The water planetary boundary: interrogation and revision

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Key points:

- The water planetary boundary is a compelling concept that could motivate and improve our understanding and management of water cycle in the Earth System
- The current planetary boundary for freshwater use should be replaced since it does not adequately represent the role of water in influencing critical Earth System functions

- A road map towards a new water planetary boundary suggests how to move towards setting six new water planetary sub-boundaries.

Abstract

The planetary boundaries framework has proven useful for many global sustainability contexts, but is challenging to apply to freshwater, which is spatially heterogeneous, part of complex socio-ecological systems and often dominated by local dynamics. To date, the planetary boundary for water has been simplistically defined by as the global rate of blue water consumption, functioning as a proxy for water partitioning in the global hydrological cycle, and considering impacts on rivers' environmental flow requirements. We suggest the current planetary boundary should be replaced since it does not adequately represent the influence of water in critical Earth System functions such as regional climate and biodiversity. We review the core functions of water in the Earth System and set out a roadmap towards a more robust, holistic, and locally applicable water planetary boundary. We propose defining the boundary using four core functions of water (hydroclimatic regulation, hydroecological regulation, storage, and transport) in conjunction with five water stores (surface water, atmospheric water, soil moisture, groundwater and frozen water). Through the functions, the stores are inextricably interconnected with the atmosphere, land, ocean and biosphere. The roadmap outlined here suggests how to move towards setting six new water planetary sub-boundaries. This ambitious scientific and policy Grand Challenge that could substantially improve our understanding and management of water cycle modifications in the Earth System and provide a complementary approach to existing water management tools.

Plain language summary (<200 words)

The planetary boundaries framework proposes quantified guardrails to human perturbation of global environmental processes that regulate the stability of the planet, safeguarding a Holocene-like status of the Earth System, and has been widely adopted in sustainability science, governance, and corporate management. However, the planetary boundary for human freshwater use has been applied much less. It is based on a global sum of the average annual surface water use from rivers, reservoirs, lakes, and aquifers. This measure does not reflect all types of human interference with the complex global water cycle and Earth System. We suggest that the water planetary boundary will be more scientifically robust and more useful in decision-making frameworks if it is redesigned to consider more specifically how climate and living ecosystems respond to changes in the different forms of water on Earth: atmospheric water, soil moisture, groundwater and frozen water, as well as surface water. This paper provides an ambitious scientific roadmap to define a new water planetary boundary consisting of sub-boundaries that account for a variety of changes to the water cycle.

1. The challenges and possibilities of a water planetary boundary

1.1 The current planetary boundary for freshwater use

The current 'freshwater use' planetary boundary, one of nine planetary boundaries, is based on allowable human blue water consumptive use (Figure 1). The planetary boundaries, a global environmental sustainability framework for identifying critical transitions or tipping points in the complex, interacting Earth, based on control and response variables (Figure 2; see Box 1 for an overview of the planetary boundary concept). The control variable for the current freshwater use planetary boundary has been set at 4,000 km^3/year blue water consumption, the lower limit of a 4,000 - 6,000 km^3/year range that is considered a danger zone as 'it takes us too close to the risk of blue and green water induced thresholds that could have deleterious or even catastrophic impacts on the earth system' (Rockström et al., 2009b). Rockström et al. (2009b) suggested blue water consumptive use as a proxy variable because it functionally integrates the three largest anthropogenic manipulations of the water cycle: human impacts on precipitation patterns, modifications of soil moisture by land use and land cover; and water withdrawals from discharge for human use; it was not intended to be an explicit variable implying that water use can or should be aggregated to global scales. Focusing on water withdrawals, Gerten et al. (2013) proposed quantifying the boundary by assessing the amount of streamflow needed to maintain environmental flow requirements in all river basins on Earth, which suggests a freshwater use planetary boundary in the range of 1,100-4,500 km^3/year.

While the planetary boundary framework garnered interest from international bodies such as the United Nations (Leach et al., 2013) as well as from the corporate sustainability sector (Clift et al., 2017), the water planetary boundary has seen limited uptake in water resource management, policy, and governance. A number of jurisdictions have estimated their local contributions to the water planetary boundaries (Campbell et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2014; Häyhä et al., 2016, 2018), though it is not clear that these exercises have led to concrete policy outcomes. In turn, the water planetary boundary is often not included in global assessments of water and the environment. This lack of uptake is likely due to the conceptual and methodological over-simplifications of the current freshwater use planetary boundary, which raises the fundamental question of the relevance or value of a water planetary boundary for environmental governance, and for water management, specifically.

1.2 The relevance of a water planetary boundary for water management and environmental governance, and our understanding of socio-hydrologic systems across scale

Water has been identified as one of the planetary boundaries highlighting the critical role water has in the functioning and stability of the Earth system and that water is fundamentally inextricable from other parts of the Earth System and other planetary boundaries. The 'raison d'être' for the concept of a water planetary boundary lies in the need for humanity to consider and govern the multiple, critical roles water has in the functioning and stability of the Earth System, and the habitability of Earth for humankind (Rockström et al., 2014). Defining a water planetary boundary could be part of the large and growing field of water resource management, which addresses the constantly evolving nexus of hydrology, society, and economics (Konar et al., 2016; Montanari et al., 2013; Sivapalan et al., 2012, 2014; Wagener et al., 2010). Adding a simplified aspirational metric to the toolbox does not suggest that spatial heterogeneity of water issues be ignored or local-scale data or metrics be superseded. The water planetary boundary is useful because it serves a distinct and complementary purpose to other water resources management methods, tools and frameworks in four ways:

- Considering water flows beyond traditional basin boundaries. Research on virtual water flows (Oki et al., 2017; Porkka et al., 2012), moisture transfer (Keys et al., 2012; Wang-Erlandsson et al., 2018) and regional groundwater flow (Gleeson & Manning, 2008; Tóth, 1963) together suggest that basin-scale approaches could be complemented by, and nested within approaches and metrics at scales beyond basins and even to global scales (Vörösmarty et al., 2015).
- Acknowledging that all water cycle flows and stocks are important to humanity and the Earth System, rather than just blue water flows and stocks, which are often the focus of water resource management for water supply, flood control and aquatic habitat management (Falkenmark & Rockstrom, 2006). Expanding the focus on water cycle dynamics, the interactions

between water cycle and other Earth System components, and the dependence of the terrestrial biosphere (including human societies) on green water more holistically and realistically represent the complex interactions between humanity and the water cycle.

