Humusica 1, article 3: Essential bases – Quick look at the classification

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ABSTRACT

Terms and concepts have been defined in Humusica 1, article 1 and the functioning of humus systems has been discussed in Humusica 1, article 2. Here a short overview of the matter, showing humus systems in their environment, is provided for beginners, before making field investigations. The present work is intended as a part of the field manual (HUMUSICA 1 and 2), an illustrated, easy-to-use application tool for humus systems classification, helpful even for not (yet) expert pedologists. The present article gives also a fast look at the classification, sharing Terrestrial, Histic, Aqueous and Para humus systems, every group being defined by its characteristics set in synthetic tables, and suggests a step-by-step approach allowing everyone to classify and investigate humus systems and forms.

1. Quick look at the classification

The present classification has been conceived around forest soils, for which more information and historical datasets are available, and for soils of grasslands, pastures and wetland areas, with negligible to strong human impact. Originally it was not suited to tilled agro-ecosystems, because tillage periodically destroys the “natural” organization and radically alters the functioning of surface horizons. Recently we considered the possibility to apply our system of classification even to anthropogenic soils, with the purpose of comparing their morpho-functional properties to those of more natural soils. In the long run, the final goal might be to decrease the functional distance between exploited and natural soils, by comparing them and adjusting properties of the former at regular intervals, thereby ensuring the incessancy of their ecosystemic functions and a sustainable production of food. The authors of this manual propose a classification of anthropogenic Agro (agricultural, modified from natural humus systems) and Techno humus systems (artificial, newly man-made) as a tool for monitoring and managing exploited soils.

The humus form classification is based on the sequence and morphological characteristics, including morphological evidence of biological activity, of organic and/or organic-mineral soil horizons observed and described in the field. In some cases, a few basic chemical data (pH, organic carbon content) are required. A complete set of diagnostic organic and organic-mineral horizons, which are mutually exclusive, is defined. The classification keys use diagnostic horizons and other complementary humipedon (humus profile) or environmental data. These last complementary data are not part of the classification, but can help in circumscribing the classified units and understanding their peculiar functioning. Every mineral horizon cited in this paper has been classified and named using the manual of the Guidelines for Soil Classification (FAO, 2006).

The classification consists in a scheme that tries avoiding strict cleavages between soil types, allowing intergrades to be classified. A first look at the surface of our planet allows distinguishing:
- well-drained soils (Terrestrial humus systems, potentially forest/shrub/grassland ecosystems);
- wet soils (Histic humus systems, potentially forest/shrub or aquatic plants ecosystems; Aqueous, sea tidal zones and sea beds);
- intergrades (dry Histic = Epihisto Histic humus systems; wet Terrestrial = Hydro Terrestrial humus systems);
- other natural soils (Para humus systems: soil systems strongly influenced by archaea = Archaeo; soil systems strongly influenced by anaerobic bacteria = Anaero; soil systems strongly influenced by lichens, algae, fungi = Crusto; soil systems strongly influenced by mosses = Bryo; soil systems strongly influenced by fern, grass, ericaceous root systems = Rhizo; soil systems strongly influenced by organisms living in decaying wood = Ligno);
- anthropogenic soils (Agro: natural soils transformed for agricultural and sylvicultural purposes; Techno: new man-made humus systems).

