

# The Socio-ecohydrology of Rainwater Harvesting in India: Understanding Water Storage and Release Dynamics across Spatial Scales

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19 **Abstract**

20 Rainwater harvesting (RWH), the small-scale collection and storage of runoff for  
21 irrigated agriculture, is recognized as a sustainable strategy for ensuring food security,  
22 especially in monsoonal landscapes in the developing world. In south India, these  
23 strategies have been used for millennia to mitigate problems of water scarcity. However,  
24 in the past 100 years many traditional RWH systems have fallen into disrepair due to  
25 increasing dependence on groundwater. This dependence has contributed to accelerated  
26 decline in groundwater resources, which has in turn led to increased efforts at the state  
27 and national levels to revive older RWH systems. Critical to the success of such efforts is  
28 an improved understanding of how these ancient systems function in contemporary  
29 landscapes with extensive groundwater pumping and shifted climatic regimes.  
30 Knowledge is especially lacking regarding the water-exchange dynamics of these RWH  
31 “tanks” at tank and catchment scales, and how these exchanges regulate tank  
32 performance and catchment water balances. Here, we use fine-scale water-level variation  
33 to quantify daily fluxes of groundwater, evapotranspiration (ET), and sluice outflows in  
34 four tanks over the 2013 northeast monsoon season in a tank cascade that covers a  
35 catchment area of 28 km<sup>2</sup>. At the tank scale, our results indicate that groundwater  
36 recharge and irrigation outflows comprise the largest fractions of the tank water budget,  
37 with ET accounting for only 13-22% of the outflows. At the scale of the cascade, we  
38 observe a distinct spatial pattern in groundwater-exchange dynamics, with the frequency  
39 and magnitude of groundwater inflows increasing down the cascade of tanks. The  
40 significant magnitude of return flows along the tank cascade leads to the most  
41 downgradient tank in the cascade having an outflow-to-capacity ratio greater than 2. At  
42 the catchment scale, the presence of tanks in the landscape dramatically alters the  
43 catchment water balance, with runoff decreasing by nearly 75%, and recharge increasing  
44 by more than 40%. Finally, while water from the tanks directly satisfies ~ 40% of the  
45 crop water requirement across the northeast monsoon season via surface water irrigation,  
46 a large fraction of the tank water is “wasted,” and more efficient management of sluice  
47 outflows could lead to tanks meeting a higher fraction of crop water requirements.

## 48 1 Introduction

49 Issues of water stress are now estimated to impact more than one-third of the global  
50 population, and it is predicted that this fraction will nearly double as the world reaches  
51 peak population (Wada et al., 2014). Such increases in water stress are driven not only  
52 by a growing population, changing patterns of food consumption, and climate-driven  
53 changes in water availability (Wiltshire et al., 2013), but also by spatial and temporal  
54 mismatches between water availability and water demand (Oki, 2006). From a spatial  
55 perspective, regional per capita water availability can vary drastically from more than  
56 50,000 m<sup>3</sup>/year to less than 500 m<sup>3</sup>/year (Parish et al., 2012; Wada et al., 2014), with  
57 levels of water stress in one basin having little impact on that in another. Similarly,  
58 temporal mismatches, particularly in areas with high seasonal rainfall variability, can  
59 create high rates of runoff leading to flood events and high short-term availability during  
60 wet seasons, followed by severe water stress during dry periods (Haile, 2005). Such  
61 temporal mismatches, paired with a shortage of surface-water storage, have been linked  
62 to both reduced incomes and a lack of food security (Gohar et al., 2013; Grey and Sadoff,  
63 2007).

64 Both spatial and temporal mismatches in water stress and availability characterize the  
65 climatic regime of India. The monsoon-driven climate common to semi-arid areas of  
66 India results in remarkable temporal variation where it is common for half of the year's  
67 total rainfall to fall over a period of only twenty hours (Keller et al., 2000). With such  
68 limited annual water availability and the extreme intra-annual rainfall variability, there  
69 have been ongoing efforts in India to increase storage capacity and additional water  
70 supplies for agricultural production and economic development (Grey and Sadoff, 2007).  
71 Over the last century, such efforts have focused primarily on large-scale projects  
72 designed to ensure higher levels of water storage and availability such as the building of  
73 large dams and canal systems (Cullet and Gupta, 2009; Mehta, 2001). For millennia,  
74 however, India has met the demand for seasonal water storage and increased water  
75 availability at the local level via the building of village-scale rainwater harvesting (RWH)  
76 structures, often referred to as tanks (Van Meter et al., 2014).

77 It is estimated that more than 39,000 of these RWH tanks are present in the southern  
78 Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which is the focus of the present study (Van Meter et al.,  
79 2014). These RWH tanks, which commonly take the form of earthen impoundments, 20-  
80 40 ha in size (Gunnell and Krishnamurthy, 2003), are built up from natural depressions in  
81 the landscape and have historically been designed to meet the water needs of subsistence-  
82 level farmers for rice production via managed sluice channels for irrigation (Farmer,  
83 1977). Tanks are often linked in a cascade with overflow from the upstream tanks  
84 spilling into surplus channels that lead to downstream tanks. The tank systems have fallen  
85 into decline in recent decades, primarily as a result of increasing reliance on groundwater  
86 pumping, and cheap access to electricity. This has led to declining groundwater levels,  
87 which coupled with a growing demand for increased agricultural production, have led to  
88 renewed interest in these traditional systems (Kumar et al., 2008; Shah, 2004). Although  
89 the majority of existing RWH tanks still remain in a state of disrepair (Anbumozhi et al.,  
90 2001), it is estimated that reviving RWH systems at an all-India scale could potentially  
91 add as much as 125 km<sup>3</sup> per year to the country's current water supply, making them  
92 critical in meeting the projected water shortfall of 300 km<sup>3</sup> per year by 2050 (Gupta and  
93 Deshpande, 2004). Consequently, in India's Groundwater Recharge Master Plan (2005),  
94 the need for renovation or new construction of RWH structures was highlighted at a cost  
95 of approximately \$6 billion, leading to high rates of revival of RWH structures across  
96 India (Agarwal and Narain, 1997; Shah et al 2009)

97 With the renewed and large-scale interest in the use of RWH structures (Garg et al.,  
98 2013; Rockstrom et al., 2002; van der Zaag and Gupta, 2008), it is critically important to  
99 ask whether these ancient structures perform their intended purpose of significantly  
100 improving water availability in a basin (Batchelor et al., 2003; Bouma et al., 2011; Calder  
101 et al., 2008a, 2008b; Garg et al., 2013). To do so requires quantifying the dominant tank  
102 inflows and outflows, specifically evapotranspiration (ET), groundwater recharge, and  
103 sluice outflows to irrigated fields. These water fluxes determine relative water allocation  
104 to aquifer supplies, irrigation needs, and atmospheric losses, and are influenced by a wide  
105 range of both natural and management controls, from climate and geology to the more  
106 direct anthropogenic controls (e.g., sluice outflow regulation). As such, a better  
107 understanding of tank fluxes and drivers of these fluxes is necessary when managing

108 individual and cascades of tanks to meet both societal (irrigation demand) and  
109 environmental (increasing rates of groundwater recharge) needs (Glendenning et al.,  
110 2012; Neumann et al., 2004; Ngigi, 2003).

111 Unfortunately, there is a lack of empirical studies that quantify tank hydrologic fluxes,  
112 especially at the scale of watersheds comprising of multiple tanks (Glendenning et al.,  
113 2012; Mialhe et al., 2008; Pandey et al., 2011, 2013). One reason for the lack of  
114 information is that both groundwater recharge and ET are highly spatially variable, and  
115 thus difficult to accurately measure at the field scale (Glendenning et al., 2012). Most  
116 previous studies of RWH tanks estimate recharge as a residual term in the water-balance  
117 method (Glendenning et al., 2012); in arid environments, however, recharge magnitude is  
118 small compared to other fluxes (Bond, 1998), making estimates from water balance  
119 residuals vulnerable to errors in other measured components. Furthermore, water-balance  
120 methods used in RWH tanks estimate recharge using modeled values of tank  
121 evapotranspiration, another rarely measured but critically important water flux in these  
122 arid environments (Sharda et al., 2006). While there is consensus regarding the value of  
123 direct measurements of temporal variations in recharge and evapotranspiration fluxes  
124 from RWH structures, such data are difficult to obtain due to the inherent complexities in  
125 making these measurements, especially under resource constraints (Glendenning et al.,  
126 2012).

127 Here, we propose an innovative use of the White (1932) method as a cost-effective means  
128 of obtaining spatially integrated, direct measurements of both ET and groundwater  
129 exchange in flooded RWH tanks. The White method, which was originally developed to  
130 estimate the magnitude of groundwater consumption by phreatophytes (Loheide, 2008;  
131 Loheide et al., 2005), has since been used to estimate ET and groundwater exchange in  
132 small, surface water systems (Carlson Mazur et al., 2014; Hill and Durchholz, 2015;  
133 McLaughlin and Cohen, 2013). In these systems, diurnal variations in high-resolution  
134 surface water level data are used to decouple ET dynamics from groundwater exchange.  
135 In this paper, we demonstrate an application of this method to RWH structures, which are  
136 more complex than the systems studied thus far in that they have additional outflows  
137 (overflow and sluice outflow), and are much larger in spatial extent (~1 ha vs. 20-60 ha).

138 Furthermore, while most studies of RWH systems have focused on individual tanks, we  
139 explore how groundwater-exchange dynamics change along a tank cascade made up of  
140 four tanks, and scale up measured fluxes to estimate cumulative effects of tanks on  
141 catchment water balances. Our study has two linked objectives: (1) quantify temporal  
142 patterns in groundwater exchange, ET, and sluice outflows over the Northeast monsoon  
143 season; and (2) describe spatial patterns of measured fluxes from upstream to  
144 downstream tanks in a cascade. Using these estimates, we attempt to answer the  
145 following questions:

- 146 • At the local scale, how do tanks partition water, and what is the spatial  
147 variability in this partitioning behavior along a tank cascade?
- 148 • At the catchment scale, how do tanks alter the water balance in a basin?
- 149 • What percentage of the irrigation requirements do tanks meet, and can  
150 they be managed more efficiently to increase this fraction?

## 151 **2 Study Area**

### 152 **2.1 Site Description**

153 The study site is located in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in the foothills of the  
154 Western Ghats mountain range (**Figure 1a**). The region surrounding the tank cascade is  
155 semi-arid, receiving a mean annual rainfall of 850 mm, with 50% of that falling during  
156 the Northeast monsoon season (Oct – Dec) (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2011; Vose et  
157 al., 1992). ET is greater than rainfall from January through July, while it is less than  
158 rainfall during the monsoon months (**Figure 1b**). For the year in which the field study  
159 was done (2013), rainfall over the northeast monsoon season (October – December) was  
160 355 mm, which is close to the 70-year average of 363 mm.

161 The focus of the study is the Thirumal Samudram (TS) tank cascade, a hydrologically  
162 connected group of four rainwater harvesting tanks that encompass an overall catchment  
163 area of 28 km<sup>2</sup>, in the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu near the headwaters of the Gundar  
164 river basin (**Figure 1a**). All four tanks in the cascade have undergone renovation through  
165 a joint effort of local stakeholders and the Development of Humane Action (DHAN)  
166 Foundation, an NGO group leading tank rehabilitation efforts across South India (DHAN,

167 2010), including regular desiltation, strengthening of tank bunds, repair of surplus and  
168 sluice weirs. The four tanks provide irrigation water for three village revenue districts:  
169 Pappanaickenpatti (Tank 1), Kudipatti (Tanks 2 and 3), and Ketuvarpatti (Tank 4), from  
170 upstream to downstream. The population of the tank cascade area is 6,057 (Government  
171 of India, 2011), and 88% of the working population hold jobs either as farmers or  
172 agricultural laborers (**Table 1**).

173 The landscape surrounding the tank cascade has a gentle slope, ranging from 0.5%-1.0%,  
174 and is characterized by Alfisol and Vertisol soils underlain by fractured rock of granitic  
175 origin (CGWB 2012; ICRISAT, 1987; Palaniappan et al., 2009) . Land use for the study  
176 area is primarily agricultural. Within the study cascade, 81% of the land is devoted to  
177 agricultural use, with 42% of this total being irrigated (**Table 1**) (DHAN, 2010) . During  
178 the northeast monsoon season (October-January), paddy (rice) is the primary crop in the  
179 region, while during other periods of the year, a variety of other crops are cultivated,  
180 including cotton, groundnuts, and pulses (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2011).

