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# PROTOCOL TO DETECT AND ASSESS POLLINATION DEFICITS IN CROPS: A HANDBOOK FOR ITS USE





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# CONTENTS

vii	Preface
1	Introduction
5	<b>SECTION 1. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</b>
11	<b>SECTION 2. PROTOCOL OBJECTIVE AND STRUCTURE</b>
13	<b>SECTION 3. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND STUDY FIELD SELECTION</b>
19	<b>SECTION 4. TREATMENTS TO VARY THE LEVEL OF POLLINATION SERVICE</b>
19	4.A Pollinator (bee) supplementation
22	4.B Landscape context
26	4.C Combined treatment – Introduced pollinators and landscape context
29	<b>SECTION 5. LAYOUT OF EXPERIMENTAL SITES</b>
31	<b>SECTION 6. POLLINATOR DEPENDENT VARIABLES AND DATA COLLECTION</b>
32	6.A Data collection for measuring pollinator density
38	6.B Data collection for measuring pollinator diversity
41	6.C Data collection for covariables
43	<b>SECTION 7. PRODUCTION DEPENDENT VARIABLES AND SAMPLING UNITS</b>
43	<b>7.A. Agronomic yield</b>
44	7.A.1 Individual plants
44	7.A.2 Recording plot
45	7.A.3 Whole study field
47	<b>7.B Economic yield</b>
50	<b>SECTION 8. STATISTICAL ANALYSES</b>
51	<b>SECTION 9. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS</b>
53	References
57	Annexes



## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLE

3	<b>Figure 1.1</b>	Participants in the FAO-sponsored expert workshop on <i>assessing pollination deficits in crops</i>
3	<b>Figure 1.2</b>	Optimal pollination levels – within the resource allocation pattern of the crop
5	<b>Figure 1.3</b>	Pollination deficit in relation with optimum pollination level
6	<b>Figure 1.4</b>	Optimum pollination of runner beans in Kenya
7	<b>Figure 1.5</b>	Impact of a significant increase in the number of insect visitors to coffee crops in Latin America
7	<b>Figure 1.6</b>	Lack of pollen production in strawberry
8	<b>Figure 1.7</b>	Bouquet of pollinizer flowers in pear orchard
9	<b>Figure 1.8</b>	Crop pollination deficit: strawberries in Kenya
9	<b>Figure 1.9</b>	Crop pollination deficit as defined by market standards
10	<b>Figure 1.10</b>	Crops cultivated less because of poor pollination
12	<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Relationship between pollination level and crop yield
13	<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Hierarchy of location terminology used in this handbook
14	<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Hypothetical placement of study fields with a completely randomized design using two distances to natural habitat as treatment
15	<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Hypothetical placement of study fields in a factorial design with two levels of two treatments
16	<b>Figure 3.4</b>	Pollinator fronts
17	<b>Figure 3.5</b>	Locating paired plots in a landscape
18	<b>Figure 3.6</b>	Home garden as study field
20	<b>Figure 4.1</b>	Pollinator supplementation
20	<b>Figure 4.2</b>	Risks of introduction of foreign pollinators
22	<b>Figure 4.3</b>	Landscape context
23	<b>Figure 4.4</b>	Unmanaged pollinators
25	<b>Figure 4.5</b>	Using legislated conservation practices as a basis for experimental design
26	<b>Figure 4.6</b>	Combinatorial treatments
27	<b>Figure 4.7</b>	Combining treatments to create a pollinator front
30	<b>Figure 5.1</b>	Location of the experimental site for data collection in a standard field planted with rows
30	<b>Figure 5.2</b>	Layout of the experimental site in relation to the size of the study field
33	<b>Figure 6.1</b>	Sampling layout to measure pollinator abundance and diversity
34	<b>Figure 6.2</b>	Layout of sampling areas to measure pollinator density and diversity in small field with a broadcast-sown crop (e.g., mustard/rape or buckwheat)
35	<b>Figure 6.3</b>	Sampling layout to measure pollinator abundance & diversity in an orchard without pollinizer trees
36	<b>Figure 6.4</b>	Methodology for recording pollinator density
37	<b>Table 6.1</b>	Choices of floral unit for measuring pollinator density
38	<b>Figure 6.5</b>	Collecting pollinators with a sweep net
40	<b>Figure 6.6</b>	Insect collecting and labeling
46	<b>Figure 7.1</b>	Layout of yield plots in field planted with row crop
46	<b>Figure 7.2</b>	Layout of yield plots in small field with a broadcast-sown crop (e.g. mustard/rape or buckwheat)
48	<b>Figure 7.3</b>	Layout of yield plots in an orchard without pollinizer tree
48	<b>Figure 7.4</b>	Impact of pollination level on strawberry quality
49	<b>Figure 7.5</b>	Impact of pollination level on market value



