Revised peer-reviewed manuscript submitted on 16 Nov 2024 to *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*

Challenges and opportunities of ML and explainable AI in large-sample hydrology

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Subject Areas:
Hydrology, Machine Learning

Keywords:
AI, ML, XAI, hydrology

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Machine learning (ML) is a powerful tool for hydrological modelling, prediction, dataset generation, model interpretation, and process discovery. As such, ML has become integral to the field of large-sample hydrology, where hundreds to thousands of river catchments are included within a single ML model to capture diverse hydrological behaviours and improve model generalisability. This manuscript outlines recent advances in ML for large-sample hydrology. We review new tools in explainable AI (XAI) and interpretability approaches, as well as challenges in these areas. Key research avenues for ML in large-sample hydrology include addressing inconsistencies in model interpretability, enhancing hydrological predictions in data-sparse and human-modified regions, addressing hydrology's "cascade of uncertainty," developing improved methods for multivariate prediction, and uncovering causality.

1. Introduction: ML for large-sample hydrology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) are powerful tools for producing skillful predictions relative to traditional hydrological models (1; 2; 3) and as a new approach to generate insights about physical driving mechanisms in hydrology (4; 5; 6). Existing reviews of ML in hydrology have emphasized the differences between process-oriented and data-driven hydrological modelling, while presenting the spectrum of ML methods applied to streamflow, rainfall-runoff modelling, groundwater, water quality, and extremes (e.g. 7; 8; 9). Some reviews have instead focused on more specific areas, such as ML for water resources management (10), the implementation of deep learning and explainable AI (XAI) in hydrology (e.g. 11) or deep learning architectures for monitoring and managing water resources within the water industry (12). Zounemat et al. (13) focused on the use of ML for ensemble learning methodologies, while Mahdavi-Meymand et al. (14) examined the strengths and weaknesses of meta-heuristic algorithms (MHAs) in surface hydrology, hydrometeorology and groundwater hydrology, comparing approaches like genetic algorithms and particle swarm optimization relative to standard ML models. Mosavi et al. (15) explored ML's role in flood prediction, highlighting the value of different methods for short-term (hourly to weekly) versus long-term (weekly to annual) forecasting. Additionally, these reviews addressed some of the challenges of ML in hydrology, including the extrapolation problem, physical interpretability, and limitations from small sample sizes or data scarcity (e.g. 7).

In this review, we examine recent developments in machine learning for large-sample hydrology (16), where hydrological time series, metrics, or "signatures" are combined across hundreds to thousands of river catchments within a single ML model. A major advantage of the large sample (multi-catchment) ML approach is that the larger training envelope reduces the likelihood of extrapolation relative to single-catchment analyses (17). Our focus is on new methods that are being developed to derive systematic process insights across many locations. Unlike previous reviews, we do not seek to provide an exhaustive catalogue of ML model architectures, tools, or taxonomies; the field is developing so rapidly that such efforts would quickly become outdated. Instead, we take a narrative approach, outlining the key successes of ML and interpretability within the field of large-sample hydrology. We illustrate this progress through selected examples from the literature.

Contrary to the widespread perception of ML models as 'black boxes', we show how advances in XAI, a set of advanced techniques to interpret machine learning models, are now providing greater insight into the relationships between different variables and model predictions, particularly when combined with a large-sample hydrological modelling approach. ML models extract insights directly from the underlying data, enabling them to uncover new processes and relationships if the model is well designed (18). We believe this field represents a significant opportunity for uncovering new hydrological insights in the future. However, large-sample ML models also face various challenges that may limit their adoption in the hydrological sciences. These challenges include data availability issues, such as the skewed over-representation of data from the Global North, and particularly Europe and North America, which can lead to biased models. Additionally, model training problems can occur like shortcut learning (19), where models identify simpler patterns (shortcuts) in the training data that do not capture the true underlying relationships, leading to high performance on the original dataset but poor generalisation to new data. Here we review the strengths of ML for large-sample hydrology (Section 2), approaches for generating novel insights through explainability and attribution of large-sample ML models (Section 3), challenges associated with ML and XAI in large-sample hydrology (Section 4), and areas for further research (Section 5).

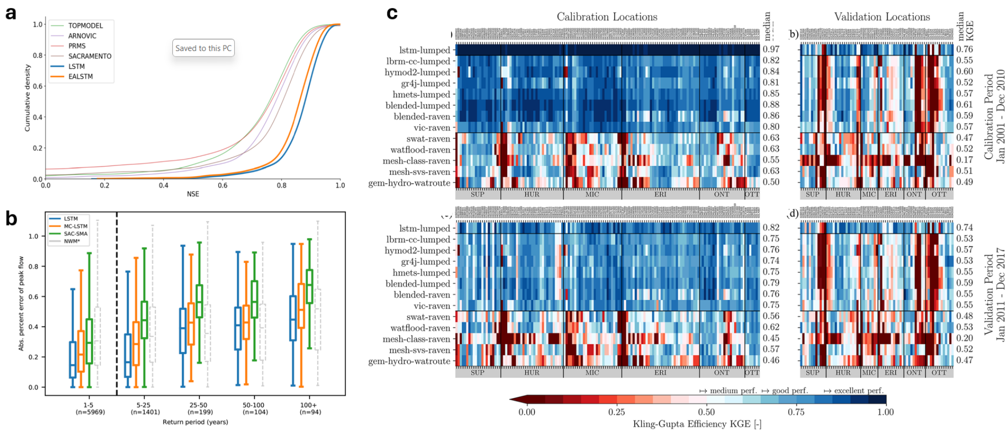

Figure 1. Benchmarking Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) models against traditional hydrological models. (a) LSTM and Entity Aware LSTM (EA-LSTM) are benchmarked against conceptual models (TOPMODEL, ARNOVIC, PRMS, and Sacramento) in Great Britain; reproduced from Lees et al. (3); (b) LSTM, Mass-Conserving LSTM (MC-LSTM), Sacramento Soil Moisture Accounting model (SAC-SMA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Water Model (NWM), reproduced from Frame et al. (20). (c) A suite of models including LSTM, basin-wise, subbbasin-based, and gridded models with local to global calibration, reproduced from Mai et al. (2). In panel c, the performance is shown for each of the different models (y axis) across the calibration and validation locations (x axis).

2. ML for enhanced hydrological modelling, forecasting, and variable estimation

Below, we highlight some of the main types of applications of ML within large-sample hydrology, including their strengths and limitations. Areas of focus include simulation and forecasting of hydrological variables (streamflow, soil moisture, snow water equivalent, evapotranspiration), generation of new datasets (e.g. from remote sensing, digital elevation models, and in-situ measurements), and novel applications of differentiable or physics-informed hydrological models.

(a) ML for hydrological simulation

It is now well-established that Long Short-term Memory (LSTM) models trained on large samples of catchments systematically outperform traditional hydrological models (2; 3; 20) (Figure 1). LSTMs are a specialized form of recurrent neural network (RNN) in deep learning designed to handle sequential data effectively by capturing long-term dependencies, which traditional RNNs struggle with. They achieve this by mitigating the vanishing gradient problem, where gradients become too small during training, hindering the model's ability to understand long-term dependencies in the data (21).

A robust model intercomparison in the Great Lakes region by Mai et al. found that an LSTM-lumped model significantly outperformed various types of basin-wise, subbasin-based, and gridded models with local to global calibration, not only in calibration but also in every validation scenario (2). While certain catchments remain difficult to model with LSTMs, such as those with spatially-variable human impacts, Lees et al. showed that LSTMs exhibit considerable promise for learning intermediate stores such as soil moisture (see section 3(c)), suggesting that during training the model implicitly learns certain hydrological processes that are explicitly defined in conceptual and physics-based models (3). Addressing a common misconception about ML models, Frame et al. showed that LSTMs are consistently better at predicting extreme events when compared to conceptual, process-based and physics-informed ML methods, even when comparable extreme events are not included in the training dataset (20).

