

SSN2: The next generation of spatial stream network modeling in R

Michael Dumelle¹, Erin E. Peterson², Jay M. Ver Hoef³, Alan Pearce⁴, and Daniel J. Isaak⁵

¹ Office of Research and Development, United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) ² EP Consulting and Queensland University of Technology, Centre for Data Science Brisbane Australia 4000 ³ NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center, United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) ⁴ NIASRA, School of Mathematics and Applied Statistics, University of Wollongong ⁵ Rocky Mountain Research Station, United States Forest Service (USFS)

DOI:

Software

- [Review](#) ↗
- [Repository](#) ↗
- [Archive](#) ↗

Submitted:

Published:

License

Authors of papers retain copyright and release the work under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License ([CC-BY](#)).

Summary

The **SSN2 R** package provides tools for spatial statistical modeling, parameter estimation, and prediction on stream (river) networks. **SSN2** is the successor to the **SSN R** package (Jay M. Ver Hoef, Peterson, Clifford, & Shah, 2014), which was archived alongside broader changes in the **R**-spatial ecosystem (Nowosad, 2023) that included 1) the retirement of **rgdal** (R. Bivand, Keitt, & Rowlingson, 2021), **rgeos** (R. Bivand & Rundel, 2020), and **maptools** (R. Bivand & Lewin-Koh, 2021) and 2) the lack of active development of **sp** (R. S. Bivand, Pebesma, & Gomez-Rubio, 2013). **SSN2** maintains compatibility with the input data file structures used by **SSN** but leverages modern **R**-spatial tools like **sf** (E. Pebesma, 2018) and provides many useful modeling features that were not available in **SSN**, including new modeling functions, updated fitting algorithms, and simplified syntax consistent with other **R** generic functions.

Statement of Need

Streams provide vital aquatic services that sustain wildlife, provide drinking and irrigation water, and support recreational and cultural activities. Data are often collected at various locations on a stream network and used to characterize spatial patterns in stream phenomena. For example, a manager may need to know how the amount of a hazardous chemical changes throughout a stream network to inform mitigation efforts. Comprehensive formulations of spatial stream network (SSN) models are provided by Jay M. Ver Hoef & Peterson (2010), Peterson & Ver Hoef (2010), and Jay M. Ver Hoef et al. (2014).

SSN models use a spatial statistical modeling framework (Cressie, 1993) to describe unique and complex dependencies on a stream network resulting from a branching network structure, directional water flow, and differences in flow volume. SSN models relate a continuous or discrete response variable to one or more explanatory variables, a spatially independent error term (i.e., nugget), and up to three spatially dependent error terms: tail-up errors, tail-down errors, and Euclidean errors. Tail-up errors restrict spatial dependence to flow-connected sites (i.e., water flows from an upstream to a downstream site) and incorporate spatial weights through an additive function to describe the branching network between sites. Tail-down errors describe spatial dependence between both flow-connected and flow-unconnected (i.e., sites that share a common downstream junction but not flow) sites, but spatial weights are not required. Euclidean errors describe spatial dependence between sites based on straight-line distance and are governed by factors not confined to the stream network like regional geology. The length-scales of spatial dependence in the tail-up, tail-down, and Euclidean errors are controlled by separate range

parameters. In this paper, we show how to use the **SSN2 R** package to fit and inspect SSN models and make predictions at unobserved locations on a stream network.

Package Overview

Before fitting SSN models using **SSN2**, stream network and observation data sets must be pre-processed either by using the STARS toolset for ArcGIS Desktop versions 9.3x - 10.8x (Peterson & Ver Hoef, 2014) or by using the **openSTARS R** package (Kattwinkel, Szöcs, Peterson, & Schäfer, 2020), which leverages open-source GRASS GIS. Pre-processing using STARS or **openSTARS** ends with the creation of an **.ssn** folder, which is non-proprietary and contains all the spatial, topological, and attribute information needed to fit models to data on a stream network using **SSN2**. Shapefiles and text files residing in the **.ssn** folder are read into **R** (using `ssn_import()`) and placed into a special list we call an SSN object. The SSN object contains geometry and topological information about the stream reaches and sites, as well as observed data and data for prediction at unsampled sites.

