Optimization of algal culture medium for zeaxanthin production by *Dunaliella tertiolecta*: an RSM based approach

S. Priyanka1,2,*, R. Kirubagaran1 and J. T. Mary Leema1

1Department of Marine Biotechnology, National Institute of Ocean Technology, Chennai 600 100, India
2Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai 600 119, India

The Chlorophycean microalgae *Dunaliella* have gained commercial interest because of the synthesis of highly valuable products. One among them is zeaxanthin, a xanthophyll carotenoid valued for its nutraceutical potential related to prevention of age-related macular degeneration and cataract, which is the primary cause for blindness. To improve zeaxanthin production by the microalgae *Dunaliella tertiolecta* (NIOT-141), De Walne’s medium was optimized to its most favourable nutrient level using response surface methodology (RSM) approach. Plackett–Burman method was employed to screen the most significant nutrients influencing zeaxanthin accumulation which revealed sodium nitrate, trace metals and sodium dihydrogen phosphate as the crucial medium components for increasing zeaxanthin production (P < 0.05).

Further, RSM was employed to study the interaction between these factors and identify optimum concentration of the significant ingredients for higher zeaxanthin production. The highest zeaxanthin production reached 20.2 ± 1.29 mg l⁻¹ under the optimal conditions of 910 mg l⁻¹ NaNO₃, 40.5 mg l⁻¹ NaH₂PO₄ and 0.605 mg l⁻¹ trace metals solution. Moreover, validation of optimized medium resulted in a three-fold increase in zeaxanthin production compared to un-optimized Walne’s medium (6.72 ± 0.22 mg l⁻¹). The results thus obtained were more analogous to the predicted values. Hence the model is effective for enhancing zeaxanthin production in *D. tertiolecta*.

**Keywords:** *Dunaliella tertiolecta*, De Walne’s medium, nutraceutical, response surface methodology, zeaxanthin.

In recent decades, the carotenoid industry is an emerging sector because of its high-end applications in healthcare, food and feed supplements. The increasing health awareness in developing countries has enhanced the demand for immunity boosters and natural health supplements. Zeaxanthin is a yellow xanthophyll carotenoid produced by many microalgae, certain bacteria and higher plants. It is also involved in cellular photo-protection by scavenging harmful blue light. The strong antioxidant activity of zeaxanthin makes it a suitable nutraceutical for the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, some types of cancer and especially age-related macular degeneration (AMD). The approval of zeaxanthin and lutein as food additives (E161h for zeaxanthin and E161b for lutein, WHO Technical Report Series No. 940; 2007) has expanded the zeaxanthin market demand. The present market for xanthophyll pigments in USA alone surpasses US$ 250 million per year. Though daily xanthophyll intake of 6.0 mg is advocated, the pigment industry is in the fledging stage due to low productivity of prospective candidate species. Hence there is greater need for identifying microalgal strains with higher productivity.

The conventional source of zeaxanthin and lutein production is marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) flower petals; but it suffers from lower pigment content (ca. 0.03%) and prolonged cultivation period (3–6 months). Shorter lifespan (10–15 days) and higher pigment content (0.5–1.0%) have made microalgae a viable alternative. Earlier studies have reported zeaxanthin production from two Chlorophycean and one Cyanophycean algae. Nevertheless, none of them has focused on the prime problem confronted, viz. lower zeaxanthin production. Hence the present study addresses the challenge of poor production using statistical approach of medium component optimization with respect to zeaxanthin production by microalgae. For this, we chose *Dunaliella tertiolecta* (NIOT-141) isolated from salt pans as a model organism. *Dunaliella* species was preferred due to its inherent ability to grow and accumulate higher carotenoid content (up to 10% of cell dry weight) in high salinity and light intensity. Interestingly, these strains lack rigid cell wall as well, which makes pigment extraction easier than other microalgae. At present, *Dunaliella salina* is a rich source for commercial exploitation of β-carotene and glycerol globally. The Chlorophycean marine microalgae *Dunaliella* is also commercially exploited for several other products like SCP (single-cell protein), minerals and other bioactive compounds. However, the actual content of natural pigments and secondary metabolites in the cell is determined by the culture medium conditions and other physico-chemical and environmental parameters like light intensity, salinity, temperature and pH.
With regard to optimization techniques, the drawback of outdated method of single factor experiment involves bulk experiments for optimizing a large number of parameters (variables), thereby time consuming and it might produce inaccurate conclusions, as relationship between factors are eliminated. Plackett Burman, response surface methodology and central composite design (CCD), are some of the statistical methods which aim at better results in shorter time regimes. Additionally, they are an extensive multi-practical apparatus for building experimental models and breaking down the impacts of various factors and their interaction between the variables and testing significance. This statistical approach can be used for most organisms like microbes and algae, for optimizing the recovery of products like secondary metabolites and enzymes to attain fruitful results. The present study focuses on the optimization of zeaxanthin production by *D. tertiolecta* using statistical methodology by a two-step optimization strategy.

