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To my family
CHEMICAL STUDIES ON SOME PLANTS THAT HYPERACCUMULATE NICKEL

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Chemistry
at
Massey University
Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Faye Allyson Homer
1991
ABSTRACT

Following the discovery of the hyperaccumulation of nickel by the Philippine plants *Dichapetalum gelonioides* subsp. *tuberculatum* and *Phyllanthus palawanensis*, the nature of the nickel in aqueous extracts has been investigated by gel filtration chromatography, ion-exchange chromatography, high-voltage electrophoresis and GC-MS.

Nickel in *D. gelonioides* subsp. *tuberculatum* was shown to associate mainly with compounds of high polarity and low molar mass. In *P. palawanensis* only about 50% of the nickel demonstrated this association, while 25% of the metal appeared to be in the form of pectate or bound to proteins. In both plants, nickel was shown to exist in anionic and cationic forms. A discussion of the usefulness of assigning portions of nickel to these forms is presented in the light of changes in the relative amounts of cationic and anionic nickel observed during ion-exchange chromatography and high-voltage electrophoresis.

Nickel, citric acid and malic acid comprised 95% of the purified extract from *D. gelonioides* subsp. *tuberculatum*. Only 25% of the low molar mass, high polarity nickel-rich fraction from *P. palawanensis* was accounted for by these constituents. Small amounts of Ca, Mg, K and Na were detected in each extract. The nickel:citric acid:malic acid mole ratios were 1:0.4:1 and 1:0.4:0.4 for *D. gelonioides* subsp. *tuberculatum* and *P. palawanensis* respectively. These observations are discussed in terms of the stabilities of the nickel citrate and nickel malate complexes. Tartaric acid was identified in both extracts, while 4-oxopentanoic acid and 2-furylacetic acid were identified in the nickel-rich fraction from *P. palawanensis* only. The role of these acids in the plant is discussed in an attempt to explain their presence in the nickel-rich material.

By using X-ray crystallography, it was shown that crystals obtained from a nickel-citrate-malate solution simulating the extract from *D. gelonioides* subsp. *tuberculatum*, contained nickel exclusively in the form of an anionic Ni(II)-citrate complex. It was assumed that a crystal obtained from a nickel-citrate-malate solution of mole ratio 1:0.4:0.4, as in the nickel-rich fraction from *P. palawanensis*, would have yielded similar results given the greater stability of the Ni-citrate complex over the Ni-malate complex.

Pot trials carried out on *Alyssum troodii* confirmed its hyperaccumulating status, and showed it to be a cobalt hyperaccumulator as well. The amount of cobalt taken up by the plant was an order of magnitude lower than that of nickel. It was observed that *A. troodii* survived soils with
available concentrations of nickel and cobalt at least five times higher than those commonly found in serpentine soils. Possible reasons for this behaviour are presented. *Alyssum troodii* also co-accumulated nickel and cobalt. However, while the cobalt concentration in plant organs showed little difference from that obtained when the plant was cultivated in soil enriched with cobalt only, the nickel levels were lower.

*Aurinia saxatilis* did not hyperaccumulate nickel and cobalt. The levels of the metals found in the plant were one-tenth of those observed in *A. troodii*. As in the Ni-hyperaccumulating plant, cobalt uptake appeared to suppress nickel uptake when the plant was cultivated in media containing added nickel and cobalt. A possible uptake mechanism giving rise to this differential uptake is discussed. Very little difference was discerned in the tolerance to, and uptake of, copper in the two plants. The levels of this metal in *A. troodii* were about one-tenth those of cobalt, while in *Au. saxatilis* the levels of copper and cobalt were comparable.

Low concentrations of nickel exerted a stimulatory effect on the germination of *A. troodii* seeds. Cobalt appeared to exert this effect on *Au. saxatilis* seeds at higher concentrations. Copper was not observed to be stimulatory to either plant.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all those people who advised, assisted and encouraged me during this project.

I am extremely grateful to my parents. This achievement, like so many others, is a result of their faith in me, their support, and their encouragement.

I am particularly indebted to my chief supervisor Professor R.R. Brooks and my co-supervisor Associate Professor R.D. Reeves for their guidance and unstinting support. No Ph.D. student could be supervised by a better duo.

My gratitude is also extended to other staff of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at Massey University. Thanks to Dr G. Midwinter who initially assisted me in carrying out electrophoretic separations, Mr J. Reid for amino acid determinations, Dr G. Norris and Mr S. Ingham for X-ray crystallography work, and Mr G. Freeman for allowing me the use of his laboratory, labware and chemicals on numerous occasions during the course of this research.

I thank Dr J. Clemens and his staff at the New Zealand Nursery Research Centre, Palmerston North, for allowing me the use of their facilities, and for the advice offered.

Thanks to Dr J. Lee, Dr J. Shaw and Mr J. Allen of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Palmerston North for making GC-MS and ICP-AES analysis possible.

I thank Dr M. Hoashi for the initial perusal of my thesis prior to typing, for typing the references, and for her advice and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis.

I am grateful to Dr A.J. M. Baker for his comments and advice on certain aspects of my thesis. Thanks are also extended to you, along with my two supervisors, for making available the plant material used in this research.

To Mrs J. Trow, I say thanks for doing a good job on the illustrations.
I acknowledge the receipt of a Commonwealth Scholarship from the New Zealand Government, which was made possible through the Government of Guyana.

Lastly, thanks to all my friends in New Zealand and abroad, for their encouragement during this research. A special thank you to Mr U. L. Opara for his moral support during the preparation of this thesis.
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