

Sensors in the Stream: The High-Frequency Wave of the Present

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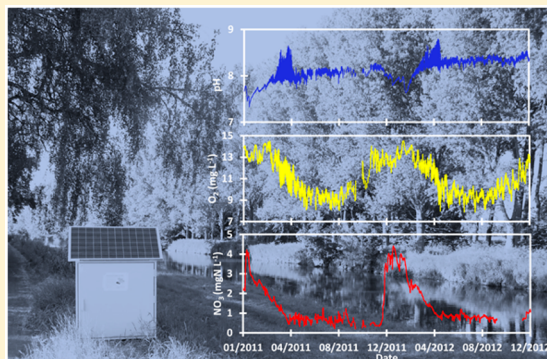
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ABSTRACT: New scientific understanding is catalyzed by novel technologies that enhance measurement precision, resolution or type, and that provide new tools to test and develop theory. Over the last 50 years, technology has transformed the hydrologic sciences by enabling direct measurements of watershed fluxes (evapotranspiration, stream-flow) at time scales and spatial extents aligned with variation in physical drivers. High frequency water quality measurements, increasingly obtained by in situ water quality sensors, are extending that transformation. Widely available sensors for some physical (temperature) and chemical (conductivity, dissolved oxygen) attributes have become integral to aquatic science, and emerging sensors for nutrients, dissolved CO₂, turbidity, algal pigments, and dissolved organic matter are now enabling observations of watersheds and streams at time scales commensurate with their fundamental hydrological, energetic, elemental, and biological drivers. Here we synthesize insights from emerging technologies across a suite of applications, and envision future advances, enabled by sensors, in our ability to understand, predict, and restore watershed and stream systems.



■ RECENT PROGRESS IN IN SITU SENSOR MONITORING

Just over a decade ago, Kirchner et al.¹ envisioned the hydrologic sciences being transformed by the increased availability of stream chemistry measurements at time scales commensurate with hydrologic forcing, a theme echoed in the U.S. National Research Council's "Challenges and Opportunities in the Hydrologic Sciences" in 2012 (<http://www.nap.edu/read/13293/chapter/1>). At the same time, ecologists were

recognizing the transformative potential of sensors that allow ecosystem processes to be measured at time and space scales that match relevant physical, chemical and biological drivers.^{2–4} The vision of Kirchner et al.¹ has been realized, in part, with significant progress in estimating solute residence times in watersheds,⁵ but it is the converging vision across hydrological, biogeochemical, biological, and ecological disciplines that

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highlights the significant intellectual payoff from new sensor technologies in watershed and stream science. Now stream-water chemistry data are available every hour, or even every minute across a broad range of analytes, and commensurate biological data are available at fortnightly to daily intervals for sustained periods greater than one year. These advances allow the study of multiple solutes at subdaily intervals, not just single solute time series, and enable interpretations and hypothesis testing of ideas around river biogeochemistry, biology and ecology, in addition to catchment signals. These novel measurements have revealed complex temporal dynamics that were obscured by traditional sampling frequencies^{6–8} and have enabled new insights into the inner-workings of watersheds and streams.

While automated collection and traditional laboratory processing of discrete samples have yielded enormously informative subdaily data,^{8,9} the transformation of stream and watershed science will occur primarily in response to increasing availability of automated in situ sensors. Indeed, electrode-based measurements of pH, conductivity, temperature, and dissolved oxygen (DO) have been available for over half a century¹⁰ and are now essential tools for stream and watershed studies; however, sensor technology has been extended through the development of other methods such as optical, wet analytical chemical or flow cytometry techniques (a laser- or impedance-based, biophysical technology employed in cell counting), recent advances in field deployment engineering (antifouling, batteries, micropumps), and electronics (detectors, emitters) that have reduced costs. This, in turn, has increased the number of sites at which in situ measurements are now made. Among the solutes for which sensors are most widely available is nitrate. Early colorimetric based sensors¹¹ for nitrate were constrained by performance and reagent wastes, and have largely given way to spectrophotometers¹² enabling very high frequency (0.5 Hz, samples per second) sampling that has proven enormously informative for understanding riverine dynamics.^{13–15} For other solutes, wet analytical chemistry remains the most viable approach, with “lab-on-a-chip” sensors lowering power requirements and reducing the interferences that are intrinsic in optical absorbance measurements.^{16,17} For example, measurements of orthophosphate using standard reagent-based colorimetry has emerged as a robust field-deployable technology, permitting automated hourly sampling and a host of attendant informative inferences enabled by this increase in temporal resolution.^{6,18} Other deployable optical sensors include fluorimeters that can measure chlorophyll-*a* and other photosynthetic pigments, as well as fluorescent dissolved organic matter;¹⁹ while these sensors have a long history in marine and estuarine settings, their use in streams and small watersheds has revealed a variety of novel insights.²⁰ Indeed, Fast repetition rate Fluorimetry (FrrF), a technique which measures the variability of light emission from chlorophyll *a*, can be used to measure photosynthetic rates in situ which reduce when algae are stressed due to the prevailing environmental conditions (e.g., drought), and these measurements are supported by weekly (imaging) flow cytometry (that can discriminate and assess abundance among phytoplankton and phytochemical functional groups) and environmental DNA techniques (that can characterize microbial communities and detect invasive species).^{21,22} In short, the suite of widely used parameters that hydrologists, geochemists, and stream ecologists consider relevant is almost uniformly possible in real time and at high spatial or temporal resolution.

