The Role of Phytotechnology in the Rehabilitation of the BHPBilliton Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine

Thesis submitted by

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Preface

Significant contributions from the following persons were crucial to the progress of this study. Mr Peter Whitehead and Dr Paul Nelson provided generous support and advice in matter of earth science. Associate Professor Paul Gadek and Dr Peter Franks provided vital access to plant growth facilities. Mr Gary Warren contributed his detailed botanical knowledge of northern Australia. Dr Michael Liddell provided essential laboratory equipment and personnel, namely the technical services of Mr Robert Ennis-Thomas. Dr Michael Steele provided statistical advice for the project. Mr David Godwin provided expertise in experimental design. In addition to funding the project, the Environment Department of the Cannington mine also provided travel and accommodation to and from its operational centres. The Advanced Analytical Centre (AAC) at James Cook University and the Townsville and Brisbane offices of Australian Laboratory Services Ltd provided analytical services for this research project.

The following publications resulting from this research project are currently in press or have been accepted for publication at this time;


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Abstract

Phytotechnology utilises the unique biochemical processes of plants to manage and remediate contaminants such as heavy metals, hydrocarbons, radionuclides and pesticides from soil and water. The use of in situ biological systems to rehabilitate large volumes of contaminated soil has enormous potential for application around the globe, particularly in the mining and metal production industries. This study investigated the use of two phytotechnologies (pastoral vegetation covers and chemically-assisted phytoextraction) as environmental tools to manage mine tailings and soil contaminated with mine tailings at the BHPBilliton Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine. The study was conducted in accordance with the mine’s Environmental Management Overview System (EMOS) and employed the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) Investigation Guidelines for heavy metal and metalloid contamination of industrial and commercial soil.

Selected pasture plant species (*Chloris gayana*, *Crotalaria novae-hollandiae*, *Cymbopogon ambiguus*, *Cymbopogon bombycinus*, *Cyperus victoriensis*, *Gomphrena canescens* and *Triodia moesta*) were cultivated in soil contaminated with mine tailings (60 µg Ag g⁻¹, 2039 µg As g⁻¹, 30 µg Cd g⁻¹, 11950 µg Pb g⁻¹ and 4150 µg Zn g⁻¹). The addition of 5 wt% to 35 wt% mine tailings to uncontaminated soil significantly improved the biomass production of *Chloris gayana*. In contrast, the biomass production of the remaining species (all native pasture plants) was significantly reduced on soil contaminated with 5 wt% to 35 wt% mine tailings. The pasture plant species accumulated low concentrations of heavy metals and metalloids from soil contaminated with mine tailings, indicating their suitability for the revegetation of pastoral lands. In addition, limestone amendments to soil contaminated with mine tailings effectively improved the revegetation potential of *Cymbopogon ambiguus*, *Cymbopogon bombycinus* and *Crotalaria novae-hollandiae* on soil contaminated with mine
tailings, in addition to reducing the uptake of heavy metals and metalloids by the plants.

The chemically-assisted phytoremediation of soil contaminated with mine tailings was investigated using *Chloris gayana*, *Crotalaria novae-hollandiae*, *Cymbopogon bombycinus* and *Cyperus victoriensis* and soil amendments of EDTA, DTPA, EDDS, ammonium thiosulphate, ammonium thiocyanate and thiourea. Plant uptake of heavy metals and metalloids resulting from the application of the soil amendments indicated that, based upon published models for the technology, no pasture plant species would be suitable for the chemically-assisted phytoremediation of contaminated soil at the Cannington mine. *Crotalaria novae-hollandiae* and *Cyperus victoriensis*, however, did tolerate the effects of ongoing soil treatments with EDTA and EDDS, while accumulating modest quantities of heavy metals and metalloids, suggesting that vegetation covers with these plants could be used to phytoremediate low levels of soil contamination.

