Diversity and composition of cave methanotrophic communities

Kevin D. Webster[a,b]# Arndt Schimmelmann[c], Agnieszka Drobniak[d], Maria Mastalerz[d],

Laura Rosales Lagarde[e], Penelope J. Boston[f], Jay T. Lennon[g]#

[a]Diné College, School of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, Tsaile, Arizona,

USA 86556

[b]Planetary Science Institute, Tucson, Arizona, USA 85719

[c]Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Indiana University, Bloomington,

Indiana, USA 47405

[d]Indiana Geological and Water Survey, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA

47405

[e]Department of Physical and Life Sciences, Nevada State College, School of Liberal Arts

and Sciences, Henderson, Nevada, USA.

[f]NASA Astrobiology Institute, NASA Ames Research Center, Moffett Field, California,

USA.

[g]Department of Biology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA 47405

#Address correspondence to Kevin D. Webster, webster@psi.edu, or Jay T. Lennon,

lennonj@indiana.edu.

ABSTRACT Methane oxidizing bacteria (methanotrophs) are a ubiquitous group of microorganisms that represent a major sink for the greenhouse gas methane (CH_4). Recent studies have demonstrated that methanotrophs are abundant and contribute to CH_4 dynamics in caves. However, very little is known about what controls the distribution and abundance of methanotrophs in subterranean ecosystems. Here, we report a survey of sediments collected from >20 caves in North America to elucidate the factors shaping cave methanotroph communities. Using 16S rRNA sequencing, we recovered methanotrophs from nearly all (98 %) of the samples, including cave sites where CH_4 concentrations were at or below detection limits (≤ 0.3 ppmv). We identified a core microbiome among caves that was dominated by members of the USC-γ clade, which are recognized as high-affinity methanotrophs. Although methanotrophs were associated with local-scale mineralogy, their community composition did not systematically vary between the entrances and interior of caves, where CH_4 concentrations varied. However, we did detect a decay in compositional similarity of methanotrophic community composition with geographic distance. This biogeographic pattern is consistent with dispersal limitation perhaps due to the insular nature of cave ecosystems. Last, the relative abundance of methanotrophs was positively correlated with cave-air CH_4 concentrations—suggesting that these microorganisms contribute to CH_4 flux in subterranean ecosystems.

IMPORTANCE Recent observations have shown that the atmospheric greenhouse gas methane (CH_4) is consumed by microorganisms (methanotrophs) in caves at rates

comparable to CH$_4$ oxidation in surface soils. Caves are abundant in karst landscapes that

comprise 14 % of Earth's land surface area, and therefore may be acting as a substantial

CH$_4$ sink. A detailed ecological understanding of the forces that shape methanotrophic

communities in caves is lacking. We sampled cave sediments to better understand the

community composition and structure of cave methanotrophs. Our results show that the

members of the USC-γ clade are dominant in cave communities, that the relative

abundance of methanotrophs was positively correlated with CH$_4$ concentrations in cave air,

and that methanotroph relative abundance was correlated with local scale mineralogy of

soils.

KEYWORDS: Biogeography; Cave; Greenhouse Gas; Karst; Methane; Methanotroph

INTRODUCTION

Methane (CH$_4$) is a greenhouse gas in Earth's atmosphere, and an energy source for

humanity (1, 2), inspiring research into the sources and sinks of CH$_4$ to and from the

atmosphere. Two major processes are responsible for the removal of CH$_4$ from Earth's

atmosphere, oxidation by hydroxyl radicals in the atmosphere, and by methane-consuming

microorganisms (methanotrophs) in surface soils. Oxidation by hydroxyl radicals accounts

for 90 % of atmospheric-CH$_4$ removal while methanotrophs consume roughly 5 % of the

CH$_4$ that is removed from the atmosphere each year (3). Despite the influence that

methanotrophs have on regulating Earth's climate, gaps remain in our understanding of

these organisms, like how they respond to changing CH_4 concentrations or how they

disperse through the environment (4, 5).

