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► **To cite this version:**

Cian Blaix, Olivier Chabrerie, Didier Alard, Manuella Catterou, Sylvain Diquelou, et al.. Forage nutritive value shows synergies with plant diversity in a wide range of semi-natural grassland habitats. 2023. hal-03750651v2

HAL Id: hal-03750651

<https://hal.uca.fr/hal-03750651v2>

Preprint submitted on 8 Feb 2023

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1 **Forage nutritive value shows synergies with plant diversity**
2 **in a wide range of semi-natural grassland habitats**

3

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22

23 **Abstract**

24

25 Assessing the relationship between grassland plant diversity and
26 agronomic value is a major challenge to reconcile nature

27 conservation and agricultural use of extensive grassland habitats.
28 To do this, multiple facets of forage production must be
29 considered such as the quantity produced and its nutritive value,
30 commonly assessed through its digestibility, energy content, and
31 nutrient content. The aim of this study was to analyse the effects
32 of plant diversity and functional traits on forage productivity and
33 nutritive value in a wide set of semi-natural grassland habitats.

34 Forage was sampled in 202 plots located across 68
35 permanent extensive grasslands in eight regions of France.
36 Species and functional diversity indices, community-weighted
37 means (CWM) of plant functional traits, and the relative cover
38 of main plant functional types (PFT; graminoids, forbs, and
39 legumes) were used to describe plant communities. Forage
40 production was evaluated by recording early standing biomass
41 (SB), and nutritive value parameters, namely digestibility
42 (DMD), crude protein content (CP), and average mineral content
43 (MinAv) at the beginning of the vegetation growing season.

44 Species richness was negatively associated with SB and
45 MinAv. Species evenness was positively correlated with CP,
46 DMD, and MinAv, while PFT evenness was positively
47 correlated with CP and DMD. Forage standing biomass
48 increased with increasing graminoid cover and decreased with
49 increasing forb cover. A higher legume cover and specific leaf
50 area CWM as well as a lower leaf dry matter content CWM was
51 associated with improved forage nutritive value and had no

52 effect on SB. Our results highlight that a better forage nutritive
53 value can be obtained with a higher plant species evenness in
54 permanent grassland habitats. Furthermore, in grasslands with an
55 even distribution of plant functional types, forage nutritive value
56 may be improved with no loss in early standing biomass.

57

58 **Keywords:** Natura 2000, grassland conservation, LDMC, SLA,
59 species diversity, functional diversity, forage digestibility,
60 mineral content, crude protein.

61

62 **1. Introduction**

63

64 Grasslands are the main agricultural land use both on a European
65 and global scale (Stypinski, 2011; Török et al., 2021). Semi-
66 natural grasslands are recognized for their heritage values
67 (Halada et al., 2011), and provide numerous ecosystem services
68 such as forage production, climate regulation through carbon
69 sequestration, pollination, water regulation, nutrient cycling, and
70 provide habitats for biodiversity (Anderson-Teixeira et al., 2012;
71 Wehn et al., 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2019). All these services
72 depend on the structural and functional components of grassland
73 habitats, and could be considered for the structure and function
74 criteria used to assess their conservation status within the
75 European Directive 92/43/EEC. Amongst the services provided
76 by semi-natural grasslands, those related to agronomic and
77 conservation values deserve particular attention. Agronomic use,
78 and thus agronomic value, condition the persistence of semi-
79 natural grasslands, which otherwise would either be converted to
80 intensive agricultural land uses (often sown grasslands or
81 croplands), or abandoned and replaced by woody habitats after
82 natural shrub encroachment (MacDonald et al., 2000. Prévosto
83 et al., 2006; Henle et al., 2008; Pe'er et al., 2014). This
84 conversion of temperate grasslands may threaten biodiversity
85 (Hoekstra et al. 2005) and ecosystem service supply (Vidaller &
86 Dutoit, 2022). However, forage productivity and nutritive

87 quality are not used in the assessment of conservation status of
88 Natura 2000 grasslands (Evans & Arvela, 2011, Silva et al.
89 2019). Considering forage productivity and nutritive value and
90 investigating to what extent semi-natural grasslands are
91 agronomically valuable to justify and ensure extensive
92 traditional agricultural management over the long term is thus of
93 the utmost importance for conservation. This is especially true
94 for the many grasslands which are not part of a conservation
95 scheme and in the many regions where agriculture remains the
96 main driving factor of rural landscapes. More precisely, we need
97 to identify the factors that determine forage productivity and
98 nutritive value, and the relationships between forage production
99 and plant diversity. As agronomic value and biodiversity may
100 not vary in the same direction, identifying synergies and trade-
101 offs, among and between forage nutritive variables, forage
102 productivity, and species and functional diversity, as well as the
103 environmental drivers of these relationships is worthwhile for
104 the conservation of farmed semi-natural grasslands.

105 Assessing forage value is a multifaceted task. The value of
106 forage is mainly characterised by yield and its nutritional quality,
107 which can be described by digestibility, net energy, crude
108 protein, and mineral contents especially those considered to be
109 essential to animal health (Suttle, 2010; Collins & Newman,
110 2018).

111 Plant communities through their functional composition
112 may operate on grassland forage biomass production (Michaud
113 et al., 2015; Duru et al., 2015). Grasses tend to produce more
114 biomass than forbs (Michaud et al., 2015) and show better
115 regrowth capacity after defoliation (Schleip et al., 2013;
116 Tahmasebi Kohyani et al., 2009). Quantitative functional traits
117 of plants are also valuable predictors of forage productivity. Leaf
118 dry matter content (LDMC) has been found to be negatively
119 correlated with plant growth rate (Wilson et al., 1999; Pontes et
120 al., 2007). By contrast, vegetation with a high specific leaf area
121 (SLA) tends to be composed of fast-growing species found in
122 nutrient-rich habitats (Lavorel & Garnier, 2002; Wright et al.,
123 2004; Laliberté et al., 2012). This results in a positive correlation
124 between SLA and above-ground biomass production (Poorter &
125 de Jong, 1999; Lavorel & Garnier, 2002).

