



Staggering collapse in migratory fish populations threatens health of millions and critical freshwater ecosystems

*** 81% average decline in migratory fish populations since 1970**

*** Steepest falls in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe**

May 21, 2024 - Populations of migratory freshwater fish species continue to decline across the globe, risking the food security and livelihoods of millions of people, the survival of countless other species, and the health and resilience of rivers, lakes and wetlands. This news is supported by a global study published today by the World Fish Migration Foundation (WFMF), ZSL, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Wetlands International and WWF.

Published ahead of [World Fish Migration Day](#) on May 25th, the [new Living Planet Index \(LPI\) report on freshwater migratory fishes](#) reveals a staggering 81% collapse in monitored population sizes on average between 1970 to 2020, including catastrophic declines of 91% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 75% in Europe. A [shorter version of the report](#) is also available online.

Habitat loss and degradation – including fragmentation of rivers by dams and other barriers and conversion of wetlands for agriculture – account for half of the threats to migratory fishes, followed by over-exploitation. Increasing pollution and the worsening impacts of climate change are also fuelling the fall in freshwater migratory fish species, which have now been declining consistently for 30 years.

“The catastrophic decline in migratory fish populations is a deafening wake-up call for the world. We must act now to save these keystone species and their rivers,” said Herman Wanningen, founder of the World Fish Migration Foundation. “Migratory fish are central to the cultures of many Indigenous Peoples, nourish millions of people across the globe, and sustain a vast web of species and ecosystems. We cannot continue to let them slip silently away.”

Migratory freshwater fishes are vital to the food security and nutritional needs of hundreds of millions of people, particularly in vulnerable communities across Asia, Africa and Latin America. They also support the livelihoods of tens of millions, from local fisheries to the global trade in migratory fish and fish-byproducts, and the multi-billion-dollar recreational fishing industry.

The report is not all doom and gloom. Nearly one third of monitored species have increased, suggesting that conservation efforts and improved management can have positive impacts. Some promising strategies include the improved and/or species-focused management of fisheries, habitat restoration, dam removals, the creation of conservation sanctuaries, and legal protection.

For example, in Europe and the United States, thousands of dams, levees, weirs and other river barriers have been removed in recent decades, and momentum for such actions is growing. In 2023, [Europe removed a record 487 barriers](#) - a whopping 50% increase over the previous high reported in 2022. Meanwhile, in the United States, the largest dam removals in history are



currently underway along the Klamath River in California and Oregon. Dam removals can be cost-effective, job-producing solutions that help reverse the disturbing trend of biodiversity loss in freshwater systems as well as solutions that improve river health and resilience for people, too.

While scaling up dam removals is a key solution to reversing the collapse in freshwater migratory fish populations, there are more. Decision makers across the globe must urgently accelerate efforts to protect and restore free-flowing rivers through basin-wide planning, investing in sustainable renewable alternatives to the thousands of new hydropower dams that are planned across the world as well as other measures that contribute to the ambitious goals in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of inland waters and restore 30% of degraded inland waters. Rising to the Freshwater Challenge's goal of restoring 300,000 km of degraded rivers will contribute enormously to reversing the trend in migratory fish populations.

Along with protecting and restoring healthy rivers, there is an urgent need to strengthen monitoring efforts; better understand fish species' life-history, movement and behaviour; expand international cooperation, such as adding more freshwater migratory fish species to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS); and promote greater public and political engagement.

There are many initiatives around the world supporting the recovery of migratory fish species and freshwater biodiversity in general. The Emergency Recovery Plan for Freshwater Biodiversity highlights a variety of measures that could transform the management and health of rivers, lakes and wetlands to improve the health of freshwater systems and biodiversity. The Global Swimways Initiative identifies and prioritizes key river migration routes that are important for ecologically, culturally, and economically important fish species. It highlights the collaborative efforts of international river basin authorities in addressing this critical issue.

Since 2014, the World Fish Migration Foundation has organized [World Fish Migration Day](#) to raise awareness about migratory fish. This year's edition celebrates existing and renewed free-flowing rivers under the theme "Free Flow" and already counts over 65 participating countries! Individuals and organisations are still in time to join, either by creating their own events, joining nearby events, or connecting live to watch other events around the world on May 25th at 11am CET, at the [World Fish Migration Day YouTube channel](#).

