Fast Growth May Impair Regeneration Capacity in the Branching Coral Acropora muricata

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Abstract

Regeneration of artificially induced lesions was monitored in nubbins of the branching coral Acropora muricata at two reef-flat sites representing contrasting environments at Réunion Island (21°07’S, 55°32’E). Growth of these injured nubbins was examined in parallel, and compared to controls. Biochemical compositions of the holobiont and the zooxanthellae density were determined at the onset of the experiment, and the photosynthetic efficiency (Fv/Fm) of zooxanthellae was monitored during the experiment. Acropora muricata rapidly regenerated small lesions, but regeneration rates significantly differed between sites. At the sheltered site characterized by high temperatures, temperature variations, and irradiance levels, regeneration took 192 days on average. At the exposed site, characterized by steadier temperatures and lower irradiation, nubbins demonstrated fast lesion repair (81 days), slower growth, lower zooxanthellae density, chlorophyll a concentration and lipid content than at the former site. A trade-off between growth and regeneration rates was evident here. High growth rates seem to impair regeneration capacity. We show that environmental conditions conducive to high zooxanthellae densities in corals are related to fast skeletal growth but also to reduced lesion regeneration rates. We hypothesize that a lowered regenerative capacity may be related to limited availability of energetic and cellular resources, consequences of coral holobionts operating at high levels of photosynthesis and associated growth.

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Introduction

Disturbances from multiple biotic and abiotic factors cause recurring losses of living tissues from coral colonies [1] and may result in sporadic severe reductions of living corals at the reef scale [2]. A colony’s integrity is maintained through rapid tissue repair [3], while regrowth from surviving colony parts greatly accelerates the recovery of damaged reefs [4] and may even reverse coral-algal phase shifts [5]. Thus, the growth and regenerative capacities of corals are fundamental to determining the resilience of reefs [5,6] and are often used as indicators of coral colony condition and generalized to define a reef’s health status [7,8].

Coral colony growth and regeneration are likely closely related processes, involving calcification and tissue extension [9]. Repair of damaged colony parts (hereafter defined as ‘lesions’) requires energy [10] and interstitial cells [11–13] and competes for these limited resources with other essential biological processes, such as growth [14], reproduction [15], disease resistance, and competitive ability [16]. Lesion regeneration is facilitated by the clonal architecture of corals, enabling the transport and reallocation of resources among units [10,11], to which polyps proximal to the damaged area contribute the most [14,17]. Lesion regenerative capacity varies with the lesion size and shape [18–20], colony morphology and species (see review in [21]), and environmental conditions [8,22]. Also, coral colony growth is known to vary with these parameters (e.g. in [23–25]). While trade-offs between colony growth and lesion repair were documented at the level of individual colonies [17], high skeletal extension rates are generally associated with an efficient lesion-repair capacity (see review in [21]). Hence, fast-growing branching corals have higher lesion regeneration rates with full recovery [26] compared to more-slowly growing massive corals [17].

The present study was designed to investigate the lesion regenerative capacity of the branching coral Acropora muricata at Réunion Island in contrasting natural environments. An earlier study on this species revealed a trade-off between regeneration and growth, and indicated that they were independent of size [27]. We further investigated relationships between skeletal growth and lesion regeneration by monitoring both processes in experimental coral nubbins on two reef flats, Planch’Alizé and Kiosque, selected...
for their contrasting environmental conditions that induced strong differences in coral growth rates. We not only show that coral growth is inversely related to the rate of lesion repair, but also that high coral growth rates may harm regeneration capacity in *A. muricata*. We suggest that rapid coral growth, promoted by a high zooxanthellae density and high photosynthetic efficiency, compromised their capacity to invest energy and cellular resources in lesion repair. We hypothesize that maintaining coral-symbiont functioning under conditions that boost zooxanthellae densities and their photosynthetic rate implies their sequestering of an important share of host resources. This may particularly involve the use of the energy-rich photosynthetic compounds produced by the *Symbiodinium*.

