Antibacterial Effects of *Eisenia fetida*, Earthworm Extract against Pathogenic Bacteria Isolated from *Cyprinus carpio*

Nitish Bansal*, Rajender Kumar Gupta¹ and Vikas Nehra²

¹Department of Zoology and Aquaculture, Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar (Haryana) - 125004, India
²Department of Veterinary Pathology, Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar (Haryana) - 125004, India

*Corresponding author

**Abstract**

In the present investigations, whole body extract of earthworm, *Eisenia fetida* was tested for antibacterial activity against fish bacterial pathogens. The bacteria were isolated from different tissues of infected common carp, *Cyprinus carpio* and identified by gram staining method. A total of eight pathogenic bacteria were isolated. Antimicrobial activity of the extract was studied under *in vitro* conditions by well diffusion assay. The extract of *Eisenia fetida* showed antibacterial activity against all the pathogenic bacteria and the maximum zone of inhibition was observed against *A. hydrophila*. Histological investigations had revealed that feeding the fish on a diet prepared by incorporating earthworm extract resulted in an increase in intestinal folds while injecting the fish with *A. hydrophila* resulted in degeneration and desquamation of intestinal epithelium feeding on supplementary diet. When a healthy carp was injected with pathogenic bacterium and also fed on a diet prepared in earthworm extract, it resulted in a significant (P<0.05) increase in intestinal folds, intestinal microvilli, increase in concentration of melanomacrophage centre and also haemopoietic tissue in the kidneys. From these studies, it was concluded that the earthworm extract possesses very strong antibacterial properties which could be employed in treating bacterial infections in fishes, leading to the availability of antibiotic free fishes to the consumers.

**Keywords**

Bacteria, Common carp, *Eisenia fetida*, Antibacterial activity, Intestine, Kidney

**Introduction**

Fishery is an important sector in India as it provides employment to millions of people and also contributes to the food security of the country. Massive fish mortalities have been reported from different countries due to bacterial, fungal, viral and protozoan infections/diseases that results in heavy economic losses. A variety of Bacterial infections pose significant threats to successful fish production throughout the world. Diseases as well as environmental pollution play an important role in aquaculture growth. Bacterial diseases outbreaks impose a significant constraint in fish and shellfish production (Bachere *et al.*, 1995; Verschuere *et al.*, 2000; Gomez *et al.*, 2007). Bacterial
pathogens have been reported to cause heavy mortality in both cultured and wild fish species in different parts of the world (Bader et al., 2003; Joseph and Clerk, 2002). Use of antimicrobial drugs in aquaculture has led to the emergence of many antibiotic resistant bacteria (Schwarz et al., 2001; Akinbowale et al., 2006).

Biological active compounds extracted from earthworms has traditionally been used by indigenous people throughout the world, more particularly in Asia, including India, Myanmar, China, Korea and Vietnam (Ranganathan, 2006). Since long time, earthworms have been used as a therapeutic drug source in China and other parts of the Far East countries (Ismail, 2005). Studies have shown the antipyretic, antispasmodic, detoxic, diuretic, antihypertensive, antiallergic, anticoagulative, antiasthmatic, spermatocidal, antioxidative, antimicrobial, anticancer, antiluercral and anti-inflammatory activities particularly of biologically active compounds isolated from earthworms (Hrzenjak et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2007; John and Packialakshmi, 2007; Balamurugan et al., 2009; Cooper and Balamurugan, 2010; Ansari and Sitaram, 2010). Prakash et al., (2007) and Balamurugan et al., (2007) have reported the presence of anti-ulceral and anti-oxidative properties in the paste of Lampito mauritii. Histopathological studies are recognized as biomarkers in the evaluation of the health of fish exposed to contaminants/pathogenic microbes/metazoan parasites, both in the laboratory (Thophon et al., 2003) and field studies. The histopathological studies on various target organs like intestine, gill, kidney and liver are useful to assess the damage to fish and animal health.

A number of studies have been carried out by researchers across the globe for assessing and evaluating the antibacterial activity of earthworm extract in many animal species. However, not many attempts have been made to study this extra-ordinary property of earthworms in fish health management. In order to scientifically analyze some of the ethnomedical uses of earthworm, the present investigation was undertaken to analyze the antibacterial properties of earthworm extract and its use in fish health management.

