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Utilizing GIS and Remote Sensing to Revolutionize Parasitological Studies: An Integrated Approach

Satyam Yadav[1], Ankur Sharma[1], Abhishek Gupta[2*] and N.S. Rathore[3]
1 M.V.Sc. Scholars, Department of Veterinary Parasitology, CVAS, Bikaner
2 Assistant Professor Veterinary Parasitology, Co-PI CEUSBTAS
3 Assistant Professor, Veterinary Biochemistry, PI, Centre For Excellence For Use Of Space Based Technology In Animal Science (CEUSBTAS), RAJUVAS, Bikaner
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Introduction

The unique agroclimatic profile of Rajasthan, with its expansive and diversified topography, affects animal husbandry, land usage, and the frequency of parasitic illnesses. The main uses of the dry and semi-arid areas of western Rajasthan are for pastoralism and the production of crops that can withstand drought. Animal husbandry is a major economic activity in these regions, with an emphasis on resilient breeds that are well-suited to the arid climate. But because there is scarcity of clean water and grazing pasture in the arid climate, livestock are also more vulnerable to parasite diseases. The highly irrigated and productive areas of eastern Rajasthan, on the other hand, encourage intensive farming methods, such as the production of soybeans, maize, and wheat. Dairy farming is more common here, and because of the water bodies that support the parasites' life cycle, there are greater incidence rates of parasitic diseases like fasciolosis in cattle. Although horticulture and forestry are well suited to the mountainous regions of Udaipur and Kota districts, these places are also confronted with parasites that prefer cooler, more humid temperatures. All things considered, Rajasthan's agroclimatic variability calls for region-specific approaches to land use, animal health care, and parasite control.

In the modern era of parasitology, the integration of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing (RS) technologies has revolutionized the way we understand, predict, and manage parasitic diseases. These tools offer a powerful framework for capturing, storing, manipulating, analyzing, and presenting spatial data, enabling researchers to map, model, query, and analyze large datasets with unprecedented precision.

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What is GIS?

GIS is a computer-based system designed to handle all types of spatial or geographical data. It allows users to map, model, query, and analyze data within a single database according to their location. This capability is particularly useful in modelling diseases, as exemplified by the kriging method. Kriging, a geostatistical technique, has been widely used in meteorology and veterinary epidemiology to model the distribution of parasites and diseases such as Canine Heartworm infection in Europe, *Ixodes scapularis* (the vector for Lyme disease), malaria, alveolar echinococcosis, and tsetse flies (Berke, 2004).

Remote Sensing: A Key Component in Parasitology

Remote sensing is a crucial technology in the field of parasitology, enabling researchers to acquire valuable information about the Earth's surface without direct contact.

Active vs. Passive Remote Sensing

Remote sensing can be categorized into two main types: active and passive remote sensing, each with its own set of applications and advantages.

Active Remote Sensing

Active remote sensing involves emitting energy towards the target and measuring the reflected or backscattered radiation. Active sensors are especially helpful when there is a lack of natural light or when precise topography information is needed. Active sensors, for instance, can assist in locating possible disease vector breeding grounds in veterinary parasitology, even in the presence of thick vegetation or at night. Following are the methods to use active remote sensing:

RADAR (Radar Detection and Ranging)**:** RADAR systems emit microwave radiation towards the Earth's surface and measure the backscattered signals. This technology is particularly useful for monitoring areas under cloud cover or in low-light conditions, making it ideal for continuous **surveillance regardless of weather conditions (Lillesand et al., 2015).**

LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging)**:** LiDAR uses laser pulses to create high-resolution 3D models of the Earth's surface. It is highly effective for detailed topographic mapping, forest canopy analysis, and urban planning (Weinmann et al., 2015).

Laser Altimeter**:** This technology uses laser pulses to measure the distance between the sensor and the Earth's surface, providing precise elevation data. It is often used in conjunction with other sensors to create detailed topographic maps.

Scatterometer: A scatterometer measures the scattering of radar pulses by the Earth's surface, which can be used to estimate wind speed over oceans, soil moisture levels, and vegetation.

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Passive Remote Sensing

Passive remote sensing relies on natural radiation emitted or reflected by objects on the Earth's surface. The simplicity and affordability of passive sensors have led to their widespread application. Passive sensors are useful in parasitology to track environmental elements that affect vector habitats, such as soil type, water bodies, and vegetation cover. Following are some common sources and applications:

***Reflected Sunlight*:** Satellites like Landsat and Sentinel-2 use reflected sunlight to capture images of the Earth's surface in various spectral bands. This data is useful for land use/land cover classification, crop health monitoring, and identifying water bodies.

