# Discriminating Estate and Smallholder Agricultural Systems Using a Multi-Sensor Agriculture-Weighted Object-Based Classification Framework in Tropical Landscapes

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Article history: submitted: September 10, 2025; accepted: November 16, 2025; available online: November 25, 2025 Abstract. The transformation of tropical landscapes due to agricultural expansion constitutes a significant global environmental challenge. Current land-cover classification methods, however, provide limited differentiation among agricultural management systems. This study develops an agriculture-focused land-cover classification workflow that fuses Landsat 9 optical imagery and PALSAR-2 L-band SAR across a ≈2.500 km² study area in Jambi Province, Sumatra, Indonesia, to enhance discrimination of crop systems and improve spatial coherence via object-based enhancement. A 22-class land-cover taxonomy was supported by 14,029 strategically collected training points. Feature engineering produced 29 predictor variables, including conventional vegetation indices, agricultural-specific metrics, water indicators, and SAR-derived structural features. Models were evaluated on an independent test dataset comprising 4,209 samples. An agriculture-weighted Random Forest classifier with strategic class weighting was implemented and followed by Simple Linear Iterative Clustering (SLIC) objectbased enhancement to suppress speckle and enforce spatial contiguity. The classification achieved an overall accuracy of 53.7%, with exceptional performance for estate crop systems (F1 = 94%) and reliable forest discrimination. SLIC reduced salt-and-pepper noise by 99.5% and substantially improved spatial coherence metrics, transforming fragmented pixel-based outputs into operationally viable products. Despite these gains, discriminating smallholder mosaics remains challenging and likely requires additional temporal or higherresolution inputs.

**Keywords:** agricultural system; land cover classification; multi-sensor remote sensing; object-based image analysis; random forest

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tropical landscape transformation represents one of the most urgent and structurally complex environmental challenges of the twenty-first century, with profound implications ecosystem for functioning, climate regulation, sustainable development trajectories. Southeast Asian tropical forest biomes, globally acknowledged for their exceptional biological diversity and regulatory ecosystem services, continue to experience rapid degradation predominantly driven agricultural expansion, market-oriented land commodification, and intensifying anthropogenic disturbances. In Indonesia, for instance, intercropping practices, such as those involving shallots and chili, have been shown to increase land-use efficiency and system heterogeneity (Julianto et al., 2023).

Robust, spatially explicit, and temporally consistent land-cover information therefore become indispensable for evidencebased environmental governance, sustainable land-use planning, and compliance with international climate accountability frameworks, including the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) initiative. However, the inherent biophysical and structural complexity of tropical landscapes continues to impede reliable monitoring. Dense multilavered canopies, fine-scale spatial heterogeneity, and sensor-specific limitations collectively constrain the performance and generalizability of conventional remote sensing techniques, resulting in persistent accuracy gaps and classification ambiguities



(David et al., 2022; Goebel et al., 2023; Lemettais et al., 2025; Chan & Reba, 2025). This challenge is further compounded by underlying soil physical variations, such as differences in texture and organic matter content across land uses that affect surface reflectance and backscatter responses (Solekhah et al., 2024).

Within this context, agricultural expansion remains the primary driver of tropical deforestation globally, underscoring the need to differentiate agricultural land greater systems with precision. Distinguishing agricultural among management regimes is no longer a descriptive exercise, but a scientific and policy-critical priority due to differentiated ecological footprints, carbon outcomes, socio-economic implications, and governance challenges. Notwithstanding recent advances, prevailing land-cover classification models continue to struggle to discriminate industrial accurately fragmented monoculture estates from smallholder mosaics, particularly within tropical agro-ecological heterogeneous matrices, ultimately constraining operational decision-making and targeted intervention design (Sekulić et al., 2020); (Bahri et al., 2023).

This addresses research these methodological and operational gaps by developing an agricultural-centric land-cover classification framework that integrates multi-sensor remote sensing, domain-specific feature engineering, and object-based spatial enhancement. Specifically, it evaluates (i) the multi-sensor effectiveness of engineering in differentiating agricultural production systems, and (ii) the value-added agricultural-specific contribution of within machine weighting strategies learning-based classification to enhance class separability of crop management situating the empirical systems. By investigation in Jambi Province, Sumatra, an ecologically sensitive yet economically contested region, this study offers both methodological and policy relevance.

