

The effects of river stage fluctuations on the
hyporheic and parafluvial ecology of the Hunter
River, New South Wales

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Abstract

The hyporheic zone is the area of saturated sediments underlying many gravel-bed rivers where channel water actively exchanges with interstitial water. Through a series of biological, physical, and chemical filtration processes, the hyporheic zone influences the water quality of the surface stream. Lateral to the hyporheic zone is the parafluvial zone, the saturated area below gravel bars, which can have a similar filtration role. The ability of the hyporheic and parafluvial zones to act as filters largely depends on surface discharge. Fluctuations in discharge are needed to prevent the clogging of sediment pore-spaces, and to vary the rate at which nutrients and oxygen are transported into the hyporheic zone. Sediment packing, porosity and size, the amount of microbial and invertebrate activity, and stream topographical profile are other factors that control hyporheic filtration. Filtration efficiency is a measure of the rate at which dissolved nutrients and physico-chemical variables of a parcel of water are transformed during a period of interstitial flow. It can be gauged by measuring gradients of nutrients and physico-chemical variables along subsurface flowpaths.

From May 2000 to May 2001, the hyporheic and parafluvial zones of seven sites along the Hunter River, a large coastal river in central New South Wales, were sampled using a hyporheic pump. Analysis of physico-chemical, nutrient, and invertebrate fauna samples revealed that all sites displayed some degree of hyporheic and parafluvial filtration. In general, the filtration efficiency declined with distance downstream, with the two upstream sites showing more biological activity than other sites. Despite this, there was no longitudinal increase or decrease in the net concentration of either nitrate/nitrite nitrogen (NO_x) or soluble reactive phosphorus (SRP) in the downstream hyporheic zones. Most filtration occurred within the upper 40 cm of bed sediments. The most active part of the parafluvial zone was the area of sediments within 1 m of the upstream shore-line, and efficiency often declined within the first 10 m of the subsurface flow-paths. Deeper sediments and areas of the bar further from the stream appeared to act as storage areas for NO_x.

Two unregulated sand bed tributaries of the Hunter River were also surveyed and displayed divergent trends in their bed filtration capacity. The fine sand of Wollombi Brook at Warkworth limited exchange substantially, so that most of the nutrient transformation probably occurred within the upper 10 – 20 cm of the bed. The

remainder of the bed and bar acted as slow-release nutrient storage areas, depending on upwelling groundwater or floods to facilitate exchange with the surface stream. In contrast, hydrologic exchange between bar and river at Sandy Hollow, on the Goulburn River, appeared to be less restricted than that at Warkworth, perhaps facilitated by spear-point pumping.

In all, 71 invertebrate taxa were collected from the interstitial habitats of the Hunter River and one of its tributaries. This fauna consisted of a mix of surface dwelling (epigean) species and groundwater fauna (stygobites). Three families of the stygobite crustacean superorder Syncarida were found during this study, as well as one amphipod family and a genus of blind isopod. The occurrence of stygobites at all sites emphasised the strong linkages between the hyporheic zone and the groundwater aquifer. These links have probably sustained the high hyporheic activity in the Hunter River, despite heavy anthropogenic modifications to its catchment.

Following these surveys, a conceptual model was developed and tested to examine the effects of stream fluctuations on hyporheic filtration efficiency and ecology. High, within-bank flows are predicted to enhance linkages between the hyporheic zone and stream. Strategically timed pulses of water temporarily increase discharge, covering more of the lateral bars and increasing the area available for hyporheic exchange. If the flow is great enough, fine particles will be flushed and sediment that has become compacted over time will be jostled loose, increasing the pore-space of the hyporheic zone. When this is coupled with the increased hydraulic pressure that comes with higher water levels, oxygen-rich surface water is able to travel further through the hyporheic zone and extend its oxidising margins both vertically and laterally. All of these processes are hypothesised to enhance bed filtration through stimulating microbial processes such as nitrification.

