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Aquaculture: Water Quality Management

Jesi Nayaki. M[1], Vasudhevan. I[2*], Subhitsha. S[1] and Roshini. M[1]

[1]*UG Student, PG & Research Department of Zoology, Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India*

[2]*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of Zoology, Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India*

[*]*Corresponding Author E-mail: goldvasu1953@gmail.com*

Abstract

In aquaculture, water quality is one of the prime factors that determines the success of that particular culture. Primarily the water quality parameters are divided into three major categories, physical, chemical and biological. But a slight change in some of the parameters especially pH, temperature, DO will lead to stress in the organism and it may be of physiological or behavioral. Deteriorated or changed water quality will affect growth, reproductive capacity. Susceptibility to diseases is also more in such environment. Water quality management measures aim at improving water quality. Aquaculture entrepreneurs should know the basics of water quality management measures in aquaculture to reduce the problems related with water quality so as to utilize the of water body with viable profit as well as environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Temperature, Dissolved oxygen, Carbon dioxide, pH, Salinity, Hardness

Introduction

Aquaculture the farming of Fish, Shellfish, and aquatic plants, is one of the fastest – growing food production sectors in the world. As nature fish stocks decline and the demand for protein – rich food increases, aquaculture plays a vital role in ensuring food security and economic development. However, the success of aquaculture largely depends on maintaining suitable water quality conditions, as water is the primary environment in which organisms live.

Water quality management refers to the control and maintenance of physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of water to ensure optimal growth, survival, and health of cultured species. Unlike terrestrial animals, fish and other aquatic organisms are directly influenced by their surrounding environment, making them highly sensitive to changes in water conditions.

Effective water quality management involves practices such as aeration, water exchange, filtration, proper, feeding, and waste management. It also includes understanding the interactions between different water parameters and how they affect aquatic life. By maintaining optimal water quality, farmers can improve productivity, reduce losses, and ensure sustainable aquaculture practices.

Dissolved Oxygen (DO)

Dissolved oxygen (DO) is one of the most critical factors in aquaculture, as it is essential for the respiration and survival of fish and other organisms. Oxygen from the atmosphere dissolves in water through diffusion and is also produced during photosynthesis by aquatic plants and phytoplankton. The amount of oxygen available in water directly affects the growth, metabolism, and overall health of cultured species.

The concentration of dissolved oxygen in water is usually measured in milligrams per liter (mg/L). Most fish species require a DO level of at least 5 mg/L for optimal growth, while levels below 3 mg/L can cause stress, reduced feeding, and slow growth, Extremely low levels (below 1-2 mg/L) may lead to suffocation and death.

Several factors influence dissolved oxygen levels in aquaculture systems. Temperature plays a major role warmer water holds less oxygen compared to cooler water. High stocking density and overfeeding can also reduce DO levels because of increased respiration and decomposition of organic matter. Additionally, respiration by aquatic organisms and microorganisms consumes oxygen, especially during nighttime when photosynthesis does not occur.

Low dissolved oxygen levels can have serious effects on aquaculture species. Fish may come to the surface and gasp for air, a condition known as “air gulping”. Prolonged oxygen deficiency can weaken the immune system, making fish more susceptible to diseases and infections. It can also lead to poor feed conversion and reduced production efficiency.

To maintain adequate dissolved oxygen levels, several management practices are used. Aeration is the most common method, using devices like paddle wheels, air pumps, or diffusers to increase oxygen levels in water. Proper feeding management, regular removal of waste, and maintaining optimal stocking density also help in preventing oxygen depletion. In some systems, water exchange is used to bring in oxygen- rich water.

Carbon dioxide (CO_2)

Carbon dioxide (CO_2) is an important component of water chemistry in aquaculture systems. It is produced mainly through the respiration of fish, aquaculture organisms, and microorganisms, as Uneaten feed and waste. CO_2 is also utilized by aquatic plants and phytoplankton during photosynthesis.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in water is usually expressed in milligrams per liter (mg/L). In aquaculture systems, a CO_2 level below 10 mg/L is generally considered safe for most fish species. Higher concentrations can be harmful and may affect the health and productivity of aquatic organisms.

Excess carbon dioxide in water can interfere with the ability of fish to absorb oxygen, even when dissolved oxygen levels are adequate. This condition can lead to stress, reduce growth, and poor feed utilization. High CO_2 levels may also cause fish to exhibit abnormal behavior such as sluggishness and reduced activity. In extreme cases, it can result in suffocation.

Several factors influence CO_2 levels in aquaculture ponds and tanks. High stocking density, overfeeding, and accumulation of organic waste increase CO_2 production. At night, CO_2 levels tend to risk because photosynthesis stops while respiration continues, leading to a decrease in oxygen and an increase in carbon dioxide.