126 Plant functional types and traits may also influence forage
127 nutritive values (Gardarin et al. 2014; Tasset et al., 2019). It has
128 already been shown that forage crude protein content varies
129 between plant functional types, with legumes possessing a
130 higher protein concentration than grasses, and dicotyledonous
131 plants containing more digestible tissues than grasses especially
132 in later development stages (Bruinenberg 2002, Duru et al.,
133 2010). Forage digestibility has also been shown to be negatively
134 correlated with LDMC (Pontes et al., 2007; Gardarin et al.,
135 2014). Forage nutritive value mineral content, although this

136 aspect is often overlooked. Contrasts in functional composition
137 are meaningful for explaining variations in forage mineral
138 content, with forbs and legumes more likely to have a higher
139 individual mineral content than grasses for most minerals
140 (García-Ciudad et al., 1997; Pirhofer-Walzl et al., 2011; Schlegel
141 et al., 2016). These contrasts are however not always measured
142 for all minerals (Schlegel et al., 2016). Manganese, for example,
143 can be found in higher concentrations in grass-dominated forage
144 (Spears, 1994). The reason for differences in mineral content
145 between functional types are not yet well understood, although
146 they may reflect differences in cation exchange capacities in cell
147 walls (Haynes, 1980; Marschner, 2011). A positive relationship
148 is expected between SLA and forage mineral content. This is due
149 to the combination of a positive relationship between plant
150 mineral content and plant relative growth rate, and the positive
151 correlation between SLA and plant growth rate (Poorter &
152 Bergkotte, 1992; Wright et al., 2004). In general, it seems that
153 the response of forage biomass production to plant community
154 composition differs to the response of forage nutritive quality.
155 This suggests that a negative correlation between biomass
156 production and certain parameters of forage nutritive quality can
157 be expected.

158 Forage productivity and nutritive value, and species
159 diversity are key attributes of grasslands when considering
160 farming system sustainability from an agroecological

161 perspective (Wezel & Peeters, 2014). The relationship between
162 plant diversity and biomass production is complex in grasslands.
163 On the one hand, the most productive grasslands are those which
164 are intensively managed with fertilisation promoting
165 competitive species with a consequent reduction of plant
166 diversity (Tilman, 1982; Plantureux et al., 2005; Gaujour et al.,
167 2012). On the other hand, it was repeatedly experimentally
168 shown that the increase in specific and particularly functional
169 diversity increases plant production (Finn et al., 2013), as a result
170 of facilitation and species complementarity in the use of
171 resources (Loreau, 1998; Tilman, et al., 2001; Hector et al.,
172 2002; Marquard et al., 2009). In studies which disentangle
173 diversity effects from management effects on semi-natural
174 grassland productivity, both positive and negative effects of
175 diversity on production have been reported (Assaf et al., 2011;
176 Rose & Leuschner, 2012). Grime's humped-back model (1973)
177 suggests why no simple relationship between species diversity
178 and primary productivity is expected. This model shows that
179 diversity decreases both in highly productive systems, due to
180 competition, and in low-productive systems, because only
181 species adapted to a high level of stress or disturbance can
182 survive (Grime, 1973). The positive effect of species richness on
183 biomass is also essentially obtained in experimental grasslands,
184 which are immature and simplified. Such results may not be
185 confirmed by studies in permanent grasslands (Grace et al.,

186 2007) which are, by definition, ancient ecosystems. In such
187 mature grasslands, which can be counted among the richest plant
188 communities in the world per unit area (Wilson et al., 2012), the
189 diversity-production relationship involves a complex web of
190 multitrophic interactions. The richness-biomass relationship is
191 likely dependent on the age of the grasslands (Guo, 2007) and it
192 could be a transitory effect in young ecosystems (Thompson et
193 al., 2005).

194 Less is known about the effect of species diversity on forage
195 nutritive value (Baumont et al., 2014; Lü et al., 2021). Negative
196 effects of species diversity on forage digestibility have been
197 demonstrated but with possible confounding effects with
198 management intensity (Schaub et al., 2020). In extensively
199 managed semi-natural grasslands, a positive correlation between
200 plant species diversity and plant digestibility and mineral content
201 was found by Farruggia et al. (2008), probably due to the
202 presence of diverse and abundant dicotyledonous species. A
203 similar positive effect of plant diversity was found on vegetation
204 mineral concentrations (French, 2017) also possibly due to an
205 increase in the abundance of dicotyledons (Pirhofer-Walzl et al.,
206 2011). However, relationships between plant diversity and
207 forage nutritive quality have not been explicitly tested in
208 empirical studies and among contrasting habitats.

209 Increasing forage yield and nutritive value are the objectives
210 of management intensification, whether by increasing the

211 frequency of biomass exports or by increasing external inputs
212 (e.g., fertilisers and pesticides. The effect of management may
213 be direct by, for example, not allowing plants to flower, with an
214 increase in stocking density of livestock or mowing frequency
215 resulting in an increase in forage digestibility (Pavlů et al., 2006;
216 Pontes et al., 2007; Gardarin et al., 2014). Similarly, soil
217 characteristics may directly impact forage biomass production
218 and nutritive value through its capacity to provide nutrients for
219 plants (Barker & Culman, 2018). However, both management
220 and soil characteristics may also impact floristic composition
221 which, as highlighted above, can impact forage productivity and
222 nutritive quality (Janssens et al., 1998; Rusch et al., 2009;
223 Gilhaus et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2019). This suggests that the
224 effects of these factors on forage productivity and quality could
225 be both direct and indirect by altering vegetation composition.

