MANTECH Publications
Journal of Remote Sensing, Environmental Science & Geotechnical Engineering
Volume 11, Issue 1, January-April 2026
ISSN: 3107-7366 (Online)

Remote Sensing of Groundwater Sustainability

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DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19733468*

ABSTRACT

Groundwater is one of the most important natural resources but its sustainability is increasingly under threat. Traditional methods used to monitor groundwater (like well measurements) are often limited in spatial coverage and costly. Recently, remote sensing technology has emerged as a powerful tool to assess groundwater sustainability over large regions. This review investigates how remote sensing is used to monitor groundwater resources, its strengths and weaknesses, and future directions. The paper provides a broad summary of major remote sensing techniques, such as satellite gravimetry, land surface temperature, vegetation indices, and microwave sensing, and discusses their application in groundwater assessment. It also highlights the integration of remote sensing with hydrological models and ground data. Despite challenges like coarse resolution and data interpretation, remote sensing provides valuable insights into groundwater variations across space and time. The review concludes with suggestions to improve the use of remote sensing for sustainable groundwater management.

KEYWORDS: *Remote sensing, groundwater sustainability, satellite gravimetry, groundwater depletion, hydrological modelling, groundwater monitoring*

INTRODUCTION

Groundwater represents the invisible part of the water cycle, serving as a key source for irrigation, drinking water, and industrial processes. The expansion of agriculture and

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population growth has led to increased groundwater extraction, especially in semi-arid and arid regions. Sustaining this resource is critical to avoid aquifer depletion, land subsidence, water quality deterioration, and ecological imbalance.

Traditional groundwater assessment methods involve well drilling, measurement of water levels, and pumping tests. These methods are often expensive, time-consuming and represent only point-based information. With advances in satellite technology, remote sensing emerged as a way to acquire data that covers large areas consistently over time. Remote sensing allows monitoring of land use changes, groundwater storage, surface water bodies, soil moisture, and vegetation health, all of which indirectly or directly relate to groundwater sustainability.

This paper reviews the concepts, applications, and challenges of remote sensing in groundwater sustainability, supporting the idea that satellite-based observations provide an essential complement to ground data for sustainable groundwater management.

CONCEPT OF GROUNDWATER SUSTAINABILITY

Groundwater sustainability refers to the capacity of an aquifer or groundwater system to supply water over the long term without causing unacceptable social, economic, or environmental consequences. Sustainable groundwater management aims not only to balance the volume of water extracted with natural replenishment but also to maintain water quality and ecosystem health.

Sustainability depends on multiple interacting factors:

Groundwater Quantity

- **Recharge Rates**: Recharge is the process by which water infiltrates from the surface into aquifers, replenishing the groundwater. It is influenced by rainfall, soil type, vegetation cover, land use, and the permeability of geological formations. Recharge rates can be highly variable across regions and seasons.
- **Extraction Volumes**: Groundwater is extracted for drinking, irrigation, and industrial uses. Excessive pumping beyond recharge rates can lead to declining water tables, reduced well yields, and eventual aquifer depletion.
- **Seasonal and Climatic Variations**: Seasonal rainfall patterns, droughts, and climate change can cause significant fluctuations in groundwater levels. For example, prolonged

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dry periods reduce recharge while increasing dependency on groundwater for irrigation, intensifying stress on aquifers.

Groundwater Quality

Sustainable groundwater use also requires maintaining water quality suitable for its intended uses. Over-extraction can lead to the intrusion of saline water in coastal aquifers, concentration of pollutants, or mobilization of naturally occurring contaminants such as arsenic or fluoride. Sustainable management involves monitoring both quantity and quality to ensure long-term usability.

Key Indicators of Groundwater Sustainability

Monitoring groundwater sustainability relies on several measurable indicators:

- **Water Table Fluctuations**: Changes in the depth of the water table over time indicate whether the aquifer is being replenished adequately or is declining due to over-extraction.
- **Groundwater Storage Change**: The total volume of groundwater stored in an aquifer, which can vary seasonally or due to human activities, is a direct indicator of the system's health.
- **Recharge and Discharge Balance**: Sustainability requires that the net recharge (incoming water) approximately equals the net discharge (extraction plus natural outflow to rivers, springs, or the sea). Persistent imbalance leads to depletion.
- **Land Subsidence**: Over-pumping groundwater can reduce pore pressure in aquifers, causing compaction of soil and sediments. This results in land subsidence, which is often irreversible and indicates unsustainable groundwater use.

