A morphogenetic survey on ciliate plankton from a mountain lake pinpoints the necessity of lineage-specific barcode markers in microbial ecology

Thorsten Stoeck,¹ Hans-Werner Breiner,¹ Sabine Filker,¹ Veronika Ostermaier,² Barbara Kammerlander²,³ and Bettina Sonntag²,⁎
¹Department of Ecology, Faculty of Biology, University of Kaiserslautern, Kaiserslautern, Germany.
²Research Institute for Limnology, Mondsee, University of Innsbruck, Mondsee, Austria.
³Institute of Ecology, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria.

Summary

Analyses of high-throughput environmental sequencing data have become the ‘gold-standard’ to address fundamental questions of microbial diversity, ecology and biogeography. Findings that emerged from sequencing are, e.g. the discovery of the extensive ‘rare microbial biosphere’ and its potential function as a seed-bank. Even though applied since several years, results from high-throughput environmental sequencing have hardly been validated. We assessed how well pyrosequenced amplicons [the hypervariable eukaryotic V4 region of the small subunit ribosomal RNA (SSU rRNA) gene] reflected morphotype ciliate plankton. Moreover, we assessed if amplicon sequencing had the potential to detect the annual ciliate plankton stock. In both cases, we identified significant quantitative and qualitative differences. Our study makes evident that taxon abundance distributions inferred from amplicon data are highly biased and do not mirror actual morphotype abundances at all. Potential reasons included cell losses after fixation, cryptic morphotypes, resting stages, insufficient sequence data availability of morphologically described species and the unsatisfying resolution of the V4 SSU rRNA fragment for accurate taxonomic assignments. The latter two underline the necessity of barcoding initiatives for eukaryotic microbes to better and fully exploit environmental amplicon data sets, which then will also allow studying the potential of seed-bank taxa as a buffer for environmental changes.

Introduction

Traditional approaches for the investigation of protistan plankton diversity, including enrichment and clonal cultivation, manual selection of individual cells, live observation through microscopy and fixation and staining procedures were the methods of choice for several hundred years to study the composition, dynamics and distribution of protistan plankton communities (Patterson, 1992 and references therein). More than 10 years ago, the interrogation of taxonomic marker genes obtained from environmental samples amended these traditional approaches in protistan plankton diversity research (López-García et al., 2001; Moon-van der Staay et al., 2001). Since then, a vast number of studies on the molecular diversity of protistan plankton has contributed to our understanding and perception of this group. Important discoveries include: (i) the detection of an ecologically and numerically important plankton group, namely eukaryote picoplankton, which is microscopically difficult to detect and to identify because of small cell sizes (<3 μm) and insufficient morphological characters (Massana et al., 2006); (ii) the identification of morphologically indistinguishable cryptic species (Nanney et al., 1998; de Vargas et al., 1999; Darling et al., 2004; Stoeck et al., 2008); (iii) a genetic heterogeneity within protists that is much higher when compared with the findings of studies on morphological diversity (Foisssner et al., 2008); (iv) the detection of novel taxon groups on high taxonomic levels such as the novel class Cariacotrichea within the morphologically well-characterized ciliates (Stoeck et al., 2006; Orsi et al., 2012); (v) the existence of life and active eukaryote plankton communities in even the most extreme environments on our planet, which were previously difficult to sample and to analyse by traditional plankton research approaches (López-García et al., 2003; Alexander et al., 2009; Edgcomb et al., 2009); and (vi) the detection and identification of biogeographic and temporal patterns through the high resolution of molecular phylotypes previously obscured by the lower resolution of morphotypes (Bass et al., 2007; Boenigk et al., 2007).
The basic idea of a molecular approach included the extraction of genomic DNA or RNA from environmental samples, the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification of taxonomic marker genes, predominantly the small subunit of the ribosomal RNA gene (SSU rRNA) with specific oligonucleotide primer sets, the isolation and multiplication of individual PCR fragments through cloning into plasmid vectors and transformation in competent bacterial cells, and the subsequent isolation, purification and Sanger sequencing of the obtained target genes. These sequences were then placed into a phylogenetic context and analysed statistically. This strategy evolved to the ‘gold standard’ in protistan diversity research (Caron et al., 2004) until next-generation sequencing strategies such as the 454 sequencing (pyrosequencing; Margulies et al., 2005) invaded the field of microbial diversity research. First applied to prokaryote plankton communities (Sogin et al., 2006), it soon after revealed the complexity of protistan plankton communities (Amaral-Zettler et al., 2009; Stoeck et al., 2009; 2010; Edgcomb et al., 2011; Charvet et al., 2012; Logares et al., 2012). Meanwhile, pyrosequencing has largely replaced the clone library approach in protistan diversity research, as its depth of sequencing is much higher at a fraction of the costs of Sanger sequencing. However, similar to the clone library approach, pyrosequenced data sets are prone to bias. For example, sequencing errors may artificially inflate biodiversity records through the production of erroneous phylogenotypes that do not exist in nature (Kunin et al., 2010; Behnke et al., 2011). Another issue is the translation of sequence read abundance into biological abundance in a sample (Amend et al., 2010; Medinger et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2011), which is of high relevance when it comes to the statistical analyses of amplicon data sets using abundance-based indices and estimators (Chao and Shen, 2003–2005; Chao et al., 2005; 2006; Colwell, 2009). Also, the accuracy of taxonomic assignments of short amplicon reads is a very critical subject (Nebel et al., 2010; Bittner et al., 2013). In the past few years, a plethora of techniques, workflows and algorithms have been developed to address these difficulties (Liu et al., 2007; Quince et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2009; Caporaso et al., 2010; Clemente et al., 2010; Huse et al., 2010; Behnke et al., 2011; Edgar et al., 2011; Nebel et al., 2011; Schloss et al., 2011). Yet, with very few exceptions (Medinger et al., 2010; Bachy et al., 2013), environmental high-throughput amplicon data sets were put to the test by comparing the diversity uncovered by pyrosequencing with the diversity unveiled by microscopic analyses. However, such comparisons are crucial for the evaluation and interpretation of environmental amplicon data sets in ecology and diversity research.

Yet the advances in sequencing strategies enabled unprecedented depth and scale of sampling for the detection of molecular microbial diversity, resulting in two major paradigm-shifting discoveries: first, a microbial, including protistan diversity exceeding previous estimates from clone library data sets several fold, and second, the discovery of an exciting ‘rare biosphere’ of poorly understood ecological significance (Pedrós-Alió, 2007; Caron and Countway, 2009; Dawson and Hagen, 2009; Stoeck and Epstein, 2009; Stoeck et al., 2010; Caron et al., 2012; Bittner et al., 2013). One of the hypothesized functions of the rare biosphere assumed that, for example, the high genomic potential of the numerous but rare seed-bank taxa (relative abundance of a species < 0.1%) allowed a microbial community to react to environmental changes (Sogin et al., 2006; Caron and Countway, 2009; Dawson and Hagen, 2009; Stoeck and Epstein, 2009).

In this study, we investigated a protistan morphotype community structure in a mountain lake (Piburgersee, Austria) directly compared with pyrosequenced ciliate amplicon data. As the effort to identify, quantify and finally record the diverse microbial morphotypes within a specific ecosystem is enormous, we focused on the morphologically relatively well distinguishable ciliate plankton. In general, ciliates are major plankton components and play crucial roles in microbial food webs. For example, they belong to the most important consumers of algal biomass in lakes (Weisse and Müller, 1998), contribute to the top-down control of specific bacterial taxon groups (Šimek et al., 2002), and they transfer energy and organic matter from the microbial food web to higher trophic levels (Weisse and Müller, 1998).

