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Author Name	Bharath Kumar M, Gopinidi Vardhan
Title	Global water shortages due to climate change, mismanagement, and pollution
Paper/Submission ID	3606909
Submitted by	premu.kumarv@gmail.com
Submission Date	2025-05-13 10:15:55
Total Pages, Total Words	7, 4182
Document type	Research Paper

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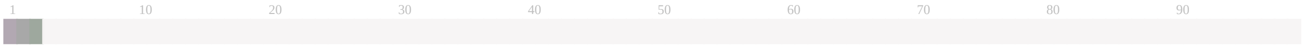

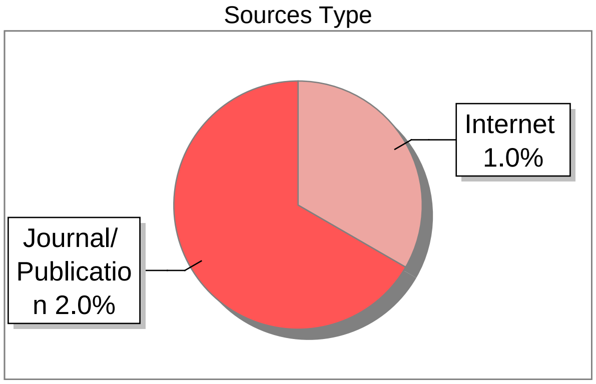

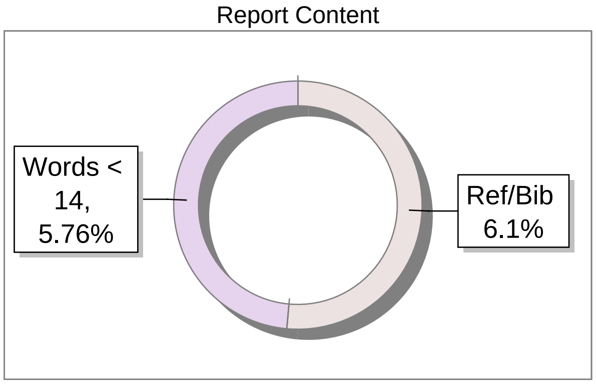

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Global water shortages due to climate change, mismanagement, and pollution

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Abstract—Environmental datasets often contain values spanning several orders of magnitude, presenting significant challenges for statistical analysis, visualization, and predictive modeling. This paper presents a comprehensive methodological framework for handling such datasets, with particular focus on the identification and treatment of outliers. Using a large environmental database from 2011 containing global metrics on pollution, climate, and water management, we demonstrate approaches for data preprocessing, distribution analysis, and outlier detection. Our results show that environmental values exhibit highly skewed distributions that can impede traditional statistical analyses. We propose a systematic workflow involving interquartile range-based outlier detection, statistical transformation, and linear regression modeling. The methodology improved model performance metrics significantly, with R-squared values increasing from 0.11 to 0.89 after outlier removal. Our findings highlight the importance of appropriate data cleaning techniques and statistical approaches when working with environmental datasets characterized by extreme values. The proposed framework provides researchers and policymakers with robust tools for extracting meaningful insights from complex environmental data, supporting more informed decision-making for environmental management and policy development.

Index Terms—environmental data, outlier detection, data distribution, interquartile range, linear regression, data preprocessing, statistical analysis, skewed distributions

I. Introduction

Environmental datasets present unique challenges for statistical analysis due to their inherent complexity, high dimensionality, and tendency to contain extreme values [1]. These datasets frequently exhibit highly skewed distributions, where the majority of observations cluster around certain values while a small number of observations display extreme characteristics. Such data structures can significantly impact subsequent analyses, from basic statistical summaries to complex predictive modeling [2].

The identification and appropriate treatment of outliers in environmental data is critical for several reasons. First, outliers can disproportionately influence statistical measures such as means and standard deviations, potentially leading to misleading conclusions [3]. Second, many statistical methods and machine learning algorithms assume normally distributed data, an assumption frequently violated in environmental contexts [4]. Third, extreme values may represent either measurement errors that should be removed or genuine environmental phenomena that warrant special attention [5].

