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**Author(s):** von Ahnen, Mathis; Aalto, Sanni L.; Suurnäkki, Suvi; Tirola, Marja; Pedersen, Per Bovbjerg

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1 Salinity affects nitrate removal and microbial composition of denitrifying woodchip bioreactors treating  
2 recirculating aquaculture system effluents

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4 Mathis von Ahnen<sup>a</sup>, Sanni L. Aalto<sup>b,c</sup>, Suvi Suurnäkki<sup>b</sup>, Marja Tirola<sup>b</sup>, Per Bovbjerg Pedersen<sup>a</sup>

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6 <sup>a</sup>Technical University of Denmark, DTU Aqua, Section for Aquaculture, The North Sea Research Centre,  
7 P.O. Box 101, DK-9850 Hirtshals, Denmark.

8 <sup>b</sup>Department of Biological and Environmental Science, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014  
9 Jyväskylä, Finland

10 <sup>c</sup>Department of Environmental and Biological Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, P.O. Box 1627,  
11 70211 Kuopio, Finland

12 Corr. author email address: [mvah@aqu.dtu.dk](mailto:mvah@aqu.dtu.dk)

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15 Abstract

16 This study investigated the effect of salinity on microbial composition and denitrification capacity of  
17 woodchip bioreactors treating recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) effluents. Twelve laboratory-scale  
18 woodchip bioreactors were run in triplicates at 0, 15, 25, and 35 ppt salinities, and water chemistry was  
19 monitored every third day during the first 39 days of operation. Microbial communities of the woodchips  
20 bioreactors were analyzed at the start, after one week, and at the end of the trial.

21 Woodchip bioreactors removed nitrate at all salinities tested. The highest NO<sub>3</sub>-N removal rate of 22.0 ±  
22 6.9 g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d was obtained at 0 ppt, while 15.3 ± 4.9, 12.5 ± 5.4 and 11.8 ± 4.0 g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d were  
23 obtained at salinities of 15, 25 and 35 ppt, respectively. Nitrate removal rates thus decreased with salinity,  
24 being 54-69% lower than at 0 ppt. Leaching of total ammonia nitrogen (TAN) and orthophosphate (PO<sub>4</sub>-P)  
25 from woodchips was initially higher at saline treatments compared to 0 ppt, while initial leaching of BOD<sub>5</sub>  
26 appeared to be similar across all treatments. Production of alkalinity per g NO<sub>3</sub>-N removed was higher at  
27 0 (3.6 ± 0.5 gCaCO<sub>3</sub>/gNO<sub>3</sub>-N) and 15 ppt (3.5 ± 0.8) than at the more saline treatments (25 ppt: 2.0 ± 0.9,  
28 35 ppt: 1.12 ± 0.5 gCaCO<sub>3</sub>/gNO<sub>3</sub>-N), indicating that heterotrophic denitrification was the dominant nitrate  
29 removing process at 0 and 15ppt, while autotrophic denitrification processes probably interfered with the  
30 alkalinity balance at 25 and 35 ppt. In the woodchip reactors, Gammaproteobacteria was the most  
31 abundant taxa. However, salinity shaped the woodchip microbiome, resulting in an increase in the

32 abundance of sulfide oxidizing autotrophic denitrifiers, but decrease in the overall abundance of  
33 denitrifying microbes at higher salinities, which presumably explained the reduced nitrate removal rates  
34 at elevated salinities.

35 This study demonstrates that woodchip bioreactors can be applied to remove nitrate from saline RAS  
36 effluents albeit at lower nitrate removal rates compared to freshwater installations.

37 1. Introduction

38 Practical and effective methods for removing nitrate from recirculating aquaculture system (RAS)  
39 effluents are needed, to ensure a reduced environmental impact and a sustainable growth of the  
40 aquaculture industry (van Rijn et al. 2016). One approach to remove nitrates from waste waters are  
41 denitrifying woodchip bioreactors, which are typically trenches filled with woody substrate, that have  
42 been successfully applied to treat tile drainage for more than twenty years (Schipper et al., 2010;  
43 Christianson et al., 2012, Addy et al., 2016). Laboratory and pilot-scale studies have demonstrated that  
44 woodchip bioreactors may be applied to treat effluents from freshwater RAS (Lepine et al., 2016; von  
45 Ahnen et al., 2016 a,b; Christianson et al., 2016; Christianson et al., 2018). These previous studies have  
46 focused on examining factors regulating woodchip bioreactor operation (e.g. hydraulic retention time  
47 Lepine et al., 2016), the possibilities to increase N removal rates (von Ahnen et al., 2016a), start-up phase  
48 at pilot-scale (von Ahnen et al., 2016b), as well as potential operational risks (e.g. bioreactor clogging  
49 Christianson et al., 2016), or mitigation of potential phosphorus leaching after bioreactor start-up (Sharrer  
50 et al., 2016; Christianson et al., 2017). Recently, woodchip bioreactors have been successfully  
51 implemented in full-scale at three commercial recirculated freshwater trout farms in Denmark (von Ahnen  
52 et al., 2018).

53 However, since the production of marine fish species including smolt and even full grow-out of Atlantic  
54 Salmon (*Salmo salar*) in saline waters is being increasingly moved on land (Dalsgaard et al., 2013),  
55 knowledge on the capability of woodchip bioreactors to treat saline RAS effluents is now requested by  
56 the aquaculture industry. So far, only one study in the international scientific literature (He et al., 2018)  
57 has looked at woodchip bioreactors treating saline waters, by investigating denitrification performance of  
58 three woodchips types; eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*), red oak (*Quercus rubra*), and eucalyptus  
59 (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) as well as other organic carbon sources (methanol, fish waste, elemental sulfur  
60 pellets with oyster shells, mixtures of sulfur and woodchips) when treating synthetic saline RAS water (15  
61 ppt,  $97.2 \pm 1.8$  mg  $\text{NO}_3\text{-N/l}$ ). In their microcosm study, bottles were incubated under static conditions at  
62  $23.5 \pm 2.1^\circ\text{C}$  and achieved volumetric removal rates for the three wood species which ranged from  $1.2 \pm$   
63  $1.0$  (eucalyptus) to  $16.5 \pm 1.1$  (pine)  $\text{gN/m}^3/\text{d}$ .

64 The microbial communities of woodchip reactors are still rather poorly known. Recent laboratory  
65 experiments proved that Alpha-, Beta- and Gammaproteobacteria were dominating in woodchip  
66 bioreactors and high microbial denitrification and anammox activities was found on the woodchips  
67 (Grießmeier et al. 2017; Grießmeier & Gescher 2018). However, the effect of salinity on woodchip

68 microbiome is currently unknown. In a previous study by Bakke et al. (2017), the microbial communities  
69 within RAS have been found to differ between three systems operated at different salinities (12, 22, and  
70 32 ppt), suggesting that significant changes in microbial communities could be expected also in woodchip  
71 reactors. Furthermore, since salinity decreases nitrate removal rates in natural aquatic systems (e.g.  
72 Rysgaard et al. 1999), changes in denitrification rate might also be expected.

