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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1666879> since 2020-01-20T10:26:39Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1016/j.scitotenv.2017.12.155

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1 **Assessment of climate change effects on mountain ecosystems through a cross-site analysis in**
2 **the Alps and Apennines.**

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50 **Abstract**

51 Mountain ecosystems are sensitive and reliable indicators of climate change. Long-term studies
52 may be extremely useful in assessing the responses of high-elevation ecosystems to climate change
53 and other anthropogenic drivers from a broad ecological perspective. Mountain research sites within
54 the LTER (Long-Term Ecosystem Research) network are representative of various types of
55 ecosystems and span a wide bioclimatic and elevational range.

56 Here, we present a synthesis and a review of the main results from long-term ecological studies in
57 mountain ecosystems at 20 LTER sites in Italy, Switzerland and Austria covering in most cases
58 more than two decades of observations. We analyzed a set of key climate parameters, such as
59 temperature and snow cover duration, in relation to vascular species composition, plant traits,
60 abundance patterns, pedoclimate, nutrient dynamics in soils and water, phenology and composition
61 of freshwater biota.

62 The overall results highlight the rapid response of mountain ecosystems to climate change, with
63 site-specific characteristics and rates. As temperatures increased, vegetation cover in alpine and
64 subalpine summits increased as well. Years with limited snow cover duration caused an increase in
65 soil temperature and microbial biomass during the growing season. Effects on freshwater
66 ecosystems were also observed, in terms of increases in solutes, decreases in nitrates and changes in
67 plankton phenology and benthos communities. This work highlights the importance of comparing
68 and integrating long-term ecological data collected in different ecosystems, both terrestrial and
69 freshwater, for a more comprehensive overview of the ecological effects of climate change.
70 Nevertheless, there is a need for (i) adopting co-located monitoring site networks to improve our
71 ability to obtain sound results from cross-site analysis, (ii) carrying out further studies, in particular
72 short-term analyses with fine spatial and temporal resolutions to improve our understanding of
73 responses to extreme events, and (ii) increasing comparability and standardizing protocols across
74 networks to clarify local patterns from global patterns.

75 **Key-words:** long-term research, climate change, vascular plants, freshwater, soil, snow cover,
76 alpine lifezone, Alps, Apennines.

77

78 1. INTRODUCTION

79 Mountains represent unique areas to detect climate change and assess climate-related impacts. One
80 reason they are unique is that, as the climate rapidly changes with altitude over relatively short
81 horizontal distances, so do vegetation and hydrology (Whiteman, 2000). Therefore, because of the
82 complex topography in alpine environments, mountains exhibit high biodiversity (Winkler et al.,
83 2016).

84 According to climate change projections, global warming will not be uniform but will vary
85 considerably between different regions; in particular, climate change will be greater over land and
86 at high latitudes and elevations (Auer et al., 2007; Gobiet et al., 2014). The high sensitivity of
87 mountain areas with respect to climate change was clearly highlighted by the IPCC in its latest
88 report (IPCC, 2014). Mountain ecosystems are indeed increasingly threatened by climate change,
89 causing biodiversity loss, habitat degradation, deterioration of freshwater quality and landscape
90 modifications (e.g., Körner, 2003), which poses a serious threat to the ecological integrity of
91 terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems and the services they provide (Stoll et al., 2015; Huss et al.,
92 2017). The response of mountain ecosystems may differ according to the rate of climate change, the
93 ecological domain and the biogeographical region (Beniston, 2003; Müller et al., 2010).

94 High mountains in Europe contain 20% of the native flora of the continent (Väre et al., 2003) and
95 are centers of plant diversity, hosting highly specialized vascular plants (Myers et al., 2000;
96 Barthlott et al., 2005) and many endemic species (Langer & Sauerbier, 1997; Dirnböck et al., 2011;
97 Stanisci et al., 2011). Climate change is considered one of the main threats to plant diversity above
98 the tree-line. Recent model projections using climate change scenarios predicted a dramatic
99 reduction of suitable habitats for high-elevation herbaceous plants (Engler et al., 2011) even if
100 thermal microhabitat mosaics offer alpine species both refuge habitats and serve as stepping stones

101 as atmospheric temperatures rise (Scherrer, Körner 2011). The slow growth rates of long-lived
102 alpine plants may lead to a delayed decrease in the ranges of species, creating an extinction debt
103 (Dullinger et al., 2012). Mountain forests are also particularly vulnerable to climate change due to
104 their long rotation cycles that may hinder their adaptation capacity (Lindner et al., 2010). However,
105 forests can also benefit from global change, as increasing concentrations of CO₂ and nitrogen
106 deposition should increase photosynthesis rates and forest growth (e.g., Matyssek et al., 2006).

107 Freshwater ecosystems in mountain areas are of paramount importance as high-quality water
108 resources and biodiversity hotspots because they host specialized aquatic biotas (Körner, 2004).
109 Mountain lakes are particularly sensitive to the effects of global change, such as the deposition of
110 atmospheric pollutants and increasing temperatures (Battarbee et al., 2009; Catalan et al., 2009).
111 Mountain lakes are usually small (< 0.5 km²), relatively shallow and generally ice-covered for
112 prolonged periods (from 3-4 to 8-9 months per year). Organisms living in these lakes face harsh
113 environmental conditions, low nutrient availability, and extreme changes in light conditions during
114 the year (Sommaruga, 2001). Riverine habitats in glacier catchments are also among the most
115 vulnerable habitats with respect to climate change. River community structure (species
116 composition, abundance, and ecological traits) is related to geomorphological features, which are in
117 turn affected by glacier dynamics (Füreder, 2007; Finn et al., 2010) that are strongly affected by
118 climate change.

119 Increased air temperatures due to climate change resulted in shorter snow cover seasons due to later
120 accumulation and earlier meltdown (Klein et al., 2016). A general decrease in the spatial extent of
121 spring snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere has been reported (IPCC, 2014) as well as an
122 upward shift of the rain–snow line (Lundquist et al., 2008). In the Alps, mean snow depth, snow
123 cover duration and number of snowfall days have decreased since the early 1980s, although with
124 large regional and altitudinal variations (Laternser and Schneebeli, 2003). Changes in snow cover
125 may in turn affect mountain ecosystem hydrology (Gobiet et al., 2014), biogeochemical processes
126 in soil and water (Magnani et al., 2017), plant composition, phenology and structure (Grabherr et al.

127 1995). The insulating properties of snow influence the underlying soil temperature regime and the
128 extent to which soil is directly exposed to cold air temperatures in the winter (Edwards et al., 2007).
129 Indeed, mountain soils typically experience freezing conditions only during the early winter. After
130 the deposition of snow cover that insulates the underlying soils from low air temperatures, soils
131 remain unfrozen during most of the winter season (Jones, 1999).

132 A valuable volume of long-term ecological data that can be used for defining and testing the
133 consequences of climate change on mountain ecosystems is available from the LTER Network
134 (Long Term Ecosystem Research; <http://www.lter-europe.net/>). The LTER is an international
135 monitoring network that gathers multiyear high-quality ecological data that are periodically
136 collected to assess the impacts of global change on ecological processes. The operation of several
137 LTER sites distributed along the Apennines and the Alps offers an excellent resource to develop
138 and test the effects of climate change on different types of mountain ecosystems. Indeed, long-term
139 ecosystem research has been successfully carried out addressing the impact of climate change in the
140 different high elevation ecosystems, and very interesting results have been found (Müller et al.,
141 2010). However, these results have often been determined only at a site-specific or regional level.
142 Based on the urgent demands for long-term research with comparative ecological analysis (Müller
143 et al. 2010), a comprehensive overview accounting for the effects of climate change in different
144 mountain ecosystems needs further attention and research efforts.

145 In this context, this paper presents a new analysis of existing ecological data for many LTER sites,
146 both terrestrial and freshwaters, and aims to summarize the complex information obtained from the
147 long-term observations of different mountain ecosystems in response to climate change. We aimed
148 to assess and possibly synthesize the response of the main ecological processes in different
149 mountain ecosystems to climate change. In particular, the ecological changes we tested with our
150 analyses were: (i) the change in vegetation cover and C-uptake; (ii) the alteration of biogeochemical
151 cycles in soils and water; and (iii) the change in phenology and biological diversity.

152 We focused on the following compartments and ecological parameters:

- 153 • soil: the interannual variability in soil temperature and nutrient cycling was investigated at one
154 LTER site in the Alps in relation to snow cover duration and pedoclimatic conditions;
- 155 • vegetation: we assessed changes in vegetation cover over time considering both regional scale
156 and elevation belts, using newly collected data from LTER high-elevation sites;
- 157 • freshwater: we assessed interannual variability and long-term changes in selected chemical and
158 biological variables in response to climate drivers at some LTER lake and river sites representative
159 of different mountain areas.

160 In addition, we discuss previous and on-going studies in LTER mountain sites dealing with the
161 effects of climate drivers on additional ecological parameters, including grassland ecosystem
162 productivity, forest carbon storage and animal population dynamics.

