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Compositional Data Analysis in Environmental Science

Yanna Liang*

Department of Economics and Management, Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Lanzhou, China

Introduction

Environmental science is a diverse and complex field that deals with the study of the natural world and its interactions with human activities. To understand environmental phenomena and assess their impact on ecosystems, researchers often rely on various forms of data. Compositional Data Analysis (CoDA) is a powerful statistical approach that has found increasing relevance in environmental science. This technique is particularly valuable when working with data that represents proportions or parts of a whole, which is common in environmental research. In this essay, we will explore the applications of Compositional Data Analysis in environmental science, highlighting its significance and advantages in addressing key research questions. Compositional data in environmental science typically represent the partitioning of a whole into various components. For instance, the composition of soil samples may include the percentages of sand, silt and clay, while water quality data can consist of proportions of different chemical compounds. Such data is inherently constrained since the components must sum to 100%. Traditional statistical methods, such as linear regression or ANOVA, are not suitable for the analysis of compositional data because they ignore these constraints [1].

Description

Compositional Data Analysis offers a range of applications in environmental science, which include but are not limited. In sedimentology, researchers analyze the composition of sediments to understand their origin and environmental history. CoDA techniques can help in identifying the sources of sediments in riverbeds or ocean floors, which is crucial for managing erosion and pollution control. Soil composition data is a classic example of compositional data. By using CoDA, scientists can investigate the relationship between soil composition and crop yield, helping farmers make informed decisions about fertilization. Environmental scientists often measure the composition of chemical compounds in water samples. CoDA is valuable for identifying trends and associations between these compounds, making it possible to pinpoint sources of contamination. Compositional data analysis can also be applied to biodiversity assessments. Researchers can investigate the composition of species in ecosystems and evaluate how land use changes or climate shifts affect biodiversity [2,3].

The primary advantage of CoDA in environmental science is that it respects the constraints of compositional data, ensuring that the results are meaningful and interpretable. Compositional data analysis guarantees that the components add up to a constant, providing a more realistic representation of the system under investigation. In contrast, traditional analysis methods often ignore this constraint, leading to biased or incorrect interpretations. CoDA offers various transformation techniques to address the "closure" constraint. The most common method is the centered log-ratio (clr) transformation, which allows researchers to perform standard statistical analyses on the transformed data. Compositional data analysis can handle multiple components simultaneously. This is particularly useful when dealing with complex environmental systems where various factors contribute to the overall composition. CoDA techniques provide effective visualization tools like ternary plots and Aitchison's biplot, making it easier to interpret compositional data and identify patterns [4].

While Compositional Data Analysis has numerous advantages, it's not without its challenges and limitations. Compositional data can be highly sparse, with many components close to zero. This can lead to challenges in analysis and interpretation, especially when working with multivariate methods. Selecting an appropriate transformation method is critical, and the choice may impact the results. Different transformations can lead to different conclusions. Some CoDA techniques can be computationally intensive, requiring substantial expertise and computational resources [5].

Conclusion

Compositional Data Analysis has proven to be an invaluable tool in environmental science. It offers a robust framework for working with data that represents proportions or parts of a whole, ensuring that statistical analyses are valid and meaningful. Researchers in various environmental disciplines can benefit from CoDA when investigating soil compositions, water quality, sediment characteristics, and biodiversity, among other areas. While CoDA comes with challenges, its advantages far outweigh the limitations, making it an essential method for advancing our understanding of environmental systems and their dynamics. As environmental issues become increasingly critical, the role of Compositional Data Analysis in addressing these challenges cannot be understated.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest by author.

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***Address for Correspondence:** Yanna Liang, Department of Economics and Management, Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Lanzhou, China, E-mail: liang@yan.cn*

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