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STATE OF OREGON DEPARTMENT OF GEOLOGY AND MINERAL INDUSTRIES

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OPEN-FILE REPORT 0-88-4

ELEMENTAL CONTENT OF HEAVY-MINERAL CONCENTRATIONS ON THE CONTINENTAL SHELF OFF OREGON AND NORTHERNMOST CALIFORNIA

Bv

LaVerne D. Kulm and Curt D. Peterson

College of Oceanography Oregon State University Corvallis, OR 97331

1982

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ABSTRACT

A total of 73 surface and near-surface sediment samples from the continental shelf off Oregon and northernmost California was analyzed for their elemental content using instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA). The elements chromium and titanium were the most abundant economic metals of the 26 elements analyzed in the opaque mineral phase of the heavy-mineral assemblage of the sand fraction. Chromium, which is found mainiy south of Coos Bay, Oregon, and into northern California, ranges in concentration from a trace up to 7% by weight across the middle and inner shelf. Titanium is present in large quantities (2 to 23%) on the inner shelf from Tillamook to Cape Bianco. Both elements are present in abundance in the vicinity of Cape Blanco.

INTRODUCTION

Previous geological studies of the Oregon coastal region have identified several areas where strategic and economic heavy minerals (chromium-bearing chromite, titanium-bearing ilmenite, and zircon) and metal (gold) placer deposits occur in substantial quantities in modern beach and ancient uplifted marine terrace deposits Pardee, 1934; Griggs, 1945; Komar and Wang, 1984; Peterson and others, 1986, 1987). The modern rivers and beaches have been mined for placer deposits containing gold since 1850. During mineral shortages of World War II, the coastal terrace deposits of southwest Oregon were explored for chromite and ilmenite. These black sands were mined in 1943 to produce a chromite concentrate that was then stockpiled for potential use during the war (Griggs, 1945).

Previous geological and geophysical studies of the continental shelf off southern Oregon strongly suggest that placer deposits occur on the shelf and that they may contain the same minerals and metals found in the adjacent coastal region (Kulm and others, 1968; Clifton, 1968; Chambers, 1969; Bowman, 1972a,b). Anomalous concentrations of heavy minerals found in the surface sediments of the southern Oregon shelf as well as the magnetic anomalies associated with these concentrations suggest that ancient beach placers may be present in the subsurface deposits (see Background).

While chromite is presently the chief strategic mineral in these Oregon deposits, it is associated with the other potentially strategic and economic minerals (ilmenite and zircon) and precious metal (gold). The continental shelf deposits could become a valuable national resource if these minerals and metals are present in sufficient concentrations and quantities to be mined.

The objective of this study was to determine if economic mineral phases occur within

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the surface sediments of the continental shelves off Oregon and northernmost California. This was accomplished by the analysis of the elemental content of widely distributed samples from the shelf.

BACKGROUND

According to Kulm and others (1975), the unconsolidated sediments on the Oregon continental shelf are classified into three sedimentary facies: (1) a transgressive sand, composed of well-sorted fine sand; (2) a modern mud, consisting of silt and clay; and (3) a mixture of sand and mud, created by the burrowing of benthic organisms, which mix the mud into the underlying sand (Figure 1). The sand facies extends to a water depth of 90 to 100 meters off northern and central Oregon but retreats to a depth of 50 meters off southern Oregon, where the shelf is much narrower. The mud facies is thin and patchy and concentrated in areas near rivers that have a fairly high discharge. The mixed facies extends seaward from the sand facies to the edge of the shelf except where it is overlain by mud.

