

## Modern Oxygenation Techniques in Aquaculture: A Technological Evolution

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### *Abstract*

Dissolved oxygen (DO) is the most critical water quality parameter governing metabolic activity, growth, and survival of aquatic organisms in aquaculture systems. Increasing intensification and high stocking densities have significantly elevated oxygen demand, making natural replenishment processes insufficient. Modern oxygenation techniques including mechanical aeration, diffused aeration, pure oxygen systems, and emerging micro- and nanobubble technologies have been developed to enhance oxygen transfer efficiency and sustain optimal DO levels. This article integrates fundamental principles of oxygen dynamics with the technological evolution of aeration systems, from primitive mechanical devices to advanced automated and nanotechnology-based solutions. It further evaluates system performance, economic considerations, and future innovations such as sensor-based automation and renewable energy integration. These advancements are essential for improving productivity and ensuring sustainability in modern aquaculture.

**Key words:** Dissolved Oxygen, Modern Oxygenation, Aerators, Artificial aeration, Sustainable aquaculture

### **1. Introduction**

Aquaculture has emerged as one of the fastest-growing food production sectors globally, driven by increasing demand for aquatic protein and declining capture fisheries. However, the sustainability and productivity of aquaculture systems are highly dependent on maintaining optimal water quality, among which dissolved oxygen plays a central role. In intensive aquaculture system increased fertilization, excessive feeding and high stocking density causes the natural aeration insufficient to meet the dissolved oxygen requirement by the fish and other biological process and will be a limiting factor for production. Oxygen availability directly influences respiration, feed utilization, growth performance, and immune responses in cultured organisms (Boyd & Tucker, 2012).

Traditional aeration techniques, although widely used, are often inadequate in meeting the oxygen requirements of high-density culture systems. Consequently, modern oxygenation technologies have been developed to enhance oxygen transfer efficiency, reduce energy consumption, and provide precise control over DO levels. This article provides a comprehensive

analysis of these modern oxygenation techniques and their applications in contemporary aquaculture systems.

## 2. Oxygen Dynamics in Aquaculture Systems

Oxygen transfer in aquatic systems occurs primarily through diffusion driven by partial pressure differences between atmospheric oxygen and dissolved oxygen in water. In stagnant conditions, the surface layer becomes rapidly saturated, limiting further oxygen transfer unless mixing occurs. Wind-induced turbulence enhances oxygen diffusion by promoting vertical mixing of water layers.

Reported oxygen diffusion rates in aquaculture ponds range from 0.03 to 5.0 g m<sup>-2</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>, while daily oxygen input varies from 1.5 g m<sup>-2</sup> day<sup>-1</sup> in small ponds to 4.8 g m<sup>-2</sup> day<sup>-1</sup> in larger wind-exposed systems (Kepenyés & Váradi, 2015). Photosynthesis by phytoplankton contributes significantly to oxygen production during daylight hours, often leading to supersaturation, whereas respiration during nighttime results in oxygen depletion. Consequently, DO levels exhibit strong diurnal fluctuations, with minimum levels typically observed at dawn (Boyd, 1998; Wallace et al., 2021).

Oxygen consumption by fish is commonly expressed in mg O<sub>2</sub> per unit body weight per hour, with standard oxygen consumption representing basal metabolic requirements. When oxygen demand exceeds supply, hypoxic conditions develop, leading to stress, reduced feed efficiency, and increased susceptibility to disease. Maintaining DO levels above critical thresholds (>3.5 mg L<sup>-1</sup>, optimal 6–8 mg L<sup>-1</sup>) is therefore essential (Boyd, 1998).

## 3. Need for Artificial Oxygenation

The intensification of aquaculture practices has significantly increased oxygen demand due to higher stocking densities, increased feeding rates, and organic loading. Environmental factors such as elevated temperature, prolonged cloudy conditions, and decomposition of organic matter further exacerbate oxygen depletion.

