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Review Article

Beyond Chemistry: Unveiling the Interdisciplinary Role of Natural Products in Modern Biology

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Abstract

Natural products, bioactive molecules synthesized by living organisms, have long served as a cornerstone of drug discovery and therapeutic innovation. However, their relevance extends far beyond pharmacological applications, permeating diverse scientific disciplines such as ecology, microbiome research, synthetic biology, and personalized medicine. These compounds reveal intricate ecological relationships, drive molecular innovation, and provide insights into evolutionary dynamics. With the advent of omics technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), natural product research has undergone a transformative shift, enabling the rapid discovery, engineering, and optimization of bioactive compounds. This review synthesizes the multifaceted roles of natural products, highlighting their contributions to sustainable agriculture, environmental resilience, and biotechnological innovation. Furthermore, it critically examines ethical and sustainability challenges, emphasizing the need for equitable resource sharing and biodiversity conservation. By integrating traditional approaches with cutting-edge technological advancements, this review underscores the transformative potential of natural products to address global challenges in health, ecology, and biotechnology. Future directions are proposed to enhance the ethical, technological, and ecological dimensions of natural product research, advocating for interdisciplinary collaborations that prioritize sustainability and equity.

Keywords: Natural Products; Synthetic Biology; Omics Technologies; AI in Drug Discovery; Microbiome Interactions; Sustainability and Bioprospecting

Introduction

Natural products are defined as bioactive chemical compounds synthesized by living organisms, including plants, microorganisms, marine organisms, and animals. These compounds often serve ecological purposes for the organisms that produce them, such as defense mechanisms, communication, and survival under environmental stress. Characterized by their immense structural diversity and biological activity, natural products have been pivotal in shaping the fields of pharmacology and molecular biology. Natural products have been a cornerstone of scientific and therapeutic advancements.

Historically, the discovery of natural products revolutionized medicine and biotechnology. Notable examples include the isolation of penicillin from *Penicillium* molds by Alexander Fleming, which heralded the antibiotic era, and the development of paclitaxel (Taxol) from the Pacific yew tree, a breakthrough in cancer chemotherapy. Such discoveries underscore the profound impact of natural products on therapeutic innovation and human health.

Beyond their contributions to medicine, natural products have played a crucial role in elucidating molecular mechanisms in biology. For instance, cyclosporin, derived from soil fungi, not only transformed organ transplantation through its immunosuppressive properties but also advanced our understanding of immune signaling pathways. Similarly, marine-derived compounds such as ziconotide have provided insights into neuropharmacology while offering new analgesic solutions.

In recent years, research has increasingly highlighted the interdisciplinary roles of natural products in areas such as microbiome modulation, synthetic biology, and environmental sustainability. These bioactive compounds play crucial roles in mediating interactions between species, enabling organisms to adapt to environmental pressures, and shaping microbial ecosystems. For example, flavonoids released by plants not only attract pollinators but also modulate soil microbial communities, fostering symbiotic relationships critical for plant health and growth [1].

The rise of cutting-edge technologies has exponentially expanded the scope of natural product research. Omics platforms—genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics—allow researchers to uncover biosynthetic pathways and identify novel bioactive molecules at unprecedented speed and scale [2]. Metagenomics, in particular, has enabled the study of unculturable microbes, revealing a wealth of biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs) encoding for previously unknown natural products [3]. Similarly, metabolomics has provided comprehensive metabolic fingerprints, facilitating the identification and characterization of new bioactive compounds [4].

Complementing these advancements, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative tool in natural product discovery. AI algorithms can predict the structures of complex molecules from genomic data, guide chemical synthesis, and optimize screening for bioactivity. For instance, deep learning models have been used to analyze microbial genomic datasets, predicting novel biosynthetic pathways and accelerating the identification of potential therapeutic agents [5,6].

Moreover, synthetic biology has provided avenues to engineer natural product biosynthetic pathways, enabling the production of high-value compounds in microbial hosts. This approach not only facilitates the scalable synthesis of essential drugs like artemisinin but also allows for the creation of "unnatural" natural products with enhanced bioactivity or novel functions [7].

The integration of these technologies has unlocked new potential for natural products in diverse scientific domains. Beyond their traditional applications in pharmacology, natural products are being explored as ecological tools for environmental sustainability, as modulators of human and environmental microbiomes, and as bioinspired scaffolds for material science and industrial biotechnology. These interdisciplinary contributions emphasize the growing importance of natural products as drivers of innovation in modern biology.

This review delves into these developments, highlighting the transformative impact of natural products across ecology, medicine, and technology. It underscores how the convergence of traditional natural product research with advanced technologies is not only expanding our understanding of biology but also providing solutions to some of the most pressing challenges in health, sustainability, and biotechnology.

Materials and Methods

Literature search and data collection

Databases: Comprehensive searches were conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles published between 2017-2024.