**Methods**

**Ethics Statement**

This experiment was conducted and corals were sampled with permission granted by the Réservation Naturelle Marine de la Réunion. All survey procedures carried out were done with proper precautions to minimize impacts to the reefs.

**Study Area and Species**

Experiments were conducted on the west coast of Réunion Island (21°07’S, 55°32’E) at two shallow (1–2 m deep) reef-flat sites 11 km apart from each other: Planch’Alizé and Kiosque. At each site, the seawater surface temperature (SST) was measured at hourly intervals using calibrated underwater temperature loggers (Hobo Water Temp Pro, with an accuracy of 0.2°C, Onset Computer Corp., USA). Solar radiation (J cm⁻² hour⁻¹) was estimated from the French Meteorological Service on land at station close to each site (stations no. 97415590 and 97415354).

Situated at the la Saline reef, Planch’Alizé is a sheltered site, located downstream of seawater flowing over the 500-m-wide reef-flat. Low water flow and high solar radiation contribute to heating the reef water during the day, inducing important daily SST variations (Fig. 1a) and higher average SSTs compared to the reef water during the day, inducing important daily SST fluctuations (Fig. 1b). Moreover, solar radiation at this site is often tempered due to cloud formation that reduces daily SST fluctuations (Fig. 1b).

At Kiosque, coral diversity is higher, but the density of *A. muricata* but the density of *Porites (Synaraea) rus* is lower than at Planch’Alizé [30,31].

**Regeneration and Growth**

For 3 of the 5 colonies per site, 1 undamaged nubbin was sampled before the beginning of the experiment (February 28, 2008), snap frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C. Genomic DNA was then extracted from a subsample using a Qiagen® Blood and Tissue Kit (Santa Clarita, CA, USA). The internal transcribed spacer (ITS)-2 region of *Symbiodinium* ribosomal (r) DNA was amplified using the primers “TTS Infect” and “TTS2revclamp” [35] under the following conditions: an initial denaturing step of 94°C for 3 min followed by 35 cycles of 1 min at 94°C, 1 min at 58°C, and 1 min at 74°C, followed by a single cycle of 7 min at 74°C. Amplified DNA was then analyzed by denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis (DGGE; CBS Scientific, Del Mar, CA, USA) using a denaturant gradient of 35% to 75%. Prominent bands characterizing different profiles were excised, re-amplified, and sequenced as described by LaJeunesse [30]. Sequences were identified using BLAST searches of GenBank, and exact matches were reported using the nomenclature established by LaJeunesse [35].
Tissues were removed from the skeleton using a dental jet (Waterpik Technologies, Fort Collins, CO, US) with recycled freshly filtered seawater [37], and the obtained coral blastate was homogenized with a potter homogenizer (5 min, 2000 rpm). Zooxanthellae densities were determined from an aliquot of the homogenate by first separating zooxanthellae from host tissue by centrifugation, suspension, and homogenization of the pellet in 2 mL of a formalin solution (5%). Zooxanthellae were then counted in 5 subsamples (0.2 mm³ each) using a hemocytometer at 400× magnification. The chlorophyll (Chl) a concentration was determined by spectrometric absorbance at 664 nm [38]. The protein concentration was determined from 0.1 mL of homogenate following a modified protocol [39] of the Lowry method [40], using the Folin reagent with phenol and bovine serum albumin as standards. Finally, total lipids were extracted using a monophasic solvent mixture (CH₂Cl₂: CH₃OH: H₂O; 1:2: 0.8 v/v/v) [41] with 100 μL of an internal standard (hexadecanone, GC grade, Sigma Chemical, St. Louis, MO, USA) and stored under a nitrogen atmosphere at −20°C until being analyzed. The total lipid content was then determined using thin-layer chromatography coupled with flame-ionization detection (TLC-FID) on an Iatroscan apparatus model MK6-s (with hydrogen flow of 160 mL min⁻¹ and air flow of 2000 mL min⁻¹) and an i-Chromstar 6.1 integration system (SCPA, Bremen, Germany).

