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Appreciating aquatic organizational complex life cycles and reproductive strategies in various ecoregions

Prachi Gurudiwan[1]; Deepak Kumar Sahu[2]; Dr. Ritu Talwar[3]

Received: 13 February 2025; Revised: 19 March 2025; Accepted: 04 April 2025; Published: 20 May 2025

Abstract

The extraordinary rate of worldwide amphibian decrease is ascribed to the Anthropocene, with human activities instigating the Sixth Mass Extinction Catastrophe. Amphibians have experienced significant reductions, and their inadequate response to conservation initiatives indicates difficulties that taxa encounter with biphasic life cycles. It is imperative to guarantee that conservation approaches are economically efficient and have favorable results. Numerous conservation efforts have not succeeded in achieving their objectives of enhancing communities to ensure species' survival in the future. The research proposes that previous conservation initiatives have overlooked the impact of various hazards on many life stages of amphibians, which might result in unsatisfactory results for conservation. The study emphasizes the dangers amphibians encounter at every life stage and the conservation measures implemented to alleviate these threats. The research highlights the scarcity of research that has utilized several actions throughout various life stages. Preservation initiatives for biphasic amphibians and the science behind them lack a comprehensive strategy to address multiple hazards throughout their lifecycle. Conservation strategies must acknowledge the evolving threat scenario for biphasic amphibians to mitigate their status as the most imperiled vertebrate taxon worldwide.

Keywords: Aquatic, Complex life cycle, Reproductive strategies, Ecoregions

1- Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Raipur, India.
Email: ku.prachigurudiwan@kalingauniversity.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0150-5250
2- Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Raipur, India.
Email: ku.deepakkumarsahu@kalingauniversity.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2995-1175
3- Assistant Professor, New Delhi Institute of Management, New Delhi, India, Email: ritu@ndimdelhi.org, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8617-4479
DOI: 10.70102/IJARES/V5I1/5-1-08

Introduction

Many human endeavors have led to the swift deterioration of world biodiversity (Kolawole and Iyiola, 2023). Numerous species are currently extinct, while others confront extinction because of the combined impacts of habitat loss and deterioration, climate change, and the spread of diseases and invasive carnivores (Çağıltay *et al.*, 2023; Mohan *et al.*, 2023). Forecasts indicate that over one-third of the surviving identified species will face extinction within 30 years if unabated risks persist (Kaplan, 2024). The current extinction rate is 10k times higher than the normal natural rate, necessitating a comprehensive array of conservation methods to save species from imminent extinction.

Amphibians have gained infamy as the most endangered vertebrate group since their initial global evaluation in 2010. Studies indicate that illness is the predominant cause of the ongoing amphibian disappearance crisis. The interplay of various anthropogenic dangers has intensified declines: flooding, forest fires, and extreme temperatures intensified by global warming; habitat destruction, deterioration, and division, and the spread of introduced species (Jhariya *et al.*, 2022). These hazards diminish survival and fertility, leading to a decline in the number of people and a reduction in genetic vitality.

Many frogs (45%) display a complex alternating life cycle, rendering them susceptible to several dangers (Lipkowski, Almeida and Schulte, 2024). The embryonic and larval stages of biphasic amphibians are restricted to watery conditions or highly humid terrestrial ecosystems, where natural factors (Kumar and Yadav, 2024), including competition and predators, can result in death rates of up to 92%.

Anthropogenic risks to aquatic habitats that worsen egg and larval health include water contamination, alterations in natural hydraulics, diseases, and invading predators (Rajak *et al.*, 2024; Jagadeeswaran *et al.*, 2022). As larvae undergo metamorphosis and exit from aquatic environments as froglets to inhabit the terrestrial surroundings, they are inherently susceptible to dehydration and attack, with the challenges of survival and effective reproduction as frogs exacerbated by fires, flooding, destruction of habitat, and illness. The interplay of these elements stresses multiple life stages, amplifying the risk of loss and complicating attempts at preservation. Various threats to amphibian existence necessitate diverse conservation measures to guarantee population sustainability.

