Changes in Mediterranean flood processes and seasonality

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Abstract

Floods are a major natural hazard in the Mediterranean region, causing deaths and extensive damages. Recent studies have shown that intense rainfall events are becoming more extreme in this region, but paradoxically without leading to an increase in the severity of floods. Consequently, it is important to understand how flood events are changing to explain this absence of trends in flood magnitude despite increased rainfall extremes. A database of 98 stations in Southern France with an average record of 50 years of daily river discharge data between 1959 and 2021 was considered, together with a high-resolution reanalysis product providing precipitation and simulated soil moisture. Flood events, corresponding to an average occurrence of one event per year (5317 events in total), were extracted and classified into excess rainfall, short rainfall and long rainfall event types. Several flood events characteristics have been also analyzed: flood event durations, base flow contribution to floods, runoff coefficient, total and maximum event rainfall and antecedent soil moisture. The evolution through time of the flood event characteristics and seasonality were analyzed. Results indicated that, in most basins, floods tend to occur earlier during the year, the mean flood date being on average advanced by one month between 1959-1990 and 1991-2021. This seasonal shift could be attributed to the increased frequency of southern-circulation weather types during spring and summer. An increase in total and extreme event precipitation has been observed, associated with a decrease of antecedent soil moisture before rainfall events, linked to a smaller contribution of base flow during floods. The majority of flood events are associated with excess rainfall on saturated soils, but their relative proportion is decreasing over time notably in spring with a concurrent increased frequency of short rain floods. Therefore, this study shows that even in the absence of trends, flood properties may change over time and these changes need to be accounted for when analyzing the long-term evolution of flood hazards.

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in understanding the evolution of floods occurring in different regions in the context of climate change. The recent sixth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Ali et al., 2022), reported a mixture of observed trends in different Mediterranean countries, with both increasing and decreasing river floods and overall, a low confidence in their attribution to climate change. Several large-scale studies on changes in flood risk (Slater et al., 2021a; Blöschl et al., 2017, 2019) have indicated for the Mediterranean region a possible decrease over the last decades. This difficulty in detecting possible changes in flood hazard is doubtless linked to the fact that there are different types of floods (Tarasova et al., 2019; Berghuijs et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2020; Tramblay et al., 2022). Indeed, a distinction can be made between floods associated with soil saturation excess, soil infiltration excess or snowmelt-driven floods and the relative frequency of these different types of floods may change over time (Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, these changes can occur at local to regional scales, given complex combinations of climatic and physiographic triggers, making global generalization of changes in flood risk hazardous, if not irrelevant (Whitfield, 2012; Blöschl et al., 2015).

Only a few studies are focusing on changes in flood types over time, while it is important to understand the long-term changes in flood processes to evaluate how flood risk can evolve, in order notably to better adapt the flood mitigation strategies (Merz et al., 2014). The main limitation to perform such studies is the need for long time-series of river discharge, to have large samples of flood events to evaluate how their properties may change over time. For many regions of the world, the lack of observed river discharge data prevents this type of analysis. Some studies attempted to analyze the changes in different types of floods for different regions (Berghuijs et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2019; Kemter et al., 2020; Bertola et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Tramblay et al., 2022, Tarasova et al., 2023). Most of these studies rely on flood classification schemes, with various complexity depending on the type of data available, allowing a data-based separation of floods into their distinct generation mechanisms (Tarasova et al., 2019; Berghuijs et al., 2019; Tarasova et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2020, 2021; Tramblay et al., 2022). For basins under a Mediterranean climate, several studies reported complex interactions between precipitation increases and lower antecedent soil moisture, leading to thresholds effects (Brunner et al., 201) in the catchment response to changing hydro-climatic conditions (Wasko and Nathan, 2019; Cao et al., 2020; Bertola et al., 2021). Recent large-scale studies (Jiang et al., 2022, Tarasova et al., 2023) suggested a reduction of the frequency of floods driven by soil saturation in Europe, including basins in the Mediterranean area.

In French Mediterranean basins, several studies reported an increase in precipitation extremes (Tramblay et al., 2013; Blanchet and Creutin, 2022; Ribes et al., 2019) that did not translate into increased floods (Tramblay et al., 2019). It is hypothesized that, as many regions of the world, a decrease in soil moisture linked with a greater aridity can potentially offset the increase in precipitation extremes and thus not increase flood severity (Sharma et al., 2018; Tramblay et al., 2019; Wasko and Nathan, 2019; Wasko et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022). Excess soil moisture was previously identified as an important flood driver notably in the Mediterranean (Kemter et al., 2020; Bertola et al., 2021), indicating that they can play an important role. Yet, beside trend detection or changes in flood types, no study has provided

an in-depth analysis of the joint long-term evolution of flood processes in Mediterranean basins, in relation to their drivers such as precipitation, soil moisture and the evolution of synoptic weather patterns associated with floods. Therefore, the objective of the study is to evaluate how the characteristics of Mediterranean floods are evolving in time, not only in terms of flood event types, but also the seasonality of events, their duration, runoff coefficients, and antecedent soil moisture. A recent study (Tramblay et al., 2019) indicated no significant trends on flood hazards for a large ensemble of basins located in southern France. This database is used herein to further analyze the possible changes in flood generating processes and in the seasonality of flood events.

In section 2 are presented the different datasets used for this analysis, including river discharge, precipitation, soil moisture data and weather types classification. In section 3 the methods are presented, for event extraction, analysis of the seasonality and changes in the different flood drivers. Results are presented in section 4.

2. Data

We consider 98 catchments in southern France (Figure 1) where the time series of daily discharge exceeds 30 years of complete data between 1959 and 2021 (Tramblay et al., 2019). Among them, 48 basins have more than 50 years of data and the basins selected are not influenced by reservoir or dam regulation. The catchment sizes are ranging from 14 km² to 3195 km², with a mean size equal to 480 km² (see Table t1 in supplementary materials). Basins with a nival regime were removed, identified from the river discharge hydrographs and removing basins with more than 20% of precipitation falling as snow. In addition to river discharge data, the precipitation and soil moisture for each basin has been retrieved from the SAFRAN-ISBA-MODCOU (SIM) reanalysis covering the whole France territory at 8 km spatial resolution (Vidal et al., 2010). Precipitation and soil moisture data have been extracted and averaged at the catchment scale. The soil moisture data extracted from SIM is a soil wetness index obtained from the normalization of the volumetric soil moisture content with the wilting point and field capacity, that ranges between 0 and 1. Land cover classes (forest, agricultural, urban) corresponding to 2018 have been extracted from the CORINE land cover inventory (Büttner, 2014). In addition, we used the weather type classification from *Electricité de France* (EDF), corresponding to a daily classification into 8 synoptic situations associated with rainfall events over France (Garavaglia et al., 2010). This classification is built on geopotential heights at 700 and 1000 hPa pressure levels associated with rainy days over France.

