

## Biochemical and Physiological Biomarkers in Aquatic Environmental Research

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Received November 13, 2013; Revised November 14, 2013; Accepted November 15, 2013

**Abstract:** Biomarkers are used as tools to assess biological changes that may reveal exposure of organisms to environmental chemicals. In some cases, biomarkers are able to indicate that chemicals specifically affect metabolic pathways or physiological functions in exposed individuals. Therefore, biomarkers can be used as both diagnostic and predictive tools. More recently, the concept of “biomarkers” has gained popularity amongst environmental managers. There are many different biomarkers that occur at many different levels of organization from sub-cellular to whole-organisms. Biomarkers at the molecular level tend to respond first, followed by responses at the cellular (biochemical and physiological), and whole-body levels. Within this review, I will review the application of some biochemical and physiological biomarkers in aquatic environmental research. This review presents a synthesis of the state of the art in the methodology of biochemical and physiological biomarkers and its contribution in aquatic environmental research. The text explores the latest knowledge and thinking on this very important approach for the assessment of environmental health, management, and conservation. The primary concern of the present review is the measurement of biomarkers in aquatic organisms under field and laboratory conditions, where effects of chemicals at different levels of biological organization can be examined.

**Keywords:** Biomarkers, aquatic organisms, biochemical biomarkers, physiological biomarkers

### Introduction

Biomarkers are used as tools to assess biological changes that may reveal exposure of organisms to environmental chemicals. In some cases, biomarkers are able to indicate that chemicals specifically affect metabolic pathways or physiological functions in exposed individuals. Therefore, biomarkers can be used as both diagnostic and predictive tools. A number of case-studies demonstrated that biomarkers are useful tools to detect the presence of xenobiotics in living organisms and to diagnose individual health. Biomarkers have been proposed as sensitive tools for detecting environmental exposure and adverse effects of toxic anthropogenic chemicals on aquatic organisms. More recently, the concept of “biomarkers” has gained popularity amongst environmental managers. There are many different biomarkers that occur at many different levels of organization from sub-cellular to whole-organisms (Connell et al., 1999). Biomarkers at the molecular level tend to respond first, followed by responses at the cellular (biochemical and physiological), morphological/histological and whole-body levels. Thus, by monitoring molecular, biochemical and physiological parameters biomarkers can be used as an early warning system and the potential harm of an agent can be assessed before more severe disturbances/consequences occur (Lam & Gray, 2003). The biomarkers of early warning system are very sensitive to environmental stressors and rapidly-responding biomarkers but they are generally characterized by low ecological significance. Previously, I have reviewed the application of the molecular biomarkers in the aquatic environmental research (submitted). As a consequence, within this review, I will review the application of some biochemical and physiological biomarkers in aquatic

environmental research. This review presents a synthesis of the state of the art in the methodology of biochemical and physiological biomarkers and its contribution in environmental risk assessment. The text explores the latest knowledge and thinking on this very important approach for the assessment of environmental health, management, and conservation. The primary concern of the present review is the measurement of biomarkers in aquatic organisms under field and laboratory conditions, where effects of chemicals at different levels of biological organization can be examined.

## **Biochemical biomarkers**

Biochemical indicators could be used (as biomarkers) to identify possible environmental contaminations before the health of aquatic organisms is seriously affected (Barnhoorn & Van Vuren, 2004 ; Jimenez & Stegeman, 1990) and to develop water quality indices (Gayet et al., 1993; Melancon, 1995; Powers, 1989; Zollner, 1993). Such biochemical approaches are among the first measurable responses to the presence of chemical pollutants and thus are early, sensitive indicators of possible damage at higher levels of organization, both in the organisms and possibly in the fish community (Casillas et al., 1983). There are many biochemical biomarkers and it is impossible and undesirable to cover them all here. In this review, two key examples which have proved popular in environmental assessment of the hazards of toxic chemicals to aquatic organisms are presented; (1) Alteration of enzymes and (2) structural changes in stress proteins.

