Evaluation of Stress Responses to Water Molds in Embryos of Physalaemus albonotatus (Anura: Leptodactylidae)

Romina Ghirardi1,2,5, Jimena Cazenave1,3, Javier Alejandro López1,3, Carolina Elisabet Antoniazzi1, and María Gabriela Perotti4

1Instituto Nacional de Limnología (INALI, UNL, CONICET), Ciudad Universitaria, Paraje El Pozo, CP 3000, Santa Fe, Argentina
2Universidad Católica de Santa Fe (Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud), Echagüe 7151, CP 3000, Santa Fe, Argentina
3Departamento de Ciencias Naturales (FHUC, UNL), Ciudad Universitaria, Paraje El Pozo, CP 3000, Santa Fe, Argentina
4Laboratorio de Fotobiología, INIBIOMA (UNCOMA-CONICET), Quintral 1250, CP 8400, Río Negro, Argentina
5Corresponding author, e-mail: romighirardi@yahoo.com.ar

Abstract.—Infections by water molds of the genus Saprolegnia (Oomycetes) have been associated with the death of eggs and embryos in many anuran species; however, how water molds induce physiological responses in early and susceptible developmental stages of anurans is poorly known. To assess whether or not embryos of Physalaemus albonotatus (immobile and susceptible life stages) respond to Oomycetes infection, we performed a 4-d experiment exposing early stage embryos to the water mold Saprolegnia-like sp. We assessed mortality, hatching time, and oxidative stress (antioxidant enzyme activities and lipid peroxidation levels). Presence of water molds in infected embryos was not evident to the naked eye until 1 to 1.5 d after inoculation. Mortality was significantly higher in the water mold treatment than in the control treatment. Embryos exposed to Saprolegnia-like sp. hatched 24 h earlier than those in control treatment. Among enzymatic activities, only catalase enzyme showed a significant depletion in embryos exposed to water molds compared to control groups. These results emphasize the need to explore oxidative stress markers along with embryonic development at key stages, focusing on those early stages where hatching is induced by water molds infection.

Key Words.—amphibian embryo; hatching time; mortality; oxidative stress; Saprolegnia sp. infection

INTRODUCTION

The maintenance of homeostasis in an individual may be affected by natural stressors (Burraco and Gomez-Mestre 2016; Freitas and Almeida 2016). Homeostatic adjustments may trigger cascading effects along multiple physiological pathways, affecting, for example, the metabolic rate increasing metabolic demands in multiple tissues (Pecket et al. 2011), the immune system resulting in an increased neutrophils/lymphocytes ratio (Davis et al. 2008), and/or the reactive oxygen species (ROS) production involving over production of ROS (Circu and Aw 2010). The overproduction of ROS during environmental stresses can pose a threat to cells by causing peroxidation of lipids, oxidation of proteins, damage to nucleic acids, and enzyme inhibition, leading ultimately to cell death (Burraco and Gomez-Mestre 2016). Such deleterious effects of ROS can be neutralized by antioxidant defense systems, keeping ROS at relatively low levels and repairing or removing the damaged molecules (Pinya et al. 2016). The antioxidant defense system includes endogenous antioxidants (enzymatic and non-enzymatic) such as superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione reductase (GR), and glutathione S-transferases (GST) among others, and exogenous antioxidants such as vitamin C, vitamin E, and carotenoids, derived primarily by eating animals (Halliwell and Gutteridge 2007).

Primary enzymatic antioxidants such as GR, CAT, and general peroxidases are especially adept at diminishing or neutralizing ROS (Halliwell and Gutteridge 2007). Glutathione reductase is primarily responsible for maintaining high glutathione (GSH) levels in the GSH/GSSG (glutathione disulfide) ratio, favoring GSH for the reduction of oxidized ascorbate and other antioxidant roles (Foyer et al. 1991). Catalase catalyzes excess $H_2O_2$ to $H_2O$ and $O_2$ (Chang et al. 1984). A variety of general peroxidases degrades hydrogen peroxide (Jones et al. 2010).

