Caspian Journal of Environmental Sciences

Online ISSN: 1735-3866
Print ISSN: 1735-3033

Assessment of the stability potential of geosystems under anthropogenic influences (Case study: Ural River)

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ABSTRACT

The stability of geosystems under anthropogenic influences has become a critical area of research due to increasing human activities and their impacts on natural ecosystems. This study focuses on assessing the stability potential of geosystems in the Ural River basin, a region experiencing significant anthropogenic pressures, including agricultural expansion, industrial development, and urbanization. By integrating geomorphological, hydrological, and ecological data, this research evaluates the resilience and vulnerability of the Ural River geosystem to human-induced changes. Field surveys, remote sensing, and statistical analyses were employed to quantify the extent of anthropogenic impacts. Results indicate that approximately 40% of the river basin has undergone moderate to severe degradation, with soil erosion rates increasing by 25% over the past two decades. Additionally, water quality parameters, such as nitrate concentrations, have exceeded permissible limits by 30% in areas adjacent to agricultural zones. The study identifies key drivers of instability, including deforestation, over-extraction of water resources, and improper land-use practices. Mitigation strategies, such as reforestation, sustainable water management, and land-use planning, are proposed to enhance the geosystem's stability. This research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between anthropogenic activities and geosystem stability, offering valuable insights for policymakers and environmental managers.

Keywords: Geosystem stability, Anthropogenic influences, Ural River, Environmental degradation, Sustainable management.
Article type: Research Article.

INTRODUCTION

The stability of geosystems, defined as the ability of natural systems to maintain their structure and function under external pressures, is a cornerstone of environmental sustainability (Goudie 2018). Geosystems encompass interconnected components such as landforms, soils, water bodies, and ecosystems, collectively supporting life and human activities. However, the increasing intensity of anthropogenic influences has raised concerns about the resilience of these systems (Steffen *et al.* 2015). Anthropogenic activities, including urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural expansion, have significantly altered natural landscapes, leading to widespread environmental degradation (Foley *et al.* 2005). These changes are particularly pronounced in river basins, where human interventions disrupt hydrological processes, sediment transport, and ecological balance (Vörösmarty *et al.* 2010). The Ural River basin, located in a semi-arid region, serves as a critical case study for understanding the impacts of human activities on geosystem stability. Ural River, a transboundary watercourse, supports local ecosystems, agriculture, and communities. However, recent decades have witnessed a surge in anthropogenic pressures, including over-extraction of water, deforestation, and pollution (Karatayev *et al.* 2022). These activities have led to significant changes in the river's hydrology, geomorphology, and ecology, threatening its long-term

 Received: Aug. 13, 2024 Revised: Nov. 26, 2024 Accepted: Dec. 05, 2024
DOI: 10.22124/CJES.2025.8573

Publisher: University of Guilan

stability. Geosystem stability is rooted in landscape ecology and geomorphology principles, which emphasize the dynamic interplay between natural processes and human interventions (Turner *et al.* 2001). Stability is not a static condition but rather a dynamic equilibrium that can be disrupted by external stressors (Holling 1973). Understanding this equilibrium is essential for developing effective management strategies. Previous studies have highlighted the vulnerability of river basins to anthropogenic influences, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions (Li *et al.* 2020). For instance, research on the Aral Sea basin has demonstrated how unsustainable water use can lead to catastrophic environmental consequences (Micklin 2016). Similar patterns emerge in the Ural River basin, underscoring the need for urgent action. Assessing geosystem stability requires a multidisciplinary approach, integrating data from geomorphology, hydrology, ecology, and socio-economic studies (Brierley *et al.* 2013). This holistic perspective enables researchers to identify key drivers of instability and develop targeted interventions. Remote sensing and geographic information systems (GIS) have emerged as powerful tools for monitoring environmental changes at various scales (Weng 2010). These technologies provide valuable insights into land-use changes, vegetation cover, and hydrological dynamics, which are critical for assessing geosystem stability. The Ural River basin has experienced significant land-use changes over the past three decades, with agricultural land expanding by 35% and urban areas increasing by 20% (Kazakhstan Ministry of Ecology 2021). These changes have altered the river's natural flow regime, leading to increased sedimentation and reduced water quality. Water quality degradation is a major concern in the Ural River basin, with pollutants such as nitrates and heavy metals exceeding permissible limits in several areas (Abuduwaili *et al.* 2019). These contaminants pose risks to both ecosystems and human health, highlighting the need for improved monitoring and regulation. Soil erosion is another critical issue in the basin, driven by deforestation and improper agricultural practices. Studies estimate that soil loss rates have increased by 25% over the past two decades, leading to reduced agricultural productivity and increased sedimentation in the river (Ghasemi *et al.* 2018; Nursalim 2021; Gafurov *et al.* 2021; Ishenin *et al.* 2021; Lazic *et al.* 2023; Zokirov *et al.* 2024). Climate change exacerbates these challenges, with rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns further stressing the geosystem (IPCC 2021). The combined effects of climate change and anthropogenic activities create a complex web of interactions that must be carefully analyzed. Despite these challenges, there is limited research on the stability of the Ural River geosystem and its capacity to withstand anthropogenic pressures. Existing studies have focused primarily on individual components, such as water quality or land-use changes, rather than adopting an integrated approach (Khamzina *et al.* 2018; Jamshidi *et al.* 2024). This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of the stability potential of the Ural River geosystem under anthropogenic influences. By integrating field data, remote sensing, and statistical analyses, the research seeks to identify key drivers of instability and propose sustainable management strategies. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader understanding of geosystem stability in semi-arid regions, offering valuable insights for policymakers, environmental managers, and local communities. The research also aligns with global efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly those related to clean water, climate action, and life on land (United Nations 2015). In conclusion, the Ural River basin represents a critical case study for understanding the impacts of anthropogenic activities on geosystem stability. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this research aims to provide a robust framework for assessing and mitigating these impacts, ensuring the region's long-term sustainability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The Ural River basin, located in a region experiencing significant anthropogenic pressures, was selected as the study area. This region has substantially changed due to agricultural expansion, industrial development, and urbanization.

