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Highlight articles

- 129 Rice: Reducing arsenic content by controlling water irrigation
Ashley M. Newbigging, Rebecca E. Paliwoda and X. Chris Le
- 132 Apportioning aldehydes: Quantifying industrial sources of carbonyls
Sarah A. Styler

Review articles

- 30 Application of constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment in tropical and subtropical regions (2000-2013)
Dong-Qing Zhang, K.B.S.N. Jinadasa, Richard M. Gersberg, Yu Liu, Soon Keat Tan and Wun Jern Ng
- 47 Stepwise multiple regression method of greenhouse gas emission modeling in the energy sector in Poland
Alicja Kolasa-Wiecek
- 113 Mini-review on river eutrophication and bottom improvement techniques, with special emphasis on the Nakdong River
Andinet Tekile, Ilho Kim and Jisung Kim

Regular articles

- 1 Effects of temperature and composite alumina on pyrolysis of sewage sludge
Yu Sun, Baosheng Jin, Wei Wu, Wu Zuo, Ya Zhang, Yong Zhang and Yaji Huang
- 9 Numerical study of the effects of local atmospheric circulations on a pollution event over Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, China
Yucong Miao, Shuhua Liu, Yijia Zheng, Shu Wang and Bicheng Chen, Hui Zheng and Jingchuan Zhao
- 21 Removal kinetics of phosphorus from synthetic wastewater using basic oxygen furnace slag
Chong Han, Zhen Wang, He Yang and Xiangxin Xue
- 55 Abatement of SO₂-NO_x binary gas mixtures using a ferruginous active absorbent: Part I. Synergistic effects and mechanism
Yinghui Han, Xiaolei Li, Maohong Fan, Armistead G. Russell, Yi Zhao, Chunmei Cao, Ning Zhang and Genshan Jiang
- 65 Adsorption of benzene, cyclohexane and hexane on ordered mesoporous carbon
Gang Wang, Baojuan Dou, Zhongshen Zhang, Junhui Wang, Haier Liu and Zhengping Hao
- 74 Flux characteristics of total dissolved iron and its species during extreme rainfall event in the midstream of the Heilongjiang River
Jiunian Guan, Baixing Yan, Hui Zhu, Lixia Wang, Duian Lu and Long Cheng
- 81 Sodium fluoride induces apoptosis through reactive oxygen species-mediated endoplasmic reticulum stress pathway in Sertoli cells
Yang Yang, Xinwei Lin, Hui Huang, Demin Feng, Yue Ba, Xuemin Cheng and Liuxin Cui
- 90 Roles of SO₂ oxidation in new particle formation events
He Meng, Yujiao Zhu, Greg J. Evans, Cheol-Heon Jeong and Xiaohong Yao
- 102 Biological treatment of fish processing wastewater: A case study from Sfax City (Southeastern Tunisia)
Meryem Jemli, Fatma Karray, Firas Feki, Slim Loukil, Najla Mhiri, Fathi Aloui and Sami Sayadi

