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## Human and Ecological Risk Assessment: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713400879>

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Online publication date: 03 June 2010

**To cite this Article** Adams, William J. , Conard, Bruce , Ethier, Guy , Brix, Kevin V. , Paquin, Paul R. and DiToro, Dominic M.(2000) 'The Challenges of Hazard Identification and Classification of Insoluble Metals and Metal Substances for the Aquatic Environment', Human and Ecological Risk Assessment: An International Journal, 6: 6, 1019 — 1038

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/10807030091124266

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10807030091124266>

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## The Challenges of Hazard Identification and Classification of Insoluble Metals and Metal Substances for the Aquatic Environment

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### ABSTRACT

The OECD is currently harmonizing procedures for aquatic hazard identification of substances. Such a system already exists in Europe where it is recognized that special consideration must be given to sparingly soluble metals and metal compounds (SSMMCs) because standard hazard testing procedures designed for organic chemicals do not accommodate the characteristics of SSMMCs. Current aquatic hazard identification procedures are based on persistence, bioaccumulation, and toxicity (PBT) measurements. Persistence measurements typically used for organic substances (biodegradation) do not apply to metals. Alternative measurements such as complexation and precipitation are more appropriate. Metal bioaccumulation is important in terms of nutritional sufficiency and potential food chain transfer and toxicity. Unlike organic substances, metal bioaccumulation potential cannot be estimated using log octanol-water partition coefficients. Further, bioaccumulation and bioconcentration factors are often inversely related to exposure concentration for most metals and organisms, and hence are not reliable predictors of chronic toxicity or food chain accumulation. Metal toxicity is due predominately to the free metal ion in solution. In order to assess the toxicity of SSMMCs, the rate and extent of transformation to a soluble form must be measured.

**Key Words:** classification, metals, toxicity, persistence, bioaccumulation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Procedures for aquatic hazard identification of organic and inorganic substances are currently being harmonized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for the purpose of classifying market-place substances in terms of their potential hazard. Such a system already exists in Europe (EU, 1967; 1991) and is evolving in other countries (United States and Canada). One common theme in each of these systems is the use of persistence, bioaccumulation, and toxicity (PBT) measurements to estimate aquatic hazard. It is recognized within the OECD and European Union systems that special attention must be given to metal elements and sparingly soluble metals and metal compounds (SSMMCs). This recognition is based upon a common understanding that standard hazard testing procedures designed for soluble organic chemicals do not accommodate the special characteristics of SSMMCs. This paper briefly describes the challenges associated with hazard identification and classification of SSMMCs using PBT as the basis for the assessment.

## PERSISTENCE

The concept associated with measuring persistence of substances in an environmental compartment (*e.g.*, water, sediment, soil, air) is that the length of time the substance remains in a given compartment increases the possibility that the substance will accumulate over time and that exposure may increase with additional inputs. Persistence of organic substances is assessed frequently using biodegradation ( $\text{CO}_2$  evolution/loss of dissolved organic carbon), hydrolysis and photolysis measurements. Loss of parent compound and conversion to a less toxic and persistent break down product is viewed as desirable. Rapid degradation is interpreted as leading to a reduction in exposure. Complete degradation to carbon dioxide and water is desirable.

While this is an appropriate approach for organics, the degradation tests used to assess persistence for organic substances do not apply to metals (Canada/European Union, 1996). The inability of metal elements to undergo degradation (especially biodegradation) is often translated to mean that metals are persistent. While all elements including carbon are persistent in the sense that the total mass present on the planet remains reasonably consistent, the intent of the biodegradation measurements for organic substances is to provide an estimate of the persistence of potential exposure. In that light, the appropriate measure for metals is an estimate of the persistence of the bioavailable metal species. Alternative measurements such as complexation, precipitation, and remineralization are more appropriate measures of persistence for metals than degradation. Complexation with dissolved organic carbon and suspended solids in surface waters and binding with iron and manganese oxides and sulfides in sediments are key processes controlling metal exposure in aquatic ecosystems. Significant differences in metal binding constants and solubilities of metal hydroxides exist and range across more than 20 orders of magnitude (Figure 1) for different metal ions. These data are presented to indicate there are very large differences in metal bioavailability in surface waters and sediments and that these differences can be evaluated to assess persistence of metal species and exposure.

