Lecture 15
Fluvial Landforms (II): Deltas

KEY QUESTIONS:

- ✓ *What factors influence the formation of deltas in the humid tropics?*
- ✓ *What is the importance of deltas in the humid tropics?*

With the completion of this lecture, attached readings and tutorial, you should be able to:

- Identify deltas as a fluvial landform
- Discuss the features of deltas: delta plain, delta front, prodelta
- Explain the role geomorphic processes, including the role of sediments removal and dispersal by waves and tides, in the formation of deltas in the humid tropics
- Discuss the factors influencing the formation of deltas
- Discuss the ecosystem services provided by deltas
- Discuss the impact of human activities on ecosystem services provided by deltas

Lecture Outline

15.1 Deltas

15.1.1 Features of a Delta

15.1.2 Conditions Necessary for the Formation of Deltas

15.1.3 Formation of Deltas (Geomorphic Processes including the Role of Sediments Removal and Dispersal by Waves and Tides in the Formation of Deltas)

15.2 Factors Influencing the Formation of Deltas

15.3 Ecosystem Services Provided by Deltas

15.4 Impact of Human Activities on Ecosystem Services Provided by Deltas

15.5 Conclusion

15.1 Deltas

- Deltas are partly subaerial and partly subaqueous accumulations of riverborne sediment deposited at the mouth of the river, with the sediment reorganised by tides, waves and currents.
- Deltas are mainly formed by fluvial depositional process at the mouth of a river, where a river loses velocity and competence as it flows into an ocean.
- Deltas are so called because their triangular shape which resembles the Greek Letter Δ. In fact, deltas vary greatly in shape and can be grouped into three basic forms: arcuate, cuspate and bird's foot (see **Fig. 1**). **Fig.2** shows examples of the different types of deltas.

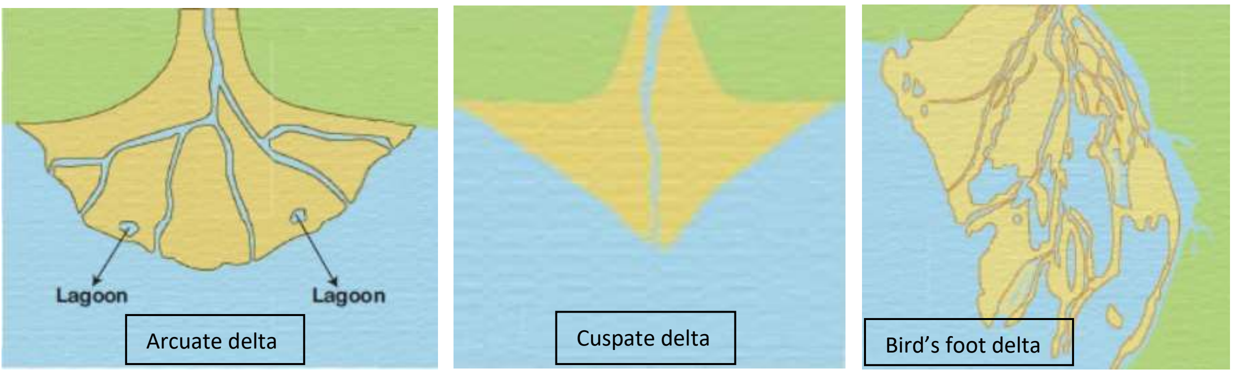

Fig. 1 Basic shapes of deltas

Fig. 2 Examples of deltas

- In shape, deltas are approximately **triangular** or **lobate**. The apex of the triangle starts where the main river first splits into more than one channel. Such channels which branch out from the main river are known as **distributaries**. The surface of the delta is marked by a number of distributaries and their number **generally increases** as the delta extends towards the sea or ocean.
- In general, **gradient** or slope of delta is very low as these are nearly at sea level.
- Deltas are mainly composed of **fine-grained sediments** like sand, silt and clay with sand overlying slit and clay. Sediments are reorganised by the tides, waves or currents depending on local conditions and delta-building continues under water by sedimentation in the depositional basin.

15.1.1 Features of a Delta

- Deltas have three components: a low and flat delta plain forming the subaerial part of the delta; the seaward-dipping part which extends offshore beyond the delta plain, called the delta front; and the subaqueous low edge of the delta in front of and below the delta front, termed the prodelta (see **Fig. 3**).
- When the delta advances towards the sea, these features move forward, overriding each other.

