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Why increased extreme precipitation under climate change negatively affects water security

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Abstract. An increase of extreme precipitation is projected for many areas worldwide in the coming decades. To assess the impact of increased precipitation intensity on water security, we applied a regional scale hydrological and soil erosion model, forced with Regional Climate Model projections. We specifically considered the impact of climate change on the distribution of water between soil (green water) and surface water (blue water) compartments. We show that an increase in precipitation intensity leads to a redistribution of water within the catchment, where water storage in soil decreases and reservoir inflow increases. This affects plant water stress and the potential of rainfed versus irrigated agriculture, and increases dependency on reservoir storage, that is increasingly threatened by an increase of soil erosion. This study demonstrates the crucial importance of accounting for the fact that increased precipitation intensity leads to water redistribution between green and blue water, increased soil erosion, and reduced water security.

1 Introduction

For many areas worldwide, increased rainfall intensity and frequency of extreme weather events are projected for the coming decades (Sun et al., 2007; O'Gorman and Schneider, 2009; Sillmann et al., 2013). Yet, there is surprisingly little known about how this will affect water security at regional scales, most relevant for policy making (Nicholson et al., 2009). Water security is defined as a condition in which the population has access to adequate quantities of clean water to sustain livelihoods and is protected against water related disasters (UN-Water, 2013). Accurate quantification of the impacts of climate change on water security is crucial for the design and evaluation of effective adaptation strategies and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations General Assembly, 2015), in particular SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 15 (life on land). Previous impact studies have indicated how climate change may affect water availability, flood risk (Sperna Weiland et al., 2012; Arnell and Gosling, 2013; Forzieri et al., 2014; Donnelly et al., 2017; Thober et al., 2018) and soil erosion (Li and Fang, 2016), with positive and negative reported impacts. However, these estimates insufficiently account for actual impacts on the redistribution of water between soil and surface water compartments. While water storage potential in soils (green water) and reservoirs (blue water) is increasingly important for climate change adaptation, there is insufficient knowledge of how both are affected by increasing precipitation intensity and how this affects crucial aspects of water security such as plant water stress, reservoir inflow, soil erosion and reservoir storage potential.

Most available studies on the impact of climate change on water security do not fully account for the impact of extreme precipitation on water redistribution and crucial hydrological and soil erosion processes. To assess the impact of climate change, hydrological and soil erosion models are generally forced with future projected climate data from Global Circulation Models (GCMs). To enhance accuracy and spatial resolution of climate projections some studies adopt Regional Climate Models (RCMs) to downscale GCM output (Jacob et al., 2014) and apply bias-correction methods to overcome the bias between historical observed and modelled data. While the change factor (or delta change) approach is the most popular bias-correction method, other bias-correction methods that consider the change in future precipitation distribution are needed to assess the effects of changes in frequency and intensity of extreme events (Mullan et al., 2012; Li and Fang, 2016). The selection of climate models, downscaling and bias-correction methods strongly affects the climate projections (Maraun et al., 2017) and consequently also the simulated hydrological and erosional response. Moreover, most global and regional studies only consider saturation excess surface runoff and disregard infiltration excess surface runoff, which may lead to an underestimation of the actual impact of extreme precipitation on surface runoff generation. Saturation excess and infiltration excess are the main mechanisms causing surface runoff. They may co-exist within a catchment and occur at different times or places due to differences in spatio-temporal conditions, i.e. antecedent soil moisture, soil characteristics or precipitation intensities (Beven, 2012). Infiltration excess surface runoff is mainly driven by precipitation intensity and is responsible for major parts of surface runoff generation in many parts of the world, such as the Mediterranean (Merheb et al., 2016; Manus et al., 2008) and semi-arid environments (Lesschen et al., 2009; García-Ruiz et al., 2013), due to steep slopes, low infiltration rates and frequent intense precipitation events. Considering the future increase of extreme precipitation (Sun et al., 2007; O'Gorman and Schneider, 2009; Sillmann et al., 2013), infiltration excess surface runoff will become increasingly more important.

Climate change will affect soil erosion through changes in precipitation volume and intensity and through climate change induced changes in vegetation cover. Climate change induced increase in extreme precipitation is likely to be a dominant factor causing future increase of soil erosion (Nearing et al., 2004; Nunes et al., 2008), as was demonstrated in various hillslope scale (Zhang et al., 2012; Mullan et al., 2012; Routschek et al., 2014) and catchment-scale event-based model studies (Baartman et al., 2012; Paroissien et al., 2015). Given the relevance of precipitation intensity, appropriate bias-correction methods and accounting for infiltration excess surface runoff are particularly important to assess the impact of climate change. However, large-scale assessments rarely consider the impact of increased extreme precipitation frequency on soil erosion rates. They are either applied at a low temporal resolution (e.g. monthly time steps), hence, focusing on changes in precipitation volume, or use bias-correction methods that do not consider changes in the frequency distribution (e.g. the delta change method), leading to strong underestimation of the impact of climate change. Furthermore, vegetation cover mitigates soil erosion through canopy interception and flow resistance (Nearing et al., 2004; Nunes et al., 2013). However, the interactions between reduced precipitation, increased temperature and changes in the vegetation cover are rarely assessed in soil erosion impact studies,

Hydrology and Earth System Sciences
Open Access
Discussions

while the change in vegetation cover may have a significant impact on hydrological and soil erosion processes (Nunes et al., 2009).

