



Nickel Contamination in Rivers and Its Effects on Fish Population Dynamics

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Abstract:

Nickel (Ni) contamination in riverine ecosystems has emerged as a significant environmental concern due to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and anthropogenic activities. As a heavy metal, nickel persists in aquatic environments and poses serious risks to aquatic organisms, particularly fish, which are highly sensitive to water quality changes. This research article examines the sources, distribution, bioavailability, and ecological consequences of nickel contamination in rivers, with a specific focus on its effects on fish population dynamics. The study synthesizes findings from experimental, field-based, and laboratory research to explore how nickel exposure affects fish physiology, behavior, reproduction, growth, and survival rates. Additionally, it highlights bioaccumulation and biomagnification processes that disrupt aquatic food chains. The article also discusses alterations in species diversity, population structure, and ecosystem stability due to prolonged nickel exposure. Special emphasis is placed on the Indian context, where industrial effluents and agricultural runoff contribute significantly to river pollution. The study concludes by recommending sustainable management strategies, regulatory frameworks, and remediation techniques to mitigate nickel toxicity and preserve aquatic biodiversity.

Keywords: Nickel Contamination, Fish Population Dynamics, Bioaccumulation, Aquatic Toxicity, River Pollution.

Introduction:

Rivers are vital freshwater ecosystems that support diverse biological communities and provide essential services such as drinking water, irrigation, and fisheries. However, increasing anthropogenic activities have led to the contamination of river systems with heavy metals, among which nickel (Ni) is of particular concern. Nickel is widely used in electroplating, battery manufacturing, stainless steel production, and chemical industries. Improper disposal of industrial effluents, mining activities, and urban runoff has resulted in elevated nickel concentrations in many river systems worldwide.

Although nickel is an essential trace element required in small quantities for biological processes, excessive exposure can be toxic to aquatic organisms. Fish, being integral components of aquatic ecosystems and important sources of human nutrition, are particularly vulnerable to heavy metal pollution. Nickel contamination can disrupt fish physiology, impair reproductive functions, and ultimately alter population dynamics.

Objectives: This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of nickel contamination in rivers and its effects on fish populations, integrating ecological, physiological, and environmental perspectives.

Sources of Nickel Contamination in Rivers

Nickel contamination in river systems arises from a combination of natural processes and anthropogenic activities, both of which contribute to its presence and distribution in aquatic environments. Natural sources of nickel include the weathering of rocks and soils, through which nickel-bearing minerals gradually release metal ions into surrounding water bodies. Volcanic eruptions also contribute to atmospheric nickel emissions, which eventually settle into rivers through precipitation. Additionally, atmospheric deposition from natural dust and aerosols introduces trace amounts of nickel into aquatic ecosystems (Alloway, 2013).

However, anthropogenic sources are the dominant contributors to elevated nickel concentrations in rivers, particularly in industrial and densely populated regions. Industrial discharge from electroplating, metallurgy, stainless steel manufacturing, and textile industries releases significant amounts of nickel into nearby water bodies, often without adequate treatment. Mining and smelting operations further intensify contamination by exposing nickel-rich ores and facilitating their transport into rivers through runoff. Urban sewage and improper waste disposal also introduce nickel through domestic and municipal effluents. Moreover, agricultural runoff containing fertilizers, pesticides, and sludge contributes to diffuse nickel pollution in river systems (Tchounwou et al., 2012). In developing countries such as India, weak regulatory enforcement and rapid industrialization make industrial effluents the primary source of nickel contamination, posing serious ecological risks.

Behavior and Fate of Nickel in Aquatic Systems

In aquatic environments, nickel exists in multiple forms, including dissolved ions, particulate matter, and sediment-bound fractions, each influencing its mobility and bioavailability. The chemical behavior of nickel is largely governed by environmental factors such as pH, temperature, water hardness, and the presence of organic matter. Under acidic conditions, nickel becomes more soluble and readily bioavailable, increasing its potential toxicity to aquatic organisms. Conversely, in alkaline or hard water conditions, its mobility may be reduced due to precipitation or complex formation (Förstner & Wittmann, 2012).

Nickel also exhibits a strong affinity for binding with sediments and organic particles, allowing it to accumulate in riverbeds where it can persist for extended periods. These sediments act as secondary sources of contamination, releasing nickel back into the water column under changing environmental conditions. Aquatic organisms, particularly fish, absorb nickel through various pathways, including gill membranes, skin surfaces, and ingestion of contaminated food or sediments. Over time, when the rate of nickel uptake exceeds the rate of excretion, bioaccumulation occurs, leading to elevated concentrations in tissues such as liver, kidneys, and gills (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006). This process not only affects individual organisms but also facilitates the transfer of nickel through the food chain, posing broader ecological and health concerns.

