

Analysis and synthesis of data on relationships between soil factors and soil erosion in South Africa

By

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Declaration

I declare that this mini-dissertation describes my original work, except where specific acknowledgement is made to the work of others, and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted for a degree to any other university

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Date 27/03/02.....

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is dominated by soils that are inherently unstable and extremely vulnerable to erosion. Soil erosion is most severe in the semi-arid regions although it is not confined solely to these areas. The Karoo, former Transkei, parts of the western Orange Free State and former Transvaal and a considerable part of Kwazulu Natal are subject to severe erosion by water.

Work reported in a number of post graduate studies on erosion in South Africa was critically evaluated and the most important results reported. Soil formation from different parent materials was investigated in a number of these studies. It was found that the stability of the soils developed on dolerite was higher than the stability of the soils on granite and sedimentary rocks. The soils on dolerite have lower stability with decreasing rainfall. The soils on granite do not show the same decrease in stability with a decrease in rainfall.

It was also found that some soils erode more easily than others under the same conditions of rainfall, vegetation and topography. This shows that the nature of the soil plays an important role in the occurrence and severity of erosion.

A distinction between hydraulic conductivity (HC) and infiltration rate (IR) was also studied. HC is usually measured under conditions where the soil surface is not disturbed. Considerable surface disturbance occurs when IR is measured, especially when precipitation is involved, leading to crust formation at the soil surface and thus to differentiated water transmission properties of the crusted layer compared with the underlying soil. The HC of the soil depends to a large extent on the exchangeable sodium percentage (ESP) of the soil and the salt concentration of the percolating solution.

Levy (1988) studied the effect of clay mineralogy and soil sodicity on the IR of soils subject to rain. The IR experiments were carried out using a laboratory rainfall simulator.

On the basis of the results presented by Levy, it is suggested that as far as clay mineralogy is concerned, the order of soil sensitivity to crust formation and its dependence on the level of soil sodicity is as follows: smectite>illitic> kaolinitic.

Threshold slope criteria were established for the dominant soils of three different pedosystems of the former Ciskei. Pilot areas were selected by means of aerial photographs and orthophoto maps.

Sumner (1957), D'Huyvetter (1985) and Bloem (1992) evaluated the effect of texture on erosion. Sumner and Bloem showed that clay content is the soil parameter with the biggest effect on surface sealing. Sumner indicated that crust formation could develop with any type of texture except sand with very low silt and clay. D'Huyvetter found that in all three main pedosystems namely, Mavuso, Keiskammahoek and Middledrift, topsoils with less than 20 per cent clay were found to be highly erodible while those which had a clay content of more than 20 per cent were found to be less erodible.

The effects of soil properties (e.g. texture, clay mineralogy, exchangeable cations, organic matter content) and experimental conditions (e.g. soil bulk density, moisture content, aging duration, prewetting rate) on rill erodibilities were investigated. Rill erosion depends on flow shear stress and stream power, the shear strength of the soil and cohesion forces between soil particles and the stream transporting capacity.

Stern (1990) studied the effects of slope and phosphogypsum (PG) application on seal formation, runoff and erosion from kaolinitic soils which vary in their response to rainfall and mechanisms which account for these variabilities were proposed. He found that PG was beneficial in increasing the IR of the soils. He also established that by diminishing chemical dispersion at the soil surface, the PG treatment slowed down seal formation and reduced removal of seal by erosion. The kaolinitic soils were divided into two categories: stable (S) and dispersive (D) soils. The presence of small amounts of swelling minerals caused dispersion, seal formation, high runoff and high soil loss on the dispersive kaolinite soils. Stable kaolinite soils did not contain swelling minerals.

Stern (1990) also studied the effects of surface application of mulch cover, PG, and polyacrylamide (PAM) on runoff during natural rainstorms. Runoff from control (bare) plots were high and during high intensities storm events most of the rain was lost through runoff. Mulch was beneficial in reducing runoff, indicating water infiltration was restricted by seal formation rather than by the hydraulic properties of the profile. PG reduced runoff to about half the amount from control plots. PAM treatment reduced runoff by three fold compared with the control treatment.

Knowledge of soil properties is essential for adequate land use planning in ensuring sustainable utilization of soil and preventing erosion and the mistakes of the past.



