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Vetiver Grass as a Green Bio-engine for Tannery Effluent Decontamination

*Keerthana T[1] and Suganya K[2]
[1]Research Scholar, Department of Environmental Science, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore-641003, Tamil Nadu, India
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Science, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore-641003, Tamil Nadu, India
*Corresponding Author's email: tkeagri2020@gmail.com

Leather production uses large quantities of water and generates a chemically complex effluent. Depending on the process stream, it may contain suspended solids, organic matter, salts, sulfide, nitrogen and chromium. If inadequately treated, these pollutants can deplete oxygen in receiving waters, damage soil and aquatic life, and create long-term chromium contamination. Cleaner production must therefore begin inside the tannery: reduce water use, segregate concentrated streams and recover valuable chemicals wherever feasible. Within this wider treatment strategy, vetiver grass offers a promising biological finishing step. Phytoremediation uses plants and their associated root-zone microorganisms to remove, transform or immobilize pollutants. It generally requires little energy and can turn a treatment area into a green landscape, but it needs suitable land, retention time and careful management.

Fig. 1. Community planting of vetiver beside a drainage channel in Kenya (illustrative field photograph, not a tannery-effluent trial). Photo: treesftf, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0; cropped from the original.

Vetiver: A Natural Bio-Engine for Ecological Restoration

Vetiver (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*; synonym *Vetiveria zizanioides*) is a perennial grass valued for its dense, deep-rooting habit, high biomass and tolerance of waterlogging, salinity and several heavy metals. In water, a floating raft holds the crown above the surface while the roots form a submerged curtain. This living curtain provides extensive surfaces for filtration, adsorption, nutrient uptake and microbial attachment. Vetiver is also propagated through slips, making establishment relatively simple.[4].

A root zone that plays multiple roles

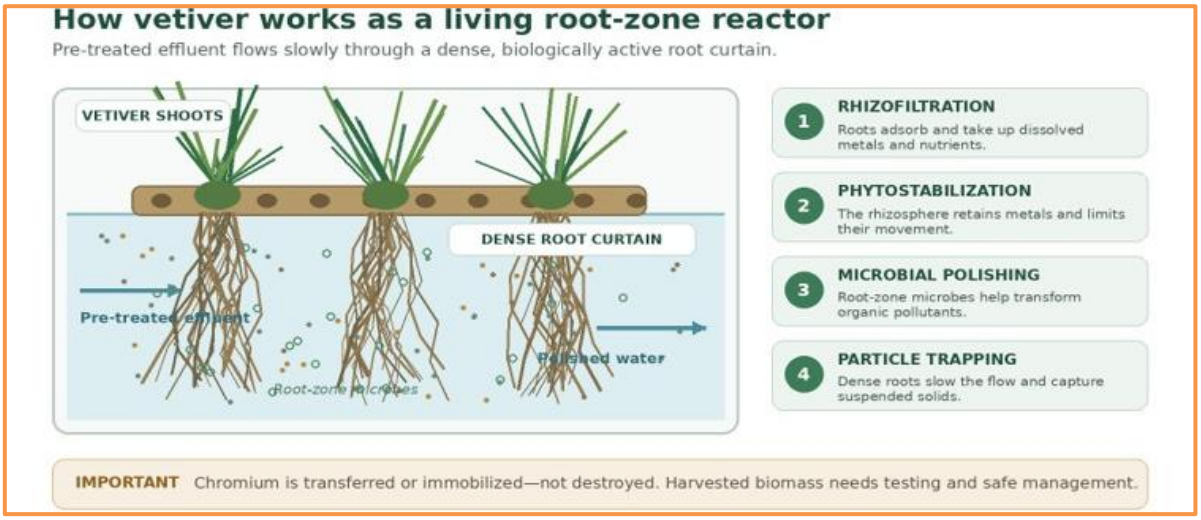

Fig. 2. Conceptual diagram of vetiver-based polishing. Root uptake, immobilization, microbial activity and particle trapping act together; their relative importance varies with effluent chemistry and system design.

Rhizofiltration removes dissolved contaminants at the root–water interface, while phytoextraction transfers some metals and nutrients into plant tissues. Phytostabilization reduces contaminant mobility in the root zone. Meanwhile, root surfaces support microbial communities that contribute to organic matter transformation, and the dense root network traps particles. Thus, a fall in pollution load reflects several interacting processes—not plant uptake alone.