Rocks that host caves are widespread on Earth, and are emerging as a global CH_4

sink (6–11) (Figure 1), but little is known about the methanotrophic communities in these

environments. Recent studies of cave microbial communities have revealed the presence of

atmospheric-CH_4 consuming or high-affinity methanotrophs in caves (8, 12–15). High-

affinity methanotrophs have been previously observed from upland soils and these groups

are referred to as the Upland Soil Cluster (USC) -α and -γ clades. Atmospheric CH_4

oxidation has also been observed by methanotrophs belonging to the Type II group

(organisms in the *Methylocystaceae* and *Beijernickiaceae*), but it is not thought that these

organisms can consume CH_4 at these concentrations indefinitely (16). Both high-affinity

and Type II methanotrophs tend to be the most prominent members of the methanotrophic

community in environments with low CH_4 concentrations and high O_2 concentrations.

They are less common in environments with high CH_4 and low O_2 concentrations, like

lakes or geological seeps, which are dominated by Type I methanotrophs (methanotrophs

from the Methylococcaceae) (17, 18).

The factors that control the distribution and abundance of methanotrophs in caves

are not well understood. Previous work has shown that methanotrophs are frequently

related to CH_4 concentrations, sediment texture, and other microorganisms, but it is

unclear how these factors, or the local mineralogy influences methanotroph communities

in caves. Type I and Type II methanotrophs have been shown to exhibit niche partitioning

between environments with high and low CH_4 concentrations (18, 19). However, it is

unknown if methanotrophic communities exhibit similar changes in community

composition with atmospheric to subatmospheric CH_4 concentration gradients.

In addition, very little is known about the spatial distribution of methanotrophs,

even though such information could shed light on the biogeography of microbes within

and among cave ecosystems. While the community composition of methanotrophs may be

influenced by environmental conditions of caves, their abundances may also be influenced

by dispersal limitation. Caves are unique and insular habitats that have a patchy

distribution in the terrestrial landscape. Similar methanotrophs have been observed in both

Hawai'i and the Arctic (4) suggesting that the dispersal of these organisms is relatively

unhindered. However, biota in caves are typically unique due to their isolation from other

environments (20, 21). Thus, it may be possible that dispersal limitation is important in

structuring the methanotrophic communities in caves. If no group of methanotrophs could

consistently be found among caves, this may suggest that methanotrophs are dispersal

limited.

In this study, we sampled 21 caves in North America to examine the factors

regulating the community composition of cave methanotrophs (Figure 1). First, we

hypothesized that the methanotroph community structure should be similar to the structure

of methanotrophic communities in other low CH_4 environments, and that the relative

abundance of methanotrophs should be correlated with cave-air CH_4 concentrations.

Additionally, we hypothesized that methanotrophs should show relationships to sediment

texture and the minerals present in the environment since these features are known to

influence the diffusion of air and micronutrient abundances. Finally, we hypothesized that

high-affinity methanotroph communities in caves should exhibit signatures of dispersal-

limitation owing to the insular nature of caves.

RESULTS

Methanotroph community structure. Methanotrophs were recovered in nearly all

(98 %) of the cave-sediment samples, including locations where CH_4 concentrations were

at or below the analytical detection limit (< 0.3 ppmv). The maximum relative abundance

of methanotrophs in the cave sediment samples was 6.25 % and the median relative

abundance was 0.52 %. The average methanotrophic community contained 3 ± 2

methanotroph OTUs. Methanotrophic communities in the sampled caves were dominated

by the USC-γ clade, but members of the USC-α clade, Methylocystaceae, and

Methylococcales were also present (Figure 2). Members of the USC clades comprised a

median of 99.3 % of the total methanotrophic community at locations where

methanotrophs were observed and members of the USC-γ clade represented 70.1 % of the

community on average (median). Methanotrophs from the Type II and Type I functional

groups represented 0.12 % of the observed methanotroph community on average (median).

The observed diversity of the USC-γ and -α clades was lower than that of the Type II and

Type I functional groups. Members of the USC-γ and -α were each represented by two

unique OTUs, whereas Type II and Type I methanotrophs were represented by seven and

11 unique OTUs respectively.

Methanotroph core microbiome. Taxa that were present in at least 60 % of

samples were defined as the core methanotroph community. Based on this definition, the

core microbiome was made up of only two OTUs. Both of the OTUs were from members

of the USC-γ. These taxa were found together in 84 % of samples, and the most widely

distributed OTU was observed in 93 % of samples. The core methanotroph community

accounted for 59 % of the obtained methanotroph sequences.

