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A review on water balance models

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Abstract

Originally, water balance models were introduced to evaluate the importance of different hydrological elements under different hydrological conditions, but their current applications are mostly connected to water resources management. Since many factors affect hydrologic processes, the water balance equation can introduce enormous errors or complexities. The water balance models were computed based on different inputs like precipitation, precipitation and temperature, precipitation and potential evaporation and daily input data. Recently, lot of studies have been carried to assess the climate change and the impacts of human activities using water balance models. This paper provides a critical review on water balance model with special reference to humid tropics.

Keywords: Climate change, models, precipitation, water balance, watershed

1. Introduction

Water balance analysis is the basis of management and policy making in some critical matters related to water resources such as design of water supply systems, flood estimation, water allocation and use, management of and wastewater in urban areas, aquatic ecosystems management, water trading and virtual water. Based on the results of water balance computations a great number of important water projects can be planned (Quinn *et al.*, 2000) [57].

We can define two separate boundaries and scales for water balance equation: spatial boundaries for the region (spatial scstormwater ale) and temporal boundary for water balance period (time scale). Selecting different spatial or time scales in a specific region changes the accuracy, equation elements and methodology according to the reliability of data, financial conditions and facilities. Major classifications of water balance computation methods have performed to look at groundwater interactions with surface waters and water use in atmosphere-water-soil system.

Practical strategies for calculation of dynamic components of water balance equations depend on the targets, accuracy and the time period in which the equations are assessed. In this regard, a lot of internal processes and events are usually neglected and only the response of the region at the end of the period is considered. The calculations for monthly totals had been made at daily time steps; for this reason daily runoff values quickly have become a motive of calculation. The interest in calculation of day by day flows has step by step multiplied up to the present. However, the use of sub-daily water balance modeling for flood studies is necessary. The modeling purposes, target area, calculation method, temporal and spatial boundaries, available data and facilities drive the accuracy of water balance results; generally the degree of accuracy is determined before any computations.

Water balance models have been developed at various time scales (e.g. hourly, daily, monthly and yearly) and to varying degrees of complexity. Monthly water balance models were first developed in the 1940s by Thornthwaite (1948) [66] and later revised by Thornthwaite and Mather (1955, 1957) [67, 68]. These models have since been adopted, modified and applied to a wide spectrum of hydrological problems (e.g. Bellot and Chirino, 2013; Arnell, 1999) [7, 4]. Lately, they have been hired to explore the impact of climatic trade e.g. Global Climate Model (GCM) (Ndhlovu and Woyessa, 2020) [53], Canadian Centre for Climate Modelling and Analysis (CCCMA) (Nyatuame *et al.*, 2020) [55]. However, these models are more data intensive and have more parameters than do the corresponding monthly models.

A number of water balance models and parameter estimation algorithms have been considered, ranging from relatively complex conceptual models with 10 to 15 parameters (e.g. Dhote *et al.*, 2021; Corbari *et al.*, 2022) [20, 18] to very simple models with 2 to 5 parameters models (e.g. Arnell, 1999; Jayatilaka *et al.*, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2021) [4, 35, 43].

There is a need that the model users must be familiar with the sensitivity, strengths and weaknesses of the model. Thus, there is a need to take stock of such models and review them. Recently, numerous models with different assumptions and affecting parameters have been introduced for water balance computations such as: WASIM (Singh *et al.*, 1999) [60]; WAVES (Mingan *et al.*, 2002) [46]; WetSpass (Batelaan and Woldeamlak, 2007) [6] and these models are specialized for modeling of water balance in a farm. NAM module from MIK-11 is applied to investigate the statistical importance of various parameters in water balance equations (Celleri *et al.*, 2000) [16]. There are hundreds of models based on explicit catchment water balance modeling and many new models are still being added.

A good review of monthly water balance models was presented by Xu and Singh (1998) [74] according their applications and kinds of input parameters. Similar, major review of water balance models was presented by Boughton (2004) [10]. Ghandhari and Moghaddam (2011) [31] also reviewed water balance principles for five watersheds in Iran. The dominant interests in water balance modeling vary in different regions like estimation of water yield, flood estimation and budget allocation and putting new constrains on groundwater exploitation. The wide application of water balance results and decisions which can be made, especially in India, show the importance of water balance applications. This study is an attempt to shed more light on the water balance computation process and its accuracy and also is to present some key points for improving the reliability of water balance results. The study focuses on the different models used for water balance analysis and its applications.

