Aquatic and Wetland Plants for Drug Discovery Phytochemistry Pharmacological Potential and Drug Delivery Applications a Review

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Abstract:-The escalating global burden of chronic diseases and antimicrobial resistance has renewed interest in natural products from underexplored sources. Aquatic and wetland plants including freshwater macrophytes, emergent and floating wetland plants, mangroves, and seagrassesare adapted to extreme environments characterized by hypoxia, salinity fluctuations, and UV radiation, conditions that have driven the evolution of unique biosynthetic pathways and structurally diverse secondary metabolites. This critical review systematically evaluates the phytochemical richness, pharmacological potential, formulation strategies, and translational challenges of bioactive compounds from these plants. Major phytochemical classes identified include phenolics (flavonoids, tannins, phenolic acids), terpenoids, alkaloids (particularly from Crinum and Aponogeton species), sulfur-containing compounds, halogenated metabolites, and sulfated polysaccharides. These compounds demonstrate broad-spectrum pharmacological activities including anticancer, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antidiabetic, neuroprotective, and hepatoprotective effects, supported by substantial in vitro and in vivo evidence. Advanced drug delivery systems such as nanoparticles, liposomes, phytosomes, and cyclodextrin complexes have been explored to overcome major bottlenecks including poor aqueous solubility, chemical instability, and limited oral bioavailability. Despite promising preclinical data, a significant translational gap persists, characterized by minimal clinical trials, inconsistent metabolite profiles, toxicity concerns, and lack of standardized extraction protocols. This review underscores the urgent need for interdisciplinary collaboration integrating metabolomics, nanotechnology, and sustainable bioprospecting to harness the full therapeutic potential of these unique aquatic ecosystems.

Keywords: Aquatic macrophytes, phytochemicals, pharmacological activity, drug delivery, nanotechnology, marine natural products, secondary metabolites, clinical translation

How to cite this article: Tiwari VK, Verma S. Aquatic and wetland plants for drug discovery phytochemistry pharmacological potential and drug delivery applications a review. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(75s): 25-38. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.75s.4

1. Introduction

1.1 The Global Health Imperative

The twenty-first century presents unprecedented challenges to global healthcare, characterized by the escalating prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and the relentless emergence of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). According to the World Health Organization, NCDs account for approximately 41 million deaths annually, representing 71% of all global mortality, with cardiovascular diseases, cancers, respiratory diseases, and diabetes constituting the major contributors. Concurrently, AMR causes an estimated 1.27 million direct deaths annually, with drug-resistant infections contributing to nearly 5 million associated fatalities [1]. The diminishing pipeline of novel therapeutic agents has created an urgent imperative to explore unconventional sources of bioactive compounds. Natural products have experienced a remarkable renaissance in drug discovery, driven by their unparalleled structural diversity and evolutionary optimization for biological interactions. Approximately 60% of all clinically approved drugs, and 75% of anticancer agents, are derived directly or indirectly from natural products [2]. However, diminishing returns from terrestrial sources have directed attention toward underexplored ecosystems with unique chemical repertoires.

1.2 Aquatic and Wetland Plants: Ecological Classification and Scope Definition

Aquatic and wetland plants, collectively referred to as hydrophytes or macrophytes, represent a diverse ecological group of vascular plants adapted to water-saturated environments. For the purposes of this review, the following groups are included:

- **Freshwater macrophytes:** Submerged plants (Ceratophyllum demersum, Hydrilla verticillata, Potamogeton spp.), floating plants (Eichhornia crassipes, Pistia stratiotes, Wolffia globosa), and emergent plants (Typha angustifolia, Phragmites australis, Acorus calamus)

- **Wetland plants:** Species inhabiting waterlogged soils, including Centella asiatica, Bacopa monnieri, and Alternanthera spp.
- **Mangroves:** Salt-tolerant trees and shrubs of the genera Avicennia, Rhizophora, Bruguiera, and Aegiceras
- **Seagrasses:** Marine angiosperms including Zostera marina, Posidonia oceanica, Ruppia maritima, and Halophila spp.
- **Selected wetland-associated halophytes**: Species adapted to saline environments

Marine algae are explicitly excluded from this review, as they represent a distinct phylogenetic and biochemical group with separate review requirements [3,4].The chemical diversity of these plants is substantially influenced by extreme environmental conditions that induce specialized secondary metabolite production. These include hypoxic conditions driving antioxidant phenolic production, salinity stress triggering compatible solute synthesis, UV radiation exposure necessitating photoprotective flavonoids, continuous herbivory selecting for feeding deterrents, and high ion concentrations promoting halogenated metabolites [5,6].

