

# **Environmental Sampling for Trace Analysis**

Edited by Bernd Markert



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# Preface

Environmental analysis has entered a phase which is difficult to describe precisely because of its meteoric development. The advent of more and more modern systems of instrumental analysis now makes it possible to penetrate areas of ecology and ecotoxicology that would have been considered inaccessible a few years ago. Trace analysis and ultra-trace analysis of individual substances, in particular, have proved to be a useful dynamo for new scientific findings. One example is the development of possible concentration and action models for specific dioxin molecules which it would have been impossible to investigate without highly efficient analytical procedures. In addition to detecting lower and lower concentrations, such highly sophisticated measuring equipment has the important advantage of opening up totally new fields of work. Procedures such as multielement analysis, chemical fingerprinting and non-target screening are already familiar to many laboratories and will continue to pave the way for trendsetting research strategies.

But orientation towards more and more efficient analytical methods also involves a risk that is all too easily overlooked. Too little attention is often given to analytical steps before and after actual instrumental measurement — sampling and the preparation of specimens, for example — because the measuring work itself is the focus of interest. Representative sampling, especially, has not kept pace with the development of increasingly sensitive analytical systems. Today it has to be said that the greatest error in the overall result of the analytical process is usually caused by improper sampling.

This development becomes obvious when we compare the almost uncountable number of publications on the measurement of any arbitrary substance X in sample Y with the small number of scientific publications dealing with careful representative sampling suitable for trace and ultra-trace analysis. The ratio of publications is probably somewhere around 1000:1.

The reason for this development is clear. First of all, sampling is only a small step in the overall process of analysis and one that is unlikely to produce any “spectacular” data for a subsequent discussion of the overall result. This means that sampling is all too easily dismissed as uninteresting. Secondly, the equipment it requires is often less expensive than the apparatus needed for the instrumental measurement itself. In many cases a rigid PVC spade is all that is needed to acquire a soil specimen, so that manufacturers do not at once consider it lucrative to orient their product range towards sampling systems. Sampling as a field of work in its own right is therefore very quickly deemed unattractive from both the scientific and the commercial point of view. So it is not surprising that progress towards quality control in representative environmental sampling lags far behind that in actual instrumental measurement, where remarkable steps towards “true data” have

been made as a result of precise definition of the terms accuracy, reproducibility or concentration-dependence of the accuracy of the analytical results (“Horwitz Trumpet”), and the production of suitable reference materials. The results are serious: the data from individual study groups cannot be compared with each other; harmonization of research in the various fields, so often demanded, is difficult to achieve even at the stage where the data are generated.

A further problem is that the *first* principle of sampling, namely that “the sample taken from the system should have exactly the same chemical composition as the original material” cannot be followed even approximately in the field. It should never be forgotten that environmental processes are continuous in terms of space and time. Watercourses, for example, demonstrate most plainly that sampling has to be carried out in a time/space continuum if the findings are to be relevant. Many investigations, even recent ones, fail to take this into account sufficiently. In order to achieve meaningful and comparable results in respect of the current state of the environment it is necessary to develop standards for sampling similar to those that already exist in Germany for the water, sewage and sludge sector (German Standard Procedure for Water, Sewage and Sludge Analysis). By developing suitable guidelines at a national and, still more important, at an international level it must then be ensured that the *second* and *third* principles of sampling can be implemented. These are: “The probability of being selected from a total population must be equal for each individual”, and “the amount of work required for sampling increases with the degree of dispersion of the individuals and the number of such individuals”.

One must, however, bear in mind that practical difficulties during the actual sampling process make it virtually impossible to follow the first two principles. A sample taken out in the field can never have exactly the same chemical composition as the original material; at best it will be very similar. One of the reasons is that often only a tiny fraction of the original material is actually analyzed (e.g., 100 mg of 100 kg of leaves from a forest ecosystem). The initial content of the material can be altered by contamination or volatilization of individual constituents while the sample is being taken and during transportation. Moreover, it is scarcely possible to give each individual the same likelihood of being selected when such individuals are diffusely distributed over the ecosystem. The objective must rather be to come as close as possible to the first two principles by means of a carefully prepared sampling strategy. Some practical, basic rules may be helpful here:

- Avoid contaminating the sample in any way with the equipment used, the containers, or by the person taking the sample.
- Avoid any volatilization of chemical compounds as a result of microbial activity, absorption by the walls of the vessels in which the samples are kept or overheating of the samples during transportation and storage.
- Take reasonably large samples, provided that there is enough material in the system and this is not subject to the nature conservation laws.
- Take account of seasonal fluctuations in the composition of the original material and other parameters affecting its overall composition such as temperature, humidity, light etc.