2. Water Balance in Watersheds

Water balance is an efficient means for programming and evaluating in the scale of watersheds especially in the case of ungauged basins (Boughton and Chiew, 2007 [11]; Boughton, 2004) [10]. Long-term water storage changes in watersheds, including surface water and ground water, are expressed in the form of residual water balance equation (Berezovskaya *et al.*, 2005) [8].

$$Ds/DT = P - Q - ET \quad (1)$$

Where,

Ds/DT is total water change in watershed

P is average precipitation

ET is evapotranspiration

Q is the surface water discharge at the main drain of basin

This simple expression of water balance is valid where the groundwater output and its withdrawals are negligible. Correct definition of water balance period or hydrological year is a very important factor in the simplification of computations and can be evaluated as a basis for judgment about the hydrological regime of watershed (Najjar, 1999) [51]. In arid and semi-arid zones, all sub-basins contribute to final discharge that means infiltration, evaporation and evapotranspiration are influenced significantly because of expanded floodplains and vegetation cover development. Dividing a watershed into smaller sub-hydrological systems can improve the results in these basins (Cohen *et al.*, 2001) [17].

A lacking element in the present day water balance models is transmission loss in flow channels among the regions wherein runoff is generated and the catchment outlet in which runoff is

measured. The significance of transmission loss is growing because the importance of low flows for both water allocation and aquatic ecosystems will increase.

Flerchinger and Cooley (2000) [23] computed a ten-year water balance of a mountainous semi-arid watershed at Upper Sheep Creek watershed, which was a 26-ha semi-arid mountainous sub-basin within the Reynolds Creek Experimental watershed in southwest Idaho, USA. Oroud (2015) [56] assessed water budget for semi-arid watershed in the eastern Mediterranean. It was observed that the significant runoff occurred over steep terrains where vegetation cover was limited and this adversely affected the water quality and life span of dams constructed over these catchments.

Lv *et al.* (2017) [44] studied the water budget closure based on Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) measurements and reconstructed ET and water use data for two large densely-populated mid-latitude basin, Yellow River Basin (YRB) and Changjiang River Basin (CJB). They recommended the proposed reconstruction method to be relevant to other human-managed river basins to provide an alternative estimation. Noviadi *et al.* (2019) [54] analysed water balance in Bera watershed of 164.6 km² in the Sumbawa River basin, Indonesia using excel by comparing the demand and supply of water.

3. Methods for Computation of Water Balance Components

3.1 Precipitation

In general, precipitation is the principal input for water stability models. The accuracy of dimension and computation of precipitation from a network of stations determines to a vast quantity the reliability of water stability computations. No reliable water stability computation is viable with insufficient know-how of the spatial rainfall patterns. Areal rainfall may be incorrect both randomly and systematically. A variety of general interpolation methods is available for areal estimation (Fung *et al.*, 2022) [26]. Remote sensing and satellite data can be used for catchment modeling. Radars are employed for rainfall measurement (Caseri *et al.*, 2022; Ghimire *et al.*, 2022) [15, 32]. Satellite data can be used for estimation of area and intensity of rainfall. Recently, remote-sensing techniques based on satellite imagery and ground-based radar with a network of recording raingauges has proved to be promising for estimation of precipitation (Mtibaa and Asano, 2022; Sukanya and Kalapureddy, 2022) [50, 64].

3.2 Evapotranspiration

In most cases, evapotranspiration is the second largest quantity in the hydrological water balance. Accurate spatial and temporal predictions of ET are required for water balance models. Complex models have been developed to determine evapotranspiration (Traore *et al.*, 2010) [70]. In water balance models, most researchers have found it necessary to derive "true" evapotranspiration as a function of potential evapotranspiration and soil dryness. In fact, this has been the most popular method of calculating evapotranspiration for most conceptual hydrological models (Casado-Rodriguez and Jesus, 2022; Dile *et al.*, 2020) [14, 21]. Interpolation and aggregation methods are used to present weather and land cover data at appropriate spatial and temporal scales for catchment hydrology. Remote sensing methods will play an increasing role in water balance assessment, which use models of varying complexity to estimate evaporation from the surface (Soltani *et al.*, 2021; Fu *et al.*, 2022) [62, 25].

3.3 Runoff

Streamflow records provide a measure of watershed response to time-varying input and internal hydrologic processes. For water balance studies, it is important to know the different components of runoff and their regimes. The number of runoff components to be analyzed depends on the watershed characteristics and separation objective, including the time base to be considered (Wang *et al.*, 2014; Knoll *et al.*, 2020) [72, 37].

4. Monthly Water Balance Models

Monthly water balance models are not only used to investigate the importance of various hydrological variables in different watersheds, but also monthly water balance models are used to assess the impact of climate change, predict river flow, design and operate water projects, etc. (Desai *et al.*, 2021; Ahmad *et al.*, 2022; Guo *et al.*, 2022; Motschmann *et al.*, 2022) [19, 3, 33, 48].

