Agri Articles
(e-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)
Volume: 06, Issue: 03 (MAY-JUNE, 2026)
Available online at http://www.agriarticles.com
©Agri Articles, ISSN: 2582-9882

Live Feed, Healthy Fish: The Secret to Successful Aquaculture

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Aquaculture has emerged as one of the fastest-growing food production sectors worldwide, playing a vital role in food security, nutrition, and economic development. However, the successful rearing of fish larvae remains a major challenge due to their underdeveloped digestive systems and high nutritional requirements. Live feed organisms, including rotifers (*Brachionus* spp.), brine shrimp (*Artemia* spp.), copepods, and cladocerans, are essential components of larval aquaculture because of their superior nutritional quality, digestibility, and ability to stimulate natural feeding behaviour. These live feeds provide proteins, essential fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, and digestive enzymes that support growth, survival, immunity, and overall larval development. Enrichment techniques further enhance their nutritional value by increasing the levels of critical nutrients such as DHA, EPA, and vitamins. Despite challenges related to production costs, contamination, and culture management, live feed remains indispensable in hatchery operations. Advances in enrichment technologies, probiotics, bioencapsulation, and sustainable production systems are expected to improve aquaculture efficiency and productivity. Thus, live feed continues to be a cornerstone of successful and sustainable aquaculture practices.

Keywords: Live Feed, Aquaculture, Fish Larvae, Nutritional Enrichment.

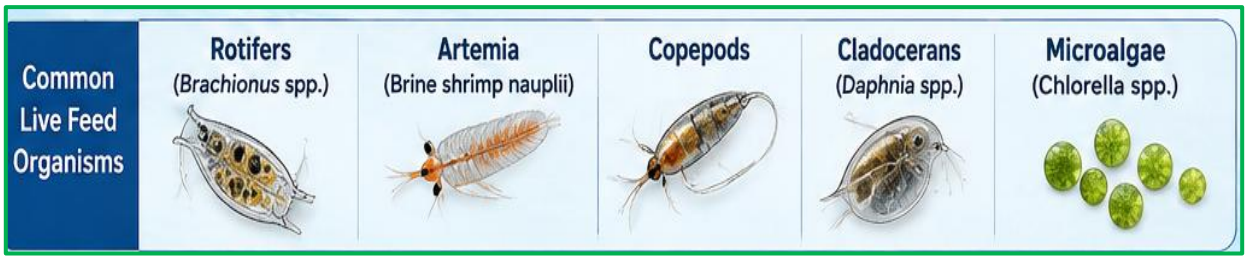
Introduction

Aquaculture, defined as the farming of aquatic organisms such as fish, crustaceans, and mollusks, has become one of the fastest-growing sectors in global food production. It plays a vital role in ensuring food and nutritional security by supplying high-quality protein, essential fatty acids, and micronutrients to a rapidly expanding human population. In recent years, aquaculture has significantly contributed to economic development and livelihood generation, particularly in developing nations where fish forms an important component of the diet (Pan et al., 2022).

Despite its rapid expansion, aquaculture continues to face several challenges, especially during the early life stages of fish. The larval stage is widely recognized as a critical bottleneck due to the underdeveloped digestive system of larvae, their limited capacity to utilize artificial diets, and their high susceptibility to environmental stress and mortality. Successful larval rearing largely depends on the transition from endogenous (yolk-based) to exogenous feeding, which is often inefficient when suitable nutrition is not provided (Melaku et al., 2024). In fact, larval nutrition remains one of the most limiting factors affecting survival and growth in aquaculture systems (El-Sayed et al., 2024).

To overcome these constraints, live feed organisms such as rotifers, *Artemia*, and copepods are widely used in hatcheries. These live feeds are considered indispensable because they are nutritionally rich, easily digestible, and capable of stimulating natural feeding responses in fish larvae. Moreover, no artificial diet has yet been able to fully replace live feed during early larval development, highlighting its fundamental importance in aquaculture (Samat et al., 2020; Lahnsteiner et al., 2023).

Live Fish Feed



In aquaculture, the success of fish rearing largely depends on providing the right type of feed at the right stage of development. During the early life stages, fish larvae have limited feeding ability, small mouth size, and an underdeveloped digestive system. Therefore, live feeds play a crucial role as they are naturally suitable, nutritionally rich, and capable of stimulating feeding behavior. Different types of live feed are used progressively as the fish grow, ensuring optimal survival and development (Pan et al., 2022).

