**TopEros model: Integrating hydrology and multi‑process erosion modelling at catchment scale**

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**Abstract**

Hydro‑erosion is a primary driver of soil degradation worldwide, yet accurate catchment‑scale prediction remains challenging because sheet, gully, and raindrop‑impact detachment processes operate simultaneously at sub‑grid scales. We introduce **TopEros**, a novel hydro‑erosion model that integrates the hydrological framework of TOPMODEL with three distinct erosion modules—sheet erosion, gulley erosion, and raindrop‑impact detachment. TopEros employs a sub‑grid zoning strategy in which each grid cell is partitioned into diffuse‑flow (sheet erosion) and concentrated‑flow (gulley erosion) domains using threshold values of two topographic indices: the topographic index (*TI*) and the contributing‑area‐slope index (*aitanβ*).

Applied to the Namatala River catchment in eastern Uganda, and calibrated with TI = 15 and a tan β = 35, TopEros successfully identified sheet‑dominated and gully‑prone areas. Simulated specific sediment yields ranged from 95 to 155 Mg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹—classified as “high” to “very high”—with gully zones contributing disproportionately large erosion volumes. These results demonstrate the importance of capturing intra‑cell heterogeneity: conventional catchment‑average approaches can obscure critical erosion hotspots. By explicitly representing multiple detachment mechanisms within a unified, process‑based framework, TopEros enhances the realism of catchment‑scale erosion estimates and supports the precise targeting of soil and water conservation measures.

**Keywords:** TopEros; hydro-erosion; sheet erosion, gulley erosion, raindrop detachment, sub-grid zoning

# Introduction

Soil erosion by water, is a pervasive hydrological phenomenon and remains the leading cause of soil degradation globally (Gruver, 2013). The loss of fertile topsoil diminishes soil, accelerates nutrient depletion, reservoir siltation and degradation of water quality. Hydro-erosion involves several mechanisms: detachment by diffuse flow (sheet and inter-rill erosion), detachment by concentrated flow (rill and gulley erosion) and detachment of particles by raindrop impact. Notably, although gullies typically occupy a limited portion of the landscape, they can dominate sediment export from a catchment — often contributing 10–95% of total sediment yield(Nkonge et al., 2023a; Poesen et al., 2003a)—, making their representation crucial for understanding sediment dynamics and planning effective conservation measures.

Numerous hydro-erosion models have been developed and applied, ranging from empirical erosion models—such as USLE (Wischmeier & Smith, 1978) and its derivatives (RUSLE (Renard et al., 1994) and MUSLE (Williams, 1982), as implemented in SWAT (Neitsch et al., 2011)—to more physically based erosion models in ANSWERS (Beasley et al., 1980), SHESHED (Wicks & Bathurst, 1996) and SHETRAN (Ewen et al., 2000). However, capturing the complexity of erosion processes at catchment scale remains challenging (Cerdà et al., 2013). Empirical models—like USLE, RUSLE and MUSLE—were developed on simple idealised plots, with diffuse flow, and are unable to account for channelised flow processes that are experienced at catchment scale. In particular, the 1-D USLE slope-length factor (*LS*) and its variants cannot resolve 3-D surface complexity or predict gulley initiation and growth Foster (1982) as cited in Wang et al., (2012) . yet in many cases, these models are extended to the entire catchment without modification or explicit treatment of their limitations (Gwapedza et al., 2018; Sadeghi et al., 2014; Sadeghi & Mizuyama, 2007; Thakuriah, 2023).

To address the shortcomings of the 1-D LS factor in complex 3-D terrains, Moore et al., (1992) and Desmet & Govers, (1996) proposed a physically meaningful slope-length factor (LSp), explicitly catering for the complex nature of the catchment terrain. Despite this, USLE-type models remain confined to predicting erosion due to diffuse flow (sheet erosion). Some advanced schemes have attempted to address this shortcoming. For example, SHETRAN calculates grid-scale soil erosion along the hillslope—sheet erosion—and the main channel network—gulley erosion—separately. However, beyond the main channel, along the hillslope itself, concentrated flow can occur, leading to gulley type erosion within the gulley features. In other words, the hillslope in a complex catchment may experience both sheet and gulley erosion at certain locations. Wang et al., (2010) tackled this by calculating both sheet erosion and gulley erosion within a grid-scale, with the assumption that each grid cell experiences both types of erosion.

We, however, find some shortcomings in their framework. We perceive that not all grid-cells along a hillslope experience concentrated flow.

Cognisant of this, we proposed an alternative concept of the erosion process at catchment scale. Firstly, all cells experience water erosion due to detachment by rain drop impact and by diffuse surface runoff. Secondly, in addition to detachment by diffuse runoff flow and rain drop impact, some cells also experience gulley erosion (detachment by channelised flow).

Two challenges then emerge: The first being determining which cells along the hillslope experience concentrated flow. TopEros solves this by identifying the threshold values of a pair of topographic indices —The Topographic Index (TI) (Beven & Kirkby, 1979), which describes the state of saturation of a soil and the *aitanβ* index (Moore et al., 1988), which describes the erosive power of surface runoffClick or tap here to enter text.—at which there is a transition from sheet to gulley erosion. This approach allows the selective application of MUSLE in non‐gully domains and process‐based gully models where channelised flow dominates. The second challenge is estimating the channel width within each cell. Since the study area consists of river widths that are smaller than the resolutions of the finest freely available DEM datasets—12.5 m (JAXA/METI, 2022)—it is impossible to resolve the stream dimensions by these data. Moreover, like reported by Wang et al., (2010, 2012), river widths change as rivers flow from upstream to downstream, making the representation of a river section as a grid-cell a tedious process (each grid cell would have to be of a different size). For these reasons, TopEros adopted the concept of “assumed channel widths”. While Wang et al., (2010) reported a power relationship between channel width and upstream contributing area, Poesen et al. (2003) adopted a relationship between peak discharge and the assumed channel width. Given that upstream contributing area is constant for every cell in a catchment, and for simplicity, we adopted the relationship proposed by Wang et al., (2010) (Equation 13).

