Controls on Ice Cliff Formation, Distribution and Characteristics on Debris-Covered Glaciers

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Key Points:

- We derived an unprecedented dataset of 37537 ice cliffs and their characteristics across 86 debris-covered glaciers in High Mountain Asia
- We find that 38.9% of the cliffs are stream-influenced, 19.5% pond-influenced and 19.7% are crevasses
- Ice cliff distribution can be predicted by velocity as an indicator of both the dynamics and state of evolution of debris-covered glaciers

Abstract

Ice cliff distribution plays a major role in determining the melt of debris-covered glaciers but its controls are largely unknown. We assembled a dataset of 37537 ice cliffs and determined their characteristics across 86 debris-covered glaciers within High Mountain Asia (HMA). We complemented this dataset with the analysis of 202 cliff formation events from multi-temporal UAV observations for a subset of glaciers. We find that 38.9% of the cliffs are stream-influenced, 19.5% pond-influenced and 19.7% are crevasses. Surface velocity is the main predictor of cliff distribution at both local and glacier scale, indicating its dependence on the dynamic state and hence evolution stage of debris-covered glacier tongues. Supraglacial ponds contribute to maintaining cliffs in areas of thicker debris, but this is only possible if water accumulates at the surface. Overall, total cliff density decreases exponentially with debris thickness as soon as debris gets thicker than 10 cm.

Plain Language Summary

Debris-covered glaciers are common throughout the world's mountain ranges and are characterised by the presence of steep ice cliffs among the debris-covered ice. It is well-known that the cliffs are responsible for a large portion of the melt of these glaciers but the way they form, and as a result the controls on their development and distribution across glaciers remains poorly understood. Novel mapping approaches combined with high-resolution satellite and drone products enabled us to disentangle some of these controls and to show that the ice cliffs are generally formed and maintained by the surface hydrology (ponds or streams) or by the opening of crevasses. As a result, they depend both at the local and glacier scale on the dynamic state of the glaciers as well as the evolution stage of their debris cover. This provides a pathway to better represent their contribution to glacier melt in predictive glacier models.

1 Introduction

Debris-covered glaciers are found in all mountain ranges (Scherler et al., 2018), and supraglacial debris extents and thickness are expected to increase in a warming climate (Compagno et al., 2022; Herreid & Pellicciotti, 2020; Stokes et al., 2007). However, despite considerable recent advances, modelling the mass balances of these glaciers remains challenging (Rounce et al., 2021). This is partly due to the presence of supraglacial ice cliffs, which melt up to 20 times faster than the surrounding debris-covered ice, therefore compensating for the relatively well constrained debris insulating effect (Anderson, Armstrong, Anderson, & Buri, 2021; Brun et al., 2018; E. S. Miles, Willis, et al., 2018; Reid & Brock, 2014; Sakai et al., 1998, 2002). In one catchment in High Mountain Asia (HMA) ice cliffs were shown to contribute 17+/-4% of the melt of the debris-covered ice (Buri et al., 2021). This has major implications for the mass balance of debris-covered glaciers (Pellicciotti et al., 2015) and their long-term evolution (Ferguson & Vieli, 2021; Racoviteanu et al., 2022).

While models accurately simulate the energy and mass balance contribution of individual ice cliffs (Buri et al., 2016; Kneib et al., 2022), their application at large spatial scales is limited by our understanding of the controls of ice cliff distribution. Indeed, estimates of ice cliff density are difficult to make (Anderson, Armstrong, Anderson, & Buri, 2021; Herreid & Pellicciotti, 2018; Kneib et al., 2020) and vary widely in time and space, between 1 and 15% of the debris-covered area (e.g. Falaschi et al., 2021; Kneib et al., 2021; Loriaux & Ruiz, 2021; Sato et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2017). Remote sensing studies have shown that cliffs are often associated with ponds (Steiner et al., 2019; Watson, Quincey, Carrivick, et al., 2017), hinting at a preferential location of ice cliffs where lower glacier longitudinal gradient and surface velocities promote surface ponding (Bolch et al., 2008; Quincey et al., 2007; Quincey & Glasser, 2009; Racoviteanu et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2000; Sakai & Fujita, 2010; Salerno et al., 2012). Other limited observations indicate that ice cliffs preferentially develop at the confluence of glacial tributaries, in locations of high compressive strain rates, and areas of thinner debris (Anderson, Armstrong, Anderson, & Buri, 2021; Anderson, Armstrong, Anderson, Scherler, et al., 2021; Benn et al., 2012; Kraaijenbrink et al., 2016; Steiner et al., 2019; Watson, Quincey, Carrivick, et al., 2017). However, the lack of consistent observations of cliff distribution makes it difficult to include ice cliffs in predictive glacier models in a way that accounts for their spatial distribution and temporal evolution.

