IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Study Of Food Web Of Gorakhpur Dam And Silgi River Of Dindori District Of Madhy Pradesh

Sameeksha Uikey[1] and Pushpendra Singh[2*]

1. Research Scholar, Department of Zoology, Government Model Science college Rewa, APS University Rewa Madhya Pradesh, India
2. Assistant Professor, Government Girls PG College Satna ,Madhya Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Freshwater ecosystems serve as critical habitats supporting diverse aquatic life and complex trophic interactions. This research examines the food web structure and dynamics of two important freshwater systems in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh—the Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River. Understanding food web complexity is essential for assessing ecosystem health, identifying keystone species, and developing effective conservation strategies. The study employed systematic sampling across different seasons (monsoon, winter, and summer) during 2023-2024, collecting data on phytoplankton, zooplankton, benthic macroinvertebrates, fish species, and aquatic vegetation. A total of 48 phytoplankton species, 32 zooplankton species, 27 macroinvertebrate taxa, and 23 fish species were identified across both systems. Food web analysis revealed four distinct trophic levels with primary producers dominated by diatoms and green algae, primary consumers including rotifers and cladocerans, secondary consumers comprising insect larvae and small fish, and tertiary consumers represented by predatory fish species. The Gorakhpur Dam exhibited higher species diversity (Shannon index H'=3.24) compared to Silgi River (H'=2.87), though the river showed greater seasonal variation. Connectivity analysis indicated 156 trophic links in the dam versus 134 in the river, suggesting more complex food web structure in lentic systems. Anthropogenic impacts including agricultural runoff, fishing pressure, and habitat modification were identified as major threats to food web stability. The study provides baseline ecological data crucial for sustainable management of these freshwater resources and highlights the need for integrated watershed management approaches to preserve aquatic biodiversity.

Keywords: Food web, freshwater ecology, trophic levels, aquatic biodiversity, Gorakhpur Dam, Silgi River, Dindori district, species diversity, ecosystem dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Freshwater ecosystems, despite occupying less than 1% of Earth's surface, harbor approximately 10% of all described species and provide essential ecosystem services including water supply, nutrient cycling, and food production (Dudgeon et al., 2006). These systems support complex food webs characterized by intricate feeding relationships among producers, consumers, and decomposers. Understanding food web structure is fundamental to comprehending ecosystem functioning, energy flow patterns, and community stability.

Food webs represent the network of feeding relationships within ecological communities, depicting who eats whom and illustrating energy transfer across trophic levels. Unlike simple food chains, food webs capture the complexity of natural systems where organisms typically consume multiple prey types and face predation from various predators. The structure and dynamics of food webs influence ecosystem properties including productivity, nutrient cycling, resilience to disturbances, and biological diversity (Pimm et al., 1991).

Freshwater food webs face mounting pressures from human activities. Agricultural intensification introduces nutrient pollution causing eutrophication and algal blooms. Industrial effluents and urban wastewater introduce toxins affecting sensitive species. Overfishing removes top predators, triggering cascading effects throughout food webs. Habitat modification through dam construction, channelization, and riparian vegetation removal disrupts natural flow regimes and breeding sites. Climate change alters temperature and precipitation patterns, affecting species distributions and phenology (Woodward et al., 2010).

India's freshwater systems support rich biodiversity but face severe degradation. Rapid population growth, agricultural expansion, industrialization, and urbanization have severely impacted rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Many aquatic species face population declines or local extinctions. Systematic documentation of food web structure and functioning remains limited for most Indian freshwater systems, hampering evidence-based conservation planning (Sarkar et al., 2019).

Madhya Pradesh, located in central India, contains diverse freshwater ecosystems including rivers, reservoirs, and seasonal wetlands. Dindori district in eastern Madhya Pradesh is characterized by forested landscapes, tribal populations, and relatively pristine freshwater systems. The Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River represent important aquatic resources in this region, supporting local livelihoods through fishing, irrigation, and domestic water supply. However, increasing anthropogenic pressures threaten these ecosystems.

Despite their ecological and socio-economic importance, comprehensive food web studies of Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River remain absent from scientific literature. Existing research focuses on isolated taxonomic groups or water quality parameters without examining trophic interactions. This knowledge gap hinders effective management and conservation planning. Understanding the food web structure, identifying key species, and assessing ecosystem health are essential for developing sustainable management strategies.

This research addresses these gaps through systematic investigation of food web structure and dynamics in both systems. The study documents species composition across multiple trophic levels, maps feeding relationships, analyzes food web properties, compares between lentic (dam) and lotic (river) systems, examines seasonal variations, and assesses anthropogenic impacts. The findings provide baseline ecological data essential for monitoring, management, and conservation of these valuable freshwater resources.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents research objectives. Section 3 defines study scope. Section 4 reviews relevant literature. Section 5 describes methodology. Sections 6 and 7 present findings on species composition and food web structure. Section 8 discusses implications, and Section 9 concludes with management recommendations.

OBJECTIVES

This research pursues the following specific objectives:

- To identify and enumerate species across different trophic levels including phytoplankton, zooplankton, benthic macroinvertebrates, fish, and aquatic macrophytes in both study systems.
- To construct detailed food web diagrams depicting feeding relationships and energy flow pathways within each ecosystem.
- To analyze and compare food web properties including species diversity, connectivity, trophic levels, and complexity between lentic (dam) and lotic (river) systems.
- To examine seasonal variations in species composition, abundance, and food web structure across monsoon, winter, and summer seasons.
- To assess anthropogenic impacts on food web stability and identify key threats to aquatic biodiversity in both systems.

SCOPE OF STUDY

This research operates within the following boundaries:

Geographical Scope: The study focuses on two freshwater systems in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh—Gorakhpur Dam (a lentic system) and Silgi River (a lotic system) within a 15-kilometer radius.

Temporal Scope: Field sampling and data collection occurred across three seasons over one annual cycle (June 2023 to May 2024): Monsoon season (July-October 2023), Winter season (November 2023-February 2024), and Summer season (March-May 2024).

Taxonomic Coverage**:** The study includes primary producers (phytoplankton and aquatic macrophytes), primary consumers (zooplankton), secondary consumers (benthic macroinvertebrates and herbivorous/omnivorous fish), and tertiary consumers (carnivorous fish).

Sampling Locations: Five sampling stations at Gorakhpur Dam representing different zones (inlet, central deep zone, outlet, littoral zones), and six sampling stations along Silgi River covering upstream, midstream, and downstream sections.

Parameters Examined: Species identification and enumeration, relative abundance, biomass estimation (for selected groups), feeding habits determination, trophic position assignment, and food web connectivity analysis.

