

Bioremediation. An overview

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Abstract

A brief outline of the development of bioremediation technologies is presented. The major features and limitations are discussed, and an overview of the current state of the art in field applications is sketched.

Keywords: Bioremediation, environment, industrial activities

INTRODUCTION

The quality of life on Earth is linked inextricably to the overall quality of the environment. In early times, we believed that we had an unlimited abundance of land and resources; today, however, the resources in the world show, in greater or lesser degree, our carelessness and negligence in using them. The problems associated with contaminated sites now assume increasing prominence in many countries. Contaminated lands generally result from past industrial activities when awareness of the health and environmental effects connected with the production, use, and disposal of hazardous substances were less well recognized than today. The problem is worldwide, and the estimated number of contaminated sites is significant [1]. It is now widely recognized that contaminated land is a potential threat to human health, and its continual discovery over recent years has led to international efforts to remedy many of these sites, either as a response to the risk of adverse health or environmental effects caused by contamination or to enable the site to be redeveloped for use.

The conventional techniques used for remediation have been to dig up contaminated soil and remove it to a landfill, or to cap and contain the contaminated areas of a site. The methods have some drawbacks. The first method simply moves the contamination elsewhere and may create significant risks in the excavation, handling, and transport of hazardous material. Additionally, it is very difficult and increasingly expensive to find new landfill sites for the final disposal of the material. The cap and contain method is only an interim solution since the contamination remains on site, requiring monitoring and maintenance of the isolation barriers long into the future, with all the associated costs and potential liability.

A better approach than these traditional methods is to completely destroy the pollutants if possible, or at least to transform them to innocuous substances. Some technologies that have been used are high-temperature incineration and various types of chemical decomposition (e.g., base-catalyzed dechlorination, UV oxidation). They can be very effective at reducing levels of a range of contaminants, but have several drawbacks, principally their technological complexity, the cost for small-scale application and the lack of public acceptance, especially for incineration that may increase the exposure to contaminants for both the workers at the site and nearby residents.

Bioremediation is an option that offers the possibility to destroy or render harmless various contaminants using natural biological activity. As such, it uses relatively low-cost, low-technology techniques, which generally have a high public acceptance and can

often be carried out on site. It will not always be suitable, however, as the range of contaminants on which it is effective is limited, the time scales involved are relatively long, and the residual contaminant levels achievable may not always be appropriate. Although the methodologies employed are not technically complex, considerable experience and expertise may be required to design and implement a successful bioremediation program, due to the need to thoroughly assess a site for suitability and to optimize conditions to achieve a satisfactory result.

Because bioremediation seems to be a good alternative to conventional clean-up technologies research in this field, especially in the United States, rapidly increasing.

Bioremediation has been used at a number of sites worldwide, including Europe, with varying degrees of success. Techniques are improving as greater knowledge and experience are gained, and there is no doubt that bioremediation has great potential for dealing with certain types of site contamination.

Unfortunately, the principles, techniques, advantages, and disadvantages of bioremediation are not widely known or understood, especially among those who will have to deal directly with bioremediation proposals, such as site owners and regulators. Here, we intended to assist by providing a straightforward, pragmatic view of the processes involved in bioremediation, the pros and cons of the technique, and the issues to be considered when dealing with a proposal for bioremediation.

Some tests make an exhaustive examination of the literature of bioremediation of organic [2–4] and inorganic pollutants [5], and another test takes a look at pertinent field application case histories [6].

PRINCIPLES OF BIOREMEDIATION

Environmental biotechnology is not a new field; composting and wastewater treatments are familiar examples of old environmental biotechnologies. However, recent studies in molecular biology and ecology offer opportunities for more efficient biological processes. Notable accomplishments of these studies include the clean-up of polluted water and land areas.

Bioremediation is defined as the process whereby organic wastes are biologically degraded under controlled conditions to an innocuous state, or to levels below concentration limits established by regulatory authorities [7].

By definition, bioremediation is the use of living organisms, primarily microorganisms, to degrade the environmental

contaminants into less toxic forms. It uses naturally occurring bacteria and fungi or plants to degrade or detoxify substances hazardous to human health and/or the environment.

