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GENERAL ARTICLE

Tracing the Pollen: Unraveling Insect-Plant Interaction through Entomopalynology

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Abstract

The diversification of plants has been shaped by pollination; a fundamental ecological process crucial for the reproductive success of approximately 80% of angiosperms. Insects are important pollinating agents. Clarifying ecological linkages, maintaining biodiversity, and maximizing agricultural productivity depend on an understanding of pollen-insect interactions. The study of pollen linked to insects, or Entomopalynology, offers important information about pollination networks, pollinator food preferences, and ecological stability. Methodological developments like as network analysis, automated pollen identification, and pollen DNA metabarcoding have improved the precision of research on pollen-insect interactions. While structural assessments of pollination networks help to understand ecosystem resilience, investigations have shown that pollen particle size affects pollinator selection. Long-term evaluations of plant-pollinator dynamics are further made possible by field observations and the analysis of museum specimens. Through identification of keystone pollinators and the improvement of habitat management techniques, these studies aid conservation efforts. Future research should expand beyond and integrate interdisciplinary approaches for spanning ecology, genetics, and climate science. Given the increasing impact of anthropogenic changes and climate fluctuations on pollination systems, entomopalynology play a pivotal role in guiding adaptive strategies for biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture.

Keywords: Pollination, Entomopalynology, Pollen-Insect Interaction, Pollen DNA Metabarcoding, Pollination Networks, Biodiversity

1. Introduction

Pollination is a crucial ecological activity that has shaped the diversification of different seed plant families throughout evolutionary history (Ollerton et al., 2019; Asar et al., 2022). Gymnosperms and angiosperms demand pollination for sexual reproduction; around 80% of angiosperms depend on biotic pollinators, predominantly insects (Von Aderkas et al., 2018), to enable this process. Pollen-insect interaction studies are crucial for comprehending the intricate linkages that facilitate pollination, which is critical for the reproduction of several plants and the overall vitality of ecosystems. Robust pollinator populations enhance plant diversity, hence sustaining a multitude of other creatures within the environment which is essential for sustaining ecosystem services. In agriculture, numerous crops rely on insect pollination to optimize yield. Pollinators contribute substantially to the food supply (Van der Sluijs and Vaage, 2016); one in three bites of food we consume is directly associated with pollinator activity. Comprehending these connections aids in formulating ways to improve crop yield and guarantee food security. Examining pollen-insect interactions facilitates the identification of essential species and elucidates their functions within ecosystems. Targeted conservation strategies may be established based on these ideas. Considering these, entomopalynology, the study of pollen associated with insects, is gaining recognition for its significant contributions to understanding ecological interactions, particularly in pollination biology. This field not only enhances our knowledge of insect behavior and ecology (Sharma et al., 2023) but also has practical implications for agriculture (Saunders, 2018), conservation (Balasubramanian,

Table 1. Economic uses of pollen.

Sl no.	Details	References
1	**Pollen-Based Materials**	
	Pollen Paper: Scientists have developed a paper-like material derived from softened pollen grains that responds to environmental humidity changes. This material can be used in applications such as:	Zhao et al., 2020
	Green Analytical Chemistry: Sorbent for Solid-Phase Extraction (SPE): Pollen grains, due to their robust outer coating (sporopollenin), serve as low-cost, green sorbents for hydrophilic solid-phase extraction. They are used for separating organic acids and phenolic compounds, reducing reliance on silica-based sorbents, which have environmental and health risks. Pollen's natural adsorption ability makes it a promising material for miniaturized methodologies in analytical chemistry.	Li et al., 2021
2	**Functional Food and Feed**	
	Human Nutrition: Pollen is marketed as a dietary supplement in forms such as granules, capsules, powders, and tablets. It is rich in bioactive compounds like polyphenols, flavonoids, vitamins, and amino acids	
	Fermented pollen products improve nutrient bioavailability and antioxidant capacity, with potential health benefits like antitumor effects	
	Animal Feed: Pollen-based feed enhances animal growth, health, and meat quality. It is incorporated into bakery products, juices, and meat formulations to improve nutritional and functional properties	Kostić et al., 2020
3	**Therapeutic Applications**	
	Bee pollen is studied for its therapeutic potential in treating allergies, boosting immunity, and improving overall health due to its nutrient-rich composition	Khalifa et al., 2021
4	**Allergen Extracts**	
	Pollen is utilized in the production of allergen extracts for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes in allergy treatments	Codina et al., 2015
5	**Environmental Sustainability**	
	Pollen-based innovations reduce the ecological footprint by replacing synthetic materials with biodegradable alternatives. This aligns with global efforts toward sustainability	Şenol et al., 2023

