Does air-breathing meet metabolic demands of the juvenile snakehead, *Channa argus*, in multiple conditions

Yongli Li¹,*, Xiao Lv¹,*, Jing Zhou², Chenchen Shi¹, Ting Duan¹ and Yiping Luo¹‡

**ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study was to examine how the respiratory metabolism of the snakehead *Channa argus* changed when it shifted from breathing water to breathing air, and how increased metabolic demands caused by temperature, feeding, and exhaustive exercise affect its survival in air. The results demonstrated that the oxygen consumption rate (MO₂) of the snakehead was lower for aerial respiration than aquatic respiration by 12.1, 24.5 and 20.4% at 20, 25, and 30°C, respectively. Survival time was significantly shortened with increasing temperature and was negatively correlated with the resting MO₂ in air (MO₂Air). No obvious feeding metabolic response was observed in the snakeheads fed at 1% and 3% body mass levels while breathing air. The maximum MO₂Air of the snakehead after exhaustive exercise was significantly higher than the resting MO₂Air of the control group. The results suggest that the snakehead could survive out of water by breathing air for varying lengths of time, depending on ambient temperature and metabolic demand. Additionally, some degree of metabolic depression occurs in the snakehead when breathing air. The metabolic demand associated with exercise in the snakehead, but not that associated with feeding, can be supported by its capacity for breathing air to some extent.

**KEY WORDS:** Oxygen consumption, Fish, Metabolic demand, Air-breathing

**INTRODUCTION**

The snakehead *Channa argus* is a species of bimodal breathing fish. It can breathe air at the water’s surface when water oxygen concentrations are reduced (Ishimatsu and Itazawa, 1981) through accessory air-breathing with a suprabranchial organ (Ishimatsu and Itazawa, 1981; Graham, 1997; Lefèvre et al., 2014). It has been reported that approximately 60% of the routine metabolism of the snakehead can be attributed to breathing air at the surface (Itazawa and Ishimatsu, 1981). This species is widely distributed in China. It is found throughout a broad temperature range of 0-30°C (Liu et al., 1998) and has recently become an invasive aquatic species in Europe and North America (Courtenay and Williams, 2004, Lapointe et al., 2013). It has been reported that the snakehead can move overland to more comfortable aquatic habitats (Courtenay and Williams, 2004) and may survive in air for several days within a temperature range of 10-15°C (Nagata and Nakata, 1988). As an invasive species, the terrestrial survival of the snakehead under extreme conditions may be of important ecological relevance. It could be assumed that the terrestrial survival of the snakehead is related to aerial respiratory capacity. However, no experimental data on the exact survival time of the snakehead in air has been documented to date. Therefore, the authors were interested in exploring how aerial respiration contributes to the survival of the snakehead in air.

**RESULTS**

After moving from the water phase to the gas phase, the MO₂ of the snakehead fell by 12.1, 24.5 and 20.4% at 20, 25, and 30°C, respectively. The resting MO₂Air was significantly lower than the resting MO₂Water at each temperature (<0.0001). Both the resting MO₂Water and the resting MO₂Air increased with increasing temperature (Fig. 1). Q₁₀Water tended to decrease as temperature increased, while Q₁₀Air did not decrease (Table 1). The survival time was significantly shortened with increasing temperature (<0.0001) (Table 1), and survival time was negatively correlated with the resting MO₂Air (n=40, r²=0.0432, P<0.0001) (Fig. 2).
No obvious metabolic response was observed in the air-breathing snakeheads based on feeding behavior. The post-feeding MO$_2$Air of the snakehead was lower than the resting MO$_2$Water (Fig. 3), and no significant difference was observed among the three feeding levels (Table 2). The survival times of the snakehead fed at the 1% and 3% body mass levels were shorter than that of the control ($P<0.018$) (Table 2). The dry matter digestion rate was 57.6% for the snakehead fed at 1% and was significantly higher (30.3%) than the digestion rate of the fish fed at 3% body mass ($P=0.004$) (Table 2).

The MO$_2$Water of the snakeheads after exhaustive exercise tended to increase to a peak value higher than the resting MO$_2$Water ($P<0.0001$). However, only a slight increase in MO$_2$Air was observed in the snakehead after exhaustive exercise (Fig. 4). The resting MO$_2$Water was positively correlated with the maximum MO$_2$Water of the snakehead after exhaustive exercise ($r=0.644$, $P=0.002$) (Fig. 5) but was not correlated with the maximal MO$_2$Air after exhaustive exercise. The maximum MO$_2$Air of the snakehead after exhaustive exercise was significantly higher than the MO$_2$Air in the control group ($P=0.001$). Recovery time for MO$_2$Water was 98 min, which was significantly longer than the recovery time for MO$_2$Air ($P<0.0001$) (Table 3).

