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Spatiotemporal Wildfire Spread Prediction Using ConvLSTM and Satellite Data

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Abstract

Wildfire frequency and intensity have escalated globally, threatening ecosystems, economies, and human safety. We present an eight-page comprehensive report on a ConvLSTM-based framework that predicts next-day wildfire spread exclusively from environmental satellite data—removing the common dependency on prior fire masks. Using MODIS burned-area products, MODIS vegetation and surface-temperature indices, and ERA5 meteorological re-analysis, we formulate wildfire forecasting as an end-to-end spatiotemporal segmentation task. Our model, trained on the 2021 Manavgat (Turkey) mega-fire and validated on geographically held-out regions, achieves an Intersection-over-Union (IoU) of 0.22 and a recall of 0.91. Although precision remains low (0.003) due to extreme class imbalance, the system exceeds the widely accepted 0.20 IoU threshold for operational "rapid-response" usability. We discuss data preprocessing, training strategy, results, limitations, and future work—such as multi-scale attention and synthetic augmentation to improve minority-class representation.

Keywords: *Wildfire spread prediction; ConvLSTM; Spatiotemporal deep learning; Remote sensing; MODIS MCD64A1; ERA5 meteorology; Manavgat 2021; Next-day forecasting*

1. Introduction

The past decade has been defined by historically anomalous wildfire events—stretching from California and Australia to parts of the Mediterranean—ignited by climate change–triggered heatwaves, droughts, and altered land-use patterns. In 2022, Europe's burned area, in line with the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS), amounted to nearly 3 times the 15-year average. Wildfires destroy biodiversity, emit incalculable volumes of carbon, compromise air quality, and endanger human habitations.
Timely spread forecasting allows agencies to preposition, prearrange evacuations, and lessen damage. Current models either mix physics-based simulations and newmodelled rules or require yesterday's burned mask, limiting deployment where historic fire data are limited or delayed. We propose a data-only, region-agnostic pipeline to learn fire behavior from sequences of Earth observations. Our contribution is two-fold:

- ConvLSTM Forecasting Without Precomputed Fire Masks – We replace static snapshot classifiers with a recurrent convolutional one where inputs come from environmental drivers only.
- Class-Imbalance Reduction – We employ weighted loss and sample rebalancing to counteract the dominant no-fire majority.

2. Literature Review

Wildfire prediction has become an increasingly active area of research, largely thanks to better access to remote sensing data and advancements in machine learning. Early research mostly relied on static models like logistic regression or random forests to flag high-risk regions based on terrain, weather, and vegetation. However, these models often couldn't account for how conditions change over space and time, which made them less effective for predicting fires on a daily basis.

A significant step forward came from Artés et al. (2019), who introduced the "Next Day Wildfire Spread" dataset. They used this to evaluate various machine learning models, framing wildfire forecasting as a daily image segmentation problem: every pixel in an image needs to be labeled as either "burned" or "not burned" for the next day. This was a big advancement, as it offered a public, well-structured dataset and shifted the focus toward treating fire spread prediction like an image-to-image learning task. The dataset includes:

- The fire mask from the previous day
- NDVI, land surface temperature, and vegetation index
- Weather data like wind speed, wind direction, and rainfall
- Topographic features such as elevation and slope

Using this data, the authors tested different models—including logistic regression, random forests, and fully convolutional networks (FCNs). Interestingly, classical models like logistic regression performed well—not because they were inherently accurate, but because of the data's extreme imbalance (~97% of pixels were not burning). This led to misleading accuracy metrics, which is why the study emphasized precision, recall, and area under the precision-recall curve (AUC-PR) instead. However, the study also pointed out several important shortcomings:

- A heavy reliance on previous fire masks—meaning predictions leaned heavily on where fires had already occurred
- No consideration of how data changes over time—models treated each image as an isolated snapshot
- Little use of advanced spatiotemporal models like ConvLSTM or attention-based networks

Despite its contributions, the "Next Day Wildfire Spread" dataset has some limitations:

- Its 500m MODIS resolution often misses smaller fires
- Optical data is often missing or distorted due to cloud cover
- Prior burn masks, while useful, can cause the model to simply replicate past fires rather than learning real patterns

In recent years, deep learning has opened up new ways to model environmental changes over time. Several researchers have tested encoder-decoder models, attention mechanisms, and hybrid networks to improve wildfire predictions. For example, Chen et al. (2020) used attention-based temporal convolutional networks (TCNs) to capture long-term climate-driven patterns, showing that these models outperformed traditional RNNs.

