

## Mercury mobilization by chemical and microbial iron oxide reduction in soils of French Guyana

Jennifer Harris-Hellal, Michel Grimaldi, Evelyne Garnier-Zarli, Nouredine Bousserhine

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1 Short title: **Iron oxide and mercury biogeochemistry in tropical soils**

2

3

**General research paper**

4

5 Title: **Mercury mobilization by chemical and microbial iron oxide reduction in soils of**  
6 **French Guyana**

7

8 Jennifer Harris-Hellal<sup>1\*</sup>, Michel Grimaldi<sup>2</sup>, Evelyne Garnier-Zarli<sup>1</sup> and Noureddine  
9 Bousserhine<sup>1</sup>

10

11 <sup>1</sup> UMR 7618 BioEMCo, Equipe Ibios, LBSE. Faculté des Sciences et Technologies

12 Université Paris XII - Val de Marne. 61 avenue du Général de Gaulle

13 94010 Créteil cedex

14 <sup>2</sup> UMR 7618 BioEMCo, Equipe Impacts des changements globaux sur les transferts (H<sub>2</sub>O,

15 CO<sub>2</sub>, solutés) et particulaires. Centre IRD d'Ile de France. 32 Avenue Henri Varagnat, 93143,

16 Bondy Cedex, France.

17 \* Present address: Bureau de Ressources Géologiques et Minières (BRGM), 3 avenue Claude

18 Guillemin, 45060 Orléans, France.

19

20 **Corresponding author:** Dr. Noureddine Bousserhine, UMR 7618 BioEMCo, Equipe Ibios,

21 LBSE, Faculté des Sciences et Technologies. Université Paris XII - Val de Marne. 61 avenue

22 du Général de Gaulle 94010 Créteil cedex

23 Email: bousserhine@univ-paris12.fr Tel: (+33) 1 45 17 16 59. Fax: (+33) 1 45 17 19 99.

24

25 **Key words:** mercury, iron oxides, chemical reduction, ferri-reducing bacteria, French Guyana

1 **Abstract**

2

3 Iron oxy(hydr)oxides (oxides) are important mercury sinks in tropical oxisols and the  
4 geochemistry of these two elements are thus closely entwined. We hypothesized that bacterial  
5 Fe-oxide reduction in anoxic conditions could be a significant mechanism for mobilizing  
6 associated Hg. Iron oxide and mercury solubilisation in presence of two chemical reducers  
7 (ascorbate and dithionite, dissolving amorphous and amorphous plus well crystallized Fe-  
8 oxides, respectively) was compared to their solubilisation in presence of autochthonous ferri-  
9 reducing bacteria. This work was carried out on two soil profiles from a small catchment  
10 basin in French Guyana, an oxisol (O) from a well drained slope and a water-saturated  
11 hydromorphic soil (H).

12 The chemical reductions showed that in the oxisol 20 and 48 % of total Hg ( $Hg_T$ ) was  
13 associated to amorphous and well crystallized iron oxides, respectively. However, in the  
14 hydromorphic soil, no Hg seemed to be associated to amorphous iron oxides while the well  
15 crystallized fraction contained less than 9 % of  $Hg_T$ . Chemical Fe-oxide reduction showed  
16 that Hg solubility was correlated to Fe reduction in the oxisol, demonstrating a relationship  
17 between the geochemistry of these two metals.

18 During bacterial growth, while bacterial iron reduction solubilised up to  $3.2 \text{ mg Fe g}^{-1}$   
19 soil in the oxisol sample,  $Hg_T$  remained unchanged. No mercury was detected in the culture  
20 medium either. However, chemical analysis showed a decrease of the amounts of Hg  
21 associated to amorphous and well crystallized Fe-oxides after 14 days of incubation,  
22 underlining the potential for iron-reducing bacteria to modify mercury distribution in soil.

23

24

25

## 1 **Introduction**

2

3 Amazonian soils have been accumulating atmospheric mercury (Hg) for several millions of  
4 years and register natural background levels of Hg up to ten times those found in temperate  
5 soils (Carmouze *et al.*, 2002). On top of that, human activities, and in particular gold mining,  
6 have contributed to raising the levels of Hg in these regions. Indeed, it has been estimated that  
7 around 5 000 tons of Hg have been dumped in the whole Amazonian area since the beginning  
8 of the gold rush towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nriagu, 1994).

9 In pristine soils of the Amazonian basin, high mercury concentrations have been  
10 measured in Fe-oxide rich oxisols that contain little organic matter. Conversely, in  
11 hydromorphic soils that contain little Fe, lower Hg concentrations have been measured.  
12 Several studies have identified relationships between Hg and Fe contents in soils (Roulet and  
13 Lucotte, 1995; Roulet *et al.*, 1998; Roulet and Grimaldi, 2001) and it is now generally  
14 accepted that in organic-poor soils, such as oxisols, Fe-oxides play an important role in  
15 adsorbing Hg. Thus, the geochemistry of these two elements may be strongly linked. This  
16 explains the lower amounts of Hg measured in hydromorphic soils in which most of the iron  
17 has been reduced and exported, along with the mercury, via the aquifer.

