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CATION-CONTAINING ACTIVE CARBONS AS PHOTOCATALYSTS FOR DYES DEGRADATION

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We have oxidized commercial coconut-shell-based activated carbon Aquacarb 607C with nitric acid. Prepared oxidized active carbon has micro-mesoporous structure and contains surface carboxyl and phenol/enol groups. Cation-exchanged forms of active carbon were prepared via impregnation of oxidized active carbon with copper and cobalt salts in aqueous solutions. We studied photodegradation of rhodamine B, methyl orange, and phenol under UV- and visible irradiation using oxidized carbon as well as its Cu- and Co-containing forms as catalysts. Initial oxidized active carbon is photoactive toward rhodamine B and methyl orange under UV illumination but inactive under action of visible light. At the same time, cation-exchanged forms of active carbon has improved activity toward rhodamine B, methyl orange, and phenol under both UV- and visible irradiation. Cu-containing active carbon has maximal activity under UV-irradiation: the rate constant of rhodamine B photocatalytic degradation K_d is $2.9 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ s}^{-1}$ while Co-containing active carbon is the most active under visible irradiation – $K_d = 1.2 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ s}^{-1}$. For 7 h irradiation, the degree of discoloration of dyes solutions reaches 90–95 % and degree of mineralization of dyes and phenol solutions (according to total organic carbon measurements) is 16–73 %.

Keywords: *active carbon, cation-exchanged forms, photocatalytic degradation, UV and visible irradiation, discoloration and mineralization*

INTRODUCTION

Active carbons (ACs) are high-porous materials with a huge specific surface area. Therefore, ACs are much more frequently used as a catalyst support than as a catalyst as well [1, 2]. Active carbons also are universal and effective adsorbents for removal organic and inorganic pollutants from gaseous and liquid media including water [3, 4]. Besides, oxidized ACs possess excellent cation-exchange properties [5, 6]. Photodegradation of organic pollutants using carbon materials as catalysts can be an alternative technique for water purification [7–9]. ACs possessing high specific surface area and adsorption capability can be perspective in photocatalytic processes, particularly as a support of photoactive species or constituent element in compositions with oxides [2, 7, 8, 10, 11]. However, the photocatalyst must be a semiconductive material with an electronic band structure which can generate electron–hole pairs after irradiation at a given wavelength (in the visible or UV region). Carbon materials show different electronic structure. Band gap E_g varies in a wide range: from the

values characteristic for conductors to those for dielectrics [12]. Thus, diamond has E_g 5.5 eV [13], graphite is conductor while graphite oxide as well as graphene oxide are semiconductors with E_g 1.8–4.7 and 1.2–4.0 eV, respectively [14–16]. Therefore, these carbon oxides are active under UV- and visible irradiation [15, 17, 18].

Theoretical calculations and experimental measurements show that active carbons can have E_g within 4.8–2.9 eV depending on their origin, chemical composition, and mode of preparation [19–21]. These values allow activated carbons to be used as photocatalysts in UV- and visible region. The examples of ACs application without semiconductor additives for photocatalytic degradation of organic pollutants in aqueous media were reported [19, 21–23]. It has been shown that ACs are photocatalytically active under UV- and visible irradiation. S-doped carbon showed 2 times higher activity in photodegradation of methylene blue under visible and NIR irradiation as compared to that of commercial TiO_2 . Gamma radiation treatment reduced the band gap values of the ACs and

increased sodium diatrizoate removal rate values under UV light. The presence of oxygen-containing groups on the surface is a necessary condition for photocatalytic activity of ACs. Nevertheless, the nature of photocatalytic activity of ACs and mechanism of initiation of oxidation reactions on carbon surface require further investigations.

In the present communication, the activity of oxidized AC and its cation-exchange forms in photodegradation of dyes and phenol under UV- and visible irradiation is studied.

EXPERIMENTAL

Materials. Commercial coconut-shell-based activated carbon Aquacarb 607C (Chemviron, Belgium) was oxidized with 20 % nitric acid for 5 h. After oxidation, carbon was extensively washed with hot water in Soxhlet extractor until neutral pH of wash waters and dried at 110 °C. Thus obtained, oxidized carbon was abbreviated as AC Ox-H. Copper and cobalt-doped carbons were prepared by impregnating 0.5 g of oxidized carbon AC Ox-H with 0.01 M solution of corresponding nitrates at pH 2.3 for copper and 2.6 for cobalt followed by washing with distilled water and drying. Therefore, cation-exchanged forms of AC (AC Ox-Cu and AC Ox-Co, respectively) were prepared.

