# Microplastics in Aquaculture

**Manav Khoraba[1]*, Prakash Parmar[2], Ketan Tank[3] and Alwinpeter M[4]**

*[1]PG Scholar, Department of Aquaculture,*
*College of Fisheries Science, Kamdhenu University, Veraval, Gujarat, India.*
*[2]Associate Professor,*
*Fisheries Research and Training Centre, Kamdhenu University, Mahuva, Gujarat, India*
*[3]Professor, Department of Aquaculture,*
*College of Fisheries Science, Kamdhenu University, Veraval, Gujarat, India.*
*[4]PhD Scholar, Department of Aquaculture,*
*Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies, Kochi, Kerala, India*

**Corresponding Author**
Manav Khoraba
Email: manavkhoraba54@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

Microplastics, defined as plastic particles smaller than 5 mm, have become ubiquitous contaminants in aquatic environments and pose emerging threats to aquaculture sustainability. In aquaculture systems, microplastics enter via multiple pathways, including contaminated aquafeeds, polluted source waters, degradation of plastic-based equipment and infrastructure, and atmospheric deposition. Once introduced, their distribution and accumulation are governed by hydrodynamics, particle properties such as density, size, and shape, and biological interactions, leading to retention in water columns, sediments, and cultured organisms. Ingestion of microplastics by farmed fish and shellfish can cause physical damage, impaired growth, and altered behaviour, while sorbed or inherent chemicals contribute to toxicological impacts such as oxidative stress, endocrine disruption, and reproductive impairment, with implications for seafood safety. Mitigating these risks demands a multifaceted strategy encompassing improved waste and plastic management, the development and adoption of biodegradable or less persistent materials, and the implementation of robust regulatory, monitoring, and awareness measures tailored to

aquaculture value chains.

## INTRODUCTION

Microplastics, characterized as plastic particles less than 5 mm in size, have emerged as pervasive contaminants in both marine and freshwater systems. These pollutants originate from multiple sources, such as the breakdown of larger plastic debris, microbeads in personal care products, and synthetic fibres from textiles. The widespread presence of microplastics in aquatic environments is alarming, particularly within the aquaculture sector.

Aquaculture, the cultivation of aquatic organisms including fish, crustaceans, molluscs, and aquatic plants, is a rapidly growing industry crucial to global food security and economic stability. However, the sustainability of aquaculture is increasingly jeopardized by microplastic contamination. These minute particles infiltrate aquaculture systems through various channels, accumulate in the environment, and are ingested by aquatic organisms, leading to a myriad of harmful effects.

## 1. SOURCES OF MICROPLASTICS IN AQUACULTURE

Microplastics infiltrate aquaculture environments through diverse pathways, including feed, water supply, equipment and infrastructure, and atmospheric deposition.

**a. Feed:** Commercial aquafeeds, vital for the growth and health of farmed aquatic species, have been identified as a significant source of microplastics. These feeds may contain microplastic particles either as contaminants from the manufacturing process or as deliberate additives to enhance specific properties.A study by Karbalaei *et al*. (2018) revealed the presence of microplastics in several commercial fish feeds, with contamination occurring during production. These microplastics, ranging from fragments of larger plastics to microbeads, can be ingested by farmed fish and other aquatic organisms, potentially leading to bioaccumulation and biomagnification in the food chain.

b. **Water Supply:** Water sources used in aquaculture, such as rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, often carry microplastics from upstream pollution sources, including urban runoff, industrial discharges, and wastewater effluents. Once introduced into aquaculture systems, these microplastics can settle in sediments or remain suspended in the water column, posing a risk of ingestion by aquatic organisms.

Murphy *et al.* (2016) reported higher concentrations of microplastics in water bodies near urban areas, exacerbated by inadequate wastewater treatment, leading to continuous microplastic pollution in aquaculture environments.

**c. Equipment and Infrastructure:** Plastic materials used in aquaculture equipment and infrastructure, such as nets, ropes, and cages, are significant sources of microplastics. Wear and tear of these materials release microplastic particles into the environment.

Lusher *et al*. (2017) documented that the degradation of plastic nets and ropes in aquaculture facilities results in the generation of microplastics, which can be ingested by aquatic organisms, posing health risks and reducing aquaculture productivity.

d. **Atmospheric Deposition:** Atmospheric deposition is another pathway through which microplastics enter aquaculture systems. Studies have shown that microplastics can be transported long distances through the atmosphere and settle in both terrestrial and aquatic environments.

Dris *et al*. (2016) found that synthetic fibres and other microplastic particles could be deposited from the atmosphere into water bodies, including those used for aquaculture. This highlights the pervasive nature of microplastic pollution and the challenges in preventing their entry into aquaculture systems.

## 2. DISTRIBUTION AND ACCUMULATION OF MICROPLASTICS

Microplastics distribute unevenly in aquaculture systems, accumulating in sediments, water columns, and biota, influenced by factors such as water currents and circulation patterns, physical and chemical properties of the microplastics, and biological interactions with organisms.

a. **Water Currents and Circulation Patterns:** Water currents and circulation patterns are crucial in the distribution of microplastics in aquaculture environments. Currents can transport microplastics over long distances, leading to widespread dispersal in marine and freshwater systems.