***Infrared Sensors*:** These sensors detect thermal radiation emitted by objects on the Earth's surface. They are useful for monitoring temperature changes, soil moisture levels, and detecting heat stress in plants.

***Charge-Coupled Devices (CCDs) and Radiometers*:** CCDs are used in digital cameras to capture images across various spectral bands. Radiometers measure the radiation flux from the Earth's surface and are often used in climate studies and weather forecasting.

Applications in Parasitology

The integration of remote sensing technologies into parasitology has several practical applications:

Disease Mapping

Remote sensing data can be combined with GIS to create detailed maps of disease incidence, prevalence, mortality and morbidity. A study on schistosomiasis in sub-Saharan Africa used high-resolution satellite imagery to analyze the relationship between environmental factors (e.g., water bodies, vegetation cover) and the distribution of schistosomiasis. Transmission of schistosomiasis is spatially and temporally restricted to freshwater bodies inhabited by specific intermediate host snails, which act as disease vectors by shedding cercariae (Walz, 2015). Also, Bluetongue outbreaks are dependent on the geographical distribution of suitable vectors (*Culicoides* species) which require specific climatic conditions for their establishment and breeding. GIS combined with weather data and cattle density maps can predict areas where outbreaks are likely to occur. A recent study in Europe used GIS to model the risk of bluetongue virus transmission based on vector distribution and environmental factors, highlighting the importance of integrating climatic data into disease models (Purse et al., 2017).

Vector Habitat Analysis

Remote sensing technologies are instrumental in analysing habitats that support disease vectors like mosquitoes or snails. A study in Africa utilized RS to map snail habitats based on environmental factors such as water bodies, vegetation cover, soil type, and topography (Seto et al., 2007). In Ethiopia, GIS was used to develop a risk assessment model for fasciolosis by creating regional forecast index maps based on environmental data parameters and *Fasciola* sp. prevalence survey data. This approach helped in mapping survey data and fitting them to associated climatic and edaphic conditions. The study demonstrated that GIS can be a powerful tool for predicting the snail distribution leading to several economically important parasitic diseases of livestock (Boitt et al., 2021; Mereta et al., 2023).

Environmental Monitoring

RS and GIS allow for continuous monitoring of environmental changes that may influence the prevalence of parasitic diseases. Climate change has significant implications for the distribution and prevalence of parasitic diseases. As per Zeilhofer et al., 2007, hydropower plants provide more than 78 % of Brazil's electricity generation, but the country's reservoirs are potential new habitats for main vectors of malaria. Remote sensing and GIS techniques were applied to extract additional spatial layers of land use, distance maps, and relief characteristics for spatial model building. High-resolution satellite imagery can capture subtle changes in temperature patterns over time. RS data from satellites like TRMM (Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission) or GPM (Global Precipitation Measurement) can provide detailed information on precipitation patterns. This helps in identifying areas where increased rainfall might create breeding sites for disease vectors.

***Land Use Changes*:**

Land use changes, such as deforestation or urbanization, can drastically alter vector habitats and disease transmission dynamics. A study in Baltimore County, Maryland used land use/land cover maps along with soils, elevation, geology, and watershed maps to evaluate the risk of exposure to Lyme disease and its vector, *Ixodes scapularis*. The risk was found to be significantly lower in highly developed areas and decreased with increasing distance from forests (Glass et al., 1992). Satellite imagery revealed that urban expansion led to increased presence of *Aedes aegypti* in certain areas due to the creation of new breeding sites such as standing water in construction areas or abandoned containers (Marti, 2020). Deforestation was found to alter local microclimates and increase the availability of breeding sites for disease vectors.

Training and Capacity Building

The Indian Institute of Remote Sensing (IIRS), a constituent unit of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), plays a crucial role in training and capacity building in geospatial technology.

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Established in 1966, IIRS provides education and research opportunities in Southeast Asia, ensuring that professionals are equipped with the latest tools and techniques in GIS and RS. This capacity building is essential for widespread adoption of these technologies in parasitology and public health (IIRS, n.d.). The Centre For Excellence For Use Of Space Based Technology In Animal Science (CEUSBTAS), RAJUVAS, Bikaner is also working as co-ordinating centre of IIRS and is co-ordinating the training programs and workshops to increase the spectrum of beneficiaries around the country.

Conclusion

The use of Remote Sensing and Geographic Information Systems in veterinary parasitology is a powerful approach for monitoring environmental changes that influence parasitic disease dynamics. By leveraging advanced sensors, machine learning algorithms, cloud computing, and temporal analysis, researchers can better understand how factors like climate change, land use changes, and urbanization impact vector habitats. The integration of GIS and RS technologies has the potential to transform the field of parasitology by enabling precise mapping, modelling, and analysis of disease dynamics. These tools facilitate targeted interventions.

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