

1 **Molecular processes of transgenerational acclimation to a warming ocean**

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22 Some animals have the remarkable capacity to acclimate across generations to projected  
23 future climate change<sup>1-4</sup>; however, the underlying molecular processes are unknown. We  
24 sequenced and assembled *de novo* transcriptomes of adult tropical reef fish exposed  
25 developmentally or transgenerationally to projected future ocean temperatures and  
26 correlated the resulting expression profiles with acclimated metabolic traits from the  
27 same fish. We identified 69 contigs representing 53 key genes involved in thermal  
28 acclimation of aerobic capacity. Metabolic genes were among the most upregulated  
29 transgenerationally suggesting shifts in energy production for maintaining performance at  
30 elevated temperatures. Furthermore, immune and stress responsive genes were  
31 upregulated transgenerationally, indicating a new complement of genes allowing the  
32 second generation of fish to better cope with elevated temperatures. Other differentially  
33 expressed genes were involved with tissue development and transcriptional regulation.  
34 Overall, we found a similar suite of differentially expressed genes among developmental  
35 and transgenerational treatments. Heat shock protein genes were surprisingly  
36 unresponsive, indicating that short-term heat stress responses may not be a good  
37 indicator of long-term acclimation capacity. Our results are the first to reveal the  
38 molecular processes that may enable marine fishes to adjust to a future warmer  
39 environment over multiple generations.

40 Over the next century, rising ocean temperatures due to climate change will pose a serious  
41 threat to the survival of many aquatic species. To persist, populations will either need to  
42 shift their geographic distributions<sup>5</sup> or adapt through genetic evolution or phenotypic  
43 plasticity<sup>6-8</sup>. Of particular concern for marine species, is that rising temperatures will reduce

44 the capacity for oxygen supply and delivery<sup>9,10</sup>, limiting activities essential to survival and  
45 individual fitness. Reduced aerobic scope (the capacity for oxygen uptake above resting  
46 metabolic rate) at higher temperatures can affect vital functions such as growth, swimming  
47 performance, reproduction and competitive ability<sup>10-14</sup>. In reef fishes, aerobic scope declines  
48 at temperatures just a few degrees above the summer average, within the range projected  
49 to occur as a result of climate change<sup>9,12,15</sup>. However, aerobic capacity can be fully restored  
50 transgenerationally, when parents and their offspring both experience the same elevated  
51 temperatures (transgenerational acclimation)<sup>1</sup>. Understanding the molecular processes that  
52 make this transgenerational plasticity possible is important for assessing the performance of  
53 marine organisms and sustainability of their populations in a rapidly warming ocean.

54 We used a multi-generational rearing experiment to identify the molecular pathways  
55 associated with transgenerational thermal acclimation of metabolic traits in a common reef  
56 fish, *Acanthochromis polyacanthus*. Second generation fish were reared developmentally  
57 (from hatching to adulthood) and transgenerationally (two generations) at two elevated  
58 temperatures (+1.5 and +3.0 °C) and in control conditions (+0.0 °C; Fig. 1a). The full  
59 transcriptome of four to five adult fish from each of the five treatments (Fig. 1a) was  
60 sequenced and expression data correlated to standardised metabolic traits from the same  
61 fish: routine metabolic rate (RMR), maximum metabolic rate (MMR) and net aerobic scope  
62 (MMR - RMR; NAS; Supplementary Methods). As observed in previous studies<sup>1</sup>,  
63 developmental exposure to elevated temperatures from just after hatching into adulthood  
64 led to a reduction in aerobic scope (Fig. 1b). However, when both parents and offspring  
65 were exposed to elevated temperatures, complete restoration of aerobic scope was  
66 achieved (Fig. 1b). Of 89,543 assembled contiguous sequences (contigs), 165 had significant

67 differential expression (adjusted  $P < 0.05$ ) in at least one of the treatment comparisons  
68 (transgenerational and developmental treatments vs. control; transgenerational vs.  
69 developmental treatments). One hundred and sixty of the differentially expressed contigs  
70 had BLASTN and/or BLASTP<sup>16</sup> sequence matches with e-values less than  $10^{-10}$ , of which 69  
71 had expression that was significantly correlated to at least one of the standardised  
72 metabolic measures (RMR, MMR, and NAS). Comparing transgenerational and  
73 developmental treatments at the same temperatures enabled us to distinguish patterns of  
74 gene expression due to transgenerational effects, compared with effects of within-  
75 generation exposure to elevated temperatures.

