

## Research Article

# Structure and organic matter content of the seafloor sediment affect the growth of sea cucumbers (*Holothuria scabra*) reared in sea pens

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Sea pens,  
Growth,  
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Organic matters**Abstract**

The sea cucumber, *Holothuria scabra* (sandfish), is an important aquaculture species due to its high economic value. This has led to over-exploitation causing population decline; consequently, aquaculture of sea cucumber is required to increase production. This study aims to obtain data and information on the growth performance of sandfish reared in a sea pen culture system and develop its cultivation in coastal areas of Sumberkima Village, Gerokgak District of Buleleng, Bali-Indonesia. Three 10 x 5 m<sup>2</sup> sea pens (KJT), namely KJT-A, KJT-B, and KJT-C, with a 3-m height net, were installed at the site using bamboo and plugged into the seabed to support the net. These three KJTs have different seafloor characteristics from the experimental group. The sediment composition in the KJT-B consisted of loamy sand with high organic matter compared to KJT-A and KJT-C, which were sandy. The sandfish juveniles were stocked into each KJT at a density of 300 individual/pen with an average initial weight of 17.7±6.6 g and an average total length of 6.6±1.2 cm for 180 days. The results showed the daily growth rate of sandfish in KJT-B was the highest (1.44 %/day) when compared with KJT-A (0.92 %/day), and KJT-C (0.96 %/day). These results indicated that the growth of sandfish (*H. scabra*) depends on the structure and composition of the seafloor sediment. The seafloor sediment structures of loamy sand with high organic matter and C-organic content promote the best growth of sandfish.

**Article info**

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## Introduction

Sandfish, *Holothuria scabra* Jaeger, 1833, has become the most important species of sea cucumber with high commercial value in the Asian market. It is mostly found on sandy or muddy beaches (Pangkey *et al.*, 2012) and distributed along the Indo-Pacific waters (Mercier *et al.*, 2000). Meanwhile, the extract matters of sea cucumber have a good nutritional value and contain certain active compounds that are used as a functional food and for health purposes (Chatterji *et al.*, 2010; Bordbar *et al.*, 2011; Karnila *et al.*, 2011; Seo and Lee, 2011). This has led to a high demand for sandfish causing over-exploitation, which threatens the sustainability of its wild population (Purwati *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the development of sea cucumber aquaculture provides the opportunity to increase the volume of production. In Indonesia, the aquaculture practice has been supported by the development of hatchery technologies at the Institute for Mariculture Research and Fisheries Extension (IMRAFE) Gondol, Bali. This institute had successfully produced sandfish juveniles on a mass scale (Sembiring *et al.*, 2015; Giri *et al.*, 2017).

Since sandfish are generally known as a slow-growing species, there is a need for a relatively long period of farming. Some studies reported that sea ranching is an alternate method of raising this species (Hair *et al.*, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2016; Taylor *et al.*, 2016). Through this method, sandfish easily obtain food sources from the surrounding habitats without being supplied. Sea cucumbers belong to the group of omnivores but are more likely to be herbivores (Hauksson, 1979). The

species that inhabit coastal ecosystems often filter out seafloor sediment and prey on diatoms, bacteria, detritus, and organic matter (Uthicke and Karez, 1999; Hartati *et al.*, 2017). For this reason, accumulated areas that have soft seafloor sediment, which consist of sandy loam substrate and are located in low physical exposure sheltered areas is the best habitat that is rich in food for sandfish (Garcia *et al.*, 2015; Mayerle *et al.*, 2020). In addition, seagrass beds are also an important habitat for sea cucumbers due to the availability of several types of microorganisms suitable for food. According to Taurusman *et al.* (2013), areas with poor conditions of seagrass need to be rehabilitated before restocking sea cucumber seed. In addition, Wulandari *et al.* (2016) also conducted a study on the suitability of the sandfish (*H. scabra*) farming areas based on parameters of depth, seafloor conditions, brightness, salinity, acidity, protection, dissolved oxygen content, and surface temperature in Kiowa Bay waters, Enggano. This shows that the characteristics of the aquatic environment greatly determine the success of sea cucumber farming by sea ranching and pens system. Han *et al.* (2016), also documented that the key to success in sea ranching is site selection and proper routine management. Tomatala *et al.* (2018), also examined the construction of sea pens that were suitable for the cultivation of sea cucumbers in the seashore of Maluku Tenggara Regency. Furthermore, Juinio-Menez *et al.* (2014), conducted a study on aquaculture to determine the effect of juvenile size, rearing period, and suitability of the location for growth and survival of the species that were maintained in sea pens

