

Propagation of Meteorological Drought into Satellite-Observed Reservoir Storage and Multi-Horizon Forecasting of a Standardized Water-Level Index for the Chah-Nimeh 3 Reservoir, Iran

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Abstract: Reservoir storage in hyper-arid basins responds to drought with a delay that is rarely quantified with observations. This study combines a monthly satellite record of the Chah-Nimeh 3 reservoir in Sistan, Iran (December 2018 – November 2025, 83 months) with local precipitation, potential evapotranspiration and the three-month Standardized Precipitation (SPI-3) and Standardized Precipitation Evapotranspiration (SPEI-3) indices. A Standardized Water-Level Index (SWLI) derived from the satellite storage is used to describe reservoir drought. Storage declined significantly over the record (Mann–Kendall $Z = -5.03$), from an annual mean of 108 million cubic metres (MCM) in 2019 to 47 MCM in 2023, and 13 months had $SWLI \leq -1$, almost all of them in the 2023–2024 drought. Lagged correlation showed that SPI-3 leads the SWLI by 4 months ($r = 0.38$) and SPEI-3 by 5 months ($r = 0.28$), which reflects the delayed propagation of meteorological drought through the transboundary Hirmand system. Six models (MLR, SVR, XGBoost, an SVR tuned by the sparrow search algorithm, an XGBoost tuned by the whale optimization algorithm and a GRU network) were compared with persistence for forecasting the SWLI one and three months ahead under a chronological split. At one month SVR-SSA was the best model (RMSE = 0.437, NSE = 0.75) and improved on persistence (RMSE = 0.525) by 17%. At three months all models lost skill, but XGB-WOA still reduced the error of persistence by 10%. Antecedent SWLI dominated the one-month forecasts, whereas the six-month precipitation total and SPI-3 lagged by four to five months became the most important predictors at three months. The results quantify drought propagation in a data-scarce transboundary basin and provide a simple early-warning tool.

Keywords: Hydrological drought, SPI, SPEI, Reservoir storage, Sparrow search algorithm

1. Introduction

Drought propagates through the hydrological cycle: a precipitation deficit first reduces soil moisture, then streamflow, and finally groundwater and reservoir storage (Van Loon, 2015). The delay and attenuation of this propagation determine how early a meteorological signal can be used to warn of a water-supply drought. Standardized indices provide a convenient framework for the comparison: the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI; McKee et al., 1993) and the Standardized Precipitation Evapotranspiration Index (SPEI; Vicente-Serrano et al., 2010) describe the meteorological forcing, and analogous standardized indices can be computed for streamflow, groundwater or reservoir storage (Barker et al., 2016).

In regions where storage is not publicly measured, satellite observations can supply the hydrological side of this analysis. Optical imagery gives the water-surface area, and area–volume relationships convert it into storage (Gao, 2015; Busker et al., 2019). The resulting series can be standardized in the same way as SPI, which makes the propagation from meteorological to reservoir drought directly measurable.

The Sistan plain in south-eastern Iran is an extreme case of vulnerability. Its water comes almost entirely

from the transboundary Hirmand (Helmand) River, which is regulated in Afghanistan, and is stored in the four Chah-Nimeh reservoirs. Local precipitation is below 60 mm per year while potential evapotranspiration exceeds 3,000 mm, so the local water balance is strongly negative and the reservoirs depend on upstream releases. The desiccation of the Hamoun wetlands (Sharifikia, 2013) and the recurrent dust storms of the region (Rashki et al., 2012) illustrate the consequences of drought in this system.

Data-driven models are increasingly used to forecast drought indices, often in combination with metaheuristic optimizers (Mohamadi et al., 2020; Nabipour et al., 2020; Piri et al., 2023). Most of these studies forecast meteorological indices from their own past values. Forecasting a reservoir-storage index from meteorological indices is more directly useful for management, and it tests whether the propagation relationship is strong enough to be exploited. The objectives of this study were (i) to characterize the storage dynamics and the reservoir drought of Chah-Nimeh 3 from satellite data, (ii) to quantify the lag between meteorological and reservoir drought, and (iii) to forecast the SWLI one and three months ahead with

machine learning, deep learning and metaheuristic-tuned models, benchmarked against persistence.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area and Data

Chah-Nimeh 3 (about 30.83° N, 61.69° E) is one of four natural depressions that store water diverted from the Hirmand River east of Zabol, Sistan and Baluchestan province, Iran (Fig. 1). They supply drinking water to the city of Zabol and irrigation water to the Sistan plain.

