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Application of an indirect ELISA and a PCR technique to detect grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) adulteration in the fish market

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Abstract

An indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and a multiplex polymerase chain reaction (PCR) procedure has been applied for the detection of grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) mislabelling in the fish market. An indirect ELISA (microtiter plate format) using two monoclonal antibodies (3D12 and 1A4) has been assayed in this study. Moreover, the multiplex PCR has been performed by using species-specific primers of the 5S rDNA gene for the rapid authentication of grouper. In this work, 70 commercial fish fillets samples collected from local markets and supermarkets, which were labelled as grouper, have been analysed by these techniques; 12 out of 70 samples were confirmed to be grouper. The PCR technique permitted the detection of the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) in the commercial fish fillets while it was not possible using ELISA. These results suggested that both ELISA and PCR may provide specific and reliable tools for the detection of grouper adulteration, and an accurate implementation of the traceability for successful regulatory food controls.

Keywords: grouper, adulteration, multiplex PCR, ELISA

Introduction

Fresh and frozen fish fillets, where only a portion of flesh is available, are difficult to identify since many of the distinguishing morphological features are no longer detectable. This opens the possibility of fraudulent adulteration and substitution of the expected fish species with others of less value.

In this context, grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) is a highly appreciated and expensive fish in the Spanish fish market. Due to its high cost, popularity and demand, grouper fillets are subjected to substitution using cheaper fish species such as Nile Perch (*Lates niloticus*). Also, grouper can be substituted by closely related species such as wreck fish (*Polyprion americanus*); this fish species is renamed as grouper to make it sound more appealing to consumers. Therefore, analytical approaches for the specific identification of commercial fish species are required for detection of inappropriately labelled products (Woolfe and Primrose 2004).

Different protein-based methods have been reviewed for fish species identification, such as electrophoretic, chromatographic and immunological techniques (Dreyfuss et al. 1997; Knuutinen and Harjula 1998; Berrini et al. 2006; Martinez et al. 2007). Nevertheless, in food analysis, the Enzyme-Linked ImmunoSorbent Assay (ELISA) has been the most widely used technique for regulatory purposes in detecting food authenticity because of its specificity, simplicity and sensitivity, among other advantages (Asensio et al. 2008).

 However, work relating to fish species identification is scarce, partly due to the variety of fish species that are commercialized. To date, enzyme immunoassays have been used for rock shrimp (An et al. 1990), sardines (Taylor and Jones 1992), red snapper (Huang et al. 1995), flat fish (Céspedes et al. 1999), or grouper identification (Asensio et al. 2003a), among others.

In recent years, significant attention has been turning towards DNA-based approaches, which have proven to be reliable, sensitive and fast for many aspects of food authentication. Among them, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) based techniques are undoubtedly the most common genetic methods used for tracing the species origin in food (Lockley and Bardsley 2000). PCR-based methods commonly used for fish species identification include random amplified polymorphic DNA (RAPD) (Bartfai et al. 2003), PCR-restriction fragment length polymorphism (PCR-RFLP) (Santaclara et al. 2006), PCR-single strand conformational polymorphism (PCR-SSCP) (Colombo et al. 2005), multiplex-PCR (Infante et al. 2006) and PCR lab-on-a-chip (Dooley et al. 2005), among others.

On the basis of this information, this paper reports the application of two alternatives for the detection of inappropriately labelled grouper fillets in the marketplace: a multiplex PCR technique relying on the 5S rDNA gene (Asensio et al. 2001), and an indirect ELISA assay that uses two monoclonal antibodies against grouper muscle proteins (Asensio et al. 2003a; Asensio et al. 2003b). Both methodologies provide a specific, sensitive and reliable means to detect adulteration of grouper, and may assist the regulatory agencies to enforce

national and trans-national laws and regulations (Council Regulation (EC) 104/2000; Resolution of 27th of February 2007 of the Spanish Secretary General of Maritime Fishing).

Materials and methods

Fish samples collection

Grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*), wreck fish (*Polyprion americanus*), Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) and other fish species (*Table 1*) were obtained from local markets from Madrid. Every species was morphologically identified according to the keys of Muus et al. (1998) and Froese and Pauly (2007).

