

# EC routing of the Mechelbach River, Luxembourg

Karen Chen, David Haasnoot, Emma Oosterveld, Jesse van Leeuwen, Sophie van Velzen  
Group B - Msc Environmental Engineering ENVM1602

This report describes the EC routing experiments of the Mechelbach river in Luxembourg. EC routing is done to better understand a catchment, where water comes from and what differences there are in water quality. To be able to allocate where the water comes from and why there are differences in water qualities, EC routing field measurements are compared to an analysis of topographical information and land use. The research question therefore is: What is the relationship between topographical information (and land use) and the discharge of different tributaries within the Mechelbach catchment? Topographical information is obtained through GIS analysis, using a DEM of the area to calculate Strahler order, division of subcatchments and TWI. Also a land use map is made. These are compared to field measurements of EC and discharge. Quite a large spread is observed in the discharge measurements, indicating inaccuracies. Concluding on the research question, topographical information seems to be mostly related to discharge through land use. The relation between TWI and discharge is highly dependent on the method for calculating TWI values, of which some show a positive trend as well.

## I. Introduction

Measuring parameters in water is usually done to analyse the quality of water. However, it can also be used to quantify water fluxes and to trace back to where the water comes from. To have a better understanding of the catchment, the focus should not solely be on the values of these parameters, but also on the cause of these values. This way, a problem can be solved from its roots instead of only taking care of the consequences.

Environmental tracers observed in water can help to characterise a catchment by identifying fluxes of water and solutes [1]. By going into the field and measuring electrical conductivity (EC) of stream flow at different locations, it is possible to infer where stream flow may originate from and what processes it undertook from rain droplet to river discharge. Combined with discharge observation, the method can be used for allocating where the water originated from through a mass balance. The method to measure EC is quick, reliable and easy, which makes EC a very useful parameter to get to know important processes in the area.

By looking at the topography of a catchment, inferences about the hydrological processes that formed

the catchment can be made [2]. One way of linking hydrology and topography is by evaluating the topographic wetness index (TWI), which relates the local slope and catchment area to the water storage capacity at any location. Given that storage strongly governs the flow of water from rainfall to stream flow, the TWI could provide a simple yet useful measure to predict how different areas contribute to discharge within a larger catchment.

Hydrological processes are also strongly governed by land use, both in terms of quantity [3] and quality of water fluxes. This study will therefore also assess the effect of land use on these processes. In this report, this method of allocation by environmental tracers is compared to the contributions from different areas based on topographical information. The main research question therefore is:

*Based on environmental tracers in tributary channels, how do topography and land use explain differences in stream flow contributions from different areas within Mechelbach catchment?*

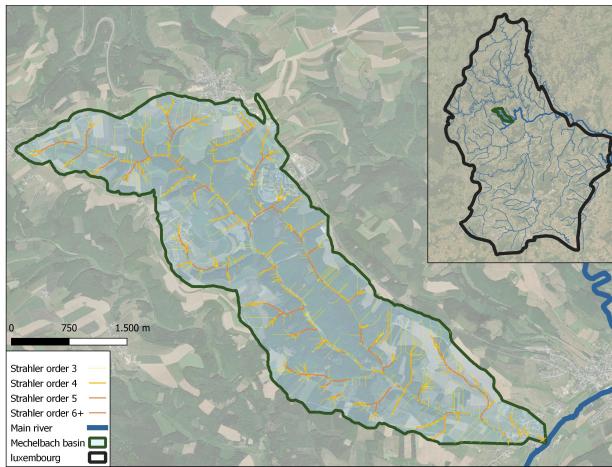
Logically, the following sub-questions can be formulated:

- What is the contribution to stream flow from different areas based on topographic information?

- What is the contribution to stream flow from different areas based on land use?

### A. Site description

The site of this research is the Mechelbach catchment in Luxembourg. ~~The Mechelbach catchment can be seen in figure 1.~~ The catchment has streams with flows of less than 100 L/s in May. On the map, many ~~side streams~~ can be seen. In reality, only a few of them contain enough water to form a side stream. At the other locations, no flowing water can be observed, only wetlands. EC values are measured where side streams come together with the main stream. When measuring locations are far from each other, additional EC measurements are taken in between. At some places, the discharge is also measured. Upfront it is not clear where in the field the suitable measurement locations are. Therefore the exact locations on which the measurements take place, are given in the results section.



