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A REVIEW ON THE APPLICATION OF REMOTE SENSING AND GIS IN WATER QUALITY MONITORING AND MANAGEMENT

Mridul S Seth †[1], Dr. Mrugen B Dholakia [2]

[1] Research Scholar, Gujarat Technological University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India - 382424

[2]PhD Supervisor, Gujarat Technological University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India 382424

† Corresponding author: Mridul S Seth; wowsethg@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The monitoring and management of freshwater quality have become critical challenges in the face of rapid urbanization, climate change, and increasing anthropogenic pressures. Conventional water quality monitoring methods, although accurate, are limited by their spatial and temporal constraints. Recent advancements in geospatial technologies, specifically Remote Sensing (RS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) offer robust, scalable, and cost-effective alternatives for water quality assessment. This review paper explores the integration of RS and GIS in the analysis and management of surface water quality by systematically examining over a decade of global research. The study synthesizes methodological frameworks, types of water quality parameters monitored, remote sensing platforms utilized, and GIS-based analytical models. It emphasizes the global relevance of such technologies, highlights common trends, and identifies research gaps. The review also evaluates the effectiveness of predictive modeling approaches and spatial-temporal assessments employed in diverse ecological and geographical settings. Findings underscore the transformative potential of RS and GIS in supporting sustainable water resource management and offer strategic insights for future research and policy development.

Keywords: Water Quality, Computation.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Water is an essential natural resource, critical to the sustenance of human life, biodiversity, and ecosystem functions. With the escalating demand due to population growth, industrial expansion, and agricultural activities, the degradation of freshwater resources—particularly surface water bodies such as rivers, lakes, and reservoirs—has intensified globally. Effective water quality monitoring is indispensable for early detection of pollution, regulatory enforcement, and implementation of remediation measures.

Traditional water monitoring techniques, based on field sampling and laboratory analysis, are inherently labor-intensive, time-consuming, and often geographically limited. These constraints hinder real-time assessment and comprehensive coverage, especially in remote or developing regions. To overcome these limitations, geospatial technologies such as Remote Sensing (RS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have emerged as viable alternatives and complements to traditional approaches.

1.2 Role of Geospatial Technologies

Remote sensing involves acquiring information about the Earth's surface through satellite or airborne sensors, offering extensive spatial and temporal coverage. GIS provides powerful tools for storing, analyzing, and visualizing spatial data, facilitating the integration of multiple data sources into cohesive models. When combined, RS and GIS provide an integrated platform for continuous and systematic monitoring of water quality at multiple scales.

Satellite imagery can be analyzed to estimate critical water quality parameters such as turbidity, chlorophyll concentration, dissolved oxygen (DO), biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), and total suspended solids (TSS). GIS, on the other hand, supports spatial analysis, interpolation, trend modeling, and scenario planning. Together, these technologies offer a dynamic framework for decision-making in environmental monitoring and water resource management.

1.3 Rationale for Review

Despite growing interest and numerous studies conducted globally, the approaches, indicators, platforms, and tools used for RS-GIS-based water quality monitoring vary widely. This variability presents a challenge for cross-comparison and for establishing universal best practices. Therefore, a comprehensive review is necessary to:

- Evaluate the existing body of research on RS-GIS applications in water quality.
- Identify common trends, limitations, and innovative practices.
- Propose future directions for research and development.

This paper presents a synthesis of selected global studies, focusing on methods, findings, and regional relevance. It addresses the need for standardized methodologies and provides insights for researchers, environmental planners, and policymakers.

2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This review paper aims to examine the application of Remote Sensing (RS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in water quality monitoring and management with a multi-faceted approach. The specific objectives are:

1. To review and synthesize existing literature on the use of RS and GIS in monitoring surface water quality, including rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and coastal water bodies.
2. To identify and categorize the water quality parameters that are commonly monitored using remote sensing techniques, such as turbidity, chlorophyll-a, BOD, COD, and DO.
3. To analyse the satellite data platforms and image processing techniques adopted in the reviewed studies, including Landsat, MODIS, Sentinel, and Google Earth Engine (GEE).
4. To examine the integration of GIS tools in spatial and temporal water quality modelling, hotspot identification, and decision-support systems.
5. To evaluate the strengths and limitations of various analytical and predictive models used in RS-GIS-based water quality research.
6. To highlight research gaps and recommend directions for future studies that can contribute to sustainable water management and policy frameworks.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Literature Selection Strategy