**Materials and methods**

**Microorganism and growth conditions**

The chlorophycean microalga, *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT 141) strain used in this study was isolated from the salt pans of Marakkanam (12°12′05.0″N; 79°57′40.5″E), Tamil Nadu, India. The unialgal axenic cultures were maintained in De Walne’s medium, with a photo period of 14 h light : 10 h dark regime under 140 μmol photon m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ light intensity at 25°C.

**Morphological characterization of *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT 141)**

Morphological characteristics representing cell shape and size along with cell constituents like pyrenoid, refractile granules, etc. were examined using a light microscope (Zeiss, Axioscope Plus, Germany). Cell length, cell width and flagella length were also measured using an ocular micrometre. Scanning electron microscope (SEM) of *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT141) was performed according to the method adopted by Takaichi. The initial and final biomass were determined according to the protocol of Zhu and Lee. For biochemical characterization of *Dunalieella* strain, salinity tolerance test was performed by growing the axenic cultures in PES medium amended with a series of NaCl concentrations (0.5–4 M).

**Molecular characterization**

The genomic DNA of *D. tertiolecta* was isolated using a modified CTAB method. The extracted genomic DNA was quantified and its concentration was determined spectrophotometrically using UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Unicam UV 300, USA) by measuring the OD at 260 nm. PCR was carried out in a thermal cycler (AB Biosystems, USA) using three different primers, namely, internal transcribed spacer region (ITS) (AB28 and TW81), species specific 18S rRNA (MA1 and MA2), and plastid encoded gene for a large subunit of RUBISCO (ribulose-biphosphate carboxylase-rbcl) according to standard procedure.

**Pigment extraction and HPLC quantification**

Zeaxanthin was extracted from the algal cells using alkali digestion method in darkness, as zeaxanthin being a photo-oxidative pigment. Pigment extraction and quantification were done according to the procedure described by Priyanka et al. The microalgal biomass was disrupted with solvent mixture of methanol : dichloromethane (3 : 1 v/v). The solvent extract was saponified with alkali containing ascorbic acid as antioxidant (3 ml of 10 M KOH with 2.5% ascorbic acid). The extracted zeaxanthin was analysed using RP-HPLC (Shimadzu-LC 2010, Japan) equipped with LC 2010 low pressure gradient HPLC pump, degasser, auto-sampler and programmable UV-Vis detector and C-18 Phenomenox Luna column (4.6 × 250 mm, 5 μm particle size). The mobile phase used was methanol/dichloromethane/acetonitrile/water (67.5 : 22.5 : 9.5 : 0.5, v/v) and data were acquired using LC solutions® software. The zeaxanthin yield ($P_{zeaxanthin}$) was calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{Zeaxanthin yield (mg/l)} = \frac{\text{Cumulative biomass production (g)}}{\text{Working volume (l)}} \times \text{Zeaxanthin content(mg/g)}.$$  

(1)

