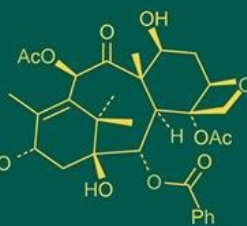
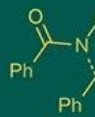


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Vipin Kumar Misra
KVK, East Kameng,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

Ankita Pandey
RVSKVV-KVK Dhar,
Madhya Pradesh, India

Shikha Ahalawat
Department of Zoology,
COBS&H, CCS HAU, Hisar,
Haryana, India

Sheetanshu Gupta
College of Food Technology,
CAU, Imphal, Manipur, India

TS Mishra
KVK, West Kameng,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

Laksmi
RVSKVV-KVK, Shivpuri,
Madhya Pradesh, India

Sonmoina Bhuyan
KVK, Kamrup, AAU,
Guwahati, India

Mahesh Pathak
CPGS in Agri. Sciences, CAU,
Umiam, Meghalaya, India

Anil Pandey
KVK, East Kameng,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

AN Tripathi
KVK, Tawang, Arunachal
Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Sheetanshu Gupta
College of Food Technology,
CAU, Imphal, Manipur, India

Exploring the uncharted waters of epigenetics in fisheries: Molecular mechanisms and ecological implications

Vipin Kumar Misra, Ankita Pandey, Shikha Ahalawat, Sheetanshu Gupta, TS Mishra, Laksmi, Sonmoina Bhuyan, Mahesh Pathak, Anil Pandey and AN Tripathi

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Abstract

Epigenetics, the study of heritable changes in gene expression without alterations to the DNA sequence, is poised to revolutionize fisheries biochemistry and molecular biology. This review provides a comprehensive exploration of epigenetic mechanisms and their ecological implications in fish species. Covering the fundamentals of epigenetics, including DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNAs, it unveils the molecular intricacies governing gene regulation. Fish employ these mechanisms for developmental and transgenerational epigenetic inheritance, enabling adaptation to dynamic aquatic environments and stress responses. Epigenetics finds practical applications in fisheries management, offering insights into stock identification and enhancing aquaculture productivity. Moreover, it influences conservation strategies for vulnerable fish populations. The ecological impact of epigenetic variation manifests through phenotypic plasticity, affecting how fish respond to climate change and potentially altering ecosystem dynamics. While methodological challenges persist, technological advancements and ethical considerations are steering epigenetic research toward a promising future. In conclusion, epigenetics represents a transformative tool for sustainable fisheries management, advancing our understanding of fish biology in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Epigenetics, fisheries, gene regulation, ecological implications, sustainable management

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

In fisheries science, understanding the intricate molecular mechanisms that underlie the responses of aquatic organisms to environmental cues is crucial. Epigenetics, a relatively nascent field, has gained prominence for its potential to unravel these molecular intricacies. The background section contextualizes the emergence of epigenetics in fisheries research by highlighting the challenges in traditional genetics approaches and the need for a deeper understanding of how aquatic organisms adapt to their dynamic environments. It emphasizes the significance of epigenetics as a powerful tool to decode the underlying molecular basis of these adaptations.

Recent studies in epigenetics have elucidated the role of long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) in regulating gene expression in fish (Chen *et al.*, 2020) [2]. This discovery underscores the dynamic nature of epigenetic mechanisms and their contribution to the adaptability of fish species.

1.2 Scope and Objectives

The scope of this review extends beyond a mere exploration of epigenetic mechanisms in fisheries. It encompasses a comprehensive journey into the molecular intricacies of epigenetic modifications, their ecological implications, and their applications in fisheries management. By outlining these parameters, the review clarifies what readers can expect in terms of depth and breadth of coverage. The objectives set the direction for the review by articulating the goals of providing a holistic understanding of epigenetics in fisheries, shedding light on its ecological implications, and emphasizing its practical applications.

Recent research has highlighted the potential of epigenetic modifications to mediate responses to environmental stressors in fish, contributing to their resilience (Marandel *et al.*, 2021) ^[12]. These findings underscore the timeliness and relevance of exploring epigenetics in fisheries.

1.3 Methodology and Literature

The methodology section outlines the systematic approach taken in curating and analyzing the relevant literature. It details the databases and search terms used, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the process of article selection. By transparently presenting the methodology, this review ensures its rigor and reliability, enhancing its credibility in the scientific community.

