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Biological Management of Water Hyacinth *(Eichhornia crassipes)* through Neochetina Species in the Panchaganga River, Kolhapur, and its impact

1. **Shivam Satyawan Madrewar,** Student, R. C. S. M. College of Agriculture, Kolhapur.
2. **Sangeeta Dhinwa,** Student, IIM – Ahmedabad.
3. **Atharva Manish Gumphekar,** Student, R. C. S. M. College of Agriculture, Kolhapur.
4. **Aastha Atul Deshmukh,** Student, R. C. S. M. College of Agriculture, Kolhapur.
5. **Sayli Sujit Sarve,** Student, R. C. S. M. College of Agriculture, Kolhapur.

Abstract

The biological management of water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) through Neochetina spp. was studied in the Panchaganga River, Kolhapur, India, where extensive infestations threatened ecological balance and human activities. Five sites along the river were monitored for six months after the introduction of Neochetina weevils. Initial water hyacinth cover averaged 85%, declining to 51% post-intervention, reflecting a 40% reduction. Water quality parameters showed significant improvements, with dissolved oxygen levels increasing by 25% and a slight pH rise indicating favorable ecosystem conditions. Biodiversity evaluations indicated a rise in species diversity indices and the resurgence of native fish species. Statistical analysis confirmed a strong correlation ($R^2 = 0.85$) between weevil density and biomass reduction. Visual and spatial analyses supported these findings, showing reduced hyacinth density and improved river navigability. This research demonstrates Neochetina spp. as effective agents for sustainable water hyacinth management, emphasizing their role in restoring ecological health in impacted river systems.

Introduction:

Water hyacinth (Eichhornia crassipes), a plant from the Amazon Basin, has become a major environmental problem in many parts of the world, including India. Known for its rapid growth and ability to form thick mats on water surfaces, water hyacinth blocks waterways, disrupts aquatic ecosystems, hinders water flow, and increases the spread of vector-borne diseases. The Panchaganga River in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, is one such water body severely affected by this invasive species. This river, once crucial for irrigation, drinking water, and local biodiversity, is now overwhelmed by an extensive growth of water hyacinths, which presents significant challenges to ecology, economy, and public health.

Traditional methods like removing with machines and using chemicals are expensive, require a lot of work, and harm the environment. As a result, there is an urgent need for effective and sustainable management strategies. This study investigates the use of biological control, introducing weevils from the Neochetina genus, as a potential solution to reduce the water hyacinth infestation in the Panchaganga River.

Neochetina spp., such as *Neochetina eichhorniae* and *Neochetina bruchi*, are renowned for their specificity to hosts and effectiveness in managing water hyacinths. Originating from South America, these weevils have proven successful in numerous countries in controlling water hyacinth populations. The larvae of Neochetina spp., bore into the plant's petioles and roots, causing significant damage that impairs its ability to float and reproduce, leading to a gradual decline in its population.

This paper aims to provide a thorough investigation into the introduction and establishment of Neochetina spp. in the Panchaganga River. We will assess the efficacy of these biological control agents in reducing water hyacinth coverage, evaluate their impact on the river's ecosystem, and offer recommendations for future management strategies. Through this research, we aim to help develop sustainable and environmentally friendly strategies for controlling invasive species and improving the health of the Panchaganga River.

Problem Statement:

The Panchaganga River in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, is experiencing a severe infestation of water hyacinth (Eichhornia crassipes), which has covered extensive areas of the river surface. This invasive plant blocks water flow, lowers oxygen levels, disturbs local water habitats, and makes the river less useful for irrigation, drinking water, and recreation. Traditional control methods, such as mechanical removal and chemical herbicides, have proven ineffective, environmentally harmful, and economically unsustainable for long-term management. Therefore, there is an immediate need for a sustainable and ecologically responsible solution to manage the water hyacinth infestation and enhance the health of the Panchaganga River. This study explores the potential of Neochetina spp., as a biological control agent to manage and decrease the water hyacinth population in the Panchaganga River. The goal is to establish a sustainable approach for controlling this invasive species and minimizing its harmful effects on the river ecosystem.

Material required:

1. Neochetina spp. (Weevils):
    - *Neochetina eichhorniae*
    - *Neochetina bruchi*
2. Study Area:
    - Panchaganga River, Kolhapur, Maharashtra
    - Specific sites within the river for data collection
3. Field Equipment:
    - GPS device for initial site mapping
    - Sampling nets for collecting weevils
    - Data recording sheets
    - Boats for river navigation and sampling
    - Secchi disk for measuring water transparency
    - Dissolved oxygen meter
    - pH meter
    - Temperature probes

4. Laboratory Equipment:
   - Microscopes for examining plant and insect samples
   - Growth chambers or rearing containers for weevil propagation
   - Analytical balances for biomass measurements

Methodology and Calculations:

- **Site Selection and Baseline Survey**

1. Site Selection:

   ✓ Rationale: Five distinct locations along the Panchaganga River were strategically chosen based on the extent of water hyacinth infestation and the varying river conditions, including flow rates and depths.

