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Turning Waste into Wealth: Innovative Waste Management Practices in Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS)

*Denesh A and T.L.S. Samuel Moses
Department of Aquaculture, Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Fisheries University, Fisheries College and Research Institute, Thoothukudi-628008, India
*Corresponding Author's email: ddenesh149@gmail.com

Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS) have emerged as a resource-efficient alternative to conventional pond and cage-based aquaculture, enabling intensive fish and shrimp production with over 90 to 99 percent water reuse. They generate concentrated waste streams that pose significant environmental and economic challenges. This paper reviews "waste-to-wealth" valorization pathways including vermicomposting, aquaponics, IMTA, anaerobic digestion, black soldier fly bioconversion, struvite recovery, and algae cultivation evaluating their operational dynamics, advantages, and limitations. Contextualized within India's aquaculture sector (such as ICAR and PMMSY initiatives), the review concludes that these circular technologies can substantially enhance RAS sustainability, provided that technology costs are reduced and supportive policies are implemented.

Keywords: Recirculating Aquaculture System, circular economy, sludge valorization, aquaponics, IMTA, biogas, black soldier fly, struvite, algae cultivation

Introduction

Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS) are rapidly emerging as a highly resource-efficient alternative to conventional pond and cage-based aquaculture. RAS allows for intense fish and shrimp production at high stocking densities while reusing 90 to 99 percent of the water through the use of a continuous sequential water treatment train that comprises mechanical filtration, biofiltration, degassing, and disinfection. This closed-loop method is a crucial technology for water-scarce areas and places with stringent environmental discharge restrictions because it enables operators to maintain extremely steady water quality and significantly reduce fresh water inputs. Highly concentrated waste streams, including solid sludge, dissolved nutrients, and carbon dioxide, are produced by the extensive water reuse in RAS and pose serious environmental and financial disposal issues. The industry must switch from conventional disposal techniques to a circular "waste-to-wealth" strategy, turning these inevitable residues into valuable, sustainable commodities, in order to guarantee long-term profitability.

Recirculatory Aquaculture System

A typical RAS comprises a culture tank in which fish or shrimp are reared at high stocking densities, followed by a sequential water treatment train. Water leaving the culture tank first passes through mechanical filtration, commonly drum filters or settling tanks, which remove larger particulate solids such as uneaten feed and faecal matter. The clarified water then enters a biofilter, where nitrifying bacteria oxidize toxic ammonia to nitrite and subsequently to the comparatively less toxic nitrate through the nitrification pathway. Downstream unit processes typically include degassing to strip dissolved carbon dioxide and nitrogen gas, disinfection using ultraviolet light or ozone to control pathogens, and oxygenation before the water is returned to the culture tank.

This continuous treatment loop allows RAS operators to maintain stable water quality while minimizing new water inputs, which is particularly valuable in water-scarce regions or where environmental discharge is tightly regulated. Figure 1 illustrates the principal unit processes and the points at which waste streams are generated and diverted from the recirculating loop.

Characterization of Waste Generated in RAS

Effective waste-to-wealth planning requires a clear understanding of the quantity and composition of RAS waste streams.

Waste Type	Major Constituents	Typical Source	Approx. Output / Characteristics
Solid waste / sludge	Uneaten feed, faeces, biofilm sloughing	Mechanical filter, drum screen, settling tank	0.3-0.5 kg dry solids per kg feed fed; 85-95% moisture
Dissolved nitrogen	Ammonia-N, nitrite-N, nitrate-N	Fish excretion, protein catabolism	Nitrate accumulates in recirculated water; 20-30 mg/L in intensive RAS
Dissolved phosphorus	Orthophosphate (PO_4^{3-})	Feed residues, faecal matter	2.7-20.4 mg/L in effluent (Ebeling et al., 2003)
Dissolved organic carbon	Soluble organics, metabolites	Feed leaching, microbial activity	Contributes to biochemical oxygen demand (BOD)
Carbon dioxide / off-gas	CO_2, N_2 supersaturation	Fish respiration, biofiltration	Removed via degassing units and forced aeration
Backwash / purge water	Diluted solids and nutrients	Filter backwashing, water exchange	5-10% of system volume replaced daily in most RAS

Innovative Waste Valorization Technologies in RAS

This section reviews six major waste-to-wealth pathways currently applied or under investigation for RAS waste streams. Figure 2 presents an integrated overview of how RAS waste is diverted into each pathway and the resulting value-added products.

