Are alkalitolerant fungi of the *Emericellopsis* lineage (*Bionectriaceae*) of marine origin?

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Abstract: Surveying the fungi of alkaline soils in Siberia, Trans-Baikal regions (Russia), the Aral lake (Kazakhstan), and Eastern Mongolia, we report an abundance of alkalitolerant species representing the *Emericellopsis*-clade within the *Acremonium* cluster of fungi (order *Hypocreales*). On an alkaline medium (pH ca. 10), 34 acremonium-like fungal strains were obtained. One of these was able to develop a sexual morph and was shown to be a new member of the genus *Emericellopsis*, described here as *E. alkalina* sp. nov. Previous studies showed two distinct ecological clades within *Emericellopsis*, one consisting of terrestrial isolates and one predominantly marine.Remarkably, all the isolates from our study sites show high phylogenetic similarity based on six loci (LSU and SSU rDNA, RPB2, TEF1-α, β-tub and ITS region), regardless of their provenance within a broad geographical distribution. They group within the known marine-origin species, a finding that provides a possible link to the evolution of the alkalitrophic trait in the *Emericellopsis* lineage. We tested the capacities of all newly isolated strains, and the few available reference ex-type cultures, to grow over wide pH ranges. The growth performance varied among the tested isolates, which showed differences in growth rate as well as in pH preference. Whereas every newly isolated strain from soda soils was extremely alkalitolerant and displayed the ability to grow over a wide range of ambient pH (range 4–11.2), reference marine-borne and terrestrial strains showed moderate and no alkalitolerance, respectively. The growth pattern of the alkalitolerant *Emericellopsis* isolates was unlike that of the recently described and taxonomically unrelated alkaliphilic *Sodiomyces alkalinus*, obtained from the same type of soils but which showed a narrower preference towards high pH.

Article info: Submitted: 2 July 2013; Accepted: 23 October 2013; Published: 5 November 2013.

INTRODUCTION

Alkaline soils (or soda soils) and soda lakes represent a unique environmental niche. There are few studies available on the fungal biodiversity therein. The eye-catching characteristic of these soils is a high pH maintained mainly by the buffering capacities of soluble carbonates present. Soda accumulation is thought to be a common process associated with savannas, steppes and desert regions across the world (Jones et al. 1998). Some examples of such extreme occurrences include the Magadi Lake in Kenya and the Natron Lake in Tanzania where the pH values of water are as high as 11–12. Seventy fungi have been isolated from The Dead Sea in Israel, almost half *Eurotiales*, where the salt levels are 340–350 g salt/L (Buchhalo et al. 2009). In Russia, alkaline soils are mostly restricted to areas adjacent to saline lake basins in southwestern Siberia (Sorokin et al. 2008).

Naturally, high salts concentration and high environmental pH impose a substantial amount of stress to any living organism. Some have adapted and therefore evolved metabolic pathways in order to thrive in such harsh conditions, such as high osmotic pressures, low water potentials, and, clearly, elevated ambient pHs (>9). The vast majority of so-called alkaliphiles, with a growth optimum at pH above 9, include prokaryotes (Duckworth et al. 1996). However, some filamentous fungi have been shown to be able to grow optimally at pH values exceeding 9 (Nagai et al. 1995, 1998, Grum-Grzhimaylo et al. 2013). Alkaliphily in filamentous fungi is uncommon, while alkalitolerance, on the other hand, is far more widespread. Alkalitolerant fungi, i.e. fungi that can grow to some extent at an alkaline pH but with their optimum still being at neutral pH values, are not only of basic scientific interest for the molecular mechanisms of adaptation, but also in the search for potentially biotechnologically valuable enzymes. It has become more obvious that alkalitolerant fungi may be encountered in many neutral soils (Kladwang et al. 2003, Eliades et al. 2006). The relative abundance of alkalitolerant fungi has facilitated studies on both their biodiversity and their enzymatic properties. And yet, truly alkaliphilic filamentous fungi have been isolated infrequently. The few existing descriptive studies on alkalitolerant and alkaliphilic fungi show a bias towards fungi with simple
| Strain                          | VKM number | CBS no. | Isolation area          | Isolation place                  | pH of the soil | Total salts (g/kg) | Salinification type      |
|--------------------------------|------------|---------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Acremonium sclerotigenum A101  | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | near Alla River                   | 8              | -                 | sulfate                  |
| Acremonium sclerotigenum A130  | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | near Alla River                   | 8              | -                 | sulfate                  |
| Acremonium sp. A104            | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | -         |                | taken from *Atriplex verrucifera* MB. | soda |
| Acremonium sp. A105            | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Orongoyskoe Lake                  | 7.8            | 26                | soda-sulfate             |
| Acremonium sp. A106            | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Sulfiatnoe Lake                   | 8.5            | 3.7               | sulfate-soda             |
| Acremonium sp. A107            | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Chedder Lake                      | 9.1            | -                 | soda                     |
| Acremonium sp. A108            | -          | -       | Aral lake, Kazakhstan    | Cape Aktumsyk                     |                | taken from *Sueda salsa* | chloride-sulfate         |
| Acremonium sp. A109            | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Kuchiger area                      | 9              | -                 | sulphate                 |
| Acremonium sp. A110            | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Sulfiatnoe Lake                   | 10.3           | 139.4             | sulfate-soda             |
| Acremonium sp. A111            | -          | -       | Aral lake, Kazakhstan    | Cape Aktumsyk                     | 8              | -                 | chloride-sulfate         |
| Acremonium sp. E102            | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | -         |                | Bezimyanne Lake      | chloride                 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A103   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Mirabilit Lake                  | 9.6            | 100               | soda-chloride-sulfate    |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A112   | -          | -       | North-East Mongolia      | Burd Lake                         | 10.1           | 33                | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A113   | FW-1476    | -       | Choibalsan area, North-East Mongolia | -         | 11             | 57                | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A114   | FW-1473    | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Solyonoe Lake                    | 10             | 187               | chloride                 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A115   | FW-1474    | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Mirabilit Lake                   | 9.6            | 225               | chloride-sulfate         |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A116   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Mirabilit Lake                   | 9.6            | 100               | soda-chloride-sulfate    |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A117   | FW-1471    | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Shukurtuz Lake                   | 9.9            | 53                | chloride-sulfate         |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A118   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Zheltir' Lake                    | 9.6            | 137               | soda-chloride            |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A119   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Bezimyanne Lake                  | 10.1           | 38                | chloride-sulfate         |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A120   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Bezimyanne Lake                  | 9.9            | 310               | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A121   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Tanatar Lake                      | 10.2           | 73                | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A122   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | -                                | 9.5            | 65                | chloride                 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A123   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | -                                | taken from *Salicornia europaea* L. | soda | |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A124   | -          | -       | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | south, Berdabay                  | 10.1           | 60                | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A125   | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Nuhe-Nur Lake                     | 10.1           | 7.1               | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A126   | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Nuhe-Nur Lake                     | 10.1           | 1.9               | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A127   | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Nuhe-Nur Lake                     | 10.1           | 1.9               | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A128   | -          | -       | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Sulfiatnoe Lake                   | 10.3           | 139.4             | sulfate-soda             |
| Emericellopsis alkalina E101 T | F-4108     | CBS 127350 | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Tanatar Lake                     | 10.1           | 73                | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M14    | F-3905     | CBS 120043 | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Bezimyanne Lake                  | 9.9            | 310               | soda                     |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M20    | FW-3040    | CBS 120044 | Kulunda steppe, Altai, Russia | Zheltir' Lake                    | 9.6            | 137               | soda-chloride            |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M71    | F-3907     | CBS 120049 | Trans-Baikal, Russia     | Sulfiatnoe Lake                   | 10.3           | 139               | sulfate-soda             |
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Conidial morphology, commonly asexual Acremonium or Verticillium species, and typically, without the development of the any sexual morph (Okada et al. 1993, Kladwang et al. 2003). Substantial difficulties in identifying Acremonium species imposed by their simple morphology have stimulated the use of molecular phylogeny in their identification. The array of fungi with acremonium-like conidiation has been shown to be highly polyphyletic, occupying several lineages throughout Ascomycota (Summerbell et al. 2011). However, most Acremonium species belong to Hypocreales (subphylum Hypocreomycetidae). One of the well-defined subclades within the hypocrealean acremonia is the Emericellopsis-clade (family Bionectriaceae), which includes isolates derived from various ecological niches. Notably, previous studies have shown a phylogenetic separation of marine-derived and terrestrial isolates within the Emericellopsis-clade (Zuccaro et al. 2004). The marine clade also contains fungi derived from soda soils. The current study confirms the evolutionary relationships between marine-borne and soda soil fungi of the genus Emericellopsis. Here, we analyse acremonium-like strains isolated from soda soils in western Siberia, the Trans-Baikal area (Russia), the Aral Sea (Kazakhstan) and the Gobi Desert (Mongolia) and elucidate their phylogenetic relationships, with an emphasis on the Emericellopsis-clade. A new Emericellopsis species, E. alkalina sp. nov., is described. We also analysed the newly isolated strains for growth at various pH values, in comparison with reference ex-type strains, and show that the alkalitolerant strains group within the known Emericellopsis isolates originated from the marine habitats. We discuss a possible origin of alkalitolerance in this particular lineage of mostly sea-borne fungi.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Soil samples, strains and media

