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Perspectives from the French workshop on the development and validation of biomarkers and bioassays for the monitoring of aquatic environments

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1 Workshop objectives and main outcomes

During the past three decades, there has been an increasing interest in the field of ecotoxicology for development of effect-based monitoring tools (EBMTs) including in vitro tests, biomarkers and whole organism bioassays. This interest is due to the practical application of EBMTs in the surveillance of the quality of water and aquatic ecosystems (ICES, 2008). Within this framework, these ecotoxicological tools seem to offer numerous potential advantages, as they allow one to take into account the cumulative impact of the whole contaminants present in the field, and the bio-available and active fractions of toxicants as well as their degradation bioaccumulation, biotransformation (Lam and Gray, 2003; Hecker and Hollert, 2009). Hence, they are often seen as complementary tools to conventional environmental monitoring approaches, mostly based on the measurement of a predefined list of chemical substances in various aquatic compartments (water, sediments and biota) and the analyses of indices of biological integrity (OSPAR 2004). Due to these research activities, several core EBMTs (SGIMC, 2011) are now well characterised and may be directly used to assess the quality of the aquatic environment under a European consensus (Table 1; Sanchez and Porcher, 2009; Lyons et al., 2010). However, if EBMTs are widely used in research studies and provide, at geographically and temporally limited scales, data on ecotoxicological status of water bodies, few applications of EBMTs are currently implemented in regulatory environmental monitoring programs.

The workshop on “the development and validation of effect-based monitoring tools for aquatic environment monitoring” was held the 17th November 2010 in Verneuil en Halatte, France. It was organized by the French Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks (INERIS), the French Research Institute for Exploration of the Sea (IFREMER) and the French Agency for Water and Aquatic Environments (ONEMA). The major aims of this workshop were i) to compile and review state of art on biomarker and bioassay currently used
in environmental risk assessment; ii) to identify of scientific and technical limitations 
hampering the implementation of these biomarkers/bioassays in environmental monitoring 
programs; and iii) to highlight research needs and organise future applications of EBMTs. 
Workshop attendees (i.e. representatives of French research institutions, environmental 
managers and decision makers) agreed on the potential interest of EBMTs for water body 
and/or effluent monitoring (Table 2). Moreover, the need of EBMT validation and 
standardisation recognised in national and international quality assurance programmes was 
clearly identify as a key challenge to be met for these indicators to be deployed in future 
marine and freshwater environmental monitoring programmes. The French National 
Reference Laboratory for Water (AQUAREF), the International Council for the Exploration 
of the Sea (ICES) and the network of reference laboratories for monitoring of emerging 
environmental pollutants (NORMAN) were considered as suitable European platforms for the 
validation and standardization of candidate EBMTs. To complete these conclusions, several 
research needs and knowledge gaps were identified such as the identification of relevant 
 sentinel species, the definition of reference values and assessment criteria and also 
development of specific tools for data analysis.

2 Workshop perspectives and current activities

Since October 2010, several activities were planned and/or organized to facilitate EBMT 
validation and the methodological transfer to environmental managers in accordance with 
workshop conclusions. In a first step, an inventory of biomarkers and in vitro bioassays 
available in French research laboratories was conducted in cooperation with the marine ICES 
Study Group on Integrated Monitoring of Contaminants and Biological Effects (SGIMC 
2011). This work benefited from the contributions by other European countries, including 
Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Norway, the United Kingdom and The 
Netherlands. This exhaustive inventory distinguishes well-characterised EBMTs and tools for
which development is still needed due to a lack of data related to response specificity, basal level or interactions with physiological and environmental factors. This European-wide survey will be integrated in the technical report on effect-based monitoring tools, which is in preparation by the Sub-Group on Chemical monitoring and emerging pollutants (SG-CMEP) of the Working Group E on chemical aspects (WG-E) of the DG Environment of European Commission.

As recommended by workshop attendees, an action aiming at the standardisation of EBMTs was initiated by the French AQUAREF laboratory. During the first year, the aim is to define a clear validation process for biomarkers and bioassays based on the European experience acquired by the ICES Working Group on Biological Effects of the Chemical Contaminants (WGBEC, 2010) and in the NORMAN Working Group on “Validation of biomarkers and bioassays for aquatic environment monitoring” (WG2). In the following years, this methodology will be applied to biological indicators selected in the EBMT inventory by a working group operating under the mandate of AQUAREF. This exercise will entail validation or rejection of EBMTs, or identification of missing data required to define validation status. To complete this work, a comparison study will be organised during Autumn 2012 in collaboration with the NORMAN network (WG2 and WG on “Field-relevance based approaches for hazardous pollutant identification” (WG3)). This campaign is designed i) to compare assay performances for a same EBMT; ii) to assess the potential of various EBMTs for a same effect or mechanism of action; and iii) to evaluate various data analysis tools. For this purpose, two river basins exhibiting reference sites and various environmental pressures will be investigated and chemical contamination of investigated sites will be characterized. This comparison study will be opened to all interested institutions and laboratories working on EBMTs and the conclusion will be discussed in relation with the
ICON marine monitoring programme deployed in the European North-East Atlantic coasts (Hylland et al., 2009).

According to the workshop conclusions, the work on EBMT validation performed by NORMAN and ICON network and AQUAREF laboratory can significantly contribute to the future implementation of these assessment tools in major environmental legislations related to water and aquatic ecosystems and especially in the European Water Framework Directive and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. Concurrently, this experience seems to be relevant to develop a strong academic research to develop novel biomarkers and bioassays able to address new challenges in ecotoxicology such as emerging pollutants (manufactured nanoparticles, GMOs), or the combined effects of chemical stress and climate change on aquatic ecosystems.

Acknowledgements

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References

French National Reference Laboratory for Water (AQUAREF). http://www.aquaref.fr/


International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). http://www.ices.dk/


Table 1. List of core Effect-Based Monitoring Tools (EBMTs) that could be used in environmental monitoring programs (adapted from Sanchez and Porcher, 2009; Lyons et al., 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of EBMTs</th>
<th>EBMT name</th>
<th>Data provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In vitro bioassay</td>
<td>DR-CALUX</td>
<td>Contamination by dioxin-like compounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomarker</td>
<td>EROD activity</td>
<td>Exposure to dioxin-like compounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomarker</td>
<td>Vitellogenin</td>
<td>Exposure to estrogenic compounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomarker</td>
<td>Lysosomal stability</td>
<td>General health status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomarker</td>
<td>Acetylcholinesterase</td>
<td>Exposure to neurotoxic compounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-organism bioassay</td>
<td>Growth of sea urchin embryo</td>
<td>Toxic potential of environmental matrices for organisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-organism bioassay</td>
<td>Abnormality of bivalve embryo</td>
<td>Toxic potential of environmental matrices for organisms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Summary of workshop conclusions on Effect-Based Monitoring Tools (EBMTs): potential applications according to needs of environmental managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs of environmental managers</th>
<th>EBMTs and application strategies</th>
<th>Environmental legislation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of effluents</td>
<td>In vitro and whole organism bioassays</td>
<td>Financial regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water body monitoring</td>
<td>Biomarker in wild or caged organisms</td>
<td>WFD, MSFD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of specific site impact</td>
<td>Weight of evidence approach, Effect-Directed Analysis</td>
<td>WFD investigative, MSFD monitoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>