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## Spatial and ontogenetic variations in sardine feeding conditions in the Bay of Biscay through fatty acid composition

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► **To cite this version:**

Mathilde Bertrand, Pablo Brosset, Philippe Soudant, Christophe Lebigre. Spatial and ontogenetic variations in sardine feeding conditions in the Bay of Biscay through fatty acid composition. *Marine Environmental Research*, 2022, 173, 105514, 12 p. 10.1016/j.marenvres.2021.105514 . hal-03485223

**HAL Id: hal-03485223**

**<https://hal.univ-brest.fr/hal-03485223v1>**

Submitted on 5 Jan 2024

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25 total FA contents in both lipid fractions varied mainly with the sampling locations and age.  
26 Indeed, sardines aged 1 and 2 years living in South BoB had particularly high contents in FA  
27 specific to non-diatom phytoplankton, while older sardines living in the Northern part had  
28 higher total FA content and more FA specific to copepods. These differences probably resulted  
29 from differences in prey availability and to a lesser extent a change in feeding behaviour with  
30 age. The strong dependence of younger sardines' diet to phytoplankton in spring suggests that  
31 changes in primary production may explain their decline in size-at-age. Finally, NL clearly  
32 reflect finest feeding variations in comparison to PL imprinted by diet variations at longer time  
33 scale. Future studies should consider separately NL and PL fractions.

34

35 **Keywords:** fatty acids, lipids, *Sardina pilchardus*, small pelagic fish, NE Atlantic, size-at-age

## 36 1. Introduction

37

38 Food characteristics are one of the most important biotic factors influencing  
39 individuals' fitness as it allows animals to extract energy from their environment. This energy  
40 is then allocated to life history traits and any alteration in its quantity or quality leads to a  
41 decrease in survival, growth, and reproductive success (Pigliucci, 2005; Stearns, 1992).  
42 Furthermore, the environment governs communities' composition and dynamic by controlling  
43 the abundance and assemblage of primary producers and their consumers (Dalsgaard et al.,  
44 2003; Hauss et al., 2012). For instance, Hixson and Arts (2016) and Pethybridge et al. (2015)  
45 predicted a decrease in the nutritional quality of phytoplankton along increasing sea surface  
46 temperature, potentially (i) affecting the recruitment and dynamics of forage fish (and their  
47 predators), and (ii) having consequences for human food safety (Budge et al., 2014) since fish  
48 may become less abundant and/or less nutritious. In other words, changes at the base of  
49 trophic chains can strongly influence the fitness of all species in the upper trophic levels,  
50 making it crucial to understand as such changes may have important consequences for stock  
51 productivity, ecosystem dynamics and fisheries yields (Carozza et al., 2019; Martino et al.,  
52 2019).

53 The European sardine (*Sardina pilchardus*) plays a central role in the transfer of energy  
54 between planktonic compartments and higher trophic levels in pelagic food webs (Certain et  
55 al., 2011; Cury et al., 2000). In the Bay of Biscay (BoB), there has been a marked decrease in  
56 size-at-age, weight-at-age and body condition of sardine (Doray et al., 2018b; Véron et al.,  
57 2020a, 2020b), a pattern similar in another small pelagic fish at the same trophic level, the  
58 European anchovy (*Engraulis encrasicolus*, Doray et al., 2018b). More specifically between  
59 2000 and 2015, mean length of sardine decreased particularly at age 1 fish (ca. from 18.5 to

60 15 cm, i.e. 20%) and body condition declined by 15% on average across all ages (Doray et al.,  
61 2018b; Véron et al., 2020a). However, their size-at-maturity (*ca.* 14 cm) did not change and  
62 their age-at-maturity remains at 1 year in the BoB (Véron et al., 2020b). These declines have  
63 started while the stock had a relatively low exploitation rate and the increase in harvest was  
64 unrelated to the decline in fish growth and selective mortality (Boëns et al., 2021), making it  
65 unlikely that the recent decline in morphometry of sardines in this area can be attributed to  
66 fisheries-induced evolution. Therefore, such a decline in size-at-age and body condition is  
67 more likely to be driven by environmental changes in the BoB, though the actual mechanism  
68 remains elusive (Véron et al., 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, these phenotypic trends are similar  
69 to those observed in the Gulf of Lions since 2008, in which food quantity and quality have  
70 been identified as the main drivers leading to the decline of sardines size and body condition  
71 and the subsequent collapse of its fishery (Brosset et al., 2017, 2015b; Saraux et al., 2019). As  
72 sardine's stock of the BoB sustains major French and Spanish fisheries (totalling 32,299 tons  
73 landed in 2018; ICES, 2019), it is important to determine whether bottom-up processes also  
74 explain the decline in size-at-age and body condition in this species.

75 A bottom-up control of the phenotypic characteristics of sardines may result from  
76 changes in their diet: a decrease in the quantity of food available per individual due to density-  
77 dependent competition (the survival rate of juveniles increases in this stock; Doray et al.,  
78 2018b; Van Beveren et al., 2014), and/or a decrease in the quality of food (as it seems to be  
79 the case with sardines of the Gulf of Lions; Bachiller et al., 2020; Brosset et al., 2016; Saraux  
80 et al., 2019). Sardines primarily feed on small species of zooplankton (copepods, decapods,  
81 cirripedes, fish eggs and cladocerans) and phytoplankton (diatoms and dinoflagellates) but  
82 whose contribution to individuals' diet varies depending on fish length, season and region  
83 considered (Costalago et al., 2015; Garrido et al., 2008a; Van der Lingen et al., 2009). Indeed,

84 during sardine spawning periods (October to May, with peaks in November and April; [Gatti et](#)  
85 [al., 2017](#)), their broad distribution appears fragmented by the presence of cold bottom water  
86 ([Bellier et al., 2007](#)). Thus, in Spring the biomass of sardines is higher along the coast in the  
87 Southern BoB, near the Loire estuary, and in the waters South-West of Brittany ([Doray et al.,](#)  
88 [2018a](#)). In general, this population structure coincides with the distribution of sardine eggs  
89 ([Bellier et al., 2007](#); [Petitgas et al., 2006](#)) and younger sardines are usually located in the  
90 Southern BoB ([Silva et al., 2009](#)). In the BoB, the abundance of primary producers and  
91 zooplankton is also strongly structured spatially as the amount of chlorophyll-a is particularly  
92 high near the coasts and estuaries (Adour, Gironde, Loire; [Huret et al., 2013](#)) and large  
93 copepods are particularly abundant near the shelf-break of the BoB ([Dessier et al., 2018](#)).  
94 Studies based on stable isotopes and stomach contents showed that sardines' diet changed  
95 as they aged (especially in spring and summer; [Bachiller and Irigoien, 2015](#); [Costalago et al.,](#)  
96 [2012](#); [Le Bourg et al., 2015](#)) and that there was no significant spatial pattern in fish diet within  
97 the BoB ([Chouvelon et al., 2014](#)). However, the characterisation of lipids and their variation  
98 may allow us to learn more about the sardines' diet and the constraints exerted by the  
99 modification of planktonic communities on their biology. Indeed, lipids are a source of energy  
100 (neutral lipids, hereafter NL) and underpin the properties of cell membranes (polar lipids,  
101 hereafter PL; [Hulbert et al., 2014](#); [Tocher, 2003](#)). Lipids comprise saturated and unsaturated  
102 carbon chains called fatty acids (FA) that are particularly useful biomarkers of organisms' diet  
103 ([Cartes, 2011](#); [Dalsgaard et al., 2003](#); [Meyer et al., 2019](#); [Riquelme-Bugueño et al., 2020](#)).  
104 Indeed, the FA synthesis chains differ between zoo- and phytoplankton meaning that the  
105 presence or absence of some FA can reflect changes in sardines' diet ([Graeve and Greenacre,](#)  
106 [2020](#)). Thus, FA have been used as qualitative and semi-quantitative food web biomarkers and  
107 have proven to be a valuable method to define food web relationships, trophic positioning,

108 and the dietary behaviours of marine species (Turchini et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2020). FA can  
109 also inform us about the reproductive status of fish as NL are strongly solicited during  
110 reproduction (Gatti et al., 2017; Rosa et al., 2010) and largest sardines may have a longer  
111 laying period due to their larger quantities of NL (Nunes et al., 2011; Zwolinski et al., 2001).  
112 Furthermore, marine fish must find essential fatty acids (EFA; e.g. n-3 and n-6 polyunsaturated  
113 FA at 20 and 22 carbons) in their food as they have little or no ability to synthesise them *de*  
114 *novo* (Ahlgren et al., 2009; Hulbert et al., 2014; Sargent et al., 1999). It has been shown that  
115 EFA deficiencies can affect many vital functions such as growth, survival, stress resistance, and  
116 immune system (Benítez-Santana et al., 2007; Izquierdo, 1996; Koven et al., 1990). Therefore,  
117 EFA composition and quantity can enable us to test if fish nutritional needs are fully satisfied,  
118 both qualitatively and quantitatively (Sargent et al., 1997). Consequently, the variation in  
119 sardines' FA composition and concentration reflects their food characteristics (Bandarra et al.,  
120 1997) and their phenology (growth or reproduction; Pacetti et al., 2013), making these  
121 markers invaluable to examine whether bottom-up processes are acting on the phenotype of  
122 this species.

123         The aim of this article is therefore (i) to characterise the FA composition of sardine  
124 muscles in both NL and PL fractions, (ii) to determine whether it is associated with sardine  
125 endogenous characteristics (sex, age, weight, sexual maturity) and/or spatial distribution in  
126 the BoB, and (iii) to understand the variations in sardine feeding conditions according to the  
127 different FA useful to identify prey groups. Considering the spatial structure in food resources  
128 (i.e. primary production and zooplankton) and sardines' age across the BoB, we hypothesised  
129 that *S. pilchardus* FA composition changes according with the sampling location and  
130 individuals' age and that these changes are more visible in the NL than in the PL, due to a  
131 different FA turnover rate between these two lipid fractions.

