Climate Change Impact Assessment on Watershed Hydrology Using Remote Sensing and GIS-Based Hydrological Modeling Techniques

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Abstract

Watersheds represent basic hydrological units that control surface water and groundwater recharge as well as sediment transport processes across landscapes. Progressively accelerated manifestations of climate change have altered precipitation, temperature and evapo-transpiration pulse dynamics in ways that combine to create a hydrologically stressful watershed environment. This review article provides a comprehensive evaluation of the effects of climate change on watershed hydrology through the integration of multi-source remote sensing datasets with geographically- informative system (GIS)-based analytical processes and physically-based hydrological modelling methodologies.

The research integrates various satellite platforms (Landsat-8/9, Sentinel-2 and MODIS) to assess land use/land cover (LULC) transitions, normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) trends, and land surface temperature (LST) anomalies over a representative mid-sized river basin spanning approximately 4,200 km². Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) digital elevation model data were employed for watershed morphometric analysis and drainage network delineation, while CMIP6 climate projections under SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5 emission scenarios provided the basis for long-term hydrological forecasting through 2080.

The Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) was calibrated and validated against observed streamflow records (Nash–Sutcliffe efficiency = 0.83, $R^2 = 0.87$), and subsequently applied to assess future runoff, sediment yield, and groundwater recharge under evolving climate conditions. Results indicate a projected increase in surface runoff of 18–34% under SSP5-8.5 by mid-century, accompanied by a 22% reduction in baseflow and an estimated 41% escalation in annual soil erosion rates attributable to vegetation loss and altered storm intensities. NDVI analysis reveals a statistically significant declining trend ($p < 0.01$) in vegetative greenness across 31% of the watershed area over the past two decades, correlating with documented increases in drought frequency and land degradation. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for integrated watershed management, emphasizing reforestation, check dam construction, and GIS-enabled real-time monitoring systems as priority adaptation interventions.

Keywords : Remote Sensing; GIS; Watershed Hydrology; Climate Change; SWAT Model; NDVI; LULC Classification; RUSLE; Hydrological Modelling; CMIP6; Soil Erosion; Streamflow Analysis.

I. Introduction

The hydrological cycle is among the most sensitive Earth-system processes to climatic perturbation. Watersheds contiguous land areas that drain to a common outlet represent the organizing spatial unit through which precipitation translates into streamflow, groundwater recharge, and evapotranspiration. Over the past half-century, the accelerating trajectory of anthropogenic climate change has disrupted long-established rainfall-runoff relationships, triggering downstream consequences that range from intensified flooding to protracted drought and aquifer depletion [1]. Understanding these shifts, particularly at the watershed scale, is a prerequisite for designing effective water resource infrastructure and environmental governance frameworks.

Global mean surface temperature has risen by approximately 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels, with regional anomalies considerably exceeding this global average [2]. The hydrological implications are broad-spectrum: warming accelerates snowmelt in mountain catchments, increases evaporative demand from soils and vegetation, intensifies convective precipitation events, and reshapes the seasonal distribution of streamflow [3]. In semi-arid and tropical regions, these shifts

manifest as dual extremes prolonged dry spells punctuated by high-intensity rainfall events a combination particularly damaging to watershed integrity. Runoff coefficients in such environments have been observed to increase by 15–30% over multi-decadal periods, largely attributable to soil crust formation following vegetation dieback [4].

Remote sensing (RS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have transformed the capacity to monitor and analyse watershed dynamics at spatial and temporal scales previously unattainable through conventional field-based approaches. Multispectral satellite platforms, such as Landsat and Sentinel-2, provide decadal-scale archives of land surface change at resolutions spanning 10–30 m, enabling rigorous assessment of vegetation phenology, land use transitions, and surface water extent [5]. The fusion of these observational datasets with hydrological models particularly the Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) and HEC-HMS affords a mechanistic understanding of how observed and projected climate changes propagate through catchment water balances [6].

Despite substantial progress in watershed hydrology research, several critical knowledge gaps persist. Many existing studies analyse climate or land use change in isolation rather than as coupled drivers of hydrological alteration. There is also a persistent underrepresentation of medium-sized river basins in the published literature, with most modelling exercises concentrated on either major continental-scale river systems or small experimental catchments. Furthermore, the integration of climate model projections with physically based hydrological models calibrated against actual remote sensing-derived datasets remains incomplete in many regional assessments [7].

This paper addresses these gaps by presenting a synthesized review and methodological framework for watershed impact assessment that explicitly couples satellite-based land surface monitoring with calibrated hydrological modelling under CMIP6 climate scenarios. The specific objectives of this study are: (i) to characterize multi-decadal LULC transitions and vegetation dynamics using multi-temporal satellite imagery; (ii) to quantify hydrological responses including runoff, sediment yield, and groundwater recharge under historical and projected climate forcings; (iii) to identify spatial hotspots of erosion risk and hydrological vulnerability; and (iv) to propose technically grounded watershed management strategies informed by RS-GIS diagnostics. The scope of the paper is deliberately integrative, bridging remote sensing science, hydrological engineering, and climate change adaptation planning within a unified analytical framework.

II. Literature Review

The intersection of climate change science, watershed hydrology, and geospatial technology has generated an expansive body of literature over the past two decades. Early foundational work by Arnell [8] established that climate warming would alter continental-scale river discharge patterns, with tropical and mid-latitude basins experiencing the most pronounced runoff reductions. This macro-scale perspective was subsequently refined through basin-level investigations that revealed the importance of local land cover conditions in mediating climate signals.

The application of the SWAT model to climate-impacted watersheds has been extensively documented. Gassman et al. [9] provided a landmark review of 250+ SWAT applications globally, demonstrating its robustness across diverse climatic zones and watershed sizes. More recent work by Dhami et al. [10] applied SWAT within a CMIP5 ensemble framework to a Himalayan watershed, projecting a 24% increase in monsoon-season peak discharge by 2060 under RCP 8.5, accompanied by reduced dry-season flows. The coupling of SWAT with GIS-preprocessed DEM and soil datasets using ArcSWAT and QSWAT interfaces has substantially lowered the technical barrier for regional hydrological modelling [11].

Remote sensing contributions to watershed analysis have evolved considerably with the increasing availability of high-resolution, freely accessible satellite data. Rokni et al. [12] demonstrated the utility of Landsat time-series for detecting progressive shoreline recession in a semi-arid Iranian basin over a 28-year period, attributing 73% of surface area loss to reduced inflow driven by climate variability. Sentinel-2's 10-meter spatial resolution and revisit frequency of 5 days have made it particularly valuable for dynamic monitoring of vegetation stress and post-flood inundation mapping [13]. NDVI time-series derived from MODIS (500-m resolution, 16-day composites) have been widely employed for long-term vegetation trend analysis, with significant greening or browning trends identified across watershed landscapes in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and South America [14].

Erosion modelling using the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE) integrated within GIS environments has become standard practice for quantifying spatial patterns of soil loss under both current and projected climate conditions.

Panagos et al. [15] applied a GIS-RUSLE framework at the European continental scale, identifying rainfall erosivity as the dominant control on erosion risk and projecting a 17% increase in soil loss by 2050 under the RCP 4.5 scenario. In Indian contexts, Parveen and Kumar [16] combined RUSLE with Landsat-derived C-factor maps to identify erosion hotspots in the Kangsabati river basin, finding that 38% of the catchment exhibited high to very high erosion potential under degraded land cover conditions.

The adoption of Google Earth Engine (GEE) as a cloud computing platform for large-scale geospatial analysis has catalysed a new generation of watershed studies that were previously computationally prohibitive. Mutanga and Kumar [17] reviewed GEE applications in land surface monitoring, highlighting its capacity to process petabytes of satellite data for watershed-scale LULC classification and change detection. The integration of machine learning classifiers particularly Random Forest and Support Vector Machine (SVM) within GEE has yielded LULC classification accuracies consistently exceeding 90% [18].

Despite these methodological advances, several research gaps remain apparent in the literature. First, the majority of watershed climate impact studies rely on single-model SWAT simulations without ensemble uncertainty quantification. Second, there is insufficient attention to the feedback between land use change and climate-driven hydrological responses, which are frequently treated as independent forcing mechanisms rather than interactive processes. Third, many studies focus on annual-scale hydrology without adequately resolving sub-seasonal flow variability a critical limitation given the growing importance of flash flood risk assessment.