These new data sets have the ability to transform our understanding of a diverse range of fundamental aquatic processes, from watershed dynamics to nutrient spiralling to ecosystem response to disturbance. The potential for sensors to unravel ecosystem functioning and realize improved environmental management was illustrated by the recent commissioning of a “national nutrient sensor challenge” by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. This effort seeks to enable the next generation of long-term deployable, high accuracy, high precision in situ sensors, and to drive down costs to ensure broad adoption by academic, private and government scientists.²³

Here we present four examples (inferring nutrient sources and transport, measuring in situ nutrient processing, detecting ecological effects, and temporal scaling of solute export), spanning continents and time scales, in which recent utilization of sensor technologies have advanced our understanding of stream and watershed systems. While rivers and their watersheds are our focus, the use of novel measurement technologies in other aquatic ecosystems such as lakes, estuaries and oceans has been equally transformative.^{2–4} In addition to the insights that have already been made, we highlight ongoing trends in sensor development and suggest areas in which sensors will enable new insights and allow tests of watershed and ecological theory.

■ IDENTIFYING NUTRIENT SOURCES AND TRANSPORT PATHWAYS IN WATERSHEDS

Subdaily monitoring of nutrient hydrochemistry has traditionally utilized automatic water-samplers, but these are expensive to run in terms of regular sample collection and subsequent laboratory analysis, and can have chemical and biological stability issues during sample storage,²⁴ which usually is in the range of days. Through the deployment of in situ sensor and colorimetric based autoanalyzer technology, Bowes et al.²⁵ measured hourly total reactive phosphorus (TRP) and nitrate concentrations and used these to characterize, on a storm-by-storm basis, the nutrient source changes to a rural river in southern England over a two year period by analyzing the hysteresis in the relationship between concentration and flow during storm events when the stream or river flow increases and then recedes. Differences in the hysteresis behavior between storms provide information on nutrient sources and pathways and the findings are summarized in Figure 1. In this case study of the River Enbourne in the UK, the results highlighted the importance of the acute mobilization of sewage-derived phosphorus in bed sediment and the large diffuse phosphorus inputs entering the stream from manure applications during May storms, thereby helping to target future remediation measures. Additional analysis showed clear double-peaked diel phosphorus and nitrate cycles during low flows, which pointed to chronic pollution related to the daily pattern of effluent discharges from sewage treatment works and septic tank systems.²⁶ Recently Mellander et al.²⁷ also used 20 min phosphorus concentration monitoring to identify that subsurface flows in bedrock cracks were the dominant phosphorus transport pathways in a karst landscape in County Mayo, Ireland, and Mellander et al.²⁸ demonstrated that phosphorus could predominantly be transferred to streams via groundwater during winter in the south of Ireland using sub daily colorimetric based autoanalyzer measurements. Both these studies allowed a deeper understanding of phosphorus transfer pathways and retention in the aquifer to be developed

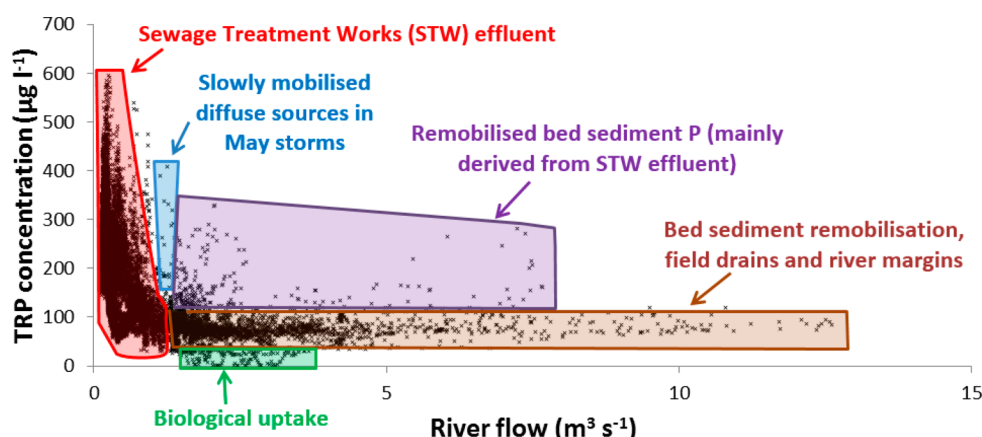


Figure 1. Phosphorus sources to the River Enborne (southern England) identified using two years of hourly total reactive phosphorus (TRP) and flow data. The clusters were derived from storm hysteresis analysis.²⁴

with advice on location of critical source areas for phosphorus loss in a Karst landscape resultant.