# Hazard Identification and Classification of Insoluble Metals

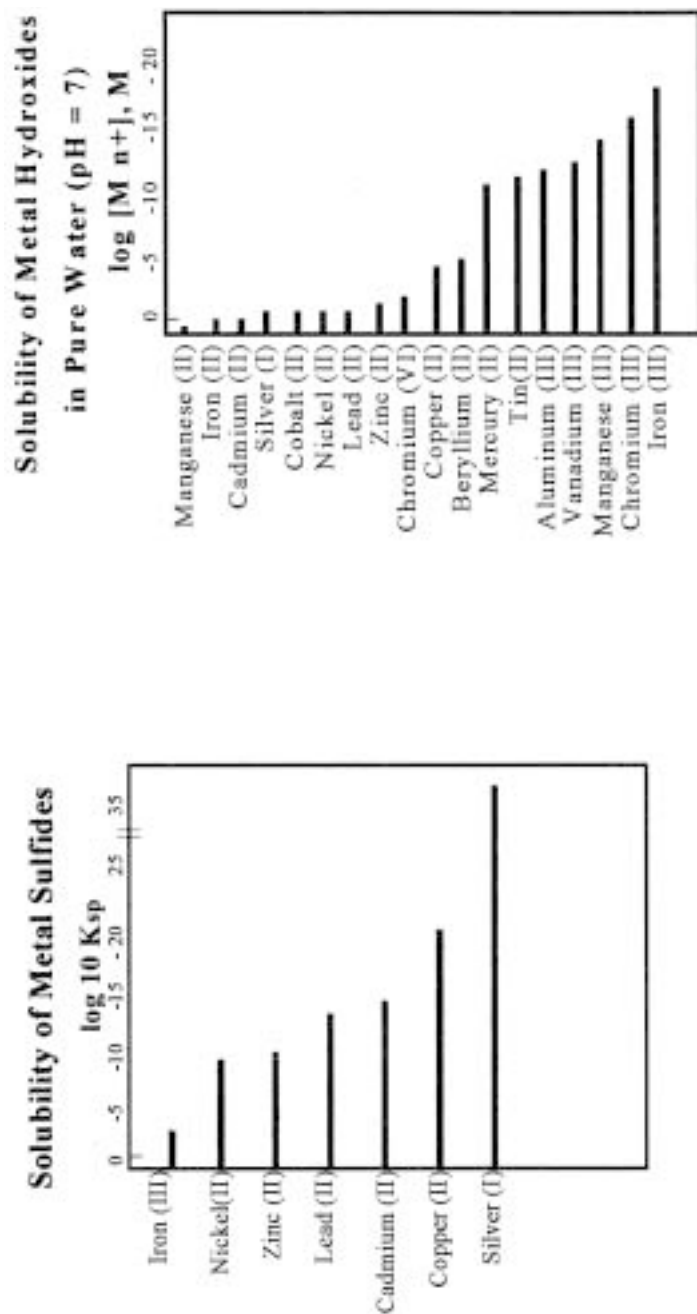


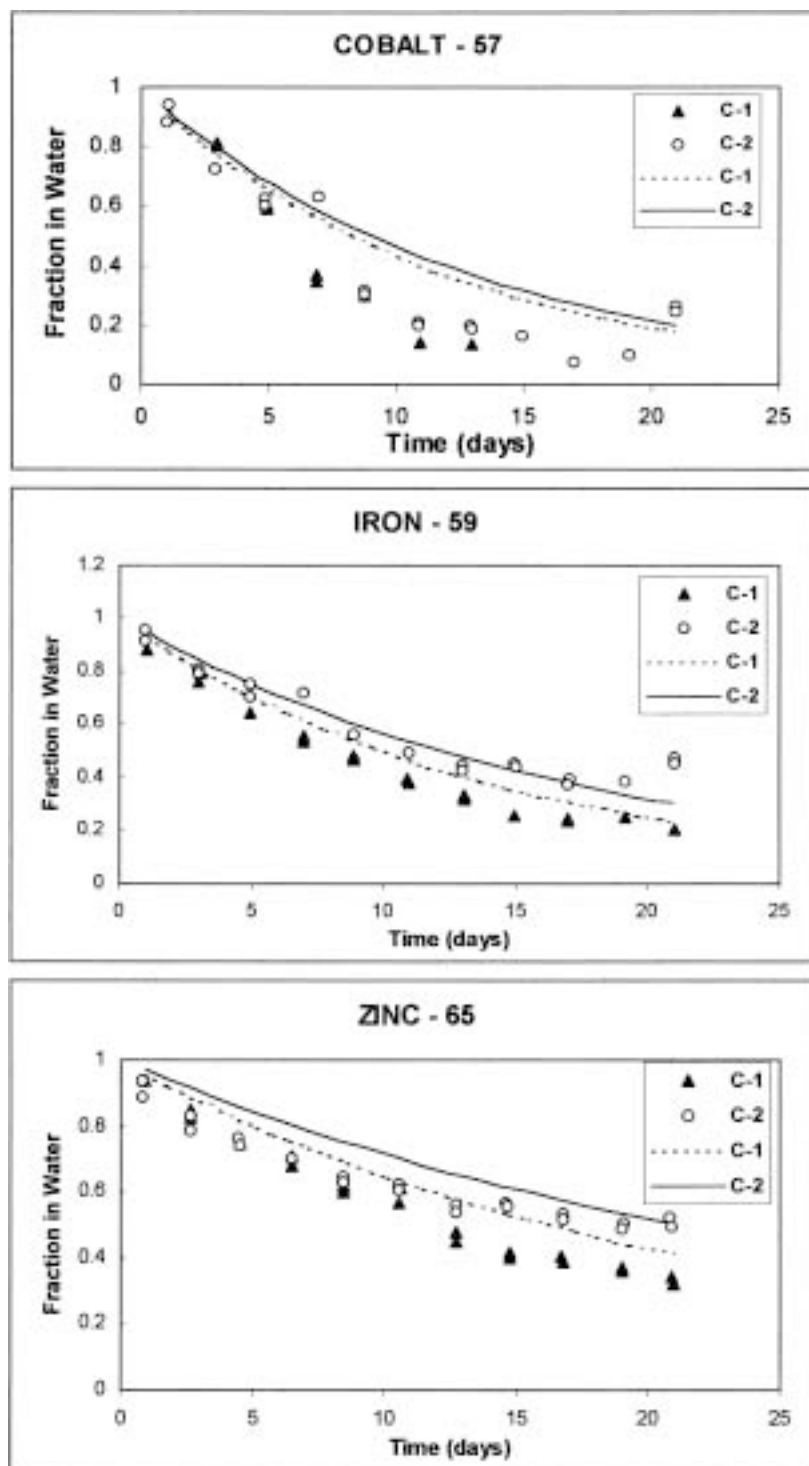
Figure 1. Solubility of various metal sulfides and hydroxides.

It is suggested that the water column is the appropriate place to focus an initial assessment of metals' persistence since aquatic hazard assessment procedures are based upon toxicity tests designed, in principle, to evaluate the hazard of substances in typical surface waters. A recent review of the existing literature (DiToro and Paquin, 2000) concluded that both total and soluble fractions of most metal ions decline fairly rapidly following release in typical surface waters. This report reviews the persistence of total, and in some cases soluble metal, and supports the concept that an appropriate assessment of metal persistence in surface waters should include an assessment of the persistence of the bioavailable form of the metal species. The state of the science has advanced to where this is now possible through the appropriate use of speciation models in conjunction with toxicity models (*i.e.*, biotic ligand model). The basis for these models is a variety of field and laboratory experiments on the environmental persistence of metals. These experiments are briefly summarized below.

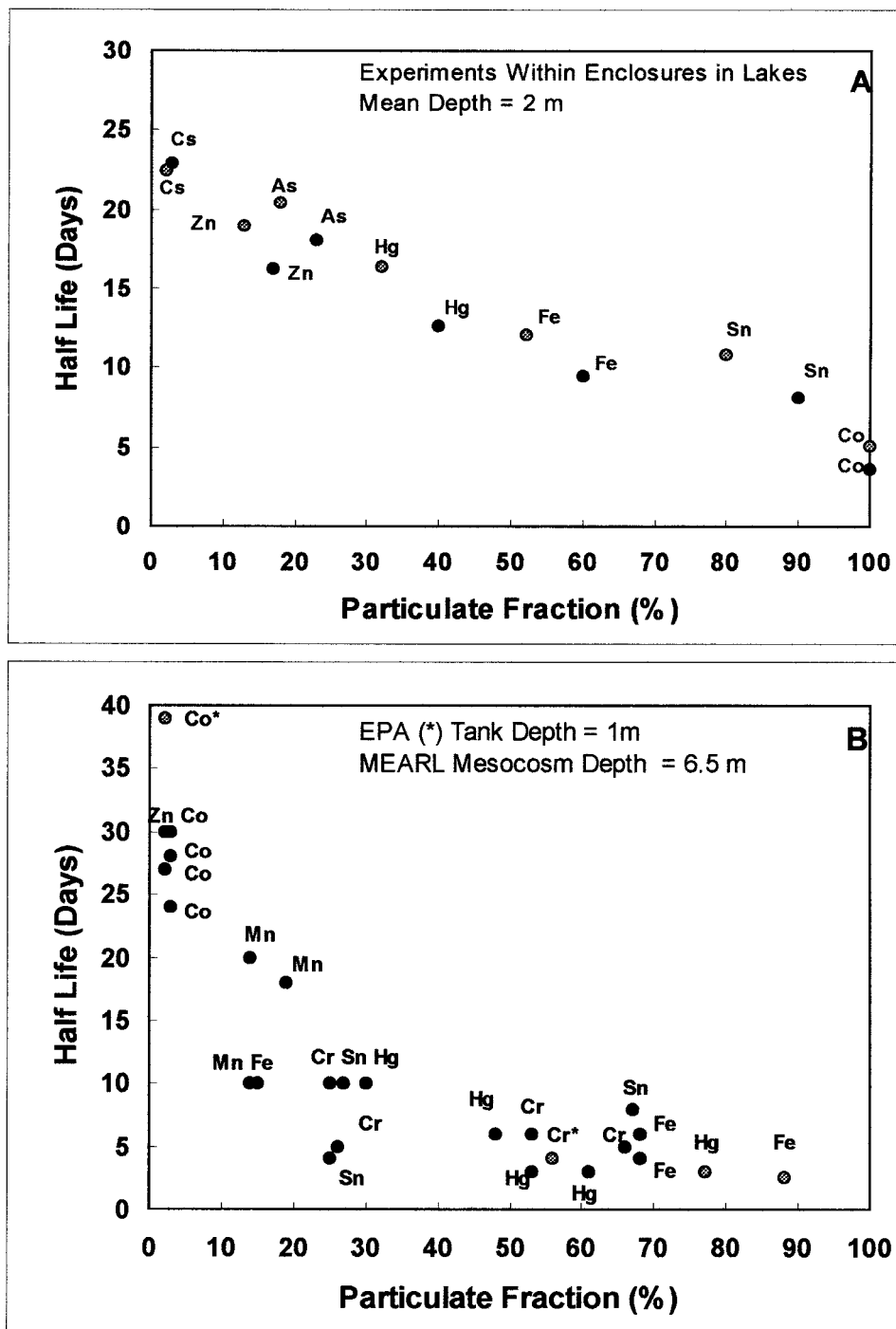
A variety of laboratory and field mesocosm experiments and designs were evaluated. Typical experiments use a large enclosure placed in a lake or beside an estuary (Adler *et al.* 1980, Pilson *et al.* 1980, and Diamond *et al.* (1990). Diamond *et al.* (1990) added a mixture of gamma-ray emitting metal isotopes into the water column and the progression of concentration in time was measured. The concentrations added were such that they increased the background concentration by no more than 10%, with the exception of mercury. The results of Diamond *et al.* (1990) for iron, cobalt, and zinc are shown in Figure 2. The total metal concentrations for two replicate experiments normalized to the initial concentration are shown versus the time from the initial introduction. The removal is approximately exponential in time. The lines are from a model calculation and half-lives for all the metals examined (arsenic, cesium, cobalt, iron, mercury, tin, and zinc) were less than 25 days.

