Monitoring induced denitrification during managed aquifer recharge in an infiltration pond

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MONITORING INDUCED DENITRIFICATION DURING MANAGED AQUIFER RECHARGE IN AN INFILTRATION POND

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Abstract

Managed aquifer recharge (MAR) is a well-known technique for improving water quality and increasing groundwater resources. Denitrification (i.e. removal of nitrate) can be enhanced during MAR by coupling an artificial recharge pond with a permeable reactive layer (PRL). In this study, we examined the suitability of a multi-isotope approach for assessing the long-term effectiveness of enhancing denitrification in a PRL containing vegetal compost. Batch laboratory experiments confirmed that the PRL, installed in 2011, was continuing to enhance denitrification. At the field scale, changes in redox indicators along a flow path and below the MAR-PRL system was monitored over 21 months during recharge (RP) and non-recharge (NRP) periods. Our results showed that the PRL was still releasing non-purgeable dissolved organic carbon five years after installation. Nitrate concentration and isotope data indicated that denitrification was occurring under and close to the infiltration area where recharge water and native groundwater mix. Furthermore, longer operational periods of the MAR-PRL system increased denitrification. Multi-isotope analysis might be useful in identifying and quantifying denitrification in MAR-PRL systems.

Keywords: managed aquifer recharge, multi-isotope analysis, reactive layer, mixing zone, artificial recharge, nitrate isotopes.

1. Introduction

Growing populations with increasing demands for water and potential water shortages require flexible management strategies that replenish aquifers. The artificial recharge of groundwater, commonly known as managed aquifer recharge (MAR), is becoming increasingly important all over the world as a sustainable way of protecting the quality and quantity of groundwater supplies. Recharge ponds are one of the most commonly used approaches for MAR. This approach involves surface infiltration through spreading basins or ponds to introduce surface water into the subsurface environment [Bouwer, 2002; Miller et al., 2006].

Common sources of water for MAR in recharge ponds include wastewater effluents (after different stages of treatment) and effluent-receiving rivers [Díaz-Cruz and Barceló, 2008; Maeng et al., 2011], as well as river water and storm water runoff. These sources of water, mainly those from wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs), might contain high levels of ammonium (NH_4^+), whereas those resulting from agricultural activity might have high concentrations of nitrate (NO_3^-) [Schmidt et al., 2011]. Furthermore, oxic conditions promote ammonium nitrification, transforming it to nitrate.

The chemical composition of the infiltrating water in MAR changes due to a combination of physical and biogeochemical processes as the water passes from unsaturated to saturated zones, where it mixes with native groundwater. In some circumstances, these changes can lead to an overall improvement in groundwater quality [Bouwer, 2002; Fox et al., 2006]. Several studies have demonstrated that artificial recharge reduces the concentration of nutrients [Bekele et al., 2011], organic matter [Bekele et al., 2011; Vanderzalm et al., 2006], metals [Dillon et al., 2006; Bekele et al., 2011], pathogens [Dillon et al., 2006], organic contaminants [Dillon et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2011] and pharmaceutically active compounds (PhACs) [Herber et al., 2004; Valhondo et al., 2014]. Massmann et al. [2006], investigating changes in redox conditions below an artificial recharge pond in Berlin, found that the level of PhACs in groundwater was controlled by the hydrochemical conditions of

51 the system. Thus, to increase the quality of recharge water and groundwater, the infiltration

52 pond can be coupled to a permeable reactive layer (PRL), an organic reactive layer at the

53 bottom of the pond [Valhondo et al., 2014, 2015, 2016] that promotes diverse redox

54 conditions along the recharge path to enhance the degradation of pollutants.

55 NO_3^- is one of the most abundant pollutants in groundwater [Li et al., 2010; Menció et al.,

56 2016]. Denitrification, a microbe-mediated process in which NO_3^- is converted into dinitrogen

57 gas (N_2), is the main naturally occurring process that decreases NO_3^- concentration in

58 groundwater. Dilution and dispersion also decrease groundwater nitrate concentration, but in

59 contrast to denitrification, they do not lead to mass reduction of the contaminant within an

60 aquifer. Denitrification is carried out by bacteria that use NO_3^- as the terminal electron

61 acceptor when dissolved oxygen (DO), which is energetically more favorable, is unavailable

62 [Knowles, 1982]. Denitrification can be heterotrophic or autotrophic, depending on whether

63 the substrate is organic or inorganic, respectively (Eq.1 and 2).

64 $5CH$ (1)

65   (2)
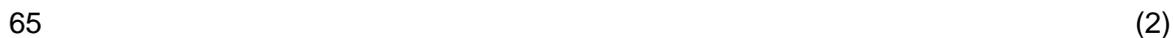
66 Denitrification can be enhanced in MAR pond systems, since the presence of easily

67 degradable organic carbon, as well as an adequate residence time, promotes the activity of

68 heterotrophic denitrifying bacteria. Recent laboratory studies [Grau-Martínez et al., 2017;

69 Gibert et al., 2008] have suggested that low-cost carbon-releasing materials like organic

70 compost, palm tree leaves and wood by-products could induce denitrification. Promoting

71 denitrification by using a reactive layer in a recharge pond requires control mechanisms to

72 test the efficacy of the implemented materials at the field scale.

73 Multi-isotope analysis, coupled with chemical data, is useful for identifying and even

74 quantifying denitrification processes in aquifers [Mariotti et al., 1988; Aravena and

75 Robertson, 1998; Pauwels et al., 2000, among others]. Denitrification affects the isotope

76 composition of the residual nitrate, resulting in increased levels of the heavy isotopes ^{15}N

77 and ^{18}O [Mariotti et al., 1988; Aravena and Robertson, 1998; Fukada et al., 2003; Kendall et

78 al., 2007]. This change in isotope composition, or isotope fractionation (ε), distinguishes

79   denitrification at the field scale from other processes such as dilution, which can also

80   decrease NO_3^- concentration, but without changing its isotopic value [Clark and Fritz, 1997;

81   Kendall et al., 2007].

82   By combining the analysis of ^{15}N and ^{18}O isotopes with hydrochemical data as well as with

83   the measurement of isotopes of the ions involved in denitrification reactions (e.g., $\delta^{34}S$ and

84    $\delta^{18}O$ of dissolved sulphate and/or $\delta^{13}C$ of dissolved inorganic carbon), additional information

85   on the mechanisms controlling denitrification can be obtained [Aravena and Robertson,

86   1998; Pauwels et al., 1998, 2000, 2010; Kendall et al., 2007; Otero et al., 2009; among

87   others]. Schmidt et al. [2011, 2012] used nitrate isotope ratios to demonstrate the

88   occurrence of denitrification in the infiltrating water during its passage through the first meter

89   of the soil beneath the base of a MAR pond in central coastal California.

90   In the present work, we monitored denitrification processes in a MAR-PRL system located at

91   Sant Vicenç dels Horts, Barcelona, Spain [Valhondo et al., 2014, 2015, 2016], which has a

92   layer of vegetal compost at the bottom of the infiltration pond. The aim of the present study

93   is to test the usefulness of a combined isotope analysis and depth specific hydrochemical

94   data to: (i) assess the long-term effectiveness of the reactive layer in promoting

95   denitrification 5 years after installation; (ii) identify the denitrification processes occurring at

96   different aquifer depths and locations along the saturated zone below the infiltration pond

97   (including the mixing zone between recharge and native groundwater). The field site was

98   monitored during 21 months. Laboratory experiments, using two-year-old vegetal compost

99   from the PRL, were performed to estimate the ϵ values and, thus, assess the extent of

100   denitrification during MAR. The methods tested here can be applied to assess the efficacy of

101   MAR ponds coupled to reactive layer PRL (MAR-PRL) in promoting denitrification.

102   **2. Materials and methods**

103   **2.1.   Site description**

104 The field site studied is located 15 km inland from the Mediterranean coast, in the lower

105 valley of the Llobregat Delta (Catalonia, NE Spain). The aquifer consists of Quaternary

106 alluvial sediments, mainly coarse gravel and sand with small clay lenses [Iribar et al., 1997].

107 The minerals present include quartz, calcite and dolomite, and the solid phase fraction of

108 organic carbon is less than 0.002 (g_{OC}/g_{soil}) [Barbieri et al., 2011]. At this location, the aquifer

109 extends to a depth of 23 to 27 m underground [Valhondo et al., 2014] and is located

110 between 5 and 10 m below the Llobregat river bed, the river and aquifer thus being

111 hydraulically disconnected [Vázquez-Suñé et al., 2007]. The regional groundwater flow

112 direction is from NNW to SSE [Quevauviller et al., 2009], with a natural hydraulic gradient of

113 2.3‰. Previous pumping tests determined the hydraulic parameters of the MAR system of

114 Sant Vicenç to be 1.4×10^4 m^2 day^{-1} for transmissivity and 0.03 for storage coefficient

115 [Barahona-Palomo et al., 2011].

