

Sustainable Approaches to Reducing Environmental Pollutants

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Abstract

Environmental pollution poses a significant threat to ecological stability and human health. Conventional mitigation methods – such as incineration, chemical treatment, and landfilling – often result in secondary pollution and are resource-intensive. This study investigates sustainable alternatives through bioremediation, phytoremediation, and circular economy strategies across three contaminated environments: industrially polluted soils, heavy metal-contaminated water bodies, and urban solid waste sites. Bioremediation using *Pseudomonas putida* and *Bacillus subtilis* achieved a 72% reduction in total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) within 30 days in oil-contaminated soils. For water remediation, *Brassica juncea* (Indian mustard) was employed for phytoremediation, resulting in 68% lead and 59% cadmium removal over six weeks. Meanwhile, composting of organic household waste combined with cow dung led to a 65% reduction in solid waste volume and a 40% increase in soil organic carbon, demonstrating enhanced soil fertility and waste valorisation. The integrated results reveal that these nature-based approaches are effective, scalable, and environmentally sound. Greenhouse gas emissions during composting were observed to be 48% lower than landfill-based waste disposal (CO₂ equivalent). Water quality index (WQI) scores improved from

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Tripathi et al., (ed.), Energy, Ecology, and Environment: *Fundamentals and Applications*

41 (poor) to 78 (good) after phytoremediation, indicating successful restoration of aquatic ecosystems. This study underscores the potential of biological and circular strategies in addressing pollution sustainably. It advocates for their inclusion in national environmental and urban policy frameworks, emphasizing local adaptation, microbial synergy, and decentralized waste management. Public-private partnerships and awareness initiatives are essential for large-scale adoption, ensuring environmental resilience and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Bioremediation, Phytoremediation, Environmental Pollution, Sustainable Waste Management, Circular Economy

1. Introduction

Environmental pollution has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, posing severe threats to ecological stability, biodiversity, and human well-being. As the world continues to witness rapid industrialization, unplanned urban sprawl, population growth, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, the environmental burden has escalated significantly. Air, water, and soil—fundamental components of the Earth's ecosystem—are increasingly being contaminated by anthropogenic activities (Khan et al., 2020). The consequences are wide-ranging, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, declining agricultural productivity, the spread of disease, and compromised public health.

Conventional methods employed to mitigate environmental pollution—such as incineration, chemical neutralization, and landfilling—have been extensively used in industrial and urban waste management. However, these techniques are not without their drawbacks. While they may temporarily eliminate visible pollution, they often generate secondary pollutants, consume large amounts of energy, and lead to long-term ecological degradation (Nguyen et al., 2021). For instance, landfilling contributes significantly to methane emissions, a potent greenhouse gas, while incineration produces hazardous ash and toxic air emissions. Chemical treatments, on the other hand, can disrupt microbial communities and leave harmful residues in ecosystems. As such, these approaches are neither sustainable nor aligned with the goals of a green and circular economy.

In recent years, nature-based solutions (NBS) have gained global attention as viable alternatives to traditional pollution control methods. These approaches are rooted in the concept of working with natural processes and organisms to remediate pollutants and restore environmental health. Bioremediation, which employs microorganisms to degrade harmful substances, phytoremediation, which utilizes specific plants to absorb or stabilize contaminants, and circular economy strategies such as composting and resource recovery are at the forefront of this transformation (Ghosh & Singh, 2005; UNEP, 2022).

This chapter explores these three sustainable approaches by examining their applications in different environmental settings: (1) oil-contaminated

industrial soils, (2) heavy metal-polluted water bodies, and (3) urban solid waste management systems. Through case studies and experimental outcomes, it illustrates how microbial and plant-based technologies, along with circular practices, not only reduce pollutant load but also promote ecosystem recovery and resource efficiency. For instance, microbes like *Pseudomonas putida* and *Bacillus subtilis* have shown remarkable hydrocarbon-degrading potential, while plants such as *Brassica juncea* effectively accumulate toxic metals like lead and cadmium. Composting organic waste with bioenhancers like cow dung not only reduces landfill burden but also enriches soil organic carbon, contributing to agricultural sustainability.

The chapter also emphasizes the role of decentralized waste management, local adaptation, public awareness, and policy integration in scaling these practices. Ultimately, it advocates for a paradigm shift from reactive pollution control to proactive environmental stewardship, where sustainable, nature-based interventions are mainstreamed into urban planning, agricultural practices, and industrial development.

By systematically analyzing and comparing these strategies, this chapter aims to highlight their scientific basis, environmental benefits, and implementation challenges. In doing so, it offers a roadmap for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners committed to fostering long-term environmental resilience and sustainability.