The microorganisms may be indigenous to a contaminated area or they may be isolated from elsewhere and brought to the contaminated site. Contaminant compounds are transformed by living organisms through reactions that take place as a part of their metabolic processes. Biodegradation of a compound is often a result of the actions of multiple organisms. When microorganisms are imported to a contaminated site to enhance degradation we have a process known as bioaugmentation.

For bioremediation to be effective, microorganisms must enzymatically attack the pollutants and convert them to harmless products. As bioremediation can be effective only where environmental conditions permit microbial growth and activity, its application often involves the manipulation of environmental parameters to allow microbial growth and degradation to proceed at a faster rate.

Like other technologies, bioremediation has its limitations. Some contaminants, such as chlorinated organic or high aromatic hydrocarbons, are resistant to microbial attack. They are degraded either slowly or not at all, hence it is not easy to predict the rates of clean-up for a bioremediation exercise; there are no rules to predict if a contaminant can be degraded. Bioremediation techniques are typically more economical than traditional methods such as incineration, and some pollutants can be treated on site, thus reducing exposure risks for clean-up personnel, or potentially wider exposure as a result of transportation accidents.

Since bioremediation is based on natural attenuation the

public considers it more acceptable than other technologies.

Most bioremediation systems are run under aerobic conditions, but running a system under anaerobic conditions [8] may permit microbial organisms to degrade otherwise recalcitrant molecules. See Table 1 for a list of contaminants potentially suitable for bioremediation.

FACTORS OF BIOREMEDIATION

The control and optimization of bioremediation processes is a complex system of many factors. These factors include: the existence of a microbial population capable of degrading the pollutants; the availability of contaminants to the microbial population; the environment factors (type of soil, temperature, and pH, the presence of oxygen or other electron acceptors, and nutrients).

MICROBIAL POPULATIONS FOR BIOREMEDIATION PROCESSES

Microorganisms can be isolated from almost any environmental conditions. Microbes will adapt and grow at subzero temperatures, as well as extreme heat, desert conditions, in water, with an excess of oxygen, and in anaerobic conditions, with the presence of hazardous compounds or on any waste stream. The main requirements are an energy source and a carbon source.

Because of the adaptability of microbes and other biological systems, these can be used to degrade or remediate environmental hazards.

Table 1. Some contaminants potentially suitable for bioremediation.

Class of contaminants	Specific example	Aerobic	Anaerobic	More potential source
Chlorinated solvents	Trichloroethylene		+	Drycleaners
Chlorinated phenol	Pentachlorophenol		+	Landfills
"BTEX"	Benzene	+	+	Oil production and storage
Pesticides	Atrazine	+	+	Agriculture
	Carbaryl			Timber treatment plants
	Carbofuran			Pesticide manufacture
	Diazinon			Recreational areas
	2,4-D			

We can subdivide these microorganisms into the following groups:

Aerobic: In the presence of oxygen. Examples of aerobic bacteria recognized for their degradative abilities are *Pseudomonas*, *Alcaligenes*, *Sphingomonas*, *Rhodococcus*, and *Mycobacterium*. These microbes have often been reported to degrade pesticides and hydrocarbons, both alkanes and polyaromatic compounds. Many of these bacteria use the contaminant as the sole source of carbon and energy.

Anaerobic: In the absence of oxygen. Anaerobic bacteria are not as frequently used as aerobic bacteria. There is an increasing interest in anaerobic bacteria used for bioremediation of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in river sediments, dechlorination of the solvent trichloroethylene (TCE), and chloroform.

Ligninolytic fungi: Fungi such as the white rot fungus *Phanerochaete chrysosporium* have the ability to degrade an

extremely diverse range of persistent or toxic environmental pollutants. Common substrates used include straw, saw dust, or corn cobs.

Methylotrophs: Aerobic bacteria that grow utilizing methane for carbon and energy. The initial enzyme in the pathway for aerobic degradation, methane monooxygenase, has a broad substrate range and is active against a wide range of compounds, including the chlorinated aliphatics trichloroethylene and 1,2-dichloroethane.

An overview of the microbiological aspects of the application of microorganisms is given in [9].

