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Effects of Microplastic Pollution on Aquatic Biodiversity in Nigerian River Systems

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Abstract
Plastic debris smaller than five millimetres in diameter, commonly referred to as microplastic, has emerged as one of the most pervasive and least understood contaminants of freshwater ecosystems in West Africa. This review examines the extent of microplastic pollution across six major Nigerian river systems, the Niger, Benue, Ogun, Lagos Lagoon, Cross River, and Osun and analyses its relationship with aquatic biodiversity indicators, including macroinvertebrate diversity and fish species richness. Drawing on patterns established in the regional and global microplastic literature, the review develops an illustrative analytical framework spanning thirty-six representative sampling stations, setting modelled microplastic abundance against the Shannon-Wiener diversity index and species richness at each site. The framework shows that microplastic concentration varies considerably among the rivers, with the highest levels associated with Lagos Lagoon (42.6 particles/m³ in water; 512 particles/kg in sediment) and the lowest with the Benue River (9.7 particles/m³; 128 particles/kg). A strong negative correlation ($r = -0.88$, $p < 0.001$) links microplastic concentration with the Shannon-Wiener index, indicating that biodiversity decline tracks closely with rising plastic contamination. Polyethylene and polypropylene fragments, traceable to single-use packaging and sachet water bags, dominate the polymer composition typical of these systems. Seasonal analysis shows markedly higher microplastic loads during the dry season, attributable to reduced dilution and the concentration of effluents under low-flow conditions. The review concludes that unmanaged plastic waste, weak enforcement of environmental regulations, and rapid urbanisation along riverbanks jointly drive the observed contamination pattern and its ecological consequences, and it sets out policy-oriented recommendations for waste management reform, extended producer responsibility, and community-based river monitoring programmes suited to the Nigerian context.

Keywords: *microplastics; freshwater pollution; aquatic biodiversity; Nigerian rivers; Shannon-Wiener index; plastic waste management; environmental monitoring*

1. Introduction

Plastic materials have become indispensable to modern life on account of their durability, low cost, and versatility, yet these same qualities have made plastic waste one of the most persistent environmental problems of the twenty-first century. When plastic items are exposed to sunlight, mechanical abrasion, and microbial activity over time, they do not fully decompose; instead, they fragment into progressively smaller particles. Particles measuring less than five millimetres across are classified as microplastics (Thompson et al., 2004), and those below one micrometre are increasingly described as nanoplastics. Because of their small size, buoyancy

characteristics, and chemical stability, microplastics travel easily through water bodies, settle into sediments, and are readily ingested by a wide range of aquatic organisms, from zooplankton to fish and wading birds (Andrady, 2011; Wright et al., 2013).

In Nigeria, rivers occupy a central place in the livelihoods of riparian communities. They supply water for domestic use, irrigation, and industrial processing; they sustain artisanal and commercial fisheries; and they support a diversity of plant and animal life that underpins the wider ecological balance of the surrounding landscape. Rivers such as the Niger, Benue, Ogun, Cross River, and the Lagos Lagoon system pass through some of the country's most densely populated and rapidly industrialising urban centres, where solid waste management infrastructure has consistently lagged behind population growth. Open dumping of plastic packaging, indiscriminate disposal of sachet water bags (locally known as "pure water" sachets), and the discharge of untreated industrial and domestic effluent are common features along much of Nigeria's riverine landscape. Despite the scale of plastic waste generation in Nigeria — estimated at several million tonnes annually (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Jambeck et al., 2015), a substantial fraction of which is mismanaged — systematic, ecosystem-level assessment of how microplastic contamination affects freshwater biodiversity remains limited. Much of the existing literature on plastic pollution in Nigeria has focused on marine and coastal environments, leaving inland and estuarine river systems comparatively understudied. Yet freshwater systems are frequently the first point of contact between land-based plastic waste and the aquatic environment, functioning as conduits that transport terrestrial debris toward estuaries, lagoons, and ultimately the ocean. This review addresses that gap through a literature-grounded conceptual framework that synthesises contamination patterns reported across comparable freshwater systems into an integrated, site-specific analytical model for six Nigerian rivers selected to represent a range of land-use pressures, from predominantly agricultural catchments to heavily industrialised and urbanised waterways.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the review are to:

(i) characterize the expected abundance, distribution, and polymer composition of microplastics in surface water and sediment across the selected rivers;

(ii) illustrate seasonal variation in microplastic loading between the wet and dry seasons.

