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Impact of climate change on groundwater point discharge: backflooding of karstic springs (Loiret, France)

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Abstract

Under certain hydrological conditions it is possible for spring flow in karst systems to be reversed. When this occurs, the resulting invasion by surface water, i.e. the backflooding, represents a serious threat to groundwater quality because the surface water could well be contaminated. Here we examine the possible impact of future climate change on the occurrences of backflooding in a specific karst system, having first established the occurrence of such events in the selected study area over the past 40 yr. It would appear that backflooding has been more frequent since the 1980s, and that it is apparently linked to river flow variability on the pluri-annual scale. The avenue that we adopt here for studying recent and future variations of these events is based on a downscaling algorithm relating large-scale atmospheric circulation to local precipitation spatial patterns. The large-scale atmospheric circulation is viewed as a set of quasi-stationary and recurrent states, called weather types, and its variability as the transition between them. Based on a set of climate model projections, simulated changes in weather-type occurrence for the end of the century suggests that backflooding events can be expected to decrease in 2075–2099. If such is the case, then the potential risk for groundwater quality in the area will be greatly reduced compared to the current situation. Finally, our results also show the potential interest of the weather-type based downscaling approach for examining the impact of climate change on hydrological systems.

1 Introduction

Studying the impact of global climate change on water resources requires a combination of climate-scenario and hydrological models (Boé et al., 2009a). Water resources at the regional scale rely on particular hydrogeological contexts on which the impacts of climate change may differ extensively depending on the predominance of surface-over groundwater flows (van Roosmalen et al., 2007). With certain geomorphological

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settings, such as karst systems, even small changes in climatic conditions have to be studied in detail because of specific geologic hazards such as groundwater-quality vulnerability (Bonacci et al., 2006).

Climate projections based on coupled general circulation models (CGCMs) suggest a general increase in precipitation over the northern areas of Western Europe for the end of the century along with a decrease over the Mediterranean area (Christensen et al., 2007). With Europe's median latitudes marking a transition situation in terms of precipitation for most of the year, predicting the evolution of the hydrological cycle under anthropogenic forcing is beset by uncertainties (Boé et al., 2009b). Given the scale mismatch between current CGCMs and hydrological model requirements, regional downscaling of global models is necessary to study the main parameter changes of the regional hydrological cycle, particularly as regards precipitation (Habets et al., 2005; Fowler et al., 2007; Boé and Terray, 2008; Boé et al., 2009a). The downscaling results for France forecast a decrease in summer precipitation and river discharge throughout the country at around 2050, along with an increase in winter precipitation and river discharge for southeastern France; the winter results are still very uncertain for the rest of the country (Boé et al., 2009a; Quintana et al., 2010).

Alluvial and karst hydrogeological systems are particularly affected by small changes in the hydrological components. Stream backflooding and the subsequent appearance of swallow holes can occur because of relative changes between surface and underground drainage, which are controlled by both local precipitation and spring discharge (Albéric, 2004). Consequently this type of system is sensitive to small climate variations, even at mid-latitudes.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the impact of climate variation on local hydrological cycle components by focusing on (i) an analysis of backflooding occurrences in a small catchment within the Val d'Orléans (France) over the last 40 yr in order to determine how they are related to the meteorological conditions, and (ii) the prediction of backflooding frequency in the future. To study the effect of climate change on the catchment's highly variable hydrological system, we applied a statistical downscaling

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methodology based on the weather-type (WT) approach describing atmospheric forcing at the regional scale (Boé et al., 2006; Boé and Terray, 2008; Pagé et al., 2010). After briefly describing the study area in the Val d'Orléans, the data used for calculating past backflooding events and the methodology of the WT approach, we discuss the links between the occurrence of particular WTs and the onset of backflooding. Finally, based on different WT frequency projections, we look at future changes that could affect the hydrological components in the Val d'Orléans.

2 The study area

The study area is in the Val d'Orléans, in the Centre Region of France. It is a fluvial-karst system developed in the Loire floodplain and comprising three main components that are highly interactive: the groundwater in the upper part of the Beauce Limestone (Aquitanian), the Loire River and the small local rivers.

In the east of the Val d'Orléans, the Beauce Limestone is separated from the Quaternary alluvium by an impermeable sandy-clayey formation that disappears westward (Fig. 1) to bring the limestone and alluvium into contact. This enables exchanges between surface water and aquifer groundwater, and explains how the Val d'Orléans karst system is supplied mainly through leakages from the Loire (Lepiller, 2006; Joodi et al., 2010).

