SUNSHINE AGRICULTURE
e-Newsletter

ISSN (E): 2583 – 0821

Sun. Agri.:e- Newsletter, (2024) *4*(8), 9-13

Article ID: 324

The Role of Insects in Food Security

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Article History
Received: 15. 08.2024
Revised: 17. 08.2024
Accepted: 19. 08.2024

INTRODUCTION

Insects play a vital role in global food security, contributing to various ecological processes essential for the production of food. As pollinators, decomposers, and biological control agents, insects are integral to the functioning of ecosystems that sustain agriculture. Despite their importance, insects are often overlooked in discussions about food security, which tend to focus on crop production and livestock management. However, with the increasing challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and population growth, understanding and conserving insect populations is becoming increasingly critical for ensuring food security in the future (FAO, 2019). This article explores the multifaceted role of insects in food security, emphasizing their contributions as pollinators, soil health enhancers, and natural pest controllers. It also examines the threats to insect populations and the implications for global food systems.

Insects as Pollinators

Pollination is one of the most crucial ecosystem services provided by insects. Approximately 75% of the world's leading food crops depend, at least in part, on animal pollination, with insects, particularly bees, playing the most significant role. These crops include fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds, which are vital for human nutrition (Klein et al., 2007). Insect pollination not only increases crop yields but also improves the quality of produce. For example, insect-pollinated strawberries are often larger and have a better shape and flavor than those that are not pollinated by insects (Klatt et al., 2014). Additionally, pollinators contribute to the diversity of crops, ensuring that a wide range of nutrients is available in the human diet.

Recent studies have highlighted the economic value of insect pollination in agriculture. Globally, the contribution of pollinators to crop production is estimated to be worth over $200 billion annually (IPBES, 2016).

In regions where insect pollinators are declining, farmers have experienced reduced yields and have had to resort to labor-intensive manual pollination, which is both costly and less efficient. However, the decline of pollinator populations, particularly bees, poses a significant threat to food security. Habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change, and the spread of diseases are all contributing to the decline of pollinator species (Potts et al., 2010). The reduction in pollinator populations can lead to lower crop yields, which could exacerbate food insecurity, especially in regions already vulnerable to food shortages.

Table 1: Impact of Insect Pollinators on Food Crops (Klein et al., 2007; IPBES, 2016)

Crop Type	Percentage of Yield Dependent on Pollinators	Example Crops
Fruits and Vegetables	70-90%	Apples, tomatoes, cucumbers
Nuts and Seeds	80-90%	Almonds, sunflower seeds
Oil Crops	40-60%	Canola, rapeseed
Beverage Crops	60-80%	Coffee, cocoa

Insects and Soil Health

Insects are also vital for maintaining soil health, which is a key factor in sustainable agriculture and food security. Soil-dwelling insects, such as beetles, ants, and termites, contribute to the decomposition of organic matter, nutrient cycling, and soil structure maintenance. By breaking down dead plant material and animal remains, these insects help release nutrients back into the soil, making them available for plant uptake (Lavelle et al., 2006).

Insects also enhance soil aeration and water infiltration through their burrowing activities. For example, ants and termites create tunnels that allow air and water to penetrate the soil, improving its fertility and structure. This is particularly important in arid and semi-arid regions, where soil compaction and poor water retention can limit agricultural productivity (Evans et al., 2011). Moreover, insects play a crucial role in controlling soil-borne pests and diseases. Predatory insects, such as beetles and spiders, feed on soil-dwelling pests, reducing their populations and preventing them from damaging crops. This natural pest control service reduces the need for chemical pesticides, which can harm the environment and human health (Landis et al., 2000).

Despite their importance, soil-dwelling insects are often under threat from agricultural practices such as intensive tillage, monoculture, and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These practices can disrupt insect habitats, reduce biodiversity, and degrade soil health, ultimately compromising food security (Bardgett & van der Putten, 2014).

Table 2: Contributions of Soil-Dwelling Insects to Soil Health (Lavelle et al., 2006; Bardgett & van der Putten, 2014)

Soil Function	Insect Contribution	Example Insects
Decomposition and Nutrient Cycling	Breakdown of organic matter, nutrient release	Beetles, ants, termites
Soil Aeration and Water Infiltration	Creation of soil tunnels, improving fertility	Ants, termites
Natural Pest Control	Predation of soil-borne pests	Beetles, spiders

Insects as Natural Pest Controllers

Insects also play a significant role in food security by acting as natural pest controllers. Many insects, such as ladybugs, wasps, and spiders, prey on agricultural pests that can damage crops. This biological control helps to reduce the need for chemical pesticides, which can be harmful to the environment and human health (Schmidt et al., 2003). For instance, ladybugs are effective predators of aphids, which are common pests in crops like wheat, barley, and potatoes. Parasitic wasps, such as *Trichogramma* species, lay their eggs inside pest insects like caterpillars and beetles, leading to the death of the host insect. These natural enemies of pests help maintain a balance in the ecosystem, preventing pest outbreaks and reducing crop losses (van Lenteren, 2012).