To our knowledge, this is the first framework that: (i) systematically identifies hillslope cells with gully features using complementary topographic thresholds, and (ii) applies domain‐specific erosion models within a single grid‐based catchment scheme. We name this approach TopEros. We test TopEros in the Namatala River catchment, eastern Uganda, and evaluate its ability to capture both sheet and gully erosion dynamics across spatial scales. Finally, we discuss the potential of TopEros as a decision‐support tool for catchment management under changing land‐use and climate conditions.

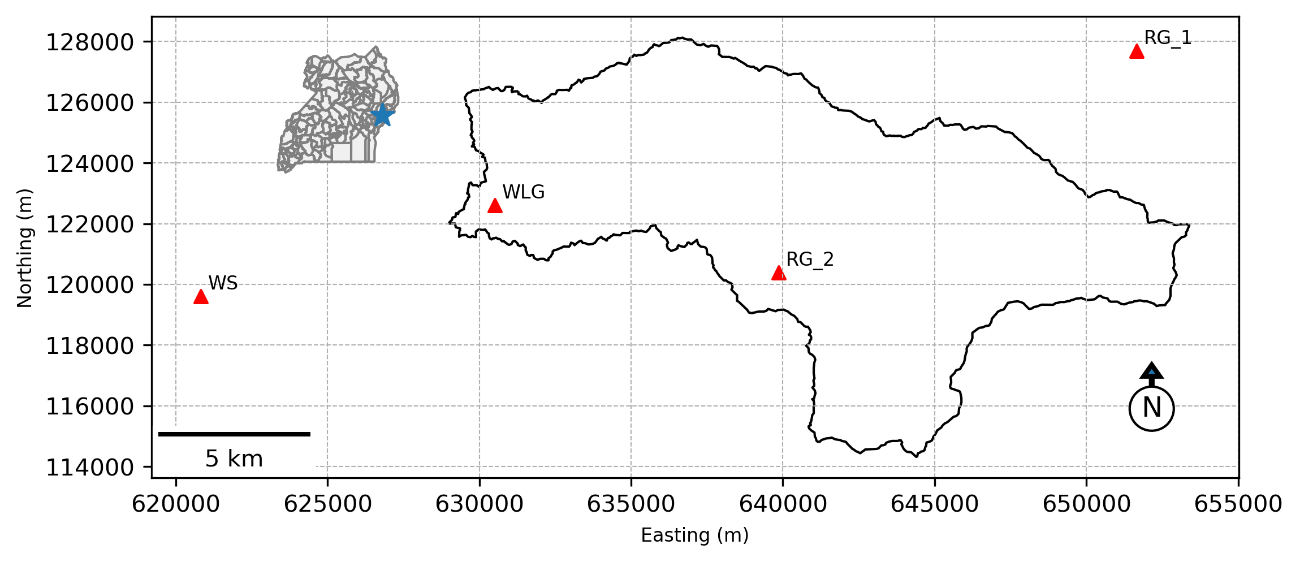
# Materials and Methods

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## The study area

The Namatala River catchment, originating from Mt. Elgon in eastern Uganda, is majorly a rural, and agricultural catchment, with upland crops in the highland areas and rapid paddy field development projects in the lowland areas. The catchment is drained by the Namatala River, a permanent river with a catchment area of 154 km2 at the river gauging station (**Figure 1** and Extended Data Figure 2). The river flows in a westerly direction within the delineated watershed. Further downstream of the gauging station, it flows in a southwestern direction, making confluence with Manafwa River, and draining into the Mpologoma River system, which finally flows into Lake Kyoga.

Based on the definition of large catchments—catchments of a scale at which water resources are managed and monitored (Ferguson et al., 2018)—Namatala River catchment can be classified as a large catchment. However, from the definition of Singh (1995), by its size alone, it is classified as a mid-sized catchment.



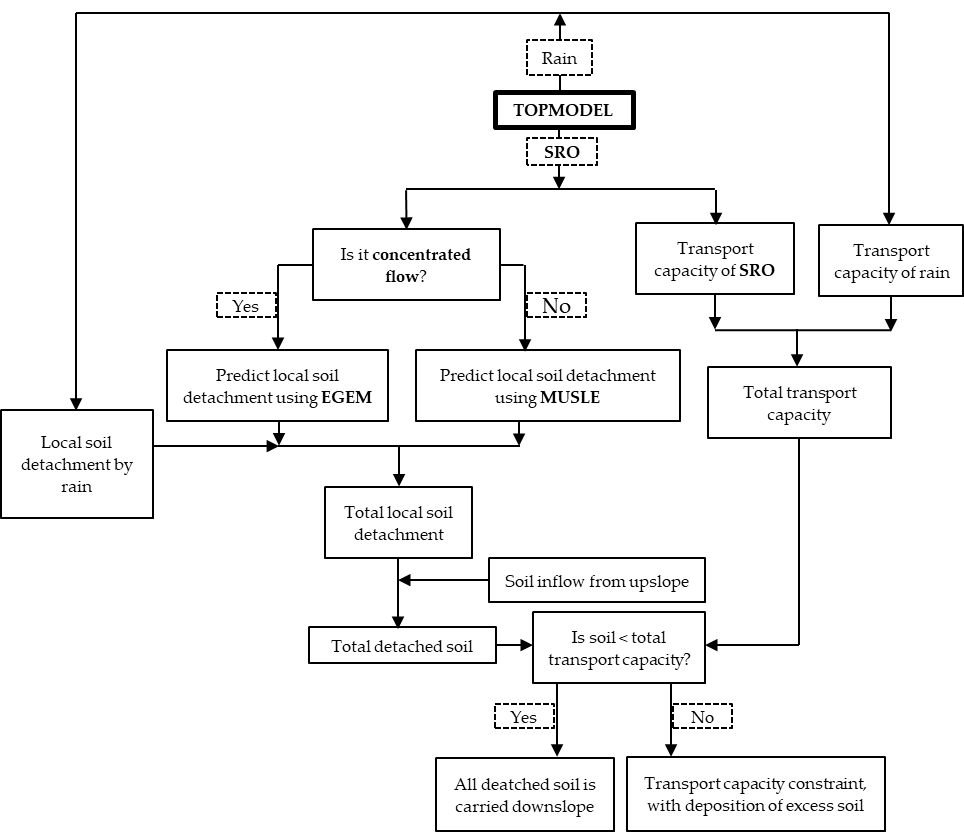
**Figure 1: Namatala River catchment. The blue star shows the location of the catchment on the map of Uganda. Note that RG\_1 and RG2 are stations where only rainfall is measured, WS is a weather station—with measurement of 5 meteorological variables— while WLG is the water level gauge along the Mbale-Soroti road.**

