

LETTER

Evolutionary rescue can be impeded by temporary environmental amelioration

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Abstract

Rapid evolutionary adaptation has the potential to rescue from extinction populations experiencing environmental changes. Little is known, however, about the impact of short-term environmental fluctuations during long-term environmental deterioration, an intrinsic property of realistic environmental changes. Temporary environmental amelioration arising from such fluctuations could either facilitate evolutionary rescue by allowing population recovery (a positive demographic effect) or impede it by relaxing selection for beneficial mutations required for future survival (a negative population genetic effect). We address this uncertainty in an experiment with populations of a bacteriophage virus that evolved under deteriorating conditions (gradually increasing temperature). Periodic environmental amelioration (short periods of reduced temperature) caused demographic recovery during the early phase of the experiment, but ultimately reduced the frequency of evolutionary rescue. These experimental results suggest that environmental fluctuations could reduce the potential of evolutionary rescue.

Keywords

Adaptation, demographic recovery, environmental change, evolutionary rescue, experimental evolution, microcosm, virus, warming.

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INTRODUCTION

A biological population in decline due to environmental deterioration can recover in abundance if genotypes tolerant of the environmental change increase in frequency and restore population growth sufficiently quickly. This phenomenon is known as evolutionary rescue, and it has the potential to lessen the loss of biodiversity due to environmental changes, including those associated with global climate change (Maynard Smith 1989; Gomulkiewicz & Holt 1995; Bell 2013; Osmond & de Mazancourt 2013; Bourne *et al.* 2014; Carlson *et al.* 2014). Evolutionary rescue depends on the relative rate of demographic decline and evolutionary adaptation. Therefore, more severe stresses and higher rates of environmental changes, which cause higher rates of population decline, can decrease the chance of rescue (Burger & Lynch 1995; Collins *et al.* 2007; Perron *et al.* 2008; Bell & Gonzalez 2009, 2011; Collins & de Meaux 2009; Lindsey *et al.* 2013). Conversely, larger population sizes and higher genetic variation can promote evolutionary rescue by allowing more time, and more efficient selection, for adaptation (Gomulkiewicz & Holt 1995; Lande & Shannon 1996; Willi *et al.* 2006; Orr & Unckless 2008; Bell & Gonzalez 2009; Samani & Bell 2010; Ramsayer *et al.* 2013). Experimental studies of these questions have all involved monotonic environmental deterioration.

A more realistic scenario of environmental deterioration would show both a directional trend and short-term fluctua-

tions (Karl *et al.* 1995; McLaughlin *et al.* 2002; Bell & Collins 2008). The impact of short-term environmental fluctuations on evolutionary rescue is now poorly understood. When environment fluctuates over time, periods of extremely harsh environmental conditions can cause dramatic decline in population sizes and likely reduce the chance of evolutionary rescue (Bell 2013; Lindsey *et al.* 2013). The effect of episodes of environmental amelioration is, however, unclear. Temporary environmental amelioration may promote evolutionary rescue by acting as a temporal refuge and allowing populations to recover in abundance, as this can lead to slower demographic decline and thus increase the probability to obtain beneficial mutations before extinction (Wahl *et al.* 2002; Samani & Bell 2010). However, such environmental amelioration may also lead to a relaxation of selection for tolerance of environmental stress and thus reduce the probability of fixation of the beneficial mutations required for adaptation (Uecker & Hermisson 2011; Peischl & Kirkpatrick 2012; Alto *et al.* 2013; Kirkpatrick & Peischl 2013). This may be particularly important when progressive adaptation via fixation of multiple beneficial mutations is needed for populations to survive increasing magnitudes of stress, where later steps of adaptation are contingent on the success of earlier ones (Martin *et al.* 2013). In such cases, the negative effect of environmental amelioration on evolutionary adaptation may amplify through time (Fig. S1). With these antagonistic effects, the net impact of temporary environmental amelioration on evolu-

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tionary rescue is not easy to predict, and merits careful examination.

