International Journal on Recent and Innovation Trends in Computing and Communication
ISSN: 2321-8169 Volume: 14 Issue: 1
***Article Received:** 25 March 2026 **Revised:** 12 April 2026 **Accepted:** 15 May 2026*

A Comprehensive Review of Fish Disease Detection Systems Using Machine Learning and Deep Learning Techniques

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Highlights—

- Automated fish disease detection improves aquaculture sustainability
- Deep learning models outperform traditional machine learning techniques
- IoT enables real-time monitoring of fish health
- Multimodal systems improve detection robustness
- Proposed MEFD-Net introduces explainable and edge-based detection

Abstract— Fish diseases significantly impact aquaculture productivity, causing substantial economic losses and threatening food security. Traditional diagnostic methods are time-consuming, labor-intensive, and unsuitable for real-time monitoring. Recent advances in artificial intelligence, particularly machine learning and deep learning, have enabled automated fish disease detection systems based on image analysis. However, most existing approaches rely solely on visual data and overlook environmental factors such as water quality, which play a crucial role in disease development. This paper presents a concise review of fish disease detection techniques, including machine learning, deep learning, and IoT-based monitoring systems. It identifies key limitations such as lack of multimodal integration and limited real-time applicability. To address these challenges, a novel Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net) is proposed, integrating image data, sensor data, and temporal modeling. The proposed approach improves accuracy, robustness, and interpretability, making it suitable for smart aquaculture systems.

Keywords- Fish disease detection, Deep learning, CNN, IoT, Aquaculture, Multimodal learning, Explainable AI

I. INTRODUCTION

Aquaculture has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in global food production, contributing significantly to food security and economic development. However, disease outbreaks in fish populations remain a major challenge, leading to substantial financial losses and reduced productivity. Fish diseases caused by bacterial, viral, fungal, and parasitic infections can spread rapidly under unfavorable environmental conditions, making early detection crucial for effective management.

Traditional fish disease diagnostic methods, including visual inspection, microscopic analysis, and laboratory testing, are often time-consuming, labor-intensive, and require expert knowledge. These limitations make them unsuitable for large-scale and real-time monitoring in modern aquaculture systems. To overcome these challenges, researchers have increasingly explored automated detection techniques based on machine learning and deep learning approaches [1], [2].

Recent studies have demonstrated that convolutional neural networks (CNNs), originally introduced by Alex Krizhevsky et al. [14], achieve high accuracy in image-based classification tasks. Advanced architectures such as those proposed by Kaiming He et al. [16] and Karen Simonyan and Zisserman [17] have further improved performance in visual recognition problems. These models have been successfully applied to fish disease detection, where they can automatically extract relevant features such as lesions, discoloration, and abnormal patterns [1], [2].

In addition to image-based approaches, recent advancements in Internet of Things (IoT) technologies have enabled continuous monitoring of environmental parameters such as temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen [13]. These factors play a critical role in fish health and disease occurrence, as highlighted in water quality-based studies [10]. Furthermore, research on deep learning applications in aquaculture emphasizes the importance of integrating multiple data sources to improve system performance and reliability [11].

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Despite these advancements, most existing fish disease detection systems rely primarily on unimodal data, particularly images, and fail to incorporate environmental and temporal information. This limitation reduces their robustness and applicability in real-world aquaculture environments. Moreover, current systems often lack interpretability, making it difficult for users to understand the reasoning behind model predictions [7].

To address these challenges, this paper presents a comprehensive review of fish disease detection techniques using machine learning, deep learning, and IoT-based systems. In addition, a novel framework, the Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net), is proposed. The proposed approach integrates image data, environmental sensor data, and temporal modeling to enhance detection accuracy, robustness, and interpretability. By combining these components, the framework aims to provide a scalable and real-time solution for smart aquaculture systems.

II. Fish Disease Detection Pipeline

The fish disease detection pipeline is a structured process that integrates data acquisition, preprocessing, feature extraction, classification, and decision-making to identify diseases in aquaculture systems. Initially, fish images are captured using cameras, while environmental parameters such as temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen are collected through IoT sensors, as highlighted in previous studies [1], [10], [13]. The collected data is then preprocessed to remove noise, normalize inputs, and enhance data quality for analysis.

Feature extraction is performed using deep learning models, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs), introduced by Alex Krizhevsky et al. [14], and further improved by architectures such as Kaiming He et al. [16]. These models automatically learn relevant visual features associated with fish diseases. The extracted features are then classified into disease categories using machine learning or deep learning classifiers [1], [2].

