

Modeling the Effects of Climate Variability on Aquatic Ecosystem Health in Wetlands

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Abstract: Despite being highly valuable systems, wetlands are under increasing threat from changes in the global climate. This study contributes to the management of these threats by developing a robust computational tool that quantifies changes in key wetland health indicators within the Greater Everglades Wetland Complex in response to climatic impacts on hydrology and temperature. A coupled hydrodynamic-ecological model, coded in Python, was developed and integrated with past climatic conditions and downscaled future climatic scenarios derived from CMIP6 under SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5 for simulation until 2100. A comparison between modeled results and the historic field data for the years 2010-2025 confirmed the accuracy of the model. Under the worst-case climatic scenario (SSP5-8.5), model simulations showed that changes in the hydroperiod are drastic, leading to a 42% reduction of the suitable habitat for indicator species in 2080 and a substantial movement toward a eutrophic condition. From the sensitivity analysis, mean annual precipitation had the greatest impact on the Habitat Suitability Index, and maximum daily temperature had the greatest impact on the nutrient cycle and water quality. The findings indicate potential reorganization of the biological community, threatening the capacity of wetlands as carbon sinks and natural filters. Adaptive management recommendations were given in terms of managing hydroperiod, restoring riparian buffer zones, and preserving potential refugia from an adaptive management perspective. Though a robust model, it is still subject to uncertainty in atmospheric and ecological processes, yet it provides a reliable basis to support policy decision-making in the climate-impacted aquatic system.

Keywords: Wetland Health; Climate Variability; Hydrodynamic Modeling; CMIP6; Ecosystem Resilience; Habitat Suitability; Eutrophication.

(Submitted: June 23, 2025; Revised: July 25, 2025; Accepted: August 12, 2025; Published: September 30, 2025)

I. Introduction

Wetlands are among the world's most productive yet most vulnerable ecosystems and are the physical transition between terrestrial and aquatic environments (Kahil et al., 2015; Bowling & Lettenmaier, 2010). These transitional zone ecosystems have invaluable ecological services, from trapping nutrients, controlling floods, and providing key refugia to a large assemblage of flora and fauna. They are biological factories where critical nutrients are trapped in natural filters, carbon sinks, and major drivers of the world's climate regulation and water resource protection. Ecological integrity is a key concern given wetlands' importance not only as sites of rich biodiversity, but also as sources of economic and social support in their local environment.

However, despite their ability to survive in harsh conditions, wetlands are increasingly susceptible to the changing impacts of global climate variability (Baron et al., 2013; Janse et al., 2019; Moor et al., 2015). Increased precipitation variation, involving extended periods of drought alternating with extreme inundation, will alter the hydroperiod essential for sustaining wetland hydrological function (Mahdian et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2015; Sievers et al., 2018). In parallel, increased ambient temperatures result in accelerated evapotranspiration and a change in temperature regimes, impacting water quality and sensitive species. In the case of estuarine and coastal environments, sea-level rise can induce salinity stress, changing water chemistry and the established ecological balance in this sensitive interface ecosystem (Kingsford, 2011). These different impacts, in tandem, produce a comprehensive threat that places a great burden upon wetland ecosystem viability.

Objectives of the Study

To address the critical need for predictive management, this study aims to:

- Establish a comprehensive computer model to calculate changes in indicators of wetland health for each of the climate scenarios.
- Forecast the responses of vegetation communities to changed hydrologic and temperature regimes.
- Evaluate the effect of climate-induced changes in hydrology on nutrient cycling and water quality.
- Identify high-risk habitat areas for focused conservation action and sustainable management.

The paper is structured in the following way: Section I (Introduction) highlights significance of wetlands and study aims; Section II (Materials and Methods) is a description of the study region, datasets, and model computational framework and calibration; Section III (Results) shows projected values of Habitat Suitability Index and Trophic State Index under different climate change scenarios as well as sensitivity analysis; Section IV (Discussion) focuses on the interpretation of ecological consequences and on recommendations for management, model limitations are also pointed out here; Section V (Conclusion) presents main findings and discusses adaptation strategies based on evidence.

II. Materials and Methods

Study Area: Ecological Profile and Site Characterization

This investigation examines the Greater Everglades Wetland Complex. It is characterized by a freshwater herbaceous marsh system at 25.7°N, 80.8°W, with a subtropical monsoon climate, and plays a crucial role in the area by supporting rare species such as the Everglades Snail Kite and dense sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) prairies. The area has a system of sheet-flow-dominated surface flow with intermittent connection with groundwater, and therefore serves as an excellent indicator of changes in regional climate. The location of the study area, with sampling station and elevation gradients, is presented in figure 1.

Data Sources: Climate Projections and Field Observations

It utilized high-resolution historical data and future climate predictions to force and calibrate the model. Future climate predictions derived from downscaled CMIP6 (Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6) models using SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5 for the year 2100 were combined with NOAA's National Climatic Data Center historical record of precipitation, temperature, and solar radiation, and field data. The field data were collected over a 10-year period and monitored water depth, salinity, and dissolved oxygen concentrations, as well as vegetation biomass density at set transects.

