

PERSPECTIVE OPEN ACCESS

An Urgent Call for the Coordinated Monitoring of European Freshwater Mussels

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ABSTRACT

Large freshwater mussels, also known as naiads, are important organisms that provide crucial ecosystem functions and services but are experiencing significant declines across Europe. To ensure effective conservation, it is essential to have a well-coordinated monitoring scheme. Therefore, we analyzed the functioning of naiad monitoring systems in 31 European countries. Monitoring of naiad populations is not coordinated in Europe, is largely unrelated to monitoring of water quality or host fish species, and receives irregular funding. Raw data on monitored species are typically unavailable, which hampers independent and/or large-scale analyses. The quality of EU monitoring schemes according to Article 17 of the Habitats Directive is poor for the most threatened species. To improve this, a new scheme is recommended with raw data stored in publicly available repositories to enable instant analysis and rapid, appropriate, evidence-based responses that can support the conservation of this imperilled taxon.

1 | Introduction

In a recent study, Moersberger et al. (2024) found that while 66% of biodiversity monitoring schemes across Europe targeted terrestrial systems, just 24% considered freshwaters. Freshwater ecosystems are recognized as especially vulnerable in Europe due to agricultural and land use pressures, hydromorphological alterations, water extraction, biological invasions, and climate change (Reid et al. 2019). Simaika et al. (2024) in a study comprising a total of 67 countries showed that in 14 European countries analyzed there is relatively good harmonization of bioassessment of freshwaters, where indicator taxa are used to make inferences about water quality, but that wider biodiversity monitoring lacks standardization and is rarely undertaken. These authors identified challenges stemming from inconsistent sampling approaches across regions, funding limitations, and inadequate data availability.

The European Union (EU) has established the Natura 2000 network of protected areas, which is the largest coordinated network of nature conservation areas in the world (EEA 2020). This is a key tool for nature conservation in Europe, aimed at halting biodiversity decline and guiding its recovery in the whole EU (European Commission 2023). However, the latest reports on the state of nature in the EU (EEA 2020) indicate that inadequate and insufficient monitoring is the primary barrier to effective conservation. Much of the information reported by member states under the Habitats Directive (Article 17, 92/43/EEC), that is, 6-year reporting on the conservation status and trends of protected habitats and species, is based only on partial surveys, on expert judgments or is still unknown (DG Environment 2017). To set realistic goals to conserve biodiversity and to draw up future national restoration plans, it is important to design and implement effective, timely, and coherent monitoring systems not only in EU but also throughout the European continent.

Here, we investigated the monitoring effort of the large freshwater mussels (*Bivalvia*, *Unionida*; hereafter, naiads) across Europe. Naiads can dominate the benthic biomass of rivers and lakes and provide important ecosystem functions and services (Zieritz et al. 2022). Sensitive to water pollution, naiads are also considered sentinels of water quality (Vereycken and Aldridge 2023). Naiads are experiencing dramatic declines at the regional (Nogueira et al. 2021a; Ollard and Aldridge 2023; da Silva et al. 2023) and global (Lopes-Lima et al. 2018) scales and require urgent conservation measures (Sousa et al. 2023). Moreover, the growing frequency

of unexplained mass mortality events is raising considerable concern (Cossey et al. 2025). In some situations, the causes of these declines are clear. For instance, in recent years, a number of Mediterranean rivers, which support significant populations of some of Europe's rarest naiad species (Supporting Information S1), have experienced reduced and intermittent flows, leading to mass mortalities (e.g., Sousa et al. 2018). However, the drivers of mussel declines are in general still poorly understood (Aldridge et al. 2023).

To facilitate conservation of naiads in Europe, an effective monitoring scheme is a fundamental prerequisite for understanding patterns of population change and for helping to identify the factors contributing to their declines (Strayer 2024). We undertook a comprehensive Europe-wide review of existing monitoring programs for naiads—defined here as any national monitoring scheme designed to detect changes in abundance and habitat conditions at the country scale, particularly in relation to Article 17 of the Habitats Directive—to characterize the current state of monitoring practice and to generate an evidence base for effective informed management and conservation of this imperilled taxon.