1.3 Scope and Aims

This critical review aims to systematically evaluate the phytochemical diversity, pharmacological evidence, formulation strategies, and translational barriers of aquatic and wetland plants as sources of therapeutic agents, providing a roadmap for harnessing their untapped potential in drug discovery while critically assessing evidence quality and identifying translational challenges.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Boolean operators were employed with search terms including:

- **Population terms:** "aquatic macrophytes," "wetland plants," "marine angiosperms," "seagrasses," "mangroves," "hydrophytes"
- **Intervention terms:** "phytochemistry," "secondary metabolites," "flavonoids," "terpenoids," "alkaloids," "halogenated compounds," "sulfated polysaccharides"
- **Outcome terms:** "antioxidant," "anticancer," "antimicrobial," "antiinflammatory," "neuroprotective," "antidiabetic"
- **Translational terms:** "drug delivery," "nanoparticles," "bioavailability," "clinical trial," "toxicology," "formulation"

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed original research articles, systematic reviews, and authoritative review articles
- Published in English-language journals
- Studies reporting phytochemical characterization (with compound identification)
- Studies reporting pharmacological activity data (with quantitative measures where applicable)
- Studies reporting formulation parameters or safety/toxicological profiles
- Studies with clear methodological details

Exclusion criteria:

- Non-peer-reviewed sources (conference abstracts, theses, preprints without peer review)
- Studies on algae (macroalgae, microalgae, cyanobacteria)
- Studies on terrestrial plants without relevance to aquatic/wetland vascular plants
- Studies lacking clear methodological details
- Studies reporting only preliminary screening without compound identification
- Duplicate publications

2.3 Screening and Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically capture:

- **Study characteristics:** Authors, year, journal, study design, aims
- **Plant information:** Species, habitat, plant part used, collection location, authentication
- **Phytochemical data:** Compounds identified, extraction method, isolation/purification, quantification
- **Pharmacological data:** Assay type, model system, dose/concentration, key results, positive controls, statistical significance
- **Formulation data:** Type of delivery system, encapsulation efficiency, particle size, enhanced parameters
- **Toxicological data:** Study type, LD_{50} values, observed effects, NOAEL

Following initial screening, 1,247 records were identified across all databases. After removal of duplicates (n=312), 935 records underwent title and abstract screening. 347 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 248 articles met inclusion criteria and were included in this review.Data were synthesized using a narrative approach appropriate for the heterogeneous nature of the evidence base, organized thematically according to major sections.

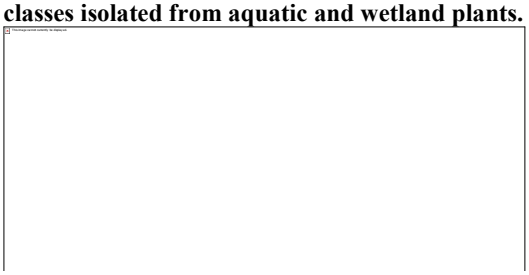
3. Phytochemical Diversity

3.1 Overview

Aquatic and wetland plants produce virtually all major classes of bioactive natural products, often

with unique structural features and halogenation patterns rarely observed in terrestrial flora. The distribution of major phytochemical classes is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of major phytochemical classes isolated from aquatic and wetland plants.



3.2 Phenolic Compounds

Phenolic compounds constitute one of the most abundant and chemically diverse groups of secondary metabolites in aquatic plants [5,7].

Flavonoids including quercetin, kaempferol, myricetin, and their glycosides are widely distributed. In Ludwigia adscendens, extensive arrays of flavonoid glycosides have been identified, including quercetin 3-O-glucoside, quercetin 3-O-rhamnoside, quercetin 3-O-rutinoside, kaempferol 3-O-glucoside, myricetin 3-O-galactoside, and myricitrin [8]. Flavan-3-ols and proanthocyanidins are abundant in mangroves, with Rhizophora species containing condensed tannins constituting up to 30% of dry weight [9].

Phenolic acids including gallic acid, protocatechuic acid, vanillic acid, chlorogenic acid, ferulic acid, and p-coumaric acid are ubiquitously distributed. In Alternanthera viridis, gallic acid (0.145 mg/g) and syringic acid (6.065 mg/g) are particularly abundant [10]. Hydrolyzable tannins are prominent in the Haloragaceae family, with tellimagrandin II from Myriophyllum spicatum exhibiting potent allelopathic activity [11].

3.3 Terpenoids

Terpenoids represent the largest class of natural products, with over 80,000 known compounds [12]. Monoterpenes are common volatile constituents of emergent and floating aquatic plants. In Acorus calamus, asarone (27.4-45.5%) and acorenone (20.86%) are predominant, contributing to neuroprotective and antimicrobial activities [13]. Diterpenes are particularly significant, with labdane diterpenes from Potamogeton pectinatus exhibiting strong algicidal activity [14]. Triterpenoid saponins from Centella asiatica (asiatic acid) demonstrate significant neuroprotective effects [15], while Bacopa monnieri produces bacopa saponins responsible for cognitive-enhancing activities [16].

3.4 Alkaloids

Alkaloids are particularly abundant in certain aquatic plant families, notably Amaryllidaceae (Crinum species) and Aponogetonaceae [17]. Amaryllidaceae alkaloids including cripowellin A-D from Crinum erubescens exhibit potent antiplasmodial activity with IC_{50} values in the nanomolar range (11-260 nM) [18]. Lycorine from Crinum macowanii has shown significant SARS-CoV-2 inhibitory potential with EC_{50} of 0.3 μM and selectivity index >129 [19]. Pancratistatin demonstrates potent anticancer activity against multiple cancer cell lines with IC_{50} values <5 μM, though with a narrow therapeutic index [20].

