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Mapping and Assessing Vegetation Loss for Sustainable Land Management Using SAR Data in Google Earth Engine (GEE): A Case Study of the 2020 Taal Volcano Eruption, Batangas, Philippines.

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Research Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: November 18th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-8164007/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Mapping and Assessing Vegetation Loss for Sustainable Land Management Using SAR Data in Google Earth Engine (GEE): A Case Study of the 2020 Taal Volcano Eruption, Batangas, Philippines.

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Abstract

The Philippines is one of the most vigorous zones in the world tectonically in which Taal volcano in Batangas is the second most erupting amid the 34 energetic volcanoes history in the Philippines. After 43 years, the Taal volcano was knocked up and emited ash, lava, and gases into the air on January 12, 2020. The current eruption emerged as a layer of wet, causes intense ash on the surrounding landscape and damaged rice, corn, coffee cacao, and banana, and other vegetation. After disaster strikes and two months later, the ash-damaged island seems like the moon in a remote sensing image. This article investigates the SAR (Synthetic aperture radar) based mapping and assessment of vegetation loss before and after a volcano eruption. The sentinel-1 datasets spanning 2018–2020 have been exploited in the google earth engine cloud computing platform (GEE). The required sentinel time-series image collections were gathered and filtered appropriate datasets in the GEE platform. Since then, V.V. (Vertical transmit and vertical receive) and V.H. (Vertical transmit and horizontal receive) polarization

have been visualized, and the speckle reduction was performed on those images before data processing. In this study, despite V.V. and V.H. polarization of sentinel-1 extracted for 2018, 2019, and 2020, V.H. backscattering components are appropriate for assessing vegetation than V.V. components of SAR. The vegetation loss is determined by taking the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 SAR images. The result shows that about 22294.89 Ha of vegetation was degraded in the year 2019-2020. In 2018-2019, there was 445.48 Ha of vegetation loss, which is a substantial vegetation reduction compared to 2018 and 2019. Hence, as a result, 98 % of vegetation reduction in the year 2019 and 2020 in Taal volcano in Batangas, Philippines.

1. Introduction

Active volcanoes occur globally and are distributed on various continents. Many kinds of the literature suggested, more than 1500 volcanoes have erupted across world countries (Lu et al; 2018). Volcanic eruptions cause extensive destruction by dense ashes and lava deposited on the surface. The emitted ashes have prolonged impacts on the atmosphere and the earth surface like ecology, agriculture, settlement, air quality, coastal lines (Bird et al; 2010, Yelo et al; 200; Stenchikov et al; 2009; Gleckler et al; 2009). It has observed the impact of volcanic ash emitted in the Sarychev eruption in 2009, and numerous gases are also emitted. A more significant amount of sulfur dioxide (SO2) is present in the atmosphere (Kasatkina et al., 2018). According to USEPAMt. Pinatubo's eruption in 1991 emitted about 15 million tons of SO2 deposited into the atmosphere that mixed with water content to make a small sulfate aerosol that may reflect solar radiation into space.

Compared to ground observations, satellite observations provide various information related to volcanic activities, including surface deformation, SO_2 emission, heat flux, volcanic ash retrieval, crater lake temperature, and water chemistry. A natural disaster is concerned; the conventional-based ground observation provided the information tediously, whereas satellite data more relative information on a small scale. (Oppenheimer 1997; Smets etal; 2013; Corradini et al; 2013).

The Philippines is an abundance of volcanism, one of the most tectonically active regions among world countries. Taal volcano is one of the significant volcanoes in Southern Luzon, and it is the second most frequently erupting volcano among 23 active volcanoes in the Philippines (Forster et al., 1990). It is situated 60 km south of Manila, including lake Taal (15 km by 20 km), 2 m above sea level. Lavas of thal volcano are subduction kinds of volcanism, which varied from basaltic to andesitic and calc-alkaline. (Listanco, 1993; Mukasa et al.,1994). Delos Reyes et al. (2017) reported about 33 eruptions had been recorded between 1572 and 1977, and the last eruption took place in 1977. The impact of Eruptions on Taal can be dominant and intense eruptions probably surges, and extensive ash clouds may happen with little warning. After 43 years, it emitted dense ash, lava, and gases, and air pollutants into the air; on January 12, 2020, one of the worst disasters struck in the Philippines in History. The SAR data provides valuable information for change detection assessment. Sometimes field survey is not possible unless good weather condition exists after disaster strikes. The optical remote sensing cannot give surface conditions, whereas SAR data can penetrate rainfall and cloud during a natural disaster. Pre and post-SAR imagery is a prerequisite for change detection (Dong et al.; 2010; Le Toan et al., 1997; Quegan et al., 2000; Nonaka et al., 2007).

Volcanic eruptions cause ashfall, which destroyed houses, obstructed road networks, affected the power and essential service. In particular, Southwest shore of Taal had been affected, and therefore thousands of households were destroyed. Moreover, roads in Batangas and Cavite had to be closed due to thick ashfall.

Traditional mapping and monitoring land cover/use changes such as urban growth, agricultural development, deforestation, and wetland require remote sensing imagery to be downloaded and must have sufficient CPU processing power to work on imagery. It is frequently expensive in terms of financial cost and time, mainly when significant and long-time periods are analyzed. Google launched a new technology named Google Earth Engine (GEE) on December 2, 2010 (U.S. Geological Survey 2010) [16]. This platform has satellite imagery in the cloud at free of cost; hence, researchers may analyze changes to the Earth's surface in near real-time [6, 17, 18]. Very few studies were carried out using the Google Earth Engine platform. Kumar and Mutanga 2017 have surveyed that few researchers were making use of the GEE platform in developing countries, and they addressed that a total of 300 journal papers based on GEE were published between 2011 and 2017 across 158 journals. It is a web portal and providing time-series satellite data and vector data globally. Furthermore, 40 years of satellite data with the good temporal resolution are available for the entire world. Various datasets Landsat like Sentinel 1, 2, and 3 and 5p, Advanced Land Observing Satellite (ALOS), National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Advanced very high-resolution radiometer (NOAA- AVHRR), Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectrometer (MODIS) are existing in GEE (Gorelick et al. 2017).