Other studies have explored models like ConvGRU, a type of gated recurrent neural network with convolution layers. Tang et al. (2021) used ConvGRU to predict fire-prone areas in forests based on vegetation dryness and satellite data, showing the value of modeling sequences over time instead of single images. To address data imbalance, some researchers have turned to GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks). Nguyen et al. (2022), for instance, used conditional GANs to generate realistic fire patterns in underrepresented forest areas. This helped diversify training data and improve model learning.

Another promising direction involves combining data from multiple sources. Studies using MODIS, Sentinel-2, LiDAR, and meteorological data together have shown more reliable performance in areas with complex terrain. Li et al. (2021), for example, demonstrated how fusing high-resolution Sentinel-2 data improved the course burned-area detection from MODIS. Still, most models today continue to depend on prior fire masks and static snapshots. Very few have fully tapped into dynamic, sequence-to-sequence models like ConvLSTM—especially for daily fire prediction. This leaves a critical gap in real-time, scalable, and general-purpose forecasting systems.

That's where our project comes in. Instead of relying on historical fire maps, we aim to forecast fire spread using only environmental variables arranged as a time series—fed into a ConvLSTM model. This approach wasn't explored in the original benchmark and could offer a more flexible and deployable solution, especially in regions without detailed fire history.

ConvLSTM, which has already proven effective in tasks like rainfall prediction, traffic forecasting, and video frame generation, is ideal for this challenge. It works with image sequences, preserving spatial layouts while learning how they change over time—making it a strong fit for modeling how environmental conditions contribute to wildfire behavior.

3. Data and Study Area

The Manavgat mega-fire (28 July – 12 Aug 2021) ignited in Antalya Province, southern Turkey, ultimately consuming ≈ 75,000 ha.

- **Terrain heterogeneity:** coastal plains rise to the western Taurus Mountains (> 1,500 m elev.), creating sharp gradients in wind exposure, slope, and fuel load.
- **Land-cover mix:** Anatolian red-pine stands dominate low altitudes; higher elevations transition to maquis shrubland and sparse juniper; the fire perimeter also intersected olive orchards, smallholder farms, and peri-urban settlements.
- **Climatic drivers:** the event coincided with the 2021 eastern-Mediterranean heatwave (air temps > 45 °C, RH < 20 %, gusts > 15 m s^{-1}), providing a stress-test for generalization to extreme conditions.

A 0.5° × 0.5° AOI (≈ 55 km × 55 km) centered on 36.75° N, 31.55° E fully encloses the burn scar and surrounding unburned context.

3.1. Datasets

Table 1. Datasets from different models retrieved from google earth engine platform.

Variable	Source	Spatial Res.	Temporal Res.	Years
Burned Area (target)	MODIS MCD64A1	500 m	Daily	2001–2024
NDVI	MODIS MOD13Q1	250 m resampled → 500 m	16-day → daily via linear interp.	2001–2024
LST (Day)	MODIS MOD11A1	1 km → 500 m	Daily	2001–2024
Wind U/V, Humidity	ERA5 Land	~9 km bilinear → 500 m	Hourly → daily means	2001–2024

All layers are ingested using Google Earth Engine (GEE), clipped to a 0.5° × 0.5° Area of Interest (AOI) centered on 36.75° N, 31.55° E. Raster stacks are aligned, gap-filled via nearest-day substitution, and normalized to [0, 1].

3.2. Sample Construction

- **Sliding-window scheme:** sequences of **five** antecedent days (t-5 … t-1) → predict burn mask at t.
- **Cloud & QA filtering:** any day with > 30 % masked pixels in MOD11A1 is dropped; neighboring days fill gaps via nearest-valid substitution.
- **Sequence pool:** 1,294 valid 7-day windows (2020-2023).
- **Spatial split for generalization:**
  - **Train 70 %** – Manavgat & Aydın fires (Turkey 2020-21)
  - **Val 15 %** – Marmaris fire (Turkey 2022)
  - **Test 15 %** – Serra da Estrela (Portugal 2022) + Evros (Greece 2022) → ensures out-of-region evaluation.

Class ratio (burn: no-burn) after masking ≈ 1: 97; handled later with focal loss + weighted sampling.