## 181 **2.2 Rainwater Harvesting Structures**

182 Tanks in South India are created through the construction of an earthen dam (bund)  
183 across depressional areas in the landscape as a means of storing surface runoff (Van  
184 Meter et al. 2014) (**Figure 2**). During elevated water levels, flooding extends beyond the  
185 main depressional area and into flatter, often farmed areas (i.e., tank water spread area).  
186 The bunds are constructed using locally available materials, usually a combination of  
187 amassed earth and stones, supported by the roots of trees and bushes growing along the  
188 bunds (Weiz 2005). Sluices (typically sliding gates) are constructed within the tank bund  
189 and are used to control the release of water into irrigation channels, which then transport  
190 the stored water to agricultural fields in the downstream tank command area (i.e., fields  
191 irrigated by tank water. During heavy monsoon rains, water may spill over the tank's  
192 overflow weir into surplus channels leading to downstream tanks or to nearby waterways  
193 (Van Meter et al. 2014). Tanks are often linked through these surplus channels in chains,  
194 or cascades, that can range in size from several to more than a hundred tanks, forming a  
195 dense hydrological network across this intensively managed agricultural landscape.

196 Tank storage capacities vary across sites and time, with the latter due to siltation and  
197 desiltation cycles (Weiz, 2005). Historical data regarding maximum tank area and  
198 storage volumes for the four study tanks, obtained by the Public Works Department in  
199 India in approximately 1900, are summarized in **Table 2** (DHAN, 2010). Information  
200 regarding the tank irrigated area, also known as the command area or “ayacut” (Weiz,  
201 2005), is also provided. Although the maximum water depths of the four tanks are  
202 similar, ranging from 3-4 m at maximum fill, the historical data show that the tank areas  
203 vary significantly, ranging from 19.3 ha (Tank 3) to 58.7 ha (Tank 2). The ratio of  
204 command area to tank area historically ranged between 0.77 – 1.25 (**Table 2**), which is  
205 characteristic of tank systems found in this area (M. von Oppen, K.V. Subba Rao, 1987;  
206 Weiz, 2005). **Table 2** also includes measurements made in the present study for  
207 comparison (discussed later).

## 208 **3 Methods**

### 209 **3.1 Field Methods: Sensor Installation and Bathymetric Survey**

210 Tank water levels were continuously measured during and in the months immediately  
211 following the 2013 Northeast Monsoon season (October 2013-February 2014) using total  
212 pressure transducers (Solinst Levellogger Edge, accuracy =  $\pm 0.3$  cm, resolution = 0.01  
213 cm; Solinst Canada, Georgetown, Ontario, Canada) installed in wells at the deepest point  
214 of each tank. Wells constructed of 10 gage PVC, were installed to a belowground depth  
215 of 70 cm and were screened above and below the ground surface. The pressure  
216 transducers measured total pressure (m H<sub>2</sub>O) at 5-min intervals, and these measurements  
217 were corrected for variations in barometric pressure based on measurements collected at  
218 the same intervals with barometric pressure transducers (Solinst Barologger, accuracy =  $\pm$   
219 0.5cm ( $\pm 0.05$  kPa), resolution = 0.001 cm (.0001 kPa)). Slug tests were used to measure  
220 soil hydraulic conductivity ( $K_{sat}$ ) in the installed wells using the Hvorslev (1951) method.  
221 Barometric pressure transducers were installed in dry wells open to atmospheric pressure  
222 but below ground to avoid changes in temperature and known temperature sensitivities  
223 (McLaughlin and Cohen 2011). Corrected tank stage data were verified based on direct  
224 stage measurements at the study site. Pressure transducers were installed on September  
225 26<sup>th</sup> before the start of the rainy season, and retrieved on January 20<sup>th</sup> for Tanks 1 and 2,



226 and March 7<sup>th</sup> for Tanks 3 and 4 generally when wells became dry. Continuous  
227 precipitation was measured using Onset RG3-M automatic tipping bucket rain gages  
228 (Onset Computer Corporation, Bourne, MA) installed near each of the four tanks.

229 Bathymetric surveys were conducted using a combination of measured water depths in  
230 flooded areas (i.e., ground elevations relative to water surface) and a Trimble ProXRT2  
231 GPS receiver paired with a Juno handheld computer for absolute ground elevations in  
232 exposed areas. Since Tank 4 had a large number of acacia trees that interfered with the  
233 accuracy of the Trimble, a Sokkia Total Station was used for ground elevation surveys.

234 Sixteen to twenty-four transects at a grid-spacing of 40 m were taken in each tank, and all  
235 surveyed elevations were converted to ground elevations relative to the tank base (lowest  
236 point), which was defined as zero. The bathymetric data were used to create stage-  
237 volume and area-volume relationships for each tank, and estimate current tank capacities.

238 The capacities estimated by this method led to reasonable values, with current capacities  
239 ranging between 62 – 92 % of the historical capacities (**Table 2**).

### 240 **3.2 Sluice and Overflow Weir Outflow Estimates**

241 There are six sluices in the study area, two in Tank 1, two in Tank 2 and one each in  
242 Tanks 3 and 4. Water release from the sluices is controlled by a sluice gate that can be  
243 opened to different degrees by a sluice rod. For our study tanks, the degree of sluice  
244 openness remained primarily unchanged during the period of study, and thus the major  
245 factor that controlled sluice discharge was the tank water level. To understand this  
246 relationship, sluice discharge was estimated at different tank water levels. Discharge was  
247 estimated by measuring the velocity and cross-sectional area over a chosen section of  
248 each outflow channel just downstream from the sluice outlet. This section was selected  
249 based on width uniformity and channel straightness. Approximately 20-40 measurements  
250 were made during each discharge measurement to obtain a reliable velocity estimate.

251 Stage-discharge relationships developed for each sluice were used to estimate volumetric  
252 daily sluice outflow rates; these rates were then converted to area-normalized rates ( $S_o$ ,  
253 cm/day) based on tank stage-area relationships (Section 3.1).

254 As described in Section 2.2, in addition to water loss via sluice outflow, water may also  
255 flow out of the tank by spillage through the overflow weir into surplus channels during  
256 large storm events. Overflow was observed during the study period only in the case of  
257 Tank 4 on 10/20, during the first major rains of the monsoon season. For this event, the  
258 surplus flow volume was estimated based on the observed drop in water levels between  
259 10/20 and 10/21.

### 260 **3.3 Estimation of Groundwater Recharge and Evapotranspiration (ET)**

261 The White (1932) method was used to calculate daily ET and net groundwater exchange  
262 from high-resolution stage data on days with no rainfall (**Figure 3**). The White method is  
263 based on two central assumptions: (1) ET (cm/d) fluxes are negligible at night, enabling  
264 groundwater flows to be estimated from nighttime stage changes, and (2) there is no  
265 diurnal variation in the groundwater exchange (GE; cm/d). Additionally, we have assumed  
266 that there is no surface inflow to the RWH tanks on days when it is not raining, which  
267 implies that overland flow occurs over very short time intervals. This is a reasonable  
268 assumption with the monsoonal rainfall dynamics that are characteristic of this region. Here,  
269 the White method was also modified to account for sluice outflow ( $S_o$ ; cm/d), which  
270 occurred both night and day in our study.

271 ET and GE (cm/d; positive values indicate tank outflow, or recharge) were estimated  
272 using the following equations:

$$273 \quad ET = S_y \times (s - 24h_n) \quad (1)$$

$$274 \quad GE = S_y \times 24 h_n - S_o \quad (2)$$

275 where  $S_y$  is the specific yield (dimensionless),  $s$  (cm) is the 24-hour stage change  
276 (positive values indicate net stage decline), and  $h_n$  (cm/h) is the slope of the nighttime  
277 decline in water level between 0:00 and 5:00 hours. Since sluice outflow occurs  
278 throughout the day and night, the nighttime slope ( $h_n$ ) includes both  $S_0$  and GE, and thus  
279 ET can be estimated as the difference between the 24-hour drop in water level ( $s$ ) and  $h_n$   
280 scaled to the daily rate (Equation 1). Because only GE and  $S_0$  occur at night, GE can be  
281 estimated by subtracting  $S_0$  from the nighttime hourly slope  $h_n$  scaled to a daily rate, and

282 after accounting for the specific yield. Specific yield ( $S_y$ ) is defined as the volume of  
283 water released from or added to storage in porous media divided by the total volume of  
284 the system (Healy and Cook, 2002). On a per unit area basis,  $S_y$  represents the input  
285 (rain) or output (ET) depth divided by the observed change in the water level.

286 In our study,  $S_y$  was set to 1.0, following the common assumption for flooded areas  
287 (Mitsch and Gosselink, 2007). It should be noted, however, that  $S_y$  values in soils can  
288 range from 0.1 to 0.35 (Loheide et al., 2005), meaning that below-ground water levels  
289 experience a greater decline than flooded areas for an equal ET flux. At the edge of a  
290 surface water body, this difference in water levels can lead to the formation of a hydraulic  
291 gradient, and thus to for water subsidy from the flooded area to adjacent exposed areas.  
292 In soils allowing rapid equilibration of water levels, daytime declines from the flooded  
293 area would thus to subsidy to adjacent exposed areas (McLaughlin and Cohen, 2014).  
294 Under these circumstances, ET estimated via the White method using  $S_y = 1.0$  would  
295 include both ET from standing water and any daytime flux to adjacent exposed areas to  
296 equilibrate greater ET-induced declines in belowground water levels. Such rapid  
297 equilibration between flooded areas and adjacent exposed areas was observed by  
298 McLaughlin and Cohen (2014) when applying the White method to estimate wetland ET  
299 in the sandy soils of Florida (hydraulic conductivity  $K_{sat} = 1.13 - 6.42$  m/day). In our  
300 study area, however, soils are more clay-dominated, and  $K_{sat}$  values for the tanks were  
301 measured to be from 0.024 – 0.17 m/day, 1-2 orders of magnitude lower than those for  
302 the Florida sites. These very low  $K_{sat}$  values suggest that any rapid equilibration (if any)  
303 would likely be limited to small edges, and thus a  $S_y$  value of 1.0 is a reasonable  
304 assumption. Moreover, measured losses in surface water are still valid and accurate  
305 components of the tank surface water budget regardless of the degree to which  
306 equilibration occurs. That is, if exposed areas are equilibrating with flooded areas, then  
307 the measured surface water decline will include both the direct flux (ET or GE) in the  
308 flooded area ( $S_y = 1$ ) and the subsidy (indirect flux) to equilibrate those exposed areas  
309 where  $S_y < 1$ . In this case, the loss in surface water depth is still loss due to a particular  
310 flux (ET or GE), just over a greater footprint (i.e., direct fluxes in flooded areas + indirect  
311 losses to equilibrate flux-driven declines in adjacent areas). Therefore, when we convert  
312 ET and GE depth losses to surface water volume losses using stage-to-volume

313 relationships, the estimates are accurate, and useful for discussing the proportions of  
314 stored surface water lost due to various water budget components.

### 315 **3.4 Tank and Catchment Water Balances**

316 Volumetric water balance calculations were carried out at both the individual tank and  
317 the tank catchment scales across the Northeast monsoon season to answer questions  
318 regarding the partitioning of rainfall into the various outflow components (e.g.  $S_o$ , ET,  
319 GE). For individual tank water balances, we utilized daily data for water levels, rainfall,  
320  $S_o$ , ET, and GE. For non-rainfall days, ET and GE values were calculated using the White  
321 method. For rainfall days, ET and GE could not be calculated directly via the White  
322 method, as the method necessarily assumes a constant groundwater flow and therefore  
323 cannot account for rainfall-related inputs. This disruption in the continuity of the data  
324 set, without correction, would lead to gaps in the daily water balance and an  
325 underestimation of both ET and groundwater exchange across the monsoon season. To  
326 eliminate these gaps, we estimated ET values on rainfall days via interpolation between  
327 White method-estimated ET rates on days without rain. GE on rainfall days was  
328 estimated based on the residuals of the daily water balance, using the measured 24-hour  
329 change in tank water levels, estimated ET rates, measured precipitation, and estimated  
330 runoff into the tank (McLaughlin and Cohen, 2013). Runoff was estimated using the  
331 Strange method (Shanmugham and Kanagavalli, 2013), an empirical method that was  
332 developed to predict runoff from catchments with irrigation tanks and small reservoirs  
333 and that is widely used throughout India by government departments dealing with  
334 irrigation (Latha et al., 2012). In this method, daily runoff is calculated as a percentage of  
335 daily rainfall, based on tabulated values in which runoff is expressed as a function of (a)  
336 rainfall on that day, (b) antecedent rainfall conditions, and (c) catchment characteristics  
337 (Shanmugham & Kanagavalli, 2005). The Strange Method has been shown to provide  
338 results comparable to those obtained with the more commonly used SCS Curve Number  
339 method (Latha et al. 2012), but is more representative of the South Indian conditions that  
340 are the focus of our study. Stage-to-area relationships (Section 3.1) were used to convert  
341 daily stage change and estimated fluxes (ET, GE, and  $S_o$ ) into volumes, which were  
342 calculated for each tank. Note that the water balances for all tanks are calculated for the

343 period from October 17, 2013-January 13, 2014, a period that spans the entire monsoon  
344 season and for which water-level data were available for all four tanks.