Statistical Analysis

Regeneration of each nubbin was quantified by fitting the remaining lesion size (%) over time using a least-squared regression and an exponential decay model, allowing full recovery [20]. We used the following formula:

\[ \text{size} = \text{size}_{\text{reg}} \times e^{(\text{slope} \times t)} \]

where size is the remaining lesion size (%), \( \text{size}_{\text{reg}} \) is the maximum area that can be fully regenerated, slope is the regression slope, and \( t \) is the time in days. Since there is no natural logarithm for 0 (when a lesion is completely healed), +1 was added to the remaining lesion size for the calculations.

Conformity with parametric assumptions was visually assessed from residual plots. A potential site difference in the initial lesion size was tested using a 1-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Possible effects of the initial lesion size on the regression slopes were analyzed using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the initial lesion size as the co-variable. A site difference in model slopes was investigated using an ANOVA, with “colony” as the random factor. For each site, mean slopes were used to simulate regeneration during 300 days. The difference in relative growth between sites and treatments was compared using a 2-way ANOVA, and Tukey’s honest significant difference (HSD) test was used for post-hoc comparisons.

Welch’s t-test was used to compare biochemical properties of nubbins between sites at the onset of the lesion regeneration experiment. As a parametric assumption could not be met, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test was used to compare \( \text{Fv}/\text{Fm} \) of injured and control nubbins at the beginning, middle, and end of the experiment, and was also used to assess site differences in \( \text{Fv}/\text{Fm} \) of injured nubbins. Friedman’s ANOVA was used to test temporal variations in \( \text{Fv}/\text{Fm} \), where values obtained from the same nubbin over time were considered dependent. Results are presented as the mean ± standard deviation (SD).

Results

*Acropora muricata* nubbins were consistently associated with C3 *Symbiodinium*. Corals from the sheltered site Planch’Alizé were characterized by a higher zooxanthellae density, Chl a concentration, and total lipid content, but also not significant lower tissue biomass and protein content compared to those from the exposed site Kiosque (Table 1).

The initial lesion size was \( 104±11 \text{ mm}^2 \) (\( n=48 \)) and did not differ between sites \( (F_{1,47}=2.21, p>0.05) \) or colonies \( (F_{9,39}=1.98, p>0.05) \). Two nubbins at Kiosque died before the onset of regeneration monitoring; these were not included in the analysis. There was no mortality of nubbins during the experimental period. The lesion size decreased rapidly over time (Fig. 2). After 53 days, lesions in nubbins at Kiosque were at 3% of their initial size, while those in nubbins at Planch’Alizé were still at 24% of their initial size. Based on the outcomes of the exponential decay model, lesions healed completely after on average 81 days at Kiosque and 192 days at Planch’Alizé (Fig. 3). Regression slopes significantly differed between Planch’Alizé (−0.024±0.012,
Table 1. Biochemical properties of nubbins of *Acropora muricata* at the onset of the lesion regeneration experiment.

| Parameter                        | Planch’Alizé | Kiosque |
|----------------------------------|--------------|---------|
| Tissue biomass (mg dry weight cm⁻²) | 3.27 (±0.49) | 4.13 (±0.83) |
| Zooxanthellae density (10⁶ cells cm⁻²) | 2.11 (±0.08) | 1.85 (±0.60) |
| Chl a concentration (µg cm⁻²)   | 9.68 (±1.88) | 8.74 (±2.09) |
| Protein content (mg cm⁻²)       | 1.99 (±0.19) | 2.30 (±0.34) |
| Total lipids in holobiont (mg C cm⁻²) | 0.81 (±0.26) | 0.51 (±0.10) |

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

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At Kiosque, the calcification rates of the injured nubbins were lower than that of the controls (*p<0.001*), and rates of calcification and lesion regeneration were negatively correlated (*R²= 0.532, *p<0.001*; Fig. 5). At Planch’Alizé, no difference in growth was observed between injured and control nubbins (*p=0.3*). At this latter site, lesion regeneration rates were slow and not related to growth (Fig. 5).

