

Supplementary Information for:

Unintended consequence of combating desertification in China

Contents

Supplementary Note 1 *Desertification-prone region (DPR) in China*

Supplementary Note 2 *“Grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices in China*

Supplementary Note 3 *Constructed fractional vegetation coverage (FVC) dataset*

Supplementary Note 4 *Trend of climate change and FVC*

Supplementary Note 5 *Field truthing and interpolation of CNLUCC*

Supplementary Figures 1~15

Supplementary Tables 1~13

Supplementary Note 1 Desertification-prone region (DPR) in China

Desertification is defined as “land degradation in arid, semiarid, and dry subhumid areas resulting from various factors including climatic variations and human activities”^{1,2}. From 1999 to the present, every five years, the State Forestry Administration of China (SFAC) has released a bulletin on the status quo of desertification and sandification in China; these bulletins summarize the water erosion, freeze-thaw, salinification, and aeolian desertification statuses of the nation³. However, these bulletins do not specify the monitoring criteria, and only the desertification classifications and the corresponding areas in different provinces are released. Based on bulletins released by relevant Chinese agencies, in 2014, the areas affected by water erosion, salinification, freeze-thaw cycles, and aeolian desertification were 25.01×10^4 , 17.19×10^4 , 36.33×10^4 , and 182.63×10^4 km², respectively⁴.

However, there are differences in the desertification classification schemes applied by different researchers in China and by SFAC. In China, water erosion and freeze-thaw events mainly occur on the Chinese Loess Plateau⁵ and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau⁶, respectively. At present, the Chinese Loess Plateau is not regarded as a typical desertification region⁷, and under the context of global warming, freeze-thaw events on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau have positive effects on vegetation growth⁸. Therefore, no severe desertification issues currently exist in either of these regions, and most researchers in China do not regard water erosion, freeze-thaw events or the resulting ecological, environmental and food security issues as consequences of desertification. In addition, although salinification also occurs in parts of arid, semiarid, and semihumid regions and is one form of desertification⁹, the reversal of salinification resulting from a decreased groundwater level¹⁰⁻¹² and the limited area affected by salinification ($\sim 17 \times 10^4$ km²) means that salinification is not considered a serious desertification issue and does not significantly affect the ecological environment or food security in China. Due to the exceptionally large

33 affected area ($\sim 184 \times 10^4 \text{ km}^2$, comprising $\sim 90\%$ of the desertification-prone area in China), ‘aeolian
34 desertification’ is usually regarded as a kind of desertification. This process is formally defined as “the destruction
35 of an ecological balance as a result of excessive human activities under conditions characterized by high wind
36 activity in regions with sandy surface sediments, accompanied by evidence of intensifying wind activity occurring
37 simultaneously with land degradation”¹³⁻¹⁵.

38 Desertification-prone regions are mainly covered by sandy lands, the ecological landscapes of which are similar
39 to those of grasslands and steppe regions, as has been noted in various vegetation classification schemes^{16,17}
40 developed for the arid, semiarid and semihumid regions of China. Under the condition that the underlying soils
41 consist mainly of sands (particles of 0.05-2 mm in diameter), these landscapes are referred to as ‘sandy lands’;
42 according to the vegetation coverage, these areas can be further classified as mobile, semimobile, semianchored,
43 and anchored sandy lands. The Gobi Desert is defined as “wide, shallow basins with smooth rocky bottoms filled
44 with sand, silt or clay, pebbles or, more often, with gravel”¹⁸; the land surface of the Gobi Desert is usually covered
45 by a layer of coarse sands or gravels ($>0.5 \text{ mm}$ in diameter) with very low vegetation coverage ($<5\%$)¹⁹. If the
46 vegetation coverage or productivity of sandy lands/the Gobi Deserts decreases, desertification occurs. From the
47 historical period to the present, several sandy lands have been reclaimed and have become major grain production
48 areas in China²⁰⁻²², and nearly all of the sandy lands have been used for animal grazing²³. Although the intensity
49 of human activity in the Gobi Desert is extremely low²⁴, due to the extremely low productivity of this region²⁵⁻²⁷,
50 desertification in such areas is usually not considered¹⁷. According to the above definition, we compiled the spatial
51 distributions of the DPR (Supplementary Fig. 1) and counted the land use types (Supplementary Fig. 6),
52 population, GDP (Supplementary Fig. 11), grain production, livestock production, and related income of
53 individuals (Supplementary Fig. 7) in the DPR. The recent (2015-2019) specific economic situation of the DPR
54 is shown in Supplementary Table 1.

55

56 **Supplementary Note 2 “Grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices in China**

57 Since the late 1970s, and especially from the early 2000s to the present, multiple desertification-combating
58 programmes, mainly including the “Natural Forest Protection”, “Great Green Wall”, “Returning Farmland to
59 Forest/Grassland”, “Pasturing Prohibition”, and “Beijing-Tianjin Sandstorm Source Control” programmes, have
60 been launched to combat desertification, control dust storms, and improve the ecological environments in the
61 DPR of China (Supplementary Tables 1, 11). Although diverse countermeasures are employed in each programme,
62 the major countermeasures of these programmes can be roughly divided into two categories: returning farmlands
63 to forests/grasslands and afforestation (“grain-for-green” practices), and grazing exclusion practices. Following
64 the practices of these programmes, the Chinese government invested some money (Supplementary Table 1), a

65 portion of which was paid to farmers and herders (Supplementary Table 6). In addition, following the government
66 plan, in the near future, “grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices are expected to continue
67 (Supplementary Table 2).

68 However, there are no official details regarding limited or banned regions and land use types covered by the
69 “grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices; therefore, we identified these regions and land use types based
70 on multiple-period land use data by referring to the relevant legal literature, and acquired the proportions of DPR
71 areas in each province related to the two practice types (Supplementary Fig. 3). Then, we applied a statistical
72 framework to identify the contributions of climate change and the two practice types to vegetation restoration in
73 the DPR (Supplementary Fig. 9) and calculated the production and income losses induced by the two practice
74 types in the DPR (Supplementary Fig. 4; Supplementary Table 4).

75 76 **Supplementary Note 3 Construction of the fractional vegetation coverage (FVC) dataset**

77 We used the long-term, continuous NDVI dataset of the Blended Vegetation Health Product (VH NDVI) and 250-
78 m MODIS NDVI data to construct the FVC dataset. The VH NDVI product (for 1982-2018), which has a spatial
79 resolution of 4 km and a temporal resolution of 7 days, was retrieved from the Visible Infrared Imaging
80 Radiometer Suite (VIRS) (available since 2013) and Advanced Very-High-Resolution Radiometer (AVHRR,
81 available from 1982 to 2012) land surface data ([ftp://ftp.star.nesdis.noaa.gov/pub/corp/scsb/wguo/data/
82 Blended_VH_4km/VH/](ftp://ftp.star.nesdis.noaa.gov/pub/corp/scsb/wguo/data/Blended_VH_4km/VH/)). Sixteen-day composite 250-m MODIS NDVI values were derived from the MOD13Q1
83 Terra Vegetation Indices ([https://ladsweb.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/missions-and-measurements/products/
84 MOD13Q1](https://ladsweb.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/missions-and-measurements/products/MOD13Q1)), which has been available since 2000.

85 To match the temporal resolution of the MODIS and VH NDVI datasets, a dataset with a spatial resolution of half
86 a month was composited using the maximum value composite (MVC) method. Before resampling, missing data
87 in the MODIS and VH NDVI dataset were compensated using the nearest value at the temporal scale. When the
88 monthly VH NDVI data is less than 4 periods, the nearest time data is used as substitute. Meanwhile, in order to
89 maintain the continuity of monthly scale data, the MVC was used to generate NDVI for the two periods of the
90 upper and the second half of the month respectively. This work ensures that the two sets of data have 24 periods
91 per year. To construct a high-quality MODIS data map, median filter technology^{28,29} was used to smooth the
92 MODIS NDVI profiles. Then, based on the Quality Control (QC) information for MODIS NDVI
93 (http://lpdaac.usgs.gov/modis/qa/mod13a2_qa_v5.asp), NDVI values derived using the main radiative transfer
94 method ($Q < 3$) were retained, while those derived using the empirical method due ($Q \geq 3$) to geometric
95 incompatibility or other problems were excluded and replaced by the filtered values. Due to the large spatial
96 heterogeneity of the start and end times of the growing season in the DPR, the accumulated annual NDVI was

97 used to reflect vegetation growth characteristics. The annual NDVI value was calculated as follows:

$$98 \quad NDVI_{y,i} = \sum_{m=1}^{m=24} NDVI_{m,i} \quad (1)$$

$$99 \quad NDVI_{m,i} > 0 \quad (2)$$

100 where $NDVI_{m,i}$ is the NDVI value of the i_{th} grid point at the m_{th} time and $NDVI_{y,i}$ is the annual NDVI value
 101 of the corresponding grid point. To match the spatial resolution and timespan of the MODIS dataset in the DPR,
 102 annual VH NDVI data for 1982-2018 were resampled to a 250-m spatial resolution using the bilinear interpolation
 103 method to provide information about the distribution of vegetation and help reduce the probability of non-
 104 vegetation being treated as plants in the constructed NDVI (CD NDVI) datasets. Therefore, based on the NDVI
 105 data sources and methods described above, the constructed NDVI dataset (CD NDVI) was created, and the annual
 106 value of NDVI value could be calculated as follow:

$$107 \quad ANDVI_{M,ix,jx} = \frac{\sum_{y=2000}^{y=2018} NDVI_{M,y,ix,jx}}{19} \quad (3)$$

$$108 \quad ANDVI_{B,ix,jx} = \frac{\sum_{y=2000}^{y=2018} NDVI_{B,y,ix,jx}}{19} \quad (4)$$

$$109 \quad V_{ix,jx} = \frac{ANDVI_{B,ix,jx}}{ANDVI_{M,ix,jx}} \quad (5)$$

$$110 \quad NDVI_{ix,jx} = \left(1 + \frac{NDVI_{B,ix,jx} - ANDVI_{M,ix,jx}}{ANDVI_{M,ix,jx}} \right) \times \frac{NDVI_{B,ix,jx}}{V_{ix,jx}}, \quad i < ix, j < jx \quad (6)$$

$$111 \quad i = h + ix \cdot \Delta_i, h < \Delta_i \quad (7)$$

$$112 \quad j = v + jx \cdot \Delta_j, v < \Delta_j \quad (8)$$

113 where i (or ix) and j (or jx) refer to pixel in the i_{th} (or ix) row and j_{th} (or jx) column in the image data,
 114 respectively. Δ_i is $\frac{ix}{i}$; Δ_j is $\frac{jx}{j}$. $NDVI_B$ refers to the VH NDV, $NDVI_M$ refers to the MODIS NDVI, and
 115 $ANDVI$ is the annual NDVI value. Then, we reproduced a 250-m-resolution FVC dataset (CD FVC) using the
 116 improved pixel bipartite model for the 1982-2018 period (see Methods).

