Otolith sulfur isotope method to reconstruct salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) life history

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Abstract: We report a new ion microprobe method to reconstruct aspects of fish life history based on sulfur isotopes (\[^{34}\text{S/32}\text{S}\], expressed as \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\)). Selected hatchery raised and naturally spawned juvenile chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) are shown to have a 12.96 ± 0.27‰ (mean ± 2 standard errors) difference in muscle \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) values, corresponding to \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) differences between the hatchery and freshwater diets. Isotopic microanalyses of otoliths demonstrate that this 13‰ difference is preserved in the otoliths. We interpret the otolith \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) record to be a chronology of dietary \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\), with approximately one-week temporal resolution, preserved in these banded calcium carbonate structures. Potential applications of this method include identifying hatchery raised fish and reconstructing nutrition sources, migration, and other aspects of fish life history.

Résumé : Une nouvelle méthode qui utilise une microsonde ionique permet de reconstituer certains aspects du cycle biologique d’un poisson à l’étude des isotopes de soufre (\[^{34}\text{S/32}\text{S}\], soit \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\)). De jeunes saumons quinquen (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) sélectionnés, certains élevés en pisciculture et d’autres nés en nature, présentent des différences de 12.96 ± 0.27‰ (moyenne ± 2 fois l’erreur type) dans les \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) de leurs muscles, ce qui correspond aux différences de \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) entre les régimes alimentaires en pisciculture et en milieu d’eau douce. Des microanalyses des isotopes des otolithes révèlent que cette différence de 13‰ se maintient dans les otolithes. Nous interprétons cet enregistrement du \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) dans les couches de carbonate de calcium des otolithes comme le reflet de l’évolution dans le temps du \(\delta^{34}\text{S}\) alimentaire avec une précision de l’ordre de 1 semaine. L’identification des poissons élevés en pisciculture, ainsi que la reconstitution des sources alimentaires, de la migration et d’autres aspects du cycle biologique des poissons sont parmi les applications potentielles de cette nouvelle méthodologie.


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sonal growth increments, preserved by successive growth layers. Sulfur (100–600 µg·g⁻¹) is associated with the otolith organic matrix (Kalish 1989). Otolith chemistry has been extensively analyzed (Campana 1999), but no measurements of otolith δ³⁴S have ever been reported. We expect the organic matrix in the centre of each salmon otolith to reflect the marine sulfur isotopic composition of the mother, transmitted via the egg to the fish. Once the juvenile salmon hatches out and begins to feed, the δ³⁴S of each otolith growth increment should reflect the diet of the fish at that particular time (i.e., the otolith layers preserve a temporal record of fish diet).

We test this hypothesis by making in situ measurements of otolith δ³⁴S for hatchery raised and naturally spawned juvenile chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha). Hatchery raised and naturally spawned salmon should have distinct juvenile dietary δ³⁴S histories in most river systems. In the hatchery, juvenile salmon are raised on commercial feeds typically consisting of 80–90% protein from marine sources, whereas in the wild, juvenile salmon have a freshwater diet. We analyze tissue and food samples to show that hatchery raised and naturally spawned juvenile chinook salmon have distinct dietary sulfur histories. We compare hatchery and source river water dissolved sulfur content to exclude significant additions of exogenous sulfur from hatchery operations (e.g., feeding). Finally, we analyze otolith δ³⁴S by ion microprobe, generating a spatially resolved δ³⁴S record.

Methods

Five sets of juvenile chinook salmon from the Sacramento – San Joaquin river system (~38°N, 122°W) were used in this study. One set of fish came from a river with no hatchery stocking (Butte Creek), another set was captured in August in a river that last received hatchery fish four months before (Sacramento River at Red Bluff), the third set was taken directly from the hatchery (Feather River), the fourth set were naturally spawned chinook salmon fry recently emerged from the gravel (34- to 38-mm fork length, FL), and the fifth set were tagged hatchery raised salmon (Merced River) released in the Tuolumne Delta and recaptured in the Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta 25 days later. With the exception of the fry, the fish caught in the wild were all larger than 60-mm FL, and the fish taken directly from the hatchery were larger than 45-mm FL.

