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Strengths and limits of long read metabarcoding

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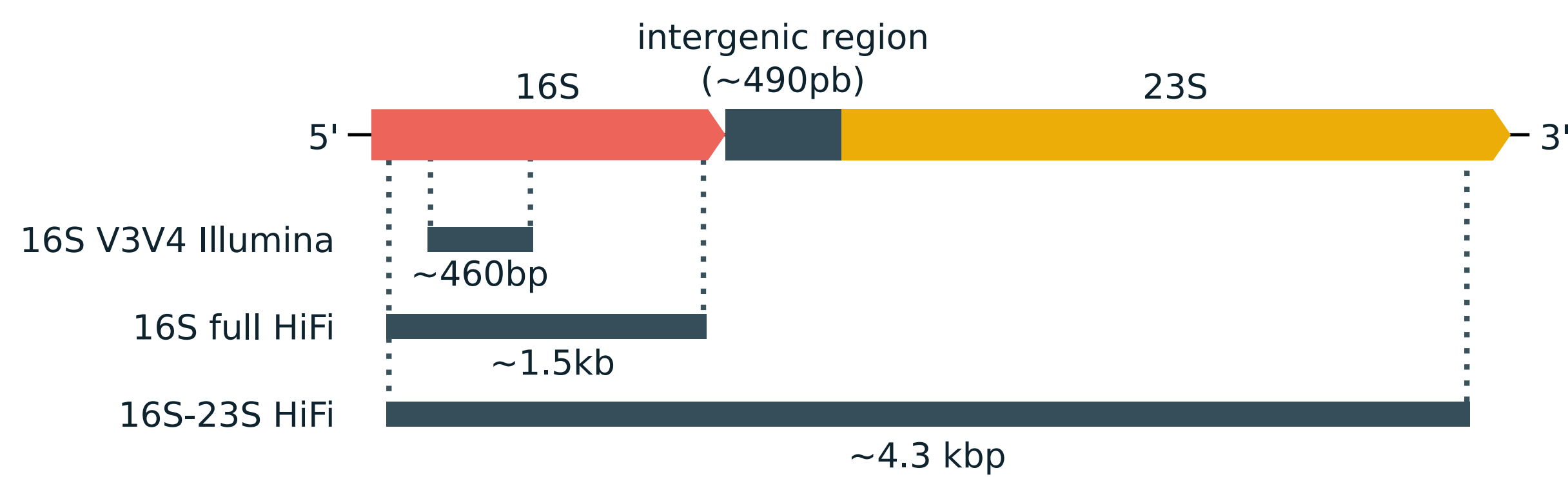
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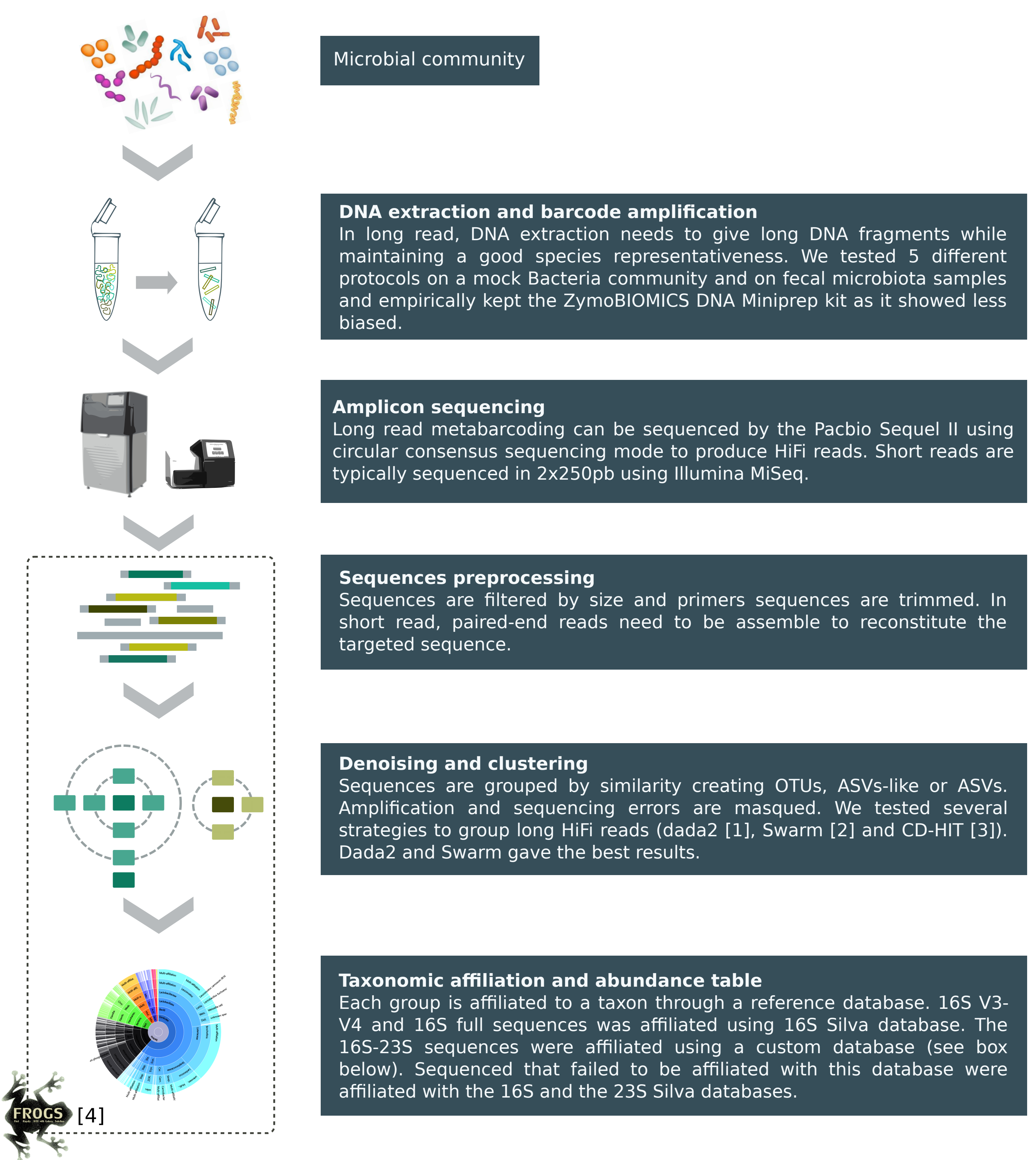
Introduction

