Quantifying a potential mechanism between ice cover and cisco recruitment success: what role does light play in cisco embryonic development?

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# ABSTRACT:

# INTRODUCTION:

Freshwater whitefishes, Salmonidae Coregoninae (hereafter coregonines) have played important economic (Ebener et al. 2008) and ecological (Nyberg et al. 2001, Lynch et al. 2010, Stockwell et al. 2014) roles throughout the northern hemisphere. Over the past 35 years, coregonine populations worldwide have experienced declines due to highly variable and low survival of fish to age-1 (Nyberg et al. 2001). Year-class strength in most fish species, including coregonines, is thought to be established prior to the end of the first season of growth (Hjort 1914, Cushing 1990, Karjalainen et al. 2015). Climate-induced changes in early-life stage environments have been hypothesized as reasons for declining recruitment (Nyberg et al. 2001).

Most coregonines are autumn spawners whose embryos incubate under ice throughout the winter (Karjalainen et al. 2000, Stockwell et al. 2009), and winter ice and water temperature regimes have changed over the past 20 years or more (Austin and Colman 2007, O’Reilly et al. 2015, Sharma et al. 2019, 2020). Embryos are static which leaves them vulnerable to predation (Stockwell et al. 2014) and unable to evade inter-annual variation in winter conditions (Pepin 1991). Changes in winter severity and ice cover could alter developmental rates, embryo survival, and time of hatching (Karjalainen et al. 2015). Potential mechanisms by which ice cover might influence cisco embryonic development include the reduction of physical wave action (Walter et al. 2006, Austin and Colman 2007, Wang et al. 2010, Nguyen et al. 2017), more stable winter and spring water temperatures (Magnuson et al. 1997, Winslow et al. 2017), and less sunlight reaching the lake bottom (Bolsenga and Vanderploeg 1992, Hampton et al. 2015).

Light is the most consistent abiotic factor in nature (Ruchin 2020) and can regulate fish development phenology, behavior, and physiology (Ruchin 2007, Villamizar et al. 2011). However, lake ice cover plays a critical role in winter light regulation (Bolsenga and Vanderploeg 1992, Hampton et al. 2015). Ice can reduce light transmittance from 83% in open water to 62% under ice coverage, and to ≤ 10% under snow and ice coverage (Bolsenga and Vanderploeg 1992). The length of photoperiods characterize circadian rhythms and ensure that biological processes are synchronized with the environment (Marchesan et al. 2005, Gaston et al. 2013, Ruchin 2020).

Salmonid embryos, including European whitefish *Coregonus lavaretus*, incubated under elevated light levels had higher mortality and deformity rates, slower formation of cartilaginous skeletal elements, decreased time to hatching, and smaller size-at-age; with development after organogenesis accelerated (Eisler 1958, 1961, MacCrimmon and Kwain 1969, Kwain 1975, Chernyaev 2007, Lyutikov 2012). However, other teleost species (*e.g.,* turbot *Scophthalmus maximus*, Atlantic halibut *Hippoglossus hippoglossus*, Brown-marbled grouper *Epinephelus fuscoguttatus*) have been shown to have opposing responses, or no response, to high illumination (Iglesias et al. 1995, Mangor‐Jensen and Waiwood 1995, Seth et al. 2014, Ruchin 2020).

Recent reductions in lake ice cover coupled with low survival of coregonines to age-1 in the Laurentian Great Lakes led us to want to experimentally evaluate how cisco embryos responded to different photoperiod intensities, as a proxy for different ice regimes. Our objective was to identify to what extent light influences cisco embryo survival, incubation duration, and length and yolk-sac volume at hatching. We hypothesized that exposure to elevated light intensity (low ice cover) would accelerate embryogenesis, resulting in earlier hatchings, smaller yolk-sacs, and lower embryo survival. We also hypothesized that populations adapted to lower light levels (high ice cover) are expected to experience more negative impacts from increasing light intensity.