Excluded Elements: The study does not cover terrestrial inputs (insects falling into water), riparian vegetation (except aquatic macrophytes), microbial food webs (bacteria and fungi), or detailed physiological studies of individual species.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Web Theory and Concepts

Food web ecology has evolved from simple descriptive diagrams to sophisticated quantitative analysis of ecosystem structure and function. Early food web research focused on documenting species and their feeding relationships. Contemporary approaches employ network theory, stable isotope analysis, and modeling to understand energy flow, trophic cascades, and ecosystem stability (Ings et al., 2009).

Key food web properties include species richness (number of species), connectance (proportion of realized feeding links among possible links), linkage density (average number of links per species), and trophic position (organism's position in energy flow hierarchy). These properties influence ecosystem functioning, with higher complexity generally associated with greater stability, though this relationship remains debated (McCann, 2000).

Trophic cascade theory posits that changes in top predator abundance ripple through food webs, affecting multiple trophic levels. Classic examples include lake ecosystems where piscivorous fish control planktivorous fish populations, which regulate zooplankton abundance, which in turn affects phytoplankton density. Such cascades demonstrate strong top-down control in aquatic food webs (Carpenter et al., 1985).

Bottom-up processes, driven by primary productivity and nutrient availability, also structure aquatic food webs. Nutrient enrichment increases primary production, supporting higher consumer biomass. However, excessive nutrient loading causes eutrophication, algal blooms, oxygen depletion, and food web degradation. The relative importance of top-down versus bottom-up control varies among systems and depends on factors like productivity and predator diversity (Shurin et al., 2002).

Freshwater Food Web Components

Phytoplankton form the base of most freshwater food webs, converting solar energy into organic matter through photosynthesis. Diatoms, green algae, blue-green algae (cyanobacteria), and dinoflagellates represent major groups with distinct ecological roles. Diatoms often dominate cooler, nutrient-rich waters, while cyanobacteria proliferate in warm, stratified, eutrophic conditions. Phytoplankton composition reflects water quality, with certain species serving as indicators of pollution or nutrient enrichment (Reynolds, 2006).

Zooplankton consume phytoplankton and smaller zooplankton, serving as crucial links between primary producers and higher consumers. Rotifers, cladocerans (water fleas), and copepods constitute the major groups. Rotifers are small and reproduce rapidly, responding quickly to favorable conditions.

Cladocerans filter-feed on phytoplankton and bacteria, exerting strong grazing pressure. Copepods include herbivorous and predatory species, with some consuming fish larvae. Zooplankton population dynamics influence phytoplankton community structure and provide food for fish (Gliwicz, 2003).

Benthic macroinvertebrates inhabit sediments and submerged surfaces, performing vital ecosystem functions. This diverse group includes insect larvae (mayflies, dragonflies, caddisflies, midges), mollusks (snails, clams), crustaceans (amphipods), and worms (oligochaetes). They process organic matter, recycle nutrients, and provide food for fish. Macroinvertebrate community composition indicates habitat quality and pollution levels, with sensitive taxa declining in degraded conditions (Rosenberg &Resh, 1993).

Fish occupy multiple trophic positions in freshwater food webs. Herbivorous species consume algae and macrophytes. Planktivores feed on zooplankton. Insectivores consume aquatic insects. Omnivores utilize diverse food sources. Piscivorous predators consume other fish, exerting top-down control. Fish community structure reflects habitat conditions, with diverse assemblages indicating healthy ecosystems (Karr, 1981).

Lentic versus Lotic Systems

Lakes and reservoirs (lentic systems) differ fundamentally from rivers and streams (lotic systems) in physical characteristics, biological communities, and food web structure. Lentic systems have slow water movement, thermal stratification, and distinct depth zones (littoral, limnetic, profundal). Standing water favors planktonic organisms and rooted macrophytes. Food webs often include well-developed pelagic (open water) and benthic (bottom) components with some coupling between them (Wetzel, 2001).

Lotic systems exhibit continuous water flow, turbulent mixing, and longitudinal gradients in physical and chemical conditions from headwaters to downstream reaches. Flow creates specialized habitats like riffles, pools, and runs. Current constrains organism distribution, with adapted species possessing attachment structures or streamlined bodies. Food webs emphasize benthic pathways, with macroinvertebrates processing leaf litter and algae, and fish consuming invertebrates. The River Continuum Concept describes predictable downstream changes in energy sources and food web structure (Vannote et al., 1980).

Despite differences, both system types face similar threats from human activities. Dams convert lotic sections into lentic habitats, disrupting natural flow regimes, blocking migrations, and altering thermal patterns. Agricultural runoff introduces nutrients and pesticides affecting primary production and sensitive species. Urban development increases impervious surfaces, causing flashy flows and sediment inputs. Climate change affects temperature, precipitation patterns, and extreme events (droughts, floods), stressing aquatic communities (Allan & Castillo, 2007).

Indian Freshwater Ecology

India's freshwater ecosystems span diverse climatic zones from Himalayan streams to tropical rivers, supporting rich biodiversity including endemic species. Major river systems like the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Narmada, and Godavari have sustained civilizations for millennia. Traditional knowledge systems recognized the importance of water conservation and ecosystem stewardship, though many practices have eroded under modernization pressures (Sarkar & Borah, 2018).

Contemporary research documents severe degradation of Indian freshwater systems. Rivers receive massive pollution loads from inadequately treated sewage, industrial effluents, and agricultural runoff. Many rivers, especially near urban centers, have become essentially open sewers. Biodiversity has declined precipitously, with numerous fish species threatened or extinct. Iconic species like the Gangetic dolphin and gharial crocodile face precarious futures (Sarkar et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, some Indian freshwater systems retain ecological integrity, particularly in less developed regions. Protected areas, sacred groves, and remote locations harbor diverse communities. However, documentation remains incomplete. Many regions lack baseline surveys of aquatic biodiversity and food web structure. Such knowledge gaps impede conservation planning and management (Kumar, 2000).

Central Indian freshwater systems, including those in Madhya Pradesh, remain relatively understudied compared to Himalayan or peninsular systems. The Narmada River has received attention due to controversial dam projects, but smaller rivers and reservoirs lack comprehensive ecological assessments. Dindori district's freshwater systems exemplify this knowledge gap—supporting local livelihoods yet lacking scientific documentation of their biodiversity and ecological functioning.

Research Gaps

Several gaps characterize freshwater food web research in India generally and Madhya Pradesh specifically. First, most studies examine isolated taxonomic groups (only fish, or only plankton) rather than integrated food webs spanning multiple trophic levels. Second, temporal dimensions receive limited attention, with single-season snapshots dominating over multi-season or long-term studies. Third, comparative analyses between lentic and lotic systems in similar geographic regions remain rare.

Fourth, anthropogenic impact assessment typically focuses on chemical water quality rather than biological communities and food web structure. Fifth, management recommendations often lack ecological grounding in understanding species interactions and ecosystem processes. Finally, publication bias favors charismatic species or heavily impacted urban water bodies, leaving relatively pristine rural systems undocumented.

