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THERMAL POLLUTION AND ITS IMPACTS ON HUMAN HEALTH: A REVIEW

Najmaldin Ezaldin Hassan[1] and Sonia Khalil[2]

[1]College of Engineering, Civil and Environment Department, University of Zakho, Kurdistan region, Iraq
[2]City, University of London, United Kingdom
Corresponding author: Najmaldin Ezaldin Hassan

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ABSTRACT

Thermal pollution, primarily caused by industrial discharges and power plants, significantly impacts both environmental and human health. This review explores the sources, ecological consequences, and emerging concerns regarding human health linked to thermal pollution. Power plants, particularly nuclear and coal-fired, release heated water into natural bodies, disrupting aquatic ecosystems by altering species composition, increasing metabolic rates, and reducing dissolved oxygen levels, which are vital for aquatic life. Urbanization, stormwater runoff, and deforestation exacerbate this issue by increasing surface temperatures and contributing to the degradation of aquatic habitats. Furthermore, climate change intensifies thermal pollution, compounding its environmental effects. This review also investigates the lesser-explored human health implications of thermal pollution, particularly through the contamination of water supplies and disruption of aquatic resources. While much research focuses on ecological impacts, there is a growing need for studies addressing how thermal pollution indirectly affects human populations, such as through compromised food chains and degraded water quality. Mitigation strategies, including cooling towers, green infrastructure, and riparian buffer restoration, offer potential solutions. However, the review highlights significant gaps in understanding the full scope of thermal pollution's effects on human health and emphasizes the need for future interdisciplinary research to bridge these gaps.

KEYWORDS: Thermal Pollution; Environmental Impact; Climate Change; Water Temperature Alteration; Public Health; Ecological Balance

1. INTRODUCTION

Definition of Thermal Pollution

Thermal pollution refers to the degradation of water quality by any process that alters the ambient water temperature. It is most commonly caused by industrial processes that discharge heated water into natural water bodies, which can lead to significant ecological disruptions. Thermal pollution can impact aquatic life by decreasing oxygen levels in the water and altering the ecosystem's balance [1, 2].

The concept of thermal pollution began gaining attention in the mid-20th century as industrialization and energy production expanded rapidly. With the rise of power plants, particularly those utilizing water for cooling purposes, the discharge of heated water into natural water bodies became a significant environmental issue. Early studies in the 1960s and 1970s highlighted the ecological consequences of this practice, leading to growing awareness and subsequent regulatory efforts [3, 4].

The primary sources of thermal pollution are power plants, particularly nuclear and fossil-fuel-based facilities, and industrial processes that use water for cooling. As these industries expanded globally, the environmental impact of thermal pollution became more apparent, leading to a growing concern among environmentalists, scientists, and policymakers [5].

The increasing concern over thermal pollution is tied to its cumulative effects on the environment. As global temperatures rise due to climate change, the additional stress of thermal pollution exacerbates the vulnerability of aquatic ecosystems. This growing concern has led to stricter regulations and the development of alternative cooling technologies that aim to mitigate the adverse effects of thermal pollution [6, 7].

One of the primary objectives of this review is to systematically examine the potential impacts of thermal pollution on human health. While much of the focus in the literature has been on the ecological consequences, there is an emerging concern about how thermal pollution might indirectly affect human populations, particularly through changes in water quality and the availability of aquatic resources. This review will explore these connections and highlight the need for a more integrated approach to studying thermal pollution's broader health implications [8, 9].

Another key objective is to identify the existing gaps in the literature related to thermal pollution. Despite extensive research on its ecological impacts, there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive studies addressing the full scope of its effects, particularly those related to human health and socio-economic outcomes. This review aims to pinpoint these gaps and encourage more interdisciplinary research that bridges the ecological and human health domains [10].

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Finally, the review will suggest areas for future research, particularly in terms of mitigating the adverse effects of thermal pollution and developing more sustainable industrial practices. Future research directions may include exploring innovative cooling technologies, assessing the long-term socio-economic impacts of thermal pollution, and studying the effects of thermal pollution in the context of climate change. These recommendations aim to guide future studies towards addressing the most pressing issues related to thermal pollution [11, 12].

2. SOURCES OF THERMAL POLLUTION

Power Plants:

Power plants, particularly nuclear and coal-fired plants, are significant contributors to thermal pollution. These plants use large quantities of water as a coolant, which, after absorbing heat from the process, is often discharged back into nearby water bodies at elevated temperatures [13]. This thermal discharge can drastically alter the local aquatic environment, leading to decreased oxygen levels, disrupted ecosystems, and adverse effects on aquatic life [14].

