Genetic Studies on Tick Ecdysteroid Regulation for Development of Sustainable Tick Control Strategies

Mari H. OGIHARA1,2 and DeMar TAYLOR1

1Graduate School of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan.
2Fellow of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science

Ticks are exoparasites of mammals and important pest of livestock production. Presently, tick management is limited to the use of acaricides that provide great advantages to livestock production but also ticks develop resistant against acaricides. Development of alternative ways for sustainable livestock production is required. The knowledge of tick ecology and physiology is important to construct strategies for integrated tick management. Tick molting and reproduction require blood feeding and are under endocrinological regulation. Therefore, our studies focus on the roles of blood feeding and mating in the regulation of these endocrinological mechanisms.

Viable egg production requires both engorgement and mating, but the distinct roles of these two stimuli are not understood. The soft tick Ornithodoros moubata provides an excellent model to study the separate roles of feeding and mating because both virgin and mated females engorge but only mated females produce viable eggs. Ecdysteroid titers significantly increased in only mated females and remained low in virgin females. In addition, both mated and virgin females showed up-regulation of EcR and RXR hormonal receptors immediately after engorgement. Both mated and virgin females showed Vg expression during an early phase (3 to 10 days) after engorgement, whereas only mated females showed increased Vg expression during the late phase (12 to 20 days). Whole mount in situ hybridization revealed the main site of Vg expression is the midgut during the early phase while the fat body enlarges and shows strong Vg expression during the late phase in only mated females. Therefore, feeding stimulates Vg expression in both virgin and mated females while mating is required for Vg up-regulation in the late phase. Furthermore, mating appears to induce secretion of ecdysteroids after engorgement and high titers of ecdysteroids up-regulate Vg expression in mated females leading to mature egg production. This two phase regulation of vitellogenesis in O. moubata reveals the importance of investigating the separate roles of nutrition and mating in arthropod reproduction. Understanding these mechanisms may lead to the development of better strategies for the use of hormone agonists in controlling tick populations.