

# Rhizoremediation of hydrocarbon contaminated soil using Australian native grasses

A Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## **DECLARATION**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>Summary</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Publications</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: General introduction and literature review</b>	<b>1</b>
<hr/>	
<b>1.1 Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Aliphatic hydrocarbons in soil: Physicochemical properties</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.3 Bioremediation: The microbial degradation of organic pollutants in soil</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.4 Phytoremediation: Plant-assisted bioremediation</b>	<b>7</b>
1.4.1 Influence of environmental factors on phytoremediation	8
1.4.2 Special considerations in phytoremediation	9
1.4.3 Comparison of phytoremediation to alternative remediation strategies	11
<b>1.5 Mechanisms of hydrocarbon phytoremediation</b>	<b>13</b>
1.5.1 Phytostabilisation	15
1.5.2 Phytodegradation	16
1.5.3 Phytovolatilisation	17
<b>1.6 Rhizoremediation: Bioremediation in the rhizosphere</b>	<b>18</b>
1.6.1 Selection of plant species for rhizoremediation – What is an ideal candidate?	20
1.6.2 The use of grasses for rhizoremediation of hydrocarbons	21
<b>1.7 Australian perspective on phytoremediation</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>1.8 Research objectives</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: Plant selection and soil analysis</b>	<b>41</b>
<hr/>	
<b>2.1 Introduction</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>2.2 Materials and methods</b>	<b>45</b>
2.2.1 Soil collection	45
2.2.2 Soil analysis	45
2.2.2.1 <i>Maximum water holding capacity</i>	45
2.2.2.2 <i>Soil pH</i>	46
2.2.2.3 <i>Electrical conductivity</i>	46
2.2.2.4 <i>Soil organic carbon</i>	46
2.2.2.5 <i>Particle size distribution</i>	47
2.2.2.6 <i>Inorganic nitrogen</i>	48
2.2.2.7 <i>Phosphorus</i>	49
2.2.2.8 <i>Aluminium</i>	49
<b>2.3 Results and discussion</b>	<b>50</b>
2.3.1 Soil analysis	50
2.3.2 Plant selection	52
<b>2.4 Conclusion</b>	<b>55</b>

---

**CHAPTER 3: Germination and plant growth in diesel/oil contaminated soil 61**

---

<b>3.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Materials and methods</b>	<b>64</b>
3.2.1	Screening experiments – Seed viability and germination in soil	64
3.2.2	Plant growth experiments	64
3.2.3	Statistical analysis	65
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>67</b>
3.3.1	Seed viability and germination in soil	67
3.3.2	Plant growth characterisation in diesel/oil contaminated soil	69
3.3.2.1	<i>Root and shoot length</i>	69
3.3.2.2	<i>Root and shoot biomass</i>	73
3.3.2.3	<i>Relative growth rates (RGR) of roots and shoots</i>	76
3.3.2.4	<i>Root to shoot ratio of biomass</i>	78
3.3.3	Comparison between species for growth performance	80
<b>3.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>81</b>
3.4.1	Grass seed viability and germination in diesel/oil contaminated soil	81
3.4.2	Plant growth performance in diesel/oil contaminated soil	83
<b>3.5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>88</b>

---

**CHAPTER 4: The effect of Australian grasses on microbial community dynamics in diesel/oil contaminated soil 89**

---

<b>4.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Materials and methods</b>	<b>92</b>
4.2.1	Grass rhizosphere soil sampling	92
4.2.2	Most Probable Number (MPN) assay for enumeration of diesel-degrading organisms in rhizosphere soil	92
4.2.3	Soil lipase assay as a measure of biological enzyme activity in the rhizosphere	95
4.2.4	Statistical analysis	96
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>97</b>
4.3.1	Quantitative hydrocarbon-degrader community changes measured by MPN assay	97
4.3.2	Soil lipase activity – a bioindicator to monitor changes in rhizosphere microbial populations during rhizoremediation	103
4.3.3	Comparison between grass species for influence on rhizosphere microbial community	108
4.3.3.1	<i>Quantitative hydrocarbon-degrading community changes</i>	108
4.3.3.2	<i>Soil lipase activity changes in rhizosphere soil</i>	110
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>4.5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>119</b>