73 In this study, we examined the effect of salinity on the performance and microbial composition of  
74 laboratory-scale woodchip bioreactors treating RAS effluent waters under start-up conditions using  
75 combined measurements of water chemistry and next generation sequencing technique.

## 76 2. Materials and Methods

### 77 2.1 Experimental set-up

78 The experimental set-up comprised 12 horizontal-flow woodchip bioreactors (described in von Ahnen et  
79 al., 2016a) operated at four different salinities, n=3 per salinity level. Each woodchip bioreactor contained  
80 poplar (*Populus* sp.) woodchips with an average length of  $0.7 \pm 0.4$  cm, width of  $0.6 \pm 0.3$  cm and thickness  
81 of  $0.3 \pm 0.2$  cm (n=20) with a submerged woodchip volume of 3l and was operated at an empty bed contact  
82 time (EBCT) of 12 hours. Total woodchip porosity was measured according to Christianson et al. (2010)  
83 and was  $70 \pm 1$  % (n=3).

84 The effluent to be treated in the experimental woodchip bioreactors originated from a  $8.5 \text{ m}^3$   
85 experimental, freshwater RAS stocked with rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) as described in von  
86 Ahnen et al. (2016a). The effluent was pre-filtered through a  $60 \mu\text{m}$  mesh, and kept in the aerated holding  
87 tank (700 l). Every third day, the holding tank water was used to replace water in four small reservoirs (60  
88 l each), which each acted as inlet water source to 3 experimental woodchip bioreactors (three bioreactors  
89 of same salinity receiving water from one small reservoir). After water replacement, synthetic sea salt  
90 (Blue Treasure SPS Sea Salt) was added to three of the small reservoirs to generate inlet waters with  
91 salinities of 0, 15, 25 and 35 ppt, respectively. The woodchip bioreactors were operated continuously in  
92 this fixed set-up during the entire study period.

### 93 2.2 Water sampling and analyses

94 Water sampling was conducted every third day for 39 days during bioreactor start-up. Water from the 4  
95 inlet-reservoirs was collected as grab samples, while outlet samples from all woodchip bioreactors were  
96 collected as 24 hour pooled samples by collecting the entire bioreactor effluent in a container cooled by  
97 ice over 24 hours. Immediately before water samplings, point measurements of oxygen, pH and

98 temperature were performed in the inlet reservoirs, and at the outlet side of the woodchip bioreactors  
99 using a portable meter (Hach Lange HQ40 multimeters, Düsseldorf, Germany).

100 After sampling, total BOD<sub>5</sub> was analyzed from unfiltered water samples (BOD<sub>5-total</sub>; ISO 5815-2, 2003) and  
101 subsamples of water (1000 ml) were filtered through 0.45 µm mixed cellulose ester filters (Whatman, GE  
102 Healthcare, UK) and analyzed for dissolved BOD<sub>5</sub> following standard procedure (BOD<sub>5-diss</sub>; ISO 5815-2,  
103 2003). Measurements of BOD<sub>5</sub> were carried out on every fourth sampling event only.

104 Other subsamples were filtered through 0.2 µm syringe filters (Filtropur S 0.2 µm, Sarstedt, Germany)  
105 prior to analyses of total ammonia nitrogen (TAN; DS224, 1975) and measurements of the ions nitrite-N,  
106 nitrate-N, orthophosphate (PO<sub>4</sub>-P), and sulfate (SO<sub>4</sub>-S) using an ion chromatograph (Thermo Scientific™  
107 Dionex™ Ion Chromatography, Mettler Toledo). Filtered subsamples were kept cold (3°C) after collection  
108 for subsequent analysis.

### 109 2.3 Sampling and analyses of the woodchip-associated microbial community

110 For microbiome analysis and qPCR, approximately 20 mL of woodchips were collected with sterilized  
111 tweezers from the center of the outlet side of the woodchip bioreactors after 1, 7 and 39 days (end of  
112 trial) of bioreactor operation, and stored at -20 °C until further analyses. To detach the microbes from  
113 woodchips, 20 ml of water was added to woodchips and sonication was performed in two periods of two  
114 minutes by an ultrasonic bath (Branson 1510). Woodchips were discarded, samples were freeze-dried  
115 (Alpha 1-4 LD plus, Christ) and DNA extraction done with PowerLyzer PowerSoil DNA extraction kit (MoBio  
116 Laboratories, Inc.). The Quant-IT PicoGreen® dsDNA Assay Kit (Invitrogen) was used to quantify DNA .  
117 Changes in the community composition, richness, and diversity of organisms harbouring the 16S rRNA  
118 gene were studied with next generation sequencing. Universal prokaryotic primers 515F-Y  
119 (GTGYCAGCMGCCGCGGTAA; Parada et al. 2016) and 806R (GGACTACHVGGGTWTCTAAT; Caporaso et al.,  
120 2011) were used to amplify the V4 region of the prokaryotic 16S rRNA gene. The abundance of nirK  
121 (nirK876/1040; Henry et al. 2004) and nirS (nirSC3aF/R3cd; Kandeler et al. 2006) genes in samples were  
122 quantified by qPCR amplification with Bio-Rad CFX96 Real-Time System (Bio-Rad Laboratories).

123 The qPCR reactions of 25 µl consisted of Maxima SYBR Green/Fluorescein qPCR Master Mix (Thermo  
124 Fisher Scientific), 5 ng of template DNA, and 0.4 µM of each primer (Sigma Aldrich). Thermal cycling  
125 consisted of 10 min initial denaturation at 95 °C, followed by 35 cycles of 95 °C for 30 s, 50 °C for 30 s and  
126 72 °C for 60 s, followed by final elongation at 72 °C for 5 min.). For nirK and nirS genes, the annealing  
127 temperature was 60 °C and 55°C, respectively. For microbial community analysis, one µl of the PCR

128 product was used as a template in PCR where Ion Torrent PGM sequencing adapters and barcodes were  
129 added to the ends of PCR product. Linker and fusion primers (0.04  $\mu$ M of M13\_515F-Y, 0.4  $\mu$ M of  
130 IonA\_IonXpressBarcode\_M13 and P1\_806R) were used in 10 additional cycles with conditions otherwise  
131 identical to the first amplification (Mäki et al. 2016). Products were purified with Agencourt AMPure XP  
132 purification system (Beckman Coulter Life Sciences, Indianapolis, IN, USA), quantified, and pooled in  
133 equimolar quantities for sequencing on Ion Torrent PGM using Ion PGM Hi-Q View OT2 Kit for emulsion  
134 PCR, PGM Hi-Q View Sequencing Kit for the sequencing reaction and Ion 316 Chip v2 (all Life Sciences,  
135 Thermo Fisher Scientific).