**Figure 1. Overview Mechelbach basin**

The Mechelbach catchment mostly consists of 3 types of land use: wetlands, forest on hill slopes and plateau. The plateau is often used for agriculture and the wetlands are mostly grasses. Some of the wetlands are very wet and muddy, but a lot of them are more solid grass lands: the soil ~~doesn't~~ sink while standing on it. An impression of the wetland and forest hills along the Mechelbach river can be seen in figure 2. It can be seen that there is clear distinction between these types of land. Besides the different kinds of landscape, there are more important things in the area

that are likely influencing the EC values of water. ~~Some of the pollution~~ comes from upstream towns. Also, there is a waste water treatment plant (WWTP) in the area, of which the effluent is discharged into the Mechelbach stream.



**Figure 2. Wetland and forest**

During the measurements on May 15, 16 and 17 it was dry all the time. ~~In the night of May 15-16, it was rainy for a few hours.~~ Also in the preceding week of the fieldwork, there had been rainfall in the area of Heiderscheid as well. This caused the rivers to have relatively high water levels compared to other years. This water is assumed to come mainly from storage in the subsurface. The temperature was between 8 and 17 degrees Celsius during the day, lowering down to a minimum of 4 degrees at night.

### B. Hypothesis

Both topography and land-use provide information on the storage and flow paths of water in an area. Areas with a large storage capacity will store rainwater and distribute it to streams over a longer stretch of time. Given that the weather conditions imply that most of the observed stream flow will come from storage, we expect to see a positive relationship between TWI and discharge. Similarly, we expect areas with high vegetation cover to generate more baseflow than areas that promote runoff, given their role in slowing down runoff and allowing it to percolate in the soil.

## II. Methodology

To answer the main question, both field measurements and a theoretical model must be obtained. How this is done, is described in this section.

### A. In the Field



The following equipment is required for the field measurements:

- Calibrated EC meter
- Pencil and notebook
- Laptop with AquaCal software (full battery)
- Calibrated rhodamine probes
- Pre-made rhodamine solution

At each confluence of streams, EC values are measured. When measuring locations are far from each other, additional EC measurements are taken in between. At some places, also the discharge is measured. Up front, it is not clear where in the field the suitable measurement locations are. Therefore, the exact locations where the measurements take place are provided in the results section.

In the field, EC and discharge is measured for the relevant locations. Beforehand, it is not known which streams on the map contain water and which are dry at the moment. To deal with this, an empty table is created as a template. **The locations where measurements are done** are indicated on the map by numbering these locations. In the table, all information of a numbered location is filled in the row for this location.

Location	Comments & observations [for instance: amount of rhodamine used for discharge measurement]
1	
2	
..	

**Figure 3. Table field manual**

The general procedure for obtaining the measurements is as follows:

- 1) Gather all the equipment and walk to the lowest point indicated in the catchment allocated to your group. Note down this location on the map and in the table as location 1.
- 2) Measure the EC and temperature at this location. Where to do this is explained below in ‘Where

to measure EC?’’. Fill in columns 2 to 7 of the table in your notebook.

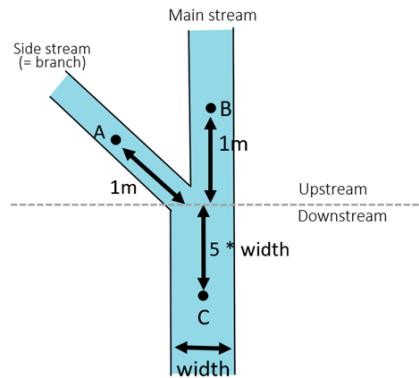
- 3) Estimate the amount of upstream water in the side and main stream in L/s. This can be done by estimating the width, depth and flow velocity of the stream. Fill in column 8 and 9 in your notebook.
- 4) Also measure discharge at locations that are indicated on the map with a cross. The discharge measurements are always done downstream of the point where two streams come together. How to measure the discharge is explained below in section II.A.2: ‘How to measure discharge?’.
- 5) Write down comments and observations in the last column of the table in your notebook and double check if you filled in all the columns for this location. If a discharge measurement was done, write down the amount of rhodamine that was used.
- 6) Walk to location 2 and repeat all steps for this location. Then, walk to the next location and so on.