3. Methods

3.1 Extraction of flood events

We extracted a sample of flood events with a mean occurrence of 1 event per year using a peaks-over-threshold approach. This type of sampling is chosen since low annual maximum runoff could be observed during dry years (Farquharson et al., 1992). A de-clustering algorithm is applied to identify single events to avoid introducing autocorrelation in the analysis and ensuring that flood events are independent, using two rules (Lang et al., 1999): first a minimum of n days between events, with $n = 5 + \log(\text{catchment area})$ and second, between two consecutive peaks, runoff must drop below ⅔ of the smallest peak. The maximum daily runoff

164 of each event is kept. This means that for an event lasting several days, only the maximum
165 daily discharge, and the corresponding date, are kept. Then, for each flood event, we
166 computed the total rainfall and maximum rainfall. The *n*-day previous precipitation is extracted.
167 Total rainfall for each event is estimated by a cumulative sum of precipitation starting the day
168 of the flood and this aggregation stops if there are two consecutive days with precipitation
169 close to zero (1 mm) to account for rainfall intermittency within events. The maximum daily
170 precipitation is extracted from the same time interval used to compute total event precipitation.
171 The soil moisture at the beginning of the events is extracted from the previous day of the start
172 of the rainfall event. A base flow filter has been used to separate direct runoff and base flow
173 for each time series, using the Lyne Hollick Filter (Lyne and Hollick, 1979), with its default
174 parameters. For each flood event, the base flow corresponding to the peak has been extracted
175 to estimate the direct runoff, corresponding to the event rainfall contribution, in addition to base
176 flow. Different metrics characterizing each flood event have been computed: total rainfall
177 (mm), event maximum rainfall (mm), duration of the rainfall event (days), duration of the flood
178 event (days), antecedent soil moisture (0-1) and runoff coefficient (0-1). The runoff coefficient
179 was computed for each event as the ratio of direct runoff depth and total event precipitation
180
181 **3.2 Analysis of the mean date of occurrence**
182
183 Circular statistics (Burn, 1997; Berens, 2009) are used to analyze flood timing. The dates are
184 first converted into an angular value, then from this sample of angular values, the mean date
185 of occurrence (θ) can be computed, together with the concentration index (*r*) which measures
186 the variability of the flood occurrences around the mean date. Using the dates of flood events,
187 considering hydrological years starting September 1, θ and *r* are computed from the sample
188 of dates. The first step in the analysis of seasonality is to test against circular uniformity.
189 Circular uniformity refers to the case in which all angular values of flood dates around the
190 circle are equally likely, indicative of the absence of flood seasonality. In that case, the
191 computation of the mean date would have little relevance. The Rayleigh (Fisher, 1993) and
192 the Hermans-Rasson (Landler et al., 2019) tests are used to test against uniformity for
193 unimodal distributions, to verify the presence of flood seasonality (ie. meaning that floods do
194 not occur randomly throughout the year). To associate flood events and weather types, for
195 each rainy day corresponding to flood events, the weather type has been extracted from the
196 weather type's classification.
197
198 **3.3 Classification of flood generating processes**
199
200 A classification is applied to the flood events, adapted from a previously implemented
201 classification at the global scale (Stein et al., 2020), in the United States (Stein et al., 2021)
202 and Africa (Tramblay et al., 2022). This approach relates the occurrence of rainfall amounts
203 above various thresholds to the occurrence of floods. Flood events in each catchment are
204 classified according to three hydrometeorological generating processes, namely, the excess
205 rainfall, short rainfall, long rainfall using a decision tree. Excess rainfall is defined as a flood
206 event triggered by rainfall higher than average occurring over wet soils (i.e. soil moisture above
207 than 50% saturation), short rainfall as a single daily rainfall event above high thresholds (the
208 95th percentile computed over the whole time series of rainfall) and long rainfall as several
209 consecutive days (> 2 days) with rainfall above the 95th percentile of rainfall summed over 7
210 days. The classification first evaluates if a larger than average multi-day rainfall fell on wet soil
211 to determine if the flood event was an excess rainfall type of flood. If that was not the case, it

212 evaluates whether the thresholds for long rainfall and then short rainfall are exceeded. If no
213 process could be identified, the class "other" is assigned.
214
215 **3.4 Changes in flood characteristics**
216
217 To assess the changes over time in flood dates and generating mechanisms, we split the
218 records of each station into two periods of equal length. Given that most stations have records
219 starting after the 1960s, on average the first period is ranging from 1959 to 1990 and the
220 second one from 1991 to 2021, with a pivot year within +/- 5 years around 1991, allowing the
221 comparison of the two time slices across the different stations. To assess the relative changes
222 in the flood drivers, the frequency of each driver for each time period has been computed, and
223 then we computed for each station the relative change (%) in each driver contribution
224 (Berghuijs et al., 2019). In addition, to detect trends on the long-term frequency of event types
225 per year pooled at the regional scale, we used the Mann-Kendall test for trends, modified to
226 account for autocorrelation in the time series (Hamed and Ramachandra Rao, 1998).
227
228 We use the same approach to estimate changes in the different flood events characteristics,
229 and we applied the two-tailed Wilcoxon test to check the difference in medians. In addition, to
230 assess the regional significance of the trends, we also computed the Mann-Kendall test on
231 flood events characteristics pooled at the regional scale. For flood dates, we computed the
232 mean dates of occurrence for the two time periods and assessed the significance of the
233 difference using the Watson and Williams test, which is a circular analogue to the two sample
234 t-test (Watson and Williams, 1956). Finally, to estimate potential relationships between
235 different flood characteristics, the Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) is computed.
236

4. Results and discussion

237
238
239 **4.1 Change in flood event characteristics**
240
241 There are several changes in flood event characteristics as seen in Figure 2 between the two
242 sub-periods, 1959-1990 and 1991-2021. On average, total event precipitation is increasing in
243 65 basins (66% of basins), maximum event rainfall is increasing in 76 basins, consistent with
244 previous studies in this area (Ribes et al., 2019; Tramblay et al., 2019; Blanchet and Creutin,
245 2022), while on the opposite antecedent soil moisture is decreasing in 71 basins, baseflow
246 contribution is decreasing in 75 basins and runoff coefficient is decreasing in 68 basins. These
247 changes in soil moisture, base flow and runoff coefficients are consistent with an overall
248 increase of aridity in southern Europe mostly driven by higher evapotranspiration (Tramblay
249 et al., 2020) and have been also observed in other regions with a similar climate (Ho et al.,
250 2022). The number of local statistically significant changes for each flood event characteristic
251 is given in Table 1. These numbers remain small but it should be reminded that sample sizes
252 are quite short for a robust statistical assessment in a context of high interannual variability.
253 To overcome this issue, we also assessed the regional significance of these changes in flood
254 event characteristics. We performed a regional pooling of the events and applied the Mann-
255 Kendall test to detect trends in the regional series of event characteristics. As shown in table
256 1, all the detected changes are regionally significant except the decrease in base flow
257 contribution to peak discharge during floods. Overall, an increase in total event rainfall can be
258 observed, mostly caused by the increase of maximum rainfall during the events (the changes