Soil samples were collected from several locations on the edge of the soda lakes (Table 1). We used alkaline agar (AA) with the antibiotic rifampicin (2 g/L) as a selective medium for alkalitolerant species isolation. For routine subculturing on AA of the newly isolated strains, the antibiotic was not used. The AA medium was prepared as described previously (Grum-Grzhimaylo et al. 2013). Several reference ex-type Emericellopsis strains were obtained from the KNAW-CBS Fungal Biodiversity Centre (CBS) as well as from the All-Russian Collection of Microorganisms (VKM). For the colony morphology characterization we used several types of media: WA, CZ, MYA, PDA, OA and AA (Mueller et al. 2004). The elucidation of the pH optimum was performed in duplicate using race tubes with the media ranging in pH as described previously (Grum-Grzhimaylo et al. 2013), with the following modification. Instead of using acetic buffer to generate pH 4 and 5.2, we used a citric acid buffer system. Race tubes and plates were incubated in the dark at 28 °C, and the growth rates were recorded once a week over 2 mo.

Morphology

We used light microscopy (LM) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM) for morphological characterization of the
strains, as described previously (Grum-Grzhimaylo et al. 2013).

**DNA extraction, PCR, and sequencing**

Total genomic DNA (gDNA) was extracted from mycelium using DNeasy Plant Mini kit (Qiagen, Chatsworth, CA). We amplified and sequenced six nuclear loci (large and small subunit rDNA, internal transcribed spacers 1 and 2, including 5.8S rDNA, RPB2, TEF1-α and β-tub) from gDNA using the standard primers set. Primer sets, thermo cycling programs and sequencing procedures were performed as described previously (Grum-Grzhimaylo et al. 2013). The amplification of beta-tubulin intron 3 (hereafter named as "β-tub") was as in Zuccaro et al. (2004).