#### 1. Where to measure EC?

When two streams come together, EC must be obtained at the following points:

- Upstream, for both the main and side stream the EC must be measured like indicated with points A and B in figure 4. The measurement must be done at least 1 meter upstream of the point where the two streams come together.
- To obtain the downstream location, first the width downstream must be estimated. The location of the downstream measurement is 5 times the width of the stream away from the point where the two streams come together. The downstream measurement is indicated with point C in figure 4. The reason for this is that only from a distance of 5 times the width, the stream can be assumed as well mixed.
- Make sure that you always measure at locations where water is flowing: measurements of stagnant water are not useful.
- EC needs to be measured at least every 500 meters, so at some points you need to measure EC even though no streams come together. For these measurements, you only need to fill in the

'downstream' value of this location.



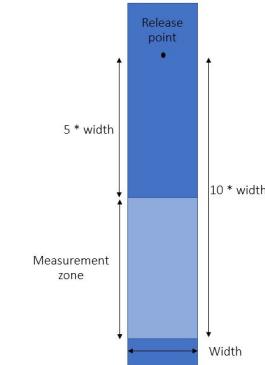
**Figure 4. Where to measure EC**

## 2. Discharge

Discharge is measured using a rhodamine solution. Using this method, a known amount of rhodamine is put into the river. Rhodamine has not been used in this TU Delft hydrology fieldwork before, so the required concentration was not known beforehand. The measured amount should be within the range of the sensor (0-500 µg/L). Under the assumption of 1/l s in the stream, the expected concentration of rhodamine required is 100 µg/L. In the field it is tested if this concentration is truly the optimal amount. The rhodamine probes must be installed between 5 and 10 times the width of the river downstream of the release point to measure the change in concentration. This is illustrated in figure 5. The probes must be installed at a location where the water is flowing (so not a stagnant zone). They must lay as steady as possible, because moving the probes gives disturbances in the results. Putting a known amount of rhodamine into the river and measuring the change in concentration over time allows the calculation of discharge through the relation shown in equation 1 and 2. The concentration over time was measured using a probe containing a fixed response fluorometer [4], which logged to a computer. From this data, the discharge can be calculated using the area under the graph.

$$\int_{t_0}^{\infty} C(t) dt = k \left( \frac{\mu g}{l} \times s \right) \quad (1)$$

$$Q \left( \frac{l}{s} \right) = \frac{C_{initial} (\mu g)}{k \left( \frac{\mu g s}{l} \right)} \quad (2)$$

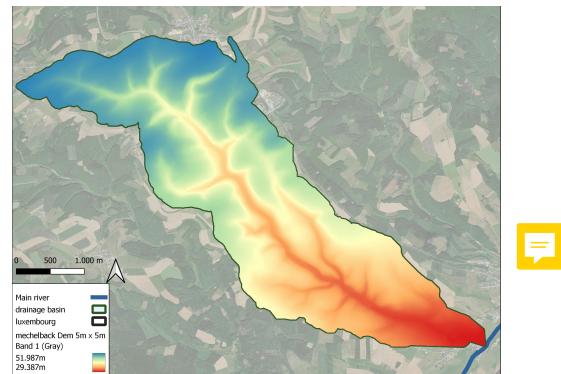


**Figure 5. Where to measure discharge**

## B. Terrain indices

### 1. Digital Elevation Model (DEM) and Strahler order

A digital elevation model was used in QGIS to generate the stream flow based on the topographical information. The digital elevation model itself is a map showing elevation per pixel, as can be seen in figure 6. With the DEM, a map of how the river flows through the catchment is made. The rivers can be labeled using Strahler order to give an indication of their sizes. This map is used for getting familiar with the area before going there. It shows where the streams can be and gives a good idea of where and how often it is expected to measure. This map can be seen in figure 1, in chapter II. Site description. Besides, the DEM can be used to split up sub-catchments. This is useful for explaining differences in EC. When the source of the water is known, one can compare the different types of land use to explain the differences in water quality.