and floating net cages. The results of their studies showed that the growth of the harvested sea cucumber varied considerably.

This study was conducted to obtain data and information on the growth performance of *H. scabra* which were reared in the sea pens culture system for the development of sea cucumber aquaculture clusters in coastal areas.

## Materials and methods

### *Experimental locations and preparation of sea pens culture system*

This study was conducted close to the mangrove area in Sumberkima Village, Gerokgak District, Buleleng Regency, Bali-Indonesia. In this site, there was a flow of

water discharged from intensive shrimp ponds that could affect the characteristics of seafloor sediment. The three  $10 \times 5 \text{ m}^2$  sea pens (KJT), namely KJT-A, KJT-B, and KJT-C, with a 3-m height net, were installed at the site using bamboo and plugged into the seabed to support the net. Nylon nets with a mesh size of 5 mm were used, and its lower edge was held using a bamboo frame. The net was fitted to the seafloor, buried to a depth of 20 cm, and pressed tightly using a sand-sack weight to prevent sea cucumber from escaping (Fig. 1). Before the seeds were stocked, predatory animals inside the pen such as crabs and starfish were removed.



Figure 1: Sea pens (KJT) used for sea cucumber rearing.

### *Sandfish juveniles*

Sandfish juveniles were produced in the IMRAFE's Sea Cucumber Hatchery, located in Gondol, Gerokgak District, Buleleng Regency, Bali-Indonesia, with an average weight of  $17.7 \pm 6.6 \text{ g}$  and total length of  $6.6 \pm 1.2 \text{ cm}$  and were stocked at a density of 300 ind./pen ( $6 \text{ ind./m}^2$ ). Growth observation was carried out in the sea pens for 180 days. After stocking for 60 days, the weight and total length of thirty samples from each pen culture were measured and were repeatedly conducted every 30 days until the end of the experiment. Also, at the end of the

experiment, the number of sea cucumbers in each pen culture was calculated to obtain the survival data. Parameters of weight gain (WG), specific growth rate (SGR), daily growth rate (DGR), and survival rate (SR) of sandfish were calculated based on the following formula:

$$\text{Weight gain (\%)} = 100 \times (W_t - W_o) / W_o;$$

$$\text{Specific growth rate (\%/day)} = 100 \times (\ln W_t - \ln W_o) / t.$$

$$\text{Daily growth rate (g/day)} = (W_t - W_o) / t;$$

$$\text{Survival rate (\%)} = 100 \times (N_t / N_o).$$

Where,  $N_t$  and  $N_o$  are the number of sandfish at the end and the beginning of the experiment,  $W_t$  and  $W_o$  are the average

weight of sandfish at the end and the beginning of the experiment, and  $t$  is the length of the experiment (days).

