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**SEDIMENT RESPONSES OF CORALS FROM INSHORE REEFS,
GREAT BARRIER REEF, AUSTRALIA**

**Thesis submitted by
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**for the degree of Master of Science in
the School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture at
James Cook University of North Queensland**

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Jeremy. J. Sofonia

1 November 2006

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ABSTRACT

The role of turbidity and sedimentation is a key problem for nearshore coral reefs worldwide. However, little is known about how sedimentation interacts with other environmental factors such as hydrodynamics, temperature and light and how coral species vary in their sediment responses. Here, I investigate the response of corals to sediment under varying flow, temperature and light regimes in two controlled mesocosm experiments, and then preliminarily examine the role of sedimentation in structuring coral assemblages using a new method for manipulating sedimentation rates in field settings.

The first experiment was designed to test the specific hypothesis that coral stress (using the foliaceous *Turbinaria mesenterina* as a study species) associated with sedimentation is reduced under turbulent flow conditions that prevent long-term sediment deposition on coral tissues. To provide a rigorous assessment of the physiological response, three key physiological parameters were used: tissue lipid concentration, skeletal growth rate and photosynthetic performance (maximum quantum yield). The second experiment investigated interactions between sediment stress and stresses associated with high temperature and light – a problem highly topical in the context of climate change. Lastly, the field experiment consisted of an array of six erosive sediment blocks (plaster of paris and silicate-based sediment) suspended above the fringing reef at Pelorus Island (Queensland, Australia) to simulate replicate sediment gradients. The sediment responses of three coral species (*Acropora formosa*, *Montipora tuberculosa*, and *Porites cylindrica*) were followed and compared over a fifteen-day sedimentation even, using the relative surface area of tissue lesions/necrosis as the response variable.

Experiment 1 demonstrated that sediment concentrations (or sedimentation rates) of up to $110.7 \pm 27.4 \text{ mg cm}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ had no effect on colony growth rate, lipid concentration or photosynthetic yield in *T. mesenterina* under high flow ($23.7 \pm 6.7 \text{ cm s}^{-1}$) or stagnant conditions. Also, interactions between flow and sediment treatments were non-significant. This is a surprising result that indicates that *T. mesenterina* is highly resistant to sediment deposition under low flow as well as sediment abrasion under wave action. Horizontal colonies subjected to sediment loads of up to 100 mg cm^{-2} under stagnant conditions were able to clear their surface within

two hours, suggesting that rapid and energy efficient clearing of sediment is a key mechanism of alleviating sediment stress. These results may explain the success of *T. mesenterina* on reef crests as well as deep reef slopes on highly turbid, inshore coral reefs in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

Results of experiment 2 showed that sediment treatments of up to $246 \pm 47 \text{ mg cm}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ had no effect on colony growth rates, lipid concentrations or chlorophyll concentrations in either of the study species under the low (Control) light conditions ($190 \pm 60 \text{ } \mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$). In high light ($270 \pm 110 \text{ } \mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$), however, lipid and chlorophyll concentrations declined significantly indicating a bleaching response. Interestingly, temperature treatments (25.5 ± 0.1 and $28.4 \pm 0.1^\circ\text{C}$) had no effect on the lipid or chlorophyll responses of *T. mesenterina*. Also, sediment, temperature, and light treatments did not interact significantly, further demonstrating that the physiology of this species is highly robust to these environmental stressors. Of the three physiological responses measured, chlorophyll concentration proved to be the most sensitive.

The field experiment (experiment 3) showed contrasting sediment responses among the three study species, consistent with predictions based on growth forms. Specifically, the prevalence of tissue lesions in *M. tuberculosa* (flat, foliaceous) increased significantly with sedimentation rate, whereas *Acropora formosa* and *Porites cylindrica* showed minimal tissue lesions, which were not correlated with sedimentation rates. This result suggests that sediment can act as a selective pressure on coral reefs, potentially related to the functional morphology of the species in the assemblage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
CHAPTER 1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Sediment Issues on Coral Reefs	1
CHAPTER 2 ASSESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER FLOW ON THE SEDIMENT TOLERANCE OF THE REEF CORAL <i>TURBINARIA MESENERINA</i> ...4	
2.1 Introduction	4
2.2 Materials and Methods.....	5
2.2.1 <i>Study Site and Coral Collecting</i>	5
2.2.2 <i>Laboratory Experiment</i>	8
2.3.3 <i>Determining Flow</i>	9
2.3.4 <i>Field Reference Group</i>	10
2.3.5 <i>Coral responses</i>	10
2.3.6 <i>Data Analysis</i>	11
2.4 Results.....	12
2.4.1 <i>Coral Skeletal Growth (change in buoyant weight)</i>	12
2.4.2 <i>Coral Lipid Concentration</i>	12
2.4.3 <i>Photosynthetic Efficiency</i>	12
2.6 Discussion	15
CHAPTER 3. EFFECTS OF LIGHT AND TEMPERATURE ON THE SEDIMENT STRESS RESPONSE IN CORALS.....	17
3.1 Introduction	17
3.1.2 <i>Description of Study Species</i>	18
3.1.3 <i>Coral Collection Areas</i>	19
3.2 Materials and Methods.....	21
3.2.1 <i>Experimental Set-up</i>	21
3.2.2 <i>Experimentation</i>	21
3.2.3 <i>Assessment of the coral stress response</i>	22
3.2.4 <i>Data Analysis</i>	23
3.3 Results.....	24
3.3.1 <i>Light, Temperature, and Sediment Treatments</i>	24
3.3.2 <i>Coral Skeletal Growth (change in buoyant weight)</i>	24
3.3.3 <i>Coral Lipid Concentration</i>	25
3.3.4 <i>Chlorophyll a concentrations</i>	26
3.4 Discussion	29