132

## 133 **2. Materials and methods**

134

### 135 *2.1. Acquisition of sardine samples: PELGAS 2018*

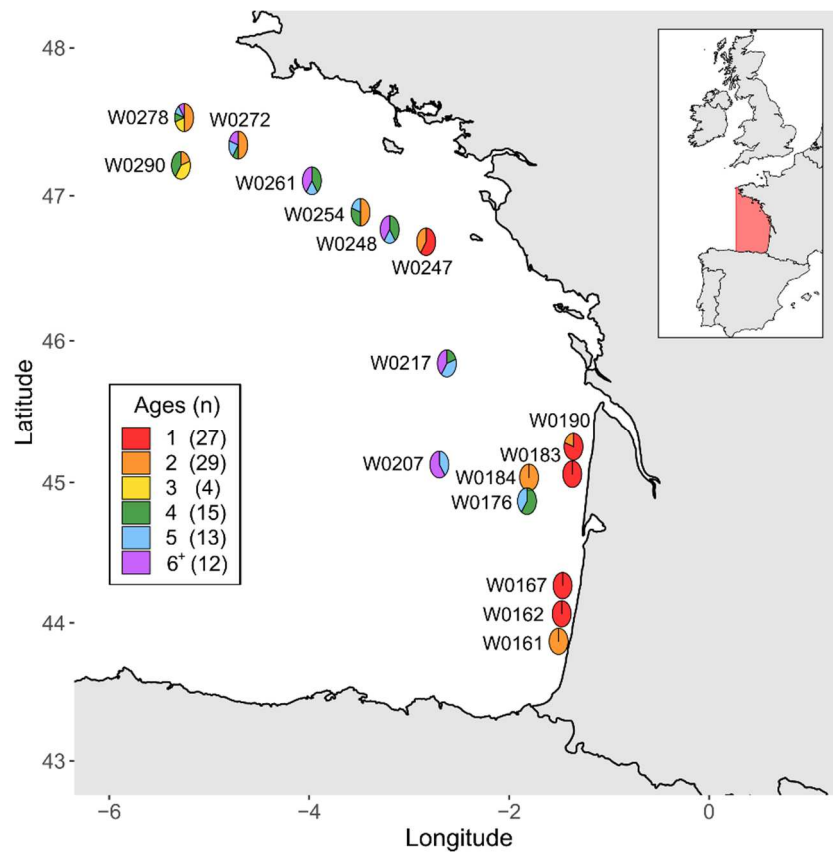
136

137           The PELGAS survey, led by Ifremer, takes place in the BoB every May since 2000. Its  
138 main purpose is to estimate the biomass of small pelagic fish by acoustic detection, to inform  
139 the European Union on the status of the pelagic stocks in this area ([Doray et al., 2018b](#)). At  
140 each sampling location, called station, the fish are sorted by species and size (three size classes  
141 are defined in sardines: < 15 cm; 15-20 cm; > 20 cm). Muscle samples were collected in five  
142 sardines per size classes at 16 stations in May 2018 (PELGAS 2018,  
143 <https://doi.org/10.17600/18000419>). As only one or two different size classes were observed  
144 per station, our sampling is less homogeneous than we would have desired (Figure 1, Table  
145 1). Muscle is an interesting tissue in clupeid species as it stores most of the lipid reserves  
146 ([Brosset et al., 2015a](#); [Lloret et al., 2013](#)) at fairly constant levels year round except at the  
147 beginning of the spawning season (May is the end of sardine spawning, [Garrido et al., 2008a](#)),  
148 and is recommended for human nutrition (omega 3 dietary supply; [Pacetti et al., 2013](#)). For  
149 sardines, the biological parameters routinely collected were: body length, total fresh weight,  
150 age, sex and sexual maturity. Age is determined by microscopic reading of otoliths' growth  
151 rings (calcified parts of the inner ear of fish; [ICES, 2011](#)). Sex and sexual maturity stages are  
152 determined by macroscopic analyses of the gonads and assigned such as: (1) immature, (2)  
153 developing, (3) pre-spawning, (4) spawning, (5) partial post-spawning, and (6) post-spawning  
154 ([Véron et al., 2020b](#)). The average sardine size-at-age and their standard deviations were: 15.0  
155  $\pm$  1.0 cm for age 1, 17.8  $\pm$  1.1 cm for age 2, 19.4  $\pm$  0.6 cm for age 3, 20.7  $\pm$  0.7 cm for age 4,



156 21.0 ± 1.1 cm for age 5, 21.7 ± 1.3 cm for age 6 and older (one individual for ages 7, 8 and 10).  
 157 In addition, a piece of muscle was taken from each selected sardine and stored in the freezer  
 158 at -80°C until lipid analysis in the laboratory. Overall, we collected 100 individual muscle  
 159 samples during the 2018 survey.

160



161

162 Figure 1. Spatial distribution of sardines sampled in the Bay of Biscay, as part of PELGAS 2018.

163 Colours of the pie charts indicate the age of fish sampled for this study (with 6+ individuals  
 164 aged 6 years and over), and "n" is the number of individuals at each age.

165

166 Table 1. Geographical coordinates and biological parameters of sardines at the 16 sampling

167 stations. S.D. is the standard deviation.

Station IDs	Latitude	Longitude	Number of individuals	Length (cm)		Weight (g)		Sex		Mean age (year)	Mean maturity stage
				Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Male	Female		
W0161	43.867	-1.505	5	17.0	0.0	37.8	4.6	5	0	2.0	5.0
W0162	44.065	-1.474	5	16.0	0.0	30.2	1.9	0	5	1.0	2.8
W0167	44.267	-1.465	10	15.0	0.5	25.6	2.1	7	3	1.0	3.1
W0176	44.868	-1.821	5	19.7	0.3	60.0	6.6	2	3	4.4	4.6
W0183	45.059	-1.368	5	14.0	0.6	20.6	3.6	2	3	1.0	2.6
W0184	45.036	-1.801	5	17.6	0.2	40.0	1.6	2	3	2.0	5.0
W0190	45.253	-1.356	5	14.0	0.0	19.8	2.0	4	1	1.2	2.2
W0207	45.127	-2.698	5	21.6	0.2	77.4	3.8	2	3	5.8	4.2
W0217	45.843	-2.623	5	20.3	0.3	62.6	3.4	2	3	5.2	5.0
W0247	46.685	-2.83	5	16.7	0.3	37.8	4.8	5	0	1.4	5.0
W0248	46.769	-3.195	5	22.0	1.4	82.8	12.5	1	4	5.8	5.0
W0254	46.887	-3.486	10	19.7	1.6	60.8	12.4	6	4	3.2	4.8
W0261	47.102	-3.973	5	21.0	0.4	76.4	10.9	2	3	5.4	5.0
W0272	47.345	-4.71	10	20.2	1.4	65.0	13.6	4	6	3.6	5.0
W0278	47.531	-5.251	10	19.9	2.3	67.1	23.9	6	4	3.1	5.0
W0290	47.207	-5.283	5	19.7	0.3	61.0	2.5	3	2	3.2	4.6

168

169 *2.2. Grinding, lipid extraction and storage*

170

171 Before any manipulation, the glassware was heated to 450°C for 6 hours and the metal  
172 or Teflon materials were rinsed with acetone to avoid contamination of the samples. We first  
173 solidified muscle samples in liquid nitrogen and passed them through a ball mill (1 min at 30  
174 oscillations/sec). We retrieved between 200 and 250 mg of shred for each sample and added  
175 6 mL of a CHCl<sub>3</sub>/MeOH mixture (2/1, v/v) to extract lipids ([Mathieu-Resuge et al., 2019](#)). We  
176 then vigorously shook vials to re-suspend the shred and improve lipids' extraction. Prior to  
177 their storage at -20°C, the samples were passed under a flow of N<sub>2</sub>, shaken, placed in an  
178 ultrasonic bath for 10 min, and agitated for at least 20 min.

179

180 *2.3. Analyses of lipid classes*

181

182 To ensure that samples were not degraded, we performed High-Performance Thin-  
183 Layer Chromatography (HPTLC) on total lipids (TL) based on [Olsen and Henderson \(1989\)](#). This  
184 TL plate allowed us to quickly visualise the different classes of PL and NL, including the free FA  
185 potentially appearing during the degradation of the samples. The samples analysed had no  
186 significant concentrations of free FA (<1% of TL) indicating that samples' degradation was  
187 absent or limited.

188

#### 189 *2.4. Fatty acid composition*

190

191 To determine the composition of FA, lipid extracts stored at -20°C were first shaken for  
192 20 min, centrifuged for 15 min at 3,000 rpm and 1 mL of each sample was transferred to new  
193 vials and evaporated to dryness. Dry lipid extracts were then re-suspended three times with  
194 500 µL of CHCl<sub>3</sub>/MeOH (98/2; v/v) and gently deposited on top of a silica micro-column ([Marty  
195 et al., 1992](#)). We eluted NL with 10 mL CHCl<sub>3</sub>/MeOH (98/2; v/v) in a 22 mL vial and PL with 20  
196 mL MeOH in another 22 mL vial ([Le Grand et al., 2011](#)). Upstream, an internal standard  
197 composed of 20 µL of C23:0 (0.115 µg/µL) has been added to each 22 mL vial. After the elution,  
198 the NL and PL fractions were evaporated to dryness using a Genevac centrifugal evaporator  
199 (program: Low Boiling Point; temperature: 30°C).