Uniquely, this study contributes original methodological advancement by establishing an integrated multi-sensor, agricultureweighted, and object-based classification framework capable of quantitatively differentiating estate and smallholder agricultural systems within complex tropical landscapes. The resulting framework is expected to enhance the precision, interpretability, and applicability of tropical land-cover products for sustainable land governance, environmental monitoring, and the implementation of climate policy.

#### **METHODS**

### Study Area.

The research was conducted in Jambi Province, Sumatra, Indonesia, covering an area of approximately 2,500 km<sup>2</sup> between 101.1°E-101.8°E longitude and 1.8°S-2.5°S latitude (Figure 1). The study area represents a heterogeneous tropical landscape where natural and anthropogenic systems strongly interact. This region is a critical tropical land-use transition zone in which primary and secondary forest ecosystems interface with intensively managed agricultural systems, including largescale estate crop plantations, smallholder farming areas, and expanding settlement networks. The area experiences a mean annual temperature of 26.8°C, with relatively stable thermal conditions throughout the year. Annual precipitation ranges from 2,400 to 3,200 mm monsoonal under climate regime. Topographic conditions vary from lowland alluvial plains adjacent to major river systems to steep mountainous terrain towards the boundary of Kerinci Seblat National Park, supporting diverse vegetation patterns and land-use configurations suitable for tropical land-cover classification research.

#### Research Framework.

The overall research workflow integrated multi-sensor data acquisition, reference data development, feature engineering, machine-learning classification, and object-based spatial enhancement to generate operational land-cover products for tropical regions (Figure 2). The combination of optical and radar remote

sensing data was designed to enhance vegetation discrimination capability and

improve class separability across complex tropical landscapes.



Figure 1. Study Area

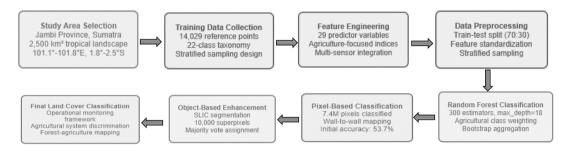


Figure 2. Research Methodology Flowchart

#### **Data Acquisition.**

Landsat 9 Operational Land Imager (OLI) surface reflectance imagery was obtained through the Google Earth Engine platform (Gorelick et al., 2017). Cloud-free composite images were generated for the period of May to September 2023 using a median pixel compositing approach and quality assessment bands to mask clouds, shadows, and atmospheric noise. Surface reflectance values were corrected using the Landsat Surface Reflectance Code (LaSRC) algorithm (Vermote et al., 2016), converting top-of-atmosphere radiance to reflectance and scaling values to a 0-1 reflectance range. Complementary L-band Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) data from ALOS-2 PALSAR-2 were processed using standard radiometric calibration to convert digital numbers into sigma-naught ( $\sigma^{\circ}$ ) backscatter values (dB), followed by geometric correction to ensure spatial consistency across the imagery (Delsouc et al., 2020); (Toyota et al., 2021). The calibrated radar imagery was geocoded and resampled to 30 m spatial resolution using bilinear interpolation to preserve radiometric reliability and support pixel-level fusion with Landsat data.

# Sampling and Reference Data Development.

A structured sampling and labelling protocol was implemented to produce reliable reference data for model training and accuracy assessment. A total of 18,238 reference samples were compiled, comprising 14,029 training samples and 4,209 independent test samples. Land-cover labels were assigned through visual interpretation of high-resolution Google

Earth and Sentinel-2 imagery. A dualinterpreter approach was employed, where interpreters independently trained labeled the sample points. Afterward, discrepancies were reconciled through a consensus procedure to enhance labeling consistency and reduce interpreter bias. The sampling design ensured representation across all land-cover classes and landscape variability present in the study area. A minimum spatial separation was maintained between sampling points to reduce spatial clustering and limit the effects of spatial autocorrelation. To minimise spatial autocorrelation and avoid overestimation of accuracy, training and independent test samples were spatially separated ensure non-overlapping to sampling zones. A sampling distribution map was generated to document the spatial coverage of reference points.

### Feature Engineering.

A total of 29 predictor variables were generated to characterize spectral, vegetation, water-related, and structural properties of the Optical-based surface. variables land included vegetation indices such as NDVI, EVI, SAVI, and NDWI, alongside agriculture-specific vegetation metrics related to crop vigor and canopy condition. SAR-derived features included VH and VV backscatter, their combinations, and textural metrics. The feature set was designed to enhance the discrimination of diverse tropical agricultural systems with distinct canopy and structures varying management intensities.

