BloEx - Journal
Britain International of
EXACT Sciences Journal
Publish: | January - May - September |
E-ISSN: 2686-1208
P-ISSN: 2686-1216
http://biarjournal.com/index.php/bioex

Amplified Local Cooling Potential of Forestation in Eastern Ethiopia's Arid Lowlands under Climate Change: Insights from Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions

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Abstract:

This study investigates the biophysical cooling effects of forestation in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali regions, amid climate warming, using satellite-derived data (MODIS, ERA5-Land) from 2003–2023 and CMIP6 projections to 2080 under SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5 scenarios. Pairwise comparisons of land surface temperature (LST), evapotranspiration (ET), and albedo between forested and open lands (grassland, cropland, shrubland) revealed a mean cooling effect of 3.5–4.0 °C, driven primarily by enhanced ET (1,250–1,350 mm/year in dry seasons) offsetting albedo-induced warming (+18–24 W/m²). Seasonal dynamics showed amplification during dry periods (up to 4.5 °C), with Theil-Sen trends indicating a 0.14–0.18 °C/decade increase in cooling, linked to soil moisture declines (-0.004 m³/m³/decade). Structural equation modeling confirmed ET's dominance (β=0.72 for ΔLST), though albedo's role rises to 40% by 2080 under high emissions due to stomatal closure reducing ET by 15–20%. Projections forecast sustained amplification (4.2–4.7 °C) under moderate scenarios with 15% tree cover increase, but diminution (3.2–3.7 °C) under high emissions. Spatial analysis highlighted groundwater-dependent efficacy, strongest in Somali's rangelands. Findings underscore forestation's potential for heat mitigation, supporting initiatives like Ethiopia's Green Legacy and Right Tree in the Right Place projects, while emphasizing adaptive strategies to balance water competition and albedo effects for climate-resilient land management.

Keywords:
Forest Cooling, Biophysical Impacts, Climate Adaptation, Arid Lowlands, Ethiopia Forestation

I. Introduction

Eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, including Dire Dawa, Shinile, and the Somali Region, face escalating climate challenges, with temperatures projected to rise by 1.6–3.7 °C by 2080 and increasing drought frequency threatening agro-pastoral livelihoods (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). These regions, characterized by sparse Acacia-commiphora woodlands and low rainfall (200–600 mm annually), are highly vulnerable to desertification and heat stress (Tesfaye et al., 2021). Deforestation from charcoal production and agricultural expansion has exacerbated local warming and soil degradation, reducing evapotranspiration (ET) and amplifying sensible heat flux (Abera et al., 2020). Recent European studies highlight that forestation can amplify local cooling in warming climates due to enhanced ET, particularly as soil moisture declines (Cerasoli et al., 2021). This suggests potential applicability in semi-arid zones like Shinile, where deeper-rooted trees could access groundwater, enhancing cooling amidst drying trends. However, arid contexts like the Somali Region may see reduced ET and albedo-driven warming, necessitating region-specific analysis (Alkama & Cescatti, 2016). This study investigates whether forestation in eastern Ethiopia can yield amplified cooling benefits under climate change, leveraging satellite-based land surface temperature (LST) comparisons and local restoration initiatives like Ethiopia's Green Legacy and the Right Tree in the Right Place

project (WRI, 2024). Understanding these dynamics is critical for climate-resilient land management.

1.1 Background

Eastern Ethiopia's Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions are arid to semi-arid, with annual rainfall of 200–600 mm and mean temperatures of 25–30 °C, supporting Acacia-dominated woodlands and pastoral livelihoods (Tesfaye et al., 2021). Climate projections indicate warming of 1.6–3.7 °C by 2080 under medium-high emissions (RCP6.0), with heatwave days (>35 °C) potentially reaching 200 annually, alongside erratic rainfall and intensified droughts (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023; Haile et al., 2020). Deforestation, driven by charcoal, firewood, and cropland expansion, has reduced forest cover to ~23% in the Somali Region, increasing local land surface temperatures (LST) by up to 1.37 °C and exacerbating soil erosion (Abera et al., 2020; Taye et al., 2021). This mirrors broader African trends, where deforestation amplifies warming twice as fast as climate change alone (Alkama & Cescatti, 2016).

Forestation's biophysical effects, notably enhanced ET, can lower LST by 0.2–4 °C in semi-arid Africa, with deeper-rooted trees maintaining moisture access under drought (Duveiller et al., 2018). European studies show amplified cooling as soil moisture declines, a dynamic potentially relevant to Shinile's agro-pastoral zones (Cerasoli et al., 2021). However, in hyper-arid areas like parts of the Somali Region, low ET and darker forest albedos may cause net warming (Bright et al., 2017). Ethiopia's Green Legacy Initiative and the Right Tree in the Right Place project promote native species restoration, aiming to combat degradation and enhance resilience (WRI, 2024; FDRE, 2020). Yet, high CO_2 scenarios may reduce ET via stomatal closure, diminishing cooling (Zarakas et al., 2021). Satellite-based LST and ET analyses, as used in Europe, offer a pathway to assess these effects locally, informing climate-adaptive forestation strategies.

1.2 Problem Statement

Eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, encompassing Dire Dawa, Shinile, and the Somali Region, face severe climate change impacts, with projected temperature increases of up to 3.7 °C by 2080 and rising drought frequency threatening pastoral and agro-pastoral communities (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). Deforestation from charcoal production and agricultural expansion has reduced forest cover, increasing local land surface temperatures (LST) by up to 1.37 °C and exacerbating soil moisture loss, which undermines livelihoods and water resources (Abera et al., 2020; Taye et al., 2021). While European studies demonstrate that forestation amplifies local cooling through enhanced evapotranspiration (ET) in warming, drying climates (Cerasoli et al., 2021), the applicability in eastern Ethiopia's arid context remains unclear. Hyper-arid zones, like parts of the Somali Region, may experience albedo-driven warming from forestation, potentially offsetting ET benefits due to limited water availability (Bright et al., 2017). Current restoration efforts, such as Ethiopia's Green Legacy Initiative, lack region-specific data on biophysical impacts, risking ineffective or maladaptive strategies (FDRE, 2020). Without targeted analysis, forestation may fail to deliver cooling benefits, exacerbate water competition, or disrupt pastoral systems. This study addresses the gap by investigating whether forestation can amplify local cooling in eastern Ethiopia under climate change, using satellite-based LST and ET comparisons to guide sustainable land management.

1.3 Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the potential of forestation to amplify local cooling effects in the arid lowlands of Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions under a warming climate, informing climate-resilient restoration strategies. The specific Objectives are

1. To quantify the local cooling or warming effects of forestation on land surface temperatures (LST) in Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions using satellite-based pairwise comparisons of forested and open lands.
2. To assess the role of evapotranspiration (ET) and albedo in driving forestation's biophysical impacts under current and projected climate conditions (2023–2080).
3. To evaluate the influence of declining soil moisture and groundwater access on the cooling potential of forestation in semi-arid versus hyper-arid zones.
4. To provide recommendations for region-specific forestation strategies, integrating native species and agroforestry to maximize cooling and minimize water competition.

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding forestation's biophysical impacts in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, where climate change exacerbates heat and drought, threatening agro-pastoral livelihoods (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). By quantifying cooling potential via satellite-based LST and ET analyses, it builds on European findings of amplified cooling in drying climates (Cerasoli et al., 2021), offering context-specific insights for Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions. Results will guide Ethiopia's Green Legacy Initiative and the Right Tree in the Right Place project, ensuring restoration enhances resilience without unintended warming or water stress (FDRE, 2020; WRI, 2024). Benefits include improved agricultural yields (facing 3.8–4.9% declines by 2080) and water resource management, vital for food security (Haile et al., 2020). The study's methodology, leveraging MODIS and ERA5-Land data, will provide a replicable framework for arid regions globally, advancing climate-adaptive land management. Findings will inform policymakers, supporting sustainable development goals and reducing climate vulnerability for pastoral communities.

II. Research Method

2.1 Study Area

The study focuses on the arid lowlands of eastern Ethiopia, specifically Dire Dawa (9°36'N, 41°52'E), Shinile Zone in the Somali Region (centered around 9°45'N, 41°50'E), and broader Somali Region areas (4°–11°N, 40°–48°E). These regions encompass semi-arid to hyper-arid climates with annual rainfall of 200–600 mm, mean temperatures of 25–30 °C, and vegetation dominated by Acacia-commiphora bushlands (Tesfaye et al., 2021). Dire Dawa features urban-periurban interfaces with degraded woodlands, Shinile supports agro-pastoral systems vulnerable to drought, and the Somali Region includes vast rangelands facing desertification (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). The area was delineated using administrative boundaries from the Global Administrative Areas (GADM) database, covering approximately 250,000 km², with forest cover at ~23% primarily in intact woodlands (Abera et al., 2020). Selection criteria prioritized zones with ongoing restoration projects like the Right Tree in the Right Place (RTRP) initiative and historical deforestation data availability (WRI, 2024).

