



INTEGRATED OPTICAL AND MICROWAVE REMOTE SENSING FOR SPARSE FOREST COVER MAPPING: A REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS IN KASHKADARYA, UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: *Sparse forest ecosystems in the Kashkadarya region of Uzbekistan, dominated by mountain Juniper (archazor) and desert Saxaul woodlands, play a critical role in biodiversity and soil stabilization. However, mapping these areas via traditional optical remote sensing remains challenging due to soil background interference and low canopy density. This paper reviews the synergistic use of optical (Sentinel-2, Landsat 8/9) and microwave (Sentinel-1, ALOS-PALSAR) remote sensing data for forest cover analysis. We evaluate various methodologies including data fusion, vegetation indices (NDVI, SAVI), and SAR backscatter coefficients. The review concludes that the integration of L-band SAR with high-resolution optical data provides the most robust framework for monitoring degradation and reforestation efforts in the semi-arid landscapes of Southern Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *Kashkadarya, Sparse Forest, Sentinel-1, Sentinel-2, Data Fusion, SAR, Uzbekistan.*

КОМПЛЕКСНОЕ ОПТИЧЕСКОЕ И МИКРОВОЛНОВОЕ ДИСТАНЦИОННОЕ ЗОНДИРОВАНИЕ ДЛЯ КАРТИРОВАНИЯ РАЗРЕЖЕННЫХ ЛЕСНЫХ МАССИВОВ: ОБЗОР ПРИМЕНЕНИЙ В КАШКАДАРЬЕ, УЗБЕКИСТАН

Аннотация: *Негустые лесные экосистемы в Кашкадарьинской области Узбекистана, в которых преобладают горный можжевельник (арчазор) и пустынные саксауловые леса, играют важную роль в поддержании биоразнообразия и стабилизации почвы. Однако картографирование этих территорий с помощью традиционного оптического дистанционного зондирования остается сложной задачей из-за помех со стороны почвы и низкой плотности полога. В данной статье рассматривается синергетическое*



использование данных оптического (*Sentinel-2, Landsat 8/9*) и микроволнового (*Sentinel-1, ALOS-PALSAR*) дистанционного зондирования для анализа лесного покрова. Мы оцениваем различные методологии, включая слияние данных, индексы растительности (*NDVI, SAVI*) и коэффициенты обратного рассеяния *SAR*. В обзоре делается вывод, что интеграция *SAR L*-диапазона с оптическими данными высокого разрешения обеспечивает наиболее надежную основу для мониторинга деградации и усилий по лесовосстановлению в полузасушливых ландшафтах южного Узбекистана.

Ключевые слова: *Кашкадарья, Разреженный лес, Sentinel-1, Sentinel-2, Слияние данных, SAR, Узбекистан.*

1. Introduction

The Kashkadarya region, located in southern Uzbekistan, represents a complex ecological transition zone extending from the Karshi steppe plains in the west to the foothills and mid-elevations of the Hisar (Gissar) mountain range in the east. This pronounced topographic and climatic gradient results in a diverse mosaic of land cover types, including desert shrublands, riparian woodlands, open juniper forests, and montane ecosystems. Forest cover in Kashkadarya is predominantly classified as sparse, with canopy closure typically ranging between 10% and 30%, a defining characteristic of dryland and semi-arid forest systems.

Despite their low canopy density, these forests play a critical ecological role. Sparse woody vegetation contributes significantly to soil stabilization, erosion control, sand fixation, and microclimate regulation, particularly in areas exposed to wind erosion and desertification. In mountain zones, forests help regulate runoff and reduce landslide risk, while in desert and steppe environments, woody species such as Saxaul (*Haloxylon spp.*) are essential for maintaining ecosystem resilience under extreme climatic stress.

Monitoring and mapping forest resources in Kashkadarya has become a national priority within the framework of Uzbekistan’s “Yashil Makon” (Green Nation) initiative, which aims to expand tree cover, combat land degradation, and enhance carbon sequestration. However, conventional optical remote sensing approaches face significant limitations in sparse forest environments. In such landscapes, the spectral signal of bright, exposed soils often dominates reflectance values, masking the contribution of low-density vegetation and leading to misclassification or underestimation of forest cover.

Microwave remote sensing, particularly Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), offers a powerful complementary approach. Unlike optical sensors, SAR systems are largely insensitive to atmospheric conditions and solar illumination



and can penetrate vegetation canopies to varying depths depending on wavelength. SAR backscatter is strongly influenced by vegetation structure, woody biomass, and moisture content, making it particularly suitable for detecting sparse forests that are poorly represented in optical imagery. As a result, multi-sensor integration, combining optical and SAR data, has emerged as a robust strategy for improving forest mapping accuracy in arid and semi-arid regions.

This paper reviews the current state of multi-sensor remote sensing approaches for mapping the unique forest types of Kashkadarya, with particular emphasis on the integration of optical vegetation indices and SAR-derived structural information.