We first load **SSN2** into our current **R** session:

```
library(SSN2)
```

The **SSN2** packages comes with an example **.ssn** folder called **MiddleFork04.ssn** that represents water temperatures recorded from a stream network in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho, USA during 2004. We may store the file path to this example data:

```
path <- system.file("lsndata/MiddleFork04.ssn", package = "SSN2")
```

Several functions in **SSN2** for reading and writing data (which we use shortly) directly manipulate the **.ssn** folder. If it is not desirable to directly manipulate the **MiddleFork04.ssn** data installed alongside **SSN2**, **MiddleFork04.ssn** may be copied it into a temporary directory and the relevant path to this alternative location can be stored:

```
copy_lsn_to_temp()
path <- paste0(tempdir(), "/MiddleFork04.ssn")
```

After specifying **path** (using `system.file()` or `copy_lsn_to_temp()`), we import the stream reaches, observed sites, and prediction sites (**pred1km**):

```
mf04p <- ssn_import(path, predpts = "pred1km")
```

We visualize the stream network, observed sites, and prediction sites (Figure 1) using **ggplot2** (Wickham, 2016):

```
library(ggplot2)
ggplot() +
  geom_sf(data = mf04p$edges) +
  geom_sf(data = mf04p$preds$pred1km, pch = 17, color = "blue") +
  geom_sf(data = mf04p$obs, color = "brown", size = 2) +
  theme_bw()
```

We supplement the **.ssn** object with hydrologic distance matrices that preserve directionality, which are required for statistical modeling:

```
ssn_create_distmat(mf04p, predpts = "pred1km", overwrite = TRUE)
```

Next, summer mean stream temperature (**Summer_mn**) is modeled as a function of elevation (**ELEV_DEM**) and watershed-averaged precipitation (**AREAWTMAP**) with exponential, spherical, and Gaussian structures for the tail-up, tail-down, and Euclidean errors, respectively.

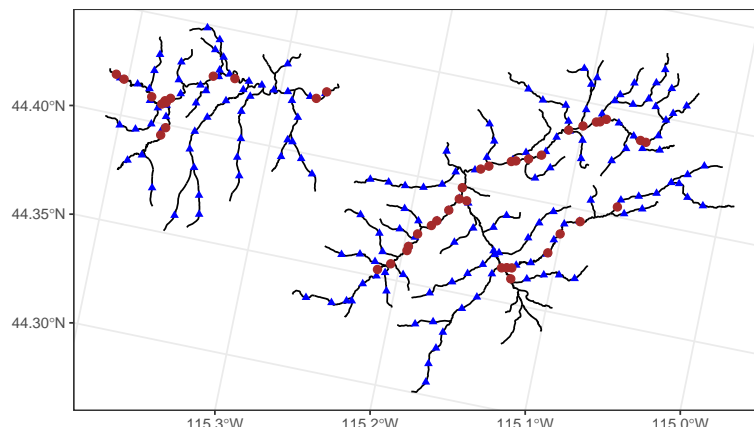


Figure 1: Middle Fork 2004 stream networks. Observed sites are represented by brown, closed circles. Prediction sites are represented by blue, closed triangles.

