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ICT Tool for Natural Fire in Forest

S. V. Patekar, A. D. Rane, P. R. Kolhe, A. R. Patil, V. D. Jadhav, T. K. Pawar

P. G. Scholar, Department of Silviculture and Agroforestry , College of Forestry, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krushi Vidhyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India

Head of the Department, Department of Silviculture and Agroforestry , College of Forestry, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krushi Vidhyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India

Associate Professor, College of Agriculture Engineering and Technology, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krushi Vidhyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India

IT Professional, College of Agriculture Engineering and Technology, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krushi Vidhyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India

Senior Research Assistant, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan krishi Vidhyapeeth Dapoli, Ratnagiri Maharashtra India

P. G. Scholar, Department of Silviculture and Agroforestry , College of Forestry, Dr. Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krushi Vidhyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT: Forest ecosystems play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, yet they are increasingly threatened by the rising frequency and intensity of wildfires. Effective fire management depends on early detection, accurate monitoring, and rapid response. This article examines both traditional and modern approaches to forest fire detection, highlighting their scientific principles, operational applications, and limitations. Conventional methods such as fire watchtowers continue to provide localized, human-verified observations but are constrained by visibility, terrain, and limited spatial coverage. In contrast, satellite-based systems, particularly MODIS and VIIRS, enable large-scale, near real-time fire detection. While MODIS offers long-term global datasets useful for trend analysis and emissions estimation, VIIRS provides higher spatial resolution, improving the detection of smaller and low-intensity fires critical for early intervention.Emerging technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and wireless sensor networks (WSNs) further enhance detection capabilities by offering high-resolution, on-demand monitoring and continuous ground-level data. UAVs support tactical decision-making during active fires, whereas WSNs enable early warning through micro-climatic sensing. Geographic Information System (GIS)-based platforms integrate these diverse data sources to deliver actionable alerts and support strategic planning.The study emphasizes that no single technology is sufficient for comprehensive fire management. Instead, an integrated, multi-scale approach combining satellite observations, ground-based systems, and advanced analytics is essential. As climate change intensifies wildfire risks, future systems must focus on data fusion, automation, and real-time decision support to improve detection accuracy, reduce response time, and minimize ecological and socio-economic impacts.

KEYWORDS : Forest Fire Detection, Remote Sensing, MODIS, VIIRS, Fire Radiative Power (FRP), Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Early Warning Systems, Data Fusion .

I. INTRODUCTION

Forest ecosystems provide critical ecological services, including carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and climate regulation. However, they are increasingly vulnerable to wildfires, which cause large-scale ecological damage, economic loss, and greenhouse gas emissions. Timely and accurate detection of forest fires is therefore essential for effective fire management and mitigation of impacts on both ecosystems and human communities.

Historically, fire detection depended on ground-based methods such as fire watchtowers and manual patrolling. While these approaches remain relevant in some regions, they are constrained by limited visibility, rugged terrain, and delayed response times. To overcome these limitations, satellite-based remote sensing has emerged as a primary tool for large-scale, near real-time fire monitoring.

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The Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) on NASA's Terra and Aqua satellites has provided daily global fire detection for over two decades using thermal bands at 1,000 m resolution. Since 2012, the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) onboard the Suomi NPP satellite has complemented MODIS with a higher 375 m resolution, enabling detection of smaller and lower-intensity fires that MODIS may overlook. Studies comparing the two sensors in Northeast Asia found that 65% of VIIRS-detected fire pixels in forests were missed by MODIS, highlighting VIIRS's improved sensitivity.

These satellite fire products quantify Fire Radiative Power (FRP), which supports estimation of fire intensity and emissions. The higher spatial and temporal resolution of VIIRS allows scientists and fire managers to model and predict fire behavior more accurately and incorporate detections into tactical fire response. In India, such satellite-derived active fire data underpin the Forest Survey of India's near real-time fire alert system for forest departments.