2017), and forensic science (Alam et al., 2024). The current article focusses on the importance of entomopalynology, with its present implications and approaches to understanding the pollen–insect continuum.

Among diverse economic products of honeybees (Figure 1), apart from its role in pollination, bee pollen has various applications in the market, contributing to diverse industries such as materials science, food production, and green chemistry (Table 1). Below are the key areas where pollen is economically valuable:

2. Importance of pollen study in pollination ecology

Studying pollen-plant-insect interactions is critical for understanding ecological dynamics and ensuring the sustainability of both natural ecosystems and agricultural systems. The coevolution of these relationships highlights the intricate connections that have developed over time, emphasizing the need for continued research and conservation efforts in this area. The following are the crucial roles for understanding the pollen-plant studies.

2.1.Understanding pollinator interactions through pollen studies

Pollen studies play a crucial role in elucidating the complex interactions between pollinators and flowering plants. For example, the spring ephemeral *Corydalis ambigua* Cham. & Schltdl. is flowering earlier in mountain habitats due to earlier snowmelt, but the pollinators

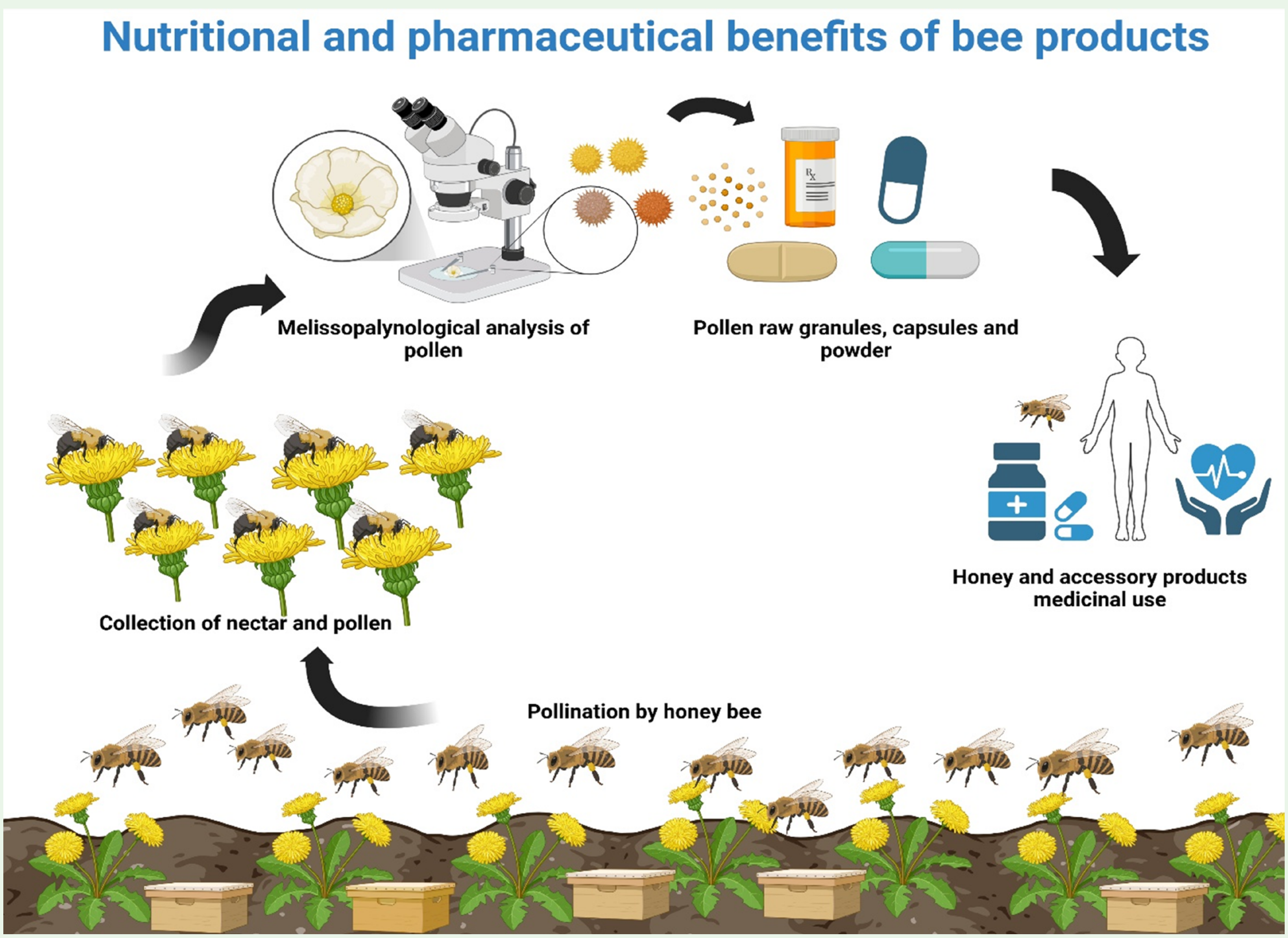

Figure 1. Nutritional and pharmaceutical benefits of bee products

(*Bombus hypocrita* and *B. hypnorum koropokkrus*), whose emergence is associated with soil temperature, are not always synchronized with flowering commencement, resulting in lower seed production (Kudo and Ida, 2013). By examining the pollen carried by various insect species, researchers can gather insights into the dynamics of these ecological relationships, which are vital for ecosystem health and agricultural productivity (Byers, 2017) (Table 2).

2.2. The role of pollen in pollination ecology