We fit and summarize this model:

```
ssn_mod <- ssn_lm(
  formula = Summer_mn ~ ELEV_DEM + AREAWTMAP,
  ssn.object = mf04p,
  tailup_type = "exponential",
  taildown_type = "spherical",
  euclid_type = "gaussian",
  additive = "afvArea"
)
```

A summary of the fitted model looks similar to a summary returned by `lm()` but also returns spatial dependence parameter estimates:

```
summary(ssn_mod)

##
## Call:
## ssn_lm(formula = Summer_mn ~ ELEV_DEM + AREAWTMAP, ssn.object = mf04p,
##   tailup_type = "exponential", taildown_type = "spherical",
##   euclid_type = "gaussian", additive = "afvArea")
##
## Residuals:
##      Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
## -3.6393 -2.0646 -0.5952  0.2143  0.7497
##
## Coefficients (fixed):
##              Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
## (Intercept)  76.195041   7.871574   9.680 < 2e-16 ***
## ELEV_DEM      -0.026905   0.003646  -7.379 1.6e-13 ***
## AREAWTMAP     -0.009099   0.004461  -2.040 0.0414 *
## ---
## Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
##
## Pseudo R-squared: 0.6124
```

```
##
## Coefficients (covariance):
##           Effect      Parameter      Estimate
##   tailup exponential de (parsill) 3.800e+00
##   tailup exponential      range 4.194e+06
##   taildown spherical de (parsill) 4.480e-01
##   taildown spherical      range 1.647e+05
##   euclid gaussian de (parsill) 1.509e-02
##   euclid gaussian      range 4.496e+03
##           nugget      nugget 2.087e-02
```

SSN2 leverages the `tidy()`, `glance()`, and `augment()` functions (Robinson, Hayes, & Couch, 2021) to inspect the fitted model and provide diagnostics:

```
tidy(ssn_mod, conf.int = TRUE)
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 x 7
##   term      estimate std.error statistic p.value conf.low conf.high
##   <chr>      <dbl>    <dbl>    <dbl>   <dbl>   <dbl>   <dbl>
## 1 (Intercept) 76.2      7.87      9.68 0      60.8    91.6
## 2 AREAWTMAP -0.00910  0.00446    -2.04 4.14e- 2 -0.0178 -0.000356
## 3 ELEV_DEM -0.0269  0.00365    -7.38 1.60e-13 -0.0341 -0.0198
```

```
glance(ssn_mod)
```

```
## # A tibble: 1 x 9
##       n      p  npair value   AIC  AICc logLik deviance pseudo.r.squared
##   <int> <dbl> <int> <dbl> <dbl> <dbl> <dbl>   <dbl>         <dbl>
## 1    45     3     7  59.3  73.3  76.3 -29.6    41.9             0.612
```

```
aug_mod <- augment(ssn_mod)
subset(aug_mod, select = c(Summer_mn, .fitted, .resid, .hat, .cooksd))
```

```
## Simple feature collection with 45 features and 5 fields
## Geometry type: POINT
## Dimension: XY
## Bounding box: xmin: -1530805 ymin: 2527111 xmax: -1503079 ymax: 2537823
## Projected CRS: USA_Contiguous_Albers_Equal_Area_Conic_USGS_version
## # A tibble: 45 x 6
##   Summer_mn .fitted .resid .hat .cooksd geometry
##   <dbl> <dbl> <dbl> <dbl> <dbl> <POINT [m]>
## 1 11.4 14.4 -3.07 0.0915 0.0962 (-1512690 2531883)
## 2 10.7 12.9 -2.20 0.114 0.00471 (-1512852 2531295)
## 3 10.4 12.7 -2.25 0.0372 0.00724 (-1513400 2530706)
## 4 10.1 12.3 -2.18 0.0251 0.00153 (-1514027 2530147)
## 5 10.1 12.3 -2.13 0.0374 0.000583 (-1514309 2529902)
## 6 9.81 12.0 -2.16 0.0602 0.0150 (-1515032 2529461)
## 7 9.76 11.6 -1.85 0.0736 0.00739 (-1515513 2528810)
## 8 9.77 11.6 -1.84 0.0648 0.00687 (-1515588 2528592)
## 9 9.53 11.4 -1.87 0.112 0.00152 (-1516440 2527899)
## 10 12.6 14.9 -2.28 0.0498 0.00964 (-1512464 2531195)
## # i 35 more rows
```

