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Urban Heat Islands and Vegetation Cover in Ho Chi Minh City: A Remote Sensing Analysis for 2024

1. Introduction

Urban Heat Island (UHI) is a phenomenon in which urban areas exhibit significantly higher temperatures compared to their surrounding rural regions. These temperature differences are largely the result of anthropogenic activities and the high concentration of impervious surfaces, such as buildings and roads, that absorb and retain heat. The UHI effect tends to be most pronounced under clear skies and low wind conditions, typically peaking a few hours after sunset. Its intensity can vary depending on the city size and characteristics of the rural reference, with maximum temperature differences often reaching up to 10°C (Heziel & Brazel, 2010).

UHIs have been extensively studied worldwide to quantify their intensity, understand the underlying physical processes, evaluate their environmental and health impacts, and differentiate UHI-induced warming from broader global climate change driven by greenhouse gas accumulation (Heziel & Brazel, 2010). The main drivers of UHI are differences in land surface materials and urban morphology, which influence the surface energy balance and alter heat retention and radiation patterns (Heaviside et al., 2017).

Although the UHI effect can occur in any urbanized area, it is generally more intense in large metropolitan cities. In extreme cases, especially at night, city centers such as New York, London, Manchester, and Birmingham have been observed to be 5–10°C warmer than surrounding rural areas. On average, UHI intensity typically ranges from 2 to 4°C (Bohnenstengel et al., 2011; Gedzelman et al., 2003).

UHI effects can intensify environmental and health risks, particularly during heatwaves. They have been associated with altered rainfall patterns (Collier, 2006), increased air pollution levels (Xu et al., 2014), higher flood risk, and decreased water quality. The most direct public health impact of UHI arises from increased heat stress in densely populated urban zones. However, in colder seasons, some regions may benefit from slightly higher temperatures (Heaviside et al., 2017).

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), located in southern Vietnam, is one of the country's most populous urban centers, with over 7 million inhabitants (approximately 8.4% of Vietnam's total population as of 2012). The city has a high population density of approximately 2,660 inhabitants per square kilometer. According to the Köppen–Geiger climate classification, HCMC has a tropical wet and dry climate, with high annual average temperatures and two distinct seasons: a rainy season from May to November and a dry season from December to April. The city experiences an average annual temperature of 28°C and around 1,800 mm of rainfall per year (Dang et al., 2018).

Given its dense population, rapid urban expansion, and significant loss of vegetative cover, Ho Chi Minh City is particularly vulnerable to the Urban Heat Island effect. These factors have led to increasing surface temperatures and make the city an important case study for UHI research in Southeast Asia.

Therefore, the aim of this report is to analyze the spatial patterns of surface temperature and vegetation cover in Ho Chi Minh City during the year 2024, and to evaluate the relationship between NDVI and LST at the district level.

2. Methodology

This study utilized remote sensing and spatial analysis techniques to evaluate the relationship between vegetation cover and land surface temperature (LST) in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam, for the year 2024. The analysis was conducted using a combination of satellite imagery from Google Earth Engine (GEE) and statistical processing in R.

2.1 Study Area

The study focused on the administrative boundaries of Ho Chi Minh City, located in southern Vietnam. District-level boundaries (Level 2) were obtained from the Global Administrative Areas (GADM v4.1) dataset. The selected area encompasses both densely urbanized central districts and peripheral areas with varying degrees of vegetation cover.

2.2 Data Sources

The following satellite datasets were used:

- NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index):
    - Source: Sentinel-2 Surface Reflectance (COPERNICUS/S2_SR) via GEE

    - Timeframe: January to December 2024
    - Bands used: B8 (NIR) and B4 (Red)
    - Cloud filtering: <20% cloud coverage and cloud probability masking using MSK_CLDPRB
- LST (Land Surface Temperature):
    - Source: Landsat 8 Level 2 Surface Temperature (LANDSAT/LC08/C02/T1_L2) via GEE
    - Timeframe: January to December 2024
    - Band used: ST_B10 (thermal band), scaled and offset to convert to Kelvin
    - Masking: cloud pixels removed using QA_PIXEL bitmask
    - Converted to Celsius by subtracting 273.15 from Kelvin values

2.3 Image Preprocessing in GEE

In Google Earth Engine:

- NDVI and LST were calculated and composited into annual mean values for 2024.
- A user-defined rectangular polygon (roi) was drawn to cover the urban extent of HCMC.
- The final rasters were clipped to this region and exported at 30-meter spatial resolution to Google Drive in GeoTIFF format.