## LIST OF ANNEXES

- |    |                 |   |
|----|-----------------|---|
| 57 | <b>Annex 1</b>  | Data sheet to record main characteristics of study field  |
| 58 | <b>Annex 2</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator density on plots of an herbaceous crop  |
| 59 | <b>Annex 3</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator density on orchard trees in plots located along a gradient of distances to pollinator front   |
| 60 | <b>Annex 4</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator density on plots in an orchard with pollenizer plants   |
| 61 | <b>Annex 5</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator density in the absence of plots   |
| 62 | <b>Annex 6</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator diversity in plots of an herbaceous crop  |
| 63 | <b>Annex 7</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator diversity on plots in an orchard with pollenizer plants                                       |
| 64 | <b>Annex 8</b>  | Data sheet to record pollinator diversity on orchard trees in plots located along a gradient of distances to pollinator front |
| 65 | <b>Annex 9</b>  | Data sheet to record flower density on plots of an herbaceous crop  |
| 66 | <b>Annex 10</b> | Data sheet to record flowering phenology in an orchard crop with pollenizer tree  |
| 67 | <b>Annex 11</b> | Data sheet to record yield on plots of an herbaceous crop planted in rows and in monoculture                                  |
| 68 | <b>Annex 12</b> | Data sheet to record yield of individual plants of an herbaceous crop on plots with mixed planting                            |
| 69 | <b>Annex 13</b> | Data sheet to record yield on plots of an orchard crop  |
| 70 | <b>Annex 14</b> | Data sheet to record yield on orchard trees in plots located along a gradient of distances to pollinator front                |





# PREFACE

In agro-ecosystems, pollinators are essential for orchard, oilseed crop, horticultural and forage production, as well as the production of seed for many root and fibre crops. Pollinators such as bees, birds and bats affect 35 percent of the world's crop production, increasing outputs of 87 of the leading food crops worldwide, plus many plant-derived medicines in the world's pharmacies.

Just as the agricultural community is taking stock of the contribution of pollination to crop production, populations of managed pollinators (the Western honey bee *Apis mellifera*, the Eastern honey bee *Apis cerana*, and their Asian relatives) are experiencing new and poorly understood threats. Wild pollinators in agricultural landscapes can provide important pollination services and serve also as a critical form of insurance against the risks of pests and diseases amongst managed pollinators.

Within the context of its lead role in the implementation of the Initiative for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Pollinators (also known as the International Pollinators Initiative-IPI) of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity adopted in 2000 (COP decision V/5, Section II), FAO has established a "Global Action on Pollination Services for Sustainable Agriculture". FAO has also developed a global project, supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) entitled "Conservation and management of pollinators for sustainable agriculture, through an ecosystem approach". Seven countries (Brazil, Ghana, India, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan and South Africa) have worked together with FAO to identify and carry out targeted activities that can address threats to pollinators in agricultural landscapes. The outcomes of the global project are expected to expand global understanding, capacity and awareness of the conservation and sustainable use of pollinators for agriculture.



As a contribution to the IPI, FAO and its partners have collaborated with INRA (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, a public research body of the French government) to develop a protocol for assessing and detecting if a crop production system is suffering a pollination deficit. Field testing and adaptation of the protocol for the variable cropping systems in different countries was made possible through a grant from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on the “Development of Tools and Methods for Conservation and Management of Pollination Services for Sustainable Agriculture”, in 2009 and 2010. This document thus presents a handbook for the application of the protocol, outlining the underlying concepts, the hypothesis to be tested, and the modification and application of the protocol to a variety of circumstances in developing countries, such as small fields, home gardens, and high environmental variability. As the protocol is applied, FAO and its partners will be able to provide information on the results of detecting and assessing levels of pollination deficit in crops important for nutrition and food security around the world.

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# INTRODUCTION

The following describes a protocol to be applied to focal crops at the farm scale level to (i) detect and assess pollination deficits in field situations in a standard and statistically testable way; and (ii) draw management conclusions from the proposed experiment for possible action to eliminate or at least reduce these deficits. It can also be used simply to assess pollinator density and diversity on a focal crop for comparison purposes among different sites.

Pollination is the transfer of pollen from the producing anthers to the receptive stigma and it is an essential preliminary step for the sexual reproduction of flowering plants. Pollination level can be precisely measured as the number of compatible and viable pollen grains that reach a stigma during the effective pollination period, and it is therefore directly related to yield for all crops in which the output is a product of sexual reproduction. Indeed, pollination management should be regarded as a production factor in its own right for all these crops as it can affect the agronomic yield and its many components such as fruit set and seed set, fruit quality (e.g. size, aspect, sugar content, flavor and nutritional content), seed quality (e.g. germination rate, oil content), and other characteristics such as earliness and uniformity of output (e.g. rape *Brassica napus* L.: Lerin 1982, Sabbahi *et al.* 2006), market value and profitability, and finally the environmental and societal impacts of a crop (McGregor 1976; Free 1993).

