LiDAR Based High Resolution Three-dimensional Modeling for Structural Characterization, Above-Ground Biomass Estimation, and Sustainable Management of Complex Forest-Based Agroforestry Systems

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Abstract
Accurate structural assessment and biomass quantification are critical for sustainable management and climate change mitigation in forest-based agroforestry systems. Traditional field-based inventory methods are labor-intensive, time-consuming, and often inadequate for capturing complex three-dimensional canopy architectures characteristic of multi-layered agroforestry landscapes. Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) technology has emerged as a transformative remote sensing tool enabling high-resolution three-dimensional modeling of vegetation structure at multiple spatial scales. This review examines the application of terrestrial, airborne, and unmanned aerial vehicle-based LiDAR systems for structural characterization and biomass estimation in agroforestry contexts. Key methodological approaches including point cloud processing, canopy height model generation, individual tree segmentation, and allometric model integration are critically evaluated. LiDAR-derived metrics demonstrate strong correlations with field-measured biomass and enable spatially explicit carbon stock assessment across heterogeneous agroforestry landscapes. Applications extend to productivity monitoring, land-use optimization, and climate-smart management strategies. Despite challenges related to data acquisition costs, processing complexity, and accuracy in dense understory conditions, LiDAR-based modeling represents a paradigm shift toward precision agroforestry management, facilitating evidence-based decision-making for resource-efficient and environmentally sustainable production systems.

Keywords: LiDAR Remote Sensing, Three-Dimensional Canopy Modeling, Biomass Estimation, Agroforestry Systems, Sustainable Forest Management, Precision Agriculture

1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of Structural and Biomass Assessment in Agroforestry

Forest-based agroforestry systems represent multifunctional landscapes integrating woody perennials with agricultural crops and livestock, providing critical ecosystem services including carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, soil protection, and sustainable livelihoods [1, 2]. Accurate quantification of vegetation structure and above-ground biomass (AGB) is essential for assessing system productivity, monitoring carbon stocks, and implementing climate-smart agricultural practices [3, 4]. Structural parameters such as canopy height, crown diameter, tree density, and vertical stratification directly influence microclimate regulation, nutrient cycling, and resource-use efficiency in complex agroforestry configurations [5, 6]. Furthermore, precise biomass estimation supports national greenhouse gas inventories, carbon credit schemes, and payments for ecosystem services, enhancing the economic viability of agroforestry interventions [7, 8].

1.2 Limitations of Conventional Field-Based Methods

Traditional forest inventory techniques relying on manual measurements of diameter at breast height (DBH), tree height, and crown dimensions are constrained by high labor requirements, temporal coverage limitations, and measurement uncertainties in heterogeneous agroforestry landscapes [9, 10]. Field-based approaches typically employ allometric equations derived from destructive sampling, which may introduce substantial errors when applied across diverse species compositions and environmental gradients characteristic of agroforestry systems [11, 12]. Moreover, conventional methods provide limited spatial resolution and fail to capture fine-scale three-dimensional structural complexity, hindering comprehensive ecosystem assessments [13]. The accessibility challenges in dense multi-strata systems further compromise sampling representativeness and data quality [14].

1.3 Scope of the Article

This article provides a comprehensive review of LiDAR technology applications for high-resolution three-dimensional modeling, structural characterization, and biomass estimation in forest-based agroforestry systems. The review synthesizes recent advances in terrestrial, airborne, and UAV-based LiDAR platforms, point cloud processing methodologies, and integration with complementary remote sensing data. Critical evaluation of biomass estimation algorithms, model validation approaches, and operational applications for sustainable agroforestry management is presented. The article concludes by identifying key challenges and emerging research directions toward enhanced decision-support systems for precision agroforestry.