2.4 Spatial Analysis in R

The downloaded NDVI and LST rasters were processed in R 4.x using the packages terra, sf, tmap, ggplot2, and dplyr.

1. Reprojection:
   Rasters were reprojected to EPSG:32648 (UTM Zone 48N) to ensure accurate spatial metrics.
2. Shapefile Filtering:
   The GADM Level 2 shapefile was filtered to isolate only the districts within Ho Chi Minh City.

3. Zonal Statistics:
   Mean NDVI and LST values were extracted for each district using the extract() function from the terra package.
4. Visualization:
   Thematic maps were generated using tmap v4 with palettes from cols4all, and a scatterplot of NDVI vs LST was created using ggplot2.
5. Data Export:
   A summary table containing mean NDVI and LST per district was exported as a .csv file for reporting.

3. Results

3.1 NDVI Distribution

The spatial distribution of the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) in Ho Chi Minh City for 2024 revealed significant heterogeneity across districts. Northern and western districts, including Cu Chi, Hoc Mon, and Binh Chanh, exhibited relatively higher NDVI values (0.25–0.35), indicating greater vegetative cover. In contrast, the central and highly urbanized districts such as District 1, District 3, and District 10 (Table 1) showed markedly lower NDVI values (0.10–0.18), consistent with high building density and minimal green space (Figure 1).

3.2 Land Surface Temperature (LST)

The mean Land Surface Temperature (LST) in 2024 ranged from 30.5°C to 38.5°C across districts (Table 1). The highest temperatures were concentrated in central and southeastern districts, which correspond with areas of high impervious surface and low vegetation. Cooler surface temperatures were observed in districts with higher vegetation coverage, particularly in peripheral and suburban areas (Figure 2).

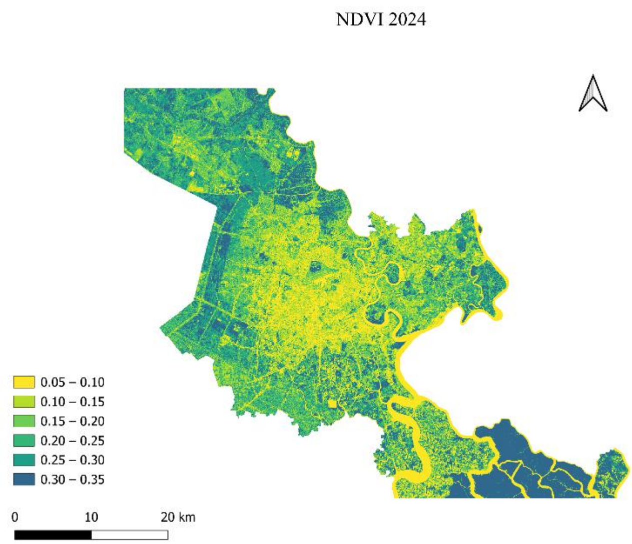

Figure 1. Figure 1. Urban Vegetation (NDVI) in Ho Chi Minh City (2024).

Spatial distribution of NDVI across Ho Chi Minh City. Higher NDVI values indicate areas with denser vegetation.

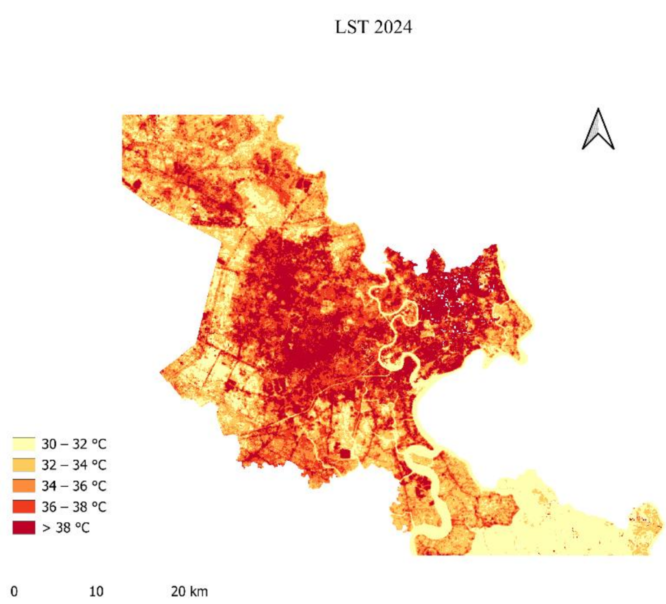

Figure 2. Land Surface Temperature in Ho Chi Minh City (2024).