# METHODS:

## Study Species and Locations

Cisco were collected from the Apostle Islands, Lake Superior (46.85, -90.55) and Chaumont Bay, Lake Ontario (44.05, -76.20) in December 2019. Lakes Superior and Ontario cisco populations were collected in different spawning habitats that provided a contrast in ice cover and subsequent light levels to coregonine embryos. Lake Superior cisco were collected at an open lake location at depths between 15-50 m. Lake Ontario cisco were collected in a shallow protected bay on rocky shoals at depths between 2-5 m. Historical ice conditions over the sampled spawning locations varied between lakes with the shallower, more protected Lake Ontario having more consistent ice coverage than the deeper, open location in Lake Superior (Figure 1). Light transmittance is less in deeper water (Secchi 1864, Ramus et al. 1976, Preisendorfer 1986, Fleming-Lehtinen and Laamanen 2012).

## Crossing Design and Fertilization

Gametes were stripped from 12 females and 16 males and artificially fertilized under a blocked, nested full-sib, half-sib fertilization design to create 48 families from each lake. The crossing design maximized the amount of genetic variation and minimized the potential loss of multiple families if a female or male produced poor quality gametes, compared to a full-factorial design. Adults used in the experiment were divided into four fertilization blocks. A single block consisted of four males each paired with three females (Stewart et al. 2021).

Approximately 200 eggs per female were fertilized with an equal amount of milt (5-15 μl) from each male in the block and water used to activate the germ cells. Embryos were rinsed with water until the water ran clear. Reconstructed fresh water was used during fertilizations (OECD ISO 6341:2012) to standardize the chemical properties of the water used between lakes. Embryos were transported to the University of Vermont in coolers by shipping overnight for Lake Superior samples and driven the same-day for Lake Ontario samples. A temperature logger recorded air temperature inside the cooler during transport (Lake Superior: mean (SD) = 2.80°C (0.21); Lake Ontario: mean (SD) = 3.28°C (0.37)). Demographic data (e.g., total length, mass, and egg diameter) were collected on adults. Fertilization success was determined by haphazardly assessing 10 embryos under microscopy within 72-hours post-fertilization (Oberlercher and Wanzenböck 2016). If fertilization was low (<30%), the family was removed from the experiment (Stewart et al. 2021).

## Rearing Conditions

Embryos were individually distributed into 24-well cell culture microplates and incubated in 2 ml of reconstructed fresh water (Stewart et al. 2021). A total of 36 embryos per family were used for each Lake Ontario and Lake Superior cisco. Families were randomly distributed across three microplates (*i.e.,* 12 eggs per family per microplate and two families per 24-well microplate).

Microplates from each population were incubated under three experimental light treatments to represent the day light intensity under 90-100, 40-60, and 0-10% ice cover (Table 1), and followed mean weekly photoperiods with gradual sunrise and sunset transitions. Light intensities for each treatment were chosen to mimic *in situ* winter, lakebed light measurements recorded with a photometer (JFE Advantech Co., Ltd. DEFI2-L) from Lake Superior (46.97, -90.99) at 10 m of water in 2016-17. Remote-sensing ice data (U.S. National Ice Center; usicecenter.gov/) was used to quantify the daily percentage of ice cover above the light sensor (Figure 2). Embryos were incubated at a constant target water temperature of 4.0°C in a climate-controlled chamber (Conviron® E8; Table 2). Forced airflow was used in the climate-controlled chamber to ensure equal air circulation around the microplates and opaque, plastic sheeting was used to separate light treatments. Microplates were covered to minimize evaporation and rotated (*i.e.,* orientation and position) weekly. Water temperature and light intensity were recorded hourly with loggers (HOBO® Water Temperature Pro v2 and JFE Advantech Co., Ltd. DEFI2-L) and daily mean values calculated. Microplates were checked weekly for dead eggs and the eye-up stage. During the hatch period, microplates were checked on a three-day cycle for newly hatched embryos. All hatched embryos were photographed (Nikon® D5600 and Nikon® AF-S DX 18-55mm lens) and immediately preserved in 95% ethanol. Egg size, total length, and yolk-sac axes were measured from images using Olympus® LCmicro.