Keywords: The following terms were used: "natural products," "synthetic biology," "microbiome," "AI in drug discovery," "omics technologies," "ecological interactions," "bioprospecting," and "sustainability".

Inclusion Criteria: Articles were included if they focused on advancements in natural product research, technological innovations (e.g., AI, omics), and applications across biology, medicine, and ecology. Studies addressing ethical and sustainability issues were also prioritized.

Exclusion Criteria: Non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion pieces without empirical evidence, and studies published prior to 2018 unless historically significant were excluded.

Thematic categorization

- **Ecological Contributions:** Reviewed literature on the roles of natural products in symbiosis, microbial interactions, and environmental adaptation.
- **Microbiome Interactions:** Focused on microbiome-derived metabolites, prebiotic effects of plant-based natural products, and therapeutic innovations.
- **Synthetic Biology Applications:** Examined advancements in CRISPR-Cas9 editing, metabolic engineering, and hybrid biosynthetic pathways for natural product optimization.
- **Technological Integration**: Analyzed studies integrating omics technologies (genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, metabolomics) and AI in natural product discovery and characterization.
- **Ethical and Sustainability Challenges:** Evaluated frameworks for equitable bioprospecting, synthetic alternatives to natural harvesting, and conservation priorities.

Analytical framework

- **Qualitative Analysis:** Synthesized thematic findings to highlight interdisciplinary contributions of natural products in diverse fields.
- **Quantitative Analysis:** Compiled data on the frequency and diversity of biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs), novel compounds identified, and success rates of AI-driven natural product discoveries.

Case studies

- **Selection Criteria:** Case studies were chosen based on their demonstration of natural product applications in medicine, ecology, or technology.
- **Examples:** Included microbial-derived antibiotics, plant-microbe symbiosis mechanisms, and AI-facilitated discoveries like malacidin.

Ethical and sustainability assessment

- Evaluated the impact of natural product research on biodiversity and indigenous communities.
- Reviewed policies such as the Nagoya Protocol for equitable benefit-sharing and conservation-focused bioprospecting.

Integration and synthesis

Findings were synthesized to highlight transformative impacts and future directions for natural product research, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaborations and emerging technologies.

Results and Discussion

Natural products as ecological mediators

Symbiosis and communication

Natural products play an essential role in sustaining biodiversity through the mediation of ecological interactions and symbiotic relationships. They are chemical messengers that facilitate intricate communication among organisms, influencing behaviors, growth, and survival.

- **Plant-Microbe Symbiosis**: In the plant-soil ecosystem, flavonoids secreted by legumes initiate a highly specific symbiotic dialogue with rhizobia bacteria. This interaction triggers the formation of nitrogen-fixing nodules, essential for plant growth in nutrient-depleted soils. Beyond flavonoids, other exudates such as strigolactones play a dual role in signaling symbiosis with mycorrhizal fungi while also influencing weed seed germination, thus linking plant growth with ecological weed management [8].
- **Insect Communication**: Semiochemicals such as pheromones and allomones regulate critical insect behaviors like mating, foraging, and defense. For example, ants utilize formic acid and alkaloids for communication and protection against predators. Additionally, recent studies show that natural product-based insect semiochemicals could offer environmentally friendly alternatives to synthetic pesticides, minimizing ecological harm while supporting integrated pest management [9].
- **Marine Chemical Ecology**: In marine ecosystems, secondary metabolites from organisms such as algae, sponges, and corals act as chemical defenses. For example, brominated metab-

olites from red algae deter herbivory while simultaneously preventing microbial biofouling. Furthermore, corals release terpenoid-based compounds to repel pathogens, ensuring the survival of reef ecosystems under increasing environmental stress [10].

Environmental stress adaptation

Natural products enable organisms to adapt to abiotic and biotic stressors, supporting ecosystem resilience.

- **Terpenoids in Drought Resistance**: Terpenoids are versatile compounds synthesized by plants to cope with water deficits. They stabilize cellular membranes, scavenge reactive oxygen species (ROS), and regulate stomatal conductance. Recent advances in genetic studies highlight how terpenoid biosynthesis pathways are upregulated in plants experiencing drought, offering potential targets for engineering drought-tolerant crops [11].
- **Antibiotics in Microbial Competition:** Soil microbes such as Streptomyces spp. and Bacillus spp. produce antibiotics that suppress competitors and pathogens. Beyond competition, these compounds also foster mutualistic relationships, enhancing nutrient availability and promoting plant growth. Studies have shown that the introduction of antibiotic-producing microbes can reduce the reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, promoting sustainable agricultural practices [12,13].

Case study: Microbial ecosystem regulation

Microbial natural products exemplify the interplay between ecology and sustainability, offering solutions for agricultural challenges.

- **Geosmin and Streptomycin:** Geosmin, a volatile compound produced by Streptomyces and other soil microbes, acts as a signaling molecule, influencing microbial diversity and soil health. Similarly, streptomycin, a well-known antibiotic, controls pathogenic bacteria in the rhizosphere while promoting beneficial microbial communities. Recent research demonstrates that these natural products can improve nutrient cycling, suppress plant pathogens, and reduce the environmental impact of chemical inputs in agriculture [14,15].

