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Discussions

Monitoring the combined effects of drought and salinity stress on crops using remote sensing

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Abstract. Global sustainable agricultural systems are under threat, due to projected increases of co-occurring drought and salinity with climate change. Combined effects of drought and salinity on agricultural crops have traditionally been evaluated in small-scale experimental studies. As such the need exists for large scale studies that increase our understanding and assessment of the combined impacts in agricultural practice in real life scenarios. This study aims to provide a new approach to estimate and compare the impacts of drought, salinity and their combination on crop traits at large spatial (138.74 km^2) and temporal extents in the Netherlands using remote sensing observations. Specifically, for both maize and potato, we calculated five functional traits from Sentinel-2 observations, namely: leaf area index (LAI), the fraction of absorbed photosynthetically active radiation (FAPAR), the fraction of vegetation cover (FVC), leaf chlorophyll content (Cab) and leaf water content (Cw). Individual and combined effects of the stresses on the seasonal dynamics in crop traits were determined using both one-way and two-way ANOVAs. We found that both stresses (individual and co-occurring) affected the functional traits of both crops significantly (with R^2 ranging from 0.326 to 0.796), though with stronger sensitivities to drought than to salinity. While we found exacerbating effects within co-occurrent stresses, the impact-level depended strongly on the moment in the growing season. For both crops, LAI, FAPAR and FVC dropped the most under severe drought stress conditions. The patterns for Cab and Cw were more inhibited by co-occurring drought and salinity. Consequently, our study constitutes a way towards evaluating drought and salinity impacts in agriculture with the possibility of potential large-scale application for a sustainable food security.

Keywords: Drought; Salinity; Agriculture; Remote sensing; Functional traits

1 Introduction

Food production is required to increase by 70% to satisfy the growing population demand by the year 2050 (Godfray et al., 2010). Meanwhile, food security is becoming increasingly threatened due to the increasing abiotic stresses under the influence of global climate change. Currently, abiotic stresses, including drought, soil salinity, nutrient stress and heavy metals, are estimated to constrain crop productivity by 50% ~ 80% (Shinozaki et al., 2015). Of these stresses, drought and salinity have been identified as the two main factors to limit crop growth, affecting respectively 40% and 11% of the global irrigated areas (FAO, 2020;Dunn et al., 2020). With drought and salinity forecasted to increase spatially and in severity (Schwalm et al., 2017;Trenberth et al., 2013;Rozema and Flowers, 2008), and with predictions of higher co-occurrence around the world (Wang et al., 2013;Corwin, 2020;Jones and van Vliet, 2018), food production will be deeper challenged by both stresses.

Numerous small-scale experimental studies for a large variety of crops have shown that the impact of co-occurring drought and salinity stress is additive. It was found that co-occurrence of drought and salinity stress decreased the yield of spinach (Ors and Suarez, 2017) and of the forage grass *Panicum antidotale* (Hussain et al., 2020) more than compared with the occurrence of one of these stresses only. Likewise, cotton root growth was observed to be more inhibited under the co-occurrence of drought and water stress than by isolated occurrences (Zhang et al., 2013). Similarly, the exacerbating effect of co-occurring stresses has been shown to limit both maize reproductive growth and grain formation (Liao et al., 2022). While these small-scale experimental studies demonstrate the exacerbating effects of drought and salinity, they have limitations in projecting the impact towards real farmers' conditions due to their small-scale experimental nature. Thus, research focusing on the combined impacts of drought and salinity with respect to large-scale evaluation is still a knowledge gap.

Remote sensing (RS) provides a huge potential to close this knowledge gap due to its capability of monitoring continuous large areas at a frequent interval. Traditionally, remote sensing has used vegetation indices, such as Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) (Tucker, 1979), to monitor the impact on crop growth. Nevertheless, such indices provide limited information on how this impact is achieved (e.g. Wen et al., 2020) and how it can be mitigated. With the launch of better multispectral and high-resolution satellite sensors (such as Sentinel-2), new RS methods (e.g., hyperspectral, thermal infrared, microwave) have been identified to detect stress in both natural vegetation (Gerhards et al., 2019;Vereecken et al., 2012) as well as for agricultural applications (Homolova et al., 2013;Weiss et al., 2020). Specifically, these new RS methods allow for the retrieval of plant traits that directly link to plant processes, such as leaf biochemistry and photosynthetic processes, and thereby provide high potential for agricultural applications. RS plant traits of specific interest to monitor crop health include: leaf area index (LAI) (Wengert et al., 2021), canopy chlorophyll content (Cab*LAI) (Gitelson et al., 2005), canopy water content (Cw*LAI) (Kriston-Vizi et al., 2008), the fraction of absorbed photosynthetically active radiation (FAPAR) (Zhang et al., 2015), and the fraction of vegetation cover (FVC) (Yang et al., 2018). However, while there have been several attempts to monitor the response of crop health based on a multi-trait, multi-crop, and either drought or salinity focus, not much research has taken these three factors into account simultaneously (Wen et al., 2020).