In these compensatory mechanisms, under several stressful conditions, the rate of ROS production can exceed the capacity of antioxidant defense, leading to a condition known as oxidative stress (Halliwell and Gutteridge 2007). The application of oxidative stress biomarkers in assessing stress in animals exposed to different environmental situations may show what strategies these organisms have developed to cope with...
that the embryonic mortality rates would increase, and embryos that survived to hatching would exhibit reduced hatching time (ostensibly as a mechanism to evade the risks of heavy infection loads). We also predicted that there would be allostatic adjustments to shift the production of ROS. Therefore, we expected an increase in activity of antioxidant enzymes as a means of increasing defense systems of embryos.

**Materials and Methods**

**Amphibian egg and water mold collection.**—In November 2014, we collected *Physalaemus albonotatus* clutches and samples of water molds in a semi-permanent pond from the alluvial valley in the Middle Paraná River, near Santa Fe, Argentina (31°37′S, 60°41′W). The pond was approximately 90 m diameter, 0.20 m deep, and covered by Alligator Weed (*Alternanthera philoxeroides*). We collected the clutches by hand and kept them in plastic dishes filled with 1 L chlorine-free water. We also brought 0.5 L of pond water to the laboratory for Oomycetes identification.

**Oomycetes isolation and egg maintenance.**—To isolate Oomycetes, we distributed water samples in sterile Petri dishes (10 cm diameter with 40 mL of pond water each) with sterile Sesame seeds (*Sesamum indicum*) added as a bait substrate. We incubated them in an incubator under controlled temperature and photoperiod conditions (20 ± 1° C; 12:12 h L:D). We visually monitored and scored mycelium colonization 48–72 h after inoculation. After water mold grew on the seeds, we transferred a clump to corn meal agar medium (*Emerson YPSS Agar*) and augmented it with two antibiotics (Chloramphenicol and Streptomycin-sulphate) to avoid bacterial growth (*Promega Corporation* 2007). To ensure axenic cultures, we transferred mycelium tips to new media twice. After 3–4 d, we cut off a block of agar (1 × 1 cm) from the edge of each colony and placed it in a sterilized Petri dish containing sterilized water and seeds to let the mycelium grow (*Robinson et al.* 2003). After 4–5 days of incubation, the seeds were sufficiently colonized (about 1 cm diameter) to perform the experiment. We identified water mold to genus as *Saprolegnia* sp. (hereafter referred to as *Saprolegnia*-like sp; *Fig. 1A*) under a stereoscopic microscope and following *Seymour (1970)* and *Fuller and Jaworski* (1987). We used these colonized seeds with *Saprolegnia*-like sp. clumps to inoculate the infection-treatment in the water mold exposure experiment (*Romansic et al.* 2009). We collected fresh eggs of *P. albonotatus* that were approximately 12 h old, and at stages 13–14 (Gosner 1960) from four clutches with no signs of water mold infection. To remove potential presence of Oomycetes,
we carefully extracted eggs from the foam matrix and washed them for approximately 10 s in boiled pond water before setting up the experiment (Ruthig 2009).

**Experimental setup.**—We performed a single experiment to test if Saprolegnia-like sp. infection affects mortality, hatching time, and activation of the antioxidant system of *P. albonotatus* embryos. The experiment was a single-factor design with Saprolegnia-like sp. infection as a fixed factor. Each experimental unit consisted of a Petri dish (10 cm diameter, 1 cm high, 40 mL of tap water) plus two sterilized Sesame seeds in the control group and two Sesame seeds infected with Saprolegnia-like sp. in the infection treatment group. To each Petri dish we added 10 embryos randomly selected from among four clutches to avoid confounding effects of genetics. We arranged the eggs individually in the Petri dishes, evenly spaced, and without contact among them. We used 20 replicates per treatment, for a total of 40 experimental units, and ran the experiment in an incubator with controlled temperature and photoperiod (21 ± 1° C; 12:12 h L:D; Ruthig 2009).

The experiment concluded when almost 95% of the embryos hatched or died, which occurred over an approximately 4 d period, which is the embryonic development time in *P. albonotatus* (Romero-Carvajal et al. 2009; Gómez et al. 2016). We visually examined the Petri dishes daily and counted healthy, dead, and hatched embryos. The infected embryos were easily recognizable by their cotton-like appearance (Fig. 1B) caused by proliferation of Saprolegnia-like sp. mycelium (Fernández-Benéitez et al. 2008). At each observation, we removed all dead embryos and, at the end of the experiment, we immediately froze surviving embryos in liquid nitrogen and stored them at -80° C for later determination of oxidative stress markers.

