

Short Communication

What type of amphibian tunnel could reduce road kills?

David Lesbarrères, Thierry Lodé and Juha Merilä

Abstract Increased traffic volumes worldwide are contributing to amphibian declines, and measures to reduce the occurrence of road kills are needed. One possible measure is the construction of underpasses through which animals can pass under roads, but little is known about whether amphibians will choose tunnels if given a choice or about their preferences for different tunnel types. We tested the preferences of three anuran species for two kinds of concrete amphibian tunnels currently used in France. One was a tunnel lined with soil, the other a bare concrete pipe. The animals could use the tunnels or bypass them over a grassy area. Water frogs *Rana esculenta* and common toads *Bufo bufo* showed a

preference for the tunnels, whereas agile frogs *Rana dalmatina* avoided them. Among the individuals that chose either of the tunnels, all species showed a significant preference for the tunnel lined with soil. These results indicate that species differ in their preferences and in their likelihood of using underpasses when given a choice. This highlights the fact that there is no unique solution to the problem, and underpasses are only one of the possible mitigation measures that need to be assessed.

Keywords Amphibian tunnels, *Bufo bufo*, choice tests, highways, *Rana dalmatina*, *Rana esculenta*, road kills.

The decline of amphibian populations throughout the world is now a well established fact, although the debate about the causes continues (Alford & Richards, 1999). One factor contributing to these declines is traffic mortality: during their annual movements a large proportion of adults in a given population might perish in road kills (Vos & Chardon, 1998; Means, 1999; Carr & Fahrig, 2001; Hels & Buchwald, 2001). Kuhn (1987) estimated that a traffic volume of 24–40 vehicles per hour would result in 50% mortality among migrating common toads *Bufo bufo*, while 60 vehicles per hour would cause 90% (Percsy, 1994). There are comparable figures for other species (van Gelder, 1973; Fahrig *et al.*, 1995; Hels & Buchwald, 2001, and references therein). Even if increased traffic volumes do not cause direct extinctions, they may have indirect negative effects on local populations by increasing their isolation through habitat fragmentation (Andrews, 1990; Vos & Chardon, 1998). This in turn may have negative consequences for populations, as

isolation reduces genetic diversity (Sjögren-Gulve, 1994), increases inbreeding (Lesbarrères *et al.*, 2003) and may thereby reduce viability (Saccheri *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, reduced population sizes caused by fragmentation will increase the stochastic risk of extinction (Bennett, 1990).

A potentially simple measure to reduce traffic mortality and fragmentation in amphibian populations is the construction of amphibian tunnels or bridges, allowing animals to pass under or over roads that have high traffic volumes (van Leeuwen, 1982; Langton, 1989; Tying, 1989; Beier & Noss, 1998). In France the total highway network has increased by 88% in the two last decades (Association des Sociétés Françaises d’Autoroutes et d’ouvrages à péage, 2001). Public and scientific committees initiated the construction of highway underpasses for amphibians in 1984 (Mougey, 1996) but their efficiency for different amphibian species has seldom been assessed (but see Simonyi *et al.*, 1999; Veenbaas & Brandjes, 1999). Our aim was to assess three anuran species (common toads, water frogs *Rana esculenta* and agile frogs *Rana dalmatina*) for their preference or avoidance of tunnels used in highway construction in western France. In particular, we were interested to know whether: (1) there are inter-species differences in their preference for utilizing tunnels, and (2) there is preference for a particular type of tunnel.

The choice experiments were carried out in a 15 m² outdoor enclosure near the University of Angers, France,

David Lesbarrères (Corresponding author) and Juha Merilä Ecological Genetics Research Unit, Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, PO BOX 65, FIN-00014, University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail david.lesbarreres@helsinki.fi

Thierry Lodé Laboratoire d’Écologie Animale, Université d’Angers, Belle-Beille, F-49045, Angers cedex, France.

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Table 1 Results of the choice experiments using three species of anuran during two trials. Individuals (n = number) could either enter the tunnels (soil covered or bare) or bypass them by going around, over a lawn (see Fig. 1). Unsuccessful individuals either did not move or went backwards.

	Trial no.	Lawn (n)	Tunnels (n)	χ^2	Unsuccessful individuals (n)	Soil-covered tunnel (n)	Bare tunnel (n)	χ^2
Water frog <i>Rana esculenta</i>	1	14	26	3.60°	2	20	6	7.54**
	2	12	29	7.05**	1	22	7	7.76**
Common toad <i>Bufo bufo</i>	1	13	23	2.78°	5	12	11	0.04
	2	10	31	10.76***	0	15	16	0.03
Agile frog <i>Rana dalmatina</i>	1	23	9	6.13*	0	8	1	5.44*
	2	16	8	2.67	8	7	1	4.50*

°P < 0.1, *P < 0.05, **P < 0.001, ***P < 0.0001

of tunnels, our results suggest that underpasses should be lined with soil substrate as suggested by Lesbarrères & Lodé (2000), and this has already been done in Switzerland where concrete pipes under roads have mud-lined interiors (Müller, 1992).

Apart from olfactory cues, other factors can also be involved in the choice or avoidance of particular tunnel types. These can include cues from magnetic fields (Fisher *et al.*, 2001) and the intensity of light at the tunnel exit (Epain-Henry, 1992). Furthermore, it is also likely that moisture has a significant effect on tunnel choice. For instance, frogs are more sensitive to desiccation than toads because of the differences in their skin structure, and so could prefer soil to concrete because the former is likely to better maintain moisture levels. It is therefore possible that moist concrete tunnels in the wild are not avoided to the degree indicated by our experiments.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that although the three species tested show differential preference for entering tunnels, they all seem to prefer soil-lined to bare concrete tunnels. The results suggest that, for maintaining population connectivity, concrete tunnels could be improved, and that highway constructors should use soil-lined underpasses rather than plain concrete ones. Given the preference of agile frogs to bypass tunnels, and the much wider habitat tolerance of *Bufo bufo* when approaching roads, effective underpass construction should probably also involve fencing, forcing animals towards tunnels despite their preference for avoiding them. The results also show that, because of a species-specific preference for tunnel use, it may be difficult to propose a protective measure that works equally well for all species.

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Biographical sketches

D. Lesbarrères, T. Lodé and J. Merilä are evolutionary biologists who have been working with local adaptation, conservation and genetics of amphibians in France and Scandinavia over the past 5 years. They are particularly involved in conservation projects for the promotion of protected areas for amphibians near highways.