Here, we analysed the morphotypes and pyrosequenced phylogenotypes of ciliates from the same samples taken during a unique sampling event in winter 2011. We presumed that the microscopically detected morphotypes represented the numerically abundant taxa and accordingly expected most of them to be reflected quantitatively in the abundant fraction of the amplicon data set. Furthermore, considering the seed-bank hypothesis for low-abundant phylogenotypes (see above), it was reasonable to assume that the highly sensitive pyrosequencing (if sampled to saturation) would reveal the near-complete ciliate plankton inventory. Therefore, we expected to find ciliate taxa in the seed-bank phylogenotypes that were microscopically undetectable in the winter sampling but recorded throughout an annual sampling at the same site.

**Results**

**Abiotic parameters and chlorophyll a**

On the day of sampling, the clear ice cover was approximately 40 cm thick and covered by ca 15 cm of snow. We measured the most important abiotic parameters and chlorophyll a to show the pronounced differences between the three selected sampling depths (Table 1). Temperature was lowest (1.2°C) directly under the ice.
cover followed by more or less stable values down to the greatest depths (21 m). Oxygen and chlorophyll a concentrations decreased from surface to bottom waters, while ammonium increased. Highest values for total phosphorus were detected directly under the ice with a decrease in 9 m and again an increase in the bottom waters. The other parameters remained more or less stable throughout the water column.

V4 amplicon analyses

After data cleaning, we obtained 82,493 ciliate V4 tags from the surface water sample (0 m), 57,117 ciliate tags from the 9 m sample and 87,445 tags from the bottom water sample (21 m). When clustering all tags into operational taxonomic units (OTUs), OTU numbers collapsed exponentially with decreasing cluster levels from 100% to 97%, followed by a gentle linear decline from 97% to 90% (Fig. 1). OTUs clustering at 97% sequence similarity (OTU<sub>97</sub>) resulted in 1386, 1464 and 1657 OTU<sub>97</sub> for water samples from 0 m, 9 m and 21 m respectively. The rank-abundance distribution (Fig. S1) showed relatively few singletons and doubletons (OTU<sub>97</sub> with one and two tags respectively) indicating near-saturated sampling profiles. Moreover, the rarefaction analyses (Fig. 2) confirmed that the sequencing effort was sufficiently deep to record the near-complete OTU<sub>97</sub>-inventory. This was a substantial prerequisite to address the questions raised in this study and for solid comparative analyses of molecular samples to each other as well as to the morphological data sets.

In total, 69.4% (n = 157,662) of all sequences detected in March 2011 showed a sequence similarity of > 95% to their closest Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) hit in the ciliate V4 18S rDNA database (Fig. 3). These sequences were taxonomically assigned to ciliate genera, and the remaining tags obtained a ‘candidatus status’ on the genus level (Table S1). In total, the assigned sequences represented 47 different ciliate genera with distinctly different relative proportions (Fig. 4A). The highest amplicon abundances were assigned to *Pseudomonilicaryon* (43.0%), *Orthoamphisiella* (18.4%) and *Askenasia* (12.6%). *Rimostrombidium, Urocentrum, Halteria, Didinium, Enchelyodon* and *Spirostomum* accounted for 1–10% whereas most of the remaining genera (n = 38) were represented by less than 1% of all assigned tags.

Comparing morphological data with sequencing data

From morphologic analyses, we detected 30 ciliate genera (Fig. 4B) including 48 species (Table S2). In total,

### Table 1. Abiotic parameters and chlorophyll a in the three sampling depths (directly under the ice cover, 9 m and 21 m) in Piburgersee measured on 1 March, 2011.

|                  | 0 m     | 9 m     | 21 m    |
|------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Temperature (°C) | 1.2     | 4.2     | 4.3     |
| Oxygen (mg l⁻¹, %) | 8.1, 64 | 5.2, 45 | 2.9, 25 |
| pH               | 7.09    | 6.95    | 6.87    |
| Conductivity (μS cm⁻¹) | 74.5    | 74.1    | 75.5    |
| Nitrate (μg l⁻¹)  | 208     | 227     | 194     |
| Ammonium (μg l⁻¹) | 84      | 95      | 209     |
| Diss. nitrogen (μg l⁻¹) | 407     | 394     | 472     |
| Total phosphorus (μg l⁻¹) | 14.7    | 5.3     | 8.7     |
| Diss. phosphorus (μg l⁻¹) | 4.5     | 2.6     | 5.1     |
| Sulphate (mg l⁻¹)  | 6.6     | 6.4     | 6.2     |
| Chloride (mg l⁻¹)  | 0.66    | 0.64    | 0.64    |
| DOC (μg l⁻¹)       | 2338    | 2210    | 2229    |
| Chlorophyll a (μg l⁻¹) | 21.2    | 1.9     | 1.9     |

© 2013 The Authors. *Environmental Microbiology* published by Society for Applied Microbiology and John Wiley & Sons Ltd,
in the March sampling we observed $2.4 \pm 1.2$ ind. ml$^{-1}$ directly under the ice cover, $3.2 \pm 0.3$ ind. ml$^{-1}$ in 9 m and $5.4 \pm 2.4$ ind. ml$^{-1}$ in 21 m respectively. Significant differences were found between pyrosequencing and morphological data from the March sampling (Fisher’s exact test: $P < 0.01$) as only 11 morphogenera out of the 47 genera detected in the sequence survey were in accordance (Fig. 4A and B). Amplicon sequencing revealed that 36 genera remained undetected from morphological analyses. Similarly, 19 genera were detected microscopically but escaped the molecular survey. We note that eight of these genera (red bars in Fig. 4B) had no representative sequences in publicly accessible databases, and five were detected in the sequencing survey as candidatus genera (blue bars in Fig. 4B). Thus, only six genera that were detected morphologically and had representative V4

Fig. 2. Rarefaction curves of amplicon data sets from the three different depths screened for ciliate phylotype diversity in Piburgersee in March 2011. All three data sets showed near-saturation profiles, suggesting that the nearly complete ciliate phylotype inventory (OTUs called at 97% sequence similarity) was obtained. Data were rarified to 82 140 sequences per sample.

Fig. 3. Similarity distribution (percentage of identity) between all high-quality amplicon reads ($n = 227 065$) and SSU rDNA V4 regions of database Sanger sequences of described ciliates as obtained from NCBI’s nr database collection. Note that most amplicons had a sequence similarity of at least 98% to database entries. In total, 69.4% of all high-quality sequences were at least 95% similar to deposited sequence entries of ciliate morphospecies.

© 2013 The Authors. Environmental Microbiology published by Society for Applied Microbiology and John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Environmental Microbiology, 16, 430–444
Fig. 4. Relative proportion of identified genera in samples analysed in this study. (A) Pyrosequenced amplicon data collected in March 2011. Only amplicons were considered that were at least 95% similar to deposited database sequences from ciliate morphospecies. (B) Morphotype data collected in March 2011. Sample aliquots were obtained from the same bulk water samples that were used for pyrosequencing. (C) Morphotype data collected over the course of 1 year (see Fig. 5) at the same sampling location and depths where samples for Fig. 4A and B were obtained. Blue bars in (B) and (C) are genera that were also detected with pyrosequenced amplicons, but sequence similarity to closest relative sequence in reference database was < 95% (‘amplicon candidatus genera’). Red bars represent genera not available in public databases. Green bars represent genera available as sequence entries in the reference database but escaped amplicon detection.
database entries remained that were not detected in the molecular survey (green bars in Fig. 4B).

Quantitative distributions of sequences and morphotypes in March 2011 were not in agreement. For example, the most abundant morphotype was Urotichia (24.5% of all individuals), but only 0.09% of all amplicons could be assigned to this genus. Further, the two most abundant amplicon genera (Pseudomonilicaryon and Orthoamphisiella) were not detected microscopically, and Askenasia accounted for 12.6% of all amplicons and for only 2.9% of all morphotypes.