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## Development of TopEros

The tool for analysis, TopEros (Figure 2), integrates the TOPMODEL concept (Beven & Kirkby, 1979), the FAO56 Penman-Monteith model of reference evapotranspiration (Allen et al., 1998) and three erosion models. MUSLE (Williams, 1982), to predict water erosion by non-concentrated surface runoff; a model to estimate soil detachment by raindrop impact (Foster et al., 1982) and a model to measure soil loss by concentrated flow (Foster et al., 1977). This makes the first version of TopEros an integration of 5 models.

The mathematical formulation of the model was written in Python 3. Various data types, ranging from scalars to 4-D NumPy arrays were adopted. The primary constraint to running the model at fine spatio-temporal resolutions was computing power.



**Figure 2:Schematic of the TopEros concept. Note that SRO refers to the surface runoff predicted by the hydrological model; and that EGEM represents the erosion model due to concentrated flow.**

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### Hydrologic Model Component

TOPMODEL is a TOPography-based hydrological model that was put forward by Beven & Kirkby, (1979). It adopts the Topographic Index (TI), an index of hydrological similarity, i.e., cells with the same TI are assumed to have the same hydrologic response, reducing the computational need. From the TI spatial distribution (**Extended Data Figure 3**), TOPMODEL is also able to track the state of saturation of the soil surface (Beven & Kirkby, 1979; Quinn et al., 1995).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Equation 1 |
| Where *ai* is the upstream contributing area per unit contour length (Quinn et al., 1995): Speight (1980) defined it as the specific catchment area. Further, Pradhan et al. (2008) defined the “unit contour length” as it pertains to a DEM as the width of a pixel. The term s the local slope and *i* is the grid number under calculation. | | |

TOPMODEL boasts of pros like being spatially distributed; flexible and easily integrated with Geographic Information Systems (GISs), allowing for the use of freely available gridded data. Its calibration involves the determination of parameter values like the exponential decay parameter (*m*); downslope transmissivity (*Te*) and the delay time (*td*). The objective functions that were used to test for the model performance were the Nash-Sutcliffe Efficiency (NSE), RMSE-observations standard deviation ratio (RSR) and probability bias (PBIAS) (Foglia et al., 2009; Moriasi et al., 2007).Okiria et al. (2022) have identified the parameter values for Atari River catchment in eastern Uganda (Extended Data Figure 2). Their study also found that TOPMODEL ably reproduced the hydrological response of catchments in the Elgon region in eastern Uganda. For this reason, TOPMODEL was chosen as the hydrological module for TopEros. A detailed description of the computational procedure of this TOPMODEL can be found in (Beven, 2012; Hornberger et al., 2014; Mukae et al., 2017).

### The soil erosion component

Like Wang et al., (2012) , each grid cell has an assumed channel. However, unlike their model, where each grid cell simultaneously experienced both sheet and gulley erosion, we posited that: a) All grid cells experience both detachment by raindrop and sheet erosion; b) and that additionally, a grid cell whose topographic index exceeds a certain threshold also experiences gulley erosion within its channels. In other words, each cell can experience “sheet erosion + rain drop splash erosion” and cells with gulleys in them have a duality of “sheet+rain drop splash erosion” and “gulley erosion.” However, in each cell, after the erosion process, the eroded soil is carried into the assumed channel for routing to a downstream cell (Note that in non-gulley cells, this hypothetical channel is just a transporter of material and does not experience gulley erosion).

Assumptions of the erosion module:

* Each cell has an assumed channel, whose width is expressed by Equation 13 (Wang et al., 2010).
* Grid cells whose topographic indices exceed a certain threshold, have zones of concentrated flow and exhibit a duality of “sheet+raindrop splash erosion” and “gulley erosion.” i.e., sheet erosion due to non-concentrated runoff in the non-channel zone of the cell, rain drop splash erosion when the soil is not saturated and gulley erosion within the channel section of the cell.
* The hypothetical channel in each cell receives runoff and its entrained sediment for routing to a downstream cell.

The sediment yield is formulated as in Equation *2*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Equation 2 |
| Where *SY* (Mg) is sediment yield, *Dse* (Mg) is the soil detachment due to non-concentrated runoff, *Dcf*(Mg) is the soil detachment due to concentrated flow, *Drd* is soil detachment by rain drop impact and *SD* is sediment deposition. | | |

**Table 1: Classification of soil loss risk (Jiang et al., 2014)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Erosion risk | Threshold (Mgha-1yr-1) |
| Very low | Soil Loss ≤ 2 |
| Low | 2≤Soil Loss≥10 |
| Moderate | 10≤Soil Loss≥50 |
| High | 50≤Soil Loss≥100 |
| Very high | Soil Loss≥100 |

#### Detachment by rain drop

Before becoming saturated, a cell is exposed to detachment by rain drop. Wang et al., (2010) and Foster et al., (1982) proposed a formulation to calculate detachment by effective rain drop energy (Equation 3).

