PLATFORMS & SENSORS

Platform:

the vehicle carrying the remote sensing device

– e.g. ground, airborne, or spaceborne

Sensor:

the remote sensing device recording wavelengths of energy

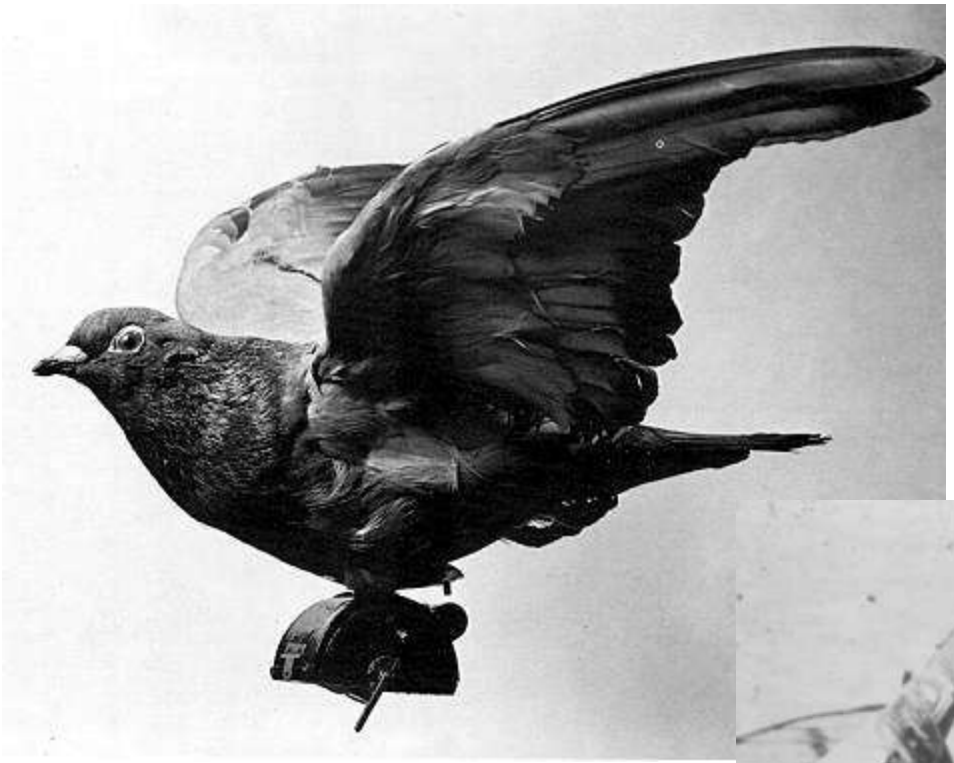
e.g. camera, or scanner

Image data might be referred to using the platform or sensor e.g.

platform: Landsat (1, 5, 7 etc..)

Sensor: Multispectral Sensor (MSS) or Thematic Mapper (TM)

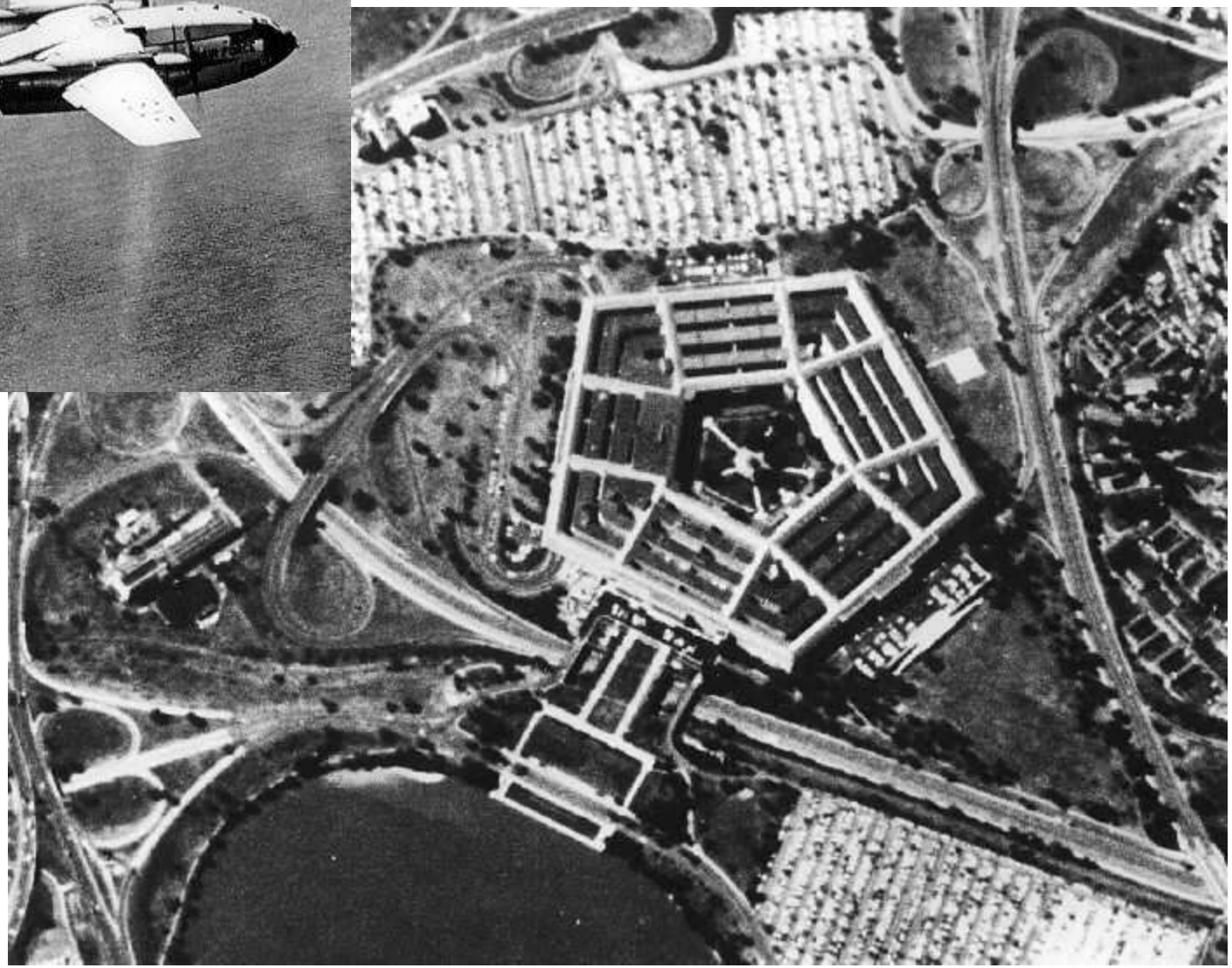
EARLY PLATFORMS & SENSORS



Birds, Kites, Balloons, Planes, with cameras

Suceeded today by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) = Remotely Piloted Airborne Systems (RPAS)