### ***Alteration of enzymes activity***

In toxicological studies of acute exposure, changes in concentrations and activities of some enzymes may reflect cell damage in specific organs (Casillas, et al., 1983; Heath, 1996). Changes of maximum enzyme activities altered demands for the related metabolic function (Kiessling et al., 1991; Moon & Mommsen, 1987). This methodological approach has been used in numerous studies to investigate the influence of environmental factors on fish metabolism (Cowey et al., 1981; Hilton & Atkinson, 1982; Pelletier et al., 1994; Segner & Verreth, 1995).

The commonly used enzymes as biochemical biomarkers are Cytochrome P450 monooxygenases, glutathione S-transferases, Acetylcholinesterase, Glucose-6-Phosphate dehydrogenase and Lactate dehydrogenase.

In recent years, there has been a rapid development of enzymatic biomarkers. This is due not only to advances in biochemistry but also to modern methods of measurement (Lam & Gray, 2003). Such biomarkers generally include the deployment of detoxifying enzymes and antioxidant systems (Fitzpatrick et al., 1997; Livingstone et al., 1995). The suitability of various antioxidant parameters, such as glutathione S transferase (GST), superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione reductase (GR), glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PDH), lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), glutathione (GSH) and lipid peroxidation, for use as biomarkers has been examined in a variety of aquatic organisms. For example, (Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2010) studied the alteration in the activity of G6PDH and LDH in the tissues of African catfish and Nile tilapia collected from the whole course of the river Nile. These alterations go in parallel with the elevation in the levels of water chemical parameters detected in the water of Damietta and Rosetta sites as a result of pollution stress in these areas.

They concluded that, altered activities of G6PDH and LDH can provide a useful biomarker for environmental managers in investigating the exposure of fish to contaminated waters. In the same context, Sahan et al. (2010) analyzed the levels of pollution in the Ceyhan River (Turkey), subjected to agricultural and industrial pollution, and the effects of these pollutants on the gill and liver tissues of *Cyprinus carpio*. The biomarkers examined in the liver and gill tissues of the carp were superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) as well as glutathione (GSH) and lipid peroxidation (LPO). The activities of CAT, G6PD, GST and GSH were observed to be higher in the liver tissues of the fish in the polluted region. Tsangaris et al. (2010) measured a suite of biomarkers in caged mussels at areas impacted by different anthropogenic activities along the Greek coastline to assess biological effects of environmental pollution. Biomarkers indicative of neurotoxicity (acetylcholinesterase, AchE), oxidative stress (catalase, CAT), and phase II biotransformation of xenobiotics (glutathione S-transferase, GST), were measured to assess effects of various types of pollutants. AchE activity proved to be the most responsive biomarker with decreased values at sites influenced by agricultural, urban and industrial activities. Jemec et al. (2009) summarized their past experiences in biochemical biomarker research in two crustacean species. They assessed the intrinsic properties of biochemical biomarkers CAT, GST and ChE in the *D. magna* and the isopod *P. scaber*. They recommend that the use of biochemical markers is most appropriate for hazard identification because this is a procedure whose purpose is to characterize the potential hazard of the substance in question and is more flexible in terms of using different tools. They concluded that, the lesson learnt from biochemical biomarkers in environmental studies utilizing crustacean model species is that, for successful application of each group of biomarkers, their intrinsic properties are needed to be known before an (eco)toxicity study is designed. They suggest that a substantial body of experience obtained with biochemical biomarkers should be exploited to new emerging biomarkers in environmental studies in order to facilitate their application. As a part of a monitoring program Kurutas et al. (2009) investigated the levels of pollution indicator parameters of the water and their effects on various oxidative stress biomarkers in gill and liver tissues of spotted barb (*Capoeta barroisi* Lortet, 1894). The oxidative stress biomarkers analyzed included superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), and glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD). Levels of reduced glutathione (GSH) and lipid peroxidation (LPO) were also evaluated. High levels of CAT, G6PD, GST, and GSH activity were found in the liver tissues of fish collected from the river Ceyhan discharging region. The findings of this investigation provided a rational use for oxidative stress biomarkers in aquatic ecosystem pollution biomonitoring.