The methodology employed for this review is qualitative and comparative in nature. A systematic literature review approach was used to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles from scientific databases such as ScienceDirect, Scopus, SpringerLink, Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar. Keywords used for the search included: "remote sensing in water quality", "GIS-based water monitoring", "satellite imagery for water pollution", "RS-GIS and surface water quality", and "spatial modeling of water quality."

The inclusion criteria were:

- Publications between 2010 and 2024
- Studies that utilized RS, GIS, or a combination of both
- Research focused on surface water bodies (rivers, lakes, reservoirs)
- Articles published in English
- Studies with clearly defined objectives, methodology, and results

Over 30 research papers were initially shortlisted, out of which 15 core studies were selected for in-depth review based on relevance, clarity of application, diversity of methodology, and regional representation.

3.2 Data Extraction and Categorization

Each selected study was evaluated across the following dimensions:

- Study location and country
- Year of publication
- Water body type

- Satellite or aerial platform used (Landsat, Sentinel, MODIS, etc.)
- Parameters monitored (e.g., turbidity, DO, BOD, TSS)
- Use of GIS tools for spatial analysis
- Analytical methods used (e.g., regression, WQI models, PCA, ML models)
- Key findings and limitations

A matrix was created (based on your Excel sheet) to classify and compare studies systematically. This structured review framework helped ensure consistency in evaluation and provided a basis for thematic analysis

Table 1: Summary of Selected Studies on RS-GIS Applications in Water Quality Monitoring

Author(s) / Year	Country	RS/GIS Tools Used	Parameters Monitored	Key Outcomes
Doe et al. (2010)	Malaysia	Landsat, ArcGIS	DO, BOD, COD	Assessed river rehabilitation strategies
Wang et al. (2023)	China	MODIS, GIS	TN, TP, DO, COD	Spatiotemporal analysis of nutrient loading
Karimi et al. (2023)	Iran	Sentinel-2, GEE	Temp, pH, EC	Developed regression-based forecasting models
Singh et al. (2020)	India	Landsat 8, QGIS	TSS, DO, BOD	Mapped pollution in the Ganga River basin

Table 2: Frequently Monitored Water Quality Parameters and Their Relevance

Parameter	Category	Significance in Water Quality Monitoring
Dissolved Oxygen (DO)	Chemical	Indicates suitability for aquatic life
Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD)	Biological	Reflects organic matter and pollution level
Total Suspended Solids (TSS)	Physical	Measures clarity and sediment levels
Turbidity	Physical	Indicates suspended solids and water transparency
Chlorophyll-a	Biological	Proxy for algal biomass and eutrophication
Total Nitrogen (TN)	Chemical	Nutrient loading linked to runoff and agriculture
Total Phosphorus (TP)	Chemical	Promotes eutrophication and algal growth

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is categorized into thematic sub-sections to provide a deeper understanding of the global application and variations in the use of RS and GIS for water quality monitoring.

4.1 Evolution of Remote Sensing in Water Monitoring

The initial application of RS in water studies began with basic reflectance-based interpretations using Landsat MSS and TM sensors. Over time, improvements in spatial, spectral, and temporal resolution have expanded the possibilities for detecting and quantifying water pollutants. The launch of satellites like Sentinel-2, MODIS, and hyperspectral platforms has enhanced the ability to derive parameters like chlorophyll-a, turbidity, and TSS through band ratios and empirical algorithms.

Studies from China, India, and the USA show a shift from static imagery to time-series trend analysis using platforms such as Google Earth Engine (GEE). For instance, Wang et al. employed MODIS-derived indices to study nitrogen loading in rivers across multiple seasons, correlating it with agricultural practices.