136 Analysis of gene sequences was done using Mothur (version 1.39.5; Schloss et al., 2009). Sequences  
137 shorter than 200 bp, low-quality sequences with more than one mismatch in barcode/primer sequences,  
138 or with homopolymers longer than eight nucleotides, as well as barcodes, and primers were removed.  
139 Sequences were aligned using Silva reference alignment (Release 132). Chimeric sequences, denoted  
140 using Mothur's implementation of Uchime (Edgar et al., 2011), were removed from each library.  
141 Sequences were divided into operational taxonomic units (OTUs) at 97% similarity level, and singleton  
142 OTUs (OTUs with only one sequence in the entire dataset) were removed. Sequences were assigned  
143 taxonomies with a naïve Bayesian classifier (bootstrap value cut off = 80 %) (Wang et al. 2007) using Silva  
144 database (Release 132) and sequences classified as chloroplast, mitochondria and eukaryote were  
145 removed. Finally, the data was normalized by subsampling to 12,887 sequences. Sequences have been  
146 submitted to NCBI Sequence Read Archive under Sequences have been submitted to NCBI Sequence Read  
147 Archive under BioProject PRJNA509197.

#### 148 2.4 Statistics and calculation of removal rates and correlation analyses

149 Volumetric removal rates ( $\text{g}/\text{m}^3/\text{d}$ ) were calculated based on concentration differences between  
150 bioreactor inlet and outlet samples and the EBCT of the woodchip bioreactors. The EBCT was calculated  
151 from the volume of the submerged woodchips and the flow rates. Results are throughout presented as  
152 means  $\pm$  SD.

153 Differences between removal rates were assessed by Kruskal–Wallis One-Way ANOVA on Ranks followed  
154 by Tukey Test of Multiple Comparisons using SigmaPlot version 13.0 (SystatSoftware Inc., CA, USA). The  
155 statistical analysis for microbiome were conducted using R version 3.4.3 (R Core Team, 2018). Non-metric  
156 multidimensional scaling (NMDS) conducted with metaMDS function in vegan package; (Oksanen et al.,  
157 2013) plots calculated based on Bray–Curtis distance matrix were used to visualize dynamics in the

158 microbial community structure (OTUs represented by at least two reads). Before NMDS, Wisconsin and  
159 square-root-transformations were applied to OTU abundance data.

## 160 3 Results and discussion

### 161 3.1 Nitrogen removal

162 In all bioreactors, dissolved oxygen concentrations were  $\sim 1$  mg O<sub>2</sub>/l (Fig. 1a), and pH values  $\sim 7$  (Fig. 1b.)  
163 at the outlets, indicating that suitable conditions for denitrification prevailed throughout the experimental  
164 period (Henze et al. 2002). Indeed, nitrate was removed in all bioreactors during the experimental period  
165 of 39 days, albeit removal rates were significantly higher in freshwater bioreactors than in the bioreactors  
166 with salinities of 15, 25 and 35 ppt, respectively (Tab. 1, Fig. 1c). In a previous study with high-salinity  
167 synthetic wastewaters, salt concentrations larger than 1% (10 ppt) have been found to suppress  
168 heterotrophic denitrification in a downflow packed column with plastic media fed with sugar solution  
169 (Dincer and Kargi 1999). In agreement with this, we found reduced nitrate removal rates with increasing  
170 salinity also in woodchip beds, although there was no significant difference between removal rates  
171 obtained at 25 and 35ppt (Tab. 1).

172 In the freshwater treatment/bioreactors, the nitrate removal rates achieved ( $22.02 \pm 6.87$  g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d;  
173 Tab. 1) fitted into the upper range of removal rates reported for drainage water treatment (2-22 gN/m<sup>3</sup>/d;  
174 Schipper et al., 2010; Christianson et al., 2012). However, removal rates in woodchip bioreactors may  
175 decline over the first years of operation (Addy et al. 2016), suggesting that the removal rates might have  
176 declined if this trial was continued further after the 39 days. Nitrate removal rates at three full-scale  
177 woodchip bioreactors operated at commercial freshwater recirculated trout farms in Denmark ranged  
178 from 4.5 – 7.8 gNO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d during the first year. The average temperature was 10.1 °C as compared to  
179 the 14.4 °C in this study. At 15 ppt, the average nitrate removal rate in the bioreactors filled with poplar  
180 woodchips was  $15.30 \pm 4.86$  g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d, similar to findings by He et al. (2018), who found nitrate  
181 removal rates of 11.6 - 16.5; 1.2 – 4.9; and 4.7 – 9.5 g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d for eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*),  
182 eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and red oak (*Quercus rubra*), respectively, in a microcosm study  
183 incubating woodchips with 800 ml of synthetic saline RAS water at 15 ppt, initial nitrate concentrations of  
184 approximately 100 mg NO<sub>3</sub>-N/l and at  $23.5 \pm 2.1$ °C. At 25 and 35 ppt, nitrate-N removal rates were  $12.46$   
185  $\pm 5.41$  and  $11.82 \pm 3.96$  g NO<sub>3</sub>-N/m<sup>3</sup>/d, respectively.

186 The amount of alkalinity produced per g NO<sub>3</sub>-N reduced in the woodchip bioreactors decreased as salinity  
187 increased (0 ppt:  $3.58 \pm 0.47$ , 15 ppt:  $3.52 \pm 0.84$ , 25 ppt:  $1.96 \pm 0.86$ , and 35 ppt:  $1.17 \pm 0.53$  gCaCO<sub>3</sub>/gNO<sub>3</sub>-

188 N removed, n=13). According to van Rijn et al. (2006), heterotrophic denitrification produces 3.57 mg  
189 CaCO<sub>3</sub> for each mg NO<sub>3</sub>-N reduced to N<sub>2</sub> gas, indicating that the alkalinity production at 0 and 15 ppt was  
190 well explained by heterotrophic denitrification. At 25 and 35ppt, however, alkalinity production was lower  
191 than would be expected on the basis of heterotrophic denitrification alone. At these salinities, sulfate was  
192 net produced at rates of 1.38 ± 25.17 (25 ppt) and 6.38 ± 27.32 gSO<sub>4</sub>-S/m<sup>3</sup>/d (35 ppt). Since the reduction  
193 of sulfate (SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup>) to sulfide (S<sup>2-</sup>) produces 100 mg CaCO<sub>3</sub> per mole sulfate reduced, while sulfate production  
194 through sulfide-driven autotrophic denitrification consumes 20mg CaCO<sub>3</sub>/mole H<sub>2</sub>S (van Rijn et al., 2006),  
195 the reduced alkalinity production at 25 and 35 ppt bioreactors could be explained by increased  
196 autotrophic denitrification and/or by lower sulfate reduction. Minor average sulfate removals at 0 and 15  
197 ppt (Tab. 1, Fig. 1d) may indicate that some nitrate limitation potentially occurred locally at microsites  
198 within the woodchips. However, inlet concentrations of nitrate-nitrogen to all bioreactors increased  
199 steadily from 55 to 86 mg NO<sub>3</sub>-N/l during the study period (Fig. 1 c), and outlet nitrate concentrations  
200 were above 40 mg NO<sub>3</sub>-N/l at all times thus indicating that overall woodchip bioreactors were not limited  
201 by nitrate availability during the experiment.

