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Microplastic Contamination in Freshwater Ecosystems and Its Potential Effects on Aquatic Organisms

Hamza Khalil
Department of Zoology, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract:

Microplastic (MP) pollution has emerged as an important environmental concern because Microplastic contamination has become an increasingly important environmental concern because plastic particles smaller than 5 mm can persist in aquatic environments and interact with aquatic organisms. Although early research concentrated largely on marine environments, freshwater ecosystems are now recognized as important reservoirs and transport pathways for microplastics. This article examines the occurrence, sources, distribution, and potential effects of microplastics on aquatic organisms, with particular emphasis on freshwater ecosystems. The article incorporates primary observations from a previous investigation of inland water bodies in Tehsil Pattoki, Punjab, Pakistan. In that study, twelve water samples were collected from different freshwater sources, including groundwater, canal water, surface water, swamp water, tap water, filtration plants, and swimming-pool water. Samples were processed through sieving, filtration, sodium-chloride density separation, and stereomicroscopic examination. Microplastics were detected in four of the twelve samples. Concentrations ranged from 6 to 15 items/L in positive samples, while the overall mean concentration was 3.583 items/L with a standard deviation of 5.407. The highest concentration was recorded in standing swamp water at 15 items/L, followed by standing surface water at 12 items/L and running canal water at 10 items/L. Three principal forms of microplastics—microfibers, microbeads, and microfragments—were identified in the investigation. Statistical analysis showed a weak negative correlation between the rural and urban groups ($r = -0.399$), while one-way ANOVA indicated no statistically significant difference between the groups ($F = 0.93$, $p = 0.35$). The findings demonstrate that freshwater environments can contain measurable microplastic contamination and that stagnant and surface-associated waters may represent important accumulation sites. Microplastics may affect aquatic organisms through ingestion, physical interaction, trophic transfer, oxidative stress, immune responses, and interactions with associated chemical contaminants. Strengthened plastic-waste management, standardized freshwater monitoring, seasonal sampling, and polymer-specific identification are recommended for future research.

Keywords: *microplastics, freshwater ecosystems, aquatic organisms, plastic pollution, microplastic contamination, freshwater pollution, ecological risk, aquatic food webs*

INTRODUCTION

Plastic has become one of the most widely used materials worldwide because of its low cost, durability, flexibility, and resistance to degradation. These properties provide important benefits for modern society but also create persistent environmental problems when plastic waste is inadequately managed. Larger plastic materials can gradually fragment into progressively smaller particles through physical abrasion, ultraviolet radiation, weathering, and other environmental processes. Particles smaller than 5 mm are commonly described as microplastics. Microplastics can be introduced into aquatic environments as primary particles or generated as secondary particles through the degradation of larger plastic materials. The thesis used for this article describes primary and secondary microplastics as important pathways of environmental contamination and identifies domestic products, packaging, clothing, cosmetics, agricultural materials, and other plastic-containing products as potential sources. Freshwater ecosystems are particularly important in the environmental fate of microplastics because rivers, canals, ponds, wetlands, drainage systems, and other inland waters receive materials from surrounding terrestrial environments. Freshwater systems may act simultaneously as receiving environments, temporary reservoirs, and transportation routes. Particles can remain suspended in the water column, accumulate near the surface, become associated with sediments, or be transported downstream. The biological importance of microplastics is related to their interaction with aquatic organisms. Fish, zooplankton, mollusks, crustaceans, and other organisms can ingest particles directly or indirectly through contaminated food. Once ingested, microplastics may produce physical effects and may also contribute to physiological or biochemical stress. Research reviewed in the thesis reports associations between microplastic exposure and altered hematological parameters, oxidative stress, immune responses, neurotoxicity, inflammation, and other biological effects. Freshwater microplastic contamination is particularly relevant in developing regions where monitoring remains limited. The Pattoki investigation was designed to characterize microplastics isolated from different inland-water sources, determine their concentration, and compare their occurrence between rural and urban areas.

The objective of the present article is to synthesize the evidence concerning microplastic contamination in freshwater ecosystems and its potential effects on aquatic organisms while integrating the primary data obtained from inland water bodies of Tehsil Pattoki, Punjab, Pakistan.

