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FISH PASSAGE AND RIVER CONNECTIVITY

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The role of rivers in transporting water from its source to destination is simplistic. They are longitudinally connected systems, where organisms and their movements, along with sediments, nutrients, and energy transfers, provide a mechanism of sustaining ecological processes. However, dams and other barriers interfere with such continuity by fragmenting habitat and obstructing the routes of migration for certain fish species for reproduction, feeding and completion of their life cycle. The impact of the dams on the water bodies in terms of changes in the hydrology, trapping of sediments and alteration of thermal regime is well researched and documented. Yet, the biological impact resulting from disconnection is understated during decision making regarding river management and dams construction. In this paper we will explore how dams prevent fish migration and connectivity in rivers, the impacts of such a disruption in an ecological and socioeconomic manner and different methods being employed to facilitate fish migration and re-establish connectivity in the form of fish passages and dams removal.

Rivers act as continuous corridors of ecology longitudinal from source to mouth, lateral from channel to floodplain, and vertical from surface to groundwater level. In doing so, they make it possible for migratory and non migratory fish species to reach their breeding grounds, nursery areas, and feeding grounds during all seasons. The construction of dams for irrigation, electricity generation, flood management, and water supply disrupts such a continuum. Currently, over 60% of the world's long rivers are not free flowing, making river fragmentation a major cause of extinction of fresh water species besides fishing and pollution.

How Dams Disrupt River Connectivity?

Dams create physical barriers that stop anadromous and potamodromous fish like hilsa, mahseer, or salmon from reaching their spawning grounds. What used to be a single open route

for migration turns into a broken-up series of river sections. Fish can only go as far as the first dam they hit. Even if they aren't killed trying to get past, the effort drains them, and repeated failures can mess up their timing. Sometimes, they miss the crucial window for spawning, and that means fewer offspring even if migration isn't completely blocked.

Controlled river flows change things too. Natural rivers pulse with seasonal floods, and these floods trigger spawning or help larvae drift downstream. But once there's a dam, flow becomes steady flattened by human control for things like irrigation or power generation. Fish that evolved to time their spawning to specific cues like rising water, warmer temperatures, or cloudy, sediment-laden pulses lose their signals. So, spawning can end up off schedule, weaker, or just doesn't happen, even if the total annual water released seems about right.

Dams also trap sediment. Normally, sediment moves downstream, delivering nutrients and building up deltas and riverbanks. Without that sediment, spawning gravel gets worse, and deltas and coasts start to erode. River channels downstream can even cut down deeper over time, leaving them further disconnected from their floodplains. Temperature and water quality take a hit too. Dams often release water from deep in a reservoir, and this water is colder and has less oxygen compared to what fish are used to. Cold releases at the wrong time can block spawning cues linked to seasonal warmth. At the same time, water from the oxygen-starved bottom layer can create dead zones downstream, especially in the dry season when there's less water to dilute it. For fish and invertebrates, these shifts can be deadly. All this creates fragmented habitats. Populations get split into smaller, isolated groups that are more likely to suffer from disease or climate swings. Genetic mixing drops, which ramps up the risk of inbreeding and lowers genetic diversity a big problem, especially for migratory fish like Himalayan mahseer, which are already threatened. Isolated populations are also on thin ice: just one pollution disaster or disease outbreak can wipe out a whole group, since there's no nearby population to help repopulate the area.

Dams also cut off rivers from their floodplains and wetlands. Seasonal floods used to spread water, nutrients, and fish across the landscape, giving young fish places to feed and grow. Without these flood pulses, even fish that manage to migrate up and downriver can lose their best nursery grounds. And it's not just fish feeling the impact. Dams break up migrations for all sorts of river life freshwater prawns, mollusks, and invertebrates many of which need to move between rivers, estuaries, or even the sea to complete their life cycles. The fallout ripples through the food web, hurting the species that depend on them.

Ecological and Socioeconomic Consequences

When rivers get broken up by dams and barriers, migratory fisheries crash and millions of people feel the loss. Just look at hilsa in the Ganga-Padma system, their numbers have dropped sharply upstream of the barrages. It's the same story for mahseer caught downstream from Himalayan hydropower dams. There's more at stake than just fish, though.