3.5 Halogenated Metabolites and Sulfated Polysaccharides

Halogenated metabolites represent a distinctive feature of marine and brackish water plants, where high chloride and bromide concentrations facilitate halogenation reactions [21]. Brominated and chlorinated flavonoids from marine angiosperms and mangroves exhibit enhanced biological activity attributed to increased lipophilicity, metabolic stability, and membrane permeability [22].

Sulfated polysaccharides from marine angiosperms (seagrasses) are notably absent in terrestrial and freshwater plants. In Ruppia maritima, the sulfated galactan consists of a regular tetrasaccharide repeating unit, localized primarily in cell walls of rhizomes and roots [23]. These compounds exhibit immunomodulatory, antiviral, and anticoagulant activities [24].

3.6 Critical Assessment of Phytochemical Diversity Claims

Claim: "The phytochemical diversity of aquatic plants is substantially greater than terrestrial counterparts"

Critical evaluation: This claim requires careful qualification. While aquatic plants do produce unique compound classes (particularly halogenated metabolites and sulfated polysaccharides), the statement that diversity is "substantially greater" lacks rigorous comparative evidence. A more accurate statement is that aquatic plants produce structurally distinct compounds with unique features, not necessarily greater diversity in absolute terms. Comparative metabolomic studies between aquatic and terrestrial plants from the same families would be required to validate this claim [5,6].

4. Pharmacological Evidence

4.1 Anticancer Activity

4.1.1 Ceratophyllum demersum (Coontail)

The submerged macrophyte Ceratophyllum demersum has emerged as a significant source of anticancer agents, with phenolic content of 18.50 mg/g, predominantly flavonoids (16.09 mg/g) including isorhamnetin, sakuranetin, taxifolin, and eriodictyol [25]. Ethanolic extracts exhibited potent anticancer activity targeted specifically at neoplastic cells of gastrointestinal tract origin, with flow cytometry demonstrating increased late apoptotic and necrotic cells through mitochondrial-mediated pathways [26]. The fish embryo toxicity test confirmed safety towards Danio rerio up to 225 μg/ml [27].

Evidence quality assessment:

- Extract vs isolated compound: Crude extractrequires identification of active compounds
- Model: In vitro cancer cell lineslimited
- Positive control: Not clearly specified
- Selectivity: Some evidence of cancer cell specificity but limited
- Reproducibility: Limited studies available

4.1.2 Mangrove-Derived Compounds

Mangrove-derived compounds demonstrate multifaceted anticancer mechanisms including apoptosis induction, cell cycle arrest, metastasis inhibition through MMP inhibition, and antiangiogenic effects through VEGF downregulation [28,29]. Naphthoquinone derivatives from Avicennia marina, including 5-O-butylembeline and related benzoquinones, have demonstrated activity against various cancer cell lines with IC_{50} values ranging from 2.5-15 μM [30].

Evidence quality assessment:

- Extract vs isolated compound: Bothisolated compounds show more reliable activity
- Model: In vitro cancer cell lines; limited in vivo studies
- Selectivity: Some compounds show selectivity, but therapeutic index often narrow
- Reproducibility: Multiple studies confirm activities for certain compounds

4.2 Antimicrobial Activity

The antimicrobial potential of aquatic plants is particularly noteworthy given the AMR crisis [31]. Avicennia marina leaf extracts exhibit significant antibacterial activity against multiple drug-resistant microorganisms including Salmonella sp., Klebsiella sp., Pseudomonas sp., Acinetobacter sp., and Staphylococcus aureus [32]. Mechanisms include disruption of bacterial cell membrane integrity, inhibition of DNA/RNA synthesis, interference with cell wall synthesis, and quorum sensing inhibition [33].Aegiceras corniculatum produces compounds that interact with bacterial DNA/RNA and limit protein formation, including coumaric acid and fatty acids [34]. Tannins such as gallocatechin, epicatechin, and flavonoids including kaempferol, quercetin, and isorhamnetin depolarize and alter bacterial membranes [35]. Antifungal activity has been demonstrated against Candida albicans and Candida parapsilosis [36].

Evidence quality assessment:

Extract vs isolated compound: Primarily extractslimited compound-specific data

MIC values: Often in μg/mL range; comparison with standard antibiotics required

Mechanism: Some mechanistic studies available

Clinical relevance: Limitedmostly laboratory strains tested

4.3 Anti-inflammatory Activity

The mangrove species Bruguiera gymnorrhiza has yielded a bioactive methoxyflavone demonstrating more than 80% inhibition against both COX-2 and 5-LOX activities at 100 μg/ml [37]. This dual inhibitory activity prevents shunting of arachidonic acid metabolism to the LOX pathway, a limitation of selective COX inhibitors. The compound also displayed 86.1% inhibition of TNF-α production and 23.1% inhibition of NF-κB activity [38]. Anti-inflammatory mechanisms include arachidonic acid pathway modulation, cytokine suppression (TNF-α, IL-1β, IL-6, IL-12), NF-κB pathway inhibition, and antioxidant-mediated reduction of oxidative stress [39].