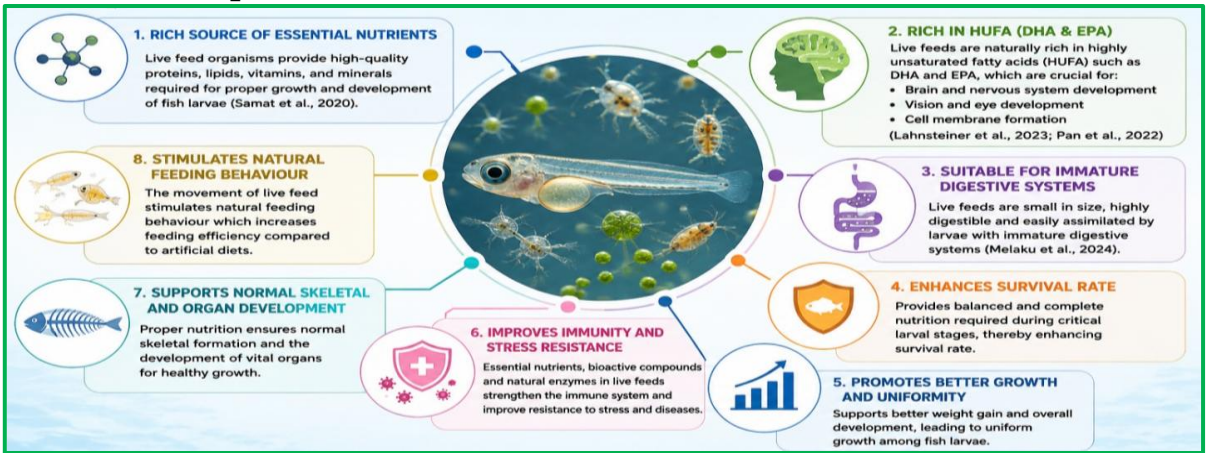
Live feeds can be broadly classified into phytoplankton and zooplankton based on their nature and function in aquaculture systems. Microalgae (phytoplankton) such as *Chlorella*, *Nannochloropsis*, and *Isochrysis* form the base of the aquatic food chain and are primarily used during the early larval stage, often indirectly. They serve as food for zooplankton like rotifers and copepods and help maintain water quality through the "green water technique." Microalgae are rich in essential nutrients, including fatty acids, vitamins, and pigments, which contribute to improved larval health (Samat et al., 2020).

Among zooplankton, rotifers (*Brachionus* spp.) are the most commonly used first feed for fish larvae immediately after yolk sac absorption. Their small size and slow swimming behavior make them easy for larvae to capture. Rotifers can be mass-produced and nutritionally enriched, making them highly suitable for hatchery operations. As larvae grow, they are gradually shifted to larger live feeds such as Artemia (brine shrimp), which are widely used due to their availability in cyst form, ease of hatching, and high protein content. Artemia nauplii are particularly suitable for early to advanced larval stages (Lahnsteiner et al., 2023).

Copepods, including calanoid, cyclopoid, and harpacticoid types, are considered one of the most nutritionally superior live feeds. They are rich in essential fatty acids like DHA and EPA and closely resemble the natural prey of many fish species. Copepods can be used from first feeding to juvenile stages depending on their size and are known to enhance growth, survival, pigmentation, and stress resistance in fish larvae (Melaku et al., 2024).

In later stages, larger live feeds such as cladocerans (e.g., *Daphnia* and *Moina*), along with organisms like Tubifex worms and insect larvae, are used for juveniles and growing fish. These feeds provide high protein and energy, supporting rapid growth and development. Overall, the use of stage-specific live feeds ensures better feed utilization, improved health, and higher survival rates, making them indispensable for successful aquaculture practices.