Ice cliff survival is inherently linked to debris stability, which is a function of local slope, debris thickness and water content, as well as undercutting by streams or ponds (Moore, 2018). The local slope can change in relatively short time scales with differential melt caused by heterogeneous debris thicknesses (Moore, 2021; Nicholson et al., 2018; Sharp, 1949), which results in the surface of debris-covered glaciers being particularly hummocky where the debris gets thicker than 20-30 cm (Bartlett et al., 2020; King et al., 2020). Slope undercutting and destabilisation by streams or ponds is expected to be one of the main triggers for ice cliff formation (Mölg et al., 2019; Röhl, 2006, 2008; Sakai & Takeuchi, 2000) and survival (Benn et al., 2001, 2012; Brun et al., 2016; Kneib et al., 2022; Sato et al., 2021; Watson, Quincey, Smith, et al., 2017). Other hypothesised cliff formation mechanisms include crevasse opening (Reid & Brock, 2014; Steiner et al., 2019) or the collapse of englacial conduits (Egli et al., 2021; Gulley et al., 2009; Immerzeel et al., 2014; E. S. Miles, Watson, et al., 2018; K. E. Miles et al., 2020; Sakai & Takeuchi, 2000), but these hypotheses have never been tested in a quantitative way.

In this study, we therefore 1) map ice cliffs across 86 glaciers in HMA, 2) determine their physical characteristics, 3) attribute their distribution to potential local and glacier-wide controlling factors. The findings are further corroborated by complementary observations on ice cliff formation from high-resolution, multi-temporal Unoccupied Aerial Vehicle (UAV) data at five of the studied glaciers (Text S1).

2 Data and Methods

We used 14 Pléiades stereo-images acquired between 2017 and 2021 to derive 2m-resolution multi-spectral images and Digital Elevation Models (DEMs) covering 86 debris-covered glaciers across HMA (Berthier et al., 2014; Shean et al., 2016; Fig. 1; Table S2), 70 of which had more than 65% of their debris-covered area that could be classified after removal of clouds, shadows and fresh-snow (Table S3). The DEMs were used to derive surface slope and aspect, the glacier 'hummockiness', which we defined as the percentage of area for which the Statistical Measure of Relief (SMR) calculated over a 8 m window was greater than 50 m (King et al., 2020), as well as supraglacial channels (Schwanghart & Scherler, 2014; Text S2). The multi-spectral images were used to manually update the glacier and debris outlines of the RGI 6.0 (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Scherler et al., 2018; Table S3). Glacier longitudinal gradient was computed using the 30m resolution AW3D DEM (Dehecq et al., 2019; Tadono et al., 2014) and combined with glacier ice thicknesses (Farinotti et al., 2019) to estimate driving stress over a distance of two ice thicknesses. Distributed glacier velocity, compressive and tensile strain rates were obtained from the global 50m resolution composite by Millan et al. (2022). We additionally used the distributed debris thickness dataset of McCarthy et al. (2022) for all glaciers larger than 2 km^2 (64 glaciers, 47 of which have more than 65% of their debris-covered area that could be classified). All these datasets were aggregated 1) in 500 m distance bins along the glacier flowlines (Kienholz et al., 2014; King et al., 2020) and 2) for each glacier. Data gaps within the bins were filled using a nearest neighbour interpolation.

Ice cliffs and ponds were derived automatically in each Pléiades scene following the Spectral Curvature method for cliffs, which is based solely on spectral characteristics (Kneib et al., 2020), and the Normalized Difference Water Index (NDWI) for ponds (McFeeters, 1996; E. S. Miles et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2016, 2018; Text S2). The ice cliffs are then implicitly defined here as exposed ice in an otherwise debris-covered domain, therefore likely to undergo 'enhanced' melt locally. Some of these features were clearly identifiable as crevasses due to their elongated, straight or slightly curved shapes and these zones were outlined manually. Past studies have only examined high-relief (several meters) ice cliffs, but here our interest is in all exposed ice in the debris-covered area, so we include smaller features common for thin-debris areas, such as crevasses, which similarly enhance surface ablation (Colgan et al., 2016).

Multi-temporal UAV data with a monitoring period longer than 2 years and with at least 3 high-resolution (<1 m) DEMs and orthoimages were available at five of the studied glaciers distributed across HMA. This complementary data was used to identify ice cliff formation events and derive the characteristics of newly formed ice cliffs (Text S1).