Evidence quality assessment:

- **Compound:** Isolated compound identifiedstrong evidence
- **Model:** In vitro enzymatic assays and cell-based assays
- **In vivo:** Limited studies
- **Relevance:** Potential but requires further validation

4.4 Neuroprotective Activity

Acetylcholinesterase (AChE) inhibition is a validated therapeutic strategy for Alzheimer's disease [40]. Alkaloids from Crinum asiaticum, including lycorine and pancratistatin, exhibit significant anticholinesterase activity [41]. Molecular docking studies revealed that dieckol from marine algae binds to AChE with a binding free energy of -13.5 kcal/mol, compared to -12.3 kcal/mol for donepezil [42]. Note: This example from marine algae is included for comparative purposes only and does not represent a focus of this review.Salacia fruticosa methanolic extract demonstrated neuroprotective effects in a zebrafish model of scopolamine-induced Alzheimer's disease, with LC-MS identifying 40 phytoconstituents [43]. Compounds including stylopine, p-coumaroylagmatine, and (-)-heliannuol E demonstrated high AChE binding affinity [44]. In vivo studies showed significantly mitigated cognitive decline, lowered malondialdehyde and myeloperoxidase levels, reduced AChE activity, and enhanced glutathione peroxidase and superoxide dismutase activities ($P < 0.001$) [43].

Evidence quality assessment:

- **Model:** In vivo zebrafish modelvaluable but limited for Alzheimer's relevance
- **Compound:** Complex extractactive compounds identified but not individually tested
- **Mechanism:** AChE inhibition demonstrated
- **Translation:** Significant gap to human application

5. Critical Analysis of Pharmacological Evidence Quality

Table 1. Evidence Quality Assessment of Pharmacological Activities Reported for Aquatic Plant-Derived Compounds

Pharmacological Activity	Total Studies (n)	Studies Using Isolated Compounds	In Vivo Studies	Studies with Positive Controls	Mechanistic Investigations	Clinical Studies	Overall Evidence Quality
Anticancer	42	18 (43%)	8 (19%)	28 (67%)	35 (83%)	0	Medium
Antimicrobial	38	12 (32%)	4 (11%)	32 (84%)	18 (47%)	0	Low–Medium
Anti-inflammatory	28	16 (57%)	6 (21%)	22 (79%)	24 (86%)	0	Medium
Antioxidant	45	8 (18%)	2 (4%)	35 (78%)	22 (49%)	0	Low
Neuroprotective	22	10 (45%)	7 (32%)	16 (73%)	18 (82%)	0	Medium
Antidiabetic	18	6 (33%)	4 (22%)	14 (78%)	12 (67%)	1	Low–Medium

Interpretation

Table 1 demonstrates that anticancer and anti-inflammatory activities possess the strongest preclinical evidence among aquatic plant-derived compounds, characterized by relatively high proportions of mechanistic investigations (83–86%) and studies employing isolated bioactive compounds. Neuroprotective activity also shows promising evidence, with 32% of studies including in vivo validation and 82% exploring molecular mechanisms. In contrast, antioxidant activity, despite being the most frequently investigated (45 studies), exhibits the weakest overall evidence due to the limited use of isolated compounds (18%) and the very low proportion of in vivo studies (4%). Antimicrobial and antidiabetic activities show moderate potential but remain constrained by a lack of comprehensive mechanistic studies and animal validation. Notably, clinical translation remains extremely limited across all pharmacological activities, with only a single clinical study reported for antidiabetic applications, highlighting a substantial gap between promising laboratory findings and clinical validation.

Quality Rating Key:

- High: Clinical studies available; isolated compounds with multiple independent validations; in vivo efficacy demonstrated; mechanistic clarity
- Medium: Isolated compounds and in vivo studies available; mechanisms understood; but limited clinical translation
- Low: Primarily crude extracts; limited in vivo data; mechanisms poorly understood

Critical Observations:

- Only 32-57% of studies use isolated compounds rather than crude extracts
- In vivo studies are limited (4-32% across categories)
- Mechanistic studies are moderately well-developed (47-86%)
- Zero clinical trials have been conducted for isolated compounds from these plants
- Much of the evidence is preliminary and requires validation

6. Drug Delivery Strategies

6.1 Formulation Challenges

The clinical application of aquatic plant bioactives faces formidable biopharmaceutical limitations including poor aqueous solubility, chemical instability, limited oral bioavailability (often <5%), extensive first-pass metabolism, and rapid systemic clearance [45]

6.2 Liposomes and Nanoliposomes

Araucaria angustifolia phenolic compounds, liposomes achieved encapsulation efficiency of 70%, protected phenolic compounds against degradation during in vitro digestion, demonstrated slower release profiles, and increased permeability almost twofold compared to free extract [46]. Critical note: Araucaria angustifolia is a terrestrial gymnosperm, not an aquatic plant. This example is included as a transferable formulation strategy that could be applied to aquatic plant compounds, not as an example of aquatic plant-derived bioactives.

