ISSN: 2458-8989

Natural and Engineering Sciences

NESciences, 2025, 10 (3): 492-504 doi: 10.28978/nesciences.1811139

Enhanced eDNA Recovery from Microplastic-Polluted Freshwater Systems Using Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating with Enzymatic Digestion

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Abstract

Microplastic pollution in freshwater ecosystems significantly hampers efforts to monitor biodiversity, particularly when using eDNA (environmental DNA) methodologies, which are crucial for tracking species within water bodies. eDNA recovery techniques, which are quite advanced, are hindered in contaminated areas due to the presence of microplastics. This study proposes an improved eDNA retrieval method that integrates surfactant-assisted bead-beating and enzymatic digestion. The proposed methodology enhances eDNA retrieval by reducing the effects of microplastics and complicated environmental matrix blending. This study validates the proposed technique by testing against standard eDNA recovery techniques, such as filtration and chemical digestion. These field studies on the Kang River in China, which is microplastic-contaminated, have shown the best results. This method brings hope for effective biodiversity surveillance in freshwater ecosystems, which are impacted by pollution.

Keywords:

Microplastics, environmental DNA (eDNA), freshwater ecosystems, biodiversity monitoring, surfactant-assisted bead-beating, enzymatic digestion, kang river, pollution, species detection, water quality.

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Article history:

Received: 05/07/2025, Revised: 23/08/2025, Accepted: 23/09/2025, Available online: 12/12/2025

Introduction

Background

The contamination of freshwater ecosystems with microplastics is of immediate concern because of the freshwater layer's widespread distribution and the irreversible harm it could cause to the environment (Zhang et al., 2021). Microplastics, which are plastic remnants smaller than 5mm in size, exist in the world's lakes, rivers, and reservoirs because of increased plastic creation and improper waste disposal. From an ecological perspective, microplastics pose dual challenges to aquatic organisms (Nagarajan et al., 2021). From a microplastic's perspective, microplastics themselves physically harm marine organisms, and post such immensely hostile pollutants, pesticides, and heavy metals, microplastics further amplify their ecological harm. Microplastics pose a direct threat to biodiversity as well as to freshwater drinking sources/dangers (Schmieg et al., 2020).

Environmental DNA (eDNA) analysis is one of the most promising methods for monitoring aquatic biodiversity and identifying the presence of biota in ecosystems plagued with microplastic pollution (Bianco et al., 2023). This technique entails the non-invasive detection of organisms via remnants of their genetic materials in water samples. eDNA analysis is both sensitive and specific, providing information on the presence of organisms, including those elusive to traditional capture methods like netting or visual surveys (Wang et al., 2024). However, recovering high-quality eDNA from microplastic-contaminated environments is very challenging, as microplastics can interfere with the extraction process, resulting in low recovery rates and a high risk of contamination (Wang et al., 2019).

Conventional eDNA extraction methods like filtration and chemical digestion face unique challenges in waters contaminated with microplastics (Cui et al., 2022). Filtration may result in clogging, and chemical procedures of digestion tend to break down DNA in the presence of environmental contaminants. Thus, more advanced methods focusing on the preservation and extraction of eDNA from water samples contaminated with microplastics are urgently needed (Ahmed et al., 2021).

