Collapse of Amphibian Communities Due to an Introduced Ranavirus

Stephen J. Price,1,2,7,8 Trenton W.J. Garner,1 Richard A. Nichols,2 François Balloux,3 César Ayres,4 Amparo Mora-Cabello de Alba,5 and Jaime Bosch6
1Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London, Regents Park, London NW1 4RY, UK
2The School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 4NS, UK
3UCL Genetics Institute, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK
4Asociación Herpetológica Española, José Gutiérrez Abascal 2, 28006 Madrid, Spain
5Parque Nacional Picos de Europa, Avenida Covadonga 43, 33550 Gansas de Onís, Asturias, Spain
6Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, CSIC, José Gutiérrez Abascal 2, 28006 Madrid, Spain

Summary

The emergence of infectious diseases with a broad host range can have a dramatic impact on entire communities and has become one of the main threats to biodiversity [1–4]. Here, we report the simultaneous exploitation of entire communities of potential hosts with associated severe declines following invasion by a novel viral pathogen. We found two phylogenetically related, highly virulent viruses (genus Ranavirus, family Iridoviridae) causing mass mortality in multiple, diverse amphibian hosts in northern Spain, as well as a third, relatively avirulent virus. We document host declines in multiple species at multiple sites in the region. Our work reveals a group of pathogens that seem to have preexisting capacity to infect and evade immunity in multiple diverse and novel hosts, and that are exerting massive impacts on host communities. This report provides an exceptional record of host population trends being tracked in real time following emergence of a wildlife disease and a striking example of a novel, generalist pathogen repeatedly crossing the species barrier with catastrophic consequences at the level of host communities.

Results and Discussion

We have been monitoring amphibian communities located in the Picos de Europa National Park (PNPE) since 2005, when we first recorded ranavirus infection, disease, and mass mortality. We began demographic surveys in 2007, making annual counts of target species at 15 sites across the park (Figure 1). This predates the first published records of lethal ranavirus infections (occurring in September 2007) in the PNPE in two of our study species [5, 6]. Ranaviruses are large, double-stranded DNA viruses of the family Iridoviridae, which are emerging pathogens with broad geographical and host ranges. They infect and cause disease in fish and reptiles but are noted for their ability to cause lethal disease in amphibians in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia [5, 7–17]. Despite Ranavirus’s broad geographic distribution and documented multihost epizootics in amphibian communities [18], quantitative evidence for amphibian demographic decline due to rananoviruses has previously been reported for only a single amphibian host species [19].

Disease and Mass Mortality

We have continued to record mass mortality events consistent with ranavirus infections affecting amphibian communities at four locations in the PNPE (Áliva, Ercina, Lloroza, and Monetas [ÁLIVA, ERC, LLOR, and MON], Figure 1). During annual field surveys, we encountered numerous dead and dying adult, juvenile, and larval caudate and anuran amphibians, including all six common species inhabiting the park. Ranavirus infections may be subclinical [20, 21] but are more typically associated with overt, distinctive disease in the form of systemic or ulcerative syndromes [6, 7] and accompanied by host mass mortality. Sick and dead animals in the PNPE exhibited superficial and ulcerating skin lesions, internal hemorrhages, and severe limb necrosis, all gross signs typical of lethal rananovirusosis (see Figure S1A available online). Additionally, since 2010 we have been observing mortality associated with signs of rananovirusosis at a location 200 km west of the PNPE in Galicia, affecting two caudate amphibian species that are rare or absent in the PNPE and one squamate reptile (Figure S1B).

Molecular diagnostics have confirmed that infection with Ranavirus is associated with disease at all five of these locations (Table S1). We also screened for Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis (Bd), a fungal pathogen commonly associated with amphibian die-offs in Iberia [22], at eight locations in the PNPE. Bd was present at two sites (25%; Table S1B), occurring in the absence of observed disease and mortality at La Güélga (LAG, a ranavirus-negative site, Figure 1) and at low prevalence in 2005 only at an artificial pond (near Áliva refuge). A more widespread survey for bacteria and viruses was also undertaken as part of the first published account of ranavirus infection and mass mortality in the PNPE [5] (at Iguedri [IGU], Figure 1). That mass mortality event affected some of our study species, which exhibited the same suite of lesions observed in this study. There were no other pathogens found besides the Ranavirus Common midwife toad virus (CMTV). We consider it unlikely that other environmental factors, such as pollution, are contributing to the observed mass mortality events, given the pristine nature of the PNPE and the heterogeneity among study sites in terms of the type and situation of water bodies.