18 The Hg adsorbed to Fe-oxides has little risk of being exported from the well drained  
19 oxisols, except via **natural surface** erosion and soil transformation. However, modern gold  
20 mining and deforestation **expose** soils to sunlight and rain and the excavation of the gold-  
21 containing soils causes previously immobile mercury to encounter conditions that (i) favour  
22 its erosion and transport **in** watersheds (Oliveira (de) *et al.*, 2001; Lacerda *et al.*, 2004;  
23 **Béliveau *et al.*, 2009**) and (ii) create disorganized hydromorphic areas where all the  
24 geochemical conditions necessary to favour methylation are brought together (Guedron,  
25 2008). Indeed, Hg methylation is generally considered to occur in anoxic soils and sediments

1 (Morel *et al.*, 1998), mainly by microbial methylation of inorganic Hg (Gadd, 1993; King *et*  
2 *al.*, 2002). Once methylated, methylmercury (MeHg) can be transported via the aquifer or by  
3 soil water runoff or erosion, to streams and rivers (Morel *et al.*, 1998; Wasserman *et al.*,  
4 2003). Once in the water system, MeHg is readily accumulated along the food chain and can  
5 become an environmental and sanitary hazard as it can be consumed by local fish-eating  
6 populations (Veiga *et al.*, 1999).

7  
8         Although geochemical conditions and erosion are a well recognized means of  
9 remobilizing Hg, little attention has been given to soil microbial communities, although their  
10 activity could play an important role in Hg distribution and speciation. Indeed, in natural  
11 environments, and in particular in the tropics, microbial Fe-reduction is a major factor in the  
12 mobilization of Fe (Stemmler and Berthelin, 2003). Ferri-reducing bacteria reduce Fe in  
13 anoxic conditions by using it either as a major final electron acceptor in anaerobic respiration  
14 or as a minor electron acceptor during fermentation metabolism. During this process, it has  
15 been demonstrated that heavy metals adsorbed to iron oxides can be mobilized. (Addy *et al.*,  
16 1976; Schwertmann and Latham, 1986; Francis and Dodge, 1989; Lovley, 1993; Trolard *et*  
17 *al.*, 1995; Bousserhine *et al.*, 1999; Quantin *et al.*, 2001; Quantin *et al.*, 2002; Cornell *et*  
18 Schwertmann, 2003; Garrido *et al.*, 2003; Bradl, 2004; Neaman *et al.*, 2004; Noubactep *et al.*,  
19 2005; Cooper *et al.*, 2006). However, although bacterial Fe reduction is frequently mentioned  
20 as being an important factor of heavy metal mobilization, to our knowledge, there is no  
21 available data on the impact of this reductive dissolution on Hg mobility.

22  
23         The aim of this study was to evaluate and compare the impact of chemical and  
24 microbial Fe-oxide reduction on the mobilization and distribution of associated Hg in tropical  
25 ferralitic soils. The chemical reducers used were ascorbate and dithionite that extract

1 amorphous ( $\text{Fe}_{\text{Asc}}$ ) and amorphous plus well crystallized ( $\text{Fe}_{\text{CBD}}$ ) Fe-oxides, respectively.  
2 Microbial reduction was carried out with autochthonous soil bacteria. The soils **studied** were  
3 an oxisol (O) and a hydromorphic soil (H) from a small catchment basin in French Guyana of  
4 which the downstream flats were gold-mined towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and again in  
5 the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, high Hg concentrations could be found locally.

6

## 7 **Material and methods**

8

### 9 *Sample collection*

10

11 Soil samples were collected in December 2005 from the catchment basin of the Combat creek  
12 (1 km<sup>2</sup>), situated at approximately 10 km from the village of Cacao in French Guyana  
13 (52°23'W, 4°35'N). Soil profiles up to 1 m deep were sampled with a metal auger, and each  
14 10 cm **layer** was immediately sealed in sterile hermetic polyethylene bags. Two soil profiles  
15 were considered in this study: an oxisol (O) collected from a well drained slope and a  
16 hydromorphic soil (H) from the **toeslope**. These soils did not appear to have been directly  
17 affected by gold-mining as a logical continuity in vertical variations was observed; for  
18 example organic matter getting scarce with depth.

19

### 20 *Soil preparation and characterization*

21

22 The collected samples were air dried at 25°C, sieved at 2 mm and hermetically **sealed** at 4°C  
23 until use. Initial analyses were carried out on all samples by the National Institute of  
24 Agronomic Research (INRA, Arras, France). They consisted in the determination of 5  
25 granulometric fractions without decarbonation (NF X 31-107), organic carbon (C) and total

1 nitrogen (N) (NF ISO 10694 and NF ISO 13878), and total Fe (NF EN ISO 11885). Finally,  
2 pH was measured in water with a 1:2.5 ratio soil: solution (NF ISO 10390).

3

#### 4 *Chemical iron reduction*

5

6 Chemical iron reduction was followed over time on homogenised samples of the 70-80 cm  
7 deep horizon of O and H using ascorbate and dithionite to reduce amorphous ( $\text{Fe}_{\text{Asc}}$ ) and well  
8 crystallized Fe-oxides ( $\text{Fe}_{\text{CBD}}$ ), respectively. These samples were chosen firstly because of  
9 their depth which induced low organic matter contents, thus increasing the possibilities of  
10 interactions between mercury and mineral elements, and secondly for their total iron and  
11 mercury contents which made them representative of their soil type (i.e. oxisol or  
12 hydromorphic soil).

