Vermicology II – The potential, products and problems of Vermiculture.

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Abstract

The two main products of vermiculture are earthworm biomass and vermicompost. Excess earthworm stock may be sold on and used as bait or as a source of protein, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. Vermicompost has generic properties that make it a suitable soil amendment, of potential benefit to organic production. This paper will address issues of stabilization of organic "wastes" using particular earthworm species, discussing the problems of organic pollutants, heavy metals, and transmission of propagules of pathogens and pests. Published reports of the effects of vermicompost application on soil properties, microbial activity, plant productivity, and on resident earthworm faunas will be reviewed, in particular, the results of glasshouse and field trials using vermicompost or earthworm casts in pasture, horticulture, viticulture, paddy, and broadacre crops. Contrasting technologies and economic issues will not be covered.

Keywords: vermiculture, earthworm casts, sludge stabilization, vermicompost, plant productivity.

Introduction

Vermicomposting is used extensively in China, Cuba, India and Mexico, but the industrial use of earthworms in management of municipal refuse and sewage sludge has only recently been attempted in Australia, Europe and North America. Only a few of the many earthworm species have been trialed for their suitability and efficacy for composting of sewage sludge and municipal wastes. Although there have been many successful results, most schemes have been experimental and short lived, few have been sustained for more than a few years demonstrating the relatively innovative nature of this industry.

Environmental concerns with vermicomposting of sewage sludge and municipal refuse include the fate of heavy metals, major pollutants of sludge. For example, in north America 50-60% of municipal sludges cannot be applied on agricultural land because the cadmium (Cd) content exceeds the permissible heavy metal limit (of 25 ppm) (Tyagi and Couillard, 1991). Different earthworm species deal with heavy metals in different ways: immobilisation and excretion being the most important strategies employed to minimise toxic effects. This implies that the choice of earthworm species depends on the particular task required of it and on the range of products anticipated: protein preparation would best be done using species that egest cadmium, rather than accumulate it. However, this view is an oversimplification and there are a number of important over-riding factors that limit the choice of species.

Other considerations include accumulation and concentration of pesticides such as organochlorines, and the potential for dissemination of pathogens such as enteric bacteria, viruses, parasitic protists (e.g. *Giardia* spp., *Entamoeba* spp. *Cryptosporidium* spp., *Toxoplasma* spp.), nematodes and cestodes, as well as plant pathogens and weed propagules.

The major issues addressed in this synopsis are:

- decomposition of sewage sludge by earthworms;
- suitability and efficacy of different species;
- accumulation of heavy metals;
- accumulation of organic pollutants;
- residues of heavy metals and pollutants in castings;
- potential for transmission of pathogens;
- effect of vermicast/compost on suppression of plant pathogens and on crop yields.

Issues not covered are:

- composting technology and economics;
- comparison of the various composter species.

Background

Increasing population density, combined with restrictions on ocean dumping, incineration and landfilling require innovative methods of disposal of domestic 'wastes'. Appropriate disposal involves both maximum cost-effective recovery of recycleable constituents and transformation of non-recoverable material into forms which do not present environmental hazards (Applehof, 1981). Two traditional methods of disposal that have received a lot of attention are composting and spreading of biosolids on the land as fertilizer. Potential problems with either method relate to the persistence of heavy metals and pesticides and to the dissemination of pathogens (eg. Epstein, 1988). These problems have been dealt with in the past by bulking sewage sludge with innocuous material to dilute concentrations of contaminants and by sterilizing and aerating to reduce pathogens.

Trials on vermicomposting of sewage sludge began in the 1970's (Knight, 1989). Several sewage works in the USA established pilot schemes, amongst the largest were Lufkin, Texas and Keysville, Maryland. The plant at Lufkin could process up to 4 tonnes of sludge a week by spraying thickened sludge over sawdust to create a material suitable for vermiculture using *Eisenia fetida* (Savigny, 1826) the "Tiger worm" or "Compost worm" (Pincince *et al.*, 1981). At Keysville, the method used raised indoor beds and concentrated air-dried sludge. However, the schemes suffered technical difficulties and were uneconomic (Knight, 1989). Many subsequent attempts at vermicomposting of sludge have suffered the effects of extravagant claims, made often by entrepreneurs or environmental zealots, and lacking in rigorous scientific research, as a result few of these early trials were sustainable.