Microbiome and natural product interplay

Microbiome-derived natural products

The human microbiome, consisting of trillions of microorganisms, serves as a prolific source of bioactive metabolites. These natural products exhibit significant physiological and therapeutic implications, impacting not only local gut health but also systemic processes. Current research highlights the roles of these microbiome-derived metabolites in maintaining health and combating diseases:

- **Butyrate:** Short-chain fatty acids like butyrate, primarily produced by Clostridia species, are integral to intestinal epithelial integrity, immune modulation, and host metabolism. Emerging evidence suggests a protective role for butyrate in reducing the incidence of inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD) and colorectal cancer by promoting anti-inflammatory pathways [16,17]. Butyrate supplementation or microbiota-targeting strategies show potential in clinical applications for gastrointestinal health.
- **Indoles:** Microbial metabolism of dietary tryptophan yields indole derivatives, which influence gut barrier function and immune signaling. These compounds play a pivotal role in maintaining gut homeostasis, mitigating metabolic disorders, and even influencing neurological functions via the gut-brain axis [18].
- **Ruminococcins:** These antimicrobial peptides, produced by Ruminococcus species, selectively inhibit pathogenic bacteria, supporting microbiota balance. Therapeutic studies have shown their potential in managing antibiotic-resistant infections, highlighting the need for further exploration into their mechanisms and applications [19,20].

Other metabolites such as propionate and secondary bile acids are being actively investigated for their roles in cardiovascular health, metabolic regulation, and cancer prevention. This ongoing research underscores the microbiome's critical role as a source of bioactive natural products with far-reaching therapeutic potential. Table 1 provides examples of natural products derived from microbiomes.

Prebiotics and synbiotics

Prebiotics and synbiotics, often plant-derived natural products, significantly shape the gut microbiome by promoting the growth of beneficial microorganisms. These compounds, including various polyphenols, oligosaccharides, and other bioactive molecules, contribute to gut health and systemic benefits.

Metabolite	Source Organism	Function/Application	Therapeutic Potential
Butyrate	*Clostridia* spp., *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii*	Maintains gut epithelial integrity, modulates immune responses	Anti-inflammatory, supports IBD management, reduces colon cancer risk
Indoles	Microbial metabolism of tryptophan	Enhances gut barrier function, regulates immune signaling	Promotes gut homeostasis, mitigates metabolic disorders, supports liver health
Ruminococcins	*Ruminococcus* spp.	Exhibits antimicrobial activity against pathogens	Management of antibiotic-resistant infections, supports microbiome balance
Propionate	*Bacteroides* spp., *Veillonella* spp.	Regulates energy metabolism, inhibits cholesterol synthesis	Protects against obesity, reduces insulin resistance, lowers cardiovascular risk
Acetate	*Bifidobacterium* spp., *Akkermansia muciniphila*	Energy source for gut epithelial cells, enhances mucin production	Improves metabolic health, reduces gut inflammation, strengthens gut barrier
Secondary Bile Acids	Microbial metabolism of primary bile acids	Regulates lipid absorption, modulates immune signaling	Potential in managing metabolic syndrome, liver disorders, and colon cancer
Spermidine	*Enterococcus* spp., *Bacteroides* spp.	Promotes autophagy, supports cellular regeneration	Anti-aging effects, neuroprotection, reduces cardiovascular disease risk
Urolithins	Ellagitannin-metabolizing bacteria (e.g., *Gordonibacter* spp.)	Acts as anti-inflammatory and antioxidant compound	Enhances mitochondrial health, reduces inflammation in neurodegenerative diseases
Phenylpropanoic Acid	*Lactobacillus* spp., *Enterococcus* spp.	Anti-inflammatory properties, modulates gut microbiota	Supports gut health, reduces chronic inflammation, potential for autoimmune conditions
Succinate	*Prevotella* spp., *Fusobacterium* spp.	Energy production, precursor in metabolic pathways	Improves glucose metabolism, potential in metabolic syndrome treatment
D-3-Hydroxybutyrate	Microbial ketogenesis	Acts as an alternative energy substrate	Neuroprotection, supports ketogenic therapies, improves cognitive function
Conjugated Linoleic Acids (CLA)	*Lactobacillus* spp., *Bifidobacterium* spp.	Reduces inflammation, modulates lipid metabolism	Anti-obesity effects, enhances immune function, reduces atherosclerosis risk
Equol	Soy isoflavone-metabolizing bacteria (e.g., *Adlercreutzia* spp.)	Acts as a selective estrogen receptor modulator	Alleviates menopausal symptoms, reduces hormone-related cancer risks
Lipoteichoic Acid	Gram-positive bacteria (e.g., *Lactobacillus* spp.)	Modulates immune responses, enhances gut barrier	Reduces allergic responses, supports immune tolerance

Table 1: Microbiome-Derived Natural Products with additional examples, sources, and detailed therapeutic potentials.

