Unravelling groundwater's role in soil-plant-atmosphere continuum: Integrated ecohydrological modelling approach using STEMMUS-SCOPE and MODFLOW 6

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Abstract

Soil-plant-atmosphere continuum (SPAC) models are commonly used to investigate various components' role(s) in ecosystem functioning. Yet, in most SPAC models, groundwater is ignored or at best represented in an over-simplified manner, leading to misunderstanding of its critical role in simulating soil-vegetation dynamics. This study investigates groundwater's role in SPAC processes, in particular, the impacts of groundwater component (mass and energy) on: 1) regulating the soil profile, in terms of moisture and temperature; 2) the dynamics of the unsaturated/saturated zones and their further impact on water fluxes; and 3) the carbon fluxes and vegetation physiological processes (i.e. root water uptake and photosynthesis reflected by fluorescence).To address this, an integrated ecohydrological modelling (IEM) framework is developed by coupling the STEMMUS-SCOPE SPAC model with the MODFLOW 6 integrated hydrological model. The standalone STEMMUS-SCOPE (ST-SC) and the coupled STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (ST-SC-MF6) models were applied over an 8-year period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2024) to three sites in the Netherlands (Loobos, Cabauw and Veenkampen). Simulated various essential variables, including soil moisture (θ), soil temperature (T_s), groundwater level (GWL), groundwater temperature (GT), evapotranspiration (ET), gross primary productivity, net ecosystem exchange (NEE), and sun-induced chlorophyll fluorescence (SIF) were then compared to corresponding in-situ observations. Performance of both ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 was evaluated using the Kling–Gupta efficiency (KGE) and the root mean square error (RMSE) metrics. Results indicated that the groundwater contribution is spatially and temporally variable. The ST-SC-MF6 showed better agreement with observations than the ST-SC,

47 improving the KGE values for: a) T_s (+0.29), and ET (+0.35) at Loobos, b) θ (+0.30), ET (+0.11), NEE
48 (+0.18), and SIF (+0.15) at Cabauw, and c) θ (+0.21), and ET (+0.15) at Veenkampen. Notably,
49 benefits of ST-SC-MF6 simulation were particularly prominent during both wet and dry periods, i.e.
50 improving the representation of: a) the θ dynamics during wet conditions, when hydraulic
51 connectivity between the phreatic surface and the unsaturated zone is strong; b) the root water
52 uptake and carbon assimilation during dry periods, when shallow groundwater mitigated vegetative
53 water stress; and c) the T_s dynamics during both wet and dry periods, influenced by both GT and
54 GWL, and further propagated to other T_s dependent processes/variables such as canopy
55 temperature. Overall, the proposed ST-SC-MF6 IEM helped to: (1) incorporate groundwater as a key
56 component of the water, energy and carbon cycles; and (2) define the important role groundwater
57 dynamics plays in the SPAC for deepening the understanding of ecosystem functioning.

58 Short summary

59 Groundwater is ignored in soil-plant-atmosphere continuum (SPAC) models, potentially
60 underestimating its impact on soil and vegetation simulation. To address this, an integrated
61 ecohydrological model is developed by coupling a SPAC model to a hydrological model. The coupled
62 model improved simulation of soil moisture, temperature, evapotranspiration, carbon fluxes and
63 fluorescence. The findings highlight groundwater role in ecosystem dynamics and advance water,
64 energy and carbon cycle modelling.

65 1. Introduction

66 The interactions among the soil, water, vegetation and atmosphere play a fundamental role in
67 regulating ecosystem functioning. These interactions include hydrological, thermal and carbon
68 processes that collectively shape the dynamics of the water, energy and carbon cycles. Deepening
69 the understanding of such interactions is crucial for better supporting ecosystem resilience against

the adverse impact of climate change and anthropogenic activities (Chen et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2024). To assess and monitor ecosystem functioning, a range of different physical variables are recognized (Bojinski et al., 2014; GCOS, 2025). Examples of such variables, in particular the vegetation ones are: leaf area index, above- and below-ground biomass (Atkins et al., 2018; de Conto et al., 2024), gross primary productivity, net ecosystem exchange, evapotranspiration, plant phenology (Shi et al., 2023), and more recently the sun-induced chlorophyll fluorescence (SIF), which serves as a proxy for tracking the photosynthesis process (Sun et al., 2023). Additionally, other soil-related variables play a significant role in characterizing the ecosystems' functioning, i.e. soil moisture, surface and subsurface temperature, and evaporation (Bojinski et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2019; GCOS, 2025).

Soil-plant-atmosphere continuum (SPAC) models are widely used to simulate most of the aforementioned variables. SPAC models simulate the transfer of thermal energy and mass (water and carbon) between soil, plants (through roots, stems and leaves), and the atmosphere (Guo, 1992). Furthermore, SPAC models are capable of assimilating remote sensing information such as canopy reflectance, vegetation optical depth, and SIF (X. Yang et al., 2021). Integrating the RS data into SPAC models enables upscaling the processes from point (plant) scale to regional scales (Senf, 2022; Van Cleemput et al., 2025), allowing for predicting ecosystem responses to regional environmental changes (Dronova & Taddeo, 2022). Examples of SPAC models are the Community Land Surface (CLM5) model (Lawrence et al., 2019), the integration of Simultaneous Transfer of Energy, Mass, and Momentum in Unsaturated Soil (STEMMUS) and Soil Canopy Observation, Photochemistry, and Energy Fluxes (SCOPE) models (Wang et al., 2021), the Tethys-Chloris (T&C) model (Fatichi et al., 2012), the Soil-Plant-Atmosphere (SPA) model (Williams et al., 1996; Williams et al., 2001), and the Soil Water Atmosphere Plant (SWAP) model [(van Dam et al., 2008) – specifically the version coupled to the World Food Studies (WOFOST) model (de Wit et al., 2019)]. However, SPAC models either ignore or oversimplify the underlying groundwater system by neglecting spatio-temporal variability in groundwater variables (e.g., head and temperature), and

processes (e.g., recharge, discharge and groundwater evapotranspiration). Thus, the SPAC models lack or simplify the groundwater influence on the simulated SPAC processes.

For most landscapes, groundwater storage is generally the largest component of the local water budget. It plays a vital role in sustaining essential ecosystem services by mitigating biodiversity loss and buffering against climate change (Saccò et al., 2024). Many ecosystems rely primarily on groundwater resources, so-called groundwater-dependent ecosystems, to maintain their ecological functions (Lubczynski, 2009; Kløve et al., 2014). Groundwater-dependent ecosystems can be exposed to surface water – groundwater interactions, through altered recharge or discharge rates. Such changes may impair their ecological function if groundwater availability declines, particularly under future climate regimes (Otoo et al., 2025). Groundwater can also have a significant effect on enhancing carbon assimilation, plant growth and productivity (Ruehr et al., 2023). Under shallow water table conditions, the groundwater dynamics is significant, exerting a strong influence on the soil moisture distribution and the evapotranspiration rates (Martínez-De La Torre & Miguez-Macho, 2019). Additionally, groundwater systems typically respond slower to meteorological forcing, as compared to the surface water or the near-surface soil moisture, due to their larger storage and longer flow paths. This relative hydrological stability allows groundwater to continue supporting vegetation in mitigating water stress effects during prolonged drought periods after soil moisture has been depleted. Marchionni et al. (2020) demonstrated that the presence of the water table within the vegetation rooting depth supported the ecosystem transpiration and vegetation productivity during a prolonged drought event (2001-2009) near Melbourne, Australia.

Groundwater and its interaction with the surface (through the unsaturated zone) are often simulated by integrated hydrological models (IHMs). IHMs simulate flow processes in the surface and subsurface domains, including their dynamic interaction (i.e., flow exchange) within a single simulation environment (Daoud et al., 2022; 2024). Examples of IHMs are Hydrogeosphere (Brunner & Simmons, 2012), MIKE SHE (Graham & Butts, 2005), CATHY (Camporese et al., 2010), and

MODFLOW 6 (Langevin et al., 2017; Langevin et al., 2023). However, IHMs do not consider ecosystem functioning, so they do not simulate explicitly the carbon cycle nor detailed plant processes. Consequently, IHMs are rarely used to evaluate ecosystem functioning and the interactions between the water, energy and carbon cycles, for which SPAC models are used.

Despite the critical role groundwater plays in sustaining many different types of ecosystems, SPAC models, unlike IHMs, typically lack a physically-based groundwater model. Instead, they commonly assume that soil moisture dynamics is primarily driven by infiltration (generated from precipitation or applied irrigation) and either ignore or oversimplify groundwater and its connection to the soil and the vegetation domains (Samuel & Chakraborty, 2023). Notably, SPAC models typically do not account for heterogeneity in any of the aquifer properties, i.e. porous media or fractured-rock systems (Zhang et al., 2020; Agbotui et al., 2025), which can be significant in shaping key groundwater processes such as recharge, capillary rise, and groundwater evapotranspiration (Ireson et al., 2013; Xin et al., 2023). Thus, SPAC models are not equipped to accurately capture the effect of salient groundwater processes while simulating soil and vegetation dynamics. Additionally, SPAC models ignore or simplify spatio-temporal groundwater temperature dynamics. However, many recent studies (Xin et al., 2023; Benz et al., 2024; Egidio et al., 2024; Rammler & Bertermann, 2025) showed that soil temperatures are modulated not only by surface-atmosphere heat exchange processes, but also by soil zone – groundwater heat exchange processes (i.e. conductive and advective heat transport), especially in cases of shallow water table conditions. Ignoring the thermal dynamics of groundwater can subsequently lead to biases in simulating soil temperature, which is a key driver for photosynthesis, evapotranspiration (specifically latent heat flux), and carbon fluxes. Omitting or simplifying the groundwater component (for flow and heat processes) in SPAC models may also lead to misrepresentation of soil and plant physiological responses to changing ambient (climatic) conditions; thereby limiting the usefulness of SPAC models for appraising the impact of a changing climate on groundwater-dependent ecosystems (Elrashidy et al., 2023) or, more generally, ecosystems with shallow groundwater conditions.

147 Given the limitations of both the SPAC models and IHMs, an integrated modelling approach, that
148 combines hydrology with ecosystem functioning, would result in a modelling tool that is better
149 suited for evaluating ecosystem functioning under a changing climate. An integrated SPAC-IHM
150 model is hereafter referred to as an integrated ecohydrological model (IEM). The advantage of an
151 IEM is that it can simulate the full continuum of water (including groundwater), energy, and carbon
152 fluxes at high spatio-temporal resolution within a single simulation environment. IEMs are also
153 capable of integrating the surface and subsurface hydrology (both unsaturated and saturated zones)
154 with plant physiological processes, as well as incorporating remote-sensing information (as inputs)
155 for simultaneous simulation of multiple variables [i.e., soil moisture (θ), soil temperature (T_s),
156 evapotranspiration (ET), groundwater level (GWL), and groundwater temperature (GT), gross
157 primary productivity (GPP), net ecosystem exchange (NEE), and SIF] that are vital for accurately
158 characterizing ecosystem dynamics. Furthermore, IEMs facilitate the simulation of continuous
159 moisture and temperature profiles from the subsurface to the top of the canopy. Table 1 lists the
160 few existing IEMs that can physically simulate energy, carbon and water processes, including
161 groundwater flow. The list includes the enhanced CLM5 (Akhter et al., 2025), the Terrestrial System
162 Modelling Platform (TerrSysMP, Shrestha et al., 2014; Gasper et al., 2014), the enhanced version
163 (Liao et al., 2025) of the Earth system model (E3SM; Golaz et al., 2022) and the MODFLOW–
164 MetaSWAP–WOFOST (Van Walsum & Supit, 2012). While all these IEMs can simulate the water
165 processes, including detailed groundwater flow processes, they all lack the representation of
166 groundwater heat processes and groundwater temperature simulation. Furthermore, none of them
167 accounts for SIF simulation. Hence, a new IEM is needed that can physically-based integrate the
168 groundwater processes (mass and energy) with detailed energy, carbon and SIF fluxes. The
169 hypothesis of this study is that explicit representation of groundwater mass and energy in an IEM
170 framework would improve quantification of the soil–plant–atmosphere continuum by: a) improving
171 the simulation of soil moisture and temperature profiles; b) enabling two-way feedbacks between
172 the unsaturated and saturated zone and their further impact on water fluxes; and c) revealing the

groundwater's influence on carbon fluxes and vegetation physiological processes such as root water uptake and photosynthesis (reflected by fluorescence). Collectively, testing these hypotheses would unravel the role of groundwater in shaping the SPAC dynamics and deepen the understanding of ecosystem functioning.

177 Table 1. List of available integrated ecohydrological models (IEMs)

Model name	Water cycle processes			Heat transfer processes		Energy cycle, ET and root growth & uptake	Carbon cycle and photosynthesis	SIF	Reference
	Surface water (runoff and streamflow)	Unsaturated zone flow	Groundwater flow	Unsaturated zone	Groundwater zone				
Enhanced CLM5	Yes	Yes, 1D Richards equation	Yes, by incorporating an aquifer beneath the soil column to allow for lateral groundwater flow and pumping	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	(Akhter et al., 2025)
TerrSysMP (COSMO–CLM3.5–ParFlow)	Yes	Yes, via ParFlow (3D Richards equation)	Yes, via ParFlow (3D Richards equation)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	(Shrestha et al., 2014; Gasper et al., 2014)
Enhanced E3SM	Yes	Yes	Yes, by developing a new hillslope-based hydrological model to simulate lateral groundwater flow	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	(Liao et al., 2025)
MODFLOW–MetaSWAP–WOFOST	Yes	Yes, 1D Richards equation	Yes, via MODFLOW (1D/2D/3D).	Yes	No	Yes	Yes, via WOFOST	No	(Van Walsum & Supit, 2012)
STEMMUS–SCOPE–MODFLOW 6	Yes	Yes, 1D Richards equation	Yes, via MODFLOW 6 (1D/2D/3D). 1D is used in this study	Yes	Yes, via MODFLOW 6	Yes	Yes	Yes	This study

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This study aims to investigate the role of groundwater in the SPAC with a focus on assessing the benefits of explicitly incorporating the groundwater component in modelling SPAC processes. In particular, the specific objectives are to investigate the impacts of the groundwater component (mass and energy) on: 1) regulating the soil profile, in terms of moisture and temperature; 2) the dynamics of the unsaturated/saturated zones and its further impact on water fluxes and root water uptake; and 3) the carbon fluxes and vegetation physiological processes (i.e. root water uptake and photosynthesis reflected by fluorescence). To address these objectives, a new IEM framework is developed by coupling the STEMMUS-SCOPE SPAC model to the MODFLOW 6 IHM model and applied at three sites in the Netherlands (i.e., Loobos, Cabauw, and Veenkampen). Since STEMMUS-SCOPE is a point-based model, MODFLOW 6 is a grid-based model, and this study is the first example of coupling these two models, the ST-SC-MF6 models were set up in a vertically-stacked orientation (1-dimensional, 1D). The 1D models were assumed to be representative of the ecosystem of each of the corresponding sites. Simulated variables of interest are evaluated with and without the coupling to quantify the effect of explicitly representing groundwater within the simulations.

