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Numerical modelling framework for assessing dune effectiveness against coastal inundation

Italo R. Lopes[1,2], Ivan Federico[2], Michalis Vousdoukas[3], Luisa Perini[4], Salvatore Causio[2], Giovanni Coppini[2], Maurilio Milella[5], Nadia Pinardi[1,2], Lorenzo Mentaschi[1,2]

[1]Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca per le Scienze Ambientali (CIRSA) - Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna (UNIBO), Ravenna, 48121, Italy
[2]Centro euro-Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici (CMCC), Lecce, 73100, Italy
[3]MV Coastal and Climate Research Ltd, Limassol, 3046, Cyprus
[4]Servizio Geologico, Sismico e dei Suoli, Regione Emilia-Romagna, Bologna, 40127, Italy
[5]Environmental Surveys S.r.l. (ENSU), Bari, 70125, Italy

Correspondence to: Italo R. Lopes (italo.dosreislopes2@unibo.it)

Abstract. Coastal inundation is one of the prominent natural hazards threatening both economic assets and human lives. Precise modeling of these events is vital for comprehensive risk assessment, yet there is a persistent gap in data availability and modelling accuracy for coastal flood mapping. In this study, we expanded the LISFLOOD-FP model's ability to simulate coastal floods by incorporating wave setup and swash, as well as the interaction with protective infrastructures like temporary dunes. This improved approach was applied to the coastline of Cesenatico, Italy, where dunes are built each winter as seasonal coastal defenses. We analyzed two storm events for which observational flood maps are available for validation: the 2015 Saint Agatha Storm, which saw intense waves breaching the dunes and causing extensive inland flooding, and the 2022 Denise Storm, when the dunes withstood the storm and successfully shielded the coast. Our results demonstrate that dunes are highly effective in mitigating inundation, particularly during the 2022 event. However, they also reveal that the failure of even a small portion of the dunes can lead to widespread inundation, emphasizing the need for optimized dune design. These findings represent a significant advancement toward developing a digital twin of coastal regions, providing valuable support for a range of coastal management activities.

1 Introduction

Floods are substantial environmental hazards that impact global populations and present significant socio-economic challenges (UNODRR, 2020). In Europe, climate-related economic losses between 1980 and 2020 are estimated in 450 to 520 billion euros, with hydrological events being the most impactful (44%) (EEA, 2023). Projected scenarios indicate that coastal flood-related damage could reach up to 1 trillion euros annually by 2100, due to the ongoing climate changes and the related Sea Level Rise (SLR) (European Environmental Agency, EEA, 2024). Climate Change, urbanization and migration

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into coastal areas contribute for a rise in coastal exposure (IPCC, 2018) emphasizing the critical importance of accurate representation and effective management of coastal flood events for risk prevention.

Flood numerical modeling techniques vary widely, from simple bathtub models (Didier et al., 2019; Williams & Lück-Vogel, 2020), which tend to overestimate flooding, to comprehensive representations of hydro-morphodynamical processes (Vousdoukas, 2012; Wilmink et al., 2023), which require extensive data inputs and computational resources. Intermediate complexity models, solving the shallow water equations for floodplains, such as LISFLOOD-FP (Bates & De Roo, 2000; Bates et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2021), offer a good balance between accuracy and computational efficiency. Initially developed to extend the LISFLOOD model for river channels and floodplain inundations, LISFLOOD-FP has proven to have skills comparable to more complex hydrological inundation models while using lower computational resources (Smith et al., 2012; Vousdoukas et al., 2016; Bessar et al., 2021). In the European Flood Awareness System (EFAS) project, LISFLOOD-FP is used on a large scale to create datasets of river flood hazard maps by using hydrological data over various return periods to generate flood scenarios (Dottori et al., 2022).

LISFLOOD-FP is also a popular choice for coastal flood modelling. Indeed, the European Coastal Flood Awareness System (ECFAS) project (https://www.ecfas.eu), relies on LISFLOOD-FP to simulate inundations in the coastal area. The ECFAS project aims to improve flood awareness and preparedness along the European coastline, focusing on the significant economic impacts of coastal flooding. Le Gal et al. (2023) developed comprehensive flood maps generated by LISFLOOD-FP for different coastal sectors on the European coasts, considering synthetic scenarios that provide general insights into flood hazard assessment across Europe. However, local-scale coastal studies highlight the limitations in our capabilities to predict this phenomenon. To start, accurate coastal flood modelling requires accurate data of Total Water Level (TWL), which consists of Sea Surface Height (SSH) and wave components, to accurately represent flood extent (Zhang & Najafi, 2020; Carneiro-Barros et al., 2023). This implies that LISFLOOD-FP offshore lateral open boundary conditions must include information as accurate as possible on sea level and waves.

Another modelling limitation discussed by Dottori et al. (2022) and Carneiro-Barros et al. (2023) is the non-inclusion of defenses in the simulations. Coastal defenses encompass a range of structures, including hard engineering solutions, Nature-Based Solutions (NBS), and hybrid forms that vary in structural complexity and interaction with storm events (Almarshed et al., 2020). Incorporating these defensive structures into numerical models poses a challenge, as accurate representation requires detailed information on defense geometries and potential modifications in response to flooding. Coastal dunes, a form of NBS commonly found on sandy shorelines, provide effective protection against storm surge-induced flooding by acting as barriers near the beach interface (Singhvi et al., 2022; Wijnberg et al., 2021). However, the numerical modeling of dune erosion presents complex challenges due to the combined effects of storm surges and wave overwash (van Wiechen et al., 2023).

The Italian region of Emilia-Romagna (ER) is an example of a low-lying area vulnerable to coastal flood events usually associated with a combined effect of surge, tides, and waves. Several studies account for the economic losses (Carisi et al., 2018; Armaroli et al., 2019) and hazard assessment impact (Ciavola et al., 2007; Martinelli et al., 2010; Armaroli et al.,

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2012). To reduce the hazard, temporary dunes are erected as coastal defenses in November and maintained during the Winter until April. Harley & Ciavola (2013) conducted risk assessments studies related to these seasonal dunes and propose a GIS based methodology for engineering the dunes' geometry. In flood modeling, these dunes present two main challenges: a) accurately representing their elevation and spatial distribution in the topographic data, and b) understanding and modeling their potential responses, including structural failures, during extreme events.

Enhancing our coastal flood modeling capabilities is a critical step toward developing a digital twin for sustainable coastal management. Digital twins are advanced virtual replicas of the physical systems, enabling scenario simulations and exploration while using observational data to continuously refine and calibrate models. Although initially popular in the industrial sector, digital twin technology has recently been adopted for environmental applications across Europe (Nativi et al., 2020). As an example, in Emilia-Romagna Pillai et al. (2022) explores this concept, highlighting the potential of digital twins to improve understanding of wave attenuation through Nature-Based Solutions such as seagrass in the region offshore the coasts. The development of an accurate coastal flood numerical model would enable the exploration of what-if scenarios with the aim of developing an optimal layout of coastal defenses.

To address these gaps, here we introduce novel approaches tailored to parametrize the dynamics of coastal protections and wave component within the LISFLOOD-FP model. Specifically, we incorporate dune structures and a Failure Water Depth (FWD) threshold to simulate their collapse and introduce the effect of wave swash on erosion and on flood water supply.

Our developments were tested by carrying out simulations for two flood events in Cesenatico (Emilia-Romagna, ER) for which observed flood maps are available, provided by the Geological, Seismic and Soil Service of the ER region. The first is the Saint Agatha Storm, which occurred in February 2015. During this event, a significant portion of the artificial dunes along the coast failed resulting in a major flood (Perini et al., 2015). The second event is the Denise Storm, which took place in November 2022, causing a combination of surge, tides and waves that led to floods in part of the region, however in this case the artificial dunes provided an effective protection in sarge swaths of the coasts.

In section 2 the numerical modelling improvements for the Total Water Level are described, including the Swash boundary forcing, the dune failure assumptions and all the input data used. In section 3 we show the numerical simulations with and without dunes during the two flood events and section 4 concludes with a discussion.

2 Methods and data

2.1 Contribution of waves to coastal water levels

Waves contribute in a complex way to Total Water Levels (TWL), which is defined as the combination of tides, surge, and wave runup (composed by the wave setup and swash). The wave setup associated with the wave dissipation and the related decrease in radiation stress, provide a neat contribution to the coastal sea level (e.g. Melet et al., 2018). The swash is the intermittent water wash-up on the beach as the waves finally break. Although the swash has no effect on the mean sea

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level, it contributes to coastal hazard and inundation in at least 2 ways: 1) in extreme conditions the runup is a major driver of erosion, possibly contributing to the collapse of coastal defenses like sandy dunes. 2) A continuous overwash can provide a substantial water supply for coastal inundation compared to mean coastal sea level.

