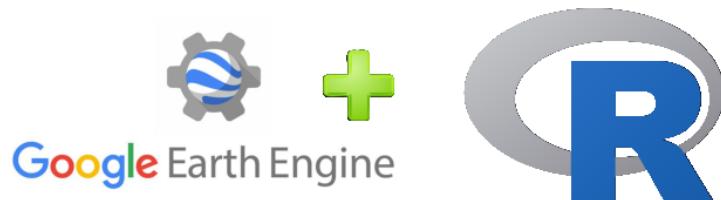




# The earthEngineGrabR - An R package to simplify the acquisition of remote sensing data

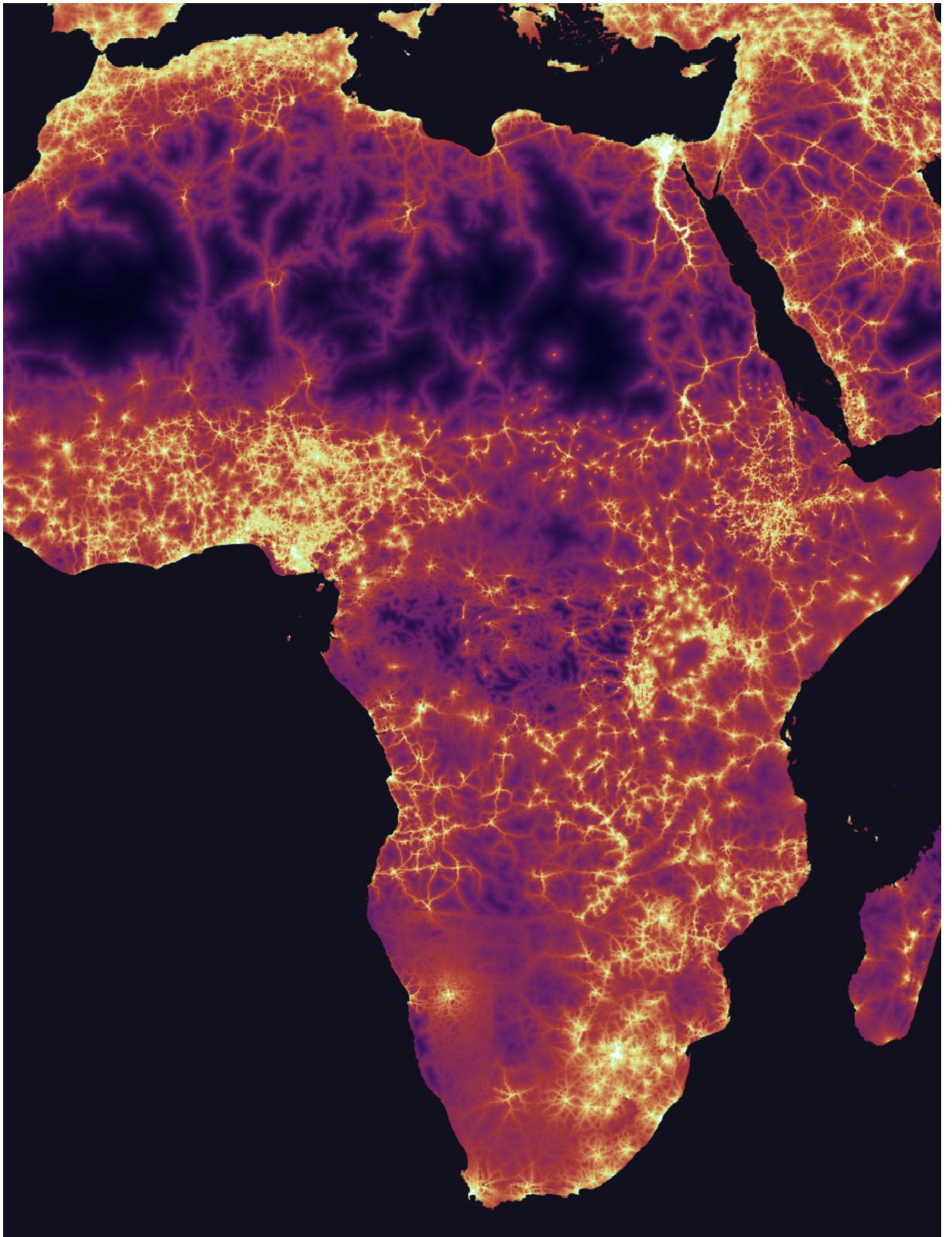
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## **Abstract**

Place your abstract text here

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

To model environmental systems, information or data about the system is needed and the resources to process this data to derive insight. Remote sensing data, such as satellite imagery and derived data products, like land cover, vegetation indices, elevation models, or precipitation, are integral parts of most environmental system models.

### **1.1 Remote sensing data in environmental system modeling**

The value of remotely-sensed data as a source of input data for environmental process modeling has been increasing in the past years (Melesse et al. 2007). The increasing availability of remotely-sensed data from different sensors with a wide range of spatial-, temporal- and radiometric-resolution has made remote sensing data, perhaps, the best source of data for large-scale applications for a wide range of study fields like urban studies (Wu 2000), hydrological modeling (Bøgh et al. 2004), watershed mapping (Melesse et al. 2003), energy and water flux estimation (Melesse et al. 2005), fractional vegetation cover (Carlson et al. 2000) and drought predictions (Rhee et al. 2010).

Through contributions of several earth observation missions, the stock of freely available remote sensing data, as well as its temporal- and spatial-resolution, is continuously growing (Melesse et al. 2007). However, acquiring and preparing remotely-sensed data for the use as input for an environmental system model is still related to significant expenditures of time, expertise, work and processing resources. The reason for the necessary spending is strongly related to how remotely-sensed data is acquired, stored, managed and provided.

### **1.2 Accessibility of remote-sensing data**

Most geospatial environmental data is derived from satellite imagery. This primary satellite imagery is retrieved from sensors of various earth observation satellite missions that again are part of mainly two earth observation programmes.

The most extensive programme concerning duration and the number of satellites is the Earth Observing System (EOS). The EOS is a cooperation of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) with various Government Agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the second is the recent Copernicus Programm of the European Commission in partnership with the European Space Agency (ESA) (Salomonson et al. 2002). A representative satellite mission of the EOS is the Terra satellite that carries multiple sensors that among others produce the popular imagery products: Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer (ASTER) and Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS). The most well-known satellite's mission is probably the Landsat satellites. The Copernicus Programm at the moment has two active missions: Sentinel 1 and Sentinel 2 (Butler 2014). From this primary satellite imagery, a multitude of secondary geospatial environmental data like Digital Elevation Models (DEMs), land cover, atmosphere, weather, climate simulations or even socio-economic variables are derived. Examples are the National Land Cover Database (NLCD) of the USGS, the NASS Cropland Data Layers of the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA) but also the WorldPop project population data produced by a collaboration between researchers at different Universities worldwide (Homer et al. 2007, Johnson et al. 2010, Tatem 2017). With the decision of multiple U.S agencies including NASA, USGS and NOAA, as well as ESA to provide open access to their imagery data, petabyte-scale archives of geospatial data are now freely available (Gorelick et al. 2017). Although freely available, all this geospatial data is separately stored in databases scattered around different governments, agencies or even universities that all have different conventions in file formats, storing or projections.

### 1.3 The difficulty in acquire, integrate and process remote sensing data

Usually, the databases are accessible through an online search and order tool like the NASA Earth Observation, the USGS Earth Explorer or the Copernicus Open Access Hub. These tools allow searching for scenes of a remote sensing data product according to different metadata properties like acquisition time, name or spatial-coverage and order or download the selected scenes subsequently. Scenes are near-square images covering an area that varies in size depending on the remote sensing data. For Landsat images, the coverage is about 170 to 185 km per scene. Because these online search and order tools do not provide any processing resource, it is not possible to aggregate or subdivide the scenes to a specific extent.

Figure 1.1 shows a schematic approach of acquiring and preparing remotely-sensed data for the use as input for an environmental system model. First, the remote sensing data must be download via one of the search and order tools. If the downloaded data is acquired from multiple sensors or different sources, the different coordinate reference systems and projections need to be integrated and

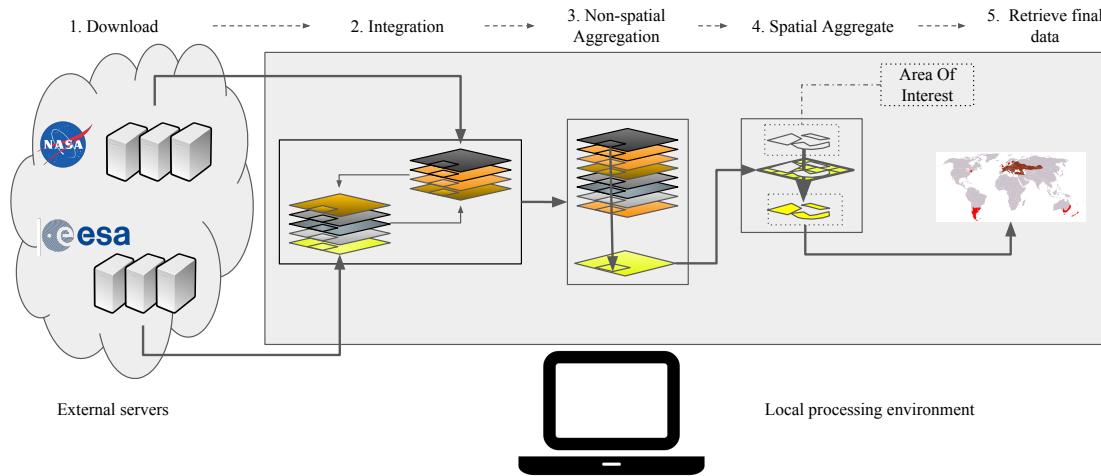


Figure 1.1: Schematic approach to acquire and prepare remote sensing data for environmental system modeling

harmonised. Third, in case of multiple scenes of the same locations, for instance, multiple satellite images of the same location acquired at different times, the data has to be aggregated non-spatially. For example to calculate the yearly sum of precipitation from daily chirps satellite imagery, or to calculate the NDVI from multiple bands of Landsat imagery. Forth, the data is spatially aggregated according to a given target. The target represents the shape of the area of interest (AOI). The AOI could be a world-wide grid of  $1^\circ \times 1^\circ$  cells, the resolution of a raster, a set of points representing the locations of experiments, or the sample area. Finally, in the last step, the data is retrieved as tabular data with a geographic reference. The entire processing of the remote sensing data was performed on the local system. Although the order of the steps in of the workflow in Figure 1.1 can vary and in some cases specific steps can be skipped, they represent essential tasks in the acquisition and preparation of remote sensing data for environmental modeling (Iosifescu et al. 2011).

Although the described method is common for the acquisition of remote sensing data for most research, the approach is time consuming and cumbersome due to the interoperability and size of remote sensing data.

### Interoperability problem

Because various governments and agencies collect remote sensing data, most data is distributed and stored in different locations, in a variety of file formats, projections and resolutions. Integrating data from different sources requires a manual and thus time-consuming pre-processing of the data even when processing only a few satellite images (Schell et al. 2000). To perform the required integration and harmonisation of different remote sensing data sets expertise in a geographic information system (GIS) is prerequisite.