CHAPTER 4	EFFECTS OF SEDIMENTS APPLIED TO CORALS <i>IN SITU</i> USING A NEW EROSIONAL BLOCK TECHNIQUE.....	34
4.1	Introduction	34
4.1.1	<i>Description of Study Species</i>	36
4.1.2	<i>Description of Study Area</i>	37
4.2	Materials and Methods.....	38
4.2.1	<i>Erosion Block Design & Calibration</i>	38
4.2.2	<i>Erosion Block Composition & Construction</i>	40
4.2.3	<i>Experimental Set-up</i>	42
4.2.4	<i>Experimentation</i>	43
4.2.5	<i>Assessment of Stress Response</i>	44
4.2.6	<i>Data Analysis</i>	44
4.3	Results.....	45
4.3.1	<i>Erosion Block Performance</i>	45
4.3.2	<i>Coral Stress Response</i>	47
4.4	Discussion	49
CHAPTER 5	GENERAL DISCUSSION	53
5.1	General Conclusions	53
REFERENCES	57
APPENDIX A	64
APPENDIX B	65
APPENDIX C	71

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
2.1	Calculated maximum likely error in measuring the physiological response of <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> with a given sample size9
2.2	Results of the full factorial, univariate ANOVA testing for effects of water flow and sediment treatments on the skeletal growth rate, lipid content, and maximum quantum yield of <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> 13
3.1	Calculated maximum likely error in measuring the physiological response of <i>T. mesenterina</i> and <i>M. digitata</i> with a given sample size23
3.2	Results of the full factorial, univariate ANOVA testing for effects of light, water temperature, and sediment treatments on differences in buoyant weight of <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> and <i>Montipora digitata</i>25
3.3	Results of the full factorial, univariate ANOVA testing for effects of light, water temperature, and sediment treatments on differences in lipid concentrations of <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> and <i>Montipora digitata</i>26
3.4	Results of the full factorial, univariate ANOVA testing for effects of light, water temperature, and sediment treatments on differences in chlorophyll concentrations of <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> and <i>Montipora digitata</i>27
4.1	Constants calculated for experimental erosion blocks using various ratios of plaster to sediment38
4.2	Calculated maximum likely error in measuring the percentage of coral bleaching with a given sample size.....44
4.3	Mean sediment concentration from traps collected from all six experimental sites at Pelorus Island.....46
4.4	Linear Regression results testing for a significant relationship between the percentage of colony bleaching for <i>Acropora formosa</i> , <i>Montipora tuberculosa</i> , and <i>Porites cylindrica</i> in correlation to the measured seiment concentration47

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
2.1 Map of Magnetic Island illustrating the coral collection and field experiment locations for this study	6
2.2 Photograph of large monospecific stands of <i>Turbinaria Mesenterina</i> within Cockle Bay, Magnetic Island	7
2.3 Side and plan profiles of the high flow tank design	9
2.4 Mean differences of changes in skeletal coral weight, lipid concentration, and photosynthetic yield between water flow and sediment treatments on <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i>	14
3.1 Map of Orpheus Island illustrating the coral collection and experimental locations of this study	20
3.2 Mean differences of changes in coral weight, lipid concentration, and chlorophyll concentration between the interaction of light, temperature, and sediment treatments on <i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> and <i>Montipora digitata</i>	28
4.1 Map of Pelorus, Orpheus, and Magnetic Islands illustrating the coral collection and experimental locations for this study	37
4.2 Predicted sediment rates as produced by the experimental erosion blocks with a plaster to sediment ratio of 3:4, particle sizes ranging from 150-600 μ , in flow conditions ranging from 1-15 cm s^{-1}	41
4.3 Diagram illustrating the side and transverse profiles of the mold used to create the experimental erosion blocks	42
4.4 Photograph showing a typical experimental site setup	43
4.5 Results of a Linear Regression showing the measured concentration of sediments correlated to the distance from the experimental erosion blocks and the resulting exponential trend line used to estimate sediment rates at distances up to 1.6 meters from the erosion blocks	46
4.6 Percentage of coral colony that remained unbleached in relation to the distance from the experimental erosion blocks in <i>Acropora formosa</i> , <i>Montipora tuberculosa</i> , and <i>Porites cylindrical</i>	48
4.7 Photographs showing a colony of <i>Montipora digitata</i> covered with sediments and necrosis of underlying tissues	49