Specific helper functions (e.g., `coef()`, `AIC()`, `residuals()`) can be used to obtain the same quantities returned by `tidy()`, `glance()`, and `augment()`:

```
coef(ssn_mod)
```

```
## (Intercept)      ELEV_DEM      AREAWTMAP
```

```
## 76.19504087 -0.02690478 -0.00909941
```

```
AIC(ssn_mod)
```

```
## [1] 73.2623
```

```
head(residuals(ssn_mod))
```

```
##          1          2          3          4          5          6
## -3.066413 -2.204147 -2.252004 -2.175337 -2.131527 -2.162417
```

Prediction at the unobserved sites is performed using `augment` (or `predict()`):

```
aug_pred <- augment(ssn_mod, newdata = "pred1km", interval = "prediction")
subset(aug_pred, select = c(.fitted, .lower, .upper))
```

```
## Simple feature collection with 175 features and 3 fields
## Geometry type: POINT
## Dimension:      XY
## Bounding box:  xmin: -1530631 ymin: 2521707 xmax: -1500020 ymax: 2540253
## Projected CRS: USA_Contiguous_Albers_Equal_Area_Conic_USGS_version
## # A tibble: 175 x 4
##   .fitted .lower .upper      geometry
##   <dbl>   <dbl>   <dbl>   <POINT [m]>
## 1    14.6    14.3    15.0 (-1520657 2536657)
## 2    15.0    14.7    15.4 (-1519866 2536812)
## 3    14.8    14.3    15.3 (-1521823 2536911)
## 4    15.0    14.5    15.5 (-1523183 2537256)
## 5    15.2    14.7    15.6 (-1523860 2537452)
## 6    15.1    14.8    15.5 (-1525443 2537698)
## 7    15.1    14.7    15.5 (-1526397 2537254)
## 8    15.0    14.6    15.4 (-1527436 2536803)
## 9    14.9    14.6    15.3 (-1529043 2536449)
## 10   14.9    14.5    15.2 (-1529689 2537313)
## # i 165 more rows
```

Here, `.fitted` are the predictions, `.lower` are the lower bounds of 95% prediction intervals, and `.upper` are the upper bounds of 95% prediction intervals.

Generalized spatial linear models for binary, count, proportion, and skewed data are available via the `ssn_glm()` function. Simulating data on a stream network is performed via `ssn_simulate()`.

Discussion

SSN models are valuable tools for statistical analysis of data collected on stream networks and help improve inference about vital stream ecosystems. These models have been employed (using SSN) to better understand and manage water quality (McManus et al., 2020; Scown, McManus, Carson Jr, & Nietch, 2017), ecosystem metabolism (Rodríguez-Castillo, Estévez, González-Ferreras, & Barquín, 2019), and climate change impacts on freshwater ecosystems (Isaak, Wenger, et al., 2017; Ruesch et al., 2012), as well as generate aquatic population estimates (Isaak, Ver Hoef, Peterson, Horan, & Nagel, 2017), inform conservation planning (Rodríguez-González et al., 2019; Sharma, Dubey, Johnson, Rawal, & Sivakumar, 2021), and assess restoration activities (Fuller, Leinenbach, Detenbeck, Labiosa, & Isaak, 2022), among other applications. The breadth and applicability of SSN models are further enhanced by data aggregation tools like the National Hydrography Dataset (McKay et al., 2012), National Stream Internet Project (Nagel, Peterson, Isaak,

Ver Hoef, & Horan, 2015) and StreamCat (Hill, Weber, Leibowitz, Olsen, & Thornbrugh, 2016).