**Screening of important media components using Plackett–Burman design**

For effective zeaxanthin production, it is mandatory to optimize the culture conditions and media ingredients, which further facilitates suitable economic impact in the commercial sector. PB method was utilized to categorize and optimize the constituents of Walne’s medium, which significantly affected zeaxanthin production from *D. tertiolecta*. Six independent factors were successfully screened in 12 experimental trials (Table 1). The concentration of six factors (variables), namely sodium nitrate (A), sodium dihydrogen phosphate (B), iron EDTA (C), manganese chloride solution (0.04%) (D), trace metals stock solution (E) and vitamin solution (F) were studied over two specific levels, maximum (+) and minimum (−).
The composition of trace metals stock solution was 33.6 g l \(^{-1}\) H\(_2\)BO\(_3\), 21 g l \(^{-1}\) ZnCl\(_2\), 20 g l \(^{-1}\) CoCl\(_2\) \(\cdot\) 6H\(_2\)O, 9 g l \(^{-1}\) (NH\(_4\))\(_6\)Mo\(_7\)O\(_24\) \(\cdot\) 4H\(_2\)O, 20 g l \(^{-1}\) CuSO\(_4\) \(\cdot\) 5H\(_2\)O and the composition of vitamin solution was 200 mg l \(^{-1}\) of thiamine HCl, 1 ml l \(^{-1}\) of 1% cyanocobalamin and 1 ml l \(^{-1}\) of 0.1% biotin.

The PB design for culture medium optimization of \(D.\) tertiolecta (NIOT-141) was analysed using Design Expert \textsuperscript{\textregistered} software, version 9.03.1 (Stat-Ease Inc, Minneapolis, USA). Experimental trials were performed in triplicates, which was essential to evaluate the fluctuation of estimations. The PB experiment which follows the first-order model was calculated based on the following equation

\[
Y = \beta_0 + \sum_{i=1}^{I} \beta_i X_i, \quad (2)
\]

where \(Y\) is the response of the dependent variable (zeaxanthin production), \(X_i\) is the independent variable, \(\beta_i\) is the linear coefficient and \(\beta_0\) is the intercept of the model. If \(P \leq 0.5\), it is considered significant.

**Optimization of significant medium ingredients using RSM**

To scrutinize the consolidated impact of various media ingredients on zeaxanthin production by \(D.\) tertiolecta, a full factorial central composite rotatable experimental design (CCRD) \(\textsuperscript{31}\) comprising of six replicates of local (centre) points along with 14 star points prompting a sum of 20 trials was developed (Table 2). RSM was utilized to enhance the three most critical variables, viz. sodium nitrate (A), sodium dihydrogen phosphate (B) and trace elements solution (C), which were identified as significant factors affecting zeaxanthin production using PB design. These independent variables (NaNO\(_3\), NaH\(_2\)PO\(_4\) and trace metals) were studied at five different coded levels as \(-\alpha, -1, 0, +1\) and \(+\alpha\) (ref. 32). The value for \(\alpha\) (1.68179) was chosen to fulfill the rotatability of the design \(\textsuperscript{33}\). RSM follows the second-order model

\[
Y = \beta_0 + \sum_{i=1}^{I} \beta_i X_i + \sum_{i=1}^{I} \beta_{ii} X_i^2 + \sum_{i<j}^{I} \beta_{ij} X_i X_j, \quad (3)
\]

where \(Y\) is the predicted response (zeaxanthin yield), \(\beta_i\) the linear coefficient, \(\beta_{ii}\) the regression coefficient, \(\beta_{ij}\) the interaction coefficient, \(\beta_0\) the quadratic coefficient and \(X_i\) denotes coded values of independent variables.

\[
X_i = X_i - X_0 / \delta X, \quad (4)
\]

where \(X_i\) symbolizes the dimensionless coded value of variable \(X_i\) and \(X_0\) denotes the value of \(X_i\) at the centre point, while \(\delta X\) signifies step change value. The experimental data thus obtained were used for regression analysis \(\textsuperscript{34}\). Table 2 shows the structure and design of the experiments and their respective yields.