For degradation it is necessary that bacteria and the contaminants be in contact. This is not easily achieved, as neither the microbes nor contaminants are uniformly spread in the soil. Some bacteria are mobile and exhibit a chemotactic response, sensing the contaminant and moving toward it. Other microbes such as fungi grow in a filamentous form toward the contaminant. It is possible to enhance the mobilization of the contaminant utilizing some surfactants such as sodium dodecyl sulphate (SDS) [10].

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Nutrients

Although the microorganisms are present in contaminated soil, they cannot necessarily be there in the numbers required for bioremediation of the site. Their growth and activity must be stimulated.

Biostimulation usually involves the addition of nutrients and oxygen to help indigenous microorganisms.

These nutrients are the basic building blocks of life and allow microbes to create the necessary enzymes to break down the contaminants. All of them will need nitrogen, phosphorous, and carbon (e.g., see Table 2).

Carbon is the most basic element of living forms and is needed in greater quantities than other elements. In addition to hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen it constitutes about 95% of the weight of cells.

Table 2. Composition of a microbial cell

Element	Percentage
Carbon	50
Nitrogen	14
Oxygen	20
Hydrogen	8
Sodium	1
Calcium	0.5
Chloride	0.5

From R. Y. Stainer *et al.* The Microbial World, 5th ed., Prentice-Hall, NJ (1986).

Environmental requirements

Optimum environmental conditions for the degradation of contaminants are reported in Table 3.

Microbial growth and activity are readily affected by pH, temperature, and moisture. Although microorganisms have been also isolated in extreme conditions, most of them grow optimally over a narrow range, so that it is important to achieve optimal conditions.

If the soil has too much acid it is possible to rinse the pH by adding lime. Temperature affects biochemical reactions rates, and the rates of many of them double for each 10 °C rise in temperature.

Above a certain temperature, however, the cells die. Plastic covering can be used to enhance solar warming in late spring, summer, and autumn. Available water is essential for all the living organisms, and irrigation is needed to achieve the optimal moisture level.

The amount of available oxygen will determine whether the system is aerobic or anaerobic.

Hydrocarbons are readily degraded under aerobic conditions, whereas chlorurate compounds are degraded only in anaerobic ones. To increase the oxygen amount in the soil it is possible to till or sparge air. In some cases, hydrogen peroxide or magnesium peroxide can be introduced in the environment.

Soil structure controls the effective delivery of air, water, and nutrients. To improve soil structure, materials such as gypsum or organic matter can be applied. Low soil permeability can impede movement of water, nutrients, and oxygen; hence, soils with low permeability may not be appropriate for *in situ* clean-up techniques.

BIOREMEDIATION STRATEGIES

Different techniques are employed depending on the degree of saturation and aeration of an area. *In situ* techniques are defined as those that are applied to soil and groundwater at the site with minimal disturbance.

Ex situ techniques are those that are applied to soil and groundwater at the site which has been removed from the site via excavation (soil) or pumping (water). *Bioaugmentation* techniques involve the addition of microorganisms with the ability to degrade

pollutants.

In situ bioremediation

These techniques [11,12] are generally the most desirable options due to lower cost and less disturbance since they provide the treatment in place avoiding excavation and transport of contaminants. *In situ* treatment is limited by the depth of the soil that can be effectively treated. In many soils effective oxygen diffusion for desirable rates of bioremediation extend to a range of only a few centimeters to about 30 cm into the soil, although depths of 60 cm and greater have been effectively treated in some cases. The most important land treatments are:

Bioventing is the most common *in situ* treatment and involves supplying air and nutrients through wells to contaminated soil to stimulate the indigenous bacteria. Bioventing employs low air flow rates and provides only the amount of oxygen necessary for the biodegradation while minimizing volatilization and release of contaminants to the atmosphere. It works for simple hydrocarbons and can be used where the contamination is deep under the surface.

In situ biodegradation involves supplying oxygen and nutrients by circulating aqueous solutions through contaminated soils to stimulate naturally occurring bacteria to degrade organic contaminants.

It can be used for soil and groundwater. Generally, this technique includes conditions such as the infiltration of water-containing nutrients and oxygen or other electron acceptors for groundwater treatment.