Scientific investigation of vermicomposting of sludge began in New York in 1976 (Hartenstein and Mitchell, 1978). This work was the basis for a workshop entitled "*Utilization of Soil Organisms in Sludge Management*" (Hartenstein, 1978). Other conference proceeedings include those compiled by Applehof (1981). Review articles appear in Edwards & Neuhauser (1988) while more general reviews on earthworm biology and ecology are by Edwards & Lofty (1977), Satchell (1983), Lee (1985), and Edwards & Bohlen (1996)

1. Decomposition of sewage sludge and municipal wastes by earthworms

Vermicomposting uses earthworms to mix, fragment and aerate the source material making it more conducive to microbial activity and generally avoiding the exothermic stage. Vermicomposting has been stated to offer the following advantages over thermophilic composting (Domingues et al., 1997):

- Less manual manipulation of the composting material.
- Greater rates of humification, the processing of organic wastes in 1-2 months.
- Pathogenic microbes are reduced and product can have suppressive effect on soilborne pathogens (as for compost).
- Greater reduction in bioavailable heavy metals than in composting.
- Product is microbially enhanced and has good crumb structure and nutrient status, also contains plant-hormonal agents.
- Potential by-product of earthworm biomass.

Vermicomposting can thus provide an organic product in less time with less handling when compared to thermophilic composting. However composting alone is simpler to manage for the purposes of stabilization and sanitization (i.e., removal of pathogens and weed seeds) (Ingham, 1999). Riggle and Holmes (1994: 60) report on a Canadian company's proprietary "Vermiconversion System" that combines thremophiolic composting for 3-15 days to neutralize pathogens and weed seed, followed by vermicomposting for 30 days.

Earthworms facilitate the stabilization of organic wastes because their activity maintains aerobic conditions and ingested solids are converted into discrete, odorless casts (Waugh & Mitchell, 1981; Haimi & Huhta, 1987; Loehr *et al*., 1988). Earthworms and microorganisms enhance each other's activity in the composting process (Satchell, 1983a). To be useful in sludge management programs, earthworms must readily colonise sludge, increase the stabilization rate compared with other composting methods, and be economical in terms of operating costs and marketability of final products.

Anaerobically-digested sludge was found to be acutely toxic to *Eisenia fetida* but this toxicity disappeared when the sludge was allowed to age for 2 months as thin layers exposed to air (Hartenstein & Mitchell, 1978). Moreover, the subsequent rate of decomposition was accelerated about 2- to 5-fold following its conversion into casts by earthworms Toxicity was believed to relate to redox potential and it was later shown that anaerobic sludge was non-toxic to *E. fetida* only after it attained an E_h of greater than 250 mV as the sludge aged on soil (Kaplan *et al.,* 1980a). A substrate's redox potential (E_h) is its reducing or oxidising capacity, measured in mV potential difference. High E_h values indicate oxidizing conditions determined by factors such as moisture content, oxygen permeability and organic matter content, factors that perhaps reflect a substrate's habitability for earthworms. However, some sludges that have achieved an E_h of greater than 250 mV may still fail to provide adequate nourishment to earthworms due to retention of toxic but unidentified material (Hartenstein and Mitchell, 1978). Organic wastes containing much ammonia or large amounts of inorganic salts are toxic to *E. fetida* according to Edwards (1988).

Hartenstein & Mitchell (1978) reported that *E. fetida*, when placed directly in aerobically-digested sludge drying beds, hasted the decomposition process where the moisture content of the drying sludge was below critical levels. In the absence of earthworms, anaerobic processes predominated over aerobic ones and decompostion slowed. In its untreated state, aerobic sludge assumes a rock-like hardness upon drying and is resistant to rewetting, passage of this sludge through earthworms results in casts which have a large surface area, dry rapidly and yet can readily resorb water.

Neuhauser *et al*. (1988) showed that *E. fetida* can double the rate of destruction of volatile solids in aerobically digested sludge after 20 days, probably due to increased aeration and other processes of earthworm activity. These authors also found that optimum *E. fetida* growth was when total sludge solids upper range was about 16% on a wet basis. Experiments by Loehr *et al*. (1988) demonstrated that vermistabilization of fresh aerated sludge with *E. fetida* functioned successfully in trials run for 27 weeks. Conversely, Neuhauser *et al*. (1988) found that as aerobic sludge aged for more that 12 weeks its nutritive value to earthworms decreased rapidly.