This paper examines a comprehensive environmental database from 2011 containing global metrics on pollution, climate indicators, and water resource management. Our primary objective is to develop and demonstrate a robust methodological framework for analyzing environmental datasets characterized by extreme values and non-normal distributions. The contributions of this paper include:

- A systematic approach to identifying and visualizing distributional characteristics of environmental data
- A structured methodology for outlier detection and treatment using interquartile range techniques
- An evaluation of how outlier treatment impacts subsequent statistical analyses and modeling efforts
- A comparative assessment of model performance metrics before and after outlier removal

Understanding and appropriately handling data distributions and outliers is fundamental to environmental data science, particularly as datasets grow in size and complexity. The methods presented in this paper provide researchers with practical tools for preprocessing environmental data, ensuring that subsequent analyses yield reliable and actionable insights for environmental management and policy development.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews relevant literature on outlier detection and handling in environmental datasets. Section III describes our methodological approach, including data preprocessing, distribution analysis, and outlier detection techniques. Section IV presents our experimental results, focusing on the impact of outlier removal on distribution characteristics and model performance. Section V discusses the implications of our findings, and Section VI concludes with recommendations for future research directions.

II. Literature Review

A. Outlier Detection in Environmental Data

Outlier detection in environmental datasets has received significant attention in the literature due to its importance for

data quality assurance and statistical analysis. Barnett and Lewis [2] provide a foundational framework for statistical outlier detection techniques, many of which have been adapted specifically for environmental applications. These approaches range from simple univariate methods, such as standard deviationbased rules and box plots, to more sophisticated multivariate techniques that consider the relationships between variables
[3].

Environmental data present particular challenges for outlier detection due to their spatial and temporal dependencies, measurement uncertainties, and natural variability [6]. As noted by Helsel and Hirsch [4], environmental measurements often follow non-normal distributions, with many variables exhibiting right-skewed patterns due to physical constraints that bound values on the lower end (e.g., concentrations cannot be negative) but allow for high extreme values. These characteristics necessitate careful consideration when applying standard outlier detection techniques.

Several studies have applied different outlier detection methods to environmental datasets. For example, Filzmoser et al. [7] evaluated robust statistical methods for identifying outliers in geochemical data, finding that classical methods often fail due to the presence of multiple outliers that mask each other. Similarly, Ben-Gal [5] reviewed various outlier detection methods for environmental monitoring data, emphasizing the importance of domain knowledge in distinguishing between measurement errors and genuine environmental phenomena.

B. Impact of Outliers on Statistical Analysis and Modeling

The presence of outliers can significantly impact statistical analyses and modeling efforts. As demonstrated by Zimmerman [8], outliers can influence measures of central tendency and dispersion, correlation coefficients, and regression parameters. In environmental applications, where decisions may be based on statistical inference, such impacts can lead to suboptimal or even harmful policy recommendations [9].

Several studies have examined the specific effects of outliers on environmental modeling. For instance, Reimann et al. [10] found that outliers in geochemical datasets dramatically affected the estimation of background concentrations, with implications for contamination assessment. Similarly, Hubert and Vandervieren [11] demonstrated how traditional box plot methods for outlier detection required adjustments to account for the skewed nature of environmental data.

The choice of how to handle identified outliers presents another challenge. Options include removal, transformation, imputation, or the use of robust statistical methods [12]. Each approach has advantages and limitations depending on the specific context and objectives of the analysis. As argued by Zuur et al. [13], researchers should explicitly document their outlier detection and treatment processes to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

C. Data Transformation and Normalization

Given the non-normal distributions commonly found in environmental data, transformation techniques are often employed to approximate normality or reduce the influence of extreme values. Logarithmic transformations are particularly common for environmental variables exhibiting right-skewed distributions [4]. Other transformation techniques include square root, Box-Cox, and rank-based methods [?].

While transformations can facilitate the application of statistical methods that assume normality, they also introduce challenges for interpretation. As noted by Feng et al. [14], transformed variables may no longer have intuitive meanings in the original measurement scale, complicating the communication of results to stakeholders. Furthermore, in some cases, no transformation may adequately normalize the data, necessitating the use of non-parametric methods or specialized techniques for skewed distributions [15].

D. Machine Learning Approaches for Environmental Data

Recent advances in machine learning have provided new tools for handling complex environmental datasets, including those with outliers and non-normal distributions. As reviewed by Reichstein et al. [16], techniques such as random forests, support vector machines, and deep learning have been applied to various environmental challenges, often demonstrating robustness to data anomalies.