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Equation 3 |
| Where *Dr* is the soil detachment rate due to rain drop (kgh-1m-2), and *K*, and *C* are USLE soil erodibility and crop management factors respectively, while *P* is the effective rainfall intensity (mh-1) and is the degree slope of the cell. | | |

#### Sheet erosion detachment

Detachment due to sheet erosion was estimated using MUSLE of Williams, (1982). Its erosion energy factors accept a surface runoff volume and peak discharge rate. The runoff volume and the peak runoff rate are calculated by the hydrological model (TOPMODEL). The critical parameters for MUSLE include among others: the physically derived slope length-slope factor (LSp) – a measure of the erosive force of the runoff –; and the soil erodibility factor (K), a measure of the susceptibility of a soil textural class to erosion. After experimentation, van der Knijff et al., (1999) developed a formulation to estimate USLE’s C factor (Equation 5). A formulation for K was suggested by Williams (1995). Further, Moore & Burch, (1986) proposed a physically based formulation of the LSp factor, hinged on the “unit stream power” theory (Equation 7).

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|  |  | Equation 4 |
| *Dse* is the sediment yield due to sheet flow (Mg); *Q* is the runoff volume (m3); *qp* is the peak runoff rate (m3s-1) and *K*, *C*, and *P* are the standard USLE factors for soil erodibility, cover management and erosion control practice, respectively. *LSp* is the physically derived slope-length factor. | | |
|  |  | Equation 5 |
| and β determine the shape of the NDVI-C curve*.* van der Knijff et al., (1999) found that and *β* of 2 and 1 respectively yielded reasonable results. | | |
|  |  | Equation 6 |
| *SAN*, *SIL*, and *CLA*, and *C* are the percentage sand, silt, clay and organic carbon contents of the soil and SN1 = SAN/100. K is allowed to vary from 0 to 0.5. | | |
|  |  | Equation 7 |
| Where a*i* is the upstream contributing area per unit width of contour (Analogous to upstream contributing area per unit width of cell), *β* is the local degree slope and *m*, and *n* are constants. Moore & Burch, (1986) adopted *m* and *n* as 0.4 and 1.3, respectively. However, Moore & Wilson, (1992) reported that the RUSLE *LS* and *LSp* were best fitted when exponents *m* and *n* were 0.6 and 1.3 respectively. They further reported that values from 0.4 to 0.6 (for *m*) and from 1.2 to 1.3 (for *n*) were reasonable in representing a 3-D complex terrain, which we adopted for our analysis. | | |

#### Soil erosion by concentrated flow

Each cell experiences detachment by rain drop impact and sheet erosion. However, when the grid-cell’s topographic indices exceed a given threshold, a cell will be assumed to experience concentrated flow in its channel section. The cell’s channel has assumed width dimensions. In Wang et al., (2010), net flow detachment by concentrated flow occurred when; a) the hydraulic shear stress exceeded the critical shear stress of the soil; and b) when the sediment load was at most, equal to the sediment transport capacity of the flow. The flow detachment capacity was further described as “the gross detachment rate, assuming a uniform distribution of flow and soil erosion rates over the computational grid”(Wang et al., 2010). Here, we modified this to assume a uniform distribution of flow and soil erosion rates over the assumed channel reach.

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##### Identification of the location of gulley erosion

Since ephemeral gulley location is controlled by micro-topographies (Moore et al., 1988; Thorne et al., 1986), by extension, all gulley locations can be predicted through topography-derived indices. Moore et al., (1988) found that the combined use of the Topographic Index (*TI*) and the *ai.tanβ* index best predicted gulley locations on a 0.075 km2 catchment.

##### Calculation of gulley erosion

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|  |  | Equation 8 |
| *Df* is the net detachment by concentrated flow (kgh-1m-2), *Dch* is the flow detachment capacity/gross detachment rate (kgh-1m-2) and G is sediment load. | | |
|  |  | Equation 9 |
| Where *w* is the channel width (m), *K* is USLE’s soil erodibility factor, is the average shear stress for a cross-section (Pa) and is the critical shear stress (Pa). The basic form of the equation describing *Dch* was developed by (Foster et al., 1977). A reformulation of Foster *et al.*’s equation was suggested in Wang et al., (2010) (Equation 9). | | |
|  |  | Equation 10 |
| Where *Sa* is the fraction of sand in the soil, *or* is the fraction of organic matter in the soil and is the dry bulk density of the soil (kgm-3). The formulation of is in Flanagan & Livingston, (1995) . | | |
|  |  | Equation 11 |
| Where (kgm-2s-2) is the specific weight of water and *Sf* is the friction slope. This formulation is in Wang et al., (2010). | | |
|  |  | Equation 12 |
| Where n is Manning’s roughness co-efficient, u (mh-1) is the depth average of channel flow velocity and R is the hydraulic radius of the assumed channel. | | |
|  |  | Equation 13 |
| Where *wi* (m) is the assumed channel width at grid *i* of a rectangular cross-section channel, *Ai* is the upstream contributing area of grid *i* and and are constants. In Wang et al., (2010), while =0.5, was found by entering the known channel width at the catchment outlet into Equation *13*. | | |

##### Transport capacity of flow

This is a limit on how much sediment can be carried by runoff (See illustration in Figure 2). Sediment is deposited if the sediment load exceeds the capacity of the runoff to carry it. Beasley et al., (1980) proposed Equation 14 as an estimator of the transport limiting capacity under different rates of discharge.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Equation 14 |
| *Tc* is the transport capacity of the flow per unit width of catchment(kg min-1m-1); *q* is the flow rate per unit width of catchment (m2min-1) (Moore & Wilson, 1992) and tanis the local slope. | | |

# Results and Discussion

TopEros explicitly addresses the inability of traditional USLE‐type models to simulate gully erosion or gulley erosion models to predict sheer erosion. It achieves this by dividing the catchment into sheet‐erosion and gully‐erosion zones, through the adoption of thresholds of two topographic indices (TI and αtanβ) to each grid cell. In the Namatala catchment, these thresholds were calibrated to 15 and 35 for TI and αtanβ respectively. This “sheet–concentrated flow duality” allows MUSLE to be applied in sheet‐erosion zones and a gully erosion sub-model in zones above the thresholds, thus more realistically capturing the dominant erosion mechanisms in each zone.