The leaching of Ag, Pb and Zn from mine tailings using weekly amendments of low-ionic-strength solutions of EDTA, ammonium thiosulphate, ammonium thiocyanate, thiourea and sodium cyanate was investigated over a three-month period. EDTA, ammonium thiosulphate and ammonium thiocyanate leached significant quantities of metals from the mine tailings over an approximate eight-week leaching period. EDTA solutions were found to dissolve large quantities of Pb (28.1%) and Zn (12.6%) from the mine tailings. Zinc dissolution was also high using a solution of ammonium thiosulphate (12.1%) and Ag dissolution was only notable using an ammonium thiocyanate solution (83.7%). The data indicate that chemical leaching of the Cannington mine tailings using low-ionic-strength solutions may remove a large proportion of the wastes contained heavy metals thus increasing metal production at the site, in addition to decontaminating a hazardous mine waste material.
This research project concludes that the pasture plant species investigated are highly suited to the revegetation of soil contaminated with mine tailings. In addition, the study concludes that the native pasture plant species that were deemed appropriate for phytotechnology applications at the Cannington mine are not suitable for the chemically-assisted phytoremediation of soil contaminated with mine tailings. The study also concludes that periodic leaching of the mine tailings using chemical reagents employed for phytoextraction applications has the potential to elevate metal production by reprocessing the waste while also reducing its toxicity and environmental risk.
Glossary of Terms

**Chelate:** A large molecular weight organic compound, such as EDTA, DTPA and EDDS, having the ability to form soluble complexes with metallic ions (SSSA, 2004).

**Chlorinated solvents:** Organic solvent containing chlorine atoms, e.g., methylene chloride and 1,1,1-trichloromethane, which are used in aerosol spray containers and in traffic paint (SSSA, 2004).

**Ligand:** A low molecular weight molecule or ion capable of sharing an electron pair during bonding, such as sulphate ($\text{SO}_4^{2-}$), thiosulphate ($\text{S}_2\text{O}_3^{2-}$), cyanate (OCN$^-$) and thiocyanate (SCN$^-$) (SSSA, 2004).

**Metallothioneins (MTs):** Low molecular weight proteins and polypeptides involved in the intracellular fixation and regulation of zinc and copper in plants and in neutralising the effects of toxic elements such as cadmium and mercury (SSSA, 2004).

**PAHs:** Polyaromatic hydrocarbons (SSSA, 2004).

**PCB:** Polychlorinated biphenyl; a pathogenic and teratogenic industrial compound used as a heat-transfer agent; PCBs may accumulate in human or animal tissue (SSSA, 2004).

**Phytochelatin (PCs):** Any of a group of plant peptides that bind metals (Cd, Zn, Cu, Pb, Hg) and play important roles in the detoxification of heavy metals (particularly Cd) in plants (BioTech, 2004).

**Pyrrolizidine alkaloids:** A group of alkaloids characterized by a nitrogen-containing necine, occurring mainly in specimens of the Boraginaceae, Compositeae and Leguminosae plant families (Brown, 2004).
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Access</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Sources</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Copy</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary of Terms</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1. Study Overview

1.1. Introductory statement ................................................................. 1
1.2. Phytotechnology ............................................................................. 4
1.2.1. Heavy metal bioavailability in soil ............................................. 8
1.2.2. Manipulating heavy metal bioavailability in soil ....................... 10
1.3. The phytoextraction of heavy metals by plants .............................. 11
1.3.1. Plant uptake response to heavy metals in soil ............................ 13
1.4. Phytorextraction: phytoremediation and phytomining ................... 14
1.5. Chemically-assisted phytoextraction ............................................. 16
1.6. Research goal ............................................................................... 22
1.6.1. Specific aims ........................................................................... 23
1.7. Thesis outline ............................................................................... 24

