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**Soil erosion and  
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catchment**

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## Abstract

Soil erosion and sediment yield are strongly affected by land use/land cover (LULC). Spatially distributed erosion models are useful tools for comparing erosion resulting from current LULC with a number of alternative scenarios, being of great interest to assess the expected effect of LULC changes. In this study the soil erosion and sediment delivery model WATEM/SEDEM was applied to a small experimental catchment in the Central Spanish Pyrenees. Model calibration was carried out based on a dataset of soil redistribution rates derived from  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  inventories along three representative transects, allowing capture differences per land use in the main model parameters. Model calibration showed a good convergence to a global optimum in the parameter space. Validation of the model results against seven years of recorded sediment yield at the catchment outlet was satisfactory. Two LULC scenarios were then modeled to reproduce the land use at the beginning of the twentieth Century and a hypothetic future scenario, and to compare the simulation results to the current LULC situation. The results show a reduction of about one order of magnitude in gross erosion ( $3180$  to  $350 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$ ) and sediment delivery ( $11.2$  to  $1.2 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1} \text{ ha}^{-1}$ ) during the last decades as a result of the abandonment of traditional land uses (mostly agriculture) and subsequent vegetation re-colonization. The simulation also allowed assessing differences in the sediment sources and sinks within the catchment.

## 1 Introduction

According to estimations one sixth of the surface land is affected by accelerated water erosion (Schröter et al., 2005). Apart from the at-site problems related to loss of fertile land, sediment yield to the stream network poses problems for hydraulic infrastructures such as reservoirs, and for the preservation of certain fluvial ecosystems. Mountain regions, where the relief energy contributes to increase soil erosion and sediment transport rates, are among the areas at risk. It has been pointed out that land use/land

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cover (LULC) change is among the main factors explaining the intensity of soil erosion, even exceeding the importance of rainfall intensity and slope in some cases (García-Ruiz, 2010). The effects of LULC change on soil erosion and sediment transport have raised the attention of transnational authorities (e.g. UN, 1994; EC, 2002; COST634, 2005). Many studies have demonstrated that historical LULC change has affected the sediment yield in drainage basins over the World (e.g. Dearing, 1992; Piégay et al., 2004; Cosandey et al., 2005; Gyozo et al., 2005).

The impact of LULC change on erosion and sediment yield are well understood qualitatively, but there is still little quantitative knowledge. Its study has been addressed in different ways: (i) field suspended sediment load measurements and historical sedimentary archives (sediment accumulated in lakes) showed that deforestation and changes in the agricultural practices greatly influenced erosion and sediment transport (e.g. Valero-Garcés et al., 2000); (ii) experimental catchments have been monitored worldwide in order to understand the factors that control runoff generation and sediment transport (e.g. Bosch and Hewlett, 1982), and to obtain detailed information on different parameters for hydrological modeling and to assess the influence of LULC change on erosion rates and sediment yield (e.g. García-Ruiz et al., 2008). All these studies provided a deep insight into the interaction between LULC change and geomorphic processes. Experimental approaches, however, are resource-intensive and very limited in their ability to address the effects of future changes in LULC or other drivers such as the climate.

Erosion models are useful tools for comparing erosion resulting from current LULC condition with a number of alternative LULC scenarios. Spatially distributed models allow determining not only the variation in the total sediment exported, but also assessing differences in sediment sources and the existence of sedimentation areas at intermediate locations within the watershed. Although most of erosion and sedimentation processes have been studied in detail using experimental devices, assessing the link between on-site soil erosion and total sediment yield at the outlet of a catchment is very difficult because it implies making a complete sediment budget of the catchment

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including possible internal sedimentation areas, on which there is seldom quantitative data available. Recent advances in spatially distributed erosion and sediment transport models opened new possibilities to understand the complex spatial patterns of erosion and deposition within a catchment (Merri<sup>5</sup>t et al., 2003). However, a direct comparison of predicted erosion rates with field observations, which is necessary for validating the accuracy of the estimates, is usually not possible because it is not practically or financially feasible to acquire long-term, spatially distributed soil erosion data. In the best instances data are available only on the sediment transported by the main rivers in a catchment, and these data seldom span a long time period (Alatorre et al., 2010). For example, it is common to rely on catchment-aggregated soil erosion rates derived from reservoir or lake sedimentation records for the calibration or validation of erosion and sediment transport models (e.g. de Vente et al., 2008). This allows predicting the total catchment sediment yield, but the capability to predict soil redistribution within the catchment can not be addressed. The lack of spatially distributed soil erosion data is a major problem hindering the use of spatially distributed erosion models, and even makes model calibration not possible (Alatorre et al., 2010).

In addition to modeling exercises, the difficulties associated with classical techniques for estimating erosion have led to research into new methods. In the last decades field measurements of fallout cesium-137 (<sup>137</sup>Cs) inventories have been used to determine soil redistribution rates at specific points in the landscape. Here soil redistribution refers to the net result of erosion and sedimentation over a period of approximately 50 yr (Walling and Quine, 1990). The use of fallout radionuclides has attracted increasing attention as an alternative approach for water-induced soil erosion analysis, and it has been applied successfully in a wide range of environments (e.g. Ritchie and McHenry, 1990; Walling and Quine, 1991; Navas and Walling, 1992; Collins et al., 2001; Bujan et al., 2003). Unlike the experimental devices described above, <sup>137</sup>Cs soil redistribution estimates are related to a small sampling surface (usually a few dm<sup>2</sup>), and can be taken as point estimates when considered at the landscape scale.

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A simple approach for studying spatial patterns of soil redistribution from point  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  estimates is to get a sufficiently large sample and perform a spatial interpolation.  $^{137}\text{Cs}$ -derived soil redistribution rates have also been used for validating the results of process-based erosion models, including: (i) empirical erosion models such as the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE) (Ferro et al., 1998; López-Vicente et al., 2008); (ii) spatially semi-distributed erosion models such as the Aerial Non-point Source Watershed Environmental Response Simulation (ANSWERS) and the Agricultural Non-point Source Pollution (AGNPS) (De Roo, 1993; Walling et al., 2003); and (iii) fully spatially distributed physically based models such as the Limburg Soil Erosion Model (LISEM) and WATEM/SEDEM (Takken et al., 1999; Feng et al., 2010).

