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USE OF *SPARTINA ALTERNIFLORA* LOISEL. (GRAMINEAE) SALT MARSHES BY JUVENILE FISHES: EFFECTS OF THE PRESENCE OF *MAGALLANA GIGAS* (THUNBERG, 1793) ON DISTRIBUTION PATTERNS

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Salt marshes are ecologically important ecosystems that provide high biodiversity and key ecosystem services but are increasingly threatened by global wetland loss driven by climate change, sea-level rise, and human activities. Invasive species such as the Pacific oyster *Magallana gigas* can function as autogenic ecosystem engineers, which modify habitat structure and associated biological communities. In the Bahía Blanca Estuary, Argentina, we evaluated the effects of oyster presence on fish assemblages in vegetated *Spartina alterniflora* marshes and adjacent non-vegetated habitats. Fish were sampled using gillnets during nine tidal cycles, and changes in prey availability and sediment characteristics were also assessed. Vegetated areas showed higher fish abundance, greater species diversity, and larger body sizes than non-vegetated oyster-dominated areas. Oyster invasion was additionally associated with shifts in benthic food resources and sediment properties. These results demonstrate that *M. gigas* significantly alters fish assemblage structure, underscoring the need to incorporate biological invasions into salt marsh conservation and management strategies.

Keywords: salt marshes; Bahía Blanca Estuary; *Magallana gigas*; fish; *Spartina alterniflora.*
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