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From Ocean to Medicine: How Seaweeds are Changing Healthcare

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Gicy Mathew[1] and Ashish Khandelwal[1]
[1]ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Kochi.

Introduction

Some of the most promising therapeutic compounds are found not on land, but beneath the waves. Covering more than 70% of the planet, oceans are home to extraordinary forms of life, including coral reefs, seaweeds, micro and macro algae, which have supported the marine ecosystem and coastal communities for centuries as food and traditional remedies.

Today, seaweeds are gaining widespread recognition as a natural reservoir of bioactive compounds with immense potential in modern health care. These compounds are rich in polysaccharides, polyphenols, and pigments, which exhibit a wide range of uses and biological activities, including anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial, antiviral, and neuroprotective properties. Researchers around the world have exploited the use of these compounds for developing safer and more effective therapies that can benefit the treatment of chronic diseases and improve overall health.

Besides their health benefits, seaweeds play a meaningful role in nutrition; they even help with environmental sustainability, and they support the emerging blue economy, which makes them, in practice, one of the most multifaceted marine resources. In a way, seaweeds are already changing how we think about healthcare and sustainable medicine, from functional foods and nutraceuticals all the way to advanced medication delivery systems and tissue engineering.

This article focuses on the surprising evolution of seaweeds from the ocean's depths into the leading edge of biomedical innovation, and it highlights how these marine organisms are pushing forward the future of global healthcare.

Meet the Ocean's Green Gold: What are Seaweeds?

Seaweeds often get mixed up with seagrasses, yet they are different in a basic sense. Seagrasses are real flowering plants; they have roots, stems, leaves, and even make flowers and seeds. Seaweeds, however, reproduce by spores, and they have a simpler body structure, including a thallus. While seagrasses form underwater meadows that provide habitats for marine organisms, seaweeds create dense forests and beds that serve as ecological hotspots, supporting countless species of fish, invertebrates, and microorganisms.

So, depending on their pigments as well as biochemical makeup, seaweeds are generally grouped into three major categories:

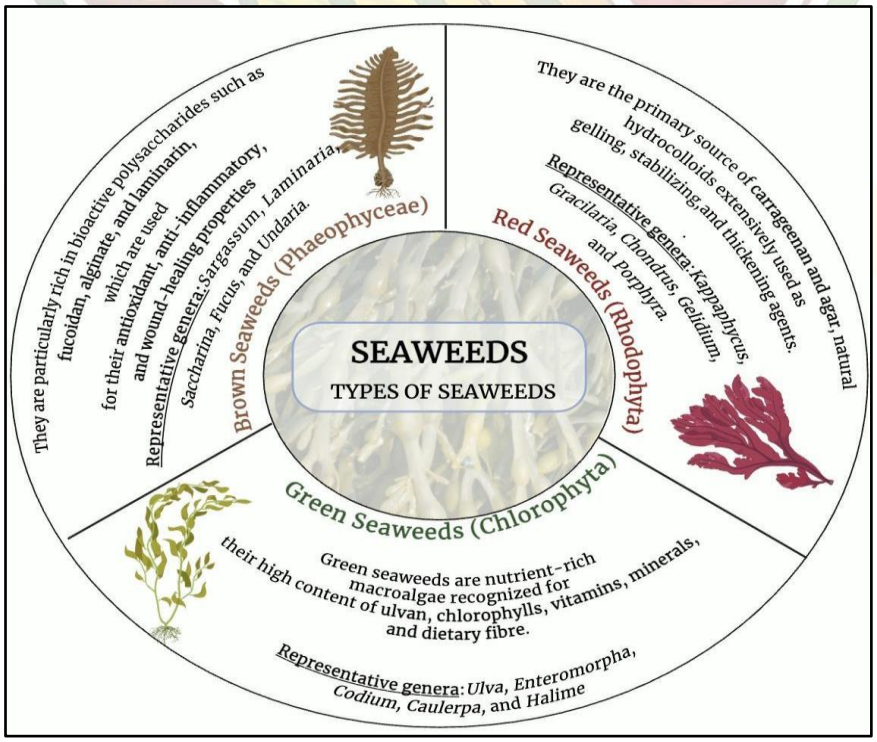


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of types of seaweeds

Brown seaweeds (Phaeophyceae) - generally known for a higher content of fucoidan, alginate, and laminarin. Brown types such as *Sargassum, Laminaria,* and *Undaria* are among the most thoroughly investigated for pharmaceutical and biomedical uses.