117 To test the robustness of the CD NDVI and FVC dataset, we used the GIMMS3g NDVI
 118 (<https://iridl.ldeo.columbia.edu/SOURCES/.NASA/.ARC/.ECOCAST/.GIMMS/.NDVI3g/.v1p0/>) and SPOT
 119 NDVI (<https://land.copernicus.vgt.vito.be/PDF/portal/Application.html#Browse;Root=513186>) datasets to
 120 construct VH, GIMMS3g, SPOT, and MODIS FVC data series. First, because assessing the consistency of the
 121 spatiotemporal variation trends is an effective method for verifying the quality of data from different sources^{30,31},
 122 we compared the CD NDVI with the VH, GIMMS3g, SPOT, and MODIS NDVI data from 2000-2013. The results
 123 show that although, from 2000 to 2013, the average CD NDVI value (1.91 ± 0.15 , mean ± 1 standard deviation)
 124 was 0.51 and 0.39 times higher than that of GIMMS3g and SPOT NDVI, respectively, all of the NDVI datasets
 125 showed significant increasing trends on the annual scale ($P < 0.01$) (Supplementary Fig. 13). This analysis
 126 suggests that the annual variation trends of the five NDVI datasets were relatively consistent in the DPR. Secondly,

127 an intercomparison of the annual variation trends of the five NDVI datasets in different subregions in the DPR
128 was performed. The results (Supplementary Fig. 14) also show that, at the annual scale for the nine subregions in
129 the DPR, all of the NDVI datasets exhibit increasing trends (with slopes >0), indicating that the variation trend
130 of the CD NDVI is similar to the VH, GIMMS3g, and MODIS NDVI. Third, the zonal variation trends of the CD
131 NDVI and MODIS NDVI from 2000-2018 (Supplementary Fig. 15a, b) also show a significant and consistent
132 decreasing trend over the latitudinal range of 35.5° N - 42.5°N and an increasing trend over the range of 46.5°N
133 - 50°N, suggesting that spatial consistency exists between these two datasets. Finally, the CD NDVI and MODIS
134 NDVI were also highly correlated at both the zonal and pixel levels ($R \geq 0.879$ ($P < 0.001$) and ≥ 0.564 (P
135 < 0.001), respectively) (Supplementary Fig. 15c). Therefore, the CD NDVI dataset accurately quantified the
136 spatial and temporal NDVI variations and was available for the entire DPR region. Using the methods described
137 above, we also verified the reliability of the CD FVC data (Supplementary Fig. 8; Supplementary Table 8;
138 Supplementary Table 9).

139

140 **Supplementary Note 4 Climate change and FVC trends**

141 The temperature, precipitation, and FVC trends in the DPR of China from 1982-2018 are shown in Supplementary
142 Fig. 5 and Supplementary Table 3. To assess the impacts of future climate and CO₂ change on vegetation
143 restoration in the DPR, we obtained monthly output data from 21 commonly used GCMs spanning the period
144 from 1982-2050 from the Earth System Grid Federation (ESGF, <https://esgf-node.llnl.gov/search/cmip6/>)
145 (Supplementary Table 10). The time series of CMIP6 model outputs comprise two parts: 1) historical
146 simulations (1982-2014) used for comparisons with the observed data and 2) ScenarioMIP simulations (2015-
147 2050) that were used to show the future changes in the climate system under different SSP and RCP scenarios
148 ^{32,33}. The SSP1-2.6, SSP2-4.5, and SSP5-8.5 scenarios are three of the scenarios commonly used in future
149 projection assessments³³, and thus were thus chosen in this work to analyse future FVC changes in the DPR. In
150 addition, only the r11p1f1 simulations of the 21 GCMs were used here to ensure consistency among all of the
151 output data³⁴. In general, climate variables that may potentially affect vegetation growth include the precipitation,
152 air temperature (mean, maximum, and minimum), solar irradiation, and wind, and therefore the monthly output
153 data of these variables were used in this study.

154 In addition to climate factors, the fertilization effect of anthropogenic CO₂ increases can also favour vegetation
155 growth and rehabilitation^{35,36}; therefore the monthly atmospheric CO₂ concentration data during the historical
156 (1981–2014) and future (2015–2100) periods under different scenarios were also used in this study. These data
157 were generated by the simplified climate carbon cycle model (MagicC7.0)³⁷ at a longitudinal interval of 0.5°
158 by the University of Melbourne (<https://greenhousegases.science.unimelb.edu.au/#!/view>).

159 Differences between GCM simulations and observed data occur because of uncertainties in initial fields, the
160 depictions of physical processes, and the probabilities associated with climate systems. To address these
161 differences and uncertainties, we used the delta change (DC) method modify the GCM simulations by removing
162 the errors between the simulated and observed data³⁸ during the reference period of 1982–2014 at each weather
163 station and then applied the correction to modify the simulated data during the period of 2015-2050 period:

$$164 \quad x_f^* = \mu_o + (x_f - \mu_m) \quad (10)$$

$$165 \quad x_f^* = \mu_o \times (x_f / \mu_m) \quad (11)$$

166 where the subscript f indicates the future; μ_o and μ_m are the means of the observed and model-simulated data,
167 respectively; and x_f and x_f^* are the original and modified simulation data, respectively. Some of the variables
168 (such as temperature) were modified using Equation 10, while other variables (e.g., precipitation) were modified
169 using Equation 11. Then, we used a multiple model ensemble (MME) based on the average equal-weights GCMs
170 as the input for the simulations to prevent potential errors resulting from using a single GCM.

171 The temperature and precipitation trends in the DPR of China from 2015 to 2050 were added to Supplementary
172 Fig. 5 to facilitate a clear comparison. Then, we proposed an SMLR model for each pixel based on the reference
173 period of the FVC and environmental factors data (the corresponding coefficient of determination is shown in
174 Supplementary Fig. 10) and simulated the future trends from 2015-2050 under the SSP1-2.6, SSP2-4.5, and SSP5-
175 8.5 scenarios from CMIP6 model experiments (Fig. 5; Supplementary Table 7).

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177 **Supplementary Note 5 Field truthing and interpolation of the CNLUCC data**

178 Mistakes in the characterization and positioning of patches due to operator misjudgements are inevitable
179 accidental errors in visual interpretation work. Therefore, data teams have evaluated the accuracy of the reported
180 land use data for each period by randomly sampling or sampling along the lines and comparing the actual and
181 interpreted results at the sample points one-by-one using global positioning system (GPS) data³⁹. At present, such
182 validations have covered most regions and each period in China (e.g., Supplementary Table 12 shows the accuracy
183 analysis results for Northeast China) and show that the overall accuracy of the dataset exceeds 90%^{40,41}. Therefore,
184 these data have been widely trusted and applied^{42,43}.

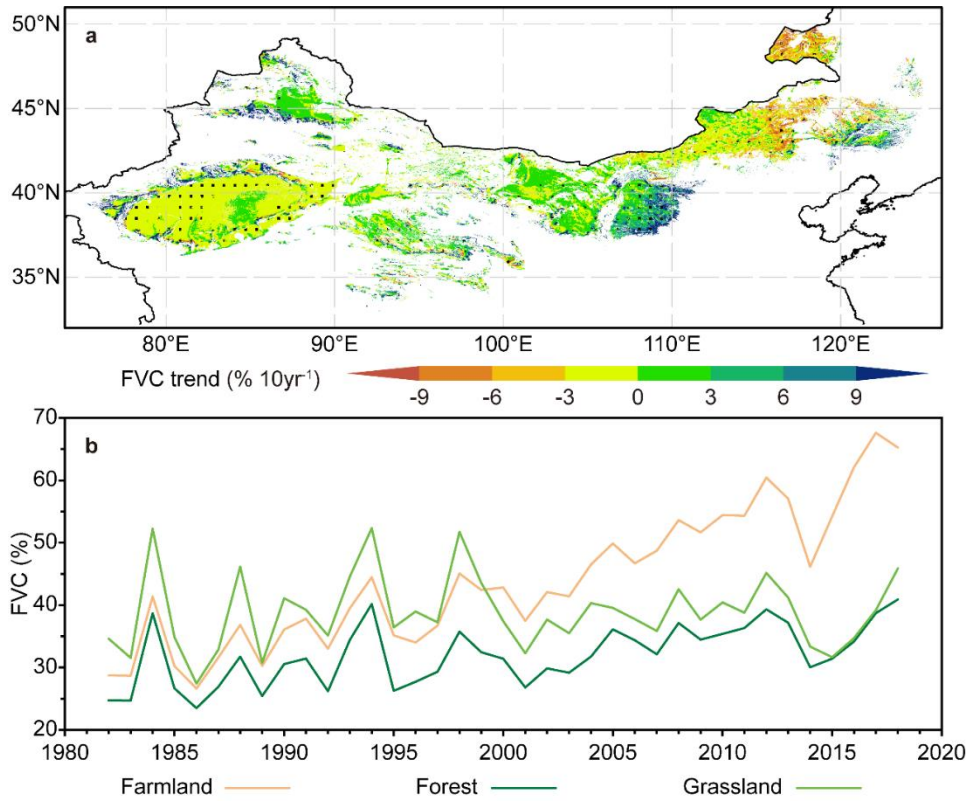
185 To obtain the arable lands and livestock production per unit area of grasslands and farmlands from the country-
186 level database covering the DPR from 1982-2020, we used CNLUCC data to extract the cultivated land and
187 grassland areas in each county (district). As CNLUCC has only 8 years of data (1980, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005,
188 2010, 2015, and 2020), we built a linear regression model based on the available data and used this model to
189 generate a complete time series via interpolation:

$$190 \quad Y = \alpha + \beta X + \varepsilon \quad (9)$$

191 where Y is the time series of the cultivated land and grassland areas, X is the year, β is the regression coefficient,
192 and ε is the regression error or residual. A least-squares method was used to fit equation (1) and, subsequently,
193 to estimate the missing data. The goodness of fit was assessed by the coefficient of determination (R^2)⁴⁴.
194 Cross-validation⁴⁵ was used to test the performance of the linear interpolation method filling the data gaps. For
195 land use data, the validations showed that the average interpolation errors for 126 counties (representing 48.65%
196 of the total) were within 10%, and 101 counties (39.00% of the total) had average interpolation errors of 10-20%
197 (Supplementary Table 10). Given the classification errors in the land use data⁴¹, the results suggested that the
198 linear interpolation method could reliably estimate the missing data. Table 1 lists the cross-validation results
199 obtained for a randomly selected proportion of counties in 1995, 2005, and 2015. The missing socioeconomic
200 data values are scattered, so the test results are not shown.

