Short Article

Different vertical distribution of diatoms in sea ice at the river mouth and off the eastern coast of Saroma-ko Lagoon, Hokkaido, Japan

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Abstract: The composition and cell abundance of diatoms in sea ice near the eastern coast of Saroma-ko Lagoon, Hokkaido, Japan, and near the mouth of the Saromabetsu River were reported in late February and early March 2023. Off the lagoon coast, a diatom bloom $(13.6 \times 10^{6} \text{ cells } 1^{-1})$ dominated by *Detonula confervacea* was found at the bottom 5 cm of sea ice. At the river mouth, however, the diatom cell abundance was highest in the top 5–10 cm layer (9.9 × 10⁶ cells 1^{-1}) and decreased with the depth of the sea ice. The diatom community here was overwhelmingly dominated by arborescent colonies of marine diatom *Nitzschia frigida* throughout the ice (4.4 × 10^{5} –9.9 × 10^{6} cells 1^{-1}), accounting for 97–100% of the total cells, which were thought to be adapted to the bottom ice environment. The high cell abundance at the river mouth was associated with lower nutrient concentrations implying that *N. frigida* had consumed nutrients of river water trapped in sea ice. These results suggest that the composition and vertical distribution of diatom species in sea ice in the lagoon can differ at a small spatial scale.

Key words: Fast ice; Ice algae; Ice algal bloom; Nitzscia frigida; Detonula confervacea

Introduction

Saroma-ko Lagoon (Hokkaido, Japan) is the lowestlatitude area covered by sea ice in the Northern Hemisphere. From January to March, sea ice covers on average > 60% of the lagoon (Tateyama and Enomoto, 2011) and ice thickness can exceed 50 cm (Nomura et al., 2022). Sea ice algae are the major primary

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受付日: 2024 年 7 月 5 日,受理日: 2024 年 12 月 3 日,WEB 掲載日: 2024 年 12 月 31 日



Fig. 1 Sampling locations in Saroma-ko Lagoon, Hokkaido, Japan.

producers, and their productivity is equivalent to that in the water column (Satoh et al., 1989). They develop high concentrations compared to the underlying phytoplankton, and chlorophyll *a* (Chl *a*) concentrations can reach > 290 μ g l⁻¹ in the bottom 10 cm of the ice layer (Nomura et al., 2022). During ice-melting periods, ice algae are released from the sea ice, and some can occasionally trigger phytoplankton blooms in seawater (Wilson et al., 1986) by acclimating to the seawater environment (e.g., higher light and low salinity). The remaining algal cells sink to the depths, providing organic matter for zooplankton (Saito and Hattori, 1997), or are subject to sedimentation at the water bottom (Sakoh et al., 1997; Taguchi et al., 1997).

To understand the role of sea ice in the primary production in seasonally ice-covered oceans, it is necessary to obtain information on the species composition and cell abundance of ice algae. In Saromako Lagoon, various microalgae have been reported from sea ice (Ikeya et al., 2001; Yoshida et al., 2020; Nomura et al., 2024). The large pool size of photoprotective pigments and high plasticity in photosynthetic performance relative to light availability suggest that ice-algal communities can respond to fluctuating and low-light conditions (Aikawa et al., 2009; Takimoto et al., 2017; Yoshida et al., 2020). Their photosynthetic performance, however, depends on the species, based on studies in Saroma-ko Lagoon (Takimoto et al., 2017) and other oceanic water bodies (Yoshida et al., 2018; Takao et al., 2020). In addition to photosynthesis in sea ice, subsequent bloom formation in seawater may depend on the species composition of ice algae, because a limited number of species form blooms after sea ice melts (Takahashi et al., 2022). Understanding the spatial and temporal variability of ice-algal compositions can therefore help to elucidate the impact of sea ice on primary production in seasonal ice zones.