The Butte Creek, Sacramento River, and Feather River Hatchery fish were used to characterize dietary and resultant bulk muscle tissue δ³⁴S for the naturally spawned and hatchery raised juvenile salmon because these fish were expected to be in equilibrium with their diets. Whole prey items were extracted from the stomachs of salmon caught in the wild, three commercial chinook salmon feeds were obtained from the Feather River and Merced River hatcheries, and stomach contents were extracted from three of the hatchery salmon. To characterize prefeeding salmon δ³⁴S, two sets of chinook salmon eggs and the four naturally spawned chinook salmon fry were analyzed. All muscle, stomach content, feed, and egg samples were dried at 60°C and ground to a fine powder. Lipids were extracted using methylene chloride and methanol (2:1, v/v). The lipid-extracted samples were analyzed for ³⁴S/³²S by an Isochrom Continuous Flow Stable Isotope Mass Spectrometer (Micromass, Manchester, U.K.) coupled to a Carlo Erba Elemental Analyzer (ThermoFinnigan Italia, Milan, Italy) at the Environmental Isotope Laboratory, University of Waterloo, Ont., Canada.

To test for sulfur additions in the hatchery (Merced River), matched pairs of filtered water samples (0.4 µm) were collected from the hatchery raceways and the adjacent river when salmon were present (February 1998, March 1998, and January 1999). Total sulfur was determined by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometer (Thermo Jarrell Ash Iris HR, Thermo Elemental, Franklin, Mass., U.S.A.) at the University of California, Berkeley. Replicate analyses of matched pairs were made using concentrated and spiked aliquots.

We selected otoliths from the Butte Creek juvenile salmon for analysis to characterize otolith δ³⁴S in the wild because these fish were the most likely to be naturally spawned. Otoliths from the recaptured Merced River Hatchery salmon were selected to characterize otolith δ³⁴S in the hatchery and after release. Otoliths were removed, cleaned in deionized water, dried at 60°C, mounted in Araldite epoxy, and polished to expose banding (Fig. 1).

The spatial distribution of sulfur isotopes in otoliths was determined using ion microprobes (Cameca, Courbevoie, France) at the University of California at Los Angeles (Cameca IMS 1270, National Ion Microprobe Facility) and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (Cameca IMS 3f, Livermore, Calif.). Techniques for the IMS 1270 were similar to those described previously for oxygen-isotope analyses (McKeegan et al. 1998). A 20-keV, ~4-nA Cs⁺ primary ion beam, defocused to produce a uniformly illuminated spot, was used to sputter gold-coated sections of otoliths. Low-energy (<30 eV) negative secondary ions were accelerated to 10 keV and mass analyzed at high resolving power (m/Δm = 4000). A normal incidence electron flood gun was used to provide charge compensation. Secondary ions were detected by static multicollocation: ³²S (~4 × 10⁶ ions·s⁻¹) on a Faraday cup and ³⁴S by ion counting on an

Fig. 1. Transmitted light micrograph of a polished otolith from a juvenile chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha) showing concentric growth increments and ion microprobe traverse used to determine δ³⁴S. In situ ion microprobe analyses reveal variations in δ³⁴S, correlated with radial position (salmon age), that track changes in nutrient-source and (or) diet δ³⁴S, which can in turn be related to aspects of salmon life history (Fig. 3).
Fig. 2. Sulfur isotope composition of muscle tissue (□) from hatchery raised (>45 mm fork length, FL) and naturally spawned juvenile (>60-mm FL) chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha), with comparison to $\delta^{34}$S of diet (○; ● for Merced River Hatchery feed), eggs (×), and recently hatched, naturally spawned fry (△). The egg ($n = 2$) and fry ($n = 4$) data demonstrate that the maternal marine $\delta^{34}$S signal is transmitted to the prefeeding juvenile fish. The data for the larger juvenile fish ($n = 7, 12$, and 10 from left to right) show an unambiguous difference in $\delta^{34}$S (12.96 ± 0.27‰ (2 SE)) between hatchery raised and naturally spawned fish. The larger fish are in approximate equilibrium with their diets ($n = 6, 6, \text{ and } 6$), as expected based on known history and size. Butte Creek salmon are expected to be naturally spawned in the wild because the river is not stocked with hatchery salmon. The Sacramento River samples were collected at the Red Bluff diversion dam four months after the last releases from the upstream hatchery; therefore, any hatchery fish still in the river would reflect a freshwater diet in the wild. Data point size represents two standard errors.