This research addresses these gaps through comprehensive multi-trophic food web analysis across seasons in both lentic and lotic systems, providing baseline data essential for monitoring and management of Dindori's freshwater resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Area Description

Dindori district is located in eastern Madhya Pradesh (22°57'N to 23°19'N latitude and 80°58'E to 81°42'E longitude), covering approximately 7,427 square kilometers. The district features hilly terrain, dense forest cover (approximately 52% of area), and predominantly tribal population. Climate is tropical with three distinct seasons: summer (March-June) with temperatures reaching 42°C, monsoon (July-October) receiving 1,200-1,400mm annual rainfall, and winter (November-February) with minimum temperatures around 8°C.

Gorakhpur Dam is located approximately 18 kilometers from Dindori town (23°02'N, 81°05'E), constructed in 1985 for irrigation purposes. The reservoir covers approximately 2.5 square kilometers at full capacity with maximum depth of 12 meters. The dam receives water from seasonal streams draining forested catchment areas. Aquatic vegetation includes emergent macrophytes in shallow zones and submerged species in deeper areas. The reservoir supports subsistence fishing by local communities and provides irrigation water for downstream agriculture.

Silgi River originates from forested hills in Dindori district, flowing approximately 45 kilometers before joining larger drainage systems. The study section covers 15 kilometers of the middle reach (22°58'N to 23°04'N, 81°03'E to 81°08'E). River width varies from 8-15 meters during summer to 25-40 meters during monsoon. Substrate composition includes boulders and cobbles in riffle sections, and sand and silt in pool sections. Riparian vegetation consists of mixed deciduous forest with some agricultural encroachment in downstream reaches.

Sampling Design and Methodology

Sampling occurred seasonally over one annual cycle to capture temporal variation: Monsoon season (July and September 2023), Winter season (December 2023 and January 2024), and Summer season (April and May 2024). Two sampling events per season provided replication while being logistically feasible.

At Gorakhpur Dam, five sampling stations represented ecosystem heterogeneity: Station GD1 (inlet zone, depth 2-3m), Station GD2 (western littoral zone with vegetation, depth 1-2m), Station GD3 (central deep zone, depth 10-12m), Station GD4 (eastern littoral zone with rocky substrate, depth 1-2m), and Station GD5 (outlet zone, depth 3-4m).

Along Silgi River, six sampling stations covered longitudinal variation: Station SR1 (upstream section with forest canopy, riffle-pool sequence), Station SR2 (upstream pool with moderate current), Station SR3 (midstream riffle section), Station SR4 (midstream pool with sand substrate), Station SR5 (downstream section with agricultural influence), and Station SR6 (downstream pool with slow current).

Phytoplankton Sampling

Surface water samples (1 liter) were collected in clean plastic bottles from each station. An additional 50 liters was filtered through plankton net (20µm mesh) for concentration. Samples were preserved immediately using Lugol's iodine solution (2%). In the laboratory, samples were allowed to settle for 24 hours, concentrated to 50ml, and examined using compound microscope at 400x magnification.

Phytoplankton were identified to species level using standard taxonomic keys and classified into major groups: Bacillariophyceae (diatoms), Chlorophyceae (green algae), Cyanophyceae (blue-green algae), Dinophyceae (dinoflagellates), and others. Enumeration used Sedgewick-Rafter counting chamber with at least 300 units counted per sample. Abundance was expressed as cells/liter.

Zooplankton Sampling

Zooplankton samples were collected by filtering 100 liters of water through plankton net (50µm mesh). In shallow areas, vertical hauls captured the entire water column. In deeper zones, both surface and bottom samples were collected. Samples were preserved in 5% formalin with rose bengal stain.

Laboratory analysis involved examining subsamples in Sedgewick-Rafter chamber under microscope at 100-400x magnification. Zooplankton were identified to genus/species level and classified into major groups: Rotifera, Cladocera, Copepoda, and others. At least 200 individuals were counted per sample, and abundance expressed as individuals/liter.

Benthic Macroinvertebrate Sampling

Benthic samples were collected using Ekman grab sampler (area 225 cm^2) in lentic environments, with three replicates per station. In the river, kick sampling with D-frame net (500µm mesh) covered 1 square meter area per station. Samples were sieved through 500µm mesh and preserved in 10% formalin.

Laboratory sorting used white trays with illumination. Macroinvertebrates were picked with forceps and soft brushes, counted, and identified to family level using standard keys. Major groups included Ephemeroptera (mayflies), Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies), Trichoptera (caddisflies), Diptera (true flies, especially Chironomidae), Coleoptera (beetles), Hemiptera (water bugs), Gastropoda (snails), and Oligochaeta (worms). Abundance was expressed as individuals/m^2.

Fish Sampling

Fish were sampled using multiple methods to capture diverse species. Cast nets (mesh size 10-15mm) were used in shallow areas. Gill nets (mesh sizes 25mm, 40mm, 60mm) were set overnight in deeper zones. Hand nets captured small fish in vegetation. Local fishermen were consulted about species presence and relative abundance. All captured fish were identified, counted, measured (total length), and released after recording data. A few voucher specimens of each species were preserved in 10% formalin for verification.

Fish were identified using standard taxonomic keys and guides for Indian freshwater fish. Trophic categories (herbivore, planktivore, insectivore, omnivore, piscivore) were assigned based on literature and examination of stomach contents from voucher specimens.

Aquatic Macrophyte Survey

Macrophytes were surveyed using line transects and quadrats. In the dam, four transects perpendicular to shore covered depth gradients. In the river, transects were placed across channel width at each station. Within transects, 1x1 meter quadrats assessed species presence and percent cover. Macrophytes were identified to species level and classified as emergent, floating, or submerged growth forms.

Food Web Construction

Food web diagrams were constructed by compiling all identified species, assigning them to trophic levels based on feeding habits determined from literature and field observations, and connecting species with arrows indicating predator-prey relationships. Primary producers (phytoplankton, macrophytes) form the base. Primary consumers (herbivorous zooplankton, some macroinvertebrates and fish) occupy the second level. Secondary consumers (predatory zooplankton, insectivorous fish) occupy the third level. Tertiary consumers (piscivorous fish) form the top level.

Food web properties calculated included species richness (S = total number of species), number of trophic links (L), connectance ($C = L/S^2$), and linkage density (L/S). Shannon diversity index ($H' = -\Sigma pi \ln pi$, where pi is proportion of individuals of species i) assessed species diversity.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses used appropriate software. Species richness and diversity indices were calculated for each system and season. ANOVA tested for significant differences between systems and seasons. Cluster analysis grouped stations by species composition similarity. All statistical tests used $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level.

