

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF *BACILLARIOPHYCEAE* AS BIOLOGICAL
MONITORS OF HEAVY METAL POLLUTION IN AUSTRALIAN TROPICAL
STREAMS**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE.....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF PLATES.....	x
ABSTRACT.....	xi
THESIS DECLARATION.....	xiii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xiv
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION	15
1.1 AUSTRALIAN WATER RESOURCES AND WATER QUALITY	15
1.2 MINING IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY	15
1.3 MONITORING CHANGE IN AQUATIC SYSTEMS	16
1.4 MONITORING AND BIOMONITORING OF AUSTRALIAN AQUATIC SYSTEMS	20
1.5 DIATOMS AS BIOLOGICAL INDICATORS.....	21
1.6 DIATOM TAXONOMIC ASSUMPTIONS	23
1.7 METHODS OF DIATOM MONITORING	26
1.8 DIATOM STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA AND THE TROPICS	28
1.9 DIATOM MONITORING OF HEAVY METAL POLLUTION	29
1.10 STUDY AIMS	300
1.11 THESIS STRUCTURE.....	31
CHAPTER 2 - CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY SITES	34
2.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF AUSTRALIAN TROPICAL RIVERS.....	34
2.1.1 Hydrology.....	34
2.1.2 Climate	34
2.1.3 Water chemistry.....	35
2.1.4 Biota	35
2.2 MINING IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY	35
2.2.1 Rum Jungle Mine.....	38
2.2.2 Tom's Gully Mine.....	38
2.2.3 Redbank Mine.....	39
2.2.4 Cosmo Howley Mine	39
2.2.4.1 Cosmo Howley Mine.....	39
2.2.4.2 Brocks Creek Mine.....	40
CHAPTER 3 - FIELD, LABORATORY, GENETIC AND STATISTICAL TECHNIQUES	41
3.1 FIELD METHODS	41
3.1.1 Selection of sites	41
3.1.2 Selection and measurement of environmental variables	46
3.1.3 AUSRIVAS observations.....	47
3.1.4 Diatom sampling	48
3.2 LABORATORY METHODS	48
3.2.1 Chemical Analysis.....	48
3.2.2 Diatom preparation techniques.....	50

3.2.3	<i>Diatom counting procedure and taxonomy</i>	50
3.2.4	<i>Selection of Nitzschia palea-like cells for culturing</i>	51
3.2.5	<i>Culturing</i>	51
3.2.6	<i>Image capturing of cultured N. palea cells</i>	52
3.2.7	<i>Morphometric measurements of N. palea clones</i>	52
3.2.8	<i>DNA extraction, amplification and sequencing of N. palea clones</i>	53
3.2.9	<i>Image capturing and descriptions of teratogenic diatoms</i>	54
3.3	STATISTICAL METHODS.....	54
3.3.1	<i>Introduction</i>	54
3.3.2	<i>Data screening</i>	55
3.3.3	<i>AquaRisk, metal ranking and bioavailability</i>	55
3.3.4	<i>Multivariate Analysis</i>	56
3.3.4.1	<i>Detrended Correspondence Analysis (DCA)</i>	56
3.3.4.2	<i>Canonical Correspondence Analysis (CCA)</i>	57
3.3.4.3	<i>Detrended Canonical Correspondence Analysis (DCCA)</i>	57
3.3.4.4	<i>Weighted averaging regression and calibration of diatom data</i>	58
3.3.5	<i>Statistical Analysis of morphometric data of cultured diatoms</i>	59
3.3.6	<i>Phylogenetic analysis</i>	59
3.3.7	<i>Criteria for selection of diatom indicator species</i>	60
3.3.8	<i>Diversity indexes</i>	61
3.3.8.1	<i>Simpson's index of diversity (D)</i>	61
3.3.8.2	<i>Shannon-Wiener diversity index (S);</i>	61
3.3.8.3	<i>Species Richness</i>	62
3.3.9	<i>Relationships between diversity indexes, pH and copper</i>	62
3.3.10	<i>Statistical analysis of teratological diatoms</i>	62
CHAPTER 4 - WATER CHEMISTRY AND DIATOM FLORA DESCRIPTIONS.....		64
4.1	INTRODUCTION.....	64
4.2	CHEMICAL GRADIENTS.....	64
4.2.1	<i>Rum Jungle Mine</i>	64
4.2.2	<i>Redbank Mine</i>	67
4.2.3	<i>Cosmo Howley Mine</i>	69
4.2.4	<i>Tom's Gully Mine</i>	71
4.3	CORRELATION MATRIX OF ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES.....	73
4.4	AQUARISK.....	76
4.5	DIATOM GENUS AND SPECIES FLORISTIC DESCRIPTIONS.....	79
4.5.1	<i>Iconograph</i>	81
4.5.1.1	<i>Introduction</i>	81
CHAPTER 5 - GENETICS.....		106
5.1	INTRODUCTION.....	106
5.2	MORPHOMETRIC DATA.....	108
5.2.1	<i>Cluster Analysis</i>	110
5.2.2	<i>Morphological correlations</i>	111
5.2.3	<i>Discussion</i>	114
5.3	PHYLOGENETIC TREE.....	115
5.3.1	<i>Discussion</i>	117
5.4	SPECIES DESCRIPTIONS.....	119
5.4.1	<i>Nitzschia palea</i>	119
5.4.2	<i>Nitzschia nana</i>	121
5.4.3	<i>Nitzschia spec. 39</i>	123
CHAPTER 6 - BIOLOGICAL INDICATORS.....		125
6.1	INTRODUCTION.....	125
6.2	COMMUNITY STRUCTURE TRANSFER FUNCTIONS.....	125
6.2.1	<i>Species with occurrences greater than one</i>	126
6.2.1.1	<i>Similarities and dissimilarities in species assemblages</i>	126