The Loire catchment upstream of the studied hydrological system is estimated at 36 900 km², with its main source being about 400 km from the Val d'Orléans. The Loire's hydrological and chemical characteristics thus differ from those of the local Val d'Orléans rivers.

The Val d'Orléans contains many temporary springs (Fig. 1). Tracer studies (both artificial and natural) have shown that the surface waters infiltrating the aquifer at Jargeau arrive within a few days at the springs of the Loiret (Albéric and Lepiller, 1998). The Bouillon and Abîme springs, the major springs of the Loiret, can become sinks when the Loire is at a low level and there has been heavy local precipitation in the Dhuy

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than the actual ones during the June to September period means that the simulated backflooding events are longer.

4.3 Simulation of the backflooding events for the 1966–2009 period

One hundred and twenty three backflooding events (i.e. $I > 0$) were calculated for the 1966 to 2009 period using the actual Dhuy and Loire river flows. With the Gardenia-simulated Dhuy river flows for the same period, 73% (or 90) of the backflooding events satisfied the condition $I > 0$. Of the 33 non-simulated backflooding events, 18 lasted for less than a day: these very short events are difficult for Gardenia to distinguish because the model has a tendency to clip the high river flows. It is thus possible that some of the non-simulated backflooding events, which doubtless existed given the actual Dhuy and Loire river flows, were not correctly simulated because of their brevity. If one then takes into consideration the slightly negative (I) values ($I = -0.3-0$), one now finds that Gardenia in fact simulated 93% of the backflooding events calculated from the measured river flows. The underestimation of the Dhuy river flows greater than $1 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ would also explain why all the observed backflooding events were not recognised from the Gardenia-simulated river flows.

Figure 4 shows the backflooding occurrences calculated from the measured river flows (1966–2009) completed by simulated river flows for the period between 1971 and 1979. A total of 126 backflooding events was calculated with two particularly favourable periods for their occurrence being identified: one between 1981 and 1989, and the other between 1997 and 2003. Before the 1980s, there would have been a few fairly localised backflooding occurrences. It is interesting to note that the period of high backflooding frequency occurs when the Dhuy river flow is high on the pluri-annual scale (not shown). This clearly indicates that although the appearance of backflooding is, on the daily scale, linked to the local river flows, its frequency is associated with the rainfall sequences of the order of several years.

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4.4 Relationship between backflooding events and weather types (WT)

The daily record of weather types and the daily Dhuy river flows were combined for the 1966–2007 period (Fig. 5). The average river flow corresponding to each WT is the weighted moving average of the flows over the three days following the appearance of the WT; i.e. the appearance of a WT on day “d” will influence the flow of the Dhuy for the next three days. The assigned percentages are 0.6 for $d + 1$, 0.3 for $d + 2$ and 0.1 for $d + 3$. The variability of the Dhuy river flow is calculated using the ratio (R_{WT}) of the average flow of the Dhuy calculated for each WT over the average flow of the Dhuy for each season:

$$R_{WT} = \frac{\sum_{WT} Q_{Dhuy} / n_{WT}}{\sum_{season} Q_{Dhuy} / n_{season}} \quad (3)$$

with n_{WT} the number of days that the WT appeared between 1966 and 2007 and n_{season} the total number of days in the considered season between 1966 and 2007.

The WT are differentiated by a precise trend in the Dhuy river flow compared to its seasonal average. The value of the ratio (1 being the seasonal average of the river flow) enables one to distinguish the WTs associated with the Dhuy high river flows ($R_{WT} > 1$) and those associated with the Dhuy low river flows ($R_{WT} < 1$) (Fig. 5).