**Figure 6. 5m Digital Elevation Model supplied by T. Bogaard**

## 2. Topographical Wetness Index and sub-catchments

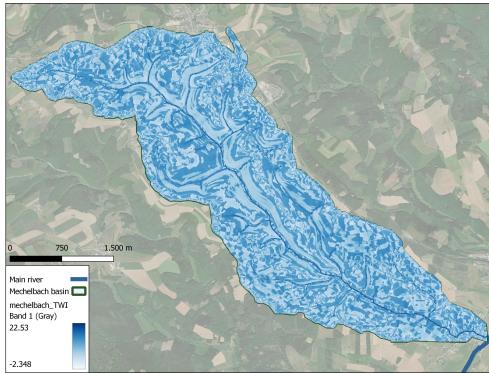
The Topographical Wetness Index (TWI) describes a measure of storage. From the DEM the upstream area and the slope angle can be calculated for every pixel. These two metrics can be combined with the shown in equation 3 to generate figure 7.

For every sub-catchment, the average TWI is calculated. The higher the TWI, the more storage an area can provide in theory. This means that areas with a high TWI provide more water in a situation where only base flow is observed.

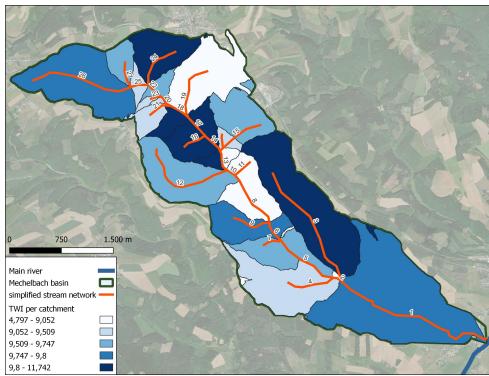
$$TWI = \ln\left(\frac{Area}{\tan(angle)}\right) \quad (3)$$

$$Q_1 + Q_2 = Q_3 \quad (4)$$

$$Q_1C_1 + Q_2C_2 = Q_3C_3 \quad (5)$$



**Figure 7. TWI calculated per pixel**



**Figure 8. TWI per sub-catchement**

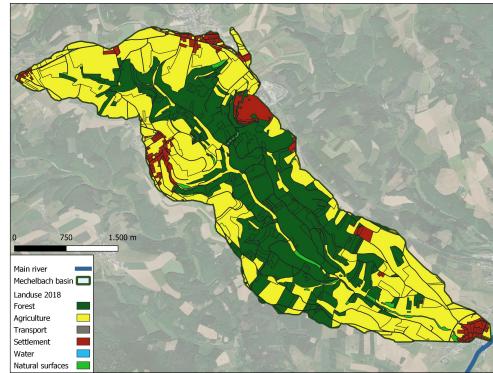
## C. Processing of measurements

The obtained field results are used to make a map which indicates the amount of water coming from

the different sub-catchments. A map showing these sub-catchments based on the DEM and TWI is given in figure 8. Calculations are done with a linear mixing model, using equation 4 and 5. For simplicity it is assumed that all downstream measurements are fully mixed in this model. In reality, this might not be the case because of heterogeneity in natural catchments.

## D. Land use

The main reason for changes in EC along the stream is differences in land use, as was indicated before. A land use map is required to compare the correlation between different land use types and EC values of sub-catchments. This is obtained from the open data portal of luxemburg which has a dataset for the 2018 landuse classification based on INSPIRE data [5]. This map is given in figure 9.



**Figure 9. Landuse in 2018**

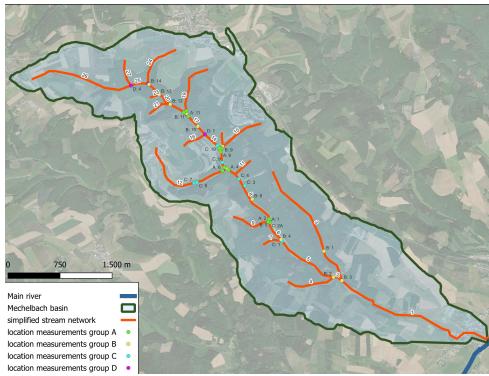
## III. Results

### A. Measurements

Before visiting the site, it was not known at which locations it was feasible to measure EC and discharge. Therefore it was decided in the field which places are good for doing the measurements. A map of all measured locations is visualised in figure 10.