The aim of this book is to provide an overview of the techniques commonly used at present for taking many different kinds of environmental samples. Because of the host of different environmental samples a selection had to be made, which was painful in some cases but unavoidable in view of the limited printing capacity. The subject of human samples has been left out completely, for it is a domain of the medical profession and analysts with the relevant training. In water sampling emphasis has been put on fresh water; the sampling of "wet depositions" such as rain and snow has not been included, for excellent monographs already exist in this field. Most animals have also had to be excluded. Only ants are used as an example of how sampling might be conducted. The editor was not authorized by the Federal Office of the Environment to publish even an extract from the sampling guidelines of the "Environmental Specimen Programme" of the Federal Ministry for Research and Technology. This is a pity, especially with respect to long-term investigations, for the results are important and valuable. It remains to be hoped that these Standard Operating Procedures of the Federal Office of the Environment will soon be made accessible to a wide circle of readers in the form of a monograph.

No attempt has been made to standardize the terminology used in sampling. The reason is that there is still a great need to establish unequivocal technical terms, especially in German and American English.

In spite of the deficiencies of this book the editor and the authors agree that together they have been able to reflect the state of the art in a field which will have to undergo much more intensive development in the future.

Again, this book would not have been come about if friends and associates had not created the scope necessary for its realization, from the initial idea to the finished product. The central figures were of course the authors, who once again succeeded in submitting, amending and improving the manuscripts within a year in spite of their numerous other commitments. The suggestions for improvements came from a multitude of associates in Germany and abroad and from my employees and associates at the GKSS Research Centre, Geesthacht. I was motivated not least by Mrs Vera Weckert of the study group on systems research at the University of Osnabrück, who missed no opportunity of urging me on and encouraging me in difficult phases. I also wish to thank VCH Publishers, especially Dr. Kraus, and Wirt.-Ing. Hans-Jochen Schmitt, for their generous and friendly assistance.

The editor and the authors hope that the book will be disseminated widely and that the problems it discusses will be examined closely; they themselves will be pleased to listen to constructive criticism.

Magdeburg, January 1994

Bernd Markert

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# Outline

List of Contributors XXVII

## **Part I: Historical Aspects 1**

- 1 History of Sampling Demonstrated on the Ore Mining Industry – Empirical and Theoretical Approaches 3  
*G. Kraft*

## **Part II: General Aspects 9**

- 2 General Aspects of Environmental Sampling 11  
*P. Hoffmann*
- 3 Trace Elements Need Trace Analysis 73  
*I. Pais*
- 4 Error Estimation in Environmental Sampling and Analysis 93  
*M. H. Ramsey*
- 5 Estimation of Varying Detection Limits 109  
*W. G. Warren*

## **Part III: Examples for Sampling 123**

### **A. Air 123**

- 6 Particle and Gas Measurements on Filters 125  
*J. G. Watson, C. Chow*
- 7 Organic Gas Sampling 163  
*B. Zielinska, E. Fujita*

### **B. Water 185**

- 8 Sampling of Freshwaters for Estimation of all Detectable Elements 187  
*U. M. Cowgill*
- 9 Guidelines for Sampling Freshwater for Eutrophication Management Programs 203  
*H. Klapper, W. Rast, D. Uhlmann*
- 10 The Sampling Strategy in the River Elbe – Experiences 223  
*H. Guhr, E. Weber*

- 11 Sampling Treated Wastewaters and Receiving Streams 249  
*J. E. Norris*
- 12 Water and Wastewater Sampling for Environmental Analysis 255  
*E. M. Dick*
- 13 Sampling of Groundwater for General Quality Monitoring 279  
*V. Schenk*
- 14 Groundwater Sampling for Metals 287  
*R. Puls*