In addition, 70 commercial fish fillets samples (*Table 2*) labelled as grouper were collected at random in different local markets and supermarkets from Madrid.

Preparation of fish samples for ELISA analysis

Fish muscle samples (1 g) were homogenized in 5 mL of saline solution (8.5 g of NaCl/liter) and maintained for 10 min in a stomacher. Extracts containing soluble muscle proteins were filtered through a Whatman no. 1 filter paper. Protein extracts were diluted 1/50 in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) before they were analyzed by the ELISA technique described bellow.

Indirect ELISA

Flat-bottomed micro-ELISA plates (Costar, Corning, NY) were filled with 0.1 mL of the diluted muscle protein extracts and incubated for 1 h at 37 °C. After washing with PBST (PBS containing 1% Tween 20), 40 μL of the 3D12 and 1A4 monoclonal antibodies (MAbs) developed previously (Asensio et al. 2003a;

Asensio et al. 2003b) were diluted in 60 μ L of PBS and the total volume (100 μ L) was added to the wells. The plates were shaken for 1 h at room temperature and, after washing with PBST, 0.1 mL aliquots of peroxidase-conjugated rabbit antimouse immunoglobulins (DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) diluted 1/2000 in PBST were added to the wells. The plates were incubated with shaking for 1 h at room temperature and the wells were washed with distilled water before addition of 0.05 mL of a ready-to-use substrate solution of 3,3',5,5',-tetramethylbenzidine (Boehringer Mannheim GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). After 10 min of incubation, the reaction was stopped by addition to each well of 0.025 mL of 1 M H₂SO₄. The yellow color developed by conversion of the substrate was measured at 450 nm with an iEMS Reader MF Spectrophotometer (Labsystems, Oy, Helsinki, Finland).

DNA extraction procedure

Genomic DNA was extracted from fish samples using a Wizard DNA cleanup kit (Promega, Madison, WI, USA). The extraction procedure was performed as follows:

Samples (0.2 g) were digested in 860 μ L of extraction buffer, pH 8.0 (10 mM Tris, 150 mM NaCl, 2 mM EDTA and 1% SDS), 100 μ L of 5 M guanidine hydrochloride and 40 μ L of 20 mg mL⁻¹ proteinase K (Boehringer Manheim GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). Digests were incubated overnight at 55 °C with shaking at 70 x g, and were left to cool at room temperature. 500 μ L of chloroform were added to the lysate before centrifugation at 10.000 x g for 10 min. The clear aqueous supernatant obtained after the centrifugation (500 μ L) was used to purify the DNA using the Wizard DNA cleanup system kit (Promega) with a vacuum manifold, according to the manufacturer's

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instructions. Finally, the DNA was eluted in 100 μ L of sterile deionized water and its concentration was determined by spectrophotometry at 260 nm (Eppendorf Biophotometer, Hamburg, Germany).

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)

The set of primers used for PCR amplification of DNA were the forward primer 5S1 (5'-TACGCCCGATCTCGTCCGATC-3'), designed by Pendás et al. (1994), and the specifically 5SG (5'reverse primers CTTAATGCACATATGCTCACTGAC-3'), 5SW (5'-CCTCTGTGCTATAAGTTGGACCT-3') (5'-5SP and TACGCTGACGTGCAGATGCA-3') designed by Asensio et al. (2001). These primers were mixed in the same ratio and used together for the multiplex PCR of this study.

Double-stranded amplifications were carried out in a final volume of 25 μ l containing 2 mM MgCl₂, 10 pmol of each primer (5S1, 5SG, 5SW and 5SP), 20 ng of template DNA, and 2 U of DNA polymerase (Roche, Mannheim, Germany) in a reaction buffer containing 75 mM Tris-HCl, pH 9.0, 50 mM KCl, 20 mM (NH₄)₂SO₄ and 0.001% bovine serum albumin (BSA).

PCR amplification was performed in a Progene Thermal Cycler (Techne Ltd, Cambridge, UK). Thirty-five cycles of amplification with the following step-cycle profile were carried out: strand denaturation at 94 °C for 45 s, primer annealing at 66 °C for 45s and primer extension at 72 °C for 45 s. An initial denaturation at 94 °C for 3 min, and a final extension at 72 °C for 5 min, improved the product yielded.