When sediment can't travel downstream, whole deltas become less stable and coastal fish farming struggles. Blocked nutrients mean less productivity in the water, changing food webs and hurting the communities that count on them.

Restoring Connectivity: Fish Passage Solutions

Fish ladders or fishways work like staircases for fish, letting them get past barriers by swimming or jumping up a series of steps or pools. Each pool breaks up the water's energy, giving fish a chance to rest before taking on the next stage. But the design really matters. A steep, fast, salmon-style ladder won't help weaker swimmers like Indian carps or catfish they need a gentler slope, slower water, and lots of nearby resting spots. All too often, people build generic ladders that look good on paper but barely get used because they don't fit local species. You end up with an expensive structure that offers little ecological benefit. Fish lifts and elevators are more high-tech. These are for really tall dams where a ladder just isn't practical. The idea is simple: fish get herded into a chamber, then the machine lifts them over the dam and releases them upstream. It does move lots of fish over big barriers, but the system isn't cheap or set it and forget it you need staff to run it, continuous maintenance, and electricity. That makes fish lifts more common on big hydropower projects, not the thousands of small dams and checks splitting up most rivers. And honestly, a lift only works if fish can actually find the entrance among all the wild currents near the dam face, so the collection design is just as important as the lifting mechanism.

Nature like fishways take a different approach you get a bypass channel that looks and acts like a natural stream, with real rocks, mixed currents, and plants along the edges. Instead of mechanical pools or boxes, these channels feel like mini rivers, which means not just more fish get through, but so do juveniles, weaker swimmers, and even crayfish or insects. Because it mimics real habitat, you sometimes get extra benefits, fish don't just pass through, they might stay to spawn or grow, making these bypasses more than simple corridors.

Environmental flow releases shift the focus to water management, not just physical structures. Here, dam managers release water downstream at certain times to mimic the natural signals fish use for migration or spawning like a pulse of rising water, a drop in temperature, or some murky flow that stirs up the urge to move. Fish don't follow calendars, so these flows have to be based on their natural life cycles rather than some basic rule about minimum flows. If the timing is off, the release doesn't trigger migration, even if there's plenty of water. Getting this right helps keep connections open not just for upstream swimming but for allowing fish, larvae, and food to move into floodplain habitats.

Dam removal goes straight to the root of the problem. In places like the US and Europe, where you find old or unsafe dams that don't really serve a purpose anymore, tearing a dam down can instantly reconnect miles of river that fish haven't seen in decades. After Washington's Elwha River dams came out, salmon started swimming up and recolonizing their old spawning grounds within just a few years, and the river mouth began rebuilding itself with sediment that had been trapped behind the dam for ages. Of course, you can't remove every dam many still supply water or power but in the right cases, it's the most direct fix. Sediment bypass systems often get less attention but matter just as much. These channels or tunnels send sand and gravel around a reservoir instead of letting it pile up behind the dam. That way, sediment still flows downstream, keeping riverbeds healthy, gravel clean for fish eggs, and river deltas stable. Without sediment, even if fish can swim past the dam, they might find the spawning grounds downstream aren't usable anymore. So, sediment bypass helps restore a river's full function, not just the fish pathway.

When it comes to tackling barriers, mapping and prioritization tools are helping managers figure out where to make the most impact. There are thousands of tiny barriers out there old weirs, small check dams, culverts and they often fragment rivers more than the big dams. Careful mapping helps spot exactly which barrier, if removed or modified, will open up the most river for the least cost. Sometimes, upgrading a forgotten roadside culvert creates more new habitat than building a fancy fish ladder on a big dam. Finally, for hydropower dams that are here to stay, smarter turbines and better intake screens are essential, especially for young fish heading downstream. Downstream mortality is easy to miss people focus on helping fish go up, but forget countless juveniles get chopped or stranded on their way out to sea. Upgrading turbines and adding good screens makes a real difference for survival and helps keep populations stable in fragmented river systems.

