Hybridization of a Rocky Mountain fir (Abies concolor) and a Mexican fir (Abies religiosa)¹

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Interspecific crosses of Abies religiosa (HBK.) Schlecht. & Cham. (oyamel) with Abies concolor (Gord. & Glend.) Lindl. ex Hildebr. var. concolor (white fir) and Abies magnifica A. Murr. (California red fir) were undertaken to explore the relationships between these species. The cross with A. magnifica produced no germinable seed, but many sound seeds were produced from the cross with A. concolor. These were sown in the nursery in 1968 and outplanted in 1970. In 1983, morphological characteristics of seven putative hybrids were compared with those of the A. concolor seed parent, herbarium specimens of A. religiosa, and published descriptions of both species. In addition, monoterpane composition of the putative hybrids was compared with that of the seed parent and two unrelated A. religiosa trees from the same provenance as the pollen parent. Results indicate that the putative hybrids are indeed hybrids between A. concolor and A. religiosa. This finding suggests that either taxonomic sections are not separated by reproductive barriers in Abies (as they are in Pinus) or that earlier classifications should be reconsidered.


Des croisements interspécifiques d’Abies religiosa (HBK.) Schlecht. & Cham. (oyamel) avec Abies concolor (Gord & Glend.) Lindl. ex Hildebr. var. concolor (Sapin blanc) et Abies magnifica A. Murr. (Sapin rouge de Californie) ont été expérimentés dans le but d’éviter les relations entre ces espèces. Le croisement avec A. magnifica n’a produit aucune graine viable, mais plusieurs graines viables ont été produites à partir du croisement avec A. concolor. Ces graines ont été ensemencées en pépinière en 1968 et les semis furent extraits en 1970. En 1983, les caractéristiques morphologiques de sept hybrides putatifs ont été comparées à ceux du parent A. concolor, à des spécimens d’herbier d’A. religiosa et aux descriptions des deux espèces qu’on trouve dans la littérature. En outre, la composition en monoterpènes des hybrides putatifs a été comparée avec celle du parent et celle de deux sujets d’A. religiosa non liés mais de même provenance que le pollen parent. Les résultats montrent que les hybrides putatifs sont en effet des hybrides entre A. concolor et A. religiosa. Ceci laisse à penser que, ou bien les sections taxonomiques ne sont pas séparées par des cloisons affectant la reproduction chez Abies (comme elles le sont chez Pinus), ou bien les anciennes classifications devraient être revues.

[Traduit par la revue]

Introduction

The Mexican highlands are an important center of speciation for the genus Abies; 6 of its 39 species are found in Mexico and Guatemala (Liu 1971). Interspecific hybridization involving Mexican firs may prove valuable in elucidating evolutionary relationships and taxonomic delineations of the firs of western North America. The crosses of Abies religiosa (HBK.) Schlecht. & Cham. (oyamel) with Abies concolor (Gord. & Glend.) Lindl. ex Hildebr. var. concolor (white fir) and Abies magnifica A. Murr. (California red fir) reported in this paper are the first reported crosses involving Mexican firs.

Abies religiosa is widely distributed from northern Mexico southwards to the high mountains of Guatemala (Liu 1971). It is a montane species, ranging in altitude from 2100 to 4100 m. Abies concolor is found throughout the mountains of the western United States and northern Mexico, ranging in altitude from 610 m in the Oregon Cascades to over 3000 m in the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada. Two varieties are recognized, A. concolor var. concolor of the Rocky Mountains, and A. concolor var. lowiana of the Pacific States. The crosses reported involved A. concolor var. concolor, and, unless otherwise stated, A. concolor hereinafter refers to this variety. Abies magnifica is found between 1400 and 2700 m elevation in California and southern Oregon. Liu (1971) assigned A. religiosa to section Oyamel, A. concolor to section Grandes, and A. magnifica to section Nobiles.

Although crosses involving Mexican firs have not been attempted, hybrids involving A. concolor have been reported frequently (Larsen 1956; Hawley and DeHayes 1985b; Rohmider 1961). In 1924, A. concolor var. lowiana was crossed with A. grandis in one of the first successful controlled hybridizations in the genus (Larsen 1956). In addition, natural populations with characteristics intermediate between A. concolor and A. grandis are widespread in southern and central Oregon and northwest California (Hamrick and Libby 1972). Abies magnifica hybridizes...
readily with *A. procera* (Silen et al. 1965), and intermediate natural populations are found in southern Oregon and northern California (Franklin et al. 1979). The ease with which these species hybridize indicates that they are recently differentiated, and they are accordingly grouped within the same sections (Liu 1971).