## **Big data problem**

Due to the limited possibility to control the request to the servers, the data throughput is unnecessary high. Even though only a fraction of a scene is needed, the complete scene needs to be downloaded. Furthermore, the processing resources are not where they are needed. It is required to download the entire row data to a local system to perform the tasks necessary to prepare the data for environmental modeling. The limited control over the requested data results in many unnecessary inter-products and again raises the data throughput. While processing small geospatial data sets, this may be of no importance, but for the processing of large-scale data sets, this quickly leads to challenges in dealing with memory limitation and the necessity for big data solutions like the use of computer cluster or cloud computing resources and associated challenges such as storage, management of databases and servers and managing clusters efficiently (Gorelick et al. 2017). For instance, the processing of a moderately sized remote sensing imagery stack with 50 satellite images (1 Landsat-8-Collection-1-Level-1 satellite image has the size of 1.6 GB) would already require using such solutions.

## **Restricted access**

In any case, this widely used approach to acquiring remote sensing data for environmental modeling is time consuming and resource intensive. The time-consuming preprocessing of the data bind significant resources of processing power and expertise that otherwise could be used for the scientific analysis. Furthermore, although petabyte-scale archives of geospatial data are freely available, the access and utilisation of these datasets for environmental system modelling are restricted due to the given difficulties. These obstacles hinder most researchers to make use of this massive stack of remote sensing imagery, restricting access to the information that can be derived from large remote sensing datasets, to remote-sensing experts with exclusive access to high-performance computing resources.

The Google Earth Engine or Earth Engine (EE) enables much broader audience access to these resources and the insights that can be retrieved from large remote sensing data sets.

## **1.4 Introduction to Google Earth Engine**

EE is a cloud-based platform that strongly simplifies the access to high-performance computing resources to process extensive remote sensing datasets, without the information technology (IT) management obstacles like, data acquisition and storage, combine different file formats, managing databases, machine allocations, CPUs, GPUs. EE consists of a multi-petabyte data catalogue, a high performance, parallel and therefore scaleable, computation service and is accessed and controlled through an Internet-accessible application programming interface (API). Queries are constructed by using operations drawn from the Earth Engine client library consisting of more than 800 functions ranging from simple mathemati-

cal operations to powerful geostatistical, machine learning and image processing operations (Gorelick et al. 2017).

### The public data catalogue

The majority of the EE public data catalogue consists of remote sensing imagery collected by earth-observing satellites missions from government agencies like NASA, USGS, NOAA and ESA. It contains the entire archives of Landsat, Sentinel 1-2 and Modis, but also several other environmental, geophysical and social-economic datasets. This catalogue is continuously extended and updated from current missions, and this way holds up to date satellite imagery with a latency of about one day. In EE, imagery data or raster is stored in a 2D gridded raster container referred to as an image. One image can have any number of bands, and while each band need to be homogeneous in data type, resolution and projection, bands in an image can vary in data type, resolution and projection. Each image can have associated metadata stored as key-value pairs to provide additional information like acquisition time, location or any metadata provided. Multiple images that are related, such as images from the same source or sensor are combined in collections. These Collections provide fast spatial and temporal filtering and sorting capabilities using metadata associated to every single image in the collection. The metadata enables users to search through millions of images to select data that meet specific criteria. For example, users can quickly filter the entire Landsat 7 archive for images within Germany, collected on day-of-year 40 - 80, from the year 1990 - 2000 with cloud cover less 50%. While this also would be possible in one of the search and order tools, EE additionally provides extensive GIS capabilities and processing resources to further manipulate the data. For instance, the filtered Landsat scenes could be aggregated to a median composite. The bands in the median composite could be used to calculate the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI). The NDVI image could be spatially aggregated over multiple regions defined by the feature of a shapefile representing the states of Germany. While this process is a matter of minutes on Earth Engine, it indeed would require extended big data solutions on a local system.

What makes EE that performant is the storage system as a tile database with built-in pyramiding architecture in combination with the system architecture and several data distribution models (Gorelick et al. 2017).

### The tile architecture

Images ingested into Earth Engine are preprocessed to provide fast and efficient access. First, images are parsed into tiles in the images original projection and resolution and stored in a tile database. Each tile has the size of 256 x 256 Pixels and refers to the practical trade-off between loading unneeded data versus the overhead of issuing additional reads. Instead of resampling all data to a fixed grid, traditional data cube systems would do, this method is information-preserving (Gray et al. 1997). Because the data is maintained in their original projection, resolution and bit depth the data degradation that is inevitable if resampling to a fixed grid, is avoided

## The pyramid architecture

Additionally, a pyramid of reduced-resolution tiles is created for each image and stored in the tile database. Each level of the pyramid is produced by downsampling the previous level by a factor of two until the entire image fits into a single tile. During downsampling, continuous valued bands by default are averaged, while discrete-valued bands are aggregated using one of min, mode, max. This way, if fractions of data from an image are requested for computation in a reduced resolution, only the relevant tiles from the most appropriate pyramid level need to be retrieved from the tile database. The tile database enables EE to provide data in a variety of resolutions without introducing significant storage overhead.

## The system architecture

The processing system automatically subdivides and distributes computations to enable high-throughput analysis. In EE a collection of enabling technologies is used that is available in the Google data centre environment. The Borg Cluster Management System is used to distribute and load-balance computation over multiple workers within a cluster. The FlumeJava framework is used for parallel pipeline execution of batch computations. Users can interact with the Earth Engine by using either an associated web-based interactive development environment (IDE), third-party Web Apps, or directly with one of the client libraries on a local system by using the EE Python or JavaScript API. The IDE code editor and the third-party Web Apps use the client libraries to send requests to EE through a Representational State Transfer Application Programming Interface (REST API). The Tilestore Servers houses the public data catalogue in the described architecture. In the Asset Database, the user can ingest their data. The Borg Cluster Management Software manages each component of the system, and each service is load-balanced over multiple workers. Failure of any individual workers results in the caller reissuing the query.

## Construct earth engine programmes with the client library

The user writes EE programmes using the client library available for Python and JavaScript. The functions in the client library can be composed to build a description of the computation the user wants to perform. This description is sent to Earth Engine servers for evaluation. To further improve performance Earth Engine uses a lazy evaluation model that allows it to compute only the fraction of output that is necessary to fulfill the current request. It postpones computing output pixels until it knows more about the context in which they are needed (Gorelick et al. 2017).

## Data distribution models

To achieve high performance, the functions in the Earth Engine library apply several built-in parallelisation and data distribution models. Each model aims to optimise a different data access pattern. For operations that are local, image tiling is

used. In remote sensing, especially raster manipulation many processing operations are local. That is, the computation of a Pixel depends only on input pixels within a fixed distance. Examples of per-pixel operations are band math, spectral unmixing neighbourhood or convolution operations. To process operations in parallel, the area is subdivided into tiles and computed independently. This way, to process one of those tiles most of the time only a few or one input tile is needed. Image tiling combined with pyramided inputs provides a fast computation of results at any requested scale or projection. For operations that are inherently non-local a spatial aggregations is used. Non-local operations such as computations of regional or global statistics, raster-to-vector conversions, or sampling an image to train a classifier, can at least partly still be executed in parallel by aggregating together many sub-results. In EE, those processes are executed as distributed processes using a scatter-gather model. First, similar to the image tiling approach, a spatial region is divided into subregions that are allocated to workers in a distributed worker pool and computed independently. These intermediate results are sent back to the master of this computation, which combines them and transform the intermediate results into the final result. For instance, to compute a mean value each worker computes sums and counts, the master collects these intermediate results and compute the final results as the total sum by the total count.

#### **1.4.1 The potential of the GEE for the acquisition of remote sensing data**

The EE thus offers an elegant solution for working with large remote sensing data and the related problems of the interoperability of the data due to distributed sources and the big data problems caused by the size of the data and required processing resources. Processing resources and data are connected, and there are no unnecessary inter-products or downloads. The data does not have to be download and preprocessed separately. Instead, the data is already stored in one managed database, pre-processed and in access and analysis-ready format. The computational power required to process the data is automatically scaled, which makes computations of an entirely new magnitude possible without bothering with any IT management obstacles. With EE, it is possible to request and generate precisely the data needed for analysis, while any acquisition, integration, preprocessing and aggregation is outsourced to the EE servers.

However, the EE API is controlled by a client library, currently only available in JavaScript and Python. To use the EE additional effort to learn and apply the client libraries is necessary, furthermore, scientists using a different programming language like R cannot access the EE API directly from within R. There is currently no R or Python package that is using EE capabilities to simplify the acquisition and preprocessing of remotely sensed data. Actually, there is not a single R or Python package using any of EE capabilities directly. The few existing ones are written in Python and only facilitate the use of the EE API by providing a pipeline to other API's like the Planet-GEE-Pipeline-GUI or provide an automated upload feature of assets via the Google Cloud Environment like

the geeadd tool (Roy 2017).

In summary, although the Earth Engine solves many of the challenges in retrieving data from large remote sensing datasets for environmental system modeling, it is still exclusive for experienced users of the EE client library available only in JavaScript and Python.

## 1.5 The earthEngineGrabR

To recap the current situation:

- The stack and resolution of freely available remote sensing data, as the potential as input for environmental system model, is continuously increasing.
- With the traditional methods discussed, the process of acquiring remote sensing data for analysis is costly and inefficient and requires high-performance computing resources.
- This restricting access to the information that can be derived from large remote sensing datasets, to remote-sensing experts and deviates resources from the scientific work.
- The EE provides a performant and flexible solution to the problems related to large remote sensing datasets and is superior to the acquisition with a search and order tool.
- However, the use of the EE is exclusive for experienced users of the EE client library only available for Python.
- Hence, to use the potential of the EE for the acquisition of remote sensing data, the access to the EE needs to be simplified.

The simplified access to the capabilities of EE would enable scientists to utilise the massive stack of freely available remote sensing data for their research projects without additional costs.

This work is inspired by the attempt to develop such simplified access to capabilities of the EE for the R programming environment.

The master's thesis aims is to develop an R package - the earthEngineGrabR, which simplifies the acquisition of remote sensing data for the analysis in R. This should be accomplished by building an interface between R and EE. The interface should enable to use EE as a backend-service to retrieve selected data sets for a given region and time of interest in an analysis-ready format. The interface is supposed to extract data from the EE data catalogue while providing extensive control over temporal and spatial resolution. Any processing of the remote sensing data shall entirely be outsourced to the EE and only the derived data products, are exported from EE and imported in R.

This way, the developed interface exploits two of EE's significant advantages. One is the public data catalogue of over 11 petabytes of remote sensing data in an analysis-ready format, and the other is its high-performance, intrinsically parallel computation service to process such massive data.

# Chapter 2

## Methods

The `earthEngineGrabR` package is supposed to provide an interface of R and the EE to acquire remote sensing data in R. The emphasis is to develop a stable framework for an interface between R and the EE. This framework should enable the user to select from some data sets, choose a temporal and spatial resolution and send a request to the EE servers to process and export the data to the user's local machine. The framework is supposed to work as a foundation that eases further extensions.

The base functionality of the framework is:

- Uploading vector data to earth engine
- Choose from a list of data product
- Provide extensive control over the aggregation corresponding to the shape, temporal- and spatial-resolution
- Export the data products from EE and import the data into R
- Manage the dependencies and authentications to the involved API's

The package consists of two functions `ee_grab()` and `ee_grab_init()`. The `ee_grab_init()` function handles authentications and the installation of additional dependencies necessary for the `earthEngineGrabR` package to work. The `ee_grab()` function controls the acquisition of the remote sensing data from EE.