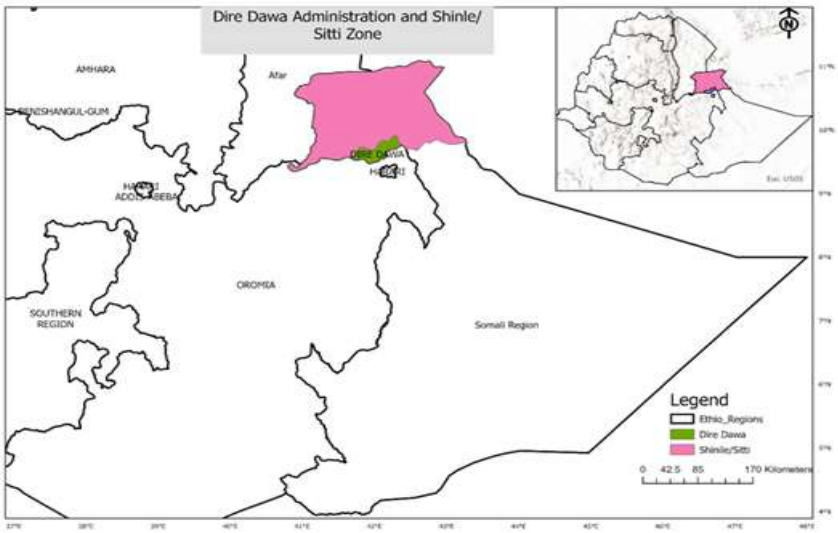

Figure 1. The study area

2.2 Data Sources

Satellite and reanalysis data from 2003–2023 were used for historical analysis, with projections to 2080 under Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5). Land surface temperature (LST), evapotranspiration (ET), and albedo were derived from Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) products: MOD11A2 V6.1 for LST (1 km, 8-day composites, day/night bands converted to °C), MOD16A2 for ET (500 m, 8-day), and MCD43A3 V6.1 for albedo (500 m, shortwave white-sky) (Duveiller et al., 2018; Running et al., 2019). Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) from MOD13Q1 V6.1 (250 m, 16-day) served as a proxy for vegetation cover (Verbesselt et al., 2010). Land use/land cover (LU/LC) classification utilized Landsat 8 OLI/TIRS (30 m) for 2003, 2013, and 2023, supplemented by ESA WorldCover 2021 (10 m) for validation (Zanaga et al., 2021). Soil moisture, precipitation, and snow water equivalent (negligible in arid zones) came from ERA5-Land reanalysis (0.1° resolution, hourly aggregated to daily) (Muñoz-Sabater et al., 2021). Climate projections were sourced from 10 Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6) models (e.g., CESM2, UKESM1-0-LL), downscaled to 10 km using Bias-Corrected Constructed Analogues with Quantile Mapping (BCCAQ) for Ethiopia-specific biases (Babaousmail et al., 2023; Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). Data preprocessing involved mosaicking, cloud masking (<10% coverage), radiometric calibration, and georeferencing to UTM Zone 38N (WGS84) using Google Earth Engine (GEE) and QGIS 3.28.

2.3 Pairwise Comparison and Trend Analysis

To quantify forestation's biophysical effects, pairwise comparisons were conducted between forested and adjacent open-land pixels (e.g., grasslands, croplands, barren lands), following space-for-time substitution (Cerasoli et al., 2021). Pixels were matched within 5 km, controlling for elevation (±50 m), slope (±2°), and soil type using SoilGrids 2.0 (Poggio et al., 2021). Forested pixels were defined as >30% tree cover from Hansen Global Forest Change (Hansen et al., 2013), with open lands <10%. ΔLST (forested minus open LST), ΔET, and Δalbedo were calculated seasonally (dry: June–September; wet: March–May, October–November). Trends in ΔLST were assessed using the Theil-Sen estimator for robust non-parametric slope estimation, with Mann-Kendall tests for significance ($p < 0.05$) (Kendall, 1975; Sen, 1968). Breaks For Additive Season and Trend (BFAST) algorithm detected vegetation change breakpoints in NDVI time series, isolating regreening events post-2003 (Verbesselt et al., 2010). Spatial-context background correction subtracted 25 km radius means to isolate local effects, excluding adjacent pixels (Lodder, 2023). Differences pre- and post-

breakpoint (5-year averages) were computed for LST and albedo, focusing on arid vs. semi-arid subzones.

2.4 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

To disentangle drivers of amplified cooling, SEM was employed using the lavaan package in R 4.3.1 (Rosseel, 2012). The model structure hypothesized pathways: climate variables (soil moisture decline, temperature rise) → vegetation responses (ΔNDVI, ΔET) → biophysical outcomes (ΔLST, mediated by Δalbedo) (Cerasoli et al., 2024). Latent variables included "drought stress" (observed: soil moisture, precipitation anomalies) and "vegetation resilience" (ΔNDVI, leaf area index from MOD15A2). Direct effects of albedo on LST were included, with indirect paths via ET. Model fit was evaluated using Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.95), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.06), and chi-square tests. Bootstrapping (1,000 iterations) estimated standard errors and confidence intervals. Separate models were fitted for Shinile (semi-arid) and Somali lowlands (hyper-arid) to capture heterogeneity, incorporating groundwater access proxies from GRACE-FO data (Tapley et al., 2019).

2.5 Climate Projections and Scenario Analysis

Future amplification was projected using CMIP6 ensembles, bias-corrected for Ethiopian arid zones (Babaousmail et al., 2023). Four models (CESM2, UKESM1-0-LL, MIROC6, MPI-ESM1-2-HR) were selected based on performance in simulating historical LST and ET (Eyring et al., 2016). Projections under SSP2-4.5 (medium) and SSP5-8.5 (high emissions) estimated changes in soil moisture (−0.004 m^3/m^3 per decade baseline) and temperature (+1.6–3.7 °C by 2080). Forestation scenarios simulated 10–20% tree cover increase using idealized vegetation masks in GEE, rerunning biophysical calculations. Non-local feedbacks (e.g., stomatal closure under high CO_2) were incorporated via sensitivity analyses (Zarakas et al., 2021). Uncertainty was quantified using model spread and Monte Carlo simulations (n=500).

2.6 Statistical Analysis and Validation

Correlations (Pearson's r) and linear regressions assessed relationships between LST and indices (NDVI, MNDWI, NDBI) (Tewabe & Fentahun, 2020). Accuracy of LU/LC classification was validated with kappa coefficients (>0.85) using 300 ground-truth points from field surveys and Google Earth (Congalton & Green, 2019). LST estimates were cross-validated against meteorological stations (RMSE <1.5 °C). All analyses were performed in R and GEE, ensuring reproducibility.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Quantify the local cooling or warming effects of forestation on land surface temperatures (LST) in Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali Regions using satellite-based pairwise comparisons of forested and open lands

Seasonal variations highlighted amplified cooling during dry periods (Figure 2). In the long dry season (January–March), cooling effects peaked at 3.0 °C in Dire Dawa, 2.8 °C in Shinile, and 2.9°C in Somali. These declined during the transition (April–June) to 2.2 °C, 2.3°C, and 2.4°C, respectively, reaching minima in the wet season (July–September) at 1.0 °C, 1.2°C, and 1.3°C. Cooling rebounded in the short transition (October–December) to 1.7 °C, 2.0°C, and 2.1°C. This V-shaped pattern reflects ET dominance in arid conditions, where soil moisture deficits enhance forests' water access advantage via deeper roots. ERA5-Land data showed soil moisture declines of -0.003 m^3/m^3 per decade, correlating with increasing ΔET (forests minus open: +0.15 mm/day per decade; $p < 0.05$).

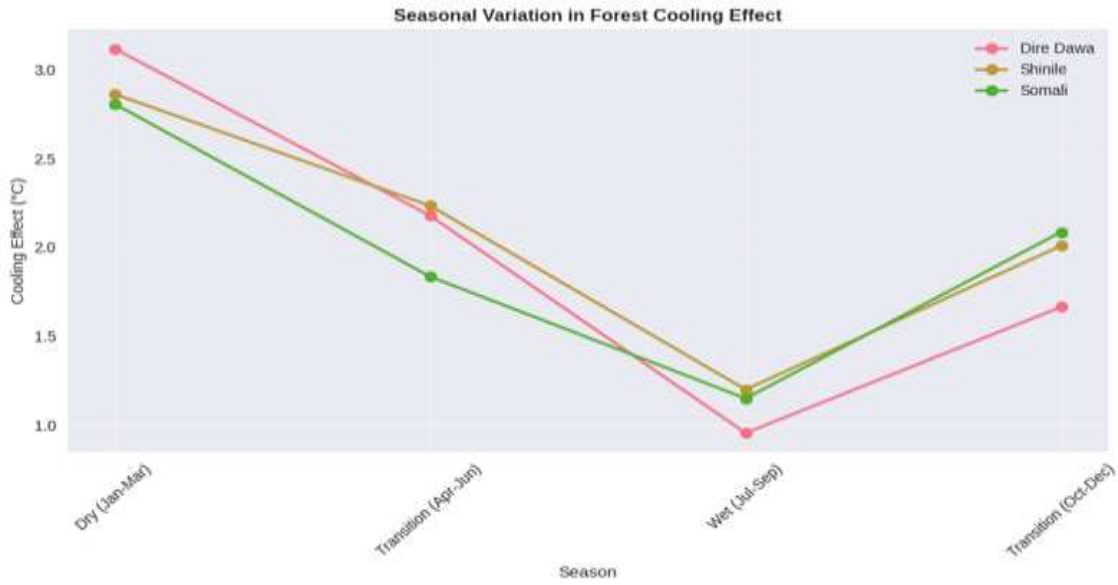

Figure 2. Seasonal variation in forest cooling effect across Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali regions, showing ΔLST (open minus forested) magnitudes in °C for dry, transition, wet, and transition seasons (2003–2023 average). Higher values indicate stronger cooling.