- **Polyphenols:** Found in fruits, vegetables, and beverages like tea, polyphenols such as flavonoids and tannins exhibit prebiotic-like effects. Their microbial metabolism produces bioactive derivatives that regulate inflammation, oxidative stress, and metabolic pathways [21]. These compounds also exhibit synergistic interactions with probiotics, enhancing their therapeutic potential.
- **Epigallocatechin Gallate (EGCG):** A green tea polyphenol, EGCG selectively enriches beneficial gut bacteria, such as Bifidobacterium and Akkermansia, while suppressing pro-inflammatory pathways. These effects suggest EGCG's potential role in mitigating risks of obesity, metabolic syndrome, and related conditions [22].
- **Galacto-Oligosaccharides (GOS):** Naturally present in dairy products and legumes, GOS selectively stimulate Bifidobacterium growth, improving gut health, calcium absorption, and overall host metabolic health [23].

Advancements in synbiotic formulations, combining probiotics with prebiotic-rich natural products, are paving the way for targeted microbiota interventions. For instance, combinations of Lactobacillus strains with polyphenol-rich extracts have demonstrated efficacy in restoring gut health post-antibiotic treatment [24].

Therapeutic innovations and future directions

Microbiome-derived natural products are gaining traction in therapeutic frameworks due to their potential in addressing chronic diseases. The integration of omics technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) modeling has facilitated the identification of novel bioactive compounds and their interactions with the microbiome.

- **Fecal Microbiota Transplants (FMT):** Insights into microbiome-derived metabolites have enhanced the efficacy of FMT, particularly in recurrent Clostridioides difficile infections.
- **Postbiotics:** The direct application of microbial metabolites, such as butyrate and indole derivatives, shows promise for targeted therapeutic outcomes, including anti-inflammatory and barrier-protective effects.

The synergy between microbiome science and natural product chemistry opens new frontiers for precision therapies. These advances hold the potential to address complex conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodegenerative disorders.

Natural products in synthetic biology

Reconstructing biosynthetic pathways

Synthetic biology has revolutionized the study and utilization of natural products, enabling the engineering of biosynthetic pathways in microbial hosts. These advancements allow for the scalable production and modification of complex natural products, which were previously challenging to produce due to their intricate biosynthesis and limited natural abundance.

- **CRISPR-Cas9 Technology:** CRISPR-Cas9 has become a powerful tool for editing biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs). By introducing targeted modifications to BGCs, researchers have optimized the production of antibiotics such as erythromycin. For instance, engineered E. coli strains harboring CRISPR-modified erythromycin pathways have significantly increased yields, improving their commercial feasibility [25].
- **Metabolic Engineering:** Metabolic engineering has transformed the production of essential natural products like artemisinin, an antimalarial agent originally derived from Artemisia annua. By transferring the artemisinin biosynthetic pathway to yeast, researchers have reduced dependence on plant sources, enhancing sustainability and accessibility [26,27]. Furthermore, metabolic engineering has enabled the production of complex compounds such as polyketides and nonribosomal peptides that were once unfeasible to synthesize in large quantities.

Advances in pathway optimization and host strain engineering have further broadened the scope of natural products that can be produced synthetically. Techniques such as promoter optimization and heterologous expression have been employed to reconstruct pathways for anticancer agents, immunosuppressants, and other high-value compounds.

Creating novel compounds

Synthetic biology enables the creation of hybrid or entirely novel natural products through the recombination of biosynthetic elements from diverse organisms. These innovations allow for the tailoring of compounds with enhanced efficacy, stability, or pharmacokinetics.

- **Hybrid Polyketides:** Combining modules from different polyketide synthases has resulted in hybrid molecules with unique structures and improved antibiotic properties. These compounds are particularly promising for combating multidrug-resistant bacterial infections [28,29].
- **Nonribosomal Peptide Engineering:** Nonribosomal peptides (NRPs) are a class of secondary metabolites with diverse biological activities. By modifying peptide synthetase modules, researchers have engineered NRPs with enhanced anticancer and anti-inflammatory properties. Recent work has demonstrated the potential of NRP engineering to create novel drugs with improved therapeutic indices [30].

These approaches pave the way for generating "unnatural" natural products, which combine the bioactivity of natural compounds with the versatility of synthetic design. For example, novel derivatives of macrolides and glycopeptides have shown enhanced potency against resistant pathogens and improved metabolic stability.

Applications in biotechnology

Synthetic biology is driving advancements in both industrial and therapeutic applications of natural products. Engineered microbial systems are now being used in diverse fields ranging from pharmaceuticals to biofuels.