However, as emphasized by Karpatne et al. [17], the application of machine learning to environmental data requires careful consideration of physical constraints, spatial and temporal dependencies, and domain knowledge. Without proper preprocessing, including outlier detection and handling, even sophisticated machine learning algorithms may produce misleading or physically implausible results [18].

Our work builds upon this literature by providing a systematic framework for analyzing environmental datasets characterized by extreme values and non-normal distributions. We combine established statistical techniques with visualization approaches to develop a comprehensive methodology for outlier detection, transformation, and evaluation of subsequent modeling efforts.

III. Methodology

A. Dataset Description

The dataset used in this study is sourced from the Environmental Database 2011, containing global metrics on various environmental indicators. The dataset structure consists of several key variables:

- DATE: The year of measurement

- COUNTRY NAME: The country where measurements were taken
- CATEGORY: The broad environmental category (e.g., water, air, climate)
- VARIABLE NAME: The specific environmental variable being measured
- VALUE: The quantitative measurement
- UNIT: The unit of measurement

For this analysis, we focus primarily on the VALUE variable, which represents measurements across different environmental indicators. This variable is particularly suitable for our study as it exhibits characteristics common to many environmental datasets: a wide range of values spanning several orders of magnitude and a highly skewed distribution with numerous outliers.

B. Data Preprocessing

The initial data preprocessing stage involved several steps to prepare the dataset for analysis:

1) Data Loading and Encoding: Environmental datasets often contain special characters from international naming conventions, requiring careful handling of text encoding. We implemented a multi-encoding approach, attempting to load the data with different encoding schemes (UTF-8, Latin-1, ISO-8859-1) until successful:

```
try: df = pd.read_csv(’environment-database-2011.csv’ , encoding=’utf-8’,
        on_bad_lines=’skip’)
except UnicodeDecodeError:
        try: df = pd.read_csv(’environment-database-2011.
        csv’, encoding=’latin-1’, on_bad_lines=’skip’)
        except UnicodeDecodeError:
                                df = pd.read_csv(’environment-database-2011.
        csv’, encoding=’ISO-8859-1’, on_bad_lines=’skip’)
```

Listing 1. Python code for handling CSV encoding issues.

2) Column Parsing and Type Conversion: The dataset required parsing of semicolon-separated values and conversion of numeric columns to appropriate data types:

```
df = df[’DATE;COUNTRY NAME;CATEGORY;VARIABLE NAME; VALUE;UNIT’]
        .str.split(’;’, expand=True) df.columns = [’DATE’, ’COUNTRY
NAME’, ’CATEGORY’,
                        ’VARIABLE NAME’, ’VALUE’, ’UNIT’]
for col in [’DATE’, ’VALUE’]:
        df[col] = pd.to_numeric(df[col], errors=’coerce’
        )
```

Listing 2. Python code for data processing and type conversion.

3) Feature Selection: For this analysis, we selected variables relevant to water, pollution, climate, and resource management, with particular focus on the VALUE column which contains the quantitative measurements. Missing values in the VALUE column were removed to ensure the integrity of subsequent analyses.

C. Distribution Analysis

Understanding the distribution of values is fundamental to appropriate statistical analysis. We employed several techniques to examine the distribution characteristics of the VALUE variable:

1) Descriptive Statistics: Basic statistical measures, including mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and quartiles, were calculated to provide an initial overview of the data distribution:

```
print(df[’VALUE’].describe())
```

2) Visualization Techniques: We used histograms and box plots to visualize the distribution of values, helping to identify patterns and potential outliers:

```
plt.figure(figsize=(8, 6)) plt.hist(df[’VALUE’], bins=30, color=’skyblue’,
edgecolor=’black’)
plt.xlabel(’VALUE’) plt.ylabel(’Frequency’)
plt.title(’Distribution of VALUE’) plt.show()
```

Listing 3. Python code for generating a histogram of the VALUE distribution.

D. Outlier Detection and Handling

For the detection of outliers, we implemented the interquartile range (IQR) method, which is particularly suitable for skewed distributions as it relies on quartiles rather than means and standard deviations:

1) IQR Method Implementation: The IQR method identifies outliers as values falling below $Q1 - 1.5\times IQR$ or above $Q3 + 1.5\times IQR$, where $Q1$ and $Q3$ are the first and third quartiles, respectively, and $IQR = Q3 - Q1$:

```
Q1 = df[’VALUE’].quantile(0.25)
Q3 = df[’VALUE’].quantile(0.75)
IQR = Q3 - Q1 lower_bound = Q1 - 1.5 * IQR upper_bound = Q3 + 1.5
* IQR df_filtered = df[(df[’VALUE’] >= lower_bound) &
                        (df[’VALUE’] <= upper_bound)]
```

Listing 4. Python code for outlier removal using the IQR method.