- Providing an assessment of the 'safe operating space' for humanity (Box 1). Various water management indicators measure impact and status such as water stress (Alcamo et al., 2007; Falkenmark, 1989; Smakhtin et al., 2004), water depletion (Brauman et al., 2016), water scarcity (Brauman et al., 2016; Kummu et al., 2016), water footprints (Hoekstra & Mekonnen, 2012), water wedges (Wada et al., 2014), water use regimes (Weiskel et al., 2007), human appropriation of evapotranspiration (Gordon et al., 2005; Postel et al., 1996), and hydroclimatic separation (Destouni et al., 2012). These could be complemented by information about the proximity of unwanted state shifts.
- Recognizing that all members of the global community are stakeholders in local-to-regional scale functioning of the water cycle. Eventually, disaggregating the water planetary boundary to a specific basin or jurisdiction could yield results and concerns for managers, policy makers or stakeholders that are different than those raised by local-to-regional scale water resource management indicators. The continental-to-global perspective could, for example, highlight the importance of the water cycle of the Amazon rainforest for climate change (D'Almeida et al., 2007; Miguez-Macho & Fan, 2012), monsoon system, and agricultural production outside the region through teleconnections and indirect impacts (Nobre, 2014). This could lead to the recognition of the global community's role as stakeholder in the Amazon rainforest water cycle beyond the regional and national scale.

1.3 Objectives, scope and terminology

Our objective is interrogating and reframing the water planetary boundary to reflect complex, interconnected and heterogeneous freshwater processes in the Earth System. This work is based on multiple workshops, working groups and intense collaboration and debate. First, we review how the planetary boundaries are defined and identified (Box 1) which forms a basis for a new set of criteria for evaluating the current freshwater use planetary boundary (Section 2). We interrogate the current freshwater use planetary boundary using this criteria, which leads to road map for revising the water planetary boundary (Section 3). Instead of presenting a new quantitative water planetary boundary, our goal is to provide a scientific roadmap for the Grand Challenge of redefining an operable planetary boundary of water. By holistically and transparently evaluating the value, concerns, and possibilities of water planetary boundaries, we aim to move the debate forward, in response to recent discussions (Gerten et al., 2015; Heistermann, 2017; Jaramillo & Destouni, 2015; Rockström, 2017; Sivapalan, M., 2017). In related papers, Gleeson et al. (submitted) identify the four key functions of freshwater in the Earth System and Zipper et al. (submitted) describe how to integrate the water planetary boundary with water management from local to global scales.

Since planetary boundaries and water in the Earth System are broad and interdisciplinary topics, we narrow our scope to focus on terrestrial freshwater, while acknowledging the vital role of oceans; for clarity 'water' refers herein to terrestrial freshwater. We also focus on water quantity (stores and fluxes) rather than water quality and temperature, again acknowledging the importance of both, in part since streamflow is often considered a reasonable proxy for aquatic ecological integrity (Richter et al., 2003). Marine systems and water quality and temperature are related to other planetary boundaries such as ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows, climate change, and novel entities. An important terminology note is that we argue that the original planetary boundary for water defined as 'freshwater use´ should be replaced with the more holistic planetary boundary on ´water´ or 'water planetary sub-boundaries'.

We use the term ‘freshwater use planetary boundary’ only to refer to the current definition presented in Rockström et al., (2009a,b), Gerten et al. (2013) and Steffen et al. (2015).

Box 1. Introduction to planetary boundaries and safe operating space

Planetary boundaries are defined as biogeophysical boundaries at the planetary scale for the processes and systems, which together regulate the state of the Earth System. The planetary boundaries place scientifically defined guardrails for human perturbations that collectively delimit the ‘safe operating space for humanity’ to enable continued world development on planet Earth that remains in a manageable Holocene-like inter-glacial state (Figure 2). The planetary boundary framework is based on (i) identifying relevant biogeochemical processes that regulate the stability of the Earth System and (ii) determining the limit of human perturbation of these critical processes. Crossing any of the planetary boundaries could destabilize essential Earth System processes (Rockström et al., 2009a, 2009b; Steffen et al., 2015).

Nine planetary boundary processes and systems have been identified. For each boundary process/system, a control variable is defined, where the Earth System response variable moves the Earth away from Holocene conditions (i.e. the past 11,700 years), that have led to the development and proliferation of human societies. The boundaries for biosphere integrity and biogeochemical flows are subdivided with different control variables covering different aspects of the Earth System response to anthropogenic perturbation. For the planetary boundaries climate change and ozone depletion, identifying and quantifying control variables is relatively easy, as they are well-mixed global systems, moreover with a single dominant human driver (ozone depleting substances and greenhouse gases). In other words, since the eventual effect on climate or the ozone layer is independent of where in the world the CO_2 or ozone-depleting substances are emitted, respectively, these boundaries can straightforwardly be assessed in a ‘top-down’ manner.

Boundaries for land-system change, biosphere integrity and freshwater use cannot be directly connected to a single, well-mixed global driver or indicator; the eventual effects on the Earth System depend on the kinds, rates, locations and sequencing of processes, some of which have critical transitions, that happen at local or regional scales. These boundaries therefore represent regulatory processes that provide the underlying resilience of the Earth System (Rockström et al., 2009a). If sufficiently widespread, however, human-caused perturbations to these ‘bottom-up’ processes will have significant aggregate consequences at global scale, with systemic or cascading interactions with other boundaries (Galaz et al., 2012).