Porous structure. Nitrogen adsorption isotherms were measured at -196 °C using an Autosorb-6 adsorption analyser (Quantachrome, USA). Pore size distributions (PSD) were calculated by Autosorb-1 software (Quantachrome, USA) using QSDFT method [24–26]. In calculation of PSD, a slit/cylindrical pore model was used. Specific surface area, S_{BET} , was calculated by BET method using nitrogen adsorption data in the relative pressure range chosen by recently proposed procedure [27]. The total pore volume, V_{tot} , was calculated by converting the amount of nitrogen adsorbed at a maximum relative pressure to the volume of liquid adsorbate. The micropore, V_{mi} , and mesopore, V_{me} , volumes were calculated from the cumulative pore size distribution as the volume of pores with sizes less than 2 nm and between 2 and 50 nm, respectively. The porous structure of cation-exchanged forms of AC is practically the same as that for initial oxidized AC.

Surface chemistry. Surface chemistry of oxidized carbon AC Ox-H was investigated by

potentiometric titration method [28] performed in thermostatic vessel at 25 °C using a DL25 Titrator (Mettler-Toledo, Switzerland). The proton concentration was monitored using an LL pH glass electrode (Metrohm, Switzerland). The method is based on calculation of proton binding from raw potentiometric titration data followed by computation of proton affinity distribution using CONTIN method [29–31].

FTIR. The FTIR spectra in the range 4000–400 cm^{-1} for ACs were registered using a “Spectrum-One” spectrometer (Perkin-Elmer). The ratio of sample and KBr powders was 1:250.

Photocatalytic tests. Photocatalytic degradation under visible irradiation was performed in a glass reactor. LED Cool daylight lamp (Philips, 100 W) that has emission spectra exclusively in the visible range with broad maximum in the region 500–700 nm and local maximum around 440 nm was used as illumination source. UV-photocatalytic degradation is realized in quartz reactor using Hg lamp with emission maximum at 254 nm and power 30 W. The initial solution and ones after substrates degradation were analyzed spectrophotometrically (Lambda 35, Perkin Elmer Instruments) at $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 553, 461$ and 265 nm for rhodamine B (RhB), methyl orange (MO), and phenol (Ph), respectively, after centrifugation of reaction mixture (10 min at 8000 rpm). The concentration of their aqueous solutions was $1\text{--}3 \cdot 10^{-5}$ mol/l, $1\text{--}2 \cdot 10^{-5}$ mol/l, and 10 mg/l ($1.06 \cdot 10^{-4}$ mol/l), respectively. The calculation of photodegradation rate K_{d} (K_{d}^{UV} and $K_{\text{d}}^{\text{vis}}$ for reactions under UV- and visible illumination, respectively) was based on the temporal changes of substrates concentration after reaching the adsorption equilibrium (2 h). The obtained results are satisfactorily described by the first-order kinetic equation (correlation coefficient $R^2 = 0.8\text{--}0.98$). The control of pH value during photocatalytic reaction was performed using an apparatus pH-150M. The determination of total organic carbon (TOC) for selected solutions was measured with the help of a Shimadzu TOC analyzer (model 5050A).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Porous structure. Nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms for oxidized carbon AC Ox-H are shown in Fig. 1 a. The isotherm can be attributed to a combination of type I and type IVa of IUPAC classification [32]. A steep raise

of nitrogen uptake at very low p/p^0 is due to adsorption in narrow micropores with enhanced potential while gradual increase in nitrogen adsorption at medium and high relative pressures corresponds to monolayer-multilayer adsorption in mesopores followed by capillary condensation accompanied by small hysteresis of type H4. The isotherm is typical to micro-mesoporous carbons. Pore size distribution of oxidized carbon

AC Ox-H (Fig. 1 b) shows narrow distribution of micropores with maximum at 1.1 nm and narrow distribution of mesopores with maximum at 2.2 nm. Oxidized carbon AC Ox-H shows high specific surface area of 1070 m²/g with the total pore volume of 0.45 cm³/g distributed mostly in micropores (82 %) and minor part in mesopores (18 %).