Red seaweeds (Rhodophyta) - Examples such as *Kappaphycus, Gracilaria*, and *Chondrus* are valued because they can make carrageenan and agar; these materials are commonly used across food, medicine, and biotechnology areas.

Green seaweeds (Chlorophyta) - species in the genus *Ulva*, also called sea lettuce, tend to be rich in ulvan plus vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. That combination makes them useful for nutraceutical and biomedical work.

Nature's Pharmacy: The Bioactive Wealth of Seaweeds

The rising curiosity about seaweeds goes way beyond just ecological and nutritional values; rather, their real scientific value is in how well they can synthesise a whole range of bioactive molecules. Since seaweeds are fixed marine organisms, they live in settings where salinity keeps shifting, temperature fluctuates, ultraviolet radiation is intense, nutrients can become scarce, and they are constantly surrounded by microbial communities. In order to cope and survive these hard circumstances, they generate secondary metabolites and also some structurally unique biomolecules, which act as natural armour against environmental pressure, pathogens, and herbivores. These adaptive compounds have attracted significant scientific interest due to their diverse biological activities and potential applications in human healthcare.

Marine macroalgae potentially serve as a vast source of biologically active compounds, which typically include polysaccharides, polyphenols, pigments, proteins, peptides, lipids, vitamins, minerals, and essential fatty acids. Together, these substances showcase a wide range of pharmacological benefits, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antiviral, anticancer, antidiabetic, and neuroprotective properties. As a result, seaweed has become a significant source of natural products for creating pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, cosmeceuticals, and advanced biomaterials.