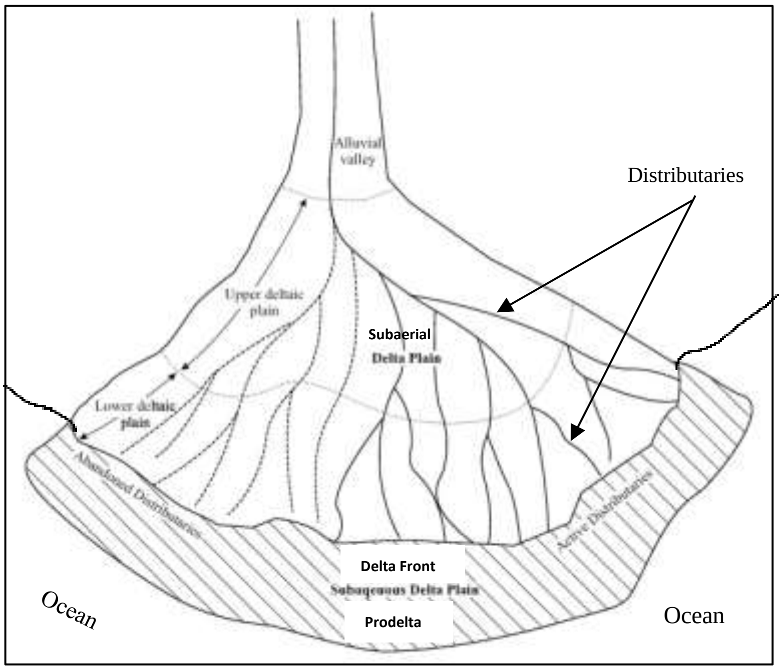

Fig. 3 Features of a Delta

a) Subaerial Delta: Delta Plain

- The delta plain is the subaerial part of the delta which is formed above sea level. This is that part of the delta that is farthest inland i.e. nearest to the land. It includes the area near the river's mouth where the river splits into many channels (known as distributaries) that fan out across the delta. These distributaries spread the river's sediments over a wide area. Sediments here are **coarse-grained**, such as **sand and silt**, because of high-energy conditions. The delta plain is a highly fertile area due to the rich sediments deposited there and often features extensive wetlands, marshes, or swamps.
- The delta plain is subdivided into two parts, upper delta plain and lower delta plain.
  - **Upper delta plain** containing **river borne deposits** of sand, silt and clay. It lies **above high tide mark** and is not affected by the actions or waves and tides. It is usually the area with least water and highest elevation. The river that forms the delta begins to divide in this area into smaller channels called **distributaries**, which carry river borne sediments towards the delta's edge.
  - **Lower delta plain** lies immediately seawards of the upper deltaic plain, in the middle of the delta. It occupies the area between high and low tides and thus are periodically covered by tidal water (during high tide). Deposits in the lower delta plain are the result of **both river borne** and **sea borne sediments**. This part of the delta is affected by the actions of

distributaries, tides and waves. It is a transition zone between comparatively dry upper delta and the wet subaqueous delta.

b) Subaqueous Delta: Delta Front and Prodelta

Delta Front

- Below the delta plain, where the river water begins to meet the standing or slower-moving water of the ocean, is the delta front. The delta front is typically subaqueous which is formed **below sea level** and represents the transition zone between the delta plain and deeper water.
- The delta front lies **below the low-tide mark and extends seaward** to that area actively receiving river borne sediment. This area ranges in water depth from 50 to 300 m and in width from a few kilometres to tens of kilometres.
- The dominant sediment here includes **fine sand and silt**, as the energy decreases from the delta plain toward the water. The delta front is located between the zone of fine-grained prodelta deposition and the more landward located, coarser-grained distributary mouth deposits of a delta.
- The delta front also represents a **zone of transition between deposits representative of progradation** (growth of a river delta into the sea over time) **and aggradation** (occurs in areas in which the supply of sediment is greater than the amount of material that the system is able to transport). As the delta front progrades (advances towards the ocean) horizontally, the delta plain aggrades (rises in height) vertically.
- The delta front is also the location where the distributaries begin to deposit their sediment loads more heavily because the flow velocity decreases sharply.

Prodelta

- The **prodelta** is the **deepest and outermost** part of the delta system, found below the delta front. The prodelta is thus subaqueous i.e. formed below sea level.
- It consists of the **finest sediments**, such as **clay** and **silt**, deposited in deeper waters due to further reduction in energy.
- This zone is mainly influenced by marine currents and suspension settling rather than direct river action.
- Prodelta deposits form a gentle seaward slope, gradually merging with the deeper ocean floor.

15.1.2 Conditions Necessary for the Formation of Deltas

- Deltas only form where the rate of deposition exceeds the rate of sediment removal i.e. where the critical threshold is no longer met, and the system has fallen out of dynamic equilibrium.
- Not all rivers form deltas. For a delta to form, the flow of a river must be slow and steady enough for silt to be deposited and build up. The Ok Tedi, in Papua New Guinea is one of the fastest-flowing rivers in the world. It does not form a delta as it becomes a tributary of the Fly River. (The Fly, on the other hand, does form a rich delta as it empties into the Gulf of Papua, part of the Pacific Ocean.) A river will also not form a delta if exposed to powerful waves. The Columbia River in Canada and the United States, for instance, deposits enormous amounts of sediment into the Pacific Ocean, but strong waves and currents sweep the material away as soon as it is deposited. Tides also limit where deltas can form. The Amazon, the largest river in the world, is without a delta. The tides of the Atlantic Ocean are too strong to allow silt to create a delta on the Amazon.
- Active vertical and lateral erosion in the upper course to provide the extensive sediments needed for deltas to form. The coastal area into which the river flows should be sheltered with weak currents and a small tidal range (preferably tideless). This will result in limited wave action and little subsequent transport of sediment after deposition.
- The sea adjoining the delta should be shallow (e.g. on the continental shelf) or else the load will be washed away into the deep waters. The calibre of the load should be high. This will require a large amount of energy to keep in transport.

