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Comment on "In situ method for estimating subsurface unsaturated hydraulic conductivity" by Uri Shani and Dani Or

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Shani and Or [1995] propose estimating hydraulic conductivity K in terms of the soil-water pressure ψ by measuring the pressure P within and the discharge Q out of a spherical cavity under steady state conditions. The authors have already pointed out some of the difficulties inherent with the method, for example, the assumption of a soil which follows the model of *Gardner* [1958], defining an equivalent spherical cavity radius r_o and the eventual presence of cracks. Possible methods to alleviate some of those difficulties, as well as additional potential sources of errors, are discussed in the following.

First, equations (7), (8), and (9) of *Shani and Or* [1995] relating P and Q can be improved. Writing

$$P = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} - A, \quad (1)$$

if $A = 0$, we have the standard point source result, with K_s being the saturated conductivity. They estimate A as

$$A = \alpha^{-1} + \alpha Q / 8\pi K_s, \quad (2)$$

where α is *Gardner's* [1958] coefficient such that

$$K = K_s \exp \alpha \Psi \quad (3)$$

Hence their result can be written as in their equation (11):

$$P = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} \left(1 - \frac{\alpha r_o}{2} \right) - \frac{1}{\alpha}. \quad (4)$$

In particular, if $P = 0$, equation (4) gives

$$\frac{Q\alpha}{4\pi K_s r_o} = 1 / \left(1 - \frac{\alpha r_o}{2} \right), \quad (5)$$

which is correct for $\alpha r_o / 2$ sufficiently small. However, it has been shown earlier [*Parlange*, 1972] that a much better approximation is to replace $(1 - \alpha r_o / 2)^{-1}$ by $(1 + \alpha r_o / 2)$, which can be significantly different; for example, for $\alpha r_o / 2 = 1/2$ the former is equal to 2 and the latter to 1.5, a 30% error! Later, *Parlange and Hogarth* [1985a] obtained exact and approximate

results. Using the approximate result, equation (4) of *Parlange and Hogarth* [1985a], we obtain

$$P = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} \left\{ 1 + \left[\alpha r_o / 2 / \left(1 + \frac{\alpha r_o / 2}{3 + \alpha r_o} \right) \right] \right\} - \frac{1}{\alpha} \quad (6)$$

although in most cases it will be sufficient to use

$$P = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} \left(1 + \frac{\alpha r_o}{2} \right) - \frac{1}{\alpha}. \quad (7)$$

A second correction is due to the measurement of P and its relation to r_o and the fact that pressure varies with position along the cavity wall due to gravity. It seems that their water pressure outlet is at the top of the cavity, which is a convenient location. Actually, the measured pressure P should be increased by the distance between the outlet and the center of the cavity. Again, if the outlet is at the top of a spherical cavity, it can be shown that P should be changed to $P + r_o$ in the left-hand side of (6) or (7). This point is rather intuitive but was discussed in detail by *Parlange* [1974] taking $P = 0$ at the top of the cavity, so that $P + r_o$ reduces to r_o . Equation (11) in that paper then gives, with present notations and neglecting terms of order $(\alpha r_o)^2$,

$$r_o = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} \left(1 + \frac{\alpha r_o}{2} \right) - \frac{1}{\alpha}. \quad (8)$$

A third correction concerns the assumption of a *Gardner's* [1958] soil. It is, of course, clear that such a soil is a very useful approximation, although if one postulates (3), α can then be measured and is not constant [*Parlange and Hogarth*, 1985b]. A simple modification to *Gardner's* law, first proposed by *Rijtema* [1965], yields (see also *Steenhuis et al.* [1991])

$$K = K_s \exp \alpha (\psi - h_{str}) \quad \Psi \leq h_{str} \quad (9)$$

$$K = K_s \quad \Psi \geq h_{str}$$

where $h_{str} < 0$ is a water entry pressure. This modification leads to significant improvement on infiltration predictions [*Haverkamp et al.*, 1990]. As a result, (6) and (7) have to be slightly modified. Altogether then, (7), for instance, is changed to

$$P + r_o - h_{str} = \frac{Q}{4\pi K_s r_o} \left(1 + \frac{\alpha r_o}{2} \right) - \frac{1}{\alpha}. \quad (10)$$

Since $1/\alpha$ is the intercept for $Q = 0$ and both r_o and $-h_{str}$ are in the centimeter range, they could affect the value of α significantly.

Finally, it should be pointed out that, in general, the use of steady state solutions is dangerous. Minute changes may be hard to detect and may lead to erroneous results if steady state and homogeneous soils are assumed. For instance, *Smettem et al.* [1994a] discussed that point within the context of twin disc

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infiltrimeters and the application of *Wooding's* [1968] equation, which is also used by *Shani and Or* [1995] for comparison purposes. Transient results can then be valuable, if properly interpreted [*Smettem et al.*, 1994b; *Haverkamp et al.*, 1994].

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