- **Industrial Biotechnology:** Engineered microbes have been deployed for the production of biofuels, biodegradable plastics, and industrial enzymes. For example, bioethanol production has been significantly enhanced through the metabolic engineering of yeast strains, making it a more viable alternative to fossil fuels [31].
- **Therapeutics:** Advances in synthetic biology have facilitated the development of precision medicines tailored to genetic and epigenetic profiles. For instance, derivatives of natural products like rapamycin and vancomycin have been optimized for specific patient subpopulations. These engineered derivatives offer improved efficacy, reduced toxicity, and better pharmacokinetics, paving the way for personalized therapeutic approaches [32].

The integration of synthetic biology with natural product research is accelerating the discovery of next-generation therapies and industrial solutions, offering unprecedented opportunities for innovation.

Technological synergy: Omics and AI integration

The convergence of omics technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) has redefined natural product research, enabling unprecedented opportunities for discovering, characterizing, and applying bioactive compounds. These methodologies enhance workflows, shorten research timelines, and improve the precision of identifying novel compounds.

Omics technologies

Omics technologies provide comprehensive datasets to investigate the biosynthesis, diversity, and therapeutic potential of natural products.

- **Metagenomics:** Metagenomics enables the discovery of biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs) in unculturable microbes, which represent the majority of Earth's microbial diversity. For example, metagenomics has identified novel microbial natural products from extreme environments, such as hydrothermal vents and deep-sea sediments [33].
- **Transcriptomics:** Transcriptomics provides insights into gene expression patterns, highlighting regulatory networks involved in natural product biosynthesis. This approach is instrumental in identifying transcriptional activators and environmental factors that enhance BGC expression [34].
- **Metabolomics:** Metabolomics offers a detailed analysis of metabolites within biological systems, aiding in the identification of bioactive compounds. Techniques such as high-resolution mass spectrometry (HR-MS) and nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy are often paired with machine learning to automate metabolite identification [35].
- **Proteomics:** Proteomics uncovers biosynthetic enzymes responsible for natural product biosynthesis. It has identified hybrid synthases, contributing to the chemical diversity of natural products and aiding in the discovery of novel enzymatic functions [36]. Table 2 provides examples of Omics Technologies applied in Natural Product Research, highlighting a wider spectrum of applications and their diverse potential.

Artificial intelligence

AI is transforming natural product research by analyzing large datasets with speed and precision, enabling the identification, design, and optimization of bioactive compounds.

- **Deep Learning for Biosynthetic Pathway Prediction:** Advanced deep learning tools such as BioNavi-NP predict natural product structures from genomic data, uncovering over 100 novel BGCs in microbial genomes [37].
- **Machine Learning for Drug Discovery:** Machine learning (ML) algorithms prioritize lead compounds by analyzing structural and bioactivity data, accelerating the drug discovery pipeline [38].
- **AI-Driven Compound Optimization:** AI facilitates the optimization of natural products by suggesting structural modifications to enhance efficacy and reduce toxicity, particularly in overcoming antimicrobial resistance [39].

Omics Technology	Key Tools/Techniques	Applications in Natural Product Research	Advantages
Metagenomics	Next-generation sequencing (NGS), Shotgun sequencing	Discovery of novel biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs), microbiome diversity analysis	Access to unculturable microbes, uncovering hidden metabolic potential in complex environments
Metatranscriptomics	RNA sequencing (RNA-Seq), Single-cell RNA-Seq	Functional profiling of microbial communities, pathway discovery	Identifies active biosynthetic pathways in situ, temporal expression analysis
Metabolomics	High-resolution mass spectrometry (HR-MS), NMR spectroscopy	Metabolite profiling, dereplication, bioactivity screening	Comprehensive chemical fingerprinting, high-throughput analysis of metabolites
Genomics	Whole genome sequencing (WGS), Comparative genomics	Prediction of biosynthetic pathways, strain improvement	Enables metabolic engineering, insights into gene clusters responsible for secondary metabolite production
Epigenomics	ChIP-Seq, ATAC-Seq, bisulfite sequencing	Influence of epigenetic modifications on secondary metabolite production	Insights into silent gene clusters, potential for epigenetic activators to unlock novel compounds
Proteomics	Tandem mass spectrometry (MS/MS), Protein microarrays	Enzyme discovery, post-translational modifications (PTMs) in pathways	Functional characterization of enzymes in biosynthetic pathways
Lipidomics	LC-MS, Shotgun lipidomics	Analysis of lipid-derived natural products, membrane-associated bioactive	Characterization of complex lipid molecules with pharmaceutical potential
Pharmacogenomics	SNP genotyping, GWAS	Personalized natural product therapies, pharmacodynamic studies	Optimizing bioactive compound use for specific genetic profiles
Nutrigenomics	Diet-gene interaction studies, Transcriptomics	Development of functional foods, dietary supplement research	Personalized approaches to health using natural product-derived nutraceuticals
Single-Cell Omics	Single-cell RNA-Seq, Single-cell ATAC-Seq	Discovery of rare metabolite-producing cells, cellular heterogeneity analysis	High-resolution insights into cell-specific biosynthesis
Microbiomics	16S rRNA sequencing, Metagenomics	Analysis of microbial symbionts, host-microbe interactions	Identifying microbiota's role in secondary metabolite production
Functional Genomics	CRISPR-Cas9, RNAi, Gene knockout studies	Functional validation of biosynthetic genes, engineering novel pathways	Deciphering the roles of specific genes in natural product biosynthesis
Epitranscriptomics	m6A-seq, PAR-CLIP	Understanding RNA modifications in natural product pathways	Reveals dynamic RNA regulation influencing secondary metabolism
Integrative Omics	Multi-omics integration, AI-based analysis	Systems biology studies, synergistic effects in natural product pathways	Holistic understanding of biosynthetic networks, enhanced discovery pipelines
Cheminformatics-Driven Omics	Molecular Docking, Network pharmacology	Virtual screening of natural product libraries, SAR analysis	Accelerates drug discovery by predicting biological activity from compound libraries
Biogeomics	Environmental genomics, Geospatial omics	Exploration of region-specific biodiversity for unique natural products	Links environmental data with metabolite diversity for novel compound discovery