Over geological time, the state of the Earth System is defined in terms of well-defined shifts as well as slower, gradual co-evolution of the climate system and the biosphere. Steffen et al. (2015) thus suggest that climate change and biosphere integrity should be considered ‘core’ planetary boundaries. Changes in either of these boundaries themselves have the ability to drive the Earth System into a new state, away from Holocene conditions (i.e. the past 11,700 years) that have allowed the development and proliferation of human societies. The other boundaries, including water, have Earth System effects by operating through the two core boundaries. In simple terms, the dynamics and state of the planetary boundaries for water, land, ocean acidification, novel entities, and biogeochemical flows (N and P cycle perturbation), will contribute to the final outcome of the climate and biosphere integrity boundaries, which thus constitute the aggregate manifestation of the interactions among all the other boundaries. Given the natural variability of Earth System dynamics, the limitations of large-scale environmental monitoring and modelling, and fundamental scientific uncertainty about complex system behaviour at all scales up to the global, the planetary boundary positions are not equivalent to any specific threshold values in the control variables. Rather, the rationale is that planetary boundaries should be placed at a 'safe' distance from potential critical thresholds or other, more gradual detrimental developments. The planetary boundaries framework resolves this challenge by focusing on defining the scientific range of uncertainty for each boundary definition (e.g., a range of 350-450 ppm CO_2 for the planetary boundary on climate change). Here there are no normative judgements, only an attempt to carry out the best possible scientific assessment, and disclose clearly the range of uncertainty. Then follows a normative step, where the planetary boundaries framework, adopting a precautionary principle (based on the extraordinary complexity of the functioning of the Earth System and in particular inter-actions and feedbacks among Earth System processes) by placing the planetary boundary position at the lower (careful) end of the uncertainty range for each control variable (350 ppm CO_2 for climate change). The safe operating space for humanity on Earth is thereby set at the lower end of the uncertainty range. When transgressing this boundary, humanity enters a 'danger zone', constituted by the uncertainty range (a zone when abrupt and irreversible changes can occur, but scientifically we cannot be certain). The upper range of the uncertainty range is the 'high-risk' zone in terms of the scientific assessment of risks to trigger non-linear irreversible changes that can destabilise the state of the Earth System and/or fundamentally change the ability of the Earth System to support human development. The final adoption of planetary boundaries, therefore, involves normative judgements of how societies choose to deal with risks and uncertainties of global environmental change (Rockström et al. 2009a,b; Galaz et al. 2012). The planetary boundaries have been combined with social boundaries (based on the Sustainable Development Goals), together defining a 'safe and just operating space' for humanity (Raworth, 2017)

2. Interrogating the current freshwater use planetary boundary

Earlier discussions have criticised the definition of the freshwater use boundary for a number of reasons including: 1) scale – water problems are often considered only at local to regional scales, whereas the metric is global which some consider misleading (Heistermann, 2017); 2) aggregation - currently sums streamflow fluxes but the best way to summarize diverse local impacts to a global metric is not clear (Heistermann, 2017); 3) control variable – blue water use is not a biophysical variable representing the complexity of the water cycle (Jaramillo and Destouni, 2015a); 4) mechanism – there is limited evidence of tipping points or connections between water use and processes that would lead to the Earth leaving a Holocene-like state (Heistermann, 2017); 5) underestimation of water use – the global consumptive use of freshwater may be larger due to possible additional or larger effects from irrigation and flow regulation (Jaramillo and Destouni, 2015b; but see (Gerten et al., 2015); and 6) the planetary boundary may actually be lower as the current global aggregate tends to disregard conditions of local overuse of water resources and may provoke the thought that all usable water can be accessed (Molden, 2009).

We propose a qualitative evaluation framework with seven criteria for defining a useful water planetary boundary based on the definition and purpose of the planetary boundaries introduced in Box 1. This framework could be used for other planetary boundaries in the future and significantly clarifies and expands on the set of criteria proposed by Rockström et al. (2009a) for identifying useful control variables for planetary boundaries: (i) the variable is universally applicable for the sub-systems linked to that boundary, (ii) it can function as a robust indicator of process change, and (iii) there are available and reliable data.

Scientific criteria

1) Planetary boundary variables: Are the proposed control and response variables clearly defined and related? Is there a clear basis for a planetary boundary value?
2) Regional impacts and upscaling mechanisms: Is there evidence for regional impacts, and plausible mechanisms by which regional impacts could scale to global impacts?
3) Impacts on Earth System stability: Is there evidence that this process impacts Earth's stability, directly or indirectly through interactions with core planetary boundaries?

Scientific representation criteria:

4) Measurable: Can the status of the control variable be measured, tracked in time, and monitored?
5) Understandable and operational: Is the planetary boundary broadly understandable to non-scientific audiences and potentially operational?
6) Represents regional and global impacts: Does this planetary boundary represent both regional and global impacts? Is this representation consistent with the social perceptions of impacts?
7) Uniqueness: Are the processes or impacts uniquely represented by this planetary boundary, or is there overlap and redundancy with other planetary boundaries?

Criteria 1–3 are fundamental requirements of any planetary boundary, as they address scientific evidence of mechanisms, especially relating to Earth's 'Holocene-like' state. Criteria 4) and 5) are necessary for operationalisation and criteria 6) and 7) address the usefulness of a planetary boundary by ensuring that representation of impacts can resonate with social concerns and policy prioritizations and that redundancy in the planetary boundary framework is limited.

Detailed interrogation of the current planetary boundaries for freshwater use

We evaluated the already proposed planetary boundaries for water based on these criteria and find that none of them fully meet any of the evaluation criteria (Table 1). First, while Rockström et al. (2009a, 2009b) and Gerten et al. (2013) both defined control variable limits, neither clearly defined the response variable, nor the relationship between control and response variables.

Second, while the impacts of water consumption on water systems at regional scales are clear and well documented, studies on the plausible mechanisms how regional impacts could scale to global impacts are generally scarce. Basins are nested, and the impacts of water use are scale-dependent, which is obscured by the current water planetary boundary methodology. For example, water use in a small basin may cause stress at the scale of that basin, but the small basin may be nested within a larger one that is on average not stressed. The same logic applies to environmental flows: water use in a small basin or along a certain river stretch may cause a transgression of environmental flow limits at that scale, but the small area may be nested within a larger basin with flows above the environmental flow limits.

Third, consumptive blue water use does not fully capture water's complex interactions with other major Earth System components, and there is scarce evidence that water use on its own can destabilize the Earth System. While multiple, simultaneously occurring regional environmental flow transgressions could potentially contribute to the transgression of the biosphere integrity planetary boundary and thus indirectly impact Earth System stability, a simple aggregate of water consumption across all regions and river basins cannot adequately represent the underlying mechanisms. Even when considering environmental flow transgressions in a spatially explicit manner (Gerten et al. 2013 and the basin scale boundary of Steffen et al. 2015), it is unclear whether transgressions in all basins should be treated equally or if some regions contribute disproportionately to maintaining biosphere integrity.

