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Efficiency of Shelters in Reducing Cannibalism among Juveniles of the Marine Blue Swimmer Crab, *Portunus pelagicus*

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**Abstract**

*Portunus pelagicus* is an important crab species for aquaculture in India. Cannibalism during the megalopa and juvenile stages is a major constraint in standardizing the hatchery technology of this species. The present study evaluates the efficiency of various types of shelters in curbing cannibalism in juvenile *P. pelagicus*. Larvae from eggs of berried females collected from the wild were reared to first crab instars under controlled conditions. They were stocked in 200-l tanks at a density of 10/l with shelters of different materials: (a) nylon mesh netting, (b) seagrass, (c) seagrass and sand, and (d) without any material as shelter. At the end of the experimental period (15 days), the mean survival rates of the juveniles in each treatment were subjected to one-way ANOVA and pairs that significantly differed (*p*<0.01) were traced using Fisher's LSD. The seagrass and sand treatment produced the highest mean survival (88±3%); the lowest (24.67±2.52%) was obtained in the treatment where no material was provided as a shelter.

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Introduction

In crustacean hatchery production, cannibalism is one of the most serious issues influencing the final survival rate. In crabs, cannibalism starts in the zoal stages and becomes more pronounced during the megalopa stage. Concentration of juvenile crabs in the nursery leads to intra and inter-cohort competition for space and food (Iribarne et al., 1994).

In species that exhibit cannibalistic behavior, early juveniles may be preyed upon by individuals of the same or older cohorts (Luppi et al., 2001). Cannibalism, particularly at the megalopa and juvenile stages, is the main cause of low survival during the hatchery production of *Scylla serrata* (Latiff and Musa, 1995). In several species of brachyuran crabs, cannibalism is an important factor affecting the year class strength and fishery recruitment through differential survival of successive cohorts (Fernández and Castilla, 2000).

Several methods have been tried by researchers to minimize cannibalism so as to improve the survival rate of larvae. Plastic pipe cuttings, plastic nets, and the seaweed, *Gracilaria bailinae*, distributed in tanks as shelters, improved the survival rate of megalopae of *S. serrata* (Quinitio et al., 2001). Size-grading of stock and trimming of claws were also successful in reducing cannibalism in the same study (Quinitio et al., 2001). Decreasing stocking densities and providing shelters in larvae tanks and ponds reduced cannibalism (Liong, 1992).

The settlement of postlarvae of *Portunus pelagicus*, *Alphaeus* sp., and caridean shrimp in seagrass habitats indicates their preference for habitats with food (Kenyon 1993) and shelter (Kenyon et al., 1995). In *Pseudocarcinus gigas* larvae, cannibalism was strongly influenced by lighting, which was manifested by greater damage to the dorsal spine in larvae kept in light than in those reared under continuous darkness (Gardner, 1996). Molting during night hours considerably reduces cannibalism in juveniles of *Chasmagnathus granulata* (Lopez and Rodriguez, 1998). *Portunus pelagicus* of less than 50 mm carapace length predominantly forage on shallow sand flats, whereas larger individuals are abundant in seagrass and unvegetated habitats further offshore (Edgar, 1990). In *Ranina ranina*, visual cues not only affect feeding but also augment cannibalism (Minagawa et al., 1994).

Photoperiod and light intensity are amongst the primary factors affecting cannibalism (Hecht and Pienaar, 1993) as in the case of *P. gigas* (Gardner, 1996). A genetic component has been suggested as instigating cannibalism in certain species (Dominey and Blumer, 1984). An increase in shelter density significantly improves the survival rate of *Callinectes sapidus* larvae (Zmora et al., 2005).

The marine blue swimmer crab, *P. pelagicus*, is a candidate species for aquaculture in India. Though there is no organized grow-out of this species, fattening is popular in several coastal areas of the country. Since there is no large-scale production of *P. pelagicus* seeds at present, farmers depend on the wild for juveniles or young ones for fattening. Non-availability of quality seeds is one of the major hindrances in establishing a systematic culture for this species. Efforts are on to develop and standardize technology for producing *P. pelagicus* seeds at a commercial level. Cannibalism during the larval and juvenile stages in the life history of this species is a major impediment to the success of such efforts. This paper studies the effectiveness of hide-outs in improving the survival rate of *P. pelagicus* by minimizing cannibalism during the juvenile stage, under laboratory conditions.

