

DETECTION OF FLOODS IN SAR IMAGES WITH NON-LINEAR KERNEL CLUSTERING AND TOPOGRAPHIC PRIOR

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ABSTRACT

After a major flood catastrophe, a precious information is the delineation of the affected areas. Remote sensing imagery, especially synthetic aperture radar, allows to obtain a global and complete view of the situation. However, the detection of the flooded areas remains a challenge, especially since the reaction time available for ground teams is very short. This makes the application of automatic detection routines very appealing. Such methods must avoid heavy parametrization, heavy computational time and long intervention by the operator. We propose an automatic three steps strategy, starting by re-balancing the different types of pixels (non-water, permanent water and flooded) using digital elevation model information, then isolating water pixels and finally separating flooded from permanent water pixels using non-linear clustering in dedicated feature spaces through appropriate composite kernels. Experiments on two sets of ASAR images show the effectiveness of the method competing with supervised standard log-ratio thresholding.

Index Terms— log-ratio, feature space, Synthetic Aperture Radar, change detection, remote sensing

1. INTRODUCTION

When a major catastrophe strikes, one of the most impelling needs is the allocation of human resources on the field. In recent years, Earth observation has shown its potential to provide a global image of affected regions and has been acknowledged to play a major role in the allocation of human resources. In the case of floods, that often happen in conjunction with heavy rains and cloud cover, the recourse to Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) becomes almost compulsory [1]: SAR imagery is not affected by weather conditions and, since it does not rely on sunlight, can also be operated at night. For this reasons, there has been a strong research current dealing with the development of change (flood) detection tools using this type of imagery. Among the many techniques deployed in the literature, techniques based on the log-ratio image have

shown very desirable properties and are enabled by an easy access to reference non-flooded SAR images. After transformation of the data, the methods rely on automatic thresholding, modelling the distributions either using generalized Gaussians [2], Nakagami-Gamma, Weibull or log-normal [3] models. The unsupervised estimation of distribution parameters can be done through Expectation-Maximization algorithms [4].

In flood detection problems, the flood class is often weakly represented and is therefore unseen in an histogram of the backscattering values. Thresholding methods fitting a certain distribution on the histogram fail at detecting the small flood class present in the lower backscattering values of the flooded image. For this reason, the change detection approaches require a way of focusing automatically on water pixels in order to be used for flood detection. In [5], an approach based on multiple tiles is proposed to detect thresholds per tile to be more robust to this small sample problem. In [6], flood detection is performed on a single post-event image by segmenting the flooded region in a semi-automatic fashion with an active contour model in conjunction with the rivers network. The final distinction between permanent water and flooded regions is done by supervised classification. In [7], a robust segmentation of very high resolution SAR images uses morphological profiles at multiple scales to remove speckle noise. The final classification exploits an electromagnetic model simulating the backscattering of the landcover types.

Digital Elevation Models (DEM) can be used to overcome the small sample problem and improve the flood detection robustness. The probability of floods is higher in low altitude regions, low-slope regions and concave areas, as well as in regions close to water bodies (rivers, lakes). This information can be integrated in a model, for example in a fuzzy classification scheme [8].

In this paper, we propose to use a non-parametric unsupervised approach with landscape topography as flooding prior, followed by non-linear clustering in an appropriate Reproducible Kernel Hilbert Spaces (RKHS) to detect flooded areas.

2. METHODOLOGY

Consider two registered SAR backscattering images X^{t1} and X^{t2} acquired at two times steps t_1 and t_2 . To derive the flood-induced changes between the acquisitions, different combination of the images can be used. The widely used log-ratio, $LR = \log(\frac{X^{t1}+a}{X^{t2}+a}) = \log(X^{t1}+a) - \log(X^{t2}+a) = X_{log}^{t1} - X_{log}^{t2}$, with $a = 0.1$ to avoid infinite values, has an histogram characterized by three modes: a major mode ($LR \approx 0$) for the unchanged pixels, a positive mode ($LR \gg 0$) for pixels showing an increase of backscattering and a negative mode ($LR \ll 0$) for pixels showing a decrease of backscattering. The latter mode corresponds to flooded pixels, which show low backscattering values at time t_2 . These different modes are extremely unbalanced, typically with a very small number of pixels corresponding to flooded areas, when compared to the unchanged (permanent water and non-water) pixels. Thus, it is very difficult to fit a specific distribution to this last mode without using prior knowledge. The proposed methodology is a three steps strategy (see Fig. 1):

- STEP 1: Balance the classes of non-water, permanent water and flooded by importance sampling (IS) based on a “flooding” probability derived from DEM features (*a priori* information).
- STEP 2: Isolate water pixels at t_2 using clustering on the backscattering values of X_{log}^{t2} .
- STEP 3: Separate flooded from permanent water pixels using non-linear clustering on the log-ratio or ratio between the two images.