### **C. Soils and Sediments 303**

- 15 Representative Soil Sampling 305  
*O. Fränzle*
- 16 Problems and Results in the Development of International Standards for Sampling and Treatment of Soils 321  
*A. Paetz, G. Crößmann*
- 17 Fixed and Hypothesis-Guided Soil Sampling Methods – Principles, Strategies, and Examples 335  
*R. W. Scholz, N. Nothbaum, T. W. May*
- 18 Sampling for Trace Analysis of Lake Sediments 347  
*U. M. Cowgill*
- 19 Sampling Design for Studying the Relationships between Heavy Metals in Soils, Sediments, and Discharged Wastewaters 365  
*Zueng-Sang Chen*

### **D. Plants and Animals 379**

- 20 Sampling of Plants for Environmental Trace Analysis in Terrestrial, Semiterrestrial and Aquatic Environments 381  
*W. H. O. Ernst*
- 21 On the Sampling of Vascular Plants for Monitoring of Heavy Metal Pollution 395  
*R. Djingova, I. Kuleff*
- 22 Sampling of Terricolous Lichen and Moss Species for Trace Element Analysis with Special Reference to Bioindication of Air Pollution 415  
*Z. Tuba, Z. Csintalan, Z. Nagy, K. Szente, Z. Takács*
- 23 Comparative Investigation of the Distribution of Chemical Elements in an Aceri Tatarico-Quercetum Plant Community and in Stands of Cultivated Plants 435  
*M. Kovács, K. Penksza, G. Turcsányi, L. Kaszab, S. Tóth, P. Szöke*

- 24 Sampling of Tropical Terrestrial Plants with Particular Reference to the Determination of Trace Elements 443  
*R. Jayasekera*
- 25 Sampling in the Stemflow and Throughfall Areas of Forests 449  
*G. Turcsányi, K. Penksza, I. Siller, E. Führer, S. Tóth, M. Kovács, S. Büttner*
- 26 Sampling of Different Social Categories of Red Wood Ants (*Formica* s. str.) for Biomonitoring 465  
*V. Maavara, A.-J. Martin, A. Oja, P. Nuorteva*

**Part IV: Literature Survey 491**

- 27 Overview of References for Sampling and Related Topics 493  
*S. Hannappel*

**Index 511**

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# Contents

## List of Contributors XXVII

### Part I: Historical Aspects 1

- 1 History of Sampling Demonstrated on the Ore Mining Industry – Empirical and Theoretical Approaches 3  
*G. Kraft*

### Part II: General Aspects 9

- 2 General Aspects of Environmental Sampling 11  
*P. Hoffmann*
- 2.1 Introduction 11
- 2.2 Terms and Definitions 12
- 2.3 Aspects of Sampling 13
  - 2.3.1 Location, Place, and Position of Sample Removal 13
  - 2.3.2 Size, Quantity, and Volume of the Sample 14
  - 2.3.3 Number of Samples to be Taken 14
  - 2.3.4 Time, Duration, and Frequency of Sampling 15
  - 2.3.5 Homogeneity of the Sample 16
  - 2.3.6 Contamination of the Sample 17
  - 2.3.7 Losses in the Sample 18
  - 2.3.8 Sample Storage and Conservation 19
- 2.4 Guidelines and Norms 19
  - 2.4.1 Quality Assurance 20
  - 2.4.2 Environmental Protection 21
- 2.5 References 22
- 2.6 Appendix 23
- 3 Trace Elements Need Trace Analysis 73  
*I. Pais*
- 3.1 Problems of Trace Element Analysis 73
  - 3.1.1 Introduction 73
  - 3.1.2 Problems of Biological Analysis 74
    - 3.1.3 Indicator Organs in Biological Evaluation 76
  - 3.2 The Importance of Trace Elements 77
    - 3.2.1 Introduction 77
    - 3.2.2 Criteria of Essentiality and Beneficiality 80