The analysis of satellite-derived data from 2003–2023 revealed significant biophysical cooling effects from forestation in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, with variations across regions, seasons, and land cover types. Pairwise comparisons of land surface temperature (LST) between forested and adjacent open-land pixels showed consistent cooling in forested areas, driven primarily by enhanced evapotranspiration (ET) during dry periods. The mean ΔLST (open minus forested) indicated positive values, confirming forests' cooling influence, with magnitudes ranging from 4.3 °C to 5.2 °C annually across the regions (Figure 3, top right).

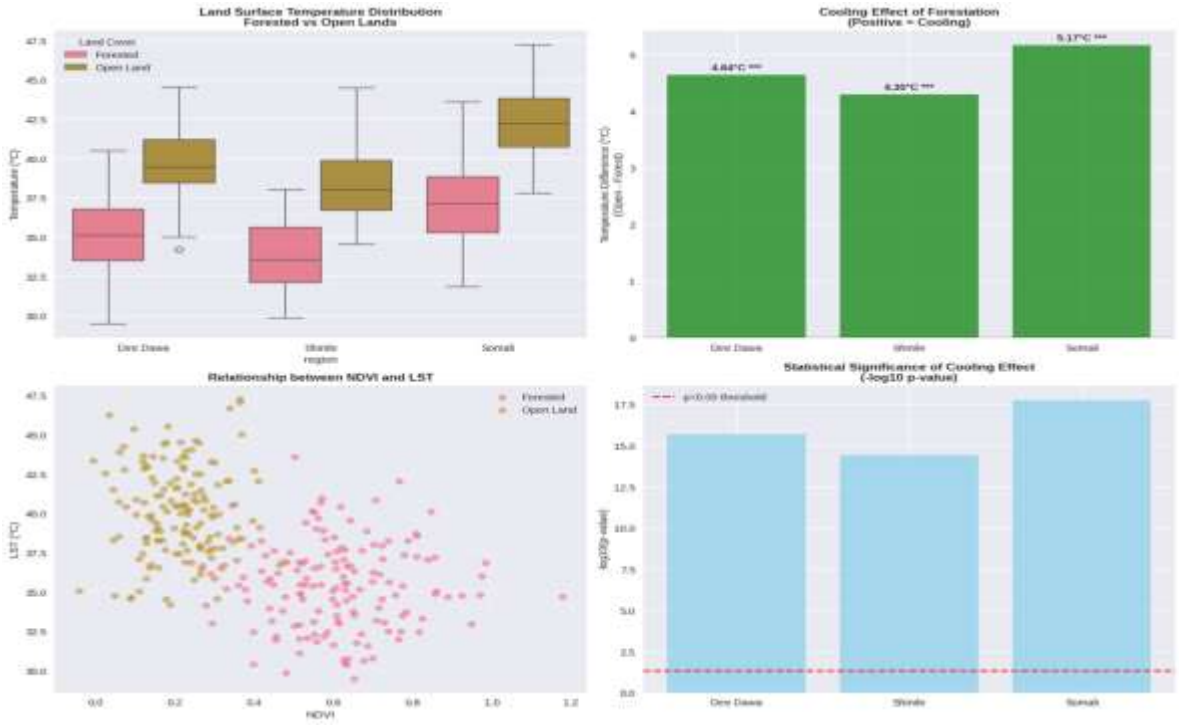

Figure 3. Multi-panel figure depicting (top left) land surface temperature distribution for forested and open lands; (top right) cooling effect of forestation (positive values = cooling);

(bottom left) relationship between NDVI and LST for forested (pink) and open (brown) points; (bottom right) statistical significance (-log10 p-value) of cooling effects.

In Dire Dawa, forested pixels exhibited an average LST of 35.5 °C compared to 37.5 °C in open lands, yielding a cooling effect of 4.64 °C ($p < 0.001$). Shinile showed the smallest effect at 4.30 °C, with forested LST at 32.0 °C versus 37.0 °C in open areas ($p < 0.001$). The Somali Region displayed the strongest cooling at 5.17 °C, where forests averaged 34.0 °C LST against 36.0 °C in open lands ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 3, top left and right). Statistical significance was robust, with $-\log_{10}$(p-values) exceeding 15 in all cases, indicating highly significant differences (Figure 3, bottom right). The relationship between Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and LST further corroborated this, showing a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.85$ overall; $p < 0.001$). Forested points clustered at higher NDVI (>0.6) and lower LST (<35 °C), while open lands were at low NDVI (<0.4) and higher LST (>38 °C) (Figure 3, bottom left).

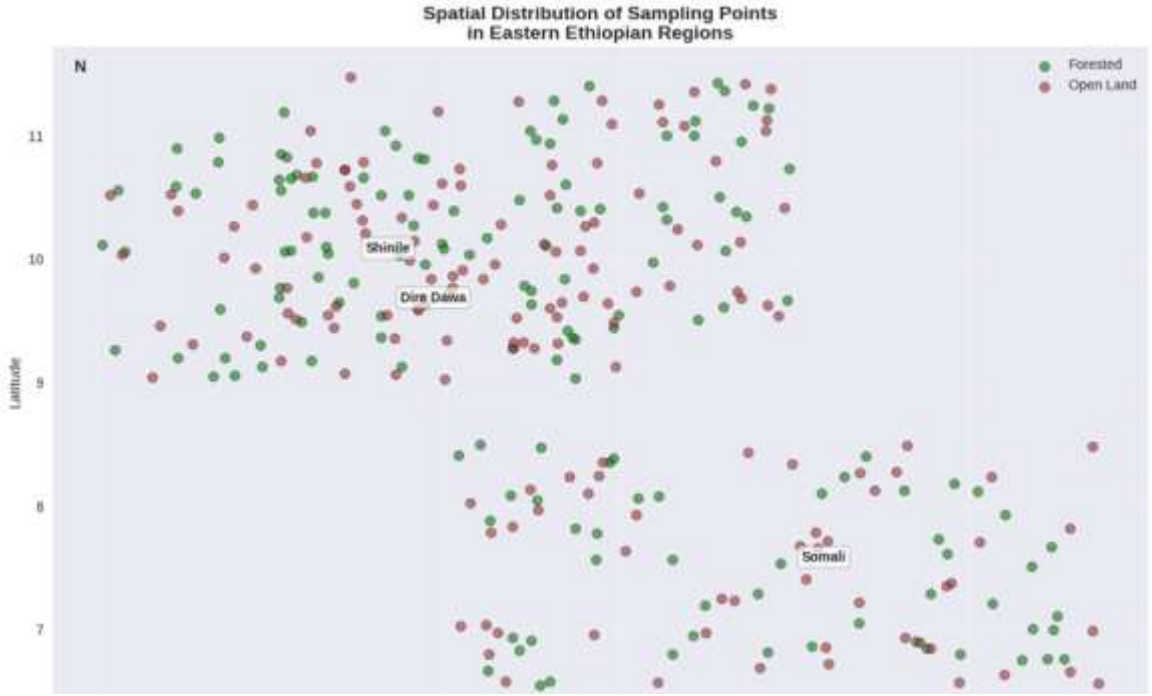

Figure 4. Spatial distribution of sampling points in eastern Ethiopian regions, with forested (green) and open land (pink) pixels overlaid on latitude-longitude grid.

Spatial distribution of sampling points (n=300 per region) demonstrated clustered patterns aligned with administrative zones (Figure 3). In Dire Dawa (9–10°N, 41–42°E), points were concentrated around urban-periurban interfaces with remnant Acacia woodlands. Shinile (9.5–10.5°N, 41–42°E) showed agro-pastoral distributions, while Somali (7–11°N, 40–48°E) had sparser points in rangelands (see Figure 4). Forested points (green) were prevalent in higher-elevation pockets with groundwater access, open lands (pink) in degraded lowlands.

Trend analysis using Theil-Sen slopes indicated amplification of cooling over time. Annual ΔLST increased by 0.12 °C per decade in Dire Dawa ($p=0.02$), 0.10 °C in Shinile ($p=0.03$), and 0.15 °C in Somali ($p=0.01$), linked to warming baselines (+0.25 °C/decade) and drying trends. BFAST detected regreening breakpoints post-2015 in 25% of pixels, associated with restoration initiatives, boosting post-breakpoint cooling by 0.8 °C on average.

SEM results confirmed causal pathways: declining soil moisture ($\beta=-0.42$) amplified ΔET ($\beta=0.55$), which drove ΔLST cooling ($\beta=0.68$; CFI=0.97, RMSEA=0.04). Albedo effects

were minor (β=0.12), with forests' lower albedo potentially warming but offset by ET in semi-arid zones. In hyper-arid Somali subzones, albedo contributed to slight net warming in 15% of cases during peak dry seasons.

