
Climate Change Impacts on Hydrology and Water Resources Systems

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is significantly altering hydrological cycles and water resources systems across the world. Rising global temperature, shifting precipitation pattern, glacier retreat and extreme events are impacting surface and groundwater availability, quality and distribution. This review paper examines the major climate change drivers affecting hydrology such as temperature increase, rainfall variability, evapotranspiration shifts and cryosphere changes. It also discusses impacts on river basins, groundwater recharge, floods, droughts and water quality. Regional vulnerability in developing countries, especially semi-arid regions, is highlighted. Adaptation strategies including integrated water resources management, climate-resilient infrastructure, watershed restoration and policy frameworks are reviewed. The paper shows that climate change is not only changing magnitude of water availability but also timing and reliability, which complicates water management. Understanding hydro-climatic linkages is essential for sustainable water planning and risk reduction in future climate uncertain scenarios.

KEYWORDS: *Climate change, hydrology, water resources, precipitation variability, drought, floods, groundwater recharge, water management*

INTRODUCTION

Water is one of the most climate-sensitive natural resources. Hydrological cycle depends strongly on temperature, precipitation and atmospheric circulation patterns. Climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions is altering these drivers and creating long-term shifts in water availability and extremes. Many regions already experiencing changes in rainfall intensity, snowmelt timing, evapotranspiration and river flows. These changes affect agriculture, drinking water supply, ecosystems and hydropower production.

Hydrology and water resource systems are connected with climate through multiple feedback processes. For example, increased temperature accelerates evaporation and soil moisture depletion, which can intensify drought conditions. On other side, warmer atmosphere holds more moisture leading to intense rainfall events and floods. Therefore climate change produces both water scarcity and water excess risks depending on region and season.

Developing countries are particularly vulnerable because of population growth, dependence on monsoon rainfall and limited infrastructure. In India, for instance, variability of monsoon already causes floods in some states and drought in others within same year. Climate change may amplify such variability and challenge water planning.

This paper reviews climate change impacts on hydrology and water resources systems with focus on physical processes, observed trends and management implications.

CLIMATE CHANGE DRIVERS AFFECTING HYDROLOGICAL PROCESSES

Hydrological cycle is strongly controlled by climatic variables such as temperature, precipitation, radiation and atmospheric circulation. Climate change modifies these variables and therefore alters water movement through evaporation, condensation, infiltration, runoff and storage processes. The major climate-driven mechanisms influencing hydrology are explained below in detail.

Temperature Rise

Global mean surface temperature has increased approximately 1.1 °C since pre-industrial era, and projections indicate further warming between 1.5 °C to 4 °C by end of century depending on emission scenario. Temperature rise affects almost all components of hydrological cycle

both directly and indirectly.

Increase in evaporation from water bodies and soil

Evaporation rate is proportional to temperature and vapor pressure deficit. Warmer air can hold more moisture, therefore evaporation from rivers, lakes, reservoirs and soil surface increases. In arid and semi-arid regions this leads to substantial water loss from open storage. Reservoirs may experience higher evaporation losses especially during summer months. Soil moisture depletion becomes faster, reducing water availability for plants and groundwater recharge.

Increase in plant transpiration

Vegetation responds to temperature through stomatal regulation and metabolic activity. Higher temperature increases transpiration demand of crops and natural vegetation. Even if rainfall remains constant, evapotranspiration demand rises, resulting in net soil moisture deficit. Agricultural water demand therefore increases under warming climate. Forest ecosystems may also experience moisture stress and change in species composition, further altering catchment hydrology.

Reduction of snowpack and accelerated snowmelt

In cold and mountainous regions, precipitation often stored as snow during winter. Rising temperature reduces fraction of precipitation falling as snow and accelerates melting period. Snow season becomes shorter and snowline shifts upward. Earlier snowmelt causes river peak flows to occur earlier in spring rather than summer.

This reduces water availability during dry growing season when irrigation demand is highest. Long-term reduction in snowpack also decreases natural seasonal storage capacity of basins.

Change in atmospheric moisture capacity

According to Clausius–Clapeyron relation, atmosphere can hold about 7 % more water vapor per 1 °C temperature rise. Increased moisture capacity enhances evaporation and also potential precipitation intensity. Therefore warming contributes to both drought (through higher evapotranspiration) and heavy rainfall (through moisture availability). This dual effect increases hydrological variability and extremes.

