## Changes in swimming depths of Atlantic salmon Salmo salar post-smolts relative to light intensity

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Eight hatchery-reared Atlantic salmon *Salmo salar* post-smolts, implanted with acoustic depth sensing transmitters and manually tracked for 5-12 h in the Hardangerfjord (Norway), spent most of their time (49-99%) at 1-3 m depth during the day, whereas four of seven fish tracked were found close (<0.5 m) to the surface at night, with a strong negative cross-correlation between general swimming depth and surface light intensity. Hence, the actual swimming depth of post-smolts during their early marine migration may depend on the light conditions, although the individual variation in vertical movement pattern was large. No cross-correlations were found between light intensity and swimming depth during daytime periods with rapid changes in light intensity, indicating that other factors than light intensity were important in initiating the irregular dives that were recorded down to 6.5 m depth.

**Key words:** acoustic telemetry; behaviour, salmonid; vertical movement.

The period of sea entry and the first weeks of the marine life of the Atlantic salmon Salmo salar L. is considered as a critical period for their survival, and thus the total production of this species (Montevecchi et al., 2002; Rikardsen et al., 2004). Several studies have shown that post-smolts are exposed to high predation immediately after sea entry (Reitan et al., 1987; Hvidsten & Lund, 1988; Dieperink et al., 2002). Hence, the predation risk is expected to have a strong selective effect on the behaviour of fjord migrating post-smolts (Solomon, 1982). Several studies in riverine systems have indicated that the smolts alter their behaviour according to the light regime. Typically, smolts have been shown to move deeper in the water column during the day than during the night (Thorpe & Morgan, 1978; Youngson et al., 1983; Hansen & Jonsson, 1985; Aarestrup et al., 2002), which is probably a strategy to minimize predation risk from avian predators (Solomon, 1982). It has also been observed that S. salar smolts in rivers may react to rapid decreases in light intensity during the day by immediately diving deeper (Davidsen et al., 2005). These observations were interpreted as anti-predator behaviour, since a sudden decrease in light intensity may indicate the vicinity of an avian predator. It is not known, however, if outward-migrating smolts maintain this behaviour after entering the marine environment. Earlier studies indicated that fjord migrating S. salar post-smolts migrate through the whole fjord system at swimming speeds up to 1.8 body lengths s<sup>-1</sup> (Finstad et al., 2005). The post-smolts tend to swim near the surface at a median depth of 2m (Døving et al., 1985; J. Sturlaugsson & K. Thorisson, unpubl. data). Although spending most of their time close to the surface, post-smolts have been observed to make regular rapid changes in the swimming depth (Westerberg, 1982; Reddin et al., 2006). Little information exists, however, on how environmental factors, such as light intensity, influence the swimming depth and migration route in the early marine phase (Moore et al., 2000). The objective of this study was to examine how changes in light intensity affect the swimming behaviour of fjord migrating S. salar post-smolts.

The study was performed in 2006 in the Eidfjord (60° 28′ N; 7° 04′ E), which is the innermost part of the 150 km long Hardangerfjord in south-western Norway. The mean and maximum depths of the Eidfjord are approximately 150 m and 600 m, respectively. A freshwater input exists throughout the year with a maximum in June and July. During the study period, there was a halocline at 1-2 meters depth, but no defined thermocline was observed. The salinity varied from 18-26 above and 22-28 below the halocline. Surface water temperature varied from 7-12 °C. The fish used were 2 year-old hatchery-reared smolts from the Statkraft Energy AS hatchery in Eidfjord (n = 8, mean total length,  $L_{\rm T}$ , 319 mm, range 277-395 mm, mean mass 239 g, range 221-291 g), with wild parents of the River Lærdal stock. The light regime in the hatchery was controlled with an on-off switch with no dimming of light, and windows were covered by black plastics. The hatchery fish were exposed to 8L:16D cycles from 15 December 2005 to 28 February 2006, after which they were exposed to 24 h light until 17 April. From 17 April, the light regime was adjusted to follow the natural daylight periods including the periods of dusk and dawn to ensure that the smolts were adjusted to natural daylight periods before release. In addition, the smolts were also gradually introduced to the actual salinity level (25) of the fjord system. Water temperature in the hatchery was 6.5-7.0 °C (ground water). A seawater challenge test (Blackburn & Clarke, 1987) performed on 9 April revealed mean plasma chloride levels of 146.4 mM at a temperature of 7 °C, indicating that smolts were ready to be released into sea water (Sigholt and Finstad, 1990). The production regimes described above are standard procedures used at several hatcheries in Norway for producing a seawater-tolerant smolt at the time of the wild smolt migrations.