In this study, we focused on the diatom communities at two sites in Saroma-ko Lagoon, one of which is close to the river mouth and feeds into the lagoon. Previous floristic studies sampled sea ice in the inner areas of Saroma-ko Lagoon, which was likely formed via the freezing of seawater (salinity ~32, Nomura et al., 2022) and focused on the most productive bottom community (Yoshida et al., 2020). The diatoms Detonula confervacea, Odontella sp., Navicula spp. and Fragilariopsis cylindrus are commonly found and dominant in sea ice (Taguchi et al., 1995; Ikeya et al., 2001; Takimoto et al. 2017; Yoshida et al., 2020; Nomura et al., 2022, 2024). However, four major rivers enter the lagoon, providing freshwater to the system (Fig. 1). Brackish water at river mouths may lead to biota that differ from those in the offshore areas. Possible reasons for this include the input of freshwater or brackish species during sea ice formation and differences in nutrient concentrations and salinity. Hence, we report for the first time the cell abundance and species composition of ice algae at the mouth of the Saromabetsu River.

Materials and methods

The observation was conducted in Saroma-ko Lagoon in northern Japan at St. N (44°07'12" N, 143°57'21" E) on February 28, 2023 and at St. R (44°04'48" N, 143°56'12" E) on March 1, 2023 (Fig. 1) as part of a multidisciplinary study on sea ice (Nomura et al., 2024). The distance between the two stations was approximately 4.7 km. The water depth was 6.0 m at St. N and 1.8 m at St. R. A set of two sea ice cores (one for salinity, Chl a, and nutrient concentration and the other for microscopic analysis) was collected at each station using a standard corer (90 mm diameter, Mark II coring system; Kovacs Enterprises, Inc.). The ice thicknesses were 35 cm and 45 cm at St. N and St. R, respectively for the measurements of salinity, Chl a, and nutrient concentration measurements (Nomura et al., 2024). Those for microscopic analysis were 36 cm (St. N) and 45 cm thick (St. R). At St. N, ice cores were cut into six and seven sections (5-7 cm thickness per each section) for microscopy and the other parameters, respectively. At St. R, they were cut into nine sections with uniform thickness (5 cm) for all parameters.

For the microscopic analysis, each ice section was allowed to melt at room temperature without adding filtered seawater. Algal cells in sea-ice meltwater were fixed by adding neutral Lugol's iodine solution (Edler and Elbrächter, 2010, final concentration 2%) and stored at +4°C in the dark. At least 400 cells were counted using an inverted light microscope (x 400 magnification) after concentrating 10 ml of water in an Utermöhl chamber (Edler and Elbrächter, 2010). Only the cells with protoplasts were counted for calculating cell abundance (cells 1-1). Sea-ice salinity, Chl a, and macronutrient (NO₃⁻, PO₄³⁻, and Si(OH)₄) concentrations were obtained from Nomura et al. (2024). Under-ice water (+1 m and +0.6 m from the ice bottom at St. N and St. R, respectively) and slush (snow mixed with seawater at the top of sea ice) were also collected for salinity and macronutrient measurements (Nomura et al., 2024). To identify the *Navicula* species in the top and bottom ice samples, diatom valves were observed at \times 1,000 magnification under an upright light microscope. Diatom valves were cleaned (removing protoplast) by a bleaching agent (Nagumo, 1995) and the permanent slides were prepared following Takahashi and Makabe (2023).

The relationships between total cell abundance and

nutrient concentrations were plotted after normalizing the nutrient concentration to the salinity of under-ice water and sea ice. Because macronutrient concentration is highly dependent on sea ice salinity, its relationship with algal concentration can be obscured by physical changes in sea ice such as the release (decrease) of nutrients by the desalination of sea ice (Fripiat et al., 2017). Therefore, we determined the salinity-normalized nutrient concentration (Fripiat et al., 2017), which is calculated as follows:

$$*C = \frac{S_W}{S_I} \times C$$

where *C is the salinity-normalized concentration; S_W and S_I are the salinities of under-ice water and sea ice, respectively; C is the bulk concentration of sea ice (NO₃⁻, PO₄³⁻, and Si(OH)₄). S_W was 27.6 at St. N and 0.6 at St. R.

Results

The total diatom cell abundance in sea ice ranged from 4.4×10^5 cells l⁻¹ to 13.6×10^6 cells l⁻¹ (Fig. 2). The maximum diatom cell abundance was found in the bottom 31–36 cm layer at St. N, and in the top 5–10 cm layer at St. R (Fig. 2). Chl *a* concentration ranged from 3.2–71.2 µg l⁻¹ and corresponded with the diatom distribution.