LISFLOOD-FP model domain starts from the coastline that is considered the open boundary condition for Total Water Level (TWL). It then extends on the land as far as necessary. Here we improved the parameterization of the contribution of waves introducing the swash (S) in the TWL, estimated consistently with existing literature (e.g. Stockdon et al., 2006) as the sum of the water level plus half the swash

$$TWL = WL + \frac{S}{2} \tag{1}$$

where the term WL is assumed to contain all the contribution to mean coastal sea level, including the wave setup. TWL is then used in the model to parameterize the possible collapse of coastal defenses (see section 2.2). Furthermore, we considered the contribution of waves to water supply for inundation by introducing the concept of Supply Total Water Level (STWL) (Figure 1), given by:

$$STWL = WL + \frac{\alpha}{2} S \tag{2}$$

where $\alpha \in [0,1]$ is a calibration factor which represents the overwash efficiency. A value of $\alpha = 0$ implies that the contribution of waves is limited to the wave setup, which could lead to an underestimation of the water supply driving the flood, as the overwash effect would be ignored. Conversely, $\alpha = 1$ assumes that the swash continuously contributes to the water supply, disregarding the intermittent nature of overwash and potentially resulting in an overestimation of the water supply.

In our model configuration, the WL is considered as the contribution of the Sea level component due to atmospheric forcing (surge) (SSH_S), Tides (T) and the wave setup <η>

$$WL = SSH_s + T + \langle \eta \rangle \tag{3}$$

The wave-induced contributions were estimated using the approach suggested by Stockdon et al. (2006), which states that the wave setup and swash for waves perpendicular to the coast is given by

$$\langle \eta_0 \rangle = 0.35 \beta_f (HL)^{1/2} \tag{4}$$

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$$S_0 = \left[HL\left(0.563{\beta_f}^2 + 0.004\right)\right]^{1/2} \quad (5)$$

where $\langle \eta_0 \rangle$ and S_0 are the wave setup and swash assuming a wave propagation perpendicular to the shore, β_f is the beach face-slope which is the inclination of the beach portion between the high tide and low tide lines, H is the Significant Wave Height, L is the mean wavelength. According to Stockdon et al. (2006), the values of $\langle \eta_0 \rangle$ and S_0 are further multiplied by a 1.1 factor, which is the regression coefficient between $\langle \eta_0 \rangle + \frac{S_0}{2}$ and the observed wave runup. Considering waves directed with an angle θ relative to the shoreline, the wave setup and swash set as boundary condition in LISFLOOD-FP in this study is given by

$$\langle \eta \rangle = 1.1 \cdot max(\sin\theta, 0)\langle \eta_0 \rangle \quad (6)$$

$$S = 1.1 \cdot max(\sin\theta, 0) S_0 \quad (7)$$

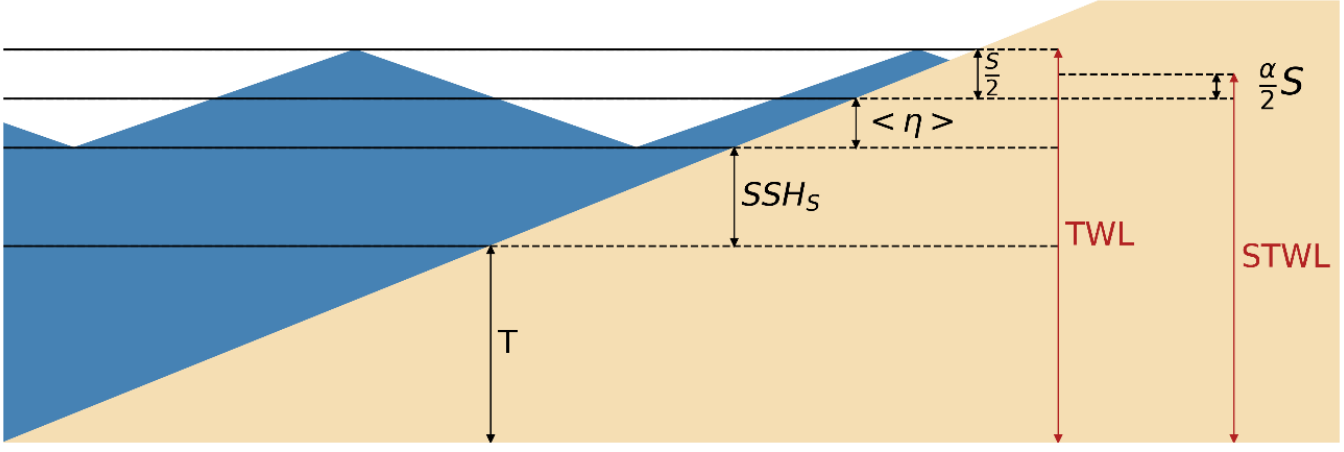

Figure 1: Schematics of the ocean components for the water level and the water supply associated with the swash where T is the tide component, SSH_s.is the Sea Surface Heigh due to surge, <n> is the wave setup, S is the swash, α is the overwash efficiency, TWL is the Total Water Level and STWL is the Supply Total Water Level.

2.2 Coastal defense structure modelling

The approach proposed in this study takes inspiration from Shustikova et al. (2020), who proposed a methodology for the levee's representation and their breaching. It consists of adding protective, sometimes non-permanent features such as dunes to the DTM, allowing the model to reproduce their effect in blocking the water flow (Figure 2). For each time step, the Total Water Level (TWL) in the vicinity of the dune is compared with its Failure Water Depth (FWD), that is a threshold for dune erosion (e.g. van Rijn, 2009). When the FWD is exceeded, the dune is entirely eroded and removed from the terrain.

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For the sides of the dune facing the offshore, the FWD is compared to the full TWL, and not the STWL, as the swash plays a prominent role in dune erosion.

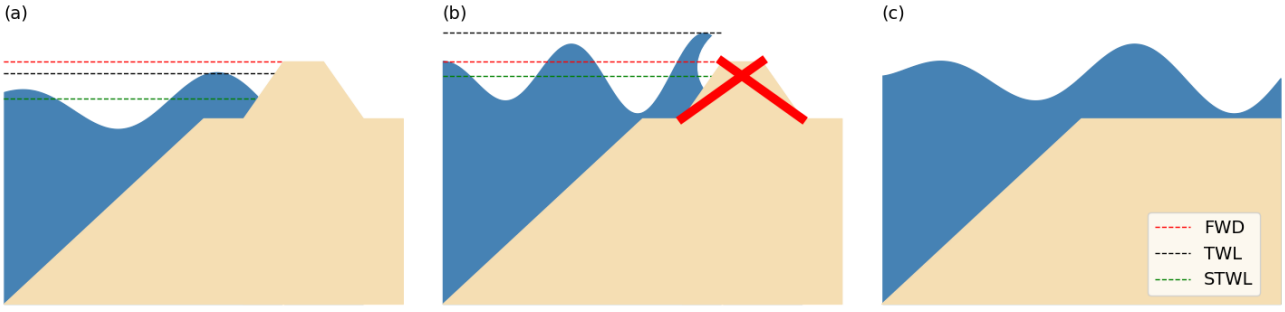

Figure 2: Schematic representation of coastal protections in LISFLOOD-FP. (a): protective action when TWL < FWL. (b): failure for TWL > FWD. (c) free flood propagation upon protection failure. Red line represents the FWD, black line the TWL and green line the STWL.

2.3 Model setup and input data validation

Among the numerical schemes available in LISFLOOD-FP we selected the acceleration scheme, which offers a trade-off between accuracy and computational parsimony. The model requires lateral boundary conditions for TWL at the coastline, Digital Terrain Model (DTM) data and dune's position/geometry. The TWL, defined in (1), is the combination of sea level and wave data from a large-scale model. These data are provided by the hindcast of Mentaschi et al. (2023), which attains a resolution of 2-4 km along the global coast.

Prior to carrying out simulations, we validated the hindcast data for the years 2015 and 2022. We compared the modeled Sea Surface Height (SSH) from Mentaschi et al. (2023) with the data from the tidal station in Porto Corsini, provided by the Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale (ISPRA), and the Significant Wave Height (SWH) with the data of the Nausicaa buoy, provided by the Agenzia Regionale per la Prevenzione, Ambiente Energia dell'Emilia-Romagna (ARPAE) (Figure 3).