Limitations of Traditional Monitoring

Traditional groundwater assessment methods rely on:

- **Drilled Wells**: Periodic measurement of water levels in wells provides direct data on water table fluctuations.
- **In situ Instrumentation**: Devices such as piezometers and data loggers record water level changes and aquifer pressure.

While accurate at point locations, these methods have limitations:

- **Spatial Gaps**: Wells only represent localized conditions, leaving large areas unmonitored.

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- **High Costs**: Drilling and maintaining wells, especially in remote areas, require significant financial and labor resources.
- **Limited Temporal Resolution**: Manual measurement schedules may miss rapid or seasonal changes in groundwater levels.

Role of Remote Sensing in Supporting Sustainability Assessment

Remote sensing fills these gaps by providing:

- **Large-scale coverage**: Satellites can monitor groundwater-relevant parameters across regions, countries, or continents, overcoming the spatial limitations of wells.
- **Temporal consistency**: Repetitive observations allow tracking seasonal and long-term trends in groundwater availability.
- **Indirect indicators**: While satellites cannot directly "see" groundwater in most cases, they provide valuable data on terrestrial water storage, soil moisture, vegetation stress, land subsidence, and precipitation patterns, all of which influence or indicate groundwater status.
- **Integration with models**: Remote sensing data can be combined with hydrological and groundwater models to estimate recharge, storage changes, and predict future trends under different extraction or climate scenarios.

By complementing traditional methods, remote sensing enables a more **comprehensive assessment of groundwater sustainability**, which is essential for planning, regulation, and resource management in a rapidly changing climate and expanding population.

Here's a **detailed elaboration** of your section **"Remote Sensing Techniques for Groundwater Monitoring"**, expanding explanations, mechanisms, and applications to make it more comprehensive for your paper:

REMOTE SENSING TECHNIQUES FOR GROUNDWATER MONITORING

Remote sensing is the science of obtaining information about an object, surface, or phenomenon without being in direct contact. In the context of groundwater monitoring, remote sensing allows scientists to observe large regions consistently and repeatedly, providing critical insights into the spatial and temporal dynamics of groundwater systems. By analyzing satellite or airborne sensor data, researchers can infer groundwater availability, depletion trends,

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recharge processes, and impacts of human activities.

The following sections describe the major remote sensing techniques applied to groundwater sustainability:

Satellite Gravimetry (GRACE and GRACE-FO)

The **Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE)** and its follow-on mission **GRACE-FO** detect small variations in Earth's gravity field caused by changes in mass distribution on the surface, including water movement. These measurements can be used to estimate **Terrestrial Water Storage (TWS)**, which represents the combined water in rivers, lakes, soil, snow, and aquifers. By subtracting contributions from surface water, soil moisture, and snow, changes in **groundwater storage** can be inferred.

Applications:

- Monitoring regional groundwater depletion in heavily irrigated areas (e.g., northern India, California Central Valley)
- Quantifying seasonal and long-term trends in groundwater storage
- Supporting global assessments of water security

Strengths:

- Provides regional to global coverage
- Can capture long-term trends and seasonal variability

Limitations:

- Coarse spatial resolution (~300 km), making local-scale assessment difficult
- Requires additional ground or model data to isolate groundwater from total water storage
- Sensitive to errors from signal separation and hydrological modeling

Mechanism Overview:

GRACE satellites detect tiny changes in gravitational pull caused by variations in water mass. For example, a heavily pumped aquifer reduces mass in a region, slightly decreasing gravitational pull, which GRACE can detect over time.

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Land Surface Temperature (LST) and Vegetation Indices

Land Surface Temperature (LST), measured by thermal infrared sensors, reflects the surface energy balance. High LST may indicate increased evapotranspiration due to soil moisture depletion or groundwater scarcity. Conversely, cooler LST can suggest sufficient moisture availability.

Vegetation indices, such as the **Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI)** or **Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI)**, are derived from multispectral optical sensors and measure vegetation health. Vegetation stress often correlates with inadequate soil moisture or shallow groundwater availability, making it an indirect indicator of groundwater conditions.