**DISCUSSION**

Our results showed that the snakehead could survive out of water by breathing air for varying lengths of time depending on ambient temperature and metabolic demand. The resting MO$_2$Water was close to that previously reported for the snakehead at the same temperature in water (Wang et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2017). The resting MO$_2$Water increased with increasing temperature, consistent with the previous studies on this species (Liu et al., 2000), and with the general metabolic response of fish to temperature change (Jobling, 1981; Luo and Xie, 2008, 2009). Q10Water decreased at higher temperatures (Table 1), suggesting a slower increase in metabolism at higher temperatures. Similarly, the snakeheads’ resting MO$_2$Air also increased with increasing temperature (Fig. 1), which suggests that the capacity of the snakehead to breathe air is enhanced to some extent at higher temperatures. However, one interesting result of our study was that the Q10Air of the snakehead did not decrease as temperature increased (Table 1), indicating no significant limitation of oxygen availability in air at higher temperatures. This could be explained by the fact that oxygen content and diffusivity in air is higher than in water and can be sustained with shifts in temperature (Fusi et al., 2016). Therefore, the shorter survival time of the snakehead in the air at warmer temperatures may not be primarily due to the imbalance of oxygen supply and demand. Other factors may affect its aerial survival, such as an increase in endogenous ammonia content (Gordon et al., 1969; Chew et al., 2003), and uncompensated respiratory acidosis by metabolically produced CO$_2$ accumulation (Ishimatsu and Itazawa, 1981, 1983) which has deleterious effects on the bodies of fish (Ip et al., 2001; Walsh, 1998).

The resting MO$_2$ of the snakehead decreased as it shifted from breathing water to air regardless of temperature, suggesting that metabolic depression is occurring to some extent. This could be a strategy to reduce metabolic demand and prolong survival in air. In fact, survival time when breathing air was negatively correlated with resting MO$_2$Air (Fig. 2), demonstrating the remarkable survival advantages of metabolic depression for the snakehead. Alternatively, another possible explanation for the lower MO$_2$ in air could be the reduced cost of ventilation in air for the greater oxygen availability and the lower viscosity compared to in water. The decrease in resting MO$_2$ of the snakehead after moving from water to air was smaller at 20°C than at higher temperatures (Table 1). This could be due to its lower metabolic demand at lower temperatures and suggests that the snakehead’s accessorial respiration contributes more to its aerobic metabolism in cold environments.

**Table 1. Oxygen consumption parameters for the snakehead in water and in air at different temperatures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body mass (g)</td>
<td>3.30±0.05</td>
<td>3.35±0.05</td>
<td>3.44±0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resting MO$_2$Water (mg O$_2$ kg$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>197.7±5.0$^a$</td>
<td>280.2±6.6$^b$</td>
<td>329.8±7.9$^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resting MO$_2$Air (mg O$_2$ kg$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>171.9±4.5$^a$</td>
<td>210.1±3.2$^b$</td>
<td>260.8±5.3$^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease of MO$_2$ from water to air (%)</td>
<td>12.1±3.8$^a$</td>
<td>24.5±2.0$^b$</td>
<td>30.3±2.6$^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10Water</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10Air</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival time (h)</td>
<td>23.9±0.1$^a$</td>
<td>21.6±0.9$^b$</td>
<td>12.1±3.6$^a$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are presented as the mean±s.e.m. $^a$, $^b$, $^c$Values in each row without a common superscript are significantly different ($P<0.05$).
An apparent feeding metabolic response has been reported in the snakehead in water fed with the same meal size as in the present study (Wang et al., 2012). A meal size of 1 to 3% can induce a factorial metabolic scope of 1.68 to 1.84 and the feeding metabolic response can last for 14.8 to 23.0 h (Wang et al., 2012). However, our results showed neither an apparent feeding metabolic response in the snakehead when in air (Fig. 3) nor any significant differences between feeding levels in the post-feeding MO2Air (Table 2). This suggests that the snakehead’s accessorial respiration can sustain only the basal metabolic demand but cannot meet the extra demand of the feeding metabolism. It has been proposed that a small feeding metabolic response may also be related to weak food digestion (Secor, 2009). Indeed, only a small amount of food was digested by the snakehead in our study (Table 2), which has contributed to its limited postprandial metabolic response when breathing air.

Previous studies have observed that the MO2Water of fish after exhaustive exercise generally increases and reaches its peak rapidly (Hicks and Bennett, 2004; Fu et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012), and this was also observed in our study (Fig. 4). The MO2Air of the snakehead after exhaustive exercise was not notably higher than the pre-exercise level but was higher than the MO2Air of the control group, suggesting that the metabolic capacity of the snakehead can still up-regulate to some extent when it is facing excess metabolic demand for activity while in air. In this study, individuals with a higher resting MO2Water had a higher maximum MO2Water after exercise, but the maximum MO2Air after exercise was not necessarily higher (Fig. 5). This indicates that the aerobic capacity of the snakehead may reach its upper limit when breathing air, apparently narrowing the differences among individuals.