116 The MAR system in Sant Vicenç dels Horts consists of a decantation pond and an infiltration

117 pond (Fig.1). In the decantation pond (≈4,000 m^2), the sediments are allowed to settle for

118 approximately 2-4 days before the water is transferred by a concrete pipe to an infiltration

119 pond (≈5,000 m^2). The infiltration rate in the infiltration pond ranges from 0.5 to 2 m d^{-1}

120 [Valhondo et al., 2014].

121 The infiltration water is surface water from the Llobregat River, which is affected by

122 wastewater treatment effluents [Köck-Schulmeyer et al., 2011]. A reactive layer was installed

123 at the bottom of the infiltration pond in 2011 to create favorable conditions for the

124 biodegradation of the contaminants present in the infiltration water. The reactive layer (≈65

125 cm thick) consists of aquifer sand (49.5% in volume), vegetal compost from gardens and

126 scrap wood (49.5%), clay (≤1%) and iron oxide dust (≤0.1%). The components were mixed

127 on site with an excavator until homogeneity was visually evident. The layer was covered with

128 approximately 5 cm of sand to prevent the woody material from floating away. The compost

129 in the reactive layer was added to promote microbial growth and redox conditions by

130 providing organic matter to the infiltration water. The sand was added to provide structural

131 integrity to the layer and guarantee high hydraulic conductivity. Finally, iron oxides and clay,

132   consisting mainly of illite (33 wt%), smectite (16 wt%) and chlorite (9 wt%), were present to

133   provide extra sorption capacity for cationic and anionic contaminants [Valhondo et al., 2014].

134   The MAR pond of Sant Vicenç undergoes two main operational periods: (1) recharge

135   periods (RPs), when the pond is full of the infiltration water and total saturation conditions

136   are not obtained under the infiltration pond [Valhondo et al., 2015, 2016] and (2) non-

137   recharge periods (NRPs), when the pond is emptied for operational redevelopment and/or

138   when the quality of the river water is low. NRPs are implemented when the control

139   parameters of the infiltration water are exceeded, such as when NH_4^+ concentrations are

140   higher than 1.5 mg L^{-1}, electrical conductivity (EC) is higher than 2000 µS cm^{-1}, river turbidity

141   is greater than 100 NTU and input water turbidity exceeds 25 NTU. NRPs are also

142   implemented when the clogged layer needs to be removed or the upper layer of sand has to

143   be cleaned. During NRPs, the groundwater table declines and the bottom of the pond is

144   exposed to the atmosphere.

145   A piezometric network consisting of seven piezometers was installed around the recharge

146   system of Sant Vicenç dels Horts (Fig.1). Piezometer P1 (screened from 6 to 24 m) is

147   located upstream of the infiltration pond and was used to monitor background groundwater.

148   P3 (screened from 5 to 23 m) is located upstream of the infiltration pond, between the

149   decantation and infiltration ponds, while P8 is located in the middle of the infiltration pond

150   and is composed of three piezometers screened at different depths (P8.1 from 13 to 15 m,

151   P8.2 from 10 to 12 m and P8.3 from 7 to 9 m). P8.3 was used to evaluate the behavior of the

152   infiltration water through the vadose zone, while P8.1 was used to monitor the recharge at

153   the deepest point of the saturated zone. P2 (completely screened from 6 to 24 m) and P5

154   (screened from 5.5 to 21.5 m) are situated downstream, at the edge of the infiltration pond.

155   Additionally, P9 (9.4-24.4 m) and P10 (6-20 m) are located 190 m and 200 m downstream of

156   the infiltration pond, respectively. Therefore, all the monitoring points, except P1 (native

157   groundwater) and P8.3 (infiltration water just after crossing the vadose zone), represent

158   different ratios of recharge water to native groundwater in the aquifer at different travel times.

159　Travel time of the recharge water to the different piezometers was determined from

160　fluctuations in EC during the infiltration tests [Valhondo et al., 2014]. The results of the

161　infiltration tests were validated by Valhondo et al. [2016] using a numerical model. The

162　results indicated a travel time from the pond to the piezometer of around 18 to 24 hours for

163　P8.3, nearly 2 days for P2 and P5, 10 days for P10 and P8.1, and more than 20 days for P9.

2.2.　Sampling surveys

165　To assess the long-term effectiveness of the PRL on nitrate removal, four sampling

166　campaigns were performed using the seven piezometers (Fig.1) in June 2013, September

167　2013, July 2014 and March 2015. The monitored period started 5 years after the installation

168　of the PRL and lasted 21 months. The June 2013 and July 2014 campaigns were performed

169　during RPs, and the other two during NRPs. Figure 2 shows the distribution along time of the

170　operational periods and the sampling campaigns. The system was under recharge for a total

171　of 222 days in 2013 and 213 days in 2014. In 2015, before the March 2015 campaign, the

172　system was under non-recharge for almost four months, whereas only two months of non-

173　recharge had occurred before the September 2013 campaign.

174　Sampling was carried out using depth-specific samplers (bailers). Bailers are considered

175　suitable for measuring groundwater nitrate concentration (Lasagna and De Luca, 2016).

176　Each piezometer was sampled at three different depths (Fig.1), which were selected

177　according to the stratigraphic profiles. A layer with high transmissivity was identified in the

178　middle depth of all the piezometers. This layer is composed of polygenic gravel and large-

179　sized gravel with medium fine sandy matrix. Although some sampling protocols (ENSAT,

180　2012) do not deem it necessary to purge piezometers in aquifers with high transmissivity

181　such as that of Sant Vicenç dels Horts (1.4×10^4 m^2 day^{-1}), we still purged the piezometers

182　prior to sampling by removing well water three times at each specific depth. During the four

183　sampling campaigns, samples from the Llobregat River were also collected, sometimes

184　more than once on the same day.

7

185   Physicochemical parameters (pH, temperature (T) and EC) were measured *in situ*, using a

186   Multi 3410 multi-parameter (WTW, Weilheim, Germany). Samples for measuring major

187   cations were filtered through 0.2-µm Millipore® filters, preserved by the addition of 1%

188   HNO_3^- and stored in polyethylene bottles at 4ºC until analysis. Samples for the analysis of

189   major anions (Cl^-, NO_3^-, NO_2^- and SO_4^{2-}) and isotope ratios ($\delta^{15}N_{NO3}$, $\delta^{18}O_{NO3}$, $\delta^{34}S_{SO4}$,

190    $\delta^{18}O_{SO4}$ and $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$) were filtered through 0.2-µm Millipore® filters and stored in

191   polyethylene bottles. Samples for measuring NO_3^- isotopes were kept frozen until analysis,

192   while those for $\delta^{18}O_{H2O}$ and δ^2H_{H2O} measurements were collected in glass flasks and filtered

193   through 0.45-µm Millipore® filters. For isotope analyses, samples were taken only from the

194   middle depth of each piezometer. Samples for the analysis of non-purgeable dissolved

195   organic carbon (NPDOC) were collected in muffled (450°C, 4.5 hours) glass bottles, filtered

196   through 0.45-µm Millipore® filters, acidified to pH 3 with hydrochloric acid and stored at 4°C

197   until analysis. To measure dissolved inorganic carbon (DIC), samples were collected in glass

198   bottles, filtered through 0.45-µm Millipore® filters and analyzed within a day.

199   **2.3. Laboratory experiments**

200   Batch experiments were performed with material extracted in 2013 from the PRL of the Sant

201   Vicenç dels Horts MAR pond system. The substrate was used within a few hours after

202   extraction without any pre-treatment. Total N and C content as well as the $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{13}C$ of

203   the reactive layer material are shown in the Supplementary Material (Table S1). Experiments

204   were performed in triplicate, using 20 g of the PRL material and 400 mL of groundwater from

205   the Llobregat aquifer (from P2) spiked with 0.80 mM of NO_3^- to evaluate the denitrification

206   potential of the vegetal compost. The experiments were run in sterilized 500-mL glass

207   bottles previously purged with N_2 for 15 minutes in a glove box in an argon atmosphere to

208   minimize the O_2 level. Experimental oxygen partial pressure in the glove box was maintained

209   between 0.1 and 0.3% O_2 and continuously monitored using an oxygen partial pressure

210   detector (Sensotran, Gasvisor 6) with an accuracy of ± 0.1% O_2. Batch experiments were

211   manually shaken once a day and aqueous samples (5 mL) were collected daily using

212   sterilized syringes. A ratio of solution/solid material at 90% of the initial value was

213   maintained.