163

164 **2. RESEARCH SITES AND DATA ANALYSIS**

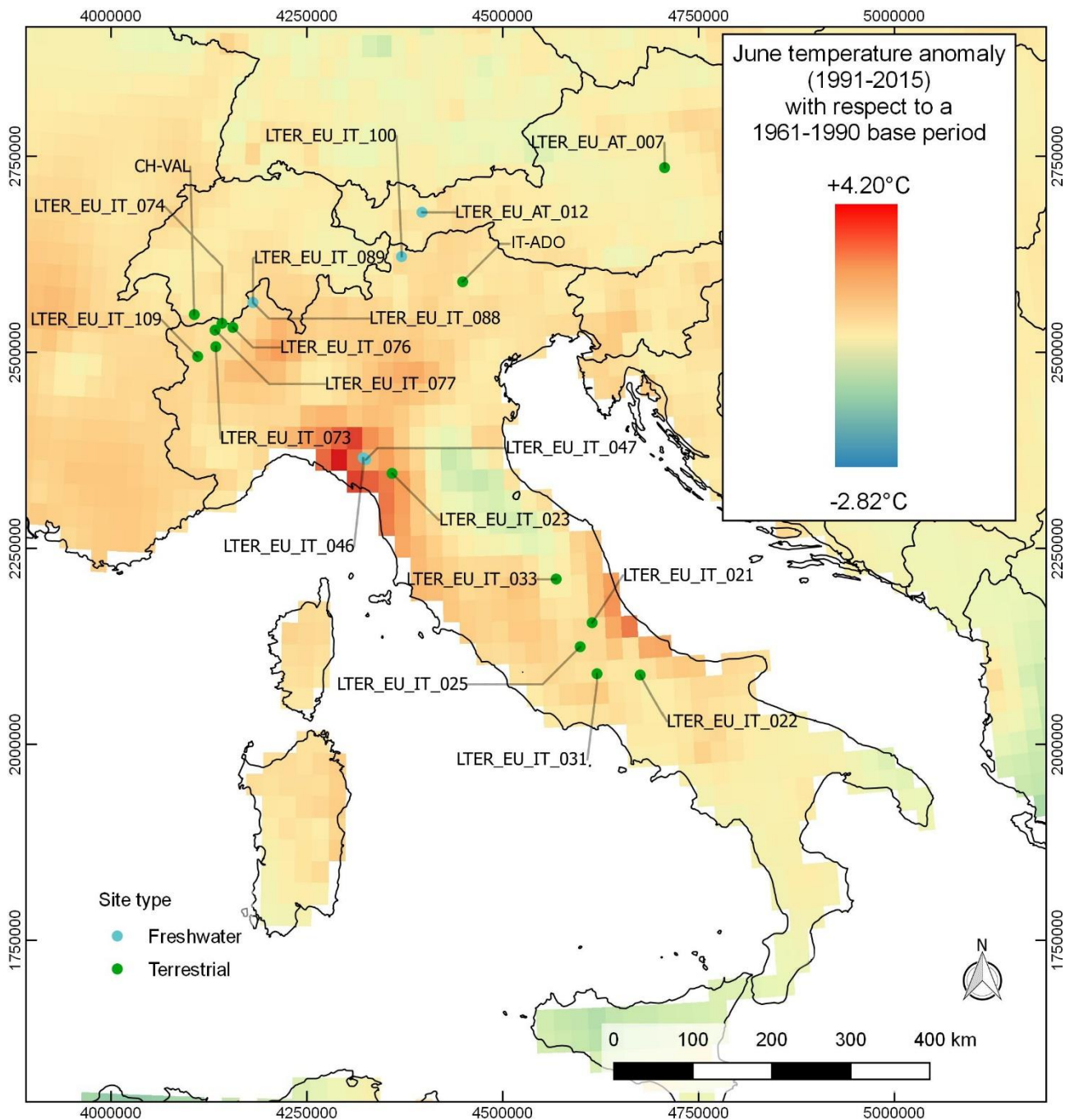
165 **2.1 Study area and climate driver description**

166 We considered 20 research sites, representative of the Alps, from west to east (Italy, Switzerland
167 and Austria) and of the Apennines (Italy) (Tab. 1, Fig. 1).

168 The sites are located between 1300 and 3212 m a.s.l. The sites are not directly affected by
169 anthropogenic disturbance, or are natural sites under sustainable management or under mild
170 pressure (e.g., land abandonment, reduced grazing, sustainable forest management). Fourteen sites
171 are terrestrial sites (forests, grasslands, alpine tundra and nival areas), and six are freshwater sites
172 (lakes and rivers). Details on site characteristics, the purpose and history of the research site and on-
173 going studies can be found at the specific links in the DEIMS-DSR portal (Dynamic Ecological
174 Information Management System - Site and dataset registry; <https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/>)
175 provided in Tab. 1. Long-term ecological data collected at the selected sites were used in this paper
176 for assessing decadal changes in soil properties, vegetation cover and chemical and biological
177 features of freshwater ecosystems.

178 Tab. 1 - LTER mountain sites considered. June anomaly refers to the air temperature anomaly (1995-2015) with respect to a 1961-1990 base period (see
 179 Fig. 1).
 180

Site code	Site name	Elevation - average m a.s.l.	June anomaly	Site type	Parent site	Established	Site description in DEIMS
LTER_EU_IT_021	Central Apennines: Gran Sasso d'Italia	2210	1.46	Terrestrial	IT01- Apennines - High elevation Ecosystems	1986	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_021
LTER_EU_IT_025	Central Apennines: Velino Duchessa (VEL)	2145	1.36	Terrestrial	IT01- Apennines - High elevation Ecosystems	1993	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_025
LTER_EU_IT_022	Central and southern Apennines: Majella-Matese (MAJ -MAT)	2400	1.22	Terrestrial	IT01- Apennines - High elevation Ecosystems	2001	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_022
LTER_EU_IT_023	Northern Apennines (NAP)	1900	3.02	Terrestrial	IT01- Apennines - High elevation Ecosystems	2001	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_023
CH-VAL	W-Alpes: Alps of Valais-Entremont (Switzerland) (VAL)	2777	1.11	Terrestrial	Project GLORIA site, not yet in LTER network	2001	
IT-ADO	S-Alps, Dolomites (Italy) (ADO)	2705	1.45	Terrestrial	Project GLORIA site, not yet in LTER network	2001	
LTER_EU_IT_073	W-Alpes: Mont Avic (MAV)	2340	1.41	Terrestrial	IT19 - High elevation sites in the NW Alps	2001	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_073
LTER_EU_AT_007	E-Alps: Hochschwab (HSW)	2100	0.85	Terrestrial	LTES Platform Eisenwurzen (EW)	1998	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_at_007
LTER_EU_IT_074	W-Alps: Cime Bianche	3100	1.30	Terrestrial	IT19 - High elevation sites in the NW Alps	2006	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_074
LTER_EU_IT_077	W-Alpes: Torgnon grassland Tellinod	2100	1.30	Terrestrial	IT19 - High elevation sites in the NW Alps	2008	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_077
LTER_EU_IT_076	W-Alpes: Istituto Scientifico Angelo Mosso	2700	1.28	Terrestrial	IT19 - High elevation sites in the NW Alps	1928	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_076
LTER_EU_IT_031	Central Apennines: Collelongo-Selva Piana ABR1	1500	1.36	Terrestrial	IT03-Forest of the Apennines	1991	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_031
LTER_EU_IT_033	Central Apennines: Montagna di Torricchio	1260	0.99	Terrestrial	IT03-Forest of the Apennines	1971	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_033
LTER_EU_IT_109	W- Alps: Gran Paradiso National Park	2500	1.34	Terrestrial	IT23 - Gran Paradiso National Park - Italy	1922	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_109
LTER_EU_IT_089	W-Alps: Lake Paione Superiore	2269	1.41	Freshwater	IT09-Mountain Lakes	1978	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_089
LTER_EU_IT_088	W-Alps:Lake Paione Inferiore	2002	1.41	Freshwater	IT09-Mountain Lakes	1978	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_088
LTER_EU_IT_047	Northern Apennines:Lake Scuro Parmense	1527	2.21	Freshwater	IT09-Mountain Lakes	1986	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_047
LTER_EU_IT_046	Northern ApenninesLake Santo Parmense	1507	2.21	Freshwater	IT09-Mountain Lakes	1952	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_046
LTER_EU_AT_012	E-Alps: Gossenköllesee	2417	1.24	Freshwater	LTSER Platform Tyrolean Alps (TA)	1975	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_at_012
LTER_EU_IT_100	E-Alps: Saldur River	2000	1.46	Freshwater	IT25 - Val Mazia/Matschertal	2008	https://data.lter-europe.net/deims/site/lter_eu_it_100



181

182 Fig. 1. Location of the LTER sites. The map shows the June temperature anomaly (1995-2015) with respect
 183 to a 1961-1990 base period (map prepared from data provided by E-OBS, Haylock et al. 2008, resolution
 184 0.25°; Coordinates are in ETRS-LAEA/ETRS89 – EPSG: 3035).

185

186 In the Northern Hemisphere, the IPCC (2014) indicated that the period between 1983 and 2012 was
 187 the warmest of the millennium. Moreover, the IPCC reported recent changes in precipitation
 188 patterns due to an increase in the atmospheric moisture content.

189 Extensive studies on alpine climate showed that air temperature increases were quite homogeneous
 190 over the Alps (EEA, 2009). The long-term climatic data available for the alpine tundra (LTER site

191 LTER_EU_IT_076 “Istituto Mosso”, time span 1928-2013, station “Gabiét”) showed an increase in
192 maximum air temperature equal to $0.015^{\circ}\text{C y}^{-1}$ (Fratianni et al., 2015). In the Ossola Valley,
193 Western Alps, where some LTER lake sites are located (LTER_EU_IT_088, LTER_EU_IT_089),
194 long-term air temperature data (since the 1930s) showed an average increase rate of $0.011^{\circ}\text{C y}^{-1}$
195 ($0.015^{\circ}\text{C y}^{-1}$ in the summer) (Rogora et al., 2004). In the central Apennines, an average temperature
196 increase rate of $0.027^{\circ}\text{C y}^{-1}$ occurred during the period 1950-2014 (Evangelista et al., 2016).