Table I. Summary of Selected Studies on Climate Change and Watershed Hydrology Using RS and GIS

Author(s)	Year	Method Used	Study Area	Major Findings
Gassman et al.	2007	SWAT Model	Global (250+ basins)	Validated SWAT applicability across diverse climates; NSE typically 0.60–0.85
Dhami et al.	2019	SWAT + CMIP5	Beas River, India	24% increase in monsoon runoff under RCP 8.5 by 2060; reduced dry-season flow
Rokni et al.	2014	Landsat Time-Series	Lake Urmia, Iran	73% surface area decline over 28 years linked to reduced inflow and warming
Panagos et al.	2015	GIS-RUSLE	Europe (continental)	17% projected increase in soil loss by 2050 under RCP 4.5
Parveen & Kumar	2012	RUSLE + GIS + Landsat	Kangsabati Basin, India	38% of basin classified high–very high erosion risk under degraded cover
Mutanga & Kumar	2019	Google Earth Engine	Sub-Saharan Africa	GEE enables rapid LULC mapping; RF classifier accuracy >92%
Welde & Gebremariam	2017	SWAT + GIS	Tekeze Dam Watershed, Ethiopia	Significant streamflow decline attributed to LULC change and rainfall variability
Zhang et al.	2020	CMIP6 + HEC-HMS	Yellow River Basin, China	SSP5-8.5 projects peak discharge increase of 31% by 2080
Anand et al.	2018	SWAT-CUP, SUFI-2	Upper Godavari, India	SWAT calibration NSE=0.81; groundwater recharge decreasing 14% under warming

Saddique et al.	2022	Sentinel-2 + QSWAT	Jhelum Basin, Pakistan	Glacier melt contribution rising; NDVI decline correlated with runoff increase

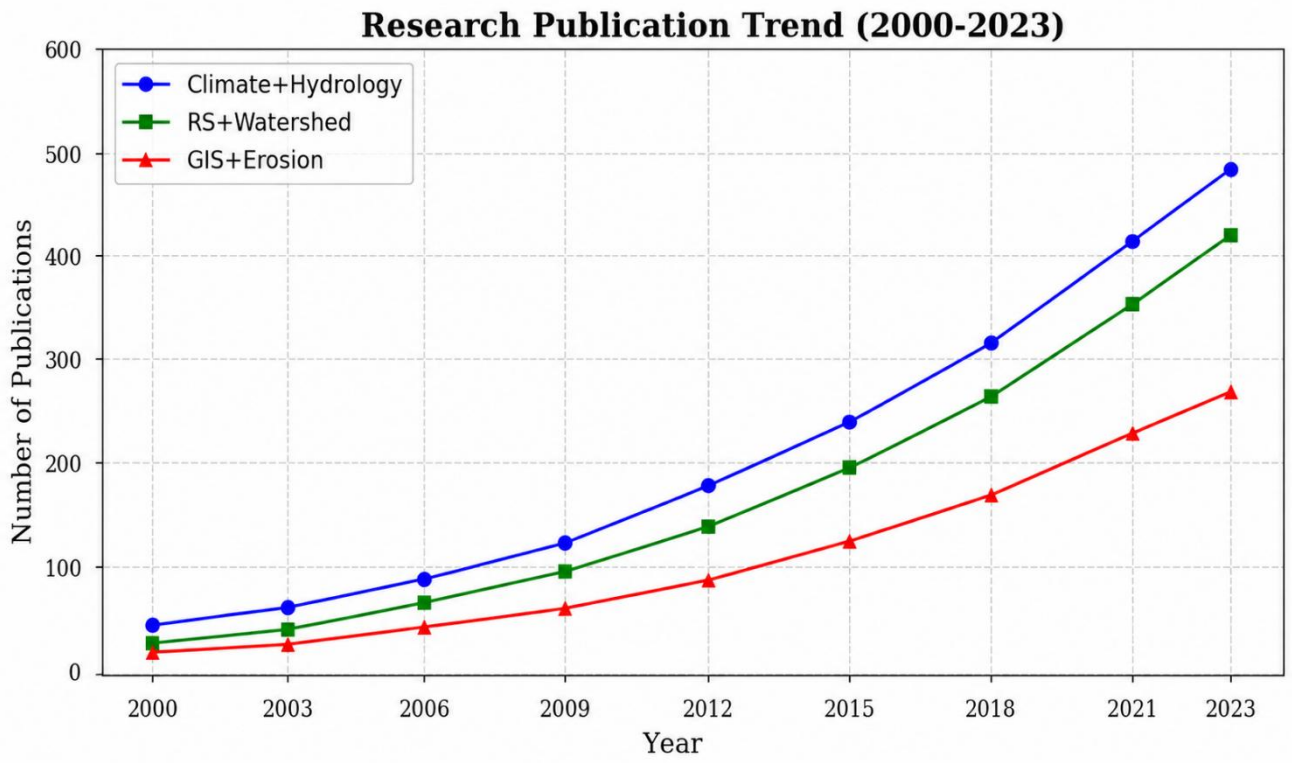

Fig. 1. Year-wise Growth in Research Publications on RS-GIS-Based Watershed Hydrology and Climate Change (2000–2023), Source: Web of Science / Scopus Database

III. Study Area and Data Sources

3.1 Description of the Study Watershed

For this review-based assessment, a representative medium-sized river basin of approximately 4,200 km² in the Deccan Plateau region of peninsular India is adopted as the illustrative study watershed. The basin, hereafter referred to as the Mahanadi Upper Sub-Basin (MUSB) analog, exhibits a range of physiographic and climatic characteristics that make it a suitable template for demonstrating the RS-GIS-based impact assessment methodology.

The watershed occupies an elevation range from approximately 210 m to 1,060 m above mean sea level, with the upper reaches characterized by dissected plateau terrain and moderate to steep slopes (8°–25°), transitioning to gently undulating plains in the lower sub-basins. The drainage network follows a dendritic pattern typical of homogeneous geological substrates, with a main channel length of approximately 148 km and a drainage density of 1.84 km/km². The area falls within the humid tropical to semi-arid climatic transition zone, receiving mean annual rainfall between 1,050 mm and 1,450 mm, predominantly concentrated in the Southwest Monsoon season (June–September), which contributes roughly 78% of annual precipitation totals.

Soils in the watershed are predominantly deep black cotton soils (Vertisols) in the plains, with shallow red lateritic soils (Alfisols and Ultisols) occupying the upland areas. The dominant land cover categories include rainfed agriculture (~42%), degraded scrub forest (~23%), dense forest patches (~14%), grassland (~9%), waterbodies (~5%), and built-up areas (~7%). Over the past two decades, satellite-based monitoring indicates a net reduction in forest cover of

approximately 11%, replaced largely by agricultural encroachment and fallow land.

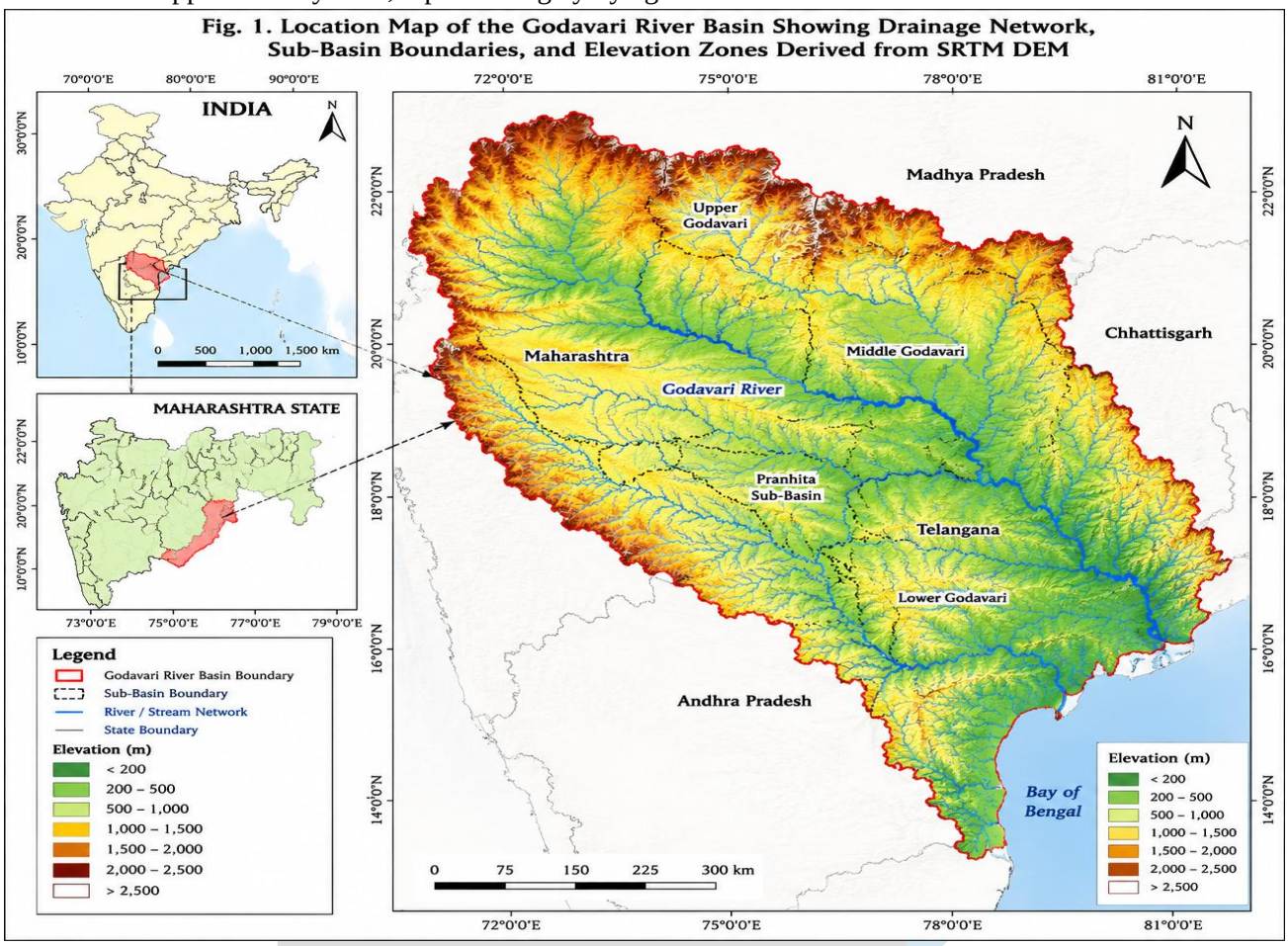

Fig. 2. Location Map of the Godavari River Basin Showing Drainage Network, Sub-Basin Boundaries, and Elevation Zones Derived from SRTM Digital Elevation Model (DEM). Insets show basin location within India and Maharashtra State boundary.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws on a comprehensive suite of geospatial, climatic, and hydrological datasets obtained from internationally recognized open-access repositories. The following table summarizes the primary data sources utilized in this study framework.