The main objective of the present study was to assess soil redistribution and sediment supply to the stream network under land abandonment on a mountain catchment, using a spatially distributed model (WATEM/SEDEM) combined with  $^{137}\text{Cs}$ -derived soil redistribution estimates. The study area (the Arnás catchment in the Spanish Pyrenees) is an experimental area for which a good amount of data and process-knowledge exists, including sediment yield data at the catchment outlet that could be used for validation (Lana-Renault et al., 2007b). In addition,  $^{137}\text{Cs}$ -derived soil redistribution rates were available from a previous study (Navas et al., 2005), allowing spatially distributed model calibration under the current LULC situation. Two LULC scenarios were then modeled reproducing the land use at the beginning of the twentieth Century and a hypothetical future scenario, and the results compared to the current situation. We discuss the validity of the results and their application. The approach followed is transferable to other regions of the World.

## 2 Materials and methods

### 2.1 Hillslope sediment delivery model

We used WATEM/SEDEM to model soil erosion and sediment flux from the hillslopes to the stream network in a small mountain catchment under current, past and hypothetical land use. WATEM/SEDEM is a spatially-distributed soil erosion and sediment transport model based on the RUSLE equation plus a sediment transport capacity equation and a cascading transport model, for predicting sediment delivery to the stream network (Van Oost et al., 2000; Van Rompaey et al., 2001; Verstraeten et al., 2002). WATEM/SEDEM has been used in various types of environments in Van Rompaey et al. (2001); Verstraeten et al. (2002); Van Rompaey et al. (2003a, b, 2005); Verstraeten et al. (2007), including hydrological catchments in Spain (de Vente et al., 2008; Alatorre et al., 2010).

The models starts by calculating annual soil erosion rates following the RUSLE approach (Renard et al., 1991):

$$E = RKLS_{2-D}CP, \quad (1)$$

where  $E$  is the mean annual soil loss ( $\text{kg m}^{-2} \text{yr}^{-1}$ ),  $R$  a rainfall erosivity factor ( $\text{MJ mm m}^{-2} \text{h}^{-1} \text{yr}^{-1}$ ),  $K$  a soil erodibility factor ( $\text{kg h MJ}^{-1} \text{mm}^{-1}$ ),  $LS_{2-D}$  a slope-length factor (Desmet and Govers, 1996),  $C$  a dimensionless crop management factor, and  $P$  a dimensionless erosion control practice factor. Next the sediment generated is routed downslope according to the topography until a stream cell is reached. Sediment transport by overland runoff is modeled according to a transport capacity equation (Van Rompaey et al., 2001):

$$TC = ktcRK \left( LS_{2-D} - 4.1 s^{0.8} \right), \quad (2)$$

where  $TC$  is the transport capacity ( $\text{kg m}^{-1} \text{yr}^{-1}$ ),  $s$  the slope gradient ( $\text{m m}^{-1}$ ), and  $ktc$  (m) an empirical transport capacity coefficient that depends on land cover. A mass

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balance approach is followed for determining the net amount of sediment in each cell: the sediment transported to the cell from neighboring upslope cells is added to the sediment generated in-cell by erosion, and this amount is then exported entirely to the downslope cells (if it is lower than the transport capacity) or deposited in the cell (if it is greater than the transport capacity). Although several equations exist for the transport capacity in cases where gully erosion dominates (e.g. Verstraeten et al., 2007), we used the original formulation because sheet wash erosion is the main erosion process in our study area.

The parameter  $k_{tc}$  in Eq. (2) represents the slope length needed to produce an amount of sediment equal to a bare surface with identical slope gradient (Verstraeten, 2006). It depends on the land cover, and it is assumed to vary linearly between arable land highly prone to erosion where  $k_{tc}$  is highest and densely vegetated areas less prone to erosion where  $k_{tc}$  is lowest (Van Rompaey et al., 2001, 2005). This implies that  $k_{tc}$  is site-dependent and needs to be calibrated based on experimental data for each application of the model. Calibration of  $k_{tc}$  requires determining the optimum value of its two extreme values  $k_{tc_{min}}$  and  $k_{tc_{max}}$  based on observed erosion data. Since these values depend on the land cover, erosion data for different land cover types is needed for calibrating  $k_{tc}$ . This data is seldom available, since in the best cases sediment yield data at the catchment outlet is the only data at hand. It has been proposed that a fixed ratio between values  $k_{tc_{max}}$  and  $k_{tc_{min}}$  can be taken, thus reducing the problem to calibrating only one parameter, but there are no easy ways to decide which is the most appropriate value for that ratio, since it is site-dependent.

In this work we used soil redistribution rates derived from fallout cesium-137 ( $^{137}\text{Cs}$ ) as a method for calibrating  $k_{tc_{min}}$  and  $k_{tc_{max}}$ . The  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  technique is based on a comparison of measured inventories (activity per unit area) at individual sampling points with a measured reference inventory at stable sites in the same catchment. Soil redistribution rates are estimated from the difference between those values using a mass balance model and considering both the fallout rates and natural decay of the radioisotope over the time span (Soto and Navas, 2004). A major advantage of the  $^{137}\text{Cs}$

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technique is the potential to provide medium-term (40 to 50 yr, depending on the sampling date), spatially distributed information regarding net soil redistribution (erosion and aggradation) rates. Additionally, and with the objective of illustrating the discussion about the model calibration, we performed an alternative calibration based on seven years of sediment yield recorded at the catchment outlet. Details of the  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  and sediment yield datasets and of the calibration procedure are given in the following sections.

## 2.2 Study area

The Arnás catchment is located in the Borau valley, central Spanish Pyrenees, in the headwaters of the Aragón River (Fig. 1a). The catchment is an experimental site area that has been subject of many studies. It has been described in detail in several works, for example in Navas et al. (1995). Here we will outline its main characteristics.