Fig. 1. Panorama of Terrestrial, Histic and Aqueous humus systems, with their main ecological determinants and diagnostic horizons. Hydro and Epihisto are prefixes used in transitional cases. Hydro is adopted as a prefix when $g_{OH}$, $g_{A}$ or $g_{AE}$ are present in Terrestrial humus profiles even without other diagnostic horizons; Epihisto is adopted as a prefix when $g_{A}$ or $g_{AE}$ are present ($g_{OL}$, $g_{OF}$ and $g_{OH}$ possible but not sufficient) in Histic humus profiles (= in addition to anA or H horizons).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humus system</th>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>Vegetation</th>
<th>Geology</th>
<th>Soils (IUSS WRB, 2015)</th>
<th>Biological agents</th>
<th>Dominant features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MULL</td>
<td>Mild temperate to tropical</td>
<td>Meadows, lowland deciduous forests with multilayered understory, floodplains, alluvial forests</td>
<td>Base-rich parent rock (limestone, dolomite, gypsum, andesite, ..., clay/silt loam deposits)</td>
<td>Andosol AN, Anthrosol AT, Arenosol AR, Calciisol CL, Cambisol CM, Chernozem CH, Ferralsol FR, Fluvisol FL, Leptosol LP, Lithosol LX, Luvisol LV, Nitisol NT, Phaeozem PH, Planosol PL, Regosol RG, Retisol RT, Stagnosol ST, Technosol T, Vertisol VR</td>
<td>Endogeic and anecic earthworms, termites, millipedes, insects, grass roots</td>
<td>Faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter weakly or not limited by harsh environmental conditions, burrows, casts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODER</td>
<td>Mild to cold temperate, subalpine, subboreal</td>
<td>Coniferous forests, deciduous forests with single-layered or no understory</td>
<td>Base-poor parent rock (granite, gneiss, schists), silt/sand deposits</td>
<td>Acrisol AC, Alisol AL, Andosol AN, Anthrosol AT, Arenosol AR, Gypsisol GY, Histosol HS, Leptosol LP, Lithosol LX, Luvisol LV, Nitisol NT, Podzol PZ, Regosol RG, Retisol RT, Solonchak SC, Solonetz SN, Stagnosol ST, Technosol TC, Umbrisol UM</td>
<td>Enchytraeids, oribatid mites, epigeic earthworms, woodlice, millipedes, insect larvae</td>
<td>Biological activities and decomposition of organic matter moderately limited by low temperature and/or acidity of parent material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMPHI</td>
<td>Mediterranean to dry subalpine</td>
<td>Coniferous and deciduous forests</td>
<td>Carbonated rocks (limestone, dolomite, gypsum) in mountain environments, base-rich crystalline rocks in Mediterranean environments</td>
<td>Acrisol AC, Alisol AL, Andosol AN, Anthrosol AT, Arenosol AR, Calcisol CL, Cambisol CM, Chernozem CH, Ferralsol FR, Kastanozem KS, Leptosol LP, Phaeozem PH, Planosol PL, Regosol RG, Retisol RT, Solonchak SC, Solonetz SN, Stagnosol ST, Technosol TC, Umbrisol UM</td>
<td>Epigeic, endogeic and anecic earthworms, enchytraeids</td>
<td>Faunal activity strongly seasonal because of climate limitation by frost (mountain areas) or drought (Mediterranean areas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOR</td>
<td>Subalpine to boreal, possible in temperate to tropical areas on very nutrient-poor substrates</td>
<td>Heathland, coniferous forests with very poor soils</td>
<td>Sand, sandstone, granite, very hard carbonated rocks</td>
<td>Acrisol AC, Alisol AL, Anthrosol AT, Arenosol AR, Calcisol CL, Cambisol CM, Chernozem CH, Ferralsol FR, Kastanozem KS, Leptosol LP, Podzol PZ, Technosol TC, Umbrisol UM</td>
<td>Fungi, lichens, springtails, mites</td>
<td>Faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter strongly limited by cold and/or acid conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANGEL</td>
<td>Subalpine to alpine</td>
<td>Heathland, mountain pastures</td>
<td>Carbonated rocks (limestone, dolomite, gypsum)</td>
<td>Calcisol CL, Kastanozem KS, Leptosol LP, Phaeozem PH, Umbrisol UM</td>
<td>Physical, springtails, mites</td>
<td>Faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter strongly limited by mountain climate on hard calcareous substrates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humus system</th>
<th>Water dynamics</th>
<th>Vegetation</th>
<th>Waterscape and environmental context</th>
<th>Dominant features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANMOOR</td>
<td>4–6 months</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>Brook valley systems or base-rich soils in half-drained fens, still water, pH &gt; 6</td>
<td>Anaerobic bacteria, tubificid worms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAPPHIMOOR</td>
<td>&gt; 6 months</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>Brook valley systems, or base-rich soils enriched by base-rich groundwater</td>
<td>Anaerobic bacteria, tubificid worms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISIMOOR</td>
<td>&gt; 6 months</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>Brook valley systems, or base-rich soils</td>
<td>Anaerobic bacteria, tubificid worms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIBRIMOOR</td>
<td>&gt; 6 months</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>Brook valley systems, or base-rich soils</td>
<td>Anaerobic bacteria, tubificid worms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Notes:
- **ANMOOR**: Evenly drained fens
- **SAPPHIMOOR**: Half-drained fens
- **MISIMOOR**: Evenly drained fens
- **FIBRIMOOR**: Unundated and recently drained bogs

### Description

Terrestrial humus systems correspond to humus forms in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are well visible and occur in aerated conditions, never submerged and/or water-saturated, or only for a few days per year (Fig. 1, Table 1). Non hydro-morphic organic (O) and organic-mineral soil horizons (A or AE) characterize these forms.