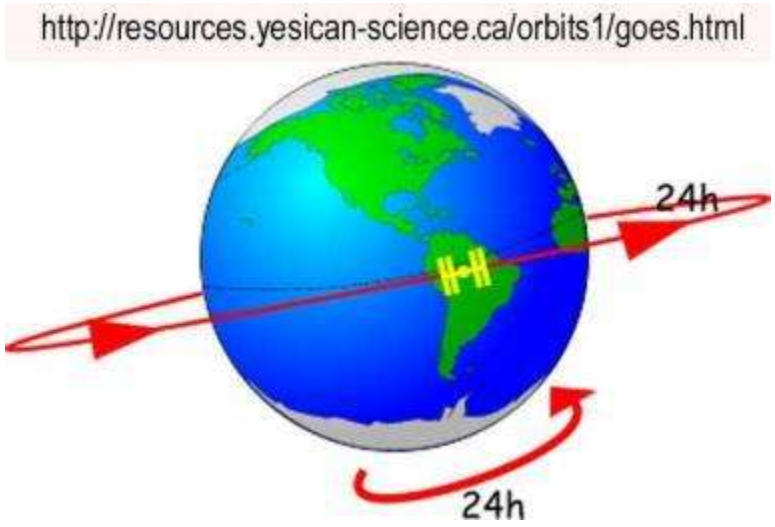
Corona 1959-1972 (CIA)
Cold War Reconnaissance / Spy

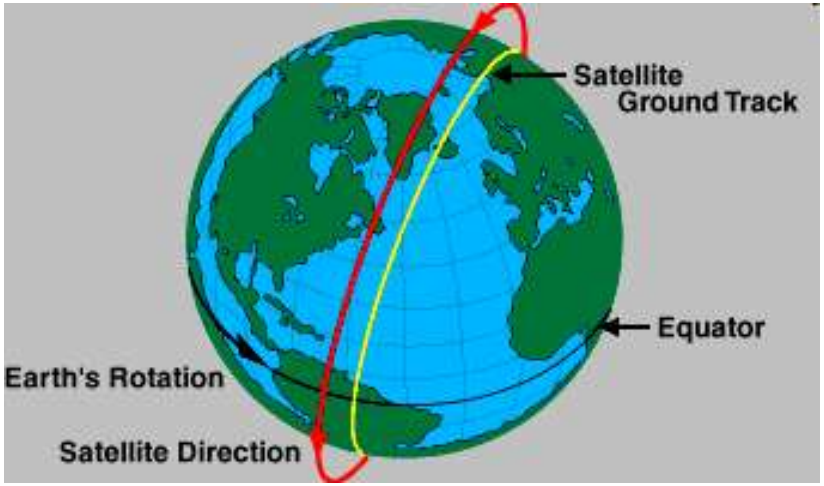


Film used –
Scanning
comes later

Platform = International Space Station
Sensor = Chris Hadfield's DSLR Nikon
ISS orbit is at 408 km altitude

1. Satellite orbits





"Geostationary"
e.g. Weather satellites, TV
Internet, GPS-WAAS
~ 36,000 km altitude
capturing all day

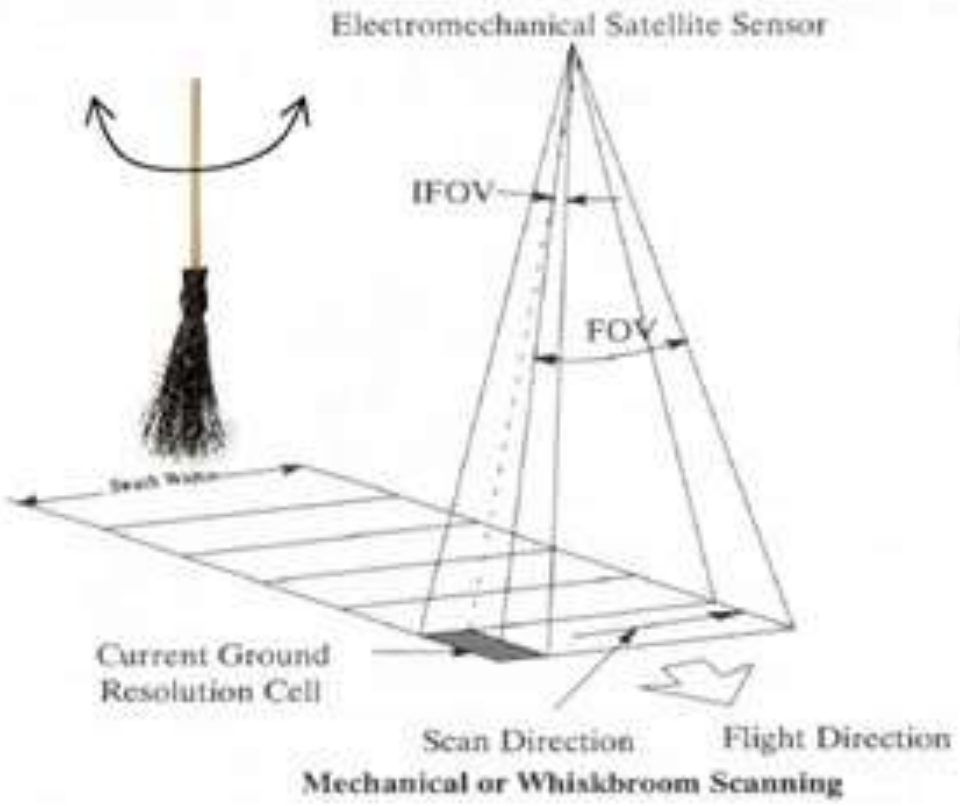
"Sun-synchronous"
EO Surface monitoring
mapping / updating
~ 400-900 km altitude
scenes mid-morning