Several well-defined heavy-mineral concentrations occur in these surface sediments on the northern and southern Oregon shelf (Kulm and others, 1968). Heavy-mineral percentages range from 10 to 33% by weight of the total sand fraction of the surface sediment (Figure 2) and from 10 to 56% in the subsurface sediment. These heavy-mineral percentages were obtained previously by separations with tetrabromoethane (specific gravity 2.96), whereas the values listed in Appendix I represent heavy mineral percentages obtained with sodium polytungstate (specific gravity 3.0, see Methods section); the former percentages are generally higher than the latter. The most extensive concentrations are located off the Columbia River, Umpqua River, Cape Bianco, and Rogue River. These concentrations extend to a subsurface depth of 40 to 60 centimeters in short box and piston cores taken in the area. Rather large magnetic anomalies (up to 300 gammas) are associated with these

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Figure 1. Sedimentary facies of the Oregon continental shelf (After Kulm and others,1975). Solid line crossing patterns near the edge of shelf is the 180-meter contour.

Figure 2. Heavy mineral concentrations (i.e., nonopaque and opaque minerals with specific gravities >2.96) of Oregon continental shelf sands. Data compiled from Runge (1966), Chambers (1969), and unpublished data (L. Kulm). Outer edge of the shelf is the 180-meter contour. See Appendix I for the heavy-mineral percentages of the sediment samples analyzed in this study.

heavy-mineral concentrations, and magnetic depth-to-source modeling suggests that placers, concentrated in iron-rich phases, lie at depth (Kulm and others, 1968).

METHODS

A total of 73 surface and near-surface samples was selected from more than 1,000 samples available for the continental shelf off Oregon (Figures 3A,B) These samples included grab samples, short box cores $\left($ <45 cm $\right)$, and short piston or gravity cores <60 cm!. The sediment samples were selected on the basis of their geographic distribution relative to known coastal deposits containing economic minerals, their probable fluvial sources of economic minerals, and their high heavy-mineral content, In a number of cores, one sample was taken from the surface sediment and one from the bottom sediment in the core, Additional short gravity cores were obtained for the northernmost California shelf from the U.S. Geological Survey, Marine Geology Branch, Menlo Park California. Few samples have been collected offshore of northernmost California, and we have used those that were available. All samples used in this study range in water depths from 17 to about 200 meters.

Surface sediments from the continental shelf off Oregon and northwest California were processed for opaque-mineral concentrates, which were then analyzed by Instrumental Neutron Activation Analyses (INAA) in order to compare compositions of potentiai offshore mineral resources from different regions of the shelf. Samples from 73 surface and near-surface sediments were wet sieved to retain the 0.062- to 2.00-mm size fractions that were used for heavy-mineral separation in sodium polytungstate. Sodium polytungstate is a nontoxic, water-based heavy liquid, specific gravity up to 3.0 glcc, that has proved ideal for heavy-mineral separations. Centrifuging the sample-liquid mixture speeded up the mineral separation in the viscous poiytungstate fiuid. Isolation of the heavy-mineral fraction was accomplished by freezing the heavy-mineral concentrate at the bottom of the separatory tube and selectively pouring off the light mineral-fluid mixture, Mineral grains were rinsed with

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Figure 3A. Sediment sample location map for the Oregon and northernmost California continental shelves. See Appendix I for the sample number, type of sampling device, and water depth at each sample site. Refer to Figure 3B for inset map of sampling area (unlabeled solid dots) between Cape Blanco and the Oregon-California border.

Figure 3B. Sediment sample location map for southern Oregon continental shelf. See also Figure 3A for reference map,

distilled water, and the filtered polytungstate wash was dehydrated in an oven to return the liquid to its maximum density of 3.0 g/cc.

The heavy-mineral fractions of the shelf samples were then passed beneath a hand magnet and through a Frantz isodynamic magnetic separator to pull out iron-rich (opaque) phases including magnetite, ilmenite, and chromite. Iron-rich garnets, pyroxenes, and rock fragments were also observed in the magnetic fraction. A colloid solution of tungsten carbide and sodium polytungstate, specific gravity =4.4 g /cc, was then used to isolate the opaque phases (densities greater than 4.5 g/cc) from the less-dense garnets and pyroxenes (densities less than 4.3 g/cc). Opaque-phase separates were rinsed in distilled water, and filtrates were examined under a microscope to confirm a pure concentrate of opaque-mineral grains. Final weights of the light, heavy, and opaque fractions were then compared to the bulk sand grain counts under a petrographic microscope to establish the efficiency of mineral separations.

