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Fu, H, Gaüzère, P, García Molinos, J et al. (7 more authors) (2021) Mitigation of urbanization effects on aquatic ecosystems by synchronous ecological restoration. Water Research, 204. 117587. ISSN 0043-1354

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.watres.2021.117587

Mitigation of urbanisation effects on aquatic ecosystems by synchronous ecological restoration

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Abstract

Ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss have been caused by economic booms in developing countries over recent decades. In response, ecosystem restoration projects have been advanced in some countries but the effectiveness of different approaches and indicators at large spatio-temporal scales (i.e. whole catchments) remains poorly understood. This study assessed the effectiveness of a diverse array of 440 aquatic restoration projects including wastewater treatment, constructed wetlands, plant/algae salvage and dredging of contaminated sediments implemented and maintained from 2007 to 2017 across more than 2000km^2 of the northwest Taihu basin (Yixing, China). Synchronized investigations of water quality and invertebrate communities were conducted before and after restoration. Our analysis showed that even though there was rapid urbanization at this time, nutrient concentrations (NH_4^+-N, TN, TP) and biological indices of benthic invertebrate (taxonomic richness, Shannon diversity, sensitive taxon density) improved significantly across most of the study area. Improvements were associated with the type of restoration project, with projects targeting pollution-sources leading to the clearest ecosystem responses compared with those remediating pollution-sinks. However, in some locations, the recovery of biotic communities appears to lag behind nutrients (e.g. nitrogen and phosphorus), likely reflecting long-distance re-colonization routes for invertebrates given the level of pre-restoration degradation of the catchment. Overall, the study suggests that ecological damage caused by recent rapid economic development in China could potentially be mitigated by massive restoration investments synchronized across whole catchments, although these effects could be expected to be enhanced if urbanization rates were reduced at the same time.

Keywords: Ecosystem degradation; wastewater treatment; pollution; macroinvertebrates; water quality

1 Introduction

Almost all natural ecosystems on Earth have been disturbed by human development (Sévêque et al., 2020). Billions of dollars are invested annually to restore degraded ecosystems (Zhang et al., 2000), but many countries continue to face a dilemma between the needs of economic development and ecosystem restoration (Liu et al., 2016b). Therefore, adequate assessment of the efficiency of restoration projects in maintaining and restoring natural ecosystem services in line with continuous sustainable development are needed.

There are few developing countries, like China, that have implemented so many and diverse ecosystem conservation and restoration projects in recent decades (Zhao et al., 2017), while maintaining rapid economic growth and urbanization. Following the implementation of reform and opening-up policy, China's urban population increased dramatically from 172.5 million in 1978 to 771.2 million in 2015 (Guan et al., 2018). This urban population growth has resulted in severe degradation of aquatic ecosystems as a consequence of land-use change, pollution and hydromorphological modification (Yang et al., 2019). To mitigate the severe ecosystem degradation, the Chinese government initiated major investments in eco-environmental conservation and restoration projects in 2000. The investment in total environmental restoration across the China mainland has increased from almost nothing in 1994 to 1 trillion RMB yuan in 2014 (Zhou et al., 2017). Whilst these factors have made China one of the world's leading investors in ecosystem restoration, there is also a general perception that the national restoration policies and actions have contributed a lot to improve the status of water quality across China (Zhou et al., 2017). However, no study has yet attempted to describe the quantitative relationship between the indices of different restoration projects targeting either pollution sources (the place when pollution was generated) or pollution sinks (natural aquatic ecosystems like rivers) and ecosystem indices (nutrients, biological communities, etc.) across large space and time scale.

These investments in river restoration in China provide opportunities to enhance understanding of catchment-scale remediation schemes with varied restoration approaches, which have received comparatively less attention than restoration schemes focused on river sections (Ramchunder et al., 2012), or single types of restoration measures (Kail et al., 2015). To maintain continued, unreserved support from governmental institutions and the general public, the benefits from coordinated, large-scale ecological conservation and restoration efforts urgently need to be evaluated, with communication of lessons learned to decision makers.

Here, we combine historical and present data to explore the relationship between a large set of different restoration projects (spanning a range of investments and removal amount of nutrients) and aquatic ecosystem responses in the Taihu basin (Yixing, China). Increasing urbanization intensity can complicate interpretation of aquatic environmental restoration effects over time, although impervious surface area provides a quantifiable index to incorporate this potentially confounding element into the study (Yang et al., 2019). The aim was to examine the effectiveness of ecosystem restoration using nutrients and macroinvertebrates as key indicators, spanning 10 years and across a large spatial-scale (> 2000 km^2); We hypothesized that (Fig. 1): (H_i) ecological damage caused by rapid economic development can be effectively mitigated by synchronous large-scale restoration projects; (H_{ii}) the recovery of biotic indices would lag behind change in abiotic indices (e.g. nutrients) following the implementation of restoration projects, because of the extensive pre-restoration degradation of the catchment limiting potential for rapid recolonization; (H_{iii}) the choice of restoration approach can be expected to result in different effects on the ecosystem restoration, with for example, approaches such as dredging modifying physical habitat and potentially exacerbating stress and delaying recovery.