6.2.1.2	Analysis of diatom-environment relations.....	131
6.2.1.3	Gradient analysis of selected environmental variables.....	137
6.2.1.4	Weighted Averaging Partial Least Squares	137
6.2.1.5	Discussion.....	140
6.2.2	<i>Genus Transfer function</i>	143
6.2.2.1	Similarities and dissimilarities in diatom genus assemblages	143
6.2.2.2	CCA of the genus dataset	146
6.2.2.3	Gradient analysis of selected environmental variables.....	151
6.2.2.4	Discussion.....	151
6.2.3	<i>Species transfer function with bioavailable metal concentrations</i>	154
6.2.3.1	Similarities and dissimilarities in species assemblages	154
6.2.3.2	CCA of the species dataset with bioavailable metal concentrations.....	156
6.2.3.3	Gradient analysis of selected environmental variables.....	160
6.2.3.4	Discussion.....	163
6.3	DIVERSITY INDICES.....	165
6.3.1	<i>Diversity indexes and species richness</i>	165
6.3.2	<i>Relationships between indices and environmental variables</i>	167
6.3.3	<i>Discussion</i>	174
6.4	INDICATOR SPECIES	178
6.4.1	<i>Species occurrence and optima and tolerance values</i>	179
6.4.2	<i>Discussion</i>	187
6.5	TERATOLOGICAL FORMS OF DIATOMS	190
6.5.1	<i>Occurrence of normal and abnormal cells</i>	190
6.5.2	<i>Description of Nitzschia vasta</i>	191
6.5.3	<i>Description of teratological forms of Nitzschia vasta</i>	192
6.5.4	<i>Multivariate regressional analysis of relationships between Nitzschia vasta and pH and copper</i>	193
6.5.5	<i>Non-parametric linear regressions</i>	194
6.5.6	<i>Discussion</i>	195
CHAPTER 7 - STUDY CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH		
POSSIBILITIES.....		197
7.1	TAXONOMIC CONCLUSIONS	197
7.2	CONCLUSIONS FROM THE MONITORING STUDY	198
7.3	EXTENSION AND IMPROVEMENT OF DIATOM MONITORING HEAVY METAL POLLUTION	199
7.4	FUTURE DIATOM MONITORING STUDIES OF MINE IMPACTED FRESHWATER STREAMS ..	201
APPENDICES.....		202
APPENDIX 1: SITE OBSERVATION AND WATER CHEMISTRY MEASUREMENTS		203
APPENDIX 2: SITE WATER CHEMISTRY		205
APPENDIX 3: FIELD WORK SHEETS.....		207
APPENDIX 4: SPECIES LIST, CODES AND TAXONOMIX AUTHORITIES		209
APPENDIX 5: BIOAVAILABLE AND TOTAL METAL CONCENTRATIONS AT EACH SITE.....		214
APPENDIX 6: RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OF SPECIES OCCURRING MORE THAN ONCE.....		215
APPENDIX 7: RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OF GENERA OCCURRING MORE THAN ONCE		231
APPENDIX 8: GENETIC DISTANCES BETWEEN CULTURES AND <i>NITZSCHIA</i> SPECIES.....		235
REFERENCES.....		237