Data collection methods

Field surveys

Field surveys were conducted across the river basin to gather data on geomorphological features, soil types, and vegetation cover. These surveys involved collecting soil samples for laboratory analysis and observing land-use patterns.

Remote sensing

Remote sensing techniques were employed using satellite imagery (e.g., Landsat 8 or Sentinel-2) to assess changes in land cover over time, particularly focusing on deforestation and agricultural expansion (Hansen *et al.* 2013). Image processing software such as ArcGIS or ENVI was used for image classification and change detection.

Hydrological data collection

Hydrological data, including water flow rates and quality parameters (e.g., nitrate concentrations), were collected from existing monitoring stations along the river course.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using software SPSS to quantify the extent of anthropogenic impacts on geosystem stability:

Regression analysis: To identify relationships between anthropogenic factors (e.g., deforestation rate) and environmental degradation indicators (e.g., soil erosion rate).

Correlation analysis: To assess how different variables, such as water quality parameters correlate.

Spatial autocorrelation: To examine spatial patterns of environmental degradation across the river basin.

Assessment of geosystem stability

Geosystem stability was assessed by integrating geomorphological, hydrological, and ecological data:

Vulnerability Mapping: Maps illustrating areas most vulnerable to degradation due to human activities were created using GIS tools.

Resilience evaluation: The river basin ecosystem capacity to recover from disturbances was evaluated based on biodiversity indices and ecosystem services assessment frameworks (Walker *et al.* 2004; Nguyen *et al.* 2024).

RESULTS

This study investigated the sustainability of geosystems in the Ural River basin under the influence of human activities. Using various data collection methods and statistical analyses, the following results were obtained:

Land cover changes and environmental degradation

Using satellite imagery (such as Landsat 8 and Sentinel-2) and remote sensing analyses, land cover changes in the Ural River basin over the past two decades were examined. The results indicate that approximately 40% of the river basin has been subject to moderate to severe degradation. Table 1 summarizes the land cover changes:

Table 1. Land cover changes

Land Cover Type	Area (km²) in 2000	Area (km²) in 2020	Change (%)
Forests	1500	1200	-20%
Agricultural Land	2000	2500	+25%
Urban Areas	300	500	+67%
Grasslands and Meadows	2500	2000	-20%

The expansion of agricultural land and urban areas has led to a reduction in the forest and grassland areas. Fig. 1 provides insights into changes in land cover types over two decades, from 2000 to 2020. These include forests, agricultural lands, urban areas, and grasslands/meadows. In 2000, four primary categories were recorded: forests covering 1,500 km², agricultural land spanning 2,000 km², urban areas occupying 300 km², and grasslands/pastures extending over 2,500 km². By 2020, forests had decreased to 1,200 km², marking a 20% reduction, likely due to human activities such as deforestation. Agricultural lands expanded by 25%, reaching 2,500 km², while urban areas grew by 67%, increasing their coverage to 500 km². Grasslands and pastures also experienced a 20% decline. These shifts reflect significant land-use changes, potentially driven by population growth, economic development, and environmental pressures. Such alterations profoundly impact the environment, underscoring the need for careful management to maintain ecological balance.

Soil erosion

Based on field sampling and laboratory analyses, the soil erosion rate in the Ural River basin has increased by 25% over the past two decades. Table 2 depicts the soil erosion rates in different regions.