Compared to traditional hydrological models, a key strength of deep learning methods for continuous streamflow prediction is their ability to leverage multiple data streams to improve simulation performance. One notable example of this is the synergistic use of meteorological drivers from different forcing products. For instance, Kratzert et al. found that an LSTM could extract information from three different meteorological forcing products over the continental United States, dynamically weighting the information from each forcing product depending on location and flow conditions (22).

Furthermore, recent progress has revealed the ability of DL models to integrate different types of spatial data for hydrological modelling (Figure 2). While existing DL models tended to use either Euclidean data, such as gridded meteorological forcing, or non-Euclidean data with irregular topological connectivity, such as information transfer between nodes along a river network, Deng et al. showed that the two types of information could be blended to systematically improve model performance (23). They integrated Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) for regular spatial data and Graph Neural Networks (GNN) for handling irregular data, along with spatial attention mechanisms to focus on important features, and an LSTM to capture temporal dependencies. With this model structure they simulated streamflow multiple timesteps ahead, at multiple locations along a river network, showing superior performance compared to other deep learning model structures.

(b) ML for hydrological forecasting

The performance of ML models for streamflow prediction compared to traditional hydrological models means they are highly suitable for hydrological forecasting, where accuracy and reliability are primary concerns. In recent years, the Google Flood Forecasting team has built a suite of forecasting services based around LSTM neural networks to predict global flooding with up to 7 days lead time, demonstrating equal or better performance than GloFAS (1). In their approach, an encoder LSTM processes static geophysical data and 365 days of historical meteorological forcing data. The encoder's states are passed to a decoder LSTM, which runs over seven days of meteorological forecast data. The model outputs are time-step dependent parameters of an asymmetric Laplacian mixture distribution from which streamflow quantiles can be drawn. This approach enables streamflow forecasting directly from meteorological inputs in ungauged basins, with parameter prediction characterising the uncertainty in the forecast.

A growing body of work has evaluated the advantages of ML models trained on dynamic forecasting model outputs to predict hydrological variability and extremes at subseasonal to seasonal and decadal lead times (24). Here, a key research area has been to define the best approach to achieve good predictions given uncertain climate forecasts. Hauswirth et al. (25) compared multilinear regression, lasso regression, random forests, and LSTM models trained on historic observations of seasonal discharge and surface water levels in single river catchments in the Netherlands. The predictions were generated using seasonal (re)forecast data. The authors found only minor differences between the various ML approaches and hypothesized this was due to the uncertainty in the forecast data outweighing the relative difference in performance of the ML algorithms. A key difficulty for hybrid forecasting, which combines machine learning models with dynamical climate forecasts (24), remains the limited skill of the dynamical forecasts months ahead. However, the limited benefit of the ML models may also arise from the lower performance of single-catchment machine learning approaches compared to large-sample (multi-catchment) approaches (17). In the UK, a large-sample seasonal forecasting system was developed to predict monthly maximum daily streamflow up to four months ahead by training a quantile regresssion forest (QRF) model directly on dynamical seasonal forecasts of precipitation and temperature from a multi-model ensemble of C3S seasonal climate forecasts, allowing the ML model to implicitly perform bias-correction and downscaling. The multi-catchment ML model

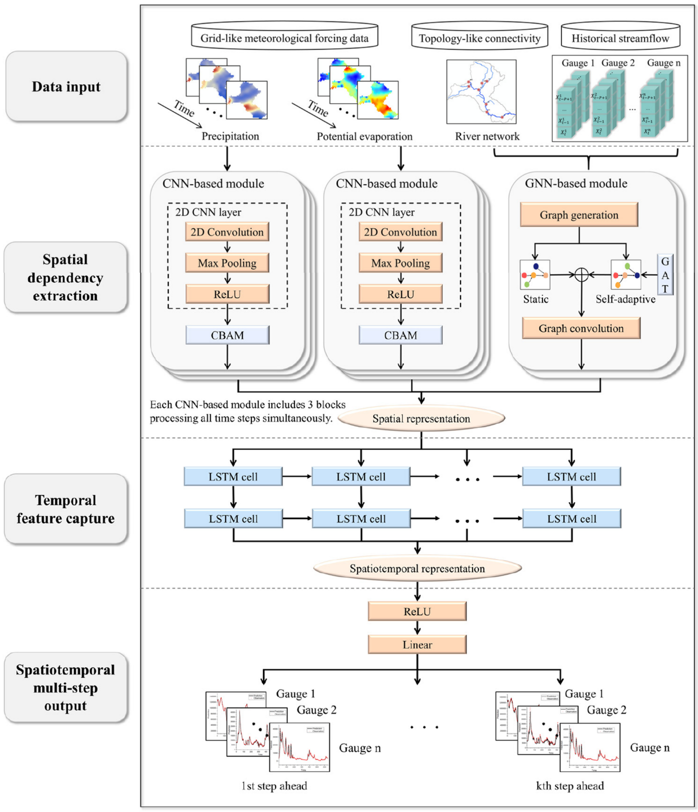

Figure 2. Spatiotemporal modelling. The CNN-based modules and GNN-based modules are employed to recognize spatial information from Euclidean gridded meteorological forcings and non-Euclidean irregular topological connectivity, respectively. The LSTM model is then employed to extract temporal dependencies. The multi-step and multi-gauge streamflow simulations are output through the subsequent ReLU function and linear layers. Figure reproduced from Deng et al. (23).

was marginally, but significantly, more skillful than the single-site approach (26). Increasingly sophisticated ML approaches could potentially provide greater benefit over simpler ML models. However, in the absence of skillful climate forecasts, skillful long-range flood forecasts are unlikely to be achieved, no matter how sophisticated the machine learning model.

A challenge for the hydrological ML community is to develop skillful forecasting models that effectively convey forecast uncertainty, especially at longer lead times. While deterministic ML or DL models still remain the most commonly-used approaches (e.g. 27; 28), there is a growing shift toward ensemble learning methodologies such as resampling (bagging, boosting), model averaging, and stacking (e.g. 13). Alongside these, probabilistic ML methods that directly estimate uncertainty (29; 30) and neural network-specific uncertainty quantification techniques (e.g. 31) are gaining traction (see Section 4(c) on uncertainty quantification). Large-sample hybrid forecasting approaches, which combine ML with the outputs of dynamical forecasting models, are starting to address uncertainty quantification through probabilistic methods (24; 32), as exemplified by Google's approach of distributional parameter prediction (33).

(c) ML for generating hydrological datasets

ML is increasingly used for generating new datasets or predicting variables which are limited by record length or sparsely distributed in space. For instance, a ML-based reconstruction of global

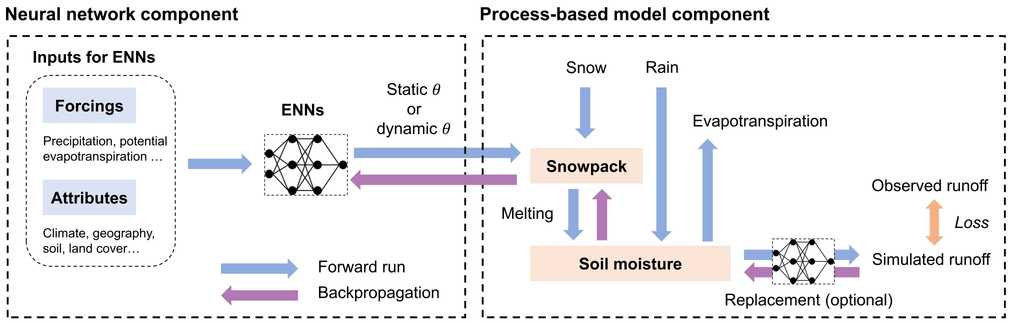

Figure 3. Structure of a differentiable hydrological model. A neural network receives dynamic inputs from meteorological forcings and static attributes across a large number of basins to provide regionalized parameterization for the process-based model. The hydrological parameters can be either static or dynamic. Modified from Shen et al. (39)

terrestrial water storage (GTWS-MLrec) was used to extend the record length of TWS data back to 1940(34), allowing a better understanding of multidecadal dynamics of the terrestrial water budget than permitted by GRACE/GRACE-FO data alone. ML has also been used to develop static datasets of physical parameters that are important for hydrological modelling and analysis. For example, bankfull river discharge was predicted for millions of kilometers of streams and rivers globally using a random forest model trained on multiple static attributes (35). Other variables include the prediction of global river width (36) or river flood depth and extent (37). Such datasets can be interrogated to better understand global hydrological and morphological dynamics, or may be used to parameterize or validate process-based hydrological models. ML is also widely used to predict discrete hydrological variables such as streamflow signatures (e.g. 6; 38) and the characteristics of extreme events. Random forests are particularly suited to these applications because of their relative resistance to overfitting and ability to exploit nonlinear relationships between the features and the predicted variable through post-hoc explainable AI tools (see section 3).