**Phylogenetic analyses**

We used five nuclear loci for phylogenetic analysis: large subunit rDNA (LSU), ITS region, RPB2, TEF1-α, and β-tub. The gene for small subunit rRNA (SSU), although sequenced, was not included in our phylogenetic reconstructions since it carried too little phylogenetic signal to contribute to clade differentiation. We constructed separate alignments for each of the analysed genes using the online MAFFT v. 7 service (Katoh & Standley 2013). Ambiguous regions were removed manually from the alignments with BioEdit v. 7.1.3.0 (Hall 1999). Two data sets for different phylogenetic analyses were constructed in order to achieve different degrees of resolution within the studied groups. Appropriate reference sequences were obtained from GenBank. The first analysis included a single LSU gene in order to build a large-scale taxonomy for hypocrealean acremonia. The second, a four-gene (ITS, β-tub, RPB2, and TEF1-α) concatenated supermatrix, was implemented to resolve the recent evolutionary relationships in the *Emericellopsis*-clade and our newly isolated alkalitolerant strains. The four-gene concatenated data set was constructed using Mesquite v. 2.75 (Maddison & Maddison 2011) and divided into four partitions corresponding to each individual gene. The best-fit model for nucleotide substitution for each partition was chosen according to the corrected Akaike Information Criterion (AICc) as implemented in jModelTest v. 2.1.1 (Guindon & Gascuel 2003, Darriba et al. 2012) (Table 2). GARLI v. 2.0 (Zwickl 2006) was used for Maximum Likelihood (ML) bootstrap analyses; for both phylogenetic analyses the number of searches was set to five for each of the 200 bootstrap replicates. A 50 % majority rule consensus trees were constructed using SumTrees v. 3.3.1 application within DendroPy v. 3.11.0 package (Sukumaran & Holder 2010) running under Python v. 2.6 platform. Bayesian analysis (BI) was performed using MrBayes v. 3.1.2 (Huelsenbeck & Ronquist 2001). Two independent searches and four chains were set to run for 10 M generations for both phylogenetic analyses sampling every 100th generation. The convergence of the runs was checked in TRACER v. 1.5 (Rambaut & Drummond 2007). The first 30 % (50 % for four-gene analysis) of the resulting trees was eliminated from the further analysis. The rest were used to generate a 50 % majority rule consensus tree and calculate posterior probabilities (PP). The consensus tree was visualized and edited with TreeGraph v. 2.0.47-206 beta (Stöver & Müller 2010) and Adobe Illustrator CS6 (Adobe Systems, San Jose, CA). The node supports were considered to be strong if they received joint scores of ML>90 and PP>0.94. Newly generated sequences from the studied strains were deposited in GenBank with accessions listed in Table 3. Phylogenetic analyses were deposited in TreeBase (submission ID 14196).

### RESULTS

**Isolated strains**

On the selective AA medium buffered at pH 10 and containing antibiotic, we isolated 34 strains of filamentous fungi from soda soils adjacent to the soda lake basins. Several of the isolated strains were deposited in CBS and VKM. All strains showed assexual acremonium-like sporulation and one displayed comprehensive sexual morphological features and was found to be a new species of the *Emericellopsis* lineage based on molecular, morphological and growth data (see below).

**Molecular phylogenetic analyses**

The alignment for the first phylogenetic analysis using the LSU gene contained 962 characters, with 162 (17 %) being phylogenetically informative (Table 2). The negative log likelihoods (-Ln) of the ML and BI consensus trees were 4696.03 and 5111.82, respectively. The phylogenetic reconstruction based on LSU sequences of our isolates from soda lakes along with the pertinent reference sequences from hypocrealean acremonia is consistent with the topology described by Summerbell et al. (2011), hence we follow the clade delineation outlined in that study. As seen in Fig. 1, the new isolates from the soda soils (in coloured boxes) almost exclusively fall into a strongly supported (97/1.0) *Emericellopsis*-clade (*Bionectriaceae*). This clade is known to include marine-borne fungi such as *Acremonium fuci*, *A. tubakii*, *E. maritima*, as well as terrestrial isolates like *E. terricola*, some *Stilbella* species, and the *Stanjemonium*
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Species. The lizard-associated ex-type-strain of A. exuviarum (UAMH 9995), producing chains of conidia, has been shown before to have affinity to the Emericellopsis-clade (Sigler et al. 2004). Thirty of our new isolates in the Emericellopsis-clade stand together within a weakly supported clade (76/0.99) that also includes the ex-type strains of E. minima (CBS 190.55), E. maritima (CBS 491.71), and E. pallida (CBS 490.71), as well as “A. potronii” (isolate CBS 379.70F); the latter is a single isolate of an undescribed species that has so far only been isolated from a dolphin skin lesion, apparently not as an agent of infection (Zuccaro et al. 2004). The marine species from Fucus, a brown seaweed, A. fuci (UAMH 6508), also grouped with our isolates from soda soils. There is not enough phylogenetic signal from our LSU-based phylogenetic reconstruction to resolve the Emericellopsis-clade further. Four new isolates from soda soils appeared to be in the sister clades, namely, two in the sclerotigenum-clade, one in the Sarocladium-clade and one in the infatum-clade. They are hence identified accordingly.

The second phylogenetic analysis included partial sequences of four genes (ITS, β-tub, RPB2, TEF1-α) known to have a higher mutation rate than LSU. We sampled a different set of taxa for this low-level taxonomic analysis. The sequences for the Emericellopsis-clade had a high degree of similarity, and were easily aligned and edited. The most variable locus in this set was the β-tub region containing introns, and this region thus contributed significantly to the reliability of the resulting tree. The alignment for this analysis had 2 810 characters of which 308 (11 %) were phylogenetically informative (Table 2). The MCMC runs in Bayesian analysis reached stationary status with a deviation of 0.008 after 5M generations. The negative log likelihoods (-Ln) of the ML and BI consensus trees were 8487.81 and 8645.85, respectively.

The tree that was generated for the Emericellopsis-clade is displayed in Fig. 2. Here, unlike in the first analysis, the Emericellopsis-clade is deeply resolved, displaying several major clades consistent with the previous study by Zuccaro et al. (2004). The basal group consists of a highly supported asexual Stainjemonium clade, asexual Stilbella fimentaria haplotypes, and the soil-derived ex-type isolates of E. synnematicola, CBS 176.60, and E. salmosynnemata, CBS 382.62. The ex-type isolate of Acremonium exuviarum, mentioned earlier, seems to be more distally basal to the rest of the core tree members. Our phylogenetic analysis confirms the presence of the two ecological groups in the Emericellopsis lineage, both of which were supported by the molecular studies. The clades designated as marine (M) and terrestrial (T), outlined previously by Zuccaro et al. (2004), also appear in our phylogenetic analysis. The T clade (98/1.0) almost
Table 3. List of taxa used for phylogenetic reconstructions. Strains used in the growth experiments and newly generated accessions are in bold.