Glenbawn Dam regulates flow in the Hunter River and, in 1998-99 a series of flow rules was developed to promote environmental protection. Flow Rule 2 specifies that the first 12 h of each flow event be allowed to pass without abstraction, followed by a maximum abstraction of 50 %. The purpose of this rule is to re-establish small to medium flow events. Two flow experiments were conducted at three sites to test separate components of Rule 2 and understand its influence on the hyporheic zone. In the first experiment, an environmental flow of 15 000 ML was released over a period

of three days, with all the restrictions on pumping specified by Rule 2. Combined sampling with a hyporheic pump and freeze corer indicated that the release increased porosity of the upper 20 cm of bed at two sites and stimulated microbial nitrification. Nitrification was also enhanced at the third site but porosity did not change, probably due to the coarser substrata. For the second experiment, a 12 h diversion of water over the bars at two sites revealed the effects of the initial ban on pumping. No changes in nitrogen dynamics were observed but soluble reactive phosphorus, initially flushed from the sediments, increased following the removal of the diversion. At one site, densities of epigeal taxa increased in the interstitial habitat during the diversion. These experimental results show that Rule 2 enhances hyporheic processes in two ways. First, deeper infiltration of oxygenated water allows aerobically mediated microbial processes such as nitrification to occur in a larger volume of sediment. Second, by covering a larger portion of the bar, the size of the hyporheic filter is extended.

This study is the first broad-scale investigation into the hyporheic zone of any large Australian regulated river. It uncovered a rich invertebrate fauna, an active microbial biota, and significantly improves our understanding of how environmental flows benefit the hyporheic zone. In streams with strong connections to the aquifer, such as the Hunter River, hyporheic biological processes can be maintained through environmental flow releases in the surface channel. Controlled manipulations in river stage may be a useful means of improving surface water and groundwater quality through hyporheic and parafluvial filtration.

Table of Contents

Title page	i
Certification	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	xii
List of Tables	xxi
Acknowledgements	xxv
Chapter 1. General introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The hyporheic zone	1
1.3 The importance of flow fluctuations to the hyporheic zone	7
1.4 Nutrient dynamics and flow	10
1.5 Flow and interstitial invertebrate communities	11
1.6 Hyporheic zones in regulated rivers	12
1.7 The Hunter River hyporheic zone and thesis outline	13
Chapter 2. Study sites	17
2.1 Catchment	17
2.1.1 Geology	17
2.1.2 Land use	17
2.1.3 Climate	18

2.1.4 The Hunter River	18
2.2 Study sites	21
2.2.1 Aberdeen	24
2.2.2 Denman	24
2.2.3 Bowmans Crossing	26
2.2.4 Downstream of Macquarie Power Generation	26
2.2.5 Moses Crossing	29
2.2.6 Maison Dieu	29
2.2.7 Dights Crossing	29
2.2.8 Goulburn River at Sandy Hollow	31
2.2.9 Wollombi Brook at Warkworth	31
Chapter 3. Spatial and temporal patterns in the hyporheic zone of the Hunter River	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.1.1 Components of an active hyporheic zone	36
3.2 Study sites	39
3.3 Methods	39
3.3.1 Field sampling	39
3.3.2 Laboratory processing	42
3.3.3 Hydrological data	42
3.3.4 Data analysis	42
3.4 Results	47
3.4.1 Trends among sites and times	47

3.4.2 Aberdeen	49
3.4.3 Denman	58
3.4.4 Bowmans Crossing	65
3.4.5 Downstream of Macquarie Generation	71
3.4.6 Moses Crossing	78
3.4.7 Maison Dieu	85
3.4.8 Dights Crossing	91
3.5 Discussion	98
3.5.1 Longitudinal patterns	98
3.5.2 Seasonal patterns	103
3.5.3 Invertebrate community structure	105
3.5.4 hyporheic ecosystem services	108
3.6 Summary and conclusions	111
Chapter 4. Interstitial activity in sand-bed hyporheic zones – the effect of substrate size	113
4.1 Introduction	113
4.1.1 Exchange in sand-bed streams	113
4.1.2 Nutrient properties of sand-bed hyporheic zones	117
4.1.3 The sandy stream hyporheos	118
4.4.4 The Hunter River basin	119
4.2 Study sites	119
4.3 Methods	120
4.3.1 Field sampling	120