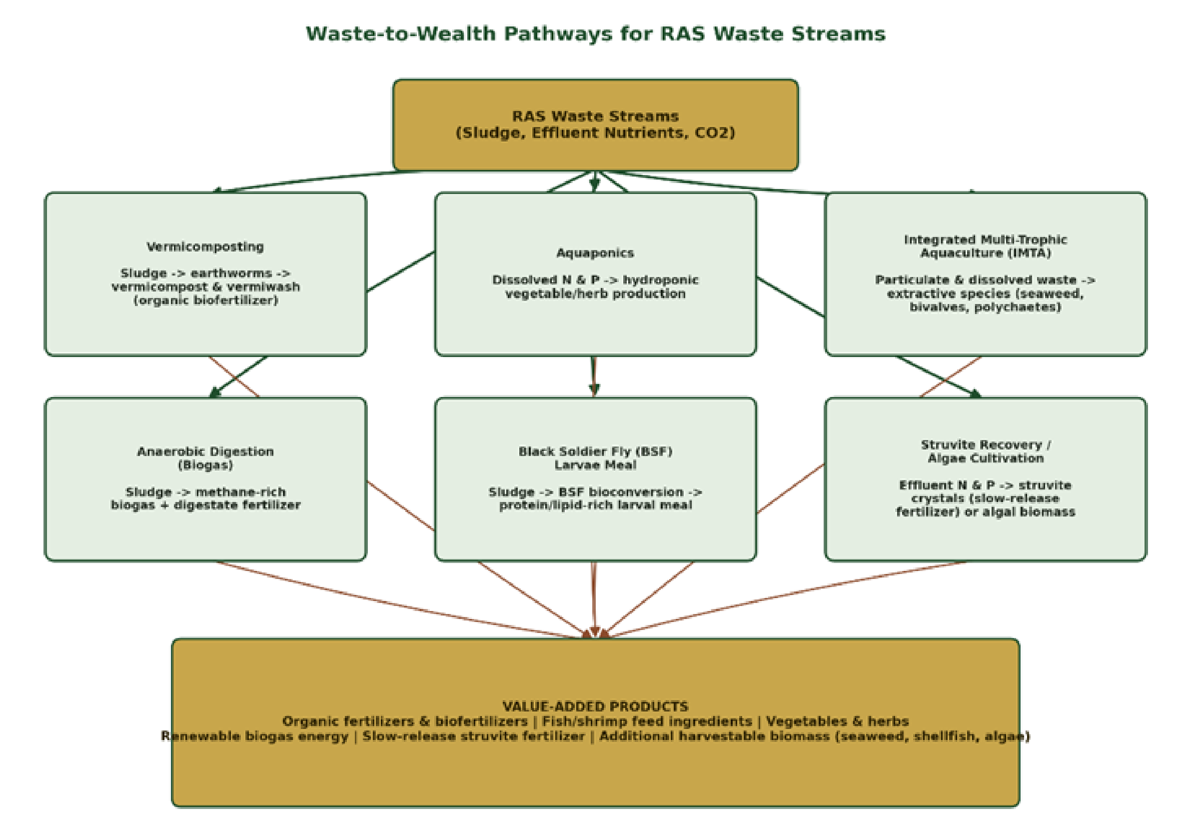


Figure 2. Integrated waste-to-wealth pathways for RAS sludge and effluent nutrients.