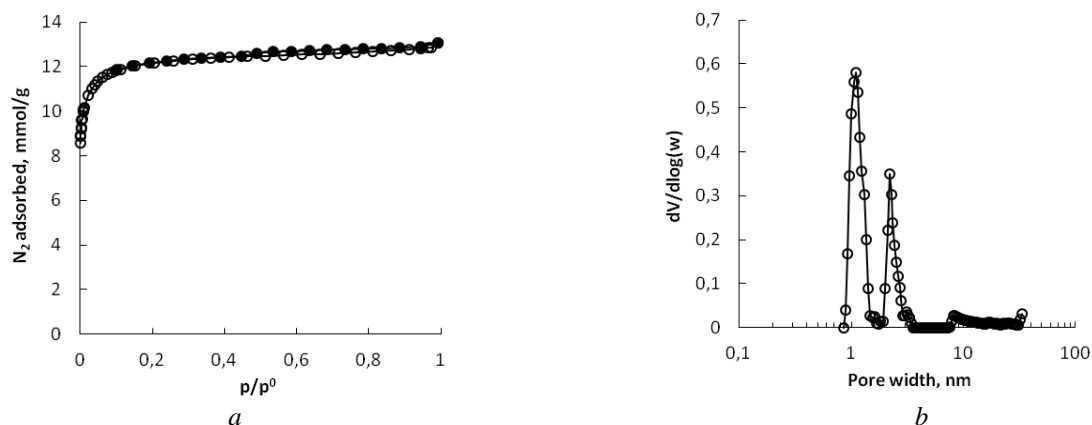


Fig. 1. Nitrogen adsorption isotherm (a) and pore size distribution for oxidized carbon AC Ox-H (b)

Surface chemistry. Surface chemistry of oxidized carbon AC Ox-H was estimated by potentiometric titration method. Proton-binding isotherm for AC Ox-H is shown in Fig. 2 a. Proton binding by AC Ox-H decreases with increasing pH due to gradual dissociation of surface groups. The point of zero charge, where proton binding is zero, lies at 2.09 showing acidic character of the carbon. The shape of proton-binding isotherm for oxidized carbon AC Ox-H is characteristic for multifunctional cation

exchangers containing surface groups of different acidity.

Proton affinity distribution of acid groups calculated by CONTIN method shows four peaks for AC Ox-H (Fig. 2 b). These peaks may be classed as strong carboxylic (0.13 mmol/g, pK 3.0), weak carboxylic (0.01 mmol/g, pK 5.3), and two types of phenolic and/or enol groups (0.06 mmol/g, pK 9.0; 1.32 mmol/g, pK 11.2). Total amount of surface groups equals to 1.52 mmol/g.

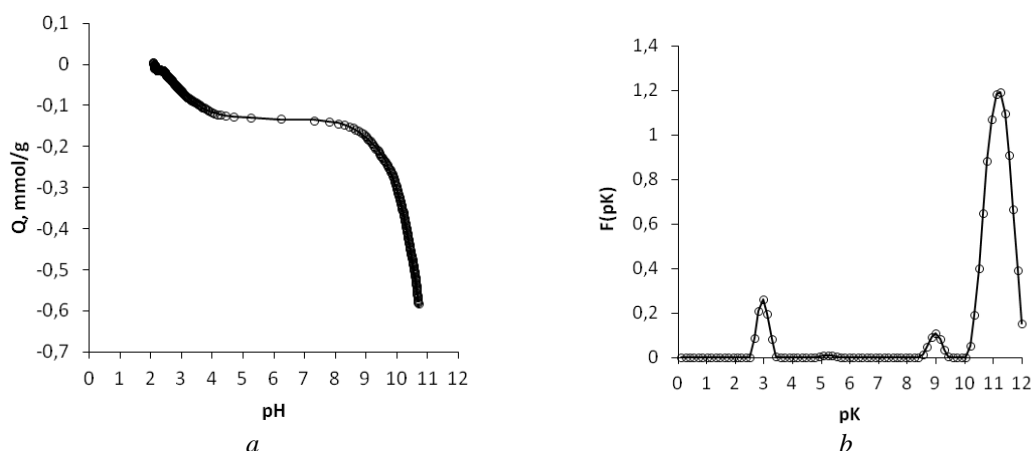


Fig. 2. Proton-binding isotherm (a) and proton affinity distribution for oxidized carbon AC Ox-H (b)

Based on the concentration of strong carboxylic groups at carbon surface, the content of copper and cobalt in the cation-exchange forms can be about 0.76 and 0.82 % w/w, respectively.

