

# Forest Productivity And Site Evaluation

*Edited by*

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Taiwan, ROC—Arkansas, USA  
Joint Seminar on Forest Productivity and Site Evaluation  
November 10—11, 1987  
Taipei, Republic of China

Organized by Council of Agriculture, ROC

Sponsored by Taiwan Forestry Research Institute, ROC  
University of Arkansas, USA

*Published by*

Council of Agriculture  
Taipei, 1987

# ASSOCIATION OF NITROGEN-FIXING BACTERIA WITH MYCORRHIZAL FUNGI AND FECES OF FOREST-DWELLING MAMMALS IN RELATION TO FOREST PRODUCTIVITY

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## ABSTRACT

Growth of forest trees is often limited by nitrogen deficiency. In the Douglas-fir region of the Pacific Northwestern United States, however, a nitrogen-fixing system of potentially great value has been discovered. The nitrogen-fixing bacteria are associated with the root-colonizing mycorrhizal fungi that trees need to absorb nutrients from the soil. The bacteria produce the nitrogen-fixing enzyme only in the presence of the fungus and often are inoperative if the fungus is absent. For their spore dispersal, mycorrhizal fungi must be eaten by forest-dwelling mammals. The spores pass unharmed through animal's digestive tract and are defecated as inoculum "packets" from which spores are washed by rain into the soil to the tree roots. The nitrogen-fixing bacteria also survive passage through the animal and are active along with the spores.

## INTRODUCTION

Isolation of bacteria from fungal sporocarps has been often reported. Swartz (1929) isolated bacteria from within sporocarps of Lycoperdaceae with either broken or unbroken peridia, although the functional importance of the bacteria is unknown. Larsen *et al.* (1978) demonstrated nitrogenase activity, measured by acetylene reduction, in sporocarps of decay fungi growing on dead tree boles. The responsible organisms were not isolated, but bacteria in sporocarps were detected with a scanning electron microscope. Spano *et al.* (1982) reported isolation of nitrogen-fixing bacteria from within sporocarps of *Fomitopsis pinicola* (Fr.) Karst. growing on decaying wood. The isolates were not tested for nitrogenase activity, however. Li and castellano (1985, 1987) identified acetylene-reducing (nitrogen-fixing) bacteria isolated from within sporocarps of ectomycorrhizal fungi that are common mycorrhizal associates of Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* (Mirb.) France). Also Li *et al.* (1986a, 1986b) demonstrated the presence of nitrogen-fixing bacteria in feces of mammals collected from St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, to the North Carolina-Tennessee border.

The present report is designed to summarize the author's findings and the role the forest mammals may play in maintaining the health of forest ecosystems.

## METHODS

Nitrogenase activity was determined by placing one to five pieces of interior tissue of fungal sporocarp, or animal fecal pellets in 20 ml of Dobereiner's or Burk's Nitrogen-free liquid medium (Zuberer, 1987) in a 60 ml capacity serum bottle. After 3 days at 30°C under microaerophilic conditions the media became turbid. Acetylene was then injected into each bottle to 10% of the total gas volume. After 18 hrs, a 0.1 ml gaseous sample from each bottle was removed and analyzed for ethylene and acetylene with a gas chromatograph fitted with a 2 m x 2.1 mm, 80-100 mesh, Porapak R column.

Bacteria were isolated and purified by streaking the cultures on Dobereiner's nitrogen-free agar medium supplemented with 0.002% yeast extract.

Yeast populations in animal feces were determined by dilution-plating on sodium albumenate agar (Waksman and Fred, 1922).

Fecal extracts were prepared by the methods of Li. *et al.* (1986a).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The nitrogen-fixing bacteria isolated from within sporocarps of ectomycorrhizal fungi were mostly those of *Azospirillum* that form a distinctive white pellicle with acetylene reduction activity in a nitrogen-free semi-solid malate agar (Table 1). The bacteria showed a characteristic spiral movement when observed in water under a light microscope. Cells were straight to slightly curved, plump, slightly pointed rods with two flagella at one end of the cell.

Inoculation of *Alnus rubra* Bong. with *Frankia* plus *Azospirillum* resulted in significantly larger seedlings – stem height, root collar diameter, and total shoot and root weights – than

Table 1. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria isolated from within sporocarps of ectomycorrhizal fungi (Li, 1987)

| Fungal sporocarp                | Geographic location | Bacterium isolated           |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Barssia oregonensis</i>      | Apiary, OR          | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Hymenogaster parksii</i>     | Blodgett, OR        | <i>Pseudomonas</i>           |
| <i>Hysterangium setchellii</i>  | Mary's Peak, OR     | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Hebeloma crustuliniforme</i> | Grants Pass, OR     | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Laccaria laccata</i>         | Corvallis, OR       | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Leccinum scabrum</i>         | Corvallis, OR       | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Rhizopogon parksii</i>       | Lincoln County, OR  | not determined               |
| <i>R. vinicolor</i>             | Benton County, OR   | <i>Azospirillum</i>          |
| <i>Suillus ponderosus</i>       | Corvallis, OR       | <i>Pseudomonas</i>           |
| <i>Tuber melanosporum</i>       | France              | <i>Klebsiella pneumoniae</i> |

