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Wesley C. Warren  
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

Patrick Minx  
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

Chad Tomlinson  
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

Fabiana H. G. Farias  
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

et al

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The Novel Evolution of the Sperm Whale Genome

Wesley C. Warren¹,*, Lukas Kuderna², Alana Alexander³, Julian Catchen⁴, José G. Pérez-Silva⁵, Carlos López-Otin⁵, Víctor Quesada⁵, Patrick Minx¹, Chad Tomlinson¹, Michael J. Montague⁶, Fabiana H.G. Farias¹, Ronald B. Walter⁷, Tomas Marques-Bonet², Travis Glenn⁸, Troy J. Kieran⁸, Sandra S. Wise⁹, John Pierce Wise Jr ⁹, Robert M. Waterhouse¹⁰, and John Pierce Wise Sr ⁹

¹McDonnell Genome Institute, Washington University, St Louis
²Institute of Evolutionary Biology (UPF-CSIC), PRBB, Barcelona, Spain
³Biodiversity Institute, University of Kansas
⁴Department of Animal Biology, University of Illinois, Urbana
⁵Departamento de Bioquímica y Biología Molecular, Facultad de Medicina, Instituto Universitario de Oncología, Universidad de Oviedo, Spain
⁶Department of Neuroscience, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania
⁷Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, Texas State University
⁸Department of Environmental Health Science, University of Georgia, Environmental Health Science Bldg, Athens, Georgia
⁹Wise Laboratory of Environmental and Genetic Toxicology, Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology, School of Medicine, University of Louisville
¹⁰Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

*Corresponding author: E-mail: wwarren@wustl.edu.

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Abstract

The sperm whale, made famous by Moby Dick, is one of the most fascinating of all ocean-dwelling species given their unique life history, novel physiological adaptations to hunting squid at extreme ocean depths, and their position as one of the earliest branching toothed whales (Odontoceti). We assembled the sperm whale (Physeter macrocephalus) genome and resequenced individuals from multiple ocean basins to identify new candidate genes for adaptation to an aquatic environment and infer demographic history. Genes crucial for skin integrity appeared to be particularly important in both the sperm whale and other cetaceans. We also find sperm whales experienced a steep population decline during the early Pleistocene epoch. These genomic data add new comparative insight into the evolution of whales.

Key words: sperm whale, cetaceans, genome.

Introduction

The sperm whale, made famous by Moby Dick, makes some of the deepest and longest dives of any marine mammal: >73 min long and up to 2,035 m deep (Watkins et al. 1993; Watwood et al. 2006) to feed on squid, including the infamous giant and colossal squids (Best 1979; Whitehead 2003). Previous comparative genomic analyses of cetaceans indicated genetic adaptation to a marine existence (Foote et al. 2015; Yim et al. 2014), including convergent pathways of metabolism regulation for deep diving (Foote et al. 2015). However, to date, the sperm whale—one of the deepest diving and earliest branching toothed whales (Odontoceti; Whitehead 2003)—has been excluded from these comparisons. We sequenced and assembled multiple sperm whale genomes to explore genetic adaptation. Given the important and broad physiological roles played by proteases, our explorations mostly focused on examining protease loss-of-function (LoF) events important in sperm whale, and cetacean, evolution. We also sought to discover which genes showed signs of positive selection shared with other cetaceans or unique to sperm whale. Finally, as previous analyses suggested that sperm whales...
experienced a global expansion <80,000 years ago (Alexander et al. 2016), we examine the estimated historical effective population size using samples from throughout the sperm whale’s range.

