Tidal Flood Mapping

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"In space, no one can hear you think."

Table of Contents

Contents

1   Tidal Flood Mapping

1.1   Introduction to Tidal Flood Mapping

Tidal flood mapping represents a critical intersection of oceanography, geodesy, geography, and risk management, providing an essential visual and quantitative framework for understanding the complex dynamics of water encroaching onto coastal land. At its core, tidal flood mapping delineates the spatial extent, depth, frequency, and potential impact of coastal inundation driven primarily by astronomical tides, often exacerbated by meteorological forces such as storm surges and wave action. Unlike riverine flooding, which originates from overflowing inland waterways, or pluvial flooding, caused solely by intense rainfall exceeding drainage capacity, tidal flooding is intrinsically linked to the rhythmic rise and fall of sea levels along coastlines. Its scope encompasses a spectrum of events, from predictable, regular high tides that may periodically inundate low-lying areas, to the more dramatic and destructive occurrences such as storm surges accompanying tropical cyclones or extratropical storms, which can elevate water levels many meters above normal tidal predictions. Furthermore, it includes the phenomenon of "king tides" – exceptionally high tides occurring during specific astronomical alignments (perigean spring tides) – which, while not storms themselves, offer a preview of future □□ as sea levels rise. Mapping these events requires integrating precise bathymetric data (ocean depth), detailed topographic elevation data of the land surface, sophisticated tidal harmonic analysis, hydrodynamic modeling of water movement, and increasingly, projections of future sea-level rise and land subsidence. The resulting maps are not static pictures but dynamic tools, capable of simulating scenarios ranging from daily tidal fluctuations to the catastrophic flooding potential of a once-in-a-century superstorm.

The profound importance and relevance of tidal flood mapping in the contemporary world cannot be overstated, particularly as global coastlines experience unprecedented development pressure and accelerating environmental change. Coastal zones are home to a significant and growing proportion of the world's population and host critical infrastructure – ports, airports, power plants, communication hubs, and transportation networks – forming the backbone of national and global economies. Tidal flooding poses a direct and escalating threat to these assets. For instance, the routine "sunny day" flooding experienced in cities like Miami, Florida, or Norfolk, Virginia, driven not by storms but by higher-than-normal tides, already disrupts daily life, damages vehicles and property, degrades infrastructure through saltwater corrosion, and incurs substantial economic costs in repairs and lost productivity. More severe events, such as the storm surge from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 which overwhelmed New Orleans' levees, or Superstorm Sandy's devastating impact on the northeastern United States in 2012, demonstrate the catastrophic potential: billions of dollars in damages, widespread displacement of communities, and tragic loss of life. Beyond the tangible economic and infrastructure impacts, tidal flood mapping is fundamentally a tool for human safety. Accurate maps inform evacuation planning, emergency response strategies, and the placement of critical facilities like hospitals and emergency shelters outside high-risk zones. They are indispensable for land-use planning, guiding decisions on where to build, rebuild, elevate structures, or implement protective measures like seawalls and natural buffers. Environmental considerations are equally crucial. Coastal ecosystems – salt marshes, mangroves, seagrass beds, and dunes – provide invaluable services, including natural flood attenuation, water filtration, and vital habitat for numerous species. Tidal flood maps help identify areas where these ecosys-

tems are threatened by inundation or where their restoration could enhance coastal resilience. They also inform the management of vulnerable habitats, such as turtle nesting beaches or bird breeding colonies, ensuring conservation efforts account for changing inundation patterns driven by both natural variability and anthropogenic climate change.

