SHORT COMMUNICATION

Energy metabolism and cellular homeostasis trade-offs provide the basis for a new type of sensitivity to ocean acidification in a marine polychaete at a high CO₂ vent: adenylate and phosphagen energy pools versus carbonic anhydrase

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ABSTRACT

Species distributions and ecology can often be explained by their physiological sensitivity to environmental conditions. Whilst we have a relatively good understanding of how these are shaped by temperature, for other emerging drivers, such as PCO₂, we know relatively little. The marine polychaete Sabella spallanzanii increases its metabolic rate when exposed to high PCO₂ conditions and remains absent from the CO₂ vent of Ischia. To understand new possible pathways of sensitivity to CO₂ in marine ectotherms, we examined the metabolic plasticity of S. spallanzanii exposed in situ to elevated PCO₂ by measuring fundamental metabolite and carbonic anhydrase concentrations. We show that whilst this species can survive elevated PCO₂ conditions in the short term, and exhibits an increase in energy metabolism, this is accompanied by a significant decrease in carbonic anhydrase concentration. These homeostatic changes are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term, indicating S. spallanzanii may struggle with future high PCO₂ conditions.

KEY WORDS: Individual approach, Ocean acidification, Climate change, Homeostatic capacity, Trade-offs, Mediterranean Sea

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of a species’ ecophysiological limits helps us identify the reasons underpinning species and population processes over different spatial scales. Whilst we have a relatively good understanding of how species distributions are shaped by temperature (see Bozinovic et al., 2011), for other emerging environmental drivers, such as increasing seawater partial pressure of CO₂ (PCO₂), which is causing the acidification of the oceans, we know relatively little (see Calosi et al., 2013; Kroeker et al., 2011; Maas et al., 2012). Shallow water, high CO₂ vents have been used as analogues to investigate the potential ecological and evolutionary implications of ocean acidification. In particular, at the CO₂ vent of Ischia the polychaete fauna have been characterised in relation to the venting activity (e.g. Kroeker et al., 2011). Based on their distribution patterns, species found inside and outside these naturally acidified areas can be considered to be either ‘tolerant’ (abundant both inside and outside the low pH/high PCO₂ areas) or ‘sensitive’ (found outside the vents in similar habitat). Tolerant species include those that are able to maintain their metabolic rate levels unchanged during acute exposure to elevated PCO₂, thus maintaining their energy metabolism and metabolic scope levels. In comparison, sensitive species show extreme decreases or elevated increases in metabolic rates, corresponding to an extreme decrease of aerobic metabolism and an increase in metabolic costs, respectively, with both responses probably leading to a substantial decrease in metabolic scope (see Calosi et al., 2013 and references therein). In general, species that are poor regulators of metabolic rate under high PCO₂ conditions have been shown to have lesser homeostatic control, with some undergoing metabolic depression (Melzner et al., 2009). The fan worm Sabella spallanzanii (Gmelin, 1791) (Sabelllidae) is present in the waters around Ischia (including those near the vents; M.-C.G. and P.C., personal observation), being especially abundant in areas with high nutrient levels, e.g. harbours (Bocchetti et al., 2004). It is absent from the high venting areas despite showing the ability to increase its metabolic rates when exposed in situ to high PCO₂ conditions (e.g. Calosi et al., 2013), and thus possibly maintain its metabolic scope, unless it undergoes a physiological trade-off between energy metabolism and other important functions (e.g. enzymatic activities, osmo-ionic or pH intracellular regulation). Thus, S. spallanzanii allows us to investigate the biochemical mechanism underpinning a type of sensitivity to high PCO₂, not connected to metabolic depression, which may contribute towards explaining the distribution of this polychaete around the CO₂ vent of Ischia.

To determine the extent to which the cellular physiological condition explains the sensitivity of S. spallanzanii to ocean acidification, we conducted in situ transplant experiments (e.g. Calosi et al., 2013), transferring specimens to either control pH/PCO₂ or low pH/high PCO₂, and examined the concentration of fundamental aerobic and anaerobic metabolites and of carbonic anhydrase. Carbonic anhydrase is an essential enzyme involved in an organism’s acid–base and respiratory function (see Fehsenfeld et al., 2011), which are key to defining its tolerance to high PCO₂. This approach allowed us to test for the effect of high PCO₂ on this species’ biochemical metabolic responses, enabling us to unravel possible functional trade-offs among different traits, which may help explain its sensitivity. Our use of an “individual approach” allowed us to examine the significance of inter-individual variation in the metabolic versus enzymatic responses, which may otherwise remain masked by using an independent samples analysis (see discussion on “the golden mean” in Bennett, 1987). Furthermore, our study is the first to provide mechanistic evidence for an alternative metabolic pathway of sensitivity to high PCO₂ conditions, characterised by a significant reduction in metabolic rates and energy metabolism (e.g. Ivanina et al.,...