2. Methods

2.1. Summary of the two coupled models

STEMMUS-SCOPE (Wang et al., 2021) is a SPAC model, which is an integrated version of two separate models (STEMMUS and SCOPE). STEMMUS simulates the transfer of energy, mass, and momentum in the unsaturated zone (Zeng et al., 2011a; b; Zeng & Su, 2013). SCOPE simulates the radiative transfer in the soil, leaves, and vegetation canopies, as well as photosynthesis and non-radiative energy dissipation through convection and mechanical turbulence (Van der Tol et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2021). The coupling between STEMMUS and SCOPE enables the seamless SPAC modelling of energy, water and carbon exchanges. Additionally, STEMMUS-SCOPE allows for

simulating the influence of θ and T_s variability on vegetation dynamics in terms of photosynthesis, stomatal behavior and plant water stress responses (Tang et al., 2024). More details about the STEMMUS-SCOPE coupling are described in Wang et al. (2021).

MODFLOW 6 is an IHM framework (Hughes et al., 2017) and is the latest "core" version of the well-known MODFLOW simulator of groundwater flow (GWF). In addition, MODFLOW 6 simulates other flow and transport processes, including unsaturated zone flow, overland flow, flow in surface water bodies (e.g. lakes, rivers, drains), and their interaction with the groundwater system (Langevin et al., 2017; Langevin et al., 2023). Recently, a new Groundwater Energy Transport (GWE) module, patterned after the solute transport module (Langevin et al., 2022), was added to MODFLOW 6 for simulating heat transport processes within a MODFLOW 6 simulation (Morway et al., 2025) and it is leveraged in this study.

2.2. STEMMUS-SCOPE & MODFLOW 6 coupling

The Basic Model Interface (BMI; Peckham et al., 2013; Hutton et al., 2020) was adopted as the convention for coupling STEMMUS-SCOPE to MODFLOW 6. The BMI protocol is general; it allows via an external program or script to control models and set their variables during runtime. By facilitating the exchange of model-calculated variables and other information between the coupled models externally, the BMI thereby eliminates the need to access (or modify) the source code(s) of the coupled models during the simulations. That protocol allows for coupling models which are written in different programming languages, as exemplified in this study (STEMMUS-SCOPE in MATLAB and MODFLOW 6 in Fortran). Hence, BMI allows for keeping up with future updates or new versions of the individual models without extensive reconfiguration.

2.2.1. BMI phases

BMI routines are commonly organized into three phases (initialize, update, finalize) as described in figure 2 of Hughes et al. (2022). Figure 1 shows the coupling framework of STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6.

Initialize phase

The initialization phase in a BMI setup is separate from the initialization routines associated with each of the individual models (explained in Section 2.4.2). During the BMI initialization routine, "hooks" are established between the coupled models to facilitate the exchange of calculated values during a forward run. During the initialize phase, initialized head (i.e., GWL) and temperature (i.e., GT) of the water table are defined in STEMMUS-SCOPE. While, initialized groundwater net recharge flux ($\mathrm{R_n}$), heat flux above water table ($\mathrm{Q_{heat}}$), and net recharge temperature ($\mathrm{RT_n}$) are defined in MODFLOW 6.

Update phase

The update phase is at the core of the coupling process (Fig. 1b). During this phase, the two models exchange variable values at the phreatic surface (the shared interface between the unsaturated zone and the saturated zone, marked by a bold blue line in the diagram of Fig. 1a). At this shared interface, STEMMUS-SCOPE requires the following bottom boundary conditions: a) specified head (i.e. GWL) for the soil water module; and b) specified temperature (i.e. GT) for the soil energy module; together to simulate groundwater gross recharge ($\mathrm{R_g}$), capillary rise flux (Cap), root groundwater uptake ($\mathrm{RWU_g}$), $\mathrm{Q_{heat}}$, and $\mathrm{RT_n}$. In turn, MODFLOW 6 requires the following upper boundary conditions: specified water flux (i.e. $\mathrm{R_n}$, calculated as the difference between $\mathrm{R_g}$, Cap, and $\mathrm{RWU_g}$) for the GWF module, and b) specified heat flux (i.e., $\mathrm{Q_{heat}}$) and/or its specified temperature (i.e., $\mathrm{RT_n}$) for the GWE module; together to simulate GWL and GT. From herein, the simulated variables ($\mathrm{R_n}$, $\mathrm{Q_{heat}}$, and $\mathrm{RT_n}$) by STEMMUS-SCOPE are referred to as 'STEMMUS-SCOPE variables' (marked by red color in the flowchart of Fig. 1b), while the simulated variables by MODFLOW 6

248 (GWL and GT) are referred to as 'MODFLOW 6 variables' (marked by blue color in the flowchart of
249 Fig. 1b).

250 The update phase runs in a looped manner (update loop) with number of updates equal to number
251 of time steps. In principle, the BMI can work with different temporal discretization (number of time
252 steps and the length of each time step) for each of the two coupled models. However, for ease of
253 use, the same temporal discretization was used for both models in this study. For each time step: 1)
254 MODFLOW 6 runs and updates the MODFLOW 6 variables; 2) the updated MODFLOW 6 variables are
255 passed to STEMMUS-SCOPE (illustrated by the blue bold arrow in Fig. 1b), which are used as bottom
256 boundary conditions by STEMMUS-SCOPE; 3) STEMMUS-SCOPE runs and updates the STEMMUS-
257 SCOPE variables; 4) the updated STEMMUS-SCOPE variables are passed back to MODFLOW 6
258 (illustrated by the red bold arrow in Fig. 1b) to be used as upper boundary conditions for the next
259 time step; and 5) updates continue until the last time step.

260 Finalize phase

261 In this phase, both models finalize their simulation, and the model outputs are exported for further
262 analysis. The model outputs include the STEMMUS-SCOPE variables, the MODFLOW 6 variables, and
263 other variables of interest (marked by black color in Fig. 1) as follows: θ, T_s, root soil water uptake
264 (RWU_s), subsurface evaporation (E_{ss}), ET which is the summation of E_{ss}, RWU_s and RWU_g, GPP,
265 NEE, and SIF.

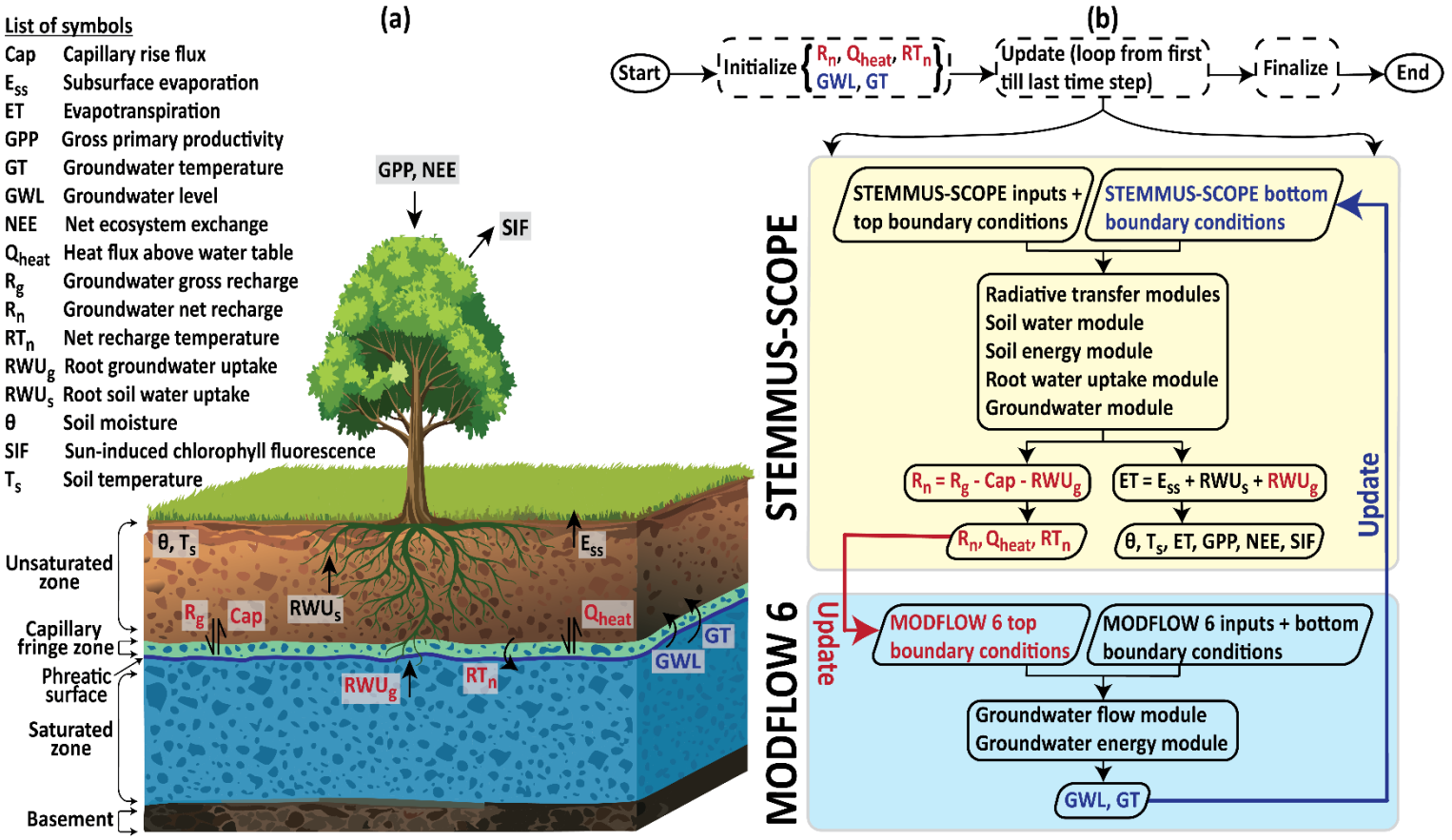


Figure 1. Schematic of the coupled STEMMUS-SCOPE and MODFLOW 6 framework: a) illustrative diagram (left panel); b) flowchart (right panel). The red color indicates the processes and/or variables that are transferred from STEMMUS-SCOPE to MODFLOW 6. The blue color indicates the processes and/or variables that are transferred from MODFLOW 6 to STEMMUS-SCOPE.

MODFLOW 6 was not originally written to support BMI; however, Hughes et al. (2022) documents the restructuring of the source code to align MODFLOW 6 to support the BMI conventions. Similarly, Schilperoort (2025) and Zeng et al. (2025) document the steps followed to make STEMMUS-SCOPE BMI-compatible. Additionally, a groundwater module is added into the source code of STEMMUS-SCOPE to: a) recognize the effect of the saturated zone dynamics on the unsaturated zone through the MODFLOW 6 variables; and b) prepare the necessary STEMMUS-SCOPE variables that are fed into MODFLOW 6. The groundwater module includes three main parts: 1) unsaturated zone bottom boundary; 2) recharge and capillary rise flux; and 3) root groundwater uptake.

2.2.2. Unsaturated zone bottom boundary

The bottom boundary of the unsaturated zone for the soil water module in STEMMUS-SCOPE can be defined using one of three options (Zeng & Su, 2013): a) specified matric head (Dirichlet) boundary; b) specified moisture flux; and c) zero matric head (i.e. gravity drainage). For this investigation, option (a) is used. This bottom boundary (specified matric head) is adaptively positioned at the phreatic surface (Fig. 1a), corresponding to the GWL at each time step (Zeng et al., 2019). The GWL value is received by STEMMUS-SCOPE from MODFLOW 6 through the BMI (Fig. 1b). Then, at the phreatic surface elevation (GWL), the specified matric head is set to zero (matric head is negative above GWL and positive below GWL). At each time step, the GWL may rise or fall, causing the phreatic surface to shift upward or downward. As a result, the thickness of the unsaturated zone decreases or increases, and the position of the bottom boundary is updated to reflect this moving boundary condition.

Similarly, for the soil energy module, a specified temperature boundary condition is used as the bottom boundary. The value of the specified temperature is the GT (Fig. 1b), received by STEMMUS-SCOPE from MODFLOW 6 through the BMI and updated at each time step.

2.2.3. Recharge and capillary rise flux

STEMMUS-SCOPE simulates two-phase mass and heat flow in the unsaturated zone using the modified Richards equation (Milly, 1982). The water flow is driven by both gravity and capillary forces (Eq. 1).

$$\frac{\delta}{\delta t}(\rho_L \theta_L + \rho_v \theta_v) = \frac{-\delta}{\delta z}(q_{Lh} + q_{LT} + q_{vh} + q_{vT}) - S$$

$$= \rho_L \frac{\delta}{\delta z}\left[K\left(\frac{\delta \psi}{\delta z} + 1\right) + D_{Ta}\frac{\delta T}{\delta z}\right] + \frac{\delta}{\delta z}\left[D_{vh}\frac{\delta \psi}{\delta z} + D_{vT}\frac{\delta T}{\delta z}\right] - S \quad (1)$$

where ρ_L and ρ_v (kg m^{-3}) are the density of liquid water and water vapor, respectively; θ_L and θ_v (m^3 m^{-3}) are the soil liquid and vapor volumetric water content, respectively; q_{Lh} and q_{LT} (kg m^{-2} s^{-1}) are the soil liquid water fluxes driven by the soil matric potential gradient ($\frac{\delta \psi}{\delta z}$) and temperature gradient ($\frac{\delta T}{\delta z}$), respectively; q_{vh} and q_{vT} (kg m^{-2} s^{-1}) are the soil water vapor fluxes driven by the $\frac{\delta \psi}{\delta z}$ gradient and the $\frac{\delta T}{\delta z}$ gradient, respectively; K is the unsaturated hydraulic conductivity (m s^{-1}); D_{Ta} (m^{-2} s^{-1} K^{-1}) is the transport coefficient of the adsorbed liquid flow due to temperature gradient; D_{vh} (kg m^{-2} s^{-1}) is the isothermal vapor conductivity; D_{vT} (kg m^{-1} s^{-1} K^{-1}) is the thermal vapor diffusion coefficient, and S is the sink term (m s^{-1}). More details of the equation are in Zeng et al. (2011a, b) and Zeng & Su (2013).