Microscopic analysis using an Utermöhl chamber identified 10 and 3 genera at St. N and St. R, respectively. Four taxa among them were identified only at the genus level. The species composition was also different between the two stations, where diverse communities (Detonula confervacea, Melosira arctica, and Chaetoceros spp.) were found at St. N, while arborescent colonies of the marine diatom Nitzschia frigida (Fig. 3f) accounted for 97.1-100.0% of the total cells throughout the sea ice core at St. R. At St. N, D. confervacea was predominant in the sample from the ice bottom (83.3%). In contrast, its contribution to the total cells gradually decreased towards the upper layers. The top and middle layers of sea ice had higher contributions of Chaetoceros spp. (0.0-17.3%), Fragilariopsis spp. (1.8-14.2%), and Navicula spp. (0.4–13.9%). According to the observations of the cleaned materials, the identified Navicula species included N. transitans and N. septentrionalis at St. N and N. lanceolata at St. R. Of the identified diatoms, both



Fig. 2 Vertical distribution of chlorophyll *a* concentration, total cell abundance and species composition of diatoms.

fresh (*Navicula lanceolata*) and marine diatoms (others) were detected at St. R.

Sea ice salinity was significantly lower at St. R (0.0–2.0) than at St. N (3.6–10.5) and highest at 0–5 cm layers (Fig. 4a–c). The bulk macronutrient concentration generally increased with higher salinity and except NO₃⁻ at St. N and the maximum concentration was found in slush (0 m) at both stations. NO₃⁻, PO₄^{3–}, and Si(OH)₄ concentrations ranged 1.3–9.6 μ mol 1^{–1}, 0.2–1.3 μ mol 1^{–1}, 5.2–32.9 μ mol 1^{–1}, respectively at St. N, being generally lower than St. R (4.2–52.5 μ mol 1^{–1}, 0.6–4.2 μ mol 1^{–1}, 1.5–138.9 μ mol 1^{–1}, for NO₃⁻, PO₄^{3–}, and Si(OH)₄, respectively).

The salinity-normalized nutrient concentrations (*NO₃⁻, *PO₄³⁻, and *Si(OH)₄) showed different trends at St. N and St. R (Fig. 4d–i). At St. N, nutrient concentration generally increased with diatom total cell abundance but only *Si(OH)₄ had significant linear relationship (Pearson correlation coefficient, r = 0.90, *p* < 0.05, Fig. 4f). At St. R, *NO₃⁻ and *Si(OH)₄ decreased with higher cell abundance and the relationship with *NO₃⁻ was found significant (Pearson correlation coefficient, r = -0.73, *p* < 0.05, Fig. 4g).

Discussion

The vertical distribution of Chl a concentration at St. N agrees with previous studies, where sea-ice algae develop at the bottom part (~ 10 cm from the bottom), and Chl *a* concentration in this layer reaches > 290 μ g 1⁻¹ (Nomura et al., 2022). However, algal blooms in the top layer of the sea ice (St. R) have rarely been reported in fast ice (Whitaker and Richardson, 1980). In firstyear or multiyear ice, macronutrients are scarce in the upper part of the sea ice unless there is flooding or flushing of seawater (Whitaker and Richardson, 1980) or vertical convection of brine (Fritsen et al., 1994) or snowfall (Nomura et al., 2011). According to Nomura et al. (2024), NO₃⁻, PO₄³⁻, and Si(OH)₄ concentrations were higher at the top (snow-ice interface) and bottom of the sea ice at both stations, suggesting that both snow and seawater provided nutrients (Nomura et al., 2011). In this study, the bulk concentrations of NO₃⁻, PO₄³⁻, and Si(OH)₄ were generally higher at the upper sea ice layers, corresponding to sea ice salinity (Fig. 4a-c). The release and convection of brine at the lower layers (Tison et al.,

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Fig. 3 The dominant diatom species found in sea ice. The Lugol-fixed cells (a–f) and the cleaned materials (g–m) prepared following Nagumo (1995) and Takahashi and Makabe (2023). a: *Chaetoceros* sp., b: *Cylindrotheca closterium*, c: *Detonula confervacea*, d: *Fragilariopsis* sp., e: *Melosira arctica*, f: *Nitzschia frigida*, g: *Detonula confervacea*, h: *Fragilariopsis cylindrus*, i: *Fragilariopsis oceanica*, j: *Nitzschia frigida*. k: *Navicula lanceolata*, l: *Navicula transitans*, and m: *Navicula septentrionalis* (valve and girdle views). The scale bar is 50 μ m for images a–f and 20 μ m for images g–m. The figures a–e, g–i, and l, m are from St. N and figures f, j, k are from St. R.