Dose of carbon photocatalyst and substrate concentration. Since AC has high specific surface area and, consequently, high adsorption capacity, its content in reaction mixture is much less than that for oxide photocatalysts. For example, the authors of works [19, 21, 23] used content of AC within 0.05–0.2 g/l. For comparison, the content of 1–2 g/l is optimal for processes using TiO₂ as photocatalyst [33, 34]. We found out that adsorption of dyes by AC catalyst reaches 90–95 % when the content of AC is 0.15–0.2 g/l. In this case, the K_d is equal to $3\text{--}9 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ s}^{-1}$ when RhB is used. However, the measurement error in this case is large. Therefore, we used for all tested samples the content of AC equal to 0.1 g/l as optimal. Adsorption of dyes and phenol is 40–75 and 25–30 %, respectively, under these conditions. The difference in adsorption is obviously due to the fact that molecules of RhB and MO contain basic groups and phenol has only acidic group. So, phenol is less adsorbed on an acidic surface of AC. Indeed, the pH values are 6.9, 6.8 and 4.7 for initial solutions of RhB, MO and Ph, respectively, while the point of zero charge for AC equals 2.09 as mentioned above.

The influence of substrate concentration on photocatalytic activity of tested ACs samples was also studied. Thus, the dependence between RhB concentration and catalytic activity of AC Ox-Cu was found: K_d^{UV} value monotonically diminishes from 9.4 to $1.4 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ s}^{-1}$ when RhB concentration increases within $1\text{--}2 \cdot 10^{-5} \text{ mol/l}$. It should be noted that this is a well-known pattern for photocatalytic processes. All tested carbon catalysts become inactive at the RhB concentration $3.0 \cdot 10^{-5} \text{ mol/l}$. Obviously, this is due to the blocking of active surface sites by the adsorbed dye. As a result, the most suitable concentrations for photocatalytic testing were found: $1.8 \cdot 10^{-5}$, $2.0 \cdot 10^{-5}$, $1.06 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ mol/l}$ (10 mg/l) for RhB, MO and phenol, respectively.

Photocatalytic degradation of RhB. First, RhB was tested as substrate because the spectrum of its absorption is overlapped on a wide region with the emission spectrum of lamp – illumination source (the maxima are located at 553 and 565 nm, respectively). Therefore, the

absorption of light and the excitation of dye molecules are possible.

It is necessary to note that initial oxidized AC predictably has no photocatalytic activity under visible illumination but exhibits noticeable activity under UV irradiation (Table). The photocatalytic properties of AC are improved after introduction of Cu²⁺ and Co²⁺ cations into its structure (Fig. 3, curves 2–4). (It's useful to show absorption/reflectance spectra of modified photocatalists if they are not absolutely black). Thus, K_d^{UV} value increases by one and a half times using AC Ox-Co sample (Table). The example of the changes in electron spectrum of RhB solution during its photodegradation under UV irradiation can be seen in Fig. 4. Under UV illumination, AC Ox-Cu sample showed somewhat less photocatalytic activity as compared to that of AC Ox-Co. On the contrary, AC Ox-Cu is more active under visible light (Table).

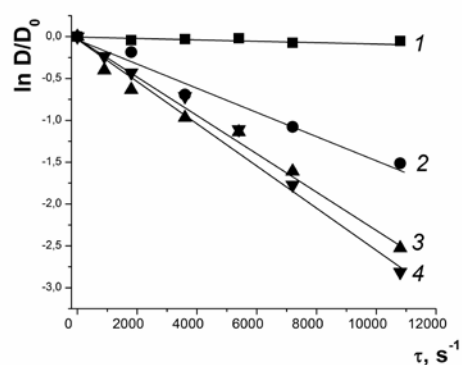


Fig. 3. Kinetic curves of RhB degradation for: AC Ox-H Vis (1), AC Ox-Cu Vis (2), AC Ox-Cu UV (3), AC Ox-Co UV (4)