197 The research sites considered in this paper all experienced an increase in air temperature over the
198 past two decades, as shown by the June temperature anomaly (1991-2015) with respect to a 1961-
199 1990 base period (Fig. 1). The increments range from 0.85°C at Hochschwab (LTER_AT_007) to
200 3.02°C in the Apennines (LTER_IT_023). We considered June temperatures because June
201 represents a key month for mountain ecosystem phenology. For instance, June coincides with the
202 first part of the growing period, which is the most relevant for plant growth (Gottfried et al., 2012).
203 Moreover, at high elevations in the Alps and Apennines, June temperatures strongly influence snow
204 melting rates, with significant effects on the beginning of the growing season (e.g., Sedlacek et al.,
205 2015). June temperatures may also be critical for high-elevation lakes and rivers, because they also
206 affect the timing of ice-break (Preston et al., 2016) and can drive the onset of lake water
207 stratification and stream water discharge. Finally, June represents a crucial month for many
208 mountain vertebrates, including ungulates, because it corresponds to the birthing season and, at
209 lower elevation (1300 – 1800 m a.s.l.), this month is also crucial for forest carbon sequestration.

210 Precipitation trends are more spatially variable compared to trends in air temperature (IPCC, 2014).
211 Climate warming is predicted to cause changes in the seasonality of precipitation, with an expected
212 increase in intra-annual variability, more intense precipitation extremes, and more potential for
213 flooding (Gobiet et al., 2014). Projected changes in precipitation, snow cover patterns and glacier
214 storage in the Alps will also alter runoff regimes, leading to more droughts in the summer (EEA,
215 2009).

216 Snow cover duration (SCD) is also an important driver of change in mountain ecosystems. A
217 reduction in the snow cover amount and extent has been described for areas in the Alps below 2000
218 m a.s.l. Specifically, the delayed onset of snow and the anticipated snowmelt contribute to an
219 overall decrease in SCD (Klein et al., 2016). A decrease in snow cover depth and SCD has been
220 specifically recorded in some of the analyzed LTER lake sites (Western Alps) over the last 30 years
221 (Rogora et al., 2013).

222

223 2.2 Data collection and analysis

224 The data analyses were partly performed on already existing datasets, developed in the framework
225 of previous and on-going research projects (e.g., GLORIA: GLobal Observation Research Initiative
226 in Alpine environments; <http://www.gloria.ac.at>), and partly on datasets specifically developed for
227 this paper (e.g., lake chemistry). Information about the datasets for each site, their availability and
228 the methods used for generating the data are provided in DEIMS-DSR (Tab. 1). Some of the sites
229 included in our analysis are also part of the NEXTDATA special project “Data-LTER-Mountain”
230 (<http://www.nextdatapoint.it/>). Within this project, a distributed system of archives and access
231 services to data and metadata of the Italian LTER sites located in mountain regions has been
232 developed.

233

234 2.2.1 Snow cover duration and soil properties

235 To analyze the regional pattern of SCD and of the snow melting date we used soil temperatures
236 collected at different LTER research sites (LTER_EU_IT_031, LTER_EU_IT_022,
237 LTER_EU_IT_077 and LTER_EU_IT_076). We used thermistors combined with data loggers
238 placed at a soil depth of 10 cm for the measurement of the hourly soil temperature (instrument
239 sensitivity of $\pm 0.1^\circ\text{C}$). The SCD at each study site was calculated based on the daily soil
240 temperature amplitude (Schmid et al. 2012). When the daily soil temperature amplitude remained
241 within a range of 1 K, the day was defined as a “snow cover day” (Danby and Hik, 2007). The SCD

242 was calculated as the sum of the snow-covered days. When the daily mean soil temperature dropped
243 below and rose above 0°C, it was considered as a freeze/thaw cycle (FTC) (Phillips and Newlands,
244 2011) that approximately corresponded to the melting period. Then, the snow melting date (DSO1:
245 day since October 1st) was assessed.

246 To assess the impact of SCD changes on soil properties, i.e., temperature and moisture during the
247 growing season, microbial carbon, microbial nitrogen, ammonium, nitrate, dissolved organic carbon
248 and dissolved organic nitrogen, we used both meteorological and physico-chemical soil data
249 recorded in 2008-2016 at the LTER site LTER_EU_IT_076, located close to Monte Rosa Massif.
250 The study was conducted at three high-elevation subsites located in the upper part of a glacial
251 valley, at an elevation ranging between 2500 and 2800 m a.s.l. (Table S1). Each subsite consisted of
252 three plots. Soil temperatures collected by data loggers and thermistors were used for calculating
253 the beginning of the growing season that was defined as the time when weekly topsoil temperature
254 reached 3°C (Paulsen and Körner, 2014). For soil characteristics, a soil sampling campaign was
255 performed in mid-September, approximately at the end of the growing season. Every year (2008-
256 2016), three soil samples (A horizon, 0–10 cm depth) were collected at each subsite, which in turn
257 consisted of three subsamples in each plot. Samples were homogenized by sieving at 2 mm within
258 24 h of collection. At each sampling time, subsamples were dried at 100°C overnight to obtain the
259 gravimetric water content. An aliquot of 20- g of fresh soil was extracted with 100 mL K₂SO₄ 0.5 M
260 as described by Brooks et al. (1996), whereas a 10-g aliquot was subjected to chloroform
261 fumigation for 18 h before extraction with 50 mL of K₂SO₄ 0.5 M. Dissolved organic carbon was
262 determined with 0.45 µm membrane-filtered K₂SO₄ extracts (extractable DOC) with a total organic
263 carbon (TOC) analyzer (Elementar, Vario TOC, Hanau, Germany). Microbial carbon (C_{micr}) was
264 calculated from the difference in DOC between fumigated and non-fumigated samples and was
265 corrected by a recovery factor of 0.45 (Brookes et al., 1985). The ammonium in the K₂SO₄ extracts
266 (extractable N-NH₄⁺) was diffused into a H₂SO₄ 0.01M trap after treatment with MgO (Bremner,
267 1965), and the trapped NH₄⁺ was determined colorimetrically (Crooke and Simpson, 1971). The

268 nitrate (extractable N-NO_3^-) concentration in the same extracts was determined colorimetrically as
269 NH_4^+ after reduction with Devarda's alloy (Williams et al., 1995). Total dissolved nitrogen (TDN)
270 in the extracts was determined as reported for DOC. Dissolved organic nitrogen (extractable DON)
271 was determined as the difference between TDN and inorganic nitrogen ($\text{N-NH}_4^+ + \text{N-NO}_3^-$) in the
272 extracts. Microbial nitrogen (N_{micr}) was calculated from the difference in TDN between the
273 fumigated and non-fumigated samples and was corrected by a recovery factor of 0.54 (Brookes et
274 al., 1985).

275

276 **2.2.2 Vegetation cover**

277 We used vegetation data that were collected in 2001 and 2015 in permanent plots at eight high
278 mountain study areas of the LTER and GLORIA networks and distributed in the Italian Apennines
279 and Alps and in the Austrian and Swiss Alps (Tab. S2). According to the GLORIA sampling design
280 (Pauli et al., 2015), each site comprises 2-4 summits along an elevation gradient. For each summit,
281 a $3 \times 3 \text{ m}^2$ grid was established for each cardinal direction at 5 m below the summit peak. In the four
282 1-m^2 corner plots (4 quadrats) of the grids, the percentage cover for each plant species was
283 estimated. At one site (Velino: VEL), the plant species cover was collected on permanent plots
284 placed along an elevational gradient that was divided into six 100 m elevation bands (from 1800 to
285 ~ 2400 m a.s.l.; Theurillat et al., 2007). For each band, four to six 2 m x 2 m vegetation plots were
286 sampled.

287 We analyzed vegetation cover change over time ($\text{T1} - \text{T2}$) for mountain sites (i.e., considering all
288 the plots grouped by site) and vegetation belts (i.e., grouping plots by vegetation belt). The
289 vegetation belts present in the analyzed sites were defined according to Pignatti (1979) and
290 Theurillat et al. (1998).

291 We analyzed changes in vegetation cover by first calculating the total vegetation cover per plot as
292 the sum of the cover estimates of the individual plant species as a proxy, non-destructive measure,
293 of aboveground biomass (Fry et al., 2013). Then, we quantified vegetation change for each site and

294 vegetation belt, by calculating the effect size obtained by computing the weighted average of the
295 standardized difference (based on pooled variance measures) between the mean cover values on the
296 two sampled dates (T1 and T2; unbiased estimator Hedge's g ; Hedges, 1981). This standardized
297 difference, which estimates the effect size as the difference between T2 and T1, provides an
298 estimate of the magnitude of an effect, i.e., the cover change between the sampled dates, when data
299 collection varies among studies (e.g. Elmendorf et al., 2012). The effect size is positive when the
300 vegetation cover increases over time and is negative when the cover decreases. We randomly chose
301 one of the four plots in each cardinal direction for the GLORIA sites and one from each band for
302 the Velino site. For each randomly extracted plot, we calculated the difference between cover
303 values on the two dates (T2-T1), and based on these differences, we computed the median and the
304 95% confidence intervals of Hedge's g by using the BootES package (Kirby and Gerlanc, 2013) in
305 the R statistical software (R Development Core Team, 2011). In addition to the weighted median
306 effect size, we also reported the median percent change in all the studies.