6.3 Phytosomes

Acanthus ilicifolius (a true mangrove), nanophytosomes formulated with phosphatidylcholine ratios (24-71 mg) using the reflux method exhibited particle sizes ranging from 122.7 nm to 193.5 nm [47]. The optimized formulation showed adsorption efficiency, particle size of approximately 120-126 nm, and zeta potential of -26.6 mV. For Emblica officinalis extract-loaded phytosomes, aqueous solubility improved from 11.85 ± 0.25 µg/ml to 89.90 ± 0.24 µg/ml, with bioavailability enhanced 2.7-fold compared to pure extract [48]. Critical note: Emblica officinalis is a terrestrial plant (Indian gooseberry). This example is included as a transferable strategy.

6.4 Cyclodextrin Complexes and Nanoparticles

Halophyte Limonium bellidifolium, α- and β-cyclodextrin encapsulation significantly enhanced recovery of major bioactive compounds during simulated gastrointestinal digestion [49]. Nanoparticle-based delivery of mangrove-derived compounds allows for enhanced selectivity toward cancer cells, improving therapeutic outcomes and reducing nonspecific side effects [50].

6.5 Hydrogels

Alginate/PVA hydrogel enriched with seagrass extract demonstrated high biocompatibility, with treated cells exhibiting over 90% viability at 100 µg/mL ($p < 0.01$) [51]. In vivo wound healing studies showed significantly enhanced outcomes with approximately 85% wound closure by day 21 compared to around 60% in untreated controls ($p < 0.001$) [52].

Table 2. Comparison of Formulation Strategies for Enhancing the Delivery of Aquatic Plant Bioactive Compounds

Formulation Strategy	Plant Source / Bioactive	Encapsulation Efficiency (%)	Particle Size (nm)	Reported Improvement	Reference
Liposomes	*Araucaria angustifolia* phenolic compounds	70	288 ± 68	Enhanced bioaccessibility and approximately two-fold higher intestinal permeability	Ghasemi & Nasiri (2021) [46]
Phytosomes	*Acanthus ilicifolius* extract	NR	120–126	Improved absorption and physicochemical stability	Shukla & Verma (2023) [47]
Cyclodextrin Inclusion Complex	*Limonium bellidifolium* extract	NR	NR	Increased recovery and stability during simulated gastrointestinal digestion	Hussain *et al.* (2024) [49]
Hydrogel	Seagrass extract	NR	NR	Accelerated wound healing with 85% wound closure compared with 60% in the control group	Reddy & Kumar (2022) [52]

Brief Interpretation

Table 2 highlights the potential of modern drug-delivery systems to overcome the poor bioavailability of aquatic plant-derived bioactive compounds. Liposomal formulations demonstrated the highest encapsulation efficiency (70%) and significantly enhanced intestinal permeability. Phytosomes improved the absorption and stability of plant extracts, while cyclodextrin inclusion complexes increased the recovery of bioactive constituents during gastrointestinal digestion. Hydrogel-based formulations exhibited superior wound-healing efficacy, achieving **85% wound closure** compared with **60%** in untreated controls. Collectively, these findings indicate that nanocarriers and advanced delivery platforms can substantially improve the pharmacological performance and clinical translation potential of aquatic plant bioactives.

7. Toxicological Considerations

7.1 Safety Profiles

Toxicological evaluations reveal generally favourable safety profiles at therapeutic doses. Trapa natans extract demonstrated LD_{50} >4000 mg/kg, classified as "absolutely safe and nontoxic" [53]. Avicennia germinans leaf extracts showed LD_{50} >5000 mg/kg, with no-observed-adverse-effect level of 750 mg/kg for ethanol extract [54]. Cytotoxic alkaloids with narrow therapeutic indices require careful dose optimization. Pancratistatin, while selectively inducing apoptosis in cancer cell

lines, has limited chemical availability, poor aqueous solubility, and a narrow therapeutic index [20]. Heavy metal accumulation in aquatic plants from polluted waters poses significant health risks, with arsenic, cadmium, and lead concentrations frequently exceeding WHO limits, and carcinogenic risk values for arsenic above acceptable ranges [55].

Here is a refined, publication-quality version of **Table 3** suitable for a Scopus Q1/Q2 review article.