200 After evaporation, the dry NL and PL fractions were re-suspended three times with 500  
201 µL CHCl<sub>3</sub>/MeOH (2/1; v/v) and transferred into 7 mL vials. These were evaporated dry under  
202 N<sub>2</sub> flow and we then added 800 µL of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>/MeOH (3.4%) and incubated the samples for 10  
203 min at 100°C after vortexing ([Budge et al., 2006](#); [Le Grand et al., 2011](#)). Heat and sulphuric  
204 acid catalyse the cleavage of ester bonds and methanol provided the CH<sub>3</sub> groups for the  
205 formation of FA methyl esters (FAME). We extracted FAME by adding 800 µL of hexane and

206 1.5 mL of hexane-saturated distilled water, and by shaking and centrifuging the NL and PL  
207 fractions 1 min at 1,000 rpm. FAME solubilise in hexane while the catalyst and glycerol mix  
208 with water, resulting in two phases. We discarded the denser aqueous phase and repeated  
209 this step twice by adding only 1.5 mL of hexane-saturated distilled water. Finally, the samples  
210 were delicately placed in the freezer at -20°C without removing the aqueous phase. After  
211 several hours, we quickly transferred the unfrozen upper organic phase into 2 mL vials, which  
212 are flushed with N<sub>2</sub> and stored in a refrigerator prior analysis.

213 We analysed our FAME one by one in gas chromatography coupled with a flame  
214 ionisation detector (GC-FID; [Couturier et al., 2020](#)) to quantify their concentration. Our  
215 samples were simultaneously analysed on two capillary columns (polar and apolar) to confirm  
216 the identity of FAME. The elution order of FAME is not the same on these two columns which  
217 produces two different chromatograms (one per capillary column).

218 The area of C23:0 (*ca.* 1,000 μV/min) has been checked using the software Galaxie  
219 Chromatography Data System (version 1.9.3.2) on all chromatograms to ensure proper  
220 reading of the samples by the GC-FID. Then, we assigned a FA to each peak by comparing the  
221 retention times of the two chromatograms of a sample (polar and apolar columns) with  
222 reference chromatograms ([Couturier et al., 2020](#)). The "NL FA" and "PL FA" data of the  
223 individuals were then processed by a predefined R script which calculates the mass (1) and  
224 mass percentage (2) of a given FA within NL and PL, based on the formulas below:

$$225 \quad M_{FA,i} = \frac{A_{FA,i} \times M_{C23:0}}{A_{C23:0}} \quad (1) \qquad P_{FA,i} = \frac{100 \times M_{FA,i}}{\sum_{i=1}^n M_{FA,i}} \quad (2)$$

226 with  $M_{FA}$  the mass of a given FA,  $A_{FA}$  its area on the chromatogram,  $A_{C23:0}$  the area of the  
227 reference FA (C23:0),  $M_{C23:0}$  the mass of the reference FA (known as equal to 2.3 μg), and  $P_{FA}$

228 the mass percentage of a given FA. The mass values obtained were finally related to  
229 concentrations ( $\mu\text{g}$  FA/mg wet weight).

230

## 231 *2.5. Statistical analyses*

232

233 Statistical analyses were performed using R (version 3.5.1; [R Core Team, 2018](#)) and all  
234 significance thresholds were set to  $\alpha = 0.05$ . First, we calculated the total amount of FA in both  
235 NL and PL fractions to detect outliers and we characterised the FA of these two fractions by  
236 quantifying inter-individual variations of the most important FA. We also calculated the  
237 percentages of saturated fatty acids (SFA), monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA) and  
238 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA).

239 Due to the unbalanced age distribution in our sampling, we performed a canonical  
240 redundancy analysis (RDA) to quantify the relationships between the composition of FA in NL  
241 and PL and endogenous factors (i.e. sex, age, weight, sexual maturity) considering  
242 geographical variables (i.e. stations' latitude and longitude) which constrained the FA data.  
243 These geographical variables are interesting since they implicitly represent a gradient of  
244 environmental conditions from the North to the South of the BoB and thus the effect of the  
245 different endogenous variables was represented without effect of the environmental  
246 variables. We then identified the overall structure of the data at the individual level and the  
247 correlations between different FA with principal component analyses (PCA) performed  
248 separately for NL and PL fatty acids, for which we extracted principal components (PC) with  
249 eigenvalues  $>1$  (this resulted in the extraction of 3 axes for each PCA). RDA and PCA were  
250 based on 35 FA of our sardine muscles, where each FA was measured as  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mg}$  of wet weight  
251 of sardine muscle. These were processed by the Hellinger distance (ideal for concentration

252 data; Legendre and De Cáceres, 2013) and were centred-reduced to give the same weight to  
253 each FA. Among the 35 FA, we selected those >0.30% in TL (14:0, 15:0, 16:0, 17:0, 18:0, 16:1n-  
254 7, 16:1n-9, 18:1n-7, 18:1n-9, 20:1n-9, 20:1n-11, 22:1n-9, 22:1n-11, 24:1n-9, 16:2n-4, 18:2n-6,  
255 18:3n-3, 18:4n-3, 20:2n-6, 20:4n-3, 20:4n-6, 20:5n-3, 21:5n-3, 22:5n-3, 22:5n-6, 22:6n-3,  
256 iso17:0) and some <0.30% in TL with ecological significance as biomarkers (20:0, 20:1n-7,  
257 16:2n-7, 16:3n-4, 16:3n-6, 16:4n-1, 18:3n-4, iso15:0). Indeed, 16:2n-7, 16:3n-4, and 16:4n-1  
258 belong to diatoms 16-carbon PUFA (Cañavate, 2019), 16:3n-6 is specific to some  
259 *Chlorodendrophyceae* class (chlorophyta phylum; Jónasdóttir, 2019), iso15:0 belongs to  
260 bacteria FA (Remize et al., 2020), and 20:0, 20:1n-7 and 18:3n-4 are potential indicators of  
261 elongation activity (from 18:0, 18:1n-7 and 16:3n-4, respectively; Soudant, personal  
262 communication).

263 To determine whether there was a spatial structure in sardines' diet at the scale of the  
264 BoB, we performed dendrograms based on the dissimilarities in the values of the extracted  
265 principal component axes between stations for each lipid fraction. These dissimilarities were  
266 established based on Euclidean distances since our variables were quantitative and clusters  
267 were identified using the "complete" method. To interpret RDA, PCA and dendrograms, we  
268 focused on fatty acids trophic markers (FATM), which are specific to various groups of prey  
269 and accumulate when consumed (Sargent, 1978; Sargent and Falk-Petersen, 1981).

270

## 271 *2.6. Fatty acids trophic markers used*

272

273 In this study, the contribution of macrozooplankton to the diet of sardines was not  
274 included due to the lack of specific enough FATM for this prey range (e.g. krill, decapods).  
275 Therefore, we retained the FATM for three prey groups of sardines: copepods, diatoms, and

276 non-diatom phytoplankton. The FATM of herbivorous copepods such as *Calanus* spp. and  
277 other calanoids (e.g. *Temora* spp.) are 20:1n-9 and 22:1n-11 (Kattner and Hagen, 1995); those  
278 of diatoms are 20:5n-3 and 16-carbon FA such as 16:1n-7, 16:2n-4, 16:2n-7, 16:3n-4, 16:4n-1  
279 (Cañavate, 2019); while others FATM such as 18:2n-6, 18:3n-3, 18:4n-3, 18:5n-3 and 22:6n-3  
280 represent FATM from non-diatom primary producers (Dalsgaard et al., 2003; Napolitano et  
281 al., 1997; Pethybridge et al., 2015). We also focussed on the EPA/DHA ratio (i.e.  
282 eicosapentaenoic acid to docosahexaenoic acid, 20:5n-3/22:6n-3) commonly used as an  
283 indicator of trophic relationships. This ratio decreases with increasing carnivory since DHA is  
284 highly conserved in food webs (Dalsgaard et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2002).

285

### 286 **3. Results**

287

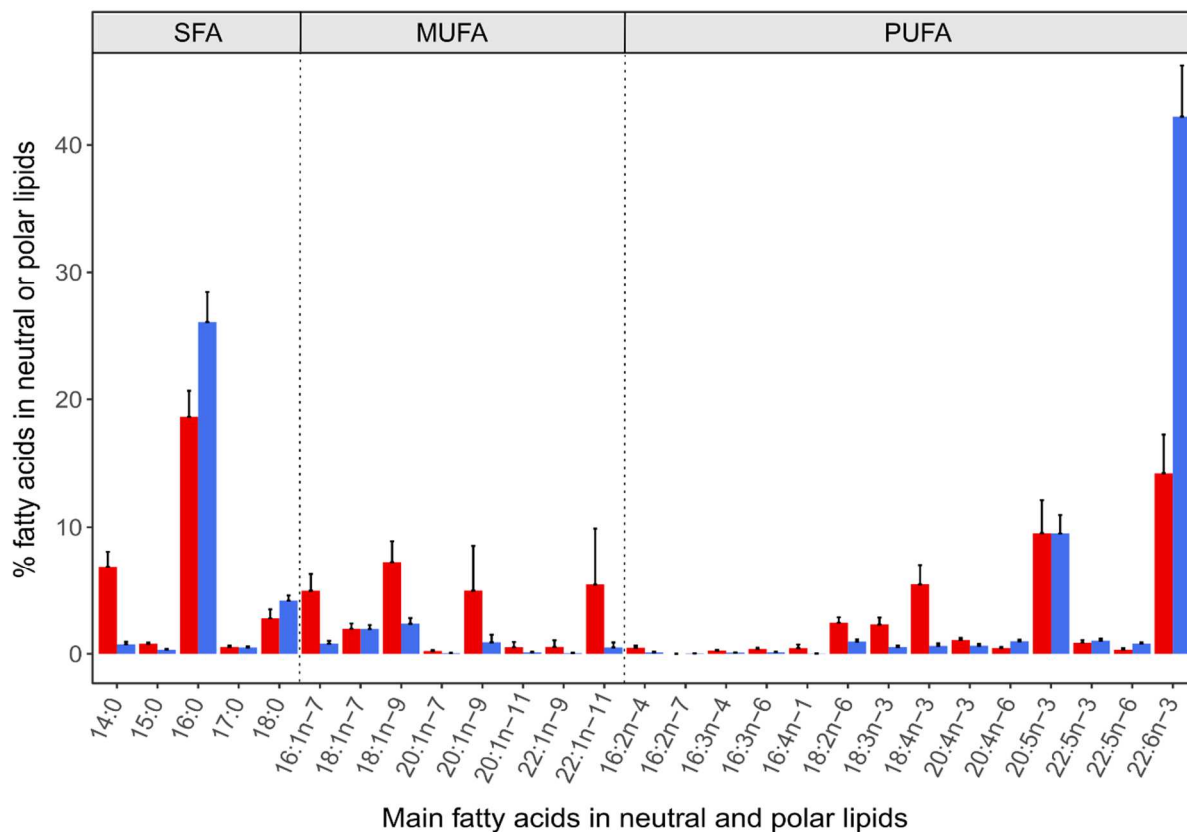
#### 288 *3.1. Sardine fatty acids profiles in the Bay of Biscay*