Table 1: Sampling Schedule and Effort

Season	Sampling Period	Gorakhpur Dam Samples	Silgi River Samples	Total Effort
Monsoon	July 2023	5 stations x 4 sample types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Monsoon	September 2023	5 stations x 4 types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Winter	December 2023	5 stations x 4 types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Winter	January 2024	5 stations x 4 types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Summer	April 2024	5 stations x 4 types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Summer	May 2024	5 stations x 4 types = 20	6 stations x 4 types = 24	44 samples
Total	**12 months**	**120 samples**	**144 samples**	**264 samples**

Note: Sample types = Phytoplankton, Zooplankton, Benthic macroinvertebrates, Fish; Additional macrophyte surveys conducted separately

SPECIES COMPOSITION AND ABUNDANCE

Phytoplankton Community

A total of 48 phytoplankton species were identified across both systems. Bacillariophyceae (diatoms) dominated with 22 species, followed by Chlorophyceae (green algae) with 16 species, Cyanophyceae (blue-green algae) with 8 species, and Dinophyceae with 2 species. Gorakhpur Dam supported 42 species while Silgi River contained 38 species, with 32 species common to both systems.

In Gorakhpur Dam, dominant species included diatoms *Cyclotella sp., Fragilaria sp., and Navicula sp., green algae Chlorella sp. and Scenedesmus sp., and cyanobacteria Microcystis sp. and Oscillatoria sp.* Seasonal variation was pronounced—diatoms dominated in winter (contributing 58% of total cells), green algae increased during summer (45% of cells), and cyanobacteria proliferated during monsoon's late phase (32% of cells).

Silgi River showed different patterns. Diatoms dominated year-round, comprising 62-78% of phytoplankton cells across seasons. Dominant species *included Navicula sp., Cymbella sp., Synedra sp., and Gomphonema sp.*—taxa adapted to flowing water and often attached to substrates. Green algae remained secondary (15-25% of cells) with filamentous forms like Spirogyra and Cladophora common in slower sections. Cyanobacteria remained minor components (<10% except during late monsoon).

Phytoplankton density ranged from 2,850 to 45,600 cells/ml in the dam versus 1,240 to 12,400 cells/ml in the river. The dam's higher density reflects its lentic nature favoring planktonic growth. Peak densities occurred during summer in both systems when high temperature and light availability promoted photosynthesis.

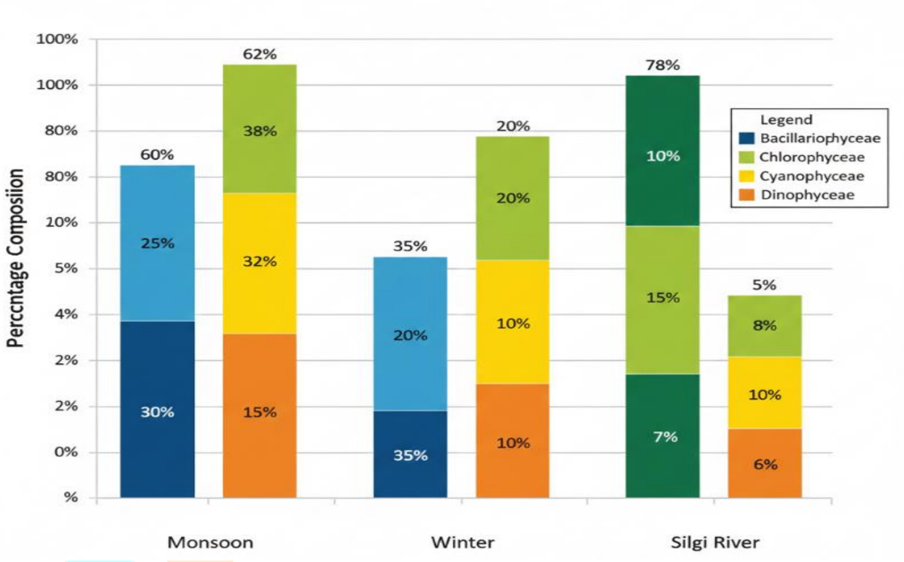

Figure 1: Phytoplankton Group Distribution Across Seasons

Description: This grouped bar chart displays the relative abundance of different phytoplankton groups across three seasons in both study systems. The x-axis shows three seasons (Monsoon, Winter, Summer), and the y-axis displays percentage composition from 0-100%. For each season, two sets of bars are shown—one for Gorakhpur Dam (left, blue tones) and one for Silgi River (right, green tones). Each set contains four stacked segments representing: Bacillariophyceae (bottom, dark blue/green), Chlorophyceae (light blue/green), Cyanophyceae (yellow), and Dinophyceae (orange, minimal). Clear labels show percentage values within segments. The chart reveals distinct patterns: in Gorakhpur Dam, diatoms dominate winter (58%), green algae increase in summer (45%), and cyanobacteria peak in monsoon (32%). Silgi River shows consistent diatom dominance (62-78%) across all seasons. A legend identifies each phytoplankton group, and gridlines facilitate reading exact values.

Zooplankton Community

Thirty-two zooplankton species were identified. Rotifera contributed 18 species, Cladocera 9 species, and Copepoda 5 species. Gorakhpur Dam supported 29 species while Silgi River contained 24 species, with 21 species found in both systems.

Gorakhpur Dam's zooplankton community showed strong seasonal patterns. Rotifers dominated during monsoon and summer, comprising 65-72% of zooplankton abundance. Common species included Brachionus sp., Keratella sp., Asplanchna sp., and Filinia sp. Cladocerans increased during winter (38% of abundance), with Daphnia sp., Ceriodaphnia sp., and Moina sp. abundant. Copepods remained relatively constant across seasons (12-18% of abundance), dominated by cyclopoid genera.

Silgi River's zooplankton community differed markedly. Rotifers remained important (45-58% of abundance) but were less dominant than in the dam. Cladocerans were less abundant (8-15%), possibly due to current stress. Copepods, particularly calanoid forms, comprised larger proportions (25-35%) than in lentic system, reflecting their superior swimming abilities in current.

Zooplankton density ranged from 45 to 320 individuals/liter in the dam versus 18 to 85 individuals/liter in the river. These differences reflect habitat suitability—standing water favors planktonic organisms. Peak densities coincided with phytoplankton blooms, demonstrating bottom-up control of zooplankton populations.

Benthic Macroinvertebrate Community

Twenty-seven macroinvertebrate taxa were identified to family level. The assemblage included Ephemeroptera (5 families), Odonata (4 families), Trichoptera (3 families), Diptera-Chironomidae (6 genera), Coleoptera (3 families), Hemiptera (2 families), Gastropoda (2 families), and Oligochaeta (2 families).

