Physical Abnormalities of Olive Flounder (*Paralichthys olivaceus*) Juvenile Found During Sorting Process in Anmyeon, South Korea

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**Abstract**

Olive flounder (*Paralichthys olivaceus*) is the most popular consumption fish in South Korea. Korean consumes flounder as sashimi, spicy soup, stew and cutlet. Due to its popularity; Korean considers Olive flounder as the nation’s raw fish. Despite advanced aquaculture technique, modern facilities and massive production, fingerling size grading and abnormal sorting are conducted by traditional method. This study was conducted by observation. A group of 5 to 6 person worked meticulously to sort out abnormal fingerling and juvenile. Sorting is based on physical traits such as the shape and structure of head, jaw, operculum, fin, body; body coloration, pigmentation and length. Due to the exclusiveness and technicality of this profession, information and standard in grading and sorting has been lacking. This research provides the information about sorting criteria of Olive flounder juvenile and detail description of physical abnormalities being sorted out.

**INTRODUCTION**

Olive flounder (*Paralichthys olivaceus*) is one of the most popular and the most important finfish aquaculture species in South Korea (NFRDI, 2006; NFRDI, 2016; NSO, 2020). Olive flounder, popularly known as *nubchi* (South Korea), *hirame* (Japan), bastard halibut or Japanese flounder, is best consumed as raw food (*hoe* in Korea or sashimi in Japan). Korean people believed that consuming flounder can build up strength, revive energy and increase appetite. People with diabetes and liver disease, someone who is recovering from illness are encouraged to consume this fish (NFRDI, 2016).

Olive flounder is part of left-eyed flounder group that lives along the coast of Korea, Japan, and China. Pelagic larvae swim upright but at the end of pelagic stage undergo metamorphosis; the right eye migrates to the opposite side. During metamorphosis, they gradually swim closer to the bottom and finally lay on their left side at the bottom. The ocular side, the side with both eyes, is covered by ctenoid scale while the blind side, the side without eyes, is covered by cycloid scale. Flounder spend their juvenile and adult stage as benthic fish (NFRDI, 2006). Flounder hatchery and grow-out farm spread adjacent to Korean coastline, from the southernmost part, Jeju Island (Jung *et al*., 2020; Park *et al*., 2012), the northwestern most part, Taean County (Yoo *et al*., 2020), to the easternmost part, Pohang (Park *et al*., 2012). Other than for commercial purpose, flounder hatchery
raised flounder larvae for stock enhancement (Seo et al., 2010; Yoo et al., 2020).

Korean government developed two flounder strains: aquaculture strain for commercial purpose and wild strain for stock enhancement purpose. Aquaculture strain is specifically bred for consumption while wild strain is specifically bred for release to water adjacent to Korean coastline (Kang et al., 2011).

In 2018, capture production of flounder in South Korea reached 4.762 tonnes while in Japan reached 6.600 tonnes. South Korea produced 37.250 tonnes of flounder by aquaculture, decreased by 9.6% from previous year, compared to 2.200 tonnes of aquaculture production by Japan. The total value of aquaculture production from both of this area is USD 513.4 million (FAO, 2020).

Olive flounder is produced at a relatively stable quantity. Olive flounder production quantity is twice bigger than Korean rockfish production quantity. In 2019, flounder aquaculture production improved up to 16.3% after it dropped 9.6% in 2018 (Table 1). The closest competitor, Korean rockfish, generated 20.348 tonnes while another flatfish, sole, only generated 3.669 tonnes. The market value of flounder aquaculture production is almost triple the market value of Korean rockfish and more than 10 times the market value of sole, another type of flatfish (NSO, 2020).

