

Use of Archived Data and Geospatial Methods for Characterising Sundarbans



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Abstract The Sundarbans, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and recognised as the world’s largest contiguous mangrove forest, is an ecologically critical region. This unique ecosystem faces significant vulnerability to a range of natural hazards, including cyclones, coastal erosion, land loss, and pollution—all of which contribute to the degradation of its biodiversity and the disruption of essential ecosystem services. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands an integrated, transboundary approach that harmonises ecological conservation with socioeconomic development. This involves not only safeguarding forest habitats but also enhancing livelihoods and reducing poverty among local communities. To enable a comprehensive analysis of both the Indian and Bangladesh parts of the Sundarbans, it is vital to leverage temporal insights from archived geospatial data sets—such as historical topographic maps, declassified satellite-based photographs, and satellite imagery from various Earth observation platforms. In this chapter, we examine a

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variety of data sources that can offer more in-depth insights into the dynamics of this ecosystem. We also compare the utility of contemporary remote sensing data with archived information dating back to the mid-eighteenth century.

Keywords Archived data · Geospatial data · Remote sensing · Mangrove forest · Sundarbans

1 Introduction

The Sundarbans, the world's largest contiguous mangrove forest and a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, is situated in the tidally active lower deltaic plain of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin along the Bay of Bengal (UNESCO, 2025). Spread approximately 10,000 km² across India and Bangladesh, this unique ecosystem supports the livelihoods of around 7.2 million people (Nishat et al., 2019). It provides critical ecosystem services, including acting as a natural buffer against cyclones, coastal erosion, and other environmental hazards (Mukul et al., 2019). The Sundarbans play a key role both ecologically, by protecting the area from coastal erosion, and for people's livelihoods, by providing resources such as honey, fuelwood, and fish (Kibria et al., 2018).

In the Sundarbans region, agricultural land is being abandoned in favour of shrimp aquaculture, and due to increasing salinity level and freshwater scarcity, the region is experiencing a rise in water-borne diseases (Dasgupta et al., 2020). A World Bank study has projected large-scale climate-induced migration from the fringes of the Sundarbans (Nishat et al., 2019).

This world's largest mangrove forest is composed of a network of low-lying conglomeration islands created from sediment loads deposited from the Himalayan rivers (Ghosh et al., 2015). These islands are of mudflats with salt pans and natural levees that are separated by tidal creeks (Siddiqi, 2001) and provide the world's largest remaining habitat for the globally endangered Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) (Mukul et al., 2019). This ecosystem, located in a tropical cyclone belt, demonstrates a complex interaction between social and ecological systems (Kibria et al., 2018). The fluctuating water levels, temperature, and wind flow are affecting the topography of the area, making it prone to several natural hazards, leading to the destruction of forest resources (Jandl et al., 2007). Studies have recommended an integrated approach that envisages the ecological and adjacent socio-cultural systems to be reconciled for natural hazards protection, livelihood improvement, and poverty alleviation (Sayer et al., 2013). The Indian vision emphasises community wellbeing, ecosystem conservation and phased out-migration. The Bangladesh vision emphasises the management and conservation of the delta (IUCN, 2014). Studies have indicated that the majority of the forested grids in the region are likely to experience a shift in forest types due to climate change scenarios (Ravindranath et al., 2006). A study on the comparison of the area with earlier survey records (e.g. early nineteenth-century Dampier and Hodges survey of forest extent) indicates that

the mangrove has shrunk to almost half in size (DasGupta & Shaw, 2017). Previous studies have indicated that the anthropogenic interference began in the region in the late eighteenth century, mainly through agricultural practices (Ghosh et al., 2015), and deforestation is contributing 6–17% of anthropogenic CO₂ emission (2000–2010, about 1.0 Pg C/year was emitted) (Baccini et al., 2012).

As mentioned above, the Sundarbans is increasingly threatened by a combination of anthropogenic pressures and natural forces (Sievers et al., 2020). The degradation of forest cover and associated resources is driven by deforestation, land-use change, and the rising frequency of climate-induced events such as cyclones, floods, and droughts (Karsch et al., 2023). Many villages have already witnessed the disappearance of protective mangrove belts, which serve as the region's first line of defence against climate change impacts. The intrusion of seawater has led to increased salinity, resulting in the decline of high-value, storm-resistant tree species such as Sundari (*Heritiera fomes*), from which the Sundarbans derives its name. This ecological stress is further exacerbated by reduced freshwater and sediment inflows due to upstream damming and river regulation (Dasgupta et al., 2020). The consequences are visible and alarming: several mangrove islands have vanished over the past century, others have significantly shrunk in the last 50 years, and repeated embankment failures have displaced communities and destroyed homes.

In this chapter, we discuss key data sources that can be utilised for long-term assessment of the ecological and socioeconomic conditions of the Sundarbans.

1.1 Study Area

This study investigates the current extent of the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem and its adjacent regions that used to be mangrove forests (Fig. 1). We demonstrate the utility of archived historic geospatial data sets to highlight regions where there is a loss of land or of mangroves over the last 175 years.

