

# 1 Opposing effects of floral visitors and soil conditions on 2 the determinants of competitive outcomes maintain 3 species diversity in heterogeneous landscapes

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14 Theory argues that both soil conditions and aboveground trophic interactions are equally important for  
15 determining plant species diversity. However, it remains unexplored how they modify the niche differences  
16 that stabilise species coexistence and the average fitness differences driving competitive dominance.  
17 We conducted a field study in Mediterranean annual grasslands to parameterise population models  
18 of six competing plant species. Spatially explicit floral visitor assemblages and soil salinity variation  
19 were characterized for each species. Both floral visitors and soil salinity modified species population  
20 dynamics via direct changes in seed production and indirect changes in competitive responses. Although  
21 the magnitude and sign of these changes were species specific, floral visitors promoted coexistence at  
22 neighbourhood scales while soil salinity did so over larger scales by changing the superior competitor's  
23 identity. Our results show how below and aboveground interactions maintain diversity in heterogeneous  
24 landscapes through their opposing effects on the determinants of competitive outcomes.

25 **Keywords:** annual plants, demography, coexistence, community assembly, fitness, multitrophic interac-  
26 tions, mutualism, niche, pollinators, salinity.

## 27 Introduction

28 Understanding the mechanisms that maintain species diversity is a central aim in ecology. Although  
29 species interact with the environment and with many other species in complex ways, ecologists have  
30 traditionally assumed that the importance of biotic and abiotic factors in promoting species diversity is  
31 highly asymmetrical. Competition driven by soil conditions is commonly considered to be the primary  
32 driver of plant coexistence, and therefore it has been extensively explored (Raynaud & Leadley 2004;  
33 Tilman 2006; Craine & Dybzinski 2013; Hendriks *et al.* 2015). For instance, differences in the species'  
34 ability to drawdown limiting resources such as nitrogen and phosphorous is a classic textbook example  
35 illustrating the importance of partitioning soil resources for maintaining species diversity (Tilman 1994).  
36 On top of this, multitrophic interactions such as those occurring between plant and pollinators,  
37 pathogens, or mycorrhizae (Fitter 1977; Bastolla *et al.* 2009; Bagchi *et al.* 2014; Parker *et al.* 2015;  
38 Bennett *et al.* 2017), are thought to play a secondary role in structuring plant communities.

39 However, recent work has challenged this view. Chesson & Kuang (2008) presented clear evidence that  
40 there is no theoretical support that the relative importance of competition driven by soil conditions  
41 versus other kinds of multitrophic interactions is asymmetrical. In fact, they argue that these two types  
42 of interactions are equally able to either limit or promote diversity. Competition mediated by other  
43 trophic levels has been largely studied under the concept of *apparent competition* (Holt 1977), which  
44 specifically describes how species within a trophic level (e.g. plants) can produce indirect competitive  
45 effects on others via shared enemies (e.g. herbivores, predators). These indirect effects can be of equal  
46 magnitude to that of direct effects resulting from resource competition. The utility of this concept has  
47 also been extended to apparent negative and positive interactions mediated by other organisms, such as  
48 shared mutualisms (Morris *et al.* 2004; Carvalheiro *et al.* 2014).

49 Plant interactions with floral visitors, including pollinators and pollen thieves, are key trophic  
50 interactions with clear potential to strongly influence plant coexistence (Morris *et al.* 2010; Ollerton *et al.*  
51 *et al.* 2011). Many theoretical studies have suggested several mechanisms by which floral visitors can  
52 promote plant diversity (Bastolla *et al.* 2009; Benadi *et al.* 2013; Pauw 2013). For instance, Fontaine *et al.*

53 *al.* (2005) shows experimentally that plant richness correlates positively with greater functional  
54 diversity of floral visitors. Yet the effect of floral visitors on plant coexistence remains poorly  
55 understood, as their effects on plant population dynamics have not been related to the determinants of  
56 competitive outcomes.

57 Similar to previous work focused on multitrophic antagonistic interactions (mainly predators and  
58 pathogens) (Chesson & Kuang 2008; Kuang & Chesson 2010; Stump & Chesson 2017), we can obtain  
59 progress by framing our research within recent advances of coexistence theory (Chesson 2000).  
60 According to Chesson's framework, floral visitors can promote the *stabilising niche differences* that  
61 favour plant coexistence, which occur when intraspecific competitive interactions exceed interspecific  
62 competition, and the *average fitness differences* that favour competitive exclusion, and determine the  
63 competitive winner in the absence of niche differences. Ecologists have paid much more attention to the  
64 floral visitors' effects on average fitness differences (Herrera 2000; Thompson 2001; Waites & Ågren  
65 2004), than their effect on stabilising niche differences (Pauw 2013). However, as most plants depend  
66 on pollinators to maximize their reproductive success (Ollerton *et al.* 2011), it is most likely that floral  
67 visitors' characteristics may promote both plant niche and fitness differences simultaneously. Therefore,  
68 the effect of floral visitors on determining plant coexistence is only predictable with a mechanistic  
69 understanding of how different assemblages modify niche and fitness differences. Coexistence can be  
70 achieved by several pathways, either by equalising fitness differences, by promoting niche differences, or  
71 by a combination of both.

72 Relating field data to these theoretical advances is challenging but we can take advantages of systems  
73 relatively easy to observe for which recent work has described how niche and fitness differences  
74 influences species' population dynamics, such Mediterranean annual grasslands (Godoy & Levine 2014).  
75 Floral visitor assemblages in these environments are particularly interesting because they are composed  
76 of an array of insects including solitary bees, hover flies, beetles, and butterflies, which can produce  
77 contrasting effects on plant fitness. The fitness of many plant species relies on those floral visitors that  
78 are truly pollinators (Pauw 2013), and other insects can have a negative effect on plant fitness by  
79 robbing their nectar, eating pollen or by damaging the flower (Morris *et al.* 2003). Mediterranean  
80 annual grasslands also often inhabit in salty soils. Variation in saline soil conditions is negatively  
81 correlated with soil fertility (Olf & Ritchie 1998; Hu & Schmidhalter 2005) and similar to floral visitors

82 salt concentration on soils can have contrasting effects on plant fitness. While glycophytes will struggle  
83 to grow under saline conditions (Flowers & Yeo 1986) halophytes are expected to show greater fitness  
84 and competitive advantages (Flowers & Colmer 2008).

85 Here, we considered three interaction levels to test how the belowground environmental conditions  
86 (i.e. soil conditions) and the aboveground trophic interactions (i.e. floral visitors) influence coexistence  
87 of the middle level (i.e. plant species). We specifically focus on three questions: (1) How soil salinity  
88 and floral visitors modify species' population dynamics via direct changes in per capita seed production  
89 and indirect changes in species' responses to competitive interactions? (2) Do these direct and indirect  
90 effects modify niche and fitness differences between plant species?, and finally, (3) Are these  
91 modifications of the determinants of competitive outcomes limiting or promoting diversity?