Promising early reports from several pilot schemes were not unsustained. Three such schemes are mentioned by Lee (1985). One was a trial in southern California (described by Collier and Livingstone, 1981) that was discontinued despite producing vermicompost favourable for plant growth and acceptable to growers. Another operation established at Lufkin, Texas (Pincince *et al*., 1981) failed when the earthworms died in a particularly hot summer. A third system in Ontario (Canada) used industrial sludges to produce vermicompost which was applied to soils at a rate that was estimated (by Bird and Hale, 1982) to raise the concentration of heavy metals in the soil above the legally prescribed limits within 45 years. Biodegradation of biosolids by composting appears to be a more acceptable option in some situations (Miller, 1991). Vermicomposting could assume a more important role if it could be clearly demonstrated that their maintenance did not add expense or complexity to standard composting techniques, or that the final product had exceptional benefit over conventional composts. One such benefit could be the presence of plant hormone-like compounds (Nielson, 1965; Tomati et al., 1987). Krishnamoorthy and Vajranabhaiah (1986, as reported in Ishmail, 1995) reported plant hormones in the casts of two earthworm species - *Lampito mauritii* Kinberg and *Perionxy excavatus* Perrier, the concentrations of which diminished rapidly as the casts aged for 10 weeks, suggesting that fresh casts are more beneficial.

3. Accumulation of heavy metals

Note: µg/g or mg/kg are synonymous with parts per million (ppm).

The term heavy metals is taken to include several elements which have a biological function or are toxic to some organisms. The most important environmental pollutants, listed in Lee (1985), are lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), mercury (Hg), zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), nickel (Ni), antimony (Sb) and bismuth (Bi). Many other elements are involved but most attention has been given to the first two in the list. Because earthworms ingest large quantities of substrate they are particularly susceptible to accumulation of pollutants which may be passed to other animals directly (eg. by predation by birds or mammals), or indirectly via plant uptake of earthworm products from the soil. The main issues are toxicity and the rate and means of heavy metal accumulation in earthworms.

Hartenstein & Mitchell (1978) reported that various sludge treatments with salts of heavy metal at these concentrations were not toxic to *E. fetida* over a six week period: Cd at 100 ppm, Hg at 100 ppm, Cr at 3000 ppm, Ni at 1000 ppm, Pb at 5000 ppm. The same sludge treated with Cu at 2500 ppm or with Zn at 10000 ppm was toxic. Of the foregoing metals, only Cd accumulated in the tissues of *E. fetida* and the authors concluded that this accumulation of Cd only occurs after it has been liberated from sludge by forces such as microbial metabolism. Toxicity studies by Hartenstein *et al*. (1980) found that *E. fetida* fed for 4 weeks on sludge doubled their biomass despite the presence of heavy metals, although long-term sublethal effects may reduce their fertility (Ireland, 1983). When removed from exposure to sublethal concentrations of heavy metals *E. fetida* was capable of compensatory growth (Neuhauser *et al*., 1984).

Toxicity of five heavy metals to *E. fetida* were tested by Malecki *et al.* (1982). Minimum concentrations (in ppm dry weight) that retarded growth were: 50 for Cd; 100 for Cu; 12,000 for Pb, 200 for Ni and 2,000 for Zn. Minimum concentrations for suppression of reproduction (again in ppm) were: 25 for Cd, 100 for Cu, 4,000 for Pb, 200 for Ni and 500 for Zn. The results of their short-term (8 weeks) and long-term (20 weeks) studies showed that Cd was the most toxic in terms of earthworm growth and reproduction. However, their results differed depending on which chemical compound of a heavy metal was fed to the earthworm, especially insoluble forms were less toxic (see also Neuhauser *et al*, 1984). This last finding may explain why conflicting data sometimes appears in the literature on concentrations that have deleterious effects on earthworms.

Numerous authors, as reviewed by Beyer (1981) and Ireland (1983), have reported that earthworms can accumulate heavy metals from both contaminated and non-contaminated environments. Storage ratios or concentrations factors (these two terms are interchangeable and refer to the ratio of a metal in tissue to that in the substrate) tend to be highest in infertile soil and lowest in media high in organic matter, such as sewage sludge. Ireland (1983) states that Cd does not appear to concentrate in earthworm tissues indefinitely and the ratio decreases with increasing Cd concentration, unlike Pb which appears to accumulate continuously. Carter *et al.* (1983) found some regulation of Zn and Cu, but not of Cd which reached a maximum in earthworm tissue of about 34 ppm (cf. 100 ppm recorded by Helmke *et al*. (1979) and 400 ppm found by Mori & Kurihara (1979)). Beyer (1981) calculated the storage ratios for 29 heavy metals from the data of Helmke *et al.* (1979), the only positive values were for Zn, Se, Br Au, Hg and Cd, this latter storage ratio being 28:1.