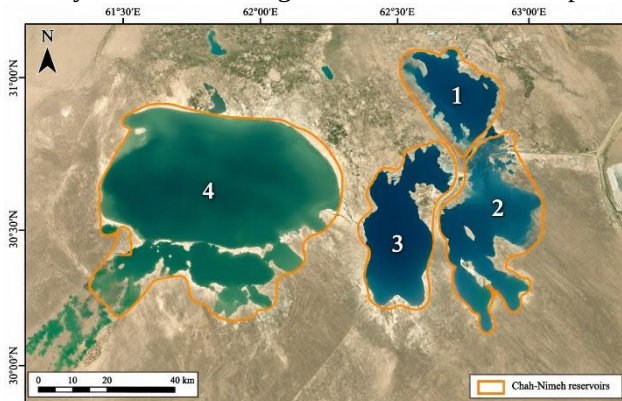


Figure 1. Location of the Chah-Nimeh 3 reservoir, Sistan, Iran

The dataset comprises 83 consecutive monthly records from December 2018 to November 2025. For each month it contains the water-surface area obtained with three indices (NDWI, MNDWI and AWEI_sh), the reservoir storage with its 95% confidence interval, the filling ratio of the reservoir, monthly precipitation and potential evapotranspiration over the reservoir area, the climatic water balance ($P - PET$), and the standardized indices SPI-3, SPEI-3 and SWLI. The area and storage series were derived from Sentinel-2 imagery processed in Google Earth Engine; the meteorological series are gridded reanalysis estimates for the reservoir location. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the monthly record (December 2018 – November 2025)

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurt
Storage (MCM)	5.88	124.12	82.57	26.58	-0.67	-0.01
Filling ratio (%)	0.95	20.11	13.38	4.31	-0.67	-0.01
SWLI	-2.90	1.57	-0.00	1.01	-0.67	-0.01
SPI-3	-0.80	3.73	-0.00	1.01	1.59	2.26
SPEI-3	-1.62	1.42	-0.00	1.01	-0.15	-1.44
P (mm)	0.00	38.57	3.16	5.88	3.49	15.54
PET (mm)	66.65	565.44	290.46	164.28	0.24	-1.39

The three area indices agree closely (pairwise $r \geq 0.99$), so the storage estimate is insensitive to this choice. The width of the reported confidence interval of the storage is 6.4% of the estimate on average, and exceeds 50% only in the driest month. Mean annual

precipitation over the reservoir is about 37 mm against a potential evapotranspiration of 3432 mm, so the climatic water balance is negative in every month of the record (Fig. 3).

2.2. Standardized Indices

SPI-3 and SPEI-3 were computed from three-month accumulations of precipitation and of the climatic water balance, respectively, following McKee et al. (1993) and Vicente-Serrano et al. (2010): the accumulated series is fitted with a probability distribution and transformed into the equivalent standard normal variate,

$$I = \Phi^{-1}[F(x)] \quad (1)$$

where F is the fitted cumulative distribution and Φ the standard normal distribution function. The Standardized Water-Level Index (SWLI) applies the same transformation to the satellite-derived storage of the reservoir, so that $SWLI = 0$ corresponds to the median storage of the record and $SWLI \leq -1$ denotes reservoir drought. Because the record is only seven years long, the indices are standardized with respect to this period and not with respect to a 30-year climatology; they therefore describe relative rather than absolute drought severity.

2.3. Lagged Dependence

The propagation of meteorological drought into the reservoir was quantified with the cross-correlation between the SWLI of month t and the meteorological variables of month $t - L$ for lags L of 0 to 12 months. The lag with the maximum correlation is interpreted as the characteristic response time of the reservoir.

2.4. Forecasting Models and Experimental Design

The target was $SWLI(t+h)$ with $h = 1$ and $h = 3$ months. The 17 predictors were the SWLI of months t , $t-1$ and $t-2$ and its monthly change, SPI-3 at lags 0, 3, 4 and 5 months, SPEI-3 at lags 0, 4 and 5 months, the six-month precipitation total, the six-month water balance, the potential evapotranspiration of month t , the MNDWI water area of month t , and the sine and cosine of the target month. The GRU network received the previous 12 months of $[SWLI, SPI-3, SPEI-3, P, PET, \text{area}, \sin, \cos]$.