| Taxon                        | Voucher       | Appearance in LSU phylogenetic analysis (1,2) | ITS       | β-tub    | RPB2   | TEF1-α   | SSU         |
|------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|-------------|
| Acremonium acutatum          | CBS 682.71    | 1 HQ231965                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium alternatum        | CBS 407.66    | 1 HQ231988                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium biseptum          | CBS 750.69    | 1 HQ231998                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium brachypenium      | CBS 866.73    | 1 HQ232004                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium breve             | CBS 150.62    | 1 HQ232005                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium chrysogenum       | CBS 144.62    | 1 HQ232017                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium curvulum          | CBS 430.66    | 1 HQ232026                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium curvulum          | CBS 229.75    | 1 HQ232021                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium exuviarum         | UAMH 9995     | 1,2 HQ232036 AY882946 AY882947                | AY882946  | AY882947|        |          |             |
| Acremonium flavum            | CBS 596.70    | 1 HQ232037                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium fuci              | CBS 112868    | 2 AY632653                                      | AY632653  | AY632690| -       | -         |             |
| Acremonium fuci              | CBS 113889    | 2 AY632652                                      | AY632652  |          | -       | -         |             |
| Acremonium fuci              | UAMH 6508     | 1 HQ232038                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium gamsii            | CBS 726.71    | 1 HQ232040                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium inflatum          | CBS 212.69    | 1 HQ232050                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium inflatum          | CBS 439.70    | 1 HQ232051                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium persicinum        | CBS 310.59    | 1 HQ232077                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium persicinum        | CBS 101694    | 1 HQ232085                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium persicinum        | CBS 102349    | 1 HQ232086                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| *Acremonium potronii*        | CBS 189.70    | 1 HQ232094                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| *Acremonium potronii*        | CBS 379.70F   | 1,2 HQ232096 AY632655 AY632691                | AY632655  | AY632691| -       | -         |             |
| Acremonium radiatum          | CBS 142.62    | 1 HQ232104                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium roseum           | CBS 289.62    | 1 HQ232123                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium rutulum           | CBS 396.66    | 1 HQ232124                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium salmoneum         | CBS 721.71    | 1 HQ232125                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium salmoneum         | JS-NJ01       | 2 HM747162                                      | -         |          | -       | -         |             |
| Acremonium sclerotigenum     | CBS 124.42    | 1 HQ232126                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium sclerotigenum     | 1             | KC987215 KC987139 KC987101 KC998999 KC998961 KC987177 |
| Acremonium sclerotigenum     | 1             | KC987242 KC987166 KC987128 KC999024 KC998988 KC987204 |
| Acremonium sclerotigenum     | 1             | KC9872130                                      |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium sordidulum        | CBS 786.69    | 1 HQ232130                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium sordidulum        | CBS 385.73    | 1 HQ232136                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium sp. A104          | 1,2           | KC987217 KC987141 KC987103 KC999001 KC998963 KC987179 |
| Acremonium sp. A105          | 1,2           | KC987218 KC987142 KC987104 KC999002 KC998964 KC987180 |
| Acremonium sp. A106          | 1,2           | KC987219 KC987143 KC987105 KC999003 KC998965 KC987181 |
| Acremonium sp. A107          | 1,2           | KC987220 KC987144 KC987106 KC999004 KC998966 KC987182 |
| Acremonium sp. A108          | 1,2           | KC987221 KC987145 KC987107 KC999005 KC998967 KC987183 |
| Acremonium sp. A109          | 1             | KC987222 KC987146 KC987108 KC999006 KC998968 KC987184 |
| Acremonium sp. A110          | 1,2           | KC987223 KC987147 KC987109 KC999007 KC998969 KC987185 |
| Acremonium sp. A111          | 1,2           | KC987224 KC987148 KC987110 KC999008 KC998970 KC987186 |
| Acremonium sp. E102          | 1,2           | KC987248 KC987172 KC987134 KC999030 KC998994 KC987210 |
| Acremonium tubakii           | CBS 790.69    | 1 HQ232148                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium tubakii           | CBS 111360    | 2 AY632654                                      | AY632654  | AY632689| -       | -         |             |
| *Acremonium tubakii*         | CBS 824.69    | 1 HQ232149                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| Acremonium verruculosum      | CBS 989.69    | 1 HQ232150                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| *Cephalosporium malorum*     | CBS 117.25    | 1 HQ232015                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
| *Cephalosporium purpurascens*| CBS 149.62    | 1 HQ232071                                     |           |          |        |          |             |
Table 3. (Continued).