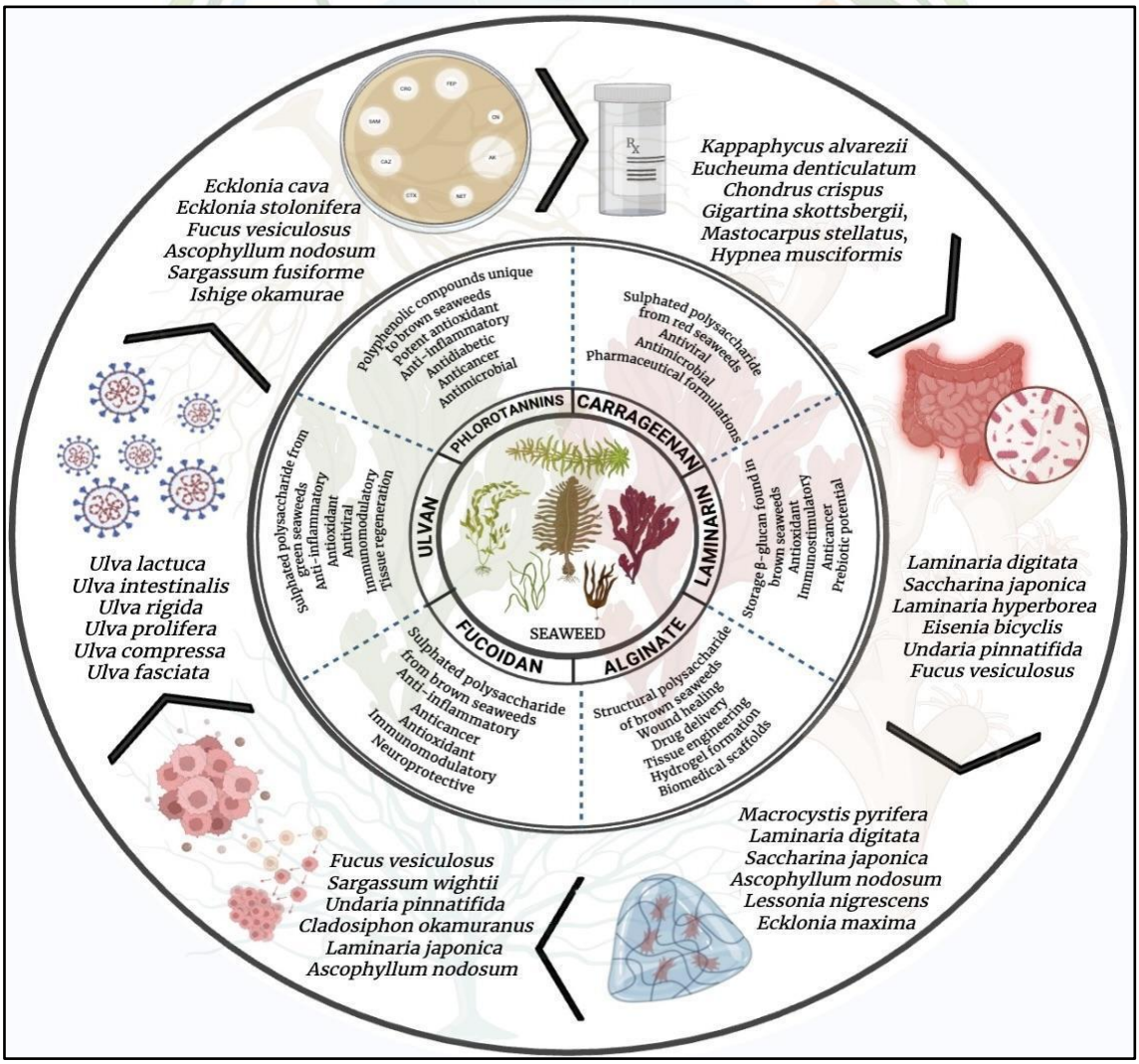


Figure 2: Major bioactive compounds derived from seaweeds, their representative marine sources, and principal biomedical applications.

Among the diverse classes of marine metabolites, sulphated polysaccharides have received the most scientific attention, mostly because their structural complexity is remarkable and they show varied multifunctional biological properties. Brown seaweeds are generally rich in fucoidan, alginate, and laminarin, while carrageenan comes mainly from red seaweeds and ulvan is typical of green seaweeds. Then, there are also brown seaweeds, which are a notable source of phlorotannins, a distinctive family of marine polyphenols that are well known for strong antioxidant activity and a broad therapeutic promise. Each of these compounds possesses distinct physicochemical characteristics that contribute to their specific biological functions and biomedical applications.

The rather impressive range of bioactive compounds that come from marine sources has put seaweeds on the map as a very promising natural resource for today's biomedical research. Their specific chemical structures and their multifunctional properties have driven a lot of studies that look into their role in wound healing, targeted drug delivery, regenerative medicine, immune modulation, cancer care and even the management of several ongoing or degenerative illnesses. And as marine biotechnology continues to advance, it's expected that these naturally produced compounds will play an even bigger role in developing safer, more sustainable approaches and, more generally, innovative treatments.

Conclusion

Seaweeds have moved on from being treated as plain marine resources to becoming really valuable reservoirs of bioactive compounds, with huge promise for helping human health. They harbour a varied collection of polysaccharides, polyphenols, pigments, proteins and other biologically active molecules, which has opened up new breakthroughs in pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, regenerative medicine, drug delivery, and functional foods. Meanwhile, their contribution to environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and the whole blue economy also makes them matter well beyond healthcare.

Still, there are obstacles like large-scale cultivation, standardization, and the need for more clinical validation, but marine biotechnology keeps pushing forward and widening the options for seaweed-based products. As studies start bridging the gap between what works in the lab and what can actually be used in clinics, these ocean macroalgae are ready to contribute a lot to safer, more sustainable, and nature-inspired therapeutic solutions.

"The ocean's oldest resources may hold the key to tomorrow's medicines."

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