## Life-History and Morphological Traits

Embryo survival was estimated as the percent of embryos surviving between the eye-up and post-hatch stages. Incubation period was assessed by two variables: the number of days from fertilization to hatching (days post-fertilization; DPF) and the sum of the degree-days (accumulated degree-days; ADD). Total length-at-hatch (LAH; mm) and yolk-sac volume (YSV; mm3) were measured from five individuals per family at, or as close as possible to, 50% hatching for each family. Yolk-sac volume was calculated assuming the shape of an ellipse (Blaxter 1963):

where a = length of the yolk sac (mm) and b = height of the yolk sac (mm).

## Statistical Analyses and Estimation of Variance Components

Embryo survival was analyzed as a binomial response variable, and incubation period, length-at-hatch, and yolk-sac volume at hatching as continuous response variables. Because embryos were raised independently, the replication unit in the statistical models is the individual embryo and the design was unbalanced from different levels of embryo mortality. All non-proportional data were visually checked for approximate normality using histograms and Q-Q plots. A cubic transformation was applied to LAH for cisco and a cubic root transformation was applied to DPF, ADD, and YSV to normalize the distributions. Therefore, binary data (*i.e.,* embryo survival) were analyzed with binomial generalized linear mixed-effects models (LMM) and variables with distributions not strongly deviating from normal (i.e., incubation period, length-at-hatch, and yolk-sac volume) were analyzed with restricted maximum likelihood LMMs with the *lme4* package (Bates et al. 2015). Population and incubation light treatment were included as fixed effects and female, male, female x male, and fertilization block as random effects. All traits and possible interactions were examined with backward, stepwise effect-selection using the *buildmer* package (Voeten 2020). The maximal model for each trait was selected by comparing a model including or lacking the term of interest to the reference model based on changes in log-likelihood, Akaike information criterion, Bayesian information criterion, and change in explained deviance. The significance for population, species, incubation temperature, interaction effects, and any random-effects selected were determined using a likelihood ratio test between the maximal model and reduced models with the model effect of interest removed.

To allow for population comparisons, the response to temperature for each trait was standardized to what we assumed was the optimal light treatment - the low light treatment (Table 1). For each trait, the within-family mean was calculated for each light treatment and the percent change from the optimal light intensity estimated. Standard error was calculated as the among-family variation in percent change.

All analyses were performed in R version 4.0.3 (R Core Team 2020).

# RESULTS:

## Spawning Adults

Lake Superior spawning adults ranged from 326-503 mm (mean = 412.54 mm) and 298.9-970.0 g (mean = 589.05 g), and were larger in total length and fresh mass than Lake Ontario adults which ranged from 321-425 mm (mean = 372.46 mm) and 280.5-795.8 g (mean = 496.6 g; Table 3). Egg diameter was larger in Lake Ontario (mean (SD) = 2.30 (0.08) mm) than Lake Superior (mean (SD) = 2.14 (0.12) mm).

## Life-History and Morphological Traits and Variance Components

All traits, except embryo survival and LAH, had significant interaction effects between population and light treatments (maximum *P* = 0.008; Table 4). The interaction effects precluded any interpretation of main effects, but did suggest contrasting norms of reaction between populations. Below we describe the interaction effects and the light pairwise comparisons for embryo survival. All random effects (*i.e.,* female, male, and female x male) were significant (maximum *P* = 0.009) except female for embryo survival, male for embryo survival and YSV, and female x male for embryo survival and LAH (Table 4). All statistical model results can be found in Table 4.

### *Embryo Survival*

Embryo survival was highest for both populations at the medium light treatment, but lowest at the low light treatment for Lake Ontario and at the high light treatment for Lake Superior (Figure 3). Light and population main effects were significant, and all pairwise light treatment comparisons were significant (maximum *P* < 0.005). Embryo survival was higher for Lake Ontario at the high (98.4%) and medium (99.6%) light treatments than Lake Superior (85.3 and 89.3%, respectively) but not different between populations (0.9%) at the low light treatment (Figure 3).

