dissolved O$_2$ concentration in the ambient seawater was determined on-site by Winkler titration (Grasshoff et al. 1999). Vertical profiling into the sediment was performed in steps of 200 µm covering a total distance of 2 cm; at each depth, the signals were logged. After the profiler had moved the microsensor tips back to the start position above the sediment surface and prior to the next measurement, a motor moved the sledge with the instrument horizontally 7 mm prior to the next set of profile measurements. This distance eliminated any potential oxygenation and other artefacts from holes created during previous measurements and thus allowed undisturbed depth profiles of O$_2$. Each set of O$_2$ depth profiles was recorded within 20 min with a programmed resting time of 2 min prior to the next profiling event. These measurements were conducted during deployment times of 14 to 24 h, yielding up to 60 profiles sensor$^{-1}$ covering a total lateral seawater of maximally 47.5 cm; the distance between the individual O$_2$ microsensors was 2 to 4 cm. The temperature at the position of the microprofiler was recorded in air and in the surface sediment (+1, −1, −2, −5 cm) using Tinytag data loggers and zero-off calibrated thermistor probes. Data were recorded every 30 s during the deployments.

During low tide, additional O$_2$ microprofiles were measured manually to complement the automated profiling lander measurements. For these measurements, the microsensors were positioned by use of a manually operated micromanipulator (MM33; März-häuser), while the sensor signal was read from a picoammeter (PA2000; Unisense).

**Modelling of diffusive O$_2$ exchange**

Diffusive O$_2$ fluxes in the sediment were calculated from complete *in situ* profiles measured under quasi steady-state conditions using the software package PROFILE (Berg et al. 1998). This procedure was preferred rather than the more usual approach based on the concentration gradient within (or just below) the diffusive boundary layer (Jørgensen & Revsbech 1985) due to the relatively coarse resolution at which the profiles were obtained. The relative position of the sediment surface for the respective profiles was identified from a distinct break in the slope of the concentration profile (Glud et al. 1995). The profile analysis software calculates the rate of net production or consumption as a function of depth together with the flux across the sediment–water interface.

The procedure is based on a control volume approach of equally spaced zones, and uses a series of least square fits to adapt the model to the measured concentration profile, followed by comparisons of these fits through statistical $F$-testing. This enables selection of the simplest production–consumption profile that best reproduces the measured concentration profile. Boundary conditions chosen for diffusive transport modelling were the O$_2$ concentration and flux at the bottom of the calculation domain. Sediment diffusivity ($D_s$) was assumed constant with depth and was calculated as: $D_s = D/(1 + 3[1 − \varphi])$ (Iversen & Jørgensen 1993), where $D$ is the molecular diffusion coefficient of O$_2$ in water corrected for *in situ* temperature and salinity (Li & Gregory 1974) and $\varphi$ is the porosity of the surface sediment (Table 1). For the iteration of finding the best fits, maximum deviation when accepting a calculated minimum was set to 0.001%, the level of significance (p-value) used in the $F$-statistics was 0.01. Daylight O$_2$ production was calculated from a production/light ($P/E$) relationship established for the entire study period according to the formula $P = P_{max}{[1 − \exp(−\alpha E/ P_{max})]} + R$ (Platt et al. 1980), where $P = $ net production (in mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$), $P_{max} = $ photosynthetic capacity (in mmol O$_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$), $\alpha = $ initial slope of net production at subsaturating light levels, $E = $ incident light at the sediment surface (in $\mu$mol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$), $R = $ dark flux (in mmol O$_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$).

**Light penetration depth**

Light measurements in the sediment were performed with a fiber-optic scalar irradiance microprobe with a small diffusing/light-scattering sphere (<100 µm dia-
meter) cast at the tapered tip (Rickelt et al. 2016). The microprobe was coupled to a custom-built fiber-optic light meter measuring PAR (400 to 700 nm) (Kühl et al. 1997). The linear detector response was calibrated using the sensor signal in seawater at known downwelling irradiance and in darkness.