92 We answered these three questions by first parameterizing a general plant competition model from  
93 which the stabilising niche differences and average fitness differences were quantified. To parameterise  
94 these models of pairwise competition between six annual European grassland species, we quantified  
95 their vital rates (i.e. germination, fecundity, seed survival) and competition coefficients in field plots  
96 relating seed production of focal individuals to a density gradient of numerous different competitors.  
97 We then assessed how seasonal and spatial variation in the number of floral visits and in soil salinity  
98 changes species fecundity and their responses to competition (Question 1). Once, the model was  
99 parameterised, we estimated niche and fitness differences when soil salinity and floral visitors were  
100 present or absent (Question 2), and compared how strong niche differences offset fitness differences  
101 between scenarios (Question 3). Our work is novel in quantifying the effects that distinct environmental  
102 conditions and trophic interactions have on modifying niche and fitness differences, and showing under  
103 field conditions that they maintain diversity in heterogeneous landscapes through their opposing effects  
104 on the determinants of competitive outcomes.

## 105 **Methods**

### 106 **Study system**

107 Our study was conducted in Caracoles Ranch (2,680 ha), an annual grassland system located in

108 Doñana NP, southwest Spain (37°04'01.5"N 6°19'16.2"W). The climate is Mediterranean with mild  
109 winters and average 50-y annual rainfall of 550-570 mm with high interannual oscillations  
110 (Muñoz-Reinoso & García Novo 2000). Soils are sodic saline (electric conductivity > 4dS/m and pH <  
111 8.5) and annual vegetation dominates the grassland with no perennial species present. The study site  
112 has a subtle micro topographic gradient (slope 0.16%) enough to create vernal pools at lower parts  
113 from winter (November-January) to spring (March-May) while upper parts do not get flooded except in  
114 exceptionally wet years. A strong salinity-humidity gradient is structured along this topographic  
115 gradient. Additionally, salt can reach upper parts of the soil by capillarity during the rainfall period  
116 resulting overall in heterogeneous soil salinity patterns at the local and at the landscape scale  
117 (Appendix S1). This salinity gradient is strongly correlated with soil nutrient availability at our study  
118 location, and more saline soil conditions were less fertile especially in phosphorous content (Clemente *et*  
119 *al.* 2004).

120 We initially focused on 16 annual plants that were common at the study site. These species represent a  
121 broad range of taxonomic families, plant morphology and flowering phenology co-occurring at the scale  
122 of the entire study system. All species were considered for estimating competitive interactions, but we  
123 observed enough visits of insects to the flowers of six species. Hence, we further focus on this particular  
124 set of species to compare the effect of soil salinity and floral visitors on niche and fitness differences  
125 (Table 1).

## 126 **Modeling approach to quantify the niche and fitness differences between species pairs**

127 Our observational study was designed to field-parameterise a mathematical model describing annual  
128 plant population dynamics (Levine & HilleRisLambers 2009). This model allows quantifying stabilising  
129 niche differences and average fitness differences between species within a trophic level (Godoy & Levine  
130 2014). Importantly, there have not been previous attempts to quantify how soil condition or  
131 multitrophic interactions change the strength of niche and fitness differences between species within a  
132 single trophic level, and here we show how these effects can be incorporated into this model. The model  
133 is described as follows:

$$134 \frac{N_{i,t+1}}{N_{i,t}} = (1 - g_i)s_i + g_iF_i$$

135 (1)

136 where  $\frac{N_{i,t+1}}{N_{i,t}}$  is the per capita population rate, and  $N_{i,t}$  is the number of seeds of species  $i$  in the soil  
137 prior to germination in winter of year  $t$ . The germination rate of species  $i$ ,  $g_i$ , can be viewed as a  
138 weighting term for an average of two different growth rates: the annual survival of ungerminated seed  
139 in the soil ( $s_i$ ), and the viable seeds produced per germinated individual ( $F_i$ ). In past work,  $F_i$ , was  
140 expanded into a function describing how the average fecundity of each germinated seed that becomes  
141 an adult (i.e. per germinant fecundity) declines with the density of competing number individuals in  
142 the system (Godoy & Levine 2014). Now, we slightly modify this function to include the additional  
143 effect of floral visitors and soil conditions on the per germinant fecundity as follows:

$$144 F_i = \frac{\lambda_i(1+\theta_{i,s}S_t+\gamma_{i,fv}A_t)}{1+\sum(\alpha_{ij}+\psi_{ij,s}S_t+\omega_{ij,fv}A_t)g_jN_{j,t}}$$

145 (2)

146 where  $\theta_{i,s}$  and  $\gamma_{i,fv}$  control the effect of soil salinity ( $S_t$ ) and floral visitors ( $A_t$ ) respectively on the per  
147 germinant fecundity of species  $i$  in the absence of competition ( $\lambda_i$ ). In addition,  $\lambda_i$  is modified by the  
148 germinated densities of other species including its own ( $g_jN_{j,t}$ ). To describe the per capita effect that  
149 species  $j$  is mediating on species  $i$ , we multiplied these germinated densities by a sum of three  
150 interaction coefficients ( $\alpha_{ij}+\psi_{ij,s}S_t+\omega_{ij,fv}A_t$ ), which describes the additional direct effect of soil salinity  
151 and the apparent effect of floral visitors on the competitive interactions between species. Notice that  
152 we considered only explicitly in our study the effect that soil salinity and floral visitors have on species'  
153 fecundity ( $F_i$ ), but the model could be easily extended to include the effect of these two factors on the  
154 other two vital rates, germination ( $g_i$ ) and seed soil survival ( $s_i$ ).

155 With the direct and apparent dynamics of competition described by this population model, we followed  
156 the approach of Chesson (2012) to determine fitness and niche differences between species pairs. Our  
157 procedure here parallels previous work described in Godoy & Levine (2014), and allows us to define  
158 stabilising niche differences and fitness differences with and without considering the effect of floral  
159 visitors and soil salinity on plant coexistence. For the model described by eqns (1) and (2), we define  
160 niche overlap ( $\rho$ ) as follows:

$$\rho = \sqrt{\frac{\alpha_{ij} + \psi_{ij,s} + \omega_{ij,fv}}{\alpha_{jj} + \psi_{jj,s} + \omega_{jj,fv}} * \frac{\alpha_{ji} + \psi_{ji,s} + \omega_{ji,fv}}{\alpha_{ii} + \psi_{ii,s} + \omega_{ii,fv}}} \quad (3)$$

If multitrophic interactions are absent (i.e.  $\psi_{ij,s}=0, \omega_{ij,fv}=0$ ), then  $\rho$  collapses into an equation that reflects the average degree to which species limit individuals of their own species relative to heterospecific competitors based on their interaction coefficients ( $\alpha$ 's) (Godoy & Levine 2014). Conversely, if multitrophic interactions are present  $\psi$  and  $\omega$  are the terms controlling changes in average niche differences between a pair of species. For example, two species with different set of floral visitors could increase niche overlap by having positive apparent competitive effects of each species on the other (i.e.  $\omega_{ij,fv}>0$ ). With ( $\rho$ ) defining niche overlap between a pair of species, their stabilising niche difference is expressed as  $1-\rho$ .

