World Applied Sciences Journal 28 (5): 718-721, 2013
ISSN 1818-4952

DOI: 10.5829/idosi.wasj.2013.28.05.1529

Assessment of Heavy Metal Concentration (Fe, Ni, Cu and Hg) in Sediment from North of Persian Gulf, Mahshahr Coast

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Abstract: The concentration of heavy metals Ni, Cu, Fe and Hg were measured in the surface sediment from Mahshahr coast, north of the Persian Gulf. Concentration of heavy metals varied depending on sampling sites. The concentration order of heavy metals in sediment was Fe > Cu > Ni > Hg. Heavy metals analysis was performed by Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer. There was significant difference ($p<0.05$) in metals levels between different stations. The highest concentration of Ni and Hg was detected in Musa estuary. The analysed heavy metals were found in sediment samples at mean concentration in the sediment quality guideline proposed by NOAA and ROPME, except for Hg concentration in some cases.

Key words: Pollution · Heavy Metal · Sediment · Khuzestan

INTRODUCTION

The Persian Gulf is a shallow and semi-enclosed sea that its environment is changing rapidly [1]. The discovery of oil in this sea led to a massive increase in anthropogenic activities in the area. In general, petrochemical and oil industries are the major sources of pollution in this area [1]. For instance, this sea has about 800 offshore oil platforms and tolerates the traffic of about 25,000 oil tankers each year.

Other sources of Persian Gulf pollution include invasions and bombardments that have been staggering in the recent years and are yet to be fully investigated [1]. Although heavy metals are very toxic to both humans and the wildlife, limited research is available on heavy metals pollution in the Persian Gulf area. Aquatic environments, such as Persian Gulf, are especially at high risk for heavy metals contamination since much of the atmospheric deposition and all of the industrial water-runoffs culminate in these ecosystems. Large areas of agricultural lands, local fisheries, oil export facilities and a petrochemical plant operate in the general area. Trace elements are found in natural water bodies at varying concentrations. The most potentially dangerous of these elements are heavy metals.

Heavy metals concentrations in aquatic ecosystems are usually monitored by measuring its concentration in water, sediments and biota [2]. Sediments are important sinks for various pollutants such as heavy metals and also play a useful role in the assessment of heavy metal contamination [3, 4]. Sediments, particularly surficial sediments, may serve as a metal pool that can release metals to the overlaying water via natural anthropogenic processes, causing potential adverse health effects to the ecosystems because of their serious toxicity and persistence [4-6]. In this study, the concentration of oil-related heavy metals Ni, Cu, Fe and Hg were measured in the surface sediments samples taken from Khuzestan coast, northeast of the Persian Gulf.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Surface sediments were collected by a Van Veen Grab in summer (July) of 2011 from Khuzestan coast (Fig. 1).

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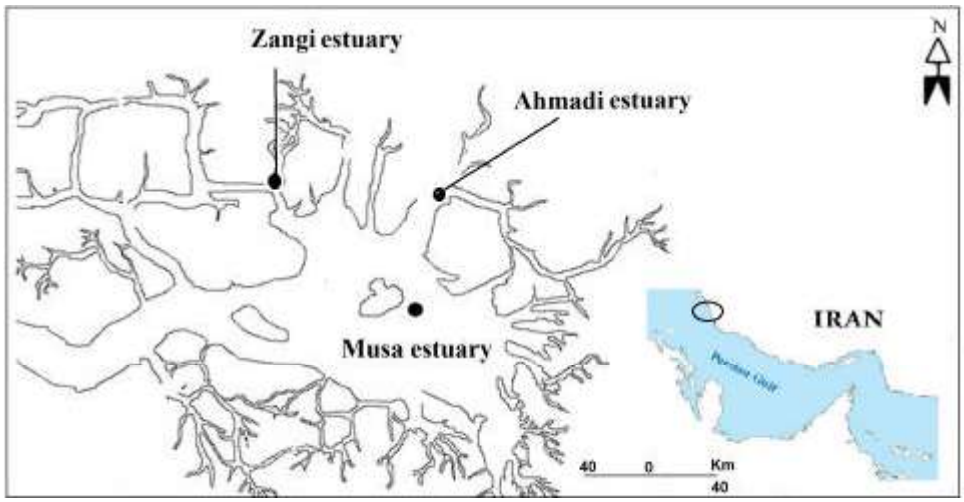