CONTENTS

- 122 Bioreduction of vanadium (V) in groundwater by autohydrogentrophic bacteria: Mechanisms and microorganisms
Xiaoyin Xu, Siqing Xia, Lijie Zhou, Zhiqiang Zhang and Bruce E. Rittmann
- 135 Laccase-catalyzed bisphenol A oxidation in the presence of 10-propyl sulfonic acid phenoxazine
Rūta Ivanec-Goranina, Juozas Kulys, Irina Bachmatova, Liucija Marcinkevičienė and Rolandas Meškys
- 140 Spatial heterogeneity of lake eutrophication caused by physiogeographic conditions: An analysis of 143 lakes in China
Jingtao Ding, Jinling Cao, Qigong Xu, Beidou Xi, Jing Su, Rutai Gao, Shouliang Huo and Hongliang Liu
- 148 Anaerobic biodegradation of PAHs in mangrove sediment with amendment of NaHCO_3
Chun-Hua Li, Yuk-Shan Wong, Hong-Yuan Wang and Nora Fung-Yee Tam
- 157 Achieving nitrification at low temperatures using free ammonia inhibition on *Nitrobacter* and real-time control in an SBR treating landfill leachate
Hongwei Sun, Yongzhen Peng, Shuying Wang and Juan Ma
- 164 Kinetics of Solvent Blue and Reactive Yellow removal using microwave radiation in combination with nanoscale zero-valent iron
Yanpeng Mao, Zhenqian Xi, Wenlong Wang, Chunyuan Ma and Qinyan Yue
- 173 Environmental impacts of a large-scale incinerator with mixed MSW of high water content from a LCA perspective
Ziyang Lou, Bernd Bilitewski, Nanwen Zhu, Xiaoli Chai, Bing Li and Youcai Zhao
- 180 Quantitative structure-biodegradability relationships for biokinetic parameter of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons
Peng Xu, Wencheng Ma, Hongjun Han, Shengyong Jia and Baolin Hou
- 191 Chemical composition and physical properties of filter fly ashes from eight grate-fired biomass combustion plants
Christof Lanzerstorfer
- 198 Assessment of the sources and transformations of nitrogen in a plain river network region using a stable isotope approach
Jingtao Ding, Beidou Xi, Qigong Xu, Jing Su, Shouliang Huo, Hongliang Liu, Yijun Yu and Yanbo Zhang
- 207 The performance of a combined nitrification-anammox reactor treating anaerobic digestion supernatant under various C/N ratios
Jian Zhao, Jiane Zuo, Jia Lin and Peng Li
- 215 Coagulation behavior and floc properties of compound bioflocculant-polyaluminum chloride dual-coagulants and polymeric aluminum in low temperature surface water treatment
Xin Huang, Shenglei Sun, Baoyu Gao, Qinyan Yue, Yan Wang and Qian Li
- 223 Accumulation and elimination of iron oxide nanomaterials in zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) upon chronic aqueous exposure
Yang Zhang, Lin Zhu, Ya Zhou and Jimiao Chen
- 231 Impact of industrial effluent on growth and yield of rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) in silty clay loam soil
Mohammad Anwar Hossain, Golum Kibria Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, Abul Hossain Molla, Mohammad Mostafizur Rahman and Mohammad Khabir Uddin
- 241 Molecular characterization of microbial communities in bioaerosols of a coal mine by 454 pyrosequencing and real-time PCR
Min Wei, Zhisheng Yu and Hongxun Zhang
- 252 Risk assessment of *Giardia* from a full scale MBR sewage treatment plant caused by membrane integrity failure
Yu Zhang, Zhimin Chen, Wei An, Shumin Xiao, Hongying Yuan, Dongqing Zhang and Min Yang
- 186 Serious BTEX pollution in rural area of the North China Plain during winter season
Kankan Liu, Chenglong Zhang, Ye Cheng, Chengtang Liu, Hongxing Zhang, Gen Zhang, Xu Sun and Yujing Mu

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Apportioning aldehydes: Quantifying industrial sources of carbonyls

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Photo by Ming Wang, State Joint Key Laboratory of Environmental Simulation and Pollution Control, College of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, Peking University, China.

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In their recent *Journal of Environmental Sciences* publication, Wang and colleagues provide field evidence that industrial activities can contribute substantially to atmospheric carbonyl concentrations (Wang et al., 2015). These results may help

to explain underestimations of carbonyl emissions in currently available emission inventories, and highlight the need for an improved understanding of industrial sources of this class of compounds.

In the atmosphere, carbonyl compounds photolyze to yield reactive radicals, and thus contribute to the formation of ozone (Edwards et al., 2014) and other components of photochemical smog, including the NO_x reservoir peroxyacetyl nitrate (Fischer et al., 2014). Carbonyls are formed in the atmosphere as stable intermediates in the photooxidation of alkanes and other precursor species, but can also be emitted directly by a variety of anthropogenic sources, including traffic, coal burning, and industrial activities (Chen et al., 2014). An understanding of the magnitude of these primary sources is important, in part because ozone production from the photolysis of accumulated

directly emitted carbonyls—formaldehyde in particular—would be expected to occur earlier in the day than that from carbonyls produced via photochemistry (Parrish et al., 2012).