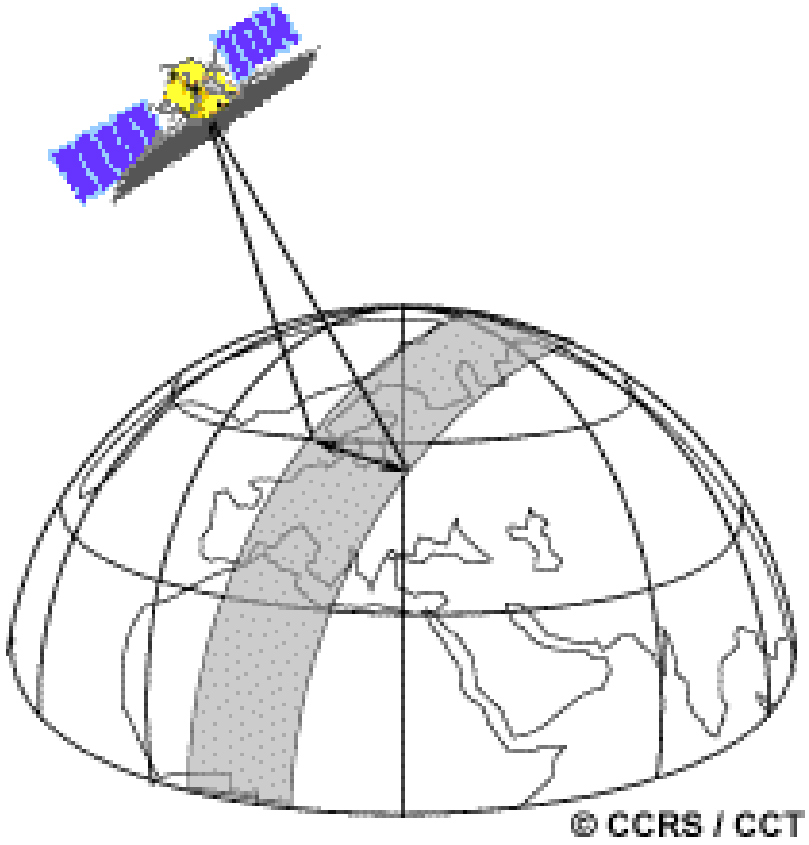
2. Scanner types

a. Whiskbroom (mirror/ cross-track): … now a bit historic

a small number of sensitive diodes for each band sweep perpendicular to the path or swath, centred directly under the platform, i.e. at nadir; now mostly historic

e.g. LANDSAT 1-7 MSS /TM / ETM

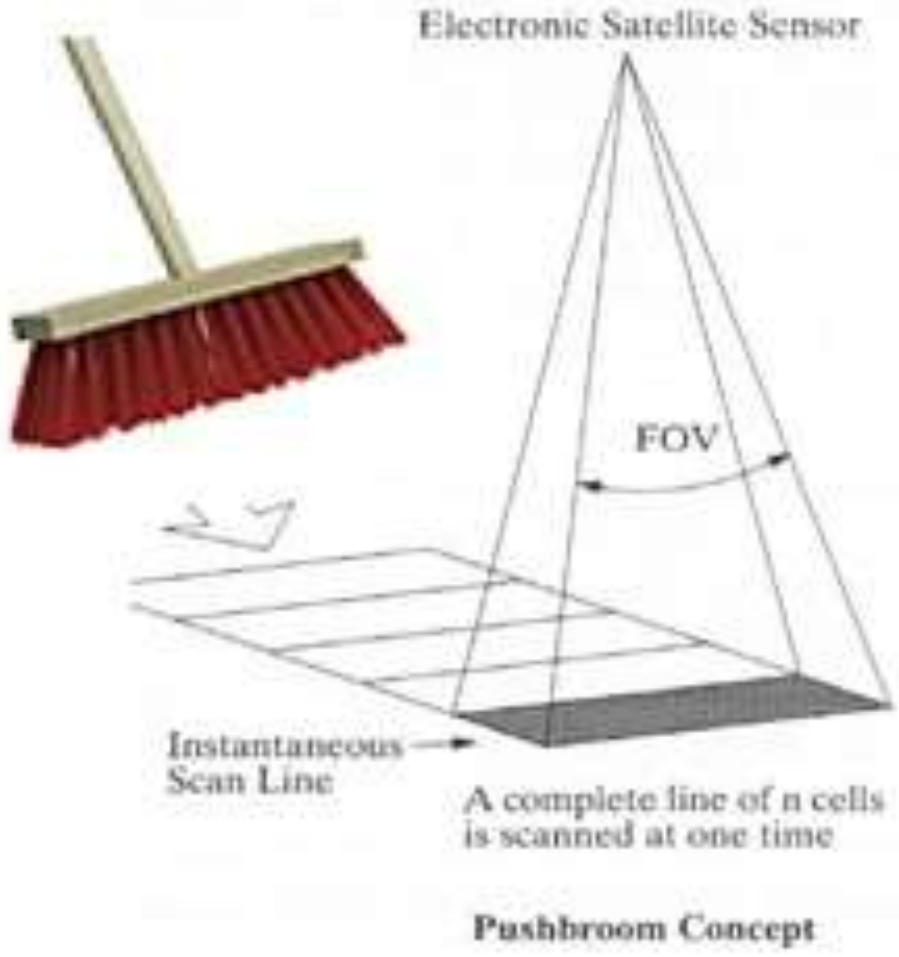


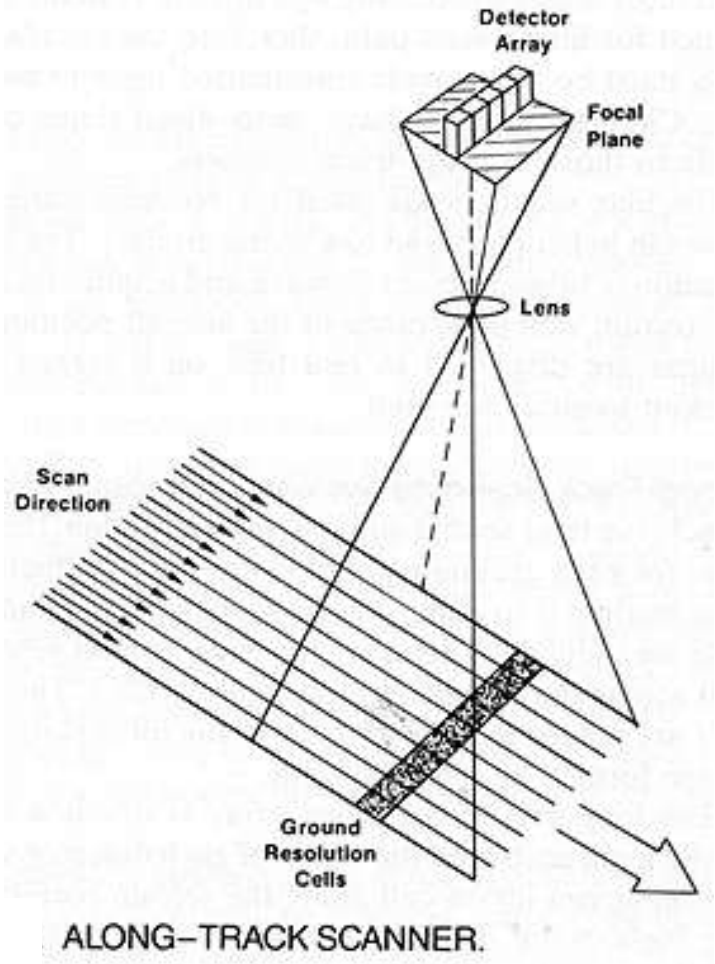


b. Pushbroom (along-track):

an array of diodes (one for each column of pixels) can be 'pointed' in a selected direction, **nadir or off-nadir**, on request, usually 0-30 degrees (max.), e.g. SPOT HRV, - almost all now .. Landsat 8/9 OLI*

* Landsat 8/9 are not redirectionned; swath = 185km = ~ 6000 pixels





3. Sensor groups

Multi-spectral sensors record bands in multiple **wavelengths**:
… but tend to focus on one of these groups

- Visible, Near IR, SWIR – Reflective (= optical)
- Thermal - emissive (sometimes with optical)
- Microwave – emissive or RADAR