Materials and Methods

We sequenced a Gulf of Mexico female sperm whale (GMX) to high coverage (72×) using short-insert and mate-pair libraries of 100 bp length (detailed in the supplementary material S1, Supplementary Material online) on an Illumina HiSeq2000. We assembled the draft genome of all sequences with ALLPATHS (Gnerre et al. 2011) using default parameter settings, subjecting assembly input reads to quality control as detailed in the ALLPATHS documentation (Gnerre et al. 2011). We obtained RNAseq data from skin biopsies of a different GMX sperm whale to aid gene annotation as described here:http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK169439/. After aligning genes from the sperm whale with other taxa (detailed in supplementary material S1, Supplementary Material online) we inferred 18,686 protein-coding genes—second only to the baiji (Lipotes vexillifer) among sequenced cetaceans at 18,906 genes. Using a core eukaryotic mapping method (Simao et al. 2015) we also demonstrated >94.7% of conserved genes were complete in our assembly (supplementary table S3, Supplementary Material online). Of the 18,686 protein-coding genes, 12,717 had single-copy orthologs in both human and other cetartiodactyls (supplementary table S4, Supplementary Material online; additional methods/results can be found in the supplementary material S1, Supplementary Material online). Several significant pathways emerged from enrichment analyses, which included genes associated with blood-circulation and skin stress responses (table 1). Cetaceans, including the sperm whale, exhibit molting or skin sloughing (Amos et al. 1992), potentially as an adaptive response to fouling by barnacles and other organisms. However, sperm whales face the additional challenge of maintaining skin integrity and blood homeostasis at high water pressures during deep foraging dives.

To complement the analysis of genes under positive selection, we manually annotated the complete set of proteases (i.e., degradome) of the sperm whale. This independent analysis identified several proteases involved in skin function and blood homeostasis that showed LoF events along the lineage leading to sperm whales (fig. 1; additional methods/results in supplementary material S1, Supplementary Material online). We also detected LoF in proteases involved in inflammation, immunity and metabolism within cetaceans, and specifically

Table 1

| Pathway                  | Source | Genes                          | Ratio of Enrichment | Adjusted P-value |
|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Focal adhesion           | Wiki   | CHAD, COL1A2, THBS2, TNC, FLT1 | 6.9                 | 0.015            |
| Focal adhesion           | KEGG   | CHAD, COL1A2, PARVG, THBS2, TNC, FLT1 | 7.5                 | 0.0076           |
| Pemphigus                | Disease| PPL, EVPL, DSP, DSG3            | 38.8                | 0.0006           |
| Calcium signaling        | KEGG   | PTK2B, ADCY3, RYR1, RYR2, P2RX3, PHKB | 7.6                 | 0.0076           |
| Blood circulation        | GO     | ALOX5, CHD7, WNK1, EPAS1, CX3C1L, PPP1R13L, COL1A2, AZU1, DSP, GUCY1A2, MYBPC3, TBC1D8 | 3.4                 | 0.036            |

Cornified envelope Reactome

DSP, TGM1, KRT4, PKP1, DSG3, PPL, EVPL

NA *FDR 3.65 × 10⁻¹¹

*The false discovery rate (FDR) calculated within the Reactome software (Croft et al. 2014) is the probability corrected for multiple comparisons. Adjusted P-values are not provided.

Results and Discussion

Our sperm whale total assembled sequence was similar in size to other assembled cetacean genomes (supplementary table S2, Supplementary Material online). Using our GMX individual reference assembly (Genbank assembly accession GCA_000472045.1) we inferred 18,686 protein-coding genes—second only to the baiji (Lipotes vexillifer) among sequenced cetaceans at 18,906 genes. Using a core eukaryotic mapping method (Simao et al. 2015) we also demonstrated >94.7% of conserved genes were complete in our assembly (supplementary table S3, Supplementary Material online). Of the 18,686 protein-coding genes, 12,717 had single-copy orthologs in both human and other cetartiodactyls (supplementary table S4, Supplementary Material online; additional methods/results can be found in the supplementary material S1, Supplementary Material online). Several significant pathways emerged from enrichment analyses, which included genes associated with blood-circulation and skin stress responses (table 1). Cetaceans, including the sperm whale, exhibit molting or skin sloughing (Amos et al. 1992), potentially as an adaptive response to fouling by barnacles and other organisms. However, sperm whales face the additional challenge of maintaining skin integrity and blood homeostasis at high water pressures during deep foraging dives.
within the sperm whale. A loss of several proteases in cetaceans suggests a trend towards a milder inflammatory response relevant to Peto’s paradox: A theory postulated to explain the lower relative incidence of cancer in large mammals (Caulin and Maley 2011). In addition, MMP7—which promotes metastasis when expressed at high levels (Li et al. 2014; Koskensalo et al. 2011)—contains a premature stop codon in sperm whales, a putative sperm whale-specific mechanism to reduce cancer incidence. We also found that CASP12 and PRSS33 were independently lost in cetaceans and some hominoids, suggesting a case of convergent evolution of the immune system in very different environments. Several proteases involved in digestion (CPA2, CPA3, CPO) were also lost in cetaceans (fig. 1). In some cases these losses were independent, suggesting convergent evolution driven by trophic level. As expected, odontocetes retain functional orthologs of proteases involved in dentition (KLK4, MMP20), which were lost in mysticetes, who use baleen—not teeth—to filter food (Keane et al. 2015).

