

Water Today

The Magazine

UNITING THE VIBRANT WORLD OF WATER

Industrial Wastewater Recycling and Reuse Methods

August 2014



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UNITING THE VIBRANT WORLD OF WATER - TO PROVIDE A PROACTIVE PLATFORM FOR THE WATER INDUSTRY TO CONVERGE AND WORK TOGETHER IN ACHIEVING SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL WATER PROBLEMS.

CONTENTS

FULLTIME

Handling Shock Loads Of BOD in Wastewater Treatment.....22

The performance of any wastewater treatment system is heavily influenced by the ability of the treatment system to remove the BOD. However, shock loads have the potential to upset the performance of the wastewater treatment plant.

By Dr. S. Eswaramoorthi

Recycling of Sewage in Building Industry: Residential Complex and Township.....30

The article discusses the need to consider water availability and sewage disposal before sanctioning the new township or complex by local authority or the town planning department with a unique case study.

By Prof. Rajendrakumar V. Saraf



Novel approach in conventional process for recycle & reuse of sewage for agriculture, urban uses and regeneration of river.....60

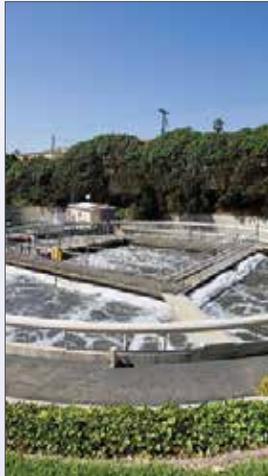
Energy-efficiency in the biological treatment with nutrient removal. Recycle water for agriculture, urban uses and regeneration of river.

By Javier Romero Sanz & Dharmendra Raval

Wastewater Treatment Plants & Their Ecological Footprints48

The article discusses the implications of climate change with respect to ecological and carbon footprints of industrial wastewater treatment plants.

By Dr. (Prof.) J.S. Pandey



Industrial Wastewater Recycle & Conservation.....70

More than 90% of all the water used by industry is the result of cooling operations. The use of water for cooling operations varies by industry.

By Harish N Valsangkar

Application of Life Cycle Assessment for Improving Facility Water Conservation.....76

The article discusses a generalized approach of water accounting, through life cycle assessment tool that may be used to identify sources of excess water use and improve in water conservation efficiency of a facility.

By Dr. Arvind K. Jha and B.R. Naidu

Microorganisms in Activated Sludge.....50

The successful removal of wastes from the water depends on how efficiently the bacteria consume the organic material and on the ability of the bacteria to stick together, form floc and settle out of the bulk fluid. This article discusses the activated sludge process.

By Daniel L. Theobald

Water Recovery System From CIP & Bottle Washer Wastewater In Beverage Industry.....54

The article discusses water recovery system in the beverage industry that can reduce nearly 90% of the raw water intake for the process.

By Narayanan



Engineering of Wastewater...80

Wastewater engineering is the branch of environmental engineering in which the basic principles of science and engineering are applied to solve the issues associated with the treatment and reuse of wastewater.

By Anitha Mary. & Dr. M. Lakshmi Prabha

CONTENTS

WATERWORKS

Water Recycling Facility in Yarra Park.....82

Water is a precious resource, yet we have traditionally used it once and disposed of it through our sewage treatment plants

By Iouri Vaisman

Use of Grooved Mechanical Piping Systems in Cross-Country Pipework.....84

Unpredictable conditions can make the outdoor installation of pipework more difficult than on construction sites.

By Pankaj Soni



Wastewater Treatment.....92

Activated sludge process is a biological wastewater treatment process which speeds up waste decomposition.

By Dr. M Lakshmi Prabha

Head Organizations of German Businesses use Rainwater as Commodity.....88

The article describes experience with rainwater technology gathered by facility management over a period of operation of 12 years.

By Klaus W. Koenig



Reduce Operational Cost of Industrial WWT.....94

A 2.3 million square foot data center located in an industrial park in Bangalore, India, was facing the dual challenge of meeting government discharge requirements and reducing water costs.