4.3.2 Laboratory analysis	120
4.3.3 Statistical analysis	121
4.4 Results	122
4.4.1 Physico-chemical variables	122
4.4.2 Nutrient patterns	133
4.4.3 Faunal communities	137
4.5 Discussion	142
4.5.1 Physico-chemical patterns	142
4.5.2 Dissolved oxygen	143
4.5.3 Nutrient patterns	144
4.5.4 Invertebrate community	146
4.6 Conclusions	147
Chapter 5. The effects of an environmental flow release on the hyporheic zone of the Hunter River	149
5.1 Introduction	149
5.1.1 A model of the effects of environmental flows on the hyporheic zone	150
5.2 Study sites	152
5.3 Methods	152
5.3.1 Sampling schedule	153
5.3.2 Field sampling	153
5.3.3 Laboratory processing	157
5.3.4 Data analysis	158

5.4 Results	162
5.4.1 Hydrological data	162
5.4.2 Sediment characteristics	164
5.4.3 Physico-chemical variables	175
5.4.4 Total invertebrate numbers and taxonomic richness	178
5.4.5 Community dynamics	183
5.5 Discussion	194
5.6 Conclusion	201
Chapter 6. The effects of a small-scale flow fluctuations on hyporheic filtration processes	203
6.1 Introduction	203
6.1.1 The importance of different size flow fluctuations	203
6.1.2 Small-scale fluctuations	203
6.1.3 A conceptual model	206
6.2 Study sites	207
6.3 Methods	207
6.3.1 Field sampling	207
6.3.2 Laboratory analysis	211
6.3.3 Statistical analysis	212
6.4 Results	213
6.4.1 Vertical hydraulic gradient	213
6.4.2 Physico-chemical variables	213
6.4.3 Nitrogen dynamics	219

6.4.4 Phosphorus dynamics	224
6.4.5 Microbial hydrolytic activity	225
6.4.6 Faunal dynamics	229
6.5 Discussion	233
6.6 Conclusions	237
Chapter 7. Synthesis, conclusions, and recommendations for management	238
7.1 Scale in hyporheic ecological research	238
7.2 The Hunter River hyporheic zone	239
7.3 Management of the Hunter River	240
7.3.1 Flow Rule 2	241
7.4 New ecological hypotheses stemming from this thesis	242
7.5 Conclusions	243
Chapter 8. References	244

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Longitudinal cross-section of a riffle and an aerial view of a lateral bar sequence showing hyporheic and parafluvial exchange.	2
Figure 1.2. The physical, biological, and chemical components of hyporheic filtration.	5
Figure 1.3. Cross section of a river corridor showing the relative location of the stream, hyporheic zone, parafluvial zone, riparian habitat, and their connection to the groundwater.	6
Figure 1.4. The central role of the hyporheic zone in linking the stream and groundwater to floodplain habitats in gravel-bed rivers.	6
Figure 1.5. The potential spatial dynamics of the hyporheic zone in response to a medium- level flow.	9
Figure 1.6. Three examples of the hyporheic fauna of the Hunter River.	14
Figure 1.7. Theoretical hydrograph, indicating the various management components of the Hunter River and the thesis chapters in which they are discussed.	15
Figure 2.1 Median daily rainfall and mean daily temperature at Scone.	19
Figure 2.2 Median daily rainfall and mean daily temperature at Jerrys Plains.	20
Figure 2.3 Map of the Hunter River showing the location of sampling sites.	22
Figure 2.4. Study site at Aberdeen.	25