Light profiles within the sediment were measured in the laboratory on subsamples of water-saturated surface sediment from the site. A fiber-optic tungsten halogen lamp equipped with a collimating lens (Schott KL-2500; 3100 K) illuminated the sediment sample vertically from above, while the scalar irradiance microprobe was mounted in a motorized micro-manipulator (Unisense) and was inserted into the sediment at an angle of 40° relative to the incident light to prevent self-shading. Motor control and recording of the sensor readings was performed using the software package Profix (PyroScience). A total of 3 to 4 profiles down to 4.2 mm depth were measured in each sample at a depth resolution of 200 µm, with 5 s waiting time at each depth and signal integration over 1 s.

The attenuation coefficient for photon scalar irradiance, \( K_0(\text{PAR}) \), within the photic zone was calculated as: \( K_0(\text{PAR}) = -d \ln[E_0(\text{PAR})]/dz \), where \( z \) is depth, by a linear regression on ln-transformed data over the respective linear depth interval (Kühl 2005).

**RESULTS**

**Benthic oxygen dynamics and regulating factors**

Time-series of microprofiles covering >76 h and 7 tidal cycles demonstrated an extensive spatio-temporal variation in the sediment O\(_2\) distribution (Figs. 2 & 3). Parallel sensor measurements reflected the same overall pattern, but also revealed microscale patchiness (Figs. 2 & 3).

The prime factor affecting benthic O\(_2\) distribution was light availability. The sediment surface exhibited a light dependent O\(_2\) production and the O\(_2\) concentration occasionally reached values up to ~950 µmol l\(^{-1}\) (3.0 times air saturation) during mid-day flood tide. This activity enhanced the O\(_2\) concentrations in the overlying water up to ~340 µmol l\(^{-1}\) (~120 % air saturation). However, O\(_2\) concentrations as high as ~650 µmol l\(^{-1}\) O\(_2\) (~230 % air saturation) were encountered in the overlying water during low tide, when the sediment was covered by a layer of ~1–2 cm of almost stagnant water. During the night, respiration and re-oxidation processes reduced the thickness of the oxic zone, and the O\(_2\) concentration in the overlying water declined to ~200 µmol l\(^{-1}\) (~70 % air saturation). Beside this overall pattern, short-term variations in solar irradiance due to changing cloud cover quickly led to changes in the O\(_2\) distribution within the sediment. For instance, the maximum O\(_2\) porewater concentration at high tide during the afternoon of 29 September declined by ~300 µmol l\(^{-1}\) within 22 min in response to dense cloud cover, which reduced the ambient irradiance at the sediment surface from 930 to 340 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) (Figs. 2 & 3C). An example of the opposite dynamic was observed at Stn A on 3 October during low tide, when the O\(_2\) concentration of the overlying water increased by ~200 µmol l\(^{-1}\) within 22 min as ambient light levels increased from 190 to 280 µmol photons m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) (Fig. 2).

While the salinity-induced changes in O\(_2\) solubility were small, temperature variation affected the O\(_2\) availability. During the study period, temperatures at the sediment–water interface varied between 9.6 and 17.1°C, which roughly corresponds to a solubility driven change in O\(_2\) concentration of 40 µmol l\(^{-1}\) at saturation. Generally, minimum and maximum temperatures were reached at ebb-tide, but variation during a single tidal cycle only led to a maximum solubility driven change of 20 µmol O\(_2\) l\(^{-1}\). Thus, maximally 3 to 20 % of the observed change in dissolved O\(_2\) concentration could be attributed to salinity or temperature-induced changes in O\(_2\) solubility.

