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Heatwave Magnitude Assessment: Methodology and Computational Framework

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Heatwaves are among the most extreme climate events which increasingly affect agriculture, ecosystems and human health. Their frequency and intensity have increased in recent decades due to global warming, posing significant challenges for food security (IPCC, 2021). The Heat Wave Magnitude Index daily (HWMId) is a single standardized index that combines both the duration and intensity of heatwave events. In this paper, we discuss HWMId in detail including definition, methodology, mathematical formulation and implementation in R using simulated daily maximum temperature data. The paper also looks at the agricultural impacts of extreme heat, particularly in terms of crop phenology, yield and resilience. The HWMId is proposed as a useful diagnostic for climate risk management and development of heat-resilient agricultural planning.

Introduction

A heatwave is long periods of unusually hot weather. It is not typical for that place. Anthropogenic climate change has resulted in a rapid increase in the frequency and duration of such events in India in recent years. Heat waves with temperatures above 45°C are common in places like Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and some parts of North India (Dash & Mamgain, 2011) and result in large yield losses and disturbances to ecosystems. Agriculture is particularly sensitive because the physiology of crops, including photosynthesis, respiration and reproductive development, is sensitive to temperature. Extended periods of high temperature can lead to heat stress in crops, which can result in problems such as pollen sterility and accelerated senescence. These effects can result in yield losses of 20 to 40 percent, depending on crop type and growth stage. Mean temperature anomalies and other traditional measures are not adequate to capture the cumulative stress of the intensity and duration of heat events. To combine both factors into a single index, Russo et al. (2015) proposed the daily Heat Wave Magnitude Index (HWMId). The HWMId has been widely used in climatology, ecology and increasingly in agricultural research to identify periods of extreme thermal stress and assess adaptation strategies (Chakraborty et al., 2019).

Methodology

HWMId is then calculated through the percentile-based thresholds obtained from the daily maximum temperature (Tmax) data for a reference period (30 years). The method includes the steps of:

- A 30-year baseline period is established and the 90th percentile (T90) of Tmax is calculated for each calendar day using a ± 15-day moving window.
- Define heatwave events as periods of at least 3 consecutive days with Tmax > T90.
- Calculate daily magnitude for each day of a heatwave based on interquartile range of Tmax values.
- Heatwave Magnitude (HWMI) is the total of daily magnitudes over all days in a heatwave.

- The annual HWMId is the maximum HWMI in a year.

This approach takes into account both frequency and severity of extreme heat events and provides a scale-independent measure which can be used to compare heatwaves between regions or periods. Several studies have confirmed its usefulness in agricultural climate risk analysis by validating the HWMId against observed mortality, yield losses and vegetation stress indices.

Mathematical Formulation

The daily magnitude (M_i) of a heatwave is defined as:

$$M_i = \frac{T_i - T_{25p}}{T_{75p} - T_{25p}}$$

where T_i is the daily maximum temperature on day i, and T_{25p} and T_{75p} are the 25th and 75th percentiles of Tmax computed for the reference period. The total magnitude of a heatwave (HWMI) is the sum of daily magnitudes over n consecutive days:

$$HWMI = \sum_{i=1}^{n} M_i, \text{ for i = 1 to n}$$

The HWMId for a given year is the maximum HWMI value among all identified heatwaves;

$$HWMI_d = \max(HWMI_1, HWMI_2, \ldots, HWMI_k)$$

This standardized formulation allows consistent comparison of heatwave intensity across regions and time periods.