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure 2.1.</u>	Location of mine sites (★) in the Northern Territory.....	37
<u>Figure 3.1.</u>	Location of monitoring sites at Rum Jungle mine.....	42
<u>Figure 3.2.</u>	Location of monitoring sites RJI1-RJI5 at the Rum Jungle mine site.....	43
<u>Figure 3.3.</u>	Location of monitoring sites at Cosmo Howley mine.....	44
<u>Figure 3.4.</u>	Location of monitoring sites at Tom’s Gully mine.....	45
<u>Figure 3.5.</u>	Location of monitoring sites at Redbank mine.....	46
<u>Figure 4.1.</u>	Spatial trends of pH at Rum Jungle sites.....	65
<u>Figure 4.2.</u>	Spatial trend of selected metals (Al, Cu, Zn, Ca, Mg, Fe, SO ₄) at Rum Jungle sites (mg/L).....	66
<u>Figure 4.3.</u>	Nutrient trends at Rum Jungle sites (mg/L).....	67
<u>Figure 4.4.</u>	Spatial trends of pH at Redbank sites.....	68
<u>Figure 4.5.</u>	Spatial trends of selected metals (Al, Co, Cu, Mg, Fe, SO ₄) at Redbank sites (mg/L).....	69
<u>Figure 4.6.</u>	Spatial trends of pH at Cosmo Howley sites.....	70
<u>Figure 4.7.</u>	Spatial trends of selected metals (Al, Cu, Mg, Mn, Fe, SO ₄ , Zn) at Cosmo Howley sites (mg/L).....	70
<u>Figure 4.8.</u>	Nutrient trends at Cosmo Howley sites (mg/L).....	71
<u>Figure 4.9.</u>	Spatial trends of pH at Tom’s Gully sites.....	72
<u>Figure 4.10.</u>	Spatial trends of selected metals (Al, Cu, Ca, Mg, SO ₄) at Tom’s Gully sites (mg/L).....	72
<u>Figure 4.11.</u>	Nutrient trends at Tom’s Gully sites (mg/L).....	73
<u>Figure 4.12.</u>	Measurements of bioavailable and total copper at Rum Jungle sites.....	78
<u>Figure 4.13.</u>	Cumulative probability distribution of measured and modelled (bioavailable) copper (mg/L) concentrations in Rum Jungle samples (n=15).....	78
<u>Figure 4.14.</u>	Number of diatom species per 100 frustule count at Rum Jungle sites.....	79
<u>Figure 5.1.</u>	Dendrogram of 44 <i>Nitzschia palea</i> -like cultures.....	111
<u>Figure 5.2.</u>	Canonical plot of clusters and morphological variables.....	113
<u>Figure 5.3.</u>	Maximum likelihood tree inferred for <i>Nitzschia</i> cultures based on SSU sequences.....	117
<u>Figures 5.4-7.</u>	SEM micrographs of <i>Nitzschia palea</i> (TGI1B2).....	120
<u>Figures 5.8-12.</u>	Light micrographs of <i>Nitzschia palea</i>	121
<u>Figures 5.13–16.</u>	SEM micrographs of <i>Nitzschia nana</i> (BKI2D6).....	122
<u>Figures 5.17-22.</u>	Light micrographs of <i>Nitzschia nana</i>	123