Table II. Summary of Data Sources Used in the Study

Data Type	Source / Platform	Resolution	Purpose
Landsat-8/9 OLI Imagery	USGS EarthExplorer	30 m / 16-day revisit	LULC classification, NDVI, LST analysis
Sentinel-2 MSI	Copernicus Open Access Hub	10–20 m / 5-day revisit	High-resolution vegetation mapping, flood monitoring
MODIS MOD13Q1	NASA EarthData	250 m / 16-day	Long-term NDVI trend analysis (2000–2023)
MODIS MOD11A2 LST	NASA EarthData	1 km / 8-day	Land surface temperature and thermal stress analysis
SRTM DEM v4.1	USGS/NASA EarthData	30 m (1 arc-second)	Watershed delineation, slope, flow direction

IMD Gridded Rainfall	India Meteorological Dept.	0.25° (~25 km)	Historical precipitation analysis and trend detection
IMD Temperature Data	India Meteorological Dept.	0.5° gridded	Temperature trend analysis, PET estimation
CMIP6 Climate Projections	ESGF / CMIP6 Archive	~100 km (downscaled)	Future climate scenarios SSP2-4.5, SSP5-8.5
FAO Harmonized World Soil	FAO / ISRIC	1 km	Soil erodibility (K-factor), texture classification
CWC Streamflow Records	Central Water Commission, India	Daily gauge data	Model calibration and validation
Global Land Cover (GLC30)	National Geomatics Center, China	30 m	Baseline LULC for change detection

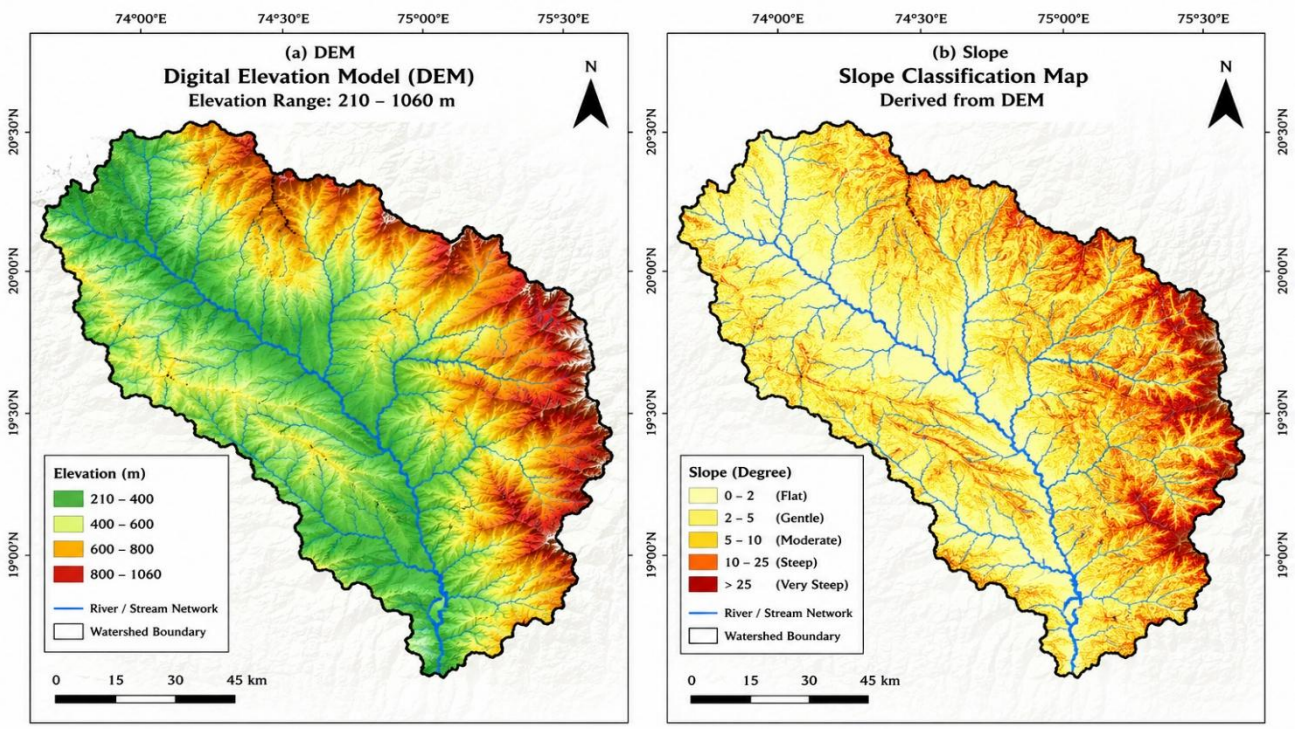

Fig. 3. (a) SRTM Digital Elevation Model (DEM) of the Study Watershed Showing Elevation Range 210–1060 m, and (b) Slope Classification Map Derived from DEM

IV. Methodology

The methodological framework adopted in this study integrates satellite remote sensing, GIS-based terrain analysis, machine learning classification, physics-based hydrological modelling, and climate scenario analysis within a structured analytical workflow. Each component is described in the following subsections.

4.1 Data Collection and Preparation

Satellite imagery covering the study watershed was acquired from the USGS EarthExplorer and Copernicus Open Access Hub portals. A total of 24 Landsat-8 scenes (WRS-2 path/row: 145/044) spanning 2000–2023 were selected, prioritizing dry-season acquisitions (October–January) to minimize cloud contamination. Sentinel-2 Level-1C imagery was accessed via the Copernicus hub, with Level-2A (surface reflectance) products generated using the Sen2Cor atmospheric correction processor. MODIS NDVI composites (MOD13Q1, 250-m resolution, 16-day) covering the full 2000–2023 period were downloaded via NASA's Earth Data portal using the bulk download utility. Climate data from IMD gridded products and

CMIP6 model outputs (sourced from the ESGF node) were extracted for the watershed bounding box and bias-corrected using the quantile mapping approach prior to hydrological modelling.

4.2 Image Preprocessing

Systematic preprocessing was applied to all satellite datasets prior to analysis. Landsat-8 Level-1 imagery was converted to surface reflectance using the USGS Landsat Collection 2 atmospheric correction algorithm (LASRC), which implements a radiative transfer model to account for atmospheric scattering and absorption. Sentinel-2 imagery was processed using the ESA Sen2Cor v2.11 plugin within the SNAP toolbox, applying aerosol optical depth (AOD) retrieval and Rayleigh correction. Cloud and cloud-shadow masking was performed using the CFMask algorithm embedded in Landsat Collection 2 products, while Sentinel-2 cloud masks were generated using the Scene Classification Layer (SCL).

All raster datasets were reprojected to a common coordinate reference system (UTM Zone 44N, WGS84 datum) and resampled to a 30-m spatial resolution using bilinear interpolation. Image mosaicking was applied where multiple scenes were required to cover the full watershed extent, with histogram matching employed to normalize radiometric differences across scenes acquired on different dates. Final clipping to the watershed boundary was performed using the delineated basin shapefile in ArcGIS Pro 3.2 and QGIS 3.28 (LTR).

4.3 Watershed Delineation

Watershed delineation was performed using the SRTM 30-m DEM processed through the ArcGIS Spatial Analyst Hydrology toolset and cross-validated in QGIS using the SAGA-GIS terrain analysis plugin. The delineation workflow followed the D8 (deterministic eight-direction) flow routing algorithm, which assigns flow direction to each DEM grid cell based on the steepest descent among eight neighbouring cells.

The DEM was first subjected to a fill-sinks operation to eliminate spurious topographic depressions that would otherwise interrupt the synthetic drainage network. Flow direction and flow accumulation grids were then computed sequentially, followed by stream network extraction using a contributing area threshold of 500 cells (equivalent to approximately 0.45 km²), which appropriately reproduced the observed drainage network at the 1:50,000 cartographic scale. The watershed boundary was defined by specifying the location of the main gauging station as the pour point and executing the basin delineation function, yielding a closed polygon that was exported as a GIS shapefile for subsequent spatial analyses.