We studied the occurrences of backflooding in relation to the WT, and noted that they are potentially higher with sudden increases in the Dhuy river flow compared to the Loire river flow. The combined trends of the Loire and Dhuy river flows, the precipitation in the study area, the backflooding occurrences and the WTs were analysed in detail for the period between 1966 and 2007. Two examples taken from the backflooding observation period (1997–2001) illustrate these trends: one during a low-water period when the level of the Loire was stable (Fig. 6a) and one during a winter period when the level of the Loire was fluctuating (Fig. 6b). Figure 6a shows the link between the appearance of backflooding events, local precipitation and the trend of the Dhuy

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and Loire river flows from June to August 2000. Certain WT during this low flow period of the Loire gave rise to high precipitation in the study area and thus increased the Dhuy river flow. Backflooding was possible because the Loire river flow varied between 80 and $155 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$. The succession of WTs JJA8, JJA7, JJA4 and JJA5 during the summer of 2000 was at the origin of these backflooding events: it is the sum of the rainy days that gives rise to backflooding. This combination of WTs was responsible for seven summer backflooding events during the observation period. During the winter period (Fig. 6b), the succession of several days associated with a same WT, i.e. DJF3, triggered backflooding due to increased precipitation over the Loiret; this WT was responsible for two of the three December backflooding events that occurred between 1997 and 2001. DJF3 also reappeared several times during this winter period but without triggering any backflooding because the Loire river flow gradually increased making any backflooding impossible; above $350 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ the Loire river flow is too high to enable backflooding. Other WTs brought high precipitation during the considered winter period (Fig. 6b); for example, DJF8 was twice associated in this example with a high precipitation level, but did not trigger any backflooding. Nevertheless, when one compares the average Dhuy river flow under DJF8 with the seasonal average (i.e. the R_{WT} ratio; Fig. 5) one notes that DJF8 tends for a lower river flow than the seasonal average. Thus even though DJF8, when averaged over 40 yr, is representative of a low Dhuy river flow compared to the seasonal average, it can nevertheless, on any particular day, contribute to an abrupt rise in the river level.

Studying the complete 1966–2007 sequence allowed us to determine for each WT a number of days of appearance that could lead to backflooding. However, they are values that need to be weighted in relation to the seasonal occurrence of each WT. The result of the weighting is the aptitude of a WT to cause backflooding, which is defined as follows:

$$\text{Apt}_{\text{WT}} = \frac{m^{\text{WT}}}{p^{\text{WT}}} \quad (4)$$

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where m^{WT} is the number of days that the WT triggers a backflooding and p^{WT} the occurrence of the WT in the season during the considered period. Figure 7 shows the aptitude of the WTs to generate backflooding over two periods: 1966–2007 (overall period) and 1997–2001 (period of backflooding observation). One obtains basically the same results for the two periods: it is the same WTs that have a high ability to trigger backflooding. Termed backflow-triggering WTs, most correspond to the summer and autumn seasons, since the backflooding event is only possible when the Loire is at its low water level. The distribution of triggering WTs is as follows: one winter WT (DJF3), one spring WT (MAM6), four summer WTs (JJA4, JJA5, JJA7, JJA8) and four autumn WTs (SON0, SON3, SON4 et SON8).

The 1997–2001 observation period was a time of many backflooding events compared to the preceding and following periods. In order to confirm the preceding result (Fig. 7) and better understand the backflooding phenomenon on a multi-annual scale, we compared the occurrences of backflow-triggering WTs and non-triggering WTs over the observation period with those over the 1989–1993 period with no backflooding events (Fig. 8). Six triggering WTs (MAM6, JJA4, JJA7, JJA8, SON3, and SON8) appeared more frequently over the four years of the observation period than during the 1989–1993 period, whereas the non-triggering WTs (i.e. those give rise to low Dhuy river flows, such as DJF1, MAM0, MAM2, MAM4, MAM7, SON7 and JJA1) appeared more frequently during the 1989–1993 period with no backflooding; here the higher frequency of non-triggering WTs would in part explain the low level of the Dhuy during this period. This comparison between the periods with backflooding and no backflooding allowed us to confirm the major role played by certain WTs, i.e. the backflow-triggering and non-triggering WTs.

4.5 Projected trend in occurrences of backflooding as a function of WTs

Simulations of the WT frequency trend were carried out for several downscaled global climate scenarios (Pagé et al., 2008). The results of five of the downscaled simulations were used in this study, i.e. ARPEGE 2, GISS-AOM, GISS-ER, MIROC3.2-MEDRES

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and MIUB-ECHO-G, all of which are part of IPCC's SRES A1B scenario (Randall et al., 2007). The data enabled us to evaluate the trend in backflooding occurrences which we have already discussed as a function of weather type.

5 Three time periods were studied for predicting the WT trends: 1961–2000 (Present), 2046–2065 (Near future) and 2081–2100 (Distant future). We shall first discuss the results of the Present/Near future comparison, and then the Present/Distant future comparison.