76 The 69 differentially expressed and correlated contigs represent 52 genes that are  
77 associated with transgenerational thermal acclimation. These genes are involved in a variety  
78 of cellular processes such as metabolism, transport, immune and stress responses, growth  
79 and development, cell cycle, cell organisation, and transcriptional regulation (Fig. 2;  
80 Supplementary Table 1). The expression profiles of these contigs separated into three  
81 distinct groups, with the first and largest group (Fig. 2a; 46 contigs) containing contigs with  
82 expression that primarily correlated to the acclimating phenotypic trait, NAS (78%).  
83 Metabolism is the major function associated with genes in this group (lipid, protein, and  
84 carbohydrate metabolism; nine, nine, and five contigs each, respectively), including 79% of  
85 the most highly upregulated contigs transgenerationally relative to controls ( $\geq 1.5$  log<sub>2</sub> fold  
86 change; Supplementary Table 1). During thermal stress, the composition of lipid  
87 membranes is altered (homeoviscous adaptation)<sup>17</sup> and there are changes in lipid use<sup>18</sup> and  
88 expression of the fatty acid pathway<sup>19</sup>. Of the nine contigs associated with lipid metabolism,  
89 six were strongly upregulated in transgenerational treatments (representing four genes:

90 acsl5, adtrp, apoEb, and pdzk1). ApoE has a major role in triglyceride and cholesterol  
91 homeostasis, suggesting that transgenerational upregulation of lipid metabolism may be  
92 critical for improved aerobic scope. ApoE and other apolipoproteins are also upregulated  
93 after short-term thermal challenge in fish<sup>20,21</sup>, suggesting a link between short-term thermal  
94 stress and long-term thermal acclimation of aerobic capacity. Many of the metabolic genes  
95 in the first group (Fig. 2a) are involved in catabolism and digestion (Supplementary Table 1),  
96 suggesting their augmented expression provides increased energy for aerobic performance  
97 in transgenerational fish (Supplementary Table 1). Supporting this hypothesis, 11 contigs are  
98 involved in the cellular transport of ions, solutes, amino acids, lipids, and carbohydrates,  
99 possibly as a result of increased substrate digestion. Our results suggest that there is  
100 transgenerational regulation of lipid, protein, and carbohydrate metabolism and that each  
101 may be critical for increased energy use associated with acclimation of aerobic scope across  
102 generations.

103 In addition to metabolic responses, sixteen contigs with putative functions associated with  
104 immune responses and inflammation, apoptosis, homeostasis, and stress were significantly  
105 upregulated during transgenerational thermal acclimation (Fig. 2a). Immune responses can  
106 be maternally imprinted in fish<sup>22</sup>, potentially by transferring maternal idiotypic networks to  
107 juveniles at a critical stage<sup>23</sup>. Such imprinting, we hypothesise, would then be augmented  
108 throughout development to establish an immune response better suited for survival under  
109 thermal stress. As chronic stress can suppress immune function and lead to increased  
110 susceptibility to disease and pathogens<sup>24</sup>, the transgenerational augmentation of five  
111 putative immune-related contigs (gimap8, xpnpep2, mep1b, and natterin3) may represent

112 new baseline levels of immune-related genes to protect against elevated temperatures  
113 experienced across generations.