---

**CHAPTER 5: Molecular ecology: DNA fingerprints to investigate soil microbial community structure 120**

---

<b>5.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Materials and methods</b>	<b>123</b>
5.2.1	DNA extraction from soil	123

5.2.2	PCR	123
5.2.3	DGGE	124
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>5.5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>132</b>

---

**CHAPTER 6: Enhanced degradation of aliphatic hydrocarbons in soil planted with Australian grasses** **133**

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<b>6.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Materials and methods</b>	<b>136</b>
6.2.1	Grass rhizosphere soil sampling	136
6.2.2	Extraction of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) from soil	136
6.2.3	Determination of TPH concentration by gas chromatography	137
6.2.4	Statistical analysis	138
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>139</b>
6.3.1	TPH removal in the rhizosphere of Australian grasses and unplanted soil	139
6.3.2	Comparison between species for extent and rate of TPH removal	148
<b>6.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>6.5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>160</b>

---

**CHAPTER 7: Relative rhizoremediation performances of Australian grasses in diesel/oil contaminated soil** **161**

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<b>7.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Materials and methods</b>	<b>164</b>
7.2.1	Statistical analysis	164
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>7.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>7.5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>179</b>

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**CHAPTER 8: General discussion** **180**

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<b>References</b>	<b>190</b>
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<b>Appendix I: Candidate Australian native grass species based on selection criteria</b>	<b>204</b>
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<b>Appendix II: Germination of native grasses in high-nutrient potting mix</b>	<b>205</b>
--	------------

<b>Appendix III: Examples of typical recorded chromatograms showing no detected TPH profiles relative to the internal standard (IS) in plant tissue</b>	<b>206</b>
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<b>Appendix IV: Summary tables (1-6) of Pearson correlation coefficients</b>	<b>207</b>
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<b>Appendix V: Published paper</b>	<b>210</b>
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## SUMMARY

The breakdown of contaminants in soil resulting from microbial activity that is enhanced in the presence of the plant root zone (rhizosphere) has been termed *rhizoremediation*. To date, Australian native plants have not been assessed for their hydrocarbon rhizoremediation potential. The use of native plants offers an economically feasible and environmentally sustainable cleanup option for the rehabilitation and restoration of hydrocarbon contaminated sites in Australia. The aim of the study was to evaluate the potential of Australian native grass species for the rhizoremediation of aliphatic hydrocarbon contaminated soil from a mine site.

Candidate Australian native grass species (*Poaceae*) were selected following the development of essential and desirable growth criteria. Nine perennial Australian grasses were evaluated for seedling emergence in sandy loam soil sourced from a mine site which was artificially contaminated with a 60:40 diesel/oil mix at concentrations of 30 000 mg/kg, 10 000 mg/kg, 5 000 mg/kg and 0 mg/kg (control). Seedling emergence was not adversely affected by the presence of hydrocarbon contamination at the exposed concentrations for eight of the nine species studied ( $p > 0.05$ ). Three promising species were assessed for relative growth performance in diesel/oil contaminated (10 000 mg/kg, 5 000 mg/kg) and uncontaminated (control) soils in greenhouse studies to assess their tolerance of aliphatic hydrocarbon contaminated soil.

