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# QUANTIFYING BED STABILITY: THE MISSING TOOL FOR ESTABLISHING MECHANISTIC HYDROLOGICAL LIMITS

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# Abstract

Sediment transport processes are a key mechanism of ecological change in riverine systems, and certain levels of sediment flux are necessary for healthy ecosystem functioning. Altered flow regimes and sediment mobility are contributing to a global problem of higher substrate embeddedness reducing the frequency of substrate scour events and leading to increases in periphyton accrual. Excess periphyton accrual leads to fish and invertebrate kills from oxygen depletion, degraded ecological health, altered sediment dynamics, deterioration in water taste, and odour nuisance. In recent decades, reports of toxic periphyton proliferations have increased and are linked with health problems in humans including asthma, skin rashes, liver damage, and the death of domestic dogs. Excess periphyton accrual is prominent in impounded catchments where dams have a considerable impact on flow and sediment regimes. With at least 3,700 large dams currently under construction or in the planning phase the problem is set to increase in the foreseeable future.

Hydrological limits are widely implemented by authorities in an attempt to manage periphyton accrual. Hydrological limits are frequently based on flow-ecology relationships but are often ineffective. Sediment transport thresholds have been found to have a better relationship with periphyton accrual than hydrological metrics. Flow-ecology relationships do not account for the mechanisms of periphyton removal (scour, abrasion, and molar action) which are likely to vary between sites at equivalent flows, and the species-specific resistance to each mechanism also likely varies. Abrasion and molar action result from transport of sediment. Improving the effectiveness of hydrological limits as a tool for river management therefore relies on setting flows with the aim of inducing sediment transport to initiate mechanisms of periphyton scour. This will require models which can accurately predict the flow required to induce different phases of sediment transport. The research presented in this thesis focuses on improving the estimation of gravel entrainment to advance entrainment models as a means of setting hydrological limits to induce molar action and improve the effectiveness of periphyton removal.

A literature review of methods for estimating gravel particle entrainment thresholds in natural channels revealed a considerable gap in methods being available to quantify substrate characteristics to calculate resistance thresholds. The review also found significant challenges in identifying the onset of gravel transport in natural channels, and difficulty obtaining corresponding hydrodynamic data to identify entrainment thresholds. Further, the review found seepage was an important component of hydrodynamic forces for inducing particle entrainment in flumes, but seepage is not considered in conventional entrainment formulae, and is not measured alongside bedload transport data in the field.

A suite of tools is identified and developed to improve the quantification of substrate structure and resistance, identification of incipient motion, and quantification of entrainment thresholds in natural gravel beds to advance the assessment of bed mobility. Optical and ranging techniques are compared to identify an optimal approach to remotely quantify substrate structure. Both approaches were found to produce a comparable quantification of surface roughness using point cloud elevations, but identified different trends in surface layer development. Quantification of surface layer development was found to be sensitive to the cell size used to grid the data, and this sensitivity increased with higher-order sta-

tistical moments which were used to describe armouring. Airborne optical sensors were found to be the most versatile method for remote characterisation of gravel-bed surface structure, with a larger range of metrics being derivable from the same dataset to quantify a wider range of substrate structural and textural characteristics.

Whilst quantifying bed structure is critical for developing bed mobility models, measuring the resistive force of the bed created by the structural arrangement of particles is required for model calibration and empirical data collection. A protocol was developed to use a modified penetrometer to quantify the resistive force of the armour (active) layer in gravel-bed channels. The modifications made to the penetrometer made it sensitive to variations in armour layer compactness, and allowed for adaptive penetration depths enabling variations in armour layer thickness to be accounted for. The protocol and modified penetrometer provide a significant advancement in the ability to empirically quantify bed resistance and relate bed structure to potential bed mobility, and build on the remote sensing methods to provide a suite of bed resistance parameters for entrainment models.