13

14 Amorphous Fe-oxides were extracted using a modified application of the ascorbate  
15 method as described by Ferdelman, (1988). Briefly, 10 g of sodium citrate ( $\text{Na}_3\text{C}_6\text{H}_5\text{O}_7$ ) and  
16 10 g of sodium bicarbonate ( $\text{NaHCO}_3$ ) were added to 200 ml of ultra pure water that was  
17 deionised by bubbling with filtered nitrogen, before adding 4 g of ascorbic acid, for a final pH  
18 of 8. One gram of soil (dry weight, dw) was placed in a 30 ml polypropylene centrifugation  
19 tube (Nalgene, France) with 10 ml of reagent and agitated at room temperature. **This**  
20 **temperature was chosen in order to avoid Hg volatilization.**

21

22 Crystallized Fe-oxides were extracted using the Carbonate, Bicarbonate, Dithionite  
23 (CBD) method of Mehra and Jackson (1960), modified by Jeanroy *et al.* (1991). Briefly, 0.2 g  
24 soil (dw) was placed in a centrifuge tube with 20 ml of reagent (78.4 g  $\text{l}^{-1}$  sodium citrate and  
9.8 g  $\text{l}^{-1}$  sodium bicarbonate in ultra pure water) for a 1/100 soil weight/reagent ratio. Sodium

1 dithionite was added at a ½ ration soil weight/dithionite (0.4 g tube<sup>-1</sup>), the tubes were agitated  
2 and incubated under agitation at room temperature.

3 **During** the ascorbate **extraction**, triplicate samples were harvested after 6, 12, 24, 48,  
4 72 and 120 hours of extraction, and **during** the dithionite **extraction**, triplicate samples were  
5 harvested after 2, 4, 8, 12, 24, 48 and 96 hours of extraction. Samples were immediately  
6 centrifuged at 5000 x g for ten minutes at 4°C. The pellets were resuspended in 2 ml of ultra  
7 pure water, centrifuged a second time and both supernatants were pooled. The supernatant  
8 was then filtered (0.45 µm acid rinsed filtered, Minisart SRP 25, Sartorius) and acidified (pH  
9 1) with HCl (37 %) to prevent metal precipitation and **preserved** at 4°C until analysis. The  
10 remaining soil pellet was air dried and crushed to < 100 µm and also conserved at 4°C until  
11 further analyses.

12 Chemical extracts were analyzed for Hg and Fe, as described below. Moreover, Fe<sub>Asc</sub>  
13 and Fe<sub>CBD</sub> were also extracted from the 50-60 and 90-100 cm deep horizons of soils O and H,  
14 with an extraction time of 72 h. **This extraction time was chosen after the extraction kinetics**  
15 **demonstrated that the maximum amount of iron was extracted after 72 hours.**

16

### 17 *Microbial iron reduction*

18

19 As chemical extractions showed (see results), significant quantities of Hg and Fe were  
20 leached only in the Fe-rich oxisol (O), thus, only this soil was investigated in bacterial iron  
21 reduction experiments. The three depths used correspond to different soil colours, described  
22 according to the Munsell Soil Colour Charts (2000). At 50-60 cm, the soil was dark  
23 yellowish brown (10YR4/6), at 70-80 cm it started evolving towards a heterogenic dark  
24 brown and red colour, and at 90-100 cm, it was clearly double phased with brownish-yellow  
25 and red volumes (5YR5/6 and 10R4/8).



1 Microbial iron reduction was followed in soil microcosms set up in sterile hermetic  
2 250 ml glass plasma bottles (BioBlock, France). Microcosms consisted in 5 g of each soil  
3 sample and 100 ml of modified Bromfield medium (Bousserrhine, 1995), of the following  
4 composition for one litre of MilliQ® water; MgSO<sub>4</sub>.7H<sub>2</sub>O (0.5 g); K<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub> (0.5 g);  
5 (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> (1 g), yeast extract (0.15 g) and glucose (1 g). Each soil sample was prepared in  
6 triplicates. Anoxic conditions were initiated by flushing microcosms with N<sub>2</sub> for 10 min.  
7 Incubations were carried out in the dark at 28°C for 14 days without shaking except prior to  
8 sampling.

9 During the incubation, several parameters were measured in the culture medium:  
10 carbon mineralization, glucose consumption, Fe(II) production and Hg solubilisation. At the  
11 end of the incubation, the microcosm medium was recovered and analyzed for Hg and Fe, and  
12 total Hg was measured in the soil. Moreover, the soil was subjected to Fe<sub>Asc</sub> and Fe<sub>CBD</sub>  
13 selective extractions as described previously.

14

#### 15 *Mercury analysis*

16

17 Total Hg (Hg<sub>T</sub>), in soils and in chemical extracts, was analyzed with an Automatic Mercury  
18 Analyzer (AMA 254, Courtage Analyses, France), detection limit 0.01 ng. Soil samples were  
19 crushed in an agate mortar to < 100 µm. About 100 mg were then placed in the AMA 254 and  
20 analyzed. In brief, the sample is heated to 550°C and all products of decomposition, including  
21 mercury, are carried by a stream of oxygen through a catalytic tube where Hg<sub>T</sub> is transformed  
22 into elementary mercury (Hg<sup>0</sup>) which then readily adsorbs to a gold-trap. The fixed mercury  
23 is then released by heating the gold-trap at 450°C and the mercury quantified by atomic  
24 adsorption spectrometry. Concentrations of standard reference materiel (MESS-3) did not  
25 exceed the range of concentrations announced (0.091 ± 0.008 µg g<sup>-1</sup>). Extraction supernatants

1 were analyzed using the same method by analyzing 400  $\mu\text{l}$  of each sample. All liquid samples  
2 were previously filtered ( $< 0.45 \mu\text{m}$  Teflon filters, Minisart SRP 25, Sartorius) and acidified  
3 to pH 1 (HCl, 37 % Suprapur).

