Vegetation Change Detection in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria using Remote Sensing and GIS Techniques from 2000 to 2020

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Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Generally, vegetation change through the conversion of the world's forest land to other uses has assumed an increasing scale due to the unprecedented growth of the human population which increases the demand for food and land. Some believed that decrease in vegetation in the area is attributed to oil exploration and exploitation activities only. This study aimed to find out the nature of the vegetation change in the region from 2000 to 2020. The data used was remotely sensed images as Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) observed by Terra-MODIS, downloaded via United States

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Geological Survey (USGS). The Simple Image Differencing was performed on two images (February 18, 2000 and February 18, 2020) using IDRISI software. The result shows that all the states in the Niger Delta region experience both positive and negative change in vegetation cover. The positive change was observed around locations where agricultural plantations exists and within urban areas followed by oil and gas exploration and exploitation that damage the natural forest cover, while negative change was observed around farms where intensive rainy season farming takes place. It was recommended that deforested areas in the region should be reclaimed by planting economic trees as plantation to enhance greenness and maintain balance of the ecosystem. If intensive farming is necessary, it should be practiced sustainably to save the environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The vegetation of the Niger Delta region according to Udo [1] is made up of equatorial rainforest. The vegetation could be subdivided into two major groups; the tropical rainforest and swamp forest (which is further sub-divided into fresh water and mangrove swamps). However, the tropical forest and swamp forest characteristics have been lost to continuous agriculture and urbanization in such a way that the few patches that remain are found in forest reserves [2] and shrines [3].The Niger Delta region has several ecosystems that play essential role for the sustenance of the different habitats and life forms in the area. Some of the notable ecosystem includes freshwater swamp forest, lowland rainforest, mangroves forest etc. In recent time, the rate of deforestation, excessive hunting of wildlife and exploitation of non- timber forest products (NTFPs), bush burning, and intensive agricultural practices has increased in the region [4].

Generally, vegetation change through the conversion of the world's forest land to other uses is in an increasing scale due to the unprecedented growth of the human population which increases the demand for food and land [5]. Many studies have confirmed that several decades ago, forests covered a vast portion of the land area on earth [6]. According to Food and Agriculture Organization [5], the world's forest decline was estimated at about 129 million ha between 1990 and 2015, approximately the size of South Africa's land mass, representing an annual rate of loss of 1.3%. Regionally, Africa had the largest annual rate of forest loss, estimated at about 0.49%, and reports from African countries documented that about 82 million ha of forest have been converted into other land uses between 1990 and 2015 [5]. Deforestation, forest degradation, and their associated environmental problems are the focus of discussion at several environmental fora deliberating on the measures required to mitigate the impact of these global phenomena [7]. The historical linkage between forest cover alterations and economic growth have been outlined by sociologists and forestry scientists about three decades ago [8,6]. The industrial development and the accelerated pace and intensity of human activities have greatly altered forest cover with spatio-temporal heterogeneity among nations [9]. In the United States and Canada, for example, economic growth in the 18th and 19th centuries encouraged investors to clear large areas of forest land for industrial and settlement purposes. Despite this, industrial expansion and urbanization had some positive effects on the vegetation cover, where the rural to urban migration and the rising farming incomes led to the restoration of forests on agricultural fields that were abandoned [10,6]. Some analysts pointed out that despite the main role that inadvertent or spontaneous afforestation played in recovering the forest cover after farmers abandoned their fields [11], the planned activities for reforestation, whether at the level of plantations or small fields, had the greatest role in forest recovery processes [12,6].

The environment of the Niger Delta region popularly called the South-South has been witnessing various forms of degradation since the discovery of the crude oil in 1956 [13]. According to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Nigeria became a member of OPEC in 1971 among the countries with substantial net export of crude petroleum. According to Collins *et al.,* [14], most of the environmental elements have been affected negatively through oil related pollution which include air, soil and water that subsequently destroy plants and animals in the area and that these negative effects were caused as a result of

oil spillage, vandalism, gas flaring and the escape of other chemicals used in the production processes. This study therefore, examines the changes in vegetation cover in the Niger Delta region between 2000 and 2020 using remotely sensed data and geospatial analytical technique.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 The Study Area

The Niger Delta Region is basically a wetland on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean spanning over 111,020 km² (12%) of Nigeria's surface area as shown in Fig. 1. With a population of 36 million in nine states of the Nigerian federation, it spreads across six ecological zones consisting of barrier islands, salt water marshes, mangroves, freshwater swamps, lowland rainforest and derived savanna vegetation. It has the largest and most important mangrove forest in Africa, 3rd largest in the world and habours a high diversity of flora and fauna—including endemic, endangered and threatened species [2,15].

