A basin-level analysis of flood risk in urban and periurban areas: A case study in the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires, Argentina

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Lowland river basin
Supervised classification
Impervious surface
Flooding risk
Flood vulnerability
Environmental management
Environmental risk assessment
Geography
Hydrology
Natural hazard
Environmental science

ABSTRACT

Flooding in urban and periurban areas is a complex phenomenon that results from the interplay between urban expansion and the dynamics of the hydrological system. Understanding both processes is essential to manage flood risk. This study aimed to analyze the flood risk in urban and periurban areas of the upper and middle basin of the Luján River (Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires, Argentina) between 1985 and 2015. We assessed the factors that affect flood frequency by analyzing the precipitation variations obtained from meteorological data and applying hydrologic models. We also used supervised classification of remote sensing imagery to detect increases in impervious surface areas that could enhance flooding. Furthermore, we combined both analyses to identify flood risk situations in the region. Our results indicated that maximum precipitation and hydrometric values remained stable during the study period, with a marked interannual variability due to the presence of dry and wet phases. During the dry phase (2011-2015), when flooding events were infrequent, there was a steady urban sprawl in the floodplain area, and, as a result, more people would have subsequently become exposed to flood risk. Our results evidence the lack of regional policies to regulate the urban sprawl in flood risk regions.

1. Introduction

Floods have become a serious problem worldwide, causing loss of life and economic damage (Gao et al., 2019; Kundzewicz et al., 2014, 2013; Svetlana et al., 2015). In urban and periurban areas, flood events may occur at different times and places and vary in intensity, duration, and spatial extent, thus constituting complex phenomena that result from a link between urban expansion and the dynamics of the hydrological system (González, 2006; Lindón, 1989; Minciardi et al., 2006; Pascale et al., 2009).

For this reason, flood risk assessment requires a robust approach to determine the nature and extent of disaster by analyzing possible flood events and evaluating existing exposure conditions (UNIDSR, 2016).

Although floods are recurrent phenomena, they exhibit changes in periodicity due to several factors. These factors are either predictable or unpredictable (chaotic) climatic and hydrologic factors, whose variation is usually analyzed using rainfall-runoff transformation models, which can be contrasted with the observed hydrograph or limnograph (Perrin et al., 2003; Beven, 2012; Crooks et al., 2014; Elga et al., 2015; Coron et al., 2017; Douben, 2006). Difficulties in assessing water surplus are dealt with using a soil moisture accounting approach, while flow propagation through the river network can be simulated by applying hydrologic and hydraulic models (Muskingsum method, cascade of linear reservoirs, St. Venant equations) (Beven, 2012; Chalfen and Niewiec, 1986; Eagleson, 1972; Liu et al., 2015; Moussa and Bocquillon, 1996).

In both urban and periurban areas, urban expansion may replace vegetation cover and increase the imperviousness and soils compaction, thus reducing infiltration and increasing the volume and velocity of runoff (Kundzewicz, 2001; Vogel et al., 2011). Combined, these alterations affect the temporal structure of flooding and waterlogging (Hollis, 1975; Tucci, 2005; Vogel et al., 2011). These changes may be monitored and evaluated by means of remote sensing applications and techniques involving aerial and satellite-based imagery of the earth (Miller and Small, 2003). In particular, many multi-temporal studies using multi-spectral satellite imagery have proved to be useful for the analysis

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04517
Received 3 June 2019; Received in revised form 15 January 2020; Accepted 17 July 2020
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of changes in land use patterns in urban and periurban areas (Angel et al., 2005; Taubenböck et al., 2012; Benza et al., 2016; Kantakumar et al., 2016; Shahtahmassebi et al., 2016; MacLachlan et al., 2017) and for the modeling of urban growth patterns (Shi et al., 2017). Understanding the dynamics of variation in climatic factors and the production of geographical space is essential to determine the flood risk. Natural precipitation fluctuations may affect the hydrological regime, leading to exceptional flooding or water logging, which poses a threat to both urban and rural settlements.

