

An Assessment of Reference Data Variability Using a "Virtual Field Reference Database"

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Abstract

A "Virtual Field Reference Database (VFRDB)" was developed using field measurement and digital imagery (camera) data collected at 999 sites in the Neuse River Basin, North Carolina. The VFRDB was designed to support detailed assessments of remote-sensor-derived land-cover/land-use (LCLU) products by providing a robust database characterizing representative cover types throughout the study area. The sampling frame incorporated both systematic unaligned and stratified random design elements, to provide both an even distribution of points and sufficient intensification to account for rare classes. Numerous quality assurance procedures were developed and incorporated to ensure both data consistency and repeatability. Two independent interpreters assigned class labels corresponding to a hierarchical classification system based on field measurement and imagery data interpretation. Correspondence between interpreters was analyzed at multiple classification levels. The relatively high 91 percent overall correspondence of interpretations was attributable to the application of the VFRDB, providing a high quality source of measurement and imagery data to guide class assignments. Confusion documented for rangeland and forest classes was consistent with reported results for studies conducted in diverse biological locations. Results demonstrate the requirement for reference data with known variability, to support the quantitative assessments of remote-sensor-derived LCLU products.

Introduction and Background

A thorough understanding of map accuracies is required to adequately evaluate remote-sensor-derived land-cover/land-use (LCLU) data for specific environmental applications. Commensurate with the widespread availability of geographic information systems (GIS), there has been a proliferation of geospatial data integration applications (including remote-sensor-derived data), while the research community has initiated development of the next generation of spatially explicit GIS-based environmental models. Hence, the availability of high quality reference data is essential to support statistically rigorous accuracy assessments of LCLU maps. The concept of a "Virtual Field

Reference Database (VFRDB)" was developed to provide a robust source of reference data to support the quantitative evaluation of LCLU maps.

The introduction of classification errors to data integration and/or modeling analyses results in the propagation of error in the final integration product or throughout the entire modeling process (Lunetta *et al.*, 1991). Errors may be propagated based on additive (Milazzo, 1980) or multiplicative (Stow *et al.*, 1980) models and expressed as both categorical and geographic errors. The potential introduction and subsequent propagation of errors introduced from LCLU maps must be thoroughly understood in order to assess the total error budget relative to the intended application. This paper focuses only on the characterization of categorical (classification) errors. The remote sensing community has long struggled to clearly articulate the true nature of what constitutes adequate "reference" data for the assessment of LCLU accuracies. Simply stated, the objective is to derive adequate reference data to evaluate individual class accuracies, typically through the application of multivariate statistical analysis techniques (Congalton and Mead, 1983). However, a complete understanding of what actually constitutes adequate reference data has been elusive. For example, is it appropriate to use an independent classification product derived from the same, similar, or different imagery source? Is an aerial photograph based approach most appropriate? Are field data required to accomplish the assessment?

Unfortunately, there is no single approach that is optimal or appropriate for all cases. Instead, the optimal approach must be designed to meet specific validation or assessment requirements that coincide with specific information needs and data quality objectives for a particular application. Theoretically, an ideal reference data source is one that can be repetitively developed with low data variability.

A quantitative validation using an independently derived LCLU map can be best realized when the reference data are acquired to correspond with the following criteria:

- the data coincide with the temporally relevant period of interest,
- spatial data resolution is commensurate with that of the data being evaluated,
- an unambiguous match between classification systems exists or can be obtained, and
- the variability of the reference data set has been characterized.

If the reference map does not meet all the above criteria, it may only be suitable for qualitative validation. Depending on the intended application(s), a qualitative validation may be sufficient. However, if the data will be used for model parameterization or integration with other geospatial data to produce an

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output product requiring uncertainty characterization, a quantitative assessment of accuracy based on individual land-cover classes is typically required.