2008) or flooding of seawater at the top by tide (Ishii and Toyota, 2012) or input from snow (Nomura et al., 2011) likely influenced the vertical distribution of salinity and nutrients. However, the average concentrations of the three macronutrients in sea ice were 2.4–3.3 times higher at St. R than at St. N (Fig. 4a–c). At St. R, ice salinity and temperature showed little vertical fluctuation (ranging from 0.5 to 2.0 for salinity and –0.1 to +0.1°C for temperature), suggesting that brine convection and nutrient replenishment following the cooling of ice (Fritsen et al., 1994) was not responsible for the high nutrient concentration at St. R. Macronutrient concentrations in snow at St. R were only 0.0–0.7 times of those at St. N (Nomura et al., 2024), therefore snowfall does not explain higher nutrient availability at St. R. The macronutrient concentration of under-ice water (i.e., the origin of sea ice) was 4.5–11.7 times higher at St. R than St. N which is shown as the steeper theoretical dilution lines (Fig. 4a–c). This likely led to higher bulk nutrient concentrations in sea ice at St. R, particularly in the high saline upper layers, supporting the development of algae in the ice.

The relationships between diatoms and nutrient concentration differed between the two stations; $*Si(OH)_4$ was enriched with increased total cell abundance at St. N while $*NO_3^-$ was negatively correlated with cell abundance (Fig. 4f, g). This is likely due to the vertical distribution of ice algae. St. N and previous studies have found algal concentration is highest in the bottom of the sea ice, where nutrients are more available from



Fig. 4 Salinity and macronutrient concentration in sea ice and slush (a–c) from Nomura et al. (2024). The circles and squares represent St. N and St. R, respectively. The theoretical dilution lines (TDL) are plotted using under-ice water salinity and nutrient concentration data of under-ice water. The solid and dashed TDL represent St. N and St. R respectively. The relationships between total cell abundance and salinity-normalized nutrient concentrations at St. N (d–f) and St. R (g–i). The coefficients (r) and p-values are from Pearson correlation.

seawater (Taguchi et al., 1995; Wongpan et al., 2020). Ishii and Toyota (2012) found brine salinity at the bottom of sea ice was higher than the under-ice seawater off the eastern coast during the mid-February. This condition enhances vertical convection of brine and seawater and could introduce nutrients into sea ice (Tison et al., 2008). At St. R, algal bloom developed in the interior of sea ice, being remote from the sources of nutrient (seawater). In contrast, *PO4³⁻ showed no relationship both at St. N and St. R (Fig. 4e, h). PO4³⁻ can be provided by remineralization of phosphorus in organic matter and the enrichment can exceed uptake by algae in sea ice (Fripiat et al., 2017; Takahashi et al., 2022), resulting in the relationship between PO4³⁻ and diatom abundance indiscernible. These findings suggest that the dominant diatoms *Detonula confervace*a utilized nutrients supplied from under-ice water, while *N. frigida* consumed those from river water trapped in the upper layers.

The diatom composition at St. N agrees with that of previous studies, in which *D. confervacea* dominated off the eastern coast of Saroma-ko Lagoon (Taguchi et al., 1995; Yoshida et al., 2020; Nomura et al., 2022, 2024). It reportedly grows well at moderate temperatures (around 12°C), yet under cold (+2°C) and dim light conditions (< 50 μ mol photons m⁻² s⁻¹, photosynthetically active radiation, PAR), its division rate surpassed those at higher irradiance (Smayda, 1969). The Chl *a* productivity measured at St. N (Nomura et al., 2024) supports the

notion that this species is adapted to low light (maximum Chl *a* production rate at 29–32 μ mol photons m⁻² s⁻¹). Takimoto et al. (2017) and Wongpan et al. (2020) reported that PAR transmittance of sea ice off the eastern coast of Saroma-ko Lagoon was 0.3–2.5%, which yields 1.0–32.2 μ mol photons m⁻² s⁻¹ at the bottom. These findings suggest that this species prefers dim light conditions, such as those in the bottom section of sea ice.