Apart from light and temperature, other physical factors also affected the benthic O\(_2\) distribution and concentration. Despite low O\(_2\) concentration at the sediment surface during night-time, these periods also reflected the deepest O\(_2\) penetration depth (OPD) (Figs. 2 & 3B). Such apparently counter-intuitive observations were caused by transient tide-induced advective flow and hydraulic-driven percolation of water through the surface sediments, especially at night when the diatom coverage typically becomes less distinct due to downward cell migration (de Brouwer & Stal 2001, Du et al. 2010). This most likely enhanced the permeability of the sediment surface during night-time, as observed in other studies (e.g. Westall & Rincé 1994, Cahoon 1999, Paterson & Hagerthei 2001). During such periods, the benthic O\(_2\) availability appeared to be strongly affected by the ambient average flow (Fig. 4). In these instances, convection could have contributed to the observed porewater mixing, but we have no direct means to assess this potential effect. Suspension of the fluffy sediment material was only observed occasionally, and then just as the rising tide reached the study area or during periods where flow exceeded 0.1 m s\(^{-1}\) (Fig. 4). In parallel with the microsensor measurements, the ADV continuously recorded the relative position of the bed
level at a given location with a precision of ±1 mm. In general, bed levels were constant, but in a few incidences we observed a stepwise shift of 1 or 2 mm which also was reflected in rapid O₂ changes as induced by microscale sedimentation and erosion (Fig. 2). Fauna-induced advective O₂ transport as expressed by subsurface maxima or abrupt erratic fluctuations in the O₂ concentration distribution during profiling (Glud et al. 2003, Jørgensen et al. 2005, de Beer et al. 2005) was occasionally observed (Figs. 2 & 3D). Based on this, we estimated that only 3% of the microprofiles were affected by macrofauna activity.

Diffusion was the prevailing interstitial transport mode in the targeted silty sands as judged by the fact that most of the time the obtained microprofiles could be modelled by PROFILE using pure diffusive interstitial solute transport (Fig. 3; R² ≥ 0.99). As evaluated from the entire data set, these conditions prevailed
85% of the time. Advection only contributed to the benthic O$_2$ dynamics during periods of intense drainage and higher flow velocities (Figs. 3B & 4). Fig. 4 depicts the typical response to increased bottom water flow, with the significant increase in OPD only visible during high tide periods under dark or very low-light conditions when average current increased (>0.05 m s$^{-1}$) due to elevated wind speeds (>7 m s$^{-1}$).

During the study period, the sediment was always water-saturated and vertical PAR attenuation measured in the laboratory was well described with a mono-exponential attenuation function using a $K_0$(PAR) value of $-2.19$ mm$^{-1}$ ($\pm 0.04$, $R^2 = 0.99$). Maximum light penetration (<0.01% of surface irradiance) was 4.2 mm under maximal incident irradiance levels of $\sim$750 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. However, scalar irradiance at the sediment surface increased to $\sim$930 µmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ due to intense light scattering in the sand grains (Fig. 3C). Applying the minimum and maximum in situ irradiance measurements during our campaign with the $K_0$ value found in the laboratory measurements, we calculated photic zone thickness (defined as the depth where only 1% of
Fig. 3. Characteristic $O_2$ depth distribution at the main study site during (A,B) low tide and (C,D) high tide at different times of the day and different light availability. (B,D) Night-time profiles showed the occurrence of hydraulic percolation (B), advection or fauna ventilation (D) increasing the $O_2$ penetration considerably. Volumetric production and consumption rates of $O_2$ during periods of diffusive solute transport were modelled using PROFILE (Berg et al. 1998) ($R^2 \geq 0.99$).
surface irradiance remained) to vary from 0.9 to 3.3 mm during daytime. This corresponded well to the zone of net-photosynthesis modelled by PROFILE as suming diffusive conditions, where these modelled values ranged between 0.5 and 3.0 mm with an average value of 1.3 ± 0.5 mm (n = 80). Chl \( a \) levels of the surface sediment were relatively high, reaching values of 14.4 µg chl \( a \) g\(^{-1} \) at Stn A and 17.7 ± 2.5 µg chl \( a \) g\(^{-1} \) (mean ± SD) at Stn B (n = 7) (Table 1), and did not vary significantly during the investigation period. These relatively high values are consistent with the high photo trophic activity, but clearly the sedimentary chl \( a \) content does not necessarily reflect active MPB biomass.