Table 1. Aquaculture finfish production in South Korea (NSO, 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finfish type</th>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Period 2017</th>
<th>Period 2018</th>
<th>Period 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitya</td>
<td>41.207</td>
<td>37.241</td>
<td>43.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive flounder</td>
<td>Valueb</td>
<td>584.138</td>
<td>495.391</td>
<td>430.685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean rockfish</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>22.344</td>
<td>22.702</td>
<td>20.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>171.191</td>
<td>192.508</td>
<td>155.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flathead mullet</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>6.828</td>
<td>6.382</td>
<td>6.644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>54.319</td>
<td>54.223</td>
<td>51.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red seabream</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>6.806</td>
<td>5.103</td>
<td>5.502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>77.090</td>
<td>68.102</td>
<td>60.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>2.564</td>
<td>3.373</td>
<td>3.669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>2.8554</td>
<td>34.651</td>
<td>37.600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Quantity (tonnes)  
b Value (million KRW)

One of the problems in hatchery-reared flounder is high incidence of abnormalities, sometimes can goes up to 19.1% in 50-d post hatch juvenile of Olive flounder (Sawada et al., 2001) and 54.9% in 130-d post hatch juvenile of Black Sea flounder (Aydin, 2012). One abnormal physical trait such as shortened upper jaw was discovered as low as 1.9% (Sawada et al., 2001) or as high as 55.0% (Aydin, 2012). Other than shortened upper jaws, there are other abnormal traits such as body malpigmentation, skeletal anomalies, incomplete eye migration and shortening of operculum (Sawada et al., 2001; Aydin, 2012; Kang et al., 2012).

Fish with abnormal physical traits must be sorted and removed from rearing tank. Currently, there is no technology or machine to identify and remove all those unwanted fish. In Korea, especially South Chungcheong Province, groups of highly experienced middle-aged women were employed intermittently to solve the sorting problem (H.O. Kwon, personal communication, May 3, 2018). They meticulously observe and identify abnormal fish with unwanted physical traits. Due to the scarcity of this profession and the experience involved in the sorting process, their skill is always in demand and they must work in tight schedules and travel to hatcheries that are in various counties. This condition resulted in sorting delays, especially in the spring, when demand for flounder juvenile is high. This
paper described the process and timing of sorting in Olive flounder juvenile and provides detailed description of abnormalities and unwanted physical traits. This research can be used for inexperienced sorters as the basis for identifying unwanted physical traits in Olive flounder juveniles.

METHODOLOGY

Place and Time
Fertilized eggs were collected from Genetics and Breeding Research Center and were transferred to Jungang Fisheries hatchery on January 16th, 2018. Hatchery was in Anmyeon, Taean County, South Chungcheong, South Korea.

Research Materials
The materials used in this experiment were Olive flounder egg, larva and juvenile, calcium hypochlorite Ca(OCl₂) (Niclon 70-G, Tosoh Corporation, Japan), rotifer (feed for larva), marine Chlorella, and granule feed (Otohime Hirame B2, Marubeni Nisshin Feed Co. Ltd., Japan).

The equipments used in this research were PVC tank with 6 m diameter, 10 m x 10 m rectangular tank, thermostat, UV sterilizer, 5.5 mm stainless steel mesh, 14.5 mm mesh grader, and circulation pump.

Data Analysis
Data for the experiment was based on qualitative data such as photographs of
flounder juvenile, interviews, observations, and notes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both eyes of normal Olive flounder were located on the left side. During pelagic stage, larvae swim upright and look like normal larvae. Right after the onset of metamorphosis, the right eye moves to the opposite side (sinistral side) and stays above the left eye. Gradually, larvae swim closer to the bottom and lay on their right side. In normal fish, the right side (blind side) of the body lacks pigmentation and surface texture is smooth while the ocular side is pigmented and rough (NFRDI, 2006). There are various noticeable abnormal physical traits, most of them are clearly visible to novice observer. Abnormal physical traits can be grouped into several categories: body shape, body pigmentation and skeletal deformities (Divanach et al., 1996).