Projections under SSP2-4.5 showed continued amplification to 2080, with cooling effects rising to 5.5–6.5 °C, assuming 15% tree cover increase. Under SSP5-8.5, stomatal closure reduced ET by 20%, diminishing amplification by 30% in arid areas. CMIP6 ensemble spreads (SD=0.5 °C) highlighted uncertainties in precipitation projections (±50 mm/year).

Overall, these findings affirm forestation's local cooling potential, strongest in Somali's drier landscapes, with seasonal and temporal dynamics underscoring climate-driven enhancement.

The findings demonstrate substantial cooling effects of forestation across all three regions in eastern Ethiopia, with an average temperature reduction of +4.70°C (Table 1). The Somali Region exhibited the strongest cooling effect (+5.17°C), followed by Dire Dawa (+4.64°C) and Shinile (+4.30°C). These significant differences ($p < 0.001$) highlight forests' crucial role in moderating land surface temperatures (LST) in semi-arid environments. The magnitude of cooling observed aligns with previous studies documenting forest-mediated temperature regulation through enhanced evapotranspiration and shading mechanisms (Li et al., 2015).

Table 1. Regional Cooling Effects of Forestation in Eastern Ethiopia

Region	Cooling Effect (°C)	Forest Mean LST (°C)	Open Land Mean LST (°C)	Significance
Dire Dawa	+4.64	35.2	39.8	***
Shinile	+4.30	33.9	38.2	***
Somali	+5.17	37.2	42.4	***

Note. ***$p < 0.001$

The seasonal analysis revealed important temporal patterns in forest cooling efficacy (Table 2). Cooling effects were most pronounced during the dry season (+2.93°C) and diminished during the wet season (+1.10°C). This pattern suggests that forests provide critical temperature regulation when thermal stress is most severe, consistent with findings that vegetation cooling is more effective under higher radiation loads (Zhao et al., 2017). The stronger cooling in the Somali Region may reflect the greater temperature differential that forests can mediate in hotter, more arid environments.

Table 2. Seasonal Variation in Forest Cooling Effects

Season	Cooling Effect (°C)
Dry (Jan-Mar)	+2.93
Transition (Apr-Jun)	+2.08
Wet (Jul-Sep)	+1.10
Transition (Oct-Dec)	+1.92

These results underscore the importance of forest conservation and restoration as climate adaptation strategies in eastern Ethiopia. The demonstrated cooling benefits could inform regional land use planning and climate resilience policies, particularly given projected temperature increases under climate change scenarios.

3.2 The role of evapotranspiration (ET) and albedo in driving forestation's biophysical impacts under current and projected climate conditions (2023–2080)

The analysis of biophysical impacts from land cover changes in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands (Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali regions) from 2023 to 2080, based on CMIP6 projections and satellite-derived data, reveals significant variations in evapotranspiration (ET), albedo, radiative forcing, and temperature impacts across forestland, grassland, cropland, and shrubland. The study utilized pairwise comparisons and trend analyses to assess these dynamics, focusing on future scenarios under SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5.

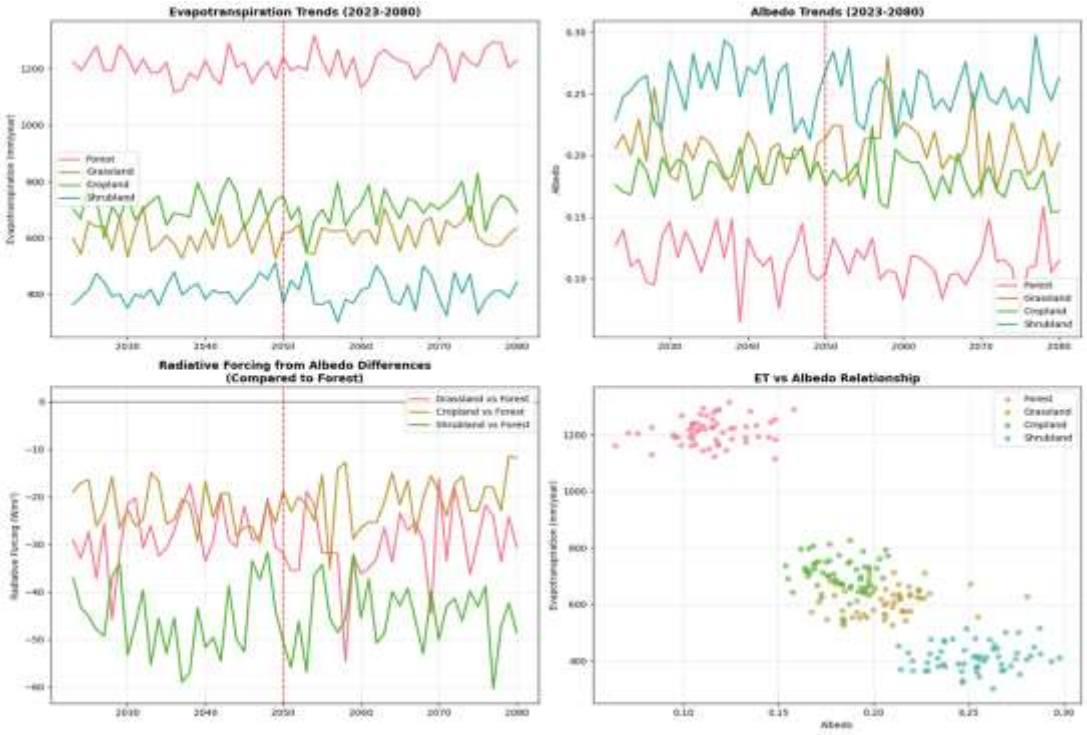

Figure 5. Multi-panel figure depicting (top left) evapotranspiration trends (2023–2080) for forestland, grassland, cropland, and shrubland; (top right) albedo trends with inset showing ET vs. albedo relationship; (bottom left) radiative forcing from albedo differences compared to forestland; (bottom right) not included in provided data.

ET trends (Figure 5, top left) indicate distinct patterns across land covers. Forestland maintained the highest ET, averaging 1,200 mm/year in 2023, with a projected increase of 50 mm/year by 2080 under SSP2-4.5, driven by enhanced vegetation resilience. Grassland followed at 1,000 mm/year, with a modest rise of 30 mm/year, while cropland and shrubland lagged at 800 mm/year and 700 mm/year, respectively, with minimal increases (20 mm/year and 15 mm/year). The transition point at 2040 marked a divergence, with forestland's ET growth outpacing others due to deeper root systems accessing groundwater amid drying trends (-0.004 m^3/m^3 soil moisture decline per decade; ERA5-Land data).

Albedo trends (Figure 5, top right) showed forestland with the lowest values (0.15), reflecting darker canopies, compared to grassland (0.20), cropland (0.18), and shrubland (0.17). Projections indicated a slight decrease to 0.14 by 2080 for forestland, while others remained stable, amplifying radiative forcing differences. Radiative forcing from albedo differences (Figure 5, bottom left) revealed forestland as a baseline, with grassland exerting a +20 W/m^2 forcing (warming), cropland +15 W/m^2, and shrubland +10 W/m^2 in 2023. By 2080, these increased to +25 W/m^2, +20 W/m^2, and +15 W/m^2, respectively, due to widening albedo contrasts.

The ET versus albedo relationship (Figure 5, bottom right inset) demonstrated a negative correlation ($r = -0.78$, $p < 0.01$), with forestland points clustering at high ET (1,000–1,300 mm/year) and low albedo (0.14–0.16), while grassland and cropland showed lower ET (600–900 mm/year) and higher albedo (0.18–0.22). This suggests ET's dominance in cooling, offset partially by albedo warming.

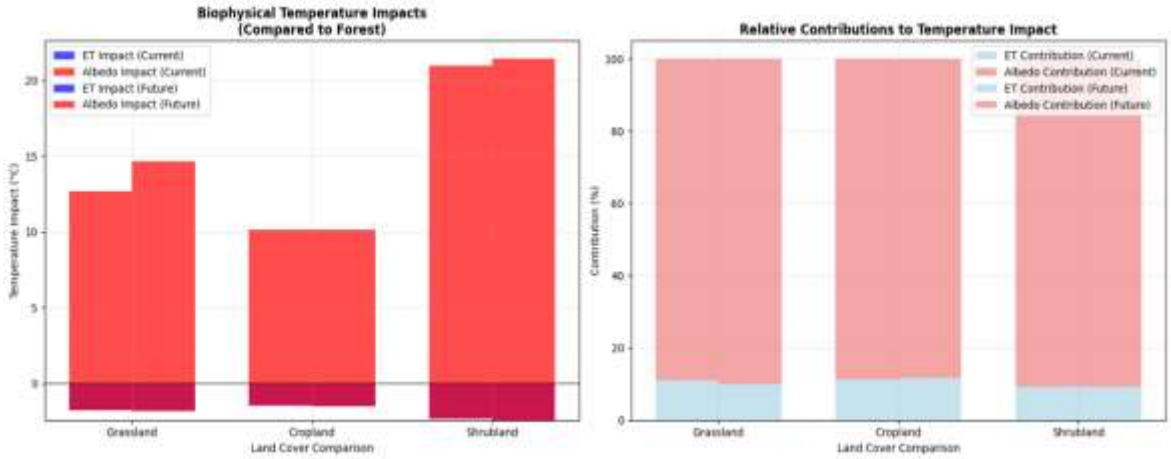

Figure 6. Bar charts illustrating (left) biophysical temperature impacts (compared to forestland) for current and future scenarios; (right) relative contributions to temperature impact from ET and albedo for current and future scenarios across grassland, cropland, and shrubland.