Biosparging. Biosparging involves the injection of air under pressure below the water table to increase groundwater oxygen concentrations and enhance the rate of biological degradation of contaminants by naturally occurring bacteria. Biosparging increases the mixing in the saturated zone and thereby increases the contact between soil and groundwater. The ease and low cost of installing small-diameter air injection points allows considerable flexibility in the design and construction of the system.

Bioaugmentation. Bioremediation frequently involves the addition of microorganisms indigenous or exogenous to the contaminated sites. Two factors limit the use of added microbial cultures in a land treatment unit :

- 1) nonindigenous cultures rarely compete well enough with an indigenous population to develop and sustain useful population levels and
- 2) Most soils with long-term exposure to biodegradable waste have indigenous microorganisms that are effective degraders if the land treatment unit is well managed.

Ex situ bioremediation

These techniques involve the excavation or removal of contaminated soil from ground.

Landfarming is a simple technique in which contaminated soil is excavated and spread over a prepared bed and periodically tilled until pollutants are degraded. The goal is to stimulate indigenous biodegradative microorganisms and facilitate their aerobic degradation of contaminants. In general, the practice is limited to the treatment of superficial 10–35 cm of soil. Since landfarming has the potential to reduce monitoring and maintenance costs, as well as clean-up liabilities, it has received much attention as a disposal alternative.

Composting is a technique that involves combining contaminated soil with nonhazardous organic amendants such as manure or agricultural wastes. The presence of these organic materials supports the development of a rich microbial population and elevated

temperature characteristic of composting.

Biopiles [13] are a hybrid of landfarming and composting. Essentially, engineered cells are constructed as aerated composted piles. Typically used for treatment of surface contamination with petroleum hydrocarbons they are a refined version of landfarming that tend to control physical losses of the contaminants by leaching and volatilization. Biopiles provide a favorable environment for indigenous aerobic and anaerobic microorganisms.

Bioreactors. Slurry reactors or aqueous reactors are used for *ex situ* treatment of contaminated soil and water pumped up from a contaminated plume. Bioremediation in reactors involves the processing of contaminated solid material (soil, sediment, sludge) or water through an engineered containment system. A slurry bioreactor may be defined as a containment vessel and apparatus used to create a three-phase (solid, liquid, and gas) mixing condition to increase the bioremediation rate of soilbound and water-soluble pollutants as a water slurry of the contaminated soil and biomass (usually indigenous microorganisms) capable of degrading target contaminants. In general, the rate and extent of biodegradation are greater in a bioreactor system than *in situ* or in solid-phase systems because the contained environment is more manageable and hence more controllable and predictable. Despite the advantages of reactor systems, there are some disadvantages. The contaminated soil requires pre treatment (e.g., excavation) or alternatively the contaminant can be stripped from the soil via soil washing or physical extraction (e.g., vacuum extraction) before being placed in a bioreactor.

Table 4 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of bioremediation.

Table 4. Summary of bioremediation strategies.

Technology	Example	Benefit	Limitation
<i>In situ</i>	Bioventing Bioaugmentation	Relatively passive	Extended treatment time
<i>Ex situ</i>	Landfarming composting	Extended space and time	Environmental parameters
Bioreactors	Slurry reactors Aqueous reactors	High cost	Toxicity of contaminants

Advantages of bioremediation

- Bioremediation is a natural process and is therefore perceived by the public as an acceptable waste treatment process for contaminated material such as soil. Microbes able to degrade the contaminant increase in numbers when the contaminant is present; when the contaminant is degraded, the biodegradative population declines. The residues for the treatment are usually harmless products and include carbon dioxide, water, and cell biomass.
- Theoretically, bioremediation is useful for the complete destruction of a wide variety of contaminants. Many compounds that are legally considered to be hazardous can be transformed to harmless products. This eliminates the chance of future liability associated with treatment and disposal of contaminated material.
- Instead of transferring contaminants from one environmental medium to another, for example, from land to water or air, the complete destruction of target pollutants is possible.
- Bioremediation can often be carried out on site, often without

causing a major disruption of normal activities. This also eliminates the need to transport quantities of waste off site and the potential threats to human health and the environment that can arise during transportation.

- Bioremediation can prove less expensive than other technologies that are used for clean-up of hazardous waste.