Pollen serves as a key component in the study of pollination ecology. Insects may interact with pollen in several ways: consuming it, passively carrying it, or actively transporting it to other plants. This interaction can reveal dietary preferences and patterns of floral visitation among pollinators. Analyzing pollen grains on the bodies of pollinators allows scientists to approximate pollen availability and track changes in plant-pollinator interactions over time, which is essential for understanding the impacts of environmental changes such as habitat loss and climate change (Galan et al., 2014). In particular, it is also observed that bees would prefer small (lipid-rich, starchless) pollen grains over large (starchy) grains because larger grains are envisioned as having relatively lower nutritional value (Hao et al., 2020).

Pollinator preferences are highly responsive to pollen nutritional profiles, floral trait integrity, and environmental volatility (Table 3). Climate change and habitat loss amplify these shifts, disrupting pollination networks. Conservation strategies must prioritize diverse, nutritionally rich floral resources and habitat connectivity to buffer against these dynamics.

2.3. Pollen-Insect Interaction Networks

Recent research has focused on constructing pollen-insect interaction networks, which provide a comprehensive view of how different species interact within an ecosystem. For instance, studies have utilized bipartite meta-networks to link specific pollen types with the insect species that carry them (Grass et al., 2018). For example, Hall et al. (2022) developed a bipartite meta-network across different land uses- remnant native forest, avocado orchard, dairy farm, and rotational potato

Table 2. Case studies of pollen mediated insect-plant synergism

Case/Study System	Insect(s) Involved	Plant(s) Involved	Synergism/Interaction Observed	Reference
Ant pollination in Proteaceae	Ants (various species)	*Conospermum*	Ants carry pollen with high germination rates (~80%), comparable to bees; ants significantly contribute to seed set	Delnevo et al., 2020
Tracking pesticide residues via pollen in honey bees	Honey bee (*Apis mellifera*)	*Spiraea spp.* (Rosaceae)	Entomopalynology traced highly toxic pollen loads to Spiraea, linking plant source to bee exposure risk	Soufbaf et al., 2018