114 The second major group of genes (Fig. 2b) is comprised of 12 contigs, all of which had  
115 expression that was negatively correlated to standardised RMR. RMR was lower in fish  
116 exposed transgenerationally to +3.0 °C compared with controls (Supplementary Fig. 1). The  
117 high proportion of contigs in this group with putative function in organ development (two  
118 contigs; *ppdpfa* and *ptf1a*) and endothelial cell proliferation (four contigs; *nlrp14* and *timp2*)  
119 suggests that lower metabolic costs enabled these cellular processes to function at a higher  
120 level in transgenerationally acclimated fish, which is consistent with acclimation of growth  
121 rates in fish exposed transgenerationally to elevated temperatures<sup>3,4</sup>. In addition, this group  
122 contains five contigs related to transcriptional regulation (three genes: *rorb*, *ptf1a*, and  
123 *rps27*), two of which enhance expression of genes involved in organogenesis (*rorb*, *ptf1a*).  
124 The third gene, *rps27*, is a nuclear protein induced upon DNA damage<sup>25</sup>. Therefore,  
125 increased transgenerational expression and negative correlation to standardised RMR  
126 suggest *rps27* plays a role in maintaining DNA integrity after transgenerational exposure to  
127 elevated temperatures to restore routine metabolic function.

128 While the first two groups in the heatmap (Fig. 2a, Fig. 2b) contained contigs with  
129 expression that was significantly elevated transgenerationally, the third group (Fig. 2c)  
130 contained 11 contigs (16% of total) with expression that was downregulated  
131 transgenerationally. The majority of these contigs had expression that positively correlated  
132 to standardised RMR (64%; seven contigs) and largely matched genes with functions related  
133 to stress, homeostasis, and immune responses (Supplementary Table 1). As many other  
134 stress and immune-related genes were upregulated transgenerationally in the first two

135 groups, the downregulated genes with these functions in the final group suggests their  
136 expression was reduced in favour of other more beneficial genes for transgenerational  
137 acclimation.

138 The heatmap indicates that many contigs had higher differential expression in  
139 transgenerational compared with developmental treatments (Fig. 2); however, only three  
140 were statistically significant: cytochrome p450 2j2 (*cyp2j2*), ribosomal protein large P1  
141 (*rplp1*), and an uncharacterised gene (Supplementary Table 1). *Cyp2j2* is associated with  
142 epoxidation of arachidonic acid<sup>26</sup>, of which the primary products formed,  
143 epoxyeicosatrienoic acids, are involved in a variety of processes such as vasodilation, anti-  
144 inflammation, and cytoprotection. For example, *cyp2j2* appears to play a cytoprotective role  
145 in animals exposed to hypoxia<sup>27</sup> and high-fat diets<sup>28</sup>. Thus, we hypothesize that increased  
146 transgenerational *cyp2j2* expression may play an important cytoprotective role, allowing  
147 proper cellular function after transgenerational but not developmental exposure to elevated  
148 temperatures. *Rplp1* plays a key role in the elongation step of protein synthesis. Therefore,  
149 *rplp1* may be required in developmental treatments to increase protein translation due to a  
150 higher rate of protein degradation during thermal stress, but is no longer required  
151 transgenerationally due to the aforementioned increases in cytoprotective gene expression.  
152 Importantly, there was only one contig (*btn1a1*) that was significantly differentially  
153 expressed in developmental but not transgenerational treatments (Supplementary Table 1).  
154 This suggests that there is not a different suite of genes and cellular processes engaged  
155 during developmental exposure to elevated temperatures compared with transgenerational  
156 acclimation.