2 | Current Status of Naiad Monitoring in Europe

In early 2023, the team of scientists appointed by COST countries to the Management Committee of the scientific network CON-FREMU ("Conservation of freshwater mussels: A pan-European approach," CA18239) collected information on naiads and their protection and monitoring in 31 European countries (Figure 1). Data were collated on which naiad species were monitored, at what frequency, which methodology was used and who was responsible for implementing the monitoring. The team members reached out to their wider national network, including coordinators of national freshwater monitoring schemes, to ensure that information on monitoring schemes was as comprehensive as possible. As naiad reproduction in Europe relies on an obligatory parasitic stage on fish (Modesto et al. 2018), information on whether any monitoring of fish species was linked with the monitoring of naiads was also collected. For the team members belonging to countries inside the EU, being specialists in naiad ecology and conservation, information about the monitoring quality level in relation to Article 17 of the European Union's Habitats Directive (EU 92/43/EEC) was retrieved.

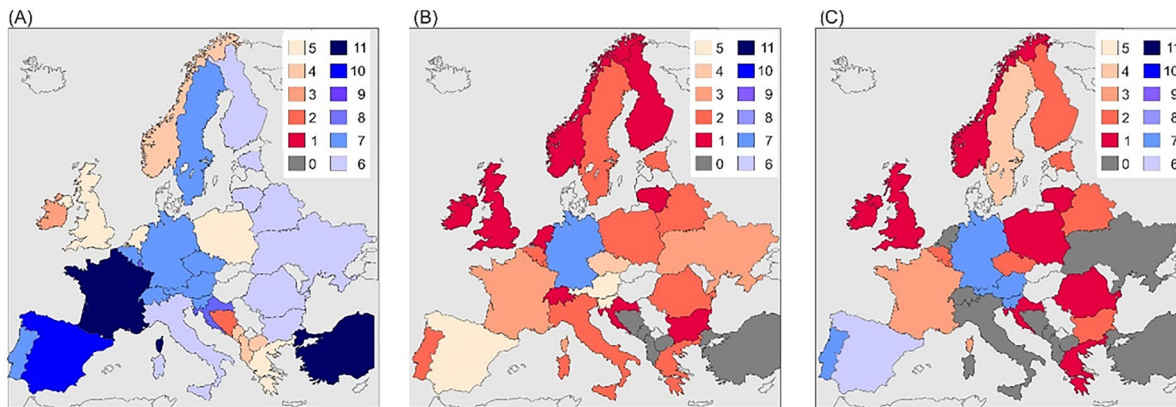


FIGURE 1 | Number of naiad species in the studied countries: (A) identified so far, (B) protected, (C) monitored. No data were available for countries with no coloring.