## Chapter 2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Site description ............................................................................... 29
2.2. Deposit geology and geochemistry ............................................... 29
2.2.1. Mining and production ............................................................ 32
2.3. Regional and local pedology .......................................................... 34
2.4. Vegetation .................................................................................... 36
2.5. Mine waste management ............................................................... 38
2.5.1. Rehabilitation practices and strategies ..................................... 39
2.6. Plant species selection and description ......................................... 39
2.7. Poaceae ....................................................................................... 42
2.7.1. Astrebla squarrosa (Bull Mitchell) ........................................... 42
2.7.2. Chloris gayana (Rhodes grass) ............................................... 45
2.7.3. Cymbopogon sp. ................................................................. 47
2.7.4. Themeda triandra (Kangaroo Grass) ...................................... 50
2.7.5. Triodia molestas (Spinifex) .................................................... 51
2.8. Fabaceae .................................................................................... 53
2.8.1. Crotalaria novae-hollandiae (New Holland Rattlepod) .......... 53
2.9. Cyperaceae ........................................................................................................55
2.9.1. Cyperus victorinus (Channel Nutgrass) ..................................................55
2.10. Amaranthaceae ..............................................................................................57
2.10.1. Gomphrena canescens (Bachelor’s Buttons) ...........................................57
2.11. Substrate materials .......................................................................................59
2.11.1. Substrate processing ...............................................................................60
2.11.2. Mineralogical characterisation of the substrate components .................61
2.11.3. Substrate preparation .............................................................................64
2.11.4. pH determination ..................................................................................66
2.11.5. Electrical conductivity ........................................................................66
2.11.6. Estimating heavy metal bioavailability ..................................................67
2.11.7. Estimating metal and metalloid distribution ..........................................68
2.12. Plant propagation .........................................................................................69
2.12.1. Biomass preparation .............................................................................70
2.12.2. Chemical amendments .......................................................................71
2.13. Hydrometallurgical leaching .....................................................................72
2.14. Chemical analyses ......................................................................................73
2.15. Quality assurance .......................................................................................74
2.16. Statistical analysis ......................................................................................76

Chapter 3. Phytoextraction of As, Ag, Cd, Pb, and Zn by Subtropical Australian Pasture
Plant Species Grown on Soil Contaminated with Mine Tailings ..........................78
3.1. Introduction ....................................................................................................78
3.2. Materials and methods ................................................................................80
3.3. Results ...........................................................................................................81
3.3.1. Substrate characterisation .......................................................................81
3.3.2. Plant growth for the soil-tailings mixtures .............................................83
3.3.3. Plant uptake of metals and arsenic from soil-tailings mixtures ...............85
3.3.4. Plant growth on limestone amended soil-tailings mixtures ....................90
3.3.5. Plant uptake of metals and arsenic from limestone amended soil-tailings mixtures ..........................94
3.4. Discussion ....................................................................................................98
3.4.1. Plant tolerance and biomass production ...............................................98
3.4.2. Plant uptake of metals and arsenic from ST and STL mixtures ..........100
3.4.3. A note on the classification of Crotalaria nova-hollandiae .....................102
3.4.4. Species selection for revegetation .........................................................103
3.5. Conclusions ................................................................................................104

Chapter 4. The Uptake of Metals and Metalloids by Rhodes grass (Chloris gayana
Kunth cv. ‘Pioneer’) Grown on Mine Tailings and Soil Contaminated with Mine
Tailings ...............................................................................................................106
4.1. Introduction ..................................................................................................106
4.2. Materials and methods ..............................................................................108
4.3. Results .........................................................................................................110
4.3.1. Substrate characterisation .....................................................................110
4.3.2. Plant growth .........................................................................................110
4.3.3. Sequential extraction ........................................................................112
4.3.4. Phytoextraction of As, Cd, Pb, and Zn by Rhodes grass ....................115
4.4. Discussion ..................................................................................................116
4.4.1. Plant growth .......................................................................................116
4.4.2. Metals and arsenic uptake by Rhodes grass .......................................117
4.5. Conclusion ..................................................................................................120

Chapter 5. Chemically-Assisted Phytoremediation of Soil Contaminated with Mine
Tailings using Australian Subtropical Pasture Plant Species .........................122
5.1. Introduction ..................................................................................................122
5.2. Materials and methods ..............................................................................125
5.3. Results ............................................................................................................................... 127
5.3.1. Partial and sequential extractions ............................................................................ 127
5.3.2. Chemical amendment toxicity .................................................................................. 130
5.3.3. Plant chemistry .......................................................................................................... 133
5.4. Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 142
5.4.1. Metal and metalloid availability in the ST mixture .................................................... 142
5.4.2. Chemical amendment toxicity .................................................................................. 144
5.4.3. Phytoremediation potential of the plant-chemical combinations ............................. 146
5.5. Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 153

