

# Impact of Climate Change on Freshwater Ecosystems due to Altered River Flow Regimes

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It is widely acknowledged that the flow regime is a primary determinant of the structure and function of rivers and their associated floodplain wetlands, and flow alteration is considered to be a serious and continuing threat to freshwater ecosystems (Bunn and Arthington, 2002; Poff and Zimmerman, 2010; Poff et al., 2010). Most species distribution models do not consider the effect of changing flow regimes (i.e., changes to the frequency, magnitude, duration, and/or timing of key flow parameters) or they use precipitation as proxy for river flow (Heino et al., 2009).

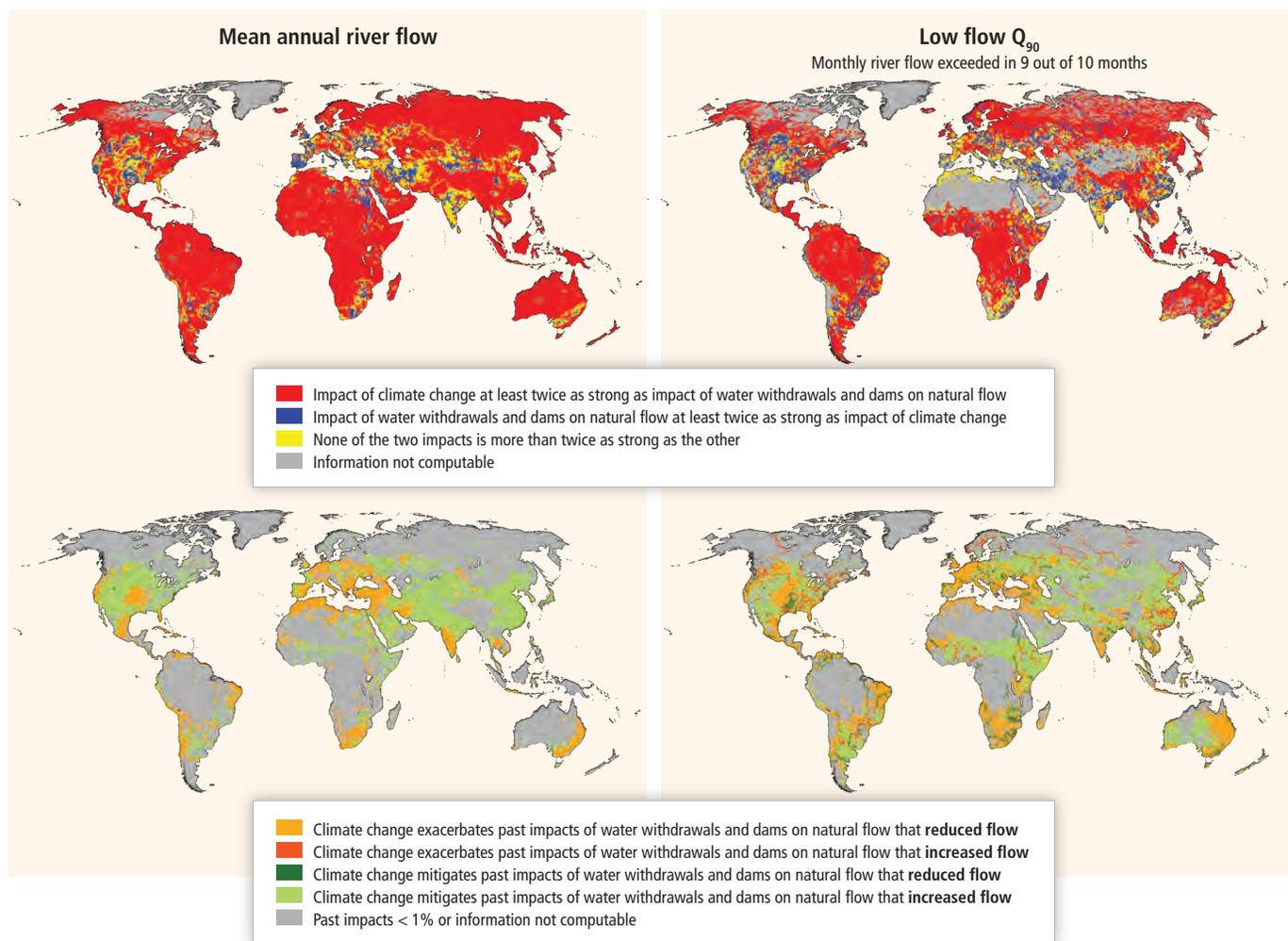
There is growing evidence that climate change will significantly alter ecologically important attributes of hydrologic regimes in rivers and wetlands, and exacerbate impacts from human water use in developed river basins (*medium confidence*; Xenopoulos et al., 2005; Aldous et al., 2011). By the 2050s, climate change is projected to impact river flow characteristics such as long-term average discharge, seasonality, and statistical high flows (but not statistical low flows) more strongly than dam construction and water withdrawals have done up to around the year 2000 (Figure RF-1; Döll and Zhang, 2010). For one climate scenario (Special Report on Emission Scenarios (SRES) A2 emissions, Met Office Hadley Centre climate prediction model 3 (HadCM3)), 15% of the global land area may be negatively affected, by the 2050s, by a decrease of fish species in the upstream basin of more than 10%, as compared to only 10% of the land area that has already suffered from such decreases due to water withdrawals and dams (Döll and Zhang, 2010). Climate change may exacerbate the negative impacts of dams for freshwater ecosystems but may also provide opportunities for operating dams and power stations to the benefit of riverine ecosystems. This is the case if total runoff increases and, as occurs in Sweden, the annual hydrograph becomes more similar to variation in electricity demand, that is, with a lower spring flood and increased runoff during winter months (Renofalt et al., 2010).