Interpreted aerial photographs have frequently been used as reference data to assess the accuracy of digitally processed LCLU maps from satellite imagery. A false assumption, often implicit in the reporting of results, is that photointerpretation results are completely accurate. To date, comparative studies evaluating the correspondence between field data and aerial photography interpretations have been extremely limited. Hilborn (1981) found a mean agreement of 80 percent among 145 interpreters in differentiating between deciduous and coniferous trees. Congalton *et al.* (1983) reported a 70 percent interclass correspondence between pasture, forest, and water. Correspondences associated with forested land-cover types ranged from 76 to 88 percent (Biging *et al.*, 1991; Kadmon and Harari-Kremer, 1999). Also, accuracies associated with differentiating among conifer and deciduous species were very poor (Congalton and Mead, 1983). Differentiation of species types within plant communities is typically unattainable using aerial photographs alone (Lauer *et al.*, 1970). Scean *et al.* (1999) found an 80 percent agreement among two interpreters using Landsat Thematic Mapper (TM) and Systeme Probatoire de la Observation de la Terre (SPOT) HRV imagery. In general, reported results indicate the wide range of variability associated with interpreted aerial photography and higher resolution imagery.

This leads us to an important question that must be addressed. What represents adequate reference data and how accurate must it be? Does it really represent "truth"? There is obviously no simple answer to these questions. However, in general, the greater the flora species diversity, the greater the difficulty in establishing "truth." Congalton and Biging (1992) compared field transect measurements versus visual field calls to establish dominant tree species. With a total species diversity of six forest species, they reported an 85 percent overall correspondence between the field measurement and visual calls. They concluded that making visual calls of species dominance is relatively easy and accurate, except where many species occur simultaneously.

In the Neuse River basin we were confronted with the problem of very high species diversity. To generate a reference data set with known variability, we developed a VFRDB to provide a versatile source of field measurement data. The goal of the VFRDB was to provide an independent source of *in situ* measurement data that could be applied to numerous classification systems to provide a robust source of reference data to assess the accuracy of current LCLU maps. An additional objective was to provide a baseline data archive to support the long-term development and evaluation of remote sensor LCLU classification approaches, change detection methods, and accuracy assessment techniques.

Study Area

The Neuse River Basin (NRB) is contained entirely within the state boundaries of the state of North Carolina (Figure 1). The basin boundaries were delineated to correspond with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) six-digit hydrologic unit code (HUC), code number 030202. The NRB is 14,582 km² in area and contains 16,900 km of stream length (based on the 1:24,000-scale digital line graphs (DLGs)), of which 56 percent were first-order, 22 percent second-order, and 22 percent third- to eighth-order streams. Based on an analysis of the Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics (MRLC) land-cover data generated primarily from Landsat 5 Thematic Mapper (TM) 1991-1993 imagery (Vogelmann *et al.*, 1998), cover types were determined to be approximately 42 percent forested, 30 percent agricultural, 18 percent wetland, 5 percent urban, 4 percent open water, and 1 percent barren.

The upper (northwestern) third of the basin is located in the Piedmont physiographic region and the remainder in the mid-Atlantic coastal plain region. The Piedmont portion of the basin is characterized by highly erodible clay soils, rolling topography with broad ridges, and sharply indented stream valleys, and low gradient streams composed of a series of sluggish pools separated by riffles and occasional small rapids. In contrast, the coastal plain is characterized by flat terrain, "black-water streams," low-lying wetlands, and productive estuarine areas. Elevations within the NRB range from 276 meters in the western part of the basin to sea level at the confluence of the Neuse River with Pamlico Sound. The Sound represents the southern extent of the Albemarle-Pamlico Sound estuary system which is defined by a series of barrier islands known as the North Carolina's Outer Banks (NCDEM, 1993).

Methods

The basic study approach was first to develop the VFRDB and a modified Anderson *et al.* (1972) LCLU classification system for the NRB (Table 1). Then, we performed field data collections, followed by the LCLU interpretations using the VFRDB. For purposes of brevity, LCLU definitions are not provided here, but are available directly from the NRB-VFRDB web site. Four major elements contributed to the development of the NRB-VFRDB. These included the development of (1) the sampling frame design, (2) field sampling protocols, (3) quality control (QC) and associated standard operation procedures (SOP), and (4) the database design.

Sampling Frame Design

The sampling frame design for the NRB-VFRDB was based on two separate elements to provide adequate sampling points across the entire watershed. The design included both systematic unaligned samples based on the USGS Quarter Quadrangles (732 points), and stratified random samples based on the MRLC LCLU data (374 points). The systematic unaligned sampling element effectively provided an even distribution of points across the entire study area, but resulted in an under-sampling of rare classes. The stratified random design element provided for sample intensification of the less abundant classes throughout the watershed. Of the total 999 sampling sites, 545 sites were sampled in 1998 and the remaining 454 during the 1999 field sampling season.