*Fₜ/Fₘ* values of injured and control nubbins were respectively 0.677±0.016 (*n= 25*) and 0.684±0.021 (*n= 50*) at Planch’Alizé, and 0.682±0.020 (*n= 23*) and 0.690±0.016 (*n= 50*) at Kiosque. *Fₜ/Fₘ* did not significantly differ between sites or treatments (Mann-Whitney U-tests, *p>0.05*), and no significant temporal variation was observed for injured nubbins (Planch’Alizé: *X²= 9.64, p>0.05, df= 6*; Kiosque: *X²= 6.92, p>0.05, df= 6*).

**Discussion**

While the existence of a trade-off between growth and regeneration was clearly identified for some coral species [17], it is not known whether this relationship varies with environmental conditions. Here, we identified that a specific environment conducive to high zooxanthellae densities in coral tissues may favour growth regardless of damage to the colony.

Environmental conditions at Planch’Alizé, including low water flow, high mean SST and high SST variation, combined with nutrient enrichment from N-rich groundwater seepage [29], likely boost zooxanthellae densities and chlorophyll concentrations [42].

Preponderance of autotrophic energy sources in *A. muricata* at this site is further reflected in the high lipid and low protein content of the nubbins. Indeed, lipids are mainly derived from excess carbon fixed by zooxanthellae [43]. Due to its sheltered location and high irradiance, stressful conditions for corals may also be expected to occur frequently here (Fig. 1a). Lipids represent important energy reserves during stressful periods [44], and integrated symbiont-host lipogenesis is considered as a photoprotective mechanism during periods of excess irradiance [45].

At Kiosque, the tissue biomass of nubbins tended to be higher than at Planch’Alizé, although the difference was not significant. Higher tissue biomass may reflect the opportunities corals have for heterotrophic feeding [see review in [46]]. The exposed site Kiosque, which receives a regular influx of coastal water, provides this advantage and allows corals to maintain vital processes during periods when photosynthetic function is compromised. In an earlier study on the lesion regeneration in massive corals at same sites, the potential importance of heterotrophic feeding at Kiosque reef flat during the summer season [22] was already highlighted.

While the contrasted light and temperature regimes between Planch’Alizé and Kiosque were expected to affect the photosynthetic efficiency in corals, *Fₜ/Fₘ* values measured in *A. muricata* nubbins did not differ between these sites. Furthermore, lesion

**Figure 2. Acropora muricata**. Lesion regeneration pattern at Kiosque, almost completely healed after 53 days. Scale bar = 5 mm.
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**Figure 3. Lesion regeneration of Acropora muricata**. Predicted size of artificial lesions over time in nubbins at Planch’Alizé and Kiosque according to slopes estimated from the regeneration model (inset).
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inflation did not affect $F_v/F_m$ values in nubbins, in spite of the stress this likely represents. High $F_v/F_m$ values were maintained throughout the experiment. Measured photosynthetic efficiencies were higher than those of A. muricata nubbins from the Great Barrier Reef kept at a non-stressful temperature [47]. This further suggests that specific environmental conditions at Planch’Alizé did not impair the photosynthesis of A. muricata at this site and may not have been stressful for nubbins there. Differences in the photosynthetic efficiency may also be related to differences in zooxanthellae genotypes [40]. However, while in Chagos Archipelago, A. muricata is commonly associated with C1-Symbiodinium [49], on the Great Barrier Reef, C3-Symbiodinium is the predominant subclade present in Acropora spp. [50,51] as identified here.

Homogeneity of lesion sizes avoids an important confounding factor that complicates drawing viable inferences about the regeneration capacity of corals under different environmental conditions [19]. Lesion size in A. muricata decreased exponentially over time, which corresponds to the common pattern observed for corals [14,17,20]. Despite significantly lower skeletal growth at Kiosque, the mean time required for complete lesion healing was shorter here (81 days) than at Planch’Alizé (192 days). This result is remarkable because it contradicts the general positive relationship between coral growth and lesion repair ability (see review in [21]). Most studies on lesion regeneration in corals have used higher than those of the Caribbean A. palmata regenerating similar-sized lesions (~0.040±0.007 [52]), indicating a lower regenerative capacity than that for this flattened branching coral. In contrast, the very steep slopes obtained for A. muricata nubbins at Kiosque attest to favourable environmental conditions for coral regeneration at this exposed site.

