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Uncovering biological soil crusts: Carbon content and structure of intact Arctic, Antarctic and alpine biological soil crusts

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Abstract. Arctic, Antarctic and alpine biological soil crusts (BSCs) are formed by adhesion of soil particles to exopolysaccharides (EPS), excreted by cyanobacterial and green algal communities, the pioneers and main producers in these habitats. These BSCs provide and influence many ecosystem services such as soil erodibility, soil formation and Nitrogen- (N) as well as carbon- (C) cycles. In cold environments degradation rates are low and BSCs increase continuously soil organic C, whereby these soils are considered as CO_2 sinks. This work provides a novel, non-destructive and highly comparable method to investigate intact BSCs with a focus on cyanobacteria and green algae and their contribution to soil organic C. A new terminology arose, based on confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) 2D biomaps, dividing BSCs into a photosynthetic active layer (PAL), made of active photoautotrophic organisms and a photosynthetic inactive layer (PIL), harbouring remnants of cyanobacteria and green algae glued together by their remaining EPS. By the application of CLSM image analysis (CLSM–IA) to 3D biomaps, C coming from photosynthetic active organisms could be visualized as depth profiles with C peaks at 0.5 to 2 mm depth. Additionally, the CO_2 sink character of these cold soil habitats dominated by BSCs could be highlighted, demonstrating that the first cm^3 of soil is made of between 7 and 17 % total organic carbon, identified by loss on ignition.

1 Introduction

Antarctica, the Arctic and the Alps are dominated by a range of extreme environmental conditions which impose severe pressure on biological life, particularly for vegetation: They begin where trees no longer dominate the vegetation, usually have temperatures below 10 °C in the warmest month (Körner 1998), and are characterized by snow fall, at least in winter. Permafrost, long periods of darkness, continuous irradiance, short growing seasons, stable snow covers and rocky sites with low nutrient supply represent other common challenges of these ecosystems (Bayard et al., 2005; Forman and Miller 1984; Thomas et al., 2008a). Thus, plant cover is sparse, decomposition rates and biodiversity are generally low; e.g. only the grass *Deschampsia antarctica* Desv. and the Antarctic pearlwort *Colobanthus quitensis* (Kunth) Bartl as autochthonous flowering

plants occur in Antarctica which are solely distributed in a few suitable areas (Thomas et al., 2008b). Instead, conglomerations of soil particles, (cyano-) bacteria, algae, microfungi, lichens and bryophytes create a skin known as biological soil crust (BSC), dominate these ecosystems (Belnap et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2017). Cyanobacteria especially are important players within these intimate associations. They adhere the subsurface and surface, because their secreted extracellular polysaccharides (EPS) form a mechanical structure, surrounding the bacterial cells that together with the soil particles form a visible organic matrix on top and within the first millimetres of soil (Mazor et al., 1996; Breen and Lévesque 2008; Garcia-Pichel and Belnap, 1996; Garcia-Pichel et al., 2003).

These frequently diverse cyanobacterial communities within a BSC can be categorized into three major groups (similar for green algae), based on functional traits (Weber et al., 2016), found in hot and cold deserts worldwide (Johansen 1993; Belnap and Lange 2001): (1) Filamentous cyanobacteria, such as *Microcoleus* or *Leptolyngbya* stabilize soils due to the presence of extracellular matrix made of EPS. Those cyanobacteria cause crust formation and are also the most abundant cyanobacteria species in BSCs (Johansen 1993). Building filaments is an essential feature that enables cyanobacteria to colonize physically unstable environments e.g., cryoturbation, and to act as successful pioneers in the bio stabilization process against erosion (Garcia-Pichel and Wojciechowski 2009). Remaining EPS retains these features over many years after the trichomes have either moved out of their sheath envelopes or died. (2) Cyanobacteria such as *Chroococcidiopsis* and *Scytonema* prefer to live in the BSC environment, enhancing the ecological role of BSCs, e.g., through their contribution to C- and N- cycling. (3) Some cyanobacteria like *Phormidium* or *Chroococcus* are known to occur only stochastically in BSCs and may originate from other habitats, such as an aquatic environment or through lichen symbiosis.

Regarding their extremophile character in areas limited by temperature and/or water availability, cyanobacteria and green algae play key roles as ecosystem engineers if other photoautotrophic clades are absent (Belnap 2003). Therefore, a large proportion of important ecosystem services are influenced by cyanobacterial communities, such as erodibility (Belnap and Gillette, 1998; Bowker et al., 2008), soil formation (Rillig and Mummey 2006), soil moisture (Belnap, 2006), C- and N- cycling (Shively et al., 2001; Tiedje 1988; Kowalchuk and Stephen 2001). Providing an initial structural foundation, they physically modify, maintain, or create habitats for other organisms and accumulate biomass. Hence, they may form the nutritional basis for higher trophic levels, such as reindeers in the Arctic (Cooper and Wookey 2001, Elster et al., 1999).

Currently, these high altitude and latitude ecosystems are experiencing effects of human induced environmental changes that are expected by many prospective predictions to be both larger in magnitude and have great impacts (Bálint et al., 2011). BSCs have recently been shown to be vulnerable to the potential impact of climate change as well as to shifting meteorological conditions since their activity and structure is strongly affected (Escolar et al., 2012; Kuske et al., 2012; Wertin et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2013; Maestre et al., 2013). Therefore, it is likely that an invasion of foreign species will alter the BSC composition during warming events in the Arctic and the Antarctic Peninsula (Pushkareva et al., 2016). In terms of climate change their microbiota is a focal point of scientific interest because in contrast to their local habitat function they also provide atmospheric overall services by fixing and storing substantial amounts of C (Evans and Lange 2003), whereby they can increase the total surface soil C by up to 300 % (reviewed in Belnap et al., 2003). Soil in general is the largest pool of C in the biosphere, storing

three times the amount of C in above ground biomass and two times the amount in the atmosphere (Schlesinger and Andrews 2000). BSCs are considered a major source of soil organic C in for example, semiarid ecosystems (Evans and Lange 2003; Housman et al., 2006), accumulating C as carbohydrates in EPS and as energy reserves for cells through their photosynthetic mechanism (Bertocchi et al., 1990).