Field Sampling Protocol

Field sampling was accomplished during May through September of 1998 and 1999. Field crews navigated to sampling points using Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers operating in real-time (satellite broadcast) differential corrected mode. Sampling point locations were located to within ± 1.0 -meter accuracy to provide for future revisit capability. Circular plots with a radius of 36.5 meters were measured and flagged to provide 0.4-hectare plots corresponding to the Minimum Mapping Unit (MMU) used for the development of satellite-imagery-derived LCLU maps. Additionally, sub-plots with a radius of 16.5 meters were established to provide a 0.1-hectare plot to support forest inventory measurements. Subsequent to plot delineation, field measurements were made corresponding to location and time, physical parameters, and biophysical measurements.

Location and Time

For each sampling point, data were recorded that included a unique site identification number that corresponded to the USGS 1:24,000-scale quadrangle map series, calendar date and time of observation, crew member names, and the original and actual sampling site X, Y coordinates. Differentiation between the original and actual coordinates was required because the

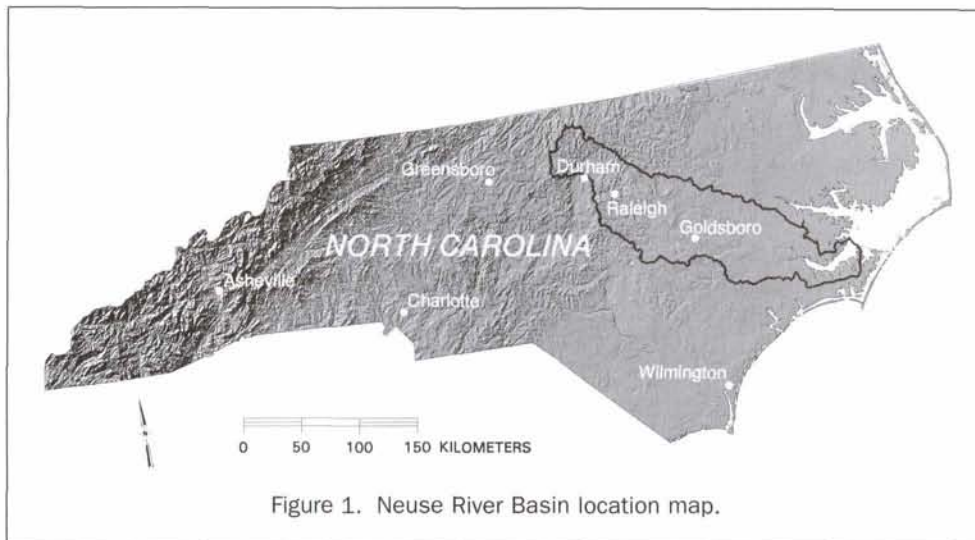


Figure 1. Neuse River Basin location map.

TABLE 1. NEUSE RIVER BASIN CATEGORIZATION SYSTEM

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
1.0 Urban (% Impervious)	1.1 High Density (71–100%) 1.2 Medium Density (36–70%) 1.3 Low Density (10–35%)	
2.0 Agricultural Land	2.1 Row Crops	2.1.1 Cotton 2.1.2 Corn 2.1.3 Soybeans 2.1.4 Tobacco 2.1.5 Vegetables 2.2.6 Other Row Crops 2.1.7 Wheat 2.1.8 Hay 2.1.9 Other Grains
	2.2 Pasture/Hay 2.3 Fallow Land	
3.0 Rangeland	3.1 Deciduous Shrub 3.2 Evergreen Shrub 3.3 Mixed Shrub 3.4 Herbaceous (Grassland)	
4.0 Forest Land	4.1 Deciduous Forest 4.2 Evergreen Forest 4.3 Mixed Forest	
5.0 Water	5.1 Streams, Rivers, and Canals 5.2 Lakes 5.3 Reservoirs 5.4 Estuaries 5.5 Ponds	
6.0 Wetlands	6.1 Herbaceous 6.2 Woody	
7.0 Barren Land	7.1 Non-vegetated 7.2 Transitional (Pioneer Vegetation)	
8.0 Unknown/Other		

protocol mandated the relocation of sampling sites under certain circumstances. For example, if greater than 20 percent of the area within the original plot coordinates contained a completely different LCLU type (i.e., forest and agricultural), then two sampling sites were established within each of the two cover types.