Histic humus systems correspond to humus forms in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are well visible but are or have been strongly limited and/or influenced by anaerobic conditions (Fig. 1, Table 2). They are submerged and/or water-saturated for many months (usually more than 6 months per year). Organic-mineral (anA) or organic (H) soil horizons characterize these forms.

Prefixes are used to resolve transitional forms between aerobic (Terrestrial) and anaerobic (Histic) conditions:

- **Hydro**: is used as a prefix when some hydro-morphic horizons (denoted by the prefix “g”) are present in Terrestrial humus forms, example Hydro Mull, Hydro Eumull, Hydro Dysmuder.
- **Epistemo**: is used as a prefix for intergrades between Terrestrial and Histic humus forms when terrestrial hydro-morphic horizons (prefix “g”) are combined with Histic horizons (anA and/or H), example Epistemo Anmoor, Epistemo Euanmoor, Epistemo Limisaprimoor.

Each humus system is composed of 3–4 humus forms listed in the following descriptions of Terrestrial and Histic systems:

**TERRESTRIAL**: Humus systems in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are well visible and occur in aerated conditions (Fig. 2, Table 1):

- Humus system in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are strongly limited by cold and/or acid conditions: MOR (humus forms: Hemimor, Humimor, Eumor);
- Humus system in which biological activities and decomposition of organic matter are moderately limited by low temperature and/or acidity conditions: MODER (humus forms: Hemimoder, Eumoder, Dysmuder);
- Humus system in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are weakly or not limited by environmental constraints: MULL (humus forms: Eumull, Mesomull, Oligomull, Dysmull);
- Humus system in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are strongly influenced by seasonally contrasted dry or cold climate conditions: AMPHI (humus forms: Leptoamphi, Eumacroamphi, Eumesoamphi, Pachyamphi);
- Humus system in which faunal activities and decomposition of organic matter are strongly limited by mountain climate on calcareous hard substrate (lithopedon): TANGEL (humus forms: Leptotangel, Eutangel, Pachytangel).

**HISTIC**: Humus systems in which the transformation of organic matter by fauna (comminution of plant material, faecal deposition) and microbes (darkening, softening of plant material) is still visible but is or has been strongly limited and/or influenced by anaerobic conditions favoured by prolonged periods of water saturation by groundwater (Fig. 3, Table 2):

- Article 4: Terrestrial – Specific terms and diagnostic horizons;
- Article 5: Terrestrial – Keys of classification of systems and forms;
- Article 6: Terrestrial – Hydro intergrades.

**Terrestrial humus systems**

- **ANMOOR**: Neith in dynamic flood nor inundation with fast currents: ANMOOR (humus forms: Leptoanmoor, Euanmoor, Limisaprimoor).
- **SAPPHIMOOR**: Amphibious glacial moraine, or partially or totally inundated by groundwater: SAPPIMOOR (humus forms: Leptopaphimoor, Euanpaphimoor).
- **MISIMOOR**: Evenly drained fens: MISIMOOR (humus forms: Leptomisimoor, Euanmisimoor).
- **FIBRIMOOR**: Unundated and recently drained bogs: FIBRIMOOR (humus forms: Leptofibrimoor, Euanfibrimoor).
Humus system of wet very base-poor soils in brook valley systems and bogs: FIBRIMOOR (humus forms: Sapribrimoor, Humi
brimoor, Eu
brimoor); Humus system of wet moderately base-poor soils in brook valley systems, or base-enriched soils of drained previously base-poor bogs: MESIMOOR (humus forms: Saprimesimoor, Humimesimoor, Eumesimoor, Fibrimesimoor); Humus system of moist (with less water than “wet”) moderately base-poor soils in brook valley systems or base-rich soils in half-drained fens: AMPHIMOOR (humus forms: Humiamphimoor, Mesiamphimoor, Fibriamphimoor); Humus system of moist base-rich soils in brook valley systems or fens (large extended systems characterized by a dominant process of sedimentation, large floodplains): SAPRIMOOR (humus forms: Limisaprimoor, Eusaprimoor, Oligosaprimoor); Humus system of wet base-rich soils or soils enriched by base-rich groundwater in brook valley systems (small rivers, brooks, small streams and floodplains, not in dynamic floods or inundations with fast currents): ANMOOR = (humus forms: Euanmoor, Limianmoor, Saprianmoor).

