

Describing Past and Future Soil Moisture in the Desert Sand Shrubland Community in the Escalante Region of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area

In the semi-arid environment of the Colorado Plateau, soil water availability is an important driver of vegetation dynamics. Recent drought-associated tree mortality in the Southwest has highlighted the potential vulnerability of ecosystems to changing water availability. Climate change models predict continued warming and seasonally drier conditions over the next century.

How will changing soil water availability impact vegetation dynamics in these already water-limited ecosystems? To answer this question the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and National Park Service (NPS) have teamed up to model soil water availability under projected climate conditions in nine Southern Colorado Plateau national park units where long-term vegetation monitoring is underway.

The resulting projections of soil water availability will allow us to develop hypotheses about how the dominant species in plant communities will respond to changing soil water conditions. This project will help park managers today by identifying the most sensitive ecosystems and informing strategies to improve long-term ecosystem resistance and resilience. Through continued monitoring over the coming decades we will also be able to compare observed vegetation dynamics to hypothesized responses, thus furthering our understanding of Colorado Plateau ecosystems.

Introduction

For this project, USGS and NPS scientists used the range of variation in historical climate data to provide context for assessing the relative impact of projected future climate on water availability. We used a soil water model, SoilWat2, to translate climate variability into site-specific estimates of soil water conditions that may drive plant responses. One of the valuable outputs of the model is daily soil water potential (SWP), which provides an estimate of water available for plants that reflects soil conditions. We examined SWP at deep soil depths (50–100 cm) in relation to site-specific NDVI, a measure of total annual vegetation greenness or productivity, generated for a 15-year period



Desert sand shrubland ecosystem of the Escalante region of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. NPS photo.

from satellite imagery. For more details, please see the Methods section.

This report provides the results of modeled SWP generated for the desert sand shrubland ecosystem in the Escalante region of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah.

Study Area: Glen Canyon National Recreation Area

The Southern Colorado Plateau Network (SCPN) has been monitoring vegetation and soil stability in grasslands, woodlands and forests in network parks since 2007. In Glen Canyon NRA (GLCA), SCPN monitors desert sand shrublands at three locations. In the Escalante region, this community is generally characterized by diverse shrubs, including Mormon-tea (*Ephedra* spp.), Fremont's indigo bush (*Psoralea fremontii*), blackbrush (*Coleogyne*

ramosissima), and sandsage (*Artemisia filifolia*). Soils in this ecosystem are typically classified as sandy.

Another location where the desert sand shrubland ecosystem is monitored in GLCA is in the Bullfrog region, which is addressed in a separate brief. The third location where this ecosystem is monitored, near Page, Arizona, did not have plots established at the time this project began. We used data from soil cores taken from ten plots in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem near Escalante as inputs to the SoilWat2 model (Figure 1).

Results

The outputs from our model show SWP for the past, present, and future, and highlight relatively moist and dry periods. These data can be considered in a variety of ways, including climate variability, variability among soil profiles, and relationships with plot-based vegetation monitoring data. Here we present seasonal and temporal patterns in soil water availability in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem in the Escalante region of GLCA.

Long term trends in past and future water availability

- Past SWP fluctuations highlight relatively moist and dry periods and allow us to compare the past variability in SWP to future projections (Figure 2A).
- Future projections (Figure 2B) suggest less water will be available. Average predicted SWP in the fall/winter will drop below -1.5 MPa, indicating potential water stress. Average predicted SWP for spring will drop below -3.0 MPa, indicating conditions of extreme water scarcity.
- In the future, soils will become drier, with fall/winter conditions approaching current spring conditions, and spring conditions approaching those observed currently