In order to assess if amplicon sequencing had the potential of detecting the (nearly) complete ciliate genus inventory of Piburgersee, we compared the pyrosequenced amplicon data to the annual ciliate morphotype inventory (Fig. 4A and C). Ten amplicon genera (Stokesia, Uroleptus, Stentor, Spathidium, Caenomorpha, Plagiopyla, Astylozoan, Colpoda, Frontonia and Vorticella) not detected in the March 2011 morphotype sampling were recorded in the annual morphotype analyses (Fig. 4C). These taxa accounted for less than 1.1% of all taxa detected in the annual morphotype profile (low-abundant taxa) in this lake. Further 20 morphotype genera that remained undetected through sequencing were recorded throughout the year by microscopy (red bars in Fig. 4C), 13 genera were not represented in nucleotide databases (green bars in Fig. 4C) and six (Dexiotricha, Monodinium, Ophryoglena, Litonotus, Coleps and Acineta) were detected with amplicons as candidatus genera (blue bars in Fig. 4C). Fisher’s exact test identified significant differences between morphotype (annual profile) and amplicon ciliate genera detected in Piburgersee plankton (P < 0.01).

Discussion
Comparing morphotypes and 18S rDNA V4 amplicon data of the same ciliate community

Community composition: In our study, we compared the ciliate community structures (taxon identity and abundance) from microscopy and pyrosequencing of the same water samples. Both pyrosequencing and microscopy revealed significantly different ciliate communities in the three depth layers sampled in Piburgersee in March 2011. As the strategy of data processing is a highly critical step that influences the quality of the results (Bachy et al., 2013), in this study, we used a workflow assumed to be the ‘gold standard’ not only in morphological ciliate identification, but also in massively parallel amplicon data processing: for the latter, a PubMed search conducted in January 2013 revealed 183 studies using the Quantitative Insights Into Microbial Ecology (QIME) pipeline, and for the taxon assignment with JAGUC (Nebel et al., 2011) it has previously been shown to be the method of choice for synthetic data sets compared with other widely used taxon assign-

ment strategies (Nebel et al., 2011). Because of its high sensitivity and a higher taxonomic resolution power of hypervariable fragments in taxonomic marker genes (Pawlowski et al., 2012), it was not unexpected that sequencing discovered many more taxa than detected through the microscopic analyses. However, taxon composition and abundances obtained from sequencing data were hardly congruent with morphotype data. Qualitatively, 20 morphotype genera (63%) remained undetected in the sequence analyses. We attribute this to the following main reasons:

(i) The V4-database assembled from publicly available data included sequences from only 308 ciliate morphospecies belonging to 247 genera. This contrasts with the number of ca 4500 globally described free-living ciliate species (Foissner et al., 2008) included into ca 1500 genera (Aescht, 2001). Our study makes evident that the value of a molecular sequence data set can only be as strong as the underlying database. The importance of cataloguing sequence data from described protist species in databases as suggested, for example, in the protistian barcoding initiative (Pawlowski et al., 2012) is mandatory to make more use of environmental sequence data sets and to obtain less biased pictures of natural protist communities.

(ii) The accuracy of taxon assignment at the genus level seemed to be biased at least in some cases, especially when it comes to the hypervariable V4 region of the SSU rDNA. This becomes obvious in five detected morphogenera in our study (Fig. 4B, blue bars). We found V4 amplicons that could tentatively be assigned to these genera, but their low sequence similarity made the taxon assignment uncertain. This category included also falsely assigned sequences, which may have obscured the presence of specific taxa in the sample. For example, morphological analyses of the ciliate inventory in Piburgersee revealed that the euplanktonic Pelagodileptus trachelioi dites was a common species found in the lake throughout the year (B. Sonntag, unpublished). Surprisingly, via sequencing, Pelagodileptus was not detected; instead Pseudomonilicaryon was the quantitatively most important genus accounting for the largest DNA pool. Yet the latter morphologically conspicuous genus has never been recorded before microscopically from Piburgersee, neither from live nor from preserved plankton samples (Fig. 4B and C; B. Sonntag, pers. obs.). Morphologically, both genera are assigned to the Monili caryon branch of the family Dileptidae represented by two clades including Pseudomonilicaryon and Monili caryon on the one hand and Paradileptus and Pelagodileptus on the other (Vďačný et al., 2011). A detailed discussion about the morphological and molecular assignment of these genera can be found in Vďačný and colleagues (2011). However, as all these genera resembled conspicuous medium- to
large-sized (around 100–800 μm in length) ciliate species, it seems unlikely that such individuals could have been overlooked over decades. Further, we found that the V4 fragments of *Pseudomonilicaryon* and *Pelagodiileptus* were identical. Thus, the computational selection of *Pseudomonilicaryon* as closest related database entry to the corresponding V4 amplicon was arbitrary. Several genes, including the SSU rDNA (Lynn and Strueder-Kypke, 2006), the cytochrome oxidase subunit 1 (Greczek-Stachura et al., 2012), the intergenic transcribed spacer region (Gentekaki and Lynn, 2009) and protein-coding genes were evaluated and discussed as potential barcodes for ciliates (Barth et al., 2008), but none of them could satisfy the criteria to serve as an adequate genetic species marker (Pawlowski et al., 2012). However, at least for tintinnid ciliates, the ITS of the SSU rDNA seemed to provide a good marker even for species identification (Bachy et al., 2012; 2013). The quest for protistan barcodes can be defined as a major and important task for a better interpretation of environmental sequence data sets. It may be legitimate to question the necessity of putting a Linnean taxonomy onto sequence OTUs (Bittner et al., 2010). However, because biological properties are coded in a taxon name (Schuh and Brower, 2000; Sonntag et al., 2008), we believe that this is mandatory for a better understanding and interpretation of gene data sets in ecology.

(iii) Technical difficulties may have prevented some genera belonging to the ciliate consortium under study here, from PCR amplification and/or sequencing (Fig. 4B, green bars). Such biases included primer specificities as in the case of *Mesodinium*. The ciliate-specific forward primer used in this study had three mismatches to its target region in the primary structure of the *Mesodinium* SSU rDNA sequence. Interestingly, *Mesodinium* is well known for its highly divergent SSU rDNA sequence distinguishing this genus from other ciliates and even suggesting that this taxon did not belong to the phylum *Ciliophora* (Johnson et al., 2004). Other taxa such as *Cinetochoilum* detected microscopically but not genetically in this study have longer inserts in the V4 region, which may result in secondary structures that could prevent this gene fragment from amplification or sequencing (Pinto and Raskin, 2012). Alternatively, the increased length of this specific V4 fragment compared with the V4 fragments of other taxa in the same sample may result in length discrimination during pyrosequencing.

Numerous genera that were detected with pyrosequencing remained unobserved microscopically. Three major reasons might explain this discrepancy. First, for microscopic analyses, protists are commonly fixed immediately after sampling and species-specific cell losses of more than 40% can occur after preservation (Pfister et al., 1999; Sonntag et al., 2000). Second, if cell abundances of specific taxa in the water sample fall below a specific threshold, these cells may still be detectable with a highly sensitive molecular tool as used here, but may not be found in small volumes of water screened by microscopy. Third, resting stages of ciliates that cannot be identified and assigned correctly morphologically may be more easily recorded in a molecular survey (Medinger et al., 2010). However, although ciliate resting cysts can be quite conspicuous (Müller et al., 2002) and hardly be overlooked in plankton samples, they were only occasionally observed in live and preserved samples in Piburgersee in the last decades (B. Sonntag, pers. obs.).