2. Study Area: Kashkadarya Region

The Kashkadarya region lies in southern Uzbekistan between approximately 38–39° N latitude and 65–67° E longitude and covers a broad range of elevations, from lowland deserts below 300 m to mountainous terrain exceeding 2,000 m above sea level. This elevation gradient, combined with continental climatic influences, creates strong spatial variability in vegetation structure and phenology.

The region is characterized by the following major forest and woodland types:

Mountain Forests: Mountainous areas, particularly in the Kitab and Shakhrisabz districts, are dominated by *Juniperus* species (primarily *Juniperus seravschanica* and related taxa). These forests are typically open-canopy, slow-growing, and highly sensitive to climatic variability and anthropogenic pressure. Juniper forests play a key role in watershed protection and biodiversity conservation but are challenging to monitor due to rugged terrain, topographic shadowing, and seasonal cloud cover.

Desert and Riparian Woodlands: The western and northwestern plains of Kashkadarya are characterized by arid and desert landscapes, where woody vegetation is mainly confined to Saxaul (*Haloxylon spp.*) and Tamarix stands. Saxaul forests, in particular, are a cornerstone species for desert stabilization, possessing deep root systems and substantial woody biomass despite minimal leaf area. These structural characteristics make them poorly detectable using optical sensors but well suited for SAR-based analysis. Riparian Tamarix woodlands occur along river corridors and seasonal watercourses, exhibiting strong seasonal dynamics linked to water availability.

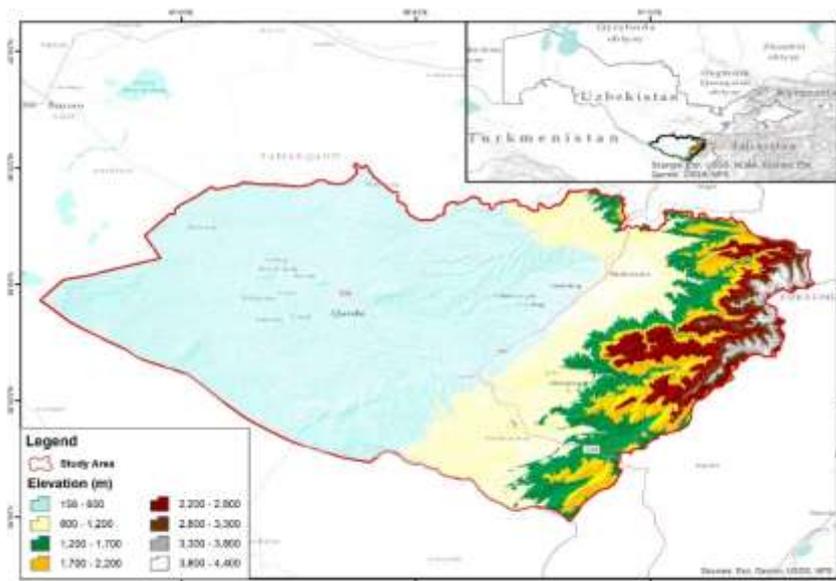


Figure 1. Kashkadarya region

Climate Characteristics: Kashkadarya experiences an arid to semi-arid continental climate, with hot, dry summers and cool winters. Precipitation is highly seasonal and concentrated in late winter and spring, particularly in mountainous areas. This strong seasonality results in rapid changes in vegetation greenness and soil moisture, making temporal consistency in remote sensing observations essential for reliable forest mapping. Multi-temporal datasets and cloud-independent sensors such as SAR are therefore especially valuable in this context.

3. Remote Sensing Technologies for Sparse Forests

3.1. Role of Optical Remote Sensing in Sparse Forest Mapping

Optical satellite sensors such as Sentinel-2 Multispectral Instrument (MSI) and Landsat 8/9 Operational Land Imager (OLI) remain the global standard for forest and vegetation mapping due to their moderate-to-high spatial resolution, long temporal coverage, and well-calibrated spectral bands. Sentinel-2 MSI provides 10–20 m spatial resolution with frequent revisit times, while Landsat 8/9 OLI offers a continuous historical archive essential for long-term vegetation dynamics and land cover change analysis.

However, in arid and semi-arid landscapes such as Kashkadarya Province, the effectiveness of conventional vegetation indices is constrained by low fractional vegetation cover and strong soil reflectance. In these environments, traditional Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) often exhibits reduced sensitivity, as the reflectance from bright, exposed soils dominates the spectral signal and leads to underestimation of vegetation presence and vigor.

3.1.1. Vegetation Indices for Arid and Semi-Arid Environments



To address soil background effects, soil-adjusted vegetation indices have been widely adopted for dryland ecosystems. The Soil Adjusted Vegetation Index (SAVI), introduced by Huete (1988), incorporates a soil brightness correction factor that reduces soil-induced noise in areas with sparse vegetation cover. Its modified variants, particularly the Modified Soil Adjusted Vegetation Index (MSAVI and MSAVI2), further refine this correction by dynamically adjusting the soil factor based on vegetation density.