Section 3.1 will present results of the calibration of the parameters of the hydrological model (TOPMODEL) while section 3.2 will present findings of the soil erosion models and finally in section 3.3, the limitations of TopEros and future directions will be discussed.

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## TopEros’ hydrological module (TOPMODEL)

Table 2 shows the top 16 parameter sets borne from the calibration of TOPMODEL. From this table, equifinality—where many parameter sets having a similar predictive performance—is evident. Through validation of the competing parameter sets against 2016 observed discharge, the first-row parameter set of Table 2—underlined—was chosen as the most optimum, albeit marginally. NSE was 0.616 and 0.503 during calibration and validation respectively. These were deemed acceptable as per Moriasi et al. (2007)’s guidelines. When the monthly mean daily stream discharges were considered, the NSE values increased to 0.881 and 0.879 for calibration and validation respectively. Following Moriasi et al. (2007), this was classified as a “very good” model performance. For the daily averages of stream flow, RSR was 0.619 and 0.705 for the 2015 and 2016 simulation respectively. An analysis of monthly mean averages saw the RSR values improve to 0.345 and 0.347 for calibration and validation respectively, earning a performance rating of “very good” as per Moriasi et al. (2007).

Before discussing percent bias (PBIAS), it is worth noting that different authors formulated and interpreted the metric quite differently (Gupta et al., 1999; Moriasi et al., 2007; Sorooshian et al., 1993; Yapo et al., 1996). In this study, we adopted the method where a positive PBIAS was synonymous with the tendency of a model to underestimate fluxes and a negative PBIAS was interpreted as a model overestimating the flux (Gupta et al., 1999; Moriasi et al., 2007). For the daily stream discharge, PBIAS was -4.576 % and 1.462 % in calibration and validation periods respectively: within |6.038| percentage points of each other. This was interpreted as a tendency towards the overestimation of stream discharge in 2015 and an opposite tendency in 2016: This can be further visualised in Figure *3* and Figure *4*. The inconsistent observations of PBIAS during calibration and validation may seem quite baffling at first. However, given that the absolute values of PBIAS were both close to zero and within |6.038| percentage points of each other, this was deemed not to be an issue of concern.

Figure *3* shows observed daily rainfall, observed daily discharge and simulated daily discharge. Even-though the hydrographs somewhat differed, the trend of the observed and simulated hydrograph corresponded well. Most notable was the ability of TOPMODEL to capture both small and large peaks, highlighting the robustness of the variable source area (VSA) concept of the model. A glance at the hydrographs in Figure *3* shows some instances of the underprediction of stream discharge. This could be attributed to localised rainfall events that were missed by the rain gauges. Indeed, Sugawara (1979) reported that tropical rainfall was highly localised, requiring multiple spatially distributed rain gauge networks to get a more meaningful representation of catchment rainfall. With the same logic, the overprediction of peaks could be explained. Though the rainfall event on 2015/06/15 was captured by the rain gauge, it could have been a local event, with minimal effect at catchment scale, hence the higher peaks during simulation. This could be a reason for the higher simulated peak runoff compared to the observed peak after this rainfall event. When the shortcomings of GSMaP rainfall products identified by Takido et al. (2016) are clarified, they—GSMaP products—could complement ground observed data, offering finer spatial resolutions (Okiria et al., 2022) and a more realistic representation of catchment rainfall.

Overall, the TOPMODEL robustly simulated catchment runoff, providing a strong foundation for the estimation of erosion due to runoff.

**Table 2: The best performing parameter sets from the calibration of TOPMODEL in 2015. Notice the equifinality. The objective functions are calculated for daily averages of stream discharge. NSE\_v, RSR\_v and PBIAS\_v are the corresponding NSE, RSR and PBIAS values during model validation in 2016. Note that SRZinitial was set to 0 in 2016 as the simulation commenced at the start of the rain season.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *m*  (mm) | *Te*  (mm2h-1) | *td*  (hmm-1) | *SRmax* (mm) | *SRZinitial* (mm) | NSE | RSR | PBIAS  (%) | NSE\_v | RSR\_v | PBIAS\_v |
| 30.847 | 6879 | 0.014 | 2.871 | 0.000 | 0.616 | 0.619 | -4.576 | 0.503 | 0.705 | 1.462 |
| 33.532 | 7335 | 0.012 | 3.485 | 0.000 | 0.611 | 0.624 | **-**6.519 | 0.503 | 0.705 | -1.109 |
| 30.882 | 6318 | 0.013 | 4.241 | 0.000 | 0.608 | 0.626 | -8.091 | 0.500 | 0.707 | 1.108 |
| 19.172 | 9575 | 0.027 | 0.331 | 0.000 | 0.601 | 0.631 | -5.371 | 0.486 | 0.717 | 6.753 |
| 21.879 | 6328 | 0.020 | 3.267 | 0.000 | 0.600 | 0.633 | -2.513 | 0.479 | 0.722 | 8.378 |
| 28.402 | 7295 | 0.020 | 0.681 | 0.000 | 0.589 | 0.641 | 4.554 | 0.491 | 0.713 | 7.673 |
| 20.713 | 6593 | 0.025 | 2.928 | 0.000 | 0.583 | 0.646 | 11.930 | 0.446 | 0.744 | 19.357 |
| 17.975 | 9069 | 0.026 | 3.605 | 0.000 | 0.579 | 0.649 | 9.893 | 0.429 | 0.756 | 21.818 |
| 23.433 | 1489 | 0.026 | 9.426 | 0.000 | 0.553 | 0.668 | 10.509 | 0.387 | 0.783 | 22.468 |
| 30.605 | 6169 | 0.011 | 5.547 | 0.000 | 0.545 | 0.675 | -17.212 | 0.465 | 0.731 | -6.767 |
| 28.797 | 7571 | 0.015 | 9.678 | 0.000 | 0.541 | 0.677 | 16.338 | 0.434 | 0.752 | 22.765 |
| 18.436 | 8702 | 0.024 | 1.719 | 0.000 | 0.537 | 0.681 | -9.384 | 0.473 | 0.726 | 7.540 |
| 47.187 | 6869 | 0.008 | 7.066 | 0.000 | 0.520 | 0.693 | 5.980 | 0.500 | 0.707 | -1.375 |
| 41.631 | 6231 | 0.012 | 0.120 | 0.000 | 0.518 | 0.694 | -23.872 | 0.426 | 0.758 | -20.933 |
| 48.838 | 2800 | 0.010 | 6.340 | 0.000 | 0.501 | 0.706 | 5.916 | 0.470 | 0.728 | -1.303 |
| 20.733 | 3611 | 0.022 | 2.884 | 0.000 | 0.452 | 0.740 | -16.854 | 0.438 | 0.749 | 0.629 |