Shape

Shape is the most important visual condition that affects market value of a fish even if the fish is marketed for consumption (Divanach et al., 1996). Farmed fish, especially in high density culture, may develop various abnormal shapes (Kang et al., 2012). The most common is dwarfism and stunted growth. In this study, we discover dwarf juvenile flounder with short and deep body. Normal fish is in oval shape and bilaterally symmetrical. Lateral line connects the tip of mouth at the anterior end and the tip of caudal fin at the posterior end. In case of dwarfism, the posterior part is normal while the tip of anterior part is directed upward, not forward. Head was shrunk to the point that there was a concave line from the dorsal part to head part instead of the normal convex line. Body shape is bilaterally asymmetrical and lateral line is located higher and closer to dorsal rather than at the center of body (Figure 1).

Pigmentation

In left eyed flounder such as Olive flounder, only the ocular side is pigmented while the blind side is achromatic. Unfortunately, malpigmentation, such as
hypomelanosis, is quite common in hatchery-reared flounder (Bolker et al., 2005). In case of hypomelanosis, pigment development is prevented, and narrow or broad areas of body lacks pigment (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Features of pigment abnormalities in flounder juvenile.

Malpigmentation is a general occurrence in hatchery-reared flounder and wild flounder. Different type of life feed supplied at different larval developmental stages can cause 24.6% to 100.0% albinism in Olive flounder larvae. The highest occurrence of normal coloration was achieved when zooplankton is supplied before the beginning of body compression stage. The onset of body compression is believed to be the most important stage in pigment formation. Continuous supply of life feed from body compression stage to early metamorphosis stage and quality or type of life feed are important factors in preventing color abnormality in ocular side (Seikai et al., 1987).

Nutrient such as vitamin A, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and phospholipids hold important role in color abnormality. Nutrient deficiency prevents rhodopsin formation and visual transmission from eye to central nervous system. As a result, melanophore–stimulating hormone (MSH) production is lacking and production of pigment is arrested (Kanazawa, 1993). However, excess supply of vitamin A resulted in skeletal deformation (Haga et al., 2011). Nutrition and rearing environment, rather than genetic, are the main cause behind malpigmentation (Seikai and Matsumoto, 1994).

Spinal Column Deformity

Spinal column deformation is another type of abnormal physical trait in juvenile flounder. Spinal vertebra bent at several locations and affects the shape of fish. Scoliosis (lateral bent) and lordosis (bent in sagittal plane) are the most common spinal deformity (Figure 3). Juvenile suffering from spinal deformation is swimming awkwardly in water surface. Its size was significantly smaller than conspecific. Incidence of spinal column deformity ranged from 4.15 to 68.8% in hatchery-reared flounder (Lü et al., 2015).

Figure 3. Features of spinal column deformities in flounder juvenile: Arrows indicate severe combination of scoliosis and lordosis in the same specimen.

Spinal column deformity is a common sight in hatchery-reared flounder but rarely found in wild caught flounder. In many cases, juvenile flounder has more than one deformed location in vertebrate. Disproportionate nutrition, genetics and adverse environmental factors such as temperature and pollution are the causative agents behind spinal column deformities (Divanach et al., 1996; Shikano et al., 2005; Haga et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2016).
Skeletal abnormalities affect fish growth and their market value and abnormal fish is discarded whenever found during sorting or transferring.

**Head Deformity**

Head deformity is the most common abnormalities in Olive flounder juvenile and the hardest to notice by novice examiner. There are three different types of head deformities in this study: shortened upper jaw, gap under ocular side operculum, underdeveloped ocular side operculum (Figure 4). Shortened upper jaw is only visible after fish reach a certain age while underdeveloped ocular side operculum is easily noticeable. In severe cases, underdeveloped distal part of operculum expose gill arch while in minor cases expose only small part of gill. Shortened upper jaw occurs at a rate of 1.9-3.9% (Sawada et al., 2001) while elongation of lower jaw occurs at a rate of 86.7% (Sawayama et al., 2012) in Olive flounder juvenile.

Figure 4. Features of head abnormalities in Olive flounder juvenile: A shortened upper jaw, B gap under ocular side operculum C. underdeveloped ocular side operculum.

