Mapping Geothermal Vegetation with Hyperspectral and Thermal Imaging – A New Way to Explore Geothermal Areas

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ABSTRACT

Vegetation can reflect activity of a geothermal system, through interactions between soil-chemical conditions, heat and gas emissions. Some plant species are extremely capable of thriving in such environments, such as kanuka (i.e. kunzea ericoides var. microflora), an endemic shrub of geothermal areas in the Taupo Volcanic Zone (TVZ), New Zealand. Remote sensing studies have targeted vegetation vigour on active geothermal areas, which can provide a fast and cheap surface exploration method as well as monitoring. In this study, airborne hyperspectral and thermal data has been acquired over the Waiotapu Geothermal Field, New Zealand to detect spatial distributions of kanuka, selected from a supervised classification. To the areas detected as kanuka a variety of vegetation indices (including Normalised Difference Vegetation Index, Simple Ratio Index, Red Edge Normalised Difference Vegetation Index, Vogelmann Index) were applied giving an insight to the overall health of kanuka in the Waiotapu Geothermal Field. The vegetation indices and the thermal infrared image spatial distributions were analysed by visual interpretation and quantitative analysis. This combined methodology allows to interpret the correlations that the kanuka plant has with geothermal heat flux, and therefore a path to utilise kanuka shrub as a proxy to detect active geothermal systems from a remote sensing platform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Geothermal exploration incorporates a variety of geological techniques (Mauriohooho et al., 2014; Simpson and Rae, 2018; Wilson et al., 1995), geophysical techniques (Bibby et al., 1994; Calvin et al., 2005; Hochstein and Soengkono, 1997; Mongillo, 1994; Reeves and Rae, 2016) and geochemical techniques (Blasco et al., 2018; Bobos and Williams, 2017; Burgos, 1999) with the main purpose of characterising the subsurface hydrogeological system. Geothermal areas formed by circulation of hydrothermal fluids in the subsurface through fractured and permeable rocks, cause alteration of the host rock and deposition of secondary minerals (Elders et al., 1984; Henley and Ellis, 1983). Deposition of primary minerals also occurs from high chloride deep-sourced geothermal fluids with near neutral pH, forming silica sinter on the surface (Pirajno, 2009). The circulating fluids are also detectable from surface as heat loss, through hot water bodies or steaming grounds (Hochstein and Dickinson, 1970; Seward et al., 2018).

A widely applied geophysical technique in geothermal areas is remote sensing. Remote sensing can offer reconnaissance surveys for generating maps of different hydrothermal alteration zones, minerals, thermal anomalies and geological lineaments at a faster and cheaper rate than ground-based techniques (Bedell et al., 2017; Kereszturi et al., 2020; Rathod et al., 2013). Amongst the remote sensing techniques, hyperspectral remote sensing has great value due to the number of spectral bands and their narrow bandwidth, which can be employed to characterise fine absorption features to differentiate amongst minerals (Calvin and Pace, 2016; Sabins, 1999). In combination with thermal infrared remote sensing techniques, this methodology becomes a strong tool to explore and delineate geothermal areas, particularly in non-vegetated regions (Haselwimmer et al., 2013; Romaguera et al., 2018).

However, there are many geothermal areas located in densely vegetated areas (e.g. Indonesia, Mexico, New Zealand) Densely vegetated areas can hinder optical remote sensing techniques. Even though hyperspectral and near infrared remote sensing techniques are widely employed for vegetation analysis, whereas mostly for precision agriculture (Haboudane et al., 2002; Pullanagari et al., 2017) and land remediation (Evangelides and Nobajas, 2020; Potter et al., 2012), there is big potential to harness their capability for geothermal exploration in densely vegetated settings. Geothermal areas are can be a harsh and extreme environment for vegetation, which can manifest on the vegetation cover (i.e. changes on height and decrease on species variety) (Burns, 1997; Seward et al., 2018). This study aims to identify correlations within typical vegetation indices from hyperspectral data and temperature changes in an active geothermal system.

2. GEOLOGICAL SETTING

Waiotapu Geothermal Field is located in the Taupo Volcanic Zone (TVZ), New Zealand, a region characterised by extensive rhyolitic and basaltic volcanism and associated geothermal activity (Figure 1). The high geothermal activity in this region is related to the subduction of the Pacific plate under the Australian plate, also causing normal faulting with a NE-SW orientation (Milicich et al., 2020; Wilson and Rowland, 2016). Out of the more than 20 geothermal systems within the TVZ, Waiotapu Geothermal Field is the largest by surface extension (~18 km²) and heat flow (~500 MW).