Table 2: Omics Technologies in Natural Product Research with a broader range of applications

Examples of synergistic success

The integration of omics and AI has delivered transformative outcomes in natural product discovery:

- **Antibiotic Discovery:** The discovery of malacidin, a novel antibiotic effective against multidrug-resistant bacteria, exemplifies the power of combining metagenomics and AI. This approach identified malacidin's BGCs and facilitated its synthesis, bypassing traditional culturing challenges [40].
- **Marine Natural Products:** AI-assisted metagenomics of marine microbiomes led to the discovery of salinosporamide derivatives with potent anticancer properties, advancing drug discovery from marine environments [41,42].
- **Fungal Natural Products:** Transcriptomics-guided ML enabled the discovery of antifungal compounds from terrestrial fungi, demonstrating the utility of AI in identifying new biosynthetic pathways [43].

Translational biology and therapeutics

Natural products are revolutionizing translational biology, addressing challenges in oncology, neurodegenerative disorders, and precision medicine.

Advancements in medicine

- **Cancer Immunotherapy:** Antitumor and Cancer Immunotherapy: Curcumin, a polyphenol from turmeric, enhances immune checkpoint inhibitors by modulating tumor immune microenvironments. Research suggests curcumin reduces immunosuppressive cytokines, bolstering immune responses against tumors [44].
- Sidrin and Sidroside, isolated from the Zizyphus genus, represent novel antitumor agents with significant therapeutic potential, highlighting the role of plant-derived secondary metabolites in cancer research. These promising anticancer agents exhibit selective cytotoxicity against various cancer cell lines while showing minimal toxicity toward normal cells. Sidrin targets leukemia (HL-60), lung (A549), breast (BT-549), colon (KM12), and melanoma (M14) cells, offering fewer side effects compared to traditional chemotherapeutic agents like doxorubicin. Sidroside, a glycosidic saponin, demonstrates potent cytotoxic activity against leukemia (MOLT-4, CCRF-CEM), lung (HOP-92), and prostate (PC-3) cancer cells, emphasizing its potential as a safer alternative for cancer therapy. Further studies focusing on their mechanisms of action and biosynthetic pathways could pave the way for their clinical applications in oncology [45].
- **Neurodegenerative Disorders:** Huperzine A, an alkaloid from Huperzia serrata, inhibits acetylcholinesterase, improving cognitive function in Alzheimer's disease. Recent studies explore its potential in combination therapies targeting amyloid-beta plaques [46].
- **Antimicrobial Resistance:** Compounds like teixobactin, discovered using iChip technology combined with AI, target resistant Gram-positive pathogens and offer hope against antimicrobial resistance [47].

Precision medicine

- **EGFR-Targeting Compounds:** Epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) inhibitors derived from natural products, such as erlotinib and gefitinib, are precision therapies for non-small cell lung cancer patients with EGFR mutations [48].
- **Biomarker Discovery:** AI-integrated omics platforms identify biomarkers predicting patient responses to natural product-based therapies, enabling personalized treatment strategies [49].

Ethical and sustainability challenges

Bioprospecting and conservation

The exploration and utilization of natural products often involve sourcing from biodiverse regions, posing significant ethical and environmental challenges. Balancing the need for scientific advancement with conservation requires innovative approaches to ensure sustainable and equitable outcomes.