In addition to their applications in the biomonitoring programs, the biochemical biomarkers are extensively used over seas as biomarker of exposure of aquatic organisms to different kind of pollutants. For example Nogueira et al. (2011) evaluated biochemical biomarkers related to oxidative stress in Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) after two and seven exposure days to diesel and pure biodiesel (B100) and blends B5 and B20 at concentrations of 0.01 and 0.1 mL L<sup>-1</sup>. Superoxide dismutase, catalase and glutathione peroxidase presented significant changes according to the treatments for all groups. They concluded that the selected stressors could activate biochemical responses in fish, at the experimental conditions tested, indicating that this fuel can also represent a risk to the aquatic biota. Also the oxidative damage and antioxidant properties of cadmium, copper, lead and zinc in chronic toxicity test as pollution biomarkers were studied in *Mugel cephalus* (Rajkumar et al., 2011). Increased activities of antioxidants, catalase (CAT) and glutathione-S-transferase (GST)

under long term exposures to heavy metals are more prominent to metal stress suggesting activation of physiological mechanism to scavenge the ROS produced. The results suggest that heavy metal does alter the active oxygen metabolism by modulating antioxidant enzyme activities, which can be used as biomarker to detect sub-lethal effects of pollution. Haluzova et al. (2011) investigated markers of xenobiotic metabolization (cytochrome P450, ethoxyresorufin-O-deethylase, glutathione and glutathione-S-transferase) in the liver of the common carp *Cyprinus carpio* after 28-day exposure to different pesticide formulations. The obtained data contributed to a better understanding of detoxification of the selected xenobiotics in fish. Cohen et al. (2005) exposed Australian bass *Macquaria novemaculeata* to the water-accommodated fraction of Bass Strait crude oil, dispersed crude oil, or burnt crude oil to assess sub-lethal effects of oil spill remediation techniques on fish. Fish were exposed to these treatments for 16 days. Anaerobic (LDH) activity increased in the gills, liver, and white muscle after waterborne exposures. Stimulation in anaerobic activity also occurred in the liver and white muscle of fish after exposure to contaminated food. In the gills, the dispersed oil treatment resulted in the most pronounced biological response, suggesting that in the short term the use of dispersants on an oil slick might cause the most perturbations to fish metabolism.

## **Stress Proteins**

An understanding of the effects of aquatic pollution on the biological system of the animal is important. However, information on the biochemical aspects of pollutants-binding proteins, which is necessary for a better understanding of the essential steps of the biological effects of aquatic pollution, is currently lacking (Ikebuchi et al., 1986). The exposure of living beings to sub-lethal levels of environmental pollution has been shown to trigger several defense mechanisms at the cellular levels. There is a cellular accumulation of stress proteins, which mainly act as molecular chaperones (Bauman et al., 1993; Feder & Hofmann, 1999). Cellular biomarkers such as Heat shock proteins (HSP) and Metallothionein have been extensively investigated for their use as sub-lethal indicators for environmental stress. Many aquatic organisms may, commonly experience environmental stresses such as toxic metal contamination. In order to minimize the potentially detrimental effects of these stresses, organisms are capable of synthesizing a group of proteins known as stress proteins.

In term of protein metabolism induced by heavy metals, Metallothionein are the most widely studied proteins. Metallothionein (MT) is a protein family of low molecular weight (6.0-7.0 KDa), high in the amino acid cysteine (which contains a thiol group, -SH), lack of aromatic amino acids, and ability to bind heavy metals via mercaptid linkage (Carginale et al., 1998). Although the physiological function of MT have not been fully elucidated, it has proposed that MTs have a major role in the control of intracellular metal concentration and detoxification of heavy metals and protection against reactive oxygen species; in addition, there is increasing evidence for there antioxidant function (Carginale, et al., 1998; Kagi & Schaffer, 1988). MTs are also considered to be stress proteins because they protect cells against excessive metal uptake (Bauman, et al., 1993; Kagi & Schaffer, 1988; Klaassen et al., 1999). They are found in many aquatic invertebrates and fishes. The over expression of MTs has been studied in different fish species, and their use as a biomarker for monitoring metal pollution in the environment has been proposed (Carbonell et al., 1998; Hamilton & Mehrle, 1986). The primary purpose of Metallothionein in cells is to regulate copper and zinc homeostasis and to detoxify the cell of cadmium and mercury (Klaassen, et al., 1999).