First, the data section gives an overview of the data temporarily accessible through the `earthEngineGrabR`. The next section introduces the general design and functionality that the package provides during the acquisition process. The section covers how the `ee_grab()` function can select, filter, aggregate and retrieve the requested data, while the emphasis lies on the design workflow and arguments of the function. The following section introduces the technical framework that enables the interface of R and the GEE, while the focus is on the technical side in `ee_grab()` function call. The last section covers the necessary dependencies and authentications processes handled by the `ee_grab_init()`.

## 2.1 Available data products

The emphasis of the current version of the earthEngineGraR package is to develop a stable interface of R and the GEE to retrieve data in a user-specific form. Therefore the temporally available data is still limited to a selected list of data products, that should illustrate the diversity of the EE data catalogue. In the further development of the earthEngineGrabR package, this list should be extended.

data source	data product	spatial	temporal	availability
MOD44B.051	Tree-cover	30 m	yearly	2000–2015
	Non-tree cover	30 m	yearly	2000–2015
	Non-vegetation	30 m	yearly	2000–2015
JRC SW	Distance to SW	30 m	yearly	1984–2015
CHIRPS	Precipitation	0.05°	monthly	2000–2015
	Elevation	30 m	single	2000
SRTM	Slope	30 m	single	2000
	Accessibility to cities	0.01°	single	2015
	Friction surface	0.01°	single	2015

Table 2.1: Data products with temporal coverage, temporal- and spatial-resolution available in the earthEngineGrabR

Table 2.1 shows the data products temporally accessible through the package. In the following, it is distinguished between a data source of the remote sensing data, that represents the primary source, for example, the Modis MOD44B.051 Terra Vegetation Continous Fields (VCF) and the derived data product: percent tree cover. In the earthEngineGrabR, the user requests remote sensing data as specific data products. A data product always represents one band of the source satellite image and one environmental variable like percent tree cover, distance to surface water or slope. The variables vary in temporal and spatial resolution dependent on the data product they are derived from.

To access land cover, the MOD44B.051 Terra VCF product with a yearly temporal resolution and a 250 m spatial resolution is used. The data set provides a sub-pixel-level representation of surface vegetation cover, designed to continuously represent earth's terrestrial surface as a gradient of three essential surface cover components: percent tree cover, percent non-tree cover and percent bare. The data set is generated using monthly composites of Terra Modis 250 m and 500 m Land Surface Reflectance data (M. Hansen et al. 2006). The Joint Research Center (JRC), Water Classification History, is a data set, produced in collaboration with the European Commission and Google. The data set provides a pixel-wise classification of surface water generated using, 3,066,102 scenes from Landsat 5, 7 and 8 acquired between 1984 and 2015. Each pixel was individually classified into water and non-water. The data comes in an original monthly temporal resolution and an aggregated yearly resolution. In the earthEngineGrabR, the aggregated yearly water classification data is used, providing a pixel-wise classification of seasonal water, permanent water and not water (Pekel et al. 2016). To convert this information in an ecological context, the data is further processed to receive

the distance to surface water (SW) product for each pixel. To compute the distance permanent and seasonal water are merged. Therefore the distance refers to permanent and seasonal water.

To provide topographic products, the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) of NASA acquired in 2007 with a spatial resolution of 30 m, is used. While the SRTM dataset provides elevation in meters, the slope product is additionally processed in EE (Farr et al. 2007). To account for socio-economic variables the recently published Oxford MAP datasets of Accessibility to Cities for 2015 and Global Friction Surface for 2015 both with a spatial resolution of 0.01°, what corresponds to approximately 30 m, are used. The global Friction Surface map estimates land-based travel speed for land pixels in the year 2015, and the global Accessibility map estimates land-based travel time to the nearest densely-populated area for the year 2015. Both datasets were produced through a collaboration between the University of Oxford Malaria Atlas Project (MAP), Google and the European Union JRC (Weiss et al. 2018). To produce the maps, the first time a global-scale combination of Open Street Map data and Google roads dataset was used, extended with datasets for topographic conditions, land cover types and national borders. For the Friction Surface map, these underlying datasets were used to calculate travel speed regarding time to cross each pixel, with the fastest travel mode intersecting the pixel being used to determine the speed to travel in that pixel. The travel speed is in minutes required to travel one meter. The Accessibility map is produced by using the Friction Surface map in combination with a least-cost-algorithm, which calculates the travel time in minutes for each pixel to the nearest city. Cities were determined by using data from the Global Human Settlement Project.

The Climate Hazard Group InfraRed Precipitation with Station Data (CHIRPS) is a global rainfall data set with a daily temporal resolution and 0.05° spatial resolution (approximately 150 m) (Funk et al. 2015). In the earthEngineGrabR, the CHIRPS daily (version 2.0 final) is utilised, an aggregated version of the daily CHIRPS dataset, with a temporal resolution of 1 days.

For consistency, the data products that have a high spatial resolution like CHIRPS and JRC are only available between 2000 and 2015. This way, there is one corresponding period most data is available in.

## 2.2 Design and functionality of the data manipulation

As described in the introduction, the necessary preprocessing of the remote sensing data is an integral part of the data acquisition process. In the earthEngineGrabR, the complete integration and aggregation of the data are outsourced to EE. Instead of downloading the raw raster data the package provides control to filter and aggregate selected data products according to a given target. This processing allows retrieving the data products in a specific, user-defined format. The user specifies a data product with a corresponding time interval and a temporal reducer, a spatial reducer and a target.

A data product in the earthEngineGrabR is specified with a earth engine data product-function. Each function specifies one particular data product with the corresponding parameters. The name of the function is `eeProduct_` followed by the source of the data products, underscore the name of the data product. For example: `eeProduct_modis_treeCover()`. The output of the function is simply an object of the class list that specifies the parameters of the requested data product. To use a function, that produces the required parameters instead of committing a list or a vector with the listed parameter, holds several advantages illustrated in the result section.

In the EE a reducer is a way to aggregate data over space and time. In the earthEngineGrabR, there are implementations for simple statistics like mean, mode, max, and min. The temporal reducer aggregates the data over time and the spatial reducer aggregates the data over a region defines by the target. The target is defined by vector data, where the spatial extent of the features define the region the spatial reducer is applied over.

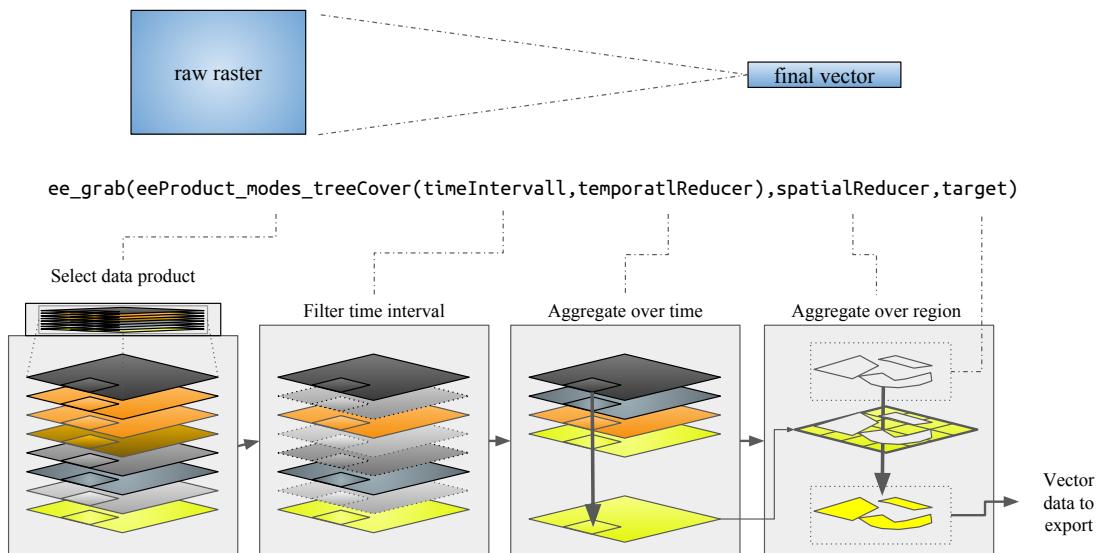


Figure 2.1: Function design and the data manipulation workflow of the `ee_grab` function

Figure 2.1 shows the basic processing flow to acquire the modis-tree-cover product for a defined time interval and a specific region. First, the data product is selected, with the corresponding data product function. If the data has a temporal resolution, the time interval as the temporal reducer is set inside the data product function. The time interval is used to filter the collection of the source data set. The images passing the filter are reduced to one image with the given temporal reducer. Next, for each region of the reduced image, which overlaps with a feature in the target vector data, a reducer is applied, and a statistic is computed. This enables the user to temporally and spatially aggregate the remote sensing data in a strongly user specific and flexible approach. The final data is returned as vector data. The output of the `ee_grab()` function is an object of class

sf. The sf package provides a convenient approach to work with vector data in R and tries to succeed the widely used sp package in the future (Pebesma n.d.). An sf object is a data.frame with an additional geometry list-column, what strongly simplifies manipulating an sf object by filtering, selecting or summarising. During this entire processing flow, the size of the data is massively reduced, while the data is converted from a large remote sensing datasets in raster format to highly flexible and small vector data. The reasons to use vector data instead of raster data and the corresponding advantages are explained in the discussion.

## 2.3 Technical framework

To enable R users to request and download data from the EE, the package combines multiple tools like the programming languages R, Python, as well as multiple web services provided by Google like the Fusion Tables, Google Drive and of course the EE. While Google Drive is a general file sharing and storage service for all kinds of files, Google Fusion Table is specifically designed to manage tabular data and enables to upload, manipulate, visualise and share small amounts of data online.

Each tool performs a specific task. In R, the user specifies the requested data and initialises all further processes. In Python, the actual request is generated and send to EE. Because EE can import Fusion Tables, the Google Fusion Table is used to upload local vector data to EE. The EE performs all data processing and exports the data to Google Drive wherefrom it is downloaded and imported into R.