Table 3. Plant factors affecting pollinator preferences

Sl no	Factor	Impact on Pollinator Preferences	Ecosystem Consequence
1	Optimal P:L ratios	Bees favor plants with ≈5:1 ratios; avoid lipid/protein extremes	Shapes plant community composition
2	Phenological shifts	Delayed flowering increases specialist pollinator efficacy; advances reduce generalist foraging	Alters seed set and plant reproduction
3	Habitat fragmentation	Reduces high-quality pollen access; intensifies selective foraging	Lowers pollinator diversity and abundance
4	Extreme weather	Destroys forage; forces range shifts (e.g., bumble bees moving northward/uphill)	Increases pollinator mortality and mismatch

crop- within a mosaic agricultural landscape. They found that agricultural sites like crops and dairy farms exhibited higher richness and strength of pollen–insect interactions compared to small forest patches and orchards. Notably, many interactions involved flies, wasps, and beetles, highlighting the ecological importance of often-overlooked pollinator groups. Additionally, bipartite meta-networks reveal that pollen-load data can uncover more interactions per individual insect than direct visitation observations, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of pollinator roles and network structure. This dual perspective is essential for effective conservation planning, as it highlights both the generalist and specialist interactions that sustain pollinator communities across landscapes. This approach enables researchers to identify key relationships and assess how land-use types influence these interactions. The structural analysis of pollination interaction networks may provide key information on network stability and robustness under environmental change (Grass et al., 2018). By comparing interactions across various landscapes, such as agricultural fields versus natural habitats, scientists can determine which environments support the most diverse and robust pollinator communities. The study of historical pollinator specimens and associated pollen loads- central to entomopalynology- offers a unique window into how pollinator preferences have expanded or contracted over evolutionary timescales. Museum collections, some spanning over a century, are increasingly used to reconstruct past plant–pollinator networks and reveal the ecological and climatic drivers behind these changes (Table 4).

Further, obligate pollination mutualisms (Table 5) such as fig-fig wasp, yucca-yucca moth, and oil palm-oil palm weevil- represent some of the most specialized and ecologically significant plant–pollinator relationships. The availability and quality of pollen are central to the stability, reproductive success, and vulnerability of these systems.

3. Methodological Innovations and approaches to study pollen-insect interactions

Innovative methodologies have emerged to enhance the study of pollen-insect interactions.

Table 4. **E**volutionary Shifts in Pollinator Preferences

Pollinator Group	**Time Span (Specimens)**	**Observed Shift**	**Ecological Driver**	**Reference/Study Region**
Bumble bees	1900–2020	Host range expansion	Habitat loss, exotics	UK, North America
Long-tongued solitary bees	1950–2015	Host range contraction	Floral partner decline	Mediterranean Europe
Monarch butterflies	1920–2020	Northward range shift	Climate warming	North America
Syrphid flies	1900–2000	Phenological shift (earlier)	Temperature rise	Central Europe

Table 5. Examples of obligate pollination mutualism and ecological factors affecting it

System	**Pollinator**	**Plant Partner**	**Role of Pollen**	**Vulnerability Factors**
Fig–Fig wasp	Fig wasp (Agaonidae)	*Ficus spp.*	Essential for wasp and seed development	Pollinator decline, habitat loss
Yucca–Yucca moth	Yucca moth	*Yucca spp.*	Required for fertilization and moth larvae	Climate shifts, pollen limitation
Oil palm–Oil palm weevil	Oil palm weevil	*Elaeis guineensis*	Key for fruit set and oil production	Weevil decline, poor pollen quality

The integration of museum specimens with field observations allows researchers to analyze historical data on insect-pollen networks across different spatial and temporal scales (Table 6). This approach not only enriches our understanding of current interactions but also helps reconstruct past dynamics, providing context for contemporary ecological changes (Balmaki et al., 2022). By identifying which insect species are effective pollinators for specific plants, conservationists can prioritize habitats that support these interactions. For example, findings indicate that certain land-use practices can enhance or diminish the richness and strength of pollen-insect interactions (Hall et al., 2022). Therefore, targeted management strategies at both field and landscape scales can significantly impact pollinator conservation outcomes.

3.1. Approaches to Study Pollen-Insect Interactions

The study of pollen-insect interactions employs a variety of innovative methodologies that enhance our understanding of these complex ecological relationships. Below are some key approaches currently being utilized in this field (Table 7).