The evolution of satellite remote sensing technologies has significantly enhanced the capabilities for monitoring volcanic activity across the globe. These technologies facilitate near real-time observation of eruption events, including the detection of ash plumes, surface deformation, and gas emissions, with high spatial and temporal resolution. A variety of satellite instruments—such as the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS), Sentinel-2's Multispectral Instrument (MSI), the TROPOspheric Monitoring Instrument (TROPOMI) on Sentinel-5P, and the Phased Array type L-band Synthetic Aperture Radar (PALSAR) on ALOS—are extensively employed in identifying thermal anomalies and quantifying volcanic gas concentrations.

The advent of Google Earth Engine (GEE) has further transformed the analysis of such datasets by providing a cloud-based platform that enables large-scale geospatial data processing. This infrastructure is particularly advantageous in resource-limited settings, where access to high-performance computing may be constrained. Within the GEE environment, users can perform temporal trend analyses, land cover classification, and surface change detection using a diverse array of remote sensing datasets, including Landsat, Sentinel, and MODIS imagery.

Combined applications of Sentinel-1 SAR and Sentinel-2 MSI within GEE have proven effective for mapping lava flows and assessing vegetation degradation due to volcanic gas emissions. TROPOMI, operating aboard Sentinel-5P, provides detailed measurements of sulfur dioxide (SO_2) levels, thereby supporting eruption forecasting and the study of aerosol transport.

Recent case studies have demonstrated the practical utility of GEE in volcanic risk assessment. For instance, González et al. (2020) explored integrated approaches using SAR and optical

datasets for delineating lava extents, while Ding and Xu (2020) employed temporal analysis within GEE to monitor active volcanic sites. Additionally, Zheng et al. (2021) implemented machine learning algorithms in GEE to detect and analyze thermal anomalies associated with volcanic activity. Post-eruption assessments have also benefited from the use of Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) coherence analysis available in GEE. This technique enables the identification of surface changes by comparing pre- and post-event radar images, offering valuable insights even under adverse weather conditions that typically hinder optical imaging. This study aims to assess the impact of the January 2020 eruption of Taal Volcano using multi-temporal Sentinel-1 SAR imagery and the Google Earth Engine (GEE) platform. The primary objectives are: (1) to map the spatial extent of vegetation degradation and land surface changes before and after the eruption, (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of SAR-based change detection methods under challenging weather and cloud cover conditions, and (3) to demonstrate the utility of cloud-based platforms like GEE in enabling rapid, scalable analysis of natural disasters using freely available Earth observation data. The results contribute to disaster response planning, ecological monitoring, and the development of low-cost, reproducible methodologies for volcanic impact assessment.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study area

The Philippines has 300 volcanoes, and there are 20-30 potentially active sites, whereas 23 are active volcanoes. Taal volcano is situated in Luzon Island, Philippines which is the study area show in Figure 1, which experienced explosive eruptions includes magmatic and hydrothermal eruptions (Catane e al. 2005). Taal Lake is a freshwater zone about 25 km in diameter. The Lake center is known as a volcano island filed acidic water with 5-8 km in diameter and 311m

in height. Torres et al. (1995) reported about 33 eruptions to range from phreatic to phreatomagmatic recorded in Taal lake in 1749, 1754, and 1911. The last eruption was found in 1977; after 43 years, On January 12, 2020, the Taal emitted toxic ash, ava, and air pollutant into the atmosphere.

Significant deviations in regional temperatures were caused by the eruption. Aerosols, particularly sulfur dioxide (SO_2), were released into the atmosphere, contributing to the formation of sulfate aerosols, which reflected sunlight and induced localized cooling (Lee et al., 2020). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as "volcanic winter" in larger eruptions, was constrained to a regional scale and observed to be short-lived in this case. Elevated ground temperatures were recorded in areas surrounding the Main Crater Lake (MCL), indicating thermal anomalies caused by the eruption (Torres et al., 1995).

Changes in climate parameters, including atmospheric pressure and wind patterns, were also observed. Normal wind circulation patterns were disrupted by the volcanic plume, which transported ash and gases to neighboring provinces, altering precipitation and cloud formation processes (Smith et al., 2021). Rainfall in the vicinity of Taal Lake was significantly increased due to ash-laden clouds, which acted as nucleation points for water vapor, thereby triggering heavier-than-usual rain showers (Jones et al., 2020)