The record was split chronologically by target month into training (to December 2022, $n = 42$), validation (2023, $n = 12$) and test (2024–2025, $n = 23$) sets. Six models were compared: multiple linear regression (MLR), support vector regression (SVR; Drucker et al., 1997), XGBoost (Chen and Guestrin, 2016), a GRU network (Cho et al., 2014), an SVR whose hyperparameters were tuned by the **sparrow search algorithm** (SVR-SSA; Xue and Shen, 2020) and an XGBoost tuned by the **whale optimization algorithm** (XGB-WOA; Mirjalili and Lewis, 2016). In SSA, producers with the best fitness search freely while scroungers follow them and a fraction of scouts react to danger; in WOA, agents either encircle the best solution or approach it along a logarithmic spiral. Both searches

used 20 agents and 40 iterations with the validation RMSE as fitness (MEALPY; Van Thieu and Mirjalili, 2023). Persistence ($SWLI(t+h) = SWLI(t)$) was the benchmark, and performance was evaluated with R^2 , RMSE, MAE, NSE (Nash and Sutcliffe, 1970) and Willmott's index (Willmott, 1981).

3. Results

3.1. Storage and Drought Dynamics

The satellite record (Fig. 2) shows a wet phase in 2019–2020, a progressive depletion that culminated in 2023, and a recovery after the spring of 2024. Annual mean storage decreased from 108 MCM in 2019 to 47 MCM in 2023 (–56%) and recovered to 90 MCM in 2025, and the filling ratio fell from a maximum of 20.1% to a minimum of 1.0%. The Mann–Kendall test confirms a significant declining trend over the record ($Z = -5.03$, $p < 0.001$). The annual mean SWLI decreased from +0.96 in 2019 to -1.35 in 2023, and 13 months reached $SWLI \leq -1$, of which 12 occurred between May 2023 and April 2024. This continuous 12-month reservoir drought is the dominant event of the record.

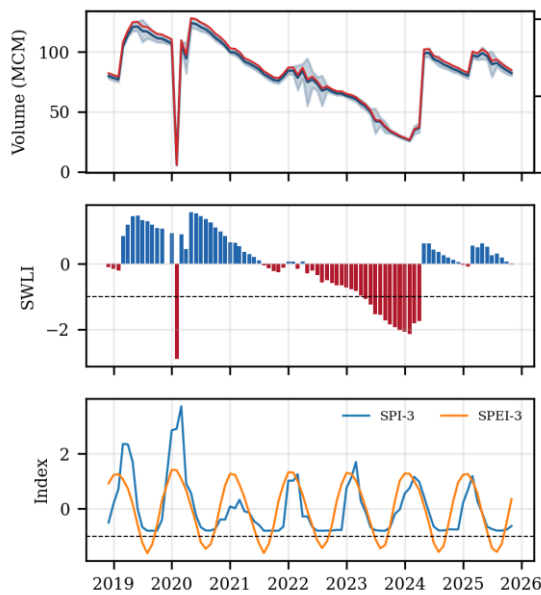


Figure 2. (a) Satellite storage with its confidence band and filling ratio, (b) SWLI and (c) SPI-3 and SPEI-3

Local precipitation is extremely low and concentrated in winter, whereas potential evapotranspiration peaks in June–July (Fig. 3). The climatic water balance is negative throughout the year, with a mean of -287 mm per month, which confirms that the reservoir is maintained by upstream inflow and not by local rainfall.