345 Water balances were also calculated at the catchment scale using a nested catchment  
346 design for four catchments (**Figure 4**): 1) Catchment 1 (C1): Tank 1 (T1) and its  
347 contributing catchment; 2) Catchment 2 (C2): Tank 2 (T2) and its contributing  
348 catchment, which includes Tank 1 and its catchment area and command area; 3)  
349 Catchment 3 (C3): Tank 3 (T3) and its contributing catchment, which includes tanks 1  
350 and 2, and their catchment and command areas; and 4) Catchment 4 (C4): Tank 4 (T4)  
351 and its contributing catchment, which includes tanks 1, 2 and 3 and their catchment and  
352 command areas. This nested catchment design enabled us to explore the effect of varying  
353 catchment sizes and tank to catchment ratios on the water partitioning.

354 Further, in order to understand the impact of the tanks at the catchment scale, we  
355 explored two scenarios for each of the four catchments scales (i.e., C1 - C4): (1) a with-  
356 tank (WT) scenario to represent current conditions within the catchment (i.e., four  
357 existing tanks); and (2) a no-tank (NT) scenario, with all other conditions (e.g., rainfall,  
358 ET on the catchment area) being the same. For the NT case, catchment-scale runoff was  
359 calculated using the Strange method (Shanmugham and Kanagavalli, 2013) and daily  
360 rainfall over the monsoon season. Remaining rainfall was assumed to exit the system  
361 through ET and groundwater recharge. For the WT case, we assumed the sluice outflow  
362 from the most downstream tank in the catchment (T1 for C1, T2 for C2, T3 for C3 and  
363 T4 for C4) to represent the Q value for each catchment. For T4, a surplus overflow event  
364 occurred at the start of the season, the volume of which was estimated based on stage-  
365 volume relationships; this volume was added to the sluice outflow to estimate the Q for  
366 C4. The Q values for the NT and WT scenarios were compared for all four catchments to  
367 understand the effect of tanks on the catchment runoff.

368 To understand the effect of tanks on catchment-scale groundwater recharge, we assumed  
369 the mean recharge to be 17% of the mean annual rainfall for the NT case following  
370 Anurag et al. (2006). For the WT case, the landscape was assumed to include three  
371 different domains, with separate recharge fractions being assumed for each domain: (1)

372 tank bed area: GE (Section 3.2) was used; (2) tank command area: 50% of the sum of  
373 rainfall and sluice outflow (based on typical values for paddy fields (Hundertmark and  
374 Facon, 2003); and (3) the rest of the watershed: 17% of rainfall (Anurag et al., 2006). The  
375 command area and the tank bed area estimates for the four tanks are provided in Table 2.

## 376 **4.0 Results and Discussion**

377 The current section is divided into two broad subsections. In the first, we report  
378 measurements of tank water levels and fluxes (ET and GE), and use these data as a basis  
379 for discussing tank water level dynamics across the monsoon season. In the second, we  
380 provide analysis of these and complementary data to answer questions regarding controls  
381 on the tank and catchment water balances and the ability of tank rainwater harvesting  
382 systems to meet irrigation water demand.

### 383 **4.1 Tank Water-Exchange Dynamics**

#### 384 **4.1.1 Tank Water levels over the Northeast Monsoon Season**

385 Water levels in the tanks rose sharply in mid-October following the monsoon rains, and  
386 then dropped over the next 3 months as water left the tanks through ET, sluice outflow,  
387 and groundwater recharge (**Figure 5**). Note that although the Northeast Monsoon rains  
388 began in early September, the tanks started filling only in mid-October. This time lag is  
389 likely due to a threshold effect, where runoff to the tanks occurs after cumulative rain  
390 volumes begin to exceed catchment infiltration capacity. Two distinct fill events can be  
391 observed, one on October 16<sup>th</sup> and the second on Nov 17<sup>th</sup> for all tanks except Tank 1, for  
392 which the second fill event is not as apparent. Between Oct 16<sup>th</sup> and Nov 17<sup>th</sup>, the  
393 trajectories of tanks 1 and 3 parallel each other, while those of tanks 2 and 4 are similar to  
394 each other. Towards the latter part of the season, the water-level trajectories of the four  
395 tanks approximately parallel each other. Tank 1 loses its water the earliest and is mostly  
396 dry by January, while the other three tanks retain some water till February. This  
397 difference possibly occurs because Tank 1 overlies Alfisol soils (Table 2), which have  
398 higher  $K_{sat}$  values than the clayey Vertisol soils that make up the tank beds of the other

399 three tanks (Pathak et al 2013). In the following sections, we explore how the outflow  
400 fluxes in the four tanks vary over the course of the monsoon season.

#### 401 **4.1.2 Estimation of Evapotranspiration**

402 Evapotranspiration (ET) fluxes estimated with Equation 1 for the four tanks are shown in  
403 **Figure 6**. ET rates derived with the White method are reasonable for the region and  
404 season (potential ET (PET) ca. 3 – 12 mm/day for Madurai (Rao et al., 2012), ranging  
405 from  $5.5 \pm 1.0$  for Tank 1 to  $10.1 \pm 0.8$  mm/day for Tank 3 during periods when the tank  
406 inundated area is greater than 25 % of maximum area. Below this 25% threshold (shown  
407 in **Figure 6** with dashed line), ET estimates for the tanks exceed PET rates by factors of  
408 2-3. These very high late-season ET values are likely the result of the tanks, at this stage,  
409 existing as small areas of flooding surrounded by comparatively extensive areas of  
410 exposed soil. Such conditions, particularly in arid regions, can create an “oasis effect”  
411 (Drexler et al., 2004, Paraskevas et al., 2013), in which advection of dry air from exposed  
412 areas can increase ET rates in flooded areas beyond typical values (and PET). The  
413 magnitude of the oasis effect is known to become greater when the soil is dry and  
414 surrounding vegetation is at higher moisture stress (Holmes and Robertson, 1958), thus  
415 explaining the significant increase in measured ET values as the landscape dries out late  
416 in the monsoon season.

417 It may also be that an overestimation of the  $S_y$  term in equations 1 and 2 could be a  
418 contributor to the high measured ET values during late season and low water level  
419 conditions. White method calculations by McLaughlin and Cohen (2014) showed ET  
420 rates exceeding PET by a factor of 5 or more when flooded areas were small, compared  
421 to  $ET/PET \approx 1.0$  at moderate to maximum flooded area. As discussed in section 3.3,  
422 however, the very low  $K_{sat}$  values in our study area, compared to the much higher values in  
423 the McLaughlin and Cohen (2014) study, suggest that any equilibration occurring at the tank  
424 edges would be very small in magnitude. Accordingly, the oasis effect, described above,  
425 appears to be the most likely explanation of our high ET values.

#### 426 **4.1.3 Estimation of Groundwater Exchange**

427 The temporal pattern of net groundwater exchange (GE), estimated using equation 2, is  
428 presented in **Figure 7** together with trends in tank water levels and daily precipitation.  
429 GE rates across the monsoon season appear to be driven by a combination of both tank  
430 water levels and the occurrence and magnitude of rainfall events. Tank 2, for example,  
431 has relatively lower recharge rates (positive values in Figure 7) in the earlier part of the  
432 season, with values decreasing with the occurrence of each major rainfall event, and then  
433 increasing incrementally over time until the next rainfall. The last period of significant  
434 rainfall occurs in mid-December, and shortly after this time, recharge magnitudes for  
435 Tank 2 reach a peak, and then slowly decrease with decreasing tank water levels. A  
436 similar pattern can be seen for Tank 4, where the peak recharge value occurs during the  
437 mid-December period, followed by a steady decline in recharge magnitudes as tank water  
438 levels decrease. In contrast, Tanks 1 and 3 appear to be less impacted by rainfall events;  
439 for these tanks, recharge magnitudes begin to decrease with decreases in tank water levels  
440 much earlier in the season, after the last major rainfall (64 mm) on November 17<sup>th</sup>. In the  
441 last few weeks of the monsoon season, Tanks 2-4 all switch over to a groundwater inflow  
442 regime (negative GE values). Lower recharge rates as well as these switches to  
443 groundwater inflow towards the end of the season may be due to tank water levels  
444 consistently having greater declines compared to the surrounding aquifer, resulting in  
445 decreases and potential reversals of hydraulic head gradients. This period is also,  
446 however, punctuated by some distinct, very high groundwater outflow events that may  
447 correspond to observed groundwater pumping in the vicinity, highlighting a potential  
448 direct human influence to tank recharge rates.

449 To better characterize the dominant drivers for the magnitude and direction of GE, with  
450 the overall goal of generalizing these observations to larger scales, we plotted GE as a  
451 function of days since last rainfall for all four tanks (**Figure 8a**). For Tanks 2 and 4, there  
452 is a threshold value of days since rain (14 days for Tank 2 and 16 days for Tank 4) that  
453 separates rainfall-GE relationships. That is, there is significant scatter in the rainfall-GE  
454 relationship at values less than this threshold, but strong negative relationships emerge  
455 between the two variables at higher values of day since rain (**Figure 8a**). In contrast,  
456 Tank 1 and Tank 3 have much lower threshold values of only 1 and 3 days, respectively.  
457 This pattern of decreasing recharge with days since last rainfall is reasonable, as water



458 levels in the tank steadily decrease over time, leading to decreased hydraulic head and  
459 thus lower rates of recharge. In contrast, immediately following a rain event, the system  
460 becomes more dynamic, and recharge is a function of not only tank water levels but also  
461 the short-term response of the local surrounding aquifer. When plotted for all tanks, GE  
462 was also found to respond linearly to tank water levels for most days throughout the  
463 monsoon season, except in the hydrologically dynamic periods after rain events, when the  
464 behavior was more erratic (**Figure 8b**).

465 In addition to these patterns of groundwater exchange across the monsoon season,  
466 differences can also be seen along the tank cascade, from top (Tank 1) to bottom (Tank  
467 4). First, while recharge dominates the exchange dynamics of Tanks 1-3, Tank 4 is more  
468 discharge-driven. As shown in **Figure 9a**, close to 90% of all days throughout the  
469 monsoon show net recharge behavior for Tanks 1-3, while Tank 4 is split almost equally  
470 between net recharge and net discharge days. From a volume perspective, the discharge-  
471 to-recharge ratio for the tanks shows a general trend from smaller (0.3 in Tank 1) to  
472 larger (1.2 in Tank 4) across the tank cascade (**Figure 9b**), with Tank 4 demonstrating net  
473 discharge behavior. Tank 4 is the most down-gradient tank, suggesting the possibility that  
474 aquifer levels adjacent to Tank 4 are higher (possibly due to upstream tanks' recharge)  
475 for a longer period of time than the other three tanks, leading to more frequent  
476 groundwater inflow.

477 Our finding of a distinct spatial pattern in groundwater exchange and sluice outflow  
478 dynamics across the tank cascade is a novel contribution of the present study. Most  
479 studies that have explored the recharge/discharge functions of tanks (Glendenning et al.,  
480 2012) have focused on individual tanks, with no consideration of the position of the tank  
481 in a cascade as an important control on its functioning. Our results indicate that in order  
482 to upscale tank-scale information to understand catchment and regional scale impact of  
483 tanks, more studies should focus on exploring the spatial arrangement of tanks in the  
484 landscape.

## 485 **4.2 Exploring biophysical vs. management controls on tank water** 486 **balance at the tank and catchment scales**

487 Three questions were posed in the introduction regarding the partitioning of water within  
488 a tank cascade, the ways in which tanks alter the catchment water balance, and the ability  
489 of tanks to meet irrigation requirements in the semi-arid landscapes of South India.  
490 Below, we use our measured data to provide answers to these questions in the context of  
491 a discussion of physical versus management controls on tank functionality.

#### 492 **4.2.1 Water balance at the tank scale**

493 The first question we asked was how tanks partition incoming surface water (direct  
494 rainfall on tank and surface runoff from tank catchment) into various outflow  
495 components, namely ET, groundwater outflow/inflow, and sluice outflow to the fields in  
496 the tank command area. The flow volumes corresponding to these components for each  
497 tank over the duration of the Northeast monsoon season are plotted by week in **Figure**  
498 **10a** and are summarized in **Table 3**. Notably, recharge to groundwater is a significant  
499 component of tank outflows. Although the primary function of tanks in South India has  
500 historically been to provide surface water for irrigation, and despite the high clay content  
501 of soils in the area, groundwater recharge is the primary outflow mechanism in Tanks 1-3  
502 (from 46-59% of total outflows). For Tank 4, however, which is dominated by discharge  
503 behavior, the primary outflow mechanism is sluice outflow, which directly provides  
504 irrigation water to the tank command area. As seen in **Figure 10a**, sluice outflows and  
505 recharge are the greatest early in the season, when tank levels are at their highest, and  
506 then decrease over time, ceasing entirely by mid-December for all four tanks.