Histic humus systems and forms are presented in the following articles of Humusica 2:

- Article 9: Histic – Specific terms and diagnostic horizons;
- Article 10: Histic – Keys of classification of systems and forms;

AQUEOUS: Tidal and subtidal humus systems in which the transformation of organic matter by fauna (comminution of plant material, faecal deposition) and microbes (darkening, softening of plant material) is still visible but is or has been strongly limited and/or influenced by anaerobic conditions (Fig. 4):

- Humus system in tidal zone (between low and high tide zone): TIDAL = (Oxitidal, Reductitidal);
Humus system under tidal zone (under low tide line): SUBTIDAL = (Eusubtidal).

Aqueous humus systems (Table 3) are presented in Humusica 2, article 12: Tidal and Subatidal humus systems and forms.

Environmental contexts of Terrestrial, Histic and Aqueous humus systems are schematized in Tables 1–3, respectively.

The ecological determinants of PARA humus systems are different from those of the main systems. Para systems can be present in the absence of soil and are strongly related to specific habitats and/or plant covers:

- Biological crusts on rock or soil: CRUSTO;
- Moss cushions or arbuscular lichens: BRYO;
- Root mats: RHIZO;
- Decaying wood: LIGNO;
- Humus systems and biological crusts in submerged photic habitats (exposed to sunlight and thus permitting photosynthesis; usually less than 100 m in depth): ANAERO (considered as a first stage of a more evolved Aqueous);
- Humus systems and biological crusts in submerged photic extreme habitats, such as volcanoes, above a persistent heat source, water in contact with pyroclastic flows, fumaroles), or in submerged aphotic zones (deep seas, hot submerged sources, colonies of barophile organisms…): ARCHAEO.

Para humus systems are briefly presented in Table 4. Each system is subdivided in humus forms defined by specific diagnostic horizons described in Humusica 2, article 13: Para humus systems.

AGRO are humus systems transformed by human practices in which diagnostic horizons of natural humus systems are still observable.

TECHNO are humus systems transformed by human practices in which diagnostic horizons of natural humus systems are no longer observable, although natural processes can be still in play. Three sub-systems are distinguished according to the degree of artificiality:

- Man-made humus systems, with recognizable and assignable to comparable natural humus horizons: MANURE HUMUS;
- Man-made humus systems without visible by the naked eye humus horizons: SOIL-FREE HUMUS;
- Man-made humus systems corresponding to waste deposits with humus horizons not assignable to known Terrestrial, Histic, Aqueous or Para natural humus horizons: DUMP HUMUS.