15.1.3 Formation of Deltas (Role of Geomorphic Processes including the Role of Sediments Removal and Dispersal by Waves and Tides in the Formation of Deltas)

- The formation of these parts of a delta occurs in stages:
    - The formation of a delta is a long and gradual process. These are created when the river borne sediments are deposited at the mouth because of a sudden reduction in river velocity. Deposition occurs as river velocity drops on entering a standing body of water like sea or ocean, thus reducing the capacity and competence of the river. Coarser particles get deposited first followed by medium and finer particles. This way the delta plain is formed.
    - The lower delta plain is formed when tiny particles in suspension like clay and silt (which under normal freshwater conditions would likely never fall out of suspension) coagulate with the salt in the water by chemical reaction and become heavy enough to 'sink' and be deposited. It occurs as freshwater mixes with salt water - e.g where a river flows into the sea (then called brackish water).
    - Delta front and prodelta are formed at the same time under the sea level below low tide mark. As the sediment builds up at the river mouth, it forms a **delta front** where the **coarser materials** settle. Finer particles continue to be carried further out by the remaining momentum and the **finer sediment** settle slowly, forming the **prodelta**.
    - As deposition continues the water becomes more and more shallow and eventually delta plain begin to rise above the surface of the water. As more sediments are brought by the river to the delta, especially in times of flooding, the main river may become choked with

sediment. When this occurs, the river branches into distributaries, finding the least resistant path to the shoreline.

- When sandy deposits block the distributaries, they then become inactive, and smaller, active distributaries branch off. As the process continues, distributaries constantly shift position across the surface of the delta. Thus, the surface of most deltas is marked by small shifting channels that carry water and sediments away from the main river channel. These small channels also act to distribute the stream's sediment load over the surface of the delta.
- As a delta increases in size and advances farther out into the water the delta plain cover the delta front, which in turn cover the prodelta.
- Over time, with continuous deposition and shifting river channels, the area builds outwards and upwards, forming new delta plains and continually evolving the delta's structure.

Geomorphic processes	**Role of geomorphic processes**
Fluvial processes	Rivers erode sediments mainly from upper and middle courses and transport these sediments to the lower course and finally to the mouth of the river. As rivers meet the sea or ocean at the coast, the velocity reduces drastically due to the decrease in gradient, causing sediments to be deposited at the mouth of the river. This deposition builds up the delta. The distribution and pattern of sediment deposition are influenced by factors such as river discharge, sediment load, and channel morphology.
Weathering	Weathering processes break down rocks into smaller particles on the surface of the earth. These sediments contribute to the sediment load of rivers only if these are brought to the river by other agents like other rivers, tributaries, wind, or by mass movement. These weathered materials add to the sediment load of the river and are then transported by the river to gets deposited at the mouth of the river to form deltas. So, weathering processes supply sediments needed for delta formation.
Mass movement	Mass movements like slides, falls and flows can supply sediment to river systems, especially in areas with steep slopes adjacent to the river. These sediments can be transported by rivers and deposited at the mouth of the river, contributing to the formation and growth of deltas.

Other agents	**Role of Waves and Tides in Sediment Removal and Dispersal**
Waves and Tides	Waves and tides can transport sediment along coastlines, redistributing it and shaping deltas. Waves and tides may rework the sediments deposited by rivers, sorting them according to size and density. They can also erode

	deltas and redistribute sediment along the shoreline, influencing the shape and configuration of deltas. Sediments deposited by rivers in deltas can be removed and dispersed by various processes such as wave action, tidal currents, and longshore drift. This redistribution of sediment can lead to the progradation (extension seaward) or retreat of deltas, depending on the balance between sediment supply and removal.

- Overall, the interplay of these geomorphological processes determines the morphology, evolution, and dynamics of deltas, which are complex and dynamic coastal landforms shaped by the interaction of fluvial, waves, and tidal processes.

15.2 Factors Influencing the Formation of Deltas

a) Relative strength or dominance of river, waves and tides influencing the shape of deltas
- **Fluvial dominated deltas** are formed where the action of waves and tides are weak and that of a **river is strong**, an irregular-shaped delta forms that extends out into the ocean well beyond the local shoreline. Resembling the spread claws of a bird's foot, this type of delta is also called a **bird's foot delta**. Fine sediments and shifting distributaries mark this fluvial dominated delta.
- Fluvial dominated deltas are associated with **large catchments with high amounts of sediments**, **high river discharge into calm protected seas** with minimal disruptions from waves and tides. In addition, the delta front tends to be further from the shore. The **sediment composition** of fluvial dominated deltas is **muddy to mixed**.
- Example: Mahakam River delta (see **Fig. 4**).
- It is possible that human activity is changing this delta into a wave-dominated one.

