Preliminary Hydrochemical Characterization of the Lagoons of "Los Flamencos" National Reserve (Salar de Atacama, Chile)

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INTRODUCTION

The Salar de Atacama is a closed evaporite basin located in the Pre-Andean Depression in the NE of Chile (Fig. 1A). Although the Salar de Atacama is placed in the most arid region of the world, a system of wetlands and lagoons is developed along its E margin, inhabited by a wide variety of wildlife. In order to preserve the environmental value of this delicate system, the processes and factors controlling its hydrochemical evolution must be identified and evaluated. With this purpose, hydrochemical data from some of the main lagoons of the area have been interpreted in this work with the assistance of geochemical modeling.

GEOLoGICAL SETTING

The study has been focused on the Soncor system as the main ecosystem placed within the “Los Flamencos” National Reserve. This system mainly consists of two main lagoons - Chaxa and Barros Negros - linked and fed by the Burro Muerto channel (Fig. 1B). Apart from this channel, the lagoons (and the channel itself) are thought to receive some contribution of surface and groundwaters, for which similar ratios have already been reported (Salas et al., 2010). Although the most apparent origin for this Na-Cl correlation would be the dissolution of halite, this mineral is scarcely present in the sediments and evaporitic crusts towards the E-SE of the system, from where most of the environmental monitoring programs developed by mining companies. To help interpret these data, solubility calculations and reaction-path modeling has been carried out using the PHREEQC code (Parkhurst and Appelo, 2013). Given the concentrated character of the studied waters, the geochemical calculations have been done using the Pitzer ion interaction approach with a modified version of the pitzer.dat thermodynamic database distributed with the PHREEQC code.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The waters from the lagoons of the Soncor system are Na-Cl type, slightly alkaline (pH generally between 7 and 8) and very concentrated, with contents of Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) varying from 70 to 370 g/L. Average Cl and Na values are around 70 and 35 g/L, respectively, although larger contents for these and the rest of major ions are generally reached during the summer seasons. Most waters are undersaturated with respect to halite and mirabilite, equilibrated with respect to gypsum and oversaturated with respect to calcite and dolomite. Calculated partial CO2 pressures are well above the atmospheric value, with average values close to 10^2.3 atm.

As shown in Fig. 2A, Cl and Na contents are closely correlated in the Soncor waters and the average stoichiometric Na/Cl ratio is around 0.8. Since the whole system presents this feature, the observed stoichiometry seems to be inherited from the recharging groundwaters, for which similar ratios have already been reported (Salas et al., 2010). The most apparent origin for this Na-Cl correlation would be the dissolution of halite, this mineral is scarcely present in the sediments and evaporitic crusts towards the E-SE of the system, from where most of the...
recharging waters are thought to come. A possible explanation for the observed correlation would be the progressive solute concentration by evaporation.

As displayed in Fig. 2B, Cl concentrations and their temporal evolution in Burro Muerto channel and Chaxa lagoon are generally very similar and the same pattern is followed by the rest of major ions (not shown). This is consistent with the fact that the main inputs to Chaxa lagoon are via Burro Muerto channel. In contrast, the dissolved contents of major elements in Barros Negros lagoon are clearly higher and describe much stronger seasonal variations, with the highest contents during the summer season (December-March). A possible explanation for this behavior, which is also observed in the Barros Negros channel and the Chaxa lagoon (although much weaker), would be the concentration by evaporation.

In order to test the feasibility of this hypothesis, reaction-path evaporation simulations have been carried out for the Chaxa and Burro Muerto lagoons. These simulations have been done taking as initial water compositions the ones corresponding to the samples with the lowest dissolved contents (from the winter season) and evaporating them until Cl contents reach similar values to the measured ones in the samples with the peaking contents (at summer season). At that point, the simulated concentrations of the rest of elements have been compared with their corresponding measured values in the summer samples after evaporation. During the simulations, which were developed for the data from 2010, 2011 and 2012, the precipitation at oversaturation of gypsum, halite, calcite, sepiolite and mirabilite was allowed.

The results obtained in these simulations indicate that evaporation proportions between 6 and 33% for Chaxa and between 40 and 89% for Barros Negros are needed to justify their measured Cl contents during the summer season just by evaporation. For Chaxa, such proportions could be consistent with the field observations. On the contrary, the evaporation proportions obtained for Barros Negros would imply, in some cases, the almost complete desiccation of the lagoon, which has never been observed nor reported in earlier works.

Moreover, although the evaporation simulations produce similar contents of some of the dissolved elements to the measured values, other concentrations cannot be fully accounted for (Figs. 2C and D, for Barros Negros and Chaxa, respectively). This is especially evident for the sulphate contents, which are two to three times lower in the simulations than in the measured values. Thus, additional input for this element is required. Two main sulphate sources could contribute to explain the high measured sulphate values: 1) input of sulphate-rich groundwater from the E margin of the Salar, as suggested by Salas et al. (2010) mainly for Barros Negros, and/or 2) dissolution of other hypothetical mineral phases not taken into account in the evaporation simulations. In order to test the validity of these two (alternative or complementary) hypotheses, further studies and modeling exercises should be carried out in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary characterization of the hydrochemistry of some of the water bodies of the Soncor system has allowed identifying their evolution patterns, the differences in their seasonal behavior and some of their possible geochemical controls. Moreover, the results obtained in evaporation simulations suggest that the evaporative processes, although probably very important in the Soncor system, do not fully justify the elemental concentration peaks observed in the Chaxa and Barros Negros lagoons during the summer season. Some alternative processes (dissolution of additional mineral phases, input of concentrated groundwaters) have been hypothesized, which will have to be examined further in future studies.

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REFERENCES