**Purification of zeaxanthin**

The extracted crude zeaxanthin was purified using biphasic separation and quantified with RP-HPLC. For biphasic separation, the extracted zeaxanthin was mixed with 30 ml deionized water and portioned with ethyl acetate (40 ml) and fractioned in a separating funnel. The ethyl acetate fraction alone was concentrated in a rotary evaporator and reconstituted with methanol for further purification using RP-HPLC. The collected fractions were analysed by comparing with the spectral properties of standard zeaxanthin \(\textsuperscript{35}\). The percentage of purity of the obtained fraction was confirmed using analytical RP-HPLC at a flow rate of 1 ml min\(^{-1}\). An isocratic mobile

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**Table 1.** Plackett–Burman design matrix for six nutrient factors (independent variables) with zeaxanthin production as the process response

| Run | A: NaNO\(_3\) (mg) | B: NaH\(_2\)PO\(_4\) (mg) | C: FeEDTA (mg) | D: MnCl\(_2\) \(\cdot\) 4H\(_2\)O (ml) | E: Trace metals (ml) | F: Vitamin solution (ml) | Zeaxanthin production* (mg l\(^{-1}\)) |
|-----|------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1   | 10 \(-1\)        | 0 \(-1\)        | 21 \(+1\)  | 0 \(-1\)                     | 2 \(+1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 0.35 ± 0.12          |
| 2   | 10 \(-1\)        | 60 \(+1\)       | 21 \(+1\)  | 0 \(-1\)                     | 2 \(+1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 1.95 ± 0.4           |
| 3   | 10 \(-1\)        | 0 \(-1\)        | 1 \(-1\)   | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 3.3 ± 0.2            |
| 4   | 1210 \(+1\)      | 60 \(+1\)       | 1 \(-1\)   | 0 \(-1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 10.86 ± 0.23         |
| 5   | 10 \(-1\)        | 0 \(-1\)        | 1 \(-1\)   | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 0 \(-1\)           | 4.48 ± 0.5           |
| 6   | 1210 \(+1\)      | 60 \(+1\)       | 21 \(+1\)  | 0 \(-1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 0 \(-1\)           | 15.86 ± 0.23         |
| 7   | 1210 \(+1\)      | 0 \(-1\)        | 21 \(+1\)  | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 7.54 ± 0.18          |
| 8   | 1210 \(+1\)      | 0 \(-1\)        | 21 \(+1\)  | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 0 \(-1\)           | 0.73 ± 0.01          |
| 9   | 10 \(-1\)        | 60 \(+1\)       | 21 \(+1\)  | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 7.56 ± 0.25          |
| 10  | 10 \(-1\)        | 60 \(+1\)       | 1 \(-1\)   | 2 \(+1\)                     | 0 \(-1\)       | 0 \(-1\)           | 1.62 ± 0.08          |
| 11  | 1210 \(+1\)      | 0 \(-1\)        | 1 \(-1\)   | 2 \(+1\)                     | 2 \(+1\)       | 0 \(-1\)           | 0.75 ± 0.02          |
| 12  | 1210 \(+1\)      | 60 \(+1\)       | 1 \(-1\)   | 2 \(+1\)                     | 2 \(+1\)       | 2 \(+1\)           | 1.69 ± 0.03          |

*Values are mean ± SD. Values in brackets indicate coded levels.
Table 2. Central composite rotatable design matrix of independent variables and their corresponding experimental and predicted yields of zeaxanthin from *Dunaliella tertiolecta* (NIOT 141)

