



An Automated Procedure to Monitor Urban Encroachment Over Time on Fort Benning Military Installation

by Sam S. Jackson and Scott G. Bourne

PURPOSE: Concerns about the effects of urban encroachment occurring near military installations continue to grow. Urban encroachment impacts both the civilian population and the military installation. Urban growth and development negatively influence a military installation's ability to conduct training and maintain combat readiness, and they hinder the viability of the installation itself. The primary objective of this study was to monitor urban encroachment at Fort Benning, GA. A secondary objective was to utilize an efficient, more automated approach in extracting urban features from satellite imagery. This effort supports the long-term baseline ecosystem monitoring plan under the Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program (SERDP), Ecosystem Management Project (SEMP), Ecosystem Characterization and Monitoring Initiative (ECMI).

Feature Analyst (version 3.4) assisted feature extraction software developed by Visual Learning Systems, was used in this study to monitor the extent and location of urban expansion occurring near the installation. Landsat 7 ETM data, used to complete the Fort Benning land-cover classifications, were already available and though perhaps not optimal for this type of analysis, were assessed for suitability in urban extraction. The 28.5-m ETM data were acquired during leaf-off conditions for the years 1999, 2001, and 2003. To monitor urban growth over time, a trend analysis was performed based on urban delineations from these two-year time intervals beginning in 1999 and continuing to 2003. This technical note (TN) describes the procedures used to extract characteristic urban features from the available satellite imagery and evaluates urban growth over time.

BACKGROUND: Urban encroachment and its negative impacts are not just problems for military installations. In general terms, forest fragmentation caused by urbanization and sprawl poses one of the most significant, permanent threats to southern U.S. forests. As a result, this trend has the potential to be the biggest single threat to forest sustainability in the South over the next 20+ years. The population of the United States has roughly doubled between the late 1950's and 2000, and the population of the South has grown at an even faster rate. The share of the U.S. population living in the South grew from 30.7 percent in 1990 to 32.5 percent in 2000. By the year 2040, about 31 million forested acres are expected to be converted, concentrated primarily along the coast, in the Piedmont, and around major metropolitan areas (Wear and Greis 2002).

In addition to impeding military operations and deforestation of natural ecosystems, increased urban growth can provide pathways for invasive species, diminish some aspects of biodiversity (including threatened and endangered species), accentuate the risk of catastrophic wildfire at the wildland-urban interface, and could ultimately influence future water supplies.

STUDY AREA: Fort Benning is located in west central Georgia, south of the city of Columbus, GA, and east of Phenix City, AL. Fort Benning is situated in the Upper Coastal Plains physiographic province – a low, flat region characterized by well-drained, gentle rolling hills and poorly drained flatwoods. The

installation is approximately 73,812 ha. Figure 1 illustrates the location of the Fort Benning military installation.