214   **2.4. Analytical methods**

215   Concentrations of major anions was determined by high performance liquid chromatography

216   (HPLC) using a WATERS 515 HPLC pump, an IC-PAC anions column and a WATERS 432

217   detector. Cation concentrations were determined by inductively coupled plasma-optical

218   emission spectrometry (ICP-OES, Perkin-Elmer Optima 3200 RL). NPDOC was measured

219   by organic matter combustion using a MULTI N/C 3100 Analytik Jena carbon analyzer. DIC

220   concentrations were analyzed by titration (METROHM 702 SM Titrino). Chemical analyses

221   were conducted at the "Centres Científics i Tecnològics" of the University of Barcelona

222   (CCiT-UB).

223   The $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ isotopes of dissolved NO_3^- were measured using a modified cadmium

224   reduction method of McIlvin and Altabet [2005] and Ryabenko et al. [2009]. Briefly, NO_3^- was

225   converted into nitrite through a spongy cadmium reduction and then to nitrous oxide using

226   sodium azide in an acetic acid buffer. Simultaneous $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ analysis of the N_2O

227   produced was carried out with a PreCon system (Thermo Scientific) coupled to a Finnigan

228   MAT-253 Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometer (IRMS, Thermo Scientific). For $\delta^{34}S$ and $\delta^{18}O$

229   analyses, dissolved SO_4^{2-} was precipitated as $BaSO_4$ by adding $BaCl_2$ after acidifying the

230   sample with HCl and boiling it to prevent $BaCO_3$ precipitation, following standard methods

231   [Dogramaci et al., 2001]. $\delta^{34}S$ was analyzed with a Carlo Erba elemental analyzer (EA)-

232   Finnigan Delta C IRMS, while $\delta^{18}O$ was analyzed in duplicate with a ThermoQuest high

233   temperature conversion EA (TC/EA) coupled in continuous flow with a Finnigan MAT Delta C

234   IRMS. For $\delta^{13}C_{DIC}$ analysis, carbonates were precipitated by adding a $NaOH$-$BaCl_2$ solution

235   and isotope ratio was measured on a Gas-Bench II-MAT-253 IRMS (Thermo Scientific).

236   δ^2H_{H2O} and $\delta^{18}O_{H2O}$ were analyzed by Wavelength-Scanned Cavity Ringdown Spectroscopy

237   (WS-CRDS) using L2120-i Picarro®. Total C, total N, $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{13}C$ from the PRL material

238 were measured using Carbo Erba EA-Finnigan Delta C IRMS. Isotope ratios were calculated

239 using both international and internal laboratory standards. Notation was expressed in terms

240 of δ relative to the international standards (V-SMOW for $\delta^{18}O$ and δ^2H, atmospheric N_2 for

241 $\delta^{15}N$, V-CDT for $\delta^{34}S$ and V-PDB for $\delta^{13}C$). The reproducibility of the samples was ±1‰ for

242 the $\delta^{15}N$ of NO_3, ±1.5‰ for the $\delta^{18}O$ of NO_3^-, ±0.2‰ for the $\delta^{34}S$ of SO_4^{2-}, ±0.5‰ for the $\delta^{18}O$

243 of SO_4^{2-}, ±0.2‰ for the $\delta^{13}C$ of DIC, ±0.2‰ for the $\delta^{18}O$ of H_2O and ±1‰ for the δ^2H of H_2O.

244 Samples for isotopic analyses were prepared at the "Mineralogia Aplicada i Geoquímica de

245 Fluids" laboratory and analyzed at CCiT-UB, except water isotopes, which were analyzed at

246 the University of Málaga.

3. Results and discussion

248 Results from the batch experiments and the complete chemical and isotopic characterization

249 of the field samples are detailed in the Supplementary Material (Table S2 and Tables S3,

250 respectively).

3.1. Laboratory experiments

252 Complete NO_3^- reduction was achieved within eleven days in the batch experiments (Fig. 3),

253 with a slight transient increase in NO_2^- concentration (up to 0.07 mM). Nitrate reduction in

254 previous batch experiments performed with fresh commercial compost was accompanied by

255 a significant initial release of NO_3^- (up to 2.5 mM) and transient NO_2^- production (up to 0.12

256 mM) [Grau-Martínez et al., 2017]. By comparison, the compost used in the present batch

257 experiments, extracted from the PRL two years after its installation, did not release NO_3^- and

258 produced a lower increase in NO_2^- concentration.

259 Denitrification in both sets of batch experiments followed pseudo-first-order kinetics and an

260 initial lag phase of 6-7 days with a lower degradation rate was observed. The pseudo-first

261 order degradation rate constant (k'), calculated using Eq. 3 (where C_0 and C_t are the initial

262 NO_3^- concentration and the NO_3^- concentration at time t, respectively, in mmol L^{-1}), were

263   0.21±0.01 and 0.83±0.06 d^{-1} with the PRL material and 0.17±0.02 and 0.67±0.01 d^{-1} with the

264   fresh compost for the lag and main phases, respectively. Although highly similar, degradation

265   rates were slightly higher for the PRL material than for the fresh compost. These results

266   demonstrated that the compost from the PRL still had denitrification potential two years after

267   its installation.

268        $=$ (3)

269   The isotope fractionation factor α can be obtained [Mariotti et al., 1988; Aravena and

270   Robertson, 1998] according to Eq. (4), assuming a Rayleigh distillation process:

271    $\ln\left(-\right)=($ $\ln\left(-\right)$ (4)

272   where R_o and R_t denote the ratios of heavy to light isotopes at the initial time and time t,

273   respectively, which are calculated according to Eq. (5).

274        $\overline{}$ (5)

275   The term (α -1) was calculated from the slope of the regression line in the double-logarithmic

276   plots [$\ln(R_t/R_0)$] vs. [$\ln(C_t/C_0)$], according to Eq. (4), and converted into isotope fractionation

277   (εN and εO) following Eq. (6).

278   (6)

279   The isotopic fractionations obtained were -10.4‰ for εN and -13.8‰ for εO, with a εN/εO

280   ratio of 0.75 (Fig. 4). The εN and εO values obtained in this study were similar to those from

281   previous laboratory experiments using fresh commercial compost (εN= -10.8‰ and εO=-

282   9.0‰ [Grau-Martínez et al., 2017]), also falling within the range of laboratory values for

283   heterotrophic denitrification reported in the literature (from -8.6‰ to -16.2‰ for εN and from -

284   4‰ to -13.8‰ for εO [Knöller et al., 2011; Carrey et al., 2013]).

285   The obtained C and N isotope fractionations associated with denitrification induced by the

286   two-year-old PRL material enables a more accurate quantification of the enhanced reduction

287   in NO_3^- levels in the aquifer.

288   **3.2. Field study**

289   **3.2.1. Hydrochemical characterisation**

290   For all the analyzed samples, pH values ranged between 6.98 and 7.60, HCO_3^-

291   concentrations between 223 and 408 mg L^{-1} and EC from 991 to 1653 μS cm^{-1}. There were

292   no significant differences in the concentrations of major cations between the piezometers

293   among the four sampling campaigns (Table S3).

294   Groundwater underneath the infiltration pond can be considered a mixture of recharge water

295   and native groundwater. Samples clustered in the HCO_3-Cl-Ca-Na hydrochemical facies,

296   with negligible differences among the sampling campaigns (data not show). The saturation

297   index of calcite, calculated using the PHREEQC code [Parkhurst and Appelo, 2012] and the

298   LLNL.dat database, ranged from -0.35 to 0.6, indicating that calcite was in equilibrium with

299   native groundwater and had a pH buffering role in the hydrochemistry of the aquifer among

300   the Quaternary alluvial sediments.

301   **3.2.2. Sources of groundwater recharge**

302   δ^2H and δ^{18}O values of the infiltration water (river water) and groundwater sampled during

303   RPs (June 2013 and July 2014) mostly plotted along the Local Meteoric Water Line (LMWL)

304   (Fig. 5). The LMWL was calculated with data from the Global Network of Isotopes in

305   Precipitation (GNIP) obtained from stations 0818001 and 0818002 in Barcelona

306   (IAEA/WMO, 2017). Isotope ratios are lower than the weighted mean long-term isotopic

307   composition of precipitation in Barcelona (δ^2H= -31.16‰, δ^{18}O= -5.3‰), but in agreement

308   with the values obtained with the surface water of the Lower end of the Llobregat River

309   [Otero et al., 2008] and samples from the Llobregat aquifer [Solà, 2009]. The results

310   confirmed that river water is the main source of recharge in the aquifer and indicate that

311   evaporation is not an important process in the pond and/or the unsaturated zone. Lastly, the

312   range of δ^2H and $\delta^{18}O$ values showed that only one recharge flow system is involved in the

313   aquifer recharge.