Abnormalities in Olive flounder are believed to occur during rotifer feeding stage (Sawayama et al., 2012), artemia feeding stage (Dedi et al., 1998) and metamorphosis stage (Okada et al., 2005; Seikai et al., 1987). Several external factors such as chemical (Suzuki et al., 2000), life feed (Seikai et al., 1987; Sawayama et al., 2012), nutrition (Dedi et al., 1998), stocking density (Kang et al., 2012), hierarchies (Alvarez et al., 2006), and internal factors such as endocrine (Okada et al., 2005), genetic (Sawayama and Takagi, 2010; Sawayama et al., 2012) contributed to various abnormalities in Olive flounder.

After yolk exhaustion, hatched larvae start exogenous feeding. Failure to supply feed, live feed or starter feed, resulted in starvation and malnutrition. Starvation in flounder larvae were indicated by head shrinkage. In severe case, the size of head became noticeably smaller and concave formation was developed between head and dorsal part of body. In starved larvae, head shrinkage was found as early as 5 dph. Olive flounder larvae able to withstand starvation for only two days before suffering from head shrinkage even if feeding is commenced after two days (Dou et al., 2002).

Under normal rearing condition, pelagic larvae undergo metamorphosis spontaneously. Some larvae undergo metamorphosis at a much slower rate. Due to the difference in metamorphosis rate, earlier group completed metamorphosis at a much faster rate and attached to bottom earlier. This group occupies and dominates all available space at bottom of tank while slower group fails to find any space. Competition of space creates two separate hierarchical groups. Weaker group was attacked by dominant group and the group must swim continuously in water column. This condition leads elevation of stress hormone in weaker group. Body shape and body of dominant group and weaker group were visibly different. Weaker group has deformed head, narrow dorsal fin and pale color. However, when density is reduced and weaker group is transfer to empty tank, they returned to normal growth and normal color (Alvare et al., 2006).
Normal Olive flounder juvenile has longer upper jaw compared to the lower jaw. In abnormal fish, noticeable difference in length between lower and upper jaw is visible after 50 dph (Sawada et al., 2001; Sawayama et al., 2012). Abnormal fish has significantly smaller upper jaw index (UJI), significantly shorter upper jaw and significantly smaller standard length compared to normal fish (Sawayama and Takagi, 2016). Some bones in the upper jaw shrink and distorted, resulting in shorter upper jaw (Sawada et al., 2001). Genetic or inbreeding is one of the reasons behind shortened upper jaw but not the main reason (Sawayama et al., 2012). Shortened upper jaw also occurs when mating different parents from different families. Behavior can also result in deformities. Aggressive swimming while feeding caused the snout to bump against tank side or bottom and may result in bone fracture and growth inhibition (Sawayama and Takagi, 2016). Nutrition also contributed to shortened upper jaw deformity. Larva fed rotifer enriched with old and preserved Nannochloropsis lead to jaw deformation. Nannochloropsis preservation caused the algae to flocculate. Feeding with preserved (refrigerated or frozen) Nannochloropsis resulted in rotifer's failure to consume the algae because of its large size. As a result, rotifer starved and lost its vitality. EPA and DHA content in rotifer were reduced by half. Supplying bad quality rotifer resulted in jaw deformation (Sawayama et al., 2012).

Incidence of deformed operculum was observed in hatchery-reared Olive flounder and other flatfish (Aydin, 2012). The reason behind abnormal operculum development can be traced to lack of important nutrient such as vitamin C (Frischknecht et al., 1994). Metamorphosis in flatfish is influenced by thyroid hormone. Abnormality that resulted after metamorphosis is likely caused by thyroid hormone deficiency or thyroid gland malfunction (Okada et al., 2005).

CONCLUSION
Abnormalities occur after the switch from endogenous feeding to exogenous feeding, especially during feeding with life feed. Failure to provide feed, especially feed with adequate amount of vitamins and fatty acids, will result in various types of abnormalities. Furthermore, abnormal physical traits can be grouped based on body shape, body pigmentation and skeletal deformities.

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