Managing carbon dioxide levels is essential for maintaining good water quality. Aeration is one of the most effective methods to reduce CO_2, as it helps release excess gas into the atmosphere while increasing oxygen levels. Water exchange is another method used to dilute high CO_2 concentration. Proper pond management practices such as avoiding overfeeding, maintaining optimal stocking density, and removing organic waste can also help control CO_2 levels.

pH in aquaculture

pH is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of water, indicating the concentration of hydrogen ions present. It is measured on a scale from 0 to 14, where 7 is neutral, values below 7 are acidic, and valves above 7 are alkaline. In aquaculture, pH is an important water quality parameter because it directly affects the physiological processes of fish and other aquatic organisms.

Most aquaculture species grow well within a pH range of 6.5 to 8.5. When the pH level falls outside this range, it can cause stress, reduce growth, and reproduction. Extremely low pH (acidic conditions) can damage fish gills and reduce their ability oxygen to absorb oxygen, while very high pH (alkaline conditions) can increase the toxicity of ammonia in water, making it more harmful to fish.

pH in aquaculture system is not constant and can fluctuate throughout the day. During daylight hours, photosynthesis by aquatic plants and phytoplankton removes carbon dioxide from the water, causing the pH to rise. At night, respiration releases carbon dioxide back into the water, lowering the pH. These daily fluctuations are normal, but sudden or extreme changes can be harmful to aquatic life.

Several factors influence pH levels, including soil type, water source, decomposition of organic matter, and biological activity. Rainfall can also lower pH by introducing acidic water, while high algal growth can increase pH during the day.

Proper management of pH is essential in aquaculture. Regular monitoring helps detect any sudden changes. If the pH is too low, substances like agriculture lime (calcium carbonate) can be added to increase alkalinity and stabilize the pH. If the pH is too high, water exchange, reducing excessive algal growth, and controlling feeding practices can help bring it back to a suitable range.

Hardness in Aquaculture

Water hardness refers to the concentration of dissolved minerals, mainly calcium (Ca2+) and magnesium (Mg2+) ions, in water. It is usually expressed in milligrams per liter (mg/L) as calcium ($CaCO_3$). Hardness is an important factor in aquaculture because it influences the biological the biological and chemical processes that affect fish health and water stability.

Water can be classified based on based on hardness levels:

Soft water: less than 50 mg/L

Moderately hard water: 50- 150 mg/L

Hard water: 150-300 mg/L

Very hard water: above 300 mg/L

In aquaculture, a hardness range of about 50 to 150 mg/L is generally considered suitable for most fish species. Adequate hardness is essential for proper bone formation, growth, and overall physiological functions in aquatic organisms. Calcium, in particular, plays a key role in maintaining fish health and regulating osmotic balance.

Low hardness (soft water) can cause stress in fish, reduce growth, and make them more vulnerable to diseases. It may also lead to unstable pH levels, as water with low hardness has poor buffering capacity. On the other hand, very high hardness is usually less harmful but can affect the effectiveness of certain treatments and may lead to mineral deposits.

Hardness also interacts with other water quality parameters, for example, higher calcium levels can reduce the toxicity of harmful substances like ammonia and certain metals, providing a protective effect for aquatic organisms.

Management of water hardness is important in aquaculture systems. If the water is too soft, it can be increased by adding substances such as agricultural lime (calcium carbonate), dolomite, or gypsum. These materials help improve mineral content and stabilize water chemistry. If hardness is too high, dilution through water exchange is commonly used to bring it down.

Regular monitoring of hardness ensures that the water remains within the optimal range for fish growth and survival. Maintaining proper hardness contributes to a stable aquatic environment and enhances overall aquaculture productivity.

Salinity in Aquaculture

Salinity refers to the concentration of dissolved of dissolved salts in water, usually expressed in parts per thousand (ppt) or grams per liter (g/L). It is a key water quality parameter in aquaculture because it directly affects the osmoregulation process-the ability of aquatic organisms to maintain the balance of water and salts in their bodies.

Aquaculture systems are generally classified based on salinity levels:

Freshwater: less than 0.5 ppt

Brackish water: 0.5 to 30 ppt

Marine water: 30 to 35 ppt

Different species of fish and shellfish have specific salinity requirements. Freshwater species such as carp and tilapia thrive in low salinity, while marine species like shrimp and sea bass require higher salinity levels. Some species, known as euryhaline species, can tolerate a wide range of salinity, while others require a narrow range.

Salinity influences several biological and chemical processes in aquaculture systems. It affects fish metabolism, growth rate, reproduction, and survival. Sudden changes in salinity can cause stress, leading to poor health and increased susceptibility to diseases. Extreme salinity levels can disrupt osmotic balance, resulting in dehydration or excessive water intake in fish. Salinity levels can changes due to factors such as evaporation, rainfall, water exchange, and the source of water used. In coastal aquaculture, tidal movements can also influence salinity fluctuations.