Materials and Methods

*Collection and maintenance of animals.* Three healthy females of mean carapace width 159.86±3.04 mm (±SD) with yellow berry were collected from the Gulf of Mannar off Mandapam, 9°09′N, 78°44′E. The animals were brought to the wet laboratory in battery-aerated containers and stocked in black oval 1-ton fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) tanks at the rate of one animal per tank. Animals were fed raw clam (*Meritrix meritrix*) and squid (*Sepia pharaonis*) meat at a ratio of 1:1, *ad libitum*. The animals were examined daily and, at dark grey berry stage, were transferred to 500-l cylindro-conical FRP tanks for hatching. Once the eggs were hatched, the most active larvae of the same
Curbing cannibalism among Portunus pelagicus juveniles

brood were collected and stocked in 200-l rectangular FRP tanks at a density of 25/l, the
stocking density that produced the best results in earlier trials. Dead larvae and feed
waste were siphoned out prior to daily water exchange (60%). Temperature, salinity, pH,
and photoperiod were maintained at 28±2.0°C, 35 ppt, 8.1±0.2, and 12 h light:12 h dark.

Larvae feeding protocol. Zoeae 1 and 2 were fed Skeletonema costatum and
Brachionus plicatilis twice daily at densities of 50,000 and 25 cells/ml, respectively. The
larvae were also fed formulated prawn feed (Frippak 2 CD, INVE, Belgium) at 0.5 g/ton,
four times daily. Zoeae 3 and 4 were fed S. costatum, B. plicatilis, and formulated prawn
feed at 50,000 cells/ml, 30 cells/ml, and 0.5 g/ton, respectively, four times daily. Megalopae were fed Moina macrura and newly hatched Artemia sp. nauplii once a day at
3 and 5 cells/ml, respectively. In addition, they were fed freshly prepared egg custard
twice daily at 0.5 g/ton. Rotifers and M. macrura were collected from the wild using
different sized nets and mass cultured in 1-ton FRP tanks on microalgae.

Experimental design. After larval rearing, the most active first crab instars were
stocked at 10/l in 200-l rectangular FRP tanks for the experiment. The experimental set-up consisted of three treatments and a control, all carried out in triplicate. In treatment
T1, twenty pieces of 500 μ nylon mesh netting (20 × 15 cm) were introduced into the
rearing tanks. A few pieces were placed at the bottom with weights and the remaining
pieces were allowed to float in the water column. In treatment T2, seagrass (Cymodocea
rotundata) was planted in small cups and suspended in the water column. Treatment T3
was provided with a 4-cm thick bottom of clean beach sand and seagrass was planted in
cups on the bottom and suspended as in treatment T2. Treatment T4 (control) tanks
were not provided any material for shelter.

The instars were fed minced clam meat (M. meritrix) twice daily, ad libitum. Dead
larvae and feed waste were siphoned out prior to daily water exchange (70%). Temperature, salinity, pH, and photoperiod were maintained at 28±2.0°C, 35 ppt,
8.1±0.2, and 12L:12D. pH was adjusted by adding 1N sodium carbonate or 1N hydrochloric acid, as required. The tanks were covered with black sheets after the
photophase and aerated continuously throughout the experiment. Juveniles in each tank
were collected and counted at the end of the experimental period (15 days) to calculate
the final survival rate.

Data analysis. The data were statistically analyzed using one-way ANOVA to
determine if there were significant differences (p<0.01) in mean survival rates amongst
treatments. The survival rates, which showed significant differences, were identified by
subjecting the data to post hoc test of multiple comparison (Fisher’s Least Significant
Difference Test) using SYSTAT version 7.0.1.

Results

In treatment T1 (nylon mesh netting), average survival was 57±9.54% (Fig. 1). Average
survival in treatment T2 (seagrass) was slightly higher, 59.67±3.79%. The highest
average survival (88±3%) was obtained in treatment T3 (sand and seagrass); in this treatment, even the tank with the lowest survival (85%) exceeded survival in tanks with the highest survival in the other treatments. The lowest average survival (24.67±2.52%) was recorded in the control tanks (no shelter). One-way ANOVA showed significant differences (p<0.01) in survival rates between treatments; Post Hoc Test
using Fisher’s LSD identified significantly different pairs (Table 1).