Results and discussion

Our $\delta^{34}$S data for eggs and fry (Fig. 2) demonstrate that the adult salmon $\delta^{34}$S signal (+17%o to +18‰o; Krouse et al. 1991) is transmitted to the juvenile fish via the egg. With time and growth (>45-mm FL), this signal in the tissue is replaced by the dietary $\delta^{34}$S value (Fig. 2), as expected (Hesslein et al. 1993). Our results show a substantial difference in muscle tissue $\delta^{34}$S (12.96 ± 0.27‰o) between juvenile salmon feeding in the hatchery and those feeding in the rivers. This difference is large relative to both sample variance (2 standard deviations, SD, of 1.0–1.8‰o) and measurement precision (2 SE of 0.6‰o). Wild salmon $\delta^{34}$S values for muscle (+1.0‰o to +3.8‰o) and stomach content (+1.3‰o to +4.5‰o) are in the range expected for freshwater sulfur sources. In contrast, the $\delta^{34}$S values in the muscle tissue of the hatchery raised fish (+14.6‰o to +16.4‰o) are indicative of sulfur derived from the hatchery feeds (+14.1‰o to +16.6‰o), reflecting a marine signature modified by the admixture of sulfur from continental sources.

Filtered water samples from the Merced River Hatchery and adjacent river contain S at 0.7–1.5 µg g⁻¹. Matched pairs have the same sulfur content within error (meanriver-hatchery = 0.03 ± 0.25 µg g⁻¹), suggesting that hatchery operation does not add significant amounts of exogenous dissolved sulfur to river water diverted to the hatchery raceways. This observation is consistent with strontium isotope and major and minor elemental data for this hatchery and others in the Sacramento – San Joaquin river system, which also suggest that hatchery operation does not alter source water chemistry (Weber 2002). If little exogenous sulfur is added to hatchery water, then the hatchery water sulfate $\delta^{34}$S cannot be significantly elevated relative to river water sulfate $\delta^{34}$S.

We present the in situ analyses of $\delta^{34}$S in two otoliths, from a naturally spawned juvenile salmon and a recaptured juvenile hatchery raised salmon (Fig. 3). The data show large differences in sulfate isotope composition correlated with nutritional history. For the naturally spawned fish, the $\delta^{34}$S of the otolith core (14.4 ± 2.2‰o, 2 SE, external precision) reflects the marine signal from the egg. The $\delta^{34}$S values abruptly decrease to near zero (~0.4 ± 1.3‰o) ~150 µm from the centre, reflecting growth of the salmon in fresh water. In contrast, the bulk of the otolith from the hatchery raised salmon (Merced River Hatchery) reflects the marine and hatchery-feed $\delta^{34}$S signal (+12.9 ± 1.5‰o). Only the outermost 25 growth bands (~100 µm wide) of the otolith, formed during the 25 days between release of the salmon and its subsequent capture downstream, have the freshwater $\delta^{34}$S value (~0.6 ± 2.0‰o).
Fig. 3. Spatially resolved otolith δ34S values for (a) a juvenile naturally spawned chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) and (b) a recaptured juvenile hatchery raised chinook salmon. The data reveal an unambiguous difference in the distribution of δ34S values across individual otoliths, correlated with salmon diet and life history. Elevated δ34S values in the core of the wild salmon otolith, reflecting the marine S signal transmitted to the fish from the mother via the egg, decrease to values near zero once the hatchling begins to feed in the river. The hatchery raised otolith exhibits uniformly high δ34S values until release to freshwater (indicated by ▼; shaded area represents the period when the nutrition source is marine), 25 days before capture. The difference in δ34S (13.33 ± 0.97‰ (2 SE)) between hatchery-feeding and river-feeding zones reflects dietary and muscle tissue δ34S. Distance from the centre of the otolith is related to days since first feeding based on visible daily banding. These data were collected on the Cameca IMS 1270 ion microprobe and replicated on the Cameca IMS 3f ion microprobe (see Methods). Error bars represent two standard errors.