By Stanley Vajdic, Santhakumar Arul, Linda Xiao Wei Li & Jeong-Mi Moon

R G L R E U A S

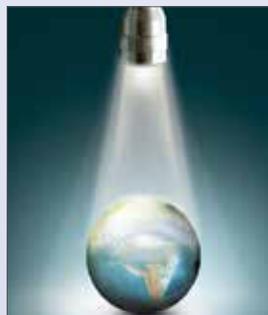
Masthead4

Water Wire.....10

Launch Pad.....14

Event Zone....16

Product Zone.....20



Editorial101

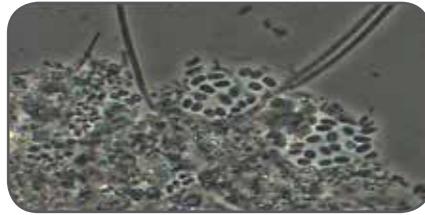
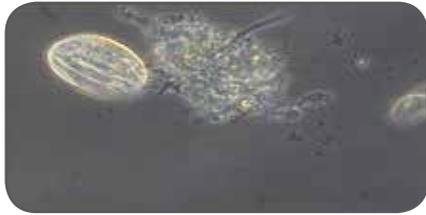
Subscription.....102

Classifieds.....103

Ad Index.....105

Editor's Note.....106

Microorganisms in Activated Sludge



The successful removal of wastes from the water depends on how efficiently the bacteria consume the organic material and on the ability of the bacteria to stick together, form floc and settle out of the bulk fluid. This article discusses the activated sludge process.

By Daniel L. Theobald

In the activated sludge process, microorganisms are mixed with wastewater. The microorganisms come in contact with the biodegradable materials in the wastewater and consume them as food. In addition, the bacteria develop a sticky layer of slime around the cell wall that enables them to clump together to form bio-solids or sludge that is then separated from the liquid phase. The successful removal of wastes from the water depends on how efficiently the bacteria consume the organic material and on the ability of the bacteria to stick together, form floc, and settle out of the bulk fluid. The flocculation (clumping) characteristics of the microorganisms inactivated sludge enable them to amass to form solid masses large enough to settle to the bottom of the settling basin. As the flocculation characteristics of the sludge improves, so is the improved settling and improved wastewater treatment.

After the aeration basin, the mixture of microorganisms and wastewater (mixed liquor) flows into a settling basin or clarifier where the sludge is allowed to settle. Some of the sludge volume is continuously recirculated from the clarifier, as Returned Activated Sludge (RAS), back to the aeration basin to ensure adequate amounts of microorganisms are maintained in the aeration tank. The microorganisms are again mixed with incoming wastewater where they are reactivated to consume organic nutrients. Then the process starts again.

The activated sludge process, under proper conditions, is very efficient. It removes 85-95% of the solids and reduces the biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) about the same amount. The efficiency of this system depends on many factors, including wastewater climate and characteristics. Toxic wastes that enter the treatment system can disrupt the biological activity. Wastes

heavy in soaps or detergents can cause excessive frothing and thereby create aesthetic or nuisance problems. In areas where industrial and sanitary wastes are combined, industrial wastewater must often be pre-treated to remove the toxic chemical components before it is discharged into the activated sludge treatment process. Nevertheless, microbiological treatment of wastewater is by far the most natural and effective process for removing wastes from water.

There are five major groups of microorganisms generally found in the aeration basin of the activated sludge process:

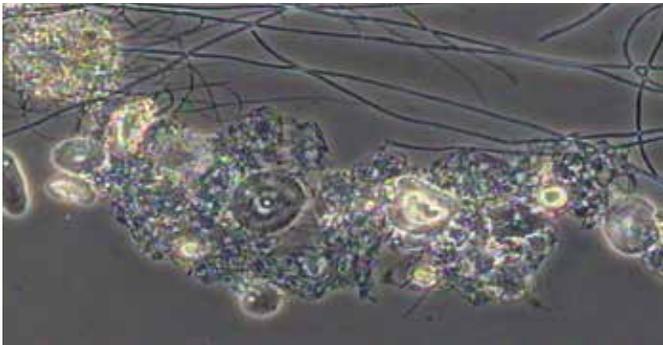
- **Bacteria:** Aerobic bacteria remove organic nutrients
- **Protozoa:** Remove and digests dispersed bacteria and suspended particles
- **Metazoa:** Dominate longer age systems including lagoons
- **Filamentous bacteria:** Bulking sludge (poor settling and turbid effluent)
- **Algae and fungi-Fungi:** is present with pH changes and older sludge

Bacteria are primarily responsible for removing organic nutrients from the wastewater.