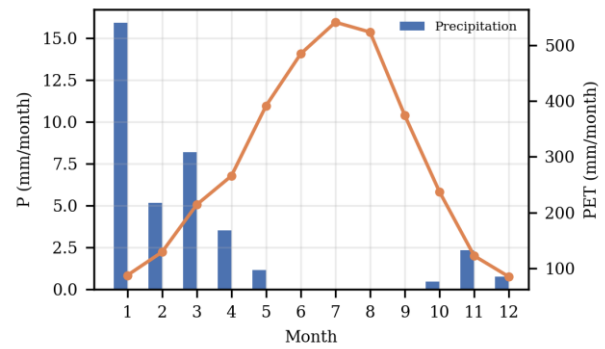


Figure 3. Monthly climatology of precipitation and potential evapotranspiration over the reservoir

3.2. Propagation of Meteorological Drought

Table 2. Correlation of the SWLI with meteorological variables at lags of 0–8 months

Lag (months)	SPI-3	SPEI-3	Precipitation	Water balance
0	-0.05	-0.21	-0.03	-0.25
1	+0.03	-0.13	-0.22	-0.22
2	+0.28	+0.02	+0.12	-0.11
3	+0.34	+0.15	+0.18	+0.01
4	+0.38	+0.24	+0.27	+0.12
5	+0.35	+0.28	+0.27	+0.23
6	+0.31	+0.22	+0.25	+0.25
7	+0.22	+0.11	+0.22	+0.21
8	+0.09	-0.02	+0.18	+0.08

The lagged correlations (Table 2, Fig. 4) show a clear propagation pattern. At lag 0 the correlation of the SWLI with SPI-3 is negligible (-0.05) and with SPEI-3 it is even negative (-0.21), because the wettest months are also the coldest months, when the reservoir is at its seasonal minimum. The correlation increases with the lag and reaches a maximum of 0.38 at 4 months for SPI-3 and 0.28 at 5 months for SPEI-3; precipitation alone peaks at 4 months. Beyond eight months the correlations decay to zero. A response time of four to five months is consistent with the travel and regulation time of the Hirmand system: precipitation over the upper basin has to generate runoff, pass the upstream reservoirs and be diverted into the Chah-Nimeh depressions. The maximum correlation of about 0.38 also shows that local meteorological indices explain only some 14% of the variance of the reservoir index, which is expected in a transboundary basin where releases are a management decision.

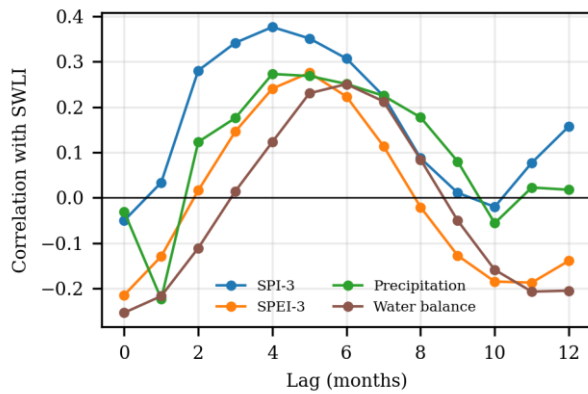


Figure 4. Correlation of the SWLI with meteorological variables as a function of the lag

3.3. Forecast Accuracy

Table 3. Test-period (2024–2025) performance of the SWLI forecasts at one- and three-month horizons

Model	R^2 (h=1)	RMSE (h=1)	NSE (h=1)	R^2 (h=3)	RMSE (h=3)	NSE (h=3)
Persistence	0.713	0.525	0.640	0.336	0.942	-0.158
MLR	0.183	0.797	0.171	0.064	0.865	0.023
SVR	0.000	0.938	-0.149	0.161	1.022	-0.362
XGBoost	0.327	0.761	0.245	0.009	1.097	-0.571
SVR-SSA	0.751	0.437	0.751	0.161	0.926	-0.118
XGB-WOA	0.444	0.693	0.373	0.132	0.848	0.063
GRU	0.493	0.737	0.291	0.192	0.859	0.038

At the one-month horizon (Table 3), SVR-SSA was clearly the best model ($R^2 = 0.751$, RMSE = 0.437, NSE = 0.751), ahead of persistence (RMSE = 0.525, NSE = 0.640), XGB-WOA (0.693), the GRU (0.737), XGBoost (0.761) and MLR (0.797). The untuned SVR failed completely (NSE = -0.15): with default hyperparameters the kernel width was inappropriate for the standardized inputs, and the model reverted to an almost constant prediction. The improvement obtained by tuning the same model with the sparrow search algorithm, from 0.938 to 0.437, is the largest effect of metaheuristic optimization found in this study, and it also produced a 17% improvement over persistence. Tuning XGBoost with WOA reduced its error by 9%.