4  
5 Total dissolved Hg ( $\text{Hg}_D$ ) in bacterial microcosm medium was analyzed by Cold  
6 Vapor Atomic Fluorescence Spectrophotometer (CVAFS), detection limit 17 pg, as described  
7 by Cossa *et al.* (2002). All liquid samples were previously filtered ( $< 0.45 \mu\text{m}$  Teflon filters,  
8 Minisart SRP 25, Sartorius) and acidified to pH 1 (HCl, 37 % Suprapur). Briefly, the sample  
9 is mineralized with  $\text{BrCl}_2$ , and reduced to elemental mercury ( $\text{Hg}^0$ ) with stannous chloride  
10 ( $\text{SnCl}_2$ ). A bubbling system then causes the elemental mercury to be caught on a gold trap  
11 before being measured using a 2500 CVAFS Mercury detector (TEKRAN, Canada).  
12 Concentrations of standard reference material (ORMS3) did not exceed the range of  
13 concentrations announced ( $12.6 \pm 1.1 \text{ pg g}^{-1}$ ).

#### 15 *Iron analysis*

16  
17 **Chemical extracts** and microcosm medium were analyzed after filtration ( $0.45 \mu\text{m}$  acid-  
18 washed membrane filter, Minisart SRP 25, Sartorius) and acidification at pH 1 with HCl (37  
19 %) by ICP-AES (Vista MPX, Varian) for total Fe. Standards were prepared from an ICM 240  
20 (Promochem, VWR) solution.

21 Reduced Fe ( $\text{Fe}^{\text{II}}$ ), was also measured in the medium at regular intervals (after 1, 2, 3,  
22 4, 9 and 14 days of incubation) using a colorimetric method with orthophenanthroline-  
23 chlordrate. Briefly 0.1 to 1 ml of filtered samples ( $0.45 \mu\text{l}$  acid rinsed filters, Minisart SRP  
24 25, Sartorius) were put in a 25 ml graduated glass vial with 1 ml of orthophenanthroline (0.5  
25 %) and completed to 25 ml with MilliQ water. After 10 min the absorbance was read at 490

1 nm. Readings were compared to a standard curve established with dissolved anhydrous  
2 ferrous sulphate ( $\text{Fe}(\text{NH}_4)_2(\text{SO}_4)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ).

3

#### 4 *Bacterial metabolism*

5

6 During the incubations, carbon mineralization was followed by measuring  $\text{CO}_2$  evolution  
7 daily in the microcosm's atmosphere with an infrared spectrophotometer (Berly 100, Cosma).

8 Glucose concentration in microcosms was measured daily in samples of microcosm  
9 medium with a D-Glucose enzymatic test (Boehringer Mannheim, France). Samples were  
10 filtered ( $0.45 \mu\text{m}$ , Minisart, Sartorius) prior to analysis.

11 Sulphate reduction was followed by measuring sulphide ( $\text{S}^{2-}$ ) formation in the culture  
12 medium. This was carried out using a kit (Spectroquant, Merck), analogue to NF ISO 10530.  
13 This kit measures sulphide concentrations in a range of 0.02 to  $1.5 \text{ mg S}^{2-}\text{l}^{-1}$ . Samples were  
14 filtered ( $0.45 \mu\text{m}$ , Minisart, Sartorius) prior to analysis.

15 Finally, redox potential and pH were measured in microcosms at the beginning and the  
16 end of the incubation with Eh/pH electrodes (Metrohm, France).

17

#### 18 *Statistical analysis*

19

20 Homogeneity of variances was checked using a Bartlett's test and normality using a Shapiro-  
21 Wilk's test. When variances were not homogeneous between replicates, real standard  
22 deviations (SD) were presented in the figures; otherwise, the overall SD was calculated and  
23 displayed as the interval associated to each sample mean. Our data ( $\text{CO}_2$  and iron  
24 solubilisation) did not follow a normal distribution ( $P\text{-value} < 0.05$ ), thus, a Friedman non  
25 parametrical test for paired data was run for each soil depth to identify the effect of time on

1 data distribution, and a Kruskal-Wallis non parametrical test and a multicomparaison test  
2 were run to identify differences between soil depths. The results for CO<sub>2</sub> and Fe solubilisation  
3 identified an effect of time (i.e. increase during the experiment) and no differences between  
4 soil depths ( $P_{Fe} = 0.643$  and  $P_{CO_2} = 0.617$ ).

5 Regression analyses were carried out between Hg and Fe solubilised during the  
6 chemical Fe extractions and between CO<sub>2</sub> evolution and Fe solubilisation in the microcosms.  
7 The R<sup>2</sup> and P-value are given in the corresponding paragraphs and significant correlations are  
8 presented graphically.

9 Student t tests were run on the molar ratios calculated between Fe and Hg, in the iron  
10 oxide CBD and ascorbate extractions, at the beginning and the end of microcosm incubations  
11 (Fig. 6), to determine whether differences were significant.

