Molecular Ecology (2002) **11**, 2703–2709

COMMENTARY

First synthesize new viruses then regulate their release? The case of the wild rabbit

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Abstract

European wild rabbits originated in southwestern Europe but have been introduced into many other countries world-wide, becoming serious pests in many instances. As a consequence of rabbits being regarded so differently, applied research for their management often has opposing goals, namely their conservation or their control. Furthermore, modern gene technology has led to the concept of using genetically modified myxoma viruses for rabbit management, again with quite contrary aims in mind. In this paper we explain the possible ecological and economic consequences of using these genetically modified viruses inappropriately and we consider whether national and international regulations are sufficient to prevent improper use. If international regulations are inadequate, molecular biologists and ecologists must consider the consequences of their research and advice beyond their own country to avoid unwanted impacts.

Keywords: conservation, GMO, myxomatosis, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, rabbit haemorrhagic disease, wild rabbit

Received 25 April 2002; revision received 21 August 2002; accepted 21 August 2002

Introduction

Organisms modified using gene technology are commonly referred to as genetically modified organisms (GMOs). They are now widely used in industry, agriculture, health care, and biological control, usually involving releases into the environment.

Nevertheless, developments in this area have often progressed faster than the legislation that provides for their safe use and Tiedje *et al*. (1989) have recommended that research should be carried out within a framework of science-based regulation that encourages innovation without compromising environmental values. As GMOs may be spread beyond political boundaries, it is essential to achieve international co-ordination in developing such regulations.

Here we present the case of genetically modified rabbit viruses, one developed to help conserve rabbits, the other developed for their control, in which the lack of effective international co-ordination and control could compromise the management of rabbit populations in countries other than those in which the viruses were developed (Angulo 2001).

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Current distribution and ecological problems concerning wild rabbits

The European wild rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, originated in southwestern Europe on the Iberian peninsula (Fig. 1). It is a prolific species and has always supported a diverse predator community. In Spain it is the staple prey of two endangered predators, the imperial eagle (*Aquila adalberti*) and the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) (Delibes & Hiraldo 1981). Humans have also taken advantage of rabbit abundance: over one million hunters generate an estimated US$ 1.2×10^9 annually in Spain (Villafuerte *et al*. 1998). However, in the last 50 years wild rabbit populations have undergone a sharp decline caused mainly by the appearance of two viral diseases, myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) (Queney *et al*. 2000). Hunters and conservationists alike are concerned.

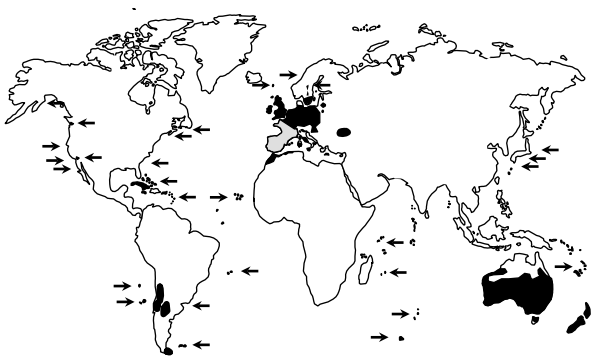

Fig. 1 Current distribution of European wild rabbits. Arrows indicate small areas where rabbits have been introduced. Natural populations marked in grey and introduced populations in black.

Besides spreading naturally into other European countries, rabbits have been distributed world-wide by man for food and hunting (Fig. 1). In many areas rabbits have become a real pest, multiplying 'like rabbits' in an optimal environment and with the lack of effective predators (Holland 1999). In Australia, rabbits cause erosion, land degradation and loss of native plants (Fenner & Fantini 1999) and rabbit control and agricultural losses cost US$ 310 million annually (Robinson *et al*. 1997). In Britain, crop damage is estimated at over US$ 170 million annually (R. C. Trout, personal communication).

New rabbit management programmes: Australian vs. Spanish GM viruses

Given the two distinct lines of research for the management of wild rabbits, conservation and pest control, it is intriguing that, for each, a solution is being sought through the genetic manipulation of the myxoma virus (MV) originally derived from cottontail rabbits (*Sylvilagus* spp.) in the Americas.