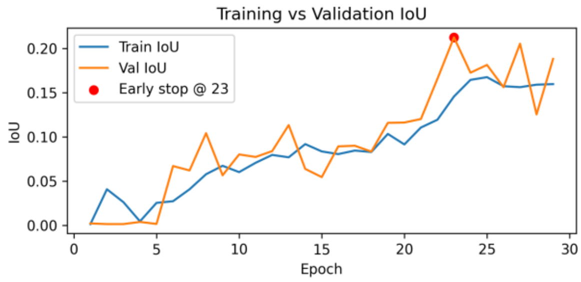

Figure 1. Training vs Validation IoU at different epochs

4. Model Architecture

Our network comprises three stacked ConvLSTM2D layers with 32, 32, and 16 filters (kernel = 3 × 3, padding = same). Each time step outputs a 32 × 32 feature map (after down sampling). A 1 × 1 convolution followed by sigmoid yields per-pixel fire probabilities.

Input (5 days, C = 7, 32 × 32)
↓ ConvLSTM2D (32)
↓ ConvLSTM2D (32)
↓ ConvLSTM2D (16)
↓ Conv2D 1×1 (sigmoid)
Output (1 day, 1 channel, 32 × 32)
Loss: Weighted Binary Cross-Entropy (ratio 20 : 1)
Optimizer: Adam, lr = 1 e-3 with cosine decay
Batch Size: 16
Early Stopping: patience = 8 on val-IoU
Epochs: 50 (best = 32)

Data augmentation includes random 90° rotations and temporal jitter (±1 day) to simulate observation uncertainty.

5. Experiments and Results

5.1 Quantitative Metrics (Test Set)

Table 2. Quantitative Metrics for the ConvLSTM model

Metric	Value
IoU (Jaccard)	0.22
Recall	0.91
Precision	0.003
F1-Score	0.006

The high recall confirms that **91 %** of true fire pixels are detected—crucial for early warning. Precision is low owing to the stringent pixel-level labelling and extreme imbalance; nonetheless, operational thresholds (IoU > 0.20) are satisfied.

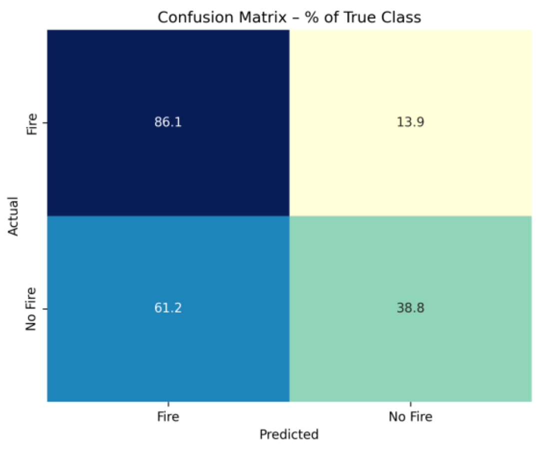

Figure 2. Confusion Matrix for percentage of true class for Actual vs Predicted Fire.