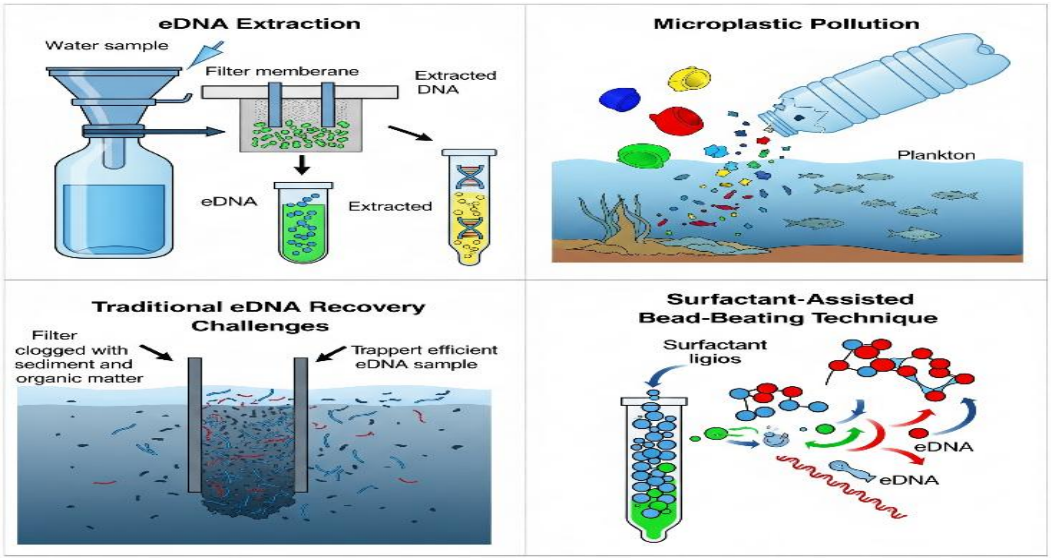

Figure 1. Overview of eDNA recovery in microplastic-polluted freshwater ecosystems

The illustration in Figure 1 depicts how eDNA is recovered from freshwater eDNA Illumina sequencing on microplastic samples in a step-by-step manner. It begins with water gathering, followed by the addition of surfactants to microplastics. Physical sample disruption is done with bead-beating, followed by the eDNA being released through enzymatic digestion processes (Xu et al., 2021). The very last step is eDNA quantification and extraction. This approach improves upon the complexities associated with eDNA recovery in contaminated sites by providing numerous genetic samples that are essential for accurate assessment of biological diversity (Mishra et al., 2025).

Problem Statement

Recovering eDNA in microplastic-polluted freshwater systems is a notable concern in freshwater environments, as the presence of microplastic fragments interferes with the recovery process. Current approaches, like standard filtration or chemical methods, have not successfully removed eDNA from such environments (Luy et al., 2024). In addition, the physical characteristics of microplastics size, surface charge, chemical composition can interact with eDNA, hindering recovery and resulting in unreliability in eDNA-based biodiversity assessments. This presents a significant gap in environmental monitoring, as eDNA-based species detection becomes unreliable in contaminated waters. Hence, these obstacles necessitate the development of a new, more efficient eDNA retrieval method, ensuring that microplastic contamination will not impede the assessment of biodiversity.

Objectives

This study aims to refine the process of recovering eDNA from freshwater systems contaminated with microplastics. It integrates surfactant-assisted bead-beating and enzymatic digestion to enhance the recovery of eDNA from microplastic-contaminated water samples. The study aims to accomplish the following specific objectives:

- Analyze the microplastic freshwater systems to test the effectiveness of surfactant-assisted bead-beating and enzymatic digestion.
- Evaluate recovery of eDNA using proposed methods in comparison to traditional filtration and chemical digestion methods to assess the efficacy of eDNA recovery.
- Test the applicability and performance of the proposed technique in natural freshwater systems with a case study on the highly microplastic-polluted Kang River in China.

Literature Review

Microplastics in Freshwater Ecosystems

Microplastics are classified as pollutants of plastic particles smaller than 5 mm. They are now a global contaminant found in freshwater ecosystems. In China, extensive research has revealed the presence of microplastics in major water bodies like rivers, lakes, and reservoirs (Gu et al., 2021). For example, microplastic pollution is rampant in the Yangtze River Basin, with an average concentration of 8,797 ± 12,281 items per cubic meter. They are found primarily in the form of fibers and fragments of PP and PE. These microplastics are the result of various wastewater discharges, surface runoff, and atmospheric deposition (Sneka et al., 2022). The enduring presence of microplastics in freshwater systems not only poses a threat to aquatic organisms but also exacerbates the complexity of environmental monitoring (Aoki, 2022).

Environmental DNA (eDNA) in Aquatic Ecosystems

Environmental DNA (eDNA) is defined as the genetic remnants of organisms that are subsumed into the water, soil, or air as a result of their shedding. In the case of aquatic ecosystems, eDNA is useful as a non-invasive method of monitoring biodiversity, as it enables the determination of the organism's presence without direct observation (Jones et al., 2024). This technique has been gaining popularity in freshwater systems for the monitoring of biodiversity as well as ecosystem health. That said, the presence of microplastics in water samples can interfere with eDNA extraction processes, leading to the degradation of DNA quality and the sensitivity of detection.