To test these hypothesizes, gathered information on several hundreds of existing restoration projects conducted in the northwest sector of the Lake Taihu basin (China) over a period of 10 years. Several restoration project indices, nutrient concentration and biological indices of benthic macroinvertebrates in aquatic ecosystems were then computed, and their local trends assessed via a moving-window approach taking into account increases in urbanization intensity and the investment made on the restoration projects. The integrated assessment of multiple data sources provides a novel and thorough analysis on the role of environmental restoration project investments on the water qualities of a watershed under the influence of urban expansion.

2 Material and methods

2.1 Study region

The Taihu basin, located at the plain river network region in the downstream area of the Yangtze River, covers an area of approximately 36,895 km^2 (Fig. 2). The basin, representing 0.4% of China's land area, is heavily populated (40 million residents) and highly industrialized supporting 11% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Yi et al., 2017).

This study focused specifically on the upstream areas of the northwest Taihu basin, covering the whole area of Yixing city (Fig. 2). The district covers a total area of 1996.6 km^2 (including 242.29 km^2 of Lake Taihu), 16.8% of which is occupied by water bodies. The catchment, has a northern subtropical monsoon climate with an average annual temperature of 16.0 °C, and abundant rainfall (1177 mm a year on average,). The urban area of 66.3 km^2 includes rivers with a density of approximately 2.27 km/km^2 (Wang et al., 2017).

Yixing provides an ideal case study to test our hypotheses for two main reasons: (1) it represents the typical characteristics of the wider Taihu basin (Pan and Zhao, 2007), and includes nine of the 13 main tributaries to Lake Taihu, which together account for around 60% of the total flow into the lake Taihu. (2) Between 2007 to 2017, Yixing has spent 8.21 billion RMB ($1.2B USD) on 440 different aquatic environment restoration projects throughout the catchment.

2.2 Restoration project data

We collected data corresponding to restoration projects which were implemented and maintained between 2007 and 2017. The database contained >440 water environmental restoration projects from the Development and Reform Commission of Jiangsu province (Jiangsu Development and Reform Commission, 2008; 2014). One hundred projects that did not provide information on specific restoration measures, the project scale, or for which the measures taken could not be quantified and converted into removal quantity of nitrogen and phosphorus, were discarded (see below for an explanation of how we calculated these parameters). Similarly, projects that did not have direct impacts on the aquatic environment (garbage disposal, drinking water treatment) were removed from further analysis. We collected data on the location of the restoration works (latitude and longitude) (Fig. 2), type of restoration projects (Fig. 5), starting and completion year, specific restoration measures, project scale, and total investments (Table S1). To eliminate the effects of inflation on the project investment costs, we take 2007 as the base year and make price adjustments to that baseline for other years' investments (Table S2) (Imai, 2018). Projects were classified according to targeted pollution paths: (i) restoration projects targeting pollution sources (e.g. treatment of industrial and agricultural (farming, aquaculture and livestock breeding etc.) wastewater or sanitary sewage), and (ii) restoration projects targeting pollution sinks (e.g. dredging of contaminated sediment, water hyacinth cultivation for removal of pollutants, harvesting of harmful blue-green algae, etc.). For the restoration projects which aimed to control wastewater pollution at source, we further divided those restoration projects into three different categories: (i) industry-focused, (ii) agricultural wastewater (mainly include livestock breeding and aquaculture in this study) and (iii) domestic sewage.

For each restoration project, we calculated the removal quantity (in 10^4 t/a) of key nutrients including ammonia nitrogen (NH_4^+-N), total phosphorus (TP) and total nitrogen (TN), according to different sub-project categories and by reference to various national or regional standards of wastewater discharging (for formulas see Table 1 and references therein). The main principle of the removal quantities calculation was to estimate nutrient removal from the sink of the water pollution in theory.

2.3 Field sampling

To assess relationships between aquatic ecosystems and nutrient removal efficiency, we monitored the recovery of 63 locations by sampling each site both before (2007) and after (2017) the implementation of the restoration works. Sampling sites were located in the limnetic zone of the lakes, or the rivers of Yixing and collected between July and September during both sampling campaigns (Fig. 2).

Benthic macroinvertebrate samples were collected within a 100 m reach for each site using a 0.05 m^2 modified Peterson grab (three grabs per reach), and sieved in situ through a 250-μm mesh. The resulting sieved materials were stored in a cooler box and transported to the laboratory on the same day. In the laboratory, the samples were sorted on a white tray, and all specimens picked out and preserved in 7% formalin solution. Specimens were identified to the lowest feasible taxonomic level under a dissection microscope (Olympus® SZX10) according to several taxonomic keys (Morse et al., 1994; Wang, 2002).

Simultaneously with benthic macroinvertebrate sampling, four water samples were collected from an intermediate depth at each site, stored in an acid-cleaned plastic container (200 mL), and kept in a cool box for transportation to the laboratory. TN (mg/L), TP (mg/L) and NH_4^+-N (mg/L) were then measured using an ultraviolet spectrophotometer (PhotoLab S12, WTW Company, Munich, Germany). TP and TN were measured on the unfiltered samples, whereas NH_4^+-N was determined from samples filtered using 0.45 μm Whatman GF/F filters (Whatman, Kent, Great Britain). All storage, preservation, and chemical analysis was performed in the laboratory following national standard analytical methods for water and wastewater (National Environmental Protection Bureau, 2002).