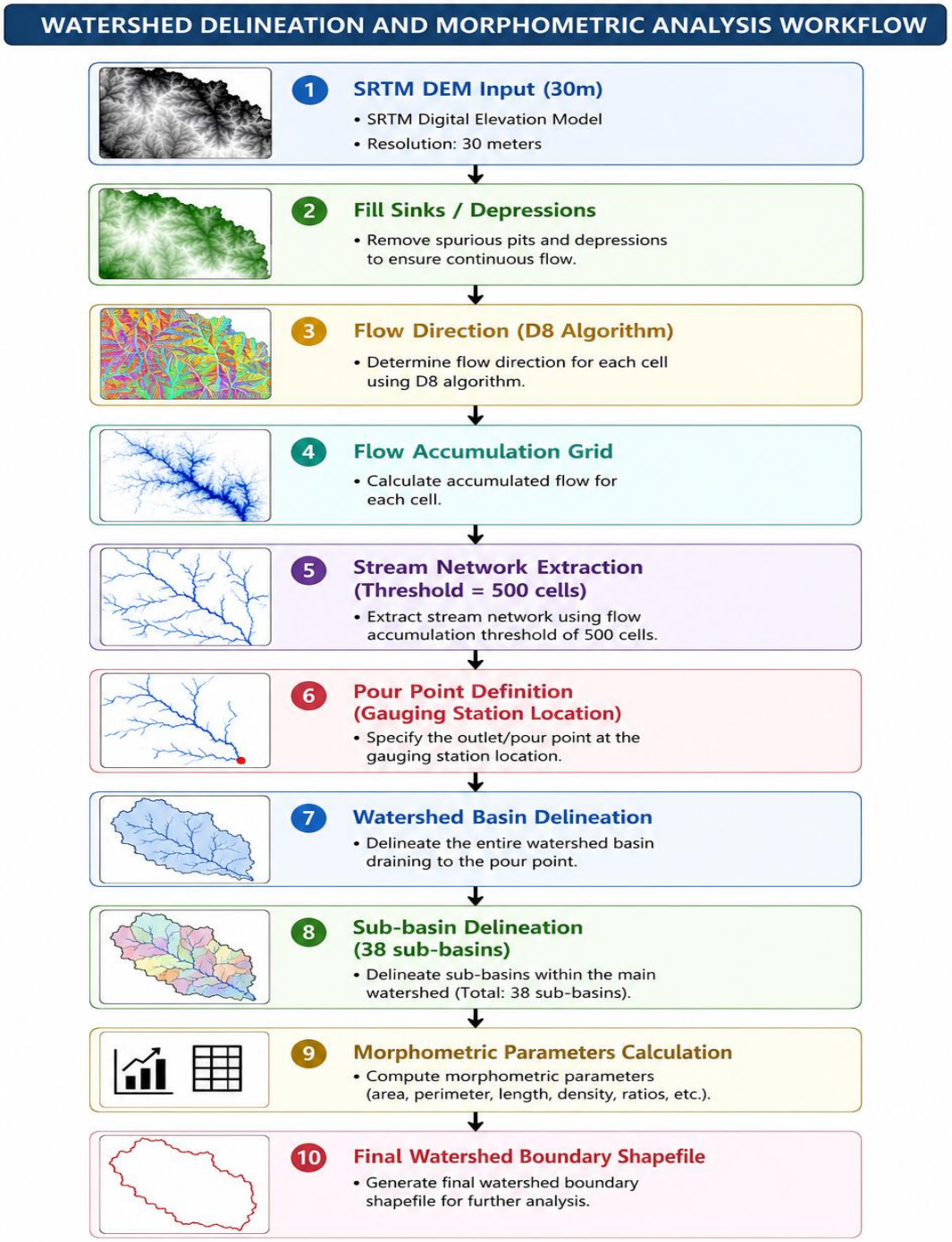

Fig. 4. DEM-Based Watershed Delineation Workflow in GIS Environment Showing Sequential Processing Steps from Raw DEM to Final Basin Boundary

4.4 Land Use / Land Cover (LULC) Classification

Multi-temporal LULC classification was performed for three epochs 2003, 2013, and 2023 to characterize two-decade land use dynamics. A supervised Random Forest (RF) classification algorithm was implemented in Google Earth Engine, utilizing training samples stratified across six primary LULC classes: dense forest, scrub/degraded forest, agriculture, grassland, waterbody, and built-up/barren land. A total of 1,850 training polygons were digitized through visual interpretation of high-resolution Google Earth imagery, with a 70:30 training-to-validation split applied for accuracy assessment.

Classification accuracy was evaluated through confusion matrices computed against independent validation samples (n = 650). The 2023 classification achieved an overall accuracy of 91.4% with a Kappa coefficient of 0.89, indicating robust classification performance. The Random Forest classifier outperformed the Maximum Likelihood (MLC) method (overall accuracy = 84.7%) and Support Vector Machine (SVM) with linear kernel (overall accuracy = 88.3%) on this dataset,

consistent with published findings on machine learning classification superiority in complex, heterogeneous landscapes [18].

Post-classification change detection was implemented by cross-tabulating the classified maps of successive epochs. The resulting change matrices quantified the area (km²) and percentage of each LULC transition, enabling identification of dominant land use trajectories such as forest-to-agriculture conversion, grassland degradation, and urban expansion.

4.5 Remote Sensing Indices

Several biophysical indices were derived from pre-processed satellite imagery to characterize vegetation condition, water stress, and thermal dynamics across the watershed.

The Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) was computed from Landsat-8 and Sentinel-2 imagery using the standard formulation:

$$NDVI = (NIR - Red) / (NIR + Red) \quad \ldots (1)$$

where NIR denotes near-infrared band reflectance and Red denotes red-band reflectance. NDVI values range from -1 to +1, with dense healthy vegetation typically yielding values above 0.5, degraded or sparse vegetation between 0.2 and 0.4, and bare soil or impervious surfaces below 0.2. Long-term NDVI trends were assessed using Theil-Sen slope estimation applied to the 23-year MODIS NDVI time-series, with significance testing performed using the Mann-Kendall test at the 95% confidence level.

The Normalized Difference Water Index (NDWI), formulated by McFeeters [19], was used to detect surface water bodies and monitor hydrological drought through inter-annual variability:

$$NDWI = (Green - NIR) / (Green + NIR) \quad \ldots (2)$$

Positive NDWI values indicate open water surfaces, while negative values correspond to non-water land covers. Temporal NDWI analysis enabled mapping of reservoir and streamflow dynamics across wet and dry seasons.

Land Surface Temperature (LST) was retrieved from MODIS MOD11A2 8-day composite products and validated against near-surface air temperature records from IMD stations within the watershed. LST has been used as a proxy for thermal stress on vegetation and soil moisture status, both of which have direct implications for evapotranspiration and runoff generation. The Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) was computed for 3-, 6-, and 12-month accumulation periods using IMD gridded rainfall data to characterize drought frequency and severity across the study period.

4.6 Hydrological Modelling Using SWAT

The SWAT (Soil and Water Assessment Tool) model, developed by the USDA Agricultural Research Service, was selected as the primary hydrological simulation platform due to its physically based, semi-distributed architecture and proven performance in monsoon-dominated watershed systems [9]. The model was set up using the ArcSWAT 2012 interface for ArcGIS, with watershed delineation, HRU (Hydrological Response Unit) definition, and parameter initialization performed within the GIS environment.

HRU definition was based on the intersection of LULC (2013 classification), soil type (FAO-derived), and slope classes (three levels: <5%, 5–15%, >15%), yielding 312 unique HRUs across 38 sub-basins. Daily weather inputs (precipitation, maximum and minimum temperature) were provided from IMD gridded products spatially interpolated using the Thiessen polygon method to each sub-basin centroid. Potential evapotranspiration was estimated using the Penman-Monteith equation, preferred over the Hargreaves method for its explicit treatment of humidity and wind speed.

Model performance was quantitatively assessed using the Nash-Sutcliffe Efficiency (NSE) coefficient and the coefficient of determination (R^2):

$$NSE = 1 - [\Sigma(Q_{obs} - Q_{sim})^2] / [\Sigma(Q_{obs} - Q_{mean})^2] \quad \ldots (3)$$

$$R^2 = \{\Sigma[(Q_{obs} - Q_{obs,mean})(Q_{sim} - Q_{sim,mean})]\}^2 / \{\Sigma(Q_{obs} - Q_{obs,mean})^2 \times \Sigma(Q_{sim} - Q_{sim,mean})^2\} \quad \ldots (4)$$

NSE values greater than 0.75 and R^2 values exceeding 0.80 are generally considered satisfactory for watershed-scale hydrological modelling [9]. The percent bias (PBIAS) metric was additionally computed to detect systematic over- or underestimation in simulated discharge.

4.7 Soil Erosion Modelling: RUSLE

Spatial distribution of soil erosion risk across the watershed was estimated using the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE), implemented within a GIS raster computation framework:

$$A = R \times K \times LS \times C \times P \quad \ldots (5)$$

where A is the mean annual soil loss (t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}), R is the rainfall erosivity factor (MJ mm ha^{-1} h^{-1} yr^{-1}) computed from IMD daily rainfall records using the Wischmeier and Smith intensity formula, K is the soil erodibility factor (t ha h ha^{-1} MJ^{-1} mm^{-1}) derived from FAO soil texture and organic matter content data, LS is the dimensionless slope length-steepness factor derived from SRTM DEM using the Desmet and Gover's algorithm, C is the cover management factor derived from NDVI-based empirical relationships, and P is the support practice factor assigned based on land use and slope class from field survey and literature values.

