Molecular and functional ecology of aquatic microbial symbionts

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The article by Bickel et al. (2012) focuses on ciliate epibionts of crustacean zooplankton in lakes. The authors show that ciliate epibiont abundance varies greatly between lakes and zooplankton species, respectively. Although the ciliate epibionts exhibited high grazing rates on free-living bacteria, their effects on the total bacterial abundance seemed to be rather low. Also, effects of epibionts on the physiology and development of their host require further study.

A cluster of three articles (Dziallas et al., 2012; Garcias-Bonet et al., 2012; McManus et al., 2012) addresses endosymbiotic relationships between microbes and higher organisms. The article by Dziallas et al. (2012) reviews knowledge on the diversity, ecological function, and evolution of ciliate symbionts and also points at several future research directions. The article by McManus et al. (2012) more specifically addresses chloroplast symbioses in marine ciliates. The authors discuss benefits and costs of chloroplast symbiosis for the ciliate Strombidium rassoulzadegani, and for the photo- and feeding-physiology of the ciliate. The paper by Garcias-Bonet et al. (2012) evaluates the biodiversity of endophytic bacterial communities on a marine angiosperm in the Mediterranean. The presence of bacterial endophytes greatly differed among locations and tissue types indicating a highly specialized bacterial endophyte community with potentially diverse and important functions for the angiosperm host.

Parasitic fungi in phytoplankton and parasitic dinoflagellates in marine copepods are the research foci in the papers by Sime-Ngondo (2012) and Skogvaard et al. (2012), respectively. Both papers highlight the importance of parasites for plankton ecology and biodiversity, and planktonic food web dynamics. Several lines of evidence indicate that parasites have the potential to drive genetic diversity at the species, population, and community levels of pelagic ecosystems.

The next two articles evaluate the role of symbionts of an ascidian (Kühl et al., 2012) and a coral (Wangpraseurt et al., 2012) in photosynthetic activities in relation to environmental parameters such as irradiation, periods of anoxia, and physiology of the host. Kühl et al. (2012) focus on a chlorophyll b-containing
symbiotic cyanobacterium and its photosynthetic activity, whereas Wangpraseurt et al. (2012) examine optical microniches in corals and provide evidence for the importance of such microniches for photobiology and stress response of the corals, as well as for the phenotypic and genotypic plasticity of the coral symbionts.

Finally, the articles by Dinasquet et al. (2012) and Rivera et al. (2013) report on the contributions of organism-associated bacteria to spatial heterogeneity of bacterioplankton activity and community composition in the sea. Dinasquet et al. (2012) show data indicating specific associations between certain bacterioplankton groups and their jellyfish host, whereas Rivera et al. (2013) highlight the role of ballast water for the dispersal of potentially pathogenic vibrio species.

In summary, these articles cover a range of symbiotic relationships in aquatic environments, pinpoint that these relationships are widespread, and that they conceivably play important roles for the health, adaptation, and evolution of the host organisms, and, thereby, for food web structure and ecosystem functioning. We hope that this special issue will stimulate more discussions and research on the fascinating subject of microbial symbiosis, which seems to be the rule rather than the exception in aquatic ecosystems.

**REFERENCES**


Received: 31 January 2013; accepted: 28 February 2013; published online: 15 March 2013.


This article was submitted to Frontiers in Aquatic Microbiology, a specialty of Frontiers in Microbiology.

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