507 Although the surface water volume lost to ET is substantial (0.48 – 1.64 million cubic  
508 meters over the 83-day study period), it is a relatively small fraction of the overall water  
509 budget. On a cumulative scale (Table 3), ET values range from 13% of total outflows for  
510 Tank 1 to 22% for Tanks 2 and 3. These smaller percentages of ET compared to recharge  
511 contradict the established view of tanks losing a significant fraction of their water  
512 through ET (Kumar et al., 2006). In addition, although the tanks have been constructed in  
513 soils with a high clay content, all but Tank 4, which has a high discharge-recharge ratio,  
514 have high relative rates of groundwater recharge. For Tanks 2 and 3, recharge is the  
515 largest outflow component (57-59%) and is more than double the values for sluice

516 outflow and evapotranspiration. For Tank 1, recharge is also the largest outflow  
517 component (47%), although it is similar in magnitude to sluice outflows (41%). The  
518 differences in flow partitioning between the four tanks can be attributed to differences in  
519 both natural (e.g., topographical position of the tank along the cascade) and human (e.g.,  
520 sluice management) factors.

521 Interestingly, a trend can be seen in the relationship between total tank outflows over the  
522 monsoon season and the maximum tank capacity (Figure 10b). As we move down the  
523 cascade of tanks, the outflow-to-capacity ratio increases, from 1.06 for Tank 1 to as high  
524 as 2.25 for Tank 4. The outflow-to-capacity ratio is an indication of how many times a  
525 tank fills up during the season, and the increase in values along the cascade of tanks is a  
526 function of increasing return flows from upstream command areas entering the  
527 downstream tanks. For Tank 4 in particular, groundwater discharge provides a  
528 significant input of water into the tank (Figure 9). Accordingly, Tank 4 has relatively  
529 greater amounts of water available for surface water irrigation throughout the season,  
530 with sluice outflow alone accounting for 1.2 times the total tank capacity. This increase  
531 in the outflow-to capacity ratio along the cascade of tanks is an important feature of the  
532 tank cascade system, and highlights the need to study the tanks not in isolation, but in  
533 relation to their position along the cascade. Biophysical controls (for example weeds or  
534 sediments in tank beds of upgradient tanks) or management choices (for example,  
535 planting crops with lower or high water requirements in upgradient tanks) can completely  
536 alter the water availability in a downstream tank. Thus, rehabilitation efforts and tank  
537 management should focus on maximizing benefits at the cascade scale instead of only at  
538 the individual tank scale.

#### 539 **4.2.2 Water balance at the catchment scale**

540 The second question we asked was how tanks alter the partitioning of rainfall into runoff  
541 at the catchment outlet (Q) and recharge within the catchment. Water balance  
542 calculations were done at the tank and catchment scales for the four nested catchment  
543 scenarios described in Section 3.4. Further, we simulated scenarios both with and without

544 tanks to understand the contribution of tanks towards altering catchment scale water  
545 partitioning.

546 Our results show a dramatic difference between the with-tank and no-tank scenarios, and  
547 a distinct spatial pattern of response in the four nested catchments. We found a  
548 significant decrease in Q at the four nested scales, from 22% of rainfall in the no-tank  
549 scenario to 5-9% of rainfall with tanks (**Table 4**). At the largest catchment scale (C4), the  
550 runoff decreased from approximately 2.29 million cubic meter (MCM) in the NT  
551 scenario to only 0.69 MCM in the presence of tanks (**Table 4**). This approximately 70%  
552 decrease is consistent with other work showing large decreases in runoff due to the  
553 presence of tanks (Kumar et al., 2008). Conversely, catchment-scale net recharge was  
554 observed to increase from 17% of rainfall without tanks to 24-27% with tanks (**Table 4**),  
555 which corresponds to an overall increase in net groundwater recharge of 40%,  
556 highlighting the potential beneficial role tanks may play in augmenting groundwater  
557 resources.

558 Despite this strong link between the presence of tanks and groundwater recharge, tank  
559 maintenance has declined across South India as farmers have become increasingly reliant  
560 on groundwater irrigation sources (Balasubramanian and Selvaraj, 2003). With tank-  
561 irrigated area across Tamil Nadu having decreased from 940,000 ha in 1960 to  
562 approximately 503,000 ha in 2010, some suggest that current tanks are operating at only  
563 30% of their potential capacity (Amarasinghe et al., 2009; Government of Tamil Nadu,  
564 2011; Palanisami and Meinzen-Dick, 2001). This degradation of tank functionality is  
565 eliminating or significantly degrading the primary mechanism for aquifer recharge in an  
566 area where, without rainwater harvesting, the majority of monsoon rainfall will leave a  
567 catchment as runoff within hours of falling. Our water balance calculations show that  
568 tanks, with adequate maintenance, provide a mean groundwater recharge benefit of 5,600  
569 m<sup>3</sup> per hectare of tank waterspread area. At the scale of the Gundar basin, with its 2276  
570 village-scale RWH tanks, each covering an area of approximately 40 ha (DHAN, 2010),  
571 these results suggest that fully functional tanks could provide a groundwater recharge  
572 benefit of 522 MCM. With a population of approximately 3,000,000, this difference  
573 translates to a difference in water availability throughout the Gundar Basin of 174 m<sup>3</sup> per

574 capita. It is currently estimated that all of India is experiencing some degree of water  
575 stress, with per capita availability ranging from 1000-1700 m<sup>3</sup>/year (Amarasinghe et al.,  
576 2005). Accordingly, maintaining tanks at full functionality has the potential to increase  
577 per capita water availability in the Gundar by approximately 10-15%.

578 It should be noted that the recharge benefit suggested by the results in our tank cascade is  
579 significantly larger than that reported for a watershed in Gujarat a state in Western India,  
580 where it was shown that the construction of new rainwater harvesting structures would  
581 lead to a 60% decrease in catchment runoff, but only a 5% increase in recharge (Sharma  
582 and Thakur, 2007). In the Gujarat catchment, however, annual rainfall is approximately  
583 half that in our South India catchment, and ET rates are estimated at more than 50  
584 mm/day, suggesting that variations in climate can strongly impact the contribution of  
585 rainwater harvesting structures to groundwater recharge.

#### 586 **4.2.3 Management controls on irrigation efficiency**

587 While the first two questions focused on the physical controls on tank water dynamics,  
588 our third question focused on understanding how tank water management affects water  
589 balances and, in doing so, contributes to meeting the irrigation requirements of the tank  
590 command areas. To answer this question we have plotted supply-and-demand curves over  
591 the growing season (**Figure 11**). The supply curves are the sluice outflow volumes from  
592 the four tanks. The demand curve in this case is the crop water requirement in mm/day,  
593 which is adjusted by the available rainfall to get the Irrigation Water Demand (IWD =  
594 Crop Water Requirement – Rainfall). The crop water requirement data in mm/day were  
595 obtained from Brouwer et al. (1989) for the four growing stages of paddy. Paddy planting  
596 dates, which differed dramatically between the four tanks (10/17, 10/17, 9/25, and 9/13  
597 for Tanks 1, 2, 3, and 4), are based on field observations. The earlier planting dates in the  
598 command areas of Tanks 3 and 4 were most likely due to the availability of borewell  
599 water for those areas. As can be seen in **Figure 11**, the difference in planting dates leads  
600 to different demand curves for the four tanks.

601 The supply-and-demand curves assess the ability of the tanks to meet paddy water  
602 demand by comparing IWDs to sluice outflows. The darker red areas in **Figure 11** denote

603 sluice water used to meet the IWD, while the lighter red areas represent sluice water that  
604 is flowing out at a time when crops are not requiring that water. The grey areas in the  
605 figure represent the IWD unmet by sluice outflow. Notably, large quantities of surplus  
606 sluice water leave the tank soon after it fills. These surplus sluice outflows are not  
607 needed by the crops at the time they leave the tank and will either leave the catchment as  
608 evaporation or downstream runoff, or will recharge groundwater over the course of the  
609 outflow channel and become available to downstream users. Because the sluices are for  
610 the most part not actively managed or appropriately maintained in our study area, the  
611 sluices remaining perpetually open and outflows are purely a function of water levels in  
612 the tank rather than a timed need for irrigation water. As reported in **Table 5**, it was  
613 found that anywhere from 31-79% of IWD within the study cascade remains unmet,  
614 while approximately 15-50% of available sluice outflows leave the tank unutilized by  
615 crops in the tank command areas. This remaining irrigation water demand in many cases  
616 must be met by farmers using groundwater pumping to supplement tank water, and in  
617 other cases remains unmet, leading to reduced yields or crop failure. In the case of  
618 groundwater pumping, it should be noted that a significant portion of the tank water does  
619 leave the tanks as groundwater outflow, and is subsequently extracted by groundwater  
620 wells for irrigation, thus helping to meet the crop water requirements by a non-direct  
621 route. The magnitude of this contribution of tank outflows to the crop water budget,  
622 however, is difficult to ascertain, and thus has not been included herein.

623 The timing of planting also has a significant impact on the ability of the tanks to meet  
624 crop water requirements (Figure 11), with the later planting dates in Tanks 1 and 2  
625 leading to more than 70% of the IWD being unmet by sluice outflows (**Table 5**).  
626 Conversely, Tank 4, with its much earlier planting time (9/13), more effectively meets  
627 crop water requirements with sluice outflow. First, the early planting time leads to the  
628 lowest total IWD of all the tanks (752 mm), as more of the crop water requirements can  
629 be met by rainfall. In addition, there is a better temporal match for Tank 4 between the  
630 unregulated sluice outflows at high tank water levels (**Figure 11**) and the crop water  
631 needs of the plants. Accordingly, more than 500 mm of the IWD is met by sluice  
632 outflows, and only 31% of the overall demand remains unmet. These results suggest that,  
633 to optimize tank operations and to maximize the water-provisioning capabilities of the

634 tanks, earlier planting times could be adopted by farmers, with supplemental irrigation  
635 from groundwater being utilized until the tanks fill. Such a change in management,  
636 however, would be dependent on both groundwater availability and the economics of  
637 groundwater pumping. Indeed, interactions with the villagers revealed that the earlier  
638 planting dates in the downgradient tanks could be attributed to the greater availability of  
639 groundwater in that region, which enables the farmers to plant before the monsoons have  
640 arrived.

## 641 **5.0 Conclusion**

642 In recent decades there has been growing interest in the revival and expanded use of  
643 rainwater harvesting tanks across the agricultural landscapes of India and other semi-arid  
644 regions to address issues of water scarcity and aquifer depletion. While it is well  
645 established that these tanks can increase local water availability, leading to higher crop  
646 yields and direct socioeconomic benefits (Palanisami et al., 2010), the impact of  
647 widespread use of small, distributed storage reservoirs on the catchment-scale  
648 partitioning of water resources is still an open question. Furthermore, while significant  
649 resources are being used to rehabilitate tanks, there is a lack of understanding regarding  
650 how these ancient structures function in a modern landscape, under current  
651 socioeconomic and environmental pressures. The hydrology of these tanks is so  
652 intricately tied with the social system in which they are embedded that only a systems  
653 approach, accounting for interactions between natural and human systems, can allow us  
654 to fully understand and manage these systems. Accordingly, any full analysis of tank  
655 water dynamics must be carried out within the domain of the emerging science of  
656 sociohydrology (Sivapalan et al., 2012).

657 In this paper we have used high-resolution monitoring of tank water levels to help  
658 quantify daily fluxes of evapotranspiration, groundwater recharge and sluice outflows  
659 from the tanks, and have coupled this information with village-level data on planting  
660 dates and irrigated areas, to further our understanding of natural and human controls on  
661 water partitioning at both tank and catchment scales. At the tank scale, groundwater  
662 recharge and sluice outflow were observed to be the largest components of the tank water  
663 budget, with ET accounting for only 13-22% of the outflows, including open water

664 evaporation and ET of plants transpiring in the tank bed. At the catchment scale, our  
665 results demonstrate that the presence of tanks within the catchment decreases runoff by  
666 approximately 70%, increases recharge by 40%, and directly satisfies approximately 40%  
667 of crop water requirements across the Northeast monsoon season via surface water  
668 irrigation. These findings suggest that village-scale rainwater harvesting tanks can  
669 dramatically increase water availability at a local or village scale, but also that they may  
670 have negative impacts on downstream users due to large decreases in catchment runoff.  
671 Our results also highlight that, despite ongoing the efforts toward tank rehabilitation in  
672 our study cascade, a lack of sluice maintenance leads to a large fraction of tank water is  
673 not being available for use in the tank command area. Thus, a more efficient management  
674 of sluice outflows, and better maintenance of the sluices themselves, could lead to the  
675 tanks meeting a higher fraction of crop water requirements.