The field of tidal flood mapping has undergone a remarkable evolution, shaped by technological advancements, scientific understanding, and growing societal recognition of coastal risks. Its origins can be traced back to ancient civilizations' empirical observations of tidal patterns, crucial for navigation and early coastal settlement. However, systematic mapping efforts began in earnest during the Age of Exploration, driven by the need for accurate nautical charts and tide tables. Early efforts were rudimentary, relying on manual surveys and simple extrapolation. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw significant strides with the establishment of national tide gauge networks and the development of more sophisticated mechanical tide prediction machines, like the renowned Kelvin machine, which painstakingly computed tidal constituents. The mid-20th century introduced aerial photography, offering the first broad-scale visual documentation of flood extents, though interpretation remained qualitative and post-event. A true revolution commenced in the latter half of the 20th century with the advent of digital computing. Early digital elevation models (DEMs), derived from traditional survey data, allowed for the first computer-generated flood simulations, albeit with coarse resolution and limited dynamic modeling capabilities. The emergence and proliferation of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the 1980s and 1990s provided the essential spatial framework, enabling the integration of diverse data layers – elevation, tide, infrastructure, land use – into cohesive analytical environments. This period also saw the development of foundational hydrodynamic models, such as those based on the shallow water equations, which could simulate the complex physics of tidal propagation and storm surge. Today, the field is characterized by interdisciplinary collaboration and rapid technological innovation. Key stakeholders include national agencies like NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) in the United States, the Environment Agency in the UK, or the Rijkswaterstaat in the Netherlands, responsible for data collection, modeling, and map production; academic researchers developing new methodologies and models; local and regional governments implementing maps for planning and emergency management; engineering firms designing defenses; and insurance companies assessing risk. The basic process of creating modern tidal flood maps involves acquiring high-resolution elevation data (increasingly via LiDAR and satellite radar altimetry), collecting and analyzing long-term tidal records, calibrating and validating complex hydrodynamic models (like ADCIRC or Delft3D) against observed events, simulating various inundation scenarios (different tide levels, storm intensities, future sea levels), and finally visualizing the results through accessible web-based platforms and detailed paper maps. This section will delve deeper into these processes, the technologies involved, and the challenges faced, setting the stage for the subsequent exploration of the field's historical development.

Tidal flood mapping is not a monolithic practice pursued in isolation; it is deeply embedded within a global context characterized by varying vulnerabilities, resources, governance structures, and international cooperation. Approaches to mapping differ significantly between regions, reflecting historical experiences, economic capacity, and the nature of the prevailing tidal and storm threats. The Netherlands, for instance, represents a global benchmark, born from centuries of existential struggle against the sea. Its approach is

highly centralized, technologically advanced, and integrated into a comprehensive national flood risk management system that includes massive engineered defenses (like the Delta Works), stringent building codes, and sophisticated, high-resolution flood maps used for spatial planning and emergency preparedness. In contrast, a densely populated, developing delta nation like Bangladesh faces immense challenges with limited resources. Here, mapping efforts often focus on community-based approaches, integrating local knowledge with satellite data to produce usable maps for early warning and evacuation planning in a region where millions live perilously close to sea level and are acutely vulnerable to cyclonic storm surges. The United States employs a more decentralized system, with federal agencies like FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Administration) producing Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) for insurance purposes, while NOAA provides more specialized coastal flood hazard maps and services. However, the patchwork of local, state, and federal efforts and varying data quality have sometimes led to inconsistencies and challenges, particularly highlighted during events like Hurricane Sandy. Certain regions stand out as global hotspots of tidal flood vulnerability. Low-lying small island developing states (SIDS), such as the Maldives, Tuvalu, and Kiribati, face existential threats from sea-level rise and storm surges, with limited land area to retreat to. Densely populated delta cities – think Jakarta (sinking rapidly), Bangkok, Lagos, and Shanghai – grapple with the triple threat of sea-level rise, land subsidence, and land reclamation altering natural hydrology. The entire U.S. Eastern Seaboard and Gulf Coast, particularly Florida and Louisiana, are highly susceptible, as are coastal areas of Northern Europe, East Asia (China, Japan, Vietnam), and parts of Australia. Recognizing that tidal flooding and sea-level rise are transboundary challenges requiring collective action, significant international cooperation has emerged. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides authoritative scientific assessments, including detailed projections of sea-level rise that form the foundation for future flood mapping scenarios globally. Organizations like the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) facilitate the sharing of tidal data and best practices. International initiatives, such as the Copernicus Marine Service in Europe or the NASA Sea Level Change Team in the US, provide freely accessible satellite data and models used worldwide. Furthermore, frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction emphasize the importance of risk assessment, including flood mapping, as a cornerstone of global efforts to build resilience. This global perspective underscores that while the specific techniques and applications of tidal flood mapping may vary, the fundamental need to understand and communicate coastal flood risk is a universal challenge, binding coastal communities across the planet in a shared endeavor towards safety and sustainability.

1.2   Historical Development of Tidal Flood Mapping

The evolution of tidal flood mapping represents a fascinating journey through human ingenuity, technological advancement, and growing awareness of our relationship with coastal environments. This historical progression reveals not only how our methods have changed but also how our understanding of tidal dynamics has deepened, driven by both necessity and curiosity. From ancient observations scratched into clay tablets to sophisticated satellite-based systems generating real-time flood forecasts, the development of tidal flood mapping mirrors humanity's enduring struggle to comprehend, predict, and ultimately coexist with the powerful forces of the sea.