In Humusica 2, article 14 we review knowledge about anthropogenic soils, before presenting anthropogenic humus systems in
Table 3
Aqueous humus systems and environmental context. Oxitidal and Reductitidal have been suggested as two successive sub-systems along a gradient of decreasing oxygen availability (see Fig. 4) but they were not erected to the humus system level, in the absence of clear-cut passage from the one to the other. Thus only two main Aqueous humus systems are presented here, Tidal (Oxitidal and Reductitidal) and Subtidal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humus system</th>
<th>Water dynamics</th>
<th>Vegetation</th>
<th>Submersion period</th>
<th>Soils (IUSS-WRB, 2015)</th>
<th>Biological agents</th>
<th>Dominant features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tidal</td>
<td>Daily tide</td>
<td>Amphibious plants, Carex, Limonium, Spartina…</td>
<td>5-7 months</td>
<td>Cryosol CR, Arenosol AR, Fluvisol FL, Gleysol GL, Stagnosol ST, Solonchar SL</td>
<td>Submersion period: anaerobic bacteria, tubificid worms. Dry period: aerobic bacteria, earthworms, enchytraeids, mites, woodlice, millipedes, insect larvae, snails, slugs</td>
<td>High tidal zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtidal</td>
<td>Exceptionally emerged</td>
<td>No plants</td>
<td>&gt; 11 months</td>
<td>Arenosol AR, Solonchar SL</td>
<td>Anaerobic bacteria, Archaea</td>
<td>Submersed coastal zone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4
Para humus systems and environmental context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humus system</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Diagnostic characters</th>
<th>Dynamic considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRUSTO</td>
<td>Biologically complex mosaic of cyanobacteria, green algae, lichens, mosses, microfungi, and/or other bacteria (thickness from mm to a few cm).</td>
<td>Soil and microorganisms form a compact 3D-aggregate. The presence of soil distinguishes biological rock crusts (micro-crusts, established on rock) from biological soil crusts (macro-crusts, established on soil). Rock crusts evolve into soil crusts once and if enough soil material has accumulated.</td>
<td>Pioneer ecosystems of arid and polar deserts, rocky outcrops and walls, harsh climate, nutrient and moisture conditions, incipient stages of soil development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRYO</td>
<td>Mosses or arbuscular lichens or small stoncrop plants totally covering the soil and forming a stratified carpet or cushion with living (green) parts overgrowing a layer of dead stems and leaves.</td>
<td>Humus systems where more than 90% of volume (estimated in the field by naked eye) of cumulated Ol and OF horizons is made of moss.</td>
<td>Pioneer ecosystems succeeding to biological crusts in cold, arid or peat environments; also in mosaic on boulders or under forest trees on eroded soil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHIZO</td>
<td>Organic and/or mineral-organic layers almost entirely made of root material (living and dead).</td>
<td>Humus systems where more than 50% of volume (estimated in the field by naked eye) of the cumulated humus profile is made of roots or other subterranean plant parts.</td>
<td>Heathland and grassland ecosystems built by grass, fern, ericaceous and other sufruteceous or scrub vegetation, with very active development of subterranean parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIGNO</td>
<td>Organic diagnostic horizons almost entirely made of wood decayed by fungi and tunneled by invertebrates</td>
<td>Humus systems where more than 90% of volume (estimated in the field by naked eye) of cumulated organic horizons is made of more or less decayed wood</td>
<td>Specific ecosystems exploiting the energy released during wood decomposition. The process of decomposition takes place on the ground or on stems and branches still on standing dead trees. Very common in old-growth forests, particularly in unmanaged temperate and tropical forests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANAERO</td>
<td>Humus system under the prominent influence of anaerobic bacteria in submersed anoxic photic habitats (exposed to sunlight and permitting photosynthesis).</td>
<td>River, lake marsh and sea beds, sewage beds…</td>
<td>Extremophile habitats without any successional development due to very harsh and instable conditions. Considered as a first stage of a more evolved Aqueous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARCHAEO</td>
<td>Humus system under the prominent influence of archaea or anaerobic bacteria, cyanobacteria, microfungi or microalgae in emerged photic or submersed aphytic extreme habitats.</td>
<td>Extremophile habitats without plants; highly saline, acidic, or alkaline water; hot springs; wet surfaces of any type, supporting organic matter or other sources of energy; areas surrounding volcanoes, fumaroles; deep dark aphytic seas (barophile microorganisms)…</td>
<td>Pioneer organic humus systems associated with incipient soil formation. In dry habitats, they may evolve into Crusto, in humid habitats into Bryo humus systems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5
Anthropogenic systems: description, diagnostic characters, dynamic considerations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humus system</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Diagnostic characters</th>
<th>Dynamic considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGRO</td>
<td>Humus system, more or less modified by man but still assignable to a functionally similar natural reference. Agricultural humus systems or less artificial urban humus systems.</td>
<td>Lying on mineral soil. At least one humus horizon (organic or organic-mineral) recognizable and amenable to a functionally similar natural reference. Tillage profile or managed dump of organic remains.</td>
<td>Agricultural fields, market and kitchen gardens, not strongly altered urban humus systems (under trees or in shrubby areas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNO</td>
<td>Man-made humus systems, with recognizable horizons assignable to comparable natural humus horizons; compost or mulch, other artificial organic or mineral-organic mixtures.</td>
<td>Man-made humus systems mimicking natural systems, with natural materials and soil; humus horizons generally recognizable even if animal and microbial communities are impoverished compared to natural humus systems. Artificial humus systems without organic or organic-mineral soil horizons; the use of inert media (gravel, sand, sawdust, rock wool, coco coir, peat, vermiculite, perlite, pumice, rice hulls, other soil-free mixtures…) is common and soil formation is avoided.</td>
<td>Used to restore strongly exploited soils, increase their content in organic matter and their biodiversity. Greenhouse production, sunlight and artificial lightning, vertical vegetable and fruit production, use of treated wastewater…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soil-free Humus: Man-made humus systems without humus horizons visible by the naked eye; nutriculture, hydroponic cultures without soil.</td>
<td>Organic matter under decomposition, but so rich in artefacts or waste materials or technic materials that it is impossible to recognize a natural humus horizon or system.</td>
<td>Landfills, waste heaps, industrial waste, very altered urban humus systems. More or less uncontrolled sewage sludge, toxic waste, landfill waste, masonry waste, topsoil abandoned to recycling of waste and biodegraded materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dump Humus: Man-made humus systems corresponding to waste deposits with humus horizons not assignable to known Terrestrial, Histic, Aqueous or Para natural humus horizons.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