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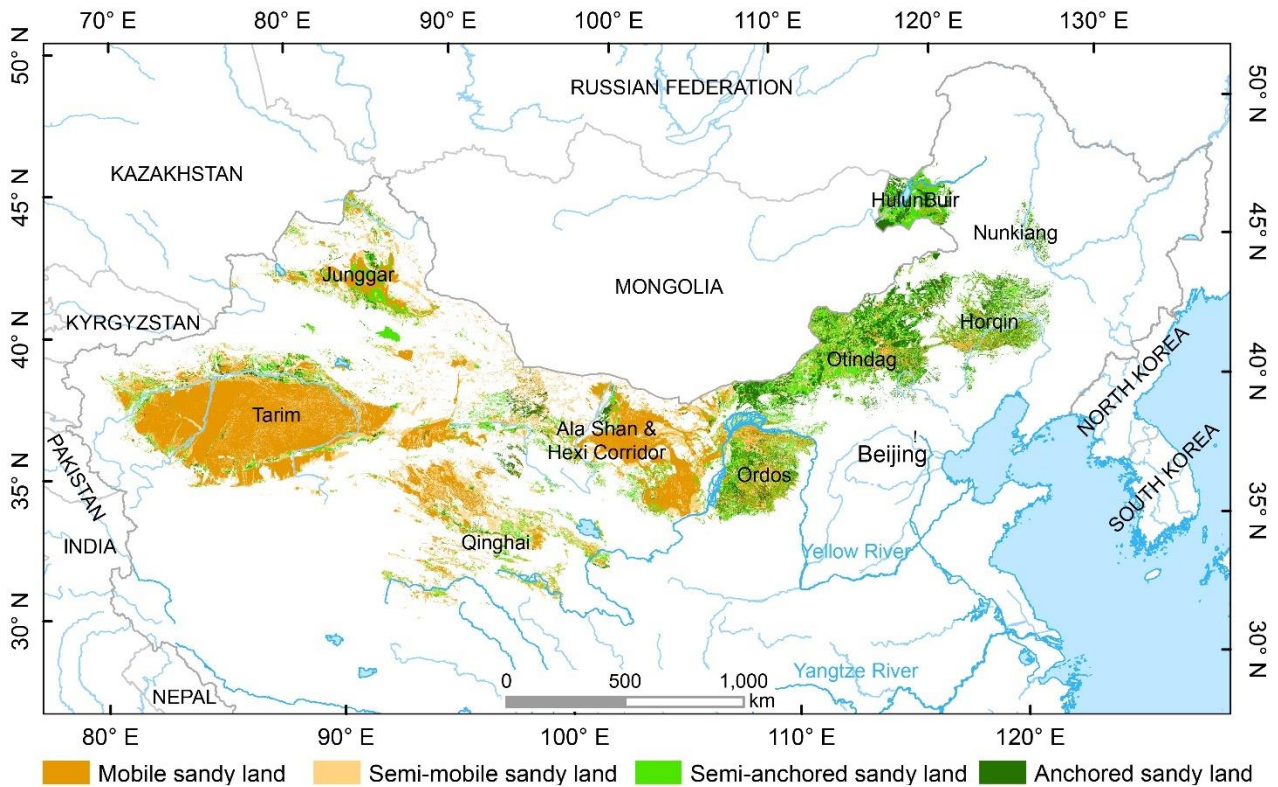
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205 **Supplementary Fig. 1 Fractional vegetation cover (FVC) trends in the desertification-prone region of China during the 1982**
 206 **to 2018.** a: Spatial patterns of the linear FVC trends; b: the annual average FVCs in farmlands, forests, and grasslands. The stippling
 207 in panel (a) marks regions with significant trends (the Mann-Kendall test passed at the 95% significance level).

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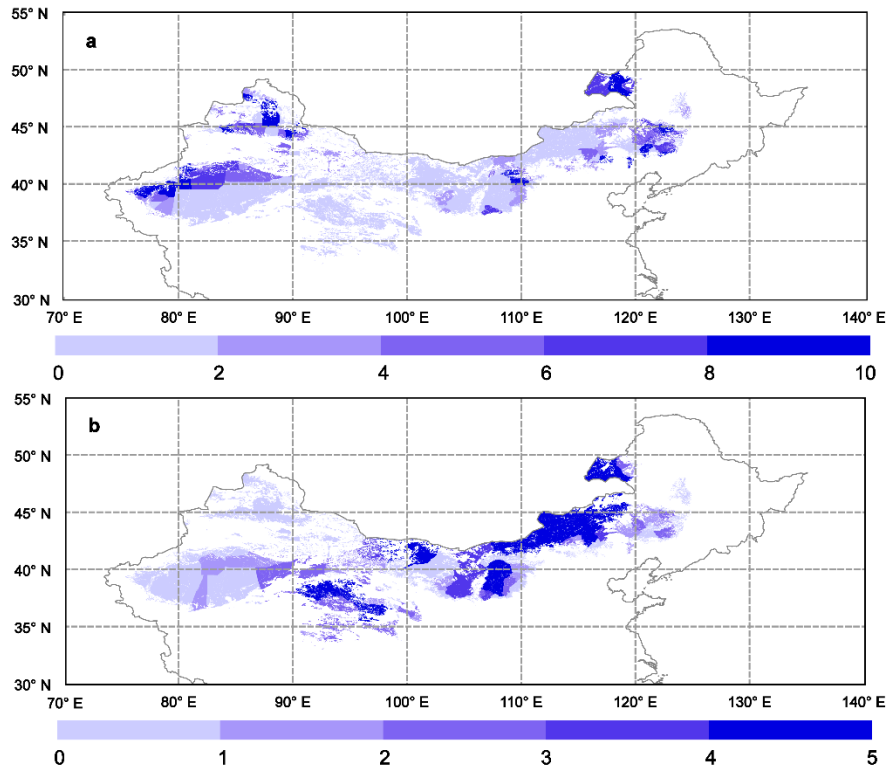


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Supplementary Fig. 2 Location and subregions of the desertification-prone region in China.



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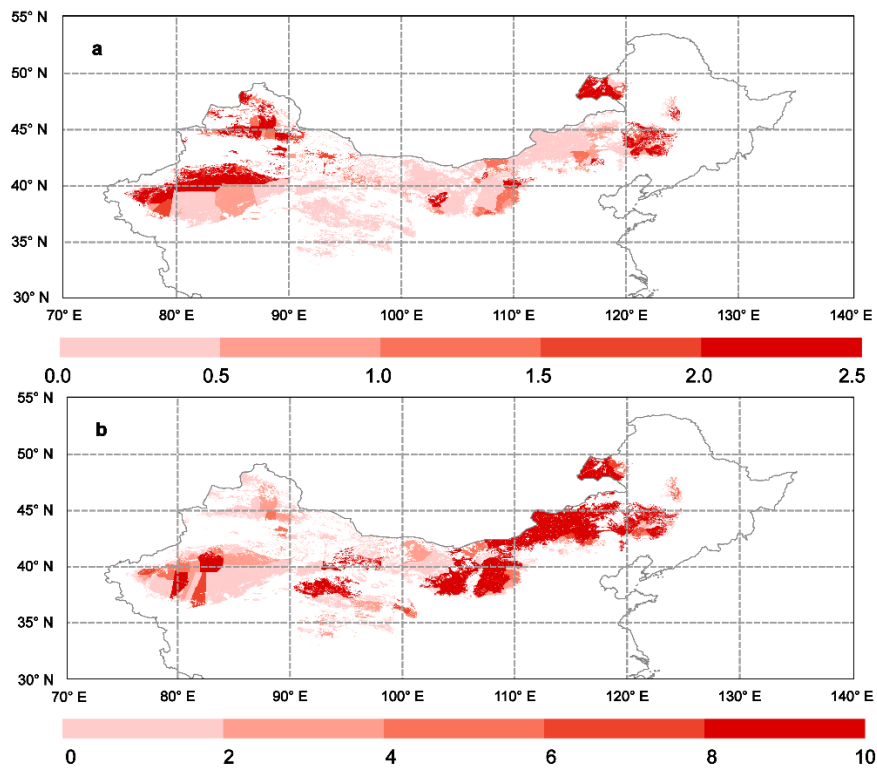
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Supplementary Fig. 3 County-level spatial distributions of combating desertification practices in the desertification-prone region since 2000. a: cultivated land areas involved in “grain-for-green” practices (10^3 ha); b: grassland areas involved in grazing exclusion practices (10^{-1} million ha). See the Methods section for more details.