A similar series of experiments (Adler *et al.*, 1980) have been conducted at the MERL (Mesocosm Experimental Research Laboratory) facility at the University of Rhode Island, Graduate School of Oceanography (Pilson *et al.*, 1980). The MERL mesocosms were somewhat larger (1.8 m by 5.5 m), contained seawater and sediments and were designed to mimic Narragansett Bay, including mixing. The results for iron and cadmium are contrasted in that iron is removed rapidly (half-life = 3 to 5 days), whereas cadmium, which forms a soluble chloride complex in seawater, is not removed under these conditions over the length of the experiment (~45 days).

The half-life data from Diamond *et al.* (1990) show that the half-life for metals in the water column is directly related to the fraction of the metal that is absorbed to particles (Figure 3A). If  $c_d$  is the concentration of dissolved metal and  $c_p$  is the concentration of particulate metal (*i.e.*, total metal minus dissolved metal concentration), then the particulate fraction is defined as  $f_p = c_p / (c_d + c_p)$ . For cesium, the particulate fraction is small and hence, the half-life is longer (*i.e.*, 22 d). For cobalt, the particulate fraction is ~100% and the half-life is 5 d. The remaining metals have intermediate half-lives. Expressing the half-lives in relation to the particulate fraction reflects the sorption properties of each of the metals for suspended particles (algae, diatoms, soil particles) that provide the principal removal mechanism. It is important to note that even metals that are often considered to be somewhat soluble are removed from the water column relatively quickly. For the marine mesocosms,



**Figure 2.** Mescocosm lake experiments: observed and modeled decrease in water column radioisotope concentrations of cobalt, iron, and zinc (Diamond et al., 1990).



**Figure 3.** Half-life versus particulate fraction. (A) Diamond *et al.*, 1990(freshwater). (B) MERL and EPS marine mesocosms (Adler *et al.*, 1980).

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using the data of Diamond *et al.* (1990) and additional metals data from Adler *et al.* (1980), the half-lives are short, with the majority less than 10 days (Figure 3B).

Gächter (1979) conducted experiments in Lake Baldegg (Switzerland). The MELIMEX (MEtal LIMnological EXperiment) mesocosm experiment was quite large, with a diameter of 12 m and a depth of 10 m. In this experiment, there was a continuous addition of metals for over one year. Cadmium, copper, lead, and zinc were tested. For all the metals except zinc, there was significant removal that continued throughout the year. Thus, the processes that removed the metals continued to operate for the duration of the experiment and were not just short-term effects. Data are shown for copper and zinc in Figure 4.

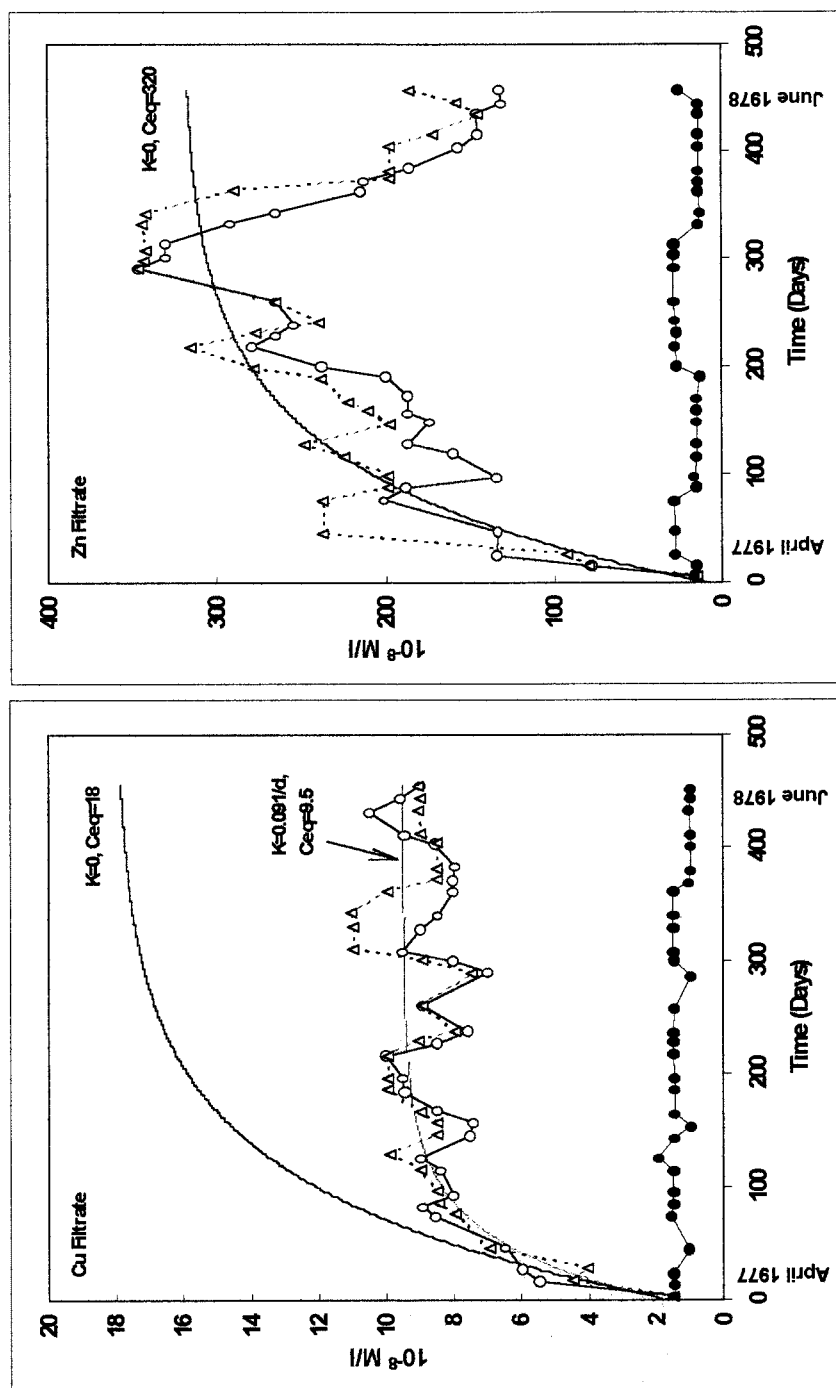
In addition to mesocosm experiments, whole-lake experiments have been carried out at the Experimental Lakes Area in Canada (Hesslein and Broecker, 1980). Cobalt, cesium, iron, mercury, selenium, and zinc were tested. The half-lives, with the exception of selenium, were between 15 to 30 days in Lake # 224 (Figures 5 and 6).

