JOURNAL OF MARITIME RESEARCH

Vol XXII. No. II (2025) pp 270–275

ISSN: 1697-4840, www.jmr.unican.es

Sustainability and Circular Economy in the Maritime Sector: Transforming Fish By-products into Protein Sources Using Black Soldier Fly Larvae

Abdul Wahid[1,2,*], Sri Suhartini[1], Siti Asmaul Mustaniroh[1], Irnia Nurika[1]

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 Oct 2024;
in revised from 20 Oct 2024;
accepted 15 Nov 2024.

Keywords:
Sustainability, Circular Economy, Fish By-Products, Black Soldier Fly Larvae, Protein Sources.

ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the application of sustainability and circular economy principles in the maritime sector by transforming fish by-products into protein sources using Black Soldier Fly Larvae (BSFL). The methodology involves the processing of fish by-products through bio-conversion, with BSFL serving as the organic degradation agent. Data analyzed include the amount of waste processed, the conversion rate into protein, and the nutritional analysis of the final product. The results demonstrate that BSFL efficiently converts fish by-products into high-quality protein, which can be used as an alternative feed ingredient for livestock and aquaculture. The novelty of this research lies in the application of bio-conversion technology within a circular economy framework, supporting waste reduction and optimal resource utilization in the maritime sector. The impact is significant, as it not only helps reduce environmental pollution from fish waste but also provides a sustainable solution to the growing global demand for protein. This research opens new opportunities for more environmentally friendly fish waste management and supports food security through the use of economical and efficient alternative protein sources.

1. Introduction.

Sustainability and circular economy have become paramount focuses in various industrial sectors, including the maritime industry. The fishing industry, which significantly contributes to global protein needs, not only produces fish for human consumption but also generates substantial quantities of waste, including by-products such as fish heads, skins, and bones that are often overlooked or discarded (Cooney et al., 2023). According to FAO (2020), nearly 30-35% of the total fish production worldwide consists of waste that is not optimally utilized. In the context of sustainability, the use of these by-products has become a primary concern due to increasing reliance on limited natural resources and environmental pressures from organic waste generated by this industry (Abdel-Moemin & Abdel-Rahman, 2022).

The application of a circular economy in the maritime sector offers an approach to reduce waste and enhance resource use efficiency through innovations in processing by-products into value-added products. One promising approach is the transformation of fish waste into alternative protein sources using Black Soldier Fly Larvae (BSFL) (Abdel-Tawwab et al., 2020). BSFL has shown significant potential in recycling various types of organic waste, including fish waste, into high-value products such as animal protein that can be used in animal feed and aquaculture (Amrul et al., 2022).

BSFL are known for their extraordinary capacity to break down organic materials, achieving high conversion rates of hard-to-process waste such as fish remains into biomass rich in protein and fat (Välimaa et al., 2019). Research conducted by Diener et al. (2020) emphasizes that BSFL can process various organic waste with remarkable efficiency, including enhancing the economic value of fish waste previously considered an environmental burden (Patnaik et al., 2024).

Furthermore, studies conducted in the last five years have shown that the use of BSFL in recycling fish waste offers several advantages compared to traditional waste management methods. Notably, BSFL not only significantly reduce the volume of waste but also produce more sustainable outputs, both environmentally and economically (Van Huis, 2020; Jansen et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2022; Romero et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). According to Van der Fels-Klerx et al. (2021), this process also generates solid waste that can be utilized as organic fertilizer, thereby further reinforcing the zero-waste approach within the maritime industry (Feng et al., 2023; Mirzaei et al., 2023; Halmald et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2024; Soleimani et al., 2024).

In the context of sustainability, the use of BSFL in processing fish by-products aligns with the principles of the circular economy, which aims to eliminate waste and continuously utilize existing resources in a closed loop (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Galo et al., 2023; D?Amico et al., 2024). Research indicates that circular-economy practices in the fishing and aquaculture sectors not only help reduce environmental impacts but also create new economic opportunities through innovations in waste management and product diversification (Gold et al., 2020; Le et al., 2021; Shafique et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2023; Boussalhal et al., 2024).

[1]Department of Agricultural Industrial Technology, Brawijaya University, Malang, 65145, East Java, Indonesia.

[2]Departement of Industrial Engineering, Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan, 67162, Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia.

*Corresponding author: Abdul Wahid. E-mail Address wahid@yudharta.ac.id.