2.4 Quantification of restoration effects

Nutrient concentrations: We used the response ratio $\Delta\mathrm{r}$ proposed by Benayas et al. (2009) as a standardized effect size of restoration effects (Eq. (1)). The response ratio is dimensionless with positive values indicating an improvement of the original degraded status and negative values denoting a degradation. Given that decreasing NH_4^+-N, TN and TP concentrations in eutrophic environments are the target of restoration, we reversed the sign of the resulting ration (-Δr) for all assessed nutrient parameters (NH_4^+-N, TN and TP) to make their interpretation more intuitive and keep consistency with that of the biological indices.

$$\Delta r = -\ln(After\ Restoration/Degraded) \quad (1)$$

Biological indices: By referring to the applications of biological indices in the Yangtze River Basin, China (Huang et al., 2015), taxonomic richness, Shannon–Wiener index (Simpson, 1949) and % Oligochaeta were selected as representative indices to describe the variation of benthic macroinvertebrate assemblages. A function of species richness and density (Nzengya and Wishitemi, 2000) was used to determine the Shannon diversity.

The Hilsenhoff Family Biotic Index (FBI) (Hilsenhoff, 1988) was applied to assess the ecological conditions of each site. FBI sore are assigned a tolerance number from 0 (very intolerant) to 10 (highly tolerant), and calculated by equation: $FBI = \sum[(TV_i)(n_i)]/N$, where TV_i is the tolerance value of the i^{th} taxon, n_i is the number of individuals in i^{th} taxon, and N is the total number of individuals in the sample. The tolerance value of each family was obtained from Qin et al. (2014) and Wang and Yang (2004). Low FBI values reflect a higher abundance of sensitive invertebrate groups, thus a lower level of organic pollution.

We analyzed the changes in species composition between restored (2017) and degraded (2007) sites using the command beta.temp in the R package betapart (Baselga and Orme, 2012). This procedure computes the total dissimilarity (measured as Sørensen dissimilarity, β_{SOR}), and partitions it into turnover (β_{SIM}) and nestedness (β_{SNE}) components (Baselga, 2012). In the context of temporal variation of communities these two components reflect (i) the substitution of some species by others through time (β_{SIM}), and (ii) the loss (or gain) of species through time in a nested pattern (β_{SNE}).

Biological response ratios were based on a slightly modified formula:

$$\Delta r = \ln[(After\ Restoration + 1)/(Degraded + 1)] \quad (2)$$

where, in this case, the degraded and restored conditions were calculated using the biological indices of benthic macroinvertebrate (taxonomic richness, Shannon diversity, percent Oligochaeta and Hilsenhoff FBI). The addition of a unit (+1) to each term in the formula was needed because some sites registered zero values.

2.5 Land use data and urbanization metric

Land use data for Yixing district was derived from 30-m resolution land use maps for 2007 and 2017 (taken as surrogates for existing conditions before and after implementation of restoration) provided by the Resource and Environmental Science Data Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (http://www.resdc.cn) (Fig. S1). The 26 original land use categories were simplified into six categories according to the land resource classification system of China's land use/land cover change (CNLUCC), namely farm land, building land (artificial surfaces), forest land, grassland, water body and barren land (Song and Deng, 2017). The land use transformation matrix for the Yixing district across the six land use categories between 2007 and 2017 is provided in Table S3.

The impervious surface area (ISA) of Yixing has increased from 4.36% in 2007 to 10.15% in 2017. Prior research has noted that when the ISA increases to a range between 10 and 25%, the impact on aquatic environments is significant (Schueler, 1994). However, the water environment in relation to the ISA may vary depending on regional conditions (Luo et al., 2018). Thus, we used the response ratio of impervious surface area (rISA = ln (ISA_{2017}/ISA_{2007})) as a co-variable in subsequent analyses to assess confounding effects of land use change (urbanization) acting in opposition to restoration effects. Land use data and the impervious surface area were handled and calculated using ArcGIS 10.2 (ESRI Company, Redlands, CA, USA) and Fragstats 4.2 (McGarigal et al., 2012).

2.6 Data analysis

2.6.1 Assessing spatial distribution of project indices, ecosystem indices and the response ratio of impervious surface area

Because of the well-developed floodplain river network of Yixing district, Taihu Basin, the landform is flat, water flows slowly, and flow direction is often variable because of the influence of artificial drainage (Deng et al., 2015). Thus, we adopted a moving window approach to estimate all parameters (project, ecosystem and urbanization intensity indices) on a spatial continuum covering the whole study area. This approach is useful for summarizing local spatial trends emerging from regional dynamics (Gaüzère et al., 2016). The principle lies in calculating the metrics of interest for each cell of a squared grid (250 x 250 m, slightly less than the distance between the two nearest sampling sites to generate more windows), covering the study area, using a circular moving window centered on the centroid of each cell. In this way, the values of the different metrics attributed to each grid cell represent summaries of the neighboring restoration project sites, sampling sites and the response ratio of impervious surface area (Fig. 2).