Graff (1982) examined the accumulation of heavy metals in *Eisenia fetida* and *Eudrilus eugeniae* (Kinberg) before and after feeding on compost made from municipal garbage. The heavy metal contents (in µg/g dry weight) before and after feeding were: for *E. fetida*, Cu 4 to 29, Zn 140 to 640, Pb 3 to 14, Cd 2 to 9, Hg 0.1 to 14; for *Eudrilus eugeniae*: Cu 17 to 55, Zn 165 to 360, Pb 10 to 72, Cd 4 to 6, Hg 1 to 15. These data indicate that the earthworms are extracting the heavy metals from the compost and are concentrating them in their tissues. Except for Cu and Pb, all these final concentrations exceed the minimum EPA accepted thresholds for heavy metals in biosolid products (Anon. 1994).

Heavy metal concentrations for *Aporrectodea caliginosa* (Savigny), a common pasture worm, in soils treated for 10 yrs with municipal waste compost were reported by Ma (1982). The concentration factors in earthworm tissue were ca. 10-140 times for Cd, 2-75 times for Zn, and 0.2-2.6 times for Pb, only sometimes was Cu concentrated while Ni, Fe, Mn and Cr were not concentrated. Similar studies were made by Andersen (1979) and Tomlin *et al.* (1992). Lee (1985) states that the data of Ma (1982) cannot be assumed to apply for other species of earthworms nor for different soils as the physico-chemical state of the soil determines the solubility of the heavy metals added.

Mechanisms of adsorption and excretion of Pb by earthworms are not clearly understood. Although Pb was absorbed by *Eisenia fetida* in investigations conducted by Wielgus-Serafinska & Kawka (1976), as reviewed in Lee (1985), increasing concentrations of Pb in the soil did not result in similar increased concentrations in the earthworm tissues. These workers concluded that increasing environmental concentrations of Pb stimulate excretory mechanisms in *E. fetida*, perhaps through excretion with mucus from the body wall. This is a possible explanation as Fleming and Richards (1982) demonstrated surface adsorption of heavy metals on the mucus coating of *Eisenia fetida*.

The pathways of heavy metal accumulation and excretion vary between species. Earthworms that tolerate high concentrations of toxic heavy metals either do not absorb the metal, accumulate it in a non-toxic form or excrete it efficiently (Ireland & Richards, 1979; Ireland, 1983). Andersen & Laursen (1982) studied the excretion and distribution of 5 heavy metals in 3 species of earthworm. They found the metals to be handled in at least three ways in *Lumbricus terrestris* Linnaeus:

(a) immobilization in fatty (chloragogen) cells of the gut wall

(b) storage in waste nodules (or "brown bodies") formed within the body cavity

(c) excretion through the calciferous glands.

The metals Pb, and Cd were accumulated in the gut wall and from here transferred to waste nodules in *L. terrestris* whereas Mn, Zn and Fe were regulated, mainly through excretion via the calciferous glands. Although fed on different contaminated soils, the total Pb content of another pasture worm *Aporrectodea longa* (Ude), which has relatively poor calciferous glands, was 6 µg/g compared with 24 µg/g for *L. terrestris* yet the Pb concentration in waste nodules were 89 ppm and 57 ppm, respectively. This was taken to indicated that a species with poorly developed calciferous glands excretes less Pb. Andersen & Laursen (1982) also found that Cd, which was accumulated by all three earthworm species, was concentrated in *L. terrestris*, *Aporrectodea rosea* (Savigny) and *A. longa* in chloragogen cells (by very effective binding in Cd-metallothioneins) and, only in the latter species, in waste nodules too. The main implication of these different pathways is that Pb and Cd when taken up and stored may be released only when the earthworm dies.

4. Accumulation of organic pollutants

Toxicity and accumulation of various biocides in earthworms, as for heavy metals, is of concern; in particular the fate of pesticide residues and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Several authors have investigated earthworm tissue concentrations of organochlorines (eg. Edwards & Thompson, 1973; Haimi *et al*., 1992), but few data are available for PCBs (eg. Kreis *et al*., 1987).

Pesticide residues in sludge are unlikely to exceed concentrations that are quoted in the literature as being toxic to earthworms, however some can accumulate. Organochlorines are particularly problematical because they are persistent in the environment, are relatively harmless to earthworms, and are lipophilic so may be concentrated in earthworm fatty tissues (Lee, 1985). Other pesticides are apparently not accumulated by earthworms and, although organophospates and carbamates may be more toxic, these compounds are generally less persistent in the evironment.

There is little quantitative information available on the accumulation and transfer of pesticides in earthworms feeding on sludge. However, it is apparent that the concentration and decay rates differ depending upon the species and substrates. *Eisenia fetida* was found to be the most tolerant (except to the carbamate, aldicarb) of several species tested for sensitivity to a range of biocides (Stenersen, 1979 as reported in Lee, 1985).