Fourth, while one argument for the current water planetary boundary might be a control variable that is simple, measurable and understandable, consumptive blue water use is in fact notoriously challenging to estimate due to uncertainty in statistics of water withdrawals (Vörösmarty et al., 2000). Furthermore, different approaches to quantify consumptive blue water use tend to produce conflicting estimates (e.g., Hoekstra and Mekonnen, 2012; Siebert and Döll, 2010; Rost et al., 2008; Jaramillo and Destouni, 2015) and separating anthropogenic blue and green consumptive use from natural fluxes requires complex water resource modeling. Additionally, there has been significant debate on what to include in and how to perform calculations of consumptive water use. For instance, Jaramillo & Destouni (2015) propose that green water and its human-driven changes should be taken into account directly, and that doing so would lead to the planetary boundary for freshwater use already being transgressed. While Rockström et al. note the crucial importance of green water flows for ecosystems in the original planetary boundary papers (2009a, 2009b), it is not reflected in the proposed control variable in a meaningful quantitative way.

Fifth, consumptive water use was originally suggested as a surrogate/proxy variable intended to capture human modification to the hydrological cycle. However, this subtle but crucial notion has escaped many readers – proponents and critics alike – prompting arguments against a global cap on consumptive blue water use. For example, it has been suggested that a water planetary boundary may be counterproductive as it suggests that increased water use in one location can be offset by a decrease in water use elsewhere, even if there is no biophysical connection between the two locations (Heistermann, 2017). Another frequent criticism of the water planetary boundary is that there is no global water management board or entity nor is one likely in the foreseeable future, so a firm global boundary may not have practical meaning for water management. Thus, for the revised planetary boundary to have any practical value for water management, it will be necessary to apply it at sub-global scales. Such down-scaled global boundaries should not supersede management thresholds based on local conditions, but rather provide a framework for determining whether regional water management is consistent with global boundaries and an aspirational goal for local managers.

Finally, it is important to explicitly consider the other aspects of scientific representation of the current water planetary boundary. Ideally, a water planetary boundary would represent both global and regional impacts of modifications to the hydrological cycle, and be consistent with the social perception of water problems. The current global aggregate metrics (Rockström et al., 2009a,b; Gerten et al., 2013) largely fail to represent the inherently local nature of water problems and provide only a partial perspective. The water use boundaries have some overlap with other planetary boundaries, especially that for land-system change, which is often associated with changes in both green and blue water fluxes, highlighting the fact that boundaries interact but also suggesting some redundancy in current planetary boundary definitions.

3. A road map for reframing the water planetary boundary

3.1 Dividing the current planetary boundary into planetary sub-boundaries

The current the current freshwater use planetary boundary needs to be replaced since it does not meet any of the criteria as described in Section 2. We suggest the water planetary boundary must be subdivided to more realistically represent the complexity and heterogeneity of the water cycle and how it interacts with the various components of the Earth System (Figure 1c) at various time and space scales. Gleeson et al. (submitted) describe in detail the four key functions of freshwater in the Earth System and the functions of each of the five water stores. We argue for a subdivision based on water stores: atmospheric water, surface water, soil moisture, groundwater and frozen water. This approach is physically based and could directly use hydrologic models and data, making it more measurable as well as understandable to hydrologists and non-hydrologists (Table 1). By dividing the water cycle into these five stores, we do not imply that different stores do not interact, as illustrated in Figure 1b. An alternative division, based on the Earth System functions of water (hydroclimatic regulation, hydroecological regulation, storage, and transport) would represent the core functions directly, but it adds complexity, as different components of the Earth System may have the same core function (i.e. hydroclimatic regulation through albedo control by clouds, glaciers, and inland surface waters).

We propose six planetary sub-boundaries for water based on the five water stores (Figure 3). For each store, we considered the most important processes that met the largest number of evaluation criteria (Section 2) and most holistic representation of the crucial functions of water in the Earth System (Gleeson et al, submitted). We argue that combining these sub-boundaries is not appropriate because these stores operate at different spatiotemporal scales and are important to different Earth System components. This means we have opted to include two planetary sub-boundaries for atmospheric water to incorporate both its hydroclimatic (evapotranspiration regulating climate) and hydroecological (precipitation supporting biodiversity) functions. The Earth System function and **process (in bold)** addressed by each of the proposed sub-boundaries are highlighted in Figure 3 and summarized below:

- atmospheric water (hydroclimatic regulation) focuses on **evapotranspiration** that is important to climate pattern stability or land-atmosphere coupling stability;
- atmospheric water (hydroecologic regulation) focuses on **precipitation** that maintains biomes which is connected to biodiversity;
- soil moisture focuses on **carbon uptake** or net primary productivity;
- surface water focuses on **streamflow** and related habitat that maintains aquatic biodiversity;
- groundwater focuses on **baseflow** or **sea level rise** that are important to aquatic biodiversity or the oceans, respectively;
- frozen water focuses on **ice sheet** volume which is important to sea level rise in the oceans.

Possible control variables and suggested response variables are compiled in Figure 3. Their suitability as planetary sub-boundaries needs to be tested by plotting the relationships between the variables as in Figure 2. The horizontal axis of Figure 2 shows the control variable, which represents local processes aggregated to planetary-scale. This necessitates an aggregation methodology, which we discuss below. The vertical axis of Figure 2 shows the response variable, which can also be thought of as global impacts mediated through water. For example, the ‘surface water’ component may have global impacts on ‘biodiversity’ through the ‘hydroecological regulation’ function, specifically the processes of ‘streamflow and habitat provision’.