Here, we report an experimental evolution study that addresses this question. We use populations of a lytic bacteriophage infecting the bacterium *Pseudomonas fluorescens*. In a previous study, we showed that evolutionary adaptation could prevent this phage from extinction when temperature was monotonically elevated to a stressful level (Zhang & Buckling 2011). In the present study, populations of the phage were experimentally evolved in gradually warming environments, with or without periodic phases of environmental amelioration (lowered temperature). We also examined the effect of population size, both to confirm that this system behaves as expected (greater chance of evolutionary rescue for larger populations) and to test for an interaction with environmental amelioration in determining the chance of evolutionary rescue. We hypothesise that an interaction may arise, as the positive effects of environmental amelioration are likely to be more important for smaller populations, for which the risk of extinction from demographic stochasticity is higher and evolutionary adaptation is limited by the supply of beneficial mutations to a greater extent (Willi *et al.* 2006; Samani & Bell 2010; Ramsayer *et al.* 2013).

METHODS

Strains and culture techniques

The bacteriophage virus SBW25Φ2 (Buckling & Rainey 2002) and its host bacterium *P. fluorescens* SBW25 (Rainey & Bailey 1996) were used in this study. The bacterium grows well at temperatures below 33 °C. The phage fails to reproduce above 30 °C, but may gain tolerance to higher temperature through evolutionary adaptation (Zhang & Buckling 2011). Bacteria and phages were grown in microcosms of 1.5 mL of 0.1KB medium (M9 buffer solution supplemented with 1 g L⁻¹ glycerol and 2 g L⁻¹ proteose peptone no. 3) in 24-well microplates, unshaken in temperature-controlled incubators.

Phage population densities were measured by plating phage dilutions onto soft agar plates containing the ancestral bacterial cells and counting the number of plaque forming units (PFUs) after 24 h culture at 29 °C. Isolation of phages from cultures were achieved by mixing 900 µL of culture with 100 µL of chloroform, which was then vortexed to lyse the bacterial cells, and centrifuged at 13,000 rpm for 2 min to pellet the bacteria debris, leaving a suspension of phage in the supernatant.

Evolutionary rescue experiment

Phage populations were allowed to evolve through 20 serial transfers. Each microcosm was initially inoculated with ~ 10⁷ isogenic stationary-phase bacterial cells and ~ 10⁵ isogenic phage particles. Every 2 days, the phage population from each microcosm was isolated, a portion of which was transferred into a fresh microcosm with ~ 10⁷ ancestral bacteria cells. As the biotic environment, host bacteria, was held in its ancestral state, phage population persistence would be mainly

determined by its adaptation to the physical environment (and not result from coevolutionary dynamics with its host).

The experiment followed a split-plot design and considered two factors: environment and population size. Phage populations evolved in a deteriorating environment with: (1) no periodic amelioration, temperature increasing in a stepwise fashion from 29 to 31.4 °C, six steps of 0.4 °C change, one step per three transfers; and (2) periodic amelioration, which differed from the 'no periodic amelioration' treatment in that, within each 3-transfer step, the second transfer experienced 0.4 °C lower temperature (Fig. 1). After the six steps of temperature increase (transfer 19), phage populations were evolved at 31.4 °C for one more transfer. This ensured that phage persistence at the end of the experiment reflected adaptation to the environment (by ruling out the possibility of transient occurrence of maladapted populations due to the time lag between environmental change and extinction). Four replicate incubators were used for each environmental change regime. Twelve phage lines were grown in each incubator, six with large bottleneck population sizes (1% of phage cultures transferred to new microcosms at each transfer) and six with small bottleneck population sizes (0.1% of phage cultures transferred). Phage population density of each line was measured at every transfer.

In addition, two replicate incubators were used for a constant environment, where temperature was kept at 29 °C. All phage lines in the constant temperature environment persisted throughout the experiment, with highly stable population dynamics (Fig. S2). This confirms that extinction events observed in the deteriorating (temperature-elevated) environments were due to a failure to evolutionarily adapt to higher temperature rather than instability arising from the general laboratory conditions.