The 2D plot in Fig. 1 represents the pixels along the log-ratio and the log-scaled image X_{log}^{t2} , respectively. The first step re-balances the histogram by decreasing the number of non-water pixels with respect to permanent water and flooded pixels. The second step clusters the backscattering values of X_{log}^{t2} in a nonlinear way, to let the model focus on permanent water and flooded pixels. Finally, the third step detects flooded pixels by non-linear clustering in an appropriate RKHS derived from the ratio or log-ratio image.

2.1. Importance sampling from “flooding” probability

In flood detection problems, the pixels of interest often represent a very small percentage of the image. Moreover in an automatic processing of images over large regions, it cannot be assumed that flooded regions will cover a large part of the image. In order to overcome this small sample problem, we propose to sub-sample the image according to some *a priori* knowledge on how a flood is likely to happen in the different regions of the image. Floods are more likely to happen along river networks and in regions having specific geomorphological attributes. Flat and concave regions have higher

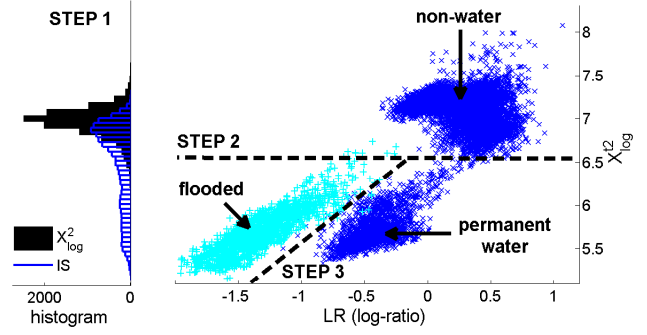


Fig. 1. 2D plot of the log-ratio and log-scaled flooded image at time t_2 . A clustered structure can be observed between flooded, permanent water and non-water pixels. The left histogram shows the typical unbalanced situation between abundant non-water and water pixels (plain black) and after importance sampling (IS) at STEP 1 (blue stripes), which re-balances the histogram using flooding probability. STEP 2 isolates water pixels and STEP 3 detects the flooded pixels.

probability of being flooded [8]. We propose a flooding probability function based on terrain altitude, slope and concavity, derived from a DEM and on the proximity to water bodies.

Let us consider the altitude Z , the slope is obtained as the norm of the smoothed (\check{Z}) horizontal and vertical gradient: $|\nabla(Z)| = \sqrt{\nabla_h(\check{Z})^2 + \nabla_v(\check{Z})^2}$ which shows low values in flat regions. The concavity is obtained from the difference of two Gaussians convoluted with the Z (DoG), as in [9]. The second Gaussian bandwidth, the subtracted one, is chosen smaller than the first one to have the highest DoG values corresponding with most concave regions. The smoothed negative \check{X}_{log}^{t2} indicates water proximity.

$$p(flooding|Z, |\nabla(Z)|, DoG(Z)) = \frac{1}{4} [\tau(-Z) + \tau(-|\nabla(Z)|) + \tau(DoG(Z)) + \tau(-(\check{X}_{log}^{t2}))] \quad (1)$$

with $\tau(\cdot)$ a normalization operator clamping each term between 0 and 1. The flooding probability from eq. (1) is high in low altitude, flat and concave regions close to water bodies. A Gaussian distribution is fitted to $p(flooding|...)$ with mean μ_f and standard deviation σ_f . Our IS scheme takes the N_f most probable pixels having $p(flooding|...) > \mu_f + 2\sigma_f$. In Fig. 2, examples of the different attributes and the corresponding flooding probability are presented.