<u>Figure 5.23-26.</u>	SEM micrographs of <i>Nitzschia</i> spec. 39 (TGI6G5 & SCUSCCD2).....	124
<u>Figures 5.27-28.</u>	Light micrographs of <i>Nitzschia</i> . spec. 39.....	124
<u>Figure 6.1.</u>	A plot of detrended correspondence analysis (DCA) of the 50 site dataset.....	130
<u>Figure 6.2.</u>	A biplot of detrended correspondence analysis of the species	131
<u>Figure 6.3.</u>	Canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) biplot showing the 7 forward-selected environmental variables and samples.....	135
<u>Figure 6.4.</u>	CCA biplot of all species from the dataset.....	136
<u>Figure 6.5.</u>	Plots of inferred versus observed values of pH, EC, SO ₄ , Mg and Cu concentrations based on WA-PLS models.....	140
<u>Figure 6.6.</u>	DCA biplot of genera and site scores.....	145
<u>Figure 6.7.</u>	CCA biplot of genera scores and environmental variables.....	149
<u>Figure 6.8.</u>	CCA biplot of genera and sample scores on axis 1 and 2.....	150
<u>Figure 6.9.</u>	DCA scatterplot of taxon scores on axis 1 and axis 2 (48 sites).....	155
<u>Figure 6.10.</u>	DCA scatterplot of site scores on axis 1 and axis 2 (48 sites).....	156
<u>Figure 6.11.</u>	CCA biplot of environmental variables and sites on axis 1 and axis 2.....	158
<u>Figure 6.12.</u>	CCA scatter plot of species scores on axis 1 axis 2.....	160
<u>Figure 6.13.</u>	Plots of observed versus inferred Cu, EC, Mn and Zn based on WA-PLS models.....	163
<u>Figure 6.14.</u>	Sample outlier analysis of jackknife distances.....	168
<u>Figure 6.15.</u>	Bivariate fit of species richness and pH excluding outlier samples (RJI3).....	169
<u>Figure 6.16.</u>	Bivariate fit of Simpson's index and pH (excluding outliers).....	170
<u>Figure 6.17.</u>	Bivariate fit of Shannon-Wiener index and pH (excluding outliers).....	171
<u>Figure 6.18.</u>	Bivariate fit of species richness and log copper (mg/L) (with all sites).....	172
<u>Figure 6.19.</u>	Bivariate fit of Simpson's index and copper (log mg/L) (with all sites).....	173
<u>Figure 6.20.</u>	Bivariate fit of Shannon-Wiener index and copper (log mg/L) (v.polluted sites).....	173
<u>Figure 6.21.</u>	Bivariate fit of Shannon-Wiener and Simpson's diversity indexes.....	174
<u>Figure 6.22.</u>	Relative abundance and modelled unimodal and monotonic responses of species to low pH.....	185
<u>Figures 6.23.</u>	Relative abundance and modelled unimodal and monotonic responses of indicator species for high pH.....	186
<u>Figures 6.24-28.</u>	SEM and light micrographs of <i>Nitzschia vasta</i> frustules from site BKI2.....	192
<u>Figures 6.29-32.</u>	SEM micrographs of teratological <i>Nitzschia vasta</i> valves from site CHI1.....	193
<u>Figure 6.33.</u>	Bivariate fit of percentage of teratological <i>N. vasta</i> frustules and pH.....	194

Figure 6.34. Bivariate fit of percentage of teratological *N. vasta* frustules and copper (mg/L
log)194

Figure 6.35. Rational curve fit of pH and percentage *N. vasta* valves with two parameters....195

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table 3.1.</u> Geographic and ecological information of culture sample sites.....	51
<u>Table 3.2.</u> Sequenced cultures of <i>Nitzschia palea</i> -like cells.....	54
<u>Table 4.1.</u> A correlation matrix of environmental variables.....	75
<u>Table 4.2.</u> Summary of environmental variable ranges for combined impacted and control sites after data screening.....	76
<u>Table 4.3.</u> Contaminants of potential concern at each mine (mg/L).....	77
<u>Table 5.1.</u> Morphometric data on <i>Nitzschia palea</i> cultures ($\bar{x} \pm \text{stdn}$).....	109
<u>Table 5.2.</u> Summary of the principle component analysis of <i>Nitzschia palea</i> cultures.....	112
<u>Table 5.3.</u> Pairwise correlations of morphological variables.....	112
<u>Table 5.4.</u> Morphological means of clusters.....	113
<u>Table 6.1.</u> Summary statistics for a DCA of the entire dataset of 50 samples.....	127
<u>Table 6.2.</u> Percentage of variance explained by the variables retained after stepwise forward selection	132
<u>Table 6.3.</u> Summary statistics for CCA of full dataset of 50 samples and 7 forward selected variables.....	133
<u>Table 6.4.</u> Environmental variable loadings.....	133
<u>Table 6.5.</u> Results of the WA-PLS for the calibration set (n=50).....	138
<u>Table 6.6.</u> Summary statistics for DCA of the entire genus dataset with 49 samples.....	144
<u>Table 6.7.</u> Percentage of variance explained by the variables retained after stepwise forward selection.....	147
<u>Table 6.8.</u> Summary of statistics for CCA of genus dataset of 49 samples and 7 forwards selected variables.....	147
<u>Table 6.9.</u> Environmental variable loadings.....	148
<u>Table 6.10.</u> Summary statistics for DCA of the entire dataset of 48 samples.....	154
<u>Table 6.11.</u> Percentage of variance explained by variables retained after stepwise forward selection	157
<u>Table 6.12.</u> Summary of statistics for CCA of genus dataset of 49 samples and 4 forwards selected variables.....	157
<u>Table 6.13.</u> Environmental variable loadings.....	158
<u>Table 6.14.</u> Results of the WA-PLS for the bioavailable dataset (n=48).....	161
<u>Table 6.15.</u> Diversity index and pH, copper values for each site.....	166
<u>Table 6.16.</u> Summary statistics for regressions of species richness and diversity indices for pH.	168

