

**The use of esterase activity as a measure
of copper toxicity in marine microalgae.**

Thesis submitted by

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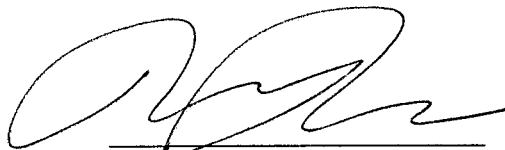
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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

I, the undersigned, acknowledge the following contributions to this thesis by others:

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Abstract

Copper is necessary for normal cellular activity, but may become toxic at high levels. Copper is widely used in North Queensland as a component of agricultural chemicals and antifouling paints, and high levels of Cu have been measured in some near-shore marine environments. Because of this, there is a need to develop early warning systems of Cu pollution in marine microalgae. Fluorescein diacetate (FDA) is commonly used as a substrate in esterase activity assays as a measure of cellular activity. Intracellular cleavage of FDA by esterases results in free fluorescein, which can be quantified fluorometrically as a sublethal endpoint. The purpose of this research was to: 1) determine the effects of experimental design on esterase activity in *Tetraselmis* sp. (Chlorophyta) and *Chaetoceros gracilis* (Heterokontophyta), 2) evaluate the use of esterase activity as a bioassay endpoint for Cu toxicity in *Symbiodinium microadriaticum* (Dinophyta), and 3) evaluate the effects of pH, salinity, and temperature on esterase activity in *Tetraselmis* sp. employing two different experimental designs. Time was also devoted to standardisation of methods due to the lack of standardised protocols in the literature.

The effect of experimental design on esterase activity (fluorescence) in *Tetraselmis* sp. and *C. gracilis* was determined by two different protocols. In the first protocol, microalgae were incubated with Cu in culture flasks, followed by sample transfer and FDA-incubation in microtitre plates for analysis. The second protocol exposed microalgae directly to copper in microtitre plates, and Cu toxicity on esterase activity (percent inhibition of fluorescence) was quantified without sample transfer. The flask protocol showed high within-culture variability and was laborious, whereas the microtitre plate protocol displayed a significant and replicable effect of Cu on percent inhibition of fluorescence. The difference between the protocols is not due to binding of Cu ions to the Erlenmeyer flasks: analysis of bioavailable Cu by inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectrometry (ICP-OES) proved that there was no Cu binding of any nominal Cu concentrations over time. Therefore, differences are likely due to stagnation of esterase activity upon transfer from the flasks to the microtitre plates or differential adhesion of the organisms to the glassware, despite methodological uniformity.

Working with established cultures of zooxanthellae (*Symbiodinium microadriaticum*) is extremely challenging, and due to its strong adhesive properties, standardisation of initial inoculation density (a necessity in microalgal bioassays) is highly difficult. Adding to the challenge is a lack of published literature using established cultures of zooxanthellae, and the tendency of the authors to “pool” their data, burying the independent culture-specific dose-response relationships within large standard errors. The aim of this research section was to: quantify *S. microadriaticum* culture density using protein content and chlorophyll *a* autofluorescence as proxies, and direct cell count. The usefulness of these estimations in standardising initial inoculation density was evaluated in independent experiments using esterase activity and Cu toxicity on esterase activity in the previously standardised microtitre plate bioassay. The results of the bioassays showed irreproducible Cu dose-response curves and base esterase activities between independent cultures of *S. microadriaticum*, indicating that all three procedures for estimating culture density were unsuitable for standardising initial inoculation density. However, this research illustrated the effect of culture and data pooling on bioassay outcome, and recommended data handling protocols for future ecotoxicological research.