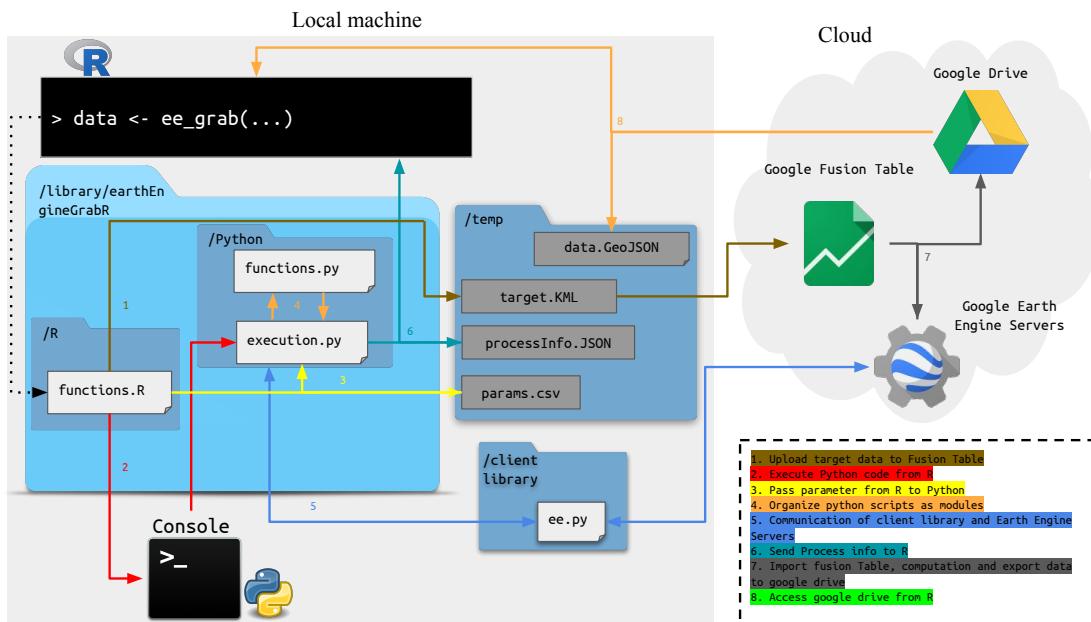


Figure 2.2: Internal processing flow of the `ee_grab()` function call

Figure 2.2 describes an internal processing flow of the `ee_grab()` function. At the beginning of the function call, the target vector data is uploaded as Fusion Table illustrated with the dark yellow arrows with number 1. The group of processes with the number 2 in red, describes the integration of R and Python and the method Python code is executed from R. The processes with number 3 in yellow, represents the exchange of arguments, or, how parameters are passed from R to Python. The orange arrows with the number 4 illustrate the structure of the Python code as executable modules. The blue processes with the number 5 show the communication of the Python client library and EE while the dark blue arrows with number 6 describe the approach to send process info from EE to R. In dark grey with number 7 the import of the Fusion Table, the computation and the export of the processed data is illustrated and finally the green processes with number 8, describes the access from R to Google Drive and the following download and import of the final data into R. Based on the classification of the flowchart of figure 2.2, the following section explains all eight groups of processes in detail.

If installed, the `earthEngineGrabR` R library is located in a default library folder for all R libraries. In the `earthEngineGrabR` folder, there is `R` folder, containing an R script, which defines all R functions used in the package. Furthermore, there is an additional Python folder containing Python scripts divided into execution scripts and function scripts. The function script, again, defines all Python functions. The execution Script, however, is executed from R and uses these functions.

To upload the target vector data the Fusion Table driver in the Geospatial Data Abstraction (GDAL) library is used. To execute GDAL from R, R's ability to invoke function calls is applied. This method will be explained in more detail in the following section. GDAL's `ogr2ogr()` function handles the upload process, that converts a variety of geo file formats to a Fusion Table. In Fusion Tables, geometries need to be expressed in the World Geodetic System 1984 (WGS84). Therefore the projection of the vector data uploaded as Fusion Table is converted and if necessary needs to be reprojected in EE. The EE is accessed with the EE client library available for Python. To access the EE from R it's necessary to execute Python from R. The integration should enable to pass arguments from R to Python and execute Python code from R. Instead of using a Python wrapper for R like the `rPython` package, `earthEngineGrabR` utilizes a simple command line or terminal to execute one language from the other, illustrated by the red arrows with the number 1. The `ee_grab()` function defined in the R script functions.R, in red, invokes a system call by utilising the command line that executes the python execution script (`execution.py`) and simultaneously, in yellow with the number 2, passes the parameters, to the execution scripts by using a flat file.

To illustrate this two processes in practice, figure 2.3 shows a simplified code example of how to retrieve metadata of a specified data product from EE in R with the command line as the connection of R and Python. The figure presents how to execute Python code from R in red and how to pass parameters from R to Python in yellow. The left boxes illustrate the R console, the right box the Python

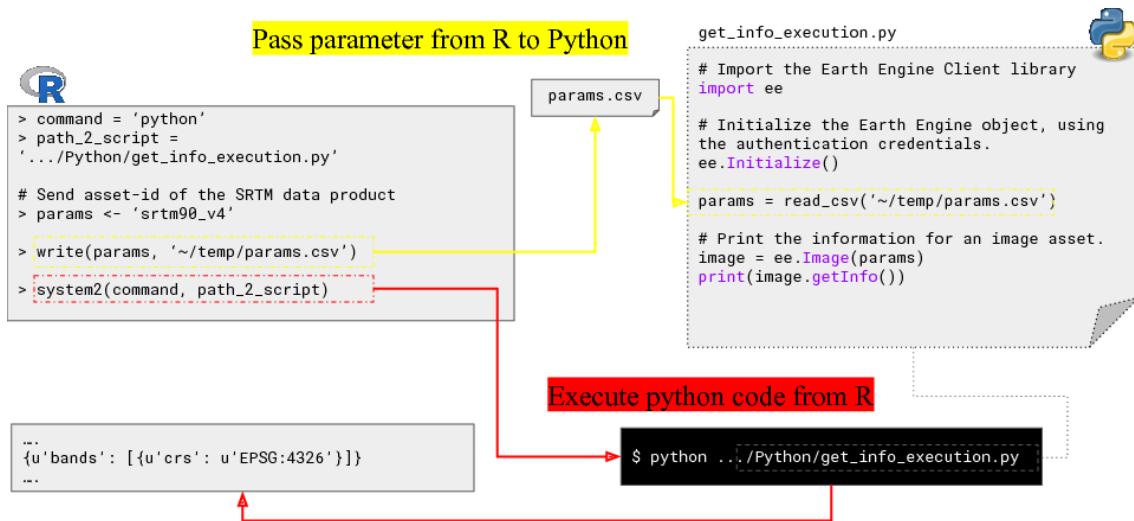


Figure 2.3: Example of utilizing the console to execute a Python script from R, that requests metadata on the SRTM data set on EE

execution script and the black box the command line. In R the `system2()` function of the base package invoices system commands and additional arguments in all operating systems. To run the python script `get_info.py`, the system call simply consists of the command `python`, to open the Python interpreter and the path to the Python script. The `system2()` function then produces the system call in the command line shown in the black box and runs the `get_info.py` script. To pass parameters from R to Python a flat file connection is used. The Parameter is defined in R, then written to a CSV file and read again into the execution script. In this example, the parameter is the asset-id of the SRTM data set in EE. In the Python script `get_info_execution.py`, first, the EE client library is imported and initialised with the authentication credentials then the parameters are imported. To load the SRTM data product from the EE data catalogue, the asset-id is put inside an EE object (`ee.Image()`) specifying an image. To access metadata from this EE object their `getInfo()` method is called and put inside a `print()` statement. The output of this script is the output of the `print` statement. This output is formatted in JSON and in the default setting of the `system2()` function, the output is directly printed to the R console. Although simplified, this example shows the essential integration of R and Python and the approach to send parameters.

### Sending parameters

Although it would be possible to send parameters directly over the command line, with an increasing number of parameter, this method becomes confusing and error-prone due to text formatting differences of the command line dependent on the operating system. Therefore the package utilises a flat file connection that provides a reliable method for exchanging parameters independent from the

operating system.

## Organize Python code os modules

All necessary processing of the data in EE is described with the EE client library in Python. To maintain a well-arranged structure, the code is organised like a sub-package, inside the earthEngineGrabR package. There is an execution script, executed with the method described above, that calls functions defined in a Python script (functions.py). This relationship is illustrated in figure 2.2 with the orange arrows with number 3, that appears as a circle. This Python script defines all functions necessary for the data manipulation workflow shown in figure 2.1. The functions are organised like independent modules, each describing one process in the processing chain shown in figure 2.1. There are functions for temporal filtering and reduction, spatial reduction and export. The modules take the parameters as function arguments, and this way provide the described control over the requested data.

## Use of the client library

The client library consists of objects, which represent placeholders for data types stored on the EE servers, each object has corresponding methods or functions that manipulate this data type. Figure 2.3 showed an example of an EE object for an Image. To perform a computation in EE, the objects and corresponding methods are composed and combined to build a description of the computation the user wants to perform.

## Communication of the client library and EE

At the moment the script is executed, this description is sent to the EE servers through a REST API, in figure 2.2 indicated as a blue arrow with the number 4. REST is a web service often used to request and modify data on a server through a Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP). In the context of the EE client library, it refers to using HTTP verbs to retrieve and modify representations of data stored on Google's servers. In a REST system, resources are stored in a data store. A client sends a request that the server performs a particular action (such as creating, retrieving, updating, or deleting a resource), and the server performs the action and sends a response. In the case of the earthEngineGrabR package, the request is: import a specific data product, filter a time interval, aggregate over time, aggregate over regions and export the generated data to Google Drive (in figure 2.2 as a dark grey arrow with number 6). While this is the action of the request that is performed the response of the request is to send info about the export process, in figure 2.2 represented as a dark blue arrow with number 5. This process info includes metadata of the exported object and whether the export was successful or not. To send this info to R again a flat file connection is used, because the response is in JSON, the info is written to disk as a JSON file and afterwards imported into R. The last step in the processing chain is to access Google Drive from R and first download and next import the data into R (shown

as green arrows with number 7). To access Google Drive from R, the `googledrive` R package is used. The `googledrive` package enables selection and download of specific files stored on the users Google Drive account. To identify the files to download, the metadata included in the retrieved process info is used. First, the data is downloaded in the temp folder that corresponds to the current working directory and if available on disk imported into R.

### Parallel processing of data products

To process multiple data products in a `ee_grab()` function call, each data product is processed in an individual request to the EE servers. While the upload of the target vector is performed only once, the remaining seven processes of the processing flow in figure 2.2 are iterated for each data product. This approach allows the parallel processing of the data products. The individual requests for the data products, generated by the EE client library in Python, all end with a command to export the generated data to Google Drive (in figure 2.2 shown as green arrows with number 7). However, the request must not wait until the data is processed and exported to Google Drive. Instead, the request ends with the response of the EE servers, whether EE started the processing. This allows requesting the computation of multiple data products at the same time. The exported data products are individually downloaded from Google Drive and finally joined in R.

## 2.4 Organize dependencies and authentications

The `earthEngineGrabR` package has several package dependencies in R and Python. While most R dependencies can be handled within the description file of an R package, the Python dependencies need to be manually installed with a package manager like pip. Furthermore, the package connects to several API's, which each require an individual, user-specific, authentication procedure. Therefore, a user-friendly organisation of all requirements of the `earthEngineGrabR` to work is particularly important. To leave the installation of dependencies and authentications to the user, would significantly hinder the use of the package and make it more cumbersome.

To simplify the installation and authentication process, the `earthEngineGrabR` includes a function `ee_grab_init()` that installs Python dependencies and furthermore guides the user through the different authentications. Before using the `earthEngineGrabR`, the user has to call `ee_grab_init()`.

### Dependencies

Table 2.2 lists the different dependencies for the `earthEngineGrabR` and how they are installed.

The dependencies handled by the description file are automatically installed during the installation of the `earthEngineGrabR`, while the libraries dealt with the `setuptools` utility are installed with `ee_grab_init()`. The installation of `sf` and

library	dependency	installation
googledrive	R	description file
dplyr	R	description file
rjson	R	description file
sf	R	not provided
GDAL	R, Python	not provided
google api python client	Python	setuptools
pyCrypto	Python	setuptools
earthengine-api	Python	setuptools
pandas	Python	setuptools
json	Python	setuptools

Table 2.2: Library dependencies of the earthEngineGrabR and how the installation is handled

GDAL is not provided and has to be manually installed by the user prior to the use of the earthEngineGrabR.