In soils, organochlorines are also the most important contaminants with regards transfer of pesticides along food chains via bird and mammal predators of earthworms (eg Brown, 1978, Edwards & Lofty, 1977; Lee, 1985). For example, Beyer & Gish (1980) sprayed dieldrin, haptachlor and DDT onto soil plots and measured concentrations in earthworms; average ratios compared to soil were: dieldrin, 8; heptachlor epoxide, 10 and DDT, 5.

5. Residues of heavy metals and pollutants in casts

Few studies have considered the fate of heavy metals in vermicomposts as opposed to studies of earthworm casts from contaminated soils (eg. Morgan & Morgan, 1992). Ireland (1983) stated that total Cd in earthworm casts from contaminated soils was sometimes higher than in the surrounding soils for some species, whereas concentration ratios of Zn, Pb and Cu in casts were more variable. In contrast, Hartenstein *at al*. (1980) reported that passage of sludge through the gut of *E. fetida* did not increase Cd, nor Cu, Ni, Pb and Zn. Carter *et al*. (1983) found that in *Lumbricus rubellus* Hoffmeister, the Cd levels in casts tended to increase as contaminated sludge concentration increased up to a certain level but that Cu and Zn levels showed no relationship with sludge concentrations.

In response to initial observations by Hartenstein & Mitchell (1978), Kaplan *et al*. (1980c) investigated self toxicity and interspecific toxicity of casts of *E. fetida*. They found that casts produced when feeding on soil were self-toxic and cross-toxic to *Eudrilus eugeniae* (Kinberg) and to two *Amynthas* spp but this toxicity disappeared after casts were aged 2 weeks. However, the casts produced by *E. fetida* and *Eudrilus eugeniae* when fed on activated sludge were self-toxic but not cross-toxic. Aging for 6 weeks made these casts more highly toxic both to themselves and one another except where the casts had been amended with soil. The cause of this toxicity was attributed to microbial populations within the casts and it was recommended that soil and fresh sludge be added when making vermicompost to ensure the earthworms were not exposed to high concentrations of their own casts.

6. Potential for transmission of pathogens and weed seeds.

Earthworms feeding on sludge may be potential vectors of a wide range of parasitic and pathogenic organisms (Lee, 1985; Satchell, 1983a). Activated sludge does not generally support growth to human enterics, but anaerobic sludge does (Taber, 1976). It has been determined that passage of organic material through the gut of an earthworm can reduce numbers of some micororganisms and increase numbers of others (Satchell, 1983a). Spores and cysts of some parasites pass unharmed through the gut of earthworms while some pathogens are reduced. A recent report by Eastman (1999) has found that USA EPA's required pathogen reduction in indicator organisms can be obtained using vermicomposting as an alternative method for stabilization of Class A biosolids.

Brown & Mitchell (1981) reported that *Eisenia fetida* feeding on a growing medium inoculated with *Salmonella eneritidus*, reduced populations of this enteric pathogen by 42 times, compared to controls, after 28 days with the greatest rate of reduction of pathogen in the first 4 days. Satchell (1983a) reports the findings of two researchers (Day, 1950, and Brusewitz, 1959) that two species of Enterobacteriaceae, *Serratia marcessens* and *Escherichia coli* inoculated in soil were killed when ingested by the earthworm *Lumbricus terrestris*.

Eggs of some nematode parasites of mammals and birds, eg. *Ascaris lumbricoides*, *A. suum* and *Ascarida galli*, are not destroyed following passage through the earthworm *Lumbricus terrestris* Linneaus, (Rysavy, 1969; Hartenstein & Mitchell, 1978). Associations between nematodes and earthworms were reviewed by Poinar (1978) who listed some 150 associations only some of which are parasitic to hosts other than earthworms. Edwards and Lofty (1977) summarised the range of helminth parasites for which earthworms are intermediate hosts. Which, if any, of these parasites are of concern in a municipality would depend on the local levels of public health and hygiene and numbers of residents or visitors from infected regions.

Microbial pathogens are perhaps the greatest concern, yet the NSW EPA code (Anon., 1994) specifically targets only faecal coliform and salmonellae and makes no mention of other enterobacteria nor viruses. The code of practice for reduction of pathogens in biosolids products for "Unrestricted Use" set out by NSW EPA (Anon., 1994) tentatively approves three processes: composting, heating and drying, and pH adjustment with heating. In addition the composted product is subjected to a minimum pathogen regrowth potential assay system as approved by the EPA. The three processes, respectively, require a compost to reach 53°C for 5 days or 55°C for 3 days; heating to 70°C for 1 hr and drying to 75% solids; raising the alkalinity to pH 12 with heating to 52°C and drying to >50% solid. Such regimes would invariably be fatal for earthworms unless they were free to migrate to areas where temperatures were abated. Survival of the earthworms would be advantageous for colonization of fresh substrates, but may be undesirable if they acted as agents for transmission of pathogens or pollutants. The proposed EPA requirements for stabilisation of biosolid products for "Restricted Use" are less stringent (Anon., 1994). It should be borne in mind that the current New South Wales EPA guidelines, which serve as standards for some other Australian states, are under review and subject to change.