259 in the two variables are correlated, with ρ = 0.52), while the flood event durations are on
260 average decreasing, consistent with studies at the global scale (Wasko et al., 2021).
261
262 These changes in precipitation are associated with a decrease of antecedent soil moisture,
263 before the beginning of the rainfall events. This decrease is also related to a smaller
264 contribution of base flow during floods in some basins. There is indeed a significant correlation
265 between the relative changes in the base flow contribution to peak runoff and soil moisture (ρ
266 = 0.56), indicating that the soil moisture decrease is likely the main driver of these changes.
267 There is also for most basins a significant nonlinear relationship (exponential type) between
268 the flood events antecedent soil moisture and runoff coefficients, as reported in many studies
269 (Penna et al., 2011; Rogger et al., 2013; Raynaud et al., 2015; Tarasova et al., 2020). Indeed,
270 for the first time period, 1959-1990 the median Spearman correlation between antecedent soil
271 moisture and flood runoff coefficients (see supplementary figure S1) is equal to 0.43 and is
272 significant at the 5% level in 56 basins (67 basins at the 10% significance level). For the
273 second time period, 1991-2021, the median correlation is increasing to 0.45 and is significant
274 in 64 basins at the 5% significance level (68 at the 10% significance level). These results
275 show, contrary to popular belief, that at the catchment scale drier soils produce less runoff,
276 and this characteristic is even slightly accentuating over time. Indeed, increased runoff
277 coefficients induced either by hydrophobic soil conditions following droughts (Burch et al.,
278 1989), soil crusting and sealing (Bissonnais and Singer, 1993) or compaction (Alaoui et al.,
279 2018), are well documented processes that mostly occur at the local plot scale that do not
280 produce discernible effects at the catchment scale. This observation is reinforced by the fact
281 that no negative correlation between runoff coefficients and initial soil moisture was detected.
282 About the explanatory factors of the association between soil moisture and runoff coefficients,
283 we found stronger correlations (significant at the 5% level) between these two variables in
284 catchments with higher percentage of urban or agricultural areas, and on the opposite weaker
285 correlations along with increased percentage of forests or mean catchment altitude. There is
286 only a very small increase of the correlations for larger basins (no significant correlation with
287 basin sizes), indicating that this relationship between soil moisture and runoff coefficient
288 remains valid for all basins scales considered in the present study. This relationship between
289 runoff coefficients and antecedent soil moisture remained stable between 1959-1990 and
290 1991-2021 (Figure 3).
291
292 **4.2 Changes in flood dates**
293
294 Floods in southern France tend to occur mainly during November or December for basins
295 close to the Mediterranean, East of the Cévennes mountainous range, while for basins located
296 on the western part of the region, they tend to occur later during winter months, centered in
297 January or February (Figure 4). Both the Rayleigh and Hermans-Rasson tests reject the null
298 hypothesis of uniformity at the 5% level, indicating that floods do not occur randomly
299 throughout the year. In most cases, the seasonal distribution is unimodal, except for a few
300 cases; in about 15 stations the maximum occurrence of floods is observed in late autumn or
301 winter and a secondary minor peak of occurrence is observed, usually centered around the
302 month of March or April. These floods are associated with rainfall events rather than snowmelt,
303 since for only 3 basins the snowfall contribution reaches 19% of total precipitation whereas
304 the snowfall contribution is much lower for the remaining 12 basins (less than 5%).
305

306 For 79 basins, floods tend to occur earlier during the year, on average by -22 days between
307 1959-1990 and 1991-2021 (Figure 5, left panel). On the opposite, for 19 basins the mean flood
308 date occurs later in the second period with an average of +12 days. These changes in the
309 mean date are significant in 26 basins at the 0.1 level according to the Watson and Williams
310 test (18 basins at the 0.05 significance level). There are two differentiated spatial patterns: all
311 basins where floods tend to occur earlier are located widespread in the center of the
312 Mediterranean region, and basins where floods tend to occur later are found only in the
313 northwestern margin of the domain. In these basins, the mean floods occur in late winter, until
314 February and March. The same spatial patterns of changes in mean flood dates have been
315 observed by Blöschl et al. (2017), but without providing the possible causes of these seasonal
316 shifts. For the concentration index (i.e., the variability around the mean date) similarly two
317 different patterns are found: for basins where floods tend to occur earlier, the concentration
318 index is increasing, meaning more floods are clustered around the mean date, while for
319 western basins where floods tend to occur later, the concentration index is decreasing,
320 meaning a larger variability in flood dates (Figure 5, right panel).
321
322 To assess the regional changes in flood dates, we first separated in two regional samples the
323 stations where floods occur earlier (sample 1) or later (sample 2). Then we used the Watson-
324 William test, previously used to assess changes in flood dates in each station, to compare
325 these two regional samples. The test results indicate that for the 19 stations where floods tend
326 to occur later, the change in flood dates are not significant at the 5% level (p value = 0.0821),
327 on the opposite, for the 79 stations where floods are occurring earlier, the change is significant
328 (p value = $5.34.10^{-8}$).
329
330 **4.3 Associations between flood occurrence and weather patterns**
331
332 The seasonal patterns observed for the floods are closely related to the occurrence of different
333 weather types in different sub-regions. As shown in figure 6, most basins located east of the
334 Cévennes mountainous range have floods associated with WT4, Southern Circulation, and
335 western basins with WT2, Steady Oceanic. The most frequent pattern associated with 37% of
336 floods, WT4, is known to be triggering intense rainfall events in this region (Ducrocq et al.,
337 2008; Tramblay et al., 2013). Interestingly, the WT6, Eastern circulation, and WT7,
338 Southwestern circulation, are both associated to a lesser extent with floods across the whole
339 region, but without notable spatial differences in the relative frequency of floods associated
340 with these weather types. Change in flood seasonality could be ascribed to changes in the
341 seasonal occurrence of the weather types (Figure 7): WT4 tends to occur more frequently
342 from March to August during 1991-2021 compared to 1959-1990, and these changes are
343 statistically significant (see supplementary figure S2). When looking at the actual count of WT4
344 days, this change represents an increase of 69 events during that 6-month period for 1991-
345 2021, so an average of +2.2 days per year. Associated with a warmer Mediterranean Sea over
346 the last decades notably during summer (Pastor et al., 2020), the combination of these two
347 factors could explain the earlier occurrence of floods east of the Cévennes mountainous
348 range. Similarly, there is an increased frequency of WT2 in January, February and March
349 between 1991-2021 and 1959-1990, that is also significant (supplementary figure S2)that
350 could be possibly related to the later occurrence of floods west of the Cévennes range.
351 Although this change in weather types seasonality leading to heavy rainfalls is a plausible
352 cause of the observed changes in the flood seasonality, more research is needed to better
353 understand these relationships and attribute changes in flood seasonality. Notably, to analyze

354 in more detail the moisture supply from the Mediterranean or Atlantic seas, the interaction with
355 the atmospheric thermodynamics, the duration, localization and the spatial dependence of the
356 rainfall episodes inducing floods.
357
358 **4.4 Changes in flood generating processes**
359
360 When first applying the classification of flood-generating processes on all floods, we find a
361 predominance of excess rainfall events (Figure 8), followed by long rain and short rains, that
362 is consistent with the known flood-generating processes in this region (Mediterranean
363 episodes) and, in particular, the strong influence of saturated soils on runoff generation with
364 floods mostly occurring during the autumn (Tramblay et al., 2010, 2019). The category 'other'
365 regroups only 0.97% of floods and it represents mostly events with very low precipitation
366 amounts, likely due to an underestimation of rainfall in the SAFRAN database for some events.
367 It is worth noticing that despite the large sample of basins considered, the patterns are
368 remarkably consistent and homogeneous across different basin sizes and locations. There is
369 a significant, yet low, correlation ($\rho = 0.26$, p-value = 0.008) between the ratio of excess rain
370 floods and catchment size, with a larger proportion of excess rain in larger basins, while on
371 the opposite there is an even weaker and negative correlation ($\rho = -0.16$, p-value =0.09)
372 between the ratio of short rain and basin size. It should be noted that floods driven by short
373 rain episodes are potentially affecting smaller regions than floods driven by excess floods
374 (Brunner and Dougherty, 2022). For 30 basins (not necessarily the largest ones), the
375 proportion of excess rain exceeds 80% of the total number of flood events (see supplementary
376 figure S3). For short rain and long rain, the maximum contributions observed much lower, 36%
377 and 32%, respectively, but these maximum values are only found in small basins. Indeed,
378 basins when short rain or long rain exceed 30% of episodes are only found in basins smaller
379 than 100 km².
380
381 The mean date of occurrence is significantly different between the three flood types, according
382 to the Watson and Williams test. As shown on figure 9, the highest proportion of floods induced
383 by short rain is observed during September to November, while the floods induced by long
384 rain are mostly occurring during October to December, and excess rain floods are observed
385 in late autumn and winter, with a peak in February. This is consistent with the annual soil
386 moisture cycle in this region: at the end of the summer the soils are dry and it takes several
387 months to replenish the soil moisture level, which is at highest during winter. If examining the
388 long-term changes in this monthly repartition of flood types (see supplementary figure S4), the
389 frequency of excess rain is decreasing from February to April, and also in October, while
390 increasing during winter months. This implies that the season during which excess rain floods
391 are occurring is reducing in length and concentrated during wet winter months. On the
392 opposite the frequency of short or long rain floods is increasing in June and September,
393 months that are getting drier over time in this region.
394
395 The noticeable changes in flood processes over time are a reduction of Excess rainfall in 71
396 basins and an increased frequency of short rains in 53 basins and Long rains in 63 basins
397 (Figure 10), while short rain and long rain floods are decreasing for 19 and 22 basins,
398 respectively. For excess rain, there are only 16 basins where their relative proportion is
399 increasing; they are mostly located on the margins of the Alps and Pyrenees mountains. For
400 more frequent events (ie. if considering an average of 3 episodes per year instead of one), the