226 Despite many studies examining relationships between
227 different descriptors of plant communities, forage productivity,
228 and nutritive value, none of these studies use a holistic approach
229 in considering the relationships between both plant traits and
230 diversity and multiple aspects of forage value, as well as the
231 influence of environmental and management factors on these
232 parameters. Our main aim in this study is to identify, synergies
233 or trade-offs between plant diversity and forage productivity and
234 nutritive value by testing their relationships across a wide range
235 of semi-natural grassland habitats in metropolitan France. This

236 choice of sampling sites allows us to see if relationships can be
237 detected in general across a multitude of different habitats and
238 environments. To achieve this, we first test for trade-offs or
239 synergies between forage parameters in (mature) permanent
240 grasslands, and then determine if the observed relationships were
241 affected by plant diversity. Secondly, we assess the relationships
242 between forage parameters and diversity and functional structure
243 variables. We test how forage parameters vary with functional
244 composition, taxonomic diversity, and functional diversity.
245 Finally, we aimed to detect direct and indirect effects of soil
246 parameters and management intensity on forage quantity and
247 nutritive value. We hypothesise that the influence of edaphic
248 conditions and management intensity is mediated by plant
249 community structure.

250

251

252

253 **2. Materials and methods**

254

255 *2.1 Study sites*

256

257 Eight study sites representing a wide range of semi-natural
258 grassland habitat types across France were sampled (Table 1,
259 map displaying the location of the study sites available in Supp.
260 info. Fig.1). The sites were AQU: Atlantic dry grasslands located

261 in the Aquitaine region; COT: marshes located in the Cotentin
262 peninsula; CRA: Mediterranean dry grasslands in the Crau plain;
263 LOR: mesic grasslands and wet grasslands located in the
264 Lorraine historical region; POI: marshes and wet grasslands in
265 the Poitevin natural region; PUY: dry grasslands and heathlands,
266 and mesic grasslands in the Chaîne des Puys mountain range;
267 SOM: dry grasslands in the Somme department; VER:
268 mountainous dry grasslands and heathlands, and mesic
269 grasslands in the Vercors mountain range. Out of the 202 plots
270 that were sampled, 172 were located in Natura 2000 sites (for
271 further site descriptions, see Supp. info. Table 1 and 2).

272

273 *2.2 Forage sampling and chemical analysis*

274

275 Sampling was carried out in 2019 apart for plots in CRA which
276 were sampled in 2020. One to four 10m x 10m sampling plots
277 were selected in each vegetation unit sampled and five forage
278 samples were harvested in 20cm x 20cm quadrats in each plot
279 and their mean values correspond to the *standing biomass* (SB,
280 g/m²). Samples were obtained during the vegetation growth
281 season and before the beginning of the grazing period as it was
282 not possible to use exclusion cages in grazed fields to obtain
283 peak biomass production due to the location and number of
284 sampling points, and also to abide by the desires of farmers. The
285 grazing period started generally at the end of spring when the

286 *growing degree days* (GDD) was between 500 and 600 GDD.
287 Sampling dates were thus fixed as close as possible to 550 GDD.
288 In COT, where wet grasslands are seasonally flooded, sampling
289 dates were set between 1000 and 1140 GDD to wait for the end
290 of flooding. Sampling dates in CRA, where vegetation growth is
291 limited by drought, were fixed at 210 and 220 GDD to
292 correspond with the beginning of the grazing season. Plant
293 biomass was cut at a minimum of 1 cm above ground level in 20
294 cm x 20 cm quadrats and immediately dried in an oven at 60°C
295 for at least 48h until a constant mass was obtained, and then
296 weighted. In some cases, additional forage samples were
297 collected to obtain at least 40 g of total dry biomass per plot, i.e.,
298 the quantity required to perform the chemical analyses. Biomass
299 chemical analyses were performed on samples grinded at 1 mm.
300 *In vitro dry matter digestibility* (DMD, %), was assessed to
301 describe forage digestibility (Aufrère et al., 2007; Nozière et al.,
302 2018). *Crude protein content* (CP, g/kg) was measured using the
303 Kjeldhal method (NF EN ISO 5983-1). Inductively coupled
304 plasma optical emission spectrometry was used to measure
305 contents in *calcium* (Ca, g/kg), *copper* (Cu, mg/kg), *iron* (Fe,
306 mg/kg), *potassium* (K, g/kg), *magnesium* (Mg, g/kg), *manganese*
307 (Mn, mg/kg), *sodium* (Na, g/kg), *phosphorus* (P, g/kg) and *zinc*
308 (Zn, mg/kg) in fodder samples (NF EN 15510 and NF EN ISO
309 11885).
310

311

312 2.3. Soil and management data

313

314 The depth of root development in the soil was visually estimated
315 with soil profiles in each sampling plot (Duchaufour, 1997).

316 Then, three topsoil cores were collected using a manual auger in
317 the root development layer in each plot. Enough soil was
318 collected to obtain at least 400g in dry soil mass for each plot.

319 The samples were then immediately dried at room temperature
320 for 3 to 5 weeks until their mass was stable, then passed through
321 a 2 mm mesh size sieve before analyses. The following
322 parameters were measured: soil texture by the pipette method
323 (NF X 31-107), pH using a glass electrode (NF ISO 10390), CEC
324 (Meq/100g, Metson method, NF X 31-106), total *nitrogen* (N,
325 g/kg) and *carbon* (C, g/kg) , and organic C (g/kg) by dry
326 combustion (NF ISO 13878 and NF ISO 10694; Flash EA 1112,
327 Thermo Electron, Germany), soluble P (g/kg, Olsen method, NF
328 ISO 11263; EON spectrophotometer BioTek Instruments Inc.
329 USA), and Ca (g/kg), Mg (g/kg), K (g/kg), and Na (g/kg) were
330 extracted using an ammonium acetate solution and measured by
331 spectrometry (NF X31-108).

332 Information on grassland management was obtained
333 from surveys conducted with land owners or managers for the
334 sampling year. The information includes whether the sites were
335 grazed, mowed, or both, the herbivore species and the annual

336 stocking rates when grazed, the number of cuts per year when
337 mown, and whether or not the sites were fertilized. A *land-use*
338 *intensity index* (LUI) was calculated for each plot as a measure
339 of grazing intensity, by summing the standardized values of the
340 number of cuts per year as a measure of mowing intensity and
341 the annual stocking rate (livestock unit per days of grazing
342 ha⁻¹ year⁻¹) (Blüthgen et al., 2012). Fertilization intensity was
343 not used in the equation as either the sites were not fertilized, or
344 fertilization practices were not known.