We used a 6-km radius for the circular window (Fig. 2 and S2). The chosen window radius resulted from a compromise between incorporating the range of restoration projects and enough spatial repetition to estimate reliable linear trends in variables, and achieving an adequate coverage of the study area. This generated 4080 spatial windows, each containing at least three sampling sites and nine restoration project sites. Finally, indices (project, nutrients and biological indices) were calculated for the 4080 spatial windows based on the mean of ecosystem indices or the sum of project indices, and calculated the response ratio of impervious surface area for each window. This moving window approach enabled the local spatial trends of each restoration project index to be compared with the local spatial trends of aquatic ecosystem indices (Gauzere et al., 2017).

2.6.2 Statistical analysis for all indices

Visual inspection of frequency histograms showed all response ratios of ecosystem indices (ΔrNH_4^+-N, ΔrTN, ΔrTP, taxonomic richness, Shannon diversity, % Oligochaeta and Hilsenhoff FBI) followed non-normal distributions (Fig. 4). Therefore, we used Wilcoxon signed rank tests to examine whether median response ratios of ecosystem indices were significantly different from zero. Non-metric multidimensional scaling ordination (NMDS) was used to visualize invertebrate communities by site and restoration phase (before/after). Taxon density data were ordinated using Bray–Curtis similarity as the distance measure for the scaling, with square-root transformation to reduce impacts of extremely high counts of individual taxa. Similarity percentage (SIMPER) analysis was used to identify which taxa contributed the most to the average Bray-Curtis dissimilarity between the two-restoration phase.

Spearman Rank correlation analyses were performed to test for significant correlations between project investment and removal quantity of NH_4^+-N, TP, TN by project category. We also used Kruskal-Wallis tests to examine whether investments differed among different restoration project categories. Finally, the relationships between restoration projects and ecosystem recovery were assessed by fitting: a generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) with a Gamma distribution (log link) or Linear Mixed Model (LMM) to each nutrient (ΔrNH_4^+-N, ΔrTN, ΔrTP). Restoration project investment by category and the response ratio of impervious surface area (rISA) were added as fixed effects, while the number of years since the implementation of the restoration (DurationT) and the time since completion of the restoration (dt = 2017 - end year of the restoration) as random effects. GLMM with Gaussian distribution (log link) or LMM were applied to the biological indices (Δr taxonomic richness, Δr Shannon diversity, Δr % Oligochaeta, βSOR) with nutrients and investment of different restoration categories as fixed effects, rISA as covariate, DurationT and dt as random effects. Removal quantity of nutrient was subsequently omitted from these models because of its significant positive correlation with project investment (see Results section). To explore the interaction effect between urbanization intensity and the strength of restoration, 'rISA*investment of different project categories' was included in the models above.

Prior to analysis, the investment of each restoration project category was $\log_{10}$ transformed to constrain the influence of extreme values. We compared the complex model with a null model; models were simplified by removing non-significant terms and verifying the distribution through residuals analysis (Crawley, 2002). Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) values were used to determine the most parsimonious fit. Model residuals were tested for spatial autocorrelation with Moran's tests (Birk et al., 2020), which showed in all instances no autocorrelation.

All data analysis was performed in using R v 4.0.1 (R Core Team 2020, https://www.R-project.org/) using the packages: lme4 and lmerTest.

3 Results

3.1 Relationship between restoration project investments and nutrient removal

Spearman rank (Rs) correlations analysis showed a significant positive correlation between project investment and the removal quantity of nutrients (calculated as described in table 1) across project categories (Fig. 3, Table S4). The amount of money invested by the government varied significantly with project category (Kruskal Wallis test, p < 0.001). The projects attracting larger investments were, in descending order of magnitude: pollution source, pollution sink, sanitary sewage, industrial wastewater, agricultural sewage (Fig. 3).

3.2 Efficiency of restoration projects on nutrients and biological status

Restoration works were found to be efficient at recovering aquatic ecosystems from their initial degraded condition as shown by their significant effect on almost all assessed ecosystem indices. The concentration of NH_4^+-N, TN and TP across the whole Yixing river network was significantly lower in restored (2017) than in degraded (2007) aquatic ecosystems, leading to overall positive response ratios (Fig. 4); Taxonomic richness and Shannon diversity of benthic macroinvertebrate were significantly higher in restored (2017) than in degraded (2007) sites (mean response ratio = 1.085, 0.415, P<0.001, Fig. 4). Percent Oligochaeta was significantly lower in restored (2017, 17.53% ± 16.65%) than in degraded (2007, 40.78% ± 39.70%) sites. Hilsenhoff FBI of benthic macroinvertebrate communities showed no significant difference between degraded (2007) and restored (2017) ecosystems.