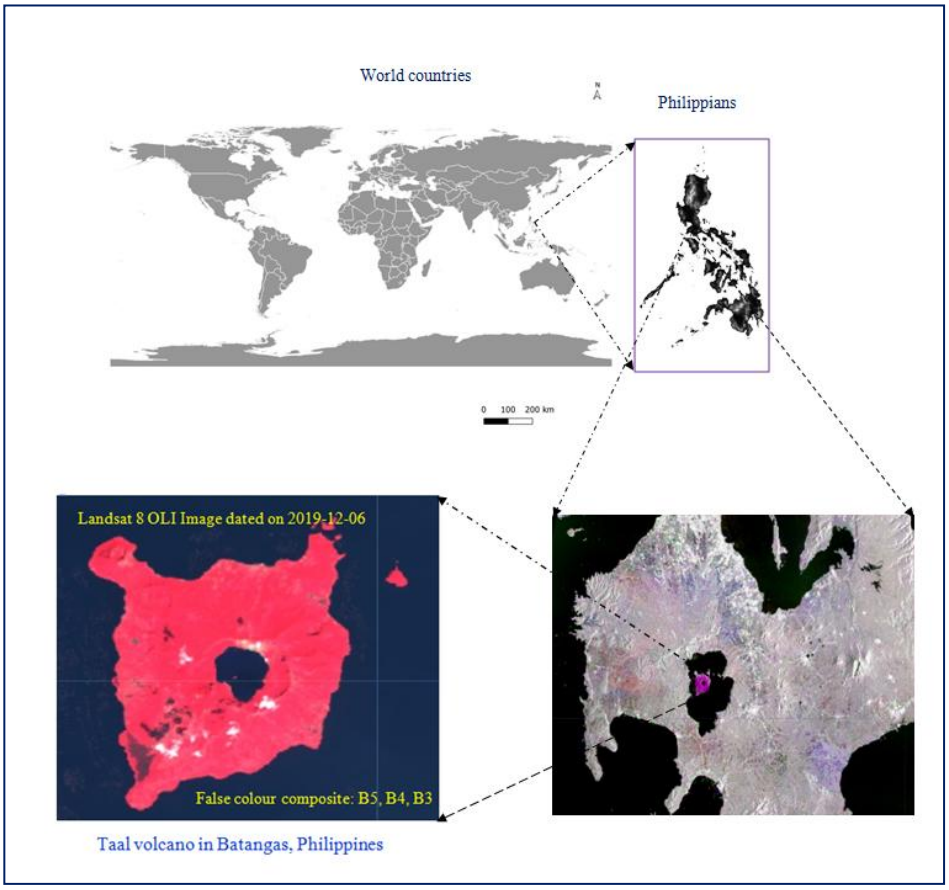


Fig. 1. Location map of Taal Volcano

2.2 Data used-Sentinel-1

In this study, The Sentinel-1 data exploited, and it provides a dual-polarization C-band Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), supplied by Copernicus (ESA). The datasets are available from 2014-10-03 onwards. This collection includes the ground range detected-S1 (GRD) imagery, which is processed using the Sentinel-1 toolbox to produce an ortho-corrected dataset. New assets are uploaded within two days in the google earth engine catalog. This collection consists of GRD images. Each of them is like 10, 25, or 40 meters spatial resolution with three instrument modes. Each scene provided either 1 or 2 among 4 possible polarization components such as single band VV(Single co-polarization, vertical

transmit/vertical receive) or HH (Single co-polarization, horizontal transmit/horizontal receive). It also has dual-band VV+VH (Dual-band cross-polarization, vertical transmit/horizontal receive) and HH+HV (Dual-band cross-polarization, horizontal transmit/vertical receive). The viewing incidence angle approximately from 0° to 90°. The thermal noise removal, radiometric calibration, and terrain correction using SRTM or ASTER data were carried out for sentinel data using the sentinel-1 toolbox. The final terrain-corrected values are transformed to decibels via log scaling (10*log10(x)). Thus it must be noted that all the pixels values in sentinel-1 data are decibel (DB) in GEE. The function, namely ee.ImageCollection("COPERNICUS/S1_GRD") has sentinel image collection.

3 Methodology

This study deployed a Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR)-based approach to assess vegetation loss resulting from the 2020 eruption of the Taal Volcano, Philippines. Sentinel-1 GRD datasets were processed and analyzed using the Google Earth Engine (GEE) cloud platform. A systematic workflow was developed, involving SAR data acquisition, polarization selection, speckle noise reduction, change detection through ratio analysis, vegetation loss mapping, and histogram-based statistical assessment. The methodological framework ensured an efficient, reproducible, and accurate evaluation of vegetation dynamics before and after the volcanic event. The overall research methodology is shown in Figure 2.

3.1 **SAR Data Pre-processing**

Sentinel-1 Ground Range Detected (GRD) products for the years 2018, 2019, and 2020 were accessed through the Google Earth Engine (GEE) platform. The datasets provided by GEE

were already radiometrically calibrated (to Sigma Nought, σ^0), terrain corrected (Range-Doppler terrain correction), and scaled to decibel (dB) units.

Consequently, no additional pre-processing steps such as radiometric calibration, dB conversion, or terrain correction were required, unlike conventional workflows using the Sentinel-1 Toolbox (SNAP). Prior to analysis, further processing steps included:

- Filtering images based on orbit direction and acquisition dates,
- Selecting VH and VV polarization images,
- Applying multi-temporal speckle filtering to reduce granular noise while preserving structural information.

These steps ensured that the SAR imagery was optimized for subsequent vegetation loss analysis and change detection tasks

The methodological workflow adopted in this study for mapping and assessing vegetation loss following the 2020 Taal Volcano eruption is illustrated in Figure [X]. The process was designed to ensure a systematic analysis of multi-temporal SAR data and to enable robust change detection over the volcanic landscape.

The workflow began with the mapping and assessment of vegetation loss before and after the volcanic eruption. Sentinel-1 SAR datasets spanning the years 2018 to 2020 were collected to capture surface and vegetation dynamics across the pre- and post-eruption periods. This approach aligned with established practices where multi-year SAR time series are exploited for environmental change monitoring (Vrînceanu et al., 2023 [2]).

The collected SAR datasets were accessed and processed through the Google Earth Engine (GEE) cloud computing platform, which facilitated efficient handling of large satellite image collections and allowed pre-processing operations at scale. Within GEE, filtering of time-series image collections was performed to ensure that only high-quality, temporally relevant scenes were included in the analysis.

Both VV and VH polarization channels were utilized, with particular emphasis placed on VH backscatter, given its higher sensitivity to vegetation structural integrity (Lucas et al., 2014 [6]). Pre-processed images underwent speckle noise reduction to enhance image interpretability while preserving essential structural and radiometric characteristics, following the methodology recommended by Choi and Jeong (2019) [1].

Subsequently, a ratio of images between 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 was calculated to highlight significant changes. Ratio analysis allowed for effective temporal change detection, pinpointing areas impacted by the eruption through relative backscatter differences. This method provided additional insights into geomorphological and vegetation disturbances (Kalaiyarasi and Saravanan, 2016 [3]).

The final step involved the quantification of vegetation loss, where thresholding and classification were applied to the ratio images, and degraded areas were calculated in terms of total affected hectares.

3.2 Statistical Thresholding and Vegetation Loss Mapping

Histograms and statistical reducers (mean and standard deviation) of ratio images informed threshold values for detecting significant change. For example, thresholds set as 1.5 times the standard deviation allowed classification of pronounced vegetation loss areas.

Thresholded difference maps were visualized as masks to spatially delineate regions of potential vegetation degradation. Quantification of these masked areas via pixel summation provided metrics for vegetation loss extent across the studied intervals.

3.3 Data Types and Their Roles

- **ee.ImageCollection:**

  This fundamental data type facilitated the loading and management of multispectral Sentinel-1 time series imagery. It enabled the aggregation of datasets across multiple dates and scenes, thereby supporting temporal analysis of vegetation dynamics.

