

Advances in Research on Biodiversity and Bioprospecting of Endophytes in Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

In debates on future global practises of agriculture, compromises in food security are not tolerated. In conventional agriculture pesticide applications are primarily used to reduce disease severity. However, the excessive use - and misuse - of agrochemicals, has generated significant interest in developing approaches alternative to pesticide application. Among these alternatives are biological control (activities of living organisms) and biopesticide (use of the natural products extracted or fermented from several sources) strategies (Pal and Gardner 2006). These formulations may be very simple or complex mixtures of natural ingredients affecting the hosts and/or the target pathogens.

Plant diseases may be due to an imbalance between the microbiome and its host as well as to reduced microbial diversity. Endophytic microorganisms are increasingly recognized for their impact on host function, especially on host immunity (Schulz and Boyle 2005; Rodriguez et al. 2009; Christian et al. 2015). The plant microbiome has also been considered fundamental in protecting plants from pathogen either by synthesizing enzymes or metabolites negatively affecting pathogens (Mendes et al. 2013; Berg et al. 2016; Braga et al. 2016).

The bioprospecting aspect of endophytes has been extensively reviewed (Mousa and Raizada 2013; Brader et al. 2014; Strobel 2015, Jia et al. 2016). However, the role of microbial symbioses has been poorly understood, mainly because plant-microbe interactions are ubiquitous and diverse in nature (Genre and Russo 2016; Mitter et al. 2016). In 1997, the Brazilian Environment Ministry started a project to catalog the country's biological diversity. The first data were generated and analyzed in 1999 and it was estimated that from all microorganisms in the world, Brazil holds 20% of the diversity (MMA, 2002) distributed in six biomes: Amazon forest, Atlantic forest, Caatinga, Cerrado, Pampas and Pantanal.

Amazon and Atlantic forests, Cerrado and Pantanal are included in UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites, and harbor biomes with enormous biodiversity. Our group has studied endophytic microorganisms from Pantanal medicinal plants for more than ten years, demonstrating the huge potential of these microbes. Due to the high diversity of plants present in Brazil, and considering that each plant harbors at least two endophytes with a high potential to produce secondary metabolites, we review here the survey on the biodiversity and bioprospecting of endophytes from different biomes found in Brazil.

ENDOPHYTES – GENERAL ASPECTS

Endophytes are living entities colonizing internal plant tissues, such as leaves, stems, bark, petioles and reproductive structures (Faeth and Fagan 2002; Hardoim et al. 2015), and play an important role in the natural environment. There is a great biological diversity of endophytic fungi particularly in tropical rainforests, wherein about 300,000 terrestrial plant species are distributed (Jia et al. 2016). The number of 1.5 million fungal species in nature is probably underestimated (Hawksworth 1991) and Petrini (1991) suggested that there could be more than 1 million species of endophytic fungi remaining to be discovered (Sun and Guo 2012).

The definition of endophytes has changed in the past years. The term endophyte was introduced by de Bary (1866) who defined endophytes as a group of organisms occurring within plants tissues. Carroll (1986) defined endophytes as mutualists that colonize aerial parts of plant, excluding microorganism that cause disease symptoms and mycorrhizal fungi as formerly defined by de Bary. Petrini (1991) proposed an expansion of Carroll's definition to include all organisms inhabiting plant organs that, at some time in their life, can colonize internal plant tissues without causing apparent harm to the host. Therefore, latent pathogens known to live symptomless inside host tissues are also defined as endophytes. Recently, Hardoim et al. (2015) suggested that the term "endophyte" should refer to the habitat only, not the function, and should not be associated with a lifestyle, e.g. phytopathogen or non-phytopathogen, but rather refer to all microorganisms that colonize internal plant tissues.

ENDOPHYTES – STUDIES OF BIODIVERSITY IN BRAZIL

Endophytic fungi are important biotechnological tools because of their ability to produce a vast number of structurally diverse secondary metabolites (Glienke et al. 2012), and to access this important source of bioactive molecules the diversity of endophytes has been explored in different ecosystems (Hokama et al. 2016). The Brazilian government has encouraged research in biodiversity and community structuration, resulting in more than 30 papers on endophytes in different biomes in the PubMed database since 2015 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>).

The different environmental conditions of the six Brazilian biomes significantly impact the distribution pattern of endophytic fungi (Suryanarayanan et al. 2005; Hardoim et al. 2015). Santos et al. (2015) analyzed the endophytic mycobiota of *Indigofera suffruticosa*, a plant commonly found in two different biomes in Brazil, the Atlantic Forest and Caatinga. Using the diversity indices, the authors suggested that the population divergence observed in the same plant species are related to seasonality rather than to geographical factors. However, Vaz et al. (2012) explored the biodiversity pattern of endophytes isolated from three plants found in the Brazilian Cerrado ecosystems (*Myrciaria floribunda*, *Alchornea castaneifolia* and *Eugenia* aff. *bimarginata*). This study indicated a rather low similarity among the fungal communities of the host plants, suggesting that not only the microbiome but also the hosts influence the endophyte distribution patterns. In addition, Almeida et al. (2015) studied two different

species of *Eichhornia* (*E. azurea* and *E. crassipes*) native to the Upper Paraná River floodplain, and found high diversity in the endophytic community analyzed, with small differences between the endophytic species found in the two *Eichhornia* species analyzed.