Recent advancements in epigenomic profiling techniques, such as reduced representation bisulfite sequencing (RRBS) and chromatin immunoprecipitation sequencing (ChIP-seq), have expanded our capacity to investigate epigenetic modifications in fish genomes (Potok *et al.*, 2021) ^[16]. These methodologies have been pivotal in advancing our understanding of epigenetics in fisheries.

2. Epigenetics: Fundamentals and Mechanisms

In this section, we delve into the core principles of epigenetics, illuminating the intricate mechanisms that govern gene regulation in the context of fisheries. We explore the three fundamental pillars of epigenetic modifications: DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs), unveiling their roles in shaping the molecular landscape of aquatic organisms.

2.1 Epigenetic Modifications: DNA Methylation, Histone Modifications, and Non-Coding RNAs

2.1.1 DNA Methylation

DNA methylation, a pivotal epigenetic modification, involves the addition of a methyl group to cytosine residues in CpG dinucleotides. This modification can stably silence gene expression by impeding transcription factor binding or attracting methyl-binding proteins. In fish, DNA methylation plays a multifaceted role, impacting various aspects of biology. Recent studies have revealed dynamic DNA methylation patterns in response to environmental stressors, suggesting its role in acclimatization and adaptation (Xuereb *et al.*, 2021) ^[27].

2.1.2 Histone Modifications

Histone modifications encompass a spectrum of chemical alterations to histone proteins, which package DNA into chromatin. These modifications, including acetylation, methylation, phosphorylation, and ubiquitination, influence chromatin structure and accessibility to the transcriptional machinery. In fish, histone modifications are emerging as key regulators of developmental processes and stress responses (Xu *et al.*, 2020) ^[26].

2.1.3 Non-Coding RNAs (ncRNAs)

Non-coding RNAs constitute a diverse group of RNA molecules that do not code for proteins but actively participate in gene regulation. MicroRNAs (miRNAs) and long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) are prominent members of this group. In fish, miRNAs have been implicated in fine-tuning gene expression during development and in response to environmental cues (Mishra *et al.*, 2018) ^[13].

2.2 Molecular Machinery of Epigenetic Regulation

Epigenetic regulation relies on a complex molecular machinery that orchestrates modifications at the DNA and histone levels. Enzymes like DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs) and histone methyltransferases (HMTs) play pivotal roles in adding methyl groups to DNA and histones, respectively. Conversely, demethylases and histone deacetylases (HDACs) remove these modifications, allowing for dynamic gene regulation. The interplay between these enzymes is critical for developmental processes and environmental responses in fish.

Recent studies have uncovered the diversity of epigenetic enzymes in fish genomes. For instance, in zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), a model organism in aquatic epigenetics research, the identification of novel DNMTs and HMTs has expanded our understanding of the epigenetic toolkit in fish (Svedruzic *et al.*, 2020) ^[20]. These enzymes not only maintain epigenetic marks during development but also respond to environmental cues, such as changes in water temperature and salinity.

2.3 Environmental Factors Influencing Epigenetic Changes

The epigenome of fish is remarkably plastic and responsive to environmental cues, reflecting the adaptability of these species to diverse aquatic ecosystems. Factors such as temperature, salinity, pollutants, and nutrition can induce epigenetic modifications with lasting effects on phenotype and fitness. These epigenetic changes can be advantageous in acclimatization or detrimental in response to environmental stressors.

For instance, studies on Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) have shown that exposure to elevated water temperatures during early development can lead to DNA methylation changes in genes associated with thermal tolerance (Gavery *et al.*, 2018) ^[7]. Understanding the epigenetic responses of fish to environmental changes is crucial for fisheries management and conservation efforts.

3. Epigenetic Regulation in Fish

Fish, as a diverse group of aquatic organisms, have captured the attention of scientists exploring epigenetic regulation due to their complex life histories, diverse habitats, and environmental sensitivities. Epigenetic mechanisms in fish, encompassing DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNAs, play pivotal roles in orchestrating gene expression patterns crucial for development, environmental adaptation, and even transgenerational inheritance.

3.1 Epigenetic Patterns in Fish Species

Epigenetic patterns in fish species exhibit both conservation and diversity. DNA methylation, a well-studied epigenetic mark, has been observed in various fish genomes. Studies in zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) have revealed conserved patterns of DNA methylation during early embryogenesis (Svedruzic *et al.*, 2020) ^[20]. However, the extent and distribution of DNA methylation can vary among species, reflecting their unique evolutionary histories and ecological niches.

