REVIEW

Molecular analyses of protists in long-term observation programmes—current status and future perspectives

ROWENA STERN1*, ALEXANDRA KRABERG2, EILEEN BRESNAN3, WIEBE H.C.F. KOOISTRA4, CONNIE LOVEJOY5, MARINA MONTRESOR1, XOSÉ ANXELU G. MORÁN6, FABRICE NOT7,8, RAFAEL SALAS8, RAFFAELE SIANO9, DANIEL VAULOT7,8, LINDA AMARAL-ZETTLER11, ADRIANA ZINGONE4 AND KATJA METFIES12,13

1MARINE BIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, CITADEL HILL, PLYMOUTH PL1 2PB, UK, 2BIOLOGISCHE ANSTALT HELGOLAND, ALFRED WEGENER INSTITUTE HELMHOLTZ CENTRE FOR POLAR AND MARINE RESEARCH, KURPROMENADE 201, HELGOLAND 27439, GERMANY, 3MARINE SCOTLAND MARINE LABORATORY, 375 VICTORIA ROAD, ABERDEEN AB11 9QB, UK, 4DEPARTMENT OF INTEGRATIVE MARINE ECOLOGY, STAZIONE ZOOLOGICA ANTON DOHRN, 80121 NAPOLI, ITALY, 5QUEBEC OCEAN, DEPARTEMENT DE BIOLOGIE, INSTITUT DE BIOLOGIE INTEGRATIVE ET DES SYSTEMES (IBS), UNIVERSITE LAVAL, QUEBEC QC G1V 0A6, CANADA, 6RED SEA RESEARCH CENTER, BIOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING DIVISION, KING ABDULLAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, THUWAL 23955-4600, SAUDI ARABIA, 7SORBONNE UNIVERSITIES, UPMC UNIV PARIS 06, CNRS, UMR 7144, FRANCE, 8STATION BIOLOGIQUE, PLACE GEORGES TEISSIER, 29680 ROSCOFF, FRANCE, 9MARINE INSTITUTE, MARINE ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD SAFETY SERVICES, RINVILLE, ORANMORE H91 1673, REPUBLIC OF IRELAND, 10IFREMER, CENTRE DE BREST DEPARTMENT DYNECO, BP 70, FLOCANZE 29280, FRANCE, 11INSTITUTE OF MARINE BIOLOGY AND BIOGEOCHEMISTRY, NIOZ, TEXEL, PO BOX 59, 1790 AB DEN BURG (TEXEL), THE NETHERLANDS, 12ALFRED WEGENER INSTITUTE, HELMHOLTZ CENTRE FOR POLAR AND MARINE RESEARCH, BREMENHAVEN 27575, GERMANY AND 13HELMHOLTZ INSTITUTE FOR FUNCTIONAL MARINE BIODIVERSITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OLDENBURG, OLDENBURG 26128, GERMANY

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: rost@mba.ac.uk

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Protists (microbial eukaryotes) are diverse, major components of marine ecosystems, and are fundamental to ecosystem services. In the last 10 years, molecular studies have highlighted substantial novel diversity in marine systems including sequences with no taxonomic context. At the same time, many known protists remain without a DNA identity. Since the majority of pelagic protists are too small to identify by light microscopy, most are neither comprehensively or regularly taken into account, particularly in Long-term Ecological Research Sites. This potentially undermines the quality of research and the accuracy of predictions about biological species shifts in a changing environment. The ICES Working Group for Phytoplankton and Microbial Ecology conducted a questionnaire survey in 2013–2014 on methods and identification of protists using molecular methods plus a literature review of protist molecular diversity studies. The results revealed an increased use of high-throughput sequencing methods and a recognition that sequence data enhance the overall datasets on protist species composition. However, we found only a few long-term molecular studies and noticed a lack of integration between microscopic and molecular methods.