Implications for soil moisture, groundwater and river flow

Higher evapotranspiration reduces effective precipitation (rainfall minus evapotranspiration). Even without rainfall decline, soil moisture decreases and percolation to aquifer reduces. Groundwater recharge therefore declines in many basins. Baseflow contribution to rivers during dry season decreases, causing low flows to become lower and longer. Hence many rivers show reduced summer discharge even where annual rainfall not changed significantly. This phenomenon already observed in Mediterranean, western US and parts of India.

Precipitation Variability

Precipitation is the most important input to hydrological cycle. Climate change is not only altering total rainfall amount but also its temporal and spatial distribution. Variability is increasing at multiple scales — daily, seasonal and interannual.

Change in rainfall amount and spatial distribution

Some regions such as high latitudes and humid tropics show increasing precipitation trends, while subtropical and semi-arid regions show decline. This uneven distribution intensifies water surplus in wet regions and scarcity in dry regions. Basin-to-basin differences in runoff and water availability therefore become more pronounced.

Short-duration intense storms

Warming atmosphere supports convective storms producing high rainfall intensity over short duration. Such storms exceed soil infiltration capacity and generate rapid surface runoff.

Instead of slowly infiltrating into ground, water quickly flows to rivers causing flash floods. Groundwater recharge efficiency decreases even when rainfall amount same. Urban areas particularly vulnerable because impervious surfaces further enhance runoff.

Longer dry spells

Between rainfall events, dry periods becoming longer in many climates. Soil moisture is depleted during extended dry intervals due to evaporation and plant uptake. Crops face water stress and irrigation demand rises.

Hydrologically, prolonged dry spells reduce baseflow and streamflow persistence. Catchments shift toward more episodic flow regimes rather than continuous flow.

Seasonal shift in rainfall timing

Climate change is modifying onset, withdrawal and seasonal distribution of rainfall such as monsoon systems. Delayed onset or early cessation shortens effective rainy season. Even if seasonal rainfall total remains similar, mismatch with crop growth and reservoir filling period creates water shortage. Snow-dominated basins also experience shift from snow to rain, altering seasonal runoff timing.

Hydrological consequences of precipitation variability

Traditional water storage and irrigation systems are designed for relatively stable rainfall regimes. Increased variability causes mismatch between water supply and demand. Heavy rainfall events increase flood risk and sediment transport, while longer dry periods intensify drought. Recharge processes become less efficient because infiltration requires moderate sustained rainfall rather than intense bursts. Thus overall water availability becomes more uncertain.

Cryosphere Changes

Cryosphere includes glaciers, snow cover, ice caps and permafrost, which play critical role in global hydrology by storing freshwater and releasing it gradually. Climate warming is causing rapid changes in cryospheric systems.

Glacier retreat and mass loss

Most mountain glaciers worldwide are shrinking due to negative mass balance (melting exceeds accumulation). Glacier area and volume reduction decreases long-term water storage. Initially, enhanced meltwater may increase river discharge, known as “peak water” phase. After substantial glacier loss, meltwater contribution declines permanently, reducing river flow especially during dry season.

Earlier snowmelt and reduced snow accumulation

Higher temperature causes more winter precipitation to fall as rain rather than snow. Snow accumulation period shortens and melt begins earlier in spring. Snowpack depth decreases and duration reduces. This alters seasonal hydrograph by shifting runoff earlier. Many snow-fed rivers now experience peak flow weeks earlier compared to historical period.

Permafrost thawing

In cold regions, permafrost acts as impermeable layer controlling infiltration and runoff pathways. Thawing permafrost increases soil permeability and changes drainage patterns. Some areas experience increased groundwater flow and wetland formation, while others experience drying due to enhanced drainage. Infrastructure and hydrological stability in Arctic regions are affected.

Long-term impacts on mountain water resources

Major river systems originating from mountains such as Himalaya, Andes and Alps depend on glacier and snow melt for sustained summer flow. As glaciers shrink, dry-season water supply to downstream agriculture and cities may decline. Hydropower generation also affected. Hence cryosphere loss represents delayed but irreversible hydrological change.

Atmospheric Circulation Changes

Large-scale atmospheric circulation determines regional climate patterns including precipitation belts, monsoon systems and storm tracks. Climate change is modifying these circulation systems through temperature gradients and ocean–atmosphere interactions.

