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Whole-body cortisol concentrations and ontogeny of aggressive behavior in yellowtail (*Seriola quinqueradiata* Temminck & Schlegel; Carangidae).

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**ABSTRACT**

Ontogenetic changes in whole-body immunoreactive cortisol concentrations (IRC) and aggressive behavior were examined in yellowtail *Seriola quinqueradiata* (Temminck & Schlegel; Carangidae). Baseline IRC significantly increased during the transition from larval to juvenile stage, and was correlated with the onset of aggressive behavior. Handled fish (13.1±2.6 ng/g tissue) showed a IRC level about three times higher than unhandled fish (4.7±1.4 ng/g tissue), indicating that whole body immunoreactive cortisol level may be used an indicator of stress in juvenile yellowtails. Behaviorally subordinate fish (8.6±1.6 ng/g tissue, n=4) showed IRC levels significantly higher than dominant fish (0.6±0.3 ng/g tissue, n=4). Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol levels may thus reflect stress and social status in juvenile yellowtails, and the inverse relationship between social rank and IRC may result from agonistic interactions.
In agonistic interactions, subordinate individuals appear physiologically more stressed (Schreck, 1981). In many animals, including teleosts, the pituitary-interrenal axis is activated by stress (Donaldson, 1981). Plasma cortisol concentrations and interrenal cell activity are often used as stress indicators in teleost fishes. Interrenal cell dimensions were greater in subordinate rainbow trout *Oncorhyncus mykiss* (Noakes and Leatherland, 1977), and plasma cortisol levels higher in subordinate coho salmon *O. kisutch* (Ejike and Schreck, 1980) and European eel *Anguilla anguilla* (Peters *et al.*., 1980).

Recently, whole-body immunoreactive cortisol concentrations (IRC) during early development were reported for Japanese flounder *Paralichthys olivaceus* (de Jesus *et al.*, 1991), chum salmon *O. keta* (de Jesus *et al.*, 1991) and tilapia *Oreochromis mossambicus* (Hwang *et al.*, 1992), focusing on the role of cortisol in development in relation to thyroid hormones, and in seawater adaptation. Moreover, IRC may indicate physiological stress in the early development of rainbow (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994; Barry *et al.*, 1995) and brown trout *Salmo trutta* (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994).

In the yellowtail *Seriola quinqueradiata* (Temminck & Schlegel; Carangidae), a migratory marine species whose juveniles show typical schooling behavior associated with drifting seaweeds (Uchida *et al.*, 1958; Anraku and Azeta, 1965), aggressive behavior appears just after transition from larva to juvenile (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1996), and social rank is established in the schools (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1997a). Moreover, tolerance of handling stress (netting and air exposure) in yellowtail rapidly decreases just after the transition to juvenile stage (Shiozawa, 1997).

However, the interrenal response to stress and social interactions, such as plasma cortisol levels, has not been examined in larval and juvenile yellowtails, partly because blood collection from the larval and juvenile yellowtails (about 4 to 12 mm in total length) is difficult. The ontogenetic changes of baseline IRC and aggressive behavior have been examined during the development of physiological stress responses, and the IRC levels have been related to the social interaction caused by aggressive behavior in juvenile yellowtails.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Fish**

Three batches of larval and juvenile yellowtail were used in this study during 1993 (Lot 1) and 1994 (2 batches: Lots 2 and 3). Yellowtail matured artificially using human chorionic gonadotropin injections were allowed to spawn naturally in a 90-m³ indoor tank at the Goto station of the Japan Sea Farming Association (JASFA) in Nagasaki Prefecture. Fertilized eggs were maintained in a 0.5-m³ tank, and after 2 days, approximately 1,000,000 larvae were obtained (Lot 1: April 29, Lot 2: April 24, Lot 3: May 28). Two days after hatching (day 2), larvae were transferred to an outdoor concrete rearing pond (90 m³). Larvae were fed with the rotifer *Brachionus plicatilis* between days 3 and 20, with *Artemia salina* nauplii between days 7 and 24, and with dry pellets (C-400 and 1000; Kyowa, Tokyo) from day 22 until the end of the experiment. Water temperature ranged from 22 to 24°C under natural daylight.

**Ontogenetic Changes in Behavior and Whole-body Immunoreactive Cortisol Concentrations (IRC)**

Fish used for behavioral observations and baseline IRC measurement were randomly sampled from the rearing pond with 13-l buckets at night (2200-2400). Night time was chosen
for sampling, because it is easy to collect sample with minimal stress, as juvenile yellowtails cease swimming and drift at surface to make dense patchiness (mass of aggregated juveniles in the current rip) at night time (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1997a,b).