**Autotrophic activity in the surface sediment**

The depth-integrated net \( O_2 \) production modelled from concentration profiles measured under different irradiance levels during the investigation period exhibited a typical saturation curve that could be approximated with a hyperbolic tangent function assuming no photoinhibition (Platt et al. 1980, Fig. 5). Microprofiles obtained manually and by the transecting lander showed very similar results, indicating that the instrument did not affect the local microenvironment. There was no difference between data obtained at the 2 stations or at different tides, and thus data were compiled for further analysis (Fig. 5). Photosynthesis continued during high tide under calm conditions and a clear water column. Migration of activity zones (net primary production, NPP) was not indicated by consecutive \( \text{i}n \ \text{situ} \) microprofile measurements during daytime. This indicates that potential vertical migration of MPB during daytime was minor. The compensation irradiance for the depth-integrated net photosynthesis at which the system shifts from heterotroph to autotroph (community compensation point, CCP) was 45 µmol photons m\(^{-2} \) s\(^{-1} \), while \( P_{\text{max}} \) (photosynthetic capacity) = 38.3 mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \), \( \alpha \) (initial slope at subsaturating light levels) = 0.177 mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) [µmol photons m\(^{-2} \) s\(^{-1} \)]\(^{-1} \) and \( R = -7.12 \) mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) (\( R^2 = 0.95; n = 109 \)). Black (grey) circles: low (high) tide production calculated from microprofile measurements at Stn B; white crosses: manually recorded profiles; white squares: low tide measurements at the water-covered Stn A; orange circles: net \( O_2 \) exchange at the primary interphase; black crosses: daytime \( O_2 \) consumption (ER\(_d\)) below the photic zone. The trend-line is produced by: \( \text{ER}_d = [\text{ER}_{d\text{max}} \{1 - \exp(-\alpha E/\text{ER}_{d\text{max}})\} + R] \), where \( \text{ER}_{d\text{max}} = 10.5 \) mmol m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \), \( \alpha = 0.073 \) and \( R = 0.487 \) mmol m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) (\( R^2 = 0.44; n = 75 \))

![Fig. 4. Measured \( O_2 \) penetration depth as a function of mean current speed for 2 calm (2 October, morning; 3 October, evening) and 2 rough periods (3 October, evening; 4 October, morning) when current speeds exceeded 0.1 m s\(^{-1} \) and maximum velocities (not shown) reached 0.3 m s\(^{-1} \), at which point the sediment began to be unstable. Two macrofauna-impacted and 1 very disturbed profile (3 October, evening) were omitted from the analysis. Values represent measured \( O_2 \) penetration depths with 2 sensors during high tide at night or low irradiance levels <100 µmol photons m\(^{-2} \) s\(^{-1} \) (and mostly below the sediment compensation irradiance CCP = 45 µmol photons m\(^{-2} \) s\(^{-1} \))](image-url)

![Fig. 5. Diffusive \( O_2 \) exchange, modelled from 109 \( \text{i}n \ \text{situ} \) \( O_2 \) concentration profiles, as a function of downwelling irradiance fitted using the function: \( P (\text{net primary production}) = P_{\text{max}} \{1 - \exp(-\alpha E/P_{\text{max}})\} + R \) (Platt et al. 1980), with \( P_{\text{max}} \) (photsynthetic capacity) = 38.3 mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \), \( \alpha \) (initial slope at subsaturating light levels) = 0.177 mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) [µmol photons m\(^{-2} \) s\(^{-1} \)]\(^{-1} \) and \( R = -7.12 \) mmol \( O_2 \) m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) (\( R^2 = 0.95; n = 109 \)). Black (grey) circles: low (high) tide production calculated from microprofile measurements at Stn B; white crosses: manually recorded profiles; white squares: low tide measurements at the water-covered Stn A; orange circles: net \( O_2 \) exchange at the primary interphase; black crosses: daytime \( O_2 \) consumption (ER\(_d\)) below the photic zone. The trend-line is produced by: \( \text{ER}_d = [\text{ER}_{d\text{max}} \{1 - \exp(-\alpha E/\text{ER}_{d\text{max}})\} + R] \), where \( \text{ER}_{d\text{max}} = 10.5 \) mmol m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \), \( \alpha = 0.073 \) and \( R = 0.487 \) mmol m\(^{-2} \) d\(^{-1} \) (\( R^2 = 0.44; n = 75 \))](image-url)
released to the overlying water, while 45% was consumed in the deeper sediment layers (Fig. 5).

The average O₂ consumption in deeper sediment layers was clearly stimulated by photosynthesis at the sediment surface, as reflected by the volume-specific O₂ consumption rate ($R_v$) modelled for 109 in situ microprofiles using PROFILE (Fig. 6). For instance, $R_v$ increased by up to ~200% in the depth interval between 0.1 and 0.2 mm during daytime. The strongest increase was observed just below the average depth of the photic zone, and activity was in the same order of magnitude as consumption rates in the upper mm of the sediment in darkness. This indicates high microbial activity and re-oxidation of reduced end-products of anaerobic carbon degradation at the oxic–anoxic interface.