1.2 Analytical Framework

The study followed a four step workflow: (1) georeferencing of archived topographic maps (root mean square error (RMSE) < 50 m) using identifiable ground control points, (2) mosaicking and orthorectification of CORONA KH-4B film scans, (3) overlay and change detection with modern satellite imagery in ArcGIS Pro and QGIS, and (4) quantitative estimation of mangrove loss and land conversion using supervised classification and manual visual interpretation. This framework ensured comparability across disparate data sets collected over a span of nearly 250 years.

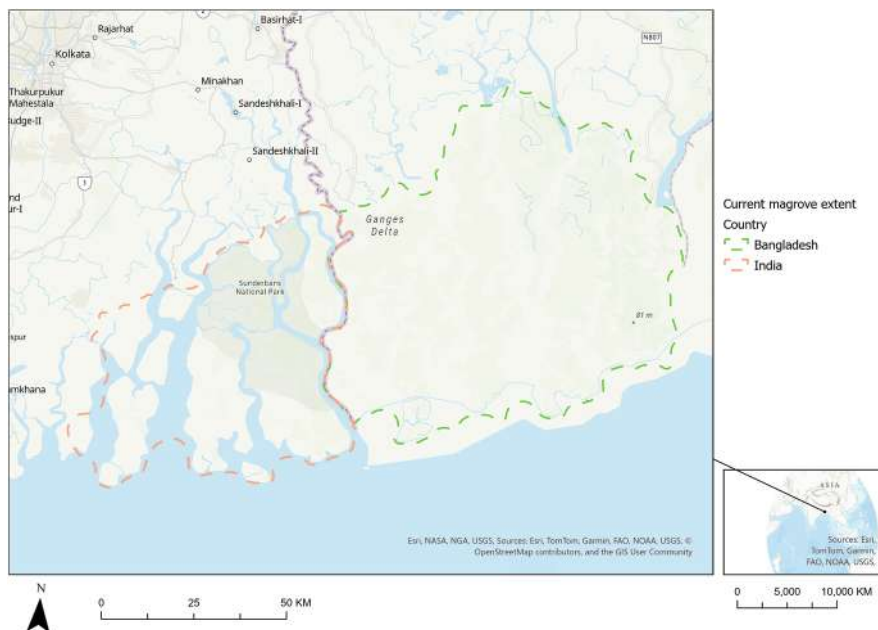


Fig. 1 The study area showing the current extent of mangroves in India and Bangladesh

1.3 Remote Sensing Data

A wide range of satellite imagery is now available for mapping the current extent of the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem, with near-daily acquisitions from multiple platforms. In this study, we utilise imagery from Landsat and PlanetScope satellites. The Landsat programme has been providing global-scale remote sensing data since 1972, while PlanetScope has offered near-daily coverage in recent years (Planet Team, 2019). These data sets are widely used for various Earth resource analyses, including vegetation mapping and monitoring in the Sundarbans. Given the availability of well-established algorithms for vegetation classification and condition assessment using these missions, this chapter focuses on the use of historic, high-resolution, declassified satellite imagery from the CORONA mission to complement contemporary analyses.

The USA's Corona mission, which was the first satellite-based remote sensing mission operational during 1960–1972 (CIA, 2025). These satellites, code-named as CORONA, ARGON, and LANYARD, collected more than 860,000 images of the Earth's surface covering 1900 million square kilometres. The USA's National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) was given the responsibility for the original film and provided access to a duplicate copy for public viewing of the film. The USGS was also provided a copy to support science products. The data set can be accessed from the USGS's Earth Explorer website (USGS, 2025a, 2025b).

A number of camera systems were used for collecting photographic films. The earlier missions carried a single panoramic camera (KH-1, KH-2, KH-3, and KH-6) or a single frame camera (KH-5). The later systems carried two panoramic cameras with a separation angle of 30°, with one camera looking forward and the other looking aft (KH-4, KH-4A, and KH-4B) (USGS, 2025a, 2025b).

For this study, we used images acquired in 1972 by the CORONA satellite with the KH-4B camera that had a spatial resolution of 1.8 m. The images were grey-scale single band, and the interpretation was based on the tone, texture, patterns, shadow, shape, and size of various features. The images were scanned using high-performance photogrammetric film scanner to create digital products at 7 micron or 14 micron resolutions, and the scanned images can be subjected to photogrammetry for 3d information extraction (USGS, 2025a, 2025b).

The images are available in different parts for each panoramic scene, and for merging all the image parts, a specialised stereogrammetry software was used. The open-source software from NASA, AMES Stereo Pipeline (ASP), was used to stitch the individual film scans to generate a whole image (Beyer et al., 2018) (Fig. 2).

The images collected from two different angles were downloaded (DA and DF series), and a mosaic was created for the study area using ArcGIS Pro software (Figs. 3 and 4). The KH4A had a dual panoramic camera system with fore (forward) and aft (backward) looking cameras having a 15° off-nadir view angle, resulting in a convergence angle of 30° and a baseline-to-height ratio of 0.54. The images were named as DF and DA series for and alt looking cameras (Figs. 3 and 4).