Artificial aeration has thus become indispensable in modern aquaculture systems. It enhances dissolved oxygen levels, improves water circulation, prevents stratification, and facilitates waste removal and feed distribution. Aeration can increase fish production by approximately 500 kg per kW of installed capacity (Moore and Boyd, 1992), although it represents a major operational cost, accounting for nearly 15% of total production expenses (Kumar et al., 2013).

## 4. Principles of Aeration and Oxygen Transfer

Aeration enhances oxygen transfer through three fundamental steps (Tanveer et al., 2018):

- (i) transfer of oxygen from the gas phase to the gas–liquid interface,

- (ii) diffusion across the interface, and
- (iii) transport into the bulk liquid

The efficiency of oxygen transfer depends on surface area, turbulence, and contact time. Mechanical agitation increases the air–water interface, while bubble formation enhances gas exchange through increased interfacial area. Smaller bubbles provide greater efficiency due to increased surface area and longer residence time (Laktuka et al., 2023)

## **5. Fundamental Mechanisms of Oxygenation in Aquaculture Systems**

Dissolved oxygen (DO) in aquaculture systems is regulated by a balance between oxygen inputs and consumption processes. Oxygen is primarily introduced into water through two natural pathways: atmospheric diffusion and photosynthesis, while it is consumed through respiration of aquatic organisms and microbial decomposition of organic matter (Kepenyes & Váradi, 2015; Boyd and Davis, 2020). According to Boyd et al. (2018) and Roy et al. (2021) in addition to natural aeration, there are three main aeration systems or types of aerators used in aquaculture: splash aerators, aerators that release air bubbles into water or bubbling aeration, and gravity aerators.

### **Atmospheric Diffusion**

Atmospheric diffusion is the passive movement of oxygen across the air–water interface driven by the partial pressure gradient between atmospheric oxygen and dissolved oxygen in water. The rate of diffusion depends on the degree of oxygen saturation in the surface water layer. Under stagnant conditions, the surface layer rapidly reaches equilibrium, thereby limiting further oxygen transfer. However, wind-induced turbulence enhances diffusion by continuously renewing the surface layer and promoting vertical mixing. Diffusion may also reverse under supersaturated conditions, resulting in oxygen loss to the atmosphere (Boyd, 1998)

### **Photosynthetic Oxygen Production**

Photosynthesis by phytoplankton and aquatic macrophytes is a major source of oxygen in aquaculture ponds. During daylight hours, oxygen production can exceed consumption, leading to supersaturation. However, at night, photosynthesis ceases and respiration dominates, causing DO levels to decline, often reaching critical minima at dawn. This diurnal fluctuation makes reliance on photosynthesis alone unreliable, particularly in intensive systems where oxygen demand is high (Tadesse et al., 2004)

### **Mechanical Mixing and Surface Renewal**

Oxygen transfer is significantly enhanced by increasing turbulence and mixing within the water body. Mechanical or natural mixing disrupts the stagnant boundary layer at the air–water interface, thereby increasing the rate of oxygen diffusion. Mixing also distributes oxygen

throughout the water column, preventing stratification and localized oxygen depletion. Wind action is a natural driver of mixing in ponds, but in controlled aquaculture systems, mechanical methods are required to ensure consistent oxygen distribution (Ignatius, 2013).

### **Bubble-Mediated Oxygen Transfer**

Another important mechanism of oxygenation involves the introduction of air or oxygen in the form of bubbles. Oxygen transfer occurs as gas diffuses across the bubble–water interface. The efficiency of this process depends on bubble size, surface area, and residence time in water. Smaller bubbles provide higher oxygen transfer efficiency due to increased surface area and slower rise velocity. This principle forms the basis for most artificial aeration technologies, particularly diffused aeration and advanced microbubble systems.