Due to the inherent nature of the processes involved, such as infiltration excess surface runoff and soil erosion, the impact of extreme precipitation can only be assessed at a sufficiently detailed spatial and temporal scale. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the effect of climate change on water security through application of a spatially-distributed hydrological model (SPHY; Terink et al., 2015), coupled with a soil erosion model (MMF; Morgan and Duzant, 2008), that runs at a daily time step. The hydrological model simulates the main hydrological processes, including infiltration excess surface runoff. The model was applied to the Segura River catchment, a typical large Mediterranean river catchment highly regulated by reservoirs. We applied the model to a reference scenario and 4 future climate scenarios, where we accounted for the multiple effects of climate change, including precipitation intensity, seasonal and inter-annual vegetation development.

2 Material & Methods

2.1 Study Area

The study is performed in the Segura River catchment in the southeast of Spain (Figure 1). The catchment area covers 15,978 km^2 and has an elevation ranging between sea level and 2055 $\mathrm{m.a.s.l.}$ (Figure 1c). The climate in the catchment is classified as temperate (Cfa and Cfb according to the Köppen-Geiger climate classification) in the headwaters (19%) and semi-arid (BSk) in the rest of the catchment (81%). Catchment-averaged mean annual rainfall amounts to 361 mm (for the period 1981-2000) and mean annual temperature ranges between 9.3 and 18.7 $^\circ\mathrm{C}$ (1981-2000) in the headwaters and downstream area, respectively.

The main landuse types are shrubland (28%), forest (26%), cereal fields (14%) and almond orchards (9%) (Figure 1d). Agriculture accounts for 44% of the catchments surface area. The main soil classes are Calcisols (41%), Leptosols (35%), Luvisols (4%) and Kastanozems (4%) (Figure 1e). There are 33 reservoirs in the catchment, from which 14 are allocated exclusively for irrigation purposes (Figure 1b and Table S1) with a total capacity of 866 Hm^3. The other reservoirs have mixed functions for electricity supply and flood prevention.

2.2 Model Description

We applied a spatially-distributed hydrological model (SPHY; Terink et al., 2015), coupled with a soil erosion model (MMF; Morgan and Duzant, 2008), described in detail in Eekhout et al. (2018). The hydrological model simulates the most relevant hydrological processes, such as interception, evapotranspiration, dynamic evolution of vegetation cover, including seasonal patterns and response to climate change, surface runoff, and lateral and vertical soil moisture flow at a daily timestep. The model simulates infiltration excess surface runoff based on the Green-Ampt formula (Heber Green and Ampt, 1911). The soil erosion model is based on the Modified Morgan-Morgan-Finney model (Morgan and Duzant, 2008), runs at a daily time-step and is fully coupled with the hydrological model. Soil detachment is determined as a function of raindrop impact and accumulated runoff. In-field deposition is a function of the abundance of vegetation and soil roughness. The remainder will go into transport,