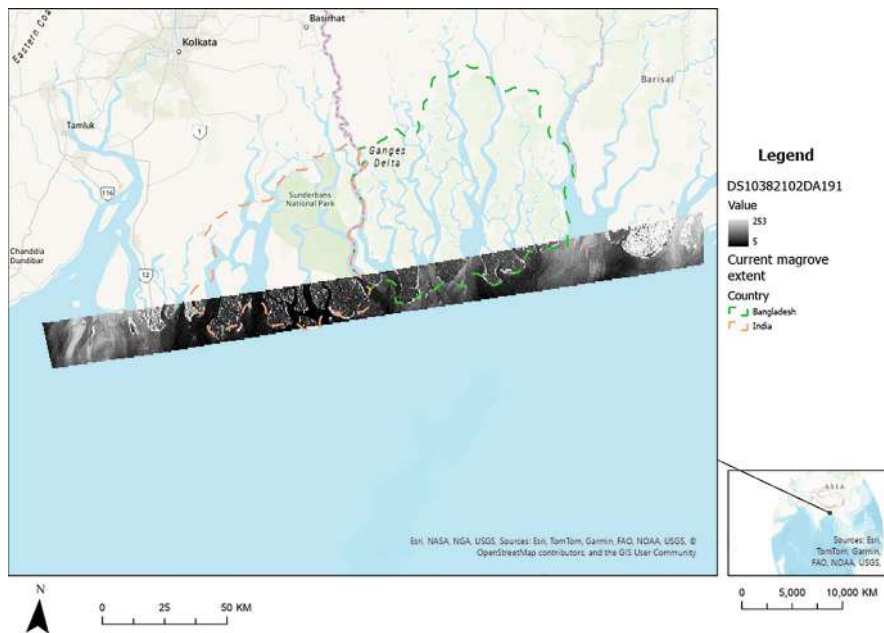


Fig. 2 An example stitched panoramic scene taken from the CORONA satellite

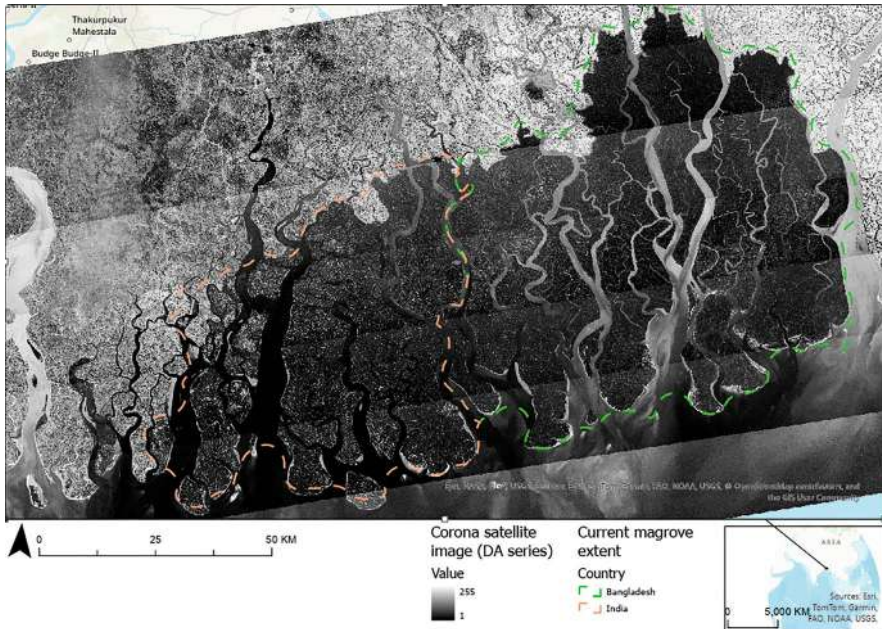


Fig. 4 The mosaic was created for the study area using images collected in the DA series. The DA series collected images in aft (backward) panoramic mode

1.4 Topographic Maps

Topographic maps offer a comprehensive overview of the landscape by depicting key natural and human-made features with precision. Their accuracy stems from data collected through systematic ground surveys conducted by trained professionals, followed by meticulous cartographic plotting. As part of national mapping programmes, these maps adhere to standardised specifications for representing surface features, which are consistently tied to the scale of the map series.

The Survey of India, established in 1767, laid the foundation for mapping the Indian subcontinent. However, systematic mapping of Earth's surface features began only in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Coldstream, 1919). Early maps were produced at coarse scales, limiting their detail and utility. In the early twentieth century, a structured topographic survey scheme was introduced, beginning with maps at a 1:1 million scale (covering 4° latitude × 4° longitude). These were subsequently subdivided into 16 sheets at a 1:250,000 scale, each covering 1° latitude × 1° longitude (Edney, 1991).