2. LiDAR Technology and 3D Modeling in Agroforestry

2.1. Terrestrial, Airborne, and UAV-Based LiDAR Systems

LiDAR technology employs pulsed laser emissions to measure distances and generate high-density three-dimensional point clouds representing vegetation structure with centimeter-level precision [15, 16]. Terrestrial Laser Scanning (TLS) systems operate from ground-based platforms, providing exceptional detail for individual tree architecture, understory vegetation, and fine-scale structural attributes within localized study areas [17, 18]. TLS excels in characterizing trunk geometry, branch configurations, and vertical leaf area distribution, though spatial coverage remains limited by occlusion effects and survey logistics [19]. Airborne Laser Scanning (ALS) platforms mounted on manned aircraft enable regional-scale assessments with point densities typically ranging from 5 to 25 points per square meter, suitable for canopy height modeling and landscape-level biomass mapping [20, 21]. UAV-based LiDAR systems have emerged as a cost-effective intermediate solution, combining the spatial coverage advantages of ALS with the flexibility and resolution approaching TLS capabilities [22, 23]. These platforms facilitate adaptive data acquisition at temporal frequencies suitable for seasonal monitoring and growth dynamics assessment in agroforestry systems [24].

2.2 Point Cloud Processing and Canopy Structure Modeling

Raw LiDAR point clouds require systematic preprocessing including georeferencing, noise filtering, and ground point classification to generate accurate digital terrain models (DTM) and digital surface models (DSM) [25, 26]. Canopy height models (CHM) derived from the difference between DSM and DTM provide fundamental metrics for vegetation structure characterization [27]. Advanced algorithms employing region-growing, watershed segmentation, or machine learning techniques enable individual tree crown delineation, essential for deriving tree-level attributes in heterogeneous agroforestry landscapes [28, 29]. Voxel-based approaches partition three-dimensional space into volumetric units, facilitating quantitative analysis of canopy density, gap fraction, and vertical foliage profiles across multiple vegetation layers [30, 31]. Recent developments in deep learning architectures have enhanced automation and accuracy of semantic segmentation, distinguishing tree species, growth stages, and structural components from multi-return LiDAR data [32].

2.3 Integration with GIS and Other Remote Sensing Data

Synergistic integration of LiDAR-derived structural metrics with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and complementary remote sensing datasets enhances analytical capabilities for comprehensive agroforestry assessments [33, 34]. Fusion with multispectral or hyperspectral imagery enables species classification, health status evaluation, and phenological monitoring through combined spectral-structural feature spaces [35, 36]. Integration of LiDAR point clouds with synthetic aperture radar (SAR) data improves biomass estimation accuracy, particularly in dense canopy conditions where optical sensors experience saturation effects [37]. Spatial analysis within GIS frameworks facilitates landscape-scale carbon accounting, biodiversity hotspot identification, and optimization of ecosystem service provisioning across agroforestry mosaics [38, 39]. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics and applications of different LiDAR platforms in agroforestry system analysis.

Table 1: LiDAR Platforms, Data Types, and Their Applications in Agroforestry System Analysis

Platform Type	Spatial Coverage	Point Density (pts/m²)	Primary Applications	Operational Advantages	Key Limitations
Terrestrial Laser Scanning (TLS)	0.01–1 ha	100–10,000	Individual tree architecture, stem volume, branch structure, understory characterization	Ultra-high resolution, detailed 3D reconstruction, multi-angular scanning	Limited spatial extent, occlusion effects, labor-intensive
Airborne Laser Scanning (ALS)	100–10,000 ha	5–25	Regional biomass mapping, canopy height models, landscape classification	Large-scale coverage, operational efficiency	Lower point density, high acquisition cost, weather dependency
UAV-based LiDAR	1–500 ha	20–200	Plot-level assessments, temporal monitoring, precision management	Flexible deployment, cost-effective, high temporal resolution	Flight time constraints, regulatory restrictions, processing demands
Mobile Laser Scanning (MLS)	Linear transects	50–500	Roadside tree inventory, corridor mapping, accessibility assessments	Rapid data collection, integration with navigation systems	Limited to accessible areas, positional accuracy challenges

