

Nanotechnology And Bioremediation Approaches For Soil Pollution Control: A Review

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Soil pollution has become one of the most pressing environmental challenges associated with industrialization, intensive agriculture, mining operations, and urban expansion. Contamination by heavy metals, hydrocarbons, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, and emerging pollutants severely threatens ecosystem stability, agricultural productivity, and human health. Conventional remediation technologies often suffer from high operational cost, incomplete pollutant removal, and secondary environmental disturbances. Recent advances in nanotechnology and bioremediation offer sustainable and efficient alternatives for soil restoration. Nanomaterials exhibit exceptional physicochemical properties such as high surface reactivity, adsorption capacity, and catalytic efficiency, enabling rapid transformation or immobilization of contaminants. Bioremediation utilizes microorganisms, plants, and enzymes to degrade or detoxify pollutants through natural metabolic processes. The integration of these approaches, known as nano bioremediation, represents an emerging interdisciplinary strategy capable of enhancing pollutant bioavailability and accelerating degradation kinetics. This review critically examines mechanisms, materials, applications, environmental risks, and future prospects of nanotechnology assisted bioremediation for soil pollution control. The study highlights recent progress toward sustainable soil restoration technologies aligned with global environmental management goals.

Keywords: Soil pollution; Nanotechnology; Bioremediation; Nanoremediation; Sustainable remediation.

1. Introduction

Soil represents one of the most complex and indispensable components of terrestrial ecosystems, functioning as a dynamic interface that sustains agricultural productivity, regulates biogeochemical cycles, and supports diverse microbial and plant communities (Adriano, 2001; Alloway, 2013). However, rapid industrialization, urban expansion, mining activities, and intensive agricultural practices have significantly accelerated soil contamination worldwide. The continuous release of hazardous substances such as heavy metals, petroleum hydrocarbons, pesticides, industrial chemicals, and emerging pollutants has resulted in severe

degradation of soil quality, posing serious risks to environmental sustainability and human health (Khan et al., 2013; Wuana and Okieimen, 2011).

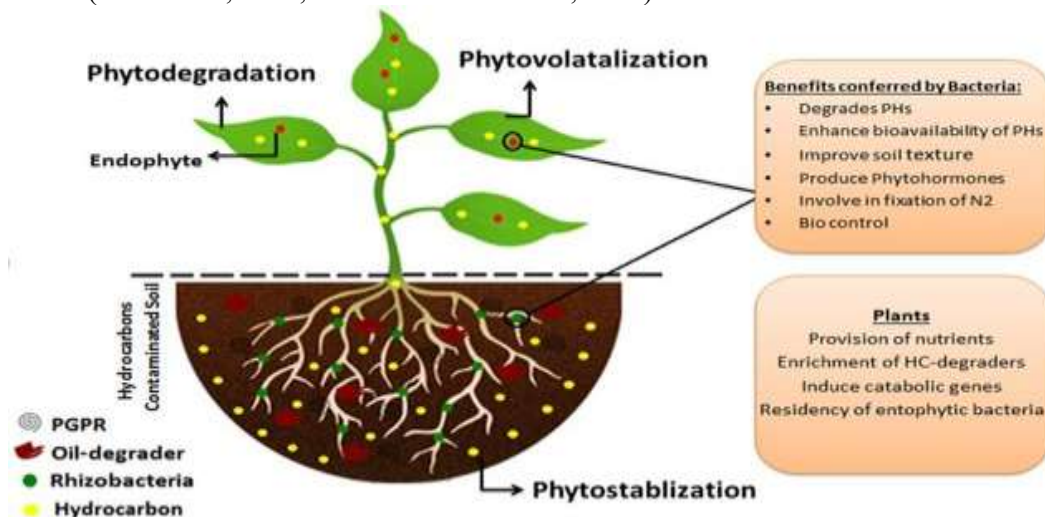


Figure 1. Plant microbe interaction in phytoremediation (Fatima et al. 2017).

Unlike air or water pollution, soil contamination often remains unnoticed because pollutants accumulate gradually and persist for extended periods due to limited natural degradation processes. Heavy metals such as lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), mercury (Hg), and chromium (Cr) are non-biodegradable and can remain in soils for decades, entering the food chain through plant uptake and ultimately affecting animal and human populations (Nagajyoti et al., 2010)(Fig.1). Similarly, organic pollutants including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), pesticides, and industrial solvents disrupt soil microbial activity, reduce fertility, and impair ecosystem functioning (Semple et al., 2001). Consequently, effective soil remediation has become a global priority aligned with sustainable development and environmental protection goals.