10 The 10 backflow-triggering WTs and the 8 non-triggering WTs were considered as two distinct groups for the Present/Near future comparison; their total annual occurrences are shown in Fig. 9a and b. All five simulations indicated that the non-triggering WTs will increase in frequency in the near future (Fig. 9b) and two simulations (GISS-ER, MIROC3.2-MEDRES) also indicated a frequency increase for the backflow-triggering WTs. Conversely, three of the simulations showed a decreasing frequency for backflow-triggering WTs in the near future (ARPEGE 2, GISS-AOM and MIUB-ECHO-G; Fig. 9a).

15 The Present/Distant future comparisons for the two WT groups show the same patterns as those for the Present/Near future comparisons; i.e. an increase of the total annual occurrence of the non-triggering WTs in all five simulations (Fig. 9d) and of the total annual occurrence of the backflow-triggering WTs in two simulations (GISS-ER, MIROC3.2-MEDRES), and a decrease of the backflow-triggering WTs for the other three simulations (Fig. 9c).

20 There is thus a well-marked trend for the non-triggering WTs towards an increase in both the near and distant future, and this in each simulation. For the backflow-triggering WTs, however, the ARPEGE 2, GISS-AOM and MIUB-ECHO-G simulations predict a decrease in their frequency, whereas the GISS-ER and MIROC3.2-MEDRES simulations tend to indicate an increase. The different results obtained from these models reflect each model's characteristics: i.e. horizontal resolution, number of vertical levels, physical parameterisation, numerical methods, intrinsic internal climate variability, etc. (Randall et al., 2007).

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It is difficult, at present, to come to a conclusion as to whether backflooding will have decreased by the middle or end of the century. The GISS-ER and MIROC3.2-MEDRES models agree about a lessening of the backflooding risk (increase of non-triggering WTs and decrease of backflow-triggering WTs). However, the other three models tend to indicate an increase of the backflooding risk (increase in both the non-triggering and the backflow-triggering WTs, and thus fewer intermediate WTs to compensate the increase).

5 If one considers that backflooding represents an extreme event in the Val d'Orléans (sudden increase in precipitation), other more specialised studies on the future frequency of extreme events help us complete the results obtained using the WT method. The models agree in predicting an increase in the number of days of drought in summer and of intense precipitation in winter (Déqué, 2007; Moisselin and Dubuisson, 2006). Planton et al. (2008) also explain that the change in the occurrence of weather regimes in the future will favour intense precipitation events in excess of 10 mm in winter, especially in the northern half of France. But the models do not succeed in evaluating the trend of very intense precipitations in the southeast of France (including the Cevennes episodes that partly feed the Loire) because they are not capable of reproducing small-scale events in the current climate conditions. The ARPEGE and LMDZ models used for the IMFREX project (Projet GICC-IMFREX, 2005) simulated the trend of the number of days with more than 10 mm precipitation in France for 2070–2099. For the Val d'Orléans, the two models predict a decrease in the number of days in summer and a slight increase (for LMDZ) in winter. In autumn and spring, the number of days of intense precipitation will not change for the study area. In predicting that the number of days of intense rain will decrease in summer, these simulations indicate a lower risk of backflooding.

25 These predictions do not, however, take into account the simultaneous evolution of the Loire. In this respect, Boé et al. (2009a) predict a 15% reduction of the Loire winter and spring river flows for the end of the century and up to a 35% reduction for the summer and autumn river flows. Incorporating these data when calculating the

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backflow index would give a 40% increase in backflooding events were the Dhuy river flow to remain stable. However, in view of the preceding results, the Dhuy river flow will diminish in the future. This probable reduction of the Dhuy river flow should be determined quantitatively using a hydrological model to find the equilibrium between the future Loire and Dhuy river flows.

5 Conclusions

It has been shown that karst systems can be very sensitive to climate change. The switch from an outflow (or emergence) function to an inflow (or loss) function can lead to a potential quality degradation of the groundwater resource. The occurrences of this occasional event were reconstructed for the last 40 yr based on river flow data. Periods of several years with a large number of backflooding events and periods with almost no backflooding events succeeded one another and appear to be directly related to the multi-annual variations of the river flow.