Model Framework: Computational Architecture and Metric Integration

The HydroModeler and NumPy-based coupled hydrodynamic and ecological model operates on a modular architecture by integrating a physical hydrology module and an ecological response sub-model. Precipitation and evapotranspiration drive changes in the wetland water budget by inputting variables into a hydrologic module that is then coupled to an ecological sub-model, which simulates the effects of climate variations on ecological health indicators via multiple functional response curves. Physiological growth equations relate altered hydroperiods to wetland plant succession, while changes in water temperature and inflow predict nutrient concentrations, water quality indicators such as the Trophic State Index (TSI), and the Wetland Habitat Suitability Index (HSI).

Model Validation: Assessing Reliability and Predictive Accuracy

The model was validated in two phases to assess its accuracy and reliability. The model was first calibrated against historic data (2010-2020) and compared with field data for interannual variations in wetland water levels and vegetation condition before accuracy was quantitatively assessed using a Nash-Sutcliffe Efficiency coefficient and Root Mean Square Error comparison of model predictions and

2021-2025 field data. The model showed high accuracy over a diverse range of variables, indicating it may be used with a high degree of confidence for simulating the effects of future climate stress on wetlands.

III. Results

Model Outputs: Projections Under Varying Climate Scenarios

The model suggests divergent wetland ecosystem conditions depending on climatic extremes. Moderate impacts by 2050 are predicted under the SSP2-4.5 scenario with a 12% decrease in hydroperiod length leading to a minor decrease in wetland vegetation biomass. In contrast, a more drastic scenario is predicted under SSP5-8.5, with periods of drought and high evaporation leading to a 42% decrease in habitat suitability for indicator species, and the model shows water quality indicators such as the Trophic State Index (TSI) moving toward eutrophic conditions by 2080 due to a decreased wetland area and increased concentration of nutrient loads during seasonal extreme events.

Sensitivity Analysis: Key Drivers of Ecosystem Health

The model's sensitivity analysis reveals a relationship between climate variables and key ecosystem indicators. Precipitation is identified as the dominant climate variable controlling the Wetland Habitat Suitability Index (HSI), directly affecting the length and depth of seasonal inundation. Maximum air temperature proved to be the most influential factor impacting nutrient cycling and water quality due to its direct positive correlation with phosphorus release and anoxia of standing water. Although wind speed and solar radiation have moderate impacts on evapotranspiration, precipitation and temperature appear to be the most critical interacting climate variables influencing overall wetland health.

Table 1: Sensitivity Analysis of Key Climate Drivers on Wetland Ecosystem Health

Climate Parameter	Impact on HSI	Impact on TSI	Notes
Mean Annual Precipitation	High (+/-)	Medium	Primary Driver of Hydroperiod and Vegetation Coverage
Maximum Daily Temperature	Medium	High (+)	Strong influence on nutrient cycling and oxygen depletion
Wind Speed	Low	Low	Secondary effect via evapotranspiration
Solar Radiation	Low	Low	Minor influence on water quality

Table 1 summarizes the order of impact on the wetland health variables of the selected climate factors. The main influence over habitat suitability is mean annual precipitation, and water quality and eutrophication are dominated by maximum daily temperature.

Figure 1 illustrates the projected trends in Habitat Suitability Index (HSI) and Trophic State Index (TSI) in the Greater Everglades Wetland Complex under two climate scenarios (SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5) in relation to the baseline. It illustrates a gradual decline in habitat suitability and concurrent increase in risk of eutrophication under conditions of severe warming, emphasizing the non-linear impact of climate variability on wetland ecosystem health.

