

Introduction to Seaweeds

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OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Seaweeds, Green algae, Brown algae, Red algae, Resources

How to cite this article:

Arivoli, P., Antony, C. and Ruby, P., 2024. Introduction to Seaweeds. *Vigyan Varta* 5(10): 90-94.

ABSTRACT

India, with its extensive coastline of over 7,500 kilometers along the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, has significant potential for seaweed cultivation and harvesting (Reddy *et al.*, 2016). The country is home to a variety of seaweed species, and the sector is gradually gaining attention for its commercial and ecological benefits. Seaweeds are marine algae that grow in oceans and other bodies of saltwater. They play an essential role in the marine ecosystem by producing oxygen, providing food, and offering habitats for marine life.

INTRODUCTION

The Tamil Nadu government, in collaboration with research institutions, is exploring the potential for seaweed-based **biofuels** and **bioplastics**, which could further increase the commercial importance of seaweed farming in the region. The growing demand for seaweed as a health supplement and its application in cosmetics and agriculture (as a natural fertilizer and soil conditioner) offers additional growth opportunities for the seaweed industry along the Tamil Nadu coast.

There are three main types of seaweeds, classified by their color:

- Green Algae (Chlorophyta):** Typically found in shallow waters, green algae include species like *Ulva* (sea lettuce). They contain chlorophyll, which gives them their bright green color.
- Brown Algae (Phaeophyta):** These include some of the largest seaweeds like kelp, which can form underwater forests. Brown algae are found in colder waters and

derive their color from the pigment fucoxanthin.

3. **Red Algae (Rhodophyta):** Predominantly found in deeper waters, red algae have a wide variety of species. Some are edible, like *nori* used in sushi. Their color comes from phycoerythrin, which allows them to absorb light in deeper waters.

Uses of Seaweeds:

- **Food:** Seaweeds are consumed in many cultures, particularly in East Asia. Examples include *nori* (used in sushi) and *wakame* (used in soups).
- **Agriculture:** Seaweed extracts are used as fertilizers due to their high nutrient content.
- **Cosmetics and Pharmaceuticals:** Seaweed components are used in skincare products for their moisturizing and anti-inflammatory properties. They're also studied for potential health benefits due to their high content of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.

Key Seaweed Resources in India:

1. Geographic Areas:

- **Tamil Nadu and Gujarat:** These are the leading regions for seaweed cultivation in India. Coastal areas around Ramanathapuram and the Gulf of Mannar (Tamil Nadu) and the Gulf of Kutch (Gujarat) have been identified as prime regions for seaweed growth.
- **Andaman and Nicobar Islands:** The islands have also been identified as promising locations for seaweed farming.
- **Maharashtra, Goa, and Kerala:** These states have emerging seaweed cultivation practices along their coastlines.

2. Common Seaweed Species:

- **Red Algae (Rhodophyta):** *Gracilaria* and *Gelidiella* are prominent red algae species harvested in India. These are used for producing agar, which has applications in food and biotechnology.
- **Brown Algae (Phaeophyta):** Species like *Sargassum* and *Turbinaria* are commonly found in Indian waters and are used for alginates, a substance used in various industries including textiles and food.
- **Green Algae (Chlorophyta):** Although less commercially significant, species like *Ulva* (sea lettuce) are found in Indian waters and hold potential for nutrient-rich supplements (Khan et al., 2024).

3. Seaweed Farming Initiatives:

- **National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB):** Under the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY), the government has set targets for expanding seaweed farming to enhance coastal livelihoods. This includes financial support and infrastructure development for seaweed farming.
- **Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI):** CMFRI has been actively involved in research and development, helping to introduce sustainable cultivation techniques and training programs for coastal communities.

4. Economic and Industrial Importance:

- **Agar and Carrageenan Production:** India produces agar from *Gracilaria* and *Gelidiella*, both used in the food industry as gelling agents. Carrageenan is produced from *Kappaphycusalvarezii*, which is widely used in processed foods, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals.

- **Biofuels and Biostimulants:** Research is ongoing to explore the use of seaweed as a sustainable source for biofuel production. Seaweed extracts are also used in agriculture as natural biostimulants, improving soil health and crop yields.

5. Government and Private Sector Support:

- The Indian government has identified seaweed cultivation as a key sector to boost blue economy initiatives. The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) and the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying are promoting seaweed farming through subsidies and research grants.
- Private companies, such as Sea6 Energy and AquAgri Processing, are involved in the commercial production of seaweed-based products, including fertilizers, food ingredients, and bioplastics.

6. Challenges:

- **Infrastructure and Technology:** Scaling up seaweed farming requires better infrastructure, especially in terms of processing and value addition.
- **Environmental Factors:** Changes in water quality, temperature, and salinity can impact seaweed farming productivity. Sustainable practices are essential to avoid overharvesting and habitat degradation.

India's seaweed sector holds great potential, especially for sustainable economic growth in coastal areas, environmental conservation, and industrial applications.