heterogeneity and scale of observation have to be considered and are illustrated in Humusica, 1, article 7;
• all organic horizons and the underlying organic-mineral horizons have to be made visible; generally, even mineral horizons are investigated to have a better assessment of the soil type, as in Fig. 5 (100 × 100 × 100–120 cm);
• all present diagnostic horizons (usually 2–5 horizons) of the profile must be identified; the description of each potential diagnostic

Fig. 5. Example of a hole dug for the observation of the humus profile in a beech forest in Trentino (Italy). Humus system: Amphi; Humus form: Biomessoraphi; Soil: dystric Cambisol (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2015). To the left are concepts used in the classification of humus systems and forms (diagnostic horizons with their letter coding). To the right are real objects as they can be observed by a naive field observer (humus horizons of varying colour and depth, humus profile).

Fig. 6. Para humus systems. Examples of a) Crusto, covering a granitic wall, b) Bryo, developing on a rocky substrate, c) Rhizo, under a grassland covering a Leptosol and d) Ligno systems taking place in correspondence to woody cumulus or stumps under biodegradation.
horizon is given in Humusica 1, article 4 for Terrestrial humus forms and Humusica 2, articles 9 and 12 for Histic and Aqueous humus forms, respectively: compare the real horizon with the illustrated description;
• to a list of diagnostic horizons corresponds a precise humus form, which is included in a particular humus system. The assignment could be easily done using the practical tables furnished in the abovementioned articles.

Facultative qualifiers in use in the Word Reference Base soil classification system (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2015) may be added between brackets to the names of humus systems or forms. A list of applicable WRB topsoil qualifiers is proposed in Appendix A.

The classification of humus forms is a step-by-step process starting from the hierarchically upper humus systems, these being easier to identify than humus forms.

2.1. First step: select the right environmental context

Rough evaluation of the main humus system corresponding to a given environmental context:

Unusual humus systems (atypical, made by algae, mosses, on rocks, bark, cold, dry hard environments, a lot of roots or wood…) are Para systems (Fig. 6a–d).

Wet soils, peats, when you need boots for accomplishing your investigation, there is water here and there, boots dip into the soil as into a sponge; if vegetation cover, then hydrophilic vegetation is present: Histic humus systems (Fig. 7a and b) or sea sides Aqueous humus systems (Fig. 8a and b).

Dry “usual” soils, forest soils dwelled by not hydrophilic vegetation: Terrestrial humus systems (Fig. 9a and b)

Agricultural crop fields, urban soils or artificial humus systems (compost, mulch other manures): Agro (Fig. 10a–c) or Techno (Fig. 11) humus systems.