Physical Measurements

Measurements corresponding to physical parameters included slope, aspect, elevation, landform, percent cover of the predominant land-cover type, water regime, and soil moisture condition (descriptive). Also, tree diameter at breast height (DBH)

and percent canopy cover were measured for each forested site. DBH was determined using direct measurement within the 0.1-hectare subplot, tree heights and slope were measured within subplots using a clinometer, and percent canopy was measured along perpendicular transects using both the vertical tube (Ganey and Block, 1994) and hemispherical densiometer (Cook *et al.*, 1995) techniques.

Biophysical Measurements

The suite of biophysical site measurements included general site descriptors such as ecological system type, general vegetative cover type, successional state, and origin (i.e., natural or

man-made). Detailed inventories of ground cover, and shrubs, and under story tree and tree canopy constituents were determined for each site, as appropriate. Both genus and species identifications were made in most cases.

Digital Photographic Documentation

A high-resolution (1040 by 840 pixels) natural color imagery series was acquired for each site. At a minimum, documentation included a panoramic site documentation set of six images (Plate 1). Also, a two-image canopy series and up/down stream image series were collected (Plate 2), as appropriate. Additionally, representative vegetation key graphics acquired from available sources were included in the database to aid users unfamiliar with NRB flora (Plate 2.).

Field Data Documentation

Field data sheets were designed to capture pertinent measurement and imagery (camera) data to document LCLU characteristics. The basis for paper field sheet(s) and complementary computer sheet(s) designs was to develop a duplicative record system for use by field interns and to provide sufficient data quality assurance to insure a high degree of quality control.

Site identification numbers were designed both to provide location data corresponding to the 1:24000-scale quadrangle series and to incorporate plot-specific stratification design element origins (i.e., systematic or stratified sampling design element). Both the original and field measured coordinates were recorded under one of three options corresponding to (1) non-split plots, (2) split plots, and (3) moved plots. General site descriptions and digital images were recorded along with a plot sketch to provide a detailed overview of the plot characteristics. Percent representative cover-type estimates facilitated

the evaluation of mixed plots. The standard field protocol was to only sample sites that exhibited ≥ 80 percent homogeneous land cover (the 80-20 rule). Height classes were chosen to delineate forests (>2 meters) from shrubs (<2 meters). Additional vegetative attributes entered for each crown class included species, DBH, relative abundance, layer density, and layer distribution. Species were entered by common name using the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) species codes as detailed in the Forest Health Monitoring (FHM) program (USDA Forest Service, 1998).

Quality Assurance and Quality Control

A high priority was placed on quality control (QC) during the development of the NRB-VFRDB to provide quality assurance (QA) relative to data completeness, accuracy, and consistency between field crewmembers. QC elements included two weeks of combined classroom and field training, continuous evaluation of field methods and plant identifications throughout the field deployment, weekly independent confirmation of plant identifications, and independent review of field data forms and imagery. Classroom training included field safety, study protocols, field methods, instrument operation, computer data input/output, and a local flora identification course. Field training involved the use of pre-documented sites, first to train the field crews, then to test and evaluate crew performance prior to field deployments. Continuous evaluations of crew performance were accomplished by rotating EPA training staff and a local flora expert among the field crews throughout the deployment. Independent species confirmations were made by forwarding a subset of field-collected samples to the herbarium at North Carolina State University for positive identification.

EPA scientists performed independent reviews of all field measurement and imagery data within a one-week period fol-



North, 0 degrees



Northeast, 45 degrees



East, 135 degrees



South, 180 degrees



Southwest, 225 degrees



Northwest, 315 degrees

Plate 1. Digital panoramic photographic series for a representative upland forested riparian buffer zone sampling site in the Neuse River Basin of North Carolina.

Canopy Photos



Riparian Zone Photos



Upstream photo



Downstream photo

Vegetative Species



Swamp Chestnut Oak

Loblolly Pine



Red Maple



Sweetgum



American Beech

Tulip Poplar

Plate 2. Digital photographic series depicting forest canopy (only two of four illustrated), riparian buffer zone structure (upstream/downstream), and representative vegetation species keys for a representative forested riparian buffer zone sampling site in the Neuse River Basin, North Carolina.

lowing data collections. Reviews included evaluations of the completeness of both measurement and imagery data, comparison of field data sheets to computer data sheets for transcription accuracy, and visual inspection of field imagery to provide a qualitative assessment of quality. Sites with incomplete measurement data and/or poor quality imagery data were rescheduled for return visits within two weeks of the original collection effort. Data sheets to computer transcription errors were corrected in consultation with the appropriate field crews. Only when the data met all QC requirements were site data entered into the database.