Since the radioactive half-life of copper is very short, it cannot be used in either mesocosm or whole-lake experiments. However, copper sulfate is used as an algicide in lakes. Data from its use in Onondaga Lake were reported by Effler *et al.* (1980) showing that both total and dissolved copper are removed from the water column fairly rapidly with half-lives less than 10 days (depicted in Figure 6).

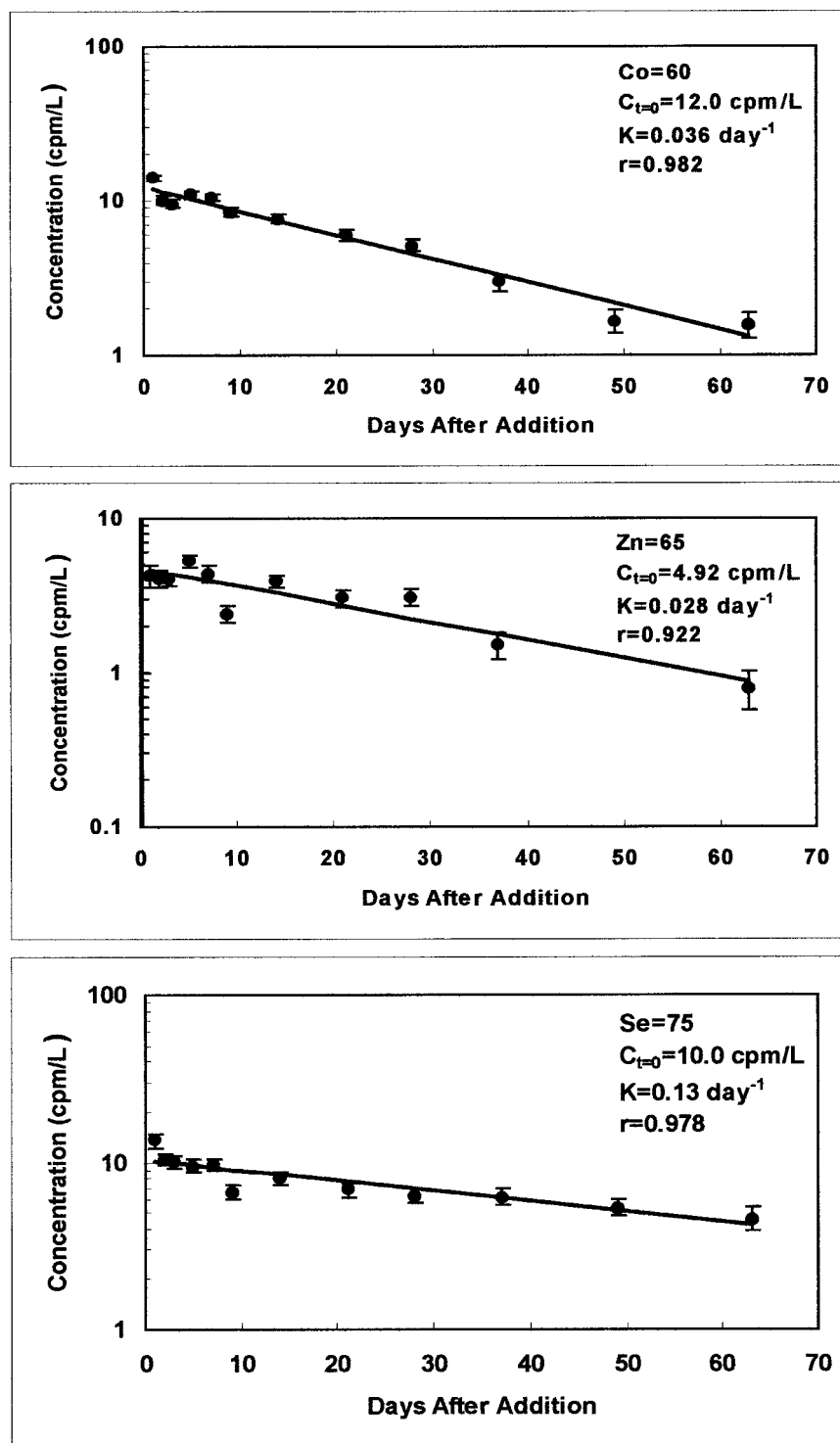
The removal of dissolved metal from the water column is via two mechanisms. The first, and the least important in moderately deep systems, is via diffusion from the water column to the bottom sediments. The second is via the settling to the sediment of metal bound to particles. The dissolved metal initially present sorbs to the particles in the water column. These particles settle to the sediment. If no other process were operating, a certain fraction of metal would be removed, but the rest would remain in the water column. The reason that removal continues is that new particles enter the water column. They are either created in the water column, by organisms such as algae, enter the water column from inflows, or are resuspended from the sediment. These new particles sorb additional metal and settle to the sediment, thereby continuing the process of metal removal from the water column.

Bioavailability of metals in sediment is an important part of site-specific risk assessments, but at present is not included in classification of substances. An approach for assessing metal bioavailability in sediments has been described by USEPA (2000).