In this study, we propose a novel approach to estimate, compare and evaluate the impacts of drought, salinity, and their combination on crop traits using remote sensing. A stress co-occurrence map was created by overlaying a high-resolution drought map of 2018 with a groundwater salinity map. Then, we characterized the response of maize and potato to different stress conditions based on five plants traits (LAI, FAPAR, FVC, Cab and Cw). Two-way ANOVAs were adopted to test the main effects and the interactive effect between stress combinations and time on crop traits. Moreover, the effect of drought and salinity on crop traits was determined across the growing season with one-way ANOVAs. Consequently, this approach facilitates simultaneously monitoring crop health at various scales (regional, national, continental) across multiple stresses (drought, salinity) and multiple species.

2 Methodology

To achieve our aim of monitoring the impacts of (co-occurring) drought and salinity on agricultural production, we developed a new approach to estimate crop traits from remote sensing observations. Specifically, we developed an approach that integrates image-processing techniques, such as image classification, co-registration, land surface parameter retrieval, and time-series analysis. Using these techniques, we were able to estimate the drought, salinity and vegetation growth.

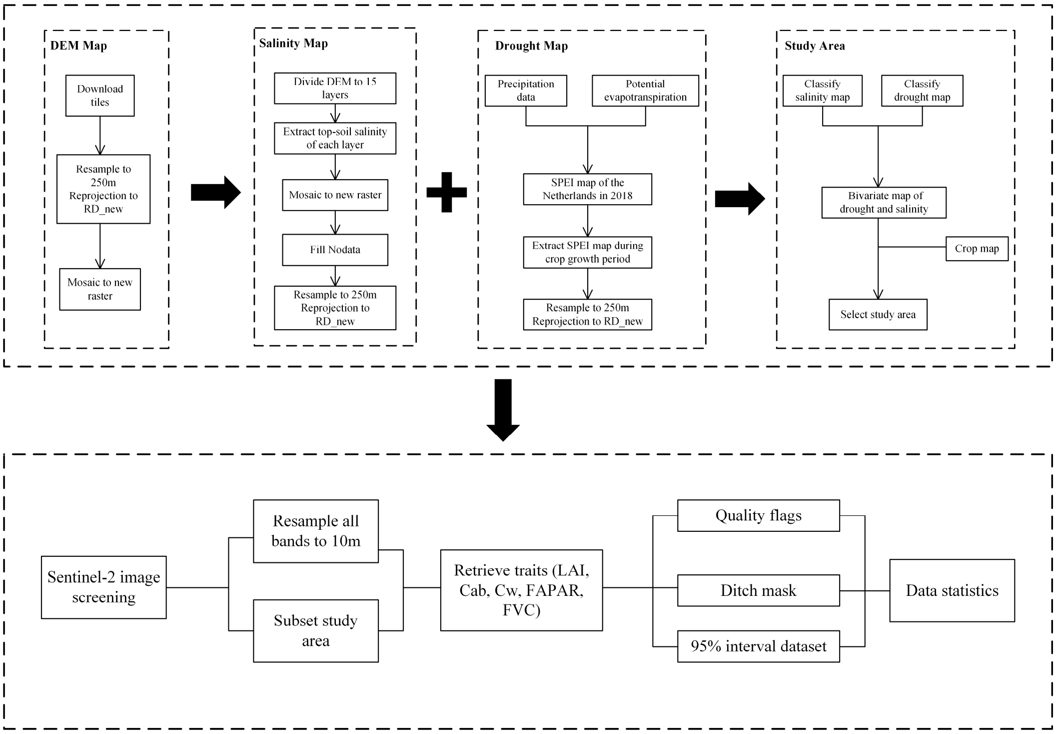

Figure 1. Technical workflow of the maps and data framework.

To allow for a detailed evaluation, we focused on the 2018 summer drought in the Netherlands. This period was selected because of the extreme drought that affected a large part of Europe (Masante D., 2018). Within parts of the selected area salinity was reported to increase during that same period (Broekhuizen, 2018). Hence this study area provides us with the opportunity to investigate the combined impacts of these stresses on crops. In the following paragraphs, we provide more information on the specific processing steps.

2.1 Study area and data

2.1.1 Drought map

A drought map of the Netherlands in 2018 was created based on the standardized precipitation evapotranspiration index (SPEI) drought index, which was calculated from long-term precipitation data and potential evapotranspiration, from 2004 to 2018 (Chen et al., 2021). Specifically, SPEI was estimated using a 3-month sliding time window, as this found best to investigate the impacts on the local ecosystems. We have extracted SPEI-3 data from April 1st to October 30th, totally 214 days, as this coincided with the crop growth period of both maize and potato. Then, the drought map was resampled to 250m resolution using the nearest neighbor interpolation and reprojected to RD_new projection. Finally, the drought map was classified into three classes namely no drought (SPEI from-214 to 0), moderate drought (SPEI from -321 to -214), and severe drought (SPEI < = -321) (McKee et al., 1993) (Fig. 2a).