The third aim of this research was to quantify the effects of pH, salinity, and temperature on esterase activity and Cu toxicity in *Tetraselmis* sp. within the context of two different protocols: one that examined the effects of pH, salinity, and temperature within three independent cultures (WIC), and another that examined the effects of these parameters between 15 independent cultures (BIC) using the microtitre plate protocol. It is necessary to determine the effect of pH and salinity on metal toxicity because these parameters can affect metal speciation, which may alter overall toxicity. Temperature can influence cellular membrane permeability, which in turn may also affect toxicity. In general, pH and temperature had a significant effect on both esterase activity and Cu toxicity in both protocols, and salinity generally did not affect fluorescence or Cu toxicity. The effect of culture did not have a consistently significant effect on either fluorescence or Cu toxicity for all three environmental parameters in the WIC protocol. This research demonstrated that the microtitre plate bioassay for Cu toxicity should be performed at stable pH and temperature levels. It also

revealed that *Tetraselmis* sp. may be a suitable candidate for bioremediation of copper in marine and estuarine waters, due to its stable esterase activity at high levels of Cu (1.0mg Cu L^{-1}), and in changing pH, salinity, and temperature regimes.

In conclusion, experimental design significantly impacted esterase activity in *Tetraselmis* sp. and *C. gracilis*. The microtitre plate protocol is a rapid, cost-effective method to determine Cu toxicity on esterase activity in microalgae. However, some organisms (such as *S. microadriaticum*) are unsuitable for use in this bioassay due to their unique physical properties. The microtitre plate protocol is a useful tool to determine the effects of pH, salinity, and temperature on esterase activity and Cu toxicity in *Tetraselmis* sp. The ability of this organism to tolerate high levels of Cu and changing environmental parameters suggests that it may be a candidate for Cu bioremediation of marine and estuarine waters.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION | 10 |
| CHAPTER 2: The impact of experimental design on growth and esterase activity as a measure of copper toxicity in <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. (CHLOROPHYTA) and <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> (HETEROKONTOPHYTA). | 16 |
| Introduction | 17 |
| Materials and Methods | 20 |
| Results | 29 |
| Discussion | 34 |
| CHAPTER 3: The use of the microtitre plate bioassay for esterase activity and copper toxicity to evaluate the suitability of initial inoculation density standardisation protocols for <i>Symbiodinium microadriaticum</i> (DINOPHYTA). | 47 |
| Introduction | 48 |
| Materials and Methods | 52 |
| Results | 57 |
| Discussion | 62 |
| CHAPTER 4: The effect of pH, salinity, and temperature on esterase activity and copper toxicity in <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. (CHLOROPHYTA) using the microtitre plate bioassay. | 68 |
| Introduction | 69 |
| Materials and Methods | 73 |
| Results | 78 |
| Discussion | 89 |
| CHAPTER 5: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS | 100 |
| References | 105 |

List of Tables

CHAPTER 2

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 2.1: Cu pipetting scheme for the flask bioassay. | 22 |
| Table 2.2: Spectrophotometric (Varian Cary Eclipse) settings for the microtitre plate bioassay for Cu toxicity to esterase activity. | 23 |
| Table 2.3: Cu pipetting scheme for the microtitre plate bioassay. | 26 |
| Table 2.4: Percent coefficient of variation (%CV) for each time point within each Cu concentration in the Erlenmeyer flask dose-response experiments for toxicity to esterase activity in <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> and <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. | 31 |
| Table 2.5: Percent coefficient of variation (%CV) within each independent experiment (culture) of the microtitre plate bioassay for Cu toxicity to esterase activity at Cu treatment concentrations in <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. and <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> . | 32 |
| Table 2.6: Medium-associated Cu in Erlenmeyer flasks as measured by ICP-OES. | 33 |
| Table 2.7: A summary of the IC ₅₀ and EC ₅₀ values for copper toxicity to the growth and esterase activity of microalgae. | 35 |
| Table 2.8: Protocol differences between three independent studies examining the impact of Cu on the culture growth of <i>Tetraselmis</i> . | 36 |

CHAPTER 3

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 3.1: Chemical components of RIPA buffer. | 53 |
| Table 3.2: Pipetting scheme for albumin standard curve. | 53 |
| Table 3.3: Pipetting scheme for <i>Symbiodinium microadriaticum</i> samples. | 53 |
| Table 3.4: Varian Cary Eclipse settings for chlorophyll <i>a</i> autofluorescence analysis. | 55 |
| Table 3.5: Protein content of four-week old <i>Symbiodinium microadriaticum</i> cultures based on the Pierce protein assay bovine serum albumin curve. | 58 |