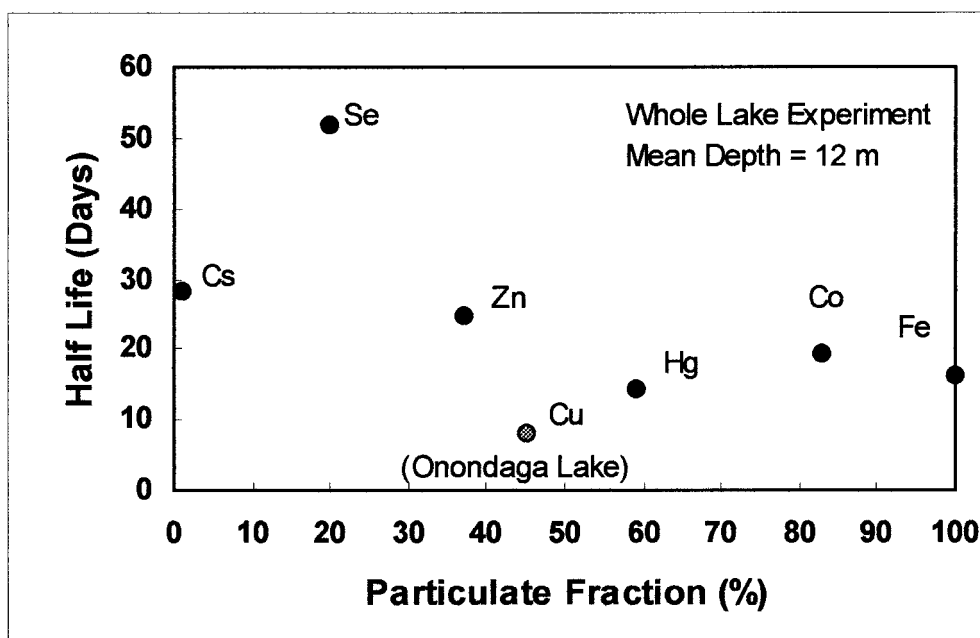
In summary, data for lakes and estuaries have been presented that characterize and quantify metal persistence in natural surface waters. Similar data exist for streams (Thomann and Mueller, 1987) and open oceans that are generally consistent with the conclusions drawn herein. The principal conclusion is that metal ions are not persistent in the water column of natural water bodies. Exceptions to this are cadmium in marine waters, and sodium in marine and freshwaters. Calcium, to a lesser extent, might be considered an exception. Selenium and cobalt (marine waters) have somewhat longer half-lives, but overall are not extensively longer. The data presented above for trace metals (aluminum, arsenic, cesium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, nickel, zinc, etc.) indicates that metal half-lives in surface waters



**Figure 4.** Observed MELIMEX concentrations (symbols connected with lines). Computed concentrations assuming no removal ( $K=0$ ) and with removal ( $K>0$ ) are presented. Equilibrium concentrations are also listed (Gachter, 1979).



**Figure 5.** Lake 224 in the Canadian Experimental Lakes Area. Semi-logarithmic plots of total concentrations of metals versus time after addition to the lake (Hesslein and Broecker, 1980).



**Figure 6.** Half-life versus particulate fraction (Hesslein and Broecker, 1980 and Effler *et al.*, 1980).

vary but are generally from 22 days to less than 10 days, depending on the fraction of the metal that is bound to particles.

### BIOACCUMULATION

Bioaccumulation may be defined as the uptake and net accumulation of a chemical substance by an organism from its environment or diet. Relative to aquatic organisms, the ratio of the tissue concentration to the water concentration is termed the bioaccumulation factor (BAF). BAF estimates assume exposure from water or diet or both and are often derived from field data. Bioconcentration factors (BCFs) are used to define the ratio of the tissue concentration to the water concentration and assume water exposure and no dietary exposure. BCFs are typically derived in laboratory experiments and are often used in place of BAFs because the latter are not typically available. In performing aquatic hazard assessments for organic chemicals, bioaccumulation potential is typically assessed using BCFs. The assumptions associated with the use of estimated or measured BCFs are (1) they are predictive of tissue residue concentrations and (2) larger BCFs indicate a greater potential for long-term (chronic) effects and reflect a greater concern for trophic transfer of the substance.

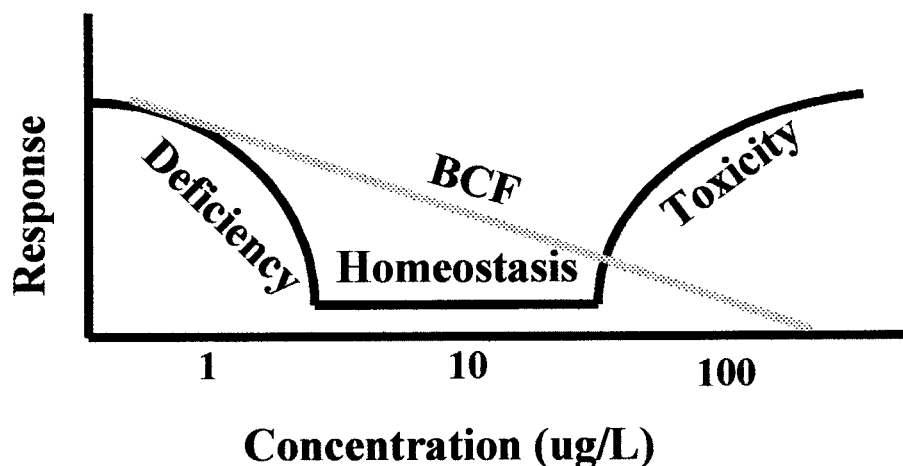
The above assumptions are based on studies performed for the most part with non-polar organic chemicals that passively partition to lipids. For these organic substances, bioconcentration factors can be estimated by a measure of the octanol-water partition coefficient ( $K_{ow}$ ). There is general recognition that large  $K_{ow}$ s or BCFs provide evidence that a substance is "bioaccumulative." There are important

differences between organic substances and metals (defined as soluble metal in the water phase and total metal in the diet or tissue). It is recognized that metals can be taken up from water and/or diet by aquatic organisms and stored in their tissues. This process of bioaccumulation occurs in all aquatic environments for both essential and non-essential metals. While the process of bioaccumulation is important, the applicability of BCFs as an indicator of hazard has not been demonstrated and has been questioned. Experts were convened at an international workshop in Brussels (Canada/European Union, 1996) concluded that BCFs and BAFs are not useful indicators of hazard for metals. In addition, an in-depth review of the utility of BCFs for 12 metals, performed by Brix and DeForest (2000), is summarized below.

It is well known that several metals are essential for various biological functions, such as enzymatic and metabolic reactions (Depledge and Rainbow, 1990; Goyer, 1996; Leland and Kuwabara, 1985). Metal bioaccumulation is an important process whereby aquatic organisms obtain these essential metals. Aquatic biota regulate their internal concentrations of essential metals in three ways: active regulation, storage, or a combination of active regulation and storage. Active regulators are organisms that maintain stable tissue concentrations by excreting metal at rates comparable to the intake rate (Rainbow, 1988). Other biota store metals in detoxified forms, such as in inorganic granules or bound to metallothioneins (Brown, 1982; Rainbow, 1987). Most organisms actually use a combination of these two regulatory strategies. Non-essential metals are also often regulated to varying degrees because the mechanisms for regulating essential metals are not metal-specific (Phillips and Rainbow, 1989). In general, essential metals such as copper and zinc tend to be actively regulated by organisms such as decapod crustaceans, algae and fish. Conversely, organisms such as bivalve mollusks, barnacles, and aquatic insects tend to store these metals in detoxified forms. Non-essential metals, such as cadmium and lead, are typically stored in detoxified forms.