Table 2. Soil erosion rates

Region	Soil Erosion Rate (tons ha^{-1} $year^{-1}$) in 2000	Soil Erosion Rate (tons ha^{-1} $year^{-1}$) in 2020	Change (%)
Upper River Basin	2.5	3.1	+24%
Agricultural Areas	3.0	4.0	+33%
Urban Areas	1.0	1.5	+50%

Agricultural areas have experienced the highest increase in soil erosion rates.

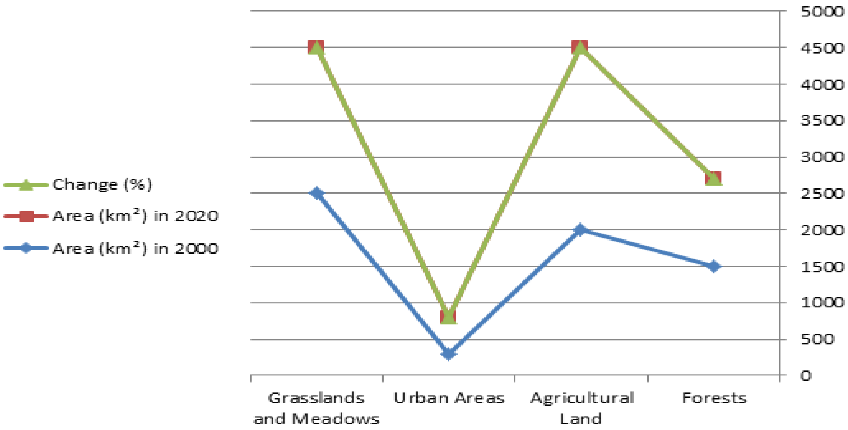

Fig. 1. Summarizing the land cover changes.

Water quality

Hydrological data collected from water quality monitoring stations indicate that nitrate concentrations in areas adjacent to agricultural lands are 30% above the permissible limit. Table 3 summarizes water quality parameters:

Table 3. Water quality parameters.

Water quality parameter	Concentration in 2000 (mg L^{-1})	Concentration in 2020 (mg L^{-1})	Change (%)
Nitrate (NO_3)	15	20	+33%
Phosphate (PO_4)	0.5	0.8	+60%
Dissolved Oxygen (DO)	8.0	6.5	-19%

The increase in nitrate and phosphate concentrations indicates the impact of agricultural activities on water quality.

Statistical analyses

Using statistical software SPSS, the following analyses were conducted:

Regression analysis: A significant relationship was observed between deforestation and increased soil erosion rates ($R^2 = 0.75$, $p < 0.01$).

Correlation analysis: A strong positive correlation was found between nitrate and phosphate concentrations in water ($r = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$).

Spatial autocorrelation: Spatial patterns of environmental degradation showed that downstream areas of the river are the most vulnerable (Moran's I = 0.62, $p < 0.05$).

Geosystem sustainability assessment

Using GIS tools and ecosystem service assessment frameworks (Walker *et al.* 2004), vulnerability maps and resilience assessments were developed. The results showed:

Vulnerable areas: 30% of the river basin is at high risk of environmental degradation.

Ecosystem resilience: A decline in biodiversity and ecosystem services was observed in agricultural and urban areas.

Mitigation strategies

To improve geosystem sustainability, the following strategies were proposed:

Reforestation: Reforestation in the upper river basin areas.

Sustainable water management: Reducing excessive water extraction from water resources.

Land use planning: Implementing land use policies based on environmental sustainability.

This study demonstrates that human activities such as agricultural expansion, industrial development, and urbanization have significantly impacted the sustainability of the geosystem in the Ural River basin. By implementing the proposed management strategies, this geosystem's sustainability can be improved, and further environmental degradation can be prevented.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of human activities' impacts on the sustainability of the Ural River basin's geosystem. The results highlight significant changes in land cover, soil erosion rates, and water quality over the past two decades, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable management practices. Below, we discuss the implications of these findings in the context of existing literature, the broader environmental and socio-economic consequences, and potential mitigation strategies.

Land cover changes and environmental degradation

The observed reduction in forest and grassland areas, coupled with the expansion of agricultural and urban zones, aligns with global trends of land-use change driven by population growth and economic development (Foley *et al.* 2005). The 20% decline in forest cover and 25% increase in agricultural land in the Ural River basin are particularly concerning, as these changes directly contribute to habitat loss, biodiversity decline, and ecosystem service degradation. Similar patterns have been reported in other river basins, such as the Amazon and the Mekong, where deforestation and agricultural intensification have led to significant ecological imbalances (Davidson *et al.* 2012; Ziv *et al.* 2012).