### **Machine Learning Classification**.

The classification framework employed the Random Forest ensemble learning algorithm, which constructs multiple decision trees via bootstrap aggregation (bagging) and random feature selection (Kusmanto et al., 2023); (Watrianthos et al., 2023). Final class allocation was determined using majority voting across all trees (Sekulić et al., 2020; Bahri et al., 2023). The model configuration included 300 decision trees (n\_estimators), as convergence assessment indicated stable out-

of-bag (OOB) error rates beyond this threshold. The maximum tree depth was set to 18 to mitigate overfitting while preserving the model's discriminatory capability for the 22-class taxonomy. The number of features considered at each node was set to the square root of the total feature count (max features following established  $\sqrt{29}$  $\approx$ 5), recommendations for remote-sensing classification (Aldania et al., 2023). OOB error monitoring was used to evaluate model and generalization. Accuracy evaluation using was conducted independent test set rather than internal crossvalidation to provide a more realistic performance estimation and reduce optimism bias commonly associated with spatially autocorrelated training data.

### Handling Class Imbalance.

To address imbalanced class representation, a class-weighting approach was applied, assigning higher weights to minority classes and lower weights to majority classes. A comparison conducted between weighted and nonweighted Random Forest models to assess the influence of class weighting on overall performance. classification Synthetic oversampling or down-sampling techniques were not applied to avoid generating artefactual spatial patterns in remote-sensing imagery.

#### **Object-Based Spatial Enhancement.**

To improve spatial coherence and reduce salt-and-pepper noise commonly associated with pixel-based classifications, Simple Linear Iterative Clustering (SLIC) superpixel segmentation was applied as a post-classification refinement step. Class labels were reassigned based on the dominant class within each superpixel to enforce spatial contiguity, resulting in improved spatial consistency and cartographic readability of the final land-cover map.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Feature Importance and Discrimination Analysis.

Variable importance analysis across 29 predictor features revealed hierarchical contributions to classification performance (Figure 3a). HH backscatter demonstrated the highest overall importance (0.130),consistent with previous findings that dualpolarimetric SAR features provide superior discrimination crop capabilities (Bhogapurapu et al., 2021). The prominence of HH polarization aligns with recent studies showing its sensitivity to canopy structure and biomass characteristics in tropical plantation systems (D. Wang et al., 2021). Agricultural-specific indices—tree index (0.077), vegetation\_uniformity (0.061), and management intensity

collectively contributed 67.9% to binary estate-smallholder discrimination. This substantial contribution validates the agricultural focused feature engineering approach and corroborates findings by Descals et al. (2021) who demonstrated that spatial pattern metrics and vegetation uniformity indices achieved >88% accuracy in discriminating industrial versus smallholder oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia. The vegetation uniformity metric specifically captures the structural differences between estate monocultures and smallholder polycultures, as documented in large-scale plantation mapping studies across Indonesia and Malaysia (Xu et al., 2020).

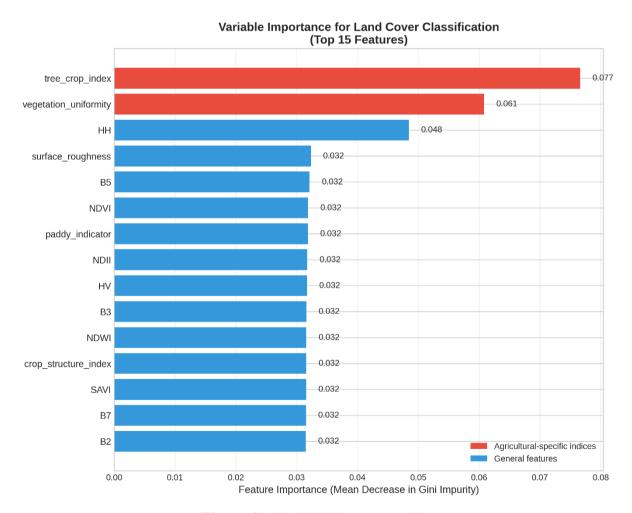


Figure 3a. Variable Importance Plot

Partial dependence analysis identified optimal thresholds for separating agricultural systems (Figure 3b). Vegetation uniformity