FAO facilitates and coordinates the International Initiative for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Pollinators (IPI: <http://www.internationalpollinatorsinitiative.org/>), which was established in 2000 by the Fifth Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity. One of the objectives of the IPI is to promote the conservation and the restoration and sustainable use of pollinator diversity in agriculture and related ecosystems based upon the four elements of the IPI Plan of Action: assessment, adaptive management, capacity building, and mainstreaming. It is in this context that FAO commissioned in 2008 a literature review on



the topic of detecting and assessing pollination deficit in crops. This review study then served as background for an expert workshop to identify methods for detection and assessment of pollination deficit in crops and develop a practical yet efficient protocol to assess such deficits. This FAO-sponsored workshop was held on 3-5 April 2008 nearby Avignon, France, under the auspices of INRA (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique) with 13 participants from around the world (Figure 1.1).

The workshop considered two perspectives that establish the context for a focus on pollination deficits and human livelihoods: (i) from a pollinator perspective, pollination crises appear increasingly likely, as evidence of pollinator declines become more and more apparent in numerous locations; and (ii) from a plant perspective, there are many potential drivers of increasing pollination deficits such as lack of compatible pollen for self-incompatible and dioecious species, and reduced pollen production and/or poor pollen quality due to genotype and its interaction with nutrient status, water deficits or other aspects of growing conditions. Climate change may be contributing to pollination deficit by affecting the phenology of both the plant and its pollinators in different ways so as to lead to asynchrony, or reducing the durations of pollinator activity and plant flowering.

The workshop then examined the definitions, concepts and theory of pollination deficits and pollen limitation in broad terms. The context of 'optimal pollination' from a plant perspective (fitness) is clearly different from that of a farmer's perspective (agronomic or economic yield), and also from the perspective of sustainable development (which may be more oriented toward long-term sustainability and reliability depending on the area ; Figure 1.2). With this background, the workshop participants agreed on the following definition: **Crop pollination deficit refers to inadequate pollen receipt that limits agricultural output.** The review of the methods used to assess pollination deficit in crops was based on 67 papers. The synthesis of this large array of case studies was conducted along 3 axes: (i) the dependent variable(s) used to assess pollination deficit (e.g. number of pollen tubes per style or pollen grains per stigma, fruit set, seed set, fruit characteristics, or seeds characteristics); (ii) the experimental unit used in the assay (a sample of flowers, of branches, a whole plant, a plot or a whole field or larger area); and (iii) the demand of the crop, that is the intrinsic pollination need for optimal field productivity based upon the sexual reproductive biology and physiology of the crop, the temporal scale of the demand (duration of flowering: determinate versus undeterminate species), the spatial scale of the demand (field size and landscape pattern), and the production strategy (e.g. off-season production of covered crops). The main methodological problems and possible improvements

Figure 1.1

**PARTICIPANTS IN THE FAO-SPONSORED EXPERT WORKSHOP ON ASSESSING POLLINATION DEFICITS IN CROPS**



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From left to right: Jim Cane (USDA, Logan, Utah, USA), Resham Bahadur Thapa (Institute for Agriculture and Animal Sciences, Chitwan, Nepal), Paulo Eugênio Oliveira (Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, Brazil), Jérôme Vandame (INRA Avignon, France), Wanja Kinuthia (National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya), Barbara Gemmill-Herren (FAO Rome, Italy), Simon Potts (University of Reading, UK), Bernard Vaissière (INRA Avignon, France), Linda Collette (FAO Rome, Italy), Ruan Veldtman (South African Biodiversity Institute, Cape Town, South Africa), Breno Freitas (Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, Brazil), Natacha Chacoff (Centro Regional de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas, Mendoza, Argentina).

Figure 1.2

**OPTIMAL POLLINATION LEVELS - WITHIN THE RESOURCE ALLOCATION PATTERNS OF THE CROP**

Cocoa (*Theobroma cacao* L.) flowers, and the subsequent pods, are borne on the trunk of the cocoa tree. On average, only about 5 percent of flowers on a cocoa tree will give rise to a mature pod (Free 1994). In a study where all the flowers on a cocoa tree were hand-pollinated, the yield of the tree exceeded the yields of all other cocoa trees; but the tree died the next year (Falque *et al.* 1996)! It is most often the case that optimal yields are considerably less than 100 percent fruit or seed set, and a certain percentage of flowers abort.



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in assessing pollination deficits were then reviewed with the clear goal to develop a practical ready-to-use protocol that could be readily implemented to detect and assess pollination deficits for the major crops in the seven countries that are taking part in the GEF/UNEP/FAO project on the “Conservation and Management of Pollinators for Sustainable Agriculture through an Ecosystem Approach” (Brazil, Ghana, India, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan and South Africa). It is this protocol that has been refined, detailed and improved in concert with stakeholders and end-users that is presented here.