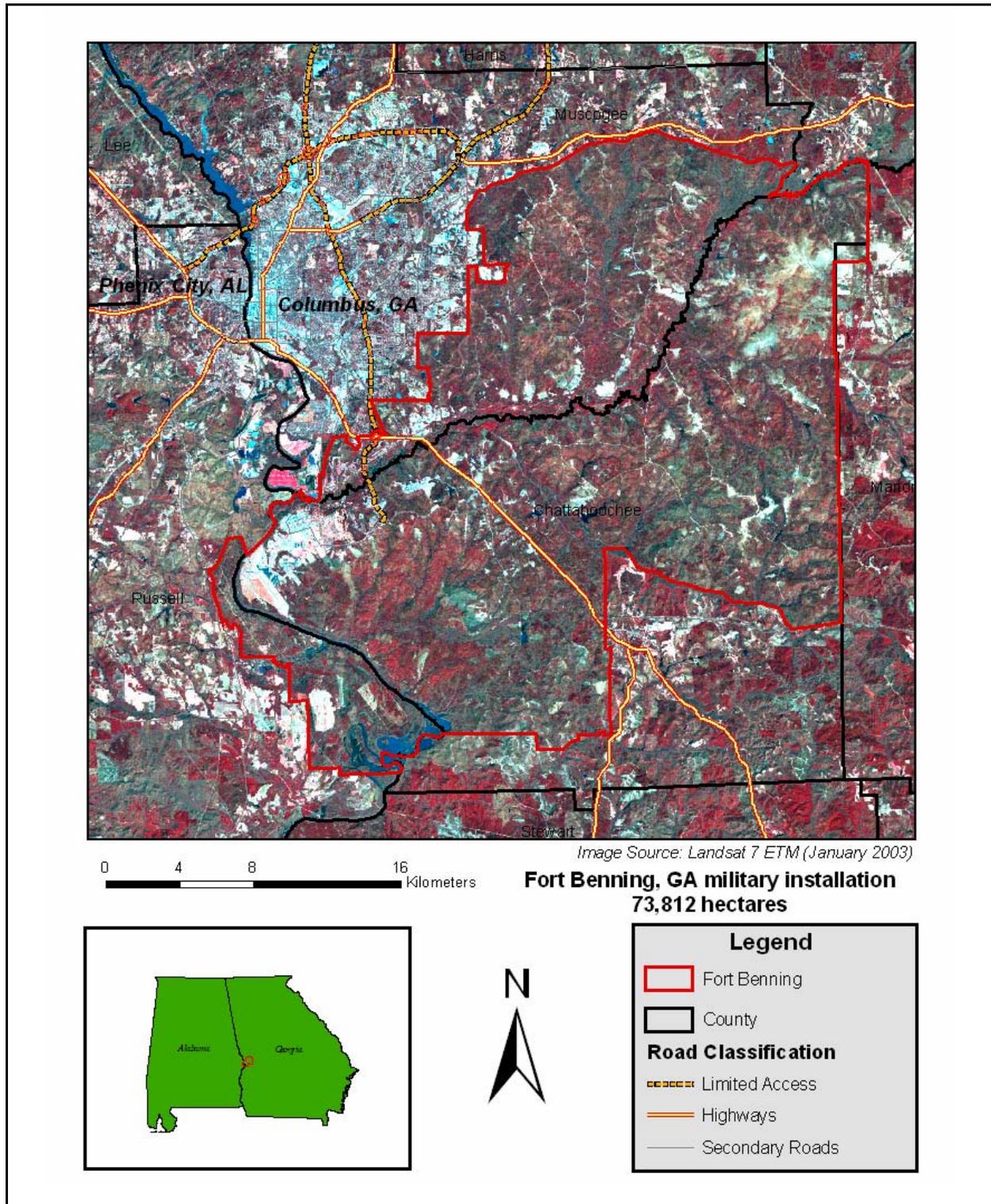


Figure 1. Location of study area, Fort Benning, GA

METHOD: Feature Analyst was used to perform semi-automated urban delineations from three sets of time-series Landsat 7 data (December 1999, January 2001, and January 2003). It was assumed that leaf-off conditions would provide an unobstructed viewpoint from the satellite platform and thus be more suited to extracting urban features from the imagery. The acquisition of these data at specified time intervals allowed for urban growth to be assessed over time.

Overview. Feature Analyst is adaptive software that responds directly to the analyst's input, or training. Therefore, the results are greatly dependent upon the quality of the input data. Training sets – output as ESRI shapefiles – are digitized by the user to produce “ideal” examples of each feature to be extracted. These training sets are then input into the software for feature extraction to take place. The heuristic learning algorithms of the Feature Analyst software utilize textural information, shape, spatial context, size, and anticipated extent of coverage, in addition to spectral information to extract features of interest. Because of this, coarse-resolution imagery such as the Landsat product used in this study may not be optimal when compared to a more suitable high-resolution product, such as Quickbird or IKONOS. Nonetheless, one objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of readily available satellite imagery in combination with sophisticated feature extraction software such as Feature Analyst.

Initial Learning. To capture urban growth near and around Fort Benning, polygon training sets representing urban features (buildings, houses, streets, etc.) were manually digitized using the Landsat 7 ETM satellite imagery. The primary urban expansion impacting Fort Benning occurs in the metropolitan areas (Columbus, GA and Phenix City, AL). Therefore, this region of interest (ROI) was clipped from the image scene to extract features only within this chosen area. Variable-sized representative samples were digitized throughout the ROI for two reasons. First, the different size polygons will adequately represent the various feature shapes in the image. Second, it is important to select areas across the extent of the image to reduce the potential effects of shadows. The completed training sets were then used as input to the learning phase of the routine. By selecting a feature type that most closely represents the target feature, in this case buildings, and by choosing the spatial resolution closest to that of the imagery, the initial extraction process was completed for each of the target urban feature classes. However, many more iterative processes are needed to render satisfactory results.