401 number of basins with a change is larger, with a reduction of Excess rainfall in 82 basins out
402 of 98 (results not shown). This indicates that the soil moisture depletion has more impacts on
403 small to moderate flood events, as previously observed by Bertola et al. (2021). There is no
404 relationship between the rate of change in the different flood generating processes and
405 catchment sizes indicating a clear regional pattern. The average magnitude across all basins
406 of these changes remains low, on average -4.1% for excess rain, +1.2% for short rain and +
407 2.1% long rain. Yet, the magnitude of these changes is ranging from +15% to -21% for excess
408 rain, +11% to -20% for short rain and +12% to -11% for long rain, depending on the catchment,
409 indicating that local catchment characteristics could strongly modulate the regional signal. In
410 addition, the average values over the whole domain are hiding some local changes: for
411 instance, short rainfall floods are increasing in the southeastern part of the Cévennes while
412 decreasing for the northwestern part as seen in Figure 10.
413
414 **4.5 Regional changes**
415
416 To assess whether the changes in the relative influence of the three different flood types are
417 significant at the regional scale, we computed for each year the relative frequency of the
418 different flood types, all basins together. It is indeed not possible to do this analysis for each
419 station independently, due to the small size of the samples over the two periods. These
420 changes in the occurrence of flood types are significant at the regional scale according to the
421 Mann-Kendall test (Figure 11), for the frequency of excess rain floods and short rain floods, at
422 the 5% significance level, but not for the long rain floods. All events pooled regionally, the
423 decrease in excess rain floods is equal to -13% between 1959-1990 and 1991-2021, and the
424 increase of short rain floods is equal to +36%. In addition, to assess whether these results are
425 robust to the thresholds used in the classification of flood events, a Monte Carlo experiment
426 has been also conducted. Results show (see supplementary figure S5) that regional changes
427 in excess rain and short rain floods are not dependent on classification thresholds, while it is
428 not the case for long rain floods. In terms of flood severity for the different flood types, the
429 median flood computed for each basin is strongly correlated to basin size ($\rho = 0.78$) for floods
430 caused by excess rain, short rain ($\rho = 0.80$) and long rain ($\rho = 0.75$); and very similar results
431 are found for the maximum flood. On the contrary, the specific discharge of flood peaks is non
432 linearly related to basin sizes, with a clear threshold effect for basins smaller than 500 km²
433 that have a much larger specific discharge than larger basins.
434
435 Given that there are different flood sample sizes in the different basins corresponding to
436 different flood-generating processes, we pooled regionally the flood events. To do so, we
437 computed the specific discharge for each event (i.e. the flood magnitude divided by catchment
438 area) to analyze the distributions of specific discharge for all the events associated with excess
439 rain, long rain or short rain. Specific discharge is used herein since it is a good indicator of
440 flash floods severity, notably in this Mediterranean region (Delrieu et al., 2005, Ruin et al.,
441 2008). Figure 12 shows that the short rain floods are more severe, in terms of specific
442 discharge, than excess rain or long rain floods at the regional level (as shown also by Tarasova
443 et al., 2023). The regional distributions for the different event types are different according to
444 the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. It must be noted that for a given basin the magnitude of the
445 different types of floods may not be very different, showing the strong variability from one event
446 to another that is not solely linked to the flood trigger. When comparing the different flood
447 distributions between the time periods 1959-1990 and 1991-2021, the differences in flood
448 magnitudes between excess rain, long and short rain are reduced. This is mainly due to a

449 slight decrease in the specific discharge of short rain floods, notably for flood events with a
450 return level higher than 10 years, while the excess rain floods show very little changes in
451 intensity over time.
452

5. Conclusions

454
455 The aim of this study was to document the evolution of the characteristics of Mediterranean
456 floods, using a large database of long river discharge records in southern France. In most
457 basins, floods tend to occur earlier during the year, the mean flood date being on average
458 advanced by one month. This seasonal shift can be attributed to the increased frequency of
459 southern-circulation weather types during spring and summer that are strongly associated with
460 the occurrence of floods in this region. Over time, floods also tend to be more clustered in time
461 over the different basins, as reflected by a decreasing variability in flood occurrence
462 throughout the year. On the contrary, for the westernmost basins influenced by Atlantic
463 circulation patterns, floods tend to occur later during the year, also due to a seasonal shift of
464 the flood-generating circulation patterns that are occurring more frequently in late winter.
465 During floods, an increase in total and extreme event precipitation has been observed,
466 associated with a decrease of antecedent soil moisture before rainfall events, linked to a
467 smaller contribution of base flow during floods. It can be concluded that it is the depletion of
468 soil water content, due to increased aridity in south France notably related to higher
469 evapotranspiration rates (Tramblay et al., 2020), that is the likely cause of the absence of flood
470 trends despite the increase in extreme rainfall. It should be also noted that over all basins,
471 dryer soils are associated with lower runoff coefficients, and this relationship remains valid
472 over time. The majority of flood events are associated with excess rainfall on saturated soils,
473 but that proportion is decreasing over time with a concurrent increased frequency of short rain,
474 potentially leading to more severe floods. At the regional scale, floods induced by short rains
475 are indeed of higher magnitude, but due to a lower runoff coefficient induced by drier
476 antecedent soil moisture, the specific discharge associated with short rain flood is decreasing
477 over time. These results are consistent with those obtained in other regions, showing that
478 floods do not necessarily increase with the increase in extreme precipitation, and that soil
479 moisture seems to play a key role in explaining these changes and the lack of trends ultimately
480 on flood hazard (Wasko and Nathan, 2019; Bertola et al., 2021; Wasko et al., 2021). The
481 results of the present study are rather homogeneous given the different catchment sizes and
482 land use types, indicating that changes in flood types are mainly resulting from regional climate
483 change and not only local changes, such as land cover or agricultural practice changes, nor
484 the increase of urban and peri-urban areas. Nonetheless, if the observed trend in increased
485 short rain floods is persisting in the upcoming decades, the severity of floods, particularly the
486 most important ones, could increase along with the rise in rainfall extremes particularly in
487 areas where the soil infiltration potential is low, such as in mountainous or urbanized areas,
488 that have expanded a lot in recent years. This aspect could be further investigated using
489 climate scenarios.

490 One of the main perspectives of this work would be to perform a similar analysis at sub-daily
491 time steps, that would be more adapted to analyze changes in flash floods characteristics,
492 notably in terms of the flashiness response of the catchments (Baker et al., 2004; Li et al.,
493 2022). Indeed, the daily time step prevents a thorough analysis of changes in rainfall patterns,
494 notably at shorter time steps. Yet, there is no gridded dataset of hourly precipitation before the

2000s in Southern France, that does not allow to repeat such a similar study over 62 years. However, given the availability of radar rainfall over France, it would be possible to analyze, at least for the recent years after 2000, the evolution of several characteristics, such as the evolution of storm hydrographs, concentration time and the flashiness response of the basins. Another relevant prospective work would be to analyze the spatial extent of floods. Given the future evolution of weather types associated with floods in combination with more local to regional characteristics, such as soil moisture state, these types of events may impact simultaneously wider, or smaller, parts of the region considered, and this could have serious implications on risk management (Brunner et al., 2021; Brunner and Dougherty, 2022). Therefore, the joint analysis of flood occurrence in nearby basins would be highly relevant. Finally, there is also a need for new approaches to incorporate these changes in flood generating process into engineering practice (Slater et al., 2021b), notably to estimate the return levels for different types of infrastructure design.