Fish for IRC measurement were immediately anesthetized with an overdose of MS222 and stored frozen at -85°C until analysis. Total lengths (TL; mm) and wet body weight (BW; mg) of samples at each age before IRC measurement were measured individually. The developmental stage was determined according to Fukuhara et al. (1986). Then samples were pooled into three to five groups of ca.100 mg in wet weight (about 5 to 50 fish for one group) at each age until day 20. From day 20 to day 39, fish were measured individually. Samples were then homogenized in three volumes of phosphate-buffered saline (PBS: 10 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.3, containing 140 mM NaCl).

For the behavioral study, thirty fish were observed at each age. Three groups, each consisting of 10 fish (2 fish l⁻¹), selected from the bucket sample to minimize size variation, were introduced into experimental tanks (30 cm in diameter, 5-l) in a water bath at 22°C. Fish were kept in the experimental tanks overnight, then fed Artemia 4 hours before observation. Following Sakakura and Tsukamoto (1996), aggressive behaviour was divided into the following 3 phases; (1) Aim: a dominant holds position towards a subordinate hovering for a short period (ca. 1 s) (2) Chase: a dominant bursts towards and follows a subordinate for 1 to 10 seconds (3) Nip: a dominant attacks and bites at the tail or body of a subordinate. These 3 phases were observed in a fixed order. Abandonment by a dominant during Chase behavior caused failure to complete an entire aggressive behavior sequence. However, Chase behavior was always observed in every instance of aggressive behavior. Since Chase behavior was also easy to observe and record, the frequency of Chase behavior was used as an index of aggressive behaviour. "Chase behavior" was recorded for 5 minutes in each tank. Experiments were conducted during the day (1000-1200) at intervals of 3 to 5 days from days 7 to 40. Following behavioral observations, all fish were immediately anesthetized with MS222 and TL of each fish was measured with a micrometer or calipers. The developmental stage was defined according to Fukuhara et al. (1986).

**IRC Radioimmunoassay**

The extraction method for IRC was followed Hiroi et al. (1997). In brief, a 250-µl aliquot of PBS-homogenate was extracted twice with 3 ml diethyl ether. Combined extracts were dried and resuspended in 250-µl of carbon tetrachloride, followed by a second extraction with 250-µl of Gel-PBS (PBS containing 0.1% gelatin). One hundred µl Gel-PBS phase was used for IRC-RIA (de Jesus et al., 1991). The efficiency of extraction of standard cortisol added to PBS-homogenate was 83.0±14.8% (n=4), and the displacement curve of the extracted sample was parallel to the standard curve (data not shown).

**Stress and IRC**

Three groups of 20 fish (Lot 2; 27 mm TL, day 40) were introduced into 3 experimental tanks (55 cm in diameter containing 100 l seawater at 22°C), and acclimated for 4 hours (0800-1200). All fish in the first tank were sampled as the non-treatment group ("Control"). Fish in the second tank were vigorously mishandled by chasing them with a hand-net for 3 minutes until the fish did not respond further to the hand-net ("Handling").

In the third tank, fish were classified into three categories based on 10 minutes of behavioral observation as follows: when fish A was chasing fish B, fish A was classified as
"Dominant" and fish B as "Subordinate"; a fish showing no agonistic interactions within 10 minutes was classified as a "Non-responder". Four pairs of "Dominant" and "Subordinate" were easily discriminated and scooped immediately, because these pairs frequently swam away from the school. Following this treatment "Non-responders" (n=12), which made one synchronized school, were immediately scooped.

All fish were anesthetized with an overdose of MS222, and then stored at -85°C until used for TL measurements and IRC-RIA.

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical analysis of baseline IRC was done using Bartlett's test for comparison of variances. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied when there was no significant difference between the variances of the different groups (p>0.05 by Bartlett's test). In cases where significant differences were found among the means by ANOVA (p<0.05), Duncan's new multiple range test was applied for comparison among groups. On the other hand, when significant differences existed among variances (p<0.05 by Bartlett's test), the Kruskal-Wallis test for multiple groups was applied to determine differences among the medians. Significant differences among medians were further examined by the Mann-Whitney U test against the previous age group.

The median frequency of "Chase" among 3 tanks was used as the representative value of an age group, and differences in the frequency of "Chase" among age groups were statistically examined by the Mann-Whitney U-test.

In the stress experiment, statistical analysis of TLs and IRC were done using the Student's t-test between the groups "Control" and "Handling", and using Duncan's new multiple range test after ANOVA treatment among "Dominant", "Subordinate" and "Non-responder", after Bartlett's test for comparison of variances (p<0.05).