676 An interesting and novel attribute of our study is the exploration of biophysical and social  
677 controls on tank water dynamics as a function of the location of the tank along a cascade,  
678 in a four-tank cascade system. We observe a distinct spatial pattern in groundwater-  
679 exchange dynamics with the most down-gradient tank being mostly driven by  
680 groundwater inflow, while the other tanks are more outflow-driven. Consequently the  
681 most down-gradient tank has a much greater outflow-to-capacity ratio, and is able to  
682 provide a much larger volume of sluice outflow compared to its capacity. The ability of  
683 the most downgradient tank to provide more irrigation water is a function of the return  
684 flow from the command areas of the upstream tanks and highlights the need to study  
685 tanks, not in isolation, but as a part of a cascade. There is also a distinct pattern in the  
686 crop planting dates in the four tanks, with the more down-gradient tanks having earlier  
687 planting dates, due to greater availability of groundwater, thus leading to a more efficient  
688 use of tank water. This dynamic highlights the feedbacks between the natural and human  
689 systems, where a greater availability of water at the catchment outlet leads to farmers  
690 deciding on earlier planting dates, which in turn leads to a more efficient use of the  
691 available water.

692 In conclusion, our results demonstrate the significant role that tanks can play in  
693 addressing challenges of limited water availability, by both increasing groundwater  
694 recharge as well as the water available for irrigation. However, they also draw attention



695 to the potentially negative environmental impacts of tanks with respect to reducing  
696 downstream flows. These findings highlight the need to understand the spatio-temporal  
697 patterns in tank water dynamics at the basin scale, especially within the framework of a  
698 coupled natural and human systems approach that allows a more complete understanding  
699 of how tanks alter the sociohydrological dynamics of water stressed landscapes. Thus,  
700 ongoing rehabilitation efforts of tanks must be complemented by more studies that  
701 quantify the functioning of these rehabilitated tanks and their impacts in altering basin-  
702 scale water dynamics, with the overall goal of appropriately managing tradeoffs between  
703 socioeconomic benefits and environmental costs.  
704

705 **Author Contributions**

706 The field study was carried out by M.S. under the guidance of D.L.M. Data analysis was  
707 carried out by K.V.M. and M.S. Drafting of the manuscript was led by K.V.M. and  
708 N.B.B. with contributions by D.L.M. N.B.B. conceived of the project and was  
709 instrumental to the basic experimental design.

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717 selection.  
718

719 **Figure Captions**

720 **Figure 1.** (a) Location of the Thirumal Samudram cascade within Tamil Nadu. The  
721 dotted lines indicate flowpaths calculated based on a digital elevation map (DEM) for the  
722 area; (b) Average rainfall and Potential Evapotranspiration (PET) (1900-1970) measured  
723 at Peraiyur weather station, 10 km from the study cascade.

724 **Figure 2.** (a) Aerial view of a Tank 4 in the Thirumal Samudram cascade; (b) plan view  
725 of a typical tank along with catchment and command area (Van Meter et al. 2014); (c)  
726 cross section showing tank water budget components.

727 **Figure 3.** The White Method for estimating ET and groundwater exchange using diurnal  
728 water level fluctuations. Gray bars denote nighttime.

729 **Figure 4.** Schematic for the catchment-scale water balance calculations. The dotted  
730 lines represent the boundaries and points Q1-Q4 represent the outlet points for the four  
731 nested catchments, C1-C4.

732 **Figure 5.** Tank water level and daily rainfall for the four tanks over the North East  
733 monsoon season. Initial water levels are zero, reflecting dry tanks at the start of the  
734 monsoon season. Tank water level is measured from the deepest point of the tank. In  
735 Tank 3 and 4, sensors were placed at the deepest points, while in Tanks 1 and 2, sensor  
736 wells were offset somewhat from the deepest points due to vegetation in the tank beds.  
737 As a result, the time series for tanks 1 and 2 end earlier than those for the other two tanks.

738 **Figure 6.** The temporal variation in daily ET over the monsoon season, shown as green  
739 bars. There are data gaps in the figure since estimates were made using the White method  
740 only on non-rainfall days. ET increases towards the later part of the season, coincident  
741 with decreases in tank surface area (shown as the grey shaded area). ET rates are

742 reasonable for the region and season when the inundated area is greater than 25 % of  
743 maximum area, as indicated by the dashed line.

744 **Figure 7** Daily groundwater exchange (mm/d) over the course of the Northeast  
745 Monsoon season (blue bars). Positive values indicate groundwater outflow  
746 (recharge) from the tank, while negative values indicate inflow (discharge) into the  
747 tank. Groundwater exchange magnitudes generally decrease and even switch from  
748 outflow to inflow towards the latter part of the season, when tank water levels  
749 (shown in grey and plotted on the secondary y-axes) are low. There are in some  
750 cases some very high groundwater outflow events near the end of the season  
751 corresponding to pumping in the vicinity. Rainfall is shown as red bars.

752 **Figure 8.** (a) Relationship between groundwater exchange and days since last rainfall,  
753 shown separately for the four tanks. The threshold line (dashed orange) separates the  
754 more erratic rainfall-driven groundwater exchange behavior following rain events (shown  
755 as light-blue diamonds) from the more predictable behavior typical of drier periods  
756 (shown as dark blue diamonds), when GE is driven primarily by hydraulic head values  
757 determined by tank water levels. (b) Relationship between tank water levels and  
758 groundwater exchange shown for all four tanks combined. Lighter blue diamonds  
759 correspond to the rainfall values below the threshold shown above in 7a.

760 **Figure 9:** (a) The frequency of daily recharge (outflow) and discharge (inflow) events  
761 over the Northeast Monsoon season, and (b) the ratios of cumulative discharge to  
762 cumulative recharge magnitudes. The results for the four tanks indicate that all tanks  
763 function as both recharge and discharge systems, but that Tank 4 is much more  
764 dominated by discharge behavior based on both frequency and overall magnitudes.

765 **Figure 10:** (a) Tank outflow dynamics (ET in green, sluice outflow in red and GE in  
766 blue) shown as weekly integrated volumes for all four tanks. (b) Tank water outflows as a  
767 fraction of the tank capacity, with total outflows calculated as the sum of ET,  $S_0$  and

768 groundwater recharge. The outflow-to-capacity ratios increase down the cascade, such  
769 that total outflows for Tank 4 over the study period are more than double the total tank  
770 capacity.

771 **Figure 11:** Water supply-and-demand portraits in our tank cascade. The grey area  
772 represents the Irrigation Water Demand (IWD), calculated as the difference between crop  
773 water requirements and rainfall (Brouwer et al., 1989). Planting dates were 10/17, 10/17,  
774 9/25, and 9/13 for Tanks 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The darker red area corresponds to  
775 the portion of sluice outflow that is utilized to meet the irrigation water demand, while  
776 the light red area corresponds to the portion of sluice outflow that is not directly utilized  
777 by crops in the tank's command area.

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- 961

962 Table 1

963 Population and land-use data for the study cascade.

| Tank #  | Village Revenue District | Population       |           |                                 |                | Land Use    |        |       |        |             |       |
|---------|--------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-------|--------|-------------|-------|
|         |                          | Total Population | Workforce | Farmers & Agricultural Laborers |                | Agriculture |        |       | Forest | Settlements | Other |
|         |                          |                  |           | total                           | % of Workforce | Active      | Fallow | Total |        |             |       |
| Tank 1  | Pappinaickenpatti        | 3313             | 1986      | 1724                            | 87%            | 48%         | 25%    | 73%   | 16%    | 2%          | 9%    |
| Tank 2  | Kudipatti                | 2122             | 1300      | 1172                            | 90%            | 74%         | 13%    | 87%   | 13%    | 3%          | 11%   |
| Tank 3  |                          |                  |           |                                 |                | 91%         | -      | 91%   | -      | 5%          | 4%    |
| Tank 4  | Ketuvarpatti             | 622              | 356       | 316                             | 89%            | 99%         | -      | 99%   | -      | 1%          | -     |
| Cascade |                          | 6057             | 3642      | 3212                            | 88%            | 68%         | 13%    | 81%   | 9%     | 3%          | 7%    |

964

965

966 Table 2: Summary of tank attributes based on historical tank data and the current study.  
 967 Current tank capacity is based on our measurements, while historical tank capacity is  
 968 based on Public Works Department data (DHAN, 2010).

| Tank # | Soil Type | Maximum Tank Depth (m) | Maximum Tank      |                        | Command Area/Surface Area Ratio | Tank Capacity (m <sup>3</sup> ) |         | Current Capacity/Historical Capacity |
|--------|-----------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|
|        |           |                        | Surface Area (ha) | Tank Command Area (ha) |                                 | Historical                      | Current |                                      |
| Tank 1 | Alfisol   | 3.2                    | 15                | 27                     | 0.96                            | 357,700                         | 276,405 | 0.77                                 |
| Tank 2 | Vertisol  | 3.4                    | 51                | 45                     | 0.77                            | 656,500                         | 407,513 | 0.62                                 |
| Tank 3 | Vertisol  | 4.0                    | 14                | 19                     | 0.93                            | 237,000                         | 217,633 | 0.92                                 |
| Tank 4 | Vertisol  | 3.3                    | 21                | 24                     | 1.25                            | 168,000                         | 139,270 | 0.83                                 |

969

970

971 **Table 3** Partitioning of tank outflows across the Northeast Monsoon season.

|                                  | Tank 1  | Tank 2  | Tank 3  | Tank 4   |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| Total Outflows (m <sup>3</sup> ) | 376,794 | 762,483 | 352,934 | 377,257* |
| Evapotranspiration               |         |         |         |          |
| <i>Total (m<sup>3</sup>)</i>     | 48,291  | 164,423 | 78,745  | 64,358   |
| <i>Percent of Total Outflows</i> | 13%     | 22%     | 22%     | 17%      |
| Sluice Outflow                   |         |         |         |          |
| <i>Total (m<sup>3</sup>)</i>     | 153,038 | 146,612 | 72,279  | 207,636  |
| <i>Percent of Total Outflows</i> | 41%     | 19%     | 20%     | 55%      |
| Recharge                         |         |         |         |          |
| <i>Total (m<sup>3</sup>)</i>     | 175,465 | 451,448 | 201,910 | 105,263  |
| <i>Percent of Total Outflows</i> | 47%     | 59%     | 57%     | 28%      |

972 \*Note that the total outflow volume given here for Tank 4 does not include the 10/20 overflow event at the  
973 start of the monsoon season. As water exiting the tank via the overflow weir passes directly out of the tank  
974 catchment, bypassing the tank command area and thus not remaining as a source for irrigation or  
975 groundwater exchange within the tank cascade, we considered it separately from other flows.

976 **Table 4:** Water Balance Summary at the Tank Catchment scale

|                         | Catchment 1 | Catchment 2 | Catchment 3 | Catchment 4 |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Area (km <sup>2</sup> ) | 5.0         | 16.2        | 22.5        | 28.4        |
| Precipitation P (MCM)   | 1.8         | 5.8         | 8.1         | 10.2        |
| Runoff, Q (MCM)         |             |             |             |             |
| <i>with tanks</i>       | 0.15        | 0.30        | 0.37        | 0.69        |
| <i>without tanks</i>    | 0.40        | 1.31        | 1.81        | 2.29        |
| Recharge, R (MCM)       |             |             |             |             |
| <i>with tanks</i>       | 0.48        | 1.44        | 1.97        | 2.42        |
| <i>without tanks</i>    | 0.31        | 0.99        | 1.37        | 1.73        |
| Q/P                     |             |             |             |             |
| <i>with tanks</i>       | 0.09        | 0.05        | 0.05        | 0.07        |
| <i>without tanks</i>    | 0.22        | 0.22        | 0.22        | 0.22        |
| R/P                     |             |             |             |             |
| <i>with tanks</i>       | 0.27        | 0.25        | 0.24        | 0.24        |
| <i>without tanks</i>    | 0.17        | 0.17        | 0.17        | 0.17        |

977

978 **Table 5:** Sluice outflows and irrigation water demand (IWD).

