

# WATER POLLUTION

By

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Comprising over 70% of the Earth's surface, water is undoubtedly the most precious natural resource that exists on our planet. Without the seemingly invaluable compound comprised of hydrogen and oxygen, life on Earth would be non-existent. It is essential for everything on our planet to grow and prosper. Although we as humans recognize this fact, we disregard it by polluting our rivers, lakes, and oceans. Subsequently, we are slowly but surely harming our planet to the point where organisms are dying at a very alarming rate. In addition to innocent organisms dying off, our drinking water has become greatly affected as is our ability to use water for recreational purposes. In order to combat water pollution, we must understand the problems and become part of the solution.

## POINT AND NON-POINT SOURCES

According to the American College Dictionary, pollution is defined as to make foul or unclean dirty. Water pollution occurs when a body of water is adversely affected due to the addition of large amounts of materials to the water. When it is unfit for its intended use, water is considered polluted. Two types of water pollutants exist point source and non-point source. Point sources of pollution occur when harmful substances are emitted directly into a body of water. The Exxon Valdez oil spill best illustrates point source water pollution. A non-point source delivers pollutants indirectly through environmental changes. An example of this type of water pollution is when fertilizer from a field is carried into a stream by rain, in the form of run-off which in turn affects aquatic life. The technology exists for point sources of pollution to be monitored and regulated, although political factors may complicate matters. Non-point sources are much more difficult to control. Pollution arising from non-point sources accounts for a majority of the contaminants in streams and lakes.

## CAUSES OF POLLUTION

Many causes of pollution including sewage and fertilizers contain nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates. In excess levels, nutrients over stimulate the growth of aquatic plants and algae.



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Excessive growth of these types of organisms consequently clogs our waterways, use up dissolved oxygen as they decompose, and block light to deeper waters. This, in turn, proves very harmful to aquatic organisms as it affects the respiration ability of fish and other invertebrates that reside in water. Pollution is also caused when silt and other suspended solids, such as soil, wash off plowed fields, construction and logging sites, urban areas, and eroded river banks when it rains. Under natural conditions, lakes, rivers, and other water bodies undergo, an aging process that slowly fills in the water body with sediment and organic matter. When these sediments enter various bodies of water, fish respiration becomes impaired, plant productivity and water depth become reduced, and aquatic organisms and their environments become suffocated. Pollution in the form of organic material enters waterways in many different forms as sewage, as leaves and grass clippings, or as runoff from livestock feedlots and pastures. When natural bacteria and protozoan in the water break down this organic material, they begin to use up the oxygen dissolved in the water. Many types of fish and bottom-dwelling animals cannot survive when levels of dissolved oxygen drop below two to five parts per million. When this occurs, it kills aquatic organisms in large numbers which leads to disruptions in the food chain.

Pathogens are another type of pollution that proves very harmful. They can cause many illnesses that range from typhoid and dysentery to minor respiratory and skin diseases. Pathogens include such organisms as bacteria, viruses, and protozoan. These pollutants enter waterways through untreated sewage, storm drains, septic tanks, runoff from farms, and particularly boats that dump sewage. Though microscopic, these pollutants have a tremendous effect evidenced by their ability to cause sickness.

#### **ADDITIONAL FORMS OF WATER POLLUTION**

Three last forms of water pollution exist in the forms of petroleum, radioactive substances, and heat. Petroleum often pollutes water bodies in the form of oil, resulting from oil spills. The previously mentioned Exxon Valdez is an example of this type of water pollution. These large-scale accidental discharges of petroleum are an important cause of pollution along shore lines.

Besides the supertankers, off-shore drilling operations contribute a large share of pollution. One estimate is that one ton of oil is spilled for every million tons of oil transported. This is equal to about 0.0001 percent. Radioactive substances are produced in the form of waste from nuclear power plants, and from the industrial, medical, and scientific use of radioactive materials.

Specific forms of waste are uranium and thorium mining and refining. The last form of water pollution is heat. Heat is a pollutant because increased temperatures result in the deaths of many aquatic organisms. These decreases in temperatures are caused when a discharge of cooling water by factories and power plants occurs.



## DEMONSTRATORS PROTEST DRILLING

Oil pollution is a growing problem, particularly devastating to coastal wildlife. Small quantities of oil spread rapidly across long distances to form deadly oil slicks. In this picture, demonstrators with "oil-covered" plastic animals protest a potential drilling project. Whether or not accidental spills occur during the project, its impact on the delicate marine eco-system of the coral reefs could be devastating.