For the present study a correlation was made between local precipitation variations and the large-scale atmospheric circulations that affect Europe. Statistical downscaling of the weather regimes has made it possible to determine the weather types (WT) that condition the onset of backflooding; it would appear that certain weather types control the frequency of backflooding events over time. The method of linking WT and backflooding has enabled us to propose, based on a small set of climate projections, trend scenarios for the occurrence of backflooding and to project a relative stability of the backflow-triggering WT and an increase of the non-triggering WT. However, one must consider the different uncertainties which can affect this method: the ones linked to future emission scenarios of greenhouse gases, to the knowledge of physical processes, to the downscaling and the differences between downscaling methods and above all the uncertainties linked to the atmospheric intrinsic variability of weather types. Consequently the results obtained in this study are not completely definitive and must be taken with considering all these sources of uncertainties. As long as it is possible to

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correctly assess the impact of each WT on a specific hydrological site, the deployed method could be applied to other climate change impact studies.

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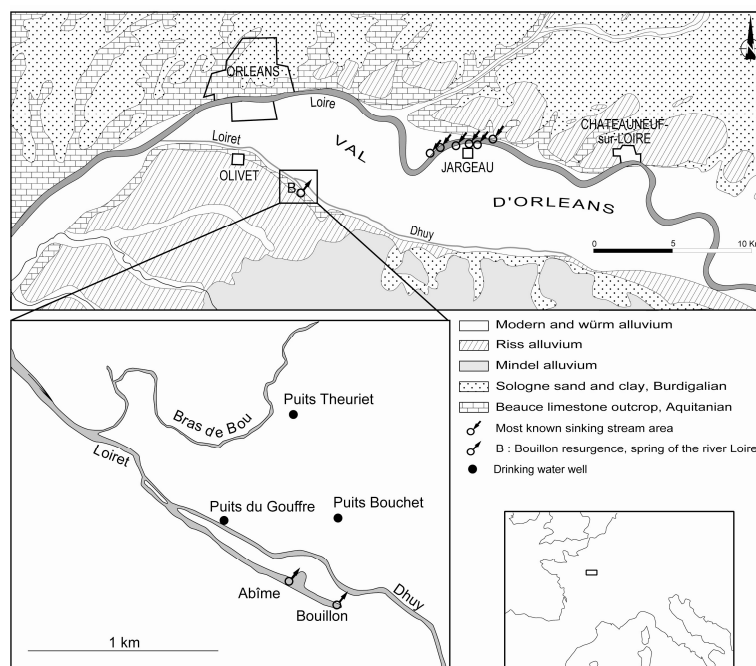


Fig. 1. Geological and hydrological setting of the Val d'Orléans (modified from Albéric, 2004).

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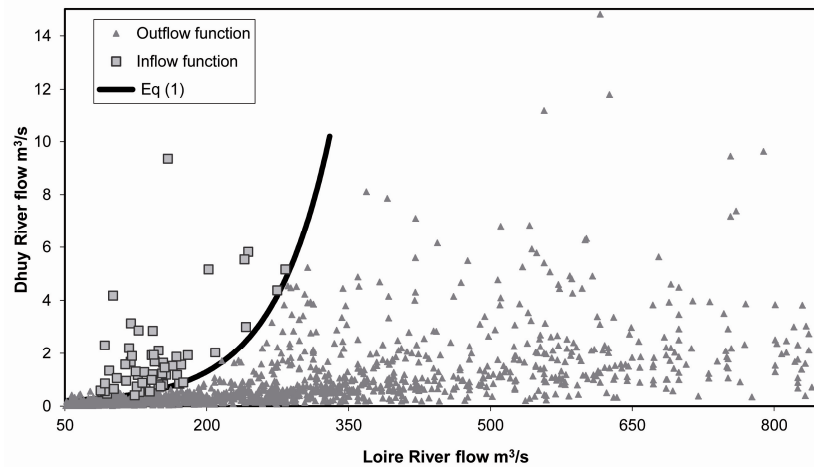


Fig. 2. Average daily Dhuy river flow versus the Loire river flow at Orléans between 1 June 1997 and 31 December 2001, with an indication of the outflow (triangles) and inflow (squares) functions of the karstic Bouillon Spring. Note: only Loire river flows below $850 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ are shown.