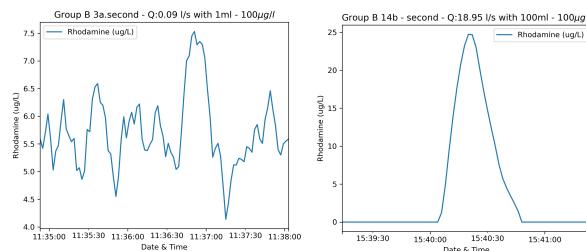
### B. discharge

The amount of rhodamine solution used in the first few experiments was 1 ml of  $100 \mu\text{g/l}$  as seen in the left plot of figure 11. This amount was insufficient and thus the experiment was repeated with higher concentrations. After a few more tries in larger streams,



**Figure 10. Locations of completed measurements**

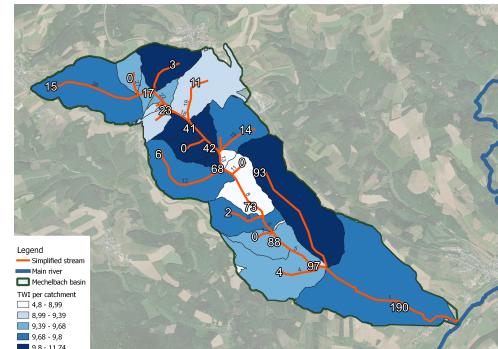
up to 100 mL of 100  $\mu\text{g/l}$  gave good results, as can be observed in the right plot of figure 11. After analyzing all discharge data, the results are used to compare with the discharge calculations obtained with the mixing model.



**Figure 11. Rhodamine concentrations over time for two different concentrations**

### C. EC routing

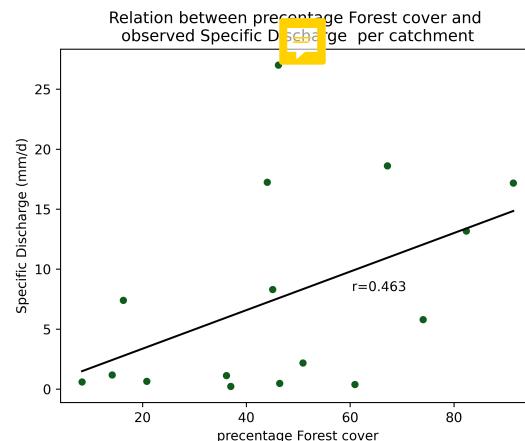
With the equations of the mixing model (4 and 5), the measured EC is used to compute the contribution to stream flow per sub-catchment. For each confluence, it is calculated in percentages how much of the water downstream comes from the main stream and how much comes from the tributary. For sections with a change in EC value with no visible tributaries, the calculation was done with groundwater as the tributary. Using a starting value of 190 l/s downstream (which was calculated by using one of the values from the measurements obtained with rhodamine), the discharge per sub-catchment can be seen in figure 12.



**Figure 12. Discharge per sub-catchment obtained by EC routing (in l/s)**

### D. Effect of land use on specific discharge

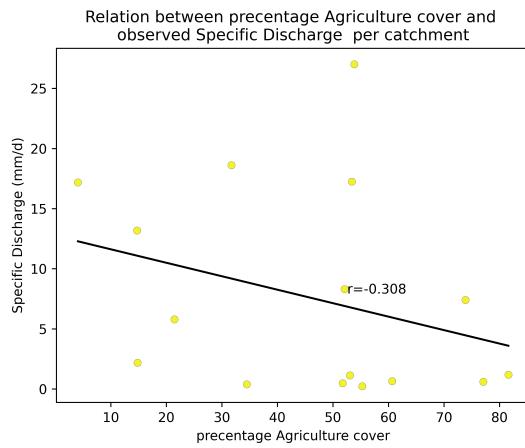
After full EC routing is done, characteristics of different sub-catchments can be compared to each other. First, specific discharge is compared to the percentage of forest cover as shown in figure 13. A positive trend can be observed, although there is a large spread in the observations. A positive relation indicates that areas with relatively large forest cover generated more stream flow.