Gorakhpur Dam's benthic community was dominated by chironomid larvae, comprising 48-62% of individuals across seasons. These pollution-tolerant organisms thrive in sediments rich in organic matter. Oligochaete worms were also abundant (15-25%). Gastropods (snails) occurred primarily in vegetated littoral zones. Insect orders typically associated with flowing water (mayflies, caddisflies) were rare or absent.

Silgi River supported more diverse and balanced macroinvertebrate communities. Mayfly larvae (families Baetidae, Heptageniidae) were abundant in riffle sections, indicating good water quality. Caddisfly larvae occurred in both riffle and pool habitats, with different families occupying distinct niches. Chironomids remained abundant but comprised smaller proportions (25-35%) than in the dam. Beetles, dragonfly nymphs, and water bugs added diversity.

Macroinvertebrate density ranged from 850 to 3,200 individuals/m² in the dam versus 1,200 to 4,800 individuals/m² in the river. Despite lower density in some seasons, the dam's macroinvertebrate assemblage was dominated by few tolerant taxa. The river's higher density and diversity, particularly of sensitive taxa, indicates better habitat quality and ecological integrity.

Table 2: Major Species Identified Across Trophic Groups

Trophic Group	Gorakhpur Dam Species (Selected Examples)	Silgi River Species (Selected Examples)	Common Species
Phytoplankton	*Cyclotella sp., Microcystis sp., Chlorella sp., Scenedesmus sp., Oscillatoria sp.*	*Navicula sp., Cymbella sp., Gomphonema sp., Spirogyra sp., Synedra sp.*	*Navicula sp., Scenedesmus sp., Chlorella sp.*
Zooplankton	*Brachionus sp., Keratella sp., Daphnia sp., Moina sp., Cyclops sp.*	*Brachionus sp., Keratella sp., Calanoid copepods, Nauplius larvae*	*Brachionus sp., Keratella sp., Cyclops sp.*
Macroinvertebrates	*Chironomus sp., Tubifex sp., Lymnaea sp., Libellula nymphs*	*Baetis sp., Hydropsyche sp., Chironomus sp., Ephemerella sp., Gomphus nymphs*	*Chironomus sp., various chironomid genera*
Herbivorous Fish	*Labeorohita, Cirrhinusmrigala, Catlacatla*	*Labeobata, Puntius species*	*Labeo species*
Omnivorous Fish	*Cyprinus carpio, Puntius sophore, Channapunctata*	*Puntius sophore, Danio species, Mystus species*	*Puntius sophore*
Carnivorous Fish	*Channamarulius, Wallago attu, Mystusseenghala*	*Channaorientalis, Heteropneustesfossilis*	*Mystus species*

Note: Species names represent common and dominant taxa; complete species lists available in supplementary materials

Fish Community

Twenty-three fish species from ten families were recorded across both systems. Cyprinidae (carp family) dominated with 11 species, followed by Channidae (snakeheads, 3 species), Bagridae (catfish, 2 species), and others. Gorakhpur Dam supported 19 species while Silgi River contained 17 species, with 13 species occurring in both systems.

Major carp species in Gorakhpur Dam included *Labeo rohita* (rohu), *Cirrhinusmrigala* (mrigal), and *Catla catla* (catla)—important food fish likely introduced through stocking programs. Native cyprinids like *Puntius sophore*, *Puntius ticto*, and *Amblypharyngo donmola* were abundant. Predatory species included *Channamarulius* (giant snakehead), *Wallago attu* (wallago catfish), and *Mystusseenghala* (long-whiskered catfish).

Silgi River's fish community emphasized rheophilic (current-loving) species. *Labeo bata* and other *Labeo species* occupied riffle sections, scraping algae from rocks. Small cyprinids like Danio species, *Rasbora daniconius*, and *Puntius species* formed schools in pool sections. Predators included *Channaorientalis* (walking snakehead) and *Heteropneustesfossilis* (stinging catfish) hunting in vegetated margins.

Fish abundance and diversity varied seasonally. Monsoon flooding in the river created connectivity with floodplains, allowing fish migration for breeding. Many species spawned during monsoon, with juveniles abundant in post-monsoon months. Summer brought low water levels, concentrating fish in remaining pools and increasing predation pressure. Winter represented moderate conditions with stable populations.

Aquatic Macrophytes

Fifteen macrophyte species were identified. Gorakhpur Dam's littoral zones supported diverse vegetation including emergent species (*Typha angustifolia, Scirpus species, Polygonum species*), floating species (*Eichhorniacrassipes*, *Lemna minor*, *Azollapinnata*), and submerged species (*Hydrilla verticillata, Vallisneria spiralis, Ceratophyllum demersum*).

Silgi River's macrophyte community varied longitudinally. Upper reaches with faster current and rocky substrate supported limited macrophyte growth, primarily algal films on rocks. Middle and lower reaches with slower flow and finer substrate hosted emergent species along margins (*Typha*, *Phragmites*) and submerged species in pools (*Potamogeton species, Hydrilla*).

Macrophytes play multiple food web roles. They produce organic matter through photosynthesis, provide physical habitat for invertebrates and fish, serve as food for herbivorous species, and after death, contribute detritus supporting decomposer-based food chains. Extensive macrophyte beds in the dam's littoral zones supported high invertebrate densities and fish spawning activities.

FOOD WEB STRUCTURE AND ANALYSIS

Trophic Level Organization

Both systems exhibited classic four-level trophic structure, though with different emphasis on pelagic versus benthic pathways. Primary producers included phytoplankton (both systems) and macrophytes (primarily dam littoral zones and river pools). These autotrophs converted solar energy into organic matter, forming the food web base.

Primary consumers comprised herbivorous zooplankton (filtering phytoplankton), grazing macroinvertebrates (scraping attached algae), and herbivorous fish (consuming macrophytes and algae). Dominant primary consumers in the dam included cladocerans like Daphnia, mayfly nymphs in vegetated zones, and carp species. In the river, calanoid copepods, baetid mayflies scraping rock surfaces, and Labeo species represented important herbivores.

Secondary consumers included predatory zooplankton (Asplanchna preying on rotifers), predatory macroinvertebrates (dragonfly and damselfly nymphs capturing other invertebrates, predatory beetle larvae), and insectivorous fish (consuming aquatic insects and zooplankton). Omnivorous fish occupying intermediate positions included Puntius species and small catfish.

Tertiary consumers were exclusively piscivorous fish species. Channamarulius in the dam and Channaorientalis in the river represented apex predators, consuming smaller fish species. Large catfish like Wallago attu also occupied this top trophic level. These predators potentially exerted top-down control on prey fish populations.

Food Web Connectivity and Complexity

Gorakhpur Dam's food web contained 42 species (nodes) and 156 documented trophic links (edges). Connectance ($C = 156/42^2 = 0.088$) indicated that approximately 8.8% of possible feeding links were realized. Linkage density ($156/42 = 3.71$) showed that each species connected to an average of 3.71 other species as predator or prey.