| Run | A: NaNO₃ (mg l⁻¹) | B: NaH₂PO₄ (mg l⁻¹) | C: Trace metals (mg l⁻¹) | Predicted value (mg l⁻¹) | Actual value (mg l⁻¹) |
|-----|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1   | 910 (+1)           | 15 (–1)              | 1.5 (+1)                | 1.63                    | 1.29 ± 0.02           |
| 2   | 610 (0)            | 4.78 (–1.68)         | 1 (0)                   | 3.93                    | 4.41 ± 0.05           |
| 3   | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 11.19 ± 0.42          |
| 4   | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 11.58 ± 0.23          |
| 5   | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 13.29 ± 0.56          |
| 6   | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 0.159 (–1.68)           | 7.92                    | 8.40 ± 0.02           |
| 7   | 310 (–1)           | 45 (+1)              | 0.5 (–1)                | 11.92                   | 11.19 ± 0.41          |
| 8   | 105.46 (–1.68)     | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 10.01                   | 10.49 ± 0.6           |
| 9   | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 13.49 ± 0.73          |
| 10  | 610 (0)            | 55.27 (1.68)         | 1 (0)                   | 10.23                   | 10.71 ± 0.02          |
| 11  | 910 (+1)           | 45 (+1)              | 1.5 (+1)                | 13.19                   | 12.85 ± 0.87          |
| 12  | 910 (+1)           | 45 (+1)              | 0.5 (–1)                | 20.20                   | 20.01 ± 0.21          |
| 13  | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1.84 (1.68)             | 5.72                    | 6.20 ± 0.2            |
| 14  | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 12.31 ± 0.56          |
| 15  | 310 (–1)           | 45 (+1)              | 1.5 (±1)                | 8.66                    | 8.52 ± 0.07           |
| 16  | 910 (+1)           | 15 (–1)              | 0.5 (–1)                | 4.25                    | 3.91 ± 0.03           |
| 17  | 610 (0)            | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 12.51                   | 13.02 ± 0.89          |
| 18  | 310 (–1)           | 15 (–1)              | 1.5 (+1)                | 2.81                    | 2.47 ± 0.09           |
| 19  | 1114.54 (+1.68)    | 30 (0)               | 1 (0)                   | 19.17                   | 19.65 ± 0.52          |
| 20  | 310 (–1)           | 15 (–1)              | 0.5 (–1)                | 15.86                   | 15.52 ± 0.4           |

*Values are mean ± SD. Values in brackets indicate coded levels.

**Table 2.** Zeaxanthin production

**Figure 1.** (a) Light micrograph and (b) scanning electron micrograph showing morphology of strain *Dunaliella tertiolecta* (NIOT-141).

phase of methanol/dichloromethane/acetonitrile/water (67.5 : 22.5 : 9.5 : 0.5 v/v/v/v) was used.

**Statistical analysis**

The framework of the model was designed and evaluated using Design Expert software version 9.03.1. Data were statistically analysed by two-way ANOVA and expressed as mean ± SD with significant levels held at *P* < 0.05.

**Results**

**Morphological characteristics of *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT 141)**

The algal cells were either ellipsoid or ovoid, but often become spherical during high salinity. Cell micrometry studies revealed a cell length of 11.85 μm, with a range 9–15.17 μm, cell width of 9.49 μm, with a range 6–13.12 μm and two equal apically inserted flagella of 13.75 μm length in *D. tertiolecta*. Light microscopic analysis revealed a cup-shaped chloroplast with a single-centred starch surrounded by a pyrenoid, few vacuoles and the nucleus. Also, some distinctive Golgi bodies, stigma, refractile granules, an eye spot, mitochondria and vacuoles were observed. The algal cells lack a rigid cell wall, but are enclosed by plasma membrane enveloped with a tough mucilaginous surface coat. Figure 1 a and b shows the light photomicrograph and SEM photomicrograph of 11-days-old culture of *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT-141) respectively. The morphological features observed were characteristic of *D. tertiolecta*, as reported in the literature.

**Molecular characterization and PCR amplification**

The amplification of 18S rRNA gene was carried out with MA1 and MA2 primers. Figure 2 a shows successful amplification. The PCR product obtained had an approximate size of 1770 bp, which is close to the reported size for *D. tertiolecta* by Olmos-Soto et al. For further confirmation of molecular phylogeny based on the more variable ITS gene and conserved *rbcL* gene, PCR amplification was done. The successful amplification of ITS and *rbcL* genes of *D. tertiolecta* (NIOT-141) gave an amplified product of approximately 700 bp on the electropherogram (Figure 2 b). The observed product size
closely matched that reported for *D. tertiolecta* for these two genes by Hosseinzadeh Gharajeh et al.\(^3^7\), thus confirming that the Chlorophycean microalgae from the salt pans was in fact *D. tertiolecta*.