Most parts of the earth are now 10,000 to 18,000 years removed from the last major glacial episode (Schlesinger 1990), and lands once covered by continental glaciers are now accumulating soil organic C at a rate possibly between 0.075 and 0.18 Gt of C year^{-1} (Harden et al., 1992). Hence, these soils may be sinks for CO_2 within the atmospheric CO_2 balance (Amundson 2001). The large carbon pools of the biosphere can lead to accelerated emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, if destabilized through changes in climate and land use (Gruber et al., 2004). Taken into consideration that BSCs are valuable ecological indicators for abiotic factors, ecological health and climate change (Belnap et al., 2001, Pushkareva et al., 2016), these communities will certainly improve the prediction of future climate change (Pushkareva et al., 2016). Thus, it is necessary to improve our knowledge regarding complex BSC interactions. Fluorescence microscopy has been applied repeatedly to cryptogamic organisms since photoautotrophic organisms emit naturally auto fluorescence (Schallenberg et al., 1989; Kuwae and Hosokawa 1999; Solé et al., 2009; Raanan et al., 2016). The confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) technique applied in this work gives novel insights into the complex architecture of BSCs, avoiding the need to either manipulate or stain the samples. Moreover, it allows accurate and non-destructive optical investigations of BSC cross sections that generate high resolution images where out-of-focus is eliminated. As a highly comparable approach, it is possible for the first time to calculate C values and partitioning patterns of green algae and cyanobacteria within intact BSCs by applying the CLSM image analysis (CLSM–IA) procedure developed by the group of Solé (2009). Additionally, these results were set in relation to organic C values obtained by loss on ignition to highlight the CO_2 sink character of the first cm³ of these cold soils dominated by BSCs.

2 Material and methods

2.1 Study sites

Hochtor, near the Großglockner High Alpine Road, Hohe Tauern National Park in Austria represents the Alpine site. The site is placed in the high mountains of Hohe Tauern (Austria), close to the Grossglockner High Alpine Road at 47°50’ N and 12°51’ E. The elevation ranges from 2,500 to 2,600 m a.s.l. The climate is Alpine with a mean air temperature ranging from -10 to -8 °C in January and 2 to 4 °C in July. On average, there are 250 frost days, 150–200 ice days and 80 to 90 frost alternation days each year. Mean annual precipitation is between 1,750 and 2,000 mm, with more than 70 % falling as snow. Snow cover lasts for 270–300 days. Under these climatic conditions development of soil and the subsequent establishment of higher plants is extremely slow but high coverage of BSCs are recorded (Büdel et al., 2014).

The Arctic region is represented by two localities in Spitsbergen, Svalbard: Ny-Ålesund (78°55’26.33’’N, 11°55’23.84’’E) and Geopol (78°56’58.38’’N, 11°28’35.64’’E), with a polar tundra climate (Peel et al., 2007, Vogel et al., 2012). Ny-Ålesund

is an international research platform on the Brøgger peninsula at the coast of Kongsfjorden. Geopol lies roughly 8 km north-west off Ny-Ålesund and is a rocky site, dominated by skeletal soils and permafrost polygons. The temperature is low year-round with an annual average of -4.5 °C, the highest and lowest monthly temperatures range between 5.8 °C (July) and -12 °C (March), respectively (Maturilli et al., 2013). However, longer cold periods (-20 to -35 °C) are possible. The annual precipitation averages 471 mm at both habitats with 70 % falling between October and May, when snow cover is usually complete (based on data from the Norwegian Meteorological Institute). The surface soil of the A-horizon (0–5 cm) has a predominantly sandy texture. Svalbard is covered by less than 10 % of vegetation, current information includes ca. 170 vascular plants, ca. 350 bryophytes (Bengtsson 1999), and ca. 600 lichen species (Elvebakk and Hertel 1997), including intact BSC communities, occupying more than 90 % of the soil surface in many areas (Williams et al., 2017).

The Antarctic habitat lies around the Juan Carlos I base (62°39'46.00''S, 60 °23'20.00''W), which is located in the South Bay of Livingston Island, Antarctica. Livingston Island belongs to the South Shetland archipelago in the Southern Ocean which is situated near the Antarctic Peninsula. It ranges from 61° to 63° south latitude and from 54° to 63° west longitude. Mean annual temperatures are -2.8 °C with summer mean temperatures above freezing, and maximum mean temperature is 4.3 °C (Bañón et al., 2013). Mean annual precipitation is 444.5 mm, with 75 % falling in summer and autumn (Bañón et al., 2013). The surface soil of the A–horizon (0–5 cm) of the test sites was characterized as sandy loam as the dominating texture class. Numbers of lichen (110) and bryophyte (50) species were reported from the vicinity of Juan Carlos I base in Livingston by Sancho et al., (1999), as well as large proportions (43 %) of BSC coverage (Williams et al., 2017).

2.2 Sample collection

Samples from Hochtor (Austria, alpine) were taken during the Soil Crust International Project (SCIN) in July, 2012 (Büdel et al., 2014). Samples from Livingston Island (Antarctica) were collected during February 2015 and samples from Svalbard, Spitzbergen (Geopol and Ny-Ålesund, Arctic) in August 2014 (Williams et al., 2017).

Samples were taken by pressing a sterile 94 mm diameter Petri-dish into the crust to remove the top 1 cm of the photic zone from the surrounding BSC. Excess soil was removed with the Petri-dish lid from the samples, which were left to air dry in the field immediately after collection for 2–3 days, until no condensation formation occurred any more. The dry and sealed crust samples were preserved at -20 °C until further processing. For this study the samples were slowly defrosted under air-tight conditions and used for investigations.