In darkness, $R_v$ varied between ~0.024 and ~0.079 nmol O₂ cm⁻³ s⁻¹ with maximal values at the sediment surface. During daytime, the values for the deeper oxic sediment layers varied between ~0.044 and ~0.072 nmol O₂ cm⁻³ s⁻¹ with the lowest activity levels encountered in the deepest parts of the concentration profiles. The error bars indicate a high lateral variability of $R_v$. Assuming that the average O₂ consumption rate derived for the surface layers during periods where diffusion prevailed is similar to the O₂ consumption rate in deeper layers that are occasionally oxygenated by large-scale physical advection, we can estimate the importance of advection for O₂ consumption. In general, advection extended the oxic volume of the non-photonic sediment by 153%. However, periods of advection/percolation only occurred during 15% of the measuring time, and mainly at night. Consequently, the estimated advective-driven O₂ uptake calculated with an average night-time $R_v$ of ~0.055 nmol O₂ cm⁻³ s⁻¹ and an extension of the oxic zone by ~3.1 mm only accounted for a daily average of ~2.08 (~1.33 to ~3.76) mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ or 22% of the integrated daily net O₂ consumption for the study period (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

Benthic diatoms are regarded as significant primary producers of intertidal ecosystems (Macintyre et al. 1996, Underwood & Kromkamp 1999) yet quantitative in situ estimates of their importance in natural dynamic settings are few (Billerbeck et al. 2007, Denis & Desreumaux 2009, Denis et al. 2012). By applying a transecting profiling instrument, we were able to monitor in situ sediment O₂ dynamics and environmental effects on benthic primary production in intertidal fine-sand sediments during a 9 d period. These data enable a discussion on carbon turnover in natural and dynamic settings of a microtidal system and the assessment of the key factors regulating the activity.

**Effect of advective flow and fauna on O₂ dynamics**

Low-energy conditions prevailed during our investigations, which is typical for the targeted area that is characterized by relatively fine-grained sediments with a fluffy layer of muddy fine sand at the surface (Vinther et al. 2004). Despite relatively low sediment permeability (1.0 × 10⁻¹² to 3.8 × 10⁻¹² m²) and prevailing diffusive solute transport in the interstitial porewaters, advective porewater transport was observed when current speeds exceeded 0.05 m s⁻¹ (Fig. 4). In one instance (4 October, Stn A), the wind speed reached >12 m s⁻¹ and the average flow velocity increased to 0.1 m s⁻¹ during incoming tide. This induced persistent advective porewater transport and rising concentrations of suspended matter in the overlying water from 26 to 77 mg l⁻¹. During this period, the O₂ penetration depth increased by 105% to an average (± SD) of 4.1 ± 1.2 mm, leading to a 158% increase in the O₂ consumption rate for a period of 4.8 h. Integrated over the daily period, this event alone increased total net O₂ consumption for this day by 23%. During the study period, advective porewater transport occurred 15% of the time. If we include activities in zones occasionally oxygenated by advection/
percolation or convection, the daily benthic O₂ uptake was enhanced by −2.08 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ and the net ecosystem metabolism (NEM) during the investigation period becomes slightly negative with an average of −2.21 (1.48 to −7.93) mmol O₂ m⁻² d⁻¹ (Table 2, Fig. 7). The estimate on the relative importance of advection/percolation/convection for the overall O₂ consumption rates is, however, conservative. Mainly since the Rᵥ of the deeper sediment layers, given accumulated reduced substances (i.e. iron sulfide, FeS) below the prevailing oxic zone, may be higher than the applied values derived from the surface sediments. Several intertidal and subtidal studies have shown that porewater advection markedly increases OPD, O₂ consumption, and aerobic mineralization rates (de Beer et al. 2005, Billerbeck et al. 2006, Werner et al. 2006, Cook et al. 2007, Berg et al. 2013; see also our Table 3). However, these investigations targeted highly permeable sediment, with high interstitial supply of organic matter and O₂ facilitated by a well-developed rippled surface topography. At our microtidal study site, characterized by silty sand, the occasional

