**Environmental Health
Engineering and
Management Journal**

Original Article

Environmental Health
Engineering and Management

Biodegradation of total petroleum hydrocarbons in contaminated soils using indigenous bacterial consortium

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Abstract

Background: Biodegradation of hydrocarbon compounds is a great environmental concern due to their toxic nature and ubiquitous occurrence. In this study, biodegradation potential of oily soils was investigated in an oil field using indigenous bacterial consortium.

Methods: The bacterial strains present in the contaminated and non-contaminated soils were identified via DNA extraction using 16S rDNA gene sequencing during six months. Furthermore, total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) were removed from oil-contaminated soils. The TPH values were determined using a gas chromatograph equipped with a flame ionization detector (GC-FID).

Results: The bacterial consortium identified in oil-contaminated soils (case) belonged to the families *Halomonadaceae* (91.5%) and *Bacillaceae* (8.5%), which was significantly different from those identified in non-contaminated soils (control) belonging to the families *Enterobacteriaceae* (84.6%), *Paenibacillaceae* (6%), and *Bacillaceae* (9.4%). It was revealed that the diversity of bacterial strains was less in oil-contaminated soils and varied significantly between case and control samples. Indigenous bacterial consortium was used in oil-contaminated soils without need for amplification of heterogeneous bacteria and the results showed that the identified bacterial strains could be introduced as a sufficient consortium for biodegradation of oil-contaminated soils with similar texture, which is one of the innovative aspects of this research.

Conclusion: An oil-contaminated soil sample with TPH concentration of 1640 mg/kg was subjected to bioremediation during 6 months using indigenous bacterial consortium and a TPH removal efficiency of 28.1% was obtained.

Keywords: Oil-contaminated soils, Biodegradation, Bacterial diversity, Total petroleum hydrocarbons, Indigenous bacterial consortium

Citation: Basim Y, Mohebali GH, Jorfi S, Nabizadeh R, Ahmadi Moghadam M, Ghadiri A, et al. Biodegradation of total petroleum hydrocarbons in contaminated soils using indigenous bacterial consortium. Environmental Health Engineering and Management Journal 2020; 7(2): 127–133. doi: 10.34172/EHEM.2020.15.

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Introduction

Hydrocarbon compounds are discharged into the environment, especially to soil, through industrial petroleum-related activities such as drilling, transportation, and storage (1,2).

Petroleum contaminants are harmful to the environment because they can remain in the soil pore space and stunt the growth of soil microbes, plants and animals, and can be dissolved in the soil moisture or groundwater and contaminate them, and escape into the atmosphere through volatilization (3). Therefore, environmental pollution with hydrocarbons is a great environmental concern due to their toxic nature and ubiquitous occurrence (4). Bioremediation is an effective and environmentally friendly process that degrades oil contaminants into non-toxic, simple, inorganic compounds using hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms (5). Bioremediation may remove the contaminants to a large extent and has proven successful in many applications to petroleum-contaminated soils and relies on the application of microorganism especially bacteria (6-8), which can be implemented both in situ (9,10) and ex situ (11,12) bioremediation technologies.

Although in situ bioremediation technologies are more

environmentally-friendly, cheaper, and easier to perform compared to ex situ alternatives (13), but are usually longer, this drawback could be mitigated by identification and following up the quantitative variations of dominant hydrocarbon-degrading strains in polluted areas (14,15). As a key question, dominant hydrocarbon-degrading strains in a highly contaminated soil were monitored and identified in order to prepare an efficient consortium for application in other polluted soils with similar soil texture. Such process is called "bioaugmentation", the inoculation of exogenous bacteria into contaminated soil (16). When contamination adversely affects the native microorganisms, bioaugmentation gives the opportunity for a successful bioremediation (17). Although bioaugmentation has been reported to be an efficient case-specific process to enhance the biodegradation of hydrocarbons in hydrocarbon-contaminated soil. Therefore, if the soil texture and characteristics are known, then, there would be a bigger chance to perform a successful bioaugmentation. Consequently, identification of native hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria by molecular methods provide a good understanding of the microbial community composition in polluted soils (18). This research was conducted to find the most suitable method for identifying the whole bacterial consortium. This method was applied using direct DNA extraction by 16S rDNA gene sequencing during six months from oil-contaminated soils by testing a combination of many procedures, and finally, applying physical, chemical, and biochemical processes, which is one of the strength points of this study. Also, indigenous bacterial consortium was used in oil-contaminated soils without need for amplification of heterogeneous bacteria and the results showed that the identified bacterial strains could be introduced as a sufficient consortium for biodegradation of oil-contaminated soils with similar texture, which is one of the innovative aspects of this research. Furthermore, an appropriate total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) removal efficiency (28.1%) in oil-contaminated soils was obtained.