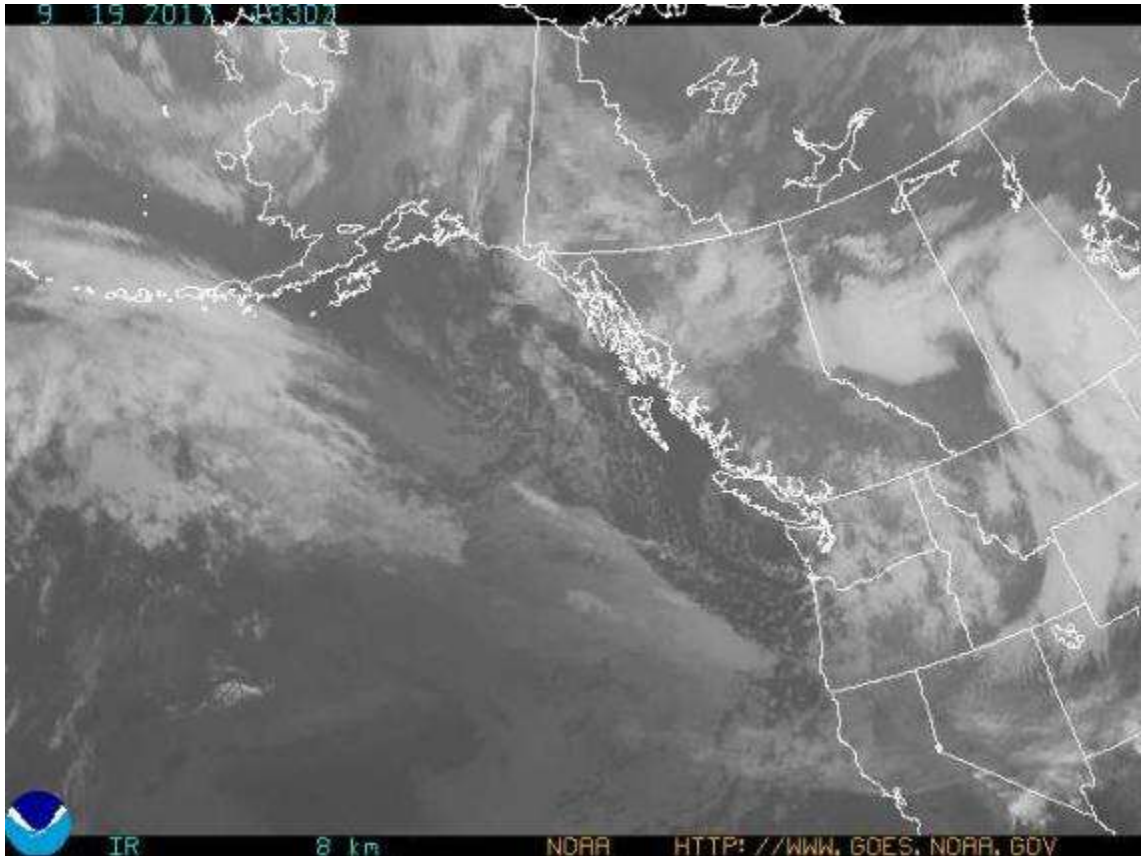
And at different **spatial resolutions** (pixel size e.g…):

- Low 1-10km
- Medium 500m
- High 30m
- Very high 1m

Many satellites now carry multiple sensors with varying resolutions

4a. Low Resolution sensors – weather

Weather: GOES (24 HOURS per day) – geostationary: 1975->
GOES 8: 75W longitude, GOES 9: 135W longitude
Visible: 1km, Thermal: 4km, 10-bit data (DN = 0- 1023)
GOES 17: 16 bands, VNIR (5)/ TIR (11)
http://www.goes.noaa.gov



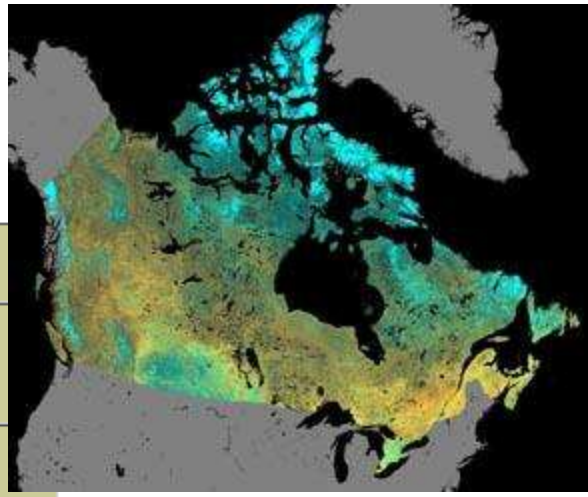
4b. Low Resolution: land/sea

NOAA AVHRR (Advanced 'Very High' Resolution Radiometer)

1.1km Red / NIR / TIR very high temporal resolution' = repeat cpverage daily

1978-> present (19 satellites) - global vegetation monitoring:

data are freely downloadable. 18, 19 operational



2500 x 2500 pixels, 10 bit data

AVHRR/3 Channel Characteristics			
Channel Number	Resolution at Nadir	Wavelength (um)	Typical Use
1	1.09 km	0.58 - 0.68	Daytime cloud and surface mapping
2	1.09 km	0.725 - 1.00	Land-water boundaries
3A	1.09 km	1.58 - 1.64	Snow and ice detection
3B	1.09 km	3.55 - 3.93	Night cloud mapping, sea surface temperature
4	1.09 km	10.30 - 11.30	Night cloud mapping, sea surface temperature
5	1.09 km	11.50 - 12.50	Sea surface temperature

5. Medium-> High RESOLUTION

LANDSAT (NASA) initially known as ERTS (Earth Resource Technology Satellite) ; **Multi-Spectral** Scanner (MSS: 80m)
- The start of detailed Erath Observation / mapping

1972 Landsat 1 -> 1978 (ERTS 1)

1975 Landsat 2 -> 1982

1978 Landsat 3 -> 1983

Band	Spectral band	Resolution
4	0,5 - 0,6 µm	79 m x 82 m
5	0,6 - 0,7 µm	79 m x 82 m
6	0,7 - 0,8 µm	79 m x 82 m
7	0,8 - 1,1 µm	79 m x 82 m