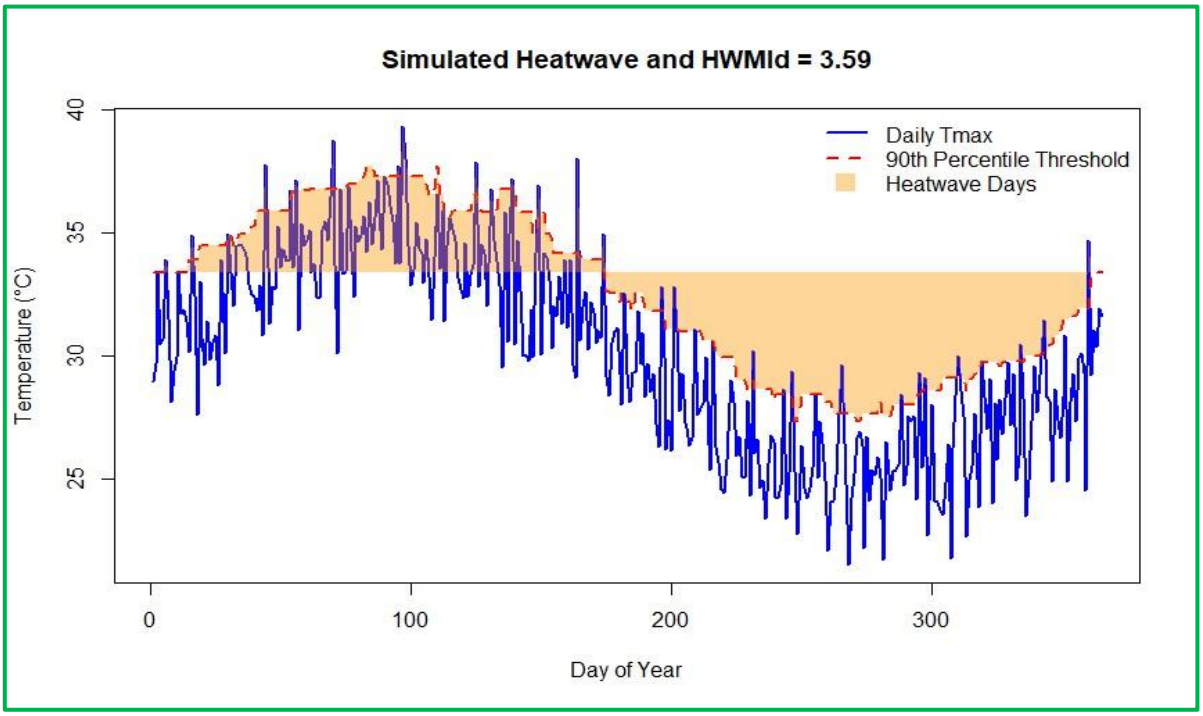
Illustration and R Implementation

An illustration using simulated daily maximum temperature data demonstrates the computation of HWMId in R.

```
# Simulate daily Tmax data (°C)
set.seed (123)
tmax <- 30 + 5 * sin(2 * pi * (1:365) / 365) + rnorm (365, 0, 2)
# Compute 90th percentile threshold using a 31-day moving window
threshold <- rep(NA, 365)
for (i in 1:365) {
  win <- ((i - 15) : (i + 15)) %% 365
  win [win == 0] <- 365
  threshold[i] <- quantile(tmax[win], 0.90, na.rm = TRUE)
}
# Identify heatwave days
heatwave_days <- tmax > threshold
# Compute daily magnitude (Mi)
T25 <- quantile(tmax, 0.25)
T75 <- quantile(tmax, 0.75)
M <- (tmax - T25) / (T75 - T25)
M[M < 0] <- 0
# Compute HWMI for consecutive heatwave days
group_id <- cumsum(!heatwave_days)
HWMI <- tapply(M[heatwave_days], group_id[heatwave_days], sum)
#Answer: 3.58519
# Compute HWMId (maximum HWMI)
HWMId <- max(HWMI, na.rm = TRUE)
print(paste("HWMId =", round(HWMId, 2)))
# Plot Tmax, threshold, and heatwave periods
plot(1:365, tmax, type = "l", col = "blue", lwd = 2,
    ylab = "Temperature (°C)", xlab = "Day of Year",
    main = paste("Simulated Heatwave and HWMId =", round(HWMId, 2)))
lines(1:365, threshold, col = "red", lwd = 2, lty = 2)
```

```
polygon(x = 1:365, y = ifelse(heatwave_days, tmax, threshold),
        col = rgb(1, 0.6, 0, 0.4), border = NA)
legend("topright",
       legend = c("Daily Tmax", "90th Percentile Threshold", "Heatwave Days"),
       col = c("blue", "red", rgb(1, 0.6, 0, 0.4)),
       lty = c(1, 2, NA), lwd = c(2, 2, NA),
       pch = c(NA, NA, 15), pt.cex = 2, bty = "n")
```

The plot shows the daily maximum temperature (Tmax) and the 90th percentile temperature threshold for a simulated year. The blue line is the daily Tmax values and the red dashed line is the heatwave threshold. The orange shaded area represents the heatwave days, i.e., periods when T maximum was above the 90th percentile threshold for two or more consecutive days. A major heatwave event is identified during Day 60 to Day 150, the warmer period of the year, and Tmax takes values above the threshold in a continuous way. The calculated Heatwave Magnitude Index (HWMId = 3.59) is the intensity of the strongest heatwave event of the year. This relatively moderate value of HWMId suggests a noticeable, but not extreme, intensity of heatwave under the simulated conditions. Overall, the plot indicates that heatwave duration and intensity can be quantified by integrating the magnitude and persistence of the temperature anomaly over consecutive days, thus providing a standardized measure to compare events across years or regions.



Interpretation and Agricultural Implications

The daily Heatwave Magnitude Index (HWMId) is a useful indicator for agricultural risk assessment, since it includes both duration and intensity of heatwave events. Higher HWMId values reflect more intense and longer-lasting heatwaves, which frequently coincide with severe stress on crops and ecosystems.

HWMId Range	Category	Agricultural Implications
1 – 2	Mild	Short-duration heatwaves with negligible impact on crops.
2 – 3	Moderate	Temporary crop stress, leaf scorching, and slight yield reduction.
3 – 4	Severe	Pollen sterility, reduced photosynthesis, and lower grain yield.
4 – 8	Extreme	High evapotranspiration, rapid soil drying, and potential yield failure.
> 8	Very Extreme	Sustained thermal stress causing irreversible crop damage or mortality.

Agricultural impacts depend on crop types, growth stages, and soil moisture status. For instance, in Telangana, rice and maize are highly vulnerable during the reproductive stage. When the daily maximum temperature (T max) exceeds 38–40 °C for several consecutive days (corresponding to HWMId > 4), grain setting is impaired, resulting in sharp yield declines. Heatwaves also increase the demand for irrigation, speed up the dessication of the soil and increase the pressure of pests and diseases. HWMId values can also be statistically related to crop yield anomalies to estimate the impact of heat extremes on agricultural productivity. Deviations in yield during high-HWMId years can be estimated using regression-based or ARIMA intervention models (Chakraborty et al., 2019). In addition, the integration of HWMId into multi-criteria decision frameworks (e.g., AHP) enables heat vulnerability assessments at the regional scale and climate-resilient agricultural planning.

Conclusion

The Heat Wave Magnitude Index daily (HWMId) is a robust and standardized indicator to characterize the strength and duration of heatwaves. Its calculation uses R programming, which allows for its implementation in research and operational monitoring. Together with drought indices, vegetation stress indicators and yield data, HWMId can yield greater understanding of combined impacts of climate on agriculture. Future applications of HWMId may include trend analysis, change-point detection, and early warning systems within the framework of climate-smart agriculture.

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