Database Design and Functionality

The objectives of the NRB-VFRDB database development were to provide a geospatial database to support field measurement and imagery data input, archive, search, display, retrieval, and interpretation. EPA designed the system for use by both EPA scientists and the external scientific community via direct Internet access (<http://www.epa.gov/nerlesd1/lcb/nrb/VFRDB/>).

Data Entry

The VFRDB was designed for both rapid and accurate data entry. Computer data forms used a sequence of tabbed pages to eliminate the need for scrolling through individual pages to view specific data fields. Also, the form interface was designed to minimize the use of point-and-click menus in favor of more

efficient keystroke navigation. Furthermore, several auto-calculation routines provided on-the-fly mathematical operations. For example, percent canopy closure was calculated from both the densiometer and vertical tube measurements without user intervention.

Quality Control

The VFRDB provides several layers of data validation and error checking:

- The electronic data forms have built-in data validation routines that function to prevent users from entering erroneous data. For example, the database checks the site coordinates entered to ensure that they are within the study area. Upon entering invalid data, the user was prompted to correct the information before the record could be saved.
- GIS software was used to provide locational QC. For example, the separation between the randomly generated coordinates and the actual measured coordinates was reviewed to ensure that the sampling was within an appropriate distance from the generated location.
- Visual Basic scripts were designed to enforce consistent naming conventions and to consistently format digital photographs. When new photography was entered, the script performed a check to ensure the proper site identification number, conformance with established naming conventions, and correct graphical input format.
- In addition to the above procedures, the database allows effective manual QC checks through the simple tabbed display type. Similar information was grouped on the same pages for easy error identification and correction.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF AGREEMENT AMONG INTERPRETERS

Classification Level	Level of Agreement	Percent Agreement
Sites with complete agreement Level 1.0 Classes	909 (<i>n</i> = 999)	91
Sites with complete agreement Modified Level 1.0 Classes	944 (<i>n</i> = 999)	94
Sites with complete agreement Level 2.0 Classes	870 (<i>n</i> = 909)	96
Sites with complete agreement Level 3.0 Classes	302 (<i>n</i> = 302)	100

TABLE 3. LEVEL 1.0 CONFUSION MATRIX FOR INTERPRETER A VERSUS B

Land-Cover/Use Classes	Interpreter B								Column Total (<i>n</i>)	Total Level of Agreement by Class
	Ur	Ag	Ra	Fo	Wa	We	Ba	O/U		
Interpreter A										
Urban or Built-up (Ur)	112	1	4						117	112/139 = 81%
Agricultural Land (Ag)	7	322	6	14	1		1	6	357	322/360 = 89%
Rangeland (Ra)	5	1	93	12				2	113	93/141 = 66%
Forest Land (Fo)	10	1	17	292				1	321	292/347 = 84%
Water (Wa)					27				27	27/28 = 96%
Wetland (We)						48			48	48/48 = 100%
Barren Land (Ba)			1				14		15	14/16 = 88%
Other/Unknown (O/U)								1	1	1/10 = 10%
Row Total (<i>n</i>)	134	325	121	318	28	48	15	10	999	Total Agreement 909/999 = 91%

Data Display and Distribution

In addition to the basic search and display capabilities, the NRB-VFRDB has been ported to a web/database server for distribution via the EPA Intranet. This implementation provided the following capabilities:

- Organized representation of project data—The user is able to view maps of sample point locations, categorized attribute data, and the site photographs using the simple tabular interface.
- Query processing—The user has the ability to query the database using user-defined parameters. For example, a summary of points, which fall within a specific county, or canopy closure data for all sites containing a loblolly pine overstory.
- Accessibility—The only requirement for database access and manipulation is a web browser. Any recent web browser will suffice—no "plug-in" modules are required.

Results

A summary of the results of LCLU class assignments among two independent interpreters is presented in Table 2. Complete agreement between interpreters for Level 1.0 classes was obtained for 91 percent of the class assignments (*n*=999). Agreement increased slightly for Level 2.0 classes interpretations to 94 percent (*n*=909). Agreement among interpreters for Level 3.0 class interpretations was 100 percent (*n*=302). However, it should be noted that Level 3 classes were limited to only agricultural row crop classes. Soybeans (38 percent), corn (20 percent), cotton (18 percent), and tobacco (16 percent) dominated agricultural cover types, with only nominal representation of vegetable crops, wheat, hay, and other grains.