Our preliminary evaluation of the six possible future planetary sub-boundaries for water shows that they are more measurable, understandable, operational and potentially represent both regional and global impacts. However, they require refinement through extensive community efforts because, while there is generally strong evidence of regional impacts, robustness of upscaling mechanisms and impacts on Earth System stability are variable (Box 3). The new sub-boundaries overlap with each other and with other planetary boundaries because of complex interactions and feedbacks within the water cycle. Overlap with planetary boundaries of climate change and biosphere integrity is expected, as these are suggested to be the ‘core’ boundaries through which the others operate (see section 1; Steffen et al. 2015). Similarly, some degree of overlap with other sub-boundaries is inevitable because of the complex interactions and feedbacks within the water cycle. The sub-boundaries for evapotranspiration and soil moisture further overlap with the land-system change boundary, which also focuses on climate-regulating processes in land systems but, we argue, does not adequately represent the hydroclimate function covered by our proposed sub-boundaries.

3.2 Setting water planetary sub-boundaries

Gleeson et al. (submitted) address important methodological questions of scale and input data as well as suggest four different methods of spatial analysis to quantify the relationship between control and response variables (bottom of Figure 4). The process of setting 'fully elaborated' planetary sub-boundaries with clearly defined relationships between control and response variables for the different water stores may take a considerable amount of time (at least ~5-10 years, comparable to other global change science synthesis activities). Yet there is significant interest in using the water planetary boundary so we explored setting interim planetary sub-boundaries based on global normative standards for carbon and existing global data. Interim planetary boundaries for water could be set by quantifying the change in proposed control variables for each water component under the Representative Concentration Pathways (RCP) with related emissions and land use scenarios consistent with the UNFCCC Paris Agreement (Figure 4). In other words, these are the water boundaries that would arise if global carbon governance actors considered water impacts. The discussions and decision-making of climate change agreements, such as the Paris agreement are based in part on impacts to water systems. For example, water security, floods, droughts are often significant considerations in the IPCC reports.

For calculating the interim sub-boundaries we specifically suggest using existing global hydrologic models and the 'hydrologic unit approach' described above to quantify the change of each proposed control variable from ~1950 to an end-of-century (~2100) scenario considering climate, land and water use change. The Paris target of 2°C or less corresponds to RCP 4.5, which does not project global temperature change stabilization until around 2100 (USGCRP 2018). Thus, 2100 provides a reasonable time frame for making modeling comparisons between Holocene and Anthropocene conditions for the six water sub-boundaries. For example, for the planetary sub-boundary for surface water, the control variable could be the 'percentage area of large basins within environmental flows' from early 1900s to ~2100s. By using models representing climate change, land use and water use, we would be looking at the combined impact of each of these on the different water stores. To pragmatically simplify identifying these interim planetary boundaries, we suggest not attempting to identify keystone regions or the functional relationships between control and response variables as described above. It is important to note that these interim sub-boundaries do not necessarily use the precautionary principle since interim sub-boundaries may be larger or smaller than the planetary boundaries defined using the relationship between control and response variables.

3.3 Using the water planetary sub-boundaries

For the water planetary boundary to have practical value for water management, it needs to be operational and informative at the sub-global scales at which water is managed such as basins, individual nations (Cole et al., 2014; Dao et al., 2015; Lucas & Wilting, 2018), areas governed by multinational organizations (Häyhä et al., 2018b), or the footprint of a company's supply chain (Clift et al., 2017). Here, we briefly introduce how the water planetary boundary may be used at sub-global scales, which is the focus of a separate study (Zipper et al., submitted). Previous attempts at operationalizing the planetary boundaries have largely focused on calculating a country's 'fair share' of the global safe operating space, (Figure 2). (Häyhä et al., 2016b) identify three key dimensions to consider: (1) biophysical processes, which define the relevant scale at which the planetary boundary can be addressed; water cycle processes are spatially heterogeneous so the global impacts of a change depend on site-specific factors; (2) socio-economic considerations, which define the environmental impact a country has both inside and outside of its borders (MacDonald et al., 2015); global accounting methods such as the water footprint (Hoekstra & Mekonnen, 2012) are tools for addressing this dimension although regional opportunity costs need to be considered (Kahil et al., 2018); and (3) ethical considerations, which address difference among countries in environmental impacts caused by exceeding the control variable as well as their ability to respond to environmental challenges; equity-based allocation frameworks could address this dimension.

In addition to methods for calculating sub-global fair shares, the water planetary boundary can be operationalized at sub-global levels using the same methods employed to define the global boundaries. For instance, if the global surface water sub-boundary is defined based on the proportion of large basins meeting environmental flow requirements, a national or regional surface water sub-boundary could be calculated based on the proportion of basins within that area meeting environmental flow requirements. In this manner, a regional safe operating space could be defined that is scientifically consistent with the global methodology (Dearing et al., 2014). At a regional level, the domain of analysis may differ depending on the sub-boundary considered; for instance, the surface water sub-boundary may require considering all basins within or draining into a region, while the atmospheric water sub-boundary would require considering the region's precipitationshed (Keys et al., 2012).

4. Conclusions

To transparently evaluate the value, concerns and possibilities for the water planetary boundary, we interrogated and reframed it to more holistically account for the complexity and heterogeneity of water and other Earth System components. Our examination of water planetary boundaries has led to the following conclusions**:**

1) The planetary boundary framework could complement existing tools for water resource management by offering a unique approach for assessing water cycle modifications as part of the wider human impact on the Earth System (Section 1.2). Thus, despite the well-founded criticism of the current freshwater use planetary boundary (Section 2), we argue that the concept of a planetary boundary for water is useful and worth serious intellectual attention.
2) Planetary boundaries can and should be evaluated with qualitative and quantitative analysis, and iteratively updated as science (for the biophysical aspects) and society (for the normative aspects) evolve. We developed a framework for evaluating water planetary boundaries (Section 2) that could be used to evaluate other planetary boundaries as well, especially those that do not have clear global tipping points - such as land use or biodiversity loss - and whose critical transitions start at the regional and local scales.
3) The current water planetary boundary does not adequately represent the complex and interconnected nature of water, and thus it should be replaced. We developed a roadmap for reframing the planetary boundary for water with new sub-boundaries for each water component. This encompasses new modeling and analysis and much work in clarifying tipping points, keystone regions, cross-scale propagation of impacts, and the fundamental relationship between core Earth System functions of water and other Earth System components. We suggest that interim planetary sub-boundaries be set while working in parallel towards fully elaborated planetary sub-boundaries.