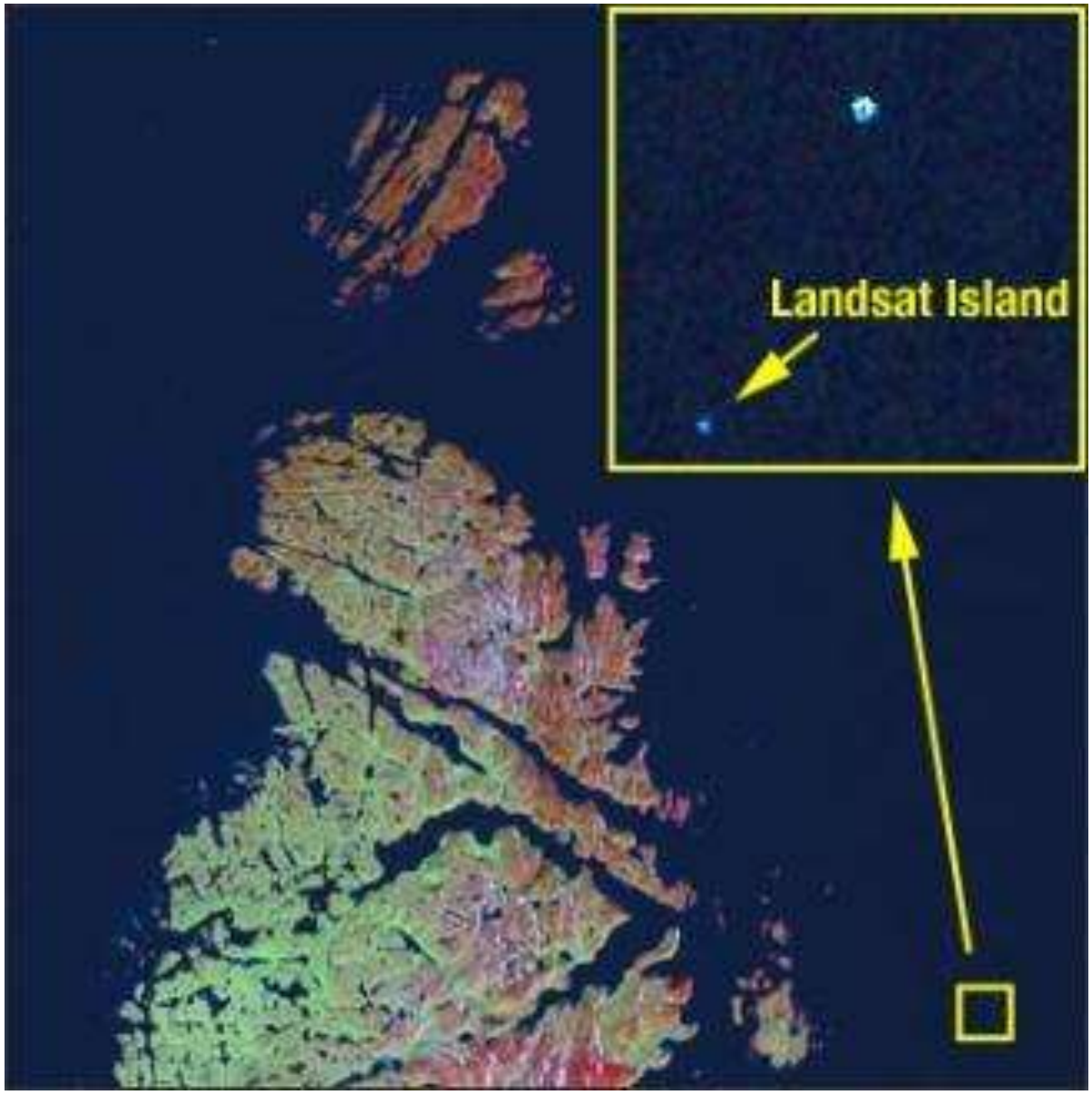
(No SWIR bands)

Bands 1,2,3 were on the (failed) 'Return Beam Vidicon' *(RBV)*

Manual interpretation e.g. fault lines

Landsat image data

Discovered in 1976, Labrador
25m x 45m (Landsat 1)



[**Landsat Island** is a small, uninhabited island located 20 kilometres off the northeast coast of Labrador

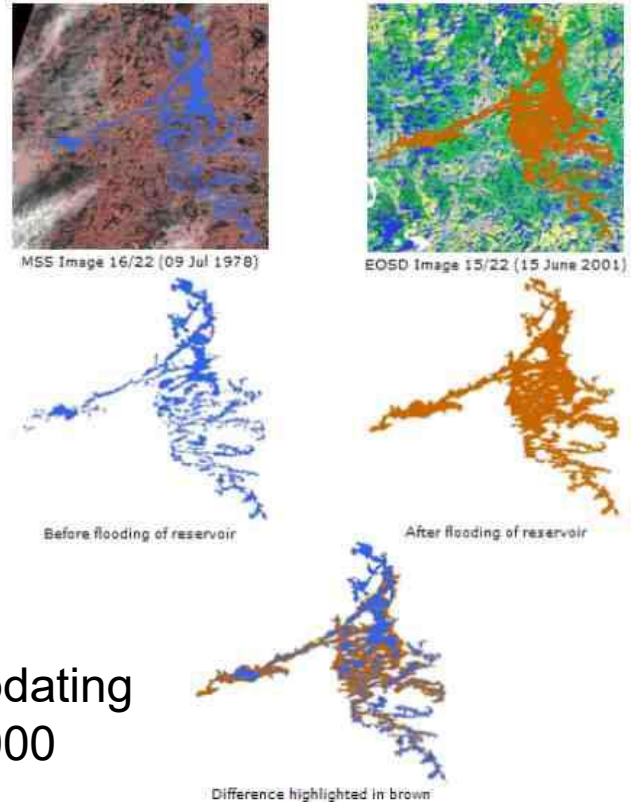
Verified by Dr. Frank Hall (Canadian Hydrographic Service). He was strapped into a harness and lowered from a helicopter down to the island. As he was lowered out of the helicopter, a polar bear took a swat at him.

The bear was on the highest point on the island and it was hard to see him in white.

1970s Multispectral image processing: The Landsat Era -this changed everything..

1972 Launch of Landsat (ERTS) 1 satellite and the 80m MultiSpectral Sensor (MSS)

Virginia Tower Norwood: "The Mother of Landsat" designed the MSS
https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/29/1025732

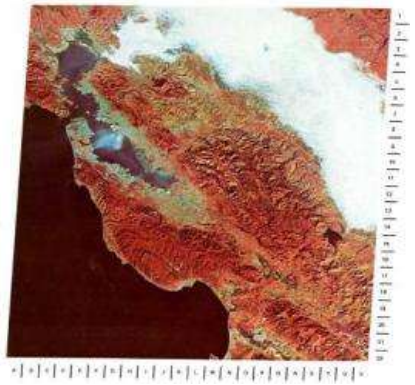


Map updating
1:250,000

6. High resolution

Landsat 4/5 Thematic Mapper (TM) 1982/**84: 'the next generation'**
– Landsat 5 TM failed November 2011

Band No.	Wavelength Interval (μm)	Spectral Response	Resolution (m)
1	0.45 - 0.52	Blue-Green	30
2	0.52 - 0.60	Green	30
3	0.63 - 0.69	Red	30
4	0.76 - 0.90	Near IR	30
5	1.55 - 1.75	SWIR	30
6	10.40 - 12.50	Thermal IR	120
7	2.08 - 2.35	SWIR	30



- Improved resolution (80 -> **30 m**)
- Addition of **SWIR** (and thermal band)
- Included MSS for continuity (mostly unused)