4.1 Purpose

The main purposes of monthly water balance models can be summarized as follows:

- Synthesis of long-term watershed records
- Generation of runoff records for uncelebrated watersheds
- Providing hydrological data as inputs for validating deterministic general circulation models
- Forecasting yield within one or two months for real-time control of water resource systems
- Derivation of climatic and hydrological regional classifications
- Predicting the possible hydrological effects of changes in land use and climate change.

Although these targets can be derived from hourly or daily models, the use of monthly water balance models is preferred because short-term models are more data intensive and in many cases these data are not available and short-term models are usually more complex.

4.2 Concepts and Structure

Hydrological models are often classified into three types, empirical models (black box models), conceptual models (grey box models) and theoretical models (white box models). Empirical models relate outputs to inputs through a structure that may be entirely statistical or partly mathematical and does not aid physical understanding, as in the application of linear and nonlinear systems theory. Hydrologic models are considered conceptual here if the form of the model equations is designed with respect to the physical processes acting on the inputs and outputs in a highly simplified form. Theoretical models have a logical structure similar to a real-world system and can be useful under changed circumstances. Each user of an individual model is thus faced with the choice of using either a sophisticated model with less perfect input data, or a less complex model based on a simpler conceptualization of "known reality" for which the data requirements are less stringent.

4.3 Model evaluation and parameters estimation

When a model has been developed or selected for use in predicting hydrologic outputs for a particular practical problem, it is then necessary to assess its applicability and potential accuracy for that problem and determine the values of the model parameters or constants for that problematic

watershed. In general, several levels of evaluation are required before a model can be used to estimate watershed output. These are: rational examination of model structure, estimation of parameter values, testing of the fitted model to verify its accuracy, and estimation of its range of applicability.

Many types of techniques are used to estimate the parameters of various hydrological models. Of these, automatic optimization using search techniques was the most common method in calibrating monthly water balance models. It is believed that when model time steps are chosen large enough, the mode will be a balance model in which the ratio of watershed response time to time step is negligible (Mouelhi *et al.*, 2006) [47]. Sometimes it can be defined from a simple bucket model to really complex hydrological models according to their resolution (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) [75]. In this case, the water balance is a set of equations in which each process or part of the process is simulated by an equation. In general, the dominant view of the water budget calculates all volume components to/from three-dimensional space that lead to storage changes (Burt, 1999) [12].

Sinha *et al.* (2019) [61] studied the effects of watershed characteristics on long-term annual and interannual water balances over India. They developed a model using multiple linear regression and machine learning techniques (ANN: Artificial Neural Network and RVM: Relevance Vector Machine).

5. Models using Different Inputs

5.1 Models using precipitation as inputs

Precipitation generally forms the largest component of the water balance equation. Deriving the relationship between rainfall over a catchment and the resulting discharge in a river is a fundamental problem in hydrology. Precipitation records are usually abundant in most countries, but stream flow data are often limited and rarely available for a particular river under study. The need to evaluate river flows from rainfall has therefore arisen. A number of monthly water balance models using only precipitation as input have been developed.

5.1.1 The model divides runoff into three components

- Instantaneous runoff, calculated as a certain fraction of precipitation during the current month;
- Delayed outflow, calculated using the linear reservoir concept
- A time function that is assumed to have no interaction with other components.

A common feature of these models is that evapotranspiration is calculated as a fraction of precipitation, and the remainder of precipitation is empirically treated as either infiltration and/or direct runoff.

5.2 Models using precipitation and temperature as input

Temperature is used as the driver for estimating potential evapotranspiration using Thornthwaite's approach, which together with monthly precipitation can be used as input data for the models. These models differ in their treatment of the relationship between actual and potential evapotranspiration and accounting for soil moisture and aquifer recharge.

5.3 Models using precipitation and potential evaporation as input

Monthly areal precipitation and potential evapotranspiration

were used as the only inputs to most of the monthly rainfall-runoff models. These models have been developed in a wide variety of climates for a wide variety of applications and vary greatly in complexity.

Fowler (2002) ^[28] evaluated the validity of using mean potential evaporation in long-term soil water balance calculations in Auckland, New Zealand. Modeling experiments were conducted over 13 years at a selected site comparing model performance during wet and dry years and achieved the best results where PE reduction was applied to account for PE suppression on rainy days. Campos *et al.* (2016) ^[13] estimated the total available water in the soil layer by integrating actual evapotranspiration data into a remotely sensed soil water balance. Wang *et al.* (2021) ^[73] modeled ET coupling processes and soil water balance in agroforestry systems.

