

silent genes are somehow switched back on, they argued, long-lost traits could reappear.

Raff's team went on to calculate the likelihood of it happening. Silent genes accumulate random mutations, they reasoned, eventually rendering them useless. So how long can a gene survive in a species if it is no longer used? The team calculated that there is a good chance of silent genes surviving for up to 6 million years in at least a few individuals in a population, and that some might survive as long as 10 million years. In other words, throwbacks are possible, but only to the relatively recent evolutionary past.

As a possible example, the team pointed to the mole salamanders of Mexico and California. Like most amphibians these begin life in a juvenile 'tadpole' state, then metamorphose into the adult form – except for one species, the axolotl, which famously lives its entire life as a juvenile. The simplest explanation for this is that the axolotl lineage alone lost the ability to metamorphose, while others retained it. From a detailed analysis of the salamanders' family tree, however, it is clear that the other lineages evolved from an ancestor that itself had lost the ability to metamorphose. In other words, metamorphosis in mole salamanders is an atavism. The salamander example fits with Raff's 10-million-year time frame.

More recently, however, examples have been reported that break the time limit, suggesting that silent genes may not be the whole story. In a paper published last year, biologist Gunter Wagner of Yale University reported some work on the evolutionary

history of a group of South American lizards called *Bachia*. Many of these have minuscule limbs; some look more like snakes than lizards and a few have completely lost the toes on their hind limbs. Other species, however, sport up to four toes on their hind legs. The simplest explanation is that the toed lineages never lost their toes, but Wagner begs to differ. According to his analysis of the *Bachia* family tree, the toed species re-evolved toes from toeless ancestors and, what is more, digit loss and gain has occurred on more than one occasion over tens of millions of years.

So what's going on? One possibility is that these traits are lost and then simply reappear, in much the same way that similar structures can independently arise in unrelated species, such as the dorsal fins of sharks and killer whales. Another more intriguing possibility is that the genetic information needed to make toes somehow survived for tens or perhaps hundreds of millions of years in the lizards and was reactivated. These atavistic traits provided an advantage and spread through the population, effectively reversing evolution.

But if silent genes degrade within 6 to 10 million years, how can long-lost traits be reactivated over longer timescales? The answer may lie in the womb. Early embryos of many species develop ancestral features. Snake embryos, for example, sprout hind limb buds. Later in development these features disappear thanks to developmental programs that say 'lose the leg'. If for any reason this does not happen, the ancestral feature may not disappear, leading to an atavism.