Furthermore, regular subdaily measurements of dissolved organic matter (DOM) composition (which plays a central role in carbon dynamics and participates in the complexation of trace metals and the mobilization of pollutants) by in situ chromophoric dissolved organic matter (CDOM) fluorescence have revealed a complex short-term variability in DOM composition. This variability is a function of source, flow pathway and instream photochemical and biologically mediated processes.^{20,29}

Together, these results highlight that subdaily observations have high potential to accurately make source assignments and that watershed management can greatly benefit from high frequency measurements to identify site specific loss mechanisms and pathways and potential legacy issues,^{25,28} such as groundwater nitrogen and stream bed phosphorus retention. The development of sensors for an increasing range of water quality constituents, with more widespread deployment, will lead to a greater ability to fingerprint chemical sources through seasons and individual storm events in the future.

■ QUANTIFYING COUPLED NUTRIENT PROCESSING AND METABOLISM

Drainage networks are not passive conduits, but are important for chemical retention and transformation. High frequency data have proven especially useful in quantifying in-stream nutrient processing and understanding the stoichiometric coupling of autotrophic uptake across the periodic table. In addition to seasonal patterns (Figure 2a), finely resolved time-series have revealed strong diel nitrate variability (Figure 2b) similar to that observed for DO and interpreted as autotrophic N assimilation.^{14,15} Actively measuring nutrient uptake rates (e.g., via isotope or nutrient dosing) is complex and expensive, limiting measurements to short (hours to days) periods,³⁰ typically under steady baseflow conditions, and with a significant bias toward small streams.³¹ In Florida's spring fed rivers, autotrophic nitrate uptake amounted to less than 20% of total net N retention.¹⁸ In two central European streams, percentage daily autotrophic N uptake peaked at 47% (agricultural stream) and 75% (forest stream) of the daily N loading input to the stream network of the whole watershed.³² There were different ranges of autotrophic areal rate of nutrient uptake (U, analogues to the mass of nutrient removed from

water per unit area of streambed (m^{-2}) per unit time (d)) with 30–160 mg N in the Florida rivers¹⁴ and 0–270 mg N and 0–97 mg N in the central European agricultural and forest stream,³² respectively. Dissimilatory pathways such as denitrification, which account for the balance of net retention, were also coupled with primary productivity through secondary relationships such as the availability of labile carbon.¹⁴ In a separate study, a more complex retention signal (Figure 2c) arose in a tidal river, representing the convolution of diel assimilatory uptake and tidally varying denitrification based on residence time and benthic surface area.³³

While early insights into coupled nutrient processing have focused on nitrate dynamics, sensors for other solutes have proven equally valuable. Cohen et al.¹⁸ used an orthophosphate sensor, along with optical nitrate, and electrode based DO and specific conductance sensors. The high frequency signals enabled identification and deconvolution of geochemical P-retention pathways that created overlapping diel P signals. The data also revealed clear coupling of N and C assimilation, and that while also coupled, P uptake was not synchronous with the timing of N and C assimilation. This asynchronous N and P assimilation may represent timing differences in protein and ribosome production in aquatic plants. It has been suggested that temporal nutrient coupling occurs only when an input nutrient is limiting and therefore the identification of such temporal coupling, through in situ high frequency monitoring, is a useful indicator of ecosystem limitation status.³⁴ Diel concentration variation for biologically active trace metals (e.g., Ba, Fe, Mn, and U) has similarly been observed in spring systems in Florida, and suggests that aquatic plant metabolism controls diel and seasonal cycling of metals.³⁵ As sensors emerge for measuring other solutes such as other nutrients (e.g., Si, Fe, Mg), the organic nutrient forms (e.g., DON, DOP), measurements of total concentrations which include the particulate fraction and therefore all the total nutrient potentially available, and organic pollutants, their dynamics can be compared to metabolic, thermal, flow and photolytic forcing, which will enable a rich new arena for understanding aquatic systems.

Sensors can also be applied using an alternative Lagrangian approach.³⁶ Reach-scale nutrient processing rates such as areal rate of nutrient uptake (U) and uptake length (average distance a nutrient molecule, typically nitrate, moves downstream in dissolved form before being assimilated by the biota) have been estimated from longitudinal changes in stream solute