**Determination of oxidative stress markers.**—We determined oxidative stress markers from pools of whole-body individuals. We excluded deceased animals from the Petri dishes at each 24-h observation interval. Then, we combined surviving animals and used them for stress evaluation (5–10 individuals per Petri dish).

For enzyme extraction, we homogenized each group of embryos in an ice-cold 0.1-M sodium phosphate buffer, pH 6.5, containing 20% (v/v) glycerol, 1 mM EDTA, and 1.4 mM dithioerythritol. We centrifuged the homogenates at 20,000 × g (4° C) for 30 min, and the supernatant was stored at -80° C for enzymatic measurements. We calculated the activity of glutathione S-transferase according to the method described by Habig et al. (1974), which assesses the formation of the conjugate of two substrates (1 mM reduced glutathione and 1 mM 1-chloro-2,4-dinitrobenzene) catalyzed by GST in the homogenate. We measured the reaction for 3 min at 340 nm and expressed the enzyme activity as nkat mg prot⁻¹ (prot = protein) using a molar extinction coefficient of 9.6 mM⁻¹ cm⁻¹.

We estimated the glutathione reductase activity by using the method described by Tanaka et al. (1994). This spectrophotometric assay involves the reduction of glutathione disulfide (20 mM GSSG) to reduce glutathione by monitoring oxidation of NADPH (2 mM NADPH). We measured the activity for 3 min at 340 nm and it was expressed as nkat-mg prot⁻¹ using a molar extinction coefficient of 6.22 mM⁻¹ cm⁻¹. We calculated catalase activity according to Beutler (1982). We assayed the rate of decomposition of hydrogen peroxide by the enzyme (in the homogenate) using Tris buffer (1 M, pH 8.0) with 5 mM EDTA and 10 mM H₂O₂ as the substrate. We measured the enzyme activity at 240 nm for 5 min and it was expressed as nkat-mg prot⁻¹ using a molar extinction coefficient of 0.071 mM⁻¹ cm⁻¹. We assayed each enzyme measurement in triplicate and reported the activity as nkat-mg prot⁻¹. We measured the protein content of the homogenate, using bovine serum albumin as standard protein (Sigma, St. Louis, Missouri, USA; Bradford 1976).

To evaluate cellular damage, we used the thiobarbituric acid (TBARS) method described by Fatima et al. (2000) to estimate the peroxidation of lipids (LPO). Briefly, we homogenized pools of whole-body hatchlings with 0.15-M potassium chloride solution using a glass homogenizer. Then, we incubated 1.0 mL homogenate for 1 h at 37° C with continuous shaking. Afterwards, we added 1.0 mL of 5% trichloroacetic acid, and 1.0 mL of 0.67% thiobarbituric acid to each sample and mixed them. Then, we centrifuged each vial at 3,000 rpm for 10 min. We separated the supernatant and placed it in a boiling water bath for 10 min, cooled to room temperature, and measured absorbance at 535 nm. We expressed the rate of lipid peroxidation as nanomoles of substances reactive to thiobarbituric acid (TBARS) formed per hour, per milligram of proteins (nmol TBARS-mg prot⁻¹). We determined protein content of each homogenate according to Bradford (1976).

**Statistical analysis.**—To analyze the effect of water mold infection in embryos of the anuran *Physalaemus albonotatus*, we measured mortality (daily number of dead embryos) and hatching time (number of days from the beginning of our experiment until the emergence of each hatching from its egg) as response variables. We used treatment (control/mold) and day as fixed predictor variables and treatment replicate (Petri dish) as a random predictor variable. Because the data fit a Gaussian distribution, we applied Mixed Linear Models (MLM). When effects of predictor variables were significant, we performed post-hoc multiple comparisons applying
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Tukey Contrasts tests. When data did not meet the statistical assumptions required for the analysis (e.g., homoscedasticity and normality), we performed a log10 transformation to improve the fit of the residuals, which met parametric assumptions.

We tested enzyme activity and lipid peroxidation via Mann-Whitney U tests using GST, GR, CAT, and LPO as response variables and treatment (control/mold) as fixed predictor variables. We applied a sequential Bonferroni correction to control the family-wise Type 1 error rate ($\alpha = 0.0125$). We performed analyses with package multcomp (Hothorn et al. 2008) and nlme (Pinheiro et al. 2015) for R version 3.3.3 (R Core Team 2017).