Insights from Current Studies

A 45-day container study in Bangladesh tested vetiver grown on floating platforms in tannery wastewater. The researchers reported removals of 79.71% for chromium, 84.66% for biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), 81.21% for chemical oxygen demand (COD), 83.28% for total suspended solids and 72.55% for total dissolved solids. Electrical conductivity declined by 35.42%. These results demonstrate potential, but they are site- and experiment-specific—not guaranteed efficiencies for every tannery.[2] Work at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University has also evaluated vetiver in rhizobox and floating-bed systems for Cr(III) removal from tannery effluent, confirming its potential while showing that performance differs with the experimental setup and sampling location.[1] Separate laboratory research on Cr(VI) found that removal depended on initial concentration, plant density and pH; toxic effects became important at higher exposures.[3]

From lab to land

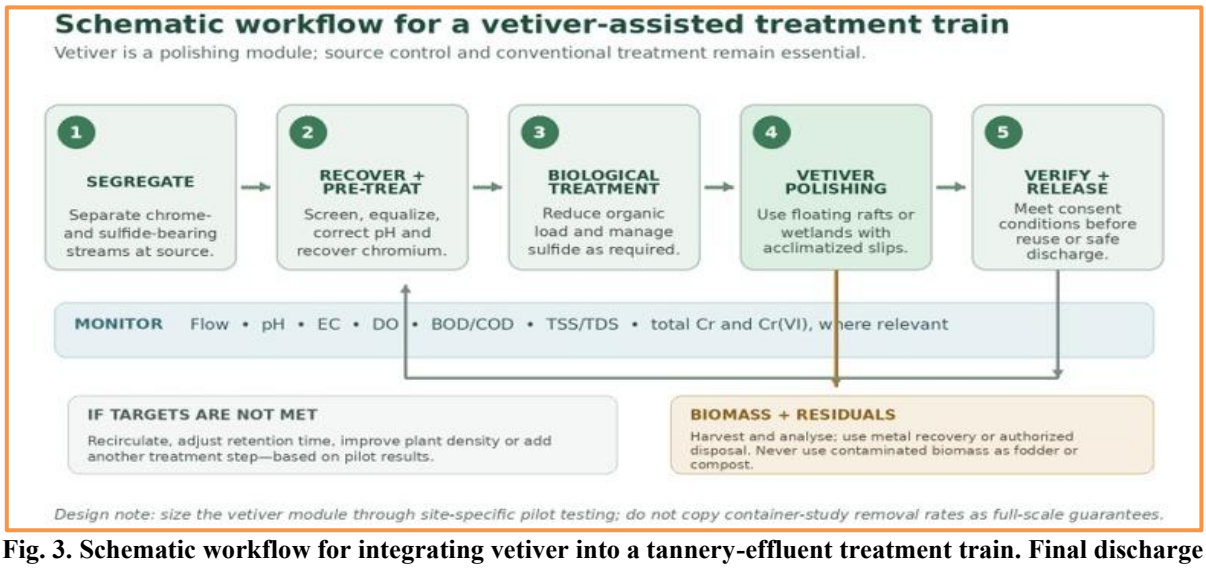

Fig. 3. Schematic workflow for integrating vetiver into a tannery-effluent treatment train. Final discharge or reuse must comply with the conditions applicable to the facility.

Field implementation

- **Start with source control.** Keep concentrated chrome- and sulfide-bearing streams separate, recover chromium where practicable, and provide screening, equalization, pH correction and appropriate biological pre-treatment.
- **Pilot before scaling.** Compare planted and unplanted units using the actual pre-treated effluent. Optimize plant density, water depth and hydraulic retention time; acclimatize healthy slips and keep the crown above water.
- **Measure performance.** Track flow, pH, electrical conductivity, dissolved oxygen, BOD, COD, suspended and dissolved solids, and chromium. Include plant growth and tissue-metal analysis to distinguish uptake from other removal pathways.
- **Manage residues safely.** Chromium is not destroyed by the grass. Harvested biomass, sediment and sludge must be characterized and sent for metal recovery or authorized disposal; contaminated material must never enter fodder, compost or the food chain.

The green advantage—and its limits

Vetiver modules can lower energy demand, add landscape value and provide a simple polishing option for suitable sites. However, they require land and time, and performance may vary with season, salinity, sulfide, chromium speciation and pollutant shock loads. Open water also needs sound operation and vector management. Vetiver should therefore be viewed as one component of an engineered treatment train, with additional treatment whenever effluent targets are not met.

Conclusion

Vetiver converts a treatment pond into a living root-zone reactor. Its strongest role is as a low-energy polishing partner after source control and conventional treatment. With local pilot testing, routine monitoring and safe biomass management, this humble grass can help tanneries move toward cleaner water and more responsible production.

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