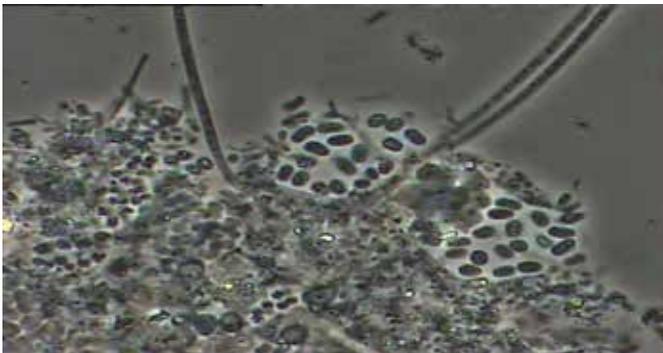
Protozoa play a critical role in the treatment process by removing and digesting free swimming dispersed bacteria and other suspended particles. This improves the clarity of the wastewater effluent. Like bacteria, some protozoa need oxygen, some require very little oxygen, and a few can survive without oxygen. The types of protozoa present give us some indication of treatment system performance which is classified as:

- **Amoebae:** Little effect on treatment & die off as amount of food decreases
- **Flagellates:** Feed primarily on soluble organic nutrients
- **Ciliates:** Clarify water by removing suspended bacteria
- **Ciliates:** Free-swimming-Removes free-dispersed bacteria
- **Ciliates:** Crawling (grazing)-Dominate activated sludge/ good treatment
- **Ciliates:** Stalked (sessile)-Dominates at process end

Protozoa images are below:



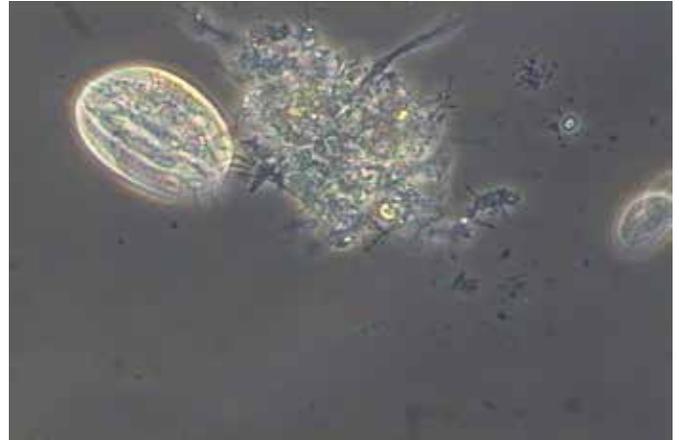
Amoeba



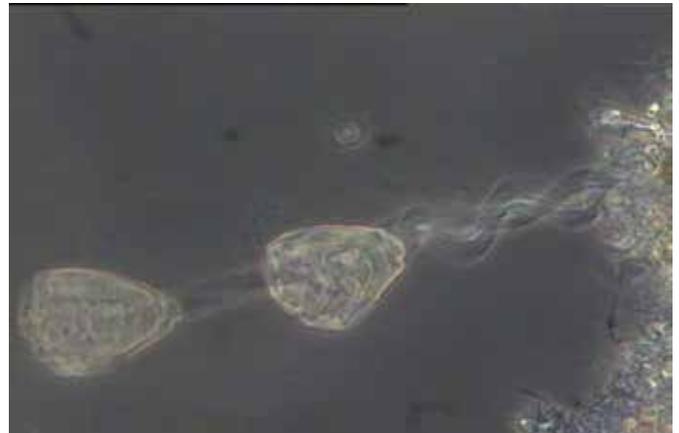
Flagellates



Ciliates: Free-swimming



Ciliates-Crawler



Ciliates-Stalked

Metazoa are multi-cellular organisms which are larger than most protozoa and have very little to do with the removal of organic material from the wastewater. Although they do eat bacteria, they also feed on algae and protozoa.

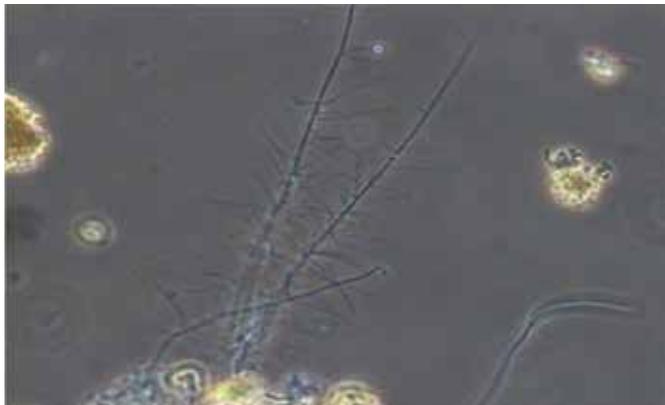
A dominance of metazoa is usually found in longer age systems; namely, lagoon treatment systems. Although their contribution in the activated sludge treatment system is small, their presence does indicate treatment system conditions. Three most common metazoa found in the activated sludge treatment system.