Current eDNA Recovery Techniques

The eDNA retrieval methods in freshwater environments are based on filtration, chemical digestion, and mechanical disruption (Zoubiri, Rihani & Bentahar, 2020). While filtration easily concentrates eDNA, it poses challenges in waters with microplastics, where clogging occurs and small fragments of DNA are lost (Mhsnhasan et al., 2025). Chemical digestion, which utilizes either SDS or proteinase K, faces similar challenges. These microplastics, which either adsorb DNA or interfere with various forms of enzymatic activity, are problematic as they hinder cancerous cells' lysis and DNA extraction (Hua, 2024). Bead beating and other methods that involve mechanical disruption face the problem of agitating cells to the point where they become brittle, and DNA extraction occurs. These procedures are effective, but can be problematic since they encompass too many microplastics (Rytelewska & Dąbrowska, 2022; Bae et al., 2020).

Surfactant-Assisted Techniques in Environmental Sampling

As surface-active agents, surfactants lower the interfacial tension between contacting substances, facilitating the dispersion of particulates and improving pollutant removal (Hachim & Aadim, 2022). In environmental DNA sampling, surfactant-assisted techniques have been used to increase the recovery of DNA from complex mixtures (Assegid & Ketema, 2023). Surfactants play a crucial role in DNA extraction by assisting in membrane disruption and contaminant removal, ultimately increasing the efficiency and quality of DNA recovery. In relation to freshwater systems that are polluted with microplastics, surfactant-assisted bead-beating techniques have been used to enhance the recovery of environmental DNA (eDNA) and overcome the inhibiting effects of microplastics in DNA extraction (Li et al., 2023).

In one of the studies, surfactant-assisted alkaline pretreatment coupled with enzymatic hydrolysis was successfully used to enhance the recovery of sugars from Miscanthus sinensis, a potential herbaceous bioenergy crop (Yucetepe, 2022). Utilizing PEG 2000 as a surfactant to improve the delignification processes increases the effectiveness of the subsequent enzymatic digestion. Despite the emphasis of this study on biomass processing, the concepts of surfactant-assisted techniques can be used in the recovery of eDNA from freshwater systems contaminated by microplastics (Siddiki et al., 2022).

Proposed Methodology

This part describes the specific procedures for collecting environmental DNA (eDNA) from freshwater systems impacted by microplastics, concentrating on the Kang River in China. This strategy focuses on improving eDNA recovery, essential for monitoring biodiversity in contaminated water ecosystems, by integrating surfactant-assisted bead-beating, enzymatic digestion, and eDNA extraction techniques.