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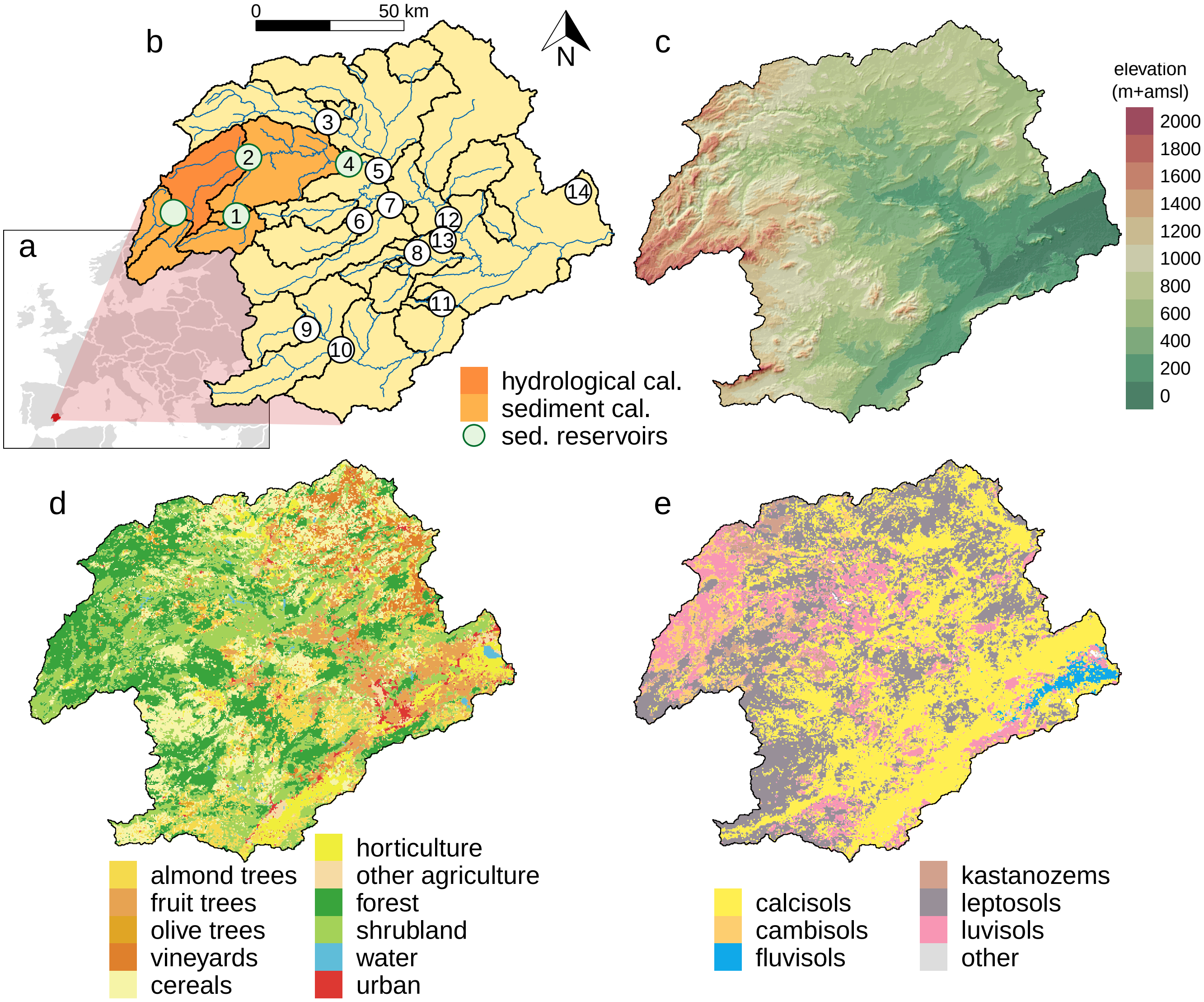

Figure 1. Location and characteristics of the Segura River catchment: (a) location of the catchment within Europe, (b) location of the subcatchments (yellow), the hydrological calibration area (dark orange), the soil erosion calibration area (light orange), the channels (blue), the reservoirs (numbers 1-14), and the calibration reservoirs (green dots), (c) Digital Elevation Model (Farr et al., 2007), (d) landuse map (Ministerio de Agricultura y Pesca Alimentación y Medio Ambiente, 2010), and (e) soil texture map (Hengl et al., 2017).

considering the transport capacity of the flow and a sediment trapping formula to account for the deposition of sediment in reservoirs. The model incorporates a vegetation module that considers inter- and intra-annual vegetation development and provides vegetation input to both the hydrological and the soil erosion model (see SI and Eekhout et al. (2018) for a detailed description of the model, input data and calibration).

2.3 Climate scenarios

We applied four different future climate scenarios, divided over two future periods (i.e. 2031-2050 and 2081-2100) and two Representative Concentration Pathways (i.e. RCP4.5 and RCP8.5), describing an emission scenario peaking in 2040 followed by a decline (RCP4.5) and one with continuous increase of emissions throughout the 21st century (RCP8.5). We obtained data from a total of nine climate models (Table S2) from the EURO-CORDEX initiative (Jacob et al., 2014), with a 0.11° resolution. Quantile mapping has been recognized as the empirical-statistical downscaling and bias-correction method that shows the best performance (Themeßl et al., 2011). We adopted the method proposed by Themeßl et al. (2012), which utilizes Frequency Adaptation and accounts for new extremes, respectively, to correct for the dry-day effect and to correct for new extreme precipitation values that do not occur in the reference period. Daily precipitation and temperature data for the reference scenario (1981-2000) were, respectively, obtained from the SPREAD dataset (Serrano-Notivoli et al., 2017), with a 5 km resolution, and the SPAIN02 dataset (Herrera et al., 2016), with a 0.11° resolution.

2.4 Water Security Indicators

We evaluated the impact of climate change on water security using plant water stress, reservoir inflow, hillslope erosion and reservoir sediment yield as impact indicators. Plant water stress, defined as an indicator between no stress (0) and fully stressed (1), was determined by comparing the soil moisture content in the root layer with the plant specific soil moisture content from which stress starts to occur and soil moisture at wilting point. Plant water stress is determined using the following equation (adapted from Porporato et al., 2001)):

$$\mathrm{PWS} = \frac{\theta_{\mathrm{PWS}} - \theta(t)}{\theta_{\mathrm{PWS}} - \theta_{\mathrm{PWP}}} \tag{1}$$

where PWS is the dimensionless plant water stress, $\theta(t)$ is the soil moisture content at timestep t, θ_{PWS} is the plant and soil specific soil moisture content from which plant water stress starts to occur and θ_{PWP} is the soil moisture content at permanent wilting point. PWP equals zero when $\theta(t) > \theta_{\mathrm{PWP}}$ The value of θ_{PWS} is determined as follows (adapted from Allen et al., 1998):

$$\theta_{\mathrm{PWS}} = \theta_{\mathrm{FC}} - d(\theta_{\mathrm{FC}} - \theta_{\mathrm{PWP}}) \tag{2}$$

where θ_{FC} is the soil moisture content at field capacity, and d is the depletion fraction. The depletion fraction is a plant specific factor, which is a function of the potential evapotranspiration (Allen et al., 1998):

$$d = d_{\mathrm{tab}} + 0.04(5 - ET_{\mathrm{P}}) \tag{3}$$

where d_{tab} is the tabular value of the depletion fraction and ET_{P} is the potential evapotranspiration obtained from the model. Values for d_{tab} were obtained from Allen et al. (1998).