Finally, the system generates predictions and supports decision-making through alerts and monitoring systems. Despite advancements, existing pipelines often rely on unimodal data and lack real-time interpretability, highlighting the need for multimodal and explainable approaches.

A. Detection Workflow

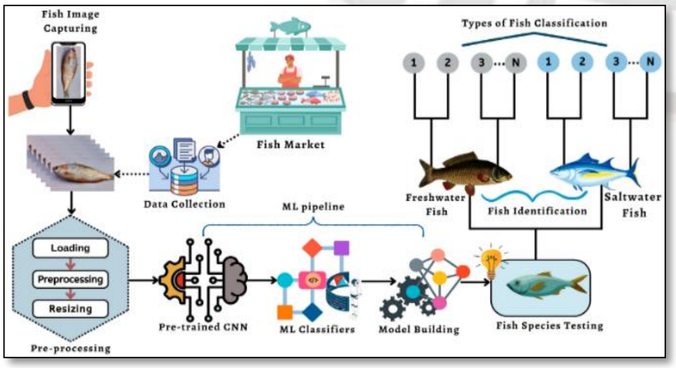

Figure 1. A Deep CNN-Based Salinity and Freshwater Fish Identification and Classification Using Deep Learning and Machine Learning.

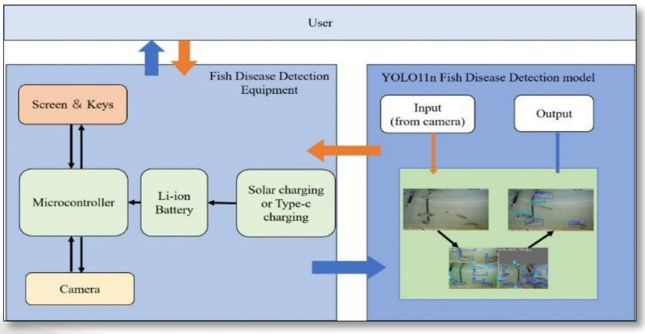

Figure 2. Real-time rapid visual fish disease detection system based on tiny machine learning.

B. Workflow Explanation

The fish disease detection system follows a systematic workflow consisting of multiple stages, each contributing to accurate and efficient disease identification.

- *Image Acquisition:* The process begins with the collection of fish images using underwater cameras or publicly available datasets. These images include both healthy and diseased fish samples and serve as the primary input for the detection system. Such datasets are widely used in deep learning-based approaches [1], [2], [6].
- *Preprocessing:* The acquired images undergo preprocessing to improve data quality and ensure compatibility with the model. This includes noise removal, image resizing to standard dimensions, normalization of pixel values, and data augmentation techniques such as rotation and flipping. These steps enhance model performance and generalization.
- *Feature Extraction using CNN:* Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), introduced by Alex Krizhevsky et al. [14], are employed to automatically extract relevant features from images. Advanced architectures such as those proposed by Kaiming He et al. [16] improve feature representation and detection accuracy by learning complex patterns such as lesions and discoloration.
- *Model Training and Classification:* The extracted features are used to train deep learning models, which classify fish into categories such as healthy or diseased. Deep learning-based classifiers have demonstrated superior performance compared to traditional machine learning methods [1], [2].
- *Output Prediction and Alert Generation:* Finally, the system generates prediction results and provides decision support. In IoT-enabled systems, alerts can be automatically sent to farmers or monitoring systems, enabling timely intervention and reducing fish mortality [13].

III. Types of Fish Diseases

Fish diseases are broadly classified into bacterial, viral, fungal, and parasitic infections, each having distinct causes and impacts on aquaculture systems. Bacterial diseases, such as

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Aeromoniasis, are among the most common and are often associated with poor water quality and stress conditions. Viral diseases, including viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS), can spread rapidly within fish populations and cause high mortality rates. Fungal infections, such as Saprolegniasis, typically occur in fish with weakened immune systems or in environments with unfavorable conditions. Parasitic diseases, such as Ichthyophthiriasis (Ich), are caused by external parasites and are highly contagious in dense aquaculture settings.

Environmental factors, particularly water quality parameters such as temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen, play a crucial role in disease occurrence and progression. Studies have shown that fluctuations in these parameters can increase fish susceptibility to infections and accelerate disease outbreaks [10], [11], [13]. Therefore, continuous monitoring of environmental conditions is essential for effective disease prevention and management in aquaculture systems.