3.2.3	Criteria of Toxicity	81
3.2.4	Changes in Element Concentrations	83
3.2.5	The Importance of Trace Elements in the Environment	84
3.2.6	Interactions between Different Elements	86
3.2.7	The Importance of Interdisciplinary Trace Element Research	88
3.3	References	89
4	Error Estimation in Environmental Sampling and Analysis	93
	<i>M. H. Ramsey</i>	
4.1	Introduction	93
4.2	Basic Concepts and Terminology	93
4.3	Sampling Error in Context	95
4.4	Methods for Estimating Quality of Measurements	96
4.4.1	Measuring Analytical Precision	96
4.4.2	Measuring Sampling Precision	99
4.4.3	Targets for Acceptable Levels of Precision in Sampling and Analysis	102
4.4.4	Measuring Analytical Bias	103
4.4.5	Estimating Sampling Bias	105
4.5	Targets for Acceptable Levels of Bias in Sampling and Analysis	106
4.6	Conclusions	107
4.7	References	107
5	Estimation with Varying Detection Limits	109
	<i>W. G. Warren</i>	
5.1	Introduction	109
5.2	Methodology	110
5.2.1	The One-Dimensional Case	110
5.2.2	The Bivariate Case	112
5.3	Examples	113
5.4	Discussion	118
5.5	References	118
5.6	Appendix	118

## **Part III: Examples for Sampling** 123

### **A. Air** 123

6	Particle and Gas Measurements on Filters	125
	<i>J. G. Watson, J. C. Chow</i>	
6.1	Introduction	125
6.2	Filter Analysis Methods	126



6.2.1	Mass	126
6.2.2	Elements	129
6.2.3	Water Soluble Ions	130
6.2.4	Organic and Elemental Carbon	132
6.3	Filter Media	134
6.4	Aerosol Sampling Systems	140
6.4.1	Size-Selective Inlets	142
6.4.2	Sampling Surfaces	146
6.4.3	Filter Holders	146
6.4.4	Pumps and Flow Controllers	147
6.4.5	Sampler Configurations	148
6.5	Sampling and Analysis Procedures	150
6.6	Summary	152
6.7	References	153
7	Organic Gas Sampling	163
	<i>B. Zielinska, E. Fujita</i>	
7.1	Introduction	163
7.2	Whole-Air Sampling	163
7.2.1	Sampling Media Selection and Preparation	164
7.2.2	Sampling	165
7.2.3	Storage and Transport	167
7.3	Preconcentration Methods	168
7.3.1	Preconcentration on Nonselective Solid Adsorbents	168
7.3.1.1	Sampling Media Selection and Preparation	168
7.3.1.2	Sampling	172
7.3.1.3	Storage and Transport	172
7.3.2	Selective Methods of Compound Preconcentration	172
7.3.2.1	Sampling Media Selection and Preparation	173
7.3.2.2	Sampling	175
7.3.2.3	Storage and Transport	175
7.4	Semi-Volatile Organic Compounds	175
7.5	Passive Sampling Techniques	177
7.6	Summary	178
7.7	References	181

## **B. Water 185**

8	Sampling of Freshwaters for Estimation of all Detectable Elements	187
	<i>U. M. Cowgill</i>	
8.1	Introduction	187
8.2	Problems Associated with Sampling	187

- 8.2.1. Contamination from Sampling Devices and Laboratory Equipment 188
- 8.2.2 Sorption and Leaching of Pollutants by Sampling Tool Materials 189
- 8.2.3 Replication 190
- 8.2.4 Frequency of Sampling 192
- 8.2.5 Equipment, Field, and Sampling Blanks 193
- 8.3 Sample Fractions and Sample Preservation 194
  - 8.3.1 Preservation of Samples 194
  - 8.3.2 Pretreatment, Storage, and General Precautions 194
- 8.4 Sampling of Lakes, Rivers, and Groundwater 196
  - 8.4.1 Stratified Bodies of Water 196
  - 8.4.2 Unstratified Bodies of Water 196
- 8.5 Sampling on Ice, Snow, Rain, Dew, and Fog 198
- 8.6 References 201
  
- 9 Guidelines for Sampling Freshwater for Eutrophication Management Programs 203
 

*H. Klapper, W. Rast, D. Uhlmann*

  - 9.1 Introduction 203
  - 9.2 What to Sample 203
  - 9.3 Necessary Temporal and Spatial Resolution for Data 206
    - 9.3.1 Where to Sample 206
    - 9.3.2 When to Sample 209
    - 9.3.3 Sampling Strategies in Waterbodies with Longitudinal Water Quality Gradients 210
  - 9.4 Calculating the Costs of Sample Collection 213
  - 9.5 Compilation and Presentation of Data 218
  - 9.6 References 220
  
