Harmonizing methods for wildlife abundance estimation and pathogen detection in Europe-a questionnaire survey on three selected host-pathogen combinations

Abstract: The need for wildlife health surveillance as part of disease control in wildlife, domestic animals and humans on the global level is widely recognized. However, the objectives, methods and intensity of existing wildlife health surveillance programs vary greatly among European countries, resulting in a patchwork of data that are difficult to merge and compare. This survey aimed at evaluating the need and potential for data harmonization in wildlife health in Europe. The specific objective was to collect information on methods currently used to estimate host abundance and pathogen prevalence. Questionnaires were designed to gather detailed information for three host-pathogen combinations: (1) wild boar and Aujeszky’s disease virus, (2) red fox and Echinococcus multilocularis, and (3) common vole and Francisella tularensis.

Results: We received a total of 70 responses from 19 European countries. Regarding host abundance, hunting bags are currently the most widely accessible data source for widely distributed mid-sized and larger mammals such as red fox and wild boar, but we observed large differences in hunting strategies among countries as well as among different regions within countries. For small rodents, trapping is the method of choice, but practical applications vary among study sites. Laboratory procedures are already largely harmonized but information on the sampled animals is not systematically collected.

Conclusions: The answers revealed that a large amount of information is available for the selected host-pathogen pairs and that in theory methods are already largely harmonized. However, the comparability of the data remains strongly compromised by local differences in the way, the methods are applied in practice. While these issues may easily be overcome for prevalence estimation, there is an urgent need to develop tools for the routine collection of host abundance data in a harmonized way. Wildlife health experts are encouraged to apply the harmonized APHAEA protocols in epidemiological studies in wildlife and to increase cooperation.

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