Based on the fact that urbanization may affect social vulnerability to flooding, management measures aim to mitigate the negative impacts by means of infrastructure (defense systems, waterway diversion and construction of dams for water storage, among others), without taking into account the complex functioning of the Socio-Ecological System. Indeed, to reduce flood vulnerability, it is mandatory to evaluate the human-made environmental changes driven by political, social and economic factors (Kundzewicz, 2001; Minciardi et al., 2006; Pascale et al., 2009; Takeuchi, 2001).

In the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires (RMB), one of the most populated areas in the world, with approximately 14 million people, floods are a recurrent problem. More than 1,075 flood events were recorded from 1970 to 2012, with over 300,000 people being evacuated (Bertoni, 2006; Barbier et al., 2012). On May 31st 1985, the city of Buenos Aires suffered an extreme flood event, in which the highest volume of precipitation accumulated over 24 h was 310 mm; this extreme event caused 15 deaths, over 100,000 people evacuated and total economic losses of over U$S 246,000,000 (Barbier et al., 2012). Other relevant flood events in the region occurred in January 2001, April 2013 (which affected mainly La Plata city), October 2014, and August 2015 (INA, 2014; SMN, 2013; UNLP, 2013; Valverde, 2017).

Floods in this region occur principally in the floodplains of three of the rivers of the region: Matanza-Riachuelo, Reconquista and Luján Rivers. In particular, recurrent flooding affects the urban and periurban areas located along the coasts of the upper and middle basin of these rivers, causing important economic losses and representing a public health hazard. The upper and middle basin of Luján River is widely
representative of this situation and the management of the flood risk responds to the logics of land use planning in the region. In 2015, local media reported that floods affected 10,000 people, 1,500 had to be evacuated, and only 20% of the families were relocated after the event (Valverde, 2017).

Based on the above, the main objective of our study was to analyze the flood risk in urban and periurban areas of the RMBA to facilitate the decision-making processes to mitigate the damages caused by floods. Our working hypothesis is that flood risk in the region is managed without policies of land-use planning aimed to prevent urbanization in floodplains.

We tested this hypothesis by assessing: 1) the factors that affect flood frequency and 2) the processes involved in urban expansion. First, we focused on the analysis of variation in precipitation by using hydrometric information and hydrological models, then applied supervised classification of remote sensing images to detect land cover changes, and finally combined both analyses to identify and characterize the main drivers of the process of urbanization-related flood risk.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study area

The study area was the upper and middle basin of the Luján River and included the municipalities of Suipacha, Mercedes, Luján and San Andrés de Giles (Figure 1). The activities developed in the area are related to agricultural production, industrial production and urban centers. Data collected from the last Argentine National Census of Population indicated a sustained population growth from 144,296 people in 1991 to 162,766 in 2001 and to 179,638 in 2010 (INDEC, n.d.), with most inhabitants being concentrated in the cities of Suipacha, Mercedes and Luján. The rural areas are located along the Luján River and tributaries, thereby being exposed to high flood risk.

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2.2. Characterization of floods

We constructed and examined precipitation annual maxima series on a daily, weekly and fortnightly basis, as well as cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies and their integration. Data were obtained from the rainfall gauge stations of Gowland, Mercedes and of Universidad Nacional de Luján (National University of Luján; UNLu) (Table 2). Consistency between different sources of rainfall data was checked by means of the double mass curve method (Figure 2).

We tested the stationary hypothesis (null hypothesis of constant mean and constant variance) by means of the regression between precipitation annual maxima series and time, and estimated the significance of the slope of the linear fit (i.e. under the null hypothesis of constant mean, slope = 0 mm/year). The Breusch-Pagan test was used to assess heteroscedasticity (Breusch and Pagan, 1979).
To identify and characterize traits related to rainfall seasonality and interannual variability, we used the series of cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies (deviation of the monthly accumulated value from the mean monthly accumulated) and their integration. We assumed that the local trend of the integration of the cumulative monthly precipitation anomaly is associated with variations in the position of the phreatic level, as it is known to be a key factor in generating water surplus in lowland river basins with humid or sub-humid climate (Kruse and Zimmermann, 2002).

In these types of hydrological systems, the dynamics of the water balance is notoriously vertical. Indeed, the predominance of vertical flows over horizontal ones is due to topographic and edaphic factors that lead to an intense relation between groundwater and surface water storage (Kruse and Zimmermann, 2002). Periods of excess water or positive cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies are associated with periods of water recharge.