High resolution SPOT (France) - 2nd after Landsat

SPOT: Satellite pour l'Observation de la Terre«

High Resolution Visible (HRV) bands 1986 ->

SPOT 1-3: 1986, 1990, 1993

Mode	Band	Spectral band	Resolution
XS-multispectral	XS1	0,50 - 0,59 µm	20m x 20m
	XS2	0,61 - 0,68 µm	20m x 20m
	XS3	0,79 - 0,89 µm	20m x 20m
P-panchromatique	PAN	0,51 - 0,73 µm	10m x 10m

SPOT 4- 5: 1998, 2002

Mode	Band	Spectral band	Resolution
Multispectral	B1	0,50 - 0,59 µm	20m x 20m
	B2	0,61 - 0,68 µm	20m x 20m
	B3	0,79 - 0,89 µm	20m x 20m
	SWIR	1,58 - 1,75 µm	20m x 20m
M - monospectral	PAN	0,61 - 0,68 µm	10m x 10m

France launches SPOT 1986 (*Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre)*

Summary table: Landsat TM versus SPOT HRV (1980s)

	LANDSAT TM	SPOT HRV
Launch	1982 / 1984	1986
Altitude	705 km	832 km
Attitude (polar)	8.2 degrees	8.7 degrees
Equatorial time	9.45 am	10.30 am
Swath width	**185km**	60km
Repeat coverage	16 days	26 days
Sensor	Thematic Mapper (TM)	High Resolution Visible (HRV)
Number of detectors	100	6000/3000
Advantages	**#bands, swath size**	**higher resolution, # 'looks'**
Bands	7	3 + 1 (**no SWIR bands**)
Scanner type	Mirror (Whisk broom)	Pushbroom
Pixel size	30m	10 / 20m

Landsat 4-7 summary

1982 Landsat 4 Thematic Mapper (TM) -> 1987

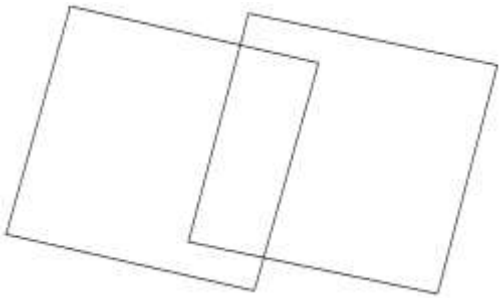
1984 Landsat 5 TM ... operational till Nov 2011

1993 Landsat 6 Enhanced TM: (ETM+) failed after launch

1999 Landsat 7 ETM+ ... sensor malfunctionned April 2003

-> Landsat imagery (ETM+ ~2000) Google Earth mosaic (2005)

Side overlap for Landsat scenes:
14% at equator, 45% at 50 degrees
higher with latitude and earth curvature
= more suitable image scenes



Landsat 7: Enhanced Thematic Mapper Plus (ETM+)

New band versus Landsat 5 TM: PAN 0.52-0.9 (Green->IR) band 15m

Sensor malfunctionned, April 2003
'Scan Line Calibrator' failed

Missing data lines thin towards the centre leaving a usable 20km strip; data are still transmitting

Landsat image data

Not the only land image data but ..

- The most accessible/downloadable
– free after 2008

- Longest continuous record: 1972 (1984)

Landsat 1

- Suitable resolution (30m) for northern environments
- Suitable scale for landscape analysis
- These factors enabled it for the Google Earth mosaic using

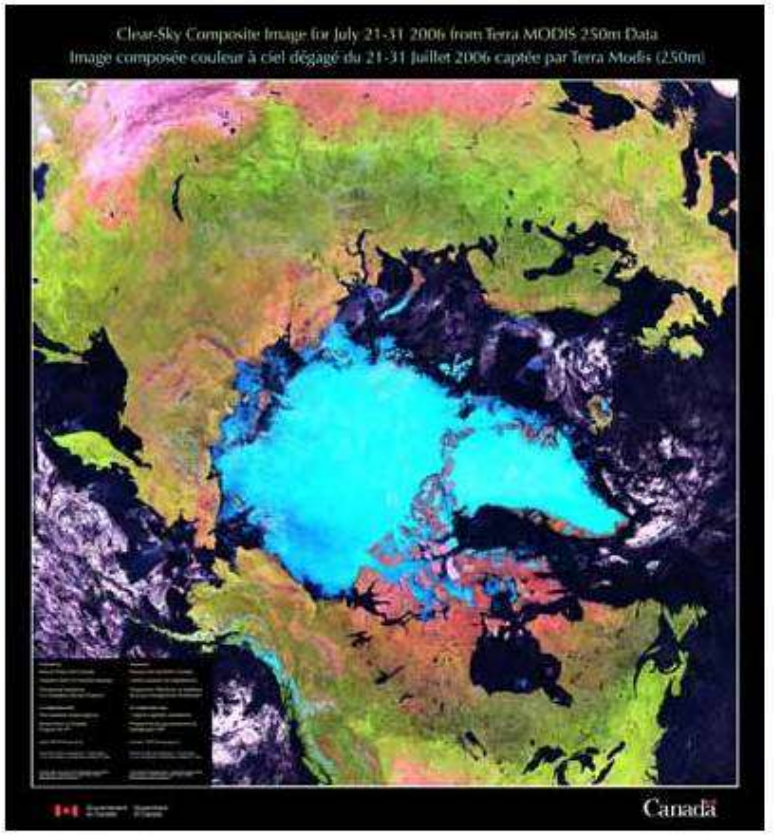
Landsat 7 ETM+ ~2000 (pre- calibration failure)

5b. MEDIUM RESOLUTION (500m-1km)

MODIS (MODerate resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer)
Descending 10.30am on Terra (1999), Ascending 1.30pm on Aqua (2002)
http://modis.gsfc.nasa.gov
Red / NIR: 250metres (2 bands) Blue/Green/NIR/SWIR: 500m VNIR/SWIR/TIR: 1000 metres (29 bands) Swath width: 2330km
Repeat: 1-2 days

CCRS produced the first-ever, high-medium resolution, circumpolar satellite image by compositing cloud-free images from the MODIS sensor

http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/land-surface-vegetation/land-cover/north-american-landcover/9144



MODIS: Smoky Skies in the Pacific Northwest, Sept 13, 2025

https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/154797/smoky-skies-in-the-pacific-northwest

High Resolution: Landsat 8 launched February 2013

Operational Land Imager (OLI): 16-bit data (vs 8-bit for previous sensors)

Landsat 8 Operational Land Imager (OLI) and Thermal Infrared Sensor (TIRS)[20]

Bands	Wavelength (micrometers)	Resolution (meters)
Band 1 - Ultra Blue (coastal/aerosol)	0.435 - 0.451	30
Band 2 - Blue	0.452 - 0.512	30
Band 3 - Green	0.533 - 0.590	30
Band 4 – Red	0.636 – 0.673	30
Band 5 – NIR	0.851 – 0.879	30
Band 6 – SWIR 1	1.566 – 1.651	30
Band 7 – SWIR 2	2.107 – 2.294	30
Band 8 – Panchromatic	0.503 – 0.676	15
Band 9 – Cirrus	1.363 – 1.384	30
Band 10 – Thermal 1	10.60 – 11.19	100* (30)
Band 11 – Thermal 2	11.50 – 12.51	100* (30)

* TIRS bands are acquired at 100 meter resolution, but are resampled to 30 meter ...

