

The Dragonfly Mercury Project: A National Scale Assessment of Mercury Bioaccumulation and Risk in US National Parks Through a Citizen Science Framework

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Overview

The Dragonfly Mercury Project (DMP) is a dynamic national-scale program that engages citizen scientists and university scientists in the collection of dragonfly larvae for mercury analysis across six eastern national parks. By combining robust public participation with advanced laboratory and data analysis, the DMP improves total mercury exposure while providing important insights into mercury risk across the nation.

Empowering Communities

As a program that engages public participants, the DMP provides people and community members with authentic opportunities and resources to improve their understanding of mercury risk and to contribute to the scientific record. The DMP provides a platform for learning about a critical environmental issue, for cultural resources, and for human health.

Linking Hg in dragonfly larvae to health risks for wildlife and humans

Dragonfly larvae are the ideal mercury bioindicator because they are ubiquitous across all aquatic systems, they are easy to collect, and they provide high-quality data that reflect mercury exposure in fish and other wildlife. Findings from this study indicate that dragonfly larvae mercury can serve as a surrogate for fish mercury concentrations, and represent the risk of mercury to aquatic organisms (Eagles-Smith et al., 2019). This study quantified risk according to a series of chemical and biological factors (Eagles-Smith et al., 2019).

Hg in dragonfly larvae varies widely

The results of this study reveal that total mercury concentrations (THg) in dragonfly larvae vary widely across parks, with an average of 1.5 µg/g. THg varied by as much as 10-fold among parks and 10-fold within parks. The most varied among parks was the very low to very high, highlighting the importance of site characteristics in determining dragonfly larvae mercury exposure and concentrations.

Engaging Youth

The DMP provides a platform for youth to engage in citizen science and to learn about mercury risk. The DMP provides a platform for youth to engage in citizen science and to learn about mercury risk.

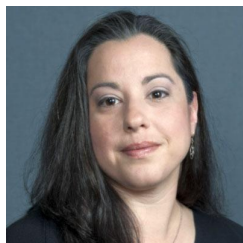
Next Steps

The multi-agency and multi-institutional DMP Working Committee will be used as a national-scale platform for policy and management decision-making, using the results of this study to inform policy and management decisions, and to improve and enhance the DMP. Efforts to be undertaken include and will not only improve risk assessment and risk management efforts, but also to improve risk assessment and risk management efforts, and to improve and enhance the DMP.

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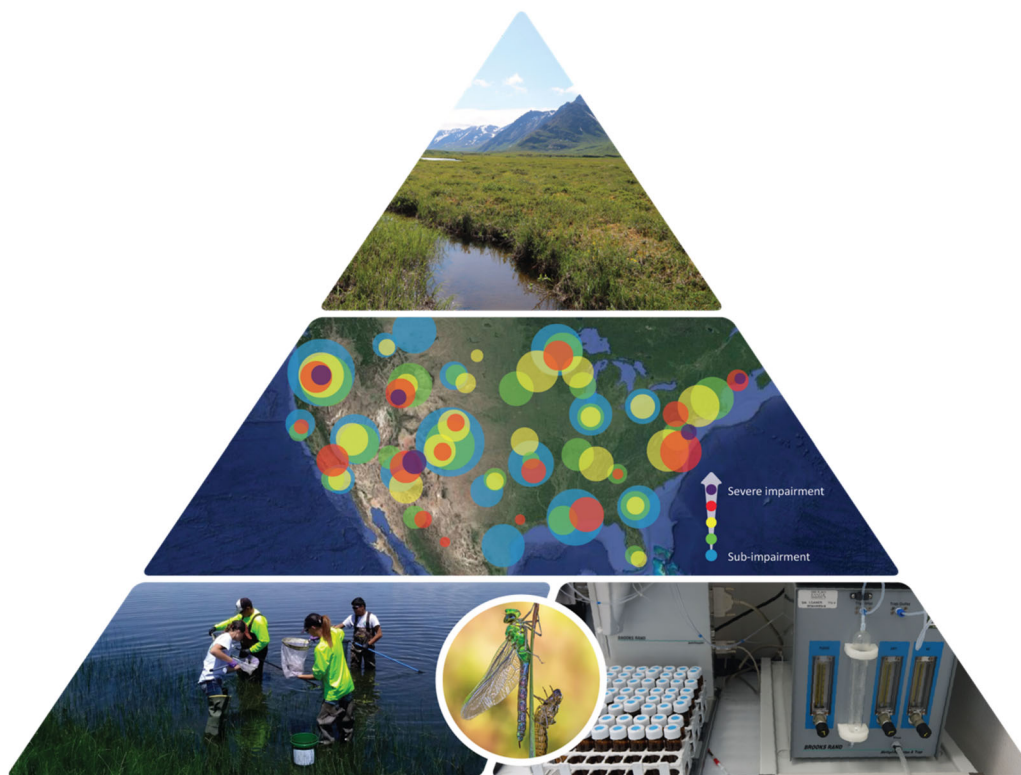