Nuclear Power Plants

Nuclear power plants are particularly notorious for their contribution to thermal pollution. The process of nuclear fission generates immense amounts of heat, necessitating the use of vast volumes of water for cooling purposes. Once this water has been used, it is typically released back into rivers, lakes, or oceans, often without sufficient cooling, thereby increasing the ambient water temperature. This change can lead to thermal shock in aquatic species and can disrupt breeding cycles, migration patterns, and the overall health of the aquatic ecosystem [15, 16].

Coal-Fired Power Plants

Coal-fired power plants are another major source of thermal pollution. These plants burn coal to generate electricity, a process that produces a significant amount of heat. To manage this heat, the plants draw water from nearby sources, which is then discharged at elevated temperatures after use. The thermal pollution from coal-fired plants can lead to a decrease in dissolved oxygen levels in the water, which is detrimental to fish and other aquatic organisms. Furthermore, coal plants often discharge not just heat but also pollutants like mercury and sulfur compounds, exacerbating the environmental impact [12].

Mitigation Strategies

To mitigate the impact of thermal pollution from power plants, several strategies have been proposed, including the use of cooling towers, artificial lakes, and cogeneration. Cooling towers help dissipate heat into the atmosphere rather than discharging it directly into water bodies. Artificial lakes or reservoirs can act as heat sinks, allowing the heated water to cool before it is released into natural water bodies.

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Cogeneration, where waste heat is used for additional energy production, can also reduce the thermal load on nearby water sources [17, 18].

Stormwater Runoff

In urban areas, the proliferation of paved surfaces such as roads, parking lots, and sidewalks contributes significantly to thermal pollution in nearby streams and rivers. These surfaces absorb solar radiation and become significantly warmer than natural ground cover. When rain falls on these hot surfaces, the water heats up as it flows across them, leading to an increase in the temperature of stormwater runoff. This heated runoff is then channeled into storm drains and eventually discharged into local water bodies, causing a rise in the temperature of streams and rivers [19].

The thermal pollution resulting from stormwater runoff can have severe consequences for aquatic ecosystems. Many aquatic species, particularly fish and macroinvertebrates, are sensitive to temperature changes. Elevated water temperatures can lead to a decrease in dissolved oxygen levels, which is vital for aquatic life. Furthermore, temperature fluctuations can disrupt reproductive cycles, alter species composition, and even lead to the death of temperature-sensitive species. The cumulative impact of such thermal pollution can result in reduced biodiversity and the degradation of aquatic habitats [10].

The urban heat island (UHI) effect exacerbates the issue of thermal pollution from stormwater runoff. Urban areas typically have higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas due to the concentration of buildings, roads, and other infrastructure that absorb and retain heat. This intensified heat leads to warmer runoff when rainwater comes into contact with these surfaces. The UHI effect thus amplifies the thermal pollution problem, as stormwater runoff from these hot surfaces carries more heat into nearby water bodies, further stressing aquatic ecosystems [20, 21].

Several strategies can be implemented to mitigate the thermal pollution caused by stormwater runoff in urban areas. One approach is the use of green infrastructure, such as green roofs, permeable pavements, and vegetated swales, which help reduce the temperature of stormwater before it enters water bodies. Additionally, implementing retention basins or constructed wetlands can allow stormwater to cool naturally before it is discharged. Urban planning that incorporates more green spaces and trees can also help reduce the urban heat island effect, thereby lowering the temperature of stormwater runoff [22, 23].

Deforestation and Land Use Changes:

Deforestation and land use changes significantly contribute to thermal pollution by altering the natural environment, particularly by removing vegetation that provides shading for water bodies. Trees and other vegetation play a crucial role in regulating water temperatures by blocking direct solar radiation. When

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forests are cleared, or land is altered for agricultural or urban development, the loss of shading leads to increased solar exposure, raising the temperature of rivers, streams, and lakes [24, 25].

The removal of riparian vegetation, which typically includes trees and shrubs along the banks of water bodies, leads to increased solar radiation reaching the surface of the water. This increase in solar energy results in higher water temperatures, particularly during the summer months. The effect can be pronounced in smaller streams, where the absence of shading allows the sun to heat the water more directly and rapidly. Elevated water temperatures can disrupt aquatic ecosystems, affecting species composition, reducing dissolved oxygen levels, and increasing the metabolic rates of aquatic organisms, leading to stress and potential mortality [26, 27].