### 202 3.2 Other water quality parameters

203 Elevated nitrite concentrations were observed at all salinities during the first 12 days of woodchip  
204 bioreactor operation (Fig. 1e). This is in agreement with previous findings by von Ahnen et al. (2016b),  
205 who found elevated nitrite concentrations in the pilot-scale woodchip bioreactor effluent during the first  
206 11 days after bioreactor start-up. Lepine et al. (2016) also observed elevated nitrite concentrations during  
207 the first days after start-up in denitrifying woodchip bioreactors operated at different hydraulic retention  
208 times.

209 Leaching of TAN (Fig. 1f) and orthophosphate (Fig. 1g) was more pronounced during the first days after  
210 bioreactor start-up at salinities 15, 25 and 35 ppt as compared to 0 ppt. This might be due to the higher  
211 density of the saline water as compared to freshwater, increasing the diffusion rate of TAN and  
212 orthophosphate. In contrast, leaching of organic matter, measured as total and dissolved BOD<sub>5</sub> was similar  
213 across all salinities, and total BOD<sub>5</sub> concentrations measured in the outlet approached inlet  
214 concentrations after 12 days of operation (Fig. 1h,i), in agreement with von Ahnen et al. (2016b), where  
215 leaching of dissolved and total BOD<sub>5</sub> occurred during the first two weeks of operation. The relatively short-  
216 lasting leaching observed in that study as compared to previous woodchip bioreactor studies (reviewed  
217 by Schipper et al. 2010) was likely due to the short EBCT (5 hours) applied, while in the current study, the  
218 short-lasting leaching was probably due to the relatively fine woodchips being used. Leaching of dissolved

219 organic matter was accompanied by a decreasing outlet pH during the first days after bioreactor start-up  
220 (Fig. 1 b), presumably due to the leaching of organic acids, typically observed during bioreactor start-up  
221 (Lepine et al., 2016; von Ahnen et al., 2016b). The pH decreased less during bioreactor start-up at higher  
222 salinities, which was likely due to the higher alkalinity values (Fig. 1j). After 3 weeks of operation, outlet  
223 TAN concentrations increased at 35ppt, presumably due to microbial processes rather than leaching.

### 224 3.3 Microbial community

225 In the beginning of the experiment (day 1), the microbial community compositions of woodchips were  
226 similar across all salinity levels (Fig. 2). However, after 7 days, the communities of the freshwater (0 ppt)  
227 and 15 ppt woodchip bioreactors were developed distinct from the more saline treatments (25 and 35  
228 ppt), and this difference was even more notable at the end of the experiment (day 39). Across all microbial  
229 classes observed in the reactors, the relative abundances of Bacteroidia (belonging to Bacteroidetes),  
230 Alpha- and Deltaproteobacteria were lower in the more saline treatments, especially at the end of the  
231 experiment (Fig. 3). Similarly, the relative abundance of Actinobacteria and Bacilli (belonging to  
232 Firmicutes) was lower, while the abundance of Gammaproteobacteria was higher at day 39 in the saline  
233 treatments than in the freshwater reactors.

234 The number of sequences (reads) assigned to denitrifying microbial orders (Saarenheimo et al. 2015;  
235 Griebmeier et al. 2017; Griebmeier & Gescher 2018) decreased in saline bioreactors in the course of the  
236 experiment (Fig. 4), suggesting that the decreased nitrate removal activities were linked to the abundance  
237 of these denitrifying microbes. The abundance of Betaproteobacteriales, Rhizobiales and  
238 Xanthomonadales decreased with increasing salinity, suggesting that they could be the main contributors  
239 to heterotrophic denitrification, and thus were most abundant in the freshwater bioreactors. In contrast,  
240 the abundance of Campylobacteriales was promoted in all saline bioreactors. This group was dominated  
241 by *Arcobacter* (Suppl. Fig. 1), which has previously been found to oxidize sulfide into elemental sulfur ( $S^0$ )  
242 (De Gusseme et al. 2009), that can be further oxidized into sulfate, thus explaining the observed sulfate  
243 production in 25 and 35 ppt bioreactors. Furthermore, *Arcobacter* has also been found to be capable of  
244 reducing nitrate and oxidizing sulfide, suggesting them as possible autotrophic denitrifiers in saline  
245 bioreactors. However, the overall abundance of these groups remained low even in the saline treatments  
246 (Fig. 4), explaining why the nitrate removal rates were lower in the more saline bioreactors. Furthermore,  
247 the abundance of the common sulfate reducers, Deltaproteobacteria, decreased in the most saline  
248 bioreactors, suggesting that less sulfide was produced in saline treatments, which could partly explain the  
249 moderate abundance of autotrophic denitrifiers. However, further studies are needed to elucidate the

250 interactions between heterotrophic and autotrophic denitrifiers in woodchip reactors more thoroughly.  
251 The microbial community composition analysis could also explain other observed water chemistry than  
252 nitrate reduction: observed nitrite accumulation in the beginning of the experiment could be due to  
253 Enterobacteriales, which decreased throughout the experiment (Suppl. Fig. 2). Campylobacteriales have  
254 been suggested to be capable of dissimilatory nitrate reduction to ammonium (Grießmeier et al. 2017),  
255 which could explain the higher TAN production at 35 ppt.

256 The qPCR of nitrite reductase genes, nirS and nirK, showed that nirS gene was more abundant than nirK  
257 in all bioreactors (Fig. 5). At the beginning of the experiment, the abundance of nirK and nirS genes were  
258 similar for all salinities. The abundance of nirS gene systematically increased toward the end of  
259 experiment, although the abundance of genes in 25 ppt ( $9.2E+06$  gene copies) and 35 ppt ( $3.4E+06$ ) was  
260 notably lower than in 0 ppt ( $6.0E+07$ ) and in 15 ppt ( $2.8E+07$ ) (Fig. 5). The higher gene copy numbers in 0  
261 ppt indicate higher amount of denitrifying prokaryotes present in the system, and thus higher genetic  
262 potential for denitrification. Similar pattern was observed in the abundances of nirK genes. Thus,  
263 denitrifying prokaryotes were less abundant in higher salinities than in freshwater environments and the  
264 genetic potential for denitrification was thus lower in higher salinity bioreactors. This finding is consistent  
265 with the reduced nitrate removal rates measured and the suppressed levels of denitrifying microbes in  
266 the more saline water.