As a result of these metal regulatory processes, an inverse relationship exists between water concentrations of metals and the corresponding BCF. Thus, at low water concentrations, organisms are actively accumulating essential metals (and often non-essential metals via the same uptake mechanisms) to meet their metabolic requirements. At higher water concentrations, organisms with active regulatory mechanisms are able to excrete excess metals or limit uptake (Figure 7). An extensive review of the literature demonstrates that this hypothesis is correct for both essential (Figure 8) and non-essential (Figure 9) metals for most organisms (Brix and DeForest, 2000).

As a consequence of aquatic organisms' regulatory ability, metal concentrations in tissue measured across a range of water exposure concentrations are often quite similar. The corresponding BCFs will not be constant, but will be inversely related to exposure concentration (*i.e.*, higher BCFs at lower exposure concentrations and lower BCFs at higher exposure concentrations). Consequently, an individual BCF provides little information on the bioaccumulation potential of a metal for most organisms. In summary, relative to metals (and in contrast to organic substances), one cannot assume that as the BCF or BAF becomes larger, the potential for hazard is greater.



**Figure 7.** Metal regulation showing ranges of deficiency, homeostasis, and toxicity.

The concept that BCFs or BAFs can be used as an indicator of long-term or chronic toxicity to aquatic organisms stems from the assumption that larger BCFs are indicative of higher tissue concentrations, which in turn result in direct or secondary poisoning. This concept is primarily relevant to organic chemicals with narcosis as the mode of toxic action. However, this relationship does not apply to all chemicals, including metals. In fact, some studies have shown that accumulated metal (whole body residue) may be poorly, or even negatively, correlated with toxicity. Organisms that tend to bioaccumulate metals to high levels do so because they are able to store the metals in detoxified forms (*i.e.*, in granules, or bound to metallothioneins) and not because they have large BCFs or BAFs. As a result, organisms with larger BCFs actually tend to be less sensitive. This is demonstrated in Figure 10 for cadmium, where daphnids are known to be among the most sensitive organisms and insects among the least sensitive, and yet the BCFs are highest for insects and lowest for daphnids (USEPA, 1984). Consequently, the magnitude of a metal's BCF is not a useful predictor of chronic toxicity.

Secondary poisoning occurs when chemical concentrations in an organism reach levels that are toxic to organisms that feed on it. For organic substances, chemicals that are highly "bioaccumulative" or which biomagnify in food webs often are considered to have the greatest potential to cause secondary poisoning. Biomagnification is the process whereby a substance increases in concentration as it passes up two or more trophic levels in the food web. It has been reported that the classic concept of biomagnification and food chain poisoning, that is based primarily on chemicals such as DDT and PCBs (Eisler, 1986; Keith, 1996), does not apply to metals, although naturally occurring organo-metals may be an exception (Suedel *et al.*, 1994). This may be explained in part by the limited bioavailability of the inorganic forms of metals in food and by the regulation of metals that occurs in both aquatic and terrestrial organisms. Site-specific data are available suggesting that some inorganic metal compounds may be instrumental in producing secondary poisoning (Woodward *et al.*, 1994). This occurrence is typically associated with

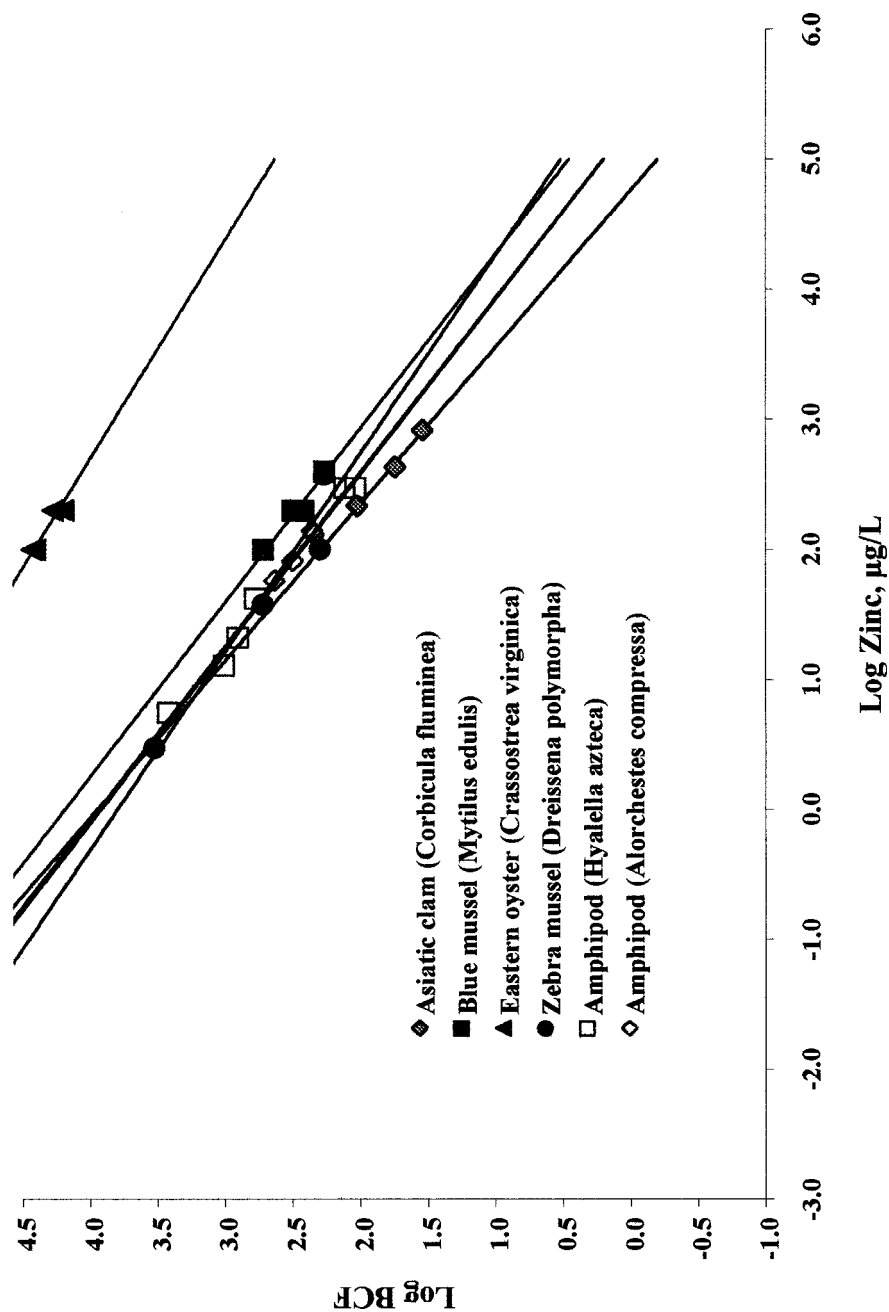


Figure 8. Zinc BCFs for invertebrates.