Fig. 1: Map of Persian Gulf and study sites

Subsamples were taken from the uppermost layer of the sediment taking care to minimize contamination. The samples were frozen after collection and later thawed, dried at 50-60 °C in an oven and disaggregated in an agate mortar, before chemical treatment for total metal analysis. For each sample a known quantity (1 g) of sediment was digested with a solution of concentrated $HClO_4$ (2 ml) and HF (10 ml) to near dryness. Subsequently, a second addition of $HClO_4$ (1 ml) and HF (10 ml) was made and the mixture was evaporated to near dryness. Finally, $HClO_4$ (1 ml) alone was added and the sample was evaporated until white fumes appeared. The residue was dissolved in concentrated HCl and diluted to 25 ml [7].

Metals concentrations were determined by a cold vapor atomic absorption spectrometer (Unicam, model 919). The accuracy of the analytical procedures was assessed using the certified reference material BCR-1 and yielded results within the reference value range [8]. The recovery means for Hg ranged 92.1% to 108.4% respectively.

All data were tested for normal distribution with Shapiro-wilk normality test. Significant differences between heavy metals concentration in the samples of various stations and between seasons were determined using One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) fallowed by Duncan post hoc test.

RESULTS

The concentrations of the heavy metals in the sediments from different stations are presented in Table 1. The results showed that the heavy metal concentration in sediments at all sampling stations occurs in descending order of Fe > Cu > Ni > Hg. The highest concentrations of the heavy metal in sediment were recorded in Musa estuary and the least was in Zangi estuary. There was significant difference ($p<0.05$) between the level of heavy metals in the different stations. The concentration of Cu ranged from of 19 μg g^{-1} to 25.5μg g^{-1} with an average of 18.2 μg g^{-1}. The concentration of Fe ranged from of 62.5 μg g^{-1} to 113.5μg g^{-1} with an average of 78.6 μg g^{-1}. In the sediments at all sampling station, concentration of Ni ranged from of 23 μg g^{-1} to 55.5μg g^{-1} with an average of 31.2 μg g^{-1}. The highest concentration of Ni (55.5 μg g^{-1}) was detected in Musa estuary. The concentration of Co ranged from 0.32 μg g^{-1} to 0.76 μg g^{-1} with an average of0.17 μg g^{-1}. The highest concentration of Pb (0.76 μg g^{-1}) was detected in Musa estuary. The concentration of Hg ranged from 0.15 μg g^{-1} to 1.02 μg g^{-1} with an average of 0.41μg g^{-1}. The highest concentration of Hg (1.02 μg g^{-1}) was detected in Musa estuary.

Table 1: Concentration of heavy metal (μ g/g dry weight) in sediments from three estuary from northwest of Persian Gulf

Stations	Fe	Cu	Hg	Ni
Zangi estuary	68.66 ± 0.15	17.34 ± 0.32	0.76 ± 0.02	25.14 ± 0.65
Ahmadi estuary	55.34 ± 0.45	21.43 ± 0.15	0.18 ± 0.03	42.72 ± 0.54
Musa estuary	97.54 ± 0.61	25.55 ± 0.23	1.32 ± 0.03	55.18 ± 0.33