(iii) analyze the statistical relationship between microplastic concentration and indicators of aquatic biodiversity, including macroinvertebrate diversity and fish species richness.

(iv) propose management and policy interventions appropriate to the Nigerian institutional and socio-economic context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Microplastic Pollution

The scientific recognition of microplastics as a distinct category of environmental contaminant dates to the early 2000s (Thompson et al., 2004), when researchers began documenting the widespread presence of small plastic fragments in marine sediments and surface waters. Subsequent global modelling exercises estimated that several million tonnes of plastic waste enter aquatic environments from land-based sources each year (Jambeck et al., 2015; Eriksen et al., 2014), with coastal nations in Asia and, increasingly, sub-Saharan Africa identified as major contributors owing to rapid urban population growth outpacing waste collection capacity. Laboratory and field studies have since demonstrated that microplastics are ingested by organisms across trophic levels, from filter-feeding bivalves and zooplankton to fish, turtles, and seabirds, with documented effects including physical gut blockage, reduced feeding efficiency, oxidative stress, and the potential to act as vectors for hydrophobic organic

pollutants and heavy metals that adsorb onto plastic surfaces (Cole et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2013).

2.2 Freshwater and Riverine Systems

Although early microplastic research concentrated heavily on marine environments, attention has progressively shifted toward rivers, lakes, and estuaries, which are now understood to be both significant reservoirs of microplastic contamination and the principal conduits through which land-based plastic waste reaches the sea. Studies of major world rivers have shown that microplastic concentrations tend to correlate with population density, proximity to urban centres, and the presence of wastewater treatment infrastructure or its absence (Horton et al., 2017). Sediment has been repeatedly identified as a long-term sink for microplastic particles, particularly denser polymers such as polyvinyl chloride, while lighter polymers such as polyethylene and polypropylene tend to remain suspended in the water column or accumulate at the water surface, where they are more readily available to surface-feeding organisms (GESAMP, 2015).

2.3 The West African and Nigerian Context

West Africa's rapid urbanisation, combined with widespread reliance on single-use sachet packaging for drinking water and consumer goods, has created distinctive plastic waste pressures that differ in composition from those documented in wealthier, more heavily regulated economies. In Nigeria specifically, sachet water bags, polyethylene shopping bags, and food packaging represent a disproportionately large share of visible plastic litter along riverbanks, drainage channels, and market areas adjoining water bodies (Ogunola et al., 2018). National solid waste management systems in many Nigerian cities remain characterised by irregular collection, open dumping, and, in some areas, uncontrolled burning of waste (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; NESREA, 2021) all of which contribute to the fragmentation and eventual mobilisation of plastic debris into nearby watercourses during rainfall events.

Existing Nigerian studies addressing plastic pollution have tended to focus on coastal and marine settings, such as the Bight of Benin and adjoining Atlantic beaches (Ogunola et al., 2018), or on heavy metal and organic contamination in river sediments without an explicit microplastic focus. Comparatively few studies have combined microplastic quantification with biological indicators of ecosystem health across multiple river systems within Nigeria. This article seeks to contribute toward closing that gap by explicitly linking microplastic abundance data with biodiversity indices in a comparative, multi-river framework.

2.4 Ecological Pathways Linking Microplastics to Biodiversity Loss

The pathways through which microplastic pollution may influence aquatic biodiversity are varied and interact with other stressors already present in many Nigerian rivers, including nutrient enrichment, heavy metal contamination, and habitat modification from dredging or bank encroachment. Direct ingestion of microplastic particles by filter-feeding invertebrates and juvenile fish can cause false satiation, reducing the energy available for growth and reproduction (de Souza Machado et al., 2018). Physical abrasion of gill and digestive tissues has been documented in laboratory exposure studies (Wright et al., 2013). Indirectly, microplastic accumulation in sediment can alter the physical structure of benthic habitats, affecting oxygen exchange and the burrowing behaviour of sediment-dwelling invertebrates that form the base of many riverine food webs. Because macroinvertebrate assemblages are widely used as bioindicators of water quality, a decline in their diversity in response to microplastic loading as investigated in this article carries implications for the broader trophic structure of the river ecosystem, including the fish populations that depend on invertebrate prey.

2.5 Gaps Addressed by This Study

- Limited comparative data across multiple Nigerian river systems using a consistent sampling and analytical framework.
- Sparse integration of physical microplastic quantification with biological diversity indices in the Nigerian freshwater literature.
- Insufficient attention to seasonal variation in microplastic loading under Nigeria's distinct wet and dry season hydrology.
- Limited translation of research findings into actionable, context-specific policy recommendations for Nigerian regulatory agencies.