Conventional soil remediation techniques, including excavation, soil washing, chemical stabilization, and thermal treatment, have been widely applied for contamination management. Although these approaches can achieve rapid pollutant removal, they are frequently associated with high operational costs, energy consumption, and secondary environmental disturbances such as soil structure destruction and waste generation (Mulligan et al., 2001; Dermont et al., 2008). These limitations have motivated researchers to explore environmentally compatible and cost-effective remediation technologies capable of restoring soil health without compromising ecological balance.

In recent years, nanotechnology has emerged as a promising tool for environmental remediation due to the unique physicochemical properties of nanomaterials. Nanoparticles typically ranging between 1 and 100 nm exhibit exceptionally high surface area, enhanced reactivity, and tunable catalytic behavior, enabling efficient interaction with contaminants (Nowack and Bucheli, 2007). Engineered nanomaterials such as nanoscale zero-valent iron,

metal oxides, carbon nanotubes, and magnetic nanoparticles have demonstrated remarkable capacity for adsorption, reduction, immobilization, and catalytic degradation of toxic pollutants in contaminated soils (Zhang, 2003; Karn et al., 2009). These properties allow in-situ remediation with minimal disturbance while significantly improving treatment efficiency. Parallel to technological advances, bioremediation has gained recognition as a sustainable and eco-friendly approach that utilizes biological systems—including microorganisms, plants, and enzymes—to detoxify pollutants through natural metabolic processes. Microbial degradation, phytoremediation, and enzyme-mediated transformation convert hazardous compounds into less toxic or mineralized forms, thereby restoring soil functionality (Glick, 2010; Vidali, 2001). Biological remediation methods are particularly attractive because they maintain soil fertility and ecological integrity while requiring relatively low energy input.

Recent research trends highlight the integration of nanotechnology with biological remediation systems, forming an advanced strategy known as nano-bioremediation. In this combined approach, nanomaterials enhance contaminant bioavailability, stimulate microbial activity, and accelerate degradation kinetics, thereby overcoming the limitations of individual technologies (Khot et al., 2012). The synergistic interaction between nanoscale materials and biological agents represents a significant advancement toward efficient and sustainable soil pollution control.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of nanotechnology and bioremediation approaches for soil pollution management, emphasizing remediation mechanisms, applications, environmental implications, and future research directions. By critically analyzing recent developments, this study seeks to contribute to the advancement of innovative and sustainable strategies for restoring contaminated soils and ensuring long-term environmental resilience.

2. Sources and Impacts of Soil Pollution

Soil pollution primarily arises from intensified anthropogenic activities associated with industrial development, modern agriculture, urbanization, and improper waste management practices (Alloway, 2013; Wei and Yang, 2010). Industrial operations such as mining, smelting, metal processing, petrochemical production, and textile manufacturing release substantial quantities of toxic substances including heavy metals, hydrocarbons, solvents, and persistent organic pollutants into surrounding soils (Wuana and Okieimen, 2011). Mining activities contribute significantly to contamination through tailings disposal and acid mine drainage, which introduce metals such as lead, cadmium, arsenic, and mercury into terrestrial environments (Adriano, 2001). In agricultural systems, excessive application of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and sewage sludge has become a major source of soil degradation, leading to the accumulation of agrochemicals and nutrient imbalances over time (Nicholson et al., 2003). Additionally, rapid urban expansion generates municipal solid waste, electronic waste, construction debris, and landfill leachates that further introduce microplastics, pharmaceuticals, and emerging contaminants into soil ecosystems (He et al., 2015).

The impacts of soil pollution extend beyond localized environmental degradation and directly influence ecosystem stability, food security, and human health. Toxic contaminants alter soil physicochemical properties, disrupt microbial diversity, and inhibit essential biological

processes such as nutrient cycling and organic matter decomposition (Giller et al., 1998). Heavy metals are particularly hazardous due to their persistence and non-biodegradable nature, enabling long-term accumulation and bioavailability within soil systems (Nagajyoti et al., 2010). These contaminants are readily absorbed by plant roots and subsequently transferred through the food chain, posing risks of chronic toxicity, neurological disorders, and organ damage in humans and animals (Kabata-Pendias, 2011). Organic pollutants such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and pesticides further suppress plant growth by interfering with photosynthesis, respiration, and enzymatic activities (Semple et al., 2001). Moreover, contaminated soils contribute indirectly to groundwater pollution through leaching processes, expanding environmental risks across multiple ecosystems (Alloway, 2013). Consequently, soil pollution represents a multidimensional environmental challenge requiring sustainable remediation strategies capable of restoring ecological balance while minimizing long-term environmental and health impacts.