As climate change intensifies fire frequency and severity, integrating satellite detection with ground networks, drones, and automated alerts is vital for early intervention. This article examines current fire detection technologies, their scientific basis, and challenges in building robust, multi-scale forest fire monitoring systems.

1. Fire Watchtowers

Fire watchtowers represent one of the oldest and most widely implemented methods for detecting forest fires. These elevated structures are strategically constructed on hilltops or ridges to maximize line-of-sight coverage of surrounding forest areas. Trained personnel stationed in towers continuously scan the landscape for smoke plumes or flame signatures, particularly during fire-prone seasons. The primary advantage of this system is its simplicity, low operational cost, and ability to provide immediate human verification of potential fire events.

Despite technological advances, watchtowers remain relevant in many countries, including India, where forest departments still employ them in remote regions with limited infrastructure. The effectiveness of a watchtower depends on factors such as tower height, topography, weather conditions, and observer experience. Visibility can be severely reduced by fog, haze, or dense canopy, and detection is limited to daylight hours unless supported by auxiliary lighting or optics.

Modern adaptations include equipping towers with binoculars, compass bearings, and communication systems like VHF radios to relay coordinates to ground crews. Some regions now integrate pan-tilt-zoom cameras and automated smoke detection software to reduce human fatigue and error. However, the spatial coverage of each tower is finite, typically 15–20 km radius, necessitating dense networks for full coverage. The method is labor-intensive and cannot provide the continuous, wide-area monitoring required for early detection across large landscapes. Consequently, watchtowers are increasingly viewed as a complementary tool within integrated fire management systems rather than a standalone solution.

2. MODIS Satellite System

The Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) onboard NASA's Terra and Aqua satellites has been a cornerstone of global active fire detection since 2000. MODIS uses thermal infrared bands centered at 4 µm and 11 µm to identify fire pixels based on high temperature anomalies relative to background land surface. The algorithm applies contextual tests to distinguish fires from other hot surfaces and clouds, producing near real-time fire detections at 1 km spatial resolution.

A key strength of MODIS is its twice-daily global coverage, enabling consistent monitoring of fire seasonality and trends across biomes. The system generates the MOD14/MYD14 fire product, which includes location, time, confidence level, and Fire Radiative Power (FRP) for each detected fire pixel. FRP is directly related to the rate of fuel consumption and smoke emissions, making MODIS data valuable for atmospheric modeling and emissions inventories. However, MODIS has limitations in detecting small or low-intensity fires due to its coarse resolution and pixel saturation at very high temperatures. Cloud cover and dense smoke can obscure detection, and the timing of overpasses may miss short-lived fires. Comparative studies in Northeast Asia showed that MODIS missed 65% of fire pixels in forests that were detected by the higher-resolution VIIRS sensor. Despite this, MODIS remains critical for long-term fire climatology, policy-scale monitoring, and as a baseline for newer sensors due to its 20+ year data record.

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3. VIIRS Satellite System

The Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) aboard the Suomi National Polar-orbiting Partnership (Suomi NPP) and NOAA-20 satellites is the operational successor to MODIS for fire monitoring. VIIRS offers a significant improvement with a 375 m spatial resolution for its I-band fire product, VNP14IMG, allowing detection of smaller and cooler fires that MODIS at 1 km often omits.

VIIRS uses similar mid-infrared and thermal bands but benefits from improved detectors and onboard aggregation schemes that reduce the pixel growth effect at scan edge. This results in more consistent fire detection across the swath. The system provides global coverage every 12 hours or less when both satellites are used, and its near real-time latency enables integration into operational alert systems like the Forest Survey of India's SMS-based fire alerts.

Research comparing MODIS and VIIRS from 2012–2017 found that VIIRS detected substantially more fires in both forests and low-biomass lands, while MODIS omission rates were 35% in forests and 53% in low-biomass lands for MODIS fire pixels. VIIRS also retrieves FRP, though values for concurrently detected fires tend to be lower than MODIS due to differences in pixel size and band characteristics. Commission errors for both sensors decrease as FRP increases, and are higher in low-biomass lands than forests.