Thermal pollution caused by deforestation and land use changes can have severe consequences for aquatic ecosystems. Species that are sensitive to temperature changes, such as cold-water fish, may be forced to migrate to cooler waters or face population declines. Warmer water temperatures can also exacerbate the proliferation of invasive species, algae blooms, and pathogens that thrive in higher temperatures, further stressing native aquatic life. The long-term impacts include reduced biodiversity, altered food webs, and degraded water quality [10, 28].

In addition to deforestation, other land use changes, such as urbanization and agricultural expansion, further exacerbate thermal pollution. The conversion of natural landscapes into urban areas replaces vegetation with impervious surfaces like roads and buildings, which absorb and retain heat. Similarly, agricultural practices that involve the removal of trees and vegetation to create open fields contribute to increased solar radiation exposure. These changes in land use not only raise water temperatures but also increase the volume of stormwater runoff, carrying additional heat and pollutants into water bodies [29, 30].

To mitigate the effects of deforestation and land use changes on thermal pollution, strategies such as reforestation, riparian buffer restoration, and sustainable land management practices can be employed. Reforestation efforts help to restore the natural shading of water bodies, reducing the amount of solar radiation that reaches the water. Riparian buffers, which are vegetated areas along the banks of streams and rivers, can be reestablished or preserved to protect water bodies from temperature fluctuations. Additionally, land management practices that minimize soil erosion, retain vegetation cover, and reduce impervious surface areas can help in maintaining cooler water temperatures and protecting aquatic ecosystems [31, 32].

Climate Change:

Global warming, primarily driven by the increase in greenhouse gases, plays a significant role in exacerbating thermal pollution. As global temperatures rise, so do the temperatures of water bodies, which can lead to the degradation of water quality and disturb the natural thermal gradients that many aquatic ecosystems rely on. The increase in atmospheric temperatures has a direct effect on the temperature of rivers, lakes, and oceans, making the issue of thermal pollution more severe [33, 34].

The rise in global temperatures has led to an increase in water temperatures worldwide. Warmer air temperatures result in the warming of surface waters, disrupting thermal stratification and altering the natural thermal gradients that are essential for maintaining biodiversity in aquatic ecosystems. These changes can lead to thermal stress on aquatic organisms, reduce dissolved oxygen levels, and promote the growth of harmful algal blooms [10, 35].

Global warming disrupts the natural thermal gradients in water bodies, which are crucial for the survival of many aquatic species. These thermal gradients, typically established through seasonal variations, are being altered as global temperatures rise, leading to shifts in species distributions and changes in the timing of biological processes such as breeding and migration. The loss of natural thermal gradients can also affect the mixing of nutrients in water bodies, further impacting the health of aquatic ecosystems [36, 37].

3. ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS

Aquatic Ecosystems:

Thermal pollution significantly impacts aquatic life by altering species composition within ecosystems. As water temperatures rise due to thermal pollution, species that thrive in cooler environments may struggle to survive, while those adapted to warmer conditions may become more dominant. This shift can lead to a reduction in biodiversity, as temperature-sensitive species are often outcompeted or forced to migrate to cooler waters [6, 38].

The rise in water temperatures caused by thermal pollution increases the metabolic rates of aquatic organisms. Higher metabolic rates can lead to increased oxygen demand, which may not be met if the water's dissolved oxygen levels decrease due to higher temperatures. This can cause stress on aquatic species, potentially leading to reduced growth rates, increased susceptibility to diseases, and higher mortality rates [39, 40].

Thermal pollution can severely disrupt the reproductive cycles of aquatic species. Many aquatic organisms rely on specific temperature cues to trigger reproductive behaviors such as spawning. When water temperatures are altered due to thermal pollution, these cues can be misaligned, leading to reduced reproductive success. In some cases, the timing of spawning may be shifted, resulting in the hatching of offspring in conditions that are not optimal for their survival [41].

The changes in species composition, metabolism rates, and reproductive cycles caused by thermal pollution have broader implications for the balance of aquatic ecosystems. Predatory-prey relationships may be altered, leading to imbalances that can affect the entire food web. Furthermore, the loss of keystone species or the proliferation of invasive species can further destabilize ecosystems, leading to long-term ecological consequences [42, 43].

Dissolved Oxygen Levels:

Thermal pollution affects the solubility of oxygen in water. As water temperature increases, the solubility of oxygen decreases, meaning that warmer water holds less dissolved oxygen. This is because the kinetic energy of water molecules increases with temperature, reducing the amount of oxygen that can be dissolved and retained in the water. This process can lead to hypoxic conditions, which are harmful to aquatic life [44].