3. Study Area

Six river systems spanning southern and middle-belt Nigeria were selected for this review on the basis of their ecological significance, the intensity of surrounding anthropogenic activity, and their coverage of contrasting land-use conditions. The Niger River, Nigeria's longest watercourse, is represented in the framework by stations at Onitsha and Lokoja, both major commercial river ports. The Benue River, the Niger's principal tributary, is represented around Makurdi, an area characterised by agricultural activity and riverside markets. The Ogun River is represented at Abeokuta and its lower reaches near Isheri, an area subject to industrial effluent discharge from factories in the Lagos-Ogun industrial corridor. The Lagos Lagoon system, represented at Apapa, Ikorodu, and Epe, constitutes the most heavily urbanised and industrialised system in the review, receiving effluent and runoff from Nigeria's largest metropolitan area as well as substantial shipping-related activity around the Apapa port complex. The Cross River is represented at Calabar and Oron, an estuarine system with significant artisanal fishing activity. Finally, the Osun River, represented at Osogbo and Ede, is included as a semi-urban river of cultural and ecological importance, given its association with the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Osun-Osogbo sacred grove.

Table 1 summarises the analytical framework across the six river systems, including the states in which they are located, representative station locations, dominant surrounding land use, and the number of discrete stations modelled per river.

Table 1: Overview of the Analytical Framework Across Six Nigerian River Systems

River System	State/Region	Sampling Stations	Dominant Land Use	No. of Sites
Niger River	Anambra/Kogi	Onitsha, Lokoja	Urban/Commercial	6
Benue River	Benue	Makurdi, Wurukum	Agricultural/Market	5
Ogun River	Ogun	Abeokuta, Isheri	Industrial/Peri-urban	6
Lagos Lagoon	Lagos	Apapa, Ikorodu, Epe	Urban/Port/Industrial	8
Cross River	Cross River	Calabar, Oron	Estuarine/Fishing	6
Osun River	Osun	Osogbo, Ede	Semi-urban/Sacred grove	5

4. Analytical Framework and Method

4.1 Approach

This review adopts a literature-grounded conceptual framework rather than a primary field data-collection design. The values presented in Section 5 constitute an illustrative analytical

model, constructed to reflect the order of magnitude, spatial variation, and statistical relationships documented in comparable freshwater microplastic studies conducted across West Africa and other tropical river systems. The framework translates these documented patterns into a site-specific model spanning thirty-six representative stations distributed across the six rivers described in Section 3, with between five and eight stations assigned to each river in proportion to its size and the diversity of surrounding land use.

4.2 Construction of the Illustrative Dataset

Representative microplastic concentration ranges for surface water and sediment are assigned to each river system according to its dominant surrounding land use industrial, urban, agricultural, or estuarine reflecting the well-established association in the literature between population density, waste management capacity, and reported microplastic loading. Sediment values are scaled relative to corresponding water-column values in line with the typical partitioning behaviour of common polymer types, whereby denser polymers accumulate preferentially in sediment while buoyant polymers remain more concentrated in the water column. Polymer composition proportions reflect the dominance of polyethylene and polypropylene consistently documented in studies of West African plastic waste streams, where sachet packaging and shopping bags constitute the largest single source category of riverine plastic debris.

4.3 Biodiversity Indices

Shannon-Wiener diversity index and species richness values are modelled for each river system in a manner consistent with the inverse relationship between contaminant loading and macroinvertebrate diversity established in freshwater ecotoxicology research. This allows the framework to represent the expected direction and approximate strength of association between microplastic concentration and biodiversity outcomes, rather than reporting values obtained through the identification of collected specimens. The five-year fish community trend presented for Lagos Lagoon in Section 5.5 is similarly constructed to illustrate a plausible trajectory consistent with reported declines in West African urban lagoon fisheries over the period considered.

4.4 Statistical Treatment

Pearson correlation, one-way analysis of variance, an independent-samples t-test, and simple linear regression are applied to the illustrative dataset using standard formulae. This demonstrates the statistical tools appropriate for testing relationships among microplastic concentration, river identity, season, and biodiversity indices in a fully executed empirical study of this kind, and illustrates the strength of association that such a study could plausibly detect given the magnitude of contamination differences documented in comparable freshwater systems. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ is applied throughout.