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Figures

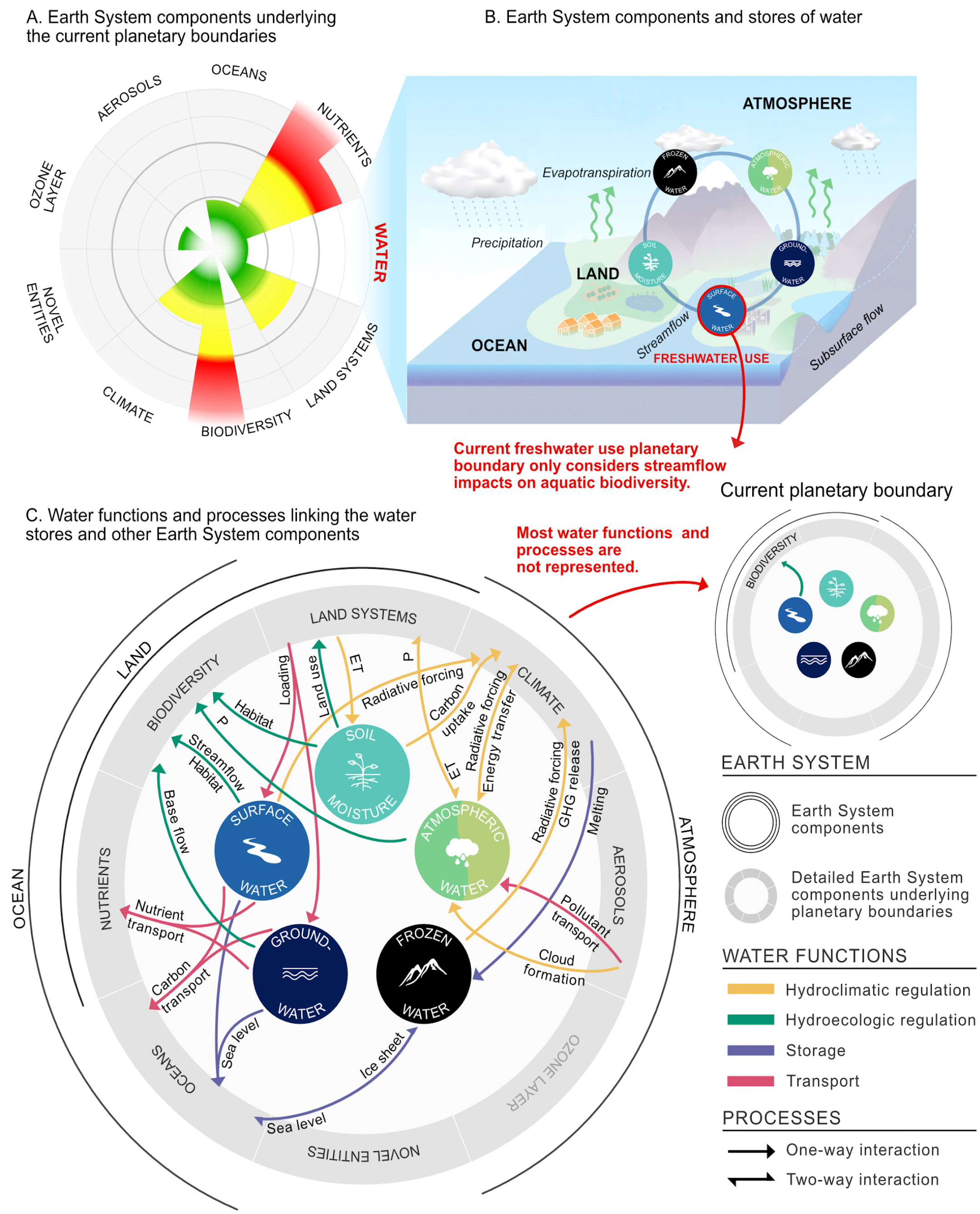


Figure 1. Freshwater use is one of the (a) current planetary boundaries, yet affecting only a small component of (b) the hydrosphere, which includes numerous stores of water. Since we focus on the near-surface hydrosphere, we consider land (part of the lithosphere) and ocean (part of the hydrosphere) as important related Earth System components. (c) The core functions of water in the Earth System (larger diagram) and how they are represented in the current freshwater use planetary boundary (small diagram). Diagrams show the five stores of the freshwater hydrosphere (colored circles in center), major components of the Earth System (outer ring), and detailed Earth System components underlying the different planetary boundaries (inner grey ring). The arrows denote

processes linking the water stores and the Earth System components, color-coded by Earth System functions of water (hydroclimate, hydroecology, storage, and transport). Note that in figures, hydroclimatic and hydroecological regulation are shorted to hydroclimate and hydroecology; P is precipitation and ET is evapotranspiration. Figures (a) and (b) are modified from Steffen et al. (2015) and Oki and Kanae (2006), respectively.

