LETTER

EVIDENCE THAT INCONSISTENT GENE PREDICTION CAN MISLEAD ANALYSIS OF ALGAL GENOMES

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Abstract

Comparative algal genomics often relies on predicted gene models from *de novo* assembled genomes. However, the artifacts introduced by different gene-prediction approaches, and their impact on comparative genomic analysis, remains poorly understood. Here, using available genome data from six dinoflagellate species in Symbiodiniaceae, we identified potential methodological biases in the published gene models that were predicted using different approaches. We developed and applied a comprehensive customized workflow to predict genes from these genomes. The observed variation among predicted gene models resulting from our workflow agreed with current understanding of phylogenetic relationships among these taxa, whereas those published earlier were largely biased by the distinct approaches used in each instance. Importantly, these biases mislead the inference of homologous gene families and synteny among genomes, thus impacting biological interpretation of these data. Our results demonstrate that a consistent gene-prediction approach is critical for comparative genomics, particularly for non-model algal genomes.

We implemented a customized, comprehensive workflow to predict protein-coding genes in six published draft Symbiodiniaceae genomes: *Breviolum minutum* (Shoguchi et al. 2013), *Symbiodinium tridacnidorum*, *Cladocopium* sp. C92 (Shoguchi et al. 2018), *Symbiodinium microadriaticum* (Aranda et al. 2016), *Cladocopium goreaui* and *Fugacium kawagutii* (Liu et al. 2018). These draft genomes, generated largely using short-read sequence data, remain fragmented (e.g. N50 lengths range from 98.0 Kb for *C. goreaui* to 573.5 Kb for *S. microadriaticum*); we treat these genome assemblies independently as is standard practice. The published gene models from these four studies were predicted using three different approaches: (a) *ab initio* using AUGUSTUS (Stanke et al. 2006) guided by transcriptome data (Shoguchi et al. 2013, Shoguchi et al. 2018), (b) *ab initio* using AUGUSTUS guided by

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52 a more stringent selection of genes (Aranda et al. 2016), and (c) a more-thorough approach
53 incorporating evidence from transcriptomes, machine learning tools, homology to known
54 sequences and *ab initio* methods (Liu et al. 2018). Because repetitive regions are commonly
55 removed prior to gene prediction, multi-copy genes are sometimes mis-identified as repeats
56 and excluded from the final gene models. To address this issue, we adapted the workflow
57 from Liu et al. (2018) to ignore inferred repeats in the final step that integrates multiple
58 evidence sources using EVidenceModeler (Haas et al. 2008). To minimize potential
59 contaminants in the published draft genomes and their impact on gene prediction, we
60 identified and removed genome scaffolds that share high similarity (BLASTn, $E \leq 10^{-20}$, bit-
61 score ≥ 1000, query cover ≥ 5%) to bacterial, archaeal and viral genome sequences, adopting
62 a similar approach to Liu et al. (2018). We then compared, for each genome, the published
63 gene models in the remaining scaffolds against the predicted gene models in these same
64 scaffolds using our approach. Specifically, we assessed metrics of gene models, and the
65 inference of homologous gene families and conserved synteny within a phylogenetic context.

66 For simplicity, hereinafter we refer to the published gene models as α genes, and those
67 predicted in this study as β genes. Compared to α genes, the structure of β genes (based on
68 the distribution of intron lengths) resembles more closely the structure of dinoflagellate genes
69 inferred using transcriptome data (Figure S1). These results suggest that β genes are likely to
70 be more biologically realistic. Variation between α and β genes was assessed using the
71 following ten metrics: number of predicted genes per genome, average gene length, number
72 of exons per genome, average exon length, number of introns per genome, average intron
73 length, proportion of splice-donor site motifs (GT, GC or GA), number of intergenic regions,
74 and average length of intergenic regions.

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75 As shown in Table S1, the metrics for α and β genes differed substantially. The number of α
76 genes per genome was much higher in some cases and showed greater variation (mean
77 48,050; standard deviation 16,741) than that of β genes (mean 32,819; standard deviation
78 7567). This is likely due to the more-stringent criteria used by our workflow to delineate
79 protein-coding genes. The larger variation in the number of α genes is likely due to biases
80 arising from the distinct prediction methods and not assembly artifacts, because the same
81 genome assembly for each species was used to independently derive α and β genes. In
82 general, most predicted genes (>60% genes in each genome) were supported by
83 transcriptome evidence (BLASTn, $E \leqslant 10^{-10}$). In some cases, β genes have stronger
84 transcriptome support than α genes; e.g. 82.6% compared to 66.9% in *S. tridacnidorum*, and
85 78.4% compared to 61.9% in *Cladocopium* sp. C92 (Table S1).