In trying to deal with diseases in wild rabbits in southwest Europe hunters and conservationists have increasingly turned to molecular technology. Immunization of rabbits against myxomatosis has long been possible using cell culture-attenuated MV strains. However, during the last few years, researchers have explored ways of developing recombinant vaccines that express the RHD virus (RHDV) capsid protein. These include the use of baculovirus (Laurent *et al*. 1994), poxivirus (Fischer *et al*. 1997), plant viruses such as potyvirus (Fernández-Fernández *et al*. 2001), or plants (Castañón *et al*. 1999). Most importantly, Bertagnoli *et al*. (1996) produced a recombinant vaccine based on an attenuated MV that expressed RHDV capsid protein to protect simultaneously against both diseases. Most of the systems listed rely on direct inoculation of individual rabbits, and consequently are not suited for large-scale wild rabbit vaccination. However, Spanish scientists have recently developed an alternative GM virus, based on an attenuated but transmissible field strain of MV, genetically modified to provide protection against RHD as well. It is capable of horizontal transmission by contact between rabbits; thus, only a few rabbits need to be initially vaccinated to achieve immunization of the greater population (Bárcena *et al*. 2000). The Spanish National Committee of Biosafety authorized the experimental test release of this recombinant on a Mediterranean island, Isla del Aire, to assess its potency and safety. Infected rabbits produced antibodies against both viruses, and horizontal transmission to about 50% of uninoculated rabbits in the field was observed during the short trial period (Torres *et al*. 2001). Scientists are hopeful of widespread release soon.

The same concept of natural spread of virus to affect rabbit populations on a wide scale is also being considered to control rabbits. One initiative of the Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre (PAC-CRC) in Australia is the use of GM MV to reduce rabbit fertility through transmissible (virally vectored) immunocontraception. This concept was proposed at the Conference on Fertility Control in Wildlife held in Melbourne in 1990. The idea was to develop recombinant viral vectors that can transmit immunogens to induce a specific immune response in the target animal against reproductive proteins. Specific and contagious viruses, in this case MV, could disseminate the contraceptive agent into the population (Tyndale-Biscoe 1991). The recombinant MV produces the rabbit zona pellucida glycoprotein B and initial experiments have induced temporary infertility in 25% of female rabbits (Kerr *et al*. 1999).

Impact of GM rabbit viruses: the world-wide spread of MV and RHD

While both GM viruses could be valuable in managing rabbits in the countries where they are being developed, the problem is that they may cause an entirely unwanted effect in another country, and the history of rabbit viruses shows clearly that they are well suited to global spread.

Myxomatosis was first recorded in Montevideo, in 1896 (Fig. 2a) when it was spread from the native South American cottontail rabbit, *Sylvilagus brasiliensis* to European rabbits. Soon after its discovery, MV was suggested as a possible tool for the control of rabbits in Australia. During the 1920s–1940s, there was great debate over the use of MV to control rabbits, but it was nevertheless legally released in Australia in 1950 (Ratcliffe *et al*. 1952). The success of myxomatosis in Australia led a French landowner to release the virus illegally in 1952, and subsequently myxomatosis spread naturally through the rest of Europe (Muñoz 1960; Sellers 1987). Myxomatosis was illegally