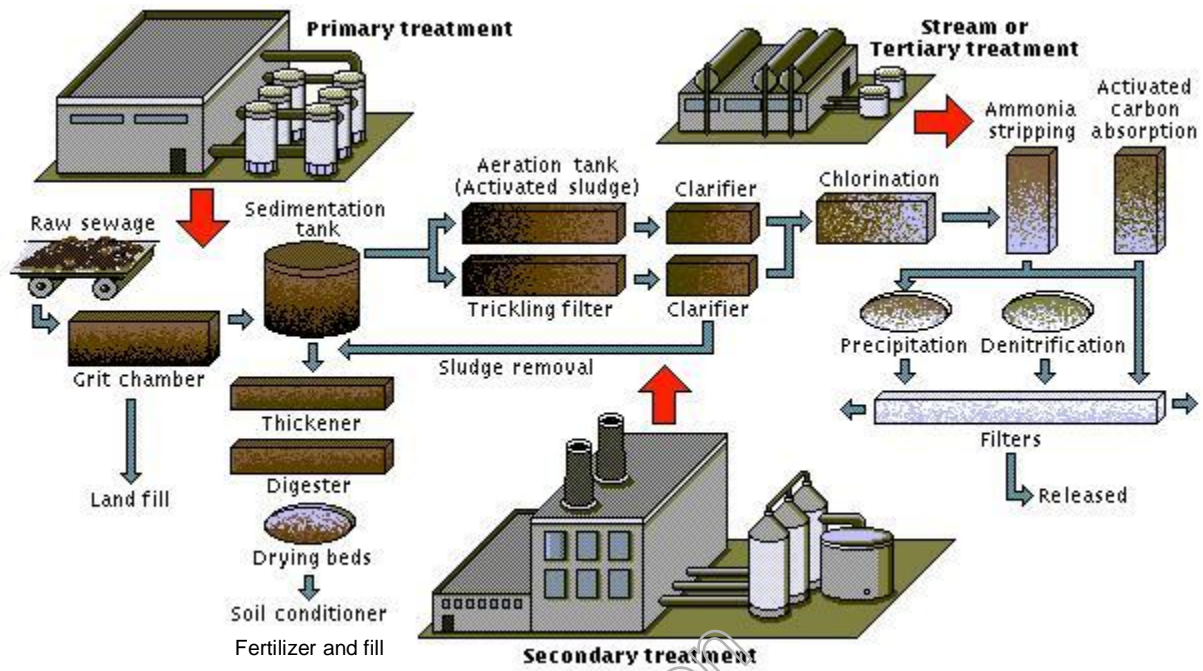
## OIL SPILL CLEAN-UP

Workers use special nets to clean up a beach after an oil tanker spill. Tanker spills are an increasing environmental problem because once oil has spilled, it is virtually impossible to completely remove or contain it. Even small amounts spread rapidly across large areas of water. Because oil and water do not mix, the oil floats on the water and then washes up on broad expanses of shoreline. Attempts to chemically treat or sink the oil may further disrupt marine and beach eco-systems.

## CLASSIFYING WATER POLLUTION

The major sources of water pollution can be classified as municipal, industrial, and agricultural. Municipal water pollution consists of waste water from homes and commercial establishments. For many years, the main goal of treating municipal waste water was simply to reduce its content of suspended solids, oxygen demanding materials, dissolved inorganic compounds, and harmful bacteria. In recent years, however, more stress has been placed on improving means of disposal of the solid residues from the municipal treatment processes. The basic methods of treating municipal wastewater fall into three stages, **primary treatment**, including grit removal, screening, grinding, and sedimentation, **secondary treatment**, which entails oxidation of dissolved organic matter by means of using biologically active sludge, which is then filtered off and **tertiary treatment**, in which advanced biological methods of nitrogen removal and chemical and physical methods such as granular filtration and activated carbon absorption are employed. The handling and disposal of solid residues can account for 25 to 50 percent of the capital and operational costs of a treatment plant. The characteristics of industrial waste waters can differ considerably both within and among industries. The impact of industrial discharges depends not only on their collective characteristics, such as bio-chemical oxygen demand and the amount of suspended solids, but also on their content of specific inorganic and organic substances. Three options are available in controlling industrial waste water. Control

can take place at the point of generation in the plant, waste water can be pre-treated for discharge to municipal treatment sources or waste water can be treated completely at the plant and either reused or discharged directly into receiving waters.



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