#### *Observation of seafloor sediment structure*

The relationship between the seafloor sediment characteristics and the growth performance of sea cucumber was determined by analyzing the sediment inside and around the sea pens culture where the sandfish were reared. Sediment samples were collected by a diver using a PVC pipe of 3-inch diameter and length approximately 25 cm as sediment corer. The sediment corer was pushed into sediment vertically, closed the cap to avoid sample disturbance inside the core and slowly brought vertically to the surface. The caps were removed, and water on the top layer was drained using a small plastic pipe (Corner, 2017; Runte *et al.*, 2021). The redox potential was immediately measured on-site using Redox Electrode senTix Brand Type Multi 350i probe as well as pH values by pH meter Ohaus Brand Type ST 20. The redox and pH probes were introduced into the water-saturated sediment surface until stable values were obtained. Detection of hydrogen sulfide gas ( $H_2S$ ) in sediment samples was done by odor testing. Approximately 1 cm sample of sediment surface was taken to measure total nitrogen, total phosphate, organic matter, and organic carbon analysis. These samples were dried on-site by smearing a thin layer on labeled plastic film and exposing them to sunlight for approximately 15-20 min to dry. The samples were then continuously dried in a laboratory oven (Mettler U-30, Germany) at 60°C for two days to complete the water evaporation. The total nitrogen of

sediment was determined by the Kjeldahl method (APHA, 2005). The total phosphate was determined following the ascorbic acid method, while organic matter content by loss of ignition at 550°C using a muffle furnace by Gravimetric method SNI 01-2891-1992 (BSN, 1992), and organic carbon was analyzed using titration method (Walkley and Black, 1934). Sediment grain size distribution was determined using the hydrometer method as described by Bouyoucos (1962).

#### **Results**

The growth patterns of sandfish reared in the pen culture system for 180 days are presented in Figure 2. Sandfish reared in KJT-B showed the highest specific growth rate (SGR) of 1.44%/day from the initial average weight of  $18.0 \pm 6.0$  g to a final weight of  $238.7 \pm 94.2$  g, or with a daily growth rate (DGR) of 1.23 g/day for 180 days of the culture period (Table 1). Meanwhile, the specific growth rates of the sandfish reared in KJT-A and KJT-C were only 0.92%/day (DGR=0.41 g/day) and 0.96%/day (DGR=0.46 g/day), respectively.

The analysis of the seafloor sediment compositions inside the sea pens (KJT) is presented in Table 2. The sediment texture of the KJT-A and KJT-C was dominated by sand, while KJT-B was classified as loamy sand (Fig. 3). The organic matter content, organic carbon, total-N (N-NH<sub>3</sub>), and total phosphate (P-PO<sub>4</sub>) were higher in the sediment of KJT-B compared to KJT-A and KJT-C. Meanwhile, KJT-B with the highest organic matter content showed the lowest sediment pH value. Although the sediment redox values at the three pens culture locations showed negative values, KJT-B had the lowest. This is due to the higher organic matter content of sediment in the KJT-B.

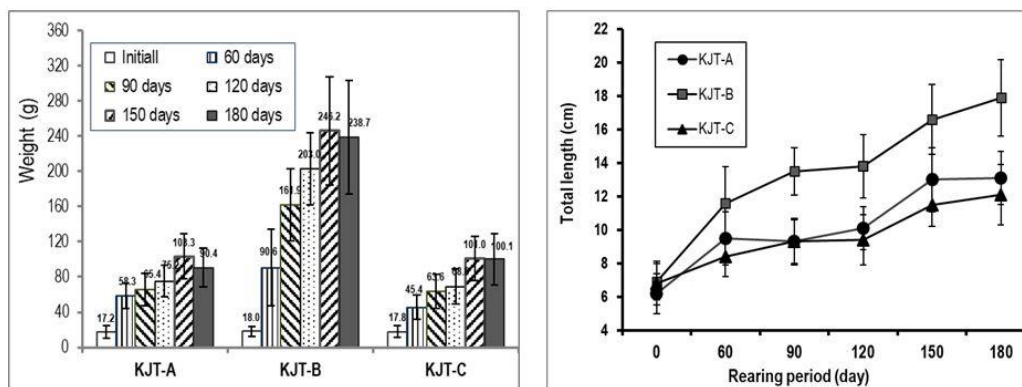


Figure 2: Growth patterns of weight (left) and total length (right) of sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*) that were maintained in the sea pen culture system (KJT) for 180 days.

Table 1: Growth performance of sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*) that were reared in sea pen culture systems for 180 days.