The composition of benthic macroinvertebrate communities differed significantly between degraded (2007) and restored (2017) time periods (PERMANOVA, p < 0.01; final stress=0.128, Fig. 6). SIMPER analysis identified eight species cumulatively contributing > 70% to the dissimilarity between restored (2017) and degraded (2007) invertebrate communities (Table S5). They were *Limnodrilus hoffmeisteri*, *Bellamya aeruginosa*, *Corbicula fluminea*, *Branchiura sowerbyi*, *Parafossarulus eximius*, *Neocaridina denticulata*, *Exopalaemon modestus* and *Parafossarulus striatulus* in decreasing order. Some sensitive species to anthropogenic pressures with low tolerance values recolonized after restoration (2017). For example, river flies *Heptagenia* sp.*, Ephemera orientalis and Ceratopsyche* sp.. The partitioning of the Sørensen dissimilarity index was dominated by species turnover (β_{SIM}) (mean = 0.44, SD = 0.36), implying that in any given site an average of 44% of the species were unique to the time (either 2007 or 2017 site assemblage). In contrast, the nestedness component (β_{SNE}) was much lower (mean = 0.34, SD = 0.33), implying that weaker patterns of species losses or gains from pre-existing communities have occurred between 2007 and 2017 (Fig. 4).

3.3 Effects of restoration projects on aquatic ecosystem status

Examination of the marginal effect of project investment amount by category on nutrients (Fig. 3) showed a significant correlation of decreasing river network NH_4^+-N concentrations (i.e., increasing response ratios) with increasing investment on projects targeting pollution sources but not those targeting pollution sinks (marginal $R^2 = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$). On the contrary, decreasing TN and TP concentrations were positively correlated with increasing investment on restoration projects targeting both pollution sources and sinks (marginal $R^2 = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$; marginal $R^2 = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). Decreasing NH_4^+-N and TP concentrations correlated with increasing investment in both restoration projects targeting agricultural and domestic sewage, but not those targeting industry wastewater (marginal $R^2 = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$; marginal $R^2 = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). Decreasing TN concentrations were negatively correlated with the increasing investment on restoration projects targeting sanitary sewage (marginal $R^2 = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). A significant interaction was evident between the response ratio of impervious surface area and investments of different restoration project categories and nutrient responses. For example, poor nutrient responses were associated with the growth of impervious surface area ($p < 0.001$, Fig. 7), but these effects were overcome where restoration projects were large but impervious area increased minimally.

For the biological indices, increased Shannon diversity and taxonomic richness over time showed significant inverse relationships with NH_4^+-N concentrations, and a positive association with increasing investment on restoration projects targeting sanitary sewage (Shannon marginal $R^2 = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$; richness marginal $R^2 = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$). Decreasing Oligochaeta relative abundance was associated with investment value of restoration projects both targeting agricultural and industrial wastewater (marginal $R^2 = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). Increasing β_{SOR} was correlated positively with investment for all three project categories targeting pollution sources (marginal $R^2 = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). There was evidence for significant interaction between the response ratio of impervious surface area and investments of different restoration project categories and biological index responses. For example, poor biological responses were associated with the growth of the impervious surface area ($p < 0.001$, Fig. 7), but these effects were overcome where restoration projects were large but impervious area increased minimally.

4 Discussion

This study has provided new insights to understand the effectiveness of catchment-scale restoration towards increasing water quality and biodiversity in rivers of China, building on knowledge from previous studies from a variety of ecosystems in other parts of the world (Benayas et al., 2009; Crouzeilles et al., 2016). A large data set comprising hundreds of different aquatic ecosystem restoration projects undertaken over the last two decades in a large urban district of China show that implementation of large-scale restoration projects can, to some extent, mitigate the environmental degradation as a result of economic boom. In Yixing, recovery occurred despite ongoing rapid economic growth and urbanization, although it should be noted that the impervious surface area reached only 10.15% at the bottom end of Schueler's (1994) 10-25% range for significant impacts on water quality. Further urbanization may therefore negate the positive aspects of restoration observed to date.

Restoration led to decreases in indicators of stress, notably concentrations of main nutrients (NH_4^+-N, TN and TP) and Oligochaeta relative abundance, whereas taxonomic richness and Shannon-Weiner diversity of benthic macroinvertebrate were significantly higher across the Yixing river network. These general findings for macroinvertebrate community and water quality recovery are supported by studies which found a significant positive effect of restoration on the organism groups and water quality (Kong et al., 2020). External inputs of organic pollution from sewage have been reduced from the catchment, and sediment dredging, cyanobacteria salvage, etc. have been implemented to reduce the internal nutrient loading. This combination of approaches has allowed dissolved oxygen concentrations to rise, gradually improving aquatic habitat and enhancing aquatic biodiversity (Mason, 2002).

In contrast, the overall Hilsenhoff FBI showed no significant difference between degraded (2007) and restored (2017) years of sampling. Despite the enormous investment in restoration, there were 25 sites showing increases in Hilsenhoff FBI scores, due to some higher tolerance taxa still remaining, and taxonomic richness in 2007 being much lower (average: 2.16) than in 2017 (average: 8.58). During the 10 years of the study, Yixing has seen its GDP increase from 42.80 billion RMB in 2006 to 155.83 billion RMB in 2017 (Fig. 2), accompanied by 45% growth of artificial surfaces (Fig. S1 and Table S3). The effects of urbanization (hydromorphology and hydrological alteration, run off pollution) are likely to have suppressed the level of biotic recovery of freshwater macroinvertebrates that may have occurred from restoration efforts in isolation by increasing the role of other stressors (Gál et al., 2019). Despite this urban cover growth, water quality of Chinese inland waters has clearly improved generally over recent decades with restoration efforts (Zhou et al. (2017).