Elemental analyses of the opaque fractions were performed by INAA to compare the relative abundances of the iron, titanium, and chromium phases and their associated trace elements of the shelf samples. The full suite of 26 elements was run on 70 samples, and a limited suite of 7 elements including titanium was analyzed on three additional samples. The prepared opaque mineral fractions were encapsulated in doubly sealed polyethylene containers prior to irradiation in the Oregon State University Reactor. Elements with relatively short radioactive half lives (several hours) were irradiated (2 minutes) in the rabbit pneumatic transfer system (3.5 X 10 $^{\circ}$ neutrons/cm²-s), while elements with longer half lives were irradiated (7 hours) in rotating Lazy Susan rack $(3 \times 10^{12} \text{ neutrons/cm}^2\text{-s})$. Absolute determination of elemental concentrations in parts per million (ppm) was established by sample comparison to standards of known concentrations that were irradiated along with the sample capsules. Standards used included USGS BCR-1 and DTS-1³, NBS SRM 688

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(Basalt Rock), SRM 1571 (Orchard Leaf), SRM 1632 (Coal), and SRM 1633 (Fly Ash). Detector signals were routed to a Nuclear Data Model 66 4096 channel analyzer for processing. Peak areas were converted to elemental abundances with an in-house computer program.

RESULTS

In this preliminary study, we have identified two major economic elements, chromium and titanium, in the opaque phase of the heavy-mineral fraction of the surface and near-surface sands of the Oregon and northernmost California continental shelf. These elements correspond roughly to the abundances of the minerals chromite and ilmenite. Preliminary microprobe analysis of the opaque phases from widely different river sources indicate that all of the chromium is carried in the chromite phase (average 42% Cr_2O_3) and that most of the titanium is carried in the ilmenite phase (average 45% $TiO₂$). A small amount of titanium is also carried in a titaniferous magnetite phase (Peterson and others, 1987). An approximation of the relative abundance of chromite and ilmenite in each sample can be obtained by multiplying the percent chromium or titanium times 3. For example, 5% chromium would indicate roughly 15% chromite and 20% titanium would indicate roughly 60% ilmenite, assuming that all of the titanium is contained in the ilmenite phase.

The chromium and titanium elemental content of the 73 samples is shown in weight percent for the sediment samples collected at each sampling site on the shelf (Figures 4A,B and 5A,B). Chromium is present in quantities ranging from a trace up to 7 percent, The highest values are found on the inner shelf from Coos Bay, Oregon to the southernmost part of the study area off California (Figures 4A,B). Titanium is present in very large quantities (2 to 23 weight percent) compared to chromium. The largest titanium content is found on the inner shelf between Tillamook and Cape Blanco off central Oregon (Figures 5A,B).

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Figure 4A. Weight percent elemental chromium in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the Oregon and northern California continental shelves. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent; two numbers separated by comma are from box cores (i.e., $19,20 =$ top, bottom of core) See expanded diagram for percents of samples shown between 42° to 43° N latitude. Analyses were conducted by INAA. Outer edge of shelf indicated by 200-meter contour.

Figure 4B. Weight percent elemental chromium in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the southern Oregon continental shelf from 42° to 43° N latitude. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent. Analyses were conducted by lNAA. Contours in meters.

Figure 5A. Weight percent elemental titanium in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the Oregon and northern California continental shelves. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent; (i.e., $19,20 =$ top, bottom of core). See expanded diagram for percents of samples shown between 42° to 43° N latitude. Analyses were conducted by INAA. Outer edge of shelf indicated by 200-meter contour.

Figure 5B. Weight percent elemental titanium in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the southern Oregon continental shelf from 42° to 43° N latitude. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent. Analyses were conducted by INAA. Contours in meters.