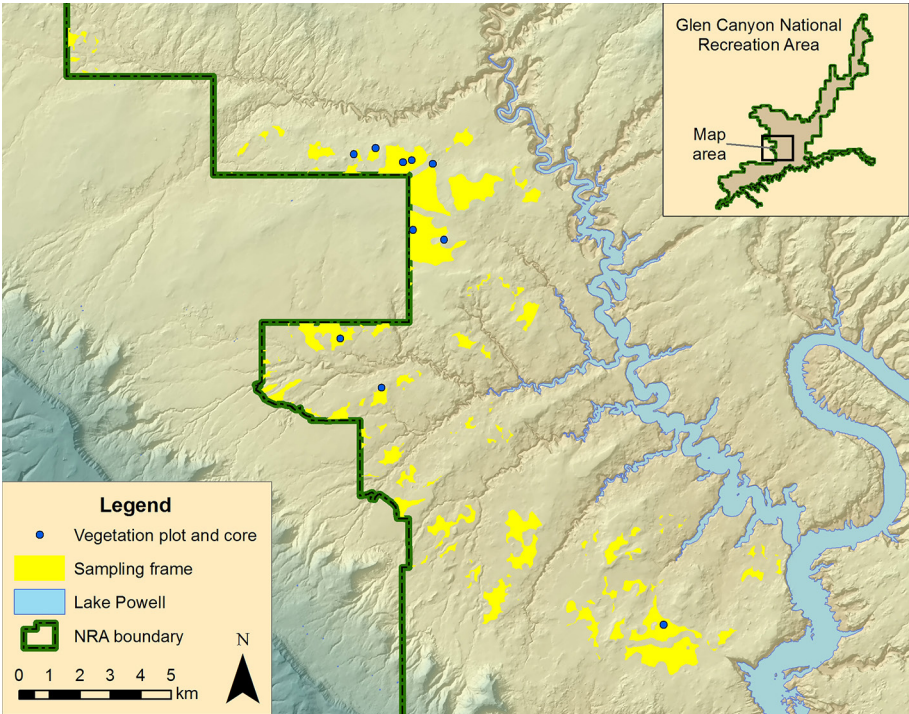
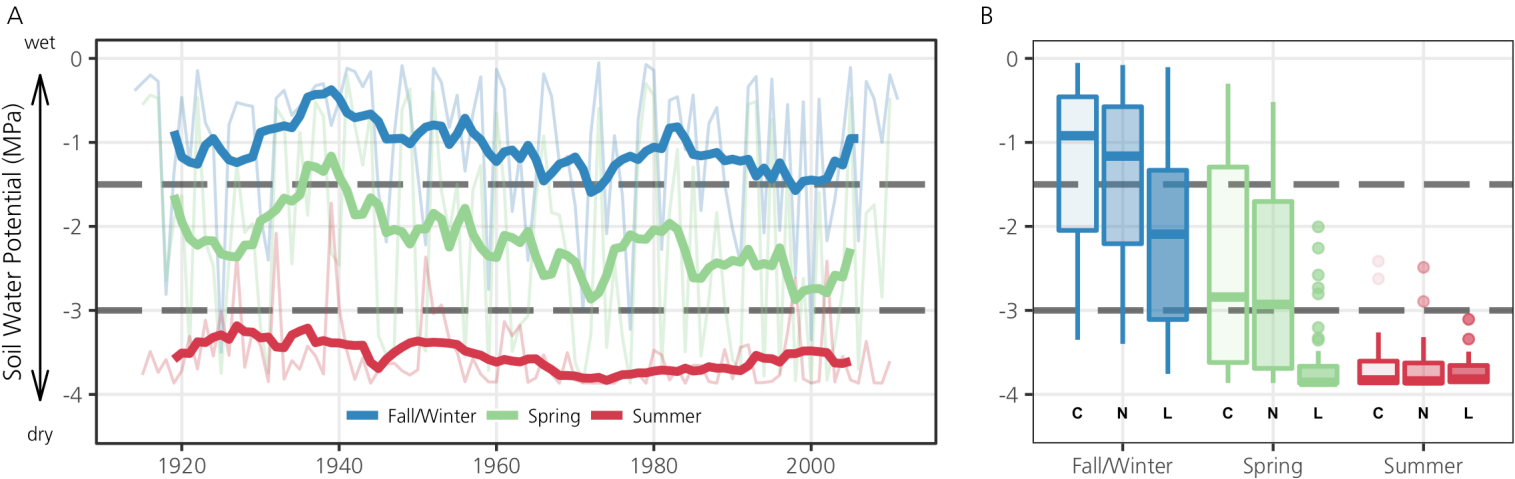


Figure 1. Map of the Escalante Region of Glen Canyon NRA showing Southern Colorado Plateau Network monitoring plots in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem. Plots from which soil cores were obtained are indicated as solid blue dots. NPS map.

in summer.

Historical and future climate patterns

- Currently, mean annual temperature (MAT) is 14.0°C. In the future, MAT is expected to increase under all climate models (near future +2.5°C, long-term future +5.1°C), underscoring the consistency of these projected rising temperatures across climate models (variation in temperature projections among models is reflected by the variation in orange and red values in Figure 3A).
- Mean annual precipitation (MAP) is 208 mm. Precipitation occurs primarily during the monsoon and the fall/winter (Figure 3A). While future changes in precipitation are less consistent across models than temperature, the substantial projected increases in temperatures will likely result in decreased soil moisture, especially during spring, and longer summer dry periods (Figure 3D).