CHAPTER 4

| | |
|--|----|
| Tables 4.1a and 4.1b: Percent coefficient of variation in pH shock experiments to esterase activity and Cu toxicity within (WIC protocol, Table 4.1a) and between (BIC protocol, Table 4.1b) independent <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. cultures. | 78 |
| Tables 4.2a and 4.2b: Percent coefficient of variation in salinity shock experiments to esterase activity and Cu toxicity within (WIC protocol, Table 4.2a) and between (BIC protocol, Table 4.2b) independent <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. cultures. | 83 |
| Tables 4.3a and 4.3b: Percent coefficient of variation in temperature shock experiments to esterase activity and Cu toxicity within (WIC protocol, Table 4.3a) and between (BIC protocol, Table 4.3b) independent <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. cultures. | 86 |

List of Figures

CHAPTER 2

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 2.1a: Growth rates of <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. | 21 |
| Figure 2.1b: Growth rates of <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> . | 21 |
| Figure 2.2: Time-course of fluorescein diacetate (FDA) incubation on esterase-induced conversion of FDA to fluorescein (fluorescence (a.u.)) for <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> . | 24 |
| Figure 2.3a: 24h dose-response to Cu on percent growth of <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. grown at normal light intensities. | 29 |
| Figure 2.3b: 24h dose-response to Cu on percent growth of <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> grown at normal light intensities. | 29 |
| Figure 2.3c: 24h dose-response to Cu on percent growth of <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> grown at low light intensities. | 29 |
| Figure 2.4a: Dose-response to Cu in time-course experiments on esterase activity (percent inhibition of fluorescence) in <i>Tetraselmis</i> sp. using the flask bioassay. | 31 |
| Figure 2.4b: Dose-response to Cu in time-course experiments on esterase activity (percent inhibition of fluorescence) in <i>Chaetoceros gracilis</i> using the flask bioassay. | 31 |

Figure 2.5a: 24h dose-response to Cu on esterase activity (percent inhibition of fluorescence) in *Tetraselmis* sp. using the microtitre plate bioassay. 32

Figure 2.5b: 24h dose-response to Cu on esterase activity (percent inhibition of fluorescence) in *Chaetoceros gracilis* using the microtitre plate bioassay. 32

CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.1: Pierce protein assay bovine serum albumin curve. 54

Figure 3.2: Determination of *S. microadriaticum* cell density via chl. *a* autofluorescence. 54

Figure 3.3: Determination of *S. microadriaticum* cell density via chl. *a* autofluorescence. Linear portion of Figure 2. 54

Figures 3.4a, 3.4b, and 3.4c: 24h Cu dose-response of *S. microadriaticum* esterase activity expressed as percent inhibition of fluorescence. IID standardised using protein content (Figure 3.4a), chl. *a* autofluorescence (Figure 3.4b), and cell counts (Figure 3.4c). 60

Figure 3.5: 24h Cu dose-response curve of *S. microadriaticum*, IID standardised using chl. *a* autofluorescence. Data are presented as three pooled independent replicates per data point with standard deviations. 63

CHAPTER 4

Figures 4.1A-4.1D: The influence of pH on esterase activity and copper toxicity in *Tetraselmis* sp. 79

Figure 4.2A: The change in pH over 24h in Erlenmeyer flasks containing only Guillard's *f/2* growth medium in seawater. 81

Figure 4.2B: The change in pH over 24h in Erlenmeyer flasks containing Guillard's *f/2* growth medium in seawater with two independent *Tetraselmis* sp. cultures. 81

Figures 4.3A-4.3D: The influence of salinity on esterase activity and copper toxicity in *Tetraselmis* sp. 82

Figures 4.4A-4.44F: The influence of temperature on esterase activity and copper toxicity in *Tetraselmis* sp. 85

List of Plates

Figure 4.5a-f: The effect of temperature and copper on the morphology of
Tetraselmis sp. 88