Environmental influences on community structure. Methanotroph composition

was related to the mineralogy of cave soils (Figure 4). The total methanotrophic

community was related to the abundance of clinochlorite ($p = 0.008$), orthoclase ($p =$

0.006), muscovite ($p = 0.05$), and microcline ($p = 0.04$). The USC functional clade showed

a relationship with the abundance of clinochlorite ($p = 0.02$) and the Type II and Type I

methanotrophs were not related to the abundance of any observed mineral ($p > 0.05$). In

contrast to mineralogical associations, the composition of the methanotrophic community

was not related to soil texture (Table 1).

Biogeography. Biological communities are known to change with the geographic

distance and the "environmental distance" between them—a pattern known as a distance

decay relationship (DDR) (51, 52). At larger spatial scales, methanotrophs showed

relationships with measures of geographic distance between the samples. Analysis of

methanotroph DDRs revealed that the composition of high-affinity methanotrophs changed

faster with respect to geographic than environmental conditions (m High-affinity

methanotrophs $= -0.14$, m environmental conditions $= -0.05$, $p = 0.01$) (Figure 5). In

contrast, low-affinity methanotroph community composition changed slower than

environmental conditions with respect to the geographic distance between the samples (m

Low-affinity methanotrophs = 0.10, *m* environmental conditions = −0.06, $p = 0.004$). At

smaller spatial scales, however, the relative abundance of methanotrophs was not related to

the distance from a cave entrance (High-affinity: Spearman's rank correlations, $\rho = -0.05$,

S = 3854, $p = 0.78$; Type II: Spearman's rank correlations, $\rho = 0.21$, S = 2882, $p = 0.28$,

Type I: Spearman's rank correlations, $\rho = 0.13$, S = 2758, $p = 0.13$).

Relationships with cave air CH_4 concentrations. The CH_4 concentration in cave

air was positively correlated with the relative abundance of methanotrophs (Figure 3,

Spearman's Test, $\rho = 0.40$, S = 5290, $p = 0.01$). This relationship was largely driven by the

USC functional groups (Spearman's Test, $\rho = 0.40$, S = 5887, $p = 0.01$). The relative

abundances of Type II and Type I methanotrophs were not correlated with the CH_4

concentration (Type II: Spearman's rank correlations, $\rho = 0.04$, S = 9462, $p = 0.79$; Type I:

Spearman's rank correlations, $\rho = -0.01$, S = 10002, $p = 0.94$).

DISCUSSION

The process of life is fundamentally centered on obtaining energy from the

surrounding environment and methanotrophs are no exception. As such, methanotrophic

clades avoid competition with each other by partitioning the ranges across which they

consume CH_4. USC clades rely on CH_4 concentrations that are at or near atmospheric

levels, whereas Type II methanotrophs may only survive and metabolize atmospheric CH_4

for a limited time period under such conditions, while Type I methanotrophs are thought to

be unable to persist in environments with atmospheric CH_4 concentrations (22–24). While

energy availability is crucial, life is also dependent on the supply of specific nutrients and

micronutrients for biosynthetic processes. Our findings support these universal

requirements based on patterns of methanotrophic diversity in caves.

Methanotroph *α*- and *β*-diversity in caves. Methanotrophs are widespread in

cave environments. The dominance of the high-affinity methanotrophs from the USC

clades in the sampled caves is consistent with observations that have been made in other

low CH_4 environments. For example, high-affinity taxa dominate methanotroph

assemblages in forest soils, Arctic soils, and soils associated with basaltic rocks (4, 25, 26).

Additionally, the high relative abundance of methanotrophs in the sampled cave sediments

from this study, and in particular of the USC-*γ* clade, agrees with observations of high

relative abundances of USC methanotrophs from 2 to 12 % in other caves (8, 12, 14, 15).

The high relative abundances of methanotrophs observed in our study are higher than the

observations of methanotrophs from caves in Vietnam (7) and contrasts with the relatively

depauperate assemblage found in a Spanish cave, which reportedly consisted of only three

species (27)

Although less abundant, Type II and Type I methanotrophs were also commonly

observed from our cave survey. Type II methanotrophs are typically more abundant in

aerated soils with access to oxygen and Type I methanotrophs are typically observed in

environments with high CH_4 concentrations and low oxygen availability (17, 18). Cave

soils are typically nutrient poor (28, 29), implying that anoxic conditions created by the

decay of organic matter are not likely to be widespread. Thus, their presence in cave soils

may be limited to local pockets of anoxia which have been suggested based on

observations of limited methanogenesis in cave systems (10, 11).