Chapter 6. Chemically-Assisted Phytoextraction of Metals and Metalloids from Mine Tailings and Soil Contaminated with Mine Tailings using Rhodes grass (Chloris gayana Kunth cv. Pioneer) ...................................................... 155
6.1. Introduction .................................................................................................................... 155
6.2. Materials and methods .................................................................................................. 158
6.3. Results ............................................................................................................................. 160
6.3.1. Metals and metalloids extractability ......................................................................... 160
6.3.2. Plant growth .............................................................................................................. 164
6.3.3. Plant chemistry for contaminated soil ..................................................................... 166
6.3.4. Plant chemistry for fertilised tailings ...................................................................... 173
6.4. Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 178
6.4.1. Chemical tolerance and plant growth ...................................................................... 179
6.4.2. Fertiliser-induced heavy metal solubility ................................................................. 181
6.4.3. Phytoremediation of contaminated soil ................................................................... 182
6.4.4. Phytoextraction of mine tailings ............................................................................. 185
6.5. Conclusions .................................................................................................................... 188

Chapter 7. The Leaching of Ag, Pb and Zn from Cannington Mine Tailings using Novel Chemical Reagents ........................................................................................................... 191
7.1. Introduction .................................................................................................................... 191
7.2. Materials and methods .................................................................................................. 196
7.3. Results ............................................................................................................................. 197
7.3.1. Leachate discoularation .......................................................................................... 197
7.3.2. Silver extraction ...................................................................................................... 198
7.3.3. Lead extraction ........................................................................................................ 201
7.3.4. Zinc extraction ........................................................................................................ 203
7.4. Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 205
7.5. Conclusions .................................................................................................................... 210

Chapter 8. The Role of Phytotechnology in the Rehabilitation of the BHPBilliton Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine: A General Conclusion ............................................................... 212
8.1. The EMOS for the Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine ................................................................ 212
8.2. The revegetation of soil contaminated with mine tailings ............................................. 214
8.2.1. Improved revegetation of contaminated soil using limestone amendments ............ 215
8.2.2. Revegetation of contaminated soil and mine tailings using Chloris gayana ............. 216
8.3. The phytoremediation of mine tailings and soil contaminated by mine tailings .......... 217
8.3.1. A potential new approach to tailings dam management ............................................. 219
8.4. Further research .......................................................................................................... 219

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................... 232

Appendices .............................................................................................................................. 243
List of Figures

Number | Page
--- | ---
Figure 1-1. Classical plant response to increasing heavy metal concentrations in soil (Baker, 1981). | 14
Figure 2-1. The location of the BHPBilliton Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine, NW Queensland, Australia (Wilson, 2002). | 30
Figure 2-2. Aerial photograph of the BHPBilliton Cannington Ag-Pb-Zn Mine (2001) indicating the position of mining infrastructure and the Process Residue Facilities tailing dam complex (Wilson, 2002). | 33
Figure 2-3. The distribution of soil orders in Australia (Ishbell, 1996; ANRA, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 35
Figure 2-4. The distribution of major vegetation groups within Australia (ANRA, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 37
Figure 2-5. The distribution of operating (red) and historical (green) Pb and Zn mines in Australia (GA, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 38
Figure 2-6. The distribution of the Mitchell grasslands plant association (green) on mainland Australia, generally found across an annual rainfall band of 250 mm to 550 mm. (Orr, 1975). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 43
Figure 2-7. *Astrebla squarrosa*. Photo D.J. Edinger (ANBG, 2004). | 44
Figure 2-8. The distribution of *Astrebla squarrosa* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 44
Figure 2-9. *Choris gayana*. Photo R. Randell (ANBG, 2004). | 46
Figure 2-10. The distribution of *Choris gayana* Kunth in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is included. | 46
Figure 2-11. *Cymbopogon ambigius*. Photo R. Davis (ANBG, 2004). | 48
Figure 2-12. The distribution of *Cymbopogon ambigius* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 48
Figure 2-13. *Cymbopogon bombycinosus*. Photo L. Wallis (ANBG, 2004). | 49
Figure 2-14. The distribution of *Cymbopogon bombycinosus* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 49
Figure 2-15. *Themeda triandra*. Photo S.M. Keeling. | 50
Figure 2-16. The distribution of *Themeda triandra* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 51
Figure 2-17. *Triodia moletoi*. Photo D.J. Edinger (ANBG, 2004). | 52
Figure 2-18. The distribution of *Triodia moletoi* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is included. | 52
Figure 2-19. *Cortaderia novae-bollandiae*. Photo L. Wallis (ANBG, 2004). | 54
Figure 2-20. The distribution of *Cortaderia novae-bollandiae* spp. novae-bollandiae in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is included. | 54
Figure 2-21. *Cyperus victoriaezi*. Photo J.S. Smith (ANBG, 2004). | 56
Figure 2-22. The distribution of *Cyperus victoriaezi* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is included. | 56
Figure 2-23. *Gomphrena cansensens*. Photo G.F. Craig and J. Thomas (ANBG, 2004). | 58
Figure 2-24. The distribution of *Gomphrena cansensens* in Australia (ANBG, 2004). The position of the Cannington mine (X) is indicated. | 58
Figure 3-1. Average (N=4) biomass production (g plant⁻¹) of selected subtropical pasture plant species cultivated on a range of soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). ANZECC Investigation Limits for Pb (1500 µg g⁻¹) and As (500 µg g⁻¹) contaminated industrial sites (ANZECC, 1999), and the total concentration of Zn deemed to be potentially phytotoxic (>650 µg g⁻¹) to the plants are indicated. | 83
Figure 3-2. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Ag (µg g⁻¹) in selected subtropical pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). | 85
Figure 3.3. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of As (μg g⁻¹) in selected subtropical pasture plants cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). ANZECC Investigation Limit for As contaminated industrial soil (500 μg g⁻¹) is included (ANZECC, 1999).................87