Amplicon sequencing of the 16S rRNA gene fragments is commonly used to study microbial communities but often fails to assign microbes at the genus or species taxonomic level. **Long read** sequencing technologies can help to overcome this limitation by sequencing longer regions such as the full **16S rRNA gene** and the **16S-23S operon** region.

We conducted a comparative study to understand the limitations and strengths of PacBio HiFi long read sequencing technology for metabarcoding analyses.

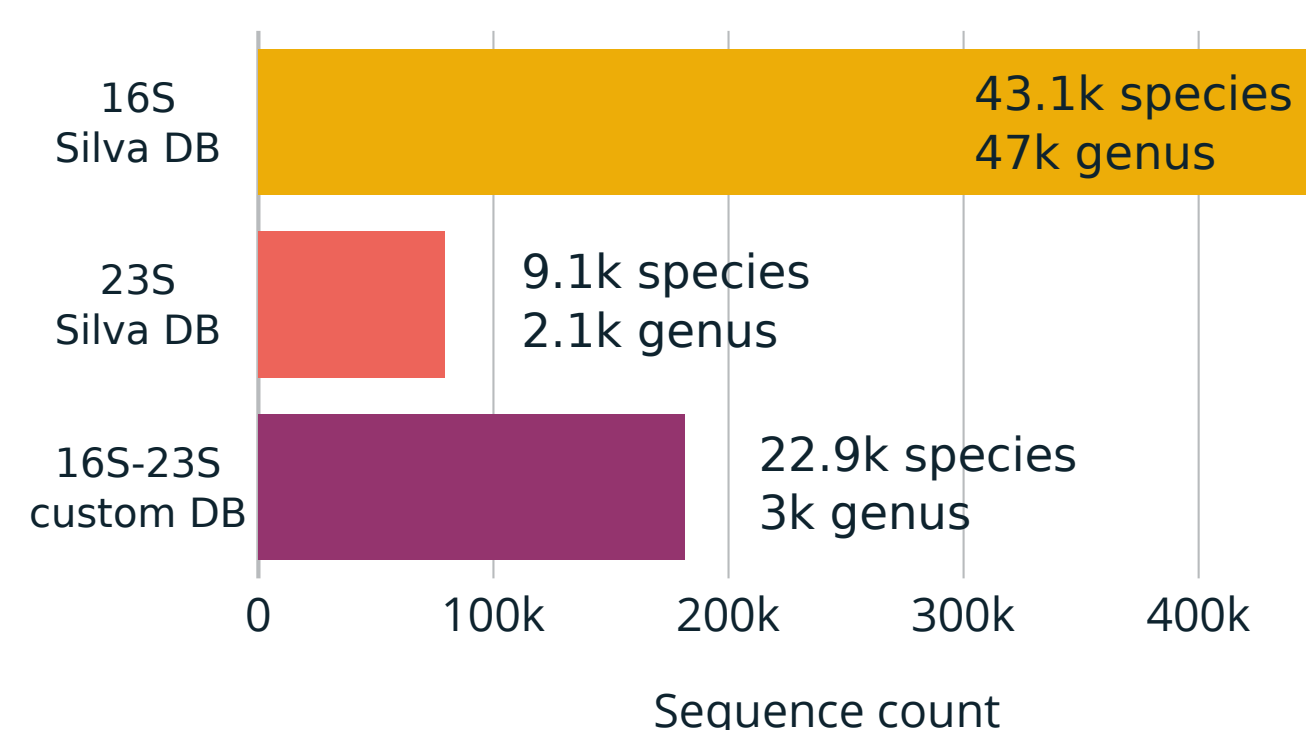


Long and short reads metabarcoding method



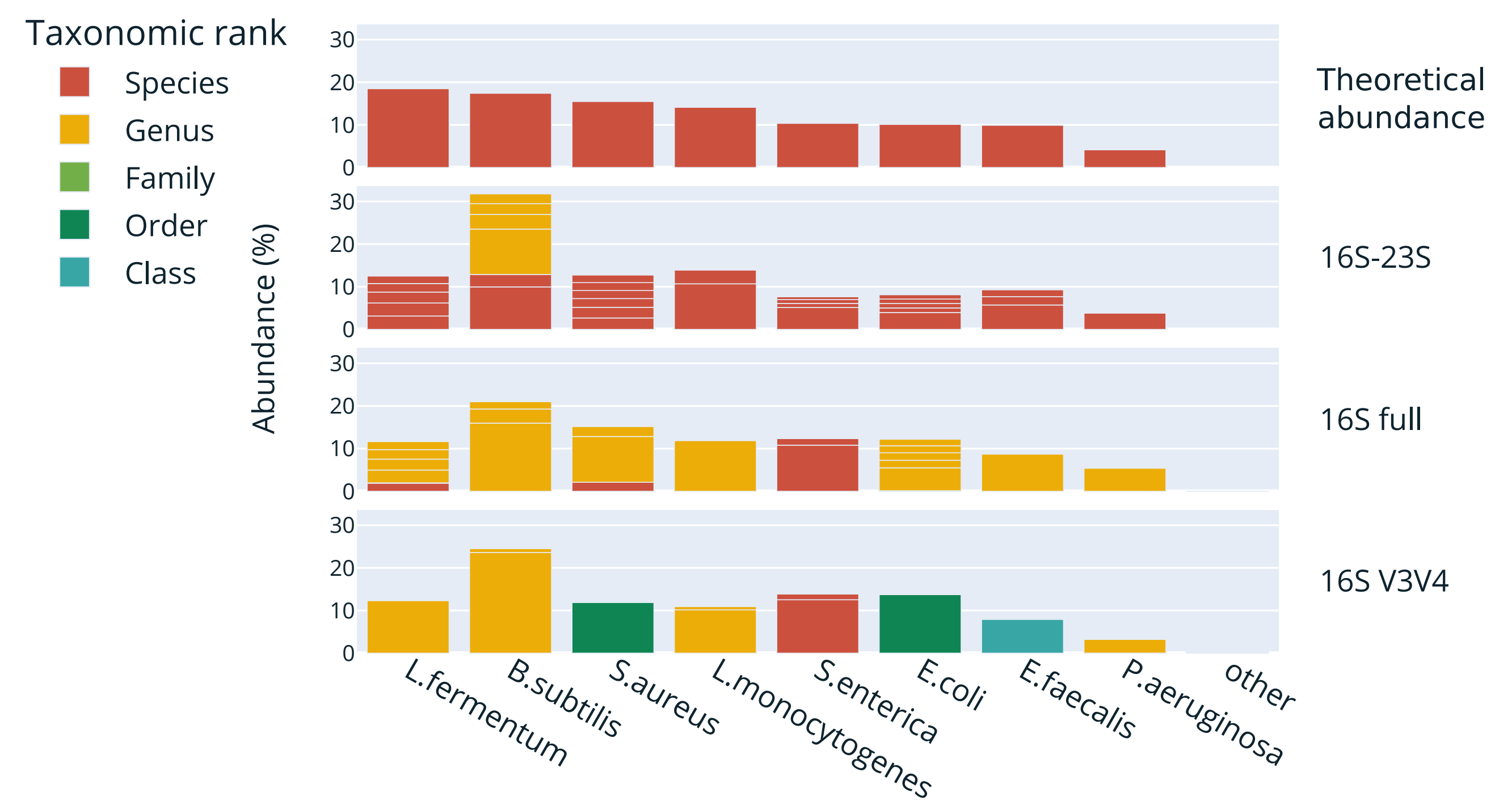
16S-23S custom reference database

To build our custom 16S-23S reference database, we first extracted the 16S-23S region from 25.2k Prokaryotic RefSeq genomes based on their annotations. A curation step was applied to remove eucaryotic rRNA sequences and flag suspicious sequences that might be a contamination.