Monsoon circulation changes

Monsoon systems depend on land–sea temperature contrast and atmospheric pressure gradients. Global warming alters these gradients and moisture transport pathways. Observations indicate increasing variability in monsoon onset, duration and spatial distribution. Weak or delayed monsoon reduces seasonal rainfall affecting agriculture and reservoir inflow. Conversely, intensified monsoon bursts may cause flooding.

Shift in storm tracks and jet streams

Mid-latitude storm tracks are shifting poleward due to warming. Regions previously receiving frequent frontal rainfall may experience decline, while higher latitudes receive more storms. Jet stream waviness changes can produce persistent weather patterns such as prolonged rainfall or drought conditions. These circulation anomalies strongly influence river basin hydrology.

Changes in tropical circulation and ENSO patterns

Climate change may influence frequency and intensity of large-scale oscillations like El Niño–

Southern Oscillation (ENSO). These phenomena control rainfall variability in many parts of world including South Asia, Africa and Americas. Altered ENSO behavior leads to irregular drought–flood cycles affecting water resources planning.

Hydrological implications of circulation shifts

Because precipitation distribution depends on atmospheric circulation, even small circulation change can produce large regional hydrological impacts. River basins relying on seasonal winds or storm systems may experience altered water availability. Agriculture, reservoirs and groundwater recharge patterns become less predictable. Thus atmospheric circulation change acts as large-scale driver linking global climate warming with regional hydrology.

Summary of Section 2

Temperature rise, precipitation variability, cryosphere loss and atmospheric circulation changes together reshape hydrological cycle. These drivers interact and amplify each other — for example warming increases evaporation while circulation change modifies rainfall supply. Result is greater variability in water availability across seasons and regions. Understanding these drivers is essential for predicting future water resources and designing climate-resilient hydrological systems.

IMPACTS ON SURFACE WATER SYSTEMS

Surface water systems such as rivers, lakes, reservoirs and wetlands are directly controlled by climate variables. Changes in precipitation, temperature and snow dynamics alter runoff generation, storage and flow patterns. Climate change therefore modifies both quantity and timing of surface water availability. In many regions the changes are already observable through altered river regimes, declining lake levels and increasing flood extremes.

River Flow Regimes

River discharge represents integrated response of basin precipitation, evapotranspiration, snowmelt and groundwater contribution. Climate change affects river flow characteristics at multiple temporal scales including annual totals, seasonal distribution and extreme events.

Annual runoff volume

Long-term runoff depends mainly on basin precipitation minus evapotranspiration. In regions

where rainfall is declining or evapotranspiration increasing due to warming, annual runoff is reducing. Semi-arid and Mediterranean climates show noticeable decreases in river flow over recent decades.

Even in regions with stable rainfall, higher temperature increases evaporation losses from soil and vegetation, lowering net runoff. Some high-latitude regions, however, may experience increased runoff due to rising precipitation.

Seasonal flow timing

One of most clear climate signals in rivers is shift in seasonal hydrograph. Snow-dominated basins show earlier spring peak because snow melts sooner under warmer temperature. Rain-fed monsoon rivers may show delayed or erratic peak depending on rainfall onset variability.

Earlier snowmelt reduces water availability during late summer when agricultural and ecological demand is highest. Seasonal mismatch between supply and demand is becoming major water management challenge in mountain-fed basins.

Peak flood magnitude

Extreme rainfall events increase short-term runoff and flood peaks. Warmer atmosphere holds more moisture and produces intense precipitation bursts. When soils are saturated or impermeable, most rainfall becomes direct runoff, raising river stage rapidly. Catchments with steep slopes or degraded vegetation respond more strongly. Thus climate change tends to increase magnitude of flood peaks in many regions, though local response depends on land use and basin characteristics.

Low flow duration and severity

Dry season flows depend heavily on groundwater baseflow and stored water release. Reduced recharge and higher evapotranspiration decrease groundwater contribution to rivers. Consequently low flow periods become longer and more severe.

Ecological flows for aquatic habitats decline and water supply reliability reduces. Many rivers now exhibit extended low-flow conditions during summer or drought years even without major rainfall reduction.

Increasing interannual variability

Climate variability causes alternating wet and dry years with larger amplitude. Rivers experience higher highs during wet years and lower lows during dry years. Such variability complicates reservoir operation, irrigation planning and flood management. Hydrological stationarity assumption (that past flow statistics represent future) becomes less valid.

Overall, river regimes are becoming more variable, with earlier peaks, stronger floods and prolonged low flows. This change directly impacts water allocation, navigation, ecosystem health and hydropower generation.

