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Groundwater Guardians: Linking Research, Policy, and People to Save Springs

Intan Nur Aisah[1], Dito Hardiansyah[2]

[1,2]Department of Livestock Agribusiness, Politeknik Pembangunan Pertanian Malang, Malang 65215, Indonesia

Corresponding author: *intanaisyah1803@gmail.com*

Synopsis

Kulon Progo Regency in Indonesia is home to a rich variety of geological features, an underground landscape that holds great promise for water resources like natural springs. Yet, in 2019, the community of Girimulyo Subdistrict faced a troubling clean water shortage, highlighting a growing need for smarter water management. To better understand where water is available and how it flows, researchers turned to modern mapping tools.

Using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, along with field surveys and measurements of spring water flow, scientists set out to chart the location and behavior of springs across the region. They used ArcGIS software and a method called Nearest Neighbor Analysis to uncover patterns in the data. What they found was surprising: springs in Kulon Progo do not follow a regular pattern; they appear scattered randomly across the landscape. The strength of each spring's water flow also varied, depending on the land's slope and the type of soil.

These findings are not just academic. They offer a practical foundation for improving how the region manages its water; a critical step toward preventing future water crises and ensuring clean water access for all. Want to know more? Let's read this!


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Mapping Springs to Secure Water Futures in Kulon Progo

As global populations grow, climate patterns shift, and land use continues to change, it has become one of the most urgent challenges of our time to manage freshwater resources. This issue hits close to home in places like Kulon Progo Regency, a region in Indonesia's Special Region of Yogyakarta. Known for its unique and varied geology, Kulon Progo is rich in natural water sources, such as rivers, reservoirs, and especially springs. In fact, local government records count at least seven major springs in the area, which play a crucial role in providing water for both household use and farming.

Yet, despite this natural wealth, the region is not immune to water scarcity. In 2019, the Girimulyo Subdistrict of Kulon Progo Regency faced a serious freshwater shortage. The crisis revealed an underlying vulnerability: while the springs may be present, we don't fully understand how they are distributed across the landscape, or how stable they are over time. The location and behavior of springs depend on a number of factors, including land elevation, vegetation cover, and underground rock layers. When these factors go unmonitored, water availability can become unpredictable.

That's where technology comes in. Geographic Information System (GIS) tools offer powerful ways to explore how water sources like springs are spread out geographically. By combining elevation models, soil maps, and land use data, we can build a clearer picture of where springs emerge and how they behave. One method we use is called Nearest Neighbor Analysis, which is a way to tell whether springs are scattered randomly, clustered in groups, or spread out evenly. These patterns can reveal hidden rules of nature and help guide smarter decisions.

Our study focuses on identifying and classifying the springs of Girimulyo based on their water output, how they emerge from the ground, and whether they flow year-round or seasonally. It also maps their locations and analyzes their spatial arrangement. The goal? To support sustainable water management in this hilly, rural region and to ensure that communities have reliable access to water, even in the face of future environmental changes.

Why Springs Cluster in Pendoworejo: What the Landscape Reveals?

Springs aren't scattered evenly across the landscape of Girimulyo; they tend to group together, especially in Pendoworejo Village. This clustering pattern isn't random; it's shaped by the region's natural geography. Scientists studying spring distribution in hilly areas have long noted that factors like slope steepness, elevation, and the presence of fractures in underground rock layers all play a role in determining where water surfaces.

Pendoworejo, sitting at an elevation of 500 to 1000 meters above sea level, has two important features working in its favor: it's part of an upper watershed area and still retains much of its original vegetation cover. These conditions encourage rainwater to seep into the ground, rather than run off the surface, a condition that recharges underground aquifers that feed springs. Geologists refer to areas like this as "spring belts," typically found at the base of hills, where underground water naturally re-emerges.

This pattern echoes findings of several previous studies in the Himalayas, where researchers observed that springs tend to form in specific elevation zones linked to where most groundwater recharge happens.

On the other hand, southern and southwestern parts of Girimulyo are much drier in terms of spring activity. This could be due to the geology: layers of dense rock or compacted clay don't let water pass through easily, making it difficult for springs to form. Previous studies across Java have also shown that land use plays a big part. In areas where forests have been replaced by farms or settlements, the number of springs has declined sharply, by as much as 40%. That's a warning sign for Girimulyo, where forest encroachment and land conversion are on the rise.

Random or Clustered? What Spring Patterns Tell Us About the Land?

To better understand how springs are arranged across Girimulyo, we used a method called Average Nearest Neighbor (ANN) analysis, a statistical tool that checks whether features on a map are randomly scattered, grouped together, or evenly spaced. In this case, the analysis of 19 spring locations revealed a pattern that's surprisingly close to random. Unlike fault-dominated terrains, Kulon Progo's underground structure is more complex and varied, shaped mainly by layers of sedimentary rock rather than active tectonic forces. In Yogyakarta, it's the sedimentary layering, not major faults, that plays the bigger role in forming aquifers. In short, the "random" spring pattern seen here reflects a more chaotic underground world, where water paths are shaped by subtle shifts in rock and soil, rather than the dramatic lines of fault zones.

How Much Water Do Springs Really Provide? A Look at Discharge and Aquifers

Not all springs are created equal, some barely trickle, while others gush. In Girimulyo, the amount of water flowing from individual springs, known as discharge, ranges widely from as little as 0.05 liters per second to as much as 6.52 liters per second. Most springs (a striking 84%) fall into the low-discharge category, delivering less than 1 liter per second. This trend mirrors findings from the East African highlands, where low-discharge springs dominate due to the region's limited aquifer permeability.