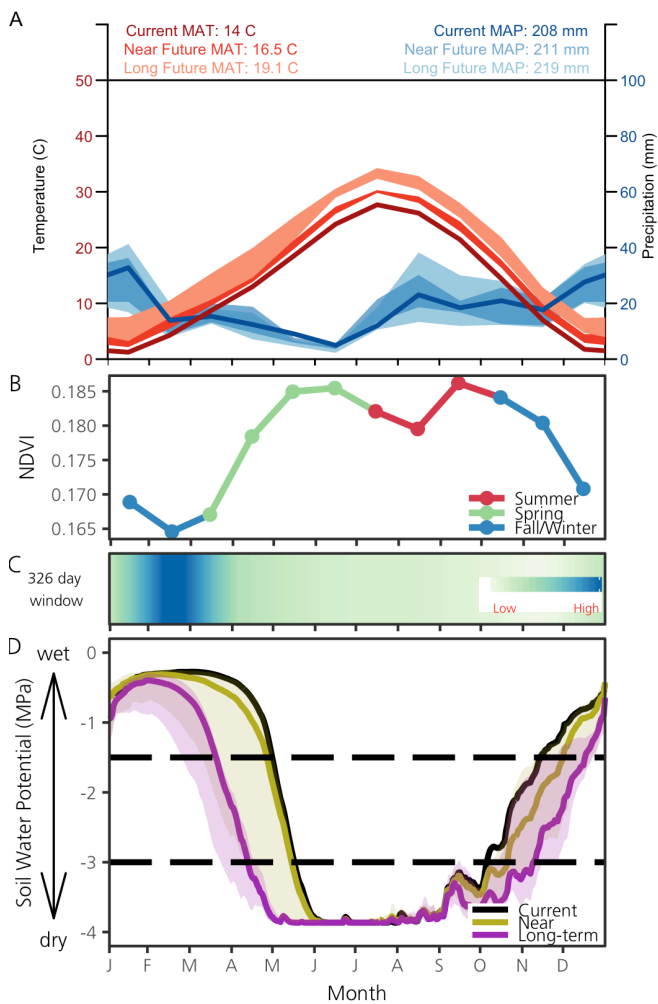


Figure 3. Panel A. Average seasonal patterns of climate in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem near the Escalante region of Glen Canyon NRA. Climate diagram (Walter and Leith 1967) shows mean monthly temperature (°C) and precipitation (mm) in dark red and blue lines, respectively, in the current period (1970–2010). Shaded red and blue areas indicate the range of potential values in the near (darker area; 2020–2059) and long-term (lighter area; 2060–2099) future periods. Mean annual temperature (MAT) and mean annual precipitation (MAP) are derived from the mean monthly values. Panel B. Monthly mean for normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI, 2001–2014). Panel C. Seasonal periods when soil moisture is related to fluctuations in vegetation productivity, depicted by correlations between NDVI and soil water potential (SWP) 2001–2014. Colors indicate the sum of significant correlations ($p < 0.1$) that overlap with each day of the year based upon window length (326 days identified as the most significant interval length). Darker blue indicates periods of greater cumulative correlation between NDVI and SWP. Panel D. Average daily SWP for the current period (1970–2010; black), near future (2020–2059; yellow), and long-term future (2060–2099; purple). For future time periods, thick lines represent the median value among climate models, while shaded areas represent the range of values across different climate models.

Figure 2 (left). Historical (A) and future projections (B) of soil water potential (SWP) at deep soil depths (50–100 cm) in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem near the Escalante region of Glen Canyon NRA for three seasons: fall/winter (October–February), spring (March–June), and summer (July–September). **Panel A** shows historical annual variability (fine lines) and moving 10-year averages (thick lines) of drying and wetting from 1915–2010. **Panel B** compares variability amongst years for three time periods, current (C; 1970–2010), near future (N; 2020–2059), and long-term future (L; 2060–2099), grouped by season. Box plot whiskers are 1.5 times the inter-quartile range of values, while dots are values outside this range. Dashed lines in both panels highlight plant-relevant SWP levels: traditional wilting point (–1.5 MPa) and a drylands wilting point (–3.0 MPa; Kolb and Sperry, 1999a, 1999b).

- Periods of meteorological drought occur when the precipitation line is below the temperature line in Figure 3A. The current period of meteorological drought spans from March to mid-November. In the future, the duration of these dry conditions will likely start earlier and last longer, primarily as a result of rising temperatures.

