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Commentary

# Gene Editing in Marine Species: Ethical, Environmental and Economic Considerations

**Karen Fischer***

*Department of Medicine, Southern Leyte University, Southern Leyte, Philippines*

## DESCRIPTION

Gene editing technology, particularly CRISPR-Cas9 (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats and the CRISPR-associated protein 9), providing unprecedented capabilities to modify the genetic material of organisms. In marine biology, gene editing holds significant promise for enhancing aquaculture, conserving endangered species, and studying fundamental biological processes. However, these advancements come with a host of ethical, environmental and economic considerations that must be meticulously addressed to balance innovation with responsibility. The ethical implications of gene editing in marine species revolve around the potential consequences for biodiversity, ecosystem balance, and animal welfare. One primary concern is the unintended genetic changes that may occur during the editing process. Such off-target effects could potentially disrupt key biological functions or lead to unpredicted ecological impacts if edited organisms are released into the wild. This risk necessitates stringent controls and extensive research to ensure precision and safety in gene editing practices.

Moreover, ethical debates often arise over the manipulation of natural organisms for human benefit. Editing the genes of marine species to enhance traits like growth rates, disease resistance, or environmental tolerance raises questions about the moral rights of these organisms and the integrity of natural evolutionary processes. Critics argue that such interventions could lead to a form of genetic homogenization reducing the genetic diversity that is important for the adaptability of species. The environmental implications of releasing genetically edited marine organisms into the ecosystem are significant. One major concern is the potential for edited genes to spread uncontrollably through natural populations. If a genetically enhanced trait confers a significant survival advantage, it could outcompete natural variations, leading to a monoculture effect that diminishes genetic diversity. This could have sequential effects on food webs, predator-prey dynamics, and overall ecosystem health.

Furthermore, the introduction of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) could impact non-target species and habitats. For instance, if a gene-edited fish designed for rapid growth escapes from an aquaculture facility, it might disrupt local ecosystems by preying on native species or outcompeting them for resources. The long-term ecological consequences of such disruptions are difficult to predict and could potentially be irreversible. From an economic perspective, gene editing in marine species presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, enhanced aquaculture species could lead to significant economic benefits. Faster-growing fish and shellfish that are resistant to diseases and environmental stresses can increase productivity, reduce costs, and meet the growing demand for seafood. This could also lessen the fishing pressure on wild populations, contributing to more sustainable fishing practices.

However, the economic advantages come with potential risks. The high costs associated with developing, regulating and maintaining genetically edited species may limit accessibility to large, well-funded enterprises, potentially marginalizing small-scale fishers and aquaculturists. This could exacerbate existing inequalities in the fishing and aquaculture industries. Additionally, public acceptance of GMOs remains a significant challenge. Consumer resistance to genetically modified seafood could impact market demand, affecting the profitability of these innovations. Comprehensive regulations must ensure the safety, efficacy and traceability of gene-edited marine organisms. These regulations should also labeling and transparency to maintain consumer trust and allow informed choices. International cooperation is essential, given that marine organisms do not adhere to national boundaries and the impacts of genetic modifications can be global. Environmental assessments and inclusive economic policies are essential to ensure that gene editing in marine species advances in a responsible and sustainable manner.

**Correspondence to:** Karen Fischer, Department of Medicine, Southern Leyte University, Southern Leyte, Philippines, E-mail: Karenfis@outlook.com

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