2.1.1 Salinity map

A topsoil salinity map of the Netherlands was created based on a nationwide fresh-salt groundwater dataset, which derived chloride concentrations as salinity indicator (https://data.nhi.nu/). To obtain the topsoil salinity map, 15 layers of the groundwater salinity were extracted from the 3D groundwater salinity map. For each location, the layer closest to the corresponding to location's elevation (according to the Digital Elevation Model), i.e. closest to the soil surface, was selected. The salinity map was resampled to 250 m resolution and reprojected to RD_new projection. Ultimately, the salinity map was classified into three levels namely no-salinity (0.1 $g \cdot L^{-1}$to 0.8 $g \cdot L^{-1}$), moderate salinity (0.8 $g \cdot L^{-}1$ to 2.5 $g \cdot L^{-1}$), severe salinity (>= 2.5 $g \cdot L^{-1}$) according to the salt-resistant capacity of various crops cultivated in the Netherlands (Mulder et al., 2018;Stuyt, 2016) (Fig. 2b).

2.1.3 Crop map

The crop map of the Netherlands in 2018 was collected from the Key Register of Parcels (BRP) of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (https://www.pdok.nl/introductie/-/article/basisregistratie-gewaspercelen-brp-). The crop map was resampled to 250m resolution and reprojected to RD_new projection.

2.1.4 Co-occurrence map of drought and salinity

The drought map and the salinity map were overlain to evaluate co-occurrences of drought and salinity of the Netherlands in 2018 (Fig. 2c). By classifying the three stress levels for the individual occurrences, we obtained nine stress classes of co-occurring drought and salinity, namely no stress, moderate drought only (MD), severe drought only (SD), moderate salinity only (MS), severe salinity only (SS), moderate drought and moderate salinity (MD+MS), moderate drought and severe salinity (MD+SS), severe drought and moderate salinity (SD+MS), and severe drought and severe salinity (SD+SS).

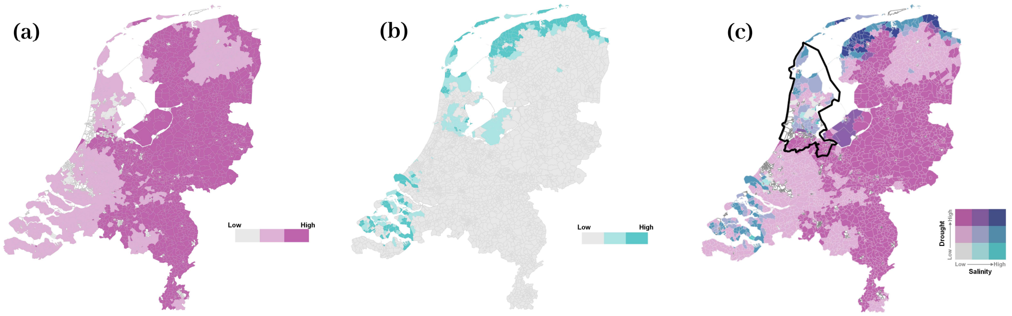

Figure 2. The overlap map of a) drought and b) salinity in the Netherlands to show c) co-occurrence of drought and salinity. The selected study area is indicated by black lines in panel c.

2.1.5 Study area selection

Based on the national map of the Netherlands (Fig. 2c), a single region with similar soil type, climate, tillage systems, and irrigation methods was chosen to minimize the interference of these factors on the observed trait expressions. The province of North-Holland was selected because it contained the most (7 out of 9) combinations of drought and salt stress (Fig. 2c), namely: no stress, MD, SD, MS, SS, MD+MS, and SD+SS. Moreover, both maize and potato were cultivated across all stress combinations in this province. For further analysis, MS and SS were grouped into a new class of salinity stress since the area of MS and SS was quite limited. Therefore, six classes of stress combinations namely no stress, MD, SD, salinity (MS+SS), MD+MS, and MD+SS were analyzed for the study area.

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2.2 Traits retrieval

2.2.1 Satellite data

Eight cloud-free scenes were found (21/04/2018, 06/05/2018, 26/05/2018, 30/06/2018, 15/07/2018, 13/09/2018, 13/10/2018, and 28/10/2018) to cover the crop growth cycle. In prior analyses, we found that none of the scenes in August (04/08/2018, 09/08/2018, 14/08/2018, 19/08/2018, 24/08/2018, and 29/08/2018) was of high quality, i.e. with low cloud-cover, and we therefore choose to omit August from our analysis. After this prior analysis, we downloaded Level 2A (L2A) data from The Copernicus Open Access Hub (https://scihub.copernicus.eu/). Then, bands in 20 m and 60 m resolution were resampled to 10 m resolution to match consistency for traits retrieval.