Figure 3.4. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Cd (μg g⁻¹) in selected subtropical pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures)...............................................................88

Figure 3.5. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Pb (μg g⁻¹) in selected subtropical pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). ANZECC Investigation Limit for Pb contaminated industrial soil (1500 μg g⁻¹) is included (ANZECC, 1999).........................................................................................................................89

Figure 3.6. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Zn (μg g⁻¹) in selected subtropical pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). The total Zn concentration deemed to be potentially phytotoxic (>650 μg g⁻¹) is also shown..................90

Figure 3.7. Average (N=4) biomass production (g plant⁻¹) of Cymbopogon ambiguus cultivated on a range of soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures). The ANZECC Investigation Limits for Pb (1500 μg g⁻¹) and As (500 μg g⁻¹) contaminated industrial sites and the Zn concentration deemed to be potentially phytotoxic to the plants (>650 μg g⁻¹) are included (ANZECC, 1999)........91

Figure 3.8. Average (N=4) biomass production (g plant⁻¹) of Cymbopogon ambiguus cultivated on a range of soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures). The ANZECC Investigation Limits for Pb (1500 μg g⁻¹) and As (500 μg g⁻¹) contaminated industrial sites and the Zn concentration deemed to be potentially phytotoxic to the plants (>650 μg g⁻¹) are included (ANZECC, 1999)........92

Figure 3.9. Average (N=4) biomass production (g plant⁻¹) of Crotalaria nova-bollandiae cultivated on a range of soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures). The ANZECC Investigation Limits for Pb (1500 μg g⁻¹) and As (500 μg g⁻¹) contaminated industrial sites and the Zn concentration deemed to be potentially phytotoxic to the plants (>650 μg g⁻¹) are included (ANZECC, 1999)........93

Figure 3.10. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Ag (μg g⁻¹) in three pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures)...............................................................................................94

Figure 3.11. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Zn (μg g⁻¹) in three pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures). The total Zn concentration deemed to be potentially phytotoxic to the plants (>650 μg g⁻¹) is included.................................................................95

Figure 3.12. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of As (μg g⁻¹) in three pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures). The ANZECC Investigation Limit for As contaminated industrial sites (500 μg g⁻¹) is included (ANZECC, 1999).................................................................96

Figure 3.13. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Cd (μg g⁻¹) in three pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures)............................................................................................................................97

Figure 3.14. Average (N=4) plant concentrations of Pb (μg g⁻¹) in three pasture plant species cultivated on soil contaminated with mine tailings and amended with 0 wt%, 10 wt% and 20 wt% limestone (LS) (STL mixtures) . The ANZECC Investigation Limit for Pb contaminated industrial sites (1500 μg g⁻¹) is included (ANZECC, 1999) .................................................................98

Figure 4.1. The growth of Rhodes grass (Chloris gayana Kunth cv. "Pioneer") after three months of cultivation on a range of soil contaminated with mine tailings (ST = 5 wt% Cannington mine tailings + 95 wt% anthroposol soil).......................................................................................................................109