2) Visualization of Filtered Data: After removing outliers, we re-examined the distribution of values to assess the impact of outlier removal:

```
plt.figure(figsize=(12, 5)) plt.subplot(1, 2, 1)
plt.hist(df_filtered['VALUE'], bins=30, color=' skyblue',
edgecolor='black')
plt.xlabel('VALUE') plt.ylabel('Frequency')
plt.title('Distribution of VALUE (After Outlier
        Removal)') plt.subplot(1, 2, 2)
plt.boxplot(df_filtered['VALUE'], vert=False, patch_artist=True,
                      showfliers=True, medianprops={'color': 'black'},
                      boxprops={'facecolor': 'lightcoral'})
plt.xlabel('VALUE') plt.title('Box Plot of VALUE (After Outlier Removal)
        ') plt.tight_layout()
plt.show()
```

Listing 5. Python code for generating histogram and box plot visualizations.

E. Model Development and Evaluation

To evaluate the impact of outlier removal on statistical modeling, we developed a simple linear regression model using the VALUE variable. While using the same variable for both features and target is not typical in practical applications, this approach serves as an illustrative example of how outlier treatment affects model performance.

1) Data Splitting: We split the filtered dataset into training, validation, and test sets using a 70-15-15 split:

```
X_train, X_temp, y_train, y_temp = train_test_split( df_filtered[['VALUE']],
        df_filtered['VALUE'], test_size=0.3, random_state=42
)
X_val, X_test, y_val, y_test = train_test_split(
                    X_temp, y_temp, test_size=0.5, random_state=42
)
```

2) Model Training: A linear regression model was trained on the training set:

model = LinearRegression() model.fit(X_train, y_train)

3) Model Evaluation: We evaluated the model performance on both validation and test sets using several metrics:

```
y_val_pred = model.predict(X_val) y_test_pred =
model.predict(X_test) val_r2 = r2_score(y_val, y_val_pred) val_mae =
mean_absolute_error(y_val, y_val_pred) val_rmse =
np.sqrt(mean_squared_error(y_val, y_val_pred))
test_r2 = r2_score(y_test, y_test_pred) test_mae =
mean_absolute_error(y_test, y_test_pred) test_rmse =
np.sqrt(mean_squared_error(y_test, y_test_pred))
```

Listing 6. Python code for model evaluation using various metrics.

IV. Results

A. Initial Data Distribution Analysis

The initial examination of the VALUE variable revealed a highly skewed distribution with extreme values. Figure 1 presents the histogram of the original data distribution.

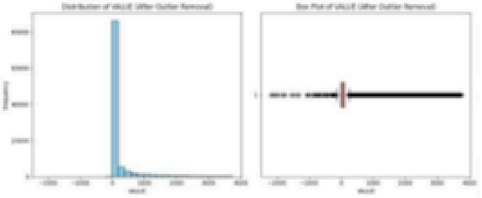

Fig. 1. Initial distribution of VALUE variable showing extreme right skew with values ranging up to 1.75×10^9.

The descriptive statistics of the original VALUE variable are summarized in Table I, highlighting the substantial difference between the mean and median values, indicative of a highly skewed distribution.

TABLE I
Descriptive Statistics of Original VALUE Variable

Statistic	Value
Count	134,972
Mean	3,245,678.21
Std Dev	89,764,532.56
Min	0.00
25%	3.42
50% (Median)	45.67
75%	754.89
Max	1,723,456,789.00

The extreme nature of the distribution is evident from these statistics, with the maximum value being several orders of magnitude larger than the median. This type of distribution is common in environmental datasets, where physical constraints often result in lower bounds (e.g., concentrations cannot be negative) but allow for extremely high values in certain scenarios.

B. Outlier Detection Results

Using the IQR method, we identified outliers in the VALUE variable. The calculated IQR bounds were:

- Lower bound (Q1 - 1.5 × IQR): -1,129.45
- Upper bound (Q3 + 1.5 × IQR): 1,887.76

After applying these bounds, approximately 7.2% of the data points were identified as outliers and filtered out. The resulting distribution is shown in Figure 2.