As explained in Section 2.2.1, the GWL is adopted as the bottom boundary condition of the unsaturated zone in STEMMUS-SCOPE. Consequently, a capillary fringe zone is formed above the phreatic surface (Fig. 1a), where water is pulled up from the saturated zone by capillary forces. Moreover, when precipitation infiltrates into the unsaturated zone and percolates downward, it has to go through the capillary fringe zone and continue downward as R_g to the saturated zone. Hence, the capillary fringe zone includes both the R_g and the Cap. The R_g and the capillary rise flux (Cap), the latter contributes to groundwater evaporation (Balugani et al., 2017), are calculated from the summation of q_{Lh}, q_{LT}, q_{vh}, and q_{vT} fluxes (Eq. 2) at the capillary fringe zone. The result of that

summation determines whether the calculated flux (Q, Eq. 2a) represents R_g or Cap. If the summation is negative (Eq. 2b), it means the flow direction is downward, and the R_g term is dominant. In contrast, if the summation is positive (Eq. 2c), it means the flow direction is upward, and the Cap term is dominant. In STEMMUS-SCOPE, upward fluxes (capillary rise) are positive, while downward fluxes (gravity drainage) are negative. However, MODFLOW 6 uses the opposite sign convention. Therefore, the R_g/Cap is multiplied by -1, when transferred to MODFLOW 6 through the BMI.

$$Q = q_{Lh} + q_{LT} + q_{vh} + q_{vT} \quad (2a)$$

$$R_g = Q \quad \text{if } Q < 0 \quad (2b)$$

$$Cap = Q \quad \text{if } Q \geq 0 \quad (2c)$$

2.2.4. Root groundwater uptake

The root water uptake (RWU) is calculated in STEMMUS-SCOPE based on a resistance scheme that takes into account the hydraulic gradient between the soil water potential (ψ_i) and the leaf water potential (ψ_l) (Eq. 3). The root water uptake module, developed by Wang et al. (2021), takes into account the θ as the only source of water for the roots (root soil water uptake, RWU_s), meaning that RWU = RWU_s. The RWU_s is calculated for all the soil layers that are above the maximum rooting depth (d_{max}).

$$RWU = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{\psi_{s,i} - \psi_l}{r_{s,i} + r_{r,i} + r_{x,i}} \text{ and } RWU_s = RWU \quad (3)$$

where $\psi_{s,i}$ is the soil water potential of layer i (m), ψ_l is leaf water potential (m), $r_{s,i}$ is the soil hydraulic resistance (s m^{-1}), $r_{r,i}$ is the root resistance to water flow radially across the roots (s m^{-1}), and $r_{x,i}$ is the plant's axial resistance to flow from the root xylem to the leaves (s m^{-1}).

However, the roots can uptake water from an additional source (root groundwater uptake, RWU_g) if the roots have access to groundwater (GWL is above d_{max}). As explained in Section 2.2.1, the GWL

is adopted as the bottom boundary condition of the unsaturated zone for the soil water module in STEMMUS-SCOPE, hence, the RWU can also be influenced. The RWU calculations were updated by splitting it into two components ($\mathrm{RWU_s}$ and $\mathrm{RWU_g}$, Eq. 4). The $\mathrm{RWU_s}$ is for the soil layers that are above the capillary fringe and above $\mathrm{d_{max}}$ (Eq. 5), and the $\mathrm{RWU_g}$ is for the soil layers that are below the capillary fringe zone and above $\mathrm{d_{max}}$ (Eq. 6). The $\mathrm{RWU_s}$ and $\mathrm{RWU_g}$ are calculated by replacing the soil water potential ($\psi_{s,i}$) in Equation 4 with the updated $\psi_{s,i}$ (due to the effect of GWL) in Equation 5), and with the groundwater potential ($\psi_{g,i}$) in Equation 6, respectively.

$$\mathrm{RWU} = \mathrm{RWU_s} + \mathrm{RWU_g} \quad (4)$$

$$\mathrm{RWU_s} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{\psi_{s,i} - \psi_l}{r_{s,i} + r_{r,i} + r_{x,i}} \text{ for the soil layers above capillary fringe zone and above } \mathrm{d_{max}} \quad (5)$$

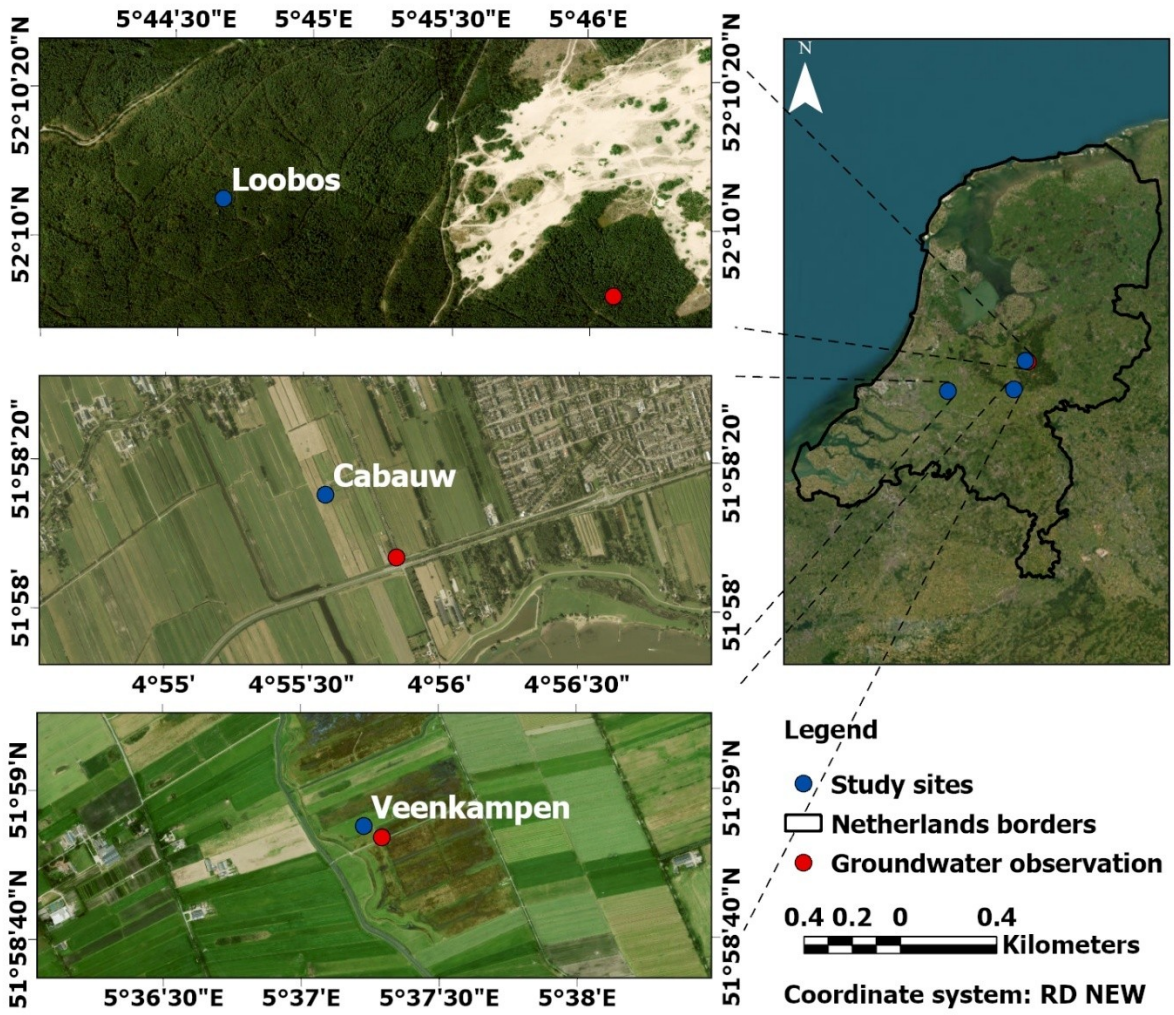
$$\mathrm{RWU_g} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{\psi_{g,i} - \psi_l}{r_{s,i} + r_{r,i} + r_{x,i}} \text{ for the soil layers below capillary fringe zone and above } \mathrm{d_{max}} \quad (6)$$

For soil layers below $\mathrm{d_{max}}$, RWU = $\mathrm{RWU_g}$ = 0

2.3. Study sites and data

The proposed model coupling was applied to three sites in the Netherlands covering both forest (Loobos) and meadow (Cabauw and VeenKampen) ecosystems (Fig. 2). Those three sites were selected because: a) they provide comprehensive in-situ measurements spanning the water, energy, and carbon cycles, including meteorological forcing, different observations such as θ and $\mathrm{T_s}$ profiles, eddy covariance flux measurements (e.g. ET, GPP, and NEE), groundwater variables (i.e. GWL and GT), and vegetation characteristics (e.g. SIF) — such data density is essential for rigorously testing the hypothesis of this study and evaluating the developed coupled modelling framework; and b) the sites represent two dominant Dutch landscapes (forest on sandy soil; meadow on clay/peat), allowing preliminary assessment of model transferability across ecosystem types. The three sites have the typical temperate climate of the Netherlands, with an annual average precipitation of 700-900 mm $\mathrm{yr^{-1}}$ (Buishand et al., 2010; Brakkee et al., 2022), and air temperature of 10.5 ^{o}C (Bense &

Kurylyk, 2017; Jansen et al., 2023). The Loobos site is located in the forested area of the Veluwe in the central part of the Netherlands, with an elevation of 25.0 m above sea level (a.s.l.) (Table 2). The land cover is evergreen coniferous forest, and the soil type is loamy sandy soil (Heinen et al., 2021). The groundwater depth ranges from 3 to 5 m below land surface (van der Molen et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2026). The Cabauw site is located in the central western region of the Netherlands, with an elevation of -0.7 m a.s.l. (Table 2). The land cover is grass, and the soil is a mixture of clay and peat (Heinen et al., 2021). The groundwater depth ranges from 0 to 1.25 m below land surface. The Veenkampen site is located in the Veluwe area in the central part of the Netherlands, with an elevation of 5.6 m a.s.l. (Table 2). The land cover is grass, and the soil is thin peat underlain by a clayey sand (Heinen et al., 2021). The groundwater depth ranges from 0.25 to 1 m below land surface.



373

374 Figure 2. Location of the three study sites. Images are generated for the day 20 March 2025 using

375 the ESRI ArcGIS Pro software

376 Table 2. Summary of site characteristics and model discretization

Feature	Loobos	Cabauw	Veenkampen
Elevation (m a.s.l.)	25.0	-0.7	5.6
Land cover	Evergreen coniferous forest	Meadow (grass)	Meadow (grass)
Soil type	Loamy sand	Mix of peat and clay	Mix of peat and clay
Groundwater depth (m) below land surface level	3.0 – 5.0	0.0 – 1.25	0.25 – 1.0

Unsaturated zone discretization:			
Thickness (m)	5.0	1.5	1.2
Number of vertical layers in STEMMUS-SCOPE	69	50	33
Layers thickness range (cm)	1 – 20	1 – 20	1 – 20
Saturated zone discretization:			
Thickness (m), limited to upper-most permeable hydrological unit	20	9	9
Number of vertical layers in MODFLOW 6	20	15	18
Layers thickness range (m)	0.25 – 1.0	0.25 – 1.0	0.25 – 1.0

The forcing inputs and observations data for the three sites were collected from different sources (Table 3). The Meteorology and Air Quality (MAQ) dataset is an open-access collection of harmonized meteorological variables, eddy covariance fluxes, and soil observations for the Loobos and Veenkampen sites, maintained by Wageningen University (van der Molen et al., 2024; Heusinkveld et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2026). Similarly, the Cesar dataset, operated by the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI), provides a wide suite of measurements including remote sensing, eddy covariance, surface, soil and hydrological measurements in the Cabauw site (Bosveld, 2020; KNMI, 2024). The forcing inputs include time series of the meteorological inputs (i.e., precipitation, net radiation, air temperature, wind speed, relative humidity, atmospheric pressure, and CO_2 dioxide concentration) and the leaf area index (LAI). For Loobos and Veenkampen, the meteorological inputs and observation datasets were retrieved from the MAQ dataset, while those for the Cabauw site were retrieved from the Cesar dataset (Table 3). The LAI for the three sites was retrieved from the remote sensing MODIS product (MCD15A3H v061, Myneni et al., 2021). The observation datasets include time series of θ, T_s, ET, GPP, NEE, GWL, GT, and SIF. Among all observations, θ and T_s profiles, as well as ET, were available for most of the simulation period, except for short gaps, at the three sites. The ET observations were derived from eddy covariance

towers at the three sites, representing actual ET. GPP was available only at the Loobos site for the period 2016-2021, while NEE was available only at the Cabauw site for the period 2016-2020. GWL was available at Cabauw and Veenkampen from observation wells located close to the main measurement infrastructure (i.e. eddy covariance tower) (Fig. 2). While at Loobos, GWL was not available exactly within the site, but obtained from the nearest available observation point (approximately 500 m away; Fig. 2) via the Data and Information of the Dutch Subsurface (DINOloket) dataset (GDN, 2024). GT was available only at the Loobos site for only one year (1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024). SIF observations were available only at Cabauw on certain days in 2022 and 2023 and were collected by Colombo et al. (2024). All the collected datasets were processed and formatted to be compatible with the needed formats (NetCDF for STEMMUS-SCOPE and ASCII for MODFLOW 6).

Table 3. Datasets acquisition at the three sites

Data	Loobos	Cabauw	Veenkampen
Meteorological inputs			
(precipitation, net radiation, air temperature, wind speed, relative humidity, atmospheric pressure and CO_2 dioxide concentration)	MAQ dataset (van der Molen et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2026)	Cesar dataset (Bosveld, 2020; KNMI, 2024)	MAQ dataset (Heusinkveld et al., 2024)
Leaf area index	MODIS-LAI (Myneni et al., 2021)		
Observations (in-situ measurements)			
Evapotranspiration, soil moisture, soil temperature	MAQ dataset	Cesar dataset	MAQ dataset
Groundwater level	DINOloket (GDN, 2024)	Cesar dataset	MAQ dataset
Groundwater temperature	MAQ dataset	Not available	Not available

Carbon fluxes (gross primary productivity and/or net ecosystem exchange)	MAQ dataset	Cesar dataset	Not available
Sun-induced chlorophyll fluorescence	Not available	(Colombo et al., 2024)	Not available

2.4. Models' setup

For brevity, from herein, the STEMMUS-SCOPE model is referred to as ST-SC and the STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 model is referred to as ST-SC-MF6.

