Marine Pollution Bulletin 104 (2016) 101–106

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Marine Pollution Bulletin

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/marpolbul

The expansion of *Ulva prolifera* O.F. Müller macroalgal blooms in the Yellow Sea, PR China, through asexual reproduction

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 June 2015
Received in revised form 3 January 2016
Accepted 31 January 2016
Available online 5 February 2016

Keywords:
Ulva prolifera
Fragmentation
Polarized growth
Macroalgae blooms
Yellow Sea
Eutrophication

ABSTRACT

Since 2007, *Ulva* macroalgal blooms have occurred along the coastal areas of the Yellow Sea, China. These blooms are dominated by fragments of *Ulva prolifera* in the early stages of development. The objectives of this study were to identify the primary mode of asexual reproduction for *U. prolifera* and to evaluate the contribution of these thalli fragments to the formation of blooms. Four different growth and reproductive strategies of *U. prolifera* segments were found including: 1) tubular diameter becoming larger; 2) formation of new branches; 3) release of zoids; and 4) polarized growth. This is the first report showing the development of numerous blade-lets from a single segment, which is remarkably different from previous studies on other *Ulva* species. The results in the present study provide critical information to understand how this species is able to support its explosive growth during a bloom.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, macroalgal blooms have increased worldwide in frequency and size. The impacts have caused significant ecological and economic losses (Fletcher, 1996a; Blomster et al., 2002; Largo et al., 2004; Lyons et al., 2009). *Ulva* has been identified as the major genus in most of these bloom events (Fletcher, 1996b). It is a cosmopolitan species in marine and estuarine habitats. *Ulva* grows rapidly especially in nutrient-rich waters and is highly tolerant to stresses, such as salinity, temperature, and light (Tan et al., 1999).

Ulva prolifera has been identified as the dominant species of the green tide in the Yellow Sea of China (Wang et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2011), which is considered as the site of the world's largest macroalgal blooms (Ye et al., 2011). Although three other *Ulva* species also appeared on the sea surface at the early stages of the blooms, only *U. prolifera* could drift into the northern Yellow Sea (Cui et al., 2015). Recent studies suggested that *Ulva* was attached to *Pyropia* aquaculture rafts from the Subei Shoal (Liu et al., 2009, 2010, 2013; Keesing et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). Through field investigations, Zhang et al. (2014) and Wang et al. (2015) found that the attached *Ulva* blooms were dragged down from the *Pyropia* rafts by fishermen, resulting in numerous *Ulva* fragments being released in the water column. Although *Ulva* has the capability of high, sustained levels of biomass production in blooms, many *Ulva* species are difficult to maintain in a sustained vegetative state (Subbaramaiah, 1970; Oza and Rao, 1977). Fragmentation has been shown to promote zoid formation in vegetative *Ulva* thalli (Dan et al., 2002). The objectives of this study were to identify the different modes of asexual reproduction of *U. prolifera*, and to further elaborate upon the contribution of fragmentation to the formation of the macroalgal blooms in the Yellow Sea, China.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Sample collection and preparation of the Ulva material

Ulva prolifera was originally collected from the *Pyropia* aquaculture rafts in the intertidal zone of Jiangsu coast, China on April 8th, 2012. Single thalli were cleaned of debris and epiphytes, rinsed gently using sterile seawater and transported to the laboratory in seawater at 10 °C. The healthy thalli were checked carefully under a microscope to make sure that there was no germ cell formation. The thalli were then chopped into small pieces and cultured in von Stosch's enriched (VSE) seawater at 12:12 L:D photoperiod, 100 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1} photon fluence rate and at 20 °C. The zoids that were released from mature thalli were individually collected and cultivated into new germlings. We were not able to differentiate if the zoids were zoospores or parthenogametes.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.01.056

2.2. Developmental pathways of the Ulva segments

The fresh grown unbranched tubular thalli were selected and cut into 3 mm segments in all experiments. These segments were transferred into Pyrex Petri dishes (6 cm in diameter) containing 50 mL von Stosch's enriched seawater medium (Ott, 1965) (15–20 segments per dish). The dishes were placed in incubators at photon fluence rates of 50, 75 and 100 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}, temperatures of 10, 15, 20 and 25 °C for 10 days, respectively. A microscope equipped with "PixeLINK" digital camera (PixeLINK, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) was used daily to observe and record the morphological variations of *Ulva prolifera* fragments at The University of Connecticut.

2.3. Growth experiment for the polarized Ulva segments

The polarized segments were transferred to new Petri dishes and flasks containing sterile VSE medium as described above and cultivated at photon fluence rates of 10, 50, 100 and 200 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}, and temperatures of 10, 15, 20, 25 and 30 °C for 8 days. During the culture period, the algae were harvested every four days and weighed after blotting the thalli dry with paper towels. The specific growth rate (SGR) was calculated based on the equation: SGR ($\%d^{-1}$) = [ln (W_t/W_o)] / $t \times 100\%$, where W_o and W_t were the initial and final weight of cultured algae, t was the culture period in days.