2.3 Sample preparation

Representative, intact, 1 cm thick parts of the BSC with soil substrate were completely embedded in a 0.9 % agarose pre-chilled solution in glass Petri-dishes. Therefore, 12 hours of cooling and hardening at room temperature in daylight was sufficient, and water available from the agarose matrix, reactivated the BSC organisms. The block was cut with a razor blade to obtain cross sections of the intact, activated and fixed BSC.

2.4 CLSM and biomaps

Cross sections were examined with a CLSM (LSM 700, Carl Zeiss) equipped with diode lasers. Photomultiplier parameters were adjusted to achieve the maximum signal from the chlorophyll and phycobiliproteins of present and active photoautotrophic organisms, while simultaneously keeping the noise signals generated by the soil particles and the agarose matrix to a minimum. Auto fluorescence of green algae (chlorophyll a) and cyanobacteria (chlorophyll a and phycobiliproteins) were excited by beams of 555 nm and 639 nm wavelengths respectively. Using two laser beams made it possible to differentiate between green algae and cyanobacteria whereby superimposed images were generated by the outputs of two channels. Emitted wavelengths were collected using a band-pass filter 530/30 and cyanobacterial natural fluorescence with a 590 nm long pass filter. Z-stacks were scanned through the BSCs with a 10x objective (n.a. 0.7 Achroplan, colour depth 8 bit). Stack series of the cross sections were taken along the depth of the sample, from the surface of the crust to where the pure soil without fluorescence signals started and the BSC structure ended. Each image frame per depth was chosen to contain a small overlap section to align the single images, showing the structure of the BSC. Each stack contained between 40 and 140 single images (512x512 pixel resolution), with three replicates per site and depth (6012 single images). Complete stacks were used to calculate C contents (3D biomap), their maximum projection was converted into 2D pictures to present the BSC structure and to obtain area patterns of green algae and cyanobacteria (2D biomap) by the procedure of CLSM–IA with the software *ImageJ 1.47v*.

2.5 CLSM micrographs

Cyanobacteria and green algae were isolated from an aqueous solution of BSC material under the binocular stereoscope. The CLSM micrographs were obtained as indicated above except a 63x objective was used and immersion oil as well as light microscopy was utilized in the same way.

2.6 CLSM–IA: Partitioning estimation

Maximum projections of the 2D biomaps were used to calculate the total area of the soil crust in mm² and to differentiate between percentages occupied by algae or cyanobacteria based on their specific auto fluorescence traits with *ImageJ 1.47v*. Thallus structures and EPS surrounding cyanobacteria and green algae were also taken into consideration because at least the outer periphery of the mucilage reflects light, coming from fluorescent pigments of the cell itself. Bryophytes and lichens were neglected although they belong within BSC organisms, because they grow upright out of the soil in different developmental stages, shifting the relative thickness of the BSC.

2.7 CLSM–IA: Carbon estimation

Image stacks of the 3D biomaps were imported in their original image format (8 bit 512x512 tiff image sequences) to *ImageJ 1.47v* and transformed into black and white binary images. Subsequently, a plugin called *Voxel Counter*, created by Wayne

Rasband which is available online (http://rsb.info.nih.gov/ij/), was applied to the *ImageJ 1.47v* software. This plugin calculates the ratio of threshold voxels as cyanobacterial/green algae volumes to all voxels, which represent the total volume of sediment from each binary image in every single stack. The obtained biovolume percentage was multiplied by a conversion factor of 310 fg C μm^{-3} to convert it to biomass (Fry 1990; Bloem et al., 1995), which has also been used previously for cyanobacteria (Solé et al., 2001; 2003; 2007; 2009). Biomass results were therefore expressed in carbon units (mg C cm^{-3}) of sediment. CLSM–IA is very precise, given that the minimum biomass that it can detect corresponds to a voxel (the abbreviation for "volume element"), equivalent to 1.183×10^{-3} mg C cm^{-3} of sediment (Sole et al., 2008). The obtained carbon value is based on the auto fluorescence signal only of the living and active green algae and cyanobacteria (bryophytes and lichens <200 µm on top of the crusts were included) and is therefore called active photosynthetic carbon (apC). Nevertheless, their EPS which contains massive amounts of carbon is only considered as minor proportion due to the missing fluorescence signal, therefore apC should be higher. Graphs are ended where the BSC visually ends to indicate the thickness of each crust. Beyond the value at the deepest point pure soil starts, which does not contain photosynthetic active organisms, this is not shown to improve the visualization of the BSC structure.

2.8 Total organic carbon

Total organic C content was determined by pre-heating four samples per site for 12 h at 105 °C to obtain dry weight and volume values before mass loss after ignition for 2 h at 550 °C (Black, 1965). Remaining material contained only inorganic C and non-photosynthetic C (npC) values were calculated by subtracting active photosynthetic C (apC) from total organic C. The latter therefore contains dead cells, EPS and heterotrophic macro- and microfauna of the BSC, that give no fluorescence signals. All values are expressed in percentage, applied to the volume of 1 cm^3 dry matter.

2.9 Statistical analysis

Statistics for loss on ignition data were completed by using the software *Statistica* (Version 9.1; StatSoft Inc. 2010). Those data were tested for normal distribution with a Shapiro-Wilk-Test. One-way ANOVA with a following Tukey posthoc test was used to look for differences between groups for normal distributed data.

3 Results

3.1 Biomap structure and graphic scheme

Cyanobacteria were found to dominate in their abundance over green algae across all four sites, which was detected based on the different fluorescent features of the photoautotrophic organisms in the 2D biomaps: Chlorophyll a (red channel) of green algae was excited separately from the phycobillins (green channel) of cyanobacteria, (Fig. 1 + 2). The EPS shows a minor fluorescence signal at its periphery as an artefact of reflectance from the main cells (Fig. 1). BSCs from all four sites are

densely packed with a variety of cyanobacteria and green algae, ranging from single coccoidal to filamentous organisms whereby Hochtor shows the highest morphological diversity (Fig. 3a). Different thallus forming *Nostoc* species are shared between three of the four sites (white triangles, Fig. 3a–c), and are found on top of the BSC as well as within.