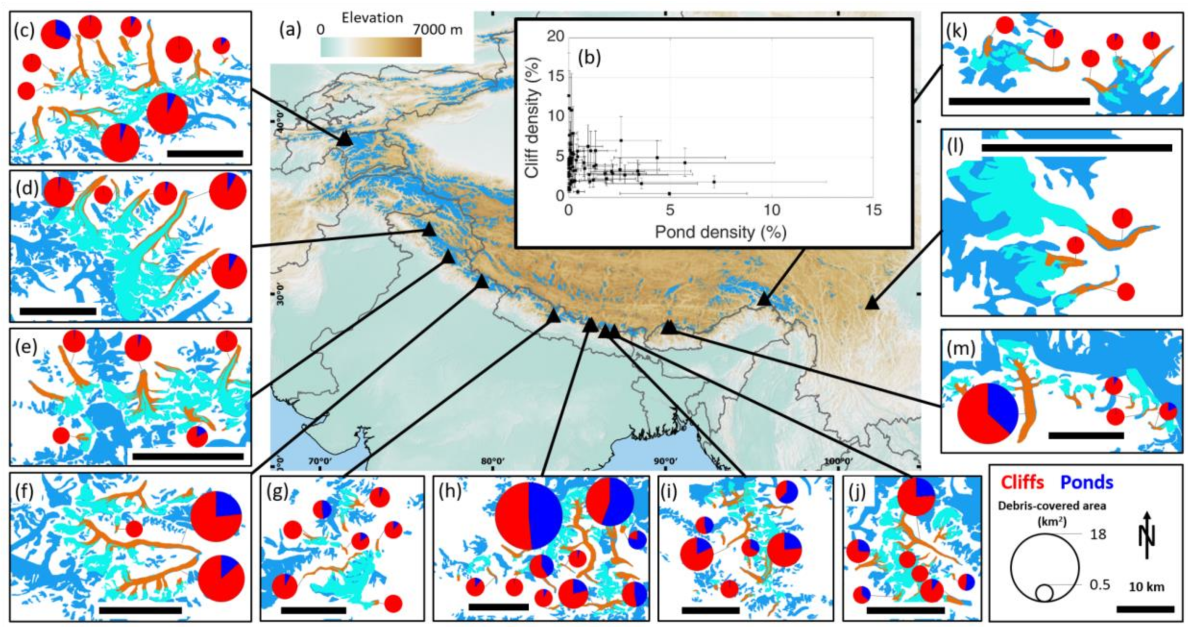


Figure 1: *(a) Map of HMA with each triangle representing one of the 14 Pléiades scenes (some scenes are very close to each other) and the boxes to the side (c-m) showing a zoomed view of the glaciers in these areas. The background is the GTOPO 30 arc seconds (~1 km) DEM, and the glacierised areas are indicated in blue. The inset boxes show the glacier RGI 6.0 outlines in dark blue, the glaciers visible in the Pléiades images in turquoise and their debris-covered areas in brown. The pie charts are scaled to the absolute size of the debris-covered areas and show the relative proportion of ponds (dark blue) and cliffs (red) for each glacier for*

which more than 65% of their debris-covered area could be classified. (b) Cliff and pond density of each of these glaciers. The bars show the uncertainties.

3 Results

3.1. Influence of supraglacial hydrology on ice cliff distribution

Cliffs are preferentially located in the vicinity of ponds and streams, as their density strongly decreases with distance from these hydrological features (Fig. 2a, b), and a large majority of the ponds are related to at least one neighbouring cliff (Fig. 2d). This is further confirmed by field observations (Fig. 2e-g) and multitemporal UAV observations showing that the presence of streams or ponds is responsible for more than 79% of the newly-formed cliff area (Fig. S2). This leads us to define a 40m-buffer around ponds and streams within which we classify the cliff pixels as pond-influenced or stream-influenced (Fig. 2h). With this definition, pond-influenced cliffs account for 19.5% and stream-influenced cliffs for 38.9% of the total cliff area (Fig. 2c). In addition, crevasses represent 19.7% of the cliff area across all glaciers. They are mostly located in the upper extents of the debris-covered areas but also appear lower down glacier, at shear margins, and in the vicinity of proglacial lakes or lateral streams entering the glacier (Fig. S6). The remaining cliffs are qualified as undefined. The stream mapping parameters and choice of buffer size have little influence on this classification (Fig. 2h, S12).

The slope and density of ice cliffs vary between categories, while this is less the case for aspect and size (Fig. S13). Crevasses are usually more densely distributed (15.2% of buffer area), followed by the pond-influenced (6.7%), stream-influenced (4.3%) and undefined cliffs (2.1% of remaining area, Fig. S13a). Despite a variety of glacier aspects (Table S3), there is a clear preferential cliff aspect distribution in the NNW direction for all categories (Fig. S13d), while the newly formed cliffs do not appear to have a preferential aspect (Sato et al., 2021; Fig. S4).