Weed seeds will need to be eliminated, either at source or in the finished product, for vermicomposting to be a viable alternative to conventional composting.

7. Effect of worm castings on crop yields

Worm casts from an organically rich source medium are variously referred to as "vermicast" or as "vermicompost". Despite claims by some producers, it is only recently that there been solid scientific results on the subject of the usefulness of vermicompost on plant growth (see Edwards & Burrows, 1988). Very little of the material that earthworms ingest is actually digested. However, during passage through the gut of the earthworm ingested material is mixed, and has its physical, chemical and biotic components altered, particularly the microbial activity tends to be enhanced. The structure and composition of the casts is largely dependent on the composition of the food source (Edwards & Burrows, 1988; Buchanan *et al.*, 1988). Organic materials differ greatly in their nutrient content; processing by the earthworm can change the form of these compounds but has very little effect on the total amounts contained. The physical structure of the casts also depends on the source material, however the final product usually comprises finely mixed and relatively stable aggregates with good structure, porosity, and moisture-holding capacity (Edwards, 1981; Lee, 1985). The composition of casts from earthworms feeding on sewage sludge can differ substantially from that produced by earthworms feeding on unamended soils.

Casts produced from soil have increased nitrate and exchangeable calcium, magnesium, potassium and phosphorus than the original soil (Lunt & Jacobson, 1944). Other chemical and physical changes in earthworm casts compared to parent soil are given by Zhang & Schrader (1993) and changes in microbial populations are covered by Satchell (1983).

Edwards & Burrows (1988) compared the nutrient contents of several organic wastes before and after being worked by earthworms: all had increased nitrate, soluble P and exchangeable potassium, calcium and magnesium when worm-worked. These authors found that emergence and growth of a range of seedlings in pots was frequently enhanced in these worm-worked compared to unworked media. Fresh earthworm casts may contain high salt soluble concentrations, especially of Na^+, sufficient to damage plants. Stark *et al.* (1978) found that leaching casts with water reduced these salts to tolerable levels while still retaining most of the plant beneficial nutrients.

Some physico-chemical changes imposed on sludge in conversion to vermicompost are given by Hartenstein & Hartenstein (1981). Chemical analyses by Buchanan *et al*. (1988) of vermicompost from a municipal sewage sludge had 48 ppm N-nitrate, 11 ppm available P, 2442 ppm available K, 4354 ppm available Ca and 1858 available Mg. These values were comparable to a commercial compost mix although the composition of the source sludge was not given.

Haimi & Huhta (1987) made comparisons between the physical, chemical and biotic nature of worm-worked and "wormless" sewage sludge and between vermicompost and conventional compost. Whereas the wormless sludge remained as a compact clump, the worms produced a friable mass of castings. Physicochemical analyses revealed only minor differences between worm-worked and other products and these authors concluded that vermicompost was superior to ordinary compost only with regard to its physical structure.

Handreck (1986) compared the porosities, salinities, nutrient contents, pH values and trace elements of several vermicomposts and potting mixes. Vermicomposts varied widely in total nutrient content: most had negligible amounts of soluble N-nitrates but had ample amounts of P and some had high concentrations of Zn and Cu. Plant (*Matthiola incana*) growth in potting mixes reflected the nutrient status of the vermicomposts: in general plants were N deficient (requiring a supplementary supply) and some were further affected by toxic levels of trace elements although there was adequate P (and often K and S) and trace elements. (See also Handreck & Black, 1994).

A glasshouse trial by Springett & Syers (1979) in New Zealand grew ryegrass seedlings for 8 days in soil in pots with or without added phosphorous (P) fertilizer and with or without casts of fieldworms: *Aporrectodea caliginosa* or *Lumbricus rubellus*, the soil and casts they collected from the same pasture site. Their results showed a consistent increase in plant growth in the presence of earthworm casts, in addition that obtained from added fertilizer, of between 5% to 50% in root length and 5% to 49% in shoot length relative to growth in the soils without casts.