Figure 2.5. Hydrograph for Aberdeen from January 2000 to December 2002.	25
Figure 2.6. Study site at Denman.	27
Figure 2.7. Study site at Bowmans Crossing during medium flow.	27
Figure 2.8. Hydrograph for Jerrys Plains from January 2000 to January 2003.	28
Figure 2.9. Study site at Downstream of Macquarie Power Generation.	28
Figure 2.10. Study site at Moses Crossing.	30
Figure 2.11. Study site at Maison Dieu.	30
Figure 2.12. Study site at Dights Crossing.	32
Figure 2.13. Study site at Sandy Hollow.	32
Figure 2.14. Hydrograph for the Goulburn River at Sandy Hollow from January 2000 to December 2001.	33
Figure 2.15. Study site at Warkworth.	33
Figure 2.16 Hydrograph for Wollombi Brook at Warkworth from January 2000 to December 2001.	34
Figure 3.1. Expected trends in the concentrations of soluble reactive phosphorus (SRP), nitrate and nitrite (NO _x), and dissolved oxygen (DO) with depth and distance along subsurface flowpaths.	38
Figure 3.2. Mean daily flow in the Hunter River at Aberdeen and Jerrys Plains.	41
Figure 3.3. The hyporheic pump sampler.	41

Figure 3.4. Location of sampling points in the riffle and bar within a site.	43
Figure 3.5. Pictorial representation of sample collection using the pump sampler.	44
Figure 3.6. Composition of invertebrate communities in each of the two habitats at seven Hunter River sites.	51
Figure 3.7. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables at Aberdeen.	55
Figure 3.8. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Aberdeen.	57
Figure 3.9. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables at Denman.	61
Figure 3.10. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Denman.	63
Figure 3.11. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables at Bowmans Crossing.	68
Figure 3.12. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Bowmans Crossing.	70
Figure 3.13. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables Downstream of Macquarie Generation.	74

Figure 3.14. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Downstream of Macquarie Generation.	76
Figure 3.15. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness and measured physico-chemical variables at Moses Crossing.	81
Figure 3.16. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Moses Crossing.	83
Figure 3.17. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables at Maison Dieu.	88
Figure 3.18. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Maison Dieu.	90
Figure 3.19. Interstitial nitrates, soluble reactive phosphorus, invertebrate abundance, taxonomic richness, and measured physico-chemical variables at Dights Crossing.	95
Figure 3.20. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling diagrams of hyporheic and parafluvial habitats at Dights Crossing.	97
Figure 4.1. The predicted effect of different sediment size on some biological, hydrological, and physico-chemical parameters of the hyporheic zone.	114
Figure 4.2. Three methods of hydrological exchange between a stream and its sand bed: a) exchange driven by hydraulic gradients, b) sediment turnover , and c) pumping.	114
Figure 4.3. Vertical hydraulic exchange in three types of hyporheic zones: (a) in a sand bed with a strong groundwater influence, (b) where	

groundwater upwelling has little or no influence on the hyporheic processes, (c) exchange with the river in coarser sediments.	116
Figure 4.4. Hyporheic and parafluvial pH for six sites and three times.	125
Figure 4.5. Hyporheic and parafluvial temperature for six sites and three times.	128
Figure 4.6. Hyporheic and parafluvial conductivity for six sites and three times.	130
Figure 4.7. Hyporheic and parafluvial dissolved oxygen for six sites and three times.	132
Figure 4.8. Hyporheic and parafluvial soluble reactive phosphorus concentration for six sites and three times.	136
Figure 4.9. Hyporheic and parafluvial nitrate and nitrite nitrogen concentration for six sites and three times.	139
Figure 4.10. Non-metric multi-dimensional scaling plots for invertebrate community assemblages during May, August, and November 2000.	141
Figure 5.1. The potential effects of an environmental flow on hyporheic and parafluvial spatial dimensions.	151
Figure 5.2. Average daily flow at Aberdeen and Jerrys Plains gauging stations.	154
Figure 5.3. The location of downwelling, upwelling, and bar sample points in a theoretical site containing a riffle and a lateral bar.	154
Figure 5.4. Operation of the freeze-corer at the downwelling habitat at Aberdeen.	156