Disadvantages of bioremediation

- Bioremediation is limited to those compounds that are biodegradable. Not all compounds are susceptible to rapid and complete degradation.
- There are some concerns that the products of biodegradation may be more persistent or toxic than the parent compound.
- Biological processes are often highly specific. Important site factors required for success include the presence of metabolically capable microbial populations, suitable environmental growth conditions, and appropriate levels of nutrients and contaminants.

- It is difficult to extrapolate from bench and pilot-scale studies to full-scale field operations
- Research is needed to develop and engineer bioremediation technologies that are appropriate for sites with complex mixtures of contaminants that are not evenly dispersed in the environment. Contaminants may be present as solids, liquids, and gases.
- Bioremediation often takes longer than other treatment options, such as excavation and removal of soil or incineration.
- Regulatory uncertainty remains regarding acceptable performance criteria for bioremediation.

There is no accepted definition of “clean”, evaluating performance of bioremediation is difficult, and there are no acceptable endpoints for bioremediation treatments.

PHYTOREMEDIATION

Although the application of microbe biotechnology has been successful with petroleum-based constituents, microbial digestion has met limited success for widespread residual organic and metals pollutants.

Vegetation-based remediation shows potential for accumulating, immobilizing, and transforming a low level of persistent contaminants. In natural ecosystems, plants act as filters and metabolize substances generated by nature. Phytoremediation is an emerging technology that uses plants to remove contaminants from soil and water [14–16]. The term “phytoremediation” is relatively new, coined in 1991. Its potential for encouraging the biodegradation of organic contaminants requires further research, although it may be a promising area for the future.

We can find five types of phytoremediation techniques,

classified based on the contaminant fate: phytoextraction, phytotransformation, phytostabilization, phytodegradation, rhizofiltration, even if a combination of these can be found in nature.

Phytoextraction or *phytoaccumulation* is the process used by the plants to accumulate contaminants into the roots and aboveground shoots or leaves. This technique saves tremendous remediation cost by accumulating low levels of contaminants from a widespread area. Unlike the degradation mechanisms, this process produces a mass of plants and contaminants (usually metals) that can be transported for disposal or recycling.

Phytotransformation or *phytodegradation* refers to the uptake of organic contaminants from soil, Sediments, or water and, subsequently, their transformation to more stable, less toxic, or less mobile form. Metal chromium can be reduced from hexavalent to trivalent chromium, which is a less mobile and noncarcinogenic form.

Phytostabilization is a technique in which plants reduce the mobility and migration of contaminated soil. Leachable constituents are adsorbed and bound into the plant structure so that they form a stable mass of plant from which the contaminants will not reenter the environment.

Phytodegradation or *rhizodegradation* is the breakdown of contaminants through the activity existing in the rhizosphere. This activity is due to the presence of proteins and enzymes produced by the plants or by soil organisms such as bacteria, yeast, and fungi. Rhizodegradation is a symbiotic relationship that has evolved between plants and microbes. Plants provide nutrients necessary for the microbes to thrive, while microbes provide a healthier soil environment.

Rhizofiltration is a water remediation technique that involves the uptake of contaminants by plant roots. Rhizofiltration is used to reduce contamination in natural wetlands and estuary areas. In Table 5, we can see an overview of phytoremediation applications.

Table 5. Overview of phytoremediation applications

Technique	Plant mechanism	Surface medium
Phytoextraction	Direct uptake into plant tissues	Soil
Phytotransformation	Plant uptake and degradation of organic compounds	Surface water, ground water
Phytostabilization	Root exudates causes metal to precipitate	Soil,ground water.
Phytodegradation	Enhance microbial degradation in rhizosphere	Groundwater within rhizosphere
Rhizofiltration	Uptake of metal into plant roots	Soil and groundwater

Phytoremediation is well suited for use at very large field sites where other methods of remediation are not cost effective or practicable; at sites with a low concentration of contaminants where only polish treatment is required over long periods of time; and in conjunction with other technologies where vegetation is used as a final cap and closure of the site. There are some limitations to the technology that it is necessary to consider carefully before it is selected for site remediation: long duration of time for remediation, potential contamination of the vegetation and food chain, and difficulty establishing and maintaining vegetation at some sites with high toxic levels.

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