2.4.1. Temporal and spatial discretization

Both ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 models of the three sites used a three month model initialization phase (i.e. "spin-up") that extended from 1 January 2016 to 31 March 2016. After this, the simulation was run for a period of 8 years (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2024). The total simulation had 144,624 half-hourly time steps.

The unsaturated zone in STEMMUS-SCOPE was modelled with site-specific total thicknesses: 5 m for Loobos, 1.5 m for Cabauw, and 1.2 m for Veenkampen – each equals to or exceeds the site's maximum observed water table depth (5.0 m for Loobos, 1.25 m for Cabauw, and 1.0 m for Veenkampen). The unsaturated zone was vertically discretized into 69, 50, and 33 layers for Loobos, Cabauw, and Veenkampen, respectively (Table 2). The thickness of the layers was variable (minimum of 1 cm and maximum of 20 cm), started with fine resolution near the surface (1 cm), gradually increased to 20 cm, then gradually decreased again to 5 cm near the water table fluctuation zone.

The MODFLOW 6 models were horizontally discretized into a single cell that is 1 m by 1 m, and were vertically discretized into 20, 15, and 18 layers for the Loobos, Cabauw and Veenkampen sites, respectively (Table 2). The layering information was retrieved from the BRO GeoTOP v1.6. geological model (TNO – GDN, 2023) and the BRO REGIS II v2.2.2. hydrogeological model (TNO – GDN, 2024). Since the models were 1D models in the vertical direction, lateral flow considerations were neglected. To minimize the effect of this negligence, the saturated zone simulation was limited to

427 the upper-most permeable hydrogeological unit, which terminates at a depth of 20 m below the
428 land surface for Loobos and 9 m for both the Cabauw and Veenkampen sites. This permeable
429 hydrogeological unit was then sub-divided into thinner layers, started with a thickness of 0.25 m,
430 then smoothly increased to 0.5, 0.75, and 1 m. At the base of the bottom-most active layer, a
431 specified flux boundary condition was applied to compensate for the vertical flow of the excluded
432 deeper hydrogeological units.

433 ### 2.4.2. Initial and boundary conditions

434 Each model of the three sites was initialized by an initial θ and T_s for STEMMUS-SCOPE, and an initial
435 GWL and GT for MODFLOW 6. The initial θ, T_s, GWL, and GT values were retrieved from the
436 collected datasets (Table 3) of the three sites as follows: a) 0.1, 5°C, 21.5 m, and 10°C for Loobos, b)
437 0.6, 5°C, -0.8 m and 10.5°C for Cabauw, and c) 0.75, 5°C, 5.1 m, and 11°C for Veenkampen.

438 The top boundary of the soil water module in STEMMUS-SCOPE was a specified flux (precipitation,
439 input retrieved from the collected datasets in Table 3), and the bottom boundary was the GWL
440 (received from MODFLOW 6). The top boundary of the soil energy module in STEMMUS-SCOPE was
441 a specified temperature (air temperature, input retrieved from the collected datasets in Table 3),
442 and the bottom boundary was the GT (received from MODFLOW 6). The top boundary of the GWF
443 module of the saturated zone in MODFLOW 6 was the R_n (received from STEMMUS-SCOPE), and the
444 bottom boundary was a specified flux (unknown value that was initially set to 0.0005 m day^{-1} and
445 calibrated later). The top boundary of the GWE module of the saturated zone in MODFLOW 6 was
446 the Q_{heat} and RT_n (received from STEMMUS-SCOPE), and the bottom boundary was a specified heat
447 flux (unknown value that was initially set to 0.05 W m^{-2} and calibrated later).

448 ### 2.4.3. Model parameters and calibration/validation

449 Both STEMMUS-SCOPE and MODFLOW 6 models have several parameters – herein, only the
450 parameters that had a high impact on the simulations (based on an earlier sensitivity analysis) are

calibrated and listed in Table 4. The main parameters that govern the flow simulation in STEMMUS-SCOPE were: the vertical saturated hydraulic conductivity of the unsaturated zone (K_{sat}), residual water content (θ_r), saturated water content (θ_s), empirical coefficients of the Van Genuchten equation (α and n), and d_{max}. In MODFLOW 6, the main aquifer parameters were: the horizontal (K_h) and vertical (K_v) hydraulic conductivity, specific storage (S_s), and specific yield (S_y). Both STEMMUS-SCOPE and MODFLOW 6 used the same thermal parameters to simulate the heat transfer in both the unsaturated and the saturated zones, including: thermal conductivity of solids (K_T), specific heat capacity of solids (c_s), and bulk density (ρ_s). As explained in Section 2.4.1, the soil profiles at each site were discretized into multiple vertical layers (Table 2) to account for soil heterogeneity. Initially, all layers were assigned uniform values for each parameter. During the calibration procedure, these parameters were updated individually for each layer to reflect the vertical variability of the θ and T_s measurements. The ranges of the calibrated values for each parameter across the layers are summarized in Table 4.

The 8-year simulation period was divided into a 4-year calibration period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2020), followed by a 4-year validation period (1 April 2020 – 31 March 2024). The collected observation datasets (Table 3) were used as calibration/validation state variables for the calibration/validation periods, respectively. The models were calibrated by trial and error until satisfactory qualitative (graphical) and quantitative (statistical) matches between the simulated variables and their observed equivalents were achieved. The goodness of fit was assessed using two statistical metrics: the Kling–Gupta efficiency (KGE; Gupta et al., 2009) and the root mean square error (RMSE). The KGE value can range from negative infinity to 1 and was deemed acceptable, when it was larger than zero (Knoben et al., 2019). The RMSE value was deemed acceptable, when it was minimized to 0.1 $m^3\ m^{-3}$, 2°C, 0.5 m, 1°C, 1 mm day^{-1}, 3 gC $m^{-2}\ day^{-1}$, 5 gC $m^{-2}\ day^{-1}$, and 0.25 mW m^{-2} µm^{-1} sr^{-1} for θ, T_s, GWL, GT, ET, GPP, NEE, and SIF, respectively, as similar ranges were indicated in former studies (Lekula & Lubczynski, 2019; Pacheco-Labrador et al., 2019; Thum et al., 2019; Van

der Velde et al., 2023; Benz et al., 2024; Qian et al., 2024; Yang & Lei, 2024; Wang et al., 2026).Table 4 Models' tuned parameters

Parameter		Loobos	Cabauw	Veenkampen	Unit	Model
		Calibrated values				
K_{sat}	Vertical saturated hydraulic conductivity	2.5-10	10-20	10-20	cm day^{-1}	STEMMUS-SCOPE
θ_r	Residual water content	0.03	0.2	0.15	m^3 m^{-3}	STEMMUS-SCOPE
θ_s	Saturated water content	0.2-0.4	0.60-0.62	0.72-0.77	m^3 m^{-3}	STEMMUS-SCOPE
α	Alpha coefficient of Van Genuchten equation	0.1	0.05-0.09	0.02-0.04	cm^{-1}	STEMMUS-SCOPE
n	n coefficient of Van Genuchten equation	3.0-5.0	1.2-2.4	1.8-2.4	-	STEMMUS-SCOPE
d_{max}	Maximum rooting depth	4	0.5	0.5	m	STEMMUS-SCOPE
K_h	Horizontal hydraulic conductivity	5.0	5.0	5.0	m day^{-1}	MODFLOW 6
K_v	Vertical hydraulic conductivity	5.0	5.0	5.0	m day^{-1}	MODFLOW 6
S_s	Specific storage	10^{-5}	$1.5*10^{-5}$	$1.5*10^{-5}$	-	MODFLOW 6
S_y	Specific yield	0.05	0.15	0.15	m^{-1}	MODFLOW 6
K_T	Thermal conductivity of solids	1.0-3.0	0.5-1.0	0.5-1.0	W m^{-1} $°C^{-1}$	Both models
c_s	Specific heat capacity of solids	800-3000	2500-4000	2500-4000	J kg^{-1} $°C^{-1}$	Both models
ρ_s	Bulk density of solids	900-1600	1200-1600	1200-1600	kg m^{-3}	Both models

3. Results

3.1. Overall models' performance

The θ simulation of the ST-SC-MF6 demonstrated better agreement with the observations during both the calibration and validation periods as compared to the ST-SC simulations at the three sites. The depth-averaged KGE values of θ were increased by 0.29 at Loobos, 0.30 at Cabauw, and 0.21 at

Veenkampen (Table 5), while the depth-averaged RMSE values were decreased by 0.02, 0.18, 0.13 at Loobos, Cabauw and Veenkampen, respectively (Table 6).

The T_s improvement of the ST-SC-MF6 simulations were site-dependent. The depth-averaged KGE values of T_s were increased by 0.19 and 0.14 at Loobos and Cabauw, respectively, while increasing slightly in Veenkampen by 0.04 (Table 5). Corresponding RMSE reductions were 0.9, 0.7, 0.2 °C at Loobos, Cabauw and Veenkampen, respectively (Table 6).

The ET improvement of the ST-SC-MF6 simulations were consistent across the three sites, with KGE increases of 0.35, 0.11, 0.15, accompanied by RMSE reductions of 0.38, 0.19, 0.25 mm day^{-1} at Loobos, Cabauw and Veenkampen (Tables 5 and 6), respectively.

The carbon flux responses were site-dependent. At Cabauw, the KGE of NEE increased by 0.18, and the RMSE decreased by 2.4 gC m^{-2} day^{-1} (Tables 5 and 6). While in Loobos, the GPP showed negligible changes between the ST-SC and ST-ST-MF6 simulations, i.e. changes in KGE and RMSE values were limited to 0.1, and 0.1 gC m^{-2} day^{-1}, respectively (Tables 5 and 6).

For SIF at Cabauw, improvement of the ST-SC-MF6 simulation were satisfactory, with KGE increases of 0.15 and RMSE reduction of 0.17 mW m^{-2} μm^{-1} sr^{-1}, respectively (Tables 5 and 6).

Considering the groundwater variables (GWL and GT) in the ST-SC-MF6 simulation, the KGE values for GWL were 0.46 at Loobos, 0.63 at Cabauw, and 0.47 at Veenkampen, and RMSE values of 0.49, 0.21, and 0.26 m, respectively. For GT at Loobos, the KGE value was 0.56 with corresponding RMSE of 0.47 °C.

Table 5. KGE values of the calibration state variables for the STEMMUS-SCOPE (ST-SC) and STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (ST-SC-MF6) models at the three sites over the entire period simulation

Variable	Loobos			Cabauw			Veenkampen		
	ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Difference (Δ)	ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Δ	ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Δ

Θ at	20 cm	0.02	0.29		20 cm	0.29	0.71		7 cm	0.49	0.53	
depth	50 cm	0.01	0.46		35 cm	0.37	0.67		13 cm	0.42	0.72	
	100 cm	0.02	0.18		55 cm	0.49	0.65		25 cm	0.46	0.71	
	Average	0.02	0.31	+0.29	Average	0.38	0.68	+0.30	Average	0.45	0.66	+0.21
T_s at	20 cm	0.42	0.49		20 cm	0.65	0.84		10 cm	0.72	0.86	
depth	50 cm	0.33	0.49		35 cm	0.67	0.77		20 cm	0.83	0.84	
	100 cm	0.22	0.56		55 cm	0.64	0.78		50 cm	0.77	0.73	
	Average	0.32	0.51	+0.19	Average	0.65	0.79	+0.14	Average	0.77	0.81	+0.04
GWL		-	0.46	-		-	0.63	-		-	0.47	-
GT		-	0.56	-		-	-	-		-	-	-
ET		0.11	0.46	+0.35		0.65	0.76	+0.11		0.46	0.61	+0.15
GPP		0.47	0.46	-0.01		-	-	-		-	-	-
NEE		-	-	-		0.01	0.19	+0.18		-	-	-
SIF		-	-	-		0.31	0.46	+0.15		-	-	-

505

506 Table 6. RMSE values of the calibration state variables for the STEMMUS-SCOPE (ST-SC) and
507 STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (ST-SC-MF6) models at the three sites over the entire period
508 simulation

Variable	Unit		Loobos				Cabauw				Veenkampen		
			ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Difference (Δ)		ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Δ		ST-SC	ST-SC-MF6	Δ
θ at		20 cm	0.05	0.03		20 cm	0.24	0.08		7 cm	0.24	0.12	
depth	$m^3\ m^{-3}$	50 cm	0.04	0.02		35 cm	0.27	0.1		13 cm	0.19	0.08	
		100 cm	0.04	0.02		55 cm	0.28	0.08		25 cm	0.25	0.09	
		Average	0.04	0.02	-0.02	Average	0.26	0.08	-0.18	Average	0.22	0.09	-0.13
T_s at		20 cm	2.4	1.7		20 cm	1.8	1.1		10 cm	2.5	2.1	
depth	°C	50 cm	2.4	1.4		35 cm	1.9	1.2		20 cm	2.2	2.2	
		100 cm	2.7	1.7		55 cm	1.7	1.1		50 cm	2.9	2.5	
		Average	2.5	1.6	-0.9	Average	1.8	1.1	-0.7	Average	2.5	2.3	-0.2

GWL	m	-	0.49	-	-	0.21	-	-	0.26	-
GT	°C	-	0.47	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ET	mm day^{-1}	1.37	0.99	-0.38	0.95	0.76	-0.19	1.12	0.87	-0.25
GPP	gC m^{-2} day^{-1}	2.7	2.8	+0.1	-	-	-	-	-	-
NEE	gC m^{-2} day^{-1}	-	-	-	7.0	4.6	-2.4	-	-	-
SIF	mW m^{-2} μm^{-1} sr^{-1}	-	-	-	0.38	0.21	-0.17	-	-	-

509

510 3.2. Saturated zone dynamics

511 The coupled ST-SC-MF6 model reproduced GWL and GT dynamics with overall satisfactory KGE and
512 RMSE performance across the three sites (Section 3.1). At the three sites, the ST-SC-MF6 models
513 successfully captured the observed GWL rise during wet periods and drawdown during dry periods
514 (Figure 3). At Cabauw and Veenkampen, the shallow water table exhibited pronounced groundwater
515 – soil coupling, which directly influenced root-zone moisture and propagated upward to ecosystem
516 fluxes. In contrast, at Loobos, the relatively moderate groundwater depths and poor soil
517 characteristics resulted in weak hydraulic connectivity with the unsaturated zone, limiting its
518 influence on upper soil layers moisture dynamics. However, the ST-SC-MF6 model successfully
519 reproduced the seasonal GT variability (Figure 3) with satisfactory KGE and RMSE performances,
520 demonstrating the ability of the coupled model in simulating the subsurface heat transfer and its
521 influence on the unsaturated zone thermal dynamics (Section 3.3.2). Overall, producing
522 groundwater variables, i.e. GWL and GT with satisfactory performance enabled a mechanistic
523 assessment of groundwater contributions, in terms of mass and heat, to different soil and vegetation
524 processes at the three sites as explained in the following subsections (Sections 4.1 - 4.4).