157 A commonly used molecular measure of thermal stress has been to examine molecular  
158 chaperone expression, specifically heat shock proteins (HSPs). Some HSPs are constitutively  
159 expressed and are involved in nascent polypeptide folding, while others are expressed to  
160 help refold proteins that unfolded due to various stressors<sup>29</sup>. We found no HSP genes with  
161 significantly altered expression in developmental or transgenerational *A. polyacanthus*. Of  
162 all 160 significantly differentially expressed contigs identified in this study, including contigs  
163 with expression that did and did not correlate to metabolic traits (Supplementary Fig. 2),  
164 only one matched a gene with putative chaperone function: eukaryotic translation  
165 elongation factor 1a (eef1a). This gene has been shown to protect aminoacyl-tRNA  
166 synthetases from denaturation in mammals<sup>30</sup>, and may therefore have a more specific role  
167 in maintaining the integrity of transgenerational protein synthesis in our study. While  
168 contigs with matches for many HSPs were found within the *A. polyacanthus* transcriptome,  
169 none were significantly differentially expressed among the five treatments (Fig. 3; adjusted  
170  $P > 0.7$ ). Therefore, the lack of differential HSP gene expression and limited chaperone  
171 activity suggests that other genes outlined in this study are better indicators of  
172 transgenerational thermal acclimation, at least in *A. polyacanthus*. While HSPs may be good  
173 indicators of acute thermal stress<sup>29,31</sup>, our results suggest they may not be good indicators  
174 of the capacity for long-term thermal acclimation to predicted temperatures under climate  
175 change.

176 Acclimation of aerobic scope within two generations<sup>1</sup> suggests epigenetic inheritance is  
177 involved. Future research into epigenetic mechanisms and their effect on genes identified in  
178 this study will be useful to improve our understanding of adaptive responses to rapid  
179 environmental change. In this study we identified key genes and processes involved in



180 transgenerational thermal acclimation, including genes involved in enhanced fatty acid  
181 oxidation, protein and carbohydrate metabolism, and changes in genes involved in  
182 cytoprotection, immunity, organogenesis, and cellular organisation. The plasticity of these  
183 genes and their strong correlation to known acclimating phenotypic traits suggests they may  
184 be critical in aiding reef fishes, and possibly other marine organisms to survive in a warmer  
185 future environment.

### 186 **Methods Summary**

187 Two generations of *A. polyacanthus* were reared as per Donelson *et al.*<sup>1</sup> and livers were  
188 dissected from control, developmental, and transgenerational temperature treated adults.  
189 mRNA was extracted and cDNA libraries constructed for transcriptome sequencing on an  
190 Illumina HiSeq 2000 platform analyser. Reads were assembled *de novo* using Trans-ABYSS<sup>32</sup>.  
191 Normalised transcriptome expression data was validated by quantitative real-time PCR for  
192 eight genes, consisting of both up and downregulated genes (Supplementary Fig. 3,  
193 Supplementary Table 2). Standardised metabolic measurements (RMR, MMR and NAS;  
194 Supplementary Methods) for each individual were correlated to the normalised and  
195 variance stabilised expression data for each contig, of which only those with a significant ( $P$   
196  $\leq 0.05$ ) correlation were selected.

### 197 **Online Content**

198 Methods, Supplementary tables, and additional Supplementary display items are available  
199 in the online version of the paper; references unique to these sections appear only in the  
200 online paper.

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#### 210 **Author contributions**

211 J.M.D. and P.L.M. designed and managed the fish rearing experiments. J.M.D. performed  
212 metabolism experiments. H.D.V. prepared samples for sequencing. T.Ry. assembled  
213 transcriptome. T.Ry., T. Ra., L.S., and Y.G. analysed expression and assessed assembly  
214 quality. H.D.V. performed qRT-PCR expression validation. H.D.V. analysed the data. H.D.V.,  
215 P.L.M., T.Ry., J.M.D., L.v.H., M.L.B., W.L., and T.Ra. wrote the paper and all authors read and  
216 approved the manuscript.

#### 217 **Additional information**

218 RNA-seq transcriptome sequences have been deposited in GenBank under BioProject ID  
219 PRJNA255544. The authors declare no competing financial interests. Supplementary  
220 information accompanies this paper on <http://www.nature.com/nature>. Reprints and  
221 permissions information is available online at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>.  
222 Correspondence and request for material should be addressed to P.L.M and T.Ra.