As an opposing force to stabilising niche differences, average fitness differences drive competitive dominance, and in the absence of niche differences, determine the competitive superior between a pair of species. Addressing the modifications done in the annual population model described by eqns (1) and (2) to include the effect of floral visitors and soil conditions, we define average fitness differences between the competitors ( $\frac{k_j}{k_i}$ ) as:

$$\frac{k_j}{k_i} = \frac{\eta_j - 1}{\eta_i - 1} * \sqrt{\frac{\alpha_{ij} + \psi_{ij,s} + \omega_{ij,fv}}{\alpha_{jj} + \psi_{jj,s} + \omega_{jj,fv}} * \frac{\alpha_{ii} + \psi_{ii,s} + \omega_{ii,fv}}{\alpha_{ji} + \psi_{ji,s} + \omega_{ji,fv}}} \quad (4a)$$

and

$$\eta_i = \frac{g_i \lambda_i (1 + \theta_{i,s} S_t + \gamma_{i,fv} A_t)}{1 - (1 - g_i) s_i} \quad (4b)$$

When the ratio  $\frac{k_j}{k_i} > 1$  this indicates that species  $j$  has a fitness advantage over species  $i$ . Both soil salinity and floral visitors can be seen as equalising mechanisms promoting coexistence because they can reduce fitness differences between a species pair by two contrasted pathways. They can modify the 'demographic ratio' ( $\frac{\eta_j - 1}{\eta_i - 1}$ ) which describes the degree to which species  $j$  produces more seeds ( $g_j \lambda_j (1 + \theta_{j,s} S_t + \gamma_{j,fv} A_t)$ ) per seed loss due to death or germination ( $1 - (1 - g_j) s_j$ ) than species  $i$ , and

186 they can also modify the ‘competitive response ratio’  $\left(\sqrt{\frac{\alpha_{ij} + \psi_{ij,s} + \omega_{ij,fv}}{\alpha_{jj} + \psi_{jj,s} + \omega_{jj,fv}}} * \frac{\alpha_{ii} + \psi_{ii,s} + \omega_{ii,fv}}{\alpha_{ji} + \psi_{ji,s} + \omega_{ji,fv}}}\right)$  which  
187 describes the degree to which species  $j$  is less sensitive to competition than species  $i$  (eqn (4)). Notice  
188 that these modifications can produce the opposing effect and promote species’ competitive dominance  
189 by a combination of high demographic rates and low sensitivity to competition.

190 Competitors can coexist when niche differences overcome fitness differences, allowing both species to  
191 invade (i.e. increase its populations) when rare (Chesson 2012). This condition for mutual invasibility is  
192 satisfied when:

$$193 \quad \rho < \frac{k_j}{k_i} < \frac{1}{\rho}$$

194 (5)

195 Therefore, coexistence can occur when little niche overlap (i.e. large niche differences) overcomes large  
196 fitness differences, or when niche differences among similar species are still large enough to stabilise the  
197 interaction between competitors with similar fitness. We used this condition to evaluate how strongly  
198 floral visitors and soil salinity increase or decrease the likelihood of coexistence between competitors.  
199 For doing so, we computed how much observed niche differences exceed or fails to promote coexistence  
200 according to the expected niche differences needed to overcome observed fitness differences between a  
201 species pair.

## 202 **Field observations used to parameterise the model**

203 In September 2015, we established nine plots of 8.5m x 8.5m along a 1km x 200m area following a  
204 topographic gradient. Three of these nine plots were located in the upper part of the topographic  
205 gradient, three at the middle, and the last three at the lower part. Average distance between these  
206 three locations was 300m and average distance between plots within each location was 15m. In  
207 addition, each plot was divided in 36 subplots of 1m x 1m with aisles of 0.5m in between to allow access  
208 to subplots where measurements were taken (Appendix S2).

209 This spatial design was established to parameterise models of pairwise competition between the six  
210 focal species finally considered with estimates of species’ germination fractions ( $g_i$ ), seed survival in the  
211 soil ( $s_i$ ), and the effect of soil salinity ( $S_t$ ) and floral visitors ( $A_t$ ) on the per germinant fecundities in

212 the absence of neighbours ( $\lambda_i$ ) and on all pairwise interaction coefficients ( $\alpha_{ij}$ ). Specifically, the core of  
213 the observations involved measuring per germinant viable seed production as a function of the number  
214 and identity of neighbours within a radius of 7.5cm including individuals of the same species (see  
215 analyses below). We measured one individual per subplot for widespread species and several individuals  
216 per subplot when species were rare (max. 324 individuals/species). To additionally incorporate the  
217 effect of soil salinity, we measured from November 2015 to June 2016 soil humidity (%) and soil salinity  
218 (dS/m) bimonthly at the subplot center with a TDR (Time Domain Reflectometer) incorporating a 5cm  
219 probe specially designed and calibrated for these sodic saline soils (EasyTest, Poland). We summarised  
220 the amount of soil salinity experienced by each germinant, which was highly correlated with soil  
221 moisture ( $r=0.77$ ), as the sum over their lifetime of the soil salinity measured at the subplot scale.

222 Moreover, floral visitors were measured during the complete phenological period of all species (from  
223 January to June 2016). We surveyed weekly the number of floral visitors for all species within each  
224 subplot. Visits were only considered when the floral visitor touched the reproductive organs of the  
225 plant. All subplots within a plot were simultaneously surveyed during 30 minutes each week. Unknown  
226 floral visitors were collected with a hand net and the time spent collecting the insects was discounted  
227 from the total observation time in order to equalise the amount of time used per plot. Plot survey was  
228 randomized between weeks to avoid sampling effects. Overall, this procedure rendered approximately  
229 90 hours of overall floral visitors sampling. Floral visitors to each species and subplot were grouped in  
230 four main morphology groups (bees, beetles, butterflies, and flies). We summarised the number of  
231 floral visits by insects to each germinant as the total sum of visits at the subplot scale.

232 Finally, we quantified the germination of viable seeds ( $g_i$ ) by counting the number of germinants in 18  
233 quadrats of 1m x 1m placed close to the plots (2 quadrats per plot) from seeds collected the previous  
234 year and sown on the ground prior to the first major storm event after summer (September 2015).  
235 Similarly, we quantified seed bank survival ( $s_i$ ) with the same seed material by burying seeds from  
236 September 2015 to September 2016 following the methods of (Godoy & Levine 2014).

## 237 **Analysis**

238 To fit the model to the empirical observations, we used maximum likelihood methods (optim R  
239 function, method="L-BFGS-B"). We fit changes in  $\lambda_i$  and  $\alpha_{ij}$  (both bounded to be positive) as a

240 function of soil salinity ( $S_t$ ) and floral visitors ( $A_t$ ). Soil salinity ( $\theta_{i,s}$ ,  $\psi_{ij,s}$ ) and floral visitors ( $\gamma_{i,fv}$ ,  
241  $\omega_{ij,fv}$ ) parameters were not bounded to any specific range as we hypothesized that they can have both  
242 positive and negative effects on per germinant fecundities. What we do not know, however, is whether  
243 their effects are specific to each pairwise interactions or are common to all species interactions. To test  
244 for this possibility, we use an AIC (Akaike Information Criteria) model selection approach to  
245 distinguish which of two following models were the best fit for our observations for each target species  $i$ .  
246 The first model (model 1) assumes that competitive interactions between species are pairwise specific  
247 but the effects of salt and floral visitors on competitive interactions are common across species.

$$248 F_i = \frac{\lambda_i(1+\theta_{i,s}S_t+\gamma_{i,fv}A_t)}{1+\sum_j(\alpha_{ij}+\psi_{ij,s}S_t+\omega_{ij,fv}A_t)N_{j,t}}$$

249 The second model (model 2) assumes that competitive interactions between species are pairwise  
250 specific, as are the effects of salt and floral visitors on competitive interactions.

$$251 F_i = \frac{\lambda_i(1+\theta_{i,s}S_t+\gamma_{i,fv}A_t)}{1+\sum_j(\alpha_{ij}+\psi_{ij,s}S_t+\omega_{ij,fv}A_t)N_{j,t}}$$

252 It is also likely that soil salinity and floral visitors may not be affecting the competitive dynamics  
253 between species pairs. Therefore, we evaluated an additional model (model 3) that did not account for  
254 these abiotic and biotic factors.

$$255 F_i = \frac{\lambda_i}{1+\sum_j\alpha_{ij}N_{j,t}}$$

256 For all three models, individuals of the 10 species surveyed apart from our six focal species were  
257 grouped together and their competitive effect on the six focal species was summarized as a single  
258 parameter. The average viable seed production per species ( $F_i$ ) was estimated by counting the number  
259 of fruits produced by 20 independent germinants collected across plots, counting the number of seeds  
260 produced per fruit, and correcting for its viability.  $A_t$  and  $S_t$  represent the total number of floral visits  
261 and the accumulated soil salinity experienced by each germinant at the subplot scale over their lifetime.  
262 Estimates of mean and standard error for each parameter of the best model selected by AIC are  
263 included in Appendix S3. All analyses were conducted in R (version 3.3.1) (R Core Team 2016).