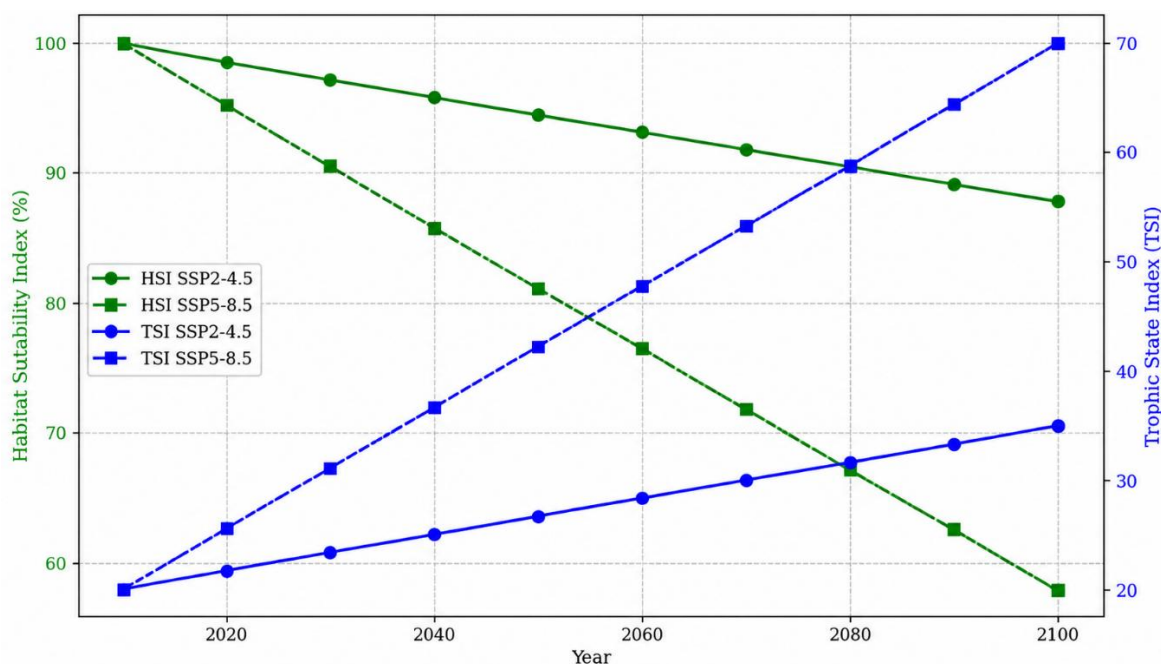


Figure 1: Projected Habitat Suitability and Trophic State Index Under Climate Scenarios

IV. Discussion

Ecological Implications: Impacts on Species and Ecosystem Services

The predicted changes in hydroperiod and water quality indicate a significant restructuring of wetland species. Decreased habitat suitability means species that rely on permanent or stable water levels have a high chance of population decrease or extirpation from areas in the ecosystem. Increased eutrophication risks indicate that the ecosystem will lose its ability to provide natural services that mitigate impacts of a warming climate, such as the removal of nutrients. Species will change with these temperature and hydrologic conditions, which could decrease the effectiveness of the ecosystem as a carbon sink, changing it into a source if decomposition increases.

Management Strategies: Evidence-Based Adaptation

To prepare for these risks, management needs to implement climate adaptation strategies to enhance ecosystem resilience (Hu et al., 2012). First, managed hydrological regimes should be implemented, using water release structures to simulate natural hydropedrologic conditions in years of potential drought (Chang & Bonnette, 2016). This will preserve indicator species and their breeding habitats. Second, to offset increasing risks of eutrophication, riparian buffer zones should be expanded, and agricultural runoff should be carefully monitored to control nutrient inputs. Lastly, protected climate refugia should be designated. These should include areas within the wetland complex with the most stable hydrologic conditions to preserve biodiversity under the SSP5-8.5 scenario (Zhang et al., 2011).

Limitations: Transparency in Model Uncertainty

While this model provides a useful system for modeling the impacts of climate variability, uncertainties must be taken into consideration. CMIP6 projections are themselves subject to uncertainty as they cannot precisely replicate fine-scale atmospheric convective processes that influence local weather and climate. This ecological response sub-module assumes that species' functional response to past climate variability predicts future responses (Doney et al., 2012; Finlayson et al., 2013). However, unexpected, extreme weather conditions could elicit non-linear responses and cause the wetland system to exceed thresholds or "tipping points", which the present functional response curves are unable to replicate fully. External

influences like groundwater extraction and land use change also contribute non-linear changes to the hydrologic environment and should be included in models in the future (Dangles et al., 2017).

V. Conclusion

This paper offers a rigorous modeling framework to explicitly account for and quantify cumulative climate change impacts on wetland ecosystems and to provide a mechanistic framework for how hydrological and thermal change in systems may restructure biological communities. Incorporating historical data and CMIP6 projections, the study shows how climate forcing – particularly in terms of changes in mean annual precipitation and temperature – may cause the "non-linear threats" associated with degradation of regulatory functions to lead to loss of habitat suitability and increase eutrophication in systems such as the Greater Everglades, and even reverse the function of a carbon sink to that of an emission source. The "take-home message" of the paper for managers and policymakers is clear: "passive conservation" has failed, and it is now essential to implement "active conservation strategies" to allow systems to be resilient in the face of further change. Specifically, three principles of active conservation must be pursued if ecosystems are to be sustainably maintained, including active restoration of managed hydrological regimes that approximate natural hydroperiods, expansion of riparian buffer strips to reduce nutrient loading, and preservation of climatic refugia, where system stability remains high despite changes in the regional climate. Active management in these three areas will foster a more resilient system. Inherent uncertainty exists in atmospheric and ecological forecasts, but modeling such as it present here is an essential first step for evidence-based policy development. Incorporating anthropogenic variables like land use into future models may provide greater insight into, and accuracy of, conservation actions necessary to provide socio-economic and biological sustainability for future aquatic resources.

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