The global fishing sector, facing sustainability challenges such as declining fish stocks and marine ecosystem degradation, can benefit from this approach as it extends product life cycles and enhances resource efficiency (Peters et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Demir et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2024; Pattanayak et al., 2024).

Specifically, processing fish waste through BSFL has several positive environmental sustainability impacts. First, reducing organic waste from the fishing industry can decrease greenhouse gas emissions and potential environmental pollution, particularly in coastal areas often affected by fish waste disposal (Newton et al., 2020; Sinha et al., 2021; Salleh et al., 2022; Mahfuz et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2024). Second, reusing fish by-products for animal feed or aquaculture reduces the pressure on conventional protein sources such as soy and small fish, which are often overexploited (Gold et al., 2020; Garcia et al., 2021; Imoize et al., 2023).

However, despite the recognized potential of using BSFL as a circular-economy solution, challenges remain. One of the main challenges is the need for increased production scale and widespread adoption of the technology to enable the transformation of fish waste into protein on a commercial scale (Mertenat et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; An et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, regulations related to the use of insects in the food and feed supply chains still need to be adjusted in many countries to support broader adoption of this technology (Rumpold & Schlüter, 2020; Schermer et al., 2021; Hallámová et al., 2022; Ahn et al., 2023; Vink et al., 2024). Some studies also highlight the need for further research regarding the potential biological and health risks associated with using insects as protein sources in feed, although current data indicate that BSFL are generally safe and effective (Spranghers et al., 2020; Veldkamp et al., 2021; Kalkalramudi et al., 2022; Kroeckel et al., 2023; Crump et al., 2024).

In addition to technical and regulatory challenges, the economic aspects of transforming fish waste into protein using BSFL also pose important considerations. According to Godfray et al. (2021), the processing costs and the infrastructure required for large-scale implementation remain barriers for many companies to adopt this technology, despite its significant long-term potential benefits in waste reduction and resource efficiency (Zhao et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2024; Salleh et al., 2024; Cardoso et al., 2024).

Overall, the transformation of fish waste into protein using BSFL presents an appealing solution to the sustainability challenges in the fishing and maritime sectors. By integrating the concepts of the circular economy and innovative waste-processing technologies, this approach not only mitigates environmental impacts but also creates economic value from previously discarded products. Therefore, collaboration between governments, industries, and researchers is essential to address existing barriers and promote the widespread adoption of this technology. In this context, this research aims to explore the potential of transforming fish by-products into protein using BSFL and its implications for sustainability and the circular economy in the maritime sector.

2. Materials and Methods.

2.1. Research Design.

This study employs an experimental design to evaluate the effectiveness of Black Soldier Fly Larvae (BSFL) in converting fish by-products (FBP) into a protein source. The experimental design consisted of three primary treatments based on varying concentrations of FBP mixed with an organic bulking agent (OBA), aimed at assessing the optimal substrate composition:

- P1 (Low FBP concentration): 25% FBP + 75% OBA.
- P2 (Medium FBP concentration): 50% FBP + 50% OBA.
- P3 (High FBP concentration): 75% FBP + 25% OBA.

Parameters evaluated included BSFL growth performance, substrate reduction, bioconversion efficiency, and the nutritional composition of the harvested larvae. The study was conducted in a controlled laboratory setting simulating conditions relevant to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in fish processing. Sampling for all analyses was performed randomly to ensure data representativeness (Alzahr et al., 2020; Hwang et al., 2021; Khalmis et al., 2022; Rumpold & Schlüter, 2020; Thamsborg et al., 2023).

2.2. Materials Collection and Preparation.

The primary material used in this study was fish by-products obtained from local fish processing SMEs. These by-products included fish heads, bones, and other unused parts. Prior to use, the fish waste was cleaned and chopped into smaller pieces to facilitate the fermentation process. BSFL were obtained from a reputable source and cultured under controlled conditions to ensure optimal growth (Almeida et al., 2019; Ghally et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Stojanovic et al., 2021; Van Huis et al., 2020).

2.3. Processing Procedure.

After preparation, the fish by-products were mixed with BSFL in specific ratios. The processing was carried out in closed containers to prevent contamination. Environmental conditions such as temperature, humidity, and fermentation time were maintained within optimal ranges to support BSFL activity. Data on larval growth, biomass conversion, and final product characteristics were analyzed to assess process efficiency (Bertin et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2022; Morales-Ramos et al., 2022; Othman et al., 2023; Veldkamp et al., 2022).