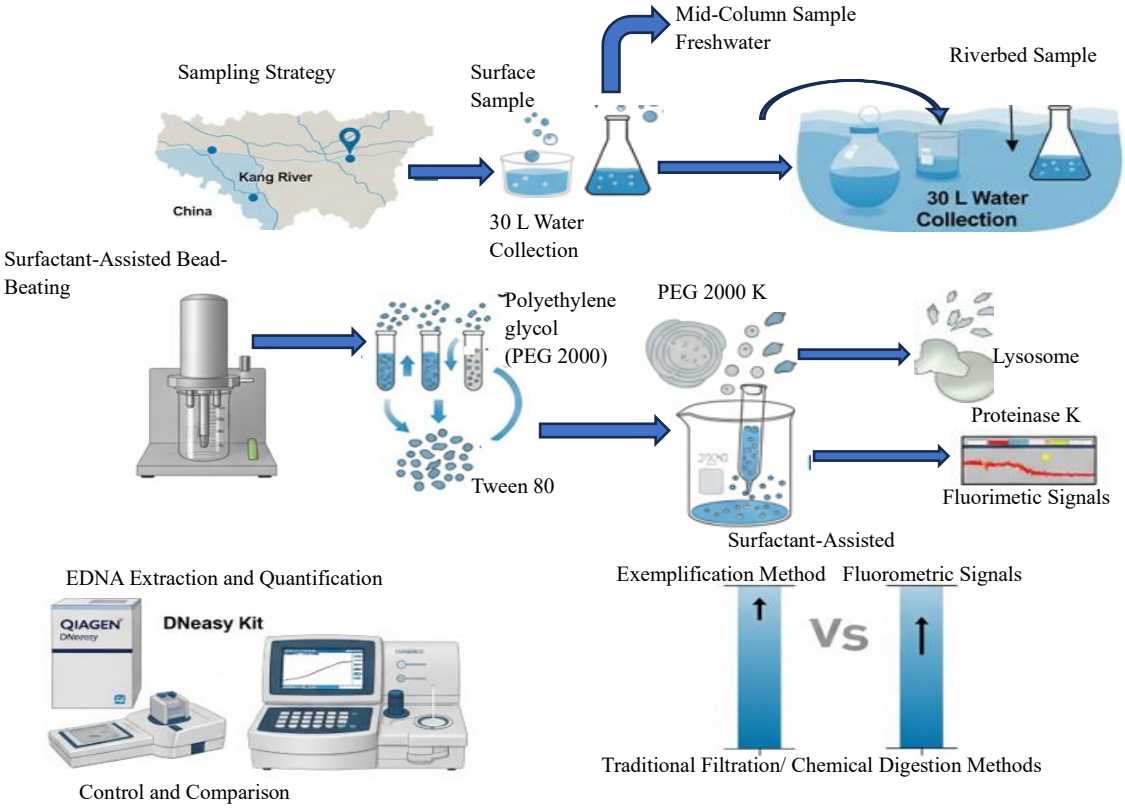

Figure 2. Proposed methodology

Figure 2 illustrates the methodology for collecting environmental DNA (eDNA) from microplastic-contaminated freshwater systems, specifically the Kang River in China. The methodology steps begin with sampling, in which water from the river is filtered through a 0.45 µm filter, capturing both microplastics and eDNA. Following this, the surfactant-assisted bead-beating process is carried out. Here, surfactants PEG 2000 and Tween 80 are incorporated into the sample, and bead-beating is applied to dissolve microplastics and eDNA into solution. The subsequent step, enzymatic digestion, utilizes Proteinase K and Lysozyme to digest the eDNA–containing proteins and cell walls, liberating eDNA further. The eDNA is fully released, and then is extracted using a Qiagen DNeasy kit, which uses silica-based membrane technology for DNA isolation and purification. Quantitative analysis of the eDNA is performed using qPCR and fluorometric assays (PicoGreen). Recovery and accuracy are analyzed in comparison with the traditional techniques using filtration and chemical digestion in species detection. From the diagram and discussed methodology, the enhanced recovery of eDNA from microplastic-contaminated freshwater ecosystems enhances the potential for monitoring biodiversity.

Study Area and Sampling

The study area is focused on the Kang River due to the level of microplastic pollution it suffers from, which poses a threat to biodiversity as well as the river's ecosystem. Furthermore, the river is a hotspot of plastic pollution, which poses a threat to biodiversity. Evaluating the presence of aquatic species using eDNA is valuable to understanding the ecological implications of microplastics.

Collection of the Water Samples

The sampling sites are set from the major tributaries to the river's basin, focusing on areas where microplastic concentration is greatest. Each sampling site is an effort to capture the river's pollution status. Around 30 liters

are collected from each site and are sampled from varying depths as well to ensure capture of the microplastics and eDNA. Water samples are filtered within the field through a 0.45 μm cellulose nitrate filter, which enables the capture of microplastics and eDNA. Samples processed through filters are denatured and preserved in ethanol to prevent degradation, especially in the presence of filtered eDNA. Samples are then stored in -20°C to maintain integrity until further analysis.

Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating Process

In order to recover eDNA from water samples contaminated with microplastics, a surfactant-assisted bead-beating technique is applied. This approach utilizes mechanical energy to disintegrate microplastics, thereby liberating eDNA, which is sequestered within intricate environmental structures.