**Taxon abundance distribution**

Quantitatively, we had expected that at least the most abundant morphotype genera would have been mirrored in the molecular ciliate profiles. However, considering the genera that were detected simultaneously by microscopy and sequencing, we could not find a correlation in abundance distribution (Fig. S2). The taxon-assigned amplicon abundances did not reflect the true taxon abundances in the samples considered in this study. This agrees with findings of Medinger and colleagues (2010), who also found incongruities between morphotype and phylotype abundances in the protist community of an oligotrophic freshwater lake, and also with a study by Amend and colleagues (2010) on fungal communities in house dust. We mainly explain our observation with the highly variable SSU rDNA copy number in different protist taxa. In their study, Zhu and colleagues (2005) demonstrated that the SSU rDNA copy number could vary several thousand fold amongst different protist taxa. The authors gave evidence for a direct correlation between SSU rDNA copy number and cell size. In the following case, we demonstrate that this is a major reason for biased protistan abundance data obtained from pyrosequencing: the most abundant morphotypes identified in March 2011 belonged to the genus *Urotichia* with 905 ± 408 ind. l⁻¹ on average accounting for only a relatively small proportion of amplicons (Fig. 4A and B). In contrast, the average abundance of *P. tracheliodae* was as low as 3.4 ± 5.7 ind. l⁻¹ in the quantitative March 2011 samples, although, interestingly, from the number of amplicons observed, *Pelagodiileptus* was the most abundant taxon (assuming that the *Pseudomonilicaryon*-assigned amplicons actually belonged to *Pelagodiileptus* – see discussion earlier). This discrepancy between low abundance of individuals vs. high amplicon number and vice versa can most probably be explained by the number of DNA copies found in the size of the macronucleus of both genera. Large species of several hundred micrometers in length such as *P. tracheliodae* or *Pseudomonilicaryon fraterculum* have a moniform macronucleus consisting of many nodules (for a detailed compilation of the species, see Vd’áčný and
Foissner, 2012). Their average macronuclear volume per individual can be calculated as follows: assuming 15 macronuclear nodules for *P. trachelioides*, each of a volume of 1600 μm³, the total volume would be 24 000 μm³. For *P. fraterculum*, 26 nodules were found on average with approximately 200 μm³ per nodule accounting for 5200 μm³ for the whole macronucleus. In contrast, urotrichs usually bear only one macronuclear nodule (assuming 10 x 5 μm resulting in 130 μm³ per macronucleus). From these exemplary calculations, we clearly see the discrepancy to quantify and directly relate amplicon numbers to ciliate abundance in a habitat. Therefore, we have to be aware of misinterpretation of protistan environmental amplicon data and ecological analyses of α- and β-diversity. These include, for example, indices such as Morisita–Horn, Bray–Curtis and the abundance-based Shannon index, as well as richness estimators including Abundance-based Coverage Estimator (ACE) and Chao (Chao and Shen, 2003–2005; Colwell, 2009). Because some indices are strongly influenced by rank-abundance distribution and are also sensitive to the few highly abundant taxa, they are of very little value for environmental molecular sequence data (Haegeman et al., 2013). Therefore, at the current state of the art, we suggest to evaluate such pyrosequencing data sets from presence/absence data only.

**Seed-bank taxa as a buffer for environmental changes?**

Our sequencing effort for the planktonic ciliate community in Piburgersee was considerably higher (ca three orders of magnitude) when compared with previous Sanger sequencing of environmental clone libraries (e.g., Edgcomb et al., 2002; Massana et al., 2004; Zuendorf et al., 2006; Countway et al., 2007; Stock et al., 2012). Yet the vast majority of OTUs97% included very few amplicons (< 0.1% of all amplicons). This agrees with previous environmental pyrosequencing surveys of protistan diversity. In the literature, these numerous low-abundant OTUs, typically perceptible as long-tail distributions in OTU rank-abundance curves, are interpreted as the rare biosphere or so-called seed-bank taxa (Sogin et al., 2006; Pedrós-Alió, 2007; Dawson and Hagen, 2009; Stoeck et al., 2010). Even though a part of this numerically pronounced rare biosphere is the result of data production and processing (Kunin et al., 2010; Behnke et al., 2011), approved strategies were developed and applied in this study (s. methods) to minimize its artificial inflation. There is much speculation about the ecological function of these seed-bank taxa, and one suggestion is that they may buffer environmental changes (Sogin et al., 2006; Pedrós-Alió, 2007; Dawson and Hagen, 2009; Stoeck and Epstein, 2009). Seasonal changes in an aquatic ecosystem are an example of environmental changes, and as expected, the ciliate morphotype community in Piburgersee showed a pronounced seasonal pattern (Fig. 5). This phenomenon has been reported frequently from morphological (Müller et al., 1991; Salbrecter and Arndt, 1994; Carrias et al., 1998; Sonntag et al., 2006) as well as from molecular studies (Behnke et al., 2010; Bielewicz et al., 2011), and has been attributed mainly to food availability and abundance, oxygen concentration, temperature or predation. In principal, knowledge of the ciliate morphotype inventory, their seasonal patterns and the existence of seed-bank OTUs are ideal model conditions to assess the function of the seed-bank ciliates as buffer for environmental changes.

If this was the case, we would expect the following: assuming that the annual morphotype sampling revealed the (near) complete morphotype inventory of planktonic ciliates in Piburgersee, we would assume that a unique pyrosequenced sample should have revealed at least most of these taxa. However, in total 39 out of 59 genera recorded in the annual morphotype sampling (from 16 sampling events) escaped the unique pyrosequencing sampling event (bars in shaded area of Fig. 4C). Thirteen of these genera had the theoretical potential for molecular discovery because their SSU rDNA V4 sequences are available in the ciliate sequence database we used for taxonomic assignments (green bars in Fig. 4C). One reason for their non-detection besides the factors discussed earlier might have been their patchy distribution in the plankton (Montagnes et al., 1999). Another possibility may have been the formation of cysts and subsequent disappearance from the water column due to sedimentation (Müller et al., 2002). For euplanktonic ciliates, encystment has so far only been identified for few species, for example, for *Pelagostrombidium* spp. (Müller, 1996) or *Cylotlophosis* sp. (B. Sonntag, pers. obs.).

However, we found a staggering number of 26 additional genera in the annual morphotype sampling but not in the molecular survey (red and blue bars in Fig. 4C). These genera were either not represented in sequence databases or the obtained V4 amplicons could not be assigned confidently to the genus level. One example from our study is *Ctedoctema acanthocryptum*, which had relatively high abundances in the warmer season, i.e. 12 000 ind. l⁻¹ on average in July mainly in 0–9 m depths but was not detected in observations over the whole water column from January to April (B. Sonntag, unpublished). In the NCBI database, no sequence had been deposited so far for the genus *Ctedoctema*. Examples for falsely assigned genera are discussed earlier.

**Conclusions**

Our study pinpoints two major difficulties in molecular protistan ecology research: insufficient database coverage of the described taxa (in this case: ciliates) and the unrel-
able use of the V4 SSU rDNA fragment as barcoding marker. Another lesson learned from our study is that the environmental buffer hypothesis for the seed-bank taxa is very difficult to test through the comparison of morphological and molecular data sets. One alternative would be a frequent deep-sequencing survey with numerous sampling events at different seasons. A high genomic potential to buffer environmental (seasonal) changes would be indicated if the basic OTU composition would remain the same but with changes in amplicon abundances in the different OTUs through seasonal cycles. However, because of relatively high expenses and a largely obscured taxonomy of OTUs, the ecological value of the data sets would be very limited with a poor cost–benefit effect. A better approach would be to intensify barcoding efforts for protists (Pawlowski et al., 2012). The identification of a barcode marker for individual protistan taxon groups, the collection and identification of taxa in specific habitats and the deposition of their barcodes in databases would then allow more powerful ecological studies with molecular tools such as conducted in this study. Such studies are fundamental as they are the baselines to address elementary ecological questions such as whether new abundant taxa occupied the same ecological niches of organisms that at times ‘disappeared’ into the rare biosphere. Even though taxonomic assignment of short sequence reads from Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) strategies is a major impediment, also other issues should be considered. These include, but are not restricted to, the true nature of rare amplicons. Such rare amplicons may reflect seed-bank taxa, sequence and/or PCR artefacts or taxa with extremely low ribosomal RNA operon copies. In-depth studies investigating the relation between abundance and number of rRNA copies in specific ciliate genera may be a promising approach to this subject.

**Experimental procedures**

**Sampling site and sampling**

Piburgersee is an oligo-mesotrophic lake situated in the Austrian Central Alps (47°11′N, 10°53′E). The lake has an area of 13.4 ha, a maximum depth of 24.6 m and is ice covered from December through April. At times, strong oxygen depletion occurs in the hypolimnion. For details on limnochemistry and chlorophyll a see Tolotti and Thies (2002) and Salcher and colleagues (2008).