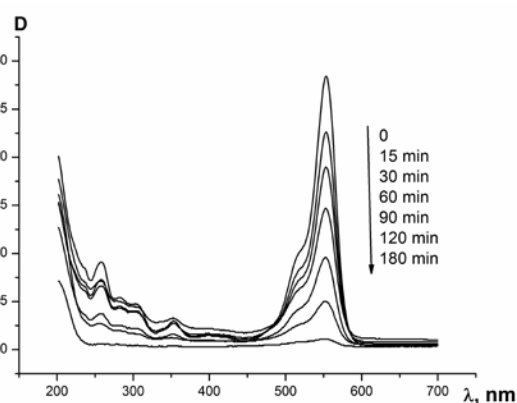


Fig. 4. The absorption spectra of solution of RhB after degradation under UV irradiation in the presence of AC Ox-Co

MO has maximum of absorption at 461 nm. So, its absorption spectrum slightly is overlapped with the emission spectrum of the used lamp. The character of the changes in the spectrum during the degradation of MO is shown in Fig. 5 *a*: monotonic decrease of band at 461 nm is observed with an increase in the duration of UV irradiation. Besides, a slight blue shift of the

absorption maximum (up to 545–542 nm) is seen after 6–8 h illumination. The kinetic curve of this process is presented in Fig. 6 (curve 2). Similar spectra and kinetic curve were obtained for the photocatalytic degradation of phenol (Fig. 5 *b* and Fig. 6, curve 1, respectively). It should be noted that maximum of absorption for phenol is in the UV region – at 265 nm.

Table. The values of rate constant degradation at optimal concentration of substrates

No	Photocatalyst	Substrate	$K_d^{UV} \cdot 10^4, s^{-1}$	$K_d^{Vis} \cdot 10^4, s^{-1}$
1	AC Ox-H	RhB	1.8	inactive
2	AC Ox-Cu	RhB	2.2	1.2
3	AC Ox-Co	RhB	2.9	0.5
4	AC Ox-H	MO	0.1	inactive
5	AC Ox-Cu	MO	0.3	0.6
6	AC Ox-Co	MO	0.6	0.5
7	AC Ox-H	Phenol	inactive	inactive
8	AC Ox-Cu	Phenol	0.15	0.1
9	AC Ox-Co	Phenol	0.24	0.1

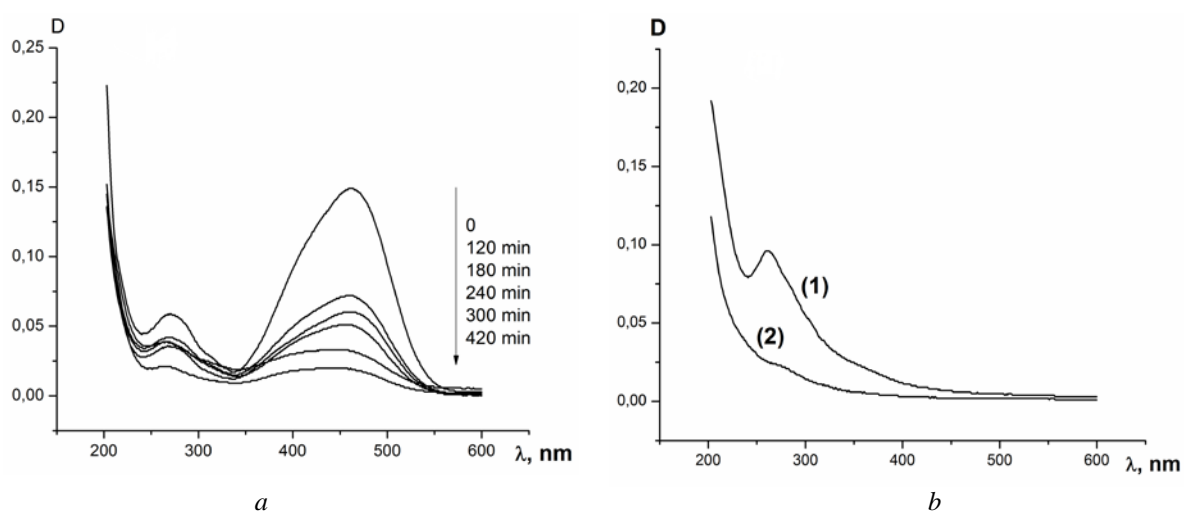


Fig. 5. The absorption spectra of MO solution after degradation under UV irradiation in the presence of AC Ox-H (*a*), phenol solution after adsorption (1) and degradation for 420 min (2) under UV irradiation in the presence of AC Ox-Co (*b*)

The rate constant of degradation values calculated for these processes as well as for visible photocatalytic degradation are also presented in Table.