Lakes and Reservoirs

Lakes and reservoirs act as surface water storage regulating seasonal availability. Their levels depend on balance between inflow (rainfall, runoff, river inflow) and losses (evaporation, seepage, withdrawals). Climate change influences both sides of this balance.

Lake level sensitivity to climate

Natural lakes in arid and semi-arid regions are highly sensitive to evaporation changes. Rising temperature increases evaporation rate from lake surface. If rainfall or inflow does not increase proportionally, lake level declines. Many closed-basin lakes worldwide have shown shrinkage trends under warming climate. Wetlands associated with lakes also contract, reducing biodiversity habitat and groundwater recharge zones.

Hydrological drought effects on lakes

Reduced precipitation and inflow during drought years lowers lake storage. Because evaporation continues, water level drop can be rapid. Recovery may take long time if subsequent rainfall insufficient. Such fluctuations affect fisheries, water supply and local climate regulation functions of lakes.

Reservoir inflow variability

Reservoirs are designed based on historical flow patterns. Climate-induced changes in river regimes alter inflow timing and magnitude. Earlier snowmelt or shifted monsoon causes reservoir filling to occur earlier or more irregularly. Managers may face difficulty in deciding storage versus release schedules. Insufficient storage during dry years or unexpected spill during floods may occur.

Evaporation losses from reservoirs

Artificial reservoirs often have large surface area relative to depth, making them vulnerable to evaporation loss. Under higher temperature and wind changes, evaporation from reservoirs increases significantly. In hot regions this can represent major fraction of stored water loss. Thus effective storage capacity declines without structural change.

Sedimentation and water quality interactions

Climate-driven extreme rainfall increases erosion and sediment transport into reservoirs. Sedimentation reduces storage volume over time. Higher temperature also promotes algal growth and eutrophication in stagnant reservoir water, affecting water quality. Hence climate change impacts reservoirs both quantitatively and qualitatively. Overall, lakes and reservoirs face declining levels, higher variability and management uncertainty under changing climate conditions.

Flood Frequency and Intensity

Floods are among most visible hydrological impacts of climate change. Altered precipitation intensity, land use change and population growth together increase flood risk and damages.

Atmospheric moisture and heavy rainfall

Warmer atmosphere can hold more water vapor, leading to intense precipitation events. Convective storms release large rainfall in short duration exceeding drainage capacity of basins. Such events generate high runoff coefficients and sudden river rise. Observational records in many regions indicate increasing frequency of heavy rainfall days even where total rainfall unchanged.

Urbanization interaction with climate

Urban areas have impervious surfaces such as roads and buildings which prevent infiltration. During intense rainfall, water quickly accumulates on surface and flows into drainage channels. When combined with climate-driven extreme rainfall, this leads to flash flooding. Many cities now experience more frequent urban floods because infrastructure designed for lower rainfall intensity in past climate.

Riverine flood enhancement

Changes in rainfall pattern and snowmelt contribute to river floods. Simultaneous rainfall and

snowmelt events under warmer conditions can produce compound flooding in mountain regions. Land degradation and deforestation also reduce infiltration and storage, amplifying runoff response. Thus climate and land use together increase flood magnitude.

Floodplain exposure and damage increase

Population and economic activities in floodplains are growing rapidly. Even if physical flood magnitude increases modestly, exposure of people and assets increases strongly. Therefore observed flood damages rising globally. Climate change acts as hazard amplifier while socioeconomic factors increase vulnerability.

Changing flood frequency

Statistical frequency of floods (return period) may shift due to climate change. Events previously considered 100-year floods may occur more often. Design standards for levees, dams and drainage systems based on historical records may underestimate future risk. Non-stationary flood frequency analysis is becoming necessary.

Overall, flood hazard under climate change is influenced by both atmospheric processes and human development patterns. Increased intensity rainfall and exposure make flood risk management more challenging.

Table 1: Observed Hydrological Changes under Climate Change

Hydrological Component	Observed Trend	Main Climate Driver
River peak flow timing	Earlier in snow regions	Rising temperature
Flood intensity	Increasing in many regions	Extreme rainfall
Lake levels	Declining in arid zones	Evaporation increase
Seasonal runoff	More variable	Rainfall variability
Wetland extent	Shrinking	Drought & heat

IMPACTS ON GROUNDWATER SYSTEMS

Groundwater provides nearly half of global drinking water and irrigation supply. Climate change influences groundwater through recharge, abstraction and quality pathways.