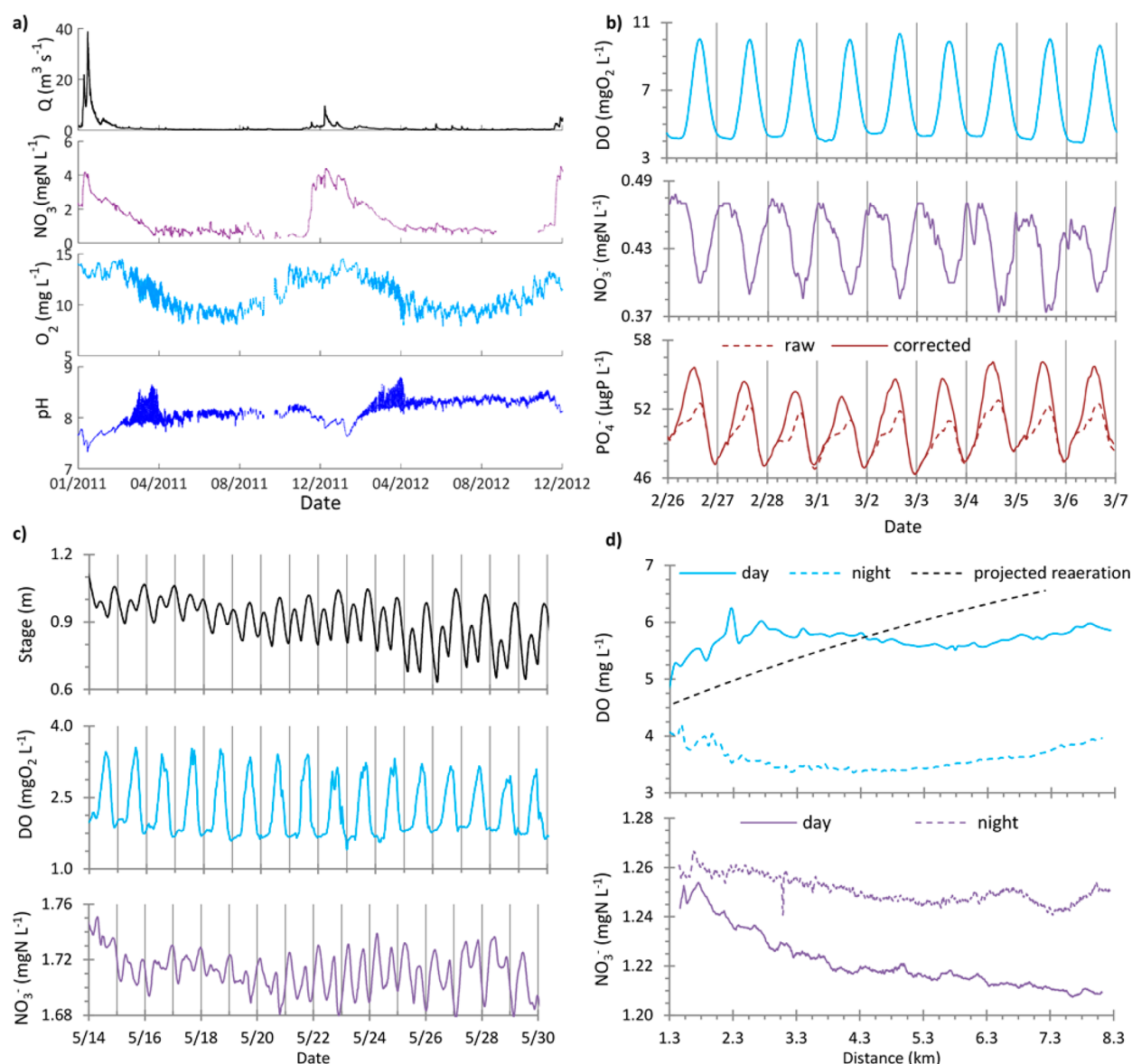


Figure 2. Continuous high frequency oxygen, nitrate and pH data reflect the seasonal pattern of primary production and assimilatory N uptake due to flow and light variability (panel a; adapted from Rode et al.³²). The relative magnitude of diel variation in DO, NO_3^- and PO_4^- (panel b; adapted from Cohen et al.¹⁸) is strongly correlated with autotroph stoichiometry. The assimilatory P uptake (PO_4^- signal must be corrected for precipitation) notably appears temporally decoupled from primary production and assimilatory N uptake by several hours. Comparison of day-night profiles can be used to partition assimilatory versus dissimilatory pathways (panel c^{33,35}), while high resolution longitudinal profiling (panel d; adapted from Hensley et al.³³) has been used to identify spatial heterogeneity with N processing in a tidal river shown to be strongly influenced by residence time variation.

concentrations (Figure 2d), revealing a large degree of spatial heterogeneity in nutrient uptake which appears related to changes in river morphology.³³ Furthermore, estimates of reach-scale metabolism and nutrient processing show diel variations along a continuous gradient from headwaters to mouth, as envisioned in the River Continuum Concept,^{37,38} and highlight how river regulation disrupts the continuum, for example, in terms of stream metabolism through increased total dissolved N uptake below dams.^{38,39}

These early insights suggest that the emergence of sensor-derived high-frequency time series for multiple solutes will better allow us to observe the stoichiometric coupling of metabolic and geochemical processes and thereby test stoichiometric theory. It will also enable a deeper understanding of variation in retention rates and pathways with flow,

temperature and other abiotic drivers across watersheds spanning a gradient of size and geochemical and physical features.