Measurement of bed mobility is also critical for calibrating entrainment models and relating ecological metrics to bed mobility thresholds. Both direct and indirect measurement of bed mobility have benefits for research and river management. Tick-box indices are frequently used in ecological studies to provide an indirect assessment of substrate (in)stability (i.e. bed mobility). These indices often provide a poor approximation of bed mobility, and do not relate well with biotic communities, but their low-cost and rapidity make them a valuable tool for research and management. An improved index is developed to provide rapid, low-cost assessment of bed mobility. This index improves on previous methods by focusing on objective measurements of parameters where low-cost approaches are available, or providing a framework for scoring parameters where visual assessment is required. The index scores correlated well with tracer particle data, and were found to relate to accrual of *Phormidium* biomass. This index therefore provides a means to rapidly and cost-effectively estimate bed mobility and predict periphyton accrual.

Direct measurement of bed mobility is also required to provide an empirical dataset for the calibration of particle entrainment and transport models, and for the empirical derivation of hydrological limits. A multi-sensor system was developed to measure the onset of particle movement, and record corresponding hydrodynamic data, including bed seepage, to identify hydraulic entrainment thresholds in natural channels, and therefore address the challenges of identifying bedload entrainment thresholds identified in the literature review. A pilot study testing the system identified bed seepage and turbulence intensity as key predictors of particle entrainment, and discharge and mean velocity as the worst predictors. These findings challenge the use of discharge and mean velocity as the metrics used to set hydrological limits if mechanistic limits based on bed mobility-ecology relationships are to be established effectively.

These tools provide a means for scientists to study bedload entrainment and transport, identify their thresholds, and relate the frequency and magnitude of these processes to benthic community dynamics. This research will form the basis for establishing the mechanisms required to achieve removal of excess periphyton and establish hydrological limits to ensure these mechanisms function and effective removal of periphyton is achieved to maintain ecosystem health.

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# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Equations</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>General Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Aims and Objectives . . . . .	3
Thesis Organization . . . . .	4
<b>1 Towards Mechanistic Hydrological Limits: A Literature Synthesis to Improve the Study of Direct Linkages Between Sediment Transport and Periphyton Accrual in Gravel-Bed Rivers</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Abstract . . . . .	8
1.2 Introduction . . . . .	8
1.3 Managing Periphyton Removal with Physical Process Targets . . . . .	9
1.4 Entrainment Mechanisms and Thresholds . . . . .	13
1.4.1 Mechanisms of Entrainment . . . . .	14
1.4.1.1 Hydraulic entrainment forces . . . . .	14
1.4.1.2 Substrate resistance . . . . .	16
1.5 Measurement of Entrainment and Resistance Forces . . . . .	16
1.5.1 Assessment of Resistance . . . . .	16
1.5.1.1 Grain size distribution . . . . .	16
1.5.1.2 Substrate structure . . . . .	18
1.5.1.3 Bed compaction . . . . .	19
1.5.2 Measurement of Entrainment Forces . . . . .	19
1.5.2.1 Near-bed hydraulics . . . . .	19
1.5.2.2 Seepage . . . . .	20
1.6 Identifying the Onset of Motion and Transport Rates . . . . .	20
1.6.1 Direct Measurement of Bedload . . . . .	20
1.6.2 Surrogate Measurement of Bedload Transport . . . . .	21
1.6.2.1 Passive bedload sensors . . . . .	21
1.6.2.2 Active bedload sensors . . . . .	21
1.7 Synthesis . . . . .	22
1.8 Acknowledgements . . . . .	23
<b>2 Terrestrial Laser Scanning and Structure-from-Motion Photogrammetry concordance analysis for describing the surface layer of gravel beds</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1 Abstract . . . . .	28