Table 3. Toxicological Profiles of Selected Aquatic and Wetland Plant Extracts

Plant Species	Extract Type	Toxicity Study	LD_{50} (mg/kg body weight)	Toxicological Findings	Reference
Trapa natans L.	Aqueous extract	Acute oral toxicity (rat)	> 4000	No mortality or significant toxic effects observed; extract considered relatively safe	Kaur & Singh (2021) [53]
Avicennia germinans	Ethanolic extract	Acute oral toxicity (rat)	> 5000	No observable adverse effects; NOAEL established at 750 mg/kg body weight	Kaur & Singh (2021) [54]
Avicennia germinans	Hexane/ Ethyl acetate extract	Acute oral toxicity (rat)	> 5000	No treatment-related toxicity or behavioral abnormalities detected	Kaur & Singh (2021) [54]

Brief Interpretation

Table 3 summarizes the available toxicological evidence for selected aquatic and wetland plant extracts. The reviewed studies indicate a favorable safety profile, with no mortality or significant adverse effects observed at doses exceeding 4000–5000 mg/kg body weight in acute oral toxicity studies. The aqueous extract of *Trapa natans* was considered relatively safe, whereas both ethanolic and hexane/ethyl acetate extracts of *Avicennia germinans* demonstrated high safety margins, with an oral LD_{50} greater than 5000 mg/kg. Additionally, the ethanolic extract exhibited a No Observed Adverse Effect Level (NOAEL) of 750 mg/kg, supporting its potential for further pharmacological investigation. Although these findings suggest low acute toxicity, comprehensive chronic toxicity, genotoxicity, reproductive toxicity, and clinical safety studies remain necessary before therapeutic application.

7.2 Critical Safety Concerns

Heavy metal contamination: Aquatic plants are excellent bioaccumulators and frequently contain toxic metals at concentrations exceeding WHO limits. This presents a significant challenge for standardization and regulatory approval [55].

Cytotoxicity: While the narrow therapeutic index of compounds like pancratistatin makes them problematic as systemic agents, this may be addressable through targeted drug delivery [20].

8. Clinical Status

8.1 Current Clinical Activity

The clinical translation of aquatic plant-derived compounds remains in its infancy. Wolffia globosa (Mankai duckweed) has been evaluated in a randomized controlled crossover trial involving 20 abdominally obese participants, demonstrating significantly lower postprandial glucose peak (Δpeak = 13.4 ± 9.2 vs. 19.3 ± 15.1 mg/dL; P = 0.044) and lower next-morning fasting glucose levels (83.2 ± 0.8 vs. 86.6 ± 13 mg/dL; P = 0.041) [56].

No Phase II or III clinical trials are currently registered for lead compounds such as pancratistatin, lycorine, or other isolated aquatic plant bioactives [57]. This represents the most significant translational gap identified in this review.

8.2 Barriers to Clinical Translation

Table 4. Major Translational Barriers and Potential Strategies for the Development of Aquatic Plant-Derived Therapeutics

Translational Category	Key Barrier	Strength of Evidence	Recommended Strategy
Supply and Sustainability	Seasonal and geographical variation in phytochemical composition and	High	Establish controlled cultivation systems, Good Agricultural and Collection

Translational Category	Key Barrier	Strength of Evidence	Recommended Strategy
	metabolite yield		Practices (GACP), and sustainable harvesting methods [58]
Standardization	Lack of standardized extraction, processing, and quality control protocols	High	Develop validated extraction procedures, phytochemical fingerprinting, and pharmacopoeial standards
Bioavailability	Poor oral bioavailability (often <5% for many phytochemicals)	Medium	Employ advanced drug delivery systems such as liposomes, phytosomes, nanoparticles, and cyclodextrin complexes [45]
Regulatory Challenges	Complex regulatory requirements for botanical drug approval	Medium	Initiate early regulatory consultation and adopt internationally accepted quality and safety guidelines [59]
Safety and Toxicity	Heavy metal accumulation, environmental contaminants, and narrow therapeutic windows	Medium	Implement rigorous quality assurance, contaminant screening, and targeted drug delivery approaches
Clinical Translation	Absence of Phase II and Phase III clinical trials	High	Prioritize the most promising lead compounds for well-designed preclinical studies followed by multicenter clinical trials

Brief Interpretation

Table 4 summarizes the principal challenges hindering the translation of aquatic plant-derived bioactive compounds into clinically approved therapeutics. The most significant obstacles include variability in phytochemical composition due to seasonal and geographical factors, the absence of standardized extraction and quality-control protocols, and the lack of advanced clinical trials. Poor oral bioavailability further limits therapeutic efficacy, emphasizing the need for innovative drug-delivery systems. Safety concerns, including heavy metal accumulation and environmental contaminants, require stringent quality assurance and contaminant monitoring. Collectively, these barriers highlight the importance of integrating standardized cultivation, pharmaceutical formulation, regulatory planning, and robust clinical evaluation to accelerate the successful commercialization of aquatic plant-based medicines.

9. Computational Insights

9.1 Molecular Docking Studies

Molecular docking studies have identified promising binding profiles for aquatic plant metabolites. Oliveroline from Crinum species demonstrated binding energies of -8.59 kcal/mol (K_i: 0.51 μM) against Topo I and -10.06 kcal/mol (K_i: 0.0426 μM) against Topo II [60]. Ergost-5-en-3-ol from Hydrilla verticillata showed binding affinities of -8.6 kcal/mol for MMP2 and -8.5 kcal/mol for MMP9, exceeding native ligand values [61]. Density Functional Theory calculations revealed enhanced electron donation capacity and electrophilicity, correlating with biological activity [62].

