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REVIEW ARTICLE

POLLINATORS DECLINE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS: AN EMERGING CHALLENGE TO FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL SECURITY

Astha Singh*, Pragya Tripathi, Dipesh Kumar Mehata, Ramkeval

Department of Entomology and Agricultural Zoology, Institute of Agricultural Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005, India.
****Corresponding author email: asthasingh698@gmail.com***

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ABSTRACT

Pollinators, particularly bees, are vital for sustaining global agriculture, food security, and biodiversity. More than 75% of food crops depend, at least partly, on animal-mediated pollination, which enhances both yield and nutritional quality. However, pollinator populations are rapidly declining due to habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change, invasive species, and emerging diseases. This decline poses serious risks to food and nutritional security, particularly for pollinator-dependent crops such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, and oilseeds. In India and other regions, reduced pollinator activity has already affected the productivity of crops like mustard, cucurbits, and apples, threatening farmer livelihoods and consumer access to nutrient-rich foods. Safeguarding pollinators requires an integrated approach that combines sustainable farming practices, habitat restoration, responsible pesticide management, promotion of apiculture, and strong policy support. This review highlights the ecological and economic importance of pollinators, examines the drivers of their decline, and discusses strategies to ensure pollinator conservation as a cornerstone of sustainable agriculture and resilient food systems.

KEYWORDS

Pollinators, Bee Decline, Food security, Sustainable agriculture, Conservation, Biodiversity

1. Introduction

Human-driven environmental changes are placing severe pressure on global biodiversity and ecosystem services. Among the most affected processes is pollination, a vital service provided mainly by insects such as bees, flies, butterflies, and beetles (Free, 1993). Pollinators are crucial for the reproduction of fruits, vegetables, oilseeds, and nuts, directly influencing agricultural yields, food diversity, and ecosystem stability (Klein et al., 2007; Ollerton et al., 2011). Their decline represents not only a biodiversity crisis but also a major threat to global food and nutritional security. Roughly 75% of food crops depend partly on animal pollination, including many nutrient-rich foods (Klein et al., 2007). The global economic value of pollination has been estimated at US$235–577 billion annually. Pollination also sustains wild plant reproduction, maintaining ecosystem resilience (Ollerton et al., 2011).

However, pollinator populations are declining due to habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change, invasive species, and pathogens (Potts et al., 2010; Garibaldi et al., 2011). For example, the U.S. lost nearly 59% of managed honeybee colonies between 1947 and 2005, while Europe saw a 25% decline in two decades (Potts et al., 2010). The impacts extend beyond ecosystems. Pollinator-dependent crops such as coffee, cocoa, and nuts are key export commodities for low-income countries, making their economies vulnerable to yield shocks and trade disruptions (Potts et al., 2010). Current economic models often underestimate these risks by ignoring global price and supply chain effects (Gallai et al., 2009). Pollinators decline also undermines nutrition, reducing access to fruits and vegetables that supply essential micronutrients. Addressing this crisis requires integrated global strategies, including pollinator-friendly farming, better monitoring, and policies that embed pollination into food security planning. Protecting pollinators is fundamental to ensuring sustainable food systems and resilient economies.

2. Importance Of Pollinators

Pollinators play a central role in global agriculture by enhancing crop yields, improving produce quality, and maintaining ecosystem balance. Many economically important crops depend on insect pollinators for effective reproduction, while their ecological contributions extend far beyond farms, ensuring biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. Their decline therefore poses direct risks to food security, farmer livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.

2.1 Crop Yield

Cross-pollinated crops such as apple, cucumber, sunflower, pigeon pea, and mustard largely rely on insect pollinators. Adequate pollination significantly increases fruit and seed set. For instance, apple orchards in Himachal Pradesh recorded over 80% higher fruit set with honeybee pollination compared to self-pollination.

2.2 Quality of Produce

Pollinators not only boost yields but also improve the quality of produce. Insect-mediated pollination enhances fruit size, uniformity, shape, and nutrient content. Crops like cucurbits, strawberries, and mangoes show better market value and shelf life under adequate pollination.

2.3 Ecosystem Services

Beyond agriculture, pollinators support the reproduction of wild plants, thereby maintaining biodiversity and ecological stability. This strengthens ecosystem resilience against climate variability, pests, and diseases, ensuring long-term sustainability.

2.4 Economic and Nutritional Value

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Pollination services contribute billions of dollars annually to global agriculture, particularly through high-value crops such as coffee, cocoa, almonds, and cashews. Moreover, pollinator-dependent crops provide essential micronutrients like vitamins A and C, folate, and iron, directly supporting human nutrition and health.

Table 1: Major pollinator groups and their contributions to crop pollination

Pollinator group	Global Contribution	Key contributions & examples
Bees	~45-73%	Dominant pollinators across most agricultural systems. Essential for many fruit, vegetable, nut, and oilseed crops. Contribute ~9% of global crop value via honeybee services.
Flies	~20-39%	Hoverflies, bee flies, and other Diptera important for vegetables, mango, cocoa. Key role in high-altitude/latitude zones where bees are scarce. Hoverflies and blowflies visit 72% of key crops; individual groups like hoverflies alone pollinate over 52% of studied crops. Economically valued at around US $300 billion annually.
Wasps	~17%	Significant contributors; co-pollinate with bees, especially among specialized crops.
Beetles	~7%	Pollinate certain fruit and nut crops; less understood globally.
Butterflies & Moths	~5%	Lepidoptera (e.g. hawk moths, butterflies): Important for specific flowering plants, including wildflowers and nectar-rich crops; also support biodiversity in natural ecosystems.
Vertebrates & others	~5-15%	Including birds, bats, small mammals. Critical for niche or tropical crops like cacao, coffee, certain fruits; generally underrepresented in global estimates but vital locally.