The smolts were tagged with acoustic depth transmitters (Thelma AS, Trondheim, Norway; ADT-9-short, diameter of 9 mm, length of 34 mm, and mass in water/air of 3.3/5.3 g). Before surgery, individuals were anaesthetised using a 3-min immersion in an aqueous solution of 2-

phenoxy ethanol (EC No 204-589-7, Sigma Chemical Co., Evanston, IL, USA, 0.5 ml l<sup>-1</sup>). The transmitter was inserted through a 13 mm incision on the ventral surface posterior to the pelvic girdle. The transmitter was subsequently pushed gently forward into the body cavity. The incision was closed using two independent silk sutures (4.0 Ethicon; Ethicon Inc., Somerville, NJ, U.S.A.). Following surgery, the smolts were placed in a saltwater tank for 1-4 days and maintained under natural light conditions. Tagged individuals were transported to the outlet of the River Eio in Eidfjord and released over a 20 day period (Table I). According to the natural behaviour of migrating smolts, each tagged smolt was released together with 10-15 untagged hatchery-reared smolts. Tagged smolts were tracked manually from a boat using an acoustic receiver (VR60, Vemco, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada). Depth was continuously decoded based on the time delay between two successive acoustic pulses. A delay of 1000 ms corresponded to the surface, increasing 100 ms m<sup>-1</sup> below the sea surface. On average, one depth measurement was recorded every 4 s. The positions of the fish were fixed every 10 min after release using a GPS receiver. Individual fish were followed 5-12 h (mean 11 h, Table I). Light intensity at the sea surface was automatically recorded every 15 s (every min on 10 and 11 May; every 5 s on 15 May) by an LI-200 pyranometer sensor (precision  $\pm$  5%) (LI-COR Corp., Lincoln, NE, U.S.A.) connected to a LI 400 data acquisition unit positioned on the top of the boat. Depth transmitters (precision  $\pm$  0.3 m) were calibrated (conditions: 25 °C, 1000 hpa) by the manufacturer. Depth measurements recorded were corrected to atmospheric pressure at the study site during tracking events. Recorded signals were also corrected for extraneous noise (e.g. boat traffic) by eliminating values with a vertical velocity >1 m s<sup>-1</sup> and values indicating a swimming depth of >0.3 m above the sea surface. As a result, 0.07% of the data collected for individual fish was deleted.

The relationship between light intensities at the sea surface and the smolts' swimming depths were evaluated using the cross-correlation (CC) function (Wei, 1994). The CC function correlates one time series with an increasingly delayed version of another series. Only the CC for lag = 0 are presented here since no delay in smolt response to variations in light intensity was assured. To obtain time series for swimming depths and light intensities that were suitable for a cross-correlation analysis, the series were interpolated to a second-wise scale. If the time difference between two consecutive depth registrations was >30 s, no interpolation was done, so all the swimming depth series became "broken" at irregular intervals. On average, the swimming depth data for each fish consisted of 18 sub-series. Rapid changes in the light intensity were defined as all light intensities >700 W m<sup>-2</sup> that dropped >200 W m<sup>-2</sup> within 15 s. The nocturnal period was defined as the time when light intensity was constantly <100 W m<sup>-2</sup>, corresponding to the sunset on days with a clear sky. All statistical analyses were performed with the free statistical software R (http://www.r-project.org).

In general, the swimming depth of the tagged post-smolt ranged from 0-6.5 m (range of individual averages: 0.5-2.3 m) and the light intensities from 0-1338 W m<sup>-2</sup> (range of individual averages: 82-602 W m<sup>-2</sup>) (Table I). The results showed large individual variation between light intensity and swimming depths. Four smolts (1, 4, 6 and 7) showed a strong negative cross correlation [CC= (-0.64) – (-0.75)] between general swimming depth and light intensity during day and night (Table I and Fig. 1), indicating individuals were swimming deeper at higher light intensities during day and closer to the surface during night. In contrast, three other individuals (3, 5 and 8) did not reflect a similar behaviour [CC = (-0.09) – (0.11)], but stayed at 2-3 m depth during the entire tracking period. Smolt number 2 was only followed during the day. When only data collected during the day were included in the analyses, only three of eight smolts (1, 4 and 7) showed a relatively strong CC [(CC= (-0.42) – (-0.63)] between light intensity and general

swimming depth (Table I). During the day, all post-smolts spent from 49-99% of their time at 1-3 m depth. When light intensities exceeded 200-300 W m $^{-2}$ , all the fish typically stayed deeper than 0.5 m from the surface (Fig 1). The definition of rapid changes in the light intensity was only observed in two of the days (15 May and 26 May). The CC between light intensity and swimming depth during the periods of rapid changes in light intensity these two days were very weak (CC = 0.041 and -0.024).