The diatom at St. R, Nitzschia frigida, is for the first time reported to be dominant in Saroma-ko Lagoon. It has been reported in sediments, sea ice, and seawater in the lagoon but is not dominant (< 5% of the total cell count or algal volume) in sea ice (Taguchi et al., 1995; Ikeya et al., 2001; Satoh et al., 1991). It is deemed as an important primary producer in Arctic sea ice because it occasionally forms blooms in first-year and multiyear ice (up to 2.5×10^7 cells l⁻¹, von Quillfeldt et al., 2003). This species is known to acclimate to sea ice (high salinity and low temperature) and is expected to survive in under-ice water and be incorporated into ice again from fall to winter (Olsen et al., 2017). Its bloom formation is restricted to the bottom ice or sub-ice layers, where the light intensity is low, and more nutrients are available than in the upper parts of the sea ice (von Quillfeldt et al., 2003). Suzuki and Takahashi (1995) found that it has adapted to cold water $(-1.8 \text{ to } +2.0^{\circ}\text{C})$ and low light (maximum growth rate at 50 μ mol photons m⁻² s⁻¹). Croteau et al. (2022) reported even lower light levels for optimal growth (23 μ mol photons m⁻² s⁻¹) at 0°C. In this study, however, the cell abundance of N. frigida at St. R was highest near the surface, with a relatively high light intensity. It remains unclear how blooms form in the near-top layer, yet one possibility is that frazil ice may capture phytoplankton during sea ice formation (Garrison et al., 1989). Nitzschia frigida was associated with a granular ice layer (sea ice formed via the accretion of frazil ice or snow whose vertical texture appears as a composite of grains) that extends from the top to a depth of 31 cm (Nomura et al., 2024). Satoh et al. (1991) reported N. frigida is a benthic diatom in the lagoon, and the shallow water depth at St. R (1.8 m) may support its incorporation from the sediment to sea ice. Frazil ice is reported to contain up to 138.4 μ g Chl *a* l⁻¹ (DiTullio et al., 1998), and micro-sized N. frigida is more efficiently incorporated into frazil ice than smaller (< 4 μ m) algae (Różańska et al., 2008). Although Navicula spp. cells in

this study were similar or larger in size to *N. frigida* cells (Fig. 3k–m); they did not form colonies and present as solitary or doublet cells. Gradinger and Ikävalko (1998) reported that the larger the cell size, the more efficiently pennate diatoms are incorporated into the newly formed sea ice. The arborescent colonies of *N. frigida* (Fig. 3f) could enhance their incorporation into sea ice. The algal composition and concentration in thinner ice at the earlier season need to be addressed to further test the hypothesis (frazil ice scavenging) on ice algal bloom in the river mouth.

Conclusion

This study is the first to report algal communities at the river mouth of Saroma-ko Lagoon. Unlike sea ice off the eastern coast, the algal concentration was found peaked in the upper layer of sea ice and was dominated by N. frigida which is thought to form blooms in the bottom and sub-ice layers. We found a decrease in *NO3in the N. frigida-dominated sea ice, suggesting that N. frigida had actively grown in the sea ice resulted in an ice-algal bloom. We surmise that river water rich in macronutrient and shallow water depth (proximity to benthic diatoms including N. frigida which are prone to be incorporated during sea ice formation) likely resulted in different vertical distribution and species composition at the two stations in Saroma-ko, Lagoon. Our findings help us understand how brackish water at river mouths can influence ice algal communities as well as biogeochemical properties in sea ice (Nomura et al., 2024).

Acknowledgements

We would like to express heartfelt thanks to Saroma Research Center of Aquaculture, Napal Kitami, research member for their support in conducting the field work. We thank Dr. Akihiro Shiomoto (Tokyo University of Agriculture) and one anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments which greatly improved the manuscript. This study was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) KAKENHI Grants Nos. 21J14914 and 24KJ0006 for K.D. Takahashi, and the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability II (ArCS II) (JPMXD1420318865) for D. Nomura.

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