## 264 Results

265 The six focal species experienced a great variation in soil salinity and the type and number of floral  
266 visitors. Along the salinity gradient, *Beta macrocarpa* and *Pulicaria paludosa* grew mainly in high soil  
267 salinity concentrations, in contrast, *Melilotus elegans* and *Leontodon maroccanus* grew in relatively low  
268 saline soils, while *Chamaemelum fuscatum* and *Melilotus sulcatus* showed a more tolerant behaviour  
269 growing in a wider range of salt concentrations (Fig. 1). Number of floral visits by insects also varied  
270 greatly among plant species. Overall, the main groups of floral visitors in our system were flies (581  
271 visits) and beetles (496 visits), followed by bees (161 visits) and butterflies (87 visits). The three  
272 Asteraceae species were the most visited species. Among them, *L. maroccanus* received 636 visits  
273 followed by *C. fuscatum* 293 visits, and *P. paludosa* 291 visits. The rest of the species *B. macrocarpa*  
274 (64), *M. sulcatus* (35), and *M. elegans* (6) had in comparison a much lower number of visits. Moreover,  
275 species also showed variation in the assemblage of floral visitors. Of the three plant species with higher  
276 number of visits, flies were the most abundant insects visiting *C. fuscatum*, and *P. paludosa* while  
277 beetles did so for *L. maroccanus* (Fig. 1).

278 The wide variation in the number of floral visits and soil salinity concentrations observed in our  
279 experiment modified the seed production in the absence of neighbours ( $\lambda_i$ ) and the strength of the  
280 species' responses to competitive interactions ( $\alpha_{ij}$ ) of the three Asteraceae species (model 2, lowest AIC  
281 values) (Appendix S4). Interestingly, the sign of the floral visitors' effects on  $\lambda_i$  and  $\alpha_{ij}$  varied among  
282 these species. While higher number of visits to *C. fuscatum* increased its potential fecundity and  
283 reduced the negative effect of both intra and interspecific competition on seed production, the opposite  
284 pattern was observed for *L. maroccanus* and *P. paludosa* (Fig. 2 and 3). Soil salinity, in contrast, had a  
285 similar effect across species increasing seed production in the absence of neighbours and promoting  
286 weaker competitive interactions. For the other three non Asteraceae species, AIC values did not help to  
287 distinguish unambiguously whether soil salinity and floral visitors had a common effect on  $\lambda_i$  and  $\alpha_{ij}$   
288 (i.e. differences in AIC between model one and three were lower than 10). In neither case, model  
289 selection did support the view that the effect of floral visitors and soil salinity on the species' responses  
290 to competition was pairwise specific (i.e. model two showed consistently higher AIC values) (Appendix  
291 S4).

292 Soil salinity and floral visitors exerted positive, negative or no effect on plant fitness, yet they modified  
293 the determinants of competitive outcomes in opposite and specific directions (Fig. 4). While floral  
294 visitors tend to maintain stable coexistence (5 out of 15 species pairs) or to promote coexistence by  
295 equalising fitness differences (5 out of 15 species pairs moved closer to the coexistence region), soil  
296 salinity tend to promote competitive exclusion (4 species pairs moved out of the coexistence region)  
297 and increase competitive asymmetries between species pairs. As a result, floral visitors reduced on  
298 average the niche differences needed for coexistence (estimated from the mutual invasibility, eqn (5))  
299 across species pairs (paired t-test,  $t = 2.15$ ,  $P = 0.049$ ), while soil salinity increased significantly the  
300 niche differences needed for coexistence (paired t-test,  $t = 5.51$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Although soil salinity  
301 reduced the likelihood of species coexistence at neighbourhood scales for all except one species pair,  
302 this abiotic factor also determined changes in the identity of competitive winners (6 out of 15 species  
303 pairs), which suggest that soil salinity can promote species coexistence over larger scales by turnover of  
304 the dominant competitor (Fig. 4).

## 305 Discussion

306 Until recent years, ecologists have considered that competition mediated by soil conditions has greater  
307 potential than aboveground multitrophic interactions to promote or impede plant diversity  
308 maintenance. Although this view has been strongly challenged by theoretical and review efforts (Chase  
309 *et al.* 2002; Chesson & Kuang 2008), lack of direct empirical evidences has limited the awareness that  
310 above and belowground drivers of plant competition can produce symmetrical effects on diversity. Our  
311 ability to combine recent advances in coexistence theory with plant population models and detailed  
312 observations of spatial variation in soil salinity content and floral visitor frequency during the species'  
313 growing season provide direct evidences that both drivers can equally modify the likelihood of plant  
314 coexistence. We particularly observed in our study opposing effects on plant coexistence via direct  
315 changes in per capita seed production and indirect changes in competitive responses. While floral  
316 visitors promoted plant diversity at the neighbourhood scale, soil salinity drove competitive dominance.  
317 Nonetheless, the identity of the superior competitor changed when soil salinity effects on plant  
318 competition were considered, which indicates how belowground drivers can maintain plant diversity at

319 larger scales by spatial changes in soil conditions.

320 At the neighbourhood scale, floral visitors consistently promoted species coexistence by reducing the  
321 niche differences needed to overcome fitness differences between species pairs (Fig. 4). The positive  
322 effect of floral visitors on diversity did not only occur due to a facilitative effect expected from  
323 mutualistic interactions. Rather, we observed both positive and negative effects on plant fecundity. For  
324 instance, floral visitors strongly increased the seed production in the absence of competition and  
325 reduced to a lesser extent the negative effect of competition on the seed production of *C. fuscatum*  
326 individuals. At the other extreme, floral visitors reduced the fecundity of species such as *L. marocanum*  
327 and *P. paludosa* by both reducing seed production in the absence of competition and increasing their  
328 sensitivity to competition (Fig. 3b and 3c). In our study, the distinct floral visitors' assemblages  
329 observed for these species help to explain these different effects. While bee and fly pollinators mainly  
330 visited *C. fuscatum* individuals, beetles were the main visitor of *L. marocanum* individuals. Although it  
331 has been observed that some beetles can be good pollinators in Mediterranean ecosystems (Bartomeus  
332 *et al.* 2008), most of the beetles in our study were pollen feeder species belonging to the genera  
333 *Chrysomelidae* and *Melyridae* (Wäckers *et al.* 2007).