| Taxon                     | Voucher             | Appearance in LSU phylogenetic analysis (1,2) | ITS       | β-tub    | RPB2    | TEF1-α   | SSU            |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|----------------|
| Didymostilbe echinofibrosa | AR 2824             | 1 AY489706                                     |           |          |         |          |                |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A103 | 1,2                | KC987216 KC987140 KC987102 KC999000 KC998962 KC987178 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A112 | 1,2                | KC987225 KC987149 KC987111 KC999009 KC987871 KC987178 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A113 | FW-1476            | 1,2 KC987226 KC987150 KC987112 KC999010 KC987972 KC987188 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A114 | FW-1473            | 1,2 KC987227 KC987151 KC987113 KC999011 KC987973 KC987189 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A115 | FW-1474            | 1,2 KC987228 KC987152 KC987114 KC999012 KC987974 KC987190 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A116 | 1,2                | KC987229 KC987153 KC987115 - KC987975 KC987191 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A117 | FW-1471            | 1,2 KC987230 KC987154 KC987116 KC999013 KC987976 KC987192 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A118 | 1,2                | KC987231 KC987155 KC987117 KC999014 KC987977 KC987193 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A119 | 1,2                | KC987232 KC987156 KC987118 KC999015 KC989878 KC987194 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A120 | 1,2                | KC987233 KC987157 KC987119 KC999016 KC987979 KC987195 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A121 | 1,2                | KC987234 KC987158 KC987120 KC999017 KC987980 KC987196 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A122 | 1,2                | KC987235 KC987159 KC987121 KC999018 KC987981 KC987197 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A123 | 1,2                | KC987236 KC987160 KC987122 KC999019 KC987982 KC987198 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A124 | 1,2                | KC987237 KC987161 KC987123 KC999020 KC987983 KC987199 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A125 | 1,2                | KC987238 KC987162 KC987124 KC999021 KC987984 KC987200 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A126 | 1,2                | KC987239 KC987163 KC987125 KC999022 KC987985 KC987201 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A127 | 1,2                | KC987240 KC987164 KC987126 - KC987986 KC987202 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina A128 | 1,2                | KC987241 KC987165 KC987127 KC999023 KC987987 KC987203 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina E101 T | CBS 127350 (=VKM F-4108) | 1,2 KC987247 KC987171 KC987133 KC999029 KC987993 KC987209 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M14 | CBS 120043 (=VKM F-3905) | 1,2 KC987244 KC987168 KC987130 KC999026 KC987990 KC987206 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M20 | CBS 120044 (=VKM F-3040) | 1,2 KC987245 KC987169 KC987131 KC999027 KC987991 KC987207 |
| Emericellopsis alkalina M71 | CBS 120049 (=VKM F-3907) | 1,2 KC987246 KC987170 KC987132 KC999028 KC987992 KC987208 |
| Emericellopsis donezki T | CBS 489.71         | 2 AY632658 AY632674 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis glabra T | CBS 119.40         | 2 AY632657 AY632673 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis glabra A.R. 3614 | 2              | HM484860 HM484879 - HM484843 |
| Emericellopsis hunicola T | CBS 180.56         | 2 AY632659 AY632675 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis maritima T | CBS 491.71 (=VKM F-1082) | 1,2 KC987251 KC987175 KC987137 KC999033 KC987997 KC987213 |
| Emericellopsis microspora T | CBS 380.62         | 2 AY632663 AY632679 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis minima T | CBS 190.55 (=VKM F-1484) | 1,2 KC987249 KC987173 KC987135 KC999031 KC987995 KC987211 |
| Emericellopsis minima CBS 111361 | 2              | AY632661 AY632677 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis minima CBS 871.68 (=VKM F-1057) | 1,2 | KC987250 KC987174 KC987136 KC999032 KC987996 KC987212 |
| Emericellopsis minima CCFC226707 | 1              | AY283560                                      |
| Emericellopsis mirabilis CBS 177.53 | 2              | AY632656 - -                                  |
| Emericellopsis pallida T CBS 490.71 (=VKM F-925) | 1,2 | KC987252 KC987176 KC987138 KC999034 KC987998 KC987214 |
| Emericellopsis pallida CBS 624.73 | 2              | AY632667 AY632683 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis robusta CBS 489.73 | 2              | AY632664 AY632680 - -                      |
| Emericellopsis salmosynnemata CBS 382.62 | 2              | AY632666 AY632682 - -                      |
Table 3. (Continued).

| Taxon                          | Voucher       | Appearance in LSU phylogenetic analysis (1,2) | ITS         | β-tub        | RPB2        | TEF1-α   | SSU       |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| *Emericellopsis stolkiae* T   | CBS 159.71    | 2                                             | AY632668    | AY632684     | -           | -        |           |
| *Emericellopsis synnematicola* T | CBS 176.60    | 2                                             | AY632665    | AY632681     | -           | -        |           |
| *Emericellopsis terricola* T  | CBS 120.40    | 1,2                                           | U57082      | U57676       | -           | -        |           |
| *Emericellopsis terricola*    | CBS 229.59    | 1,2                                           | AY305034    | AY632662     | AY632678    | -        |           |
| *Emericellopsis terricola*    | CCF3815       | 2                                             | FJ430737    | -            | -           | -        |           |
| *Emericellopsis terricola*    | NRRL 54109    | 2                                             | HQ698592    | -            | -           | -        |           |
| *Geosmithia lavendula*        | IFO 7729      | 1                                             | D88325      |              |             |          |           |
| *Geosmithia putterillii*      | IFO 31131     | 1                                             | AB047215    |              |             |          |           |
| *Gliomastix masseei* T        | CBS 794.69    | 1                                             | HQ232060    |              |             |          |           |
| *Gliomastix murorum* CBS      | CBS 157.72    | 1                                             | HQ232067    |              |             |          |           |
| *Gliomastix polychroma* T     | CBS 181.27    | 1                                             | HQ232091    |              |             |          |           |
| *Gliomastix roseogrisea* T    | CBS 134.56    | 1                                             | HQ232121    |              |             |          |           |
| *Glomerella cingulata*        | FAU 553       | 1                                             | AF543786    |              |             |          |           |
| *Hapsidospora irregularis* ATCC | 22087         | 1                                             | AF096192    |              |             |          |           |
| *Helleococcus aurantiacum* CBS | 201.35        | 1                                             | JX158442    |              |             |          |           |
| *Helleococcus japonense* CBS  | CBS 397.67    | 1                                             | JX158441    |              |             |          |           |
| *Hydropisphaera erubescens* ATCC | 36093        | 1                                             | AY545726    |              |             |          |           |
| *Melanopsamma pomiformis* ATCC | 18873         | 1                                             | AY489709    |              |             |          |           |
| *Mycoarachis inversa* ATCC    | 22107         | 1                                             | GQ505991    |              |             |          |           |
| *Mycopepon smithii* SMH       | SMH 1609      | 1                                             | AF279400    |              |             |          |           |
| *Myrothecium verrucaria* BBA | 70749         | 1                                             | AJ301999    |              |             |          |           |
| *Nigrosabulum globosum* ATCC  | 22102         | 1                                             | AFO96195    |              |             |          |           |
| *Peethambara spirostriata* CBS | 110115        | 1                                             | AY489724    |              |             |          |           |
| *Peethambara sundara* CBS     | 646.77        | 1                                             | AF193245    |              |             |          |           |
| *Roumeguernella rufula* CBS   | 346.85        | 1                                             | DQ518776    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium attenuatum* T CBS | 399.73        | 1                                             | HQ232165    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium bacillsporum* T  | CBS 425.67    | 1                                             | HQ231992    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium bactrocephalum* T | CBS 749.69    | 1                                             | HQ231994    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium glaucum* T CBS   | CBS 796.69    | 1                                             | HQ232041    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium kiliense* T CBS  | CBS 122.29    | 1                                             | HQ232052    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium ochraceum* T CBS | CBS 428.67    | 1                                             | HQ232070    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium oryzae* CBS     | CBS 180.74    | 1                                             | HQ232166    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium sp. A131*        |               | 1                                             | KC987243    | KC987167     | KC987129    | KC999025 | KC999898 | KC987205 |
| *Sarocladium strictum* T CBS  | CBS 346.70    | 1                                             | HQ232141    |              |             |          |           |
| *Sarocladium zeae* T CBS      | CBS 801.69    | 1                                             | HQ232152    |              |             |          |           |
| *Scopinella solani* CBS       | CBS 770.84    | 1                                             | AY015632    |              |             |          |           |
| *Selinia pulchra* AR          | AR 2750       | 1                                             | AF193246    |              |             |          |           |
| *Selinia pulchra* AR          | AR 2812       | 2                                             | HM484859    | HM484884     | -           | -        | HM484841 |
| *Stachybotrys chartarum* ATCC | 9182          | 1                                             | AY489714    |              |             |          |           |
| *Stanjemonium griselleum* NRRL | 26548         | 1                                             | AF049171    |              |             |          |           |
| *Stanjemonium griselleum* T CBS | 655.79        | 2                                             | AY632671    | AY632687     | -           | -        |           |
| *Stanjemonium ochroroseum* T CBS | 655.79        | 2                                             | AY632672    | AY632688     | -           | -        |           |
| *Stilbella fimetaria* DAOM    | D99026        | 2                                             | AY952467    | -            | -           | -        |           |
| *Stilbella fimetaria* SES201  | MAFF 240100   | 2                                             | HM484866    | HM484885     | -           | -        | HM484853 |
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**Fig. 2.** Four-gene phylogeny of the new alkalitolerant isolates within the *Emericelopsis*-clade based on partial sequences for ITS (including 5.8S rDNA), β-tub, RPB2 and TEF1-α genes. All strains studied are in bold. Bayesian topology is displayed with the ML/PP support values over each node. Thickened branches indicate strong combined support (ML>90, PP>0.94). T – type/ex-type strains. Representative strains from each delineated clade are shown on AA medium plates (11-d-old).
exclusively contains terrestrial species of *Emericellopsis*, such as *E. robusta*, *E. terricola*, and *E. microspora*. There are a few exceptions, namely, *E. donezkii* CBS 489.71, *E. minima* CBS 111361, and *A. tubakii* CBS 111360, which were found in aquatic environments. The very weakly supported M clade (57/1.0) predominantly contains isolates from marine and soda lake habitats, with the exception of *E. pallida* CBS 624.73 and the ex-type isolate of *E. minima*, CBS 190.55. Interestingly, eight of our new isolates from the soda soils fall into the M clade while the majority (22 strains) form a well-supported sister clade (82/1.0). We name that clade the “soda soils” clade. It comprises 22 of our isolates that collectively represent a new species named *E. alkalina* sp. nov here. Of those 22 strains, one formed ascomata, while the others only displayed asexual structures. These structures were identical to those seen in CBS 127350, the sexual strain from which we derived the type of *E. alkalina*.