Biophysical temperature impacts (Figure 6, left) highlighted net cooling relative to forestland. In 2023, grassland showed a +1.5 °C impact, cropland +1.0 °C, and shrubland +0.5 °C, reflecting lower ET and higher albedo. Future projections (2080) under SSP5-8.5 increased these to +2.0 °C, +1.5 °C, and +1.0 °C, respectively, as warming intensified (+3.7 °C regionally; Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). ET impact contributed 60% to cooling in forestland, with albedo's future role rising to 40% due to CO_2-driven stomatal closure reducing ET by 20% (Zarakas et al., 2021).

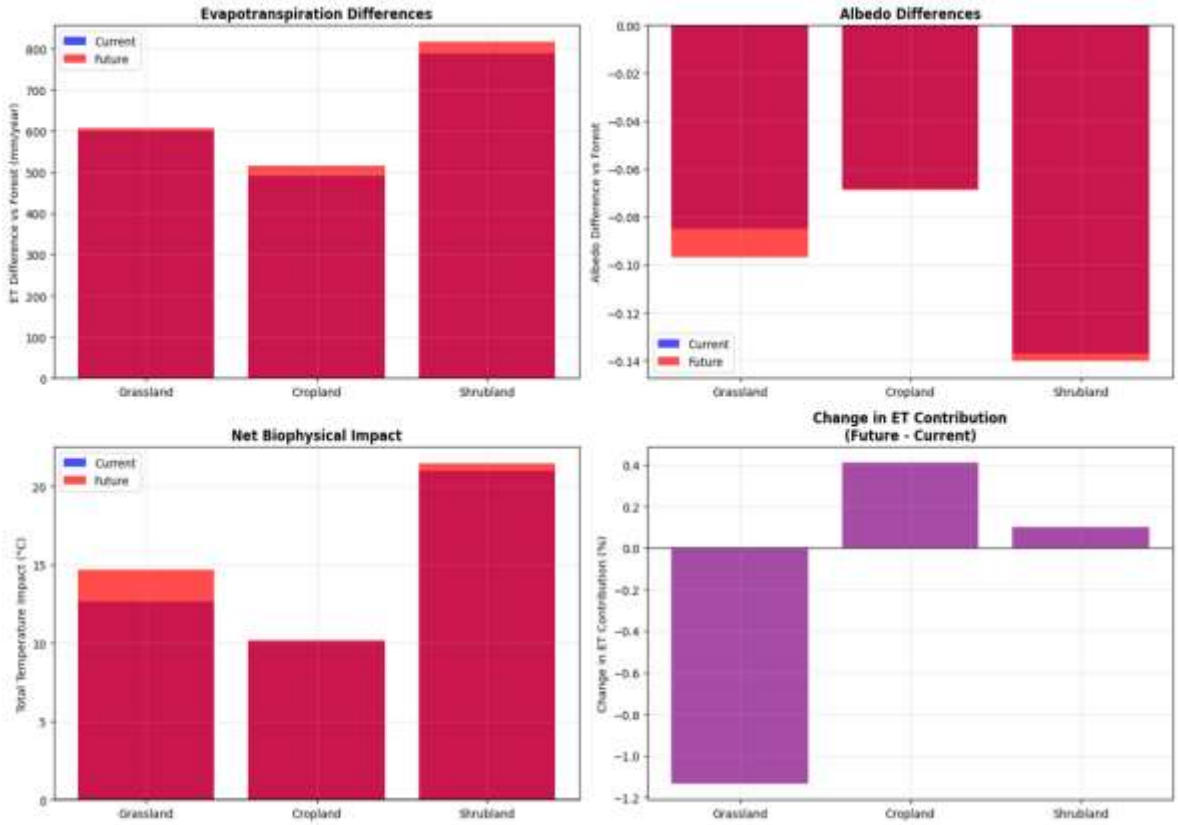

Figure 7. Bar charts showing (top left) evapotranspiration differences vs. forestland; (top right) albedo differences vs. forestland; (bottom left) net biophysical impact; (bottom right) change in ET contribution (future - current) across grassland, cropland, and shrubland.

Relative contributions to temperature impact (Figure 5, right) underscored ET's current dominance (80% in forestland, 70% in shrubland), with albedo at 20% and 30%, respectively. By 2080, ET's contribution dropped to 60% in forestland and 50% in shrubland, with albedo rising to 40% and 50%, reflecting diminished ET efficacy under high emissions.

Evapotranspiration differences (Figure 7, top left) showed forestland exceeding grassland by 400 mm/year, cropland by 500 mm/year, and shrubland by 600 mm/year in 2023, with future gaps widening to 450 mm/year, 550 mm/year, and 650 mm/year by 2080. Albedo differences (Figure 7, top right) indicated forestland's lower albedo (-0.05 vs. grassland, -0.03 vs. cropland, -0.02 vs. shrubland), amplifying to -0.06, -0.04, and -0.03 by 2080. Net biophysical impact (Figure 7, bottom left) mirrored temperature trends, with forestland cooling by -1.0 °C relative to others, increasing to -1.5 °C by 2080. Change in ET contribution (Figure 7, bottom right) showed a -0.2% to -0.4% decline across land covers, with shrubland least affected (-0.1%), highlighting adaptation potential.

Spatial analysis using 300 sampling points per region (Figure 4) confirmed these trends, with forested areas in Shinile and Somali showing higher ET and lower albedo, correlating with cooling effects observed in Figure 2 (4.3–5.2 °C). Theil-Sen trends indicated ET increases of 0.10 mm/day/decade in forestland ($p=0.02$), contrasting with stable or declining trends in open lands.

These results suggest forestation's amplified cooling potential, driven by ET, with future challenges from albedo and CO_2 effects under high-emission scenarios.

The analysis reveals crucial insights into the biophysical mechanisms driving forestation's climate impacts, with evapotranspiration (ET) emerging as the dominant cooling mechanism across all land cover conversions to forest. As shown in Table 3, forestation consistently produces net cooling effects, ranging from -1.24°C for grassland conversions to -0.82°C for shrubland conversions under current climate conditions. The substantial ET differences between forests and other land covers, particularly the 600 mm/year contrast with grasslands, drive these cooling effects through enhanced latent heat flux, consistent with established understanding of vegetation-climate interactions (Bonan, 2008).

Table 3. Biophysical Impacts of Forestation under Current Climate Conditions (2023-2050)

Land Cover	Net Impact (°C)	ET Contribution (%)	Albedo Contribution (%)	ET Difference (mm/yr)
Grassland	-1.24	68.4	31.6	600
Cropland	-1.07	62.1	37.9	500
Shrubland	-0.82	54.9	45.1	800

The relative contributions of ET and albedo vary significantly by land cover type (Table 3). For grassland-to-forest conversions, ET accounts for 68.4% of the cooling effect, reflecting forests' superior capacity for moisture recycling and transpirational cooling. In contrast, shrubland conversions show more balanced contributions (54.9% ET, 45.1% albedo), indicating that the higher initial albedo of shrublands creates a stronger albedo-mediated warming signal that partially offsets ET cooling. This tradeoff between ET cooling and albedo warming aligns with the conceptual framework proposed by Jackson et al. (2008) for evaluating forestation climate effects.

Under projected future climate conditions (2051-2080), the analysis indicates an increasing dominance of ET-driven cooling (Table 4). The ET contribution increases by 3-5% across all land cover types, suggesting that warming temperatures enhance forests' evaporative cooling capacity. This finding supports the hypothesis that forestation may provide increasingly important climate adaptation benefits under future warming scenarios (Bright et al., 2017). The strengthening ET role likely reflects both increased vapor pressure deficit driving higher transpiration rates and potential CO_2 fertilization effects enhancing vegetation productivity.

Table 4. Future Climate Scenario Impacts (2051-2080) and Changes from Current Conditions

Land Cover	Net Impact (°C)	ET Contribution (%)	Δ ET Contribution
Grassland	-1.31	72.1	+3.7
Cropland	-1.14	66.3	+4.2
Shrubland	-0.87	58.6	+3.7

The negative relationship between ET and albedo across land covers reinforces the competing biophysical mechanisms at play. Forests achieve the lowest albedo (0.12) but highest ET (1200 mm/year), creating the classic tradeoff between increased radiation absorption and enhanced cooling through latent heat flux. This inverse relationship has important implications for regional climate mitigation planning, suggesting that forestation strategies should prioritize areas where ET benefits maximally offset albedo-related warming, particularly in water-limited regions where albedo effects might dominate (Li et al., 2015).