The catchment covers an area of  $2.84\text{ km}^2$ , with altitudes between 912–1339 m above the sea level (Fig. 1b and c). The climate is sub-Mediterranean with Atlantic influence, with average temperature of  $10^\circ\text{C}$  and average annual precipitation of 930 mm for the period October 1996 to September 2009. Precipitation is slightly higher in autumn and spring due to frontal activity. Nevertheless, snowfall is not rare during the winter, and some storms occur in summer. Snow remains on the soil only for a few days per year, since the  $0^\circ\text{C}$  isotherm is located above 1600 m a.s.l. during winter.

The area is underlain by Eocene flysch, i.e. by alternating layers of marls and sandstone. The two slopes of the catchment have contrasting physiographic characteristics. On the southwest-facing slopes (left side), poorly developed Rendzic Leptosols and Calcaric Regosols on unconsolidated materials predominate (Navas et al., 2005), with an average slope gradient of  $0.5\text{ m m}^{-1}$ . On these steep slopes several ancient mass movements (debris flows) are identified, disconnected from the fluvial network (Lorente et al., 2000), and having a scarce influence on the sediment load at the basin scale (Bathurst et al., 2007). On the gentler northeast-facing slope (right side), soils are haplic Kastanozems and Phaeozems. These soils are deeper (50 to  $>75\text{ cm}$ ) and better

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developed with clearly differentiated soil horizons (Navas et al., 2005). Some deep mass movement (earthflows) affected the northeast-facing slope, resulting in an undulated topography and in small wetlands. The low slope gradient (average  $0.28 \text{ m m}^{-1}$ ) on the valley bottom has deep Calcaric Fluvisols developed on alluvial deposits, with minimal horizon differentiation (Navas et al., 2005). The main soil properties are summarized in Table 1.

Vegetation is composed of Mediterranean shrubs (*Buxus sempervirens*, *Genista scorpius*) on the southwest facing slope (shrub slope), and *Juniperus communis*, *Buxus sempervirens*, *Echynospartum horridum* and forest patches with *Pinus sylvestris* in the north-east facing slope (forest slope) (Fig. 1e). For centuries, land use in the Arnás catchment consisted on farming both the northeast- and southwest-facing slopes, in very difficult topographic conditions. Commonly, the shady aspect was not cultivated in the Pyrenees, whereas the south facing slopes were cultivated up to 1600 m a.s.l. (García-Ruiz and Lasanta, 1990). Exceptionally, the Arnás catchment was also farmed in the north-east facing slope due to its smooth gradient, allowing a relatively high insulation for cereal cropping in sloping fields. Concave slopes in the sunny slope were occupied with bench terraces, while the convex and straight slopes were cultivated under shifting agriculture systems with scarce practices of soil conservation (Lasanta et al., 2006). Since the beginning of the 20th century, farmland abandonment firstly affected the worst fields under shifting agriculture. Since the 1950's the rest of the sloping and bench terraced fields were also abandoned, and the flat fields in the valley bottom were abandoned in the 1970's. As a consequence of land abandonment a complex process of plant colonization occurred, resulting in the installation of dense shrub communities and an increasing presence of trees. The fields in the valley bottom still remain as grazing meadows, although *Genista scorpius* is progressively colonizing them due to very low grazing pressure. The process described is similar to that observed in other European regions in which re-vegetation processes are the consequence of land abandonment (Kozak, 2003; Taillefumier and Piégay, 2003; Torta, 2004).

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Since 1996 a number of studies have been carried out in the Arnás catchment devoted to understanding its hydrology, soil properties and processes (Navas et al., 2002a, b; Seeger et al., 2004; García-Ruiz et al., 2005; Navas et al., 2005; Lana-Renault et al., 2007a; Lana-Renault et al., 2007b; Lana Renault and Regüés, 2007; Navas et al., 2008; Lana-Renault and Regüés, 2009).

### 2.3 Data

An input dataset was prepared as GIS layers with a 5 × 5 m horizontal resolution. A digital elevation model (DEM) was the main input, from which a drainage network map was derived. Land use, rainfall erosivity, soil erodibility, and crop management maps were also produced. Detailed information on the elaboration of these maps is provided as supplementary material.

For calibrating the ktc parameter a database was used comprising 19 <sup>137</sup>Cs inventories along three representative transects: (i) 5 sample points on the south-west facing slope (forest slope); (ii) 4 sample points on the north-east facing slope (shrub slope); and, (iii) 10 sample points along the valley bottom (Table 3 and Fig. 1). Soil redistribution rates were computed at these points by comparing these samples with a reference <sup>137</sup>Cs inventory for the area. These are average values for the period between 1963 (starting of significant <sup>137</sup>Cs fallout in the region) and 2003 (time of sample collection and radio-isotopic analysis). We refer the interested reader to the article by Navas et al. (2005), where details of the development and interpretation of the <sup>137</sup>Cs dataset are given.

In addition, seven years of sediment yield recorded at the catchment outlet were used for validating the results of the simulation and also to perform an alternative calibration based on catchment data alone. Detailed information about the instrumentation and data collected in the Arnás catchment is given in Lana-Renault and Regüés (2009).

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## 3 Results

### 3.1 Model calibration and validation

The calibration procedure consisted in performing a high number of simulations ( $n = 100$ ) corresponding to the time span 1963–2003 modifying the values of  $k_{t_{\max}}$  and  $k_{t_{\min}}$  at discrete steps within a predefined range. For each combination of  $k_{t_{\max}}$  and  $k_{t_{\min}}$  a soil erosion map was obtained in terms of net soil redistribution ( $\text{Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ ), allowing comparison of the predicted values with the  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  derived estimations. The Nash-Sutcliffe model efficiency statistic NS (Nash and Sutcliffe, 1970) was used as a likelihood metric. The relative root mean square error (RRMSE) was used as an estimate of the model accuracy. Formulation of the two statistics is given in the supplementary material section.