### 13 *Extraction and incubation quality assurance and control (QA/QC)*

14  
15 To avoid contamination, all materials used in this work were acid-washed twice with HNO<sub>3</sub> (5  
16 %), then rinsed several times with Milli-Q® water before use.

17 The extraction reagents (ascorbate and CBD) were prepared in Milli-Q® water and  
18 analysed for Hg contents as blanks. On average we measured 0.089 ng Hg g<sup>-1</sup> ± 0.003 in the  
19 ascorbate and 0.223 ng Hg g<sup>-1</sup> ± 0.007 in the dithionite. These values are very low compared  
20 to the amounts measured in the samples.

21 Blank microcosms containing sterile Bromfield medium were incubated in the same  
22 conditions as the soil containing ones and analysed for CO<sub>2</sub> evolution, Fe(II), Fe<sub>T</sub> and Hg<sub>T</sub>.  
23 Whereas these tests were negative for CO<sub>2</sub> and Fe, we measured 0.87 ± 0.3 pg Hg l<sup>-1</sup>  
24 medium.

25

## 1 **Results**

2

### 3 *Soil characteristics*

4

5 Table 1 presents soil texture and organic carbon contents in three depths of each soil profile.

6 The oxisol (O) was very rich in clay, up to 75 % with quantities of fine **silt** and **coarse** sand

7 ranging from 5 to 15 %. The texture triangle defines this soil as **clay**. The hydromorphic soil

8 (H) was not as rich in clay (< 35 %), its dominant component being **silt** (~ 45 %), followed by

9 sand (up to 40 %). The texture triangle describes this soil as a fine **clay**-loam soil. Organic

10 carbon contents were low and decreased with depth in both soils.

11

12  $Fe_T$  and  $Hg_T$  soil contents were very different in O and H (Table 2). Quantities of  $Fe_T$

13 were up to 10 times higher in O compared to H and ranged from 198.1 mg  $Fe\ g^{-1}$  soil in the

14 50-60 cm horizon, to 290.6 mg  $Fe\ g^{-1}$  soil in the 90-100 cm horizon. In H, the maximum  $Fe_T$

15 was found at 70-80 cm: 20.7 mg  $g^{-1}$  soil, it was of 13.4 and 8.4 mg  $Fe\ g^{-1}$  soil in the 50-60 and

16 the 90-100 cm horizons, respectively.  $Hg_T$  decreased slightly with depth in O, from 294.1 ng

17  $Hg\ g^{-1}$  soil in the 50-60 cm horizon, to 248.7 ng  $Hg\ g^{-1}$  soil in the 90-100 cm one. In H,  $Hg_T$

18 was on average 134 ng  $Hg\ g^{-1}$  soil in the first two horizons and then increased to 338.6 ng  $Hg$

19  $g^{-1}$  soil in the 90-100 cm one.

20

21

### **Insert Table 1**

22

23 The selective extractions carried out before kinetic reductions (Table 2) showed a

24 good repeatability. In O, the percentage of  $Fe_{Asc}/Fe_T$  decreased with depth from 6.9 to 1.7 %,

25 as did the percentage  $Hg_{Asc}/Hg_T$  (19.8 to 8.5). Also in O, CBD extracted up to 77.3 % of  $Fe_T$ ,

1 and 48 % of  $Hg_T$ . Although significant quantities of Hg were leached with  $Fe_{Asc}$  and  $Fe_{CBD}$   
2 extractions, no significant correlation was observed between the two elements.

3 In H, the ascorbate extraction yielded up to 14 % of  $Fe_T$ , however,  $Hg_{Asc}$  was not  
4 detectable (nd) by AMA 254 in the extractant (Table 2). The CBD extracted 100 % of  $Fe_T$  in  
5 the 90-100 cm horizon and up to 9 % of  $Hg_T$  in the 70-80 cm horizon. No significant  
6 correlations were observed between Fe and Hg in H.

7

8

### Insert Table 2

9

#### 10 *Kinetics of chemical iron oxide reduction*

11

12 The kinetics of chemical Fe-oxide reduction by ascorbate and CBD are presented in  
13 Fig. 1. The citrate in CBD acts as a complexant and prevents Al, Fe or other metals from  
14 precipitating. In O, Hg and Fe were leached simultaneously over time with both ascorbate and  
15 CBD. During ascorbate extraction, the maximum of  $Hg_{Asc}$  and  $Fe_{Asc}$  were leached after 48  
16 hours, while during CBD extraction,  $Hg_{CBD}$  was leached faster (12 h) than  $Fe_{CBD}$  (48 h). In H,  
17 on the contrary, no  $Hg_{Asc}$  was detected along with  $Fe_{Asc}$ , but  $Hg_{CBD}$  appeared to be leached  
18 simultaneously to  $Fe_{CBD}$  in this soil, although values were a lot smaller than in O.

19

20

### Insert Fig. 1

21

22 Regression analyses were run between Hg and Fe leached during Fe chemical  
23 extractions when possible. Results demonstrate a clear correlation ( $R^2 = 0.84$ ,  $P = 0.003$ )  
24 between Fe and Hg extracted with dithionite and a less significant correlation ( $R^2 = 0.51$ ,  $P =$

1 0.070) for ascorbate (Fig. 2). In H on the other hand, the relation between Fe and Hg for  
2 dithionite gave a  $R^2 = 0.21$  and could not be calculated for ascorbate as Hg was not detectable.