At the three-month horizon all models lost most of their skill, as expected for a system driven by unobserved upstream releases. XGB-WOA had the lowest RMSE (0.848) and the only clearly positive efficiency (0.063), followed by the GRU (0.859) and MLR (0.865); persistence dropped to RMSE = 0.942 with a negative efficiency (-0.16). The relative gain of the best model over persistence increased from 17% at one month to 10% at three months, showing that the value of the meteorological predictors grows with the lead time, in agreement with the four- to five-month propagation lag identified above.

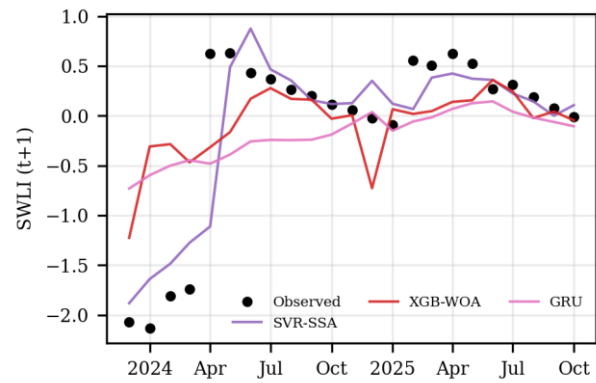


Figure 5. Observed and one-month-ahead forecast SWLI in the test period

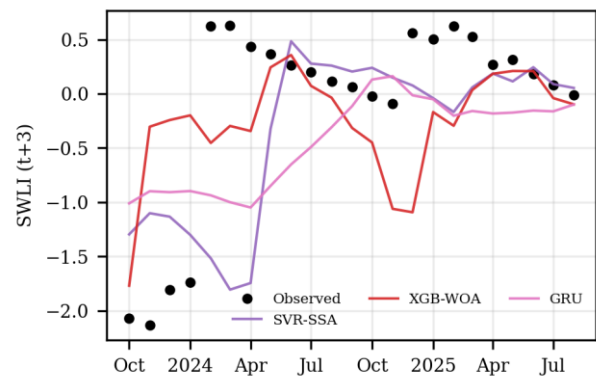


Figure 6. Observed and three-month-ahead forecast SWLI in the test period

The forecast series (Figs. 5 and 6) show that the models reproduce the end of the 2023–2024 reservoir drought and the subsequent wet phase, but that they underestimate the speed of the recovery in spring 2024, when the reservoir refilled within two months. The scatter plots (Fig. 7), the Taylor diagram (Fig. 8) and the error distributions (Fig. 11) confirm that SVR-SSA combines the highest correlation with a realistic variance, whereas the GRU and XGBoost damp the variability.