#### 223 **Figure Legends**

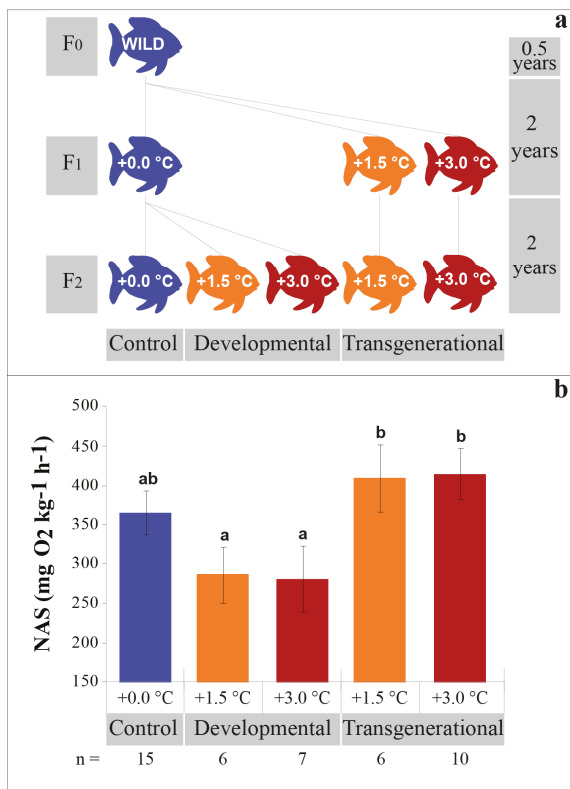
224 **Figure 1 | Transgenerational experimental design and corresponding net aerobic scope**  
225 **measures. a**, Experimental design tree showing the three temperature treatments (+0.0 °C,  
226 +1.5 °C and +3.0 °C) at which three generations (F<sub>0</sub>, F<sub>1</sub> and F<sub>2</sub>) of *Acanthochromis*  
227 *polyacanthus* were reared. Temperature treatments are colour coded and experimental  
228 duration for each generation is shown in the vertical grey bars to the right. Fish in the F<sub>2</sub>  
229 generation representing control, developmental and transgenerational temperature

230 treatments are indicated by horizontal grey bars. **b**, Net aerobic scope (NAS) of fish in  
231 control, developmental and transgenerational F<sub>2</sub> treatments (mean ± s.e.m.). Lower case  
232 letters above bars indicate significant differences (P < 0.05) among treatments. Number of  
233 fish used to measure NAS for each treatment is shown beneath the grey bars.