3  
4 **Insert Fig. 2**

5  
6 *Microbial iron oxide reduction*

7  
8 Carbon mineralization (Fig. 3) increased considerably during the first 4 days of incubation in  
9 all three horizons (Friedman test,  $P < 0.001$ ), before slowing down. The amount of C  
10 mineralized at the end of the experiments was  $5.1 \pm 0.3 \text{ mg g}^{-1}$  soil on average and no  
11 significant differences were given between soil depths (Kruskal Wallis test,  $P = 0.617$ ).  
12 Glucose was totally consumed after four days (Fig. 3). The amount of carbon that evolved in  
13 the form of  $\text{CO}_2$  in the microcosm atmosphere represented 72 % of the carbon provided by the  
14 glucose.

15  
16 **Insert Fig. 3**

17  
18 The redox potential (Eh), decreased rapidly (data not shown) and the Eh measured at  
19 the end of the incubations was  $-190 \pm 47 \text{ mV}$  on average in all microcosms. The pH increased  
20 during incubations in all three soils from  $4.7 \pm 0.25$  to  $5.3 \pm 0.25$ .

21 The formation of sulphides was detected from day 8 onwards, and at the end of the  
22 incubation we measured on average  $80 \mu\text{g S}^{2-} \text{ g}^{-1}$  soil in the microcosm medium (data not  
23 shown).

24

1 **Insert Fig. 4**

2

3 During the incubation, total dissolved Fe ( $\text{Fe}_D$ ) increased in the microcosm medium  
4 (Fig. 4). Slightly more Fe was solubilised in the 90-100 cm horizon;  $3.5 \text{ mg Fe g}^{-1}$  soil,  
5 compared to the 50-60 and 70-80 cm horizons;  $3 \text{ mg Fe g}^{-1}$  soil at the end of the incubation  
6 but overall differences were not significant (Kruskal-Wallis test,  $P = 0.643$ ). These solubilised  
7 quantities represent 2.1; 1.5; and 1.8 % of  $\text{Fe}_{\text{CBD}}$  or 21, 42 and 70 % of  $\text{Fe}_{\text{Asc}}$  in the 50-60, 70-  
8 80 and 90-100 cm horizons respectively. A colorimetric test with Orthophenantroline analysis  
9 indicated that all of this Fe was in the form of  $\text{Fe}^{\text{II}}$  (data not shown), confirming that Fe  
10 solubilisation was due to bacterial reduction. Moreover, a significant polynomial correlation  
11 was calculated between Fe solubilisation in the inoculation medium and  $\text{CO}_2$  evolution (Fig.  
12 5).

13

14 **Insert Fig. 5**

15

16 According to the chemical reduction of iron, the solubilisation of 2.1, 1.5 and 1.8 %  
17 of  $\text{Fe}_{\text{CBD}}$  should have led to the solubilisation of at least 2.4, 1.6 and  $1.3 \text{ ng Hg g}^{-1}$  soil, and  
18 the solubilisation of 21, 42 and 70 % of  $\text{Fe}_{\text{Asc}}$  to the solubilisation of 12.8, 14.6 and  $15.1 \text{ ng}$   
19  $\text{Hg g}^{-1}$  soil in the 50-60, 70-80 and 90-100 cm horizons, respectively. However, dissolved Hg  
20 ( $\text{Hg}_D$ ) was very low and constant throughout the experiment, averaging  $8.6 \pm 2.3 \text{ ng g}^{-1}$  soil,  
21 as was the total mercury in the solid phase.

22

23 The amount of Hg (nmol) extracted per  $\mu\text{mol Fe}$  in the ascorbate and CBD fractions  
24 before and after the incubation is presented in Fig. 6. Results showed that Hg was much more  
25 concentrated in the amorphous fraction (up to  $14 \text{ nmol Hg } \mu\text{mol}^{-1} \text{ Fe}$ ) than in the CBD



1 fraction ( $< 0.25 \text{ nmol Hg } \mu\text{mol}^{-1} \text{ Fe}$ ). After the incubation, these ratios had significantly  
2 decreased (Student t tests) in the 50-60 and 70-80 cm horizons for the ascorbate extractions ( $P$   
3  $< 0.05$ ) but not in the 90-100 cm horizon ( $P = 0.077$ ). They had also significantly decreased in  
4 all the horizons in the CBD extraction ( $P < 0.05$ ).

## 6 Insert Fig 6

## 8 Discussion

9  
10 The aim of this study was to compare chemical and microbial reduction of iron oxides in  
11 tropical ferrallitic soils of French Guyana, and to evaluate its impact on mercury release. It is  
12 a well accepted fact that Fe-oxides are sinks for various major and trace metals including Al,  
13 Mn, Cr, Ni, Cd, Zn, Co, Pb and U, and that bacterial Fe-reduction contributes to re-mobilizing  
14 these metals (Schwertmann, 1991; Bousserhine *et al.*, 1998; Bousserhine *et al.*, 1999;  
15 Quantin *et al.*, 2001; Dominik *et al.*, 2002; Quantin *et al.*, 2002; Stemmler and Berthelin,  
16 2003; Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Noubactep *et al.*, 2005; Cooper *et al.*, 2006). It is also more and  
17 more accepted that Fe-oxides play an important role in the geochemistry of Hg, especially in  
18 iron-rich tropical soils (Roulet and Lucotte, 1995; Roulet *et al.*, 1998; Grimaldi *et al.*, 2001).  
19 However, although re-mobilization of Hg by Fe-oxide reduction has often been suggested, to  
20 our knowledge, there is no data that demonstrates it.