2.2.2 Traits selection

Plant traits were selected in consideration of their corresponding impacts on crop functioning and their potential for assessment by remote sensing. LAI is a critical vegetation structural trait related to various plant functioning processes such as primary productivity, photosynthesis, and transpiration (Jarlan et al., 2008;Asner et al., 2003;Boussetta et al., 2012;Fang et al., 2019). FAPAR depends on vegetation structure, energy exchange, and illumination conditions while FAPAR is also an important parameter to assess primary productivity (Liang, 2020;Weiss and Baret, 2016). FVC is a promising parameter corresponding to the energy balance process such as temperature and evapotranspiration (Weiss and Baret, 2016). Cab is an effective indicator of stress and is strongly related to photosynthesis and resource strategy (Croft et al., 2017). Cw plays an important role in transpiration, stomatal conductance, photosynthesis and respiration (Bowman, 1989;Zhu et al., 2017), as well as in drought assessment (Steidle Neto et al., 2017).

2.3 dataset processing

The biophysical processor of Sentinel Application Platform (SNAP) was used to compute the selected canopy traits (LAI, FAPAR, FVC, Cab*LAI, and Cw*LAI) for each pixel from the Sentinel-2 top of canopy reflectance data. This biophysical processor is driven by an artificial neural network (ANN) approach, trained using the PROSAIL simulated database (Weiss and Baret, 2016). To eliminate the effects of crop biomass on canopy levels of chlorophyll and water, they were expressed as their leaf content counterparts, namely Cab (='Cab*LAI' / LAI) and Cw (='Cw*LAI' / LAI).

Pixels with quality flags were eliminated from the dataset. It was observed that in April no crop had yet been planted. Instead, we observed that only along the edge of the plots, e.g. in ditches, vegetation was found. This feature was used to generate a ditch map and to mask out pixels in trait maps for the other months. For each variable and each date, only data within the 95% confidence interval were taken to increase data robustness.

2.4 Analysis

Due to the unbalance in the occurrence of stress conditions, drought and salinity were not considered as two independent factors. Instead two-way ANOVAs were adopted to test the main effects and the interactive effect between stress combinations (consisting of 6 levels) and time (5 months) on crop traits. Significant effects of the main stress condition were investigated through post hoc tests to test whether interaction effects between drought and salinity had occurred. Two-way ANOVAs were run separately for each trait and each crop type (maize and potato) as we expected different patterns. In the Netherlands, potato and maize are planted between mid-April to early May. Crops are surfacing in May and harvested in October. Therefore, to evaluate the response of crops to stresses across the growing season, the effect of drought and salinity on crop traits was determined for May, June, July, and September with a one-way ANOVA. Tukey HSD post hoc tests were performed to identify the differences among the six stress combinations. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS 27.0 (SPSS Inc., USA).

3 Results

3.1 Stress impacts depend on moment in growing season

The two-way ANOVAs revealed strong effects of date and stress level on the five traits with effect sizes of the response (R^2) ranging from 0.326 to 0.796 for the five traits, which was similar for maize and potato. For both maize and potato, R^2 values were lowest for Cab and highest for LAI, FAPAR and FVC. For maize, we found a significant main effect of both date and stress ($p < 0.05$) for Cab, Cw, FAPAR, and FVC. In contrast, LAI was not significantly different across the different stress conditions. For potato, all main effects of date and stress were significant for all five crop traits (Table 1). For all traits and both crops, the interaction between the effects of time and stress conditions was significant ($p < 0.05$) (Table 1), indicating that the impact of stress depended on the moment in the growing season. Despite the significant interaction terms, the partial Eta squared values (Table 1) show that the effects of time in the growing season were much stronger than those of stress or the interaction of date and stress. The effects of date for maize were stronger than for potato. Interestingly, the effects of the interaction between date and stress were stronger than those of the main effects of stress, suggesting strongly time-specific impacts of stress on the crop traits investigated. The interaction terms were strongest for FVC.

Table 1. Two-way ANOVA for different crop traits by time series and stress interactions.

Crops	Traits	Factors	F	*p*	Partial Eta Squared	R^2
Maize	LAI	date	2144.5	0.000	0.636	0.766
		stress	1.4	0.226	0.001	
		date*stress	8.5	0.000	0.033	
	Cab	date	333.9	0.000	0.222	0.326
		stress	10.7	0.000	0.008	
		date*stress	3.6	0.000	0.015	
	Cw	date	952.1	0.000	0.449	0.590
		stress	9.9	0.000	0.007	
		date*stress	4.0	0.000	0.017	
	FAPAR	date	1865.9	0.005	0.603	0.738
		stress	3.3	0.000	0.002	
		date*stress	8.5	0.000	0.033	
	FVC	date	2022.5	0.000	0.622	0.761
		stress	22.1	0.000	0.015	
		date*stress	28.7	0.000	0.105	
Potato	LAI	date	752.1	0.000	0.273	0.782
		stress	13.7	0.000	0.006	
		date*stress	8.1	0.000	0.020	
	Cab	date	96.4	0.000	0.050	0.329
		stress	54.2	0.000	0.024	
		date*stress	8.7	0.000	0.023	
	Cw	date	347.4	0.000	0.158	0.571
		stress	68.1	0.000	0.030	
		date*stress	10.3	0.000	0.027	
	FAPAR	date	612.7	0.000	0.234	0.744
		stress	25.8	0.000	0.011	

	date*stress	14.0	0.000	0.034	
FVC	date	844.0	0.000	0.297	0.796
	stress	18.8	0.000	0.008	
	date*stress	13.6	0.000	0.033	

