

Preface

In the last 25 years, microbiology and molecular microbial ecology have undergone drastic transformations that changed the microbiologist's view of how to study microorganisms. The main problem before was the assumption that microorganisms needed to be culturable, in order to classify them and study their metabolic and organismal diversity. The heart of this transformation was the convincing demonstration that the yet unculturable world was far greater than the culturable one. In fact, the number of microbial genomes has been estimated to be between 2000 to 18,000 genomes per gram of soil. In 1985, an experimental advance radically changed our perception of the microbial world. After Carl Woese showed that rRNA genes could be used to derive evolutionary relationships, phylogenetic "trees" and evolutionary chronometers, Norman Pace and colleagues created a new chapter in molecular microbial ecology, using the direct analysis of rRNA sequences in the environment to describe the diversity of microorganisms without culturing [Handelsman, 2004]. The next major step forward was the development of the PCR reaction, to amplify rRNA genes for subsequent sequence analysis and classification. The subsequent major advance was the notion that one could extract total DNA or RNA from environmental samples, including culturable and yet unculturable organisms, and clone it into a suitable vector for introduction into a culturable organism, followed by analysis by using high throughput shotgun DNA sequencing of cloned DNA, or by direct sequencing. The idea of cloning DNA directly from environmental samples was first proposed by Page; this method was coined "metagenomics" by Handelsman et al. in 1994, and is now used in many laboratories worldwide to study diversity and for the isolation of novel medical and industrial compounds.

These recent studies are reviewed in this book and the companion book, *Handbook of Molecular Microbial Ecology I: Metagenomics and Complementary Approaches*. Instead of relying only on a limited number of (long) review articles on selected topics, Volume I

provides reviews as well as a large number of case studies, mostly based on original publications and written by expert "at-the-bench" scientists from more than 20 different countries. These books highlight the databases and computer programs used in each study, by listing them at the end of the chapter, together with their sites. This is a special feature of both books, facilitating the computer-assisted analysis of the vast amount of data generated by metagenomic studies.

In addition, this book describes metagenomic studies in a variety of habitats which present a large number of system dependent different approaches in greatly differing habitats. These approaches also result in the presentation of multiple biological systems which are interesting to microbial ecologists and microbiologists in their own right. Both books should be of interest to scientists in the fields of soil, water, medicine and industry who are or are contemplating using metagenomics and complementary approaches to address academic, medical, or industrial questions about bacterial communities from varied habitats, but also to those interested in particular biological systems in general.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their support of this project, I gratefully acknowledge: The Laboratory for Plant Microbe Interactions (LIPM),



the Institut National de Recherche de Agriculture (INRA), and



the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

I would like to thank Claude Bruand for his help with the computer work.

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Castanet, Tolosan, France
May 2011