brief communications

blood-meal sizes were also comparable for the resistant phenotype.

Artificially feeding insecticide-resistant and insecticide-susceptible mosquito colonies (PelRR and PelSS, respectively) with blood infected by W. bancrofti to an intermediate level of parasitaemia — which should result in the infection of mosquitoes without substantial insect mortality — produced stage-L3 infective parasite larvae after 12 days in 76% of PelSS females (n = 250), but no larvae in any of the PelRR females (n = 200). Our results indicate that an increase in esterase activity could affect the development of stage-L1 W. bancrofti larvae, which may be arrested in the gut cells of insecticide-resistant but not insecticide-susceptible mosquitoes.

Filarial infection severely damages the mosquito host, often killing it. The spread of esterase-based insecticide resistance in field populations of C. quinquefasciatus may therefore be influenced by selection pressures for both insecticide detoxification and reduction of the microfilarial burden. Similar esterase-based insecticide-resistance mechanisms have been selected in field populations of the malaria vectors Anopheles albimanus and A. culicifacies, which could directly affect the transmission of malaria.

L. Mccarroll*, M. G. Paton*, S. H. P. P. Karunarathne†, H. T. R. Jayasuriya†, K. S. P. Kalpage‡, J. Hemingway*  *School of Biosciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3TL, UK; e-mail: Hemingway@cardiff.ac.uk  †Zoology Department, Peradeniya University, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka  ‡Zoology Department, Open University, Nawala, Negombo, Sri Lanka


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Evolution

Paying for sex is not easy

Explaining the maintenance of sexual reproduction remains one of the greatest challenges for biology, with more than 20 hypotheses having been advanced so far. Doncaster et al. have proposed another possible explanation, but we question the novelty and importance of their suggested mechanism.

First, does this model provide a new mechanism to help explain sex? The model assumes that different genotypes exploit different parts of the environment, and that an asexual clone is not able to occupy all the environmental niches that are open to a sexual population. This provides an advantage to sex, and allows coexistence between sexuals and asexuals.

However, the assumptions are the same as those of the ‘tangled bank’ mechanism for the maintenance of sex. The message that has emerged from previous considerations of this mechanism is therefore the same as that proposed by Doncaster et al. — namely, that competition within a fixed set of niches can provide an advantage to sex, with “the success of the clone [being] restrained by the narrowness of its ecological range” and leading to “a stable equilib-rium at which both sexual and clonal individuals persist”.

Although the mechanisms favouring sex appear to be identical, the elegantly simple form of Doncaster et al.’s Lotka–Volterra model means that it requires implicit assumptions and is therefore hard to compare with previous tangled bank models, which were based on numerical simulations and which made more explicit assumptions. For example, does Doncaster et al.’s model require competition between siblings (as with some formulations of the tangled bank), or is it the special case in which sib competition is excluded?

It is hard to test the implicit assumptions in the new model, but it may render some aspects of the tangled bank mechanism more testable by emphasizing two parameters: the maximum population growth rate, R0, and the degree of overlap between sexual and asexual niches, α. However, the importance of these parameters has been discussed previously — for example, it has been pointed out that, analogous to variation in R0, higher fecundity leads to greater sib competition and so increases the advantage of sex. It has also been shown how the advantage of sex varies with a ‘competition coefficient’, which is a version of α. Furthermore, such competition coefficients are notoriously difficult to measure.

Second, does Doncaster et al.’s model aid our understanding of the patterns of sexuality observed in nature? Several theoretical problems have been pointed out with the tangled bank model, and empirical studies have tested its (identical) assumptions and predictions.

For example, the advantage of sex is reduced if sexual populations are made up of multiple clones that fill multiple portions of the niche space; coexistence of sexuals and asexuals is rarely observed; plant and algae populations consisting of mixtures of genotypes have carrying capacities not much greater than that of the average of their component genotypes, and rarely greater than that of the best genotype; and results from natural populations indicate that the ecological and demographic predictions of the tangled bank model are not met.

Third, does the model of Doncaster et al. provide new insights into the cost of sex (males)? The authors argue that the cost of males is ecology dependent, so there is not necessarily a twofold advantage to be recouped in adaptive payoffs. However, one of the model’s implicit assumptions is that different genotypes use different niches (genotype-by-environment interactions), so the model is not purely ecological.

The way in which this type of model allows coexistence between sexuals and asexuals has already been discussed. Moreover, this mechanism is more appropriately viewed as an adaptive payoff in its own right, as in previous formulations. In this case, it may reduce the cost to be paid by other mechanisms, but such interactions between models have been discussed extensively.

Nonetheless, Doncaster et al. remind us of the role that the tangled bank mechanism could play in a pluralist explanation of sex, possibly by interacting with deleterious mutations in a fashion analogous to the Red Queen.

S. A. West, A. D. Peters
Institute of Cell, Animal, and Population Biology, University of Edinburgh, Ashworth Laboratories, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JT, UK

E-mail: andy.peters@ed.ac.uk