Applications:

- Detecting irrigation dependency on groundwater
- Identifying regions with stressed vegetation due to declining water tables
- Monitoring seasonal variations in water availability

Strengths:

- High spatial resolution (10–30 m for satellites like Sentinel-2 or Landsat-8)
- Frequent observations allow seasonal trend analysis

Limitations:

- Indirect measure of groundwater; confounded by soil type, land use, and weather
- Cloud cover and atmospheric conditions can affect data quality

Soil Moisture Active Passive (SMAP)

The **SMAP mission** uses microwave radiometry to measure **surface soil moisture** up to a depth of a few centimeters. While not a direct measure of groundwater, soil moisture plays a key role in **recharge processes**, controlling how much rainfall infiltrates the soil to reach aquifers.

Applications:

- Estimating potential groundwater recharge zones
- Monitoring drought conditions that influence groundwater stress

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- Supporting hydrological models that simulate water balance

Strengths:

- Provides frequent global coverage
- Microwave signals can penetrate clouds, enabling all-weather observation

Limitations:

- Only measures the topsoil layer; deeper groundwater must be inferred indirectly
- Coarse resolution (~40 km) limits detailed local assessment

Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR)

Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) uses microwaves to measure surface characteristics and **ground deformation**. When groundwater is over-extracted, the aquifer's pore pressure drops, causing soil and sediment compaction. **Interferometric SAR (InSAR)** can detect millimeter-scale ground movements, revealing **land subsidence** patterns linked to groundwater depletion.

Applications:

- Identifying areas at risk of subsidence due to over-pumping
- Estimating groundwater loss in aquifer systems indirectly
- Monitoring infrastructure vulnerability (e.g., roads, buildings) in subsiding regions

Strengths:

- High spatial resolution (10–100 m)
- Can detect small vertical displacements over time
- Unaffected by cloud cover or daylight

Limitations:

- Cannot measure groundwater directly; interpretation requires modeling
- Requires repeated observations and specialized processing

Optical and Multispectral Imagery

High-resolution optical satellites like **Landsat**, **Sentinel-2**, and commercial satellites provide data on:

- Land use and land cover

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- Irrigation patterns and crop types
- Surface water bodies
- Vegetation growth and stress

By analyzing **land cover changes** and **surface water dynamics**, these data help infer potential groundwater extraction zones and assess human impacts on aquifers. For example, expansion of irrigated croplands over several years may indicate increased groundwater use.

Applications:

- Mapping irrigation areas and changes over time
- Identifying potential aquifer recharge regions (natural vegetation, wetlands)
- Detecting drought-affected areas and crop stress

Strengths:

- Fine spatial resolution enables detailed analysis
- Free global datasets (e.g., Landsat, Sentinel) allow broad accessibility

Limitations:

- Clouds, haze, and atmospheric conditions can reduce image quality
- Indirect measure of groundwater; requires correlation with other datasets

Here's a **detailed elaboration** of your section **"Integration with Hydrological Models"** for the paper, expanding mechanisms, benefits, examples, and challenges:

INTEGRATION WITH HYDROLOGICAL MODELS

Monitoring groundwater sustainability effectively requires not only observation but also **predictive understanding** of how aquifers respond to natural and human-induced changes. **Hydrological models** simulate the movement, storage, and distribution of water in the hydrological cycle, including surface water, soil moisture, and groundwater. Integrating **remote sensing data** into these models enhances their accuracy and spatial coverage, enabling more reliable predictions of groundwater dynamics.

Role of Remote Sensing in Hydrological Modeling

Remote sensing provides spatially continuous datasets that are often missing in traditional

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hydrological measurements.

Key inputs from remote sensing include:

- **Precipitation**: Satellite-derived products such as **TRMM (Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission)** or **GPM (Global Precipitation Measurement)** provide rainfall data across regions with sparse rain gauge networks.
- **Evapotranspiration (ET)**: Derived from Land Surface Temperature (LST), vegetation indices (NDVI, EVI), and microwave observations, ET estimates allow models to account for water loss from soil and vegetation.
- **Soil Moisture**: Microwave sensors (e.g., SMAP, SMOS) provide top-layer soil moisture, which influences infiltration and recharge to underlying aquifers.
- **Surface Water Extent**: Optical and SAR imagery help identify rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, providing boundary conditions for hydrological models.
- **Land Use and Land Cover (LULC)**: Maps derived from multispectral imagery allow models to account for anthropogenic impacts, such as irrigation and urbanization, on recharge and groundwater extraction.