3. Structural Assessment and Biomass Estimation

3.1 Tree Architecture and Canopy Structure Analysis

LiDAR-derived metrics provide comprehensive characterization of tree architectural attributes critical for understanding productivity and ecological functioning in agroforestry systems [40, 41]. Canopy height, crown projection area, and vertical complexity indices quantified from point cloud analysis correlate strongly with photosynthetic capacity and resource capture efficiency [42]. Three-dimensional canopy models enable precise quantification of leaf area index (LAI), a fundamental parameter governing light interception, evapotranspiration, and carbon assimilation dynamics [43, 44]. Stratification indices computed from vertical point distribution profiles characterize multi-layered canopy structures typical of complex agroforestry arrangements, informing shade management and intercrop selection strategies [45]. Individual tree segmentation algorithms facilitate species-specific structural assessments, accounting for taxonomic variation in growth forms and allometric relationships [46].

3.2 Above-Ground Biomass and Carbon Stock Estimation

LiDAR-based biomass estimation employs empirical models relating structural metrics to field-measured reference data or integrates physical modeling approaches based on voxel-level density distributions [47, 48]. Regression models incorporating canopy height, crown dimensions, and vertical complexity metrics achieve coefficients of determination (R^2) exceeding 0.85 for AGB prediction in diverse agroforestry contexts [49, 50]. Area-based approaches aggregate point cloud statistics over defined spatial units, providing robust estimates at landscape scales while individual tree-based methods enable spatially explicit carbon stock mapping with fine resolution [51]. Allometric equations calibrated using LiDAR-derived tree dimensions reduce reliance on destructive sampling, facilitating non-invasive monitoring of biomass accumulation and carbon sequestration rates [52, 53]. Integration of wood density information derived from species classification enhances biomass conversion accuracy from volume estimates [54].

3.3 Model Validation and Accuracy Considerations

Rigorous validation protocols comparing LiDAR-derived estimates with independent field measurements are essential for assessing model performance and quantifying uncertainty [55, 56]. Cross-validation techniques employing holdout datasets or k-fold partitioning provide robust metrics of predictive accuracy including root mean square error (RMSE), mean absolute error (MAE), and bias [57]. Accuracy assessments must account for scale dependencies, with plot-level validations typically demonstrating higher errors than aggregated landscape estimates due to individual tree segmentation uncertainties and positional registration challenges [58, 59]. Canopy penetration limitations in dense multi-layered systems may result in underestimation of understory biomass, necessitating calibration adjustments or complementary ground-based sampling [60]. Temporal stability of allometric relationships and transferability across environmental gradients represent ongoing research priorities for operational implementation [61].

4. Applications in Sustainable Agroforestry Management

4.1 Productivity Monitoring and Land-Use Optimization

LiDAR-based structural assessments enable evidence-based decision-making for optimizing spatial configurations and species compositions in agroforestry systems. Spatially explicit biomass maps derived from repeated LiDAR acquisitions quantify growth rates and productivity gradients, informing adaptive management interventions including selective pruning, thinning, and regeneration planning. Three-dimensional canopy models facilitate shade pattern prediction and microclimate modeling, supporting optimal understory crop selection and planting density recommendations. Integration of LiDAR-derived productivity metrics with economic models enhances cost-benefit analyses of alternative agroforestry configurations, promoting financially viable and ecologically sustainable land-use transitions.

4.2 Climate-Smart and Resource-Efficient Management

High-resolution structural characterization supports climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies through enhanced carbon accounting, vulnerability assessments, and resilience monitoring. LiDAR-enabled carbon stock inventories provide credible baselines for participation in carbon markets and climate finance mechanisms, incentivizing agroforestry adoption. Precise quantification of biomass accumulation facilitates evaluation of nature-based climate solutions and validation of greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. Structural diversity metrics derived from LiDAR data inform biodiversity conservation planning and ecosystem service optimization, aligning productivity objectives with environmental sustainability goals. Temporal monitoring capabilities enable early detection of stress-induced structural changes, supporting proactive management responses to drought, pest outbreaks, or degradation processes. Table 2 presents the advantages and limitations of LiDAR-based approaches for agroforestry management applications.