Recharge Variability

Recharge depends on rainfall infiltration and soil moisture. Intense rainfall events often produce runoff instead of infiltration, reducing recharge efficiency. Extended drought periods also reduce recharge opportunities. Many aquifers in semi-arid regions may experience long-term decline.

Groundwater Levels

Changing recharge combined with increased pumping during drought leads to falling groundwater table. Coastal aquifers face additional threat of seawater intrusion due to sea level rise and reduced freshwater recharge.

Groundwater Quality

Higher temperature and low recharge concentrate contaminants such as salinity, nitrate and arsenic. Flood events can also transport pollutants into aquifers. Thus climate change affects both quantity and quality of groundwater.

DROUGHT DYNAMICS UNDER CLIMATE CHANGE

Drought is one of the most important hydrological hazards intensified by climate change. It can be meteorological, agricultural or hydrological depending on affected component.

Meteorological Drought

Reduced rainfall and increased temperature raise atmospheric demand for moisture. Even slight rainfall deficit may produce severe drought because evaporation losses high.

Soil Moisture Drought

Soil moisture declines faster under warming conditions. Crops experience stress earlier and irrigation demand increases.

Hydrological Drought

Reduced river flows, reservoir storage and groundwater levels characterize hydrological drought. Climate change lengthens drought duration and reduces recovery time between drought events.

Semi-arid regions such as central India, Africa and Australia are projected to face higher drought frequency. Water management systems designed on past climate records may not be adequate for future conditions.

FLOOD RISKS IN A WARMING CLIMATE

While drought increasing in some regions, floods also intensifying globally. Hydrological extremes become more frequent due to changing rainfall patterns.

Extreme Rainfall Events

Climate models and observations show increase in short-duration high-intensity rainfall. Urban drainage systems often cannot cope with such events leading to flash floods.

Riverine Flooding

Increased storm runoff and glacier melt contribute to river floods. Changing land use such as deforestation worsens flood response by reducing infiltration and storage.

Coastal Flooding

Sea level rise combined with storm surge increases flooding in coastal areas and deltas. Salinity intrusion into freshwater systems also occurs.

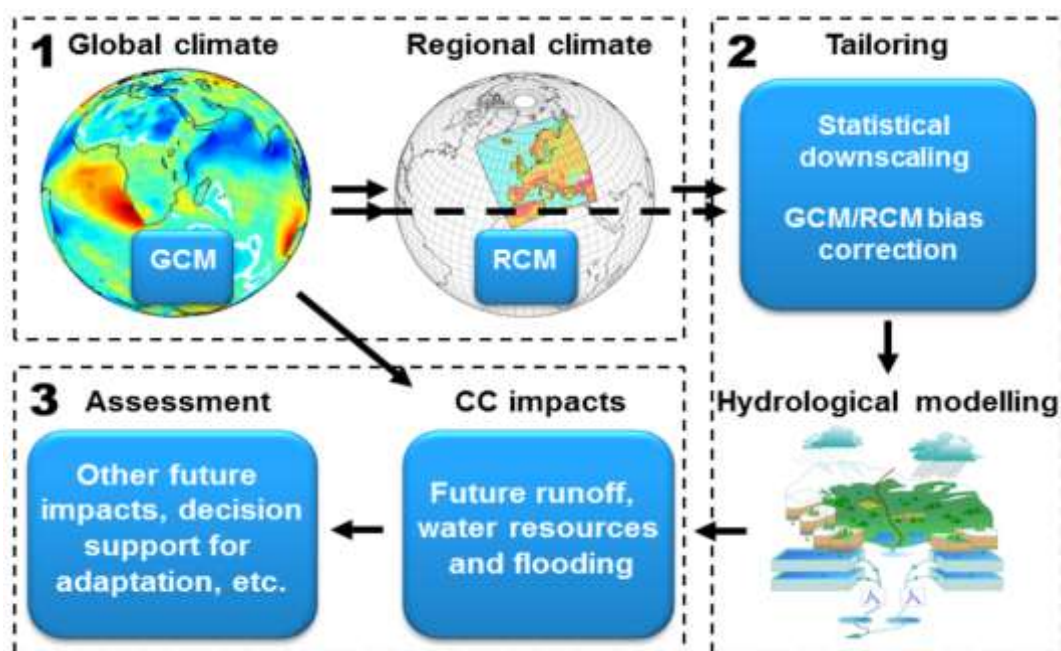


Figure 1: Climate Change Influence on Hydrological Extremes

Water Quality Impacts

Climate change not only affects water quantity but also quality. Temperature, runoff and hydrological pathways influence pollutant transport and chemical reactions.