Silgi River's food web contained 38 species and 134 trophic links. Connectance ($C = 134/38^2 = 0.093$) slightly exceeded the dam's value, suggesting proportionally more feeding connections despite fewer species. Linkage density ($134/38 = 3.53$) was marginally lower than the dam.

Both values fall within typical ranges for natural food webs, which generally exhibit connectance between 0.05-0.30 and linkage density between 2-6. The dam's slightly higher species richness and link number likely reflect its habitat heterogeneity—distinct pelagic, benthic, and littoral zones supporting specialized communities.

Shannon diversity indices confirmed this pattern. Gorakhpur Dam achieved $H' = 3.24$ (averaged across all organism groups and seasons), indicating high diversity. Silgi River reached $H' = 2.87$, respectable but lower than the dam. However, the river's diversity varied substantially by season (H' ranging from 2.42 in summer to 3.15 in monsoon), reflecting seasonal flow variation affecting habitat availability.

Figure 2: Simplified Food Web Diagram - Gorakhpur Dam

This conceptual food web diagram illustrates major trophic relationships in Gorakhpur Dam. At the bottom, green oval shapes represent primary producers: "Phytoplankton" (left) and "Aquatic Macrophytes" (right). The second level shows primary consumers in yellow ovals: "Herbivorous Zooplankton" (Daphnia, Moina), "Grazing Macroinvertebrates" (snails), and "Herbivorous Fish" (Labeo species, Catla). The third level displays secondary consumers in orange ovals: "Predatory Zooplankton" (Asplanchna), "Predatory Macroinvertebrates" (dragonfly nymphs), and "Omnivorous Fish" (Puntius, small catfish). At the apex, red ovals show tertiary consumers: "Piscivorous Fish" (*Channamarulius, Wallago attu*). Black arrows indicate energy flow direction from prey to predator. Multiple arrows from each node show the web's complexity—for example, omnivorous fish receive arrows from zooplankton, macroinvertebrates, and plant matter, while sending arrows to piscivores. Dotted lines indicate detritus pathways. The diagram clearly visualizes the four trophic levels and multiple feeding pathways characteristic of aquatic food webs.

Seasonal Dynamics

Food web structure exhibited pronounced seasonal variation, particularly in Silgi River. During monsoon, high flows and increased turbidity reduced phytoplankton abundance but enhanced connectivity with riparian zones. Terrestrial insect inputs increased, providing subsidies to aquatic food webs. Fish migrations for spawning temporarily increased species richness and altered predator-prey dynamics.

Winter brought stable conditions with clearest water and peak phytoplankton-zooplankton production in both systems. Lower temperatures reduced metabolic rates but also enhanced oxygen solubility. This season showed maximum species diversity and strongest trophic linkages, representing optimal conditions for most aquatic organisms.

Summer stressed both systems. In the dam, stratification and potential oxygen depletion in bottom waters affected fish distribution. Macrophyte growth accelerated, sometimes covering extensive areas. In the river, reduced flow confined fish to pools, intensifying competition and predation. Some reaches dried completely, fragmenting populations and locally eliminating species unable to find refuge.

Seasonal turnover in dominant species altered food web structure. For example, the shift from diatom dominance in winter to cyanobacterial proliferation in late monsoon affected zooplankton communities, as many herbivorous species cannot efficiently consume or digest colonial cyanobacteria. Such bottom-up effects cascaded through food webs.

Key Species and Trophic Roles

Certain species played disproportionately important roles in food web functioning. Among primary producers, diatoms formed the base of most productive food chains due to their high nutritional quality and digestibility. In contrast, cyanobacterial blooms, while representing high biomass, transferred energy less efficiently to higher trophic levels.

Among zooplankton, large cladocerans like Daphnia exerted strong grazing pressure on phytoplankton, serving as keystone species regulating primary producer communities. Their abundance or scarcity influenced water clarity and phytoplankton composition. Copepods, with mixed feeding modes (herbivory and predation), occupied crucial intermediate positions.

Benthic macroinvertebrates, particularly in the river, performed vital shredding and filtering functions. Mayflies and caddisflies processed leaf litter and algae, making energy available to fish. Predatory macroinvertebrates like dragonfly nymphs controlled smaller invertebrate populations.

Among fish, apex predators potentially exerted top-down control. However, fishing pressure had reduced large predator abundance, possibly weakening trophic cascades. Medium-sized omnivorous species like Puntius occupied flexible positions, feeding opportunistically across multiple trophic levels and potentially stabilizing food web dynamics through dietary plasticity.

Table 3: Food Web Properties Comparison in study sites

Property	Gorakhpur Dam	Silgi River	Ecological Interpretation
Total Species (S)	42	38	Dam supports slightly higher richness
Trophic Links (L)	156	134	Dam has more documented feeding relationships
Connectance (C)	0.088	0.093	Similar proportional connectivity
Linkage Density (L/S)	3.71	3.53	Average connections per species similar
Shannon Diversity (H')	3.24	2.87	Dam shows higher overall diversity
Maximum Food Chain Length	4	4	Both systems support four trophic levels
Omnivore Proportion	24%	21%	Similar dietary flexibility
Seasonal Variation (CV)	Low (0.18)	High (0.34)	River shows greater temporal variation

Note: Values represent averages across sampling seasons; CV = Coefficient of Variation in species richness across seasons

Comparison Between Systems

The lentic-lotic comparison revealed expected and unexpected patterns. As anticipated, the dam supported planktonic pathways more strongly, with well-developed phytoplankton-zooplankton-planktivorous fish chains. The river emphasized benthic pathways, with algae-macroinvertebrate-insectivorous fish connections dominating.

Unexpectedly, overall species richness differed less than predicted. While the dam supported more species overall, the difference (42 vs. 38 species) was modest. The river's longitudinal habitat heterogeneity—from riffle to pool sections—apparently compensated for its lotic nature, providing diverse niches supporting varied communities.

Food web complexity metrics (connectance, linkage density) were remarkably similar, suggesting that fundamental organizing principles operate similarly despite physical differences. Both systems converged on similar levels of connectivity and feeding link density, perhaps representing stable states for productive tropical freshwater systems.

The key difference lay in temporal stability. The dam's species composition and food web structure remained relatively stable across seasons (coefficient of variation in species richness = 0.18), while the river showed substantial seasonal variation (CV = 0.34). This reflects the river's dependence on monsoonal flows and its vulnerability to seasonal drying, creating boom-bust dynamics absent in the buffered reservoir environment.