The Niger Delta is the delta of the River Niger sitting directly on It is politically considered to be located within nine coastal southern Nigerian states, which include: all six states from the South- South geopolitical zone, one state (Ondo) from South West geopolitical zone and two states (Abia and Imo) from South East geopolitical zone. Of all the states that the region covers, only Cross River is not an oil-producing state [16]. The Niger Delta is a very densely populated region sometimes called the Oil Rivers because it was once a major producer of palm oil. The area was the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 until 1893, when it was expanded and became the Niger Coast Protectorate. The delta is a petroleum-rich region and has been the center of international controversy over pollution [16].

This natural vegetation of the study area has been degraded by the activities of man such as bush burning, farming, urbanization, construction, legal and illegal crude oil refining activities. The vegetation consists of various kinds of evergreen trees, including palms trees and a variety of shrubs. More than 70 % of the inhabitants of the study area are engaged in subsistent farming and fishing [17].

The mean monthly temperatures are steady throughout the year (about 20°C) [18] while the total annual rainfall in the area ranges between 2,000 mm to 3,000 mm [19]. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is geographically located between 4.20° and 7.80°N, and between 4.30° and 9.50°E (Fig. 1).

The geology of the Niger Delta has been described in details by various authors. The formation of the Delta started during Early Paleocene and resulted mainly from the buildup of fine grained sediments eroded and transported by the River Niger and its tributaries. The Tertiary Niger Delta is a sedimentary structure formed as a complex regressive off lap sequence of clastic sediments ranging in thickness from 9,000 - I2,000 m [20,17]. Starting as separate depocenters, the Niger Delta has coalesced to form a single united system since Miocene. The Niger Delta is a large and ecologically sensitive region, in which various water species including surface and sub-surface water bodies exist in a state of dynamic equilibrium [20,17].

2.2 Methodology

The vegetation data used for this research are remotely sensed images called Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) obtained by Terra/MODIS, downloaded via Land Processes Distributed Active Archive Center (LP DAAC) collection on the Earth Explorer From the United States Geological Survey website (https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/). The dates for the observation were February 18, 2000 (MOD13Q1.A2000049.h18v08.006) and February 18, 2020 (MOD13Q1.A2020049.h18v08.006) for earlier and later periods respectively. The Idrisi software was used to convert the downloaded HDF to Idrisi raster file format. The two converted images were windowed to focus on the study area (Niger Delta States). A Simple Image Differencing was performed using Image Calculator. The resulting image was then reclassified to clearly differentiate between positive and negative changes in vegetation cover in the study area. HISTO module was used to calculate area percent covered by each class of change.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two processed images denoting periods of observation (2000 and 2020) in Figs 2 and 3 shows that the later image (2020) has a pixel with higher EVI value (3.33), while the earlier one (2000) has lower EVI value (3.19). This shows

that some locations are greener than previous years. Despite the increase in vegetation cover on some locations, looking at the images holistically, low EVI values (yellow palette) can be observed to be highly distributed on the 2020 image than the 2000 image. It was suggested that locations with the high vegetation value on the later image were areas of human isturbance of vegetation with cocoa and palm plantations.

Fig. 4 shows that the study area has experienced both negative and positive changes in vegetation cover during the periods of observation and corroborates with the findings of Muktar & Yelwa [22]. The analysis shows that about 52.5% of the area experienced an increase in vegetation, while 47.4% of the area experienced a decrease in vegetation. Only 0.1% of the area remains unchanged. These changes cut across all the states in the region where Cross-River, Delta and Akwa Ibom States have pixels with higher negative values compared to other states. This suggested that the decrease in vegetation in the area was not mainly caused by crude oil activities. The Cross-River State that has higher negative values is not an oil producing state.

Therefore, it was posited that the oil exploitation causes climate change which consequently affects global vegetation.