It has observed in many species that exposure to heavy metals lead to a rapid increase in MT level (Dunn et al., 1987; Schlenk et al., 1997). MT protein determination has a strong correlation with lipid peroxidation in trout chronically exposed to zinc and copper (Farg et al., 1995). Schlenk, et al. (1997) examined the effects of low-level arsenic exposure and demonstrated dose-dependent increases in MT expression in channel catfish. In aquatic invertebrates, the development of procedures for the study of MTs is relatively recent. A few studies have shown that digestive glands and gills have the highest concentrations of MTs in aquatic invertebrates (Bernal-Hernández et al., 2010; Ceratto et al., 2002; Geffard et al., 2002). Overexposure to heavy metal contaminants can lead to overproduction of MT and consequently systemic damage to the organism (Cavaletto et al., 2002; Krishnakumar et al., 1994; Lowe et al., 1995; Petrovic et al., 2001; Ringwood et al., 2004). Although many species produce Metallothionein and can be tested for metal toxicity via MT measurements, mussels demonstrated higher rates of accumulation for metals than other species because of their filter feeding and sessile life histories (Kavun et al., 2002).

Heat Shock Proteins (hsp) group belongs to a family of highly conservative proteins which are expressed in response to a wide variety of biotic and a biotic stressors and involved in protein assembly, correct folding and translocation of other cellular proteins (Hallare et al., 2004). These proteins are thought to provide the cell with protection by preventing aggregation or improper folding of proteins, thereby ensuring the survival of the organism under stressful conditions by suppressing cell damage and/or cell death. Heat shock proteins (hsps) play a pivotal role in protein homeostasis and cellular stress response within the cell (Feder & Hofmann, 1999; Iwama et al., 2004; Keller et al., 2008; Mao et al., 2005; Multhoff, 2007). Under conditions of environmental stressors, serious cellular impairments such as degradation of protein or synthesis of aberrant protein might occur. However, when cells are exposed to a stressor, the rapid activation of this gene and the subsequent synthesis of the protein have been shown to protect the cells from the harmful effect of the stressor (Morimoto et al., 1995). Organisms respond to proteotoxicity with the expression of stress proteins which are able to repair partly denatured proteins. Thus the expression of HSP is indicative of cellular changes, in particular the effects of the stressor on the protein-related machinery. Because the accumulation of these hsp has been linked to the intensity of stress, these proteins have been regarded as a suitable biomarker in assessing reactions of biota to environmental physiological stressors (Hallare, et al., 2004).

Hsp levels have been shown to be modulated in fish cells and tissues upon exposure to an array of stressors (Iwama, et al., 2004). Studies performed in low vertebrates are already numerous, and the expression of stress proteins in different fish species in response to various stressors has been investigated by many authors (Iwama et al., 1999). For instance, several hsps have been detected after the exposure of various kinds of fish cells to heat shock, arsenate and several metal ions (Currie et al., 2000; Currie et al., 1999; Misra et al., 1989). The accumulation of these hsps has been linked to the intensity of stress; these proteins have been regarded as a suitable biomarker in assessing reactions of biota to environmental and physiological stressors.

Owing to its responsiveness to diverse forms of stress, the metallothionein and heat-shock response have undergone widespread application in biomonitoring and environmental toxicology (Sanders & Dyer, 1994).