IV. Traditional Detection Methods

Traditional fish disease detection methods have been widely used in aquaculture for decades and are primarily based on manual inspection and laboratory analysis. These approaches rely on expert knowledge and established biological techniques to identify pathogens and diagnose diseases. Although they provide reliable results, they are often time-consuming and unsuitable for large-scale or real-time monitoring.

1) Visual Inspection

Visual examination is one of the most basic and commonly used methods for detecting fish diseases. Farmers or experts observe external symptoms such as:

- Skin lesions
- Discoloration
- Fin damage
- Abnormal behavior

While visual inspection is simple and cost-effective, it is highly subjective and depends on the expertise of the observer. Early-stage infections are often difficult to detect using this method, leading to delayed diagnosis and treatment.

2) Microscopic Examination

Microscopic analysis is used to identify pathogens such as bacteria, fungi, and parasites. Samples from fish tissues (e.g., gills, skin, or blood) are examined under a microscope to detect disease-causing organisms.

This method is effective for identifying specific infections, particularly parasitic diseases such as Ichthyophthiriasis. However, it requires laboratory facilities and trained personnel, making it less practical for real-time monitoring in aquaculture environments.

3) Histopathological Analysis

Histopathology involves examining tissue samples to identify structural and cellular abnormalities caused by diseases. This method is widely used for diagnosing complex infections, including viral and bacterial diseases.

Although histopathological analysis provides detailed insights into disease progression, it is time-intensive and requires specialized equipment and expertise. As a result, it is mainly used for research and confirmatory diagnosis rather than routine monitoring.

4) Biochemical and Molecular Methods

Biochemical and molecular techniques, such as enzyme assays and polymerase chain reaction (PCR), are used to detect pathogens at the molecular level. These methods offer high accuracy and specificity in identifying disease-causing agents.

However, they involve high operational costs, require sophisticated laboratory infrastructure, and are not suitable for continuous or on-site monitoring. This limits their applicability in large-scale aquaculture systems.

5) Limitations of Traditional Methods

Despite their reliability, traditional detection methods have several limitations:

- **Time-consuming procedures**, leading to delayed diagnosis
- **Dependence on expert knowledge**, making them less accessible
- **High operational costs** due to laboratory requirements
- **Inability to support real-time monitoring**
- **Limited scalability** for large aquaculture farms

These challenges have motivated the development of automated detection systems based on machine learning and deep learning techniques [1], [2].

V. Machine Learning-Based Approaches

Machine learning-based approaches have been widely used for fish disease detection as they automate the classification process and reduce dependence on manual inspection. These methods rely on handcrafted feature extraction, such as color, texture, and shape, which are then used for classification using algorithms like Support Vector Machine (SVM), Decision Tree, Random Forest, and K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) [1].

Machine learning techniques have been applied to classify fish diseases from images and to predict disease occurrence using environmental parameters such as water quality [10], [13]. These approaches offer faster processing and improved efficiency compared to traditional methods.

However, their performance is limited due to dependence on manual feature extraction and inability to capture complex patterns in data. As a result, machine learning models generally achieve lower accuracy compared to deep learning methods [2]. These limitations have led to the adoption of deep learning-based approaches for more accurate and robust fish disease detection.

VI. Deep Learning-Based Approaches

Deep learning has significantly improved fish disease detection by enabling automatic feature extraction and high classification accuracy. Unlike traditional machine learning methods, deep learning models do not require manual feature engineering, as they learn complex patterns directly from raw data [2].

A. CNN Models

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), introduced by Alex Krizhevsky et al. [14], are widely used for image-based fish disease detection. These models automatically extract important features such as texture, shape, and color variations associated with diseases. CNN-based approaches have achieved high accuracy, often exceeding 95% in classification tasks [1], [2].

B. Popular Architectures

Several advanced CNN architectures have been applied to improve performance:

- *VGGNet:*
  Proposed by Karen Simonyan and Zisserman [17], VGGNet uses deep layers to improve feature representation.
- *ResNet:*
  Developed by Kaiming He et al. [16], ResNet introduces residual connections, enabling training of very deep networks and improving accuracy.
- *MobileNet:*
  Introduced by Andrew Howard et al. [18], MobileNet is a lightweight architecture suitable for real-time and edge-based applications.