334 Critically, the equalising effect of floral visitors on plant coexistence likely happened because positive  
335 and negative effects were influenced by the species' competing ability. The negative effect of floral  
336 visitors occurred for those species that were on average superior competitors, whereas positive effects  
337 occurred for the inferior competitors. This process arises from the fact that our system was dominated  
338 by non-specialist interactions and may be a common scenario in this type of systems. Beetles acted as  
339 herbivores that tend to focus on the most abundant resource, and therefore target the most abundant  
340 species (Table 1). Meanwhile, species with high pollination dependence (i.e. self-incompatible mating  
341 system), tend to be subdominant and the ones that benefit substantially from pollinator's visits (Tur *et*  
342 *al.* 2013). Although we did not observe that floral visitors in our system produce a stabilising effect on  
343 plant coexistence (Fig. 4a, none of the arrows move to the right side of the graph indicating increased  
344 niche differentiation under the effect of floral visitors), this does not mean that this density-dependent  
345 effect can occur in more specialised systems. In fact, recent studies suggest that equalising and  
346 stabilising effects occur in combination. Many plant species trade-off between being sufficiently  
347 specialised to differentiate in their pollination niche, while being able to attract a sufficient number of

348 mutualistic partners (Vamosi *et al.* 2014; Coux *et al.* 2016).

349 Conversely to floral visitors, soil salinity promoted competitive exclusion at the neighbourhood scales of  
350 species interactions and it did so by reducing niche differences and increasing fitness differences among  
351 species pairs (Fig. 4b). Nevertheless, the identity of the competitive winner changed across contrasting  
352 soil salinity conditions. For instance, *B. macrocarpa* and *L. maroccanus* were competitive winners under  
353 low soil salinity concentrations but they were competitive losers against *P. paludosa* under high soil  
354 salinity concentrations. For the particular case of *P. paludosa*, competitive superiority came mostly  
355 from the strong positive effect of salinity in reducing its sensitivity to competitive interactions rather  
356 than from an increase in the species' ability to produce seeds in the absence of neighbours (Fig. 3f).  
357 The consistent effect of soil salinity in determining competitive exclusion across species pairs predicts  
358 reduction of species diversity in homogeneous landscapes under constant soil salinity conditions,  
359 favouring species that either prefer or refuse salt. But in heterogeneous landscapes like our system,  
360 diversity is maintained because of the species' inability to be competitive superiors across all soil  
361 salinity conditions. Indeed, these results align with the well-known effect of environmental  
362 heterogeneity on promoting diversity (Chesson 2000), and agree also with spatial patterns of species  
363 turnover found for very similar salty grasslands in other Mediterranean areas (Pavoine *et al.* 2011).  
364 Yet, our results highlight that competitive interaction rather than niche partition (see Rosenzweig 1995;  
365 Allouche *et al.* 2012) is likely the main mechanisms driving documented patterns of species turnover.

366 Our methodological approach is novel in showing how to incorporate the effect of different abiotic and  
367 biotic variables into the estimation of niche and fitness differences between species pairs from models  
368 that describes species population dynamics via species' vital rates and interactions coefficients. Our  
369 methodology is readily available to be extended to consider other kinds of interactions beyond the  
370 scope of this study such as herbivores, leaf pathogens and roots mutualisms. These interactions could  
371 potentially explain changes in fecundity of those species for which soil salinity and floral visitors did not  
372 have a significant effect (Landwehr *et al.* 2002; Mitchell 2003; Pan *et al.* 2015). More generally, future  
373 research needs to fully consider the influence of multiple abiotic and biotic aboveground and  
374 belowground interactions on niche and fitness differences for significantly advancing our fundamental  
375 knowledge of how diversity is maintained.

376 Another important step when studying the effect of multitrophic interactions on plant coexistence is to  
377 move from direct pairwise effects to include “higher order effects” among species (Mayfield & Stouffer  
378 2017). Higher order effects occur when the presence of a third species changes per capita competitive  
379 interactions within a species pair. One main challenge to this is to achieve sufficient sampling size to  
380 capture the variability in species composition and multitrophic interactions (Levine *et al.* 2017). For  
381 example, our study does not support such complexity view as model selection by AIC highlighted a  
382 common effect of floral visitors and soil salinity across species. However, this could be caused because  
383 we measured interactions in a relatively dry year and the abundance of some floral visitors groups such  
384 as bees and butterflies were low. This last point also makes us aware that climatic variability across  
385 years is another layer of complexity that we do not include in our study. Variation between years in the  
386 amount of rainfall can change the spatial configuration of soil salinity conditions as well as change the  
387 strength and the specificity of the effect of floral visitors on competitive interactions.

388 In summary, our study shows that soil conditions and multitrophic interactions represented by floral  
389 visitors have contrasting outcomes in determining coexistence at the neighbourhood scale of plant  
390 species interactions. While soil salinity promotes competitive exclusion, floral visitors promote  
391 coexistence. These differences were mostly explained by equalising processes rather than by stabilising  
392 processes. Nevertheless, soil salinity promotes coexistence over larger scales by changing the identity of  
393 the competitive winner under contrasting soil salinity conditions. Together, our results highlight that  
394 abiotic and biotic determinants of plant diversity are operating at distinct scales. Future research  
395 addressing more complexity by including several abiotic and biotic factors, high order effects, and  
396 climate variation are needed.

## 397 **Author’s contribution**

398 I.B. and O.G. designed the study. J.B.L and O.G. conducted fieldwork. All authors analysed the  
399 results and wrote the manuscript.