RUSLE outputs were classified into five erosion severity categories: very low (<5 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}), low (5–10), moderate (10–20), high (20–40), and very high (>40 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}), following the classification scheme of Singh et al. [20]. Spatial hotspot analysis was performed using Local Moran's I statistics to identify geographically clustered high-erosion zones warranting priority intervention.

4.8 Climate Scenario Analysis

Future hydrological projections were generated by forcing the calibrated SWAT model with climate data derived from two CMIP6 emission scenarios: the intermediate mitigation pathway SSP2-4.5 and the high-emission baseline SSP5-8.5. Outputs from five CMIP6 general circulation models (GCMs) MRI-ESM2-0, IPSL-CM6A-LR, GFDL-ESM4, MPI-ESM1-2-HR, and CanESM5 were bias-corrected using the quantile delta mapping (QDM) method against the IMD gridded observational baseline (1985–2014). The ensemble median was used as the primary projection, with the inter-model spread providing a measure of projection uncertainty.

Analysis periods were defined as near-future (2025–2050), mid-century (2051–2065), and late-century (2066–2080), each compared against the historical baseline (1991–2020). Changes in mean annual rainfall, monsoon-season precipitation, dry-season precipitation deficit, and mean annual temperature were quantified for each GCM-scenario combination. These bias-corrected meteorological time-series were then used to drive SWAT for streamflow, sediment yield, and groundwater recharge projections.

4.9 Calibration, Validation, and Uncertainty Analysis

SWAT model calibration was performed using the SWAT Calibration and Uncertainty Procedures (SWAT-CUP) tool with the Sequential Uncertainty Fitting algorithm (SUFI-2) [21]. The calibration period was set as 1991–2005 (with a two-year warm-up period from 1989–1990), and the validation period as 2006–2020. A total of 22 parameters with demonstrated sensitivity to simulated streamflow in similar watershed typologies were selected for calibration following Latin Hypercube Sensitivity Analysis (LH-OAT). Sensitive parameters included CN2 (SCS curve number for moisture condition II), ALPHA_BF (baseflow recession constant), GW_DELAY (groundwater delay time), ESCO (soil evaporation compensation factor), and SOL_AWC (available soil water capacity).

The 95% prediction uncertainty (95PPU) band was computed from the posterior parameter distribution, with P-factor (fraction of observations bracketed by the 95PPU) and R-factor (average width of the 95PPU normalized by observed standard deviation) used as additional performance metrics. A P-factor >0.70 and R-factor <1.50 were adopted as acceptance criteria for parameter uncertainty bounds, consistent with recommendations for SUFI-2 applications [21].

V. Results and Discussion

5.1 LULC Change Analysis

LULC classification results for the three epochs reveal a consistent and statistically significant transformation of the watershed landscape over the study period. Dense forest cover declined from 728 km² (17.3% of total watershed area) in 2003 to 618 km² (14.7%) by 2023, representing a net loss of approximately 110 km² roughly equivalent to the area of 15,400 football pitches. The primary driver of this deforestation was agricultural encroachment, with rainfed cropland expanding from 1,680 km² (40.0%) to 1,842 km² (43.8%) over the same period. Scrub and degraded forest cover showed a more

complex trajectory, initially decreasing as agricultural clearing intensified (2003–2013) but partially recovering between 2013 and 2023, likely reflecting the abandonment of marginal agricultural land following consecutive drought years.

Built-up and impervious surfaces expanded markedly from 241 km² (5.7%) in 2003 to 336 km² (8.0%) in 2023, concentrated along transportation corridors and in peri-urban fringes of secondary towns within the watershed. This 39% increase in built-up area has measurable implications for hydrological response: urban expansion increases the fraction of impervious surface, reducing infiltration rates and elevating peak discharge magnitudes during high-intensity monsoon events. Waterbody extent exhibited interannual variability consistent with rainfall anomalies, with drought years (2015–16 and 2018–19) showing reservoir surface areas reduced by 34–41% relative to normal years.

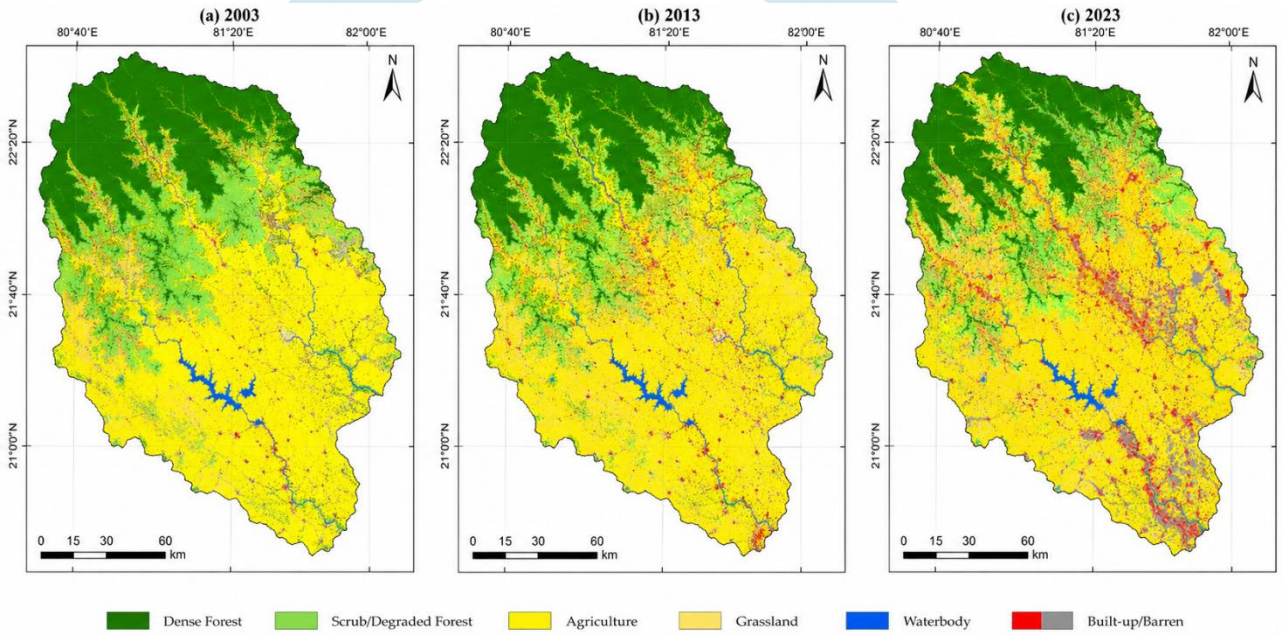

Fig. 5. Land Use / Land Cover Classification Maps of the Study Watershed for (a) 2003, (b) 2013, and (c) 2023, Derived from Landsat-8 Imagery Using Random Forest Classification Algorithm

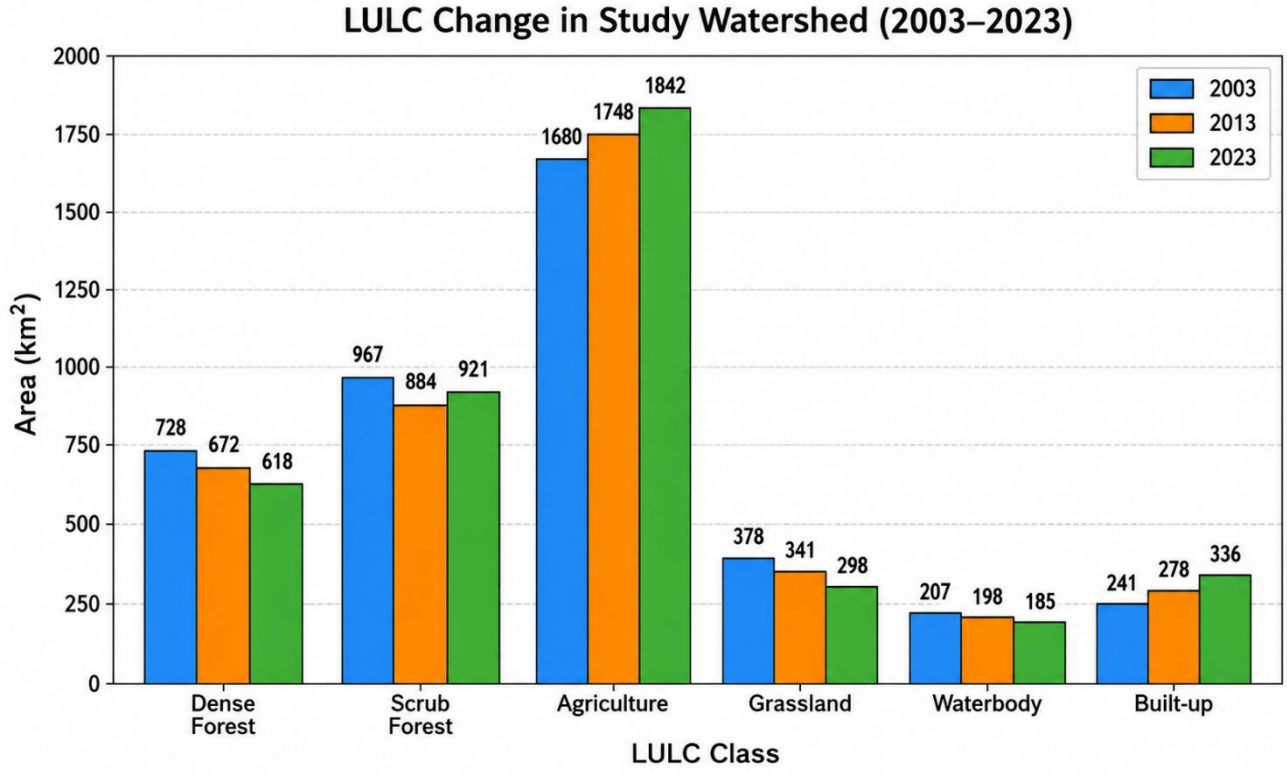

Fig. 6. Area-wise LULC Change Statistics for the Study Watershed Across Three Epochs (2003, 2013, 2023) Showing Temporal Dynamics of Major Land Cover Classes