There are several spatial modeling packages in **R**, including **geoR** (Ribeiro Jr et al., 2022), **gstat** (E. J. Pebesma, 2004), **FRK** (Sainsbury-Dale, Zammit-Mangion, & Cressie, 2022), **fields** (Nychka, Furrer, Paige, & Sain, 2021), **R-INLA** (Lindgren & Rue, 2015), and **spmodel** (Dumelle, Higham, & Ver Hoef, 2023), among others. However, these packages fail to account for the intricacies of stream networks. **rtop** (Skoien et al., 2014) allows for spatial prediction on stream networks but fails to provide options for model fitting and diagnostics. Thus, **SSN2** is the most complete tool available in **R** for working with SSN models. To learn more about **SSN2**, visit our CRAN webpage at <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=SSN2>.

Acknowledgements

The views expressed in this manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of USEPA, NOAA, or USFS. Any mention of trade names, products, or services does not imply an endorsement by the U.S. government, USEPA, NOAA, or USFS. USEPA, NOAA, or USFS do not endorse any commercial products, services or enterprises.

References

- Bivand, R. S., Pebesma, E., & Gomez-Rubio, V. (2013). *Applied spatial data analysis with R, second edition*. Springer, NY. Retrieved from <https://asdar-book.org/>
- Bivand, R., Keitt, T., & Rowlingson, B. (2021). *rgdal: Bindings for the 'geospatial' data abstraction library*. Retrieved from <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=rgdal>
- Bivand, R., & Lewin-Koh, N. (2021). *maptools: Tools for handling spatial objects*. Retrieved from <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=maptools>
- Bivand, R., & Rundel, C. (2020). *rgeos: Interface to geometry engine - open source ('GEOS')*. Retrieved from <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=rgeos>
- Cressie, N. (1993). *Statistics for spatial data (revised edition)*. Wiley: Hoboken, NJ.
- Dumelle, M., Higham, M., & Ver Hoef, J. M. (2023). *spmodel: Spatial statistical modeling and prediction in R*. *PLOS ONE*, 18(3), 1–32. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0282524
- Fuller, M. R., Leinenbach, P., Detenbeck, N. E., Labiosa, R., & Isaak, D. J. (2022). Riparian vegetation shade restoration and loss effects on recent and future stream temperatures. *Restoration Ecology*, 30(7), e13626.
- Hill, R. A., Weber, M. H., Leibowitz, S. G., Olsen, A. R., & Thornbrugh, D. J. (2016). The stream-catchment (StreamCat) dataset: A database of watershed metrics for the conterminous united states. *JAWRA Journal of the American Water Resources Association*, 52(1), 120–128.
- Isaak, D. J., Ver Hoef, J. M., Peterson, E. E., Horan, D. L., & Nagel, D. E. (2017). Scalable population estimates using spatial-stream-network (SSN) models, fish density surveys, and national geospatial database frameworks for streams. *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, 74(2), 147–156.
- Isaak, D. J., Wenger, S. J., Peterson, E. E., Ver Hoef, J. M., Nagel, D. E., Luce, C. H., Hostetler, S. W., et al. (2017). The NorWeST summer stream temperature model and scenarios for the western US: A crowd-sourced database and new geospatial tools foster a user community and predict broad climate warming of rivers and streams. *Water Resources Research*, 53(11), 9181–9205.
- Kattwinkel, M., Szöcs, E., Peterson, E., & Schäfer, R. B. (2020). Preparing GIS data for analysis of stream monitoring data: The r package openSTARS. *Plos one*, 15(9), e0239237.
- Lindgren, F., & Rue, H. (2015). Bayesian spatial modelling with R-INLA. *Journal of*