Materials and Methods

Materials
For bacterial cultivation of the oil-contaminated soils in the primary stage of the study, all chemicals including hydrochloric acid (HCl), ethanol (C_2H_5OH), acetone (CH_3COCH_3, 99.5%)], chloroform ($CHCl_3$, 99.5%), isopropanol (C_3H_8O), n-hexane ($CH_3(CH_2)_4CH_3$, ≥95.0%), sodium hydroxide (NaOH), phenol, sodium chloride (NaCl), EDTA, and R_2A were analytical graded and supplied by Merck company (Germany).

Soil sampling
Considering the aims of the present study, variations of TPH content as well as bacterial count in case and control samples were analyzed during six months. The case samples were obtained from pre-determined points due to oil leaks from oil and gas separators. Soil samples were prepared using soil cores from surface layers (0-40 cm depth), which were air-dried. Soil samples were homogenized by shaking (19). Also, the same procedure was carried out in control area without TPH contamination. The conditions of sampling site for control and case samples are presented in Table 1. Sampling was performed in spring season (June) and the biodegradation in the laboratory was done during six months from August 2017 to January 2018. The study was performed in a laboratory scale and in a small pot as container with a capacity of approximately 2 kg.

DNA extraction
Metagenomic DNA extraction was performed in a harsh manner by combining several lysis methods together. The physical lysis including bead beating with the lysis buffer treatment was done, then, the samples were applied to the enzymatic buffer and incubated with shaking overnight. The next steps for the chemical lysis and purification were continued according to Siddhapura et al (20).

Then, the genomic library was amplified by the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) using universal primers. Sequencing was carried out using the Illumina MiSeq platform at Macrogen Company of Korea, in order to examine taxonomic diversity of bacterium. Data were analyzed using QIIME software (21,22).

TPH measurement
The TPH levels in the samples were determined by a gas chromatograph equipped with a flame-ionization detector (GC-FID, Chrompack CP 9001) using an HP-5 capillary column (30 m length, 0.32 mm inner diameter, and 0.2 mm film thickness). Helium was used as the carrier gas with a constant flow rate of 1 mL min^{-1}. The temperature program was as follows: the column temperature was held at 50°C for 1 minute, and then, ramped to 280°C at 15°C min^{-1} and held for 5 minutes. The injector and detector temperatures were set at 250 and 320°C, respectively. The injection volume was 1 μL. The detection limit of GC-FID was more than 10 ppb.

The obtained data were analyzed using R-Studio or R version 4.0.0 and SPSS version 22.

Results
The contaminated soil was characterized as loamy sand

Table 1. The conditions of sampling site for case and control samples

Parameters	Case	Control
pH	7.65	7.00
Temperature of air (°C)	39	39
Temperature of soil (°C)	35.2	35.2
EC (ds/m)	2.7	2.87
Age of contamination	> 6 months	No pollution
Soil texture	Loamy sand	Loamy sand

which contained silt (22%), clay (4%) sand (74%), and approximately 30% moisture content. Volatile matter content usually accounts for organic fraction of samples, which was 12% in this case. Variations of TPH content in the oil-contaminated soils are presented in Figure 1.

As shown in this figure, there is a significant difference in the removal of TPH during six months. The initial TPH concentration of 1640 mg/kg at the beginning of the experiments decreased to 1179 mg/kg at the end of month six (28.1% removal). Statistical analysis showed that the mean difference in the TPH content between month zero and month six is significant at $P \leq 0.05$ (Table 2).

Diversity of bacterial strains in six continuous months and in two categories of oil-contaminated soils (case) and non-contaminated soils (control) are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