Parameters	Pen culture system (KJT)		
	KJT-A	KJT-B	KJT-C
Initial weight (g) (n=50)	17.2 ± 7.3	18.0 ± 6.0	17.8 ± 6.5
Final weight (g)	90.4 ± 21.9	238.7 ± 94.2	100.1 ± 29.3
Weight gain (%)	425.6	1226.1	462.4
Daily growth rate (g/day)	0.41	1.23	0.46
Specific growth rate (%/day)	0.92	1.44	0.96
Initial total length (cm)	6.2 ± 1.2	6.9 ± 1.1	6.8 ± 1.3
Final total length (cm)	13.1 ± 1.6	17.9 ± 2.9	12.1 ± 1.8
Survival (%)	65.3	23.7	60.3

Table 2: Composition of seafloor sediment inside the pen culture system (KJT) where sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*) was reared.

Parameters	Pen culture system (KJT)		
	KJT-A	KJT-B	KJT-C
Total organic matter (%)	5.68	13.54	6.06
Total C-organic (%)	1.57	3.58	0.78
Total-P (%)	0.029	0.065	0.015
Total-N (%)	0.011	0.059	0.010
Redox potential (mV)	-6.3	-39.6	-16.5
pH	8.21	7.98	8.16
H <sub>2</sub> S	-	**	-
Texture	sand	loamy sand	sand

- : H<sub>2</sub>S was not detected; \*\*= H<sub>2</sub>S was detected

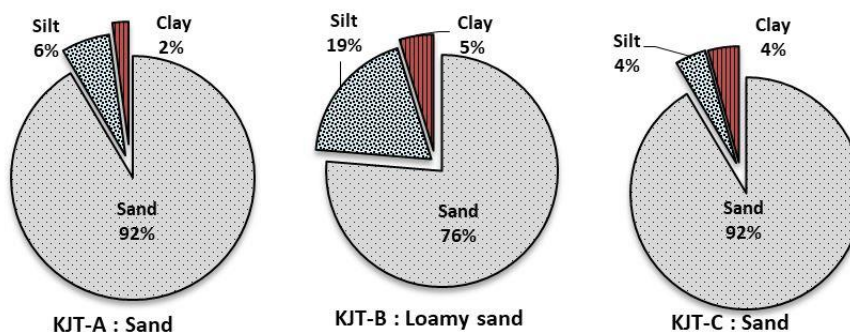


Figure 3: The texture of seafloor sediment inside the pen culture system where sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*) was reared.

## Discussion

In this study, the growth rate of sea cucumber was in line with the results reported by Agudo (2006), which were the medium size grew on an average of 14 g/month or 0.46 g/day. This showed that the growth rate of the species maintained in natural habitats varied significantly. Hair *et al.* (2016), mentioned that the growth of sandfish reared for 4 months by pen culture system in a seagrass area can reach a weight of 74.8-113.6 g from an initial of 3-20 g or 0.59 - 0.69 g/day. Similarly, Juinio-Menez *et al.* (2012) also documented that sea cucumber maintained in several pen culture systems has a growth rate of 164 g from an initial weight of 8-10 g over 5 months. However, the growth of sea cucumbers varied significantly and also had negative growth. Stocking density also affects the growth of sea cucumbers that were maintained in the pen culture system (Pitt and Duy, 2004; Lavitra *et al.*, 2010; Hannah *et al.*, 2013; Namukose *et al.*, 2016). Species with an initial weight of 114 g in a 1.5 x 1.5 m<sup>2</sup> pen culture system grew at a rate of 0.8 g/day and 0.14 g/day when reared at low and medium or high density, respectively (Namukose *et al.*, 2016).

In a previous study, the cultivation of juveniles sea cucumber in concrete tanks with artificial feed for 5 months gave a low specific growth rate of 0.57 - 0.74%/day, while floating net cages installed in the earthen pond with the same feed for 4 months resulted in high specific growth rate of 1.46 - 1.64%/day. It is important to note that rearing in the floating nets in the ponds had a smaller initial weight (Giri *et al.*, 2019). Sithisak *et al.* (2013), mentioned that the growth of sandfish was relatively

slow, thus, it required two years from hatching to reach commercial size. Battaglione (1999), also presented that the average growth of juvenile sandfish is approximately 0.2-0.8 mm/day under normal culture conditions.