Perils to the Aquatic Phase of the Amphibian Life Cycle: Embryos and the larval stages

The aquatic stage for biphasic amphibians generally signifies accelerated expansion and growth. The underwater life cycle of numerous amphibians commences when females lay gelatinous embryos in the water, which are externally fertilized by a male after amplexus (Norris, 2024). After a developmental phase, the embryos emerge and transition into the larval phase.

The larval phase is predominantly free-living and non-reproductive, undergoing metamorphosis to attain the terrestrial phase. The enduring presence of the biphasic developmental process and the free-living larval phase indicates considerable adaptive importance for resource collection and growth throughout this period. Biphasic amphibians typically produce a substantial quantity of offspring with minimal parental investment, and a mere fraction of larvae successfully undergo metamorphosis (Vági and Székely, 2023). Anthropogenic influences that diminish the ability to survive of the amphibian aquatic phase might have compounded catastrophic effects on population sustainability (Trisiana, 2024).

Threats include diminished hydroperiods and warmer temperatures resulting from global warming, predation or competition from invading species, illness, and contamination. The inherent low survival rates during the aquatic stage, coupled with increasing human-induced challenges, render failed recruitment a significant concern for the ongoing survival of indigenous communities.

Climatic Alterations

A diminished hydroperiod is a primary factor in recruitment failures in pond-breeding frogs. Research indicates that the duration and duration of the hydroperiod in intermittent lakes can influence the ability to reproduce of particular frog species. If the hydroperiod in intermittent ponds is shorter than the necessary period of growth for larvae, egg production is unattainable, as the larvae desiccate as the reservoir evaporates. As the hydroperiod of more transient ponds diminishes across the environment, the significance of the surviving permanent lakes and their interdependence for amphibian reproduction escalates (Thompson and Popescu, 2021). Permanent lakes are typically distinguished by distinct water chemistry, rivalry, predatory behavior, and resource characteristics in contrast to ephemeral lakes.

Invasive organisms

Invasive organisms inflict significant environmental harm via direct and indirect effects on biodiversity and communities. During the aquatic phase of the amphibian life cycle, effects are direct via predators or rivalry, and indirect through altering habitat or changes in larval behavior. Invasive plants diminish the value of amphibian aquatic habitats by modifying the physical makeup of aquatic life. This alteration in flora can impact the aquatic phase of amphibians by disturbing food webs, modifying the chemical makeup of pond water, and affecting the placement of eggs and clutch shape (Gandhi, Prakruthi and Vijaya, 2024). The invading shrub Lythrum salicaria adversely affected the young larvae of the Atlantic toads by immediately poisoning leached polyphenols. Indirect adverse effects on food webs were identified using a tadpole gut examination, revealing diminished algal groupings in ponds hosting invasive species in contrast to those with non-invasive ecosystems. The intrusive floating growth modified the chemical and physical properties of Mediterranean lakes by creating a thick film on the water terrain, which lowered pH and oxygen levels while elevating nutrient, nitrogen-based fertilizers, and phosphorus concentrations, adversely affecting tadpole longevity in the slow-developing eastern spadefoot toads.

Pathologies: Chytridiomycosis

The aqueous environment of fetuses and larvae contains pathogenic microorganisms. The Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis (Bd), responsible for chytridiomycosis, was initially associated with decreases in amphibian species. Chytridiomycosis is currently deemed responsible for the decline of numerous frog species globally. Bd is present in the aquatic and damp soil of subtropical freshwater ecosystems, where larvae get infected by its agile zoospores that infiltrate the keratinized mouthparts. The probability of infection decreases in larvae compared to later terrestrial phases, where the pathogen affects the skin, making it seldom fatal in larvae; it has been linked to the loss of mouthparts, diminished activity, and impaired foraging efficiency, leading to nutrient difficulties that affect embryonic and developmental rates.