The increases in vegetation in some locations were as a result of mass economic tree plantations by the local populace across the region and also government effort to combat deforestation. Some selected locations with increase in vegetation can be seen on image *a*, *b* and *c* on Plate 1 as Ondo (6.985987N, 4.953092E), Edo (6.342179N, 5.280259E) and Bayelsa (4.658136N, 6.422837E) respectively. The increase in vegetation in these locations was attributed to plantation agriculture which includes oil palm, cocoa, and rubber trees. Some locations with decrease in vegetation are on images *d, e* and *f* on Plate 1 which shows Delta (5.522624N, 6.005357E), Akwa Ibom (5.314817N, 7.730210E) and Cross River (6.022698N, 8.427842E) respectively. These are places where large scale rainy season farming is being practiced which includes Maize, Cassava and Yam. This shows that plantation agriculture helps in maintaining the ecosystem of the environment.
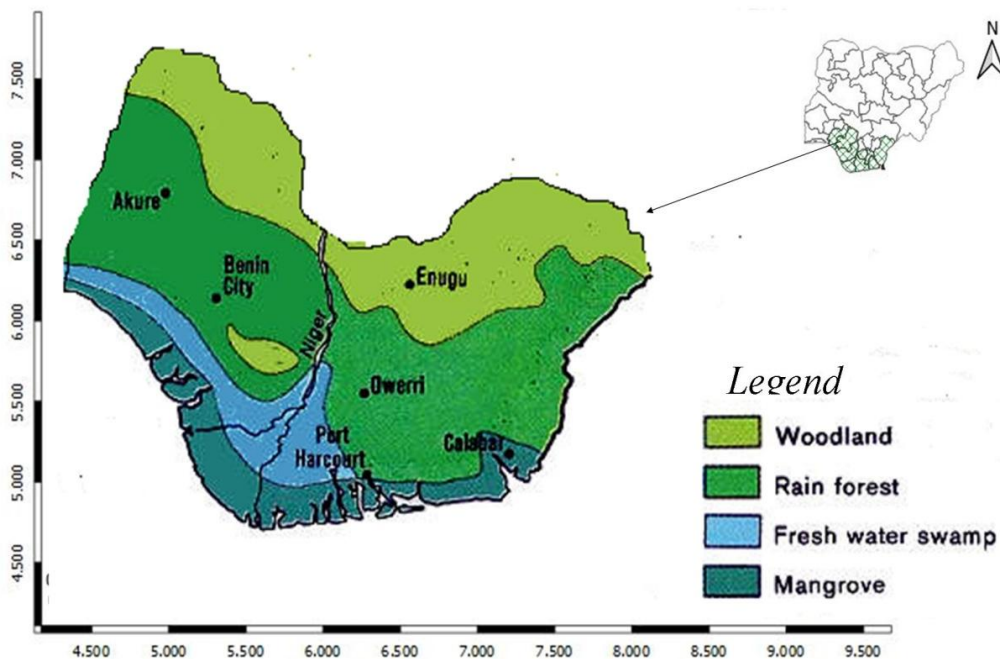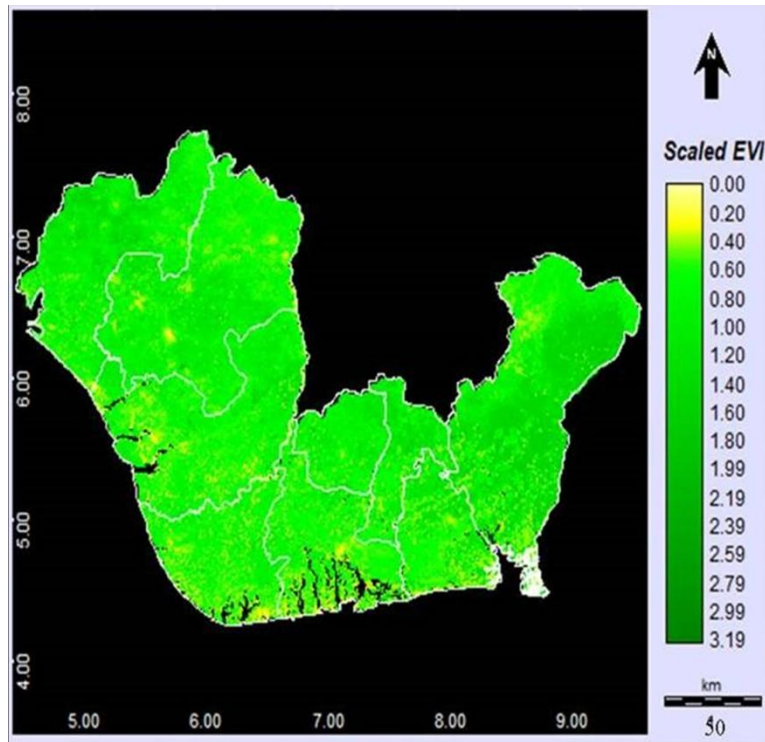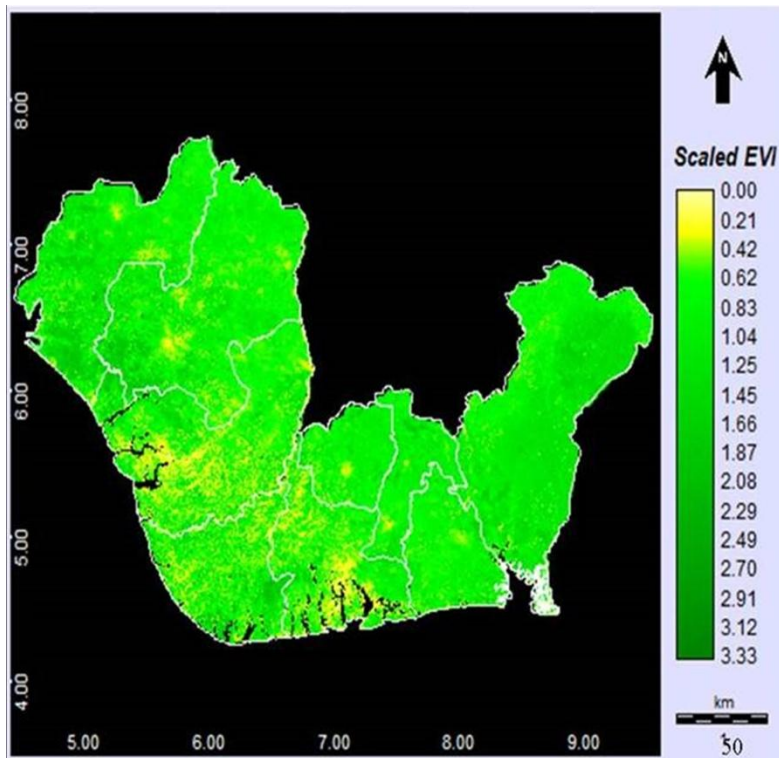