We also analyzed the temporal trend and variance of the hydrometric level by using annual maxima series. Water levels were recorded at the hydrometric station installed on the Puente Nuevo-Jaúregui bridge, corresponding to the section of the Luján River (Table 2). Available records for the 1988–2005 period were provided by the Ministry of Infrastructure of Buenos Aires province (MOSP), whereas those for 2012, 2014 and 2015 were provided by the Instituto Nacional del Agua (National Institute of Water; INA) and the UNLu. Since the data from the MOSP have gaps and the data from the INA and UNLu are restricted to punctual events, we performed rainfall-runoff modeling for the 1988–2015 period. We used two spatially lumped and time-continuous

Figure 3. Annual maxima values of daily precipitation (a. Gowland station, b. UNLu station), weekly precipitation (c. Gowland station, d. UNLu station), and fortnightly precipitation (e. Gowland station, f. UNLu station).

Figure 4. (a) Series of cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies and (b) cumulative precipitation anomaly integration.
hydrological models: the Sacramento model modified with the effective area parameter ‘SacMod/ea’ (Sánchez Caro and Bianchi, 2014) and the HIDROSAT model (Giordano, 2014), both set at a daily time step (Model description in the Annex).

The 1988–2012 period was used for calibration and validation. The model performance was assessed using the coefficient of efficiency ($R_{ns}$) proposed by Nash and Sutcliffe (1970), the coefficient of determination ($R^2$), and the root-mean-square error (RMSE). Taking into account that precipitation is the main input for these models and that the analysis was carried out at constant parameters obtained from information corresponding to the 1988–2005 period, the experiment also allowed contrasting the hypothesis of changes in the hydrological regime by the “pure effect” of precipitation (i.e. changes in the hydrological regime due to fluctuations in the pluviometric regime, assuming stationary parameters for the entire 1988–2015 period).

Finally, we tested for possible changes in the internal structure of the hydrological system by comparing the outputs of the hydrological models (daily time step) with available records of important recent floods provided by the INA and UNLu.

2.3. Land-use change analysis

Impervious surface expansion was used as an indicator of land-use change. This variable was identified using supervised classification techniques applied on LANDSAT (USGS) satellite images. LANDSAT is the most widely used satellite data sources because it is the longest-running program to observe global land use and has a multispectral scanner system for more accurate land cover classification (Estoque and Murayama, 2015; Gao et al., 2012; Guindon et al., 2004; Jiang et al., 2017; Luo et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2017; Ridd and Liu, 1998; Schneider, 2012; Song et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). We selected one cloud-free image per year between 1985 and 2015. Before 2011, images were first acquired from the THEMATIC MAPPER sensor and then from the Operational Land Imager (OLI) sensor. A normalized spectral difference vector (NDSV) was constructed prior to the classification to maximize differences in reflectance between land cover classes (Eq. 1) (Angiuli and Trianni, 2014; Luo et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2015).

$$NDSV_w = \frac{(b_1 - b) (b_2 + b)}{b_2 - b}$$

where $b_1$ and $b_2$ are the band pairs for each image.

The NDSV images were supervised classified applying the algorithms: Classification and Regression Tree -CART- (Breiman et al., 1984), Random Forest (Breiman, 2001), and Support Vector Machine-SVM-(Burges, 1998). These classification tools are considered to be expert systems because they allow determining-non-parametrically-statistical relationships between many data layers, which are then converted into binary decisions (Angiuli and Trianni, 2014; Luo et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2015). Both the Landsat imagery derived from measured values of reflectance at the top of the atmosphere and the algorithms were obtained from the Google Earth Engine platform (Gorelick et al., 2017).

The training areas were obtained using very-high-resolution images, provided by Quick Bird satellite imagery extracted from Google Earth Pro (2002–2014); we assumed that the areas with some kind of building or

![Figure 5](image-url)

Figure 5. (a) Annual maxima series of the hydrometric level (observed vs simulated) for the 1990–2005 period and monthly values, (b) annual maxima series of simulated discharge of the Sacramento Model, (c) simulated annual maxima flow series from HIDROSAT, and (d) observed vs simulated mean monthly flow values from the SacMod/ea model (red triangles, $R^2 = 0.76, R_{ns} = 0.6$) and the HIDROSAT model (green squares, $R^2 = 0.75, R_{ns} = 0.6$).
The analysis of variation of impervious surfaces was focused in the urban zones. The urban zones were delimited by the Zoning Code of Buenos Aires province (Decree-Law 8912/77) and the Argentine urban census units (INDEC, n.d.).