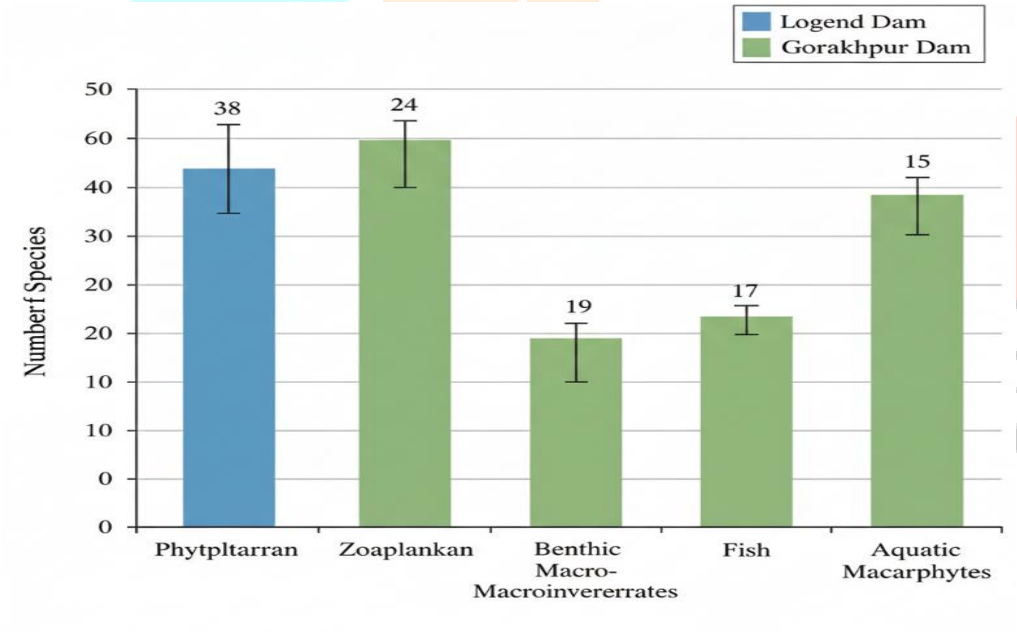

Figure 3: Species Richness Comparison by Trophic Group

This grouped bar chart compares species richness across trophic groups between Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River. The x-axis lists five organism groups: Phytoplankton, Zooplankton, Benthic Macroinvertebrates, Fish, and Aquatic Macrophytes. The y-axis shows number of species from 0 to 50. For each group, two bars are displayed side-by-side—blue bars for Gorakhpur Dam and green bars for Silgi River. Values are labeled above each bar. Phytoplankton: Dam 42, River 38. Zooplankton: Dam 29, River 24. Macroinvertebrates: Dam 21, River 27. Fish: Dam 19, River 17. Macrophytes: Dam 15, River 12. The chart reveals that the dam supports higher species richness for most groups except macroinvertebrates, where the river's diverse habitats (riffles, pools) support greater invertebrate diversity. Error bars could represent standard error across sampling seasons. A legend identifies the two systems, and gridlines facilitate reading exact values. The visualization effectively communicates taxonomic diversity patterns between lentic and lotic ecosystems.

DISCUSSION

Food Web Structure and Functioning

The documented food webs exhibit structural properties consistent with productive freshwater ecosystems in tropical regions. Species richness values (38-42 species) fall within typical ranges, though certainly represent underestimates of total biodiversity given taxonomic resolution limitations (genus rather than species level for some groups) and likely presence of rare species missed during sampling.

The four-level trophic structure is characteristic of aquatic systems, which generally support shorter food chains than terrestrial ecosystems due to higher primary productivity and more efficient energy transfer (Vander Zanden& Fetzer, 2007). The presence of apex predators (large piscivorous fish) indicates that energy flow sustains multiple trophic transfers, suggesting ecosystem productivity supports complex community structure.

Connectance values (0.088-0.093) align with general patterns where real food webs show much lower connectance than theoretically possible, typically ranging from 0.05-0.30 (Dunne et al., 2002). Low connectance may reflect feeding specialization, habitat partitioning, or simply incomplete documentation of all feeding relationships. Higher connectance sometimes correlates with greater stability through multiple pathways allowing functional compensation when species decline.

The substantial proportion of omnivorous species (21-24%) introduces complexity beyond simple linear food chains. Omnivory creates feedback loops and interconnections across trophic levels, potentially enhancing stability by providing dietary flexibility during prey fluctuations. However, omnivory can also complicate trophic cascade predictions and make food web dynamics less intuitive (Thompson et al., 2007).

Lentic-Lotic Comparison

The comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence between reservoir and river systems. Convergence in overall species richness and food web complexity suggests that fundamental ecological organizing principles operate similarly despite physical differences. Both systems apparently provide sufficient habitat heterogeneity and resource availability to support diverse communities with complex trophic interactions.

Key differences emerged in species composition and temporal dynamics. The dam's planktonic pathway dominance reflects standing water favoring suspended organisms. The river's benthic pathway emphasis reflects current constraining plankton development while enhancing substrate diversity supporting diverse macroinvertebrates. These differences demonstrate how physical template shapes biological community composition.

The river's greater seasonal variability poses both challenges and opportunities for its biota. Species must tolerate or adapt to fluctuating conditions—requiring either physiological tolerance, life history adaptations (drought-resistant eggs, migration), or behavioral responses (seeking refuges). This environmental filtering selects for hardy, adaptable species but may exclude specialists, potentially explaining slightly lower overall diversity despite high macroinvertebrate richness.

Dam construction fundamentally altered what was originally flowing river sections, converting them into reservoir habitat. This transformation favored lentic species while potentially displacing rheophilic forms. Understanding these trade-offs is crucial for assessing environmental impacts of water development projects. While dams provide water security and economic benefits, they impose ecological costs through habitat homogenization and disruption of natural flow regimes.

Anthropogenic Impacts

Several threats to food web integrity were observed. Agricultural runoff, evident particularly in Silgi River's downstream sections, introduces nutrients promoting eutrophication. While moderate nutrient enrichment can enhance productivity, excessive loading causes algal blooms, oxygen depletion, and shifts toward pollution-tolerant species. The dominance of chironomids and oligochaetes in some dam zones suggests organic enrichment from catchment runoff.

Fishing pressure affects top trophic levels. Local fishermen reported declining catches of large predatory fish over the past decade. Removing apex predators can trigger trophic cascades—prey fish populations may increase, intensifying grazing on zooplankton, potentially releasing phytoplankton from grazing control and causing water quality degradation. Such cascades have been documented in numerous lakes worldwide (Jeppesen et al., 2000).

Habitat modification threatens both systems. Deforestation in catchment areas increases sedimentation, degrading fish spawning sites and macroinvertebrate habitats. Riparian vegetation removal reduces terrestrial insect inputs that subsidize aquatic food webs. Sand mining from river bed alters substrate composition and flow patterns. These cumulative impacts gradually erode ecosystem integrity.