- **ee.Filter (eq, listContains, metadata, date, bounds):**

  Filtering functions played a crucial role in querying the large Sentinel-1 archive to retain only relevant images. For example, ee.Filter.eq was used to select imagery captured in Interferometric Wide swath mode ('IW'), while ee.Filter.listContains isolated scenes containing specific polarizations (VV or VH). Additional filters like filterDate constrained the temporal window, and filterBounds ensured spatial relevance by restricting data to the study region.

- **mosaic():**

  This function merged multiple images from the filtered collection into continuous

composites for given time ranges, facilitating seamless analysis without gaps or overlaps.

3.4 Visualization and User Interaction

- **Map.centerObject & Map.addLayer:**

  These functions controlled the visualization of processed SAR data by centering the map on the region of interest (newroi) and overlaying imagery layers in different polarizations and filtered states. This enabled visual inspection of the spatial pattern of vegetation change.

- **ui.Chart.image.histogram:**

  Histograms provided quantitative insight into the distribution of pixel values within ratio images, aiding interpretation of change detection results and threshold setting.

3.5 Image Processing and Statistical Analysis

- **focal_mean:**

  Used for spatial filtering of SAR images, this speckle noise reduction technique smoothed the data by averaging pixel neighborhoods while preserving structural detail, enhancing the signal-to-noise ratio for accurate change detection.

- **updateMask:**

  Allowed masking of pixels not meeting defined thresholds, thereby isolating regions of significant vegetation loss.

- **ee.Reducer.mean() and ee.Reducer.sum():**

  These statistical reducers calculated means, standard deviations, and totals to quantify

pixel value changes and estimate the area affected by vegetation degradation across study years.

3.6 Output and Export

- **print:**

  Essential for displaying intermediate and final numeric summaries directly within the GEE code editor for interpretation and validation.

- **Export.image.toDrive:**

  Enabled exporting processed raster masks of vegetation loss for further offline analysis or integration with other Geographic Information System (GIS) tools.

Various functions used in this study is in table 1.

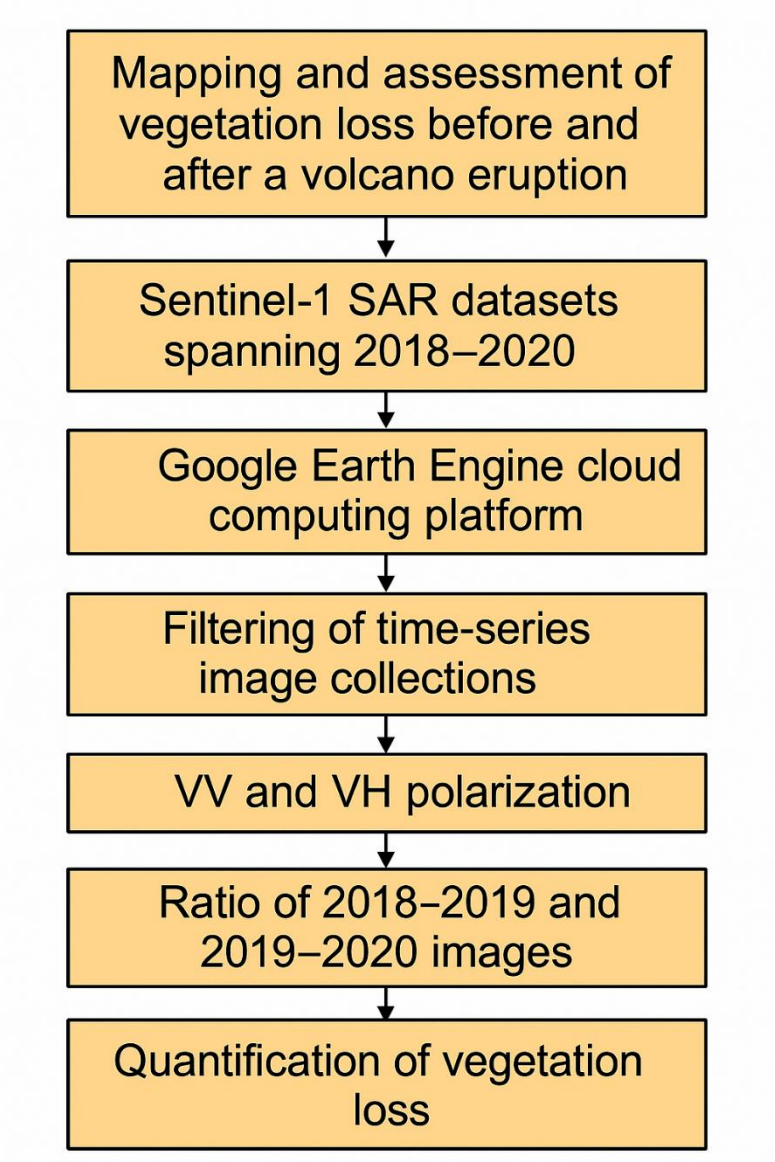


Fig. 1 Overall research Methodology

The following data (Table) types are used in this study using the google earth engine. (i) ee.Image Collection: it is used to collect the sentinel time series imagery. (ii) ee.Filter.eq: (iii) ee.Filter.listContains (iv) Map.centerObject

Table 1 Varius fuction used in GEE

S.no	Data types in GEE	Description
1.	ee.Image Collection	Load Sentinel-1 C-band SAR Ground Range collection
2.	ee.Filter.eq	Load the instrument Mode', 'IW'
3	filterMetadata	
4	ee.Filter.listContains	'transmitterReceiverPolarisation '
6	filterDate	Filtered the required images
7	filterBounds	Items in the collection with a footprint that fails to intersect the given geometry will be excluded.
8	mosaic	
9	Map.centerObject	Display the map at center
10	Map.addLayer	Display the output at google map
1	focal_mean	
12	ui.Chart.image.histogram	Calculate histograms for each image
13	updateMask	
14	ee.Reducer.mean()	
15	print	Print the object
16	Export.image.toDrive	Export outout, specifying scale and region
17	ee.Reducer.sum()	Compare differences in vegetation loss between 16/18 and 18/19

4. Result and Discussion

The impact of speckle noise reduction on SAR imagery was systematically evaluated for datasets collected in 2018, 2019, and 2020, in both VV and VH polarizations. Figure [X] presents a visual comparison between the original images and those processed with speckle reduction techniques.