In many cases, MT and hsp are especially useful biomarkers because their induction is much more sensitive to stress than traditional indices such as growth inhibition. Kovarova & Svobodova (2009) summarized the effect of heavy metals on level of metallothionein (MT) in aquatic organisms, and evaluated that the concentrations of MT are effective indicators of Cd water pollution and explain their potential use in biomonitoring applications. Most of the literature demonstrates elevated MT and hsp levels or induction of MT and hsp under pollution conditions and then proposes MT and Hsp as a potential indicator of pollutants or toxins in the environment. For example, level of metallothionein (MT) in blue mussels was determined in order to assess the spatial distribution and temporal trends of pollution with metals in the coastal sea of Slovenia (Ramsak et al., 2012). Results revealed no significant differences between sampling sites in MT content, as well as variations in the content of Cd and Hg in mussels' tissue during the examined period. In contrast a higher expression of MT was recorded in all the fish tissues collected from wastewater-fed (contaminated) fishponds compared to fish tissues from freshwater-fed (uncontaminated) fishponds (Roy et al., 2011). They studied the potential stress that fish species are facing in wastewater-fed (contaminated) fishponds in East Calcutta Wetlands (ECWs), manifested in total protein and metallothionein (MT) concentrations. Indian major carps (IMCs) – rohu (*Labeo rohita*), katla (*Catla catla*) and mrigel (*Cirrhinus mrigala*) were used as suitable fish models. These findings could be important in terms of designing biomarkers for an early environmental warning system and also for monitoring fish health. Webb & Gagnon (2009) investigated Hsp70 protein in three tissue types (gill, liver, and muscle) from black bream (*Acanthopagrus butcheri*) collected in a highly variable estuarine environment to determine which tissue provides better inter site discrimination. The usefulness of hsp70 expression to identify anthropogenic stress under field conditions was evaluated. There was high inter fish variability in hsp70 levels in each tissue group. Ireland et al. (2004) evaluated the potential of hsp70 as a biomarker of stress produced by increased temperature, osmotic pressure, and exposure to cadmium and sodium chloride in marine macroalgae and fresh water plant species. These stressors resulted in elevated hsp70 concentrations in samples of *F. serratus* and *L. minor* when compared with unstressed controls. Results suggest that Hsp70 could potentially be applied to the detection of stress in these aquatic species, although it would probably be most effective when used in conjunction with other measurements to provide a stressor-specific biomarker profile or fingerprint. Ukamaka et al. (2010) monitored metallothionein levels over 32 days in two gastropod species *Tympanotonus fuscatus* and *Pachymelania aurita* exposed to oil coated drill cuttings. In *T. fuscatus*, metallothionein levels were enhanced in all treatment groups during the study. Metallothionein levels in *Pachymelania aurita* on the other hand was reduced in test animals exposed to the drill cuttings in comparison to their background level. The implications of the finding and possible inclusion of metallothionein in biomonitoring programmes involving the evaluation of impact of drill cuttings disposal on aquatic ecosystems are discussed. Jebali et al. (2008) quantified metallothionein in sea bass *Dicentrarchus labrax* intraperitoneally injected with different Cu, Cd and Hg doses after 48 h exposure. Metallothionein increased linearly with Cu and Hg doses. Cruz-Rodríguez & Chu (2002) investigated the heat shock protein response (hsp70 family) in the eastern oyster exposed to suspended clay particles spiked with polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and to suspended field contaminated sediments (SFCS). Oysters exposed to suspended clay particles spiked with PAHs showed a significant increase in Hsp70 levels, while oysters exposed to suspended unspiked clay particles did not show changes in hsp70 levels compared to the group receiving clay particles. Exposure to the SFCS resulted in a significant increase in hsp70 as a function of exposure.

These results reveal that exposure to PAHs articles and to SFCS induced a hsp70 response in the eastern oyster. Köhler et al. (2001) quantified the level of the heat shock protein (hsp70) as a biomarker of effect, in the liver of trout and loach. Laboratory experiments with different pollutant mixtures did not mimic the hsp70-inducing or inhibiting potential of field conditions, whereas effects of long-term exposure in the bypass systems showed a significant correlation with effects recorded in feral fish. Laboratory as well as semi-field studies revealed the stress response to follow an optimum curve, resulting in a maximum hsp70 level under stress but rather low hsp70 levels when stressors (chemicals, high temperature) become too severe. The study demonstrated the suitability of hsp70 stress protein levels to integrate the response dynamics of several different stressors and, therefore, to effectively function as a biomarker for the integrated effect of all environmental stressors acting on an organism (not only of chemical pollution). Rather complex kinetics of hsp70 elevation and decrease should be taken into consideration.