SSU sequences showed almost no variation among our newly isolated strains in the *Emericellopsis*-clade. We found only two variable sites among 1,637 base pairs.

**Growth patterns**

In order to link our phylogenetic data to ecological preferences, we conducted a growth experiment testing the growth ability of all studied strains at different ambient pH values. As seen in Fig. 3A, the pH preferences vary among the members of the different clades within the *Emericellopsis* lineage. A reference member of the T clade, *E. minima* (CBS 871.68), displayed a very narrow growth optimum at pH 6 with no ability to cope with both lower and higher pH values. Three reference members of the M clade, the ex-type strains of *E. maritima* (CBS 491.71), *E. minima* (CBS 190.55), and *E. pallida* (CBS 490.71), had an optimum growth at pH 6–7, but were able to tolerate higher pH values. Identical growth patterns were seen in our strains *Acremonium* sp. A104, A105, A106, A107, A108, A110, A111, and E102 (data not shown) which also fall into the M clade. Two strains (A105 and A111) seem to be paraphyletic to the M clade, but based on their growth patterns they belong to the M clade (dashed line). Members of the M clade grew faster than *E. minima* (CBS 871.68) from the T clade. All new isolates of *E. alkalina* (except A117, which had very low growth rate and no pH preference) showed a higher growth rate than that seen in the members of the M and T clades. They had a broad pH optimum in the 7–11 range, and displayed a wide tolerance across the pH scale.

Isolates *Acremonium* sp. A109, *A. sclerotigenum* A101, A130 and *Sarocladium* sp. A131, which fall into a sister-clade to the *Emericellopsis*-clade, had an overall slow growth rate with a slight preference for neutral pH combined with the ability to tolerate higher pH values. This pattern somewhat resembled that seen in the M clade (Fig. 3B).

**TAXONOMY**

*Emericellopsis alkalina* Bilanenko & Georgieva, sp. nov.
MycoBank MB804572
(Figs 4–5)

*Etymology:* Epithet taken from the ability to grow at high ambient pH.

*Diagnosis:* *Asci* saccate, 12–15 µm long, unitunicate. *Ascospores* ellipsoid, pale brown, with uneven surfaces,
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Type: Russia: Altai, Kulunda steppe, soda soil (total salts 73 g kg\(^{-1}\), pH 10.1) on the edge of the basin of Tanatar Lake, August 2002. D. Sorokin (CBS H-21412 – holotype; culture ex-type E101 = CBS 127350 = VKM F-4108).

Description: Ascomata dark brown, superficial on the substratum, globose, 50–120–(180) μm diam, non-ostiolate, wall 6–10 μm thick. Peridium multi-layered, pseudoparenchymatous, composed of 3–5 layers of compressed cells. Asci saccate, 12–15 μm long, with thin deliquecent wall, soon dissolving, unitunicate, scattered irregularly in the ascocarp. Ascospores ellipsoid, pale brown, with uneven surfaces, 4.5–5.5 × 2.5–3.0 μm, surrounded by 3, but frequently 5 longitudinal, subhyaline, smooth-edged alar appendages, width up to 1.0 μm. Asexual morph acrocnemium-like.