The earthEngineGrabR depends on a Python version higher 2.7 with python path set (PYTHONPATH). To ease the installation of the Python dependencies, all dependencies are combined in a new python package (GEE2R), using the setuptools package in Python. The GEE2R Python package can then be installed with the package manager pip. During this installation, all specified python dependencies are installed at once. This process is similar to the use of the description file in R packages. To call pip from R, R's described ability to invoke a system call with the `system()` or `system2()` function is used.

## Authentication

In the earthEngineGrabR, three APIs are used. The EE API, the Google Drive API and the Google Fusiontable API. Each API require an authentication with a valid Google account, and concerning the Google Earth Engine API, a Google account activated for EE use. According to Google, the EE is free for research, education and nonprofit use furthermore results of the analysis performed by the user, as well as new algorithms wrote by the user remain in the property of the user alone (Google 2015). To get access to EE the user has to fill out a form and wait until the request for excess is granted. If the excess is granted the user's Google account activated for excessing EE. For utilising the Google Drive API and Google Fusiontable API, only a valid Google Account is necessary. All API's use the OAuth 2.0 Protocol to manage the authentication process. To send a valid request to one of these APIs, the request needs to be authorised with a valid access token generated with the OAuth 2.0 protocol (Hardt 2012). To manage the OAuth 2.0 protocol and generate these tokens the earthEngineGrabR package uses different approaches depending on how each API is accessed.

The initial call of the `ee_grab_init()` guides the user through the different authentications. The `ee_grab_init()` function only needs to be called once, and the required authentication tokens are saved and managed independently.

# Chapter 3

## Results

The following section is supposed to provide a scientific scenario and three corresponding sample sessions in which the earthEngineGrabR can be used to acquire remote sensing data to meet a specific question. The emphasis of this section lies on how to use the earthEngineGrabR and gives tips and tricks on how to apply the package.

### 3.1 Szenario

Imagine, you are a scientist involved with the MIKE Programm (Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants).

Your object of investigation is to find covariates for the intensity of illegally killed elephants in Africa. You have access to data collected within the Great Elephant Census, a continent-wide aerial survey counting the number and distribution of elephants within there territories. Figure 3.1 shows the study area. Each region corresponds to a territory, and for each territory, you have the aggregated number of illegally killed elephants. To run your statistical model in R and find influential covariates you need further environmental variables derived from satellite imagery like the topography, land-use, and precipitation.

Because the study area is fragmented and of large-scale at the same time it would require significant effort to use one of the search and order tools like the Earth Explorer, to acquire and prepare the remote sensing data for your analysis. You would have to download

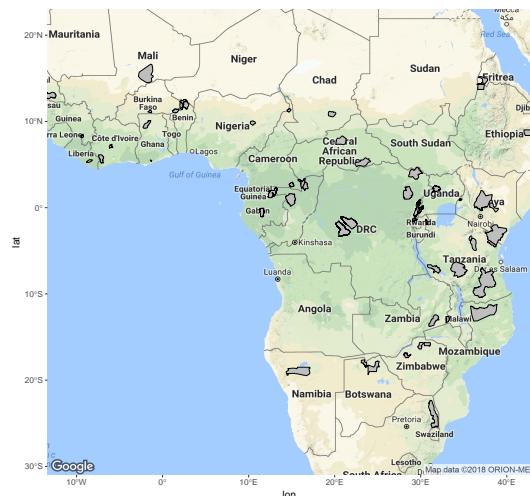


Figure 3.1: Elephant territories for the Great Elephant Census aerial survey

a multitude of tiles for each of your environmental variables to cover the study area. Next, you would have to integrate, merge and aggregate all this data in an external GIS application before you start your actual analysis in R. But fortunately, you know, that one of your colleagues lately used a new R packages, some "graber" that greatly simplified his data acquisition process and you are desperate enough to give it a try. After some googling, you find the earthEngineGrabR and the corresponding Git Hup page, which describes how to apply for an EE account and how to install the required dependencies for the package. Because you have GDAL and Python already installed, you only install the sf R package and wait a few hours for the acknowledgement e-mail from Google, that you or your Google Account is now a trusted tester of the EE. Now you are ready to use the earthEngineGrabR.

## 3.2 Large-scale analysis

First, install the package from Git Hup with the `install_github()` function form the `devtools` package.

```
library(devtools)
install_github("JesJehle/earthEngineGrabR")
```

After installing the package the first step is to initialize the package with `ee_grab_init()`.

```
library(earthEngineGrabR)
ee_grab_init()
```

As described in the method section the `ee_grab_init()` function installs all additionally required dependencies and guides the user through the authentication processes to activate the different API's. To authenticate to the API the user has to log in to his Google account and allow the API to access data on google's servers on the user's behalf.

If the Google account is verified and the permission is granted, the user is directed to an authentication token. This token is manually copied and pasted into a running command line script, which creates persistent credentials. Later, the credentials are used to authenticate a request to the API. To simplify this procedure, the `ee_grab_init()` function successively opens a browser window to log into the Google account and a corresponding command line window to enter the token (see figure 3.2).

This process is repeated for each API. If the function runs successfully, all needed credentials are stored for further sessions. Because some of the credentials expire after a few hours, a reauthentication is necessary. This process is handled automatically inside the `ee_grab()` function. If a reauthentication is needed the function opens a browser window and the user is asked to log in to his Google account. The creation of credentials is automated, and there is no need to copy or paste the token manually.

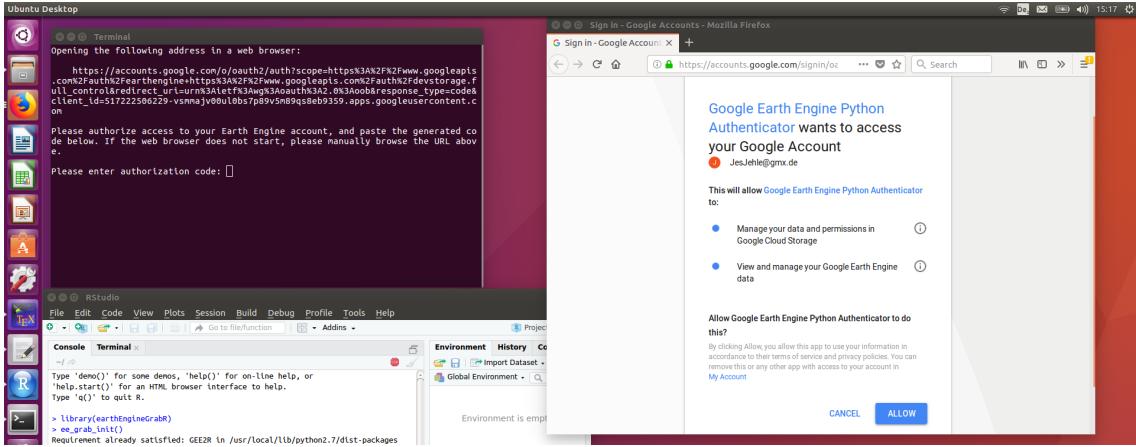


Figure 3.2: Example of the authentication process for the EE API

To acquire the data next the `ee_grab()` function is used. The target is the path to the shapefile of the elephant territories shown in figure 3.1. The products argument takes a list of earth engine data product-functions. Each function specifies one particular data product, and it's necessary parameter. The name of the function is `eeProduct_` followed by the source of the data products, underscore the name of the data product. For example: `eeProduct_modis_treecover()`. Because all data products start with `eeProduct_`, by simply typing `eeProduct_`, R's autocomplete function opens a drop-down menu of all available data products. Furthermore, the selection of a product in the menu displays a little description of the product and list their possible parameters. For more information on a particular data product simply open the documentation of the function by pressing F1, or use equivalent methods. This way, it's possible to browse through the products, without any additional metadata outside of R. Additionally the functions provide default parameter values, which allow a test run without the need of specifying any parameter. While this procedure provides a user-friendly selection of available data products with their corresponding parameters, it also minimises potential typing and spelling errors.

After browsing through the data products, you choose the modis-tree-cover product for the year 2000 to 2005. You are further interested in the mean tree cover between this period and also want the mean tree cover in each of the elephant territories. Because the default value for the time reducer and the spatial reducer is mean you only need to specify the time interval parameter with a vector of the start and end-year (`timeInterval = c(2000, 2005)`). You are further interested in a potential correlation of the accessibility to populated areas and the illegally killed elephant. Therefore you additionally choose the oxford-accessibility product. The information displayed by the R's auto compete feature reveals only one possible parameter - `spatialReducer` - and by requesting the documentation of the function, you learn that this data product is only available for the year 2015, and therefore has no temporal resolution to aggregate. Again, you choose the mean accessibility in each territory by using the default value of the parameter and add the product function to the list. The last argument specifies

the resolution in meters as edge length.

```
africa_elephant_data <- ee_grab(
  target = system.file("data/territories.shp", package =
    earthEngineGrabR),
  products = list(
    eeProduct_modis_treeCover(yearIntervall = c(2000, 2005)),
    eeProduct_oxford_accessibility()
  ),
  resolution = 1000
)
```

The resolution parameter sets the resolution of the processed data in EE and applies for all products. A value smaller than the native resolution of the data product results in EE resampling the data with the default nearest neighbour method, values higher result in a pixel aggregation with a default method mean. In the documentation, you learned that the native resolution of the tree cover product is 250 m while the accessibility products provide a resolution of 30 m. Because the area of the elephant territories is of large-scale (mean area of the regions is 9862 km<sup>2</sup>), you choose 1000 m as the scale of your analysis. The resolution parameter actively controls the scope of computation and out of this the processing time. Therefore it's a good choice to not unnecessarily set him too low. Since all parameters are set, the function can be executed. During the processing the function prints info corresponding to the state of the upload, the processing and the download of each data product. With the verbose = FALSE, this behaviour can be avoided.

As most processes of the function call are performed on Googles servers, the execution time depends strongly on the throughput of your analysis on the servers and only slightly on the performance of your local machine. However, because of the upload and download process during the function execution, deficient internet speed (1 Mbit/s in download and 0.1 Mbit/s in upload) can work as a bottleneck, particularly during the upload process. On a 64-bit ubuntu machine with 8 Gbit of RAM, 4 cores with 2.40 GHz and internet speed of 10 Mbit/s in download and 1Mbit/s in upload the ee\_grab() function took 55 s to execute. All further time measurements refer to this setting. The output of the ee\_grab() function is an object of class sf. The output always contains all properties of the original target vector data with the added data products and an additional geometry column as shown in table 3.1.

id	sitecode	name	tree Cover	accessibility	geometry
1	AKG	Akagera	15	138.4	MULTIP. (30.5 -1.
2	DZA	Dzanga-Sangha	76.4	858.9	MULTIP. (16.06 2.
3	MCH	Murchison Falls	25.0	146.1	MULTIP. (32.1 2.