To avoid false negative PCR results and verify positive amplification of fish species analysed in this study we designed an eukaryote-specific primer pair: 18Seu-fw (5'- GGTAGTGACGAAAAATAACAATACAGGAC-3')/18Seu-inv (5'-ATACGCTATTGGAGCTGGAATTACC-3') flanking a 141 bp fragment from 18S rRNA gene was used as an internal control of the assay. Amplification was performed with the following steps: a denaturation step of 93 °C for 2 min, followed by 35 cycles with a strand denaturation at 93 °C 30 s, primer annealing at 60 °C for 30 s, and primer extension at 72 °C for 45 s. The final extension step was performed at 72 °C for 5 min.

PCR results were determined by visualization of amplicons on 2% agarose gels stained with ethidium bromide (1 µg/mL). The sizes of the DNA fragments were estimated by comparison with a commercial 1Kb plus DNA ladder (Gibco BRL, Life Technologies Inc., Rockville, MD).

Results and discussion

Food quality and safety are priority research areas that include traceability along the production chain. Then, it is necessary to develop reliable traceability techniques to establish the origin and mode of manufacturing fishery products needed to prevent fraud and consequently to assure consumer confidence and to enable rapid product withdrawal (Santaclara et al. 2006). In this context, analytical tools such as immunoenzymatic assays (ELISA) are being increasingly demanded by law enforcement agencies for fish and fishery products identification (Asensio et al. 2008). Moreover other approaches include PCR-based methods, which have also proved successful for fish species authentication (Mackie et al. 1999; Asensio Gil, 2007). In the present study, we

 describe the application of an indirect ELISA by using two MAbs and a multiplex PCR assay relying on the 5S rDNA gene, to detect grouper adulteration in the fish shops.

ELISA analysis

Among immunological methods, the enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) has been the most widely used technique for regulatory purposes in detecting fish species adulteration, because of its simplicity, specificity and sensitivity (Céspedes et al. 1999).

The pre-requisite for an ELISA is the availability of amounts of antibodies sufficient to detect analytes. Both polyclonal and monoclonal antibodies (MAbs) can be used in ELISA methods for fish identification. Monoclonal antibodies, compared to polyclonal antibodies, are a homogeneous population of antibodies produced by hybridoma technology that have defined biological activity, consistent specificity and their production is not limited (Goding, 1996).

In two previous publications, we reported the development of two monoclonal antibodies specific to grouper (3D12 MAb) (Asensio et al. 2003a) and grouper and wreck fish (1A4 MAb) (Asensio et al. 2003b). Firstly, to study the specificity of these MAbs, other fish species were analysed by ELISA using these MAbs. As it can be seen in the *Table 1*, 3D12 MAb recognized specifically the grouper and did not show cross-reactivity with the other species analysed in this work. Furthermore, 1A4 MAb only recognized grouper and wreck fish specimens. The absorbance values of negative samples were similar to those of the background

readings (0.084 to 0.150), while positive samples reached values higher than 1.0.

In addition, 70 commercial fillets samples labelled as grouper were also analysed by this methodology. As can be observed in the *Table 2*, 3D12 MAb recognized specifically 12 samples of grouper out of 70. Alternatively, 1A4 MAb recognized grouper and wreck fish species. When results obtained with the two MAbs were compared, we could distinguish wreck fish from grouper samples, so that, we could identify specifically 13 samples of wreck fish out of 70 (*Table 2*).

This ELISA procedure, which can be performed in less than 4 h, has proved to be specific, sensitive, cheap and very simple to develop. It could be very useful as routine analysis tools in food control laboratories for enforcing labeling regulations in the authentication of these fish species.

Multiplex PCR

Detailed sequence information has become available for many species and consequently phylogenetically informative single base polymorphisms may be identified that enable species-specific primers to be designed. Under suitably stringent reaction conditions, such primers generate a product only in the presence of DNA from a given species. Complete sequence information permits the size of the product to be predicted, so that identification is confirmed if an appropriately sized amplicon is seen on a gel (Lockley and Bardsley 2000).

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 Recent works have reported the application of specific primers for fish and fishery products authentication (Taylor et al. 2002; Hsieh et al. 2004).