Reservoir inflow of the 14 reservoirs used for irrigation is defined as the cumulative discharge sum in the upstream area of a reservoir. In this calculation, only the area is considered that belongs to one reservoir. If the upstream area of a reservoir

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Hydrology and Earth System Sciences
Open Access
Discussions

contains one or more other reservoirs, the discharge originating from these areas is omitted. Hillslope erosion was determined from the long-term average soil erosion map. Per subcatchment we determined the average of all the cells with an upstream area smaller than 10 km^2, representing hillslope erosion. Reservoir sediment yield was determined from the sediment yield timeseries obtained at each reservoir. Per reservoir we determined the average yearly sediment yield. From reservoir sediment yield we determined annual capacity loss, by dividing the reservoir sediment yield by the storage capacity of the reservoir.

2.5 Uncertainty Analysis

To account for uncertainty we evaluated the robustness and significance of the climate projections and the model predictions between the ensemble of 9 climate models. Robustness is defined as the agreement of the simulations in terms of the direction of change, i.e. changes in which more than 66% of the models agree in the direction of change were called robust changes. A paired U-test (Mann–Whitney–Wilcoxon test, with a significance level of 0.05) was applied to test the significance of model outcomes for the 9 climate models. The pairs consisted of the model output for (1) the reference scenario and (2) the 9 climate models. The paired U-test is also applied to determine the significance of the catchment-averaged change with respect to the reference scenario.

3 Results

3.1 Climate Change Signal

The future climate scenarios predict a significant 20-135 mm decrease of annual precipitation in the headwaters of the catchment, corresponding to a decrease of 3 to 24%, with respect to the reference scenario (Figures 2 (upper row) and 3). Scenario S4 predicts significant decreases in the entire catchment, with a catchment-average decrease of 18% ($p<0.01$). All future scenarios show a robust and significant increase of annual average temperature, with changes from 1.2 $^\circ\mathrm{C}$ (scenario S1) to 3.9 $^\circ\mathrm{C}$ (scenario S4) (Figures 3 and S3).

Changes in the intensity and frequency of precipitation may be the most relevant climate signal affecting water security, which we assessed through the intensity of extreme precipitation and the duration of dry spells. Under future climate conditions, extreme precipitation is likely to increase significantly in almost the entire catchment, with largest increases found for scenario S4 (Figures 2 (lower row) and 3). The duration of dry spells, periods of 5 consecutive days with less than 1 mm precipitation (Jacob et al., 2014), is likely to significantly increase by 7-9 days (catchment-average, $p<0.02$) for scenarios S1-3 and by 26 days for scenario S4 ($p<0.01$) (Figures 3 and S4). These results suggest a significant decrease of precipitation frequency in all 4 scenarios.

3.2 Redistribution of Water

In the reference scenario, water availability shows a distinct seasonal pattern (Figures 4, S6 and S7). Reservoir inflow peaks in the autumn and winter months. In those two seasons, the plant water stress is low, except in the downstream part of the