2.2	Introduction . . . . .	28
2.3	Study Site . . . . .	31
2.4	Methodology . . . . .	32
2.4.1	Data Acquisition . . . . .	32
2.4.1.1	Survey control . . . . .	32
2.4.1.2	Terrestrial Laser Scanner surveys . . . . .	32
2.4.1.3	Structure-from-Motion photogrammetry . . . . .	34
2.4.2	Point Cloud Processing . . . . .	34
2.4.3	Calculating Point Cloud Moments . . . . .	36
2.4.4	Pebble Counts . . . . .	37
2.5	Results . . . . .	37
2.5.1	Pebble Counts . . . . .	37
2.5.2	Point Clouds . . . . .	37
2.5.2.1	Standard deviation . . . . .	37
2.5.3	Skewness and Kurtosis . . . . .	38
2.5.3.1	Complete clouds . . . . .	38
2.5.3.2	Spatially varied moments . . . . .	41
2.6	Discussion . . . . .	42
2.6.1	Characterising Surface Roughness . . . . .	42
2.6.2	Describing Surface Texture . . . . .	44
2.6.3	Implications for Modelling and Management . . . . .	44
2.7	Conclusions . . . . .	47
2.8	Notation . . . . .	49
2.9	Acknowledgements . . . . .	49
2.10	Funding . . . . .	49
<b>3</b>	<b>Rapidly Quantifying Compactness of the Active Layer in Gravel-Bed Streams</b>	<b>51</b>
3.1	Abstract . . . . .	52
3.2	Introduction . . . . .	52
3.3	Study Sites . . . . .	54
3.4	Methodology . . . . .	58
3.4.1	Conducting Penetration Tests . . . . .	58
3.4.2	Calculating the $D_{90}$ . . . . .	59
3.4.3	Calculating Substrate Resistance . . . . .	59
3.4.4	Comparison Substrate Characteristics . . . . .	60
3.5	Results . . . . .	60
3.5.1	Discussion/Conclusions . . . . .	66
3.6	Notation . . . . .	70
3.7	Acknowledgements . . . . .	70
<b>4</b>	<b>A New Rapid Assessment Technique for Measuring Stability in Gravel Substrates</b>	<b>71</b>
4.1	Summary . . . . .	72
4.2	Introduction . . . . .	72
4.3	Methodology . . . . .	73
4.3.1	Study sites . . . . .	73
4.3.2	Index Development . . . . .	76
4.3.3	Index Variable Selection . . . . .	76
4.3.4	Optimising the Index . . . . .	81
4.3.5	Calibrating the Index . . . . .	82
4.3.6	Validating the Index . . . . .	82

4.3.7	Case Study . . . . .	82
4.4	Results . . . . .	83
4.4.1	Index Optimisation and Performance . . . . .	83
4.4.2	Predicting Phormidium Accrual . . . . .	86
4.5	Discussion . . . . .	89
4.6	Acknowledgements . . . . .	90
<b>5</b>	<b>Implementation of a Multi-Sensor System to Identify Streamwise Hydrodynamic and Vertical Bed Seepage Thresholds for Particle Entrainment in Gravel-Bed Rivers</b>	<b>93</b>
5.1	Abstract . . . . .	94
5.2	Introduction . . . . .	94
5.2.1	Quantifying Thresholds . . . . .	94
5.2.2	Identifying Incipient Motion . . . . .	95
5.3	Study Site . . . . .	96
5.4	Methodology . . . . .	97
5.4.1	Identifying the Onset of Motion . . . . .	97
5.4.2	Near-Bed Velocity . . . . .	99
5.4.3	Near-Bed Velocity . . . . .	99
5.4.4	Seepage . . . . .	100
5.5	Results . . . . .	104
5.5.1	Event 1 . . . . .	104
5.5.2	Event 2 . . . . .	108
5.5.3	Event 3 . . . . .	108
5.5.4	Event 4 . . . . .	108
5.5.5	Event 5 . . . . .	108
5.5.6	Parameter Relationships . . . . .	110
5.6	Discussion . . . . .	110
5.6.1	Identifying entrainment thresholds . . . . .	110
5.6.2	Mechanisms . . . . .	112
5.6.3	Intra-Event Thresholds . . . . .	112
5.6.4	Key Outcomes . . . . .	113
5.7	Conclusions . . . . .	113
5.8	Notation . . . . .	115
5.9	Acknowledgements . . . . .	115
<b>6</b>	<b>Synthesis</b>	<b>117</b>
6.1	Conclusions . . . . .	122
6.2	Future Research . . . . .	123
<b>A</b>	<b>Statements of Contribution</b>	<b>147</b>