345

346 2.4. Plant diversity and traits

347

348 In each sampling plot, the cover of each vascular plant species
349 was estimated in a 4 m x 4 m quadrat. Trait data was obtained
350 for species which contributed the most to achieve an 80%
351 sampling plot cover. Values for *leaf dry matter content* (LDMC),
352 *specific leaf area* (SLA), were obtained from local databases
353 when available, or from the TRY database (Kattge et al., 2020).
354 Community-weighted means were then calculated for LDMC
355 (LDMC_{CWM}) and SLA (SLA_{CWM}) in each plot sampled (Garnier
356 et al., 2004). A categorical *plant functional type* (PFT) variable
357 was created to differentiate between three plant types:
358 graminoids (grasses, rushes, and sedges), legumes, and non-N₂
359 fixing forbs (hereafter forbs). Percentage covers of each PFT
360 were calculated for each sampling plot.

361 Three metrics were used to evaluate taxonomic diversity:
362 species richness, i.e. the number of species occurring in the
363 4x4m quadrat, Shannon diversity index, and Pielou evenness
364 index, calculated through species relative abundances.
365 Functional diversity was described using the functional richness
366 and functional evenness indices which were calculated for both
367 LDMC and SLA separately (Mason et al., 2005; Villéger et al.
368 2008). The functional richness index describes the size of the
369 functional space, and the functional evenness index estimates the
370 distribution of abundance in the functional space (Mason et al.,
371 2005). Additionally, PFT evenness was calculated using the
372 Pielou evenness index.

373

374 2.5. Data analyses

375

376 Kendall's rank correlation tests were used to detect significant
377 correlations among variables describing forage productivity and
378 nutritive value. The tests were performed on the residuals of
379 generalized linear models of the effect of sampling sites on
380 forage parameters in order to account for site-dependant effects.
381 The parameters considered for forage productivity and nutritive
382 value were SB, DMD, CP, and *average mineral content* (MinAv)
383 calculated as the average of the standardized macronutrient
384 values (Ca, K, Mg, Na, P). The effect of diversity on observed
385 correlations between forage characteristics was tested using a

386 modified bootstrap method to compare the correlation
387 coefficients at high diversity values and low diversity values
388 (Wilcox, 2012). For this, diversity variables were transformed
389 into two-level categorical variables by assigning a high diversity
390 factor level to values above the median in each sampling site and
391 low diversity factor level for values below the median. The
392 bootstrap method was performed on the Kendall correlation
393 coefficients.

394 Mixed-effects models were fitted to test the effect of
395 diversity indices, functional traits, and PFT on forage variables.
396 Sampling sites were added as a random effect in the models to
397 take into account the nested structure of plots within sites. Each
398 explanatory variable was fitted individually to assess its effect
399 on forage quantity and nutritive value. This analytical procedure
400 was repeated for statistically significant models ($P < 0.05$) with
401 the inclusion of sampling sites as an interacting term as opposed
402 to a random effect in generalized linear models to determine if
403 the observed relationships were stable between sampling sites.
404 Pairwise comparisons of regressions coefficient were then
405 performed using a t-test to test differences in the effect of the
406 explanatory variables between sites. The model estimates, the
407 distribution families used, and the results of the post-hoc analysis
408 are given in the supplementary information. Model predictions
409 were obtained and standardised by dividing each predicted value
410 by the mean of the response variable for each model. This

411 represented the deviation of predictions from the mean and was
412 used for graphical presentation of model results. A mineral
413 content evenness index was calculated using macronutrient
414 values, however since no significant results was found when
415 analysing the effects of plant functional traits, plant functional
416 types, and plant diversity on mineral content evenness, analyses
417 performed on this parameter have been excluded from the
418 results.

419 Mixed-effects models were used to detect effects of soil
420 properties and land-use intensity on forage variables with
421 sampling sites included as a random effect. A backward stepwise
422 model selection procedure based on the generalised Akaike
423 information criterion (GAIC, penalty term $k = 2.5$) was used to
424 select the most parsimonious model (Rigby & Stasinopoulos,
425 2005; Zuur et al., 2009). The following variables were included
426 in the initial model before applying the selection process: C/N
427 ratio, percentage of clay and fine silt, organic carbon content,
428 bulk density, pH, mean soil mineral content (the average of the
429 standardized macronutrient values; Ca, K, Mg, Na, P), and land-
430 use intensity. The choice of probability distribution type for
431 mixed-effects models was based on visual assessments of model
432 residuals using worm plots (van Buuren & Fredriks, 2001). Path
433 analysis was used to determine if the effects of soil conditions
434 and land-use intensity on forage were mediated by vegetation
435 diversity, functional traits, and/or functional types. A backward

436 stepwise selection process was used to select the independent
437 variables for model inclusion. Statistically significant terms
438 from the mixed models were retained and were tested separately
439 in path analysis models for significant relationships with the
440 dependent and independent variables. Variables leading to
441 significant results were included in an initial model and a
442 backward stepwise selection was performed to select the
443 mediators. Standing biomass was log-transformed to meet the
444 test assumptions and the square root of CP was used for the same
445 reason.

446 In all regression analyses, model terms with a p-value
447 below 0.05 were considered as having a significant effect on the
448 dependent variable. Analyses were performed on R v.4.1.1 and
449 the following packages were used: gamlss v. 5.3-4 (Rigby &
450 Stasinopoulos, 2005) for the multi-level models, piecewiseSEM
451 v. 2.1.2 (Lefcheck, 2016) for path analysis, and rstatix v. 0.7.0
452 (Kassambara, 2021) for the correlation analysis. The vegan v.
453 2.5-7 package (Oksanen et al., 2020) was used to calculate
454 taxonomic diversity indices and the FD v. 1.0-12 package
455 (Laliberté et al., 2014) was used to calculate functional diversity
456 indices and community-weighted means. Graphs were rendered
457 using the ggplot package v. 3.3.5 (Wickham, 2016) and Inkscape
458 v. 1.1.1 (Inkscape Project, 2020).