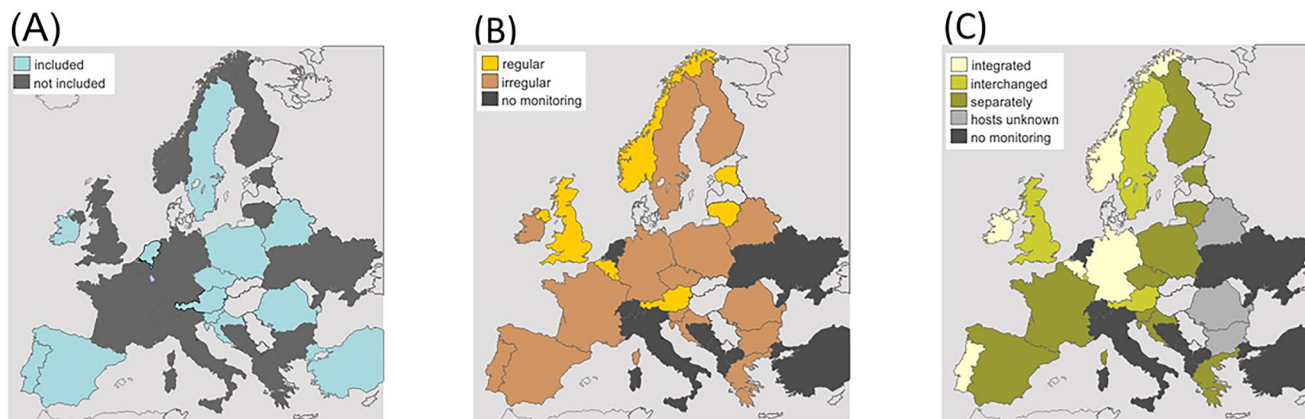


FIGURE 2 | National approaches to naiad monitoring in Europe: (A) Inclusion of naiads as bioindicators in official water quality monitoring; (B) regularity of funding for naiad monitoring; (C) link between naiad and host fish monitoring: monitoring fully integrated, conducted separately with data sharing, conducted independently without coordination, or not possible due to unknown host species. No data were available for countries with no coloring.

Although 23 species of naiads were recognized at the time of the study with a mean of 6 (maximum 11) species per country, only a few of these were protected (on average 2, maximum 7 per country) or monitored (on average 2 per country, maximum 7). Spain and Portugal have more species monitored than are protected (Figure 1). There were no data for some countries (Denmark, Latvia) or from important global biodiversity hot-spots such as the Balkans. No country currently considers protection and/or monitoring of especially large densities of naiads (e.g., shoals of over 1000 ind. per 1 m of the channel length), irrespective of species, despite their particularly important contribution toward ecosystem services in such settings.

Water quality monitoring schemes that include naiads as water quality indicators were being implemented in 15 countries (Figure 2A). However, sampling methodologies used for general invertebrate evaluation in water quality monitoring systems are not suitable for naiads (Strayer and Smith 2003). For example, a standard “kick-net” sample used in multi-habitat sampling (MHS; EN 16150:2012) is unlikely to collect naiad species that anchor firmly into the sediment and is also inappropriate for detecting naiads that may be at relatively low densities, patchily

distributed, or present in water deeper than a hand net can sample.

Naiads are not explicitly listed among the biological quality elements (BQE) under the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). They are implicitly included within the “benthic invertebrate fauna” but are not a defined indicator group (e.g., like *Daphnia* spp.). However, WFD monitoring contains BQE important for naiads conservation (fish and macrophytes) and WFD methodology (based on standards CEN EN 14011 and CEN EN 14184, respectively) has appropriate spatial span and sampling protocols to provide information important for naiads conservation. However, raw fish and macrophyte data are collected nationally but only indices are reported to the EU level. The problem also lies in the spatial matching of fish and macrophytes WFD monitoring to naiad populations.

The analyses of the methods of naiad monitoring revealed a wide variety of approaches (Supporting Information S2), which were largely implemented at a national level and with no coordination between countries. Where monitoring should be legally enforced (21 EU countries), it was found to be conducted by state admin-

istrations in 16 countries. Among these, it was supported by local authorities in six cases and supported by academic institutions in four. In the rest of the EU countries, monitoring was performed by NGOs, academic institutions, or local authorities. In most of the studied countries, monitoring occurred intermittently (contingent on availability of funding, Figure 2B) even when administered by the government. Only in six countries was monitoring regular, and even then, it was typically targeted at only a small number of EU priority species. Seven non-EU member states do not monitor naiads (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine). In Italy, the data underpinning the Article 17 reports were repeatedly the same as those used in previous reporting cycles, whereas in the Netherlands, it is not conducted due to the extirpation of all EU-protected naiad species. In 11 countries, monitoring schemes aim to be representative of the whole country, while elsewhere targeted populations are surveyed (regional, local, LIFE projects). Only five countries monitored naiads together with fish; in four additional countries, these animals were monitored independently, but data are shared so that host fish status can be identified (Figure 2C).

