

# Digital Elevation Model Based Watershed and Stream Network Delineation

## Synopsis of Class 9, GIS in Water Resources, Fall 2011

Watershed delineation, involving the extraction of hydrologic information from digital elevation models (DEMs) is one of the most fundamental concepts covered in this course. The advent of DEMs has resulted in the evolution of procedures to automatically map or derive channel networks and watersheds from DEMs. In this class you will learn how to do this using methods that effectively enrich the information content of a digital elevation model from simply a grid of elevation values into a data structure that represents the terrain flow field and supports quantification of contributing area and a host of other derived quantities useful for hydrologic analysis.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this class you should be able to:

- Explain the basic concepts involved in the terrain flow information model
- Identify and fill sinks in a small digital elevation model
- Calculate hydrologic slope in the direction of steepest descent and the eight direction pour point model flow direction
- Calculate flow accumulation as the number of grid cells draining into a grid cell
- Identify a stream network raster based on grid cells exceeding a flow accumulation threshold
- Describe the sequence of steps involved in mapping stream networks, catchments and watersheds in preparation for learning how to actually do this in the next exercise

### Reading

- At <http://help.arcgis.com>, in the Professional Library start from "An overview of the Hydrology tools" <http://help.arcgis.com/en/arcgisdesktop/10.0/help/009z/009z0000004w000000.htm> to end of Hydrologic analysis sample applications in the Hydrology toolset concepts

### Optional extra reading if you are curious

- Tarboton, D. G., R. L. Bras and I. Rodriguez-Iturbe, (1991), "On the Extraction of Channel Networks from Digital Elevation Data," *Hydrologic Processes*, 5(1): 81-100.  
<http://www.neng.usu.edu/cee/faculty/dtarb/hp91.pdf>
- Tarboton, D. G., (1997), "A New Method for the Determination of Flow Directions and Contributing Areas in Grid Digital Elevation Models," *Water Resources Research*, 33(2): 309-319.  
<http://www.neng.usu.edu/cee/faculty/dtarb/96wr03137.pdf>

### Synopsis

Sinks (or pits) are single grid cells or zones of grid cells in a DEM completely surrounded by higher elevation grid cells. As such they do not drain; and in hydrologic terrain analysis trap flow and cause holes in delineated watersheds. At scales of 10 m or greater these closed depressions are rare in natural earth topography, being restricted to a few special geomorphic environments (e.g. glaciated or karst). However pits occur frequently in DEMs due to data errors and sampling effects (e.g. a narrow channel may pass between grid points). It is standard practice to remove sinks prior to hydrologic terrain

analysis and the standard method for doing this is to fill the sinks, raising their elevation to the point at which water would just overflow from the sink. The ArcGIS fill function does this and the result is referred to as a *hydrologically correct* DEM. Other methods for pit removal that "carve" flow paths, lowering terrain blocking drainage, or adjust elevations either upwards or downwards to minimize the alteration of the original DEM to obtain a hydrologically correct DEM have been developed, but there are not functions for these in ArcGIS so they will not be used in this class.

With sinks filled the terrain flow field is numerically represented by a *flow direction grid* that encodes a set of pointers indicating the direction of steepest descent from each grid cell to one of its eight neighbors. Slope in the direction of steepest descent is a byproduct of this calculation, this procedure being referred to as the D8 method. The flow direction grid effectively defines a *grid network* that links grid cells to their downstream neighbors.

The *flow accumulation* function operates on a flow direction grid and counts (accumulates) the total number of grid cells draining into each grid cell. The result is a *flow accumulation* grid (also sometimes called contributing area grid) with high values where large quantities of flow accumulate, as in valleys or streams, and small values on hilltops and ridges.

The simplest procedure for mapping streams from a DEM is to define channels as grid cells exceeding a flow accumulation threshold. There is a question as to what is the correct threshold to use, or whether it should be the same everywhere. Much of my (Tarboton's) research has focused on these questions developing objective methods to select the channel definition threshold and using curvature related quantities as weights in the flow accumulation to map channels with a drainage density that adapts to topographic variability. This functionality is part of the TauDEM software, which is not yet ArcGIS 10 compatible, although TauDEM command line functions can be run separately and results displayed in ArcGIS 10.

Once streams are defined a stream segmentation function calculates unique stream segments that are then the basis for delineating catchments that divide the domain into areas draining to one and only one stream segment. Subwatersheds draining to designated outlets or monitoring points can also be calculated using the flow direction grid. A last step in the terrain processing is often to convert the raster stream and catchment representations to vector shapefiles or feature classes, polylines for the stream network and polygons for catchments. The relational database associations between catchments, the stream segments that they drain to and the downstream and upstream linkages in the stream network are important for hydrologic modeling and support network analysis that enables the tracing of flow through large river networks constructed in this way.

Streams mapped using this procedure, purely from a DEM may not correspond with the vector stream network of "blue lines" from a map, or the National Hydrography dataset. This occurs because of discrepancies between these different data sources. In cases where the vector stream information is believed to be more reliable than the DEM, a *reconditioning procedure* can be used at the beginning of the process to "burn in" the existing streams by lowering the elevation of the DEM where they occur, then smoothing off the nearby elevation values so that the transition into streams is not so abrupt.