We sampled the lake on 1 March 2011 by mechanically pecking two holes at a distance of ten meters into the ice cover at the deepest point of the lake. For measurements of abiotic parameters [temperature, oxygen concentration, pH, conductivity, nitrate, ammonium, dissolved nitrogen, total and dissolved phosphorus, sulfate, chloride and dissolved organic carbon (DOC)] and chlorophyll a water was collected.

---

**Fig. 5.** Relative abundance of ciliate genera accounting for at least 1% of the total abundance in at least one of 16 sampling events in Piburgersee. Samples were taken over the course of 1 year, with the first sample taken on 19 February (day 1).
with a 5 l Schindler–Patalas sampler from one of the two ice holes. For ciliate sampling, three depths were chosen based on previous observations showing different assemblages in accordance to the prevailing abiotic and biotic characteristics at this time of the year (B. Sonntag, unpublished). Sampling depths were (i) directly under the ice cover with highest chlorophyll concentrations providing food for algivorous ciliates, (ii) at 9 m depth where typically low nutrients were available for the ciliates and (iii) at 21 m depth where oxygen was strongly depleted at this time of the year, and bacterivorous ciliates prevailed (B. Sonntag, unpublished; Salcher et al., 2010).

For ciliate morphology and quantification, 200 ml subsamples were taken in triplicates and preserved immediately with freshly prepared Bouin’s fixative according to subsamples were taken in triplicates and preserved immediately ca 50 ml min⁻¹. Filters were immediately put into -1) Filters were immediately put into cryovials with RNAlater (Qiagen, Qiagen GmbH, Hilden, Germany) and stored as recommended by the manufacturer until further processing. For a more detailed comparison of the morphological data set obtained in this study to the actually prevailing ciliate assemblage in Piburgersee, we used a detailed compilation set obtained in this study to the actually prevailing ciliate assemblage in Piburgersee, we used a detailed compilation thereof (Foissner and Thies, 2002) and references therein.

A comprehensive and precise identification and quantification of the ciliates in this study, both living and specifically silver-stained individuals were considered for the morphological investigation. First, the living ciliates that were kept in a refrigerator at 4°C were identified within 2 days after lake sampling. Then, the Bouin’s-fixed ciliate samples were filtered and stained by applying a quantitative protargol stain (Skibbe, 1994; Pfister et al., 1999), revealing the characters necessary for identification such as the nuclei or the specific ciliary patterns. All ciliates were identified to the species level by the use of an Olympus BX50 microscope (Olympus, Vienna, Austria) under differential interference contrast (living cells) or brightfield (preserved cells). The protargol-stained ciliates were also quantified from the obtained permanent slides. Identification followed the keys of Foissner and colleagues (1991; 1992; 1994; 1995; 1999) and references therein.

**DNA isolation, SSU rDNA amplification and sequencing**

DNA was isolated directly from the Durapore membranes using Qiagen’s AllPrep kit according to the manufacturer’s instructions. For each site and depth, three subsamples (filters) each were extracted and pooled. From these extracts, we first amplified a ca 700 bp-long fragment of the SSU rDNA (including the hypervariable V4 region) using a ciliate-specific primer mix (Table 2). The PCR reaction included 50–100 ng of template DNA in a 50 μl reaction, 1 U of Phusion High-Fidelity DNA polymerase (Finnzymes, New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA, USA), 1x Phusion HF Buffer (New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA, USA), 200 μM of each deoxynucleotide triphosphate and 0.5 μM of each oligonucleotide primer. The PCR protocol consisted of an initial denaturation (30 s at 98°C) followed by 30 identical amplification cycles (denaturation at 98°C for 10 s, annealing at 59°C for 10 s and extension at 72°C for 30 s) and a final extension at 72°C for 10 min. In a subsequent nested PCR reaction using the purified (Qiagen’s MinElute kit) PCR products from the first reaction as template, the V4 region of the SSU rDNA was amplified by using eukaryote V4-specific primers (Table 2) following the protocol of Stoeck and colleagues (2010). The V4 forward primers were tagged with four base pair-long identifiers (Mul-

| Linker sequences | Key | MID | Primer | Sequence | Reference |
|-----------------|-----|-----|--------|----------|-----------|
| 5′-CGTATCGCTCCTCCTCGGC-GCA | TCAG | MID | TAReuk454FWD1 | 5′-CCAGCASYGCGGTAAATCC-3′ | (Stoeck et al., 2010) |
| 5′-CGTATCGCTCCTCCTCGGC-GCA | TCAG | MID | TAReukREV3 | 5′-ACTTTCGTTCTTGA-TYA-3′ | (Stoeck et al., 2010) |

**Abiotic parameters and chlorophyll a**

Temperature was read off directly from a thermometer attached inside the water sampler. All other parameters were measured in the laboratory at the Institute of Ecology (University of Innsbruck). For methodological details, see Tolotti and Thies (2002) and Salcher and colleagues (2008).
Amplicon data processing and taxonomic assignments

Homopolymer denoising of raw sequences was conducted with Acacia (Bragg et al., 2012). Denoised sequences were then further processed with the QIIME software package (Caporaso et al., 2010). Only tags meeting the following criteria were considered for further analyses: (i) containing bases A, C, G or T, (ii) containing the complete and correct forward primer and (iii) having a minimum length of 300 bp after primer removal. Chimeras were identified and removed by using UCHIME (Team, 2006; Edgar et al., 2011). The phylotypes were clustered with Uclust (Edgar, 2010) at different sequence similarities (100–90%). Rank-abundance and length distribution graphs of the tags were constructed in R (Team, 2006).

Phylootypes that clustered at 97% sequence similarity were used for taxonomic assignments and diversity statistics (Nebel et al., 2010; Behnke et al., 2011; Dunthorn et al., 2012). For taxonomic assignments and the analysis of a potentially novel diversity, one representative sequence from each phylotype at 97% was extracted (corresponding to the potentially novel diversity, one representative sequence from 2012). For taxonomic assignments and the analysis of diversity, the JAGUC output file (taxon assignments) with the QiIME OTU output file considering clusters built at 97% sequence similarity cluster threshold. This table contained information about the number of phylotypes in each sample, their distribution among the three depths, the number of phylotype tags in each of the three samples, the taxonomic assignment of each phylotype, the name of the representative sequence of each phylotype and the sequence similarity of the representative tag to the closest BLASTn match in the reference database. This file finally served as the basis for α- and β-diversity statistics.

Statistical analyses

We used the vegan package in R (Oksanen et al., 2011) to calculate the diversity among the three depths using the Sørensen index, and the Shannon index to compare α-diversity. The Fisher’s exact test (Fisher, 1922) was used to test whether the null hypothesis (the taxon distribution in molecular and morphological data sets is the same) can be accepted. Rarefaction analyses were conducted in QiIME.

Acknowledgements

We thank Claudia Grubbauer for help in the laboratory (quantitative protargol stain preparations), Josef Franzoi, Salvador Morales-Gomez and Gry Larsen (Institute of Ecology, University of Innsbruck) who sampled and analysed the abiotic parameters and chlorophyll of Piburgersee. Lucie Bittner (Department of Ecology, University of Kaiserslautern) is acknowledged for writing and providing the scripts for the statistical analyses. This study was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): projects P21013-B03 (P I. Sonntag), P16559-B06 (P I. Sommaruga, the unpublished Data set of the annual ciliate cycle in Piburgersee was collected and compiled by B. Sonntag in the course of this project) and by a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) to Thorsten Stoeck (STO414/3-2). The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References

Aescht, E. (2001) Catalogue of the generic names of ciliates (Protozoa, Ciliophora). Denisia 1: 1–350.
Alexander, E., Stock, A., Breiner, H.W., Behnke, A., Bunge, J., Yakimov, M.M., and Stoeck, T. (2009) Microbial eukaryotes in the hypersaline anoxic L’Atalante deep-sea basin. Environ Microbiol 11: 360–381.
Amaral-Zettler, L.A., McCliment, E.A., Ducklow, H.W., and Huse, S.M. (2009) A method for studying protistan diversity using massively parallel sequencing of V9 hypervariable regions of small-subunit ribosomal RNA genes. PLoS ONE 40: e6372.
Amend, A.S., Seifert, K.A., and Burns, T.D. (2010) Quantifying microbial communities with 454 pyrosequencing: does read abundance count? Mol Ecol 19: 5555–5565.
Bachy, C., Gómez, F., López-García, P., Dolan, J.R., and Moreira, D. (2012) Molecular phylogeny of tintinnid ciliates (Tintinella, Ciliophora). *Protist* **163**: 873–887.