459

460

461

462

463 Table 1: Description of the study sites. Habitat types correspond
464 to level 2 EUNIS habitat types (Chytrý et al., 2020). Habitats are
465 classified according to the latest review available for each habitat
466 type at the time of writing.

467

468

469

470

471 **3. Results**

472

473 *3.1. Relationships between forage parameters*

474

475 We first analysed the relationships between forage parameters.
476 A positive correlation was measured between crude protein
477 content (CP) and dry matter digestibility (DMD) ($\tau = 0.4$, p-
478 value <0.001). Average mineral content (MinAv) was positively
479 correlated with CP ($\tau = 0.37$, p-value <0.001) and DMD ($\tau = 0.62$,
480 p-value <0.001). Standing biomass was not significantly
481 correlated with any of the forage nutritive value variables.
482 Species richness and Shannon index significantly influenced
483 correlations between forage parameters. Greater species richness
484 resulted in a more negative correlation between DMD and SB
485 (high diversity τ – low diversity $\tau = -0.25$, p-value <0.05), and

486 MinAv and SB (high diversity τ – low diversity $\tau = -0.22$, p-
487 value<0.05). A greater Shannon index also resulted in a more
488 negative correlation between MinAv and SB (high diversity τ –
489 low diversity $\tau = -0.25$, p-value<0.05).

490

491

492 *3.2. Relationships between forage parameters and functional*
493 *composition, taxonomic diversity, and functional diversity*

494

495 The proportion of each plant functional types (i.e., graminoids,
496 legumes, and forbs) showed significant relationships with all
497 forage variables analysed (Fig. 1). Standing biomass increased
498 with increasing percentage cover of graminoids and decreased
499 with increasing forb cover. Conversely, DMD decreased with
500 increasing graminoid cover and increased with increasing forb
501 and legume covers. Increasing forb and legume covers also led
502 to an increase in MinAv and CP while legume cover had no
503 significant effect on SB. The community weighted mean of
504 specific leaf area (SLA_{CWM}) was positively correlated with CP,
505 DMD, and MinAv, while community weighted mean leaf dry
506 matter content ($LDMC_{CWM}$) was negatively correlated with the
507 same forage parameters.

508 Plant community species richness is negatively
509 correlated with SB and MinAv (Fig. 2). The Shannon index and
510 species evenness were negatively correlated with SB and

511 positively correlated with MinAv. Species evenness was also
512 positively correlated with CP and DMD. Plant functional type
513 evenness was positively correlated with DMD, and MinAv,
514 while no correlation was found between PFT evenness and CP
515 and SB (Fig. 3). SLA functional richness was negatively
516 correlated with SB and DMD and positively correlated with CP.
517 An increase in functional evenness of SLA was significantly
518 associated with a decrease in CP, DMD, and MinAv. LDMC
519 functional richness was negatively correlated with DMD and SB,
520 and LDMC functional evenness was positively correlated with
521 DMD and MinAv.

522 A significant site effect was found in five of the eleven models
523 when including a site effect in models which displayed a
524 significant effect of diversity or functional traits or types on
525 DMD (Supp. info. Fig 2, Supp. info. Table 5). For CP, this was
526 the case in four out of seven models, and for MinAv, for five out
527 of ten models (Supp. info. Fig 3 and 4, Supp. info. Table 6 and
528 7). Of the seven models displaying significant relationships
529 between SB and diversity indices or functional traits, only the
530 one for the Shannon index significantly differed between sites
531 (Supp. info. Fig 5, Supp. info. Table 8).

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535 Figure 1. Effects of plant functional types (a, b, and c), community-
536 weighted mean of specific leaf area (SLA_{CWM} , d), and community-
537 weighted mean of leaf dry matter content ($LDMC_{CWM}$, e) on forage
538 variables. The response variables are represented as the percentage of
539 deviation of the predicted values from the mean of the response
540 variable. Statistically significant effects only are plotted ($P < 0.05$).

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546 Figure 2. Effects of species richness (a), Shannon index (b) and species
547 evenness index (c) on forage variables. The response variables are
548 represented as the percentage of deviation of the predicted values from
549 the mean of the response variable. Statistically significant effects only
550 are plotted ($P < 0.05$).

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554 Figure 3. Effects of functional richness and functional evenness of
555 SLA (a, b), plant functional type (PFT) evenness (c), and functional
556 richness and functional evenness of LDMC (d, e) on forage variables.
557 The response variables are represented as the percentage of deviation
558 of the predicted values from the mean of the response variable.
559 Statistically significant effects only are plotted ($P < 0.05$).

560

561 3.3. *Soil and land use direct and indirect effects on forage*
562 *parameters*

563

564 Significant effects of abiotic factors on forage parameters were
565 detected. Soil C/N and pH were negatively correlated with SB,
566 and soil C/N was also negatively correlated with CP (Table 2).
567 The effect of pH on SB was mediated by species richness and
568 forb percentage cover (Fig. 4 a), while the effect of C/N on CP
569 was partially mediated by percentage graminoid cover, SLA_{CWM} ,
570 and $LDMC_{CWM}$ (Fig. 4 b).

571 Soil average mineral content and LUI had a positive
572 effect on DMD, CP, and forage MinAv. The effects of soil
573 average mineral content were partially mediated by graminoid
574 percentage cover and $LDMC_{CWM}$ (Fig. 4 b, and Fig. 5 a and b).
575 For CP, the effect of soil average mineral content was also
576 partially mediated by SLA_{CWM} (Fig. 4 b) while for DMD it was
577 also partially mediated by SLA_{CWM} and species richness (Fig. 5
578 a). The effects of LUI on DMD and MinAv were partially
579 mediated by SLA functional evenness (Fig. 5 a). We found a
580 negative relationship between soil pH and forage MinAv and
581 also negative correlations between soil organic C content and
582 forage DMD and MinAv which were partially mediated by
583 $LDMC_{CWM}$ and SLA functional evenness (Fig. 5 a and b). Soil
584 pH had a positive effect on DMD despite being positively

585 correlated with species richness which was in turn negatively
586 correlated with DMD (Fig. 5 a).