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. The soil erosion situation in South Africa	1
1.2. Effects of incorrect land use planning	1
1.3. History of soil erosion research and soil conservation in South Africa	3
1.4. Objectives of the present study	4
1.5. Structure of the dissertation	4
2. PROCESS AND MECHANISMS OF SOIL EROSION BY WATER	2
2.1 General	6
2.2 Splash erosion	7
2.2.1. Structure of the crust	8
2.2.2. Factors affecting the formation and permeability of crust	9
2.2.2.1. Effects of rain	9
2.2.2.2. Effect of soil properties	9
2.2.2.2.1. <i>Physical factors</i>	9
2.2.2.2.2. <i>Chemical factors</i>	11
2.2.2.2.3. <i>Clay mineralogy</i>	13
2.3. Surface wash	14
2.4. Factors affecting water erosion	17
2.4.1. Rainfall factors	17
2.4.2. Soil factors	18
2.4.2.1. Factors affecting aggregate stability	20
2.4.2.1.1. <i>Organic matter</i>	21
2.4.2.1.2. <i>Aluminium and iron oxides</i>	21
2.4.3. Slope factors	22
2.4.4. Vegetative factors	23



3. COLLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF INFORMATION FROM THESES AND DISSERTATIONS DEALING WITH SOIL RELATED STUDIES ON WATER EROSION IN SOUTH AFRICA	25
3.1. Data extraction	25
M.Sc Dissertation: Smith, HJC., (1990):	
3.2. The crusting of red soils as affected by parent material, rainfall, cultivation and sodicity	26
3.2.1. General background and objectives of the study	26
3.2.2. Summary of introductory remarks by Smith	27
3.2.2.1. Soil formation on basic and acidic rocks	27
3.2.2.2. Weathering in soils	29
3.2.3. Research technique	30
3.2.3.1. Results and discussion by Smith (1990)	31
3.2.3.1.1. <i>Chemical, mineralogical and physical properties of the soils</i>	31
3.2.3.1.2. <i>Infiltration data</i>	37
Ph.D Thesis: D’Huyvetter, JHH. (1985):	
3.3. Determination of threshold slope percentages for the identification and delineation of arable land in Ciskei	45
3.3.1. General background and objectives of the study	45
3.3.2. Research procedures	45
3.3.2.1. Areas studied	46
3.3.2.2. Determination of slope parameters	46
3.3.2.3. Determination of extent and degree of erosion	47
3.3.2.4. Soil parameters	48
3.3.3. Results	48
3.3.3.1. Mavuso pedosystem	48
3.3.3.1.1. <i>Field observations and soil classification</i>	48
3.3.3.1.2. <i>Type(s) of erosion that occurred</i>	49



3.3.3.1.3. Calculation of threshold slope percentages	50
3.3.3.1.4. Correlations between soil factors and erosion	52
3.3.3.2 Keikammahoek pedosystem	53
3.3.3.2.1. Field observations and soil classification	53
3.3.3.2.2. Type(s) of erosion that occurred	55
3.3.3.2.3. Calculation of threshold slope percentage for the Amatola Basin (Keiskammahoek pedosystem)	56
3.3.3.2.4. Correlation between soil factors and erosion	56
3.3.3.3. Middledrift pedosystem	64
3.3.3.3.1. Field observation and soil classification	64
3.3.3.3.2. Type(s) of erosion that occurred	65
3.3.3.3.3. Calculation of threshold slope percentages of Middledrift pedosystem	65
3.3.3.4. Correlations between soil factors and erosion	68
3.3.4. Conclusions	69
Ph.D Thesis: Levy, GJ. (1988):	
3.4. The effects of clay mineralogy and exchangeable cations on some of the hydraulic properties of soils	70
3.4.1. General background and objective	70
3.4.2. Experimental procedures	71
3.4.3. Results	73
3.4.3.1. Relationship between clay mineralogy and final infiltration rate (FIR)	74
3.4.3.2. Effect of ESP on crusting and FIR	75
3.4.3.3. The effects of exchangeable Mg and K on infiltration rate as opposed to their effects on hydraulic conductivity	81
M.Sc Dissertation: Sumner, ME. (1975):	
3.5. The physical and chemical properties of tall grassveld soils of Natal in relation to their erodibility	82
3.5.1. General background and objectives	82
3.5.2. Areas studied and research methodologies	83
3.5.2.1. Areas studied	83
3.5.2.2. Geology of the areas studied	84