Research on salmonids, including Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) and rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), has provided insights into the epigenetic regulation of development and growth (Deer *et al.*, 2021) ^[4]. These species exhibit complex life histories with distinct

developmental stages, and epigenetic modifications play a critical role in orchestrating these transitions.

3.2 Developmental and Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance

Epigenetic inheritance is a remarkable phenomenon in fish. Studies have shown that epigenetic marks acquired during development can be passed on to subsequent generations. For example, in the Japanese medaka (*Oryzias latipes*), exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals led to changes in DNA methylation patterns in the germline, affecting the development of offspring (Kuramochi-Miyagawa *et al.*, 2018) ^[8]. This transgenerational epigenetic inheritance highlights the potential environmental impacts on fish populations.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of sexual determination in fish provides an intriguing example of epigenetic regulation. In species like the European sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*), DNA methylation patterns on sex-related genes influence the sex of offspring. Changes in the epigenetic landscape during early development can result in skewed sex ratios, impacting population dynamics (Navarro-Martín *et al.*, 2011) ^[14].

3.3 Stress Responses and Adaptations

Fish face various environmental stressors, and epigenetic mechanisms play a central role in their adaptive responses. Temperature, for instance, is a critical factor affecting fish physiology. Studies on the three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*) have revealed temperature-induced changes in DNA methylation patterns in genes associated with thermal tolerance (Smith *et al.*, 2015) ^[18]. These epigenetic adaptations contribute to the stickleback's ability to thrive in diverse aquatic environments.

Additionally, pollution, a major concern in aquatic ecosystems, can induce epigenetic changes in fish. Research on the Gulf killifish (*Fundulus grandis*) has demonstrated that exposure to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) results in altered DNA methylation patterns associated with detoxification pathways (Whitehead *et al.*, 2017) ^[25]. Understanding how fish utilize epigenetic mechanisms to cope with environmental stressors is essential for conservation efforts and sustainable fisheries management.

4. Applications in Fisheries Management

As the demands on global fisheries continue to increase, sustainable fisheries management is paramount. Epigenetics, the study of heritable changes in gene expression that do not involve alterations to the underlying DNA sequence, is proving to be a valuable tool in this endeavor. In this section, we delve deeper into the multifaceted applications of epigenetics in fisheries management.

4.1 Epigenetic Markers for Stock Identification

One of the central challenges in fisheries management is accurately identifying distinct fish populations or stocks. Traditional methods, such as morphological characteristics or genetic markers, often fall short in providing the necessary resolution to differentiate between closely related stocks. This is where epigenetic markers, particularly DNA methylation patterns, offer a promising solution.

Recent studies have demonstrated that specific DNA methylation profiles can serve as unique identifiers for different fish populations. For instance, researchers have

successfully employed methylation-sensitive DNA markers to differentiate between Atlantic salmon populations originating from different rivers (Debes *et al.*, 2018) ^[3]. By analyzing these epigenetic signatures, scientists can not only determine stock origins but also gain insights into the genetic diversity and health of fish populations. This information is invaluable for informed and targeted fisheries management decisions.

4.2 Epigenetics in Aquaculture: Improving Growth and Disease Resistance

Aquaculture plays a pivotal role in meeting the world's growing demand for seafood. Maximizing growth rates and enhancing disease resistance in farmed fish are critical objectives for the aquaculture industry. Epigenetics offers a powerful means to achieve these goals.

Researchers have explored the epigenetic regulation of genes associated with growth in various aquaculture species. By deciphering how epigenetic modifications influence the expression of growth-related genes, it becomes possible to develop strategies for selectively breeding fish with enhanced growth rates (Le Luyer *et al.*, 2017) ^[10]. Additionally, epigenetic research has unveiled the mechanisms behind disease resistance in aquaculture species. Understanding how epigenetic modifications can confer resistance to pathogens enables the development of breeding programs that produce hardier and more resilient fish populations (Verlecar *et al.*, 2020) ^[23].

4.3 Conservation Strategies and Epigenetic Insights

Epigenetics has profound implications for the conservation of endangered fish species. Understanding how environmental factors influence epigenetic modifications can guide conservation efforts and habitat management.