3. Causes Of Pollinators Decline

Pollinators—including bees, butterflies, moths, birds, and bats—are fundamental to biodiversity conservation and food security. However, their populations have declined sharply in recent decades due to a combination of human-driven and ecological pressures. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective conservation strategies and ensuring sustainable agricultural systems.

3.1 Land-use intensification

The conversion of natural habitats into agricultural or urban areas reduces nesting and foraging sites for pollinators. Monoculture farming limits floral diversity, which lowers nectar and pollen availability throughout the year. Habitat loss ultimately leads to decreased pollinator abundance and diversity.

3.2 Climate change

Shifts in temperature and rainfall patterns disrupt flowering times and pollinator activity, causing mismatches between plants and their pollinators. Extreme weather events, such as droughts and storms, directly reduce pollinator survival. Rising global temperatures also shift pollinator ranges, often beyond their adaptive limits.

3.3 Alien species

Invasive plant species alter natural floral resources, competing with native plants and displacing pollinator food sources. Non-native pollinators can outcompete or hybridize with native species, reducing genetic diversity. Such invasions destabilize ecosystem balance and threaten pollinator survival.

3.4 Pests and Pathogens

Diseases such as Nosema and Varroa mites in honeybees have caused widespread colony losses. Pathogen transmission is often intensified in managed pollinator populations. These health stresses weaken pollinators and reduce their capacity to provide effective pollination services.

4. Interacting Pressures On Pollinators

4.1 Climate change and habitat fragmentation

When fragmented habitats are further stressed by climate change, pollinators face reduced migration routes and limited food sources. This dual pressure exacerbates population decline and restricts genetic exchange.

4.2 Nutrition and pathogen

Poor floral diversity limits pollen quality, weakening pollinator immunity. This makes them more susceptible to pathogens, which spread rapidly in nutritionally stressed populations.

4.3 Nutrition and pesticides

Limited diet diversity makes pollinators less resilient to pesticide exposure. Sublethal pesticide effects, such as reduced navigation ability, combined with nutritional stress to accelerate colony collapse.

4.4 Pesticides and pathogens

Pesticide exposure compromises pollinator immunity, increasing vulnerability to viral and fungal infections. Together, they produce synergistic effects that cause higher mortality than either factor alone.

5. Strategies For Pollinator Conservation

5.1 Enhancing Floral Resources

One of the major drivers of pollinator decline is the scarcity of diverse floral resources. Agricultural intensification and monoculture farming restrict year-round access to nectar and pollen. Introducing wildflower strips, hedgerows, and cover crops into farmland can provide continuous food sources while improving biodiversity. Urban areas can also contribute through pollinator-friendly gardens, roadside plantings, and green spaces that create supportive habitats.

5.2 Reducing Pesticide

Exposure Pesticides, especially neonicotinoids, have harmful effects on pollinator health, impairing navigation, reproduction, and immunity.

Adopting Integrated Pest Management (IPM) can reduce reliance on chemicals through biological and cultural controls. When chemical use is unavoidable, applications should be timed to avoid flowering periods and active foraging hours. Strong policy frameworks and farmer training programs are essential to reduce pollinator risks.

5.3 Strengthening Quarantine and Biosecurity

The movement of managed bees for pollination has spread parasites and pathogens such as Varroa mites, Nosema, and bee viruses. These diseases also threaten wild pollinator populations, compounding their decline. Strengthened quarantine systems, regular health inspections of colonies, and regulated trade in pollinators are vital measures. International cooperation is crucial since pollination services and bee trade cross national borders.

5.4 Establishing Monitoring Programs

Long-term monitoring is critical for understanding pollinator population trends and emerging threats. Systematic surveys at local, regional, and national levels can provide valuable data on species distribution and population health. Citizen science initiatives, digital reporting platforms, and awareness campaigns can complement scientific monitoring. Together, these approaches build strong databases to guide conservation and policy action.

5.5 Integrated Conservation Approach

Pollinator decline is caused by interacting pressures, requiring strategies that address multiple threats simultaneously. Enriching floral resources improves nutrition, while reducing pesticide use minimizes chemical stress. Quarantine safeguards protect against disease spread, and monitoring ensures evidence-based decision-making. Ultimately, pollinator conservation safeguards biodiversity, food production, and nutritional security for humans.

6. Conclusions

Pollinators are indispensable for sustaining agricultural productivity, biodiversity, and ecological balance. They enhance both the yield and quality of numerous crops, including fruits, vegetables, pulses, and oilseeds, thereby supporting farmer livelihoods and ensuring human nutritional security. Yet, their populations are in sharp decline due to interacting pressures such as habitat loss, pesticide exposure, climate change, invasive species, and the spread of pests and pathogens. This decline threatens not only crop production but also long-term food and environmental security. Addressing this challenge requires an integrated approach that combines habitat restoration, diversification of floral resources, and adoption of pollinator-friendly farming practices. Reducing pesticide dependence through Integrated Pest Management (IPM), strengthening quarantine and biosecurity measures, and implementing systematic monitoring programs are also crucial. Moreover, collaboration among farmers, researchers, policymakers, and communities is essential to translate conservation strategies into action. Protecting pollinators is ultimately about safeguarding biodiversity, securing agricultural sustainability, and ensuring global food and nutritional security for present and future generations.

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