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From Waste to Wealth: Towards Zero-Waste Seafood Processing

Ashmita Pandey[1]
Shubham Soni[2]

[1]Fish Resource Harvest and Post Harvest Management Division
ICAR – Central Institute of Fisheries Education
Versova, Mumbai, India
[2]College of Fishery Science
Morshi, Dist. Amravati
Maharashtra Animal and Fishery Sciences University
Nagpur, India

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*Corresponding Author
Shubham Soni*

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INTRODUCTION

Seafood is valued for its high-quality protein, healthy fats, vitamins and minerals, as well as the livelihoods it supports. Yet, when fish and shellfish are processed, a significant portion of the raw material may not reach the final product. Heads, frames, skins, bones, scales, viscera, trimmings and processing water are often treated as waste. In reality, many of these materials are rich in proteins, oils, minerals, collagen, chitin and other valuable compounds. Zero-waste seafood processing aims to move from a "use-and-dispose" model towards a circular approach in which resources are recovered, reused and converted into useful products.

Why does seafood processing generate waste?

Filleting can generate heads, frames, skin and trimmings, while shrimp and crab processing produces shells and other residues. Canning and other operations may also generate viscera, brines and organic-rich wastewater. These materials contain nutrients and other compounds that can be recovered rather than discarded.

Why is zero waste important?

Poorly managed seafood waste can create odour, attract pests and increase the organic load of wastewater and surrounding environments. Discarding these materials also means losing nutrients and economic value. Converting seafood by-products into useful products can reduce environmental pressure while creating additional opportunities for the fisheries sector.

Turning fish waste into useful products

One approach is to convert suitable fish residues into fishmeal, fish silage, animal feed or organic fertilizers. Such technologies can be particularly useful for small and medium-scale processors.

More advanced technologies can recover high-value compounds. Fish skin, scales and bones can provide collagen, gelatin, minerals and bioactive peptides. Fish oils can be recovered from suitable raw materials, while shrimp, crab and other crustacean shells are important sources of chitin and chitosan. These materials have applications in food, nutraceuticals, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, agriculture and biodegradable materials.

From waste management to waste prevention

Zero waste should not mean simply finding a use for waste after it has been generated. The first priority should be to prevent avoidable losses. Better handling, improved cutting and filleting techniques, careful planning of raw materials, recovery of edible portions and efficient water use can reduce waste at the processing stage itself.

Modern seafood processing can become smarter through sensors, automation and digital monitoring. These technologies can help identify where material is being lost and improve recovery efficiency. Integrated processing systems can also recover several useful products from the same raw material, improving both resource efficiency and economic returns.

The Indian perspective

India has a diverse seafood-processing sector, ranging from small-scale traditional processing to modern export-oriented plants. Research institutions such as ICAR-CIFT have been working on fishery-waste utilization and value addition. Such approaches are particularly relevant for coastal communities because they can create additional income while reducing the environmental burden of waste disposal.

Challenges remain

Zero-waste processing requires proper segregation, hygienic collection, rapid handling, suitable infrastructure and reliable markets for recovered products. The safety and quality of by-products must also be maintained, especially when they are intended for food, feed or other high-value applications. Collection and transportation can be challenging when processing units are small or widely dispersed.

A future of circular seafood

Zero-waste seafood processing is not merely about reducing what is thrown away. It is about recognising that every part of a seafood resource may have value. What was once considered waste can become an ingredient, feed, fertilizer, biomaterial, energy source or high-value bioactive product.

As the fisheries sector moves towards a more sustainable and circular blue economy, seafood processing can evolve from a system that generates waste into one that **recovers resources, creates value and protects the environment**. The future is not “fish, process and discard”; it is **fish, process, recover and reuse**.

What can consumers do?

Consumers can also become part of the zero-waste journey. Choose seafood products from responsible producers and processors, avoid unnecessary food waste, use edible portions wisely and explore safe value-added seafood products made from responsibly recovered ingredients. When buying seafood, look for businesses that demonstrate good hygiene, responsible sourcing and environmentally conscious practices.

Every conscious seafood choice can help turn waste into value. Together, consumers and the seafood industry can make every fish count—from the ocean to the plate.