- Statistical Software*, 63(19).
- McKay, L., Bondelid, T., Dewald, T., Johnston, J., Moore, R., & Reah, A. (2012). *NHDPlus version 2: User guide*. Retrieved from http://www.horizon-systems.com/NHDPlus/NHDPlusV2_home.php
- McManus, M. G., D'Amico, E., Smith, E. M., Polinsky, R., Ackerman, J., & Tyler, K. (2020). Variation in stream network relationships and geospatial predictions of watershed conductivity. *Freshwater Science*, 39(4), 704–721.
- Nagel, D., Peterson, E., Isaak, D., Ver Hoef, J., & Horan, D. (2015). National stream internet protocol and user guide. *US Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station Air, Water, and Aquatic Environments Program*.
- Nowosad, J. (2023, June 4). Upcoming Changes to Popular R Packages for Spatial Data: What You Need to Do. Retrieved from <https://geocompx.org/post/2023/rgdal-retirement>
- Nychka, D., Furrer, R., Paige, J., & Sain, S. (2021). Fields: Tools for spatial data. Boulder, CO, USA: University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. Retrieved from <https://github.com/dnychka/fieldsRPackage>
- Pebesma, E. (2018). Simple Features for R: Standardized Support for Spatial Vector Data. *The R Journal*, 10(1), 439–446. doi:10.32614/RJ-2018-009
- Pebesma, E. J. (2004). Multivariable geostatistics in S: The gstat package. *Computers & Geosciences*, 30, 683–691.
- Peterson, E. E., & Ver Hoef, J. M. (2010). A mixed-model moving-average approach to geostatistical modeling in stream networks. *Ecology*, 91(3), 644–651.
- Peterson, E. E., & Ver Hoef, J. M. (2014). STARS: An ArcGIS toolset used to calculate the spatial information needed to fit spatial statistical models to stream network data. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 56, 1–17.
- Ribeiro Jr, P. J., Diggle, P., Christensen, O., Schlather, M., Bivand, R., & Ripley, B. (2022). *geoR: Analysis of geostatistical data*. Retrieved from <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=geoR>
- Robinson, D., Hayes, A., & Couch, S. (2021). *Broom: Convert statistical objects into tidy tibbles*. Retrieved from <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=broom>
- Rodríguez-Castillo, T., Estévez, E., González-Ferreras, A. M., & Barquín, J. (2019). Estimating ecosystem metabolism to entire river networks. *Ecosystems*, 22, 892–911.
- Rodríguez-González, P. M., García, C., Albuquerque, A., Monteiro-Henriques, T., Faria, C., Guimarães, J. B., Mendonça, D., et al. (2019). A spatial stream-network approach assists in managing the remnant genetic diversity of riparian forests. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 6741.
- Ruesch, A. S., Torgersen, C. E., Lawler, J. J., Olden, J. D., Peterson, E. E., Volk, C. J., & Lawrence, D. J. (2012). Projected climate-induced habitat loss for salmonids in the John Day river network, Oregon, USA. *Conservation Biology*, 26(5), 873–882.
- Sainsbury-Dale, M., Zammit-Mangion, A., & Cressie, N. (2022). Modelling big, heterogeneous, non-gaussian spatial and spatio-temporal data using FRK. *arXiv:2110.02507*.
- Scown, M. W., McManus, M. G., Carson Jr, J. H., & Nietch, C. T. (2017). Improving predictive models of in-stream phosphorus concentration based on nationally-available spatial data coverages. *Journal of the American Water Resources Association*, 53(4), 944–960.
- Sharma, A., Dubey, V. K., Johnson, J. A., Rawal, Y. K., & Sivakumar, K. (2021). Dendritic prioritization through spatial stream network modeling informs targeted management of Himalayan riverscapes under brown trout invasion. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 58(11), 2415–2426.
- Skoien, J. O., G. Bloschl, G. Laaha, E. Pebesma, J. Parajka, & A. Viglione. (2014). rtop: An R package for interpolation of data with a variable spatial support, with an example from river networks. *Computers & Geosciences*.
- Ver Hoef, J. M., & Peterson, E. E. (2010). A moving average approach for spatial statistical models of stream networks. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 105(489), 6–18.

- Ver Hoef, Jay M., Peterson, E. E., Clifford, D., & Shah, R. (2014). SSN: An R package for spatial statistical modeling on stream networks. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 56, 1–45.
- Wickham, H. (2016). *ggplot2: Elegant graphics for data analysis*. Springer-Verlag New York. Retrieved from <https://ggplot2.tidyverse.org>