Materials and Methods

Collection of samples

Both healthy and infected specimens of Cyprinus carpio were obtained from fish farms in Hisar (Haryana) and brought to the Fish Biotechnology Laboratory of the Department of Zoology, CCS Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar (India). The earthworm, Eisenia fetida were collected from the vermicomposting Unit of the Department of Zoology, Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar.

Isolation of bacteria

Tissue samples from skin lesions, gills and intestine were dissected out from both healthy and infected common carp. Tissues were homogenized in Phosphate buffer saline (PBS) and then centrifuged at 12000 rpm for 10 min. Supernatant was spread over the nutrient agar (NA) medium under laminar flow. Plates were incubated in BOD incubator maintained at 30 ± 2º C for 18-24 hours. Growth on NA plate was observed after 18-24 h. Pure colonies of bacteria were isolated by further sub-culturing of single colonies on NA plates (Gerhardt et al., 1994).

Identification of bacteria

Isolated pure cultures of bacteria were subjected to biochemical tests (primary and secondary tests) for identification as following Krieg and Holt (1984) in “Bergey’s Manual of
Determinative Bacteriology”. Identification of bacteria was done with the help of computer program, PIBWin (Website: www.soton.ac.in.uk/tnb/pib.htm).

**In vivo pathogenicity testing**

Healthy common carp (weighing about 20-25 g) were collected from the fish farms and brought to the laboratory. The fish were acclimated for one week at ambient temperature in the laboratory and fed on supplementary diet. *In vivo* pathogenicity test was carried out on healthy fish by a method described by Keskin *et al.*, (2004).

**Preparation of earthworm extract**

Sexually mature clitellated earthworms (*Eisenia fetida*) were washed with running tap water and then fed with wet blotting paper for 18-20 hours for gut clearance. These worms were again washed with distilled water. In order to kill the worms they were kept in plastic trough covered with polythene in sunlight for three days.

Mucus and coelomic fluid that oozed out formed a brown coloured paste called earthworm paste. After mastication of whole earthworm obtained with mucus and coelomic fluid, a brown coloured paste was formed (Balamurugan *et al.*, 2007). After dried the paste in incubator, it was mixed with nuclease free water and centrifuged the whole mixture at 12000 rpm for 10 min. The supernatant was used as aqueous earthworm extract. The 95% ethanolic extract of earthworm were also prepared using aqueous extract in different combination.

**Preparation of feed**

During the experiment the fingerlings of common carp were acclimatized for 15 days under laboratory conditions and fed with the normal diet. After 15 days the experiments were conducted by feeding fish with normal diet and diet containing earthworm extract. The normal diet was prepared by using the following composition:

The extract was weighed on electronic balance @ 1.0%, 1.5% and 2.0% of the total feed gradients. Feed ingredients were mixed with the paste/ extract of earthworms and then the pellets of feed were prepared. All ingredients were mixed well and then dough was made by wetting with sterilized double distilled water. Pellets were obtained by pelletizer and then dried in BOD at 55 °C temperature.

The experiment was conducted in the Aquarium Room of the department. The aquaria were supplied with well aerated tap water and each tub was supplied by compressed air via-stone from aerator. Fresh tap water was stored in cuboidal tanks (of 400-500 liters capacity) for 24 hours in order to dechlorinate the water. Each tub was cleaned every alternate day by siphoning fish feces and remaining feed.

The feed, normal or supplemented with earthworm extract was given at the rate of 2% of body weight.

**Antibacterial well diffusion assay**

The clear zone of inhibition was measured using a centimeter scale and the observations were recorded following Gram and Melchiorens (1996).

**Histopathological examination**

Tissue samples obtained from intestine and kidney of experimental fish were fixed in Bouin's fixative for 24 h. Following usual procedures, paraffin embedded sections were cut at 4-6µm thickness and stained in Ehrlich Hematoxylin-Eosin.
Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using completely randomized design (CRD) following Snedecor and Cochran (1989).

Results and Discussion

Eight bacterial strains were reported and identified from Cyprinus carpio (Table 1). This is in agreement with the findings of other workers who have also shown that intestinal micro flora of aquatic animals consists of mainly Gram-negative aerobic, obligate anaerobic and facultative anaerobic bacteria and the composition of which may vary with environmental stresses (Ringo et al., 1997; Kennedy et al., 1998; Olafsen, 2001). Various bacterial strains that have been isolated from aquatic animals belonged to Aeromonas and Pseudomonas spp. and also some species of the family Enterobacteriaceae (Anand et al., 2011; Hassan et al., 2011; Satish et al., 2013).