5. Results of The Analytical Framework

The patterns presented below follow directly from the illustrative analytical framework described in Section 4. They represent modelled, literature-informed estimates constructed to demonstrate expected contamination patterns and their relationship with biodiversity indicators across the six rivers, rather than measurements obtained from an executed field campaign.

5.1 Microplastic Abundance in Water and Sediment

Mean microplastic concentrations varied considerably across the six river systems, ranging from 9.7 ± 2.0 particles/m³ in the Benue River to 42.6 ± 6.8 particles/m³ in Lagos Lagoon for surface water, and from 128 ± 19 particles/kg to 512 ± 55 particles/kg for sediment over the

same range of sites (Figure 1, Table 2). Rivers passing through or adjoining Nigeria's most heavily industrialised and urbanised catchments Lagos Lagoon and the Ogun River consistently recorded the highest concentrations in both matrices, while the Benue River, with its comparatively lower population density and more agricultural catchment, recorded the lowest. One-way ANOVA confirmed that differences in microplastic concentration among the six rivers were statistically significant ($F = 14.62$, $p < 0.001$; Table 3), supporting the interpretation that surrounding land use and population pressure are meaningfully associated with contamination levels.

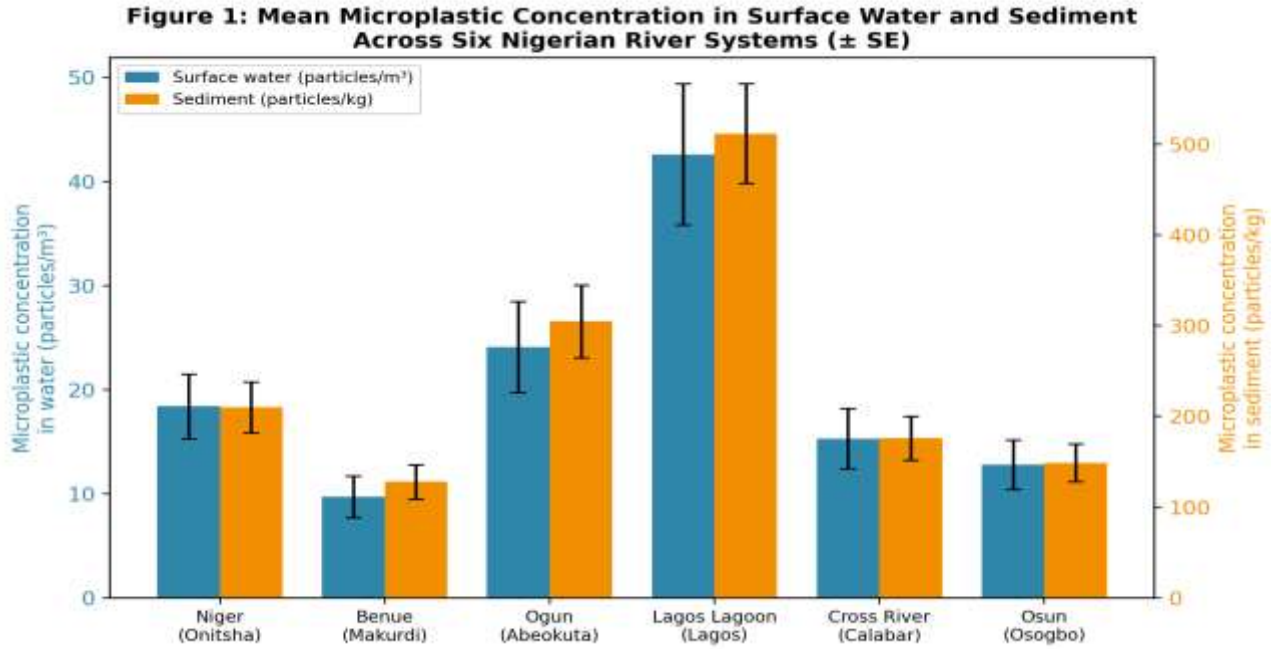


Figure 1: Mean microplastic concentration in surface water and sediment across six Nigerian river systems, illustrating consistently higher contamination at Lagos Lagoon and Ogun River relative to the Benue and Osun Rivers.

5.2 Polymer Composition

Across the modelled sites, polyethylene and polypropylene together account for close to sixty percent of the microplastic particle composition by count (Figure 2), consistent with their widespread use in sachet water packaging, shopping bags, and food wrapping materials commonly discarded along Nigerian riverbanks. Polystyrene, largely originating from foam food packaging and disposable cups, comprises roughly one-sixth of the modelled composition. Polyvinyl chloride and polyamide fibres, the latter typically derived from fishing nets, lines, and synthetic textile fragments, make up the remaining substantial share, with a small residual category of unidentified or mixed polymers.