(d) Differentiable, physics-informed ML models for hydrology

Different approaches exist to combine ML with physical information, by adding synthetic input data, imposing constraints on ML models, and blending ML models with process-based models. First, as ML models can sometimes perform poorly for predicting the most extreme events such as floods and droughts, synthetic atmospheric data can be included for ML models to learn the patterns of extreme events. Synthetic samples have been shown to effectively improve the ability of ML models to simulate extreme events and monotonic relationships (40). Second, ML models can ensure adherence to physical conservation principles, such as water and energy balance, by incorporating corresponding constraints into the loss functions as penalties. An example of lake temperature simulation after introducing energy conservation into the loss function proved to be physically consistent in the net thermodynamic fluxes into and out of the lake (41).

In addition, constraints can also be imposed on the structure of ML models. Zhao et al. implemented physical constraints (a modified Penman-Monteith equation) into the structure of an artificial neural network model to predict latent heat flux (42). They showed the benefit of this hybrid physics-informed neural network was that it could conserve the surface energy budget, respect the physics of evaporation, and better generalise during extremes. Recent work has also explicitly tested the value of using strictly enforced mass conservation constraints to model the rainfall-runoff process. Frame et al. (43) demonstrated that using such constraints could harm hydrological modelling due to errors in the precipitation and streamflow data: the deep learning models learn to account for data biases, and the 'closure' effect only accounts for a small fraction of the difference in predictive skill between the data-driven and conceptual models. A different approach, also referred to as physics-informed but focusing on incorporating causality (rather than imposing physical equations in the structure of ML models), is the approach taken by Adombi et al. (44). The authors imposed causal relationship constraints (CRCs) on the layers of the model to enforce learning of causal relationships. This allowed them to explain future changes in groundwater levels based on the changes in vertical inflow and potential evapotranspiration under different climate scenarios.

Third, hybrid methods that blend DL with conceptual hydrological models are increasingly popular to preserve specific process-based components such as the relationship between soil moisture and runoff generation. For instance, a conceptual hydrological model (GR4J) was blended with deep learning models to preserve the GR4J production storage processes and then route runoff based on net rainfall and runoff from the production storage (45). By incorporating DL, other time series such as temperature and antecedent streamflow could be included to improve predictive performance. The hybrid approach performed better than either the conceptual model or DL alone. Temporal dynamic models, often employed in the field of hydrology, can be inserted into an AI system as special recurrent neural layers to improve the representation of the physical system. This kind of physics-informed paradigm improves simulation accuracy, robust transferability and unobserved process inference (46).

As another genre of physical-informed hybrid model, differentiable models are generally composed of a process-based model (or a DL surrogate), which provides physical constraints, and embedded neural networks which can learn the model parameters or replace any internal modules of the physical model. For instance, a differentiable model based on the HBV conceptual hydrological model was used to develop a regionalized model parameterization (47), with the original soil moisture–runoff relationship replaced with an inserted neural network to learn the relationship between soil moisture, precipitation, and runoff (Figure 3). These models are called 'differentiable' because the gradients of the physical model outputs are tracked with respect to the inputs using differentiable programming and big data. This blending approach allows them to be framed either as ML models constrained by structural priors, or process-based models enhanced by learnable units (39). While their temporal performance approaches that of LSTMs, one of their strengths is that they can simultaneously respect mass conservation and output a suite of interpretable uncalibrated internal physical fluxes and state variables, such as evapotranspiration and soil moisture (39; 47). In addition, with the assistance of learnable units, differentiable models exhibit competitive or even better spatial generalization when predicting in ungauged basins and ungauged regions (48). These advantages are particularly relevant in predicting high flow trends in ungauged locations, where the model's treatment of hydrological extremes is grounded in physics. Explicit encoding of physical models in neural networks also allows data from multiple processes or subsystems to be assimilated in a physically consistent manner. For instance, integrating hydrological and dynamic vegetation modeling into differentiable models can significantly improve the spatio-temporal representation of evapotranspiration in catchments by accounting for the two-way interactions between vegetation and hydrology (49). Likewise, the explicit inclusion of river routing processes in the differentiable model allows for the effective use of streamflow observations from different gauges along a river network, thereby enabling hydrologically meaningful distributed modeling with ML (50; 51).

3. Generating novel hydrological insights through model explainability and interpretability

One of the key challenges for hydrologists is using ML to derive new knowledge and findings. Hydrology generally seeks to quantify relationships within the data, identify influential variables, and understand the nature of their influence (linear, non-linear, or conditional). XAI plays a key role in equipping hydrologists with tools to measure these relationships. Specifically, XAI

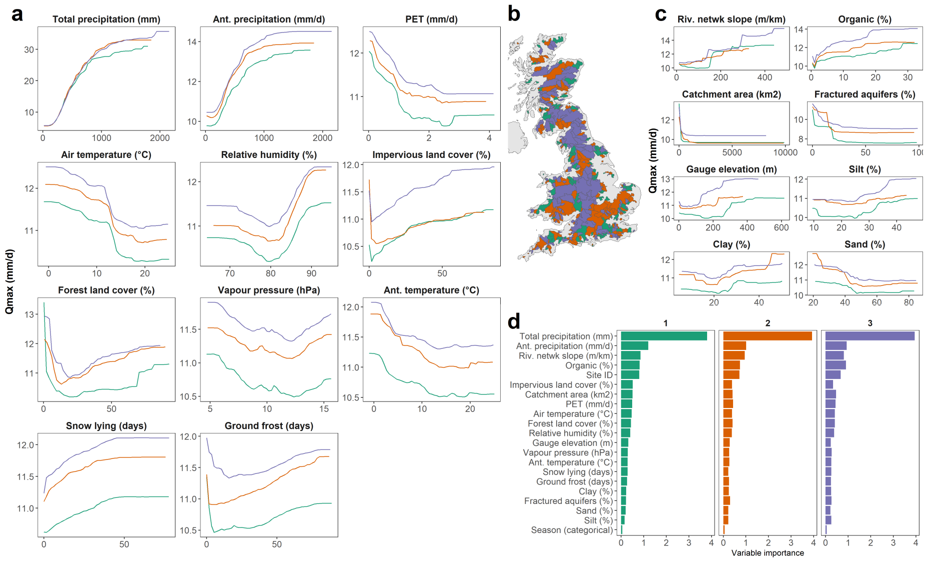

Figure 4. Partial dependence plots for a quantile regression forest (QRF) large-sample model with 1,268 gauges across Great Britain. Catchments are randomly split into three groups (3 colours) to assess consistency of partial dependence plots (panels a-c) and relative importance (panel d) across the three separate models. Features include time-series variables (a) and static catchment attributes (c). Reproduced from Slater et al. (6).

methods allow for the analysis of the relationships learned by complex ML models, evaluating model components or sensitivities, and thereby helping to generate new hypotheses about the underlying mechanisms (18). Multiple approaches exist for evaluating the relative importance or contribution of feature variables within an ML model, but the explanation obtained can vary depending on the technique used. It is thus essential to understand exactly how each technique works. Some methods are specific to certain models (i.e. intrinsic) while others can be applied to different ML model types (i.e. post-hoc). We focus principally on post-hoc approaches which can be applied to different types of ML models. Many XAI methods rely on a perturbation-based approach, whether implicitly through post-hoc interpretability methods such as relative importance, Partial Dependence Plots (PDPs), Individual Conditional Expectations (ICEs), Accumulated Local Effects (ALEs), or SHAP, discussed in section 3(a), or more explicitly through hypothesis testing and sensitivity testing, discussed in section 3(d).