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Data availability

The computed catchment-based indicators are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

Y.T.: Conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation. YT designed the experiments, performed the analyses, and wrote the paper. PA, GA, ML, EP, LN and ES Conceptualization, data curation, writing—reviewing and editing.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

529

530 Table 1: Number of local significant changes in the median of flood events characteristics
531 detected by the Wilcoxon test and results of the regional Mann-Kendall test on flood event
532 characteristics

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Indicator	Number of significant local changes (Wilcoxon, 10%)	pvalue of the regional MK test	Regional changes between 1959 and 2022 (%)
Flood event duration	17	0.0046178	-0.40%
Base flow contribution to peak	15	0.5687962	-8.62%
Runoff coefficient	19	0.0000002	-14.62%
Total event rainfall	16	0.0011851	9.01%
Maximum event rainfall	27	0.0000000	13.47%
Antecedent soil moisture	12	0.0000008	-9.80%

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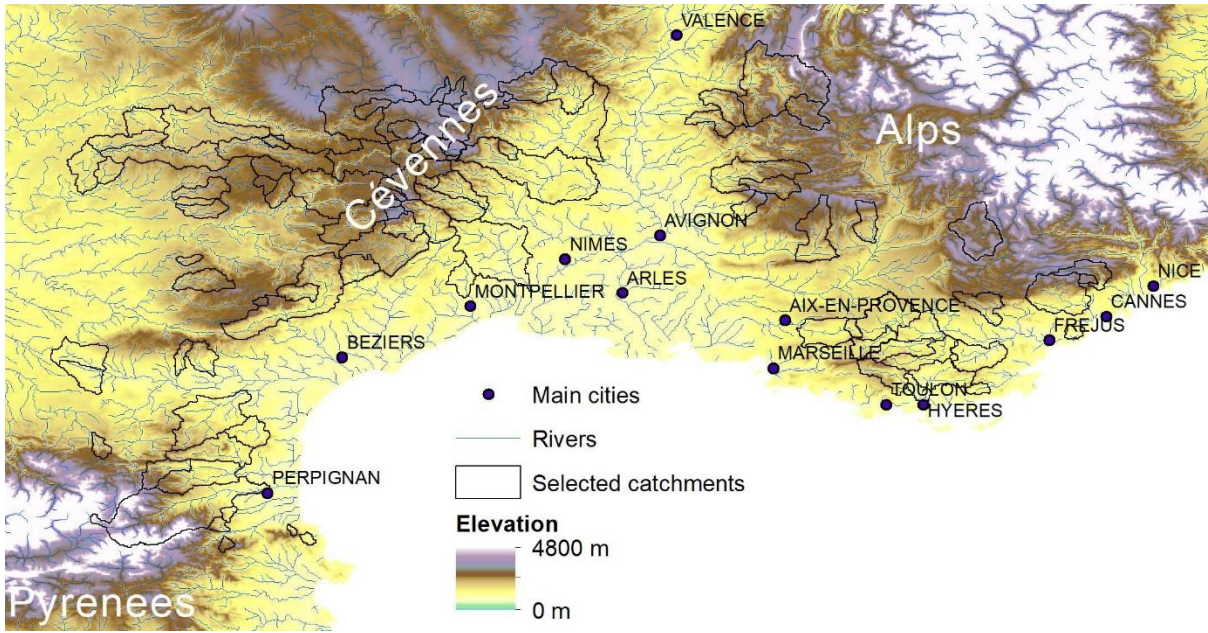
849   Figure 1: Map of the selected catchments

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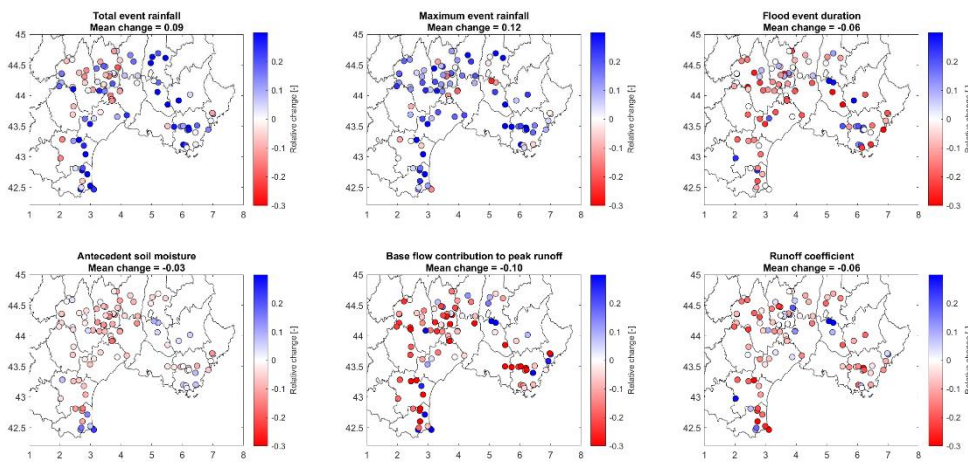
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857   Figure 2: Relative changes in different flood event characteristics between 1959-1990 and
858   1991-2021
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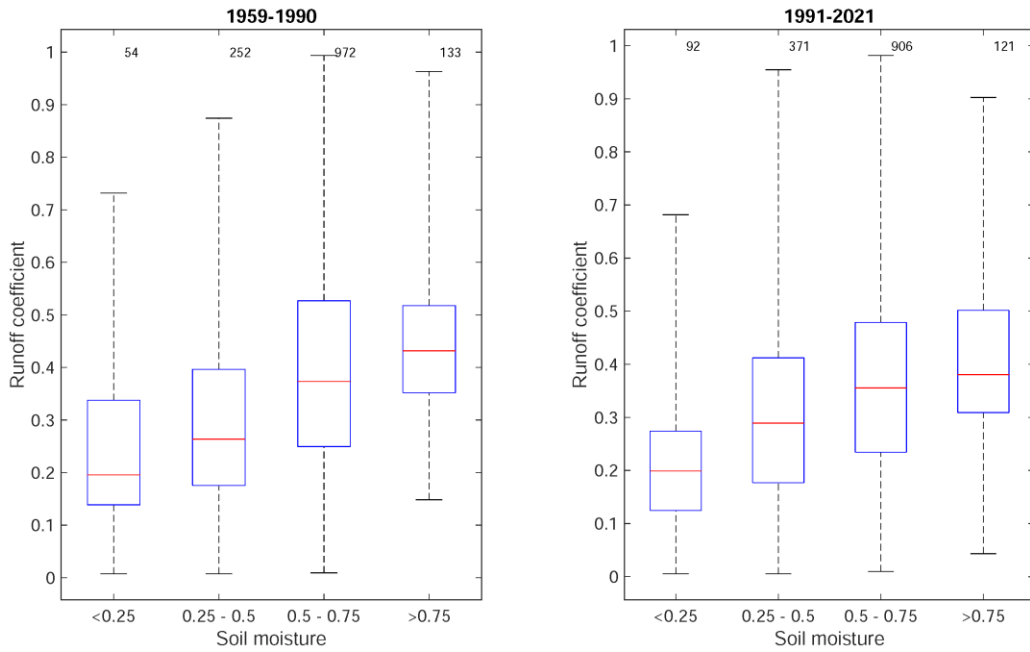
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861   Figure 3: Relationship between the flood event runoff coefficients and antecedent soil
862   moisture for the two time periods considered: 1959-1990 and 1991-2021. For each box, the
863   central line indicates the median, and the bottom and top edges of the box indicate the 25th
864   and 75th percentiles, respectively. The whiskers extend to the most extreme data points.
865   The numbers at the top of the figure indicate the number of events in each category.
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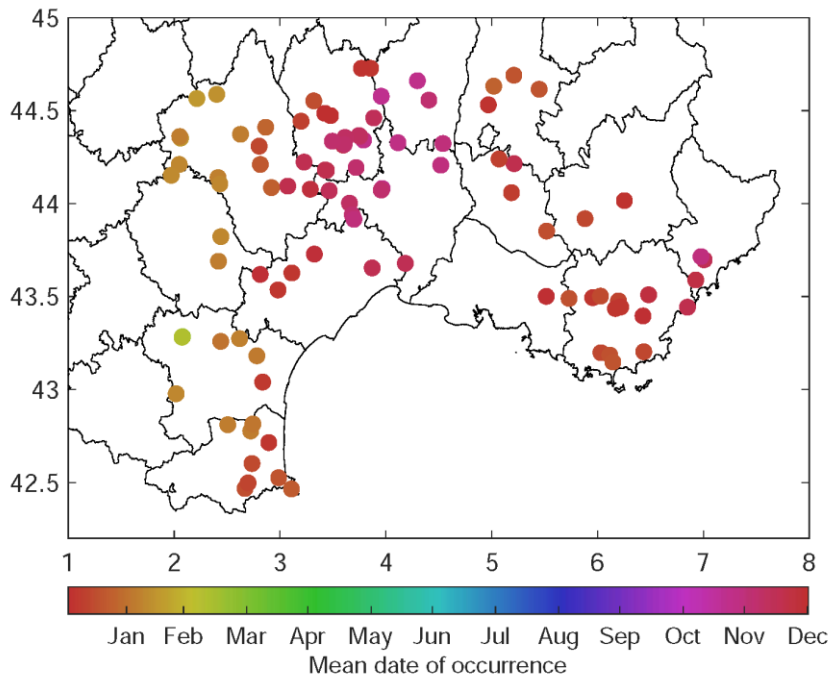
869   Figure 4: Mean date of flood occurrence