Aside from the biochemical biomarkers mentioned above, there are countless others. These include changes in the levels of key molecular components of the cell that can be used as an indication that an organism is under environmental stress. Such measurements include assessments of plasma vitellogenin levels, cholesterol and pyruvate concentrations (Kille et al., 1992; Lewis et al., 1999; Sanders, 1993). These compounds suffer from the fact that they respond not only to anthropogenic pollution but also physical stress and other natural phenomena. This makes them extremely difficult to be used as “stand-alone” biomarkers (Lam & Gray, 2003), and thus they will not be discussed further in this review.

### **Physiological Biomarkers**

Physiological responses offer a major advantage for biomonitoring because the effects of pollutants usually are rapid. The effects of pollutants on physiological processes are relatively well known and include basic physiological functions as respiration, changes in growth rate, feeding, excretion osmoregulation, neurological, and hematological indices (Arcand-Hoy & Benson, 1998; Bamber & Depledge, 1997; Randall et al., 1996; Wendelaar Bonga & Lock, 1992; Wood, 1992). Physiological responses are used to provide “integrated” measures of an organism’s well-being, based on a range of different functional attributes. Physiological assays are especially useful for monitoring fluctuating exposures, or acting as “early warning” systems for acute events, because the toxic response is usually instantaneous and/or sensitive to low exposure concentrations (Handy et al., 2003).

Most physiological assays are based on recording the resting response of the organism and then quantifying changes in the physiological parameter with exposure. Growth is an important fitness component of individual organisms, and may have an overall impact on the success of natural populations. It is worth noting that although changes in a single fitness component may not always have a direct influence on the overall fitness of an individual, growth tends to integrate and reflect most sub-lethal effects. Growth has, therefore, been widely used as an indicator of pollution stress in marine invertebrates, e.g. bivalves (Page & Widdows, 1991; Widdows et al., 1982) and gastropods (Wo et al., 1999) providing a measure of environmental quality. Scope for growth has been employed in a number of pollution monitoring investigations. For example, samples of the giant mussel, *Choromytilus chorus*, were collected at three sampling stations exposed to different degrees of pollution along the south-central portion of the Chilean coast in 1998 and 1999 (Toro et al., 2003).

Scope for growth (SFG) was employed as a physiological index to evaluate stress produced by pollutants existing at each sampling site. Individuals from San Vicente bay (highly polluted) showed negative SFG values, possibly indicating severe stress related to the accumulation of toxic compounds in their tissues. Indeed, there was a significant negative correlation between the SFG of the different populations of *C. chorus* and the concentrations of organochlorines (OCs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in their tissues (Toro, et al., 2003). Respiratory responses have been used to monitor pollutant stress in invertebrates and fishes. These are rapid and therefore useful for identifying short pollution events. Oxygen consumption rate is mainly used because it shows a clear dose-response in many organisms and for many chemicals and is also a surrogate for metabolic rate (McKim & Erickson, 1991; Randall, et al., 1996). Handy, et al. (2003) reviewed the utility of physiological measurements as biomarkers of pollutant exposure and biological effect, and then gives a step by step description of methodologies used to measure physiological parameters in mostly fish and invertebrates. The effects of pollutants on respiratory, cardiovascular, osmoregulatory, and neuro-endocrine processes are relatively well described in laboratory experiments and some of these responses particularly ventilation, heart rate, and also body ion fluxes have been evaluated as biomonitors or potential biomarkers in the field. They concluded that physiological assays are especially useful for monitoring fluctuating or complex exposures, or acting as “early warning” systems for acute events.