### *Incubation Period (days post-fertilization)*

The number of days post-fertilization to hatching was highest for Lake Ontario at the low light treatment (115.47 days) and for Lake Superior at the high light treatment (101.22 days; Figure 3). Incubation period (DPF) was higher for Lake Ontario than Lake Superior across all light treatments (mean (SD) = 13.9 (0.8) days). Lake Ontario cisco had a decrease in DPF from the low light to the high light treatments (-0.7%), while Lake Superior had an increase from the low light to the high light treatments (1.9%; Figure 3).

### *Incubation Period (accumulated degree-days)*

The effect of population depended on light because the difference in ADD between populations was less pronounced at the high light treatment (60.8 ADD), while ADD was higher for Lake Ontario (497.7 and 485.9 ADD) than Lake Superior (427.5 and 420.8 ADD) at the low and medium light treatments, respectively (Figure 3). Lake Ontario ADD had a negative response from the low to high light treatments (-2.5%), while ADD for Lake Superior did not change from the low to high light treatments (0.05%; Figure 3).

### *Length-at-Hatch*

Light was not a component returned in the stepwise-selected model, but the population main effect between Lake Ontario and Lake Superior was significant (*P* < 0.001; Table 4). Lake Ontario had a higher LAH than Lake Superior across all light treatments (Figure 4). Length-at-hatch decreased with increasing light by 3.2 and 0.2% in Lake Superior and Lake Ontario populations, respectively (Figure 4).

### *Yolk-sac Volume*

Yolk-sac volume had a different response to light intensity between populations (Figure 4). The effect of population depended on light because the difference in YSV between populations was less pronounced at the low light treatment (0.22 mm3), while YSV was lower for Lake Ontario (0.35 and 0.37 mm3) than Lake Superior (0.67 and 0.63 mm3) at the high and medium light treatments, respectively (Figure 4). Lake Superior YSV had a positive response from the low to high light treatments (15.3%), while YSV for Lake Ontario had a negative response from the low to high light treatments (-5.5%; Figure 4).

# DISCUSSION:

Our incubation experiments demonstrated both similar and contrasting reaction norms to light intensity for life-history and morphological traits between two cisco populations. First, we found contrasting responses to light intensity in embryo survival between populations. Second, increasing light intensity had minimal impact on incubation periods (both DPF and ADD) from both populations. Lastly, both populations had similar, negative responses to light for LAH but contrasting responses in YSV. These results show that cisco from Lakes Superior and Ontario are likely to have differential responses to ice cover and subsequent light conditions.

Our hypothesis that both populations would have the highest embryo survival at the low light treatment was not supported. Embryo survival had opposing responses to increasing light intensity because Lake Ontario cisco had a sharp decrease in survival at the low light treatment. This was surprising because ice concentrations over the Lake Ontario spawning location are high, with assumed low light conditions, and this is the environment we expect cisco to be locally-adapted to. However, the Lake Ontario cisco spawning location is shallow (< 5 m) and would have high light intensity when ice is not present. The potential for high winter illuminance may allow the population of Lake Ontario cisco sampled to have higher resilience to light than deeper spawning cisco sampled from Lake Superior. Both populations had the highest embryo survival at the medium light levels suggesting that populations may be adapted to withstand some light exposure from high inter-annual variability in ice cover.

Despite finding an impact of light on embryo survival, different light intensities did not change, within the magnitude of biological significance, the length of incubation for either population. ﻿Light energy is known to have a similar effect as temperature on embryonic development of European whitefish; a negative correlation between the abiotic factor and development (Chernyaev 2007). This led us to expect cisco would respond similarly to European whitefish, but our results did not support our hypothesis that elevated levels of light intensity would accelerate embryogenesis. ﻿The greatest difference in incubation periods was between populations and likely caused by differences in embryo size, with larger embryos (*i.e.,* Lake Ontario cisco) requiring more time to develop (Hodson and Blunt 1986, Kamler 2008).