Before applying the speckle reduction, the SAR images were heavily affected by granular noise, which significantly degraded the visual interpretation and obscured critical surface features. In the 2018 VV and VH images, the natural land surface and volcanic features appeared fragmented and inconsistent, with a considerable presence of random noise artifacts. Similar issues were observed in the 2019 images, where homogeneous regions were disrupted by speckle noise. The 2020 dataset exhibited the highest intensity of speckle contamination, particularly in VV polarization.

Following the application of a speckle noise reduction method, substantial improvements in image quality were observed. The surface textures appeared smoother, and the continuity of geological structures was better maintained. In the 2018 images, volcanic caldera boundaries were clearly delineated post-filtering, consistent with previous findings where statistical speckle suppression significantly enhanced SAR image interpretability (Choi and Jeong 2019).

The 2019 dataset also benefited from noise reduction, as landform boundaries became more distinct, and internal geological textures were better preserved. These improvements were similar to the results observed by Vrînceanu et al. (2023), who noted enhanced feature detection following speckle filtering on Sentinel-1 images. The Figure 2 shows the before and after speckle noise reduction in SAR polarization.

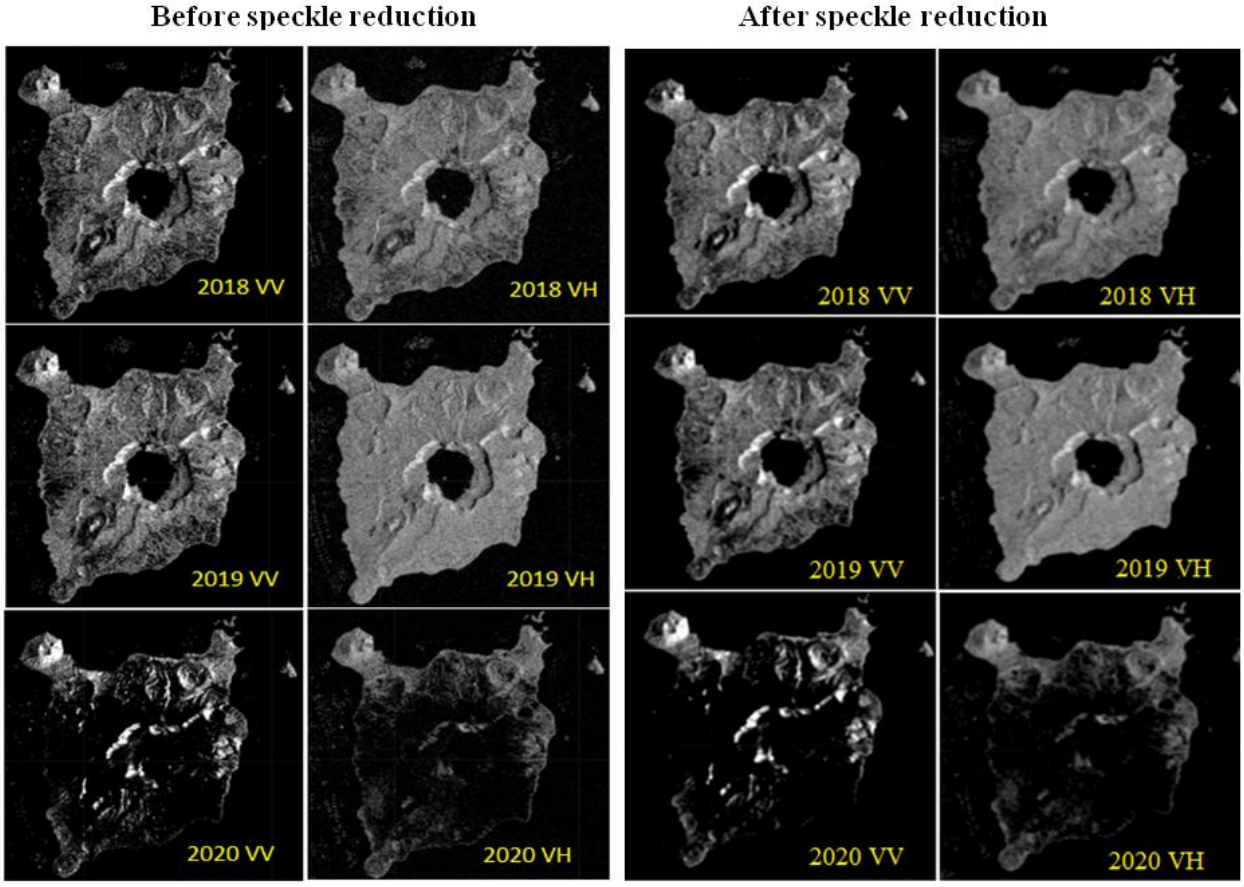


Fig. 2 Before and after spckle noise reduction for various time period

The 2020 VV and VH images, initially characterized by strong noise, exhibited a marked enhancement after processing, where the volcanic morphology and surrounding terrain could be interpreted more reliably. These findings were consistent with those reported by Kalaiyarasi and Saravanan (2016), who emphasized the importance of despeckling in maintaining geophysical features.

Furthermore, the applied noise reduction method effectively balanced noise suppression and feature preservation without introducing significant over-smoothing, aligning with conclusions by Argenti et al. (2013) .

Overall, it was confirmed that speckle reduction significantly enhanced SAR image quality, facilitating better geological interpretation and subsequent analytical tasks such as classification and change detection, supporting the observations made by Maity et al. (2015)

In addition to speckle noise reduction, inter-annual backscatter variations were assessed by generating ratio images between consecutive years for VV and VH polarizations (Figure [Y]). These ratio images provided insights into surface changes and coherence stability over the volcanic terrain.

The ratio images for 2019–2020 VV and VH polarizations revealed significant spatial variations, particularly around the volcanic caldera. Bright areas indicated an increase in backscatter intensity, likely associated with surface roughness changes, vegetation dynamics, or moisture variations. The central caldera region exhibited the most distinct changes, which may correspond to geomorphological activities or surface process alterations during this period. These observations were consistent with findings by Vrînceanu et al. (2023) [2], who emphasized that ratio images are effective in highlighting temporal changes in SAR datasets.