Toxicological Effects of Nickel on Fish

Physiological Effects: Nickel exposure exerts profound physiological stress on fish by targeting essential organs such as the gills, liver, and kidneys. The gills, being the primary site of respiration and ion exchange, are particularly vulnerable; nickel-induced damage to gill lamellae reduces the efficiency of oxygen uptake, leading to respiratory distress and impaired metabolic functioning (Heath, 1995). The liver, which plays a central role in detoxification and metabolism, exhibits structural and functional abnormalities under nickel toxicity, including cellular degeneration and reduced enzymatic activity, thereby compromising the fish's ability to neutralize harmful substances (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006). Similarly, the kidneys—responsible for osmoregulation and excretion—experience tissue damage and functional disruption, leading to ionic

imbalance and accumulation of metabolic wastes. Collectively, these physiological impairments weaken the organism, reduce survival capacity, and increase susceptibility to environmental stressors.

Biochemical Effects: At the biochemical level, nickel toxicity interferes with critical cellular processes by altering enzyme activity and inducing oxidative stress. Exposure to elevated nickel concentrations disrupts the normal functioning of enzymes such as catalase, superoxide dismutase, and peroxidase, which are essential for maintaining cellular homeostasis. This disruption leads to the excessive generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), causing oxidative damage to lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids (Tchounwou et al., 2012). Furthermore, nickel interferes with metabolic pathways, including carbohydrate, protein, and lipid metabolism, thereby reducing energy availability and affecting growth and maintenance. These biochemical disturbances often precede visible physiological damage and serve as early indicators of metal toxicity in aquatic organisms.

Behavioral Effects: Behavioral changes are among the most immediate and observable effects of nickel exposure in fish, often reflecting underlying physiological and neurological disturbances. Affected fish commonly exhibit reduced swimming activity, lethargy, and erratic movements, which may impair their ability to escape predators or search for food. Loss of equilibrium and uncoordinated motion indicate disruption of the nervous system and muscular control. Additionally, altered feeding patterns, including reduced appetite or complete feeding cessation, further weaken the organism and hinder growth (Scott & Sloman, 2004). Such behavioral impairments not only affect individual fitness but also have broader ecological consequences by influencing predator–prey interactions and population stability.

Reproductive Effects: Nickel toxicity also has serious implications for fish reproduction, ultimately affecting population sustainability. Chronic exposure to nickel has been associated with decreased fertility, reduced spawning success, and impaired gamete quality. In many cases, embryos exposed to nickel-contaminated environments exhibit developmental abnormalities, delayed hatching, and increased mortality rates (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006). Moreover, nickel can disrupt endocrine function by altering hormone levels, particularly those involved in reproduction, such as estrogen and testosterone. These hormonal imbalances interfere with reproductive cycles and breeding behavior, leading to long-term declines in fish populations. Thus, the reproductive toxicity of nickel represents a critical pathway through which environmental contamination translates into population-level impacts.

Impact on Fish Population Dynamics

Nickel contamination exerts profound and multi-dimensional effects on fish population dynamics by influencing survival, growth, reproduction, and ecological interactions. These impacts are not limited to individual organisms but extend to entire populations and aquatic ecosystems. Through both acute and chronic exposure pathways, nickel alters the structure, composition, and sustainability of fish communities, ultimately disrupting ecological balance (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006).

Mortality and Survival Rates: Elevated concentrations of nickel in river systems can lead to acute toxicity, resulting in high mortality rates among fish populations. Juvenile stages, including larvae and fry, are particularly sensitive due to their underdeveloped physiological systems and limited detoxification capacity. Nickel exposure damages critical organs such as gills and nervous tissues, impairing respiration and leading to suffocation or systemic failure. Consequently, survival rates decline significantly, reducing recruitment into adult populations and destabilizing population structures (Heath, 1995).

Growth Retardation: Chronic exposure to sub-lethal concentrations of nickel adversely affects growth rates in fish. The disruption of metabolic processes and reduced feeding efficiency limit energy availability necessary for growth and development. Additionally, physiological stress diverts energy from growth to maintenance and detoxification processes. Over time, this results in smaller body sizes, delayed maturation,

and reduced overall biomass within fish populations, which can negatively impact fisheries productivity and ecosystem functioning (Tchounwou et al., 2012).

Changes in Species Composition: Nickel contamination often leads to a shift in species composition within aquatic ecosystems. Sensitive species, which are less tolerant to heavy metal toxicity, tend to decline or disappear from contaminated habitats. In contrast, more tolerant or resistant species may survive and proliferate, leading to a homogenization of fish communities. This reduction in species diversity not only diminishes ecological resilience but also disrupts the natural balance of aquatic ecosystems (Förstner & Wittmann, 2012).

Disruption of Food Chains: Nickel accumulation in aquatic organisms at lower trophic levels, such as plankton and benthic invertebrates, initiates the process of biomagnification. As these organisms are consumed by higher trophic levels, including fish, nickel concentrations increase progressively within the food chain. Predatory fish, therefore, accumulate higher levels of nickel, which can impair their health and reproductive success. This trophic transfer results in cascading ecological effects, altering predator–prey relationships and destabilizing ecosystem dynamics (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006).