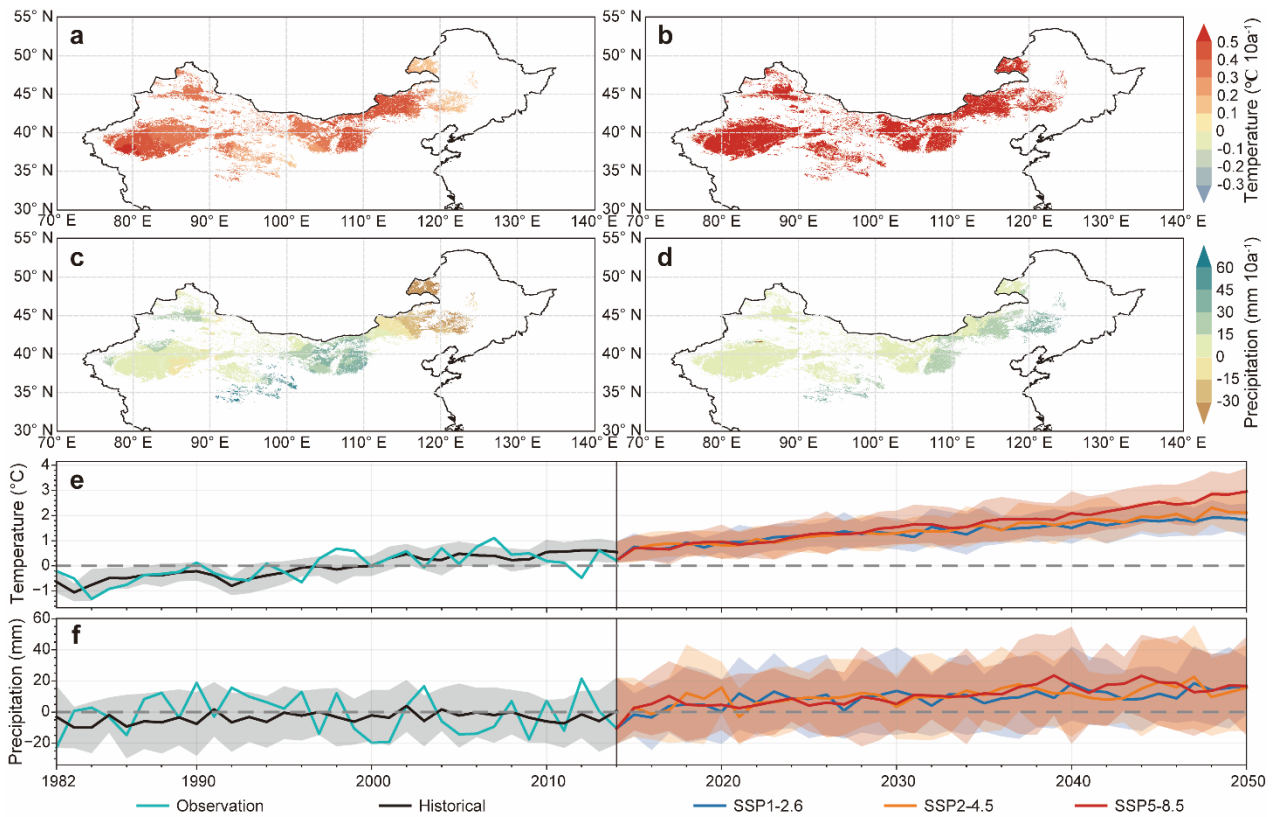
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Supplementary Fig. 4 County-level decreases in grain production and livestock production in the desertification-prone region of China since 2000. a: grain production decreases (10^{-3} million tonnes); b: livestock production decreases (10^{-1} million standard sheep units).



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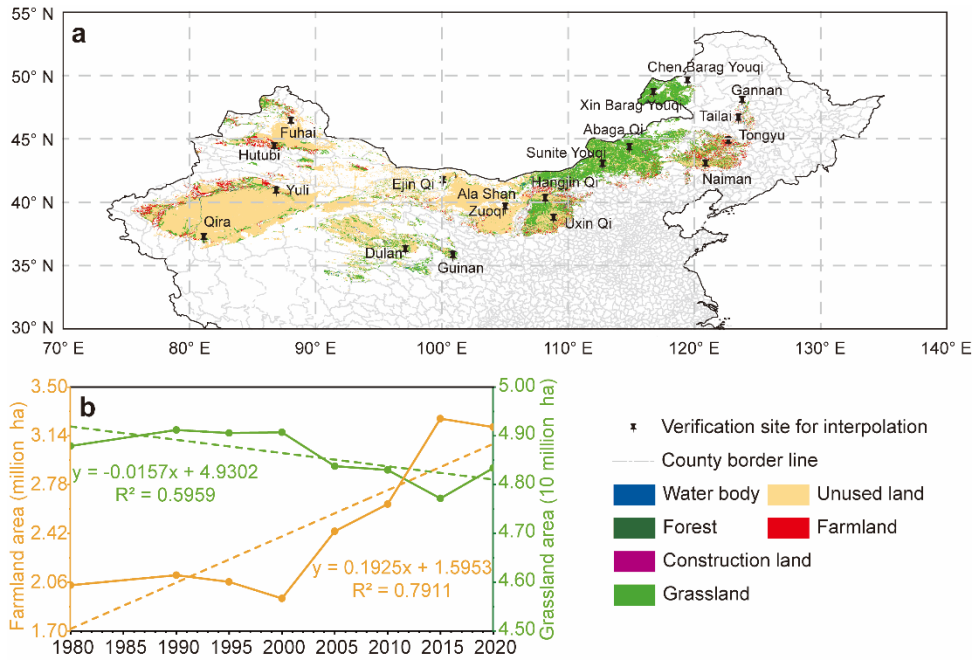
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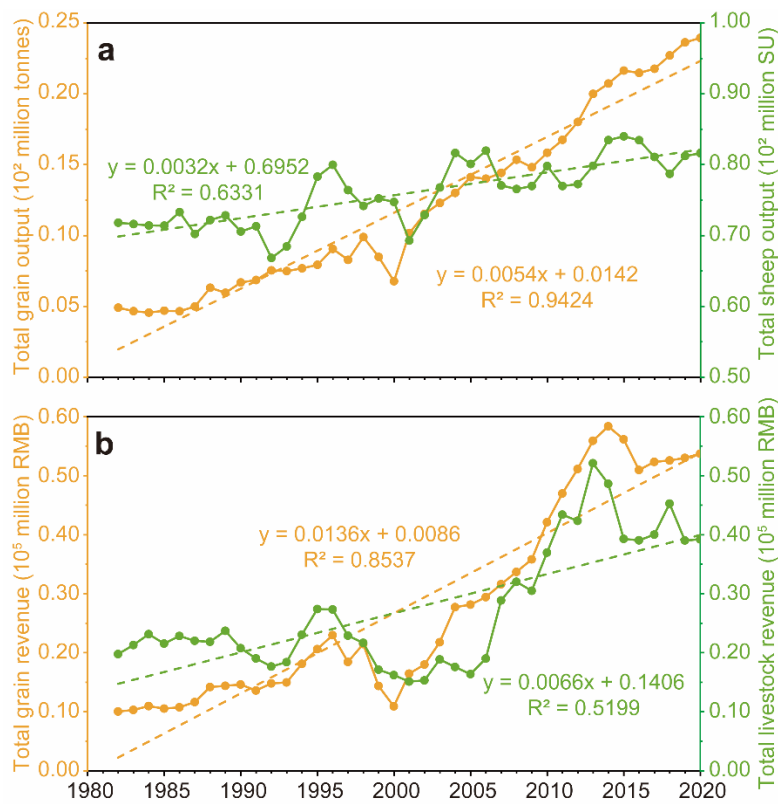
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Supplementary Fig. 5 Historical and future climate change trends in the desertification-prone region of China. Spatial distributions of temperature (a) and precipitation (c) trends from 1982 to 2018 and spatial distributions of temperature (b) and precipitation (d) trends from 2015 to 2050. The trend lines from 1982 to 2050 are also provided (e, f). The values in panels (b) and (d) are the average values derived under different shared socioeconomic pathway (SSP) and representative concentration pathway (RCP) scenarios (i.e., SSP1-2.6, SSP2-4.5, and SSP5-8.5) from the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6) model experiments. All scenario simulations were modified by removing the errors between the CMIP6-simulated (the line referred to as Historical in panels (e,f)) and observed (the line referred to as Observation in panels (e,f)) data during the 1982-2014 reference period and the difference between the three scenarios in panels (e,f) shown since 2014. The widths of the bands in panels (e) and (f) indicate the standard deviations among the different global climate models. To compare present and future climate conditions more intuitively, the absolute climate values are replaced by anomaly values obtained based on climatic averages during the 1982 to 2015 period in panels (e) and (f). See Supplementary Note 4 for details about CMIP6 data processing.

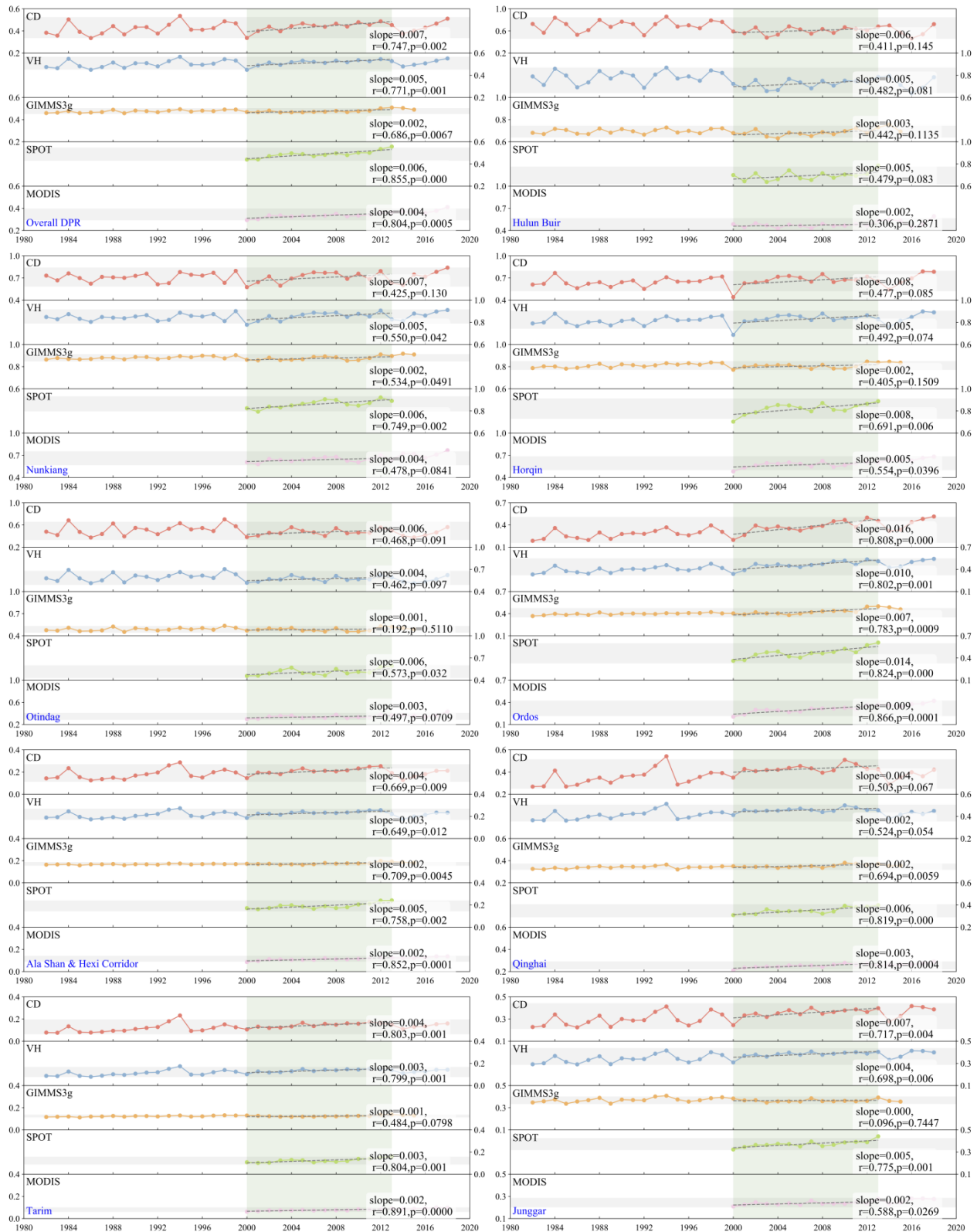


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 236 **Supplementary Fig. 6 Land use spatial pattern in 2020 (a) and area change trends during 1980 to 2020 (b) in the**
 237 **desertification-prone region.** The information representing 1980, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020 was provided by
 238 the Multi-Period Land Use Land Cover Remote Sensing Monitoring Dataset for China, and the other data were interpolated based
 239 on the line trends. See Methods and Supplementary Note 5 for more details.