Invasive species pose emerging threats. Water hyacinth (Eichhorniacrassipes), observed in dam's protected bays, can spread rapidly, covering water surfaces, blocking light, depleting oxygen, and disrupting food webs. Exotic fish species, potentially introduced through aquaculture or religious releases, may compete with or prey upon native species. The African catfish (Clariasgariepinus) presence was reported locally, though not confirmed during sampling.

Management Implications

Maintaining food web integrity requires addressing multiple stressors through integrated management. First, watershed management must control nutrient and sediment inputs. This involves promoting soil conservation, maintaining riparian buffers, regulating fertilizer application, and treating wastewater. Protecting upstream forest cover is particularly crucial for maintaining water quality and flow regulation.

Second, sustainable fishing practices must prevent overexploitation of predatory species. This might include size limits protecting breeding adults, seasonal closures during spawning, gear restrictions preventing capture of juveniles, and catch limits based on population assessments. Community-based co-management approaches involving local fishermen in monitoring and enforcement can prove more effective than top-down regulations.

Third, habitat restoration should enhance ecosystem resilience. In the dam, controlling invasive macrophytes while protecting native vegetation supports diverse communities. In the river, protecting critical habitats (spawning riffles, deep pools serving as refuges), restoring riparian vegetation, and maintaining minimum environmental flows during dry season would benefit aquatic biota.

Fourth, monitoring programs should track ecosystem health over time. Regular sampling of indicator groups (macroinvertebrates are particularly useful given their sensitivity to pollution and habitat quality) can detect early warning signs of degradation. Long-term datasets enable distinguishing natural fluctuations from anthropogenic trends, guiding adaptive management responses.

Fifth, community awareness and engagement are essential. Local communities depend on these aquatic resources for livelihoods and domestic needs. Their traditional knowledge complements scientific understanding. Participatory approaches involving communities in conservation planning, monitoring, and benefit-sharing create ownership and ensure local support for sustainable management.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations qualify this study's findings. First, taxonomic resolution varied across groups—species level for some organisms, family or genus level for others. Finer taxonomic resolution might reveal additional species and trophic links. Second, the one-year sampling period, while covering seasonal variation, cannot capture inter-annual variability or longer-term trends. Multi-year studies would strengthen conclusions about temporal dynamics.

Third, feeding relationships were inferred from literature and limited stomach content analysis rather than comprehensive dietary studies. Molecular techniques like DNA metabarcoding of gut contents or stable isotope analysis could precisely quantify trophic positions and dietary compositions, refining food web models (Nielsen et al., 2018). Fourth, the study documented presence-absence and relative abundance but lacked quantitative biomass estimates across all groups, limiting energetic analysis of food web functioning.

Future research should address these gaps through extended monitoring, finer taxonomic and dietary resolution, and quantitative modeling of energy flow and nutrient cycling. Experimental manipulations (where ethically feasible) could test hypotheses about trophic cascades and key species roles. Comparative studies including additional lakes and rivers would identify generalizable patterns versus site-specific idiosyncrasies.

Importantly, research should inform management. Collaboration between scientists, resource managers, and local communities can ensure research addresses practical conservation needs while building local capacity for ongoing monitoring and adaptive management. Science-based conservation planning offers the best hope for sustaining these valuable freshwater ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

This research provides comprehensive documentation of food web structure and dynamics in Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River, two important freshwater systems in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh. Through systematic seasonal sampling across one annual cycle, the study identified 48 phytoplankton species, 32 zooplankton species, 27 macroinvertebrate taxa, and 23 fish species, documenting 156 trophic links in the dam and 134 in the river.

Both systems exhibited four-level trophic structure characteristic of productive tropical freshwater ecosystems, with primary producers (phytoplankton and macrophytes), primary consumers (herbivorous zooplankton, macroinvertebrates, and fish), secondary consumers (predatory invertebrates and insectivorous fish), and tertiary consumers (piscivorous fish). Food web complexity metrics including species richness, connectance, and linkage density fell within typical ranges for natural aquatic systems.

The comparative analysis revealed instructive patterns. Gorakhpur Dam supported slightly higher overall species diversity (Shannon index H'=3.24 versus H'=2.87 for Silgi River) and more trophic links (156 versus 134), reflecting habitat heterogeneity in the reservoir's distinct pelagic, benthic, and littoral zones. However, the river showed greater macroinvertebrate diversity, demonstrating how flowing water creates specialized niches supporting diverse invertebrate communities.

Seasonal dynamics differed markedly between systems. The dam exhibited relative stability across seasons, buffered by its larger water volume and stratification. The river showed pronounced seasonal variation with monsoon flooding creating connectivity and habitat expansion, while summer drying stressed communities through habitat contraction and intensified competition. This temporal variability shaped community composition, selecting for species tolerant of environmental fluctuation.

Anthropogenic impacts pose growing threats to both systems. Agricultural runoff introduces nutrients promoting eutrophication and algal blooms. Fishing pressure has reduced apex predators, potentially weakening top-down control and triggering trophic cascades. Habitat degradation through sedimentation, vegetation removal, and sand mining progressively erodes ecosystem integrity. Invasive species present emerging risks through competition and predation on native species.

The research achieved its primary objective of comprehensive food web documentation while meeting secondary objectives around species identification, food web construction, property analysis, system comparison, seasonal examination, and impact assessment. The findings contribute baseline ecological data essential for monitoring these systems and detecting future changes.

Several management recommendations emerge from this work. Integrated watershed management should control nutrient and sediment inputs through soil conservation, riparian buffers, and wastewater treatment. Sustainable fishing practices including size limits, seasonal closures, and community-based co-management should prevent overexploitation. Habitat restoration focusing on native vegetation, spawning sites, and environmental flow maintenance should enhance ecosystem resilience. Regular monitoring of indicator organisms should provide early warning of degradation. Community engagement should ensure local support for conservation.

The study demonstrates the value of food web analysis for understanding ecosystem structure and functioning. By documenting species interactions across trophic levels, food web approaches provide insights impossible from single-species or single-group studies. Such integrated ecological understanding is essential for predicting responses to environmental changes and designing effective conservation strategies.

Freshwater ecosystems face mounting pressures globally and in India particularly. Gorakhpur Dam and Silgi River, while currently supporting diverse communities, require proactive management to sustain ecological integrity. The baseline data and ecological insights provided by this research offer foundations for evidence-based conservation planning and adaptive management.

Future research should extend monitoring temporally to detect long-term trends, employ advanced techniques like stable isotope analysis for precise trophic position determination, conduct experimental tests of food web hypotheses, and integrate ecological findings into participatory management frameworks involving local communities. Only through sustained scientific attention and committed conservation action can these valuable freshwater resources be preserved for future generations.

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