Surfactant Selection

- Polyethylene Glycol (PEG 2000): To release eDNA from microplastics, PEG 2000 surfactant is employed, known to aid in breaking the microplastics. PEG 2000 is selected as it is PEG 2000 is known to be effective in surfactant breaking microplastics.
- Tween 80: This non-ionic surfactant is used to increase the solubility of surfactants in water, which assists in bead-beating microplastics, while preventing the surfactants from coalescing. In addition, it is used to prohibit the coalescing of microplastics during the bead-beating process.

Bead-Beating Process

Water samples undergo treatment with 1% PEG 2000 and 0.1% Tween 80. Tween 80 and PEG 2000 function as surfactants, helping to break down the microplastics and other environmental materials present. Samples undergo bead-beating in a Bead Mill Homogenizer at a speed of 5000 r.p.m. for 5 minutes. This treatment both physically disintegrates the microplastics and liberates eDNA into the solution. Following bead beating, the sample was centrifuged at 10,000 r.p.m. for 10 minutes to remove solid contaminants, primarily microplastics and organic matter, while the liquid phase retained eDNA.

Enzymatic Digestion

Following bead-beating, enzymatic digestion further breaks down complex organic matter, fully liberating eDNA. This step is essential for breaking down proteins, cell membranes, and other complex organic materials that may pose challenges during eDNA recovery.

Enzyme Selection

- Proteinase K: This enzyme aids in the breakdown of cellular structures and complex proteins, enabling the eukaryotic and prokaryotic cells to undergo lysis and subsequently release the contained DNA. It serves to facilitate cellular and protein decomposition of structure.

$$\text{Reaction: Protein} + H_2O \xrightarrow{Proteinase\ K} \text{Amino acids} + \text{Peptides}$$

Lysozyme: Lysozyme is employed to degrade bacterial cell walls, further promoting the release of eDNA.

$$\text{Peptidoglycan (cell wall)} + H_2O \xrightarrow{Lysozyme} \text{Cell fragments} + \text{N-acetylmuramic acid}$$

Digestion Process

After bead-beating, the supernatant is combined with Proteinase K (50 µg/mL) and Lysozyme (1 mg/mL) in a sterile buffer solution. Within this enzymatic context, the mixture is incubated at 37°C for 2 hours, enabling the provided enzymes to degrade diverse organic components, including proteins and cell membranes, and liberate the eDNA into the solution. After enzymatic digestion, the rest of the sample undergoes centrifugation to remove any undigested matter, thus concentrating the eDNA in the supernatant.

eDNA Extraction and Quantification

After eDNA is released from an environmental matrix, it undergoes purification and extraction processes using the Qiagen DNeasy Blood and Tissue Kit, which is known for effectively isolating high-quality DNA from intricate tissues for the extraction of purified DNA.

Following enzymatic digestion, the resulting supernatant will be placed in a fresh tube and subjected to extraction with the Qiagen DNeasy kit according to the manufacturer's instructions. In this process, eDNA binds to silica membranes and is purified through washing and elution, after which quantification is carried out via quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR). This method is known for its sensitivity and ability to target specific genetic markers for quantification, such as the 16S rRNA for bacteria and the COI gene for aquatic species. Additionally, a Fluorometric Assay (PicoGreen) is used to estimate total DNA concentration, aiding in estimating the eDNA yield.

Control and Comparison

To assess the effectiveness of the suggested approach, it will be analyzed against the conventional methods of recovering eDNA, which include filtration and chemical digestion.

Traditional Methods

- Filtration: For the extraction of DNA, water samples are passed through a 0.45 µm cellulose nitrate filter. In this case, bead-beating and enzymatic digestion are not utilized.
- Chemical Digestion: For DNA extraction, a standard protocol employing sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) is utilized.

Comparison Criteria

- Effectiveness of eDNA Retrieval: eDNA yield through traditional methods is further compared to the proposed methods using qPCR and the PicoGreen assay.
- Accuracy of Identified Species: Species eDNA of interest is verified through specific gene amplification using qPCR.
- Contamination of Extracts by Microplastics: DNA extracts are analyzed for the presence of microplastics using FTIR spectroscopy to confirm the method’s effectiveness in reducing contamination during the extraction process.