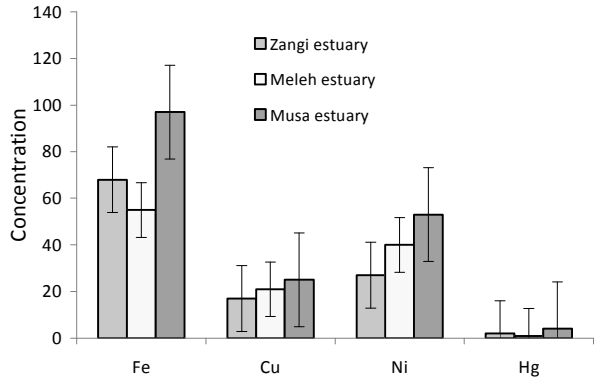

Fig. 2: The concentration (µg g-1) of heavy metals (Ni, Cu, Fu and Hg) between three stations

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated the concentration of metals in sediments from different estuary in Persian Gulf. Higher levels metals occurred at Musa estuary's mouth that discharge in the Persian Gulf. Musa estuary is surrounded by more than 19 petrochemical units such as chlor-alkali plant and superphosphate plant. The fact that total concentration of some petrochemical-related metals such as Hg, Ni, Co in the northwest of Persian Gulf decreased with distance from Musa estuary is a strong evidence reflects that the metals in this estuary were sourced from petrochemical activities and not from background geological sources. Besides, some main creeks of this estuary flow into two crowded and industrialized cities and consequently receive huge amounts of domestic effluents and urban wastewaters [9].

The comparison between the sampling stations showed that the amount of metals varied from site to site and the variation could be related to variability in the sources of metals input. Maximum concentration of metals along the Musa estuary was observed in Musa estuary. The Musa estuary is the nearest creek to Mahshahr City, petrochemical units and constructions of PETZONE [10]. In addition, Imam Port that is one of the biggest ports in Iran is located in the mouth of this creek. Therefore, Musa estuary receives different types of pollution such as heavy metal from the surrounding areas. The lowest heavy metal concentration was observed in Zangi estuary. There is no industrial activity near this station, which is a relatively remote area compared to other stations.

Many environmental geochemistry studies report higher concentration of trace metals in surface layers than deeper one [9-11] due to development of industries and other man activities. Since natural variations of heavy metal concentrations in sediments can result from differences in the grain size, the mineralogy and the redox of the sediment, we tried to limit these sources of variability by applying the grain-size normalization approach, completed by a geochemical correction; this treatment should allow better insight into the anthropogenic influence on the heavy metal distribution in the surface sediment [10-12].

A comparison between our results and those of previous studies in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the world is shown in Table 2. The concentration of heavy metal obtained in this study is generally higher than those reported in Jebel Ali (UAE), Ras Laffan (Qatar) and Askar (Bahrain) along the south Persian Gulf [13.14.15]. The concentration of heavy metal in the northern part of the Persian Gulf [16] was considerably greater than those observed in current study. Generally, the concentrations of heavy metal measured in current study do not exceed the guidelines that established by Canadian ISQG and NOAA. Apart from these, fortunately in case of heavy metal, our findings are approximately within the range of those in the guideline that was established by RSA (ROPME Sea Area) for the Persian Gulf, expect for Musa estuary [17, 18].

CONCLUSION

This study provides new information on the distribution of metals in surface sediments along northwest Persian Gulf. The results showed that the concentration of metals varied among station sampling.

Table 2: Permissible upper limits of heavy metals in various standards (in micrograms per gram wet weight)

Location	Fe	Cu	Ni	Hg
FAO (2002)		30	70	1
WHO (1996)		30	42.8	1
ROPME (1999)		108	70-80	0.5
NOAA (2009)		149	52	0.5

NOAA: national oceanic and atmospheric administration; FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization; WHO: World Health Organization; ROPME Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment.

The heavy metal concentration in the sediments are described in the descending order of Fe > Cu> Ni > Hg at all sampling sites. Results of this study also showed sediments from Musa estuary showed greater concentration of the metals than those from the other areas. The high concentration of metals in sediments at the Musa estuary sampling could result from industrial effluents. BAFs showed that the risk of Ni is higher than the risk of other metals in this study. Therefore, the Musa estuary as a major source of sediments and a source of metals can affect the concentration of metals in sediment of the area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support was carried out by National Institute of Marine Environmental Studies (NIMES), Tehran, Iran

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