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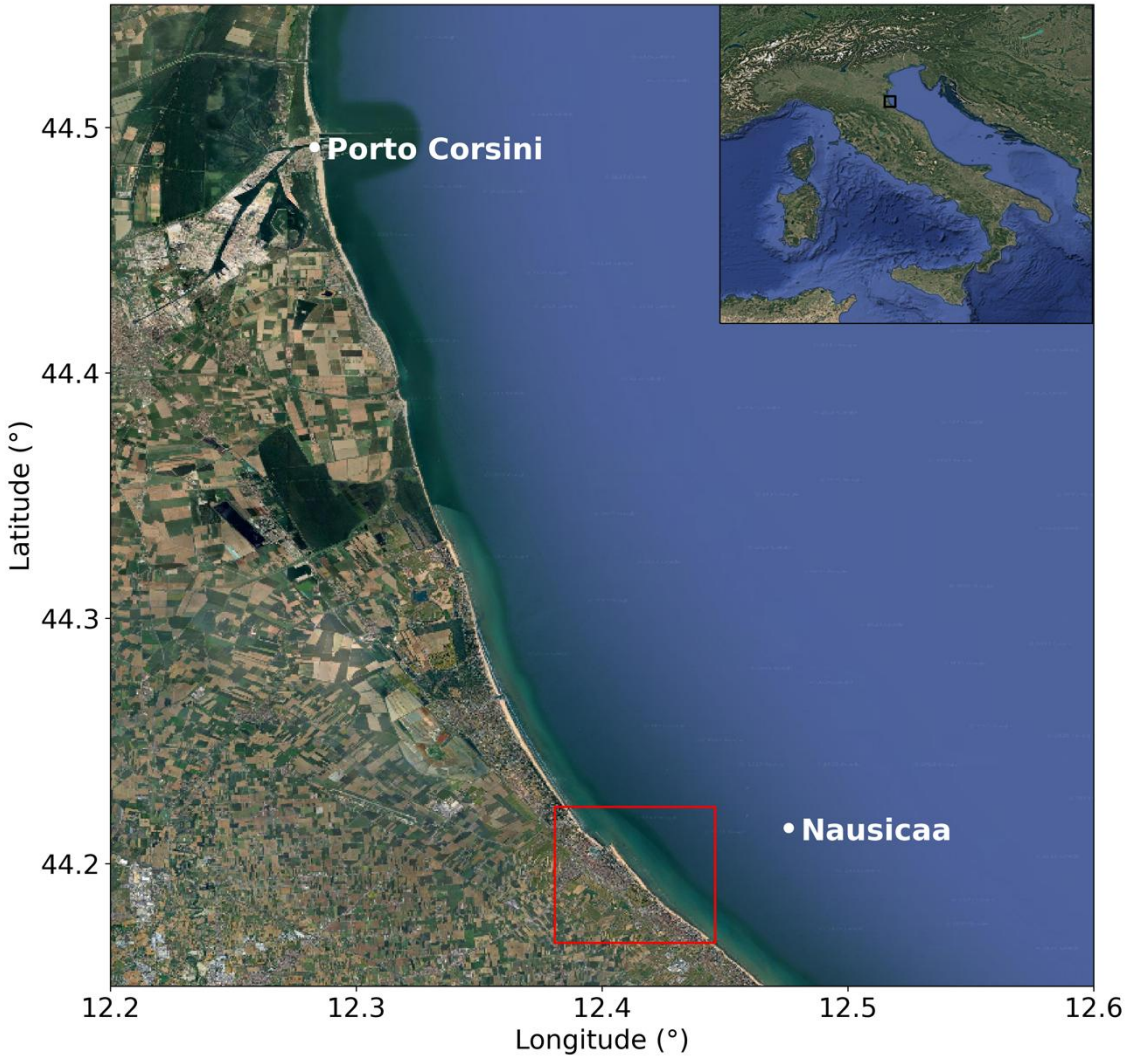

160 **Figure 3: Emilia-Romagna's coast in the northeast of Italy. White dots represent Porto Corsini's tide gauge (north) and Nausicaa's wave buoy (south). Red rectangle represents the modeled area in the town of Cesenatico. © Google Maps**

To compare Porto Corsini tide gauge data with the model simulation of Mentaschi et al. (2023), which does not include tidal information, the Posto Corsini tide gauge data had to be filtered from the tidal signal. A quasi-daily residual tidal-like
165 signal is still evident in the time series of Figure 4, likely due to the seiches, which in the Adriatic Sea have a period of roughly 22 hours (Medvedev et al., 2020). Visually the comparison is very good, quantitatively the correlation between the hindcast and observed data is 95%, and the RMSE is 0.02 meters for 2015. In 2022, the correlation is 85%, and the RMSE is 0.02 meters.

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Regarding wave data, we limited our comparison of Significant Wave Height (SWH) to the year 2015, as the data for 2022 were unavailable from the Nausicaa buoy. The correlation is 97%, with a negative significant wave height BIAS of -0.04 meters and an RMSE of 0.02 meters (Figure 5). These results, show that we can reasonably assume the hindcast provides a reliable representation of the study area and is suitable for use as input data in the model.

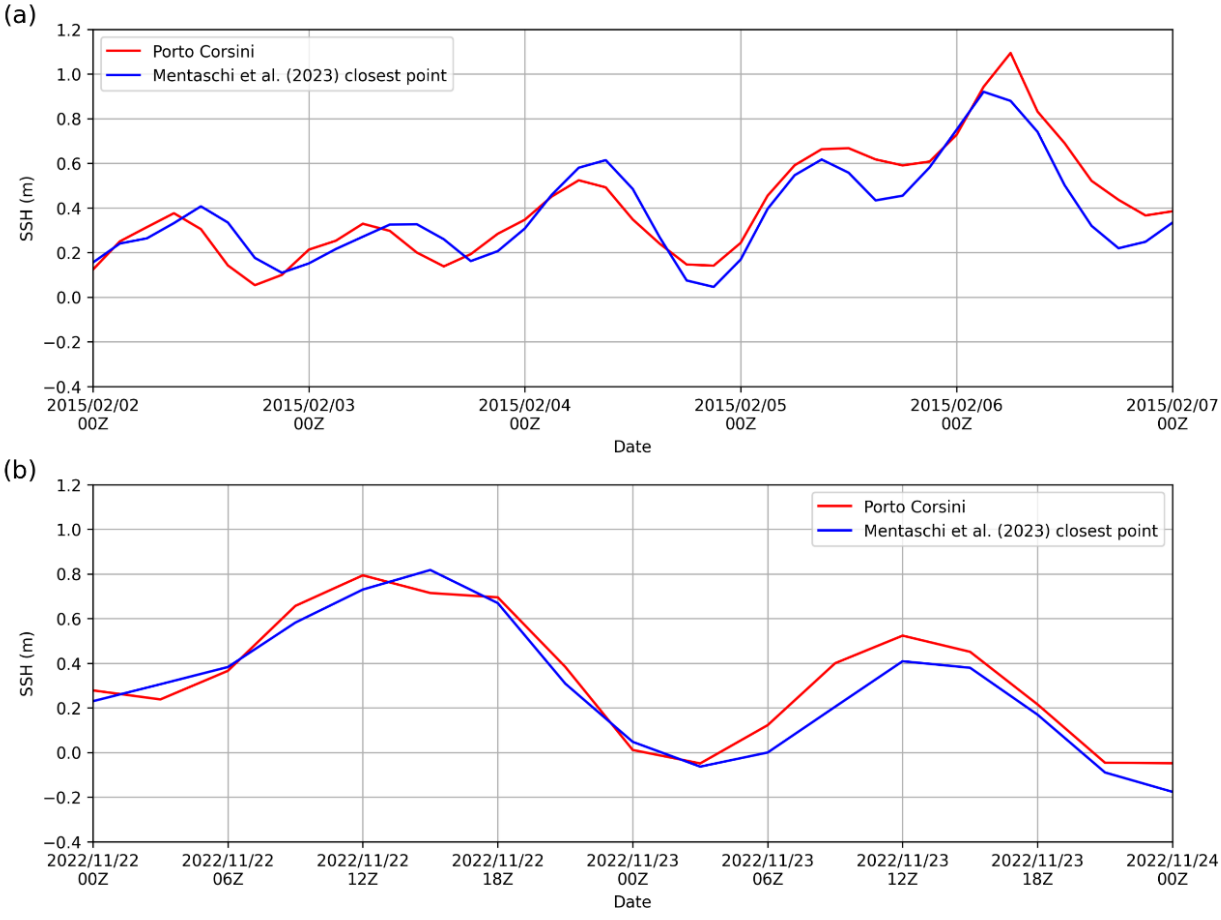

Figure 4: Comparison between the data of storm surge from Mentaschi et al. 2023 (blue line), with the filtered SSH data observed at the Porto Corsini station (red line) for the 2015 event (a) and 2022 event (b).

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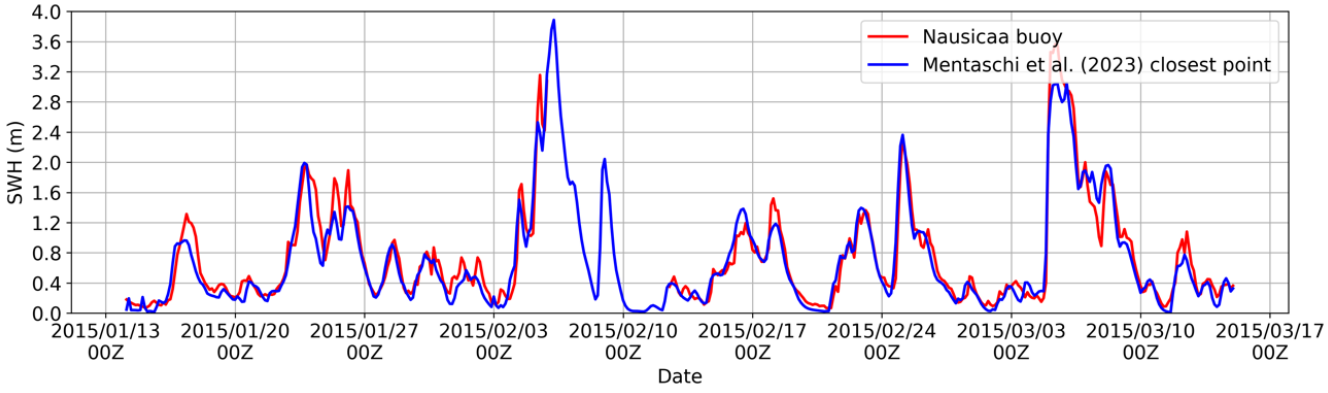

Figure 5: Timeseries of SWH for the Nausicaa buoy (red line) and from Mentaschi et al. 2023 (blue line) for the 3-month event centered comparison in 2015.