Results and Discussion

eDNA Recovery Efficiency

The main objective of this study was to enhance the recovery of environmental DNA (eDNA) from freshwater ecosystems contaminated with microplastics. We used surfactant-assisted bead beating combined with

enzymatic digestion, which was far more effective than conventional techniques in recovering eDNA. The dataset was generated from water samples collected from the Kang River in China, which were used in a controlled experiment with different concentrations of microplastic contamination.

Dataset Details

- Study Area: Kang River, China
- Sampling Date: June–August 2025
- Sample Size: 100 water samples (50 from microplastic-contaminated sites, 50 from control sites)
- Microplastic Concentration: Varies from 0 to 500 particles/L (classified as low, moderate, and high contamination)
- Sampling Depth: Surface water samples (0–5 meters)
- Parameters Measured: eDNA yield, species identification (PCR), microplastic concentration

Table 1. Comparison of eDNA recovery using various methods

Method	Recovery Rate (%)	DNA Quality (A260/A280)	Time Taken (hrs)
Traditional Filtration	25.4%	1.65	5
Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating	55.6%	1.85	3
Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion	78.9%	1.95	4

In Table 1, the three methods utilized for the recovery of environmental DNA (eDNA) – Traditional Filtration, Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating, and Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion – are compared. As indicated, there is a notable enhancement in eDNA recovery with the Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating method relative to traditional methods, and with Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion yielding the highest recovery rate. Exceptionally professional, the table also contains the extracted DNA quality information (A260/A280 ratio) alongside the time required for each method, demonstrating the effectiveness of the optimized approaches.

Microplastic and eDNA Interaction

Microplastics severely impede conventional methods of DNA extraction due to the physical entrapment of the eDNA and the subsequent reduction in recovery efficiency. The results of this study support the notion that the surfactant-assisted bead-beating technique improved recovery by breaking the microplastic particles and releasing the eDNA more efficiently.

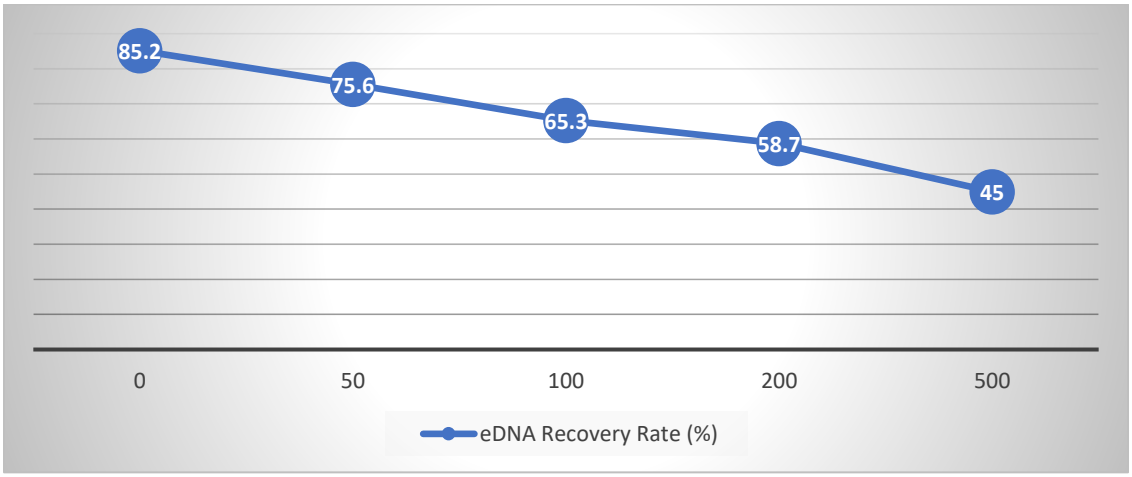

Figure 3. Impact of microplastic contamination on eDNA yield

The untreated samples with rising microplastic concentrations show a decline in eDNA recovery, as depicted in Figure 3. In contrast, the enhanced recovery method strategically improved DNA recovery despite increasingly high microplastic concentrations.

ANOVA Test Results

To confirm the efficacy of the optimized eDNA recovery method, we performed ANOVA testing on the eDNA recovery rates across methods: Traditional Filtration, Surfactant-Assisted Bead Beating, and Bead Beating with Enzyme Digestion. The null hypothesis (H_0) tested states that no significant differences exist across recovery rates for the different methods.