**Table 3: Objective functions for monthly mean daily stream discharge during calibration and validation of TOPMODEL**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year | NSE | RSR | PBIAS (%) |
| Calibration | 2015 | 0.881 | 0.345 | -3.268 |
| Validation | 2016 | 0.879 | 0.347 | 1.529 |

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| --- |
| A graph with numbers and lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (a) |
| A graph with numbers and lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (b) |
| Figure 3: Observed daily rainfall, observed daily hydrograph and the daily hydrograph simulated by TOPMODEL. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016 respectively.   |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | | (a) | (b) |   Figure 4: Observed and simulated hydrograph by TOPMODEL. Qobs\_m and Qsim\_m are observed and simulated monthly mean daily discharges, respectively. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016, respectively. |

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## TopEros’ Erosion module

### MUSLE parameters

The values of the *K* parameter of MUSLE ranged from 0.127-0.204, well within the 0-0.5 range defined by Williams (1995)`s Equation 6. Meanwhile, *LSp* values varied from 0-5.366×107. Following the guidelines of Li et al. (2023), for the study period, *P*=1 was used because there was no evidence of human intervention for soil and water conservation measures within the catchment.

### Threshold values of the topographic indices

For Namatala River catchment, the threshold values of *TI* and *aitanβ* at which concentrated flow was assumed to start were 15 and 35, respectively. Overlapped. These values predicted the channel features that could be resolved from a 12.52 m2 resolution DEM. Moore et al., (1988) reported threshold values of 6.8 and 18 for *TI* and *aitanβ* respectively. TI values varying from 6.8-9.8 and *aitanβ* values stretching from 18-40 have also been reported (Vandaele et al., 1996). Meanwhile, Daggupati et al., (2013, 2014) reported values of 12 and 30-50 for TI and *aitanβ,* respectively. All these values were of the same order of magnitude as those used for TopEros in the Namatala River catchment. This was the first step towards validating the erosion prediction. However, it is also apparent that the threshold values of topographic indices for locating ephemeral gulleys could be site-specific. With the identification of topographic index thresholds, it became possible to predict cells with and without concentrated flow.

### Soil erosion

**Gross Soil Erosion Estimates and Model Comparison**

Although in situ observations of rainfall for 2015 (February 28-October 31) and 2016 (May 1-December 31) were incomplete, they capture the entirety of the bimodal rainfall in the Namatala River catchment—April-May and August-October (Owor, M. et al., 2018). Therefore, annualised units—Mgyr-1— provide reasonable approximations of soil erosion. Table 4 and ***Figure 5*** summarise sediment yields, deposition and erosion components as simulated by TopEros and MUSLE.

First, a comparison between TopEros and MUSLE is made. In 2015, TopEros estimated catchment sediment yield (CSY) of 2.387 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹, compared to 2.915 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹ from MUSLE. In 2016 the corresponding values were 1.443 × 10⁶ and 1.774 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹, respectively. The tendency of USLE‐type models to overpredict sediment yield under high-intensity has been documented (Benavidez et al., 2018). Desmet & Govers, (1996) and Wischmeier & Smith, (1978) attributed it to non-consideration of sediment deposition process by USLE-type models. However, here, even with the incorporation of sediment deposition, MUSLE still overpredicted sediment yield, exceeding TopEros by 20–25 % in both years. This could be due to overestimation of LSp factor in the channels

**Erosion Process Partitioning**

TopEros enables decomposition of gross erosion into process‐specific components. In 2015 sheet (overland) erosion dominated, contributing 68 percent (4.438 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹), and in 2016, 60 percent (2.714 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹). Given that approximately 90 percent of the catchment area is prone to sheet erosion, these proportions are plausible. Concentrated‐flow (gulley) detachment accounted for the remaining 32 percent (2.090 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹) in 2015 and 40 percent (1.839 × 10⁶ Mg yr⁻¹) in 2016, falling within reported gulley‐erosion contribution ranges of 10–94 percent (Poesen et al. 2003; Boardman and Poesen 2006). Raindrop detachment was negligible, likely due to rapid surface saturation reducing raindrop impact energy.

These partitioned results confirm TopEros’s capacity to simulate realistic, process‐based erosion magnitudes. In contrast, MUSLE’s lumped approach cannot distinguish between detachment mechanisms, which may obscure targeted management interventions..