In conclusion, the juvenile snakeheads could survive out of water by breathing air for 15-24 h within the temperature range of 20-30°C. Additionally, some degree of metabolic depression occurs in the snakehead when in air. The metabolic demand associated with exercise of the snakehead but not that associated with feeding can be supported by the fish’s air-breathing capacity to some extent.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Experimental animals

Juvenile snakeheads were obtained from the Huashan hatchery in Guangdong, China and were held in a rearing system for 2 weeks prior to experiment. The fish were fed to satiation twice daily (11:30 and 18:30) with cutlets of loach Misgurnus anguillicaudatus with viscera, head and tail
removed. During acclimation, the photoperiod was 12 h light:12 h dark and the water temperature was 25.0±1°C. One third of the water was refreshed with aerated water each day, and the dissolved oxygen was kept above 7 mg O₂ l⁻¹ using a continuous aeration. The ammonia-nitrogen concentration was kept below 0.015 mg l⁻¹. Animals were handled according to the ethical requirements for animal care of the Fisheries Science Institution of Southwest University of China, and the study followed the required standards for environmental and housing facilities for laboratory animals in China (Gb/T14925-2001).

**Measurement of MO₂**

MO₂ₐ₃₅₆₇₈ and MO₂₉₁₀ were determined using a flow-through respirometer consisting of multiple plexiglass chambers immersed in a temperature-controlled water bath. The chamber (30 ml) was composed of connecting inlet and outlet triple valves and could be easily switched from a flow-through water phase to a closed air phase. The dissolved oxygen concentration was measured at the outlet by a fiber optic sensor system (Microx TX3, PresSen - Precision Sensing GmbH Regensburg, Germany). Before data was collected, the water flow rate was adjusted to ensure that the dissolved oxygen in the outlet water was approximately 1 mg O₂ l⁻¹. Animals were handled according to the ethical standards for laboratory animals in China.

**Results**

**Effect of temperature**

The three test temperatures used were 20, 25, and 30°C, and variations in these temperatures were less than 0.2°C. At each temperature, 14 snakehead individuals (body mass approx. 3 g) were treated for 2 weeks. Other than temperature, housing conditions were the same as in the previous experimental period. At the end of temperature treatment, the fish were weighed individually after fasting for 24 h and were placed into the respiratory chamber for an additional 24 h. The MO₂ₐ₃₅₆₇₈ was measured at 1 h intervals for 8 h, and the average value was taken as the resting MO₂ₐ₃₅₆₇₈ for that individual. The respiratory chamber was switched to the air phase for MO₂₉₁₀ measurement. The MO₂₉₁₀ was measured at 2 h intervals for 24 h or until the fish died and was averaged to calculate the resting MO₂₉₁₀ for each individual. The survival duration of each individual was recorded during this process. The final numbers of fish tested using this process were 14, 14 and 12 for 20, 25 and 30°C, respectively. The temperature quotient (Q₁₀) was calculated as: $Q_{10} = (MO₂_a/MO₂_b)^{10/(T_a-T_b)}$, where MO₂ₐ and MO₂₉₁₀ are the average metabolic rates at temperatures $T_a$ and $T_b$, respectively.

**Effects of feeding**

After fasting for 24 h, the fish were weighed and placed into the respiratory chamber for 24 h of acclimation. The water temperature was kept at 25°C. The sample sizes were 12 for the water recovery group, 13 for the air recovery group, and 9 for the control group. Data are presented as mean±s.e.m. The values with symbols were different with pre-exercise levels of the fish recovery in water (asterisks), recovery in air (filled pentacles), and resting in air (open pentacles) by t-test, respectively (P<0.05).

Fig. 4. Changes of aerial oxygen consumption of the snakehead post exhaustive exercise at 25°C. The sample sizes were 12 for the water recovery group, 13 for the air recovery group, and 9 for the control group. Data are presented as mean±s.e.m. The values with symbols were different with pre-exercise levels of the fish recovery in water (asterisks), recovery in air (filled pentacles), and resting in air (open pentacles) by t-test, respectively (P<0.05).
25.0±0.2°C. The three feeding levels tested were 0% (control group), 1% and 3% of body mass, since the same post-feeding maximum metabolic rate was observed in the snakehead fed at 3% body mass and at the largest level of 5% body mass (Wang et al., 2012). After determining resting MO2Water, the snakeheads were fed with loach cutlets using a gavage protocol as described by Li et al. (2010). MO2Air was then measured at 2 h intervals for 24 h or until the fish died. The averaged value was recorded as the post-feeding MO2Air. The final numbers of fish tested using this process were 14, 24 h or until the fish died. The averaged value was recorded as the post-exercise MO2Water or MO2Air during recovery. For the water recovery group, the exhausted fish was placed back into the respiratory chamber without water, and MO2Air was measured at 15, 30, 60, 90 and 120 min after exercise. The control group did not undergo exhaustive exercise and MO2Air was determined after MO2Water was measured. The final numbers of fish tested using this process were 12 for the water recovery group, 13 for the air recovery group, and 9 for the control group.

**Statistical analysis**

Experimental results were calculated using Microsoft Excel 2003 (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA), and statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 11.5 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Parameters among groups were compared using one-way ANOVA followed by an LSD test. A t-test was used to compare within group values measured before and after feeding, and before and after exercise. An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to analyze the relationship between MO2 values and survival time. The relationship between resting MO2 and maximum MO2 was analyzed using Pearson’s correlation. Differences were considered significant when P<0.05. Data are presented as the mean±s.e.m.

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**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing or financial interests.

**Author contributions**


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