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588

589 Table 2. Model estimates for the effect of soil properties and land-use
590 intensity on forage variables. SB: standing biomass, DMD: dry matter
591 digestibility; CP: crude protein content; MinAv_f: average mineral
592 content in forage. C/N: carbon to nitrogen ratio in soil; C_org: organic
593 carbon content in soil; MinAv_s: average mineral content in soil; LUI:
594 land-use intensity index. *, **, and *** indicate $P<0.05$, $P<0.01$,
595 and $P<0.001$, respectively. The Beta distribution (with a logit link), the
596 Box-Cox t distribution (Rigby & Stasinopoulos, 2006), and the Sinh-
597 Arcsinh distribution (Jones & Pewsey, 2009) were used.

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614 Fig 4. Path diagrams showing the effect of edaphic factors and land-

615 use intensity on forage standing biomass (a) and crude protein content

616 (b) mediated by functional traits, functional types, and diversity

617 indices. R^2_M indicates the proportion of variance explained by fixed

618 effects while R^2_C indicates the proportion of variance explained by

619 both fixed and random effects. Blue arrows indicate positive

620 relationships, red arrows indicate negative relationships, while grey

621 arrows indicate non-significant relationships. The standardised

622 regression coefficient for each relationship is indicated above the

623 arrows. The sizes of the arrows are proportional to the coefficients.

624 $LDMC_{CWM}$: community-weighted mean of leaf dry matter content;

625 SLA_{CWM} : community-weighted mean of specific leaf area. *, **, and

626 *** indicate $P < 0.05$, $P < 0.01$, and $P < 0.001$, respectively.

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647 Fig 5. Path diagrams showing the effect of edaphic factors and land-

648 use intensity on forage dry matter digestibility (a) and average mineral

649 content (b) mediated by functional traits, functional types, and

650 diversity indices. R^2_M indicates the proportion of variance explained

651 by fixed effects while R^2_C indicates the proportion of variance

652 explained by both fixed and random effects. Blue arrows indicate

653 positive relationships, red arrows indicate negative relationships. The

654 standardized regression coefficient for each relationship is indicated

655 above the arrows. The sizes of the arrows are proportional to the

656 coefficients. J: species evenness; FE_{vSLA} : functional evenness in SLA;

657 $LDMC_{CWM}$: community-weighted mean of leaf dry matter content;

658 SLA_{CWM} : community-weighted mean of specific leaf area. *, **, and

659 *** indicate $P < 0.05$, $P < 0.01$, and $P < 0.001$, respectively.

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666 **4. Discussion**

667

668 *4.1 Synergies and trade-offs between forage parameters*

669

670 Forage agronomic value assessment is based on forage

671 productivity and nutritive value. We showed here that these two

672 aspects of forage production were not correlated in the sampled

673 semi-natural grasslands at the beginning of the grazing season.

674 This offers the possibility of increasing either forage

675 productivity or nutritive value by adapting management

676 practices without impacting the other. It has been demonstrated

677 that management type had a significant effect on forage biomass

678 production but not on forage nutritive quality in mountain

679 grasslands (Loucougaray et al., 2015). A trade-off between

680 forage productivity and forage nutritive value may occur

681 however in species-rich grasslands, since we found a more

682 negative correlation between SB and DMD, and between SB and

683 MinM in plots associated with a higher species richness and

684 Shannon diversity. This suggests that although forage

685 productivity may be lower in species-rich grasslands, forage

686 nutritive value may be greater in these grasslands and can

687 compensate for reduced biomass production. Positive

688 correlations were found amongst parameters associated with
689 forage nutritive values. This was expected for DMD and CP for
690 which correlations are commonly reported (Hansen & Lawrence,
691 2017; Nozière et al., 2018).

692

693

694 *4.2 Relationships between descriptors of plant community and*
695 *forage parameters*

696

697 General trends in relationships between forage parameters and
698 plant functional traits and types were measured for extensive
699 grasslands of conservation interest. The community composition
700 in plant functional type had an influence on SB with a higher SB
701 recorded with higher graminoid cover and lower forb cover, as
702 expected (Michaud et al., 2015). Forage nutritive value
703 responded positively to the cover of forbs and legumes in plant
704 communities. For legumes, this result is in line with previous
705 findings which have demonstrated their higher protein content,
706 higher energy content, higher digestibility, and higher mineral
707 content for certain minerals compared to grasses (see review by
708 Baumont et al., 2016). The greater forage nutritive value of
709 legumes is probably detected by domestic sheep and cattle as
710 they show a partial preference for legumes compared to grasses
711 in their diet (Rutter, 2006). We found that forbs were associated
712 with high forage mineral contents, as also shown by Pirhofer-

713 Walzl et al. (2011) and Reiné et al. (2020). The different
714 responses of forage parameters to different PFTs suggests that
715 an even cover of PFTs may help in jointly increasing forage
716 biomass production and nutritive value.

717 We did not observe the positive correlation expected
718 between SLA_{CWM} and SB nor the expected negative correlation
719 between $LDMC_{CWM}$ and SB (Lavorel & Garnier, 2002). This
720 could be due to the presence of certain tussock perennial grasses
721 in extensive grasslands which are not consumed by livestock and
722 subsequently accumulate biomass (Hejmanová et al. 2016;
723 Massey et al. 2009). It is also possible that these traits are not as
724 good predictors of early standing biomass as they are of biomass
725 at a later vegetative stage or their capacity to predict forage
726 biomass vary between habitat types. The community weighted
727 means of LDMC and SLA had a negative and positive effect
728 respectively on CP. Even though the size of the effects varied
729 between sites, this was mainly due to one site (CRA) in which
730 the observed effects were particularly strong, and the direction
731 of the correlation slopes were generally consistent over all
732 studied sites. Leaf traits are also associated with DMD (Pontes
733 et al., 2007; Gardarin et al., 2014), and we found that both
734 $LDMC_{CWM}$ and SLA_{CWM} were highly correlated, negatively and
735 positively respectively, with DMD. For grasses, Khaled et al.
736 (2006) found LDMC to be better at predicting digestibility than
737 SLA. The correlation of both functional traits with DMD may be

738 due to the presence of forbs and legumes in many of the semi-
739 natural grasslands we studied, for which SLA was already shown
740 to be a good predictor for their DMD (Tasset et al., 2019). In
741 fact, SLA_{CWM} was a better predictor of DMD in our study since
742 the relation was more stable between sites than the one observed
743 between $LDMC_{CWM}$ and DMD.