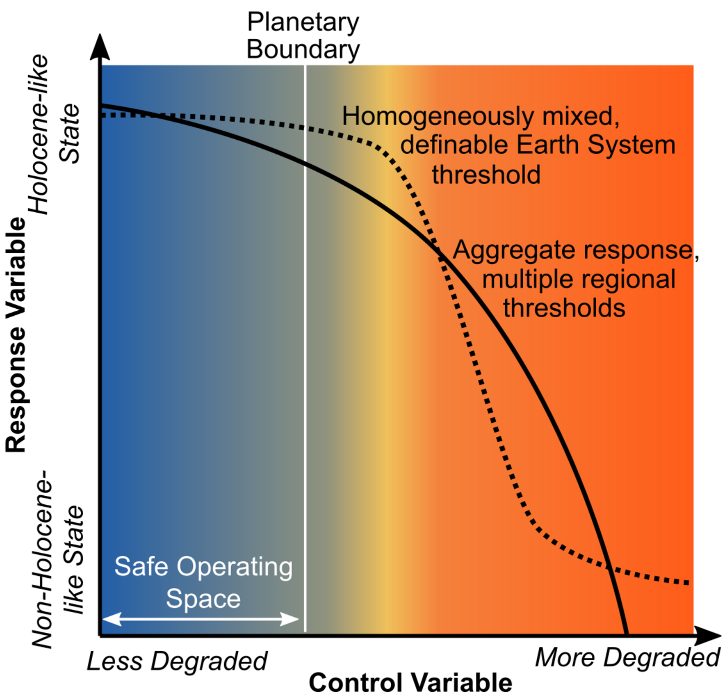
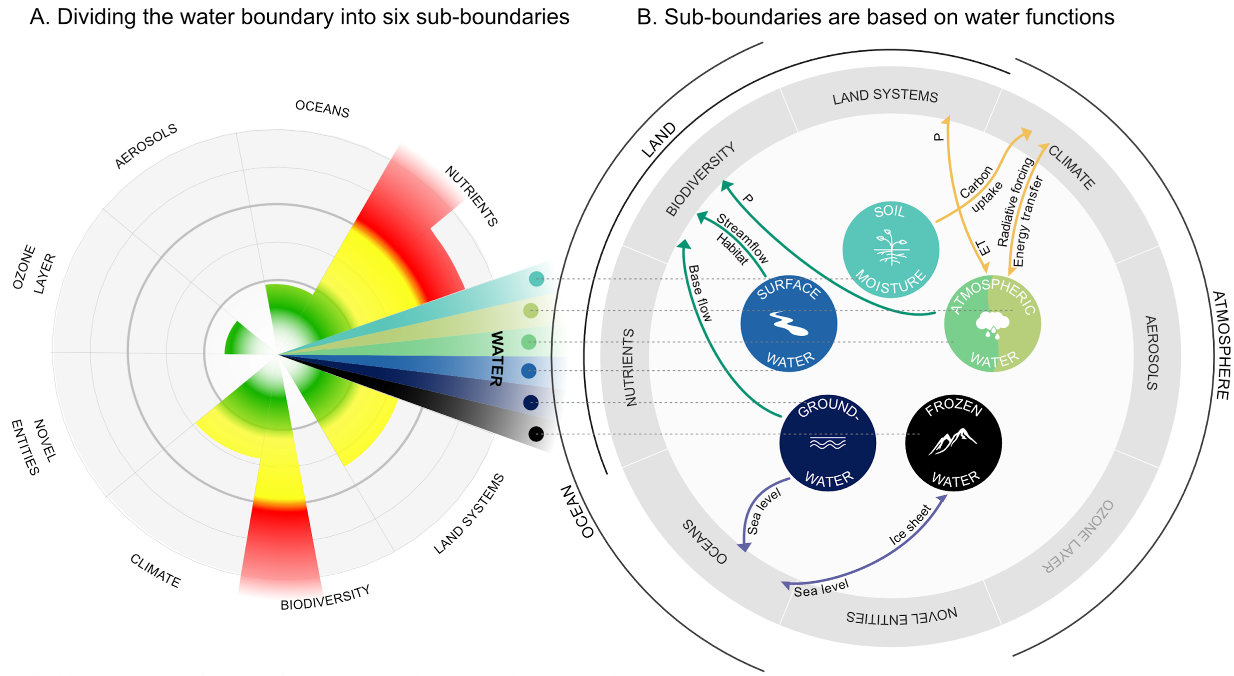


Figure 2. Graphical framework for the definition of the planetary boundaries, showing two types of relationships between a control and response variable (modified from Steffen et al., 2015).



C. Key aspects of each of the proposed water sub-boundaries

	ATMOSPHERIC WATER (hydroclimatic regulation)	ATMOSPHERIC WATER (hydroecologic regulation)	SOIL MOISTURE (hydroclimatic regulation)	SURFACE WATER (hydroecologic regulation)	GROUNDWATER (storage)	FROZEN WATER (storage)
Possible scale of analysis	Precipitationsheds	Biomes or hydroclimatic regimes	Biomes or land cover groups	Large basins or river networks	Regional aquifers	Global
Possible response variable(s)	Climate pattern stability or land-atmosphere coupling stability	Terrestrial biosphere integrity (species richness or species/area)	Carbon uptake or net primary production	Aquatic biosphere integrity (species richness or species/area)	Terrestrial or aquatic biosphere integrity, or sea level rise	Sea level rise
Possible interim planetary boundary	Percentage of global land area with evapo-transpiration change within range of simulated future	Percentage of global land area with precipitation change within range of simulated future	Maintenance of global net primary productivity at or above levels under simulated future	Percentage of basins or total river length within environmental flow limits under simulated future	Percentage of basins with low flows meeting or exceeding simulated future	Volume of ice melt to keep sea level within limits under simulated future

Figure 3. Revising the water planetary boundary to include six potential water planetary sub-boundaries. (a) A possible future planetary boundary overview figure with the six divided water stores. (b) Defining water planetary sub-boundaries based on the functional relationship between water stores and Earth System components; same as Figure 1c with only the functions used to define the sub-boundaries shown. (c) Suggestions for key aspects of each of the six sub-boundaries including possible interim planetary boundary based on 2°C target for late this century. The key Earth System functions of water for each sub-boundary are identified in parentheses (such as hydroecology for surface water).