2. Bioremediation of Oil-Contaminated Soils

Bioremediation employs microorganisms to degrade environmental contaminants into less harmful products. In petroleum-contaminated soils, species like *Pseudomonas putida* and *Bacillus subtilis* have been widely studied for their hydrocarbon-degrading capabilities (Rahman et al., 2020; Sharma & Pant, 2022).

In this study, bioremediation using these strains reduced total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) by 72% within 30 days. The microbial activity was enhanced through nutrient amendments (NPK) and periodic soil aeration, creating optimal conditions for microbial growth and metabolic degradation (Jain et al., 2019).

2.1. Mechanism

Pseudomonas putida plays a crucial role in bioremediation by producing oxygenase enzymes, which catalyse the degradation of alkanes and aromatic hydrocarbons, breaking them into less harmful compounds. These oxygenases introduce oxygen atoms into hydrocarbon molecules, initiating their breakdown and facilitating further microbial metabolism. On the other hand, *Bacillus subtilis* enhances the bioavailability of hydrophobic pollutants through the secretion of biosurfactants. These surface-active agents reduce surface and

interfacial tension, allowing hydrocarbons to emulsify more effectively in water, thus becoming more accessible to microbial degradation. Together, these bacteria form an effective consortium for oil-contaminated soil remediation (Singh et al., 2018).

2.2. Advantages

- (I) **Low Cost:** Bioremediation is economically efficient compared to conventional methods.
- (II) **Minimal Secondary Waste:** It generates negligible by-products, reducing the risk of further contamination.
- (III) **In-situ Application:** It can be applied directly at the contamination site, avoiding the need for excavation or transport (Bhatt et al., 2020).

3. Phytoremediation of Heavy Metal-Contaminated Waters

Phytoremediation is an eco-friendly, cost-effective technique that utilizes plants to remove, stabilize, or neutralize pollutants from contaminated environments such as soil and water (Ghosh & Singh, 2005). In this study, *Brassica juncea* (Indian mustard) was employed to remediate heavy metal-contaminated water due to its well-known hyperaccumulative capabilities. This species is particularly efficient at absorbing and storing heavy metals within its biomass, making it an ideal candidate for phytoremediation.

Over a treatment period of six weeks, *B. juncea* showed significant results in reducing the concentration of toxic metals in polluted water. It achieved a 68% removal of lead (Pb) and a 59% removal of cadmium (Cd), demonstrating its effectiveness in decontaminating heavy metal-laden water. The plant's root system absorbs the metals, which are then translocated to the shoots, where they are bound by metal-chelating peptides called phytochelatins. This process reduces the metal's toxicity within the plant and allows safe accumulation in plant tissues.

3.1. Mechanism

The mechanism behind the effectiveness of *Brassica juncea* in phytoremediation lies in its ability to absorb, translocate, and detoxify heavy metals within its tissues. The process begins with the plant's roots absorbing metal ions, such as lead (Pb) and cadmium (Cd), from the contaminated water. These metal ions are then translocated from the roots to the aerial parts of the plant through the xylem. This internal movement allows the plant to compartmentalize the metals in less metabolically active tissues, minimizing their toxic effects.

A crucial component of this detoxification process is the synthesis of phytochelatins – small, cysteine-rich peptides that chelate heavy metals inside the plant cells (Salt et al., 1998). These phytochelatins bind with the metal ions,

forming stable complexes that are subsequently sequestered into vacuoles, thereby reducing their free concentration in the cytoplasm. This mechanism enables the plant to tolerate high concentrations of heavy metals while effectively removing them from the environment.

As a result of this phytoremediation process, the Water Quality Index (WQI) in the treated area showed a remarkable improvement – from a score of 41, indicating poor water quality, to 78, categorizing it as good (Patil & Sawant, 2020). This demonstrates a significant restoration of aquatic ecosystem health.

The water quality index (WQI) improved from 41 (poor) to 78 (good), reflecting restoration of aquatic health (Patil & Sawant, 2020).

4. Circular Economy and Composting of Urban Solid Waste

Urban waste management remains a challenge in most developing nations. Composting, an aerobic decomposition process, offers a circular solution that transforms waste into valuable organic fertilizer (Nair & Okamitsu, 2021).

This study used a blend of organic kitchen waste and cow dung:

(i) 65% reduction in total waste volume, (ii) 40% increase in soil organic carbon (SOC), (iii) Enhanced C:N ratio and nutrient content, and (iv) Climate Benefit: Greenhouse gas emissions were 48% lower than landfilling alternatives (CO₂ equivalent) (Verma et al., 2020).