Figure 5.5. A frozen core from the upwelling habitat at Aberdeen before cutting into 10 cm sections.	156
Figure 5.6. Pictorial representation of the sampling protocol showing the 3 times (T), 3 sites (S), 3 habitats (H), 3 replicate wells (R), and 5 depths nested within habitat D(H).	159
Figure 5.7. Mean hydraulic head, temperature, and electrical conductivity for the three sites before and after the flow release.	163
Figure 5.8. Mean sediment particle size distribution for the bar, downwelling zone, and upwelling zone at Aberdeen.	165
Figure 5.9. Mean sediment particle size distribution for the bar, downwelling zone, and upwelling zone at Bowmans Crossing.	167
Figure 5.10. Mean sediment particle size distribution the bar, downwelling zone, and upwelling zone at Moses Crossing.	169
Figure 5.11. Mean porosity for each depth section at each site.	171
Figure 5.12. Mean proportion of fine sediments for each depth section at each site.	173
Figure 5.13. Mean dissolved oxygen, and nitrate and nitrite nitrogen for the three sites before and after the flow release.	177
Figure 5.14. Mean taxonomic richness and invertebrate abundance for samples collected with the pump sampler before and after the flow release.	181
Figure 5.15. Mean taxonomic richness for each depth section at each site.	181
Figure 5.16. Mean invertebrate abundance per 100 mL of interstitial water for each depth section at each site.	182

Figure 5.17. Non-metric multidimensional scaling plot for invertebrate communities at three sites pooled for all times.	185
Figure 5.18. nMDS plots of hyporheic invertebrate communities collected with the pump sampler from 40 cm depth at Aberdeen, Bowmans Crossing, and Moses Crossing .	187
Figure 5.19. nMDS plots of hyporheic invertebrate communities collected with the freeze-core sampler Aberdeen, Bowmans Crossing, and Moses Crossing.	191
Figure 5.20. nMDS plots of hyporheic invertebrate communities from the first two core sections at Aberdeen, Bowmans Crossing, and Moses Crossing.	192
Figure 6.1. Pictorial representation of the dual flow events brought about by Flow Rule 2. Initially, water level rises with the commencement of high flow (A). After 12 hours, pumping is allowed, and water level declines (B).	205
Figure 6.2. Without Rule 2, pumping prevents the maximum stage of the river from being achieved and less of the hyporheic filters become saturated.	205
Figure 6.3. Timeline showing the seven sampling occasions.	208
Figure 6.4. The location of the flow deflection fence at (a) Bowmans Crossing, and (b) Moses Crossing.	208
Figure 6.5. Looking downstream at Moses Crossing with the flow deflection fence in place.	209
Figure 6.6. Mean VHG at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	215
Figure 6.7. Mean dissolved oxygen at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	211

Figure 6.8. Mean temperature at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	217
Figure 6.9. Mean electrical conductivity at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	218
Figure 6.10. Mean pH at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	220
Figure 6.11. Mean total nitrogen at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	221
Figure 6.12. Mean ammonium at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing.	222
Figure 6.13. Mean nitrate and nitrite nitrogen at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	223
Figure 6.14. Mean total phosphorus at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	226
Figure 6.15. Mean soluble reactive phosphorus at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing over the six times of the survey.	227
Figure 6.16. Mean bacterial hydrolytic activity at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing.	228
Figure 6.17. Mean invertebrate abundance at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing.	230
Figure 6.18. Mean numbers of taxa at Bowmans Crossing and Moses Crossing.	231
Figure 6.19. Non-metric multidimensional scaling plot for faunal communities at Bowmans Crossing.	232

Figure 6.20. Non-metric multidimensional scaling plot for faunal communities at Bowmans Crossing.

