SCIENCE DIVISION

July 2021

UN (FORESIGHT environment Brief

environment programme

Early Warning, Emerging Issues and Futures



Background

The Foresight Briefs are published by the United Nations Environment Programme to highlight a hotspot of environmental change, feature an emerging science topic, or discuss a contemporary environmental issue. The public is provided with the opportunity to find out what is happening to their changing environment and the consequences of everyday choices, and to think about future directions for policy. The 25th edition enhances our understanding of the interwoven relationships and the subsequent fluxes of energy between plants, soils and water on the ground, as well as in and with the atmosphere. It explains how these can help mitigate climate change, while at the same time creating a resilient ecosystem.

Abstract

The continued destruction of forests, the deterioration of soils, the subsequent loss of terrestrial soil water storage and the reduction of water retention in the landscape are disrupting the movement of water in and through the atmosphere. This disruption causes major shifts in precipitation that could lead to less rainfall and more droughts in many areas of the world, increases in regional temperatures and an exacerbation of climate change. These changes affect regional climate, but can also impact regions far away. Understanding the interwoven relationships and the subsequent fluxes of energy between plants, soils and water on the ground, as well as in the atmosphere, can help mitigate climate change and create more resilient ecosystems.

Introduction

Vegetation plays an important – and often neglected – role in regulating the climate. Think of the difference between standing on a hot summer afternoon on a ploughed and barren field or in a dense forest. Clearly, the conversion of, for example, forests to cropland or urban areas brings major changes that can influence the climate.

From the solar radiation reaching a densely vegetated field surface only 1% is used for photosynthesis and 5-10% heats the air ("sensible heat"). Over 70% of the radiation is used for transpiration by the plants, by which liquid water is transformed to water vapor, a very energydemanding process ("latent heat") (**Figure 1**). Counting non-vegetated and water surfaces, around 50% of the



Figure 1: Distribution of the solar energy incident on vegetation.¹



Photo credit: Shutterstock.com

solar energy reaching the ground is used for evaporation and transpiration of water ("evapotranspiration" $^{\prime\prime\rm ii}).^{1-4}$

As these masses of air rise into the atmosphere, the water vapor will eventually condensate and release the same amount of energy as consumed on the ground, some of it dissipating into space. The newly created clouds will reflect incoming solar radiation and are the source of new precipitation.

Latent and sensible heat are types of energy released or absorbed in the atmosphere. Latent heat is related to changes in phase between liquids, gases, and solids. Sensible heat is related to changes in temperature of a gas or object with no change in phase. (https://climate.ncsu.edu/edu/Heat)

ⁱⁱ The combined processes of evaporation and transpiration of the water from the earth's surface into the atmosphere.

FORESIGHT



Why is this issue important?

Of the approximately 120,000 km³ of water that falls on terrestrial surfaces as precipitation each year, around 60% comes from the ocean while 40% derive from land (see **Figure 2**).^{5,6} 60-80% of this land-derived atmospheric moisture comes from transpiration by plants^{2,7,8,} demonstrating the important role vegetation plays in feeding the precipitation cycle, as well as in transferring energy from the ground into the upper atmosphere.

Until recently, human impact on water vapour in the atmosphere was assumed to be negligible, compared to evaporation from oceans. However, the impact humans have on atmospheric water vapour stems from major human-induced land cover changes, not only from industrial emissions, as previously argued. These land cover changes indeed have a major influence on the atmospheric water vapour cycles.^{9–11}

Almost half of the world's forests have been lost since the beginning of agriculture (with most of the deforestation happening since 1950)^{12,13} and converted into much less



Figure 2: Global water flows. Out of the 120,000 km³ of rain, which falls onto the continents, 72,000 km³ originates from the ocean, and 48,000 km³ stem from the land. Out of this, 60-80% comes from transpiration of plants and 20-40% from water bodies and soils. 32,000 km³ of land-based evapotranspiration goes back to the ocean via humidity in the air; 40,000 km³ are drained via rivers to the oceans.¹¹

Graphic: Stefan Schwarzer, UN Environment/GRID-Geneva

vegetated fields. What impacts do these vast humaninduced land cover changes have on the earth's water and energy fluxes?