In EU countries, monitoring of the pearl mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera* and the thick-shelled river mussel *Unio crassus* has been the primary focus, as both mussels are safeguarded under the Habitats Directive. Nevertheless, whereas *M. margaritifera* has been extensively monitored (15 countries), in the case of *U. crassus*, only a subset of populations have routinely been monitored in a country (e.g., Germany, Sweden) and sometimes in longer time intervals than *M. margaritifera*, depending on funding (e.g., Finland). While *M. margaritifera* is unlikely to co-occur with other naiads, *U. crassus* can often occur in sympatry with other mussel species, and so additional data on wider population trends could be collected without much additional effort. These two species have broad ranges in Europe but other critically endangered species with very small ranges and unknown population trends (mostly related to Mediterranean biodiversity hot-spot; see Supporting Information S1) are being monitored only occasionally or not at all (e.g., *Microcondylea bonelli*, *Unio elongatulus*, *Unio tumidiformis*).

Recent advances in naiad phylogeny, such as the *U. crassus* complex now split into 12 species (Lopes-Lima et al. 2024), highlight the need to integrate genetic and phylogeographic data into future monitoring. Newly recognized species within this complex remain protected and monitored under the legal umbrella of *U. crassus*, whereas taxa derived from non-protected lineages, although often rare (e.g., *Anodonta exulcerata*), lack this status. Such range-restricted species (Supporting Information S1) should be explicitly incorporated into legal frameworks to enable their inclusion in national monitoring and conservation programs.

Environmental DNA (eDNA) metabarcoding using next-generation sequencing (NGS; Rees et al. 2014) has become an increasingly common tool, enabling the simultaneous detection of many species of mussels from a single water sample, including cryptic and rare species. It offers synergies with other monitoring objectives and schemes, for example, will allow assessment of the composition of local fish communities and potential host species, as well as the detection of invasive species and

pathogens—provided that appropriate reference databases are available. It also offers the possibility of the semi-quantitative evaluation of the biomass of the studied species. Although highly useful for presence–absence data, eDNA cannot replace classical monitoring, as it does not provide key conservation information such as population demography (Stoeckle et al. 2016).

Even if quantitative monitoring has been carried out by EU member states, the data have not been made publicly available. The only available data are those published on EC websites using the standard system of four levels of species conservation status: favorable (FV), insufficient (U1), bad (U2), and unknown (XX) (Figure 3A). This system may indicate a general decline but provides no data for independent analyses. On the other hand, some member states do possess quantitative data: Figure 3B, for example, shows density data for *U. crassus* at 38 monitored sites in 14 rivers in Poland (details in Zajac 2022), and a significant decreasing trend has been found at all the monitored sites except one (decline caused by bridge construction and subsequent recovery). This kind of quantitative information cannot be deduced from the generalized EU data (Figure 3A).

The EU defines four quality levels for monitoring, based on Art. 17 of the Habitat Directive: (1) complete survey or statistically robust estimate, (2) extrapolation from limited data, (3) based on expert opinion with few data, (4) insufficient or no data (DG Environment 2017). Despite the obligation to maintain the favorable conservation status of species under the Natura 2000 system in the EU member states, many countries have made little or no monitoring effort (evaluation ranks of such effort are shown in Figure 3C). Moreover, those countries with poor monitoring systems often harbor the most endangered naiad species, as is the case with the Mediterranean biodiversity hot-spot (Supporting Information S1) where species such as *Unio vicarius* and *A. exulcerata* have very restricted ranges, occur within glacial refugia, or are undergoing rapid population declines, like *M. bonelli* and *U. tumidiformis*.

3 | Recommendations for Future Naiad Monitoring in Europe

Based on the above review of current monitoring efforts across Europe, we highlight the need to move toward a more harmonized approach to naiad monitoring, in order to improve documentation of population trends and support the identification of potential drivers of change (Strayer 2024). Given the importance of naiads as sentinels of water quality (Vereycken and Aldridge 2023) and their role in ecosystem services (Zieritz et al. 2022), we recommend inclusion of common species alongside those that are rare or threatened.