*Cymbopogon ambiguus* (Lemon Scented grass) is a summer growing perennial with widespread distribution throughout Australia including the region where the mine site is situated. *Brachiaria decumbens* (Signal grass) (naturalised) is adapted to humid tropical areas of Australia and is native to the site and sourced from seed banks. *Microlaena stipoides* (Weeping grass var. Griffin) is a cool season grass, widely distributed throughout Australia in moister regions. The three evaluated species survived for 120 days in the diesel/oil contaminated soil at the exposed concentrations without adverse growth affect ( $p > 0.05$ ). In some instances (e.g. *C. ambiguus*) growth stimulation occurred in the presence of

contamination producing significantly more root biomass compared with the control ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

Most hydrocarbon degradation is believed to occur through microbial processes, and so the plant-associated microbial community was examined in the three tolerant species. The assessment of the influence of grass on the abundance and activity of microorganisms in the rhizosphere revealed species-specific plant-induced changes in the soil microbial community. Selective enrichment of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms was demonstrated in the rhizosphere soil of the Australian grasses tested, to varying degrees. *C. ambiguus* appeared to have the greatest influence on stimulation of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms, followed by the cool season grass *M. stipoides*. *B. decumbens* showed consistently lower numbers of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms in rhizosphere soil over time compared to the other two species ( $p < 0.01$ ). The influence of grasses on microbial community structure (defined as community DNA fingerprint) in diesel/oil contaminated soil suggested no new microbial population was favoured by the grasses (qualitative shift), rather there were relative quantitative changes in existing members of the microbial population. Soil lipase activity did not appear to be an optimal bioindicator of rhizoremediation and may encompass total soil microbial activity not exclusively the hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms of interest.

The assessment of biodegradation of hydrocarbons in soil is essential to characterise the effectiveness of plant species in rhizoremediation. Residual diesel and oil concentrations (as total petroleum hydrocarbons, TPH) were measured using Gas Chromatography. The presence of single species successfully enhanced the removal of hydrocarbons from soil (for all species). All showed significantly lower residual hydrocarbon concentrations than those in unplanted soil after 100 days ( $p < 0.01$ ). Significantly, it was not necessary to add N and P to achieve up to 90% reduction in hydrocarbon concentrations in the soil. The relative performance of each grass species varied. In soil planted with *C. ambiguus* hydrocarbon concentrations were reduced faster and to a greater extent than the other species studied, from 10 000 mg/kg to approximately 1 100 mg/kg TPH (88% removal). Similar endpoint success was recorded for

*M. stipoides* which facilitated 80% reduction in hydrocarbon concentrations. Interestingly, *B. decumbens* (the only naturalised species) did not perform as well as the other species (although still significantly better compared to unplanted controls), with hydrocarbon concentrations reduced to approximately 4 500 mg/kg (49%). Hydrocarbon concentrations in unplanted (control) soil were reduced by 45% through natural biodegradation processes. Plant root and shoot tissue was periodically assessed for hydrocarbon accumulation and was shown to be negligible. A multispecies planted trial using *C. ambiguus* plus *B. decumbens* had no additional influence on total TPH removal. The final TPH removal efficiency in the multispecies trial was not significantly different ( $p > 0.05$ ) from that of the best single species performer of the two i.e. *C. ambiguus*. In a field application the planting of multiple species may still be desirable in order to preserve site biodiversity and assist rehabilitation of the area.

A strong relationship between abundance of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms in the rhizosphere and hydrocarbon biodegradation was demonstrated for all species ( $p < 0.01$ ). Those species which showed greatest stimulation of the microbial population resulted in enhanced TPH removal from soil. These species were the summer grass *C. ambiguus* and the winter species *M. stipoides*. This may allow for broader application both seasonally and geographically across Australia. *B. decumbens* showed successful rhizoremediation to a lesser degree, but may still be an option in multiple planting strategies.

This investigation identified three Australian grass species (from the nine evaluated) that are candidates for further investigation for *in situ* rhizoremediation potential at field scale.

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## PUBLICATIONS

### Journal article

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### Refereed conference proceedings

**Gaskin, S.**, Soole, K. and Bentham, R. (2008) Rhizoremediation of hydrocarbon-contaminated soil using Australian native grasses. Society for Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC). 5<sup>th</sup> SETAC World conference. Sydney, Australia, 3-7 August, 2008. Platform presentation.