Data analysis

Duration of persistence (time to extinction) of phage lines was analysed, using the parametric survival regression model (with the default Weibull distribution). The status of populations (extinct or persistent) at certain points in time was analysed with generalised linear mixed model (GLMM), with binomial errors for the response variable. In these analyses, the evolution environment (no amelioration or amelioration) and bottleneck population size (large or small) were included as fixed effects, and incubator ID as a random factor. We examined whether the periodic environmental amelioration could cause a demographic recovery by calculating the change in population size for each phage line at each transfer, as $D_t - D_{t-1}$, where $D_t = \log_{10}(\text{PFU mL}^{-1} + 1)$, representing the population density at transfer t . We used the software R for data analyses (R Core Team 2014).

RESULTS

Population persistence and demographic responses to periodic environmental amelioration

Over the selection experiment, 76 out of 96 phage lines went extinct. Environmental amelioration and small bottleneck

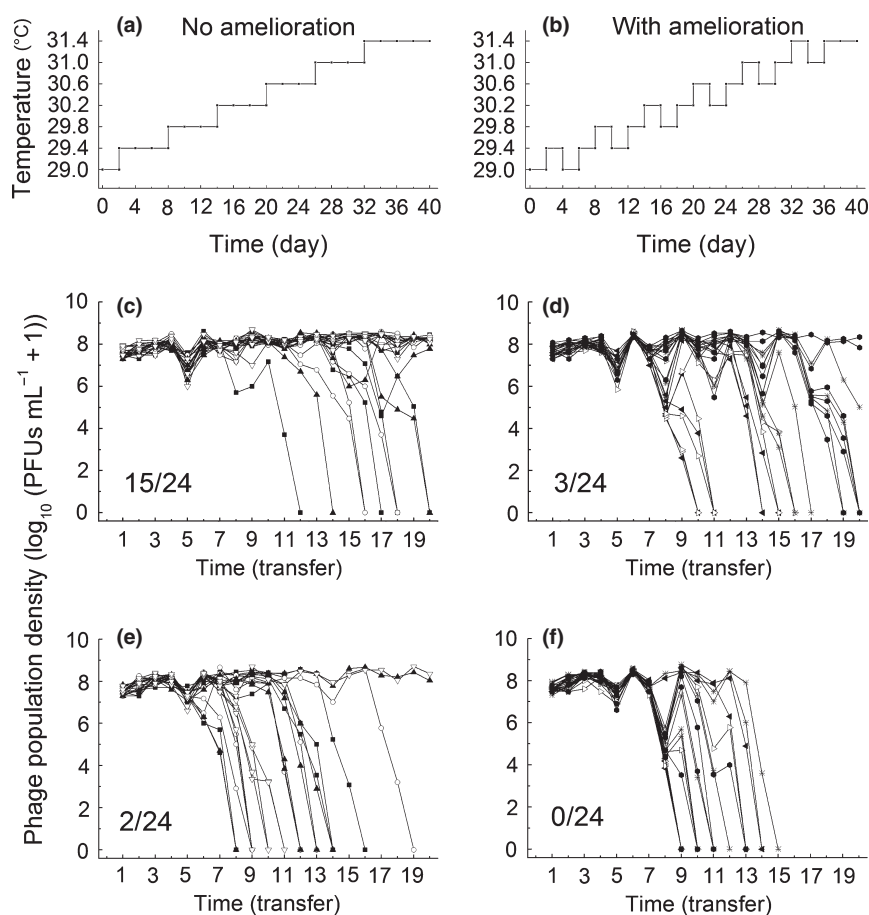


Figure 1 The trajectory of temperature change during the course of experiment (a, b), and population density of each phage line through time under the large- (c, d) and small-bottleneck size treatments (e–f). ‘Day’ was used as the x-axis for (a, b), and ‘transfer’ as the x-axis for (c–f). One transfer represents a period of 2 days; for instance, transfer 1 is the period of day 0–2. Population density at one transfer reflects the population growth performance during a 2-day period. Different symbols in (c–f) indicate phage lines from different individual incubators. And the numbers in panels indicate the frequency of phage lines that persisted throughout the experiment.

population size reduced the duration of persistence by 29% (6.9 transfers) and 39% (9.2 transfers), respectively (Fig. 1; survival regression model, amelioration, $z = -2.99$, $P = 0.003$; bottleneck size, $z = -5.62$, $P < 0.001$, interaction, $z = 0.109$, $P = 0.307$).