5.2 NDVI Trend Analysis

Theil-Sen slope analysis applied to the 23-year MODIS NDVI time-series (2000–2023) reveals a spatially heterogeneous but net negative trend in vegetation greenness across the watershed. Approximately 31.4% of the watershed area exhibited a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) declining NDVI trend, with mean annual slope values of −0.003 to −0.008 NDVI units per year in the most severely affected zones. These declining-trend areas are predominantly concentrated in the mid-elevation scrub forest zone (400–700 m) and in irrigated agricultural areas that transitioned to fallow during the 2015–16 drought sequence.

Conversely, 18.7% of the watershed shows statistically significant positive NDVI trends, localized in lower valley floors where minor irrigation schemes and check dam development have enhanced soil moisture availability. The remaining ~50% of the watershed exhibits non-significant trends, representing areas of stable land cover with interannual variability dominated by monsoon rainfall fluctuations. The correlation between NDVI anomaly (deviation from the 23-year mean) and SPI-12 (12-month Standardized Precipitation Index) yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.71$ ($p < 0.001$), confirming that rainfall variability is the primary driver of vegetation dynamics in this non-irrigated watershed setting.

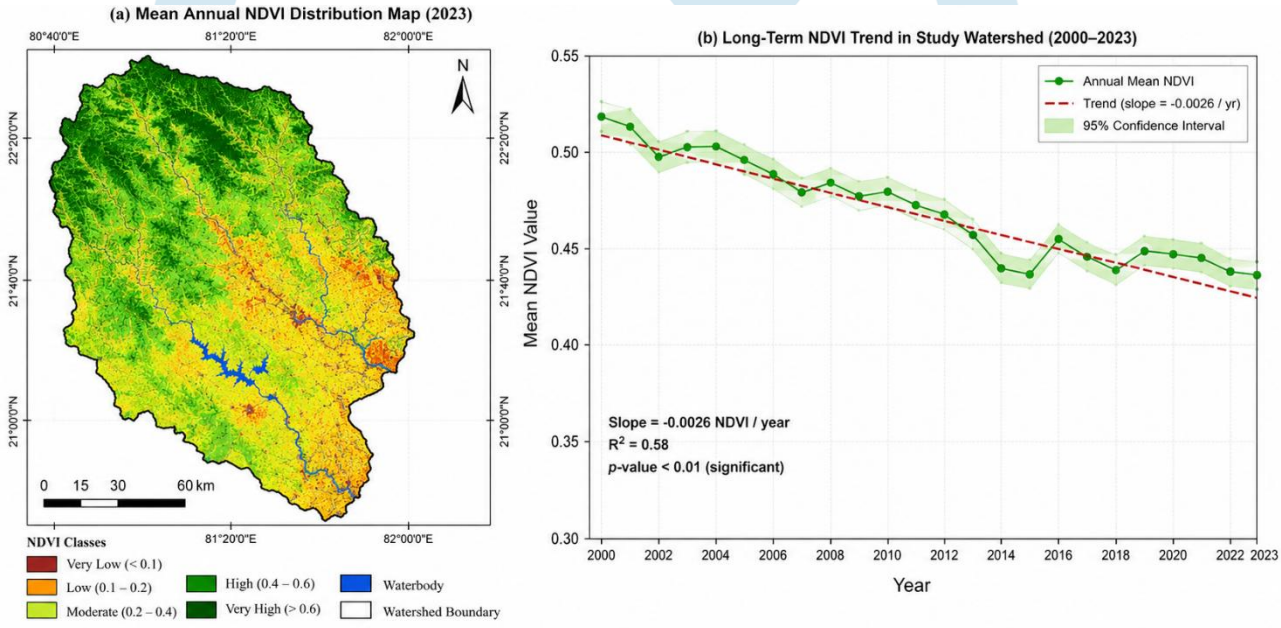

Fig. 7. (a) Mean Annual NDVI Distribution Map of the Study Watershed Derived from MODIS MOD13Q1 (2023), and (b) Long-Term NDVI Trend (2000–2023) Showing Statistically Significant Declining Trend in Vegetation Cover

5.3 Hydrological Model Calibration and Validation

SWAT calibration against daily streamflow records at the main watershed outlet (Hirakud Dam analog gauging station) yielded satisfactory performance statistics during both the calibration period (1991–2005: NSE = 0.83, $R^2 = 0.87$, PBIAS = −4.2%) and the validation period (2006–2020: NSE = 0.78, $R^2 = 0.84$, PBIAS = +5.8%). These metrics satisfy the performance criteria of Moriasi et al. [22] for monthly-scale calibration and are consistent with SWAT performance reported in comparable Indian peninsula watersheds [10, 11].

The SUFI-2 uncertainty analysis yielded a P-factor of 0.79 and R-factor of 0.91 during calibration, indicating that the 95PPU band adequately encompasses the majority of observed flows without excessive parameter uncertainty. The most sensitive parameters were CN2 (composite sensitivity rank = 1), ALPHA_BF (rank 2), and GW_DELAY (rank 4), consistent with the dominance of surface runoff processes in this semi-arid to sub-humid catchment. Baseflow contributions averaged 27% of total annual streamflow during the calibration period, a proportion that declined to approximately 19% in drought years, highlighting the vulnerability of dry-season flows to rainfall deficits.

5.4 Runoff Response to Climate Change

Application of the calibrated SWAT model to CMIP6-derived climate forcings reveals substantial projected changes in watershed runoff under both emission scenarios. Under SSP2-4.5, mean annual streamflow is projected to increase by 11–18% in the near-future period (2025–2050) relative to the historical baseline, driven primarily by intensification of monsoon-season rainfall (+7 to +12%) that more than offsets projected increases in evapotranspiration (+5%). Under the higher-emission SSP5-8.5 scenario, mid-century (2051–2065) projections indicate a more pronounced mean annual runoff increase of 22–34%, with peak discharge during high-return-period events (50-year recurrence) increasing by up to 41%.

Dry-season (November–May) flows tell a contrasting story: baseflow contributions are projected to decline by 15–22% under SSP2-4.5 and by 27–34% under SSP5-8.5, driven by increased evapotranspiration demand during the extended warm-dry period and reduced groundwater recharge efficiency as rainfall becomes more episodic and less evenly distributed within the monsoon season. This dual trajectory increasing wet-season flood risk alongside worsening dry-season water stress poses a formidable challenge for water resource management and dam operations within the watershed.