3.2. The Role of Entomopalynology from an Ecotoxicological Perspective

Entomopalynology—the study of pollen carried by insects—offers unique and powerful tools for ecotoxicological research, particularly in the context of environmental contamination, pesticide exposure, and the health of pollinator communities.

Table 6. Pollen related Studies and their Implications

Sl no	Study Title	Targeted Crops	Implications	References
1	Land use and pollinator dependency drive global patterns of pollen limitation	Various wild plants	Highlights the impact of urbanization on pollen limitation in plants reliant on pollinators, emphasizing the vulnerability of ecologically specialized species.	Bennett et al., 2020
2	Review of European studies on pollination networks and pollen limitation	Wild plants in Europe	Quantifies the distribution of plant-pollinator network studies and identifies data gaps, stressing the need for more comprehensive research in Eastern Europe.	Bennett et al., 2018
3	Plants, pollinators and their interactions under global ecological changes	Various native and introduced plants	Discusses how urban pollinators forage from a wide range of plants, emphasizing the importance of understanding plant-pollinator communities for ecosystem management.	Bell et al., 2023
4	Evaluation of sampling effort required to assess pollen species richness	-	Provides insights into the sampling efforts needed to accurately assess pollen diversity associated with various pollinators, aiding in a better understanding of ecological interactions.	Nikkeshi et al., 2021
5	Pollen grain size associated with pollinator feeding strategy	Various flowering species	Confirms a link between pollinator behavior and pollen grain size, which can inform agricultural practices by highlighting effective pollinator species for crop types.	Hao et al., 2020

3.2.1. Tracking Pesticide and Pollutant Exposure:

Pollen collected by insects (especially bees) can serve as a bioindicator of environmental contamination. By analyzing pollen loads from insect bodies or within their digestive tracts, researchers can detect the presence and distribution of pesticides, heavy metals, and other toxicants in agricultural and natural landscapes. This approach helps identify specific plants or locations contributing to pollinator exposure, supporting targeted risk assessments and mitigation strategies (Mendonça et al., 2022).

3.2.2. Assessing Sublethal and Chronic Effects:

Entomopalynological techniques allow for the monitoring of both acute and chronic exposure to contaminants. For example, pollen collected from bee hives can be analyzed over time to reveal patterns of pesticide use, changes in residue levels, and potential links to declines in pollinator health or colony collapse. Such data are essential for understanding the long-term, sublethal impacts of agrochemicals on pollinator populations and ecosystem services (Stoner et al., 2019).

Table 7. Approaches employed to understand the pollen insect interactions.

Sl no	Approach	Description	Key Techniques	References
1	Museum Specimen Analysis	Utilizes historical insect specimens to analyze pollen loads, providing insights into past pollination networks and changes over time.	Pollen extraction from museum specimens, network analysis of pollen-insect interactions.	Balmaki et al., 2022
2	Field Observations and Sampling	Involves direct observation of floral visitation by pollinators, allowing for the collection of data on pollinator behavior and preferences.	Transect sampling, floral visitor counts, standardized sampling protocols.	Barker and Arceo-Gomez, 2021
3	Pollen DNA Metabarcoding	Employs DNA analysis of pollen to identify plant species consumed by pollinators, offering a molecular perspective on dietary intake.	DNA extraction from pollen grains, sequencing and bioinformatics analysis for species identification.	Bell et al., 2023
4	Pollen Transport Networks	Examines how pollen is transferred between plants by different insect species, providing a dynamic view of plant-pollinator interactions.	Network analysis to visualize and quantify interactions based on pollen transport data.	Barker and Arceo-Gomez, 2021
5	Experimental Manipulations	Involves controlled experiments such as flower bagging or enclosure studies to assess pollinator effectiveness and interaction outcomes.	Flower bagging experiments, exclusion experiments to test pollinator contributions.	
6	Automated Pollen Analysis	Utilizes machine learning algorithms to automate the identification of pollen taxa from samples, improving efficiency and accuracy in data collection.	Convolutional neural networks for pollen identification, and automated scanning of slides.	