2.2. Isolating water areas in post-event image

The distinction of water and non-water pixels in the image X_{log}^{t2} (see Fig. 1 STEP 2) is performed with a clustering ap-

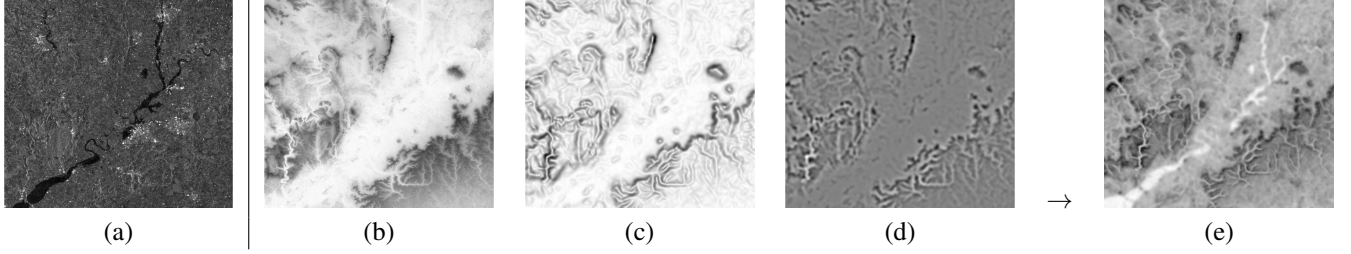


Fig. 2. (a) SAR backscattering over *Tewkesbury* region after floods, (b) negative DEM altitude, (c) negative gradient norm, (d) concavity and (e) resulting flooding probability.

proach. This strategy allows to perform detection in a completely unsupervised way, since it does not require user intervention to initialize the flooded region, contrarily to active contour methods [6]. The IS step (STEP 1) described previously eases the task of separating the two clusters, since the histogram to be partitioned is less biased towards non-water pixels. Nonetheless, a bias can still remain towards non-water pixels and fitting a mixture of 2 Gaussians or partitioning using linear k -means algorithm would still fail at separating the two groups correctly. For these reasons, we opted for a nonlinear clustering methods, kernel k -means, which has already shown desirable properties in unsupervised change detection [10].

The kernel k -means partitioning algorithm minimizes the sum-of-square distances among the cluster center and the samples attributed to the center in a feature space induced by a mapping function Φ [11]. This mapping function Φ enables the algorithm to handle non-Gaussian clusters of different sizes. Given samples $x_i \in X, i = 1, \dots, N$ and K cluster centers, the within-group scattering to be minimized is

$$S_w = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^K \sum_{i \in C_k}^N \|\Phi(x_i) - \mu_k\|^2 \quad (2)$$

with C_k the set of samples corresponding to cluster k and μ_k its center. The center can be expressed as $\mu_k = \frac{1}{N_k} \sum_{i \in C_k} \Phi(x_i)$. By replacing the center expression in eq. (2) the within-group scattering can be expressed in terms of dot products among the mapped samples $\Phi(x_i)$ and kernel functions $k(x, x) = \langle \phi(x), \phi(x) \rangle$ can be applied. By doing so, eq. (2), scaled by N , becomes

$$N \cdot S_w = k(x_i, x_i) - \frac{2}{N_k} \sum_{j \in Z_k} k(x_i, x_j) + \frac{1}{N_k^2} \sum_{j, l \in Z_k} k(x_j, x_l) \quad (3)$$

2.3. Flood detection with composite kernels

Once the water pixels have been isolated, it is possible to distinguish permanent water from flooded areas (STEP 3). This is usually done by thresholding the log-ratio [2, 3]. However,

the optimal separation is not a vertical threshold on the log-ratio as depicted in Fig. 1 but function of the backscattering values of X_{log}^{t2} (diagonal separation in the figure).

To this purpose, it is common to use the ratio image: $X = \frac{X^{t1}}{X^{t2} + \epsilon}$, ϵ being added to avoid singularities, or the log-ratio image: $X = X_{log}^{t1} - X_{log}^{t2}$ and then to map these inputs in an appropriate Reproducing Kernel Hilbert space (RKHS) space using a kernel function (see Section 2.2). In the experiments, we will refer to this strategies as ‘*Input Space*’, since the ratios are computed directly using the original images. To be more specific to the change detection problem, we also extended this straightforward formulation to more complex feature spaces, where the ratio images are computed directly in the RKHS feature space [12]. In the experiments, we will refer to these strategies as ‘*Feature space*’.