Table 3.1: Example output of the ee\_grab() function

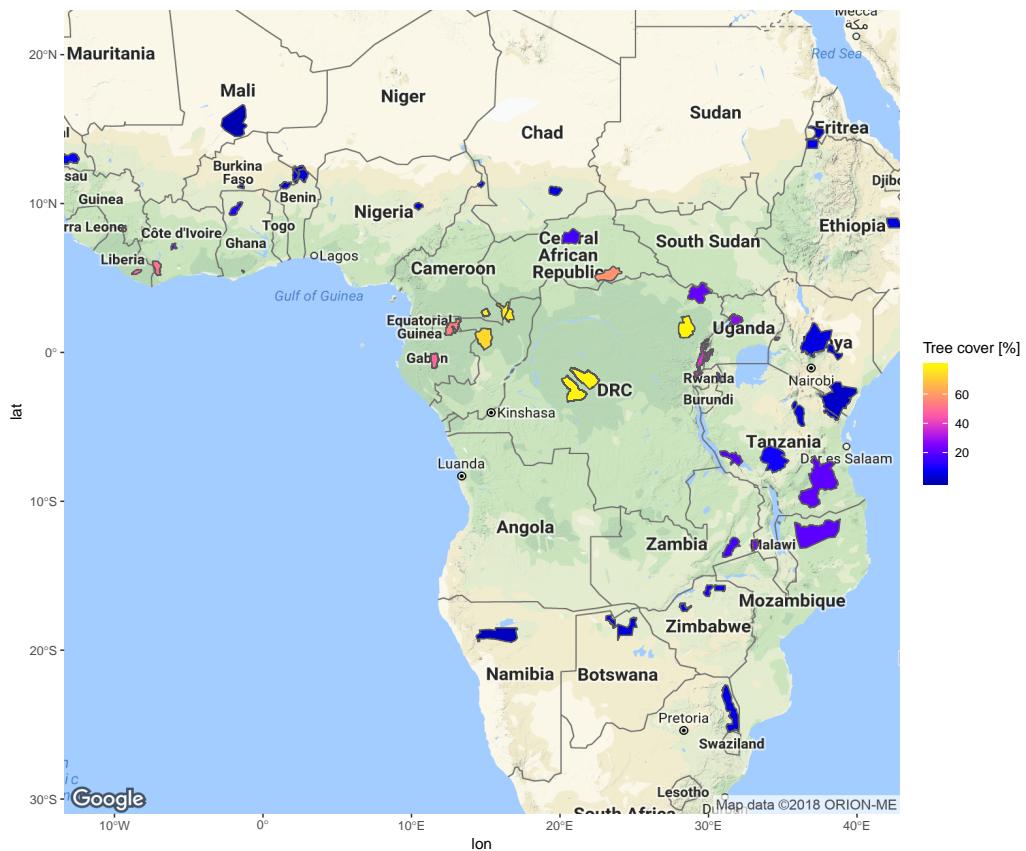
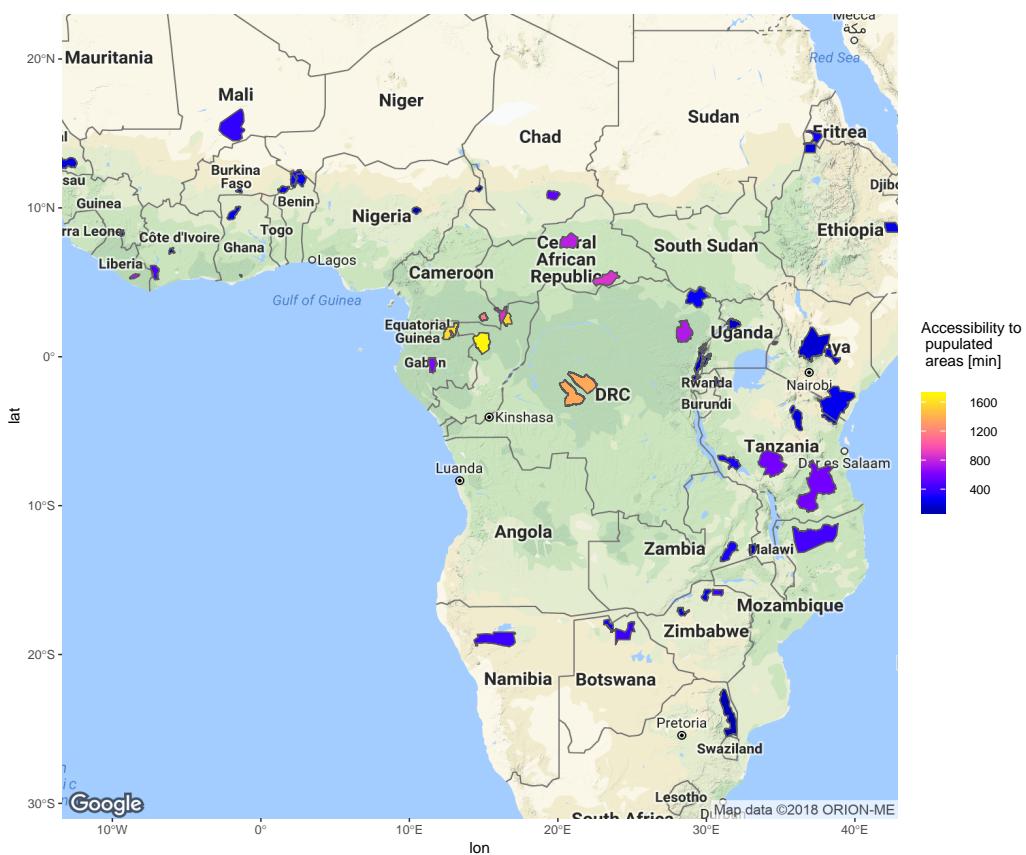


Figure 3.3: on top the accessibility to the nearest populated areas in minutes and tree cover in percent at the bottom

Figure 3.3 shows the mean tree cover in percent from 2000 to 2005 for each elephant territory in the upper figure and the mean accessibility of the territories in the figure at the bottom. Eye-catching but not surprising is the negative relationship between accessibility and tree cover resulting in a regional pattern with the highest tree cover and lowest accessibility found in central Africa, while toward the north, south and west, the accessibility increases and the tree cover decreases.

While this sample session shows the capabilities of the earthEngineGrabR package to aggregate over large areas, the next example is dedicated to the opposite situation.

### 3.3 Small-scale analysis

Because of your access to the Great Elephant Census data you have not only the aggregated data for each territory but also the pre-aggregated survey data consisting of the number of elephants counted within a region specified by position, height and the flight path of the aircraft.

The combined areas form the spatial coverage of the survey and are available as shapefiles. Figure 3.4 shows the coverage for Tanzania. You are interested in the availability of surface water in each of these regions. Therefore you want to use the jrc-distance-to-surface-water data product available in the earthEngineGrabR package. As the target, you use the shapefile of the survey coverage and only specify the `jrc_distanceToWater` product in the products argument. As spatial and temporal reducer you choose median.

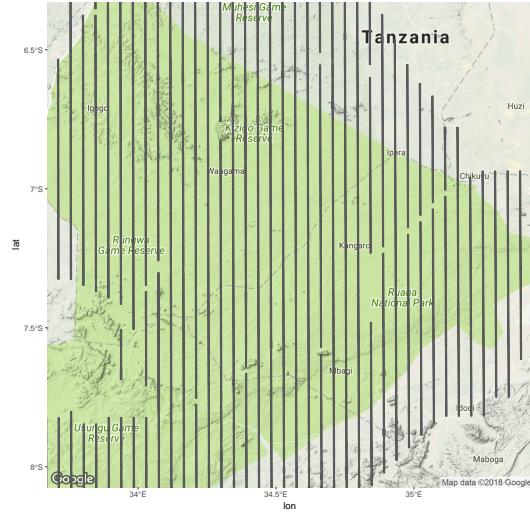


Figure 3.4: Spatial coverage of the aerial survey for Tanzania

```
africa_elephant_data_stripes <- ee_grab(
  target = system.file("data/aerial-stripes.shp", package =
    "earthEngineGrabR"),
  products = list(
    eeProduct_jrc_distanceToWater(yearInterval = c(2000, 2000),
      spatialReducer = "median")
  ),
  resolution = 50
)
```

Due to the smaller area of the features of the target (mean area of  $0.7 \text{ km}^2$ ), you choose a resolution of 50 m and execute the function. The computation time takes

about 3 m, and the result is shown in figure 3.5. Since the area of the coverage is too small for a meaningful visualisation, figure 3.5 shows an actively zoomed view of the actual figure 3.4.

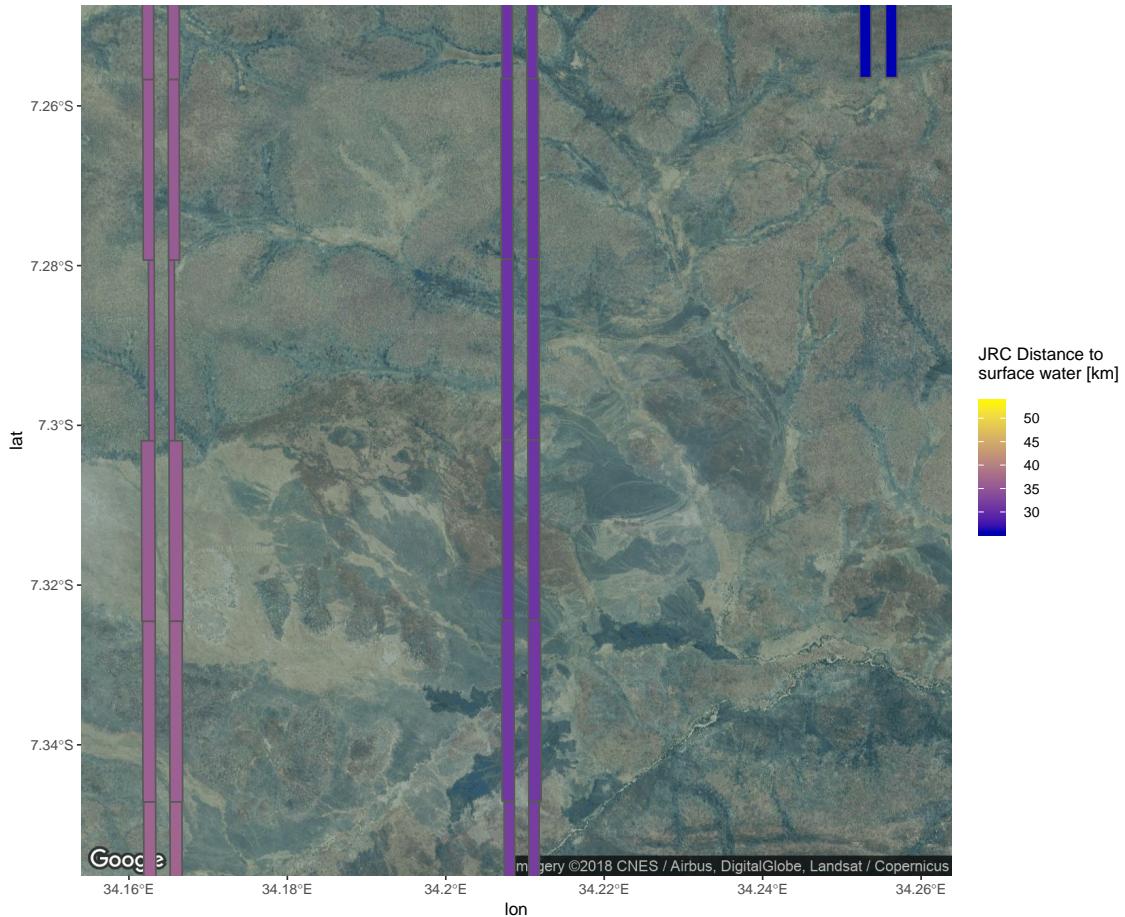


Figure 3.5: Distance to surface water in km for the coverage of the areal survey

The distance to surface water is specified in km (though, the actual resolution is 50 m) and refers to the distance to the next Landsat pixel (30 m x 30 m) classified as water (Pekel et al. 2016). The distance ranges from approximately 25 km to 35 km. In figure 3.5 the aerial stripes on the left indicate a higher distance than the stripes on the right side of the map. Thus, the next close surface water must be located approximately 25 km in an eastward direction.