525 Although lateral groundwater flow was not simulated in the present 1D applications, its potential
526 effect was indirectly accounted for by calibrating the ST-SC-MF6 models against the observed GWL.
527 By adjusting aquifer parameters, so that simulated GWL closely matched observed ones, the 1D ST-
528 SC-MF6 models implicitly incorporated the net outcome of lateral inflows, drainage, irrigation, and

pumping on the GWL dynamics. Nevertheless, incorporating lateral groundwater flow in future 2D/3D applications would likely improve process realism, particularly when assessing groundwater as a managed water resource and its broader role in ecosystem functioning.

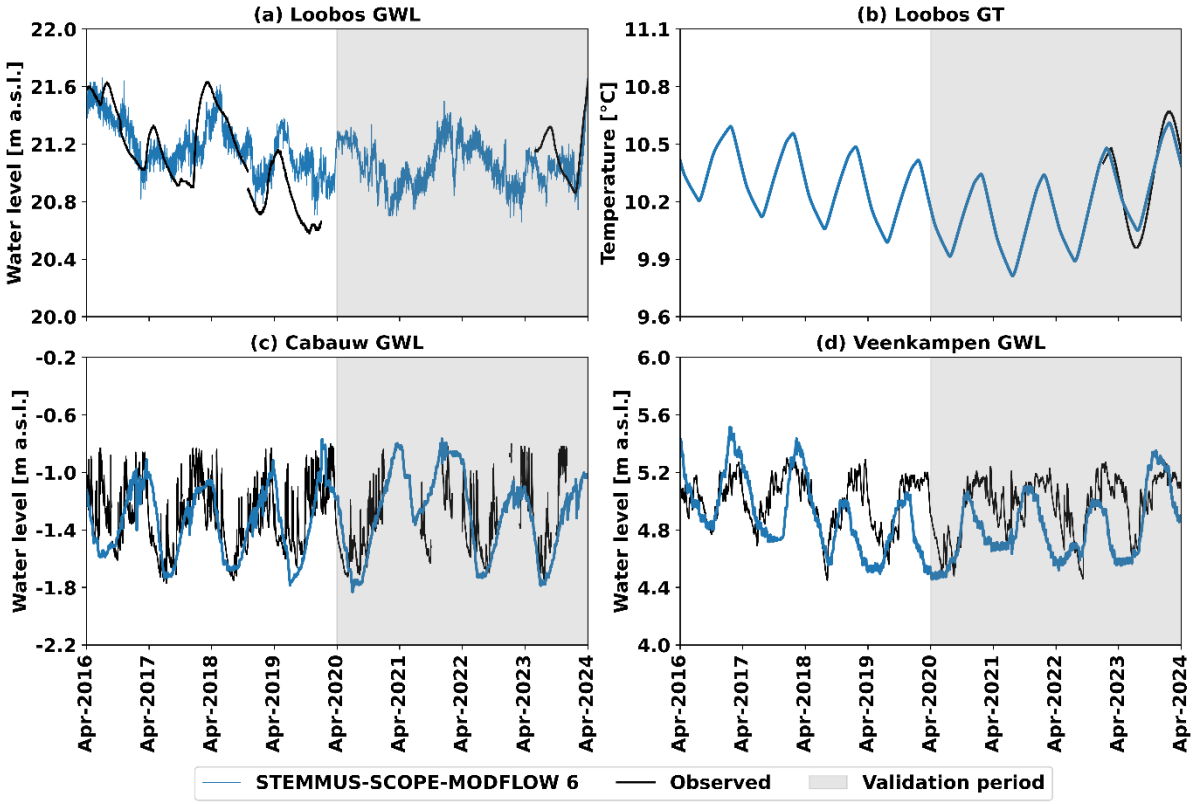


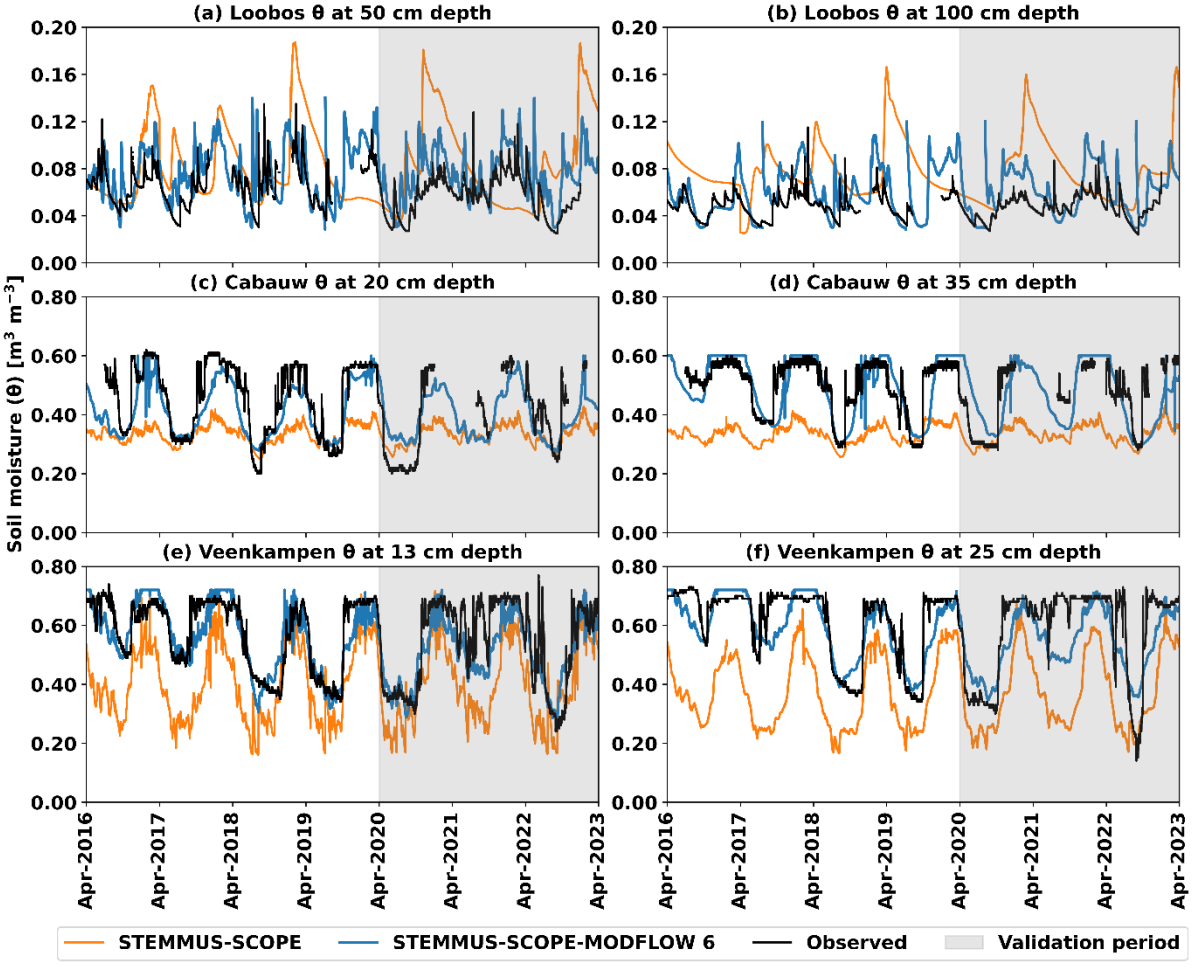
Figure 3. Comparison of half-hourly simulated groundwater level (GWL) and groundwater temperature (GT) values by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines) and observed ones (black lines) during the calibration period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2020) and the validation period (1 April 2020 – 31 March 2024; grey shaded) at: Loobos (a and b), Cabauw (c), and Veenkampen (d). Land surface elevation values of the three sites are shown in Table 2

3.3. Unsaturated zone dynamics

3.3.1. Soil moisture

Figure 4 presents half-hourly observations and simulated outputs from the ST-SC and the ST-SC-MF6 models for θ at available depths at the three sites. The improvements in capturing the θ dynamics

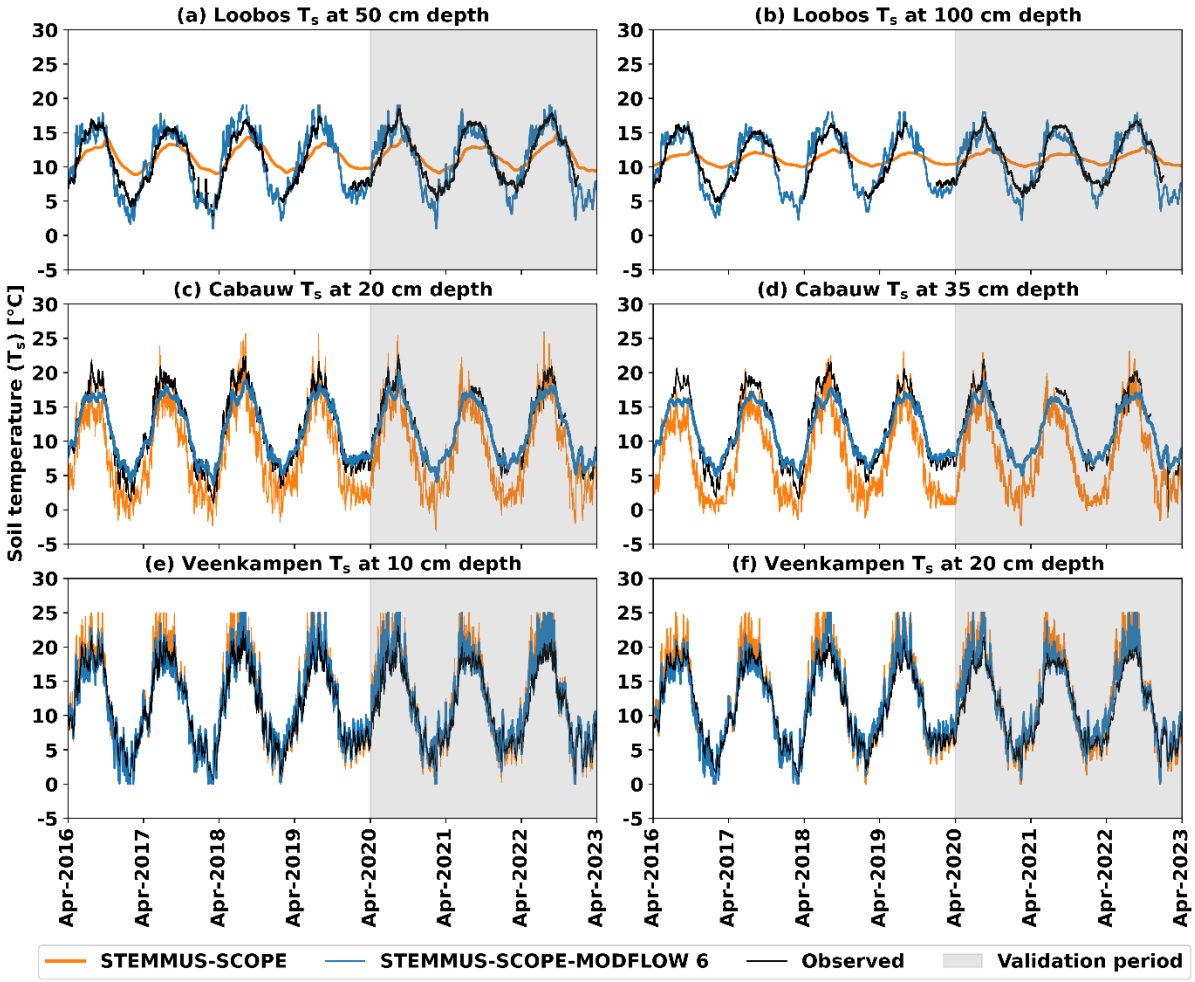
within ST-SC-MF6 simulations were evident at all soil depths, but were most pronounced during the wet periods at Cabauw and Veenkampen sites, characterized by shallow groundwater depths (0 - 1.25 m). At these two sites, the ST-SC-MF6 models successfully captured the θ peaks, occurred during winter periods, along different soil depths (0.6 m^3 m^{-3} at Cabauw and 0.75 m^3 m^{-3} at Veenkampen), representing near-saturation conditions. Those peaks reflect strong connectivity between soil and groundwater and the strong influence of groundwater on the soil profiles. In contrast, the ST-SC models underestimated these winter θ peaks, as the absence of groundwater limited the θ ability to reach saturation conditions. At Loobos, groundwater depth was relatively moderate (3 – 5 m), and had limited influence on the θ dynamics. Thus, the improvement of the θ simulation of the ST-SC-MF6 over the ST-SC model at Loobos was less associated with direct groundwater feedback and more related to improved parameter calibration within the ST-SC-MF6 model.



555 Figure 4 . Comparison of half-hourly simulated soil moisture (θ) values by STEMMUS-SCOPE (orange
556 lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), and observed ones (black lines) during the
557 calibration period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2020) and the validation period (1 April 2020 – 31 March
558 2024; grey shaded) for: Loobos at depth: a) 50 cm, b) 100 cm; Cabauw at depth: c) 20 cm, d) 35 cm;
559 and Veenkampen at depth: e) 13 cm, f) 25 cm

560 3.3.2. Soil temperature

561 Figure 5 presents half-hourly observations and simulated outputs from the ST-SC and the ST-SC-MF6
562 models for T_s at available depths at the three sites. The ST-SC-MF6 model showed a closer
563 agreement with the observations than the ST-SC model at the three sites, but were more
564 pronounced at Loobos. The GT observations were only available at Loobos, enabling a direct
565 assessment of groundwater influence on T_s, unlike the case at Cabauw and Veenkampen. At Loobos,
566 the ST-SC-MF6 simulation well captured the T_s dynamics (Figure 5a and b). In contrast, the ST-SC
567 simulation showed an overestimation of the θ amplitude (fluctuations), which reduced (dampened)
568 the T_s amplitude, leading to lower T_s peaks and higher T_s troughs than the observations. Similarly, at
569 Cabauw, the ST-SC-MF6 simulation captured well the T_s dynamics, while in contrast, the ST-SC
570 simulation showed an overestimation of the T_s amplitude, leading to higher T_s peaks and lower T_s
571 troughs than the observations (Figure 5c and d). At Veenkampen, both models generally reproduced
572 the seasonal T_s patterns and corresponded well with the observations, but exhibited a systematic
573 tendency to slightly overestimate T_s amplitudes along the entire soil profiles (Figure 5e and f).