For this study, the earliest map utilised was from the 1:250,000 scale series, published in 1913, based on survey data collected between 1895 and 1900, with some hydrological information dating back to 1878 (Fig. 5). Additional maps used in this analysis were drawn from the 1:50,000 to 1:63,000 series (Brown, 2023), most of which were published in the 1920s and 1940s. The 1920s maps incorporated data

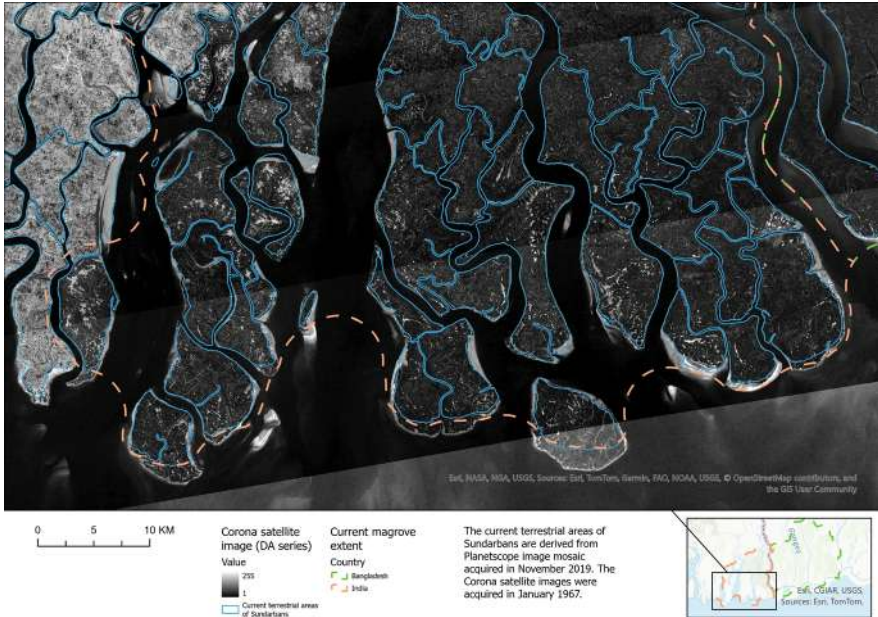


Fig. 5 The southern part of the Sundarbans shows a loss of land over the past 50 years. The blue polygons represent the current extent of Sundarbans mangroves, which are derived from PlanetScope data

collected primarily between 1904 and 1908, while the 1940s maps combined earlier survey data with new information gathered in the 1920s and updates derived from aerial photography conducted in the 1940s. Collectively, these maps offer a valuable historical perspective of the region's landscape (Fig. 6).

The largest-scale maps available for the region were produced at approximately 1:50,000 scale and were published primarily during the 1920s and 1940s (Fig. 7). For this study, the earliest map utilised was from the 1:250,000 scale series, published in 1913, based on survey data collected between 1895 and 1900, with some hydrological information dating back to 1878. Additional maps used in this analysis were drawn from the 1:50,000 to 1:63,000 series (Brown, 2023), most of which were published in the 1920s and 1940s. The 1920s maps incorporated data collected primarily between 1904 and 1908, while the 1940s maps combined earlier survey data with new information gathered in the 1920s and updates derived from aerial photography conducted in the 1940s. Collectively, these maps offer a valuable historical perspective of the region's landscape (Fig. 8).

Several historic topographic maps are available at coarse resolutions. Notably, the region was surveyed by British surveyors in the early eighteenth century, culminating in the publication of a complete map of the study area in 1761, based on survey data collected in 1760 (Fig. 9). Many of these early maps are poorly drawn and lack precise geographic coordinates, making georeferencing a significant

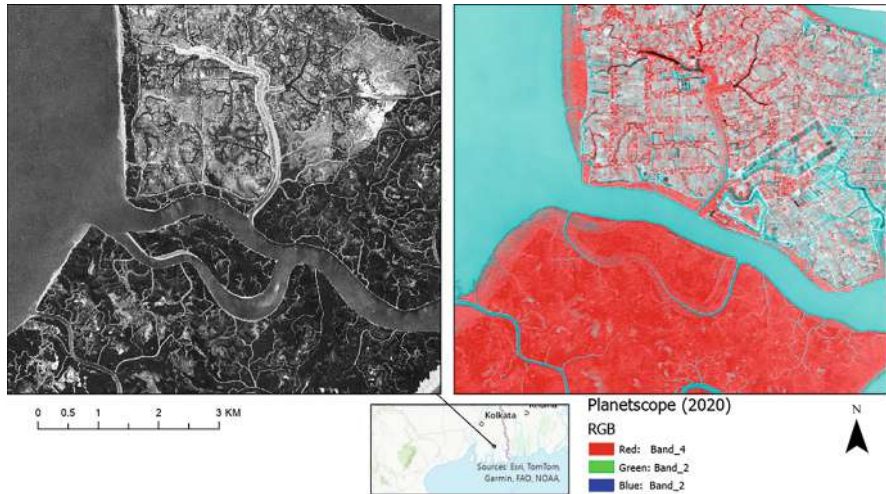


Fig. 6 A local scale comparison between CORONA (1972) and PlanetScope (2020) images showing the conversion of mangrove forests to agricultural lands

challenge. Their limited spatial accuracy and incomplete metadata further complicate integration with modern geospatial data sets.