**RESULTS**

**Ontogenetic Changes in Behavior and IRC**

In all lots, the transition from post-larvae to juveniles occurred around day 20 at a mean TL of 10 mm with the full complement of fin rays (Fig.1). Fish grew relatively slowly throughout the larval interval, but more rapidly after metamorphosis (Fig. 1). In Lots 1 and 3, aggressive behavior first occurred when the transition from larval to juvenile stage was finished at day 23 and 25 (about TL 12 mm), and increased thereafter (Fig. 2) as well as in the rearing pond. In Lot 2, aggressive behavior was not recorded until day 30 (TL 15.9 mm, Fig. 2), and not in the rearing pond. In comparison with the results from all lots in this study and the result from Sakakura and Tsukamoto (1996), fish of Lot 2 appeared to be behaviorally unusual because of the delay of the onset of aggressive behavior, although the growth pattern was similar to other lots (Fig. 1).

Baseline IRC increased at day 7 in all lots, when the fish reached about TL 5 mm (Fig. 2; U-test, p<0.05). After this peak, IRC remained at a low level until day 18 (ca. TL 9 mm), and it significantly increased at day 20 (over TL 9 mm, Fig. 2; Duncan's new multiple range test, p<0.05) and increased further thereafter.

**Stress and IRC**

The stressed group ("Handling": 13.1±2.6 ng/g tissue) showed about 3 times higher IRC
level than the unstressed group ("Control": 4.7±1.4 ng/g tissue; T-test, P<0.05; Fig. 3a). There was no significant difference in total length between control (27.0±1.8 mm) and handled (27.6±3.1 mm) groups (T-test, p>0.1).

The "Subordinate" group (8.6±1.6 ng/g tissue, n=4) showed the highest IRC level (Duncan's new multiple range test, p<0.05; Fig. 3b). The "Dominant" group was the lowest (0.6 ng/g tissue, n=4; Duncan's new multiple range test, p<0.05). The "Non-responders" showed an intermediate level (3.5±1.7 ng/g tissue, n=12). There was no significant difference in the total lengths of the groups (dominant, 27.3±1.8 mm; subordinate, 25.2±3.0 mm; non-responder, 27.7±3.1 mm: ANOVA, p>0.1).

DISCUSSION

After the transition from larval to juvenile stage, baseline IRC levels of juvenile yellowtails increased concomitantly with the onset and development of aggressive behavior. Stress tolerance in the early life stages of yellowtail, examined from the survival ratio from air exposure for 10 seconds by netting, was around 100% in the larval and transitional stage, and decreased from the juvenile stage from day 23 (TL 10 mm) and was at low levels thereafter (Shiozawa, 1997). In rainbow trout, whole-body corticosteroids did not increase in response to acute stress until 2 weeks after hatching, although immunoreactive ACTH in the pituitary (Saga et al., 1993) and interrenal cells capable of corticosteroid biosynthesis (Hwang et al., 1992; Barry et al., 1995) were already present prior to this time. Barry et al. (1995) postulated that this lack of a stress response reflected an immaturity of the higher brain and hypothalamic centers regulating stress response, and that the adrenocorticotrophs and interrenal cells are not fully mature until two weeks after hatching in rainbow trout. In the yellowtail, the interrenal first appears histologically on day 7 (about TL 5 mm, data not shown; Chantanachookhin et al., 1991). Together these observations may suggest that the pituitary-interrenal axis and stress response of yellowtail are not functional during larval stages and becomes activated from the juvenile stage; histological observation were not made on the pituitary, however.

Significant standing pool of IRC corresponded to transition from larva to juvenile in yellowtail from day 18 (TL 9 mm), whereas tissue thyroid hormones increased just before the beginning of transition from larval to juvenile stage, where typical behavior at this period named 'J-posture' appears (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1996), and calcification of bones and fin-ray formation occurs and is regarded equivalent as metamorphosis (Sakakura & Tsukamoto, 1997c). In metamorphosing Japanese flounder from larva to juvenile, increased tissue cortisol levels herald increased thyroid hormones (de Jesus et al., 1991) and cortisol accelerates dorsal fin-ray resorption in combination with thyroid hormones in vitro (de Jesus et al., 1990). Cortisol may have a role in metamorphosis of yellowtail as well as Japanese flounder, although there are differences in IRC patterns during metamorphosis between the two species (this study; Tanaka et al., 1995). Since metamorphosis involves morphological, physiological, and biochemical, as well as behavioral changes that are often associated with increased energy demands (Youson, 1988), metabolic effects of cortisol, such as gluconeogenic action and lipid and protein metabolism, may be important, in view of development of significant swimming activity (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1996) and calcification of bones and fin-ray formation (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1997c) during metamorphosis.