Figure 4.2. Average (N=4) concentrations of Ag, As, Cd, Pb and Zn (μg g⁻¹) and biomass production (g plant⁻¹) for Chloris gayana grown on uncontaminated soil, undiluted mine tailings and a range of soils contaminated with mine tailings (ST mixtures). The figure includes (a) ANZECC Investigation Limits for Pb (1500 μg g⁻¹) and As (500 μg g⁻¹) contaminated industrial sites (ANZECC, 1999), (b) total concentration of Zn deemed to be potentially to be phytotoxic (650 μg g⁻¹) to the plants and (c) the pH of the various plant growth media. ...............................................................................................................................................112

Figure 5.1. Pot trial experiment of Cypus victorinensis (foreground) and Crotalaria nova-bollandiae (background) cultivated in a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings after one application of the various phytotoxic extractive chemical amendments. ..................................................................................................................126
Figure 5-2. Plant survival (i.e., >50% of plants) (weeks) for *Crotalaria nova-hollandi*, *Cymbopogon* *bomyricus* and *Cyperus victoriensis* grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with weekly application of the various chemical amendments (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil).......................................................................................................................... 132

Figure 5-3. The maximum concentration (N=4) of Ag (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated by plants grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical reagents (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). ......................................................................................................................... 134

Figure 5-4. The maximum concentration (N=4) of Cd (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated by plants grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical reagents (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). The total concentration of Cd in the ST mixture is also shown (4.0 µg Cd g⁻¹). ......................................................................................................................... 136

Figure 5-5. The maximum concentration (N=4) of Pb (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated by plants grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical reagents (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). The total concentration of Pb in the ST mixture (1520 µg Pb g⁻¹) and the ANZIECC Investigation Limit for Pb contaminated industrial and commercial sites (1500 µg Pb g⁻¹) are included (ANZIECC, 1999). ......................................................................................................................... 137

Figure 5-6. The maximum concentration (N=4) of Zn (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated by plants grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical reagents (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). The total concentration of Zn in the ST mixture (582 µg Zn g⁻¹)......................................................................................................................... 139

Figure 5-7. The maximum concentration (N=4) of As (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated by *Cymbopogon* *bomyricus*, *Cyperus victoriensis* and *Crotalaria nova-hollandi* when grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical amendments (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). ......................................................................................................................... 139

Figure 5-8. The maximum concentration (N=4) of Sb (µg g⁻¹ DW) accumulated plants grown on a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings and amended with various chemical reagents (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2 g EDTA per kg soil). ......................................................................................................................... 141

Figure 6-1. The growth of *Chloris gayana* after 42 weeks of cultivation on fertilised mine tailings, having received four applications of the chelates; EDTA and EDDS........................................................................... 165

Figure 6-2. The Ag concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 167

Figure 6-3. The As concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 167

Figure 6-4. The Cd concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 168

Figure 6-5. The Pb concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 168

Figure 6-6. The Sb concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 168

Figure 6-7. The Zn concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with EDTA, EDDS and DTPA (e.g. 2.0 EDTA = 2.0 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 EDTA = 0.5 g EDTA per kg contaminated soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 169

Figure 6-8. The Ag concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thiosulphate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thioacetate (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 TSP = 0.5 g TSP per kg soil; etc). ......................................................................................................................... 169

Figure 6-9. The As concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thiosulphate
(TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 TSP = 0.5 g TSP per kg of soil; etc). .................................................. 171

Figure 6-10. The Cd concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 TSP = 0.5 g TSP per kg of soil; etc). ................................................... 171

Figure 6-11. The Pb concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 TSP = 0.5 g TSP per kg of soil; etc). .................................................. 172

Figure 6-12. The Sb concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg contaminated soil; 0.5 TSP = 0.5 g TSP per kg of soil; etc). .................................................. 172

Figure 6-13. The Zn concentrations (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings having received weekly amendment with ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 2.0 TSP = 2.0 g TSP per kg of soil; etc). .................................................. 173

Figure 6-14. The Pb concentration (µg g⁻¹) of *Chloris gayana* grown on fertilised mine tailings over 42 weeks and treated with chemical amendments (e.g. OSM-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ of fertilised mine tailings; TPP-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ + 300 kg Triphosphate fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ fertilised mine tailings). ................................................. 174

