Inundation prediction in tropical wetlands

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- Wetlands play a key role in hydrological and biogeochemical cycles and provide enormous value to human society in the form of multiple ecosystem services.

- Despite the importance of these inundated areas, reliable data on their extent remain surprisingly uncertain.

- We took a leading global data product on inundation extents (GIEMS-2, Prigent et al. 2020) and matched it against predictions from a leading global hydrodynamic model (CaMa-Flood, Yamazaki et al. 2011) driven by runoff data generated from the JULES land surface model (Best et al. 2011, Clark et al. 2011) using meteorological data from the earth2Observe project (Matthews et al. 2020).

Globally, wetlands may be divided into groundwater-maintained wetlands, where the effects of groundwater dominate over other processes (e.g. fens), and fluvial inundation-maintained wetlands, where their existence depends primarily on their proximity to a water course that regularly overtops its banks (e.g. igapó and várzea forests). Seasonally-varying levels of inundation are dependent on upstream precipitation and how this translates into these two forms of inflow, as well as on the ambient rates of evaporation and infiltration.

In the Sudd wetland, our model appears to over-predict inundation (Fig. 1, upper). Conversely, in the Pantanal it appears to under-predict (Fig. 1, lower). Can we explain this difference? Is the observed data always correct? We applied simple transformations to our data in order to elucidate the causes of these over- and under-estimations (Fig. 2), and the optimal values we found for each wetland of the three parameters minsense (a minimum level of inundation fraction below which GIEMS always returns zero), maxsense (a maximum inundated fraction above which GIEMS loses its sensitivity) and ffadd (a fraction added to all CaMa-Flood outputs to test for bias) provide a possible explanation for observable differences.

Wetlands exist as a balance between water input and water output (Fig. 3). The optimal parameter value derived in this study ffadd_opt may be understood as an index unique to each wetland that estimates the amount that is missing / underestimated in the overall wetland water balance (Fig. 3). We conclude that for the Pantanal wetland the JULES-CaMa-Flood predictions underestimate river and groundwater inflow (and perhaps also underestimate infiltration and evaporation), whereas in the Sudd the JULES-CaMa-Flood predictions underestimate infiltration and evaporation (and perhaps also overestimate river and groundwater inflow).

Identifying these discrepancies and their causes is important because it allows us to improve our modelling predictive capability and therefore the reliability of the model to predict the hydrology of global wetlands reliably in the future.

Best et al. (2011) GMD 4; Clark et al. (2011) GMD 4; Matthews et al. (2020) HESS 24; Prigent et al. (2020) JGR Atmos 125; Yamazaki et al. (2011) WRR 47.

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