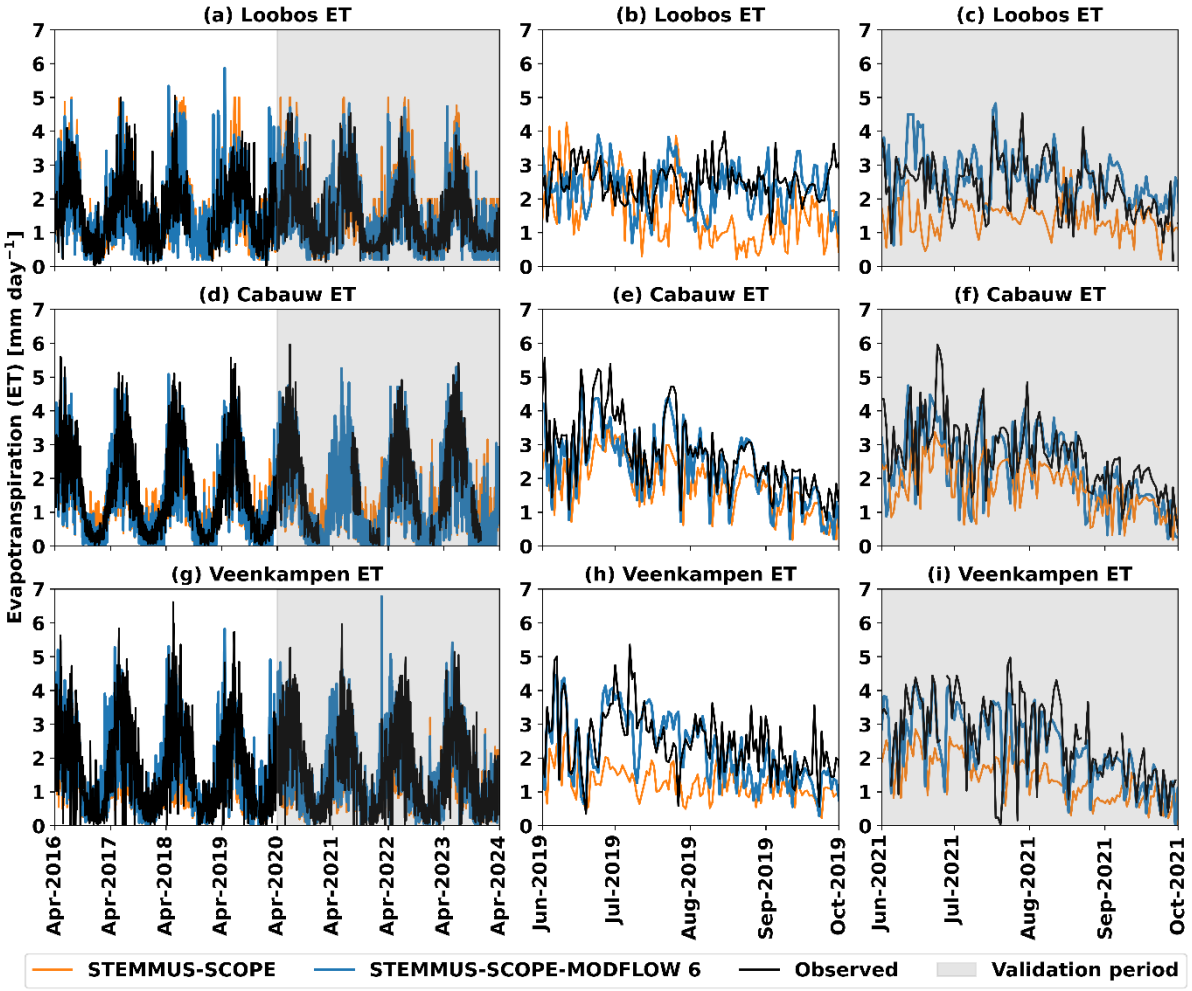
574

575 Figure 5. Comparison of half-hourly simulated soil temperature (T_s) values by STEMMUS-SCOPE
576 (orange lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), and observed ones (black lines) during
577 the calibration period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2020) and the validation period (1 April 2020 – 31
578 March 2024; grey shaded) for: Loobos at depth: a) 50 cm, b) 100 cm; Cabauw at depth: c) 20 cm, d)
579 35 cm; and Veenkampen at depth: e) 10 cm, f) 20 cm

580 ## 3.4. Evapotranspiration

581 Figure 6 illustrates daily observed and simulated ET from the ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 models at the
582 three sites. The zoom windows in Figure 6 highlight the results during a dry period example in the
583 calibration period (1 June 2019 – 30 September 2019) and in the validation periods (1 June 2021 – 30
584 September 2021). Overall at the three sites, the ST-SC-MF6 models exhibited a better match with

585 the ET observations, particularly during the dry periods, as compared to the ST-SC models. The ST-
586 SC simulations showed rapid ET declines during the highlighted dry period examples, when
587 precipitation declined, leading to θ limitation. In contrast, the ST-SC-MF6 simulations maintained
588 higher ET rates during those dry period examples due to the sustained water supply from
589 groundwater. This buffering effect reduced underestimation of the simulated ET and better
590 captured the observations.



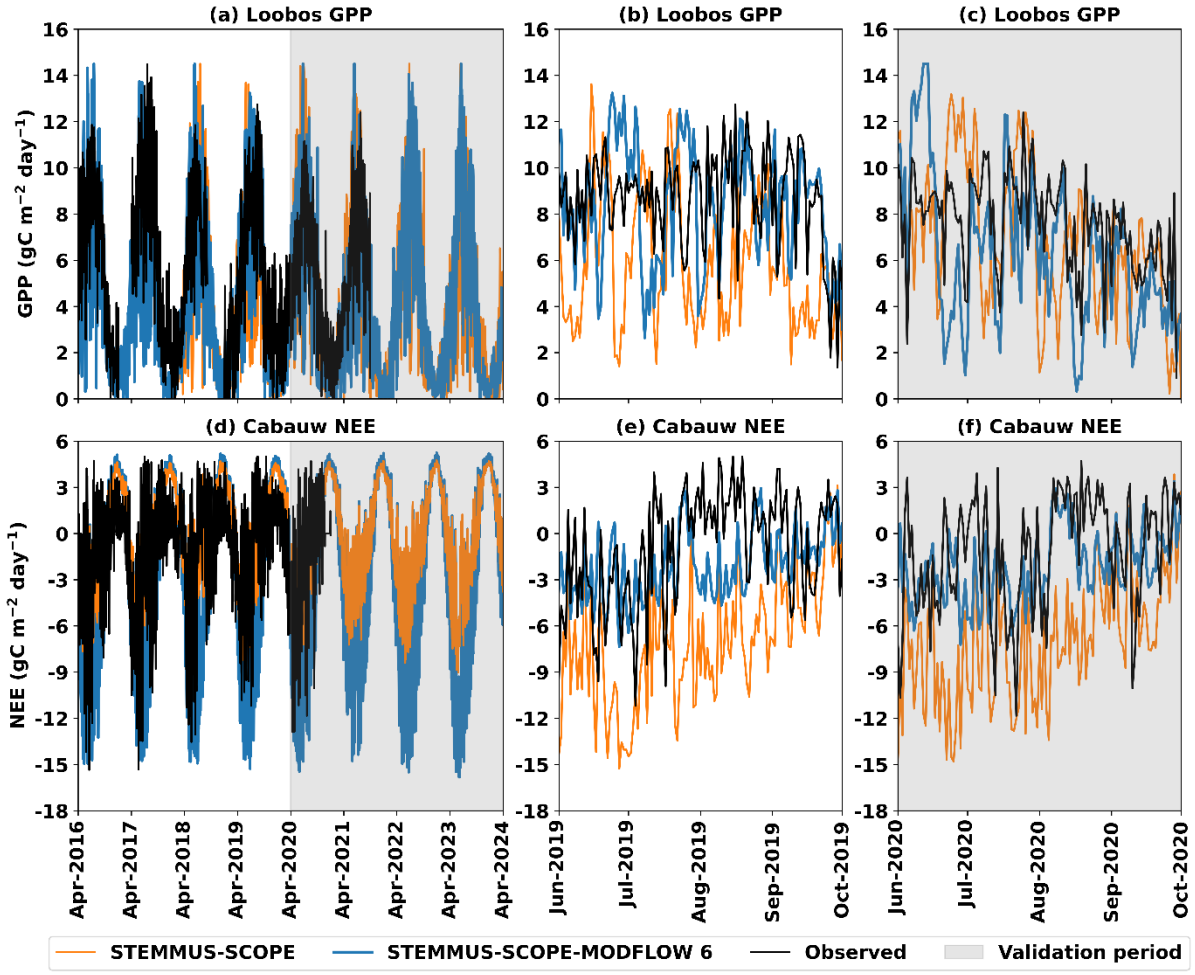
591

592 Figure 6. Comparison of half-hourly simulated evapotranspiration (ET) values by STEMMUS-SCOPE
593 (orange lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), and observed ones (black lines) during
594 the calibration period (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2020) and the validation period (1 April 2020 – 31
595 March 2024; grey shaded) at: (a) Loobos, (d) Cabauw, (g) Veenkampen; with windows zooming (b, e,

596 and h) in a dry period example in the calibration period (1 June 2019 – 30 September 2019), and (c, f,
597 and i) in a dry period example in the validation period (1 June 2021 –30 September 2021)

598 3.5. Carbon fluxes and SIF

599 Figure 7 illustrates daily observations and simulated carbon fluxes (GPP at Loobos and NEE at
600 Cabauw) from the ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 models, with zoom windows to highlight the results during a
601 dry period example in the calibration period (1 June 2019 – 30 September 2019) and in the
602 validation period (1 June 2020 –30 September 2020). At Loobos, groundwater influence on θ
603 dynamics was weak, so GPP simulations were largely unchanged, and both ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6
604 models aligned well with the observations during the simulation period, including the dry periods
605 (Figure 7b and c). While at Cabauw, where strong groundwater influence on θ dynamics was
606 observed, the ST-SC-MF6 model demonstrated a better match with the NEE observations,
607 particularly during the dry periods (Figure 7e and f), as compared to ST-SC.



608

609 Figure 7. Comparison of half-hourly simulated carbon fluxes, i.e. gross primary productivity (GPP)
610 and net ecosystem exchange (NEE) values by STEMMUS-SCOPE (orange lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-
611 MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), and observed ones (black lines) during the calibration period (1 April 2016
612 – 31 March 2020) and the validation period (1 April 2020 – 31 March 2024; grey shaded) at: (a)
613 Loobos, and (d) Cabauw; with windows zooming (b and e) in a dry period example in the calibration
614 period (1 June 2019 – 30 September 2019), and (c and f) in a dry period example in the validation
615 period (1 June 2020 –30 September 2020)

616 Figure 8 shows half-hourly observations and simulated SIF from ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 on certain days
617 at Cabauw, when the observed SIF data were available. During the summer days 9–14 August 2022
618 (Figure 8a), the ST-SC-MF6 demonstrated a better agreement with the SIF observations as compared
619 to the ST-SC. Both models aligned well with the observations during the days 3–6 June 2023 (Figure

8c), which were dry days (Figure 4c and d), while both models underestimate the SIF in the winter days 12–15 November 2022 (Figure 8b).

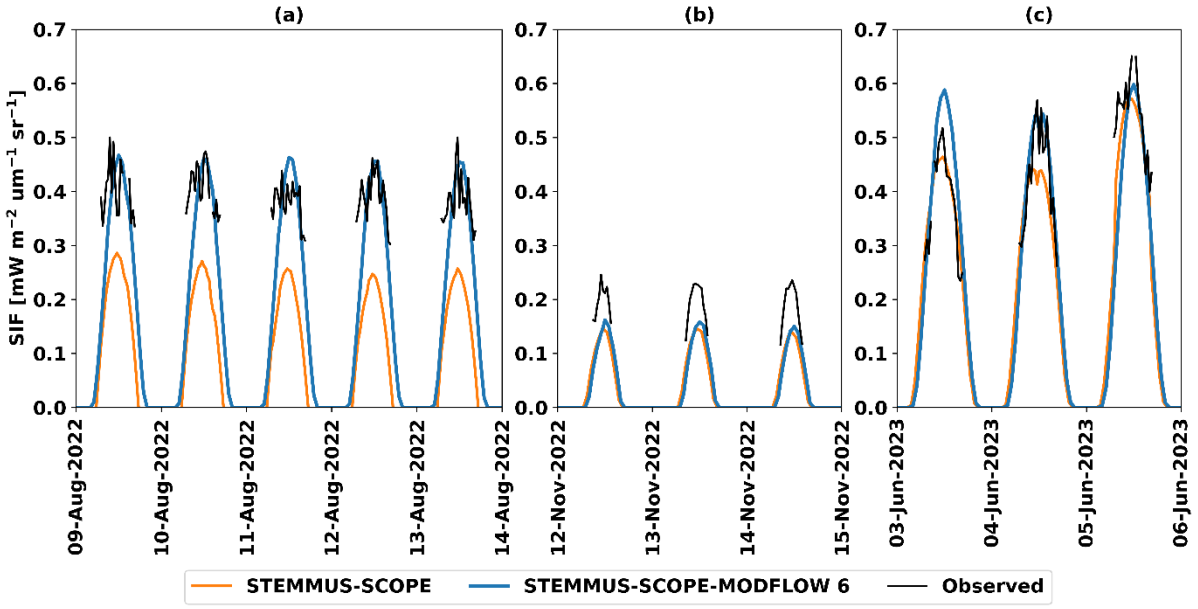


Figure 8. Cabauw site – comparison of half-hourly simulated sun-induced chlorophyll fluorescence (SIF) by STEMMUS-SCOPE (orange lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), and observed ones (black lines) during the days: a) 9 August 2022 – 14 August 2022, b) 12 November 2022 – 15 November 2022, and c) 3 June 2023 – 6 June 2023

4. Discussion

The ST-SC-MF6 IEM was tested at three different sites (the Loobos forest, the Cabauw and Veenkampen meadow sites) in the Netherlands. Different key variables from the water, energy, and carbon cycles were analyzed for the two simulations (with and without coupling with MODFLOW 6) – namely, θ, T_s, GWL, GT, ET, GPP, NEE, and SIF. The benefits of representing the groundwater in modelling the SPAC processes are described in the following subsections.