**Figure 13. Comparison of specific discharge with % forest cover**

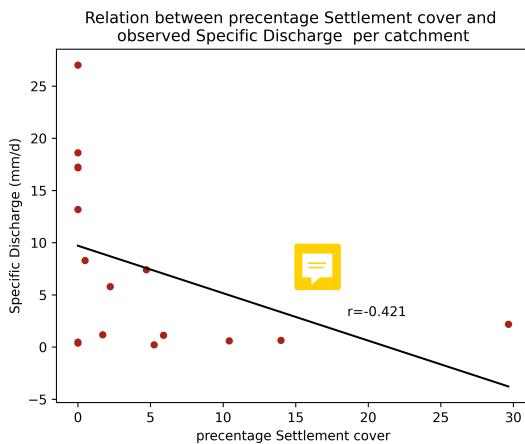
In the same way, specific discharge can be compared to the percentage of agriculture cover. This is shown in figure 14. Here, a negative trend can be observed, again with a large spread. This indicates that agriculture does not have a lot of storage, resulting in relatively lower base flows.

When the same comparison is made for the percentage of settlement cover and specific discharge, the



**Figure 14. Comparison of specific discharge with % agriculture cover**

result looks quite different as can be seen in figure 15. The highest discharges are all obtained for the areas with the least settlement cover. For higher settlement cover, specific discharge is very small. The relation between the two variables does not seem linear, but a strong negative trend can be observed. This makes sense, because settlements are known for their low storage.



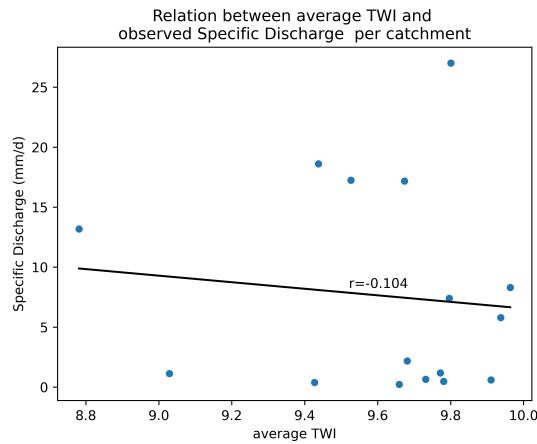
**Figure 15. Comparison of specific discharge with % settlement cover**

Altogether, an increase in forest cover seems to increase specific discharge for base flows, while an increase in agriculture and settlements cover seem to decrease specific discharge even more during base flow conditions. To be certain that the trends are a real trend and not just coincidence, a better statistical

analysis must be applied.

#### E. Effect of TWI on specific discharge

Specific discharge is also compared to the TWI of the area. There are many ways to simplify TWI in a model so both the average and summed TWI per sub-catchment are used in this comparison. For summed TWI, the comparison is with discharge instead of specific discharge. Both graphs, shown in figure 16 and figure 17, show a large spread in results. Meanwhile, the observed trend is different: for average TWI it seems like there is no clear relation, while summed TWI gives a positive relation. A possible explanation for this is that an area with both very low and very high TWI shows different behaviour compared to an area with average TWI, but both areas have the same average TWI value. Because of this, the method using summed TWI seems to be a better representation of reality. Also for these variables, a better statistical analysis must be applied to be certain that trends are real and not coincidence.

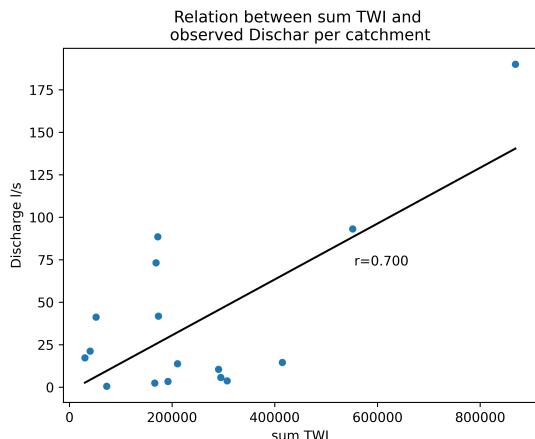


**Figure 16. Comparison of specific discharge with average TWI**

## IV. Discussion

## A. Discussion of results

While comparing the specific discharge against topography and land use, we were not able to conclude any significant relationships. Nevertheless, some rough trends were observed in the results. Specific discharge was used to omit the obvious effect that the



