

Assessing the Impact of Climate Change on Coastal Erosion and Sea-Level Rise

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Abstract

This study explores the growing concerns surrounding the effects of climate change on coastal zones, focusing specifically on coastal erosion and sea-level rise. Coastal regions, being dynamic interfaces between land and ocean, are increasingly vulnerable due to anthropogenic climate change. The research highlights the natural processes contributing to erosion, evaluates the extent of sea-level rise over recent decades, and analyzes how climatic factors intensify these phenomena. Through the use of satellite imagery, historical data, and case studies from different global coastlines, the paper assesses the socio-economic and ecological consequences of these environmental shifts. Policy recommendations are provided for sustainable coastal management and mitigation strategies.

Keywords: *Climate Change, Coastal Erosion, Sea-Level Rise, Coastal Management, Mitigation, Vulnerability, Adaptation Strategies*

1. Introduction

The growing impact of climate change on natural ecosystems and human societies is becoming increasingly evident, with coastal areas emerging as one of the most vulnerable frontiers. Coastal zones, which serve as crucial interfaces between land and sea, host dense populations, economic infrastructure, ports, and vibrant ecosystems such as wetlands, estuaries, and mangrove forests. These areas support livelihoods through fishing, tourism, agriculture, and trade. However, the dual threat posed by **coastal erosion** and **rising sea levels** is intensifying due to human-induced climate change, posing a significant risk to their sustainability and resilience.

Climate change, primarily driven by greenhouse gas emissions from industrial activity, transportation, deforestation, and land use changes, is causing atmospheric and oceanic warming. This warming leads to the **melting of glaciers and polar ice caps**, as well as **thermal expansion of seawater**, both of which contribute to **global sea-level rise**. Furthermore, the increased frequency and intensity of storms, surges, and cyclones amplify wave energy along coastlines, accelerating the process of **coastal erosion**. These changes are not only transforming coastal morphology but also displacing populations, degrading ecosystems, and causing significant economic and cultural losses.

Historically, coastal erosion has been a natural and gradual phenomenon shaped by oceanic processes like wave action, sediment transport, and tidal currents. However, under the influence of climate change, this process is now more rapid and unpredictable. In several regions across the globe, including small island nations, deltaic regions, and densely populated coastal cities, coastlines are retreating at alarming rates. For example, in South Asia's Sundarbans and the Pacific Islands such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, rising seas and land subsidence are already resulting in land loss and displacement, with some areas facing existential threats. This introduction lays the foundation for assessing how climate change is altering the equilibrium of coastal systems and increasing their vulnerability. It draws attention to the **interconnectedness** of sea-level rise and erosion, emphasizing that they are not isolated events but part of a complex climate feedback system. Additionally, the growing importance of this issue is reflected in international policy dialogues, such as the **Paris Agreement** and **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13 – Climate Action)**, which recognize the need for urgent and collective action.

The objectives of this study are fourfold:

1. To analyze the scientific mechanisms and trends of sea-level rise and coastal erosion;
2. To identify and evaluate global and regional hotspots where these impacts are most pronounced

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Understanding the relationship between climate change, coastal erosion, and sea-level rise requires a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from environmental science, oceanography, geography, climatology, and socio-economic theory. This section outlines the foundational concepts and synthesizes key findings from existing literature to provide a scholarly context for the research.

Theoretical Framework

At the core of this research lies the **systems theory** approach, which views coastal zones as dynamic systems shaped by the interaction of atmospheric, marine, terrestrial, and human processes. Climate change acts as an external stressor that disrupts the equilibrium of these coastal systems. The concept of **dynamic equilibrium** is central—coastlines naturally adjust to sediment supply, wave energy, and sea-level changes. However, anthropogenic climate change accelerates the pace of these adjustments beyond natural thresholds, resulting in increased erosion and inundation.