Reduced oxygen solubility due to increased water temperature can lead to hypoxic conditions, which are detrimental to aquatic organisms. Hypoxia, or low dissolved oxygen, can cause stress, impair metabolic functions, and lead to the death of fish and other aquatic life. Many aquatic species are highly sensitive to changes in oxygen levels, and prolonged exposure to hypoxic conditions can lead to reduced biodiversity and altered ecosystem dynamics [45, 46].

Hypoxic conditions induced by thermal pollution led to various stress responses in aquatic organisms. Fish and invertebrates exposed to low oxygen levels may exhibit increased respiratory rates, altered behavior, and decreased growth rates. These stress responses can reduce overall fitness and survival rates, affecting population dynamics and the health of aquatic ecosystems [47].

The long-term effects of thermal pollution and resulting hypoxia can significantly impact aquatic ecosystems. Persistent hypoxic conditions can lead to shifts in species composition, with more tolerant species becoming dominant while sensitive species decline or disappear. This can disrupt food webs and alter the ecological balance of water bodies [48].

Algal Blooms:

Thermal pollution can significantly contribute to the proliferation of harmful algal blooms (HABs). These blooms are characterized by rapid and excessive growth of algae, which can produce toxins harmful to aquatic life and humans. Warmer water temperatures, a direct consequence of thermal pollution, can create favorable conditions for algal growth, leading to increased frequency and intensity of HABs [49, 50].

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The proliferation of HABs due to thermal pollution can lead to several detrimental effects on aquatic ecosystems. Algal blooms can deplete oxygen levels in water through excessive respiration and decomposition, leading to hypoxic conditions. This can cause massive die-offs of fish and other aquatic organisms, disrupt food webs, and alter habitat structures [51, 52].

HABs can have significant human health implications. Many harmful algal species produce toxins that can contaminate drinking water and seafood, leading to health issues such as gastrointestinal illnesses, liver damage, and neurological effects. Additionally, the toxins can affect recreational water activities, posing risks to public health [53, 54].

Several case studies illustrate the link between thermal pollution and harmful algal blooms. For example, thermal discharges from power plants have been linked to increased algal growth in nearby water bodies. These blooms have led to documented cases of fish kills, water quality degradation, and public health advisories [55].

4. IMPACTS ON HUMAN HEALTH

Direct Health Effects:

Thermal pollution, resulting from the discharge of heated water into aquatic systems, can impact drinking water sources in several ways. Elevated water temperatures can enhance the growth of pathogens and parasites, which can lead to contamination of drinking water supplies. This is particularly concerning for communities relying on surface water sources [56].

Higher water temperatures can accelerate the growth of waterborne pathogens, including bacteria, viruses, and protozoa. This increased growth rate can lead to higher concentrations of pathogens in drinking water sources, raising the risk of waterborne diseases such as gastrointestinal infections. Increased temperatures in drinking water sources can elevate the risk of gastrointestinal diseases. Pathogens such as *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, and various strains of *E. coli* can thrive in warmer conditions, leading to outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness and other related health issues [57, 58].

Indirect Health Effects:

Thermal pollution can indirectly affect human health by altering aquatic ecosystems and food chains. Elevated water temperatures can lead to the accumulation of toxins in aquatic organisms, particularly fish, which can then be transferred to humans through consumption [59].

Thermal pollution can affect the metabolism and behavior of aquatic organisms, leading to increased accumulation of environmental toxins. Fish exposed to higher temperatures may accumulate higher levels

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of pollutants such as heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which can then be consumed by humans [60].

5. Mitigation Strategies

1. Regulatory Approaches:

Cooling Water Discharge Permits

Regulations often require industries that discharge heated water into natural water bodies to obtain cooling water discharge permits. These permits typically set specific temperature limits and require monitoring to minimize the impact of thermal pollution. The permits are designed to ensure that the thermal discharge does not significantly alter the temperature of receiving water bodies, thus protecting aquatic ecosystems and maintaining environmental quality [61].

Temperature Limits for Discharges

Temperature limits for discharges are set to prevent the temperature of receiving waters from rising beyond levels that could harm aquatic life. These limits are determined based on scientific studies and environmental assessments to balance industrial needs with ecological protection. Regulations often require industries to use cooling systems or other mitigation strategies to comply with these temperature limits.

Monitoring and Reporting Requirements

Regulations typically include monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure compliance with thermal discharge limits. Industries must regularly monitor the temperature of their discharges and report this data to regulatory agencies. These requirements help track the effectiveness of thermal pollution controls and ensure that any violations are promptly addressed.