307

308 **2.2.3 *Freshwater chemistry and biology***

309 The high elevation LTER lakes considered in this paper (Tab. S3) are located both in the Alps (Italy
310 and Austria) and in the Apennines (Central Italy). They have different origin, morphometry and
311 surrounding land cover characteristics. However, they share some common features, such as an
312 oligotrophic status, diluted waters with low solute content and relatively simple food webs
313 compared to lowland lakes (Rogora et al., 2013; Sommaruga 2001). To test for common trends
314 during 1980-2016, the following variables were considered: conductivity, alkalinity, sulphate and
315 nitrate ions. Because data have been collected with different sampling methods (e.g., vertical
316 profiles at the deepest points, sampling of lake outlets or at the lake shores) and frequency, we
317 selected surface data representative of the late summer or early autumn period, when lakes are more
318 stable and uniform from a chemical point of view. Chemical analyses were performed according to

319 standard methods for freshwater (APHA AWWA WEF, 2012). We assessed trend significance and
320 slope by the Mann-Kendall test (Hirsch et al., 1982) and Sen's method (Sen, 1968), respectively.

321 In addition to chemical trends, long-term biological data available for two lakes in the Apennines
322 were analyzed (SCU and SAN; Tab. S3). The two lakes are characterized by different size, trophic
323 structure, and level of anthropogenic disturbance. Extensive information on the lakes' chemico-
324 physical and biological characteristics can be found in Bondavalli et al. (2006) and Bertani et al.
325 (2016). Monthly values of water temperature throughout the water column, chlorophyll-a
326 concentrations and zooplankton species abundance during the open-water season (May-October) are
327 available for these two lakes for the following periods: SAN, 1971-1975 and 2012 and SCU, 1986-
328 2012. Monthly average air temperatures during 1971-2012 were derived from a weather station near
329 the two lakes (Passo della Cisa: 44°26' N, 9°25' E) (data downloaded from the National Oceanic
330 and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) website; www.climate.gov). From the same website, we
331 also downloaded monthly values of the East Atlantic pattern (EA) climatic index, a teleconnection
332 that influences climate in the Mediterranean region throughout the year (Kutiel and Benaroch,
333 2002). For both air temperature and EA we calculated seasonal averages for the winter (December
334 through February), spring (March through May), summer (June through August) and autumn
335 (September through November). We hypothesized that positive values of the EA climatic index
336 would be associated with higher air and water temperatures and earlier seasonal plankton
337 development.

338 For the two lakes, we analyzed interannual changes in the phenology of chlorophyll-a (a proxy for
339 phytoplankton abundance) and zooplankton taxa by calculating different phenology metrics.
340 Specifically, we estimated the timing of the seasonal phytoplankton peak each year by calculating
341 the "center of gravity" for monthly chlorophyll-a values across the open-water season (Edwards and
342 Richardson, 2004; Thackeray et al., 2012). For each of the dominant zooplankton taxa, we
343 characterized population phenology each year by calculating the date of its first appearance and the
344 date of its peak population abundance (Adrian et al., 2006).

345 We tested for relationships between large-scale climatic patterns (EA) and interannual variability in
346 both local climate features (air and water temperature) and plankton phenology by calculating
347 correlations (Spearman's correlation coefficient) between the average seasonal EA values and 1)
348 corresponding average seasonal air and water temperature values and 2) phyto- and zooplankton
349 phenology metrics.

350 Benthic community structure was evaluated at the LTER river site LTER_EU_IT_097
351 Matsch/Mazia Valley (Tab. S3) in the upper Vinschgau/Venosta Valley (South Tyrol, Italy). The
352 Saldura Stream, draining the Matsch/Mazia Valley, one of the driest valleys of the Alps, represents
353 an ideal site to focus on climate change impacts. The Matsch/Mazia Valley is characterized by the
354 presence of a glacier that is rapidly melting. The glacier extends from 2,800 m to 3,500 m a.s.l. To
355 evaluate the influence of the glacier and the spatial patterns of the macrobenthic assemblage, three
356 sampling stations were selected along the main stream at increasing distances from the source
357 (located from 2400 m a.s.l. to 1500 m a.s.l.). The macrobenthic community was analyzed by
358 applying the multi-habitat sampling methodology using a standard Surber Sampler. The biological
359 samples were integrated by chemico-physical analyses of the running water to correlate community
360 composition and diversity with environmental variables. We assessed temporal and spatial
361 distribution patterns of the macroinvertebrate community and related the biological results with the
362 changing abiotic conditions.

363

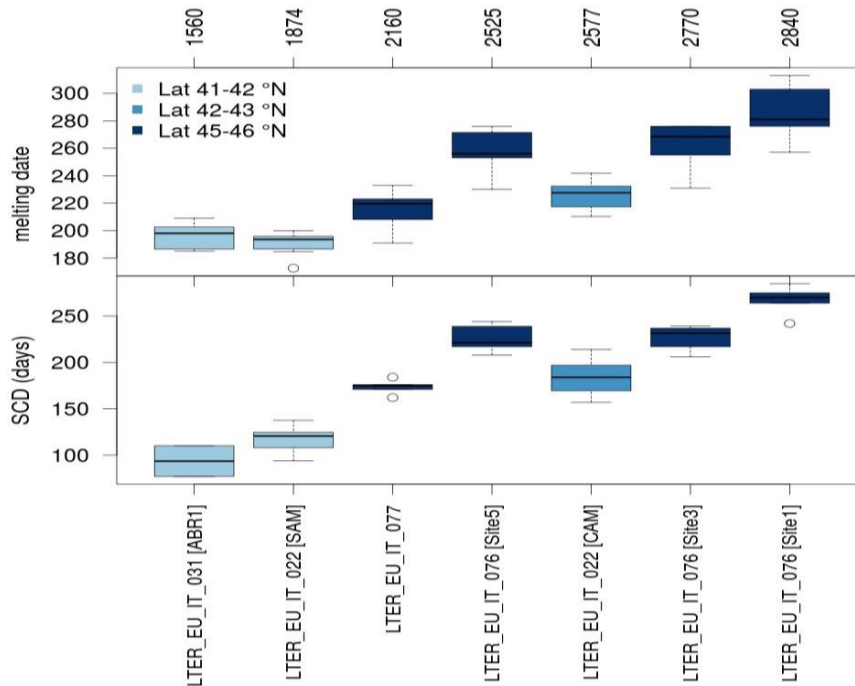
364 **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

365 **3.1 Snow cover duration and effects on soil properties and animal population dynamics**

366 The SCD and melting date calculated from the soil temperature data greatly varied across
367 elevational and latitudinal gradients, from short SCD (~100 days) and early snow melting dates
368 (DSO1~ 200) in the lower altitudes (~1500 m a.s.l.) and latitudes (Lat. 41 N) to long SDC (~250
369 days) and late snow melting dates (DSO1~300) in the higher altitudes (~2800 m a.s.l.) and latitudes

370 (Lat. 46 N) (Fig. 2). Our results agree with previous studies reporting a strong relation between the
 371 SCD and the snow melt day for the Swiss Alps (Klein et al., 2016).

372



373
 374

375 Fig. 2 - Melting dates in DSO1 (Day Since October 1st) (above) and SCD (days) (below) calculated from soil
 376 temperature data at selected LTER sites across elevation and latitude gradients. Yearly average values for the
 377 period 2008-2015. For more details about analyzed LTER sites see Tab. 1.

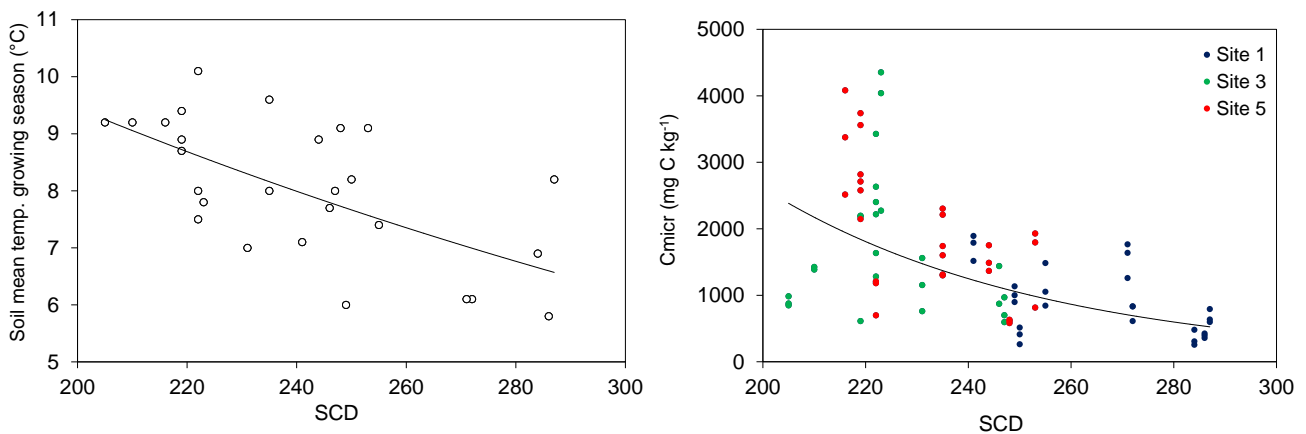
378

379 The analysis of soil temperature data collected at the research site Istituto Scientifico Mosso
 380 (LTER_EU_IT_076) demonstrated that the mean soil temperature of the snow cover season is -
 381 0.19°C (± 0.31). The beginning of the snow cover season showed lower temporal variability than the
 382 end of the SCD, ranging between October 27 (± 15 days) and June 24 (± 20 days), respectively.