By incorporating these inputs, hydrological models can simulate spatial and temporal patterns of groundwater recharge, storage, and depletion more realistically.

Common Hydrological Models and Their Applications

Several widely used hydrological models integrate remote sensing data:

1. **MODFLOW**

- Developed by the US Geological Survey, MODFLOW is a **three-dimensional groundwater flow model**.
- Remote sensing data (precipitation, ET, LULC) are used to estimate recharge rates and boundary conditions.
- Combined with well measurements, MODFLOW simulates groundwater level fluctuations, aquifer responses to pumping, and storage changes.

2. **SWAT (Soil and Water Assessment Tool)**

- A **semi-distributed watershed model** that simulates the effect of land management on

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water resources.

- Inputs from remote sensing, such as LULC and precipitation, help estimate surface runoff, infiltration, and recharge to groundwater.
- SWAT can evaluate how changes in land use or climate affect groundwater sustainability.

3. **VIC (Variable Infiltration Capacity)**

- A **macroscale hydrological model** that integrates surface energy balance with hydrology.
- Remote sensing-derived soil moisture, precipitation, and ET are used to simulate water fluxes, soil moisture dynamics, and recharge patterns at basin or continental scales.

Benefits of Integration

Integrating remote sensing with hydrological models provides multiple advantages:

- **Enhanced Spatial Coverage**: Remote sensing fills gaps where ground measurements are sparse or unavailable.
- **Improved Temporal Resolution**: Frequent satellite observations capture seasonal and interannual variations in groundwater recharge and extraction.
- **Better Prediction of Groundwater Response**: By combining remote sensing with well measurements, models can simulate aquifer behavior under various scenarios, such as increased pumping or climate variability.
- **Identification of Vulnerable Zones**: Models help pinpoint areas at risk of depletion, land subsidence, or water quality deterioration, supporting sustainable management decisions.

Example Applications

- **Northern India**: GRACE-derived groundwater storage anomalies were integrated into MODFLOW to validate aquifer depletion rates under intensive irrigation.
- **California Central Valley**: InSAR data on land subsidence were combined with SWAT and MODFLOW models to estimate groundwater extraction rates and predict future water table declines.
- **African Semi-Arid Regions**: Satellite precipitation and soil moisture data were input into VIC to assess seasonal recharge variability and its influence on shallow groundwater resources.

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CASE STUDIES (EXAMPLES FROM LITERATURE)

Groundwater Storage Changes in Northern India

Studies using GRACE data showed significant declines in groundwater storage in agricultural regions of northern India. Seasonal variations were linked to monsoon rainfall and intensive irrigation practices. Studies used time series analysis to quantify long-term trends.

Land Subsidence in Central Valley, California

InSAR data revealed land subsidence correlated with groundwater over-draft. Regions with high pumping rates showed measurable subsidence of tens of centimeters per year.

DATA COMPARISON AND EVALUATION

The following table summarizes major remote sensing techniques, their primary variables, spatial resolution, and typical applications.

Table 1: Remote Sensing Techniques for Groundwater Sustainability

Technique	Primary Variables	Spatial Resolution	Common Applications
GRACE / GRACE-FO	Terrestrial Water Storage	~300 km	Regional groundwater storage change
SMAP	Soil moisture	~40 km	Soil moisture patterns, recharge estimation
SAR / InSAR	Surface deformation	~10–100 m	Land subsidence due to pumping
Multispectral Imagery	Vegetation, surface water	~10–30 m	Land cover, irrigation patterns
LST	Surface temperature	~100 m–1 km	Evapotranspiration and surface dryness

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Although remote sensing offers significant advantages, it has limitations:

Spatial and Temporal Resolution

Some satellite products (like GRACE) have coarse resolution, which limits use for local groundwater assessments.

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Indirect Measurements

Many remote observations are proxies (e.g., soil moisture, vegetation health) rather than direct groundwater measurements.

Data Interpretation

Separating groundwater signals from other hydrological components often requires complex modelling and auxiliary data.

Atmospheric Effects

Cloud cover and atmospheric interference can affect optical and thermal remote sensing data quality.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To improve groundwater sustainability monitoring using remote sensing, research should focus on:

Improving Resolution and Data Fusion

Combining data from different sensors and platforms (e.g., satellites + drones) can enhance spatial and temporal coverage.