- **Rotifers**-Clarify and effluent are first affected by toxic loads
- **Nematodes**-Feed on bacteria, fungi, small protozoa and other nematodes
- **Tardigrades** (water bear)-Survive environmental extremes & toxic sensitivity

Metazoa images are below:



Rotifer



Nematodes



Tardigrades

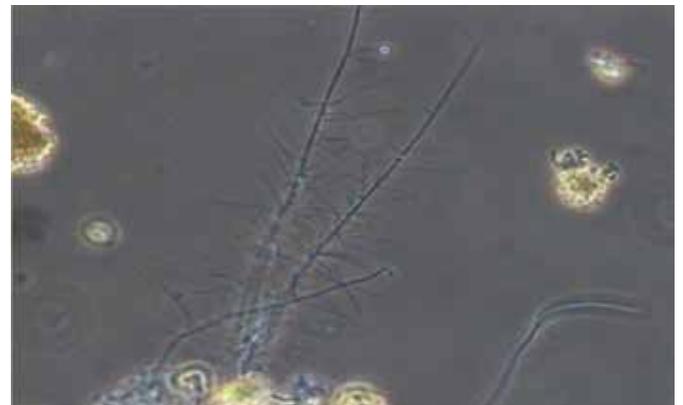
Filamentous bacteria are present when operational conditions drastically change. These bacteria grow in long filaments begin to gain an advantage. Changes in temperature, pH, DO, sludge age, or even the amounts of available nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, oils & grease can affect these bacteria.

The dominance of filamentous bacteria in the activated sludge treatment system can cause problems with sludge settling. At times excessive numbers of filamentous microorganisms interfere with floc settling and the sludge becomes bulky. This bulking sludge settles poorly and leaves behind a turbid effluent. Some filamentous microorganisms may cause foaming in the aeration basin and clarifiers.

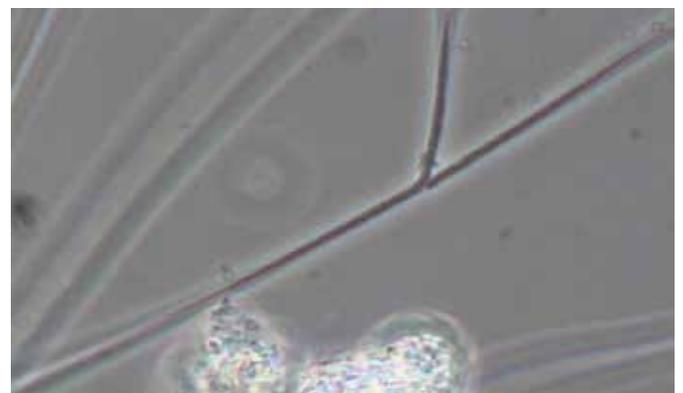
Filamentous images are below:



Sheath



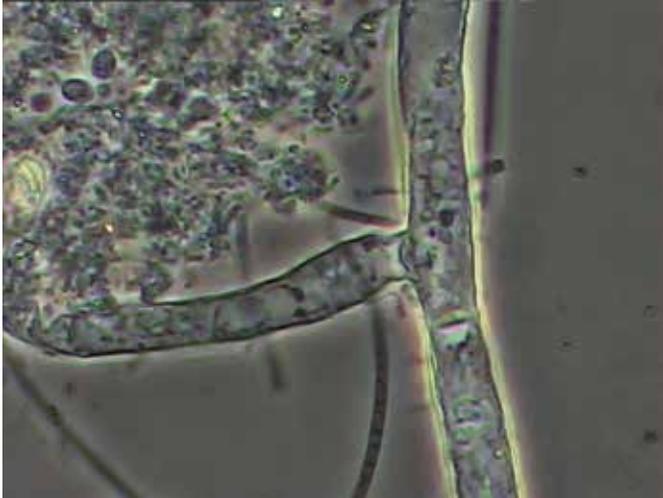
Sheath



False Branching

Algae and fungi which are photosynthetic organisms and generally do not cause problems in activated sludge treatment systems, however their presence in the treatment system usually indicate problems associated pH changes and older sludge.

Fungi image is below:



Filaments (True Branching)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Daniel L. Theobald, Proprietor of Environmental Services, is a professional wastewater and safety consultant/trainer. He has more than 24 years of hands-on industry experience operating many variants of wastewater treatment processing units and is eager to share with others his knowledge about water conservation.