**Figure 17. Comparison of discharge with summed TWI**

surface area of a sub-catchment has on the water it discharges. While a rough positive relationship between the summed topographic wetness index and discharge can be observed, this was not possible for the comparison between the specific discharge and average TWI. As the latter two are merely divisions of the former two by the surface area of the sub-catchments, this is a contradiction. This mainly points towards limitations into make meaningful statements on the investigated relationships. Nevertheless, we may also conclude that the TWI is not a good index to predict differences in streamflow contribution from different areas within a catchment. The average TWI shows that, as a result of averaging over a catchment, local shapes that have large implications for the storage and flow paths of water remain overlooked. Instead, the TWI often converged towards a similar number for each sub-catchment. It should therefore be considered to assess the topography of a catchment with a more in-depth terrain analysis or by using other indices, such as drainage density or average slope [3].

The most visible trend was observed when comparing specific discharge to forest cover, which shows that areas with more forest cover likely generate more stream flow. While this coincides with our expectations, it has to be noted that while in the field, forests were mainly observed on hill slopes with bedrock being only up to a few metres below the surface. Since we expected to observe base flow coming from storage, this somewhat coincides with our expectations. Instead, following the precipitation that occurred in the

week before our arrival, we may have observed that subsurface runoff and preferential flow at timescales of days to weeks were the dominant flow paths. Following this line of reasoning, using the TWI to predict stream flow may have been a better predictor when discharge of intermediate timescales can be ruled out as a dominant flow path.

The obtained EC measurements seem to be of good quality. It was known beforehand that the streams at the village and WWTP should have a high EC value, which was indeed the case on all days. Also, groundwater was measured two times and for both measurements the EC value was low, as was expected. For most locations that were measured multiple times (on different days), the EC values were similar. Small differences are to be expected, especially because it had rained during one of the nights. Together with the uncertainty caused by different people handling the EC meters, results from different groups did not differ significantly. The biggest difference in EC values at the same location was at the WWTP.

The obtained discharge data on the other hand, is of relatively poor quality. The rhodamine method failed a few times because the required amount of rhodamine was not known beforehand. Also, for some of the rhodamine measurements that did seem to have the right amount the results varied for the measurements done at different times at the same location. For two locations, the value of one of the measurements was more than double the amount of the other. However, both these locations were side streams so the values are not that high and could be in the right order of magnitude despite the differences. The discharges obtained by applying the mixing model, are sometimes different from the rhodamine discharge measurements as well. Possible reasons and solutions for this are indicated in the section 'Analysis of errors' below. It has to be noted that the discharge measurements only affect our analysis to a limited extent, as we only used discharge measurements in one location. The value used when taking one reference point to calculate the discharge from each tributary, following the EC routing, does not change the relative differences of specific discharge between sub-catchments.

For the EC routing, the discharge distributions of most the confluences calculated with the EC values were similar for the different measurements. For figure 12, the average distribution was taken for con-



fluences with multiple measurements. For most of the confluences, the distribution is as follows: around 85 to 100 percent of the discharge comes from the main stream and around 0 to 15 percent comes from the tributary (or groundwater). This makes sense because tributaries usually have a smaller stream flow than the main stream. The biggest exception to this is the confluence most downstream, as the discharge doubles downstream of the confluence. No multiple measurements were done for this part, so it is hard to say whether this is in the right order of magnitude.

## B. Analysis of errors



There are always measurement errors in doing field work. This is because the precision of the equipment is limited and field conditions are heterogeneous, causing small changes all the time. The largest error in EC seems to be caused by the uncertainty of whether the flow is fully mixed or not. Combined with other EC measurements, the discharge is used to calculate the discharge further upstream. Therefore not only usual measurement error margins are obtained, they are propagated through the whole catchment. At the same time, the discharge measured with rhodamine gives a large spread in results as well. Because of this, the reliability of the discharge data is considered to be low. It can be used to compare how sub-catchments differ from one another, but not for making any conclusions for design. To reduce the uncertainty, discharge should be measured more frequently. Because of the observed differences using rhodamine, it can also be considered to use another method to measure discharge. This can be done as a replacement for rhodamine or as an additional measurement to test accuracy of the rhodamine method.