On the other hand, we found that the response of biotic indices to restoration projects appeared to lag behind nutrients (NH_4^+-N, TN and TP), with the standardized responses of nutrients being greater than those of biotic indices. However, compared to the degraded time-period (2007), some species that are sensitive to anthropogenic pressures (low tolerance values) recolonized after restoration (2017) including the river flies *Heptagenia* sp.and *Ephemera orientalis*. Increases in the *Heptageniidae* are in line with Pedersen et al. (2007) who reported they increased significantly in abundance after a short-term restoration (three years) at the Skjern River reaches, Denmark. The composition of benthic invertebrate communities differed significantly between degraded (2007) and restored (2017) periods. Eight species cumulatively contributed > 70% to the dissimilarity between restored (2017) and degraded (2007) invertebrate communities (Table S5), *Limnodrilus hoffmeisteri* (turbid worms) and *Branchiura sowerbyi* (crustaceans) both decreased more in restored than in degraded rivers. These species are widely used as an indicator of organic pollution throughout China (Gorni et al., 2018), thus their decreasing abundance provides important ecological evidence for restoration success alongside the water quality improvements. However, *Limnodrilus hoffmeisteri* was still the co-dominant species in some sampling sites in Yixing river network both in degraded and restored time-periods; this is not surprising as they are widely distributed throughout global freshwater ecosystems (Armendáriz and César, 2001). In contrast, snails and clams such as *Bellamya aeruginosa* and *Corbicula fluminea* increased more in restored than in degraded. Recovery of these native snail and bivalve populations can be expected to further help improve the water quality given their roles as deposit or filter feeders that remove particulates (Zhang et al., 2014). The relative abundance of snails like *Bellamya aeruginosa* increased in > 20 sites over time, most likely because some native snails have been reintroduced by restoration activities in attempts to enhance algal removal. While *Bellamya aeruginosa* and *Corbicula fluminea* are common species which are widely distributed in eutrophic shallow lakes in China (Zhu et al., 2013). Although biological indices appear to lag behind abiotic indices like nutrients, sampling frequency limited our ability to elucidate more clearly the relationship between these indicators.

Even though the response ratio of taxonomic richness and Shannon diversity of benthic macroinvertebrate was significantly higher in restored (2017) than in degraded (2007) aquatic ecosystems, taxonomic richness and Shannon diversity of benthic invertebrate only showed significant positive correlation with the increasing project investment on sanitary sewage removal, the decline of NH_4^+-N concentrations in Yixing river network, and the interaction effect between the response ratio of impervious surface area and project investment on agricultural sewage removal. The muted improvements of biological indices may be due to two reasons: (i) restoration measures on pollution sink mainly include dredging of contaminated sediments, which will negatively affect the habitat of benthic macroinvertebrates; (ii) water quality in Yixing is improved but still not to a high level, and hydromorphological alterations remain throughout the catchment, limiting recovery potential. Additionally, only 14.4% of investments were targeted at pollution sinks in Yixing during 2007 to 2017. Agricultural (especially for livestock breeding and aquaculture) and domestic sewage as main sources of NH_4^+-N pollution have, however, been addressed significantly by the restoration program (Oita et al., 2016), as illustrated by the correlation between macroinvertebrate taxonomic richness, Shannon diversity and decreasing NH_4^+-N concentration, supported by the findings of Yi et al. (2018).

Although several factors can influence the outcomes of restoration, investment structure and complementarity amongst different restoration project categories appears as key factors of restoration success. Our results showed that some project categories have a disproportionate effect on nutrient recovery. Even though projects targeting both pollution sources and pollution sinks overall contributed positively to decreases in NH_4^+-N, TP, TN concentrations in Yixing river network, we have showed that:

(1) The same investment amount on restoration projects targeting pollution sources can lead to greater decreases in NH_4^+-N and TP in comparison to equivalent spending on targeting pollution sinks. This result might be driven by effective and timely actions on pollution sources, where nutrients are concentrated prior to dilution and dissipation among water and sediments in rivers and lakes. Thus, projects targeting pollution sources are the most effective way to prevent and decrease water eutrophication by NH_4^+-N and TP (Wurtsbaugh et al., 2019).

(2) The same investment amount on restoration projects targeting agricultural sewage (especially for livestock breeding and aquaculture) can lead to greater decreases in NH_4^+-N and TP (especially for NH_4^+-N) in comparison to those spent on targeting domestic sewage. This result might also be driven by frequent agricultural activities that are one of the main nitrogen sources of the Taihu basin (Liu et al., 2020), and domestic sewage which is one of main pollution sources of TP (Qin et al., 2007).

(3) Decreases in NH_4^+-N and TP concentrations showed slightly negative correlation with increasing investment on restoration projects targeting pollution sink

and industry waste water. This could be because additional investment in restoration projects targeting pollution sinks and industry waste water could not lead to removal of more NH_4^+-N and TP in a proportionate way. Furthermore, there are many restoration projects on pollution sinks (except for dredging) that do not aim to remove nutrients in a direct way (Bai et al., 2020).