With its enhanced sensitivity, VIIRS is now the primary data source for many national fire monitoring programs and global systems like NASA FIRMS, supporting both strategic planning and tactical response.

4. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)/Drones

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or drones, have emerged as a flexible and rapid-deployment tool for forest fire detection and monitoring. Equipped with optical and thermal infrared cameras, UAVs can fly below cloud cover and capture high-resolution imagery of heat signatures, smoke, and flame fronts in real time. Unlike satellites, drones are not constrained by fixed overpass times and can be launched on demand when a fire risk is reported or during post-lightning patrols.

Thermal cameras on drones detect temperature differences as small as 0.05°C, allowing identification of smoldering hotspots and underground peat fires that are invisible to the naked eye. This capability is critical for mopping-up operations to prevent re-ignition. UAVs can also map fire perimeters, assess rate of spread, and provide live video feeds to incident commanders, improving situational awareness and crew safety.

Operational range is limited by battery life, typically 20–40 minutes for multi-rotor platforms, though fixed-wing UAVs can cover larger areas. Regulations on beyond-visual-line-of-sight flight and airspace restrictions can constrain use in some regions. Data processing can be done onboard or transmitted to ground stations for rapid generation of orthomosaics and hotspot maps.

Drones fill the critical gap between ground crews and satellites by providing tactical-scale, on-demand intelligence. They are increasingly integrated with AI-based smoke detection algorithms to automate alerts. For PhD-level research, UAVs offer a platform for validating satellite detections, testing sensor payloads, and studying fine-scale fire behavior.

5. Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs)

Wireless Sensor Networks consist of distributed, self-powered nodes placed throughout forest areas to monitor environmental parameters indicative of fire. Each node typically integrates sensors for temperature, relative humidity, smoke particulates, and gases like CO and CO_2. Nodes communicate via multi-hop wireless links to a gateway, which relays alerts to a central server or forest department.

The main advantage of WSNs is continuous, in-situ monitoring and the ability to detect pre-ignition conditions. A rapid rise in temperature combined with a drop in humidity can trigger an alert before flames appear, offering the earliest possible warning. Unlike towers or satellites, WSNs function under canopy, at night, and during cloudy conditions.

Design challenges include power management, network reliability, false alarms from animals or dust, and the cost of deploying large numbers of nodes to cover vast forests. Solar-powered nodes with low-power protocols like LoRa or Zigbee extend lifespan to several years. Modern systems use machine learning at the edge to filter sensor data locally and reduce data transmission.

WSNs are best suited for high-value or high-risk zones such as near settlements, plantations, or protected areas rather than blanket coverage of entire landscapes. For research, they provide high-temporal-resolution ground truth data to calibrate remote sensing models and study micro-meteorological drivers of ignition.

6. GIS-Based Fire Alert Systems

Geographic Information System fire alert platforms integrate multiple data streams to deliver actionable intelligence for forest fire management. The most prominent example is the FSI Fire Alert System in India, which ingests near real-time active fire locations from MODIS and VIIRS and overlays them on administrative and forest boundaries.

When a fire pixel is detected, the system automatically identifies the state, district, division, and beat, then dispatches an SMS alert to registered forest officials within minutes. The geo-portal allows users to visualize current and historical fires, filter by confidence, and download data for analysis. Integration with road networks, water bodies, and villages supports rapid planning of suppression resources.

GIS systems add value by converting raw satellite points into jurisdictional alerts, reducing the time from detection to field response. They also archive data to analyze fire regimes, identify recurring hotspots, and assess effectiveness of prevention programs. Advanced versions incorporate weather, fuel type, and topography to run fire spread models and issue early warnings.

Limitations include dependence on satellite overpass times, cloud cover, and omission of small fires. However, as a decision-support tool, GIS-based alerts bridge the gap between remote sensing technology and ground action. For PhD research, these systems provide a framework to test data fusion, improve geolocation accuracy, and design impact-based alert thresholds.