Environmental Pollution and Chemical Corrosion

Modified water chemistry, resulting from mining, commercial, and agricultural activities, can adversely affect the aquatic phases of amphibians. Alterations in pH values and the discharge of coal combustion byproducts and toxic metals, including manganese, zinc, and copper, into aquatic ecosystems have demonstrated significant adverse effects on amphibian larvae and eggs. The research project investigated the population-level impact of aquatic Coal-Burning Residue (CBR) on different phases of the life of the eastern narrow-mouthed toad. Community models demonstrated that toads subjected to CBRs exhibited greater vulnerability to decline and extermination than their non-exposed counterparts. Acidic rainfall and releases of sulfur dioxide from factory operations have been shown to affect the growth and survival of frog larvae.

Addressing Risks During the Aquatic Phase of the Amphibian Life Cycle

Alleviating Global Warming

Although the adverse impacts of reduced hydroperiods and elevated water temperatures on the freshwater life stages of amphibians are well-documented, solutions to alleviate this hazard are scarce, with pond building and restoration being the most often employed measures. Research indicates that augmenting the quantity of temporary and permanent lakes might enhance amphibian groups, benefiting both the larval stage and adult frog phases. The investigation aimed to improve the number and occupancy of various amphibians throughout many life phases (embryos, pupae, and adults) by creating breeding lakes. The research sought to preserve the great crowned newt using habitat construction and restoration.

Mitigating Marine Invasive Species

The immediate control of invasive predatory species to save native amphibians eradicates significant top-down influences, wherein the impacts of predation originate at the apex of the food system and cascade downward to lower levels of trophic structure. Controlling introduced species of plants has proven advantages, since the elimination or decrease in grassroots forces, where trophic levels that are lower influence the social structure associated with greater trophic levels, can help the aquatic phase of amphibians. Decreasing the prevalence of invasive aquatic flora might alter habitat structure, enhancing egg and larval growth and survival in both directions. Successfully controlling invasive species on a broad scale is exceedingly challenging, as successful control typically necessitates the complete annihilation of everyone within a population.

Mitigating Chytridiomycosis in Aquatic Ecosystems

Numerous scientists feel that limited alternatives are available to alleviate chytrid effects adequately. Vaccination for chytridiomycosis proved ineffective in managing the illness in native populations, while antifungal agents, like itraconazole, efficacious at the terrestrial phase, have not succeeded in larvae. The investigation employed antifungal therapy in larval and ambient chemical decontamination across five ponds within an island structure, eradicating the disease in four of the five lakes during two years. Low levels of sodium chloride in clean water have restricted the development and infectivity of chytrid, with no negative impacts on the life span, development, or growth of eggs in at least one chytrid-susceptible amphibious species.

Alleviating Pollution and Chemical Exposure

Environmental and chemical contaminants can be reduced in aquatic settings using chemical, biological, and mechanical restoration methods. Methods encompass ultrasonic energy, hybrid procedures, bioremediation, photocatalytic degradation, adhesion, separating membranes, bio-purification structures, composite substances, exchange of ions, polymers, titanium dioxide, graphite, and nanocrystalline metal oxides. The adhesion of pesticides onto inexpensive materials can serve as an effective rehabilitation method for polluted aquatic habitats. Compared to traditional approaches, nanoparticles or nanostructures exhibit significant efficacy in eliminating certain hazardous metals from the surroundings. These novel strategies offer effective mitigation remedies for toxic metals and pollution in aquatic environments.

Results and Discussions

Supervised Life-history Assignments

During monitoring surveys, the research analyzed otolith 8Sr/86Sr patterns of Delta Smelt captured, marking this species' final year of significant abundance. Three distinctive trends were seen from ocular examinations of profiles. One group exhibited comparatively flat identities, with values consistently below 0.8, suggesting fish raising in clean water, according to the understanding of water and saltiness reenactments, in which the demarcation between clean water (<0.5 PSU) and brackish water (>0.5 PSU) occurs at approximately 0.8. A subsequent group exhibited profiles exceeding 0.8 from core to edge, indicating hatching and raising in brackish water. In contrast, a third grouping displayed values below 0.8 during early life, rising above 0.8, an arrangement aligned with semi-anadromy.