Bachy, C., Dolan, J.R., López-García, P., Deschamps, P., and Moreira, D. (2013) Accuracy of protist diversity assessments: morphology compared with cloning and direct pyrosequencing of 18S rRNA genes and ITS regions using the conspicuous tintinnid ciliates as a case study. *ISME J* 7: 244–255.

Barth, D., Tischer, K., Berger, H., Schlegel, M., and Berendonk, T.U. (2008) High mitochondrial haplotype diversity of *Colesp* sp. (Ciliophora: Prostomatida). *Environ Microbiol* **10**: 626–634.

Bass, D., Richards, T.A., Matthey, L., Marsh, V., and Cavalier-Smith, T. (2007) DNA evidence for global dispersal and probable endemity of protozoa. *BMC Evol Biol* **7**: 162.

Behnke, A., Barger, K.J., Bunge, J., and Stoeck, T. (2010) Spatio-temporal variations in protistan communities along an O/H gradient in the anoxic Framvaren Fjord (Norway). *FEMS Microbiol Ecol* **72**: 89–102.

Behnke, A., Engel, M., Christen, R., Nebel, M., Klein, R., and Stoeck, T. (2011) Depicting more accurate pictures of protistan community complexity using pyrosequencing of hypervariable SSU rDNA gene regions. *Environ Microbiol* **13**: 340–349.

Bielewicz, S., Bell, E., Kong, W., Friedberg, I., Priscu, J.C., and Barth, D., Tischer, K., Berger, H., Schlegel, M., and Stoeck, T. (2011) Depicting more accurate pictures of protistan community complexity using pyrosequencing of hypervariable SSU rDNA gene regions. *Environ Microbiol* **13**: 340–349.

Bielewicz, S., Bell, E., Kong, W., Friedberg, I., Priscu, J.C., and Barth, D., Tischer, K., Berger, H., Schlegel, M., and Stoeck, T. (2011) Depicting more accurate pictures of protistan community complexity using pyrosequencing of hypervariable SSU rDNA gene regions. *Environ Microbiol* **13**: 340–349.

Caron, D.A., and Countway, P.D. (2009) Hypotheses on the role of the protistan rare biosphere in a changing world. *Aquat. Microb Ecol* **57**: 227–238.

Caron, D.A., Countway, P.D., and Brown, M.V. (2004) The growing contributions of molecular biology and immunology to protistan ecology: molecular signatures as ecological tools. *J Eukaryot Microbiol* **51**: 38–48.

Caron, D.A., Countway, P.D., Jones, A.C., Kim, D.Y., and Schnetzer, A. (2012) Marine protistan diversity. *Annu Rev Mar Sci* **4**: 467–493.

Carrias, J.-F., Ambard, C., and Bourdier, G. (1998) Seasonal dynamics and vertical distribution of planktonic ciliates and their relationship to microbial food resources in the oligomesotrophic Lake Pavin. *Arch Hydrobiol* **143**: 227–255.

Chao, A., and Shen, T.J. (2003–2005) Program SPADE (Species Prediction And Diversity Estimates). [WWW document]. URL http://www.scribd.com/doc/38194439/SPADE-UserGuide.

Chao, A., Chazdon, R.L., Colwell, R.K., and Shen, T.J. (2005) A new statistical approach for assessing similarity of species composition with incidence and abundance data. *Ecol Lett* 8: 148–159.

Chao, A., Chazdon, R.L., Colwell, R.K., and Shen, T.J. (2006) Abundance-based similarity indices and their estimation when there are unseen species in samples. *Biometrics* **62**: 361–371.

Charvet, S., Vincent, W.F., Comeau, A., and Lovejoy, C. (2012) Pyrosequencing analysis of the protist communities in a High Arctic meromictic lake: DNA preservation and change. *Front Microbiol* **3**: 422.

Clemente, J.C., Jansson, J., and Valiente, G. (2010) Accurate taxonomic assignment of short pyrosequencing reads. *Pac Symp Biocomput* 3–9.

Colwell, R.K. (2009) EstimateS: statistical estimation of species richness and shared species from samples. Version 8.2. User’s Guide and application.

Countway, P.D., Gast, R.J., Dennett, M.R., Savai, P., Rose, J.M., and Caron, D.A. (2007) Distinct protistan assemblages characterize the euphotic zone and deep sea (2500 m) of the western North Atlantic (Sargasso Sea and Gulf Stream). *Environ Microbiol* **9**: 1219–1232.

Darling, K.F., Kucera, M., Pudsey, C.J., and Wade, C.M. (2004) Molecular evidence links cryptic diversification in polar planktonic protists to Quaternary climate dynamics. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* **101**: 7657–7662.

Dawson, S.C., and Hagen, K.D. (2009) Mapping the protistan ‘rare biosphere’. *J Biol* **8**: 105.

Dunthorn, M., Klier, J., Bunge, J., and Stoeck, T. (2012) Comparing the hyper-variable V4 and V9 regions of the small subunit rDNA for assessment of ciliate environmental diversity. *J Eukaryot Microbiol* **59**: 185–187.

Edgar, R.C. (2010) Search and clustering orders of magnitude faster than BLAST. *Bioinformatics* **26**: 2460–2461.

Edgar, R.C., Haas, B.J., Clemente, J.C., Quince, C., and Knight, R. (2011) UCHIME improves sensitivity and speed of chimera detection. *Bioinformatics* **27**: 2194–2200.

Edgcomb, V., Orsi, W., Leslin, C., Epstein, S., Bunge, J., Jeon, S.O., et al. (2008) Protistan community patterns within the brine and halocline of deep hypersaline anoxic basins in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. *Extremophiles* **13**: 151–167.

Edgcomb, V., Orsi, W., Taylor, G.T., Vd’Ačný, P., Taylor, C., Suarez, P., and Epstein, S. (2011) Accessing marine protists from the anoxic Cariaco Basin. *ISME J* 5: 1237–1241.

Edgcomb, V.P., Kysela, D.T., Teske, A., de Vera Gomez, A., and Sogin, M.L. (2002) Benthic eukaryotic diversity in the Guaymas Basin hydrothermal vent environment. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* **99**: 7658–7662.

Fisher, R.A. (1922) On the interpretation of x(2) from contingency tables, and the calculation of P. *JRSS* **85**: 87–94.
Foissner, W., Blatterer, H., Berger, H., and Kohmann, F. (1991) Taxonomische und ökologische Revision der Ciliaten des Saprobiensystems, Band I: 
Cytophorida, Oligotrichida, Hypotrichia, Colpodea. Informationsberichte Bayer Landesamt für Wasserwirtschaft, München 1/91: 1–478.

Foissner, W., Berger, H., and Kohmann, F. (1992) Taxonomische und ökologische Revision der Ciliaten des Saprobiensystems, Band II: Peritrichia, Heterotrichida, Odontostomatida. Informationsberichte Bayer Landesamt für Wasserwirtschaft, München 5/92: 1–502.

Foissner, W., Berger, H., and Kohmann, F. (1994) Taxonomische und ökologische Revision der Ciliaten des Saprobiensystems, Band III: 
Hymenostomata, Prostomatida, Nassulida. Informationsberichte Bayer Landesamt für Wasserwirtschaft, München 1/94: 1–548.