Because biota are often adapted to a certain level of river flow variability, the projected larger variability of river flows that is due to increased climate variability is *likely* to select for generalist or invasive species (Ficke et al., 2007). The relatively stable habitats of groundwater-fed streams in snow-dominated or glacierized basins may be altered by reduced recharge by meltwater and as a result experience more variable (possibly intermittent) flows (Hannah et al., 2007). A high-impact change of flow variability is a flow regime shift from intermittent to perennial or vice versa. It is projected that until the 2050s, river flow regime shifts may occur on 5 to 7% of the global land area, mainly in semiarid areas (Döll and Müller Schmied, 2012; see Table 3-2 in Chapter 3).

In Africa, one third of fish species and one fifth of the endemic fish species occur in eco-regions that may experience a change in discharge or runoff of more than 40% by the 2050s (Thieme et al., 2010). Eco-regions containing more than 80% of Africa's freshwater fish species and several

outstanding ecological and evolutionary phenomena are *likely* to experience hydrologic conditions substantially different from the present, with alterations in long-term average annual river discharge or runoff of more than 10% due to climate change and water use (Thieme et al., 2010).

As a result of increased winter temperatures, freshwater ecosystems in basins with significant snow storage are affected by higher river flows in winter, earlier spring peak flows, and possibly reduced summer low flows (Section 3.2.3). Strongly increased winter peak flows may lead to a decline in salmonid populations in the Pacific Northwest of the USA of 20 to 40% by the 2050s (depending on the climate model) due to scouring of the streambed during egg incubation, the relatively pristine high-elevation areas being affected most (Battin et al., 2007). Reductions in summer low flows will increase the competition for water between ecosystems and irrigation water users (Stewart et al., 2005). Ensuring environmental flows through purchasing or leasing water rights and altering reservoir release patterns will be an important adaptation strategy (Palmer et al., 2009).