Isobe *et al*. (2014) found that currents and tidal movements significantly influenced the spread of microplastics in coastal and open ocean waters. In aquaculture systems, these dynamics result in the uneven distribution of microplastics, creating areas of varying concentrations.

b. **Physical and Chemical Properties of Microplastics:** The distribution and accumulation of microplastics in aquaculture environments are affected by their physical and chemical properties, such as density, size, and shape. For instance, lighter microplastics may remain suspended in the water column, while denser particles settle in sediments.

Hidalgo-Ruz *et al*. (2012) noted that microplastics with different densities and shapes exhibited varying behaviors in aquatic systems. In aquaculture, these properties determine whether microplastics remain accessible to filter feeders or settle in areas where benthic organisms are more likely to encounter them.

c. **Biological Interactions with Organisms:** Biological interactions, such as ingestion by aquatic organisms, influence the distribution and accumulation of microplastics. Once ingested, microplastics can be retained in the digestive systems or excreted, affecting their distribution within aquaculture systems.

Wright *et al*. (2013) reviewed the impacts of microplastics on organisms, noting that ingestion and subsequent egestion could redistribute microplastics in the environment. In aquaculture systems, this process can move microplastics from the water column to sediments and vice versa.

## 3. EFFECTS OF MICROPLASTICS ON AQUATIC ORGANISMS

Microplastics pose several risks to aquatic organisms in aquaculture, including ingestion and physical harm, chemical toxicity, and behavioural changes.

a. **Ingestion and Physical Harm:** Ingestion of microplastics by aquatic organisms can cause physical harm, including blockages in the digestive system, reduced feeding efficiency, and impaired growth. Farmed fish and shellfish are particularly vulnerable due to their feeding habits and the high concentrations of microplastics in aquaculture environments.

Browne *et al*. (2008) showed that mussels (Mytilus edulis) ingested microplastics, which then translocated to their circulatory system, causing blockages and reduced feeding efficiency, ultimately affecting the growth and health of farmed species.

**b. Chemical Toxicity:** Microplastics can adsorb harmful pollutants from the environment, which are then transferred to organisms upon ingestion. These pollutants include heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), and other toxic chemicals.

Rochman *et al*. (2013) found that microplastics in the environment could adsorb significant amounts of toxic chemicals, which were then ingested by organisms. This chemical toxicity can lead to adverse health effects, including endocrine disruption, reproductive issues, and increased mortality in aquaculture species.

**c. Behavioral Changes:** Exposure to microplastics can cause behavioural changes in aquatic organisms, affecting their survival and reproduction. Changes in feeding behaviour, predator avoidance, and reproductive success have been documented in various studies.

Lonnstedt and Eklov (2016) reported that larval fish exposed to microplastics exhibited altered behaviour, making them more susceptible to predation. In aquaculture, such behavioral changes can lead to reduced survival rates and decreased productivity.

## 4. MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Addressing the issue of microplastics in aquaculture requires a multifaceted approach, involving improved waste management, development of alternative materials, regulatory measures, and increased public awareness.

**a. Improving Waste Management:** Effective waste management practices can significantly reduce plastic waste entering aquatic environments. This includes enhancing recycling rates, reducing plastic use, and preventing plastic pollution.

Jambeck *et al*. (2015) stressed the importance of waste management in reducing plastic pollution. Better waste management practices around aquaculture facilities can help limit the introduction of microplastics into these systems.

**b. Developing Alternative Materials:** Using biodegradable or less harmful materials in aquaculture equipment and infrastructure can reduce microplastic generation. Alternatives to traditional plastics can minimize the environmental impact of aquaculture operations.

Gewert *et al*. (2015) discussed the potential of biodegradable plastics in reducing plastic pollution. Developing and adopting such materials in aquaculture can mitigate the release of microplastics from equipment and infrastructure.

c. **Regulating and Monitoring:** Stringent regulations and monitoring programs are crucial for controlling microplastic pollution in aquaculture environments. Regulations can set limits on microplastic levels and require regular monitoring to ensure compliance.

Galloway (2015) emphasized the need for regulatory measures to address microplastic pollution. Clear guidelines and monitoring programs can help manage microplastic levels in aquaculture systems, protecting farmed species and consumers.

## CONCLUSION

Microplastics present a substantial challenge to the sustainability of aquaculture, threatening aquatic organisms, human health, and environmental quality. A comprehensive approach, including improved waste management, development of alternative materials, regulatory measures, and public awareness, is essential to address this issue.

Future research should focus on understanding the long-term impacts of microplastics on aquaculture and developing innovative solutions to mitigate their presence. Collaboration among scientists, industry stakeholders, policymakers, and the public is crucial to effectively tackle this threat and ensure sustainable aquaculture practices.

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