2.2. Second step: select the right humus system

This step is the most important point of the classification. Each humus system (abbreviated from humus interaction system, see Humusica 1, article 1 for more details about concepts and vocabulary) is characterized by a specific morpho-functional structure. The concept
of interaction system (Jagers op Akkerhuis, 2008) gives fundamental knowledge for eventual further ecological investigation or management counselling. According to this author, an interaction system is an association between several interactive components which is endowed with properties not explained by any of its unit components, i.e. it is another definition of emergent properties sensu Ponge (2005). In Fig. 1 there are general indications related to water dynamics, parent material (or lithopedon) and biological activity. The parent material is a crucial factor in the case of Terrestrial humus systems, and water dynamics is essential in the genesis of Histic systems. Moreover, biological activity, which is directly related to the rate of litter biodegradation (low rate = accumulation of non-biodegraded litter) shows a gradient from fast to slow humus systems as follows:

Fig. 9. Terrestrial environments. a) Mull system environment (humus form: Dysmull) in a sub-atlantic oak-hornbeam forest (Paimpont forest, France); b) Amphi system environment (humus form: Eumesoamphi) in a Mediterranean holm oak forest grazed by goats (Orgosolo, Sardinia, Italy).

Fig. 10. Anthropogenic environments. a) Mosaic of Agro system environments in Sardinia, Italy (during a field excursion of the Humus group in June 2006); b) Agro Mull in Legnaro (University of Padua, Italy), that has been ploughed after 5 years of grassland, prepared for a new experimental crop; c) Agro system in urban environment, under a gate of a pavement in Paris (France).
in Terrestrial systems (Fig. 2): 1) on base-rich substrate: Mull > Amphi > Tangel, or 2) on base-poor substrate: Mull > Moder > Mor;

- in Histic systems (Fig. 3): 1) in small wet systems: Anmoor > (Amphimoor or Mesimoor) > Fibrimoor, or 2) in wide wet systems: Saprimoor > (Amphimoor or Mesimoor) > Fibrimoor.

- in Aqueous systems (sea sides, Fig. 4), shallow-tidal > deep-tidal > sub-tidal, corresponding to: Oxitidal > Reductitidal > Eusubtidal humus form

References

In this manual, after the description of each diagnostic horizon that can be observed in the field, we propose a step-by-step classification key of humus systems (see § 1) based on presence/absence and relative thickness of these horizons. Practical tables for Terrestrial and Histic humus systems, showing series of diagnostic horizons, have been set for field survey and are described in Humusica 1, articles 5 and 10, respectively. A detachable dichotomous version of a key for Terrestrial humus forms is reported in Humusica 1, article 5. An iPhone application (Terrhum) will be also available, allowing determining the right Terrestrial humus forms after answering a series of yes/no questions about illustrated diagnostic horizons.

2.3. Third step: select the right humus form

A more precise identification is possible by identifying diagnostic horizons and measuring their thickness when present. Each humus form corresponds to a precise series of diagnostic horizons, well defined in their structural components. Even the thickness of the “boundary layer” between superposed horizons is often important for the classification. The structure of the organic-mineral horizon plays a master role (Fig. 12).

The phase of survey of the humus profile is crucial, very precise data have to be noted in the field. The space-time scale of variation of humus forms is smaller than that of the humus system. A humus system could be associated to a single forest type (single management type), or to a single vegetation type, covering hectares for centuries. A humus form is related to local variations at the level of plant cover heterogeneity (ex. a humus form may be present under a tree differing from another form in an open area of the same forest stand), covering often less than one are, and possibly changing within a few decades.

Practical tools like blades, knives, shovels, sieves, little pickaxes, pH meters or indicators, HCl (10%), Munsell soil colour charts, magnifying lenses, keys for soil fauna, humus systems, soil and geological maps or manuals, cameras and plastic bags for samples are generally in the bag of a humus system specialist and are necessary for a correct humus form identification (Fig. 13a-f).

2.4. Fourth step (facultative): select the right qualifier

As complementary coded information, a series of qualifiers in accordance with the World Reference Base soil classification system (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2015) can be used. When possible, these qualifiers have to be added between brackets to the name of each humus form, preceded by WRB 2015 and in alphabetical order. Some useful
WRB qualifiers for humus form description are shown in Appendix A. In IUSS Working Group WRB (2015), the qualifiers are written with capital letters when used for soil WRB references (e.g. Chernic), or with lowercase letters when used for diagnostic horizons, properties and materials (e.g. chernic horizon).

Examples

- Dysmull (WRB 2015: Dolomitic, Dystric)
- Eumoor (WRB 2015: Arenic, Floatic).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.apsoil.2017.05.025.

References