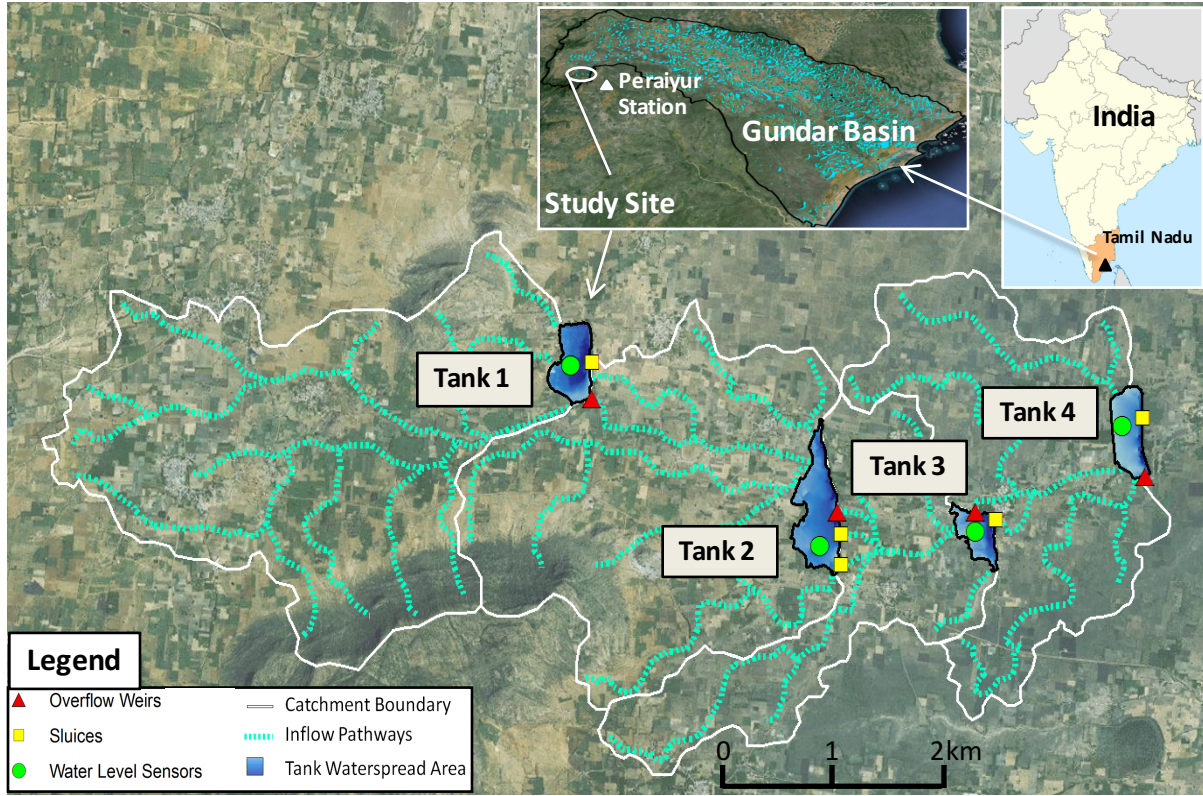
|                          | Tank 1 | Tank 2 | Tank 3 | Tank 4 |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Planting Date            | 10/17  | 10/17  | 9/25   | 9/13   |
| Sluice Water             |        |        |        |        |
| <i>Total (mm)</i>        | 570    | 326    | 391    | 861    |
| <i>Utilized (mm)</i>     | 283    | 210    | 333    | 516    |
| <i>Surplus (mm)</i>      | 287    | 116    | 58     | 345    |
| <i>Percent Surplus</i>   | 50%    | 36%    | 15%    | 40%    |
| Irrigation Water Demand  |        |        |        |        |
| <i>Total (mm)</i>        | 996    | 996    | 872    | 752    |
| <i>Unmet Demand (mm)</i> | 713    | 786    | 540    | 235    |
| <i>Percent Unmet</i>     | 72%    | 79%    | 62%    | 31%    |

979



Figure 1

a)



b)

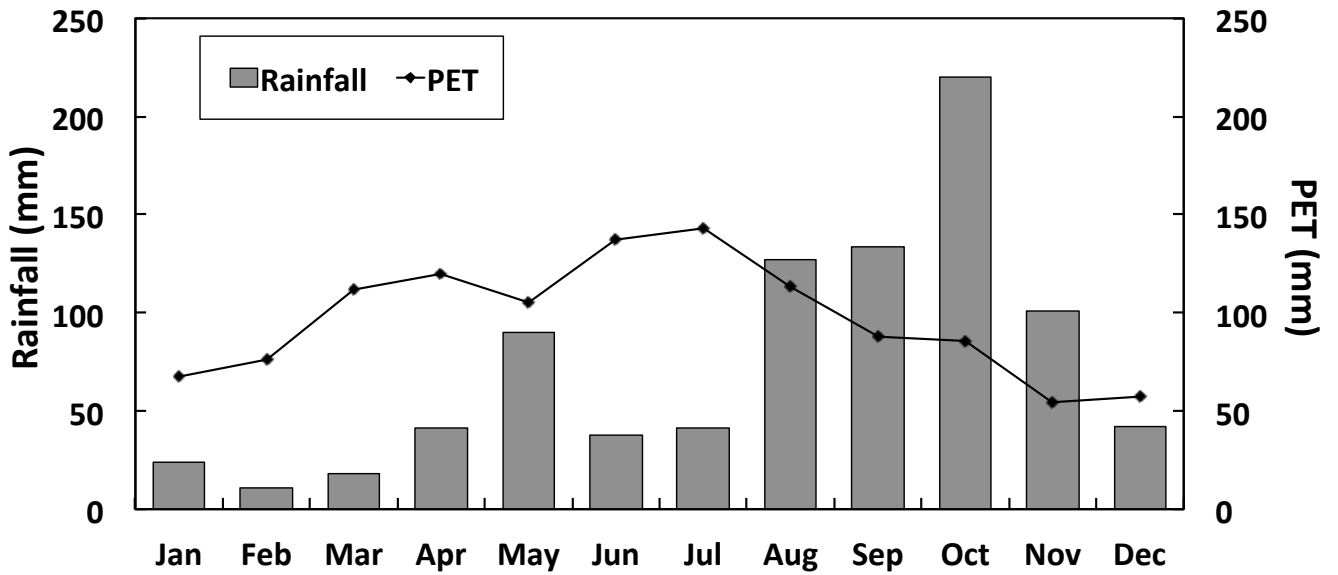
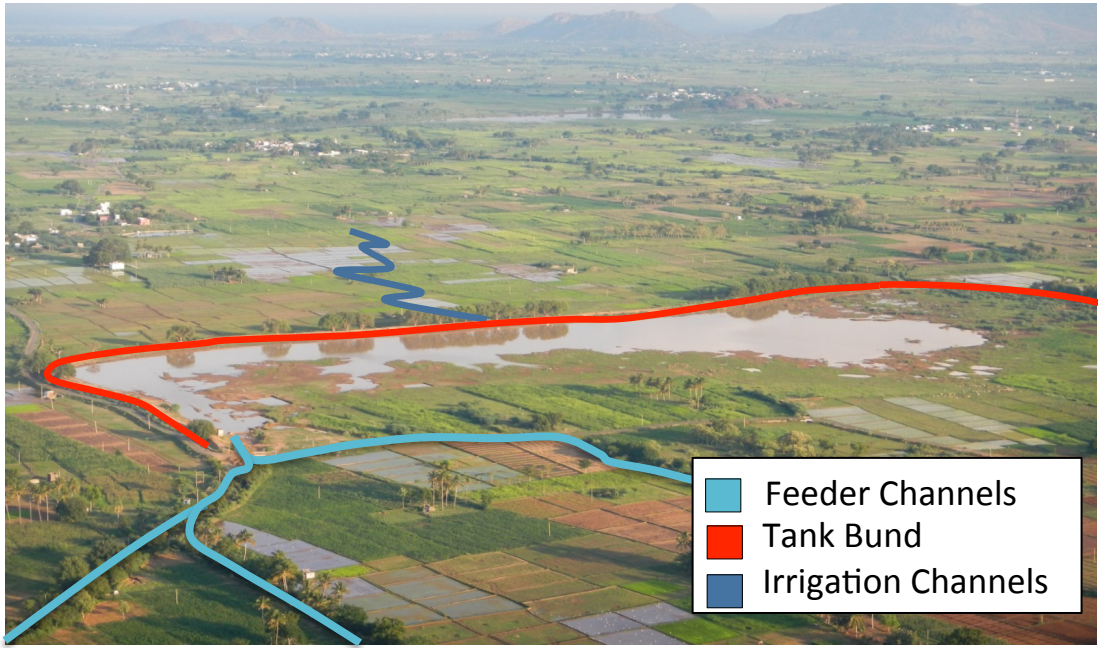
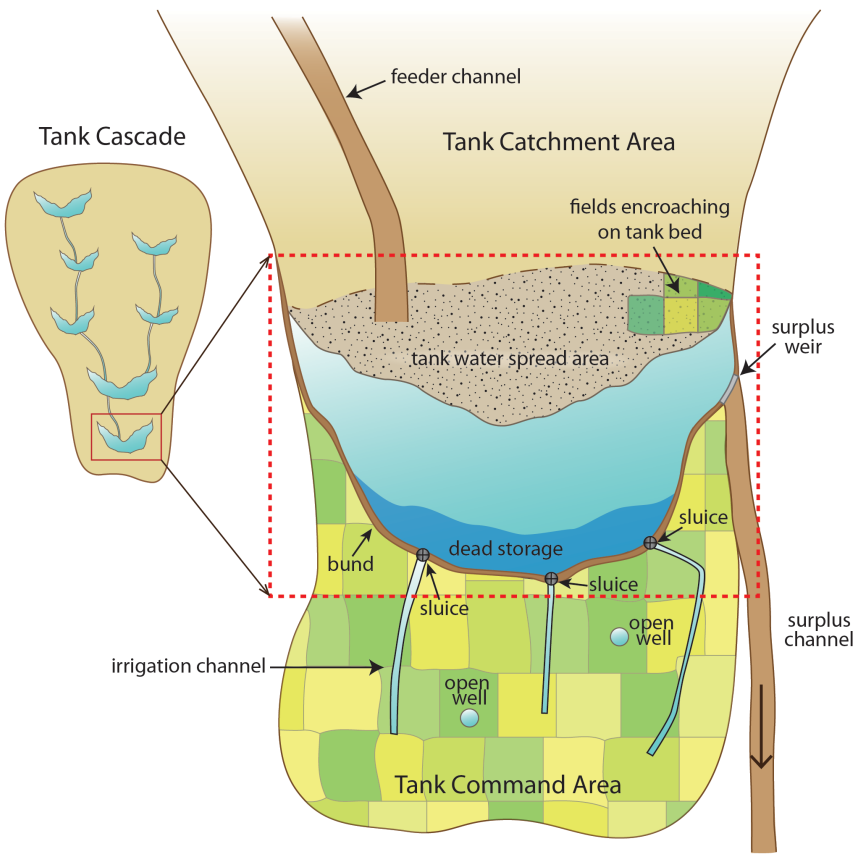


Figure 2

a)



b)



c)

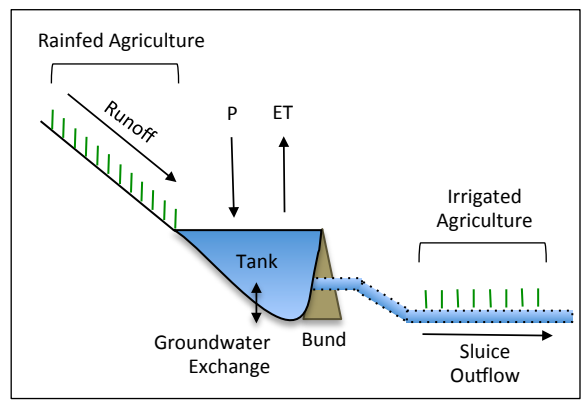


Figure 3

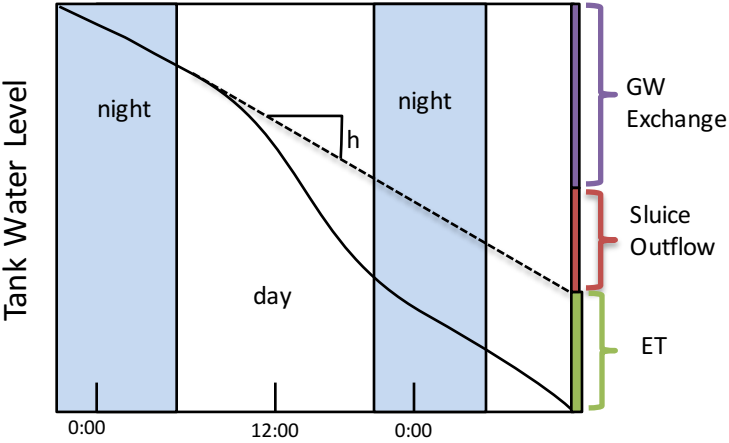
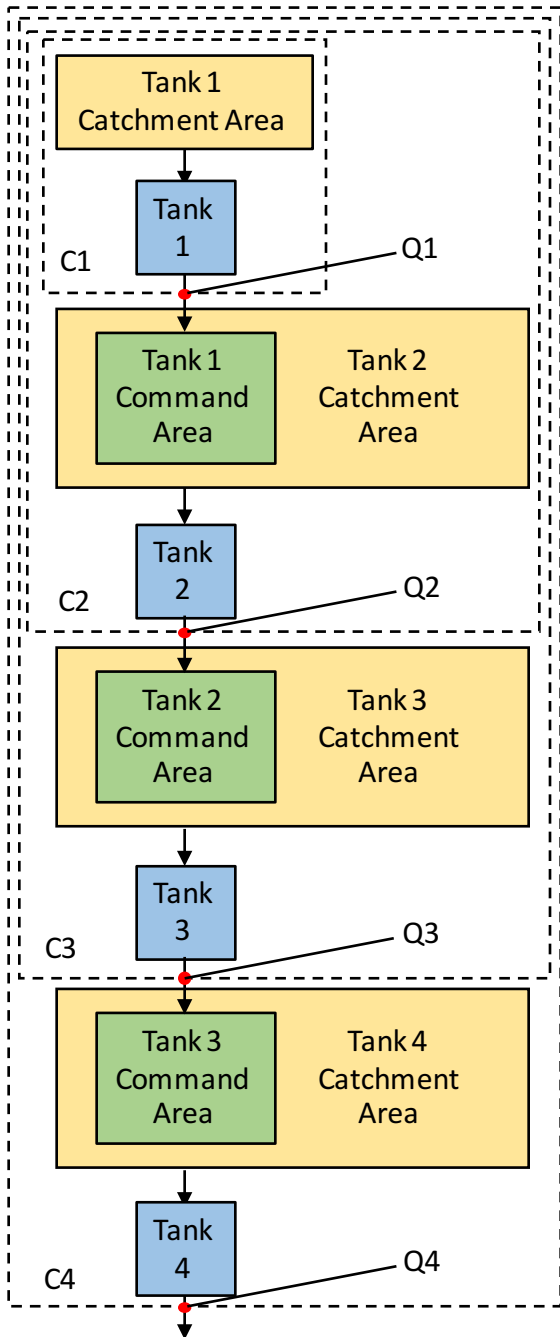