Sources and Entry Pathways of Microplastics into Freshwater Ecosystems

Fragmentation of Larger Plastic Materials

Secondary microplastics are generated when larger plastic materials undergo environmental degradation. Plastic bags, bottles, containers, packaging materials, agricultural plastics, and other discarded materials can progressively fragment into smaller particles.

Environmental degradation can occur through sunlight, mechanical abrasion, temperature fluctuations, chemical processes, and biological activity. The resulting particles may subsequently be transported by wind, rainfall, runoff, and drainage into freshwater systems.

The thesis identifies degradation of larger plastic materials as an important pathway for secondary microplastic formation.

Domestic and Urban Activities

Domestic activities can contribute microplastics through plastic packaging, synthetic textiles, personal-care products, household materials, and other consumer products. Wastewater and urban drainage can transport these particles toward freshwater bodies.

Synthetic textile fibers are particularly relevant because washing and drying processes can release small fibers that subsequently enter wastewater systems. The environmental significance of textile-derived microfibers has also been recognized in the literature reviewed by the thesis.

Agricultural Activities

Agricultural environments can receive plastic materials associated with packaging, irrigation systems, agricultural films, and other farming activities. Rainfall and irrigation runoff may transport plastic particles from agricultural soils into nearby drainage channels, ponds, canals, and streams.

This pathway is particularly relevant for freshwater systems located within agricultural landscapes such as those surrounding Pattoki.

Wastewater and Drainage

Wastewater represents an important pathway through which microplastics can reach aquatic environments. Particles released from households, commercial activities, and other sources may enter drainage networks. Treatment systems can retain some particles, but removal efficiency depends on treatment processes and particle characteristics.

The Pattoki investigation included filtration-plant and tap-water samples, several of which showed no detectable microplastics. However, these observations should not be interpreted as evidence of complete removal because the investigation involved a limited number of samples and relied on the analytical procedure employed in the study.

Microplastic Contamination in Freshwater: Evidence from Tehsil Pattoki

Sampling and Analytical Approach

The primary dataset incorporated into this article originated from an investigation conducted in Tehsil Pattoki, Punjab, Pakistan. Twelve water samples were collected from different inland-water environments on 12 June 2022. Sampling sources included running water, standing water, groundwater, canal water, surface water, swamp water, tap water, filtration plants, and swimming-pool water. The water samples were processed using stacked sieves of different mesh sizes. The retained material was dried and subjected to density separation using a 5 M sodium chloride solution. The lighter particles were subsequently filtered and examined under a stereomicroscope at 40× magnification. Particle characteristics were assessed according to size, color, and shape.

Concentration of Microplastics

Microplastics were detected in four of the twelve investigated water samples. The reported concentrations were 6 items/L in swimming-pool water, 10 items/L in running canal water, 12 items/L in standing surface water, and 15 items/L in standing swamp water. The remaining samples had zero detectable particles under the applied analytical procedure.

Sample	Water source	Microplastics (items/L)
S-1	Filtration-plant groundwater	0
S-2	Drinking groundwater	0
S-3	Swimming-pool water	6
S-4	Groundwater	0
S-5	Filtration-plant water	0
S-6	Running canal water	10
S-7	Filtration-plant groundwater	0
S-8	Groundwater	0
S-9	Standing surface water	12
S-10	Standing swamp water	15
S-11	Filtration-plant groundwater	0
S-12	Tap water	0

The average concentration across all twelve samples was **3.583 items/L**, with a reported standard deviation of **5.407**.

Types of Microplastics

The investigation identified three principal forms of microplastics: **microfibers, microbeads, and microfragments**.

Microfibers may originate from synthetic textiles and other fibrous materials. Microfragments can result from the breakdown of larger plastic objects, whereas microbeads may originate from manufactured plastic particles or consumer products.

The presence of multiple particle forms indicates that freshwater contamination can arise from several independent sources rather than a single pollution pathway.

Potential Effects of Microplastics on Aquatic Organisms

Ingestion and Physical Stress

Aquatic organisms can ingest microplastics when particles resemble food or occur together with natural food materials. Once ingested, particles may occupy space within the digestive tract and potentially interfere with feeding and digestion.