Table 2: Advantages and Limitations of LiDAR-Based 3D Modeling Approaches in Agroforestry Management

Aspect	Advantages	Limitations
Data Acquisition	Non-destructive measurement; rapid spatial coverage; multi-temporal monitoring capability; operational in diverse terrain conditions	High initial capital investment; weather and atmospheric interference; regulatory constraints for UAV operations; expertise requirements for mission planning
Structural Characterization	Centimeter-level precision; three-dimensional canopy architecture; vertical stratification quantification; individual tree segmentation	Occlusion effects in dense canopies; understory penetration challenges; species differentiation limitations without spectral data; edge effects in boundary areas
Biomass Estimation	Strong empirical correlations ($R^2 > 0.85$); reduced field sampling intensity; spatially continuous mapping; integration with allometric models	Calibration dataset requirements; transferability uncertainties; saturation effects in high-biomass systems; species-specific equation needs
Operational Implementation	Automated processing workflows; GIS integration capabilities; decision-support system compatibility;	Computational processing demands; data storage requirements; technical capacity constraints; cost-effectiveness

	scalability across management units	at small scales
Temporal Monitoring	Change detection accuracy; growth dynamics quantification; intervention impact assessment; phenological tracking potential	Registration precision requirements; radiometric calibration needs; temporal resolution trade-offs; long-term data continuity challenges

5. Challenges and Future Perspectives

5.1 Data Cost, Processing Complexity, and Scalability

Despite technological advances, LiDAR data acquisition costs remain a significant barrier for widespread adoption in smallholder agroforestry contexts, particularly in developing regions where such systems are most prevalent. Commercial ALS campaigns typically cost several hundred dollars per square kilometer, while UAV-based systems require substantial capital investment and technical expertise. Point cloud processing demands specialized software, computational infrastructure, and skilled personnel capable of implementing complex algorithms and quality control procedures. Scalability challenges persist in translating plot-level methodologies to operational landscape assessments covering thousands of hectares with diverse management units. Development of cloud-based processing platforms, open-source algorithms, and standardized workflows may enhance accessibility and reduce implementation barriers

5.2 Emerging Trends and Decision-Support Integration

Future developments in LiDAR technology emphasize miniaturization, cost reduction, and integration with autonomous platforms for routine monitoring applications. Single-photon LiDAR and Geiger-mode systems enable efficient large-area mapping with reduced flight times and operational costs. Machine learning applications including random forests, support vector machines, and deep neural networks continue to improve automated feature extraction, species classification, and biomass prediction accuracy. Integration of LiDAR-derived structural metrics into comprehensive decision-support systems incorporating socioeconomic data, climate projections, and policy scenarios will facilitate holistic agroforestry planning. Real-time data assimilation frameworks linking remote sensing observations with process-based growth models represent promising frontiers for predictive management. Enhanced collaboration between research institutions, technology providers, and land management agencies is essential for translating scientific innovations into practical tools accessible to diverse stakeholder communities.

6. Conclusion

LiDAR-based high-resolution three-dimensional modeling has revolutionized structural characterization and biomass estimation capabilities in forest-based agroforestry systems, overcoming fundamental limitations of conventional field inventory approaches. The technology enables non-destructive, spatially continuous assessment of canopy architecture, vertical stratification, and carbon stocks across heterogeneous landscapes with unprecedented precision and efficiency. Terrestrial, airborne, and UAV-based platforms provide complementary capabilities suitable for multi-scale applications ranging from individual tree phenotyping to regional carbon accounting. Integration with GIS and complementary remote sensing data enhances analytical power for comprehensive ecosystem assessments and evidence-based management planning. Demonstrated applications in productivity monitoring, land-use optimization, and climate-smart management underscore the transformative potential for sustainable agroforestry development. While challenges related to data costs, processing complexity, and accuracy in dense understory conditions persist, ongoing technological innovations and methodological refinements continue to expand operational feasibility. The convergence of LiDAR technology with machine learning, decision-support systems, and participatory monitoring frameworks promises to accelerate the transition toward precision agroforestry, supporting global objectives for food security, climate change mitigation, and environmental sustainability.

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