(a) Model-agnostic post-hoc explainability methods

In this section we provide an overview of some key, model-agnostic XAI techniques, and we discuss issues and challenges which may arise from their use. The different methods described below all provide a form of relative feature (i.e. predictor) importance. Some techniques describe the magnitude of that effect (e.g. relative importance; Figure 4), while others describe the direction of the association between a predictor and the target variable - i.e. PDPs, ICEs, and ALEs (Figure 5). It remains important to remember that XAI methods do not explain the physical reality but the ML model's representation of the physical reality.

(i) Relative importance

Relative importance describes the contribution or influence of each feature in the model's predictions, helping to understand which of the features are more influential in predicting the target variable (e.g. Figure 4 from (6)). Random forests have a built-in approach to compute relative importance (52), which is not dissimilar to R2 decomposition in linear regression (53).

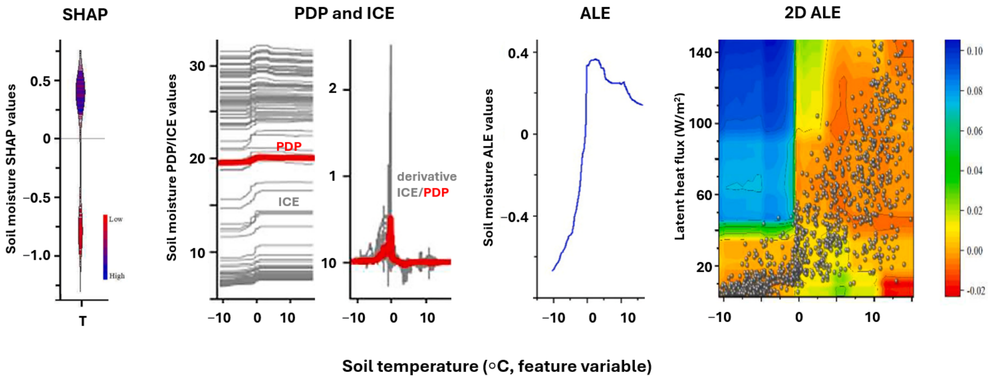

Figure 5. Four XAI metrics showing the effect of soil temperature (℃, feature variable) on the predicted soil moisture (target variable). The four sets of plots indicate (1) Distribution of SHAP values, with red colours indicating low feature values (low soil temperature) and blue colours high values (high soil temperature); (2) Partial dependence plot (PDP, red line) and Individual conditional expectations (ICE, grey lines) on same plot, along with derivative PDP and ICE; (3) Accumulated Local Effects (ALE); and (4) two-dimensional ALE plot, with soil temperature on the x-axis, latent heat flux on the y-axis, and soil moisture as colour bar. Modified from Huang et al. (5).

Permutation importance is the most simple to implement and understand; it provides an intuitive measure of feature importance by observing the effect of randomly shuffling the features. This also provides insights for feature engineering decisions, as features with low importance can be removed in cases where the model needs to be simplified. However, permutation importance can be computationally expensive with large datasets, can provide misleading importance in the presence of correlated features, and can be unstable if the model is not robust. In contrast, feature importance from tree-based models (such as Gini importance) is derived directly from the model training process, making it more computationally efficient. However, it can give more importance to predictors with more categories, and can also be misleading in the presence of correlated features. Another point worth noting is that relative importance approaches provide a global summary of feature importance (i.e. in the full model), ignoring potentially important local variability. Moreover, feature importance techniques only provide information on the importance of a given variable and not the direction of a relationship between a feature and the outcome. It is thus valuable to combine relative importance with other interpretation methods for greater insight.

(ii) Partial dependence, ICE and ALE

Three techniques are listed here which provide information on the nature of the relationship between a feature variable and the predicted outcome. Outside of these ML techniques, such relationships can also be described with statistical summary tools such as elasticity curves, which depict, for instance, streamflow sensitivity to precipitation across the entire flow distribution (54).

Partial Dependence Plots (PDPs) provide an intuitive visualisation of the relationship between an input feature and the target prediction within a ML model. They show the marginal effect of the feature on the predicted outcome of the model (i.e. how a change in the feature affects the prediction, while averaging out the effect of all other features). For instance, in Figure 4a, increases in precipitation are associated with increases in flood magnitude (6). PDPs can also show the effect of pairs of features on the target variable while keeping all other features fixed. One of the key limitations of PDPs is that they assume each feature of interest is independent of the other features, an assumption which may lead to potentially misleading interpretations when features are correlated. It is therefore worth assessing how the PDPs change when a correlated variable is removed from the model. Additionally, they only show the average effect of the feature in the model, rather than the full range.

Individual Conditional Expectation plots (ICEs), which visualize how changes in a particular feature influence the model's prediction for individual instances, can thus provide greater insight than the PDP (55). ICEs help detect heterogeneity in the model's predictions, help identify outliers and extreme cases, reveal interactions between features, and enhance overall model interpretability. In Figure 5, the grey lines show the ICEs of individual instances within the data while the red line shows the PDP, which displays the average effect across all features.

Accumulated Local Effects (ALE) are also used to assess a feature's marginal effect on the predicted outcome. ALEs are considered more robust than PDP because they do not assume feature independence. Figure 5 shows that temperature is one of the key features affecting the predicted soil moisture using various interpretability techniques. When the temperature reaches 0 °C, the thawing rate increases and the snowmelt leaches into the soil, significantly increasing the soil moisture. The derivative ICE of temperature shows a surge around 0 °C in accordance with the ICE and ALE. The two-dimensional ALE of temperature and latent heat flux shows the distribution of instances as dots. As the temperature increases above 0 °C (x-axis), the soil moisture decreases (colour bar), while latent heat flux rises. This can be explained by the joint effect of latent heat flux and temperature, both of which have a negative impact on soil moisture above freezing (5).

(iii) SHAP: the additive explanations approach

SHapley Additive exPlanations (SHAP) is an additive variable attribution method used to make models interpretable (see Figure 5). In contrast with the methods described above, SHAP provides additive explanations, meaning the prediction can be expressed as the sum of the feature contributions. For instance, if the prediction is streamflow, the SHAP value for each predictor represents the contribution of that predictor to the deviation of the streamflow prediction from the average streamflow. In other words, the sum of SHAP values equals the model's output difference from the baseline prediction.

SHAP is considered more robust than other relative importance measures due to its fair handling of feature contributions. Derived from game theory, SHAP values are calculated based on each feature's contribution to the prediction across all possible combinations of feature subsets, ensuring consistent and fair explanations. Correlated features are handled more robustly by distributing contributions among features based on their marginal contributions. SHAP allows for the interpretation of both the direction and the magnitude of the impact of each feature on the target variable prediction, and provides insights at the global level (overall model behaviour; SHAP summary plots) and the local level (individual predictions; SHAP dependence plots).

For example, De Meester and Willems (56) used SHAP summary plots to assess four drought metrics, including drought intensity, drought severity, number of dry days, and summer volume, to reveal that the proportion of irrigation in the catchment was one of the leading contributing factors of drought intensity and summer flow volumes in Flanders, Belgium. It is also possible to explicitly compute the interaction effects between features, to assess their combined effects after accounting for individual contributions, through SHAP interaction values (57). These values are represented as a matrix for each sample with dimensions $M \times M$, where M is the number of features. Jiang et al. (58), for instance, used the variability of SHAP interaction values across different flood sizes to assess the complexity of flood generation processes in individual catchments, noting that this complexity is likely to undermine the reliability of traditional flood frequency analyses.