**Evaluating the significant nutrient factors using Plackett–Burman design**

PB design (six-factor, two-level) consisting of 12 experimental trials was employed to comprehensively study the influence of De Walne’s medium components with respect to zeaxanthin production (Table 1). Figure 3 is a graphical illustration of the contribution percentage of independent variables. The factors like NaH\(_2\)PO\(_4\), NaNO\(_3\) and trace metals have positive effect on zeaxanthin production, whereas other factors like vitamin solution, manganese chloride and FeEDTA have a negative effect. The contribution of the three most significant factors was as follows: trace metal solution – 58.32%, sodium dihydrogen phosphate – 16.16% and sodium nitrate – 10.64% (Figure 3). Hence, the concentration of these three significant factors were further optimized using RSM to obtain maximum response.

**Response surface methodology**

A sum of 20 tests was structured and experimented in triplicates, with their average mean value of zeaxanthin concentration as the response. Statistical examination of the model was done using analysis of variance (two-way ANOVA). The model was assessed by the coefficient of determination (\(R^2\)) and its significance was examined with the help of \(P\) value and \(F\)-test (Table 3). Multiple regression analysis was performed and the second-order polynomial equation was utilized to relate the independent factors accomplishing high zeaxanthin production. The response of each variable was determined by the coded factors of the polynomial equation. The second-order model that was constructed after multiple regression analysis is given below

\[
\text{Zeaxanthin} = + 12.51 + 3.62 \times A + 1.87 \times B \\
- 0.65 \times C + 3.18 \times AB + 0.81 \times AC + 0.70 \times BC \\
+ 1.27 \times A^2 - 1.92 \times B^2 - 2.01 \times C^2 - 1.80 \times ABC \\
+ 1.83 \times A^2B - 2.56 \times A^2C - 3.64 \times AB^2, \quad (5)
\]

where \(A = \) sodium nitrate, \(B = \) sodium dihydrogen phosphate and \(C = \) trace metals.

In this case, \(A, B, AB, A^2, B^2, C^2, ABC, A^2B, A^2C, AB^2\) are significant model terms. Other terms were found to be insignificant (Table 3). Run 12 of CCD design yielded maximum zeaxanthin production of 19.86 ± 0.21 mg l\(^{-1}\) under the following condition: NaNO\(_3\) – 910 mg l\(^{-1}\), NaH\(_2\)PO\(_4\) – 45 mg l\(^{-1}\) and trace metals –0.5 ml l\(^{-1}\). As shown in Table 2, the forecasted response varied in the range 1.29–20.01 mg l\(^{-1}\). The model was further validated for its yield to verify the reproducibility of the results obtained.

Based on the results of two-way ANOVA, a high \(F\)-value (36.91), which is the ratio of mean square regression and mean square residual, and a very low \(P\)-value (<0.0001), indicate that the model is significant\(^3^9\). ‘Prob > F’ less than 0.0500 signifies the reliability of the experiment. ‘Adeq Precision’ measures the signal-to-noise ratio (adequate precision values ≥4 considered desirable), whereas coefficient of variation (CV) determines the accuracy of the model\(^4^0\). In this experimental model, a ratio of 23.05 indicates an adequate signal. Low value of CV (9.97%) indicates good precision and reliability of the experiments. Hence, the experimental model is reliable and reproducible\(^4^1\).

The observed coefficient of determination (\(R^2\)) value of 0.987 demonstrates that 98.70% of the unpredictability in the response value could be elucidated by the mathematical model.
Table 3. Analysis of variance (partial sum of squares – type III) for zeaxanthin concentration from \textit{D. tertiolecta} using response surface methodology (quadratic model)