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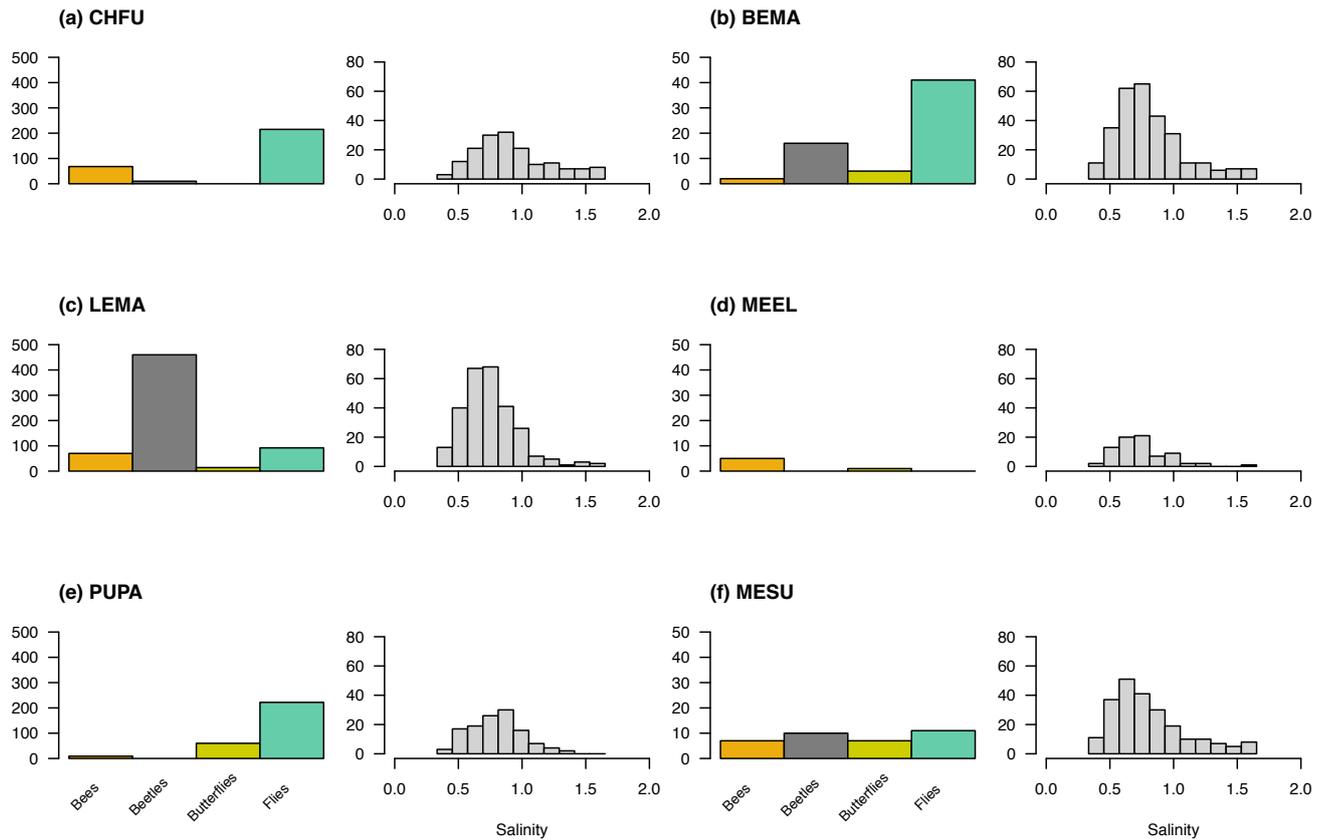
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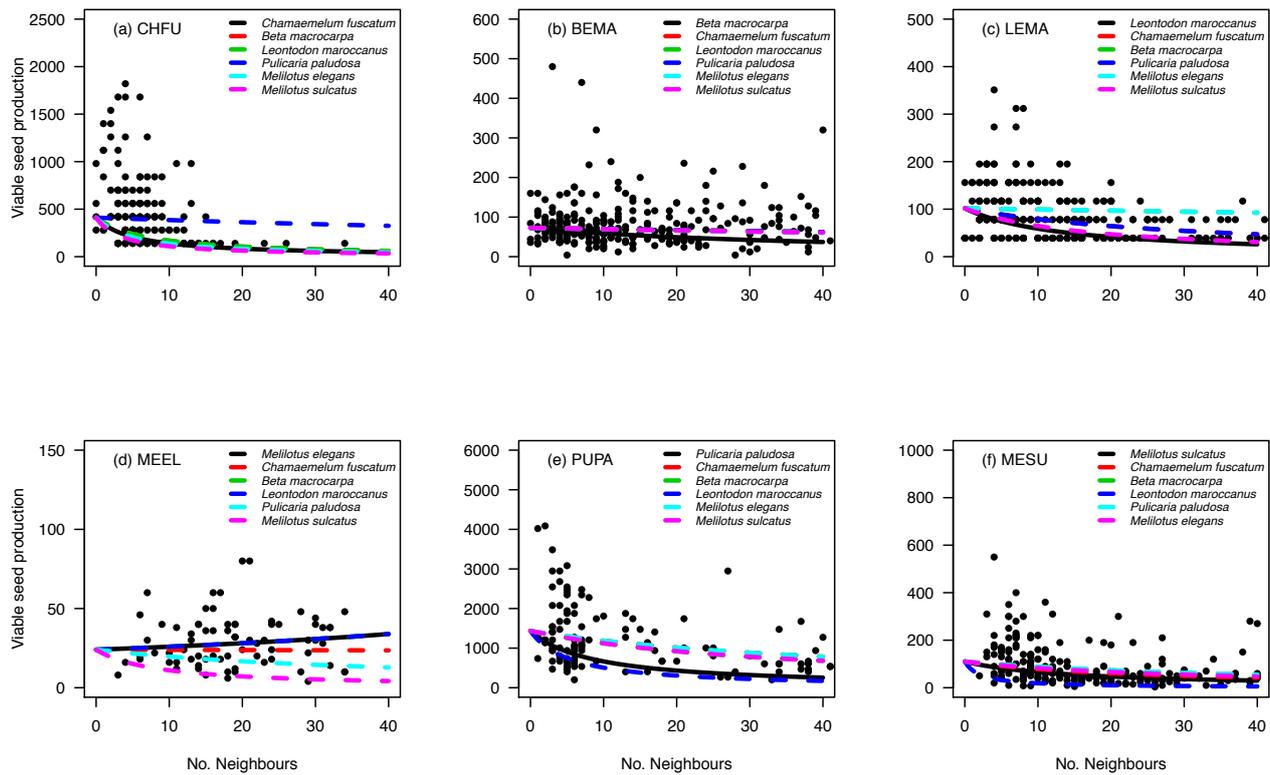
564 **Table 1.** List of species observed in Caracoles Ranch. Code and taxonomic family of each species is  
565 provided. Sample size represents the total number of individuals sampled for each focal species, and it  
566 is correlated with their natural abundance at the study site.

Species	Family	Code	Floral visitors	Sample size
<i>Beta macrocarpa</i>	Amaranthaceae	BEMA	Yes	289
<i>Chamaemelum fuscatum</i>	Asteraceae	CHFU	Yes	162
<i>Chamaemelum mixtum</i>	Asteraceae	CHMI	Yes	5
<i>Centaureum tenuiflorum</i>	Gentianaceae	CETE	No	23
<i>Frankenia pulverulenta</i>	Frankeniaceae	FRPU	No	5
<i>Hordeum marinum</i>	Poaceae	HOMA	No	289
<i>Leontodon maroccanus</i>	Asteraceae	LEMA	Yes	273
<i>Melilotus elengans</i>	Fabaceae	MEEL	Yes	77
<i>Melilotus sulcatus</i>	Fabaceae	MESU	Yes	229
<i>Plantago coronopus</i>	Plantaginaceae	PLCO	No	171
<i>Polypogon monspeliensis</i>	Poaceae	POMO	No	20
<i>Pulicaria paludosa</i>	Asteraceae	PUPA	Yes	124
<i>Scorzonera laciniata</i>	Asteraceae	SCLA	Yes	101
<i>Spergularia rubra</i>	Caryophyllaceae	SPRU	Yes	44
<i>Sonchus asper</i>	Asteraceae	SOAS	Yes	87
<i>Suaeda splendens</i>	Amaranthaceae	SUSP	No	29