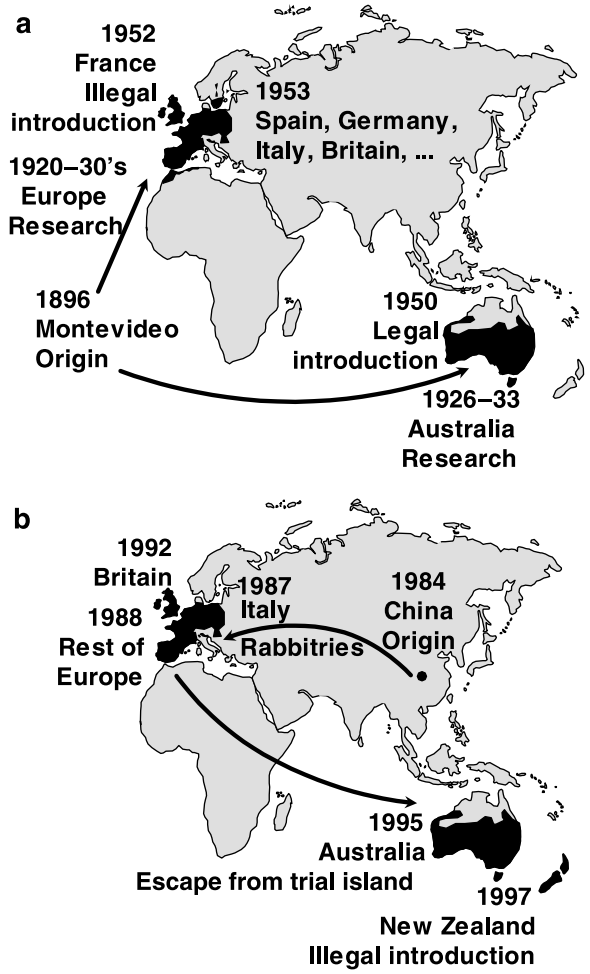

Fig. 2 (a) Origin and expansion of myxoma virus. (b) Origin and expansion of rabbit haemorrhagic disease. (Virus spread in rabbitries outside the wild rabbit distribution has not been shown.)

used by Argentinean landowners to control the spread of wild rabbits and was illegally distributed in Britain (Fenner & Fantini 1999).

Myxomatosis initially reduced British wild rabbit populations by 99% (Flowerdew *et al*. 1992). In Australia MV was also highly effective at first but attenuated into less virulent strains and rabbits developed genetic resistance to the disease so that today there is a dynamic balance between virulence and host resistance in which myxomatosis kills between 40 and 60% of infected susceptible rabbits (Kerr & Best 1998). This also explains why rabbits were relatively rare in Britain for about 25 years (Lloyd 1981) and why MV continues to regulate their populations today (Trout *et al*. 1992).

MV has caused major declines in native wild rabbit populations of southwest Europe. In Spain, it resulted in a reduction of hunting activity (Muñoz 1960), and negatively affected endangered predators (Delibes & Hiraldo 1981). MV also had negative environmental (Flowerdew *et al*. 1992) and economic impacts (Fenner & Fantini 1999).

In 1984, a new disease, RHD [also known as rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD) in Australasia], appeared in rabbitries in China (Fig. 2b). In 1987 it appeared in Italy and broke out simultaneously in several other European countries, transmitted largely through trade in domestic rabbits. It quickly expanded into wild rabbit populations, even crossing the English Channel into Britain by 1992 (Chasey & Trout 1995). In 1995, before it was fully evaluated as a new rabbit control agent in Australia, RHD escaped from an experimental trial on a quarantined island and crossed 5 km of sea to mainland Australia where it soon became established (Kovaliski 1998). In 1997 it was illegally introduced in New Zealand (O'Keefe *et al*. 1999).

In Australia, the initial effectiveness of RHD was variable, with the highest levels in arid and semiarid areas where mortality reached 95%, leading to the collapse of rabbit commerce (Fenner & Fantini 1999). Meanwhile, RHD had sharply reduced native wild rabbit populations in southwest Europe. The first RHD epizootics caused mortality rates between 70 and 90% in domestic rabbits, and between 50 and 60% in wild rabbits (Villafuerte *et al*. 1994), although Marchandeau *et al*. (1998) detected mortality rates up to 80% in wild rabbits. In Spain, few populations have recovered to prior levels, directly affecting hunting activity and endangered predators (Fernández 1993; Villafuerte *et al*. 1998; Martínez & Calvo 2001).

A single pathogenic RHDV serotype seems to exist to date (Asgari *et al*. 1999). But a nonpathogenic rabbit calicivirus related to RHDV has been described in domestic rabbits (Capucci *et al*. 1996). Besides, seropositive rabbits, apparently carrying antibodies raised against a related nonvirulent calicivirus and protected from severe RHD, have been found in Europe (Trout *et al*. 1997), Australia (Nagesha *et al*. 2000) and New Zealand (O'Keefe *et al*. 1999). Mutation of an avirulent form of the calicivirus is a possible explanation for the origin of RHD (Rodak *et al*. 1990).

Can viruses be contained within target populations or distinct geographical areas?