Another significant topographic map, available from the mid-nineteenth century, was produced at an approximate scale of 1:250,000. This map includes latitude and longitude coordinates, enabling accurate georeferencing using GIS software. Published in 1853, it was based on survey data collected between 1847 and 1851 (Fig. 10) and primarily covers the western portion of the Sundarbans. A comparative analysis with recent Landsat 8/9 imagery reveals notable mangrove forest loss, particularly in the northern and western regions of the study area (Fig. 10).

The western part of the Sundarbans has undergone significant transformation, with large areas converted into human settlements, including villages, small towns, agricultural lands, and road networks (Fig. 11). These regions now show no visible signs of mangrove forests. Mangrove ecosystems are well-known for their role in mitigating the adverse impacts of cyclones and sea-level rise. However, the western Sundarbans is now highly susceptible to coastal erosion (Mohammed et al., 2024). The replacement of mangroves with agricultural and residential land use increases the vulnerability of these areas to extreme weather events and long-term environmental degradation.

The northern part of the region, once dominated by mangrove forests, has also experienced significant encroachment by human settlements and is now largely characterised by aquaculture activities. In the Landsat false-colour composite imagery, dark blue patches clearly indicate the presence of aquaculture ponds and facilities (Fig. 12). This transformation reflects a shift in land use that has implications for ecosystem health and resilience. The destructive aquaculture practices of the past are well-known to destroy mangrove forests in the region (Parvin et al., 2023).

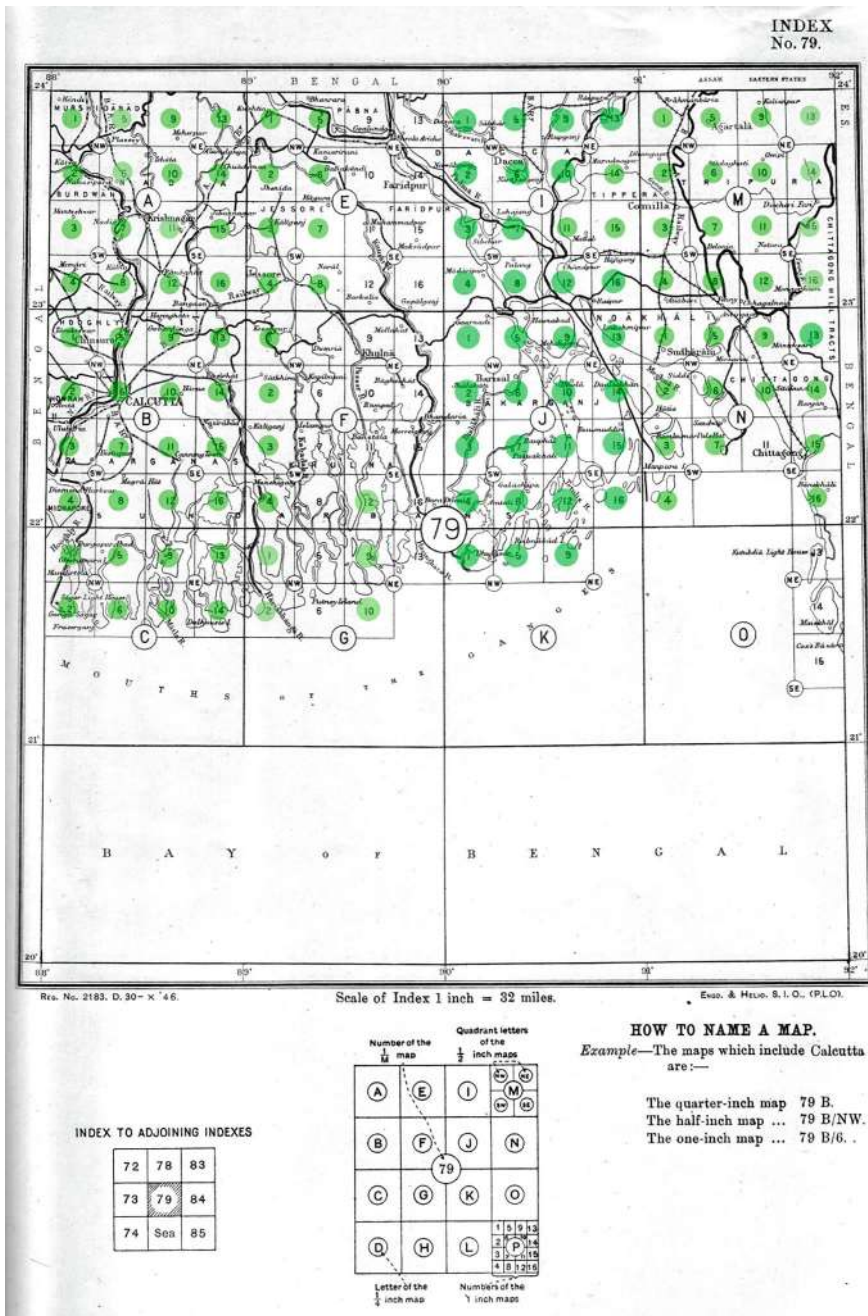


Fig. 7 The coverage of India and the surrounding regions by topographic maps (1:50–63,000) in the Sundarbans region (source: Brown, 2023)