- 10 The Sampling Strategy in the River Elbe – Experiences 223
 

*H. Guhr, E. Weber*

  - 10.1 Characteristics of the River Elbe 223
    - 10.1.1 Types of Use 223
    - 10.1.2 Pollution Loads 223
      - 10.1.2.1 Municipal Sewage Discharges 226
      - 10.1.2.2 Discharges from Agriculture 227
    - 10.1.3 Characteristics of Water Quality 227
  - 10.2 Development of a Monitoring Strategy for the River Elbe – Objectives 228
    - 10.2.1 Selection of Sampling Points 229
    - 10.2.2 Range of Measured Variables 230
    - 10.2.3 Measuring Frequency 231

- 10.2.4 Use of Automatic Monitoring Stations 231
- 10.2.5 Data Flow, Data Processing, and Evaluation 232
- 10.2.6 Special Investigations 233
- 10.3 Experience Made in Implementing the Sampling Strategy —  
Representativeness of Sampling Points 234
  - 10.3.1 Frequency of Measurements 235
  - 10.3.2 Data Collection 237
    - 10.3.2.1 Sampling 237
    - 10.3.2.2 Preparation and Preservation of Samples 240
    - 10.3.2.3 Chemical Analysis 240
    - 10.3.2.4 Measuring Errors 241
  - 10.3.3 Consideration of Sewage Discharges 243
  - 10.3.4 Data Processing and Evaluation 245
- 10.4 Conclusions 247
- 10.5 References 247
- 11 Sampling Treated Wastewaters and Receiving Streams 249  
*J. E. Norris*
  - 11.1 Introduction 249
  - 11.2 Sediment Sampling 249
  - 11.3 Fish Sampling 250
  - 11.4 Sampling of Industrial Wastewater Discharges 251
  - 11.5 Sampling of Surface Waters: Receiving Streams 253
  - 11.6 References 254
- 12 Water and Wastewater Sampling for Environmental Analy-  
sis 255  
*E. M. Dick*
  - 12.1 Introduction 255
  - 12.2 Why Sample Water? 255
  - 12.3 Elements of the Sampling Plan 256
    - 12.3.1 Sampling Objective 256
    - 12.3.2 Sampling Location 257
    - 12.3.3 Sample Types and Collection Techniques 257
    - 12.3.4 Sampling Equipment 257
    - 12.3.5 Sample Containers and Sample Preservation 258
    - 12.3.6 Sample Labeling and Shipping 258
    - 12.3.7 Types of Analyses 258
    - 12.3.8 Chain-of-Custody Documentation 258
    - 12.3.9 Quality Assurance and Quality Control 259
  - 12.4 Types of Samples 259
  - 12.5 Sampling Programs 261
  - 12.6 Sampling Equipment 262

12.6.1	Power Source	264
12.6.2	Electronic Controller	264
12.6.3	Sample Intake	265
12.6.4	Sample Transport Line	265
12.6.5	Sample Storage	266
12.6.6	Sample Delivery System	268
12.7	Pumps and Representative Samples	269
12.7.1	Peristaltic Pumps	269
12.7.2	Vacuum Pumps	270
12.7.3	Bladder Pumps	271
12.8	Advancements in Sampling	272
12.8.1	Volatile Organic Sampling	272
12.8.2	Sample Volume Accuracy	272
12.8.3	Refrigeration	273
12.9	Preserving Sample Integrity	274
12.9.1	Sampling Equipment	274
12.9.2	Sampling Containers	275
12.9.3	Sample Handling	275
12.9.4	Sample Preservation	275
12.9.5	Sample Holding Time	275
12.9.6	On-Site Analysis	276
12.10	Conclusion	278
13	Sampling of Groundwater for General Quality Monitoring	279
	<i>V. Schenk</i>	
13.1	Introduction	279
13.2	Sampling of Groundwater	279
13.2.1	Requirements for Sampling Sites	279
13.2.2	Sampling Equipment for Groundwater	281
13.3	Activities at the Sampling Site	282
13.3.1	Determinations and Preservations	282
13.3.2	Transport and Storage	283
13.4	Sampling Programs and Contents of Analyses	283
13.5	Interpretation	285
13.6	Conclusions	285
14	Groundwater Sampling for Metals	287
	<i>R. W. Puls</i>	
14.1	Introduction	287
14.2	Sampling Objectives	287
14.3	Sampling Point Design	288
14.4	Monitoring Well Development	289