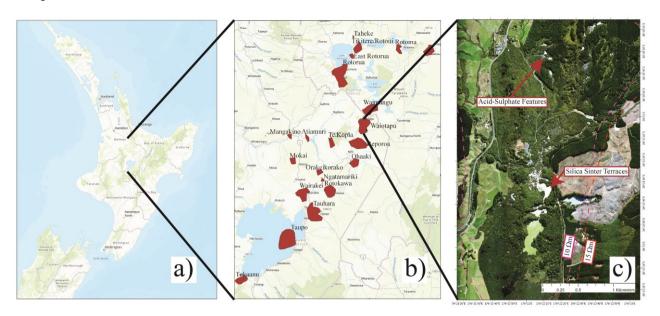


Figure 1. a) Overview map of Waiotapu Geothermal Field location within the Taupo Volcanic Zone geothermal areas of North Island of New Zealand. b) Geothermal areas in the TVZ. c) Waiotapu acquired hyperspectral image with 10 Ω m and 15 Ω m resistivity boundaries.

The TVZ basement consists of a sedimentary weakly metamorphosed rock, overlaid by extensive layers of ignimbrite and sediments (Grindley et al., 1994; Milicich et al., 2020; Steiner, 1963). Waiotapu is hosted by silicic rocks with a series of pyroclastic flows from rhyolitic eruptions (Cole, 1990; Ritchie, 1996; Wood, 1994), often interlayered with lacustrine sediments which act as a litho-cap for the hydrothermal system (Kaya et al., 2014).

Deep chloride-rich fluid heats up and rises, interacting with ground water and host rock. Developing a variety of surface features, including steaming ground, fumaroles, collapse and hydrothermal eruption craters, silica deposits and sinters, mud pools, acid-sulphate mineral alteration, hot chloride pools, sulphur-chloride and bicarbonate-chloride springs (Grange, 1937; Hedenquist and Browne, 1989; Hunt et al., 1994; Lloyd, 1959).

3. VEGETATION IN GEOTHERMAL AREAS

Vegetation in geothermal areas can be exposed to extreme conditions, including high temperatures, elevated amounts of chemical elements (i.e. As, Au, Ag, S, Hg, Sb), excess or deficiency of nutrients and water stress (Boothroyd, 2009; Burns and Leathwick, 1995; Given, 1980). Chemical in plant tissue, spectral anomalies and visible changes over time have been detected in vegetation from several geothermal systems, including the western US (Kennedy-Bowdoin et al., 2004; Martini et al., 2004; Way and Hall, 2001), southwest China (Zhou et al., 2015), Japan (Yoshii, 1937), Indonesia (Urai et al., 2000), Iceland (Elmarsdóttir et al., 2015) and New Zealand (Burns and Leathwick, 1995; Dunn, 2007; Dunn and Christie, 2019; Seward et al., 2018; Van Manen and Reeves, 2012).

The TVZ hosts most high temperature geothermal systems in New Zealand, and therefore is the main region with geothermal vegetation, where characteristic clusters of species have been identified along different geothermal fields (i.e. ferns, some moss species, manuka and kanuka). Amongst the vegetation species enduring geothermal areas, kanuka shrub (*Kunzea ericoides* var *microflora*) also referred to as prostrate kanuka, dominates in the highly active geothermal areas by being highly specialised to survive temperature and soil extremes (Van Manen and Reeves, 2012). Field surveys, multispectral remote sensing and chemical analyses, have categorised kanuka as the dominant plant species of geothermal areas in New Zealand (Beadel et al., 2018; Cochrane et al., 1994; Deroin et al., 1995; Dunn et al., 2018; Dunn and Christie, 2019; Seward et al., 2018).

Kanuka can be found in active geothermal areas in association with other tall plant species (>2 m) or with ground moss species near active geothermal features where the temperatures exceed 50 °C (Burns and Leathwick, 1995). Also, kanuka roots have been reported to associate with *pisolithus* fungi species in hot (50 °C at 8 cm depth), highly acidic and Nitrogen depleted soils (Moyersoen and Beever, 2004), these fungi facilitate the uptake of certain nutrients (Saunders, 2017). Qualitatively, plant height declines as the soil temperature increases, which is visible on the field in many geothermal areas in New Zealand (Burns and Leathwick, 1995; Cochrane et al., 1994; Given, 1980; Van Manen and Reeves, 2012).