Additionally, the BSC can vertically be divided into an upper photosynthetic active layer (PAL), where fluorescence signals from cells with active chlorophyll and phycobillins accumulate, and a lower photosynthetic inactive layer (PIL) that represents inactive cells, glued together with stones through EPS (Fig. 4). This layer does not give a fluorescence signal but belongs to the crust itself. Both compartments can be removed from the soil as a single entity. To visualize this concept a graphical scheme was drafted, presenting these structures more easily (Fig. 4).

3.2 Active photosynthetic carbon (apC) depth profiles

The apC depth profiles (Fig. 5) reveal specific patterns for each of the four sites, with C peaks in the upper part of the crust in Livingston and Geopol samples or located between 1 and 2 mm in Hochtor and Ny-Ålesund samples. Within the depth of these peaks, soil contains between 25 and 40 mg C cm^{-3}. Light grey backgrounds indicate the soil stratum made of active photosynthetic organisms (PAL), whereas the dark grey parts mark the layer (PIL), containing inactive cyanobacteria and green algae (limit set to <5 mg C cm^{-3}) according to the concept explained previously. Values at the deepest position show the mean thickness of each crust, with Hochtor having the thickest crust reaching almost 4 mm and Livingston showing the thinnest crust with a depth of 2.8 mm.

3.3 Carbon and partitioning

Soils of the study sites contain 7 % (Hochtor, Geopol), 14 % (Livingston) and 17 % (Ny-Ålesund) of total organic C, obtained by loss on ignition (Fig. 6), whereby Hochtor and Geopol differ significantly from Ny-Ålesund ($p \leq 0.05$). This total organic C can be divided into carbon coming from active photosynthetic organisms (apC), based on CLSM–IA and non-photosynthetic carbon (npC), including dead organic material, remaining EPS and macro-/micro faunal elements. Only 1.5 to 3 % of the total organic carbon is provided by active cyanobacteria, green algae and bryophytes as apC (without EPS) as well as 4–11 % npC. Cyanobacteria with their EPS and thallus structures occupy between 7 and 23 % within the BSC structure, in comparison algae contribute with 0.5 to 2 % only as a minor group (Fig. 6). Non-fluorescing EPS as the main matrix of the BSC together with stones, gravel, dead material and faunal elements differ between 76 and 92 %, grouped as adhering material.

4 Discussion

For the first time CLSM was applied to intact BSC, collected from the Arctic, Antarctica and the Alps. Together with carbon estimations we provide new insights into BSC structure. The crusts themselves show compartmentation with a PAL stratum, containing the active fraction of mainly cyanobacteria and a few green algae and the PIL fraction, with predominantly dead material, this is additionally reflected in the carbon contents and visualized in a graphic scheme (Fig. 4).

Embedding BSC in an agarose matrix allowed visualization for the first time of intact and active BSCs with CLSM. The biomaps provide insights into structural features of the different BSCs such as spatial distribution patterns related to depth, community composition of morphological and taxonomic groups as well as discrimination between green algae and cyanobacteria. The different crusts have several structural features in common:

Their crust layers are divided into a top layer characterized by high densities of active photoautotrophic organisms, which is therefore defined as PAL (0–2.5 mm) and a sublayer (2–4 mm) with a strongly decreased abundance of photoautotrophic organisms, called PIL. Both layers are part of the BSC and can be removed from the soil as a single entity, because EPS adheres microorganisms with sediment. In most cases investigated, different BSC structures were found to be very pronounced at all sites, but have additionally been identified with this technique from crusts in other habitats (Szyja; in preparation). The layered structure is similar to what has been recently described for arid desert BSCs of Israel, where three layers were defined (Ranaan et al., 2016): A top crust layer, that is about 1–2 mm thick, which is composed of small packed particles and most of the organic material (Drahorad et al., 2013), followed by a vesicle layer of approximately 0.3–0.7 mm thickness, filled with trapped air and a sub crust layer made of dead material, EPS and soil particles. The formation of a vesicle layer is maybe prevented at cold sites of this study because of the freeze-thaw dynamics and continuous water runoff into the soil, during the active season, transporting and shifting small particles that fill potential air vesicles.

Additionally, eukaryotic green algae represent only a minority in terms of occupied space at all sites. In general, it is known that there are no eukaryotic algae exclusively found in BSCs (Büdel et al., 2016). Green algae are rarely the dominant crust-forming organisms and they occur in low abundance or may be present as dormant resting stages, which are hard to detect. This is supported by other studies that detected, at least from Hochtor, Austria, only a minor proportion of green algae (Büdel et al., 2014; Peer et al., 2013).

Furthermore, cyanobacteria constitute the dominant photoautotrophic spatial unit at all sites, probably due to their thallus structures being composed of EPS and their cell densities. This becomes even more interesting when other findings are considered, where Büdel et al., (2014) showed that within the microbiome of BSC from Hochtor, cyanobacteria contributed only 1.6 % to the total bacterial diversity, whereas we show here that they occupy 20 % of space within the crust.