To determine specific sources of disagreement among interpreters, confusion matrices were constructed for Level 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 class assignments (Tables 3, 4, and 5). Overall class assignment agreement for Level 1.0 was 91 percent, ranging from 100 to 66 percent agreement by class. The best performing class assignments were 100 percent agreement for wetland (*n*=48) and 96 percent for the water (*n*=28). Agricultural interpretations averaged 89 percent (*n*=360), urban 81 percent (*n*=139), rangeland 66 percent (*n*=141), forest 84 percent (*n*=347), and barren 88 percent (*n*=16) correspondence between interpreters. Urban class disagreement was attributable to confusion with forest (37 percent), rangeland (33 percent), and agricultural classes (30 percent). Minimal

agricultural disagreements were largely attributable to forest (40 percent), urban (21 percent), and rangeland (18 percent) classes. The poor agreement of 66 percent among interpreters for rangeland classes was primarily attributable to confusion with forest lands (60 percent), followed by urban (19 percent), and agriculture (15 percent). Forest disagreements were primarily attributable to confusion with rangeland (53 percent), followed by agriculture (27 percent), and urban (18 percent). Water was confused on one occasion with agricultural land (*n*=28). Barren land disagreements were equally distributed (50/50) among rangeland and agricultural classes (*n*=16).

Sources of disagreement attributable to Level 2.0 class distinctions are presented in confusion matrix format in Tables 4a to 4g. Urban class assignments had an 85 percent interpretation correspondence (*n*=112). The primary sources of urban class disagreements were between the medium and low density and low density and manicured lawn classes. Agricultural class distinctions were in 98 percent agreement between row crop and pasture classes (*n*=322). Agreement among rangeland classes was 98 percent overall (*n*=93). The only source of disagreement among rangeland classes was between the mixed shrub and grassland classes. Forest classes had an 96 percent overall agreement (*n*=292). The majority of the forest class disagreement was attributable to confusion between deciduous and mixed forest classes. Water classes had a 96 percent agreement (*n*=27), with the only source of disagreement being between rivers and estuaries. Wetland classes were in 100 percent agreement (*n*=48). Barren classes were only 64 percent in agreement (*n*=14), with significant confusion between bare and transitional classes.

Level 3.0 class distinctions were only performed for agricultural classes (*n*=302) and displayed in Table 5 and document the complete (100 percent) agreement between interpreters. Specific crop type classes included cotton (*n* = 55), corn (*n* = 61), soybeans (*n* = 114), tobacco (*n* = 48), vegetables (*n* = 7), other row crops (*n* = 5), wheat (*n* = 4), and hay (*n* = 8).

Discussion

An overall agreement between interpreters of 91 percent for Level 1.0 classes indicates that the concept of a VFRDB can be applied to provide high quality reference data with known variability for assessing the accuracy of LCLU products derived

TABLE 4. LEVEL 2.0 CONFUSION MATRIX FOR INTERPRETER A VERSUS B

		Interpreter B					
Interpreter A	(a)						
	Land Cover Classes (Urban)	HD	MD	LD	Lw	Tot	Pct Agr
	High Dens Urban (HD)	16				16	100
	Med Dens Urban (MD)	1	14			15	93
	Low Dens Urban (LD)	3	7	33		43	77
	Maint. Lawn (Lw)			6	32	38	84
	Total (Tot)	20	21	39	32	112	
	Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	80	67	85	100		85
	(b)						
	Land Cover Classes (Rangeland)	DS	ES	MS	Gr	Tot	Pct Agr
Decid. Shrub (DS)	17				17	100	
Evergr. Shrub (ES)		3			3	100	
Mixed Shrub (MS)			3		3	100	
Grassland (Gr)			2	68	70	97	
Total (Tot)	17	3	5	68	93		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	100	100	60	100		98	
(c)							
Land Cover Classes (Water)	Riv	Lak	Est	Pnd	Tot	Pct Agr	
River (Riv)	17				17	100	
Lake (Lak)		3			3	100	
Estuary (Est)	1		5		6	83	
Pond (Pnd)				1	1	100	
Total (Tot)	18	3	5	1	27		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	94	100	100	100		96	
(d)							
Land Cover Classes (Forest)	DF	EF	MF		Tot	Pct Agr	
Decid. Forest (DF)	139		1		140	99	
Evergr. Forest (EF)		70			70	100	
Mixed Forest (MF)	6	4	72		82	88	
Total (Tot)	145	74	73		292		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	96	95	99			96	
(e)							
Land Cover Classes (Agriculture)	RC	Pas			Tot	Pct Agr	
Row Crops (RC)	302				302	100	
Pasture (Pas)	5	15			20	75	
Total (Tot)	307	15			322		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	98	100				98	
(f)							
Land Cover Classes (Barren)	Br	Tr			Tot	Pct Agr	
Bare (Br)	6				6	100	
Transitional (Tr)	5	3			8	38	
Total (Tot)	11	3			14		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	55	100				64	
(g)							
Land Cover Classes (Wetland)	HW	WW			Tot	Pct Agr	
Herb. Wetland (HW)	1				1	100	
Woody Wetland (WW)		47			47	100	
Total (Tot)	1	47			48		
Percent Agreement (Pct Agr)	100	100				100	