| Source         | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F value | P-value | Prob > F |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Model          | 544.29         | 13 | 41.87       | 36.91   | 0.0001  |          |
| A-NaNO$_3$     | 73.93          | 1  | 73.93       | 65.17   | 0.0002  |          |
| B-NaH$_2$PO$_4$| 19.85          | 1  | 19.85       | 17.49   | 0.0058  |          |
| C-Trace metal  | 2.42           | 1  | 2.42        | 2.13    | 0.1944  |          |
| AB             | 80.65          | 1  | 80.65       | 71.09   | 0.0002  |          |
| AC             | 5.25           | 1  | 5.25        | 4.63    | 0.0750  |          |
| BC             | 3.92           | 1  | 3.92        | 3.46    | 0.1124  |          |
| A$^2$          | 23.08          | 1  | 23.08       | 20.35   | 0.0041  |          |
| B$^2$          | 53.12          | 1  | 53.12       | 46.83   | 0.0005  |          |
| C$^2$          | 58.33          | 1  | 58.33       | 51.42   | 0.0004  |          |
| ABC            | 25.85          | 1  | 25.85       | 22.79   | 0.0031  |          |
| A$^2$B         | 11.09          | 1  | 11.09       | 9.78    | 0.0204  |          |
| A$^2$C         | 21.78          | 1  | 21.78       | 19.20   | 0.0047  |          |
| AB$^2$         | 43.85          | 1  | 43.85       | 38.66   | 0.0008  |          |

$R^2 = 0.987$, Adj $R^2 = 0.9609$, Pred $R^2 = 0.8754$, Adeq precision = 23.05, CV = 9.97%.

Figure 4. (a) Response surface methodology contour plot (b) three-dimensional response surface plot for effects of NaH$_2$PO$_4$ and NaNO$_3$ concentration and their interaction effect on zeaxanthin production by \textit{D. tertiolecta}. Other variables were set at zero level.

model (Table 3). The ‘Pred $R^2$’ of 0.0542 was not much contiguous to ‘Adj $R^2$’ of 0.9609, i.e. the difference is above 0.2. This may specify a huge block effect with the experimental model. In order to overcome this defect, the coded factors for NaNO$_3$ were set at +1.00 level, NaH$_2$PO$_4$ at +0.70 level and trace metals solution at −0.79 level.

The 3D response surface graph displayed in Figure 4, reveals the mutual interaction effect of the exploratory factors (variables) on the response value (zeaxanthin yield). The regression equation defines the following optimal coded units of test factors: $X_1 = 910$ mg l$^{-1}$, $X_2 = 40.5$ mg l$^{-1}$ and $X_3 = 0.605$ ml l$^{-1}$ corresponding to the concentration of NaNO$_3$, NaH$_2$PO$_4$ and micronutrient solution respectively, for maximal zeaxanthin production of $20.2 \pm 1.29$ mg l$^{-1}$, anticipated by the numerical model. However, all experimental models ought to be tested using confirmatory runs to obtain corroborative results.

Validation of the experimental model

In order to authenticate the suitability of the model equations, additional experiments were carried out using the predicted optimized conditions containing the three significant components namely, NaNO$_3$ of 910 mg l$^{-1}$ (+1.00 level), NaH$_2$PO$_4$ of 40.5 mg l$^{-1}$ (+0.70 level) and trace elements solution of 0.605 ml l$^{-1}$ (−0.79 level). As a result, zeaxanthin productivity peaked up to $20.2 \pm 1.29$ mg l$^{-1}$ on utilizing the optimized medium, which is
in good correlation with the estimated value of 20.73 mg l\(^{-1}\) by RSM regression study.

An overall three-fold enhancement in zeaxanthin production (20.2 ± 1.29 mg l\(^{-1}\)) was obtained due to optimization, when compared with the initial Walne’s medium (6.92 ± 0.2 mg l\(^{-1}\)). The good correlation between these results confirms that the predicted responses for the model are adequate to reflect the observed optimization; hence the model is reproducible.

**Purification of zeaxanthin using RP-HPLC**

The obtained zeaxanthin extract from *D. tertiolecta* was purified using analytical RP-HPLC. Figure 5 *a* displays the HPLC chromatogram of authentic zeaxanthin standard in which the major peak was obtained at 13.25 min. Figure 5 *a* and *c* displays the analytical RP-HPLC chromatogram of purified zeaxanthin. Figure 5 *c* shows the major fraction eluted at 13.16 min, characteristic to zeaxanthin, when compared to zeaxanthin standard. The zeaxanthin thus obtained was 97.35% pure.