- 14.5 Colloidal Transport 290
- 14.6 Well Turbidity 291
- 14.7 Sampling Preparation 293
- 14.8 Purging and Sampling 294
  - 14.8.1 Low Flow Purging 294
  - 14.8.2 Isolation of the Sampling Zone 295
  - 14.8.3 Water Quality Indicator Parameters 296
  - 14.8.4 Sampling Materials 298
- 14.9 Filtration and Analysis 298
- 14.10 Summary 299
- 14.11 References 300

## C. Soils and Sediments 303

- 15 Representative Soil Sampling 305
  - O. Fränze*
  - 15.1 Selection of Representative Soil Samples 305
    - 15.1.1 Methodology of Statistical Design 305
    - 15.1.2 Small-Scale Variability of European Soils in the Light of Frequency Statistics 306
      - 15.1.2.1 Determination of Regionally Representative Soils in Germany by Means of Crosstabulation and Neighborhood Analysis 306
      - 15.1.2.2 Selection of Representative European Soils for Sorption-Testing Purposes 309
    - 15.1.3 Large-Scale Soil Variability in the Light of Variogram Analysis 310
      - 15.1.3.1 Variogram Analysis 311
      - 15.1.3.2 Model Applications of Variogram Analysis 315
  - 15.2 Conclusions 319
  - 15.3 Summary 319
  - 15.4 References 320
- 16 Problems and Results in the Development of International Standards for Sampling and Pretreatment of Soils 321
  - A. Paetz, B. Cröbmann*
  - 16.1 Introduction 321
  - 16.2 What is Soil? 322
  - 16.3 Soil Sampling Objectives 323
  - 16.4 Requirements on Sampling 323
  - 16.5 Preliminary Investigation 325
  - 16.6 Selection of Sampling Patterns 325
  - 16.7 Sampling Depth 327
  - 16.8 Sample Quantity 328

- 16.9 Single Sample or Composite Samples 328
- 16.10 Preservation of Soil Samples 329
- 16.11 Use of Appropriate Sampling Tools and Containers 329
- 16.12 Sampling Report 330
- 16.13 Quality Control 330
- 16.14 Pretreatment of Soil Samples 331
- 16.15 Summary 333
- 16.16 References 333
  
- 17 Fixed and Hypothesis-Guided Soil Sampling Methods — Principles, Strategies, and Examples 335  
*R. W. Scholz, N. Nothbaum, T. W. May*
- 17.1 Introduction 335
- 17.2 “Fixed” Sampling Plans/Grid Plans 338
- 17.3 Soil Sampling Plans Guided by Hypotheses 342
- 17.4 The IHEARU Schema 343
- 17.5 Conclusions 344
- 17.6 References 345
  
- 18 Sampling for Trace Analysis of Lake Sediments 347  
*U. M. Cowgill*
- 18.1 Introduction 347
- 18.2 Sampling Devices 348
  - 18.2.1 Grab Samplers 349
  - 18.2.2 Corers 352
  - 18.2.3 Sampling Devices for the Collection of Suspended Sediments 355
  - 18.2.4 Mud-Water Interface Samplers 355
  - 18.2.5 Sediment Pore Water Sampling 356
- 18.3 Subsampling of Sediment Grabs and Cores 358
- 18.4 Quality Control 359
- 18.5 Statistical Considerations 361
- 18.6 References 362
  
- 19 Sampling Design for Studying the Relationships between Heavy Metals in Soils, Sediments, and Discharged Wastewaters 365  
*Zueng-Sang Chen*
- 19.1 Introduction 365
- 19.2 Case I: Studies of Rice-Growing Soils near Chemical Plants 365
  - 19.2.1 Principles of Sampling Design 365
  - 19.2.2 Sampling Methods 367
    - 19.2.2.1 Soil Sampling 367
    - 19.2.2.2 Sampling Design for Water and Sediments 368

- 19.2.3 Analytical Methods 368
- 19.2.4 The Distribution of Heavy Metals in Soils, Discharged Water, and Sediments 368
- 19.2.5 The Relationship between Heavy Metals in Soils, Discharged Water, and Sediments 371
- 19.3 Case II: Studies of Rice-Growing Soils near an Industrial Park 372
  - 19.3.1 Principles of Sampling Design 372
  - 19.3.2 Sampling Methods 373
    - 19.3.2.1 Soil Sampling 373
    - 19.3.2.2 Sampling Design of Water and Sediments 373
  - 19.3.3 Analytical Methods 373
  - 19.3.4 The Distribution of Heavy Metals in Soils, Discharged Water, and Sediments 374
  - 19.3.5 The Relationship between Heavy Metals in Soils, Discharged Water, and Sediments 376
- 19.4 Conclusions 377
- 19.5 References 377