3. Nanotechnology in Soil Remediation

Nanotechnology has emerged as an innovative and highly efficient approach for the remediation of contaminated soils due to the unique physicochemical properties of nanomaterials. Nanoparticles, typically ranging from 1 to 100 nm in size, possess a high surface-to-volume ratio, enhanced reactivity, and superior adsorption capacity compared to conventional remediation materials. These characteristics enable effective interaction with a wide range of soil pollutants, including heavy metals, pesticides, hydrocarbons, and persistent organic contaminants.

In soil remediation processes, engineered nanomaterials such as nanoscale zero-valent iron (nZVI), metal oxide nanoparticles, carbon nanotubes, and magnetic nanoparticles are widely employed. These materials facilitate pollutant removal through mechanisms including adsorption, chemical reduction, catalytic degradation, and immobilization (Zhang, 2003; Karn et al., 2009). Among these, nanoscale zero-valent iron has received considerable attention due to its strong reducing capacity and large reactive surface area. nZVI particles can transform toxic metal ions and chlorinated contaminants into less mobile and less toxic forms, thereby reducing their bioavailability in soil environments (Nurmi et al., 2005; Li et al., 2006). Similarly, photocatalytic nanoparticles such as titanium dioxide promote the degradation of organic pollutants under light exposure through the generation of reactive oxygen species, leading to mineralization of contaminants into environmentally benign products (Fujishima et al., 2008).

An important advantage of nanotechnology lies in its ability to support in-situ remediation, minimizing soil disturbance while improving treatment efficiency and reducing operational costs compared with conventional remediation techniques (Karn et al., 2009). Despite its promising potential, concerns regarding nanoparticle toxicity, environmental persistence, transport behavior, and long-term ecological effects remain critical considerations for sustainable large-scale application (Nowack and Bucheli, 2007; Klaine et al., 2008).

4. Bioremediation Approaches

Bioremediation is an environmentally sustainable technique that utilizes living organisms, primarily microorganisms and plants, to degrade, transform, or immobilize contaminants

present in polluted soils. This approach relies on natural biological processes in which bacteria, fungi, and plant-associated microbes metabolize toxic substances as sources of energy or nutrients, converting them into less harmful or stable compounds (Vidali, 2001; Glick, 2010). Bioremediation has gained significant attention due to its cost-effectiveness, minimal environmental disturbance, and ability to restore soil fertility while maintaining ecological balance (Das and Chandran, 2011).

Microbial bioremediation involves the activity of indigenous or introduced microorganisms capable of degrading organic pollutants such as petroleum hydrocarbons, pesticides, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons through enzymatic reactions including oxidation, reduction, and mineralization (Atlas and Hazen, 2011). Techniques such as bioaugmentation and biostimulation are commonly employed to enhance microbial efficiency by introducing specialized microbial strains or optimizing environmental conditions such as nutrient availability, moisture content, and oxygen supply (Tyagi et al., 2011).

Phytoremediation represents another important biological strategy in which plants absorb, stabilize, or transform contaminants through root uptake and rhizospheric interactions. Plant roots release exudates that stimulate microbial communities, thereby accelerating pollutant degradation within the rhizosphere (Salt et al., 1998; Pilon-Smits, 2005). Additionally, enzymatic bioremediation utilizes extracellular enzymes produced by microorganisms to break down complex organic compounds into simpler and less toxic forms (Singh and Ward, 2004). Although bioremediation processes may require longer treatment periods compared with physicochemical techniques, their ecological compatibility, low energy requirement, and sustainability make them highly suitable for long-term soil pollution management (Azubuike et al., 2016).