3.1 Stress on Vegetation Detected by Remote Sensing

The stress on plants has been studied for the last 100 years (Lichtenthaler, 1996), and analysed with remote sensing approaches for the last 50 years (Birth and McVey, 1968). Remote sensing approaches have been initially focused on band ratios which compare different bands from the spectrum, usually in the visible and near infrared regions. These ratios can reflect on the vegetation health, such as chlorophyll content, quantified through the position of the red-edge around 650 - 750 nm (Dunn, 2007; Wang et al., 2018). Typically, the less chlorophyll pigment there is, the red edge shifts towards the blue part of the electromagnetic spectrum (Sanches et al., 2013; van der Meer and de Jong, 2001). The red edge shift can also indicate a change on plant health and leaf area index (Dong et al., 2019; Sellers, 1985). Vegetation indices can include Atmospherically Resistant Vegetation Index (ARVI) (Kaufman and Tanre, 1992), Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) (Rouse et al., 1973), Red Edge NDVI (RENDVI) (Gitelson and

Merzlyak, 1994), Simple Ratio Index (SRI) (Birth and McVey, 1968), Vogelmann (VREI1) (Vogelmann et al., 1993). Other studies have evaluated water content in the Near Infrared and Short Wave Infrared regions, as canopy water content is highly relevant for vegetation health, with indices such as Moisture Stress Index (MSI) (Ceccato et al., 2001; Hunt and Rock, 1989; Vogelmann and Rock, 1986), Normalised Difference Infrared Index (NDII) (Hardisky et al., 1983; Hunt and Rock, 1989) and Water Band Index (WBI) (Champagne et al., 2001; Penuelas et al., 1993).

Remote sensing data representing the relation between vegetation indices (i.e. NDVI) and soil temperature, is typically represented in a triangular shape, with data points inside its margins (Figure 2). Variations can be related to surface soil moisture (Liu et al., 2018), slope angle (Hope and McDowell, 1992), vegetation dryness (Sandholt et al., 2002) and evapotranspiration processes (Lambin and Ehrlich, 1996).

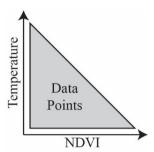


Figure 2. A simplified Temperature and NDVI data envelope from Lambina and Ehrlich (Lambin and Ehrlich, 1996).

4. DATA AND METHODS

4.1 Airborne Hyperspectral and Thermal Data Collection and Instrumentation

Hyperspectral airborne imagery acquiring data from Visible to Short Wave Infrared (VIS to SWIR) from 0.38 to 2.5 μm, was captured using an AisaFENIX push-broom, full-spectrum instrument mounted on a Cessna 185 aircraft. Collecting 448 spectral bands with a ground resolution of 1 m, detailed description on sensors can be found in Kereszturi et al., and 2018; Pullanagari et al., 2016. On 13 April 2019 (UTC +12 hrs) aerial survey was carried out in an N-S direction between 11:20 to 12:59 local time, with only 10 hours difference from the thermal infrared image acquisition flight at night.

Pre-processing of the data included radiometric correction using CaliGeoPro software package, followed by atmospheric correction using ATCOR-4 (Richter, 1998), and geo-rectification using PARGE (Schläpfer and Richter, 2002). Individual image strips were mosaicked into a full data cube. Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) was utilized as criterion for separating vegetation in the image, with 0.4 as a threshold value. Data noise due to atmospheric interferences (1.9-2.1 µm) was removed before the image classification. Additionally, a Savitzky-Golay smoothing filter (Savitzky and Golay, 1964) was applied to the hyperspectral imagery.

On 13 of April 2019 at night between 20:30 and 23:30 the airborne Thermal infrared (TIR) image was captured, with a FLIR A615 TIR camera by GNS Science (Reeves and Sanders, 2019). Night acquisition is employed as it can minimise solar heating and solar reflection effects on the ground surface (Seward et al., 2018). Calibration includes a linear temperature calibration from water bodies measured at the time of the TIR survey, this linear equation was applied to the image to get temperature values. However, as temperatures are calibrated to water, caution is advised when examining other surface temperatures. Furthermore, vegetation will block the amount of emitted energy from soil temperatures detected by the sensor.

4.2 Image Classification

A pixel-based supervised image classification was chosen to classify vegetation cover and type using the hyperspectral image. We have chosen the Support Vector Machine (SVM) algorithm, which is a non-parametric classification algorithm based on statistical learning theory (Vapnik, 1995). It constructs a model based on the training data that is used to make predictions about the unknown data sets. A hyperplane is constructed in a high-dimensional space which best separates the labelled classes data (Gewali et al., 2018; Varshney and Arora, 2004). SVM was also chosen as it can perform well on small size training data (Mountrakis et al., 2011).