5.4 Monthly models using daily input data

The use of daily precipitation as an input is believed to improve the estimation of such processes as infiltration, evapotranspiration, interception, and depression storage. On the other hand, using daily data increases the amount of work and may limit research to fewer watersheds instead of water balance calculations on large geographic units.

Spruill *et al.* (2000) ^[63] simulated daily and monthly streamflow for a small watershed in central Kentucky using the Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) model. They observed that the model adequately predicted daily stream flow trends during this period. Muttiah and Wurbs (2002) ^[49] studied the effects of scale-dependent soil and climate variability on the water balance of the SWAT model basin for large watersheds in Texas, USA. Tripathi *et al.* (2006) ^[71] studied the effect of watershed subdivision on the simulation of water balance components using the SWAT model for the Nagwan watershed in eastern India. They collected and used meteorological and hydrological data (daily precipitation, temperature, relative humidity and runoff) for the years 1995 to 1998. The water balance was found to be perfect under all decomposition schemes.

Schilling *et al.* (2008) ^[59] studied the impacts of Land Use and Land Cover (LULC) change on the water balance of a large agricultural watershed in the Raccoon River in the west-central Iowa, United States, to analyze historical effects and future directions using the SWAT model. They stated that future LULC change will affect the water balance of the basin, with consequences largely dependent on the future LULC trajectory. Bonuma *et al.* (2013) ^[9] evaluated hydrological processes using the SWAT model with respect to measurement uncertainty for the Arrio Lino watershed in southern Brazil. They used measured flow from the catchment outlet to evaluate the flow sensitivity of selected parameters for calibration and validation between 2001 and 2005.

George and Sathian (2016) ^[30] assessed the water balance of the basin using the SWAT model for water resource management for the Kurumali sub-basin of the Karuvannur river basin. It was suggested that the SWAT model could be effectively used in river flow simulation and water balance prediction of watersheds in the humid tropics. Ayivi and Jha (2018) ^[5] estimated water balance and water yield in the Reedy Fork-Buffalo Creek watershed in North Carolina using SWAT. From the graphical results, they found that the SWAT model accurately tracked monthly flow trends during both the calibration and validation periods.

Li *et al.* (2018) ^[42] studied an improved approach for ET

estimation using the water balance equation for the Yangtze River Basin (YRB). They developed an improved regional approach to ET estimation, based on the Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) water balance equation, daily precipitation and streamflow data. Rohtash *et al.* (2019) ^[58] used the SWAT model to model rainfall runoff in the Chaliyar catchment, Kerala. They used DEM, LULC map, soil map, precipitation data, discharge and temperature data, RH, solar radiation and wind speed. They studied rainfall trend analysis for the period 1991 to 2011. Abdulla and Al-Shurafat (2020) ^[1] conducted rainfall-runoff modeling for semi-arid and transboundary conditions for the Yarmouk River Basin (YRB) using the SWAT model. They used available daily precipitation, ET, and runoff data coupled with an optimization technique for SWAT calibration.

Eini *et al.* (2020) ^[22] developed alternative SWAT-based models to simulate water budget and stream flow components for a karst-influenced watershed in southwestern Iran. Fousiya and Varughese (2020) ^[27] modeled streamflow using the SWAT model for the Thuthapuzha river basin in Kerala. They confirmed that the flow simulations were successful for the model based on statistical results. Gebru and Tesfahunegn (2020) ^[29] estimated water balance components using GIS for the Dura sub-basin in northern Ethiopia. They estimated the components of the hydrological water balance using the flexible, physical and GIS water balance model WetSpss. They used descriptive and inverse weighted distance to analyze various data and calculated current ET, surface runoff, and groundwater recharge. Krishnan *et al.* (2018) ^[38] applied a SWAT model to estimate runoff from the Nethravathi river basin in Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, India. Mestry *et al.* (2020) ^[45] estimated the basin water balance components in the Manjira River Basin using a SWAT model and GIS. Using SWAT input data such as DEM, LULC, soil classification, slope and weather data, they determined various water balance components such as precipitation, base flow, surface runoff, ET, PET and water yield for each catchment. Nasiri *et al.* (2020) ^[52] simulated water balance components in the Samalqan basin in Iran. They used the SWAT model and water balance components such as surface runoff, lateral flow, base flow and evapotranspiration were simulated. Nyatuame *et al.* (2020) ^[55] assessed the impacts of LULC on the water balance of the Tordzie basin. They used SWAT embedded in ArcGIS to assess water availability after calibration (2000–2003) and validation (2004–2006) using the Tordzin discharge.