Early mapping efforts emerged from the practical needs of civilizations living along coastlines, where understanding tidal patterns meant the difference between prosperity and peril. Ancient Babylonians recorded tidal observations as early as 2000 BCE, recognizing the connection between the moon's phases and water levels along the Persian Gulf. Similarly, ancient Egyptian civilization, flourishing along the Nile Delta, developed an empirical understanding of the Mediterranean's tidal influences, though their primary focus remained on the river's annual flooding. In China, during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), astronomers meticulously documented tidal phenomena, particularly in the Qiantang River estuary, where the famous tidal bore could reach heights of up to 9 meters. These early observations, though not maps in the modern sense, represented the first systematic attempts to understand and predict tidal behavior. The ancient Greeks made significant theoretical advances, with Pytheas of Massalia around 325 BCE noting the relationship between tides and the moon during his explorations of the British Isles, and later, Posidonius in the 1st century BCE providing more detailed explanations of tidal phenomena. However, it was the Romans who produced some of the earliest known tidal charts for navigation purposes, particularly for the challenging waters of the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of their empire.

The medieval period saw the emergence of more sophisticated nautical charts, particularly the portolan charts of the Mediterranean from the 13th century onward. These detailed navigation aids, created by Italian and Catalan cartographers, included information about coastal features, harbors, and, to a limited extent, tidal information useful for sailors. However, truly scientific approaches to tide prediction began to emerge during the Renaissance. In 1687, Sir Isaac Newton published his groundbreaking theory of universal gravitation in "Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica," providing the first comprehensive physical explanation for tidal behavior as the result of gravitational forces exerted by the moon and sun. This theoretical breakthrough laid the foundation for more systematic tidal observations and predictions. Throughout the 18th century, European maritime powers established permanent tide gauges in major ports, recognizing the economic and military advantages of accurate tidal predictions. The Board of Longitude in Britain, established in 1714 to solve the problem of determining longitude at sea, indirectly spurred tidal studies by improving timekeeping and astronomical observations essential for tidal predictions.

The 19th century marked a turning point with the establishment of national hydrographic offices and more systematic approaches to coastal surveying. In the United States, the Coast Survey (established in 1807, later renamed the Coast and Geodetic Survey) began comprehensive mapping of coastlines, including tidal observations. Similarly, Great Britain's Admiralty Hydrographic Office, founded in 1795, expanded its work to include detailed tidal studies across the British Empire. These efforts were often driven by catastrophic events that highlighted the need for better understanding of coastal flooding. The devastating flood of 1953 in the Netherlands, which killed over 1,800 people and submerged large portions of the country, stands as a pivotal moment in tidal flood mapping history. This disaster directly led to the creation of the Delta Works, one of the world's most sophisticated flood defense systems, and spurred significant advances in Dutch hydraulic engineering and flood mapping that would influence practices globally. Similarly, the 1900 Galveston hurricane in Texas, which resulted in approximately 6,000-12,000 deaths, prompted the United States to invest more heavily in coastal mapping and prediction systems. These historical floods underscored a crucial point: accurate tidal flood maps were not merely academic exercises but vital tools for survival and

prosperity in coastal regions.

As we transition into the pre-digital era of the early to mid-20th century, tidal flood mapping became increasingly systematic, though still labor-intensive and limited by the technologies of the time. Manual surveying methods formed the backbone of elevation data collection, with surveyors using theodolites, leveling rods, and chains to meticulously measure land elevations relative to established tidal datums. These surveys required significant manpower and time, often taking years to complete for extensive coastal areas. The resulting data were typically recorded in field books, later transferred to large paper maps by skilled cartographers. These paper-based mapping approaches, while valuable for their time, suffered from several inherent limitations. The static nature of paper maps made them unable to represent the dynamic nature of tidal flooding, and the laborious production process meant that maps were often outdated by the time they were completed. Furthermore, the interpolation between survey points could lead to inaccuracies, particularly in areas of complex topography where elevation changes rapidly over short distances.