5. Nano-Bioremediation: Integrated Technology

Nano-bioremediation represents an advanced and integrated remediation strategy that combines the high reactivity of nanomaterials with the metabolic capabilities of biological systems to enhance soil pollution control efficiency. This emerging technology addresses the limitations associated with individual nanotechnology and bioremediation approaches by creating synergistic interactions between nanoparticles, microorganisms, plants, and contaminants (Karn et al., 2009; Khot et al., 2012). The integration improves pollutant bioavailability, accelerates degradation kinetics, and enhances overall remediation performance in contaminated soils (Paria, 2008).

Nanomaterials such as nanoscale zero-valent iron (nZVI), metal oxide nanoparticles, and carbon-based nanomaterials play a crucial role in modifying soil physicochemical conditions to support biological activity. These nanoparticles can adsorb or partially transform toxic pollutants into less complex forms, making them more accessible for microbial degradation (Zhang, 2003; Li et al., 2006). In addition, nanoparticles may function as electron donors or acceptors during microbial metabolic processes, thereby stimulating enzymatic reactions involved in contaminant breakdown (Tratnyek and Johnson, 2006). Studies have demonstrated that nanoparticle-assisted microbial systems significantly improve the degradation of hydrocarbons, pesticides, and chlorinated organic compounds compared with conventional bioremediation techniques (Shi et al., 2011).

Furthermore, nano-bioremediation enhances phytoremediation efficiency by promoting plant growth and increasing root surface interactions within the rhizosphere. Nanoparticles improve nutrient availability and stress tolerance in plants, enabling greater uptake and stabilization of heavy metals in polluted soils (Dimkpa and Bindraban, 2016). The combined action of nanoparticles and plant-microbe interactions facilitates simultaneous immobilization and biodegradation of contaminants, thereby reducing environmental toxicity (Glick, 2010).

Despite its promising potential, concerns related to nanoparticle toxicity, long-term environmental fate, and ecological safety require careful assessment before large-scale implementation (Nowack and Bucheli, 2007; Klaine et al., 2008). Current research therefore emphasizes green synthesis of biocompatible nanoparticles and controlled application strategies to ensure sustainable remediation outcomes. Overall, nano-bioremediation provides a highly efficient, eco-friendly, and innovative solution for addressing complex soil contamination challenges in modern environmental management.

6. Applications in Soil Pollution Control

The application of nanotechnology and bioremediation approaches has significantly advanced soil pollution management by providing efficient, sustainable, and site-specific remediation solutions. These technologies are increasingly applied across agricultural, industrial, mining, and urban environments where conventional remediation methods often prove economically or environmentally unsuitable (Karn et al., 2009; Khot et al., 2012). The combined use of nanomaterials and biological systems enables simultaneous contaminant removal and restoration of soil health, making them highly effective for long-term environmental management (Glick, 2010).

Table 1. Applications of Nano-Bioremediation in Different Soil Pollution Scenarios

Contaminated Site	Major Pollutants	Nanotechnology Application	Bioremediation Strategy	Remediation Mechanism
Agricultural Soils	Pesticides, herbicides, excess fertilizers, heavy metals	TiO ₂ nanoparticles, iron-based nanomaterials enhance photocatalytic degradation	Microbial degradation and phytoremediation	Catalytic oxidation, mineralization, enhanced plant uptake and soil fertility restoration
Mining and Metallurgical Areas	Lead (Pb), Cadmium (Cd), Arsenic (As), Chromium (Cr)	Nanoscale zero-valent iron (nZVI), metal oxide nanoparticles	Metal-resistant microbes and phytoremediation	Metal immobilization, reduction of toxicity and bioavailability

Petroleum Hydrocarbon - Contaminated Soils	Crude oil, PAHs, hydrocarbons	Magnetic nanoparticles and reactive nanomaterials	Hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria and fungi	Enhanced bioavailability, adsorption, enzymatic oxidation and mineralization
Industrial Waste Disposal Sites	Dyes, solvents, pharmaceuticals, mixed organic pollutants	Catalytic nanomaterials for oxidative degradation	Microbial consortia	Transformation of toxic compounds into stable products
Urban & Brownfield Lands	Mixed contaminants, heavy metals, organic residues	Nano-enabled sensors and reactive nanoparticles	Assisted natural attenuation and bioaugmentation	Real-time monitoring and precision remediation

A. Agricultural Soils

One of the most important applications is observed in agricultural soils contaminated with pesticides, herbicides, and excessive fertilizers. Continuous agrochemical application leads to accumulation of toxic residues that negatively affect soil microorganisms and crop productivity (Nicholson et al., 2003). Nanoparticles such as titanium dioxide and iron-based nanomaterials promote catalytic degradation of pesticide molecules through photocatalytic and redox reactions (Fujishima et al., 2008). Simultaneously, microbial bioremediation facilitates mineralization of these contaminants into harmless end products (Das and Chandran, 2011). Nanotechnology-assisted phytoremediation further enhances plant growth and nutrient uptake, enabling crops and hyperaccumulator plants to remove heavy metals while maintaining soil fertility (Pilon-Smits, 2005; Dimkpa and Bindraban, 2016) Table 1.