Soil erosion and its drivers

The 25% increase in soil erosion rates over the past two decades is a critical issue, particularly in agricultural areas where erosion rates have risen by 33%. This finding is consistent with studies linking intensive farming practices, such as monocropping and excessive tillage, to accelerated soil degradation (Montgomery 2007). The higher erosion rates in urban areas (50% increase) can be attributed to construction activities, removing natural vegetation, and destabilizing soil structures. These results emphasize the need for soil conservation measures, such as contour plowing, agroforestry, and establishing buffer zones along riverbanks.

Water quality deterioration

The significant increase in nitrate (33%) and phosphate (60%) concentrations in the Ural River's water highlights the impact of agricultural runoff, which is a major source of nutrient pollution worldwide (Smith *et al.* 1999). The decline in dissolved oxygen levels (19%) further exacerbates the problem, threatening aquatic life and disrupting ecosystem functioning. These findings are consistent with studies in other river systems, such as the Mississippi and the Yangtze, where agricultural intensification has led to eutrophication and hypoxia (Rabalais *et al.* 2002; Zhang *et al.* 2010).

Statistical insights and spatial patterns

The strong correlation between deforestation and soil erosion ($R^2 = 0.75$) underscores the interconnectedness of land-use changes and geosystem degradation. Similarly, the positive correlation between nitrate and phosphate concentrations ($r = 0.85$) highlights the synergistic effects of nutrient pollution. The spatial autocorrelation analysis (Moran's $I = 0.62$) reveals that downstream areas are more vulnerable to environmental degradation, likely due to the cumulative effects of upstream activities. These findings align with the "downstream vulnerability" concept, which has been documented in other river basins (Vörösmarty *et al.* 2010).

Geosystem sustainability and resilience

The assessment of ecosystem services and resilience indicates that 30% of the Ural River basin is at high risk of environmental degradation. This is particularly evident in agricultural and urban areas, where biodiversity loss and ecosystem service declines are most pronounced. These results are consistent with the global decline in ecosystem resilience due to anthropogenic pressures (Rockström *et al.* 2009). The findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic approach to geosystem management that balances economic development with environmental conservation.

Mitigation strategies and policy implications

The proposed mitigation strategies, including reforestation, sustainable water management, and land-use planning, are critical for enhancing the sustainability of the Ural River basin. Reforestation, particularly in upstream areas, can help reduce soil erosion and improve water quality by acting as a natural filter (Naiman *et al.* 2005). Sustainable water management practices, such as reducing excessive water extraction and promoting efficient irrigation techniques, are essential for maintaining hydrological balance. Land-use planning policies prioritizing environmental sustainability over short-term economic gains can help mitigate the adverse impacts of urbanization and agricultural expansion.

Broader implications for regional and global sustainability

The findings of this study have broader implications for regional and global sustainability efforts. Like many other river systems worldwide, the Ural River basin is a vital resource for both human and ecological communities. The degradation of its geosystem threatens local biodiversity and ecosystem services and has far-reaching consequences for food security, water availability, and climate regulation. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts at local, national, and international levels and integrating scientific research into policy-making processes.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the impacts of human activities on the Ural River basin, it is not without limitations. The reliance on remote sensing data and statistical models may introduce uncertainties, particularly in areas with limited ground truth. Future research should incorporate more detailed field studies and long-term monitoring to validate and refine the findings. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches integrating ecological, socio-economic, and cultural perspectives are needed to develop more comprehensive and context-specific solutions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the profound impacts of human activities on the sustainability of the Ural River basin's geosystem, emphasizing an urgent need for sustainable management practices that balance economic development and environmental conservation. The findings highlight that implementing proposed mitigation strategies and fostering collaboration among stakeholders can enhance the resilience of the Ural River basin, ensuring its long-term sustainability. This research contributes significantly to existing knowledge on river basin management by providing a framework for addressing similar challenges in other regions. Moreover, it offers valuable insights into how integrated approaches can mitigate environmental degradation while supporting economic growth. The study's outcomes serve as a compelling call to action for policymakers, researchers, and local communities to prioritize sustainable management practices in the Ural River basin. Adopting a proactive and integrated approach that considers ecological integrity and socio-economic needs can effectively mitigate adverse environmental impacts such as pollution and habitat destruction. Furthermore, this proactive stance ensures continued ecosystem services like water purification and biodiversity preservation for future generations. Given that inaction will lead to irreversible consequences with far-reaching effects—such as loss of biodiversity or severe water scarcity—immediate collective action is imperative. Therefore, all stakeholders must collaborate to implement these strategies promptly before such devastating outcomes become a reality.

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Bibliographic information of this paper for citing:

Khassenova, A, Bazarbayeva, T, Nizamiev, A, Kurbanova, L, Tussupova, B, Kenzhebay, R, Bekzhanova, A, Khamitov, A 2025, Assessment of the stability potential of geosystems under anthropogenic influences (Case study: Ural River), Caspian Journal of Environmental Sciences, 23: 181-187.