One of the most remarkable developments of this era was the invention of tide prediction machines, mechanical analog computers that could calculate future tides based on harmonic analysis. The first practical tide-predicting machine was designed by Lord Kelvin (William Thomson) in 1872, with later refinements producing increasingly sophisticated devices. These magnificent machines, often resembling elaborate clockwork mechanisms with numerous gears, pulleys, and pens, represented the pinnacle of pre-digital computational technology for tidal prediction. The Kelvin machine, for instance, used a system of pulleys and gears to represent the harmonic constituents of tidal behavior—the periodic components that combine to create the complex tidal patterns observed in nature. Operators would set the machine based on local tidal observations, and it would mechanically trace out predicted tide levels for months or even years into the future. These machines were housed in prestigious institutions like the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey and the United Kingdom's Tide Pooling Office, where they served as the primary means of generating official tide predictions well into the 1960s. The United States alone produced over thirty tide-predicting machines of various designs, each a marvel of mechanical engineering that embodied the scientific understanding of its era.

The mid-20th century saw the introduction of aerial photography as a revolutionary tool for flood mapping. During World War II, aerial reconnaissance techniques developed for military purposes found peacetime applications in surveying and mapping. After flood events, aircraft could be deployed to photograph affected areas, providing for the first time a comprehensive visual record of flood extents. These photographs allowed cartographers to trace the boundaries of inundated areas with unprecedented accuracy, creating maps that documented actual flooding rather than merely predicting potential scenarios. The historic floods along the Mississippi River in 1927 and again in 1937 were among the first major events extensively documented through aerial photography, providing valuable data for future flood mitigation efforts. However, interpreting these images required skilled photogrammetrists who could identify flood boundaries and translate them onto maps, a process that remained subjective and time-consuming. Furthermore, aerial photography provided only a two-dimensional view of flooding, lacking critical information about water depth that would be essential for comprehensive risk assessment. Despite these limitations, the introduction of aerial photography marked a significant step forward, enabling the documentation of flood events with a breadth and detail

previously unimaginable.

The computer revolution that began in the mid-20th century transformed tidal flood mapping as profoundly as it did nearly every other scientific field. The transition from mechanical to digital computation opened new possibilities for modeling complex tidal systems and processing vast amounts of data. In the 1960s and 1970s, early mainframe computers, though primitive by today's standards, offered capabilities far beyond those of mechanical tide predictors. These systems could perform complex calculations involving multiple harmonic constituents in minutes rather than the hours required by mechanical machines. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and NOAA were among the early adopters, developing computer programs for tide prediction that gradually replaced the mechanical machines that had served for nearly a century. However, these early computer systems were accessible only to large institutions with substantial resources, and their use required specialized programming skills that limited widespread adoption.

The development of digital elevation models (DEMs) represented another critical advancement in this era. DEMs are computerized representations of terrain elevation, storing elevation data for a grid of points covering a geographic area. Early DEMs were created by digitizing existing paper topographic maps, a painstaking process that involved manually tracing contour lines and assigning elevation values. The first comprehensive DEM for the United States, developed by the U.S. Geological Survey in the 1970s, had a resolution of approximately 200 meters—coarse by modern standards but revolutionary at the time. These early digital models, despite their limited resolution, offered significant advantages over paper maps. They could be easily updated, manipulated, and integrated with other digital data layers. Perhaps most importantly, they enabled the first computer simulations of tidal flooding, allowing analysts to predict how water would flow across a landscape under various scenarios. However, these early simulations were relatively simple, often based on "bathtub" models that simply filled all areas below a specified water level without accounting for complex hydrodynamic processes like flow resistance, channels, or barriers.

The emergence of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the 1980s provided the essential spatial framework that would transform tidal flood mapping from a specialized technical practice into a more accessible analytical tool. GIS technology, pioneered by researchers like Roger Tomlinson (often called the "father of GIS") and developed commercially by companies such as Esri (Environmental Systems Research Institute), allowed for the integration, analysis, and visualization of diverse spatial data layers. For tidal flood mapping, this meant that elevation data, tide gauge measurements, storm tracks, infrastructure locations, and population data could all be combined in a single analytical environment. Early GIS systems, though limited by the computing power of the time, enabled basic overlay analyses and map production that would have been extraordinarily difficult with manual methods. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began using GIS technology in the late 1980s to produce Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs), which delineated areas at risk of flooding for insurance purposes. While these early GIS-based flood maps were still relatively coarse in resolution and simplified in their modeling approaches, they established the foundation for the sophisticated mapping systems used today.