from remotely sensed imagery. The poor agreement of 66 percent between interpreters (two) for the rangeland classes was attributed to confusion with forest classes, which were distinguished based solely on the attribute of height. These results suggest that, for biologically diverse ecosystems, height not be used as a attribute to distinguish otherwise similar class types. An alternative approach would be to classify both forest and rangeland cover types as "upland woody" vegetation at classification Level 1.0 (Table 6).

The relatively poor agreement between interpreters associated with Level 1.0 barren classes was generally associated with confusion between the rangeland and forest classes, and was directly attributable to a determination of dominance among competing cover types. However, the low number of samples ($n=16$) render these results noteworthy but statistically inconclusive. The low numbers of barren locations identified was attributed to the rapid vegetation regrowth of barren areas by pioneer species. Due to the dynamic nature of the barren locations in the NRB, a high level of temporal correspondence between reference data acquisitions and clearing events is required. The above reported results are consistent with accuracy assessment results reported previously (Ormsby and Lunetta, 1987; Scepan *et al.*, 1999).

A number of very interesting and useful insights can be derived through the analysis of the Level 2.0 interpretation results presented in Tables 4a to 4g. The relatively poor agreement of 85 percent for urban (impervious surface) classes indicates that field observation data may not represent the best source of reference data to distinguish these classes. A better source of reference data would probably be obtainable from aerial photography or high-resolution (sub-meter) satellite imagery using a grid cell or dot area calculation. Similarly, the confusion among interpreters between riverine and estuarine water classes indicates that either aerial photography or high-resolution satellite image would provide useful supplemental information to better distinguish among water classes defined based on land forms (i.e., riverine versus estuarine) and to differentiate specific size class distinctions (i.e., pond versus lake).

The relatively high level of agreement between interpreters was documented for both rangeland and forest classes, being 98 ($n=93$) and 96 ($n=292$) percent, respectively. This result is attributable to the high quality of the measurement and imagery (camera) data contained in the NRB-VFRDB to enable interpreters to distinguish between deciduous and conifer species dominance and mixed (co-dominate) classes in biologically diverse systems. The use of digital camera images were particularly useful to the interpreters in making these class distinctions. Agreement between interpreters would have probably decreased substantially (compared to that reported) without the use of field-based imagery.

The poor agreement of 64 percent ($n=14$) between interpreters associated with the Level 2.0 barren class was attributed to various stages of vegetation regrowth characteristic of biologically diverse and highly productive ecosystems. As a result, it was difficult to acquire reliable reference data for transitional barren sites without adequate temporal resolution to capture these event-driven phenomena. The temporal nature of vegetation regrowth in these productive ecosystems resulted in highly variable reference data for barren locations.