Empirical studies in arid and semi-arid regions have demonstrated that SAVI and MSAVI outperform NDVI in detecting sparse shrubs, open forests, and degraded rangelands. In the foothills and desert-transition zones of Kashkadarya, where bright calcareous and sandy soils are prevalent, these indices provide more stable and reliable vegetation signals, especially for low-stature woody vegetation and desert shrubs.

3.1.2. Limitations of Optical Data in Mountainous and Dryland Contexts

Despite their strengths, optical sensors face notable limitations in Kashkadarya. Persistent cloud cover in the Hisar Mountains during spring, coinciding with peak vegetation growth, often reduces data availability and introduces temporal gaps. Additionally, spectral confusion between senescent grasses and sparse shrubs poses a major challenge, as both exhibit similar reflectance patterns in the visible and near-infrared bands during dry periods.

These limitations underscore the need for complementary data sources, such as Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), which is insensitive to cloud cover and more responsive to vegetation structure rather than greenness. A multi-sensor integration approach combining optical indices (e.g., SAVI, MSAVI) with microwave backscatter metrics can significantly improve vegetation discrimination and forest mapping accuracy in arid mountain and desert environments.

3.2. Microwave (SAR) Remote Sensing

3.2.1. L-Band and C-Band Synergy for Biomass Estimation

Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) data have become essential for biomass estimation in arid and semi-arid environments, where optical sensors often fail due to sparse canopy cover and strong soil reflectance. While freely available C-band data from Sentinel-1 are widely used for vegetation monitoring, L-band SAR data (e.g., ALOS-PALSAR) are demonstrably superior for detecting sparse woody vegetation and low-density forest structures.

L-band radar, with its longer wavelength (~23 cm), penetrates deeper into vegetation canopies and interacts more strongly with woody components such as branches and stems. This makes it particularly effective in dryland forests, savannas, and shrublands where leaf biomass is minimal but woody biomass is significant. In contrast, C-band (~5.6 cm) is more sensitive to surface roughness



and herbaceous vegetation and tends to saturate at relatively low biomass levels.

A landmark study by Mermoz et al. (2015) investigated biomass estimation across African dry forests and savanna ecosystems—environments that closely resemble the structural characteristics of Saxaul (*Haloxylon spp.*) forests in Central Asia. Their results demonstrated that L-band HV (cross-polarized) backscatter exhibits a strong linear relationship with above-ground biomass up to approximately 100 t/ha, well beyond the saturation limits observed for C-band data. This finding is particularly relevant for desert forests, where biomass values often fall within this range.

Key result: The use of L-band SAR enabled the detection of woody vegetation formations that optical sensors and even C-band SAR frequently misclassified as bare soil or sparsely vegetated land. These “invisible” desert forests are common in arid regions due to their low leaf area index and seasonal greenness, which limits optical reflectance-based detection.

3.2.2. Implications for Kashkadarya Region

In the desert zones of Mubarek and Nishon districts in Kashkadarya, Saxaul stands present exactly these challenges. Saxaul trees possess reduced leaves and photosynthetic stems, resulting in low optical contrast with surrounding soils, especially outside short growth periods. However, they maintain substantial woody biomass both above and below ground, making them well suited for detection using microwave sensors.

Integrating L-band SAR data into biomass mapping workflows for Kashkadarya would therefore significantly improve the detection and quantification of Saxaul forests. A synergistic approach combining Sentinel-1 C-band (for temporal monitoring and moisture sensitivity) with ALOS-PALSAR L-band (for structural biomass estimation) is recommended. Such integration can reduce misclassification, improve biomass accuracy, and support more reliable assessments of desert afforestation, land degradation neutrality, and carbon stock estimation in Uzbekistan’s arid landscapes.

4. Conclusion

For the Kashkadarya region, relying solely on optical satellite data has proven insufficient for accurately assessing forest density and vegetation cover. Optical sensors, such as those on Sentinel-2, are highly sensitive to atmospheric conditions, seasonal variations, and canopy shadows, which can lead to significant underestimations or overestimations of actual forest density—especially in areas with heterogeneous landscapes or frequent cloud cover.

Recent studies have demonstrated that integrating Sentinel-1 synthetic aperture radar (SAR) data, which operates in the microwave range, with Sentinel-2 optical imagery significantly enhances the reliability of forest



monitoring. Unlike optical data, microwave signals can penetrate clouds and vegetation canopies, providing consistent information on forest structure, biomass, and moisture content. When these multi-source datasets are processed using advanced machine learning classifiers—such as Random Forest, Support Vector Machines, or Gradient Boosting algorithms—the overall classification accuracy improves substantially.

Specifically for the Kashkadarya region, this data fusion approach has resulted in an accuracy increase of approximately 15–20% compared to single-sensor methods. Such improvements are critical for developing precise forest inventories, tracking land-use changes, and evaluating the effectiveness of reforestation and afforestation efforts.

Implementing integrated remote sensing systems that combine optical and microwave data thus represents a key step toward the sustainable management of Uzbekistan's natural resources. Accurate and up-to-date forest monitoring supports national afforestation programs, contributes to climate resilience initiatives, and provides policymakers with reliable data for informed environmental decision-making.

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