289

290 Overall, we identified 56 and 57 FA in NL and PL fractions, respectively (4 FA were  
291 specific to NL and 5 FA were specific to PL, Table S1). We found in NL 30% SFA, 27% MUFA,  
292 and 40% PUFA (including 35% n-3 and 4.4% n-6, Table S1) whereas PL consisted in 32% SFA,  
293 8% MUFA, and 59% PUFA (including 55% n-3 and 3.5% n-6, Table S1). The remaining  
294 percentages are associated with dimethyl acetal FA (exclusively PL), branched FA, and  
295 unknown FA (Table S1). The EPA/DHA ratio was 0.68 for NL and 0.23 for PL (Table S1). The FA  
296 contributing most to the quantitative differences between NL and PL are: 14:0, 16:0, 16:1n-7,  
297 18:1n-9, 20:1n-9, 22:1n-11, 18:4n-3 and 22:6n-3 (Figure 2). In general, there was a greater  
298 inter-individual variability in NL than in PL for the 27 FA, since the average coefficients of

299 variation were 34% (ranging from 11% to 97%) and 29% (ranging from 9% to 80%), respectively  
 300 (Figure 2).

301



302

303 Figure 2. Percentages and standard deviations of 27 fatty acids in neutral lipids (red) and polar  
 304 lipids (blue) averaged for all individuals in the Bay of Biscay (n = 100). The fatty acids are  
 305 separated by category: SFA = saturated fatty acids, MUFA = monounsaturated fatty acids,  
 306 PUFA = polyunsaturated fatty acids.

307

### 308 3.2. The relationship between endogenous variables and fatty acids profiles

309

310 The redundancy analyses highlighted that the contribution of the spatial and  
 311 endogenous variables was similar in NL (21 and 19% respectively, Table 2) while spatial



312 variables explained more variance than endogenous variables in PL (18 and 14% respectively,  
313 Table 2). While sardines' weight, sex and maturity stage explained a very limited amount of  
314 variance in FA, individuals' age explained nearly 20% of the total variation in FA (Table 2, Figure  
315 3). More specifically, the increase in individuals' age is associated with major changes in the  
316 content of some FA (Figure 4 and Figure 5). In NL, we observed an increase in FA specific of  
317 copepods (20:1n-9 and 22:1n-11, Figure 3A and Figures 4B&C) and a decline in FA specific of  
318 phytoplankton (20:5n-3, i.e. diatoms, Figure 3A and Figure 4D). For other FA non-associated  
319 with specific prey groups, there were increases (e.g. 20:1n-11, Figure 4A) and declines with  
320 sardines' age (e.g. 15:0, 18:4n-3, Figures 4E&F). Some of these FA also changed similarly in PL  
321 (Figure 3B), which was particularly evident for the increase in 20:1n-9 (i.e. copepods, Figure  
322 4H) and the decrease in 20:5n-3 (i.e. diatoms, Figure 4I) with sardines' age. As for NL, an  
323 increase (20:4n-3, Figure 4G) and a decline (15:0, iso15:0, Figure 4J&K) with sardines' age were  
324 observed for other FA non-associated with specific prey groups. We found a decrease in the  
325 EPA/DHA ratio with age in NL and PL fractions, although the ratio was three times greater in  
326 NL (Figure 5). Noteworthy, changes seemed to occur primarily between the sardines aged 1  
327 and 2 and those older than 2 years old, both in NL and PL fractions (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

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336 Table 2. Summary of the redundancy analyses quantifying the relationship between  
 337 endogenous variables and fatty acid composition of sardines (i.e. constrained effect) after  
 338 accounting for the contribution of geographic effects (i.e. conditioned effect). The percentage  
 339 of variance explained by each effect and variable is reported in parentheses.

	Neutral lipids	Polar lipids
Conditioned	6.98 (20.5)	6.08 (17.9)
Constrained ( $\lambda_1$ )	6.44 (18.9)	4.71 (13.9)
Unconstrained ( $\lambda_2$ )	20.63 (60.6)	23.21 (68.3)
Variable	$\lambda_1 / \lambda_2$	$\lambda_1 / \lambda_2$
Age	0.26 (20.1)	0.16 (13.1)
Weight	0.01 (1.4)	0.01 (1.1)
Sex	0.03 (3.1)	0.03 (2.2)
Maturity stage	0.02 (2.3)	0.02 (1.9)

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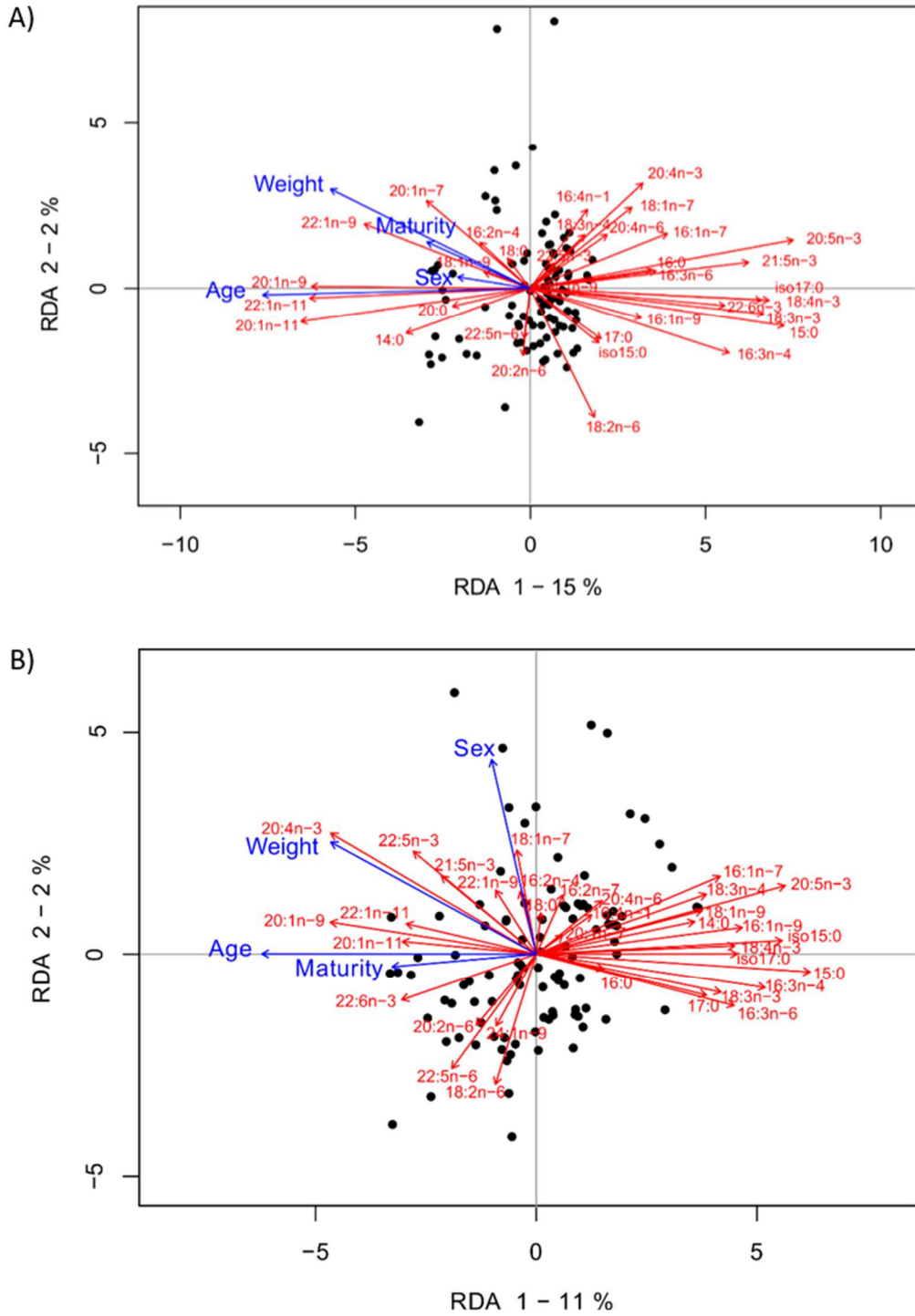
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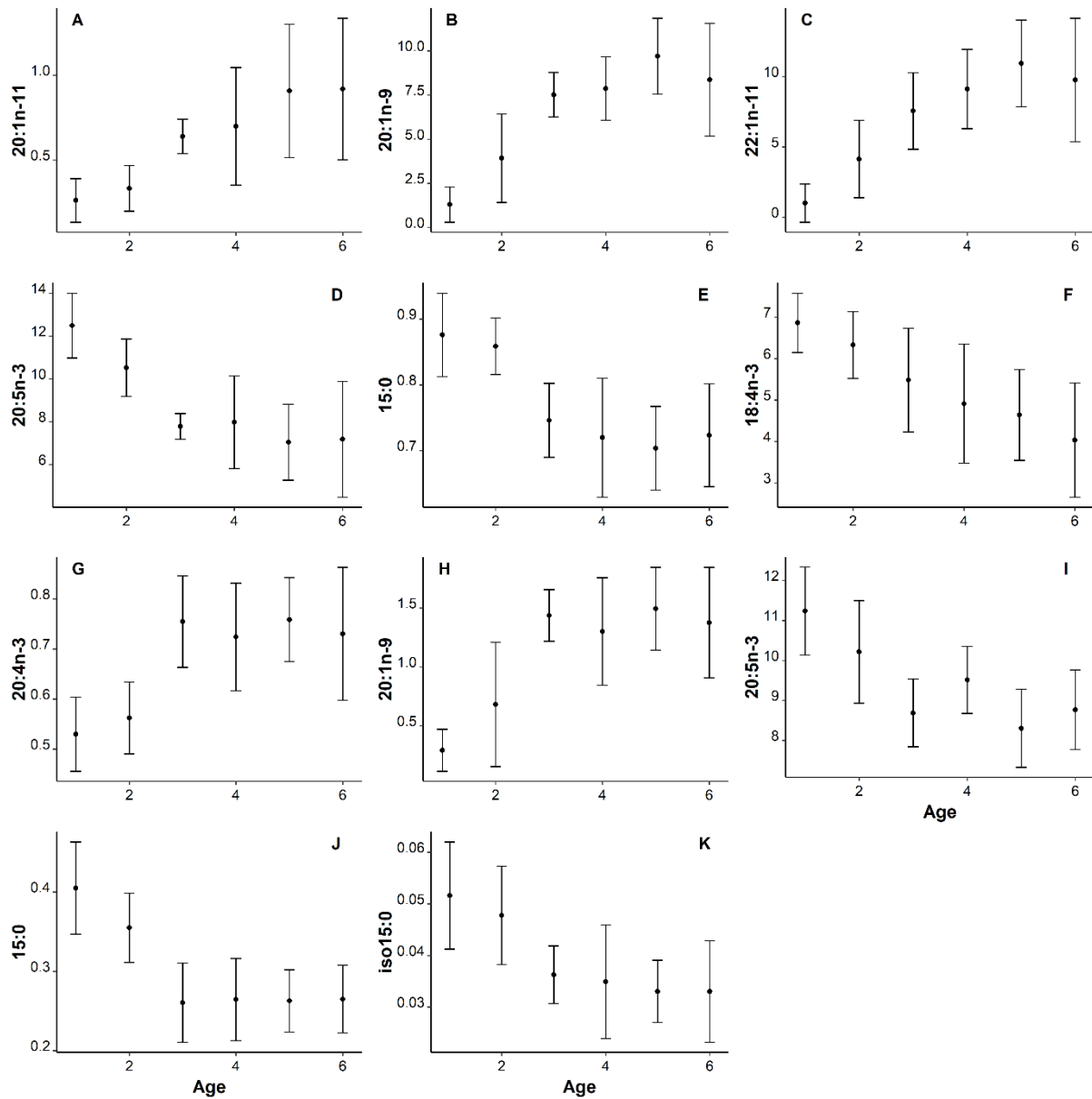