21 A kinetic approach of the reduction of Fe-oxides by chemical and microbial processes  
22 was used to determine the potential solubilisation of Fe and Hg in tropical ferrallitic soils of  
23 French Guyana. The results enabled us to estimate the amounts of Hg associated to  
24 amorphous and well crystallized Fe-oxides, which can potentially be mobilized in anaerobic  
25 conditions by ferri-reducing bacteria.

1

## 2 *Soil characteristics and Fe and Hg distribution*

3

4 Both soils under study, O and H, were very different from a textural point of view and  
5 concerning  $Fe_T$  and  $Hg_T$  contents. O is an oxisol, containing **a lot of clay and iron oxides**, as  
6 reported for these types of soils (Boulet *et al.*, 1993), whereas the hydromorphic soil  
7 contained little clay and Fe, but more sand and **silt**, due to soil transformations in anoxic  
8 conditions and the export of fine particles (Boulet *et al.*, 1993; Tessier *et al.*, 2003). The Hg  
9 concentrations measured in the oxisol were in the range of concentrations previously reported  
10 in French Guyana; 240-320 ng g<sup>-1</sup> soil (Roulet and Lucotte, 1995). In pristine hydromorphic  
11 soils, these authors measured Hg contents in a range of 50-100 ng g<sup>-1</sup> soil which is lower than  
12 those measured in the present study (133-338 ng g<sup>-1</sup> soil). This suggests that although soil  
13 horizons were not apparently **disturbed**, past gold-mining had contaminated these soils.  
14 **Indeed**, Guedron (2008) **found droplets of metallic Hg in** hydromorphic soils from the same  
15 catchment basin as **in this study that most probably came from past gold-mining.**

16 In the oxisol, O, the maximum  $Fe_{CBD}$  yielded by selective extractions was 77 % of  $Fe_T$ .  
17 The remaining iron is most probably resistant goethite or hard Fe nodules (Trolard *et al.*,  
18 1995).  $Fe_{Asc}$  represented less than 7 % of  $Fe_T$  in all the studied depths of the O soil profiles,  
19 and decreased with depth, indicating an increase **in iron** crystallinity (Fritsch *et al.*, 2005).

20 In the hydromorphic soil, H, on the contrary, up to 100 % of  $Fe_T$  was extracted with  
21 CBD, but not systematically. The presence of hard nodules in the soil profile indicates that  
22 free iron has re-precipitated, probably during the dry seasons when soils are partially  
23 oxygenated.  $Fe_{Asc}$  was slightly higher than in O (up to 14 %), and no **relations** were observed  
24 with depth. In this blue-grey coloured soil, nearly all the iron oxides have been reduced and  
25 exported, leaving only hard iron concretions.

1 Hg was only significantly leached during selective extractions of iron forms in O,  
2 where  $Hg_{CBD}$  and  $Hg_{Asc}$  represented up to 48 and 19 % of  $Hg_T$ , respectively. However, there  
3 wasn't a significant correlation between  $Fe_{Asc}$ ,  $Fe_{CBD}$  and  $Hg_T$ . Although they didn't measure  
4  $Hg_{CBD}$ , Roulet and Lucotte (1995) did not observe any correlations between  $Fe_{CBD}$  and  $Hg_T$  in  
5 soils of French Guyana, either. These authors concluded that although Fe-oxides play an  
6 important role in Hg absorption, they do not solely control Hg retention in these soils.

7

8 *Hg was significantly associated to iron oxides in the oxisol*

9

10 Iron oxide dissolution is controlled by crystallinity and surface area (Trolard *et al.*, 1995;  
11 Cornell and Schwertmann, 2003). Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that high Al  
12 substitution in Fe-oxides decreases their solubility (Rajot, 1992; Bousserhine *et al.*, 1998;  
13 Bousserhine *et al.*, 1999). During the chemical Fe-oxide reduction, Fe was continuously  
14 dissolved to a maximum as observed by other authors (Bousserhine, 1995; Trolard *et al.*,  
15 1995). Our results did not enable us to distinguish different iron oxides by variations in the  
16 rates of dissolution as the dissolution curves were smooth; this has also been pointed out by  
17 Trolard *et al.* (1995). The curves of Hg release, during chemical Fe-oxide reduction, were  
18 similar to Fe release, especially in the CBD fraction of the oxisol. Although no significant  
19 correlation was previously calculated between  $Hg_T$  and  $Fe_{CBD}$ , the regression analysis carried  
20 out between  $Hg_{CBD}$  and  $Fe_{CBD}$  demonstrated a clear relationship between the two metal  
21 fractions ( $R^2=0.84$ ).

22 In the hydromorphic soil, H, little Fe or Hg was solubilised in the CBD or the  
23 ascorbate fraction and no significant relationships could be established between the two  
24 metals. However, total mercury concentrations in this soil went up to  $338 \text{ ng g}^{-1}$  soil in the

1 deepest sample (90-100 cm), which suggests that there could be other important mercury  
2 adsorbing phases, other than iron oxides and organic matter.

