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FOCUS | Metagenomics

Nature Reviews Microbiology is delighted to present a special issue devoted to the emerging field of metagenomics — the culture-independent genomic analysis of an assemblage of microorganisms.

Until now, the focus of microbial genomics has been on the study of individual microbial strains. Outside the laboratory, however, almost all microorganisms exist in complex communities in which individual cells can exchange genetic material and nutrients — activities that have the potential to alter their metabolic capabilities and growth characteristics and, ultimately, the impact that their community has on the environment. It has become increasingly clear that the properties of individual microbial cells differ significantly when present in assemblages interacting with other forms of microbial life, and that a microbial community has properties that cannot be attributed to any of the individual members. A recent report commissioned by the American Academy of Microbiology (AAM) argues that the time has come to re-focus microbial genomics towards the analysis of microorganisms within the context of their natural environments.

In this issue, the world's leading proponents of metagenomics provide a fascinating insight into its power in answering fundamental questions about the nature of microbial communities and the processes that shape them. We hope that you enjoy this special issue of the journal and the accompanying **Web focus** that draws together relevant articles from across the Nature Publishing Group. In recognition of the importance of the topic, we are delighted to be able to offer free online access to both for one month.



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