Conversely, the ratio images for 2018–2019 VV and VH polarizations appeared relatively homogeneous, with fewer distinct spatial patterns. This suggested that minimal surface changes occurred during this interval, reflecting either a stable surface condition or limited dynamic processes within the observation period. These subtle differences were in agreement with the conclusions drawn by Choi and Jeong (2019) [1], who demonstrated that stable backscatter ratios indicate surface stability in the absence of major disturbances.

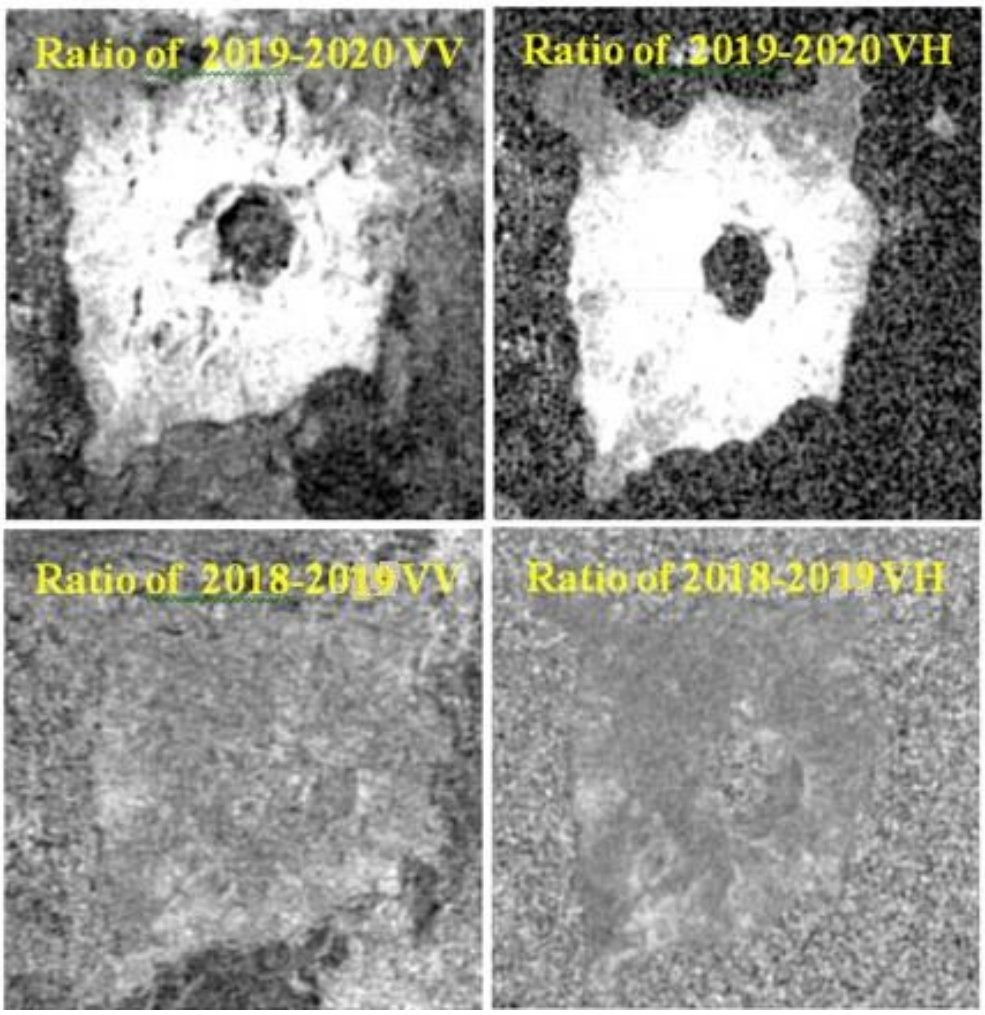


Fig.3 Ratio of temporal analysis of Radar Data (VV & VH Polarization)

Furthermore, it was observed that ratio images in VH polarization displayed higher noise levels compared to VV, aligning with the findings of Kalaiyarasi and Saravanan (2016) [3], where VH polarization was noted to be more sensitive to volume scattering and thus more susceptible to variability.

The ratio analysis demonstrated the complementary role of temporal change detection alongside speckle reduction, providing a comprehensive approach for monitoring volcanic surfaces and assessing geomorphological changes. The ratio of temporal analysis of VV and VH polzarsation is shown in Figure 3.

The impact of the volcanic eruption on surface conditions was further investigated by analyzing vegetation changes between pre- and post-eruption periods (Figure [Z]). The left image shows the vegetation loss (in red patches) that occurred after the 2020 Taal Volcano eruption, while the right image represents the surface condition before the eruption, based on 2019 SAR data.

Prior to the eruption, as observed in the 2019 image, dense and continuous vegetation cover was detected across most areas, with only small scattered red patches indicating minimal vegetation disturbance. This reflected a stable land surface, consistent with the low variability noted in the ratio analysis discussed earlier.

However, a substantial change was detected post-eruption. The 2020 image demonstrated extensive vegetation loss, as highlighted by the large red areas. These widespread changes were attributed to heavy ash deposition from the volcanic event, which severely affected vegetation health and cover. The ashfall likely increased surface roughness and dielectric

properties, leading to a significant alteration in the radar backscatter signal, as also discussed by Vrînceanu et al. (2023) [2] in relation to environmental impacts detected via SAR imagery.