Machine Learning Applications

Machine learning offers potential to better interpret remote sensing data and predict groundwater patterns.

Community-Level Monitoring Networks

Integrating local well data with satellite data improves validation and local relevance.

Policy Integration

Remote sensing results should be communicated effectively to policymakers and water managers to support sustainable extraction practices.

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FIGURE DESCRIPTION

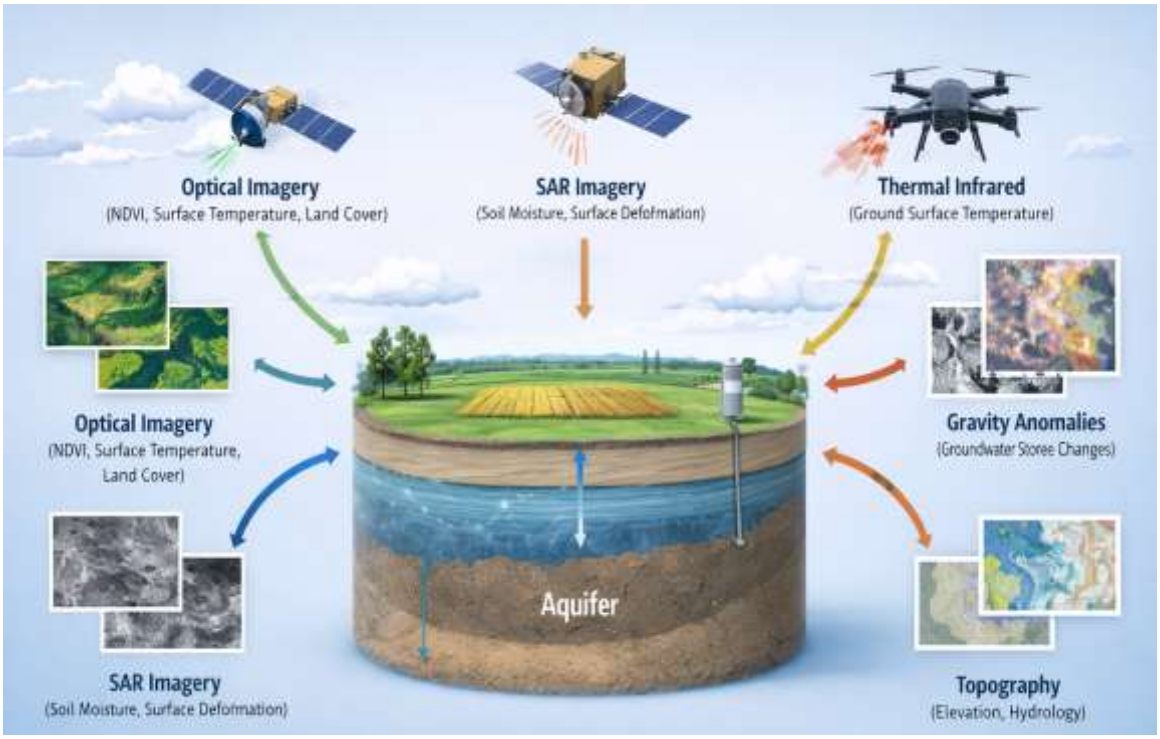


Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of Remote Sensing Inputs for Groundwater Assessment

CONCLUSION

Remote sensing has become an essential tool in assessing groundwater sustainability at regional and global scales. The variety of satellite missions now available permits analysis of terrestrial water storage, soil moisture, land surface temperature, vegetation stress, and land subsidence — all of which relate to groundwater dynamics.

When combined with hydrological models and ground data, remote sensing significantly enhances our understanding of how groundwater systems respond to natural and human stresses.

Challenges remain, especially in data interpretation and spatial resolution, but continuous technological advancements and data integration methods overcome many of these limitations. For sustainable groundwater management, decision-makers should adopt remote sensing insights alongside traditional ground-based measurements.

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Cite as:

Arun K. Verma, Shobha S. Raut, Nausad Qureshi (2026). Remote Sensing of Groundwater Sustainability. Journal of Remote Sensing, Environmental Science & Geotechnical Engineering, 11(1), 64-77.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19733468

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