Spatial distribution of land surface temperature (in °C) throughout the city. Warmer areas are typically associated with less vegetation.

3.3 NDVI–LST Relationship

A scatterplot analysis (Figure 3) showed a clear negative correlation between NDVI and LST values at the district level. A linear regression model revealed that districts with higher NDVI consistently exhibited lower surface temperatures, supporting the hypothesis that vegetation plays a significant role in mitigating urban heat (Figure 3).

This relationship aligns with previous UHI studies and confirms the cooling effect of vegetation in tropical urban environments like Ho Chi Minh City.

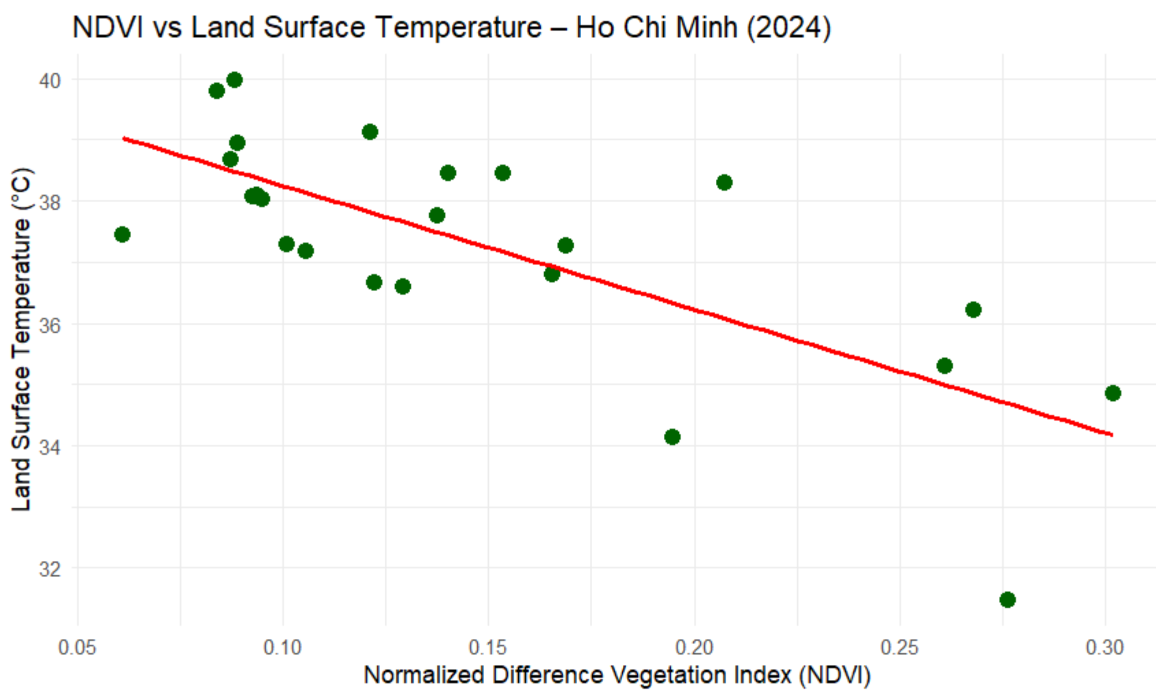

Figure 3. Relationship Between NDVI and Land Surface Temperature – Ho Chi Minh City (2024).

Scatter plot showing the inverse correlation between NDVI and land surface temperature. Districts with more vegetation tend to have lower temperatures.

Table 1. Mean NDVI and Land Surface Temperature by District in Ho Chi Minh City (2024).

This table shows the average NDVI and surface temperature (in °C) for each district in Ho Chi Minh City, based on remote sensing data from 2024.

