Krishi Netra
ISSN : 3048-5207

# Role of Aquatic Insects in Sustainability of Ecosystem

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Manuscript No: KN-V3-07/005

**Abstract**

Aquatic insects play a pivotal role in sustaining freshwater ecosystems through nutrient cycling, organic matter decomposition, food web dynamics, and biological control of pests and invasive weeds. Acting as bioindicators, they reflect water quality and ecosystem health. Their remarkable adaptations to aquatic life—including gills, siphons, and specialized locomotion—enable them to thrive in diverse aquatic habitats. However, threats like pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change endanger their populations. Recognizing their ecological importance is essential for effective conservation and ecosystem management. This article explores their taxonomy, ecological functions, threats, and the need for protection in the context of ecosystem sustainability.

**Keywords:** Aquatic insects, freshwater ecosystem, nutrient cycling, bioindicators, insect biodiversity, conservation etc.

## Introduction

Insects are the tracheate arthropod that belongs to kingdom “Animalia” and phylum “Arthropoda” (joint footed). The word ‘aquatic’ refers to water bodies’ particularly freshwater bodies such as ponds, lakes and streams. Aquatic insects are a large and diverse group of hexapod creatures that live in different aquatic environments. These insects are a fascinating and vital component of freshwater ecosystems. They are a diverse group of insects that spend a significant portion of their life cycle in water. From tranquil ponds to rushing rivers, these insects are found in nearly every aquatic environment. Aquatic insects are very diverse group of insects that include over 10,000 species which belongs to approximately 11 different orders that further divided into 150 families has adapted to freshwater habitats. They are different from the terrestrial insects as they spend one or more stages of their life cycle in water. These small creatures were actively involved in many important ecological functions in the freshwater ecosystem like processing of organic matter and food for the predators, acting as a medium for transporting energy flow between different trophic level, is an important source for bio monitoring of aquatic ecosystem, it creates and regulates nutrient flux and act as an agent for regulating the population of noxious weeds. This document explores their types, ecological roles, and contributions to the sustainability of ecosystems.

With various functional feeding groups viz., shredders, scrapers, collectors-gathers, collectors-filter feeders and predators, the majority of aquatic insects move to terrestrial (land) habitats as adults. The immature stages are truly aquatic that spend some part of their life cycle closely associated with water, either living beneath the surface or skimming along on top of the water alike of their adults. All aquatic insects are aerobic one and must get oxygen to breathe and with specific adaptations (i.e. spiracles, gills, cutaneous) to allow them to access oxygen.

Everyone is familiar with common terrestrial butterflies, moths, beetles, ants, bees, flies, grasshoppers, and cockroaches, but the many insects that live in water and are less often appreciated except by those who explore special places such as puddles, ponds, lakes, water-filled ditches, and streams.

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Aquatic insects are found in the taxonomic orders below:

Most aquatic insects are majorly grouped in 16 order among which 11 taxonomic orders are having significance in aquatic ecosystem. They are (1) Collembola, the springtails; (2) Ephemeroptera, the mayflies; (3) Odonata, the dragonflies and damselflies; (4) Plecoptera, the stoneflies; (5) Hemiptera, the true bugs; (6) Megaloptera, the dobsonflies and alderflies; (7) Neuroptera, the spongilla flies; (8) Trichoptera, the caddisflies; (9) Lepidoptera, the butterflies and moths; (10) Coleoptera, the beetles; and (11) Diptera, the true flies. Other orders (Orthoptera, the grasshoppers and crickets; Blattodea, cockroaches; and Hymenoptera, wasps) also include a few aquatic insects.

**Types of Aquatic Insects**

Aquatic insects are classified into several groups based on their morphological and behavioral adaptations to aquatic life. They occupy various niches in freshwater habitats, and their diversity reflects their evolutionary success in these environments. Here are some major types:

**1. Ephemeroptera (Mayflies)**

Mayflies are among the most primitive aquatic insects. They are known for their delicate, transparent wings and short adult lifespan. Larvae, called nymphs, are aquatic and have gills for respiration. They are important indicators of water quality because they are sensitive to pollution. They provide many essential supporting services for ecosystems such as bioturbation, bioirrigation, decomposition, nutrition for many kinds of non-human animals, spiralling in freshwaters, nutrient cycling between aquatic and terrestrial systems, habitat for other organisms, and hence serving as indicators of ecosystem health.