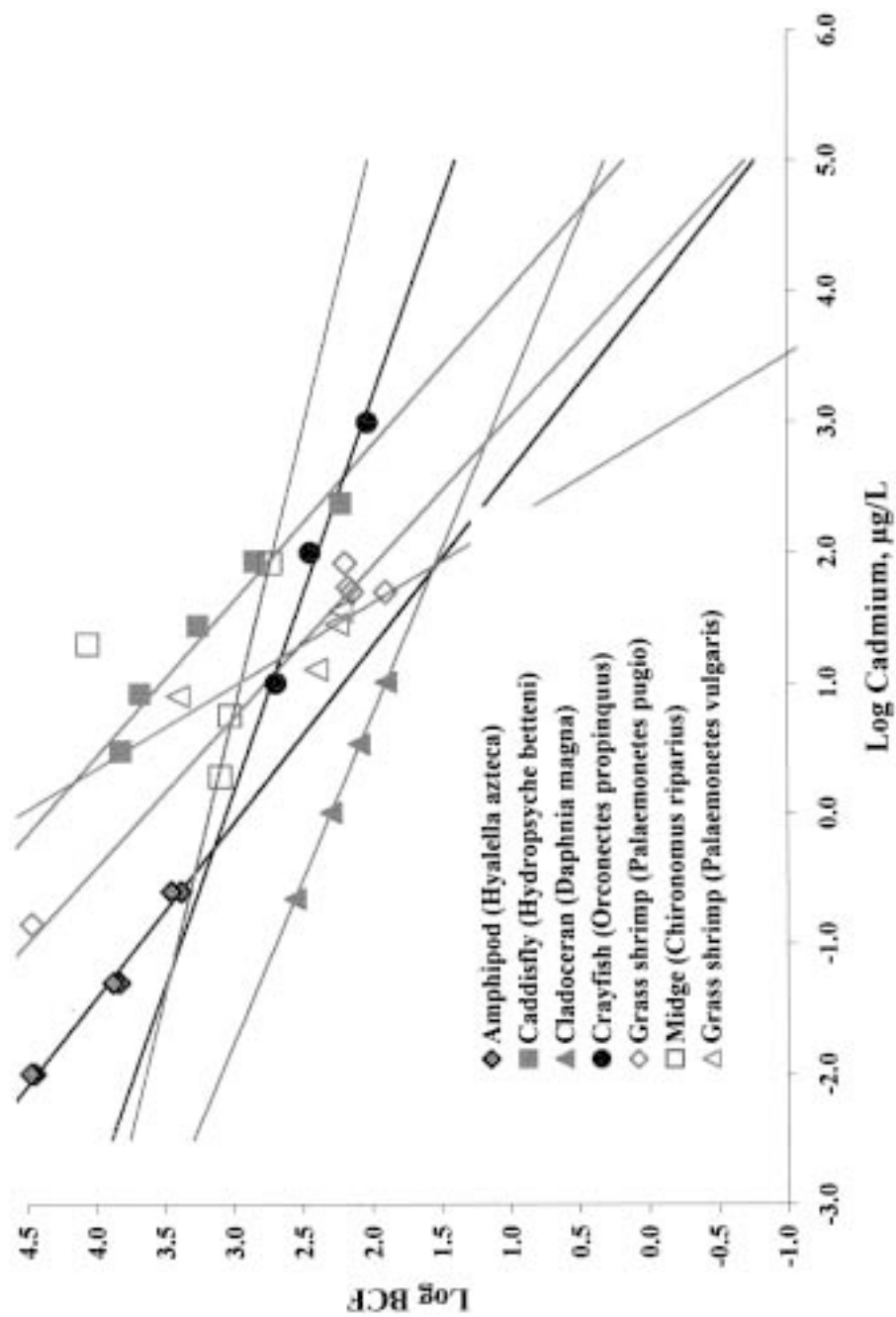


Figure 9. Cadmium BCFs for non-bivalve invertebrates.

# Hazard Identification and Classification of Insoluble Metals

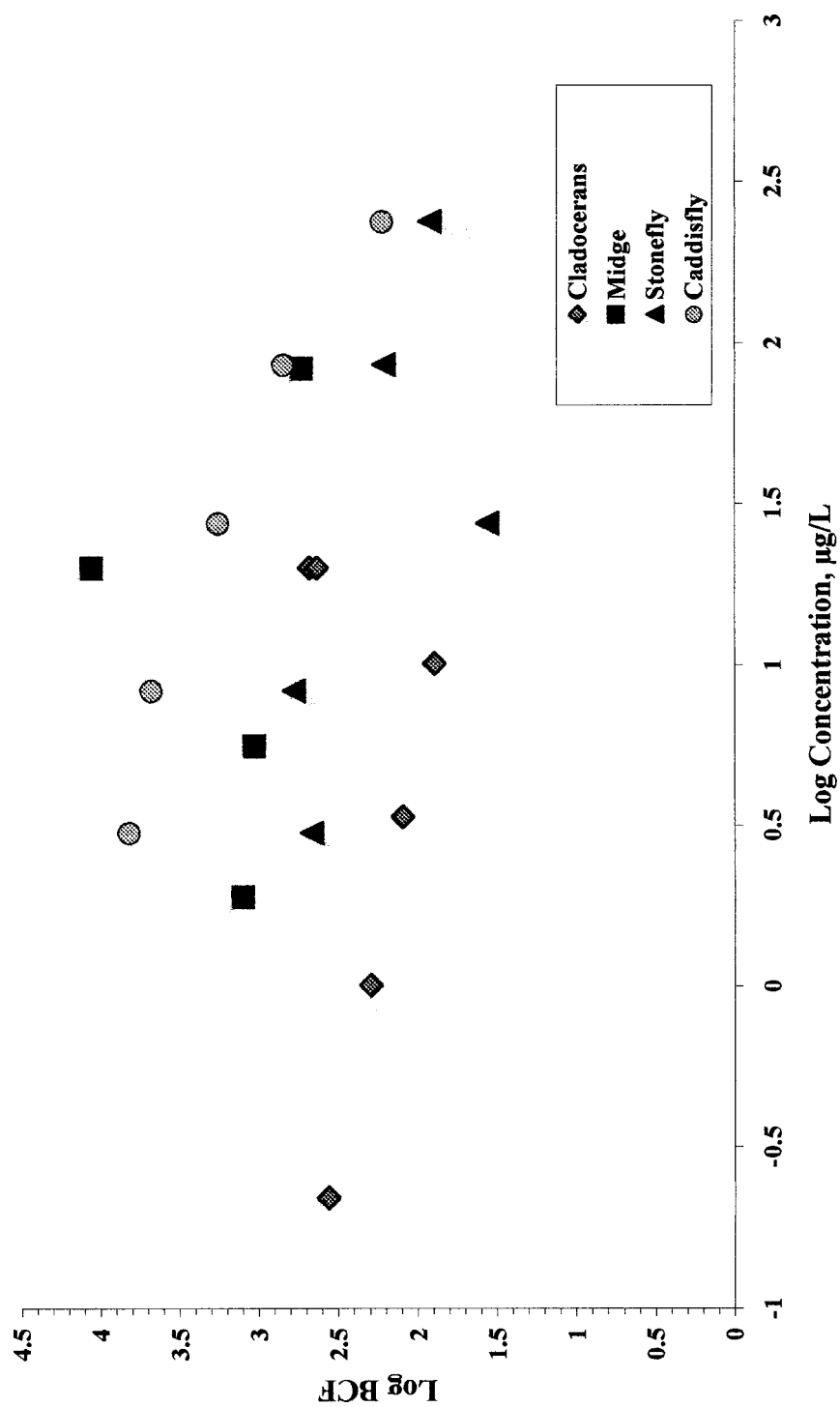


Figure 10. Relationship between cadmium BCFs for daphnids and insects.

elevated site-specific exposure levels and is not reflective of the inherent bioaccumulative nature of the metal substance.