As far as is known, the present study is the first to examine the early marine migration behaviour of S. salar post-smolts relative to light intensity. Similar to other studies, tagged post smolts swam between 1-3 m (Døving et al., 1985; J. Sturlaugsson & K. Thorisson, unpubl. data). But, the results indicated that the actual swimming depth of post-smolts during their early marine migration appeared to be influenced by light conditions, as more than half of the fish were swimming closer to the surface during the night than during higher day light intensities, with a strong negative cross correlation between general swimming depth and surface light intensity. The more shallow swimming depth during the night than during the day has been observed for out-migrating smolts in rivers (Hesthagen & Garnås, 1986; Hvidsten & Johnsen, 1997). The opposite behaviour has also been reported (Davidsen et al., 2005), but these observations were made in a river above the polar circle with midnight sun conditions and only a negligible difference in light between day and night. Several authors have shown that predation on postsmolts, from fishes and birds, is a constant threat during the seaward migration and directly influences the behaviour of migrating post-smolts (Reitan et al., 1987; Feltham, 1995; Mather, 1998). Lacroix et al. (2004) reported that smolts tended to move out of estuaries at night thereby minimising avian and other fish predation. It is likely that the vertical behaviour of the fish observed in this study may be due to a trade-off between avoidance of predators coming from above (birds) and below (fishes). In addition, varying the use of the water column by post-smolts

may also result in other advantages. Swimming close to the surface may be a help for migrating post-smolts during navigation (Flamarique & Hawryshyn, 1993), and avoiding deeper layers with higher levels of salinity in the initial phase of the post-smolt stage may reduce osmoregulatory demands. The observed change in the swimming depth between 3-5 meters during the day and closer to the surface during the night could possibly be a trade-off between the combined benefits provided by these two water layers. Feeding opportunities may also affect the vertical behaviour of the post-smolts. Fjord-migrating post-smolts in Western Norway, however, mainly feed on crustaceans (Rikardsen *et al.*, 2004), which exhibit a daily vertical migration from close to the surface during the night and down to 50-400 m depth during the day (Gorsky *et al.*, 2000). The vertical migrations of post-smolts as observed in the present study can, therefore, not alone be explained by the smolts following the vertical migration patterns of their food items.

In the present study, three out of the seven fish with night recordings did not show any correlation between swimming depth and the light regime. These three post-smolts were released in days with a much larger variation in light intensity than for the other four smolts (fish number 3, 5 and 8; Fig. 1). The larger variation was due to changing cloud cover on these days. If the post-smolt interprets rapid changes in the light regime as a predator approaching from above, days with a frequent variation in light intensity may stress the post-smolt to the point that it does not respond by varying depth preferences. Handeland *et al.* (1996) showed that too frequent reactions to predators in osmotically stressed fish might result in increased lactate accumulation in the muscles, with negative consequences for later attacks and the osmoregulatory capacity. As a result, it can be speculated that post-smolts may moderate the responses to changes in the light regime and avoid coming closer to the surface during the evening.

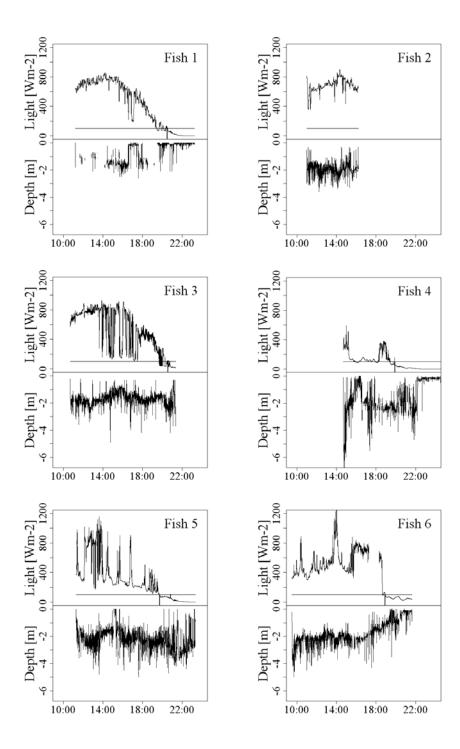
Independent from the light regime the *S. salar* often changed the swimming depth for shorter periods (1-5 min) (Fig 1), indicating that other factors than light intensity were important in setting the irregular dives. Such diving behaviour has been interpreted by other authors as exploratory searches for small-scale differences (<1 m) in the horizontal layers of water (Døving & Stabell, 2003; Rikardsen *et al.*, 2007) or as prey search (Reddin *et al.*, 2006). The exploratory behaviour of smolts may also represent a cost effective strategy to locate and exploit the most favourable outgoing current. The exact causes of the dives of the post-smolt, however, are not yet known.