While there is a core set of parameters that should be included in any monitoring scheme (Supporting Information S2), protocols cannot be prescriptive because specific approaches need to be tailored to particular locations, depending on the species present, the spatial distributions and densities of naiads, and the resources available (Foxfoot et al. 2025). A detailed standard has been published for monitoring *M. margaritifera* across Europe (CEN EN 16 859, Boon et al. 2019), and a second CEN standard for all remaining naiads is currently under vote. It is considered

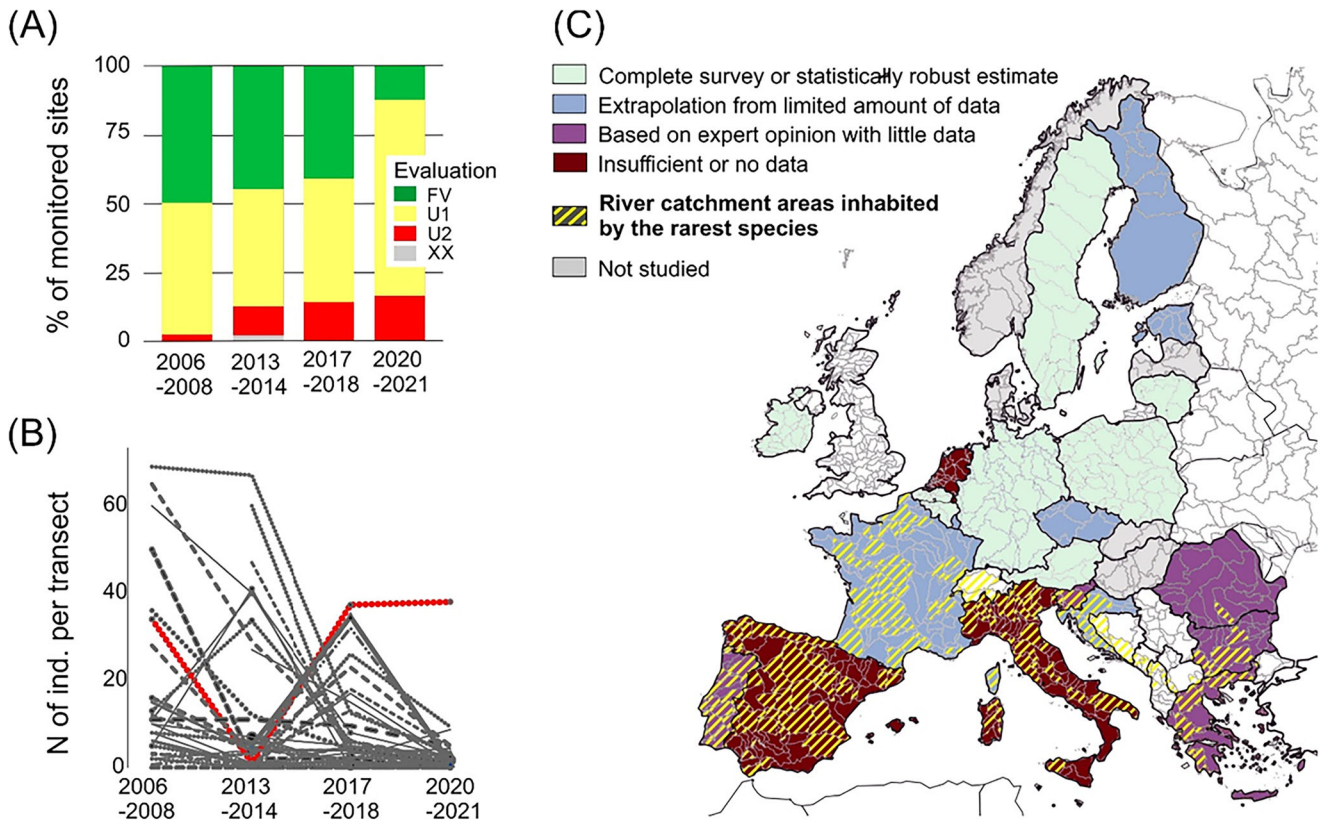


FIGURE 3 | Temporal and spatial patterns in the monitoring of threatened naiad species in the EU: (A) results of monitoring of *U. crassus* in Poland in four discrete periods from 2006 to 2021, presented in the form published on EC websites using four levels of species conservation status—favorable (FV), insufficient (U1), bad (U2), and unknown (XX). (B) Quantitative data from the governmental system of monitoring, documenting the decline in density of *U. crassus* at 38 monitoring sites in 14 rivers in Poland for the same four discrete periods (details in Zajac 2022). These data show actual abundances and their fluctuations and patterns and provide a more reliable basis for analysis than panel A. The red line indicates the only site where the density of *U. crassus* increased. (C) The quality of naiad monitoring according to Art. 17 of the Habitat Directive in EU member states: the color refers to the standard of monitoring quality, evaluated by the authors of this paper, and the yellow hatching indicates the catchment areas inhabited by the most threatened naiad species (see Supporting Information S1).

that in order to monitor all species to the levels required will need substantially more Europe-wide funding than is currently available. An effective monitoring system should be sufficiently quantitative and repeatable such that temporal and spatial patterns can be tracked (Strayer and Smith 2003). Ideally, monitoring of fish host populations and water quality should also be integrated into the same system (Table 1). Raw data, once state-level monitoring methodologies are harmonized, should be collated in a central database and made available in public repositories to enable further external, independent analysis.