**2. Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies)**

Dragonflies and damselflies are predatory insects with a distinctive appearance. Their larvae, known as naiads, are aquatic and equipped with extendable jaws to catch prey. They play a critical role in controlling mosquito populations and other aquatic pests.

**3. Plecoptera (Stoneflies)**

Stoneflies are another group sensitive to water quality. Their larvae have external gills and are often found in cool, well-oxygenated streams. Stoneflies serve as prey for fish and other predators.

**4. Hemiptera (True Bugs)**

Aquatic true bugs, including water striders, backswimmers, and water boatmen, are a diverse group. They are surface dwellers or inhabit the water column. Many are predatory, feeding on other insects or small aquatic organisms.

**5. Coleoptera (Beetles)**

Several beetle families have aquatic representatives, such as diving beetles and whirligig beetles. Both larvae and adults are often aquatic and exhibit various feeding habits, from predation to scavenging.

**6. Trichoptera (Caddisflies)**

Caddisfly larvae construct protective cases from sand, gravel, and plant material. They are found in a variety of habitats and play a role in breaking down organic matter.

**7. Diptera (True Flies)**

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This diverse group includes mosquitoes, midges, and blackflies. Many species have aquatic larvae that inhabit stagnant water, streams, or wetlands. Dipterans are crucial in nutrient cycling and serve as food for numerous aquatic and terrestrial predators.

**8. Megaloptera (Alderflies and Dobsonflies)**

These large insects have aquatic larvae known as hellgrammites. They are predatory and are often used as bait in recreational fishing.

**9. Neuroptera (Lacewings and Relatives)**

Some lacewing species have aquatic or semi-aquatic larvae. These insects are less common but contribute to the ecological balance of freshwater habitats.

**10. Collembola (springtail**s)

Collembolans or springtails are tiny white arthropods that are beneficial in many ways in natural aquarium. It related to insects that mostly colonize terrestrial soils in numbers up to 100,000/m2 but that also occur on the surface of aquatic habitats. They contribute to the decomposition of organic matter and nutrient cycling in the moist environments they inhabit. Springtails have an important role in ecosystems, as ecosystem "cleaners" as they recycle dead material called detritus, and they feed on microbes, such as bacteria and fungi. By doing this, they improve soil structure and make nutrients available to plants. Springtails can also pollinate mosses, just like bees pollinate flowers.

**11. Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths)**

Among the 165000 species which currently described Lepidoptera, only about 0.5% of the species (representing three families) are considered to be truly aquatic. Their caterpillars are generally believed to live entirely submerged. Most of the species of truly aquatic Lepidoptera belong to the family Crambidae while others − such inhabit streams and feed on algae covering wet rocks belongs to Hawaiian Hyposmocoma. Aquatic Moths (e.g., Crambidae family) larvae of species like Elophila nymphaeata live in aquatic environments, feeding on submerged vegetation. Riparian Butterflies and Moths Adults found in riparian zones, where they contribute to the connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

**Role of Aquatic Insects in Ecosystem Sustainability**

Aquatic insects play indispensable roles in maintaining the health and sustainability of ecosystems. Their contributions can be categorized into several ecological functions:

**1. Food Web Dynamics-** Aquatic insects are integral to freshwater food webs. As primary consumers, they feed on algae, detritus, and microorganisms, converting these resources into biomass that supports higher trophic levels. Generally they do this by processing nutrients from coarse particulate organic matter (CPOM) and fine particulate organic matter (FPOM). Predatory insects, in turn, control populations of smaller organisms. Many fish species, amphibians, and birds depend on aquatic insects as a primary food source.