Differences among the crusts based on CLSM 2D biomaps were reflected in their thicknesses and the morphological groups that could be identified. The alpine site Hochtor for example, harbours the thickest crust that is known throughout available literature with a thickness that exceeds 4 mm. Light regime could be a responsible factor, because all four sites share times where their BSC is protected from radiation by snow cover and times during high light exposure and desiccation due to receding snow. Appearance of photoautotrophic organisms up to these depths may be possible due to a diverse community composition with organisms and therefore is composed of organisms with different adaptions regarding light regime. Species such as *Nostoc* have been found to occupy mainly soil surface positions (Fig. 3, white triangles) where it must invest in UV- and desiccation protection for example through pigment and EPS production. Crusts dominated by these highly pigmented organisms were classified therefore as dark crust (Belnap et al., 2004). A different strategy is avoidance, which requires vertical migration down from the soil surface (Garcia-Pichel and Pringault 2001). This is therefor only available to relatively large,

mobile organisms such as the large filamentous cyanobacteria *Microcoleus*. In deeper layers of the soil, light is attenuated due to high densities of mineral and biogenic particles, shorter wavelengths penetrate less deeply than longer wavelengths, which provides a redundancy for pigment synthesis as UV protection (Belnap et al., 2004). Crusts that are dominated by these species are therefore called light crusts (Belnap et al 2004). Light regime and drying times define the activity times of these cyanobacterial dominated BSCs, which are expected to follow radiation levels: *Nostoc* dominated (dark) BSCs would have the least amount of time active and *Microcoleus* dominated (light) BSCs the most activity time (Belnap et al., 2004). The establishment of a highly diverse cyanobacterial community composition with representatives of both strategies would therefore lead to an increase in activity, and consequently the thickness of PAL. Additionally, activity recovery of BSCs after seasonal changes may be accelerated by a vivid crust. For example, this may be the case in Hochtor, where BSC is composed of various cyanobacterial species with different ecological niches. Nevertheless, the community composition of these habitats and especially of Hochtor needs to be addressed by further molecular and taxonomic studies in order to proof these ideas.

The main functional BSC groups such as cyanobacterial crust, green algae crust, cyanolichens, chlorolichens and bryophytes of Ny-Ålesund, Geopol and Livingston Island have already been shown to be distinct, which is for the most part linked to their geographic distribution and the differences between deeper and more skeletal soils (Williams et al., 2017). Carbon contents along the depth of the BSC obtained by CLSM 3D biomaps represent a summary of microclimatic conditions of the different habitats, their successional stage and structural features and therefor support these results: Highest C contents of approximately 40 mg C cm^{-3} are reached in depths between 0.5 and 2 mm, except for Livingston, where bryophytes dominate the BSC at the soil surface, leading to C peaks placed directly at the top. As described previously (Williams et al., 2017), Livingston Island shows a higher developmental vegetation stage where cyanobacteria and green algae are replaced by bryophyte cushions and especially chlorolichens, situated on the crust surface. Also at Geopol the C peak is close to the surface and combined with the thickest PIL, probably linked to the disturbance regime of cryoturbation. During polygon formation and especially freeze-thaw interaction gravel and particles of different sizes are moved which affects the cyanobacteria and green algae that are glued to them by their EPS. The BSC structure may not be destroyed but is probably shifted so that organisms from the top that are immobile are moved to deeper positions, losing their favoured photosynthetic light regime position and possibly dying off. Dead cells and EPS can remain to some extent (Tamaru et al., 2005) but their maintenance as well as the amount of new grown BSC on top of the old structures is limited by the ongoing processes of cryoturbation, a common occurrence in polar sites worldwide.

Northern circumpolar soils are estimated to cover approximately 18,782 x 103 km^2 and contain about 191 Pg of organic carbon in the 0–30 cm depth stratum (Tarnocai et al., 2009). Organic carbon stored in permafrost regions is one of the least understood and potentially most significant carbon- climate feedbacks due to the size of the carbon pools and the intensity of climate forcing at high latitudes (Schuur et al., 2008). Around Ny-Ålesund, Spitzbergen approximately 90 % of the soil surface is covered by BSCs (Williams et al., 2017), whereby the first cm^3 of soil contains almost 18 % organic C, highlighting the sink character of these cold ecosystems. This becomes even more impressive, when compared to soil organic C contents of other BSC dominated habitats like the Andes with 4–8 % (Pérez 1997) or 1 % of the Kalahari sand (Mager 2010).

Nevertheless, the contribution of C from active photosynthetic organisms (apC) to the total C seems to be in a low range (2–3 %), which is probably linked to the methodological drawback of CLSM in terms of C determination, neglecting the EPS made of carbohydrates. Through their photosynthetic activity cyanobacteria can increase the C content within the BSC in the form of carbohydrates, this acts as an energy source that can be readily utilized by other soil organisms (Bertocchi et al., 1990). Mager (2010) for example could demonstrate that carbohydrates from the EPS made up to 75 % of the total organic C within the BSC in the Kalahari, whereby this factor is captured here by the loss on ignition as total organic C. Despite the fact that CLSM does neglect the EPS of unstained cyanobacteria and green algae, to some extent, which lowers the proportion of C, it can give highly comparable insights into BSC structures that have not been addressed by any other technique known so far.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, CLSM is a suitable and highly comparable method to obtain 2D biomaps, which show the intact and undisturbed photoautotrophic community of BSCs to examine structural and clade specific features. The newly defined terminology and determination of PAL and PIL of BSCs as visual entities or C depth profiles will be helpful to investigate and compare successional stages and changes in BSCs of different sites or treatments. In addition, it is likely that BSCs contribute significantly to the global carbon flux of soils at cold sites, highlighting their role as CO_2 sinks. For this reasons it is vital to address the cyanobacterial community composition of the Arctic, Antarctica and the Alps with further studies before climate change induced species alterations take place.