Sandfish cultured in the pen system in this study were not fed, hence, they depended on food available in their habitats or the seafloor sediment. Therefore, the structure and composition of seafloor sediment largely determine their growth rate. The results showed that the structure and composition of loamy sand sediment in KJT-B supported the good growth of the sandfish. The sediment in KJT-B had higher organic matter content which provides a food source for sea cucumber to support its growth (Table 2; Fig. 3). This is in line with Namukose *et al.*, (2016), where the total organic matter content (TOM) and total organic carbon (TOC) in the bottom sediment decreased during the period of sea cucumber culture, particularly when stocked at high densities. Similarly, it is concluded that the sea cucumber inhabiting the coastal benthos ecosystem filters out sediment and feeds on diatoms, bacteria, detritus, and organic matter that passes through the digestive tract (Uthicke and Karez, 1999). According to Hamel *et al.* (2001), the seabed sediments of muddy sand were considered ideal because they have sufficient organic matter as food, are easy to consume and sea cucumbers can easily be submerged. Gutajar *et al.* (2022) reported that sea cucumbers *Holothuria poli* could grow better in locations near a commercial fish cage because sediment near commercial fish cages provides a good food source enriched by waste released

from fish cages. Altamirano *et al.* (2017) mentioned that juvenile sandfish tend to choose a muddy sand substrate to inhabit, search for food, and also prefer coarser sediment to fine-sized particles. A study by Ceccareli *et al.* (2018), it showed that sand particles of 100 - 300  $\mu\text{m}$  with high organic matter, especially organic-C and an abundance of benthic microbiota were good substrates for sea cucumber. In addition to particle size, Tsiresy *et al.* (2011) discovered that sediment friability was an important aspect of supporting their growth because they can easily obtain available food in the sediment.

Although sediment conditions in the KJT-B produced the best growth rate, lower redox values, and the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  can be an obstacle to the life of sea cucumber. A negative value for redox potential indicated an increase in organic matter accumulation that was higher than the degree of decomposition in the aquatic substrate. This usually occurs in sediments with a higher silt and clay texture composition (Viaroli *et al.*, 2004). Based on field observations, there was a flow of water discharged from intensive shrimp ponds towards the location of KJT-B. This was assumed to be the cause of an increase in the value of organic matter. In the 4<sup>th</sup> month of rearing, there were a significant number of dead sea cucumbers in KJT-B which made the number of the survivors the lowest compared to KJT-A and KJT-C (Table 1). In addition, the presence of predators also determines the success of sea cucumber cultivation in the sea as found by Eriksson *et al.* (2012). Some crustaceans, especially crabs, starfish, several species of fish, and gastropods also could be

predators, causing a low survival rate for sea cucumber aquaculture (Dance *et al.*, 2003; Zamora and Jeffs, 2013).

Seafloor sediment sand with little clay and silt content is physically harder than those with loamy sand. These conditions can inhibit the burying activities of sea cucumbers and deter their growth as observed in KJT-A and KJT-C. This is because sandfish usually immerse their bodies in the sand during the day and actively search for food before dusk and at night (Hamel *et al.*, 2001; Tomatala *et al.*, 2018; Sulardiono and Hendarto, 2014) since they prefer habitats of fine to a medium grain of sand (Plotieau *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, Hair *et al.* (2016) reported that seafloor with a coarse sand substrate, high chlorophyll-a content, and covered with seagrass overgrown epiphytes support the growth and survival of sandfish.

This study found that the growth of sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*) depends greatly on the structure and composition of the seafloor sediment. In addition, this species of sea cucumber grew better in the sediment of loamy sand with high organic matter content.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding this research article.

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