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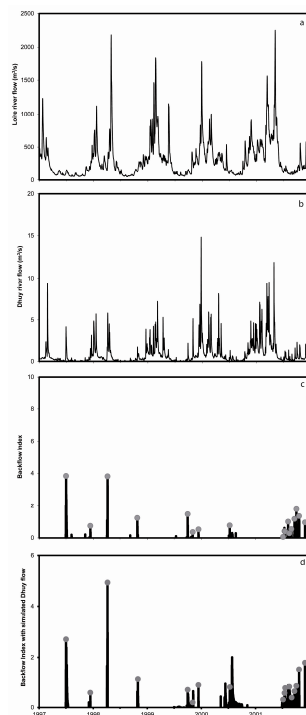


Fig. 3. Observed backflooding events and calculated backflow indices for 1997 to 2001. From the top down: Loire river flow (a), Dhuy river flow (b), backflow index calculated with the actual Dhuy river flows and the backflooding observations (grey circles) (c), backflow index calculated with the Gardenia-calculated Dhuy river flows and the backflooding observations (grey circles) (d).

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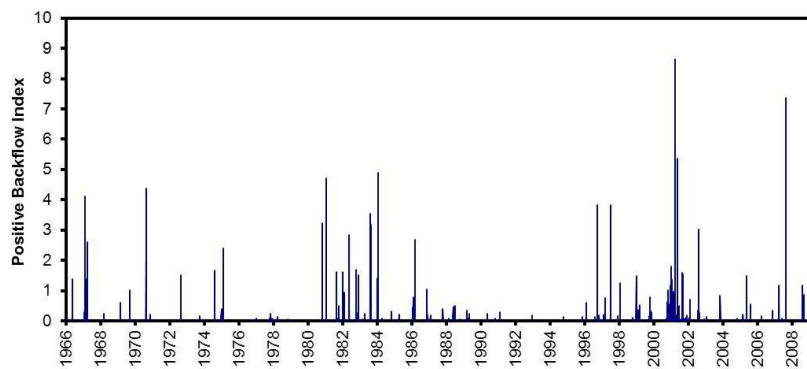


Fig. 4. Backflooding events between 1966 and 2009.

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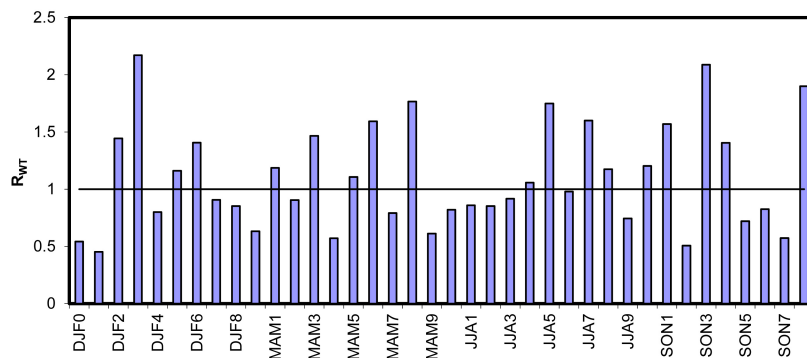


Fig. 5. Variability of the Dhuy river flow represented by the R_{WT} ratio for each weather type compared to the average seasonal flow. Note: $R_{WT} = 1$ corresponds to the average seasonal Dhuy river flow for the considered season.

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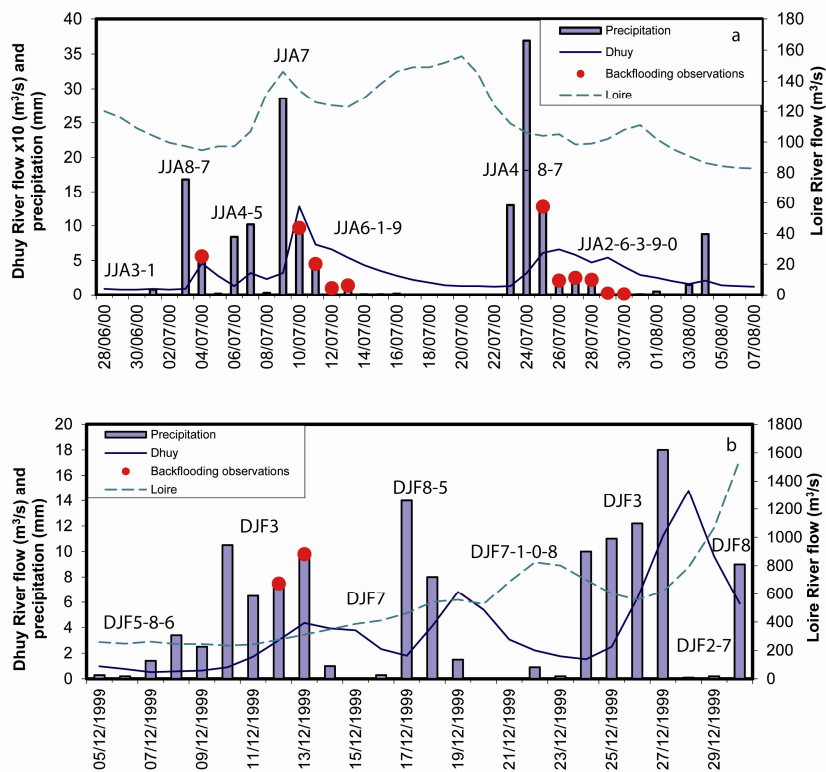