The thalli under the 20 °C and 100 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1} condition were kept in the incubator for 2 months. The media were refreshed every 3 days. Meanwhile, the morphological changes and developmental processes of thalli were recorded. Growth of *Ulva* segments was analyzed with two-way ANOVA and Tukey's test for multiple mean comparison using SAS statistical software. Positive significance was based on $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Different developmental ways of Ulva prolifera expansion

Four different growth and reproductive strategies of *Ulva prolifera* segments were observed (Fig. 1). The frequency of occurrence in the developmental pathways of *Ulva* segments was different in each of the environmental conditions (Table 1). At low temperatures (10–15 °C), most *Ulva* fragments produced inflated tubular thalli. This was most significant at low photon fluence rate (50 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}). However, when the segments were cultivated at high temperature conditions (20–25 °C) and at a high photon fluence rate (100 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}), 87% fragments released zoids within 4 days. The frequency of branch formation reached up to 68.7% under 20 °C and at 75 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}. Polarized growth was observed at high temperatures (20–25 °C) and at a low photon fluence rate (50 μmol m^{-2} s^{-1}).

3.2. Developmental process of Ulva prolifera polarized fragments

Once the *Ulva* segments were place in petri dishes (Fig. 2-a), the upper cut surfaces of *Ulva* thalli gave rise to a great number of new blade-lets (Fig. 2-b, c). At the beginning, some papillate structures appeared on the apical cut edges. Afterwards, the protoplast filled the voids of the papillae, which formed new cells (Fig. 2-d). Through continuous mitotic cell divisions, the new cells gradually grew into long intact blade-lets. On average, 25 new blade-lets were generated from the upper side of one segment. At the basal cut surfaces, cells were constantly elongated forming rhizoids, with the protoplasts unequally distributed in these elongated cells (Fig. 2-e, f).

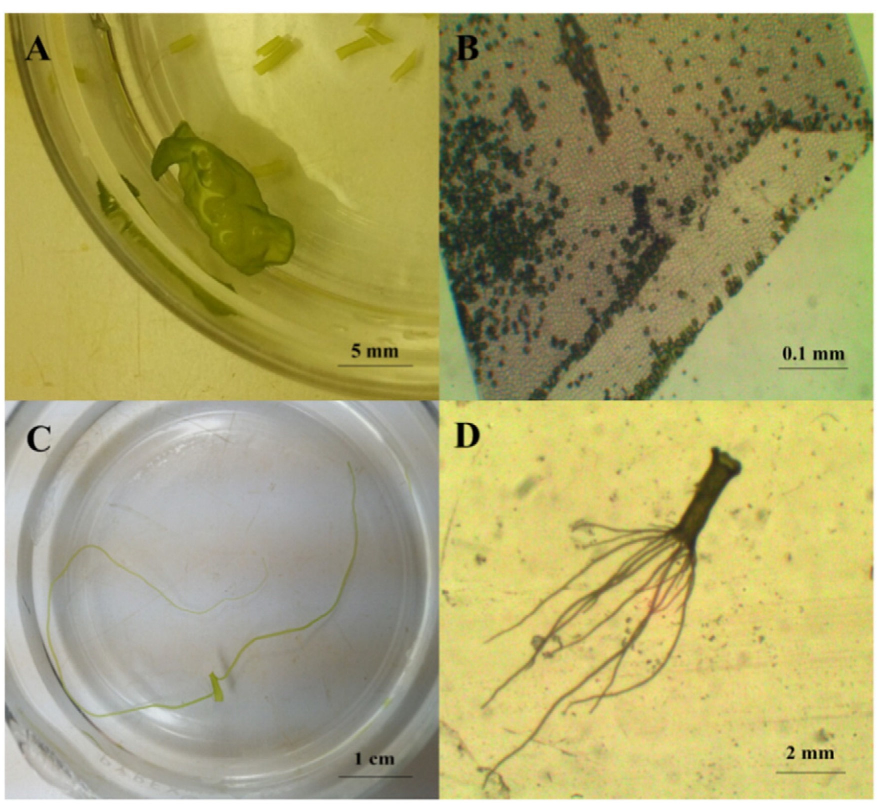

Fig. 1. Four developmental ways of *Ulva prolifera* fragments or segments (A: an inflated *U. prolifera* thallus, the fragments developed into an inflated tubular shape thallus, with the diameter approximately six times larger than that of the original segment; B: the *Ulva prolifera* segments released germ cells, which quickly attached on the sidewalls of flask and rapidly germinated into new germlings in less than 24 h; C: the thalli produced adventitious branches; D: polarized growth of an *U. prolifera* fragment, the upper cut surface formed a number of new blade-lets, and the lower cut surface gave rise to a few elongated rhizoids).