It was found that the error surfaces varied quite smoothly, allowing construction of a meta-model of the NS and RRMSE statistics in the  $(k_{t_{\max}}, k_{t_{\min}})$  space using thin plate spline (TPS) interpolation over the 100 simulation runs. Leave-one-out cross-validation of the meta-model yielded a standard error of 0.000344, that is, around 0.1%, and the  $R^2$  of the regression line between TPS cross-validation residuals and measured NS values was 0. These values allow assuming that uncertainty of the meta-model did not affect the estimation of the optimum parameter combination. Thus, the meta-model was analyzed to determine the optimum values of  $k_{t_{\max}}$  and  $k_{t_{\min}}$  as those that maximized the NS statistic (or, equivalently, minimized the RRMSE).

The error surface topographies in the 2-D  $(k_{t_{\max}}, k_{t_{\min}})$  space are shown in Fig. 3. In both cases a good convergence of the model to a global optimum point coinciding with the maximum NS and the minimum RRMSE values was found, corresponding to values of  $k_{t_{\max}} = 9.84 \text{ m}$  and  $k_{t_{\min}} = 2.05 \text{ m}$  (ratio = 0.208). The model efficiency statistics for these parameters was  $\text{NS} = 0.845$  and  $\text{RRMSE} = 0.485$ , which can be considered very good. There were no problems in identifying the optimum parameter values, since the error surfaces were smooth and converged to a single optimum

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value. Under these conditions, it is possible to implement an automated algorithm for finding the optimum parameter set in a small number of steps, up to a desired precision. The results shown in Fig. 3 demonstrate that the use of spatially distributed sediment yield data from  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  inventories allowed calibrating the empirical parameters of WATEM/SEDEM in a satisfactory way.

Application of the calibrated model to the Arnás catchment allowed comparing the soil redistribution rates predicted by WATEM/SEDEM and the corresponding  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  estimates (Fig. 5). The results revealed a strong relationship between both erosion rates ( $R^2 = 0.503$ ,  $0.818$  excluding two outlier points), mainly at the points located on the southwest-facing slope (shrub slope) and at the valley bottom. In general, WATEM/SEDEM overestimated slightly the net erosion rates, but this was due to a few influential points. Two points which corresponded to the northeast-facing slope (forest slope), 5 and 2, were located far from the perfect adjustment line. While WATEM/SEDEM predicted high erosion or sedimentation rates at these points, they can be considered approximately stable as derived from  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  estimates. It was possible to obtain stable results for these points by manually tuning the  $k_{\text{tc}_{\text{min}}}$  parameter to a much lower value, but this affected negatively the overall calibration.

An alternative calibration was performed based on seven years of sediment yield data at the Arnás catchment outlet. Contrary to the calibration based on  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  data, the results of this calibration were not conclusive, since a large number of possible parameter combinations were found that yielded equally good results. This is shown as a “valley” in the RRMSE plot or a “ridge” in the NS plot (Fig. 4). Differences between these alternative parameter combinations are related to the relative contributions of different land cover types, which could not be assessed without spatially distributed soil erosion data within the catchment.

Seven hydrological years between October 1999 and September 2008 were performed for validating the model. Sediment yield values predicted by WATEM/SEDEM with the best parameter set were compared to sediment yield values measured at the catchment outlet (Lana-Renault and Regüés, 2009). Correspondence between the two

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values was in general very good (Table 4 and Fig. 6), with an overall  $R^2$  of 0.857 (0.991 excluding the worst prediction). The bad results obtained for the hydrological year 2001–2002, for which the measured sediment yield was abnormally low at  $71 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$ , are attributed to changes in the channel caused by accumulation of debris after the years 1999–2000 and 2000–2001, which registered abnormally high sediment production due to the occurrence of severe storms responsible for high rainfall erosivity values. These morphological changes modified temporarily the behavior of the stream, reducing its capacity to transport sediment, and were not captured by the simulation. Overall, sediment yield during the measuring period 1999–2008 was  $244 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$ , compared to  $268 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$  predicted by WATEM/SEDEM.

### 3.2 Hillslope sediment delivery and major sediment sources

Application of WATEM/SEDEM to the land use conditions prevailing during the period 1963–2003 allowed estimation of the total sediment yield and assessment of the relative contributions of each hillside. WATEM/SEDEM predicted a gross SY of  $350 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$ , which can be translated to specific sediment yield SSY of  $1.23 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ . These values are slightly higher than the average values recorded during seven years at the gauging station at the outlet of the Arnás catchment, which were  $273 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$  and  $0.96 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ , respectively (Lana-Renault and Regúés, 2009). This can be explained by differences in the rainfall erosivity (R-factor) for the gauging period 1999–2008 and the period 1963–2003 corresponding to the time span of  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  estimates used for the WATEM/SEDEM simulation, which were 925 and  $1217 \text{ MJ mm ha}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ , respectively (Table 4).

To assess the sediment delivery ratio (SDR = SY/gross erosion rate; expressed as a percentage) we calculated the gross soil erosion rate ( $6521 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$ ) as the net soil erosion for the area (i.e. total sediment production) before sediment was routed down the hillslopes to the Arnás ravine. The predicted SDR value at the outlet of the watershed was approximately 5%.

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patterns and total sediment yield in the Arnás catchment (Table 5 and Fig. 8). For the past scenario (LULC prior to 1950) the catchment was almost entirely occupied by cereal crop fields (Fig. 7a). In fact, inspection of a vertical aerial photograph from 1956 confirms that the Arnás catchment was fully cultivated, both in the north-east and the south-west facing slopes, even on steep inclines, occasionally under shifting agriculture systems. The SY and SSY values ( $3180 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$  and  $11.19 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ , respectively) obtained using that scenario were extremely high in comparison with the values obtained with the current LULC, representing an increase of approximately 810 %. Consequently the SDR was higher than with the current LULC, rising up to 84 % (Table 5).

Net erosion areas had predominance over the sedimentation areas under past LULC, and erosion was intense even in the relatively gentle slopes of the northeast-facing slopes (Fig. 7a). A higher number of intermediate sedimentation areas also appeared especially in the northeast-facing slope. These bands are related to the presence of plot margins or slightly terraced slopes (now almost completely hidden by the vegetation growth, but still recognizable in the field), which helped reducing the loss of soil towards the river network.