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Figures

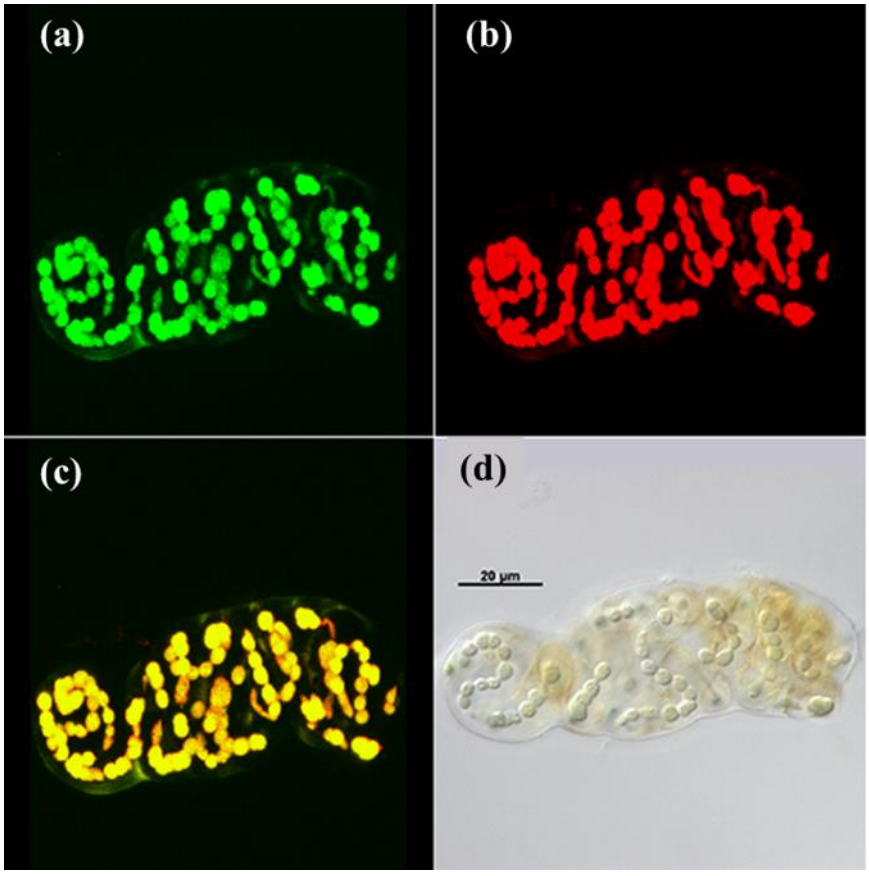

Figure 1: Cyanobacteria micrograph. *Nostoc* sp. visualized with CLSM (a–c) and light microscopy (d). Green channel (a) represents fluorescence from phycobillins, red channel (b) from chlorophyll a and an overlap of both is shown in (c).

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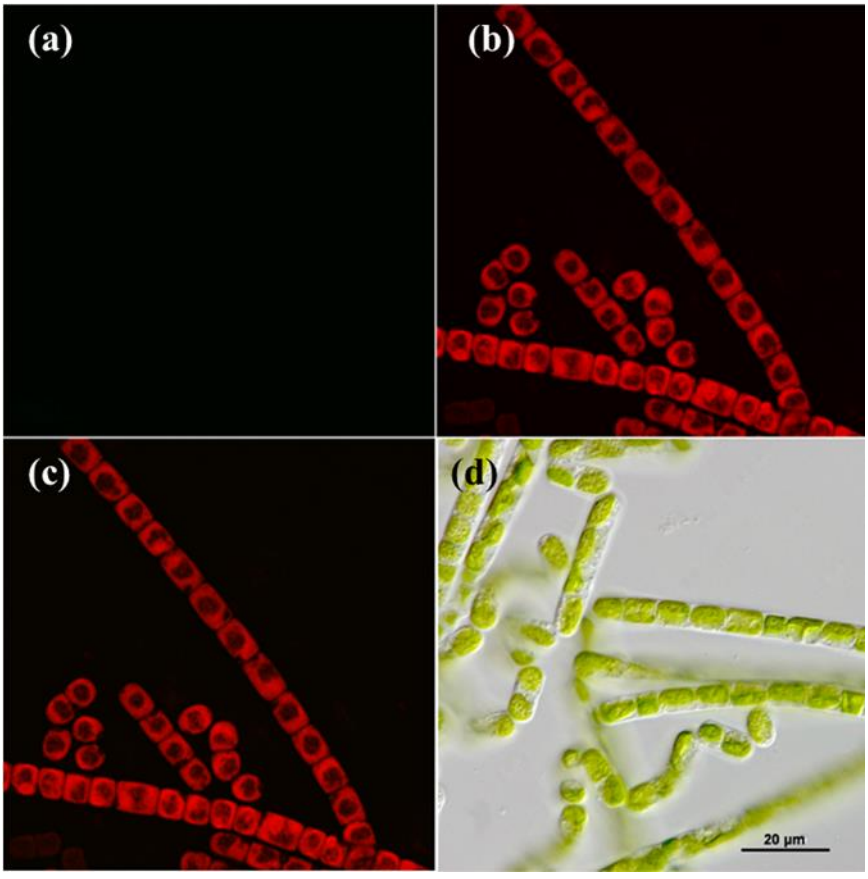

Figure 2: Green algae micrograph. *Klebsormidium flaccidum* visualiced with CLSM (a–c) and light microscopy (d). Green channel (a) represents fluorescence from phycobillins (not present in green algae), red channel (b) from chlorophyll a and an overlap of both is shown in (c).

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Figure 3: 2D Biomap. Overlap of green and red channel as maximum protection of depth profile images showing Hochtor (a), Livingston (b), Ny-Ålesund (c) and Geopol (d). White triangles indicate different *Nostoc* species. White scale bar indicates 100 µm.