We successfully amplified a suite of ranavirus loci (six partial open reading frames and an intergenic region) from three of the host species sampled at locations in the PNPE and all three species sampled in Galicia. Sequences from amplification products of all loci were aligned against whole genomes covering known global amphibian-like ranavirus diversity and joined to form a final concatenated alignment 2,274 bp in length. Phylogenetic assessment of the concatenated sequences derived from seven diseased animals show that the ranaviruses associated with disease and mortality in northern Spain were all related or near identical to the genome of CMTV.
This virus was originally isolated from a diseased animal sampled in 2008 in the PNPE and was associated with mass mortality and the same distinctive signs of disease (Figure 1) [6, 23]. Sequences amplified from all hosts sampled within the PNPE at sites of mass mortality exhibited 99.96% homology (varying at a single base) with the sequence of the type CMTV irrespective of what host species was sampled. Sequences from hosts sampled at the Galician site were highly similar to each other (two were identical and were 99.96% identical to the third, with variation again confined to a single base). They formed the sister clade to the CMTV cluster and are hereafter referred to as Balseiro et al. (2009) [5]. See also Figure S1 and Table S1.

Abbreviations key: SCR, Soto-Covadonga Road; OCR, Orandi-Covadonga Road; RAS, Rasa Pandecarmen; ERC, Ercina Lake; LAG, La Guelga; VEG, Vega Sajambre; ELP, El Pontón; POR, Pontón-Oseja Road; CAB, Charcas de Cable; BAJ, Bajero Lake; LLOR, Lloroza; MON, Moñetas; AND, Andara Lake; VLL; Vau los Lobos; ALIVA, Áliva; VDL, Vega de Liordes; IGU, Igüérdi; POZU, Pozu Llau.

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The worst-affected species was the common midwife toad, *Alytes obstetricans*. Midwife toads experienced steep decline at both diseased sites where we monitored population trends of this host species but did not decline at two other locations where signs of ranavirosis were never detected (Figure 3; Table S1A). Alpine newts (*Mesotriton alpestris*) and common toads (*Bufo bufo*) also experienced significant declines at diseased sites (Figure 3) but did not show this dynamic at locations where we did not observe amphibians exhibiting signs of ranavirosis, with one exception (*B. bufo* at Soto-Covadonga Road [SCR], Figure 1). Amphibian species that were enumerated at disease-free locations did not generally decline from 2007 to 2012 and sometimes appeared to be increasing in numbers during the course of our surveillance (Table S1A). When all monitored host populations were considered independently, infection with CMTV was significantly associated with host declines (Fisher’s exact test, $p = 0.0093$; raw data summarized in Figure S2). The same was true when we accounted for potential nonindependence of multiple species at the same site by using site data rather than host species data (Fisher’s exact test, $p = 0.022$; Figure S2).

CMTV Emergence

Our findings indicate that CMTV-like ranaviruses recently emerged in northern Spain and are responsible for mortality of every amphibian species that we have sampled. Additionally, an isolate with 99.96% sequence identity to viruses isolated from amphibians in Galicia, and closely related to CMTV, was generated from esophageal tissue taken from a viperine snake (*Natrix maura*) found dead in the process...
of ingesting diseased amphibians [24] and with ulcerating lesions along its gullet. The ability of FV3-like ranaviruses (the sister clade to CMTV-like; Figure 2 [23]) to be transmitted among both closely related and highly diverged cold-blooded vertebrate taxa is well documented [25, 26]. However, recurrent epizootics caused by FV3-like viruses in the Americas, the United Kingdom (UK), and Southeast Asia have only been linked to host population decline in UK common frogs (Rana temporaria), and UK FV3-like viruses appear limited in their ability to cause disease and significant mortality in other native UK amphibian species [19]. We have also detected FV3-like ranaviruses cocirculating in the PNPE (at Ándara Lake [AND], Figure 2) that caused morbidity without lesions in A. obstetricans but with no evidence of mass mortality or population declines. Reports of amphibian mass mortality events associated with rananvirusis are rapidly accruing across Europe, and CMTV-like forms are implicated: a partial sequence of the major capsid protein gene of the virus isolate responsible for the death of thousands of pool frogs (Pelophylax lessonae) and smooth newts (Lissotriton vulgaris) in the Netherlands reported by Kik et al. exhibited 100% sequence similarity to CMTV [9], as did sequences from the same locus derived from a Ranavirus isolated from North American bullfrog larvae sampled from invasive populations in Belgium [10]. The accumulating body of evidence indicates that universal pathogen strategies for overcoming host barriers are rare [29, 30]. Accordingly, pathogens typically exhibit significant variation in their ability to infect and cause disease across host species and must evolve novel traits to exploit a broader host range [31–33]. It is therefore unusual for an emerging pathogen to exploit a broad range of host species and extremely rare for multiple host species to suffer synchronous mass mortality and decline when infection emerges. For the rare exceptions, the results for hosts can be notably catastrophic (e.g., West Nile virus emergence in North America [1], Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis emergence in the Neotropics and Australia [2], and white-nose syndrome in North American bats [4]).