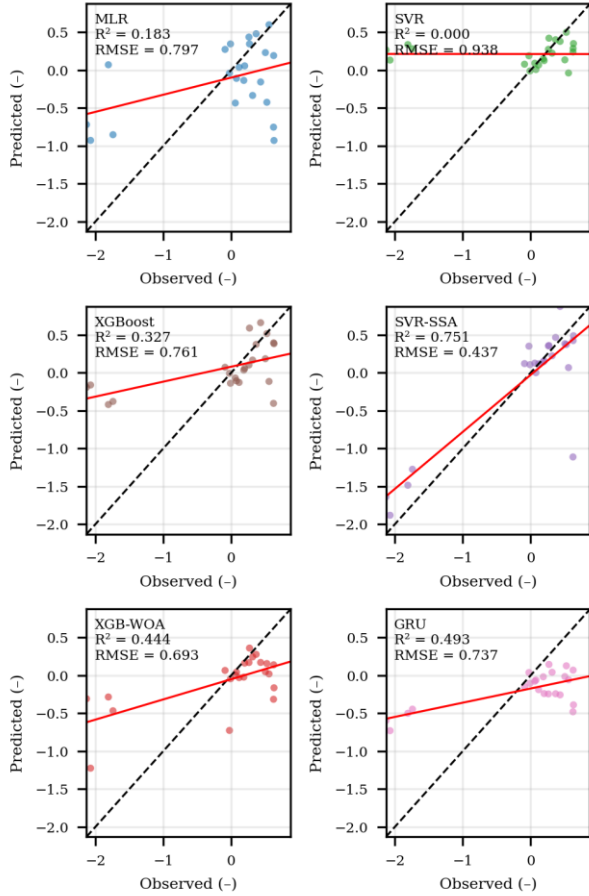


Figure 7. Observed versus one-month-ahead forecast SWLI in the test period

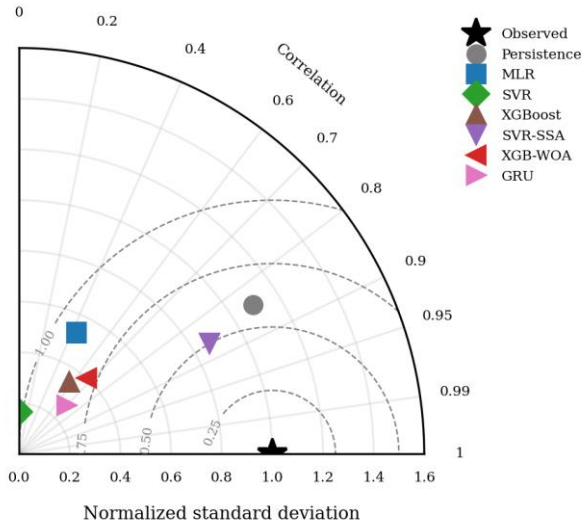


Figure 8. Taylor diagram of the one-month-ahead SWLI forecasts

The convergence curves (Figs. 9 and 10) show that SSA reduced the standardized validation RMSE from 0.303 to 0.274 within a few iterations, and WOA from 0.967 to 0.912. The searches required 3 s and 21 s. The permutation importance of XGBoost (Fig. 11) differs markedly between the two horizons: at one month the antecedent SWLI values dominate (SWLI(t), SWLI(t-

1)), whereas at three months the six-month precipitation total (P6(t)) becomes by far the most important predictor, followed by the lagged SWLI and SPI-3 at four to five months. The models therefore switch from an autoregressive regime at short lead times to a meteorologically driven regime at longer lead times.

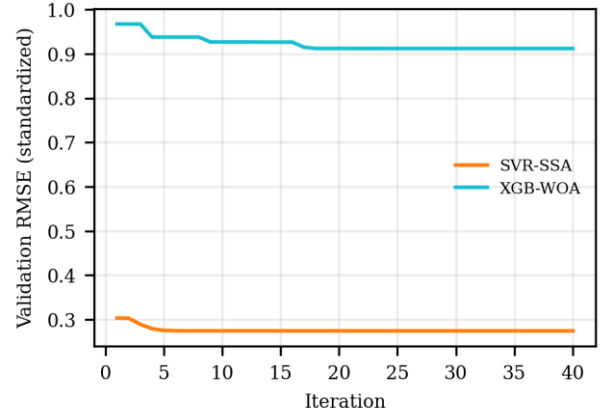


Figure 9. Convergence of the SSA and WOA searches (h = 1)

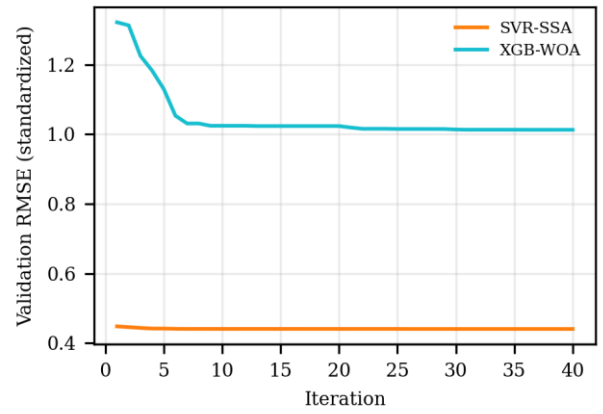


Figure 10. Convergence of the SSA and WOA searches (h = 3)

