SWA: A step-by-step approach to building land management scenarios based on multiple viewpoints on multi-agent system simulations

Tom Wallace

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Research Question

In what is probably the single most prominent theme of this semester's writing assignments, this paper does not have a research question. The paper focuses exclusively on how MAS can be used to support collective decisionmaking.

Model Effectiveness

The model appears to have been effective, as it attained buy-in from all participants. There were three key factors that allowed this effectiveness.

One, the model allowed representation of different phenomena at different time scales. Different stakeholders had different priorities: e.g., foresters were most concerned with viewing the problem through an economic lens while conservationists viewed it through an ecological and heritage lens. The ability of the model to accommodate all features relevant to the decision process and 8 different scenarios was a key part of its effectiveness.

Two, the use of a formal model allowed better forecasting of the future impact of current decisions. Even the sharpest forestry mind would struggle to map the spread of invasive pines more than a few years into the future, but putting this phenomenon into a formal model allows tracing out its evolution in the long-term.

Three, although the paper does not directly state this, the use of a model often introduces a sense of transparency and fairness into the decision-making process. Sides can argue over what parameter values should be used and how results should be interpreted but they cannot argue about the basic shape of the model and decision space.

Course Themes

Model communication is a challenge even when the intended audience is other modelers. It becomes exponentially harder when the audience is non-modelers. Moreover, the stakes of model communication are arguably higher when the model is intended to facilitate collective decisionmaking. A model intended to elucidate some intellectual point operates on the timescale of academic discourse measured in years; a model intended to facilitate practical decisionmaking needs to get its point across in the timespan of the decision process, which typically is much more compressed. For these reasons, I find the communication aspect of this model particularly noteworthy. GIS and ABM are not simple topics yet the authors apparently managed to communicate them in such a way that the audience understood them and bought in.

Integration of GIS also was noteworthy. There is a tendency to assume that more detail is automatically better, which is not necessarily true. The authors chose a model resolution—5726 cells of 4 hectares—that was sufficiently granular to capture phenomena of interest (e.g., pine dynamics and the home range of endangered species) but also was coarse enough to be computationally tractable, and was obtainable in the time period needed (c.f. earlier point about the compressed timescale of models intended for decision support). I commend the authors for their choices in this area.