This session shows the flexibility of the `earthEngineGrabR` referred to the scale of analysis and the shape of the AOI.

In the last example, a more extended use case of the `ee_grab()` function is presented.

## 3.4 Time-series analysis

You are also interested in changes over time, for example, the change of precipitation in the elephant territories. Out of the documentation you know, that the precipitation product of the earthEngineGrabR is available from 2000 to 2015 on a yearly basis, thus you decide to calculate the precipitation for each year from 2000 to 2015 and analyse the change by using a linear model. The chirps-precipitation product is produced from satellite data on a daily basis, what offers the possibility to calculate the yearly precipitation sum. Because the yearly precipitation sum is a common practice in hydrology and compared to the mean not this prone to extreme values you decide to calculate the annual sum in each of the elephant territories for each year. To achieve that, you create one product for each year and pass the list of products to the `ee_grab()` function. The list of products can be generated using a vector of years from 2000 to 2015 and iterate the precipitation data product function over the years vector.

```
years <- 2000:2015
products_ts <- list()

for (i in seq_along(years)) {
  products_ts[[i]] <- eeProduct_chirps_precipitation(yearIntervall
    = c(years[i], years[i]), temporalReducer = "sum")
}

precipitation_time_series <- ee_grab(
  target = system.file("data/territories.shp", package =
    "earthEngineGrabR"),
  products = products_ts,
  resolution = 1000
)
```

As temporal reducer, you choose sum, and for the year interval, you take the i-th value of the created years vector. This generates a list of 15 specified data products for each year from 2000 to 2015. This list is passed to the products argument in the `ee_grab()` function. Due to the large-scale of your analysis, you again select a resolution of 1000 m. Since you want the spatial mean of the yearly precipitation sum in the territories, which already is the default spatial reducer, all necessary parameters in the `ee_grab()` function are specified. While the processing of a single request for one year would take about 3 m, the processing time of all 15 data products require only approximately 15 m. Because the requests are sent and processed in parallel, the relationship of processing time and the number of requests is nonlinear. This point will be explained further in the discussion.

The output is an object of class sf that contains all properties of the original territories shapefile with 15 added columns for the precipitation sum of each year. Next, you use a linear model of  $year \sim precipitation$  for each territory and retrieve the estimates for the effect of year.

The estimates show the linear effect of year on the yearly precipitation sum in mm for each of the elephant territories. By joining the estimates with the spatial

data of the territories, the estimates can be visualised spatially.

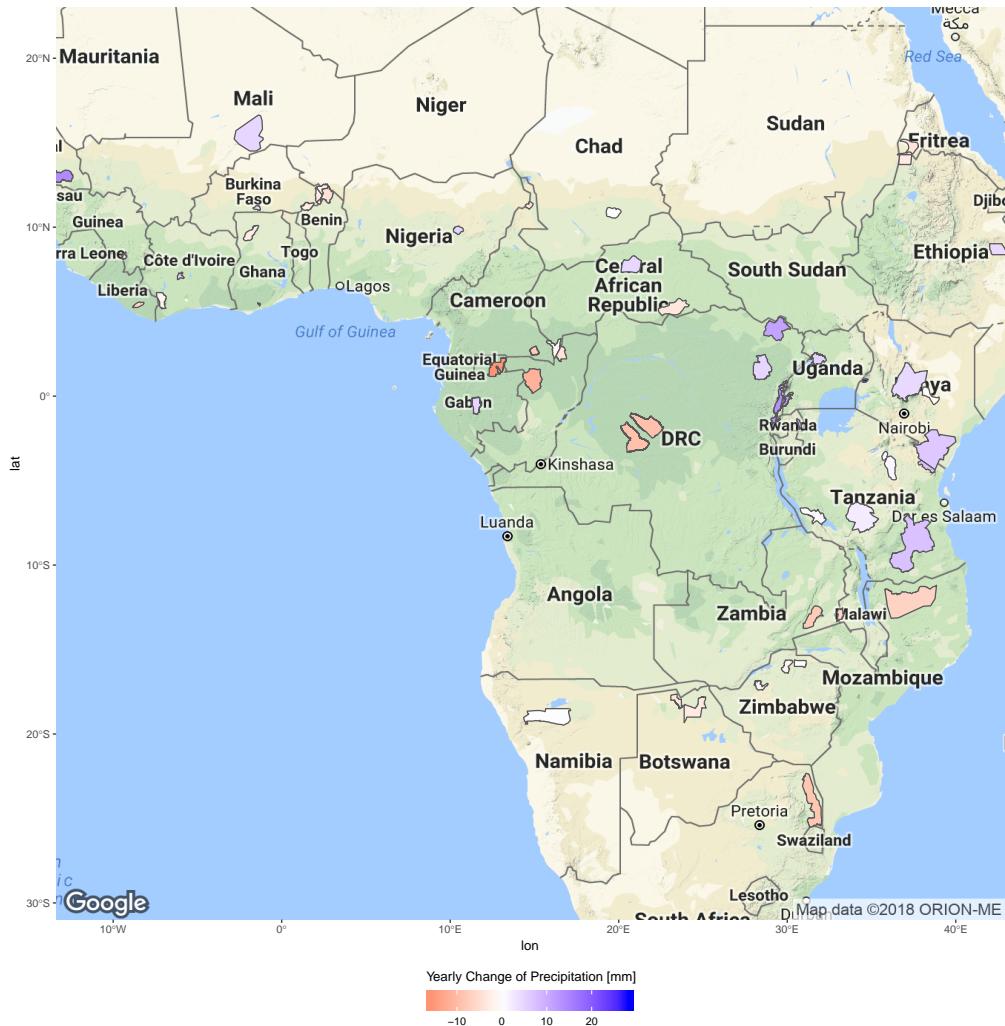


Figure 3.4 shows the estimate of the yearly change of the annual precipitation sum in mm for each territory. That estimates reflect a yearly change from - 10 mm to + 20 mm. While the yearly precipitation sum is increasing for the territories in East Africa, it is decreasing for most territories in central Africa, especially for those with hight tree cover (see figure 3.3).

## 3.5 Summary

The focus of this section is not on the interpretation of the results but to present the use of the earthEngineGrabR package. With the use of the package, it was possible to quickly and easily acquire remote sensing data in three different use-cases. First, with the instructions on the packages Git Hub site, the requirements and the earthEngineGrabR were installed. Next, the `ee_grab_init()` installed

the necessary Python dependencies and guided the user through the different authentications. The section illustrated how to use R, autocomplete feature and the package’s data product functions to browse through the available data products and quickly open further documentation. Next, the `ee_grab()` function was used to acquire remote sensing data according to 3 different questions and use-cases. The section showed the package’s flexibility referring to the possible AOI, by obtaining data for both large-scale analyses with a mean area of the territories of 9862 km<sup>2</sup> and small-scale study with a mean area of 0.7 km<sup>2</sup>. The last sample session gave suggestions on how to extend the possibilities of the package by integrating the `ee_grab()` over a series of years and doing this, acquire a time series of a specific data products.

# **Chapter 4**

## **Discussion**

The previous sample sessions in the results section showed the ability of the earthEngineGrabR to acquire remote sensing data for various research questions. Compared to the traditional method described in the introduction the earthEngineGrabR is superior in various ways: The use of the earthEngineGrabR to acquire remote sensing data for a specific time, region and aggregation provide significant savings of time, processing resources and labour. To acquire, the data for the illustrated use-cases was a matter of minutes, even the aggregation of daily precipitation satellite imagery for 15 years required less than 15 m. The necessary processing resources for the computation was outsourced entirely, while there was only a minimum of load on the local processing resources. Further, no manual preprocessing or integration of different data sources was necessary, and no external GIS software had to be used. The entire process could be controlled from within R, and only a minimum of GIS knowledge and no experience with Python or the EE Python API was required. With the earthEngineGrabR, the user not only could harvest data products from the earth engine data catalogue but with the aggregation process controlled by the user, could generate new data dependent on the research questions.

Therefore, for the described use cases, it can be said, that the earthEngineGrabR strongly simplified and at the same time extended the possibility of the user to acquire remote sensing data for there research questions. Further, the fast acquisition and preprocessing of the remote sensing data enables a more interactive excess to environmental variables. This enables fast descriptive analyses, and the test of various hypotheses prior to the modelling process. Thereby, the package shows the potential of simplified access to the capabilities of the GEE for the scientific work.

### **4.1 Limits and problems of the current version of the earthEngineGrabR**

Although in some cases, the use of the earthEngineGrabR package offers some significant advantages to the scientific work, the current version is still limited in many ways.

## **Vector data processing restriction**

Mainly, due to the current upload limit of the fusion table API, it's not possible to process vector data with more than 5000 features. This small size certainly restricts the application of the package and would make it uncomely for most scientific projects.

## **Limited number of available data products and their possible properties**

Furthermore, the choice of available data products and their properties in the earthEngineGrabR is still low. The package, for example, offers no product for temperature, climate or any vegetation indexes and the available products lack a necessary temporal resolution. For instance, since the smallest temporal interval is one year, it's not possible to request the precipitation or distance to surface water for a particular season. But for the most ecological problems, the seasonality is of great importance.

## **No control of projection**

Another problem that is, that during the upload process all vector data is transformed to geographic reference system WGS84. That is that all the processing in EE is performed without a projection unless you call the WGS84 a projection. Therefore all projections of the original vector data are lost. The output of the `ee_grab()` function does not reflect the projection of the imported vector data. The conversion to WGS84 is unproblematic as long as there is no calculation of areas. Since the spatial reducer of the earthEngineGrabR only allows simple statistics like mean, median, mode, min and max, there is no calculation of areas, and the conversion is harmless to the results of the analysis. However, in most cases, it would require a manual reprojection of the results by the user to combine the data collected by the earthEngineGrabR with data that is already at hand. Additional control of the projection would be helpful.

## **Multiple dependencies, operating system interoperability, confusing authentication process**

The most challenging problem though is to get the earthEngineGrabR to work on all operating systems properly. This point is challenging because of the many requirements and dependencies of the package. There are dependencies to R packages python libraries and external libraries like GDAL, and there has to be a working python distribution on the system with a specified Python path as an environmental variable (see 2.2). If any of the requirements is not meet, the package crashes. An additional difficulty is the confusing and extensive authentication process. While the Google Drive and Fusion Table API are accessed directly with R, the EE API and the GDAL driver for Fusion Tables are accessed with Python. In R the authentication protocol is managed by the httr R package and requires no manual copying and pasting of authorisation tokens. For the authorisation to the API's accessed from Python the copy and pasting of tokens are still

necessary. Furthermore, the httr R package in its current implementation of the earthEngineGrabR works with access tokens, which need to be refreshed after approximately an hour while the authentication protocols managed with different Python libraries work with refresh tokens, which never expire and therefore only need one initial authorisation. While using the earthEngineGrabR, this results in regular interruptions where the user is asked to again log in to his Google Account. Although with an already logged in account, this is just one click with a mouse per hour, this can be problematic for unsupervised use of the package for instance on a server. Therefore, although already strongly simplified, the current management of the dependencies and authentication protocols is still error-prone and requires too much activity on the user's side.