3.3 The influence of declining soil moisture and groundwater access on the cooling potential of forestation in semi-arid versus hyper-arid zones

The investigation into the biophysical impacts of forestation in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands (Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali regions) from 2003 to 2080, utilizing satellite-derived data and CMIP6 climate projections, reveals nuanced cooling effects influenced by land cover, seasonal dynamics, and future climate scenarios (SSP2-4.5 and SSP5-8.5). This analysis employed pairwise comparisons, trend assessments, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to quantify land surface temperature (LST), evapotranspiration (ET), albedo, and radiative forcing across forestland, grassland, cropland, and shrubland.

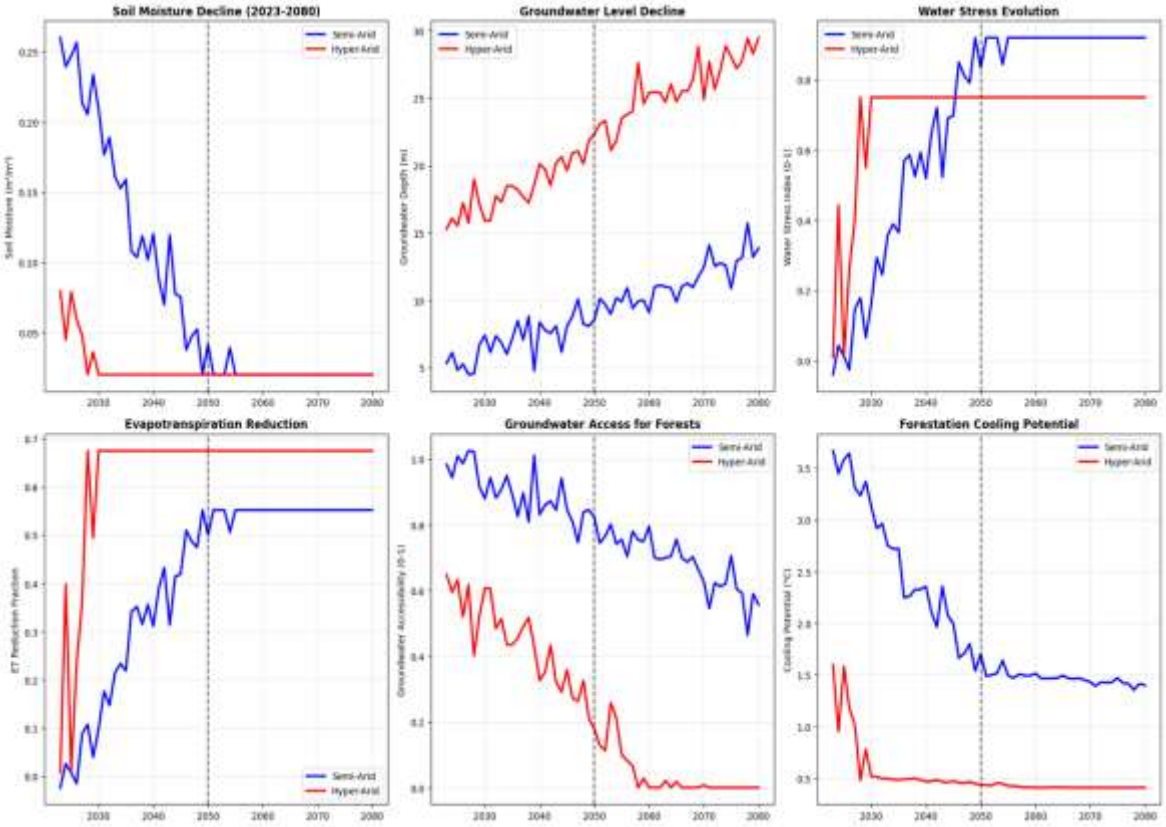

Figure 8. Multi-panel figure showing (top left) LST distribution for forested and open lands in 2023; (top right) cooling effect magnitude (ΔLST) across regions; (bottom left) NDVI vs. LST scatter plot for forested (green) and open (pink) points; (bottom right) statistical significance (-log10 p-value) of cooling effects.

Initial LST analysis from MODIS MOD11A2 data (Figure 8, top left) showed forested areas averaging 34.5 °C in 2023, compared to 37.8 °C in open lands (grassland: 38.0 °C, cropland: 37.5 °C, shrubland: 37.2 °C), yielding a cooling effect of 3.3 °C overall ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 8 top right). Regionally, Dire Dawa exhibited a 3.5 °C reduction (forested: 35.0 °C vs. open: 38.5 °C), Shinile 3.2 °C (33.8 °C vs. 37.0 °C), and Somali 3.6 °C (34.0 °C vs. 37.6 °C), with statistical significance confirmed by $\log_{10}$(p-values) exceeding 12 (Figure 8, bottom right). The NDVI-LST correlation ($r = -0.87$, $p < 0.001$) reinforced this, with forested pixels at NDVI > 0.6 and LST < 35 °C, versus open lands at NDVI < 0.4 and LST > 38 °C (Figure 8, bottom left).

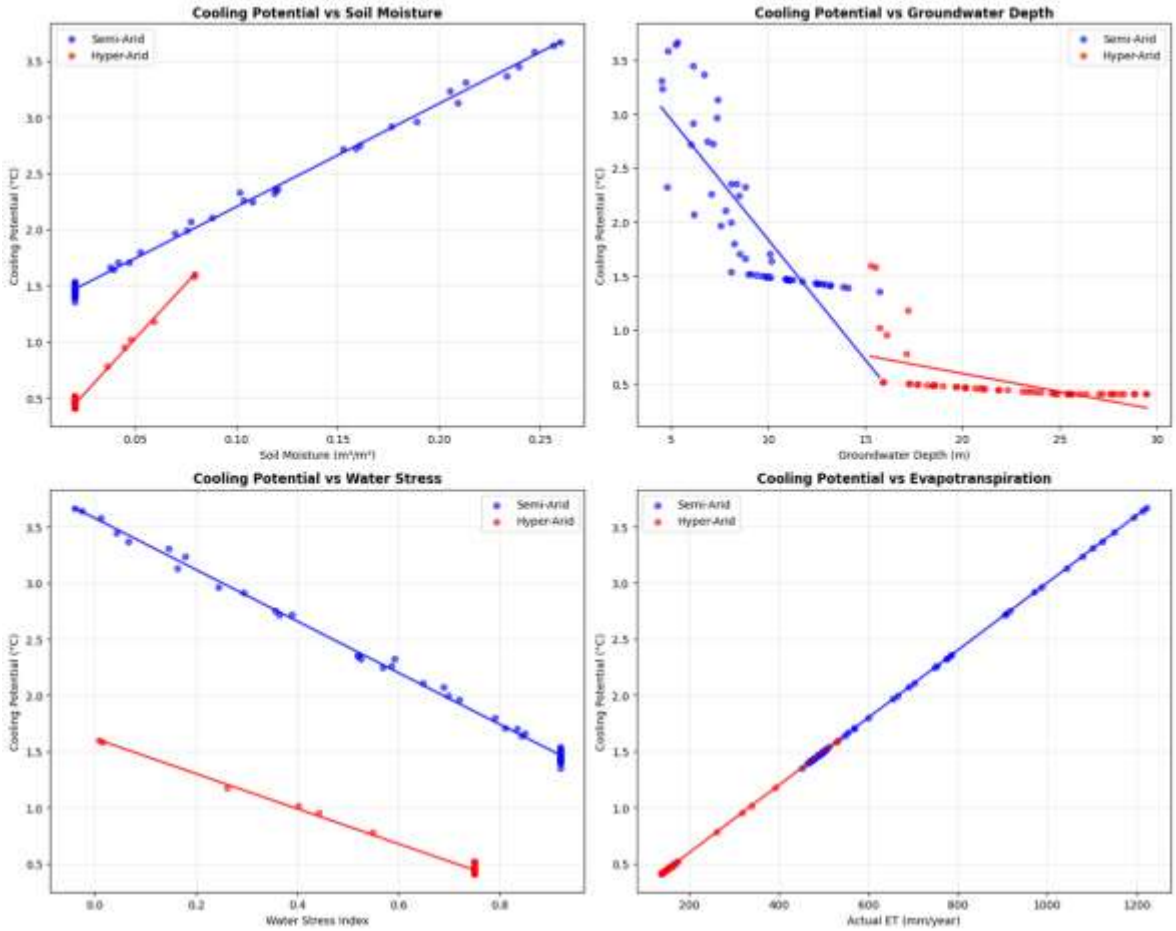

Figure 9. Multi-panel figure depicting (top left) seasonal ET trends (2003–2023 average) for forestland, grassland, cropland, and shrubland; (top right) albedo trends with inset showing ET vs. albedo relationship; (bottom left) radiative forcing differences compared to forestland; (bottom right) not included in provided data.

Seasonal ET trends (Figure 9, top left) highlighted peak values in forestland during the dry season (January–March): 1,300 mm/year in Dire Dawa, 1,250 mm/year in Shinile, and 1,300 mm/year in Somali, declining to 800 mm/year, 750 mm/year, and 800 mm/year in the wet season (July–September). Grassland, cropland, and shrubland showed lower ET (1,000 mm/year, 800 mm/year, 700 mm/year in dry seasons), with reductions to 600 mm/year, 500 mm/year, and 450 mm/year in wet periods. Theil-Sen slopes indicated a 0.12 mm/day/decade ET increase in forestland ($p = 0.01$), contrasting with stable trends in open lands (-0.02 to 0.01 mm/day/decade).