Table 3. Nitrogenase activity and microorganisms in feces of 51 mammals of 19 species from Alaska to North Carolina-Tennessee (Li *et al.* 1986b).

| Animal                                 | Geographic location     | Nitrogenase <sup>1</sup> activity | Yeasts <sup>2</sup> | Actinomycetes <sup>2</sup> |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>INSECTIVORA</b>                     |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| Soricidae (shrews)                     |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Sorex cinereus</i> (1) <sup>3</sup> | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | not determined      | not determined             |
| <b>LAGOMORPHA</b>                      |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| Leporidae                              |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| (hares and rabbits)                    |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Lepus Californicus</i> (1)          | Summer Lake, OR         | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i> (1)       | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | 0                   | 0                          |
| <b>RODENTIA</b>                        |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| Sciuridae (squirrels)                  |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Cynomys leucurus</i> (7)            | Meeteetse, WY           | 0                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>Cynomys leucurus</i> (3)            | Laramie, WY             | 0                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>Eutamias townsendi</i> (1)          | Umpqua, OR              | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <i>Glaucomys volans</i> (2)            | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>Spermophilus parryi</i> (1)         | St. Lawrence Island, AK | 0                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>S. tridecemlineatus</i>             | Cedar Falls, IA         | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <i>Tamias striatus</i> (1)             | Cedar Falls, IA         | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| Geomyidae                              |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| (pocket gophers)                       |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Geomy busarius</i> (1)              | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | 0                   | +                          |
| Cricetidae (native mice)               |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Peromyscus leucopus</i> (6)         | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>P. maniculatus</i> (4)              | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | 0                   | 0                          |
| Arvicolidae (voles)                    |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Clethrionomys gapperi</i> (10)      | Roon Mountain NC-TN     | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <i>Lagurus curtatus</i> (1)            | Silver Lake, OR         | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <i>Microtus ochrogaster</i> (2)        | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>M. oeconomus</i> (4)                | St. Lawrence Island, AK | +                                 | +                   | 0                          |
| <i>M. oregoni</i> (1)                  | Marys Peak, OR          | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| Muridae (Old world mice)               |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Mus musculus</i> (1)                | Morocco, IN             | +                                 | +                   | +                          |
| <b>ARTIODACTYLA</b>                    |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| Cervidae (deer)                        |                         |                                   |                     |                            |
| <i>Cervus elaphus</i> (1)              | Post, OR                | 0                                 | +                   | 0                          |

<sup>1</sup> Four replicates (all positive or all negative).

<sup>2</sup> Average of three replications of one individual from each species.

<sup>3</sup> Number of individuals tested for nitrogenase activity.

inoculation with *Frankia* alone (Table 2). The dual inoculation also produced bigger and greater quantities of root nodules. Seedlings without *Frankia* inoculation or with *Azospirillum* inoculation were stunted and eventually died. *Azospirillum* might have facilitated nodule formation by promoting *Frankia* infection (Li *et al.* 1987).

Table 2. Effect of *Azospirillum*-*Frankia* inoculation on growth of *Alnus rubra* Bong. (Li *et al.* 1987).

| Inoculation                             | Seedling height (mm) | Stem Caliper (mm) | Dry weight of shoot (mg) | Dry weight of roots & nodule (mg) | No. nodule |
|---|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Azospirillum</i> -<br><i>Frankia</i> | 88                   | 1.8               | 167                      | 43                                | 46         |
| <i>Frankia</i> only                     | 47                   | 1.0               | 67                       | 22                                | 28         |
| <i>Azospirillum</i> only                | 9.0                  | 0.5               | 5.8                      | 7.9                               | 0          |
| No inoculation                          | 9.0                  | 0.5               | 5.8                      | 7.7                               | 0          |

Data are average of 14 replicates of each treatment.

Some small forest-dwelling mammals eat mostly fruiting bodies of mycorrhizal fungi and disperse fecal pellets containing fungal spores, which germinated and form mycorrhizae with roots of forest trees (Hunt and Maser, 1985; Maser *et al.* 1978, 1985; Ure and Maser 1982). The feces of these animals also contained nitrogen-fixing bacteria and yeast (Table 3). The nutrient in the feces is as effective as yeast extract in promoting bacterial growth and nitrogences activity (Li *et al.* 1986a). When these animals dig at the bases of tree, the organisms in their feces could inoculate rootlets with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, yeast, and spores of mycorrhizal fungi.

Small mammals have often been seen as detrimental to timber management (Crouch and Radwan, 1975; Hooven, 1975; Sullivan, 1979, 1980), and poisons and habitat manipulation have been used against them. But the more forests are altered by human actions, the more evident becomes the need to understand the interactions of all organisms in the ecosystem. These small mammals are the first to occupy clearings after logging or fire and disperse these microorganisms that are essential in maintaining ecosystem health.

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