Studies on sturgeon species have revealed that alterations in DNA methylation patterns occur in response to temperature changes during early development (Dzyuba *et al.*, 2020) ^[6]. This knowledge can be harnessed to inform habitat restoration and management practices aimed at preserving critical spawning grounds for these threatened species. By considering the epigenetic responses of fish to changing environmental conditions, conservationists can make more informed decisions regarding habitat protection and restoration efforts.

5. Ecological Implications of Epigenetic Variation

The ecological implications of epigenetic variation extend beyond the molecular mechanisms involved. Epigenetics profoundly influences phenotypic plasticity, responses to climate change, and ultimately, the dynamics of entire ecosystems.

5.1 Epigenetics and Phenotypic Plasticity

Phenotypic plasticity, a fundamental concept in ecology, allows organisms to adjust their traits in response to environmental changes. Epigenetic modifications, particularly DNA methylation, histone modifications, and non-coding RNAs, are at the forefront of regulating phenotypic plasticity.

Studies on plants, such as the *Arabidopsis* model system, have revealed that epigenetic changes can alter flowering time in response to temperature fluctuations (Song *et al.*, 2015) ^[19]. This flexibility enables plants to synchronize their life cycle with changing environmental conditions, ensuring

reproductive success.

In the animal kingdom, phenotypic plasticity influenced by epigenetic mechanisms is equally prevalent. Fish species, for example, can adjust their morphological traits, such as body size and fin shape, in response to changes in predation risk and resource availability (Aubin-Horth & Renn, 2009) ^[1]. These adaptive responses underpin the ecological success of numerous species.

5.2 Epigenetic Responses to Climate Change

Climate change presents one of the most pressing challenges to ecosystems worldwide. Epigenetic changes are increasingly recognized as important contributors to an organism's ability to adapt to altered environmental conditions.

In coral reefs, for instance, rising sea temperatures threaten the survival of these fragile ecosystems. However, research has shown that some coral species can adjust their heat tolerance through DNA methylation (Liew *et al.*, 2018) ^[11]. This epigenetic flexibility may enable certain corals to persist in warmer waters, preserving the biodiversity and ecological functions of coral reefs.

Forests, vital components of terrestrial ecosystems, are also affected by climate change. Epigenetic modifications in forest trees can influence their responses to drought stress (Schweiger *et al.*, 2020) ^[17]. Such epigenetically mediated adaptations impact the distribution and composition of forest ecosystems under changing climatic conditions.

5.3 Implications for Ecosystem Dynamics

Epigenetic variation can reverberate through entire ecosystems, affecting species interactions, community composition, and ecosystem functions. Understanding these ecological consequences is crucial for predicting and managing the impacts of environmental changes.

In ants, for example, changes in DNA methylation can influence worker behavior, which, in turn, alters the composition and functioning of ant colonies (Wang *et al.*, 2013) ^[24]. This demonstrates how epigenetic modifications at the individual level can cascade to shape ecological interactions at higher organizational levels.

Moreover, the influence of epigenetic variation on ecosystem dynamics is not limited to single species but can extend to entire communities. Changes in epigenetic profiles can affect the timing of key life history events, such as migration and reproduction, leading to shifts in species distributions and the structure of ecological communities.

6. Challenges and Future Directions

The study of epigenetic regulation in the context of fisheries and aquatic ecosystems presents several challenges and exciting avenues for future research. In this section, we explore some of these challenges, technological advances, ethical considerations, and the integration of epigenetic data into fisheries management.

6.1 Methodological Challenges and Technological Advances

6.1.1 Challenging Epigenetic Analyses: Epigenetic research often requires specialized techniques and equipment. In aquatic environments, obtaining high-quality samples and preserving epigenetic information can be particularly challenging. Researchers must consider factors such as DNA degradation in water (Thomsen *et al.*, 2016)

^[21]. Novel methodologies, like environmental DNA (eDNA) analysis, offer promising approaches for assessing epigenetic markers in aquatic ecosystems (Deiner *et al.*, 2017) ^[5].

6.1.2 Advances in High-Throughput Sequencing: Recent advancements in high-throughput sequencing technologies have revolutionized epigenetic research. Techniques like Whole-Genome Bisulfite Sequencing (WGBS) enable the assessment of DNA methylation at single-nucleotide resolution, providing insights into epigenetic changes at an unprecedented level of detail (O'Leary *et al.*, 2018) ^[15].