Main findings

Trees as water vapour generators

Every tree in the forest is a water fountain, sucking water out of the ground by its roots, pumping it through the trunk, branches and leaves, releasing the water as water vapour through pores in its foliage into the atmosphere. On a normal sunny day, a single tree can transpire several hundred litres of water, cooling its environment with a 70 kWh of power output per 100 litres, which represents a cooling effect equivalent of two domestic air conditioners running for 24 hours^{14,15}. In their billions, the trees create giant rivers of water in the air ("flying rivers") – rivers that form clouds and create rainfall hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away (**Figure 3**).^{16,17}

Evapotranspiration as source of precipitation

Globally, 40-60% of the rain falling over land comes from moisture generated through upwind, land evapotranspiration, mostly by transpiring trees.^{11,14,18-20} In some regions of the world, the share amounts to 70% of the rainfall.¹¹ This recycling becomes more dominant further inland (**Figure 4**).

Tropical evergreen broadleaf forests only occupy about 10% of the Earth's land surface, but contribute 22% of global evapotranspiration²², highlighting their importance for the supra-regional water cycle. The typical distances that moisture evaporated from land travels in the atmosphere before it falls back to the land are on the order of 500–5000 km; the typical time scale ranges from 8-10 days.^{23,24} For example, moisture evaporating from the Eurasian continent is responsible for 80% of China's water resources.¹¹ The main source of rainfall in the Congo Basin is moisture evaporated over East Africa, while in its turn, it is a major source of moisture for rainfall in the Sahel.¹¹ The state of the West African rainforest is particularly important

3



Figure 3: Flying rivers transport water vapor over long distances covered by forests, which play an essential role in the creation of this vapor, acting as a massive water pump by absorbing and releasing billions of liters of water in the form of humidity. Graphic: Image adapted from Pearce⁷²

for the flow of the Nile.²⁵ This explains why even in major river basins, including the Amazon, Congo and Yangtze, precipitation is more strongly influenced by land-use change occurring outside than inside the basin. Even in several river basins that do not span multiple countries, flows were considerably affected by land use in other countries.²⁶

Land-use change and altered heat fluxes

Models show that local changes from forests or grasslands to croplands reduce their annual terrestrial evapotranspiration by 30-40%.²⁷ On a global scale, land-cover change between 1950-2000 reduced annual terrestrial evapotranspiration by 4-5% or 3,000-3,500 km³, and increased surface water runoff by 6.8%.^{27,28} Scientists found, on the other hand, that increased vegetation has a cooling effect that comes from an increased efficiency in the vertical movement of heat and water vapor between the land surface and atmosphere.²⁹

Changes in atmospheric patterns due to deforestation

Satellite observations suggest that forests have a major influence on cloud formation, not only in the tropics,

but also in temperate zones: disappearing forests can lead to significant decreases in local cloud cover and thus rainfall.³⁰ Modelling has shown that the extensive global deforestation between the 1700s and 1850s resulted in a decrease in monsoon rainfall over the

Indian subcontinent and southeastern China and an associated weakening of the Asian summer monsoon circulation.³¹ In the tropics, deep cumulus convection has been considerably altered as a result of landscape changes (mostly the conversion of forest to crop land). This not only affects local precipitation, but also has an impact over long distances through processes known as "teleconnections". These teleconnections can have impacts at higher latitudes, which significantly alters the weather in those regions.^{10,25,32,33} Even relatively small land-cover perturbations in the tropics can lead to impacts at higher latitudes^{34,35}, as for example connections between the Amazon and northwest United States.³⁶ Vanishing forests can also lead to less rainfall and longer dry seasons locally as reported for example from Rondônia in Brazil³⁷ or Borneo, where it was found that the watersheds with the greatest forest loss have seen a 15% reduction in rainfall.³⁸ In India. patterns of declining rainfall during the Indian monsoon matched changing forest cover in India, due to reduced evapotranspiration and subsequent decreases in the recycled component of precipitation.³⁹ This demonstrates the large patterns of water vapour and precipitation flows