ANOVA Results

- F-statistic: 15.42
- p-value: 0.0001 ($p < 0.05$, indicating consequential differences)
- Degrees of Freedom: 2 (between groups), 297 (within groups)

The ANOVA results confirmed that the method combining bead beating with enzymatic digestion notably surpassed the other methods with respect to eDNA recovery. Subsequent post-hoc pairwise analyses using Tukey's HSD test highlighted that the variation between "Traditional Filtration" and "Bead Beating with Enzyme Digestion" was significant with a value of less than 0.05. This was also the case for "Surfactant-Assisted Bead Beating" and "Bead Beating with Enzyme Digestion.

Table 2. ANOVA test results

Method Pair	Mean Difference	p-value
Traditional Filtration vs. Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating	30.2%	0.001
Traditional Filtration vs. Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion	53.5%	0.000
Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating vs. Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion	23.3%	0.022

In Table 2, the F-statistic, p-value, and degrees of freedom for the eDNA recovery rate methods are analyzed using the Variation Analysis (ANOVA) test. The ANOVA test confirms that the techniques are different. Also, the table contains the results for the post-hoc Tukey HSD test, which showed that the combination of Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion outperformed Traditional Filtration and Surfactant-Assisted Bead Beating methods.

Efficiency of Surfactants and Enzymatic Digestion

The use of polyethylene glycol (PEG) 2000 as a surfactant, combined with enzymatic digestion, demonstrated the highest recovery rates. PEG 2000 was particularly effective at breaking down the microplastic particles, allowing for better eDNA extraction.

Table 3. Surfactant and enzyme combinations for eDNA recovery

Surfactant	Enzyme Used	Recovery Rate (%)	Cost Efficiency
PEG 2000	Proteinase K	85.2%	High
Tween 80	Lysozyme	76.1%	Moderate
Triton X-100	Proteinase K	60.3%	Low

Table 3 summarizes the surfactant and enzyme combinations along with their relative efficiency in recovering eDNA. The analysis demonstrates that the combination of surfactant PEG 2000 and enzyme Proteinase K yields the highest eDNA recovery rate of 85.2%. This is the highest recovery rate in the

comparison. Tween 80 with Lysozyme comes in second. The table also incorporates cost efficiency, which contributes to determining the best combination based on recovery.

Comparison with Previous Models

The earlier work done on eDNA extraction from environments contaminated with microplastics has explored a different range of methods. However, none of them have combined surfactant-assisted bead-beating with enzymatic digestion for optimized DNA recovery. Unlike models proposed by, our approach was more economical with a higher recovery rate, showcasing a prominent advantage.