348

349 Figure 3. Redundancy analysis (RDA) ordination diagram for neutral lipids (panel A) and polar  
 350 lipids (panel B) based on the concentration of 35 fatty acids and the distribution of  
 351 endogenous variables, after accounting for the effect of sampling location.

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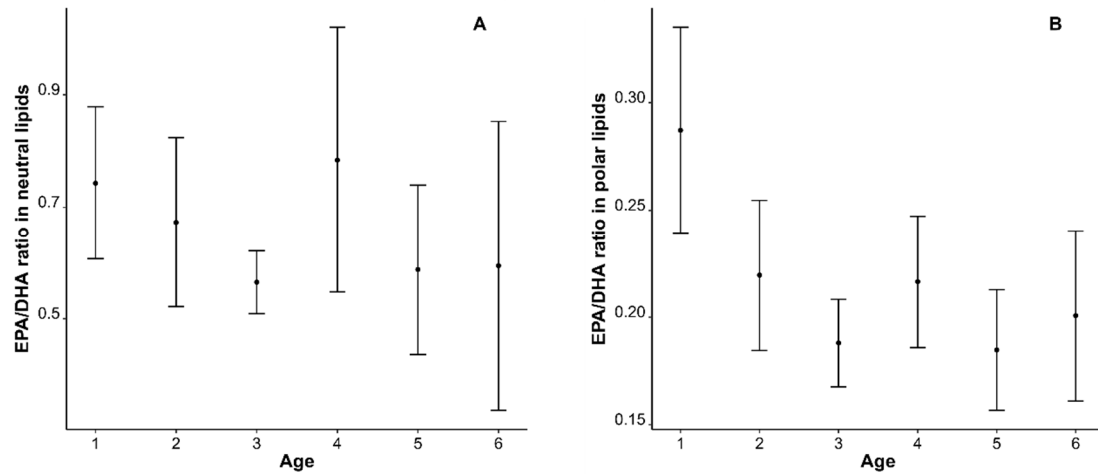
354

355 Figure 4. Changes in the main age-related fatty acids identified by the redundancy analyses

356 (RDA) for neutral lipids (panels A to F) and for polar lipids (panels G to K). Age is provided in

357 years and fatty acids were measured as µg/mg of wet weight of sardine muscle.

358



359

360 Figure 5. Changes in the EPA/DHA ratio according to the age of sardines for neutral lipids

361 (panel A) and for polar lipids (panel B). Age is provided in years.

362

### 363 3.3. Spatial variability of fatty acids profiles

364

365 To determine whether there was a spatial structure in the 35 main FA, we first carried

366 out PCA to produce integrative values of FA profiles for each individual. For NL, the first axis

367 of the PCA (PC1\_NL) was positively related to 20:1n-9 and 22:1n-11 (copepods FATM) and

368 negatively related to 22:6n-3 and iso17:0 (non-diatom phytoplankton and bacterial FATM,

369 respectively; Figure S1A and Table S2). The second axis (PC2\_NL) was positively related to a

370 mix of 20:5n-3, 18:3n-3 and 18:4n-3 (diatoms and non-diatom phytoplankton FATM) and

371 negatively related to 22:5n-6 (non-diatom phytoplankton FATM mainly present in

372 *Prymnesiophyceae*, *Pavlovophyceae*, *Pelagophyceae* and *Raphidophyceae*; Figure S1A and

373 Table S2). The third axis (PC3\_NL) was positively related to 16:4n-1, 16:1n-7 and 16:2n-4

374 (FATM typical of diatoms, Figure S1B and Table S2). For PL, the first axis of the PCA (PC1\_PL)

375 was negatively related to 16:1n-7, 16:3n-4 and 20:5n-3 (diatoms FATM) and positively related