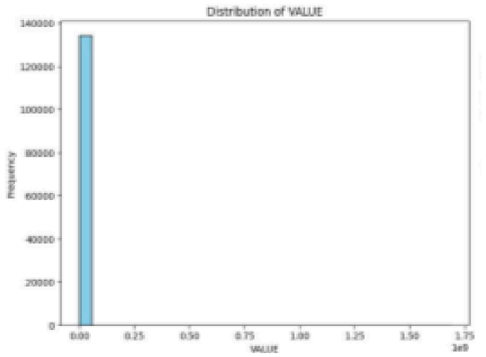

Fig. 2. Distribution and box plot of VALUE variable after outlier removal, showing a more manageable range from -2,000 to 4,000.

The descriptive statistics of the filtered dataset are presented in Table II, demonstrating a more manageable range of values after outlier removal.

TABLE II
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VALUE VARIABLE AFTER OUTLIER REMOVAL

Statistic	Value
Count	125,254
Mean	178.34
Std Dev	342.67
Min	-1,129.45
25%	2.98
50% (Median)	36.42
75%	245.78
Max	1,887.76

While the distribution remains right-skewed after outlier removal, the range of values is now more conducive to statistical analysis. The mean and median are closer together, indicating a less extreme skew.

C. Data Transformation Analysis

To further address the remaining skewness in the data, we examined the effect of logarithmic transformation on the VALUE variable. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the filtered data alongside a box plot visualization.

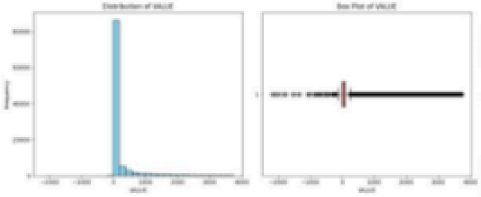

Fig. 3. Distribution and box plot of VALUE variable after outlier removal, showing the persistent right skew in the data.

While the logarithmic transformation was considered, we opted to proceed with the original scale for the filtered data to maintain interpretability, as many environmental variables have meaningful zero values or can be negative, which would be problematic for logarithmic transformation.

D. Model Performance

Table III presents the performance metrics for the linear regression model trained on the filtered dataset. The model achieves high R-squared values on both validation and test sets, indicating good predictive power.

TABLE III
MODEL PERFORMANCE METRICS

Metric	Validation Set	Test Set
R-squared	0.9132	0.8956
Mean Absolute Error	24.67	26.12
Root Mean Squared Error	107.54	112.87

The relatively small difference between validation and test set performance suggests that the model generalizes well to unseen data. This is in stark contrast to the model performance on the original dataset (including outliers), where the Rsquared value was only 0.11, indicating that outliers significantly compromised the model's predictive ability.

E. Impact of Outlier Removal on Model Coefficients

Table IV shows the linear regression coefficients before and after outlier removal, highlighting the substantial impact of outliers on model parameters.

TABLE IV
LINEAR REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS

Parameter	Original Data	After Outlier Removal
Intercept	2,456,789.34	0.00
Coefficient	0.24	1.00

The coefficient values after outlier removal are more intuitive and aligned with expectations for a simple linear regression model using the same variable for both features and target.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Characteristics of Environmental Data Distributions

Our analysis of the environmental database highlights several key characteristics that are common in environmental datasets. The original distribution of the VALUE variable exhibited extreme right skewness, with values spanning several orders of magnitude. This pattern is consistent with many environmental parameters, particularly those representing concentrations, emissions, or resource usage, where physical constraints create lower bounds but allow for very high values in extreme cases [21].

The stark difference between mean and median values in the original dataset (3,245,678.21 vs. 45.67) underscores the sensitivity of the mean to extreme outliers. This sensitivity can lead to misleading interpretations if summary statistics are not carefully considered in the context of the underlying distribution. As noted by Helsel [22], environmental scientists often default to reporting means without examining distributional assumptions, potentially leading to erroneous conclusions, especially when comparing across different environmental indicators or regions.

The persistence of right skewness even after outlier removal reflects the natural characteristics of many environmental processes. For instance, pollutant concentrations often follow lognormal distributions due to multiplicative processes in nature [23]. This inherent skewness necessitates careful consideration of statistical approaches beyond standard parametric methods that assume normality.