Foissner, W., Berger, H., Blatterer, H., and Kohmann, F. (1995) Taxonomische und ökologische Revision der Ciliaten des Saprobiensystems, Band IV: 
Gymnostomathea, Loxodes, Suctoria. Informationsberichte Bayer Landesamt für Wasserwirtschaft, München 1/95: 1–540.

Foissner, W., Berger, H., and Schaumburg, J. (1999) Identif- cation and ecology of limnetic plankton ciliates. 
Informationsberichte Bayer Landesamt für Wasser- wirtschaft, München 3/99: 1–793.

Foissner, W., Chao, A., and Katz, L.A. (2008) Diversity and geographic distribution of ciliates (Protista: Ciliophora). 
Biodivers Conserv 17: 345–363.

Gentekaki, E., and Lynn, D.H. (2009) High-level genetic diversity but no population structure inferred from nuclear and mitochondrial markers of the peritrichous ciliate 
Carchesium polypinum in the Grand River basin (North America). 
Appl Environ Microbiol 75: 3187–3195.

Grecek-Stachura, M., Potekhin, A., Przyboś, E., Rautian, M., Skoblo, I., and Tarcz, S. (2012) Identification of 
Paramecium bursaria syngens through molecular markers— 
comparative analysis of three loci in the nuclear and mitochondrial DNA. 
Protist 163: 671–685.

Hægeman, B., Hamelin, J., Moriarty, J., Neal, P., Dushoff, J., and Weitz, J.S. (2013) Robust estimation of microbial diversity in theory and in practice. 
ISME J 7: 1092–1101.

Huse, S.M., Welch, D.M., Morrison, H.G., and Sogin, M.L. (2010) Ironing out the wrinkles in the rare biosphere through improved OTU clustering. 
Environ Microbiol 12: 1889–1896.

Johnson, M.D., Tengs, T., Oldach, D.W., Delwiche, C.F., and Stoecker, D.K. (2004) Highly divergent SSU rRNA genes found in the marine ciliates Myrionecta rubra and 
Mesodinium pulex. Protist 155: 347–359.

Kunin, V., Engelbrektson, A., Ochman, H., and Hugenholtz, P. (2010) Wrinkles in the rare biosphere: pyrosequencing errors lead to artificial inflation of diversity estimates. 
Environ Microbiol 12: 118–123.

Lara, E., Berney, C., Harms, H., and Chatzinotas, A. (2007) Cultivation-independent analysis reveals a shift in 
ciliate 18S rRNA gene diversity in a polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon-polluted soil. 
FEMS Microb Ecol 62: 365–373.

Liu, Z., Lozupone, C., Hamady, M., Bushman, F.D., and Knight, R. (2007) Short pyrosequencing reads suffice for 
accurate microbial community analysis. 
Nucleic Acids Res 35: e120.

Logares, R., Audic, S., Santini, S., Pernice, M.C., de Vargas, C., and Massana, R. (2012) Diversity patterns and activity of uncultured marine heterotrophic flagellates unveiled with pyrosequencing. 
ISME J 6: 1823–1833.

López-García, P., Rodriguez-Valera, F., Pedrós-Alíó, C., and Moreira, D. (2001) Unexpected diversity of small eukaryotes in deep-sea Antarctic plankton. 
Nature 409: 603–607.

López-García, P., Philippe, H., Gail, F., and Moreira, D. (2003) Autochthonous eukaryotic diversity in hydrothermal sediment and experimental microcolonizers at the Mid- Atlantic Ridge. 
Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 100: 697–702.

Lynn, D.H., and Strueter-Kypke, M.C. (2006) Species of 
Tetrahymena identical by small subunit rRNA gene sequences are discriminated by mitochondrial cytochrome c oxidase I gene sequences. 
J Eukaryot Microbiol 53: 385–387.

Margulies, M., Egholm, M., Altman, W.E., Attiya, S., Bader, J.S., Bemben, L.A., et al. (2005) Genome sequencing in 
microfabricated high-density picolitre reactors. 
Nature 437: 376–380.

Massana, R., Balague, V., Guillou, L., and Pedrós-Alíó, C. (2004) Picoeukaryotic diversity in an oligotrophic coastal site studied by molecular and culturing approaches. 
FEMS Microbiol Ecol 50: 231–243.

Massana, R., Terrado, R., Form, I., Lovejoy, C., and 
Pedrós-Alíó, C. (2006) Distribution and abundance of uncultured heterotrophic flagellates in the world oceans. 
Environ Microbiol 8: 1515–1522.

Medinger, R., Nolte, V., Pandey, R.V., Jost, S., Ottenwalder, B., Schloetterer, C., and Boeningk, J. (2010) Diversity in a hidden world: potential and limitation of next-generation sequencing for surveys of molecular diversity of eukaryotic microorganisms. 
Mol Ecol 19 (Suppl. 1): 32–40.

Montagnes, D.J.S., Poulton, A.J., and Shammon, T.M. (1999) Mesoscale, finescale and microscale distribution of micro-
and nanoplankton in the Irish Sea, with emphasis on ciliates and their prey. 
Mar Biol 134: 167–179.

Moon-van der Staay, S.Y., De Wachter, R., and Vaulot, D. (2001) Oceanic 18S rDNA sequences from picoplankton reveal unsuspected eukaryotic diversity. 
Nature 409: 607–610.

Müller, H. (1996) Encystment of the freshwater ciliate 
Pelagostrombidium fallax (Ciliophora, Oligotrichida) in laboratory culture. 
Aquat Microb Ecol 11: 289–295.

Müller, H., Schöne, A., Pinto-Coelho, R.M., Schweizer, A., and Weisse, T. (1991) Seasonal succession of ciliates in 
Lake Constance. Microb Ecol 21: 119–138.

Müller, H., Stadler, P., and Weisse, T. (2002) Seasonal dynamics of cyst formation of strombidid ciliates in alpine 
Lake Mondsee, Austria. 
Aquat Microb Ecol 29: 181–188.

Nanney, D.L., Park, C., Preparata, R., and Simon, E.M. (1998) Comparison of sequence differences in a variable 
23S rRNA domain among sets of cryptic species of ciliated protozoa. 
J Eukaryot Microbiol 45: 91–100.

Nebel, M., Pfabel, C., Stock, A., Dunthorn, M., and Stoeck, T. (2010) Delimiting operational taxonomic units for assessing ciliate environmental diversity using small-subunit
rRNA gene sequences. *Environ Microbiol Reports* **3**: 154–158.

Nebel, M.E., Wild, S., Holzhauser, M., Huttenberger, L., Reitzig, R., Sperber, M., and Stoeck, T. (2011) JAGUC—a software package for environmental diversity analyses. *J Bioinform Comput Biol* **9**: 749–773.

Oksanen, J., Blanchet, F.G., Kindt, R., Legendre, P., O’Hara, R.B., Simpson, G.L., et al. (2011) vegan: Community Ecology Package. R package.

Orsi, W., Edgcomb, V., Faria, J., Foissner, W., Fowlie, W.H., Hohmann, T., et al. (2012) Class *Cariacotrichea*, a novel ciliate taxon from the anoxic Cariaco Basin, Venezuela. *Int J Syst Evol Microbiol* **62**: 1425–1433.

Patterson, D.J. (1992) *Free-Living Freshwater Protozoa*. London: Manson Publishing.

Pawłowski, J., Audic, S., Adl, S., Bass, D., Belbahi, L., Berney, C., et al. (2012) CBOL protist working group: barcoding eukaryotic richness beyond the animal, plant, and fungal kingdoms. *PLoS Biol* **10**: e1001419.

Pedrés-Álió, C. (2007) Ecology. Dipping into the rare biosphere. *Science* **315**: 192–193.