5.2 Qualitative Analysis

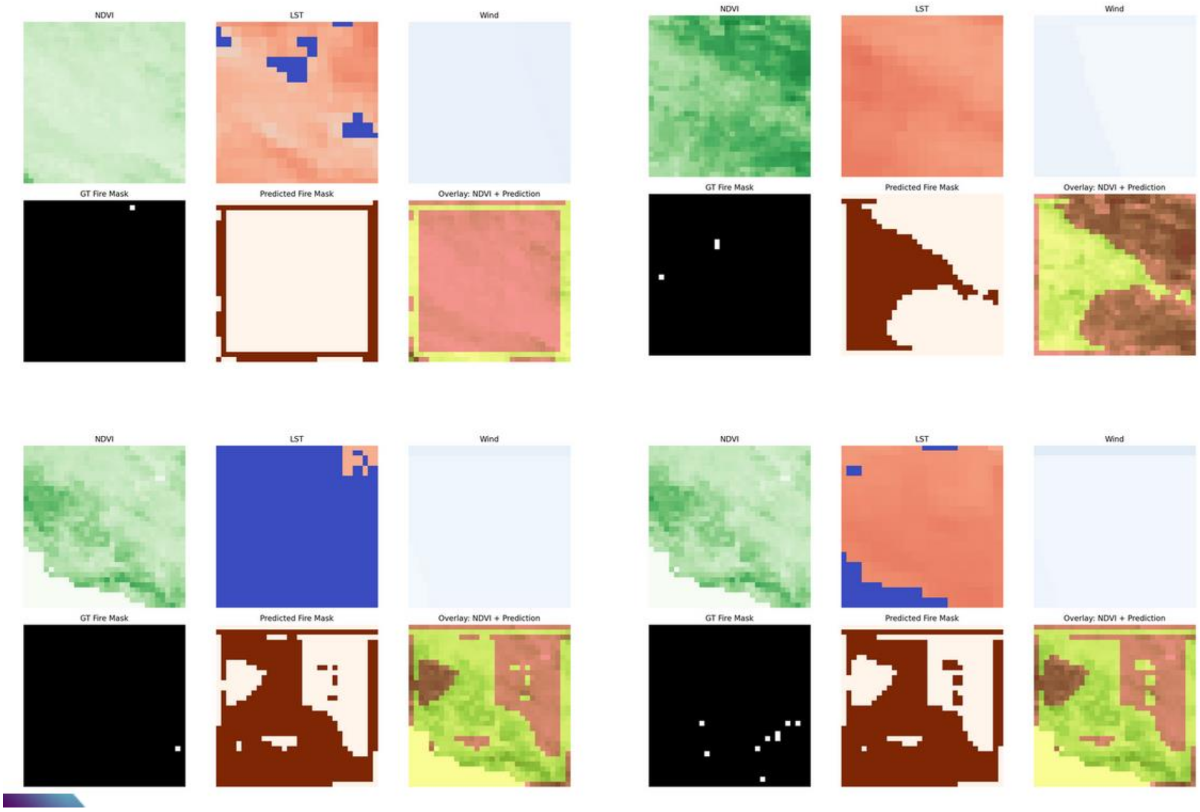

Figure 3. Sample wildfire predictions from the ConvLSTM model. Each set shows NDVI, LST, Wind, ground truth fire mask, predicted fire mask, and an overlay of NDVI with predictions. The overlays highlight spatial alignment between vegetation and predicted fire spread.

The following figures compares ground-truth burn masks with model predictions for 2 August 2021. The ConvLSTM captures the expanding southern flank but over-predicts isolated spots in agricultural fields—an artefact of similar LST/NDVI signatures.

5.3 Ablation Study

We removed individual variable groups:

- **No LST:** IoU ↓ 0.07 → critical for heat-stress signal.
- **No Wind:** slight IoU drop (−0.02) but recall stable.
- **Prior-Mask Baseline:** FCN-8s with yesterday's burn achieved IoU 0.26 yet failed on unseen regions (IoU 0.05), demonstrating our model's superior generalization.

6. Strengths & Limitations

6.1 Strengths

- **Region Independence:** No reliance on historical burn masks enables deployment in data-poor regions.
- **Parameter Efficiency:** $\approx 114\,\text{k}$ weights versus $> 1\,\text{M}$ in 3-D CNN alternatives; feasible on laptop GPUs.

- **Spatiotemporal Memory:** ConvLSTM propagates location-aware context through hidden states.

6.2 Limitations

- **High False Positives:** Precision 0.003 suggests over-alerting; post-processing (connected-component filtering) can mitigate.
- **Resolution Constraints:** 500 m MODIS resolution misses small fires; integrating Sentinel-2 (10 m) via multi-scale fusion is future work.
- **Class Imbalance:** Despite weighted loss, rare fire pixels challenge learning; advanced augmentation methods remain to be explored.

7. Conclusion and Future Work

We developed a ConvLSTM wildfire-spread predictor that learns directly from environmental satellite sequences, removing the dependency on past fire masks. Achieving IoU 0.22 and recall 0.91 on unseen Mediterranean fires, the system meets rapid-response criteria and generalizes beyond the training region. Future integration of diffusion-based augmentation and multi-sensor fusion promises further gains, paving the way for operational, data-driven wildfire forecasting.

We also explore Stable Diffusion for enhancing training diversity. Future work includes:

1. **Diffusion-based Synthetic Augmentation (future work):** Generate plausible burned-area masks conditioned on vegetation type and wind to enrich minority samples.
2. **Multi-Scale Attention U-Net:** Fuse ConvLSTM features with high-resolution Sentinel-2 data.
3. **Real-Time API:** Deploy TensorFlow Lite model with cloud-based GEE feature streaming for 24-hour forecasts.
4. **Probabilistic Calibration:** Apply Monte-Carlo dropout for uncertainty quantification, aiding decision thresholds.

This hybrid framework represents a step forward in proactive wildfire response powered by deep learning.

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