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### Size matters, but bigger not always better

CHERYL WITTENAUER  
Associated Press

ST. LOUIS - Mosquitofish play a mating game not so unlike the human one.

Males court females, trying to mate with any that will take them. Some females rush at the opportunity. Still others reject their suitors, ramming them in the head.

Now, a new study shows the females, time and again, are choosing mates with large reproductive organs over suitors not so well-endowed.

But the asset comes with a cost, according to the study to be published this week in the online issue of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The male organ, which does not retract into the fish's body, keeps it from darting away quickly from predators.

In a classic evolutionary trade-off, the study suggests that males with larger genitalia have a better chance of mating, but also a higher probability of dying. Those competing demands might explain the variability in size of male genitalia - a finding that could have implications for formation of new species.

"Our finding is that size does matter, but bigger is not always better," said evolutionary biologist Brian Langerhans, 27, a doctoral graduate student at Washington University in St. Louis who led the study.

"The genitalia have an obvious link to reproduction. Once you split up groups so they can't interbreed, that rapidly creates new species."

Langerhans called his study the first to focus on the influence of predators on genital evolution and will extend his work to better understand its link to formation of new species.

Evolutionary biologist Duncan Irschick at Tulane University called the study "groundbreaking," and all the more "remarkable" that it came from a doctoral student.

"It's a neat insight into evolution and what makes evolution tick," he said. "It is a very strong constraining factor on animal diversity."

Male genitalia - the most conspicuously variable trait in the animal kingdom - is sometimes the only attribute that distinguishes one species from another. Scientists since the time of British naturalist Charles Darwin have had difficulty explaining why size differs among populations.

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Since the 1980s, scientists have attributed variation to something occurring inside the female fish's body after mating, such as sperm competition or some internal bias that causes the female to reject the sperm of one male fish over another's.

But Langerhans says those theories may not be the only reason why male genitalia vary so much in the animal world.

The inch-long mosquitofish is part of the guppy family, which Langerhans says has become a model for investigating ecological causes of evolutionary change.

Insemination occurs inside the female, which over time has evolved into bearing live young, instead of laying eggs. The male pursues the female, attempting to copulate, "but the female can always say no," and the female fish in this study did - repeatedly - refuse males with smaller reproductive organs. Of the 700 male fish Langerhans studied in Texas and the Bahamas, he found consistently larger reproductive organs among those in predator-free environments.

University of California-Berkeley scientist David Wake, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, said the choosing of mates is important to evolutionary and human biology.

"What's in their wiring that leads them to certain traits and choices?" Wake asked. "... To reproduce in the most effective way, to have more great grandchildren than that other pair over there."

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