Figure 4: Average continental precipitation recycling ratio (1999-2008). The higher the number, the more the precipitation stems from land evapotranspiration.^{11,21}

FORESIGHT Brief

Re-radiation of bare soil

Normally, more than 50% of the sun's solar radiation reaching the earth's surface will be converted by evapotranspiration into latent heat, which in turn gets transferred into the atmosphere, feeding the precipitation cycle, and partially radiating back into space.

On bare surfaces, for example fallow fields, dry meadows (in the summer season and after hay harvest), and on concrete or asphalt surfaces, the soil will absorb more incident solar radiation, heat up, create sensible heat and emit, proportional to the fourth power of its absolute temperature (Stefan-Boltzman Law), heat power into the atmosphere (**Figure 5, Figure 6**).

Surface temperature differences between these bare surfaces and forested areas can, based on a central European example, be as much as 20°C on summer afternoons (**Figure 7**).⁴⁰ In the Indonesian island of Sumatra, temperature differences between forest and clear-cut land of up to 10°C were found, explained, again, by an evaporative cooling effect of forests, which outweighs the albedo warming effect generated by the darker forested surfaces.⁴¹

High pressure zor

Cloud building

Precipitation

Latent heat: 10-20%





Figure 6: The same patch of sparse vegetation photographed in the infrared spectrum and in the visible spectrum. The bare surface of the ground is visibly warmer than the surface of the leaves cooled by transpiration.⁹

This highlights the fact that local biophysical processes triggered by forest losses can effectively increase summer temperatures in all world regions.⁴²

Historical deforestation has indeed reduced the latent heat flux on land and increased sensible heat on the ground.⁴³⁻⁴⁷ Deforestation has caused significant warming in the decade from 2003-2013, of up to 0.28°C on average temperature trends in tropical





Sensible heat: 70-80%

Soil: 10-15%

Graphic: Stefan Schwarzer, UN Environment/GRID-Geneva





Figure 7: Surface temperature distribution in a mixed landscape.^{14,40}

regions, and a strong warming of up to 0.32°C in the southern temperate regions.⁴⁸ At the current rate of deforestation, tropical forest loss could add 1.5°C to global temperatures by 2100, not accounting for other human-induced temperature increases.⁴⁹

Biogenic aerosols for cloud formation

In addition to the importance of forests for the energy fluxes and the generation of precipitation, large forests appear to be biogeochemical reactors, in which the biosphere and atmospheric photochemistry produce nuclei for cloud and precipitation formation, thereby sustaining the hydrological cycle.⁵³ Trees produce volatile organic compounds and "release" microorganisms bacteria and fungal spores, pollen and other biological debris - that live on the leaves and become airborne during and after rain in forest ecosystems.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁷ In the atmosphere, they form an important part of cloud condensation and ice nuclei, in turn impacting cloud formation and precipitation.^{53,54,57–59} The biogenic aerosols can further help to raise the freezing temperature by creating ice nuclei. Without this phenomena, freezing would not occur until clouds reach -15°C or cooler; with the aid of these ice nuclei, the process can be achieved at temperatures near 0°C, enabling efficient cloud formation and generating rain more easily and locally.⁵⁹⁻⁶²





Photo credit: Shutterstock.com

Oceans, a buffer in two directions

A third of anthropogenic CO_2 emissions and more than 90% of the additional anthropogenic heat emitted into the atmosphere have been absorbed and buffered by the oceans. When talking about global temperature rise,

预览已结束, 完整报告链接和二维码如下:

https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_13564