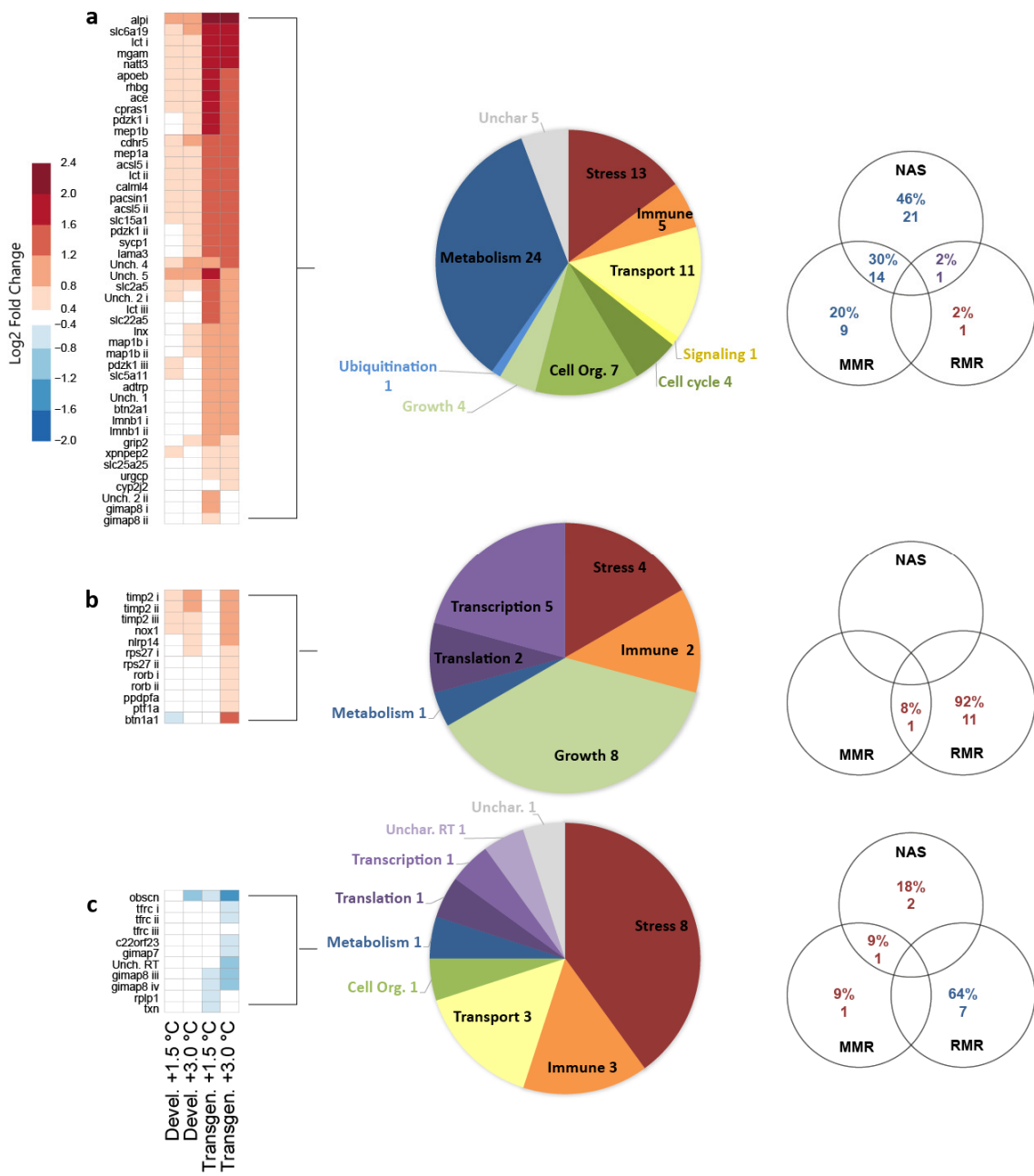
234 **Figure 2 | Differentially expressed contigs, correlations to metabolic performance, and**  
235 **putative cellular function.** Heatmap (left) of differentially expressed contigs (adjusted P <  
236 0.05) from *Acanthochromis polyacanthus*, comparing +1.5 °C and +3.0 °C developmental  
237 (devel.) and transgenerational (transgen.) treatments to control (+0.0 °C). Based on  
238 expression patterns, contigs were separated into three groups (a, b, and c). The associated  
239 cellular functions for each group are presented as pie charts (middle), with each contig  
240 represented by two functions with the exception of those that were uncharacterised.  
241 Numbers within pie chart sections represent the total number of contigs that correspond to  
242 that function. Venn diagrams (right) indicate the proportion of contigs with expression that  
243 positively (blue) or negatively (red) correlated to metabolic data (NAS - net aerobic scope,  
244 MMR - maximum metabolic rate, and RMR - routine metabolic rate). Purple text indicates  
245 negative NAS and positive RMR.

246 **Figure 3 | Heat shock protein (HSP) contig expression pattern.** Heatmap of HSP expression  
247 from *Acanthochromis polyacanthus*, comparing +1.5 °C and +3.0 °C developmental (devel.)  
248 and transgenerational (transgen.) treatments to control (+0.0 °C). There were no significant  
249 differences in expression (adjusted P < 0.05). Expression values correspond to the contig  
250 with the best match (E-value < 10<sup>-27</sup>) to HSP genes within our transcriptome.

251 **Figure 1.**



252 **Figure 2.**





253 **Figure 3.**