SEPARATING THE EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE PROCESSES ON AQUATIC ECOLOGY

The effects of multiple pressures on freshwater ecosystems are difficult to separate because of the multiple, interrelated abiotic–biotic interactions. New biological monitoring techniques have been developed that allow the high-frequency characterization of river plankton composition and function for the first time. Fluorimeters now reliably measure total chlorophyll and other photosynthetic pigments at subhourly frequencies to estimate phytoplankton concentrations (Figure 3a). FrrFs are able to monitor changes in the photosynthetic

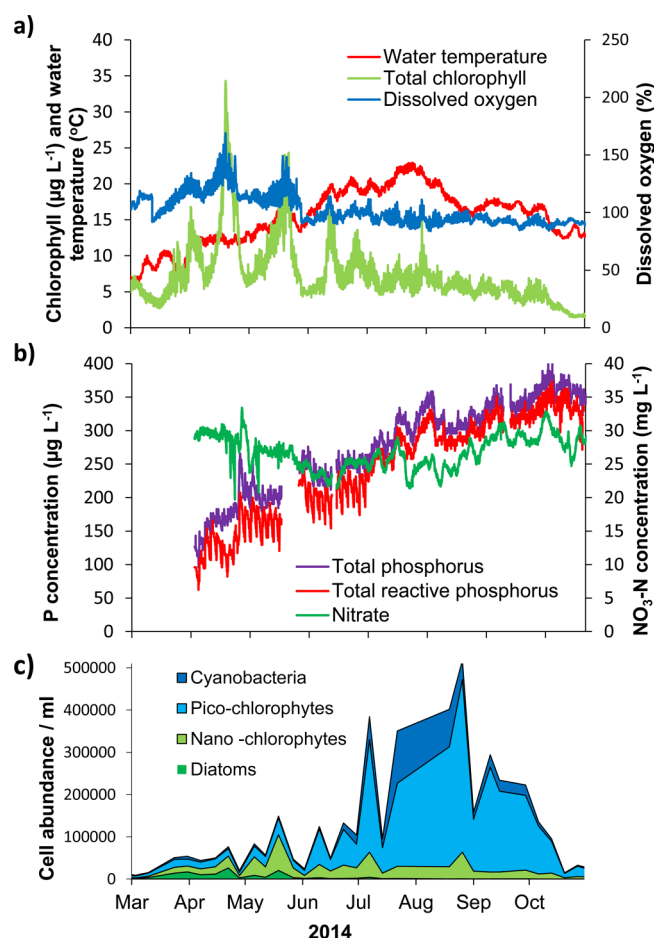


Figure 3. Combined physical (a), chemical (b) and biological monitoring (a, c) of the River Thames at Goring, UK (Unpublished Data, supplied by Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Wallingford, UK, and the UK Environment Agency). The time axis is the same in the three panels.

stress of both chlorophyte and cyanobacterial communities at subhourly intervals.⁴⁰ These in situ techniques can be further supplemented by in situ flow cytometry (Figure 3c), which provides a rapid and simple methodology to characterize, at high-frequency, the river phytoplankton community by quantifying the cell concentrations of diatoms, chlorophytes, cryptophytes and different classes of cyanobacteria.⁴¹ By combining these new biological data with physicochemical data of the same high temporal resolution, it has been demonstrated that it is water temperature, flow and light conditions that are controlling the onset and magnitude of phytoplankton blooms in the River Thames, rather than increases in nutrient concentration.⁴² However, phosphorus and silicon may ultimately terminate large phytoplankton blooms due to nutrient depletion and limitation.⁴² Such insights are only possible through long-term, subdaily biogeochemical observations that are able to capture the conditions at the precise time points where chlorophyll concentrations begin to increase or decrease. In the coming years, high frequency next generation DNA sequencing will provide an even greater understanding of river microbiological dynamics and their biotic-abiotic interactions.²²

■ QUANTIFYING WATER QUALITY ACROSS MULTIPLE TIME SCALES

Detecting water quality trends requires an understanding of water quality fluctuations over many time scales, including those that are invisible in typical weekly or monthly sampling.⁴³ At several small research watersheds, broad suites of chemical parameters have been measured at daily or higher frequency,^{8,9,44} facilitating chemical dynamic characterization on shorter time scales as well as those captured by typical monitoring programs (weekly or monthly) (Figure 4, left panels).

Spectral analysis decomposes a time-series into a spectrum of cycles of different wavelengths with the power spectrum defined by the contribution of each frequency, f , to the time series. The combination of high-frequency and long-term chemical analysis has demonstrated that, on time scales from hours to decades, the power spectrum of multiple solute time-series, in this case pH (or H^+), NO_3^- and Co, can be characterized as $1/f^\alpha$ noise, where α , the scaling exponent, is approximately equal to 1 (known as “pink noise”).⁸ This is shown in Figure 4 (right panel), where the water quality parameters have power-law slopes of -1 (parallel to the long-gray reference lines), indicating that spectral power is inversely proportional to frequency (the $1/f$ pink noise—which is sometimes referred to as “fractal” noise to emphasize that the scaling exponent, α , can be a noninteger - it does not mean there is self-similarity in the power spectrum). The result implies that three ions do not simply flush through the catchment with the water but that the catchment has a long chemical memory. The stream discharge spectrum, by contrast, has a power-law slope near 0 at low frequencies and -2 at high frequencies (as indicated by the shorter gray reference lines).