2.4. Product Quality Analysis.

Upon completion of the processing, the final product was analyzed to assess its nutritional content and protein quality. Analytical methods included chromatography, spectroscopy, and microbiological analysis to ensure the product met food safety standards. The results were compared with guidelines set by health organizations and research institutions to evaluate the potential of the product as a viable and sustainable protein source (Aro et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2021; Kappeler et al., 2023; Makkar et al., 2019; Santoyo et al., 2023).

2.5. Data Analysis.

The data collected in this study were analyzed using statistical software to identify relationships between variables and test the proposed hypotheses. The analysis was conducted to determine the effect of varying fish by-product concentrations and BSFL numbers on the final product. Results were presented in tables and graphs to facilitate interpretation, with statistical significance determined at $\alpha = 0.05$ (Feng et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

2.6. Sustainability Implicaltions Assessment.

The sustainability implications of transforming fish by - products using BSFL were assessed based on the experimental outcomes. The environmental impact was primarily evaluated through the efficiency of waste reduction (substrate reduction percentage) and the potential for diverting organic waste from landfills. Economic aspects were considered by analyzing the yield and nutritional quality (protein and fat content) of the BSFL biomass -key determinants of its value as an alternative feed ingredient- and by conducting a preliminary estimation of profitability. Social implications were assessed in terms of potential contributions to local protein supply chains and resource valorization within coastal communities.

3. Result and Discussion.

This section presents and discusses the experimental findings from the bioconversion of fish by-products (FBP) into a protein source using Black Soldier Fly Larvae (BSFL) under the different substrate concentrations (P1, P2, and P3) detailed in the methodology. The results are subsequently analyzed for their implications on sustainability and integration within a circular economy framework in the maritime sector.

3.1. Sustainability Analysis.

The transformation of fish by-products using BSFL, as demonstrated by our experimental results, has profound implications for sustainability in the maritime sector, encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions.

3.1.1. Environmental Impact.

A key environmental benefit is the significant reduction of fish waste. The efficiency of BSFL in converting fish by - products into larval biomass is presented in Table 1. Substrate Reduction (SR) was high across all treatments, with P2 (medium FBP concentration) achieving 68.5 ± 3.0% and P3 (high FBP concentration) 66.1 ± 3.3% (Table 1). This high substrate reduction translates directly into a significant diversion of fish waste from landfills or improper disposal, thereby mitigating associated environmental problems such as odors, leachate generation, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Table 1: Substrate Reduction Data and Conversion Efficiency.

Treatment	Substrate Reduction (SR, %)	Bioconversion Rate (BCR, %)	ECI (%)
P1	62.3 ± 2.5^{b}	15.2 ± 1.1^{b}	18.1 ± 1.0^{b}
P2	68.5 ± 3.0^{a}	18.5 ± 1.5^{a}	22.5 ± 1.3^{a}
P3	66.1 ± 3.3^{ab}	14.8 ± 1.8^{b}	17.5 ± 1.6^{b}

Source: Authors.

Based on our optimal bioconversion rate (BCR) of 18.5 ± 1.5% for P2 (Table 1), meaning that 1 kg of BSFL biomass is obtained from approximately 5.4 kg of fish by-products on a dry matter basis, we can refine GHG reduction calculations. If conventional fishmeal production yields 1.5 kg CO_2-eq/kg and BSFL farming yields 0.55 kg CO_2-eq/kg of larvae, and assuming a 70% replacement:

For a facility handling 10,000kg of fish by-products (dry matter) annually, yielding approximately 1,850 kg of BSFL biomass (10,000kg × 18.5% BCR):

$$\text{GHG reduction if BSFL replaces fishmeal} = 0.7 \times 1,850\text{kg BSFL} \times (1.5\text{kg } CO_2\text{-eq/kg fishmeal equivalent} - 0.55\text{kg } CO_2\text{-eq/kg BSFL}).$$

This direct utilization significantly supports zero-waste ambitions. Furthermore, the frass (larval excrement and residue) produced, though not quantified in detail in these results, is known to be a valuable soil conditioner (van der Fels-Klerx et al., 2021).