Considering the above, we conclude that metal BCFs are not indicative of the potential for direct toxicity, that inorganic forms of metals do not biomagnify in food webs, and that secondary poisoning attributed to metals is a function of site-specific exposure. Further, we conclude that bioconcentration factors are not an appropriate parameter for assessing the hazard potential of metals. This is consistent with the results of the Brussels Workshop (Canada/European Union, 1996).

## TOXICITY

It is widely recognized that the toxicity of mono- and divalent metals is due predominately to the free metal ion in solution (estimated by soluble metal measurements). Most of the toxicity data available to date have been derived using soluble metal salts and these data are then used to characterize the toxicity of the metal itself. The assumption is that the dissolved metal ions in laboratory tests are completely dissolved and bioavailable. Application of these data to metal elements requires the further assumption that the metal will transform from the element to free metal ions and these free metal ions will be bioavailable to exert toxicity. This is not always the case. Recent advances in estimating the bioavailable fraction of metal in solution using the Biotic Ligand Model allows for more accurate predictions of toxicity under relevant environmental conditions (DiToro *et al.*, in press). Differences in pH, dissolved organic carbon, hardness, and other water quality parameters can be accounted for in the model allowing predictions of bioavailability and toxicity in the field using laboratory data. At present, the model has been developed for copper and silver and is being expanded to other metals.

The acute and chronic toxicity of metals (cadmium, copper, nickel, lead, silver, zinc, etc.) have been measured with numerous species. The tests have been conducted with soluble metal salts and the results expressed in terms of the toxicity of the metal and not the salt. Data sets range from a few dozen tests for lead to nearly 1000 tests for copper. Toxicity characterization approaches (water quality criteria, risk assessments, and classification systems) are designed to select a concentration deemed to be protective of most species in the environment. These approaches may utilize a toxicity value for the most sensitive species in the data set, or in some cases, a toxicity value that is at or near the lower five percentile of all species tested (Stephan *et al.*, 1985). Acute toxicity data are most often used for classification purposes. The toxicity of most dissolved metal salts to sensitive species lies in the range of 0.1 to 1000 µg/L (Table 1). The data presented in Table 1 were derived for purposes of setting water quality criteria (USEPA, 1998), but serve to illustrate the range of acute and chronic toxicity values obtained for various metals for sensitive species.

OECD and European Union classification approaches as well as the United States and Canadian PBT prioritization approaches utilize a 1000 µ/L cutoff value for identifying substances as highly toxic. Depending upon the regulatory system, other less severe designations also exist for substances with toxicity values in the 1-10 mg/L or 1000 to 100,000 µg/L range. These cutoff values provide discriminatory power among organic substances and identify substances with the greatest aquatic hazard.

## Hazard Identification and Classification of Insoluble Metals

**Table 1.** Summary of acute and chronic toxicity data (USEPA water acute and chronic quality criteria values  $\mu\text{g/L}$ )

| Metal (Soluble Salt) | Acute Toxicity     | Chronic Toxicity   |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                      | (CMC) <sup>a</sup> | (CCC) <sup>a</sup> |
| Iron                 | —                  | 1000               |
| Arsenic              | 340                | 150                |
| Zinc                 | 120                | 120                |
| Aluminum             | 750                | 87                 |
| Chromium III         | 570                | 74                 |
| Nickel               | 470                | 52                 |
| Chromium VI          | 16                 | 11                 |
| Copper               | 13                 | 9                  |
| Selenium             | 20                 | 5                  |
| Lead                 | 65                 | 2.5                |
| Cadmium              | 4.3                | 2.2                |
| Mercury              | 1.7                | 0.91               |
| Silver               | 0.92               | —                  |

<sup>a</sup> CMC = criterion maximum concentration which is the U.S. acute water quality criterion.  
CCC = criterion continuous concentration which is the U.S. chronic water quality criterion (USEPA, 1998).

However, these regulatory approaches were not specifically designed with metals and other inorganic substances in mind. Using a cutoff value of 1000 mg/L would identify nearly all of the common soluble metal substances as highly toxic. This approach provides little discrimination between metal compounds and would rank aluminum and iron compounds with hazards equivalent to mercury and cadmium. Hence, this does not appear to be a useful approach for assessing the hazard of metal substances. The acute toxicity of common soluble metal compounds spans three orders of magnitude from approximately 1  $\mu\text{g/L}$  to 1000  $\mu\text{g/L}$ . An alternative approach for SSMMCs might utilize cutoff values across the range of 1 to 1000 or 1 to 100,000  $\mu\text{g/L}$ .

In order to assess the acute aquatic toxicity of SSMMCs, the rate and extent of transformation of metal to a soluble form must be measured. While soluble metal salts will readily dissolve in water at low mg/L concentrations, transformation of insoluble metal substances to soluble forms (dissolution) is a function of several key factors including particle size, surface area, ionic strength, pH of the test solution, and duration of the test. A standard protocol for measuring transformation is currently being developed and tested (OECD, 2000). The purpose of establishing a standardized dissolution/transformation protocol is to provide a methodology that allows for a determination of whether an insoluble metal substance will trans-

form and dissolve in water over a reasonable period of time to the extent that toxicity may occur.

## CONCLUSIONS

Toxicity of a metal is due predominately to the free metal ion in solution. In order to assess the acute aquatic toxicity of SSMMCs the rate and extent of transformation of a metal element or insoluble metal compound to a soluble form must be measured. Transformation of insoluble metal substances to soluble forms is a function of several key factors, including particle size, surface area, and the pH of the test solution. A standard protocol for measuring transformation is currently being developed by the OECD. Persistence measurements typically used for organic substances (biodegradation) do not apply to metals. Alternative measurements such as complexation, precipitation, and mineral formation are more appropriate. Bioaccumulation of metals by aquatic organisms is an important process both in terms of nutritional sufficiency and potential food chain transfer and toxicity. Unlike organic substances, bioaccumulation potential cannot be estimated using log octanol-water partition coefficients (Kow), bioaccumulation and bioconcentration factors (BAFs/BCFs) are often inversely related to exposure concentration, and BCFs and BAFs are not reliable predictors of chronic toxicity or food chain accumulation. Potential concern for bioaccumulation of sparingly soluble metals and metal compounds by aquatic organisms should be assessed on a case by case basis.

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