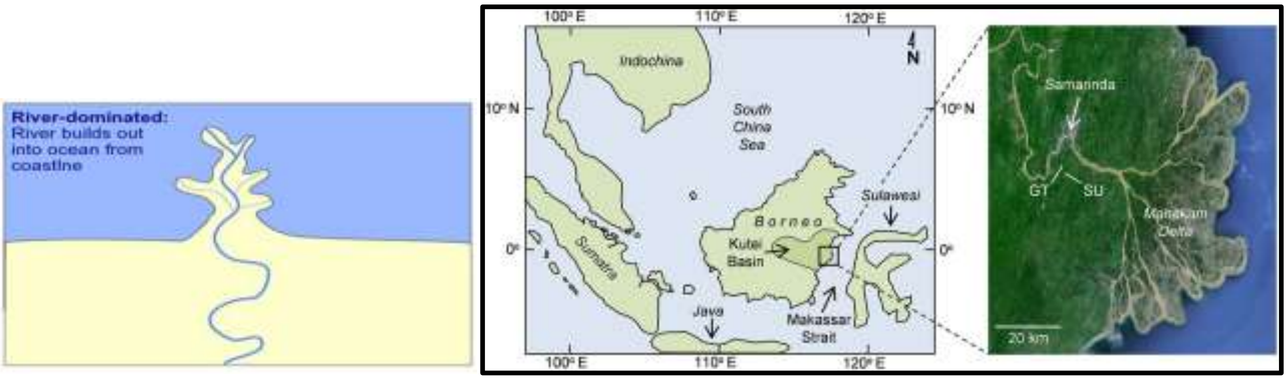

Fig. 4 Mahakam River delta

- In **wave-dominated delta**, **waves are the dominant force** shaping the delta. Strong wave action redistributes sediment along the coast, creating a relatively smooth, straight, or arcuate shoreline. Sediment is redistributed rather than forming multiple branching channels. Sediment is deposited in **parallel ridges** or sandbars, **perpendicular to the wave action**. Deltas shaped primarily by waves are usually characterised by a **small catchment basin** with **little sediment influx**. The high-energy wave environment leads fine-grained sediments to be carried away and leaves behind relatively coarser-grained sediments. Sediments are evenly spread along the coast. Consequently, the **sediment composition** of wave dominated deltas is typically **sandy**. Shoreline is smooth and continuous.
- Example: Kelantan River delta in Malaysia, São Francisco Delta, Brazil (see **Fig. 5**).
- High-energy wave environments can limit delta growth by removing or dispersing sediment.

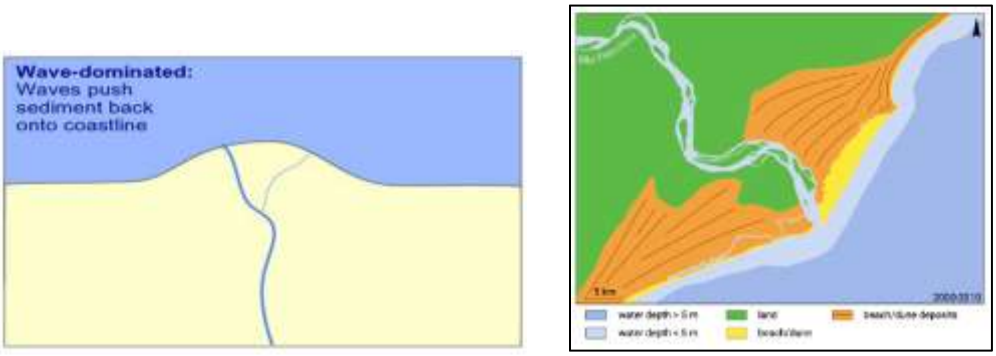

Fig.5 São Francisco Delta, Brazil

- In **tide-dominated delta**, **tidal currents dominate** over wave action. Tide dominated deltas develop when the **strong tidal currents flow in and out of the river mouth**, also causing strong mixing between the river and the sea water. **Elongated bars** develop **perpendicular to the coast**, separated by tidal channels.
- Deltas shaped primarily by tides are similar to wave dominated deltas in that tidal currents carry away much of the fine-grained sediments delivered to the coast. However, a fundamental difference is that tidally formed sand bodies are perpendicular to the shore. The **distributary channels flare seaward and in some cases are straight and oriented parallel with the tides.** Sediments are concentrated along tidal channels and bars. The **sediment composition** of tide dominated deltas is **highly variable**. Shoreline is fragmented and irregular.
- Example: Ganges-Brahmaputra River delta in India and Bangladesh, Fly River delta on the south coast of Papua New Guinea (see **Fig. 6**).