The image ratio in the feature space can be defined as $\Phi(\cdot)_{ratio} = \frac{\{(\sqrt{\gamma} \mathbf{A}^2 \varphi(X^{t2}))^T, (\mathbf{A}^1 \varphi(X^{t1}))^T\}^T}{\sqrt{\langle \mathbf{A}^2 \varphi(X^{t2}), \mathbf{A}^2 \varphi(X^{t2}) \rangle}}$, with \mathbf{A}^t a symmetric positive definite scaling matrix and $\varphi(\cdot)$ the implicit mappings. Following this idea, the kernel is expressed as

$$K_{\Phi ratio}(x_i, x_j) = \frac{K(x_i^{t1}, x_j^{t1})}{K(x_i^{t2}, x_j^{t2}) + \epsilon} + \gamma \delta_{ij} \quad (4)$$

The regularization parameter $\gamma = 10^{-8}$ is added to kernel’s diagonal to ensure its positive definiteness.

The log-ratio image can be defined similarly to the difference image in the feature space in [12] using the log of the images, since this is equivalent to the logarithm of the ratio. The difference of the log images in the feature space is $\Phi(\cdot)_{log-ratio} = \mathbf{A}^2 \varphi(X_{log}^{t2}) - \mathbf{A}^1 \varphi(X_{log}^{t1})$. The associated kernel is expressed as

$$K_{\Phi log-ratio}(x_i, x_j) = K(x_{log,i}^{t1}, x_{log,j}^{t1}) + K(x_{log,i}^{t2}, x_{log,j}^{t2}) - K(x_{log,i}^{t1}, x_{log,j}^{t2}) - K(x_{log,i}^{t2}, x_{log,j}^{t1}) \quad (5)$$

This composition of kernels exhibits the two single time kernels (for X^{t1} and X^{t2}) and the cross-time kernels encoding similarities between images at time t_1 and t_2 .

2.4. Post-processing

The spatial location of detected flooded pixels should be exploited to reduce false alarms. Since flooded regions are not extremely localized but grouped over connected locations, the pixels detected as flooded alone in a region has a high probability of being a false alarm. A median filter with a window of 5x5 pixels is convoluted with the output of our flood detection algorithm and allows to reduce a certain number of false alarms.

3. EXPERIMENTS

3.1. Data & preprocessing

To test the proposed methodology, we considered two challenging SAR datasets. Both are composed of two ENVISAT-ASAR images and a DEM from ASTER:

- *Kinkony*: Two SAR images acquired respectively on October 19th, 2011 during dry season and on February 16th, 2012 just after a cyclone strike in the north of Madagascar. See top row of Fig. 3.
- *Tewkesbury*: Two SAR images acquired on May 30th and on July 23rd 2007, respectively before and after an important flood event in Gloucestershire, U.K. See bottom row of Fig. 3.

The images and the DEM are co-registered using georeferenced tie points. A 3x3 Enhanced Lee filter is used to reduce the speckle noise in the SAR images [13]. The number of pixels after sub-sampling (importance or random sampling) is set to $N = 1000$. The test set consist in 8351 and 7116 pixels respectively. The DoG standard deviations are set experimentally to 8 and 6. The gradient of the altitude Z is smoothed by a Gaussian $\mathcal{N}(0, 6)$. The kernels are radial basis function (RBF) with a bandwidth parameter set to the sum of the standard deviation of the different variables. For stability reasons, bandwidths of the dedicated kernels in a composition are set equal to each other.

Results for both experiments are reported in terms of Cohen's κ statistic in Table 1, along with the standard log-ratio threshold set to maximize κ accuracy using 1000 labeled pixels (500 flooded and 500 non-flooded). Note that this approach is thus eased by the presence of labeled pixels, while our proposed method is completely unsupervised.