## **6. Functional Role of Aerators in Aquaculture Systems**

Aerators are broadly classified into two types: splashers and bubblers. Splashers, such as paddle wheel aerators, increase oxygen transfer by dispersing water into the air, while bubblers release air at the bottom, creating bubbles that transfer oxygen as they rise.

In addition to oxygenation, aerators provide several functional benefits:

- Enhance water circulation and mixing
- Prevent thermal and chemical stratification
- Improve distribution of oxygen throughout the pond
- Facilitate removal of metabolic wastes

Effective circulation ensures that oxygenated water is distributed evenly, preventing localized hypoxia and improving system efficiency (Ignatius, 2013)

## **7. Oxygenation Processes and Technological Evolution in Aquaculture Systems**

### **a) Natural Oxygenation Processes**

In natural aquatic environments, oxygen is supplied primarily through atmospheric diffusion and photosynthesis. Diffusion occurs due to the partial pressure gradient between oxygen in the atmosphere and dissolved oxygen in water, with the rate of transfer influenced by surface turbulence and mixing. Photosynthesis by phytoplankton and aquatic macrophytes constitutes another major source of oxygen, often resulting in supersaturation during daylight hours. However, this process is inherently unstable, as oxygen production ceases at night while respiration continues, leading to pronounced diurnal fluctuations in DO, with minimum levels typically observed at dawn (Kepenyes & Váradi, 2015). Environmental factors such as temperature, salinity, and atmospheric pressure further influence oxygen solubility, with temperature playing a dominant role by simultaneously reducing oxygen solubility and increasing metabolic oxygen demand (Ignatius, 2013). Early aeration practices were

rudimentary, often involving improvised equipment constructed from available farm machinery.

#### **b) Tractor-Powered Systems**

One of the earliest innovations was the tractor-powered impeller aerator, in which a tractor-driven mechanism agitated water to promote oxygen exchange. Similarly, tractor-mounted pumps were used to spray water into the air, enhancing aeration through increased surface exposure (Boyd et al., 2018; Boyd et al., 2020). Although these early systems provided temporary relief from oxygen depletion, they were inefficient, labor-intensive, and costly to operate over extended periods.

#### **c) Electrically Driven Aerators**

The limitations of early tractor systems led to the development of permanently installed electric aerators, marking a significant transition toward more reliable and continuous oxygenation.

#### **d) Paddlewheel Systems**

Among early electric solutions, floating electric paddlewheel aerators emerged as a major breakthrough, particularly following research and development efforts at Auburn University. These systems significantly improved oxygen transfer efficiency while simultaneously enhancing water circulation, and they remain among the most widely used aerators in pond aquaculture today. These are the most commonly used type of aerator for ponds larger than 0.5 ha and most effective, performance wise high standard oxygen transfer rate, suitable for use in emergency situations. Solar powered aerators are a result of recent research (Boyd and Chainark, 2009; Roy et al., 2021; Jamroen et al., 2023).

#### **e) Diffused Systems**

As aquaculture systems became more intensive, the limitations of surface aeration alone prompted the development of alternative aeration technologies. Diffused aeration systems introduced air or oxygen into water through submerged diffusers, producing bubbles that transfer oxygen as they rise. The evolution from coarse to fine-pore diffusers improved oxygen transfer efficiency by increasing bubble surface area and residence time. In parallel, gravity-based aeration systems, which enhance oxygen transfer through cascading water and hydraulic turbulence, offered energy-efficient solutions for certain applications (Roy et al., 2020, 2021).

#### **f) Venturi & Hydraulic Systems**

Further technological advancements led to the adoption of venturi and hydraulic injection systems, which utilize pressure differentials to entrain air into flowing water. These systems provide efficient mixing with reduced mechanical complexity (Bae and Sung, 2021)

### g) Pure Oxygen Systems

The subsequent introduction of pure oxygen systems, including oxygen cones and low-head oxygenators, represented a major advancement in high-intensity aquaculture. By dissolving oxygen under controlled pressure, these systems achieve significantly higher oxygen transfer efficiencies and support elevated stocking densities (Roy et al., 2021)).