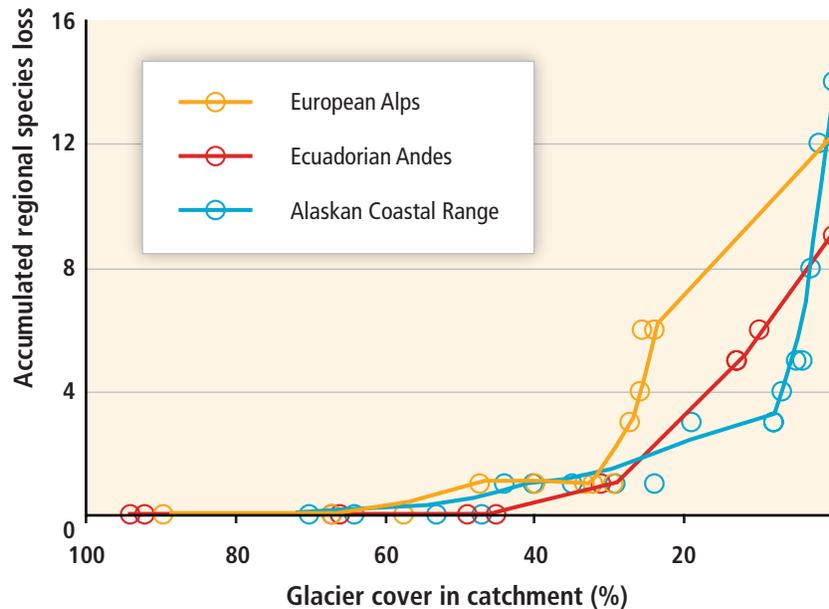


**Figure RF-1** | Impact of climate change relative to the impact of water withdrawals and dams on natural flows for two ecologically relevant river flow characteristics (mean annual river flow and monthly low flow  $Q_{90}$ ), computed by a global water model (Döll and Zhang, 2010). Impact of climate change is the percent change of flow between 1961–1990 and 2041–2070 according to the emissions scenario A2 as implemented by the global climate model Met Office Hadley Centre Coupled Model, version 3 (HadCM3). Impact of water withdrawals and reservoirs is computed by running the model with and without water withdrawals and dams that existed in 2002. Please note that the figure does not reflect spatial differences in the magnitude of change.

Observations and models suggest that global warming impacts on glacier and snow-fed streams and rivers will pass through two contrasting phases (Burkett et al., 2005; Vuille et al., 2008; Jacobsen et al., 2012). In the first phase, when river discharge is increased as a result of intensified melting, the overall diversity and abundance of species may increase. However, changes in water temperature and stream flow may have negative impacts on narrow range endemics (Jacobsen et al., 2012). In the second phase, when snowfields melt early and glaciers have shrunk to the point that late-summer stream flow is reduced, broad negative impacts are foreseen, with species diversity rapidly declining once a critical threshold of roughly 50% glacial cover is crossed (Figure RF-2).

River discharge also influences the response of river temperatures to increases of air temperature. Globally averaged, air temperature increases of 2°C, 4°C, and 6°C are estimated to lead to increases of annual mean river temperatures of 1.3°C, 2.6°C, and 3.8°C, respectively (van Vliet

et al., 2011). Discharge decreases of 20% and 40% are computed to result in additional increases of river water temperature of 0.3° C and 0.8° C on average (van Vliet et al., 2011). Therefore, where rivers will experience drought more frequently in the future, freshwater-dependent biota will suffer not only directly by changed flow conditions but also by drought-induced river temperature increases, as well as by related decreased oxygen and increased pollutant concentrations.



**Figure RF-2** | Accumulated loss of regional species richness (gamma diversity) of macroinvertebrates as a function of glacial cover in catchment. Obligate glacial river macroinvertebrates begin to disappear from assemblages when glacial cover in the catchment drops below approximately 50%, and 9 to 14 species are predicted to be lost with the complete disappearance of glaciers in each region, corresponding to 11, 16, and 38% of the total species richness in the three study regions in Ecuador, Europe, and Alaska. Data are derived from multiple river sites from the Ecuadorian Andes and Swiss and Italian Alps, and a temporal study of a river in the Coastal Range Mountains of southeast Alaska over nearly three decades of glacial shrinkage. Each data point represents a river site (Europe or Ecuador) or date (Alaska), and lines are Lowess fits. (Adapted by permission from Jacobsen et al., 2012.)

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