Temperature Effects

Warmer water reduces dissolved oxygen and increases biological activity. Algal blooms and eutrophication become more common in lakes and reservoirs.

Pollutant Runoff

Heavy rainfall events wash nutrients, sediments and contaminants from land into rivers and lakes. Agricultural chemicals and urban pollutants increase during storm runoff.

Salinity and Concentration

Reduced river flow and groundwater recharge concentrate salts and dissolved substances. Salinity problems in irrigation water may worsen in arid regions.

REGIONAL VULNERABILITY AND CASE OBSERVATIONS

South Asia

Monsoon variability is major climate driver. Increased intensity rainfall causing floods in Himalayan foothills while drought occurs in Deccan plateau. Glacier retreat threatens long-term flows of snow-fed rivers.

Africa

Many basins already water stressed. Climate change projected to reduce rainfall in southern Africa and increase variability in Sahel. Groundwater recharge uncertain and highly sensitive to rainfall pattern changes.

Europe

Northern Europe experiencing increased rainfall and floods, while Mediterranean region facing drought and declining river flows. Snowmelt timing shift affecting alpine hydropower systems.

Americas

Western North America shows declining snowpack and earlier spring runoff. Amazon basin experiencing both severe drought and floods in recent decades.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Traditional water management based on stationary climate assumption is no longer reliable. Climate change introduces uncertainty in hydrological design parameters.

Reservoir Operation

Changing inflow timing and variability require flexible reservoir rules. Multi-year storage and flood control capacity may need adjustment.

Irrigation Planning

Crop water demand increasing under higher temperature. Irrigation scheduling must consider changing rainfall pattern and drought probability.

Urban Water Supply

Cities depend on stable water sources. Climate variability can disrupt supply reliability. Diversified sources such as rainwater harvesting and wastewater reuse becoming important.

Hydropower Generation

Hydropower depends on river flow seasonality. Changes in snowmelt and runoff timing affect energy production reliability.

ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

Integrated Water Resources Management

Coordinated management of surface water, groundwater and land use improves resilience. Basin-scale planning helps balance competing demands under climate uncertainty.

Watershed Restoration

Reforestation, soil conservation and wetland restoration enhance infiltration and reduce flood runoff. Natural ecosystems act as climate buffers.

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

Design of dams, drainage systems and flood protection structures must consider future climate scenarios rather than past statistics.

Water Conservation and Efficiency

Demand management through efficient irrigation, leakage reduction and water-saving technologies reduces stress on water systems.

Policy and Governance

Water allocation policies should be flexible and adaptive. Climate information services and early warning systems help manage extremes.

Table 2: Adaptation Measures for Climate-Resilient Water Systems

Sector	Climate Impact	Adaptation Measure
Agriculture	Drought & rainfall shift	Efficient irrigation, crop change
Urban water	Supply variability	Rainwater harvesting, reuse
River basins	Flood & drought	Reservoir optimization
Groundwater	Recharge decline	Managed aquifer recharge
Ecosystems	Wetland loss	Restoration programs

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

Despite progress, uncertainties remain in predicting climate change impacts on hydrology. Key research areas include:

- Regional climate-hydrology modeling integration
- Extreme event prediction improvement
- Groundwater-climate interaction studies
- Socio-hydrology and human adaptation feedbacks
- Data scarcity reduction in developing regions

Better understanding of coupled human-water-climate systems is necessary for sustainable planning.

CONCLUSION

Climate change is fundamentally transforming hydrological processes and water resource systems worldwide. Rising temperature, precipitation variability and cryosphere loss are

altering river flows, groundwater recharge, water quality and extreme events. Both droughts and floods are becoming more frequent and severe in many regions, creating complex water management challenges. Developing countries with monsoon-dependent and semi-arid climates are especially vulnerable.

Water availability is not only changing in amount but also in timing and reliability, which affects agriculture, ecosystems and human settlements. Traditional water infrastructure and planning based on historical climate conditions may become inadequate under future scenarios. Adaptive and integrated approaches are necessary, including watershed restoration, climate-resilient infrastructure, efficient water use and flexible governance.

Understanding hydro-climatic interactions and improving predictive capability will be essential to ensure sustainable and equitable water resources in a warming world. Climate change impacts on hydrology represent one of the most critical environmental challenges of this century, requiring coordinated scientific, technical and policy responses.

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