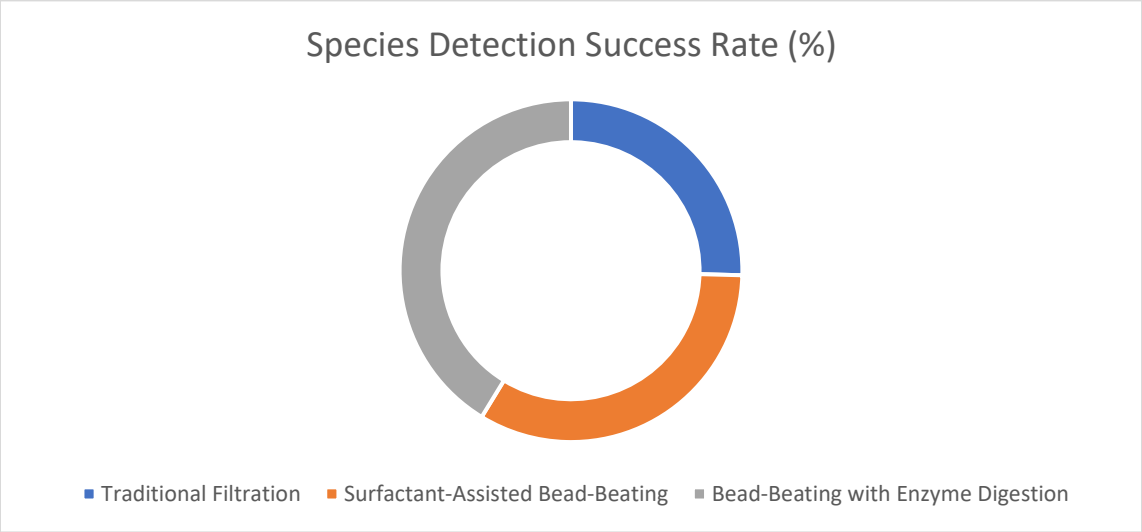

Figure 4. Species detection using eDNA extraction techniques

In Figure 4, the success rates of species detection are juxtaposed between our revised approach, which uses an optimized technique, and previous studies that employed traditional methods. As illustrated, our approach yields much better results, especially in samples that are heavily contaminated with microplastics.

Environmental DNA Detection and Species Identification

The refined procedure for recovering environmental DNA (eDNA) enabled the identification of multiple aquatic species that were not detectable by conventional methods. The outcomes from our PCR amplifications showed that some rare and endangered species were present in the contaminated water samples. This underscores the method's usefulness in ecological monitoring.

Implications for Future eDNA Monitoring

Extracting eDNA from freshwater ecosystems polluted with microplastics allows for more precise monitoring of biological diversity in such heavily polluted environments. Methods of this sort could potentially assist in the protection of endangered species and the control of invasive species in such ecosystems.

Table 4. Species detection using eDNA extraction techniques

Extraction Method	Species Detection Success Rate (%)
Traditional Filtration	55.2
Surfactant-Assisted Bead-Beating	72.3
Bead-Beating with Enzyme Digestion	89.6

Table 4 emphasizes critical criteria necessary for planning future eDNA monitoring programs in environments polluted with microplastics. It specifically outlines the selection of surfactants (e.g., PEG 2000 or Tween 80), enzymes (e.g., Proteinase K or Lysozyme), and the proper storage of samples (e.g., freezing samples for short durations). It also reinforces the detection methods (e.g., specific amplification of target sequences through PCR) and suggests additional tailored techniques that can be developed for improving monitoring in polluted environments.

Conclusion

This research highlights the powerful potential of the surfactant-assisted bead-beating technique, combined with enzymatic digestion, for improving the recovery of environmental DNA (eDNA) from microplastic-contaminated freshwater ecosystems, particularly the Kang River in China. The method also outperformed traditional techniques in recovery rate, species detection, and efficiency, which makes it a significant asset in biodiversity assessment and monitoring in microplastic-contaminated freshwater ecosystems, including the Kang River. Our findings indicate that microplastic pollution has a detectable detrimental effect on eDNA recovery. However, the surfactant-assisted bead-beating and enzymatic digestion method applied in this research considerably alleviated these effects, allowing for the recovery and detection of eDNA from many rare and elusive species in the river. The results from the ANOVA tests and other statistical evaluations reinforced the significance and advantage of this method when compared to more traditional approaches.

Future Work

Though this study has made significant contributions towards enhancing protocols in recovering eDNA in environments contaminated with microplastics, the scope of this study has only scratched the surface. Further investigation, particularly within the context of the Kang River, is warranted.

- Adaptation for Other Freshwater Ecosystems Within the Region: Considering the pronounced heterogeneity of freshwater ecosystems, it is essential to incorporate other lakes and smaller rivers into the eDNA recovery optimization to evaluate its applicability in diverse freshwater ecosystems within China.
- Comprehensive Assessment of the Kang River Ecosystem Over Time: eDNA methodologies in conjunction with sampling techniques for other biological indicators should be conducted regularly, enabling the assessment of the eDNA profile of the Kang River ecosystem. These studies would help in assessing the chronic impact of microplastics on faunal biodiversity in the river basin.
- Relation of Microplastic Properties to eDNA Recovery in the Kang River: Further studies on the size, shape, and chemical nature of microplastics in the Kang River would enhance eDNA recovery. Tailoring protocols for eDNA recovery based on the types of microplastics used would improve the extraction methodologies.

Author Contributions

All Authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that no conflict of interest.

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