Finally, we estimated the increase in urban impervious surface in flood areas by overlying the 100-year flood extent (Reyna et al., 2007). Geoprocessing was performed using ArcGIS 10.0 (ESRI); vectors and imagery were previously projected onto the local coordinate system (EPSG 22185).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Analysis of flood risk and related components

The precipitation annual maxima obtained at different time intervals (daily, weekly and fortnightly) from the stations of Gowland and UNLu are shown in Figure 3. The dispersion of values indicates randomness. The p-values of the Breusch-Pagan test for homoscedasticity were higher than 0.1 in all cases, thus indicating homogeneous variability/dispersion. Likewise, none of the slopes differed significantly from 0 (p > 0.1 in all cases) and therefore the hypothesis of simple stationary annual maxima could not be rejected. These results indicate that daily, weekly and fortnightly annual maxima precipitation showed no significant changes during the study period (1985–2015). Therefore, our results do not support the hypothesis that the change in the hydrological regime is the main forcing factor for flooding. It is possible that significant differences would be detected at shorter time scales (e.g. within daily, weekly or fortnightly intervals), but these are not expected to affect a large hydric system such as the drainage basin of the Luján River in Jäuregui.

The cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies and their integrations are shown in Figure 4. The analysis of the trends in the integration of the precipitation anomalies revealed a long period of water deficit between 2005 and 2012 (dry phase), followed by a predominance of positive anomalies from 2012 onwards (wet phase). This interannual variability is characteristic of the Pampean systems (Ameghino, 1984). The slope of the linear model fitted to the annual maxima series of the hydrometric level (H) obtained at the hydrometric station for the 1988–2003 period did not differ significantly from zero (Figure 5). On the other hand, both the Sacramento model modified with the effective area parameter (SacMod/ea) (Sánchez Caro and Bianchi, 2014) and the HIDROSAT model achieved a satisfactory performance (Rns ≈ 0.6). The results obtained through hydrological modeling showed no significant trend in the hydrological regime with the patterns of cumulative monthly precipitation anomalies, while a wet phase was detected after 2012, in line with the floods occurring at the end of the period. Therefore, there is no clear evidence supporting the hypothesis of change in the hydrological regime due to variations in the precipitation regime.

| Table 3. Impervious surface in the urban zones. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Urban area (km²) | Period       | Surface area (km²) | Relative increase (%) |
| Suipacha (3.70)  | 1985–1991   | 0.89               |                     |
|                   | 1992–2001   | 0.95               | 6.7                 |
|                   | 2002–2010   | 1.05               | 10.5                |
|                   | 2011–2015   | 1.37               | 30.5                |
| Luján (30.47)    | 1985–1991   | 8.92               |                     |
|                   | 1992–2001   | 9.09               | 1.9                 |
|                   | 2002–2010   | 9.22               | 1.4                 |
|                   | 2011–2015   | 10.82              | 17.3                |
| Mercedes (24.34) | 1985–1991   | 5.18               |                     |
|                   | 1992–2001   | 5.98               | 15.4                |
|                   | 2002–2010   | 6.46               | 8.0                 |
|                   | 2011–2015*  | 7.65               | 18.4                |

* Images for 2012 were not available because the TM sensor failed and the OLI sensor had not been launched yet.
Figure 7. Impervious surface in Luján urban zone.

Figure 8. Impervious surface in Mercedes urban zone.
Modeling and efficiency showed a similar bias for the floods of 2012, 2014 and 2015 in comparison to the 1988–2005 period of evaluation and calibration (Figure 6). We found no evidence to reject the hypothesis of stationary parameters. Therefore the combined effect of factors not included in the models may be assumed constant at modeling resolution level. Moreover, the modeling error showed no significant trend indicating changes in the parameter values of SacMod/ea and HIDROSAT for the 1988–2005 period in comparison to the 2005–2015 period. This indicates that the statistical structure of the modeling error remained stable, implying that there were no significant changes in the internal structure of the hydrological system that could explain the flood events in the last 4 years of the study.