744 Positive relationships were observed between both
745 taxonomic diversity and functional diversity and forage
746 nutritional quality, supporting the synergy between high plant
747 diversity and potential for agricultural use through forage
748 production in semi-natural grasslands of high conservation
749 value. However, negative relationships were recorded between
750 taxonomic diversity and standing biomass, which may
751 classically be explained by the competitive exclusion pressure
752 exerted by the more productive and competitive species on
753 others (Grime, 1973; Feßel et al., 2016). The grasslands we
754 studied may be situated on the declining section of the schematic
755 unimodal species richness - productivity relationship (Grime,
756 1973; Rosenzweig & Abramsky, 1993). In support of this
757 hypothesis, this study was carried out in extensively managed
758 grasslands and even the plots with the lowest species diversity
759 may nonetheless have a higher diversity compared to intensively
760 managed grasslands. It is also possible the negative correlation
761 between taxonomic diversity and standing biomass can be
762 explained by the spatial scale at which the study has been

763 conducted. A study taking this spatial effect into account (Gross
764 et al., 2009) showed that the positive relationship between
765 biodiversity and production exists in permanent grasslands at
766 very local scales (0.01m^2) whereas it is not detected at the
767 community scale ($>100\text{m}^2$), no doubt because at the scale of the
768 neighbourhood of the plants, complementarity between species
769 can come into play, while at the plant community level,
770 production is strongly dependent on environmental
771 heterogeneity, masking the biodiversity effect.

772 Among the species diversity measures calculated,
773 species evenness produced the most interesting results since it
774 was significantly correlated with all forage parameters. The
775 model outputs demonstrated a trade-off between forage
776 productivity and forage nutritive quality along a species
777 evenness gradient.

778 As for functional diversity, the negative effects of SLA
779 functional richness and LDMC functional richness on standing
780 biomass suggest that an increase in the occupation of the
781 functional space led to a decrease in biomass production. This
782 increase in functional space may be associated with a diversity
783 of species with diverse resource acquisition capacities but
784 without highly productive species. Similarly, Chanteloup &
785 Bonis (2013) found the peaks of standing biomass in fertile
786 habitats to be negatively correlated with functional diversity
787 which they interpreted as a dilution of highly productive species

788 that were first recruited in the communities resulting in a
789 reduction of community production capacity.

790 PFT evenness was correlated with DMD and MinAv
791 which along with the significant effects of vegetation trait
792 diversity on DMD, CP, and MinAv further highlights the
793 importance of traits in determining forage nutritive value. The
794 effect of species and PFT evenness on forage nutritive value in
795 our study is linked to the greater presence of forbs and legumes,
796 as species richness, Shannon index, and species evenness were
797 positively correlated with legume cover and forb cover which, as
798 previously discussed, were of higher nutritive value than grasses
799 in this study. In more evenly distributed communities with
800 different functional plant types, a large ecological
801 complementarity effect is obtained, and soil resources can be
802 exploited more fully by the communities, as suggested by
803 Picasso (2011) but also as evidenced in overyielding studies
804 manipulating the diversity of PFT in sown grasslands (Palmborg
805 et al. 2005; Finn et al. 2013).

806

807 *4.3 Direct and indirect effects of management and soil properties*
808 *on forage parameters*

809

810

811 Grassland vegetation responds to both environmental factors and
812 management practices (Delpech, 1982, Gos et al., 2016). In

813 intensive grasslands, biomass production appears mainly driven
814 by management practices such as the choice of species and
815 cultivar sown, grazing intensity or cutting frequency, and
816 fertilisation (Plantureux et al., 2005; Oenema et al., 2014). By
817 contrast, this study focused on semi-natural grasslands mostly
818 located in Natura 2000 sites where agricultural practices needed
819 to fit as much as possible with conservation goals. These semi-
820 natural grasslands are in general more limited in available soil
821 resources and their management can be defined as extensive,
822 with reduced grazing pressure or mowing frequency as well as
823 no or limited fertilisation input. The range in management
824 intensity is thus reduced and the effect of environmental factors
825 such as soil characteristics on grassland vegetation become more
826 apparent than they are in intensively managed grasslands (Balent
827 & Stafford Smith, 1991). We found this to be true for SB which
828 was not correlated with land-use intensity (LUI). However, LUI
829 did have a direct effect on MinAv and CP, and an indirect effect
830 on DMD and MinAv via a reduction of SLA evenness. Soil
831 characteristics had an impact on all forage parameters directly or
832 indirectly by altering plant diversity and the functional
833 composition of plant communities. Early standing biomass, CP,
834 DMD, and MinAv responded to vegetation functional traits and
835 PFT, and these in turn were correlated with soil fertility and pH
836 value. Direct effects of soil parameters on CP, DMD, and MinAv
837 were also detected. Edaphic and management effects on forage

838 parameters mediated by vegetation composition in extensive
839 grasslands have not been previously studied to our knowledge.
840 Average mineral soil content influence on forage nutritive value
841 was associated with a decrease in $LDMC_{CWM}$ and graminoid
842 cover and an increase in SLA_{CWM} . Leaf construction requires the
843 use of minerals which may explain the correlation measured
844 between the soil fertility parameters (average soil mineral
845 content, C/N, organic C content) and SLA_{CWM} or $LDMC_{CWM}$
846 (Wright et al., 2004; Hodgson et al., 2011). The effect of soil pH
847 on vegetation structure is site-dependent since the sampled
848 grasslands range from calcareous to acid grasslands.