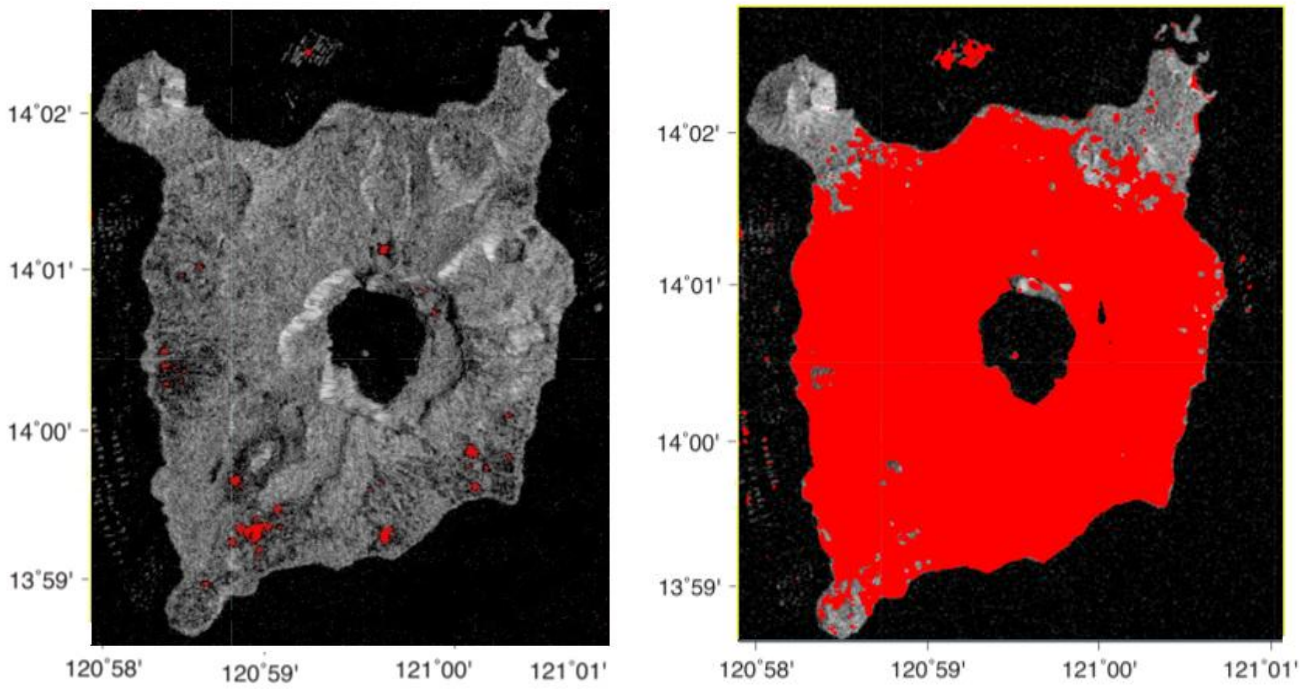


Fig. 4 Vegetation loss assement before and after eruption in Tall volcanco

Such effects were consistent with prior studies, where SAR systems were shown to be highly effective in detecting vegetation disturbance and loss caused by natural disasters (Choi and Jeong 2019) [1]. The clear contrast between pre- and post-eruption conditions illustrated the utility of SAR-based change detection methods for rapid disaster impact assessment, confirming the findings of Maity et al. (2015) [5] regarding the applicability of speckle-filtered SAR images for environmental monitoring.

Overall, the vegetation loss analysis using SAR data confirmed the severe environmental impact of the volcanic eruption, emphasizing the effectiveness of SAR remote sensing for vegetation and surface condition monitoring under disaster scenarios.

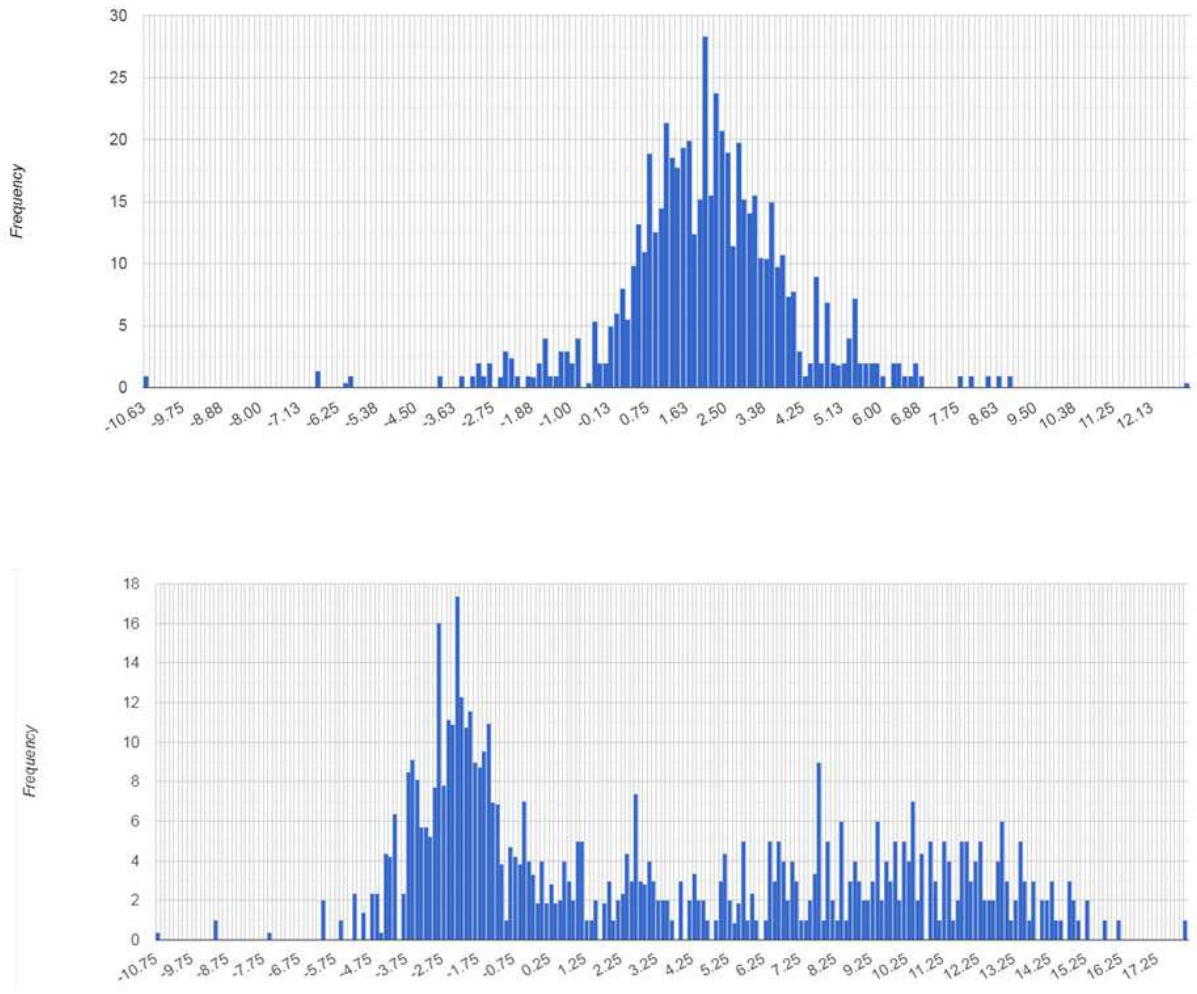


Fig.5 Comparison of Frequency Distributions

Vegetation loss associated with the Taal Volcano eruption was further analyzed using classified SAR imagery before and after the event (Figure [Z]). The right-hand panel of Figure [Z] corresponds to pre-eruption conditions in 2019, while the left-hand panel represents the post-eruption scenario in 2020.