In sum, the simple rainfall-runoff models used in our study indicate that: (a) a great amount of the information obtained after 2005 can be summarized without assuming changes in model parameters, meaning that the internal structure of the hydrological model remained invariable; (b) no changes were observed in the combined effect of the factors not included in the modeling process; and (c) the system was subjected to quasi-periodic fluctuations of dry and wet phases, with low hydrological activity during the 2005–2012 period and high recharge rate and surplus water from 2012 to 2015, in coincidence with above-average rains.

### 3.2. Extraction of impervious surfaces

Regarding the impervious surface mapping, satisfactory results were achieved using LANDSAT remote sensing images at medium resolution. In comparison to Random Forest and SVM, the algorithm CART had an overall accuracy of extraction of impervious surfaces between 79.9% and 98.03%. Table 3 shows the quantification of impervious surfaces in the projected urban area and the percentage of relative increase for each period.

| Municipalities | Period     | Impervious surface in flood-prone areas (km²) | Relative increase (%) |
|---------------|------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
|               |            | Totally impervious surface                   | Relative increase (%) |
|               |            | (km²)                                       | (%)                   |
| Mercedes      | 1985–1991  | 0.08                                        | -                     |
|               | 1992–2001  | 0.17                                        | 109.9                 | 8.67 |
|               | 2002–2010  | 0.23                                        | 35.3                  | 11.73 |
|               | 2011–2015  | 0.46                                        | 100.0                 | 23.46 |
| Luján         | 1985–1991  | 1.87                                        | -                     | 30.81 |
|               | 1992–2001  | 1.92                                        | 27                    | 31.63 |
|               | 2002–2010  | 1.97                                        | 2.7                   | 32.45 |
|               | 2011–2015  | 2.12                                        | 7.6                   | 34.92 |

![Impervious surface in Suipacha urban zone.](Figure 9)
during the last 4 years of the study (2011–2015), with the highest value being estimated for Suipacha (30.5%). Figures 7, 8, and 9 show the impervious surfaces obtained in 1986, 1991 and 2015 for the main urban zones in the municipalities of Luján, Mercedes and Suipacha.

### 3.3. Land occupation in flood extent

The 100-year flood extent represents 4.1% of the total surface area of the three municipalities (2764.4 km²). In Suipacha, the flood extent did not overlap with the urban zone, whereas in Mercedes and Luján, the flood extent overlapped the urban zone, covering 1.96 km² and 6.07 km², respectively. Table 4 shows the increase in impervious surface in the urban zone and flood extent.

The results exhibited a continuous increase in the impervious surface of Mercedes (from 4.13% in 1985 to 23.46% in 2015) and Luján urban zones, overlapped with the flood extent (from 30.81% in 1985 to 34.92% in 2015). We also detected that 79.0% of the surface in the upper Luján River basin remained pervious. Although an increase in impervious surfaces was detected in the rest of the study area, these showed a dispersed distribution and did not affect the internal structure of the hydrological system. In non-urban flood areas (107.45 km²), pervious surfaces are represented by different types of land use involving agriculture and poultry production, among others.

### 4. Conclusions

The strategy of governments to solve the problem here exposed has been based on structural measures to prevent floods. However, floods seem to be more recurrent, having much more negative impacts. The situation in the Luján River basin has the same logics and evidences the lack of land use planning and policies to prevent the flood risk in the region. The integration between the hydrological analysis and the process of urbanization reveals that the increase in urban growth observed in the last period coincides with a period of low hydrological activity between 2005 and 2012. Such information may serve as a warning to urban land managers about preventing land occupation in flood-prone areas.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Rubén Lombardo for the revision and contributions to the work.

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### Author contribution statement

Andrea Pamela Flores: Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Leandro Giordano: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Carlos Alberto Ruggerio: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

### Funding statement

This work was supported by Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina as part of the project “Sustentabilidad hídrica en cuencas hidrológicas de la región metropolitan y el noreste de la provincia de Buenos Aires” (Code 30/2005).

### Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Additional information

Supplementary content related to this article has been published online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04517.
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