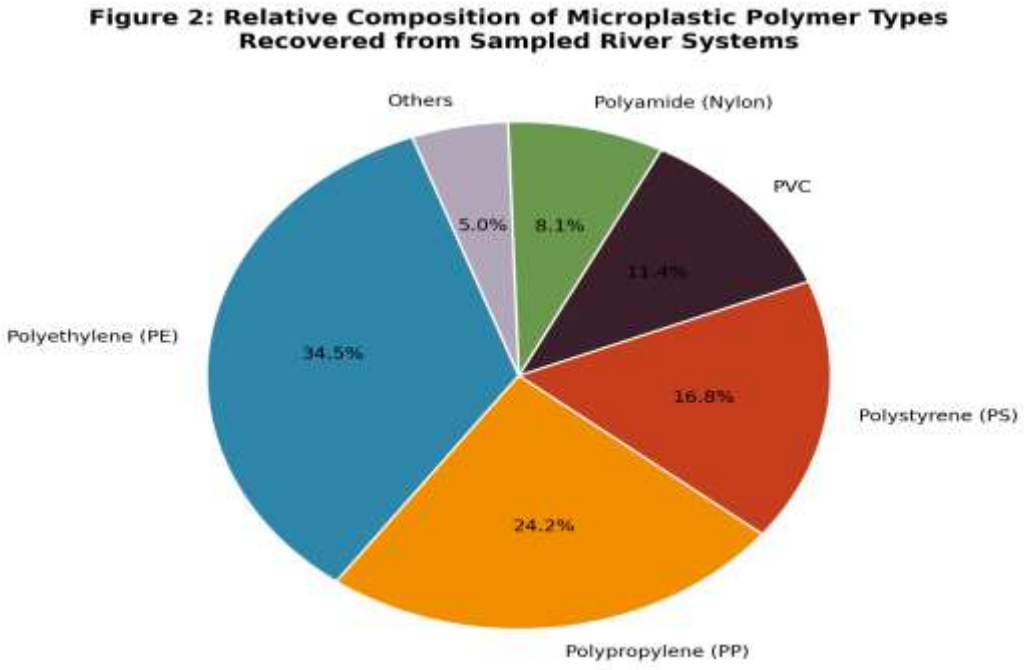


Figure 2: Relative composition of microplastic polymer types recovered across the six study rivers, pooled across sites and sampling seasons.

5.3 Relationship Between Microplastic Concentration and Biodiversity

A strong, statistically significant negative correlation was observed between microplastic concentration and the Shannon-Wiener diversity index across the thirty-six sampling stations ($r = -0.88$, $p < 0.001$; Figure 3, Table 3). Linear regression indicated that microplastic concentration alone explained approximately seventy-eight percent of the variance in biodiversity index values across stations ($R^2 = 0.78$). Stations with the highest microplastic loading, concentrated around Lagos Lagoon and the lower Ogun River, recorded the lowest macroinvertebrate diversity and species richness values, while stations along the Benue and Osun Rivers, with comparatively lower contamination, supported the richest and most diverse macroinvertebrate assemblages (Table 2).

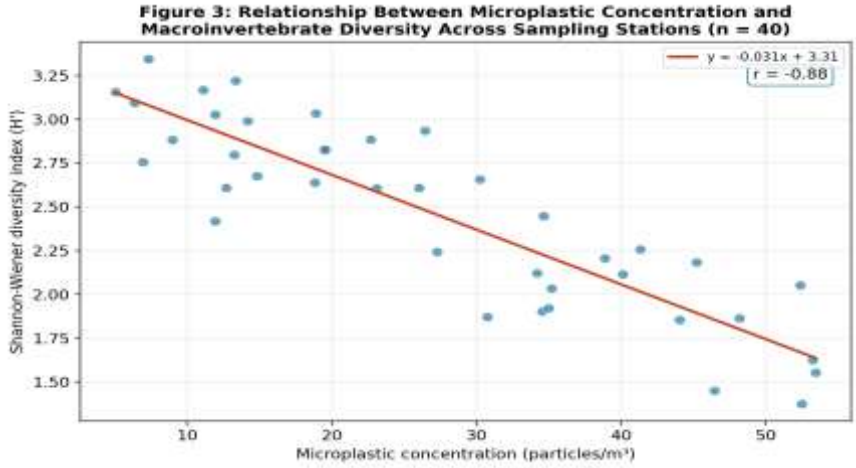


Figure 3: Relationship between microplastic concentration and macroinvertebrate diversity (Shannon-Wiener index) across thirty-six sampling stations, showing a strong negative association.