4.1. Effect of groundwater on soil moisture

The benefits obtained from incorporating groundwater within ST-SC-MF6 comes from the role changes that groundwater plays in the processes simulation. The GWL, simulated by MODFLOW 6, was used as a bottom boundary for the soil water module in STEMMUS-SCOPE; thereby influencing the $\psi_{s,i}$ and θ profiles. In the capillary fringe zone, above the GWL, soil is nearly saturated, causing the $\psi_{s,i}$ to become less negative, and the corresponding θ to increase significantly. Moving upward to the soil surface, the influence of the GWL gradually diminishes, and other surface forces (i.e. precipitation) become the dominant driver of $\psi_{s,i}$ and θ in the upper soil layers. However, the extent to which the GWL affects $\psi_{s,i}$ and θ depends on the thickness of the unsaturated zone, where groundwater fluctuations occur. When the water table is shallow, its influence can extend upward beyond the lower soil layers, affecting the upper profile with decreasing intensity. Then, over time, as GWL rises, the entire $\psi_{s,i}$ profile shifts towards less negative and θ increases throughout the entire soil profile. Conversely, a falling GWL leads to a more negative $\psi_{s,i}$ profile and a decrease in θ.

The impact of groundwater on the θ profile was particularly evident at Cabauw and Veenkampen sites, where groundwater depths were shallow (from 0 to 1.25 m below land surface). At these two sites, the strong hydraulic connectivity between the phreatic surface and the unsaturated zone enabled the GWL fluctuations to propagate upward through the soil profile, directly regulating the θ dynamics. The ST-SC-MF6 models improved the representation of the seasonal θ variability by dynamically resolving this connectivity. During winter wet periods (December - March), the θ variability is primarily controlled by groundwater fluctuations (McMillan & Srinivasan, 2015). This was observed in the simulations by the rise of the GWL (Figure 3c and d), associated with the increase of the θ towards the observed θ peaks (0.6 $m^3\ m^{-3}$ at Cabauw and 0.75 $m^3\ m^{-3}$ at Veenkampen), approaching near-saturation conditions (Figure 4c, d, e and f). In spring periods (April – June), when vegetation is mainly active, enhanced RWU_s progressively depleted the θ, while GWL is still relatively high. Further towards summer dry periods (July – September), limited or no

precipitation reduced the R_g, leading to GWL decline and the development of a drier soil profile (Gao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017) with minimum θ values of 0.2 m^3 m^{-3} at Cabauw and 0.15 m^3 m^{-3} at Veenkampen, respectively (Figure 4c, d, e and f).

At the Loobos site, the GWL impact on the θ profile was not evident. That can be attributed to two main factors. First, the site is characterized by a loamy sandy soil with a relatively low maximum observed θ (~ 0.16 m^3 m^{-3}) along the entire profile (Figure 4a and b), indicating limited specific retention capacity. Second, the groundwater depth was relatively moderate (3 – 5 m below land surface), as compared to the other two sites. However, whether groundwater influence becomes negligible at depths between 3 and 5 m cannot be generalized from the Loobos site alone. An experimental study by Zhao et al. (2023), conducted in a semi-arid region, showed that the θ within the upper 2 m of sandy soil increased with soil depth at 6 and 10 m groundwater depths, whereas there was no significant impact on θ at groundwater depth of 15 m. These findings, unlike the case in Loobos, suggest that the extent of the critical groundwater depth, which can still influence the θ is site dependant and strongly controlled by soil hydraulic properties. Therefore, future testing at different sites with similar groundwater depths (3 to 5 m) but different soil characteristics than the Loobos site is further required. Nevertheless, the ST-SC models at the three sites were unable to reproduce the observed amplitude and seasonal variability of θ (Figure 4). That is because the absence of dynamic groundwater feedback prevented realistic representation of key interacting groundwater processes, i.e. R_g, RWU_s and RWU_g and their combined influence on θ.

4.2. Effect of groundwater on soil temperature

Groundwater energy and mass, represented by GWL and GT, showed effects on the T_s as discussed in the following subsections

4.2.1. Effect of groundwater temperature on soil temperature

The GT, simulated by MODFLOW 6, was used as a bottom boundary for the STEMMUS-SCOPE soil energy module. At Loobos, where GT observations were available, the ST-SC-MF6 produced a better simulation of the T_s profile as compared to the ST-SC (Figure 4a and b). At this site, the groundwater depth is relatively moderate (3 – 5 m below land surface), resulting in a balance between atmospheric and groundwater heat processes influencing on T_s. While the shallower soil layers closely follow atmospheric conditions, deeper layers are more influenced by groundwater conditions (Parrales et al., 2026). Both observed and simulated GT fluctuated between 10.6 ^{o}C during winter periods and 9.8 ^{o}C during summer periods (Figure 3b). In contrast, T_s exhibited a much a larger seasonal variability (Figure 4a and b), with both observed and simulated T_s ranging from 15.0 – 18.0 ^{o}C during summer period to 5.0 – 8.0 ^{o}C during winter period across the soil profile. With increasing soil depth, the T_s is damped with a seasonal phase lag until gradually approaching stable GT values. By incorporating the simulated GT as a bottom boundary condition for the unsaturated zone, the ST-SC-MF6 simulation successfully reproduced the same patterns as the observed T_s. During winter periods, the GT was higher than T_s, generating upward heat transfer by diffusion, i.e. temperature gradient, from the saturated to the unsaturated zone. Towards the spring period (April – June), GT gradually declined, while T_s increased, resulting in a temporary equilibrium state between the two thermal regimes. Later during summer periods, the opposite situation occurs, with T_s exceeded GT, reversing the direction of the heat transfer from the unsaturated to the saturated zone.

It is notable that matching the simulated T_s with the corresponding observations at the Loobos site was challenging. The Loobos site has low values of θ (maximum value = 0.16 m^3 m^{-3}) along the soil profile (Figure 4a and b), corresponding with relatively low T_s values (maximum value = 18.0 °C). Such a situation created extra difficulty to be modelled, since in STEMMUS-SCOPE, the θ and T_s are simulated together with many influencing factors as follows: 1) the low θ may shift the energy partitioning to more sensible heat and less latent heat, which leads to low values of evaporation and extra soil warming (overestimation of T_s profile); and 2) the thermal parameterization (thermal

conductivity and heat capacity) in STEMMUS-SCOPE follows the de Vries formulation (Yu et al., 2018), which is influenced by θ. In this case, the low θ values lowered the values of thermal parameters, which may lead to rapid soil heating and further contribute to the overestimation of T_s. Hence, the overestimation of the θ amplitude by ST-SC dampened the amplitude of the T_s.

4.2.2. Effect of groundwater level on soil temperature

At Cabauw and Veenkampen, although no GT observations were available to control the simulations, groundwater still exerted potential influence on T_s profile, driven by the GWL rather than the GT. The shallow groundwater depths (0.25 – 1 m below land surface) at these two sites enhanced soil thermal conductance and heat capacity, which facilitated heat transfer between the top soil and the subsurface (Alkhaier et al., 2012).Under such conditions, the unsaturated zone becomes more thermally connected to the atmospheric forcing rather than the saturated zone. Previous studies have reported strong correlation between GWL and T_s, particularly under shallow groundwater depths, i.e. < 5 m (Alkhaier et al., 2012; Malik et al., 2021; Mandal & Roy, 2024; Oishy et al., 2025). The de Vries heat transport formulation, implemented in the energy module of STEMMUS-SCOPE (Yu et al., 2018), allows for producing such GWL – T_s relationship.

At Cabauw, the ST-SC-MF6 model showed a better simulation of the T_s profile as compared to the ST-SC model (Figure 5c and d). During winter periods, the GWL raised (Figure 3c), which was associated with high θ values, i.e. 0.6 m^3 m^{-3}, (Figure 4c and d) nearly approaching saturation, and relatively low T_s (Figure 5c and d). Nevertheless, both θ and T_s of the ST-SC-MF6 remained higher than the ones, produced by the ST-SC model and closer to the observed ones. During summer periods, the GWL declined, leading to low θ and high T_s values, while T_s remained higher than the values produced by the ST-SC model. Collectively, during the hydrological year, the presence of the shallow GWL in the ST-SC-MF6 simulation increased the seasonal amplitude of θ, i.e. raising maximum θ during winter while maintaining nearly similar minimum θ at summer. This behaviour, in turn, reduced the seasonal amplitude of T_s, i.e. increasing minimum T_s during winter and reducing

maximum T_s during summer. In contrast, the ST-SC model, due to the absence of GWL, underestimated the θ amplitude and consequently overestimated the T_s amplitude.

At Veenkampen, the groundwater showed little impact on the T_s simulation (Figure 5e and f). This is likely because the ST-SC-MF6 model only slightly improved the θ simulation as compared to the ST-SC model. As a result, the thermal properties of the soil remained similar in both simulations, leading to comparable T_s dynamics. Additionally, in both models, the amplitude of the simulated T_s was slightly overestimated. The likely reason is the resistance scheme in the soil energy module in STEMMUS-SCOPE, which follows the big leaf concept, assuming that the boundary layer resistance is the same for all canopy layers – a simplification that could be refined in the future.

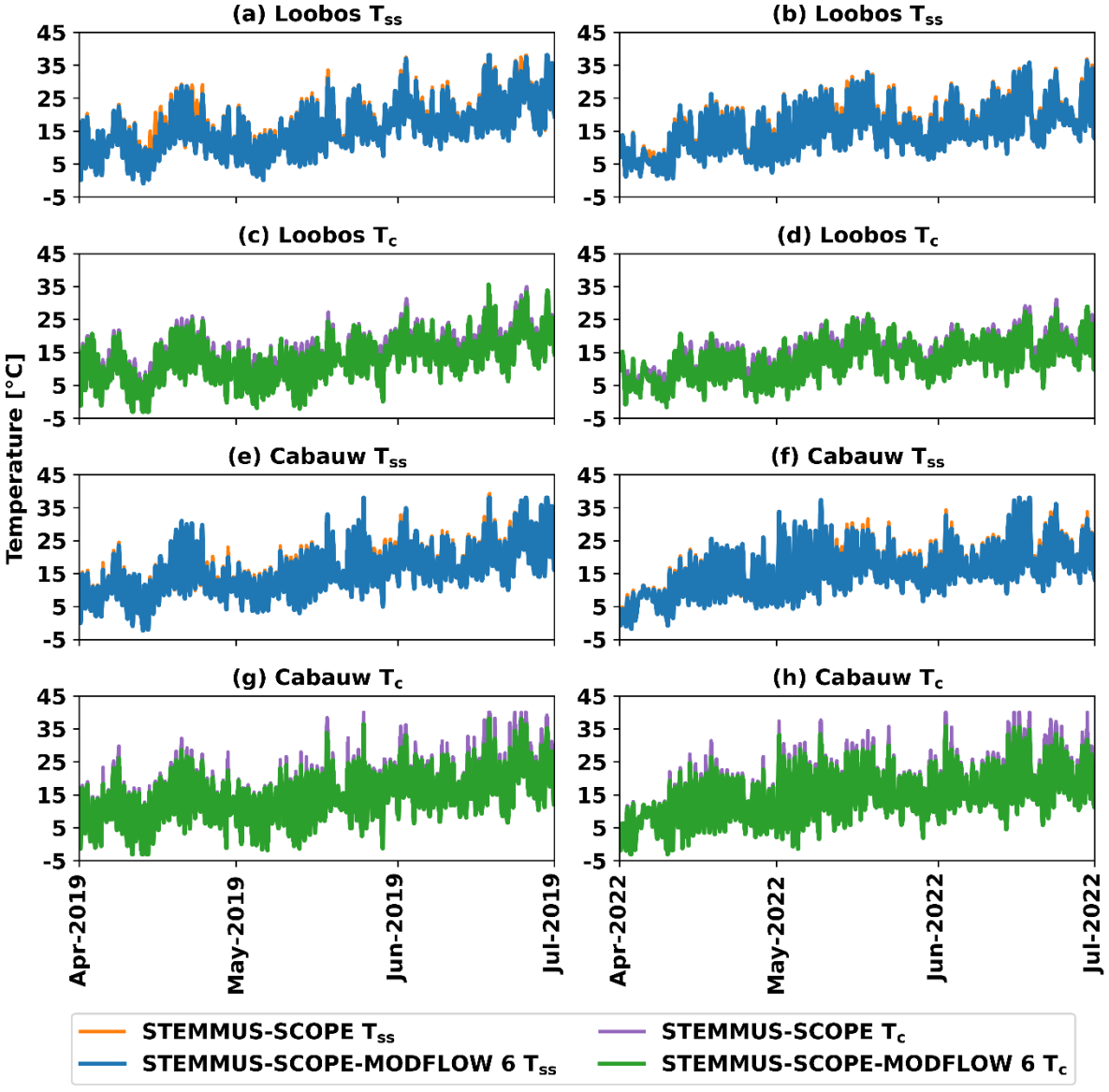
4.2.3. Effect of groundwater on surface soil temperature and canopy temperature

Beyond the groundwater influence on T_s dynamics, groundwater can also affect the thermal regime of the land surface and vegetation canopy. These effects may propagate upward, influencing surface soil temperature (T_{ss}) and canopy temperature (T_c), which in turn regulate vegetation physiological processes such as stomatal conductance and carbon assimilation.

At Loobos, the groundwater – soil heat exchanges, simulated by the ST-SC-MF6 model, facilitated proper simulating of temperature dependent processes within the SPAC. In particular, the role the GT played to cool down the T_s, especially in the deeper soil layers, close to the capillary fringe zone, thereby stabilizing the root-zone thermal conditions and supporting the RWU_g – as been observed through the increase of RWU_g, simulated by ST-SC-MF6 (Section 4.3.3). Furthermore, the moderating influence of the GT on the T_s propagated upward to cool down T_{ss} and T_c. The ST-SC-MF6 simulation produced consistently cooler T_{ss} and T_c (i.e. lower peaks) during the spring periods compared to the ST-SC simulation, with reductions of approximately 1 °C in T_{ss} (Figure 9a and c) and up to 2 °C in T_c (Figure 9b and d).

