Dolphin Morbillivirus in Eurasian Otters, Italy

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We report biomolecular evidence of dolphin morbillivirus in 4 wild Eurasian otters (Lutra lutra) from southern Italy; 2 animals showed simultaneous immunohistochemical reactivity against morbilliviral antigen. These cases add further concern and support to the progressively expanding host range of dolphin morbillivirus in the western Mediterranean Sea.

The genus *Morbillivirus* comprises several lympho-epithelio-neurotropic, highly pathogenic RNA viruses of domestic and wild vertebrates, including aquatic mammals. Among them, cetacean morbillivirus (CeMV) has been responsible since the 1980s for dramatic epidemics in free-ranging cetaceans worldwide (1). Specifically, the CeMV strain termed dolphin morbillivirus (DMV) has caused at least 4 unusual mortality events (UME) among striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) in the western Mediterranean Sea and, to a lesser extent, long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) and other wild cetaceans from the same region (1–3).

We report evidence of DMV infection in 4 wild Eurasian otters (*Lutra lutra*) from southern Italy (Apulia and Basilicata regions). The animals, all adult females, belonged to a group of 7 individuals found dead at Parco Nazionale del Cilento, a large national park that extends to the coastline of southwestern Italy. The animals underwent necropsy at Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Puglia e della Basilicata (Foggia, Italy) during 2016 and 2017, according to an official agreement between the institute and the park aimed at assessing the health and conservation status of the otter population.

Within a multidisciplinary approach framework, we conducted in-depth histopathologic, microbiologic, parasitologic, and ecotoxicologic analyses on the 7 otters, along with biomolecular (reverse transcription PCR [RT-PCR]) and immunohistochemical (IHC) investigations for *Morbillivirus* spp. After using a technique amplifying a highly conserved fragment of the *Morbillivirus* nucleoprotein (NP) gene (4), we applied 2 additional methods aimed at detecting DMV-specific hemagglutinin (HA) (5) and NP gene sequences (6) for more detailed analysis. To increase the biomolecular results’ reliability, we performed all the extraction, amplification, and sequencing steps in 3 different laboratories. We also conducted the histopathologic and IHC analyses in 3 different laboratories. We also conducted the histopathologic and IHC analyses in 3 different

References


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Figure. Evidence of dolphin morbillivirus infection in Eurasian otters (Lutra lutra), southwestern Italy. A) Comparison of nucleoprotein gene amplification products from infected otters, obtained by reverse transcription PCR. A specific band at the expected molecular weight of 287 bp is shown. Lane 1, molecular weight marker (Trakkit 100bp DNA Ladder; Invitrogen, http://www.thermofisher.com); lane 2, positive control (lung tissue from an infected striped dolphin, Stenella coeruleoalba); lane 3, negative control (distilled water); lanes 4–7, samples from morbillivirus-positive Eurasian otters: LL-290, lung (lane 4); LL-291, kidney (lane 5); LL-3380, lung (lane 6); LL-7318, lung (lane 7). B) Mayer’s hematoxylin counterstain of lung tissue shows marked and widespread immunohistochemical labeling for morbillivirus antigen (dark areas), particularly evident at the level of vascular walls and endothelial cells and, to a lesser extent, of alveolar epithelial cells (morphologically consistent, or not, with hyperplastic type II pneumocytes) as well as of thickened alveolar septa. Scale bar indicates 100 μm.

In conclusion, we identified DMV infection among Eurasian otters in southwestern Italy, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The likely source and mode of transmission of DMV to these otters was a morbillivirus-positive dolphin. Our findings emphasize that marine mammals are susceptible to morbilliviruses and should be considered as potential hosts for DMV. The regular presence of morbilliviruses in marine mammals highlights the need for comprehensive surveillance and epidemiological studies to better understand the epidemiology and transmission dynamics of these viruses in aquatic environments.

**References**

western Mediterranean Sea. The effect of DMV infection on the health and conservation of the threatened Eurasian otter populations warrants further investigation.

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Little Evidence of Zika Virus Infection in Wild Long-Tailed Macaques, Peninsular Malaysia

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We tested a sample of 234 wild long-tailed macaques (Macaca fascicularis) trapped in Peninsular Malaysia in 2009, 2010, and 2016 for Zika virus RNA and antibodies. None were positive for RNA, and only 1.3% were seropositive for neutralizing antibodies. Long-tailed macaques are unlikely to be reservoirs for Zika virus in Malaysia.

Zika virus, first isolated from a rhesus macaque (Macaca mulatta) in the Zika Forest in Uganda, reemerged in the Pacific Islands and Americas in 2015 and caused unprecedented outbreaks associated with serious congenital syndromes (1). The role of animal reservoirs for Zika virus is unclear, although in Africa, nonhuman primates (NHPs) are suspected to be involved in maintaining a sylvatic cycle, as they are for 2 other flaviviruses (yellow fever and dengue viruses) also transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes. The presence of a sylvatic cycle for Zika virus in Africa is supported by a seroprevalence of 0%–16% in African green monkeys ( Chlorocebus aethiops ) and vervet monkeys ( Chlorocebus aethiops )