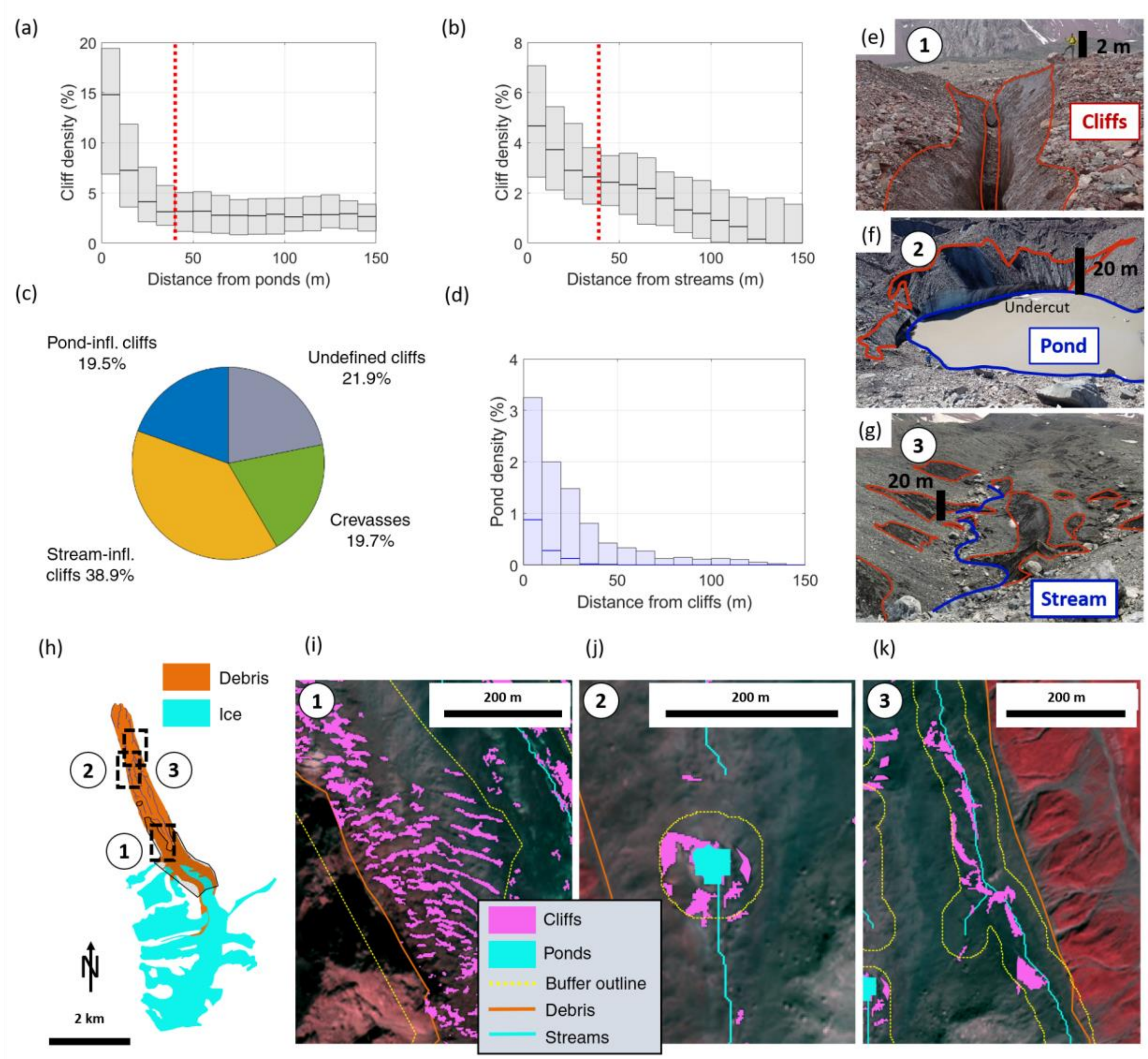


Figure 2: *Cliff density for all glaciers as a function of (a) distance from ponds after removal of the crevasses and (b) distance from streams, after removal of the pond-influenced cliffs. The box plots indicate the median, 25th and 75th percentiles of the cliff density within each 10m bin for each glacier. The red dotted lines show the 40m buffers. (c) Area proportion of undefined, pond- and stream-influenced cliffs and crevasses across all debris-covered glaciers. (d) Pond density for all glaciers as a function of distance from cliffs. (h) Example of classification of ice cliffs from Kyzylsu Glacier, Tajikistan: 1/ crevassed-areas, 2/ pond-influenced cliffs and 3/ stream-influenced cliffs, with the pictures (e-g) and Pléiades view (i-k) of the corresponding zones. Image credit: Marin Kneib and Evan S. Miles. Background of (i-k) is the Pléiades false-colour multispectral image (19/09/2021). Pléiades © CNES 2021, Distribution AIRBUS DS.*

3.2. Controls on ice cliff distribution

The variables associated with ice cliff distribution vary depending on the category of cliff considered (Fig. 3, S15, Table S5). Stream-influenced and undefined cliffs follow a similar distribution for all predictors (Fig. S15), which could indicate that a majority of the undefined cliffs were formerly stream-influenced and backwasted away from the channels. 80% of stream-influenced cliffs are located in areas with debris estimated to be thinner than 33 cm, while 45% of the pond-influenced cliffs are located in areas with thicker debris (Fig. S15). This results in the total cliff density decreasing exponentially ($Y = 5.8e^{-\frac{X}{2}}$, R^2 = 0.73) when debris gets thicker than 10 cm (Fig. 3a, S16). Furthermore, crevasses and pond-influenced cliffs have a clearly contrasting response to the different controls investigated. Indeed, 80% of the crevasses are located in areas with surface velocities higher than the 13 $m.yr^{-1}$ threshold or in areas with debris thinner than 20 cm (Fig. S15). Pond-influenced cliffs clearly depend on pond density, and are thus preferentially located in non-dynamic areas with lower longitudinal gradient and velocity and with thicker debris (Fig. 3, S15, S17).

