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Opinion Article

Genetics and Biotechnology in Aquaculture: Revolutionizing Seafood Production

Samson Afewerki*

Department of Aquaculture, The Foundation for Industrial and Technical Research (SINTEF) Ocean, Trondheim, Norway

DESCRIPTION

Aquaculture is a rapidly growing industry, providing nearly half of the world's seafood supply. As global demand for seafood increases, the need to produce more efficient, sustainable, and resilient aquaculture systems has never been greater. One of the most transformative advancements in the field is the application of genetics and biotechnology, which are revolutionizing how aquatic species are bred, grown, and managed. These technologies offer the potential to improve growth rates, disease resistance, and environmental adaptability, all while minimizing the environmental footprint of aquaculture.

Genetic improvement for faster growth

One of the most well-known applications of genetics in aquaculture is the development of Genetically Modified (GM) fish that grow faster than their wild counterparts. The AquaBounty salmon, for example, has been genetically engineered to produce growth hormones year-round, enabling the fish to grow to market size in a shorter time frame-up to 1.5 times faster than conventional salmon. This innovation can help meet the increasing demand for seafood without expanding the area used for farming.

Disease resistance through genetic selection

Aquaculture is often plagued by disease outbreaks, which can spread rapidly and lead to significant losses. Traditional methods of disease control, such as antibiotics and chemicals, are becoming less effective and raise concerns about resistance and environmental harm. Genetics offers a more sustainable solution.

For example, researchers are using genetic selection to breed fish that are naturally resistant to common diseases such as sea lice, vibrio infections, and viral diseases. By identifying genetic markers associated with disease resistance, scientists can selectively breed fish that are better equipped to withstand pathogens. This reduces the need for chemical treatments and minimizes the impact on water quality, resulting in healthier, more resilient aquaculture systems.

Enhanced feed conversion efficiency

Feed is the largest operational cost in aquaculture, typically accounting for over 50% of the total production costs. Genetic selection is being used to improve Feed Conversion Efficiency (FCE)-the ability of fish to convert feed into body mass. By selecting for traits that improve FCE, aquaculture farms can reduce the amount of feed required to grow fish to market size, making production more cost-effective and sustainable. Fish with higher FCE also produce less waste, reducing nutrient pollution in water bodies and improving overall environmental sustainability. Additionally, this innovation can help address concerns over the sourcing of fishmeal, a key ingredient in fish feed that is often derived from wild-caught fish. By improving feed efficiency, aquaculture can reduce its reliance on fishmeal and explore alternative, more sustainable feed options.

Biotechnology and gene editing for precision breeding

Beyond traditional selective breeding, modern biotechnology, particularly gene editing tools like CRISPR-Cas9, offers even greater precision in improving aquaculture species. With gene editing, specific traits can be enhanced or undesirable traits eliminated at the genetic level, without introducing foreign Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) into the organism. For example, gene editing can be used to create fish that are more resistant to environmental stressors, such as temperature fluctuations or poor water quality, which are becoming more common due to climate change. Biotechnology can also be used to improve the nutritional profile of farmed fish, such as increasing the levels of omega-3 fatty acids, making them a more healthful food source.

Ethical and regulatory considerations

While the genetic and biotechnological advancements in aquaculture hold great potential, they also raise important

Correspondence to: Samson Afewerki, Department of Aquaculture, The Foundation for Industrial and Technical Research (SINTEF) Ocean, Trondheim, Norway, E-mail: samson.aferki@sintef.no

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ethical and regulatory questions. The use of GM fish and gene editing in aquaculture is a subject of debate, with concerns over potential ecological risks, consumer acceptance, and long-term impacts on biodiversity. Strict regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure the safety and sustainability of these technologies. Several countries, including the United States of America and Canada, have already approved the production and sale of GM fish, such as salmon, while others are still conducting risk assessments and public consultations. As biotechnology advances, it will be important to have transparent and well-regulated policies in place to address these concerns and ensure that the benefits outweigh the potential risks.

CONCLUSION

Genetics and biotechnology are driving the future of aquaculture by enhancing productivity, sustainability, and resilience. From faster-growing fish and disease-resistant species to improved feed efficiency and precision breeding, these technologies are reshaping the industry. However, their responsible application will require careful regulation and consideration of ethical implications. By controlling the power of genetics and biotechnology, the aquaculture industry can meet the growing global demand for seafood while minimizing its environmental impact. As these technologies continue to evolve, they hold the potential to make seafood farming more sustainable, efficient, and resilient, offering a potential future for both consumers and the planet.