383 The analysis of the relation among SCD and both soil temperature and microbial biomass recorded
 384 during the growing season showed the occurrence of significant negative correlations ($r = -0.621$,
 385 $p < 0.01$ and $r = -0.566$, $p < 0.01$, respectively; Fig. 3). As observed by Magnani et al. (2017), a short
 386 SCD may increase soil temperature and substrate availability during the subsequent growing
 387 season, favoring soil microbial biomass.

388 Soil N-NH₄ ($r = -0.282$; $p < 0.05$), DOC ($r = -0.427$; $p < 0.01$) and N_{micr} ($r = -0.403$; $p < 0.01$) were
 389 inversely correlated with SCD, while N-NO₃ showed a sharp increase during 2008-2009,

390 characterized by rather extreme meteorological conditions; in particular, the 2007-2008 winter
391 season was characterized by a thinner snow depth (max approximately 200 cm) than the average
392 snow depth value (289 cm, time-span 2008-2016), while the 2008-2009 winter season had a thicker
393 snow depth (max of 560 cm). The little snowpack in 2007-2008 caused a large number of soil
394 FTCs, which could have contributed to the destruction of the soil aggregates and the release of
395 previously unavailable organic N (Freppaz et al., 2007). The thick snowpack recorded during the
396 next winter season could have released a greater N-NO₃ input into the soil than average during
397 snow melt.



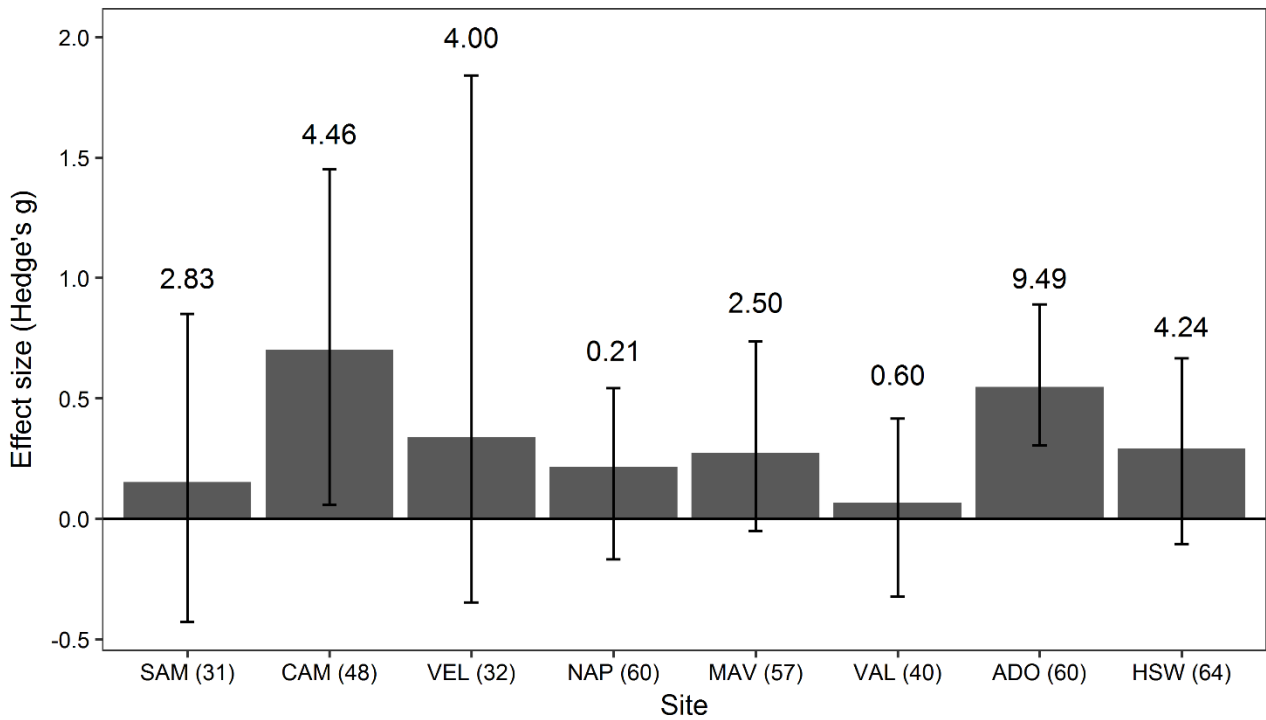
398
399 Fig. 3 - Scatterplots between SCD and soil mean temperature ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$) (left panel) and between
400 SCD and C_{micr} ($r = -0.57$, $p < 0.01$) (right panel) measured in the growing season considering all the study
401 subsites of LTER_EU_IT_076 (site 1, site 3, and site 5; Table S1) during 2008-2016 ($n = 79$).
402

403 Snow cover is also an important driver for animal population dynamics. Long-term studies that
404 have been performed at the LTER site LTER_EU_IT_109 Gran Paradiso National Park since the
405 1950s showed how the dynamics of the Alpine ibex (*Capra ibex*) prior to 1980s was mainly driven
406 by the average winter snow depth that represented a limiting factor for population growth (Jacobson
407 et al., 2004). In general, the snow cover effect on Alpine ibex survival was not linear and not equal
408 for all sex and age classes, and the snow effect was amplified during years of high animal densities
409 (Mignatti et al., 2012). Snow precipitation patterns proved to also be important for vegetation
410 growth and consequently for resource availability (Pettorelli et al., 2007).

411

412 **3.2 Vegetation cover at high elevations and carbon sequestration in mountain forests**

413 The analysis of vegetation cover changes showed positive effect size estimates for all high
414 mountain sites (Fig. 4) but with site-specific magnitudes. In particular, the Majella site (CAM) had
415 the largest positive and significant effect size (Hedge's $g=0.70$, 95% CI, 1.45 – 0.08), followed by
416 Dolomites (ADO) (Hedge's $g=0.55$, 95% CI, 0.86 – 0.29).

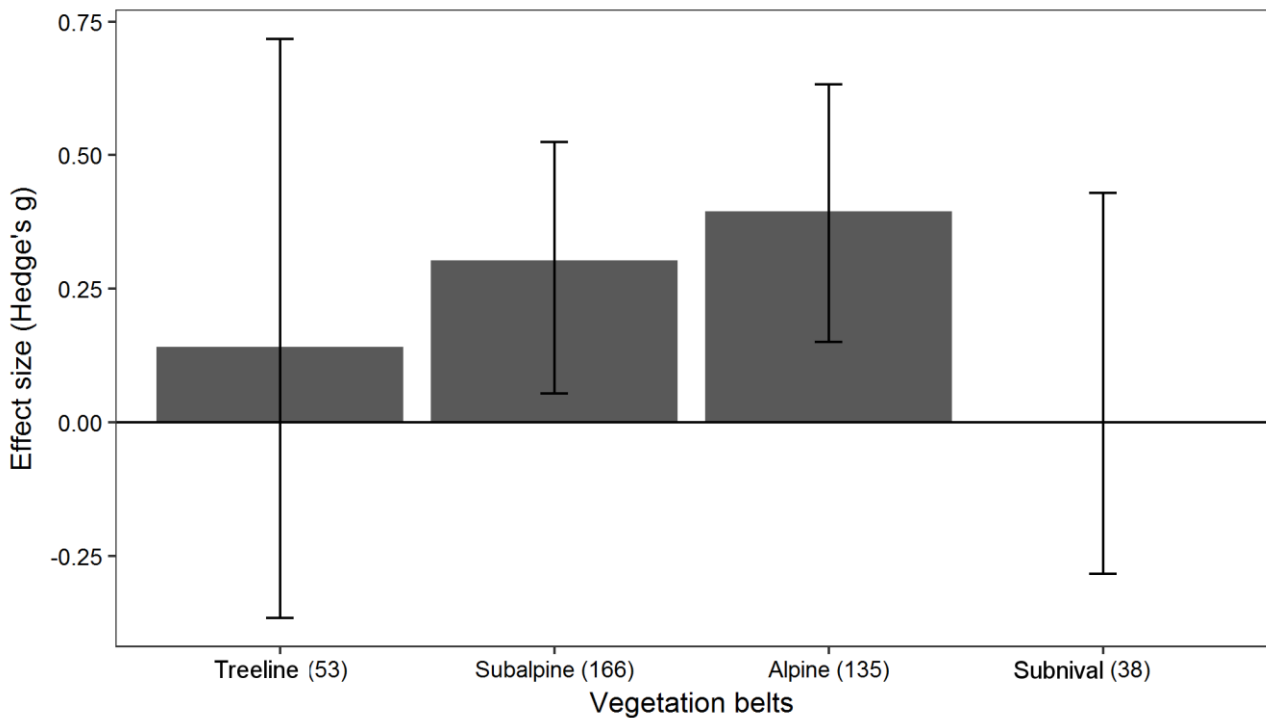


417 Fig. 4. Median effect sizes (Hedge's g) of temporal change on vegetation cover for each site separately (sites
418 are arranged from south to north). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. An effect size is significantly
419 different from zero when its 95% confidence interval does not overlap zero. Median percent change recorded
420 over all plots is shown above the corresponding bar. Abbreviations refer to Table 1. The number of plots per
421 site is indicated in parenthesis.

422
423
424 A general tendency towards increased vegetation cover was also observed in Matese (SAM), Velino
425 (VEL), Northern Apennines (NAP), Mont Avic (MAV), Hochschwab (HSW) and Valais-Entremont
426 (VAL).

427 The analyses of plant cover changes per vegetation belt showed a positive effect size for treeline,
428 subalpine and alpine belts and no effect for the nival belt (Fig. 5). The increase in plant cover over
429 the last fifteen years is most likely related to a greening process (Carlson et al., 2017), which
430 reduced vegetation gaps and was promoted by the expansion of the most thermophilic species
431 already present in the plots and/or to the immigration of species from lower elevations (Gottfried et

432 al., 2012).