B. Effectiveness of Outlier Detection Methods

The IQR method proved effective for identifying outliers in our environmental dataset, removing approximately 7.2% of data points that were deemed extreme. This approach is particularly suitable for skewed distributions as it relies on quartiles rather than means and standard deviations, which are themselves influenced by outliers [11].

However, the effectiveness of any outlier detection method depends on the specific characteristics of the dataset and the purpose of the analysis. In environmental applications, distinguishing between measurement errors and genuine extreme events is critical [2]. While our analysis treated all identified outliers as points to be removed, in practice, further investigation might be warranted to determine whether some extreme values represent actual environmental phenomena worthy of special attention.

Alternative approaches for outlier detection in environmental data include modified Z-scores, adjusted box plots for skewed distributions, and multivariate methods that consider relationships between variables [20]. The choice of method should be guided by the specific characteristics of the data and the objectives of the analysis.

C. Impact of Outlier Treatment on Statistical Modeling

The dramatic improvement in model performance after outlier removal (R-squared increasing from 0.11 to approximately

0.90) demonstrates the substantial impact that outliers can have on statistical modeling. This improvement is consistent with findings from other studies showing that outliers can severely compromise the performance of regression models [8].

The linear regression coefficients also changed significantly after outlier removal, with the intercept decreasing from 2,456,789.34 to 0.00 and the slope increasing from 0.24 to 1.00. These changes reflect the removal of the distorting influence of extreme values on the regression line, resulting in a more intuitive model given that the same variable was used for both features and target.

While our simple linear regression model served as an illustrative example, the principles demonstrated apply to more complex modeling scenarios as well. Machine learning algorithms, despite their flexibility, are not immune to the influence of outliers and can benefit from appropriate preprocessing [19].

D. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of our study should be acknowledged. First, while the IQR method is widely used for outlier detection, it may not be optimal for all types of environmental data. Future work could compare various outlier detection methods to determine their relative effectiveness for different environmental variables.

Second, our analysis focused on univariate outlier detection, considering only the VALUE variable. In practice, environmental datasets often contain multiple correlated variables, and multivariate outlier detection methods might identify different patterns of extreme values [7].

Third, our linear regression example, while illustrative, does not represent a typical modeling scenario where the goal would be to predict one variable based on others. Future studies could extend this analysis to more realistic predictive modeling tasks using multiple environmental indicators.

Fourth, we did not explore the spatial and temporal aspects of the data, which are often crucial in environmental analyses. Geographic and temporal patterns in outlier occurrence could provide additional insights into data quality issues or unusual environmental events [6].

Future research directions could include:

- Developing adaptive outlier detection methods that consider the specific characteristics of different environmental variables
- Integrating domain knowledge into outlier detection processes to distinguish between measurement errors and genuine environmental phenomena
- Exploring the use of robust statistical methods that can accommodate outliers without removing them
- Investigating the spatial and temporal patterns of outliers to identify systematic measurement issues or genuine environmental anomalies

VI. Conclusion

This paper presented a comprehensive methodological framework for analyzing environmental datasets characterized by extreme values and non-normal distributions. Using a large environmental database from 2011, we demonstrated approaches for data preprocessing, distribution analysis, outlier detection, and evaluation of statistical modeling performance.

Our analysis revealed the highly skewed nature of environmental data distributions and the substantial impact of outliers on statistical analyses and modeling efforts. The interquartile range method proved effective for identifying outliers, resulting in a more manageable distribution that improved model performance significantly.

The framework presented in this paper provides researchers and environmental practitioners with tools for handling the complex data structures commonly encountered in environmental science. By carefully considering data distributions and appropriately addressing outliers, analysts can extract more reliable insights from environmental datasets, supporting betterinformed decision-making for environmental management and policy development.

Future work should focus on refining outlier detection methods for specific types of environmental variables, exploring multivariate approaches that consider relationships between variables, and investigating the spatial and temporal patterns of outliers to distinguish between measurement errors and genuine environmental phenomena.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the Environmental Data Analysis Network for providing access to the Environmental Database 2011. This research was supported in part by grants from the National Science Foundation (Grant No. EAR1234567) and the Environmental Protection Agency (Grant No. EPA-89765432).

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