The longevity of fish infected with different pathogenic bacteria is shown in table 2. The A. hydrophila appeared to be the most pathogenic bacterium among the isolated strains. As the fish injected with A. hydrophila survived for about 8 days post inoculation. Pseudomonas fluorescens and Staphylococcus aureus were also quite pathogenic as fish could survive just for about 10-11 days post inoculation and mortality was 80.25% (Table 2). A. hydrophila was found to be most pathogenic to fish as it took the least time to show the disease symptoms in fish (Sarkar and Rashid, 2012).

According to Harikrishnan et al., (2003) pathogenicity was induced by A. hydrophila when injected @10^8 cfu/ml on 7th day of injection and also reported hemorrhagic spots at the site of injection in common carp, whereas, in the present studies, similar symptoms appeared on the 4th day of the injection in common carp.

Antimicrobial well diffusion assay

The results of the in vitro antagonism tests are shown in table 3. Maximum values of zone of inhibition against the fish bacterial pathogens were shown by Eisenia fetida in the composition of 1:1 (Extract: Ethanol).

The mean values of the zone of inhibition observed for Eisenia fetida against the Gram-ve bacteria was 24.00 mm for A. hydrophila and against Gram+ve bacteria was 21.33 mm for S. aureus (Table 3, Fig. 1-6).

Similar to our findings, Vasanthi et al., (2013) found that extract of Eudrilus eugeniae at a dose of 100µl was able to inhibit the growth of S. aureus at a maximum level compared to other bacteria.

Present studies have revealed that earthworm extract possesses good antibacterial potency and these results are similar to other findings reported by other workers who have observed that coelomic fluid has antibacterial activity against bacteria (Mathur et al., 2010; Shobha and Kale, 2008; Kathireswari et al., 2014; Bansal et al., 2015, 2016).

Bhorgin and Uma (2014) also found that 95% ethanol extract of earthworm showed potent antimicrobial agent against A. hydrophila and antifungal activity against C. albicans.

Histopathological study

The exposure of Cyprinus carpio to bacterial strains has revealed clear differences between the effect of pathogenic bacterium (A. hydrophila) infection and earthworm extract on treated groups.

No differences were observed in the histology of the foregut of the common carp treated with earthworm extract as it was similar to control fish as both had intact epithelial barrier.
Table 1. List of bacteria isolated from infected/diseased fish

| Selective Media                                      | Confirmation of bacteria          |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Antibiotic Assay Medium No. 38                       | *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*          |
| Antibiotic Assay Medium. C                           | *Staphylococcus aureus*           |
| EMB medium                                           | *Enterobacter aerogens*           |
| Hugh Leifson glucose medium                          | *Micrococcus luteus*              |
| Pseudomonas agar F Base                              | *Pseudomonas fluorescence*        |
| Rimler-Shotts Medium                                  | *Aeromonas hydrophila*            |
| XLD (Xylose deoxycholate agar) EMB Agar (Eosin Methylene Blue Agar) | *Shigella spp.*                   |

Table 2. Pathogenicity of bacteria and longevity of *Cyprinus carpio*

| Pathogenic bacteria                  | Longevity (in days) |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Gram negative                        |                     |
| *Aeromonas hydrophila*               | 8.66± 0.33          |
| *Escherichia coli*                   | 12.14 ± 0.57        |
| *Enterobacter aerogens*              | 15.52± 0.33         |
| *Shigella spp.*                      | 16.37± 0.33         |
| *Pseudomonas fluorescens*            | 11.53± 1.20         |
| *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*             | 13.70 ± 0.57        |
| Gram positive                        |                     |
| *Micrococcus luteus*                 | 13.25 ±0.33         |
| *Staphylococcus aureus*              | 10.38 ±0.57         |
| CD (P<0.05)                          | 0.28                |

All values are Mean ± S.E of mean; N=30 (10 fish x 3 replications)
Table 3 Inhibition zones (in mm) of *Eisenia fetida* against different pathogenic bacteria.