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 242 **Supplementary Fig. 7 Annual actual yields of grain and animal husbandry (a) and the resulting incomes (b) in the**
 243 **desertification-prone region during 1982-2020.** 1 RMB \approx 0.14 USD.



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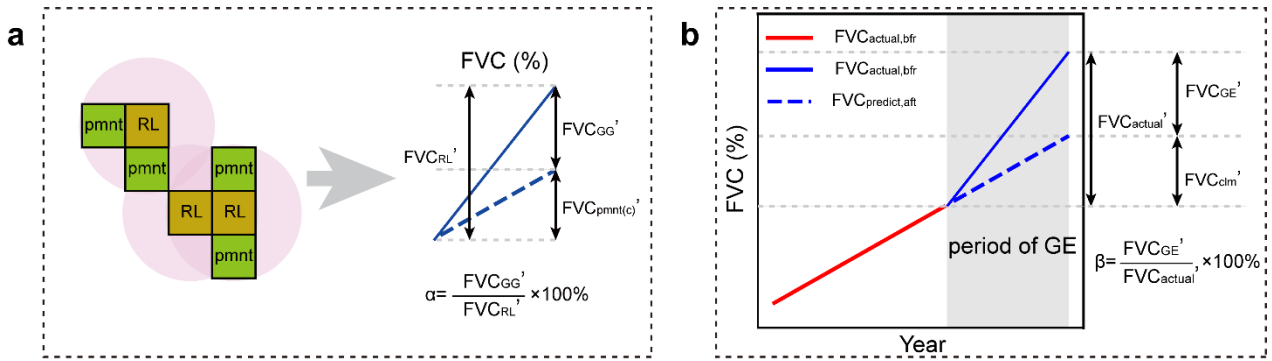
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Supplementary Fig. 8 Annual variation of the constructed (CD), the Blended Vegetation Health (VH), Global Inventory Modeling and Mapping Studies (GIMMS3g), Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), and Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) fractional vegetation cover (FVC) in the desertification-prone region and in each subregion. The locations of subregions are shown in Supplementary Fig. 2. The values are listed as regional averages for each year. The grey shading represents $FVC \pm 1.96$ standard deviation (FVC is the multiyear mean), and the green shading represents the 2000-2013 period. All statistical degrees of freedom are 13, and the sample sizes are all 14. The r value is Pearson's R . The five different coloured curves, from top to bottom, correspond to the CD, VH, GIMMS3g, SPOT, and MODIS FVC, respectively.



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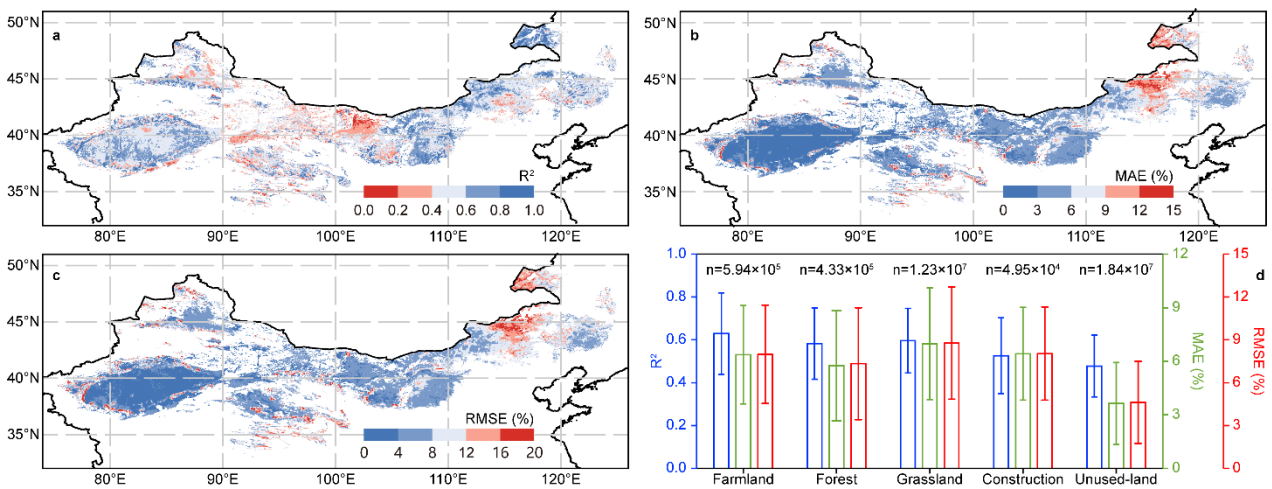
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Supplementary Fig. 9 Diagram for estimating the contribution of “grain-for-green” (a) and grazing exclusion (b) practices to vegetation changes. a: Rehabilitated land (RL) and the adjacent permanent land use types (pmnt(c)) connected via buffers (pink circles), have similar climate, topographic and soil characteristics owing to the short distances among these areas. In the absence of “grain-for-green” practices, RL and pmnt(c) should show similar changes in fractional vegetation cover (FVC). The FVC trends before and after the grazing exclusion (GE) are shown in panel (b). The difference between the predicted FVC ($FVC_{predict, aft}$) driven by unknown factors (residuals) other than climate change and grazing exclusion practices and the actual FVC ($FVC_{actual, bfr}$) thus comes only from the interference of grazing-prohibition activities due to the elimination of the effects of other land-use changes.



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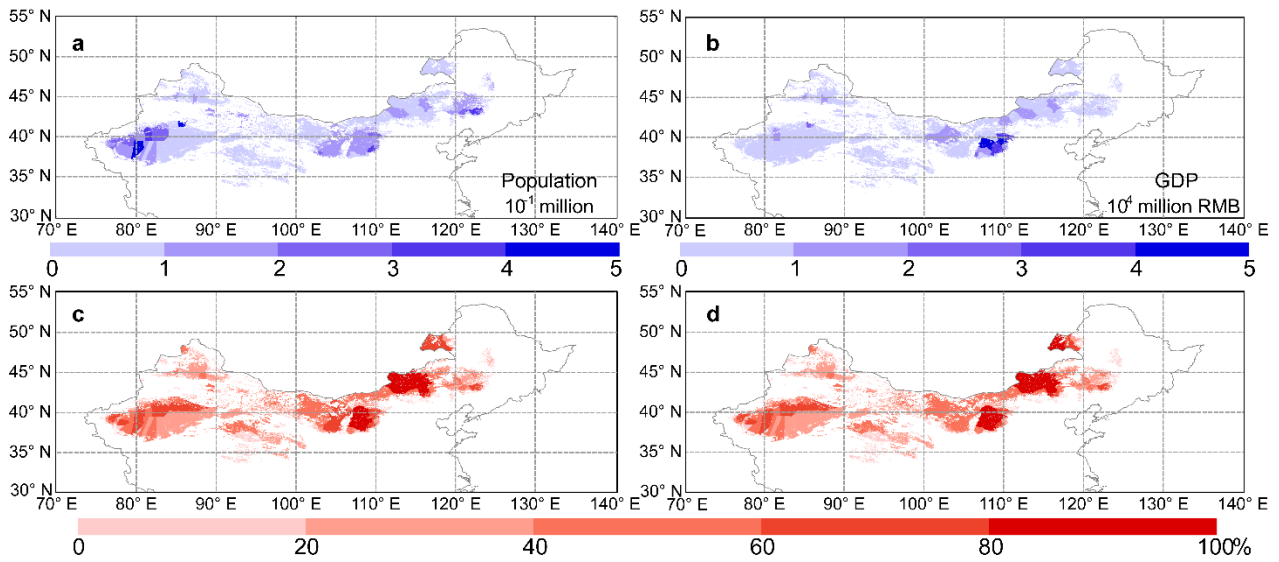
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Supplementary Fig. 10 Stepwise multiple linear regression model error. Panels (a-c) show the spatial distribution of the coefficient of determination (R^2), the mean absolute error (MAE; %), and the root mean square error (RMSE; %), respectively. The bar chart in panel (d) represent the mean +/- standard deviation of R^2 (marked in blue), MAE (marked in green), and RMSE (marked in red) for each land use type, and statistical pixel sample sizes for farmland, forest, grassland, construction and unused-land are 5.94×10^5 , 4.33×10^5 , 1.23×10^7 , 4.95×10^4 , and 1.81×10^7 , respectively. See Supplementary Fig. 6 for more details about land use spatial pattern.