In the second scenario (future situation) an increment of forest and dense scrubland was proposed in the northeast- and southwest-facing slopes, respectively, as a consequence of land use abandonment (Table 5). The SY and SSY predicted values ( $255 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$  and  $0.89 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ , respectively) were approximately 38 % lower with respect to the current LULC condition, and 1150 % lower than the past LULC scenario. The SDR was very similar to the value obtained with the current LULC (5.15 %). Nevertheless, the gross erosion rate was 32 % lower than the current situation. The sediment yield map (Fig. 8b) shows a predominance of low erosion values (less than  $10 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ ), and a reduction of the erosion areas. Figure 8b shows a remarkable trend towards: (i) a reduction in the sediment sources, even in the south-west facing slope; and (ii) a trend to homogenization.



## 4 Discussion and conclusions

A spatially distributed soil erosion and sediment transport model, WATEM/SEDEM, was applied to simulate soil redistribution in a mountain catchment under current, past and hypothetical future land use/land cover (LULC) conditions. A dataset of soil redistribution rates derived from  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  profiles at 19 sampling points within the catchment were used to calibrate the model.

Calibration using  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  data was very successful, since it was possible to determine a single combination of the  $k_{tc}$  parameters ( $k_{tc_{max}} = 9.84 \text{ m}$ ,  $k_{tc_{min}} = 2.05 \text{ m}$ ) that provided a good fit to the observed soil redistribution rates within the catchment. Only for two locations in the forested slope a disagreement was found between soil redistribution rates obtained by the two methods, probably as a consequence of the relevance in that area of soil creeping processes that are not considered by the model. These results contrast with a similar study by Feng et al. (2010), in which they found a poor convergence to a global optimum parameter set and erosion rates estimated by both methods (WATEM/SEDEM and  $^{137}\text{Cs}$ ) differed considerably. The optimum values for  $k_{tc_{min}}$  and  $k_{tc_{max}}$  in that case were 6 and 7 respectively, indicating a poor discrimination between LULC types. The poor performance in this study case could be possibly attributed to deficiencies in the sampling design, since farming LULCs were under-represented in the calibration dataset with only 4 sites against 56 sites in well vegetated LULCs, constituting a gross source of bias against farming LULCs in the calibration process. Additionally, the calibration algorithm described was far from optimal, since the multi-dimensionality of the problem was eliminated by keeping the value of some parameters fixed while calibrating other parameters, ignoring likely co-variances among parameters.

An additional calibration exercise was performed based on sediment yield data at the catchment outlet for comparison purposes, since most applications of WATEM/SEDEM up to date have been based on catchment sediment yield data. This raises a fundamental problem, since it is not possible to calibrate land-cover related parameters with

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sediment yield alone. As a solution, some authors proposed that a fixed ratio between  $k_{tc_{max}}$  and  $k_{tc_{min}}$  be taken, which has the effect of lumping both parameters into a single one, thus allowing calibration (Verstraeten, 2006). However this raises new concerns, since there is no way to decide which is the most appropriate value for that ratio, which would be site-dependent. In a previous study in the Ésera watershed in the Central Spanish Pyrenees (Alatorre et al., 2010) we found similar problems for calibrating WATEM/SEDEM based on sediment yield data at the catchment level. The results of the calibration experiment in this work confirm that it is not possible to identify a single combination of  $k_{tc}$  parameters that allows optimize the objective function, hence demonstrating the need for spatially- and land use-distributed soil redistribution data such as that provided by  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  data.

Application of WATEM/SEDEM with the optimum parameter set to the Arnás catchment allowed estimating the sediment balance of the catchment. Very good agreement was found between modeled and measured annual sediment yield values at the catchment outlet. The simulation allowed also determining the major sediment sources within the catchment, and the existence of intermediate sediment traps between the hillslopes and the channel network. Mean sediment yield was estimated at  $350 \text{ Mg yr}^{-1}$  or  $1.23 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ . These values are similar in order of magnitude to other catchments in the Spanish Pyrenees. Almorox et al. (1994) obtained an estimate of  $4.12 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$  for the Yesa Reservoir in the Aragón River basin,  $1.67 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ yr}^{-1}$  for Barasona reservoir in the Ésera river basin. Similar or higher values have been estimated for small experimental catchments in the French Alps (Mathys et al., 2005), the Eastern Pyrenees (Gallart et al., 2005; Soler et al., 2008), and the Central Pyrenees (García-Ruiz et al., 2008), which encompass a variety of bedrocks and climates.

Sediment delivery ratio (SDR) for the catchment was determined at approximately 5%. This is a low value, but not extreme considering the high variability of this parameter among catchments. For example, Van Rompaey et al. (2007) reported a SDR of 28% for a catchment of  $1960 \text{ km}^2$  in the Czech Republic; Verstraeten et al. (2007) found SDR values of 20–39% for catchments of  $164\text{--}2173 \text{ km}^2$  in Australia; Fryirs and

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As pointed out in previous works (Alatorre et al., 2010), “spatially lumped models provide reasonable predictions of sediment yield but offer no insight into sediment sources”. A clear advantage of spatially-distributed models is that they can be useful for implementing measures to prevent soil erosion and sediment generation, since they allow assessing the impacts of changes in land use or climate. However, the use of models of this kind usually involves calibration of empirical parameters, so records of soil redistribution rates are required. We have shown that the use of catchment sediment yield data alone is not enough to allow for a robust calibration of land use-dependent parameters, but the use of  $^{137}\text{Cs}$ -derived soil redistribution rates can provide this information and arises as a very promising technique for the calibration of soil erosion and redistribution models.

**Supplementary material related to this article is available online at:**  
<http://www.hydrol-earth-syst-sci-discuss.net/8/11131/2011/hessd-8-11131-2011-supplement.pdf>.

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**Table 1.** Principal soil characteristics of the two valley sides in the Arnás catchment (mean  $\pm$  standard deviation over the whole soil profile), adapted from Navas et al. (2005).