Figure 6-15. The Zn concentration (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on fertilised mine tailings over 42 weeks and treated with chemical amendments (e.g. OSM-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ fertilised mine tailings; TPP-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ + 300 kg of Triphosphate fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ fertilised mine tailings). ................................................. 175

Figure 6-16. The Ag concentration (µg g⁻¹) in *Chloris gayana* grown on fertilised mine tailings over 42 weeks and treated with chemical amendments (e.g. OSM-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ fertilised mine tailings; TPP-EDTA = mine tailings amended with 300 kg of Osmocot fertilizer ha⁻¹ + 300 kg Triphosphate fertilizer ha⁻¹ in addition to receiving periodic amendments of 2.0 g EDTA kg⁻¹ fertilised mine tailings). ................................................. 176

Figure 7-1. Vertical cross sections of the leach columns containing Canning town mine tailings after 12 weekly treatments with 0.1 M and 1 M EDTA, TSP and SCN, and 1 M THIO. 1 M EDTA was applied once only and treatment with 0.05% NaCN occurred over 8 weeks........ 196

Figure 7-2. Silver (µg g⁻¹) dissolution from Canning town mine tailings using ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 1 M TSP = 1 M TSP kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M TSP = 0.1 M TSP kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 199

Figure 7-3. Cumulative Ag recovery from Canning town mine tailings leached with ammonium thioulate (TSP), ammonium thiocyanate (SCN) and thiourea (THIO) (e.g. 1 M TSP = 1 M TSP kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M TSP = 0.1 M TSP kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 200

Figure 7-4. Silver (µg g⁻¹) dissolution from Canning town mine tailings using EDTA and sodium cyanide solutions (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 200

Figure 7-5. Cumulative Ag recovery from Canning town mine tailings leached with EDTA and sodium cyanide solutions (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 201

Figure 7-6. Lead (µg g⁻¹) dissolution from Canning town mine tailings using the various chemical treatments (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 202

Figure 7-7. Cumulative Pb recovery from Canning town mine tailings leached with various chemical reagents (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc). .................................................. 203
Figure 7-8. Zinc (μg g⁻¹) dissolution from Cannington mine tailings using the various chemical treatments (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc.).