The DTM was provided by the Geological, Seismic and Soil Service of the ER region. A coastline mapping was carried out to provide boundary points coordinates in the sea/land interface. The coastline is determined by analyzing the DTM, identifying the zero-crossing, and designating the first positive point as its location. The model was set on a domain covering the area of Cesenatico with a resolution of 50 m. The resulting grid has a size of 150x121 grid cells.

For the simulations in Cesenatico (ER), a mapping of the seasonal dunes in the area was carried out from satellite imagery to provide the structures' coordinates. The dunes are, then, positioned in the closest DTM point acquiring a width and length with the same resolution. Moreover, the dunes were all assigned a FWD of 1.4 meters.

The boundary conditions were generated using SSH_r and wave components from the hindcast's closest node, the tide component T from Porto Corsini and the coastline angle. To compute the TWL written in (1), the beach-face slope for the study area was set to $\beta_f = 0.05\%$ according to Ciavola et al. (2006) and the overwash efficiency was set to $\alpha = 0.25$ based on geometrical considerations, and approximating the waves as triangular (Figure 1). With this configuration, 9 different boundary conditions points are obtained along the coast (Figure 6a). The boundary conditions for 2015 and 2022 for the different points are, then, presented in Figure 6 and Figure 7, respectively.

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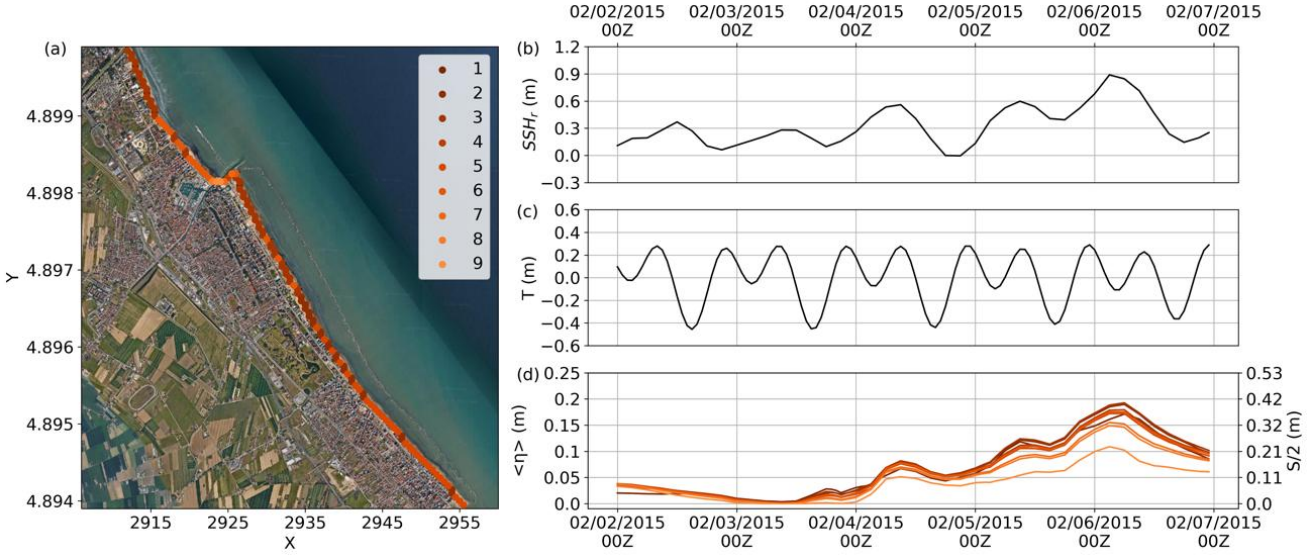

Figure 6: Boundary condition points associated with coastline angle along the Cesenatico area (a). Darker (lighter) colors indicate a more meridional (zonal) coastline orientation (from Google Maps). Panels (b–d) show the boundary conditions for SSHr (m) (b), T (m) (c), and both <η> (m) and S/2 (m) (d) during the 2015 event. In panel (d), <η> and S are proportional; the left y-axis corresponds to <η>, while the right y-axis represents S/2, allowing both quantities to be conveyed by a single curve. © Google Maps

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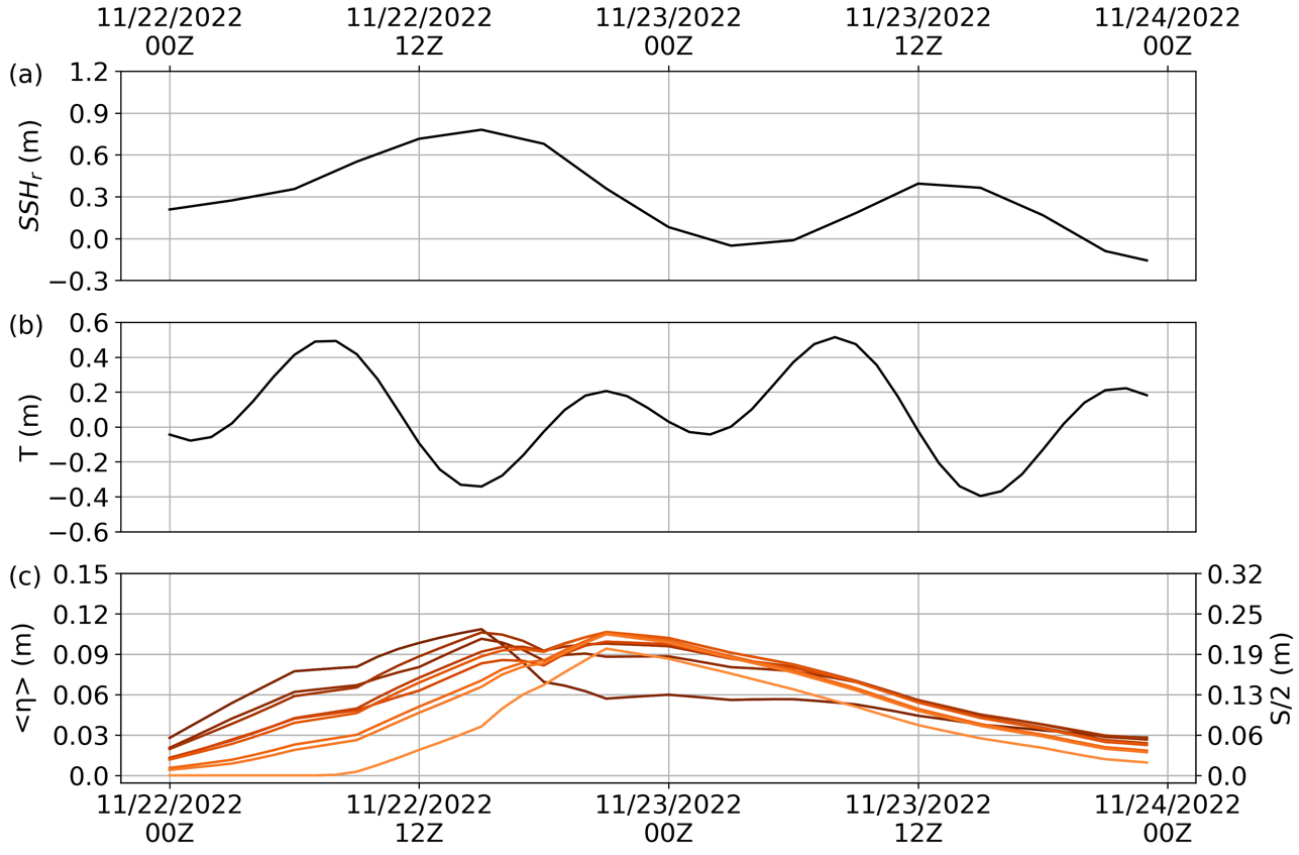

Figure 7: Boundary conditions for SSHr (m) (a), T (m) (b), and both <η> (m) and S/2 (m) (c) during the 2022 event. In panel (d), <η> and S are proportional; the left y-axis corresponds to <η>, while the right y-axis represents S/2, allowing both quantities to be conveyed by a single curve. Darker (lighter) colors indicate a more meridional (zonal) coastline orientation.

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2.4 Simulation experiments and validation

Table 1 contains the description of the numerical experiments. The simulations were carried out for two specific flood events: the storm Agatha of 2015 (from February 2 to February 6, 2015) and the storm Denise of 2022 (from November 22 to November 23, 2022). To understand the dune's contribution to the flood, for each event, 2 simulations were carried out: one without (E2015 and E2022) and one with (E2015D and E2022D) dunes.

