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Freshwater Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience under Anthropogenic Pressure

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ABSTRACT

Freshwater ecosystems support a disproportionate share of global biodiversity and provide essential services, yet they are among the most threatened ecosystems on Earth. This article reviews the status of freshwater biodiversity and the principal anthropogenic pressures acting on it, including habitat alteration, flow regulation, pollution, invasive species, overexploitation and climate change. The concepts of ecosystem resilience, alternative stable states and regime shifts are examined, along with the role of functional and response diversity in buffering ecosystems against disturbance. Cumulative and interacting stressors are shown to produce nonlinear biodiversity losses, with sensitive taxa disappearing first and tolerant generalists persisting. Conservation and restoration strategies, including environmental flows, connectivity, nutrient control, invasive species management and integrated catchment governance, are discussed. Priorities for research and policy are identified to maintain biodiversity and the resilience of freshwater ecosystems under continuing anthropogenic pressure.

Key words: *freshwater biodiversity, ecosystem resilience, anthropogenic pressure, multiple stressors, aquatic conservation*

Introduction:

Freshwater ecosystems occupy less than one percent of the Earth's surface but host close to one tenth of all described species, and they supply water, food, flood regulation and cultural benefits to billions of people. Despite this importance, rivers, lakes and wetlands have been heavily modified by human activity, and freshwater species are declining at rates that exceed those documented in most terrestrial and marine realms (Dudgeon et al., 2006).

Human pressures on freshwater systems have intensified through damming, water abstraction, land-use change, nutrient and chemical pollution, species introductions, harvest and a warming climate. These pressures seldom act alone, and their combined effects may push ecosystems beyond thresholds at which structure and function change abruptly. Understanding how biodiversity buffers or fails to buffer such change is therefore a priority for ecological science and water management.

The aim of this article is to synthesise current knowledge on freshwater biodiversity and ecosystem

resilience under anthropogenic pressure. The discussion is organised around nine thematic outlines covering ecosystem value, status and trends, major pressures, resilience concepts, the role of biodiversity, cumulative impacts and conservation strategies, followed by an overall summary.

1. Freshwater Ecosystems and Their Biodiversity Value

Freshwater ecosystems, which include rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, wetlands, floodplains and groundwater systems, cover a very small fraction of the Earth's surface and hold a tiny proportion of its water, yet they support a disproportionately large share of biodiversity. A substantial fraction of all described fish species, a large number of amphibians, molluscs, crustaceans, insects and aquatic plants depend on freshwater habitats. This richness is concentrated in a small area, which makes freshwater biodiversity especially vulnerable to local disturbance (Dudgeon et al., 2006).

These ecosystems provide services that are fundamental to human wellbeing. They supply drinking water and irrigation, support inland fisheries that feed millions of people, regulate floods, recycle nutrients, purify water through biological processes and store carbon in sediments and wetlands. Many also have cultural, recreational and spiritual value. The integrity of these services depends on the organisms that perform them, including microbes that process organic matter, invertebrates that shred leaf litter, filter-feeders that clarify water and fish that link food webs.

Freshwater habitats are strongly connected to their surrounding landscapes. Rivers transport water, sediments, nutrients and organisms along longitudinal gradients, interact laterally with floodplains and vertically with groundwater, and vary through time with the flow regime. This connectivity is both a source of ecological richness and a channel through which disturbances in the catchment propagate, so that activities on land are quickly felt in the water.

2. Status and Trends of Freshwater Biodiversity

Freshwater biodiversity is declining faster than that of most terrestrial or marine systems. Analyses of historical records for North American freshwater fauna suggested extinction rates several times higher than those for terrestrial fauna, a pattern that has been repeated in other regions (Ricciardi and Rasmussen, 1999). Large declines have been recorded among freshwater vertebrate populations, with migratory fish, large-bodied species and species with restricted ranges particularly affected.

Knowledge of status is uneven. Temperate regions of Europe and North

America are better documented, while tropical systems, which hold the greatest diversity, are poorly sampled and face rapid development. Many invertebrate and microbial groups remain largely unassessed, and the true extent of loss is therefore probably underestimated. Reviews of emerging threats and persistent challenges stress that the proportion of species at risk is high and that trends continue to be negative in most regions (Reid et al., 2019).

Declines in diversity are accompanied by changes in community composition. Sensitive specialists tend to be replaced by tolerant generalists and non-native species, leading to biotic homogenisation, in which communities in different places become more similar. This loss of distinctiveness reduces the regional diversity and may reduce the capacity of ecosystems to respond to future change.