3.2 Response of LAI, FAPAR, FVC to drought and salinity

Given the significance of both date and stress and their interactions, subsequent one-way ANOVAs were performed to compare the effects of drought and salinity on LAI, FAPAR, and FVC for maize and potato in May, June, July, and September separately (Fig. 3). The patterns for LAI, FAPAR and FVC were very similar, although they differ in details and are therefore treated together.

For maize, LAI had the lowest ($p < 0.05$) value under severe drought (SD) conditions while both FAPAR and FVC obtained their lowest value under MD+SS stress conditions in May. In June, both LAI and FVC dropped the most under salinity stress and it was significantly ($p < 0.05$) different from MD, MD+MS, and MD+SS conditions, but not significantly different from no stress conditions. In contrast, FAPAR also reached its the lowest value (under MD+MS stress conditions) in June but had a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) compared with no stress conditions. Both in July and September, LAI, FAPAR, and FVC all had the lowest value under SD conditions, and the difference was significant compared with no stress conditions.

For potato, LAI, FAPAR, and FVC had the lowest ($p < 0.05$) value under MD+MS and MD+SS stress conditions. In June, LAI, FAPAR as well as FVC reached the lowest value under SD conditions and were significantly lower than in most other stress conditions even though the difference was not significant from no stress conditions. In July, there was a tendency for LAI, FAPAR and FVC to be lower at stress conditions, although none of the effects were significant. In September, however, LAI, FAPAR and FVC significantly decreased under MD, MD+MS, and MD+SS conditions, and the difference was significant compared with no stress conditions. In addition, the difference was not significant among these three stress conditions.

Therefore, both for maize and potato, LAI, FAPAR and FVC dropped the most under SD stress conditions when they reached their respective maximum value, compared with other stress conditions. At the same time, maize and potato were more sensitive to drought than salinity since no significant change was observed between drought conditions and conditions with a combination of drought and salinity stress.

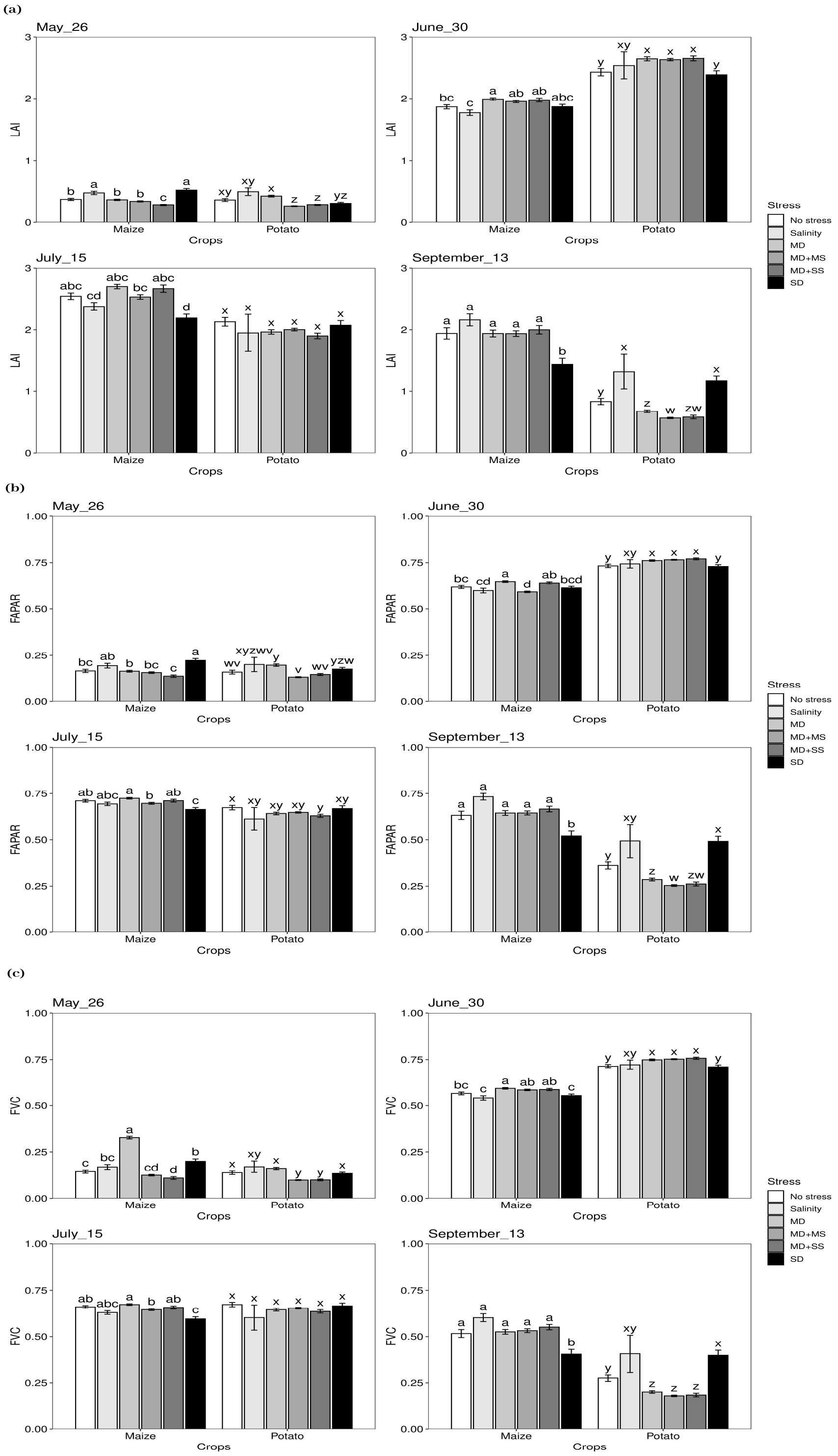
(a)
May_26
LAI
3
2
1
0
b a b b c a
xy xy x z z yz
Maize
Potato
Crops
June_30
bc c a ab ab abc
y xy x x x y
July_15
abc cd abc bc abc d
x x x x x x
September_13
a a a a a b
y x z w zw x
Stress
No stress
Salinity
MD
MD+MS
MD+SS
SD
(b)
FAPAR
1.00
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00
May_26
bc ab b bc c a
wv xyzwv y v wv yzw
June_30
bc cd a d ab bcd
y xy x x x y
July_15
ab abc a b ab c
x xy xy xy y xy
September_13
a a a a a b
y xy z w zw x
(c)
FVC
May_26
c bc a cd d b
x xy x y y x
June_30
bc c a ab ab c
y xy x x x y
July_15
ab abc a b ab c
x x x x x x
September_13
a a a a a b
y xy z z z x