While the idea of catchment solute storage is not new, analysis of rainfall and streamwater power spectra, for the same solute, allows a transfer function to be derived which can be used to quantify the travel time distribution which is very useful in understanding solute retention in different geographical settings. In addition, the $1/f$ behavior of the chemical time series has important implications.⁴⁵ Such time series are “nonself-averaging”; they do not converge to stable averages when sampled for longer periods, because their fluctuations do not average out over time. This nonself-averaging behavior implies that even purely random time series can exhibit spurious trends, on all time scales, which appear to be statistically significant when evaluated by conventional statistics.^{9,46} Even more disconcertingly, collecting more data makes this problem worse; nonself-averaging time series exhibit more spuriously “significant” trends (not fewer, as one would expect) when sampled for longer periods, or at higher frequency. Thus, environmental trends should be analyzed with more sophisticated statistical methods that are not confounded by the multiscale correlations that characterize these time series. A recent example of such analysis includes the application of dynamic harmonic regression to use this nonstationary technique to explore streamwater nitrate dynamics across decadal to subdaily time scales and to derive the main cause and effect links at long-term, seasonal, and diel time-scales.^{47,48}

■ ADDITIONAL ADVANCES

Where a particular water constituent cannot yet be measured directly with an in situ sensor, it may still be possible to

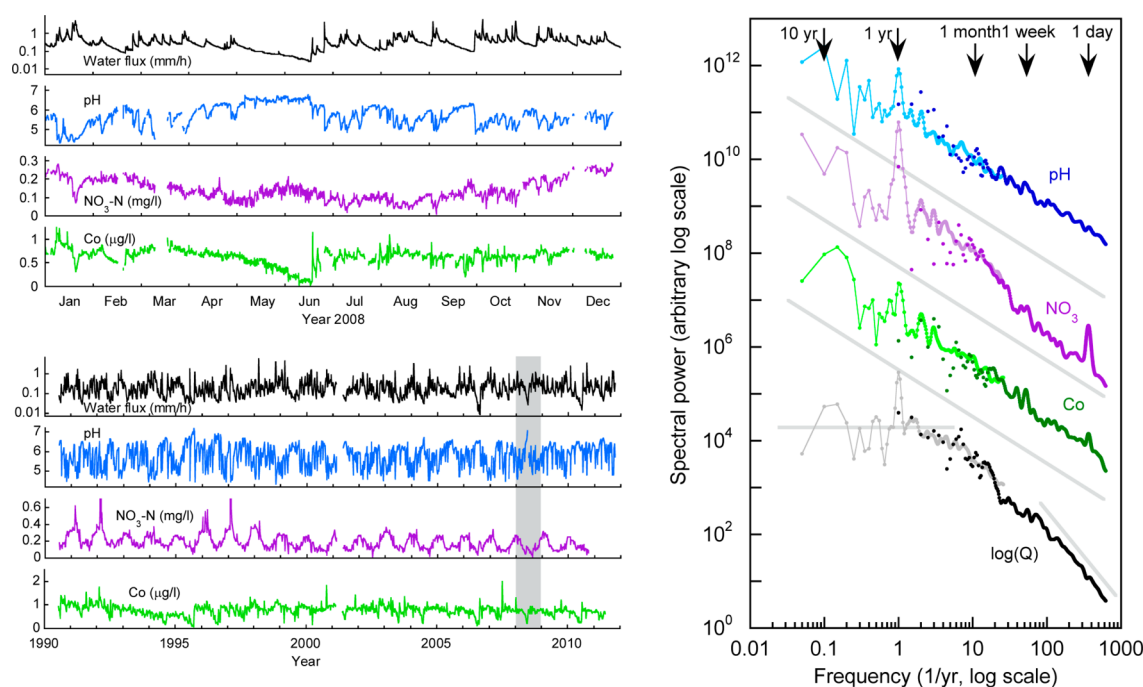


Figure 4. Water quality time series in Upper Hafren streamwater, Plynlimon, Wales, at 7 h intervals for one year (left upper panel) and weekly intervals for 21 years (left lower panel) (unpublished data). Three water quality parameters are shown: pH (an indicator of acid–base status), nitrate (a nutrient that exhibits both diurnal and seasonal cycles) and cobalt (Co). The shaded band in the lower panels shows the time interval covered by the upper panels. The right panel shows power spectra of weekly and 7 hourly time series (light and dark points, respectively), calculated using the methods of Kirchner and Neal.⁸