Seaweed Resources along the Tamil Nadu Coast

Tamil Nadu, with its long coastline along the Bay of Bengal, is one of the leading regions in India for seaweed resources and cultivation. The state has ideal conditions for seaweed growth, particularly in areas such as the **Gulf**

of Mannar and the **Palk Bay**, where the coastal environment supports a wide variety of seaweed species. The rich biodiversity, shallow waters, and nutrient-rich ecosystems make Tamil Nadu a significant player in India's seaweed industry.

Key Seaweed Resources along the Tamil Nadu Coast

1. Geographic Hotspots:

- **Gulf of Mannar:** This is one of the richest areas for marine biodiversity in India and is a hub for seaweed cultivation. The Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park is a protected region but also serves as a resource area for sustainable seaweed farming.
- **Palk Bay:** Located between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Palk Bay is another important seaweed resource area. The calm, shallow waters are conducive for the growth of seaweed species like *Kappaphycus*.
- **Rameswaram and Ramanathapuram Districts:** These coastal areas are key centers for both wild harvesting and seaweed farming. Rameswaram, in particular, has become synonymous with seaweed cultivation in the region.

2. Commonly Cultivated and Harvested Seaweed Species:

- **Red Algae:**
 - **Gracilaria:** Widely found in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mannar, this red algae is harvested for producing agar, used in food, pharmaceuticals, and research.
 - **Gelidiella:** Another important red algae species, also used for agar production.
 - **Kappaphycus alvarezii:** One of the most commercially important seaweed species cultivated in Tamil Nadu, primarily for its

- carrageenan content. This species has been successfully introduced to the region for commercial farming.
- **Brown Algae:**
 - *Sargassum*: Brown algae, commonly found along the Tamil Nadu coast, are used to extract alginate, which is used in textiles, food, and pharmaceuticals.
 - *Turbinaria*: Another brown seaweed species, important for alginate production.
 - **Green Algae:**
 - *Ulva* (sea lettuce): Found along the coast, green algae like *Ulva* are less commercially significant but are studied for their potential in biostimulants and as a food source.
3. **Farming Practices:**
- **Raft Culture:** In Tamil Nadu, seaweed farming is mainly carried out through the raft method, where ropes are suspended in the water and seeded with seaweed fragments. These rafts float on the water, allowing the seaweed to grow in ideal conditions.
 - **Bottom Culture:** Seaweeds are also grown on the seabed, especially in shallow waters, where the algae attach to rocks and are harvested periodically.
4. **Economic Importance:**
- Tamil Nadu is a leader in the production of **carrageenan**, extracted from *Kappaphycusalvarezii*, which is used in food processing (gelling, thickening, stabilizing agents), cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals.
 - **Agar** production from *Gracilaria* and *Gelidiella* contributes significantly to the local economy.
 - Seaweed cultivation provides livelihood opportunities for coastal communities, particularly women, who are heavily involved in seaweed farming in the region. Seaweed farming has been recognized as an alternative livelihood that is sustainable and low impact.
5. **Sustainability and Conservation:**
- The **Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve** plays a key role in balancing seaweed harvesting with marine conservation. Overharvesting of wild seaweed in protected areas is regulated to ensure the ecological balance of the region.
 - The **Central Salt and Marine Chemicals Research Institute (CSMCRI)** and the **Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI)** are involved in research and development to promote sustainable seaweed farming practices in Tamil Nadu.
6. **Government Initiatives:**
- Under the **Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)**, the Indian government is actively promoting seaweed cultivation in Tamil Nadu to improve the livelihoods of coastal communities. Financial support, training programs, and subsidies for infrastructure development have been provided to boost seaweed farming.
- Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** in Tamil Nadu have been encouraged to participate in seaweed farming, with the government providing assistance in creating sustainable and profitable ventures. Tamil Nadu has a rich diversity of seaweed resources, especially along its southern coast, from Mandapam to Kanyakumari. This region supports a wide variety of seaweed species, which are critical to the local economy and industries. Seaweed farming, particularly of species like

Kappaphycusalvarezii, has been traditionally practiced, and efforts are being made to upscale production to meet industrial demand. Currently, Tamil Nadu produces around 15,000 tonnes of seaweed annually, which is only a fraction of the 115,000 tonnes required by various industries.

The coastlines of Tuticorin and Tiruchendur are especially noted for their abundant seaweed resources, with over 58 species identified, including commercially valuable ones like *Sargassum* and *Hypnea*. These seaweeds are vital for the production of agar, alginate, and other industrial products. However, over-exploitation has led to the depletion of some species, prompting efforts to regulate and expand sustainable farming practices.

Additionally, the Tamil Nadu government is focusing on making the state a hub for seaweed cultivation by establishing a multipurpose seaweed park. This initiative aims to support local communities, especially women, and promote the commercial exploitation of seaweed for industries ranging from pharmaceuticals to biofuels

Challenges:

- **Environmental Impact:** Excessive harvesting, particularly in sensitive

ecosystems like the Gulf of Mannar, can lead to ecological imbalance. Sustainable farming practices are essential to prevent damage to coral reefs and marine biodiversity.

- **Climate Change:** Rising sea temperatures and changes in salinity can affect the productivity of seaweed farms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Tamil Nadu coast is a critical resource area for seaweed cultivation and harvesting in India, with a wide range of species and growing commercial importance, especially in sustainable practices and livelihood creation.

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