- Benefit-Sharing Frameworks Bioprospecting agreements must involve equitable partnerships with local and indigenous communities. These frameworks, as mandated by the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing, ensure that benefits derived from natural product discoveries—whether in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, or biotechnology—are fairly shared. Recent studies emphasize integrating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with scientific research to create inclusive, community-driven projects [50,51]. Case studies of successful benefit-sharing models in Amazonian bioprospecting efforts highlight the importance of transparency and mutual respect in fostering sustainable collaborations.
- Synthetic Alternatives Advances in synthetic biology provide viable solutions to reduce the environmental impact of natural product extraction. By engineering microbial platforms, researchers can recreate complex biosynthetic pathways to produce compounds such as artemisinin, vinblastine, and other high-demand products [52]. Synthetic alternatives not only alleviate pressure on wild populations but also enhance scalability and cost-effectiveness. For instance, yeast-engineered pathways for tropane alkaloids have demonstrated how synthetic biology can replace destructive harvesting of Erythroxylum species [53].
- Conservation Prioritization Conservation biology and natural product research must work hand-in-hand to identify and protect biodiversity hotspots critical for bioprospecting. AI-driven mapping tools are being utilized to assess ecological vulnerability and predict areas with high potential for undiscovered bioactive compounds [54]. Moreover, policies aimed at integrating natural product research into conservation strategies ensure that research benefits both science and ecosystems.

Equity and accessibility

Natural products have historically faced accessibility challenges, with high-income countries disproportionately benefiting from discoveries sourced in low-income nations. Addressing this inequity is essential to ensuring fair and inclusive outcomes.

- Access to Affordable Therapies The monopolization of natural product-derived drugs by pharmaceutical companies often leads to prohibitively high costs, restricting access in low-resource settings. Efforts to create open-access platforms for drug development and price regulation mechanisms are crucial for fostering global health equity. For example, initiatives such as the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) have facilitated access to affordable versions of natural product-based treatments in low- and middle-income countries [55].
- Inclusive Intellectual Property Frameworks Reforming intellectual property (IP) laws to accommodate traditional knowledge contributions is vital. Collaborative IP models that recognize the contributions of indigenous peoples ensure that discoveries are both ethically sourced and equitably shared. Recent legal reforms, such as those in South Africa's bioprospecting regulations, have paved the way for more inclusive approaches [56].
- Global Research Collaborations Encouraging collaborative international research partnerships helps distribute the benefits of natural product discoveries more equitably. Multinational consortia, such as the Global Alliance for Biodiversity Research (GABR), are fostering cooperative frameworks that prioritize knowledge-sharing and equitable resource allocation.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Natural products, as versatile bioactive entities, hold the potential to revolutionize multiple scientific and technological domains. However, fully realizing their promise requires addressing critical challenges and leveraging interdisciplinary advances.

- Integrate AI and Synthetic Biology The integration of AI-driven predictive modeling with synthetic biology tools will accelerate the discovery and optimization of natural products. For example, machine learning algorithms capable of predicting biosynthetic gene clusters (BGCs) have already identified novel bioactive molecules, significantly shortening development timelines [57]. Future research should prioritize the refinement of AI models for increased accuracy and scalability.
- Expand Ecological Applications Natural products offer untapped potential for environmental resilience, such as bioremediation and sustainable agriculture. For instance, microbial metabolites are being explored as eco-friendly pesticides and soil enhancers, reducing the need for synthetic agrochemicals. Expanding the ecological applications of natural products can contribute to global sustainability goals.
- Emphasizing Ethical Research Balancing innovation with conservation and equity is essential for sustainable progress. Researchers must engage in ethical practices, from sourcing materials responsibly to sharing benefits equitably. Moreover, integrating conservation priorities into bioprospecting endeavors can safeguard biodiversity for future generations.

These advancements underscore that natural products are not merely chemical entities but are central to understanding and reshaping biology. By addressing ethical and sustainability challenges, leveraging technological innovations, and fostering inclusivity, natural products can fulfill their potential to address critical global challenges in health, ecology, and beyond.

Conclusion

Natural products have long been celebrated for their transformative impact on medicine and science. This review highlights their multifaceted roles beyond traditional pharmacological applications, showcasing their significance in ecology, microbiome research, synthetic biology, and sustainability. The integration of advanced omics technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) has revolutionized natural product research, enabling unprecedented precision in the discovery, engineering, and application of bioactive compounds.

Natural products continue to drive innovations in sustainable agriculture, environmental resilience, and personalized medicine. Their ability to mediate ecological interactions, adapt organisms to environmental stressors, and serve as scaffolds for synthetic biology underscores their interdisciplinary importance. Moreover, ethical and sustainability considerations, such as equitable benefit-sharing and biodiversity conservation, are increasingly recognized as critical for the responsible advancement of natural product research.

The future of natural products lies in leveraging technological innovations, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, and addressing global challenges such as antimicrobial resistance, environmental sustainability, and equitable resource utilization. By combining traditional knowledge with modern scientific approaches, natural products offer transformative solutions to some of the most pressing health, ecological, and technological challenges of our time. With a commitment to ethical practices and collaborative efforts, natural products can continue to inspire breakthroughs across diverse scientific disciplines.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest are associated with this work.

