Identifying toxic materials in water with machine learning

21 March 2022

Along with masters student María Claudia Rincón Remolina, the researchers used fluorescence spectroscopy to quickly detect key toxins in the water. They also ran the results through a modeling program that accurately predicts the composition of the water.

The composition can be used as a benchmark for further testing of other samples, Rincón explains. The researchers are using a convolutional neural network that processes data in a grid-like topology, such as an image. It's similar, she says, to the type of modeling used for classifying hard to identify fingerprints, facial recognition and even self-driving cars.

"The modeling takes into account variability in the background of the water quality and can separate hard to detect signals, and as a result it can achieve highly accurate results," says Rincón.

The research looked at a mixture of organic compounds that are toxic, including naphthenic acids—which can be found in many petroleum sources. By using high-dimensional fluorescence, the researchers can identify most types of organic matter.

"The modeling method searches for key materials, and maps out the sample's composition," explains Peleato. "The results of the initial sample analysis are then processed through powerful image processing models to accurately determine comprehensive results."

While results to date are encouraging, both Rincón and Dr. Peleato caution the technique needs to be further evaluated at a larger scale—at which point there may be potential to incorporate screening of additional toxins.

Peleato explains this potential screening tool is the first step, but it does have some limitations since not all toxins or naphthenic acids can be
detected—only those that are fluorescent. And the technology will have to be scaled up for future, more in-depth testing.

While it will not replace current analytical methods that are more accurate, Dr. Peleato says this approach will allow the oil sands industry to accurately screen and treat its waste materials. This is a necessary step to continue to meet the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment standards and guidelines.

The research appears in the *Journal of Hazardous Materials*.

DOI: 10.1016/j.jhazmat.2022.128491

Provided by University of British Columbia

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