Relationship between water availability and vegetation dynamics

- In the desert sand shrublands of the Escalante region of GLCA, NDVI is variable, but typically highest in summer (Sep, 0.186) and lowest in fall/winter (Feb, 0.165) (Figure 3B).
- Annual NDVI is most strongly related to SWP over 326-day windows throughout the year, but most strongly in late winter and early spring (Figure 3C), underscoring the importance of soil moisture during this period.
- The correlation between soil moisture during this time of year and NDVI suggests a positive impact of long-term water availability on inter-annual variability in plant growth (Figure 3C).

Future soil moisture

- Future soil moisture is predicted to remain similar in the near-term scenario, but to decrease significantly in the long-term (Figure 3D).
- While January and February will remain moist under the long-term scenario, soil moisture will be reduced throughout the rest of the year.
- The drying of soils in spring is predicted to occur earlier in the long-term scenario and will shorten the period when soils are wet during the winter and spring growing season. This will likely have a substantial impact on vegetation reliant on this soil moisture.

Discussion

These results present a long-term historical and future perspective on soil moisture in the desert sand shrubland ecosystem in Glen Canyon NRA. Predicted changes in SWP are likely to affect vegetation community dynamics in the future. Results indicate that variation in annual productivity in this ecosystem is most strongly associated with soil moisture conditions in the fall/winter period. Spring soil moisture is also important for vegetation. In the long-term future, fall/winter and spring are expected to become drier, leaving this community vulnerable to declines as a result of climate change. However, when compared to other shrubland communities in the SCPN, the soil moisture here is expected to change less in response to climate change. And when compared to the second ecosystem monitored at GLCA, this shrubland community may fare better because it receives greater amounts of annual precipitation.

The modeled soil moisture values are influenced by both

the logic embedded within the SoilWat2 model and site-specific weather, soil, and vegetation. This approach provides a consistent, process-based framework for assessing climate change impacts on soil moisture, and projections of change in SWP should be robust to many modeling assumptions.

The relationships between soil moisture and interannual plant growth identified here can (1) contribute to hypotheses about how individual species within an ecosystem may respond to changing soil water availability and (2) inform future management decisions in the face of changing and increasingly variable climate. The variation among climate projections creates uncertainty in the magnitude of SWP change, but modeled SWP patterns consistently point to earlier and drier spring periods.

Literature Cited

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Methods

Data were collected from the following sources for input into the SoilWat2 model:

- texture and depth data from core samples that were taken during establishment of SCPN upland monitoring plots (supplemented with NRCS SSURGO soil texture data when the soil cores did not extend to the full depth of the soil profile)
- vegetation species and functional group cover data from SCPN monitoring plots
- daily weather data estimates from 1920 to the present
 - Livneh (long-term historical weather; 1916–2011; 1/16th resolution)
 - DayMet (near-term historical weather; 1980–2015; 1 km × 1 km resolution)
- projected daily weather for 9 General Circulation Models (GCMs) for the periods 2020–2059 and 2060–2099, under representative concentration pathways (RCP) 8.5. RCPs, adopted by the International Panel on Climate Change, characterize potential future climate based on the hypothetical trajectories in the concentrations of greenhouse gases, with 8.5 demonstrating the highest potential concentrations. All projected climate data were downloaded from the Green Data Oasis (<https://hpc.llnl.gov/data-vis/green-data-oasis>).

2. SoilWat2 integrated these climate data, along with the soils and vegetation data, to generate the following simulations (presented in Figure 2):

- long term historical daily soil water potential (1915–2010)
- near term historical daily soil water potential (1980–2015)
- near term future daily soil water potential (2020–2059)
- long term future daily soil water potential (2060–2099)

We used box plots to represent annual variation in each of the seasonal soil moisture projections for the respective time periods (Figure 2B). For future time periods, we used the mean projected soil moisture from the median ranked GCM.

The SoilWat2 model, along with the soil moisture simulation for this report, is available at <https://doi.org/10.5066/F7D50K6S>.

3. NDVI was generated on a bi-weekly frequency from 2000–2014 using a neighborhood analysis of MODIS data. NDVI is an indicator of productivity and represents phenological timing in vegetation communities. NDVI ranges from 0 (low productivity) to 1 (high productivity). Average monthly values are presented in Figure 2B.

4. Annual NDVI was calculated by integrating the area under the NDVI curve, as a representative measure of total annual productivity. Annual NDVI was then correlated with SWP averaged over windows ranging from 10 to 365 days throughout the year. This method of analysis allows for the consideration of both the impact of timing and duration of water availability on annual NDVI.

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