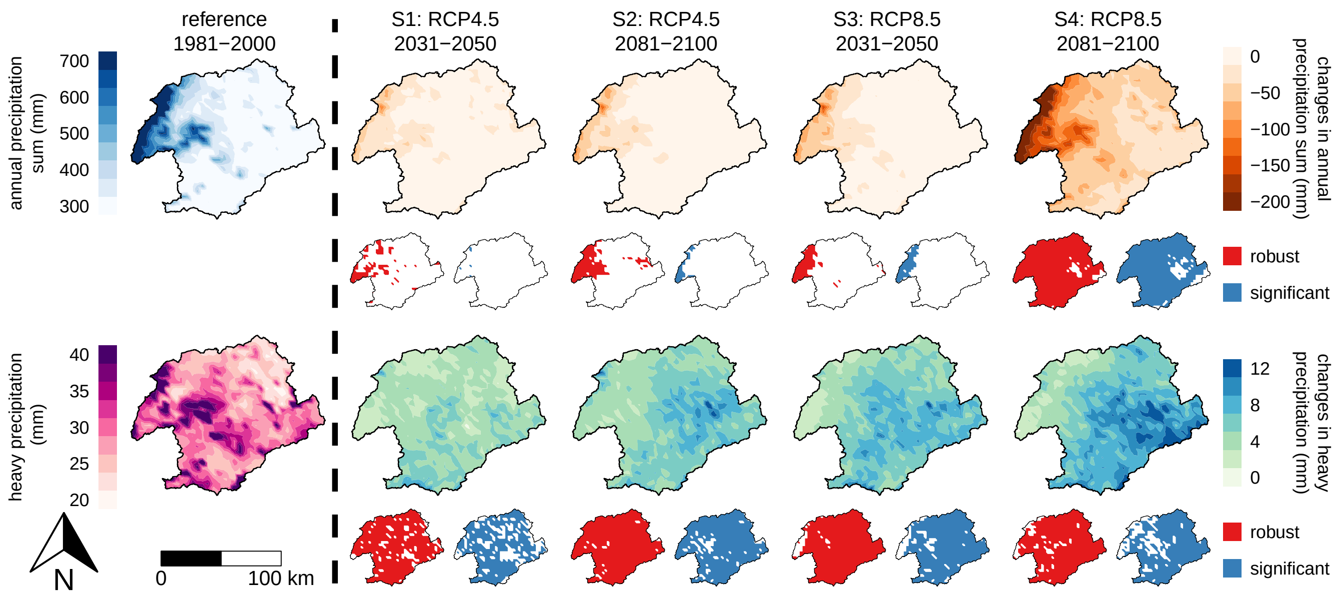

Figure 2. Ensemble average annual precipitation sum (mm, upper row) and ensemble average heavy precipitation (mm, lower row) defined as the 95th percentile of daily precipitation, considering only rainy days ($>1\ \mathrm{mm\ day^{-1}}$; Jacob et al., 2014)), for the reference scenario (left) and changes between the reference scenario and the four future scenarios (right).

catchment. In the spring and more pronounced in the summer, reservoir inflow decreases and plant water stress increases. Plant water stress reaches a maximum in the summer, where the catchment-average equals 0.88.

Changes in water availability under future climate conditions show a seasonal pattern as well. In the winter months (DJF) the catchment-total reservoir inflow decreases in all scenarios, up to 36% ($p<0.01$) in scenario S4. Significant changes in plant water stress are projected for scenarios S2-S4 showing a catchment-average increase of 0.04 ($p=0.03$) to 0.11 ($p<0.01$). In contrast, reservoir inflow in spring (MAM) increases in all scenarios, most markedly in scenario S3 with an increase of 85% ($p=0.07$). A small increase in plant water stress is observed in scenarios S1-3, however, scenario S4 shows a significant catchment-average increase of 0.09 ($p<0.01$).

Similar results are projected for the summer months, with significant changes in plant water stress in scenario S4, showing a catchment-average increase of 0.04 ($p<0.01$). Surprisingly, despite of the decreasing annual precipitation, in the summer months (JJA) reservoir inflow increases, with a maximum of 119% (scenario S3, $p=0.01$). In the autumn months (SON) catchment-average plant water stress increases most of all seasons, ranging from 0.05 to 0.11 ($p<0.01$). In autumn, reservoir inflow increases in all scenarios, with a maximum of 37% (scenario S2, $p=0.16$). Overall, a significant yearly increase of reservoir inflow is projected for scenarios S1-3, with a maximum in scenario S3 of 28% ($p<0.01$) with respect to the reference scenario. The yearly catchment-average plant water stress increases significantly in all scenarios ($p<0.01$), ranging from 0.03 (scenario S1) to 0.09 (scenario S4), equivalent to a 5-14% increase.