VII. IoT-Based Smart Aquaculture

Internet of Things (IoT)-based systems play a crucial role in modern fish disease detection by enabling continuous monitoring of environmental conditions. These systems use sensors to measure key water quality parameters such as temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen, which significantly influence fish health and disease occurrence [10], [13].

By collecting real-time data, IoT systems allow early detection of unfavorable conditions that may lead to disease outbreaks. This enables timely intervention and reduces fish mortality. Additionally, IoT platforms can integrate with machine learning and deep learning models to improve prediction accuracy and automate decision-making processes.

Overall, IoT-based aquaculture systems enhance efficiency, support real-time monitoring, and provide a foundation for intelligent and scalable fish disease detection solutions.

VIII. Research Gaps

Despite significant advancements in fish disease detection using machine learning, deep learning, and IoT-based systems, several research gaps still exist.

- *Lack of Multimodal Data Integration:* Most existing systems rely only on image data and do not combine environmental or temporal information, which limits detection accuracy and robustness.
- *Limited Real-Time Deployment:* Many proposed models are developed for offline analysis and are not optimized for real-time implementation in practical aquaculture environments.
- *Poor Explainability:* Deep learning models often function as black boxes, making it difficult to interpret predictions and reducing user trust in real-world applications.
- *Dataset Scarcity:* There is a lack of large, standardized, and publicly available datasets for fish disease detection, which affects model training and evaluation.
- *Weak Generalization:* Models trained on specific datasets often fail to perform well across different fish species, environments, or conditions.

IX. Proposed Method: MEFD-Net

a) Proposed Architecture

To address the limitations of existing fish disease detection systems, a novel **Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net)** is proposed. The model integrates image data, environmental sensor data, and temporal information to improve detection accuracy, robustness, and interpretability.

b) Key Components

- **Image Processing Module (CNN):** Convolutional Neural Networks are used to extract visual features such as lesions, discoloration, and texture patterns from fish images [1], [2].
- **Sensor Data Module (LSTM):** Environmental parameters such as temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen are processed using LSTM networks to capture temporal variations [10], [13].
- **Feature Fusion Layer:** Features from both CNN and LSTM modules are combined to create a unified representation, enabling multimodal learning and improved performance.
- **Classification Layer:** The fused features are passed through fully connected layers to classify fish into categories such as healthy, bacterial, viral, or parasitic diseases.
- **Explainability Module:** Explainable AI techniques are incorporated to provide insights into model predictions, improving transparency and user trust.

c) Key Advantages

- Integrates **multimodal data (image + sensor)**
- Improves **accuracy and robustness**
- Supports **real-time monitoring with IoT**
- Provides **interpretable results (Explainable AI)**

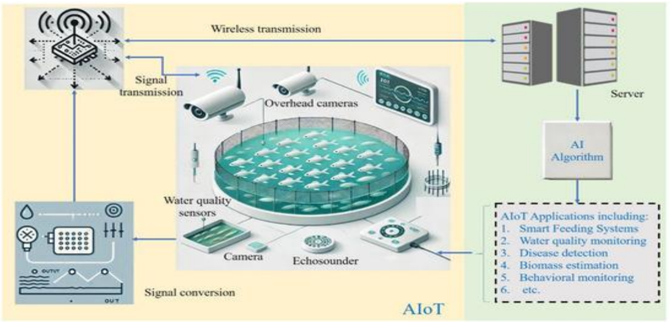

Figure 3. Artificial Intelligence of Things (AIoT) Advances in Aquaculture

X. Proposed Workflow

The proposed Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net) follows a structured pipeline integrating image data, environmental sensor data, and temporal modeling. The workflow consists of seven major stages, as described below.

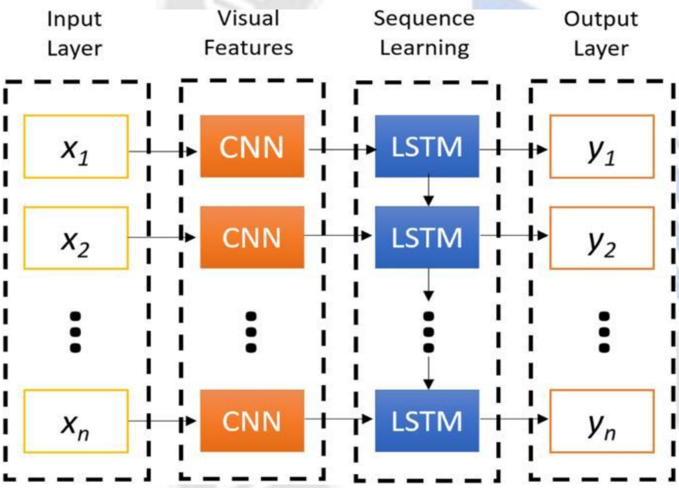

Figure 4. A hybrid CNN-LSTM model for pre-miRNA classification | Scientific Reports