Discussion. It can be seen from the data of spectrophotometric measurements that photocatalytic processes using Cu- and Co-containing ACs result in degradation of substrates under both UV- and visible illumination. Initial oxidized AC showed activity

toward the RhB and MO only under the action of UV light.

The optical density of substrate solutions after illumination (*D*) compared with that for solutions after adsorption (*D*₀) reduces 4–12 times for 7 h. Therefore, the degree of discoloration reaches 90–95 % for catalysts with highest activity. At the same time, decreasing in TOC value is measure of pollutants total mineralization [35]. In our case, TOC is within

16–73 %. Moreover, the FTIR spectra registered for AC Ox-Cu catalyst (Fig. 7) indicate a possibility of degradation of adsorbed RhB. Their comparison shows that spectrum after RhB adsorption (Fig. 7, curve 2) contains broad poorly resolved absorption bands (a.b.) in the

region ($950\text{--}1350\text{ cm}^{-1}$) where there are a.b. characteristic for RhB (Fig. 7, curve 1). At the same time, these a.b. are absent in the spectrum obtained for the same sample after photocatalysis (Fig. 7, curve 3).

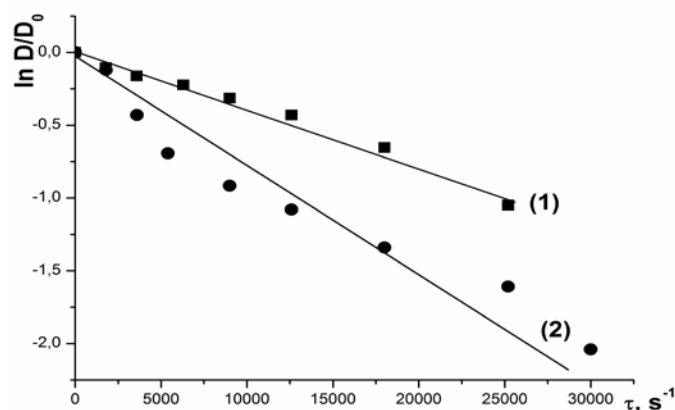


Fig. 6. The kinetic curves of photocatalytic degradation of phenol (1) and methyl orange (2) under UV illumination using AC Ox-Co as catalyst

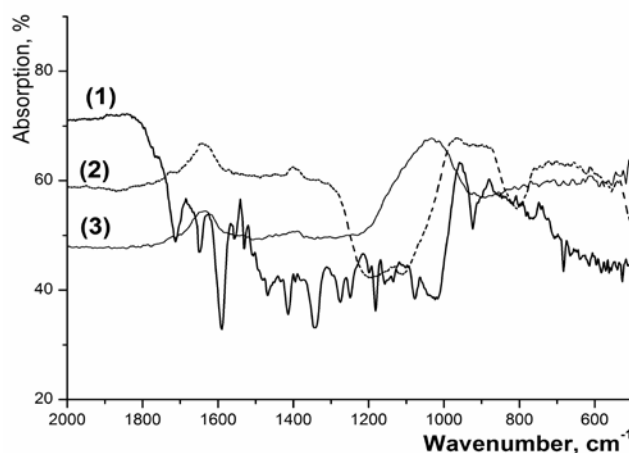


Fig. 7. FTIR spectra for initial RhB (1), AC Ox-Cu catalyst with adsorbed RhB (2) and the same after photocatalysis (3)

Maximal rate of degradation is observed for rhodamine B. This may be due to the fact that RhB molecules absorb light photons and their excitation is possible [35, 36]. On the other hand, it is well known that photocatalytic degradation of RhB can occur by two pathways [36, 37]: as de-ethylation process in a stepwise manner (with the formation of the three intermediates from RhB to completely de-ethylated Rh110) or as a direct cleavage of the chromophore rings. The gradual blue shift in λ_{max} of the spectrum of RhB is observed in the first case and the reduction in

the absorbance without shift takes place in the second case. As can be seen from Fig. 4, the RhB degradation in the presence AC photocatalyst occurs in accordance with the second mechanism: only decrease in the intensity of band at 553 nm is observed. Simultaneously, reduction of intensity of band in UV region, namely around 260 nm, takes place (Fig. 4). The latter indicates the destruction of benzene rings in the dye molecules [38]. The same results were obtained using all tested photocatalysts under UV and visible illumination. The similar

findings were described for degradation of rhodamine B and safranin T using vanadium and molybdenum oxides as photocatalysts [39].