During the early stage of the experiment, periodic amelioration led to increased population size in most of the phage lines under the amelioration treatment. The average change in population sizes during amelioration at transfer 3, 6, 9 and 12 for large-bottleneck lines, and at transfer 3 and 6 for small-bottleneck lines, was significantly positive (one sample t test, $P < 0.05$; Figs 1 and 2). During later episodes of environmental amelioration, however, only some phage lines showed recovery in population size, while most continued to decline and the average of population size change was not positive (Figs 1 and 2).

The possibility of progressive adaptation

Evolutionary rescue under continuously increasing temperature may involve progressive (multiple-step) adaptation. To infer this possibility, we grew phage populations that evolved tolerance to a mildly stressful temperature (30.2 °C; from

transfer 10) in a more stressful environment (31 °C); these populations did not show positive growth (Data S1). This suggests that adaptation to temperature above 31 °C would need accumulation of additional, and therefore at least two, beneficial mutations.

The observed pattern in population persistence is consistent with our hypothesis that the negative effect of periodic amelioration on evolutionary rescue should be stronger when accumulation of multiple beneficial mutations is required for adaptation in progressively deteriorating environments (see Introduction and Fig. S1). The amelioration treatment showed a significantly negative effect on the chance of population persistence at the end of the experiment when the environment was severely stressful (transfer 20, and 31.4 °C; 76 extinction events in total; GLMM, amelioration, $z = -2.86$, $P = 0.004$; bottleneck size, $z = -3.53$, $P < 0.001$, interaction, $z = -0.003$, $P = 0.997$), but did not have an impact on the mid-point of the experiment when the environment was only mildly harsh (transfer 10, and 30.2 °C; 26 extinction events in total; GLMM, amelioration, $z = -0.007$, $P = 0.994$; bottleneck size, $z = -0.008$, $P = 0.994$, interaction, $z = 0.007$, $P = 0.994$).

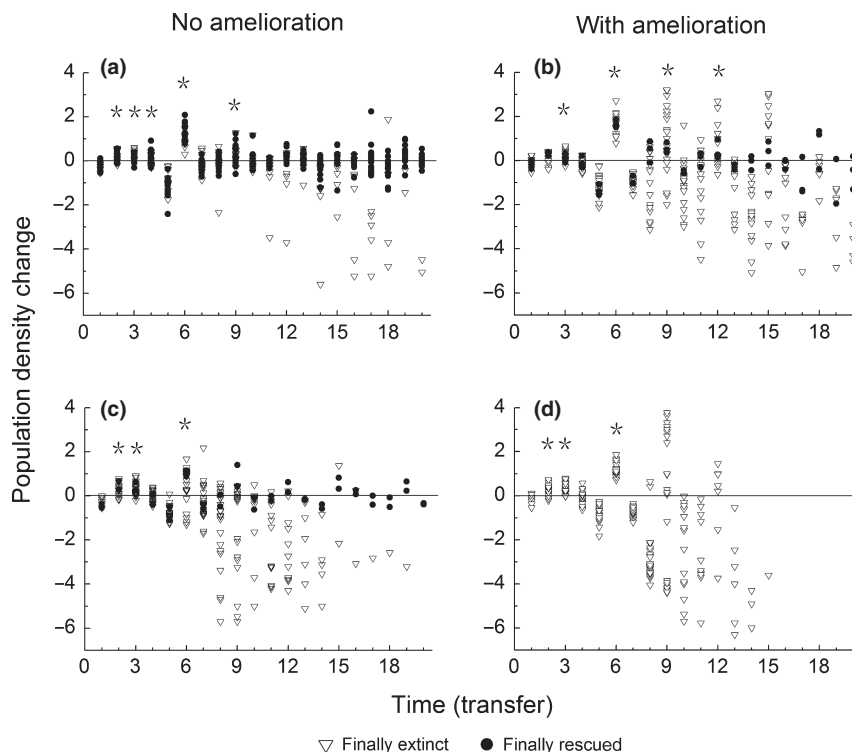


Figure 2 Change in population density at each transfer ($D_t - D_{t-1}$, where $D_t = \log_{10} (\text{PFUs mL}^{-1} + 1)$, population density at transfer t) of each phage line through time under the large- (a, b) and small-bottleneck size treatments (c, d). Under the amelioration treatment, episodes of temporary temperature decrease occurred at transfer 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18. Asterisks indicate significantly positive changes in average population densities (one-sample t test, $P < 0.05$).