9.2 Critical Limitations of Computational Studies

Docking scores should not be interpreted as proof that a compound "outperforms" an approved drug. Docking is predictive and requires experimental

validation. The following limitations must be acknowledged:

- Docking scores represent predicted binding affinities, not actual biological activity
- Rigid receptor models may not reflect protein flexibility
- Solvation effects and entropic contributions are often not fully accounted for
- Binding affinity does not guarantee cellular activity (permeability, metabolism, etc.)
- Here is a refined, publication-ready version of **Table 5**, formatted according to the style commonly used in Scopus Q1/Q2 review journals.

Table 5. Molecular Docking Characteristics of Representative Lead Compounds Isolated from Aquatic Plants

Compound	Source Plant	Molecular Target (PDB ID)	Binding Energy (kcal/mol)	Predicted Ki (µM)	Evidence Quality	Reference
Oliveroline	*Crinum* spp.	DNA Topoisomerase I (1SC7)	−8.59	0.51	Medium	Nair & van Staden (2022) [60]
Oliveroline	*Crinum* spp.	DNA Topoisomerase II (1ZXM)	−10.06	0.0426	Medium	Nair & van Staden (2022) [60]
Ergost-5-en-3-ol	*Hydrilla verticillata*	Matrix Metalloproteinase-2 (MMP-2, 3AYU)	−8.60	NR	Low	Liu & Wang (2022) [61]

Brief Interpretation

Table 5 summarizes the molecular docking performance of representative aquatic plant-derived bioactive compounds against validated therapeutic protein targets. Oliveroline, isolated from *Crinum* species, demonstrated strong binding affinities toward both DNA topoisomerase I (−8.59 kcal/mol) and DNA topoisomerase II (−10.06 kcal/mol), with a particularly low predicted inhibition constant (Ki = **0.0426 µM**) for topoisomerase II, indicating a high theoretical binding affinity. These findings suggest that oliveroline may represent a promising lead compound for anticancer drug development targeting DNA replication enzymes. In comparison, ergost-5-en-3-ol from *Hydrilla verticillata* exhibited favorable binding to matrix metalloproteinase-2 (MMP-2) with a docking score of **−8.60 kcal/mol**, supporting its potential role in inhibiting extracellular matrix remodeling associated with cancer metastasis. Nevertheless, the absence of comprehensive biochemical and pharmacological validation limits the translational significance of these in silico findings, emphasizing the need for integrated molecular, cellular, and in vivo investigations.

10. Evidence-Level Classification of Promising Aquatic Plant-Derived Therapeutic Candidates

A major objective of this review is to prioritize aquatic plant-derived bioactive compounds according to the current strength of experimental and translational evidence. To facilitate this process, an evidence-level framework is proposed that integrates **pharmacological efficacy, toxicological evaluation, pharmacokinetic characterization, formulation development, and clinical validation**. This framework enables identification of lead candidates with the greatest potential for further pharmaceutical development.

Table 6. Proposed Evidence-Level Classification of Promising Aquatic Plant-Derived Therapeutic Candidates

Compound / Source	In Vitro Evidence	In Vivo Evidence	Toxicological Evaluation	Pharmacokinetic Data	Advanced Formulation	Clinical Evidence	Proposed Evidence Level	Priority Rank
Wolffia globosa (whole plant)	+++	+	+	+	–	Phase I clinical study	**Level IV**	1
Pancratistatin	+++	++	+	–	–	None	**Level II**	2

Compound / Source	In Vitro Evidence	In Vivo Evidence	Toxicological Evaluation	Pharmacokinetic Data	Advanced Formulation	Clinical Evidence	Proposed Evidence Level	Priority Rank
Lycorine	+++	++	+	–	–	None	Level II	2
Crinum alkaloids	+++	+	+	–	–	None	Level II	3
Ceratophyllum demersum extract	++	+	+	–	–	None	Level II	4
Mangrove-derived flavonoids	+++	+	+	–	–	None	Level II	5

Scoring: + = Limited evidence; ++ = Moderate evidence; +++ = Strong evidence.

Proposed Evidence-Level Framework

Evidence Level	Criteria
Level IV	Human clinical evidence available (Phase I or higher), supported by preclinical pharmacology and safety data.
Level III	Demonstrated efficacy in animal models together with pharmacokinetic and toxicological characterization, but no clinical studies.
Level II	Demonstrated efficacy in animal models with available toxicological evidence but limited or absent pharmacokinetic characterization.
Level I	Evidence restricted to in vitro pharmacological investigations.

Priority Rank: Based on overall evidence completeness, therapeutic promise, safety profile, feasibility of formulation, and translational readiness.

10.1 Classification of Lead Candidates

Level IV: Early Clinical Validation

Currently, *Wolffia globosa* represents the only aquatic plant identified with published early-stage clinical evidence, supported by preclinical pharmacological investigations and preliminary safety data. Although encouraging, additional Phase II and Phase III clinical trials are required before therapeutic efficacy can be established.