3. Major Anthropogenic Pressures: Habitat Alteration and Flow Regulation

Physical alteration of habitat is among the most pervasive pressures. Dams and weirs fragment river networks, block migration of fish, trap sediment and alter temperature and oxygen regimes downstream. Channelisation, levee construction, dredging and removal of riparian vegetation simplify habitat structure and disconnect rivers from their floodplains. Wetland drainage and conversion for agriculture and urban development have caused extensive loss of habitat worldwide.

The natural flow regime, with its characteristic magnitude, timing, frequency, duration and rate of change of flows, is a master variable that organises river ecosystems. Species life histories are adapted to this variability, and flow regulation that dampens floods or reverses seasonal patterns can disrupt spawning cues, reduce habitat diversity and favour non-native species (Poff et al., 1997). Abstraction of water for irrigation, industry and cities further reduces flows and can dry out rivers and wetlands.

Assessments of the world's rivers show that only a minority of long rivers remain free flowing, with connectivity lost mainly in densely populated and heavily developed regions (Grill et al., 2019). Future hydropower development, particularly in biodiverse tropical basins, threatens to fragment many of the remaining free-flowing rivers. Maintaining or restoring connectivity and environmental flows is therefore a central priority.

4. Pollution, Eutrophication, and Emerging Contaminants

Nutrient enrichment from agricultural runoff, sewage and atmospheric deposition drives eutrophication in lakes, rivers and

coastal waters. Excess nitrogen and phosphorus stimulate the growth of algae and cyanobacteria, which can form harmful blooms, reduce water transparency, and deplete oxygen upon decomposition, leading to fish kills and loss of sensitive species. Diffuse, non-point sources are particularly difficult to control (Carpenter et al., 1998).

Other pollutants add to the burden. Sediment from erosion smothers habitats and reduces light, acidification from atmospheric deposition and mining affects poorly buffered waters, and salinisation from irrigation, road salt and mining threatens freshwater organisms that are intolerant of ions. Heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants and pesticides accumulate in sediment and food webs, and may cause lethal and sublethal effects on reproduction and behaviour.

Emerging contaminants include pharmaceuticals, personal care products, endocrine-disrupting chemicals, microplastics and nanomaterials, which enter water through wastewater and runoff. Their effects at environmentally realistic concentrations are poorly understood, but evidence of feminisation of fish, altered behaviour and antimicrobial resistance gene spread raises concern. Monitoring and regulation have not kept pace with the large number of chemicals in use.

5. Invasive Species, Overexploitation, and Climate Change

Non-native species are introduced to freshwater systems through aquaculture, the aquarium and ornamental trade, canals, ballast water and angling. Invaders such as predatory fish, crayfish, bivalves and aquatic plants can outcompete or consume native species, alter habitat and food webs, and transmit disease. Islands and isolated lakes with endemic faunas are especially at risk, and the impacts are often irreversible once the invader is established.

Overexploitation affects fish, turtles, molluscs and other taxa. Inland fisheries are frequently unmanaged or poorly monitored, and large, slow-growing species such as sturgeons and giant catfishes are heavily depleted. Sand mining and harvest of aquatic species for trade also disturb habitats. Removal of top predators and large fish can trigger cascading changes in food webs.

Climate change interacts with all these pressures. Warming raises water temperature, lowers dissolved oxygen, lengthens stratification in lakes and shifts the distribution of cold-water species toward higher elevations and latitudes, where dispersal is often impossible because freshwater habitats are isolated. Altered precipitation and snow regimes change flow patterns,

increasing the frequency and severity of floods and droughts, and intermittent rivers are expanding in many regions. Because freshwater species have limited ability to move across land, climate refugia and connectivity are especially important.

6. Concepts of Ecosystem Resilience and Regime Shifts

Resilience was introduced to ecology as the ability of a system to absorb disturbance and still maintain its basic structure and relationships (Holling, 1973). It is distinguished from engineering resilience, which refers to the speed of return to equilibrium after disturbance. In practical terms, resilience encompasses resistance to change, the capacity to recover, and the ability to adapt and reorganise while keeping essential functions.

Ecosystems may possess alternative stable states, and gradual increase in pressure can erode resilience until a small perturbation triggers an abrupt shift to a different state. Shallow lakes provide the classic example: under moderate nutrient loading, clear water dominated by rooted plants can persist, but beyond a threshold the system may flip to a turbid state dominated by phytoplankton, from which recovery requires large reductions in nutrients because of feedbacks that stabilise the new state (Scheffer et al., 2001). This phenomenon, known as hysteresis, means that restoration can be far more difficult than prevention.

Early warning signals, such as increased variance, slower recovery from small perturbations and rising autocorrelation, may indicate approach to a tipping point, and are being tested in lake and river monitoring data. Detecting loss of resilience before a collapse occurs would allow managers to intervene earlier, but applying such indicators in complex and noisy real-world systems remains a challenge.