This paper reports the results of controlled crosses of *A. religiosa* with *A. concolor* and *A. magnifica*. The cross with *A. magnifica* produced no germinable seeds, but that with *A. concolor* produced many. Evidence is given for verification of the *A. concolor × A. religiosa* hybrid.

Materials and methods

Pollen from a single tree of *A. religiosa* near Paseo de Cortez, Mexico (latitude 19°06’, longitude 98°41’, elevation 3400 m), was collected in 1965 and deep frozen until cones were done in the spring of 1967. Because of the small amount of available pollen, only two crosses were possible. One seed parent was an *A. concolor* planted in the Eddy Arboretum at the Institute of Forest Genetics (IFG) in Placerville, California; the other was an *A. magnifica* in a natural stand near Lake Tahoe, California. Control crosses were also done using pollen of the same species as the seed parent. Germinable seed from the *A. concolor × A. religiosa* cross were sown in the IFG nursery in 1968. (The *A. magnifica* cross produced no germinable seeds.) In 1970, five *A. religiosa* cross were sown in the IFG nursery in 1968. (The same sections (Liu 1971).

Morphological characteristics and monoterpane composition of the seven putative hybrids and the *A. concolor* seed parent were compared in 1983. Morphological characteristics used for comparing the hybrids with the *A. religiosa* pollen parent were as described by Liu (1971) and as gleaned from herbarium specimens of *A. religiosa*. Monoterpane composition data were obtained (E. Zavarin, unpublished data) for two unrelated *A. religiosa* individuals, one from the same stand as the pollen parent and one from a stand about 130 km to the north.

Characteristics used in this study to distinguish between *A. concolor* and *A. religiosa* include length, width, color, and angle of needles, stomata on the upper and lower needle surfaces, and a groove on the upper needle surface. Characteristics such as crown form, bark color and texture, and twig color were not useful in this study because of the age difference between the putative hybrids and the seed parent.

All trees were first examined in the field. A branch of the current year’s growth was taken from each of four sides of each tree, and needle characteristics were examined with a dissecting microscope. Length, width, and number of lines of stomata were measured on two needles from each branch, and differences in those characteristics between each putative hybrid and the seed parent were tested for statistical significance with *t*-tests. In addition, differences in needle color, needle angle, and the presence of stomata and a groove on the upper needle surface were recorded.

Monoterpane composition was determined by gas chromatographic analysis of cortical oleoresin. We collected cortical oleoresin by puncturing a blister on the main stem and pressing a vial against the blister so that the resin ran into the vial. An equal amount of pentane was then added to the resin, and the sample was refrigerated until analysis. Methods for gas chromatography were those described by Smith (1977).

Results

Crosses

The *A. magnifica × A. religiosa* cross produced no germinable seeds out of 45 seeds in 5 cones; the control cross using a pollen from a nearby *A. magnifica* produced 19.5 germinable seeds per cone. The *A. concolor × A. religiosa* cross produced 9.5 germinable seeds per cone (57 in 6 cones); the control cross using pollen from the same Rocky Mountain origin produced 22.2 germinable seeds per cone (288 in 13 cones). Crossability was assessed by comparing the number of germinable seeds per cone for the hybrid cross with that for an intraspecies cross that involved a pollen parent of the same origin. Estimated crossability between *A. concolor* and *A. religiosa* was 43%. Although this estimate of crossability is based on only a single cross, the results indicate that *A. concolor* and *A. religiosa* are not separated by strong reproductive barriers.

Needle length and width

Needles of *A. religiosa* are shorter and narrower than those of *A. concolor*. Needle lengths in *A. religiosa* range from 15 to 35 mm and in *A. concolor* from 40 to 60 mm; respective ranges for needle width are 1.2 to 1.6 mm and 2.5 to 3.0 mm (Liu 1971).

Needles of the putative hybrids were both shorter and narrower than those of the seed parent (Table 1). Mean needle length of the putative hybrids ranged from 31.1 to 43.5 mm; and that of the seed parent was 44.9 mm. Needles from four of the seven putative hybrids were significantly shorter (*α = 0.05*) than those of the *A. concolor* parent; needles from the other three were shorter, but the differences were not significant. Needle widths of the putative hybrids ranged from 1.8 to 2.4 mm; mean needle width of the *A. concolor* parent was 2.5 mm. Needles from six of the seven putative hybrids were significantly narrower (*α = 0.05*) than those of the *A. concolor* parent; the *p*-value of the seventh was 0.10. All putative hybrids were intermediate in needle length and width between the *A. concolor* parent and the range given by Liu (1971) for *A. religiosa*.