## 4.2 Further development of the earthEngineGrabR

Most of the shortcomings addressed in the last section can be rectified with the further development of the earthEngineGrabR package.

The further development can be divided into the improvement of the framework and the implementation and further development of additional features.

### 4.2.1 Implementation of additional features

Below, a number of additional extensions to the earthEngineGrabR are described that would rectify most of the addressed shortcomings.

#### Add more data products

The most important extension is the implementation of additional data products. All data products available within the EE public data catalogue can be considered. To provide data products covering weather and climate variables, the implementation of additional products based on ASTER (Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer) and MODIS would be reasonable. Furthermore, a data product to provide vegetation indices calculated from Sentinel or Landsat satellite imagery would be exciting. This product, for example, would enable to choose a time interval in months, maximum cloud cover to filter the image collection, whether to use Landsat or Sentinel imagery to calculate the Index and a selection of possible vegetation indexes like the NDVI or NDBI (Normalized Difference Built-up Index).

#### Extend the properties of the data products

To provide a smaller temporal resolution the package could implement an additional monthInterval parameter, that filters for specific months. This would result in the possibility to specify year and month of the interval of interest and allow to acquire the chirps-precipitation and jrc-distance-to-surface-water product in a monthly resolution. Furthermore, it would be reasonable to choose the spatial resolution for each data product separately and add control over the projection

of the analysis. This could be achieved by using the target projection and send it as a string that specifies the EPSG (European Petroleum Survey Group - list of codes for geographic reference systems) to the EE servers and reprojects the requested data. Another option would be to control the projection explicitly with an additional argument.

### **Internal iterations as workaround for the vector data processing restriction**

To increase the overall file size and the number of features of the target that can be processed it's necessary to build a workaround for internal limitations of the Earth Engine API and the Fusion Table API. One is the upload limit for Fusion Tables, of around 5000 features at a time and another an export limit of Earth Engine of about 100 000 features at a time to Google Drive. The workaround for both limitations is to subdivide the file, iterate over the request of each subdivision and finally join the subdivision results back together. In the Fusion Table API, it's possible to upload vector data as a new Fusion Table or add to an existing one. Therefore, in the beginning, the file could be subdivided into chunks, which don't exceed 5000 features. While the first chunk is used to upload a new Fusion Table, all additional chunks can be added in an iteration process. This existing Fusion Table is used as the target in EE. If the export exceeds 100 000 features, it is again subdivided into multiple requests, downloaded separately and joined during the import process in R. This approach would enable the processing of considerably larger vector data and furthermore make use of a performance gain achieved by parallelisation and iteration.

### **Simplify the authentication process**

To simplify the authentication process, it would be relevant to replace the manually copy and pasting of the authorisation tokens with an automatic transfer. Next, all authorisation processes should work with a refresh token which only requires one initial authorisation. The produced credentials refresh automatically without the intervention of the user. To further shield the user from the authorisation process it would be reasonable to incorporate the `ee_grab_init()` inside the `ee_grab()` function and run the initialisation if the credentials cannot be found. This way, if the user calls the `ee_grab()` function the first time, `ee_grab_init()` gets called and triggers the authorisation process.

### **Add the possibility for the user to add and define new data products**

Finally, it would be necessary to consider a possibility to add new data products by the user. To achieve this either the `earthEngineGrabR` has to provide a function that works with all datasets on the EE Data Catalog or provide a detailed documentation on how to create data products while the user acts like a coworker that incorporate changes to the `earthEngineGrabR` using the version control system of GitHub. These two examples indeed are extremes of two different designs of the `earthEngineGrabR` and a solution should make use of both directions. In the broader sense, it's the question of how to provide extensibility to users. It seems

necessary that the package maintainer implements demanded features. However, to supply tools, that the users can build the required data products himself is probably superior to one individual being responsible for the implementation of every request. Independently of the different approaches of how to provide extensibility, several implementations would undoubtedly simplify the integration of additional features and the collaboration with other users of the earthEngine-GrabR package. The first is, to provide comprehensive documentation with additional sample sessions, vignettes or tutorials. Next, to implement tests in the development workflow and use them for Continuous Integration (CI). Discarding, of the improved stability of the package, testing and CI would improve the collaboration with co-workers and simplify the publication of the earthEngine-GrabR.

#### 4.2.2 Improve the framework of the earthEngineGrabR

To improve the framework for the base functionality of the earthEngineGrabR package the interface of R and Python could be further developed. Instead of an interface depending on the console which invoiced system calls in the way described in the methods section the new published reticulate package of r-studio could be used ([reticulate](#)). The use of reticulate would offer some significant benefits. The reticulate package provides the translation of R and Python data types. This would be overdue the use of a flat file connection to pass parameters or processing info. Further, reticulate contains a multitude of helper functions that ease the use of R in combination with Python (`py_available()`, for instance, checks for a python version on the system). While the execution of pythons scripts with a console, require the python code organised as scripts, with reticulate it's possible to run python code directly in R and arrange the code in smaller, more flexible chunks, what is essential when it comes to tools that provide the option to expand the earthEngineGrabR with additional data products and functionalities. The use of the reticulate package also would simplify the installation of python dependencies, because they can be performed in R (`py_install()`- installs python libraries). In summary, the reticulate package would provide a more precise, less error-prone and more flexible interface of R and Python then the currently implemented use of system calls.

### 4.3 Internal limitations of EE and what this implies for the earthEngineGrabR

Besides the discussed limitation, there are also limitations of EE, which in contrast to the limitations of the earthEngineGrabR, can't be avoided by further development of the package. These inherent limitations have a strong influence on the operations that can be performed efficiently with the package. Accessory to the suggested improvement of the framework and the implementation of additional features, the limitations and strengths of EE pretend a direction to the further development of the package.

### **4.3.1 Limitation, strengths and weaknesses of EE**

#### **System throughput an performance**

A reason for EE's performance is its ability to distribute and manage complex computations across many machines efficiently. There is an almost linear relationship of throughput (pixels/sec) with the number of machines (Gorelick et al. 2017). Although EE can execute and manage extensive computations, the underlying infrastructure consists of clusters of low-end servers, and there is a hard limit on the amount of data that can be brought into any individual server. The current Remote procedure call (RPC) and caching system limit the size of an object to 100 MB. An option to configure machines in earth engine is not available.

Users can only express computations by using the parallel processing primitives provided in the EE client library, and some non-parallelizable operations just cannot be performed efficiently in this environment.

#### **Straights of EE**

The architecture of EE performs well on per-pixel and finite neighbourhood operations such as band-math, morphological operations, spectral unmixing, template matching and texture analysis and can easily combine such operations in long chains (hundreds to thousands).

Furthermore, it is also highly optimised for statistical operations that can be applied to a collection of images, such as computing statistics on a time-series stack of images. This way, the EE can easily handle very deep stacks (i.e., millions of images; trillions of pixels).

#### **Weaknesses of EE**

It performs poorly for non-local operations in which a local value can be affected by arbitrarily distant inputs, such as watershed analysis or clustering algorithms. Further due to the caching limit of 100 MB, operations that require a significant amount of data allocatable at the same time, such as training many machine learning models or operations that involve long-running iterative processes, such as finite element analysis or agent-based models can't be performed efficiently.

Another significant limitation is the export limit of the GEE to Google Drive. The GEE provides data export to Google Drive and Google Cloud Platform (GCP). While the export to GCP is fast and works with extensive datasets, the export to Google Drive is limited to 2 GB and proportionally slow. Due to the reason, that outside the USA the always free tier of the GCP is not available, the export to Google Drive is the only free option. Discarding the official limit of 2 GB, it has shown that keeping the size of the export small dramatically speeds up the process while export files larger 1 GB can result in hours of computation time.

### 4.3.2 What does that mean for the earthEngineGrabR?

#### Support the internal distribution mechanism of EE by processing the data products in parallel

During the development of the earthEngineGrabR, the experience was repeatedly made, that requests of smaller magnitude are processed fast and immediately while requests exceeding a certain magnitude in data throughput, result in unforeseeable long data processing. Unfortunately, due to the reason, that the EE system hides nearly every aspect of the computation from the user, the magnitude generating this bottleneck is not obvious. Hence, avoiding the bottleneck saves hours of computation time and also enables processes that otherwise result in errors referring to computation timeout or user memory limit exceeding. For example, processing all available data products and joining them in one request, given a target shapefile of 10.000 features, takes more than 1 hour of computation, while iterating over the data products with one request each, is a matter of a few minutes. This insight is reflected in the internal design of the earthEnigne-GrabR. In the `ee_grab()` function, each data product is processed individually. Furthermore, this approach allows processing the data products in parallel. This way, data bottlenecks, resulting in long export and computation timeout errors are avoided. The performance of the earthEngineGrabR depends on EE's ability to distribute computation by an internal parallelisation mechanism efficiently. Operations that can't be efficiently scaled result in unforeseeable long processes and error and slow down the computation. By requesting the data products individually and in parallel, instead of joining the inter-products in EE, the package supports the internal distribution and parallelisation mechanism of EE.

#### Instead of acquiring Big Data, process Big Data and acquire the results

The export limit of 2 GB from EE to Google Drive actively restricts the possible download size. To download large data sets under such conditions is time-consuming error-prone. Because the internal processes of EE are shielded from the user, there is no possibility to inform the user about the internal processing state of the computation. The user would have to wait unseeingly long without any response and in case of an internal error for nothing. Therefore, if the task is to download large data sets, the search and order tools are the better choice. Splitting the exported file into smaller chunks, indeed speed up the export and computation time but only partly solve the underlining problem. While the data that can be processed inside EE can become remarkably large, the data that can be exported is proportionally small. But, what makes EE unique are the available resources to process the data before exporting. To avoid the described export limit, the processing resources are used to aggregate the data inside EE, instead of exporting the raw raster data. The aggregation inside EE dramatically reduces the file size and speeds up the export. With the earthEngineGrabR it's not possible to acquire big geo-spatial data, but to process big geo-spatial data and acquire the results. Considering this, using vector data as the output of the `ee_grab()` function is more suitable because it provides a more flexible data format, that can

easily adapt the shape of any AOI. Furthermore, compared to raster, it's smaller in size, and therefore can be downloaded faster avoiding the export limit of EE.

### **Use EE's strengths to generate the data products**

The limitation and strengths of the earthEngineGrabR arise from the weakness and strengths of EE. To use the full potential of the EE, the earthEngineGrabR has to provide comfortable and user-friendly access to the capabilities of EE while using EE's internal strengths to offer a variety of data products. The generated data products should correspond to EE capabilities to use per-pixel and finite neighbourhood operations such as band-math, morphological operations, spectral unmixing, template matching and texture analysis or statistical operations applied to a collection of images, such as a time-series stack of images.

First package that users the GEE as backend service. Great potential to meet needs to generate unique data products, which simplify and push research.

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# **Chapter 5**

## **This is Appendix 1...**

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# **Chapter 6**

## **This is appendix 2...**

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# **Selbstständigkeitserklärung**

## **Erklärung**

Ich versichere hiermit, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit ohne fremde Hilfe selbstständig verfasst und nur die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Wörtlich oder dem Sinn nach aus anderen Werken entnommene Stellen habe ich unter Angabe der Quellen kenntlich gemacht.

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Freiburg, May 2018