86 Variation in the ten observed metrics among α and β genes was also assessed using Principal
87 Component Analysis (Fig. 1a). The α genes are more widespread along principal component
88 1 (PC1, between –0.54 and 0.44), with those based on AUGUSTUS-predominant workflows
89 distinctly separated (PC1 < –0.18; Fig. 1a). The β genes are distributed more narrowly on
90 PC1 (between –0.01 and 0.36) and more widely along principal component 2 (PC2; between
91 –0.56 and 0.20). Interestingly, the distribution of genes along PC2 exhibits a pattern that is
92 consistent with our current understanding of the phylogeny of these six species (Fig. 1b).
93 Specifically, the *Symbiodinium* species are clearly separated from the others along PC2 (Fig.
94 1a) and the two *Cladocopium* species are clustered more closely based on β, rather than α
95 genes. Therefore, PC1 (explaining 52.47% of the variance) largely reflects the variation
96 introduced by distinct gene prediction methods, whereas the distribution along PC2
97 (explaining 25.83% of the variance) is likely attributable to the phylogeny of these species.
98 This result suggests that variation among α genes is predominantly due to methodological

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99 biases, and that these biases are larger compared to those of *β* genes. Variation in the latter
100 appears to be more biologically relevant and consistent with Symbiodiniaceae evolution.

101 Genomes that are phylogenetically closely related are expected to share greater synteny than
102 those that are more distantly related. Here, we defined a collinear syntenic gene block as a
103 region common to two genomes in which five or more genes are coded in the same order and
104 orientation. These gene blocks were identified using SynChro (Drillon et al. 2014) at *Delta* =
105 4. Overall, 421 collinear syntenic blocks (implicating 2454 genes) between any genome-pairs
106 were identified among *α* genes, compared to 426 blocks (implicating 2553 genes) among *β*
107 genes (Figs. 2a and 2b). Based on *α* genes comparison (Fig. 2a), *S. microadriaticum* and *S.*
108 *tridacnidorum* shared the largest number of syntenic blocks (130; 760 genes), whereas *S.*
109 *microadriaticum* and *F. kawagutii* shared the fewest (1; 6 genes). Surprisingly, *S.*
110 *tridacnidorum* and *Cladocopium* sp. C92 shared 38 blocks (222 genes). This close
111 relationship is not evident between any other pair of genomes from these two genera (e.g.
112 only 3 blocks implicating 15 genes between *S. microadriaticum* and *C. goreaui*), and is even
113 closer than the relationship between the two *Cladocopium* species (i.e. *C. goreaui* and C92:
114 33 blocks, 187 genes). The unexpectedly high conserved synteny between *S. tridacnidorum*
115 and *Cladocopium* sp. C92 may be explained by the fact that these genes were predicted with
116 the same method (Shoguchi et al. 2018). In contrast, based on the *β* genes comparison (Fig.
117 2b), the number of syntenic blocks shared between any *Symbiodinium* and *Cladocopium*
118 species did not vary to the same extent; e.g. 7 blocks (38 genes) between *S. tridacnidorum*
119 and *Cladocopium* sp. C92, and 10 blocks (55 genes) between *S. microadriaticum* and *C.*
120 *goreaui*. The number of *β* genes implicated in blocks shared by these two genera is also
121 smaller than those between the two *Cladocopium* species (263 genes in 48 blocks), consistent
122 with their closer phylogenetic relationship.

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123 To assess the impact of methodological biases on the delineation of homologous gene
124 families, Orthofinder v2.3.1 (Emms and Kelly 2018) was used to infer "orthogroups" from
125 protein sequences (i.e. homologous protein sets) encoded by the *α* and *β* genes (Figs 2c and
126 2d). More homologous sets were inferred among the *α* genes (33,580) than among the *β*
127 genes (26,380), likely due to the higher number of *α* genes in all genomes. Genomes from
128 closely related taxa are expected to share more homologous sequences (and therefore more
129 sets) than those that are phylogenetically distant. Most of the identified homologous sets
130 (6431 from *α* genes, 4941 from *β* genes) contained sequences from all analyzed taxa; these
131 represent core gene families of Symbiodiniaceae. Similar to the results of the synteny
132 analysis described above, the pattern of homologous sets shared between members from
133 *Symbiodinium* and *Cladocopium* varies among the *α* genes (Fig. 2c). For instance, 638
134 homologous sets are shared only between *S. tridacnidorum* and *Cladocopium* sp. C92,
135 compared to 89 between *C. goreaui* and *S. tridacnidorum*. In contrast, the corresponding
136 number of homologous sets inferred based on *β* genes are closer to each other (Fig. 2d); i.e.
137 100 between *S. tridacnidorum* and *Cladocopium* sp. C92, and 132 between *C. goreaui* and *S.*
138 *tridacnidorum*.