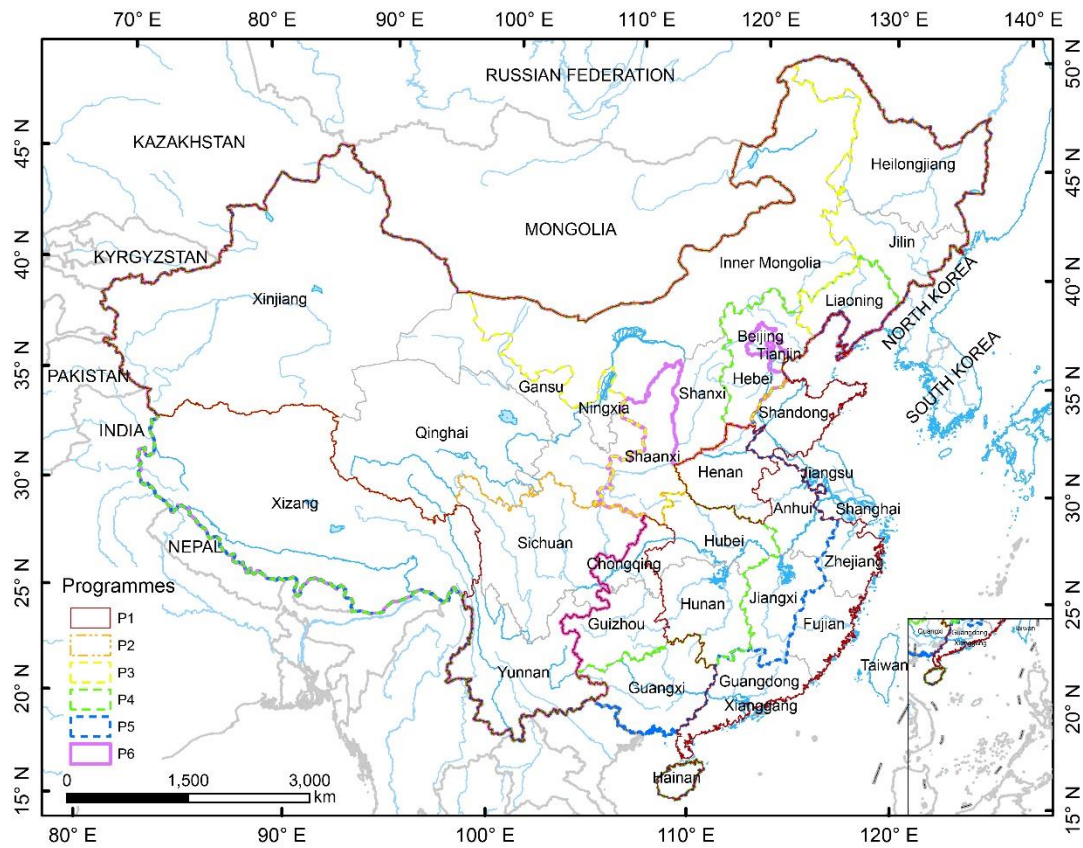
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Supplementary Fig. 11 County-level population size (a), Gross Domestic Product (GDP, b), and their corresponding proportions (c and d) from 2015 to 2019 in the desertification-prone region of China.

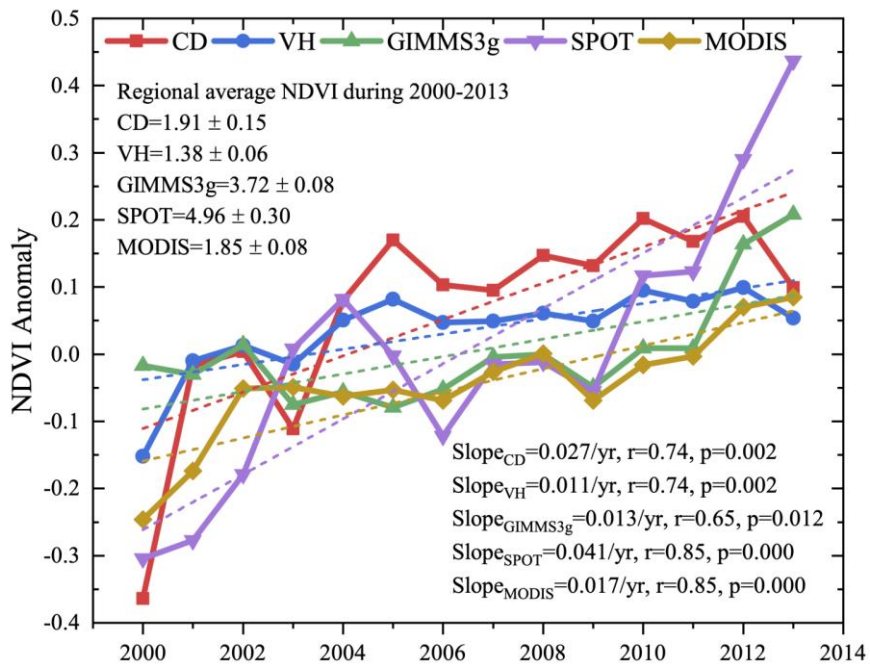


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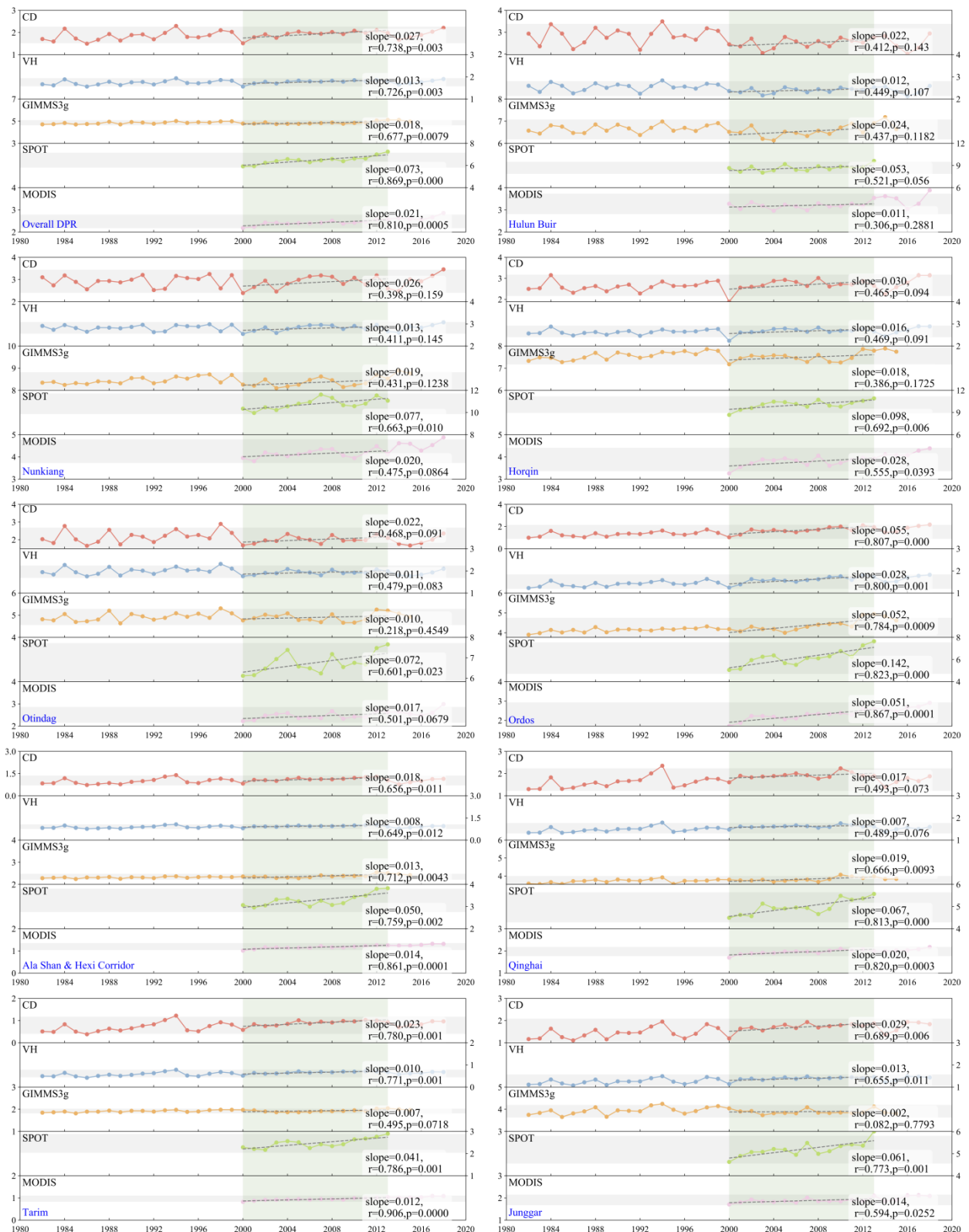
Supplementary Fig. 12 Locations of the provinces of China covered by the programs mentioned in Supplementary Table 11.



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279 **Supplementary Fig. 13** Comparison of the annual average the constructed (CD), the Blended Vegetation Health (VH), Global
280 Inventory Modeling and Mapping Studies (GIMMS3g), Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), and Moderate-resolution
281 Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) anomalies in the desertification-prone region
282 in China from 2000-2013. The regional average NDVI is relative to the multiyear mean ± 1 standard deviation. The slope refers to
283 the linear change in slope. All statistical degrees of freedom are 13, and the sample sizes are all 14. The r value is Pearson's R.

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Supplementary Fig. 14 Annual variations in the constructed (CD), the Blended Vegetation Health (VH), Global Inventory Modeling and Mapping Studies (GIMMS3g), Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), and Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) in the whole desertification-prone region and in each subregion. The locations of subregions are shown in Supplementary Fig. 2. The NDVI value is the sum of the values obtained for the 12 months in each year. The grey shading indicates $\text{NDVI} \pm 1.96$ standard deviation (NDVI is the multiyear mean), and the green shading corresponds to the 2000-2013 period. All statistical degrees of freedom are 13, and the sample sizes are all 14. The r value is Pearson's R. The five coloured curves, from top to bottom, correspond to the CD, VH, GIMMS3g, SPOT,

P2	1978-present	GG/GE	37.87	12.46	—	66.61	34.83	278.12 ¶	Ref. ⁴⁷⁻⁵⁰	
P3 ††	2002-present	GG/GE	8.01	1.73	2.53	67.64	47.68	68.71	Ref. ^{47,49}	
P4	1998-present	GG/GE	6.17	2.73	—	235.25	218.84	235.28	Ref. ^{47,49}	
P5	1999-present	GG	15.85	0.90	2.07	240.48	219.79	240.84	Ref. ^{47,49}	
P6	1 †‡	2002-present	GE	—	—	78.12	29.07	29.07	29.07	Ref. ^{47,50-52}
	2	2002-present	GE	—	—	105.16				
	3	2002-present	GE	—	—	19.03				
	4	2011-present	GE	—	—	170.00				
Total		—	69.39	20.42	441.66	786.94	696.79	1001.36	—	

307 **Note:** **A1:** Afforestation; **A2:** mobile sands/hillside anchoring; **A3:** grazing prohibition/fence provision/grass-planting/grassland
308 improvement.

