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| *Predictive modelling of sea debris around Maltese coastal waters* |
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Abstract

The accumulation of sea surface debris around the coastal waters of Malta, presents numerous ecological and environmental challenges that negatively affect both marine ecosystems and human activities. This is exacerbated by the absence of an effective system that can predict their movement, making it more challenging to address and mitigate this issue effectively.

The primary objective of this project was to develop a system that can predict dispersion patterns of sea surface debris around Malta’s coast. To achieve this, we developed a comprehensive machine learning and physics-based pipeline. This pipeline uses historical sea surface current data to predict future conditions, while also having the ability to visualise the movement of debris.

Central to this system is the integration of LSTM and GRU models, trained to predict the next 24 hours of sea currents within a specific area. These predictions were subsequently utilised by the Lagrangian model to visualise the movement of surface debris, offering insights into future dispersion patterns.

A comparative evaluation was conducted for both models, examining the accuracy of their predictions and the quality of the simulations generated by the Lagrangian model, based on these predictions. The results indicated that the LSTM model outperformed the GRU model. This was evidenced by the LSTM's enhanced precision in forecasting the movements of sea surface currents, thereby providing a more reliable basis for the subsequent simulation of debris dispersal patterns.

Overall, this project offers a novel approach to addressing the challenge of seasurface debris around Malta. By harnessing the power of machine learning in tandem with a physics based Lagrangian model, we have established a framework that not only predicts sea surface currents with notable accuracy, but also visualises the movement of surfacemarine debris, allowing us to make more informed decisions about our environment and our effect on it.

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List of Abbreviations

FYP Final year project (Style: Abbreviations)

LSTM

GRU

Note that the List of Abbreviations should be sorted on the acronym list.

# Introduction

This project is an integration of machine learning techniques with a physics based Lagrangian model [1] to address the environmental issues of sea debris. At the core of this project is a pipeline that harnesses historical data to forecast future conditions, specifically predicting the next 24 hours of sea surface currents. These predictions serve as inputs for a Lagrangian model [1], enabling it to simulate the movement of surface marine debris. Finally, a comparative evaluation of both LSTM and GRU models is conducted, focusing on their predictive accuracy and the quality of the visualizations. This project introduces an approach of merging machine learning with a physics-based model, offering valuable insights to marine conservation efforts and improving decision-making for managing marine debris around the Maltese Islands.

## Problem Definition

Sea surface debris around the coastal waters of Malta presents a significant environmental challenge. Predominantly composed of plastics, which constitute 82% of all man-made floating items encountered in the Mediterranean sea [2], this debris endangers marine life, disrupts ecological balances, and undermines the ecological integrity of coastal areas [3]. This problem is further aggravated by the lack of an effective system that can predict and forecast the movement of this surface debris, since as of writing, there exists no system that adequately addresses this challenge specifically for the coastal areas around Malta. This further underscores the need for a system that can accurately predict and visualise the dispersion patterns of sea surface debris.

## Motivation

The geological characteristics of the Mediterranean sea makes it difficult for surface debris to escape the area naturally, leading to the accumulation of sea surface debris [4]. The current absence of a predictive system tailored to the coastal regions of Malta impedes effective interventions to mitigate environmental harm. This gap opens an opportunity for the implementation of a system that through the application of Machine Learning and physics-based modelling, aims to address an urgent ecological issue, which is widely recognised as a global crisis [5]. By fulfilling this need, the project aims to provide accurate predictions that can guide effective cleanup operations and inform strategies for long-term marine conservation around the surrounding waters of Malta.

## Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project is to create a system enhanced with Machine Learning for simulating and predicting the movement of marine debris in the coastal waters of Malta, thereby supporting marine conservation efforts. To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been identified:

1. Data integration: To preprocess and integrate the sea surface currents datasets ensuring compatibility and consistency for input into both models.
2. Lagrangian model development: To utilize develop a Lagrangian physics-based model for simulating the movement of surface marine debris, employing historical data to ensure accurate simulations.
3. AI models development: To develop and fine-tune both LSTM and GRU models for the prediction of future sea surface currents. These models will serve as a crucial component of the forecasting system, leveraging their respective strengths in time series data processing to ensure robust and accurate predictions.
4. Integrating the AI models with the Lagrangian model: To integrate the model’s predictions into the Lagrangian model. This integration aims to create future simulations and visualisations of marine debris movement, enhancing the project’s predictive capabilities for marine conservation.
5. Comparison of AI models: To conduct a comparative evaluation of both LSTM and GRU models, focusing on their predictive accuracy and the quality of the final visualizations.

## Proposed Solution

This project aims to develop an integrated pipeline for predicting and simulating the movement of marine debris around Malta's coastal waters. The process begins with the preprocessing of the sea surface currents datasets that will be used as input for the subsequent modelling stages. A Lagrangian model will be developed to visualise the debris movement. This approach is designed to clarify both the expected input from the AI models and the expected nature of the ensuing visualizations. The core of the solution involves developing and fine-tuning two types of machine learning models: LSTM and GRU. These models will undergo extensive testing to determine the optimal architecture and hyperparameters, aiming to accurately predict sea surface currents for a future 24-hour period.