(b) Gradient-based interpretability methods

Various other methods besides the post-hoc model-agnostic XAI methods described above can be used to interpret ML models. Gradient-based methods quantify the sensitivity of model

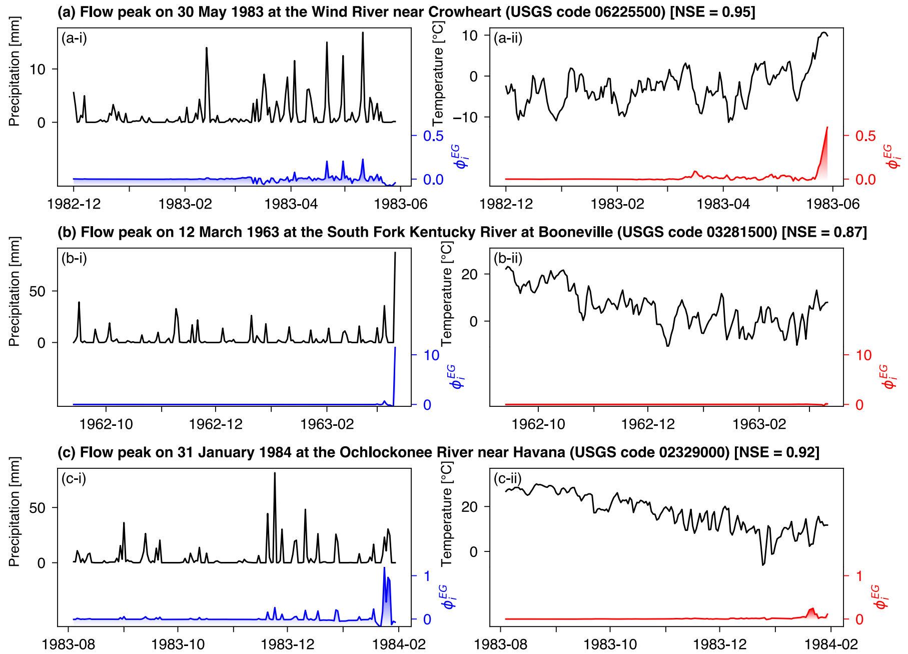

Figure 6. Observations (black lines) and feature importance scores (i.e., expected gradients; colour lines) of precipitation and temperature for three representative discharge peaks from three U.S. catchments. Each panel indicates the average NSE value of the target catchment during the test period in square brackets. Reproduced from Jiang et al. (60).

predictions to small changes to the input features. They embed core explainability principles of sensitivity (features that have the most influence on model predictions are assigned greater importance) and completeness (the total contribution of all features explains the model's output), ensuring they generate accurate and meaningful explanations (59). They are popular methods for interpreting neural networks because the gradients can be retrieved through a backward pass after training.

Integrated and expected gradients are two approaches used for interpreting DL models. In integrated gradients (IG), the prediction of the DL model is attributed to its input features by computing the integral of gradients of the model's prediction with respect to the input along a straight path from a baseline (often zero) to the input (61). This results in an attribution score for each input feature. Expected gradients (EG) are a variant of IG, where the attribution is averaged over multiple samples across a distribution of inputs, reducing the sensitivity to any single baseline in complex models or when dealing with noisy or diverse data distributions to provide a more robust attribution (62).

Gradient-based methods have been used, for instance, to interpret LSTM models that predict streamflow based on meteorological drivers (22; 63), revealing temporal feature importance scores for precipitation and temperature in relation to annual maximum discharges (60; 64). Figure 6 exemplifies three distinct temporal patterns of these feature importance scores (coloured lines) for flood events from different U.S. catchments. In the first pattern (Figure 6a), precipitation (blue line) slightly influences the peak discharge over an extended period, while temperature (red line) is more influential near the peak. The second pattern (Figure 6b) shows minimal temperature impact and significant precipitation influence only near the peak. In the third pattern (Figure 6c), precipitation has a sustained impact before the peak, suggesting historical precipitation may contribute significantly to peak flow. These patterns are consistent with three known flooding mechanisms—snowmelt, recent precipitation, and antecedent precipitation (also known as excessive soil moisture). This approach innovatively identifies flood mechanisms that emerge from complex interactions among flood drivers, without the (often subjective) classification criteria previously required, and supports further analysis of how climate and land surface shape these mechanisms and how they may change under global warming.

There are several other types of gradient-based methods that have been applied to CNN-based models. These include saliency maps (65), guided backpropagation (66), gradient × input (67), smooth gradients (68) and layer-wise relevance propagation (LRP) (69). Given gridded input features, these methods can relate the model output back to each pixel of an input feature. This generates a saliency map or heatmap that allows for the identification of the input regions that are most crucial for the model's output, which is particularly well-suited for physical inference in the geosciences.

(c) Using latent variables to assess learnt processes

Latent variables offer an alternative approach to understand what a DL model has learned during training. They represent hidden factors or underlying structures in the data that the model has inferred but not observed directly. By analyzing these latent variables it is possible to gain insights into the model's internal representations and how it processes and interprets the data. For instance, Lees et al. designed an experiment to assess whether the learned relationships of an LSTM for streamflow simulation could be related to specific hydrological processes (4). By extracting the tensors (i.e. the learned relationship), they assessed the hypothesis that the LSTM had learnt a real world process. The cell-state vector, which represents the memory of the LSTM, was mapped to soil moisture and snow. The high correlation between the probe outputs and soil moisture/snow showed that the LSTM had learned the governing hydrological processes (see Figure 7). Similar results were found by Jiang et al., who trained a physics-informed ML model on streamflow observations but could still accurately infer catchment-wide snow dynamics through one of the recurrent NN's intermediate cell-states (46).

(d) Perturbation-based methods: hypothesis testing and sensitivity testing

One intuitive approach for analysing ML models is through model perturbation, where input features are systematically removed or replaced with permuted or randomly subsampled values to see how the outcome changes. Such approaches have been used to test the role of different driving mechanisms. For example, Hoek van Dijke et al. (70) used a DL-based approach to derive insights about driving mechanisms via hypothesis testing. They evaluated whether streamflow typically increased or decreased across different catchments of the globe in the years following a major drought, i.e. producing a "drought legacy effect" on streamflow. They formulated two hypotheses: (1) that streamflow would increase following a drought in cases where drought-induced vegetation mortality decreased catchment evaporation, and (2) that streamflow would decrease following a drought in cases where the groundwater was depleted. To assess these hypotheses, they first trained an LSTM model to predict streamflow from multiple variables, omitting the drought legacy years from the training data (following (71)). They then calculated the drought legacy effect based on the positive/negative model error in the drought legacy year (see Figure 8). They found that in catchments with widespread vegetation mortality following a drought the inclusion of Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) data in the LSTM model decreased the occurrence of model underestimation compared to the model without NDVI, suggesting that the observed increases in streamflow were caused by reductions in evaporation from vegetation mortality. Likewise in catchments with depleted groundwater resources, they found that the inclusion of terrestrial water storage (TWS) in the model decreased the occurrence of model overestimation compared to relative to the model without TWS, suggesting that the decreases in streamflow following droughts were largely due to groundwater depletion (70).