309 **P1:** National Sand Control Programme, aiming to combat aeolian desertification by mobile sand anchoring, afforestation, grassland
310 management, water-saving irrigation, and ecological resettlement; **P2:** Great Green Wall Programme, aiming to anchor mobile sands
311 and to control dust storms by afforestation; **P3:** Beijing-Tianjin Sandstorm Source Control Programme, aiming to control dust storms
312 occurred in Beijing and Tianjin by afforestation and by returning farmland to grassland; **P4:** Natural Forest Protection Programme,
313 afforestation and controlling deforestation; **P5:** Returning Farmland to Forests/Grassland Programme; **P6:** National Grassland
314 Ecological Protection and Construction Programme, aiming to mitigate grassland degradation by grazing exclusion (**P6-1**), grassland
315 fencing and closure (**P6-2**), grassland management (**P6-3**), and ecological compensation (**P6-4**).

316 † GG and GE represent “grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices, respectively, indicating the main countermeasures of
317 these programme. ‡ Investment amounts were converted to the equivalent amount in 2019 according to the inflation rate calculated
318 by the consumer price index (CPI; CPI data were obtained from the National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC,
319 <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>), $V_t = V_0 * \prod(1 + CPI_i)$, $i=0, 1, \dots, t-1$, and the unconverted capital investment was ~650 billion RMB (~93
320 USD). § Statistics for programme P1 were available only for the first phase of the programme. ¶ The total investment was calculated
321 as the sum of direct capital investments converted from labour hours. The labour hours before 1997 for the Great Green Wall
322 Programme were obtained from ref.⁴⁹, and the allocation scheme was obtained from ref.⁴⁷. †† Data for the Beijing-Tianjin Sandstorm
323 Source Control Programme, also including the data before 2001. ‡‡ Grazing exclusion was practised in 2002. After 2011, the new
324 policies of the Chinese government mainly included ecological compensation practices; among such policies, the compensation for
325 grazing exclusion was 112.5 RMB/ha and that for grazing limitation was 37.5 RMB/ha⁵³.

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327 **Supplementary Table 2 Planned programmes related to combating desertification in the near future in China.**

Programme	Period	Targeted investment (RMB)	Covered regions	Programme objectives	Data source
P1	2021-2050	—	1	1	Ref. ⁵⁴
P2	2013-2022	~87.8 billion	2	2	Ref. ⁵⁵
P3	2014-2020	~63.6 billion	3	3	Ref. ⁵⁶
P4	2016-2030	—	4	4	Ref. ^{57,58}
P5	2016-2025	—	5	5	Ref. ^{57,59}

P6	1	2016-2020	—	6	6	Ref. ⁶⁰
	2	2013-2022	~87.8 billion	2		
	3	2014-2020	~63.6 billion	3		
	4	2016-2020	18.7 billion/Year	7		
P7		2014-2020	Quota	8	7	Ref. ⁵²

328 **Note:** **P1:** Phase III of the Great Green Wall Programme; **P2:** Phase II of the Beijing-Tianjin Sandstorm Source Control Programme;
329 **P3:** New round of the Returning Farmland to Forests/Grasslands Programme; **P4:** Sand Control Programme along the ‘Silk Road’;
330 **P5:** National Desert Park Programme; **P6:** The 13th Five-Year Plan for national grassland protection and use; **P6-1:** Pasturing
331 prohibition; **P6-2:** Phase II of the Beijing-Tianjin Sandstorm Source Control Programme; **P6-3:** New round of the Returning
332 Farmland to Forests/Grasslands Programme; **P6-4:** Compensation for grassland ecological conservation; **P7:** Aerial seeding
333 programme for reclaimed grassland in the arable-pastoral zone.

334 **Covered regions:** **1,** Northern China (4.36 million km²); **2,** Beijing, Tianjing, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, and Shaanxi Provinces.
335 **3,** 2.83 million ha in 18 provinces (Western China First); **4,** Nations and regions along the “Silk Road”; **5,** 17 Provinces in northern
336 China (including 440 counties); **6,** The whole of China; **7,** 13 provinces in northern China; and **8,** 6 provinces in northern China
337 (including 138 counties).

338 **Programme objectives:** **1,** controlling sand and soil erosion; **2,** combating desertification and controlling dust storms; **3,** returning
339 farmlands to forests/grasslands; **4,** revegetation; **5,** protecting wildlife resources, restoring desertified lands and promoting
340 revegetation to achieve sustainable development by establishing national desert parks; **6,** managing grasslands by restoring
341 vegetation cover, and increasing productivity, and improving herders’ income; and **7,** returning farmlands to grasslands.

343 **Supplementary Table 3 Historical fractional vegetation cover (FVC) trend statistics for different land uses.** slopeMean:
344 average FVC trend at the pixel scale (% a⁻¹); sigSlopeMean: average FVC significant trend (passes the Mann-Kendall test at the 95%
345 significance level, same below) at the pixel scale (% a⁻¹); incArea: area with increasing FVC trends (km²); decArea: area with
346 decreasing FVC trends (km²); sigIncArea: area with significantly increasing FVC trends (km²); and sigDecArea: area with
347 significantly decreasing FVC trends (km²). Because grazing exclusion has been launched since 2003 in some areas of the
348 desertification-prone region, the trends over the 2003-2018 period were also examined.

	From 1982 to 2018					
	slopeMean	sigSlopeMean	incArea	decArea	sigIncArea	sigDecArea
Farmland	1.12	0.84	14960.99	3880.27	12314.40	1652.35
Forest	0.46	0.29	9112.42	6648.09	6740.11	3376.23
Grassland	0.25	0.07	207011.30	246511.30	112688.83	83332.76
	From 2003 to 2018					
	slopeMean	sigSlopeMean	incArea	decArea	sigIncArea	sigDecArea
Farmland	1.15	2.36	14058.62	4696.89	7508.43	722.11
Forest	0.34	0.97	8683.15	7030.40	3105.28	1443.07
Grassland	0.05	0.46	199993.63	252071.02	42667.82	42222.46

349
350 **Supplementary Table 4 Expected and actual production (tonnes) of grain and meat without the restrictions on available**
351 **lands put in place by the “grain-for-green” (GG) and grazing exclusion (GE) practices in the desertification-prone region**

352 **and according to the corresponding reductions (%) in production and income.** In accordance with the times that these two
 353 practices were extensively launched, grain and meat production losses were estimated since 2001 and 2011, respectively.

Period	Grain production involving GG			Meat production involving GE			Income cost
	Expected production	Actual production	Production loss	Expected production	Actual production	Production loss	
2001	11879640	10163032		-	-	-	
2002	13467509	11521454		-	-	-	
2003	14377161	12299661	14.45	-	-	-	9.14
2004	15201598	13004967		-	-	-	
2005	16505636	14120572		-	-	-	
2006	16218971	14009947		-	-	-	
2007	16687038	14414263		-	-	-	
2008	17769063	15348917	13.62	-	-	-	7.92
2009	17158871	14821833		-	-	-	
2010	18336576	15839134		-	-	-	
2011	18856231	16749990		2051191	1539624		
2012	20274297	18009658		2058155	1544851		
2013	22508206	19994039	11.17	2127502	1596903	24.94	17.72
2014	23337900	20731057		2223874	1669240		
2015	24359588	21638622		2237978	1679826		
2016	25128342	21482220		2181780	1669062		
2017	25469389	21773781		2119807	1621652		
2018	26574764	22718766	14.51	2057455	1573953	23.5	18.77
2019	27645832	23634422		2123305	1624328		
2020	28017946	23952542		2133431	1632075		

354
 355 **Supplementary Table 5 Population, the gross domestic product (GDP), and the income of arable-land farmers and livestock**
 356 **herders in the desertification-prone region.** The conversion coefficient is based on the consumer price index (CPI)
 357 (<http://tongji.cnki.net/kns55/Navi/NaviDefault.aspx>), and GDP and incomes are converted to 2020 equivalent amounts. SD is the
 358 standard deviation.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2015~2019 Mean	2015~2019 SD
* Conversion coefficient	1.12	1.09	1.08	1.05	1.03	-	-
Population ($\times 10^4$)	1529.25	1532.75	1530.13	1537.14	1537.58	1533.37	3.87
GDP ($\times 10^8$ RMB)	10682.24	10546.85	10474.37	11105.78	11783.23	10918.49	541.76
Disposable income of arable farmers and livestock herders ($\times 10^8$ RMB)	1810.336	1902.752	2052.064	2199.929	2334.124	2059.84	213.22
Income from arable agriculture and animal husbandry ($\times 10^8$ RMB)	954.40	899.96	923.44	978.38	920.20	935.28	30.98

359
 360 **Supplementary Table 6 Direct payments from the Chinese authorities to arable farmers and livestock herders related to**

361 **“grain-for-green” and grazing exclusion practices.** The total sum from 1999 to 2004 was 100 RMB \approx 14 USD. The yearly average
362 payments of the two practices in the most recent 5 years (2014-2018) were \sim 6.82 billion RMB and 17.86 billion RMB at the
363 provincial scale, respectively. According to the area ratio of the “grain-for-green” (9.72%) and grazing exclusion (28.23%) practices
364 located in the desertification-prone region (DPR), the yearly average payments of these two practices reached \sim 0.66 billion RMB
365 and \sim 5.04 billion RMB, respectively, and the yearly total payment was \sim 5.70 billion RMB (\sim 0.80 billion USD). The areas of returned
366 farmland for “grain-for-green” practices in the DPR and at the provincial scale (11 provinces) were 5634.5 km² and 57,981.36 km²,
367 respectively, based on statistics from land-use changes from 2000 to 2020. The areas of grasslands involved in grazing exclusion
368 practices in the DPR and nationwide were 48 million km² and \sim 170 million km², respectively. These data were obtained from the
369 Editorial Department of China Environmental Yearbook (2003-2018) and China Forestry Statistical Yearbook (1998-2017).

Year	Grain-for-green (100 million RMB)			Grassland ecological compensation (100 million RMB)
	Living subsidy	Grain subsidy	Direct payment	
*1999~2004	61.61	77.41	139.02	/
2005	14.37	104.38	118.75	/
2006	14.59	100.40	114.99	/
2007	15.33	109.05	124.38	/
2008	15.42	107.52	122.94	/
2009	15.83	102.60	118.42	/
2010	22.60	80.27	102.87	/
2011	19.98	60.67	80.64	136.00
2012	20.10	47.65	67.75	150.00
2013	22.35	30.63	52.97	159.46
2014	54.71	2.22	56.93	160.69
2015	52.48	14.81	67.29	169.49
2016	51.16	19.36	70.52	187.60
2017	47.85	23.09	70.93	187.60
2018	35.64	39.41	75.05	187.60
2014~2018 ave.	48.37	19.78	68.15	178.60

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371 **Supplementary Table 7 Future fractional vegetation cover (FVC) trend statistics for different land uses under different**
372 **shared socioeconomic pathway (SSP) and representative concentration pathway (RCP) scenarios.** The meaning and units of
373 the indicator are the same as those described in Supplementary Table 3.