We see no evidence of increased host species diversity hampering the ability of a novel pathogen to exploit a host community in northern Spain. At the most species-rich site in the PNPE, all six amphibian species are experiencing mortality associated with signs of disease and have done so since disease was first observed. Instead of being inhibited by host species diversity, it appears that a single strain of CMTV has the capacity to exploit multiple host species de novo. This hypothesis is supported by an almost complete lack of variation at seven loci located across the type CMTV genome and recovered at multiple points in space, time, and host species—spanning the width of the PNPE, several years,
Common midwife toad ranavirus (CMTV) infections have been confirmed within amphibian communities at Moñetas, Lloroza, and Ercina Lake (black and diverse hosts. The synchrony of host declines across sites, beginning shortly after disease was first detected in the park, provides further support. Taken together with the obstacles to rapid amphibian dispersal presented by the rugged, mountainous terrain of the PNPE, all of the evidence points to a single introduction of CMTV at multiple locations within the park and affecting all amphibian species. Such an introduction could have occurred via human translocations of infectious materials along with equipment or livestock.

Worryingly, species declines in the PNPE show no sign of rebound over five years, and in many cases species are all but extirpated from some locations. The availability of multiple susceptible hosts at a site increases extinction risk, while small relict populations that have suffered declines are left vulnerable to stochastic events [34]. This same pattern of decline without rebound was observed in common frog populations experiencing persistent ranavirus in the UK, where 83% median host population declines were sustained over several frog generations [19]. Selection imposed on host populations experiencing high rates of mortality due to infectious disease is expected to favor genotypes capable of either resisting or tolerating infection, and UK frog populations affected by ranavirus do exhibit the genetic signature of directional selection at immunocompetent loci [19, 35]. However, selection has not been accompanied by demographic recovery, and debilitating ranavirus continues to increase in scope in common frog populations across the UK. If CMTV in Spain has similar capacity to proliferate despite host adaptive responses, amphibian communities, not just single species, will suffer.

Experimental Procedures

Sampling
All animal sampling was carried out following review by the Consejería de Medio Ambiente de Galicia and the governing body of the Parque Nacional Picos de Europa, and permits were renewed annually. We collected swabs and tissue samples from a mix of amphibian species and life stages at sites in the PNPE between 2005 and 2012, and from carcasses of two amphibian (Lissotriton boscai, Triturus marmoratus) and one reptile (Natrix maura) species at Pontillon (Galicia) in 2010 and 2011 (Table S1B). One of the sampled sites—Lloroza—is thought to correspond to the mass mortality event that led to the isolation of CMTV [6, 23].

Screening
Tissue samples were screened for Ranavirus in duplicate using a PCR of the viral MCP gene (CMTV ORF 16L; major capsid protein; AFA44920) [36]. A results summary is included in Table S1B. Swabs were screened for Bd using quantitative PCR [37].

Sequencing
Positive samples were subjected to additional PCR reactions to amplify partial sequences from CMTV ORFs 22L (GenBank accession number AFA44926), 58L (AFA44964), 59R (AFA44965), 81L (AFA44987), 82L (AFA44988), and a region covering a noncoding sequence and the start of 13R (AFA44917). Amplification products were submitted for Sanger sequencing, and sequences were archived in GenBank (see Supplemental Experimental Procedures).

Ranavirus infection and disease were first observed in the Picos de Europa National Park in 2005 (see Multispecies Host Declines). Trends are also shown for all other sites where monitoring of Alytes obstetricans, Mesotriton alpestris, and Bufo bufo has been ongoing but CMTV is assumed to be absent due to molecular screening and/or the absence of disease and mass mortality events (gray lines). Circles denote counts for adults or tadpoles; Squares denote counts for egg masses. See also Table S1.
Phylogenetics

Sequences were aligned with Prank v.100802 [38] and manually edited in Jalview 2.8 [39] to remove gaps. Additional sequences used in alignments and phylogeny construction (listed in the Figure 2 legend) were downloaded from the NCBI nucleotide database. Trees were constructed with MrBayes 3.2.2 [40] and RAxML 7.7.2 [41] using the GTR model of nucleotide substitution. Rate variation among sites was modeled by a discrete gamma distribution with four categories. Default settings were used for Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) analysis in MrBayes (1,000,000 generations, 4 chains, 2 runs, sample frequency = 500, and a 25% burn-in). Twenty maximum-likelihood trees were generated on distinct starting trees in RAxML; 100 bootstrap replicates were calculated and annotated on the best maximum-likelihood tree.

Population Monitoring and Analyses

Annual counts of amphibian populations have been conducted in the PNPE (Table S1A) since 2007. Methodology and life history stage targeted varied with the size and situation of the water body but remained consistent for each site across yearly surveys. Data were analyzed for overall trends in population size using TRIM3.0 [42].

Accession Numbers

GenBank accession numbers by sample and locus are provided in the Supplemental Experimental Procedures.

Supplemental Information

Supplemental Information includes two figures, one table, and Supplemental Experimental Procedures and can be found with this article online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.09.028.

Author Contributions

S.J.P. and J.B. carried out fieldwork in the PNPE. C.A. carried out fieldwork in Galicia. J.J. and A.M. organized and supervised the collection of population data, and J.B. analyzed these data. S.J.P. carried out molecular screening, processed samples for sequencing, and carried out phylogenetic analyses. R.A.N. and F.B. advised on phylogenetic analyses and interpretation. S.J.P. and T.W.J.G. prepared the manuscript, which was edited by all authors.

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