A significant peak of IRC occurs on day 7 (about TL 5 mm), when the interrenal first appears histologically (data not shown; Chantanachookhin et al., 1991) and high mortality.
occurs in the rearing pond as a result of failure to ingest food properly (Shiozawa, 1997). This so-called critical period (point of no return) by the starvation in the larval stages of fishes (May, 1974), may occur around day 7 (TL 5 mm) and possibly lead to gluconeogenesis from muscle resulting by a failure to feed in larval yellowtails.

Handled juvenile yellowtails showed significantly higher IRC levels than control, indicating that acute stress elevated the IRC levels in this species. As Pottinger and Mosuwe (1994) pointed out, the IRC must be interpreted with caution. Because clearance of cortisol from the body involves metabolism and conjugation, and possibly accumulation within liver or bile (Pottinger et al., 1992), the dynamics of IRC levels during stress are likely to differ in the blood (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994). However, in the relatively short period after stress (4 to 8 hours), plasma cortisol and IRC in rainbow trout showed similar pattern of change (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994). Given this evidence, whole-body immunoreactive cortisol concentration may be a reasonable stress indicator in the early life stages of this species for a short-term period after stress, as in juvenile brown (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994) and rainbow trout (Pottinger and Mosuwe, 1994; Barry et al., 1995). Although blood samples could not be collected from the juvenile yellowtails due to the small body size, whole-body immunoreactive corticosteroids is applicable as a stress indicator in terms of blood samples for the small juvenile fishes. Thus, the positive correlation between whole-body immunoreactive cortisol and aggressive behavior in juvenile yellowtails may reflect not only the development of stress response but also the development of social rank.

In the past, fish schools were thought to be egalitarian and leaderless societies (Breder, 1954; Shaw, 1962). However, in schools of yellowtail juveniles, individual differences emerge as a consequence of agonistic interactions and social rank (Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1997a). "Subordinate" yellowtail in a school showed significantly higher IRC levels than "Dominant" fish. It is suggested that "Subordinate" yellowtail juveniles are physiologically stressed by their social rank in a school in experimental tanks, akin to the effects of social rank in rainbow trout (Noakes and Leatherland, 1977) and in coho salmon (Ejike and Schreck, 1980). It seems the majority of the school is stressed for a long period, but the social rank of this species is not stabilized strictly and has some flexibility to experience a rank reversal within in long-term period (about 1 week; Sakakura and Tsukamoto, 1997c). Therefore, the balance of stress in school members can be mediated during the juvenile stage.

The present study demonstrates for the first time a positive correlation between ontogenetic changes in tissue cortisol concentration and aggressive behavior. A direct relation between the activity of the pituitary-interrenal axis and the onset of individual aggressive behavior has not yet been demonstrated, and the ability of endocrine factors including cortisol to regulate aggressive behavior require examination.

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Chronological appearance of GTH I and other adenohypophysial hormones in the
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**FIG. 1.** Growth pattern of the yellowtail. Each point represents the mean total length of 30 fish (open circle, Lot 1, year 1993; closed circle, Lot 2, the first lot of year 1994; cross, Lot 3, the second lot of year 1994).
Lot 1

Chase (count/min) vs. Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (ng/g tissue)

Lot 2

Chase (count/min) vs. Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (ng/g tissue)

Lot 3

Chase (count/min) vs. Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (ng/g tissue)

Days after hatching

* Indicates significant difference
FIG. 2. Changes in frequency of chase behavior (closed circles) and whole-body immunoreactive cortisol concentrations (open circles) in early life stages of yellowtail (upper, Lot 1, year 1993; middle, Lot 2, the first lot of year 1994; bottom, Lot 3, the second lot of year 1994). Vertical bars represent quartile deviation of medians for closed circles (n = 3), and standard errors of the means for open circles (n = 3 < day 10; n = 5 < day 20; n = 20 ≥ day 20). An asterisk indicates a significant difference (p<0.05) from the previous point by the Mann-Whitney U test or Duncan's new multiple range test. Shaded areas represent time of metamorphosis (transition from larva to juvenile).
Control Handling

Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (ng/g tissue)

T-test, p<0.05

n=10

n=20

Dominant Subordinate Non-responder

Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (ng/g tissue)

a

b

ab

n=4

n=4

n=12
FIG. 3. (a) Whole-body immunoreactive cortisol (IRC) levels before ("Control") and after handling stress ("Handling"). (b) IRC levels in relation to social rank; "Dominant" = aggressive fish, "Subordinate" = attacked by aggressive one and "Non-responder" = no agonistic interactions. Vertical bars represent standard errors of means, and different letters indicate significant differences (p<0.05; Duncan's new multiple range test).