

# Enhanced photoprotection pathways in symbiotic dinoflagellates of shallow-water corals and other cnidarians

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**Photoinhibition, exacerbated by elevated temperatures, underlies coral bleaching, but sensitivity to photosynthetic loss differs among various phlotypes of *Symbiodinium*, their dinoflagellate symbionts. *Symbiodinium* is a common symbiont in many cnidarian species including corals, jellyfish, anemones, and giant clams. Here, we provide evidence that most members of clade A *Symbiodinium*, but not clades B–D or F, exhibit enhanced capabilities for alternative photosynthetic electron-transport pathways including cyclic electron transport (CET). Unlike other clades, clade A *Symbiodinium* also undergo pronounced light-induced dissociation of antenna complexes from photosystem II (PSII) reaction centers. We propose these attributes promote survival of most cnidarians with clade A symbionts at high light intensities and confer resistance to bleaching conditions that conspicuously impact deeper dwelling corals that harbor non-clade A *Symbiodinium*.**

coral bleaching | light-harvesting complexes | photoinhibition | *Symbiodinium* | cyclic electron transport

Corals and other cnidarians thrive in tropical, near-shore oceans due to intracellular symbioses with dinoflagellates of the genus *Symbiodinium*, which provide their hosts essential photosynthates (1, 2). Coral species distribution largely correlates with prevailing light and temperature gradients and likely is influenced by the differing photosynthetic and light tolerance properties of their symbionts coupled with host-symbiont specificity and biogeographical distribution (3–6). Hence, *Symbiodinium* phlotypes, predominantly clades A, B, and C and sometimes clade D and their respective hosts are found at characteristic depth ranges (4, 7). Clade A *Symbiodinium* are especially prevalent in shallow-water cnidarians including corals, jellyfish, and anemones in the Caribbean (4). Clade A isolates abundantly produce UV-protective mycosporine-like amino acids (MAAs) in culture whereas all clades, with a depth-dependent correlation, synthesize MAAs *in hospice*, especially mycosporine-glycine, which effectively absorbs harmful UV-B wavelengths (8). Little else is known about distinct physiological properties of *Symbiodinium* species and their susceptibilities to temperature and high light stress, although corals harboring clade D have been observed to be high-temperature tolerant (9).

*Symbiodinium*, like other photosynthetic organisms, are susceptible to photodamage of PSII (10). The resulting photoinhibition can lead to breakdown of symbioses and is an initial event in the onset of coral bleaching during episodes of elevated ocean temperatures (11). Differences in temperature sensitivity to photodamage (12) and rates of replenishment of the PSII D1 reaction center protein are documented in a few representatives of *Symbiodinium* in culture and *in hospice* (10, 12). Low degrees of fatty acid desaturation in thylakoid lipid membranes of cultured dinoflagellates have been correlated with elevated temperature tolerance and reduced production of reactive oxygen species under high irradiance, but there is not a strict correlation with heat sensitivity along *Symbiodinium* cladal lines (12).

Some corals bleach seasonally and others rarely (13), suggesting differential survival capabilities of the symbionts and their hosts

when subject to environmental extremes. In the Caribbean, deeper water corals that commonly harbor clades B and C *Symbiodinium* are generally more susceptible to bleaching at elevated temperatures than are shallow-water corals in symbiosis with clade A (10), indicating that thermal and high irradiance tolerance can be interrelated. Photoprotection mechanisms identified in *Symbiodinium* include engagement of xanthophyll deepoxidation associated with nonphotochemical quenching (NPQ) within intrinsic light-harvesting complexes (LHCs) (14, 15) and longer-term photoacclimation processes that modulate the abundance and size of photosynthetic units and peripheral peridinin–chlorophyll-*a*–protein (PCP) antenna complexes (16, 17).

We show here that members of clade A *Symbiodinium* in culture and those inhabiting shallow-water cnidarians are conspicuously capable of PSII-independent CET. Evidence is also presented for the occurrence of chlororespiration, wherein oxygen serves as an alternative photosynthetic electron transport acceptor and is supplemental to CET. Both chlororespiration and CET can sustain ATP synthesis when PSII is inactivated (18). These studies employ a modified pulse amplitude modulated (PAM) fluorometry method that is easily applied in field studies. Clade A *Symbiodinium* are also found to readily undergo high light-induced dissociation of antenna complexes from PSII, particularly the “soluble” PCPs found only in dinoflagellates.

Conventional PAM fluorometry uses dark-adapted photosynthetic samples to assess PSII photosynthetic efficiency from minimal and maximal chlorophyll fluorescence levels. Emission from a weak modulated measuring light (ML) ( $F_0$ ) and maximal fluorescence ( $F_m$ ) induced by a saturating light pulse estimates maximum quantum yield as  $F_v/F_m = F_m - F_0$ . Typically, continuous actinic irradiation is subsequently imposed along with intermittent saturating flashes to monitor decreases of maximal fluorescence ( $F_m'$ ) due to NPQ [ $(F_m - F_m')/F_m'$ ]. We show a simple method to detect nonlinear photosynthetic pathways by measuring chlorophyll-*a* (chl-*a*) fluorescence in response to serial irradiation pulses (SIP) of 1-s duration without concurrent actinic irradiation.

## Results and Discussion

**Evidence for CET in clade A *Symbiodinium* by Using SIP Protocol.** When using the SIP method with dark-adapted symbiotic clade A *Symbiodinium* cells in culture and *in hospice*, incremental

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