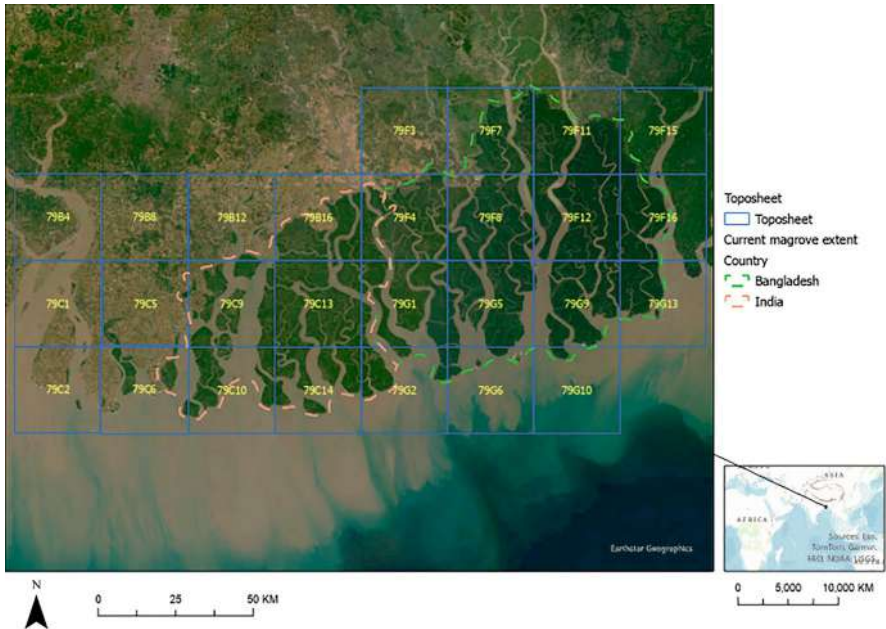


Fig. 8 The current extent of the mangrove vegetation is distributed across India and Bangladesh. The earlier extent was much larger, which can be seen in topographic maps published in the early twentieth century. These toposheets are available at roughly 1:63,000 map scale and were published in the early and mid-twentieth century. The recent topographic maps can be obtained from the survey departments of India and Bangladesh

A well-established human settlement in the region can be seen in the photographs taken by the authors during a field visit to the area, featuring aquaculture ponds, road networks, residential structures, agricultural fields, and railway tracks (Fig. 13). While exploring Google Street View, we noticed several other anthropogenic structures such as railway tracks and mobile towers.

1.5 *Combining Historic Topographic Maps with Declassified Images and Recently Acquired Remote Sensing Data*

Integrating multiple archival data sets offers valuable insights into the long-term ecological dynamics of ecosystems. Such an approach is particularly critical for future management, as climate projections indicate an increased frequency of extreme weather events, which could severely impact ecosystem health and, consequently, local livelihoods (Sarkar et al., 2024). This strategy becomes even more important in regions like the Sundarbans, where large areas are inaccessible and inhabited by wildlife, making remote sensing-based desktop analyses the most practical and effective method for monitoring and assessment (Srivastava et al., 2025).



Fig. 9 The oldest topographic map of Sundarbans available at the scale of approximately 1:300,000. The map was published in 1761, and the area was surveyed in 1760. This map has geographic area and map scale, but key coordinate information is missing, making georeferencing a challenge (source: Brown, 2023)

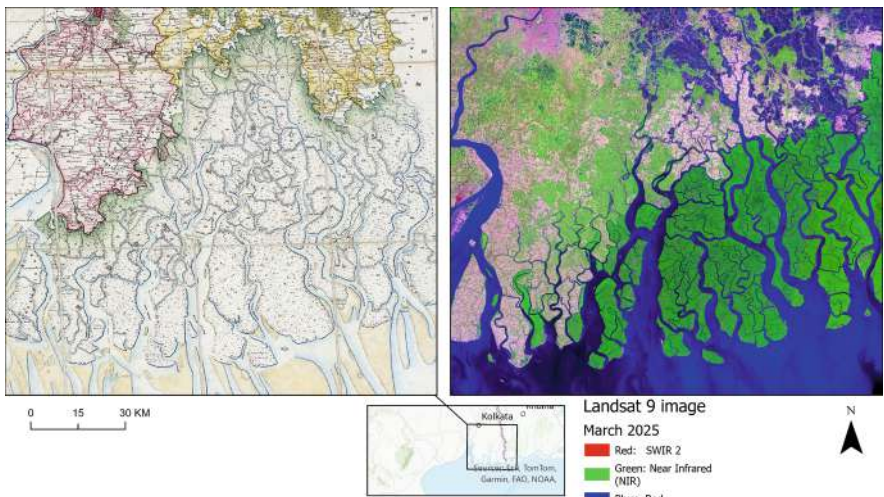


Fig. 10 The topographic map, prepared in 1853 from survey data collected between 1847 to 1851 clearly shows a much larger northern extent of the Sundarbans mangroves when compared with a recently acquired Landsat 9 image. The dark green colour in the Landsat image indicates mangrove forests. These mangrove forests are replaced by urban areas and agricultural fields on the western and northern sides