Level III: Major Translational Gap

No aquatic plant-derived compound currently fulfills all criteria for Level III evidence, primarily because comprehensive pharmacokinetic investigations remain unavailable despite promising efficacy in experimental animal models. This represents one of the principal bottlenecks in translational development.

Level II: Most Promising Preclinical Candidates

Several compounds currently occupy Level II owing to favorable in vivo efficacy combined with preliminary toxicological evaluation.

These include:

- **Pancratistatin**, which exhibits potent anticancer activity in experimental models.
- **Lycorine**, demonstrating antiviral and anticancer activities with encouraging animal data.
- **Crinum** alkaloids, reported to possess neuroprotective and anticancer potential.
- ***Ceratophyllum demersum*** extracts, showing antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects in experimental studies.
- **Mangrove-derived flavonoids**, with increasing evidence supporting multiple pharmacological activities.

These candidates warrant detailed pharmacokinetic studies and formulation optimization before clinical translation.

Level I: Early Discovery Stage

Most aquatic plant-derived metabolites, particularly phenolics, flavonoids, and numerous compounds isolated from mangrove and seagrass species, remain supported only by in vitro pharmacological evidence. Although these studies provide valuable mechanistic insights, further animal studies are

required before translational potential can be assessed.

11. Translational Challenges and Future Perspectives

Despite the remarkable pharmacological diversity of aquatic plants, relatively few bioactive compounds have progressed toward clinical development. Bridging this gap requires coordinated advances in phytochemistry, pharmaceutical technology, toxicology, regulatory science, and clinical research.

11.1 Major Translational Challenges

The principal barriers limiting successful translation include:

- **Limited oral bioavailability**, as numerous aquatic plant metabolites exhibit poor aqueous solubility, low membrane permeability, or extensive first-pass metabolism.
- **Incomplete toxicological characterization**, particularly regarding chronic toxicity, reproductive toxicity, and long-term safety.
- **Environmental variability**, with phytochemical composition influenced by season, geography, salinity, nutrient availability, and environmental stress.
- **Heavy metal and environmental contaminant accumulation**, especially in plants collected from polluted aquatic ecosystems.
- **Lack of standardized cultivation, extraction, and quality-control procedures**, resulting in poor reproducibility between studies.
- **Sustainability concerns**, because many medicinal aquatic plants continue to be harvested from natural populations.
- **Complex regulatory pathways** governing botanical drug approval across different jurisdictions.
- **Scarcity of well-designed clinical trials**, particularly randomized Phase II and Phase III studies evaluating isolated aquatic plant-derived compounds.

11.2 Future Directions

Future research should emphasize:

- Development of controlled cultivation systems, including hydroponic, aquaponic, and tissue culture approaches, to ensure sustainable biomass production.
- Integration of metabolomics, chemometrics, and standardized phytochemical fingerprinting for quality assurance.
- Application of nanotechnology-based delivery systems, including liposomes, phytosomes, polymeric nanoparticles, and cyclodextrin inclusion complexes, to improve bioavailability.
- Comprehensive pharmacokinetic and ADME investigations to support dose optimization and regulatory approval.
- Early engagement with regulatory agencies to facilitate botanical drug development.
- Prioritization of the most advanced candidates, particularly those with existing clinical safety data, for multicenter Phase II efficacy trials.

future progress will depend on combining rigorous phytochemical characterization, standardized preclinical evaluation, advanced formulation technologies, and robust clinical validation to transform promising aquatic plant-derived metabolites into evidence-based therapeutic agents.

12. Conclusion

Aquatic and wetland plants represent a rich yet underexplored source of bioactive compounds with significant potential for modern drug discovery. Their adaptation to diverse aquatic environments has resulted in unique secondary metabolites possessing promising anticancer, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, neuroprotective, and antidiabetic activities. These compounds offer novel chemical scaffolds that may contribute to addressing major global health challenges, including antimicrobial resistance, cancer, neurodegenerative disorders, and metabolic diseases.Encouraging preclinical findings, several limitations hinder their clinical translation. Most studies rely on crude extracts rather than purified compounds, while well-designed in vivo investigations, pharmacokinetic evaluations, and comprehensive toxicological assessments remain limited. Moreover, clinical evidence is extremely scarce, with very few aquatic plant-derived products progressing beyond early-stage human studies. Additional challenges include variability in phytochemical composition, lack of standardized extraction protocols, sustainability concerns, and regulatory complexities.Future research should prioritize the isolation and structural characterization of active compounds, rigorous **in vivo** validation, pharmacokinetic and safety studies, and the development of standardized quality-control procedures. Advanced drug delivery systems, sustainable cultivation practices, and regulatory-guided clinical development should also be emphasized. Integrating metabolomics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and systems pharmacology will accelerate lead identification and optimization. Collectively, these multidisciplinary approaches can unlock the therapeutic potential of

aquatic and wetland plants, facilitating their translation into safe, effective, and evidence-based pharmaceuticals for future healthcare applications.

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