In this context and in agreement with the results obtained in a previously reported work (Asensio et al. 2001), the combination of different primers specific for grouper (5SG), Nile perch (5SP) and wreck fish (5SW), along with the 5S1 oligonucleotide (forward primer), allowed the amplification of specific regions of the 5S rDNA gene: a 323 bp fragment from grouper DNA, a 471 bp fragment from wreck fish DNA and a 185 bp fragment from Nile perch DNA (*Figure 1*).

To determine the specificity of this procedure, other fish species were analysed by using these markers, and no amplification was obtained (*Table 1*). *Figure 1* shows an example of this specificity study. Moreover, to avoid false negative PCR results and verify positive amplification we used an internal control based on the 18S rRNA gene. All fish species studied in this work were amplified by this marker (*Table 1*), which is eukaryotes specific.

Also, the commercial samples collected from the fish shops were analysed by using the multiplex PCR. PCR amplifications results matched unequivocally with ELISA results showing a complete agreement of both methods allowing the authentication of grouper (*Table 2*). In addition, the multiplex PCR allowed to detect 34 samples of Nile perch out of the 70 fish samples. Nile perch is the fish species most used as a substitute for grouper in Spain. Likewise, 11 samples analysed were unknown: no amplification was obtained. Probably other cheap fish species could be used to substitute grouper. Also, to avoid false negatives

these unknown samples amplified the internal control used in this study (data not shown). *Figure 2* shows an example of electrophoresis of various commercial samples analysed by this technique.

The application of this multiplex PCR is a powerful approach for the specific identification of grouper fillets. Since it is very specific, rapid, reliable and easy to perform, this methodology is an useful alternative for detection of grouper adulteration in the market of fish fillets.

Conclusions

Results obtained in this work suggest that both the ELISA and PCR techniques may provide a reliable means for the specific detection of inappropriately labelled grouper fillets. PCR-based methods are the most specific and sensitive methods for fish species identification, although they require some expensive laboratory equipment and a certain degree of knowledge. On the contrary, ELISA, being sensitive and specific, are quicker than genetic methods for routine analysis of large sample numbers. In spite of ELISA technique was unable to recognise Nile perch from other unknown species used to adulterate the grouper, both procedures reported here may represent two effective and straightforward tools for grouper authentication and this work is a good example of applied research and its direct impact on the lives and health of consumers.

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Figure captions

r the 5S rDN rgina Figure 1. Electrophoretic analysis of the 5S rDNA amplicons from the multiplex PCR. Samples are: 1= Epinephelus marginatus; 2= Polyprion americanus; 3= Lates niloticus; 4= Prionace glauca; 5= Solea solea; 6= Pleuronectes platessa; 7= Auxis rochei; 8= Sardina pilchardus; 9= Platichthys flesus; 10= Engraulis encrasicholus; 11= Trisopterus luscus; 12= Xiphias gladius; 13= Diplodus sargus. M indicates kb plus DNA ladder for molecular weight marker.

Figure 2. Electrophoretic analysis of the 5S rDNA amplicons from the multiplex PCR. Lanes 1-11 corresponds to samples 60-70 of the study. M indicates kb plus DNA ladder for molecular weight marker and N corresponds negative control.

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Table 1. Different fish species analysed by ELISA and PCR techniques.