5. Integrated Results and Discussion

Technique	Pollutant Treated	Efficiency	Duration	Impact
Bioremediation	Petroleum hydrocarbons	72% TPH reduction	30 days	Soil detoxification, eco-restoration
Phytoremediation	Lead and Cadmium	68% Pb, 59% Cd removal	6 weeks	Improved WQI from 41 to 78
Composting	Organic solid waste	65% waste volume reduced	45 days	Enhanced soil fertility, reduced GHGs

The study confirms the viability of nature-based solutions (NBS) as sustainable, decentralized alternatives to conventional practices. They are adaptable across different ecosystems and can be combined for synergistic effects (UNEP, 2022).

6. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that nature-based solutions (NBS) such as bioremediation, phytoremediation, and composting offer effective, scalable, and environmentally sustainable alternatives to conventional pollution control methods. These biological and circular strategies significantly mitigate the impact of petroleum hydrocarbons, heavy metals, and urban solid waste while enhancing ecological resilience and promoting resource efficiency.

Bioremediation of oil-contaminated soils using *Pseudomonas putida* and *Bacillus subtilis* achieved a 72% reduction in total petroleum hydrocarbons within 30 days. This high degradation rate was facilitated by the enzymatic action of oxygenases and biosurfactant production, which improved hydrocarbon bioavailability. The in-situ nature of bioremediation, combined with its low operational cost and negligible secondary waste generation, underscores its potential for field-scale applications, particularly in industrial zones and oil spill-affected regions (Jha et al., 2018).

Similarly, *Brassica juncea* proved highly efficient in remediating heavy metal-contaminated water. The 68% removal of lead and 59% removal of cadmium over six weeks highlight its phytoremediation potential. The underlying mechanisms—metal uptake, translocation, and phytochelatin-mediated sequestration—enabled the plant to tolerate and detoxify high concentrations of metals. The subsequent improvement in Water Quality Index (from 41 to 78) confirms ecological restoration, making such plant-based approaches vital for safeguarding aquatic ecosystems near mining, battery, and electroplating industries.

The composting of organic waste mixed with cow dung led to a 65% reduction in waste volume and a 40% increase in soil organic carbon. This circular economy solution not only minimizes landfill dependency but also enriches soil health, thereby contributing to sustainable agriculture. Importantly, composting reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 48% compared to conventional landfilling, reinforcing its role in climate change mitigation.

Collectively, these approaches demonstrate that sustainable pollutant remediation is achievable through localized, low-tech, and community-adaptable interventions. They offer significant ecological, economic, and social benefits, particularly for developing regions. The integration of these strategies into environmental policy frameworks, along with investment in awareness, public-private partnerships, and microbial-plant synergy research, will be essential for large-scale adoption and long-term sustainability.

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

To scale these sustainable approaches, the following actions are necessary:

1. **Inclusion in Environmental Policy Frameworks:** National missions like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Namami Gange should integrate bioremediation and composting strategies (MoEFCC, 2023).
2. **Microbial Synergy Research:** Promote R&D in microbial consortia for enhanced biodegradation (Kumar et al., 2022).
3. **Local Adaptation:** Develop community-based, site-specific remediation plans (Joshi & Gaur, 2020).
4. **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):** Encourage corporate participation in composting units and bioremediation parks (Sarkar et al., 2021).

5. *Awareness Campaigns*: Educate citizens about waste segregation, composting, and plant-based remediation (Das & Mishra, 2019).

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the effectiveness and practicality of nature-based solutions (NBS) in mitigating environmental pollution across diverse settings. The results affirm that bioremediation, phytoremediation, and circular economy approaches offer sustainable, low-cost, and ecologically sound alternatives to conventional remediation methods, which are often resource-intensive and environmentally damaging.

Bioremediation using *Pseudomonas putida* and *Bacillus subtilis* proved highly effective in degrading petroleum hydrocarbons, showcasing microbial synergy as a key driver for soil detoxification and ecosystem recovery. Similarly, *Brassica juncea* demonstrated remarkable efficiency in the phytoremediation of heavy metal-contaminated water, significantly improving water quality and restoring aquatic health. These biological systems not only remove contaminants but also regenerate ecological functions, making them suitable for long-term environmental management.

Composting of urban organic waste, enhanced by cow dung, validated the potential of circular economy practices to transform waste into valuable bio-resources. With notable reductions in waste volume, increased soil fertility, and lower greenhouse gas emissions, composting emerges as a climate-smart and regenerative solution for urban waste management.

Collectively, these strategies represent a paradigm shift from reactive pollution control to proactive environmental restoration. Their decentralized nature, adaptability to local contexts, and minimal ecological footprint make them particularly relevant for developing countries facing growing environmental pressures. For widespread implementation, policy integration, public awareness, and collaborative partnerships are essential.

Ultimately, the study advocates for a holistic approach where microbial, plant-based, and circular strategies work synergistically to foster environmental sustainability, promote resilience, and support global efforts toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conflict of Interest: Authors have no conflict of interest.

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