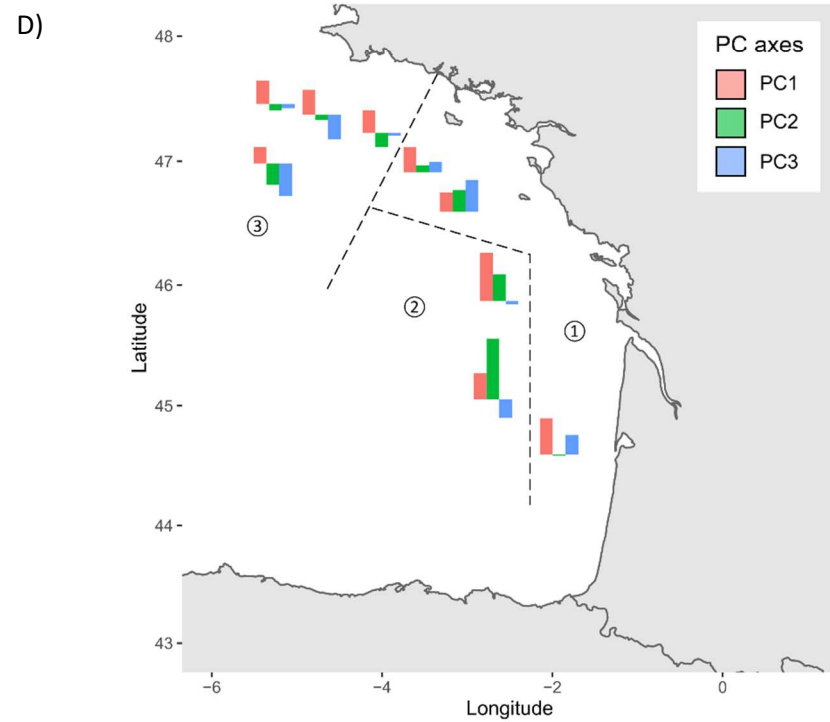
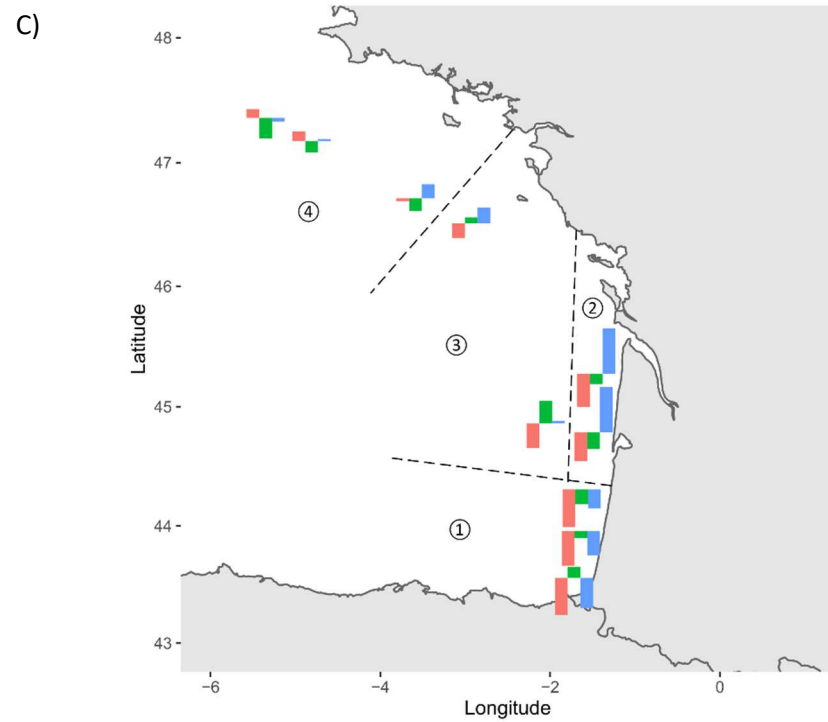
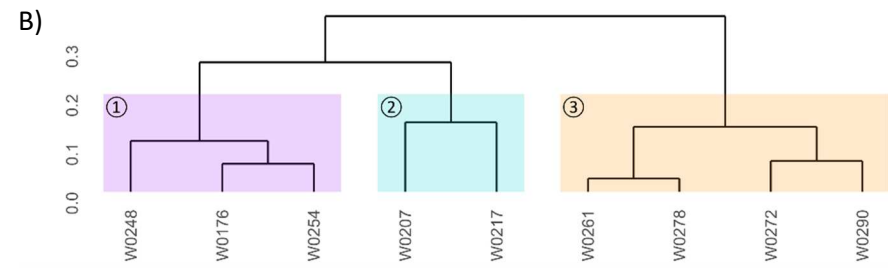
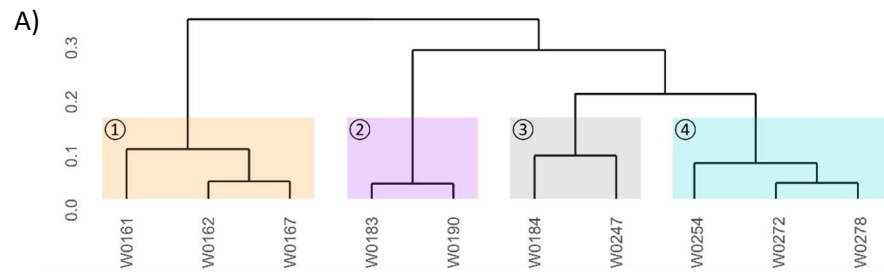
376 to 22:6n-3 (abundant in haptophytes and dinophytes, Figure S1C and Table S2), while the

377 second axis (PC2\_PL) was negatively related to 20:1n-9 and 22:1n-11 (FATM of copepods) and  
378 18:2n-6, 18:3n-3 and 18:4n-3 (non-diatom phytoplankton FATM, Figure S1C and Table S2).  
379 Finally, the third axis (PC3\_PL) was negatively related to the diatoms FATM (i.e. 16:2n-7 and  
380 16:4n-1) that were poorly explained by PC1\_PL (Figure S1D, Table S2).

381 To account for the effect of ontogenetic diet changes in FA profiles, we carried out two  
382 separate clustering analyses (based on the values of the first three PCA axes) for NL and PL:  
383 one with only ages 1 and 2 sardines (10 stations) and another with older sardines (9 stations).  
384 For NL in 1 and 2 years old sardines, the clustering analysis identified four clusters of stations  
385 across the BoB (Figure 6A) distributed along a latitudinal gradient (Figure 6C). More  
386 specifically, the Southern group was characterised by primarily negative values of the PC1\_NL  
387 (i.e. more non-diatom phytoplankton and bacterial FATM) and negative values of PC3\_NL (i.e.  
388 less diatoms FATM; Figure 6C, area 1). The Northern group was characterised by positive  
389 values of PC1\_NL indicating more FATM of copepods (Figure 6C, area 4). The third and fourth  
390 groups, located in between Southern and Northern groups, showed slightly negative and  
391 positive values for PC1\_NL and PC3\_NL, respectively, indicating both low concentrations of  
392 copepods FATM and more FATM of diatoms (Figure 6C, areas 2 and 3). The group located near  
393 the coast had particularly high PC3\_NL (i.e. more diatoms 16-carbon FATM; Figure 6C, area 2)  
394 compared with the group further from the coast which was also characterised by positive  
395 values of PC2\_NL (i.e. a mix of diatoms and non-diatom phytoplankton FATM; Figure 6C, area  
396 3). We found a very similar spatial structure in sardines older than 2 years (Figures 6B&D) with  
397 the notable difference that PC1\_NL values were all positive (depicting a large part of copepods  
398 FATM, Figure 6D). Stations located near the Gironde estuary were characterised by strong  
399 positive values of PC1\_NL and PC2\_NL (i.e. more copepods and a mix of diatoms and non-  
400 diatom phytoplankton FATM; Figure 6D, area 2). A second group included four stations in the

401 Northern part of the BoB in which sardines had also FA characteristic of copepods but low  
402 values of PC2\_NL and PC3\_NL (i.e. more non-diatom phytoplankton FATM; Figure 6D, area 3).  
403 A third group was identified near the coast and characterised by a more equal content of  
404 FATM of copepods, diatoms and non-diatom phytoplankton (Figure 6D, area 1).

405 For PL, the hierarchical dendrogram for 1 and 2 years old sardines based on PCA axes  
406 values distinguished two clusters (Figures 7A&C). Southern stations had negative and positive  
407 values of PC1\_PL and PC2\_PL, respectively, indicating FA characteristic of diatoms (Figure 7C,  
408 area 1). Northern stations had higher PC1\_PL and lower PC2\_PL indicating higher proportions  
409 of non-diatom phytoplankton (PC1\_PL and PC2\_PL) and copepods FATM (PC2\_PL; Figure 7C,  
410 area 2). For sardines older than 2 years, we did not find any clear spatial structure in PL (Figures  
411 7B&D).

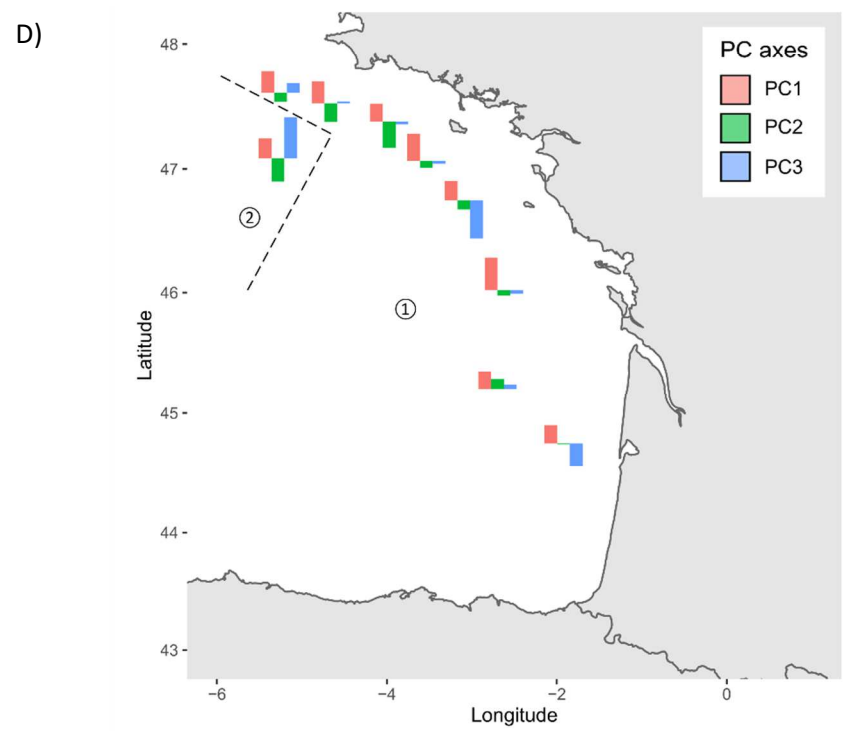
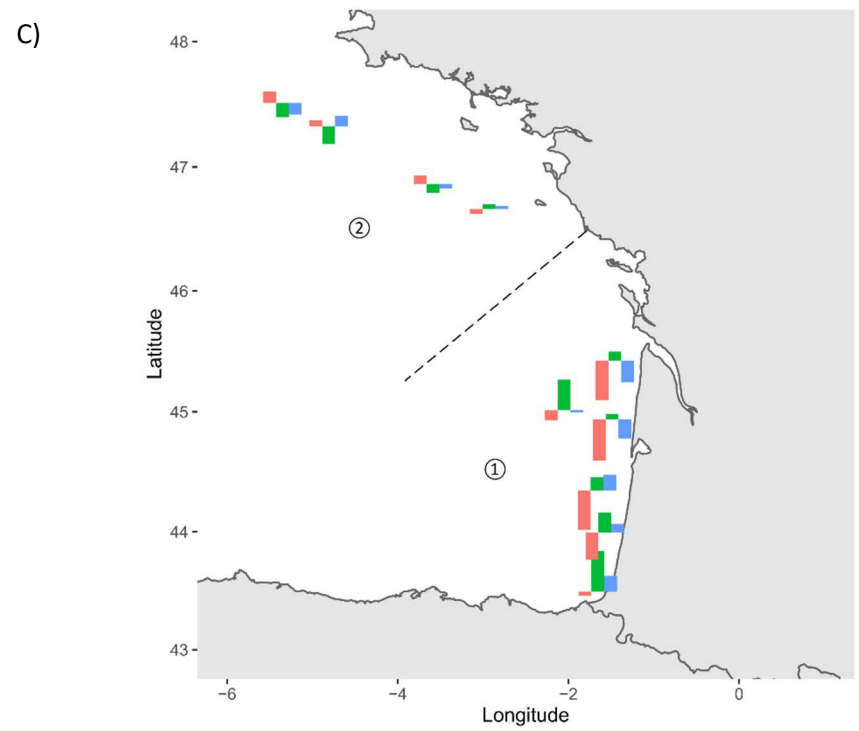
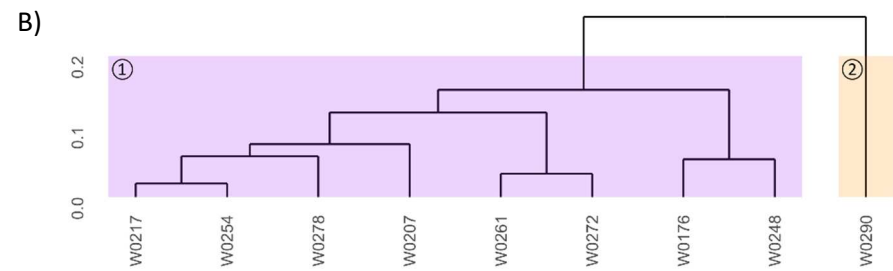
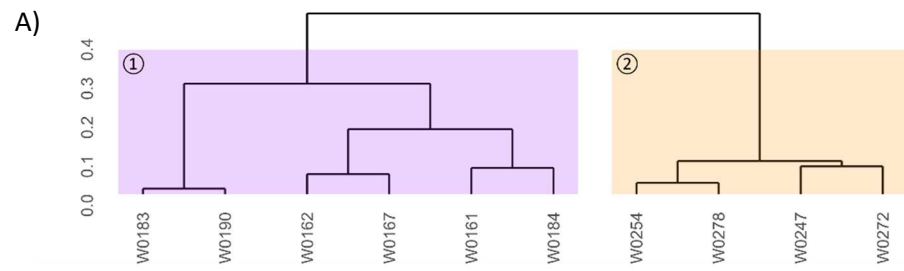