There is an overlap in the chromium and titanium abundances in the vicinity of Cape Blanco. Chromium ranges from 2 to 3% and titanium from 19 to 20% in a region where Kulm and others (1968) have identified an anomalously high heavy-mineral concentration (10 to 33%). These sand deposits are located in water depths $<$ 50 meters just north of the Cape.

The elemental titanium/chromium ratio (i.e., weight percent titanium divided by weight percent chromium) ranges from 1 to 122 (Figures $6A, B$). The highest ratios, which are located off central Oregon, reflect the low chromium content of these sands. They occur in the sands of the inner shelf in water depths of <50 meters.

We emphasize that the above weight percents of the economic elements and other elements (Appendix I) in the shelf surface sediments are based upon our analysis of the opaque phase of the mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of the total sand sample. The percentages of opaque minerals range from $<$ 1% to 6% in this super heavy fraction of the shelf sands. We have excluded a certain amount of titanium and chromium, which also resides in the lighter opaque fraction (specific gravities 3.0 to 4.4), from this INAA analysis because we wished to obtain a nearly pure concentration of the mineral phases. For this reason, the percentages of opaque minerals and corresponding economic elements given in this study should be considered as minimum values for the shelf sands.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Substantial quantities of elemental titanium and/or chromium comprise the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of the surface and near-surface sediments of the continental shelf off Oregon and northernmost California. The highest elemental contents are generally present within surface and near-surface heavy-mineral concentrations previously outlined on the continental shelf (Figures 2,4,5), although titanium is present in high quantities off central Oregon, where the

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Figure 6A. Elemental titanium/chromium ratio (i.e., 10% titanium/2% chromium = 5) in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the Oregon and northern California continental shelves. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent (i.e., $19,20 =$ top, bottom of core). See expanded diagram for percents of samples shown between 42° to 43° N latitude. Analyses were conducted by INAA. Outer edge of shelf indicated by 200-meter contour

Figure 6B. Elemental titanium/chromium ratio in the opaque-mineral fraction (specific gravity >4.4) of surface sands on the southern Oregon continental shelf from 42° to 43° N latitude. Solid dot is sample location, and number is percent, Analyses were conducted by INAA. Contours in meters.

percentage of heavy minerals range from 1 to 9%.

Placer deposits in the coastal beaches and uplifted marine terraces of southern Oregon generally contain from 90 to 100% heavy minerals, most of which consist of the opaque minerals chromite and ilmenite and the nonopaque minerals garnet and zircon (Peterson and others, 1986,1987). If well-developed placer deposits do exist in the subsurface deposits of the adjacent continental shelf, they should have similar opaque-mineral contents. However, the titanium/chromium ratio may not be the same as that found in the adjacent coastal placers, since a substantial northward longshore transport is indicated by the heavy-mineral assemblages present in the shelf sediments (Scheidegger and others, 1971), whereas the present coastal headlands tend to inhibit this northward longshore transport and the mixing of minerals from different river sources (Peterson and others, 1986).

We are continuing our studies of the INAA data presented here and companion analyses from the beaches, terraces, and rivers of the coastal region. The results of all these studies will be reported in a series of publications in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We greatly appreciate the efforts of Margaret Mumford in the preparation of the heavy-mineral samples for INAA and the work of Bobbi Conard and Margaret Mumford during the analyses. Margaret Mumford also assisted in the preparation of the diagrams presented in this report. Stephen E. Binney provided valuable advice on the INAA during the course of this study. We are grateful to Mike Field of the U.S. Geological Survey, Marine Geology Branch, Menlo Park, California, for providing the sediment samples from the California shelf for this study,

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Appendix I. Elemental content of heavy-mineral concentrations of the Oregon and northernmost
California continental shelf.

Sample types: GC = gravity core; S = Shipek grab; BC = box core; G = grab; NA = not available

Appendix I. Continued

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