**Table 4: Sediment yield, sediment deposition and the gross soil erosion as predicted by TopEros in Namatala River catchment. CSY is the “sediment yield”, CSD is the “sediment deposition”, CGE\_Dof is “catchment gross soil erosion by the sheet erosion process”, CGE\_Dr is “catchment gross soil erosion by rain drop detachment “and CGE\_Df is “catchment gross soil erosion by concentrated flow.”**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | CSY (Mgyr-1)  ×106 | CSD (Mgyr-1)  ×106 | CGE\_Dof (Mgyr-1)  ×106 | CGE\_Dr (Mgyr-1) | CGE\_Df (Mgyr-1)  ×106 | Model |
| 2015 | 2.387 | 4.141 | 4.438 | 2.510 | 2.090 | TopEros |
| 2015 | 2.915 | 3.697 | — | — | — | MUSLE |
| 2016 | 1.443 | 3.110 | 2.714 | 1.719 | 1.839 | TopEros |
| 2016 | 1.774 | 3.697 | — | — | — | MUSLE |

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| A graph with numbers and lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (a) |
| A graph of a graph showing the amount of erosion  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (b) |
| **Figure 5: Daily predicted soil erosion by type and sediment deposition of Namatala River catchment as predicted by TopEros. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016, respectively.** |

**Specific Erosion and Sediment Delivery Ratios**

To normalize for catchment area and focus on erosion severity, specific soil‐loss metrics were calculated (Table 5). TopEros predicted specific gross erosion of 385 and 296 Mg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ in 2015 and 2016, respectively, while MUSLE estimated 431 and 252 Mg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹. Again, MUSLE’s overestimation aligns with critiques of empirical USLE variants in steep, heterogeneous terrains (Panagos et al. 2015).

For specific sediment yield (csy), TopEros yielded 155 and 94 Mg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹, versus 190 and 115 Mg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ from MUSLE. Sediment delivery ratio (SDR) further illuminates transport efficiency: TopEros SDRs were 0.366 (2015) and 0.317 (2016), whereas MUSLE predicted 0.441 and 0.456. The empirical relationship of Vanoni (1975) for catchments of this size suggests an SDR of approximately 0.252 (Vanoni 1975, cited in Dhakal et al. 2006; Ouyang and Bartholic 1997). TopEros’ closer agreement with Vanoni’s benchmark underscores its improved handling of within‐catchment erosion, deposition and routing processes.

**Table 5: Soil Erosion simulation in in Namatala River Catchment. Note that csy is “catchment specific sediment yield”; csd is “catchment specific sediment deposition, SDR\* is “sediment delivery ratio from TopEros” while SDR\*\* is “the sediment delivery ratio from the empirical relationship of Vanoni (1975), as cited in Dhakal et al., (2006); Ouyang & Bartholic, (1997).**

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| Year | csy (Mgha-1yr-1) | csd (Mgha-1yr-1) | SDR\* | SDR\*\* | Model |
| 2015 | 155 | 270 | 0.366 | 0.252 | TopEros |
| 2015 | 190 | 241 | 0.441 | 0.252 | MUSLE |
| 2016 | 94 | 202 | 0.317 | 0.252 | TopEros |
| 2016 | 115 | 137 | 0.456 | 0.252 | MUSLE |

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| |  | | --- | | A green map with many lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. | | (a) | | A green map with lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. | | (b) |   **Figure 6: Yearly grid-scale soil erosion of Namatala River catchment as predicted by TopEros. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016 respectively** |
| A green map with white text  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (a) |
| A green map with lines on it  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (b) |
| **Figure 7: Sediment deposition in Namatala River catchment as predicted by TopEros. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016, respectively.** |

**Spatial Patterns and Risk Classification**

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the spatial distribution of annual erosion and deposition. High‐erosion hotspots coincide with steep slopes and sparse vegetative cover, while depositional zones cluster in valley bottoms. This spatially explicit output is invaluable for prioritizing conservation measures (Quinton et al. 2010).

Integrating these results into erosion‐risk classes (Jiang et al. 2014) yields a catchment‐wide classification of “very high” risk in 2015 and “high” in 2016 (Figure 8). However, channel and gully zones exhibit “very high” risk irrespective of year, whereas non‐channel areas largely fall in “low” or “very low” classes. This dichotomy highlights the necessity of focused interventions in ephemeral gully networks, supplementing broader sheet‐erosion controls.

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| A green and red map  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (a) |
| A green map with red lines  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |
| (b) |
| **Figure 8: Erosion risk map of Namatala River catchment. Note that the values 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4 on the colour bar correspond to Jiang et al., (2014) `s Very Low, Low, Moderate, High and Very High respectively (Table 1). Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016, respectively.**  **Model Validation and Implications**  Our three‐fold validation—comparison with MUSLE, alignment of SDR with Vanoni (1975), and consistency with observed process proportions—builds confidence in TopEros as a robust, catchment‐scale tool. By seamlessly coupling MUSLE concepts for sheet erosion with concentrated‐flow modelling, TopEros bridges plot‐scale empirical methods and process‐based routing frameworks, addressing a long‐standing scale transition challenge (El‐Wakeel et al. 2020). Limiations and future directions While TopEros shows promise, some limitations point to future work. For example, ephemeral gullies are not yet explicitly modelled: Their detection could be enhanced by incorporating high resolution optical imagery and or high‐resolution DEM analysis. Similarly, the model’s robustness should be tested by extending it to other catchments of the Mt. Elgon region and beyond. Finally, incorporation of a flow routing algorithm into TopEros could; Firstly, improve model performance for larger catchments and 2) Will be a prerequisite for future extension of the model to studies of global soil erosion. |

# Conclusions

We have introduced **TopEros**, a novel process-based hydro-erosion model that couples a TOPMODEL-derived hydrological framework with three dedicated soil-detachment modules—sheet erosion, concentrated-flow (gulley) erosion, and raindrop-impact detachment. By deriving grid-cell–specific topographic-index thresholds, TopEros dynamically identifies zones of ephemeral gully formation and applies the most appropriate erosion law in each domain.