Moreover, to understand the waves' contribution to the flood, simulations were carried out by neglecting the contribution of the swash (E2015DWL and E2022DWL) and assuming that waves fully contribute to both dune failure and water supply, by setting a boundary condition equal to TWL (E2015DTWL and E2022DTWL).

Furthermore, we estimated how uncertainty in the DTM propagates in the results of the flood model. Duo et al. (2018) quantified the uncertainty in beach profiles by comparing the measurements of two different instruments in post-storm

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conditions after the 2015 event. The Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) between these instruments was found to be 0.12-0.14 meters. Assuming our DTM exhibits a similar range of uncertainty, we conducted additional simulations by adding or subtracting a confidence value of 0.07 m to the DTM. These simulations were performed both with dunes (E2015D+, E2015D-, E2022D+, E2022D-) and without dunes (E2015+, E2015-, E2022+, E2022-), where the +/- suffix indicates the addition or subtraction of the confidence value. We then estimated the uncertainty associated with dunes (UDUNE2015 and UDUNE2022), waves (UWAVE2015 and UWAVE2022) and DTM (UDTM2015 and UDTM2022) as the difference between simulations (Table 2).

Table 1: Simulations configurations using different dunes, lateral boundary conditions, DTM offset and simulation period.

Simulations	Dunes	Dune's failure condition	Boundary condition	DTM offset	Simulation period
E2015	No	None	STWL	0 m	02/02/2015 00:00:00 to 06/02/2015 23:00:00
E2015D	Yes	TWL		0 m	
E2015D+				+ 0.07 m	
E2015D-				- 0.07 m	
E2015DWL	Yes	WL	WL	0 m	
E2015DTWL		TWL	TWL		
E2022	No	None	STWL	0 m	23/11/2022 23:00:00 to 06/02/2015 23:00:00
E2022D	Yes	TWL		0 m	
E2022D+				+ 0.07 m	
E2022D-				- 0.07 m	
E2022DWL	Yes	WL	WL	0 m	
E2022DTWL		TWL	TWL		

Table 2: Uncertainties definition as the difference between simulations.

Uncertainty	Simulations
UDUNE2015	(E2015D) - (E2015)
UDUNE2022	(E2022D) - (E2022)
UDTM2015	(E2015D+) - (E2015D-)
UDTM2022	(E2022D+) - (E2022D-)
UWAVE2015	(E2015DTWL) - (E2015DWL)
UWAVE2022	(E2022DTWL) - (E2022DWL)

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The maximum flood extension simulated by LISFLOOD-FP was compared with the observations for each event. The grid points where the model reproduced water levels lower than 10 cm were neglected. For the comparison, the set of skill indicators suggested by Vousdoukas et al. (2016) was used:

- The BIAS is defined as the percentage ratio between predicted and observed area, and values lower (higher) than 100% indicate an underestimation (overestimation) of the flooded area. It is given by

$$BIAS = 100 \times \frac{F_m}{F_o} \tag{8}$$

where F_m and F_o are the extent of the modelled and observed flooded areas.

- The false alarm F is the percentage ratios between wrongly inundated pixels and the observed ones. High values of this indicator indicate a high amount of wrongly inundated areas.

$$F = 100 \times \frac{F_m \neg F_o}{F_o} \tag{9}$$

where $F_m \neg F_o$ indicates the extent of the area flooded in the model but not in the observations.

- The hit ratio (H) provides the opposite information with respect to F, which is an indication on the degree of agreement between the correctly modelled and the observed flooded areas. It is defined as the percentage ratio between the intersection of the modelled/observed flooded areas ($F_m \cap F_o$) and the observed flooded area.

$$H = 100 \times \frac{F_m \cap F_o}{F_o} \tag{10}$$

- The critical success index (C) is a renormalization of H that results in the penalization of the indicator in case of high false alarm. It is defined as the percentage ratio between the intersection of the modelled/observed flooded areas ($F_m \cap F_o$) and the union of the two ($F_m \cup F_o$).

$$C = 100 \times \frac{F_m \cap F_o}{F_m \cup F_o} \tag{11}$$

3 Results

3.1 Effects of dunes in inundation

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In Figure 8, the maximum flooded area roughly corresponds with the observed one (cyan line) for the 2015 event. The simulations with and without dunes (E2015D and E2015) are in substantial agreement and reproduce a major coastal flood. However, the simulations show overestimation with a broader flood inland for the whole area except in the south. For E2015 (Figure 8a), the maximum water depth presents lower values in the northern and southern portions of the domain (0.7 meters, in general) and higher values in the center (>1.0 m), with a maximum of 1.18 m. In E2015D (Figure 8b), the high TWL resulted in the failure of the artificial dunes in 7 cells of the domain (5% of all the dunes). Even with the collapse of only 7 cells, the water was able to flow inland but with a more limited water supply, generating a flood pattern similar to the one of the simulations without protections and water depths 0.03 m smaller.

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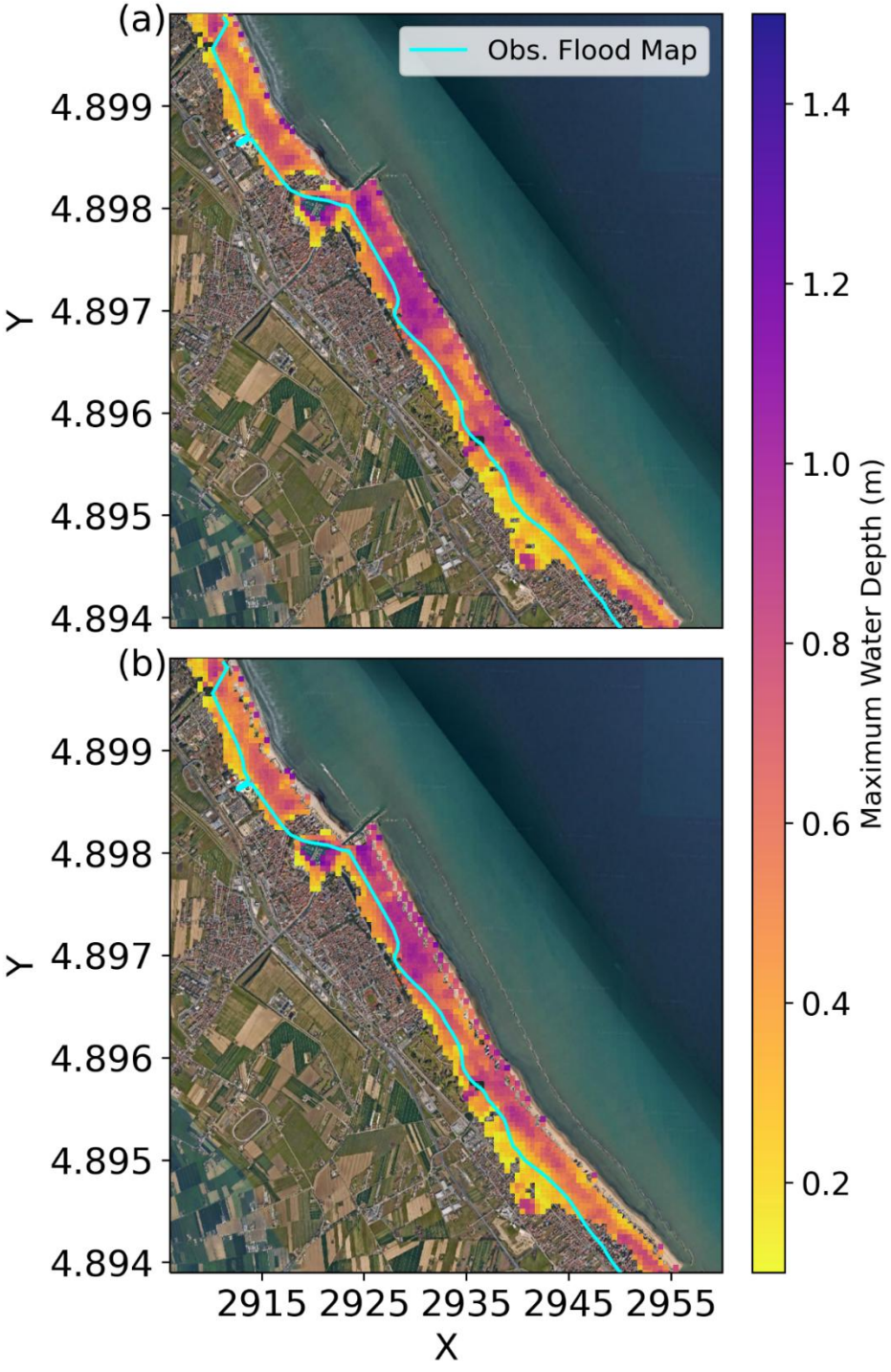

Figure 8: LISFLOOD-FP maximum water depth (m) for the 2015 simulation without protections E2015 (a) and with protections E2015D (b). The cyan line corresponds to the limits of the observational flood area. © Google Maps

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In terms of evaluation indices (Table 3), the E2015 shows a 132% value of BIAS and 39% value of F, due to the false alarm associated with some overestimation of the event. The simulation also exhibits a 92% value of H and 66 % value of C showing a good representation of the flood extent even with misalignments between the flooded areas. Results for E2015D present similar pattern. Values for BIAS (130%), F (43%), H (88%) and C (59%) indicates that both simulations can similarly reproduce the flood.