	Right side, forest slope ( $n = 48$ )	Left side, shrub slope ( $n = 29$ )
pH	7.97 ( $\pm 0.42$ )	8.17 ( $\pm 0.19$ )
Clay ( $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ )	210 ( $\pm 31$ )	195 ( $\pm 34$ )
Silt ( $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ )	660 ( $\pm 63$ )	620 ( $\pm 73$ )
Sand ( $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ )	130 ( $\pm 85$ )	180 ( $\pm 103$ )
Organic matter ( $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ )	59 ( $\pm 22$ )	54 ( $\pm 25$ )
Bulk density ( $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ )	1.12 ( $\pm 1.22$ )	1.19 ( $\pm 0.61$ )
Moisture (%)	17 ( $\pm 6.7$ )	11 ( $\pm 7.7$ )
Porosity (%)	57 ( $\pm 5.9$ )	55 ( $\pm 6.2$ )

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**Table 2.** Values of the C-factor assigned to the current land cover/land use condition, as well as land cover/land use before 1950 and future scenario (Almorox et al., 1994).

Land use	C factor
Infrastructure and built-up areas	0.000
Drainage network	–
Forest	0.020
Scrubland with low density	0.200
Scrubland with high density	0.080
Grassland	0.083
Grassland and forest	0.035
Meadow	0.300
Annual crops	0.250
Bare soil	0.807

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**Table 3.**  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  inventories and derived soil redistribution rates for the period 1963–2003 along three transects in the Arnás catchment (Navas et al., 2005): negative and positive values indicate net soil erosion and aggradation, respectively. Location of the  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  inventories is shown in Fig. 1.

Transect	Point ID	$^{137}\text{Cs}$ inventory (m Bq cm $^{-2}$ )	Soil redistribution (Mg ha $^{-1}$ yr $^{-1}$ )
Forest	1	437	0.9
Forest	2	400	0
Forest	3	430	0.8
Forest	4	404	0.1
Forest	5	400	0
Shrub	6	175	−26.4
Shrub	7	162	−29.5
Shrub	8	280	−11.6
Shrub	9	282	−14.3
Valley	10	297	−7.4
Valley	11	367	−2.0
Valley	12	476	2.2
Valley	13	433	1.0
Valley	14	436	1.0
Valley	15	324	−4.3
Valley	16	439	1.2
Valley	17	325	−5.2
Valley	18	333	−4.7
Valley	19	248	−44.6

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**Table 4.** Values of cumulative precipitation ( $P$ ), runoff coefficient (RC), rainfall erosivity (R factor), measured sediment yield (Obs. SY) and specific sediment yield (Obs. SSY) in the Arnás experimental catchment (adapted from Lana-Renault and Regüés, 2009), rainfall erosivity (R-factor) calculated from high frequency (15 min) rain gauge data (Angulo-Martínez and Beguería, 2009) and simulated sediment yield (Sim. SY and Sim. SSY). Annual values for the hydrological years between 1999–2000 and 2007–2008, and averages for the periods 1999–2008 and 1963–2003. NA (not available) indicates that no data exists for a given parameter and time period.

Year (Oct–Sep)	$P$ (mm)	RC (mm mm <sup>-2</sup> )	R-factor (MJ mm ha <sup>-1</sup> h <sup>-1</sup> yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Obs. SY (Mg yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Obs. SSY (Mg ha <sup>-1</sup> yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Sim. SY (Mg yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Sim. SSY (Mg ha <sup>-1</sup> yr <sup>-1</sup> )
1999–2000	881	0.42	1302	542	1.91	473	1.67
2000–2001	1353	0.35	1216	381	1.34	348	1.22
2001–2002	765	0.14	852	71	0.25	244	0.86
2002–2003	1043	0.20	792	216	0.76	227	0.80
2003–2004	958	0.33	846	253	0.89	242	0.85
2005–2006	986	0.25	715	116	0.41	155	0.55
2007–2008	922	0.30	754	129	0.45	186	0.65
1999–2008	986	0.28	926	244	0.86	268	0.94
1963–2003	925	NA	1217	NA	NA	350	1.23

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**Table 5.** Predicted gross erosion, sediment yield (SY), specific sediment yield (SSY) and sediment delivery ratio (SDR) under current land cover/land use (LULC) conditions and two LULC scenarios (prior to 1950 and future) in the Arnás catchment, based on the best parameterization of  $k_{t_{\max}}$  and  $k_{t_{\min}}$  over the period 1963–2003.

Period	Gross erosion ( $\text{Mg yr}^{-1}$ )	SY ( $\text{Mg yr}^{-1}$ )	SSY ( $\text{Mg ha}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ )	SDR (%)
Current LULC	6521	350	1.23	5.36
LULC before 1950	32 066	3180	11.19	9.90
LULC future scenario	4947	255	0.89	5.15

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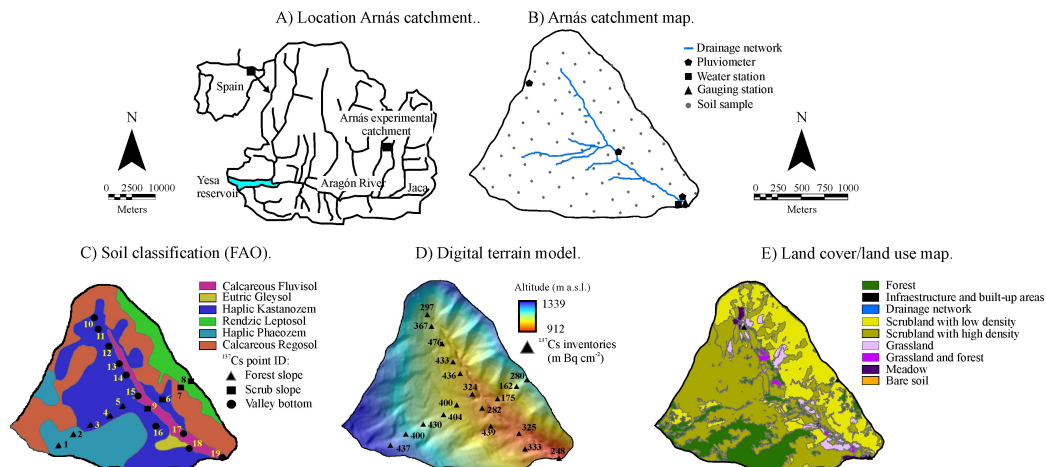
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**Fig. 1.** Study area: **(A)** location of the Arnás catchment; **(B)** map of the Arnás catchment showing the sites of the main monitoring instruments and soil samples; **(C)** Lithologic map and location of the  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  profiles (see points IDs in Table 3); **(D)** digital terrain model (DTM) and  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  inventories ( $\text{m Bq cm}^{-2}$ ); and **(E)** current land cover/land use map derived from aerial photo-interpretation.