Figure 4



- Non-Irrigated Catchment Area,  
Recharge = 17% of Rainfall
- Irrigated Command Area,  
Recharge = 50% of Rainfall +  
50% Upstream Sluice Outflow
- Tank Bed Area,  
Recharge = Measured Groundwater  
Recharge
- $Q_i$  = Sluice Outflow from Tank  $i$
- C1-C4 Catchment Boundaries

Figure 5

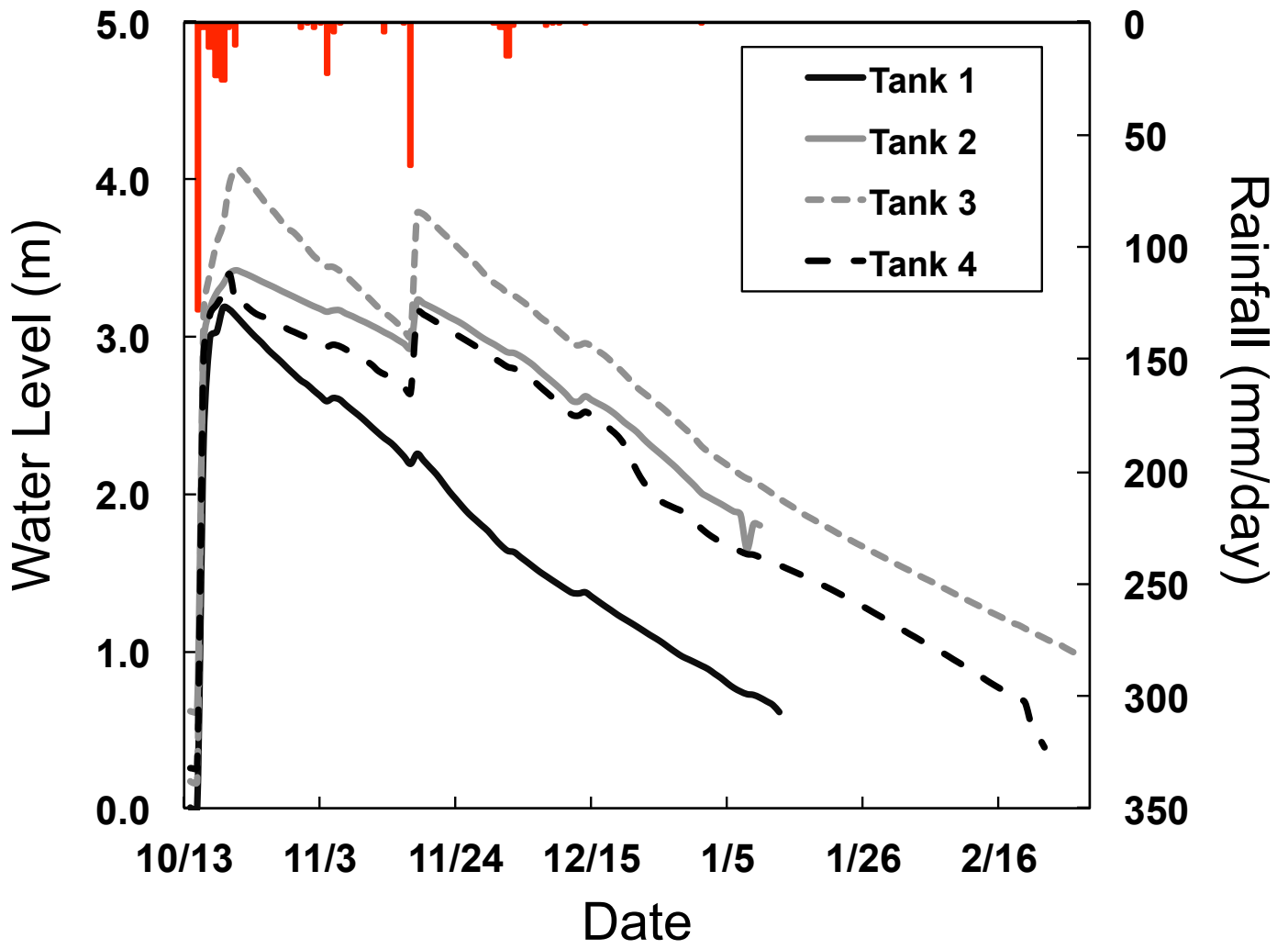


Figure 6