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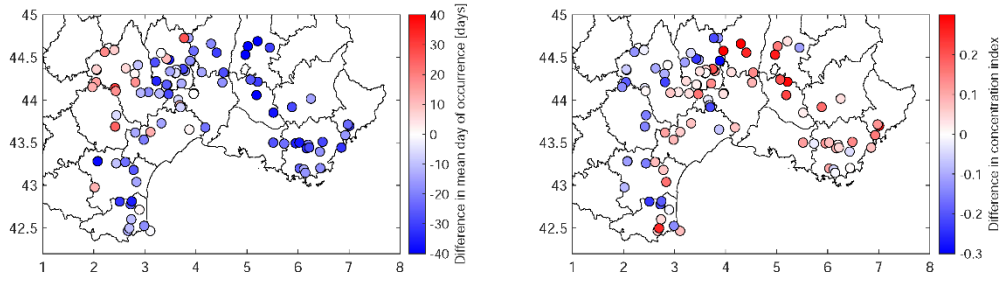
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873 Figure 5: Changes in mean flood date (left) and changes in the concentration index (right)
874 between 1959-1990 and 1991-2021
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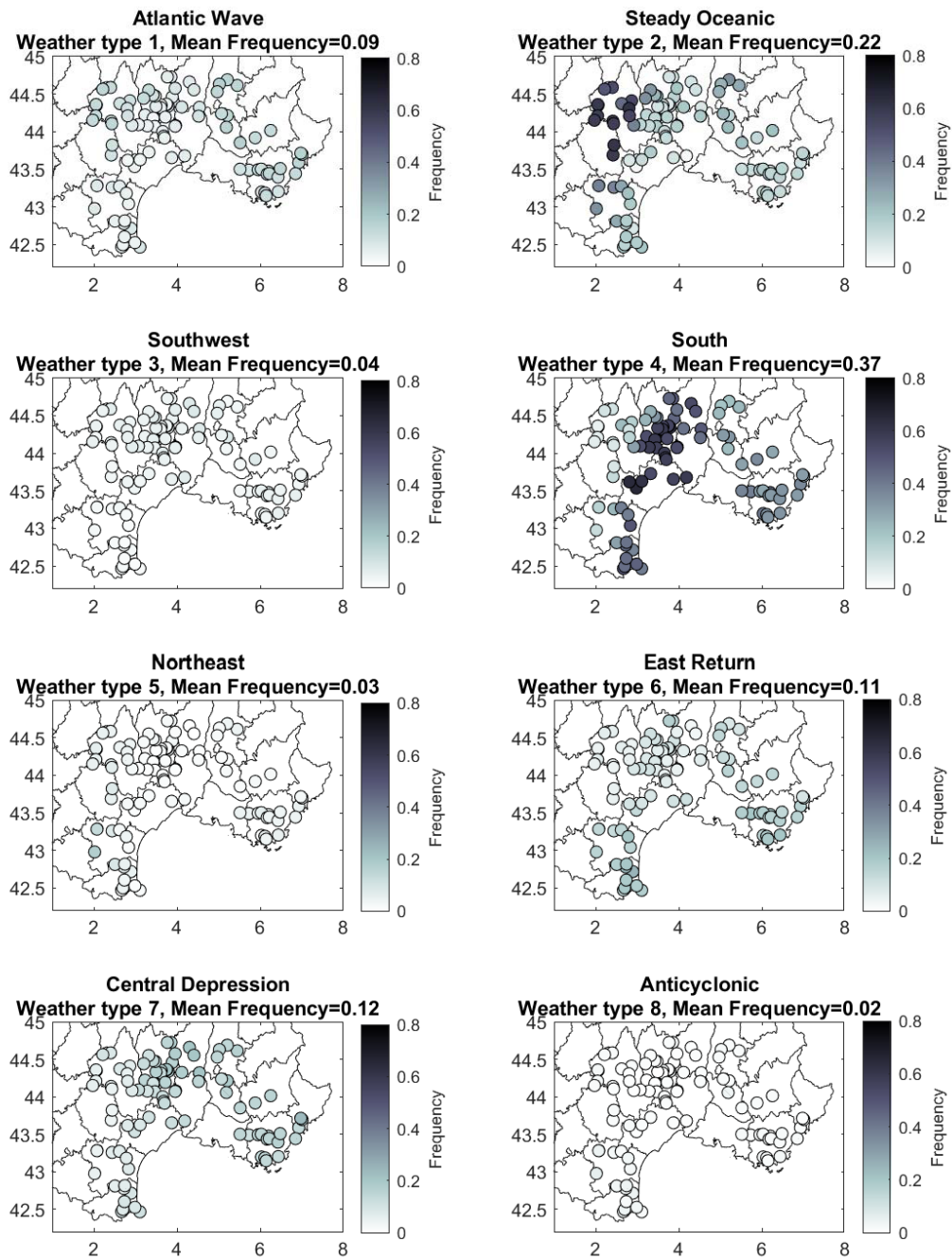
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878   Figure 6: Frequency of the different weather types associated with flood events, the names
879   of the different weather types are from Garavaglia et al. (2010)
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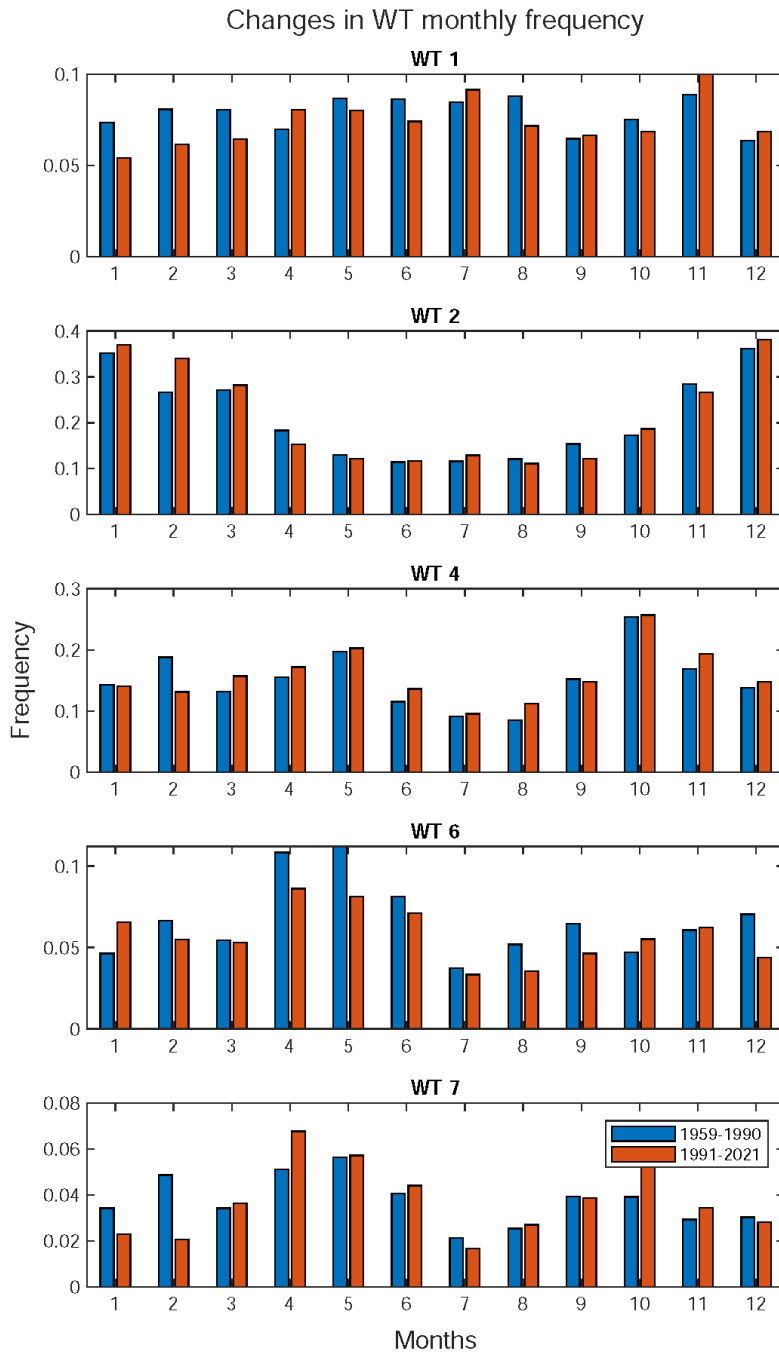
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886   Figure 7: Change in monthly frequency of weather types 1, 2, 4 ,6 and 7 between 1959-1990
887   and 1991-2021
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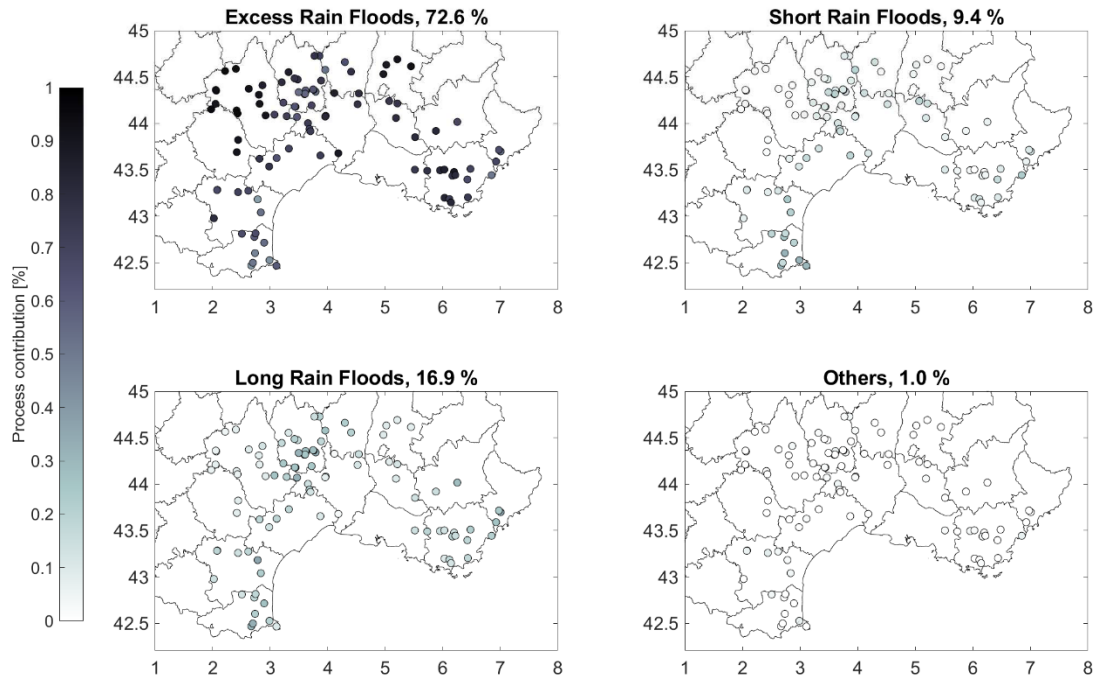
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891 Figure 8: Flood event classification into four categories: excess rain, long rain, short rain and
892 others
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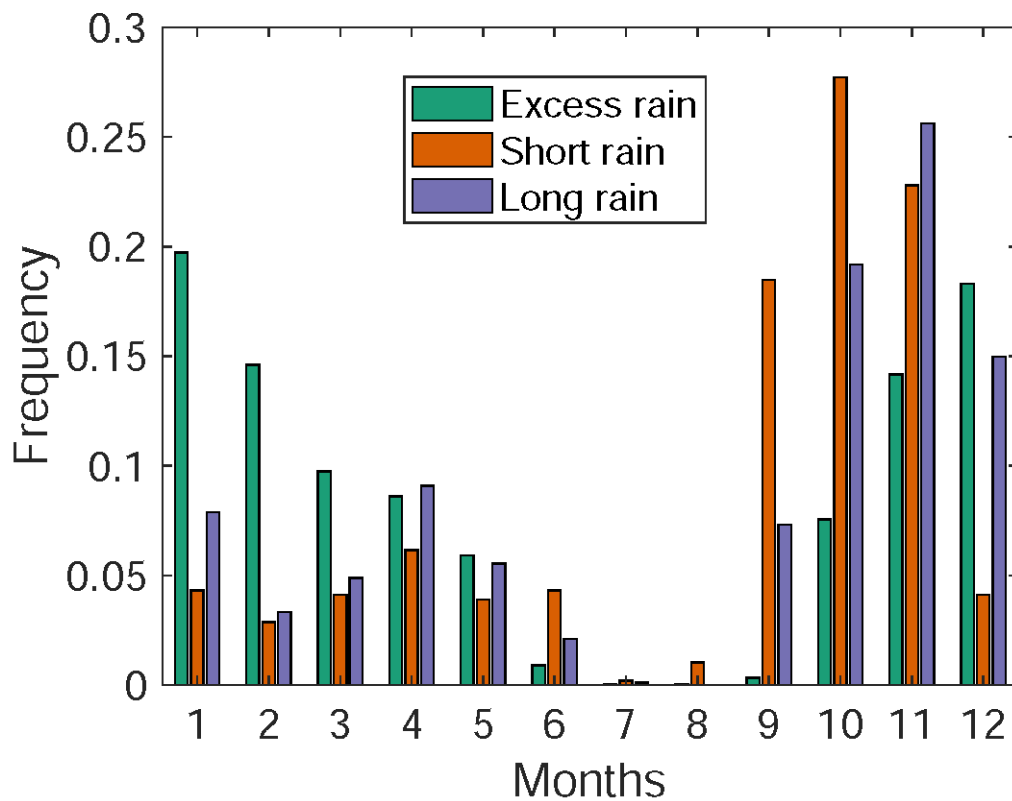
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896 Figure 9: Mean monthly frequency of occurrence for the three flood drivers: excess rain,
897 short rain, and long rain