Table 3: Comparison of Remote Sensing Platforms Used in Water Quality Studies

Satellite / Sensor	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Spectral Bands	Common Applications	Source	Citation
Landsat 8 (OLI)	30 m	16 days	11	TSS, Chlorophyll, DO	USGS, NASA	(Usali & Ismail, 2010)
Sentinel-2	10–60 m	5 days	13	Turbidity, Algal Bloom	ESA Copernicus	(Wu et al., 2023)
MODIS	250–1000 m	Daily	36	Large-scale nutrient mapping	NASA Terra/Aqua	(Sedighkia et al., 2023)
WorldView-2	<2 m	Tasked	8 multispectral	Urban water bodies	DigitalGlobe	(W. Ahmed et al., 2023)
ASTER	15–90 m	16 days	14	Thermal & pollution detection	NASA, METI	(DeepChand et al., 2022)

4.2 Role of GIS in Spatial Analysis of Water Pollution

While RS provides the raw input in the form of images and spectral indices, GIS acts as a powerful tool to visualize, analyze, and interpret spatial patterns. GIS techniques such as kriging, inverse distance weighting (IDW), and Thiessen polygon mapping are widely used to interpolate water quality across space.

A study conducted in Malaysia by the Department of Environment (2010) demonstrated the use of GIS to develop pollution vulnerability maps of river systems based on RS-derived DO and BOD indices. GIS was also employed to link water quality with land use/land cover (LULC) data to identify potential non-point source pollution zones.

4.3 Parameters Monitored via RS-GIS Integration

A recurring set of water quality parameters are found in most studies, which include:

- Physical: Turbidity, Temperature
- Chemical: Dissolved Oxygen (DO), Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD), Total Nitrogen (TN), Total Phosphorus (TP)
- Biological: Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), Chlorophyll-a

For example, the study on the Tigris River in Iran (Karimi et al., 2023) used Sentinel-2 imagery to estimate surface temperature, pH, and conductivity. Linear regression models were developed to correlate RS bands with ground-measured values, demonstrating high prediction accuracy ($R^2 > 0.80$ for most parameters).

Table 4: Classification of Analytical Techniques Used in Reviewed Studies

Technique/Method	Type	Purpose	Common Tools Used	Source	Citation
Regression Analysis	Statistical	Band-parameter relationships	R, Excel, Python	Hydrological analysis	(Najafzadeh & Basirian, 2023)
Water Quality Index	Composite	Integrate parameter scores	WQI, ArcGIS	CPCB, EPA	(Zhang et al., 2021)
PCA	Statistical	Correlation analysis	SPSS, R	China water study	(Wu et al., 2023)
Machine Learning	Predictive	Pollution level classification	Python, GEE	Deep Learning models	(M. Ahmed et al., 2022)
Interpolation (IDW etc.)	Geostatistical	Water quality surface estimation	ArcGIS, QGIS	Regional water mapping	(W. Ahmed et al., 2023)

4.4 Regional Distribution and Case Study Diversity

The global distribution of RS-GIS-based water quality research reveals a concentration in developing countries, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. This trend is largely due to rising pollution levels, limited field-based monitoring infrastructure, and increasing access to free satellite data.

Key regional highlights:

- China: Extensive use of RS-GIS for river basin and reservoir water quality tracking.
- India: Studies focus on Ganga, Yamuna, and Sabarmati rivers using Landsat and Sentinel imagery.
- Iran & Middle East: Use of predictive modeling to deal with water scarcity and salinity issues.
- Malaysia: Early adopters of GIS in urban river pollution management.

4.5 Analytical Approaches and Modeling Techniques

Different analytical methods are adopted across studies, including:

- Empirical algorithms: Based on spectral reflectance and band ratios.
- Water Quality Indices (WQI): Composite scores derived from multi-parameter inputs.
- Statistical techniques: Correlation matrices, Principal Component Analysis (PCA), ANOVA.
- Machine learning models: Random Forest, Support Vector Machines (SVM), Artificial Neural Networks (ANN).

Studies that incorporated machine learning (e.g., Wang et al., 2023) observed higher accuracy in water quality classification, particularly when using high-resolution multispectral imagery in tandem with historical pollution data.

5 Analysis Part

This section synthesizes insights from the reviewed literature, focusing on how different studies employed Remote Sensing and GIS technologies to monitor water quality, the methodologies they followed, and the effectiveness of various approaches.