construct a high frequency time-series for that constituent if there is a strong relationship with a water quality parameter that can be readily measured, such as turbidity, dissolved oxygen, temperature, and pH. In this way, such sensor measurements have recently been used as proxies for a range of water quality parameters, including total suspended solids,^{49,50} alkalinity,⁴⁹ total nitrogen,⁴⁹ total phosphorus,^{49,50} sodium,⁴⁹ chloride,⁴⁹ fluoride,⁴⁹ sulfate,⁴⁹ fecal coliform bacteria,⁴⁹ fluoranthene and mercury,⁵¹ polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons,⁵² and when coupled with discharge measurements allow flux estimation. For example, high resolution in situ measurements of turbidity and fluorescence were used to estimate total mercury transport between the San Francisco estuary and an adjacent tidal wetland.⁵³ High frequency water quality measurements can also be used to reconstruct concentration patterns in combination with other commonly available continuous data, such as precipitation or discharge. In this way, Rozemeijer et al.⁵⁴ reduced the bias of total phosphorus load calculations by up to 63% using 20 events sampled at 15 min intervals.

Measurements of lake, reservoir, wetland and estuarine diel dynamics help identify internal processing of nutrients and metals. High frequency monitoring in lakes and reservoirs using autonomous vertical profiling systems is increasingly exploited for safeguarding high water quality (e.g., for drinking water abstraction⁵⁵). Such systems detect river intrusions that may quickly reach water abstraction infrastructure.^{56,57} High frequency measurements also allow new insights into lake metabolism and help constrain biogeochemical budgets or to differentiate the importance of internal versus external factors.⁵⁸ It has been recently shown that monitoring external watershed loading, as well as within lake chemistry, at high frequency, enables separation of carbon accumulation due to internal phytoplankton dynamics versus external inputs of organic

carbon from runoff events.⁵⁹ High frequency oxygen measurements revealed that external seasonal forcing plays a key role in determining the extent to which a lake ecosystem is a seasonal carbon sink or source to the atmosphere.⁶⁰ Further experimental uses of high-frequency sensors extends to monitoring tracers,⁶ changes in artificial environments (e.g., benthic chambers) and in process-control systems, for example, to control iron dosing to coprecipitate phosphorus at Wessex Water's Keynsham Sewage Treatment Works in the UK (<http://www.worldpumps.com/view/316/control-of-chemical-dosing-in-wastewater-treatment/>).

For parameters with a strong diel variation, such as DO, the value obtained, and thus the classification of the European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD), which commits European Union member states to achieve good qualitative and quantitative status of all water bodies, can depend markedly on the frequency of sampling. In lowland UK river-systems, monthly sampling for a year can result in the same water body being assigned to three or four of the WFD classes with 95% confidence, due to random sampling effects, although the specific effect on WFD classification depends on the closeness of the range of measured concentrations to the class boundaries. Where water body status is estimated using parameters, such as water temperature, that are assessed using extreme percentiles in a distribution of measurements, such as the 98th percentile for water temperature as done in the UK, then monthly sampling does not capture the full variance observed and causes an inaccurate estimate of the true value.⁶¹

■ IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL MODELING

From a modeling perspective, the emerging evidence for excessive nutrient contribution of short-term events puts into question the ubiquitous applications of the data-driven models,

such as the water quality balance model SPARROW in North America.^{62,63} Underestimating nutrient export by a factor of 2 or 3 and missing the timing of greatest nutrient delivery into a waterbody impedes efforts to delineate watershed “hot-spots” or time periods with increased likelihood of violations of water quality targets.⁶⁴ The advent of high resolution data offers a new perspective on process-based model parametrization and our capacity to accommodate threshold-type of behaviors when locating critical source areas of nonpoint source pollution.⁶⁵ In this regard, Wellen et al.⁶⁶ presented a Bayesian hierarchical framework which postulated that the watershed response to precipitation occurs in distinct states, depending, for example, on precipitation and catchment storage. The proposed calibration framework enabled the identification of extreme states and the characterization of different watershed behaviors and improved model performance by allowing parameter values to vary between low and high flow conditions. In addition, estimates of instream assimilation and denitrification help to constrain catchment nitrogen delivery and transport models,³² and subdaily chemistry data coupled with weekly biological monitoring are providing the basis on which to develop a process-based description of aquatic biotic–abiotic interactions, thus enabling an enhanced understanding compared to using ecological indicators alone. Furthermore, development of intelligent water body-specific, cost efficient monitoring schemes combining modeling tools with high frequency monitoring would also help to optimize monitoring schemes and make these technologies accessible for large scale water management.

■ LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT IN SITU TECHNOLOGIES

In case of conventional in situ chemical and biological measurements there are major issues related to calibration (requiring stable reagents and standards) and supporting infrastructure (e.g., of pumped flow systems) and frequency of servicing intervals which in turn affect the scalability of in situ deployment. In situ optical sensors, such as those for nitrate, require cleaning to remove biofilm. They can also suffer from interferences due to turbidity and from coabsorbing species like humic acids. However, performing multiparameter sensing, such as monitoring turbidity and nitrate simultaneously, enables the robustness of the nitrate measurements to be assessed. Given the costs, service requirements, the risks of theft and vandalism, and instrument power requirements, which has decreased recently, there is a need for a cost-benefit analysis to assess the utility of in situ sensors for widespread operational and regulatory monitoring. Furthermore, “big” data streams from in situ measurements pose a challenge to environmental scientists because traditional approaches to data quality assurance and quality control are no longer practical when confronted with the demands of real-time processing. Despite routine maintenance and calibration of sensors, there is a pressing need for the development of automated tools and standards for quality assurance and quality control of sensor data.⁶⁷

■ FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The use of high frequency sensors has moved beyond the realm of purely academic research⁶⁸ and these sensors are now employed by numerous national, state, and municipal level environmental authorities. In the United States there are over

500 stations with continuous DO sensors, and over 100 stations with continuous nitrate sensors (<http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis>). There are similar levels of deployment in other developed nations.

The knowledge gained from new sensor technology has and will continue to stimulate further advancement. Already microfluidic sensors for measuring nutrients based on colorimetric techniques have advantages of small size and limited reagent and power requirements,^{16,17} though further improvements of these devices are necessary to increase robustness and reduce maintenance during permanent deployment. There is still a clear need for further development of new types of sensors, particularly for chemical and organism-based measurements of freshwater ecosystems. Increasing the number of analytes to include redox sensitive elements, micronutrients and pesticides would be highly beneficial for more complete environmental assessment. The exciting prospect of microscale inductively coupled plasma spectrometers would allow the measurement of a wide-array of elements in water.⁶⁹

The inferences drawn from the examples we present above are broadly applicable, as suggested by their geographic range and variation in temporal scales, and move beyond findings that can be obtained from single experiments. Real time sensor deployment for measuring water quality properties continuously from multiparameter probes offers new prospects to develop sensor networks for whole river networks, watersheds, and lakes. High frequency measurements will expand from the water column to hot spots of biogeochemical transformation and ecological significance, such as the interfaces between aquatic and terrestrial sites (e.g., hyporheic and riparian zones, wetlands, and river-estuarine transition zones). This would significantly increase our understanding of the interaction between sources, uptake (e.g., primary production) and retention (e.g., denitrification) in whole river networks. The collocation of isotope and dissolved anions and cations measurements will also enable enhanced understanding of pollutant storage and transfer and integration of hydrological and water quality models through better characterization of water and ion transit times.⁷⁰

Current use of real time sensors is still restricted to fundamental aquatic attributes such as DO, pH value, SRP and NO₃,⁷¹ but the field of sensor development is rapidly advancing and we see great potential for developing observational data sets that can substantially improve our ability to understand and predict the causes and consequences of environmental changes of aquatic ecosystems. Furthermore, such high temporal resolution data streams can be complemented by additional data types like satellite products for a synoptic survey of water quality of wetlands, large rivers, and lakes to create new scope for validating ecosystem models across multiple scales.⁷² The utility of in situ sensor measurements has already begun to transform routine monitoring in the U.S., with federal (e.g., U.S. Geological Survey), and state agencies (e.g., St Johns River Water Management District in Florida) investing heavily in the structural and personnel capacity to deploy and interpret high-resolution solute time series. In Germany, routine high resolution sensor deployments are not restricted to highly sensitive water bodies like drinking water reservoirs and the gain of scientific transport process understanding;⁶⁵ German state water authorities (e.g., state environmental agency of Hesse and Baden Württemberg) increasingly use high frequency monitoring to quantify matter fluxes (especially at

the outlet of large rivers) and for early warning systems for drinking water river bank infiltration facilities (e.g., at the Rhein river). There is also potential to use high frequency monitoring more widely to measure intermittent discharges from combined sewer overflows.

Automated sensors that collect novel data, or even traditional data at novel time scales, can enable analyses that inspire new paradigms in aquatic ecology.⁴ The susceptibility of an ecosystem to changing drivers or random events depends on the characteristics of critical thresholds, such as in ecosystem metabolism⁷³ or in the physical drivers of change, such as flow, light, and temperature. Fundamental progress in ecology requires better understanding of thresholds and the rate of anthropogenic induced change in aquatic ecosystems. Emerging technology such as FrrF, “lab-on-a-chip”, and DNA technology for observing time series data at high temporal resolution will make a growing contribution to this field.⁷⁴ High frequency measurements gained by automated sensors will increase our opportunities to better determine the severity of extreme events in terms of water quality and freshwater ecological impacts, and identify the most important variables for assessing the links to environmental change⁷⁵ at different spatial scales and for different aquatic ecosystem types.⁴¹ Based on this, we will be in a stronger position to spot early warning signals of critical transitions of watershed biogeochemistry and aquatic ecosystems, and identify and evaluate management options to help mitigate adverse water quality and ecological impacts.⁷⁶

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