Labelled class data of vegetation types was digitized as polygons using field observation, hyperspectral imagery and high-resolution RGB photographs. From which four main types of vegetation were selected, kanuka, mixed bush, pine plantation and grass. In this study, a radial basis function kernel which is a non-linear decision boundary, was applied. Kanuka shrub represented ~35% of the image, which if combined with the ~10% of exposed soil in Waiotapu Geothermal Field (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., in review) represents a significative larger area with potential to be explored.

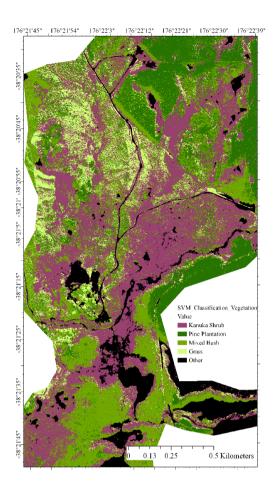


Figure 3. Image classification map using Support Vector Machine in Waiotapu Geothermal Field. This map shows the distribution of kanuka that is used to develop thermal proxies to quantify geothermal activity.

4.3 Vegetation Indices and Thermal Infrared Correlations

The areas classified as kanuka shrub were explored with 8 commonly used indices (Table 1), by extracting data from about 200 random points distributed amongst 5 temperature ranges (i.e. 0-2.5 °C, 2.5–5.5 °C, 5.5–13 °C, 13–25 °C, 25–100 °C). Buffers of 2 meters (~10 pixels) were created in each point location and averaged to reduce the noise from the image and plotted directly against the thermal infrared image data.

5. RESULTS

The SVM image classification (Figure 3) had a 98.7% overall accuracy, with kanuka shrub rarely misclassified with grass or mixed shrub. In addition to a high overall accuracy, the image classification exhibits a congruent spatial distribution of vegetation classes to what was observed on field.

Vegetation indices were visually analysed and quantitatively compared against the thermal infrared imagery (Figures 4 and 5). The 8 selected vegetation indices fitted an exponential trend with R² values as follows; NDVI 0.78 R², VREII 0.77 R², RENDVI 0.76 R², SRI 0.73 R², ARI2 0.72 R², ARVI 0.72 R², WBI 0.40 R², and MSI 0.38 R².

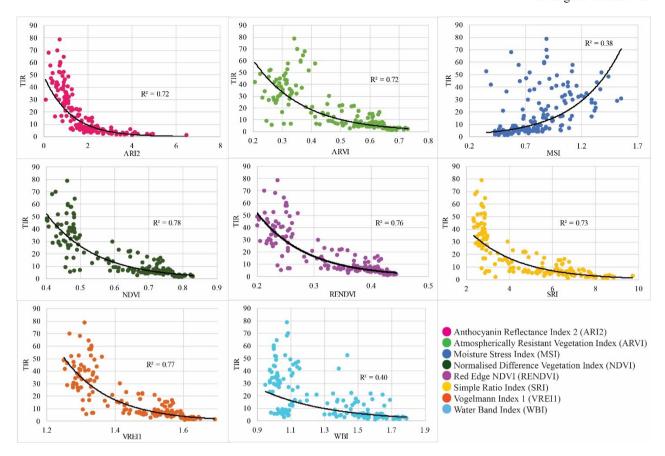


Figure 4. Vegetation Indices Plotted Against Thermal Infrared Data.

Diminishing vegetation health with increasing temperatures is an overall trend, observed throughout the 8 selected indices (Figure 4). As thermal infrared imagery was, however, calibrated against water bodies temperatures, therefore objects with different emissivity can only be used as a relative measure. Hence, as kanuka shrub has been recorded to increase height with decreasing soil temperatures, it can mask surface temperatures as a function of height. Regardless, the presented trends coincide with previous studies relating vegetation indices (i.e. NDVI) with soil temperatures (Hope and McDowell, 1992; Lambin and Ehrlich, 1996; Sandholt et al., 2002).

Some of the best fitting correlations (i.e. ARVI, NDVI, RENDVI, SRI, and VREI1) are based on red-edge values, and are directly correlated to chlorophyll concentrations (Kaufman and Tanre, 1992; Rouse et al., 1973; Slonecker et al., 2009). Chlorophyll is fundamental for photosynthetic activity, by allowing vegetation to absorb energy from light. Consequently, chlorophyll amongst other pigments are excellent indicators of overall physiological status (Elarab et al., 2015; Evans et al., 1986; Sims and Gamon, 2002). ARI2, measures anthocyanins, water soluble pigments abundant in newly forming leaves (Gamon and Surfus, 1999; Gitelson et al., 2009). Therefore, low levels in this index indicate stress on vegetation causing limited vegetation growth.