3.3.   Changes in redox sensitive indicators

315   The evolution of the concentration of NO_3^- and NPDOC in the saturated zone along the flow

316   path, during both RPs and NRPs, is shown in Figure 6. The results of major anions (Cl^-,

317   SO_4^{2-}, HCO_3^-) are shown in the Supplementary Material (Fig. S1).

318   The chemical composition of groundwater collected upstream of the infiltration pond (P1,

319   which represents native groundwater not affected by the recharge) was compared to that of

320   the piezometers affected by recharge water. The concentrations of major anions in P1

321   samples remained almost constant with depth and time, although SO_4^{2-} and Cl^-

322   concentrations were slightly lower in June 2013 (Fig. S1). As expected, the influence of river

323   water hydrochemistry is clearly observed during RP in the piezometers located closer to the

324   infiltration pond (P8, P2 and P5) and is observed to a lesser extent during NRP. Significant

325   changes with depth are only detected in P8 that showed increasing HCO_3^- concentrations

326   with depth, except in July 2014 (RP). Piezometers located furthest from the infiltration pond

327   (P9 and P10) are less influenced by river water chemistry, showing values similar to P1 and

328   P3, and no significant changes with depth were observed during both RP and RNPs.

329   During RPs, NPDOC concentrations at all the piezometers downstream of the infiltration

330   pond generally ranged between those for native groundwater (1.9-4.9 mg L^{-1}) and those for

331   river water (3.2-3.7 mg L^{-1}), except the higher values measured in the shallowest part of P5

332   in June 2013 (4.1 mg L^{-1}) and the deepest part of P2 in July 2014 (5.5 mg L^{-1}) (Fig. 6).

333   During NRPs (September 2013 and March 2015), NPDOC concentration in most of the

334   mixed groundwater samples also ranged between those for native groundwater (1.9-3.0 mg

335   L^{-1}) and those for river water (4.3-4.7 mg L^{-1}), being generally lower than the values obtained

336   from the RPs. Higher concentrations were detected in September 2013 than in March 2015,

337   especially for the shallowest part of P3 (8.6 mg L^{-1}) and the deepest part of P8 (7.1 mg L^{-1}).

13

338 These results suggest that the reactive layer was still releasing NPDOC five years after

339 installation. The effects of the PRL was more apparent at P2 and P5 during RPs and

340 especially P3 and P8 during NRPs. Higher levels of organic matter were released from the

341 PRL during September 2013 (two months of non-recharge before sampling) than March

342 2015 (four months of non-recharge before sampling), indicating that the duration of recharge

343 conditions had a significant effect.

344 During the monitoring period, NO_3^- concentration in native groundwater (P1) ranged from 4.1

345 to 6.4 mg L^{-1}, except the higher values recorded in March 2015 (9.8 mg L^{-1}) and September

346 2013 (3.7-6.9 mg L^{-1}) (Table S3). Similarly, NO_3^- contents in river water ranged from 6.1 to

347 8.4 mg L^{-1}. It should be noted that NO_3^- and NH_4^+ concentrations vary considerably in rivers

348 with effluents from WWTPs, even among samples collected on the same day. During the

349 RPs a significant decrease in NO_3^- concentration was observed in the piezometers located

350 close to the infiltration pond (P2 and P5), especially in the June 2013 sampling, which

351 showed complete NO_3^- reduction at some depths highlighting the ability of the MAR-PRL

352 system to enhance nitrate reduction (Fig.6). Low NO_3^- concentration also occurred in the

353 shallowest part of P8 (0.9 mg L^{-1}), increasing with depth probably because P8.3 is more

354 affected by the recharge water than P8.2 and P8.1. During the July 2014 RP, although NO_3^-

355 concentration in the mixed groundwater was lower than that in the native groundwater,

356 higher values and smaller changes with depth and along the flow path were observed.

357 During NRPs, NO_3^- concentrations at the piezometers downstream of the infiltration pond

358 were generally within native groundwater and river water samples, although slightly lower

359 NO_3^- concentrations were detected at P2, suggesting that NO_3^- reduction was maintained to

360 some extent during NRPs.

361 Fe concentrations in samples downstream of the infiltration pond were generally lower than

362 that in the native groundwater (P1) (data not shown). No significant variations between the

363 sampling campaigns were observed (values ranged from 0.2 to 1.0 µM at all the

364 piezometers and depths studied), except for an important increase at P5 during the June

365   2013 RP (up to 3.7 µM) probably arising from more reducing conditions occurring. The

366   solubility of Fe(III)-oxyhydroxides, which usually affects Fe concentration in groundwater,

367   increases under more reducing conditions, thereby increasing aqueous Fe concentration.

368   Overall, the observed changes in redox indicators suggested that the PRL installed in 2011

369   was still releasing organic matter and promoting reducing conditions to varying extents

370   below the infiltration pond.

371   **3.4. Denitrification during artificial recharge**

372   Samples for isotope analyses were taken only from the middle depth of each piezometer.

373   Nitrate isotope composition was measured in a subset of these samples based on NO_3^-

374   concentrations. Figure 7 shows the $\delta^{15}N_{NO3}$ and $\delta^{18}O_{NO3}$ values of dissolved nitrate at the

375   piezometers, as well as the isotope composition of the main potential sources of nitrate:

376   nitrate fertilizers, ammonium fertilizers, soil nitrate and animal manure or sewage [Vitòria et

377   al., 2004; Kendall et al., 2007; Xue et al., 2009]. The range of $\delta^{18}O$ of NO_3^- for ammonium

378   fertilizers, soil nitrogen and manure/sewage plotted in Figure 7 (+1.93‰ to +3.13‰) was

379   estimated according to Eq.7 [Anderson and Hooper, 1983; Kendall et al., 2007], where

380    $\delta^{18}O_{H2O}$ corresponds to the range measured in Sant Vicenç dels Horts groundwater samples

381   and $\delta^{18}O_{O2}$ to atmospheric O_2 (+23.5‰ [Horibe et al., 1973]).

382   −   −   (7)

383   Native groundwater (P1) showed $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ values ranging from +13.0 to +17.5‰ and

384   from +2.8 to +9.7‰, respectively. The nitrate isotope ratios of the samples from the

385   piezometers located downstream of the pond ranged from +9.5 to +26.7‰ (averaging

386   +18.4‰) for $\delta^{15}N$ and from +3.5 to +16.6‰ (averaging +9.5‰) for $\delta^{18}O$ (Table S4). All these

387   samples presented isotope ratios compatible with those for soil organic nitrogen and

388   sewage/manure. The mixed groundwater samples showed a positive correlation (r^2=0.55)

389   between $\delta^{15}N_{NO3}$ and $\delta^{18}O_{NO3}$ and were aligned following a εN/εO ratio of 1.5 (Fig. 7), which

390   is consistent with denitrification [Kendall et al., 2007]. The εN/εO ratio reported in the

391   literature for denitrification in groundwater ranges from 1.3 to 2.1 [Böttcher et al., 1990; Cey

392   et al., 1999; Mengis et al., 1999; DeVito et al., 2000; Lehmann et al., 2003; Fukada et al.,

393   2003].

394   The lowest NO_3^- concentrations in groundwater were measured in the samples obtained

395   during the June 2013 RP, with those recorded in P2 and P5 samples being close to the

396   detection limit at most of the depths studied (Fig. 6), thus suggesting denitrification. For the

397   June 2013 samples in which NO_3^- content was high enough for isotope characterization,

398    $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ values were up to +21.0‰ and +9.5‰, respectively (Fig. 7). Whereas the P8

399   and P9 samples followed a trend consistent with denitrification, the samples P2 and P10 do

400   not fit to the denitrification trend. These samples likely correspond to denitrification of NO_3^-

401   resulting from the nitrification of the ammonium in sewage that had undergone further

402   volatilization. In this sampling campaign, all the piezometer samples, except the middle and

403   deepest part of P8, showed lower NO_3^- concentrations than native groundwater and river

404   water (Fig. 6). The middle part of P8 showed similar nitrate isotope ratios as P1 and river

405   water (Fig. 7).