	From 2015 to 2050 in SSP1-2.6					
	slopeMean	sigSlopeMean	incArea	decArea	sigIncArea	sigDecArea
Farmland	1.06	1.09	13726.38	2454.46	13496.16	2243.67
Forest	0.39	0.40	9824.90	5772.79	9502.21	5434.39
Grassland	0.08	0.09	204815.91	251512.83	190275.40	234110.80
	From 2015 to 2050 in SSP2-4.5					
	slopeMean	sigSlopeMean	incArea	decArea	sigIncArea	sigDecArea
Farmland	1.56	1.60	13235.03	2945.81	13052.54	2799.67
Forest	0.54	0.56	9525.79	6071.89	9293.40	5892.86

Grassland	0.04	0.04	188264.83	268063.90	180342.08	258837.80
From 2015 to 2050 in SSP5-8.5						
	slopeMean	sigSlopeMean	incArea	decArea	sigIncArea	sigDecArea
Farmland	2.37	2.41	13085.63	3095.22	12972.37	2955.39
Forest	0.82	0.83	9470.05	6127.63	9330.73	5985.60
Grassland	0.03	0.03	185108.28	271220.45	180149.71	265774.80

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Supplementary Table 8 Comparison of the averaged of the constructed (CD), the Blended Vegetation Health (VH), Global Inventory Modeling and Mapping Studies (GIMMS3g), Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), and Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) fractional vegetation cover values in different regions in the desertification-prone region from 2000-2013. The locations of these regions are shown in Supplementary Fig. 2.

Region	CD	VH	GIMMS3g	SPOT	MODIS	Mean	SD (Standard Deviation)
Hulun Buir	0.606	0.725	0.681	0.694	0.471	0.635	0.102
Nunkiang	0.703	0.853	0.875	0.863	0.64	0.787	0.108
Horqin	0.664	0.829	0.805	0.821	0.574	0.739	0.114
Otindag	0.471	0.571	0.486	0.514	0.338	0.476	0.086
Ordos	0.376	0.461	0.425	0.469	0.299	0.406	0.070
Ala Shan & Hexi Corridor	0.208	0.231	0.174	0.193	0.110	0.183	0.046
Qinghai	0.428	0.456	0.353	0.35	0.251	0.368	0.080
Tarim	0.145	0.135	0.125	0.124	0.076	0.121	0.027
Junggar	0.354	0.381	0.365	0.373	0.238	0.342	0.059
Over DPR	0.439	0.516	0.476	0.489	0.333	0.451	0.071

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Supplementary Table 9 Pearson's correlation coefficients between the constructed (CD), the Blended Vegetation Health (VH), Global Inventory Modeling and Mapping Studies (GIMMS3g), Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), and Moderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) fractional vegetation cover in different regions in the desertification-prone region from 2000-2013. The locations of these regions are shown in Supplementary Fig. 2. The '*' symbol indicates that the correlation coefficient is significant at the 95% confidence level; the '**' symbol indicates that the correlation coefficient is significant at the 99% confidence level.

Region	VH	GIMMS3g	SPOT	MODIS
Hulun Buir	0.97**	0.81**	0.84**	0.64*
Nunkiang	0.98**	0.52	0.66**	0.64*
Horqin	1.00**	0.56*	0.85**	0.89**
Otindag	1.00**	0.69**	0.86**	0.85**
Ordos	1.00**	0.74**	0.88**	0.93**
Ala Shan & Hexi Corridor	0.99**	0.31	0.45	0.67**
Qinghai	1.00**	0.60*	0.68**	0.81**
Tarim	0.99**	0.13	0.57*	0.69**
Junggar	1.00**	0.05	0.81**	0.78**

Supplementary Table 10 Commonly used global climate models (GCMs) in the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6) model experiments⁶¹.

No.	GCM	Grid (lon × lat)	Organization
1	ACCESS-ESM1-5	192×145	CSIRO, Australia
2	CanESM5	128×64	CCCma, Canada
3	CanESM5-CanOE	128×64	CCCma, Canada
4	CAS-ESM2-0	256×128	CAS, China
5	CMCC-CM2-SR5	288×192	CMCC, Italy
6	CMCC-ESM2	288×192	CMCC, Italy
7	CNRM-CM6-1	256×128	CNRM-CERFACS, France
8	CNRM-ESM2-1	256×128	CNRM-CERFACS, France
9	EC-Earth3-Veg	512×256	EC-Earth-Consortium
10	FGOALS-g3	180×80	CAS, China
11	FIO-ESM-2-0	288×192	FIO-QLNM, China
12	GFDL-ESM4	288×180	NOAA-GFDL, US
13	GISS-E2-1-G	144×90	NASA-GISS, US
14	HadGEM3-GC31-LL	192×144	MOHC, NERC, UK
15	INM-CM4-8	180×120	INM, Russia
16	INM-CM5-0	180×120	INM, Russia
17	IPSL-CM6A-LR	144×143	IPSL, France
18	MIROC-ES2L	128×64	MIROC, Japan
19	MPI-ESM1-2-HR	384×192	MPI-M, DWD, DKRZ, Germany
20	MPI-ESM1-2-LR	192×96	MPI-M, AWI, DKRZ, DWD, Germany
21	UKESM1-0-LL	192×144	MOHC, NERC, NIMS-KMA, NIWA

Supplementary Table 11 Detailed countermeasures of ecological programmes in China.

Programme	Provinces included	Countermeasure	Land use type	References
P1	BJ, TJ, HE, SX, NM, LN, JL, HLJ, ZJ, AH, FJ, JX, SD, HN, HB, GD, HI, SC, YN, SN, GS, NX, QH, XJ	(1) Afforestation, (2) Closing hillsides to facilitate afforestation and sandy land protection, (3) Artificial grass planting in grassland, (4) Aeolian desertified land (grassland and farmland included) controlling, (5) Mobile sand anchoring, (6) Water-saving irrigation, and (7) Ecological resettlement	Forest, grassland, and farmland	Ref. ⁶²
P2	BJ, TJ, HE, SX, NM, LN, JL, HLJ, SN, GS, NX, QH, XJ	(1) Afforestation, (2) Closing hillsides to facilitate afforestation and sandy land protection, (3) Tree planting along the sides of roads, ditches, canals, and houses, (4) Forest network building for farmlands, oases, and pasture, and (5) Grass / tree planting on surfaces of mobile and semi-anchored dunes	Forest, grassland, farmland, and unused land	Ref. ^{63,64}
P3	BJ, TJ, HB, SX, NM, SN	(1) Grain for green, (2) Afforestation, (3) Grassland construction, (4) Water controlling, and (5) Ecological resettlement	Forest, grassland, desertified farmland, and sandy land	Ref. ^{64,65}
P4	NM, HLJ, JL, HI, CQ, SC, GZ, YN,	(1) Deforestation forbidding in the upper and middle reaches of Yellow River and in the upper reaches of Yangtze River,	Forest	Ref. ^{64,66}

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400 **Supplementary Table 13 Fitting and cross-validation results obtained for cultivated lands and grasslands in 18 counties in**401 **different areas of the desertification-prone region in 1995, 2005, and 2015.** R² indicates the goodness of fit, and ‘**’ indicates

402 that the results are significant at the 99% confidence level. The cross-validation results show the error percentage between the

403 observed and the predicted values in the corresponding year. The geographical locations of the counties listed in the table are shown

404 in Supplementary Fig. 6. The region codes are established as follows: A1: Hulunbuir, A2: Nenjiang, A3: Horqin, A4: Hunshandak,

405 A5: Ordos, A6: Alashan and Hexi Corridor, A7: Qinghai, A8: Tarim, and A9: Junggar.

Zone	County	Cropland area					Grassland area				
		Significance	R ²	Cross-validation results (%)			Significance	R ²	Cross-validation results (%)		
				1995	2005	2015			1995	2005	2015
A1	Xin Barag	**	0.96	4.42	25.98	-4.20	**	0.97	-0.05	-0.20	0.23
	Youqi										
	Chen Barag	**	0.86	0.00	0.00	0.00	**	0.92	0.00	0.00	0.00
A2	Gannan	**	0.97	-6.33	-6.49	7.85	**	0.81	-2.39	0.37	2.67
	Tailai	**	0.96	-7.58	-0.32	-6.85	**	0.93	-6.04	-0.02	1.44
A3	Tongyu	**	0.93	-13.63	-3.30	10.37	**	0.92	35.91	6.60	-26.40
	Naiman	**	0.54	20.48	-7.18	-6.37	**	0.95	0.26	-1.06	0.39
A4	Abaga Qi	**	0.93	15.98	-34.90	3.46	**	0.92	-0.22	0.30	-0.06
	Sunite Youqi	**	0.82	30.96	-30.62	52.27	**	0.42	0.00	0.26	0.11
A5	Hangjin Qi	**	0.94	12.58	-11.42	-4.72	**	0.47	-0.18	2.05	-1.66
	Uxin Qi	**	0.90	-4.58	-24.11	-14.43	**	0.93	-4.20	6.51	-0.46
A6	Ala Shan Zuoqi	**	0.93	-0.65	2.12	-6.15	**	0.94	3.51	3.70	-8.24
	Ejin Qi	**	0.84	0.68	-1.36	-0.89	**	0.55	0.10	1.02	-2.84
A7	Dulan	**	0.80	10.15	0.35	-3.93	**	0.84	-0.09	-0.46	0.60
	Guinan	**	0.94	5.74	24.42	-7.88	**	0.97	-0.29	-0.42	0.16
A8	Yuli	**	0.98	8.84	4.85	3.86	**	0.96	9.20	2.54	-6.43
	Qira	**	0.95	11.58	36.72	-6.00	**	0.74	-5.39	0.07	5.36
A9	Fuhai	**	0.97	14.62	-10.91	-11.04	**	0.86	-3.24	-0.07	8.42
	Hutubi	**	0.96	14.76	11.20	-9.78	**	0.88	-2.29	-2.45	12.18

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