433

434 Fig. 5. Median effect sizes (Hedge's g) of temporal change on vegetation cover grouped by vegetation belt.
435 Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. An effect size is significantly different from zero when its 95%
436 CI does not overlap zero. The number of plots per vegetation belt is indicated in parenthesis.

437

438 Indeed, global warming affects high mountain ecosystems by increases in temperature, early
439 snowmelt and a prolonged growing season (Pauli et al., 2012). These factors might have played a
440 key role in the observed increase in plant cover. In fact, the air temperatures before snowmelt and
441 after the meltdown (i.e., the May/June temperatures) are the main factor affecting plant growth in
442 these ecosystems (Jonas et al., 2008; Rammig et al., 2010; Carbognani et al., 2016). However,
443 climate change probably interacted with land-use change, which can exacerbate the effects of
444 climate warming on mountainous vegetation (Theurillat and Guisan, 2001), although such an issue
445 is still largely unexplored (Chelli et al., 2017).

446 On European mountain summits, increasing atmospheric temperatures already have resulted in a
447 measurable expansion of thermophilic species that increased their cover in situ and migrated from
448 lower elevations into the alpine lifezone (Grabherr et al., 1995; Gottfried et al., 2012; Jiménez-
449 Alfaro et al. 2014). Our results agree with recent local research that provided evidence of an

450 increase in caespitose hemicryptophytes and suffruticose chamaephytes frequencies on CAM
451 summits (Stanisci et al., 2016) and an overall increase in species frequency on ADO summits
452 (Erschbamer et al., 2011; Unterluggauer et al., 2016).

453 The temporal analysis of vegetation belts at the LTER and GLORIA mountain sites highlighted a
454 significant increment in vegetation cover at these alpine sites, followed by the subalpine ones,
455 whereas sites located at the treeline belt showed negligible variation, and vegetation cover at the
456 nival belt did not show any change. The specific behavior of vegetation cover on each elevational
457 belt probably reflects the natural structure patterns of plant communities across the elevation
458 gradient. For instance, the cover of subalpine and alpine sparse/open vegetation in ridge habitats
459 significantly increased, appearing more prone to a greening process. This process is likely due to
460 the expansion of plant species already present at the site and to colonization events, which have
461 been recorded in previous papers based on long-term vegetation analysis in alpine environments
462 (Walther et al., 2005; Vittoz et al., 2009b; Matteodo et al., 2016; Carbognani et al., 2014).

463 Conversely, although nival ridges experienced changes in species composition (e.g., Pauli et al.
464 2012), this did not seem to result in an increase in vegetation cover. The environmental constraints
465 at these elevations likely do not allow a greening process, at least until now, but only plant species
466 turnover.

467 Previous vegetation studies carried out at high-elevation LTER and GLORIA sites in the Alps and
468 Apennines indeed revealed changes in plant community structure and composition. Specifically, an
469 increase in species richness (Erschbamer et al., 2008; Erschbamer et al., 2011; Pauli et al. 2012;
470 Unterluggauer et al., 2016) and changes in community compositions (Petriccione, 2005;
471 Erschbamer et al., 2008; Erschbamer et al., 2011; Stanisci et al. 2016) were observed in response to
472 temperature increases and changes in precipitation patterns (Petriccione, 2005). For instance,
473 Unterluggauer et al. (2016) observed a 9% to 64% increase in species richness over a period of 14
474 years in the Southern Alps (Dolomites). Similarly, Petriccione (2005) observed a 10 to 20%
475 increase in species richness at the research site Gran Sasso d'Italia (LTER_EU_IT_021) over a

476 period of nine years.

477 As observed on other European summits (Gottfried et al., 2012), a thermophilization process also
478 occurred at the Apennine and Alps LTER and GLORIA sites (Theurillat and Guisan, 2001; Pauli et
479 al., 2007; Holzinger et al., 2008; Parolo and Rossi 2008; Engler et al., 2011, Erschbamer et al.,
480 2008, 2011; Matteodo et al., 2013; Cannone and Pignatti, 2014; Stanisci et al., 2016) and the arrival
481 of new species typical of lower elevation belts was registered (Petriccione, 2005; Vittoz et al., 2008;
482 Erschbamer et al., 2009; Pauli et al., 2012; Evangelista et al., 2016; Unterluggauer et al., 2016). In
483 the central Apennines, a general increase of chamaephytes, drought-tolerant species (Petriccione,
484 2005) and graminoids (Stanisci et al., 2016) was recorded too. Furthermore, graminoids
485 demonstrated better growth performance under a warm and dry climate, which is most likely related
486 to their strategy to allocate resources to belowground parts (Wellstein et al. 2017).

487 Our results, based on plant cover data recorded in permanent plots, highlight that the observed
488 changes in species composition and structure in alpine and subalpine ridge habitats of the Alps and
489 Apennines are causing a greening trend. Our results are largely consistent with those determined
490 through remote sensing studies (Carlson et al. 2017), which identified on-going greening trends in
491 over half (67%) of the above treeline habitats in the French Alps.

492 As vegetation cover may be considered a proxy of standing biomass (Fry et al. 2013), its increase
493 affects ecosystem productivity and services in mountain landscapes.

494 Indeed, climate warming effects, changes in rainfall seasonality and water availability have been
495 proven to be important for ecosystem productivity (Rammig et al., 2010). This issue has been
496 investigated at the Forests of the Apennines (LTER_EU_IT_003 site; Tab. 1) research site where
497 changes in aboveground net primary productivity (ANPP) in response to a shift in the precipitation
498 regime have been detected (Chelli et al., 2016).

499 Ferretti et al. (2014), in a study including LTER forest sites in the Alps and Apennines,
500 demonstrated that an increase in nitrogen deposition had a positive effect on tree growth (measured
501 as basal area increment) and on aboveground net primary productivity (ANPP), thus promoting

502 carbon sequestration. However, reduction in rainfall can override such positive effects (Chelli et al.
503 2017). Long-term studies performed at a beech forest in the Apennines (LTER_EU_IT_031; table
504 1) showed that carbon (C) sequestration depends on both water availability (precipitation) and air
505 temperature. Lower C sequestration in the beech forest was detected in the years characterized by
506 below-average summer precipitation especially when there was also warmer temperatures
507 (Scarascia and Matteucci, 2014; Mazzenga, 2017). Furthermore, in these beech forests, a significant
508 increase in the growing season length and a general increase in the annual net C sequestration were
509 detected from remotely sensed data during 2000 – 2015 (Mazzenga, 2017).

510

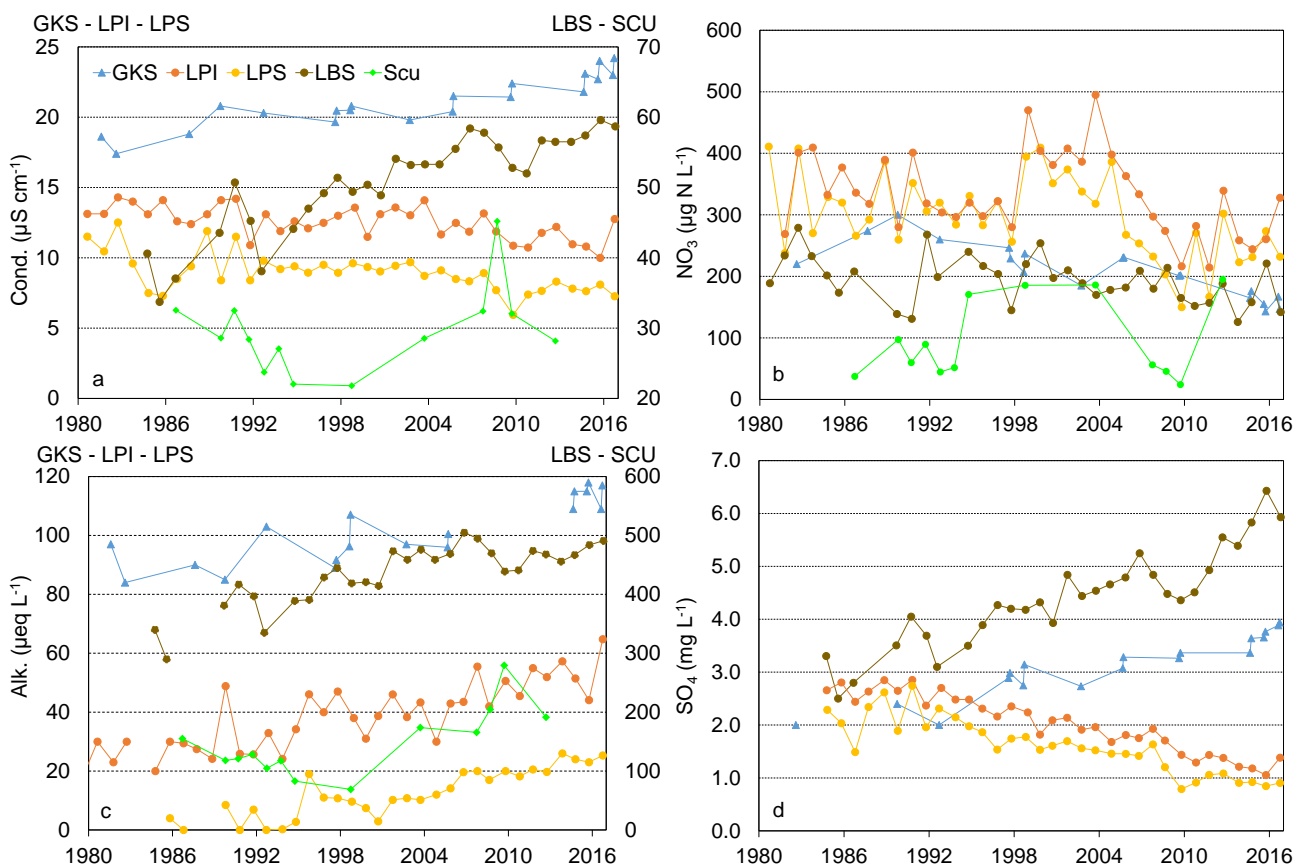
511 **3.3 Long-term changes in water chemistry**