Landsat 9 launched September 2021: OLI-2 / TIRS-2

Bands are near identical to Landsat 8; 8 days apart from Landsat 8

Landsat 9 will replace Landsat 7 (launched in 1999), taking its place in orbit.

OLI: 12 bit (4096) OLI-2: 14-bit (16,384) – both stored in 16-bit channels (65,536 DNs)

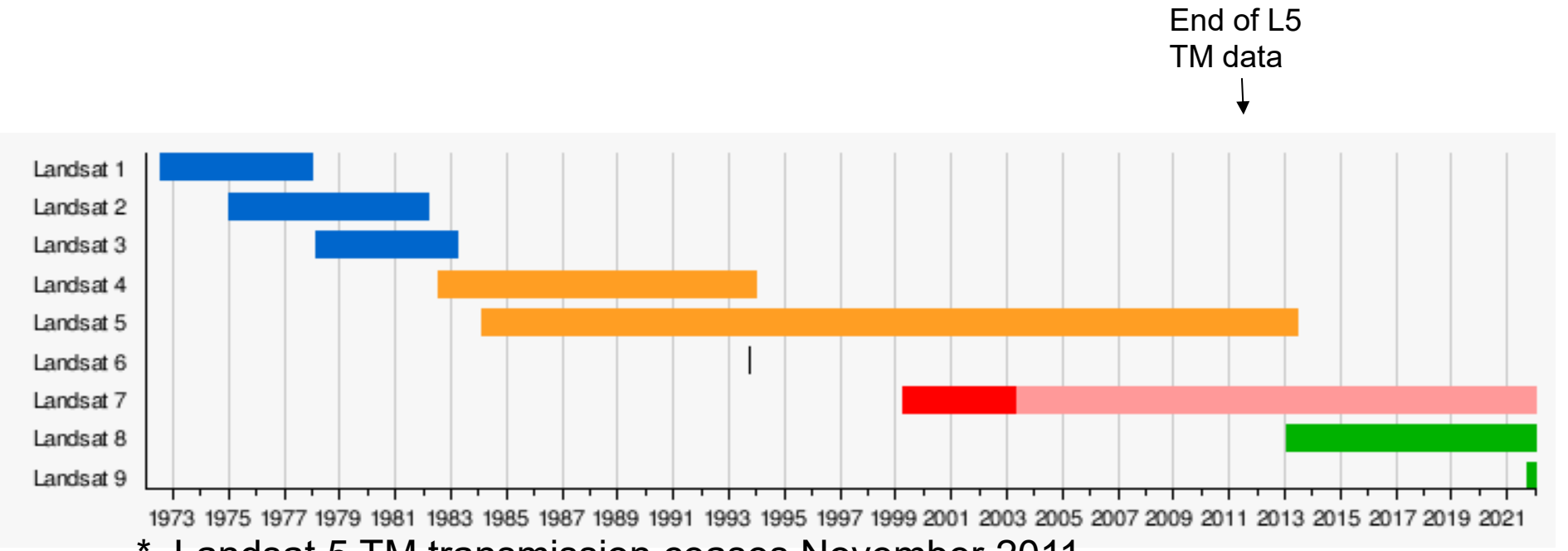
14 v 12 bit data = more discrimination in shadows, details in snow accumulation areas ?

Landsat continuation and the end of Landsat 5

the longest-operating Earth observation satellite 1984-2011 / 2013
The basis for Google Earth TimeLapse https://earthengine.google.com/timelapse/

- Landsat 5 TM transmission ceased November 2011 fully decommissioned May 2012

The secondary instrument, the Multispectral Scanner (MSS) had been turned off in 1995. Mission operations engineers realized that the communication links used by MSS were still good, and the mission could continue if the MSS still worked. Seventeen years after turning the instrument off, engineers powered it back on, and amazingly, it worked. This allowed Landsat 5 to acquire one more year of data until Landsat 8 was ready to take its place in early 2013. i.e. Jan 2012-13



* Landsat 5 TM transmission ceases November 2011

High resolution

European Space Agency (ESA)

Copernicus Program
Sentinel 2A/B
2015 / 2017

free download

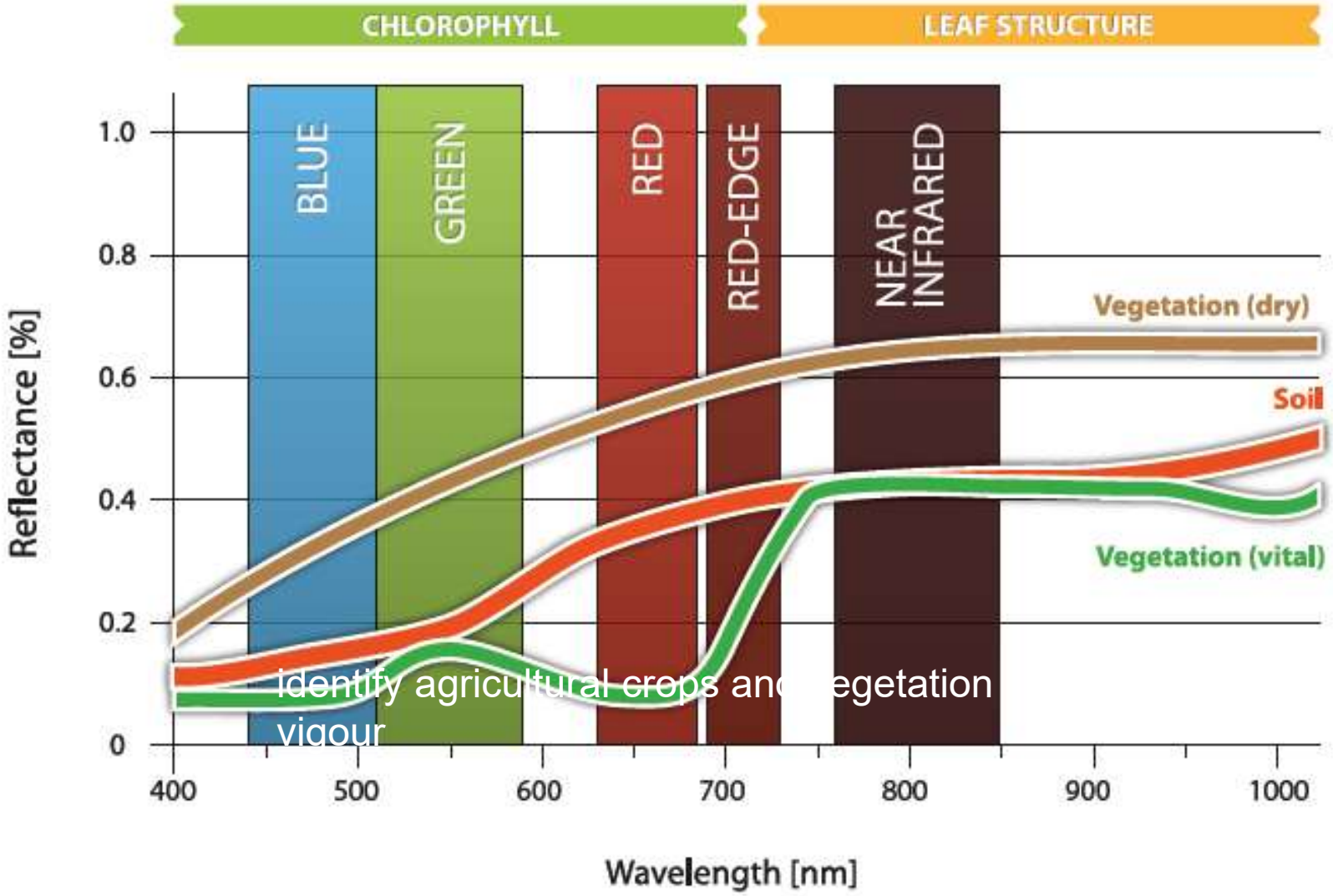
Multi-Spectral Instrument (MSI)
10 / 20m