The possibility of reversal of selection for beneficial mutations by periodic environmental amelioration

The negative effect of periodic amelioration on the spread of beneficial mutations would be stronger if the beneficial mutations incurred fitness costs in the benign environment. In this case, the episodes of environmental amelioration would select against the beneficial mutations needed for adaptation to the future stressful environment. We assayed population growth profiles for certain phage lines, and found that the finally rescued phage populations, regardless of their evolution environments, showed no reduction in growth performance at lower temperature compared with control populations evolved in the temperature-constant environment (Data S1; Figs S3 and S4). This suggests that phages carrying mutations conferring tolerance to high temperature suffered no appreciable fitness costs in terms of reduced growth performance at lower temperature. While selection for beneficial mutations may have been relaxed during the amelioration periods, it would not have been reversed.

DISCUSSION

A large body of research suggests that increasing environmental variability associated with global climate change often, although not always, leads to negative demographic consequences for populations in the long run (McLaughlin *et al.* 2002; Drake 2005; Burgmer & Hillebrand 2011). Studies of evolutionary rescue have, however, paid little attention to the

impact of environmental fluctuations, although a realistic scenario of environmental deterioration must observe fluctuations on short-term time scales (Karl *et al.* 1995; Bell & Collins 2008). In an environment with a deteriorating trend, fluctuations may lead to both phases of highly stressful conditions and episodes of more benign environmental conditions. Phases of extremely harsh environmental conditions are akin to very severe environmental deterioration, which is likely to reduce the chance of evolutionary rescue (Bell 2013; Lindsey *et al.* 2013). Our study shows that periodic environmental amelioration can also limit evolutionary rescue. Taken together, these results imply that the potential for rapid evolutionary adaptation to mitigate biodiversity loss might be limited in the face of increased climate variability.

In our experiment, temporary environmental amelioration could cause demographic recovery during the early stage of the experiment (Fig. 2), but ultimately reduced the chance of evolutionary rescue in the late stage (Fig. 1). It is likely that evolutionary rescue in this experimental system was mainly limited by the fixation, not the appearance, of beneficial mutations. Relaxed selection, during the episodes of environmental amelioration, could have reduced the chance of fixation of the beneficial mutations that were later required for population survival in future, more stressful, environment. Thus, the ecological (demographic) benefits of periods of environmental amelioration were outweighed by the evolutionary costs, wherein the failure of evolutionary adaptation diminished any positive effect of environmental amelioration on demography in the late stage of the experiment. The fact that the

environmental amelioration treatment did not interact with the bottleneck population size treatment in affecting population persistence (see Results) also suggests that the positive effect of amelioration on demography had little influence on ultimate evolutionary rescue. It could be argued that periodic environmental amelioration can function as an 'evolutionary trap' (Ferriere & Legendre 2013; Carlson *et al.* 2014), and populations 'falling into the trap' fail to adapt to the future environmental change. The extent to which our findings were contingent on a relatively rapid environmental change combined with modest fluctuations (relative to the rate of the directional change) is unclear. Moreover, our experimental design and study organism preclude the possibility to examine the relevance of other important ecological and evolutionary processes such as recombination and dispersal (Bell 2013; Bourne *et al.* 2014; Carlson *et al.* 2014). More research is therefore required to explore the generality of these findings under a wider range of conditions and in other organisms.