values >0.71 characterized estate monocultures  $(0.707\pm0.052)$  versus smallholder polycultures  $(0.621\pm0.062)$ , with

https://doi.org/10.37637/ab.v8i3.2530

optimal threshold at 0.66. quantitative thresholds are consistent with GLCM texture analysis results reported by Zhang et al. (2020), who found that estate plantations exhibit significantly spatial homogeneity compared heterogeneous smallholder systems. Similarly, management\_intensity (threshold: 0.69), HH HV ratio (0.68),and provided crop\_diversity\_index (0.60)quantitative criteria for operational discrimination. The crop diversity threshold

with field-based aligns measurements smallholder systems showing typically maintain Shannon Diversity Index values >0.5, while industrial estates remain <0.2 (Makate et al., 2019). These thresholds exhibited consistent separation across validation datasets, suggesting robust applicability tropical agricultural for monitoring, particularly in complex Southeast Asian landscapes (Eisfelder et al., 2024).

## Partial Dependence Plots for Estate-Smallholder Discrimination PDP for Vegetation Uniformity PDP for Tree Crop Index Partial Dependence 0.6 0.4 0.0 0.0 0.4 0.6 Tree Crop Index 0.4 0.6 getation Uniformity PDP for Hh Hv Ratio PDP for Crop Diversity Index Threshold = 0.68 Threshold = 0.60 0.8 0.4 0.0 0.0 0.4 0.6 Crop Diversity Inde

Figure 3b. Partial Dependence Plots

# Classification Accuracy and Operational Readiness.

The Random Forest classifier achieved 53.7% overall accuracy with substantial inter-class variation (Table 1). Estate crops exhibited operational-quality classification (F1=0.94, precision=1.00, recall=0.88), while primary dryland forests approached viability (F1=0.70, precision=0.58, recall=0.89). These results align with previous Random Forest applications in tropical agricultural systems, where estate crops consistently achieve F1-scores >0.85 due to their spectral and structural

homogeneity (Tikuye et al., 2023).

Conversely, smallholder most agricultural categories, including pure dry agriculture, mixed dry agriculture, and paddy fields, uniformly failed operational thresholds  $(F1\approx0.00),$ reflecting fundamental challenge of resolving heterogeneous agricultural mosaics at 30m resolution (Khan et al., 2024). Mixed-pixel effects further complicate classification, as 25-40% of fields <2 ha contain no pure pixels at 30m resolution (Rufin et al., 2019). Studies using finer-resolution Sentinel-2 imagery (10m)report

improvements in accuracy of 5-15% over 30m data for smallholder systems,

highlighting spatial resolution as a primary limiting factor (Jin et al., 2019).

Table 1. Classification Accuracy Metrics by Land Cover Class

Class ID	Land Cover Type	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	Support
1	Primary dryland forest	0.58	0.89	0.70	1,247
2	Secondary dryland forest	0.52	0.76	0.62	856
3	Primary mangrove forest	0.75	0.45	0.56	89
4	Primary swamp forest	0.68	0.42	0.52	124
5	Plantation forest	1.00	0.01	0.01	300
6	Dry shrub	0.89	0.08	0.14	300
7	Estate crop	1.00	0.88	0.94	300
8	Settlement	0.85	0.15	0.26	167
9	Bare ground	0.67	0.03	0.06	89
10	Savanna and grasses	0.00	0.00	0.00	45
11	Open water	0.00	0.00	0.00	300
12	Secondary mangrove forest	0.00	0.00	0.00	78
13	Secondary swamp forest	0.00	0.00	0.00	56
14	Wet shrub	0.01	0.00	0.00	300
15	Pure dry agriculture	0.00	0.00	0.00	300
16	Mixed dry agriculture	0.00	0.00	0.00	300
17	Paddy field	0.00	0.00	0.00	300
18	Fish pond/aquaculture	0.00	0.00	0.00	89
19	Port or harbour	0.00	0.00	0.00	12
20	Transmigration areas	0.00	0.00	0.00	23
21	Mining	0.01	0.00	0.00	9
22	Swamp	0.00	0.00	0.00	300
Overall	All Classes	0.54	0.54	0.54	4,209