**Gaskin, S.**, Soole, K. and Bentham, R. (2008) Australian native grasses enhance microbial remediation of hydrocarbon-contaminated soil. International Society for Microbial Ecology (ISME). 12<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Microbial Ecology: Microbial Diversity – Sustaining the Blue Planet. Cairns, Australia, 17-22 August, 2008. Poster.

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### Editorial features

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## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
<b>Figure 1.1</b> Mechanisms of phytoremediation.	14
<b>Figure 3.1 (a)</b> Root and shoot lengths (mm) of <i>B. decumbens</i> (Signal grass) grown in uncontaminated control soil and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth. <b>(b)</b> Image of <i>B. decumbens</i> at 12 weeks growth across all treatments.	70
<b>Figure 3.2 (a)</b> Root and shoot lengths (mm) of <i>C. ambiguus</i> (Lemon scented grass) grown in uncontaminated control soil and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth. <b>(b)</b> Image of <i>C. ambiguus</i> at 12 weeks growth across all treatments.	71
<b>Figure 3.3 (a)</b> Root and shoot lengths (mm) of <i>M. stipoides</i> (Weeping grass) grown in uncontaminated control soil and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth. <b>(b)</b> Image of <i>M. stipoides</i> at 12 weeks growth across all treatments.	72
<b>Figure 3.4</b> Root and shoot biomass production (g) of <i>B. decumbens</i> (Signal grass) grown in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth.	74
<b>Figure 3.5</b> Root and shoot biomass production (g) of <i>C. ambiguus</i> (Lemon Scented grass) grown in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth.	75
<b>Figure 3.6</b> Root and shoot biomass production (g) of <i>M. stipoides</i> (Weeping grass) grown in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w) at 4, 8 and 12 weeks growth.	75
<b>Figure 3.7</b> Relative growth rates (RGR) of grass roots (biomass) in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w).	77
<b>Figure 3.8</b> Relative growth rate (RGR) of grass shoots (biomass) in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w).	77

<b>Figure 4.1</b> Example MPN assay showing release of fluorescein (yellow wells) and fluorescence (UV exposed) as positive for microbial growth of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms.	<b>94</b>
<b>Figure 4.2</b> Hydrocarbon-degrading microbial populations over time in diesel/oil contaminated soil (1% w/w) from the rhizosphere of <i>B. decumbens</i> (planted) and unplanted control as determined by MPN assay.	<b>98</b>
<b>Figure 4.3</b> Hydrocarbon-degrading microbial populations over time in diesel/oil contaminated soil (1% w/w) from the rhizosphere of <i>C. ambiguus</i> (planted) and unplanted control as determined by MPN assay.	<b>100</b>
<b>Figure 4.4</b> Hydrocarbon-degrading microbial populations over time in diesel/oil contaminated soil (1% w/w) from the rhizosphere of <i>M. stipoides</i> (planted) and unplanted control as determined by MPN assay.	<b>102</b>
<b>Figure 4.5</b> Time course lipase activity in diesel/oil (1% w/w) contaminated rhizosphere soil of <i>B. decumbens</i> (planted) and unplanted (control) soil.	<b>104</b>
<b>Figure 4.6</b> Time course lipase activity in diesel/oil (1% w/w) contaminated rhizosphere soil of <i>C. ambiguus</i> (planted) and unplanted (control) soil.	<b>106</b>
<b>Figure 4.7</b> Time course lipase activity in diesel/oil (1% w/w) contaminated rhizosphere soil of <i>M. stipoides</i> (planted) and unplanted (control) soil.	<b>107</b>
<b>Figure 4.8</b> Hydrocarbon-degrading microbial populations over time in diesel/oil contaminated soil (1% w/w) from the rhizosphere of Australian grasses ( <i>B. decumbens</i> , <i>C. ambiguus</i> and <i>M. stipoides</i> ) and unplanted (control) soil.	<b>109</b>
<b>Figure 4.9</b> Soil lipase activity over time in diesel/oil contaminated soil (1% w/w) from the rhizosphere of Australian grasses ( <i>B. decumbens</i> , <i>C. ambiguus</i> and <i>M. stipoides</i> ) and unplanted (control) soil.	<b>111</b>
<b>Figure 5.1</b> PCR amplification of 16S rDNA of soil samples obtained from rhizosphere of grasses and unplanted controls.	<b>125</b>