Aside from hypothesis testing, another approach to understand the model predictions is model sensitivity testing. This is a form of perturbation analysis. For instance, Slater et al. developed

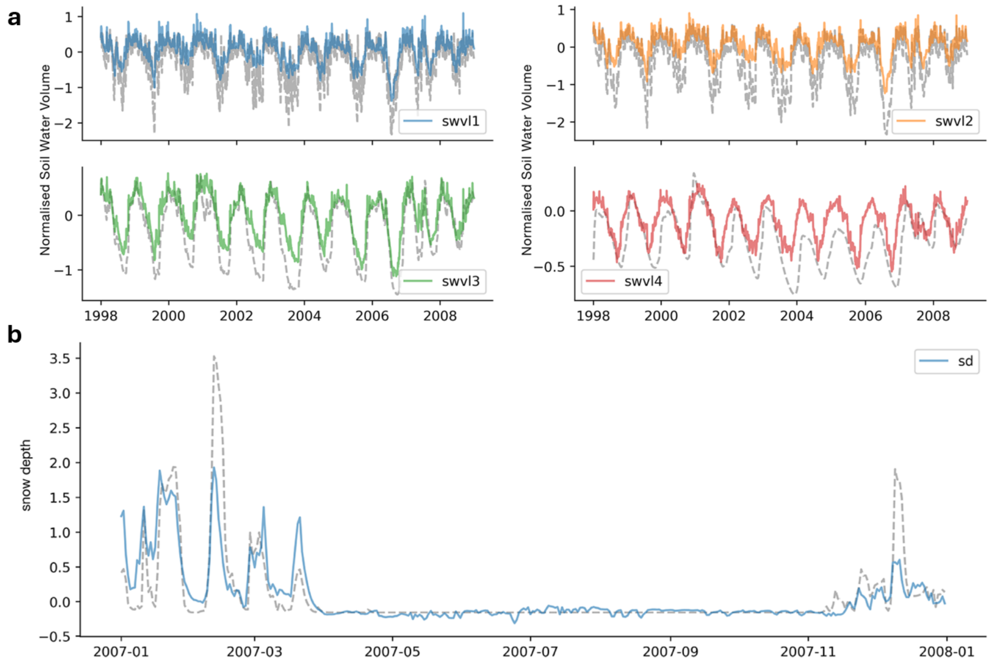

Figure 7. Using probes to explore hydrological variables learned by an LSTM model during model training. Panel (a) shows probe prediction time series as coloured lines alongside the target variables (grey dotted lines) for the Read Brook catchment at Hookagate, for four soil moisture levels. The probe correctly captures the temporal dynamics of the soil moisture signals, despite some systematic bias. Zero defines the mean soil moisture across Great Britain. Panel (b) shows probe predictions for the snow depth target variable at one site located in the Cairngorm Mountains. Reproduced from Lees et al. (4).

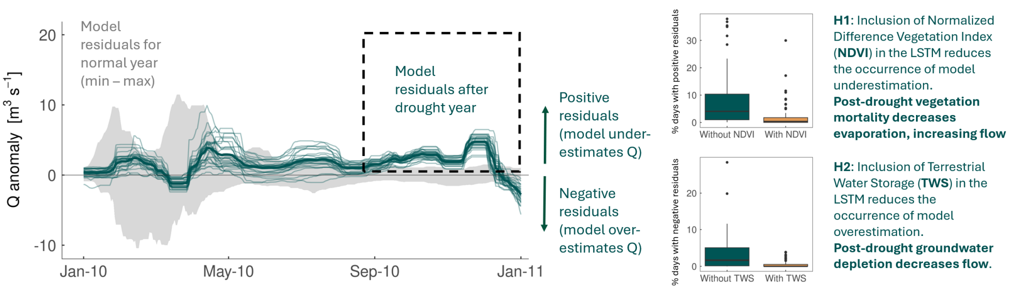

Figure 8. Hypothesis testing the causal mechanisms of post-drought streamflow legacy effects using a DL model. Grey shading shows model residuals in normal years; green lines indicate model residuals in drought years. Positive model residuals here (green lines enclosed in dashed black rectangle outline) show cases of the model underestimating streamflow in post-drought years. Top boxplots show that the inclusion of NDVI in post-drought years decreases the magnitude of residuals, reflecting the reduction in evaporation caused by vegetation mortality. Bottom boxplots show that the inclusion of TWS in post-drought years also decreases the magnitude of residuals, reflecting the decrease in streamflow from groundwater depletion. Example modified from Hoek van Dijke et al. (70).

a quantile regression forest model across 1268 UK NRFA catchments and used this model to quantify the sensitivity of flood magnitude to a 10% increase in precipitation, a 1°C rise in air temperature, or a 10 percentage point increase in urban or forest land cover (6). The results of the sensitivity testing showed which catchments were more sensitive to changes in climate and land cover, revealing that increases in precipitation and urbanization tended to amplify flood magnitudes more in catchments that had high baseflow contribution, while rising air temperature and afforestation decreased flood magnitudes more in the catchments with low baseflow index.

4. Challenges associated with ML and XAI in hydrology

(a) Causality in ML models

Most supervised ML models are built to leverage patterns in the data rather than to specifically identify causal relationships. In general, predictive models based on supervised ML focus on estimating the observational probability by predicting the likely values of Y when X is takes on a certain value. In contrast, causal tasks aim to determine the interventional probabilities, to assess the impact of changes or interventions in X (e.g., setting X to a specific value) on Y (72). A critical requirement for a predictive model to estimate causal effects is that confounding variables — affecting both the predictor and the target — are properly accounted for. If these confounders are not controlled, it becomes difficult to determine whether a given variable is a cause, an effect, or unrelated to the target variable (73).

Several promising methods are emerging to attempt to assess causality in ML models, but they are not yet widely applied in hydrology. Causal ML methods which formalize the data-generation process through structural causal models (SCMs) have surged in recent years in other disciplines (74). The causal random forests approach (75) can be implemented to estimate quantile treatment effects nonparametrically based on the generalized random forests method, along with a measure of variable importance. Counterfactual approaches, i.e. hypothetical retrospective interventions to explain an outcome, are also increasingly popular in the causal ML literature. Some causal ML approaches applied to soil moisture–precipitation coupling include a causal inference approach by Li et al., who combined Granger causality analysis and ML (76) and a new methodology proposed by Tesch et al., who trained a DL model to reflect causality using prior knowledge on additional variables that might affect the causal relationship (77). The authors also suggested two additional approaches to assess whether the detected causality was more than a spurious outcome.

Although causal explanations remain the holy grail, there is still no existing approach for uncovering process mechanisms with certitude. Causal inference methods are not specific to ML and have various challenges such as contemporaneous causation, hidden confounding, and nonlinearity - especially in the context of time series modelling (78). Challenges in causal ML include the loss of generalization performance when the data distribution shifts (74). In hydrology, this may occur when the hydrological models are trained on observations, but the forecasts use predictor variables with a different distribution, such as dynamical climate forecasts. Another key challenge when using XAI to uncover causality lies in the fact that ML models capture correlations and patterns in the data (such as non-linear relationships between the target variable and predictors), but these relationships do not necessarily represent true causal relationships. Thus, while XAI tools can help interpret some of these patterns, providing insights into model behaviour and decision-making processes, they often struggle to distinguish between correlation and causality. More rigorous causal inference techniques are required to reliably separate spurious correlations from genuine causal effects.

(b) Prediction in ungauged catchments/regions

Prediction in ungauged basins remains a longstanding problem in hydrology. Early applications of ML to address this challenge involved techniques for parameter regionalisation (e.g. (79)), but

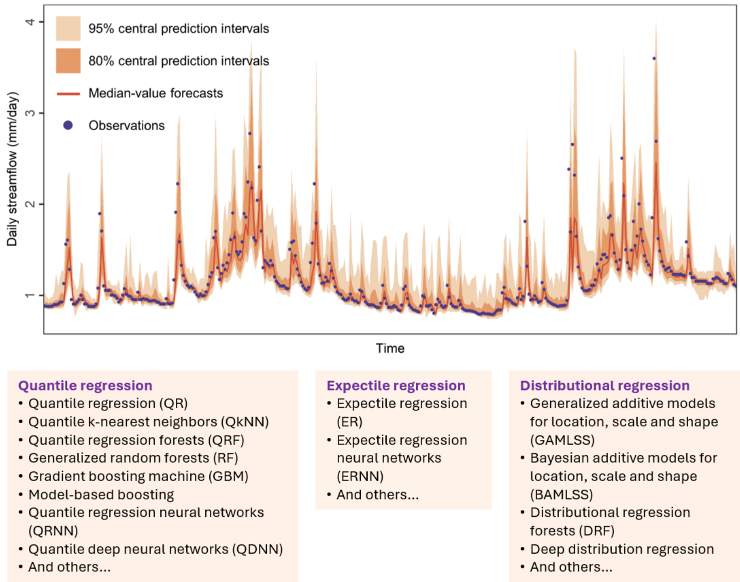

Figure 9. Probabilistic daily one-day ahead machine-learning streamflow forecasts. Median value is indicated in red, 80% (95%) central prediction intervals as dark (light) orange ribbon, and observations as purple circles. Modified from Papacharalampous and Tyralis (29).

the use of LSTMs delivered a major step forward. For example, Kratzert et al. (80) showed that an LSTM outperformed a conceptual model calibrated to a specific catchment, even when that catchment was left out of the data used to train the LSTM. In the Great Lakes Intercomparison Project (2), LSTM models systematically outperformed conceptual and physics-based models on the same test datasets (Figure 1). Apart from LSTM models, random forest and differentiable models have also shown good performance and stability in data-scarce regions (e.g. 35; 48).