Although no difference in incubation period was found across light treatments, a response to light in LAH and YSV was found. Lake Ontario cisco had a minimal change in LAH as light increased, but YSV responded negatively, suggesting that light intensified the metabolic demand of embryos and diverted energy away from somatic growth. However, Lake Superior cisco showed a strong trade-off between LAH and YSV and had a positive YSV response to increasing light. The negative relationship between LAH and YSV is a common response among temperature incubation studies (Blaxter 1991, Karjalainen et al. 2015, Stewart et al. 2021), but a change in incubation period is typically also found and explains the mechanistic basis behind morphological changes from temperature. In our experiment, light did not influence incubation period and therefore the length of development and metabolic demand over the length of the incubation cannot be the cause of this trade-off between LAH and YSV. Actual reasons remain unknown, however, the contrasting responses in YSV between populations suggests that each population has different levels of plasticity to light during embryogenesis.

﻿Environmental conditions experienced during embryo development can greatly influence life-history trajectories, performances, and reproductive success (Colby and Brooke 1970, Luczynski 1991, Karjalainen et al. 2015, 2016). Our experiment did not quantify developmental stages, except eye pigmentation, so specific life-stage developmental rates are unknown. Organogenesis and ﻿having specialized organs of photoreception is known to be a critical developmental stage in relation to light (Chernyaev 2007) so the impact of light intensity could be further intensified during late-embryonic stages. Instead of consistent maximum light intensities for treatments, further studies examining the impact of changing light intensities throughout incubations (*e.g.,* decreased light during winter from ice cover and increased light during spring ice-out) will help determine the fine-scale impact light may have on specific development stages (*i.e.,* hatching) and organ, tissue, and skeletal formation.

﻿A certain contribution to light attenuation in water is made by turbidity, and this should be considered along with the light intensity. Spring ice-out and river discharge can drastically increase the presence of suspended particulates and increase light absorption (Shao et al. 2019). The proximity of spawning grounds to shoreline and river outlets would likely impact the light exposure to embryos and the impact light may have on hatching and larval feeding. In this context, our study only examined one spawning location within each lake, however, various spawning locations and habitats do exist for both lakes (Goodyear 1982). To further understand any adaption to local light conditions, expanding experimental studies to within-lake populations from various spawning locations, depths, and substrates would add to our understanding of the effect of light during embryogenesis. Additionally, comparing populations from higher latitude lakes which experience decreased winter sunlight would provide an additional contrast for local adaptation and plasticity across geographic regions.

﻿This study brings a new finding on the influence light intensity has on cisco embryo development and the impact changing ice regimes may have on cisco survival and recruitment.

We were unable to distinguish ﻿cisco populations with only a negative or only a positive reaction to light, and ﻿light is likely to have a differential effect on a number of physiological and biochemical processes. Optimal light preferences are adaptations of cisco to their specific ecological niche and spawning habitat, which we found to be different between the populations examined. Our results provide a step towards better understanding the recent high variability observed in coregonine recruitment and may help predict what the future of this species may look like under current climate trends.

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# TABLES:

Table 1. Mean ± SD photon flux (μmol m-2 s-1) for three ice regimes from Lake Superior and corresponding laboratory experimental light conditions.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Ice Cover (Light Treatment) | | |
| Location | > 90% (Low) | 40-60% (Medium) | < 10% (High) |
| Lake Superior | 1.96 ± 1.07 | 3.35 ± 2.54 | 5.45 ± 5.88 |
| Laboratory | 0.62 ± 0.06 | 3.85 ± 1.88 | 6.15 ± 0.99 |

Table 2. Mean ± SD water temperatures (°C) during embryo incubations from each light treatment for Lakes Superior and Ontario.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Light Treatment | | |
| Lake | High | Medium | Low |
| Superior | 4.25 ± 0.24 | 4.28 ± 0.28 | 4.34 ± 0.34 |
| Ontario | 4.24 ± 0.25 | 4.28 ± 0.28 | 4.36 ± 0.36 |