3 In the oxisol, O, the percentages of Hg<sub>T</sub> in the extraction fractions were higher for  
4 CBD than for ascorbate, although the ratio nmol Hg / μmol Fe was much higher in the  
5 amorphous Fe-oxide fraction, thus suggesting that it is only the small amount of amorphous  
6 Fe-oxides that limits their Hg adsorption. Indeed amorphous Fe-oxides have the largest  
7 surface areas and are reputed to be more efficient adsorbents for trace elements than well  
8 crystallized oxides (Cornell and Schwertmann, 2003).

#### 9 10 *Bacterial iron reduction was related to carbon mineralisation*

11  
12 Due to the first results obtained with the chemical Fe-oxide reduction, bacterial Fe-  
13 reduction was only carried out in soils from the oxisol profile. The three horizons studied (50-  
14 60, 70-80 and 90-100 cm) were chosen because of the variations in colour, and thus  
15 theoretically their different contents in Fe-oxide types, e.g. goethite and hematite. These  
16 depths also differed in their carbon contents which could influence microbial density and  
17 activity. Thus, we tried to cover the vertical differentiation of our soil profile.

18 Although soil characteristics varied with depth, this did not interfere on carbon  
19 mineralisation, induced by the addition of glucose, or iron solubilisation as they were no  
20 significant differences between horizons ( $P_{Fe} = 0.643$  and  $P_{CO_2} = 0.617$ ). Eh decreased rapidly  
21 in all microcosms and all of the dissolved Fe was ferrous Fe (Fe<sup>II</sup>) indicating that Fe was  
22 dissolved by a reduction process. The correlation between Fe solubilisation and carbon  
23 mineralization indicated that reduction was biologically mediated (Lovley and Phillips, 1986;  
24 Bousserhine *et al.*, 1999). All of the glucose was consumed after 3 days incubation and up to  
25 72 % of the provided carbon was transformed into CO<sub>2</sub>. This also corresponded to a decrease

1 in soil respiration and  $\text{Fe}^{\text{II}}$  production, thus suggesting that in the present study, available  
2 carbon was the limiting factor, in which case we have possibly underestimated the potential  
3 bacterial Fe-oxide reduction in these soils. Another limiting factor could be the accessibility  
4 of reducible iron as suggested by Stemmler and Berthelin (2003). Indeed, while in the case of  
5 chemical CBD extractions, a citrate buffer prevented metal precipitation in the solution, in  
6 natural conditions, however, soluble aluminium and iron can re-precipitate on the surfaces of  
7 iron oxides and prevent their reduction by bacteria (Dominik *et al.*, 2002).

### 9 *Bacterial iron reduction influenced Hg distribution in soils*

10  
11 According to the chemical extractions, the bacterial reduction of  $3 \text{ mg g}^{-1}$  soil in the  
12 50-60 and 70-80 cm horizons and of  $3.5 \text{ mg g}^{-1}$  in the 90-100 cm horizon could have led to  
13 the solubilisation of 2.4, 1.6 and  $1.3 \text{ ng Hg g}^{-1}$  soil if we consider the CBD fraction  
14 (amorphous plus well crystallised oxides) or to the solubilisation of 12.8, 14.6 and  $15.1 \text{ ng Hg}$   
15  $\text{g}^{-1}$  soil if we just consider the amorphous fraction. However, although we have observed the  
16 solubilisation of other trace metals such as Ni and Cr (unpublished data), in the present  
17 experiment we did not measure an increase of  $\text{Hg}_D$  in the microcosm medium, or a decrease  
18 of  $\text{Hg}_T$  in the solid phase.

19 Nevertheless, when selective extractions were performed on the soil samples after  
20 microbial incubations, the amounts of mercury associated to  $\text{Fe}_{\text{Asc}}$  and  $\text{Fe}_{\text{CBD}}$  had decreased  
21 significantly, even more than the theoretical amounts that should have been mobilized by iron  
22 reduction (in comparison to chemical reduction). This Hg could then have re-precipitated on  
23 metabolites or formed organo-mercurial complexes, or more likely, due to the presence of  
24 sulphates in Bromfield medium, and their reduction to sulphides towards the end of the  
25 incubation, Hg could have re-precipitated in the form of HgS. Indeed, for  $[\text{S}^{2-}] > 1.8 \text{ mg g}^{-1}$

1 soil; all dissolved Hg forms HgS. However, in laboratory conditions, bacterial iron reduction  
2 carried out on pure goethite have shown that 100 % of Fe<sub>CBD</sub> can be reduced by ferri-reducing  
3 bacteria (Bousserrhine *et al.*, 1999). If this were the case in the oxisol used in this study then  
4 in the right conditions and with a sufficient source of carbon, we can imagine that kilograms  
5 of mercury could rapidly be remobilized in the watersheds.

## 6 7 **Conclusion**

8  
9 Our results demonstrate that a significant amount of Hg is adsorbed to Fe-oxides in the Fe-  
10 rich oxisol used in this study. During the chemical reduction of iron oxides, mercury was  
11 significantly leached from the soils, whereas mercury solubilisation was not detected during  
12 the microbially-mediated iron reduction. However, during the later, the distribution of Hg on  
13 amorphous and well crystallized iron oxides was modified. Further work would enable to (i)  
14 assess the dynamics of Hg associated to Fe oxides in soils, in relation to soil pedogenesis and  
15 water table fluctuations (ii) estimate the amounts of Fe and Hg that can be mobilized by  
16 bacteria in natural conditions, i.e. without glucose or Bromfield medium, and (iii) identify the  
17 micro-organisms present in the soils, and their potential to transform the available Hg.

18  
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