We identified a core group of two OTUs that were present in the studied caves. The

core methanotrophic community was derived entirely of members from the USC-γ clade.

This suggests these methanotrophs are well attuned to cave environments and may be able

to disperse between them easily. The fact that these methanotrophs accounted for 59 % of

the observed methanotrophs suggests these organisms are reproducing in these

environments as well. Previous observations are also indicative of high-dispersal

capabilities for these organisms. For example, methanotrophs from a newly formed soil in

Hawai'i showed close taxonomic affiliations with Arctic methanotrophs (4). Additionally,

microbes are known to travel intercontinental distances on windblown dust (30), and

perhaps windblown dust may carry methanotrophs into caves.

Microenvironmental influences on methanotroph communities. The

relationship between the mineralogical assemblage and methanotrophs at the sample sites

is probably related to the abundance of trace metals. Copper is the trace metal responsible

for the oxidation of CH_4 in particulate methane monooxygenase enzyme of methanotrophs.

The methanotroph community showed relationships with the abundance of clinochlorite,

orthoclase, muscovite, and microcline. These minerals are associated with felsic

metamorphic and igneous rocks, and metals like copper are associated with these kinds of

rocks (31).

In contrast, the grain size of the cave sediments did not influence the methanotroph

community composition nor their abundance, even though it reflects important physical

and chemical properties. Previous research observed that methanotrophs tend to be more

abundant in silt and clay fractions of soils because these fractions made up the bulk of the

soils themselves, and potentially that these soils may have greater organic matter contents

(32, 33). The lack of relationships between methanotroph community composition and

methanotroph abundance agree with previous studies where no relationship was observed

between these variables (34).

Biogeography of methanotroph communities. Methanotrophic communities

showed relationships with regional assessments of geographic distance, but did not show

relationships with local assessments. The community composition of high affinity

methanotrophs changed faster than the environmental variables. This suggests that process

like community sorting are operating on this community (35). If community sorting is

operating on high-affinity methanotrophs, they may be actively adjusting to the cave

environment and preventing the establishment of other groups of organisms in this

environment. Conversely, the slope of the community composition of both Type II and

Type I (low affinity) methanotrophs, changed more slowly than the slope variables

comprising environmental similarity when compared to changes in the geographic

distance. This suggests that neutral processes are operating on these communities (35).

These processes are thought to operate more strongly on communities that are not strongly

influenced by the environment and are the strongest in small populations (36). This

suggests that these communities may be being passively dispersed into the caves or

awaiting favorable conditions to carryout active metabolism.

The composition and abundance of methanotrophic communities close to cave

entrances was not different compared to those in more interior locations. The most

probable explanation for this is that the distance from a cave entrance is a proxy variable

for how interior a specific point is in a cave, but is not an absolute variable. Cave size and

shape may prevent the distance from a cave entrance from being a useful variable for

predicting cave methanotrophic community composition.

Relationships with cave air CH_4 concentrations. The relative abundance of

methanotrophs was positively correlated with CH_4 concentrations in cave air. This pattern

was driven by the high-affinity methanotrophs. High-affinity methanotrophs are thought to

derive a significant portion of their energy from CH_4 at atmospheric concentrations and

less energy is available for these organisms at locations in caves with sub-atmospheric CH_4

concentrations. Some of the variability observed in the relationship between high-affinity

methanotrophs and cave air CH_4 concentrations may be explained by daily and seasonal

variation in cave air flow patterns. Many caves are known to exhibit faster air flow when

the external atmospheric temperature is lower than the temperature of cave air. This leads

to higher CH_4 concentrations in caves during the winter (10, 37). Our samples were

acquired during summer, so it is likely that the CH_4 concentration observed at the sample

sites may fluctuate around our observations.

CONCLUSIONS

263   The structure of cave methanotroph communities appears to be best understood in

terms of how cave methanotrophs access CH_4. Cave methanotrophic communities showed

relationships with cave-air CH_4 concentrations suggesting these communities are actively

consuming CH_4 within the cave environment. Additionally, methanotroph communities

showed relationships to minerals in the environment that are known to be related to the

abundance of Cu, an essential trace metal for methane oxidation. Methanotrophs from the

USC-γ clade were numerically dominant. This community structure mirrors that of other

cave communities (8, 12, 14, 15). Members from this clade also comprised a core

methanotrophic community with both members present together in 84 % of samples. The

cave methanotrophic community assemblage appears to be undergoing the effects of

community sorting and does not appear to be dispersal limited. This result also suggests

that the dispersal barrier for high-affinity methanotrophs from cave to cave may be low.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Microbial sampling. We sampled microbial communities from caves along the

western front of the Appalachian fold and thrust belt, in intracratonic settings of the USA,

and in the Sierra Madre of Mexico. We obtained 42 sediment samples from the caves

along transects from their entrances to interiors. Cave sediment samples from walls and

floors were collected using a spatula that had been sterilized with 70 volume % ethanol in

water from locations that were 0.1 m^2 in area (38). Samples were stored on ice until they

could be transferred to a −80 °C freezer.