Research reviewed in the thesis indicates that microplastics can be ingested by a range of aquatic organisms. Studies involving fish and other aquatic species have demonstrated biological responses following exposure.

Effects on Fish

Fish are particularly important organisms for assessing microplastic pollution because they occupy different trophic levels and can interact with suspended particles and contaminated prey. Hamed et al. reported changes in blood biomarkers in juvenile Nile tilapia following microplastic exposure. The thesis also summarizes evidence that increased microplastic exposure can be associated with changes in hematological and physiological parameters.

Kim et al. further reviewed evidence concerning bioaccumulation, hematological changes, oxidative stress, immune responses, and neurotoxicity in fish exposed to microplastics.

These findings indicate that the ecological significance of microplastics extends beyond their physical presence in water.

Oxidative Stress and Cellular Effects

Microplastic exposure may contribute to oxidative stress and cellular damage. Laboratory investigations have reported biological responses associated with exposure to different particle sizes and concentrations. Gonzalez-Soto et al. demonstrated that exposure to polystyrene microplastics, particularly when combined with benzo[a]pyrene, could produce stronger biological effects than exposure to microplastics alone. The study reported effects involving biomarkers and cellular responses in mussels. This suggests that microplastics may also act as carriers or interacting surfaces for other environmental contaminants.

Effects on Reproduction and Development

Microplastic exposure may affect organisms during sensitive developmental stages. The thesis reviews research indicating that exposure can influence reproduction and development in experimental organisms. Pannetier et al. reported significant toxic effects in fish larvae exposed to environmentally relevant microplastic samples, while Park et al. examined possible reproductive and developmental implications following repeated polyethylene microplastic exposure. Although laboratory findings cannot automatically be extrapolated to natural freshwater ecosystems, they provide evidence that microplastic exposure can have biological consequences under certain conditions.

Trophic Transfer

Microplastics can enter aquatic food webs when organisms at lower trophic levels ingest particles and are subsequently consumed by predators. This process can transfer particles between trophic levels. Research reviewed in the thesis discusses trophic transfer and the occurrence of microplastics in aquatic food webs. Consequently, contamination of freshwater organisms may have implications beyond individual species and may influence ecological interactions within aquatic communities.

Rural and Urban Distribution of Microplastics

The thesis divided the twelve samples into rural and urban groups and compared their microplastic concentrations. The reported group values were 31 items/L for the rural group and

12 items/L for the urban group, with group averages of 5.16 and 2.00 items/L, respectively. The analysis reported a weak negative correlation between the two groups, with **$r = -0.399$**. However, the one-way ANOVA showed that the difference was not statistically significant, with **$F = 0.93$ and $p = 0.35$**.

Therefore, the results should not be interpreted as demonstrating a statistically confirmed difference between rural and urban environments. The apparent difference in group averages may instead reflect the small sample size and considerable variation among individual sampling sites.

This is an important consideration for future freshwater microplastic research. Larger numbers of samples across multiple seasons and land-use categories would provide stronger evidence regarding spatial patterns.

Environmental and Ecological Implications

The presence of microplastics in freshwater systems has several ecological implications. Freshwater bodies provide habitat for aquatic organisms, support food webs, contribute to irrigation and drinking-water resources, and connect terrestrial environments with downstream aquatic systems. The Pattoki results demonstrate that microplastic contamination was not uniformly distributed. Standing swamp water contained the highest observed concentration, while standing surface water and running canal water also contained measurable concentrations. Stagnant environments may provide conditions favorable for particle retention. In contrast, flowing waters may transport particles downstream, potentially distributing contamination across larger geographic areas. The ecological effects depend on several factors, including particle size, concentration, polymer composition, shape, exposure duration, and the presence of other contaminants. Therefore, simply measuring the number of particles per liter provides an important baseline but does not fully characterize ecological risk.

Recommendations for Monitoring and Management

Several measures can improve understanding and control of freshwater microplastic contamination.