849

850

851 *4.4 Generalisation of the relationships observed in a variety of*
852 *habitat types and climatic conditions*

853

854 Although we sampled across different habitat types, our study
855 design did not allow us to investigate effects of plant community
856 structure on forage productivity and nutritive value specific to a
857 study site. However, we were able to show correlations between
858 forage parameters and descriptors of community structure
859 among the wide range of habitat type and environmental
860 conditions sampled. Only the relationship between standing
861 biomass and species richness varied out of the seven significant
862 correlations measured between standing biomass and

863 community structure parameters. Relationships between forage
864 nutritive quality and community structure parameters were less
865 stable. The correlation between all forage nutritive quality
866 parameters and $LDMC_{CWM}$ significantly varied between sites.
867 However, the relationship between species evenness and DMD
868 and MinAv was stable across sampled sites. This suggests that
869 the relationship between standing biomass and forage nutritive
870 value is driven by species evenness in multiple extensive
871 grassland habitat types. The forage parameter with the least
872 stable relationship with community structure parameters across
873 site was crude protein content (five out of seven significant
874 relationships). More research is needed to decipher which
875 parameters among habitat types drive the relationship between
876 community structure and forage nutritive value.

877

878 *5. Conclusion and perspectives*

879

880 Forage production is a key service delivered by grasslands for
881 farmers. Our work, together with other studies (see review by
882 Tallwin and Jefferson, 1999, Farruggia et al., 2008), showed
883 that synergies occurred between plant diversity conservation and
884 forage nutritional quality in a wide range of semi-natural
885 grassland types extensively managed in France. Such synergies
886 may even be expressed in the economic value of forage while

887 considering forage yield and nutritive value in grasslands
888 (Schaub et al., 2020).

889 This study has demonstrated the importance of plant
890 functional traits and PFT in determining forage productivity and
891 nutritive value. Forage production in intensive grasslands tends
892 to focus on grasses and legumes. Here, we evidenced that non-
893 fixing forbs play an important role in diversified grasslands for
894 forage nutritional quality. We also showed that an even
895 distribution in PFTs may improve forage nutritive value without
896 reducing biomass production, opening perspectives for the
897 compatibility of agricultural and conservation values in semi-
898 natural grasslands. Furthermore, greater species evenness and
899 especially functional evenness was previously shown to increase
900 community stability and resistance to external threats
901 (Hillebrand et al., 2008) and thus show multiple benefits to semi-
902 natural grasslands. This study highlights the equitability, both at
903 the species level and at the functional traits and types level, as
904 key to the analysis of the relationship between biodiversity
905 conservation and forage production. The idea of considering
906 nutritive quality in forage evaluation could also be taken further
907 by analysing the effect on animal health, the diversity of other
908 taxonomic groups (e.g. birds, insects, and microorganisms), or
909 the quality of products derived from forage such as meat, milk,
910 and cheese.

911 Seeking a good compatibility among biodiversity and
912 forage production is of fundamental importance for high heritage
913 value grasslands for their sustainable use and management.
914 Therefore, we recommend integrating forage production
915 quantity and nutritive value in grasslands conservation status
916 assessment. This will have two main benefits:

917

918 • To provide managers, conservationist as well as farmers
919 with the actual nutritive and production values of species-
920 rich grasslands, offering firm basis for management
921 choices and then, eventually, limiting underestimation of
922 their agronomic quality. With such a clear knowledge,
923 farmers may be enticed to participate in conservation
924 efforts, as they will be in a position to argue on the related
925 economic impact or to realise that there is little or no
926 compromise required between grassland agronomic values
927 and their conservation efforts (McGinlay et al., 2017).

928

929 • The diagnosis of forage productivity and nutritive value in
930 evaluating grassland conservation status could help
931 identify situations which are at risk of land use
932 abandonment because of poor forage productivity or poor
933 forage nutritional quality.

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937

938 **Acknowledgements**

939

940 The authors would like to thank Hugo Fontes, François

941 Mesleard, Sylvain Plantureux, and Maxime Burst for

942 contributing to discussions for this study or in data acquisition.

943 We also thank the following people for their help in field

944 work/acquiring data: Benjamin Allard, Pauline Boubert,

945 Méghan Boulembert, Lucie Chauvel, Clémence Helleu, Nathan

946 Daumergue, Françoise Dubois, Frédéric Dubois, Adeline

947 François, Claude Gallois, Marion Girardier, Loan Madej, Chloé

948 Malik, Daniel Pavon, Lisa Poisse, Hervé Ramone, Emmanuelle

949 Revardel, Adelaïde Theraroz, Romain Ulmer, and Christel

950 Vidaller. We would like to thank the laboratory “Laboratoire

951 Agronomique Normand” (LANO) for the chemical analysis

952 management. We are grateful to the farmers who provided

953 access to their fields and to the following organisations which

954 provided basic information and facilities for working in the

955 Natura 2000 sites: Parc naturel regional (PNR) des Marais du

956 Cotentin et du Bessin, PNR Volcans d’Auvergne, PNR du

957 Vercors, Conservatoire des Espaces Naturels (CEN) Aquitaine,

958 CEN Lorraine, Pôle Lorrain du Futur Conservatoire Botanique

959 National Nord-Est, CEN de Provence-Alpes-Côte-d’Azur,

960 Réserve Naturelle Nationale des Coussouls de Crau, the

961 “Coussouls sentinelles” programme of the Conseil
962 Départemental des Bouches-du-Rhône, Chambre d’Agriculture
963 des Bouches-du-Rhône, and CEN des Hauts-de-France.

964

965 This work is a result of the SUR-PAS project (“SURveillance de
966 l’état de conservation des habitats agro-PASToraux pelousaires
967 et prairiaux”) funded by Le Ministère de la Transition
968 Ecologique et Solidaire (MTES) and driven by UMS PatriNat
969 for the Office Français de la Biodiversité (OFB), within the
970 framework of the "Habitats, Fauna, Flora" directive, Natura
971 2000 Project.

972

973

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