PRESENTED AT:



OVERVIEW

The Dragonfly Mercury Project (DMP) is a dynamic national-scale program that engages citizen scientists and community volunteers in the collection of dragonfly larvae for mercury analysis across our nation's national parks. By combining robust public participation with advanced laboratory and data analyses, the DMP inspires next-generation stewards while providing resource managers with information and tools to better understand and mitigate mercury risk across varied ecosystems.



Mercury (Hg) is among the most ubiquitous environmental contaminants, with a global distribution due to its release into the atmosphere via coal combustion, gold mining, and other sources; its ability to transport vast distances in the atmosphere; and subsequent deposition to watersheds and aquatic ecosystems. Once deposited, naturally occurring bacteria convert the atmospheric Hg into a more toxic form called methylmercury, which bioaccumulates and biomagnifies up the food chain and can have toxic effects at high concentrations. Given its persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic effects, Hg is found at elevated levels in even the most remote and pristine ecosystems, such as those managed by the National Park Service (NPS).

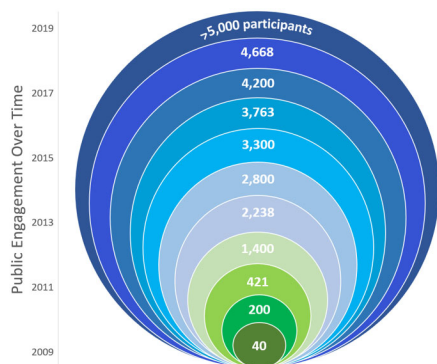
The Dragonfly Mercury Project (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm>) is built upon the power of public participation and citizen science. Without help from hundreds of participants each year, the scope and geographic coverage of the DMP would not be possible.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

As a program that engages public participants, this project connects youth and community members with authentic research and education experiences in national parks, in some of most pristine and remote settings our nation offers, providing experiential opportunities for learning about a critical conservation threat to natural resources and human health.

A strong majority (96%) of DMP parks to date have participated in project multiple years, commonly citing “getting kids outdoors” as a highlight. Post-sampling feedback includes testimonials such as:

- “...the enthusiasm and curiosity of the students while participating. During the nymph capturing, students were actively engaged with the process and asking many questions about the water body itself as well as how their work would be used for science.”
- When the data was released back to a biology class, “a huge light came on... students were beaming with pride.”
- “It’s not just a learning experience; it empowers.”