Environmental variables. We measured multiple environmental variables to

assess factors that potentially influence the composition of cave methanotrophic

communities. We measured CH_4 concentrations *in-situ* with Fourier Transform Infrared

spectroscopy (FTIR) (Gasmet DX4030 – Milton Keynes, United Kingdom) or we

collected discrete air samples collected in the field for measurement the laboratory with

FTIR spectroscopy or gas-chromatography (Varian – Agilent Technologies, Palo Alto,

California). Some of the CH_4 concentrations listed in this study have been previously

published (11, 39), and new data were collected according to methods reported in the same

publications. In cases where cave maps were available, the distance from the nearest

entrance to the sampling location was calculated along the length of the cave passages. We

measured cave sediment grain-size distributions with a Malvern Mastersizer 3000

(Malvern Instruments Inc., Westborough Massachusetts). Raw data from the Mastersizer

were converted to % gravel, % sand, % silt, and % clay sized particles by volume using the

GRADISTAT software package (40). Metadata used for statistical analyses are available

in a public GitHub repository (https://github.com/websterkgd/CaveMethanotrophs)

Cave sediment mineralogy. We randomly selected 14 samples for mineralogical

analysis using X-ray powder diffraction. Sediments were powdered to < 5 μm using a

mortar, pestle, and acetylene. Following the methods of Furmann et al. (41), we used

Bruker D8 Advance X-ray diffractometer with a Sol-X solid-state detector and a W X-ray

tube operated at 30 mA and 40 kV to identify mineral phases. We placed cave sediment

powders in an aluminum large frontpacked mount. Packed mounts were scanned from 2°

to 70° using a count time of 2 s per 0.02° step. Rietveld refinements were used to

determine the abundances of the minerals present in the sample and were quantified with

TOPAS software.

Molecular techniques. We extracted Genomic DNA from cave sediment samples

with a MoBio PowerSoilTM extraction kit (MoBio, Carlsbad, California USA). About 10

ng of extracted DNA was used as a template for amplification by polymerase chain

reaction (PCR). The V4 region of the 16S rRNA gene was amplified using 515F and 806R

with barcoded primers designed to work with the Illumina MiSeq platform (42).

DNAamplification was performed using 50 μL reactions from each sample. PCR reactions

were carried out by a 3 min denaturing step at 94 °C, followed by 30 cycles of 94 °C for

45 s, 50 °C for 60 s, and 72 °C for 90 s. A final 10-minute extension was carried out at 72

°C. Quality of the PCR amplifications was checked by gel electrophoresis. Amplified

DNA was cleaned using a commercial kit (Beckman Coulter Agencourt AMPure XP,

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA). Once the DNA was cleaned, the DNA concentrations were

quantified using the QuanIt PicoGreen kit (Invitrogen) and were pooled at a final

concentration of 20 ng per sample.

We sequenced the cleaned PCR amplicons using Illumina MiSeq technology

(Illumina Reagent Kit v2, 500 reaction kit) at the Center for Bioinformatics and Genomics

at Indiana University. Data quality and unique sequences obtained from the PCR

amplifications were analyzed using mothur (43). DNA sequence data were aligned using

the Needleman algorithm and read lengths were limited to 197 base pairs. Sequences

matching chimeras were removed using VSEARCH (44). Sequences that matched

chloroplasts, Archaea, and other non-bacterial sequences were also removed. OTUs were

created by binning the data at 97 % sequence similarity using the opticlust algorithm (45).

OTUs were identified using the SILVA reference database (version 132).