Table 3: Evaluation metrics for simulations E2015, E2015D, E2022 and E2022D.

Metrics	E2015	E2015D	E2022	E2022D
BIAS (%)	132	130	739	72
F (%)	39	43	640	5
H (%)	92	86	99	67
C (%)	66	60	13	64

For the storm Denise of 2022, the simulation without protections (E2022) results in a maximum flood extent larger than the observed one, as the latter includes only areas in the proximity of the shoreline (Figure 9a). In E2022 the flood pattern is like the event of 2015, with a maximum water level lower in the northern and southern portions of the domain (around 0.5 meters) and higher for the central part of the study area (around 0.8 meters). The highest value reached is 1.09 meters. However, the realistic case with dunes (Figure 9b) shows the much-reduced flood extent, consistent with observations (simulation E2022D). This time the dunes did not erode, and their protective action was evident.

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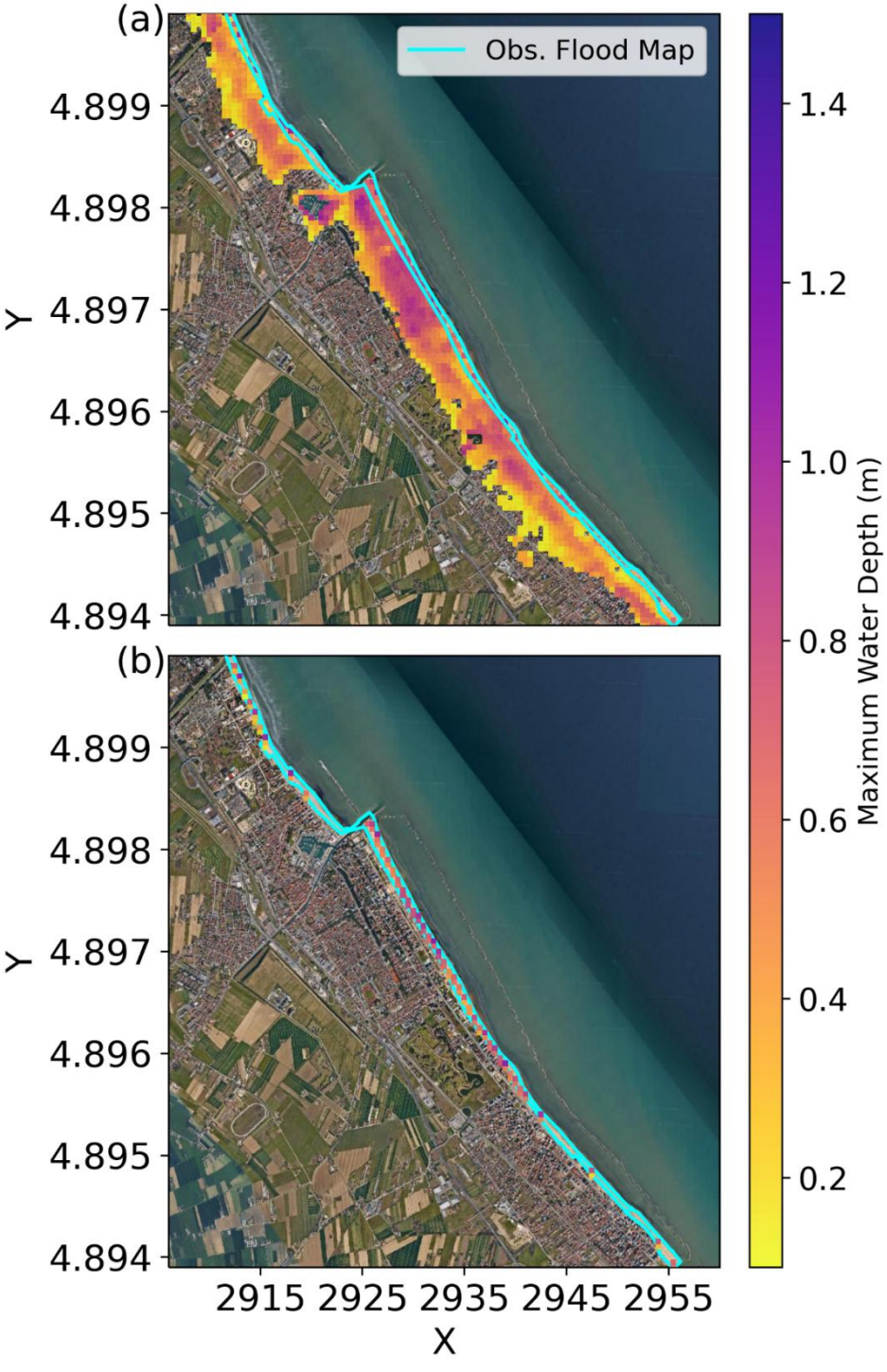

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Figure 9: LISFLOOD-FP maximum water depth (m) for the 2022 simulation without protections E2022 (a) and with protections E2022D (b). The cyan line corresponds to the limits of the observational flood area. © Google Maps

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The evaluation indices of E2022 display values of 640% of F and 739% of BIAS due to the large overestimation in maximum flood extent (Table 3). The H value of 99% indicates that most of the cells identified as flooded in the observations are flooded also in the simulation, but the value of C of 13% indicates that the simulation results in many false positives. These values are much improved in the simulation with coastal protection (E2022D), where the flooded area broadly coincides with the observational one. In particular, the false alarm rate drops to 5 %, and the values of BIAS, H and C are reasonable, considering that the width of the flooded area is comparable with the resolution of the model.

3.2 Effects of swash on dune failure

Suspendisse a elit ut leo pharetra cursus sed quis diam (Smith et al., 2014; Miller and Carter, 2015). Nullam dapibus, ante vitae congue egestas, sem ex semper orci, vel sodales sapien nibh sed lectus. Etiam vehicula lectus quis orci ultricies dapibus. In sit amet lorem egestas, pretium sem sed, tempus lorem.

As discussed in the previous section, during the 2015 event, dune failure occurred not preventing the large inundation. A correct representation of the waves' contribution is important for the event since dune failure depends on that. Simulation E2015DWL (Figure 10a), which does not consider the contribution of swash, does not result in dune failure, and reproduces as inundated only tiny areas near the shoreline. By contrast, E2015TWL (Figure 10b), which considers the full TWL as boundary condition overestimates the flood with a 18% larger maximum flooded area compared with E2015D and is associated with water depths 0.3 m higher. Thus, we conclude that for the correct reproduction of the dune failure the contribution of the swash in TWL is important.

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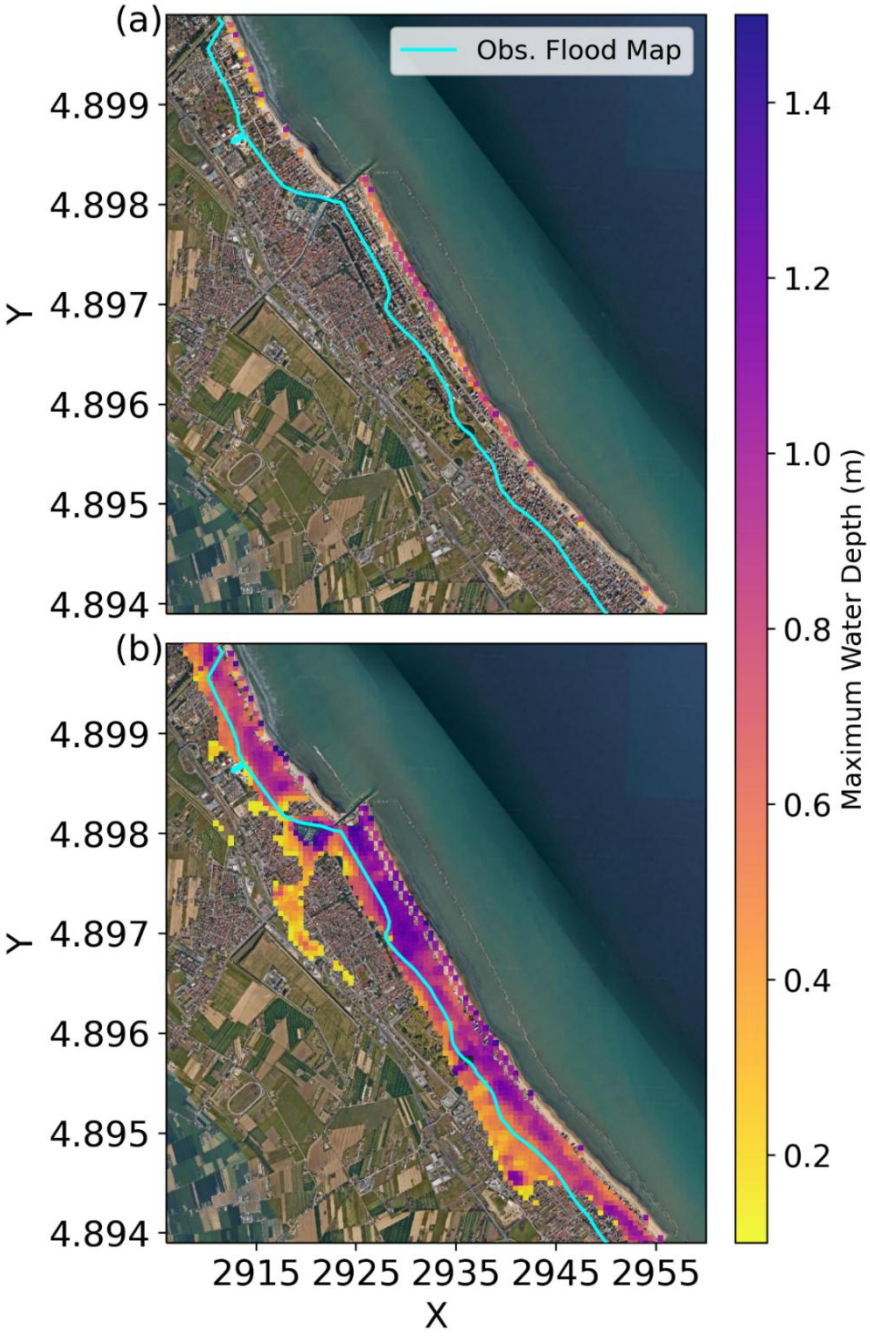