## 267 Conclusions

268 Denitrifying woodchip bioreactors may be used to treat saline aquaculture effluents. However,  
269 denitrification rates in saline waters appear to be reduced compared to freshwater applications, which  
270 need to be considered in the planning and design of woodchip bioreactors for the saline RAS effluents.  
271 Analyses of the microbial community revealed that salinity altered the woodchip microbiome significantly,  
272 promoting autotrophic denitrifiers, but decreasing the overall denitrification potential.

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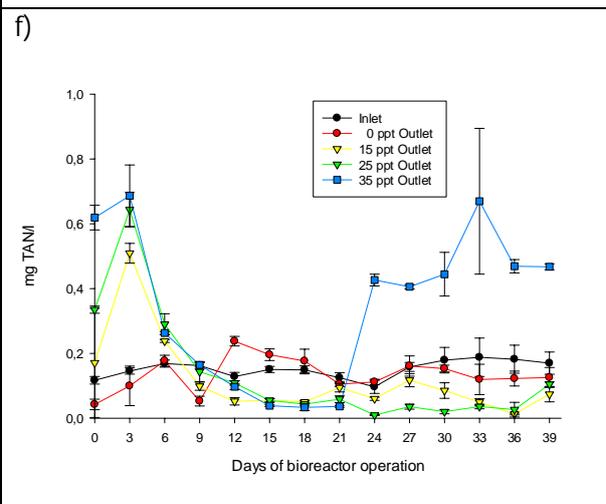
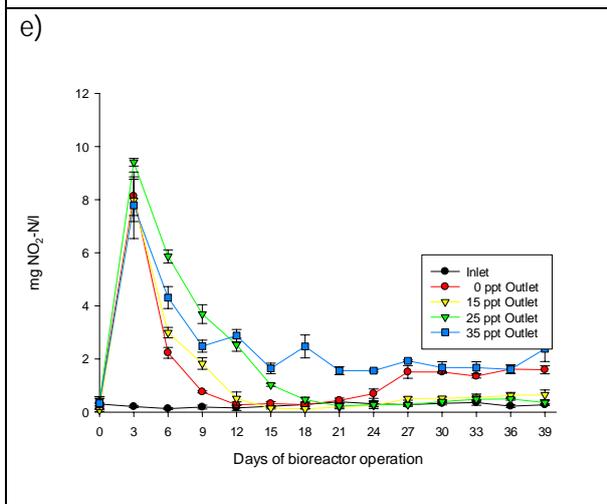
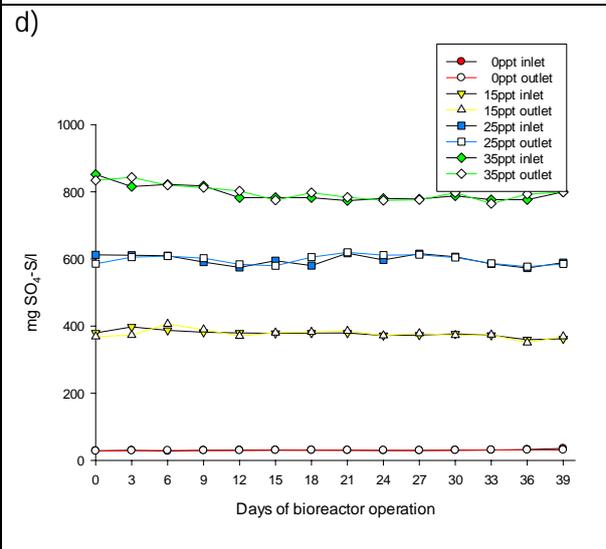
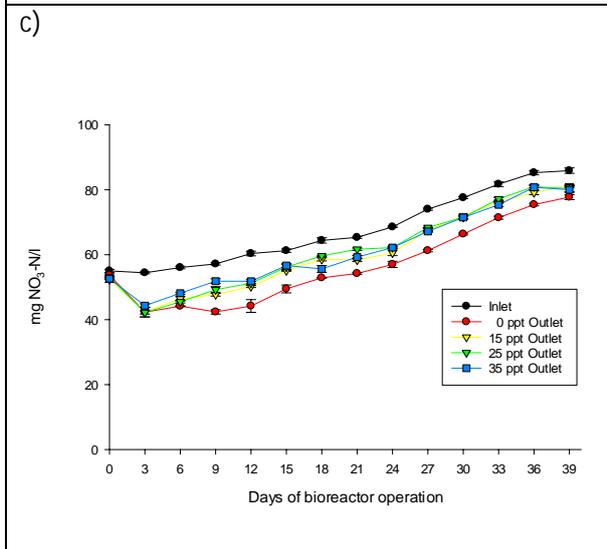
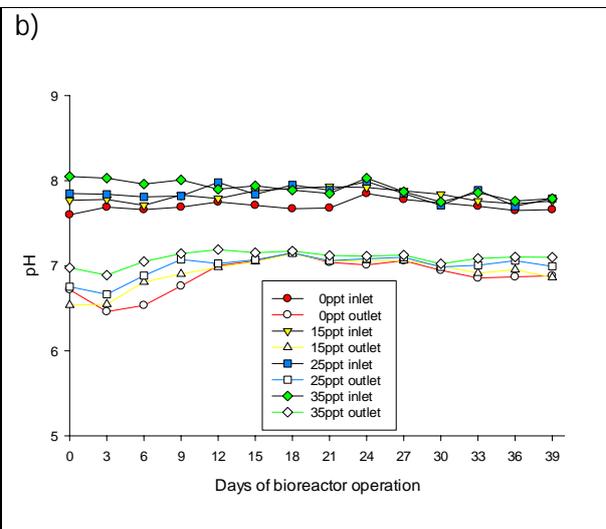
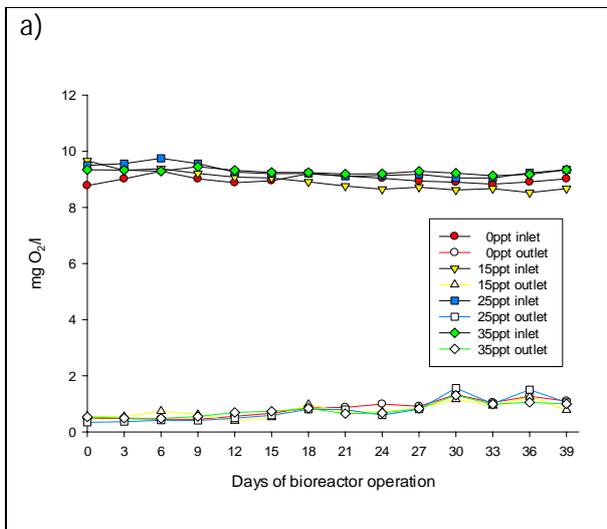
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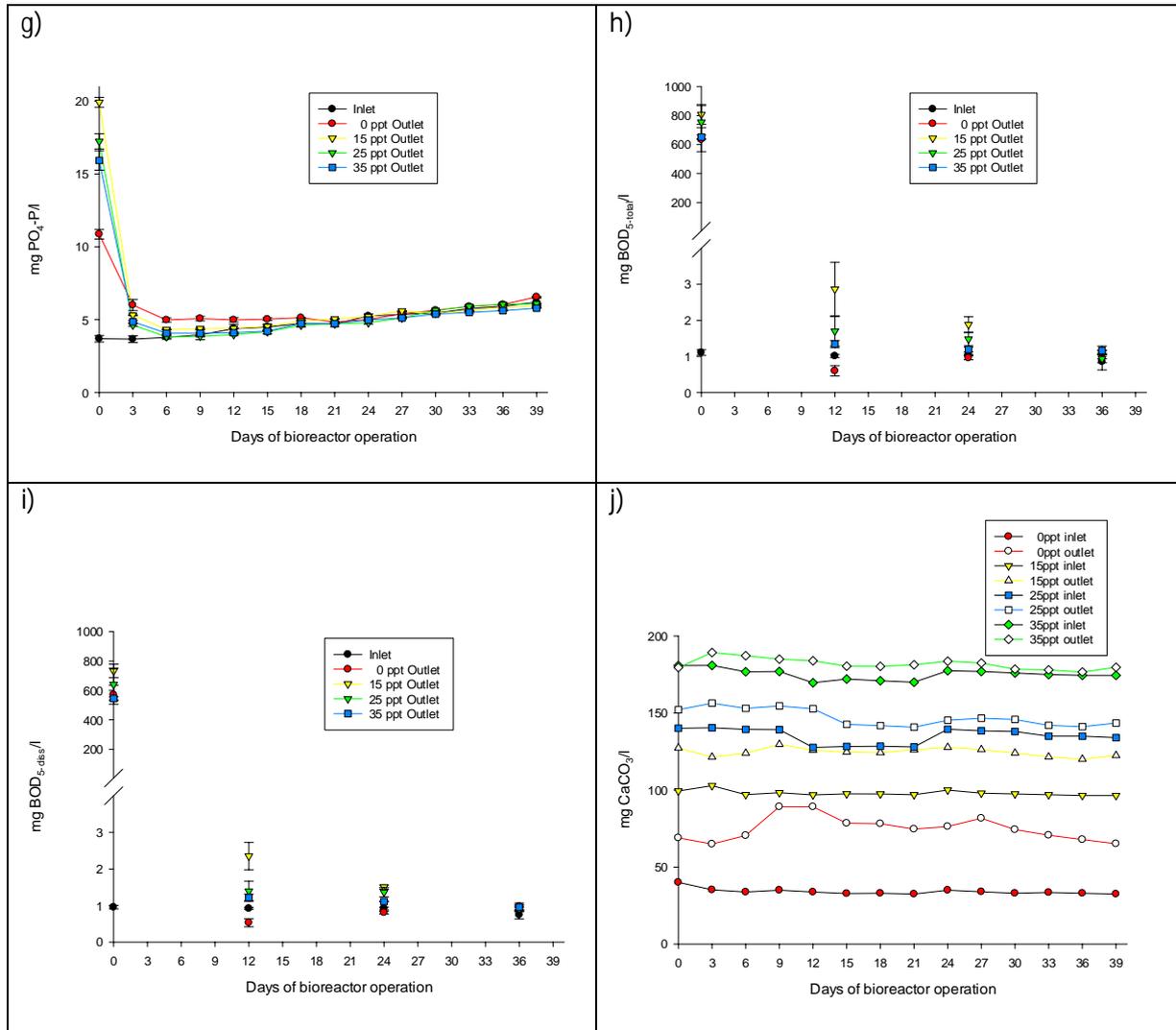