A major challenge to the co-ordinated monitoring of European naiads is funding. Considering that some species inhabiting the small catchments in the Mediterranean biodiversity hot-spot may die out in just one season during drought, irregular frequency of monitoring is surely insufficient for the conservation of these species. If member states do not monitor these species, external scientific bodies should do so with financial support from the EU.

Quantitative field research is a more reliable and accurate, though more expensive, method for understanding population patterns and trajectories than relying on mere expert opinion. In Poland, a single monitoring cycle for all Habitats Directive protected species ($N = 88$) meets the highest reliability level required under

Art. 17 of the Directive but costs 4.5 million euros. Such a sum may represent a substantial financial burden for low-income countries with large areas and many species requiring monitoring. External EU funding for Natura 2000 monitoring is a possible solution, in line with the EU's subsidiarity principle. This would also allow the EU to assess the quality of monitoring and, if need be, to reject poor-quality reports from member states.

The quality of monitoring, and its enforcement and implementation, remains very variable throughout Europe. This concerns not only the methodologies applied but also the criteria adopted by some countries for granting favorable conservation status to particular species. The standard of monitoring in countries where the most threatened species have been found so far is poor (Figure 3C). Some countries lack quantitative criteria for assessing the conservation status of certain species (e.g., *U. crassus* in Finland), even if they do carry out Art. 17 monitoring (e.g., Estonia). The lack of monitoring for naiads is particularly pronounced in parts of Eastern Europe and especially so in many non-EU countries and the Balkans. The United Kingdom is also an outlier within Western Europe with no routine monitoring for naiads and almost complete neglect of the more common species (*Anodonta* spp. and *Unio* spp.) other than through academic research.

TABLE 1 | Challenges and recommendations for the co-ordinated monitoring of European freshwater naiads.