In Germany, Graff & Makeschin (1980) grew ryegrass in soil in pots which had either contained and then had removed after 11 days specimens of *L. terrestris*, *A. caliginosa* and *E. fetida*, or had held no earthworms. The grass was harvested three times and total plant yields were compared. Dry matter and root production were significantly higher in the worm-worked soils, for each species, than in the control soils. The increased yields, relative to the controls for *L. terrestris*, *A. caliginosa* and *E. fetida* were: for shoot dry matter, 100%, 68% and 52%, respectively and for total root production, 59%, 38% and 24%, respectively. It is assumed that some contribution to these increased yields is attributable to the presence of casts but that earthworm burrows and exudates also had an influence.

As reported by Lee (1985), Collier (1978) planted sunflower, tomatoes and corn in three treatments: (a) *E. fetida* casts derived from sewage sludge, (b) in unprocessed sludge that was ground to a similar size to the casts and (c) in untreated soil. All plants in (b) treatment died within 2 month whereas they thrived in the other two treatments and plants in treatment (a), i.e., those in *E. fetida* casts, yielded 4 times those in (c). In contrast, Frederickson & Knight (1988) found that tomatoes grown in sludge worked by *E. fetida* showed a reduced rate of development after 109 days compared to tomatoes grown in a commercial compost. This they attributed to a high pH and excess nutrients in the worm-worked material.

In India, Reddy (1988) compared the growth of an ornamental shrub, *Vinca rosea* and rice, *Oryza sativa*, in soils with or without the casts of *Pheretima alexandri*. Those *V. rosea* plants in casts grew better and produced flowers and fruits earlier than plants in soil alone. Rice growing for 4 months in pots with highest concentrations of added casts grew best, the whole plant lengths (means) being 81.5 cm in soil mixed with casts compared to 62.8 cm in soil alone.

One of the first attempts to determine specific effects of vermicompost on some plant pathogens was by Szczech et al. (1993). These authors found that *Phytophthora* and *Fusarium* fungi were suppressed by vermicompost, but that parasitic nematodes were not affected. In contrast, Zambolium et al. (1996) showed that 'agro-wastes' reduced nematodes. Innoculation of sorghum seeds with *Azospirillum brasiliense* and earthworm casts increased growth of sorghum (Savalgi and Savalgi, 1991). *Trichoderma* fungi produce antibiotics that slow or arrest growth of take-all and *Rhizoctonia* fungi. Periera et al. (1998) have studied the survival and saprophytic ability of *Trichoderma harzianum* Rifai and *Bacillus subtilis* Cohn in vermicompost derived from by-products of sugarcane and rice (see also Phae et al., 1990).

Soil borne diseases are believed to be less prevalent on organic farms that regularly use organic soil amendments (Workneh et al., 1993, referred to in Hoitink and Grebus, 1994). Porter (1999) reports that organic vineyards using composts for at least 4 or 5 years in California show significantly reduced root rot in phylloxerated vines (15.3% lower).

Control measures for the potential hazards associated with weed seeds and pathogens in vermicomposts were recently investigated by Buckerfield et al. (1999) who demonstrated that steam pasteurization of vermicompost (at 45 mins at 80ºC) did not reduce its perfomance in promoting raddish test crop growth, while sterilization (60 mins at 120ºC and 105Kpa) rendered it as ineffective as the sand control without vermicomost.

Few reports deal with field trials involving the application of vermicompost. Kale *at a*l. (1992) studied vermicompost in a rice paddy in India. Significant increases in the colonisation of soil by microbes (including N-fixers, Actinomycetes, spore formers and mycorrhizae) occurred in the experimental plots compared to the control plots without added vermicompost. Higher levels of total N in the experimental plot where vermicompost was added was attributed to higher counts of N-fixing microbes. Lee (1985) mentions findings by Khan (1966) that the growth of maize on a loamy soil in Pakistan was enhanced by the addition of casts of *Metaphire posthuma* and that their effect was greater than was obtained with the addition of farmyard manure.

For soybean, worm castings had a stimulating effect on the growth of *Glycine max* (soybeans), with an increase in root length, lateral root number, shoot length, and internodal length of seedlings (Chan & Griffiths, 1998). Casts alone were used or casts + peat-sand mix. Beneficial effects were attributed to presence in casts of plant growth regulators. The application of vermicasts (100 and 300 g per 3.5 kg soil) increased the dry weight of soybean by 40-70%, compared to soil-only control. The N absorbed by the plants from the soil increased from 30 to 50%. P and K in the treated plants were twice that of the control. The amount of organic matter, total N, P and K and available P and K in the soil were also increased (Lui et al., 1991).