District	NDVI 2024	LST 2024
Bình Chánh	0.261138986	35.29140132
Bình Tân	0.140229333	38.46194238
Bình Thạnh	0.129282118	36.58433857
Cần Giờ	0.276293123	31.48215046
Củ Chi	0.301991333	34.84266571
Gò Vấp	0.100844772	37.29636972
Hóc Môn	0.267977431	36.21195923
Nhà Bè	0.1949335	34.13483606
Phú Nhuận	0.093539614	38.08604207
District 1	0.10561801	37.17183206
District 10	0.09494845	38.02220364
District 11	0.083937283	39.79447397
District 12	0.168898345	37.25865225
District 2	0.165673866	36.79179518
District 3	0.08722729	38.6794218
District 4	0.060964528	37.43958504
District 5	0.092849772	38.07615674
District 6	0.088926951	38.93947497
District 7	0.122459986	36.67066074
District 8	0.137486259	37.75925046

District 9	0.207394233	38.28544262
Tân Bình	0.121219748	39.11098787
Tân Phú	0.088238095	39.97751871
Thủ Đức	0.15360163	38.4481733

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate a pronounced Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), where spatial variations in land surface temperature (LST) are strongly linked to patterns of vegetation cover, as measured by the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI). The results confirm that urban districts with low vegetation cover tend to exhibit significantly higher surface temperatures, while districts with more green space maintain relatively cooler thermal profiles.

This pattern is in line with well-established ecological principles and has been observed in numerous cities worldwide, including in both temperate and tropical climates (Heaviside et al., 2017; Bohnenstengel et al., 2011). Vegetation serves as a critical regulator of surface temperatures by providing shade, increasing evapotranspiration, and altering the surface energy balance. Urban areas lacking vegetation tend to absorb and retain heat more efficiently due to the presence of impervious materials such as asphalt, concrete, and metal, which have high thermal inertia and low albedo.

In HCMC, central districts such as District 1, District 3, and Bình Thạnh, characterized by dense infrastructure and minimal green space, showed surface temperatures exceeding 36°C. These findings reflect the intensity of urban heat retention in core metropolitan areas. In contrast, outer districts such as Củ Chi, Nhà Bè, and Cần Giờ, which contain more natural or peri-urban vegetation, consistently exhibited lower surface temperatures, sometimes falling below 31°C. This highlights the protective role of vegetated land in buffering urban areas against extreme heat.

The UHI effect in HCMC is particularly concerning due to the city’s tropical climate, which already predisposes the population to heat stress. When combined with climate change and increased frequency of heatwaves, the UHI effect can exacerbate environmental and public health risks. Studies have shown that elevated nighttime temperatures—often intensified by UHI conditions—can impair sleep quality, increase cardiovascular stress, and raise mortality rates, especially among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, low-income communities, and outdoor workers (Heaviside et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2014).

Beyond health, urban heat also has implications for energy consumption and infrastructure resilience. Higher ambient temperatures drive increased demand for air conditioning, placing strain on electrical grids and increasing greenhouse gas emissions in a feedback loop. Road surfaces and buildings also degrade more rapidly under sustained heat exposure, leading to higher maintenance costs.

Interestingly, while the inverse correlation between NDVI and LST was evident and statistically consistent, the relationship is not perfectly linear. Some districts with moderate NDVI levels still experienced elevated temperatures, which may be attributed to factors such as urban geometry, building height (which affects radiative trapping), and local anthropogenic emissions (e.g., traffic, industry). This suggests that UHI mitigation strategies should not rely solely on increasing green cover but must be part of a broader framework that includes urban design, ventilation corridors, sustainable transportation, and building material selection.

The results of our spatial analysis closely align with the key findings of Dang et al. (2018), who quantified the influence of green space on mortality attributable to the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect in Ho Chi Minh City. While their study employed a modeling framework based on remote sensing and mortality statistics, both approaches converge in showing that districts with limited vegetation are systematically exposed to higher thermal stress.

In our 2024 dataset, central districts such as District 1, District 3, and Bình Thạnh displayed some of the highest average surface temperatures, often exceeding 36°C, coinciding with low NDVI values (e.g., below 0.15). Dang et al. similarly identified these inner urban zones as hotspots of UHI-related mortality, due to their high population density and low vegetation coverage. In contrast, our analysis showed that outer districts like Cần Giờ and Củ Chi, which maintain higher vegetation indices (NDVI > 0.3), exhibited significantly lower surface temperatures (often below 31°C). These areas were also noted in Dang et al.'s study as less vulnerable to UHI-driven health impacts.