Since blood parameters are influenced by a variety of environmental stressors, they have the potential to be used as biomarkers. Hematological techniques are the most common method to determine the sub-lethal effects of the pollutants (Larsson et al., 1995). In fish, exposure to chemical pollutants can induce either increases or decreases in hematological levels (Kori-Siakpere et al., 2006). Hematological parameters are closely related to the response of the animal to the environment, an indication that the environment where fishes live could exert some influence on the hematological characteristics (Gabriel et al., 2004). Blood is a good indicator to determine the health of an organism and hematological parameters are important in diagnosing the functional status of exposed animals to toxicants (Joshi et al., 2002). As a result of association between the circulatory system and the external environment, the hematological variables were used to determine the effects of external stressors and toxic substances (Wendelaar Bonga & Lock, 1992). It has been suggested that hematology of fish be used in pollutants toxicity detection (Wepener et al., 2005). Damage to blood and hemopoietic organs in fish may be associated due to either change in environmental conditions (Gardner & Yevich, 1969) or water born pollutants (Dawson, 1935; Gardner & Yevich, 1969; Reichenbach-Klink, 1966). Blood analysis is crucial in the area of toxicology and environmental monitoring as possible indicator of physiological changes in fishery management and diseases investigation. The most common hematological variables measured during stress included RBC (Red Blood Cells), HGB (Hemoglobin), HCT (Hematocrit), MCV (Mean Cellular Volume), MCH (Mean Cellular Hemoglobin Concentration), PLT (Thrombocytes) (Wedemeyer & Yasutake, 1977). Many studies have demonstrated changes in blood variables as a result of environmental conditions such as temperature (Houston & Pilar Schrapp, 1994), radiation (Schultz et al., 1993), hypoxia (Scott & Rogers, 1981), and presence of contaminants (Houston & Pilar Schrapp, 1994). As an indicator of pollution, blood parameters are used in order to diagnose and describe the general health condition of some fish (Kori-Siakpere, et al., 2006; Maheswaran et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2003). Besides, this type of index reflects certain ecological changes in the environment (Roche & Boge, 1996).



Blood biochemical variables such as liver function tests are usually recognized as the reliable indicator of liver metabolism (Tseng et al., 1988). The raised enzymatic activity in the liver may be because of induction of enzyme synthesis (Kimbrough et al., 1971; Krample & Hladka, 1975; Street, 1969), while their low levels could either be due to enzymatic inhibition (Henderson, 2005; Meany & Pocker, 1979) or due to liver damage without any regeneration. The main hepatic cellular component to be affected by the ambient toxicants seems to be the cell membrane. Aquatic toxicants either have increased the membrane permeability causing enhanced leaching out of the enzymes, or reduced the permeability forcing the enzymes to accumulate in the cells. Cellular damage is another reason for decreased synthesis of enzymes in living organisms. Monitoring of liver enzymes leakage into the blood has proved to be a very useful tool in liver toxicological studies.

Little information is available about the potential application of physiological biomarkers under field conditions, particularly in free living fish populations. The use of physiological biomarkers to identify pollutant exposure in the field is relatively new to ecotoxicology. For example Yousafzai & Shakoory (2011) evaluated freshwater fish, *Tor putitora* caught from polluted portion of river Kabul for various physiological parameters and was compared with control fish caught from non polluted Warsak Dam to know the possible toxic effects of pollution in the river. The selected variable exhibited remarkable alterations in the fishes collected from polluted site. The increase and decrease in various physiological and biochemical parameters in the liver of test fish samples in comparison with the control shows the adverse effect of aquatic pollution on the fish health. McKenzie et al. (2007) used portable swimming respirometers to compare respiratory metabolism of fish exposed in cages for three weeks to either clean or polluted sites on three urban European river systems: the river Lambro, Milan, Italy; the rivers Blythe, Cole and Tame, Birmingham, UK; and the river Amstel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Measurements of oxygen uptake during swimming revealed increased rates of routine aerobic metabolism in both chub and carp at polluted sites in all of the rivers studied, indicating a sub-lethal metabolic loading effect. Therefore, the physiological traits of exercise performance and metabolic rate have potential as biomarkers of the overall sub-lethal toxic effects of exposure to complex mixtures of pollutants in rivers, and may also provide insight into why fish do not colonize some polluted environments. As a part of monitoring program, Linderoth et al. (2006) measured a battery of basic physiological biomarkers in adult female perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), an assumed aquatic pollution gradient was confirmed, with the city of Stockholm (Sweden) as a point source of anthropogenic substances. The results indicated a severe pollution situation in central Stockholm, with poor health status of the perch. Besides the main gradient other sources of pollution also influenced the response pattern of the measured biomarkers. In particular, there were strong indications of pollution coming from the Baltic Sea. In the same way, Camargo & Martinez (2006) evaluated from a set of biochemical and physiological biomarkers the ones which could work as sensitivity tools for the environmental quality assessment. In situ tests were carried out at three sites along an urban stream heavily contaminated by anthropogenic activities and at a reference site. The variables analyzed were: hemoglobin content (Hb), plasma concentrations of cortisol, glucose, total protein, Na<sup>+</sup> and Cl<sup>-</sup>, plasma osmolarity, liver activities of glutathione-S-transferase (GST) and catalase and interrenal cells area. Results showed that glycemia, interrenal cell size and GST activity, which were significantly higher in fish caged in the urban stream, were best able to distinguish between the most disturbed sites and the reference one, showed to be a promising tool for the assessment and monitoring of tropical aquatic ecosystems.