Fig. 1. Survival of Portunus pelagicus juveniles raised in different shelters: T1 = nylon mesh netting, T2 = seagrass, T3 = seagrass & sand, T4 = without shelter.
the most important habitat characteristic appeared to be the relative availability of refuge space for the crab instars (Loher and Armstrong, 2000). Likewise, the reason for the better survival in T3 where two types of shelters were used simultaneously could be that the two materials provided refuge in different niches of the tank, i.e., sand at the bottom and seagrass in the water column. The use of two niches might have distributed the stock, decreasing the number of instars per unit area.

The higher rate of cannibalism during the daytime in the present study agrees with observations in *Pseudocarcinus gigas* juveniles, where there was a directly proportional relationship between cannibalism and light hours (Gardner and Maguire, 1998). In *Scylla serrata* juveniles, cannibalism-related mortalities are often due to asynchronous molting and inadequate food (Rodriguez et al., 2001). Though food was provided ad libitum in all the tanks in the present study, molting was not uniform, which led to a difference in the size of the juveniles. This might have instigated cannibalism as suggested in the case of *S. serrata* juveniles. The main reason for the significant loss of zoeae due to cannibalism by megalopae in *Portunus trituberculatus* is the difference in size (Hamasaki, 1997). The availability of *Artemia* nauplii as an alternative food source helped reduce cannibalism of zoeae by megalopae in the mangrove crab *Ucides cordatus* (Ventura et al., 2008).

The likelihood of cannibalism increases when there is asymmetry between individuals in a interaction. Individuals in transition stages are at great risk of being cannibalized since they are either immobile or soft and virtually defenseless during and after ecdysis (Polis, 1981). In the present study, cannibalism was enormous when the crab juveniles were soft shelled (immediately after ecdysis). Cannibalism decreased when seaweed *G. bailinae* was distributed into megalopa tanks during hatchery production of *S. serrata* (Quinitio et al., 2001). In the present study, tanks with seagrass had better average survival (59.67±3.79%) than tanks without any shelter (24.67±2.52%). Cannibalism could have been the main reason for the decline in survival of early juveniles of the blue crab *C. sapidus* when reared large-scale in captivity (Zmora et al., 2005).

The present experiment illustrates the importance of shelters in curbing cannibalism among crab juveniles. The results of the study have significance both in hatchery production and also in understanding the larval biology of the species. It is possible to minimize cannibalism by providing adequate shelter using different materials. However, except for sand, the refuge materials used in this experiment, though simple, were not capable of providing complete protection to the animals. Provision of a sand bed is very helpful to crustaceans which have a natural tendency to remain buried, but the feasibility of such treatment in hatcheries is doubtful as sand is likely to cause difficulties during harvest. Numerous predator-prey studies have demonstrated that habitat complexity significantly reduces cannibalism. Therefore a combination of methods such as providing shelters, keeping low stocking density, size grading, provision of adequate supplementary and live feeds are suggested to curtail cannibalism and obtain better survival rates in crustacean seed production.

Acknowledgements

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<p>| Table 1. Fisher’s LSD Matrix of pair-wise comparison probabilities for different treatments. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>0.569</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
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<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T1 = nylon mesh netting, T2 = seagrass, T3 = seagrass & sand, and
T4 = without shelter

Discussion

Several factors including availability of refuge (Moksnes et al., 1997) and level of satiation (Luppi et al., 2001) influence the frequency and intensity of cannibalism among decapod crustaceans. In the present work, where experimental conditions were similar for all treatments, but for the nature of the substrata, we assumed that cannibalism would be the major reason for differences in mortality. In the red king crab, *Paralithodes camtschaticus*, survivorship was associated with the complexity of the habitat and
encouragement. Acknowledgement is also due to Dr. G. Gopakumar, Scientist-in-Charge, Regional Centre of CMFRI, Mandapam, for the facility provided.

References