# List of Figures

1.1	Impacts, causes, and mitigation methods for periphyton proliferations. . . .	9
1.2	Conceptual model of the approach needed to design effective hydrological regimes vs. the approach used in many contemporary methods. Adapted from de Jalón <i>et al.</i> (2017). . . . .	10
2.1	Example of a patch of gravel from the same extent in the TLS and SfMp clouds. Note the SfMp cloud has considerably more data points, and less occluded spots. . . . .	30
2.2	Location of the Pohangina River catchment, North Island, New Zealand (left), and the study site at Mais Reach indicated by the black box (right) which shows the extent of Figure 2.3. . . . .	31
2.3	Distribution of the survey peg network at Mais Reach (top) displayed on an aerial image from 2016 showing the bar configuration for the August 2016 survey. Pegs from the benchmark survey are displayed in green, the temporary peg used for the October 2015 survey is shown in red (indicating the extent of the bar in October 2015), and pegs 8 and 9 which replaced 6 and 7 are shown in blue. Arrow indicates flow direction. The bottom image shows an example of the GCPs used in the August 2016 survey, allowing rapid deployment, and automatic recognition of targets during processing. DJI® Phantom 3 battery shown for scale. . . . .	33
2.4	Difference in the z direction between points in the SfMp and TLS clouds. .	35
2.5	Rasters showing the difference in elevation between the SfMp and TLS clouds. The clouds were gridded to 0.5 m resolution, with cell values representing the mean elevation. Areas in red represent cells where the TLS was lower than the SfMp. Areas below 60 mm difference (approximately the $D_{84}$ ) are thresholded out as these areas tended to show pixels where the SfMp cloud had data points in occluded areas of the TLS, or at the base of grains where TLS had only sampled the top of the grain. It is worth noting the largest b-axis measured in a pebble sample exceeded 256 mm, and therefore differences in the clouds are within the range of b-axis measurements at the site. The black outline represents the survey boundary.	36
2.6	Box and whisker plots of the spatially varied $\sigma_z$ (left) and $\Delta\sigma_z$ (right). Note the y-axis has been scaled to make the IQR legible, so some data points beyond the whiskers are not included in the plots. . . . .	38
2.7	Rasters showing the spatial variation of $\sigma_z$ for the October 2015 survey 1 m (top) and 0.25 m (bottom) cell resolutions. SfMp surveys are on the left and TLS on the right. Red circles highlight some of the roughness patches which are evident in the clouds. . . . .	40
2.8	Box and whisker plots of the spatially varied $S_{kz}$ (left) and $\Delta S_{kz}$ (right). Note the y-axis has been scaled to make the IQR legible, so some data points beyond the whiskers are not included in the plots. . . . .	42

2.9	Box and whisker plots of the spatially varied $K_{uz}$ (left) and $\Delta K_{uz}$ (right). Note the y-axis has been scaled to make the IQR legible, so some data points beyond the whiskers are not included in the plots. . . . .	42
2.10	Images of the substrate surface for each survey, along with sorting coefficients derived from the pebble count data. . . . .	45
2.11	Rasters showing the spatial variation of $K_{uz}$ for the October 2015 survey 1 m (top) and 0.25 m (bottom) cell resolutions. SfMp surveys are on the left and TLS on the right. Note the higher frequency of more extreme platykurtic cells in the 0.25 m rasters, particularly the TLS. . . . .	46
3.1	Site locations. Sites A-F are the trial sites. . . . .	55
3.2	Photographs showing the characteristics of the six trial sites, ranging from third order boulder-bed headwater streams to 6 <sup>th</sup> order wandering lowland rivers. . . . .	57
3.3	Schematic of the penetrometer design, showing dimensions and part names. . . . .	61
3.4	Illustration of how the depth reader attachment is used to measure penetration depth ( $d$ ), assuming the foot started level with the penetrometer tip. . . . .	62
3.5	Conversion curve for the relationship between the $BCI$ and substrate resistance ( $R_s$ ) for the penetrometer described in this paper. . . . .	63
3.6	Scatterplots showing relationship between $BCI'$ and grain size metrics. . . . .	64
3.7	Scatterplots showing relationship between $BCI'$ and substrate characteristics. . . . .	64
4.1	Relationships between the bed stability score calculated using PerMatrix <sub>17104</sub> and observed bed movement for each Hold Out test. The title above each plot indicates which site was withheld. . . . .	85
4.2	Observed vs. predicted bed movement for the cross-validation procedure. . . . .	86
4.3	BSI score vs biomass metrics for the Canterbury case study. . . . .	87
5.1	Location of the Mais Reach study site and Pohangina River catchment within the context of the North Island (left), and the Ruahine Ranges and neighbouring catchments (right). The head of the catchment is in the north with the river flowing southward, running parallel with the axial Ruahine Range. . . . .	97
5.2	Top left: Dimensions and layout of the impact plate. Bottom left: Impact plate sitting on the bed showing securing rods as they were being driven in to the bed. Right: White arrows show location of the impact plate at low flow (top) and during a high flow event (bottom). . . . .	99
5.3	Location of the impact plate and piezometers within the context of the channel planform. The stage gauge is mounted alongside the piezometers. The black box on the left image indicates the extent of the right image. Note there are no major source areas of sediment near the study site, although some erosion of the true left bank did occur, this mainly supplied sand to the channel. . . . .	100
5.4	Diagram demonstrating the application of the differential standpipe piezometers (SP1 and SP2) for measuring seepage direction. Scenario 1 demonstrates a state of no seepage, scenario 2 demonstrates injection due to high pore pressure at $x_2$ , and scenario 3 demonstrates suction due to low pore pressure at $x_2$ . . . . .	103