7. Biodiversity as the Foundation of Resilience

Biodiversity contributes to resilience through several mechanisms. Functional diversity ensures that multiple species can perform the same ecological role, so loss of one species may be compensated by others, a property termed functional redundancy. Response diversity, in which species within a functional group respond differently to environmental change, provides an insurance effect that stabilises ecosystem processes when conditions fluctuate. Reviews of this topic conclude that diversity of responses, rather than diversity alone, determines the stability of functions (Oliver et al., 2015).

In freshwater systems, these mechanisms operate across trophic levels. Diverse assemblages of detritivores sustain leaf litter processing

under different temperatures and flow conditions, diverse primary producers maintain productivity across seasons, and varied fish communities support food web stability. Spatial diversity matters too, since a network of connected habitats allows recolonisation after local disturbance, creating a metacommunity capacity for recovery.

The loss of diversity erodes these buffers. Pressures often remove sensitive and specialised species first, reducing functional and response diversity and leaving communities dominated by tolerant generalists, which may perform fewer functions and respond similarly to stress. Consequently, ecosystems with depleted biodiversity may appear to function normally until a disturbance exceeds the limited capacity of the remaining species, after which decline can be rapid.

8. Multiple Stressors and Cumulative Impacts

Freshwater ecosystems rarely face a single pressure. Habitat alteration, pollution, invasive species, exploitation and climate change interact, and their combined effect may be additive, synergistic, in which the combined impact exceeds the sum, or antagonistic, in which one stressor offsets another. Synergies are of particular concern: for example, warming reduces oxygen solubility while eutrophication increases oxygen demand, so the two combined can cause hypoxia sooner than either alone.

Global analyses of threats to river biodiversity and human water security, which combine many pressures into cumulative indices, show that large parts of the world's rivers are exposed to high levels of threat, particularly in densely populated regions in which investment in water technology partly protects people but leaves biodiversity at risk (Vorosmarty et al., 2010). The conceptual figure below illustrates how species richness of different groups may decline as cumulative pressure increases, with sensitive taxa lost first and tolerant generalists persisting.

Responses to cumulative pressure are typically nonlinear, with thresholds beyond which declines accelerate. The figure is illustrative, since actual curves vary by system and taxon, but it highlights why managing single stressors in isolation can fail and why risk assessments should consider the combined effect of several pressures. Experimental and monitoring studies that vary several stressors simultaneously are needed to predict interactions and to identify which pressures are most efficient to reduce.

Effective conservation of freshwater biodiversity requires approaches that address the catchment as a whole, since threats originate across the landscape. Priority measures include

protecting remaining intact rivers, wetlands and lakes, maintaining connectivity, safeguarding environmental flows, controlling nutrient and chemical inputs, preventing introduction and spread of invasive species, and regulating fisheries. An emergency recovery plan proposed to bend the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss identifies actions such as accelerating implementation of environmental flows, improving water quality, protecting critical habitats, managing exploitation, preventing invasions and restoring connectivity (Tickner et al., 2020).

Restoration can recover diversity and function, but success depends on removing the cause of degradation and on the availability of colonists from nearby sources. Examples include dam removal, reconnection of floodplains, re-meandering of channels, riparian buffer planting, wetland creation and reduction of nutrient loads to shallow lakes. Because of hysteresis and lags, monitoring over long periods and adaptive management are essential. Conservation planning must also account for climate change by protecting refugia and enabling movement.

Governance and society are central. Integrated water resources management that treats ecosystem needs as a legitimate water user, participation of local communities and Indigenous peoples, stronger monitoring and data sharing, and policies that align agricultural, energy and urban development with freshwater protection are essential. Future research should prioritise understudied tropical regions and taxa, quantify tipping points and resilience, and develop tools that integrate biodiversity into water planning, so that human development and freshwater life can be sustained together.

Summary

Freshwater ecosystems combine exceptional biodiversity with high vulnerability, since small habitats are tightly connected to catchments and exposed to numerous human pressures. Habitat fragmentation, flow alteration, eutrophication, chemical pollution, invasive species, overexploitation and climate change have driven steep declines in species and populations, and replaced sensitive specialists with tolerant generalists.

Ecosystem resilience depends on functional redundancy, response diversity and connectivity, all of which erode as diversity is lost, increasing the risk of abrupt regime shifts and hysteresis. Because pressures interact and produce nonlinear responses, effective protection requires catchment-scale action that safeguards connectivity and environmental flows, reduces pollution, controls invasions and

regulates exploitation, together with restoration, long-term monitoring and adaptive governance. Sustained investment in understudied regions and in tools to detect declining resilience will be essential for maintaining freshwater biodiversity and the services it provides.

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