   ✓ These variations in site conditions are critical for understanding how different environmental factors influence the effectiveness of biological control.

   ✓ Site Details: Each site encompassed an area of approximately 500 square meters, providing a sufficient spatial scale for detailed monitoring and analysis.

2. Baseline Survey:

   ✓ Mapping: Precise GPS coordinates were recorded for each site to establish baseline data, ensuring accurate tracking of changes over time.

   ✓ Water Hyacinth Cover:
   Quadrat Sampling: Initial measurements of water hyacinth cover were conducted using a standardized quadrat sampling method. Twenty 1m x 1m quadrats were randomly placed within each site to obtain representative data on the extent of infestation.

   Data Recording: We visually estimated and recorded the percentage of water hyacinth cover in each quadrat, establishing a reliable starting point for future comparisons.

   ✓ Water Quality Parameters:

   Dissolved Oxygen: Measured using a dissolved oxygen meter, recorded in milligrams per liter (mg/L). Dissolved oxygen levels are crucial for assessing the health of aquatic ecosystems.

   pH: Measured using a pH meter to determine the acidity or alkalinity of the water.

   Temperature: Recorded using a temperature probe (°C) to monitor thermal conditions, which can affect both plant and animal life.

   ✓ Biodiversity Assessments:

Initial Sampling: Aquatic organisms, including fish and macroinvertebrates, were sampled using nets. Specimens were identified and counted in the laboratory to establish baseline biodiversity data.

- **Weevil Introduction**

1. Propagation:

✓ Laboratory Conditions: Neochetina spp. (*Neochetina eichhorniae* and *Neochetina bruchi*) were propagated under controlled laboratory conditions. A healthy and sufficient population of approximately 1,000 weevils per site for the initial introduction.

✓ Health Monitoring: Weevils were regularly monitored for health and reproductive activity to ensure they were viable for release.

2. Introduction:

✓ Release Strategy: Weevils were released at multiple points within each site to promote even distribution and adequate, practice coverage of the infested areas. This approach maximizes the likelihood of establishing a robust weevil population capable of exerting significant pressure on the water hyacinth.

- **Monitoring and Data Collection**

1. Monthly Monitoring:

✓ Water Hyacinths Cover:

Quadrat Sampling: Monthly measurements were taken at 20 random points within each site to track changes in water hyacinth cover. The method provided consistent and reliable data over time.

Biomass Estimation: The Samples of Water hyacinths were collected, dried, and weighed to estimate biomass. This gave us a way to measure how much the plant grew or decreased over time.

✓ Water Quality Parameters:

Dissolved Oxygen, pH, and Temperature: These parameters were recorded monthly using the same methods as the baseline survey to detect any changes attributable to the biological control intervention.

✓ Biodiversity:

Aquatic Organisms: Monthly sampling and identification of fish, macroinvertebrates, and other aquatic organisms were conducted monthly to assess changes in biodiversity. Species diversity and abundance were recorded and compared to baseline data.

- **Impact Assessment**

1. Data Analysis:

   ✓ Decrease in Water Hyacinth Coverage:

   Initial Cover: The initial average water hyacinth coverage across all sites was measured at 85%.

   Current Cover: After six months, the average cover was reduced to 51%.

   Calculation: The percentage reduction in cover was calculated as follows:

$$Reduction = \left(\frac{Initial\ Cover - Current\ Cover}{Initial\ Cover}\right) \times 100$$

2. Statistical Analysis:

   ✓ T-Tests: Paired t-tests were used to analyze the differences between pre- and post-introduction water hyacinth coverage and water quality parameters (dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature). This statistical method helps determine if the observed changes are statistically significant.

   ✓ ANOVA: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to assess differences among the various sites. This approach aids in understanding the variability within and among sites, offering insights into the efficacy of biological control under varied conditions.

   ✓ Regression Analysis: Regression analysis was conducted to examine the correlation between weevil population density and reduced water hyacinth biomass. This analysis helps establish the relationship between weevil numbers and the extent of biomass reduction.

   ✓ Multivariate Analysis: Multivariate analysis was used to evaluate how biological control affects the entire river ecosystem, encompassing water quality and biodiversity. This comprehensive analysis provides insights into the broader ecological impacts of the intervention.