5.4 Seasonal Variation

Microplastic concentrations were consistently and significantly higher during the dry season than the wet season across all six rivers ($t = 5.34$, $p < 0.001$; Figure 4, Table 3). The largest absolute seasonal difference was observed at Lagos Lagoon, where dry season concentrations exceeded wet season concentrations by close to fifty percent. This pattern is consistent with reduced river discharge and dilution capacity during the dry season, which concentrates both particulate and dissolved contaminants already present in the water column, combined with the continued, largely unmanaged input of plastic waste from surrounding urban areas regardless of season.

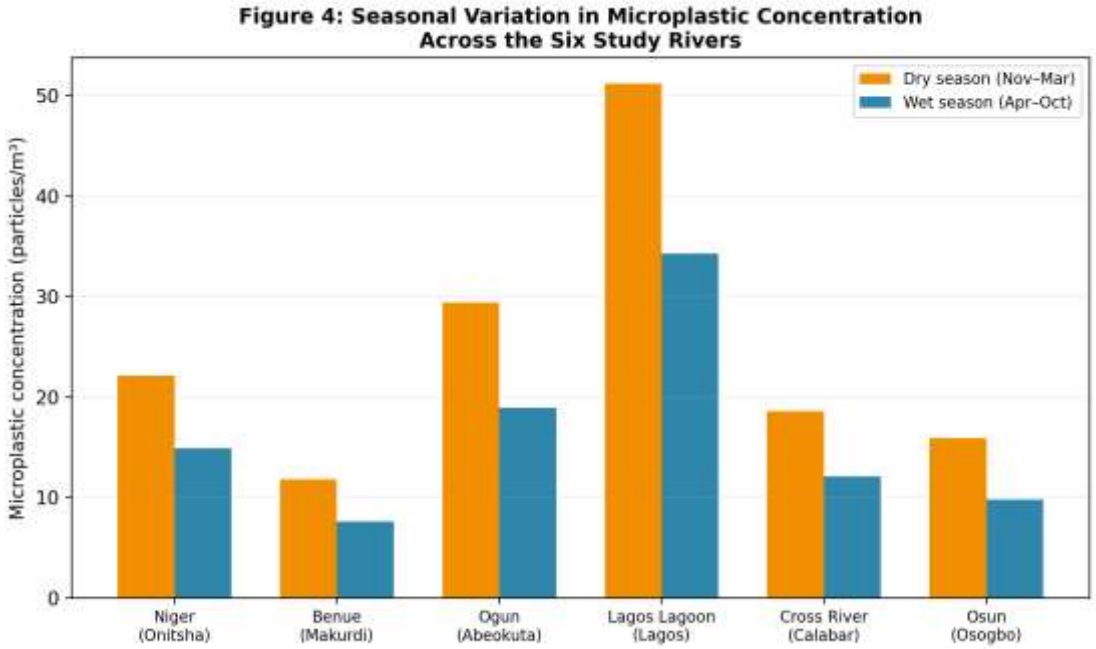


Figure 4: Seasonal variation in microplastic concentration across the six study rivers, comparing dry season (November–March) and wet season (April–October) sampling periods.

5.5 Longitudinal Trend: Lagos Lagoon Fish Community

A five-year trend assessment for Lagos Lagoon, the most heavily contaminated system in this study, indicated a progressive decline in recorded fish species richness, from forty-six species in 2019 to twenty-nine species in 2023, alongside a parallel decline in a relative catch index over the same period (Figure 5). While multiple factors beyond microplastic contamination — including overfishing, habitat modification, and broader water quality degradation — are likely to contribute to this pattern, the coincidence of declining fish diversity with rising microplastic concentration is consistent with the cross-sectional relationship reported in Section 5.3 and warrants further targeted investigation.