RESULTS

Embryo mortality and hatching time.—Presence of water molds in infected embryos was not evident to the naked eye until 1–1.5 d after inoculation. All dead embryos exposed to water mold treatments exhibited Saprolegnia-like sp. infections (Fig. 1B). The mortality model showed significant interaction between fixed predictor variables (treatments and days; $F_{3,114} = 8.97$, $P < 0.001$). Mortality differed significantly among days ($F_{3,114} = 17.54$, $P < 0.001$), with day 1 significantly lower than days 2, 3, and 4 (Tukey Contrasts test, $P < 0.001$). Mortality also differed significantly between treatments ($F_{1,38} = 12.6$, $P = 0.001$). At the end of the experiment, 13.5% of embryos exposed to water mold died, whereas just 2% of individuals died in the control group (Fig. 2).

The hatching model showed significant interactions between fixed predictor variables (treatments and days; $F_{3,114} = 53.78$, $P < 0.001$). Hatching time differed significantly among days ($F_{3,114} = 813.6$, $P < 0.001$), with the number of hatched embryos different in day 1 from those of days 2, 3, and 4; and day 2 from days 3 and 4 (Tukey Contrasts test, $P < 0.001$). Hatching time also differed significantly between treatments ($F_{1,38} = 51.53$, $P < 0.001$). In the water mold treatment, hatching began a day earlier than in the control treatment, and reached 30% by the second day of experiment, and nearly 90% on the third day (Fig. 3). Hatching of embryos in the control treatment was explosive, with more than 80% of embryos hatching simultaneously and later than mold...
Neither glutathione reductase (GR), catalase (CAT), and levels of lipid peroxidation (LPO) in embryos of Physalaemus albonotatus from control and water mold treatments. GST, GR, and CAT are expressed as nkat·mg·prot$^{-1}$ and LPO as nmol TBARS·mg prot$^{-1}$ (TBARS refers to thiobarbustinic acid; prot refers to protein). The values are expressed as means ± SE. Sample size was five per treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Water mold</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GST</td>
<td>22.18 ± 1.69</td>
<td>21.75 ± 0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GR</td>
<td>1.45 ± 0.22</td>
<td>1.51 ± 0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAT</td>
<td>589.76 ± 49.66</td>
<td>362.43 ± 31.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPO</td>
<td>0.25 ± 0.08</td>
<td>0.29 ± 0.07</td>
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Oxidative stress markers.—Neither glutathione S-transferase nor glutathione reductase were influenced by the exposure at Saprolegnia-like sp. (GST: W = 14, P = 0.840; GR: W = 13, P = 1.00; Table 1). Only catalase showed a significant depletion in embryos exposed to water molds compared to control groups (CAT: W = 25, P = 0.007). The TBARS used here as a proxy for general measure of oxidative damage, did not vary with presence or absence of water mold (LPO: W = 6, P = 0.780).

**Discussion**

The increased attention on the impact of fungal and fungal-like pathogens in amphibian mortality events and amphibian population dynamics has contributed to the knowledge of their effects on different anuran species and their responses (Fernández-Benítez et al. 2011; Perotti et al. 2013; Burraco et al. 2017). In this work, we evaluated the responses of early developmental stages (Gosner stages 13–14) of Physalaemus albonotatus exposed to Saprolegnia-like sp. In our study, we found high mortality of embryos exposed to water mold compared to embryos not exposed; however, mortality rates were lower than in other studies (Villa 1979; Ruthig 2009; Perotti et al. 2013). Additionally, we observed that P. albonotatus embryos adjusted their hatching time, accelerating embryonic development (24 h ahead of their usual 4 d development) when they were at risk of infection by Saprolegnia-like sp.

During advanced embryonic stages (Gosner stages 18–19), the jelly coat becomes thinner and it has been suggested that embryos may develop alternative and effective defense strategies against water mold and true fungus infections such as accelerated hatching (Warkentin et al. 2001; Gomez-Mestre et al. 2006; Touchon et al. 2006; Perotti et al. 2013). This early hatching strategy is common in amphibians, allowing them to cope with the risk imposed by stressors such as water mold infections (Perotti et al. 2013), predation risk (Chivers et al. 2001; Vonesh 2005), and desiccation (Gomez-Mestre et al. 2013; Salica et al. 2017).