406   Native and mixed groundwater samples from the July 2014 RP campaign gave higher $\delta^{15}N$

407   and $\delta^{18}O$ values than those from the June 2013 RP campaign (Fig. 7). Nevertheless, $\delta^{15}N$

408   and $\delta^{18}O$ values (up to +25.3‰ and +16.1‰, respectively) were higher in all the mixed

409   groundwater samples than in native groundwater (+18.8‰ and +11.4‰, respectively), which

410   is consistent with denitrification. The exception was the P10 sample (+19.1‰ and +10.9‰,

411   respectively), which showed similar isotope ratios as P1. The highest $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ values

412   were measured in P2 (+25.3‰ and +16.1‰, respectively). However, it should be noted that

413   high $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ values were also measured in river water. The high variability in NO_3^-

414   contents in river water samples even on the same day (data not shown) could explain the

415   particularly high isotope ratios measured in September 2013 and July 2014.

416   All the mixed groundwater samples, except P2, collected during the March 2015 NRP (when

417   the pond had been under non-recharge for four months) showed similar isotope ratios as the

418   native groundwater (P1, $\delta^{15}N$= +13.9‰ and $\delta^{18}O$= +5.6‰). Those collected in the

419   September 2013 NRP, when the pond had been under non-recharge for a shorter time (two

420   months), showed higher $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ values than P1 (+17.5‰ and +9.7‰, respectively),

421   except P5 and P8 samples (Fig. 7). In both sampling surveys, P2 samples presented the

422   highest isotope ratios ($\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$ were +17.3‰ and +9.3‰ in March 2015 and +26.7‰

423   and +16.6‰ in September 2013, respectively). Thus, differences between the two NRP

424   sampling campaigns indicate that the effect of the RP can take some time to manifest after

425   non-recharge conditions.

426   εN and εO values allow quantifying at field scale NO_3^- losses due to denitrification

427   independently of dilution effects on NO_3^- concentrations [Mariotti et al., 1981; Böttcher et al.,

428   1990; Fukada et al., 2003; Otero et al., 2009; Torrentó et al., 2011]. With the ε values

429   obtained in laboratory experiments, the percentage of denitrification at the field scale can be

430   calculated according to Eq. 8 using either εN or εO, or both.

431   —————   —————   (8)

432   Using the ε values obtained in the batch experiments with the two-year-old PRL material (-

433   10.4‰ for εN and -13.8‰ for εO, with an $\varepsilon N/\varepsilon O$ ratio of 0.75) and assuming an initial isotope

434   composition similar to that of the P1 samples collected in June 2013 ($\delta^{15}N_{NO3}$= +13.0‰ and

435     $\delta^{18}O_{NO3}$= +2.8‰) (corresponding to the lowest values measured), the extent of denitrification

436   ranged from 0% to 50%, except for two samples (P2 in September 2013 and July 2014)

437   showing reductions greater than 60% (Fig. S2). The median percentage of NO_3^- reduction in

438   groundwater was 36±22% (n=19) when using the laboratory-obtained εN and 32±19% (n=

439   20) when using εO.

440   A more precise estimation of the extent of denitrification enhanced by the MAR-PRL system

441   in the mixed groundwater samples was determined for each sampling campaign using the

442   isotope composition of the native groundwater (P1) for each campaign as the initial value. It

443   should be noted that P1 and river samples collected in July 2014 (RP) and September 2013

444   (NRP) showed high values of $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{18}O$, indicating the occurrence of natural

445   attenuation. High NO_3^- concentrations indicate other sources of NO_3^- (such as fertilizers from

446   the fields around Sant Vicenç dels Horts). Compared to native groundwater, P9 and P10

447   (located furthest from the infiltration pond) samples, except those collected in the June 2013

448   RP (NO_3^- reduction of around 30%), presented the lowest level of denitrification (NO_3^-nitrate

449   reduction less than 10%). Denitrification was enhanced in the piezometers located closer to

450   the infiltration pond (P2 and P5). For P5, the degree of reduction in NO_3^- concentration was

451   greater in RPs (around 15%) than in NRPs (no denitrification); however, this difference was

452   not so significant for P2 (30-35% vs. 25-45%, respectively). In all the campaigns, the isotope

453   composition of P8.2 was very similar to that of P1, indicating that denitrification was not

454   occurring at this depth. Since isotope values in samples from different depths were not

455   determined, the observed variations in NO_3^- concentration with depth at P8 cannot be

456   attributed to denitrification or other process (e.g., mixing).

457   Therefore, denitrification occurred during both RPs, the maximum degree of attenuation

458   (between 30 and 40%) taking place at the middle depths of P2 and P5. Complete

459   denitrification at some of the depths of P2 and P5 was observed in samples collected in

460   June 2013 (Fig. 6). Comparing the two RP sampling campaigns, the June 2013 samples

461   presented a slightly higher level of denitrification, probably because the system was under

462   almost continuous operation since January 2012 (except for 30 days in August 2012, 24

463   days in February-March 2013 and 5 days in April 2013). The MAR system was stopped from

464   22nd June to 1st July, 10 days before the July 2014 sampling campaign. The longer

465   operational period before the June 2013 campaign could have induced a well-developed

466   denitrifying microbial community, with the bacteria being more concentrated in the areas

467   receiving more recharge water, such as P2 and P5. Li et al. [2013], simulating the infiltration

468   zone of a MAR system, showed that microbial communities reached stability after 3-4

469   months of operation.

470   During NRPs, the percentage of denitrification was very low (<20%) in all the samples,

471   except those from P2 (30-60%), which was one of the areas most affected by recharge

472   water (Valhondo et al., 2014) (Fig. 8). All the samples collected in March 2015, including P2,

473   showed the lowest percentage of denitrification among all the sampling campaigns. The

474   September 2013 campaign was performed after a year of almost continuous recharge (Fig.

475   2) followed by less than two months of non-recharge, whereas the March 2015 campaign

476   was undertaken after almost four months of non-recharge. Differences in the percentage of

477   denitrification among the P2 samples collected from both NRPs indicate that the bacteria

478   grow during RPs were still denitrifying even when the MAR pond was under non-recharge,

479   but became less active with time in the absence of a carbon source [Rodríguez-Escales et

480   al., 2016].

481   **3.5. Additional isotope data**

482   The isotope composition of SO_4^{2-} ($\delta^{34}S_{SO4}$ and $\delta^{18}O_{SO4}$) was analyzed to assess the

483   occurrence of sulfate-reducing conditions. The isotope composition of the dissolved SO_4^{2-} in

484   mixed groundwater samples was only analyzed for the June 2013 and September 2013

485   campaigns. Values ranged from +6.7 to +10.6‰ for $\delta^{34}S$ and from +9.0 to +11.1‰ for $\delta^{18}O$

486   (Fig. 9). Similar values were obtained for the river water and native groundwater samples.

487   Most of the mixed groundwater samples gave values within the range obtained for sewage

488   [Otero et al., 2008] (Fig. 9), indicating that the vast majority of SO_4^{2-} came from sewage,

489   which is consistent with the conclusions drawn from the NO_3^- isotope results regarding

490   potential NO_3^- sources.

491   The narrow range of the $\delta^{34}S_{SO4}$ and $\delta^{18}O_{SO4}$ values obtained suggests a lack of SO_4^{2-}

492   reduction. Based on these results and those from the NO_3^- isotope analysis, it can be

493   concluded that the NPDOC released by the reactive layer produces variable redox

494 conditions in the saturated zone along the flow path, leading mainly to the reduction of NO_3^-,

495 as well as iron under certain conditions, but not of SO_4^{2-}.

496 Due to the lithology of the aquifer, native groundwater contained high concentrations of

497 natural bicarbonate (median value of 325±25 mg L^{-1} in P1 for the four sampling campaigns)

498 that could buffer any change in the $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ isotope ratio. The $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ values in P1 samples

499 (native groundwater) averaged -13.2±1‰, which is in agreement with the known range of

500 $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ for groundwater (-16‰ to -11‰ [Vogel and Ehhalt, 1963]). Mixed groundwater

501 samples displayed $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ values close to that of P1 samples (between -13.8 and -12.0‰,

502 with a median value of -12.7‰), except three samples collected in the June 2013 campaign

503 (RP) (that had values ranging from -11.1 to -9.9‰) (Fig. 10). As expected, the role of organic

504 matter oxidation in the observed denitrification processes was not evident from the $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$

505 data due to the buffering effect of the bicarbonate.

506 **4. Conclusions**

507 We evaluated the feasibility of a multi-isotope approach for assessing the efficacy of the

508 MAR-PRL system of Sant Vicenç dels Horts in promoting denitrification in the groundwater

509 below the infiltration pond. Similarities in the hydrochemical data (except for NO_3^- levels,

510 which decreased during recharge periods) of river water, native groundwater and mixed

511 groundwater demonstrated a unique recharge flow system. Changes in the redox indicators

512 with depth and along the flow path during recharge and non-recharge periods confirmed that

513 the reactive layer was still releasing NPDOC five years after installation. NO_3^- concentrations

514 decreased during recharge periods especially in the piezometers closest to the infiltration

515 pond, while aqueous Fe concentrations increased in the piezometers with lower NO_3^-

516 concentrations. However, SO_4^{2-} reduction was not observed.