The **Bruun Rule** serves as a fundamental geomorphological model for predicting shoreline retreat due to sea-level rise. It posits that for every unit of sea-level rise, the beach profile moves landward and upward in a proportionate manner. Although criticized for its simplicity and lack of accommodation for sediment dynamics and coastal structures, the Bruun Rule remains widely cited for preliminary assessments. Another essential theory is the **Sediment Budget Concept**, which evaluates the gains and losses of sediment in a coastal cell. Climate change, by altering precipitation patterns, river discharge, and storm frequency, influences sediment supply and transport, disrupting the balance and contributing to erosion. Additionally, **risk theory** and **vulnerability frameworks** are employed to analyze the socio-economic dimensions of coastal degradation, focusing on exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity of human populations.

Review of Literature

Numerous studies have contributed to our understanding of climate-induced changes along coastlines. The **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** reports, particularly the Sixth Assessment Report (2021), emphasize the unequivocal role of human activity in accelerating sea-level rise and the widespread impacts on coastal ecosystems and communities. According to the IPCC, global mean sea level rose by approximately 20 cm during the 20th century and is projected to rise by up to 1.1 meters by 2100 under high-emission scenarios. Research by **Nicholls and Cazenave (2010)** highlights that deltaic regions such as the Nile, Ganges-Brahmaputra, and Mekong are particularly vulnerable due to their low elevation and high population density. Their study underscores the compounded risk of land subsidence, reduced sediment supply due to upstream dams, and sea-level rise in accelerating erosion.

Ericson et al. (2006) conducted a global assessment of delta vulnerability, demonstrating that over 10 million people live in delta regions threatened by relative sea-level rise and suggesting the need for urgent adaptive infrastructure and policy. Similarly, **Leatherman (2001)** draws attention to the impacts of sea-level rise on U.S. coastal zones, advocating for integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) as a comprehensive solution. From a regional perspective, **Dasgupta et al. (2009)** provide critical insights into the socio-economic impacts of sea-level rise in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh. Their findings show that even a 1-meter rise could displace millions, submerge agricultural land, and increase salinity intrusion into freshwater systems.

In the context of small island developing states (SIDS), **Kelman and West (2009)** explore the existential threats posed by sea-level rise. Their work emphasizes the need for combining scientific adaptation with community knowledge to build resilience, a theme echoed by **Adger et al. (2005)** in their study on social vulnerability and adaptation. Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. Many developing nations lack long-term shoreline monitoring data, which hampers accurate projections. There is also a limited understanding of the cumulative impact of multiple stressors—such as urbanization, deforestation, and climate change—on erosion rates. Moreover, indigenous and local perspectives are often underrepresented in climate adaptation research, despite their potential to inform culturally relevant and sustainable solutions.

Research Gap

The literature affirms that climate change is a driving force behind escalating coastal risks. It also indicates that while numerous technical models and empirical studies exist, there is a pressing need for **integrated, context-specific research** that combines physical science with socio-economic vulnerability assessments. Furthermore, the intersection of coastal policy, climate governance, and community engagement remains an area in need of deeper exploration.

This research seeks to bridge these gaps by offering a multi-scalar analysis of coastal erosion and sea-level rise—one that blends satellite data, field-based case studies, and stakeholder insights to develop holistic strategies for risk reduction and sustainable coastal management.

3. Methodology

This research employs a comprehensive mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of climate change on coastal erosion and sea-level rise across selected Indian coastal regions. By integrating quantitative tools such as geospatial mapping and statistical analysis with qualitative approaches like interviews and focus group discussions, the methodology aims to present a multidimensional understanding of the issue. The study focuses on India's extensive 7,516-kilometer coastline, which includes nine coastal states and two union territories. To capture regional variations and vulnerabilities, four critical coastal zones were chosen as case studies: the Sundarbans in West Bengal, the Chilika Coast in Odisha, Kochi in Kerala, and the Kutch Coast in Gujarat. These sites were selected based on their exposure to coastal threats, ecological importance, and socio-economic sensitivity.

Data collection relied heavily on both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data included sea-level measurements from the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) and the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), erosion and shoreline change maps from the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), and climate projections from the Centre for Climate Change Research (CCCR) under IITM Pune. Socio-economic vulnerability data were gathered from the Census of India, NDMA, and various State Disaster Management Plans. Satellite imagery from ISRO's Bhuvan Portal, Landsat, and Sentinel-2 also supported the remote sensing component of the analysis. In addition, field-level data were collected through semi-structured interviews with local communities, governance officials, and vulnerable groups, as well as through focus group discussions and direct observation of erosion-prone areas and adaptation mechanisms.