The performance of ML models in ungauged basins varies depending on the composition of the training dataset in relation to the ungauged basins. For instance, Fang et al. (81) showed that the highest predictive performance was achieved when the training dataset was representative and heterogeneous – a notion they termed 'data synergy'. Kratzert et al. (17) observe that, in order to train as accurate as possible rainfall-runoff LSTM models, hydrologically diverse data from at least hundreds of basins should be employed, even if the geographical area of interest is limited. This contrasts with conventional hydrological modelling approaches where models are tailored to specific regions or regimes of interest. The implication is that hydrological predictions tend to improve in ungauged locations as the diversity of training data is increased.

Many large-sample (multi-catchment) machine learning applications in hydrology rely on pre-compiled datasets with static attributes, such as the "CAMELS" datasets (82). The performance of AI models in ungauged locations is typically assessed by evaluating the model on a subset of test basins that were left out during training. However, there are significant gaps in global coverage of these datasets, especially in Africa and Asia. Numerous efforts are underway to address this data gap, including the deployment of low-cost sensor networks and the use of satellite altimetry aboard missions such as SWOT (83). Nevertheless, the question of how best to combine these novel data sources with AI to improve the accuracy and coverage of streamflow estimates worldwide remains an open question.

(c) Uncertainty quantification in hydrological ML models

Probabilistic methods have been slowly emerging in machine learning for hydrology (29; 30), with entire families of ML regression algorithms designed to provide probabilistic predictions, as summarised in Figure 9 from (29). These families include: (i) Quantile regression algorithms that can support conditional quantile estimation (including quantile regression LSTMs, XGBoost, and more). Most of these algorithms are based on the idea of using a 'pinball loss' function, rather than typical (mean) regression algorithms. (ii) Expectile regression algorithms are similar to quantile regression algorithms, except they focus on conditional expectiles rather than quantiles, and are still unexplored in hydrology. (iii) Distributional regression algorithms (i.e. parametric algorithms) are expected to exhibit better skill than the first two types when sufficient information about the required predictive probability distribution is available. Papacharalampous and Tyralis highlight that the relative performance of these algorithms depends largely on the challenge that needs to be solved, as well as their degree of interpretability and flexibility.

In neural networks, different approaches have also been suggested to quantify uncertainty. Approaches include the running of Monte Carlo simulations, bootstrapped training samples, Bayesian approximations, or modifying the dropout scheme during inference (31). The dropout technique (84) can be used during testing to generate an ensemble of predictions. By dropping units, 'thinned' networks can be trained. Compared to multiparameter ensembles, dropout ensembles are similar to a 'Bayesian approximation', offering more reliable but less sharp coverage of prediction intervals, and require only a single calibration run (parameter set), thus no additional computational cost (31). Deep ensembles or stochastic variational inference are also increasingly popular in uncertainty quantification. Schreck et al. compared evidential neural networks with ensemble techniques to estimate predictive uncertainty. They showed the benefits of the evidential neural networks in terms of their interpretability and computational efficiency (85).

(d) Uncertainty of XAI methods for model interpretability

The use of post-hoc XAI methods on ML models for process understanding can lead to misinterpretations (e.g., 86; 87) partly because there is no clear consensus on what constitutes a valid explanation. As such, many have argued that we should favour models that are interpretable to begin with, rather than post-hoc interpretations (86). However, intrinsic models sometimes fail to match the predictive performance of more complex ML models, in part because these complex models have access to a larger solution space. For this reason, post-hoc XAI methods are often used to give the model posterior interpretability, balancing the need for high performance with the desire for interpretability.

The interpretation of different features in a machine learning model can be highly variable depending on the choice of data sources (and their uncertainties), the type of ML model used, the choices made in the model structure and training, and the choice of XAI methods, including specific assumptions and computations inherent in each XAI method (e.g., 18). Often, the application of different XAI methods to a single model (88), or even the repeated application of the same XAI method to the same model and input instance (89), can lead to interpretation results that differ to varying degrees. One question is thus whether researchers should combine insights from all interpretation techniques and 'average' results to reach a reliable conclusion, or favour specific techniques over others. This domain is highly unregulated, and many researchers use different combinations of techniques, or just one.

Huang et al. (90), for example, compared the instance-level variable importance in a ML model and a deep learning model. They predicted the land atmosphere coupling (LAC) strength, which has been increasing over the last four decades in South America, using both a machine learning (Random Forest, RF) and deep learning (ConvLSTM) model, and then compared the performance of XAI metrics on both models (90). For the RF model they considered random forest importance (RFI), SHAP and perturbation importance (PI), and for the DL model the

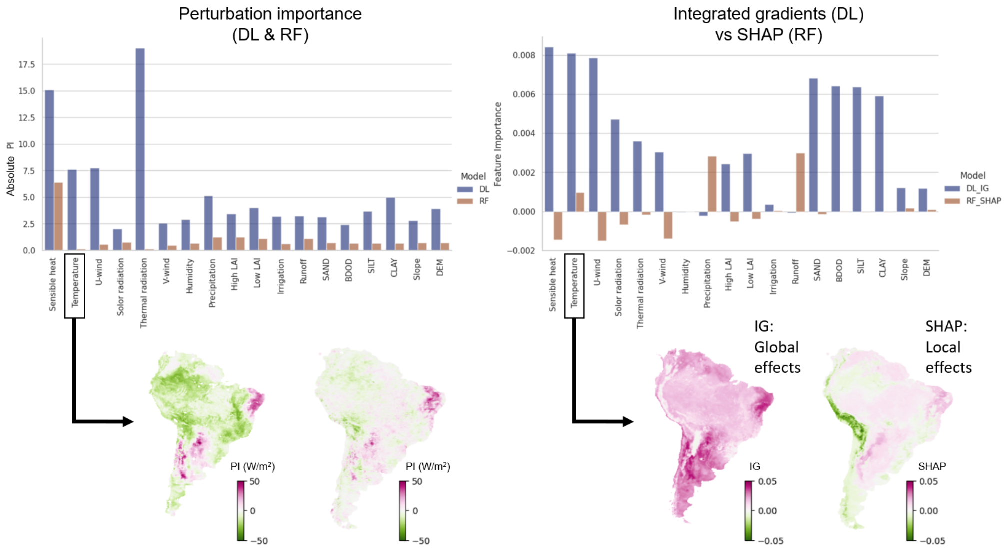

Figure 10. Comparison of instance-level variable importance in a deep learning (ConvLSTM) and a machine learning (Random forest) model. Both models predict land-atmosphere coupling. Modified from Huang et al. (90).

perturbation importance (PI) and integrated gradients (IG). They found the prediction of both models was comparable; DL had slightly less bias but also exhibited 'smoothed' predictions. The DL model's integrated gradients provide global information about model behaviour, while the RF model's importance metric provides local information. In Figure 10, the left panel shows the inconsistency between DL and RF. The permutation importance is higher in the DL model, showing greater sensitivity to perturbation. In the right panel, the SHAP values emphasize the local effects of precipitation and runoff in the ML model, while the IG values emphasize the global effects of meteorological and static variables in the DL model. Overall, this example highlights the importance of understanding and justifying the choice of specific XAI approaches selected for any given task in hydrology.