This study was performed using hatchery-reared post-smolts, and an important question is whether the results are representative also for wild post-smolts. The hatchery-reared post-smolts had been adjusted to the natural light regime prior to release, to ensure that the observed behaviour was not a result of smolts being adapted to an artificial light regime in the hatchery that was different from the light regime during the study. Previous studies have shown that hatchery-reared and wild post-smolts did not differ in their migration behaviour during the seaward migration (Økland et al., 2006; Thorstad et al., 2007), indicating that results from hatchery-reared smolts during this migration stage may be representative also for wild post-smolts, despite different previous experiences in the wild and hatchery environment. The vertical behaviour, however, has not specifically been compared because wild post-smolts were too small for the current generation of acoustic transmitters. The increase in depth relative to increased light levels, and reluctance to expose themselves during daylight, appears to be a shared characteristic among different life stages of wild and farmed *S. salar* (Hvidsten & Johnsen, 1997; Fernö et al., 1999; Thorstad et al., 2008). Thorstad et al. (2008) suggested that such anti predator behaviour may be a basic instinct throughout all life stages. Hatchery fish have also been observed to swim deeper

in the tanks when the light is turned on (Hansen, 1998), thereby reflecting a similar behaviour to wild fish.

In conclusion, the present study showed that the swimming depth of the *S. salar* post-smolts may depend on the differences in light intensity between day and night. This behaviour may be a trade-off response between searching for prey, navigating, avoiding osmoregulatory problems and decreasing the predation risk from predators attacking from above or below.

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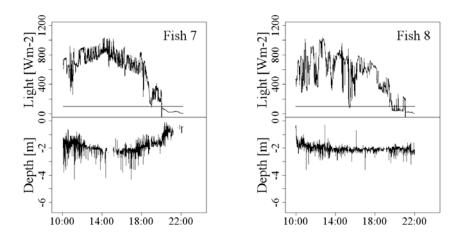


FIG. 1. Light intensity (—, 100 W m<sup>-2</sup> level, the value used to separate the day and night periods) and swimming depth recorded during manual tracking of eight acoustically tagged post-smolt *Salmo salar* in the Hardangerfjord. For fish 4, the light and depth profiles are only shown until 2400 hours. It was tracked until 0243 hours, but stayed at the same depth after 2230 hours.

Table I: Release date, time period of tracking, swimming depths and surface light intensities for individual post-smolt *Salmo salar* equipped with acoustic transmitters and manually tracked in the Hardangerfjord in 2006. Cross correlations (CC) between swimming depth and light intensity are also given, both for analyses of day and night data combined, and for data collected during the day only (fish number 2 was only tracked during the day). All cross-correlations, except fish number 8 - day only, were significant (P < 0.05). This significance, also for the weaker cross-correlations, is caused by the high number of observations in each time series, so even if a cross-correlations, is caused by the high number of observation is statistically significant it does not have to be biologically relevant. (N/A, not available

		Time period		Light during	Light during		
		the fish was	Depth,	day and night,	day only,		
Fish	Release	tracked	maximum/minimum	maximum/minimum	maximum/minimum	CC day	CC day
numbers	date	(hours)	(mean) (m)	(mean) (W m <sup>-2</sup> )	(mean) (W m <sup>-2</sup> )	and night	only
1	10 May	1410–2315	-2.6/0 (-0.5)	858/0 (409)	858/66 (550)	-0.75	-0.63
2	11 May	1100-1600	-3.6/-0.3 (-2.0)	901/309 (602)	901/309 (687)	N/A	-0.19
3	15 May	1041–2121	-4.9/-0.2 (-1.7)	934/15 (513)	934/31 (549)	-0.09	-0.17
4	20 May	1440-0243	-6.5/0 (-1.5)	593/0 (82)	593/57 (171)	-0.64	-0.50
5	26 May	1117–2321	-5.0/0 (-2.3)	1160/0 (301)	1160/90 (426)	0.11	-0.14
6	28 May	0930–2139	-5.0/0 (-1.8)	1338/0 (350)	1338/92 (512)	-0.69	-0.12
7	29 May	1004-2211	-4.3/-0.1 (-1.8)	1036/0 (502)	1036/87 (663)	-0.72	-0.42
8	30 May	0959–2201	-3.6/-0.3 (-2.0)	1038/0 (448)	1038/31 (523)	0.06	0 13

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