The bacterial consortia identified in oil-contaminated soils (case) belonged to the families *Halomonadaceae* (91.5%) and *Bacillaceae* (8.5%). The findings are significantly different from those obtained in non-contaminated soils (control) belonging to families *Entrobacteriaceae* (84.6%), *Paenibacillaceae* (6%), and *Bacillaceae* (9.4%). It is very surprising that the diversity of bacterial strains was less in oil-contaminated soils, and generally, the identified strains varied significantly in the case and control samples. Taxonomic diversity and frequency of bacterial community in oil-contaminated soils (case) and non-contaminated (control) soils are presented in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.
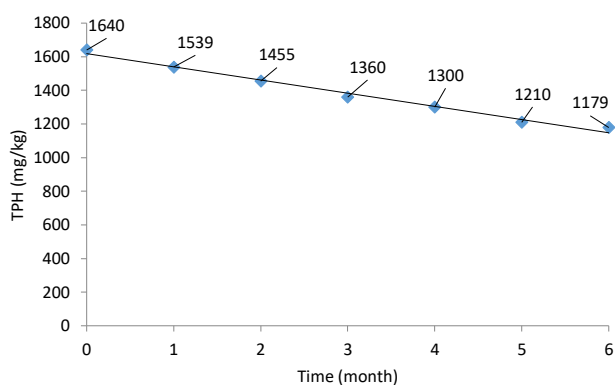

Figure 1. Variations of the TPH content in the oil-contaminated soils.

Variation of bacterial count in case and control samples during the study period are presented in Figure 2. By comparison of bacterial count changes in case and control samples, it can be concluded that there is no rational relationship between these two conditions. Generally, the total counts of bacterial consortium in control samples is smaller than the case ones.

Discussion

The statistical analysis of TPH concentration showed a significant difference in the TPH concentration in case samples at the beginning and at the end of the experiment ($P < 0.05$). By comparing the TPH removal rate (28.1%), it can be concluded that the removal rate observed in the oil-contaminated soils can be attributed to the biodegradation activity of native microorganism (23), which is consistent with the results of some studies (24-26). Feizi et al investigated the TPH bioremediation in polluted soils using bacteria under conditions approximately similar to the present study, and reported the TPH removal efficiency of 17.7%, which is similar to that reported in the present study (28.1%) (27). Safdari et al in a study on the bioremediation of TPH, reported that the initial concentrations of TPH were reduced by 4.5% in the natural attenuation, which is very lower than that reported in the presented study. Also, they found that bioremediation by adding nutrients and bacterial consortia did not significantly enhance TPH biodegradation compared to natural attenuation, which is consistent with the results of the present study that was done without the addition of nutrients and bacterial inoculation (28). A research conducted by Liu et al in an oilfield in northern China showed that after bioremediation for 230 days, the removal efficiency of oil and grease was obtained to be 27%-46%, which is consistent with the results of present study. Furthermore, they reported an increase in the TPH degrader concentrations in all oily sludge, which is consistent with the results of the present study (29).

The high total counts of bacterial consortium in case samples could be attributed to the occurrence of biodegradation and related growth of the bacteria compared to control samples with no pollution as a carbon source (30,31). The bacterial count variations in control samples were less, which can be attributed to almost

Table 2. Results of significance test for TPH concentration between different months of study

(I) Month	(J) Month	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	P value	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
6	0	-461.000*	60.752	0.003	-742.64	-179.36
	1	-360.000*	60.752	0.012	-641.64	-78.36
	2	-276.000	60.752	0.056	-557.64	5.64
	3	-181.000	60.752	0.431	-462.64	100.64
	4	-121.000	60.752	1.000	-402.64	160.64
	5	-31.000	60.752	1.000	-312.64	250.64

Dependent variable: TPH
*The mean difference is significant at *P*<0.05.

Table 3. Average count and frequency of the bacterial community identified in the oil-contaminated soils (case)

Bacterial strain	Average count	Frequency (%)	Month
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	285	5.9	0
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	231	4.8	0
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas	146	3.0	0
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__; s__	127	2.6	0
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae; g__Bacillus; s__	141	2.9	1
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	122	2.5	1
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	102	2.1	1
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	154	3.2	2
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	132.5	2.8	2
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas	121	2.5	2
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	252.5	5.2	3
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	121.5	2.5	3
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae; g__Bacillus; s__	57	1.2	3
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas	56	1.2	3
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	1204.5	25.0	4
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	542.5	11.3	4
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas	269.5	5.6	4
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	130.5	2.7	5
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae	104	2.2	5
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	76.5	1.6	5
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae; g__Halomonas; s__	190.5	4.0	6
o__Oceanospirillales; f__Halomonadaceae	141.5	2.9	6
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae; g__Bacillus; s__	103	2.1	6
Total	**4811**	**100**	-

Table 4. Average count and frequency of the bacterial community identified in the non-contaminated soils (control)