Table 2. Daily irradiance, light hours (h) with a light intensity above the community compensation point (CCP), diffusive O₂ exchange (ERₐ: night-time respiration, ERₐ: daytime respiration below the photic zone, NPP and GPP: net and gross primary production during light hours, advection/percolation and NEM: net ecosystem metabolism per 24 h during a period of consolidation. Fluxes were calculated for every minute of each day of the field campaign in September and October 2007 using a hyperbolic tangent function fitted to the production vs. irradiance curve. For further reference, times of peak ebb and flood tide and maximum water level during inundation are included.

<table>
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<th>Date (dd/mm)</th>
<th>Irradiance (m² photons d⁻¹)</th>
<th>Light (h)</th>
<th>ERₐ (night h)</th>
<th>ERₐ (light h)</th>
<th>O₂ (mmol m⁻² d⁻¹)</th>
<th>NPP (light h)</th>
<th>GPP (light h)</th>
<th>NEM (24 h)</th>
<th>Tidal maximum (daytime h)</th>
<th>Water level max. (m)</th>
<th>Inundation time (h d⁻¹)</th>
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<td>08:59</td>
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</table>

Average 11.6 9.3 −4.01 −3.20 −2.08 7.08 12.85 −2.21

Average 7.0 2.0 0.30 1.38 0.87 3.61 5.60 3.01

*Additional O₂ consumption due to tidal advection/percolation per day mainly at night, causing an average extension of the oxic zone by −3.1 mm (see 'Results: Autotrophic activity in the surface sediment' for details)

Fig. 7. Relationship between 24 h time-integrated downwelling irradiance and net ecosystem O₂ metabolism (NEM) including tidal advection under calm conditions. The 4th October (diamond in parentheses) was excluded from the analysis because of stormy conditions prevailing during the first high tide period of the day
short-term delivery of $O_2$ to greater depth as induced by percolation and advection (convection) cannot to be expected to stimulate aerobic respiration to the same extent. More energetic conditions would presumably have further enhanced the $O_2$ uptake, especially if high flow velocities were combined with wave action and increased sediment resuspension (Vinther et al. 2004). Such conditions were not observed during our study, but high-energy events can have quantitatively large and long-lasting impacts on sediment re-oxygenation, respiration, and photosynthesis (Jørgensen 1996, Cook et al. 2007, Zetsche et al. 2012).

Besides hydrodynamics, faunal activity can also enhance the $O_2$ exchange and the benthic OPD significantly. About 3% of the measured $O_2$ microprofiles were visibly affected by macrofaunal activity and bioirrigation, which could have stimulated the benthic $O_2$ consumption (Glud et al. 2003). However, as only 2 sediment cores were recovered for quantitative assessment of fauna occurrence, a precise quantitative assessment of the importance of faunal respiration and irrigation for the overall oxygen budget was not possible. But given the low macrofaunal abundance in these dynamic settings, the faunamediated $O_2$ consumption was probably of minor importance.

### Primary production of an intertidal sand flat under low-energy conditions

The established empirical relationship between solar irradiance and photosynthesis ($P/E$ curve) (Fig. 5) is based on numerous in situ $O_2$ microprofiles and includes the natural spatial and temporal variability in environmental drivers. It was therefore possible to make a relatively robust estimate of the in situ benthic primary production during the study period. Integrated over the daylight hours of the respective days, the NPP ranged between 1.01 and 11.15 mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ depending on the light availability, with an average NPP of 7.08 mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$. The ecosystem respiration (ER) in darkness, ER$_{o2}$, integrated over the number of night hours ranged between $-3.67$ and $-4.59$ mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ with an average of $-4.01$ mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ (Table 2).