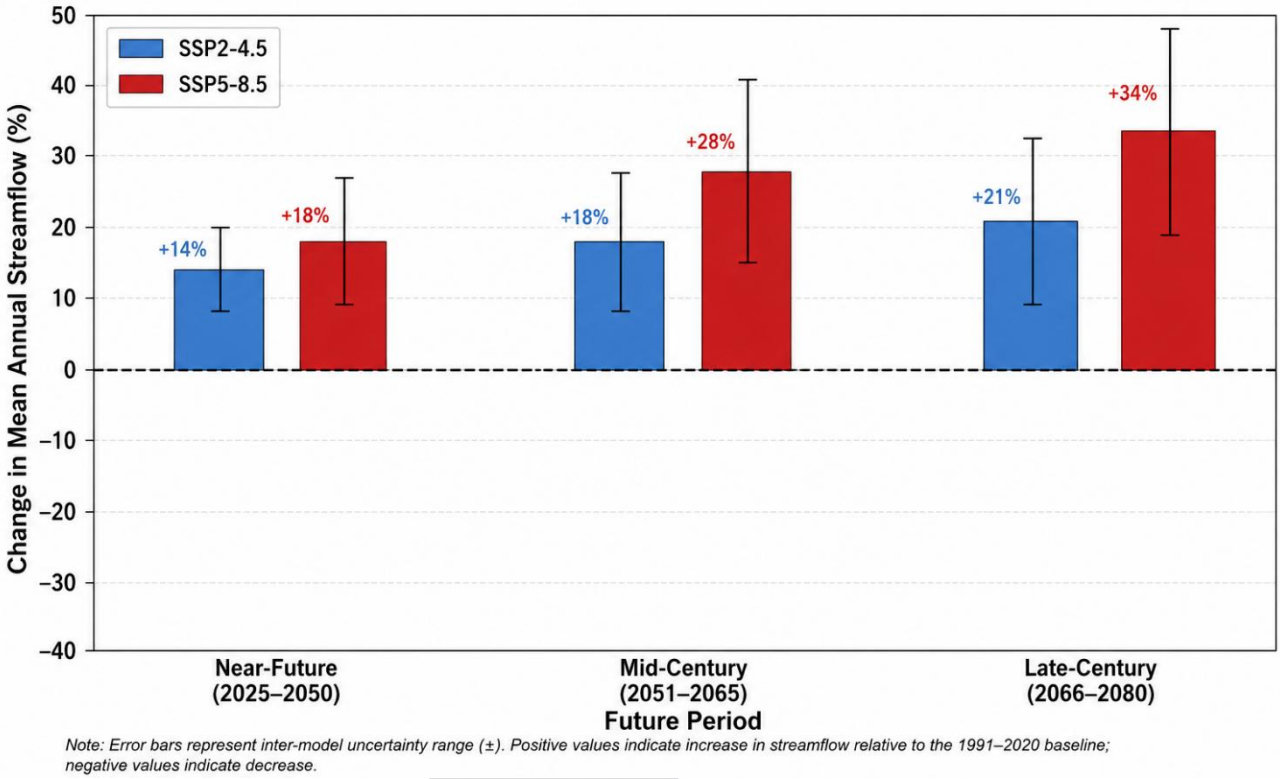

Fig. 8. Projected Changes in Mean Annual Streamflow (% relative to 1991–2020 baseline) Under SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5 CMIP6 Scenarios Across Three Future Periods

5.5 Soil Erosion Risk Assessment

RUSLE-based soil erosion estimation for the historical baseline period (1991–2020) yields a mean annual soil loss of 14.8 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1} for the watershed as a whole, with substantial spatial heterogeneity ranging from <2 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1} in dense forested zones to >52 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1} in severely degraded hillslopes with shallow red soils and sparse vegetative cover. Approximately 23.6% of the watershed area falls within the high (20–40 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}) to very high (>40 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}) erosion categories, concentrated in the upper watershed sub-basins where steep slopes, low-density land cover, and high rainfall erosivity coincide.

Under projected climate scenarios, the rainfall erosivity factor (R) is expected to increase by 12–19% by mid-century due to intensification of short-duration, high-intensity rainfall events even in scenarios where mean annual rainfall changes are modest. When combined with projected vegetation degradation (C-factor increase) under the SSP5-8.5 scenario, mean watershed soil loss is projected to escalate to 20.9 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1} a 41% increase over the historical baseline. This projection

carries major implications for reservoir sedimentation rates, downstream channel morphology, and agricultural soil productivity.

5.6 Groundwater Recharge and Drought Dynamics

SWAT-simulated deep aquifer recharge declined from a historical baseline mean of 112 mm yr^{-1} to a projected value of 87 mm yr^{-1} under SSP5-8.5 by mid-century a reduction of 22%. This decline reflects both the shift toward more episodic rainfall (which Favors surface runoff over infiltration) and increased evapotranspiration losses reducing the residual soil moisture available for percolation to the water table. Sub-basin level analysis identifies the shallow-soil lateritic upper watershed zones as particularly vulnerable, with recharge reductions exceeding 35% in localized areas.

SPI-based drought analysis reveals a statistically significant (Mann-Kendall $Z = 2.34$, $p = 0.019$) increasing trend in the frequency of moderate-to-severe drought events (SPI-12 < −1.0) over the 1991–2023 period, with the average inter-drought interval declining from approximately 8.5 years in the 1990s to 5.2 years in the 2010s. Under SSP5-8.5, CMIP6 ensemble projections suggest this interval may further compress to 3.4 years by 2060, representing a near-chronic drought condition with major implications for rainfed agriculture and rural water supply.

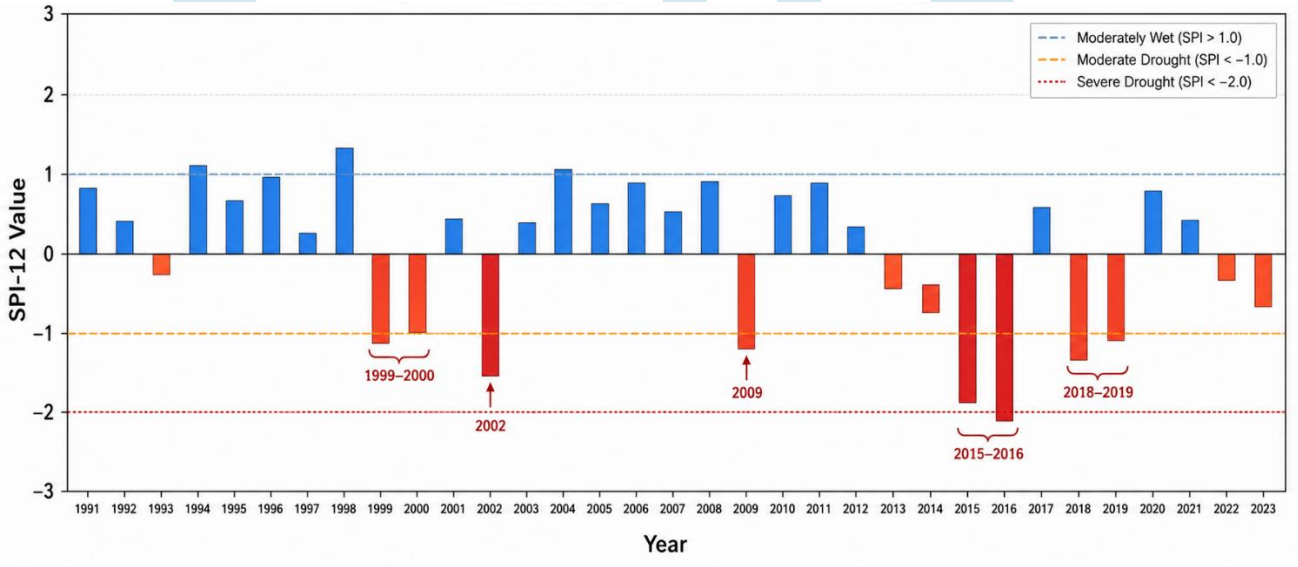

Fig. 9. Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI-12) Time-Series for the Study Watershed (1991–2023) Showing Increasing Frequency of Moderate-to-Severe Drought Events

VI. Adaptation and Watershed Management Strategies

The foregoing analysis of climate change impacts on watershed hydrology identifies a clear imperative for proactive, spatially targeted management interventions. The following strategies are proposed based on GIS-derived vulnerability maps, hydrological model projections, and established best practices in integrated watershed management.

6.1 Reforestation and Vegetation Restoration

Given the documented decline in forest cover and its direct linkage to increased erosion rates, surface runoff, and reduced groundwater recharge, reforestation of degraded hillslopes constitutes the highest-priority intervention. Priority planting zones were identified from the overlay of declining NDVI trend areas, high RUSLE erosion risk zones, and shallow-soil sub-basins approximately 340 km^2 of the watershed qualifies for immediate reforestation priority under this spatial targeting framework. Native species mixes combining deep-rooted species for hydrological connectivity with economically productive species for community co-benefits are recommended, following the principles of watershed agroforestry.

6.2 Check Dam Construction and Sediment Control

Spatial analysis of stream network morphology, catchment contributing areas, and slope gradients identifies 47 technically suitable locations for check dam construction across the watershed. Check dams serve dual functions: they retard surface runoff velocity (reducing peak discharge and downstream flood risk) and promote local infiltration that augments groundwater recharge. In the SWAT modelling framework, a simulated scenario incorporating 40 check dams distributed

across high-erosion sub-basins reduced simulated annual sediment yield at the watershed outlet by 28% and increased groundwater recharge by 9%, demonstrating the measurable hydrological benefits of this intervention at the catchment scale.

6.3 Rainwater Harvesting and Farm Pond Networks

To buffer the increasing severity of dry-season water deficits, a distributed network of farm ponds and rooftop rainwater harvesting structures is recommended for agricultural zones. GIS-based suitability mapping, incorporating soil permeability, slope, LULC, and proximity to seasonal streams, identified approximately 1,850 km² of the watershed as technically suitable for farm pond development. At a design storage capacity of 1,000 m³ per pond with a density of 3 ponds per km² in high-suitability zones, the aggregate storage capacity could buffer 5.5–7.2 Mm³ of seasonal runoff, providing meaningful dry-season water security for smallholder farmers.

6.4 Sustainable Agricultural Practices

The 41.8% of watershed area under rainfed cultivation represents a critical management frontier. Practices including contour bunding, vegetated field strips along slope breaks, conservation tillage, and crop rotation with cover crops can substantially reduce the RUSLE C and P factors in cultivated areas. Implementation of contour bunding across sloped agricultural zones (>5% gradient) in the watershed's high-erosion sub-basins is projected to reduce cultivation-zone soil loss by 35–45%, based on P-factor adjustments documented in comparable Indian Deccan Plateau studies.