Clutter Removal. As a result of the first iteration, clutter – in the form of small polygons – was removed from the data set by aggregating the undesirable features. Aggregating effectively removes “island” polygons as well as small holes within the resulting polygons (Visual Learning Systems 2002). By specifying a minimum pixel area (~60 pixels in this study) isolated, extraneous polygons not representative of target urban features were eliminated from the residual polygons. To further refine the clutter removal process, a series of correct (positive) and incorrect (negative) examples were identified. Areas of missed urban features were also identified during this phase of the process. This helps the software to “learn” from any mistakes that may have been made during the initial classification and was initiated several times to produce desirable results. Because of the coarse resolution of the Landsat imagery and the inability to effectively use pixel size to extract key features, editing had to be done manually to eliminate areas of confusion (i.e. areas that resemble urban features such as bare ground and highway construction). Once satisfactory results were obtained, the residual polygons were smoothed to eliminate the jagged-edge appearance.

RESULTS: Urban features were extracted from the satellite imagery for the past three collection years. Figure 2 illustrates the urban expansion over time (1999-2001-2003) for the metropolitan areas affecting Fort Benning. To remain consistent with prior urban growth estimates, urban features within the cantonment areas of Fort Benning were included with the final delineation estimates for all years. The results (represented as total area in hectares) were then analyzed to correspond to the urban growth impacting Fort Benning. There has been a steady increase in urban growth since 1999. Table 1 summarizes the growth estimates as well as the percentage of growth from the initial estimate in 1999 to

the present in 2003. Table 1 shows that urban growth has increased roughly 2.5 percent from 1999 to 2001 and slightly more (2.8 percent) from 2001 to 2003.