512 The studied mountain lakes (Tab. S1) are representative of varying levels of solute content and
513 buffer capacities, from very diluted water (LPS, LPI: conductivity $< 10 \mu\text{S cm}^{-1}$ at 20°C ; alkalinity
514 $20\text{-}50 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1}$) to moderately diluted waters (GKS, SCU: conductivity $25\text{-}30 \mu\text{S cm}^{-1}$; alkalinity
515 $100\text{-}150 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1}$) or highly mineralized water (LBS: $60 \mu\text{S cm}^{-1}$; alkalinity $400\text{-}500 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1}$). All of
516 the lakes are oligotrophic or ultraoligotrophic systems (total phosphorus $< 10 \mu\text{g P L}^{-1}$).

517 All the lakes showed an increase in alkalinity values (Fig. 6). These trends were highly significant
518 ($p < 0.001$) according to the Mann-Kendall test. Slopes varied from $0.8\text{-}0.9 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ (LPI, LPS,
519 GKS) to $3.9 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ (LBS). In the LPS and LPI, the alkalinity trend was mainly a sign of
520 acidification recovery in response to a decrease in acid deposition after a period of acidification in
521 the 1980s (Rogora et al., 2013). Conductivity also increased over time in the GKS and LBS
522 ($p < 0.001$; slopes 0.16 and $0.56 \mu\text{S cm}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$, respectively), whereas it slightly decreased in the LPI
523 and LPS. Lake Scuro showed high interannual variability in both conductivity and alkalinity, with a
524 tendency towards increasing values for the latter variable (from $100\text{-}120$ to $200 \mu\text{eq L}^{-1}$).

525 Highly significant negative trends in SO_4 concentrations were observed in the LPI and LPS (-6.5
526 $\mu\text{eq L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$), due to a sharp decrease in SO_4 deposition that occurred throughout Europe over the last
527 three decades (Rogora et al., 2006). In contrast, SO_4 increased significantly in the GKS and LBS

528 (slopes of 3.7 and 6.0 $\mu\text{eq L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$, respectively). These trends may be ascribed to an enhanced
 529 release of sulphate from the rocks and soils in the catchments of those two lakes. Both lakes also
 530 showed positive trends in base cation (calcium and magnesium) concentrations. This increase in the
 531 content of major ions in lake water (sulphate, bicarbonate, base cations) has been reported
 532 elsewhere in the Alps (Sommaruga-Wögerath et al., 1997; Rogora et al., 2013; Thies et al., 2013;
 533 Ilyashuk et al., 2014) and in other remote regions (Williams et al., 2006; Kokelj et al., 2009; Preston
 534 et al., 2016; Salerno et al., 2016) where it was ascribed to climate drivers, including a decrease in
 535 the amount and extent of snow cover, a shift in ice-off dates, glacier retreat, and permafrost
 536 thawing. Low rates of runoff in the summer of dry and warm years may also contribute to
 537 concentrated solutes in the runoff water and in the lake (Preston et al., 2016).



538
 539 Fig. 6 – Time series of selected water chemical variables at LTER lake sites in the Italian and Austrian Alps
 540 and in the Northern Apennines, Italy: a) conductivity at 20°C; b) nitrate; c) alkalinity; d) sulphate. For the
 541 lake acronyms, see Tab. S3.

542
 543 The study sites in the Alps showed a common trend in decreasing nitrate concentrations over the
 544 past decade (Fig. 6). The trend was significant at the GKS, LPS ($p < 0.01$), LPI and LBS ($p < 0.05$)

545 sites. The trend slopes varied between $-2.0/-2.5 \mu\text{g L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ in the LPI and LBS and $-2.8 \mu\text{g L}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ in
546 the GKS and LPS. Lakes in the Apennines showed a high interannual variability (e.g., NO_3 in Lake
547 Scuro varied from 20-30 to $200 \mu\text{g N L}^{-1}$), without any evidence of a trend.

548 The negative temporal trends observed for NO_3 concentrations could be related to an increase in
549 primary productivity in the lakes in response to climate warming, promoting nitrogen uptake
550 (Sommaruga-Wögrath et al., 1997). Nitrogen uptake also occurs in lake catchments and is regulated
551 by the extent of soil and vegetation (Marchetto et al., 1995). No specific studies have been
552 performed at the lake sites to assess potential changes in plant cover in the catchments. However, it
553 may be hypothesized that the increase in plant cover observed during the last two decades at the
554 LTER vegetation sites (see paragraph 3.2) has taken place in the lake areas too, contributing to the
555 increase in N retention and decrease in NO_3 export to the surface waters. Furthermore, changes in
556 depth and extent of snow cover have been shown to affect soil nutrient dynamics (see paragraph
557 3.1), thereby regulating N release to the water compartment. In general, soil, vegetation and water
558 are strongly interconnected with each other in these high-altitude environments (Magnani et al.,
559 2017); the observed changes in lake water NO_3 are probably the result of several interacting
560 processes. Besides climate, a decrease in N input from the atmosphere is likely to have played a role
561 in the observed trend in NO_3 , especially for acid-sensitive lakes in the Alps; atmospheric deposition
562 of inorganic nitrogen has recently decreased as an effect of decreasing emissions of N compounds,
563 mainly in the oxidized form (Waldner et al., 2014; Rogora et al., 2016). The effects of decreasing N
564 deposition on NO_3 levels in rivers and lakes have been widespread, with several monitoring sites in
565 Europe showing a significant negative trend in NO_3 concentrations (Garmo et al., 2014).

566

567 **3.4 Biological response in lakes and rivers**

568 *3.4.1 Large-scale patterns*

569 The effect of a large-scale climatic pattern (EA: East Atlantic pattern climatic index) on plankton
570 phenology was tested in two Apennine lakes (LTER_EU_IT_046 and LTER_EU_IT_047; Tab. S3).

571 In Lake Santo, we found a positive correlation between the spring EA values and June water
572 temperatures (Spearman's $\rho=0.66$, $p < 0.05$; not shown in tables), while in Lake Scuro, the spring
573 EA was positively correlated with May water temperatures (Spearman's $\rho=0.67$, $p < 0.05$; not
574 shown in tables). In Lake Santo, we observed significant negative correlations between the spring
575 EA values and the center of gravity calculated for chlorophyll-*a* at the surface, intermediate, and
576 bottom layers, respectively. We also found significant negative correlations between the spring EA
577 values and the date of the first appearance of several of the most abundant zooplankton taxa,
578 including the dominant microcrustaceans (*Daphnia longispina*, *Bosmina longirostris*, and
579 *Eudiaptomus intermedius*) (Tab. 2).

580 We did not find significant relationships between the proxies of phytoplankton and zooplankton
581 phenology (chlorophyll-*a* center of gravity, date of peak of chlorophyll-*a* concentration, dates of first
582 seasonal appearance of zooplankton taxa) in Lake Santo. In Lake Scuro, the dates of the first
583 seasonal appearance of several zooplankton taxa were positively related to the corresponding dates
584 of peak chlorophyll concentrations (Tab. 2), while both the phytoplankton and zooplankton
585 phenological proxies did not show any relationship with the EA values.

586 Our results for Lake Santo suggest that large-scale climate variations may be associated with
587 changes in lake plankton phenology, likely because of changes in local climate (e.g., air
588 temperature) and lake thermal dynamics. Specifically, in Lake Santo, we observed that years with
589 positive spring EA values were characterized by higher spring air temperatures, warmer June water
590 temperatures, and earlier seasonal development of both phytoplankton (represented by chlorophyll-
591 *a*) and key zooplankton taxa. The lack of similar climatic signatures on plankton dynamics in Lake
592 Scuro is most likely due to the relatively small size and substantially reduced thermal inertia of this
593 lake, resulting in a markedly higher sensitivity of Lake Scuro to local meteorological variability and
594 thereby masking the potential impacts of large-scale climatic patterns when compared to Lake
595 Santo. On the other hand, we found significant correlations between the phytoplankton and
596 zooplankton proxies in Lake Scuro, indicating a stronger influence of interspecific interactions in

597 this lake.

598 Tab. 2 - Spearman's correlation values between: a) spring EA values and plankton phenology metrics for
599 Lake Santo; b) phyto- and zooplankton phenology metrics for Lake Scuro. CG: chlorophyll-a center of
600 gravity calculated for the surface (sur), intermediate (int) and bottom (bot) layers of the water column;
601 ChlaMax: date of peak chlorophyll-a concentration; C1, 2, 3: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd copepodite stages; ns: not
602 significant.