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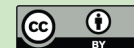
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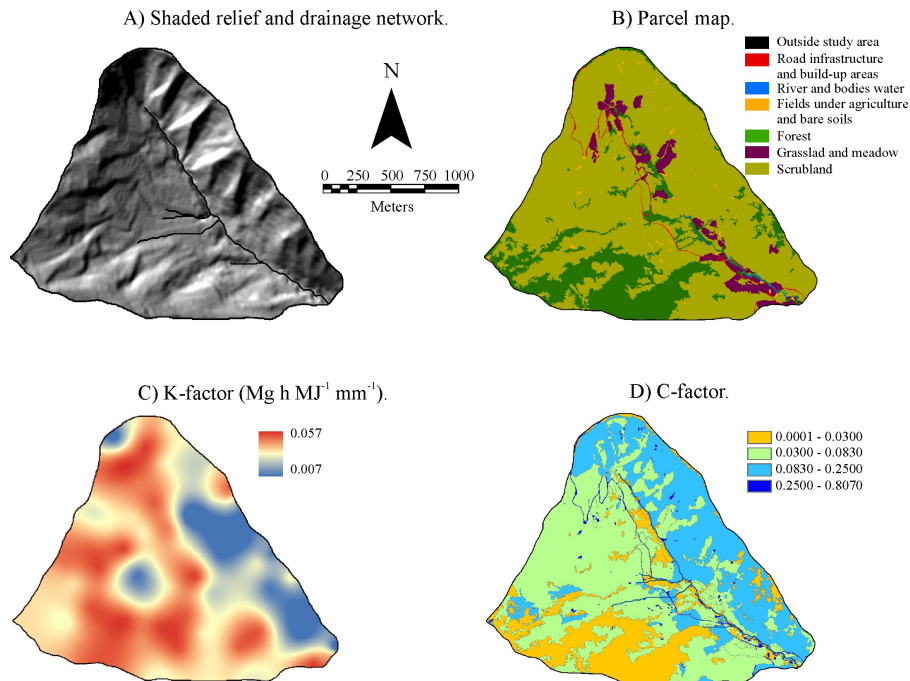
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**Fig. 2.** Input data derived from the database of the Arnás catchment: **(A)** drainage network map derived from the DTM using threshold value of 1 km<sup>2</sup> contributing area (continuous line); **(B)** parcel map, derived from the current land use/land cover map; **(C)** soil erodibility map (K-factor in RUSLE, Mg h MJ<sup>-1</sup> mm<sup>-1</sup>); and **(D)** crop management map (C-factor in RUSLE).

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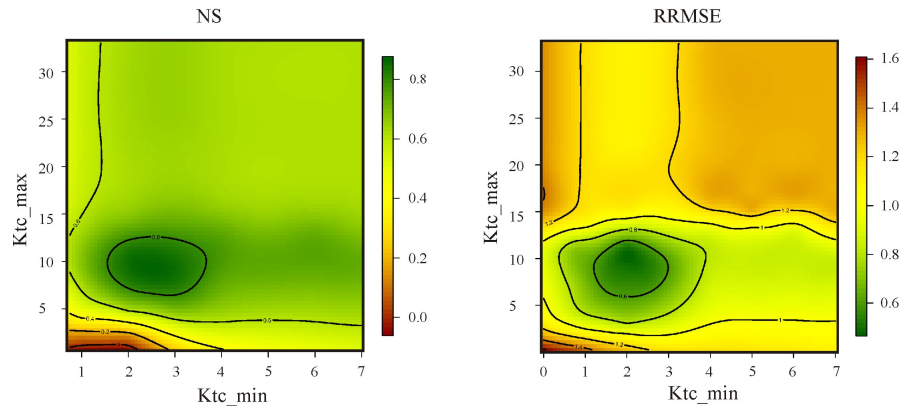
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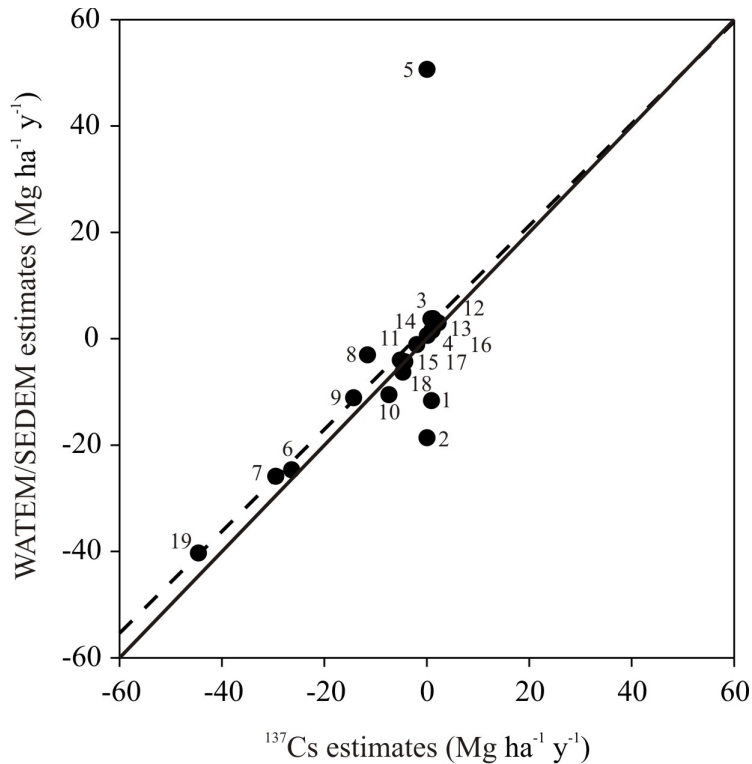
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**Fig. 3.** Calibration of the transport capacity parameters  $ktc_{\min}$  and  $ktc_{\max}$  (m) using  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  soil redistribution rates: error surface topographies as measured by the NS (left) and the RRMSE (right) statistics on the two-dimensional space determined by both parameters. Green colour represents the best fit.