412

413 Figure 6. Hierarchical dendrogram showing the clustering of stations (panels A&B) according to the fatty acid profile on the first three principal  
 414 components (PC) of PCA on the neutral lipids and their location in the Bay of Biscay (panels C&D) for ages 1 and 2 sardines (panels A&C) and age



415 3 and older sardines (panels B&D). The numbers indicate the different zones. The PC axes are defined from FATM as: PC1 positive: copepods,  
416 PC1 negative: non-diatom phytoplankton and bacteria, PC2 positive: diatoms and non-diatom phytoplankton, PC2 negative: non-diatom  
417 phytoplankton, PC3 positive: diatoms, PC3 negative: not applicable.



418

419 Figure 7. Hierarchical dendrogram showing the clustering of stations (panels A&B) according to the fatty acid profile on the first three principal  
 420 components (PC) of PCA on the polar lipids and their location in the Bay of Biscay (panels C&D) for ages 1 and 2 sardines (panels A&C) and age 3

421 and older sardines (panels B&D). The numbers indicate the different zones. The PC axes are defined from FATM as: PC1 positive: haptophytes  
422 and dinophytes, PC1 negative: diatoms, PC2 positive: not applicable, PC2 negative: copepods and non-diatom phytoplankton, PC3 positive: not  
423 applicable, PC3 negative: diatoms.

424

## 425 4. Discussion

426

### 427 4.1. Sardine fatty acids profiles in the Bay of Biscay

428

429 Although we measured and identified more FA, the sardine muscle FA profiles in NL  
430 and PL in the BoB were consistent with the composition and proportions of FA obtained in this  
431 species in other areas ([Bandarra et al., 2018](#); [Biton-Porsmoguer et al., 2020](#); [García-Moreno  
432 et al., 2013](#); [Pacetti et al., 2013](#); [Pethybridge et al., 2014](#)). Indeed, the most common FA and  
433 the percentages of the different categories of FA in these studies were broadly similar to those  
434 that we measured here (e.g. greater proportions of PUFA than SFA and MUFA). We found that  
435 the most abundant FA were the 16:0 and 22:6n-3 whatever the lipid fraction considered, but  
436 their proportions varied substantially between NL and PL. For instance, the proportions of  
437 16:0 and 22:6n-3 are respectively 1.4 and three times higher in PL than in NL. These differences  
438 are similar to those reported by [Bandarra et al. \(1997, 2018\)](#), confirming the importance of  
439 these two FA as major structural components of fish cell membranes ([Sargent et al., 1999](#)).

440 Our EPA/DHA ratios in NL and PL (on average 0.68 and 0.23, respectively) are similar  
441 to those found by [García-Moreno et al., 2013](#) (0.60 for sardine oils in spring equivalent to NL),  
442 [Pethybridge et al., 2014](#) (0.37 in March and 0.86 in July for NL of sardine muscle) and [Bandarra  
443 et al., 2018](#) (0.25 for PL of wild sardine muscle). In our case, the EPA/DHA ratio is three times  
444 higher in NL than in PL. This ratio should decrease towards higher trophic levels as DHA is  
445 conserved especially in PL and EPA tends to decrease ([Dalsgaard et al., 2003](#); [Scott et al.,  
446 2002](#)); here, a decline in the ratio is visible with the ageing of sardines, in both lipid fractions.  
447 Sardines aged 1 and 2 years have the highest EPA/DHA ratio indicating a more herbivorous

448 diet while those older than 2 years seem to orient their diet towards higher trophic levels such  
449 as macrozooplankton.

450

#### 451 *4.2. Ontogenetic and spatial differences in the diet of Bay of Biscay sardines through fatty acids* 452 *profiles*

453

454 In the BoB, the strong spatial distribution pattern in sardines' age reflects the ecology  
455 of this species in spring (Bellier et al., 2007; Doray et al., 2018a; Petitgas et al., 2006). Indeed,  
456 a majority of young individuals are found near the coast in the Southern part of the BoB (Silva  
457 et al., 2009) and near the nutrient rich plumes of the Gironde estuary (Doray, personal  
458 communication). Despite this spatially unbalanced age distribution, we found that sardine FA  
459 profiles were different depending on age in both NL and PL while accounting for the sampling  
460 location. This ontogenetic dietary change in NL is consistent with other studies of sardines'  
461 feeding habits based on stomach content (Bachiller and Irigoien, 2015; Garrido et al., 2008a;  
462 Le Bourg et al., 2015) and stable isotopes (Bode et al., 2004; Costalago et al., 2012; Le Bourg  
463 et al., 2015), which showed that sardines have a more varied diet as they age. According to  
464 these studies, smaller and younger sardines have a high proportion of diatoms and copepods  
465 (*Microsetella* spp., *Corycaeus* spp.) whereas larger sardines eat more fish eggs, crustacean  
466 eggs, and other copepod genera (*Oncaea*, *Temora*, *Centropages*). In summary, larger sardines  
467 eat more calanoid copepods than smaller ones. This pattern is consistent with our FA profiles  
468 that showed a substantial increase in FATM of herbivorous copepods between ages 1 and 3  
469 followed by a plateau. In contrast, sardines aged 1 and 2 years show a higher concentration  
470 of small prey FATM (e.g. 20:5n-3 for diatoms). Three processes can explain this ontogenetic  
471 dietary difference: a morphological change in gills and/or a change in feeding behaviour with

472 age or the overriding effect of prey availability. Indeed, sardines are capable of switching from  
473 non-selective filter-feeding to particulate-feeding behaviour ([Bachiller et al., 2020](#); [Costalago](#)  
474 [et al., 2015](#); [Garrido et al., 2008a](#); [Van der Lingen et al., 2009](#)). [Van der Lingen et al. \(2009\)](#)  
475 suggested that the filtering apparatus is fully developed when sardines have reached a length  
476 of 15 cm, corresponding to *ca.* 48% of the sardines aged 1 year sampled for this study. It has  
477 also been suggested that dietary differences in planktivorous pelagic fishes can also be  
478 explained by changes in fish feeding behaviour *per se* rather than by morphology ([Tanaka et](#)  
479 [al., 2006](#)). The change in feeding behaviour is supported by the very different FA profiles of  
480 young and old sardines sampled in the same station. In addition, the decline in the EPA/DHA  
481 ratio with age (meaning more carnivory, [Garrido et al., 2008b](#)) may indicate a greater dietary  
482 contribution of macrozooplankton in older sardines diet (as DHA accumulates in  
483 macrozooplankton; [Sargent and Falk-Petersen, 1988](#); [Virtue et al., 2000](#)). However, we do not  
484 identify prey for some FA strongly changing with sardines' age (e.g. 15:0) and we lack FA of  
485 prey ingested by the particulate-feeding of sardine (e.g. fish eggs, decapods), limiting  
486 investigation about macrozooplankton. Nevertheless, prey availability is probably the main  
487 driver of the overall change in FA profiles as sardines aged 1 and 2 years are living in the coastal  
488 areas of the Southern BoB, where the abundance of primary producers is very high ([Huret et](#)  
489 [al., 2013](#)) while older sardines were sampled in areas near the shelf-break where large  
490 copepods are found ([Dessier et al., 2018](#); [Petitgas et al., 2018](#)). We lack historical values of  
491 sardine FA composition in BoB, but the stronger decline in size-at-age for sardines aged 1 and  
492 2 years compared to older ones may reflect changes in primary production that is somehow  
493 lagged in secondary production.