To better understand patterns of genetic diversity among sperm whales from different ocean basins, we carried out medium-coverage resequencing of individuals from the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. Average genome-wide heterozygosity per base, corrected for callable sequence space, was 0.0011. This value is low in comparison with the fin whale (0.0015) and bottlenose dolphin (0.0014; Yim et al. 2014), suggesting the sperm whale has a smaller effective population size ($N_e$). A pairwise sequentially Markovian coalescent (PSMC) analysis (Li and Durbin 2011) indicated a rapid decline in $N_e$ during the transition from the Pliocene to Pleistocene epoch, inferred consistently regardless of the ocean origin of samples (fig. 2A). The increase in upwelling associated with the Pliocene and/or cycles of glaciation within the Pleistocene have been implicated in the evolution of gigantism in mysticetes (Slater et al. 2017), as well as the diversification of marine dolphins (do Amaral et al. 2016). This suggests that changes in ocean dynamics during this time period have had a strong impact on cetaceans in general, and we suggest are also the likely cause of the inferred sperm whale population decline. The GMX sample had significantly lower heterozygosity than Pacific and Indian Ocean samples (fig. 2B, supplementary table S1, Supplementary Material online). Future sequencing will clarify whether lower diversity is restricted to GMX, or characteristic of the entire Atlantic. However, the isolation of GMX due to high levels of female philopatry (inferred from differentiation of the maternally-inherited mitochondrial DNA, Engelhaupt et al. 2009; Alexander et al. 2016), and the limited census size (763 sperm whales in 2009, Waring et al. 2013), suggest that GMX could be subjected to greater levels of genetic drift associated with a small and maternally-isolated population. The ability of the sperm whale to respond to future selective pressures, including climate change, in the face of such reduced genetic diversity should be a focus of ongoing study.

![Fig. 1.](https://example.com/fig1.png)
Overall, our results suggest positive selection has differentially affected localized portions of the sperm whale genome. In particular, the complex pattern of convergent gene evolution involving skin-related genes suggests they have played an important role in aquatic adaptation, possibly influenced by the somewhat contradictory requirements of heat insulation, buoyancy and deep diving. In comparison to the localized effects of selection on the genome, we infer that the sperm whale experienced a rapid population decline, potentially in response to glaciation, which had a broad effect on genome-wide diversity. Given the apparent influence of past climate change, monitoring the on-going response of sperm whales to anthropogenically mediated climate change will be paramount.

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Authors Contributions

S.S.W., J.W.J., J.W.S. isolated genomic DNA and sexed all samples. L.K., T.M.B. performed all population history analyses. J.G.P., C.L.O., V.Q. performed all protease analyses. C.T., P.M. completed genome assembly and curation. J.C., T.J.K., T.G. analyzed population sequences. M.J.M., F.H.F. analyzed gene selection. R.M.W. completed all gene orthology analyses. W.C.W., A.A. wrote the paper and reviewed all analyses. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at Genome Biology and Evolution online.
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