Figure 7-9. Cumulative Zn recovery from Cannington mine tailings leached with various chemical reagents (e.g. 1 M EDTA = 1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, 0.1 M EDTA = 0.1 M EDTA kg⁻¹ mine tailings, etc.).
### List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>The relative abundance (µg g⁻¹) of a selection of trace elements in soil (Alloway, 1995; ANZECC, 1999).</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>A breakdown and description of the techniques collectively termed phytotechnology (USEPA, 2000a).</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>The taxonomy of plant species selected for this study (ANBG, 2004)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Subdivision of the Cannington orebody into economic zones based primarily upon the abundance of sulphide minerals (Walters, 1998).</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>The chemical composition of the fertiliser amendments used in the study (Osmocote Plus, Scots Australia Pty Ltd; Triphosphate – Incitec Ltd).</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>The chemical reagents and their concentrations (in grams of reagent per kg of soil and as molar concentrations) applied to the 12.5 wt% ST mixture (ST) and the fertilised tailings substrates (OSM = 300 kg ha⁻¹ Osmocote, TPP = 300 kg ha⁻¹ Osmocote + 300 kg ha⁻¹ Triphosphate).</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>The chemical reagents and their concentrations applied as weekly amendments (200 mL) used in the teaching study. The mass of applied reagent (g kg⁻¹ wk⁻¹) is included.</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Analytical methods used to determine the elemental concentrations of various samples resulting from this study.</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Statistical analysis of the replicate sampling performed on the substrate components and the geochemical reference material used in this investigation.</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Total element concentrations (µg g⁻¹) and pH of the plant growth medium in this study (e.g., SST10L = Soil amended with 5 wt% Tailings and 10 wt% Limestone). ANZECC Investigation Limits for contaminated industrial and commercial sites (ANZECC, 1999) are also listed.</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The distribution of sequentially extracted elemental fractions (% of total conc.) in the 25 wt% ST mixture (Appendix D).</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Water-soluble (dH₂O) and ammonium-acetate-extractable (1 M NH₄OAc) Ag, As, Cd, Pb and Zn (µg g⁻¹) concentrations that were used to estimate total and proportional plant availability of metals and arsenic in the 25 wt% ST mixture.</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Total metal and metalloid concentrations of the soil, mine tailings and a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings (µg g⁻¹). Below are the proportions (% of the total element concentration – TEC) of metals and metalloids extracted from the contaminated soil using deionised water (dH₂O), 0.01M EDTA, 0.005M DTPA and 0.01M EDDS.</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>The proportions of metals and metalloids (% of total concentration - TEC) that were sequentially extracted from a soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings (Appendix E).</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Total (µg g⁻¹) and proportional (% TEC) metal and metalloid concentrations in solvent extractions of the soil contaminated with 12.5 wt% mine tailings. Total metal and metalloid concentrations are also shown.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Chemical properties (pH, EC) and the total (µg g⁻¹) and proportional (% of total metal concentration) Pb and Zn extractability for the unfertilised and fertilised (OSM = 300 kg ha⁻¹ equiv. Osmocote, TPP = OSM + 300 kg ha⁻¹ equiv. Triphosphate) mine tailings (11950 µg Pb g⁻¹, 4150 µg Zn g⁻¹ and 60 µg Ag g⁻¹). Silver concentrations in extract solutions were below the detection limit (0.005 µg g⁻¹) and are not reported.</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>The proportion of Ag, Pb and Zn (% of total metal concentration) leached from the Cannington mine tailings by the various chemical reagents (EDTA, TSP, SCN, THIO, and NaCN). Total metal concentrations (µg g⁻¹) of the mine tailings are included.</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Mass of metal removed from Cannington mine tailings after three months of weekly leaching, including total metal concentrations of the tailings.</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7.3. The estimated quantity (kg t⁻¹) and cost (US$ t⁻¹; reagent cost of US$5 t⁻¹) of the leaching reagents used to extract Ag, Pb, and Zn from the mine tailings, included are estimates of metal revenue (US$ t⁻¹) and process value (US$ t⁻¹).
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAC</td>
<td>Advanced Analytical Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>Atomic Adsorption Spectrometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALS</td>
<td>Australian Laboratory Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANZECC</td>
<td>Australian and New Zealand Environmental Conservation Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Chemically-assisted phytoextraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDTA</td>
<td>1,2-Cyclohexanediaminetetraacetic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEC</td>
<td>Cation exchange capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dH₂O</td>
<td>deionised water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTPA</td>
<td>Diethylenetriaminepentaacetic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW</td>
<td>Dry weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Dilution factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>Electrical conductivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDDS</td>
<td>Ethylenediaminedi succinic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDTA</td>
<td>Ethylenediaminetetraacetic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGTA</td>
<td>Ethylene Glycol Bis(2-aminoethyl ether)-N,N,N′,N′-tetraacetic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOS</td>
<td>Environmental Management Overview System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFAAS</td>
<td>Graphite furnace atomic absorption spectrometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GXR-3</td>
<td>Geochemical reference material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEDTA</td>
<td>N-Hydroxyethylenediamine-N,N′,N′-tetraacetic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOAc</td>
<td>Acetic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNO₃</td>
<td>Nitric acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICP MS</td>
<td>Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCU</td>
<td>James Cook University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS</td>
<td>Limestone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NaCN</td>
<td>Sodium cyanide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH₄HCl</td>
<td>Ammonium hypochlorite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH₄OAc</td>
<td>Ammonium acetate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH₄NO₃</td>
<td>Ammonium nitrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSM</td>
<td>Osmocote fertiliser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oz</td>
<td>Ounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Plant concentration (µg g⁻¹)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGE</td>
<td>Platinum group element</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRF</td>
<td>Process Residue Facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCN</td>
<td>Ammonium thiocyanate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Soil-Tailings mixture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STL</td>
<td>Soil-Tailings-Limestone mixture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEC</td>
<td>Total element concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIO</td>
<td>Thiourea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPA</td>
<td>Tonnes per annum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPP</td>
<td>Triphosphate fertiliser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSP</td>
<td>Ammonium thiosulphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USEPA</td>
<td>United States Environmental Protection Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XRD</td>
<td>X-ray diffraction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>