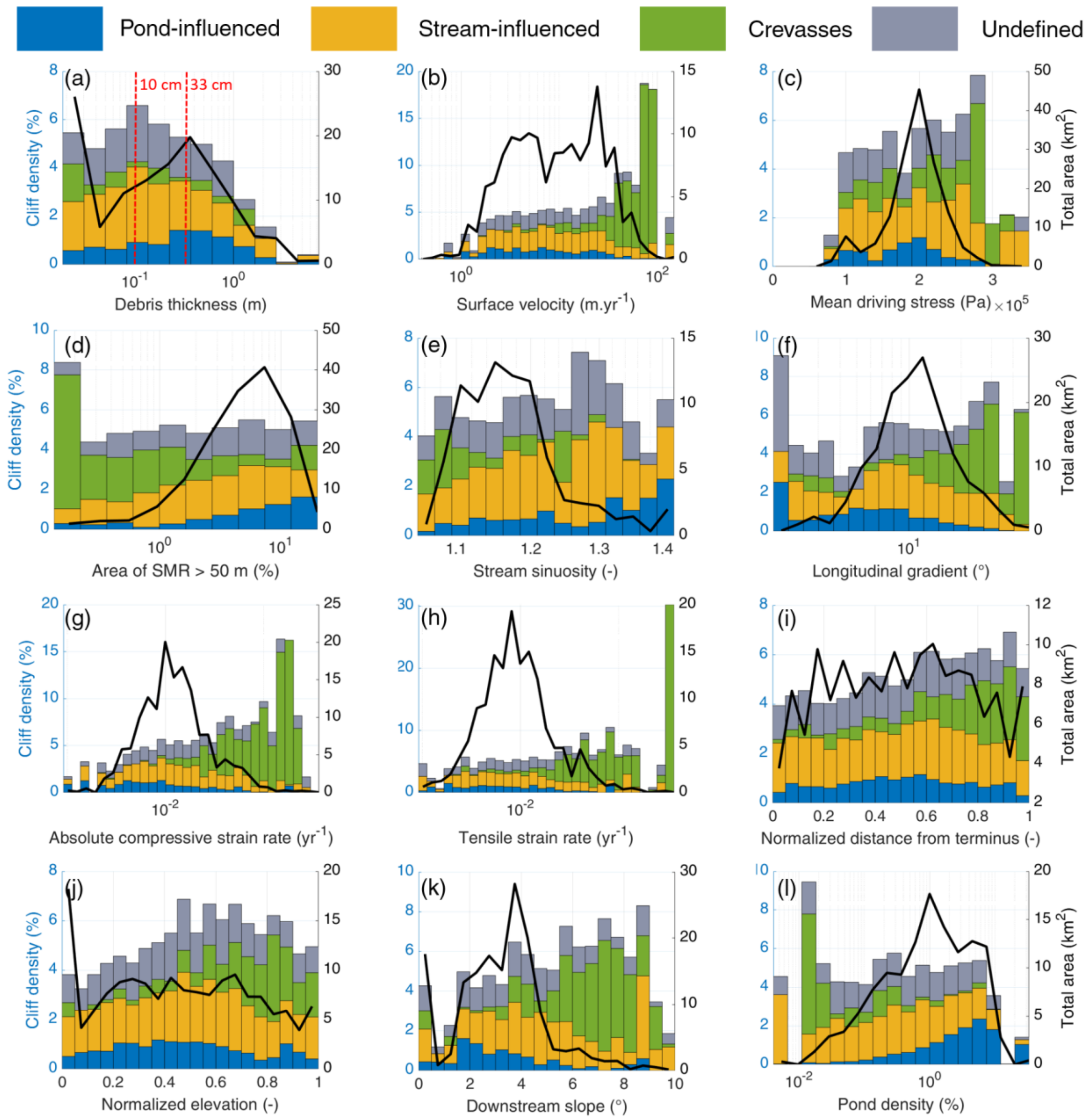


Figure 3: *Mean cliff density split by cliff category for all bins of all glaciers where more than 65% of the debris-covered area could be classified as a function of (a) debris thickness, (b) surface velocity, (c) mean driving stress, (d) 'hummockiness', (e) stream sinuosity, (f) longitudinal gradient, (g) absolute compressive strain rate, (h) tensile strain rate, (i) normalized distance from terminus, (j) normalized elevation above terminus, (k) downstream slope to terminus and (l) pond density. The black line shows the area distribution of all the bins.*

3.2. Ice cliff dependence on glacier state

When aggregating the metrics per glacier, a clear relationship between mean surface velocity across the debris-covered area and cliff density becomes apparent (Fig. 4, S18). The influence of climatic variables seems instead to be limited (Fig. S19). Cliff density decreases with decreasing velocity, up to a point where the trajectory seems to bifurcate. The debris-covered tongues with the highest cliff density and fastest velocity have a larger proportion of crevasses (state 1, Fig. 4). At slower velocities (<10 $m.yr^{-1}$), two trajectories are apparent: 1) glaciers with a large proportion (> ⅓) of pond-influenced cliffs and higher cliff densities (state 3a, Fig 4), and 2) glaciers with a majority of stream-influenced cliffs, which tend to have lower cliff densities (state 3b, Fig. 4). The majority of the glaciers are found at an intermediary stage between these three end-members, with a decreasing proportion of crevasses and an increasing proportion of stream- and pond-influenced cliffs as velocity decreases (state 2, Fig. 4).