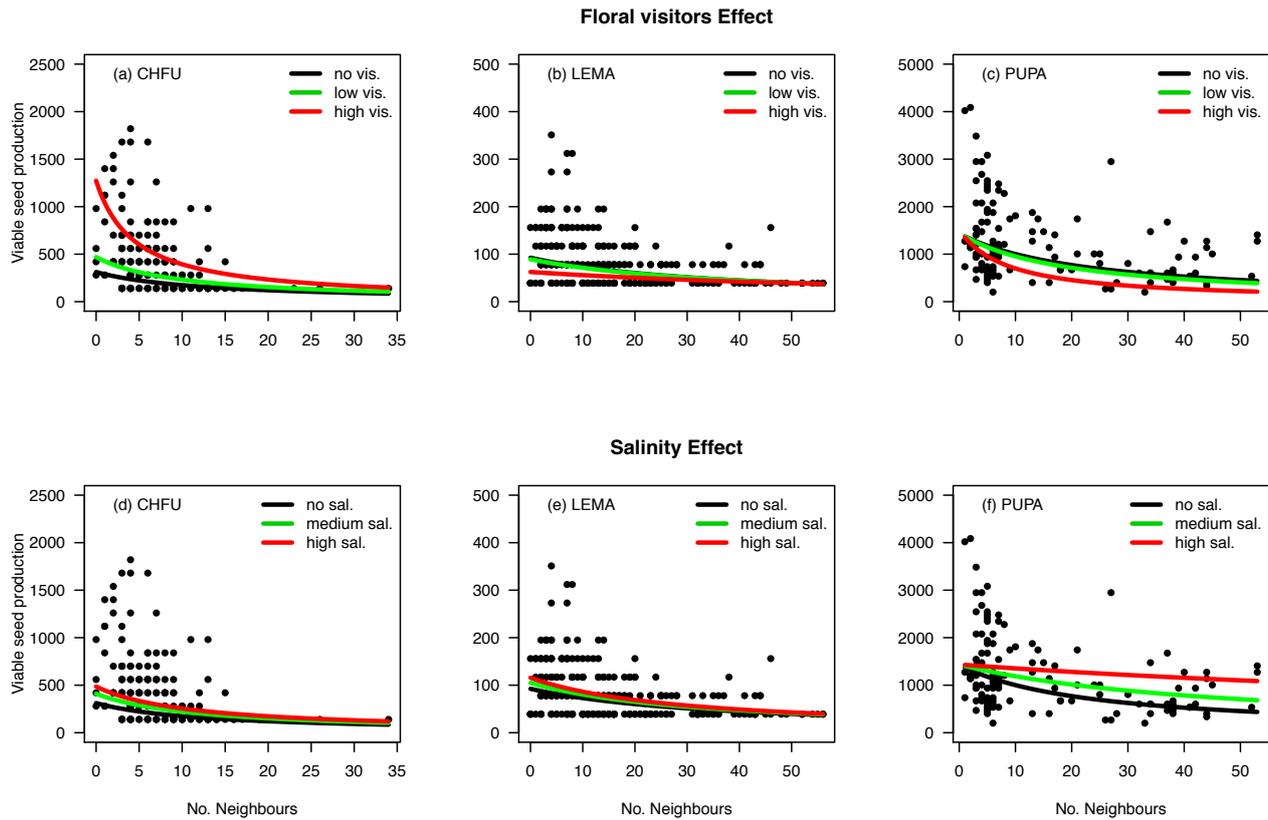
567

568 **FIGURE 1.** For the six focal species this shows: total number of visits of the four groups of floral  
569 visitors (bees, beetles, butterflies and flies) (left panel) and species abundance along the salinity  
570 gradient (right panel). The amount of salinity experience during the life span of each species was  
571 measured as the sum of the electric conductivity in Ds/m measured bi-monthly. Note that the three  
572 Asteraceae species (a) CHFU, (c) LEMA and (e) PUPA had an order of magnitude more floral visits  
573 than the non-Asteraceae species (b) BEMA, (d) MEEL and (f) MESU. See Table 1 for species code.



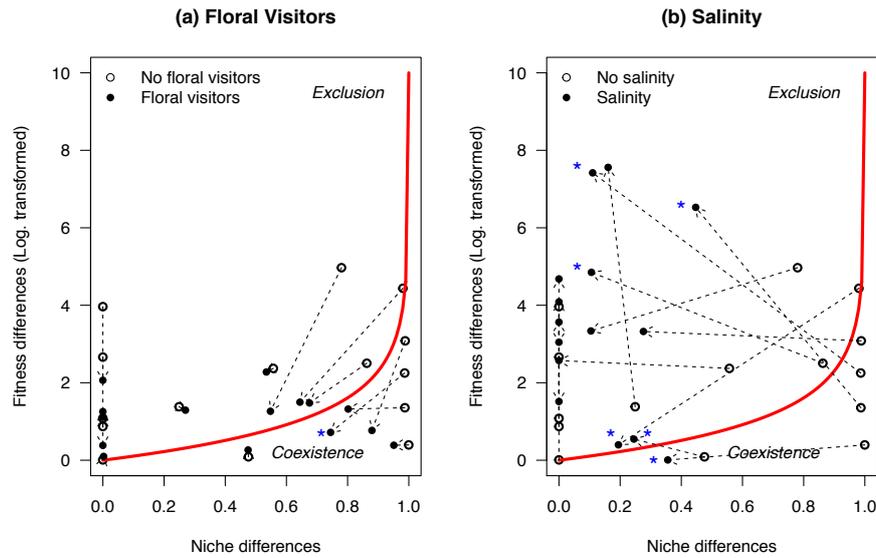
574

575 **FIGURE 2.** Relationship between per capita seed production as a function of the number of  
576 neighbours within a 7.5 cm radius area for the six studied plant species. The negative exponential  
577 regressions are represented with the parameters estimated from the maximum likelihood approach and  
578 median conditions of soil salinity and frequency of floral visitors experienced by each focal species.  
579 Parameters estimates correspond to the AIC best-supported model, which were model 1 for (a) CHFU,  
580 (c) LEMA and (e) PUPA and model 3 for (b) BEMA, (d) MEEL and (f) MESU. Intraspecific  
581 competitive effects are represented with a solid black line whereas interspecific effects are represented  
582 with a coloured dashed line.



583

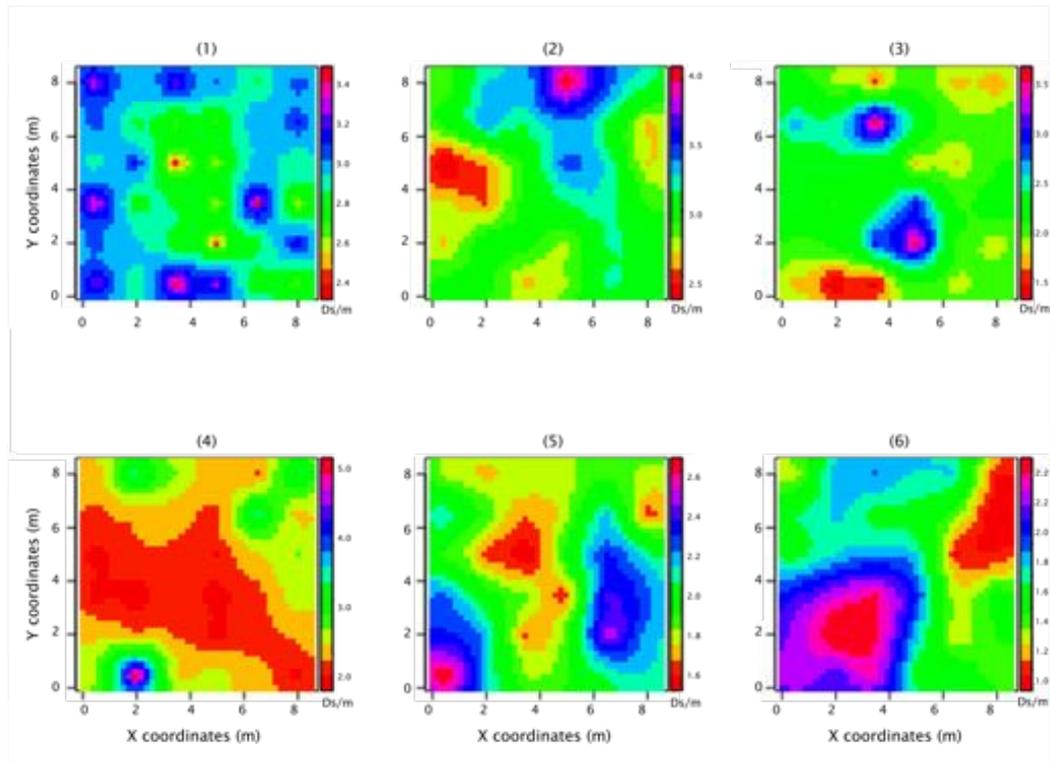
584 **FIGURE 3.** Relationship between per capita seed production as a function of the number of  
585 neighbours according to three different conditions of floral visitors and soil salinity. Here is shown the  
586 three focal species (CHFUF, LEMA, and PUPA) for which these abiotic and biotic factors had a  
587 significant common effect on species' fecundity (model 1). Upper panel contains floral visitors effects  
588 with black curves representing no floral visitation, green curves representing one or two visits, and red  
589 curves representing percentile 95 of floral visits (which ranges from 6 visits in *C. fuscatum* to 9 visits in  
590 *L. maroccanus* and *P. paludosa*). Lower panel contains soil salinity effects with black curves considering  
591 no salt in the soil, and green and red curves representing percentiles 50 and 95 respectively of the soil  
592 salinity sum over focal species life span.