One reason for the changes in observed discharge and EC is the different times at which it was measured. Comparing the data of different days, the EC values at the same locations had quite small differences in general except around the WWTP. In discharge, differences are quite large. Because it was raining in the night of May 15-16, it makes sense that there is more water in the catchment afterwards, increasing the discharge. In the WWTP the parameters can be even more variable: effluent concentrations and

amounts may vary constantly. Because of this, values of the different days cannot directly be compared to each other. To reduce the uncertainty, it is best if all measurements are done in one period with the least amount of changing conditions possible. It can also help to do further research into the effluent of the WWTP, since this has far more variable parameters than the other streams. It might be feasible to install a constant logger there, so that large changes can be allocated.

An important difference between a model and reality is the division of sub-catchments. A mixing model suggests that the only "entries" into the main river are at the confluences. In reality, groundwater flow plays a role as well. This causes water to infiltrate in the river at locations along the whole river and not only the confluences. Because of this, the upstream EC of one confluence can be very different from the downstream EC of the next confluence, even if no tributaries join the river in between. The EC of groundwater was measured two times. Using the difference between EC upstream of one confluence and the EC downstream of the next confluence, an estimation of the amount of groundwater inflow could be made. Implementing this into the model will make the model better at representing the inflow from different areas compared to each other. However, the EC of incoming groundwater might be variable, which also results in an uncertainty. Also the obtained EC values might not be fully accurate because the water was not fully mixed.

## C. Recommendations

Overall, we would recommend to perform this research more extensively to obtain more robust results. The most important improvements in accuracy could be made by improving the quality of the discharge measurements. This can be achieved through improving the rhodamine method or using a different kind of discharge measurement. Because of an underestimation of the expected stream flow, the rhodamine was too diluted on the first day of fieldwork. More accurate predictions beforehand could therefore reduce the number of 'trial and error' outliers that were produced on this day. More frequent discharge measurements can improve accuracy as well. Firstly, this could be

achieved by gaining experience with using the equipment, so that more measurements can be done within one day. This could also be achieved by making use of a logging device instead of a laptop, as this is easier to handle in the field. Secondly, a longer measuring campaign will create a larger sample size. Other discharge measurements that could be considered are salt dilution coupled with EC measurements or a simple bucket filling measurement. If discharge becomes more reliable, the accuracy of EC and mixing model can be measured more precisely.

With a more extensive analysis of the hydrological system, one could also make a better distinction between the flow paths of the water. This could be done by characterising the subsurface more elaborately for each sub-catchment or by analysing a hydrograph created with daily discharge measurements in combination with precipitation data [6]. Lastly, conducting this study on a larger scale will enable researchers to find significant relationships between the data and draw more certain conclusions.

## V. Conclusion

In this report, we have aimed to find relationships between topography and land use data and observations on stream flow from different tributaries using environmental tracers. While some trends could be observed from scatter-plots, no significant relationships were found. For the topographic wetness index, the reason for this may lie in the chosen index being inappropriate or limitations in our measurements. Among land use types, forest was most strongly related to discharge, which could imply that the dominant flow path was subsurface runoff and preferential flow at an intermediate timescale. Using EC routing to attribute discharge to different areas within a larger catchment was found to be a robust method. By doing this, it becomes possible to create an overview of the catchment and compare sub-catchments. The measurements of discharge, however, were less certain. The reason for this mainly lies in the limited number of observations which, in turn, is a result of the effort required to do these types of measurements within a limited amount of time. In order to better understand the hydrology of this catchment in the context of this study, we therefore recommend further studies to take place on a larger scale. This would allow more measurements to be

done and a more detailed description of the landscape and processes.

## Acknowledgments

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## Appendix

GIS files and further details on the analysis methods can be found at [github.com/daafip/tracer-experiment-luxemburg](https://github.com/daafip/tracer-experiment-luxemburg).