Figure 3. Expressions of LAI, FAPAR and FVC under various stress conditions in May, June, July and September. Different letters in each panel indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

3.3 Response of leaf chlorophyll and water content to drought and salinity

The one-way ANOVAs revealed that there were significant ($p < 0.05$) impacts of the various stress conditions on Cab and Cw (Fig. 4). For maize, Cab obtained its lowest value under salinity stress in May and June while it was not significantly different from no stress conditions. However, in July, Cab reached the lowest value under MS+MS conditions although the difference was not significant from other stress conditions. There were no significant changes observed for Cab in September. For potato, Cab dropped the most under saline conditions in May although the difference was not significant from no stress conditions. Furthermore, Cab significantly decreased under MD+SS conditions in June and July, compared with other conditions. Although Cab dropped the most under salinity conditions in September, the difference was not significantly different from other conditions. In addition, compared with no stress, potato had the lowest Cab under MD+SS conditions while there was no significant difference between MD+SS and saline conditions only.

Cw decreased under all stress conditions in May, June and July for both maize and potato, except for SD conditions in May, compared with no stress conditions. At the same time, Cw reached its lowest value under MD+SS co-occurring conditions and it was significantly different from under no stress conditions. Nonetheless, there were different changes for both maize and potato in September. Cw was not significantly different among any condition for maize while it was the lowest under salinity conditions for potato.

Therefore, this analysis illustrates that salinity affected maize less than drought since crop responses were more obvious to drought than salinity for Cab and Cw. In contrast, salinity showed a more severe effect on maize and potato at the early growth stages for Cab. Meanwhile, Cab was affected by co-occurring drought and salinity in June and July for potato. It seems that there was a non-additive effect of drought and salinity, since the changes were not significant between MD conditions, salinity, and MD+MS compared to no stress conditions.