It is known that the mechanism of initiation of photocatalytic reaction under UV and visible light illumination can be different: *via* absorbing irradiation by photocatalysts or substrate molecules (photosensitization process) [35, 40]. Based on the literature data on semiconductor properties of oxidized carbons [19–21], it can be predicted that due to the action of UV, and possibly visible irradiation, the pairs of electron-hole is generated on the surface. Formed electrons are promoted from the valence band to the conduction one. As a result of this, photoactive species (likely OH^* radicals) are generated which initiate the processes of substrate oxidation. UV degradation of RhB, MO and Ph using initial as well as Cu- and Co-containing ACs obviously occurs according to this mechanism.

In addition, the comparison of the emission spectrum for used lamp of visible light with absorption spectra for RhB and MO indicates that a significant portion of the irradiation can be absorbed by dye molecules. For these substrates, the primary act of photocatalysis may also be excitation of dye molecules and therefore a photosensitization mechanism can be realized. Phenol absorbs only in the UV region. So, in case of phenol, obviously, only the first mechanism is realized, namely formation of electron-hole pairs.

The activity of AC Ox-Cu and AC Ox-Co catalysts under visible illumination can be

associated with formation of additional levels in band gap of carbon as it occurs due to the doping of oxides with metals [35,41] or narrowing of band gap. The latter was observed by authors of work [19, 21] as a result of introduction of heteroatoms and defects into carbon structure.

An alternative mechanism of photocatalytic oxidation process initiation can be connected with superoxide ion $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ which is formed at the surface of AC in contact with aqueous solution containing dissolved oxygen. Superoxide ion take an important part in oxidation reactions *via* interaction with adsorbed molecules of substrates [20, 42–44].

CONCLUSIONS

Initial oxidizing active carbon has micro-mesoporous structure with predominance of micropores and contains four types of surface acidic groups. Cu- and Co- containing ACs were prepared *via* cation exchange process with the participation of surface carboxylic groups. Initial AC is photocatalitically active toward dyes (RhB and MO) under UV illumination but inactive in visible region. Cationic forms of AC as doped semiconductor oxides have improved photocatalytic activity in the process of degradation of dyes and phenol under UV and visible irradiation. The degradation is accompanied by partial mineralization of substrates. The practical significance of the results obtained is that carbon adsorbents with sorbed cations, instead of regeneration, can be reused in processes of photocatalytic degradation of pollutants in aqueous media.

Катіон-вмісне активоване вугілля як фотокаталізатори деградації барвників

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Окиснене вугілля та його катіонообмінні форми використані як фотокаталізатори в процесах деградації барвників (родамін Б, метилоранж) та фенолу під дією УФ та видимого світла. Встановлено, що вихідне окиснене вугілля є активним в умовах УФ опромінення, але неактивне у видимій області. Введення в активоване вугілля добавок міді та кобальту сприяє значному збільшенню фотокаталітичної активності отриманих каталізаторів. Мідь-вмісне вугілля є найактивнішим в УФ області, а кобальт-вмісне – у видимій області. Ступінь знебарвлення розчинів барвників досягає 90–95 %, а ступінь їх мінералізації складає 16–73 %.

Ключові слова: *активоване вугілля, катіонообмінні форми, фотокаталітична деградація, УФ-та видиме випромінювання, знебарвлення та мінералізація*

Катион-содержащие активированные угли как фотокаталитизаторы деградации красителей

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Окисленный уголь и его катионообменные формы использованы как фотокаталитизаторы в процессах деградации красителей (родамин Б, метилоранж) и фенола под действием УФ и видимого облучения. Установлено, что исходный окисленный уголь является активным в условиях УФ облучения, но неактивным в видимой области. Введение в активированный уголь добавок меди и кобальта способствует значительному увеличению фотокаталитической активности полученных катализаторов. Медь-содержащий уголь является наиболее активным в УФ области, а кобальт-содержащий уголь – в видимой области. Степень обесцвечивания растворов красителей достигает 90–95 %, а степень их минерализации – 16–73 %.

Ключевые слова: *активированные угли, катион-обменные формы, фотокаталитическая деградация, УФ и видимое облучение, обесцвечивание и минерализация*

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