Best Practices for Cooling Water Systems

Best practices for cooling water systems are outlined in various regulatory documents and guidelines. These practices include using closed-loop cooling systems, cooling towers, and heat exchangers to minimize the thermal impact on natural water bodies. Adhering to these best practices helps reduce the risk of thermal pollution and its adverse effects on aquatic ecosystems.

International Standards and Agreements

International standards and agreements often address thermal pollution in the context of broader environmental protection goals. These standards provide frameworks for regulating thermal discharges and promoting sustainable industrial practices across different countries.

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2. Technological Solutions:

Cooling Towers

Cooling towers are a widely used technology to mitigate thermal pollution by reducing the temperature of water before it is discharged back into natural water bodies. They work by transferring excess heat from the water to the atmosphere through evaporation. This process effectively lowers the water temperature and minimizes its thermal impact on the environment.

Heat Exchangers

Heat exchangers are devices designed to transfer heat between two or more fluids. In the context of thermal pollution control, heat exchangers are used to cool down the heated water from industrial processes before it is released into natural water bodies. By transferring heat to a secondary cooling fluid, heat exchangers help to reduce the thermal load on the environment.

Artificial Wetlands

Artificial wetlands are engineered systems that mimic natural wetland processes to treat and cool water before its discharge into natural bodies. These systems use vegetation, soil, and microorganisms to absorb and dissipate heat, improving water quality and reducing thermal pollution. Artificial wetlands can be designed to accommodate large volumes of water and can effectively manage thermal loads [62, 63].

Advanced Cooling Technologies

Emerging cooling technologies, such as dry cooling systems and hybrid cooling systems, offer innovative solutions to mitigate thermal pollution. Dry cooling systems use air instead of water to remove heat, significantly reducing thermal discharge into water bodies. Hybrid systems combine wet and dry cooling methods to optimize efficiency and environmental protection [64].

3. Ecological Restoration:

Reforestation

Reforestation, the process of planting trees in deforested areas, plays a significant role in mitigating thermal pollution by restoring natural shading and cooling effects. Trees and forests provide shade over water bodies, reducing solar radiation and decreasing water temperatures. This helps maintain the thermal balance of aquatic ecosystems and supports overall water quality.

Reintroduction of Native Vegetation

The reintroduction of native vegetation along riverbanks and water bodies is crucial for mitigating thermal pollution. Native plants provide natural shading and contribute to the cooling of surface waters. They also enhance the buffering capacity of riparian zones, improve water quality, and support biodiversity. This restoration practice helps in maintaining the ecological integrity of aquatic systems [65].

Wetland Restoration

Wetland restoration is an effective strategy for mitigating thermal pollution. By restoring wetlands, which act as natural water filters and buffers, the thermal load on nearby water bodies can be reduced. Wetlands help in cooling water through evapotranspiration and provide critical habitat for aquatic life [68].

Buffer Zones

Creating buffer zones with vegetation around water bodies helps in reducing the impact of thermal pollution. These zones filter runoff, provide shade, and reduce the amount of heat reaching the water. Effective buffer zones also improve water quality and support aquatic ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

Thermal pollution, driven by industrial activities like power plant cooling, urban runoff, deforestation, and climate change, has significant environmental and health consequences. This review underscores the broad impacts of thermal pollution, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive research and action. Elevated water temperatures reduce oxygen levels, disrupting aquatic ecosystems and affecting species like cold-water fish. The resulting thermal stress leads to altered reproduction, reduced growth, and increased mortality. Additionally, invasive species and harmful algal blooms threaten biodiversity.

Higher water temperatures lower dissolved oxygen levels, leading to hypoxic conditions that harm aquatic life and disrupt ecological balance. This decline in water quality also affects human populations reliant on these waters for drinking, fishing, and recreation.

Emerging research shows that thermal pollution can affect public health by contaminating water, reducing fish stocks, and promoting harmful pathogens. The loss of biodiversity may also impact communities dependent on fisheries for food.

The degradation of aquatic ecosystems has socio-economic effects, including reduced fisheries, tourism, and recreation, with knock-on effects on local economies. Increased water treatment costs and health risks from waterborne diseases further emphasize the broad societal impact.

Effective mitigation methods include cooling towers, artificial lakes, and green infrastructure. Reforestation and riparian buffer zones can also protect water bodies from temperature increases. However, more research and investment are needed to scale these solutions.

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Future research must bridge the gap between ecological and human health studies, especially considering the indirect socio-economic and health impacts. Long-term studies are critical to understanding the broader effects of thermal pollution in a changing climate.

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