517 Isotope data revealed that denitrification occurred in the area under the infiltration pond. The

518 piezometers closest to the MAR-PRL, P2 and P5, showed higher levels of denitrification

than the other piezometers. Importantly, denitrification was enhanced by a more continuous recharge of the MAR-PRL system, probably because microbial communities become stable after 3-4 months of continuous operation. Although a more detailed field sampling survey is needed to determine the real extent of denitrification at the field scale, the results of this study show the usefulness of a multi-isotope approach in identifying denitrification in MAR-PRL systems.

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1   **Figure captions**

2   **Figure 1.** Upper panel: Schematic location and plan view of the Sant Vicenç dels Horts

3   recharge system. Lower panel: Cross-section of the transect A-A'. The red diamonds show

4   the sampling depths.

5   **Figure 2**. Operational periods of the Sant Vicenç dels Horts MAR-PRL system between

6   January 2013 and May 2015: recharge periods (RPs, grey) and non-recharge periods

7   (NRPs, white). The four sampling campaigns are also shown (red bars).

8   **Figure 3**. Changes in NO_3^- and NO_2^- concentrations over time in the batch experiments with

9   compost extracted from the PRL (two-year-old reactive layer). Results of previous batch

10 experiments with fresh commercial compost (Grau-Martínez et al., 2017) are also shown for

11 comparison. Values and error bars represent the mean and standard deviation, respectively,

12 for the experiments performed in triplicate.

13 **Figure 4**. Isotope analyses of the batch experiments performed with two-year-old PRL

14 material. Slopes of the regression lines represent (α-1) for N and O.

15 **Figure 5.** $\delta^{18}O$-H_2O vs. δ^2H-H_2O of samples collected in June 2013 (RP) and July 2014 (RP)

16 from the Llobregat River, native groundwater (P1) and mixed groundwater (all the

17 piezometers, except P1). The Local Meteoric Water Line (LMWL) and weighted mean

18 precipitation (WMP) are also shown, as well as the groundwater samples from the Llobregat

19 aquifer collected in an area close to the MAR pond ("Llobregat aquifer", Solà, 2009) and

20 Llobregat river samples collected in 1998-1999 ("LB", Otero et al., 2008).

21 **Figure. 6**. Changes in the concentration of NPDOC and NO_3^- in depth-specific groundwater

22 samples along the flow path under both RPs (a, c) and NRPs (b, d). Values for the Llobregat

23 river samples are also shown. The size of the symbols is proportional to the corresponding

24 concentration value. Concentrations ranged from 0.11 to 8.6 mg L^{-1} for NPDOC and from

25 0.01 to 19.4 mg L^{-1} for NO_3^-. Concentration values are given in the Supplementary Material

26 (Table S3).

27 **Figure 7**. $\delta^{15}N_{NO3}$ and $\delta^{18}O_{NO3}$ of dissolved NO_3^- in the collected samples, as well as the

28 isotope composition of the main nitrate sources: fertilizers, soil nitrate and animal manure or

29 sewage (Vitòria et al., 2004; Kendall et al., 2007; Xue et al., 2009).

30 **Figure 8**. Estimation of the extent of NO_3^- attenuation in all the sampling campaigns, using ε

31 values obtained from the batch experiments with two-year-old PRL material. The isotope

32 composition of the native groundwater was used as the initial value.

33 **Figure 9**. $\delta^{18}O_{SO4}$ vs $\delta^{34}S_{SO4}$ for river, native groundwater and mixed groundwater samples

34 collected in June 2013 and September 2013. The isotope composition of potential SO_4^{2-}

35 sources is also shown. Values for SO_4^{2-} derived from sulfide oxidation are from Pierre et al.

36 (1994) for disseminated pyrite in anoxic Tertiary marls that outcrop in the Llobregat River

37 basin. Values for pig manure are taken from Otero et al. (2008) and Cravotta (1997). Soil

38 SO_4^{2-} data are from Krouse and Mayer (2000) and fertilizer data from Vitòria et al. (2004).

39 Gypsum values correspond to local gypsum outcrops (Utrilla et al., 1992). Sewage data are

40 from the Igualada sewage plant (Otero et al., 2008).

41 **Figure 10**. $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ vs HCO_3^- concentration for native and mixed groundwater samples

42 collected in June 2013, September 2013 and July 2014. The dotted lines represent the

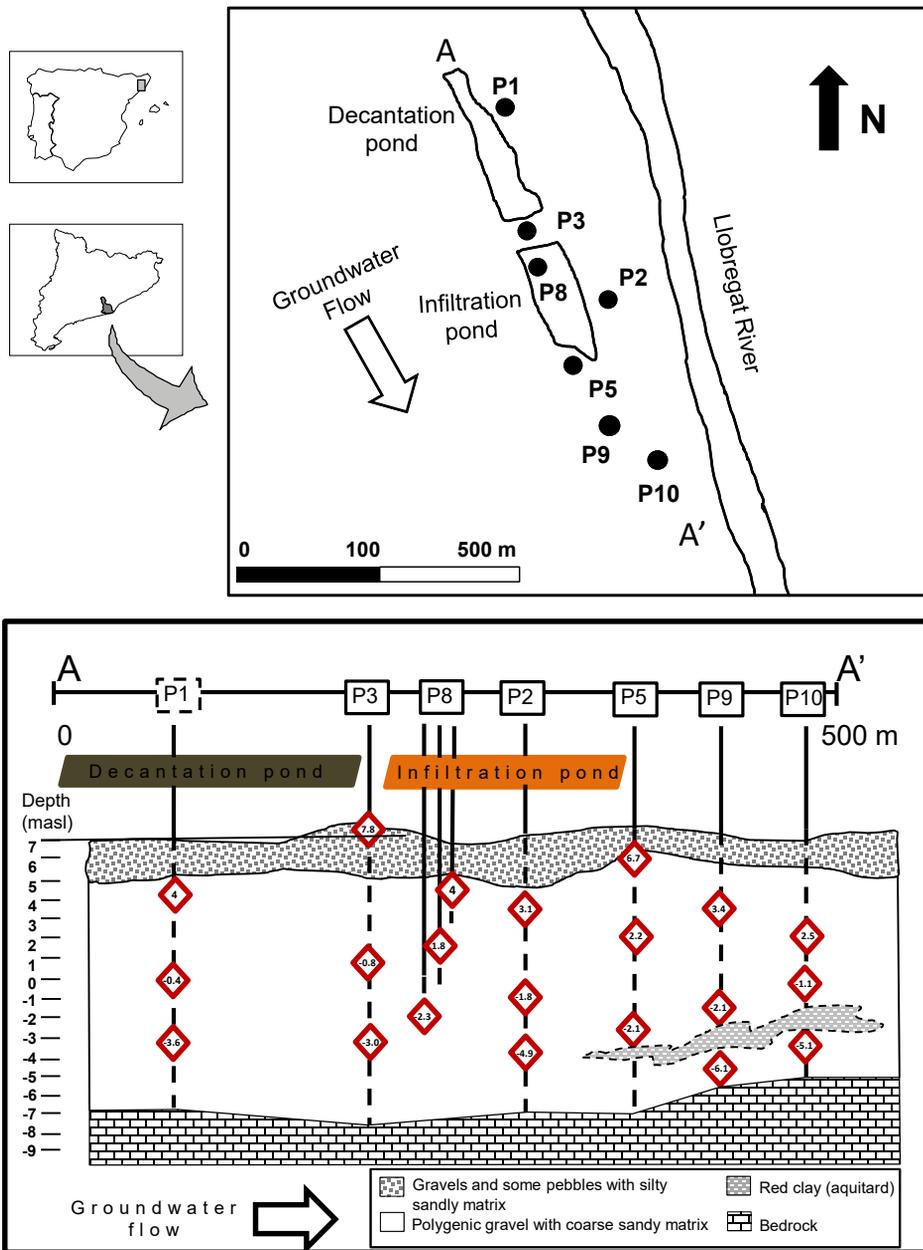43 range of the $\delta^{13}C_{HCO3}$ values for the native groundwater samples.