Applying TopEros to the Namatala River catchment in eastern Uganda demonstrated its ability to reproduce both annual and sub-grid variability in sediment yield. Compared to the empirically deriven MUSLE, TopEros reduced overprediction biases by 20–25 percent, achieved sediment delivery ratios (SDR = 0.366 and 0.317 in 2015–16) much closer to the Vanoni (1975) benchmark of 0.252, and partitioned gross erosion into realistic process proportions (sheet vs. gulley vs. raindrop detachment). These improvements confirm TopEros’s enhanced representation of physical erosion and in-catchment deposition processes.

**TopEros** thus bridges the gap between plot-scale empirical models and catchment-scale process models by seamlessly integrating distinct detachment mechanisms within a single, spatially distributed framework. This advancement not only refines our conceptualisation of hydro-erosion dynamics at landscape scales but also enables the generation of erosion-risk maps that pinpoint critical hotspots for conservation interventions.

For future work, we recommend:

1. **Cross-catchment validation** with observed sediment-yield records to quantify TopEros’ predictive gains over conventional models.
2. **Enhanced gully detection**, leveraging high-resolution optical and DEM data, topographic‐wetness indices, and targeted field surveys to improve the delineation of ephemeral features.
3. **Integration of flow-routing modules** to extend the model’s applicability to larger basins and facilitate eventual upscaling to regional or global soil-erosion assessments.

By addressing these directions, TopEros can become a robust tool for both scientific research and practical catchment management, ultimately supporting more strategic, data-driven soil and water conservation planning.

**Code and Data availability**

TopEros code and input data can be availed upon request from the authors.

**Author contribution**

EO and KN developed the concept and designed the experiment, EO wrote the TopEros model code, YK and EO collected and processed the input data, EO conducted the experiment, EO wrote the manuscript with contributions from SN, KN and YK.

**Competing Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Financial support**

Funding: This work was supported by Gifu University THERS Interdisciplinary Frontier Next Generation Researcher Project; and JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21H05002

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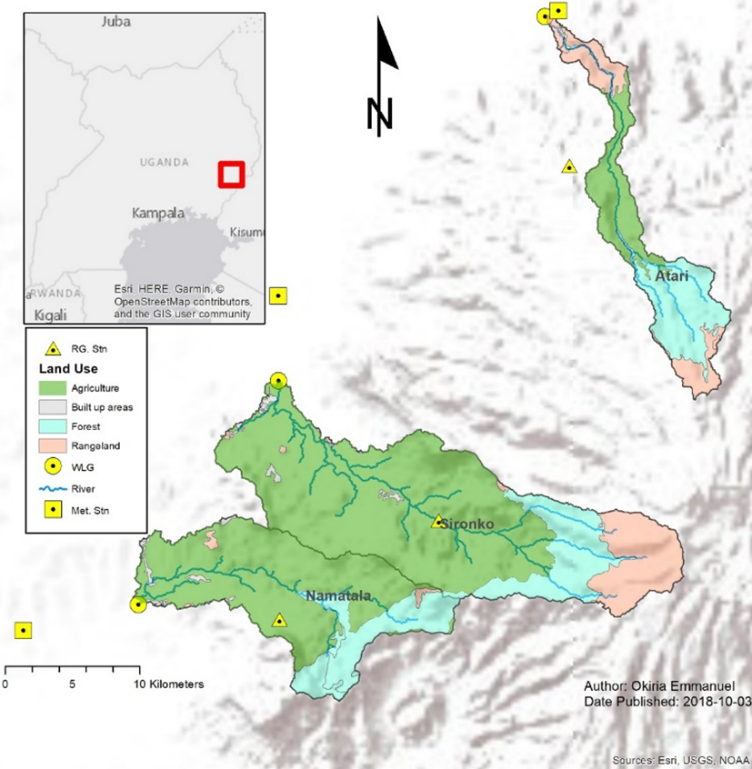
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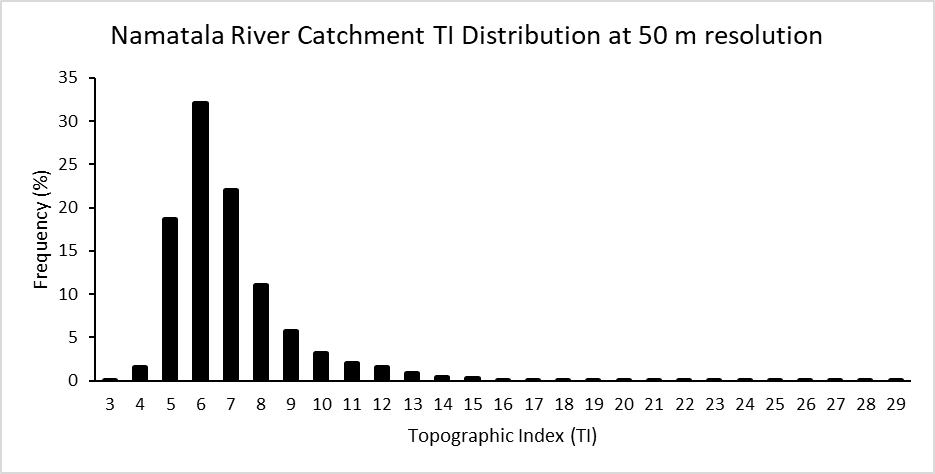
**Extended Data**

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**Extended Data Figure 1: Daily sediment yield in Namatala river catchment. Panels (a) and (b) are as predicted in 2015 and 2016 respectively.**



**Extended Data Figure 2: Instrumentation and land cover of the Namatala, Atari and Sironko River catchments. Note that RG is rain gauge, WLG is water level gauge and WS is weather station.**



**Extended Data Figure 3: Topographic Index distribution of Namatala catchment at 50m grid-resolution.**