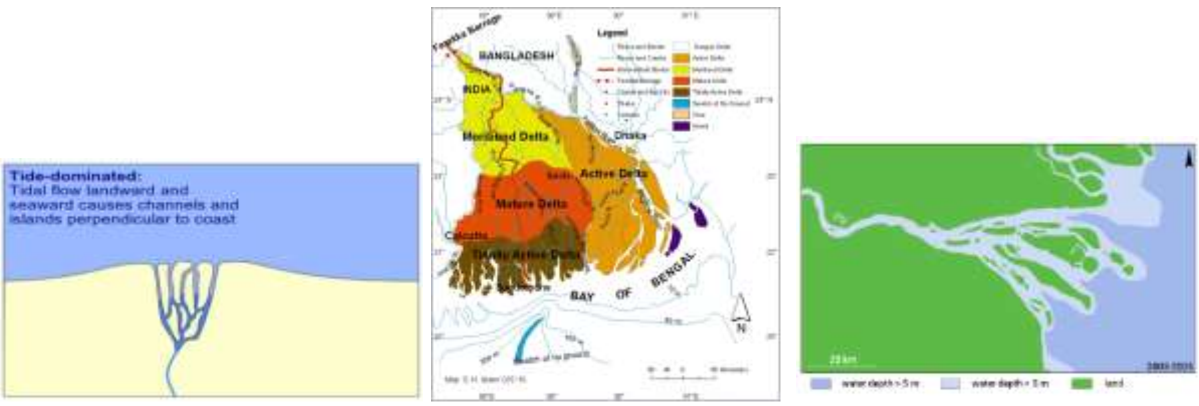

Fig. 6 Ganges Brahmaputra River delta and Fly River delta, Papua New Guinea

b) Climate

- Warm temperatures in humid tropical regions accelerate weathering and erosion processes. This increases the rate at which rocks break down into sediments, which are then transported by rivers to form deltas. Example: The Orinoco Delta in Venezuela experiences high temperatures, which enhance chemical weathering and erosion of rocks in the surrounding areas. The resulting sediments are carried by the Orinoco River and deposited in the delta region.
- In the humid topics, rainfall controls river discharge. The changes in a river's discharge over the course of a year is known as **river regime**. Thus, the river regime controls the sediment erosion, transportation and deposition in the mouth of a river. In Am/Aw climates, during **high discharge** like **wet season** or **flood**, the quantity of suspended load and bed load increases due to increase in river capacity. This increased sediment load can lead to more deposition at the river mouth and extension of the delta into the sea. River competence also increases which allows the river to carry large to small sediment particles which later gets deposited from larger particles near the delta plain and smaller particles towards the sea. However, during periods of **low discharge** such as during **dry season**, the river capacity and competence reduces affecting the formation of deltas. The river erodes and transports less sediments resulting in less deposition at the mouth of the river. Low discharge may cause the delta to retreat as the lack of sediment deposition fails to keep pace with erosion from waves and currents in the sea. This can result in the loss of land area and the retreat of the delta inland.

c) Climate Change

- Climate change can significantly impact the formation and evolution of deltas in humid tropics in several ways:
  - **Sea Level Rise**: One of the most significant impacts of climate change on deltas is sea level rise. As global temperatures increase, glaciers and polar ice caps melt, causing ocean levels to rise. This rise in sea level can lead to increased inundation and erosion of coastal areas, affecting the shape and size of deltas. For example, the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta in Bangladesh, one of the largest deltas in the world, is highly vulnerable to sea level rise, which can submerge vast areas of agricultural land and change the delta's morphology.
  - **Saltwater Intrusion:** Rising sea levels can lead to saltwater intrusion into freshwater systems, affecting the delicate balance of ecosystems in deltas. This intrusion can degrade freshwater resources, impact agricultural productivity, and alter sediment deposition patterns. The Mekong Delta in Vietnam is facing challenges from saltwater intrusion due to sea level rise, affecting rice cultivation and freshwater availability for local communities.
  - **Changes in Precipitation Patterns**: Climate change can alter precipitation patterns, leading to changes in river discharge and sediment transport. Increased rainfall in some regions can result in higher river runoff, carrying more sediment to the coast and contributing to delta formation. Conversely, prolonged droughts can reduce river flow, impacting sediment supply and delta growth. For instance, the Niger Delta in West Africa is influenced by seasonal variations in rainfall, and changes in precipitation patterns due to climate change can affect sediment deposition and delta morphology.

- **Extreme Weather Events**: Climate change is also associated with an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, typhoons, and storm surges. These events can cause significant erosion and sediment redistribution in deltas, reshaping their landscapes. For example, the Mississippi River Delta in the United States has experienced substantial land loss due to hurricanes and storm surges exacerbated by climate change.
- **Loss of Coastal Vegetation**: Climate change can also result in the loss of coastal vegetation such as mangroves and salt marshes, which play a crucial role in stabilizing delta ecosystems and protecting against erosion. Deforestation, habitat degradation, and sea level rise can lead to the loss of these protective barriers, making deltas more vulnerable to erosion and land loss. The Sundarbans Delta in India and Bangladesh, renowned for its mangrove forests, is threatened by climate change-induced habitat loss and degradation.

- In summary, climate change influences delta formation in the humid tropics by altering sea levels, precipitation patterns, extreme weather events, saltwater intrusion, and coastal vegetation dynamics. These impacts can have significant implications for the geomorphology, ecology, and socio-economic well-being of deltaic regions and the communities that depend on them.

d) Vegetation

Vegetation in humid tropical regions plays a multifaceted role in the formation and stabilization of deltas. From soil stabilization to sediment trapping and erosion protection, vegetation contributes to the resilience and sustainability of delta ecosystems, shaping their evolution over time.