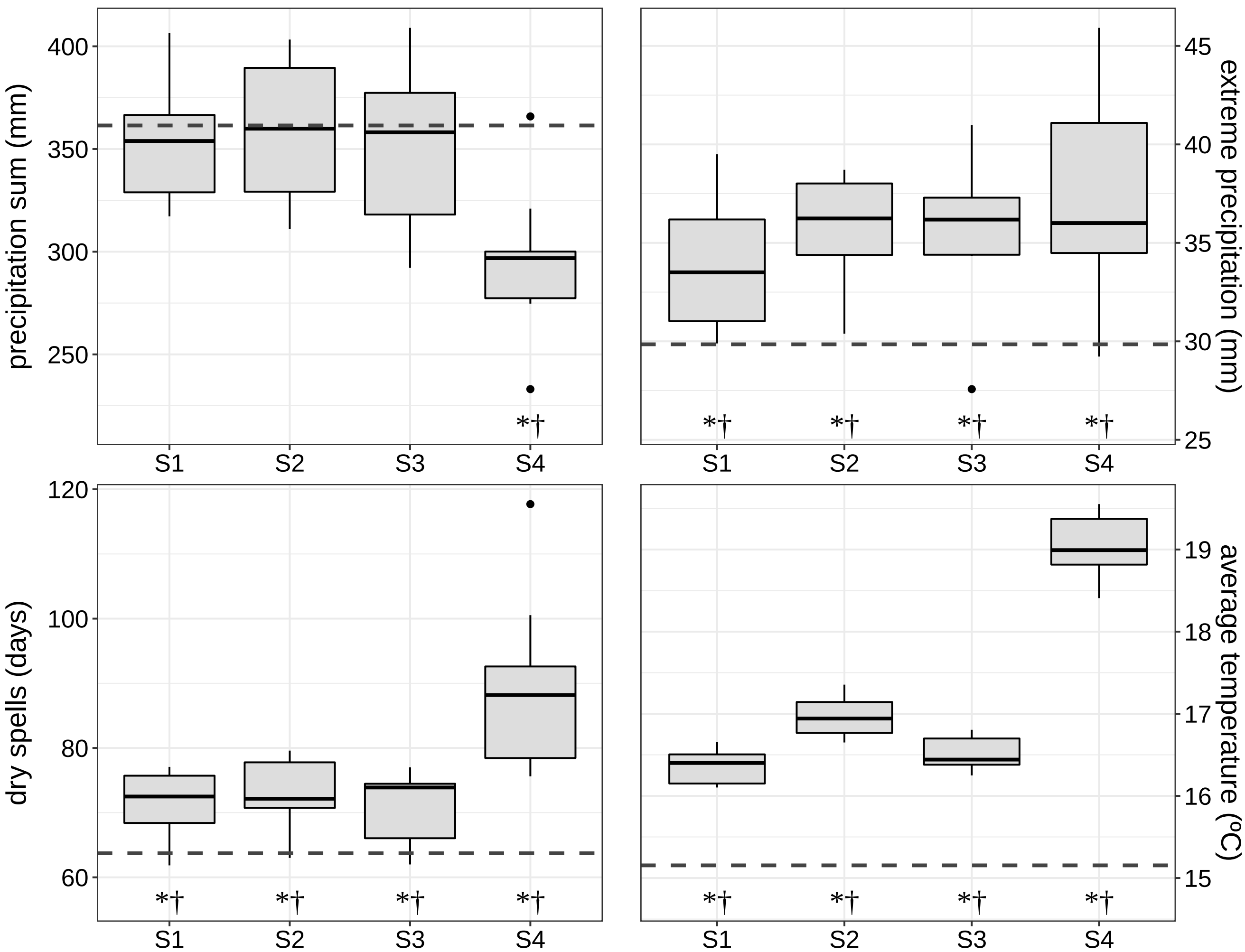

Figure 3. Catchment-average climate signal indicators, i.e. precipitation sum (mm), extreme precipitation (mm), dry spells (days) and average temperature (°C). The boxplots indicate the spread of the catchment-average among the nine climate models. In each panel the horizontal dashed line represents the catchment-average value for the reference scenario. An asterisk (∗) indicates a robust change and a dagger (†) indicates a significant change ($p<0.05$).

To understand water security and assess the potential for climate change adaptation, it is important to consider water storage capacity in reservoirs, and storage capacity loss due to soil erosion. In the reference scenario, reservoir sediment yield (SY) corresponds to a total annual capacity loss of 0.11% (Figures 5 and S8). The average hillslope erosion (SSY) in the subcatchments ranges between 129 and 622 $\mathrm{Mg\,km^{-2}\,yr^{-1}}$. Under future climate conditions, an increase of hillslope erosion is observed in all scenarios (S1-S4). Hillslope erosion mainly increases in the central and downstream located subcatchments. In the headwaters, hillslope erosion decreases due to a decrease of annual precipitation (Figure 2) and an increase in vegetation cover (Figure S5). The increase in catchment-average hillslope erosion ranges from 23% (p=0.13) to 45% (p=0.01). Reservoir