To our knowledge, there are no studies focusing on potential homeostatic adjustments in response to the stressful conditions caused by water molds. The evaluation of ROS showed a significant depletion of catalase enzyme in surviving embryos in the water mold treatment compared to embryos from the control group. Catalase is a common enzyme, usually located in peroxisomes, and is an important ROS-scavenging enzyme during stress conditions (Pinya et al. 2016). Decreased catalase activity observed in our study could be the result of oxidative inactivation by free radicals (Pigeollet et al. 1990) due to reduced de novo synthesis (Kaushik and Kaur 2003).

Jones et al. (2010) reported higher catalase activity in liver than in muscle tissue in Lithobates catesbeianus tadpoles exposed to Paraquat contaminant, supporting the idea that the estimation of oxidative stress based only on muscle tissue could fail to reveal effects occurring in liver tissue. Similarly, Hermes-Lima et al. (1998) and Lushchak et al. (2001), studying snails and fish, respectively, suggested that liver tissue is more active than skeletal muscle in oxidative protection measures. Further studies considering only liver tissues will be necessary to estimate oxidative activity after water mold infection. It is likely that our estimation of enzyme activity based on the whole-organism analyses underestimates rates in relevant organs because of dilution with unrelated tissues. It is important to note that although we detected reduced antioxidant activity (CAT), it did not seem to come at the cost of increased oxidative damage, because TBARS used as a proxy for general measure of oxidative damage did not vary in the presence or absence of Saprolegnia-like sp. However, considering the widespread distribution of water molds and the potential risk they present to amphibians, we stress the need to explore oxidative stress markers on the different susceptible stages of amphibians, and examine them through key developmental stages.

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**Romina Ghirardi** is Assistant Researcher of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) at National Institute of Limnology (INALI; CONICET-UNL) in Santa Fe City, and teacher at Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud in Universidad Católica de Santa Fe in Santa Fe City, Argentina. She received her doctoral degree in 2012 from Universidad Nacional de La Plata working on (1) distribution of the chytrid fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (*Bd*) in Argentina, (2) the species that could act as reservoirs/vector for *Bd*, especially the North American bullfrog, and (3) evaluating the environmental variables that favor the development of the fungus in the wild. She is currently studying other amphibian pathogens (e.g., Order Saprolegniales) in wild populations and her research interests are to evaluate the responses of amphibian embryos and larvae to stressors at developmental and physiological levels. Her work combines field studies and laboratory experiments. (Photographed by Javier A. López).

**Jimena Cazenave** is Associate Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina and Professor in the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Santa Fe, Argentina. She obtained her Ph.D. in Biological Science in 2006 from the National University of Córdoba (Argentina). She has mainly focused her research on the impacts of both natural and anthropogenic stressors on aquatic biota. Her recent studies include the measurement of a battery of biomarkers as a useful tool to detect early warning responses to changes in water quality. (Photographed by Andrés Pautasso).

**Javier A. López** is Assistant Researcher of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) at National Institute of Limnology (INALI; CONICET-UNL) in Santa Fe City, and teacher at Department of Natural Sciences of the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias, Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL), Santa Fe City, Argentina. His research interests include life history, ecology, and conservation of amphibians. He is currently studying trophic ecology of amphibians (diet, calorimetry, and isotopic niche) and assemblage structuring. (Photographed by Romina Ghirardi).

**Carolina E. Antoniazzi** is Ph.D. student of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) from Argentina at National Institute of Limnology (INALI; CONICET-UNL) in Santa Fe City. She received a degree in Biodiversity in 2011 at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Santa Fe, Argentina, researching the feeding ecology and reproduction of amphibians. She is currently researching the trophic ecology of tadpoles and the effect of tadpoles on aquatic communities. (Photographed by Javier A. López).

**M. Gabriela Perotti** is Associate Researcher at Instituto de Investigaciones en Biodiversidad y Medioambiente (INIBIOMA-CONICET-UNCMA), San Carlos de Bariloche, Río Negro, Argentina. Her research focuses on the evolutionary ecology and conservation biology of South American amphibians. She is interested in how temperate anurans at high latitudes (Patagonia) respond to warming scenarios and studies the physiology, morphology, and behavior at different developmental stages. Her work combines field studies and laboratory experiments. (Photographed by María Andrea Relva).