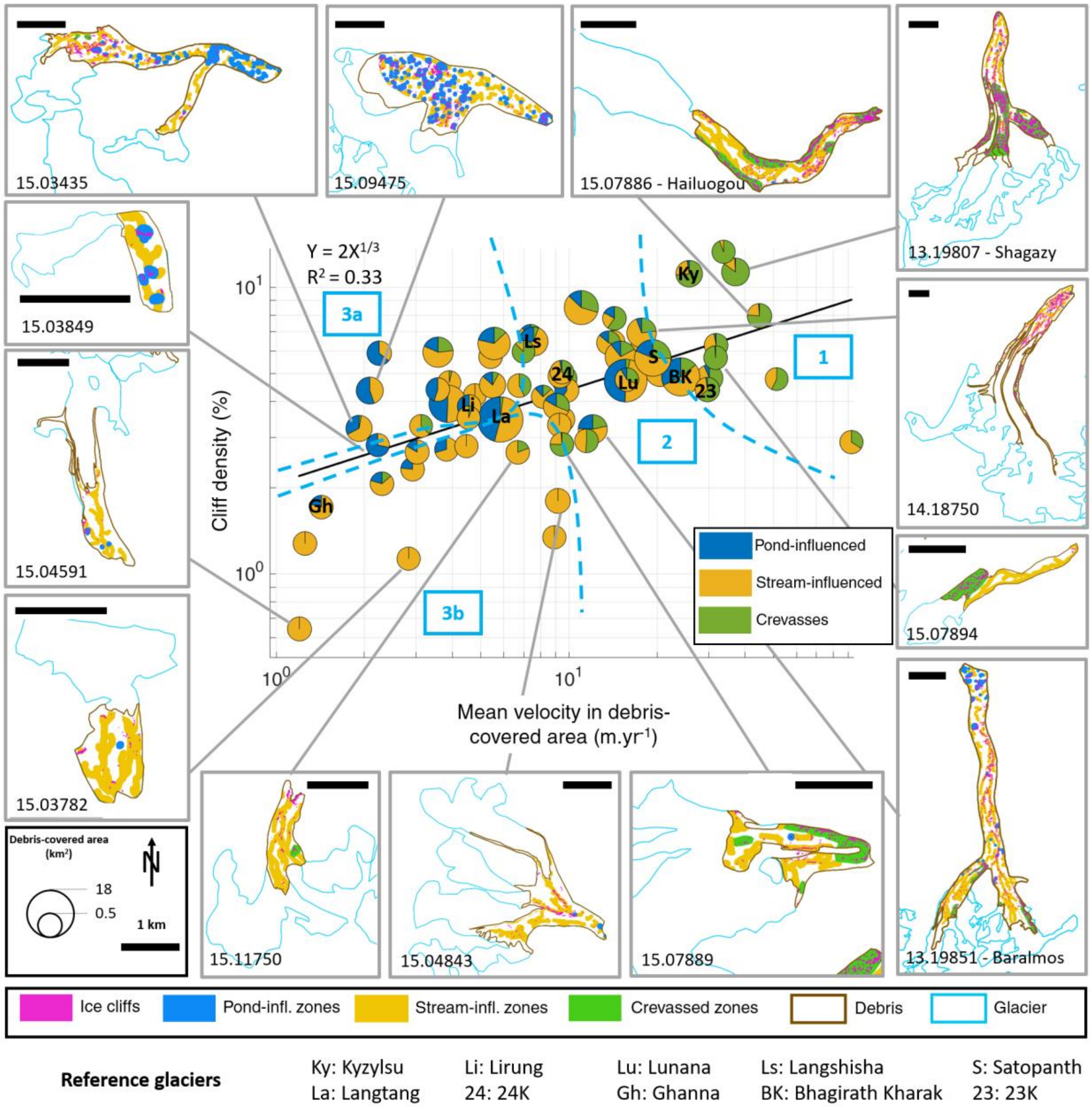


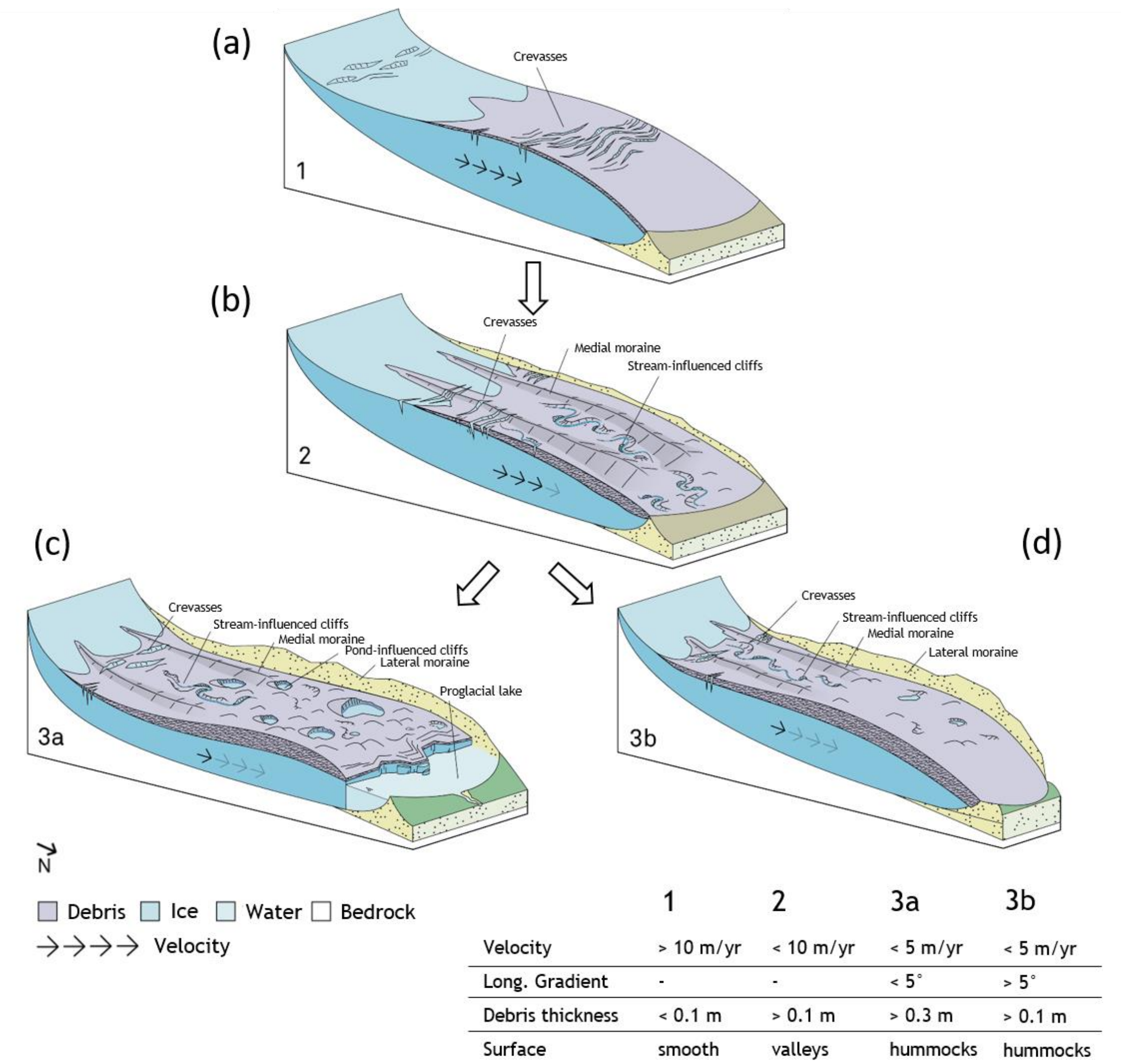
Figure 4: *Glacier-wide cliff density as a function of mean velocity in the debris-covered area for all glaciers where more than 65% of the debris-covered area could be classified. The proportion of undefined cliffs was not represented for readability. The boxes to the side show example maps of some of the glaciers with their surface classifications. Some additional reference glaciers are indicated in the main plot in black. The expression and* R^2 *of the black linear regression are indicated in the upper left corner. In light blue are shown four glacier clusters.*

4 Discussion and conclusions

We have identified the presence of supraglacial streams and ponds, along with the opening of crevasses, to be the main mechanisms responsible for ice cliff formation and development. Newly-formed cliffs tend to be smaller in size and do not have any preferential aspect (Kneib et al., 2021; Fig. S4, S5). Cliffs get reburied when they backwaste away from these supraglacial features (Fig. 2a, b), with the strong control of solar radiation on cliff survival resulting in the preferentially poleward orientation of the total ice cliff population (Buri & Pellicciotti, 2018).