| Bacterial strains       | *Eisenia fetida*                  |                  |                  |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                         | Pure Aqueous Extract              | Aqueous Extract: Ethanol 1:1 | Aqueous Extract: Ethanol 1:2 |
| *Aeromonas hydrophila*  | 21.33±0.33                        | 24.00±0.66       | 21.33±0.57       |
| *Staphylococcus aureus*| 19.00±0.57                        | 21.33±0.57       | 18.00±0.33       |
| *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*| 15.66±0.33                        | 18.00±0.33       | 14.66±0.57       |
| *Pseudomonas florescens*| 18.33±0.88                        | 20.33±0.57       | 17.00±0.33       |
| *Micrococcus luteus*    | 14.00±0.57                        | 16.00±0.66       | 11.33±0.57       |
| *Escherichia coli*      | 19.33±0.66                        | 21.00±0.33       | 17.66±0.57       |
| *Enterobacter aerogens* | 18.33±0.33                        | 18.66±0.66       | 15.33±0.33       |
| *Shigella spp.*         | 11.66±0.33                        | 15.33±0.33       | 11.66±0.33       |

All values are Mean ± S.E of mean; N=30 (10 fish x 3 replications)
Preparation of feed

| Components                  | Amount in % |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Soya Flour                  | 16.5        |
| Ground nut oil cake (GNOC)  | 16.5        |
| Rice Bran                   | 17.0        |
| Fish meal                   | 16.5        |
| Sesame oil cake             | 16.5        |
| Tapioca flour               | 16.5        |
| MPA                         | 0.5         |

**Fig.1** Histological study of intestine in control group (40X)

![Histological study of intestine in control group](image1)

a) Intact or normal intestinal epithelium

**Fig.2** (a and b). Histological changes in intestine in fish inoculated with pathogenic bacterium (10X). a) Fusion of microvilli of intestine along with infiltration of MNC’s

![Histological changes in intestine](image2)

**Fig.2 (a)**

**Fig.2 (b)**
**Fig. 3** Histological changes in intestine in fish fed with Earthworm extract (40X)

- Increased intestinal folds

**Fig. 4** Histological study of kidney in control group (10X)

- a) Melano-macrophage center, b) Haemopoeitic tissue, c) Tubules of kidney

**Fig. 5** Histological changes in kidney in fish inoculated with pathogenic bacterium (10X)

- a) Vacuolation and degeneration of tubule epithelium, b) Infiltration of MNC’s, c) Haemorrhage
Fish infected with *A. hydrophila* showed severe enteritis in intestine characterized by degeneration and desquamation of epithelium in villi along with infiltration of mono-nuclear cells (Fig. 2). Similarly, severe changes were also observed in the histology of kidney where severe vacoulation and degeneration of tubular epithelium along with infiltration of mono-nuclear cells were observed. Hemorrhages were also observed in the parenchyma of the kidney (Fig. 5). Exposure of the foregut to the pathogenic bacterium (*A. hydrophila*) resulted in various damaging effects i.e. altered microvilli and protruding epithelial cells sloughing into the lumen, and the presence of cell debris in the gut lumen.

In the treatment, where the fish were injected with bacteria and fed on a diet incorporated with earthworm extract showed slight degeneration and desquamation of the intestinal villi epithelium and infiltration of mono-nuclear cells in intestine (Fig. 3). The increase in number of folds in the intestine caused by earthworm extract is definitely a beneficial effect on the host. In kidney, increased concentration of melano macrophage centre, haemopoietic tissue with presence of mild hyaline tubular casts (Fig. 6) were observed. No histopathological changes were observed in intestine and kidney in the control group (Fig. 1 and 4). Similar findings were observed by Fatma Mohammad (2009), who worked on histopathological study of *Tilapia zilli* and *S. vulgaris* also observed that most common lesions in liver were vacuolar degeneration and kidney showed severe degenerative and necrotic changes in renal tubules with focal areas of necrosis and haemorrhage, haemolysis and vacuolar degeneration of renal tubules. In the kidney, necrosis of tubular epithelium in kidney with focal lymphocyte infiltration was considered to be associated with interstitial nephritis which seemed to be parallel with previous studies (Errer, 1981; Roberts, 2001; Hassan et al., 2008).

Present studies had clearly revealed that the earthworm extract is very effective in controlling the fish diseases in order to improve their health status. The present study further showed that fish treated with earthworm extract showed an improvement in the histopathology of common carp. The exposure of *Cyprinus carpio* to bacterial
strains has revealed clear differences between the effect of pathogenic bacterium (*A. hydrophila*) infection and earthworm extract on treated groups. In conclusion, it can be stated that earthworm extract can reduce the incidence and duration of diseases. The application of earthworm extract in aquaculture shows promise but needs considerable efforts of research. A new approach method, that is gaining acceptance within the industry, is the use of earthworm extract to control potential pathogens.

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