![Sulfur Isotope Composition Diagram](image-url)

At our current levels of accuracy and precision, we are unable to distinguish between the marine δ34S signal in the otolith core and the (largely) marine signal derived from the hatchery feed. We are also unable to determine whether the offset in otolith δ34S relative to muscle δ34S is an artifact of the mass-fractionation correction or whether it is an actual difference between otolith and muscle δ34S.

Based on the observations that (i) the spatial variation of otolith sulfur content is consistent with the spatial variation in otolith protein content and (ii) the sulfur content of an otolith is consistent with the total amount of sulfur in the proteins of the organic matrix, Kalish (1989) inferred that S-bearing amino acids in the organic matrix are the primary source of sulfur in otoliths. Otoliths are 0.2–10% protein, containing 1–3% cysteine and methionine (Degans et al. 1969), which are 26.5% and 21.5% S by weight, respectively (Kalish 1989). However, sulphated acid mucopolysaccharides have also been detected in otoliths (Asano and Mugiya 1993), and their abundance and provenance have not been studied. Mugiya and Iketsu (1987) demonstrated that inorganic sulfate in ambient water is incorporated into an otolith under experimental conditions, most likely in the organic matrix as sulphated acid mucopolysaccharides. Our sulfur concentration results for matched pairs of water samples exclude hatchery water sulfate as a significant source of

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elevated $\delta^{34}$S for the otolith hatchery-feeding zone, supporting the thesis that diet is the primary source of otolith sulfur under river and hatchery conditions.

**Applications**

Hatchery managers can use a number of physical, chemical, and thermal methods to tag hatchery fish, but not all hatchery fish are marked. In California’s Sacramento – San Joaquin river system, only 10 to 20 percent of hatchery chinook salmon are tagged, primarily because of concerns about physiological stress to the fish and cost (compiled from personal communications with: Rich Bryant, Mokelumne River Hatchery, Clemments, Calif.; Mike Cozart, Merced River Hatchery, Snelling, Calif.; Anna Kastern, Feather River Hatchery, Oroville, Calif.; John Scott, Coleman Hatchery, Anderson, Calif.; Terry West, Nimbus Hatchery, Rancho Cordova, Calif.). In this river system, otolith $\delta^{34}$S will be useful for identifying hatchery salmon. This method will also work in other systems where (i) fish are released from the hatchery after significant feeding and growth occur, (ii) the hatchery feed is marine-based, and (iii) exceptionally high $\delta^{34}$S lithologies do not dominate the freshwater $\delta^{34}$S signal (Nriagu et al. 1991; Thode 1991). Where hatchery raised fish can be identified, the timing of the release of fish to the river can also be determined.

More generally, in situ analyses of $\delta^{34}$S can be used to reconstruct aspects of fish life history, given sufficient differences in $\delta^{34}$S between geographic regions and food sources of interest. The presence of the marine $\delta^{34}$S value in the centre of the otolith can be used to distinguish anadromous and resident populations. Regional differences in river $\delta^{34}$S (Nriagu et al. 1991) should be useful for determining fish origin and reconstructing migration. For estuary or migratory fish, bulk tissue $\delta^{34}$S provides time-averaged information on nutrition sources (Hesslein et al. 1993). By contrast, spatially resolved otolith $\delta^{34}$S analyses provide a time-resolved record of dietary $\delta^{34}$S.

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**References**