But there's one standout: Point 19. With a discharge rate of 6.52 liters per second, it's an outlier. What makes this spring different? We suspect that the spring at Point 19 taps into a confined aquifer, which is an underground water source trapped between layers of impermeable rock. The evidence? It shows signs of artesian flow, where water rises to the surface under pressure, without the need for pumping. This is exactly the kind of phenomenon described by hydrogeologist József Tóth (1963), who showed that high-pressure groundwater from elevated recharge zones can surface naturally when confined.

Interestingly, all 19 springs flow year-round. That makes them "perennial" springs, suggesting that the region benefits from a stable and continuous groundwater recharge system. Such consistency is typically linked to deep, fractured aquifers, which is underground systems common in mountainous tropical regions.

When it comes to how water escapes the ground, most of these springs emerge from natural depressions in the land, which is a classic behavior for unconfined aquifers where gravity drives the flow.

Point 19, again the exception, breaks through under pressure, confirming its artesian nature.
This condition is common in landscapes with layered geology, where water moves through permeable layers but is held in place by denser, impermeable rock above and below.

Soil and Slope: What the Land Tells Us About Water?

In the hilly terrain of Girimulyo, where elevations climb between 500 and 1,000 meters, the landscape plays a major role in how much water springs can deliver. Recent analysis shows that both the shape of the land and the type of soil covering it significantly influence spring flow.

The Point 19 spring with the highest water output (6.52 liters per second) is located in an area dominated by Nitosol soils, which are deep, clay-rich, and highly porous. These qualities make them excellent at holding onto rainwater and slowly releasing it into underground reservoirs that feed springs.

On the contrary, areas with Lithosol soils, the thin, rocky, and poor at retaining moisture, which tend to produce only weak springs, often with flows below 0.1 liters per second. The contrast shown by the two soil types highlighted that soil depth and porosity are key to spring productivity in mountainous regions.

So, how can this knowledge help communities manage water more sustainably?
We suggest two main strategies:

1. Protect recharge zones in areas with Nitosol soils, where the land naturally supports groundwater replenishment. Keeping these zones intact, especially by preserving forest cover, which helps ensure a steady supply of spring water.
2. Build reservoirs in areas with Lithosol soils. Since these soils can't store much water, creating small reservoirs or tanks can help collect rainwater and reduce shortages during the dry season.

These two approaches call for integrated land, soil, and water management with "hydroecological" perspective, to be especially implemented in regions where rainfall and water supply can vary dramatically throughout the year.

The Future of Spring Research: Why Mapping Water Sources Matters More Than Ever?

Springs aren't just water sources; they're lifelines. They support ecosystems, provide clean water for drinking and farming, and sustain biodiversity. As our climate changes and human activities reshape the land, the need to understand where springs are, how they function, and what threatens them is more urgent than ever.

Future research into spring systems should go beyond mapping locations. We need to look closely at how factors like urban growth, changing land use, agriculture, and climate variability influence where springs appear, how much water they provide, and whether that water is safe. Only by understanding these complex relationships can we plan for a water-secure future.

The path forward lies in integrated science. By bringing together experts in hydrology, geospatial analysis, climate science, and social research, we can develop a deeper and more accurate picture of how spring systems behave. Long-term studies and computer modeling will be key to predicting how springs might respond to rising temperatures, shifting rainfall, and growing demand for water.

But research alone isn't enough.

What's needed is action. Local and regional governments should use scientific findings to shape smart, adaptive policies. These might include protecting recharge zones, limiting development in sensitive areas, and regulating groundwater extraction. Such policies work best when they're part of broader environmental and spatial planning strategies that look at the whole landscape.

Equally important is community involvement. Springs often hold deep cultural value and are central to the identity and history of local communities. Public education, participatory mapping, and citizen-led monitoring efforts can help people reconnect with their natural water sources. When local residents are empowered to protect springs, conservation efforts are far more likely to succeed.

Collaboration will also be key. Academic institutions, environmental organizations, and government agencies must work together in sharing data, ideas, and responsibilities. Researchers should strive to publish their work in open-access formats and engage with local communities at every step, from fieldwork to final recommendations.

Lastly, each of us has a role to play. Whether it's supporting forest protection, using water wisely, or joining a local conservation initiative, every action counts. Springs are part of our natural infrastructure; once they're lost, they're hard to replace.

In the end, protecting our springs means protecting our future. Through science, policy, and people-powered action, we can ensure that these quiet sources of life continue to flow for generations to come

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Short Author's Biographies

Intan Nur Aisah is a student at the Politeknik Pembangunan Pertanian Malang, majoring in Livestock Agribusiness. With a passion for sustainable rural development, Intan is exploring how spatial technologies like GIS (Geographic Information Systems) can help communities better understand and manage their natural water sources. Her latest research focuses on mapping spring distribution in Kulon Progo, aiming to turn data into real-world solutions for water resilience in hilly regions.

Dito Hardiansyah studies Livestock Agribusiness at the Politeknik Pembangunan Pertanian Malang, where he is involved in research that combines agriculture, environment, and geospatial science. Fascinated by how landscapes influence water flow, Dito uses spatial analysis tools to identify patterns in spring locations and help inform local water management practices. His work highlights the power of science and technology in addressing everyday challenges faced by rural communities.