For both the Spanish GM virus, which vaccinates rabbits against myxomatosis and RHD, and the Australian virus, aimed at reducing the fertility of rabbits, it is envisaged that active viruses that retain their capacity to spread would be most useful. This is important because it would not be necessary to vaccinate every rabbit. A naturally spreading vaccine could be introduced into some rabbits then spread to a greater part of the population. However, it is precisely this characteristic that would make them so difficult to contain.

The ready spread of both MV and RHDV raises many questions about our ability to contain such viruses. Clearly landholders interested in reducing rabbit problems deliberately spread MV and RHDV. There is also a risk, as happened with RHDV in Australia, of underestimating the role of insect vectors in transmitting the virus over very long distances. Sea birds have also been implicated in the spread of both MV and RHDV. It is therefore quite conceivable that recombinant MV could be used in areas where such risks were not fully considered. Indeed, the most recent trials with a GM MV were carried out on Isla del Aire, only 1 km offshore from one of the larger Balearic Islands and where there is a seagull colony and regular hunting activity.

Other issues also need to be fully understood. These include the potential for interaction between GM viruses and field strains of MV (Tyndale-Biscoe 1994) including genetic exchange between GM viruses and wild viruses which may have different virulence or greater ability to compete. It is also necessary to understand and counter any potential impact of GM viruses on *Sylvilagus* spp., the original hosts of MV.

Although such questions are being considered with the idea of developing safeguards in the GM viruses, the idea of using actively spreading viruses remains problematic. As we have seen, MV and RHDV are difficult to contain within distinct geographical areas. It is essential to ask whether it would be possible to prevent the potential for spread of GM rabbit viruses into inappropriate regions through currently available mechanisms such as international controls and regulations.

What regulations cover research and release of GMOs at national levels?

During the 1970s many countries launched biotechnology policies and management plans. Most distinguish between contained GMO work and deliberate releases into the environment with separate legislation. A national authority generally regulates approval for release following risk assessment that may include scientific and ethical considerations as well as public consultation.

For example, in 1990, the European Union allowed for releases of GMOs through Directive 90/219/EEC (EEC 1990). Within that framework a national authority could evaluate risks. This directive resolved the problems on a national level but created a problem on the European level, as other Member States could not discuss the decision. In April 2001 a new Directive 2001/18/EC was adopted (EC 2001), whereby the release of a GMO in any country needs the agreement of the European Commission and the rest of the member states. The final date for Member States to comply with this Directive is October 2002 (although it has not yet been adopted in Spain). Until this date, GMO applications (i.e. recombinant vaccine MV) may be subject to the Directive 90/220/EEC.

In New Zealand, the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act covers the importation, development, field-testing and the intentional release of GMOs into the environment (http://www.hsno.govt.nz/). For GM viruses, an assessment would obviously be made in terms of their capacity to cause disease. But, it is not clear whether international risks or consequences are considered by this legislation.

Gene technology was subject to voluntary assessment in Australia from 1975 until June 2001. Responsibilities were held by different committees, but their recommendations were not enforced. In 1997 Australia began preparing new legislation to tighten assessment. Called the Gene Technology Act 2000, it commenced operation in June 2001 (Radke 2001). For the release of GMO into the environment, the Gene Technology Regulator may consult international experts. The Gene Technology Regulator can impose conditions to limit the spread or persistence of the GMO in the environment. However, the release may be approved, claiming isolation distances or physical barriers to other continents. Currently, research on modified MV done by the Pest Animal Control CRC and Australian National University is licensed as a dealing not involving intentional release into the environment.

International agreements on research and release of GMOs

International organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the World Health Organization, or the Convention on Biological Diversity, try to unify national regulations. However, international organizations only develop recommendations and guidelines, and these may or may not necessarily be adopted by individual countries.

The OECD seeks to ensure safety, develop effective regulatory oversight and facilitate trade in biotechnology products between the 29 member countries. The OECD has organized international meetings on GMOs, mainly on modified food and crops. Similarly, the WTO has developed the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) to protect animals and plants from pests and diseases and GMOs were discussed during SPS Committee meetings in November 2001. The OIE informs countries of the occurrence of animal diseases, harmonizes regulations for trade in animals or animal products, and develops recommendations to prevent disease spread.