Recent studies have shown that vermicomposting operations can benefit a variety of industries, including viticulture. A report by Logsdon (1994) makes passing reference to a study in Pune, India (by H. Jambhekar from Matarasha Agricultural Bioteka) that grapes fertilized with 2 tons of vermicompost per acre (ca. 5 t/ha) per year for five years increased yields to 15 tons per acre, higher than yields under conventional fertilization and there were additional improvements in soils (see also Ismail, 1995).

In Australia, clear benefits have been derived from organic amendments (mulches, composts and vermicomposts) in vinyard management (Buckerfield & Webster, 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 1999). Buckerfield & Webster (1996) demonstrated that vineyards in the Barossa Valley benefited from the applications of organic mulches under-vine rather than 'normal practices' of keeping the soil bare. Higher soil moisture (34%), significant grape yield increases (46%) and increased resident earthworm density (155%) were all recorded. Subsequent trials, reported by Buckerfield & Webster (1998a, 1999), using compost mulches under Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz rootlings at Rutherglen resulted in a rapid increase in stem diameter – by up to 50% in four months. While in McLaren Vale, where composted 'green organics' where used as mulches under one-year old Cabernet Sauvignon vines, increases in shoot length (70%) after 6 weeks led to 300% increase in grape yields within six months. Young Chardonnay vines in the Barossa Valley had double yields when 75 mm of compost mulch were applied. Mulching with compost rather than straw was also found to increase soil moisture and to be effective in suppressing weeds, with optimum application of 50-75 mm depth under vines.

The first published attempt to assess the value of vermicomposts on Australian vineyards were by Buckerfield & Webster (1998b). Surface applications of vermicompost derived from grape marc or pomace, spread undervine and covered with straw or paper mulch, increased the yield of Pinot Noir by 56% at a site in McLaren Vale, SA. At a second site at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills, vermicompost derived from animal manures under a straw mulch increased Chardonnay by up to 35%. Yields with either straw, paper, marc, manure or vermicompost alone did not differ significantly from the untreated control. However, Buckerfield (pers. comm. August, 1999) has subsequently found sustained yield increase from this initial treatment of up to 35% in the subsequent two years harvests.

Conclusions

Early experiments that demonstrated the potential benefits of vermicomposting organic 'wastes' for increasing rates of stabilization and for production of useable products have not been extensively adopted. Various pilot trials and schemes were initiated to put theory into practice, few of which succeeded for more than a short while. Reasons for failure have varied but perhaps the main causes were inability to maintain suitable conditions for earthworm survival. These conditions include regulation of suitable food supplies, temperatures, moisture levels, aeration, and control of contaminants. Only recently have more prolonged and viable operations existed, these serving as demonstration facilities for this developing technology.

Vermicomposting relies almost entirely on one earthworm, *Eisenia fetida*, a generalist able to tolerate wide variations in environmental conditions compared to other species. Only a small fraction of the four thousand species of earthworms known from around the world have been studied with regards their vermicomposting potential. Those species that have been investigated appear to have very different behaviours and requirements, making them suitable for particular conditions and climates. Regardless of these differences, unless a species has better handling properties than *Eisenia fetida* then it is unlikely to be widely exploited commercially.

Assuming the environment could be maintained suitable for earthworm survival with sufficient precision, there then remains problems of contamination by heavy metals, pesticides, pathogens and weeds. The importance for each of these depends on the particular composition and screening of the source material. Levels of toxins and pathogens require monitoring, both before and after processing. Heavy metals are perhaps of greatest concern, and it may be possible to exploit some aspect of earthworm behaviour for their removal. Processing by the earthworms may alter the solubility or stability of some heavy metals, or perhaps enhance other physical, chemical or microbial means of removal (eg. Tyagi and Couillard, 1991). Accumulation of pesticide may be slightly less problematical in the short term as these chemicals and their metabolites often have known rates and products of decay. Earthworms may be used in combination with conventional composting techniques to reduce pathogens and weeds, although the temperatures involved are incompatible for earthworm survival.

A major obstacle for greater uptake of vermicomposting is the need to prove that the products are safe, reliable, and acceptable. Caution is required when promoting potenitial benefits, since over-stated claims and 'snake oil' selling damage the credibility of this industry in its infancy.

Rigorous scientific studies are indicating that vermicomposting of municipal and farm wastes may be a suitable option for production of beneficial products. Composition and consistency of these products would largely depend on the composition of the initial waste materials and of any materials with which they are combined. As for sludge treatment, there would be a requirement to constantly monitor nutrients and contaminants, in both the raw materials and the final products, and to prevent pathogen regrowth. There is a concurrent need for more extensive investigation on the range and rates of applications of vermicomposts so that restrictions and recommendations can be formulated.

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