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From Persistent Pollutant to Biodegradable Possibility: Insects as Emerging Agents of Plastic Degradation

*Thamidela Meera Devi[1], Gundreddy Raja Reddy[2], Neeli Priyanka[3] and Mude Pavan Kalyan[4]
[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Entomology- Sri Krishnadevaraya College of Agricultural Sciences, Ananthapuramu, Andhra Pradesh- 515002
[2]Biological Control Laboratory, Division of Entomology, ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi-110012
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Entomology - Heartfulness Academy of Research and Innovation HARI (Deemed to be University) Kanha Shanti Vanam, Nandigama (M), Rangareddy, Telangana-509325
[4]Ph. D Scholar, Department of Entomology, S.V. Agricultural College, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh-517502
*Corresponding Author's email: thamidelameera369@gmail.com

Plastic pollution has become one of the most formidable environmental challenges confronting humanity. With global plastic production exceeding 400 million tonnes annually and a substantial fraction entering terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, the ecological footprint of synthetic polymers continues to expand. Conventional disposal strategies such as landfilling, incineration and mechanical recycling are energy-intensive and often inefficient in addressing microplastic contamination. Recent scientific advancements have uncovered an unexpected biological ally in the fight against plastic waste— insects and their gut-associated microbiota. Species such as the black soldier fly (*Hermetia illucens*) and mealworms (*Tenebrio molitor*) have demonstrated the ability to ingest and partially degrade synthetic polymers including polyethylene, polystyrene and polyurethane. This emerging interdisciplinary domain bridges entomology, microbiology and environmental biotechnology, offering a promising avenue for sustainable plastic waste management. The present article discusses the scientific basis, mechanisms, applications, limitations and future prospects of insect-assisted plastic degradation.

Keywords: Plastic pollution, biodegradation, black soldier fly, mealworms, insect gut microbiome, environmental biotechnology

Introduction

The 20th century witnessed the rapid expansion of plastic production due to its durability, lightweight nature, chemical resistance, and low manufacturing cost. Plastics revolutionized sectors such as packaging, healthcare, agriculture, and transportation; however, their resistance to natural degradation has resulted in massive environmental accumulation. Unlike organic materials, most conventional plastics are derived from petroleum-based polymers containing strong carbon–carbon bonds that resist microbial breakdown. Over time, plastic debris fragments into microplastics (<5 mm) and nanoplastics that infiltrate soil systems, aquatic ecosystems, and food chains. Microplastics have been detected in marine organisms, agricultural soils, drinking water, and even human blood, raising concerns about long-term ecological and toxicological impacts. Conventional waste management approaches face several limitations: mechanical recycling is constrained by contamination and polymer heterogeneity, chemical recycling requires high energy input and specialized infrastructure, incineration releases greenhouse gases and potentially toxic emissions, and landfilling leads to persistent environmental accumulation. These challenges have stimulated interest in biological alternatives, particularly biodegradation, which involves the use of living organisms or their enzymes to decompose materials and has emerged as a promising sustainable strategy. In this context, insects have recently gained attention as potential biological mediators of plastic degradation.

Discovery of Plastic-Degrading Insects

The discovery of plastic-degrading insects began when researchers observed that mealworms (Tenebrio molitor) could consume and survive on polystyrene foam. Further studies revealed that the larvae not only physically broke the plastic into smaller pieces but also metabolized part of it inside their digestive system. Later, scientists began investigating other insects and found that the black soldier fly (*Hermetia illucens*)-an insect already widely used for organic waste recycling and animal feed production-also showed potential for degrading certain plastic polymers.

1. Black Soldier Fly (*Hermetia illucens*)

The black soldier fly (BSF) is a non-pest fly species known for its ability to convert organic waste into high-protein biomass. Recent studies indicate that BSF larvae can ingest some plastic polymers, particularly polyurethane.

Black soldier fly larvae chew plastic into small fragments, and the particles pass through their digestive system. Gut microorganisms produce enzymes that partially break down the plastic polymer chains into smaller molecules. Some degraded compounds are absorbed into larval biomass, and studies show a reduction in plastic mass, indicating biodegradation potential.

$$\text{Plastic Polymer} + O_2 \xrightarrow{\text{Insect + Gut Microbes}} CO_2 + H_2O + \text{Biomass}$$

This equation represents the general pathway where plastic polymers are oxidized, broken into smaller molecules, and finally converted into carbon dioxide, water, and insect biomass through microbial metabolism.

2. Mealworms (*Tenebrio molitor*)

Mealworms were the first insects reported to degrade polystyrene. In laboratory experiments, larvae fed only on polystyrene were able to survive and complete their life cycle, although their growth rate was slower.

Role of the Insect Gut Microbiome

Insects contain diverse communities of microorganisms in their digestive systems. These gut microbes, including bacteria and fungi, produce enzymes capable of breaking down complex materials.

Several enzymes play an important role in plastic degradation, including **oxidases, esterases, hydrolases, and laccases**, which help break down complex polymer chains into smaller molecules. In addition, various bacterial genera present in the insect gut microbiome have shown plastic-degrading potential, such as **Bacillus, Pseudomonas, Enterobacter, and Exiguobacterium**, which contribute to the enzymatic breakdown of plastic polymers.

Biochemical Basis of Polymer Degradation

Many plastics, such as polyethylene, consist of long hydrocarbon chains connected by strong carbon–carbon (C–C) bonds, making them highly resistant to degradation.

Environmental and Agricultural Significance

Insect-assisted plastic degradation can support decentralized waste management, integrate with organic waste processing (especially using black soldier fly systems), reduce carbon emissions compared to incineration, and enable resource recovery through biomass production, offering a potential solution for plastic waste management in developing countries.

Limitations and Scientific Challenges

- ✓ Despite promising results, several challenges remain:
- ✓ Plastic degradation rates are still slow under natural conditions.
- ✓ Complete mineralization has not yet been fully demonstrated.
- ✓ Possible toxic by-products need careful evaluation.
- ✓ Long-term ecological impacts are not yet known.
- ✓ Regulatory frameworks for large-scale applications are still lacking.
- ✓ Ethical and biosafety considerations must also be addressed before practical deployment.

Future Research Directions

- ✓ Isolation of efficient plastic-degrading enzymes
- ✓ Development of enzyme-based industrial bioreactors
- ✓ Genetic improvement of microbial strains
- ✓ Synthetic biology approaches to optimize degradation pathways
- ✓ Large-scale pilot projects combining insect systems with municipal waste management
- ✓ Instead of directly releasing insects into landfills, researchers are increasingly focusing on extracting and utilizing the enzymes produced by insect gut microbes.

Conclusion

The discovery that insects can contribute to plastic degradation represents an important development in applied entomology and environmental science. It highlights the ecological versatility of insects and their potential role in addressing global plastic pollution.

Although still in the experimental stage, insect-assisted biodegradation offers a promising complementary strategy for sustainable waste management. Continued interdisciplinary research involving entomology, microbiology, molecular biology and environmental engineering will be essential to transform these laboratory findings into practical, scalable solutions.

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