3.1.2. Economic Impact.

Economic feasibility is strongly supported by our experimental conversion rates and larval growth performance. BSFL growth performance, including final larval weight, varied significantly among treatments (Table 1). Larvae reared on P2 exhibited the highest average final larval weight (0.22 ± 0.02 g/larva), significantly higher ($P < 0.05$) than P1 and P3.

Table 2: BSFL Growth Performance and Development Time.

Treatment	Final Larval Weight (g/larva)	Growth Time (days)
P1	0.18 ± 0.01^{b}	14 ± 1^{ab}
P2	0.22 ± 0.02^{a}	12 ± 1^{a}
P3	0.19 ± 0.03^{b}	15 ± 2^{b}

Source: Authors.

Re-evaluating with a direct experimental link: if 1,000 kg of wet fish by-products yield 280 kg of wet BSFL biomass (derived from optimal growth in P2):

$$\text{Revenue} = 280 \text{ kg} \times \text{IDR } 22,500/\text{kg} = \text{IDR } 6,300,000$$

$$\text{Cost (fish by-products)} = 1,000 \text{ kg} \times \text{IDR } 1,500/\text{kg} = \text{IDR } 1,500,000$$

$$\text{Net profit per 1,000 kg of waste} = \text{IDR } 4,800,000$$

For a facility processing 10,000 kg of fish by-products annually:

$$\text{Annual net profit} = \frac{10,000 \text{ kg}}{1,000 \text{ kg}} \times \text{IDR } 4,800,000$$

$$= \text{IDR } 48,000,000 \text{ per year}$$

This indicates a viable business model for SMEs, transforming a costly waste problem into a revenue stream. The low cost of fish by-products as a raw material is a key advantage.

3.1.3. Social Impact.

Social benefits, such as job creation (estimated at five direct jobs for a facility processing 10,000 kg per year), are relevant. This is particularly impactful for coastal communities reliant on the maritime sector. By providing a locally produced alternative protein source, this technology can also contribute to enhancing food security for the aquaculture sector, reducing reliance on potentially overexploited wild-caught fish for fishmeal.

3.2. Circular Economy Integration.

This study successfully demonstrates a closed-loop system in which fish processing ”waste” is upcycled into high-value BSFL biomass, aligning perfectly with circular economy principles: designing out waste, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. For SMEs, treatment P2 (medium fish by-product concentration) appears most promising.

3.2.1. Waste Reduction.

As highlighted in the Environmental Impact section (3.1.1), BSFL efficiently reduced the substrate volume. The observed substrate reduction rates (SR, Table 1), particularly for P2 (68.5 ± 3.0%) and P3 (66.1 ± 3.3%), underscore the significant potential of BSFL in managing and reducing the volume of fish waste. This is a critical aspect for waste management in fish-processing SMEs and a core tenet of the circular economy - minimizing waste generation.

3.2.2. Resource Efficiency.

The efficiency with which BSFL convert the ”waste” resource into valuable biomass is crucial. P2 demonstrated the highest Bioconversion Rate (BCR) (18.5 ± 1.5%, Table 1), significantly greater ($P < 0.05$) than P1 and P3. This indicates an optimal balance of nutrients and physical properties in the P2 substrate for efficient resource utilization. The development time was also shortest for P2 (12 ± 1 days, Table 1), further contributing to resource efficiency through faster turnover. Lower concentrations (P1) might have been nutritionally limiting, while higher concentrations (P3) could present challenges that slightly hamper conversion compared to P2. These findings are consistent with studies reporting that overly rich or imbalanced substrates can negatively impact BSFL performance Palrodi et all., 2020. The BCR achieved (up to 18.5% for P2) is comparable to or exceeds values reported for other organic wastes, highlighting the resource efficiency of using fish by-products as a BSFL substrate.

3.3. Protein Content Analysis.

The nutritional content of the harvested BSFL prepupae varied according to the substrate composition (Table 3). Proximate anallysis revealed that BSFL reared on fish by-products are a rich source of protein and lipids.

Table 3: Proximate Composition of BSFL Prepupae.

Treatment	Protein (%)	Fat (%)	Ash (%)
P1	40.5 ± 2.1[b]	30.1 ± 1.5[b]	7.5 ± 0.5[a]
P2	44.2 ± 1.8[a]	33.5 ± 1.9[a]	7.2 ± 0.4[a]
P3	41.3 ± 2.5[b]	35.1 ± 2.2[a]	7.9 ± 0.6[a]

Source: Authors.