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Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
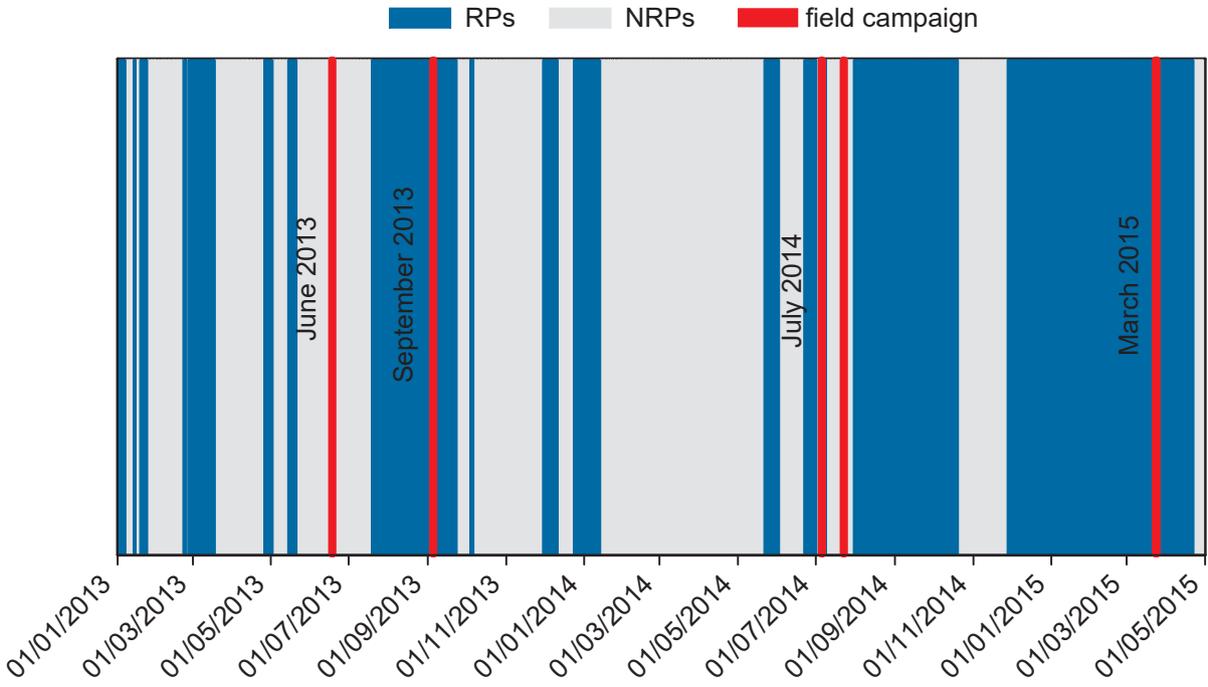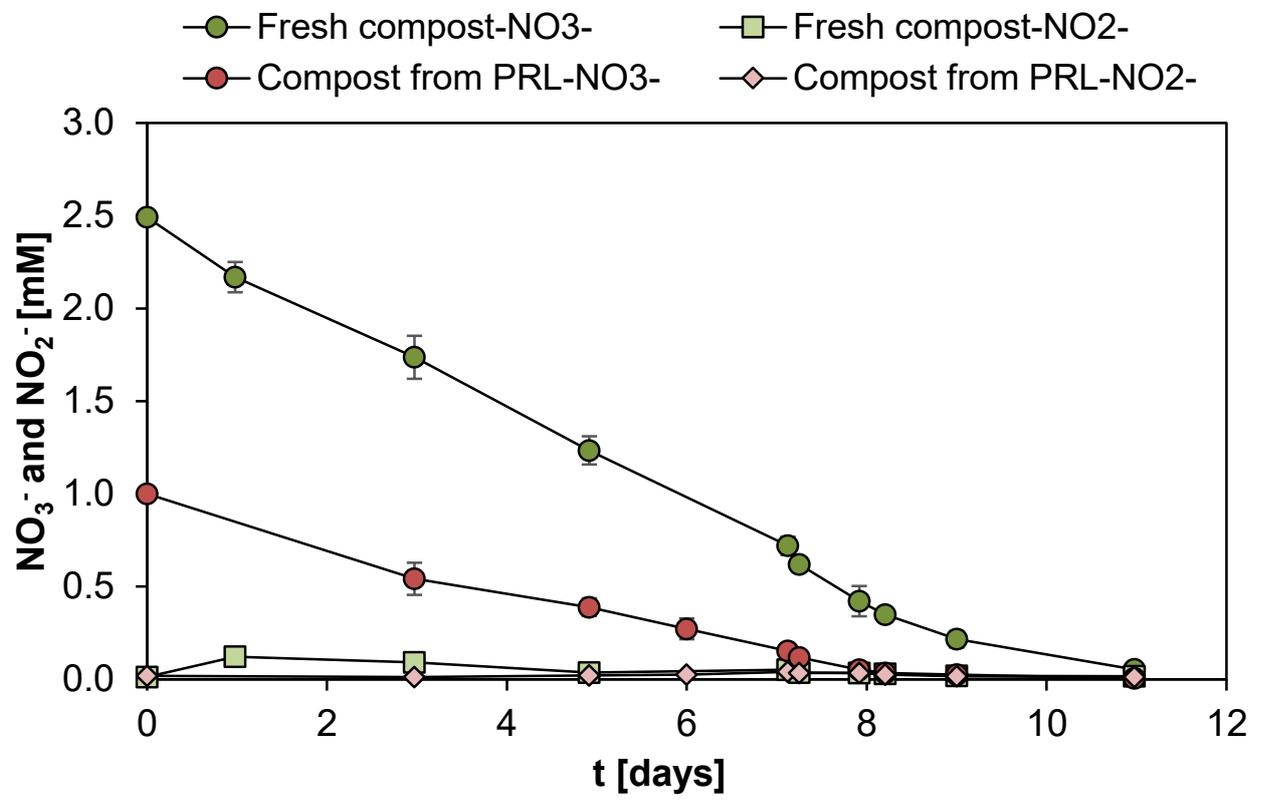