Ahmed et al. (10) highlight the importance of model interpretability and understanding ML models, so that there is transparency in any conclusions which may impact policy decisions. Moreover, the question of whether XAI results should be interpreted through the lens of pre-existing domain knowledge is a challenge in itself. Promptly disregarding methods where the results are not fully aligned with pre-existing knowledge can limit the potential of hydrological XAI, reinforcing established theories, rather than recognising the potential of ML as an exciting new approach to reveal novel and possibly counter-intuitive patterns directly from data (18).

5. Conclusion: ML and XAI limitations and future recommendations

Common pitfalls and challenges of ML in hydrology include issues such as variable selection bias, testing models on the same data they were trained on (resubstitution validation), inconsistent validation across multiple algorithms, and model selection or optimization based on the test set (91). In the field of large-sample hydrology specifically, based on the current state of the art in ML and XAI, we believe some of the key remaining challenges are as follows.

(1) Addressing inconsistencies in ML model interpretability. Different ML models and XAI approaches can produce conflicting interpretability results, and as such can lead to different interpretations (e.g. 88; 90; 92). Rather than considering specific methods to be wrong, and others ‘right’, users need to be aware of the inherent strengths and limitations of each ML model or XAI method. We have attempted to outline some of the strengths and weaknesses of ML/DL models and XAI tools herein. For instance, PDPs can be highly sensitive to variable multicollinearity, and should be assessed alongside potentially more robust approaches such as ALE. Our discussion of these different XAI/interpretability methods aims to provide some guidelines on their respective utility and trustworthiness. In practice, it is recommended that the XAI analysis be repeated by resampling the data, using different subsets of data, varying initial seeds in ML models, or using multiple XAI methods in different runs (93). This strategy can potentially prevent the finding from being the product of a specific data set, ML model, or XAI method, and also allows for estimation of the variability and confidence intervals of the interpretation results.

(2) Enhancing prediction in data-sparse environments. There has been considerable progress in the field of large-sample hydrology for hydrological prediction in ungauged basins and regions. Many papers have showcased the strengths of ML compared to traditional hydrological models, exploring which model types perform best out of sample, and how different types of out-of-sample prediction (random, geographical, hydrologically-separated, or by climate zone) affect generalisability (e.g. 1). However, there remain areas for further research, such as: improving the representation of meteorological and geophysical predictors beyond the use of catchment-averaged values, better predicting the most extreme "unseen" events, and evaluating performance in the most data-sparse regions where many observations remain unavailable or unreliable. Ultimately, increasing data collection in underrepresented regions (94) and better integration of satellite information (83) are both needed to improve global large-sample hydrology.

(3) Improving predictions in human-modified and dynamically-evolving regions. There remains scope to improve our understanding of hydrological drivers in heavily modified or regulated catchments. This includes further research on the ability of DL to learn different anthropogenic impacts on hydrological variables. We believe this is a fruitful avenue for further research, given the ability of DL to learn stores of water (4). The new global river network, GRIT (Global River Topology) (95) also presents an exciting opportunity to generate predictions in data-sparse, human-modified, and nonstationary sections of the global river network. GRIT blends the 30m Landsat-based river mask from GRWL (96) with elevation streams using the new 30m FABDEM (97). It faithfully represents divergent river flows (including bifurcations, multi-threaded channels and canals) and can be dynamically updated over time as new Earth Observation datasets become available. The use of dynamically-updating river networks like GRIT also paves the way to better representing the physical nonstationarity of the river network in large-sample hydrology.

(4) Developing better multivariate prediction. Predicting multiple dependent variables (outcomes) simultaneously is particularly useful for obtaining more accurate insights in large-sample hydrology. One of the strengths of differentiable modelling is the ability to consider multiple hydrological variables simultaneously. However, an equivalent data-driven approach for handling multivariate hydrological outputs remains an area for further research. Recently, there have been explorations in multi-task learning that incorporate basic hydrological principles, such as water balance, to constrain the relationships between variables computed by ML models (e.g., 49; 50; 98). These studies show promise for multi-variable constraints compared to focusing only on streamflow or a single variable, which may not sufficiently constrain the internal processes in the hydrologic system.

(5) Rethinking hydrology’s "cascade of uncertainty". The traditional hydroclimatic modelling framework includes multiple sources of uncertainty arising from the climate models and other data inputs, through to the hydrological models and post-processing. In contrast, ML models can implicitly handle steps such as downscaling and bias correction of climate forcing data by developing direct relationships between good quality data sources (e.g. 24; 99). This implicit handling of biases can be seen when higher resolution meteorological inputs (obtained through downscaling and bias correction) do not lead to better hydrological ML model performance, suggesting that the model has already addressed these biases implicitly (e.g. 23). We argue that in some cases there is scope for new prediction methods that train ML directly on dynamical climate forecasts (24) to shorten the hydrological modelling chain (99). Despite such methods, however, the underlying uncertainty in streamflow measurements continues to be a fundamental challenge for hydrology (100).

(6) Improving large-sample methods for hydrological causality. Hydrologists, ourselves included, are often at risk of implying causality when discussing the drivers of hydrological processes, and still need to be careful not to claim causality too quickly. High predictive accuracy does not guarantee valid causal inference. The challenge of 'equifinality', in which different model structures or parameter sets within a given model structure can produce a similar result (101), exists also in ML. Within this context, XAI offers hydrologists a powerful tool to interrogate ML models and assess their representation of reality. However, results should always be interpreted with caution, as XAI only reveals the internal mechanics of the ML model, which should not be mistaken for the real world. Although XAI alone does not confirm causality, the correlations and patterns it uncovers can nevertheless provide valuable insights. For example, XAI may reveal that certain predictors thought to be unimportant exert a significant influence on predictions, or that the importance of variables changes unexpectedly in different environmental contexts (18) or over time. Such revelations may prompt hydrologists to reevaluate their assumptions, leading to further testing and targeted studies. Therefore, in most cases where causality is still a challenge, it is preferable to consider XAI findings as hypotheses rather than definitive causal conclusions.

(7) Working with machine learning experts. While it is valuable for hydrologists to expand their skillset with machine learning techniques, the importance of actively collaborating with machine learning experts cannot be overstated, as is already recognised in other disciplines like ecology (102). Previous studies have highlighted that successful outcomes often rely on co-authorship between machine learning and hydrological experts (15).

(8) Learning from our failures. Various challenges arise when implementing ML for large-sample hydrology; these also represent an important step forward. Most papers present only the successes of their ML modeling attempts and the promises of their model architectures, with some briefly mentioned drawbacks in the Discussion sections. However, when it comes to new ML and XAI methods in hydrology, where best-practices are still not well established, it would be highly beneficial to share our ML and XAI difficulties. Sharing our model failures and shortcomings would significantly speed up scientific advancements, both in terms of methods and results. Such efforts are considerably enhanced by making code and data freely available to the research community (103).

Taking these limitations and recommendations into account, we remain highly optimistic on the future of ML and XAI in hydrology. There is considerable potential to drive future progress in the field, to enhance early warning systems, and discover new processes which diverge from our traditional understanding. Here, we are not suggesting a move away from process-based modeling; rather, we highlight the complementary advantages that ML and XAI offer for tackling challenges that traditional methods may struggle with. Looking ahead, we foresee hydrologists widely embracing the nonlinear insights provided by ML, leveraging it as a powerful analytical tool in this data-rich era. We also expect increased cross-disciplinary collaborations, where hydrologists, data scientists, and machine learning experts work together to develop and fine-tune ML and XAI tools specifically designed to meet the diverse needs of different sub-disciplines of hydrology. Overall, we think AI/ML has clear potential for better water resources management in a rapidly changing world.

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Acknowledgements. The authors gratefully acknowledge input from Grey Nearing, one anonymous Reviewer, and the Editor. We thank the organisers of the Royal Society Conference "Hydrology in the 21st Century: Challenges in Science, to Policy and Practice" for the invitation to present a review of ML in hydrology. LS gratefully acknowledges funding from the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship scheme (MR/V022008/1). JY acknowledges support from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (52361145864). AHvD acknowledges the German Research Foundation (Emmy Noether grant 391059971). SJ and GB acknowledge support from the Carl Zeiss Foundation.