603

	EAspr (SAN)	ChlaMax (SCU)
Phytoplankton		
CGsur	-0.68	-
CGint	-0.70	-
CGbot	-0.75	-
Zooplankton (date of 1st appearance)		
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius ovigerous</i> F	-0.79	ns
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius nauplii</i>	-0.80	ns
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius</i> C1	ns	0.77
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius</i> C2	ns	0.68
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius</i> C3	ns	0.68
<i>Cyclopoid copepodites</i>	ns	0.66
<i>Mesocyclops leuckarti</i>	ns	0.69
<i>Conochilus gr. unicornis-hippocrepis</i>	ns	0.66
<i>Daphnia longispina</i>	-0.80	ns
<i>Bosmina longirostris</i>	-0.76	ns
<i>Ascomorpha ecaudis</i>	-0.69	ns
<i>Kellicottia longispina</i>	-0.69	ns
<i>Keratella quadrata</i>	-0.69	ns
<i>Synchaeta gr. stylata-pectinata</i>	-0.69	ns
Zooplankton (date of peak)		
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius nauplii</i>	ns	0.87
<i>Eudiaptomus intermedius</i> C2	ns	0.62
<i>Keratella cochlearis</i>	ns	0.57
Cyclopoid nauplii	ns	0.69
<i>Pleurata sp.</i>	ns	0.17

604

605

606 Overall, these results indicate that large-scale climate indices can be useful indicators of climate

607 variation at a local scale. The EA, in particular, was confirmed as a relevant index for the

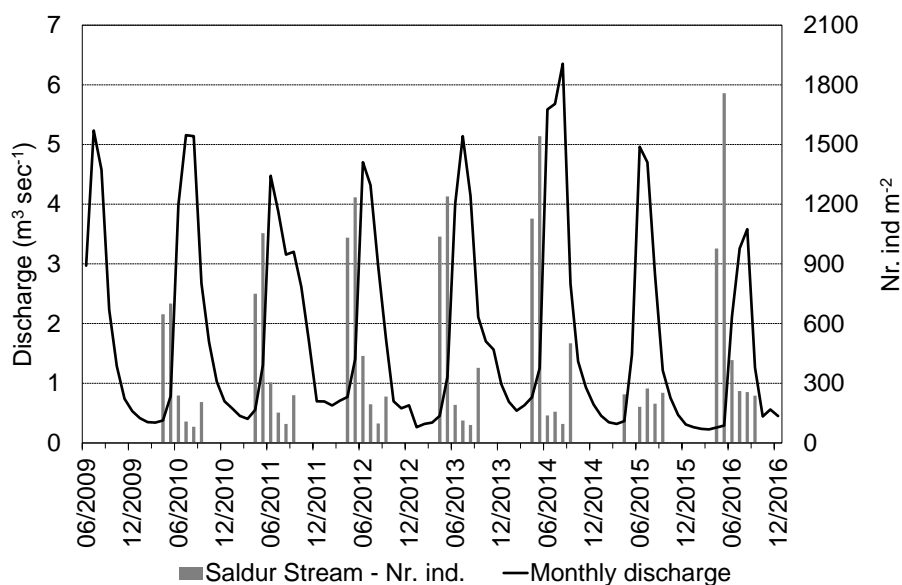
608 Mediterranean area (Salmaso et al., 2012). However, the response of lakes to large-scale climatic

609 patterns is largely dependent on the thermal structure and mixing regime of lakes (Gerten and
610 Adrian, 2001).

611 3.4.2 Local patterns

612 The effects of local patterns, mainly abiotic parameters, on benthic communities were investigated
613 at the LTER site Matsch/Mazia Valley (LTER_EU_IT_100). Long-term data showed clear seasonal
614 distribution patterns; the increased discharge at snowmelt during June and July led to a sharp
615 decrease of faunal density and number of taxa (Fig. 7). A significant negative correlation was found
616 between the monthly discharge and number of individuals ($r = -0.73$; $p < 0.001$). The presence of a
617 glacier within the drainage basin also played a role, by affecting abiotic parameters (primarily water
618 discharge) over a wide range of time scales, with fundamental implications for the whole river
619 system.

620



621

622 Fig. 7 – Time series of monthly mean discharge and number of macrobenthic individuals at one sampling
623 station located at 2340 m a.s.l. on the Saldur Stream (Matsch/Mazia Valley; LTER_EU_IT_100).

624

625 These results demonstrate that, in addition to large-scale patterns, minor changes in environmental
626 conditions can also have significant consequences on biological communities in mountain lakes and
627 streams (Wallace and Webster, 1996). In particular, the snow melting process significantly modifies
628 the biological communities of stream invertebrates in the Saldur stream (Fig. 7). Benthic

629 community structure in mountain streams is a result of complex environmental interactions (Milner
630 et al. 2001; Zemp et al., 2009; Lencioni and Spitale, 2015; Niedrist and Füreder, 2017). Therefore,
631 the understanding of hydro-ecological relationships is essential for the development of effective
632 conservation strategies for alpine rivers. Long-term observations on benthic invertebrate
633 communities may enable assessments of the potential impacts of global change on stream
634 ecosystems (Jourdan et al., 2018). In particular, the community composition of the numerous small
635 alpine valleys, which are often not investigated from the faunistic point of view, may be an
636 important proxy for environmental changes, including climate change.

637 Besides the long-term effects of climate change, high-elevation ecosystems may also be affected by
638 extreme climatic events such as heat waves, droughts, heavy rainfall and floods (Jones, 2013).
639 Studies at the survey lakes in the Western Alps, Italy, belonging to the parent site
640 LTER_EU_IT_009 Mountain Lakes, showed that climatic factors, particularly air temperature and
641 SCD, interact with atmospheric deposition and determine short-term changes in lake water e.g.,
642 heavy rainfall or snowy winters caused a temporary decrease in the alkalinity pool in the lakes by
643 dilution and a simultaneous pulse of NO_3 to the lake, with an overall acidification effect (Rogora et
644 al., 2013). The impact of extreme climatic events on ecological processes was also addressed at the
645 LTER site LTER_EU_IT_047 Lake Scuro Parmense; Bertani et al. (2016) observed a shift from an
646 unvegetated to a macrophyte-dominated regime as a result of the 2003 heat wave. Some of the
647 observed changes in the lake food web persisted after 2003, suggesting that abrupt and long-lasting
648 ecosystem-level reorganizations may occur in small mountain lakes as an effect of extreme events.

649

650 **Conclusions**

651 The long-term ecological analysis we performed, based on data obtained from permanent plots,
652 provided evidence that mountain ecosystems in the Alps and Apennines, both terrestrial and
653 freshwater, show varying levels of effects in response to climate change.

654 The results of our analyses and the review of the results gathered at the study sites from previous

655 and on-going studies highlight that climate change effects are mainly indirect and result from
656 multiple, interacting processes. To assess these changes, there is a need for strong partnerships in
657 mountain ecosystem observation and research and for multidisciplinary approaches, encompassing the
658 distinction between different types of ecosystems (Mirtl et al., 2018).

659 The observed long-term ecological changes include the increase in vegetation cover and in soil
660 microbial biomass in alpine and subalpine summits, and the increase in C uptake in mountain
661 forests. The interannual variability in snow cover duration plays a relevant role in nutrient cycles,
662 both in soils and in surface waters, and snow cover change, when coupled with climate-related
663 vegetation phenology, was also proven to affect animal population dynamics, namely, some glacial
664 follower species, such as the alpine ibex. Snow- and ice-melting processes also affect biological
665 communities of glacier-fed streams by interacting with abiotic parameters such as water discharge
666 and turbidity.

667 In addition to long-term changes, short-term episodes or extreme events also proved to be relevant
668 for mountain ecosystems, causing, for instance, a regime shift in response to heat waves, pulses of
669 nutrient or chemicals to lake water at snowmelt and sudden changes in the nutrient dynamics in
670 soils.

671 The joint analyses we provided demonstrate that long-term research is essential to understanding
672 mountain ecosystem complexity and dynamic. The results also highlighted the great potential for
673 further scientific advances that rely on international collaboration and integration. From this
674 perspective, the LTER is an ideal network for improving our knowledge on sensitive ecosystems
675 such as mountain soils, vegetation and freshwater lakes and streams.

676 Our effort of combining a huge amount of data gathered from different ecosystem types also
677 demonstrates the limits of such an approach; there is a strong need for adopting co-located
678 monitoring site networks (Haase et al. 2018) to improve our ability to obtain sound results from
679 cross-site analysis. Moreover, a useful tool would consist of the adoption of site and dataset
680 registries, providing access to site metadata and information on existing collaborative networks and

681 research platforms.

682 Nevertheless, there is a need for further studies, in particular, short-term analyses with fine spatial
683 and temporal resolutions to improve our understanding of the response to extreme events and an
684 effort to increase comparability and standardize protocols across networks to clarify local patterns
685 from global patterns.

686 The outcomes of this paper demonstrate that LTER mountain sites would gain additional value from
687 the development and improvement of joint networks, indicators, and methodologies. This approach
688 would take advantage of mountain ecosystems as early warning indicators in monitoring
689 frameworks.

690

691 **Acknowledgments**

692 This study was supported by the following projects: Project of Interest NextData through the Special
693 Project Data-LTER-Mountain (Harmonisation and standards for existing and newly collected Data
694 and MetaData on LTER sites in Italian Mountain ecosystems); H2020 EcoPotential (grant
695 agreement No. 641762), eLTER H2020 (GA n. 654359) and Advance_eLTER (GA n739558);
696 project MEDIALPS - Disentangling anthropogenic drivers of climate change impacts on alpine
697 plant species: Alps vs. Mediterranean mountains, funded by the Austrian Academy of Sciences;
698 LTSER Austria, GLEON, and the University of Innsbruck. We thank three anonymous reviewers
699 for providing helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript.

700

701 **Conflict of interest**

702 The authors certify that there is no actual or potential conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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