232

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Summary of study sites in the Hunter Valley.	23
Table 3.1. ANOVA results for Time x Site interactions for riffle and bar habitats.	50
Table 3.2. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Aberdeen.	54
Table 3.3. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Denman.	60
Table 3.4. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Bowmans Crossing.	67
Table 3.5. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Downstream of Macquarie Generation.	73
Table 3.6. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Moses Crossing.	80
Table 3.7. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Maison Dieu.	87
Table 3.8. ANOVA results for Time x Habitat interactions for riffle habitat at Dights Crossing.	94
Table 3.9. Dominant spatial trends in nutrient and invertebrate patterns at each site.	101
Table 4.1. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for pH in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	124

Table 4.2. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for temperature in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	127
Table 4.3. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for conductivity in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	129
Table 4.4. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for dissolved oxygen in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	131
Table 4.5. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for soluble reactive phosphorus in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	135
Table 4.6. Mixed-model ANOVA results table for nitrate and nitrite nitrogen in the surface, hyporheic, and parafluvial habitats.	138
Table 5.1. Equations for calculating sediment volume at each site - derived from the cores of the first sample occasion.	159
Table 5.2. Factors and interaction terms for analysis of variance, and the formulas used for deriving the estimated mean squares (EMS), error terms used to calculate the F ratio, and variance components.	161
Table 5.3. ANOVA results table for hydraulic head.	163
Table 5.4. Average proportion of each sediment Wentworth size-class at each site.	165
Table 5.5. ANOVA results table for sediment porosity.	170
Table 5.6. ANOVA results table for the proportion of fine sediments.	173
Table 5.7. ANOVA results table for temperature.	174
Table 5.8. ANOVA results table for the electrical conductivity.	174

Table 5.9. ANOVA results table for dissolved oxygen.	177
Table 5.10. ANOVA results table for nitrate and nitrite nitrogen.	177
Table 5.11. ANOVA results table for taxonomic richness for samples collected with the pump sampler.	180
Table 5.12. ANOVA results table for invertebrate abundance for samples collected with the pump sampler.	180
Table 5.13. ANOVA results table for taxonomic richness for samples collected with the freeze-core sampler.	180
Table 5.14. ANOVA results table for invertebrate abundance for samples collected with the freeze-core sampler.	182
Table 5.15. ANOSIM results from pump samples.	184
Table 5.16. Results of SIMPER analysis for pump samples.	186
Table 5.17. ANOSIM results from freeze-core samples.	189
Table 5.18. ANOSIM results from the pooled top two sections of freeze-core samples.	189
Table 5.19. Results of SIMPER spatial and temporal analysis for the upper two sections of core samples.	190
Table 6.1. ANOVA results table for VHG for the main factors and interaction terms.	215
Table 6.2. ANOVA results table for dissolved oxygen for the main factors and interaction terms.	216

Table 6.3. ANOVA results table for temperature for the main factors and interaction terms.	217
Table 6.4. ANOVA results table for electrical conductivity for the main factors and interaction terms.	218
Table 6.5. ANOVA results table for pH for the main factors and interaction terms.	220
Table 6.6. ANOVA results table for total nitrogen for the main factors and interaction terms.	221
Table 6.7. ANOVA results table for ammonium for the main factors and interaction terms.	222
Table 6.8. ANOVA results table for nitrate and nitrite nitrogen for the main factors and interaction terms.	223
Table 6.9. ANOVA results table for total phosphorus for the main factors and interaction terms.	226
Table 6.10. ANOVA results table for soluble reactive phosphorus for the main factors and interaction terms.	227
Table 6.11. ANOVA results table for bacterial hydrolytic activity for the main factors and interaction terms.	228
Table 6.12. ANOVA results table for invertebrate abundance for the main factors and interaction terms.	230
Table 6.13. ANOVA results table for taxon numbers for the main factors and interaction terms.	231

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