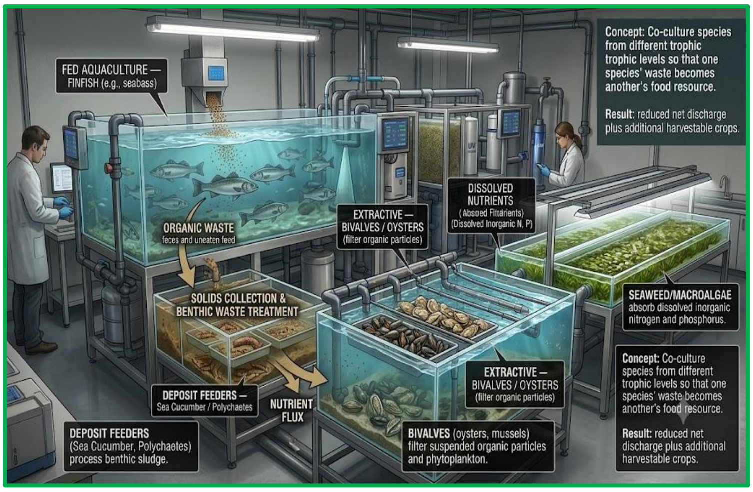
1) Vermicomposting

Vermicomposting uses earthworms, typically *Eisenia fetida*, to bio-oxidize dewatered fish sludge into a stabilized, nutrient-rich vermicompost along with a liquid extract known as vermiwash. The process is attractive for small and medium RAS operators because it requires minimal capital investment and can be implemented using simple bedding beds or vermicomposting units. The resulting vermicompost serves as an organic biofertilizer for horticulture and agriculture, closing the loop between aquaculture waste and crop production. Its principal limitation is processing time, since vermicomposting is slower than mechanical or chemical treatment and requires sludge to be dewatered to an appropriate moisture content before worm inoculation.

2) Aquaponics

Aquaponics integrates RAS with hydroponic crop production, routing nutrient-laden effluent, particularly nitrate and phosphate, into plant grow beds where crops such as lettuce, leafy greens, and herbs take up dissolved nutrients as they would from a synthetic fertilizer solution. Coupled aquaponic systems share water treatment units directly with the RAS, while decoupled systems operate the aquaculture and hydroponic components as semi-independent loops for greater control over nutrient concentrations. Reported nitrogen and phosphorus recovery efficiencies in integrated microalgal-aquaponic configurations exceed 95 percent, alongside reductions in freshwater consumption of up to 90 percent relative to conventional agriculture. A persistent challenge is nutrient imbalance: fish feed does not supply nutrients in the ratios optimal for plant growth, and phosphorus, potassium, and certain micronutrients often require supplementation.

3) Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA)



IMTA co-cultures the primary finfish or shrimp species alongside extractive organisms occupying complementary trophic levels, such as seaweeds that assimilate dissolved inorganic nutrients, and filter-feeding bivalves or deposit-feeding polychaetes that consume particulate organic waste. In the context of RAS, IMTA principles can be applied by directing filtered solids and effluent to adjacent extractive-species culture units, whether in land-based tanks or, for marine RAS, adjoining open-water installations. IMTA offers the dual benefit of bioremediation and additional harvestable biomass. Still, its performance is highly site- and species-specific, requiring careful matching of extractive species to the waste load and environmental conditions of the primary crop.

4) Anaerobic Digestion and Biogas Recovery

Anaerobic digestion (AD) converts concentrated organic sludge into biogas, principally methane and carbon dioxide, along with a nutrient-rich digestate suitable as a soil amendment. Studies on anaerobic co-digestion of fish sludge with food waste and fruit and vegetable waste have demonstrated stable biogas production, achieving specific methane yields of 70 to 82 percent of those obtained in laboratory biomethane potential tests under equivalent conditions. Anaerobic digestion has been estimated to offset 2 to 5 percent of total RAS energy demand, a share that can be further enhanced through co-digestion with other organic waste streams. The technology's principal drawbacks are its relatively high capital cost and the need for consistent feedstock volume and composition to maintain digester stability.