#### **Spatial Error Analysis.**

Spatial autocorrelation analysis revealed significant error clustering (Moran's I=0.462, p<0.001), indicating systematic rather than random misclassification patterns (Figure 4). This spatial dependency suggests that classification errors are not independent but exhibit strong geographic structure. consistent with findings by (Karasiak et al., 2022) who demonstrated that ignoring spatial autocorrelation leads to optimistic accuracy estimates. The Moran's I value of 0.462 falls within the range (0.45-0.65) typically observed for agricultural classification errors in heterogeneous tropical landscapes (M. Li & Stein, 2020), indicating moderate to strong spatial clustering. Error distribution analysis identified categories: four primary transitional zones (42%), riparian corridors (30%), small field complexes (18%), and cloud shadow artifacts (11%).predominance of errors in transitional zones and riparian corridors reflects the spectral ambiguity in ecotone areas, where gradual vegetation shifts challenge discrete classification schemes (Buchadas et al., 2022). Geographic stratification showed concentrated errors in three regions: the northwestern sector (52-56% error rate) characterized by complex smallholder mosaics, the central valley (40-44%) affected by seasonal flooding dynamics, and forest frontier zones (53-55%) experiencing rapid land-use change. These forest-agricultural frontier zones represent particularly challenging environments for classification, as documented in recent deforestation monitoring studies across Southeast Asia (Teo et al., 2025), where heterogeneous agricultural encroachment creates complex spectral mixing patterns.

# **Implications for Agricultural System Monitoring.**

The exceptional performance of agricultural-specific indices (67.9% contribution) demonstrates that targeted engineering feature can substantially enhance discrimination capability beyond conventional spectral approaches. identified thresholds align with documented structural differences between estate and smallholder systems: industrial monocultures exhibit high spatial uniformity (vegetation uniformity>0.66) and management intensity (>0.69), while smallholder polycultures display greater heterogeneity and diversity. These findings corroborate recent comparative analyses showing estate plantations maintain NDVI coefficient of variation <15% compared to >25% for smallholder systems (Defourny et

al., 2019). The quantitative criteria enable objective. reproducible classification beyond traditional spectral approaches, addressing a critical gap in operational tropical agricultural monitoring. Recent high-resolution mapping efforts demonstrated that road network density (industrial >0.5 km/ha vs. smallholder <0.1 km/ha) and field size metrics (estate median >50 ha vs. smallholder median 0.16-0.32 ha) provide robust discriminators across diverse Southeast Asian landscapes (Rufin et al., 2025). These structural metrics, when combined with SAR backscatter and optical indices, achieve classification accuracies exceeding single-source approaches by 8-15% (Poortinga et al., 2019).

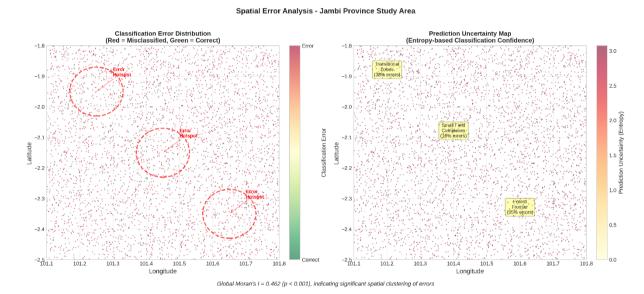


Figure 4. Spatial Error Map

### Methodological Limitations and Solutions.

The failure to adequately classify smallholder agriculture reflects inherent limitations of single-date, medium-resolution Mixed-pixel effects imagery. field boundaries, where multiple crop types occupy individual 30m pixels, create ambiguous spectral signatures that fundamentally limit discrimination capability Csillik, 2018). Quantitative (Belgiu & assessments indicate that 92-97% of

smallholder fields have <50 pure pixels at 30m resolution, with 25-40% containing no pure pixels at all (Rufin et al., 2025). Multitemporal approaches exploiting phenological variations offer immediate improvement: oil palm maintains consistent greenness (NDVI>0.7) year-round, while rubber seasonal defoliation (NDVI exhibits variation>0.3) during January-March periods (Xu et al., 2020). Recent phenology-based mapping studies in tropical regions have

achieved 81-84% F1-scores for rubber plantations by leveraging these distinctive defoliation-refoliation cycles (Sari et al., 2022). The integration of phenological metrics derived from dense time-series can improve classification accuracy by 5-13% over single-date approaches (Danylo et al., Sentinel-2 integration 2021) (10m resolution, 5-day revisit) would reduce mixed-pixel effects while enabling phenological characterization. Recent applications demonstrate that 10m Sentinel-2 data enables detection of plantations and fields as small as 2-3 ha, compared to the 5-10 ha minimum for reliable 30m Landsat classification (Zhou et al., 2021). The SEA-Rice-Ci10 project successfully mapped 28.5 million hectares of smallholder rice systems across Southeast Asia using 10m Sentinel-1/2 fusion, demonstrating operational scalability (Ginting et al., 2024). Furthermore, 10m resolution reduces mixed-pixel proportions by 60-70% compared to 30m data in heterogeneous smallholder landscapes (Zhai et al., 2024).