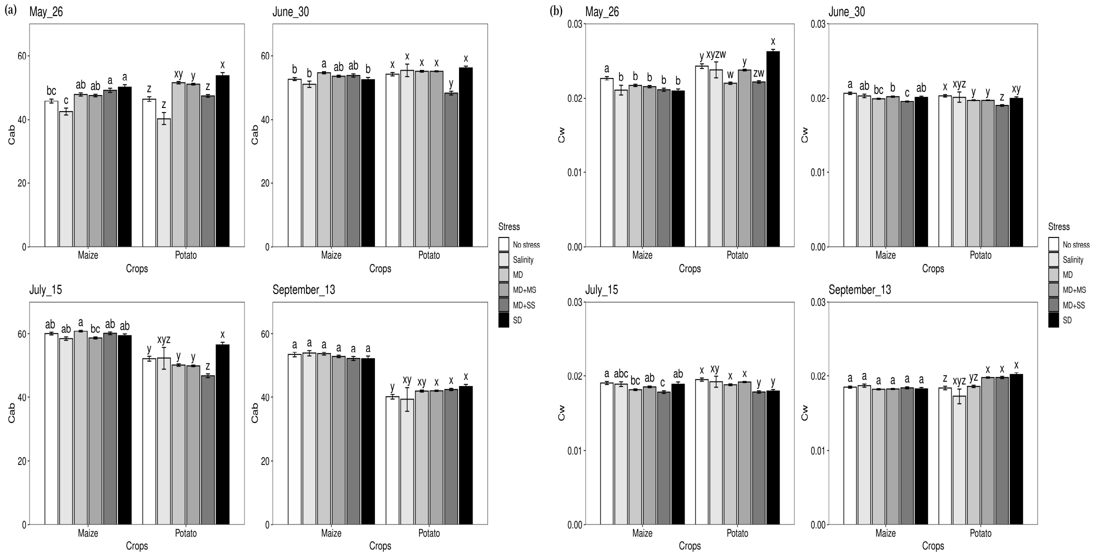

Figure 4. Trait expression of Cab and Cw under various stress conditions in May, June, July and September. Different letters in each panel indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

4 Discussion

In this study, we quantified the large-scale impacts of co-occurring drought and salinity on a variety of crop traits using satellite remote sensing. We observed that –in contrast to our expectations – the impacts of salinity were not highly pronounced at this scale, with most strong impacts originating due to drought stress during the 2018 drought. However, at specific moments in the growing season, salinity and/or the combined effects of salinity and drought pronouncedly affected individual crop traits. In this way, with increasing salinity driven by more intensive droughts, water allocation should not only be governed by the amount of water shortage, but also the salinity of the remaining water. In this paper, we provide the first evidence that those impacts can be monitored through remote sensing. This might provide a basis towards a monitoring system for multiple crops with multiple stresses as well as better governance policies to release this problem.

4.1 Drought stress is more important than salinity stress in farmers' conditions

The exacerbating effects of co-occurrent drought and salinity (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) that we found are consistent with findings of small-scale experiments (e.g. greenhouses). Consistent with our results, synergistic effects of co-occurring water stress and salinity stress have been found on maize reproductive growth and grain formation in a field study (Liao et al., 2022). Spinach (*Spinaciaoleracea* L., cv. Racoon) yield decreased more under co-occurring water-salinity stress in comparison with separate water stress and salinity (Ors and Suarez, 2017). The co-occurring drought and salinity stress was more harmful to cotton root growth compared to their individual effects (Zhang et al., 2013). Moreover, the combined negative effect of drought and salinity stress on *Panicum antidotale* was stronger than that of single stress (Hussain et al., 2020). Our research showed that the outcomes of these small-scale experimental studies also apply to real large-scale environments, where different sources of variance are present. Specifically, we show that in real farmers' conditions, the co-occurrence of drought and salinity indeed can constitute a severe threat for crop growth.

In addition, we evaluated whether drought or salinity stress has more impact on crop performance. We observed that maize and potato were generally more sensitive to drought than salinity in this study (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). This is consistent with results of previous studies that highlight that drought impacts are generally more detrimental than salinity stress for crops, e.g. for sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) (Harfi et al., 2016), *Mentha pulegium* L. (Azad et al., 2021), durum wheat (Sayar et al., 2010), grass pea (Tokarz et al., 2020), and sweet sorghum (Patane et al., 2013). However, given that the threshold of salinity at which crop damage occurs (according to the FAO guidelines (Ayers and Westcot, 1985)) was surpassed in all situations in which salinity stress was imposed (including in our study), we initially expected salinity to be a stronger explanatory variable than drought. As such, salinity impacts on crop performance (by the FAO) may have been overestimated. Indeed, in an experimental field situation in which drought stress was carefully avoided, higher thresholds of salinity-induced damage were observed for potato (van Straten et al., 2021).

In combination, the results from our study (supported by results from other studies) suggest that salinity particularly induces adverse effects when co-occurring with drought stress. Thus, the detrimental effect of single drought stress on crop growth is considered to be mitigated by salinity, which might be associated with the synergetic effect in carbon assimilation and osmotic adjustment by Na^+ and Cl^- (Hussain et al., 2020).

4.2 Drought and salinity stress differ between growth stages

The responses to drought and salinity stress were different at different growth stages of the crops. This was expressed by the significant interactions between the effects of time and stress conditions for all of our crop responses (Table 1). We found that during the grain filling (maize) and tuber bulking phase (potato), the sensitivities of these crops are expressed distinctly in the non-harvested aboveground tissues (Fig. 3 and Fig.4), with clear differences in the remote sensing plant traits.

