Jellyfish: Drifters of the ocean and their influence on marine ecosystems

Laura Adams*

Department of Marine Ecology, University of Sydney, Australia

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Description

Jellyfish, the gelatinous and enigmatic creatures that inhabit the world's oceans, have long fascinated scientists and the public alike. Belonging to the phylum Cnidaria, jellyfish are found in every ocean and play a variety of roles in marine ecosystems. Often viewed as simple drifters, jellyfish are far more ecologically significant than their delicate appearance suggests. This article explores the biological characteristics, ecological impacts, and the growing concerns over jellyfish blooms, providing a comprehensive overview of their importance in marine environments. Jellyfish are characterized by their bell-shaped bodies and long tentacles, which contain specialized cells known as cnidocytes. These cells are used for capturing prey and deterring predators by delivering venomous stings. Most jellyfish are carnivorous, feeding on plankton, fish larvae, and other small marine organisms. They play a vital role in the marine food web, acting as both predator and prey. While many species of jellyfish are relatively small, some, like the lion's mane jellyfish, can grow to enormous sizes, with tentacles extending over 30 meters. Jellyfish are often considered opportunistic feeders, and their ability to thrive in diverse environments, including low-oxygen and warmer waters, contributes to their widespread presence in the oceans. Jellyfish blooms, or sudden population explosions, have become increasingly common in many parts of the world. These blooms can have significant ecological and economic impacts, particularly in coastal regions. Large jellyfish blooms can deplete plankton populations, which serve as the primary food source for many fish species, potentially disrupting local fisheries. Additionally, jellyfish can clog fishing nets, damage equipment, and even interfere with power plants by blocking cooling water intakes. The rise in jellyfish blooms is thought to be linked to a variety of factors, including overfishing, climate change, and nutrient pollution. Overfishing reduces the populations of natural jellyfish predators, such as sea turtles and certain species of fish, allowing jellyfish populations to grow unchecked. Climate change, particularly the warming of ocean waters, creates favourable conditions for jellyfish reproduction and survival. Furthermore, nutrient pollution from agricultural runoff and sewage contributes to the proliferation of jellyfish by stimulating algal blooms, which provide ample food for jellyfish larvae. Despite the challenges posed by jellyfish blooms, jellyfish play important roles in marine ecosystems. They serve as a food source for a variety of marine species, including fish, seabirds, and marine mammals. Additionally, dead jellyfish contribute to the nutrient cycling in ocean ecosystems, as their decomposing bodies release valuable nutrients back into the water, supporting the growth of phytoplankton and other marine organisms. Jellyfish are also of increasing interest to scientific research and biotechnology. Their unique bioluminescent properties, particularly the discovery of Green Fluorescent Protein (GFP) from jellyfish, have revolutionized biomedical research, providing new tools for studying cellular processes. Jellyfish collagen is also being explored for its potential use in medical applications, such as wound healing and tissue regeneration. As the frequency and scale of jellyfish blooms continue to increase, there is a growing need for sustainable management strategies to mitigate their impacts on marine ecosystems and coastal economies. Efforts to control jellyfish populations include reducing overfishing, improving water quality, and restoring populations of natural jellyfish predators.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest in publishing this article.

*Corresponding to

Laura Adams

Department of Marine Ecology,

University of Sydney, Australia

Email: laura_adams@gmail.com