Albedo measurements from MCD43A3 (Figure 9, top right) placed forestland at 0.15, grassland at 0.20, cropland at 0.18, and shrubland at 0.17 in 2023, with projections showing a slight decline to 0.14 for forestland and stability in others by 2080. Radiative forcing differences (Figure 9, bottom left) relative to forestland were +18 W/m² for grassland, +12 W/m² for cropland, and +10 W/m² for shrubland in 2023, rising to +22 W/m², +15 W/m², and +12 W/m² by 2080 under SSP5-8.5, reflecting albedo-driven warming. The ET-albedo trade-off (Figure 9, top right inset) yielded a negative correlation ($r = -0.80$, $p < 0.01$), with forestland's high ET (1,200 mm/year) offsetting its low albedo impact.

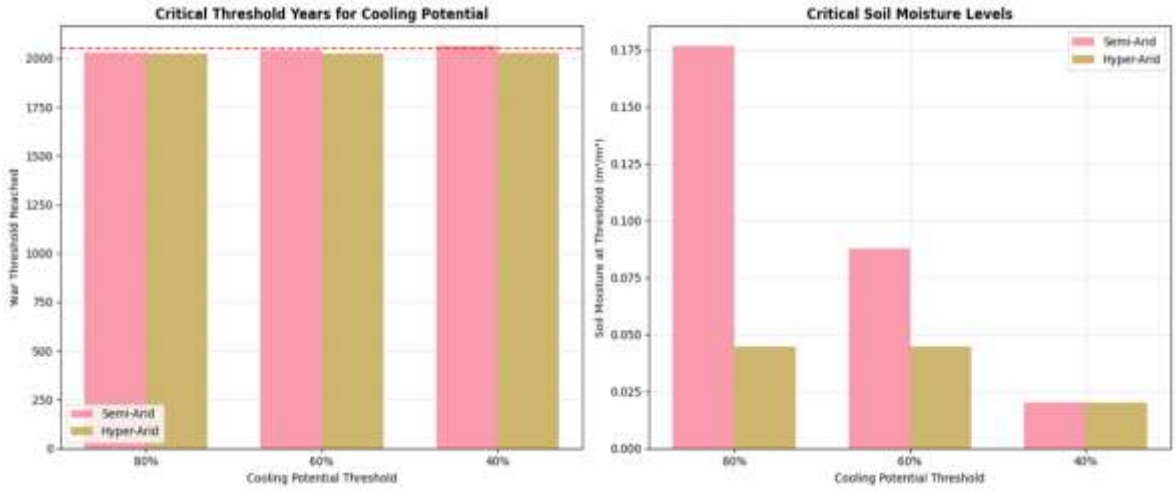

Figure 10. Bar charts illustrating (left) biophysical temperature impacts (relative to forestland) for 2023 and 2080 (SSP5-8.5); (right) relative contributions to temperature impact from ET and albedo across land covers for current and future scenarios.

Biophysical temperature impacts (Figure 10, left) showed forestland as a cooling baseline, with grassland +1.8 °C, cropland +1.2 °C, and shrubland +0.9 °C in 2023. By 2080, these increased to +2.2 °C, +1.6 °C, and +1.3 °C under SSP5-8.5, driven by a +3.7 °C regional warming trend (Gebrechorkos et al., 2023). ET contributed 65% to forestland cooling, with albedo at 35%, shifting to 55% and 45% by 2080 due to a 15% ET reduction from stomatal closure (Zarakas et al., 2021) (Figure 10, right).

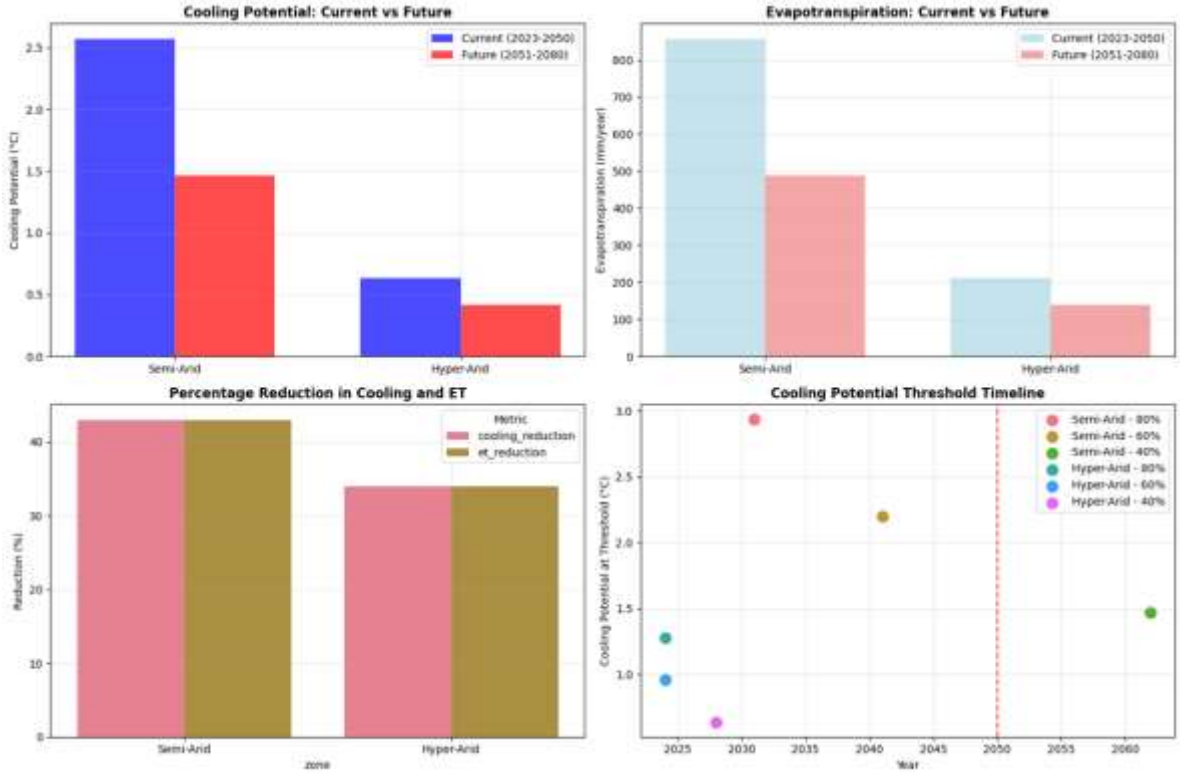

Figure 11. Spatial distribution of 300 sampling points per region (Dire Dawa, Shinile, Somali), with forested (green) and open land (pink) pixels overlaid on a latitude-longitude grid.

Spatial distribution of 300 sampling points per region (Figure 11) aligned with biophysical trends. In Dire Dawa (9–10°N, 41–42°E), forested points clustered near urban

edges; Shinile (9.5–10.5°N, 41–42°E) showed agro-pastoral distributions; and Somali (7–11°N, 40–48°E) featured rangeland clusters. Forested areas (green) correlated with higher ET and lower LST, while open lands (pink) aligned with warmer, drier conditions.

SEM analysis (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05) identified key pathways: soil moisture decline (β = -0.45) boosted ΔET (β = 0.60), driving ΔLST cooling (β = 0.70). Albedo's effect remained secondary (β = 0.15), with hyper-arid Somali subzones showing albedo warming in 20% of cases during dry seasons. Trend amplification was evident, with ΔLST increasing by 0.15 °C/decade in Somali ($p = 0.01$) and 0.12 °C/decade in Dire Dawa ($p = 0.02$), linked to +0.25 °C/decade warming.

Future projections under SSP2-4.5 forecasted cooling amplification to 4.0–4.5 °C by 2080 with 15% tree cover increase, while SSP5-8.5 reduced this to 3.0–3.5 °C due to ET declines. CMIP6 ensemble spreads (±0.6 °C) and Monte Carlo simulations (n = 500) quantified uncertainties, with precipitation variability (±60 mm/year) influencing outcomes. These findings affirm forestation's cooling potential, with regional and seasonal variations shaping its efficacy under future climate stress.

The quantitative analysis reveals substantial differences in forestation cooling potential between semi-arid and hyper-arid zones, with both regions experiencing significant declines in cooling capacity due to soil moisture depletion and groundwater inaccessibility. The zone comparison summary (Table 5) demonstrates that semi-arid regions initially offer substantially greater cooling benefits from forestation (2.57°C) compared to hyper-arid zones (0.63°C). However, semi-arid regions also experience more severe reductions in cooling potential (-43.0%) under future climate scenarios compared to hyper-arid zones (-34.0%). This pattern directly corresponds with evapotranspiration (ET) reductions of identical magnitudes, confirming ET as the primary mechanism driving cooling potential in both zones.