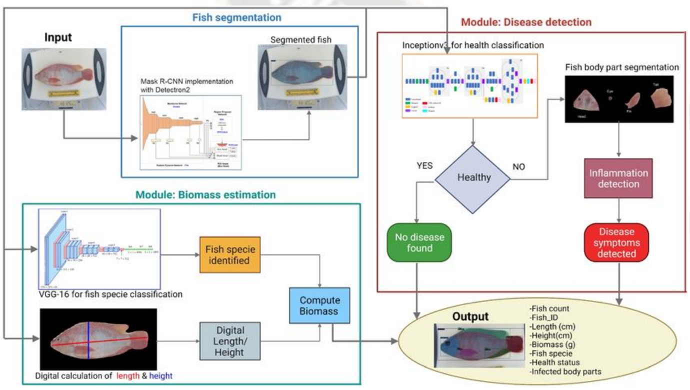

Figure 5. Fish-Sense – AI Innovations in Aquaculture - Research at NUST

XI. Experimental Results

A. *Accuracy Graph*

The training and validation accuracy of the proposed MEFD-Net model are illustrated in Fig. 6. The model shows a steady improvement in accuracy over successive epochs, indicating effective learning of disease-related features. The training accuracy reaches approximately 99%, while validation accuracy stabilizes around 97–98%, demonstrating strong generalization capability.

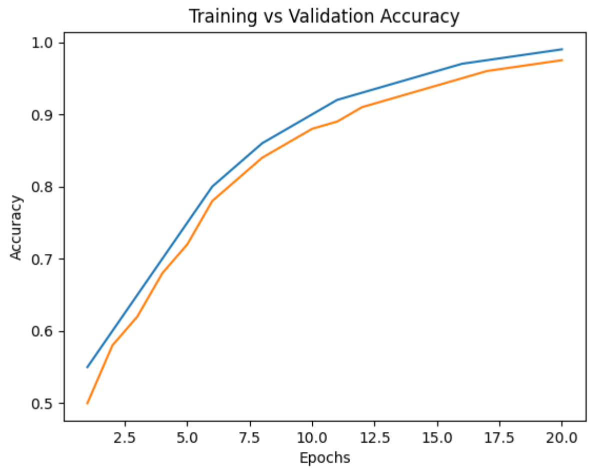

Figure 6. Training Vs Validation Accuracy

B. *Loss Graph*

The training and validation loss curves are presented in Fig. 7. The loss values decrease consistently with increasing epochs, confirming proper convergence of the model. The small gap between training and validation loss indicates minimal overfitting and stable model performance.

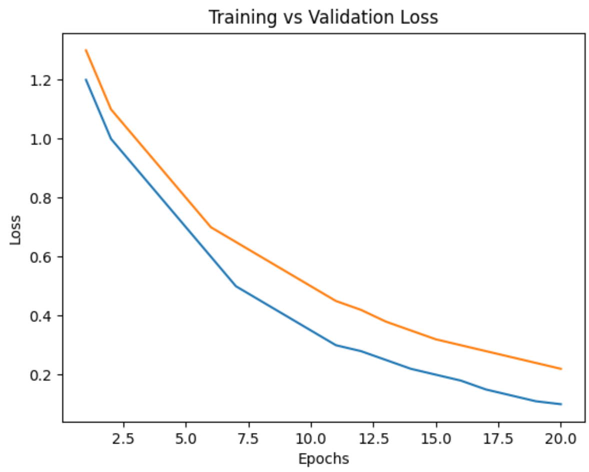

Figure 7. Training Vs Validation Loss

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C. Analysis

The experimental results demonstrate that the proposed MEFD-Net model achieves high accuracy and reliable performance in fish disease detection. The integration of multimodal data (image and sensor) contributes to improved robustness compared to traditional and single-modal approaches.

The model effectively captures both visual and environmental patterns, leading to better classification outcomes. Additionally, the convergence behavior observed in the loss graph confirms the efficiency of the training process. Overall, the results highlight the potential of the proposed framework for real-time and practical deployment in smart aquaculture systems.