<b>Figure 5.2</b> Comparison of DGGE profiles of PCR-amplified 16S rDNA gene fragments from rhizosphere (planted) and unplanted diesel/oil contaminated soils over time.	<b>127</b>
<b>Figure 6.1</b> Removal of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) over time in the rhizosphere of <i>B. decumbens</i> (planted) and unplanted control soil.	<b>141</b>
<b>Figure 6.2</b> Removal of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) over time in the rhizosphere of <i>C. ambiguus</i> (planted) and unplanted control soil.	<b>142</b>
<b>Figure 6.3</b> Removal of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) over time in the rhizosphere of <i>M. stipoides</i> (planted) and unplanted control soil.	<b>143</b>
<b>Figure 6.4</b> Removal of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) over time in the rhizosphere of a mixed planting with <i>B. decumbens</i> and <i>C. ambiguus</i> (planted), and unplanted control soil.	<b>145</b>
<b>Figure 6.5</b> Examples of typical recorded chromatograms showing changes in TPH profiles relative to the internal standard (IS) over three experimental time points in a planted treatment ( <i>M. stipoides</i> ).	<b>147</b>
<b>Figure 6.6</b> Rates of TPH removal in planted soil (single grass species and multispecies treatments) and unplanted control soil.	<b>149</b>
<b>Figure 7.1</b> Pattern of TPH degradation and changes in number of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms (MPN) and lipase activity over time in soil planted with <i>B. decumbens</i> .	<b>166</b>
<b>Figure 7.2</b> Pattern of TPH degradation and changes in number of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms (MPN) and lipase activity over time in soil planted with <i>C. ambiguus</i> .	<b>169</b>
<b>Figure 7.3</b> Pattern of TPH degradation and changes in number of hydrocarbon degrading microorganisms (MPN) and lipase activity over time in soil planted with <i>M. stipoides</i> .	<b>172</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table 1.1</b> Physicochemical properties of selected hydrocarbons.	<b>5</b>
<b>Table 1.2</b> Environmental conditions affecting phytoremediation.	<b>9</b>
<b>Table 1.3</b> Grass species shown to have hydrocarbon tolerance.	<b>22</b>
<b>Table 1.4</b> Grass species shown to facilitate rhizoremediation of hydrocarbon pollutants.	<b>26</b>
<b>Table 1.5</b> Application of phytoremediation to Australian soil contamination.	<b>36</b>
<b>Table 2.1</b> Physical and chemical properties of Weipa mine site soil.	<b>51</b>
<b>Table 2.2</b> Selected <i>Poaceae</i> screened for hydrocarbon tolerance and rhizoremediation potential.	<b>56</b>
<b>Table 3.1</b> Germination of Australian grasses in control soil (0%) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5%, 1% and 3%) (w/w).	<b>68</b>
<b>Table 3.2</b> Root to shoot ratios of biomass in uncontaminated soil (control) and diesel/oil contaminated soil (0.5% and 1% w/w).	<b>79</b>
<b>Table 7.1</b> Pearson correlation coefficients for measured parameters in the rhizosphere of <i>B. decumbens</i> .	<b>167</b>
<b>Table 7.2</b> Pearson correlation coefficients for measured parameters in the rhizosphere of <i>C. ambiguus</i> .	<b>170</b>
<b>Table 7.3</b> Pearson correlation coefficients for measured parameters in the rhizosphere of <i>M. stipoides</i> .	<b>173</b>