6. Flow Record Generation in Ungauged Catchments

One of the main goals in developing a conceptual water balance model is to provide a model that can be used on ungauged catchments to generate a runoff record for planning and design purposes. Monthly water balance models usually have a simple structure and a small number of parameters, which has led to some successful studies in the field. Regression equations can be used to calculate model parameters from watershed characteristics.

Tejaswini and Sathian (2018) ^[65] assessed the hydrological processes in a small watershed in Valancheri, a sub-basin of the Bharathapuzha river basin in Kerala using the SWAT model. They used a regionalization technique and a calibrated model to predict hydrological features at the micro-basin level. They claimed that these simulation results were very useful for planning the development of water resources in the locality.

7. Farm Water Balance

In the water balance of the farm, field measurements are not effective by themselves. They are time consuming and do not capture ongoing data. On the farm, we usually need to determine the proportion of leached water and evapotranspiration as a percentage of total irrigation water. Therefore, farm water balance models need to develop some modules and codes to evaluate transport budget, root zone moisture, etc. (Zhang, 2002) [75]. Water scarcity, water rights, project development, irrigation system efficiency, common water resources around the farm and reclaimed water from neighboring farms are arguments that lead to serious legal problems in many watersheds and plains (Burt, 1999) [12].

8. Climatic Change Impact Assessment

The use of monthly water balance models appears to offer significant advantages over other methods in accuracy, flexibility and ease of use. Several case studies have been reported. Abdulla *et al.* (2009) [2] assessed the impact of potential climate change on the water balance of a semi-arid catchment located in the Zarqa River Basin (ZRW), Jordan. They used the U.S. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed the BASINS-HSPF modeling environment, which was designed to simulate the major hydrologic processes that affected the spatiotemporal distribution of water.

Kavvas *et al.* (2011) [36] evaluated water balances over the Tigris-Euphrates basin using the regional hydro-climatic model RegHCM-TE to reconstruct historical precipitation data, perform terrestrial hydrologic water balance calculations for infiltration, soil water storage, actual evapotranspiration, and direct runoff as input to streamflow calculations, and for estimating irrigation water requirements. Touhami *et al.* (2015) [69] assessed the impacts of climate change on soil water balance and aquifer recharge in a semi-arid region in southeastern Spain. They used the HYDROBAL hydrological model to determine the water balance of the soil. The required input data were soil data, climate and vegetation data, and reference evapotranspiration. Model outputs were interception, net precipitation, surface runoff, soil water storage, actual evapotranspiration, direct percolation, infiltration and potential recharge.

Kumar and Srinivasan (2020) [21] studied the climatic water balance and drought assessment in the Kallar Watershed of Tamil Nadu, India. They used data on rainfall, temperature and water holding capacity as the three primary parameters. They proposed sustainable water management practices for such areas. Leta *et al.* (2016) [41] assessed the impacts of climate change on the water balance components of the Heeia watershed in Hawaii, USA, using SWAT. They used a calibrated model to assess the impact of changes in precipitation, temperature and CO₂ concentration on the water balance of the basin. Kundu *et al.* (2017) [40] studied the individual and combined impacts of future climate and land use changes on the water balance for a portion of the Narmada river basin in Madhya Pradesh.

9. The Impacts of Human Activities and Climate Change on Water Balance

The development of water balance formulations, especially when targets include future programming based on forecasts, is highly dependent on human activities and climate change; however, many models have an inability to incorporate these effects. Human activity has the potential to directly and

indirectly influence the amount of water and the natural flow regime of the river system. Indirect impacts on the hydrological cycle may result from changes in land use.

Urban and rural development in part of the catchment can have significant quantitative and qualitative impacts on flows. All kinds of constructions, such as roads, fences, asphalt surfaces, etc., can change the natural river regime and increase the occurrence of random hydrological phenomena. Changes to the landscape caused by the development of urban structures can affect hydrological systems. There are some models, such as the macaque model, TOPOG, ANTHROPOG, MM5 and SWAT, which have been effectively used to investigate some of the effects of human activations on components of the local water cycle (Fohrer *et al.*, 2001) [24].

10. Conclusions

Many models and software are developed and widely used to analyze water storage and movement within a watershed based on water balance equations. In countries like India, most of the models used in water resource planning have been extracted from other countries with different climatic and topographic conditions. Hence, it is very important to focus on the structure and adoptability of these models before it is put in use. Determination of minimum standards, required number of parameters and estimation methods in individual local zones, required reliability, new techniques and tools for cost reduction, field measurements, etc. can help achieve more efficient water management.

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