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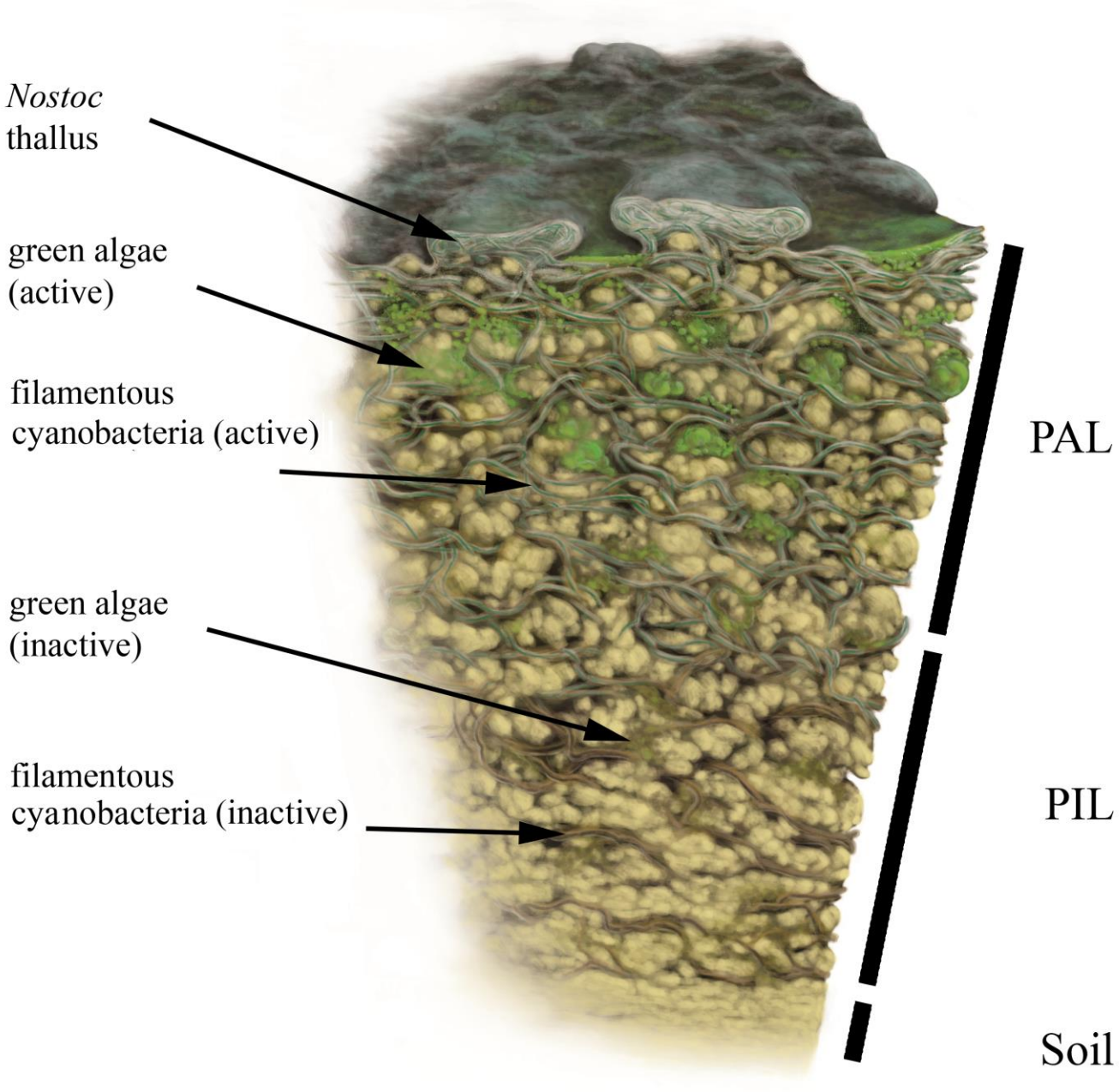

Figure 4: Biomap Scheme. Simplified illustration of a vertical BSC cross section with photosynthetic active cyanobacteria and green algae in the PAL (photosynthetic active layer) stratum as well as both fractions in their dead or inactive forms within the PIL (photosynthetic inactive layer) stratum. Illustrator: Frederik Spindler.

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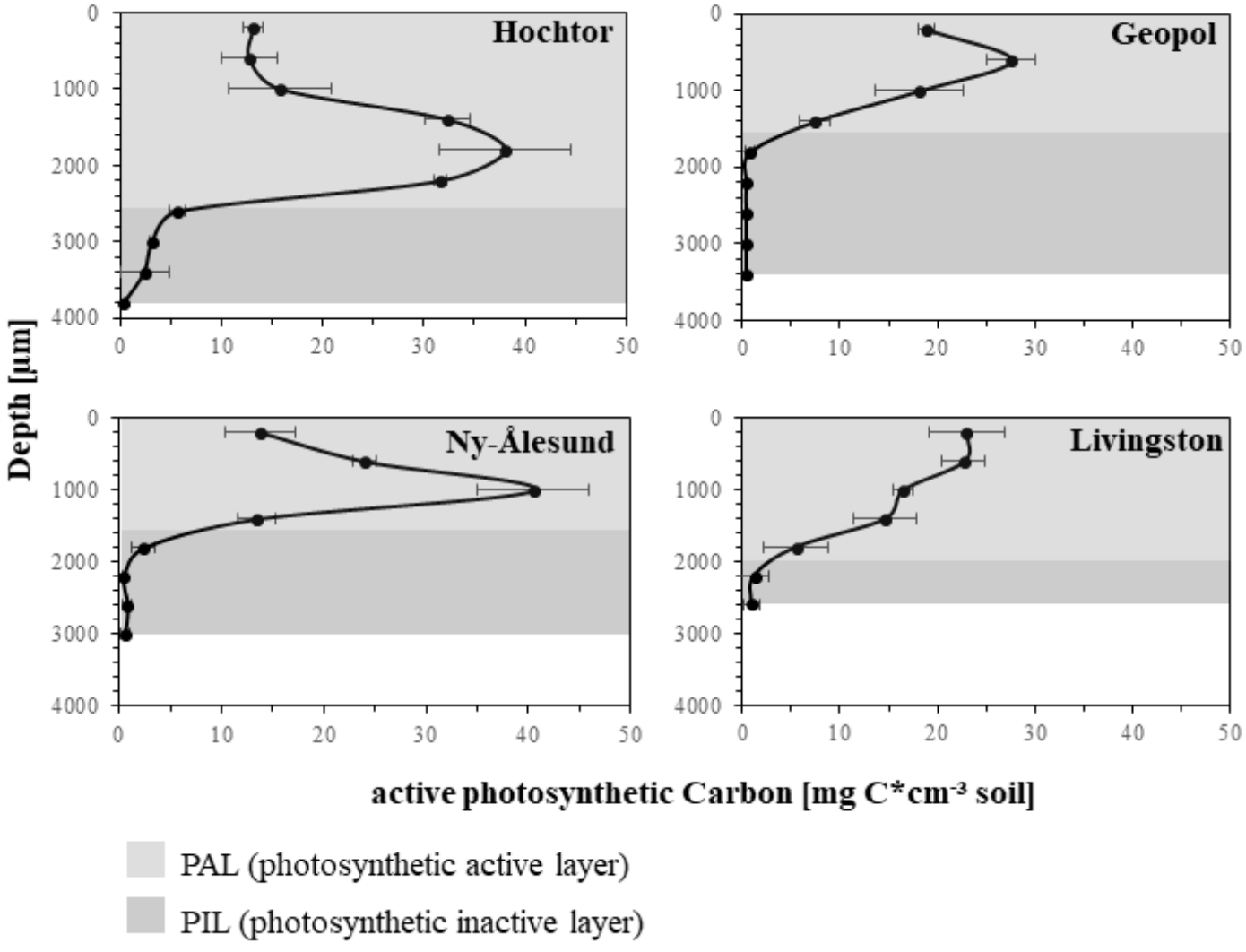