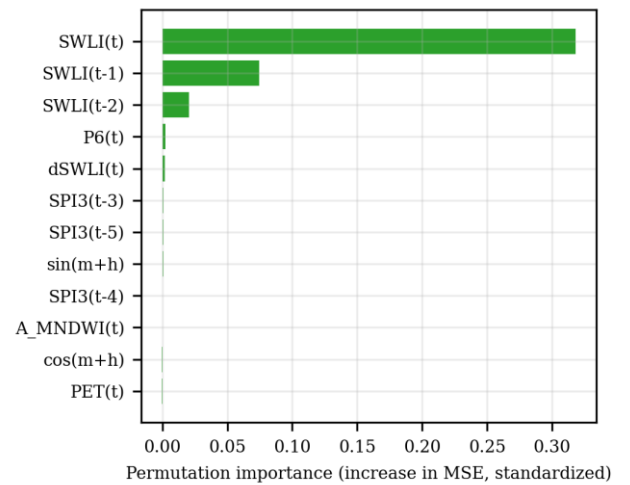


Figure 11. Permutation importance of the XGBoost predictors (h = 1)

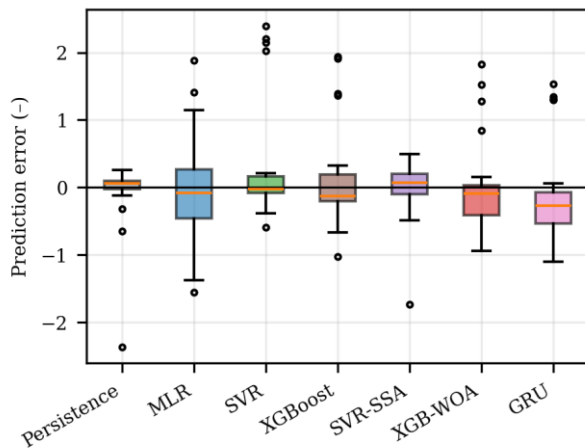


Figure 12. Distribution of one-month-ahead forecast errors

4. Discussion

The analysis quantifies, with observations only, the delay with which meteorological drought reaches the reservoirs of Sistan. The four- to five-month lag between SPI-3 and the SWLI is comparable with values reported for surface-water systems in semi-arid basins, where propagation times of three to six months are common (Barker et al., 2016; Van Loon, 2015). The moderate strength of the relationship ($r \approx 0.38$) is, however, specific to this transboundary system: the reservoirs are filled by regulated releases from Afghanistan, so a wet season upstream does not automatically translate into storage downstream. Any early-warning system for Sistan should therefore combine local drought indices with information on upstream reservoir operation.

From a modelling perspective, three findings are worth emphasizing. First, hyperparameter tuning mattered much more here than in our companion analyses of larger datasets: the untuned SVR was the worst model at one month and the tuned SVR-SSA the best, which shows that default settings can be harmful when the sample is small and the inputs are standardized indices. Second, the benefit of the learning models relative to persistence grew with the forecast horizon, mirroring the physical propagation time. Third, the choice of the best model changed with the horizon, so operational systems should maintain separate models per lead time rather than a single model applied recursively.

Several limitations should be kept in mind. The standardized indices were computed over a seven-year record, which is shorter than the 30 years recommended for SPI, so the absolute classification of drought severity is relative to this period. The SWLI is derived from a satellite storage product whose absolute values carry a systematic uncertainty, although its relative variations are robust. Finally, the test period contains a single drought termination event; longer records and additional reservoirs would be needed before the model ranking can be generalized.

5. Conclusions

Satellite storage of the Chah-Nimeh 3 reservoir was combined with local drought indices to study drought propagation and to forecast a standardized reservoir index. The reservoir experienced a continuous 12-month drought ($SWLI \leq -1$) between May 2023 and April 2024, and its storage declined significantly over the record. SPI-3 led the reservoir index by 4 months ($r = 0.38$) and SPEI-3 by 5 months ($r = 0.28$). SVR tuned by the sparrow search algorithm gave the best one-month-ahead forecasts ($NSE = 0.75$), improving on persistence by 17% and on the untuned SVR by 53%, while XGBoost tuned by the whale optimization algorithm was the most accurate model at three months. Predictor importance shifted from antecedent storage at short lead times to accumulated precipitation and lagged SPI-3 at longer lead times. Operational drought early warning in Sistan should therefore use lead-time-specific models and, above all, information on upstream releases.

6. Data Availability

The monthly satellite storage, area and drought-index series used in this study were produced in Google Earth Engine and are available from the authors on request, together with the analysis code.

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