A distinct advantage associated with the application of reference data with known variability is the potential to calculate corrected or theoretical accuracies to better reflect the actual performance of remote-sensing-derived LCLU products. A simplified approach proposed for the reporting of corrected class accuracies is as follows:

$$Au = (At \cdot Ar) \cdot 100$$

TABLE 5. LEVEL 3.0 CONFUSION MATRIX FOR INTERPRETER A VERSUS B

Land-Cover/Use Classes	Interpreter B									Column Total (n)	Total Level of Agreement by Class	
	Ct	Cn	Soy	Tob	Veg	OR	Wh	Hay	OG			
Interpreter A												
Cotton (Ct)	55										55	100%
Corn (Cn)		61									61	100%
Soybeans (Soy)			114								114	100%
Tobacco (Tob)				48							48	100%
Vegetables (Veg)					7						7	100%
Other Row Crop (OR)						5					5	100%
Wheat (Wh)							4				4	100%
Hay								8			8	100%
Other Grain (OG)											0	N/A
Row Total (n)	55	61	114	48	7	5	4	8	N/A	302	Total Agreement 302/302 = 100%	

TABLE 6. MODIFIED LEVEL 1.0 CONFUSION MATRIX FOR INTERPRETER A VERSUS B

Land-Cover/Use Classes	Interpreter B								Column Total (n)	Total Level of Agreement by Class	
	Ur	Ag	WV	HV	Wa	We	Ba	O/U			
Interpreter A											
Urban or Built-up (Ur)	74	1								75	74/99 = 75%
Agricultural Land (Ag)	6	302	2	4			1	6	321	302/327 = 92%	
Woody Vegetation (WV)	9		354	6				2	371	354/376 = 94%	
Herbaceous Vegetation (HV)	9	5	2	123				1	140	123/150 = 82%	
Water (Wa)					28				28	28/28 = 100%	
Wetland (We)						48			48	48/48 = 100%	
Barren Land (Ba)			1				14		15	14/16 = 88%	
Other/Unknown (O/U)								1	1	1/10 = 10%	
Row Total (n)	98	308	359	133	28	48	15	10	999	Total Agreement 944/999 = 94%	

where Au is the uncorrected land-cover accuracy, At is the theoretical accuracy predicted land cover, and Ar is the accuracy of reference land-cover data.

This approach assumes that error is equally distributed between the predicted land cover and the reference data. However, the assumption of complete data independence is not valid due to spatial correlation inherent with landscape structure, thereby violating the assumption of data independence (Congalton, 1988). Therefore, the overall accuracy should be reported as a accuracy range, reporting both the measured and calculated theoretical values. The advantage of this approach is that the variability of the reference data is accounted for in the accuracy assessment process and provides a better representation of the true accuracy range associated with the LCLU product reported.

Conclusions

Past assessments of the accuracies associated with remote-sensing-based LCLU classifications have largely been qualitative. However, as these products are increasingly being integrated with other geospatial data and used as modeling inputs, quantitative accuracy assessments may be required to support the calculation of uncertainties associated with data integration products and modeling outputs. If aerial photography or high-resolution satellite imagery is to be used as reference data to support a quantitative accuracy of satellite-derived LCLU maps, a thorough characterization of the variability associated with interpretations should be established. One possible approach is to institute a subset of reference data evaluation sites to provide detailed field reference data that would firmly establish linkages with the landscape resource(s) of interest. This approach would be analogous to the concept of image interpretation keys (Loelke *et al.*, 1983).

Absolute "ground reference" is an illusive goal that is difficult (if not impossible) to achieve when dealing with biologically diverse ecosystems. The ultimate objective is to minimize the variability associated with the reference data to the maximum extent possible to best accomplish a statistically rigorous assessment of LCLU products. The results of this study demonstrate clearly the value of field-based measurement and digital image (camera) data to support the development of reference data of known variability for quantitative assessment of LCLU classification results. The information provided to interpreters from the combination of field measurement and imagery data were adequate to support development of a reference data set with known variability, at multiple classification levels. Similar approaches using a multistage approach incorporating high-resolution (i.e., sub-meter) remote sensing imagery may be feasible to establish the interpretation variability associated with reference data set development.

Application of the NRB-VFRDB provided a means to assess the appropriateness of a classification system for the study area prior to the LCLU classification process. In this study, the identification of ambiguous classes facilitated a refinement of the classification systems prior to remote sensing analysis to provide a better correspondence between the classification system and measurable LCLU conditions as they existed within the Neuse River Basin of North Carolina (Table 6). This optimization of the classification scheme further reduced the variability associated with the reference data and in theory should minimize the need to collapse classes subsequent to remote sensing data analysis. The NRB-VFRDB can also be applied repeatedly using alternative classification systems to assess their appropriateness. Owing to the high level of geospatial accuracy associated with field sampling sites, precise relocation of sites is possible for future repeat measurements to support future

LCU change detection methods development, testing, and evaluation.

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