**Culture characteristics:** Colonies on alkaline agar (AA, pH 10.0–10.2) fast-growing, reaching 70–80 mm diam in 10 d at 25°C. On MEA (pH 6.5) growing slower, reaching 32–38 mm diam in 10 d. Colonies orange-salmon-pink, later darkening in centre due to the formation of ascocoma with tufted aerial mycelium sometimes forming concentric zones upon exposure to light. Reverse colourless. Exudate absent. Decumbent vegetative hyphae thin-walled, hyaline, 0.5–2.0 μm wide. Mycelium consisting of hyaline, smooth-walled, septate hyphae, 1–3 μm wide, often fasciculate.

**Additional specimens examined:** A103, A112, A113 (= VKM FW-1476), A114 (= VKM FW-1473), A115 (= VKM FW-1474), A116, A117 (= VKM FW-1471), A118, A119, A120, A121, A122, A123, A124, A125, A126, A127, A128, M14 (= VKM F-3905 = CBS 120043), M20 (= VKM FW-3040 = CBS 120044), M71 (= VKM F-3907 = CBS 120049).

**Notes:** The current study shows a well-supported clade (82/1.0) as inferred from four phylogenetic loci (ITS, ß-tub, RPB2, TEF1-α) containing 22 isolates including the type E101. Although only the type E101 strain formed a sexual morph, we assign the remaining 21 isolates to *E. alkalina* as well, based on sequence similarity and the identity of asexual morphology. All 22 isolates of *E. alkalina* showed essentially the same growth patterns with a wide pH tolerance culminating in an optimum at pH 7–11. Isolate A117 is the only exception, showing a highly reduced growth rate in general, and no obvious pH optimum.

**Morphological differences from sister species:** The ascomata of the type of *Emericellopsis alkalina* (CBS 127350), have a multilayered peridium, composed mostly of five layers of flattened cells. The peridium of *E. pallida* ex-type isolate CBS 490.71 is thinner, 1–2 layered. The ascospore morphology of the type of *E. alkalina* (CBS 127350) looks similar to that of *E. pallida* and *E. minima*. However, *E. alkalina* ascospores have an uneven surface with (3–)5 alar appendages, while *E. pallida*, as represented by ex-type CBS 490.71, has smooth ascospores often with three alar appendages. The ex-type of *E. minima* (CBS 190.55), unfortunately did not produce ascocoma during our investigation. A non-type isolate of *E. minima*, CBS 871.68, has wider (2 μm) alar appendages with flexuose rims, while *E. alkalina* (CBS 127350) has narrow (1 μm) appendages with smooth rims.

**DISCUSSION**

Here we provide phylogenetic evidence that our newly isolated alkalitolerant fungi from geographically diverse soda soils, are derived from marine-borne species within the genus *Emericellopsis*. Based on pH growth preference, the highly alkalitolerant strains form a “soda soils” clade distinct from the moderately alkalitolerant “marine” clade and the neutrophic “terrestrial” clade. The genus *Emericellopsis*, previously considered to belong to *Eurotiales*, was erected in 1940, based on the isolation of *E. terricola* and its variant *E. terricola* var. *glabra* (eventually renamed *E. glabra*; Backus & Orpurt 1961). Van Beyma (1939–40) described *E. terricola* based on an isolate from soil collected near the town of Baarn in The Netherlands. The generic name came from the close morphological resemblance of the ascospore ornamentation to that of *Emericella nidulans*, which was originally thought to be taxonomically related. Subsequent studies described additional soil-borne *Emericellopsis* species from various parts of the world (Stolk 1955, Gilman 1961). At the beginning of the 1960s, the genus contained five species and one variety. Ascospore size and shape constituted the major criteria used to distinguish species (Durrell 1959).

The beginning of the 1970s marked a new period in the study of *Emericellopsis* with the establishment of marine mycology. New *Emericellopsis* species were discovered in the sediments of soda lakes and along the seacoasts. *Emericellopsis stolkiae*, for instance, was isolated from the soil on the edge of the soda lake in south-western Wyoming, USA (Davidson & Christensen 1971). That species had larger ascospores than previously known *Emericellopsis* species, and also had distinct alar appendages. Tubaki (1973) suggested the conidial genus *Cephalosporium* was characteristic of aquatic sediments, and he linked *Emericellopsis* as the corresponding sexual state.

*Emericellopsis* was revised by the Russian mycologist Belyakova (1974) who analysed the morphological features of the then known *Emericellopsis* species and compiled an identification key for 12 species. She also described three new aquatic species: *Emericellopsis donezkii* isolated from the basin of the North Donetz River (Ukraine), and *E. maritima* and *E. pallida* from the intertidal zone of the Black Sea in the Crimean peninsula (Ukraine) (Belyakova 1970, 1974).
Fig. 4. *Emericellopsis alkalina* (CBS 127350). A–E. 11-d-old (28 °C, dark regime, 9 cm Petri dish) colony on alkaline agar (AA), Czapek agar (CZ), potato dextrose agar (PDA), oatmeal agar (OA), malt yeast extract agar (MYA). F–G. Hyphal bundles with acremonium-like conidiation (SEM). H. Conidiogenous cells emerging from single hypha (SEM). I. Conidiophore on a single conidiogenous cell emerging from the hyphal bundle (SEM). J. Matured conidial heads (SEM). K. Single conidiogenous cell with young conidial head (SEM). L. Conidial head (LM). M. Conidia (SEM). Bars F–G = 20 μm; H, J and L = 10 μm; I and K = 5 μm; and M = 2 μm.
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**Fig. 5.** *Emericellopsis alkalina* (CBS 127350). **A.** Cleistothecia (SEM). **B.** Cleistothecium surrounded by the asexual sporulation (SEM). **C.** Open cleistothecium (SEM). **D.** Magnified view on the multilayered peridium (SEM). **E.** Open cleistothecium (LM). **F.** Young asci (LM). **G.** Young asci (SEM). **H–J.** Lysing asci (SEM). **K–M.** Ascospores with alar appendages (SEM). Bars: A and E = 100 μm; B = 20 μm; C = 10 μm; D, F–H, and J = 5 μm; I and M = 2 μm; and K–L = 1 μm.
At the moment, *Emericellopsis* comprises homothallic saprobic deistothecial species with aceronomium-like conidiation; one species, *E. synnematicola*, also forms stibellia-like synnemata. However, different authors accept different numbers of species in the genus. Currently, 16 species with four varieties are listed in the MycoBank database (Crous et al. 2004). All authors have so far supported the opinion that the main distinguishing features among species are the morphology of the ascosporae and theiralar appendages. Molecular studies conducted in the late 1990s placed *Emericellopsis* in the family Hypocreales (Glenn et al. 1996). Analysis of SSU and LSU revealed it as a member of the family Hypocreaceae (Ogawa et al. 1997), as it was then defined, although it was subsequently assigned to the family Biocectriaceae (Rossman et al. 1999, 2001). The genus appears to be monophyletic, with strong support values obtained in the analysis of the ITS and beta-tubulin sequences (Zuccaro et al. 2004). The *Emericellopsis* lineage s. lat. also harbours the asexual genera Stibella and Stanjemonium, along with the marine species *Acremonium tubakii* and *A. fuci* (Summerbell et al. 2011).