4.1. Ice cliff distribution and glacier state

Velocity stands out as the main control on ice cliff density both at the local and glacier scale (Fig. 3, 4). Interlinkages with other variables means that the cliff density also responds to other local controls, and debris thickness especially, although each category of cliffs responds differently (Fig. 3). The distribution of ice cliffs therefore depends on the glacier dynamics and state. A dynamic debris-covered glacier (mean surface velocity > 10 $m.yr^{-1}$, Fig. 4, 5a, S20a) is usually characterised by thin debris and crevasses which comprise the majority of exposed ice and drain supraglacial streams. Glacier slow-down results in reduced strain rates and the migration of crevasses to the upper sections of the debris-covered area and their eventual disappearance (Fig. 3j, S20b), the extension of stream-influenced cliffs through debris destabilisation and thermo-erosional undercutting (Moore, 2018; Fig. 3a) and possibly the emergence of pond-influenced cliffs. Ponds maintain cliffs in more stagnant zones of thicker debris, also characterised by low longitudinal gradients and driving stress as well as increased hummock prevalence (Benn et al., 2017; Steiner et al., 2019; Watson, Quincey, Carrivick, et al., 2017; Fig. 5c). Such evolution has been observed on other glaciers: on Zmutt Glacier, where it was linked to the development of supraglacial valleys driven by stream incision (Mölg et al., 2020); and on Khumbu Glacier, where high relief zones characterised by growing cliffs and ponds have developed as the glacier has slowed (King et al., 2020; Rowan et al., 2021). Our large dataset enables us to show that this evolution holds across a large number of glaciers, and to identify predictors of cliff type and distribution. The development of large pond-influenced cliffs however requires the accumulation of water in surface depressions, which occurs for larger glaciers with lower longitudinal gradients (Fig. 4, 5c, S17). Most HMA glaciers in this stage of evolution are located in the Central and Eastern Himalaya (Benn et al., 2012, 2017; Racoviteanu et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2016; Watson, Quincey, Carrivick, et al., 2017; Fig. 1). However, some glaciers do not develop such drainage systems due to their relative steepness and small size, resulting in lower ice cliff densities (Fig. 4, 5d, S20d).



	1	2	3a	3b
Velocity	> 10 m/yr	< 10 m/yr	< 5 m/yr	< 5 m/yr
Long. Gradient	-	-	< 5°	> 5°
Debris thickness	< 0.1 m	> 0.1 m	> 0.3 m	> 0.1 m
Surface	smooth	valleys	hummocks	hummocks

Figure 5: *The four glacier evolution states, with their ice cliff distributions. State 1: fast flowing glacier with thin debris and extensive crevassing. State 2: advanced debris cover, with thicker debris and lower velocities enabling the development of supraglacial valleys and stream-*

influenced cliffs in the non-crevassed areas. State 3a: large stagnating debris-covered tongues, characterised by hummocks, thick debris and ponds maintaining cliffs in these zones. State 3b: stagnating tongues with thick debris, but high enough longitudinal gradient or low enough surface meltwater to prevent the formation of ponds and therefore the survival of cliffs. Figure credit: Martin Heynen.

4.2. Implications for glacier mass balance

We have shown that ice cliff density and characteristics depend on the evolution state of the debris-covered glacier (Fig. 5), which is controlled mainly by dynamics (velocity) and debris thickness. Leveraging this new understanding of how glacier stage affects the presence of cliffs on their surfaces, we have provided the distribution of each type of cliff on glaciers at different stages of evolution (Fig. 3, 4, S20, Table S5). Future efforts should focus on testing the framework developed here by substantially expanding the number of data points with particular attention to include glaciers at distinct stages. Most of the debris-covered glaciers that have been the object of detailed investigations belong to glacier states 2 and 3 and efforts should be made to explore the whole range of evolution when targeting field studies. Already at this stage, however, the relationships detailed in this study outline a framework to estimate ice cliff distribution based on glacier flow characteristics, that are usually available in prognostic flow models, and debris thickness, without having to map the cliffs. Combined with cliff melt enhancement factors (E. S. Miles et al., 2022), this would allow long term estimation of the contribution of ice cliffs to debris-covered glacier mass balance - representing a key modelling advance.

Future work should also target the contribution of crevasses to glacier mass balance. Indeed, these features would likely enhance melt even more than traditional stream- and pond-influenced cliffs due to greater surface roughness at their location increasing turbulent fluxes, and additional reflected shortwave contributions from the opposite crevasse walls (Cathles et al., 2011; Colgan et al., 2016; W. T. Pfeffer & Bretherton, 1987; Purdie et al., 2022). Time-lapse images actually show the upper walls of crevasses backwasting as traditional ice cliffs would (Fig. S21).

Furthermore, their longer-term evolution and influence on shaping the debris-covered glacier surface remains unclear (Kirkbride & Deline, 2013).

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Open Research

The glacier, debris, crevasse, cliff and pond outlines will be made available on Zenodo. Other datasets used include surface velocity from Millan et al. (2022), climate data from ERA5-Land (Muñoz Sabater, 2019), RGI 6.0. glacier outlines (https://nsidc.org/data/nsidc-0770/versions/6), the AW3D 30m DEM (Tadono et al., 2014) and ice thicknesses (Farinotti et al., 2019). Atmospherically-corrected Sentinel-2 images prior to 2019 were obtained from CNES through the PEPS platform (Hagolle et al., 2015). From 2019 and later they were processed directly in Google Earth Engine.

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