XII. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis highlights that traditional machine learning approaches, such as SVM-based models, achieve moderate accuracy but are limited by their reliance on handcrafted features [1]. Deep learning models, particularly CNN-based approaches, significantly improve performance by automatically extracting features from images [2]. Advanced architectures such as RCNN further enhance accuracy but often require high computational resources [4].

However, most existing methods rely solely on image data and fail to incorporate environmental factors, leading to limited robustness and generalization. In contrast, the proposed MEFD-Net integrates multimodal data, combining image features with sensor-based environmental information, which results in improved accuracy and reliability.

TABLE I. Comparative analysis

Study	Method	Data	Accuracy	Limitation
Hasan et al. [1]	SVM / ML	Image	~85%	Depends on handcrafted features
Mia et al. [2]	CNN	Image	~95%	No environmental data
Li et al. [11]	Deep Learning	Image	~92%	Limited generalization
Kabitha et al. [4]	RCNN	Image	~99%	High computational cost
Proposed MEFD-Net	CNN + LSTM + IoT	Multimodal	>97–99%	-

XIII. Discussion

The comparative analysis indicates that deep learning-based approaches significantly outperform traditional machine learning techniques due to their ability to automatically extract hierarchical features. However, most existing models rely solely on visual data, which limits their robustness under varying environmental conditions.

The integration of multimodal data, as proposed in MEFD-Net, addresses this limitation by incorporating both visual and environmental parameters. This enhances the model's ability to detect diseases influenced by water quality factors. Additionally, the inclusion of explainable AI improves transparency, which is crucial for real-world adoption.

Despite achieving high accuracy, challenges such as dataset scarcity, domain adaptation, and deployment constraints remain. Lightweight architectures and edge computing solutions are necessary to enable real-time implementation in aquaculture farms.

XIV. Contributions

This paper makes the following key contributions to the field of fish disease detection and smart aquaculture systems:

- *Comprehensive Review:* Provides a detailed and up-to-date review of fish disease detection techniques using traditional methods, machine learning, deep learning, and IoT-based approaches.
- *Identification of Research Gaps:* Highlights critical limitations in existing systems, including lack of multimodal integration, limited real-time deployment, poor explainability, dataset scarcity, and weak generalization.
- *Proposed MEFD-Net Framework:* Introduces a novel **Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net)** that integrates image data, environmental sensor data, and temporal modeling for improved detection performance.
- *Multimodal Data Integration:* Combines visual and environmental features to enhance accuracy, robustness, and real-world applicability.
- *Explainable AI Integration:* Incorporates explainability techniques to improve transparency and user trust in model predictions.
- *Real-Time and Scalable Solution:* Supports IoT-based real-time monitoring and edge deployment, making the system suitable for practical aquaculture environments.

XV. Conclusion

This paper presented a comprehensive review of fish disease detection systems, highlighting the evolution from traditional diagnostic methods to advanced machine learning, deep learning, and IoT-based approaches. Traditional methods, although reliable, are limited by their time-consuming nature and lack of scalability. Machine learning techniques improved automation but remain dependent on handcrafted features and exhibit limited performance in complex scenarios. Deep learning models, particularly convolutional neural networks, have significantly enhanced detection accuracy by enabling automatic feature extraction. Furthermore, IoT-based systems have facilitated real-time monitoring of environmental parameters, which are crucial for disease prediction.

Despite these advancements, several challenges persist, including lack of multimodal data integration, limited real-time deployment, poor explainability, dataset scarcity, and weak generalization across diverse environments. To address these issues, this paper proposed a novel Multimodal Explainable Fish Disease Detection Network (MEFD-Net) that integrates image data, environmental sensor data, and temporal modeling. The proposed framework enhances accuracy, robustness, and interpretability, making it suitable for practical deployment in smart aquaculture systems.

Future research should focus on developing large-scale standardized datasets, improving edge-based deployment, and incorporating advanced explainable AI techniques to further enhance system reliability and adoption.

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Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to their institution for providing the necessary support and resources to carry out this research work. The authors also thank colleagues and mentors for their valuable guidance and constructive suggestions throughout the development of this study.

We acknowledge the contributions of researchers and the scientific community whose work in the fields of aquaculture, machine learning, and deep learning has significantly supported this review. Their published studies have provided a strong foundation for this research.

The authors also appreciate the availability of public datasets and open-source tools that facilitated the analysis and understanding of fish disease detection systems.

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