Policy and Management Implications

If we want to really fix river connectivity, we have to design for fish passage right from the start not wait until we've already seen the damage and then try to patch things up. That means environmental impact assessments need to dig deeper. Instead of just checking boxes for things like minimum downstream flow, we should look at how dams and barriers break up rivers, both along their length and across their width. And it's not enough to focus on just one type of fish or barrier. Planners need to consider the needs of all local species, what happens when there are several barriers on the same river, and both upstream and downstream movements. Downstream migration, for example, gets ignored a lot, even though fish getting killed by turbines can wipe out whole populations just as badly as a blocked upstream route. In India, some positive shifts are happening there's the National Mission for Clean Ganga and state fisheries departments starting to include fish passage in new hydropower projects. The problem is, enforcement is spotty, and the designs often don't fit local fish. Most fishways in the region are borrowed from northern salmon runs, but local species like major carps aren't built for leaping; the current setups just don't work for them. More research focused on native species, making it mandatory to check if fishways actually work after they're built (not just building them and walking away), and getting departments like irrigation, power, and fisheries to share information and work together right now, they're all over the place, with different goals and not enough data sharing.

Looking at other places helps. The European Union's Water Framework Directive set real targets for bringing rivers back together, which pushed governments to remove barriers and build better fishways. It's worked well enough to offer some ideas for how things could work elsewhere. And lately, people have realized it's the little barriers culverts, check dams, and low weirs that together do more harm than the big name dams, just because there are so many of them and they're rarely regulated. So, policy can't just focus on the big hydropower projects it has to cover all these smaller, everyday structures too. Planning at the watershed scale makes a lot more sense than just looking at one dam at a time. If you map where all the breaks are in a river network, you can figure out which barriers, if you fixed or removed them, would open up the most habitat for the least cost. This way, you can judge new projects not just by themselves but by how much they'll add to an already chopped-up river system.

At the moment, funds set aside for river restoration are pretty rare, and schemes like mitigation banking in which developers fund connectivity projects elsewhere are even rarer,

especially for rivers. International conservation spending is still skewed towards oceans and forests, leaving freshwater systems underfunded. One more thing real progress means listening to local people. Fishing communities often know more about fish migration patterns and river changes than official reports ever will. Their knowledge is priceless for figuring out when and where to help fish move, but policymakers often leave them out of the loop. If we start bringing that knowledge into the planning process, everyone benefits, including the rivers.

Conclusion

Dams don't just change a stretch of river where they rebuilt they break the flow between a river's source and where it meets the sea. This ripple effect hits hard: migratory fish populations dwindle, sediment stops moving like it used to, nutrients end up in the wrong places, and floodplains lose the regular cycles that kept them full of life. Zoom out, and the numbers start to look even bleaker. More than half of the world's long rivers don't flow freely anymore. We've built tens of thousands of big dams, not to mention millions of smaller barriers. Losing this kind of river connectivity is quietly driving freshwater wildlife into serious decline and most people hardly talk about it. No single fix gets us out of this mess. Sure, there are fish ladders, lifts, or "nature-like" detours that help fish get around some dams. These tools can reconnect parts of a river, especially where taking out a dam isn't an option. But they're really hit or miss. Sometimes they work for a few species at certain spots, but often they look good on paper while the river stays broken for most species. When it's possible especially for old, outdated, or low value dams removing the dam is still hands down the best way to actually heal the river. The speed of ecological bounce back after certain removals proves this point. Still, lots of dams aren't going anywhere. They're too important for water supplies, electricity, or flood control. For these, there are other ways to chip away at the problem: tweak the water release schedules, redesign turbines to let fish through, add systems to shuffle sediment, or rank which barriers matter most at a basin scale. These options can help, even if they can't fix everything.

The first step is treating river connectivity as a real priority, just like water and energy. It's the only way to keep healthy rivers delivering fish, clean water, and livelihoods to people who depend on them. That means putting money into research that doesn't just focus on well studied temperate rivers and salmon, but also learns from tropical rivers and the Global South which have been largely ignored. Regulations need to catch up, setting clear standards for connectivity in dam planning. Long-term monitoring has to become the norm, not the

exception, so we know our fixes actually work and don't just check a box. In the end, keeping rivers connected is about more than conservation it's about securing the food, jobs, and life giving benefits only free flowing rivers can offer millions of people.

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