**Limnobotics:**
Understanding blooms of toxic freshwater cyanobacteria using an autonomous sampling platform and molecular strain typing


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Recurrent blooms of the microcystin-producing cyanobacterium Planktothrix rubescens (Fig. 1) are observed in Lake Zürich, where its recent proliferation (Fig. 3) seemed to be favored by changes in lake-wide hydrodynamic processes under global warming forcing.1

Basic seasonal patterns of *P. rubescens* are known, but the basin-wide horizontal variability over the entire annual cycle is poorly understood.

![Fig. 1. A) Filaments and B) surface accumulation of *P. rubescens*](image)

Automated sensing technologies are developing into an important tool for aquatic microbial ecology research, but few studies have applied them to limnology for long-term and basin-wide observational research.2

We built an Autonomous Surface Vessel (ASV; Fig. 2) that is equipped with a variety of sensors, i.e., temperature, pH, light, oxygen, nutrients, and algal pigments (chlorophyll *a* and phycocyanin).

![Fig. 2. Our Autonomous Surface Vessel to investigate Lake Zürich](image)

Our project brings together limnology and robotics for the autonomous acquisition of limnological data. This would allow for an unprecedented spatial and temporal data resolution for a better understanding of the population dynamics of *P. rubescens* in Lake Zürich.

![Fig. 3. Mean annual biomass of total phytoplankton (green) and *P. rubescens* (red) in the upper 20 m in Lake Zürich from 1973 to 2008](image)

Molecular approaches based on the microcystin (mcy) gene cluster (Fig. 4) will be combined to our large-scale sampling to address the coexistence and successions of mcy producing and non-producing strains of *P. rubescens* and their relationship with particular parameters or seasonal events. Specifically, we will:

1. Determine mcy-producing phenotypes at the level of single filaments using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA).
2. Characterize mcy genotypes by single-cell approaches.
3. Use quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) to quantify non-producing mcy strains and estimate their share of the total population.
4. Investigate the influence of environmental factors on mcy production and the proportions of mcy and non-mcy strains with *P. rubescens* cultures (Fig. 5).

![Fig. 4. Microcystin synthase gene cluster of *Planktothrix* and mutations resulting in the inactivation of the gene](image)

![Fig. 5. *P. rubescens* culture](image)

Our ASV allows for a high-frequency monitoring of cyanobacterial spatiotemporal distribution (Fig. 6) together with a comprehensive overview of environmental changes within the lake (Fig 7).

![Fig. 6. A) Current profiling strategy and B) projected intelligent profiling](image)

![Fig. 7. A) Turbidity and B) temperature over a distance of 1.5 km in Lake Zürich](image)

Ultimately, our ASV will provide an exhaustive collection of field data to identify environmental parameters that control blooms of mcy-producing strains of *P. rubescens* in order to develop a regional predictive model for Lake Zürich and other similar pre-alpine Swiss lakes.

**References**

2. Caron et al. 2008 Limnol. Oceanogr. 53:2333
3. Posch, unpublished
4. Ostemaier & Kurnayer 2009 Microb. Ecol. 58:1