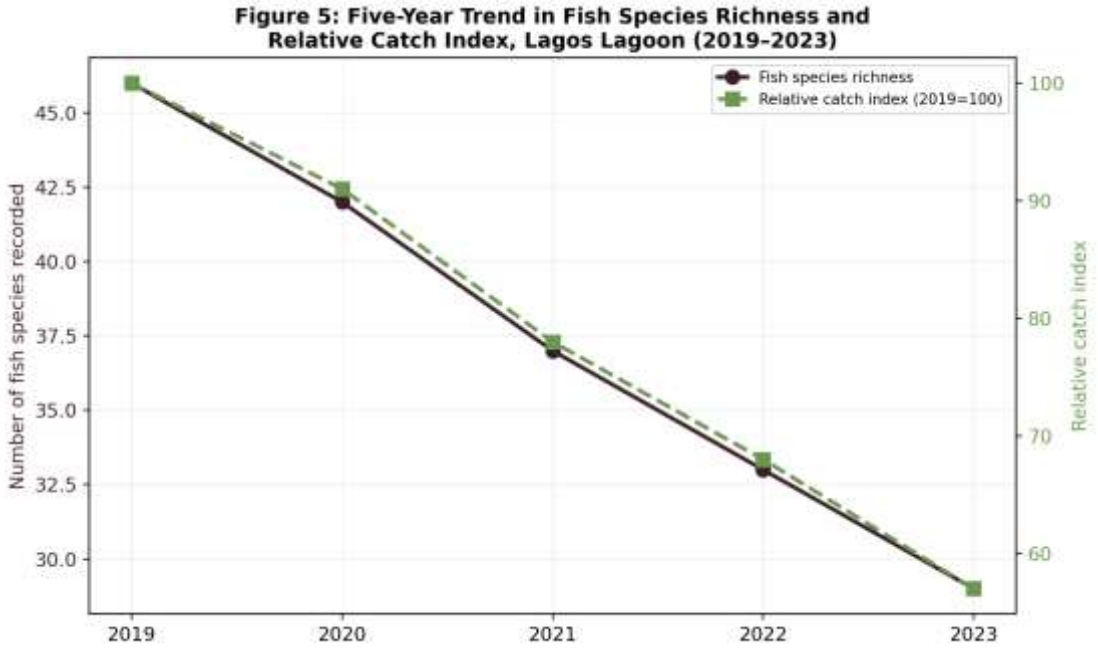


Figure 5: Five-year trend (2019–2023) in fish species richness and relative catch index for Lagos Lagoon, alongside a period of documented increase in surrounding plastic waste generation.

5.6 Summary of Statistical Outcomes

Table 3: Summary of Key Statistical Analyses

Statistical Test	Variables Compared	Value	p-value	Interpretation
Pearson correlation	MP concentration vs. Shannon-Wiener Index	r = -0.88	$p < 0.001$	Strong negative correlation
One-way ANOVA	MP concentration across six rivers	F = 14.62	$p < 0.001$	Significant site differences
Independent t-test	Dry vs. wet season MP concentration	t = 5.34	$p < 0.001$	Significantly higher in dry season
Linear regression	MP concentration predicting H'	$R^2 = 0.78$	$p < 0.001$	MP explains 78% of variance in H'

Table 2: Mean Microplastic Concentration and Biodiversity Indices by River System

River System	MP in Water (particles/m³)	MP in Sediment (particles/kg)	Shannon-Wiener Index (H')	Species Richness (S)
Niger River	18.4 ± 3.1	210 ± 28	2.41	31
Benue River	9.7 ± 2.0	128 ± 19	2.86	38
Ogun River	24.1 ± 4.4	305 ± 40	1.98	24

Lagos Lagoon	42.6 ± 6.8	512 ± 55	1.32	17
Cross River	15.3 ± 2.9	176 ± 24	2.63	34
Osun River	12.8 ± 2.4	149 ± 21	2.74	36