3.5.2.3. Field survey techniques	84
3.5.2.4. Laboratory analyses	84
3.5.3. Results	85
3.5.3.1. Particle size distribution	85
3.5.3.2. Exchangeable base contents of Tall Grassveld soils(developed on the Estcourt geological formation) as compared with some other soils	85
3.5.3.3 Classification of soils according to erodibility	86
3.5.3.3.1. <i>Highly erodable soils</i>	86
3.5.3.3.2. <i>Relatively stable residual soils on dolerite</i>	87
3.5.4. Conclusions	87
Ph.D Thesis: Rapp, I (1998):	
3.6. The effects of soil properties and experimental conditions on the rill erodibilities of selected soils.	88
3.6.1. General background and objectives	88
3.6.2. Materials and methods	90
3.6.2.1. Description of soils used	90
3.6.2.2. Soil analysis methods	90
3.6.2.3. Rill erosion (RE) simulation system	91
3.6.3. Results	91
3.6.3.1. Effects of soil bulk density (ρ_b) and moisture content (MC) on rill erosion	91
3.6.3.2. Effects of clay mineralogy on rill erosion	97
Ph.D Thesis: Stern, R. (1990):	
3.7. Effects of soil properties and chemical ameliorants on seal formation, runoff and erosion	98
3.7.1. General background and objectives	98
3.7.2. The effect of clay composition on seal formation, runoff and erosion	100
3.7.2.1. Runoff and erosion from stable and dispersive kaolinitic soils	100
3.7.3. Materials and methods	100
3.7.4. Results and discussion	101
3.7.4.1. Infiltration rate and runoff	101
3.7.4.2. Soil loss	110
3.7.4.3. Particle concentration in the runoff	113



3.7.5. Conclusions	115
3.7.6. Runoff and erosion from illitic soils	115
3.7.6.1. Introduction	115
3.7.6.2. Materials and methods	116
3.7.6.3. Interpretation of results and discussion by Stern	118
3.7.6.3.1. <i>Infiltration rates of Jozini and Rosehill soil</i>	118
3.7.6.3.2. <i>Soil loss from Jozini and Rosehill soils</i>	123
3.7.6.4. Trevanian soil from Piketberg	126
3.7.6.5. Conclusions	128
3.7.7 Field studies with runoff plots under natural rainfall	128
3.7.7.1. Introduction	128
3.7.7.2. Materials and methods	129
3.7.7.2.1. <i>Soil and plot preparation</i>	129
3.7.7.2.2. <i>Measurement of runoff</i>	130
3.7.7.3. Interpretation of results and discussion by Stern	134
3.7.7.3.1. <i>Runoff from untreated (control) plots</i>	134
3.7.7.3.2. <i>Effect of mulch on seal formation</i>	135
3.7.7.3.3. <i>Effect of Phospogypsum (PG) on runoff</i>	136
3.7.7.4. Runoff from Piketberg site	139
3.7.7.5. Effect of PAM on runoff	140
3.7.7.6. Conclusions	140
3.7.8. Relationship between microaggregate stability and soil surface dispersibility	145
3.7.8.1. Introduction	145
3.7.8.2. Materials and methods	145
3.7.8.2.1. <i>Procedure and apparatus</i>	146
3.7.8.3. Discussion and interpretation of results by Stern	149
M.Sc Dissertation: Bloem, AA (1992):	
3.8. Criteria for adaption of the design and management of overhead irrigation systems to the infiltrability of soils	153
3.8.1. General background and objective of the study	153
3.8.2. Materials and methods	153
3.8.3. Results and discussion	154



4. SYNTHESIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATIONS AND THESES SUMMARIZED IN CHAPTER 3	161
4.1. Introduction	161
4.2. Parent material	161
4.3. Climate	162
4.4. Soil factors	163
4.4.1. Clay mineralogy	163
4.4.2. Texture	164
4.4.3. Chemical factors	165
4.4.4. Degree of weathering	166
4.4.5. Types of soils	167
4.5. Slope	168
4.6. The importance of planning	169
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	170
5.1. Conclusions	170
5.5. Recommendations	172
6. REFERENCES	174