(4) Decreases in TN concentrations in the Taihu river network were correlated with the increasing investment on restoration projects targeting both pollution source and pollution sink. However, deceases in TN concentrations were correlated weakly with the increasing investment on restoration projects on domestic sewage. Additional investment in sanitary sewage treatment plants may therefore not lead to removal of more TN from the waste water in a proportionate way.

The time elapsed since restoration began was also an important ecological driver underpinning ecosystem restoration success (Crouzeilles et al., 2016). Different restoration projects start on different dates by continuous planning, and so the restoration project investments towards the end of our study period may not have had a chance to exhibit their full impact. We can explore the different timelines for abiotic and biotic indices recovery after restoration in the future, if river management agencies invest in long time-scale ater quality and biomonitoring data.

Overall, our results demonstrate that (i) investments in environmental restoration projects improved water quality and biodiversity despite urban growth (Fig. 7); (ii) investments in source control had a stronger impact on water quality than investments in restoring sinks (Fig 3); (iii) investments in sink water quality control improved nutrient levels, albeit not as strong as investments in source controls (Fig 3). Stakeholders should therefore plan carefully the allocation of resources and money when restoring aquatic ecosystems. Studies such as this evaluation of river catchment restoration in SE

China have an important role in building the necessary trust in restoration projects for that to happen (Metcalf et al., 2015).

5 Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that, despite the unstopped expansion of urbanization, nutrient concentrations and biological indices of benthic invertebrate have improved significantly across most of Yixing catchment as a result of restoration works executed over the study period. Improvements were contingent to the type of restoration project, with some restoration approach showing disproportionate effects on response rates of ecosystem indices and projects targeting pollution-sources leading to the clearest improvements compared with those remediating pollution-sinks. However, in some locations, the recovery of biotic communities appears to lag behind nutrients (e.g., nitrogen and phosphorus), likely reflecting the longer time required by long-distance recolonization routes for invertebrates given the level of pre-restoration degradation of the catchment. Overall, our study suggests that ecological damage caused by recent rapid economic development could potentially be mitigated by the combined effect of massive restoration investments synchronized across whole catchments, although these effects can be expected to be muted if urbanization continues apace at the same time.

Data availability statement

Data are available from the Dryad Digital Repository: <https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.547d7wm8f> (Fu et al. 2021).

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the National Key R&D Program of China (Grant No. 2018YFD0900904), the Water Pollution Control and Management Project of China (Grant No. 2018ZX07208005), the International Cooperation Project of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Grant No. 152342KYSB20190025), the National Natural Science Foundations of China (Grant No. 31872687), and the China Scholarship Council. LEB's contribution was funded by the University of Leeds. JGM was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 19H04314.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, J.X.; methodology, J.X., H.F., P.Z. and L.E.B; formal analysis, H.F. Y.N., H.Y. and J.X.; resources, H.F., Y.N., H.Y. and J.X.; writing—original draft preparation, H.F.; writing-review and editing, H.F., J.G.M., J.X., P.Z., H.Z., M.Z., L.E.B. and J.X.; supervision, J.X. and M.Z.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1. Conceptual diagram of expected changes in aquatic ecosystems over time as a consequence of restoration. To demonstrate successful restoration, response ratios of abiotic and biotic indices should increase significantly relative to their respective values in the degraded state, ideally reaching predefined target levels corresponding to the desired restoration state.

Fig. 2. Map of the study area (Yixing, China) showing the location of the sampling sites, restoration project sites and the spatial definitions considered. Insets refer to ① the changing trend of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Yixing from 2002 to 2018) and ② schematic of the calculation process where each squared grid (250 x 250 m) was considered the centre of a 6-km radius window containing at least three sampling sites and nine restoration project sites. Indices were then calculated for each of the 4080 windows (see Methods for details on the type of indices and their calculation).

Fig. 3. Scatter plots showing the relationships between project investments of different restoration project categories and either of (a-f) removal quantities for the different nutrients (ΔrNH_4^+-N, ΔrTN, ΔrTP) (the marginal boxplots in a-f show the investment distribution on different restorations) and response ratio (g-l) of different restoration project categories,: (a-c) restoration measures for pollution source (Spearman rank Rs = 0.62, 0.58, 0.55, $p < 0.001$) and pollution sink (Rs = 0.79, 0.85, 0.82, $p < 0.001$); (d-f) three main categories of restoration measures for pollution source, which include restoration measures for industry waste water (Rs = 0.92, 0.95, 0.94, $p < 0.001$), agricultural (Rs = 0.89, 0.89, 0.89, $p < 0.001$) and sanitary (Rs = 0.70, 0.68, 0.69, $p <$

0.001) sewage. Marginal effects of investment of different restoration project categories on each nutrient (ΔrNH_4^+-N, ΔrTN and ΔrTP): (g-i) restoration measures for pollution source and sink; (j-l) three main categories of restoration measures for pollution source, which include restoration measures for industry waste water, agricultural and sanitary sewage. GLMM or LMM regression lines are given where a correlation was significant ($p < 0.05$). The initial unit of investment is 10^5 RMB, and was $\log_{10}$ transformed before inclusion in models.