**Fig. 5.** Comparison of WATEM/SEDEM and  $^{137}\text{Cs}$  soil redistribution estimates. The line 1:1 represents a perfect fit.

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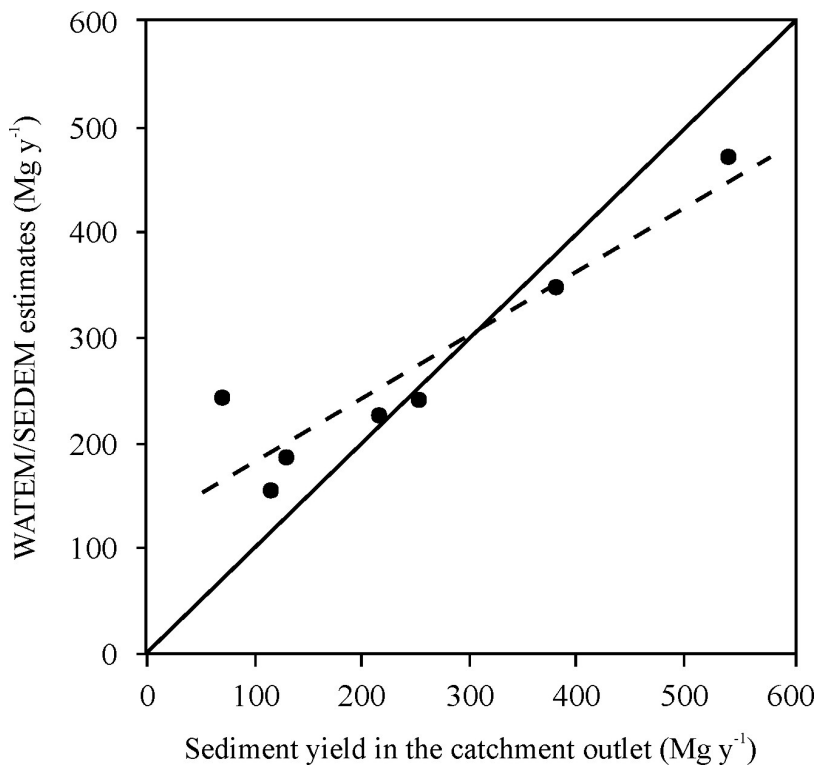
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**Fig. 6.** Comparison of measured and predicted sediment yield at the Arnás catchment outlet between the hydrological years 1999–2000 and 2007–2008 (October to September). The line 1:1 represents a perfect fit, and the dashed line is the linear regression between both values.

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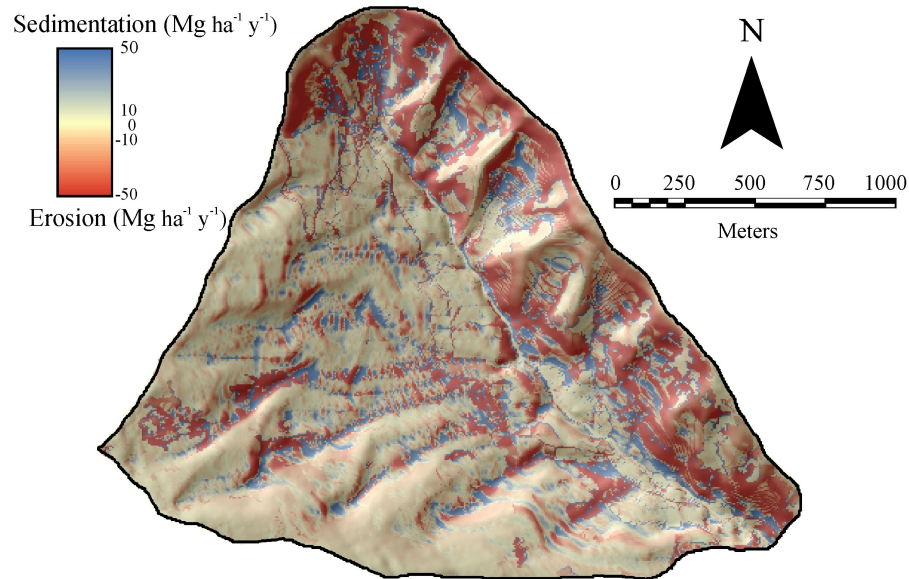
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**Fig. 7.** Predicted sediment delivery map of the Arnás catchment under current land use/land cover.

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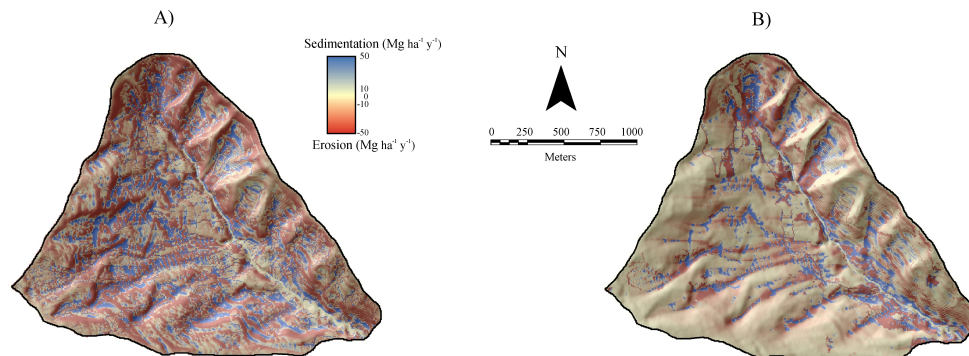
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**Fig. 8.** Predicted sediment delivery maps of the Arnás catchment: **(A)** under land use/land cover system at the beginning of the 20th century; and, **(B)** under a likely future LULC system.

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