- **Soil Stabilisation**: Vegetation helps in stabilising the soil through root systems. The roots of plants penetrate into the soil, holding it together and preventing erosion caused by water flow. This is particularly important in deltas where sediment deposition is high, and erosion is a constant threat. Example: Mangrove forests, such as those found in the Sundarbans Delta in Bangladesh and India, stabilise the soil with their extensive root systems. These forests help prevent erosion and provide protection against storm surges and tidal waves.
- **Protection Against Erosion**: Vegetation provides a protective barrier for the delta against erosive forces such as waves, tides, and storm surges. In humid tropical regions where deltas are often exposed to intense weather events, vegetation acts as a buffer, reducing the impact of these forces on deltas. Example: The Mekong Delta in Vietnam is home to extensive mangrove forests and wetlands. These mangroves help protect the delta from erosion caused by tidal waves and storm surges, preserving the integrity of the land and supporting local ecosystems.
- **Nutrient Cycling:** Vegetation contributes to nutrient cycling in deltaic ecosystems, enhancing soil fertility and promoting the growth of vegetation. Organic matter from plant litter and roots enriches the soil, supporting the growth of new vegetation and contributing to the overall stability of the delta ecosystem. Example: The Niger Delta in Nigeria is characterized by lush mangrove forests and swamps. These ecosystems play a vital role in nutrient cycling, with organic matter from vegetation contributing to soil fertility and supporting the diverse flora and fauna of the delta.

e) Geology

Geology influences the shape, size, and characteristics of deltas.

- **Geology of the upstream drainage basin**: The geology of the upstream drainage basin determines the type and amount of sediment transported to the delta. In humid tropics, where heavy rainfall and intense weathering are common, the geology may consist of easily weathered rocks like shale, sandstone, or limestone. These rocks break down into fine sediment that is readily transported by rivers to the delta.
- **Subsurface Geology**: The subsurface geology, including the presence of underlying geological structures such as faults or folds, can affect the stability and morphology of the delta. These structures may influence sediment transport and accumulation patterns, as well as the distribution of groundwater, which can affect delta stability.
  - For example, in West Africa, the Niger River Delta is formed by the sediment transported from the Guinea Highlands and deposited along the Gulf of Guinea coast. The geology of the region, including the presence of oil and gas deposits, influences the delta's economic importance. Tectonic activity in the region also contributes to subsidence, which affects the morphology and stability of the delta.
- Thus, the interplay of geological factors shapes the formation and characteristics of deltas in humid tropics, influencing their morphology, sediment dynamics, and environmental significance.

f) Human Activities

- Deltas in humid tropics are formed through the interaction of various natural processes and human activities. Human activities can significantly influence delta formation through alterations in sediment transport, land use changes, and water management practices. Human activities also impact the ecosystem services provided by deltas (see **Section 12.5**).
  - **Deforestation** in humid tropics often leads to increased soil erosion due to the removal of vegetation cover. This results in higher sediment loads being carried by rivers to deltas. For example, extensive deforestation in the northern mountain tracks of Bangladesh contributes to the high amount of sediment load in river Brahmaputra and more deposition in the Ganges-Brahmaputra or Sundarbans delta.
  - **Agricultural Expansion**: The expansion of agriculture, particularly through practices like slash-and-burn agriculture, can accelerate soil erosion and sedimentation in river systems. This increased sediment input can contribute to the growth of deltas. For instance, the expansion of oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia has led to increased sedimentation in deltas like the Mekong Delta.
  - **Urbanisation**: Urbanisation often involves extensive land reclamation, channelisation of rivers, and construction of infrastructure such as dams and levees. These alterations to natural river systems can disrupt sediment transport processes and lead to changes in delta morphology. Examples include the Nile Delta, where urbanization and dam construction along the Nile River have altered sediment dynamics.
  - **Hydroelectric Dams**: The construction of hydroelectric dams can trap sediment upstream, reducing the sediment load transported to deltaic regions downstream. This can lead to

reduced sediment deposition and land loss in deltas. The construction of dams along rivers like the Ganges-Brahmaputra in South Asia affects sediment delivery to the Sundarbans Delta.

  - **Sand Mining:** Sand mining from riverbeds can disrupt sediment transport processes and alter delta formation. Excessive sand mining can lead to erosion of riverbanks and changes in sediment loads, impacting the growth and stability of deltas. The Mekong Delta, for example, is affected by sand mining activities in upstream areas. Sand mining plays a major role in the sediment budget of the Mekong River and suggest that it may be responsible for part of the retreat of the delta.
  - **Infrastructure Development:** Infrastructure development such as ports, navigation channels, and coastal protection structures can alter sediment dynamics and deltaic processes. For instance, the construction of jetties and harbours can disrupt sediment transport along coastlines (by reducing velocity of flow), affecting delta morphology and sediment deposition patterns.
- Overall, human activities play a significant role in shaping delta formation in humid tropics by **altering sediment dynamics, land use patterns, and hydrological processes**. These alterations can have both short-term and long-term impacts on delta ecosystems and the communities dependent on them.