<u>Table 6.17.</u> Regressions of species richness and diversity indices for copper mg/L (log).....	172
<u>Table 6.18.</u> Species with abundances greater than 50% at one or more sites.....	179
<u>Table 6.19.</u> WA-PLS optima and tolerance for pH, Hills N2 and occurrence values for diatoms which occur at 7 or more sites.....	179
<u>Table 6.20.</u> pH range of the 14 very impacted sites.....	182
<u>Table 6.21.</u> pH range of the 17 control sites.....	183
<u>Table 6.22.</u> Occurrence of <i>Nitzschia vasta</i> frustules.....	191

LIST OF PLATES

<u>Plate 4.1.</u> White efflorescence salts at Rum Jungle site RJI1	66
<u>Plate 4.2.</u> Orange iron floc at Rum Jungle site RJI1	67

ABSTRACT

During the recessional flow period of 2004, benthic diatoms were sampled from four catchments in the tropics of the Northern Territory of Australia. Each of the catchments showed evidence of acid mine drainage. Diatoms were used in conjunction with physical and chemical water parameters to provide a biomonitoring approach with the ultimate goal to assess the water quality of the mine impacted catchments. A total of 267 species of diatoms from 45 genera were recorded from 50 sites in the Northern Territory.

One of the primary aims of this study was to assess diatom classification techniques, morphological and genetic, for the accurate identification of the morphologically variable taxon, *Nitzschia palea*. A second primary aim was to determine the degree to which diatom taxa and community structures can be effectively used as biological indicators and monitors of heavy metal pollution in tropical aquatic environments. To address the lack of diatom floristic studies from the Northern Territory, an iconograph of the most abundant taxa was created.

Forty eight *Nitzschia palea*-like cells were cultured and then grouped by hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's method). The reliability of the groups was tested with discriminant analysis. The morphological groups were compared to the phylogenetic grouping of 20 of the cultures which were each genetically sequenced using the nuclear-encoded small subunit rDNA. For monitoring studies, multivariate statistical techniques were used to produce models to infer environmental variables from diatom distributions. The three datasets used varied in terms of the level of taxonomic identification and the inclusion of bioavailable or total metal concentrations. The program AquaRisk was employed to determine the bioavailable concentrations of the heavy metals. Each dataset was related to water quality parameters using canonical correspondence analysis. The Simpson's index and the Shannon-Wiener diversity index were statistically related, together with species richness, to the variables pH and copper through bivariate regression analysis. To determine the usefulness of individual diatom taxa as indicators, species were selected based on their occurrence, weighted average optima and tolerance values, and species response curves. Additionally, teratogenic frustules were statistically correlated with environmental variables by bivariate and linear regression.

Although the *Nitzschia palea*-like cultures displayed morphological variation, which could be used separate the cultures into five distinct groups, the cultures were not found to be genetically variable. However, one new species, *Nitzschia* sp. 39, was defined genetically and described morphologically. As with other analyses of mine impacts, canonical correspondence analysis identified pH and aluminium as the principal environmental factors structuring the diatom communities. The calibration set models generated to infer pH and heavy metals had high predicative capabilities. Overall, the species dataset, rather than the datasets utilising genus level identification or bioavailable metal fractions, provided the statistically strongest results. Monitoring using diversity indices was less successful for indicating pollution. Contrary to findings from other studies, species richness tended to be higher in polluted waters than control sites. Unlike other studies of acidic environments, the species *Chamaepinnularia mediocris*, *Naviculadicta subtilissima*, *Nitzschia vasta* and *Pinnularia schoenfelderi* were found to be the best indicators. *Nitzschia vasta* was the only teratogenic diatom within the dataset. However, as with other analyses, the relationship between teratogenic valves and mine impact was not significant.

This study demonstrates the continued need for research in the tropics in order to better understand biological responses and enable study comparisons. Although at least one new

species was identified, the genetic research indicated that taxonomic texts produced for northern hemisphere regions can be applied to tropical diatom taxa as long as the risk of taxonomic force fitting is avoided. Additionally, the benefit of diatoms as biological monitors varies depending on the method utilised. In these highly impacted systems, transfer functions produced the strongest results. In contrast, it is evident that the abundance and distribution of teratological forms of diatoms are poor indicators of impact. Further work culturing diatoms and combining this technique with ecotoxicological work will help verify autecologies of taxa and their responses to co-varying pollutants. This will strengthen use of diatom taxa as indicator species. Continued monitoring of these sites can add much to our ecological understanding of these highly impacted systems which, in turn, will lead to better management of the systems for both sustainable resource development and conservation.

THESIS DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available in all forms of media, now or hereafter known.

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