Evolutionary adaptation to changing environments has attracted much interest in population genetics in the past several decades, where adaptation has usually been studied in a sense of relative fitness increase (but see Burger & Lynch 1995; Orr & Unckless 2008). It has been often suggested that lower levels of temporal autocorrelation in environmental conditions could retard adaptation, and the inconsistency in selection over time has been a major explanation (Lande & Shannon 1996; Lenormand *et al.* 2009; Alto *et al.* 2013; Chevin 2013; Kirkpatrick & Peischl 2013; Kingsolver & Buckley 2015). Interestingly, our periodic amelioration treatment led to reduced temporal autocorrelation compared with the 'no amelioration' environment. The consistency of our results with the earlier population genetics studies implies that our conclusion should be fairly robust.

There has been a rich literature on how source-sink dynamics affects population adaptation and persistence in spatially heterogeneous environments. Immigration from benign habitats may help maintain the persistence of populations in harsh habitats through a demographic rescue effect, and meanwhile affect the evolutionary adaptation in the sink environment, either positively by increasing the mutation supply, or negatively by interfering with the fixation of beneficial mutations (Holt & Gomulkiewicz 1997; Perron *et al.* 2007; Venail *et al.* 2008; Bell & Gonzalez 2011; Bourne *et al.* 2014). Similar logic may apply to adaptation in temporally heterogeneous environments, where phases of relatively benign environmental conditions function as temporal refuges that promote population survival, but meanwhile may retard the fixation of mutations required for adaptation to harsh future environments. Meanwhile, fundamental differences also exist. For instance, in a spatially heterogeneous environment, a realistic level of migration might not be very high and the negative effect of immigration on the fixation of beneficial mutations in a sink environment should be rather weak. In a temporally heterogeneous environment, however, all individuals experience both benign and stressful conditions and the negative effect of environmental amelioration on the fixation of mutations for adaptation to harsh conditions is inevitable. Now a major gap in our understanding of what conditions favour evolutionary rescue is the combined effects of spatial and temporal variability (Bell & Gonzalez 2011).

Population persistence in increasingly deteriorating environments may require progressive adaptation via accumulation of multiple beneficial mutations and the chance for such multiple-step adaptation might be more limited (Weinreich *et al.* 2006; Toprak *et al.* 2012; Bell 2013). This seems to be the case in our experiment. Assays of phage growth performance suggested that tolerance to the highly stressful environment required multiple beneficial mutations (Data S1). If the relaxation of selection during amelioration periods can delay the fixation of beneficial mutations (Peischl & Kirkpatrick 2012), this effect may accumulate through time and impact the later steps of adaptation to a larger extent (Fig. S1). This is consistent with our observations: environmental amelioration treatment did not show a significant effect on population survival at the mid-point of the experiment when the environmental stress was relatively mild, but showed a negative effect at the end of the experiment when the environment became very harsh. Therefore, it will be helpful to explicitly consider evolutionary paths in future studies of evolutionary rescue (Lindsey *et al.* 2013).

The effect of evolutionary rescue in mitigating biodiversity loss can be particularly relevant to microbes, of which we may observe adaptive evolution in real time. Studies of the causes and consequences of microbial extinction might greatly benefit from taking account of evolutionary processes. For instance, while the impacts of agricultural intensification and land use changes on soil microbial diversity have been recognised (Postma-Blaauw *et al.* 2010; Wagg *et al.* 2014), it is unclear whether environmental variability arising from those anthropogenic activities could have reduced the potential for evolutionary adaptation in the microbes. The concept of evolutionary rescue is also highly relevant to pathogen eradication, where reduced chance of evolution of resistance to chemotherapeutic agents is desirable (Lagator *et al.* 2013; Lindsey *et al.* 2013; Ramsayer *et al.* 2013; Alexander *et al.* 2014; Wu *et al.* 2014). Interestingly, our finding here is consistent with an early suggestion for drug use practice, that temporary low-dose treatments may slow the rate of drug resistance evolution (Read *et al.* 2011; Kouyos *et al.* 2014; Wu *et al.* 2014). The findings highlight the importance of considering both the ecological and population genetic consequences of environmental fluctuations for predicting the likelihood of evolutionary rescue.

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AUTHORSHIP

QGZ conceived the study. YQH conducted the experiment. YQH, OLP and QGZ analysed the data. All authors contributed to designing the experiment and writing the manuscript.

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