Pfister, G., Sonntag, B., and Posch, T. (1999) Comparison of a direct live count and an improved quantitative protargol stain (QPS) in determining abundance and cell volumes of pelagic freshwater protozoa. *Aquat Microb Ecol* **18**: 95–103.

Pinto, A.J., and Raskin, L. (2012) PCR biases distort bacterial and archaeal community structure in pyrosequencing datasets. *PLoS ONE* **7**: e43093.

Quince, C., Lanzen, A., Curtis, T.P., Davenport, R.J., Hall, N., Head, I.M., et al. (2009) Accurate determination of microbial diversity from 454 pyrosequencing data. *Nat Methods* **6**: 639–641.

Saltbrechter, M., and Arndt, H. (1994) The annual cycle of protozooplankton in the alpine, mesotrophic lake Mondsee (Austria). *Mar Microb Food Webs* **8**: 217–234.

Salcher, M.M., Pernthaler, J., Zeder, M., Psenner, R., and Posch, T. (2008) Spatio-temporal niche separation of planktonic *Betaproteobacteria* in an oligo-mesotrophic lake. *Environ Microbiol* **10**: 2074–2086.

Salcher, M.M., Pernthaler, J., and Posch, T. (2010) Spatiotemporal distribution and activity patterns of bacteria from three phylogenetic groups in an oligomesotrophic lake. *Limnol Oceanogr* **55**: 846–856.

Schloss, P.D., Gevers, D., and Westcott, S.L. (2011) Reducing the effects of PCR amplification and sequencing artifacts on 16S rRNA-based studies. *PLoS ONE* **6**: e27310.

Schuh, R.T., and Brower, A.V.Z. (2000) *Biological Systematics – Principles and Applications*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Šimek, K., Nedoma, J., Pernthaler, J., Posch, T., and Dolan, J.R. (2002) Altering the balance between bacterial production and protistan bacterivory triggers shifts in freshwater bacterial community composition. *Antonie Van Leeuwenhoek* **81**: 453–463.

Skibbe, O. (1994) An improved quantitative protargol stain for ciliates and other planktonic protists. *Arch Hydrobiol* **130**: 339–347.

Sogin, M.L., Morrison, H.G., Huber, J.A., Welch, D.M., Huse, S.M., Neal, P.R., et al. (2006) Microbial diversity in the deep sea and the underexplored ‘rare biosphere’. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* **103**: 12115–12120.

Sonntag, B., Posch, T., and Psenner, R. (2000) Comparison of three methods for determining flagellate abundance, cell size, and biovolume in cultures and natural freshwater samples. *Arch Hydrobiol* **149**: 337–351.

Sonntag, B., Posch, T., Klammer, S., Teubner, K., and Psenner, R. (2006) Phagotrophic ciliates and flagellates in an oligotrophic deep alpine lake: contrasting variability with seasons and depths. *Aquat Microb Ecol* **43**: 193–207.

Sonntag, B., Strueder-Kypke, M.C., and Summerer, M. (2008) *Uroleptus willii* nov. sp., a euplanktonic freshwater ciliate (*Dorsomarginalia, Spiriotricha, Ciliophora*) with algal symbionts: morphological description including phylogenetic data of the small subunit rRNA gene sequence and ecological notes. *Denisia* **23**: 279–288.

Stock, A., Breiner, H.W., Pachiadaki, M., Edgcomb, V., Filker, S., La Cono, V., et al. (2012) Microbial eukaryote life in the new hypersaline deep-sea basin Thetis. *Extremophiles* **16**: 21–34.

Stoeck, T., and Epstein, S. (2009) Protists and the rare biosphere. Crystal Ball. *Environ Microbiol Reports* **1**: 20–22.

Stoeck, T., Hayward, B., Taylor, G.T., Varela, R., and Epstein, S.S. (2006) A multiple PCR-primer approach to access the microeukaryotic diversity in environmental samples. *Protist* **157**: 31–43.

Stoeck, T., Jost, S., and Boenigk, J. (2008) Multigene phylogeny of clonal *Spumella*-like strains, a cryptic heterotrophic nanoflagellate isolated from different geographic regions. *Int J Syst Evol Microbiol* **58**: 716–724.

Stoeck, T., Behnke, A., Christen, R., Amari-Zettlter, L., Rodriguez-Mora, M.J., Chistoserdov, A., et al. (2009) Massively parallel tag sequencing reveals the complexity of anaerobic marine protistan communities. *BMC Biol* **7**: 72.

Stoeck, T., Bass, D., Nebel, M., Christen, R., Jones, M.D., Breiner, H.W., and Richards, T.A. (2010) Multiple marker parallel tag environmental DNA sequencing reveals a highly complex eukaryotic community in marine anoxic water. *Mol Ecol* **19**: 21–31.

Sun, Y., Cai, Y., Liu, L., Yu, F., Farrell, M.L., McKendree, W., and Farmerie, W. (2009) ESPRIT: estimating species richness using large collections of 16S rRNA pyrosequences. *Nucleic Acids Res* **37**: e76.

Team, R.D.C. (2006) *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing.

Toitoti, M., and Thies, H. (2002) Phytoplankton community and limnchemistry of Piburger See (Tyrol, Austria) 28 years after lake restoration. *J Limnol* **61**: 77–88.

Vd’acˇný, P., and Foissner, W. (2012) Monograph of the dipleptids (*Protista, Ciliophora, Rhynchozomatia*). *Denisia* **31**: 1–529.

Vd’acˇný, P., Orsi, W., Bourland, W.A., Shimano, S., Epstein, S.S., and Foissner, W. (2011) Morphological and molecular phylogeny of dipletid and tracheliid ciliates: resolution at the base of the class *Lilostomatidae* (*Ciliophora, Rhynchozomatia*). *Eur J Protistol* **47**: 295–313.

© 2013 The Authors. Environmental Microbiology published by Society for Applied Microbiology and John Wiley & Sons Ltd, *Environmental Microbiology*, **16**, 430–444.
Weisse, T., and Müller, H. (1998) Planktonic protozoa and the microbial food web in Lake Constance. *Arch Hydrobiol Spec Issues Advanc Limnol* **53**: 223–254.

Zhou, J., Wu, L., Deng, Y., Zhi, X., Jiang, Y.H., Tu, Q., et al. (2011) Reproducibility and quantitation of amplicon sequencing-based detection. *ISME J* **5**: 1303–1313.

Zhu, F., Massana, R., Not, F., Marie, D., and Vaulot, D. (2005) Mapping of picoeucaryotes in marine ecosystems with quantitative PCR of the 18S rRNA gene. *FEMS Microbiol Ecol* **52**: 79–92.

Zuendorf, A., Behnke, A., Bunge, J., Barger, K., and Stoeck, T. (2006) Diversity estimates of microeukaryotes below the chemocline of the anoxic Mariager Fjord, Denmark. *FEMS Microbiol Ecol* **58**: 476–491.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web-site:

**Fig. S1.** Rank-abundance distribution of amplicon data sets from the three different depths screened for ciliate phylotype diversity in Piburgersee in March 2011. The distribution follows a long-tail distribution, typically for large environmental amplicon data sets.

**Fig. S2.** Log-regression of relative abundances of amplicon ciliate genera and morphotype ciliate genera. Abundance distributions are incongruent and do not correlate, suggesting that amplicon read abundances do not reflect morphotaxon (organismic) abundances.

**Table S1.** ‘Candidatus ciliate genera’ that were detected through V4 SSU rDNA amplicons in data sets from the three different depths screened for ciliate phylotype diversity in Piburgersee in March 2011. Amplicons were assigned to a ‘candidatus genus’ status when the maximum sequence similarity to a reference sequence database of described ciliate morphotypes did not exceed 95%.

**Table S2.** Ciliate genera and number of species (in brackets) detected in Piburgersee on 1 March, 2011 in order of relative frequency (mean abundance in ind. l$^{-1}$ over the three sampling depths) and abundance in the respective depth. $n = 6$ (0 m, 9 m), $n = 3$ (21 m), n.d., not detected.