ESA Copernicus Program - Sentinel 2A/B, 2015/2017 - free download; multi-spectral instrument (MSI) – 12 bit

Sentinel-2 Bands	Central Wavelength (µm)	Resolution (m)
Band 1 – Coastal aerosol	0.443	60
Band 2 – Blue	0.490	10
Band 3 – Green	0.560	10
Band 4 – Red	0.665	10
Band 5 – Vegetation Red Edge	0.705	20
Band 6 – Vegetation Red Edge	0.740	20
Band 7 – Vegetation Red Edge	0.783	20
Band 8 – NIR	0.842	10
Band 8A – Narrow NIR	0.865	20
Band 9 – Water vapour	0.945	60
Band 10 – SWIR – Cirrus	1.375	60
Band 11 – SWIR	1.610	20
Band 12 – SWIR	2.190	20

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinel-2#Instruments

Introducing the Red Edge

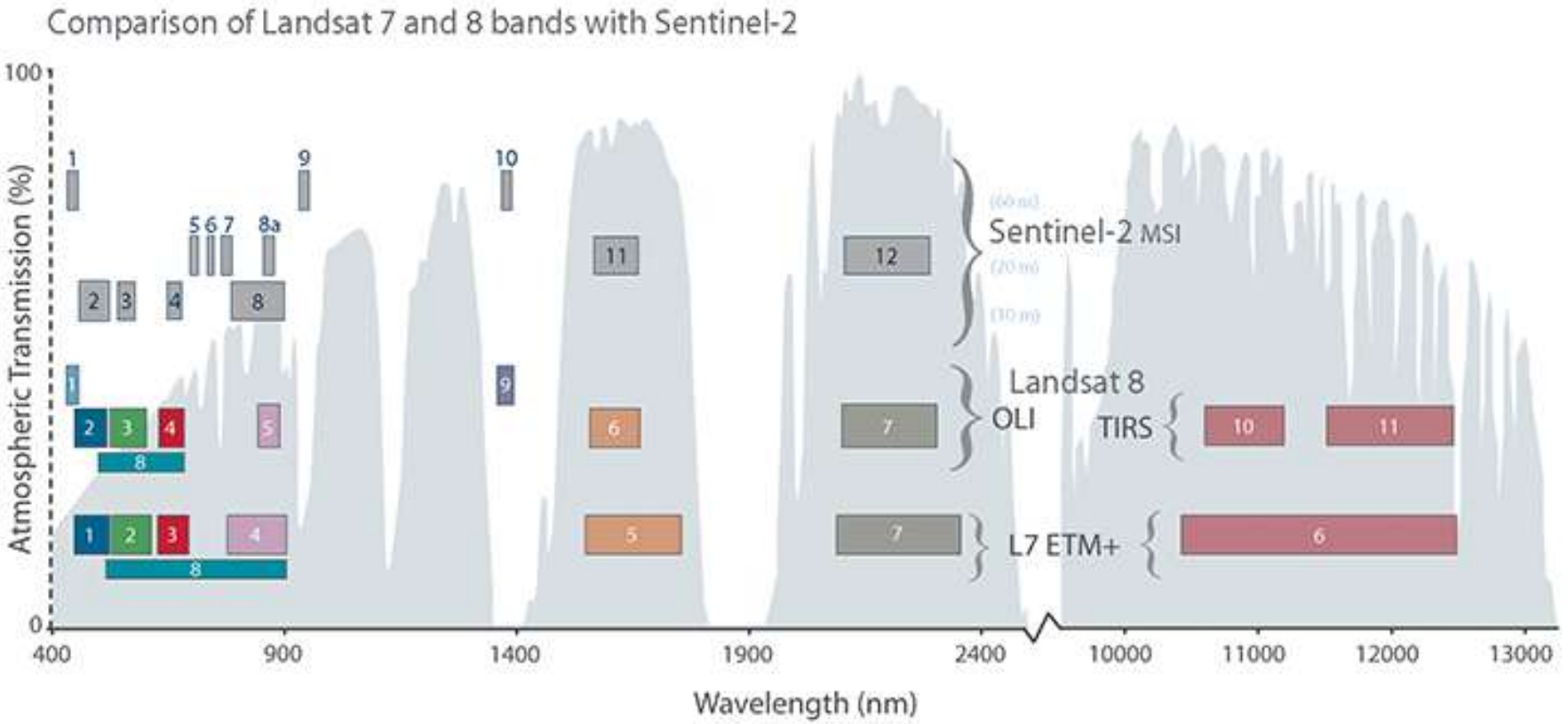


Identify agricultural crops and vegetation vigour

Typical spectral reflectance curves of selected surfaces

Useful for studies in agriculture and vegetation health

Sentinel 2 vs Landsat 8(9) OLI vs Landsat 7 ETM+ bands:



S2 has finest **‘spectral**’ resolution = narrowest bands

L9 has highest **‘radiometric’** resolution (14 bit)

S2; L8/9 have finer **‘spectral/radiometric** resolution than L7 ETM+

Earth Observing satellite lists

So far we've seen AVHRR, MODIS, Landsat, SPOT, Sentinel – are there more?
- Yes many more .. e.g. from Brazil, China, India, especially very high resolution

https://gisgeography.com/satellite-list

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Earth_observation_satellites

https://www.eoportal.org/satellite-missions

https://www.itc.nl/Pub/sensordb/AllSensors.aspx

Note: many Very high resolution sensors (<5m pixels) post 2000
- See lecture after November break