Nutritional Importance of Live Feed



- Live feed organisms provide high-quality proteins, lipids, vitamins, and minerals required for proper growth and development of fish larvae (Samat et al., 2020).
- Live feeds are naturally rich in highly unsaturated fatty acids (HUFA) such as DHA and EPA, which are crucial for: Brain and nervous system development, Vision and eye development and Cell membrane formation (Lahnsteiner et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2022)
- Suitable for larvae with immature digestive systems (Melaku et al., 2024)
- Enhances survival rate by Providing balanced nutrition required during critical larval stages
- Supports better weight gain and development. This leads to uniform growth among fish larvae
- Improves immunity and stress resistance
- Proper nutrition ensures normal skeletal and organ development
- Movement of live feed stimulates natural feeding behaviour which Increases feeding efficiency compared to artificial diets

Challenges in Live Feed Management

- Continuous production of live feed requires dedicated facilities, equipment, and skilled labor. Daily maintenance (feeding, harvesting, cleaning) increases operational costs (Pan et al., 2022)
- Live feed cultures are highly prone to contamination by bacteria, fungi, and unwanted microorganisms. Contaminants can reduce feed quality and may introduce diseases into hatchery systems
- Successful production requires precise control of environmental conditions such as temperature, salinity, and water quality. Poor management can lead to culture crashes and heavy losses (Melaku et al., 2024).
- Nutritional composition of live feed can vary depending on culture conditions and feed provided to them. Requires additional enrichment steps to maintain consistent quality (Lahnsteiner et al., 2023)

Enrichment of Live Feed

Enrichment of live feed is a process used to improve the nutritional quality of live organisms such as rotifers and *Artemia* before they are fed to fish larvae. Many live feeds naturally lack sufficient levels of essential nutrients, particularly highly unsaturated fatty acids, which are critical for larval development. Through enrichment, these organisms are fed nutrient-rich substances so that they accumulate and transfer these nutrients to the fish. This commonly includes Omega-3 fatty acids such as DHA and EPA, which are important for brain development, vision, and stress resistance, as well as vitamins like Vitamin C and Vitamin E that enhance immunity and prevent deformities. By ensuring that live feed contains balanced and adequate nutrients, enrichment significantly improves larval growth, survival, and overall health. In simple terms, enrichment improves the nutritional quality of live feed before feeding it to fish, making it a key practice in modern aquaculture.

Future Perspectives of Live Feed in Aquaculture

1. **Nutritional Enhancement of Live Feed** – Development of enriched live feeds with higher levels of essential fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, and bioactive compounds to improve larval growth and survival.
2. **Probiotic-Enriched Live Feed** – Incorporation of beneficial microorganisms into live feed cultures to enhance gut health, immunity, and disease resistance in cultured species.
3. **Bioencapsulation Technologies** – Use of live feed as carriers for probiotics, vaccines, immunostimulants, and micronutrients, enabling targeted delivery of health-promoting substances.
4. **Sustainable Production Systems** – Adoption of environmentally friendly live feed culture methods that reduce resource consumption, waste generation, and ecological impacts.

5. **Automation and Precision Aquaculture** – Integration of automated live feed production and feeding systems to improve efficiency, consistency, and scalability of hatchery operations.
6. **Support for Sustainable Aquaculture Growth** – Continued innovations in live feed technology will enhance seed quality, increase aquaculture productivity, and contribute to global food security while maintaining environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

Live feed plays a fundamental role in modern aquaculture, particularly during the larval and early juvenile stages when nutritional requirements are highly specific and critical for survival. Organisms such as rotifers, *Artemia*, copepods, and cladocerans provide a balanced source of essential nutrients, digestive enzymes, and bioactive compounds that support optimal growth, development, and physiological functioning. Their high digestibility and natural feeding stimulation enhance feed intake, nutrient utilization, and overall performance of cultured species. In addition to promoting rapid growth, live feed contributes significantly to immune development, stress tolerance, and disease resistance, resulting in healthier and more resilient fish populations. As aquaculture continues to expand to meet global food demands, the importance of efficient live feed production and innovative enrichment technologies becomes increasingly evident. Advances in probiotic supplementation, bioencapsulation, and sustainable culture methods are expected to further improve the effectiveness of live feeds and support environmentally responsible aquaculture practices. Ultimately, the success of hatchery operations and the long-term sustainability of aquaculture depend greatly on providing high-quality nutrition during the earliest stages of life. Healthy fish begin with the right nutrition, and live feed remains the cornerstone of successful aquaculture.

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