**Discussion**

Among the essential macronutrients, nitrogen alone represents almost 10% of the total dry cell weight in microalgae\(^{42}\). In several microalgae, N is the most significant supplement in the culture medium as it plays a critical role in influencing growth and controlling cellular metabolism and carotenoid synthesis\(^{45}\). Although, there are different nitrogen sources like ammonia, urea, nitrate, peptone, etc. the best N source for *Dunaliella* is nitrate only. In the present study, a higher sodium nitrate concentration of 910 mg l\(^{-1}\) shows more zeaxanthin yield. These findings agree well with those of Del Campo *et al.*\(^{44}\), who demonstrated that *Chlorella zofingiensis* showed an increase in lutein (25 mg l\(^{-1}\)) and astaxanthin (18 mg l\(^{-1}\)) content with higher nitrogen concentration of 2.5 g l\(^{-1}\). Leesing *et al.*\(^{45}\) demonstrated that growth and lipid production in *Chlorella* sp. KKU-S2 were highly related to the amount of nitrogen in the culture medium. Shi *et al.*\(^{46}\) observed that an amalgamation of various nitrogen sources resulted in maximal lutein synthesis in *Chlorella protothecoides*. However, total absence of N source reduces biomass productivity and consequently results in poor zeaxanthin synthesis. Hence, zeaxanthin accumulating ability of algae is mostly related to the amount of N in the culture medium\(^{47}\). Therefore, nitrate should be supplied at a moderate level so that growth rate is not hindered.

Hannon *et al.*\(^{48}\) observed that phosphorus makes up extensively about 1% of absolute algal biomass (up to 0.06%), but it plays a vital role in growth and metabolism of microalgae, thereby promoting carotenoid synthesis\(^{49}\). Belotti *et al.*\(^{50}\) observed that total absence of phosphorus in culture medium could suppress photosynthesis, thereby resulting in poor growth and leading to starvation. In the present study, sodium dihydrogen phosphate was utilized as a PO\(_4\) source, with a range of 15–55.27 mg l\(^{-1}\). In run 12 of CCD, the higher PO\(_4\) concentration of 45 mg l\(^{-1}\) yielded maximum amount of zeaxanthin. This result agrees well with that of Celekli *et al.*\(^{51}\) who observed that phosphate enhanced carotenoid synthesis in the filamentous Cyanophycean microalga, *Spirulina platensis*. In order to achieve higher zeaxanthin content and biomass, a combination of optimum nitrate and phosphate concentrations is essential to increase the zeaxanthin accumulation.

Ben-Amotz and Avron\(^{52}\) reported that four important micronutrients, namely cobalt, zinc, copper and manganese are essential for sustained growth and metabolite production in *Dunaliella*, which is in line with the present study, that reflected trace metals solution as a significant component for zeaxanthin production. Trace metals also act as cofactors for enzyme synthesis during photosynthesis. Therefore, several ecological stresses along with varied physico-chemical factors could enhance the synthesis of metabolites in a single growth cycle and developing such strategies in large-scale production could be more economical.

**Conclusion**

In the present study, PB and CCD were utilized to improve the suitability of De Walne’s medium, thereby...
optimizing the conditions for maximum production of zeaxanthin by *D. tertiolecta*. The medium containing 910 mg l$^{-1}$ sodium nitrate, 40.5 mg l$^{-1}$ sodium dihydrogen phosphate and 0.605 mg l$^{-1}$ trace elements solution was considered as optimal, which improved zeaxanthin production by three-fold (20.2 ± 1.29 mg l$^{-1}$) more than that obtained in the initial medium. Two-way ANOVA demonstrated a high coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.987$), thereby proving the reliability and accuracy of the experimental model. It also resulted in the increase of biomass from 2.5 ± 0.26 g l$^{-1}$ to 3.53 ± 0.56 g l$^{-1}$, which was 1.4-fold higher. Thus, the Chlorophycean halotolerant microalga, *D. tertiolecta* could be a suitable candidate for industrial-scale zeaxanthin production.

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