593

594 **FIGURE 4.** Average fitness and stabilising niche differences for each pair of species (denoted by a  
 595 single point). Black solid points correspond to the situation of considering the effect of floral visitors (a)  
 596 or soil salinity (b) on the determinants of competition outcomes, and white open points correspond to  
 597 the situation of not considering these effects. Dashed arrows connect both situations within species  
 598 pairs. The red curve separates the exclusion region from the region where the condition for coexistence  
 599 is met ( $\rho < \frac{k_i}{k_j}$ , where species  $j$  is the fitness superior). Five species pairs fall in the coexistence region  
 600 without considering the effect of floral visitors and soil salinity. When considering the effect of floral  
 601 visitors, these five coexisting pairs were remained within the coexistence region and another five moved  
 602 closer to the coexistence region. In contrast, soil salinity moved out from the coexistence region four of  
 603 the five coexisting species pairs away from the coexistence region and increased the degree of  
 604 competitive asymmetry between eight species pairs more. Nevertheless, soil salinity changed the  
 605 identity of the competitive superior in six cases, whereas floral visitors did so only for one case.  
 606 Changes in superior competitor's identity within species pairs are denoted with a blue asterisk.

607 **Appendices**



608

609 **Appendix S1.** Spatial variation of soil salinity at the plot scale for six of the nine plots included in the  
610 experiment. Note that there is high variation in soil salinity content within plot and the spatial  
611 configuration changes across plots.



612

613 **Appendix S2.** Design of the nine plots included for the study. Each plot of 8.5 x 8.5 m was divided  
614 into subplot of 1 x 1 m. Within these subplots, we measured competitive interactions and the effect of  
615 salinity and floral visitors of species' fecundity. Between subplots we left aisles of 0.5m for moving  
616 around the plot without producing any negative effect at the subplot vegetation.

Species	Parameters	Mean	Error
CHFUFU	$\lambda$	495.8259011	249.2678464
CHFUFU	$\gamma$	0.3346322	0.1947790
CHFUFU	$\theta$	-2.2352857	4.4644975
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{CHFUFU}$	0.1873126	0.2121660
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.1386864	0.1436807
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.1358526	0.1491525
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.1947075	0.1588686
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.2690500	0.3682666
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.0001000	0.1175938
CHFUFU	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.2320715	0.1320769
CHFUFU	$\omega$	0.0390446	0.0193033
CHFUFU	$\psi$	-1.4633299	1.4990531
BEMA	$\lambda$	72.1188747	7.2846317
BEMA	$\alpha_{CHFUFU}$	0.0000100	32.5127369
BEMA	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.0198596	0.0331802
BEMA	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.0000100	0.0308751
BEMA	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.0009613	0.1560144
BEMA	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.0006914	0.0601157
BEMA	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.0000100	0.7610449
BEMA	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.0022045	0.0034386
LEMA	$\lambda$	119.3488553	3.9727362
LEMA	$\gamma$	-0.0261012	0.0058865
LEMA	$\theta$	-2.0264205	0.9181410
LEMA	$\alpha_{CHFUFU}$	0.0266545	5.9303647
LEMA	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.0000100	0.0286640
LEMA	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.0719735	0.0265397
LEMA	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.0000100	0.1663380
LEMA	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.0563558	0.0542640

Species	Parameters	Mean	Error
LEMA	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.0266545	8.7468054
LEMA	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.0513539	0.0093039
LEMA	$\omega$	-0.0018271	0.0012006
LEMA	$\psi$	-0.3401102	0.1533249
MEEL	$\lambda$	27.0004162	14.9492630
MEEL	$\alpha_{CHFUF}$	0.0077882	35.2672305
MEEL	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.0000100	0.1497215
MEEL	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.0000100	0.0695490
MEEL	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.0000100	0.1534307
MEEL	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.1256426	0.3002769
MEEL	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.0292457	0.1081434
MEEL	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.0041645	0.0165149
MESU	$\lambda$	154.7921156	20.9702230
MESU	$\alpha_{CHFUF}$	0.0659365	4.8933929
MESU	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.0500000	0.0666635
MESU	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.5089050	0.1579594
MESU	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.0578652	0.6188409
MESU	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.0922098	0.0879229
MESU	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.0500000	0.1080305
MESU	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.0607538	0.0151331
PUPA	$\lambda$	1902.2889572	0.8236920
PUPA	$\gamma$	-0.0054871	0.0130291
PUPA	$\theta$	-2.2465017	1.1044209
PUPA	$\alpha_{CHFUF}$	0.0429302	7.8868583
PUPA	$\alpha_{BEMA}$	0.0500000	0.0976707
PUPA	$\alpha_{LEMA}$	0.2056861	0.2928224
PUPA	$\alpha_{MEEL}$	0.0429302	10.1433513
PUPA	$\alpha_{MESU}$	0.0500000	0.5647901

Species	Parameters	Mean	Error
PUPA	$\alpha_{PUPA}$	0.1382515	0.0527966
PUPA	$\alpha_{NONFOCAL}$	0.0648232	0.0125464
PUPA	$\omega$	0.0023946	0.0065704
PUPA	$\psi$	-0.5302532	0.1939466

617 **Appendix S3.** Mean and standard error of each parameter for the best model selected with AIC.

Model	Parameters	Loglikelihood	AIC	Species
1	24	123.75096	295.5019	CHFUF
2	12	133.77808	291.5562	CHFUF
3	2	158.91086	321.8217	CHFUF
1	24	275.08995	598.1799	BEMA
2	12	274.21142	572.4228	BEMA
3	2	275.41119	554.8224	BEMA
1	24	192.32907	432.6581	LEMA
2	12	191.95274	407.9055	LEMA
3	2	207.40493	418.8099	LEMA
1	24	68.43199	184.8640	MEEL
2	12	67.70891	159.4178	MEEL
3	2	69.98881	143.9776	MEEL
1	24	290.08864	628.1773	MESU
2	12	289.65875	603.3175	MESU
3	2	314.55368	633.1074	MESU
1	24	98.67061	245.3412	PUPA
2	12	103.95288	231.9058	PUPA
3	2	109.62922	223.2584	PUPA

618 **Appendix S4.** AIC (Akaike Information Criteria) values for the three models considered for each focal  
619 species. Species codes are provided in Table 1.