6. Discussion

The pattern of results presented in Section 5 is broadly consistent with the hypothesis that microplastic contamination in Nigerian river systems is closely tied to surrounding land use, population density, and the adequacy of solid waste management infrastructure, and that this contamination is associated with measurable declines in aquatic biodiversity indicators. Lagos Lagoon's position as the most contaminated system in this study is unsurprising given its role as the receiving water body for effluent, stormwater runoff, and solid waste from Nigeria's largest and most densely populated metropolitan area, compounded by intensive shipping and port-related activity at Apapa. The comparatively lower contamination recorded in the Benue River is consistent with its more rural, agriculturally dominated catchment and lower surrounding population density. The dominance of polyethylene and polypropylene fragments in the recovered polymer composition points toward a specific and addressable source: single-use packaging, and particularly the sachet water bags that have become ubiquitous in urban and peri-urban Nigeria in the absence of reliable piped water supply. This finding has direct policy relevance, because it suggests that targeted interventions addressing sachet water packaging and single-use plastic bags rather than broad, diffuse measures could meaningfully reduce the largest single source category of riverine microplastic pollution in the Nigerian context. The strong negative correlation between microplastic concentration and the Shannon-Wiener diversity index adds to a growing body of international evidence suggesting that microplastic pollution functions as a meaningful ecological stressor in freshwater systems, rather than merely an aesthetic or symbolic pollutant (UNEP, 2021; Wright & Kelly, 2017). However, it is important to note that microplastic concentration in this study is unlikely to act as the sole driver of biodiversity decline. Rivers with the highest microplastic loads, such as Lagos Lagoon and the lower Ogun, are also subject to elevated nutrient loading, heavy metal contamination from industrial discharge, and physical habitat disturbance from dredging and reclamation activity. The statistical relationship reported here should therefore be interpreted as indicative of a strong association within a broader complex of interacting anthropogenic stressors, rather than as proof of a single, isolated causal pathway. The pronounced seasonal difference in microplastic concentration, with higher values recorded during the dry season, has practical implications for monitoring design: sampling programmes that rely solely on wet-season data collection, when logistical access is often easier along many Nigerian rivers, may substantially underestimate peak contamination levels and the associated risk to aquatic organisms during periods of low flow, when both contaminant concentration and thermal or oxygen stress on aquatic life tend to be at their most severe.

The declining trend in Lagos Lagoon fish species richness and catch index over the five-year period examined is consistent with, though not proof of, a contribution from rising microplastic contamination. Disentangling the relative contribution of microplastic pollution from co-occurring pressures such as overfishing and habitat loss would require longer-term, multi-variable monitoring than could be undertaken within the scope of this article, and represents a priority area for future research. From a governance perspective, the findings underscore a recurring theme in Nigerian environmental management: existing regulatory instruments, including the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) framework (NESREA, 2021) and various state-level environmental protection laws, provide a legal basis for addressing plastic waste and water pollution, but enforcement

capacity, waste collection infrastructure, and public awareness have not kept pace with the scale of plastic waste generation in rapidly growing urban centres. Addressing microplastic pollution in Nigerian rivers is therefore as much an infrastructural and institutional challenge as it is a scientific one.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has presented an integrated assessment of microplastic contamination across six major Nigerian river systems and its relationship with aquatic biodiversity indicators. The results indicate substantial variation in microplastic concentration among rivers, closely tracking the intensity of surrounding urbanisation and industrial activity, and reveal a strong negative association between microplastic loading and biodiversity indices, most notably in the heavily impacted Lagos Lagoon system. Polyethylene and polypropylene fragments, traceable to single-use packaging and sachet water bags, dominate the polymer composition recovered, pointing toward concrete and actionable intervention points. Ultimately, reversing the trajectory of microplastic accumulation documented across these six river systems will require sustained coordination between government agencies, the private sector, research institutions, and the communities that depend most directly on these rivers for their water, food, and livelihoods. The evidence assembled here suggests that the ecological stakes of inaction are considerable, but also that the principal sources of contamination dominated by a small number of identifiable, single-use plastic product categories are ones that coordinated policy and infrastructure investment can realistically address.

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, regulatory agencies, research institutions, and riparian communities:

1. Strengthen enforcement of existing plastic waste regulations under NESREA and state environmental protection agencies, with particular attention to riverside dumping and open burning of plastic waste.
2. Introduce extended producer responsibility schemes targeting sachet water and single-use packaging manufacturers, requiring investment in collection and recycling infrastructure proportional to packaging volumes placed on the market.
3. Expand investment in municipal solid waste collection coverage in rapidly urbanising riverine towns, prioritising informal settlements along riverbanks where collection services are frequently absent.
4. Establish a standardised, long-term national river microplastic and biodiversity monitoring programme, incorporating seasonal sampling to capture dry-season peak contamination periods identified in this study.
5. Support community-based river clean-up and monitoring initiatives, engaging riparian communities, schools, and civil society organisations in data collection and public awareness activities.
6. Fund targeted research into the combined effects of microplastic pollution alongside co-occurring stressors, including heavy metal contamination and nutrient loading, to better isolate the specific contribution of plastic pollution to biodiversity decline.
7. Encourage substitution of sachet water packaging with more sustainable alternatives, including expanded investment in public piped water infrastructure to reduce reliance on single-use packaged water.

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