- **Results and Observations with Calculations:**

1. Reduction in Water Hyacinth Cover:

   ✓ Significant Reduction: The introduction of Neochetina spp resulted in a notable reduction in water hyacinth coverage. The initial average coverage of 85% decreased to 51% after six months, indicating a 40% reduction.

   ✓ Statistical Significance: Paired t-tests confirmed the reduction was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the observed changes were not due to random variation.

2. Water Quality Improvements:

- ✓ Dissolved Oxygen:

  Initial Average: 4.8 mg/L

  Post-Introduction Average: 6.0 mg/L

  Increase: $\left(\frac{6.0-4.8}{4.8}\right) \times 100 = 25\ \%$

  Statistical Significance: T-tests showed significant improvement in dissolved oxygen levels
  ($p < 0.05$).

- ✓ pH Levels:

  Initial Average: 7.2

  Post-Introduction Average: 7.5

  Statistical Significance: Paired t-tests showed a significant change ($p < 0.05$).

- ✓ Temperature:

  Initial Average: 28.5°C

  Post-Introduction Average: 28.3°C

  Observation: Minor temperature, variations were not statistically significant, suggesting that biological control primarily influenced dissolved oxygen and pH.

3. Biodiversity Changes:

- ✓ Species Diversity Index:

  Initial Index: 1.2 (Shannon-Wiener Index)

  Post-Introduction Index: 1.8

  Increase: The increase in the diversity index indicates a richer and more balanced ecosystem.

- ✓ Fish Species:

  Initial Count: 10 species

  Post-Introduction Count: 15 species

  Observation: The return of native fish species highlights the ecological recovery of the river.

- ✓ Macroinvertebrate Abundance:

  Increase: The abundance of macroinvertebrates increased by 30%, indicating improved habitat conditions and water quality.

4. Weevil Population Dynamics:

   - ✓ Establishment and Reproduction: The weevil population was successfully established and reproduced, with noticeable larvae activity on water hyacinth plants.

   - ✓ Correlation with Biomass Reduction: Regression analysis indicated a strong positive relationship ($R^2 = 0.85$) between weevil density and the reduction in water hyacinth biomass, confirming the effectiveness of the biological control agents.

5. Visual and Spatial Analysis:

   - ✓ GPS Mapping: Detailed GPS mapping indicated a marked reduction in the spatial coverage of water hyacinth over the six-month study period.

   - ✓ Visual Inspections: Field observations confirmed the thinning and weakening of water hyacinth mats, making them more susceptible to mechanical removal and natural decay.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Utilizing Neochetina spp. for biological control has been demonstrated as a highly effective strategy in managing water hyacinth infestations in the Panchaganga River. Over six months, significant improvements and changes were observed across multiple parameters, highlighting the success and ecological benefits of this approach:

1. Decrease in water hyacinth coverage.: Introducing Neochetina spp led to a 40% decrease in water hyacinth cover. This helps improve how the river looks and makes it easier to navigate, while also making the ecosystem healthier.
2. Water Quality Enhancements: There was a noticeable improvement in water quality indicators post-introduction. Dissolved oxygen levels increased by 25%, indicating better oxygenation and improved conditions for aquatic organisms. The slight increase in pH towards more neutral levels and stable temperature readings further support the positive environmental impact of reducing water hyacinth biomass.
3. Biodiversity Recovery: The study documented a significant increase in biodiversity metrics. The Shannon-Wiener Index for species diversity rose from 1.2 to 1.8, demonstrating a more diverse aquatic community. The return of native fish species and a 30% increase in macroinvertebrate abundance underscore the restoration of habitat quality and ecological resilience.
4. Weevil Population Dynamics: Neochetina spp successfully established and proliferated within the river environment, evidenced by larvae activity and sustained adult populations. The strong correlation ($R^2 = 0.85$) between weevil density and biomass reduction affirms their role as effective biological agents against water hyacinths.
5. Spatial and Visual Observations: GPS mapping showed a significant decrease in the size and density of water hyacinth mats. Visual inspections confirmed that the mats were thinner and less dense, making them easier to manage and indicating long-term improvements in the river's health.

In conclusion, applying Neochetina spp for biological control presents a sustainable and environmentally friendly solution to the persistent challenge of water hyacinth infestations in the Panchaganga River. The positive outcomes observed underscore the efficacy of biological methods in restoring and maintaining the ecological integrity of aquatic ecosystems impacted by invasive species. Going forward, ongoing monitoring and integrated management practices will be essential to sustain these gains and support a resilient river ecosystem for future generations.

For long-term success, it is recommended to combine biological control with periodic mechanical removal to manage the remaining water hyacinth biomass. Additionally, community engagement initiatives should be implemented to raise awareness and promote sustainable river management practices. By combining these strategies, the health and resilience of the Panchaganga River ecosystem can be effectively restored and maintained.

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