## **D. Plants and Animals 379**

- 20 Sampling of Plants for Environmental Trace Analysis in Terrestrial, Semiterrestrial and Aquatic Environments 381  
*W. H. O. Ernst*
  - 20.1 Introduction 381
  - 20.2 What Do we Want to Know? 381
  - 20.3 Are Trace Elements Relevant Objectives? 382
  - 20.4 The Exploration of Environmental Compartments 384
    - 20.4.1 The Hygro- and Hydrophytes 384
    - 20.4.2 The Epiphytes 385
    - 20.4.3 Soil Exploring Plants 386
  - 20.5 Plant Parts and Life History 388
  - 20.6 Conclusion 390
  - 20.7 References 391
- 21 On the Sampling of Vascular Plants for Monitoring of Heavy Metal Pollution 395  
*R. Djingova, I. Kuleff*
  - 21.1 Introduction 395
  - 21.2 Concentration Differences at Biological Levels 396
  - 21.3 Seasonal Variations in the Heavy Metal Content of Plants 401

- 21.4 Sample Pretreatment 403
- 21.5 Discussion 410
- 21.6 References 412
  
- 22 Sampling of Terricolous Lichen and Moss Species for Trace Element Analysis, with Special Reference to Bioindication of Air Pollution 415  
*Z. Tuba, Z. Csintalan, Z. Nagy, K. Szente, Z. Takács*
  - 22.1 Introduction 415
  - 22.2 Materials and Methods 417
    - 22.2.1 The Species of Investigation 417
    - 22.2.2 The Original Habitat 417
    - 22.2.3 The Cryptogam Transplantation Technique 417
    - 22.2.4 Exposition 418
    - 22.2.5 Sampling 418
    - 22.2.6 Preparation of the Samples for Measuring Trace Element Contents 419
    - 22.2.7 Element Analysis 419
    - 22.2.8 Data Analysis 419
  - 22.3 Results and Discussion 419
    - 22.3.1 Vertical Distribution of Trace Elements within the Various Lichen and Moss Parts 419
    - 22.3.2 Horizontal Distribution of Trace Elements within the Thalli of *C. furcata* and the Cushions of *T. ruralis* 423
    - 22.3.3 Distribution of Trace Element Contents in Parts of the Lichen Thalli and Moss Cushions Compared to Whole Thalli and Cushions, Respectively 424
    - 22.3.4 Variability of the Trace Element Contents in the Lichen Thalli and Moss Cushions 426
    - 22.3.5 Trace Element Contents in the Soil Substrate of the Lichen Thalli and Moss Cushions 426
    - 22.3.6 The Influence of Sample Washing on Trace Element Contents 429
  - 22.4 Summary 431
  - 22.5 References 433
  
- 23 Comparative Investigation of the Distribution of Chemical Elements in an *Aceri tatarico-Quercetum* Plant Community and in Stands of Cultivated Plants 435  
*M. Kovács, K. Penksza, G. Turcsányi, L. Kaszab, S. Tóth, P. Szôke*
  - 23.1 Introduction 435
  - 23.2 Material and Methods 435



- 23.3 Results and Discussion 436
- 23.4 Summary 442
- 23.5 References 442
  
- 24 Sampling of Tropical Terrestrial Plants with Particular Reference to the Determination of Trace Elements 443  
*R. Jayasekera*
  - 24.1 Introduction 443
  - 24.2 Statistical Aspects 444
  - 24.3 Plant Sampling 444
  - 24.4 Concluding Remarks 447
  - 24.5 References 447
  