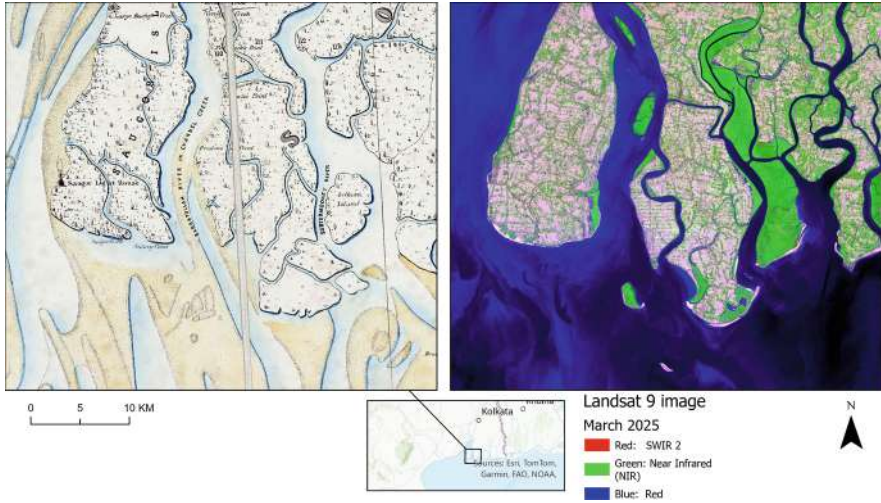


Fig. 11 The detailed version of Fig. 8 focuses on the western part of the Sundarbans, which is now fully converted to small towns, villages, and agricultural fields with road networks

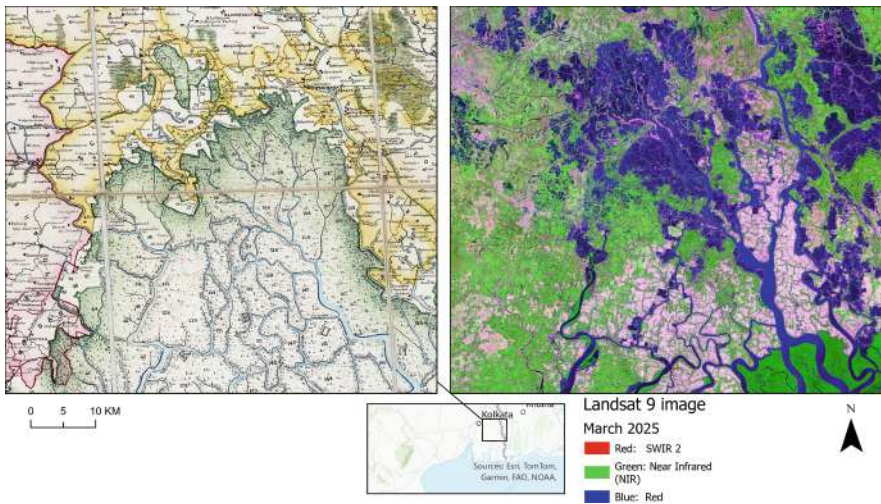


Fig. 12 The detailed version of Fig. 8 focuses on the northern part of the Sundarbans, which is now fully converted to small towns, villages and agricultural fields with road networks

The topographic maps published in 1922, based on survey data collected in 1905 primarily for revenue purposes, provide valuable insights into the ecological conditions of that period (Fig. 14). When compared with the 1942 topographic map, clear evidence of anthropogenic encroachment and land loss emerges. Further comparison with remote sensing imagery from the early 1970s reveals continued changes in both landmass and mangrove cover. A recent Landsat image highlights significant



Fig. 13 Photographs taken in the northern part of the regions mentioned in Fig. 10. This area was a mangrove forest in the past, but now it is an established human settlement with aquaculture ponds, houses, power lines, and roads (source: photographs taken by authors, February 2023)