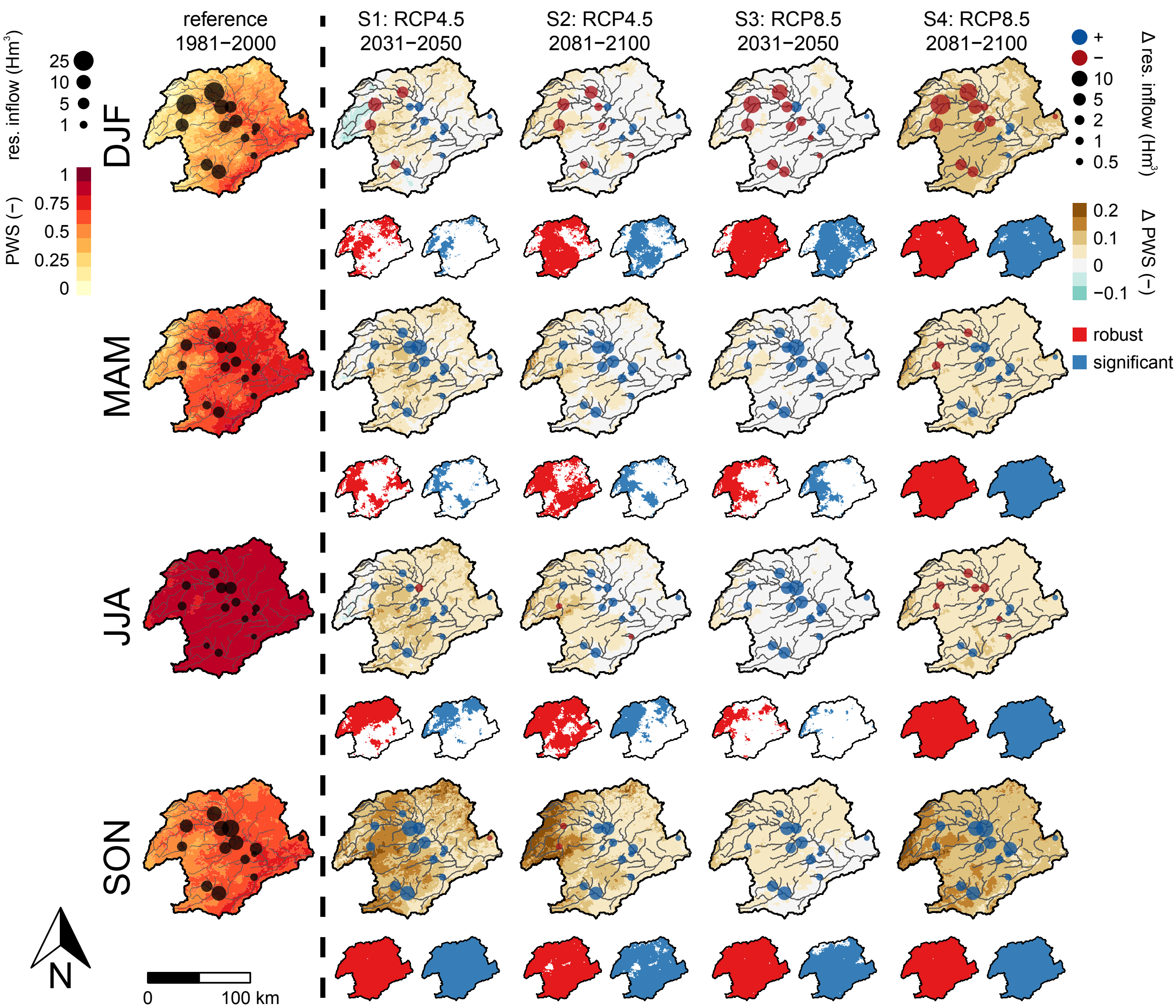

Figure 4. Ensemble average seasonal reservoir inflow (dots, Hm^3) and plant water stress (PWS) (-) for the reference scenario (left) and changes between the reference scenario and the four future scenarios (right), differentiated by season: winter (DJF), spring (MAM), summer (JJA), and autumn (SON). For the future scenarios, the reservoir inflow is presented as an increase (blue) or a decrease (red).

sediment yield increases in scenarios S1-S3 and decreases in scenario S4. However, significant changes in sediment yield are only observed in scenario S4, with a decrease of 22% ($p<0.01$) due to decreasing sediment transport capacity in channels.

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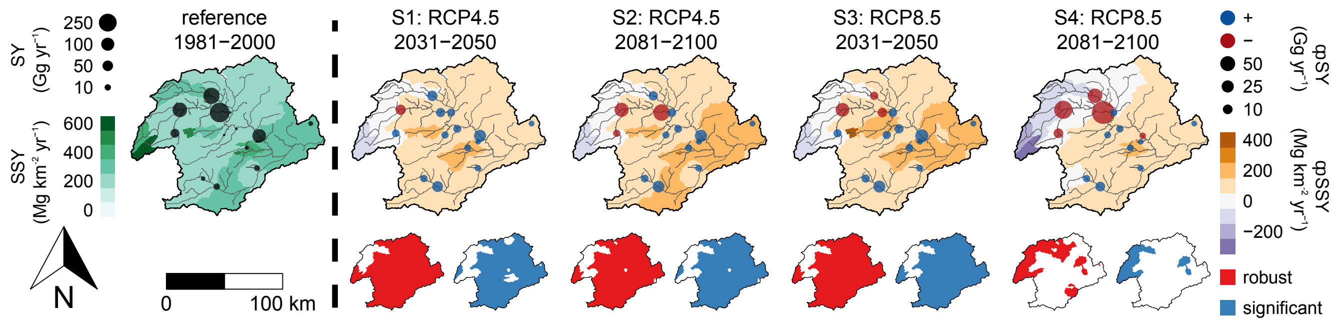

Figure 5. Ensemble average sediment yield (SY) at the reservoirs (dots, $\mathrm{Gg\,yr^{-1}}$) and average hillslope erosion (SSY) per subcatchment ($\mathrm{Mg\,km^{-2}\,yr^{-1}}$) for the reference scenario (left) and changes between the reference scenario and the four future scenarios (right). For the future scenarios, the SY is presented as an increase (blue) or a decrease (red).