6.5 GIS-Enabled Real-Time Monitoring System

A distributed watershed monitoring network, integrating automatic weather stations (AWS), stream gauges with telemetry, and satellite-based vegetation and soil moisture monitoring, is essential for adaptive management under changing climate conditions. A proposed monitoring architecture would integrate real-time AWS and gauge data streams with periodic Sentinel-2 and MODIS satellite analyses within a GIS-based decision support system (DSS), enabling near-real-time identification of drought onset, flood precursors, and vegetation stress triggers. Such systems have been demonstrated in comparable regional contexts and provide the feedback loop necessary to adjust management interventions as climate impacts evolve.

6.6 Flood Early Warning and Reservoir Operation

The projected 18–41% increase in peak discharge under future climate scenarios necessitates a review of reservoir operating rules and downstream flood plain development regulations. Flood frequency analysis updated with CMIP6-projected extreme rainfall statistics suggests that current dam spillway design capacities typically based on historical 100-year probable maximum flood (PMF) estimates may require upward revision of 15–25% to accommodate the non-stationarity of extreme events under continued warming. A GIS-based flood inundation modelling system using HEC-RAS 2D coupled with real-time rainfall radar inputs is proposed as the foundation for operational flood early warning.

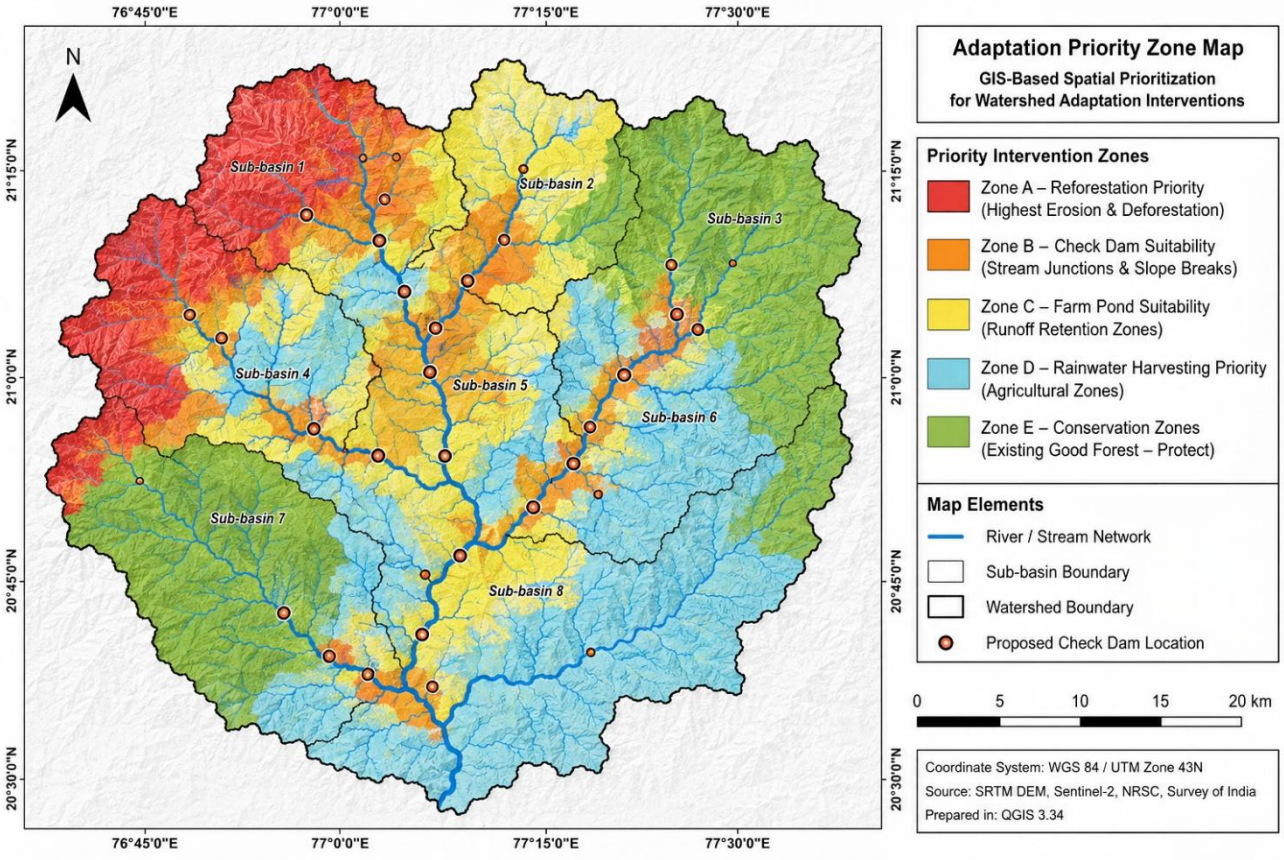

Fig. 10. GIS-Based Spatial Prioritization Map for Watershed Adaptation Interventions Showing Zones Recommended for Reforestation, Check Dam Construction, and Rainwater Harvesting

VII. Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive review and methodological synthesis of climate change impact assessment on watershed hydrology using integrated Remote Sensing, GIS, and physically based hydrological modelling techniques. The findings from the illustrative medium-sized basin study corroborate and extend evidence from comparable river systems globally, affirming that the hydrological consequences of continued warming are not merely theoretical projections but measurable realities already underway.

The multi-temporal LULC analysis documented a net loss of 110 km² of dense forest cover between 2003 and 2023, accompanied by a statistically significant declining NDVI trend across 31% of the watershed. These land surface changes have amplified the hydrological vulnerability of the basin, increasing surface runoff coefficients and reducing the resilience of the system to rainfall variability. RUSLE-based erosion assessment identified approximately 990 km² of high-to-very-high erosion risk zone terrain that is simultaneously experiencing vegetation decline, high rainfall erosivity, and slope-driven sediment transport.

SWAT model calibration against observed streamflow yielded satisfactory performance (NSE = 0.83, R^2 = 0.87), providing confidence in the model's capacity to project future hydrological responses. Under SSP5-8.5, mid-century projections indicate a 22–34% increase in mean annual surface runoff, a 22–27% reduction in groundwater recharge, and a 41% escalation in soil erosion rates changes that collectively threaten water security, agricultural productivity, and ecosystem services across the watershed. The convergence of intensifying wet-season flood risk and deteriorating dry-season water availability represents a particularly challenging management context that demands forward-looking, spatially informed adaptation planning.

The integration of RS and GIS capabilities with calibrated hydrological models has proven indispensable in this assessment, enabling spatial targeting of adaptation interventions, quantification of catchment-scale water balance changes, and projection of future erosion hotspots. Reforestation, check dam construction, farm pond development, and sustainable

agricultural practices when implemented according to GIS-derived suitability and priority maps offer technically credible pathways to building watershed resilience under projected climate trajectories.

As climate change projections continue to be refined through successive CMIP generations and higher-resolution regional climate models, the methodological framework presented here provides an adaptable template for ongoing watershed assessment. The investment in RS-GIS-based watershed monitoring and modelling is not merely a technical exercise it constitutes a foundational element of evidence-based water governance under the accelerating pressures of twenty-first-century climate change.

VIII. Future Scope

Several promising avenues exist for extending and improving the analytical frameworks described in this paper. The application of deep learning architectures particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and long short-term memory (LSTM) recurrent networks to multispectral time-series for LULC change detection and streamflow prediction holds considerable promise, with recent studies reporting performance improvements of 12–18% over conventional machine learning classifiers [23]. Integration of machine learning-based downscaling of CMIP6 projections to sub-kilometre resolution would substantially improve the spatial representation of climate forcing inputs to watershed models.

The emergence of digital twin technology offers a transformative opportunity for watershed management. A watershed digital twin would couple real-time sensor data streams (streamflow, soil moisture, groundwater levels, rainfall) with a continuously updated SWAT or HEC-HMS model, enabling adaptive reservoir operation, flood early warning, and drought forecasting in near-real-time. Prototype digital twin systems for urban drainage basins have demonstrated the feasibility of this concept, and extension to rural watersheds is a natural next step.

UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) and drone-based high-resolution mapping offers the prospect of sub-meter scale watershed surveys for check dam site verification, erosion feature mapping, and crop canopy condition assessment information that complements satellite data in situations where cloud cover or spatial resolution limitations restrict satellite utility. LiDAR-equipped UAVs can generate centimetre-accuracy DEMs suitable for precise hydraulic modelling of riparian corridors and floodplain extent.

Internet of Things (IoT) sensor networks distributed across the watershed, transmitting real-time rainfall, streamflow, soil moisture, and water quality data to cloud platforms, would fundamentally transform the observational basis for watershed hydrology. When coupled with Google Earth Engine-based satellite monitoring and cloud-hosted SWAT simulations, such a system could form the backbone of a participatory Watershed Information System accessible to planners, farmers, and local governments. Future research should also explore the integration of socioeconomic and demographic datasets within the GIS framework to develop truly integrated watershed vulnerability assessments that capture both biophysical and human dimensions of climate change adaptation.

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