Glossary

- **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)**: The ability of microorganisms to withstand the effects of antibiotics, posing challenges to global health.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**: The simulation of human intelligence in machines, used in natural product research for pattern recognition, molecule prediction, and data analysis.
- **Biogeomics:** The study of natural product diversity as it relates to environmental or geospatial factors, linking ecological data with metabolite discovery for unique compound identification.
- **Bioprospecting**: The exploration of biological materials (e.g., plants, microbes) for commercially valuable compounds or genetic resources.
- **Biosynthetic Gene Clusters (BGCs)**: Groups of co-located genes in an organism's genome responsible for the biosynthesis of a specific natural product or secondary metabolite.
- **Cheminformatics-Driven Omics:** An interdisciplinary approach using computational tools for virtual screening, structure-activity relationship (SAR) analysis, and predicting biological activity, complementing experimental research in natural products.
- **CRISPR-Cas9**: A gene-editing technology used to modify DNA sequences in organisms, including the optimization of natural product biosynthesis.
- **Deep Learning**: A type of machine learning that uses neural networks to analyze complex patterns and datasets, such as predicting biosynthetic pathways.
- **Ecological Adaptation**: Changes in an organism's traits or behavior in response to environmental pressures, often mediated by natural products.
- **Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR)**: A protein involved in cell growth and division, often targeted by natural product-derived drugs in cancer therapy.
- **Epigenomics and Epitranscriptomics:** Fields exploring regulatory layers that control gene expression and RNA modifications, respectively, including the activation or silencing of biosynthetic gene clusters in natural product pathways.
- **Ethical Bioprospecting**: Practices ensuring fair benefit-sharing, sustainability, and respect for indigenous knowledge in natural product research.
- **Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT)**: A procedure where stool from a healthy donor is transplanted to a recipient to restore microbiome balance.
- **Flavonoids**: A group of polyphenolic compounds found in plants, known for their antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and prebiotic properties.
- **Geosmin**: A volatile compound produced by soil microbes, contributing to soil health and microbial communication.
- **iChip Technology**: A method to culture previously unculturable microbes by isolating them in situ, facilitating the discovery of novel antibiotics.
- **Lipidomics:** The comprehensive study of lipids within a biological system, emphasizing their roles in bioactive compound research and potential applications in health and disease.
- **Machine Learning (ML)**: A subset of AI where algorithms learn from data to make predictions or decisions, often used for drug discovery and optimization.
- **Malacidin**: A calcium-dependent antibiotic effective against multidrug-resistant pathogens, identified through metagenomics and AI.
- **Metabolic Engineering**: The practice of optimizing genetic and regulatory processes within cells to increase the production of specific substances, like natural products.
- **Metabolomics**: The comprehensive analysis of metabolites (small molecules) within a biological system, often used to identify bioactive compounds.
- **Metagenomics**: The study of genetic material recovered directly from environmental samples, enabling the exploration of unculturable microorganisms.
- **Metatranscriptomics:** A branch of omics technology that focuses on analyzing active biosynthetic pathways in microbiomes by studying RNA transcripts, providing insights into functional and temporal gene expression.
- **Microbiome**: The collection of microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, viruses) and their genetic material residing in a specific environment, such as the human gut or soil.

- **Nagoya Protocol**: An international agreement promoting fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources, emphasizing biodiversity conservation.
- **Natural Products**: Bioactive chemical compounds synthesized by living organisms (e.g., plants, fungi, bacteria, and marine organisms), often with ecological roles and applications in medicine, agriculture, and biotechnology.
- **Nonribosomal Peptides (NRPs)**: Small molecules synthesized by nonribosomal peptide synthetases, often with therapeutic properties.
- **Omics Technologies**: High-throughput approaches like genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, used to analyze biological systems comprehensively.
- **Polyketides**: A class of secondary metabolites with diverse bioactivities, including antibiotic and anticancer properties.
- **Postbiotics**: Bioactive compounds produced by probiotics during fermentation, used in health applications.
- **Prebiotics**: Non-digestible food ingredients that promote the growth of beneficial microorganisms in the gut.
- **Proteomics**: The large-scale study of proteins, including their structures, functions, and roles in biological processes.
- **Secondary Metabolites**: Organic compounds produced by organisms that are not essential for growth, development, or reproduction but often serve ecological roles like defense or communication.
- **Strigolactones**: Plant hormones involved in signaling symbiosis with fungi and regulating plant growth and development.
- **Symbiosis**: A close and long-term biological interaction between two different species, often involving mutual benefits (e.g., plant-rhizobia nitrogen fixation).
- **Synbiotics**: A combination of prebiotics and probiotics designed to improve gut health by supporting beneficial microbial populations.
- **Synthetic Biology**: An interdisciplinary field that applies engineering principles to biology, enabling the design and construction of new biological parts or systems.
- **Terpenoids**: A diverse class of organic compounds derived from isoprene units, often involved in plant defense and stress responses.
- **Teixobactin**: A natural antibiotic effective against multidrug-resistant bacteria, discovered using iChip technology.
- **Transcriptomics**: The study of the complete set of RNA transcripts produced by an organism, providing insights into gene expression and regulatory mechanisms.

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