END OF PRESS RELEASE

Editor's notes:

- **Link to executive summary:** https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LPI_Executive-Summary_2024.pdf
- **Link to full report:** https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LPI_migratory-freshwater-fishes-2024_Technical-report.pdf
- **Image folder:**



<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JtNDUcE1SqE2WsVcgjuMxMcUoojm75-U?usp=sharing>

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Quotes from partners:

Nicole Silk, Global Director of Freshwater Outcomes at The Nature Conservancy (TNC): “This new study highlights the urgent need to protect, connect and restore freshwater systems for the benefit of both people and nature,” said Nicole Silk, TNC’s director of freshwater outcomes. “The alarming findings of the report make it clear that no one organization can spur action or change to solve this problem. This is a challenge that calls for collected and concerted actions from governments, other environmental NGOs, communities and Indigenous Peoples, and more from around the globe.”

Michele Thieme, Deputy Director of Freshwater for WWF-US: “This new study highlights the urgent need to connect, protect, and restore rivers for the wellbeing of species and communities worldwide. With the recent launch of the country-led Freshwater Challenge, the largest freshwater restoration and protection initiative in history, the moment to act is now. We have the tools, ambition, and commitment to reverse the collapse of freshwater fish populations, reconnect disrupted rivers, and restore resilience to freshwater ecosystems globally. The United States has joined the Freshwater Challenge with a commitment to tackle issues including habitat degradation and river fragmentation. Through collaborative efforts and innovative strategies, we can begin to reverse the decline of these critical species and bend the curve for biodiversity.”

“In the face of declining migratory freshwater fish populations, urgent collective action is imperative. Prioritizing river protection, restoration, and connectivity is key to safeguarding these species, which provide food and livelihoods for millions of people around the world. Let’s unite in this crucial endeavor, guided by science and shared commitment, to ensure abundance for generations to come.”

Stefanie Deinet, who led the analysis from ZSL’s Institute of Zoology: “Globally we’re seeing alarming declines in migratory freshwater fishes, and our analysis is a key towards understanding why. We’ve been able to paint the strongest picture to date of trends in these species, and although it still tells a bleak story, hidden within the data is a reason for hope. While habitat loss, degradation and over-exploitation continue to impact fish across the world, almost one-third of monitored species have increased in size - highlighting the power of knowledge pooling, management and conservation action to identify possible strategies for restoring populations on a global scale.”

Chris Baker, Director Wetlands International Europe: “Whilst this report further underlines the parlous state of Europe’s migratory fish and rivers there is some cause for hope. Grass roots action to reconnect our rivers and improve fish mobility is growing. Furthermore, together with Wetlands International the Trans-European Swimways Network is helping to identify and prioritise the most important rivers and species for attention. To help this reach scale European governments must commit to and implement the Nature Restoration law to help accelerate the recovery of our rivers and migratory fish.”

About the organisations:

World Fish Migration Foundation (WFMF)



The World Fish Migration Foundation (WFMF) is a Dutch non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection, conservation, and restoration of migratory fish populations and their habitats. Their aim is to build an inspiring international dam removal movement to scale up obsolete river barriers removal and restore free-flowing rivers, for the benefit of nature and people. <https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/>

Wetlands International Europe

Wetlands International Europe is the only network organization in Europe bringing together NGOs whose shared mission is to inspire and mobilize society to safeguard and restore wetlands. <https://europe.wetlands.org/>

The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

TNC, an environmental non-profit founded in 1951, impacts conservation in nearly 80 countries, has restored more than 4,900 miles (some 8,000 kilometers) of rivers, and has protected more than 125 million acres (51 million hectares) of land. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/>

ZSL

Founded in 1826, ZSL is an international conservation charity, driven by science, working to restore wildlife in the UK and around the world; by protecting critical species, restoring ecosystems, helping people and wildlife live together and inspiring support for nature. Through our leading conservation zoos, London and Whipsnade, we bring people closer to nature and use our expertise to protect wildlife today, while inspiring a lifelong love of animals in the conservationists of tomorrow. www.zsl.org

WWF

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with over 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption. www.panda.org

IUCN

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. Created in 1948, IUCN is now the world's largest and most diverse environmental network, harnessing the knowledge, resources and reach of more than 1,400 Member organisations and some 15,000 experts. It is a leading provider of conservation data, assessments and analysis. Its broad membership enables IUCN to fill the role of incubator and trusted repository of best practices, tools and international standards. <https://www.iucn.org>