The economic value of natural pest control provided by insects is significant. A study in the United States estimated that biological control by natural enemies saves farmers over $13 billion annually by reducing crop losses and pesticide use (Losey & Vaughan, 2006). In addition to economic benefits, biological control contributes to the sustainability of agriculture by preserving biodiversity and reducing the environmental impact of farming practices. However, the effectiveness of natural pest control is threatened by factors such as habitat destruction, pesticide use, and climate change. The loss of natural habitats can reduce the availability of refuges and food sources for beneficial insects, while pesticides can kill non-target species, including natural enemies of pests (Geiger et al., 2010). Climate change can also disrupt the synchrony between pests and their natural enemies, leading to increased pest pressure and reduced effectiveness of biological control (Thomson et al., 2010).

Threats to Insect Populations and Implications for Food Security

The decline in insect populations poses a significant threat to food security. A growing body of research indicates that insect populations are declining globally at an alarming rate. For example, a study published in *Biological Conservation* found that over 40% of insect species are threatened with extinction, and the total biomass of insects is decreasing by 2.5% per year (Sánchez-Bayo & Wyckhuys, 2019). This decline is driven by multiple factors, including habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change, pollution, and invasive species.

The implications of this decline for food security are profound. As insect populations decline, the ecosystem services they provide—such as pollination, soil health maintenance, and natural pest control—are also diminished. This can lead to reduced crop yields, lower food quality, and increased reliance on chemical inputs, which can further harm the environment and human health. Moreover, the decline in insect populations can exacerbate food insecurity in vulnerable regions. In many developing countries, smallholder farmers rely heavily on natural ecosystem services to maintain agricultural productivity. The loss of insects in these regions could lead to reduced food production, higher food prices, and increased poverty and malnutrition (IPBES, 2016).

Strategies for Conserving Insect Populations to Ensure Food Security

To ensure food security, it is essential to conserve insect populations and protect the ecosystem services they provide. Several strategies can be implemented to achieve this goal, including habitat conservation, reducing pesticide use, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

1. Habitat Conservation

Conserving and restoring habitats is crucial for supporting insect populations. This can be achieved by creating protected areas, maintaining landscape connectivity, and promoting agroecological practices that integrate biodiversity into farming systems. For example, agroforestry and organic farming practices that enhance habitat diversity can provide refuges and food sources for insects, supporting their populations and the services they provide (FAO, 2019).

2. Reducing Pesticide Use

Reducing the use of harmful pesticides is essential for protecting insect populations. This can be achieved through integrated pest management (IPM) practices that combine biological control, habitat management, and

ISSN (E): 2583 – 0821

the use of less harmful pesticides. IPM reduces the reliance on chemical inputs and minimizes the impact of pesticides on non-target species, including beneficial insects (Stokstad, 2013).

3. Promoting Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable agricultural practices that enhance biodiversity and support ecosystem services are critical for conserving insect populations. These practices include crop rotation, polyculture, and the use of cover crops, which can improve soil health, reduce pest pressure, and provide habitats for beneficial insects. Promoting these practices through policies, incentives, and education can help ensure that agriculture contributes to food security while protecting insect populations (Pretty et al., 2018).

Table 3: Strategies for Conserving Insect Populations to Ensure Food Security (FAO, 2019; Stokstad, 2013; Pretty et al., 2018)

Strategy	Description	Example Application
Habitat Conservation	Protecting and restoring insect habitats	Agroforestry, organic farming practices
Reducing Pesticide Use	Minimizing the use of harmful pesticides	Integrated pest management (IPM)
Promoting Sustainable Agriculture	Enhancing biodiversity in farming systems	Crop rotation, polyculture, cover crops

CONCLUSION

Insects are indispensable to global food security, providing essential services such as pollination, soil health maintenance, and natural pest control. However, the decline in insect populations poses a significant threat to these services and, consequently, to food security. Addressing this challenge requires concerted efforts to conserve insect populations through habitat conservation, reducing pesticide use, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. By protecting insects and the ecosystem services they provide, we can ensure a more resilient and sustainable food system for future generations.

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