B. Mining and Metallurgical Areas

Mining and metallurgical activities frequently contaminate soils with heavy metals including lead, cadmium, arsenic, and chromium. Nanoscale zero-valent iron (nZVI) and metal oxide nanoparticles are widely applied to immobilize or chemically reduce toxic metal ions, thereby decreasing their mobility and bioavailability (Zhang, 2003; Li et al., 2006). When combined with metal-resistant microbial strains or phytoremediation systems, these integrated technologies stabilize contaminated soils and prevent transfer of metals into groundwater and food chains (Salt et al., 1998). Such approaches are particularly valuable in abandoned mining regions where excavation-based remediation is impractical (Table 1).

C. Petroleum Hydrocarbon-Contaminated Soils

Petroleum hydrocarbon-contaminated soils commonly occur near oil refineries, transportation corridors, and spill sites. Hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria and fungi metabolize complex organic compounds through enzymatic oxidation and mineralization pathways (Atlas and Hazen, 2011). Nanoparticles enhance pollutant solubility and surface accessibility, thereby accelerating microbial degradation processes (Tratnyek and Johnson, 2006). Magnetic

nanoparticles additionally support contaminant adsorption and recovery, improving remediation efficiency while reducing treatment duration (Karn et al., 2009)(Table 1).

D. Industrial Waste Disposal Sites

Industrial waste disposal and landfill areas expose soils to mixed contaminants such as dyes, solvents, pharmaceuticals, and emerging pollutants. Nanomaterials function as catalysts in oxidative degradation reactions, while microbial consortia biologically transform organic toxins into stable compounds (Paria, 2008). These nano-bio systems enable in-situ remediation with minimal ecosystem disturbance, making them suitable for environmentally sensitive or densely populated regions (Nowack and Bucheli, 2007) (Table 1).

E. Urban and Brownfield Land Restoration

Nanotechnology and bioremediation are increasingly utilized in urban and brownfield land restoration, enabling safe reuse of contaminated land for agricultural, recreational, or residential purposes. Nano-enabled sensing technologies allow real-time monitoring of soil contaminants and support precision remediation strategies that minimize excessive chemical intervention (Klaine et al., 2008). Such adaptive remediation approaches contribute to sustainable urban land management and environmental rehabilitation (Table 1).

Overall, nano-bioremediation technologies provide multifunctional solutions capable of addressing diverse soil pollution scenarios. By simultaneously detoxifying contaminants, improving soil structure, and restoring microbial activity, these approaches contribute significantly to sustainable land management and environmental protection. Continued technological development and field-scale validation are expected to expand their implementation in global soil restoration programs.

7. Environmental Risks and Safety Considerations

Despite the significant potential of nanotechnology and bioremediation for soil pollution control, careful evaluation of environmental risks and safety considerations is essential to ensure sustainable implementation. The introduction of engineered nanomaterials into soil systems raises concerns regarding their long-term behavior, persistence, and possible ecological impacts (Nowack and Bucheli, 2007; Klaine et al., 2008). Due to their extremely small size and high surface reactivity, nanoparticles can interact not only with target pollutants but also with beneficial soil organisms, potentially altering microbial diversity and soil biochemical processes (Handy et al., 2008).

One major concern involves the potential toxicity of nanoparticles to soil microorganisms, which play critical roles in nutrient cycling, organic matter decomposition, and ecosystem stability. Excessive concentrations of certain metal-based nanoparticles have been reported to inhibit microbial growth, disrupt enzymatic activities, and induce oxidative stress in microbial cells (Nel et al., 2006; Ge et al., 2011). Such disturbances may negatively influence soil fertility and ecological balance if nanoparticle exposure is not appropriately controlled. Furthermore, nanoparticles may undergo aggregation, dissolution, or surface transformation within soil environments, significantly influencing their mobility, reactivity, and bioavailability (Hotze et al., 2010).

