

ANNALES

Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije
Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee
Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies
Series Historia Naturalis, 33, 2023, 2





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Series Historia Naturalis, 33, 2023, 2

ISSN 1408-533X
e-ISSN 2591-1783

UDK 5

Letnik 33, leto 2023, številka 2

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Izdajatelj/Editori/Published by:Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / *Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria*®Inštitut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / *Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment / Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente*®**Sedež uredništva/Sede della redazione/
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Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 23. 12. 2023.

**Sofinancirajo/Supporto finanziario/
Financially supported by:**

Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije (ARRS) in Mestna občina Koper

Annales - Series Historia Naturalis izhaja dvakrat letno.**Naklada/Tiratura/Circulation:**

300 izvodov/copie/copies

Revija Annales, Series Historia Naturalis je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / *La rivista Annales, series Historia Naturalis è inserita nei seguenti data base / Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in:* BIOSIS-Zoological Record (UK); Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Abstracts (ASFA); Elsevier B.V.: SCOPUS (NL); Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).To delo je objavljeno pod licenco / *Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza / This work is licensed under a* Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0.Navodila avtorjem in vse znanstvene revije in članki so brezplačno dostopni na spletni strani <https://zdjp.si/en/p/annalesshn/>
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received: 2023-10-02

DOI 10.19233/ASHN.2023.33

FIRST EVIDENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF *OKENIA PICOENSIS* PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA) IN THE ADRIATIC SEA

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ABSTRACT

*The authors report the finding of some specimens (8 sightings) of *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) at three different sites in Croatia (northern Adriatic Sea). Although this seaslug species has only recently been described, this record confirms its rapid spread throughout the Mediterranean Sea. This finding represents the first substantiated record in the Adriatic Sea.*

Key words: Heterobranchia, spreading, northern Adriatic Sea

PRIME PROVE DELLA PRESENZA DI *OKENIA PICOENSIS* PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA) NEL MARE ADRIATICO

SINTESI

*Gli autori riportano il ritrovamento di alcuni esemplari (8 avvistamenti) di *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) in tre diversi siti della Croazia (Adriatico settentrionale). Sebbene questa specie di nudibranco sia stata descritta solo di recente, i dati confermano la sua rapida diffusione in tutto il Mediterraneo. Questo ritrovamento rappresenta il primo ritrovamento documentato nell'Adriatico.*

Parole chiave: Heterobranchia, espansione, Adriatico settentrionale

INTRODUCTION

Heterobranch gastropods have been gaining increasing attention from the scientific community, with fresh evidence consistently being published in specialised scientific literature. A significant contribution to their knowledge also comes from citizen science, which is recognised for its efficacy in collecting valuable and dependable data for diverse research purposes, as highlighted by Langeneck *et al.* (2022). According to Trainito *et al.* (2022), the intense fascination with ‘nudibranchs’, along with the technological development of increasingly powerful cameras, and their widespread use by divers have made diving a basic documentation tool for most researchers, as demonstrated by Bohnsack (1979) and Cattaneo-Vietti & Mojetta (2021). Moreover, with the growing number of underwater photographers (Parera *et al.*, 2020), discoveries of new, rare, or lesser-known heterobranchs are rapidly shared through social media, leading to the publication of many new heterobranch detections (e.g., Fortič *et al.*, 2021; Kousteni *et al.*, 2022; Montesanto *et al.*, 2022; Trainito *et al.*, 2023). The team of authors gathered around this article testifies to the

well-established cooperation between underwater photographers and researchers, confirming it with a new sighting of *Okenia picoensis* Paz-Sedano, Ortigosa & Pola, 2017 in the northern Adriatic Sea. This species was originally described from the Azores by Paz-Sedano *et al.* (2017), who identified two colour patterns: one white with yellow tips of the rhinophores and cerata, and the other pale yellow with orange tips (Paz-Sedano *et al.*, 2017). The first record of *O. picoensis* in the Mediterranean Sea was reported by Pontes and Madrenas (2022) at four different localities in Malta and off the coast of Almuñécar (Granada), Spain. Later, specimens of *O. picoensis* were recorded in different locations in Sicily (Crocetta *et al.*, 2021; Lombardo & Marletta, 2021). Afterwards, Trainito *et al.* (2022) published the first record of this species in Sardinia and provided a comprehensive list of all thirty documented sightings in the Mediterranean Sea to date, based on published records and specialist portals (DORIS; OPK-Opisthobranchus). They noted that almost all the records were derived from reports by non-specialists. Trainito *et al.* (2022) concluded that the spreading of *O. picoensis* involves the entire Mediterranean Sea save the Adriatic Sea.



Fig. 1: Locations of sighting. The red square indicates the location of the investigated area in the Adriatic Sea.
Sl. 1: Lokacije opazovanj. Rdeč okvir označuje lokacijo raziskanega predela v Jadranskem morju.