Bacterial strain	Average Count	Frequency (%)	Month
o__Bacillales; f__; g__; s__	44	2.2	0
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae; g__Bacillus; s__endophyticus	20	1.0	0
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	41.5	2.1	1
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	20	1.0	1
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	80.5	4.0	2
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	49	2.5	2
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	500.5	25.1	3
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	384.5	19.3	3
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	139.5	7.0	4
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	121	6.1	4
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	134	6.7	5
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	91	4.6	5
o__Bacillales; f__Paenibacillaceae; g__Paenibacillus; s__	122	6.1	6
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae	65	3.3	6
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae; g__; s__	63.5	3.2	6
o__Enterobacteriales; f__Enterobacteriaceae	59.5	3.0	6
o__Bacillales; f__Bacillaceae; g__Bacillus; s__	58	2.9	6
Total	**1993.5**	**100**	-

constant environmental conditions in terms of pollution, soil texture, and chemical composition of soil (32). For oil-contaminated soil, there is no uniform variation trend. The complicated nature of various hydrocarbons present in the contaminated soils, diversity of biodegrading bacteria with different enzymatic and metabolic functions could be considered as the possible reasons for the observed variations (33).

Table 5. Taxonomic diversity and frequency of the bacterial community in the oil-contaminated soils (case)

Taxonomy						Frequency (%)
Kingdom	Phylum	Class	Order	Family	Genus	
Bacteria	Proteobacteria	Gammaproteobacteria	Oceanospirillales	Halomonadaceae	Halomonas	59.8
Bacteria	Proteobacteria	Gammaproteobacteria	Oceanospirillales	Halomonadaceae	-	31.7
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Bacillaceae	Bacillus	6.3
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Bacillaceae	-	2.2
			Total			100

Table 6. Taxonomic diversity and frequency of the bacterial community in the non-contaminated soils (control)

Taxonomy							Frequency (%)
Kingdom	Phylum	Class	Order	Family	Genus	Species	
Bacteria	Proteobacteria	Gammaproteobacteria	Enterobacteriales	Enterobacteriaceae	-	-	84.6
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Paenibacillaceae	Paenibacillus	-	6.0
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Bacillaceae	-	-	3.3
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Bacillaceae	Bacillus	-	2.9
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	-	-	-	2.2
Bacteria	Firmicutes	Bacilli	Bacillales	Bacillaceae	Bacillus	endophyticus	1.0
			Total				100
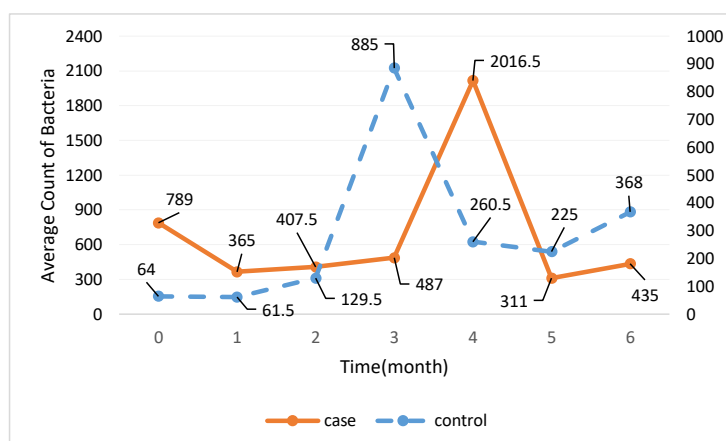
Figure 2. Variations of the average bacterial count in the case and control samples during the study period.

Conclusion

Variations of microbial count in oil-contaminated soils (case) were monitored and compared with non-contaminated soils (control). Furthermore, the bacterial strains were identified by the extraction of DNA. According to the majority of bacterial consortium in oil-contaminated soils (case) belonged to the families *Halomonadaceae* (91.5%) and *Bacillaceae* (8.5%). These findings are significantly different from those identified in non-contaminated soils (control) belonging to the families *Entrobacteriaceae* (84.6%), *Paenibacillaceae* (6%), and *Bacillaceae* (9.4%). It is very surprising that the diversity of bacterial strains was less in oil-contaminated soils, and generally, the identified strains varied significantly in case and control samples. In addition, indigenous bacterial strains were identified as efficient hydrocarbon degraders with a removal efficiency of 28.1% (the initial TPH concentration of 1640 mg/kg) after six months. According to the results, the identified bacterial consortium could be introduced as the efficient consortium for biodegradation of oil-contaminated soils with loamy sand texture.

Ethical issues

The authors hereby certify that all data collected during the research are as expressed in the manuscript, and no data from the study has been or will be published elsewhere separately (Ethical code: IR.AJUMS.RES.1395.254).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed in the study design, experiments, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation. The final version of the manuscript was reviewed and confirmed by all authors.

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