3.2. Results and discussion

The IS at STEP 1 is affecting drastically the results of both datasets, with the exception of the case considering the log-ratio in the feature space in STEP 3: in that case better results are obtained with random sampling. The ratio in the feature space gives the best κ accuracy with importance sampling. In *Tewkesbury*, IS strongly affects the results and leads to better

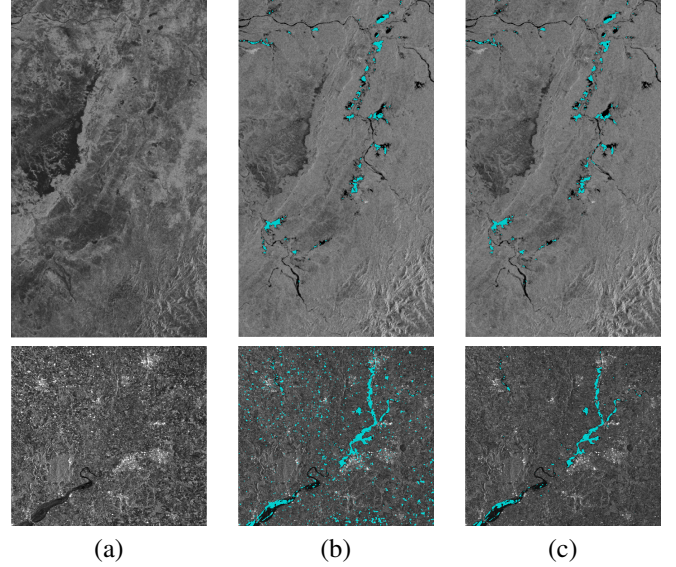


Fig. 3. SAR images of the experiments (a) before floods and after floods with overlaid flood detection from (b) supervised log-ratio thresholding (post-processed) and (c) ratio in Feature Space for *Kinkony* (top row) and log-ratio in Input space for *Tewkesbury* (bottom row), all post-processed.

results for the ratio and log-ratio in input space only. The variability and low results for the in ‘Feature space’ experiments are due to a series of non-water pixels clustered as water in STEP 2. This results in biased separation of flooded and permanent water clusters at STEP 3. These remaining pixels of non-water can induce a radically different separation for the more complex feature mappings (ratio and log-ratio in feature space), sometimes pushing the boundary almost orthogonally to the ideal separation depicted in Fig. 1. Our unsupervised approach compared to the supervised log-ratio thresholding reaches equivalent or better results for both datasets. Moreover, the flood detection maps are neater with less false alarms (see the two right columns of Fig. 3).

4. CONCLUSION

We proposed a three-steps strategy for unsupervised flood detection. First, the distribution of water pixels is enhanced by importance sampling based on a prior on topography and then water areas are detected with nonlinear clustering. Finally, the flooded pixels are distinguished from permanent waters using non-linear clustering on the ratio or log-ratio images in dedicated feature spaces through appropriate composite kernels. The experiments shows the benefit of importance sampling prior to clustering and similar accuracies than supervised log-ratio thresholding. Further perspectives are on the robustness of the two first steps for the complex feature spaces in any situation, the use of other clustering algorithms [14] and the extension to very-high resolution SAR images using contex-

Dataset Ratios in Ratio type		<i>Kinkony</i>				<i>Tewkesbury</i>			
		Input space		Feature space		Input space		Feature space	
		ratio	log-ratio	ratio	log-ratio	ratio	log-ratio	ratio	log-ratio
RS	Raw	0.48 (0.26)	0.32 (0.38)	0.26 (0.40)	0.86 (0.08)	0.48 (0.01)	0.48 (0.02)	0.34 (0.16)	0.41 (0.05)
	PP	0.48 (0.25)	0.32 (0.38)	0.25 (0.40)	0.93 (0.06)	0.53 (0.01)	0.53 (0.02)	0.36 (0.19)	0.51 (0.07)
IS	Raw	0.96 (0.01)	0.93 (0.02)	0.98 (0.01)	0.39 (0.41)	0.64 (0.00)	0.67 (0.00)	0.45 (0.03)	0.32 (0.03)
	PP	0.97 (0.01)	0.95 (0.02)	0.99 (0.01)	0.38 (0.42)	0.68 (0.00)	0.72 (0.00)	0.47 (0.03)	0.32 (0.03)
LR Raw		0.97 (0.01)				0.64 (0.01)			
LR PP		0.98 (0.00)				0.71 (0.00)			

Table 1. Averaged κ over 10 random runs. RS: Random Sampling, IS: Importance Sampling, LR: log-ratio thresholding (supervised), PP: post-processed (Section 2.4)

tual kernel composites.

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