II. APPLICATION

1. Fire Watchtowers

Fire watchtowers are still applied as the first line of ground-based detection, especially in developing countries and remote forest divisions with limited digital infrastructure. In India, State Forest Departments position towers on ridges to monitor high-risk beats during the fire season from February to June. Observers use azimuth indicators to report smoke location, which is then relayed via radio to range offices for ground crew dispatch.

Their main application today is in _verification and triangulation_. When satellite alerts are received, tower staff are often tasked with visual confirmation to reduce false alarms before committing resources. Towers also serve as communication hubs and rest points for patrolling teams.

In research, watchtower networks provide ground-truth data for validating satellite detection accuracy and for studying human factors in fire reporting, such as detection time lag vs. distance and visibility. Modernized towers are being integrated with PTZ cameras and AI-based smoke detection software, enabling 24/7 automated monitoring while retaining human oversight. This hybrid application extends their relevance in areas where satellite latency or cloud cover is a problem. Their low-tech nature also makes them deployable in community-based forest management, where local villagers are trained as fire watchers, linking livelihoods with conservation.

2. MODIS Satellite System –

MODIS is applied globally for _strategic-scale fire monitoring, emissions accounting, and policy planning_. Because of its 20+ year consistent data record, agencies use MODIS to map fire seasonality, inter-annual trends, and fire-climate interactions. NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) and Global Fire Emissions Database (GFED) rely on MODIS for long-term analysis.

At national levels, MODIS data is applied in early warning systems. The Forest Survey of India incorporates MODIS detections into its daily fire alert emails and SMS to state nodal officers. Because MODIS provides FRP, it is applied to estimate biomass burned and CO_2 emissions for UNFCCC reporting and carbon accounting.

In research, MODIS is the baseline dataset for calibrating fire models, studying global pyrogeography, and validating newer sensors. Its twice-daily overpass is applied to track large fire complexes and smoke transport across continents. Although coarse at 1 km, MODIS is often applied in data fusion: it flags large events that are then investigated with

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VIIRS or drones. Its main operational application remains in _large-area situational awareness_ rather than tactical firefighting due to resolution and latency constraints.

3. VIIRS Satellite System –
VIIRS is applied for _near real-time operational fire detection and response_ because of its 375 m resolution and low latency of ~3 hours from observation to alert. It is the primary input to most national fire alert systems today, including India's FSI Fire Alert System, NASA FIRMS, and the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).

Forest departments use VIIRS alerts to mobilize crews the same day. Each detection is geotagged to a specific beat/compartment, so applications include direct dispatch of firewatchers and pre-positioning of resources. Because VIIRS detects smaller fires, it is applied in monitoring agricultural stubble burning near forests, which is a major ignition source in central India.

In research, VIIRS is applied to study diurnal fire cycles when both Suomi NPP and NOAA-20 overpasses are combined, giving ~4 detections daily. FRP from VIIRS is applied in near real-time emissions models like the Global Fire Assimilation System (GFAS) for air quality forecasts. Its higher sensitivity makes it suitable for applications in fragmented landscapes and wildland-urban interfaces where early detection of small ignitions is critical to prevent escalation.

4. UAVs/Drones –
Drones are applied for _tactical fire intelligence, prescribed burn monitoring, and post-fire assessment_. During an active fire, incident commanders deploy UAVs with thermal cameras to map the fire perimeter, identify spot fires ahead of the main front, and locate safe access routes for crews. This application reduces risk to personnel and improves resource allocation.

Drones are also applied in _mopping-up_ operations to detect residual hotspots and smoldering logs using thermal sensors, preventing re-ignition. Forest managers apply them for prescribed burning by monitoring fire intensity and ensuring it stays within control lines.

In research and conservation, UAVs are applied to validate satellite FRP, measure flame height, and collect ultra-high-resolution imagery for burn severity mapping. They are increasingly applied with AI for automated smoke detection during routine patrols of power lines, plantations, and protected areas. In rugged terrain like the Western Ghats, drones are applied to reach areas inaccessible to ground teams within the critical first hour of detection. Their on-demand nature makes them a key bridge between strategic satellite alerts and ground action.