MSI and WBI plots exhibit weak correlations with temperature changes (Figure 4). These indices are based on bands from the short-wave infrared region. This region is typically noisier than the visible range for the AisaFENIX data (Pullanagari et al., 2016). The increased noise levels can interfere with an accurate reading of the canopy's water content.

Furthermore, some areas (black arrows, Figure 5-b) exhibit low values for vegetation health, while temperatures from the thermal infrared imagery are not exceedingly high (<25 °C). This could indicate stress caused by other factors than temperatures, such as limited nutrients and high concentrations of elements in the soil related to geothermal activity (i.e. As, Au, Ag, S, Hg, Sb). It could also indicate temporal activity changes, such as areas once thermally active, but cold and nutrient depleted at the present.

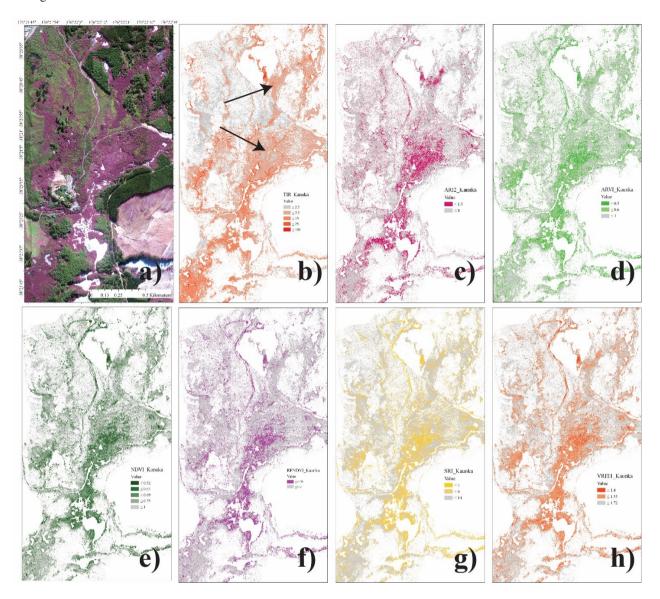


Figure 5. Map displaying the spatial distribution of kanuka, from the image classification overlain by the RGB image of the Waiotapu Geothermal Field (a), the thermal infrared imagery (b); and a series of vegetation indices: ARI2 (c), ARVI (d), NDVI (e), RENDVI (f), SRI (g), VREI1 (h).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows that simple vegetation indices from narrow band hyperspectral imagery can be used to assess the thermal stress on vegetation living around geothermal areas. This is interpreted to be due to the change of plant height (i.e. canopy structure) and health in relation to ground temperature. Vegetation indices measuring anthocyanin and chlorophyll content (NDVI, SRI, ARVI, RENDVI, VREI1 and ARI2) show good correlations with the temperatures derived from the thermal infrared imagery, at R² values between 0.72 and 0.78. These correlations produced the best fit with an exponential trendline, rather than a more common linear correlation. We also conclude that vegetation health living around geothermal areas is likely to get affected not only by temperature but additional stress factors.

From visual analysis, some areas may also indicate the presence of other stress factors (e.g. nutrient depletion or excess, acidic conditions, high concentration of elements (i.e. As, Au, Ag, S, Hg, Sb) or temporal changes in thermal activity). Further research should consider acquisition of LiDAR imagery to analyse vegetation height against soil temperatures. As well as, chemical concentrations, nutrient depletion and high element concentration data and their effect on geothermal vegetation spectral signature. Such analyses in combination with the presented methodology would determine how kanuka health and height relate to ground temperature, opening a new tool for geothermal exploration.

This study also illustrates the potential of utilizing vegetation as a proxy to understand subsurface geothermal at different spatial resolutions and at regional scale. For example, the calculated vegetation indices can be calculated from both broad bandwidth Sentinel-2 imagery with 10 m spatial resolution and narrow bandwidth hyperspectral PRISMA imagery acquired at 30 m spatial resolution. These satellite platforms can offer an opportunity to map vegetation proxies for geothermal activity across the whole TVZ, while it can also significantly improve our capabilities for temporal monitoring with a revisit times of 5 days and 29 days, respectively. Furthermore, this study suggests satellite thermal surrogate information now available on ~60 m spatial resolution (i.e.

ECOSTRESS) could be deduced from higher spatial resolution satellite spectral imagery, providing higher value at lower economical cost.

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