5.5 Hydrograph for Mais Reach from July 2016 to January 2017. Initiation of bedload events 1-5 are indicated by vertical dashed lines. The dotted vertical line indicates a bedload event recorded by the geophone, but no velocity data was recorded during the onset of bedload transport, so this event was not analysed in this paper. The grey boxes are sections of the hydrograph where no bedload or velocity data was recorded. . . . . 105

5.6 Plots showing geophone impacts ( $MaxA$ ) and discharge ( $Q$ ) for each event. Axis extents are the same for all plots. The initiation and cessation of each event are indicated by the dashed vertical lines. Event 1 represents a textbook case where bedload transport initiates at a critical discharge on the rising limb. Events 2-4 show initiation occurred at peak discharge. It is interesting to note Event 2 had two phases of bedload transport as a second flood peak occurred shortly after the first cessation of bedload transport. Event 5 shows a case where initiation occurred on the failing limb of the hydrograph. Note: during Event 5 the data cables were damaged, so the cessation of transport was not truly captured. The second vertical dashed line for Event 5 therefore represents the end of the data set rather than end of transport. . . . . 106

5.7 Plots showing geophone impacts ( $MaxA$ ) and seepage head ( $\Delta h$ ) for each event. Axis extents are the same for all plots. The initiation and cessation of each event are indicated by the dashed vertical lines. The horizontal dotted line represents 0 m seepage head, indicating the point where seepage switches between suction and injection. During Events 1 and 2 it is apparent that initiation and cessation of bedload transport occurs around the point of injection switching to suction and vice versa. During Events 3-5 initiation coincides with peak suction, and cessation occurs as suction switches to injection. Note: during Event 5 the data cables were damaged, so the cessation of transport was not truly captured. The second vertical dashed line for Event 5 therefore represents the end of the data set rather than end of transport. . . . . 107