Another important safety issue relates to the transport and accumulation of nanoparticles within terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Nanoparticles introduced during remediation processes may migrate through soil pores and reach groundwater systems, posing potential

risks to water quality and aquatic organisms (Gottschalk et al., 2009). Additionally, nanoparticle uptake by plants raises concerns regarding trophic transfer and possible entry into the food chain, thereby increasing the likelihood of indirect human exposure (Ma et al., 2010). Although bioremediation is generally regarded as environmentally friendly, risks associated with the introduction of non-native microbial strains or genetically modified microorganisms must also be considered. Improper microbial management may disturb indigenous microbial communities or result in unintended ecological consequences (Gentry et al., 2004).

To minimize these risks, current research emphasizes the development of green or biologically synthesized nanoparticles, controlled dosage application, and comprehensive environmental risk assessment frameworks (Iravani, 2011). Long-term environmental monitoring, toxicity evaluation, and regulatory guidelines are therefore necessary to balance remediation efficiency with ecosystem safety. Ensuring responsible application will be crucial for the successful adoption of nano-bioremediation technologies in large-scale soil restoration programs.

8. Emerging Trends and Future Perspectives

Recent advances in soil remediation research are increasingly focused on developing sustainable, efficient, and environmentally compatible technologies through the integration of nanotechnology and biological systems. Emerging trends include the green synthesis of nanoparticles using plant extracts and microbial processes, which reduces toxicity and enhances biocompatibility in soil environments. The application of nano-enabled biosensors for real-time monitoring of soil contaminants is also gaining attention, enabling precision-based remediation strategies. Furthermore, genetically engineered microorganisms and plant-microbe consortia are being explored to improve degradation efficiency for complex and persistent pollutants. Artificial intelligence and data-driven modeling approaches are expected to optimize remediation design, predict contaminant behavior, and enhance field-scale implementation. Future research emphasizes scalable, cost-effective nano-bioremediation systems capable of restoring soil health while maintaining ecological balance. These innovations are anticipated to play a crucial role in sustainable land management and global environmental protection initiatives.

9. Research Gaps

Despite considerable progress in nanotechnology and bioremediation for soil pollution control, several research gaps limit their large-scale practical implementation. Most existing studies remain confined to laboratory or pilot-scale experiments, with limited field-level validation under complex environmental conditions. The long-term environmental fate, transformation, and persistence of engineered nanoparticles in soil ecosystems are still insufficiently understood, particularly regarding their interaction with native microbial communities and potential bioaccumulation in food chains. Additionally, standardized methodologies for assessing nanoparticle toxicity, ecological risks, and remediation efficiency are lacking, making comparison across studies difficult. Economic feasibility and large-scale production of environmentally safe nanomaterials also remain significant challenges. Furthermore, integrated nano-bioremediation systems require optimization to ensure stability under varying soil properties such as pH, temperature, and moisture content. Addressing these gaps through

interdisciplinary research and regulatory frameworks is essential for advancing sustainable and widely applicable soil remediation technologies.

10. Conclusion

Soil pollution has emerged as a critical environmental concern due to increasing industrialization, intensive agricultural practices, and improper waste disposal, leading to the accumulation of hazardous contaminants that threaten ecosystem stability and human health. Conventional remediation techniques, although effective in certain situations, often involve high costs and ecological disturbances, highlighting the need for sustainable and environmentally friendly alternatives. In this context, nanotechnology and bioremediation have gained significant attention as promising approaches for efficient soil restoration.

Nanotechnology offers rapid and targeted remediation through enhanced adsorption, catalytic degradation, and immobilization of pollutants, while bioremediation utilizes natural biological processes to detoxify contaminants and restore soil functionality. The integration of these technologies into nano-bioremediation systems provides synergistic benefits by improving pollutant bioavailability, stimulating microbial activity, and accelerating degradation processes. Such combined approaches enable effective treatment of complex contaminants while preserving soil health and ecological balance.

However, challenges related to nanoparticle toxicity, environmental safety, large-scale applicability, and long-term monitoring must be addressed before widespread implementation. Future research focusing on green nanomaterial synthesis, field-scale validation, and regulatory standardization will be essential for ensuring safe and sustainable applications. Overall, nano-bioremediation represents a transformative and innovative strategy with strong potential to support global soil conservation, sustainable agriculture, and environmental protection efforts.

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