3.2.3. Informing Integrated Pest and Pollinator Management:

By identifying the foraging patterns and pollen sources of beneficial insects, entomopalynology can guide the selection of floral resources that support pollinator health while minimizing exposure to harmful chemicals. This information is valuable for developing strategies that reduce pesticide use, enhance biological control, and promote sustainable agriculture (Biddinger and Rajotte, 2015).

3.2.4. **Supporting Environmental Forensics:**

In environmental forensic entomotoxicology, pollen found on or within insects can be used as evidence to trace the movement of toxicants through food webs, identify sources of contamination, and reconstruct exposure events. This is particularly useful when traditional environmental samples (soil, water) are unavailable or insufficient for detecting trace contaminants (Walker, 2014).

3.2.5. Techniques and Advantages

Pollen can be isolated from both external (legs, proboscis) and internal (gut, crop) insect tissues using relatively simple and cost-effective methods. Light microscopy and, when available, scanning electron microscopy are used for pollen identification and quantification. These approaches are less invasive and more accessible than many conventional ecotoxicological assays (Jones, 2012). Further, Entomopalynological data provide regulators and researchers with direct evidence of contaminant transfer from environment to pollinators, strengthening environmental risk assessments. They help in evaluating the effectiveness of regulatory measures and in designing more pollinator-friendly pest management protocols (Grímsson et al., 2021).

4. Future Prospects of Entomopalynology and Conclusion

Although major studies related to entomopalynology predominantly emphasize bees, there is an increasing interest in investigating other insect taxa, including Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) and Diptera (flies). Broadening the scope of entomopalynology to encompass these groups may reveal distinct facets of pollen-insect interaction networks and their ecological functions. Improvements in molecular methods and microscopy are poised to augment the potential of entomopalynology. These tools will facilitate more accurate identification of pollen types and enhance comprehension of their ecological significance across temporal and spatial dimensions. As climate change increasingly affects global ecosystems, entomopalynology is essential for examining the influence of climatic fluctuations on pollinator behavior and plant-pollinator interactions. Comprehending these processes will be crucial for formulating adaptive management methods in agriculture and conservation initiatives. Future investigations in entomopalynology will be enhanced by interdisciplinary collaborations that amalgamate ecology, agriculture, genetics, and climate science. Collaborations can yield extensive research that tackles intricate ecological inquiries and guides policy decisions related to biodiversity conservation and agricultural methods.

By mapping pollen–insect interactions, entomopalynology can reveal the richness and strength of pollination networks in different agricultural landscapes. Sites with higher interaction diversity—such as those in crops and dairy farms—tend to have enhanced pollination services and greater resilience to disturbances. The diversity and abundance of pollen types collected by insects can serve as a proxy for pollinator visitation rates and effectiveness, helping to identify key pollinator species and their preferred floral resources. Reconstructing historical and current plant trait composition from pollen records allows for the identification of crop types and wild plants that contribute most to ecosystem services, such as pollination and soil health. Entomopalynological data, when combined with precision agriculture tools (e.g., remote sensing, sensor networks), can enable real-time monitoring of pollinator activity and pollen movement, supporting targeted management interventions.

Practical Implications

Present article has following practical implications like, optimizing Crop and habitat Management, temporal planning to constitute floral calender for year round non-migratory bee keeping, improving Integrated Pest and Pollinator Management (IPPM), and enhancement of yield. The integration of entomopalynology into extension services and policy frameworks can support evidence-based recommendations for pollinator-friendly farming practices and landscape planning.

Entomopalynology, through its ability to map, monitor, and analyze pollen–insect interactions, offers actionable insights for optimizing crop management, enhancing pollination services, and improving integrated pest and pollinator management. Its integration with precision agriculture and biocontrol strategies can help overcome current limitations, leading to sustainable increases in agricultural productivity and ecosystem resilience. The study of pollen not only sheds light on the intricate relationships between insects and plants but also informs broader ecological management strategies. As research continues to evolve, leveraging both modern techniques and historical data will be essential for understanding and preserving these vital interactions in an ever-changing environment. By fostering a deeper comprehension of how pollinators interact with their floral resources, we can better protect the ecosystems that rely on these essential relationships.

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