EROSION HAZARD MAPPING: MODELLING THE VEGETATIVE COVER

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ABSTRACT
Soil loss Estimation Model for Southern Africa (SLEMSA) has been used as a method to determine the erosion hazard in member countries of Southern African Development Community (SADC). The Vegetative cover sub-model, however, is based on the development of crops as a result of rain. An average vegetative cover, based on the development of crops through the rainy season, is used for the rainfall interception sub-model. This vegetative cover estimate is not applicable in Namibia, as (i) the initial rainfalls of the season, when the vegetative cover is at its lowest, often has the highest intensity and causes the most damage; (ii) cropping is only marginally possible in about 10% of the country, and (iii) the Zimbabwean crop growth models are not applicable to Namibia.

A method has been devised to correlate the cover of the natural vegetation to the Normalized Differentiated Vegetation Index (NDVI) value from a National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) image. The fitted regression line was applied to another NOAA NDVI image of October, representing the stage where the vegetation offers the least cover to the soil (before the onset of the rainy season). In this way an estimate of the lowest vegetative cover was obtained for the country.

Overall, the vegetation cover map produced is felt to be a good first approximation of the minimum vegetation cover in the country. However, the map can be refined by doing some detailed studies in the methodology, as well as collecting additional cover data. Different methods should however be investigated.

INTRODUCTION
As part of the SADC Erosion Hazard Mapping project, an estimate had to be obtained of the vegetative cover of Namibia. SLEMSA (Stocking, 1987) proposes the measurement of the vegetative cover by using standard crop growth models, predicting the estimated vegetative cover of the crop growth through the season. The algorithm is dependent on the type of crop, and the rainfall. It has been developed and extensively tested in Zimbabwe by Elwell & Wendelaar (1977) (as cited in Stocking, 1988).

Three problems present themselves with this approach:

(i) In Namibia, the initial rains of the season often have the highest intensity, and result in the most damage through erosion.
(ii) Very little crops are planted in Namibia (approximately 10% of the country, under marginal conditions).
(iii) Virtually no suitable data on crop growth is available for Namibia. Due to the low rainfall in Namibia, the Zimbabwean models can not be applied locally.

A completely different approach has thus been followed: The Namibian Weather Bureau is in the possession of a NOAA receiving station. An NDVI image is processed and made available to the Early Warning/Food Security Unit on a 10-day basis. The NOAA NDVI images are often composites of various images, selected for being cloud-free. These NDVI images are stored on computer tape and can be easily accessed.

The NDVI is a "greenness" index, depicting the activity of the vegetation. All that was needed, was to correlate the vegetative cover to the intensity of the NDVI. For this purpose a field survey of the vegetative cover on various sample sites all over the country was taken within a ten-day time limit (i.e. a "decade"), to coincide with the decade in which a NOAA image was collected and composed by the Weather Bureau.

For the purpose of mapping the vegetative cover, a NDVI image from the driest time of the year was used, in order to depict the minimum cover, or a worst case scenario. It was decided to follow this approach of minimum vegetative cover rather than an estimate of the average vegetative cover due to the following reasons:

i) The initial rains create the worst erosion,
ii) The rainfall is erratic, and often the vegetative cover can be expected to be far lower than the average (as often as 5 years out of 10 years, in some areas even more),
iii) Wind erosion is not included in the SLEMSA model. The strong winds responsible for much of the erosion problems are normally occurring during the dry season from July to October/November.

METHODS AND RESULTS
i) Survey methodology

A sighting frame has been developed for the use with the Elwell/Stocking model, with which the cover at various stages of development can be estimated (Stocking, 1988). This sighting frame works on a similar principle as the descending point frame (Mueller-Dombois & Ellenberg, 1974), except that instead of a descending point or pin, only a visual inspection is made whether a plant or part thereof is intercepting the path of a raindrop.

Because of the principle on which the survey is based, however, it was found that the construction and use of such frames was not feasible. As large amounts of data needed to be collected over a relatively large plot, and numerous plots needed to be collected during a short period of time, it was decided to replace the sighting frame method by a simple stave point method using an aluminium rod of 6 mm diameter and 2.50 m length. These were available as standard products at local hardware stores for less than N$ 10.00 each.