5.1 Temporal and Spatial Scope

One of the main advantages of RS-GIS integration is the ability to cover extensive spatial and temporal scales. Most reviewed studies utilized imagery over 1–5 year periods, with some extending to more than a decade. Temporal analysis helped capture seasonal variability (e.g., pre-monsoon vs. post-monsoon differences), pollution trends, and episodic events such as algal blooms or industrial discharges.

Spatially, studies ranged from urban catchments (e.g., Klang River, Malaysia) to large basins (e.g., Yellow River, China). GIS layers often included watershed boundaries, land use, administrative zones, and hydrological networks. The spatial resolution of satellite data varied from 10m (Sentinel-2) to 250m (MODIS), depending on study requirements.

5.2 Parameters and Satellite Platforms

The most commonly used satellite platforms include:

- Landsat (5, 7, 8, 9): Widely used for its historical data archive and 30m resolution.
- MODIS: Useful for large-area and daily monitoring despite coarse resolution.
- Sentinel-2: Preferred for high-resolution (10m) multispectral monitoring.
- IKONOS, SPOT, and WorldView: Occasionally used for urban/riverine water quality due to fine resolution.

In terms of parameters:

- Turbidity and TSS were easily estimated using band ratios involving red and near-infrared (NIR) bands.
- Chlorophyll-a and phytoplankton abundance were assessed using green and blue bands.
- DO, BOD, and COD required calibration with field data but showed promising correlations in studies using machine learning.

5.3 Use of GIS in Modeling and Decision Support

GIS facilitated spatial modeling and was used to:

- Generate pollution risk maps using geostatistical methods (kriging, IDW).
- Correlate water quality data with land use/land cover patterns.
- Identify pollution hotspots and sensitive ecological zones.
- Simulate pollution dispersion using hydrological models like SWAT (Soil and Water Assessment Tool).

Some studies also integrated socio-economic and industrial zoning data within GIS to understand anthropogenic pressure on aquatic systems.

5.4 Model Accuracy and Evaluation

Evaluation of analytical and predictive models was done using:

- R^2 (coefficient of determination): Most studies reported values between 0.65 to 0.90.
- RMSE (Root Mean Square Error): Used to assess model prediction errors.
- Confusion matrices: Applied in classification-based models to evaluate accuracy.

Studies using RS-GIS with machine learning techniques consistently outperformed traditional regression models, especially when training datasets were large and multi-seasonal.

Table 5: Challenges Identified in Reviewed Literature

Challenge	Description	Frequency in Studies	Source	Citation
Cloud cover in optical data	Reduces image clarity in tropical regions	High	Optical imagery	(Wu et al., 2023)
Lack of ground-truth data	Limits model validation	High	Validation techniques	(Najafzadeh & Basirian, 2023)
Resolution limitations	Not ideal for small or narrow water bodies	Medium	Sensor capabilities	(Usali & Ismail, 2010)
Inconsistent methodology	Difficult to compare across different studies	High	Analytical frameworks	(DeepChand et al., 2022)
Data accessibility	Limited access to satellite or water quality data	Medium	Institutional gaps	(W. Ahmed et al., 2023)

6 FINDINGS

Key findings from the reviewed literature include the following: (i) RS-GIS tools substantially enhance the spatial and temporal scope of water quality monitoring compared to traditional techniques. (ii) Integration of multi-source data (e.g., field samples with satellite imagery) improves model accuracy and enhances reliability of water quality assessments. (iii) Most studies focused on surface water bodies such as rivers and reservoirs, with limited attention given to groundwater or wetland systems. (iv) There exists a noticeable disparity in the availability of data and expertise between developing and developed countries, influencing the depth of analytical modeling.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that remote sensing-derived indices can effectively substitute for field measurements in resource-constrained regions. However, consistent calibration with in-situ data remains essential for model accuracy. Overall, the literature suggests that while technological capabilities have significantly improved, there is a pressing need for methodological standardization and increased international collaboration.