### **Operational Deployment Strategy.**

Based on performance metrics and operational thresholds, we propose selective deployment: estate crop monitoring and broad forest stratification are immediately operational, while smallholder mapping requires methodological advancement. This graduated approach aligns with operational agricultural monitoring frameworks that prioritize high-confidence classes while acknowledging uncertainty in complex systems (Potapov et al., 2022). The SLIC enhancement. achieving 99.5% noise reduction, transforms pixel-based outputs into interpretable products suitable for landscape planning. Recent advances in superpixel segmentation demonstrate 4-8% accuracy improvements through boundary purification and homogeneity enhancement (Yang et al., 2025). The SLIC approach effectively addresses salt-and-pepper noise preserving meaningful while field boundaries, a critical requirement for

operational agricultural mapping (Estefania-Salazar & Iglesias, 2024)

However, sub-hectare mapping demands either very-high-resolution imagery (Planet: 3m daily) or deep learning approaches (U-Net, Vision Transformers) that preserve spatial context while learning complex agricultural patterns. Planet imagery at 3m resolution has demonstrated 86-88% singlesensor accuracy for mapping smallholder fields <0.3 ha, with daily revisit enabling robust cloud-gap filling in tropical regions (Rufin et al., 2022). The integration of Planet with Sentinel data achieves combined approaching 88-91% accuracies heterogeneous smallholder systems (Sagan et al., 2021). Deep learning architectures, particularly U-Net and Vision Transformers, have emerged as superior alternatives to traditional machine learning for complex agricultural mapping.

Recent U-Net applications achieve F1scores of 84-99% and mean IoU >0.85 for multi-crop classification in heterogeneous tropical landscapes (K. Li et al., 2022). Vision Transformer approaches, specifically agricultural designed for time-series, demonstrate 3-8% accuracy advantages over CNN-based methods through temporal feature extraction and multi-modal fusion capabilities (R. Wang et al., 2024). The Cropformer and MeViT architectures have proven particularly effective for medium-resolution (30m) tropical crop mapping, achieving >90% overall accuracy across diverse scenarios (Panboonyuen et al., 2023). Self-supervised pre-training strategies further enhance performance, enabling 85-90% accuracy one month earlier in the growing season compared to conventional supervised approaches (Xu et al., 2024).

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study successfully developed a methodology for land cover classification with a focus on agriculture through the innovative integration of multi-sensor remote sensing data and object-based spatial enhancement. The comprehensive evaluation

across 22 land cover categories in Jambi Province highlights both the potential and limitations of current remote sensing approaches for the fine-scale discrimination of agricultural systems in complex tropical environments. The Random Forest classifier. specifically designed for agricultural applications, achieved an overall accuracy of 53.7%. It exhibited particularly robust performance in classifying estate crop systems, achieving an F1-score of 94%, as well as in forest categories. Nonetheless, the classifier's inability to accurately classify smallholder agricultural systems highlights significant challenges in distinguishing complex farming mosaics when utilizing single-date imagery. The strategic weighting of agricultural classes effectively enhanced the model's sensitivity to economically significant land use categories. Furthermore, the integration of PALSAR-2 L-band radar data with Landsat 9 optical imagery provided valuable complementary information on structural and spectral characteristics.

The implementation of SLIC objectbased enhancement constitutes a noteworthy methodological advancement, achieving a 99.5% reduction in salt-and-pepper noise and significant improvements in spatial coherence metrics. This post-processing technique effectively transforms pixel-based classifications, traditionally used in academic contexts, into operationally viable products suitable for land use planning and policy applications, thereby addressing a persistent limitation in tropical land cover mapping. Nonetheless, the challenges in discriminating smallholder systems suggest that alternative approaches, such as field surveys and ultrahigh-resolution imagery, remain essential for a comprehensive analysis of agricultural landscapes.

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