The length of the rod had two advantages: The length made it possible to model the line of fall of a raindrop upwards into the tree layer relatively accurate. The length also meant that the stave was acting like a spring, making it impossible to place the point onto the earth subjectively.
Figure 4: Estimated vegetation cover of Namibia for October 1994.
The thickness of the stave is important in accessing the cover. Mentis (1981) showed that the basal cover measurement is dependant on the thickness/diameter of the point used in sampling basal cover. A similar problem was experienced with the survey - some staff were equipped only with a broomstick. Samples were later verified, and a discrepancy of between 20 and 100 % found between the aluminium rod and the broomstick. The discrepancy was linked to the structure of the vegetation rather than the actual cover - finer grass tended to "intercept" the thicker broomstick, but not the aluminium rod. In the final analysis the data collected by broomstick was omitted.

ii) Field survey
An initial survey was done using two teams during the 2nd decade of February 1994 (i.e. 11-20 February 1994). Due to problems with cloud cover which could not be excluded from the NOAA image, it was decided to repeat the sampling during the 2nd decade of August 1994, now using 6 teams.

Plots were identified in a systematic manner all over the country. Because of limited time and manpower, it was decided that each team was to follow a route along the major roads, covering as much as possible distance within one day. Plots were thus selected every 40 or 50 km, depending on the route taken. An important criterium was that the plots should be of a (visually) uniform landscape for at least 1 km radius from the point sampled. This was necessary as the pixel size of the NOAA image is roughly 1 km x 1 km.

The rod was placed onto the ground every 2nd step, and it was noted whether the rod intercepted a part of a plant or not.

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Figure 1: Schematic overview of the data processing done to develop a vegetation cover map.
(i.e., whether a raindrop would be intercepted along this path or not). This measurement was repeated 150 times or more per plot. The measurement was done indiscriminately whether the plant part "intercepting the rain drop" was dead or not, as it was assumed that even dead plant material will contribute to the plant cover and thus protect the soil.

Additional data collected at each sample site was the position by way of a GPS reading, as well as a soil sample to determine the soil colour (Munsell colour) and the soil acidity (Coetzee, 1994). A basic description of the relevant vegetation was also included.

In total, 259 plots were sampled during February, and an additional 418 plots during August.

iii) Data processing

A schematic overview of the data and image processing is given in Figure 1.

An ASCII file of the plot positions was prepared, and then used with IDA to extract the NDVI values from the images. The initial data set from the 2nd decade of February 1994 proved to have extensive cloud cover over some areas during the entire 10 day period. A completely cloud-free image could therefore not be made up. This meant that not all data collected could be used for further analyses. The average NDVI values for February and for March were therefore also extracted by the Weather Bureau, in order to facilitate the extraction of possible clouded samples.

The average March and average February data were compared to the 2nd decade of February to identify plots which were probably cloud covered, i.e. plots which showed an extreme low NDVI cover during the 2nd decade compared to the average of February and the average of March. Eventually a linear regression line was fitted between the 2nd decade and the corresponding average NDVI values. All sample sites falling below the 95 % confidence limit were regarded as partially clouded and excluded from the data set (Figure 2). 38 plots were in this way excluded, which represent roughly 15 % of the total data from the 2nd decade of February.

A linear regression line was fitted, using the cover as independent, and the NDVI value as dependant variable. For the statistical analysis Statgraphics (Statistical Graphics Corporation 1991) was used. A $R^2$ value of 0.5180 was achieved, which can be regarded as a reasonable fit. The statistics of the fitted regression lines are given in Table 1. When plotting the NDVI values against the cover values (Figure 3), it was found that distinct groupings according to the vegetation type could be identified. This prompted the splitting of the data set into various vegetation type subgroups, using the Giess vegetation map (1971) as base. The data for some individual types was however so few, (and often so green, without any low cover samples), that it was decided to repeat the survey during a drier time of the year to collect enough additional data.