Identification of methanotrophs. We identified methanotrophs from the 16S

rRNA sequences using a three step process. First, we compiled a database of organisms

known methanotrophs through literature surveys. Type I MOB were classified as the

known methanotrophic members of the Methylococcaceae. We defined Type II MOB as

known methanotrophic genera in the Methylocystaceae and Beijernickiaceae (23, 24). We

used the genera *Methylacidiphilum*, *Methylacidimicrobium* to identify methanotrophs

belonging to the Verrucomicrobia (24, 46). High-affinity MOB were defined as organisms

belonging to the USC-α and -γ clades (13, 23, 24). 16S rRNA sequences for USC-α and

USC-γ MOB were obtained using published 16S rRNA sequences for USC-α from (12)

and for USC-γ from (13). Second, organisms from this database were checked against the

identifications assigned to the OTUs during the initial analysis from the SILVA database.

Third, we compiled a FASTA file of the 16S rRNA gene of these organisms and this file

was compared against the FASTA file of all organisms in the dataset using the

usearch_global command to identify putative methanotrophs that may have been missed

through the SILVA analysis (usearch v.11.0.667) (47). This list of putative methanotophs

was then compared against the NCBI database. If the sequences did not match an organism

capable of the function of interest at 98 % similarity they were excluded from downstream

analysis. The compiled methanotroph FASTA file used in our analysis is available in a

public GitHub repository (https://github.com/websterkgd/CaveMethanotrophs).

Statistical analyses. We assessed the relationships between methanotrophs and

environmental conditions through a series of statistical analyses. First, to avoid

complication arising from unavoidable variation in the total number of reads between

samples, we calculated the relative abundance for each taxon within a sample. Next, to

quantify among cave variation, we calculated pairwise dissimilarities using the Bray-Curtis

metric. The methanotroph core microbiome was characterized by including taxa that were

found in 60 % or more of our samples. We used this cutoff because it is in the middle of

the range of what has been used in other studies (48, 49). We evaluated the effect of

sediment mineralogy and grain size on the multivariate composition of methanotroph

communities using canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) with the *vegan* package in R

(50).

To gain insight into the biogeography of cave methanotrophs, we constructed a

DDR while also comparing community composition along gradients from cave exteriors to

cave interiors. We analyzed DDR using Bray-Curtis measures of community similarity

and Euclidian measures of environmental similarity that had been scaled from 0 to 1.

Samples from Cave 38 (Cueva de Villa Luz) were excluded in DDR analyses since they

were roughly 2000 km away from the nearest sample. Slopes for geographic and

environmental DDR were calculated using ordinary least squares (52). We then tested for

differences in the slopes using the diffslope() function R package *simba*, which calculates

statistical significance through a permutation-based linear regression approach (53). We

used Spearman's correlation to examine how methanotrophic communities changed along

gradients from cave exteriors to interiors. Finally, we tested for a relationship between

methanotroph relative abundance and CH_4 concentrations using Spearman's correlation.

Data and software availability. This Targeted Locus Study project has been

deposited at DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank under the accession KCRG00000000. The version

described in this paper is the first version, KCRG00000000.1. All code and data used in

this study can be found in a public GitHub repository

(https://github.com/websterkgd/CaveMethanotrophs).

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Figure 1: (A) The distributions of karst landscapes at global scale. Inserts show the

occurrence of karst (B) in the eastern United States (C) and in Mexico. Numbers represent

the locations of sampled caves in this study. Karst land cover data were obtained from (6,

54).

Figure 2: The relative abundance of A) USC methanotrophs, B) Type II methanotrophs, and C) Type I methanotrophs in the sampled caves.

Figure 3: The relative abundance of members of the methanotrophic community plotted

against the CH_4 concentration at each sample location ($\rho = 0.40$, S-statistic: S = 5290, $p =$

0.01).

Figure 4: The total methanotrophic community showed relationships with the abundance

of muscovite, clinochlorite, orthoclase, and microcline detected in the samples. The

vectors show increasing abundances of minerals the samples.

Figure 5: Distance decay analyses of the high affinity. The high-affinity community

changed more quickly with changes in geographic distance than changes in environmental

conditions. The samples from Cueva de Villa Luz have been removed from this analysis

due to the large geographic separation of these samples from the rest of the samples.

Table 1: The *p*-values associated with the relationship between different methanotrophic communities
and soil texture.

Particle Size	Total Community	USC	Type II	Type I
Gravel	0.39	0.42	0.34	0.65
Sand	0.48	0.47	0.33	0.39
Silt	0.29	0.44	0.19	0.83
Clay	0.55	0.54	0.51	0.53

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