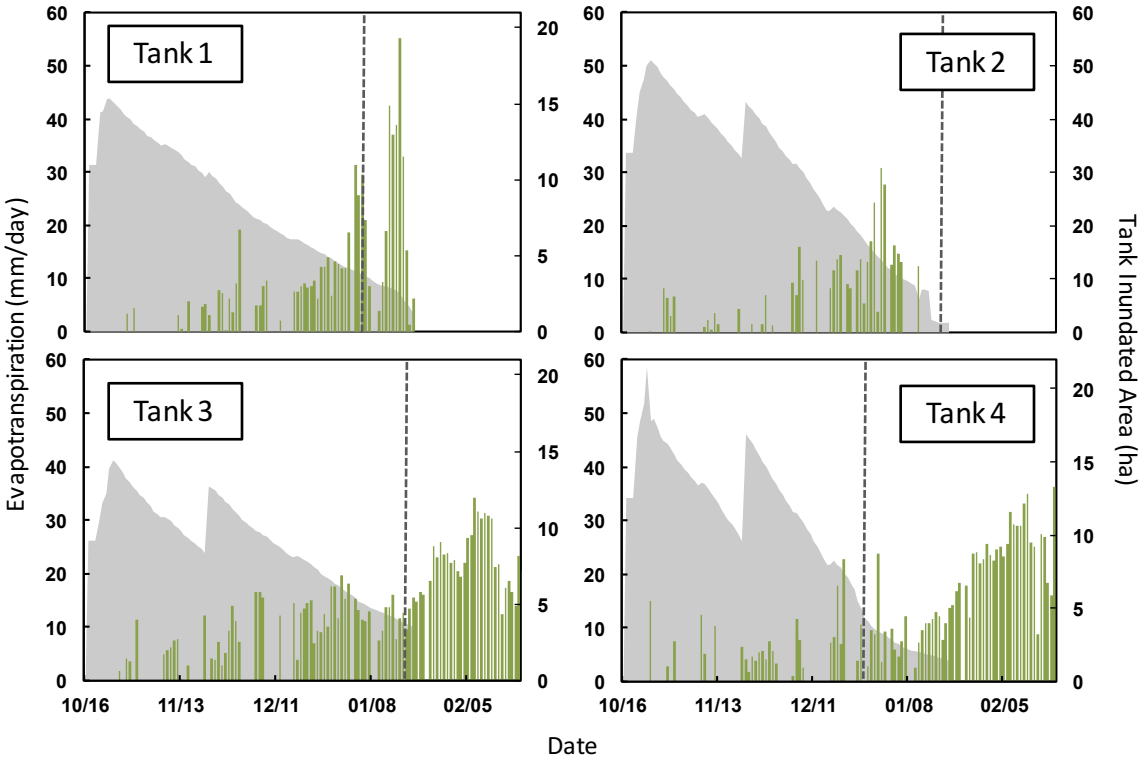


Figure 7

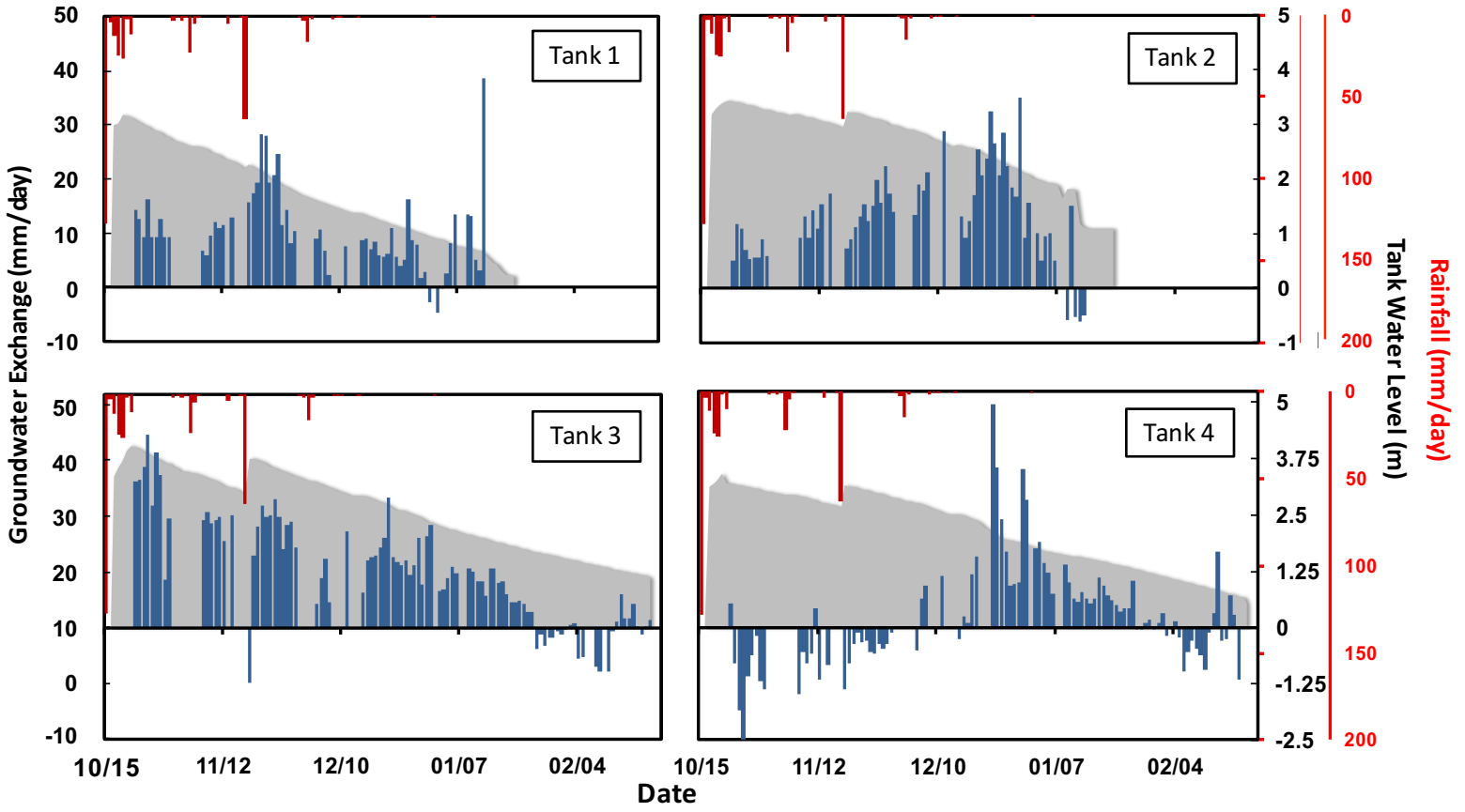




Figure 8

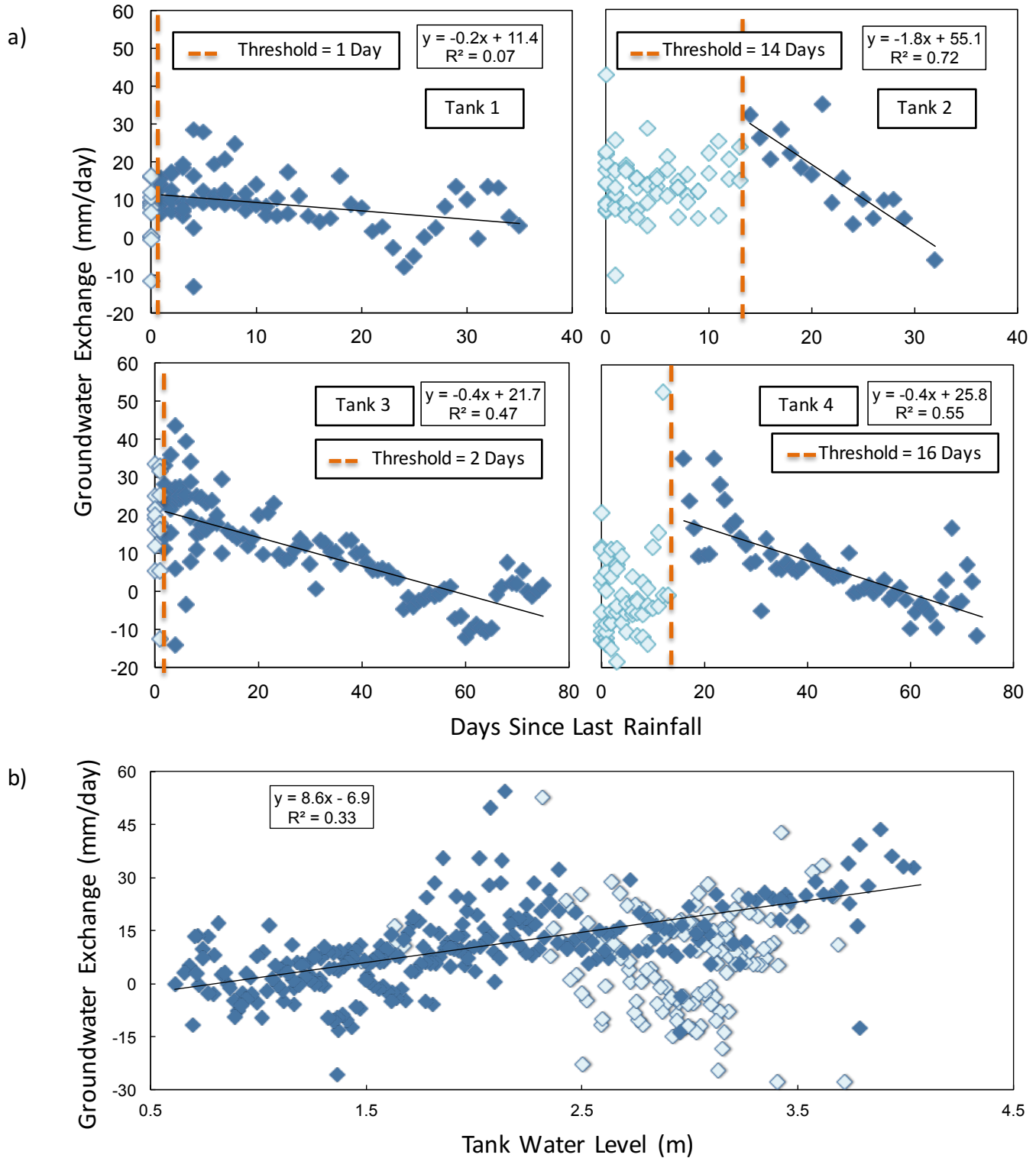
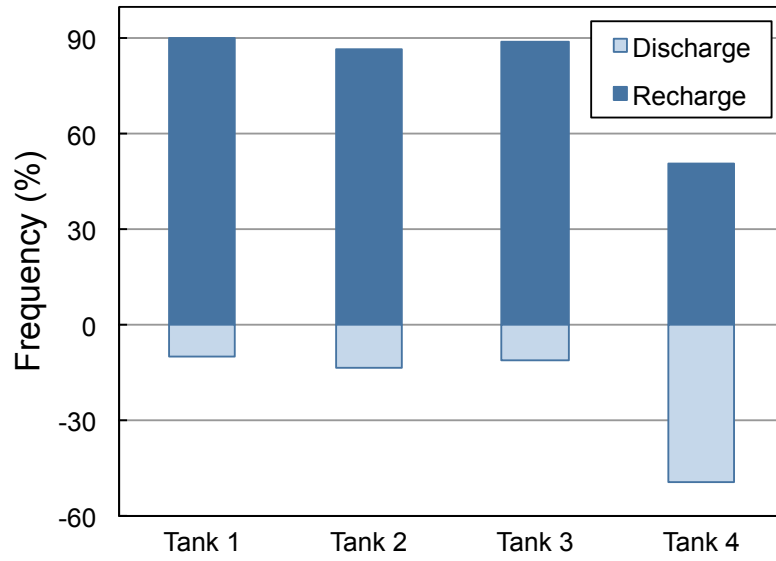




Figure 9

a)



b)

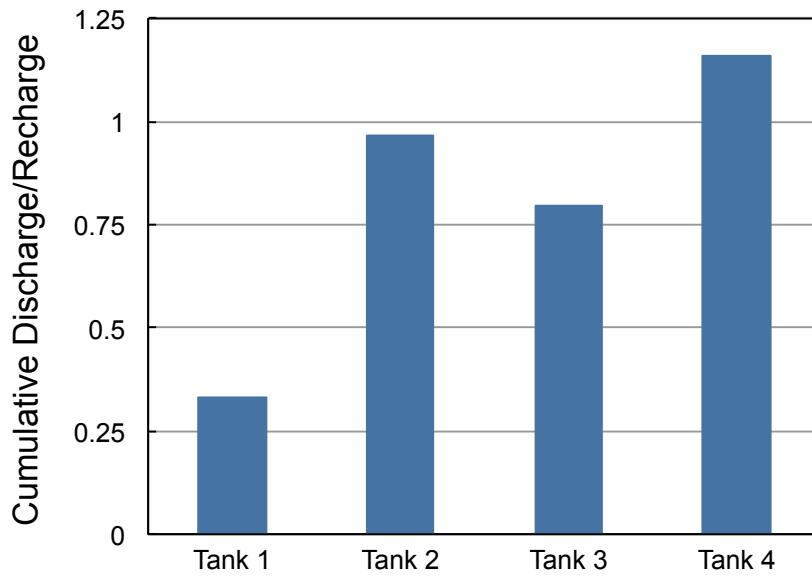


Figure 10

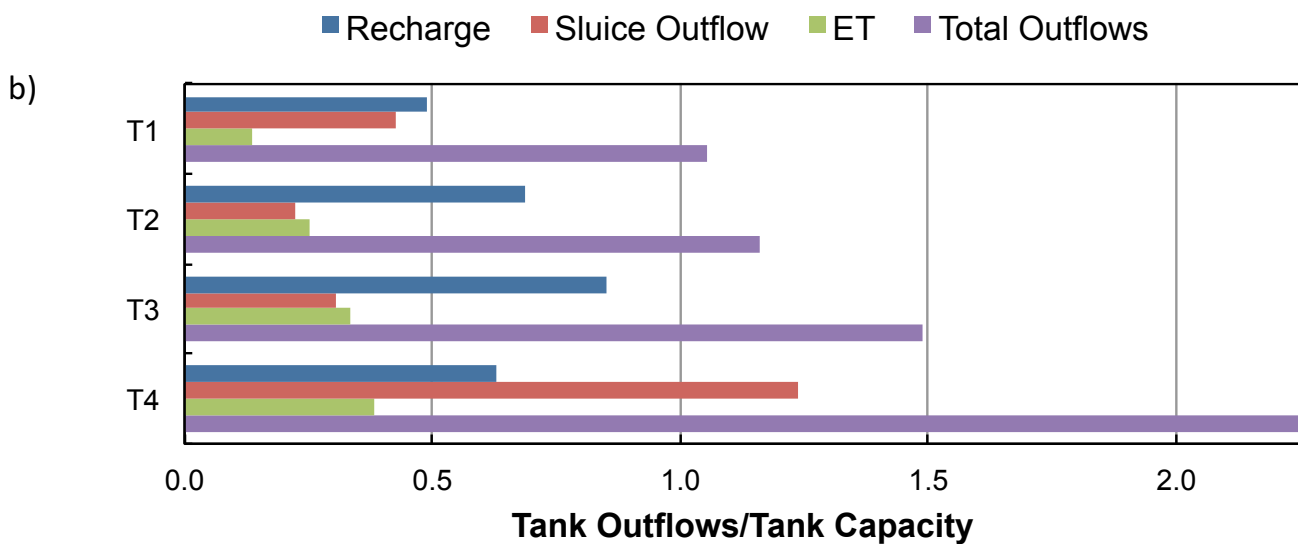
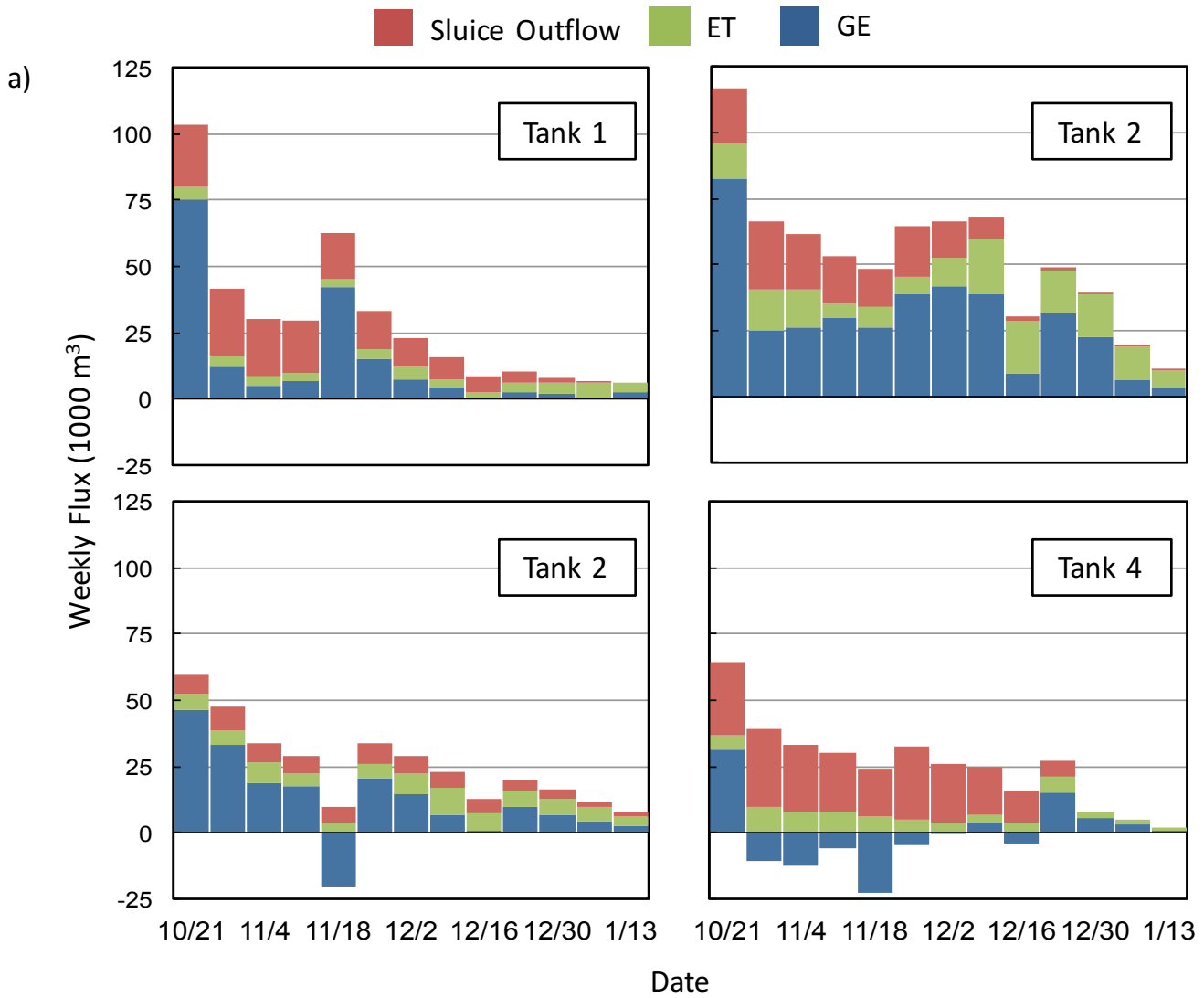


Figure 11