The Convention on Biological Diversity adopted an agreement known as the Cartagena Protocol of Biosafety in

January 2000, to protect biological diversity from potential risks posed by GMOs. It established a procedure specifically focusing on cross-border movement of GMOs in which risks are assessed by national authorities but final decisions regarding the importation or release of GMOs must be communicated to the Convention. By November 2001 only eight countries had ratified the Cartagena Protocol, but neither countries of the European Community nor Australia and New Zealand were signatories.

We conclude that, while there are some regulations focused on the research and release of GMOs there appear to be few agreements that specifically address safe research, handling and release of GMOs at an international level. Moreover, regulations are very general, or focus on safety issues regarding GM food trade and importation, and their effectiveness is weak, as shown by the discovery of GM crops growing in areas where permission had not been granted (Dalton 2001; Jayaraman 2001). Regulations for nontradable GMOs or GM viruses seem to be even less well considered.

Conclusion

Applied research for the management of wild rabbits in different parts of the world has opposing goals. This may lead to the creation and release of antagonistic GM viruses, one aimed at conservation, the other aimed at rabbit control. The use of virally vectored immunocontraception to control pests is currently being investigated for a number of different species (Tyndale-Biscoe 1991), including possums (Sutherland *et al*. 1996), foxes (Holland 1999), cats (Courchamp & Cornell 2000) and rodents (Ylönen 2001). Bearing in mind the facility with which viruses spread or can be intentionally spread and the difficulty of virus control in the field (Fenner & Fantini 1999) mere legislation is not enough. To avoid unexpected effects of the introduction of new GMOs for wildlife management, it is essential to get international agreement and co-ordination in the development and use of such strategies.

It is essential that research on rabbit control and conservation try to achieve realistic management goals where risks are minimized (Angulo 2001). Certainly, Australian and Spanish scientists follow the guidelines established in their respective countries (Robinson *et al*. 1997; Bárcena *et al*. 2000), but a greater effort should be made to promote the international communication between scientists and national and international authorities (Tyndale-Biscoe 1994). Evaluating the possible impact of release of GMOs into the environment requires expertise in many scientific disciplines. Between them, molecular biologists, veterinarians and ecologists must consider the consequences of their decisions, beyond their own country.

This paper takes a step in that direction by pointing out some potential impacts of GMOs being developed for managing wild rabbit populations. Past studies have focused on general ecological and evolutionary aspects (Tiedje *et al*. 1989) or particular legal and ethical issues (Tyndale-Biscoe 1994), but none has provided a thorough assessment of the risks. We make no specific recommendations about a course of action that can be taken other than to list some questions that might be raised in international scientific or regulatory meetings. These include asking: (i) whether accidental or illegal spread could be prevented by existing international controls or conventions that regulate cross-border GMO movements; (ii) what international scientific structures should be established to enable the rational development of GMOs for wildlife management; (iii) how can international regulations on GMO releases be designed to be acceptable to and implemented within individual countries?

In essence, there is a need for scientific and regulatory structures that guide the development and release of GMOs by (i) evaluating their potential to escape and establish abroad; (ii) assessing whether or not risks are internationally acceptable at scientific, economic and environmental levels; and (iii) developing specific regulation of their use.

In the meantime, ecologists, veterinarians and molecular biologists must keep an international perspective on their work and devise measures to reduce the risk of unwanted ecological and economic impacts, of the kind illustrated here for viruses being designed to manage wild rabbits.

Acknowledgements

Funds were provided by Junta de Andalucía-CSIC (ref.2413/99/M00) and the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology. Xim Cerdá encouraged us to write this paper, and with Marc Artois and Roger Trout provided useful comments and insights. Thanks go also to Ana Angulo, Carlos Calvete, Iván Gómez-Mestre, Christian Gortázar, Javier Juste, Sacramento Moreno, Antonio Tugores, Ramón Soriguer and Rafael Villafuerte. We are grateful to Tony Peacock, Robert Wayne and two unknown referees whose comments greatly improved the manuscript.

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This review stems from Elena Angulo's PhD thesis on the ecological factors influencing abundance and distribution of wild rabbit populations in Spain. This work showed that diseases were among the most important limiting factors. Brian Cooke is a Principal Research Scientist with CSIRO. He has been involved with research on the biological control of wild rabbits in Australia for 35 years, working mainly with rabbit haemorrhagic disease over the last 14 years.