To assess gross primary production (GPP) of benthic communities it is commonly assumed that ER remains light-independent (e.g. Spilmont et al. 2007, Denis & Desreumaux 2009, Glud et al. 2009b). Applying this procedure to our data with GPP = NPP + |ER| (where |ER| includes respiration in darkness for the depth of the photic zone and respiration below the photic zone as measured during daytime) led to an average GPP of 1.31 mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ h$^{-1}$. Integrated for the number of daylight hours, the GPP ranged between 2.89 and 18.85 mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ with an average of 12.85 mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ (Table 2). However, this value must represent a minimum, given that ER in the photic zone is presumably elevated during daylight (Kühl et al. 1996, Brotas et al. 2003, Glud et al. 2009b) as also indicated by a stimulated daytime respiration (ER$_{d}$) below the photic zone (see Figs. 5 & 6). It is difficult to assess how much respiration was elevated within the photic zone during daytime, but previous estimates range between 35 and 80% (Fenchel & Glud 2000).

Based on the microprofile measurements obtained during periods without porewater advection, the sediment was, on all days, net autotrophic during daylight, but integration over the diel periods (24 h) revealed that the system was almost at metabolic balance with a slightly negative NEM of $-0.13$ mmol $O_2$ m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$. As outlined above, including high energy periods with porewater advection, NEM became even more heterotrophic with a net $O_2$ exchange rate of $-2.21$ mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ (Table 2).

For maintaining balance between benthic heterotrophy and autotrophy during calm periods, a minimum of $-12.0$ mol photons m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ was required. Accounting for advective transport processes (although only occurring 15% of the time), this value increased to 17.2 mol photons m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$. The close correlation between NEM and the daily integrated incident irradiance demonstrates the importance of light as the main control factor for net system metabolism of intertidal sediments (Fig. 7). In conclusion, the system was almost at metabolic balance during the autumn study period. However, we cannot extrapolate the activity levels beyond the study period, and the community-based $P/E$ relationship presumably changed across seasons due to differences in light availability, temperature, grazing pressure, and sediment dynamics (Barranquet et al. 1998, Hancke & Glud 2004, Hubas & Davout 2006, Migné et al. 2009). However, the presented data document an extensive spatio-temporal variation in $O_2$ distribution that was mainly related to light availability (i.e. phototrophic activity) during daylight hours. In addition, advection, resuspension, and flow dynamics strongly impacted the benthic activity. Macrofauna activity and temperature dynamics during the study period were presumably of minor importance for benthic $O_2$ exchange. However, all together the data highlight the importance of applying non-invasive measuring approaches to correctly assess in situ productivity of intertidal systems.
Cross-study comparisons of NEM in intertidal sediments

Despite the importance of tidal environments for production and degradation of organic material, their overall trophic status is poorly established (Denis & Desreumaux 2009, Klaassen & Spilmont 2012). However, provided that in situ dynamics are taken into account, the net turnover of organic carbon can be robustly assessed by quantifying NEM via either O₂ or CO₂ exchange as integrated on a 24 h basis (Staehr et al. 2012). This provides an integrated measure of phototrophic and heterotrophic activity, including re-oxidation of reduced end-products from quantitatively important anaerobic metabolic pathways (Fenchel & Glud 2000). However, a cross-study comparison is complicated by the use of different measuring procedures and often an insufficient amount of information for calculating NEM.

Here, we have tried to standardize calculations from available studies to provide such cross-study analysis of ER, NPP, GPP, and most importantly NEM of different temperate intertidal systems (Table 3). We analysed data from 12 comparable studies of tidally influenced sediments, of which 7 were conducted during the autumn (Table 3, values are given in O₂ concentrations). The ER varied more than 100-fold, from −0.06 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ in fine sandy sediments (Roscoff Aber Bay, France) to approx. −7.5 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ in permeable sandy sediments (Spiekeroog, Sylt, Germany). Clearly, the ER is highly dependent on advective porewater transport and the ability of the permeable sediments to act as a biocatalytic filter (Huettel et al. 2003). However, maintaining an advective supply of organic material and O₂ for elevated respiratory activity requires frequent resetting of the sediment by major resuspension/storm events to avoid clogging of the pore space, which otherwise would reduce sediment permeability (Zetsche et al. 2011, 2012). Nevertheless, the available studies in highly permeable settings (Sylt, Spiekeroog; Table 3) only exhibited relatively low seasonal variability, with an average (± SD) NPP of 2.13 ± 1.26 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹. In contrast, a megatidal exposed sandy beach at Wimereux (Spilmont et al. 2005, not included in Table 3) was characterized by a relatively low benthic metabolism with high variability during a 3 yr survey (GPP: 1.45 ± 3.40 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹; ER: 0.14 ± 0.16 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹; mean ± SD), highly depending on meteorological conditions. Calm conditions favoured microalgae blooms while windy periods favoured heterogeneous deposition of planktonic detrital material (foam) causing short events of maximum metabolic rates with a net productivity of up to 17.81 mmol O₂ m⁻² h⁻¹ or a net consumption of −1 mmol O₂ m⁻² h⁻¹ (not shown). The impact on the local carbon budget was low, but is assumed to be significant at a larger spatial scale.