# List of Tables

1.1	Changes in periphyton biomass under different velocities. Adapted from Davie & Mitrovic (2014).	13
1.2	Data capture and analysis methods to improve incipient motion research.	24
2.1	RMS registration errors for each survey and total number of points in each point cloud.	36
2.2	Statistics for the pebble count surveys following Folk (1980), and the $D_{50}$ and $D_{84}$ characteristic grain sizes.	38
2.3	Moments of $z_{detrended}$ for each survey and detrending grid resolution (not spatially varied). Note the kurtosis coefficients ( $K_{uz}$ ) are excess kurtosis.	39
2.4	Statistics for the pebble count surveys following Folk (1980), and the $D_{50}$ and $D_{84}$ characteristic grain sizes.	39
2.5	Number of cells in each spatially differenced moment raster which had equal values for the TLS and SfMp surveys.	41
3.1	Site characteristics. Grain size for the Waikanae shows range between the study reaches.	56
3.2	Statistics for the 30 penetration rates ( $PR$ ) measured at each site. We propose the use of the mean $PR$ to represent compactness at the site, termed the $BCI$ .	63
3.3	$BCI$ score and substrate characteristics for each site.	65
3.4	Regression coefficients for the linear models of the $BCI$ score vs various substrate characteristic metrics, ranked by statistical significance.	66
3.5	Regression coefficients for the linear models of the $\log_{10}$ transformed $BCI$ score ( $BCI'$ ) vs various substrate characteristic metrics, ranked by statistical significance.	66
3.6	$BCI$ scores converted to substrate resistance ( $R_s$ ) following Herrick & Jones (2002). $R_s$ values are in Newtons.	67
3.7	$BCI$ score and substrate resistance ( $R_s$ ) for the control reaches (1 and 2) and engineered reaches (3 and 4) of the Waikanae River. Change in the $BCI$ ( $\Delta BCI$ ) and $R_s$ ( $\Delta R_s$ ) are also shown.	67
4.1	Location, planform, channel parameters, and sediment characteristics of the 10 study sites in the Ruahine Ranges, North Island, New Zealand.	74
4.2	Location, planform, channel parameters, and sediment characteristics of the eight study sites in the South Island, New Zealand.	75

4.3 Parameters initially trialled for the index during the pilot surveys, prior to optimisation. The parameter type indicates whether the parameter is measuring a driver of resistance or entrainment, or a product of bed movement. The scoring approach differentiates between the use of objective scoring, using physical measurements of parameters e.g. with a tape measure; visual assessment where the observer assigns a numeric rating for the parameter; or categorised visual assessment where the observer uses a guide which provides categories to follow for visual estimation, such as percentage of subaerial active channel. . . . . 78

4.4 Correlations between pilot index parameters and bed movement at 10 sites in the Ruahine Ranges. . . . . 81

4.5 Correlation Coefficients for predicted bed movement using PerMatrix<sub>17104</sub> at the test sites for each Hold Out dataset correlated with bed movement. Based on these results PerMatrix<sub>17104</sub> became the BSI. . . . . 84

4.6 Optimised weightings for the BSI parameters. These are the parameter weightings for PerMatrix<sub>17104</sub> which had the highest frequency of maximum correlation with observed bed movement in the 10 Hold Out datasets. . . . 84

4.7 Regression statistics for BSI score vs selected metrics for chlorophyll-*a* as measures for *Phormidium* biomass. . . . . 88

5.1 Bedload transport events recorded by the impact plate which also had corresponding hydrodynamic data. . . . . 104

5.2 Critical threshold values (denoted by *cr*) for the range of hydraulic parameters which were recorded at the onset of bedload transport for the five events. The table shows the large variation in thresholds, with no consistent threshold for incipient motion being identified. . . . . 109

5.3 Correlation coefficients for each hydrodynamic parameter threshold regressed against *MaxA* for the initiation of each event, listed in descending order of relationship strength. . . . . 110

5.4 Correlation coefficients for each velocity and turbulence parameter regressed against *MaxA* for each impact record over the duration of each event (*intra-event thresholds*). Thresholds are ordered by significance for each event. . . 111

# List of Equations

3.1 Penetration Rate . . . . .	59
3.2 Bed Compaction Index . . . . .	59
3.3 Substrate Resistance . . . . .	59
3.4 Substrate Resistance using Bed Compaction Index . . . . .	60
3.5 Work done by the soil/Kinetic Energy of the penetrometer hammer . . . . .	60
3.6 Travelling velocity of the penetrometer hammer . . . . .	60
4.1 Standard Feature Scaling Normalisation . . . . .	82
5.1 Time-average Velocity . . . . .	100
5.2 Turbulence . . . . .	100
5.3 Turbulence Intensity . . . . .	100
5.4 Pore Pressure . . . . .	101
5.5 Elevation Head . . . . .	101
5.6 Total or Piezometric Head . . . . .	101
5.7 Seepage Head . . . . .	101