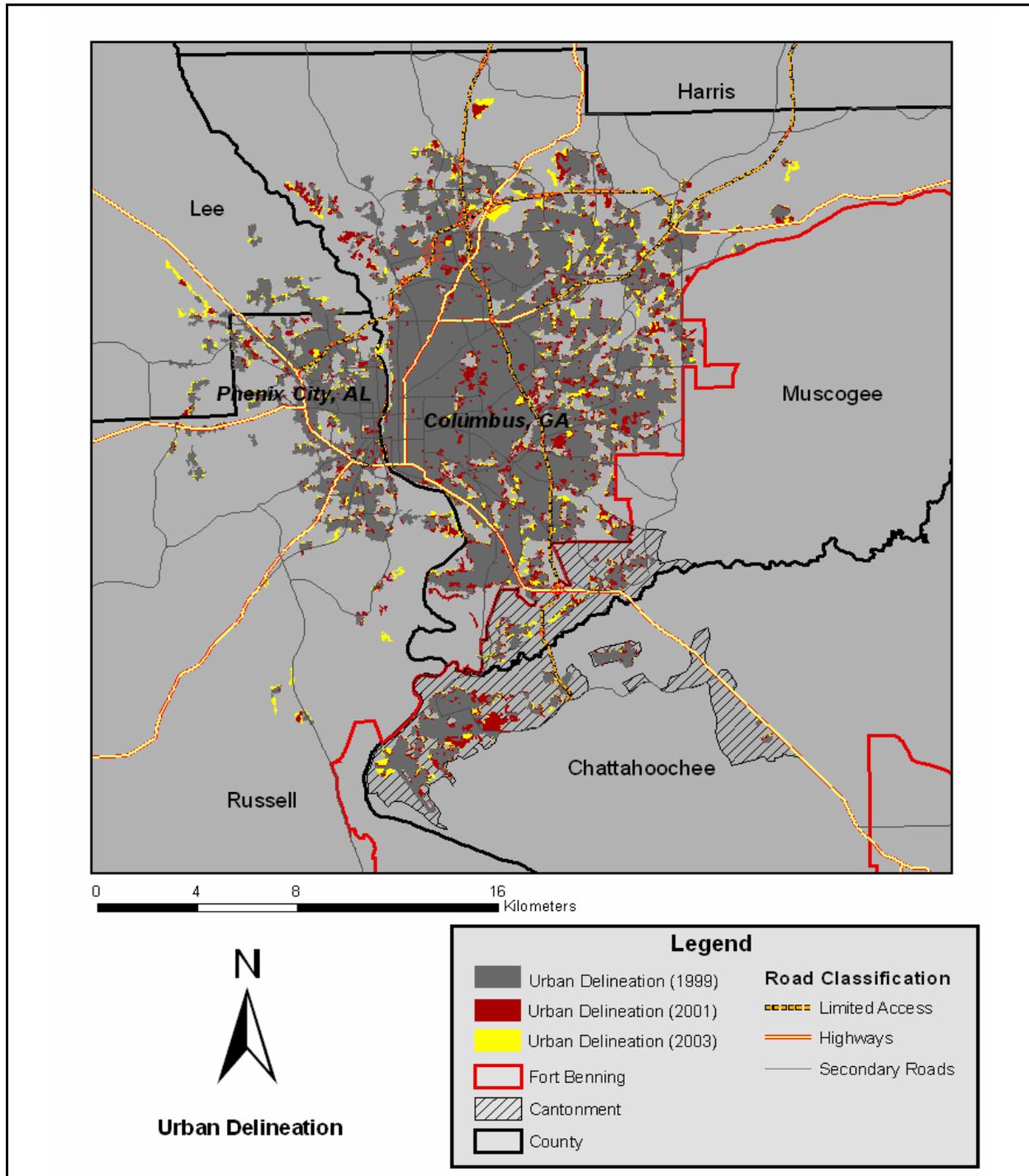


Figure 2. Urban expansion over time (1999-2001-2003)

Table 1 Urban Growth Estimates for Metropolitan Areas Affecting Fort Benning		
Year	Total Area (ha)	Growth Percentage
1999	15,246	-----
2001	15,644	2.54%
2003	16,101	2.83%

DISCUSSION: The assisted feature extraction method utilized in this project demonstrates the ability of the Feature Analyst software to provide the user with an easy way to extract urban features from satellite imagery without using traditional image processing techniques. Other advantages of using the feature extraction software are that it is incorporated into ArcGIS 9.0, it is quite user-friendly, and it produces results quickly.

The completed output (ESRI shapefile) from Feature Analyst can be easily compared to previous years to effectively determine where urban encroachment is occurring. This approach appears to be very helpful and efficient in a decision support system, especially for generalizing urban growth and its potential impacts. The feature extraction software provides the user with a quick and easy method to extract single features from the satellite imagery. However, using high-resolution satellite imagery, as opposed to coarse-resolution, may provide more precise estimates when using semi-automated feature extraction software such as Feature Analyst to extract detailed urban features. Similar to why high-resolution imagery is unsuitable for input into traditional pixel-based clustering and classification algorithms, coarse-resolution imagery may not be the best input for sophisticated feature extraction software that relies on a finer spatial context based on pixel size.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: This technical note was prepared for the Ecosystem Characterization and Monitoring Initiative (ECMI) sponsored by the Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program (SERDP) Ecosystem Management Project (SEMP). The technical monitor was Dr. Robert Holst, SERDP Program Manager.

The work was performed under the direction of the Ecosystem Evaluation and Engineering Division (EE) of the Environmental Laboratory (EL), U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC). The EL Principal Investigator was Mr. Sam S. Jackson, EL, and co-investigator was Mr. Scott G. Bourne, EL. Project Manager for the ECMI was Dr. Rose Kress, EL, and Program Manager for the SEMP was Mr. William Goran of the Construction Engineering Research Laboratory (CERL), ERDC, Champaign, IL.

Many individuals contributed to the support of this project, including the following: Mr. John Brent and Mr. Pete Swiderek of Fort Benning, GA, the host site for the SEMP, and Mr. Mark R. Graves and Dr. David Price of EL.

At the time of publication, Chief of EE was Dr. David J. Tazik and Director of EL was Dr. Edwin A. Theriot. Dr. James R. Houston was Director of ERDC, and COL James R. Rowan, EN, was Commander.

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Jackson, S. S., and Bourne, S. G. (2005). "An automated procedure to monitor urban encroachment over time on Fort Benning military installation" *SERDP Technical Notes Collection*, ERDC/EL TN-ECMI-05-x, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Vicksburg, MS. <http://el.erdc.usace.army.mil/>

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