Genetic and Evolutionary Impacts: Long-term exposure to nickel contamination may induce genetic and evolutionary changes in fish populations. Chronic metal stress can cause DNA damage, mutations, and alterations in gene expression, potentially affecting traits related to survival and reproduction. In some cases, populations may develop adaptive resistance to nickel toxicity; however, such adaptations often come at a physiological cost, such as reduced growth or reproductive efficiency. These genetic shifts can lead to evolutionary changes that alter population fitness and long-term viability (Tchounwou et al., 2012).

Human Health Implications

Nickel-contaminated fish pose a significant risk to human health, primarily through dietary exposure (Tchounwou et al., 2012). As fish occupy an important position in the human food chain, the bioaccumulation of nickel in their tissues—particularly in muscles and organs—facilitates its transfer to consumers (Jeziarska & Witeska, 2006). Chronic ingestion of nickel-contaminated fish can lead to a range of adverse health effects. One of the most common outcomes is allergic reactions, including dermatitis and skin sensitization, especially among individuals with nickel hypersensitivity (Das et al., 2008). Prolonged exposure may also contribute to respiratory complications, as nickel compounds can affect pulmonary function when accumulated in the body over time (Tchounwou et al., 2012).

In extreme cases, and particularly with long-term exposure to high concentrations, nickel has been associated with carcinogenic effects, although such outcomes depend on dosage, duration, and individual susceptibility (WHO, 2017). Furthermore, the cumulative nature of heavy metals increases the risk of systemic toxicity, affecting organs such as the liver and kidneys (Das et al., 2008). These health concerns highlight the critical need for continuous monitoring of nickel levels in edible fish and strict adherence to food safety standards (WHO, 2017). Ensuring safe consumption limits is essential to protect public health, particularly in regions where fish constitutes a major dietary component.

Mitigation and Management Strategies

Effective mitigation of nickel contamination in river systems requires an integrated approach combining technological, regulatory, and community-based strategies (Fu & Wang, 2011). These measures aim not only to control pollution at its source but also to restore contaminated ecosystems and ensure long-term environmental sustainability (Tchounwou et al., 2012).

Pollution Control: Controlling nickel pollution at its source is the most effective strategy for reducing environmental and health risks (Tchounwou et al., 2012). Strict regulation of industrial effluents is essential,

particularly for industries such as electroplating, mining, and metallurgy that release high levels of nickel into water bodies (Alloway, 2013). Governments must enforce discharge standards and ensure compliance through regular inspections and penalties for violations (Fu & Wang, 2011). The establishment and proper functioning of wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) are equally critical, as they help remove heavy metals before effluents are released into rivers (Tchounwou et al., 2012). Adoption of cleaner production technologies and waste minimization practices can further reduce nickel discharge at the industrial level (Alloway, 2013).

Remediation Techniques: Remediation strategies focus on removing or neutralizing nickel already present in aquatic environments (Fu & Wang, 2011). Phytoremediation, which involves the use of aquatic plants such as water hyacinth and duckweed, has gained attention due to its cost-effectiveness and eco-friendly nature (Tchounwou et al., 2012). These plants absorb and accumulate heavy metals from contaminated water. Bioremediation, utilizing microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi, offers another sustainable approach by transforming or immobilizing nickel through biological processes (Fu & Wang, 2011). Additionally, advanced adsorption and filtration technologies—such as activated carbon, ion-exchange resins, and nanomaterials—are increasingly used for efficient removal of nickel from water systems (Fu & Wang, 2011). These techniques can be applied in both large-scale treatment facilities and localized water purification systems.

Monitoring and Policy Measures: Regular monitoring of water quality is essential to assess nickel concentrations and detect contamination trends over time (WHO, 2017). Systematic sampling and analysis help in early identification of pollution sources and enable timely intervention (Tchounwou et al., 2012). Strong enforcement of environmental laws and policies is crucial to ensure accountability among polluters and protect aquatic ecosystems (Alloway, 2013). In addition, public awareness programs play a vital role in educating communities about the risks of heavy metal contamination and promoting environmentally responsible behavior (WHO, 2017). Collaborative efforts involving government agencies, researchers, industries, and local communities are necessary to implement effective and sustainable management strategies (Fu & Wang, 2011).

Conclusion

Nickel contamination in rivers represents a serious threat to aquatic ecosystems, particularly fish populations. Its toxic effects on fish physiology, behavior, and reproduction lead to significant alterations in population dynamics, including reduced biodiversity and ecosystem imbalance. The problem is especially critical in developing regions where industrial discharge is inadequately regulated. Effective management requires a multidisciplinary approach involving scientific research, policy implementation, and community participation. Sustainable practices and advanced remediation technologies are essential to mitigate nickel pollution and ensure the conservation of aquatic life and human health.

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Citation: Mahapatra. P., Dixit. Dr. A. & Kumar. S., (2026) “Nickel Contamination in Rivers and Its Effects on Fish Population Dynamics”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-03, March-2026.