Figure 1. Inlet and outlet concentrations of NO<sub>3</sub>-N (c), NO<sub>2</sub>-N (e), TAN (f), PO<sub>4</sub>-P (g), BOD<sub>5-total</sub> (h), BOD<sub>5-diss</sub> (i) SO<sub>4</sub>-S (d), CaCO<sub>3</sub> (j) and dissolved oxygen a) as well as pH b) values for experimental woodchip bioreactors run at salinities of 0, 15, 25 and 35 ppt over 39 days.

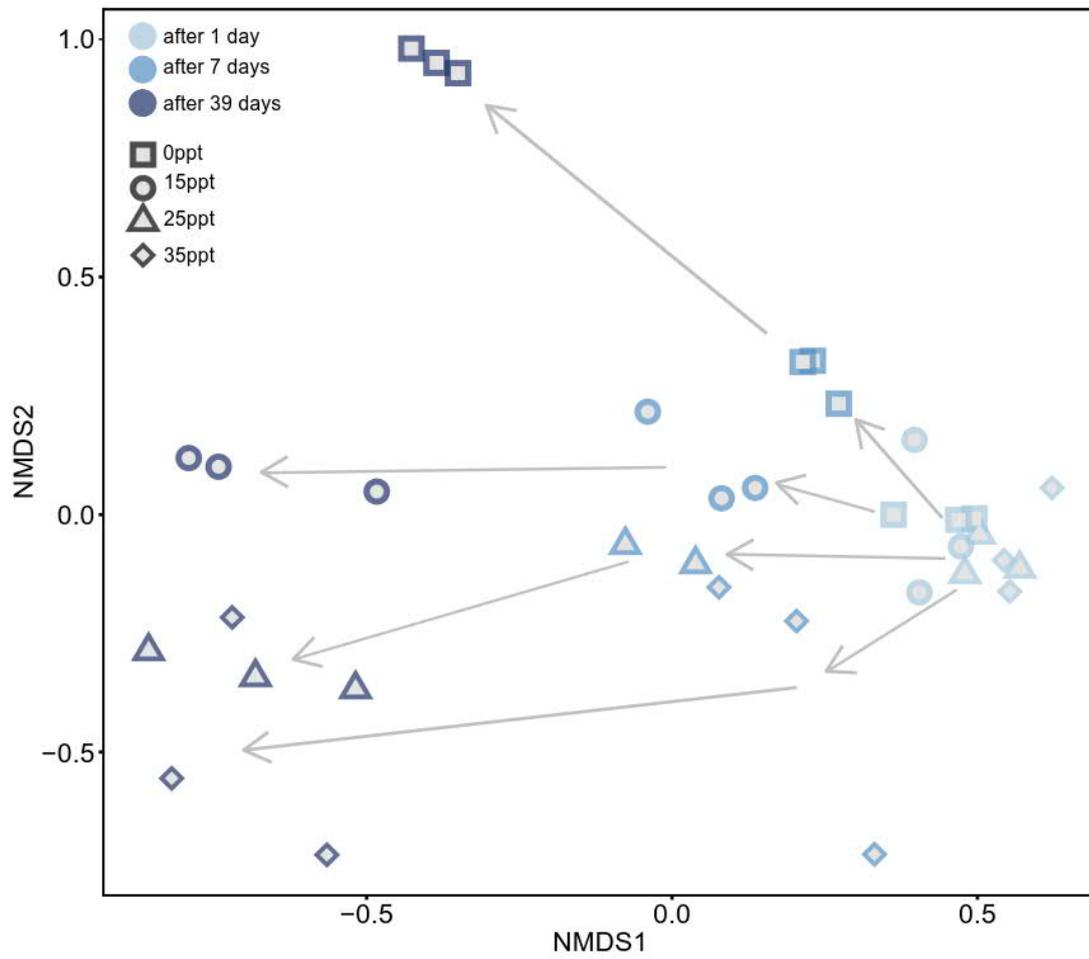


Figure 2. Nonmetric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) of woodchip microbiome at four different salinities and three sampling times. Arrows illustrate average change in community composition with time.

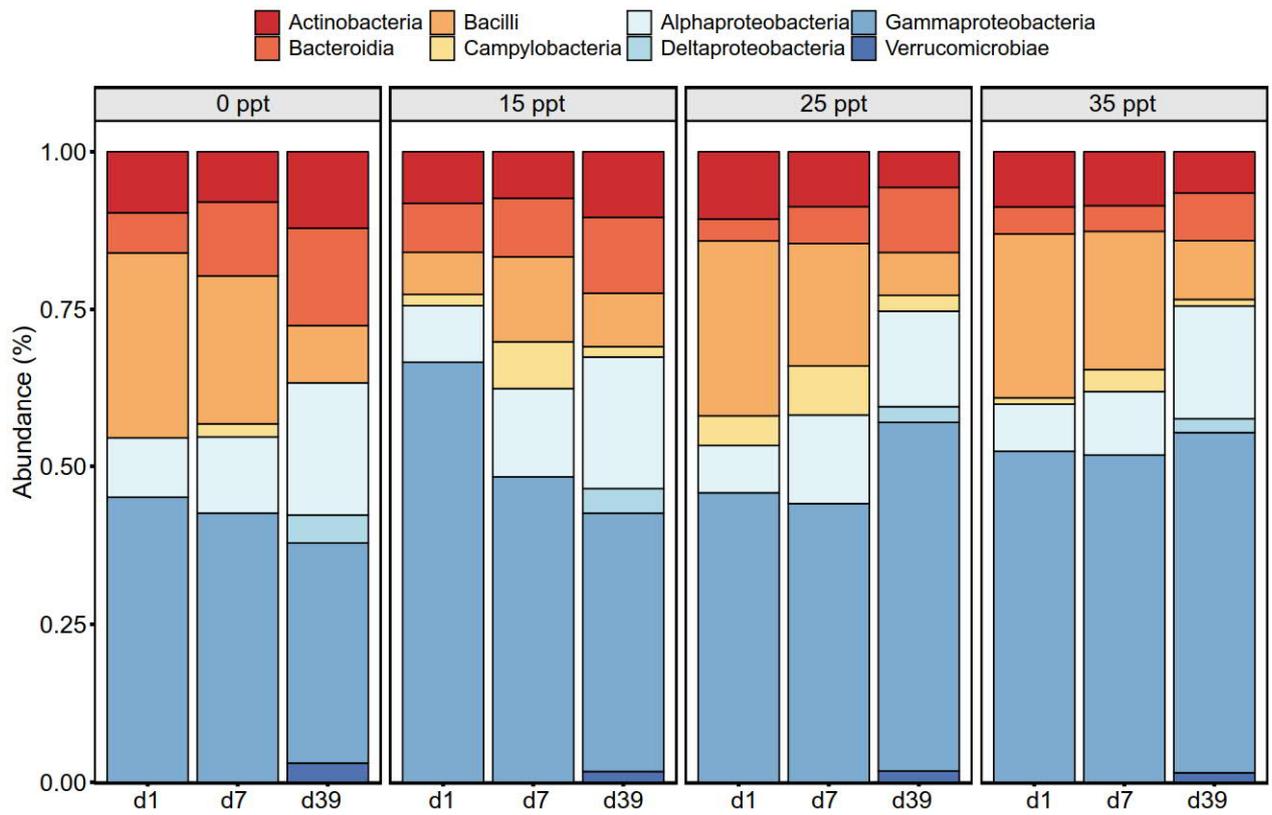


Figure 3. The relative abundances of microbial classes with relative abundance > 1% in different salinities and sampling occasions (d1= 1 day, d7= 7 days and d39= 39 days after the beginning of the experiment).