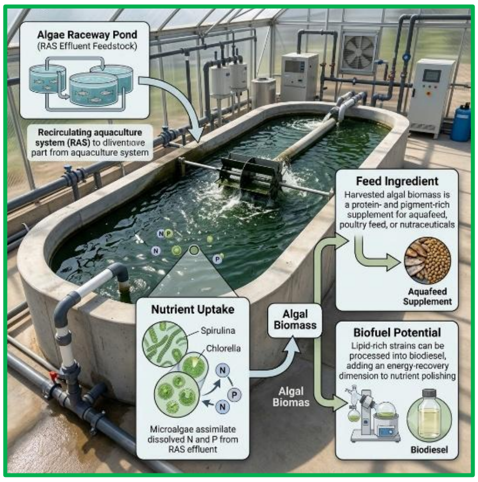
5) Black Soldier Fly (BSF) Larvae Bioconversion

Black soldier fly larvae (*Hermetia illucens*) are increasingly used to bioconvert organic waste, including aquaculture sludge and processing offal, into a protein- and lipid-rich larval biomass suitable as an aquafeed ingredient. Comparative studies feeding BSF larvae on kitchen waste, agricultural waste, aquaculture sludge, aquaculture offal, and mixed diets confirm that aquaculture-derived substrates support viable larval growth, feed conversion, and bioconversion performance, while also transferring beneficial bioactive polyphenols in plant-based diets. However, safety studies caution that BSF larvae reared on aquaculture sludge can accumulate undesirable contaminants, including cadmium, mercury, and dioxins, with dioxin levels in one study exceeding the European Union's maximum permissible level for animal feed, even though pathogen transfer risk was found to be low. This underscores the need for contaminant screening of source sludge before BSF larvae derived from it are approved for use in aquafeed.

6) Struvite Recovery

Struvite (magnesium ammonium phosphate) crystallization chemically precipitates ammonium and phosphate from nutrient-rich effluent into a stable, slow-release fertilizer mineral by dosing a soluble magnesium source at an elevated pH. The technology is considered one of the more mature and practically implementable phosphorus recovery routes, addressing both eutrophication risk and the long-term scarcity of mined phosphate rock; recovery efficiencies exceeding 95 percent for phosphorus have been reported using techniques such as bipolar membrane electrodialysis with magnesium sources including magnesite tailings, seawater, and brine.

7) Algae Cultivation



Algae cultivation offers a complementary biological route for nutrient capture, using microalgae to assimilate dissolved nitrogen and phosphorus from RAS effluent while simultaneously sequestering carbon dioxide stripped during degassing. Algal nitrogen removal performance is primarily governed by light availability and hydraulic retention time, and while algal integration remains at a comparatively early stage of commercial adoption due to reactor space and cost constraints, the resulting biomass can be valorized as a biofertilizer or a protein-rich feed ingredient, further closing the nutrient loop within the RAS facility.

Challenges and Limitations

High Costs: For small and medium-sized businesses, advanced technologies (such as anaerobic digestion and struvite recovery) are frequently unaffordable.

Contaminant Risks: Insect-based feeds, such as BSF larvae, can dangerously accumulate heavy metals and contaminants from sludge.

Nutrient Imbalances: Because fish waste is insufficient to meet all plant growth requirements, aquaponic systems often need additional fertilizers.

Limited Scalability: Many breakthroughs, such as AI and microalgae integration, stall at the pilot stage because to high prices and a lack of experience.

Regulatory Gaps: Particularly in developing countries like India, there are unclear quality-assurance frameworks for the use of derived biofertilizers and insect meals.

Site-Specificity: It is challenging to replicate ideas across multiple farms because solutions like IMTA and algae cultivation rely significantly on local conditions and species.

Conclusion

For intensive fish and shrimp farming, RAS provides a very resource-efficient approach, but if they are not controlled, they produce concentrated waste streams such solid sludge, dissolved nutrients, and carbon dioxide that provide problems for the environment and the economy. Operators can successfully convert these inevitable byproducts into valuable commodities, such as organic biofertilizers, secondary harvestable crops, renewable biogas, and protein-rich aquafeed ingredients, by implementing circular, "waste-to-wealth" technologies like vermicomposting, aquaponics, Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA), anaerobic digestion, Black Soldier Fly (BSF) larvae bioconversion, struvite recovery, and algae cultivation. In the end, if the aquaculture sector can effectively reduce high technological capital costs, overcome operational and biological constraints, and fortify supportive policy and regulatory frameworks, these novel approaches have the potential to significantly enhance the overall environmental and economic sustainability of RAS facilities.

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