Tab. 1: Findings of *Okenia picoensis* specimens in the studied area with data about dates, sites, coordinates, number of specimens, depths, and habitats.**Tab. 1: Podatki o datumih, lokalitetah, številu primerkov, globinah in habitatih najdenih primerkih vrste *Okenia picoensis* na obravnavanem območju.**

Date		Site	Coordinates		n	Depth (m)	Habitat
			N	E			
1	dec. 22	Kostrena	45.30323	14.48866	1	11	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
2	apr. 23	Marco Polo Diving	45.34083	14.37235	3	7	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
3	jun. 23	Girandella diving	45.07949	14.17512	1	27	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
4	jun. 23	Marco Polo Diving	45.34083	14.37235	1	22	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
5	jun.23	Girandella diving	45.07949	14.17512	1	17,5	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
6	aug. 23	Kostrena	45.30323	14.48866	1	23	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>

Herein, we report the first record of *O. picoensis* in the Adriatic Sea and discuss the accompanying information obtained in the region.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A first specimen of *Okenia picoensis* was found in December 2022 at a depth of 11 m in Kostrena (Rijeka, Croatia) (Fig. 1). Subsequently, in April and May 2023, three more specimens were discovered at a depth of 6–7 m at the Marco Polo diving site near Rijeka, not far from the first location (Tab. 1). Finally, in June, the species was observed in the waters off Rabac (reef near the Girandella diving centre) in the eastern part of the Istrian Peninsula at a depth of 17 m, and again in August in the Kostrena area at a depth of 23 m. The specimens were identified using the diagnostic features described by Paz-Sedano *et al.* (2017). The validity of the Latin name was checked against the World Register of Marine Species [WoRMS]. The specimen from Kostrena was photographed using a Canon M50 with a mini flash backscatter, while the specimens from Rijeka were shot using a Nikon D800 and a Seacam150 flash with a macro lens Inon ucl67. The first specimen is now housed in the collection of the Marine Biology Station Piran (NIB).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eight specimens of *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) were recorded at three different sites in Croatia (northern Adriatic Sea).

The discovery areas were characterised by rocky bottom boulders of varying sizes and small inlets covered with a sciaphilous assemblage at depths ranging from 7 to 27 m. All the individuals were found on *Codium bursa* algae. According to published monographs and scientific papers (Betti, 2011; Ciriaco & Poloniato, 2016; Zenetos *et al.*, 2016; Lipej *et al.*, 2018; Prkić *et al.*, 2018; Ciriaco *et al.*, 2023), the species had not been previously recorded in the Adriatic Sea (Fig. 2).

Since *O. picoensis* has only recently been described, its ecological and biological characteristics are still poorly known. This sighting is the first documented record of this species in the Adriatic Sea. Considering the map of all records summarised by Trainito *et al.* (2022), which confirmed records for all parts of the Mediterranean except the Adriatic Sea, a first record in the latter was expected. In the northern Adriatic, *O. picoensis* was found at shallower depths (6 to 17 m) compared to other areas, where depths ranged from 15 to 34 m (Orfanidis *et al.*, 2021; Crocetta *et al.*, 2021; Lombardo & Marletta, 2021; Trainito *et al.*, 2022).

According to Pola *et al.* (2019), to date, at least five species of the genus *Okenia* have been recorded in the Adriatic Sea: *Okenia elegans* (Leuckart, 1828), *O. mediterranea* (Von Ihering, 1886), *O. aspersa* (Alder & Hancock, 1945), *O. longiductis* (Pola, Paz-Sedano, Macali, Minchin, Marchini, Vitale, Licchelli & Crocetta, 2019), *O. problematica* (Pola, Paz-Sedano, Macali, Minchin, Marchini, Vitale, Licchelli & Crocetta, 2019). All of these were also reported in the northern region of the Adriatic. The present finding of *O. picoensis*