Factors	Challenges	Recommendations
Monitoring design		
Aim	Within the order Unionida, 92% of species are threatened, with no species classified as data deficient (DD; IUCN SSC MSG/CPSG/CONFREMU 2024). Monitoring should focus on documenting and understanding this decline.	Conduct a national inventory of threatened species (consider using eDNA). Focus on key populations of the most threatened species and monitor them quantitatively, including habitat characteristics (Boon et al. 2019). Apply surveillance to less threatened species, and if adverse changes occur, implement quantitative monitoring.
Number of monitoring sites	Countries have limited resources, and so monitoring must be efficiently targeted.	The number of monitored sites should be representative of the country's range and habitats and sufficient to allow statistical inference. In multi-species assemblages, all species present should be monitored. For each species, sites should be selected from different bioregions and catchments, taking into account genetic population structure where known. Additional monitoring should be conducted at threatened sites or where rapid declines or mass mortality events have occurred. Populations of varying densities should be represented; however, sampling results from low-density populations are prone to high error and may be difficult to interpret.
Sampling frequency	Some naiads with a long life span may have irregular recruitment meaning that population trends may be seen only over decades. Other naiads may live for <10 years, meaning that more regular monitoring will be required.	Monitoring frequency should be adjusted according to population abundance to ensure adequate detection of population changes; populations with lower abundance may require more frequent surveys than those with higher abundance. In general, annual monitoring should be conducted for all naiads except for <i>M. margaritifera</i> (living for > 100 years), where monitoring every 6 years has been recommended (Boon et al. 2019). However, it should be undertaken more frequently at sites showing signs of potential threats or suspected population decline. Where estimation of reproductive effort is required, several sampling sessions during the reproductive season may be required.
Seasonality	Sampling can be impeded by seasonal floods, vegetation development or accumulation of leaf debris. Mussels differ in seasonality of reproduction (autumn-winter in <i>Anodonta</i> spp. vs. spring-summer in <i>Unio</i> spp.).	Sampling is typically most efficient during low water periods (summer) or early autumn (detection of juveniles). However, in some habitats (e.g., lowland rivers), development of vegetation (e.g., macrophytes or filamentous algae) or accumulation of vegetation litter may mean that springtime sampling is easiest. Monitoring months should be standardized for each site so that data are comparable between survey events. Where mass mortality events occur, reactive sampling will be desirable.
Habitats sampled	Some naiad species are generalists, living across a broad range of lotic and lentic habitats, while others are typically associated with very narrow microhabitat.	Use reconnaissance surveys to locate where unionids occur before designing your sampling scheme. Sampling effort should be allocated to capture the spatial variance in mussel abundance across all functional habitat types they occupy. However, deeper water habitats in lotic and lentic systems tend to be under-surveyed and should be included if resources allow.
Sampling methods	Population density will vary dramatically between sites and species, ranging from < 1 to > 200 individuals m ⁻² . Ease of sampling of naiads will vary depending on habitat (e.g., water depth, substrate type). Resources (staff availability, budgets) will vary between sites.	It is inappropriate to prescribe a unified monitoring method across all sites and species (Foxfoot et al. 2025), but the same method should be standardized to each site so that comparisons can be made and population trends quantified. As a minimum, replicate timed searches (e.g., by hand sampling) should be used to generate a catch per unit effort (CPUE) with a measure of error. Emerging tools, such as eDNA, may be useful in detecting the presence/absence of a naiad species but cannot provide the quantitative data required for an effective monitoring programme. Minimize handling and sampling-related stress, and avoid disturbing or altering the habitat.