For the August data, a similar process of extraction, subdivision into vegetation units and regression analysis was followed as with the February data. However, the August data proved to have two serious flaws:

a) During August 1994, the sensors of the NOAA satellite were not adequately controlled. This meant that especially in the southern parts of the country extreme high NDVI values were obtained for large areas. Samples with such high NDVI readings, but low cover measurements, were visually identified on the graphs and eliminated. For the Dwarf Shrub savanna, which was worst affected, the August data had to be omitted.

b) Due to the rather good rainy season, especially annual grasses flourished and formed a dense canopy cover. A high cover was thus measured on such plots. However, such dead material does not give a NDVI reading, and will most probably disappear before the next rainy season, thus

Table 1: Linear regression analysis of the vegetative cover as independent variable (x) against the NDVI as dependent variable (y) (Regression formula: y = a + bx).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vegetation type</th>
<th>Data set used</th>
<th>Intercept (a)</th>
<th>Slope (b)</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Namib</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>-3.24e-04</td>
<td>2.16e-03</td>
<td>0.9428</td>
<td>0.0157</td>
<td>0.8829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Namib</td>
<td>February &amp; August (4 points only!)</td>
<td>1.14e-01</td>
<td>1.01e-03</td>
<td>0.0733</td>
<td>0.0575</td>
<td>0.0335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Namib</td>
<td>February &amp; August</td>
<td>0.94e-02</td>
<td>1.27e-03</td>
<td>0.4594</td>
<td>0.0341</td>
<td>0.2111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escarpment zone</td>
<td>(desert transition)</td>
<td>7.57e-02</td>
<td>1.58e-03</td>
<td>0.441</td>
<td>0.0543</td>
<td>0.1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mopane Savanna</td>
<td>February data only</td>
<td>1.52e-01</td>
<td>1.72e-03</td>
<td>0.5477</td>
<td>0.0372</td>
<td>0.3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karstveld &amp; Mountain savanna</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers (Total: 4 points!)</td>
<td>9.26e-02</td>
<td>3.95e-03</td>
<td>0.9632</td>
<td>0.0357</td>
<td>0.9660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornbush savanna</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers</td>
<td>9.77e-02</td>
<td>4.66e-03</td>
<td>0.8525</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.7267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland savanna</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers</td>
<td>7.90e-02</td>
<td>2.41e-03</td>
<td>0.7488</td>
<td>0.0363</td>
<td>0.5668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwarf shrub savanna</td>
<td>February data only</td>
<td>2.22e-02</td>
<td>2.91e-03</td>
<td>0.6951</td>
<td>0.0366</td>
<td>0.4832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmi desert</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers (Total: 5 points!)</td>
<td>1.17e-01</td>
<td>7.50e-03</td>
<td>0.6901</td>
<td>0.0145</td>
<td>0.4762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Kalahari (forest savanna and woodland)</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers</td>
<td>5.51e-02</td>
<td>6.16e-03</td>
<td>0.6569</td>
<td>0.1078</td>
<td>0.4315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Kalahari (camelthorn savanna)</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers (Total: 3 points!)</td>
<td>1.21e-01</td>
<td>1.75e-03</td>
<td>0.9917</td>
<td>0.0124</td>
<td>0.9835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Kalahari (mixed tree and shrub savanna)</td>
<td>February &amp; August</td>
<td>2.81e-01</td>
<td>-1.90e-03</td>
<td>-0.3182</td>
<td>0.1087</td>
<td>0.1013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All desert types, including escarpment zone</td>
<td>February &amp; August</td>
<td>8.55e-02</td>
<td>1.02e-03</td>
<td>0.3904</td>
<td>0.0408</td>
<td>0.1524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Kalahari, Thornbush savanna &amp; Karstveld combined</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers</td>
<td>8.78e-02</td>
<td>5.23e-03</td>
<td>0.7901</td>
<td>0.0833</td>
<td>0.6243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mopane savanna, Highland savanna, central and southern Kalahari combined</td>
<td>February &amp; August, excluding outliers</td>
<td>1.65e-01</td>
<td>2.04e-04</td>
<td>0.0985</td>
<td>0.0549</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined</td>
<td>February &amp; August</td>
<td>1.08e-01</td>
<td>7.67e-05</td>
<td>0.01665</td>
<td>0.1114</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined</td>
<td>February data only</td>
<td>6.68e-02</td>
<td>4.74e-03</td>
<td>0.7197</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.5180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
not protecting the soil during the first rain storms of the season. It was thus decided to eliminate data from the August survey which, upon visual inspection, showed a high cover value combined with a low NDVI. Such cases were common in the Northern Kalahari, Karstveld and Thornbush savanna types in the north-eastern parts of the country.