Another aspect to be considered in biodiversity studies is the plant development stage. Miguel *et al.* (2016), employing culture-independent and culture dependent methods, explored the diversity of endophytic bacterial community at different stages of *Eucalyptus* growth and demonstrated that the distribution of the endophytic bacterial species in *Eucalyptus* was distinct and specific to the development stages.

Besides the efforts to catalog the richness of species, a common problem observed in studies about endophytes biodiversity is that the largest fraction of papers is associated with bioprospecting studies. Thus associative studies of biodiversity and bioprospecting in Brazil normally lead to an ineffective species richness description because only strains that showed bioactivities are identified at species level (Lopes *et al.* 2015; Nascimento *et al.* 2015; Conti *et al.* 2016; Orlandelli *et al.* 2016; Santos *et al.* 2016; Silva *et al.* 2016). Non-exploitation of the entire endophytic community and ineffective species descriptions led to underestimating the Brazilian endophytic richness.

In endophytes biodiversity studies, there are important points that should be considered: the correct identification of isolates at the species level, the number of samples analyzed, the method(s) used for endophyte isolation and the region where the research has been performed. The most common error observed in many papers is the species misidentification, due to improper interpretation of DNA sequence blasts in public databases (Almeida *et al.* 2015; Fernandes *et al.* 2015; Almeida-Lopes *et al.* 2016; Conti *et al.* 2016; Miguel *et al.* 2016; Silva *et al.* 2016). Furthermore there are huge numbers of misidentified sequences in some data-banks, likewise leading to misidentifications. Nilsson *et al.* (2006), explored ITS sequences and noted that 27% of the sequences deposited even in renowned databases were incorrectly annotated at the species level, further supporting the inconsistency in species identification using the Blast tool (Clarridge 2004). In order to correctly identify species using a single DNA sequence, we recommend that the following premises be met: I) background phylogenetic analyses must have been performed for given species and barcoding should be available (Heinrichs *et al.* 2012); II) the comparison should be made with sequences from type or authentic strains (Crous *et al.* 2014); III) the new nomenclature rules (International Code of Nomenclature for Algae, Fungi, and Plants) must be followed (Hawksworth *et al.* 2011) for fungi, and prokaryotes (List of Prokaryotic Names; <http://www.bacterio.net/>). Therefore, the species identification should be performed by a primarily identification at the genus level, using the Blast tool in the database (like GenBank), and a robust analysis should be performed using the specific genus database, or by search of the sequence code of the type strains. As examples of useful websites we recommend: Mycobank (www.mycobank.org); The Genera of Fungi (www.generaoffungi.org/); *Fusarium*-ID (<http://isolate.fusariumdb.org/>), *Fusarium* MLST (www.cbs.knaw.nl/fusarium/), *Escherichia* MLST (<http://mlst.warwick.ac.uk/mlst/dbs/Ecoli>), *Streptomyces* MLST (<http://pubmlst.org/streptomyces/>).

ENDOPHYTES - STUDIES IN BIOPROSPECTING IN BRAZIL

Due to the large biodiversity observed in Brazil, a large number of studies have been published about biological activity of endophytes producing secondary metabolites (Conti et al. 2016; Hokama et al. 2016; Almeida-Lopes et al. 2016; Tonial et al. 2016; Silva et al. 2016), endophytes used in biological control (Chaverri et al. 2015; Dourado et al. 2015; Souza et al. 2016) or plant growth promotion (Almeida-Lopes et al. 2016; Soares et al. 2016), and in reduction of impacts of the environment (Costa et al. 2012; Mesquini et al. 2015).

A concern for the bioprospecting studies in Brazil is that, for a long time, many studies performed only a screening for biological activity by microbial confrontation tests or crude extract, without compounds elucidation or evaluation of plant-microbe interactions (Vaz et al. 2012; Bezerra et al. 2013; Banhos et al. 2014; Hokama et al. 2016; Silva et al. 2016). However, with the concept of multidisciplinary in science, this context started to change, and microbiology and chemistry laboratories cooperate to purify and identify these metabolites, and to test their biological activities (Lima et al. 2005; Sebastianes et al. 2012; Chapla et al. 2014; Andrioli et al. 2014; Savi et al. 2015; Tonial et al. 2016).

In Brazil, the unique database available for compounds described from Brazilian biodiversity is the NuBBE (<http://nubbe.iq.unesp.br/portal/index.html>) and can serve as a useful platform for multidisciplinary research. The NuBBE contains data of more than 640 compounds, with only 6% representing microbial metabolites (Valli et al. 2013).

CONCLUSION

Brazil has the largest biodiversity in the world contained in a single political unit. Studies exploring the endophytes from different biomes of Brazil have been performed, using new strategies to catalog this diversity. One of the most exciting aspects is the discovery of microorganisms exhibiting biocontrol activity and to identify bioactive molecules, likewise to be used in plant disease control. A major future challenge will relate to the effectiveness of transforming the knowledge accumulated so far in the universities to commercial royalties in order to rationally use the Brazilian biodiversity in plant and possibly human and animal health.

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