Attention has been drawn to potential drawbacks of excessive aeration, including increased water currents that may cause erosion of pond bottoms and stress to cultured organisms. Optimal aeration strategies must therefore balance oxygen supply with hydrodynamic conditions suitable for specific species, as both insufficient and excessive water movement can adversely affect growth and welfare (Henares et al., 2020; Timmerhaus et al., 2021).

### h) Micro and Nanobubble Technology (MNBs)

More recently, microbubble and nanobubble technologies have emerged as highly efficient oxygenation methods. These systems generate extremely small bubbles with high internal pressure and prolonged residence time, enabling superior oxygen transfer compared to conventional aeration techniques. In addition to enhancing oxygen availability, nanobubbles have been reported to improve water quality by facilitating oxidation processes and reducing microbial load, thereby contributing to improved fish health and system stability. While traditional aerators produce macro-bubbles (greater than 1 mm), MNB technology focuses on bubbles at the microscopic (1–100  $\mu\text{m}$ ) and nanoscopic ( $<1 \mu\text{m}$  or  $<200 \text{nm}$ ) scale. Their behavior in water defies standard bubble physics.

- **Prolonged Residence Time (Brownian Motion):** Macro-bubbles rise rapidly to the surface and burst, wasting most of their oxygen. Nanobubbles lack sufficient buoyancy to overcome water resistance. Instead, they are subjected to Brownian motion (random movement of particles), allowing them to remain suspended in the water column for weeks or even months, creating a stable, supersaturated oxygen reservoir.
- **High Internal Pressure & Gas Dissolution:** According to the Young-Laplace equation, the internal gas pressure of a bubble is inversely proportional to its radius. Nanobubbles have immense internal pressure, which drives oxygen molecules into the surrounding water at a highly efficient rate (Eklund et al., 2021)
- **Zeta Potential (Surface Charge):** Nanobubbles possess a strong negative surface charge (zeta potential). This causes them to repel each other, preventing them from coalescing (merging) into larger, buoyant bubbles (English, 2024)
- **Pathogen Suppression via ROS:** When nanobubbles eventually collapse under their own pressure, the massive release of energy splits water molecules, generating Reactive

Oxygen Species (ROS) like hydroxyl radicals (OH<sup>•</sup>). These ROS are powerful oxidants that can destroy the cell walls of pathogenic bacteria (such as *Vibrio* species) and oxidize toxic compounds like ammonia and nitrite, acting as an in-situ water sterilizer without the need for chemicals (Nghia et al., 2022)

### i) Solar-Powered and Thermal Aeration Systems

Contemporary developments in aeration technology are increasingly focused on energy efficiency and sustainability. The selection of appropriate aeration systems now considers not only oxygen transfer efficiency but also economic and operational factors such as installation cost, maintenance requirements, and energy consumption (Ridwan et al., 2023). Innovations include solar-powered aerators and hybrid systems designed for off-grid applications, as well as novel concepts such as the Solar Updraft Aeration (SU<sub>P</sub>A) system, which utilizes solar thermal energy to induce natural convection and destratification of pond water, thereby enhancing oxygen distribution (Mahmoud et al., 2015; Jamroen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021).

- **Solar Updraft Aeration (SU<sub>P</sub>A):** Instead of using electricity to run a motor, SU<sub>P</sub>A relies on solar thermal energy. A solar collector heats a metal pipe submerged in the pond. This localized heating creates a strong, natural convection current. Cold, oxygen-depleted water from the pond bottom is drawn up through the pipe and pushed to the surface where it can absorb atmospheric oxygen. This breaks pond stratification completely passively, using zero moving parts.
- **Solar PV with Smart Storage:** Modern solar paddlewheels or diffusers are integrated with smart lithium-ion battery banks and intelligent charge controllers. These systems capture excess solar energy during peak daylight (when photosynthesis is already providing high DO) and deploy that stored energy to run the aerators precisely at dawn, when DO levels naturally crash.