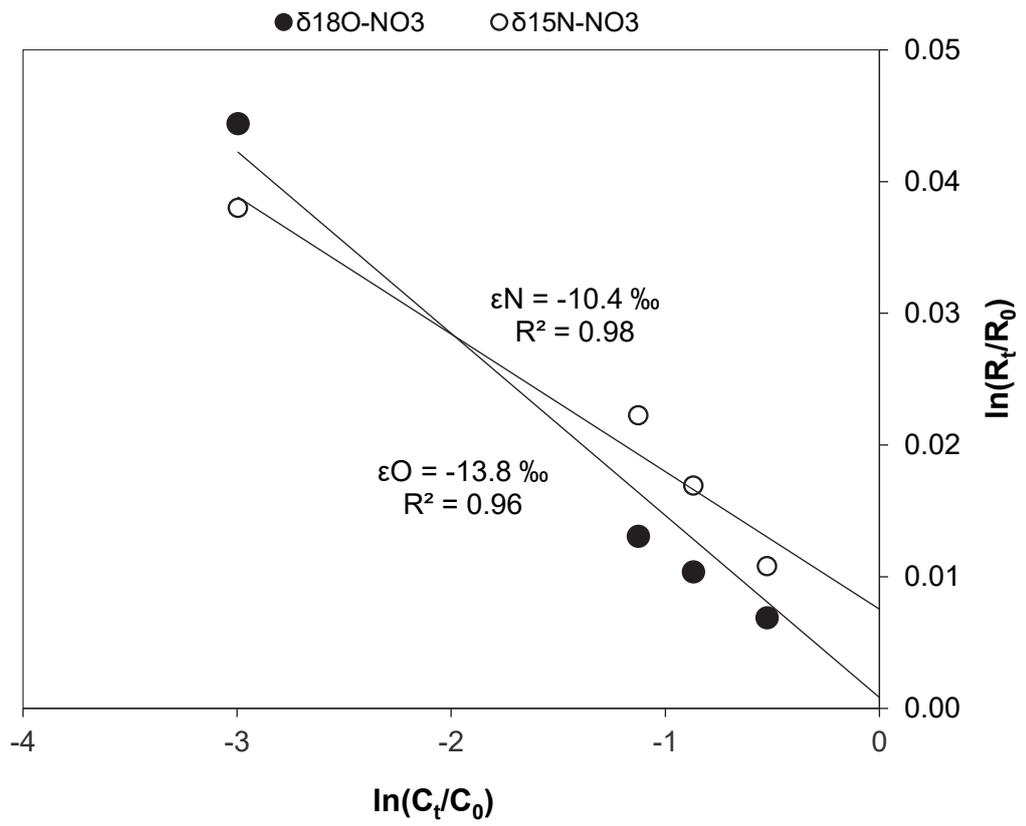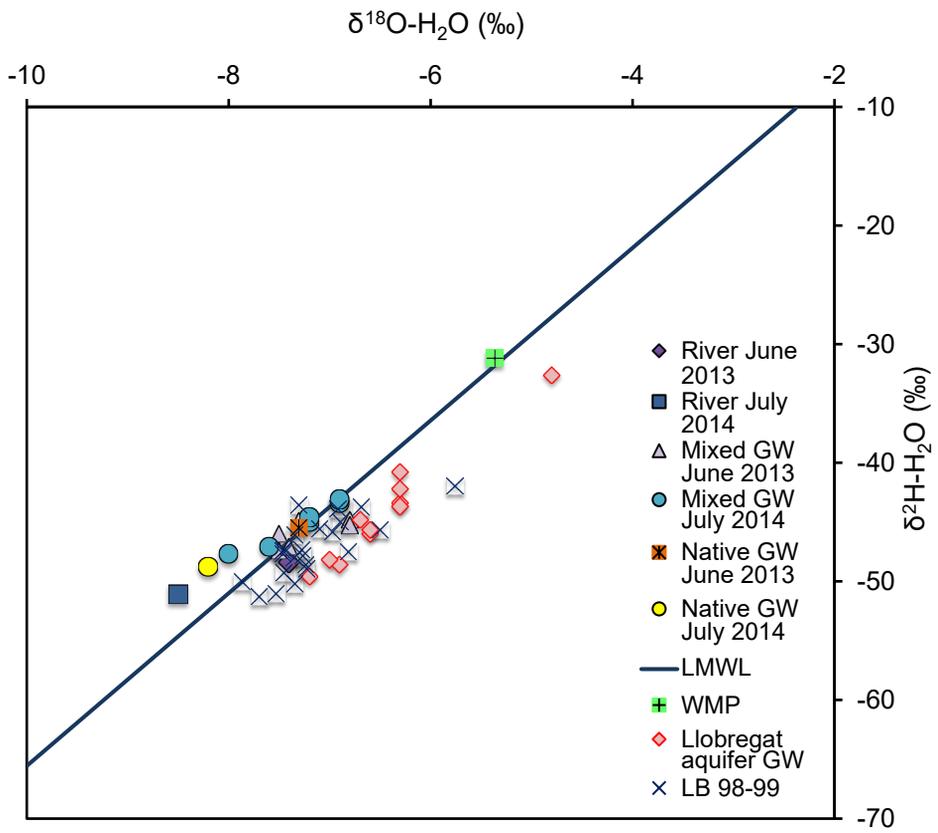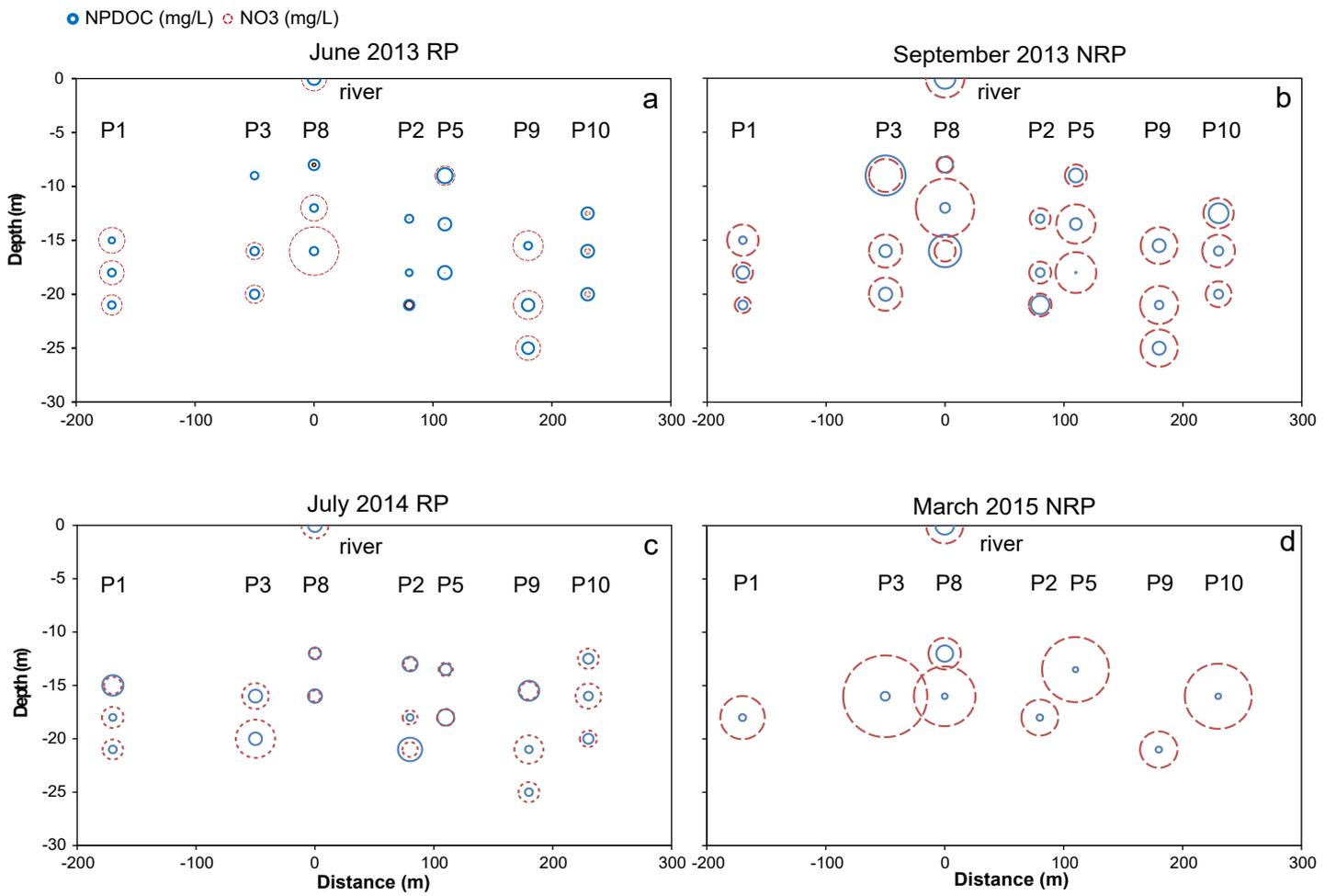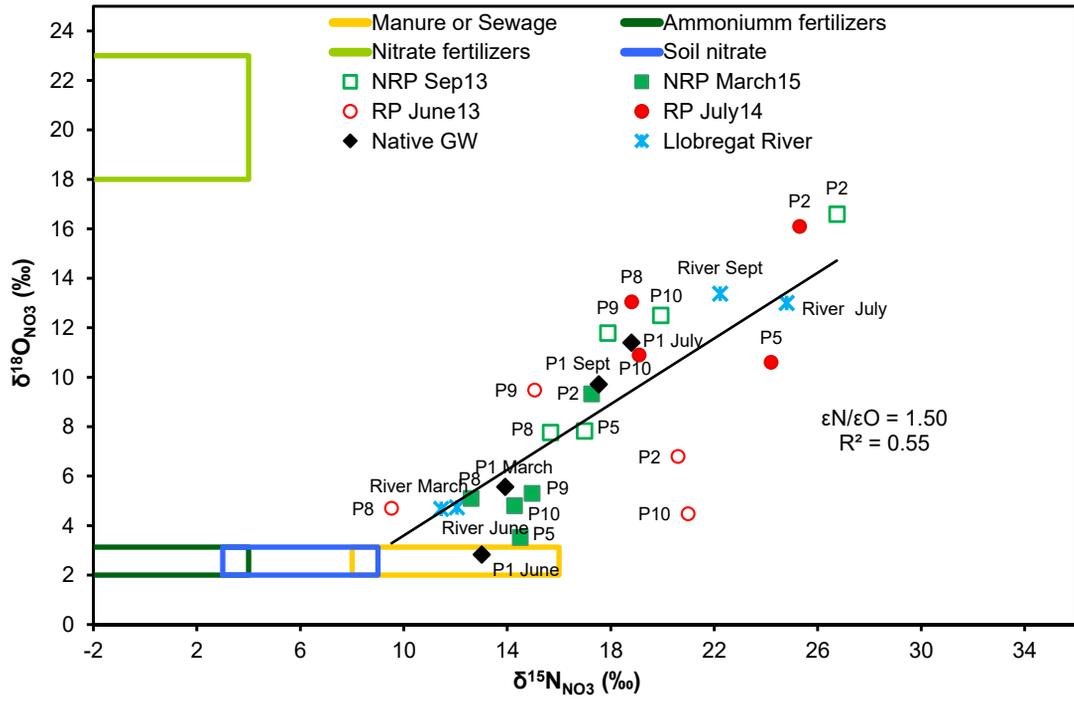
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