**2. Control of noxious aquatic weeds** – Several species of noxious weeds have become problem in parts of the world. Weed killer insects plays a prime role in reducing and managing the population of weeds in sustainable manner. Aquatic insects reported to play a vital role in regulating the populations of aquatic weeds in the freshwater ecosystem. For example, alligator weed is controlled by alligator weed stem borer and alligator weed flea beetle. Water hyacinth by weevil and moths, Noogoora bur by cerambycid beetle and seed fly and congress weed by Zygogramma beetle.

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Fig. Different insects actively involved in control of noxious aquatic weeds

**3. Nutrient Cycling**

Through feeding, digestion, and excretion, aquatic insects facilitate nutrient cycling. Detritivores, such as caddisfly larvae, break down organic matter and release nutrients back into the water column, promoting primary production. This process ensures the continuous availability of essential nutrients for aquatic plants and algae.

**4. Pollination**

While pollination is primarily associated with terrestrial ecosystems, some aquatic insects, like certain water beetles, contribute to the pollination of aquatic and semi-aquatic plants. This service supports plant reproduction and diversity.

**5. Water Quality Indicators**

Aquatic insects are sensitive to changes in water quality, making them valuable bioindicators. Species such as mayflies, stoneflies, and caddisflies are particularly useful for monitoring pollution levels, oxygen concentration, and habitat degradation. Their presence or absence can provide insights into the ecological health of aquatic systems.

**6. Habitat Formation and Maintenance**

Some aquatic insects contribute to habitat structure. For example, caddisfly larvae use organic and inorganic materials to build protective cases, which can influence sediment composition. Others, like burrowing insects, help aerate the substrate and create microhabitats for other organisms.

**7. Control of Pest Populations**

Predatory aquatic insects, such as dragonfly naiads, play a crucial role in controlling populations of pest species like mosquitoes. This natural regulation reduces the spread of diseases like malaria and dengue, contributing to public health and ecosystem stability.

**Adaptations for Aquatic Life**

Aquatic insects exhibit remarkable adaptations that enable them to thrive in their environments:

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- Respiration: Many aquatic insects have specialized respiratory structures, such as gills (e.g., mayfly nymphs) or siphons (e.g., mosquito larvae), to extract oxygen from water.
- Locomotion: Adaptations like swimming legs, paddles, or streamlined bodies enhance mobility in water.
- Feeding Mechanisms: Aquatic insects have diverse feeding strategies, from filter feeding (e.g., blackfly larvae) to active predation (e.g., dragonfly naiads).
- Life Cycle Plasticity: Many aquatic insects undergo complete metamorphosis, with aquatic larval stages and terrestrial adult stages, allowing them to exploit multiple ecological niches.

**Threats to Aquatic Insects**

Despite their ecological importance, aquatic insects face numerous threats due to human activities:

1. **Pollution:** Chemical contaminants, pesticides, and nutrient loading from agriculture and industry degrade water quality, impacting insect populations.
2. **Habitat Loss:** Urbanization, dam construction, and wetland drainage alter or destroy aquatic habitats.
3. **Climate Change:** Rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns affect water availability and habitat suitability.
4. **Invasive Species:** Non-native species can outcompete or prey on native aquatic insects, disrupting ecological balance.

**Conservation Efforts**

**Protecting aquatic insects requires a multifaceted approach:**

- Water Quality Management: Reducing pollution and maintaining clean waterways are essential for sustaining aquatic insect populations.
- Habitat Restoration: Rehabilitating degraded habitats, such as wetlands and streams, supports biodiversity and ecosystem functions.
- Monitoring Programs: Regular monitoring using bioindicator species helps assess ecosystem health and guide conservation strategies.
- Public Awareness: Educating communities about the importance of aquatic insects fosters support for conservation initiatives.

**Conclusion**

Aquatic insects are indispensable to freshwater ecosystems, playing roles as primary consumers, predators, decomposers, and bioindicators. Their presence ensures the stability of food webs, nutrient cycling, and water quality. However, they face significant threats from human activities and environmental changes. Conservation efforts must prioritize the protection of aquatic habitats and water quality to preserve these vital organisms and the ecosystems they support. By understanding and valuing the contributions of aquatic insects, we can work toward a more sustainable and resilient natural world.

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ISSN : 3048-5207

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