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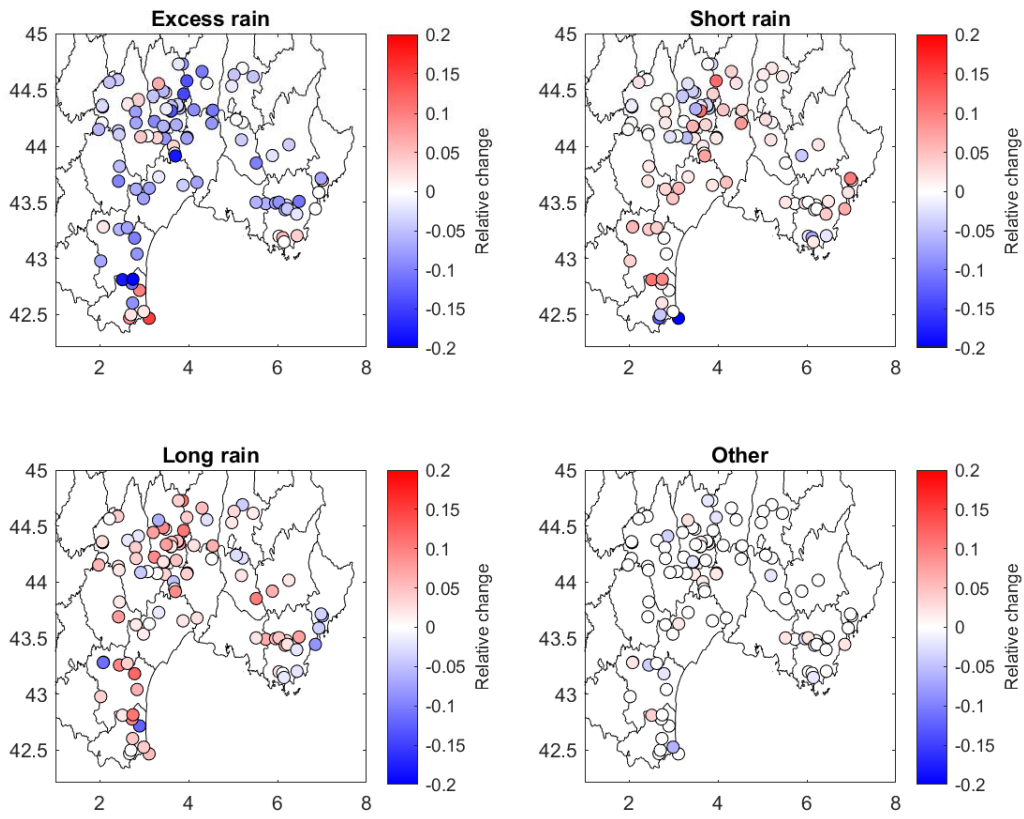
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901   Figure 10: Relative changes in the frequency of excess rain, short rain and long rain
902   between 1959-1990 and 1991-2021

