The dynamics and consequences of introgression can inform about numerous evolutionary processes. Biologists have therefore long been interested in hybridization. One challenge, however, lies in the identification of non-admixed genotypes that can serve as a baseline for accurate quantification of admixture. In this issue of *Molecular Ecology*, Cahill et al. (2014) analyze a genomic data set of 28 polar bears, eight brown bears and one American black bear. Polar bear alleles are found to be introgressed into brown bears not only near a previously identified admixture zone on the Alaskan Admiralty, Baranof, and Chichagof (ABC) Islands, but also far into the North American mainland. Elegantly contrasting admixture levels at autosomal and X-chromosomal markers, Cahill and colleagues infer that male-biased dispersal has spread these introgressed alleles away from the late Pleistocene contact zone. Compared to a previous study on the ABC Island population in which an Alaskan brown bear served as a putatively admixture-free reference, Cahill et al. (2014) utilize a newly sequenced Swedish brown bear as admixture baseline. This approach reveals that brown bears have been impacted by introgression from polar bears to a larger extent (up to 8.8% of their genome), than previously known, including the bear that had previously served as admixture baseline. No evidence for brown into polar bear introgression is found, which the authors argue could be a consequence of selection. Besides adding new exciting pieces to the puzzle of polar/brown bear evolutionary history, the study by Cahill and colleagues highlights that wildlife genomics is moving from analyzing single genomes towards a landscape genomics approach.
Genomic studies are revealing a wealth of information about past evolutionary events. For instance, we are gaining insights into the dynamic nature of species integrity over time, and how factors like climate and demography have influenced the coexistence and adaptation of differentiated phenotypes.

For studies of introgression, the presence of a pure, non-admixed genotype is required as a baseline for accurate estimation of admixture rates. In human genetics research, relatively admixture-free populations from sub-Saharan Africa have been used for quantification of Neanderthal admixture in our genomes, and populations from outside Asian and Oceania for quantification of Denisovan ancestry (Sánchez-Quinto & Lalueza-Fox 2015). However, such information is lacking for most study systems, complicating the quantification of admixture levels.

Polar and brown bears and their history of admixture on the Alaskan ABC Islands
Polar and brown bears are sister species whose evolutionary histories are intertwined by introgressive hybridization and incomplete lineage sorting (ILS). Recently, Cahill et al. (2013) used extensive demographic modeling to demonstrate that the genomes of brown bears on the ABC Islands derive from a Pleistocene polar bear population that over time received extensive male-biased gene flow from mainland brown bears. This process has retained only a small proportion of polar bear alleles on the ABC Islands, with a gradual conversion into a brown bear-like genotype and phenotype.

In this issue of Molecular Ecology, Cahill et al. (2014) add three brown bear genomes to other recently sequenced bear genomes, mining the data for signals of admixture using D and \( f \)-statistics (ABBA/BABA tests; Green et al. 2010; Durand et al. 2011). Utilizing a newly sequenced Swedish brown bear as a baseline, Cahill et al. (2014) report 5.9-8.8% of polar bear ancestry on the autosomes and 7.5-9.7% on the X chromosomes of five ABC-Islands brown bears. Interestingly, the brown bear from Admiralty Island that was analyzed in both studies (Cahill et al. 2013, 2014) now shows much higher polar bear ancestry (autosomes: 6.0%, X-chromosome: 7.6%) than in the previous study (autosomes: <1%, X-chromosome: 6.5%) when using an Alaskan brown bear as admixture-free reference. The new baseline also reveals that the Alaskan mainland brown bear individual that was previously used as an admixture baseline (Cahill et al. 2013) in fact shows clear signals of polar bear introgression. This bear shows a reversed discordance in admixture levels between the autosomes and the X chromosome compared to ABC Island bears: on the mainland, introgression is lower on the X than on the autosomes, which can be explained by male-biased dispersal not only to but also from the ABC Islands. Hence, based on different contributions of male or female dispersers to the gene pool of autosomes and X chromosomes, (Cahill et al. 2013, 2014) recover a fascinating evolutionary history of ABC Islands bears: male brown bears bringing brown bear alleles onto the islands, and male bears also dispersing off the islands – carrying some polar bear alleles onto the continent. Last but not least, the present study by Cahill and colleagues highlights that the quantification of admixture levels can be sensitive to the baseline reference employed.

The baseline problem: how can we be certain that the admixture of an individual is zero?
But – is the Swedish brown bear actually admixture-free? Cahill et al. (2014) found that in their data set, this individual showed the lowest amount of polar bear alleles. However, if this individual also proves to carry introgressed polar bear alleles, the admixture proportions in North American brown bears may require additional adjustment. How likely is it that polar bear alleles are found in brown bears across their range?

Mitochondrial (mt) DNA has provided evidence for at least two additional hybridization events between polar and brown bears, besides the ABC Islands case. Polar bear-like mtDNA has been found in Pleistocene fossil remains from Alaska and in now-extinct brown bears on Ireland (Edwards et al. 2011). This indicates that the two bear species hybridized several times over their evolutionary past. Dispersal could further distribute introgressed alleles far away from the original admixture zone.

Hence, polar bear alleles could conceivably be found in many locations across the brown bear range. This would resemble the findings from humans, where introgressed Neanderthal and Denisovan alleles have been dispersed across large distances (Sánchez-Quinto & Lalueza-Fox 2015).

Direction of introgression in polar and brown bears, and the enigmatic evolutionary history of polar bear mtDNA
One intriguing finding by Cahill et al. (2014) is the lack of evidence for introgression of nuclear markers into polar bears. Introgression may thus have been unidirectional, occurring only from polar into brown bears and not vice versa. Cahill and colleagues discuss how ecological factors could lead to a selective disadvantage for hybrids attempting to survive and reproduce in polar bear habitat, explaining the present findings (see also Welch et al. 2014).

The low effective population size of polar bears implies that ILS has a smaller impact on this species’ genome, facilitating the detection of recent introgression by D and \( f \)-statistics (Green et al. 2011).
branching could hypothetically explain the discrepancy between divergence time estimates.

Introggression of brown bear mtDNA into polar bears during the late Pleistocene and subsequent spreading of this variant across the arctic (Edwards et al. 2011; Hailer et al. 2012) hence remains a viable hypothesis. Polar bears would then have served as a ‘vector’ for brown bear mtDNA, transporting it into areas as disjunct as the ABC Islands and Ireland.

The same process that has been reconstructed for the ABC Islands (Cahill et al. 2013, 2014) might have acted in another late Pleistocene contact zone in coastal regions – Ireland (Edwards et al. 2011). It would be interesting to see whether nuclear DNA can be retrieved from these Irish bear remains.

Conclusion
The study by Cahill et al. (2014) is an elegant demonstration of the wealth of evolutionary information that can be retrieved from the genome. Analysis of differentially inherited components of the genome – as done here for autosomes and the X chromosome - can reveal important aspects of sex-biased gene flow. In addition, the study is a reminder that, even when we have information from the entire genomes of several individuals available for analysis, another component is crucial to consider: where (and when) were the individuals sampled? After years of genomicists being proponents of gathering ever increasing amounts of information from single genomes for accurate parameter estimation, the field is now moving on to an old insight – different individuals capture different aspects of evolutionary history.

References


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Sequences Reveal that Polar Bears Are an Old and Distinct Bear Lineage.” Science, 339, 1522–1522.

Fig. 1: A brown bear in the Finnish taiga. Polar and brown bears share a complex evolutionary history - this individual might carry some polar bear DNA in its mostly brown bear-like genome. (Photo ©: Hansruedi Weyrich, www.weyrichfoto.ch)