Sublethal effects of diel fluctuations in dissolved oxygen saturation on freshwater fishes from tropical Queensland

Thesis submitted by
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in August 2005

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Zoology and Tropical Ecology
within the School of Tropical Biology
James Cook University
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DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics review Committee (approval numbers A865 and A624)

Nicole Flint 29-08-05
STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

Research funding:
- Sugar Research and Development Corporation – scholarship and research funds.
- Rainforest CRC’s “Catchment to Reef” program – research funds.
- Queensland Government Department of the Premier and Cabinet’s “Growing the Smart State PhD Research Funding Program” – research funds.
- James Cook University School of Tropical Biology – research funds.

Research in-kind support:
- Queensland Department of Primary Industries, Fisheries, Walkamin Research Station, location for experiments on sooty grunter eggs.
- The Tablelands Fish Stocking Association provided sooty grunter eggs and fingerlings for experiments.
- The Aquaculture Association of Queensland provided the Utchee Creek rainbowfish for use in experiments.

Supervision:
- Principal supervisor: Professor Richard Pearson (School of Tropical Biology)
- Co-supervisors: Dr Michael Crossland (Australian Centre for Tropical Freshwater Research) and Dr Marcus Sheaves (School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture)
- All three supervisors provided statistical, analytical and editorial support.

Expert and technical advice:
- Mr Rob Gegg assisted in creating the experimental aquaria used in the study.
- Mrs Sue Reilly provided advice and assistance in histological techniques.
- A/Prof Leigh Owens provided expert advice on the pathological analysis of fish organs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family – Ray, Paulette, Megan and Kate Flint for their support and guidance. Mum and Dad, thanks for putting me through uni and for taking me seriously when I was eight years old and intent on saving the world one whale at a time. Dad, thanks also for giving me so much advice on fish and aquariums – you got me out of quite a few sticky situations! Mum, thanks for providing a sympathetic ear through the many testing moments of the last few years. Thanks to my Ooya for your cheerful letters and unwavering support, and to Nanny and Poppy for always being there. Thanks also to the Elms family for putting me up during my stay in the Tablelands.

Aside from all the fish who ‘participated’ in the project, several other members of the animal world require acknowledgement. My two fat cats, Moby and Sally, entertained me with their unsuccessful attempts to murder any fish that ventured into the house. May food always appear in front of you when you yowl. My hilarious dog Sanjay joined me during thesis writing and convinced me that dogs really are the best people.

The greatest acknowledgement must go to my partner and best friend, Martin Elms. Thank you for sticking around, helping me with my experiments at ridiculous hours of day and night, driving me to creek after creek looking for rainbowfish, helping me to collect pond weed, listening to me whinge, allowing me to adopt as many stray animals as possible, and most of all for making me laugh. I have no doubt that I wouldn’t have finished this thesis without you.
ABSTRACT

The effects of diel fluctuations in DO saturation were investigated for four species of tropical freshwater fish at various life history stages. Fluctuating hypoxia was achieved by gradually lowering DO saturation to a minimum level (minimum level differed between treatments), then allowing DO to return to normoxia each day for the duration of experiments. A range of oxygen regimes were tested on juvenile *Lates calcarifer*, *Melanotaenia splendida splendida* and *Hephaestus fuliginosus*; adult *Melanotaenia utcheensis*; and embryonic *M. s. splendida*, *M. utcheensis* and *H. fuliginosus*. Immediate lethal limits after gradual oxygen reductions were recorded for each species/life history stage where possible, as well as various effects on the sublethal level, including effects on growth (for juveniles), ventilation (for juveniles), reproduction (for adults) and viability (for embryos).

The four fish species tested were found to be surprisingly tolerant to the oxygen regimes they were exposed to during the study. Species/life history stages that are frequently exposed to hypoxia in natural situations were found to be the most tolerant during experiments. The rank order of resistance of each species/life history stage from highest to lowest was: eggs of *M. s. splendida* and *M. utcheensis* (no immediate lethal level identified), juvenile *L. calcarifer* (immediate lethal level ~2% DO saturation), juvenile *M. s. splendida* and adult *M. utcheensis* (immediate lethal level 6-7%), and juvenile *H. fuliginosus* (immediate lethal level ~7%).

*L. calcarifer*, *M. s. splendida* and *M. utcheensis* were all capable of aquatic surface respiration at the juvenile and adult stages tested. Juvenile *H. fuliginosus* did not display this adaptive behaviour. Growth and feeding behaviour of juvenile *L. calcarifer* were affected in treatments reaching 5% and 10% minimum DO saturation daily; as was food consumption of some *H. fuliginosus* individuals in the treatment reaching 10% DO saturation daily (5% treatment was lethal for the species).

Eggs of *M. s. splendida* and *M. utcheensis* were completely resistant to the oxygen regimes tested, and more tolerant to hypoxia than juvenile and adult stages of the same species. Reproduction of surviving adult *M. utcheensis* was largely unaffected by exposure to diel fluctuations in DO saturation, although one of two broodgroups
treated with a minimum DO saturation of 10% daily ceased egg production after 18 days of oxygen cycling; and in the same aquarium one of the two female fish was found to have a high percentage of atretic (degenerative) eggs in her ovary.

Although the results suggested that species of fish tested were remarkably tolerant to the sublethal DO regimes imposed during the study, some effects on reproduction, growth and feeding were apparent and may be much more detrimental in natural situations where food must be caught, and mates located. Additionally, longer durations of daily minimum DO saturation, or longer duration of the fluctuating hypoxia regime may increase effects. The results have implications for water quality guidelines for wetlands and waterways of tropical north Queensland, and provide a broad baseline for more targeted research into the effects of hypoxia on fish from the region.
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