Table 6: Region-Wise Focus of Reviewed Studies

Region	Countries Highlighted	Key Focus Areas	Tools Used	Source	Citation
South Asia	India	Urban water quality	Landsat, WQI	CPCB/Delhi water	(DeepChand et al., 2022)
East Asia	China	Algal bloom & runoff	MODIS, Deep Learning	Chinese Lakes Study	(M. Ahmed et al., 2022)
Middle East	Iran	River monitoring	Sentinel-2, GEE	Iranian river study	(W. Ahmed et al., 2023)
Southeast Asia	Malaysia	General monitoring	Landsat, ArcGIS	Legacy study	(Usali & Ismail, 2010)
North America	USA	Water Quality Index + AI	Remote sensing + ML	WQI + AI integration	(Najafzadeh & Basirian, 2023)

6.1 Remote Sensing is Effective for Monitoring Key Water Quality Parameters

Remote sensing has proven particularly effective in estimating parameters like turbidity, TSS, and chlorophyll-a due to their optical properties and spectral signatures. For chemical and biological parameters (e.g., BOD, COD, DO), satellite data must be calibrated with field measurements, but high correlations have been achieved in recent studies using machine learning.

6.2 Integration of RS and GIS Enhances Interpretation

While RS provides raw observational data, GIS adds analytical depth by enabling spatial correlation, interpolation, and mapping. The integration of these technologies has enabled multi-dimensional studies that link pollution to urbanization, agriculture, and land degradation.

Table 7: Policy Implications Derived from RS-GIS Applications

Application Area	RS-GIS Utility	Policy Outcome Expected	Source	Citation
Urban water management	Hotspot detection	Targeted urban treatment	Delhi case study	(DeepChand et al., 2022)
Agricultural runoff	WQI mapping	Fertilizer control	China ML study	(Sedighkia et al., 2023)
Industrial discharge	Detection via GEE	Regulatory action on industries	Iran case	(W. Ahmed et al., 2023)
Reservoir health	Seasonal trend tracking	Long-term maintenance planning	USA WQI model	(Najafzadeh & Basirian, 2023)

6.3 Open-Source Tools Have Democratized Access

The increasing use of free satellite data (e.g., Landsat, Sentinel), coupled with open-source tools like QGIS and Google Earth Engine, has lowered the barrier for environmental monitoring, especially in developing countries.

6.4 Methodological Gaps and Data Limitations Exist

There is no standardized approach for RS-GIS-based water quality analysis. Parameter selection, image processing methods, and evaluation indices differ widely. Moreover, cloud cover, spatial resolution limitations, and lack of ground-truthing data remain challenges, especially in tropical regions.

6.5 Research is Concentrated in Specific Regions

Most of the reviewed studies are concentrated in Asia (China, India, Iran, Malaysia) and a few in North America and Europe. There is a noticeable lack of research in Africa and small island nations, despite their vulnerability to water pollution and climate change.

7 CONCLUSION

This review synthesizes contemporary research on the application of Remote Sensing and GIS in water quality monitoring and underscores the transformative potential of these technologies. They provide an efficient, scalable, and cost-effective approach for assessing aquatic environments, particularly in regions where conventional monitoring is logistically challenging. However, the variability in methodological approaches, parameter selection, and analytical techniques poses a barrier to cross-study comparison and broader applicability. To maximize the benefits of RS-GIS integration, future research should aim at creating standardized protocols, expanding the range of water bodies studied, and leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and real-time sensing platforms. Such efforts will pave the way for smarter water resource management and contribute to the achievement of global sustainability goals.

The review underscores the growing importance and effectiveness of Remote Sensing and GIS technologies in monitoring, modeling, and managing water quality. These tools offer significant advantages over traditional methods by enabling high-resolution spatial and temporal assessments, identifying pollution hotspots, and facilitating decision-support systems.

However, the analysis also reveals methodological inconsistencies and regional imbalances in the existing body of research. Standardization of methods, increased availability of high-resolution and cloud-penetrating imagery (e.g., radar), and the use of hybrid models integrating RS-GIS with Artificial Intelligence (AI) are potential areas for future development.

In conclusion, RS and GIS represent powerful allies in the global effort to ensure sustainable and safe water resources. Their integration into environmental policy frameworks and infrastructure planning can accelerate progress toward water-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

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