Stomata

*Abies concolor* stomata appear on both needle surfaces, whereas *A. religiosa* stomata appear mainly on the lower surface, with a few in the apex of the groove on the upper surface (Liu 1971). Needles of the putative hybrids were similar to those of *A. religiosa* except that some of the stomata on the upper surface were further down the groove. The *A. concolor* parent had many stomata on both surfaces.

In both species, lines of stomata on the lower needle surface are arranged in two distinct bands. *Abies concolor* has 6 to 8 lines of stomata per band and *A. religiosa* has 2 to 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tree No.</th>
<th>Needle length (mm)</th>
<th>Needle width (mm)</th>
<th>Lines of stomata per band</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-1</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>0.610</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-2</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-3</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-4</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-5</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-6</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAR-8</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC-V6</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value from *t*-test for *H₀: µ(hybrid) = µ(seed parent).*
A. religiosa as dark shiny green on the upper surface and need color

Needle color

Liu (1971) described the needles of A. concolor as pale bluish green and glaucous on both surfaces and those of A. religiosa as dark shiny green on the upper surface and greyish below. This difference is related to the presence of stomata on the upper needle surface in A. concolor. Needles of the seed parent were pale bluish green on both surfaces; those of the putative hybrids were dark shiny green on the upper surface, and thus were similar to those of the pollen parent and distinctly different from those of the seed parent.

Needle groove

A. religiosa needles are conspicuously grooved on the upper surface, whereas A. concolor needles are not (Liu 1971). All putative hybrids had median grooves on the upper needle surface, although the grooves were not as distinct as those on the needles of A. religiosa herbarium specimens. Although intermediate between parents in this characteristic, the putative hybrids more closely resembled the pollen parent.

Needle angle

The A. concolor parent and the putative hybrids differed in the angle at which median needles were attached to new branchlets. Needle angle of the seed parent varied from slightly back to slightly forward along the branchlet; needles of the putative hybrids generally pointed forward at about 45°. Liu (1971) says little about needle angle, but describes A. religiosa as having “median needles pointing forward” and A. concolor as having “some of the middle ranks above directed forward.” Most needles of the A. religiosa herbarium specimens pointed forward, and needle angle of the putative hybrids was closer to that of the A. religiosa herbarium specimens than to that of the seed parent. Needle angle thus appears to differentiate the putative hybrids from the seed parent.

Monoterpene composition

Cortical oleoresin from all seven putative hybrids and the A. concolor parent was analyzed for monoterpene composition (Table 2), which for each monoterpene is expressed as a percentage of the total monoterpenes present. Data for the two unrelated A. religiosa are included for comparison. The putative hybrids different from the seed parent primarily in the percentages of α-pinene, myrcene, and limonene (Table 2), and appear to be intermediate between the A. concolor parent and the two unrelated A. religiosa individuals.

Discussion

Morphological observations and analysis of monoterpene composition indicate that the putative hybrids were indeed hybrids between A. concolor and A. religiosa. Distinct A. religiosa traits appeared in the hybrids, including dark green needle color, absence of stomata on the upper needle surface, and presence of a median groove. The intermediate needle length and width, number of lines of stomata per band, and monoterpene composition further support the validity of these hybrids.

The difficulty of successful intersectional crosses varies in Abies. Hawley and DeHayes (1985a) found low crossability between A. concolor and species from the section Balsameae. Mergen et al. (1964), however, had good success in intersectional crosses of A. sachalensis (section Elate) with A. firma (section Momii), A. mariesii (section Homolepides), and A. lasiocarpa (section Balsameae), although estimates of crossability were not given. Rohmeder (1961) reported several intersectional crosses involving A. concolor but provided little documentation of crossability or hybrid verification.

In contrast to the success of intersectional crosses in Abies, taxonomic sections in the genus Pinus are separated completely by reproductive barriers (Critchfield 1975). The ease with which A. concolor and A. religiosa cross indicates either that sections are not separated by strong reproductive barriers in Abies as in Pinus or that the classification of Liu (1971) should be reconsidered. However, the inability of A. magnifica and A. religiosa to cross in our single attempt suggests that these two species probably are in groups that are separated by reproductive barriers.
The ease with which *A. concolor* and *A. religiosa* crossed in this study suggests that these species are recently differentiated. Indeed, *A. concolor* is the only fir indigenous to both the United States and Mexico; geographic isolation of *A. concolor* from the Mexican firs may be relatively recent. Further study of the hybridization and geographic variation of the Mexican firs and other North American firs, particularly the southern populations of *A. concolor*, should prove valuable in elucidating the evolutionary history and taxonomic delineations within the genus *Abies*.

Acknowledgements

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Liu, T.-S. 1971. A monograph of the genus *Abies*. National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan.