Proper management of salinity is essential for maintaining a healthy aquaculture environment. Regular monitoring helps detect changes early. Salinity can be increased by adding salt or using seawater, and decreased by adding freshwater or through dilution. Adjustments should always be made gradually to avoid stress on aquatic organisms.

Turbidity in Aquaculture

Turbidity refers to the cloudiness or haziness of water caused by the presence of suspended particles such as clay, silt, organic matter, plankton, and microorganisms. It is an important physical parameter in aquaculture because it affects light penetration, water quality, and the overall health of aquatic organisms.

Turbidity is usually measured in Nephelometric Turbidity Units (NTU) or assessed indirectly using a Secchi disk, which measures water transparency. In aquaculture ponds, moderate turbidity is often beneficial, especially when it is due to plankton, as it indicates good natural productivity. However, excessive turbidity can be harmful.

High turbidity reduces the penetration of sunlight into the water, which limits photosynthesis by aquatic plants and phytoplankton. This can lead to decreased oxygen production during the day. Suspended particles can also clog fish gills, causing stress and difficulty in respiration. In addition, high turbidity can reduce visibility, affecting the feeding efficiency of fish and increasing the risk of disease.

Turbidity in aquaculture systems can be caused several factors, including soil erosion, runoff from surrounding land, uneaten feed, fish waste, and excessive algal growth. Disturbance of pond bottom sediments by fish or strong winds can also increase turbidity.

Proper management of turbidity is essential to maintain a healthy aquatic environment. Preventing soil erosion around ponds, controlling runoff, and maintaining proper feeding practices can help reduce excess turbidity. In some cases, materials like lime or gypsum are added to settle suspended particles. Water exchange and filtration systems can also be used in tanks and intensive aquaculture systems.

Regular monitoring of turbidity helps ensure that water clarity remains within a suitable range for fish growth and survival. Maintaining balanced turbidity levels supports good oxygen production, feeding efficiency, and overall pond productivity.

Ammonia in Aquaculture

Ammonia is one of the most important and potentially toxic chemical parameters in aquaculture systems. It is produced mainly from the excretion of fish, decomposition of uneaten feed, and breakdown of organic waste by bacteria. Because it accumulates easily in water, ammonia must be carefully monitored and controlled to ensure the health of aquatic organisms.

Ammonia exists in water in two forms:

Unionized ammonia (NH_3)- highly toxin

Ionized ammonia (NH_4^+) – less toxin

The total ammonia nitrogen (TAN) is the sum of both forms. The toxicity of ammonia mainly depends on the concentration of unionized ammonia (NH_3), which increases with higher pH and temperature.

In aquaculture, safe levels of ammonia are very low. Ideally, unionized ammonia (NH_3) should be below 0.02 mg/L, while higher concentrations can cause stress, reduced growth, reduced growth, and health problems. At toxic levels, ammonia can damage fish gills, affect oxygen uptake, and lead to mortality.

Symptoms of ammonia stress in fish include reduced feeding, slow growth, erratic swimming, and increased susceptibility to diseases. Long-term exposure, even at low levels, can weaken fish and reduce overall production.

Several factors contribute to ammonia buildup in aquaculture systems. Overfeeding, high stocking density, poor water exchange, and accumulation of organic waste are the main causes. In addition, poor biological filtration in intensive systems can lead to increased ammonia levels.

Proper management of ammonia is essential for maintaining water quality. Some common control measures include:

Avoiding overfeeding and removing uneaten feed

Maintaining optimal stocking density

Regular water exchange to dilute ammonia levels

Aeration, which supports beneficial bacteria that convert ammonia into less harmful substances through the nitrification process.

Use of biofilters in tank-based systems to convert ammonia into nitrite and nitrate. Maintaining stable pH and temperature also helps reduce ammonia toxicity.

Conclusion

Water quality management is a fundamental aspect of successful aquaculture, as it directly influences the health, growth, and survival of aquatic organisms. Parameters such as dissolved oxygen, carbon dioxide, pH, hardness, salinity, turbidity, and ammonia are closely interconnected, and any imbalance in one factor can affect the entire environment.

Maintaining optimal levels of these water quality parameters ensures proper physiological functioning, better feed utilization, and resistance to diseases in cultured species. Poor water quality, on the other hand, can lead to stress, slow growth, increased mortality, and economic losses for farmers.

Effective water quality management requires regular monitoring, proper feeding practices, controlled stocking density, aeration, and timely water exchange. The use of modern techniques such as biofiltration and water testing tools further helps in maintaining a stable and healthy aquaculture systems.

Sustainable aquaculture depends on a balanced ecosystem where physical, chemical, and biological factors are well managed. By understanding and controlling water quality parameters, aquaculture farmers can improve productivity, ensure environmental sustainability, and meet the growing demand for aquatic food. In conclusion, proper water quality management is not just a supportive practice but the backbone of aquaculture, playing a crucial role in achieving efficient, profitable, and sustainable production.

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