300 **Figure 10: Waves' contribution to flood: simulation E2015DWL which does not consider the contribution of swash (a) and simulation E2015TWL which considers the full extent of TWL as contributing to both dune failure and water supply (b). © Google Maps**

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3.3 Effects of uncertainty

The uncertainty associated with the DTM (Figure 11c) and wave conditions (Figure 11b) exerts a significant influence on the extent of flooding observed in the simulations, whereas the uncertainty related to dune parameters is less pronounced for the 2015 event (Figure 11a). In the UDEM2015 simulations, discrepancies between the E2015 and E2015D scenarios are primarily confined to the cells of the portions of dunes that did not fail and areas with low water levels within the interior of the study domain (Figure 11a). Variations in the DTM critically affect the structural integrity of the dunes under storm conditions, leading to a more pronounced impact of DTM uncertainty. Specifically, in the E2015D+ simulation, no dune failures were observed, while the E2015D- simulation exhibited failures in 28 cells, corresponding to 22% of the dune structures. Consequently, the uncertainty area UDTM2015 is substantially larger compared to UDUNE2015. Notably, the flooded area in the E2015D- simulation was 1315% greater than that in E2015D+ and 7% greater than E2015D. The highest level of uncertainty was observed in UWAVE2015, where the flooded area accounting for the full swash (E2015DTWL) was 1463% larger than that using only the setup (E2015DWL). For both UWAVE2015 and UDEM2015, the largest discrepancies in flooded areas were directly linked to dune collapse. These findings highlight a strong nonlinearity in the relationship between flooded area and variations in the DTM and swash, with a critical threshold evident during the dune failure process.

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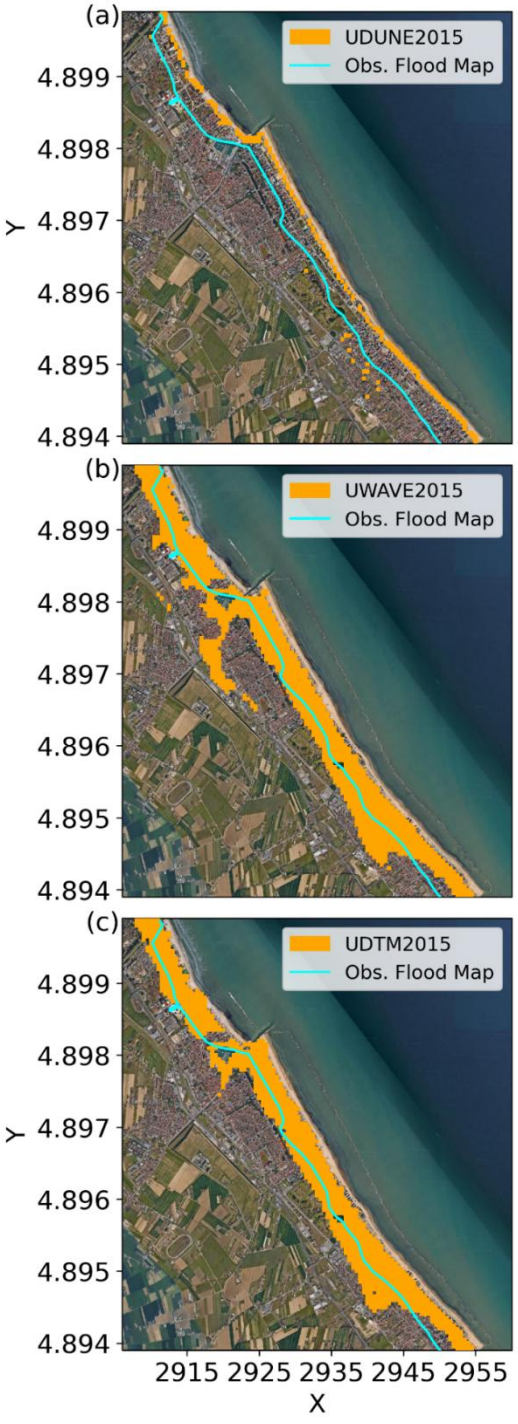

320 **Figure 11: LISFLOOD-FP uncertainty associated with dunes UDUNE2015 (a), waves UWAVE2015 (b) and DTM UDTM2015 (c). Orange areas represent the uncertainty, given by the difference of flooded areas in the simulations. The cyan line corresponds to the limits of the observational flood map. © Google Maps**

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For the 2022 event, the uncertainty associated with dunes (UDUNE2022; Figure 12a) has the most significant impact on the extent of flooding observed in the simulations since they did not fail. Specifically, the flooded area in the E2022 scenario is 1317% larger than that in E2022D. This is evident in Figure 9, which illustrates that dune integrity is maintained, thereby confining flooding to the beach strip. In contrast, the uncertainties associated with swash contribution and the Digital Terrain Model (UWAVE2022 and UDEM2022; Figure 12b) indicate no influence on dune collapses in this scenario. Consequently, the uncertainty for these parameters is negligible, with values effectively equal to zero.

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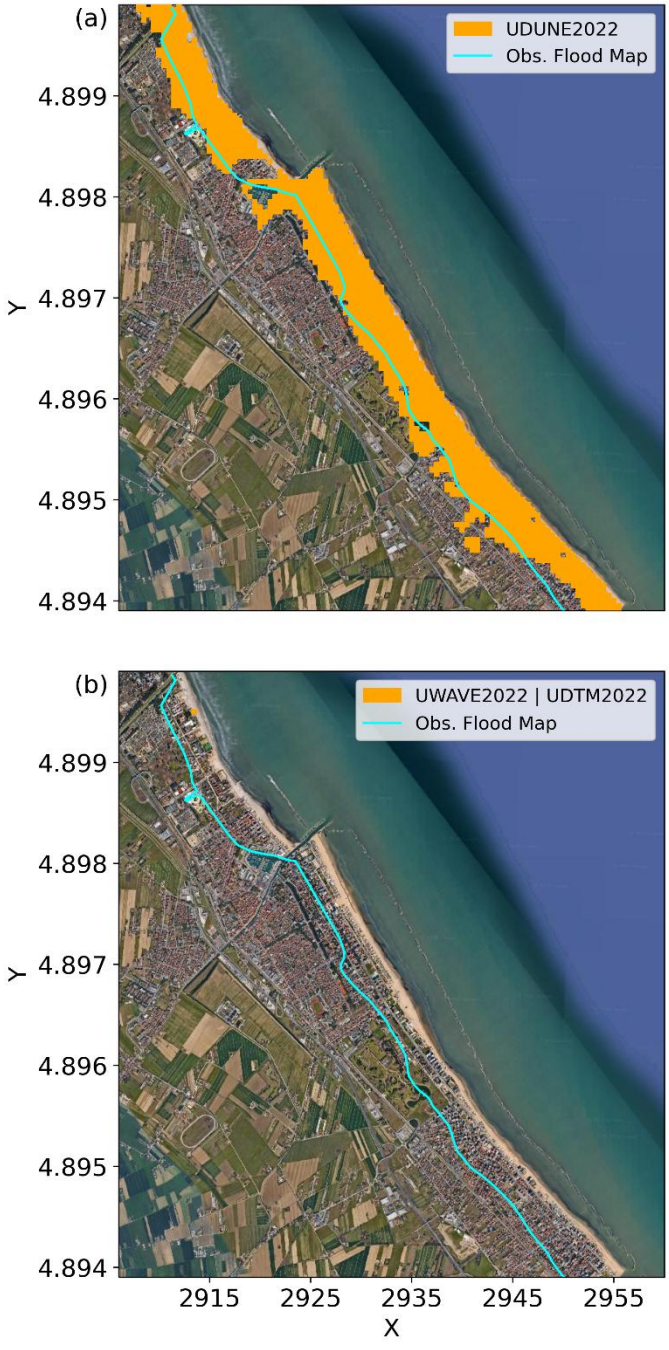

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Figure 12: LISFLOOD-FP uncertainty associated with dunes UDUNE2022 (a), waves UWAVE2022 (b) and DTM UDTM2022 (c). Orange areas represent the uncertainty, given by the difference of flooded areas in the simulations. The cyan line corresponds to the limits of the observational flood map. © Google Maps

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The analysis of the uncertainties reveals that during the 2015 event, where dune collapse occurred, the largest source of uncertainty was associated with wave contributions, followed by uncertainties related to the Digital Terrain Model (DTM) and dune parameters. These findings suggest that the failure of even a small number of dunes can produce flooding conditions comparable to scenarios without dune protection, with the extent of flooding primarily influenced by water inflow and the regional topography. Conversely, for the 2022 event, in which the dunes withstood the storm, uncertainties related to the DTM, and swash contributions were insufficient to induce dune failure. This underscores the critical importance of dune integrity in determining the simulation outcomes.