The highest protein content was found in larvae from P2 (44.2 ± 1.8% on a dry matter basis), which was significantly higher ($P < 0.05$) compared to P1 and P3. This protein content is substantial and falls within the range (40-50%) reported in many studies for BSFL reared on various substrates (Van Huis et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). While this is lower than conventional fishmeal (typically 60-72% protein), the sustainable production method and waste valorization make BSFL an attractive alternative protein source.

Fat content was notably high in larvae from P3 (35.1 ± 2.2%), though not significantly different from P2 (33.5 ± 1.9%). This lipid content is also significant and can serve as a valuable energy source in animal feed or potentially be extracted for other applications. The variation in protein and lipid content among treatments suggests that substrate composition can be tailored to some extent to influence the final nutritional profile of the larvae-a point also noted by Author et al. (Year). Ash content was relatively consistent across treatments.

3.4. Sensitivity Analysis.

The profitability of BSFL production from fish by-products was assessed for its sensitivity to key variables. The baseline bioconversion rate used for this analysis was derived from our optimal experimental treatment (P2, BCR of 18.5% as per Table 1, or the 28% value if calculated based on wet weight conversion). The results confirmed that profitability is most sensitive to changes in this bioconversion rate. A 10% decrease in the experimentally determined conversion rate (e.g., from an assumed 28% wet weight conversion to 25.2%) would reduce net profit by approximately 12%. Market price fluctuations for BSFL biomass also had a significant impact, while the cost of fish by-product raw material, being relatively low, had a lesser-though still important-influence. This underscores the importance of optimizing and maintaining high bioconversion efficiencies, as demonstrated by treatment P2, in BSFL rearing operations.

3.5. Limitations and Future Research.

This study was conducted under controlled laboratory conditions, simulating an SME environment. Future research should involve pilot-scale trials directly within fish-processing SMEs to validate these findings under real-world operational variability and to assess unforeseen practical challenges. While this study focused on mixed fish by - products, investigating the suitability of specific components-such as fish heads, bones, and skin-could further optimize the process. Long-term feeding trials using the produced BSFL meal in aquaculture species relevant to the local maritime sector are also crucial to confirm its efficacy and safety as a fishmeal replacer.

Finally, a detailed Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) based on the optimized parameters from this study would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the overall environmental benefits. Furthermore, a rigorous Techno-Economic Analysis (TEA) is essential to evaluate the economic feasibility, profitability, and commercial scalability of this BSFL-based valorization process, particularly for SMEs, to fully assess its potential for practical implementation.

Conclusions.

This study conclusively demonstrates the significant potential of Black Soldier Fly Larvae (BSFL) to efficiently transform fish by - products into valuable, protein-rich biomass, strongly aligning with key sustainability and circular economy principles. The experimental findings revealed that a medium concentration of fish by-products (50% FBP mixed with 50% organic bulking agent, designated as treatment P2) provided the optimal conditions, leading to the highest final larval weight, shortest development time, and superior bioconversion rate (18.5 ± 1.5%). This underscores the importance of a balanced substrate for maximizing BSFL performance.

Environmentally, the process showcased substantial waste - reduction capabilities, with substrate reduction exceeding 65%, thereby offering a tangible solution for diverting fish waste from landfills and mitigating associated environmental burdens. Nutritionally, larvae reared on the optimized P2 substrate exhibited high protein (44.2±1.8%) and lipid (33.5±1.9%) contents, confirming their value as a sustainable alternative feed ingredient.

Overall, the bioconversion process presents clear environmental, economic, and social benefits, fitting seamlessly into a circular economy model by upcycling waste into a resource. Furthermore, the sensitivity analysis highlighted bioconversion efficiency as the paramount driver for economic viability, emphasizing the practical importance of the optimized conditions identified in treatment P2.

Therefore, BSFL technology offers a technically feasible and economically promising pathway for managing fish industry by-products, paving the way for further development and implementation, particularly within maritime sector SMEs. Future efforts are advised to focus on scaling up and conducting comprehensive life cycle assessments.

Acknowledgements.

The authors gratefully thank the Department of Agro - Industrial Technology, Faculty of Agricultural Technology, Universitas Brawijaya, and the Department of Industrial Engineering, Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan, for their support in this research.

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