15.3 Ecosystem Services Provided by Deltas

- Deltas, as the nexus of land and water, stand as dynamic and complex ecosystems vital to both natural processes and human societies. Nestled at the confluence of rivers and oceans, these regions serve as the lifeblood of coastal environments worldwide. In recent years, heightened attention has been drawn to the pivotal role deltas play in delivering a myriad of ecosystem services, essential for the well-being of both local populations and global ecosystems. Understanding and appreciating these services are crucial for sustainable management and conservation efforts.
- The ecosystem services provided by deltas encompass a broad spectrum of functions, ranging from provisioning to regulating and cultural services. **Provisioning services** include the tangible goods extracted from these ecosystems, such as fish (food), freshwater, and fertile soils. The rich alluvial soils of deltas have allowed for the establishment of bountiful crops vital to the establishment and expansion of early and present cultures. **Regulating services** encompass the invaluable role deltas play in regulating water flow, nutrient cycling, and carbon sequestration, thereby mitigating the impacts of climate change. Deltas also provides land for settlement. Furthermore, deltas hold immense **cultural significance**, serving as sources of inspiration, recreation, and spiritual connection for countless communities.
- Today, deltas that were more recently viewed as uninhabitable wasteland are once again considered to be of utmost ecological value (see **Fig. 7**). Additionally, ancient deltas are actively explored as they often contain a wealth of **fossil fuels** (provisioning services) such as hydrocarbons and coal, resources that helped spur the industrial revolution and continue to be critically important to our modern technologically driven society.

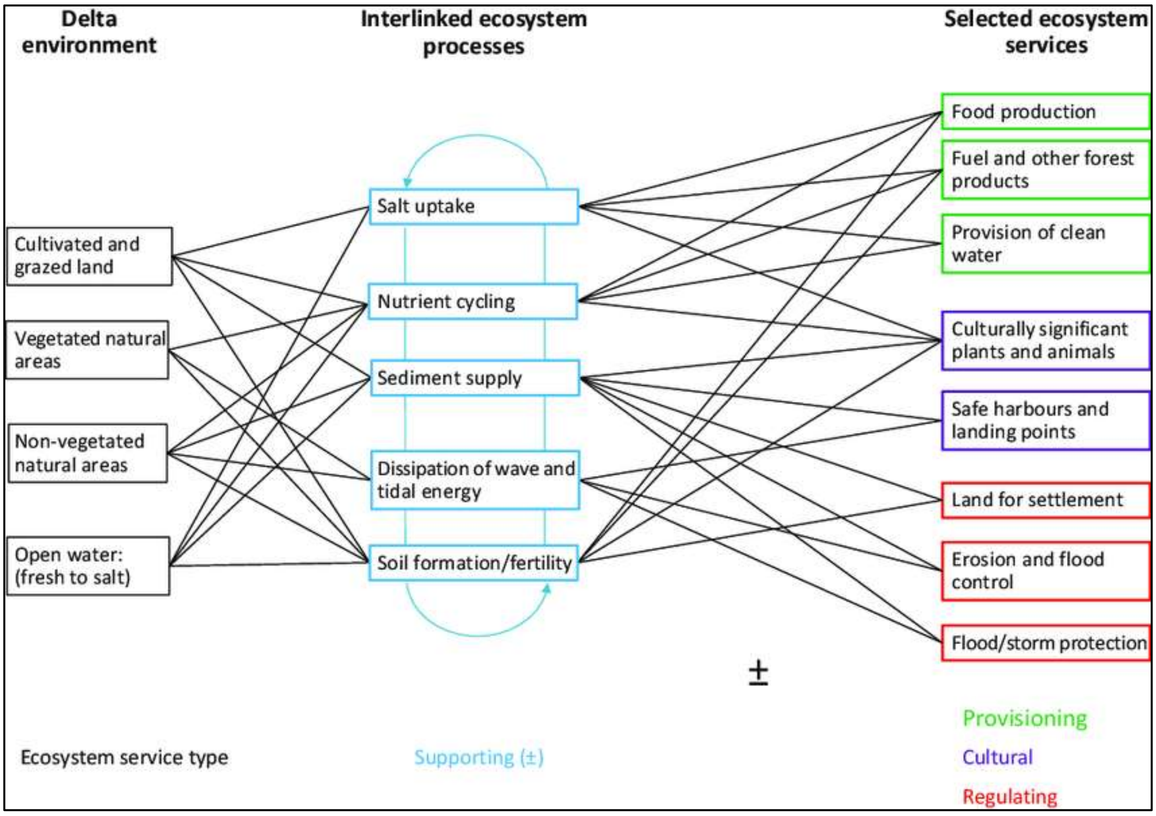

Fig. 7 Principal ecosystem processes and services in delta environments

15. 4 Impact of Human Activities on Ecosystem Services Provided by Deltas

- This lecture aims to delve deeper into the intricate web of ecosystem services offered by deltas, exploring their socio-economic importance, ecological significance, and the challenges they face in an era of rapid environmental change. By shedding light on the multifaceted contributions of deltas, we endeavor to underscore the urgent need for their conservation and sustainable management in the face of mounting anthropogenic pressures and climate-induced uncertainties.