Fig. 6. Precipitations, Loire river flow, Dhuy river flow, backflooding observations and associated WT during a period of Loire stability (a) and a period of Loire high river flow (b).

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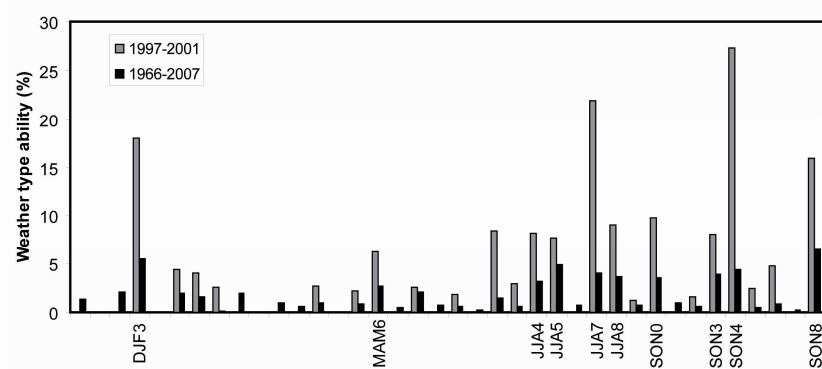


Fig. 7. Ability of the WTs to trigger backflooding, calculated over two periods: 1997–2001 and 1966–2007.

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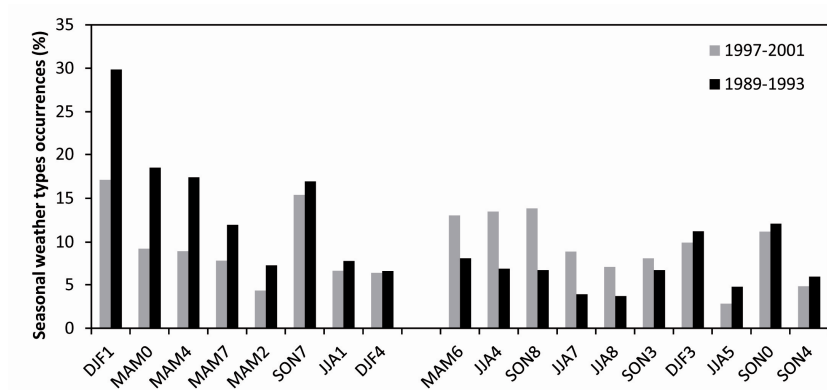


Fig. 8. Comparison of WT occurrences for the periods with (1997–2001) and without (1989–1993) backflooding.

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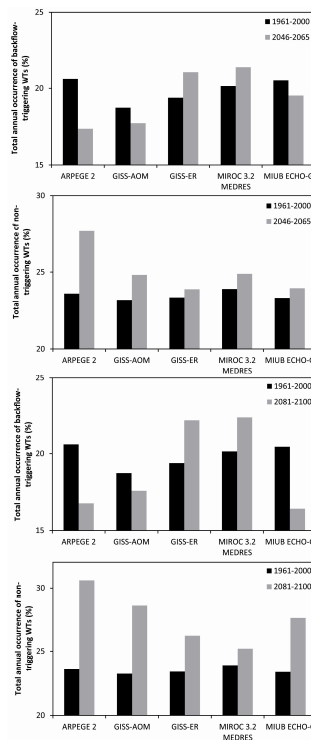


Fig. 9. Total annual occurrence (%) of backflow-triggering WT types (a) and non-triggering WT types (b) between the present and the near future and of backflow-triggering WT types (c) and non-triggering WT types (d) between the present and the distant future according to the five simulations.

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