### j) Automation, IoT, and AI-Driven Oxygenation

The latest phase in the evolution of aeration technologies is characterized by the integration of automation and digital monitoring systems. Automatic aerator control systems equipped with dissolved oxygen sensors can activate or deactivate aerators in response to real-time DO levels, thereby optimizing energy use and improving operational efficiency (Boyd & Chainark, 2009; Boyd et al., 2020). Advances in wireless sensor networks and IoT-based platforms have enabled remote monitoring of multiple water quality parameters, including DO, temperature, pH, and conductivity, allowing for precise and adaptive management of aquaculture systems (Wiranto et al., 2020; Prapti et al., 2022).

Intensive aquaculture is shifting toward demand-based aeration driven by the Internet of Things

(IoT).

- **Optical vs. Galvanic Sensors:** Traditional galvanic DO sensors rely on chemical membranes that foul easily and require constant recalibration. Modern systems use optical (luminescent) DO sensors. These emit a specific wavelength of light into the water and measure how dissolved oxygen quenches the returning fluorescence. They are highly accurate, require almost no maintenance, and do not consume oxygen during measurement (Parra et al., 2018)
- **Variable Frequency Drives (VFDs):** In older systems, a 5-horsepower motor was either 100% ON or 100% OFF. A VFD is a power converter that allows the motor's speed to be dialed up or down dynamically. If the DO drops slightly, the VFD might run the aerator at 30% capacity; if the DO crashes, it ramps up to 100%. This saves massive amounts of electricity (Afonso et al., 2020)
- **Predictive AI Algorithms:** Advanced IoT platforms don't just react to low oxygen; they predict it. By feeding historical DO data, real-time temperature, stocking density, feeding times, and local weather forecasts into machine learning algorithms such as Support Vector Regression (SVR) optimized by advanced algorithms—can accurately predict future dissolved oxygen levels by analysing complex, non-linear environmental variables (Feng et al., 2024). This allows automated systems to anticipate DO crashes before they occur, optimizing energy consumption by activating aerators predictively rather than reactively.

#### k) Emerging "Bubble-Less" and Electrochemical Systems

For the most intensive Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS) and delicate hatcheries, engineers are abandoning bubbles altogether.

- **Hollow Fiber Membrane Contactors:** Standard aeration creates severe turbulence, which can physically damage delicate larval fish or shear biofloc apart. Membrane contactors utilize microscopic, semi-permeable hollow fibres. Pure oxygen is pumped through the inside of the fibre, while culture water flows over the outside. The oxygen diffuses straight through the membrane wall directly into the liquid phase. Zero bubbles are formed, achieving 100% gas transfer efficiency in complete silence with zero turbulence (Bazhenov et al., 2018)
- **Electrochemical Oxygenation (Water Electrolysis):** This system runs a highly controlled, low-voltage direct current through an isolated chamber of water. The current physically splits the H<sub>2</sub>O molecules, venting hydrogen gas and instantly dissolving pure oxygen into the water. It requires no compressors, no liquid oxygen tanks, and no moving

parts, making it an incredibly robust life-support system for high-density live fish transport (Nguyen & Matsushashi, 2019)

## 8. Conclusion

As global fish farming becomes more crowded and intensive, simply relying on natural oxygen or basic paddlewheels is no longer enough. The industry must move towards highly efficient systems like Venturi injectors, and advanced nanobubble technologies that deliver significantly more oxygen while using less energy. Furthermore, the integration of smart sensors, AI prediction, and solar power is transforming how farms operate, allowing systems to automatically manage oxygen levels based on real-time needs rather than guesswork. Ultimately, combining these advanced oxygen delivery methods with smart, automated technology is the key to keeping aquatic species healthy and ensuring the sustainable future of global aquaculture.

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