Uncontrolled Life History Classifications

Through the supervised examination of fish, an evaluation process incorporating consensus age matches and profile length reduction yielded 280 fish appropriate for the hierarchical clustering method, which established 5 clusters to minimize within-cluster variation. The initial cluster encompassed all species classified as clean water fish, but the subsequent cluster comprised all species that hatched and developed in brackish water. Four groups had organisms demonstrating a semi-anadromous pattern, hatching in freshwater and maturing in brackish water. In summary, the hierarchical grouping revealed that 82% of the fish were classified as semi-anadromous, 13% as aquatic residents, and 8% as brackish-water residents.

Residence and Semi-anadromy

The yearly trends of in-situ salinity profiling at five water quality monitoring sites, extending from the Carquinez Islands to the Delta confluence, typically mirrored otolith timelines. The average salinity readings of the brackish inhabitant (cluster 2), obtained from the salinity mixed curve, indicated a natal origination at Martinez, and the rise in mean salinity corresponded with salinity incursion at Martinez in early July. By the conclusion of July, the average salinity more accurately reflected the ambient salinity recorded at Port Chicago. The semi-anadromous collections 5 and 6 displayed natal saltiness indicative of a beginning close to Port Chicago. The rise in mean saltiness for cluster 6 correlated with saltwater intrusion at this location, whereas the increase in average saltiness for group 5 transpired when saltiness extended to Mallard Island. This implies that these fish categories were likely spawned downriver in Suisun Bay and displayed permanent behavior throughout the fall.

Comprehensive Lifecycles and Reproduction Methodologies

The research integrated cluster designations with capture location and gonadal maturity stage throughout the spawning migratory period to elucidate the complete life cycle of the species. All freshwater residents fish (group 1) were collected from the permanent freshwater sources of the northern Delta, indicating that individuals inside this group finished their lives in waterways. The 28 aquatic resident aquatic creatures, comprising five males and five females, exhibited gonads in a late embryonic stage or a post-spawn circumstance, indicating reproductive maturity. Brackish-water permanent fish (group 2) were captured in all three areas, suggesting their migration to clean water throughout spawning. At least one fully developed reproductive saltwater inhabitant fish was captured in each location. The highest number of older people reproduced in this cohort was captured in the North River. Over half (54%) of all Semi-Anadromous (SA) species (clusters 3-5) were captured. SA males and females reached maturity in all locations; the number of mature SA fishes was higher in the West-Central River and Northern River than in San Pablo-Suisun Bay, predominantly influenced by males.

Conclusion

The cumulative effects of several human-induced threats have exacerbated the biodiversity catastrophe of the 21st century. Biphasic creatures possess distinct physiologies and occupy varied environments throughout their life phases, and are subjected to more significant dangers than their non-biphasic counterparts. The research proposes that they require tailored conservation measures at each life cycle step to ensure survival. The analysis assessed the degree to which research addressed hazards throughout life phases and revealed that few studies evaluated the entire life cycle of biphasic animals. A few studies implemented several conservation strategies to address various risks, and few could statistically assess their effectiveness. There is a genuine risk that efforts to preserve amphibians fail if hazards at different life phases are not mitigated, and that the continued existence of communities could be significantly enhanced by using several conservation strategies to tackle this issue.

Numerous conservation initiatives have not achieved their objectives of enhancing populations and eventually securing the survival of varieties of amphibians for future generations. This is an inadvertent effect of failing to address dangers at both life phases. Biphasic amphibian embryos and larvae are especially susceptible to anthropogenic challenges that jeopardize aquatic ecosystems, including modified hydroperiods, degraded water quantity, competition, and predation by invasive species. Amphibians in terrestrial ecosystems face disease, habitat depletion, and climate change threats. The sustainability of populations is jeopardized at both extremes of the life cycle, with offspring affected in aquatic environments and adult reproduction impaired in terrestrial habitats. The inherently elevated mortality rates during the larval and adolescent stages render the demise of amphibian preservation efforts unsurprising. The research offers a novel viewpoint on preserving biphasic frogs by asserting that diverse risks necessitate distinct strategic frameworks for forthcoming amphibian preservation efforts. The study affirms that the same results apply to additional biphasic species, and tackling these difficulties is crucial to ensure subsequent generations have the same chances to experience nature as present species.

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