The quantification of volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions is often accomplished using emission inventories, which sum the products of activity rates (*e.g.* material production) and emission factors (*e.g.* mass emission per production unit) for all known sources of a single compound or compound class (Zhang et al., 2009). Field-derived estimates of carbonyl emissions often differ substantially from those predicted by such inventories, however: in one recent study, for example, aldehyde and ketone emissions estimated from ambient measurements of these species in Beijing were found to be more than twice as high as those reported in current inventories (Wang et al., 2014). These discrepancies highlight major gaps in our understanding of carbonyl sources.

In an effort to address these uncertainties, Wang et al. measured concentrations of 72 VOCs, including aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons, carbonyls, and alkyl nitrates, at a rural site located in the Yangtze River Delta, China, near a number of ship manufacturing facilities. They found that VOC concentrations varied substantially over the month-long sampling campaign, with the highest concentrations—a seven-fold enhancement in total VOCs relative to clean conditions—measured during a three-day stagnant period.

This pollution period was characterized by a doubling of the relative contribution of aromatic compounds to the measured VOC profile, and in particular by substantially elevated toluene concentrations. In order to determine the source of these elevated concentrations, Wang et al. first used measured concentrations of 2-butyl nitrate and its parent alkane 2-butane to assess the extent of photochemical processing (*i.e.* the “photochemical age”) of sampled air masses. Then, they used this parameter to derive the ratio of toluene to benzene in fresh air masses (*i.e.* the emission ratio) from concentrations of these species measured at the sampling site. Since benzene is primarily associated with combustion processes, whereas toluene is also emitted by industrial sources, this ratio can be used to evaluate the relative contributions of these sources to ambient toluene levels. The ratio that they obtained was significantly higher than those associated with combustion sources, which suggests that the elevated toluene concentrations measured during the pollution period were of industrial origin.

Source apportionment of carbonyls is complicated by the fact that they have both primary and secondary sources. However, since carbonyls and alkyl nitrates both arise from peroxy radical (RO_2) precursors, relationships between these two compound classes can be used to assess the relative contribution of secondary (*i.e.* photochemical) production to measured carbonyl concentrations. Although Wang et al. found a significant correlation between carbonyl–alkyl nitrate pairs under clean conditions, this correlation broke down at elevated toluene concentrations—or, in other words, when air quality at the measurement site was strongly influenced by industrial emissions. These results imply that both industrial and photochemical sources contributed to carbonyl concentrations at the site.

Extracting meaningful quantitative information regarding emissions of secondary species from correlations measured in the field is challenging (Parrish et al., 2012). Nevertheless, in order to obtain a preliminary estimate of the relative

contribution of industrial activities to ambient carbonyls at the study site, Wang et al. fit measured carbonyl concentrations using a simple multiple linear regression model, in which toluene and alkyl nitrates were used as respective tracers of industrial and photochemical carbonyl sources. Using the coefficients obtained by the model, the authors estimated that industrial sources contributed ~70% of ambient acetaldehyde, ~50% of ambient acetone, and ~20% of ambient formaldehyde.

These results underscore the valuable role that field measurements can play in identifying sources underrepresented in emission inventories, and highlight the need for an improved understanding of both the magnitude of industrial carbonyl emissions and the specific industrial processes that lead to these emissions. Although not measured here, one carbonyl particularly deserving of further study is benzaldehyde, a highly efficient precursor of secondary organic aerosol (SOA) whose emissions are significantly underestimated in available inventories (Borbon et al., 2013).

Carbonyl photolysis has very recently been shown to be the dominant radical source driving ozone production in the Uintah Basin, a remote oil and gas-producing region in Utah (Edwards et al., 2014). The results obtained in the present study suggest that primary carbonyl emissions from industrial facilities have the potential to contribute to ozone production in nearby rural areas. Further work is needed, however, to clarify the contribution of these direct emissions to regional-scale air quality. Results from a recent study in Houston, Texas suggest that although primary formaldehyde emissions from petrochemical facilities are important on a local scale, regional formaldehyde concentrations are largely determined by secondary production from co-emitted reactive VOCs (Johansson et al., 2014). It is unclear whether these results are applicable to rural sites where air quality is influenced by industrial activities that do not produce large quantities of carbonyl precursors. The performance of source apportionment studies at varying distances from industrial facilities with different VOC emission profiles should help to resolve these uncertainties.

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