Fish species analysed	ELISA by 1A4 MAb	ELISA by 3D12 MAb	Amplification by Multiplex PCR	Internal control amplification
Epinephelus marginatus	+	+	323 bp	141 bp
Polyprion americanus	+	-	471 bp	141 bp
Lates niloticus	-	-	185 bp	141 bp
Argyrosomus regius	-	-	-	141 bp
Auxis rochei	-	-	-	141 bp
Brama brama	-	-	-	141 bp
Chamelea gallina	-	-	-	141 bp
Clupea harengus	-	-	-	141 bp
Conger conger	-	-	-	141 bp
Dicentrarchus labrax	-	-	-	141 bp
Diplodus sargus 🛛 📃		-	-	141 bp
Eledone cirrosa	-	-	-	141 bp
Engraulis encrasicholus		-	-	141 bp
Ensis arquatus	-	-	-	141 bp
Gadus morhua	-	-	-	141 bp
Galeorhinus galeus	-	-	-	141 bp
Genypterus blacodes	-	-	-	141 bp
Lepidorhombus boscii	-		-	141 bp
Lepidorhombus whiffiagonis	-	-	-	141 bp
Limanda limanda	-	- 0	-	141 bp
Littorina littorea	-	-	-	141 bp
Liza aurata	-	-	_	141 bp
Loligo vulgaris	-	-	-	141 bp
Lophius budegassa	-	_	_	141 bp
Melanogrammus aeglefinus	-	-	-	141 bp
Merluccius merluccius	-	-	-	141 bp
Micromesistius poutassou	-	-	-	141 bp
Mullus barbatus	-	-	-	141 bp
Mytilus edulis	-	-	-	141 bp
Necora puber	-	-	-	141 bp
Nephrops norvegicus	-	-	-	141 bp
Oncorhynchus mykiss	-	-	-	141 bp
Oreochromis niloticus	-	-	-	141 bp
Pagellus bogaraveo	-	-	-	141 bp
Pagellus erythrinus	-	-	-	141 bp
Pangasius hypophthalmus	-	-	-	141 bp
Parapenaeus longirostris	-	-	-	141 bp
Platichthys flesus	-	-	-	141 bp
Pleuronectes platessa	-	-	-	141 bp
Pollicipes pollicipes	-	-	-	141 bp
Prionace glauca	-	-	-	141 bp
Salmo salar	-	-	-	141 bp
Sarda sarda	-	-	-	141 bp
Sardina pilchardus	-	-	-	141 bp

3	Scomber scombrus	-	-	-	141 bp
+ 5	Scophtalmus maximus	-	-	-	141 bp
5	Scorpaena scrofa	-	-	-	141 bp
7	Solea solea	-	-	-	141 bp
3	Sparus aurata	-	-	-	141 bp
9	Thunnus alalunga	-	-	-	141 bp
10	Thunnus thynnus	-	_	-	141 bp
12	Trachurus trachurus	-	_	-	141 bp
13	Trisopterus luscus	_	-	-	141 bp
14	Xiphias gladius	_	-	-	141 bp
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Table 2. Commercial fish	fillets analysed b	y ELISA and PCR	techniques.
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Sample designation	ELISA by 1A4 MAb	ELISA by 3D12 MAb	ELISA authenticity	Amplification by Multiplex PCR	Multiplex PCR authenticity
1	-	-		-	
2	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
3	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
4	-	-		-	
5	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
6	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
7	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
8	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
9	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
10	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
11	-	-		-	
12	-	-		-	
13	-	-		-	
14	-			185 bp	Nile perch
15	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
16	-	_		185 bp	Nile perch
17	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
18	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
19	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
20	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
21	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
22	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
23	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
24	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
25	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
26	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
27	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
28	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
29	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
30	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
31	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
32	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
33	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
34	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
35	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
36	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
37	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
38	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
39	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
40	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
40 41	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
42	, +	' +	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
42	, +	, -	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
	-		Groupor	323 hr	Grouper

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3	45	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
4 F	46	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
5	47	, ,	-	Wrock fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
7	47			Wrook fich	471 bp	Wrook fich
8	40	+	-	Wreek fish	471 bp	Wreek fish
9	49	+	-	Wreck lish	471 bp	Wreck lish
10	50	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
11	51	-	-		-	
12	52	-	-		-	
13	53	-	-		-	
14	54	-	-		-	
15	55	_	-		185 bp	Nile perch
16	56	_	_		185 bp	Nile perch
17	50				195 bp	Nile perch
18	57		-		105 UP	
19	58	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
20	59	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
21	60	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
22	61	-	-		185 bp	Nile perch
23	62	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
24 25	63	+	- (Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
26	64	+		Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
27	65	+		Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
28	66			Groupor	323 bp	Groupor
29	00	Ŧ	Ŧ		525 bp	Cioupei
30	67	-	-		-	
31	68	-	-		-	
32	69	+	-	Wreck fish	471 bp	Wreck fish
33	70	+	+	Grouper	323 bp	Grouper
34						

+ + Grouper 323 bp Groupe