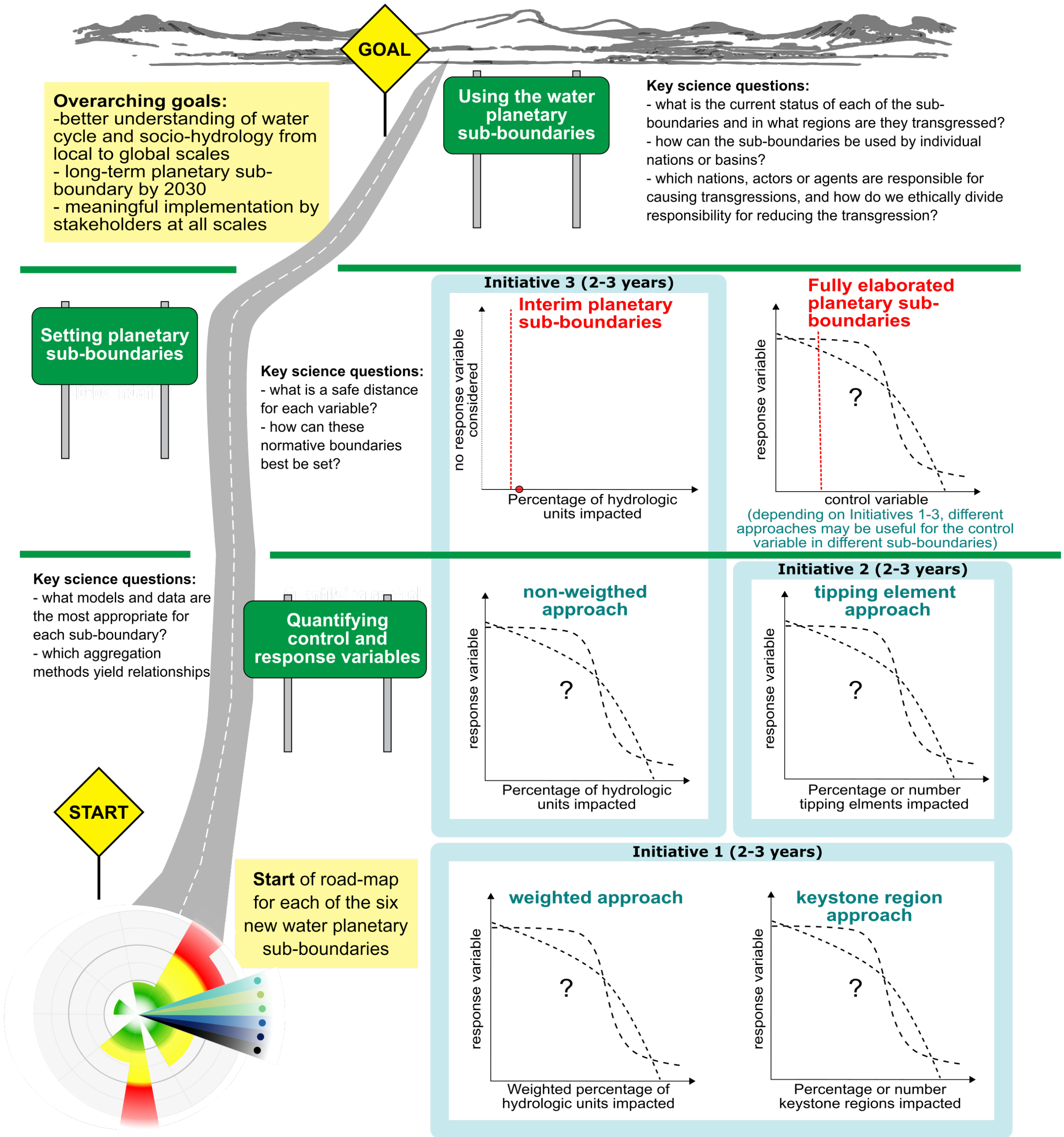


Figure 4. A roadmap for developing the new spatially-explicit water planetary sub-boundaries as described in Section 3 of the text. The horizontal axes on all graphs are the proposed control variables.

Table 1. Evaluating the current planetary boundaries for water use and different approaches to subdividing the water planetary boundaries. Each criterion is qualitatively evaluated as *met* (+), *not met* (-) or *ambiguous or uncertain* (+/-). Criteria are summed for comparison to tables although any single one is not considered more or less important. Steffen et al. (2015) is not included since they effectively re-stated the top-down (Rockström et al., 2009a,b) and bottom-up (Gerten et al., 2013) calculations.

Criteria	Rockström et al 2009a	Gerten et al 2013	Subdividing based on water functions	Subdividing based on water stores
1) Planetary boundary variables	- Maximum amount of consumptive blue water use considered proxy control variable (~4000 km^3/year); response variable and relationship both unclear	- Considered regional impacts on aquatic ecosystems related to rivers' environmental flow requirements; response variable and relationship remain unclear	+/- uncertain	+/- Possible. To be developed, see Sect 3.2, 3.3 and Fig. 4.
2) Regional impacts and upscaling mechanisms	+/- Evidence of regional water scarcity and environmental flow transgressions but top-down approach largely neglects spatiotemporal heterogeneity; unclear scaling mechanisms, planetary boundary is thought to represent the aggregate of human interference in catchment water balances	+/- Focused on environmental flow transgressions and their impacts on aquatic ecosystems in a spatially explicit manner but scaling mechanisms remain unclear; very partial perspective excluding other water effects	- Evidence and mechanisms challenging since function not directly physically based	+ Evidence and mechanisms could be derived from physically based models and data, see Sect. 3.2 3.3, and Fig 4.
3) Impacts on Earth System stability	- Water consumption and associated environmental flow transgressions could potentially impact Earth System stability through the biosphere integrity planetary boundary, however, global aggregate metric does not capture heterogeneity or underlying mechanisms	+/- See column to the left; spatiotemporal heterogeneity is better taken into account, but unlikely that all basins/regions carry equal weight for biosphere integrity, as the method suggests	- Assessing impacts challenging since function not directly physically based	+ Impacts could be assessed from physically based models and data, see Sect. 3.2.
4) Measurable	+/- Status of boundary approximately measurable with models and country statistics - however significant debate on uncertainties, on what to include, and how to calculate (Jaramillo & Destouni 2015)	+/- See column to the left	- Unclear what would be directly measured	+ Potentially measurable, see Sect. 3.2 and 3.3.
5) Understand-able and operationa-lizable	+/- Understandable but also leads to significant confusion since water use only considered proxy control variable, can be misinterpreted as regional transgressions are not explicitly captured and unclear how to operationalize	+/- See column to the left)	+/- uncertain	+/- Potentially possible. To be developed, see discussion in Sect. 3.5.
6) Represents regional and global impacts	- Does not specifically represent regional impacts and aggregates global impacts based on fluxes	+/- Spatially represents regional transgressions of environmental flow needs and aggregates flows globally	+/- uncertain	+/- Potentially possible. To be developed, see Fig. 4.
7) Uniqueness	+/- Interacts with planetary boundaries of biosphere integrity, land use change and climate change, and to a lesser degree ocean acidification and biogeochemical flows. Is unique in representing the water system	+/- See left, although more directly interacts with biosphere integrity planetary boundary through environmental flow requirements	+/- See left.	+/- For interactions (and potential overlaps with other planetary boundaries), see Fig 1.
Total criteria met	**0/7**	**0/7**	**0/7**	**3/7**