Upon establishing the predictive models, the pipeline integrates these predictions into the Lagrangian model, transforming the predicted data into dynamic visualisations of future debris movement. The project culminates in a comparative analysis of the LSTM and GRU models, evaluating their effectiveness through various metrics, including their predictive accuracy and the quality of the generated visualisations. By analysing the results and visualisations, this project aims to provide actionable insights for effective cleanup operations and strategies for long-term marine conservation around the coastal waters of Malta.

## Summary of Results

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## Document Structure

The remainder of this document is organised into the following chapters:

**Background:** Here, the foundational elements of the project are discussed. This chapter includes a thorough overview of the utilized datasets, an explanation of the Lagrangian model's principles and capabilities, and an insight into the Machine Learning models.

**Literature Review:** In the literature review, we will delve into existing research and findings relevant to marine debris, the use of Lagrangian models, and the application of different AI models in environmental forecasting, establishing the scientific grounding for the project’s methodologies.

**Methodology:** This section details the processes undertaken in implementing the FYP. It includes the steps involved in data integration, the development and integration of the Lagrangian and AI models, and the comparative evaluation of the AI models.

**Evaluation:** A comprehensive outline of the strategies employed to test and evaluate the effectiveness and reliability of the implementation is presented in this section. This will be followed by the presentation and discussion of the results.

**Conclusion:** This FYP is concluded by summarizing conducted work, revisiting the aims and objectives, acknowledging any encountered limitations, highlighting obtained results, and finally suggesting any proposals for future work.

# Background and Literature Review

In this chapter, we provide a comprehensive background for the project, as well as give an overview of pertinent academic papers and literature to underpin the project’s scientific foundations.

## Background

This section is divided into five distinct segments where we collectively provide detailed information regarding this project. First, we begin with an exploration of the impacts of marine debris on ecosystems and delve into the specific datasets critical to this study. Then, we discuss the intricacies of the physics based Lagrangian Model, provide an explanation of time series analysis, and finally round off with an exposition on deep learning models, specifically LSTMs and GRUs.

### *The impact of marine debris on ecosystems*

The environmental and ecological impact of marine debris, particularly in coastal and marine ecosystems, has been extensively researched, as evidenced by [6] and [7]. Several studies in this area reveal significant negative effects, ranging from harm to marine wildlife due to ingestion and entanglement [8], to the disruption of natural habitats [9]. The impact on coastal ecosystems extends beyond the environment, affecting economic sectors reliant on marine health, such as tourism and fishing as discussed in [9]. Further research delves into the long-term ecological consequences, highlighting the urgent need for effective management and mitigation strategies as seen in [10]. These studies collectively emphasize the critical nature of addressing marine debris for ecosystem sustainability and conservation.

### *The Dataset*

The dataset serves as the foundation for any project, with its careful selection and preprocessing being crucial for creating the subsequent models. In this project, a single type of dataset is utilized. This dataset is provided by the Department of Geosciences at the University of Malta.

The dataset used for this project is of sea surface currents velocity data, which is recorded in hourly increments across four years, spanning from January 2020 to December 2023. This dataset is derived from a model generated by high-frequency (HF) radar systems located around the northern parts of the Maltese islands and southern Sicily, which provides a temporal snapshot of the ocean's surface current movements.



Figure 1.1 High Frequency Radars Locations

The data is composed of several variables including longitude, latitude, and time, coupled with eastern and northern ocean current velocities—denoted as 'u' and 'v'. 'U' signifies the east-west current component, indicating the velocity at which surface currents travel horizontally, either eastwards (positive 'u') or westwards (negative 'u'). Similarly, 'v' represents the north-south current component, denoting vertical movement towards the north (positive 'v') or south (negative 'v'). The data's geographical scope is defined within the boundaries of 14.15 to 14.81 degrees longitude and 35.79 to 36.30 degrees latitude.

The dataset is in NetCDF format, which is the standard for climate and meteorological data, the dataset aligns seamlessly with the requirements of the Lagrangian Model used for simulation. Accompanying this data is a visual map indicating the data points' geographical spread, offering an intuitive grasp of the dataset's scope.

This dataset is integral to the project, providing comprehensive environmental parameters essential for the subsequent development of physics-based simulations as well as predictive models.

# Methodology

# Evaluation

## Writing the Evaluation Chapter

*The evaluation component of an FYP is critical.*

* *One has to make sure and explain why all tests used to evaluate the system are relevant, using evidence from the literature about similar systems, and justifying any deviations from standard approaches.*
* *Demonstration that system works as intended (or not, as the case may be).*
* *Include comprehensible summaries of the results of all critical tests that have been made.*
* *The student must also critically evaluate the system in the light of these tests results, describing its strengths and weaknesses.*
* *Ideas for improving it can be carried over into the Future Work section.*
* *Comparison of practical with theoretical results and their interpretation.*
* *Comparison with published work when available.*

# Conclusion

## Writing the Conclusions Chapter

*The Conclusions section should be a summary of the project and a restatement of its main results, i.e. what has been learnt and what it has achieved. An effective set of conclusions should not introduce new material. Instead, it should draw out, summarise, combine, and reiterate the main points that have been made in the body of the report and present opinions based on them.*

## Writing the Future Work Chapter

*Whether by the end of the project all the original aims and objectives have been completed or not, there is always scope for future work. Also, the ideas will have evolved during the project beyond the original target. The Future Work section is for expressing these ideas.*

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