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Factors	Challenges	Recommendations
Data to be collected		
Species included	Focus is currently only on species covered by EU directives (<i>U. crassus</i> , <i>M. margaritifera</i>). Other rare or threatened species are currently overlooked. Some common species providing important ecosystem services should be considered.	All naiad species at a site should be monitored. As a rule, sampling approaches will be equally suited for all naiad species at a site. If not, a sampling method targeted at the rarest/umbrella species is likely to also generate appropriate data on all species.
Population data to be collected	Due to vulnerability of juveniles to stressors (Wang et al. 2017), some apparently healthy populations may have stopped recruiting. Changes in environmental conditions may affect growth rates, maximum sizes, longevity, and reproduction. Changes in host fish populations may affect recruitment.	Evidence of recent recruitment should be noted (juveniles if sediments are sieved, 3- to 5-year-old mussels are visible on the surface), as well as the number of moribund individuals and fresh shells of dead mussels fixed in natural positions in sediments. The abundance and maximum length of individuals should be recorded (at least 30 individuals from random samples for each species). If resources allow, reproductive timing and output should be estimated through inspection of marsupia (Zajac and Zajac 2025); if visible, growth rates from shell annuli should be measured from a subsample of larger individuals, allowing maximum age and length to be inferred.
Habitat data to be collected	Without data on habitat, it is challenging to understand what factors are important for different naiad species and which factors may be important in driving changes to population trends.	Important factors include water level and discharge, which should be measured over timescales that can detect drought and/or spates, water temperature, conductivity, pH, dissolved oxygen, nutrients (TN, TP), alkalinity, total suspended solids, riparian cover, organic content and substrate type (organic content and redox potential are important for some species). Ideally, naiad monitoring sites would be co-ordinated with national water quality monitoring schemes (e.g., Water Framework Directive monitoring or Copernicus Emergency Management Service (drought)) or located close to existing automated water sampling sites.
Other data to be recorded	Naiad recruitment is dependent on availability of host fishes. Some non-native species represent especially harmful threats to naiads.	Where possible, quantitative data on host fish populations (species, abundance, age classes, mass mortality events, relative abundance of host fish species) should be collected sympatrically or retrieved from fish restocking schemes. Surveys should quantify the relative abundance of non-native bivalves, including attached zebra mussels (<i>Dreissena</i> spp.) and the co-occurrence of <i>Corbicula</i> spp. Evidence of any predation (e.g., middens, shell damage) should be recorded. If there is evidence of mass mortality events, additional protocols to determine possible drivers should be followed (Cossey et al. 2025). In the event of a reported mass mortality or habitat deterioration, an immediate survey may be necessary to facilitate reactive conservation measures.
Data storage		
Online databases	Monitoring data are sometimes held privately by consultants or not made available publicly to protect especially vulnerable species. Where data are available, they are often held in non-standardized formats.	Data should be held in a standardized manner and on a database that can be publicly accessed. For sensitive data, access permissions should be made available to verified authorities. All surveys should have a contractual obligation to enter data into the European database following the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles (Wilkinson et al. 2016).

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Factors	Challenges	Recommendations
Data analyses		
Harmonized data	Without harmonization, trends in naiad populations cannot be identified.	Harmonization is a process that allows all datasets to be analyzed collectively. By having a shared purpose for the aims of monitoring, it is possible for different types and quality of data to be used together (e.g., to track population trends, species abundance, size of individuals, evidence of reproduction, recruitment, or mortality).

The European Commission collaborates with member states and is concerned solely with the overall status of a particular species within a country in order to evaluate each government's compliance with EU treaties and directives. However, employment of stricter monitoring methodologies may lead to the detection of a decline in a protected species, which would prompt intervention from the European Commission and result in the need for costly remediation actions. Because of this potential financial burden, member states may be tempted to adopt looser criteria with reference to both the monitoring methodology and the reporting of favorable conservation status of the species.

In our opinion, the very poor awareness of the existence of naiads and their ecological significance among the general public in Europe is one reason why these animals are largely ignored in ecological education and scientific activities. A lack of qualified specialists might explain the poor quality of monitoring (Sirbu 2019), such that some countries may require external assistance (e.g., Denmark, Latvia, or Balkan countries). Developing or improving freshwater mussel education at universities could help to overcome this obstacle. This will cascade to state administration, NGOs, and the private consultancy sector, thereby increasing awareness and ultimately leading to an effective network for mussel monitoring, including intercalibration exercises and the development of monitoring protocols to ensure broad data interoperability (Simaika et al. 2024).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are available within the article or its [Supporting Information](#).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supplementary Materials: conl70040-sup-0001-SupMat.docx **Supplementary Materials:** conl70040-sup-0002-SupMat.docx