5. Wireless Sensor Networks –
WSNs are applied in _high-value, high-risk forest zones_ where early detection is prioritized over cost. Examples include near wildlife sanctuaries, teak plantations, seed orchards, and wildland-urban interfaces. The network continuously monitors micro-climate and sends automated alerts when temperature/humidity thresholds are breached, enabling response before visible smoke appears.

They are applied as _early warning systems for peat and ground fires_, which satellites cannot detect. Nodes with gas sensors can identify smoldering combustion in organic soils common in northeast India.

In smart forest applications, WSNs are integrated with weather stations and camera traps to create multi-sensor hubs. Data is applied to develop fire danger rating systems specific to a compartment. For research, WSNs provide high-temporal-resolution data to study ignition processes, model fire weather indices, and train machine learning models for false-alarm reduction.

While not applied for landscape-wide coverage due to cost, they are ideal for _protecting critical infrastructure_ like transmission lines, ecotourism sites, and villages inside forests. The application is shifting toward solar-powered, LoRa-based nodes with 5+ year lifespans to make them operationally viable.

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6. GIS-Based Fire Alert Systems –

GIS-based systems are applied as _decision support platforms that convert raw detections into actionable alerts_. The FSI Fire Alert System is the best example: it takes MODIS/VIIRS points, intersects them with forest administrative boundaries, and sends SMS to the beat guard and DFO within 30 minutes of satellite overpass. This application cuts detection-to-action time from days to hours.

Forest departments apply the geoportal to visualize active fires, filter by confidence, and plan suppression logistics using layers like roads, water sources, and habitation. After the fire season, the same system is applied to generate annual fire statistics, identify hotspots, and allocate budget for fire lines and watchtowers.

In research, GIS platforms are applied to perform spatial analysis of fire causes, model fire risk using fuel, slope, and proximity layers, and assess the effectiveness of management interventions. They are also applied in public outreach: some states release fire maps to citizens to discourage agricultural burning.

The core application is _information fusion_ – combining detection, administrative data, and geography to ensure the right person gets the right alert at the right time. Future applications include integrating UAV feeds, weather forecasts, and fire spread models for predictive alerts.

III. FUTURE THRUST

Data Fusion & Automation: Future systems will integrate MODIS/VIIRS satellite alerts, UAV thermal imaging, WSN ground sensors, and GIS platforms into a single intelligent framework. Fusing multi-sensor data reduces false alarms and latency, enabling response within the first hour of ignition.

AI & Edge Computing: Deep learning models trained on satellite imagery, drone footage, and fire history will automate smoke detection and predict ignition probability. Edge computing on UAVs and sensor nodes will allow real-time processing in remote forests without cloud dependency.

Improved Resolution & Persistence*: Geostationary fire-monitoring satellites, high-altitude pseudo-satellites, and CubeSat constellations will provide near-continuous observation to fill gaps between polar-orbiting passes. LoRaWAN-based WSNs will expand affordable ground coverage in high-risk zones.

Localization & Policy Integration*: For India, adapting VIIRS alerts into vernacular SMS, linking them to village response teams, and training forest staff in UAV use will strengthen last-mile action. Open data sharing between forest, disaster, and research agencies is critical.

IV. CONCLUSION

No Single Solution: Current tools like watchtowers, MODIS, VIIRS, UAVs, WSNs, and GIS each have limitations. Isolated use cannot meet the scale and speed needed for modern fire management.

Layered System is Essential: The way forward is a multi-tier approach where satellites provide synoptic coverage, drones give tactical detail, sensors offer early ground truth, and GIS unifies data for decision-makers.
Climate-Driven Necessity: With climate change increasing fire frequency and intensity, investment in integrated detection is no longer optional. It is vital for ecosystem stability and disaster resilience.

Broader Impact: Early detection directly reduces biodiversity loss, carbon emissions, economic damage, and risk to communities. It forms the foundation of sustainable forest management and climate adaptation strategy.

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