Some new variables as plasmatic parameters in fish were evaluated to investigate whether they could serve as physiological indicators to evaluate water quality (Masson et al., 2002). Plasma Cl content in two fish species caught in a wide range of rivers representative of the hydrographic system of Lorraine (N-E France) were investigated. While indigenous trout maintained their Cl content even in the acidic streams, transferred trout exhibited an important decrease of Cl content after 48 h of exposure under acidic conditions.

Some blood parameters have also proved to be quite sensitive toward many toxicants in laboratory experiments (Lauren & McDonald, 1985; Patrick & Wood, 1999; Poleo et al., 1995). For example, Adedeji et al. (2009) assessed the effect of diazinon on cultured and wild African catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*). Examination of erythrocytes and leukocytes profile was performed after 96 h of exposure to Diazinon. The experimental group of the African catfish showed significantly lower values of erythrocytes count (RBC), hemoglobin content (Hb) and hematocrit (PCV) compared to the control group. On the contrary, there was a significant decrease in leukocyte count ( $p < 0.05$ ), as well as in both the relative and absolute lymphocyte count. Changes in values of both the erythrocytes and leukocytes profile after exposure to diazinon-based preparation may be referred to disruption of hematopoiesis as well as to a decrease on non-specific immunity of the fish. As another example of exposure Parma et al. (2007) exposed freshwater fish *Prochilodus lineatus* to sublethal concentrations of cypermethrin for 2, 5 and 8 days. It was observed that with the increase of exposure time total erythrocyte (RBC), hemoglobin (Hb), hematocrit (Ht) and mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration (MCHC) values decreased. These reports indicate that hematological parameters, may be useful as a diagnostic test for cypermethrin exposure in aquatic organisms.

The heavy metals are the commonly used toxicant in the exposure experiments. For example Serezli et al. (2011) evaluated whether short-term exposures (3 h) to high concentrations of heavy metals may induce blood cells in Coruh trout (*Salmo coruhensis*). It was investigated that copper and lead have effects on hematocrit, serum glutamic oxaloacetic transaminase (SGOT), serum glutamic and pyruvic transaminase (SGPT), total protein, blood cell numbers and erythrocyte morphology of *S. coruhensis* exposed to two copper and lead concentrations for 3 h. In the same way Vinodhini & Narayanan (2009) investigated the effect of heavy metal pollutants such as cadmium, chromium, nickel and lead in aquatic system on common carp (*Cyprinus carpio* L.) by using a set of biochemical parameters. Concentrations of red blood cells, blood glucose and total cholesterol were significantly elevated. The study suggested that the presence of toxic heavy metals in aquatic environment has strong influence on the hematological parameters in the fresh water fish common carp (*Cyprinus carpio* L.). Also, Adeyemo (2007) investigated the changes in *Clarias gariepinus*' blood cells after 96-h of exposure to lead. The packed cell volume (PCV) of the treatments decreased significantly relative to that of the control, while their platelet counts increased compared to the control. There was also a reduction in the RBC of treatments. Mean corpuscular volume (MCV), mean corpuscular haemoglobin (MCH) and mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration (MCHC) increased considerably in all treatments compared to the control. These alterations have been attributed to direct or feedback responses of structural damage to RBC membranes resulting in haemolysis and impairment in hemoglobin synthesis, stress related release of RBCs from the spleen and hypoxia, which was induced by exposure to lead (Adeyemo, 2007).

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