494           When we analysed separately sardines aged 1 and 2 years old and older sardines, we  
495 found that there was a clear spatial structuring in FA profiles along a geographical gradient. In

496 1 and 2 year old sardine, the proportion of copepods increased towards the North-Western  
497 part of the BoB, and the proportion of non-diatom phytoplankton increased in the South-  
498 Eastern part of the BoB. The proportion of diatoms was highest near the Gironde estuary and  
499 lowest near the Adour river, which is consistent with previous studies about phytoplankton  
500 distribution in spring (Marquis et al., 2007). Such spatial structuring was apparent in PL, but  
501 was particularly strong in NL which enabled us to identify two additional groups of stations off  
502 the Gironde estuary. Nevertheless, there are clear cycles of the primary production with high  
503 values some years (2000-2001, 2007-2008) and others with substantially lower concentrations  
504 (2003-2005, 2011, 2015; Boëns et al., 2021; Huret et al., 2013). The overlap between primary  
505 producers and 1-year-old sardines near the Southern coast of the BoB (Huret et al., 2013;  
506 Petitgas et al., 2018) reveals the importance of phytoplankton for younger sardines, although  
507 sardines prefer to feed on zooplankton (Garrido et al., 2008a). Young sardines are probably  
508 more filter-feeding or consume smaller zooplankton, explaining why sardines aged 1 and 2  
509 years do not exhibit such high copepods FATM proportion. For sardines older than 2 years old,  
510 we found greater proportions of the FA characteristics of copepods over the entire BoB and  
511 the spatial structure was primarily driven by differences in the concentration of diatoms  
512 FATM. The general dominance of copepods FATM in the Northern BoB is consistent with past  
513 studies that have described the spatial heterogeneity in the hydrobiological characteristics in  
514 spring: larger zooplankton are more abundant in the North-Western than in the South-Eastern  
515 BoB (Petitgas et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a larger abundance of *Calanus helgolandicus* off  
516 the Gironde estuary with particularly high energy density (Dessier et al., 2018). This copepod  
517 species is one of the largest in the BoB and may be primarily caught by older sardines (based  
518 on stomach contents and trophic levels of the food, Bachiller and Irigoien, 2015; Costalago et  
519 al., 2012; Le Bourg et al., 2015). Sardines eat what they can find and suit their feeding mode,

520 which depends on the environment and seasonal phenology of plankton ([Costalago et al.,](#)  
521 [2015](#); [Garrido et al., 2008a](#); [Napolitano et al., 1997](#)). Consequently, the difference in diet of  
522 BoB sardines is probably due to food availability along a geographical gradient at a given time  
523 and sardines' feeding behaviour may change with their diet as they feed on larger copepods  
524 or more macrozooplankton when they age.

525

#### 526 *4.3. Lipid fractions and the ontogenetic variability in fatty acids profiles*

527

528 Our study clearly shows that NL and PL vary differently with endogenous and spatial  
529 variables. Indeed, differences in sardine diet were more pronounced when studying NL than  
530 PL as has already been shown experimentally (e.g. [Bandarra et al., 2018](#)). This reflects the  
531 more selective incorporation of some very specific FA into PL than into NL (e.g. n-3 and n-6  
532 long-chain PUFA such as EFA), allowing membranes to adapt to changing environmental  
533 conditions ([Dalsgaard et al., 2003](#); [Soudant et al., 1996](#)). Indeed, the FA profiles of PL undergo  
534 a stronger selective incorporation of EFA than that of NL following feeding, retaining  
535 preferentially the FA necessary for the functioning of cell membranes ([Robin et al., 2003](#);  
536 [Szabo et al., 2011](#)). Therefore, PL have a lower nutritional marking compared with NL that,  
537 conversely, reflect more tightly feeding variations. In addition, MUFA such as copepods FATM  
538 are preferentially oriented to energy storage ([Sargent et al., 1999](#)), explaining their greater  
539 proportion in NL than in PL. These aspects are important as many recent studies (e.g. [Biton-](#)  
540 [Porsmoguer et al., 2020](#); [Pacetti et al., 2013](#)) rely on TL, which is the sum of NL and PL fractions.  
541 As PL/NL ratios can change substantially with fish state, for instance depending on the  
542 sampling season or reproductive stage ([Bandarra et al., 1997](#)), the use of TL to compare  
543 individuals from different species, locations or seasons could be biased and result in



544 ambiguous results. Indeed, the distinction between NL and PL allowed us to better understand  
545 the variance in FA composition, which could be largely due to the fact that both lipid fractions  
546 reflect different physiological and metabolic processes.

547         The great variability in sardine FA profiles illustrated the importance of testing and  
548 accounting for ontogenetic changes in the species of interest, especially when focusing on the  
549 NL fraction. [Xu et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that within species *Salmo salar* and *Sparus aurata*, small  
550 fish have a faster FA turnover than large fish and hence that age can be a major factor in the  
551 rate of FA turnover. Whatever the temporal or spatial comparison of a species FA profile, one  
552 should ensure that the fish size and/or age distribution are similar in sampling design or  
553 consider appropriate statistical analyses to eliminate potential bias due to the ontogenetic  
554 variation in diet. Provided the dynamic nature of NL and PL profiles and their different  
555 sensitivity to recent changes in diets, future studies should be careful with the use of the TL  
556 extract and we recommend to consider NL and PL fractions separately to deeply investigate  
557 the ecological meaning of potential differences in FA profiles.

558

#### 559 *4.4. Limits and perspectives of the study*

560

561         Only some FA reported in the PCA were interpreted due to the limited knowledge of  
562 the different FATM and the meaning of the dietary source signature. However, there are other  
563 FA that are related to the different PCA axes that we do not really interpret because they are  
564 not specifically synthesised by a group of species/trophic level and could not be attributed to  
565 particular preys of sardines. Even if copepods and phytoplankton represent the large majority  
566 of sardine preys, especially in spring during phytoplankton blooms ([Costalago et al., 2012](#);  
567 [Dessier et al., 2018](#); [Le Bourg et al., 2015](#)), we may have missed a part of the food

568 characterisation of sardines. Indeed, sardines' stomachs in the BoB do also contain  
569 appendicularians and decapods in spring (Bachiller and Irigoien, 2015), for which we could not  
570 consider FATM. Thus, developing knowledge about new FATM specific to these groups will be  
571 important in a near future to move towards a more global description of sardines' diet with  
572 FA. In addition, there is some uncertainty in the proportions of phytoplankton FATM measured  
573 in NL as these can be underestimated if they are preferentially incorporated in PL or  
574 overestimated as they may be accumulated in copepods that eat phytoplankton (Dalsgaard et  
575 al., 2003). Nevertheless, as the spatial structure of the FATM is consistent with that of the  
576 distribution of plankton in the BoB (Petitgas et al., 2018), it is very likely that our results are  
577 explained by different foraging behaviours (filter-feeding and particulate-feeding).

578         This study can therefore be expanded over time and seasons to determine whether  
579 such changes in diet are consistent within and between years and the degree to which the  
580 variation in plankton communities affect their FA profiles. Moreover, studying the prey's FA  
581 composition could help to better understand the transfer efficiencies of essential FA and the  
582 nutrition potential of plankton for small pelagic fish. To this end, a more homogenous  
583 sampling with respect to individuals' age over space is needed to disentangle more efficiently  
584 the effects of age and geographical location on sardines' FA profiles. However, even if our  
585 sampling cover one season and year, the structuration observed with the most abundant FA  
586 is consistent with the great diet variability already found with other technics in BoB (Bachiller  
587 and Irigoien, 2015; Chauvelon et al., 2014, 2015). This confirms the potential of using FA  
588 including some FATM to provide additional information in multi-proxy studies (e.g. Bachiller  
589 et al., 2020) and to better understand small pelagic fish population changes.

590

## 591 **5. Conclusion**

592

593           Our study is the first to fully characterise the composition and variability in the FA of  
594 sardines in the BoB through NL from PL. There were clear spatial and ontogenetic differences  
595 in sardines' FA profiles especially in the NL fraction. Higher total FA contents were observed  
596 in the Northern part of the BoB (area of older and larger sardines), with a dominance of FA  
597 characterising copepods, while non-diatom phytoplankton FATM prevailed in Southern BoB  
598 (area of younger and smaller sardines). Diatoms FATM were highest near the Gironde estuary.  
599 This high dependence on younger sardines' diet to phytoplankton in spring suggests that  
600 changes in primary production (quantity and quality) may explain the stronger decline in size-  
601 at-age of sardines aged 1 and 2 years during the last decade in the BoB. We also showed that  
602 it is important to consider both NL and PL fractions as the FA contents of NL are much more  
603 variable than those of PL and conversely, PL can provide key information about the long-  
604 lasting effects of changes in individuals' diet and environmental conditions. The contribution  
605 of FA to trophic studies can clearly enable us to better understand the bottom-up control  
606 exerted by the plankton community on the characteristics of small pelagic fish and identify  
607 the food-web dynamics of the BoB pelagic ecosystem.

608

### 609 **Acknowledgements**

610

611           We thank Mathieu Doray and Erwan Duhamel, chief survey scientists of PELGAS, for  
612 enabling us to collect these data. We are also grateful the crew of R/V 'Thalassa', particularly  
613 Hervé Barone and Laurence Pennors for their precious help during the onboard sampling. We  
614 are also grateful to two anonymous referees for providing thoughtful comments on the  
615 manuscript. PELGAS surveys are co-funded by the European Union through the Data Collection

616 Framework. P.B. was supported by ISblue project, Interdisciplinary graduate school for the  
617 blue planet (ANR-17-EURE-0015) which is co-funded by the French government under the  
618 program "Investissements d'Avenir" and by the Regional Council of Brittany (SAD  
619 programme).

620

#### 621 **Declaration of competing interest**

622

623 The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal  
624 relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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