It was found that several data sets were unacceptably small (less than 10 sample points). Because of this, several data sets were lumped together. In this way the following groups were identified:

- All deserts and semi-deserts (Northern, Central and Southern Namib, the Winter Rainfall Succulent Steppe, the Escarpment Zone (desert transition) and the Saline Desert).
- The drier savannas (the Mopane Savanna, the Highland Savanna, the Central and Southern Kalahari).
- The wetter savannas (the Northern Kalahari, the Karstveld and the Thornbush Savanna).
- The Dwarf Shrub Savanna.

Linear regression lines were fitted on each of these data sets. The results of the linear regressions are displayed in Table 1.

iv) Image processing

A NOAA NDVI image for October 1994 was obtained from the Etosha Ecological Institute. Other than the NDVI images from the Weather Bureau, this image was not cropped to show only the Namibian part of the image, nor was it geo-referenced. The image was converted with IDA software.

![Image](image.png)

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**Figure 2:** Correlation between the NDVI values of the 2nd decade of February 1994 (ndvi.feb_2) and the average NDVI values for February 1994 (ndvi.feb_4). All samples below the 95% confidence limit were regarded as "clouded" and removed from the data set.

![Image](image.png)

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**Figure 3:** Correlation between the NDVI and the vegetation cover for the 2nd decade (11-20) February 1994.
As a final step, the area of the various cover classes was calculated, using the AREA module of IDRISI. The results are given in Table 3.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The final estimate of the vegetative cover ranges from below -0.2% in the desert areas, to just about 60% at the Hardap scheme. With the RECLASS procedure, all negative values were converted to a 0% cover class. These are especially along the coast, but also in the Etosha Pan itself. The largest part of the country has a cover ranging between 5 and 25%, as can be seen in Table 3. The Hardap scheme is the only place in the country where a cover of over 60% is estimated.

Some obvious mistakes are seen on the map: A difference has been picked up across the border between the central and the southern Namib. This border is the Kuiseb river, with gravel plains north and sand dunes south of the river. In actual fact, no big difference should occur between these types. The difference perceived in the image can be attributed to the difference in soil type and/or geology.

In the Caprivi region, cloud cover obscured the measurements. The peripheries of the clouds are not completely opaque, but filter out much of the reflected light measured by the scanners of the satellite. The effect is that in the Caprivi strip some areas are classified as having a low cover. A higher cover can be expected in this area.
The fact that the data collected during August 1994 proved to be unusable, demonstrates that this method can be refined. Especially while sampling the cover, dead material should not be considered as being part of the vegetative cover. The sampling during February was advantageous, as virtually no dead material was left from the previous season, and the actual cover was actively growing. Problems with cloud cover are unfortunate, but can be excluded with repetition.

An average cover map, as well as an average minimum cover map, can also be derived by this method, simply by averaging the NDVI images over a number of years and seasons.

Refinement according to vegetation types is warranted, if considering the fact that there is a difference between the central and southern Namib, and that the slope of the regression lines of the "wetter" savanna types are often steeper than the lines of the desert and "drier" savanna types. It is considered to determine an average vegetative cover for each vegetation type with future vegetation type descriptions. This would be an alternative method to map the vegetative cover to the method presently employed.

Overall, the vegetation cover map produced is felt to be a good first approximation of the minimum vegetation cover in the country. However, the map can be refined by doing some detailed studies in the methodology, as well as collecting additional cover data. Different methods are also to be investigated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Agro Ecological Zoning (AEZ) Project team hereby gratefully acknowledges all help and assistance from especially the following persons and institutions:

- The Namibian Weather Bureau, and especially Dr Peter Hutchinson, with advice on processing, and the extraction of NDVI data.
- The Etoisha Ecology Institute for providing the October NDVI image.
- The Directorate of Extension for their assistance with field sampling. Especially the Grootfontein Office and the Gobabis Office were of great help.
- All colleagues involved in field sampling during February and August 1994.
- Renette Krommenhoek for assistance and advice with the statistical procedures.

REFERENCES