Improved Plastic-Waste Management

Reducing plastic waste at its source is essential. Improved collection, recycling, reuse, and disposal systems can reduce the quantity of plastic available for environmental fragmentation.

Regular Freshwater Monitoring

Monitoring programs should examine rivers, canals, ponds, wetlands, groundwater, wastewater, and drinking-water sources. Sampling should be repeated seasonally to account for rainfall, flooding, irrigation, and changes in water flow.

Sediment Analysis

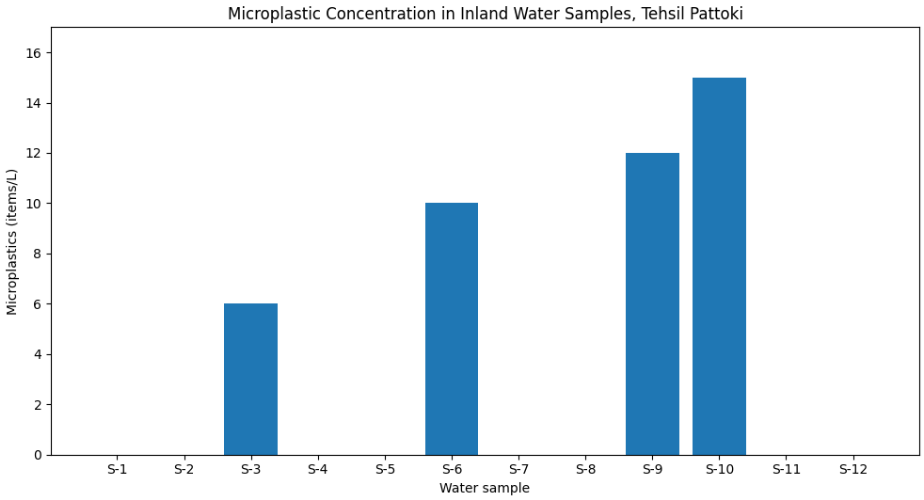
Future studies should examine sediments in addition to water. Microplastics may settle from the water column and become temporarily stored in sediments before being resuspended.

Polymer Identification

The Pattoki investigation relied primarily on physical separation and stereomicroscopic observation. Future studies should combine microscopy with Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), Raman spectroscopy, or other polymer-identification techniques to confirm particle composition.

Biological Monitoring

Fish, zooplankton, mollusks, and other aquatic organisms should be investigated to determine whether environmental contamination corresponds with biological exposure and physiological responses.



Summary

Microplastic contamination represents an emerging environmental challenge for freshwater ecosystems. Microplastics originate from multiple sources, including degradation of larger plastic materials, domestic waste, synthetic textiles, agricultural activities, wastewater, and other anthropogenic activities. Once released, particles may enter freshwater bodies through runoff and drainage or may be transported through rivers and canals. The primary data incorporated from the Tehsil Pattoki investigation provide evidence of microplastic contamination in selected freshwater environments. Twelve water samples were analyzed using sieving, sodium-chloride density separation, filtration, and stereomicroscopic examination. Microplastics were detected in four samples, with concentrations of 6, 10, 12, and 15 items/L. The highest concentration occurred in standing swamp water, while the overall mean concentration was 3.583 items/L. Three major particle forms—microfibers, microbeads, and microfragments—were identified. The distribution of particles suggests that stagnant and surface-associated freshwater environments may act as important accumulation locations, while flowing canals can provide transportation pathways. The potential biological consequences are also important. Aquatic organisms can ingest microplastics, potentially resulting in physical stress, altered physiological processes, oxidative stress, immune responses, hematological changes, and other effects. Microplastics may also participate in trophic transfer and interact with other contaminants. The rural and urban comparison in the Pattoki dataset showed a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.399$), but the difference was statistically non-significant ($p = 0.35$). Accordingly, larger studies are required before firm conclusions can be made about geographical differences in contamination.

Overall, the available evidence supports the need for systematic freshwater microplastic monitoring in Pakistan. Future research should use larger sample sizes, seasonal sampling, sediment analysis, polymer identification, and biological assessment. Reducing plastic waste at its source and improving wastewater and solid-waste management should remain central components of freshwater pollution control.

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