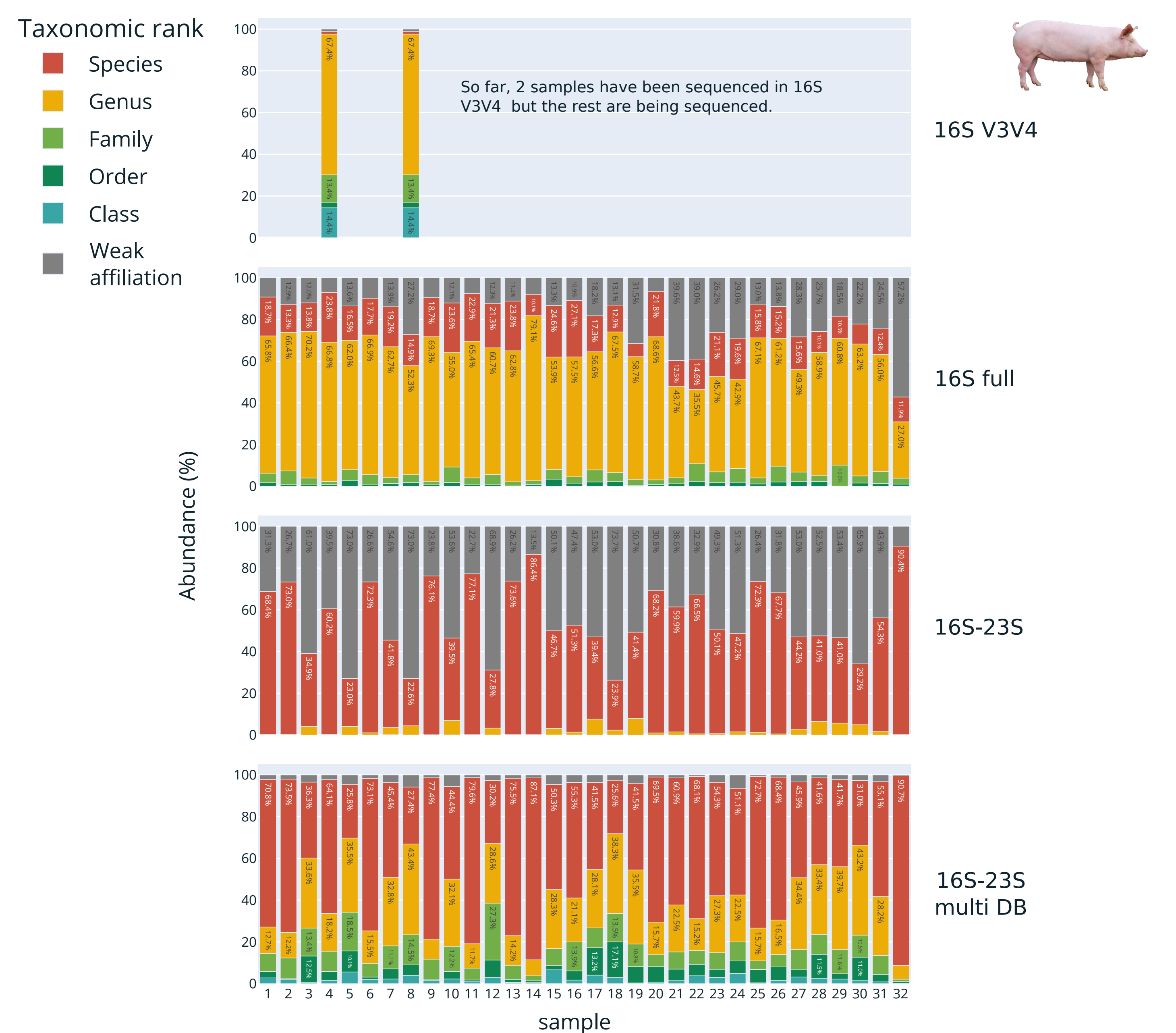
Number of sequences in our custom 16S-23S database compared to 16S and 23S Silva databases. The 16S Silva database is far more comprehensive than our 16S-23S database. But, a **multi DB** approach consisting of using the 3 databases allows to obtain a better affiliation of the biological data.

Mock community analysis



Abundance and affiliation obtained with the 16S-23S, the 16S full and the 16S V3V4 metabarcoding on a Bacteria mock community (Zymobiomics) containing 8 Bacteria species. **Longer the target region, the more precise the affiliations.** Each block in a bar represents a cluster.

Porc fecal microbiota analysis



Proportion of taxonomic ranks obtained using 3 different targets on porc fecal microbiota samples*. Weak affiliation are sequences that have no affiliation hit above 99% identity and 99% coverage. In **16S-23S multi DB**, unaffiliated sequences with the 16S-23S database have a **second round of affiliation** using the 16S and the 23S Silva databases. The multi DB approach allows to **greatly reduce** the proportion of **weak affiliations**. As for the mock community, **longer target regions increase the proportion of species affiliations**.

* We thank Philippe Pinton for providing the samples for analysis.

Conclusion

Long read sequencing in metabarcoding **improves the specificity** of sample characterization.

Long read sequencing remains **more expensive** and requires special **care in DNA extraction** to preserve species representativeness while giving long fragments.

In the case of 16S-23S, the use of **complementary databases** (Silva 16S and 23S databases) in addition to a full 16S-23S database is a complicating factor, but it helps to **increase the reliability** of the affiliations.