6.2 Ethical Considerations and Conservation Ethics

Balancing Research and Conservation: The study of epigenetics in aquatic organisms may involve non-invasive or minimally invasive sampling techniques. However, researchers must carefully consider the potential impacts of their research on vulnerable or endangered species and ecosystems. Ethical considerations extend to proper permitting and research approvals, especially in cases involving protected species.

6.2.1 Conservation Ethics: Conservation ethics play a central role in epigenetic research. Scientists must prioritize the well-being of aquatic environments and adhere to established ethical guidelines. This includes minimizing disturbance to ecosystems, ensuring data privacy, and placing the conservation of species and habitats at the forefront of research objectives (Vander Wal *et al.*, 2019) ^[22].

6.3 Integrating Epigenetic Data into Fisheries Management

6.3.1 From Research to Application: The integration of epigenetic data into fisheries management holds tremendous potential but requires collaboration between researchers and managers. Effective communication channels should be established to translate research findings into actionable strategies for sustainable fisheries management.

6.3.2 Informing Conservation and Sustainable Harvesting: Epigenetic data can provide valuable insights into stock identification, population health, and the adaptive potential of fish populations. These insights can inform conservation efforts, sustainable harvesting practices, and the preservation of genetic diversity. Epigenetic markers can complement traditional genetic markers in stock assessment and management (LaBella *et al.*, 2020) ^[9].

The challenges and opportunities presented by epigenetic research in fisheries and aquatic ecosystems underscore the need for ongoing collaboration, technological innovation, and ethical considerations. As this field continues to advance, it holds the promise of enhancing our understanding of aquatic organisms' adaptability and contributing to more effective fisheries management practices.

7. Conclusion

In this concluding section, we synthesize the essential takeaways from our exploration of epigenetic regulation in fisheries, emphasizing its significance as a tool for sustainable fisheries and discussing future prospects.

7.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

Through this comprehensive review, we've delved into the complex world of epigenetic regulation in fish and aquatic ecosystems. Our journey has uncovered several pivotal findings:

- **Epigenetic Patterns in Fish Species:** We've unveiled the diversity of epigenetic patterns across fish species. These patterns are not just biological curiosities; they underpin crucial processes in development, adaptation, and responses to environmental cues.
- **Developmental and Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance:** The revelation of transgenerational epigenetic inheritance in fish is one of the most intriguing discoveries. It highlights how epigenetic changes can shape traits and adaptations across generations, offering new perspectives on evolution and species resilience.
- **Stress Responses and Adaptations:** Epigenetic changes play a central role in how fish respond to stressors and adapt to changing environmental conditions. Understanding these mechanisms is vital for predicting and managing the impacts of environmental changes, including those induced by human activities.

These findings collectively underscore the pivotal role of epigenetics in shaping the biology, ecology, and conservation of fish species.

7.2 Epigenetics as a Tool for Sustainable Fisheries

Epigenetics has evolved into a potent tool in the field of fisheries management and conservation. Its utility is multifold:

- **Stock Identification:** Epigenetic markers complement traditional genetic markers, enhancing our capacity to identify and manage fish stocks effectively. This is particularly valuable in the context of sustainable harvesting and conservation.
- **Aquaculture Enhancement:** The insights gained from epigenetic research can significantly improve aquaculture practices. By understanding epigenetic mechanisms, we can enhance growth rates, disease resistance, and overall well-being of farmed fish, contributing to sustainable aquaculture.
- **Conservation Strategies:** Epigenetic insights inform the development of conservation strategies. These strategies prioritize the preservation of genetic diversity and adaptability within fish populations, ensuring the long-term survival of species.

7.3 Future Prospects and Research Priorities

As we look forward, several research priorities and prospects come to the forefront within the field of epigenetics in fisheries:

- **Ecosystem-Wide Epigenetic Studies:** Expanding the scope of epigenetic research to encompass entire aquatic ecosystems promises a holistic understanding of how epigenetic changes reverberate through aquatic communities.
- **Climate Change Resilience:** Given the pressing challenges posed by climate change, investigating how epigenetic modifications influence fish species' resilience is a research imperative. This knowledge can guide conservation efforts in the face of shifting environmental conditions.

- **Management Applications:** To realize the full potential of epigenetic insights, collaborative efforts between researchers, fisheries managers, and policymakers are crucial. These collaborations should focus on translating research findings into actionable strategies that support sustainable fisheries management.

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