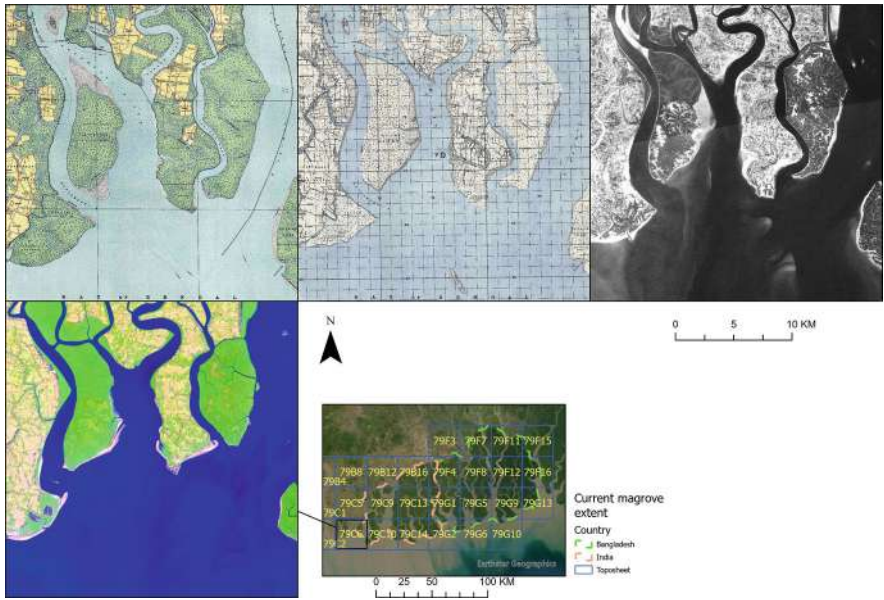


Fig. 14 A comparison of geospatial information collected over 120 years. The information is from early and mid-twentieth-century topographic maps, CORONA satellite data collected in the 1970s, and a recent Landsat 9 image. An anthropogenic conversion of a mangrove ecosystem into human settlement can be seen in one of the islands that were dominated by mangroves in the year 1905

transformations, particularly in the southern part of the region, underscoring the extent of ecological change over time (Fig. 15).

Recent Google Earth Street View imagery of the same area reveals that land once covered by mangrove forests has been transformed into a well-established human

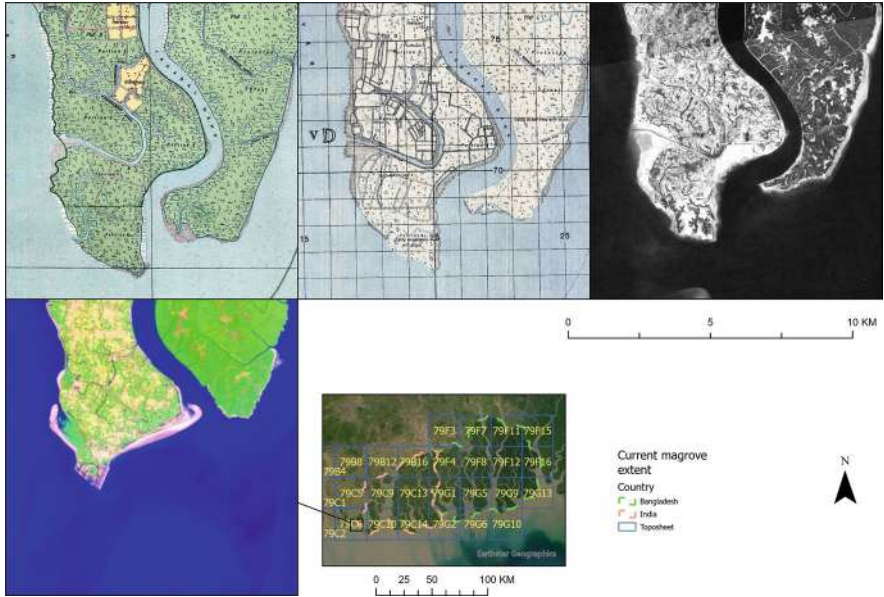


Fig. 15 A detailed view of the southern end of the island, where mangrove forests are totally lost. Land loss over time can also be noticed in the southern end, mostly in the last 50 years



Fig. 16 Examples of mangrove area converted into human settlements showing commuters, power lines, roads, and houses (source: photographs taken by authors, February 2023)

settlement. The area now features a connected network of roads, residential buildings, agricultural fields, communication towers, power lines, and people commuting for work (Fig. 16). The recent conversions of agricultural fields to aquaculture farms have been a concern for this ecosystem (Sumon et al., 2025).

2 Conclusions and Recommendations

Archived data sets play a vital role in long-term ecological monitoring, offering critical insights that inform future planning and conservation strategies for sensitive ecosystems. Many human settlements are increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events, particularly in areas where natural ecosystems—once capable of buffering such impacts—have been degraded or lost. With advancements in data processing and image analysis technologies, it is now possible to extract meaningful information from historical landscape records. This enables the identification of high-risk regions and supports more targeted efforts to preserve and restore ecologically significant areas.

A variety of additional sources can be utilised to enrich long-term ecological assessments, including archived aerial photographs of the region. Beyond topographic maps and satellite imagery, nonspatial historical records containing geographic descriptions also offer valuable context for understanding ecosystem changes over time. Integrating these diverse data sources using modern geospatial technologies and recent high-resolution data sets enables a more comprehensive reconstruction of past landscapes and supports more informed conservation and management strategies.

Future research should increasingly integrate high-resolution LiDAR and UAV photogrammetry for canopy structure mapping, SAR time-series (Sentinel-1, ALOS PALSAR) for salinity and inundation monitoring, and machine learning-based change detection algorithms for automated analysis of multi-temporal data sets. Such innovations, when combined with archived historical baselines, can provide a holistic monitoring system that not only tracks ecological integrity but also anticipates areas most vulnerable to sea-level rise and human encroachment.

Acknowledgement The book chapter is written from the study under the Multinational Collaborative Project partially supported by Asia Pacific Network for Global Change Research (APN-GCR) and University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC), Australia. The logistic support from Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Department of Agricultural Research and Education, Govt. of India for the study is duly acknowledged.

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