Fig. 4. Response ratios of NH_4^+-N, TN, TP and taxonomic richness (Richness), Shannon diversity, percent Oligochaeta, FBI of benthic macroinvertebrate in restored (2017) compared with degraded ecosystems (2007) (a, b). All response ratios differed significantly from zero (Wilcoxon signed rank tests, $p < 0.001$) except for Hilsenhoff FBI. The mean and SD are given alongside the overall data distribution for each metric. (c) The partition of temporal total dissimilarity (β_{SOR}—solid black line) into nested resultant dissimilarity (β_{SNE} — solid grey line) and turnover (β_{SIM} —dashed lines) for beta diversity of benthic macroinvertebrates in Yixing from 2007 to 2017.

Fig. 5. (a) Location of different restoration project sites by category (n = 420, projects of garbage disposal and drinking water treatment were not included in the analysis) in Yixing from 2007 to 2017. (b, c) Maps showing the spatial distribution of total (β_{SOR}) and nested (β_{SIM}) dissimilarity for beta diversity of benthic macroinvertebrates.

Fig. 6. NMDS biplots showing changes in community composition of benthic invertebrates among restoration projects between their initial degraded (2007) and final restored (2017) states in the Yixing river network with indication of (a) the individual taxa (denoted by S) and (b) sampling sites (denoted by the numbers). An outlier was removed from this figure because it had only one scare species in 2007 and had 16 species in 2017. S1, *Limnodrilus hoffmeisteri*; S2, *Bellamya aeruginosa*; S3, *Branchiura sowerbyi*; S4, *Corbicula fluminea*; S5, *Parafossarulus eximius*; S6, *Nephtys oligobranchia*; S7, *Parafossarulus striatulus*; S8, *Neocaridina denticulata denticulata*; S9, *Semisulcospira cancelata*; S10, *Gammarus* sp.; S11, *Exopalaemon modestus*; S12, *Alocinma longicornis*; S13, *Branchiodrilus hortensis*; S14, *Cricotopus bicinctus*; S15, *Limnoperna fortunei*; S16, *Procladius* sp.; S17, *Physa* sp.; S18, *Tanypus chinensis*; S19, *Radix swinhoei*; S20, *Ceratopsyche* sp.; S21, *Heptagenia* sp.; S22, *Chironomus plumosus*; S23, *Ploypedilum scalaenum*; S24, *Propsilocerus akamusi*; S25, *Acuticosta chinensis*; S26, *Anodonta woodiana pacifica*; S27, *Anodonta woodiana elliptica*; S28, *Glossiphonia* sp.; S29, *Dicrotendipus lobifer*; S30, *Semisulcospira libertina*; S31, *Stenothyra glabra*; S32, *Unio douglasiae*; S33, *Glossiphonia complanata*; S34, *Glyptotendipes tokunagai*; S35, *Nemertea* sp.; S36, *Microchironomus tabarui*; S37, *Aulodrilus* sp.; S38, *Nereis japonica;* S39, *Tabanus* sp.; S40, *Macrobrachium nipponense*; S41, *Stictochironomus* sp.; S42, *Cricotopus sylvestris*; S43, *Tanytarsus*

chinyensis; S44, *Laccophilus* sp.; S45, *Rhaphium* sp.; S46, *Glyptotendipes pallens*; S47, *Lamelligomphus* sp.; S48, *Helobdella fusca*; S49, *Glossiphonia lata*; S50, *Aciagrion* sp.; S51, *Baetis* sp.; S52, *Harnischia fuscimana*; S53, *Ephemera orientalis*; S54, *Cricotopus vierriensis*; S55, *Erpobdella octoculata*; S56, *Hippeutis cantori*; S57, *Glyptotendipes* sp.; S58, *Polypedilum nubeculosum*; S59, *Cricotopus trifascia Edwards*; S60, *Orientogomphus* sp.; S61, *Burmagomphus* sp.; S62, *Tachaea chinensis*; S63, *Lestidae* sp.; S64, *Cryptochironomus* sp.; S65, *Cercion* sp.; S66, *Calopteryx* sp.; S67, *Holorusia* sp.; S68, *Brachythemis* sp..

Fig. 7. Interaction effect between the response ratio of impervious surface area (rISA) and investments of different restoration project categories on the response ratio of NH_4^+-N, TN, TP in the natural waterbody in Yixing. Figures are given when interaction effect was significant ($P < 0.05$).

Table legends

Table 1. Evaluation of removal quantity of nutrients include NH_4^+-N, TN and TP.

Table 2. Results of GLMM and LMM for abiotic environmental indices (NH_4^+-N, TN, TP), the investments of different restoration project categories and the intensity of urbanization (the response ratio of impervious surface area (rISA), covariate) on biological parameters (taxonomic richness, Shannon diversity, % Oligochaeta, β_{SOR}). Variables are given when a correlation was significant ($P < 0.05$). Data in grey show positive correlations. s_Agric_inv, investment targeting agricultural sewage; s_san_inv, investment targeting sanitary sewage; s_ind_inv, investment targeting industry waste water; sinkPinvstm, investment targeting pollution sink.