

22. The Ecology of Algal Polysaccharide Degradation: Characterizing Novel Fucoidan-Degrading Bacteria

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**Project Goals:** Marine algae hold great promise for biofuel production and have advantages over terrestrial biomass and freshwater algae. Despite this potential, little effort has been made to date to harness the enzymatic machinery that bacteria use to convert marine algal carbohydrates into bioenergy substrates. Our project capitalizes on this unexplored opportunity via three distinct activities: bioprospecting for novel algal polysaccharide-degrading genes, functional screening for enzymes with desired biochemical properties, and repackaging pathways in reusable genetic modules.

Marine macroalgae are vital players in the global carbon cycle, and polysaccharides represent a significant output of their primary production (~90% dry mass). Identifying the microbes and metabolic pathways responsible for degrading these sugars is not only crucial to understanding marine carbon flow, but also offers vast potential for biofuel production utilizing seaweed feedstocks. Fucoidans are an important class of structurally heterogeneous sulfated polysaccharides found in brown seaweeds, yet few organisms have been shown to metabolize this abundant carbohydrate. Using environmental samples from coastal waters we have isolated numerous representatives from diverse genera (Vibrio, Lentimonas, Stappia, Neptunomonas, Alteromonas, Tenacibaculum) capable of using fucoidan as a sole carbon source, and demonstrated enzymatic degradation of fucoidan polysaccharides using cellular extracts.

Furthermore, draft genomes of novel fucoidan-degrading Verrucomicrobia sp. have revealed Polysaccharide Utilization Loci (PULs) enriched with numerous and diverse Carbohydrate Active Enzymes (CAZymes), with some isolates encoding as many as 60 genes with homology to established fucosidases. Preliminary findings reveal differences in the dynamics and extent of fucoidan degradation among closely related isolates, suggesting variation in enzymatic capabilities may reflect metabolic specialization and resource partitioning within natural populations. Specific combinations of natural isolates also appear to complement one another and yield greater overall biomass accumulation, raising the possibility that engineered organisms or communities with a full repertoire of enzymatic machinery and metabolic modules may facilitate the efficient conversion of algal biomass.

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