Given that we were not able to monitor the harvestable products, multiple mechanisms may explain these patterns. The relatively high leaf coverage (as related to LAI, FAPAR, and FVC) at saline and severe drought conditions at the end of the growing season may be an expression of a compensation process. Specifically, early and prolonged drought could have led to more assimilates allocated to non-harvestable potato parts for drought resistance since the number of tubers reduced (Jefferies, 1995;Schittenhelm et al., 2006). In that case, we should consider their higher leaf coverage at the end of the season a survival mechanism, rather than true drought tolerance, leading to reduced tuber yields (Daryanto et al., 2016b). Future studies that combine remote sensing with harvesting data may be able to evaluate this mechanism in more detail.

In our study, different response patterns of maize and potato occurred to the different stresses over the growing season. This is consistent with previous studies focusing on the impact of drought and/or salinity onsets. For potato, it has been suggested that tuber yields particularly decreased when drought stress occurs during the vegetative and tuber initiation stages than during the tuber bulking stage (Wagg et al., 2021), although another study observed the reverse pattern (Daryanto et al., 2016b). For maize, on the other hand, drought seems to have the most detrimental impact during the maturation stage (Mi et al., 2018;Zhang et al., 2019), and the reproductive phase (Daryanto et al., 2017;Daryanto et al., 2016a). Considering, the additional co-varying factors within our 'real-life' study, it is very promising that we were able to detect similar effects. This suggests that we may use satellite remote sensing –albeit less spatially precise than e.g. sensing through drones- as a cost-effective early warning signal for detecting drought and salinity stress at moments during the growing season when differences in crop performance are still subtle.

4.3 A multi-trait approach to understanding crop responses to stress

In addition to being able to evaluate crop performance during multiple stages of the growing season (in contrast to most destructive methods), remote sensing also allows a multi-trait approach to better understand the mechanisms involved in crop responses. In our study, Cab and Cw had a response to drought and salinity distinct from LAI, FAPAR, and FVC, which showed a similar pattern (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Given that individual crop traits may differently respond to drought and salinity to reflect their stress resistance and tolerance strategies, the evaluation of these distinct responses may help understanding these strategies.

In this study, Cw was consistently lower in all drought and salinity treatments compared to no stress conditions in May, June and July. Indeed, this is a common response of plants in response to drought and salinity (e.g. Wen et al., 2020). In that respect, it is interesting that no decrease in Cw was observed at the end of the growing season, in October. Whether the phenomenon is related to the survival mechanism mentioned above or to the lower transpiration demands at the end of the season because of lower aboveground biomass, cannot be concluded from these data. Some evidence pointing to the survival mechanism is the finding (Ghosh et al., 2001; Levy, 1992) that the leaf dry matter increased for potato under drought/salinity stress (like in our study) while the dry matter of the tubers appeared to have a greater decline.

With respect to chlorophyll contents, we observed a decline in Cab at saline conditions, at the salinity treatment in May and the MS+SS treatment in June and July, while no decrease was observed in any of the treatments exposed to drought only. This indicates that while total leaf area was not (much) affected by salinity, the salinity did negatively affect crop performance. It has been reported that chlorophyll content in maize was significantly reduced upon salinity, along with other plant traits including plant height, shoot/root biomass, and leaf numbers (Fatima et al., 2021;Mahmood et al., 2021).

Likewise, similar patterns were obtained in potato plants in saline soil (Efimova et al., 2018). Hence, this implies that soil salinity tends to negatively affect crop growth and restrict nutrient uptake.

5 Conclusions

In this study, we represent the first attempt to evaluate the effects of drought, salinity and their combination on crop traits in real-life conditions based on remote sensing information. Our approach gives new insights for monitoring multi-crop growth under co-occurring stresses at a large scale with high-resolution data. We found that while in general temporal patterns –reflecting crop growth dynamics- were stronger than effects of stress conditions, stress impacts depended on the time of the growing season. Furthermore, we also found that the temporal dynamics in crop responses to drought and salinity were different for maize vs. potato. In general, the five investigated traits were more negative affected by a combination of drought and salinity stress compared to individual stress. Meanwhile, both maize and potato responded more prominently to drought, thus demonstrating a stronger sensitivity, than to salinity. Specifically, LAI, FAPAR, and FVC dropped the most under severe drought stress conditions. Consequently, the proposed new approach poses a facilitated way for simultaneously monitoring the effect of drought and salinity on crops in large-scale agricultural applications.

Data availability. The drought map of the Netherlands in 2018 is retrieved from Chen et al. (2021). The topsoil salinity map of the Netherlands is retrieved from The Netherlands Hydrological Instrumentarium (NHI) (https://data.nhi.nu/). The crop map of the Netherlands in 2018 is retrieved from the Key Register of Parcels (BRP) of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (https://www.pdok.nl/introductie/-/article/basisregistratie-gewaspercelen-brp-). All satellite scenes are downloaded from The Copernicus Open Access Hub (https://scihub.copernicus.eu/). The dataset relevant to this study is available upon request from the corresponding author.

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