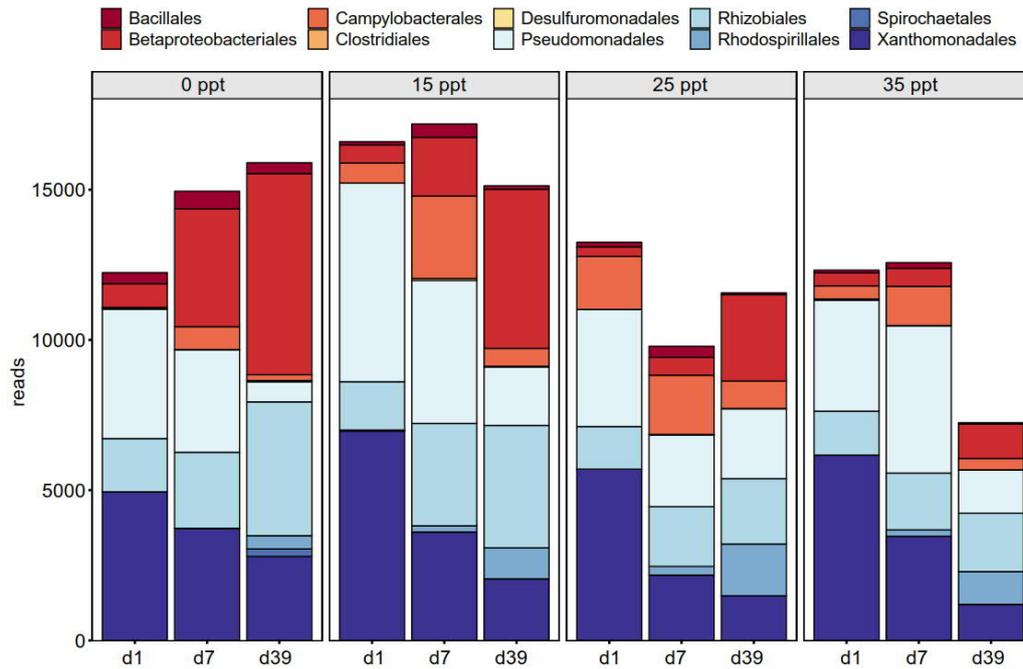
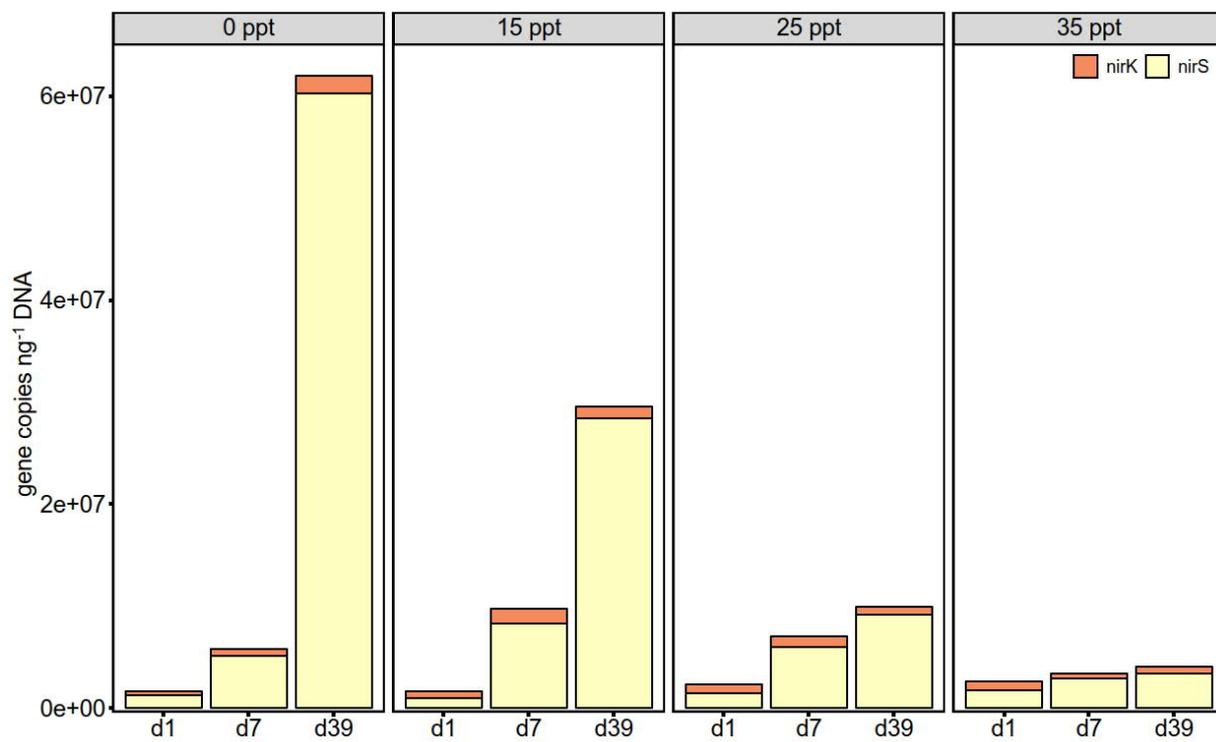


Figure 4. The amount of reads assigned to denitrifying microbial orders in different salinities and sampling occasions (d1= 1 day, d7= 7 days, and d39= 39 days after the beginning of the experiment).



1  
 2 Figure 5. The total amount of nirK and nirS gene copy numbers in different salinities (d1 = 1 day, d7 = 7  
 3 days, and d39 = 39 days after the beginning of the experiment).

Table 1. Average removal rates (g/m<sup>3</sup>/d) as well as average inlet and outlet values for dissolved oxygen, pH and temperature (n=14) during the first 39 days of operation of experimental woodchip bioreactors run at salinities of 0, 15, 25 and 35 ppt. Mean values in rows not sharing a common superscript are significantly different from each other (P<0.05).

Removal Rate (g/m <sup>3</sup> /d)	0 ppt	15 ppt	25 ppt	35 ppt
NO <sub>3</sub> -N	22.02 ± 6.87 <sup>a</sup>	15.30 ± 4.86 <sup>b</sup>	12.46 ± 5.41 <sup>c</sup>	11.82 ± 3.96 <sup>c</sup>
NO <sub>2</sub> -N	-2.52 ± 3.97 <sup>ab</sup>	-1.94 ± 4.11 <sup>ab</sup>	-3.15 ± 5.38 <sup>b</sup>	-4.33 ± 3.62 <sup>c</sup>
NH <sub>4</sub> -N	-0.01 ± 0.12 <sup>a</sup>	0.07 ± 0.28 <sup>b</sup>	0.04 ± 0.35 <sup>b</sup>	-0.36 ± 0.48 <sup>ac</sup>
PO <sub>4</sub> -P	-1.52 ± 3.60 <sup>a</sup>	-2.57 ± 8.27 <sup>a</sup>	-2.18 ± 7.09 <sup>a</sup>	-2.06 ± 6.39 <sup>a</sup>
SO <sub>4</sub> -S	1.10 ± 2.76 <sup>a</sup>	1.03 ± 20.87 <sup>a</sup>	-1.38 ± 25.17 <sup>a</sup>	-6.38 ± 27.32 <sup>a</sup>
CaCO <sub>3</sub>	-81.82 ± 17.21 <sup>a</sup>	-53.35 ± 6.34 <sup>b</sup>	-23.86 ± 10.41 <sup>c</sup>	-13.32 ± 8.45 <sup>c</sup>
BOD <sub>5</sub> -total	-316 ± 554 <sup>ac</sup>	-405 ± 701 <sup>bc</sup>	-377 ± 662 <sup>c</sup>	-325 ± 563 <sup>c</sup>
BOD <sub>5</sub> -diss	-284 ± 497 <sup>ac</sup>	-367 ± 635 <sup>bc</sup>	-320 ± 565 <sup>c</sup>	-273 ± 471 <sup>c</sup>
<b>Inlet parameter</b>				
Dissolved oxygen (mg O <sub>2</sub> /l)	8.29 ± 0.14	8.95 ± 0.33	9.30 ± 0.21	9.27 ± 0.08
pH	7.70 ± 0.06	7.82 ± 0.07	7.85 ± 0.08	7.91 ± 0.10
Temperature (°C)	13.9 ± 1.0	14.0 ± 1.0	14.0 ± 0.9	14.0 ± 0.9
<b>Outlet parameter</b>				
Dissolved oxygen (mg O <sub>2</sub> /l)	0.82 ± 0.31	0.76 ± 0.27	0.77 ± 0.40	0.77 ± 0.27
pH	6.84 ± 0.21	6.92 ± 0.18	6.99 ± 0.14	7.09 ± 0.08
Temperature (°C)	14.9 ± 0.9	14.8 ± 0.9	14.8 ± 0.8	14.8 ± 0.8