Molecular characterization of *Sardina pilchardus* larvae diet in Málaga Bay (SW Mediterranean Sea)

The study of predation in the early life stages of fish by direct observation of their stomach content is very difficult, mostly because prey lose all identifiable characteristics.

We developed a multiplex-PCR based method, which detected within the gut of the larvae the presence/absence of the five main species of copepods that live in Malaga Bay: *Clausocalanus parapergens*, *Oncaea waldemari*, *Paracalanus indicus*, *Temora stylifera* and *Acartia clausi*.

A set of five species-specific primers were designed and combined in a single multiplex PCR system, which allowed a time and cost effective screening of the samples. The method detected as little as 0.09 ng/μL of copepod DNA without cross-reactions with *Sardina pilchardus* DNA.