At Cabauw, the influence of groundwater on the surface thermal regime is primarily controlled by the shallow GWL rather than GT. The shallow GWL moderates near-surface thermal conditions

through its control on soil moisture and thermal properties; enhancing the buffering of temperature fluctuations in the soil profile. The ST-SC-MF6 simulation produced cooler T_{ss} (i.e. lower peaks, Figure 9e and g) and T_c (Figure 9f and h) during the spring periods as compared to the ST-SC simulation, with average reductions of about 1 °C and 2 °C, respectively. Such moderation of T_c, particularly during the spring periods, when the vegetation activity is high, would maintain stomatal conductance and support carbon uptake. Under good nutrient and water availability conditions, slightly cooler T_{ss} and T_c would further enhance photosynthesis and carbon assimilation (Oishy et al., 2025), as been observed in the NEE, simulated by ST-SC-MF6 (Section 4.4).



765 Figure 9. Comparison of half-hourly simulated surface soil temperature (T_{ss}) by STEMMUS-SCOPE
766 (orange lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (blue lines), simulated canopy temperature (T_c) by
767 STEMMUS-SCOPE (purple lines), by STEMMUS-SCOPE-MODFLOW 6 (green lines) in a spring period
768 example in the calibration period (1 April 2019 – 30 June 2019) for Loobos (a and c) and Cabauw (e
769 and g), and in the validation period (1 April 2020 –30 June 2020) for Loobos (b and d) and Cabauw (f
770 and h)

771 ## 4.3. Effect of groundwater on evapotranspiration components

772 The explicit representation of groundwater improved the simulation of the ET. As shown in Figure
773 *6*, the ST-SC-MF6 simulations generally reproduced the observed ET dynamics better than the ST-SC
774 simulations, particularly during dry periods when groundwater contributed to sustaining θ and
775 RWU. The improved ET representation originates from the more realistic simulation of individual ET
776 components, i.e. E_{ss}, RWU_s, and RWU_g, which are discussed below.

777 ### 4.3.1. Subsurface evaporation

778 At Cabauw and Veenkampen, the E_{ss} values simulated by ST-SC-MF6 models were increased by 7.3
779 and 12.6%, respectively as compared to the ST-SC models. These increases can be attributed to two
780 mechanisms. First, the formation of the capillary fringe zone (Fig. 1) above the phreatic surface,
781 enabled the calculation of the Cap flux. The Cap flux further contributed to the water loss that
782 moved upward to the land surface, where E_{ss} takes place (Hird & Bolton, 2017; Balugani et al., 2021;
783 2023). Second, the improved simulation of $\psi_{s,i}$ and the corresponding θ created strong upward
784 hydraulic gradients that promoted E_{ss} (Huo et al., 2020). Both experimental (Huo et al., 2020) and
785 field studies (Yang et al., 2021) have demonstrated that shallow groundwater, i.e. generally less than
786 2.5 m, can sustain evaporation by maintaining moisture supply to the soil layers.

4.3.2. Root soil water uptake

The inclusion of GWL as a dynamic bottom boundary had improved the simulation of the $\psi_{s,i}$ across the soil profile by allowing proper seasonal dynamics of $\psi_{s,i}$ with respect to the GWL fluctuations. The improved representation of $\psi_{s,i}$ resulted in a substantial improvement of the RWU_s by better capturing the hydraulic connectivity between the saturated zone and the root zone (Wang et al., 2023). At Cabauw and Veenkampen, RWU_s, which is based on $\psi_{s,i}$ (Eq. 5), was increased by 29.6 and 35.9%, respectively. Such improvement highlights the sensitivity of the RWU_s to the groundwater depth, particularly when the groundwater depth lies within the range of 0.5 - 2.5 m from the land surface, as reported by Sulis et al. (2017). They demonstrated using two different models, i.e. TerrSysMP (Shrestha et al., 2014) and Parflow-WRF (Maxwell et al., 2011), applied at vegetated areas in the Rur catchment in Germany, that the GWL fluctuations significantly influence the energy fluxes, further affecting the RWU_s, through their impacts on the θ profile. This mechanism has been described by Huang et al. (2017) who showed that shallow groundwater can: a) prevent the ψ_l from declining to the critical ψ_l that trigger stomatal closure; and b) maintain high values of $\psi_{s,i}$, thereby preventing the rapid depletion of the θ. Consequently, these processes led to increasing the plant water storage and supported high RWU_s, as been observed in the ST-SC-MF6 simulations at Cabauw and Veenkampen sites.

4.3.3. Root groundwater uptake

The $\psi_{g,i}$ was explicitly defined for the soil layers below the capillary fringe zone, which was further used to calculate RWU_g (Eq. 6). The RWU_g is an additional component that contributed 27.0, 15.2, 13.0% to the total ET at the three sites (Loobos, Cabauw, and Veenkampen), respectively.

At Loobos, the maximum rooting depth of the evergreen forest was defined in the models as 4 m, allowing the plant roots to access the groundwater, located at depths between 3 and 5 m below the land surface. The increase in the RWU originated mainly from the RWU_g, while RWU_s showed nearly no change. That is because of the similar θ simulation by both ST-SC and ST-SC-MF6 models,

812 resulting in comparable RWU_s estimates. Furthermore, the groundwater contribution to ET was
813 more significant during dry periods (Figure 6b and c), when θ was depleted owing to lack of rains,
814 while the GWL continued to support the water uptake by plant roots. Such mechanism has been
815 reported in many previous studies (Zhu et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2023; Du et al., 2025). From a
816 modelling perspective, Bieri et al. (2025) also showed that the failure of the models to reproduce
817 proper dry season transpiration is often related to the absence of deep RWU mechanisms in the
818 simulations. Moreover, the impacts of GT (discussed in Section 4.2.1) on cooling the T_s for the
819 deeper soil layers, allowed for better RWU_g during spring and summer periods.
820 At Cabauw and Veenkampen, the maximum root depth of the grassland was set to 0.5 m in the
821 models, allowing the roots to access the groundwater, fluctuated between 0 and 1.25 m below land
822 surface. However, the contribution of RWU_g to the total ET at these two sites remained less as
823 compared to Loobos. That is because the soil water availability, reflected in the improved simulation
824 of θ by the ST-SC-MF6 models, was sufficient to sustain higher RWU_s, thereby reducing the reliance
825 on the RWU_g. In such shallow water table conditions, land surface processes, including RWU, are
826 subject to more energy control rather than water control (Wang et al., 2023).

827 ## 4.4. Effect of groundwater on carbon fluxes and SIF

828 Explicit representation of groundwater in the IEM also had an impact on the carbon fluxes (GPP and
829 NEE), particularly during dry periods (Ruehr et al., 2023), even though groundwater is not explicitly
830 represented in the carbon fluxes' calculations. Instead, θ, which is dynamically constrained by GWL,
831 is included in the carbon fluxes' calculations and is positively correlated with carbon fluxes through
832 affecting plant water status and stomatal conductance. When θ is limited (i.e., low water content),
833 both $\psi_{s,i}$ and ψ_l decreased (became more negative), and the gradient between the $\psi_{s,i}$ and ψ_l
834 shifted to more negative. Under such conditions, the plant closed the stomata, so the stomatal
835 conductance decreased in attempt to mitigate water stress, reducing CO_2 uptake and consequently

836 lowering GPP and NEE. In contrast, higher θ increased the stomatal conductance, leading to higher
837 CO_2 uptake, promoting carbon assimilation and higher GPP and NEE.

838 At Cabauw, where GWL is relatively shallow, exerting strong control on the θ dynamics, the ST-SC-
839 M6 showed improved simulation of both θ and NEE, as compared to the ST-SC model. In particular,
840 the NEE was increased during the dry periods (Figure 7e and f), due to enhancement in the
841 simulated θ, resulting from the dynamically updated GWL values. This simulated mechanism aligns
842 with recent findings that groundwater depth is a critical control on ecosystem productivity, with
843 higher carbon assimilation occurring under shallow groundwater conditions (Glanville et al., 2023).
844 Specifically, in meadow ecosystems with shallow GWL, such as in Cabauw, shallow groundwater can
845 enhance net carbon uptake by suppressing soil respiration under near-saturated soil conditions,
846 thereby increasing the net ecosystem carbon sink, as discussed by Sun et al. (2021). Their analysis, in
847 two meadow sites in the Tibetan Plateau in China, revealed that the influence of high θ, maintained
848 by shallow GWL, played a more significant role in controlling carbon fluxes rather than low
849 temperature. Moreover, the pronounced improvement of the simulated NEE during the dry periods
850 (Figure 7e and f) is consistent with the evidence that there is a significant positive correlation
851 between groundwater depth and carbon fluxes under certain conditions, i.e. during dry periods
852 when vegetation activity is minimum and carbon fluxes have low values (Koirala et al., 2017).

853 Meanwhile, at the Loobos site, there was negligible GWL effect on the simulated θ and
854 consequently also on the simulated GPP (Figure 7b and c). This is because: a) the simulated GWL
855 was relatively moderate (3 – 5 m), limiting its hydraulic connection to the unsaturated zone,
856 consistent with the observation that deeper GWL reduces carbon fluxes (Glanville et al., 2023); and
857 b) the maximum observed θ was generally low (0.16 m^3 m^{-3}), indicating low water availability for
858 vegetation, and consequently poor carbon assimilation.

859 The contrasting responses between Loobos (no GPP improvement) and Cabauw (NEE improvement)
860 demonstrate that groundwater effects on carbon cycling and vegetation productivity are strongly

861 site dependent. Specifically, the groundwater influence becomes significant when the water table is
862 shallow enough to interact with the root zone and meaningfully affect θ dynamics. These findings
863 support recent calls to explicitly represent groundwater–carbon feedbacks in Earth system models
864 to improve predictions of carbon fluxes under environmental change (Klaus, 2023). Moreover, it was
865 highlighted by Tak et al. (2023) regarding the importance of groundwater level management to
866 optimize ecosystem carbon uptake.
867 Similarly, in the simulation of SIF, the impact of groundwater was evident at the Cabauw site through
868 the changes in θ. The θ affects the water availability to the plant, which regulates the stomatal
869 conductance and photosynthetic activity, and in turn contributes directly to the SIF calculations. The
870 simulated SIF was enhanced in the dry summer days 9–14 August 2022 (Figure 8a) due to the
871 enhanced θ, caused by shallow GWL. Meanwhile, groundwater had no clear impact on the
872 simulated θ during the summer days 3–6 June 2023 (Figure 8c), since, during those days, both ST-SC
873 and ST-SC-MF6 produced a very similar θ simulation (Figure 4b and c), resulting in no groundwater
874 impact on the SIF simulation. While both models underestimated the SIF on the winter days 12–15
875 November 2022 (Figure 8b), likely due to other parameters and/or forces that could influence the
876 SIF calculations, which are beyond the scope of this study and need further investigation.

877 ## 4.5. Recommendations

878 The changes in the θ, $\mathrm{T_s}$, ET, GPP, NEE, and SIF variables suggest that accounting for groundwater
879 interactions significantly improves the model's ability to represent the SPAC. However, certain
880 assumptions and/or limitations highlight areas for future development. The coupling between
881 STEMMUS-SCOPE and MODFLOW 6 was applied to three sites in the Netherlands, and only for 1D
882 vertical flow. Future enhancements would include expanding the ST-SC-MF6 IEM to 2 or 3D scale
883 and incorporating groundwater lateral flow and surface runoff. Furthermore, although calibration
884 was performed manually in this proof-of-concept study, future work should incorporate a multi-
885 objective automatic calibration framework to systematically reduce parameter uncertainty and

enhance model robustness. Implementing such an approach in future 2D/3D applications will increase confidence in predictive simulations and strengthen the broader applicability of the developed IEM. Moreover, the inconsistency in the amplitude of the simulated T_s (i.e., higher peaks or lower troughs than observations) could be addressed by improving the boundary layer resistance scheme in STEMMUS-SCOPE. Additionally, the incorporation of a more physically based simulation of SIF is expected to better capture the SIF dynamics, especially during winter periods.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrated the added value of incorporating the groundwater component in modelling the SPAC. To achieve this, an IEM framework was developed by coupling the STEMMUS-SCOPE SPAC model with the MODFLOW 6 IHM, resulting in the ST-SC-MF6 IEM. Results from three sites in the Netherlands (Loobos, Cabauw, and Veenkampen) demonstrate that explicitly including groundwater (mass and energy) in SPAC modelling improves the simulation of key ecohydrological variables, i.e. the θ dynamics, particularly at sites with shallow groundwater tables (Cabauw and Veenkampen) and during wet periods. This improved θ representation propagated to other processes, i.e. T_s dynamics, and ET components, including vegetation RWU. The enhanced ET simulation was realized at the three sites by improving the E_{ss} and the RWU_s simulations and by enabling the representation of Cap and RWU_g. In addition, groundwater – soil heat exchange improved the simulation of T_s profiles, further influenced energy partitioning and other T_s dependent processes, i.e. T_c, RWU and carbon uptake. Groundwater effects also propagated to ecosystem carbon dynamics. At Cabauw, the improved θ enhanced stomatal conductance and carbon uptake, leading to improved simulations of NEE and SIF during dry conditions. In contrast, groundwater impacts on GPP were limited at Loobos, with limited specific retention capacity and relatively moderate groundwater depths, emphasizing that groundwater – vegetation interactions are strongly site dependent and controlled by groundwater depth, soil properties, and rooting characteristics.

Overall, this study demonstrates that explicitly including groundwater dynamics with SPAC modelling is essential for realistically simulating ecosystem water, energy, and carbon cycles.

Code availability

STEMMUS-SCOPE v.1.6.1 is available as open-source code repository at https://github.com/EcoExtreML/STEMMUS_SCOPE. STEMMUS-SCOPE was run using the PyStemmusScope v0.5.0 Python package available at https://github.com/EcoExtreML/STEMMUS_SCOPE_Processing.

MODFLOW 6 v.6.6.0 is available at https://www.usgs.gov/software/modflow-6-usgs-modular-hydrologic-model and as open-source code repository from https://github.com/MODFLOW-ORG/modflow6. MODFLOW 6 was run using the modflowapi v0.3.0 Python package available at https://github.com/MODFLOW-ORG/modflowapi.

Authors contribution

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Competing interest

One of the co-authors (Zhongbo Su) is a member of the editorial board of the journal. Other authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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