4 Discussion

The results from simulation E2015 provide valuable insights into the flooding dynamics of 2015 and demonstrate that LISFLOOD-FP accurately reproduces inundation patterns for significant events by incorporating representations of dunes and swash dynamics. The interaction between these protections, waves, and water levels can be complex, as demonstrated by extreme events like the 2022 flood, when temporary dunes effectively safeguarded the shoreline, or the one of 2015, when they failed. The model successfully predicted dune failure during the 2015 event, while in 2022, the dunes effectively protected the land from inundation.

Our findings indicate that during the 2015 event, the swash significantly contributed to the erosion of these structures, reaching up to 0.4 m in areas where dune collapse occurred (Figure 6d), ultimately allowing water to breach inland. Notably, even though only a small portion of the dunes (5%) failed in our simulation, this was enough to trigger a flood as severe as if no protections had been in place. Additionally, a possible outcome is that once a dune is breached, the remaining dunes may obstruct the floodwater's backflow, worsening the aftermath of the inundation.

The event of 2022, when the dunes successfully protected the coast, is characterized by significantly lower values of the swash than in 2015 (only 0.2 m, Figure 7c). For this event, representing the dunes was critical for improving the model's accuracy, shifting the simulation bias from widespread overestimation of 739% to a modest underestimation.

The precise representation of the dune structures and the corresponding flooded areas depends heavily on accurate DTM data and height measurements Our uncertainty analysis, consistent with Dottori et al. (2022), shows that small changes in DTM data can significantly enlarge flooded areas. This is a crucial point, as demonstrated by the 2015 event, where the uncertainty in the DTM ranged from scenarios with no dune failure and minimal impact to a dam break scenario resulting in a significant flood and highlights that frequent topographic surveys are essential for effective flood forecasts in the context of disaster risk reduction.

Dune failure, like any coastal protection failure, is a stochastic process influenced by structural characteristics, natural variability (e.g., erosion and sediment transport), and forcing mechanisms like water levels and wave action. While large-scale assessments are limited by scarce high-resolution data, local-scale studies with detailed measurements of dune geometry and maintenance practices can enhance predictive modeling.

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Lateral boundary conditions at the coastline play a crucial role, particularly the inclusion of wave contributions for the TWL. In the E2015DWL simulation, which neglects the swash and uses only the wave setup, the flood is confined to the coast. Conversely, the E2015DTWL simulation, which accounts for the full swash contribution, extends the inundation further inland. We found that E2015D, using an overwash efficiency $\alpha = 0.25$, provided a satisfactory representation of the event. These findings highlight the importance of correctly representing the wave contribution to water supply: neglecting it leads to underestimation, while using TWL as the boundary condition leads to overestimation. It is important to underline, that in this study we set $\alpha = 0.25$ based on geometrical considerations and approximating the waves as triangular. But in general, the overwash efficiency α can be used as a calibration parameter to best fit the simulation results.

Our results align with the findings of Zhang & Najafi (2020) and Carneiro-Barros et al. (2023), emphasizing the critical interplay between various components of water levels. During the 2015 event (Figure 6), the storm surge peak coincided with the peak of the waves, which were directed perpendicular to the shore. The occurrence of this event during neap tide, combined with the peak of residuals during low tide, suggests that the tide did not exacerbate the event's intensity. This implies that the impact would have been even more severe had it occurred during spring tide. In contrast, the 2022 event (Figure 7) was less impactful, despite residuals reaching levels comparable to the 2015 event. This was because both surge peaks coincided with low tide during spring tide, and the wave peak was not in phase with the storm surge, with mean wave directions not perpendicular to the shore.

The occurrence of both events during low tide suggests that their severity could have been much greater, highlighting the critical need for continuous monitoring of dune conditions and timely forecasting to ensure a comprehensive risk management in Emilia Romagna.

The findings of this study also align with recent advancements in coastal flood modeling. Bertin et al. (2014) conducted a comprehensive analysis of coastal flood risk using a full hydrodynamic model. Their findings highlighted the model's remarkable ability to simulate coastal flood dynamics with high accuracy, emphasizing the critical role of detailed and precise data on the geometry of coastal defenses. However, the study did not consider the potential defense failures, which represents a significant limitation in understanding real-world flood risks. Additionally, while fully hydrodynamic models are praised for their precision and reliability, their applicability is constrained by substantial computational demands, which can hinder their use in large-scale or time-sensitive scenarios.

Closer to our approach, Leijnse et al., (2021) uses a shallow water equation model and incorporate a wave energy solver which translate offshore wave conditions into nearshore dynamics. Howerver, our method bypasses the computational demands of a wave energy solver by directly integrating externally provided wave data. Geertsen et al. (2024) uses an intermediate complexity model and integrated it with an empirical dike failure model using conditional FWD levels. In contrast, our architecture is built inside the same code without the need to use separated models simplifying integration and facilitating alternative and more complex failure scenarios developments. Our enhanced model offers a streamlined, empirically grounded framework that maintains practical applicability without sacrificing detail.

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The model's ability to represent the effects, failures, and drawbacks of coastal protection dunes, as well as quantify the contribution of waves, makes it a valuable tool for coastal hazard mapping. A possible way to overcome the limitation posed by the nonlinear nature of the uncertainty is using this LISFLOOD-FP in an ensemble framework. Additionally, this model can assist in defining appropriate failure heights for seasonal dunes in the region.

5 Conclusions

In this study, we improved the coastal flood modeling capabilities of LISFLOOD-FP by developing and testing new methods to account for the impact of waves, as well as the potential failure of coastal defenses due to overwash. Our findings demonstrate an improved ability to replicate accurately past inundation events, highlighting that incorporating dune failure and swash at the coastline are crucial modelling components for accurate coastal hazard mapping. This is especially important in regions like Emilia Romagna, where seasonal protective dunes are constructed and maintained annually to mitigate flood risk.

This improvement comes with an important caveat: the uncertainty regarding the exact topographic location and size of the temporary dunes, which are not captured in the available topographic data, propagates non-linearly in the extent of the simulated flood map. In our simulations, even a few centimeters of variation in dune height can be the determining factor between the collapse or survival of the dunes, significantly impacting the accuracy of flood predictions. This limitation is further compounded by the lack of observational flood maps, making it challenging to validate the model results. One potential way to address this issue in forecasting applications is by adopting an ensemble approach, which would allow for a more thorough probabilistic assessment of coastal hazards. By generating simulations with a variety of dune geometries and extreme sea level scenarios, this method could better capture the range of possible outcomes, helping to mitigate the uncertainty and improve the reliability of the hazard predictions. Furthermore, the implementation of such a strategy would be facilitated by the model's high computational efficiency.

Another way to partially solve the uncertainty conundrum is to design a monitoring system that would continuously observe the status of the dunes with drones or other cameras at appropriate locations. Present technology would allow this at a reasonable expense, and it will help to inform future data-driven modelling.

The findings represent a significant leap in the development of a coastal digital twin for coastal protection. The improved model can be a useful tool for coastal management by aiding in the prevention efforts of correctly sizing coastal defenses, leveraging on the existence of reliable statistics of extreme events. It can also contribute to disaster mitigation by effectively forecasting the occurrence and aftermath of extreme coastal events. By providing accurate simulations, the model can help in making informed decisions to protect coastal communities and infrastructure.

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Data availability

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

Author contributions

IRL conducted the conceptualization, software development, data elaboration and manuscript drafting. LM guided the supervision, conceptualization and manuscript drafting. LP supported with data provision, manuscript review, and revision. . GC contributed for the funding, manuscript review and revision. IF, SC, MV, MM and NP contributed with the manuscript review and revision.

Competing interests

The authors have the following competing interests: Co-author Michalis Vousdoukas is employed by the company MV Coastal and Climate Research Ltd. Co-author Maurilio Milella is employed by the company Environmental Surveys S.r.l. The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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