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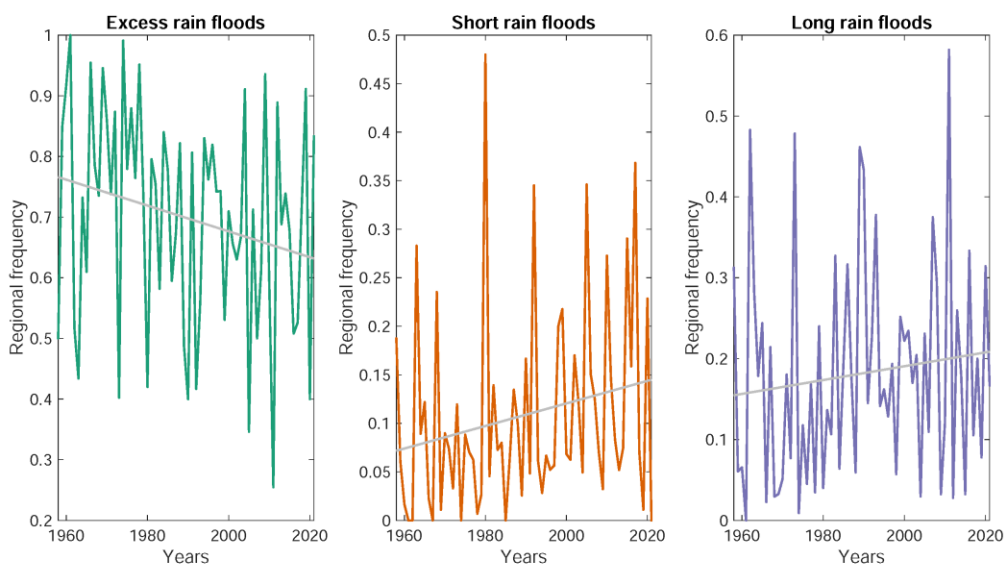
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906   Figure 11: Regional frequency of excess rain, short rain, and long rain floods between 1959
907   and 2021. The gray lines denote a least-square linear fit to represent the long-term tendency

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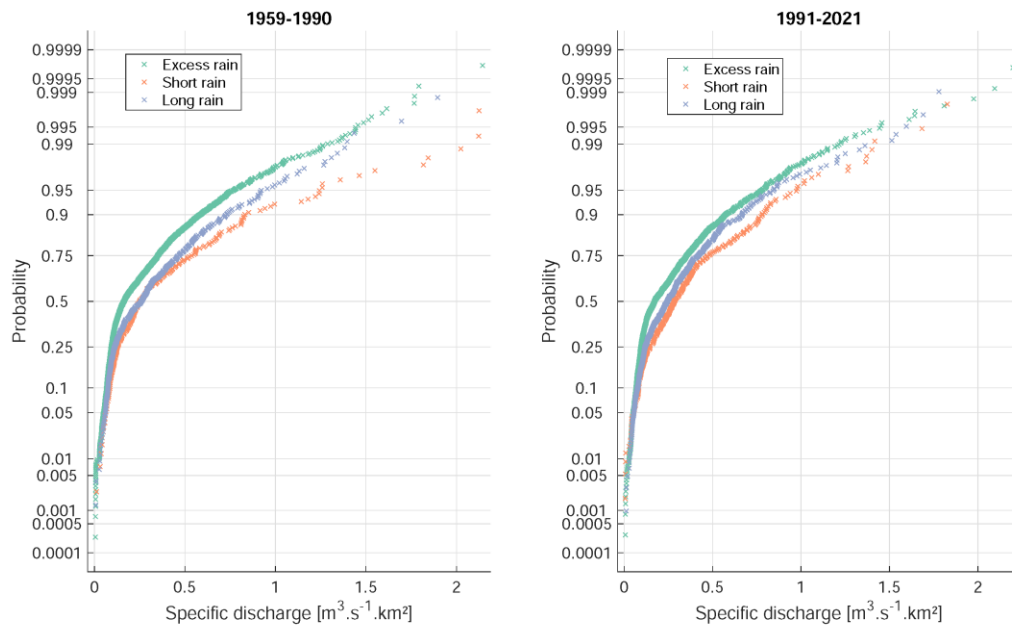
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911
912   Figure 12: Distribution of regionally sampled floods corresponding to excess rain, short rain
913   and long rain types of floods for the two time periods 1959-1990 and 1991-2021
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