Prior to the eruption, the SAR backscatter signature indicated a relatively continuous vegetation cover across the volcano's surface. Only minor patches of low backscatter, marked in red, were detected, suggesting limited areas of natural vegetation variability or minor anthropogenic disturbances.

Following the eruption, a significant expansion of red-marked areas was observed, indicating widespread vegetation loss. The deposition of heavy volcanic ash on the surface led to dramatic changes in the backscatter response, as ash burial caused the loss of dielectric contrast typically associated with healthy vegetation. This phenomenon was clearly evident in the extensive red patches dominating the caldera and its surroundings.

The findings were consistent with previous studies, such as those by Vrînceanu et al. (2023) who demonstrated the utility of SAR data for mapping surface changes following geophysical events. The observed vegetation loss pattern also aligned with the concepts presented by Lucas et al. (2014) who showed that SAR backscatter is highly sensitive to vegetation structural integrity and biomass changes, especially under disturbance events like volcanic eruptions.

Moreover, the comparative analysis confirmed that SAR-based classification techniques could effectively detect and map abrupt vegetation changes, supporting the earlier work by Choi and Jeong (2019) who emphasized the application of speckle-filtered SAR imagery for land cover monitoring.

Overall, it was demonstrated that the Taal eruption led to extensive vegetation degradation, which could be effectively monitored through multi-temporal SAR analysis, offering a valuable tool for rapid environmental impact assessments following volcanic activity.

In Figure 6 red-marked areas still dominate the volcanic surface, indicating that substantial vegetation loss persisted several months after the eruption. Only minor patches of regrowth were observed, primarily along the northern and northeastern flanks of the volcano. These isolated regrowth areas suggested that natural vegetation succession processes had begun but were still limited in extent and coverage.

The low degree of vegetation recovery could be attributed to the severity of the ash deposition, which had buried the soil seed bank and altered the physical and chemical properties of the substrate, hindering rapid re-establishment of plant communities. This behavior was consistent with findings by Lucas et al. (2014) [6], who observed prolonged recovery times in ash-covered regions detected through SAR backscatter analysis.

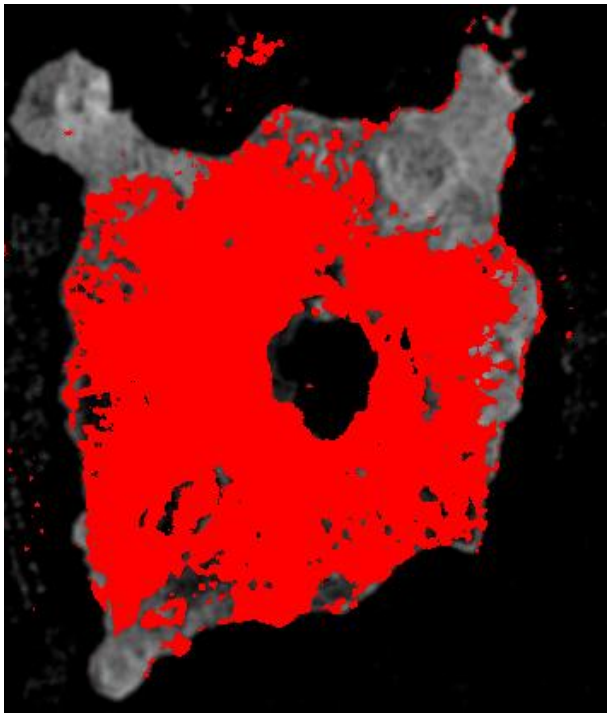


Fig. 6 Vegetation loss assement in 2024

Moreover, the widespread persistence of low backscatter values across the volcano suggested that surface roughness and dielectric properties remained altered. As reported by Vrînceanu et al. (2023) such conditions typically delay the return of vegetation-related volume scattering signals in SAR datasets.

Although minor vegetation gains were detected, the spatial pattern indicated that full ecological recovery would require a significantly longer period. The monitoring of future satellite passes would be crucial for evaluating the trajectory of vegetation succession and for guiding environmental management strategies.

5. Conlusion

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of SAR-based remote sensing techniques for mapping and assessing vegetation loss following the 2020 eruption of the Taal Volcano in Batangas, Philippines. By utilizing Sentinel-1 time-series datasets from 2018 to 2020 within the Google Earth Engine (GEE) cloud computing environment, vegetation degradation was successfully quantified. Speckle noise reduction techniques were applied to enhance image quality, and comparative analyses between VV and VH polarization components indicated that VH backscatter was more sensitive for detecting vegetation changes. The analysis of multi-temporal SAR data revealed that approximately 22,294.89 hectares of vegetation were lost between 2019 and 2020, compared to only 445.48 hectares between 2018 and 2019. This corresponded to an overall vegetation reduction of about 98% following the eruption event.

The findings highlighted the significant environmental impact caused by volcanic ash deposition on agricultural and natural vegetation systems. Furthermore, the results underscored the utility of SAR imagery, particularly VH polarization, for rapid post-disaster environmental

assessment. Although minor signs of vegetation recovery were observed in recent satellite passes, the majority of the volcanic island remained barren several months after the eruption.

The approach presented in this work could be applied to other volcanic or disaster-affected regions to monitor vegetation dynamics, assess ecological recovery, and support disaster response strategies.

Funding

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

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