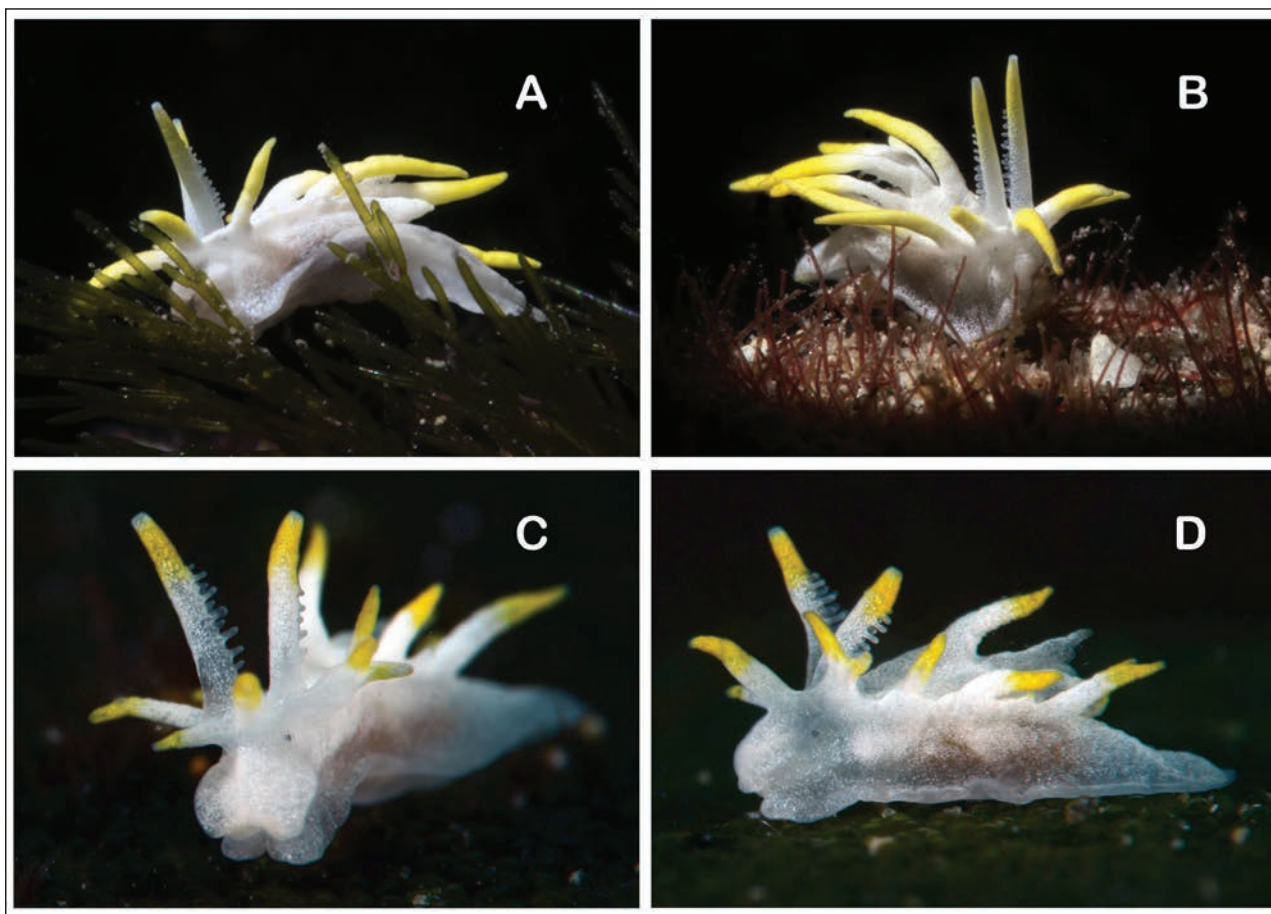


Fig. 2: A white morph of *Okenia picoensis*. A, B – a specimen photographed in Kostrena (Rijeka, northern Adriatic Sea) in December 2022 (photo: J. Vecchi); C, D – specimens photographed at the Marco Polo Diving Centre (Rijeka, Croatia) in April 2023 (photo: C. Scrigner).

Sl. 2: Bela različica vrste *Okenia picoensis*. A, B – primerek, fotografiran v Kostreni (Rijeka, severno Jadransko morje) v decembru 2022 (foto: J. Vecchi); C, D – primerka, fotografirana na lokaciji Marco Polo Diving Centre (Rijeka, Hrvatska) v aprilu 2023 (foto: C. Scrigner).

brings the total number of species in the Adriatic Sea to six for this genus.

Trainito *et al.* (2022) expressed some doubts regarding the status of *O. picoensis* as an alien species, suggesting that it might be more reasonable to consider *O. picoensis* a native species of the entire Atlanto-Mediterranean region. This consideration

raises the question whether the species has spread to the Adriatic from a specific part of the Mediterranean Sea or is simply a case of a previously overlooked nudibranch.

Due to its rapid expansion throughout the Mediterranean Sea, it is realistic to expect reports of this species from other parts of the Adriatic Sea as well.

PRVI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU VRSTE GOLOŠKRGARJA *OKENIA PICOENSIS*
PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA)
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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o najdbi osmih primerkov vrste Okenia picoensis (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) na treh različnih lokacijah na Hrvaškem (severno Jadransko morje). Čeprav je bila ta vrsta šele pred kratkim opisana, pričujoči podatki potrjujejo, da se hitro razširja po Sredozemskem morju. Te najdbe predstavljajo prvi zapis o pojavljanju te vrste v Jadranskem morju.

Ključne besede: Heterobranchia, razširjanje, severno Jadransko morje

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