Concurrent with the development of GIS, the 1980s and 1990s saw significant advances in computational models of tidal flooding. Researchers developed increasingly sophisticated hydrodynamic models based on

the shallow water equations, which describe how water moves in response to forces like gravity, friction, and pressure gradients. Models like ADCIRC (Advanced Circulation Model) and Delft3D, developed by research institutions in the United States and the Netherlands respectively, incorporated complex physics to simulate tidal propagation, storm surge, and wave action with unprecedented accuracy. These models required substantial computing power and specialized expertise to operate, but they represented a quantum leap forward in predictive capability. For the first time, modelers could simulate how a storm with specific characteristics would interact with coastal topography to produce flooding patterns, accounting for factors like wind stress, bottom friction, and the Coriolis effect. The validation of these models against historical events, such as Hurricane Camille in 1969 and Hurricane Hugo in 1989, gradually improved their reliability and established them as essential tools for coastal flood risk assessment.

The last two to three decades have witnessed technological leaps that have transformed tidal flood mapping from a specialized discipline into a dynamic, rapidly evolving field characterized by unprecedented precision and accessibility. The proliferation of satellite technology has been perhaps the most transformative development, providing global coverage of coastal areas with increasing frequency and resolution. Satellite altimetry missions, beginning with TOPEX/Poseidon in 1992 and continuing with the Jason series and more recently the Sentinel-6 Michael Freilich satellite, have enabled precise measurement of sea surface heights across the globe. These measurements have not only improved our understanding of ocean dynamics but have also provided critical data for monitoring sea-level rise, a key factor in long-term tidal flood risk assessment. Meanwhile, Earth observation satellites like Landsat, Sentinel-1 and Sentinel-2, and commercial high-resolution satellites deliver detailed imagery of coastal zones, allowing for regular monitoring of changes in shorelines, wetlands, and other features that affect flood patterns.

Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) technology has revolutionized elevation data collection, providing high-resolution topographic and bathymetric data essential for accurate flood modeling. LiDAR systems, typically mounted on aircraft, use laser pulses to measure distances to the Earth's surface, creating detailed three-dimensional point clouds that can be processed into elevation models with vertical accuracies of 10-15 centimeters or better. The U.S. Geological Survey's 3D Elevation Program (3DEP) and similar initiatives in other countries have systematically collected LiDAR data for vast coastal areas, replacing the older, coarser elevation models. This high-resolution data reveals subtle topographic features that critically influence flooding patterns, such as natural levees, small channels, and artificial barriers that might be invisible in lower-resolution data. The value of this detailed elevation data was dramatically demonstrated during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, when models using LiDAR data accurately predicted flooding in many areas while older, coarser models failed to capture the complex dynamics of water movement across urban landscapes.

Advances in hydrodynamic modeling have kept pace with improvements in elevation data, resulting in increasingly sophisticated simulations of coastal flooding. Modern models like ADCIRC, Delft3D, and FV-COM (Finite Volume Community Ocean Model) incorporate complex physical processes at multiple scales, from global tidal dynamics to local wave-structure interactions. These models can simulate compound flooding events where multiple drivers—astronomical tides, storm surge, river discharge, and wave setup—interact to produce flooding patterns more severe than any single factor alone would cause. The computing power required for these simulations has been dramatically reduced by advances in high-performance com-

puting and parallel processing, making complex modeling more accessible to researchers and practitioners. Furthermore, ensemble modeling approaches have become standard practice, where multiple model runs with slightly different initial conditions or parameter values are used to quantify uncertainty in flood predictions. This probabilistic approach provides a more nuanced understanding of flood risks than deterministic single-scenario models, allowing decision-makers to consider a range of possible outcomes rather than a single predicted flood extent.

The integration of climate change projections into tidal flood mapping represents one of the most significant recent developments in the field. As scientific understanding of sea-level rise has improved, flood mappers have begun incorporating various sea-level rise scenarios into their work, creating maps that look decades or even centuries into the future. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides authoritative projections of sea-level rise under different emissions scenarios, which form the basis for future flood mapping efforts globally. These projections account for multiple factors, including thermal expansion of seawater, melting of glaciers and ice sheets, and changes in land water storage. Forward-looking tidal flood maps have become essential tools for long-term coastal planning, helping communities identify areas that may become chronically inundated in the coming decades and informing decisions about where to build new infrastructure, which existing assets to protect, and where retreat from the coastline may be necessary. The NOAA Sea Level Rise Viewer, an interactive web-based mapping tool launched in the early 2010s, exemplifies this approach, allowing users to visualize potential future flooding under various sea-level rise scenarios for coastal areas in the United States.

The democratization of tidal flood mapping through web-based platforms and open data initiatives has made this critical information more accessible than ever before. Organizations like NOAA, FEMA, and their international counterparts now