A key strength of Dang et al.'s work lies in quantifying the public health consequences of green space loss, estimating that up to 24% of heat-related deaths in HCMC could be prevented with adequate green infrastructure coverage. While this study did not directly address mortality, the spatial correlation between vegetation and lower temperature in our findings provides an ecological mechanism supporting their conclusion. In essence, our temperature and NDVI data serve as spatial evidence that explains the patterns of vulnerability identified in their epidemiological model.

Interestingly, while Dang et al. relied on MODIS-based NDVI with coarser resolution (250 m), our study utilized Landsat 8 data at 30 m resolution, providing more detailed intra-urban variation. Despite these methodological differences, the overarching message remains consistent: vegetation plays a fundamental role in reducing thermal exposure, and its uneven distribution across urban districts creates disparities in climate-related health risks.

Together, both studies highlight the urgency of urban planning policies that prioritize green infrastructure, especially in densely built districts. Incorporating green roofs, pocket parks, and vegetated corridors could mitigate the UHI effect, improve thermal comfort, and reduce mortality during extreme heat events. The combination of epidemiological modeling (Dang et al., 2018) and geospatial surface analysis (this study) thus provides a multidimensional understanding of UHI dynamics in Ho Chi Minh City.

Furthermore, the work of Nguyen et al. (2023) offers additional support and temporal depth. By analyzing Landsat data from 2013 to 2022, they showed that NDVI values in urban districts have been steadily decreasing, particularly in the central and southern parts of the city, while LST has increased correspondingly. This trend is consistent with our 2024 snapshot, where central districts remain ecological hotspots with NDVI values often below 0.15 and LST above 36°C.

Nguyen et al. also emphasized the influence of impervious surface growth on UHI intensity, identifying urban expansion as a key driver of thermal vulnerability. Our results confirm that spatial heterogeneity in vegetation continues to be a dominant factor shaping surface temperatures, and the lack of green buffers in high-density zones likely exacerbates local warming and its public health implications.

By integrating our 2024 findings with these previous studies, it becomes evident that urban greening is not only a long-term solution but an urgent necessity. Together, these results strongly advocate for evidence-based urban policies that prioritize green infrastructure, particularly in districts with historically low vegetation indices and growing populations.

One notable limitation of this study is the reliance on annual composites of satellite imagery. While this approach offers a valuable overview of long-term patterns and minimizes cloud contamination, it may underrepresent short-term temperature peaks or vegetation anomalies caused by seasonal variability. Future analyses could incorporate seasonal or even monthly composites to provide a finer temporal resolution and better capture the dynamics of heat events and vegetation phenology throughout the year.

Another consideration is the spatial resolution of the data used. While 30-meter Landsat imagery is sufficient for district-level analysis, urban microclimates often operate at finer spatial scales. The inclusion of high-resolution thermal imagery from newer sensors such as ECOSTRESS or commercial satellites could allow for block-level or neighborhood-scale assessments. Moreover, integrating socio-demographic data could help identify populations most vulnerable to urban heat and inform equity-centered adaptation planning.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates the strong inverse relationship between urban vegetation (NDVI) and land surface temperature (LST) across the administrative districts of Ho Chi Minh City in 2024, confirming the presence and spatial heterogeneity of the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect. Areas with sparse vegetation and dense urban infrastructure, such as central districts (Quận 1, Quận 3, Bình Thạnh), exhibited surface temperatures consistently higher than those in more vegetated outer districts (Củ Chi, Cần Giờ), with differences exceeding 5°C in some cases.

By leveraging high-resolution satellite imagery and district-level spatial analysis, this work complements and reinforces the conclusions of Dang et al. (2018), who found that reduced green space in Ho Chi Minh City contributes to excess mortality due to heat stress. While their research focused on the epidemiological implications, our geospatial analysis helps elucidate the environmental mechanisms underlying those risks. The concordance between both studies underlines the critical role of green infrastructure in moderating urban microclimates and protecting public health.

The findings also highlight the unequal distribution of green cover across the city and its environmental consequences, pointing to the need for targeted urban planning interventions. Expanding vegetated areas, especially in vulnerable inner-city districts, could help mitigate the UHI effect, reduce energy demands for cooling, and enhance overall urban resilience to climate change.

Future research should integrate socio-demographic data, land-use classifications, and temporal trends to build a more comprehensive urban heat vulnerability assessment. Meanwhile, city authorities and stakeholders should consider both spatial and health-based evidence when designing adaptive strategies to combat urban overheating.

6. References

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