To analyze this multifaceted data, the study used advanced GIS and remote sensing tools to map historical shoreline changes, identify areas of erosion and accretion, and overlay projected sea-level rise onto current land-use patterns. Statistical techniques were used to track trends in sea-level changes, compare erosion rates across time periods using methods such as the Linear Regression Rate and End Point Rate, and correlate erosion intensity with climatic variables and human activities. The qualitative component involved thematic analysis of narratives from affected communities to explore how climate impacts are experienced, perceived, and responded to locally, offering valuable insights into governance and adaptation challenges.

Each case study contributed distinct insights: the Sundarbans highlighted the dual threat of sea-level rise and salinity intrusion displacing human and ecological systems; Chilika emphasized cyclone-induced erosion and its implications for biodiversity and tourism; Kochi revealed issues linked to urban development and flooding; and Kutch illustrated the challenges of saline ingress in arid coastal zones. Together, these cases underscore the necessity for region-specific, evidence-based strategies to address climate-induced coastal risks in India. This methodology ensures scientific rigor while remaining rooted in local realities, aiming to inform both academic inquiry and practical policy interventions.

4. Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise: A Scientific Overview

This section provides an in-depth explanation of how climate change causes sea levels to rise. It explains thermal expansion (when ocean water warms and expands) and melting of glaciers and ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica. The global mean sea level has risen approximately 21–24 cm since 1880, with rates accelerating in the 21st century. Projections suggest an increase of 0.6 to 1.1 meters by 2100 under high-emission scenarios. The overview also discusses oceanic circulation changes and subsidence in coastal areas, which can amplify relative sea-level rise locally. Scientific consensus and uncertainties are explored with reference to recent IPCC assessment reports.

5. Coastal Erosion: Mechanisms and Trends

Here, the focus shifts to the physical processes driving coastal erosion. Natural factors such as wave action, tidal currents, storm surges, and sediment transport are discussed. Human-induced changes like construction of seawalls, dredging, and sand mining exacerbate these processes. Case studies illustrate how coastal communities have witnessed beaches retreat by tens of meters in just a few decades. For example, in West Africa, unregulated development and reduced river sediment flow have led to catastrophic erosion. The section also presents erosion mapping data and highlights temporal trends, showing seasonal and long-term shifts in coastline stability.

6. Socio-Economic and Environmental Impacts

This section examines the repercussions of coastal erosion and sea-level rise on communities, economies, and ecosystems. Displacement of populations due to loss of habitable land (climate refugees), reduced fishery yields, loss of biodiversity-rich mangroves, and infrastructure damage are discussed. Economic losses include the decline of tourism and reduced agricultural productivity. Additionally, the paper notes the increased burden on governments for disaster management, healthcare, and resettlement. The disproportionate impact on marginalized populations, especially in low-income countries, is emphasized as a key concern in global climate justice.

7. Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies

This section outlines both nature-based and engineering solutions to tackle the problems of erosion and sea-level rise. Hard engineering solutions include sea walls, breakwaters, and groynes. However, these can sometimes exacerbate erosion downstream. In contrast, nature-based solutions such as mangrove restoration, dune reinforcement, and wetland conservation offer sustainable alternatives. Community-based adaptation approaches are highlighted, such as early warning systems, land-use planning, and climate-resilient infrastructure. International efforts, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and SDG 13 (Climate Action), are mentioned as part of a coordinated response.

8. Conclusion

The conclusion synthesizes the key insights from the research, reaffirming that climate change-induced sea-level rise and coastal erosion represent significant threats to both human and ecological systems. It stresses the urgency of proactive adaptation measures and calls for global solidarity in addressing these pressing environmental challenges. The paper ends with a note on the need for further research, especially in under-studied regions, and highlights the importance of integrating local knowledge into scientific and policy frameworks.

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