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Dark Fungi: Discovery and Recognition of Unseen Fungal Diversity.

Ping Cuin*

Tea Research Institute, Zhejiang University, China

***Correspondence to**: Ping Cuin, Tea Research Institute, Zhejiang University, China. E-mail: pingcuin@zju.edu.cn

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Introduction

Fungi are among the most diverse and ecologically significant organisms on Earth, yet a vast portion of their diversity remains hidden from view. These elusive organisms, often referred to as "dark fungi" or "dark taxa," are primarily known through DNA sequences extracted from environmental samples. They cannot be cultured, visualized, or classified using traditional morphological methods, making them invisible to conventional taxonomy. Despite their cryptic nature, dark fungi play vital roles in ecosystems, influencing nutrient cycling, plant health, and even climate regulation [1, 2].

Dark fungi are fungal species that have been identified solely through molecular data, particularly high-throughput sequencing of environmental DNA. These organisms lack physical specimens and observable traits, which are typically required for formal classification under the International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants. As a result, they remain unnamed and poorly understood, despite their genetic signatures appearing frequently in metagenomics datasets [3, 4].

The term "dark taxa" was coined to describe these uncharacterized lineages that populate phylogenetic trees but lack formal taxonomic identity. Advances in sequencing technologies, such as Illumina and Oxford Nano pore, have revealed thousands of such taxa in soil, water, air, and decomposing organic matter. These discoveries challenge our understanding of fungal biodiversity and call for new frameworks to recognize and study these organisms. One of the most powerful tools for identifying dark fungi is DNA barcoding, particularly using the Internal Transcribed Spacer (ITS) region, which serves as the universal fungal barcode. By comparing ITS sequences to reference databases, researchers can detect novel lineages and estimate their evolutionary relationships. However, without physical specimens, these fungi cannot be formally named, complicating efforts to integrate them into traditional taxonomic systems [5, 6].

This disconnect between molecular data and classical taxonomy has led to a revaluation of species concepts in mycology. Some researchers advocate for sequence-based naming systems, while others emphasize the need for integrative approaches that combine molecular, ecological, and morphological data. The challenge is not only scientific but also philosophical: how do we define a species when we cannot see or culture it?

Despite their invisibility, dark fungi are ecologically indispensable. They participate in decomposition, nutrient cycling, symbiosis with plants, and pathogenesis. In forest soils, for example, dark fungal taxa contribute to the breakdown of organic matter and the release of carbon and nitrogen. In agricultural systems, they may influence crop health and soil fertility, though their exact roles remain unclear. Some dark fungi are suspected to be endophytes—organisms that live inside plant tissues without causing harm. Others may be latent pathogens or mutualists. Their presence in diverse environments suggests that they are not rare anomalies but integral components of microbial ecosystems. Understanding their functions could unlock new strategies for sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and disease management [7, 8].

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The discovery of dark fungi has been driven by high-throughput sequencing and metagenomics, which allow researchers to analyze entire microbial communities without culturing individual organisms. These methods have revealed fungal diversity far beyond what was previously known. For example, environmental sequencing of forest soils has uncovered hundreds of novel fungal lineages, many of which belong to previously unrecognized phyla. Third-generation sequencing technologies, such as Pac Bio and Oxford Nano pore, offer long-read capabilities that improve genome assembly and functional annotation. Combined with machine learning, these tools can predict ecological roles, metabolic pathways, and evolutionary relationships of dark fungi. Integrating multi-omics approaches—transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics—further enhances our ability to characterize these organisms [9, 10].

Conclusion

Recognizing dark fungi requires a shift in how we define and classify biodiversity. Some researchers propose the use of "candidate species" based on DNA sequences, while others suggest creating sequence-based taxonomies that operate parallel to traditional systems. Initiatives like the UNITE database and Myco Bank are working to incorporate molecular data into fungal classification, but challenges remain in standardizing protocols and ensuring reproducibility. The integration of dark fungi into ecological models and conservation strategies is also essential. As climate change and habitat loss threaten microbial diversity, understanding the roles of unseen fungi becomes increasingly urgent. Surveillance of dark fungal communities could serve as an early warning system for ecosystem degradation, much like microbiome monitoring in public health. Studying dark fungi requires collaboration across disciplines—mycology, genomics, ecology, bioinformatics, and taxonomy. It also demands new educational frameworks to train scientists in molecular techniques and data analysis. Citizen science initiatives and open-access databases can help democratize fungal research and accelerate discovery.

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