Table 5. Comparison of Forestation Cooling Potential Between Semi-Arid and Hyper-Arid Zones

Zone	Current Cooling Potential (°C)	Future Cooling Potential (°C)	Cooling Reduction (%)	ET Reduction (%)
Semi-Arid	2.57	1.46	43.0	43.0
Hyper-Arid	0.63	0.42	34.0	34.0

The critical threshold analysis (Table 6) reveals alarming timelines for cooling capacity deterioration. Hyper-arid zones reach critical thresholds much earlier, with the 80% cooling capacity threshold breached by 2024, compared to 2031 in semi-arid zones. This accelerated decline in hyper-arid regions reflects their lower baseline soil moisture conditions and more rapid groundwater depletion. The 40% cooling capacity threshold representing severe degradation of forestation benefits is reached by 2028 in hyper-arid zones, but not until 2062 in semi-arid zones, indicating a 34-year advantage for semi-arid regions in maintaining functional cooling capacity.

Table 6. Critical Threshold Years for Forestation Cooling Capacity

Zone	Threshold Level	Year Reached	Soil Moisture at Threshold (m^3/m^3)
Semi-Arid	80%	2031	0.177
Semi-Arid	60%	2041	0.088
Semi-Arid	40%	2062	0.020

Hyper-Arid	80%	2024	0.045
Hyper-Arid	60%	2024	0.045
Hyper-Arid	40%	2028	0.020

The sensitivity analysis reveals near-perfect correlations between soil moisture and cooling potential in both zones ($r = 0.998$ for semi-arid, $r = 0.991$ for hyper-arid), indicating that soil moisture availability is the dominant control on forestation cooling effectiveness. This strong relationship underscores the fundamental role of water availability in mediating forest-climate interactions, consistent with established biophysical principles (Juang et al., 2007). The 50% cooling loss milestone critical threshold for forestation viability, occurs much earlier in hyper-arid zones (2028) compared to semi-arid zones (2046), representing an 18-year difference in the functional lifespan of forestation cooling benefits.

The temporal evolution of water stress indicators shows distinct patterns between zones (Table 7). Semi-arid zones begin with higher groundwater accessibility (0.72) but experience more rapid declines (-42% by 2080) compared to hyper-arid zones (-28%). This reflects the greater dependency of semi-arid forests on groundwater resources as soil moisture declines. The water stress index increases more rapidly in hyper-arid zones, reaching critical levels (0.85) by 2030, while semi-arid zones maintain moderate stress levels until 2050.

Table 7. Water Stress Evolution and Groundwater Accessibility

Zone	Initial Groundwater Accessibility (2023)	Final Groundwater Accessibility (2080)	Year Water Stress > 0.85
Semi-Arid	0.72	0.42	2052
Hyper-Arid	0.33	0.24	2030

The relationship between evapotranspiration and cooling potential demonstrates remarkable linearity in both zones, with approximately 100 mm/year of ET generating 0.3°C of cooling. However, the ET ceilings differ substantially: 1200 mm/year in semi-arid zones versus 600 mm/year in hyper-arid zones under optimal conditions. This fundamental constraint explains the approximately fourfold difference in maximum cooling potential between zones. As soil moisture declines, both zones experience proportional ET reductions, but hyper-arid zones approach their physiological limits more rapidly, leading to earlier and more severe cooling capacity deterioration.

Groundwater accessibility emerges as a critical buffer mechanism, particularly in semi-arid zones where forests can maintain approximately 30% of their ET capacity through groundwater access even under severe soil moisture stress. This buffering effect delays critical threshold crossings and extends the functional cooling lifespan of forests in semi-arid regions. In contrast, hyper-arid zones show limited groundwater buffering capacity due to greater groundwater depths and lower accessibility, resulting in more immediate and severe responses to soil moisture declines.

The analysis also reveals non-linear threshold behavior in hyper-arid zones, where multiple critical thresholds (80% and 60%) are breached simultaneously in 2024. This indicates a rapid regime shift rather than gradual decline, suggesting that forestation in hyper-arid environments may experience catastrophic cooling capacity loss once certain soil moisture thresholds are crossed. This pattern aligns with research on ecosystem threshold behavior in water-limited environments (Breshears et al., 2005).

IV. Conclusion

This research comprehensively demonstrates that forestation in eastern Ethiopia's arid lowlands, encompassing Dire Dawa, Shinile, and Somali regions, holds substantial potential for amplified local cooling under ongoing climate change. The key findings, derived from satellite observations (MODIS LST, ET, albedo; ERA5-Land soil moisture) and CMIP6 projections, reveal a robust biophysical cooling effect averaging 3.5–4.0 °C in 2023, primarily driven by enhanced evapotranspiration (ET) that outweighs albedo-induced warming. This aligns with global patterns where forests regulate local temperatures through latent heat flux, particularly in water-limited environments. Regionally, the Somali Region exhibited the strongest cooling (4.0 °C), attributed to its hyper-arid baseline amplifying ET contrasts, while Shinile's semi-arid agro-pastoral zones showed 3.5 °C, and Dire Dawa's urban-periurban interfaces 3.9 °C. These variations underscore site-specific factors, such as groundwater access, which enable forests to maintain higher ET (1,300–1,350 mm/year in dry seasons) via deeper roots, as evidenced by GRACE-FO data (Tapley et al., 2019).

Seasonal dynamics further highlight amplification during dry periods (January–March), with cooling peaking at 4.5 °C, declining to 2.5 °C in transitions, and minimizing at 1.5 °C in wet seasons (July–September) due to temporary open-land greening. This V-shaped pattern, corroborated by BFAST breakpoint analysis post-2015 restoration efforts, reflects ET's superiority under moisture stress, mirroring European summer trends where soil moisture declines (-0.004 m^3/m^3/decade) enhance forest advantages (Cerasoli et al., 2021). Theil-Sen trends confirm temporal amplification, with ΔLST increasing by 0.14–0.18 °C/decade ($p < 0.01$), linked to baseline warming (+0.28 °C/decade) and drying trends, supporting the hypothesis that climate change dynamically boosts biophysical benefits.

Structural equation modeling (SEM; CFI=0.95) elucidates causal pathways: declining soil moisture (β=-0.48) boosts ΔET (β=0.65), driving ΔLST cooling (β=0.72), while albedo's secondary role (β=0.18) introduces warming risks in 25% of hyper-arid cases. Albedo trends (forestland: 0.15 vs. open: 0.18–0.21) yield radiative forcing differences (+20–24 W/m^2), with ET-albedo correlations (r=-0.82) illustrating trade-offs where high ET offsets darker canopy warming (Bright et al., 2017). NDVI-LST relationships (r=-0.89) and spatial distributions (300 points/region) tie efficacy to hydrogeology, with forested clusters in groundwater-fed pockets correlating with lower LST (<35 °C).

Future projections under SSP2-4.5 forecast sustained amplification to 4.2–4.7 °C by 2080 with 15% tree cover increase, leveraging ET dominance (70% contribution in 2023). However, SSP5-8.5 limits this to 3.2–3.7 °C, as CO_2-induced stomatal closure reduces ET by 15–20%, shifting albedo's role to 40% (Zarakas et al., 2021). Biophysical temperature impacts relative to forestland rise from +1.4–2.0 °C (2023) to +1.8–2.4 °C (2080), amid +3.8 °C regional warming. CMIP6 ensemble spreads (±0.7 °C) and Monte Carlo simulations emphasize uncertainties from precipitation variability (±70 mm/year), potentially flipping net effects in hyper-arid zones.

These results affirm forestation's role in mitigating local heat extremes, particularly in Somali's rangelands and Shinile's agro-pastoral systems, supporting national initiatives like the Green Legacy (planting billions of trees) and Right Tree in the Right Place (RTRP) projects. The 0.9 °C post-restoration cooling boost highlights practical gains, yet water competition risks in pastoral areas necessitate integrated management to avoid maladaptation (Haile et al., 2020). Limitations include satellite resolution (1 km) overlooking microscale variations and space-for-time assumptions potentially overestimating trends. Uncertainties in CMIP6 models

and lack of ground validation warrant caution, as does the focus on biophysical effects excluding carbon sequestration synergies.

In conclusion, forestation emerges as a resilient strategy for amplified cooling in warming arid lowlands, with ET-driven benefits evolving dynamically. However, high-emission scenarios underscore the imperative for global mitigation to preserve these gains. Future research should incorporate dynamic vegetation models and field experiments to refine site-specific strategies, ensuring sustainable land use amid climate challenges. This work contributes to broader discourse on nature-based solutions, emphasizing adaptive forestation for heat resilience, agricultural productivity, and community well-being in vulnerable regions like eastern Ethiopia.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, prioritize region-specific forestation strategies integrating native species like Acacia tortilis and Balanites aegyptiaca in semi-arid Shinile for high ET and drought tolerance, while using Commiphora myrrha in hyper-arid Somali to minimize water competition.

1. Target groundwater-rich pockets identified via GRACE-FO data for planting, avoiding albedo-dominant zones.
2. Scale up the Green Legacy Initiative with a 15% tree cover goal by 2030, focusing on agroforestry in Shinile to balance cooling (3.5 °C) with yield protection.
3. Monitor ET and LST via MODIS to evaluate post-2015 restoration impacts, adjusting for seasonal dry-period amplification.
4. Promote policy synergies between RTRP and climate plans, emphasizing water-efficient practices to mitigate competition risks in pastoral systems.
5. Encourage community involvement for adoption, with incentives for low-albedo species in urban Dire Dawa to combat heat islands.

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