139 Our results indicate that comparative genomics using the *α* genes (i.e. simply based on
140 published gene models) could lead to the inference that *S. tridacnidorum* and *Cladocopium*
141 sp. C92 are more closely related with each other than is each of them with other isolates in
142 their corresponding genus. The bias introduced by different gene-prediction approaches can
143 significantly impact downstream comparative genomic analyses and lead to incorrect
144 biological interpretations. We therefore urge the research community to consider a consistent
145 gene-prediction workflow when pursuing comparative genomics, particularly among highly
146 divergent, non-model algal genomes. Although we only considered dinoflagellate genomes

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147 from a single family in this study, the implication of our results can be applied more broadly
148 to all other non-model eukaryote genomes.

149 **Acknowledgements**

150 TGS is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.
151 RAGP is supported by an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship and a University
152 of Queensland Centenary Scholarship. This work was supported by Australian Research
153 Council grants (DP150101875 and DP190102474) awarded to CXC and DB, and the
154 computational resources of the Australian National Computational Infrastructure (NCI)
155 Facility through the NCI Merit Allocation Scheme (project d85) awarded to CXC.

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189 **Data accessibility**

190 All genome data (after removal of microbial contaminants), and the predicted gene models
191 from this study are available at: https://cloudstor.aarnet.edu.au/plus/s/JXALPndBKLNYgF9

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Author contribution

YC, RAGP and CXC conceived the study and designed the experiments. YC conducted all computational analyses. YC, TGS, RAGP and CXC analyzed and interpreted the results. YC and RAGP prepared all figures, tables, and the first draft of this manuscript. YC, TGS and RAGP provided analytical tools and scripts. All authors wrote, reviewed, commented on and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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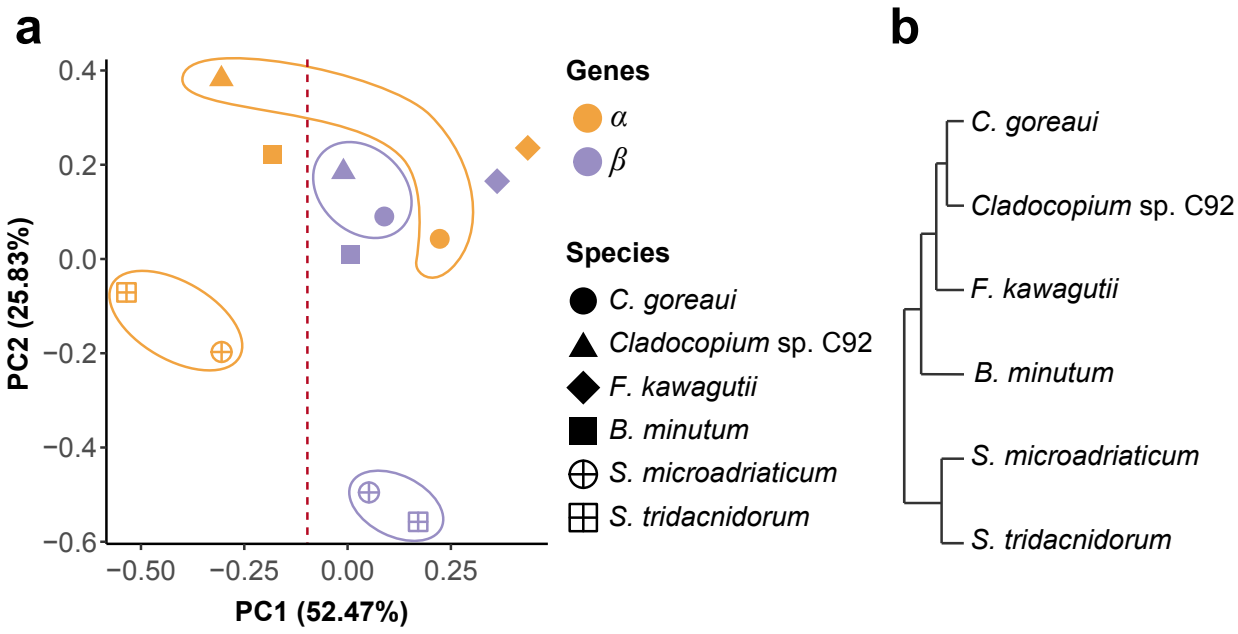
202 **Figures**