The accumulated knowledge on the genus *Emericellopsis* suggests a wide ecological amplitude and worldwide distribution. This includes typical species of soils undergoing periodic flooding (e.g. rice paddies), as well as species found in bogs, the sediments of freshwater and seawater basins, and even the soils around subterranean wasp nests where humidity and alkalinity are elevated (Batra et al. 1973, Tubaki 1973, Domshc et al. 2007). Some species have a broad ecological distribution, such as *E. terricola*, which has been isolated from alkaline soils at the Mono Lake in California as well as from both acidic and saline soils in the Czech National Park (Steiman et al. 2004, Hujslová et al. 2010). A survey of ascomycetous fungi in limestone soils in Argentina formed by mollusc shells yielded *E. minima*, with its ability to grow from pH 5 to 11 (Elíañes et al. 2006). The pattern of marine and other salt-associated isolations has suggested that marine habitats might harbour a large number of the *Emericellopsis* species. The ability to survive in high salinity and pH does not always coincide with the ability to develop the full lifecycle in those conditions, making the salts-adapted species difficult to discriminate from “transit” species and hampering efforts to estimate their ecological contribution (Kohlmeyer & Volkman-Kohlmeyer 2003). A study by Zuccaro et al. (2004) revealed the presence of distinct marine and terrestrial clades within *Emericellopsis*, as noted above. The M clade contained isolates from saline habitats, including the recently described *A. fuci* from the thalli of the seaweed *Fucus serratus* and *F. distichus*. Members of the marine clade within *Emericellopsis* showed an ability to utilize sugars present in seabeown brown algae (e.g. fucoidan, fucose). The presence of marine water appeared to be necessary for conidial germination in *A. fuci*.

Involvement of additional loci in our phylogenetic analysis confirms the presence of the M and T clades (Fig. 2). Our new alkalitolerant isolates are exclusively linked to the M clade, with our 22 *E. alkalina* isolates displaying an extreme alkalitolerant phenotype. Both growth patterns and molecular data suggest that the *E. alkalina* group originated from the marine isolates of the M clade, linking evolutionary development in the marine habitat with that of the soda soils. Clearly, these environments share high salinity and elevated ambient pH values. As far as we know, however, such an ecological overlap has not been demonstrated for other marine fungal lineages. To address this issue, we need systematic biodiversity research on the fungi from soda lakes.

That the intron of the β-tub gene contributed extensively to the phylogenetic signal in our study suggests a relatively recent divergence of *E. alkalina* from the M clade. Our *Acremonium* sp. strains A105 and A111 seem to be intermediate isolates situated in a statistically ambiguous position between the alkaline and marine lineages. The growth pattern of these isolates contributed significantly to our decision to include them within the M clade.

*Emericellopsis alkalina* grew well at pHs from 4 to 11.2, with a slight preference towards 7–11. However, a few isolates of this species, namely A113, A118, A122, A126, A127, and M20, displayed a significant dip in growth rate at neutral pH values (data not shown). This feature could be seen as a physiological trade-off that has evolved in some strains of *E. alkalina* that thrive along with alkalitolerant strains from the M clade. Interestingly, A128 from the soda soils clade, and A110, were isolated from the same soil sample at Sulfatnöwe Lake. And yet, this trend does not extend to all *E. alkalina* strains that were jointly isolated with M clade strains. It is unclear what makes the majority of *E. alkalina* strains grow more vigorously than the M clade members essentially at every pH value we tested. That *E. alkalina* performs well along a large section of the pH scale makes it difficult to specify the ecology of this species in conventional terms. It is technically not correct to label it an ‘alkaliphile’, since it is capable of growth at low pH as well as at high pH. Nor is the term ‘alkalitolerant’ entirely true, since the optimal growth pH is above neutral. The term ‘pH-tolerant’ with the preference towards alkaline conditions might be suitable. As opposed to the soda soils clade, members of the M clade can be appropriately called ‘alkalitolerant’, while *E. minima* (CBS 871.68) from clade T can safely be termed a ‘neutrophile’.

A link between marine and soda soil inhabitants has previously been observed in bacteria. In metabolic studies of fungi, specifically *Fusarium oxysporum*, it has been shown that the expression of the gene *ena1* encoding P-type Na+-ATPase, which is believed to be an important player in the halotolerance adaptation cascade response, is up-regulated as the ambient pH goes up (Caracuel et al. 2003). Therefore, halophilic or halotolerant species may hold a clue towards elucidating the mechanisms of the ability to thrive at high pH. The molecular aspects of the ability to cope with high ambient pH have not been studied in filamentous fungi. Future work aimed at revealing these molecular properties could be carried out by contrasting the genomics of neutrophiles and alkaliphiles. Such a project might provide answers to the intriguing questions inherent in the alkaliphily phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Dmitry Sorokin for providing soil samples, Bertha Koopmanschap and Marijke Slakhorst for technical assistance, and Denis Landin for processing the images. The work was funded by the Laboratory of Genetics at Wageningen University (The Netherlands) and an RFBR grant No. 11-04-01576 (Russia).
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