Figure 5: Active photosynthetic carbon (apC) depth profiles. Carbon values calculated from 3D biomaps with CLSM–IA are plotted against soil depth from surface to where the crust ends with standard deviation. PAL (photosynthetic active layer) is indicated in light grey, describing the soil stratus that contains active photoautotrophic organisms. PIL (photosynthetic inactive layer) is shown in dark grey, marking the soil stratum with inactive photoautotrophic cyanobacteria and green algae. The value representing the deepest point describes the thickness of each biocrust.

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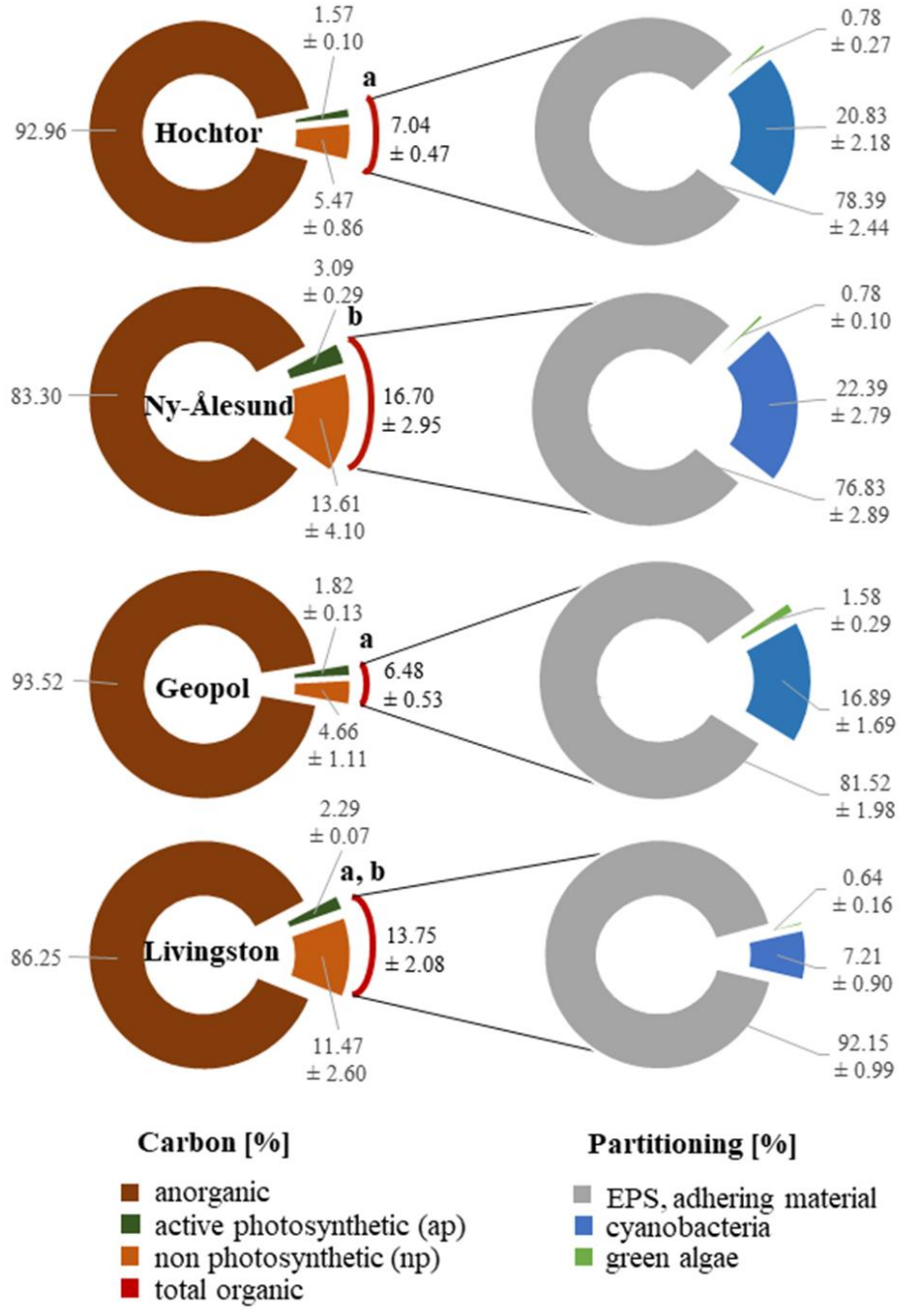

Figure 6: Carbon and BSC group partitioning. Carbon content determined by loss on ignition and CLSM–IA of the 3D biomaps is combined in percent, applied to the volume of 1 cm³ (left circle). Total organic C obtained by loss on ignition from Hochtor and Geopol differ significantly from Ny-Ålesund ($p \leq 0.05$). Lower case letters are marking statistically significant differences. Area partitioning of cyanobacteria, green algae and adhering material within the BSC is expressed in percentage, applied to the total area of the 2D biomaps (right circle). Values are the mean ± standard deviation.