Vigorous skeletal growth, both in terms of linear extension and calcification, of nubbins from Planch’Alizé was not affected by lesion infliction and may be driven by a high supply of photosynthetic products from zooxanthellae. Indeed, a previous study suggested the stimulating role of photosynthesis on calcification induced by nutrient enrichment at this site [41]. Whereas the lesion regenerations rates at Planch’Alizé were slower and not related to growth, at Kiosque both the reduced skeletal growth of injured lesions compared to controls and the negative relationship between calcification and lesion regeneration rates suggest competition for limited resources between these vital processes. While a high lesion regeneration rate is generally assumed in fast-growing corals [21], our observations suggest that environmental conditions that promote fast skeletal growth may compromise rather than boost the lesion regeneration capacity. This observation may help explain the paradox that while fast growing corals such as Acropora spp. are capable of fast tissue regeneration [5,14,53], they may nevertheless be prone to substantial partial mortality in their natural environment [54,55].

Energetic reserves such as lipids are considered to uphold vital life processes [43]. Despite A. muricata nubbins from Planch’Alizé having high lipid content, they regenerated lesions slowly. Tissue biomass of nubbins may be a better predictor of the regenerative capacity, as nubbins from Kiosque showed both high tissue biomass and fast regeneration. Essential resources required for lesion regeneration not only involve energy but also interstitial cells, which are shared among different life functions, including reproduction, growth, repair [11,56] and mucus production. The trade-off between growth and lesion regeneration observed in nubbins from Kiosque complement this view. Very high skeletal extension rates, as observed in nubbins from Planch’Alizé may exert an important drain on interstitial cell availability for tissue repair and may compromise a coral’s regenerative capacity. As proposed by Rinkevich [12], the availability (or depletion) of stem cells will ultimately control observed trade-offs among life-history traits, which are independent of energy availability.
The fact that corals living with high zooxanthellae densities under high irradiation levels require more photosynthetically derived energy to maintain the stability of this symbiosis may provide an alternative explanation for the reduced regeneration capacity of rubble in Planch’Alizé. While CO₂-concentrating machinery, despite being highly energy consuming, they may play an essential role in preventing CO₂ limitation of zooxanthellae and its deleterious consequences for both photosystem II and the coral host [57]. Such energetic demands could interfere with lesion regeneration. At Planch’Alizé, where environmental conditions boost zooxanthellae densities alongside with high photosynthetic and calcification rates, our results suggest that growth demands have priority over other life processes. At Kiosque, where zooxanthellae densities, light levels and photosynthetic demands are lower, corals show the expected trade-off between growth and regeneration rates.

Eventually, competition with organisms (such as algae or microbes) that settle inside lesions may hamper lesion regeneration as an energetically costly mechanism [58]. Chronic nutrient enrichment at Planch’Alizé reef flats favours particularly the development of benthic algae, especially during the rainy season [27,59]. We suggest that this chronic disturbance contributed to the seasonal impairment of the lesion regeneration capacity of P. lutea [22] and may also have contributed to the slower lesion repair in A. muricata at this site during the same hot and warming seasons.

An understanding of key processes of corals is critical to appreciating the divergent population trajectories after exposure to disturbances [60]. Our results suggest that the path to recovery (growth, regeneration, etc.) may strongly differ according to local environmental conditions. Such conditions need to be taken into account when assuming the resilience capacities of coral reefs exposed to increasing levels of disturbances.

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Author Contributions
Conceived and designed the experiments: VD MMMG JHB. Performed the experiments: VD MMMG ACB JHB. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: MMMG MG ACB JHB. Wrote the paper: VD MMMG JHB.

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