Fig. 1. Map of Nigeria showing the study area (Niger Delta States)
Source: NDLink Admin, [21]

February 18, 2000

Fig. 2. Vegetation characteristics in february, 2000

February 18, 2020

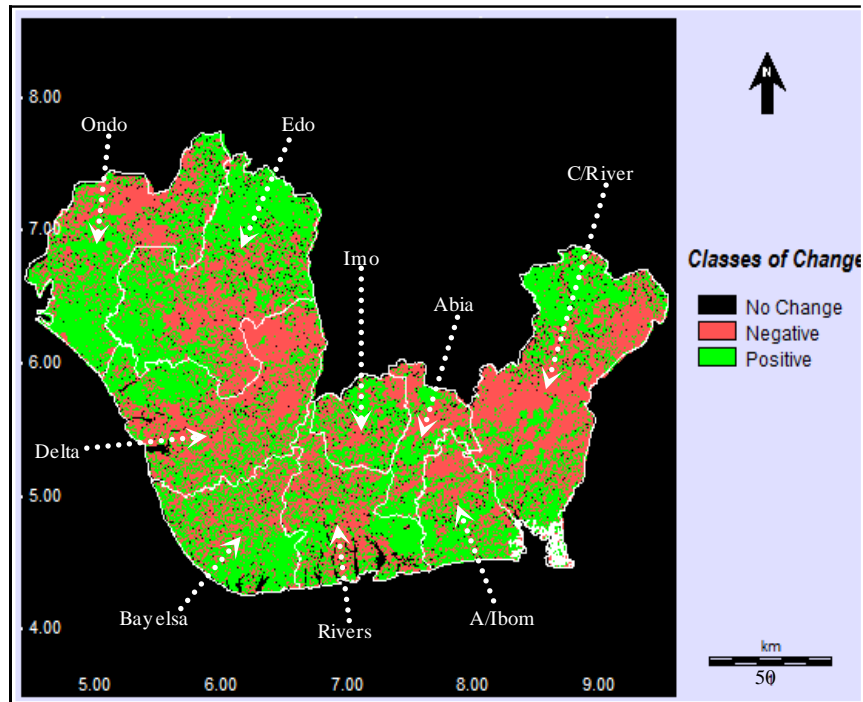**Fig. 3. Vegetation characteristics in february, 2020**

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Fig. 4. Classes of vegetation change

Plate 1. Vegetation characteristics on some strategic locations

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDA-TIONS

It is observed that all the states in the Niger Delta region experience both positive and negative changes in vegetation cover. Invariably, there is also a decrease in vegetation which is not directly linked to oil exploitation activities but rather climate change which affects vegetation in the long run. The changes in vegetation in some locations are attributed to agricultural activities within the areas, which are as follows lumbering, shifting cultivation and bush fallowing. It was recommended that deforested areas in the region should be reclaimed by planting economic trees as plantation to enhance greenness and maintain balance of the ecosystem. If intensive farming is necessary, it should be practiced sustainably to save the environment.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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