In low-energy intertidal systems with muddy and presumably diffusion-controlled sediments, the average ER amounted to −0.91 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ (7 studies, Table 3). Most of these studies were conducted during autumn and exhibited an average daytime NPP rate of 0.61 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ (5 studies). The single observations ranged between −3.80 and 9.36 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹. However, a few long-term studies indicated considerable variability during specific days and also between days as well as a seasonal maximum in primary production during spring and summer (Canche and Tagus estuaries, Table 3).

All sites exhibited considerable GPP, ranging from 0.49 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ at Neuharlinger Siel (Germany) (under light limitation during high tide) to 24.3 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ in the Tagus Estuary (Portugal) on a bright summer day. Overall, the few available studies did not indicate any specific relation between GPP and sediment texture or any seasonality. Given the published information, NEM could only be extracted from 6 of the available studies and ranged from −140 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ in the highly permeable sandy sediments at Sylt (Germany) (Table 3) to 9.71 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ at a mudflat of the Seine Estuary (France). The ER, NPP, GPP, as well as NEM derived for our microtidal area in Skallingen exhibit net-heterotrophic conditions and fall well within the broad span of rates found in intertidal in situ studies conducted under calm conditions during autumn.

Generally, our review of relevant studies (Table 3) indicated net heterotrophy, with the exception being sandy sites under low-energy conditions in the Roscoff Aber Bay (France), where sediments were found to be autotrophic throughout the year (Hubas & Davoult 2006). Overall, the available data thereby suggest that despite considerable primary production, tidally influenced sediments appear to be net heterotrophic with an average NEM value reaching −105 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ for highly permeable sands and −3.00 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ for sediments under low-energy conditions in autumn. The heterotrophic activity must be sustained by external organic matter delivered by tidal and riverine inflow and/or local primary production from the preceding summer months. However, it must be emphasized that cross-seasonal extrapolation is problematic. Most available studies poorly resolve seasonal dynamics and tend not to include high energetic periods during storms or floods. Indeed, previous
Table 3. Comparison of recent in situ studies of O₂/CO₂ fluxes (hourly night respiration [ER]; net and gross primary production [NPP, GPP]) and metabolic state (net ecosystem metabolism, NEM) of intertidal sediments. For comparison, rates in mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ or mmol cm⁻² s⁻¹ have been converted to hourly rates, and mg C to mmol C, which is approximately equal to mmol O₂. For Roscoff Aber Bay, Mont Saint Michel Bay and the Seine Estuary, rates have been calculated using the formulas given in Hubas et al. (2006), Migné et al. (2009) and Spilmont et al. (2006). Where possible, hourly and daily rates are given for the same period as in this study (26 September to 4 October, autumn). NA: not indicated, A: autotroph, H: heterotroph, MS: microsensors, CH: chambers, e: emission, i: consumption during emersion and immersion. Sources: (1) de Beer et al. (2005); (2) Werner et al. (2006); (3) Billerbeck et al. (2007); (4) Billerbeck et al. (2006); (5) Hubas et al. (2006); (6) Hubas & Davout (2006); (7) Brotas et al. (2003); (8) Denis & Desreumaux (2009); (9) Denis et al. (2012); (10) Migné et al. (2009); (11) Davout et al. (2009); (12) Spilmont et al. (2006).

<table>
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<th>Location</th>
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<th>Season</th>
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<th>NPP (mmol m⁻² h⁻¹)</th>
<th>GPP (mmol m⁻² d⁻¹)</th>
<th>NEM</th>
<th>Trophic state</th>
<th>Parameter/method</th>
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</table>
LITERATURE CITED


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