Table 3. Mean ± SD total length (TL) and fresh mass (FM) of spawning females and males from Lake Superior and Lake Ontario cisco (*Coregonus artedi*) used in the experiment.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Lake Superior | |  | Lake Ontario | |
| Sex | TL (mm) | FM (g) |  | TL (mm) | FM (g) |
| Female | 428.92  ± 44.40 | 676.02  ± 181.51 |  | 380.33  ± 24.18 | 567.59  ± 122.89 |
| Male | 400.25  ± 34.35 | 523.82  ± 134.65 |  | 366.56  ± 25.30 | 443.29  ± 103.16 |

Table 4. Likelihood ratio test output for each model selected for embryo survival (%), incubation period (number of days post-fertilization; DPF), incubation period (accumulated degree-days; ADD), length-at-hatch (mm), and yolk-sac volume (mm3) from Lakes Superior and Ontario cisco (*Coregonus artedi*). pop indicates population. The full model that was selected is bolded for each trait.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Trait | Model | Effect Tested | df | χ2 | p-value |
| Embryo Survival | **light + pop** |  |  |  |  |
| pop | light | 2 | 181.92 | < 0.001 |
|  | light | pop | 1 | 95.00 | < 0.001 |
| Incubation Period (DPF) | **light + pop + light:pop + female:male + female + male** |  |  |  |  |
| pop + female:male + female + male | light | 2 | 10.80 | 0.005 |
| light + female:male + female + male | pop | 1 | 3,023.89 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + female:male + female + male | light:pop | 2 | 9.66 | 0.008 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female + male | female:male | 1 | 79.91 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female:male + male | female | 1 | 25.29 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female:male + female | male | 1 | 10.80 | 0.001 |
| Incubation Period (ADD) | **light + pop + light:pop + female:male + female + male** |  |  |  |  |
| pop + female:male + female + male | light | 2 | 51.72 | < 0.001 |
| light + female:male + female + male | pop | 1 | 3,092.41 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + female:male + female + male | light:pop | 2 | 13.23 | 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female + male | female:male | 1 | 79.99 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female:male + male | female | 1 | 25.25 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female:male + female | male | 1 | 10.75 | < 0.001 |
| Length-at-Hatch | **pop + female + male** |  |  |  |  |
| female + male | pop | 1 | 373.34 | < 0.001 |
| pop + male | female | 1 | 100.97 | < 0.001 |
|  | pop + female | male | 1 | 11.37 | < 0.001 |
| Yolk-sac Volume | **light + pop + light:pop + female:male + female** |  |  |  |  |
| pop + female:male + female | light | 2 | 1.96 | 0.376 |
| light + female:male + female | pop | 1 | 712.18 | < 0.001 |
| light + pop + female:male + female | light:pop | 2 | 19.04 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female | female:male | 1 | 6.52 | < 0.001 |
|  | light + pop + light:pop + female:male | female | 1 | 38.94 | < 0.001 |

# FIGURES:

**Chart

Description automatically generated**

Figure 1. Histogram of annual mean ice concentration between 1-Jan and 15-Mar from 1973-2020 for each sampling location in Lake Superior (top) and Lake Ontario (bottom). Error bars represent the interquartile range. Ice coverage data was obtained from the U.S. National Ice Center (usicecenter.gov/).

Chart, histogram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2. Daily ice coverage (%; blue line) and light intensity (μmol m-2 s-1; gray line) relationship based on light sensors set at 10 m depth off Sand Island, Lake Superior. Ice coverage data above the sensor was obtained from the U.S. National Ice Center (usicecenter.gov/).

**Chart

Description automatically generated**

Figure 3. Mean embryo survival (%) and incubation period (number of days post-fertilization (DPF) and accumulated degree days (°C; ADD)) at each incubation light treatment (left) and standardized responses to light within each population (%; right) from Lake Superior and Lake Ontario cisco (*Coregonus artedi*). Error bars indicate standard error.

**Chart

Description automatically generated**

Figure 4. Mean length-at-hatch (mm; LAH) and yolk-sac volume (mm3; YSV) at each incubation light treatment (left) and standardized responses to light within each population (%; right) from Lake Superior and Lake Ontario cisco (*Coregonus artedi*). Error bars indicate standard error.