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Previous studies concluded that climate change leads to reduced water availability in those areas where lower future annual precipitation sums are projected, evidenced by increased drought indices and reduced streamflow (Sperna Weiland et al., 2012; Arnell and Gosling, 2013; Lopez-Bustins et al., 2013; Forzieri et al., 2014). Our results confirm this, but more importantly we show an significant redistribution of water under future climate conditions, resulting in increased plant water stress due to a reduction of soil water content (green water), and increased water and sediment inflow into streams and reservoirs (blue water), leading to an overall reduced water security. The redistribution of water is mainly driven by an increase in extreme precipitation (Figure 2) and a decrease of precipitation frequency (Figure S4), and to a lesser extent by a change in annual precipitation volume (Figure 2). The increase in extreme precipitation causes an increase in surface runoff and, subsequently, an increase in reservoir inflow and soil erosion. As such, climate change eventually leads to a reduction of infiltration into the soil, which negatively affects soil moisture content and, subsequently, leads to an increase in plant water stress (Figure 4), which is a crucial impact indicator for rainfed agricultural and natural ecosystems.

Previous studies indicated that erosion can either decrease or increase under climate change due to the combined effect of decreasing precipitation, increasing intensity and changing vegetation cover (Li and Fang, 2016). However, most previous studies do not, or insufficiently, account for crucial processes like infiltration excess surface runoff, and intra- and inter-annual vegetation development as affected by climate change. Our results show an increase in hillslope erosion due to increased precipitation intensity in the majority of the subcatchments, leading to an increase of sediment yield towards streams and in most reservoirs (Figure 5). However, the catchment-total reservoir sediment yield remains constant or even decreases, due to a decrease in the transport capacity of the flow resulting from a decrease in runoff in the headwaters, most pronounced in scenario S4. This further illustrates the importance of accounting for sediment transport capacity and the different response of hillslope erosion as compared to catchment sediment yield.

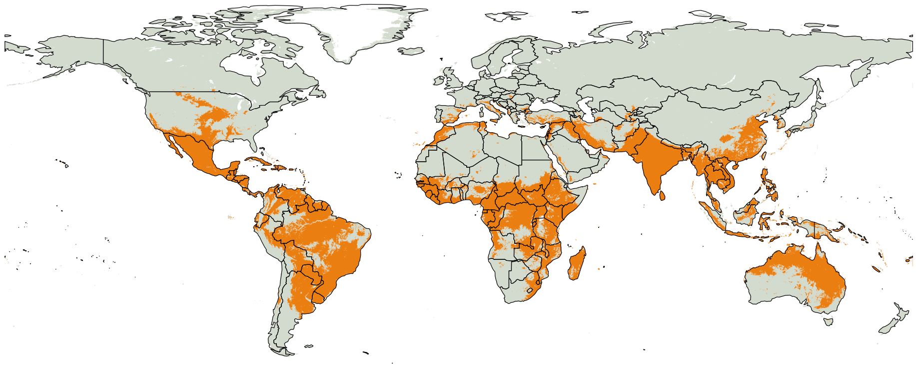

Figure 6. Global map indicating the areas (in orange) prone for infiltration excess surface runoff, defined as those areas where extreme precipitation exceeds the infiltration rate (Figure S2). See SI for more details.

Our results show that increased precipitation intensity leads to increased surface runoff, soil erosion, and redistribution of water within the catchment. While it is well established that extreme precipitation leads to surface runoff Beven (2012) and significantly contributes to soil erosion (Favis-Mortlock and Mullan, 2011), most large-scale impact assessments do not consider the most relevant process involved, i.e. infiltration excess surface runoff. A rough preliminary estimate indicates infiltration excess overland flow actually plays a substantial role in about one quarter of the global land surface (Figure 6) where extreme precipitation intensity exceeds the infiltration capacity of the soil. Therefore, we argue that, to account for the impact of increased extreme precipitation on water security, it is crucial to consider infiltration excess surface runoff in hydrological and soil erosion assessments.

Our analysis further shows that, in general, plant water stress and reservoir inflow both increase under future climate conditions. For agriculture, which amounts to more than 40% of the catchment surface area, this may have significant consequences. An increase of plant water stress for rainfed crops (e.g. cereals and almond trees, covering 29% of the catchment) may lead to decreasing crop yields. On the other hand, increased reservoir inflow may be beneficial for irrigated agriculture (e.g. horticulture and fruit, covering 19% of the catchment). These changes have short-term and long-term consequences. On the short-term seasonal changes in plant water stress (i.e. increase plant water stress in autumn), will strongly affect the harvest and seeding period of the dominant crops (e.g. winter cereal and almonds; Figure 4). Long-term consequences may include a shift from rainfed to irrigated agriculture, a trend that is already taking place (Nainggolan et al., 2012) and that would increase the dependency on reservoir storage and irrigation infrastructure. Further land abandonment can be foreseen in areas without access to irrigation water, leading to an increase of shrubland and forest, with significant consequences for ecosystem functioning and rural livelihoods and possible decreased streamflow (Beguería et al., 2003; García-Ruiz et al., 2011).

Our results illustrate that representation of pertinent hydrological processes and suitable bias-correction methods are crucial for accurate climate change impact assessments. To increase water security under climate change we show there is a need for effective adaptation strategies that aim to increase the water holding capacity of the soil (green water) and to reduce soil erosion in order to enhance soil quality and maintain the storage capacity of reservoirs (blue water).

Competing interests. The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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