- Human activities compromise the ability of deltas to provide ecosystem services:
  - As humans have populated the world's deltas, harnessed the rivers that built them by flood-control structures, and altered natural deltaic coastlines, the delicate balance of these dynamic systems has been compromised. Deprived of water and sediment, most of the world's deltas are undergoing dramatic coastal land loss and habitat change as a result of anthropogenic induced as well as naturally occurring subsidence and rising sea level along coastal zones.
  - Over-extraction of water can also contribute to saltwater intrusion, affecting freshwater availability and agricultural productivity.
  - Industrial, agricultural, and domestic activities often result in the discharge of pollutants into delta ecosystems. Pollutants such as chemicals, heavy metals, and nutrients can degrade water quality, harm aquatic organisms, and disrupt regulating ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling and water purification.

- Unsustainable fishing practices and habitat destruction, such as mangrove deforestation and wetland conversion, can degrade delta ecosystems and reduce the availability of important ecosystem services such as fisheries, coastal protection, and carbon sequestration.

- Human activities maintain/enhance the ability of deltas to provide ecosystem services:
  - A new multidisciplinary field of coastal restoration science is emerging as humans embark to rescue and effectively manage deltas. The future of modern deltas will be dependent on our ability to balance environmental protection and economic development, while developing new restoration technologies for their maintenance and restoration.

- High population density (see **Fig. 8**) and deltas often have a complex relationship when it comes to ecosystem services. Deltas, where rivers meet the sea, are typically fertile and biodiverse areas that provide numerous ecosystem services such as flood control, water filtration, carbon sequestration, and habitat provision for various species. However, when coupled with high population density, these ecosystems can face significant pressures and challenges.

"Deltas are sinking at a much greater rate than sea levels are rising,"

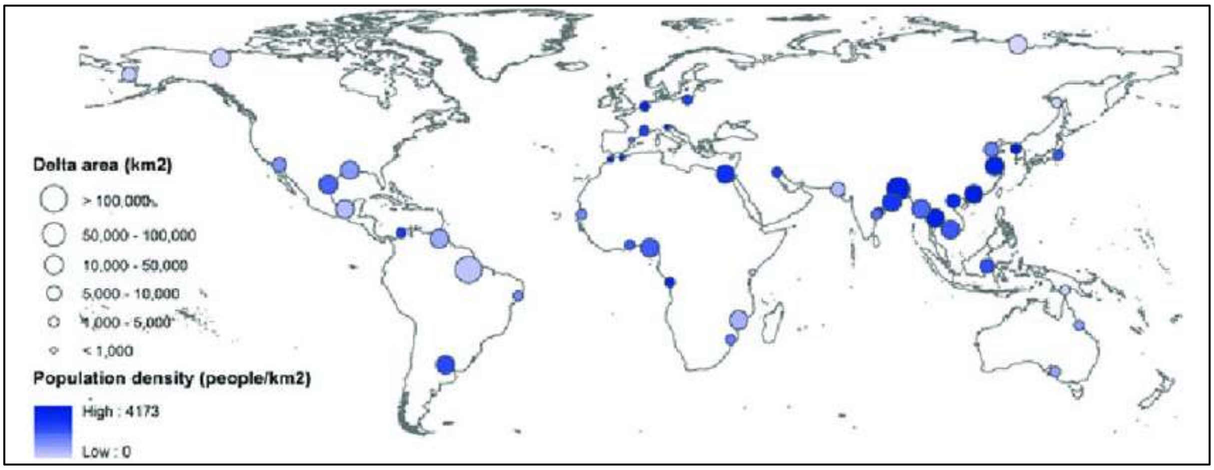

Fig. 8 World map showing 47 deltas and population density (Source: Dunn, 2017)

- The principal tenets of ecosystem service science are firstly that the observed decline in ecosystem services at all scales is widely caused by human action (see **Fig. 9**). The drivers of decline include the scale of economic activity, not least in extraction of renewable resources such as forests and fisheries, unsustainable pollution loading and the trade-off between the selective enhancements of some ecosystem services at the detriment of others.

Fig. 9 Infographic showing the scale of human impact on global deltas

- There are positive benefits of conserving ecosystem services, but there are trade-offs involved in this process. There is a continuing uncertainty on whether natural resources can be managed to optimise well-being, conservation of services and development processes. If there are trade-offs, then these may involve temporal questions, for example, the short-term enhancement of human welfare compared to long-term sustainability.
- In summary, while deltas are invaluable for the ecosystem services they provide, the relationship between high population density and deltas can be complex. Sustainable management practices and policies are essential to balance the needs of growing human populations with the conservation and preservation of delta ecosystems and the services they offer.

15.5 Conclusion

- Deltas are dynamic and complex landforms shaped by the interplay of fluvial deposition, wave action, and tidal influences. They provide crucial ecosystem services, such as fertile agricultural land, biodiversity support, and coastal protection, making them vital to both natural systems and human communities. However, their formation and sustainability are increasingly threatened by climate change, rising sea levels, and human activities such as deforestation, dam construction, and sand mining. While deltas have historically adapted to environmental changes, the accelerating pace of anthropogenic disruptions is outpacing their natural resilience. Effective management strategies, including sustainable sediment management, habitat restoration, and climate adaptation measures, are essential to safeguarding the ecological and socio-economic benefits of deltas. Moving forward, balancing development with conservation will be critical to ensuring the long-term stability of these invaluable coastal environments.