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204 **Fig. 1. Gene metrics of *α* and *β* genes from six Symbiodiniaceae genomes.** (a) Principal
205 Component Analysis plot based on ten metrics of the predicted gene models, shown for the *α*
206 genes in orange, and the *β* genes in purple, for each of the six genomes (noted in different
207 symbols) as indicated in the legend. The two *Cladocopium* species and the two *Symbiodinium*
208 species were highlighted for clarity. (b) A tree topology depicting the phylogenetic
209 relationship among the six taxa, based on (LaJeunesse et al. 2018).

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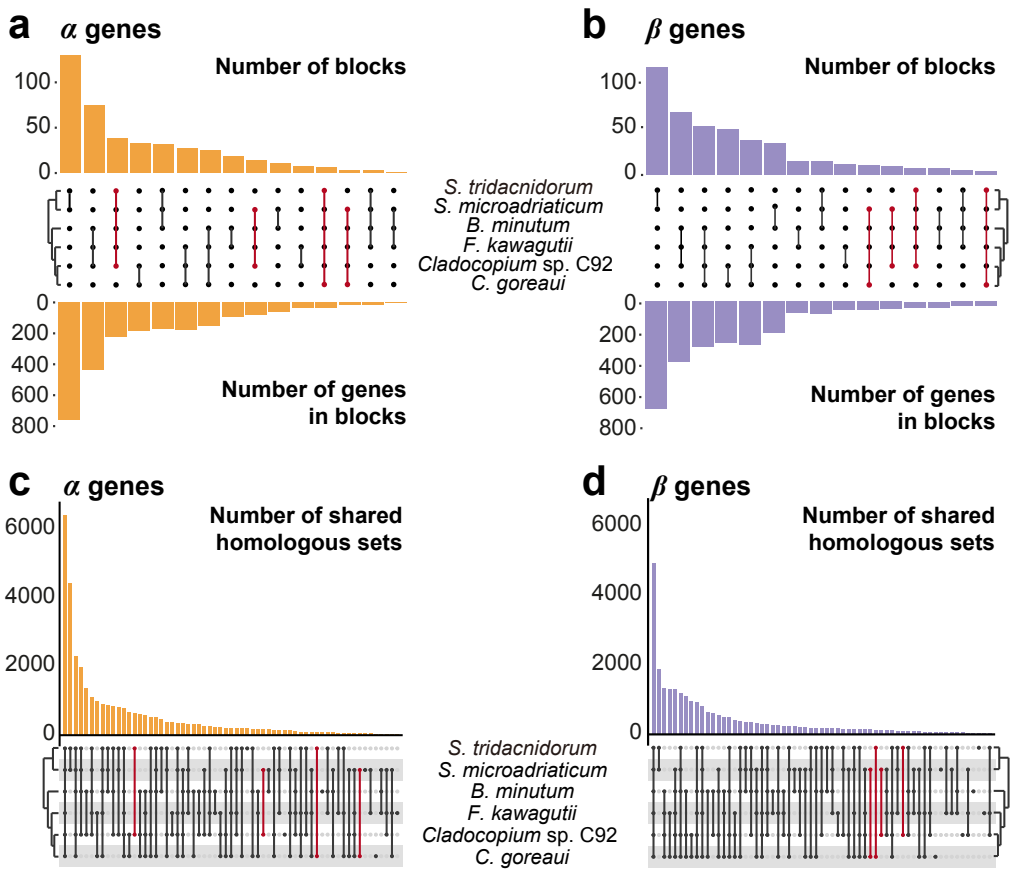

Fig. 2. Conserved synteny and homologous sets among six Symbiodiniaceae genomes. The number of collinear syntenic gene blocks between each genome-pair is shown for those inferred based on (a) *α* and (b) *β* genes; the upper bar chart shows the number of blocks, the lower bar chart shows the number of implicated genes in these blocks, and the middle panel shows the genome-pairs corresponding to each bar with a line joining the dots that represent the implicated taxa. The number of homologous sets inferred from (c) *α* and (d) *β* genes is shown, in which the taxa represented in the set corresponding to each bar are indicated in the bottom panel. The most remarkable differences between (a) and (b), and (c) and (d), focusing on *Symbiodinium* and *Cladocopium* species are highlighted in red.

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