- 25 Sampling in the Stemflow and Throughfall Areas of Forests 449  
*G. Turcsányi, K. Penksza, I. Siller, E. Führer, S. Tóth, M. Kovács, S. Büttner*
  - 25.1 Introduction 449
  - 25.2 Literature Data 449
    - 25.2.1 The Amount of Stemflow and Throughfall in Stands of Different Tree Species 449
    - 25.2.2 Chemical Composition of Stemflow and Throughfall 451
    - 25.2.3 Physical Changes in Soils Due to Stemflow 452
    - 25.2.4 Chemical Changes in Soils Due to Stemflow 452
    - 25.2.5 Living Organisms Influenced by Stemflow 453
      - 25.2.5.1 Microorganisms 453
      - 25.2.5.2 Fungi 453
      - 25.2.5.3 Mosses and Lichens 454
      - 25.2.5.4 Other Plants 454
    - 25.2.6 Impact of Stemflow on the Roots of Trees 454
    - 25.2.7 Impact of Stemflow on Animals 454
    - 25.2.8 Some Contradictions 455
  - 25.3 Material and Methods 455
  - 25.4 Results and Discussion 456
  - 25.5 Conclusions 459
  - 25.6 References 460
  
- 26 Sampling of Different Social Categories of Red Wood Ants (*Formica* s. str.) for Biomonitoring 465  
*V. Maavara, A.-J. Martin, A. Oja, P. Nuorteva*
  - 26.1 The Role of Ants in Nature 465
  - 26.2 Pollutant Accumulation in Ants 466
  - 26.3 Definition of the Red Wood Ants 468

- 26.4 Structure of the Nests and Territories 469
  - 26.4.1 The Nest Mound 469
  - 26.4.2 The Base of the Nest 470
  - 26.4.3 The Underground Part of the Nest 470
  - 26.4.4 The Foraging Territory 471
  - 26.4.5 Super- and Substructures 471
- 26.5 Social Structure of Ant Colonies 472
  - 26.5.1 Sexualls 472
  - 26.5.2 Workers 473
    - 26.5.2.1 Reserve Workers 473
    - 26.5.2.2 Nurses 474
    - 26.5.2.3 Inside Workers 474
    - 26.5.2.4 Outside Workers 475
- 26.6 Sampling 475
  - 26.6.1 What Kind of Nest Mounds is Suitable for Sampling? 475
  - 26.6.2 Sample Taking 476
  - 26.6.3 Sampling Objects 477
    - 26.6.3.1 Foragers Leaving the Nest 477
    - 26.6.3.2 Foragers Traveling to the Nest 477
    - 26.6.3.3 Surface Workers from the Top of the Nest 477
    - 26.6.3.4 Workers and Brood from the Brood Chamber 478
    - 26.6.3.5 Reserve Ants 478
    - 26.6.3.6 Nest Material 478
  - 26.6.4 Collection of Background Data and the Order of Sampling 479
    - 26.6.4.1 Traffic Density of Foragers on Ant Roads 479
    - 26.6.4.2 Ant Activity on the Nest Surface 479
    - 26.6.4.3 Temperature of the Nest 479
    - 26.6.4.4 Sample Taking from Ant Roads 479
    - 26.6.4.5 Measuring the Size of the Nest Mound 480
    - 26.6.4.6 Sampling from the Nest 480
- 26.7 Feeding Experiments 480
  - 26.7.1 Honey as a Feeding Substrate 480
  - 26.7.2 Fish as a Feeding Substrate 481
- 26.8 Description of some Pilot Studies already Performed 481
  - 26.8.1 Natural Cd Levels in Different Castes and Worker Groups 481
  - 26.8.2 Cd Transfer to Ant Colonies under Pollution Stress 483
  - 26.8.3 Artificial Cadmium Feeding Experiments 483
  - 26.8.4 Effects of Metal Pollution on the Enzyme Balance 486
- 26.9 References 486

**Part IV: Literature Survey 491**

- 27 Overview of References for Sampling and Related Topics 493  
*S. Hannappel*
- 27.1 Introduction 493
- 27.2 Literature 493
  - 27.2.1 General Aspects 493
  - 27.2.2 Statistical Methodology 495
  - 27.2.3 Air 498
  - 27.2.4 Water 499
  - 27.2.5 Soils, Sediments, Sludges, Rocks and Mining 503
  - 27.2.6 Biota 504
  - 27.2.7 Waste, Sewage, Sludge 507
- 27.3 Norms by the International Organization of Standardization  
in Geneva 507
  - 27.3.1 Air 507
  - 27.3.2 Water 508
  - 27.3.3 Soil and Mining 508
  - 27.3.4 Biota 509

**Index 511**

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