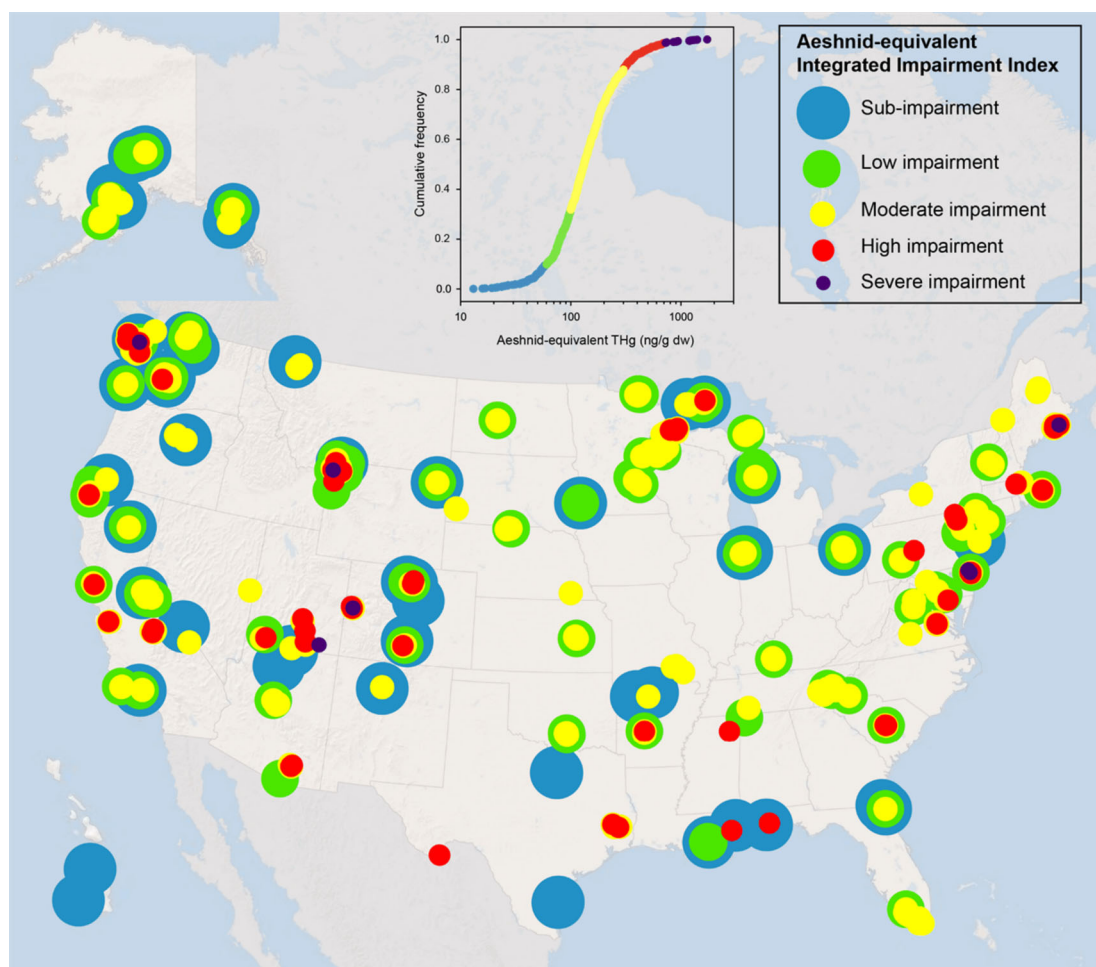


To date, over 5,000 citizen scientists and community volunteers have contributed greater than 20,000 hours of service to the DMP. As the project continues to grow, more and more youth and diverse participants are engaged in a program that empowers local communities while also contributing to the most comprehensive assessment of mercury contamination and environmental risk in the nation’s protected lands.

LINKING HG IN DRAGONFLY LARVAE TO HEALTH RISKS FOR WILDLIFE AND HUMANS

Dragonfly larvae are the ideal mercury biosentinel because they are ubiquitous across ecosystem types, easy and cost-effective to monitor, and provide high-quality data that reflect mercury exposure in fish and other wildlife. Findings from this study indicate that dragonfly larvae mercury can serve as a surrogate for fish mercury concentrations and represent the risk of mercury to aquatic ecosystems (Eagles-Smith et al. 2020).

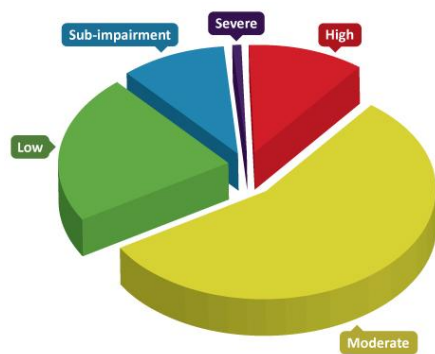
This study quantified risk according to a series of Integrated Impairment Indices based on dragonfly mercury concentrations. These index categories are centered on both the number of taxa exceeding various benchmarks, as well as the severity of the benchmarks themselves. Impairment benchmarks for mercury are the concentrations above which an organism's health may be harmed.



While 10 percent of the sites sampled were safer (below known impairment benchmarks), 12 percent of sites, distributed across all regions of the U.S., posed high or severe risk of impairment to fish, wildlife, and humans. These sites with elevated risk for mercury toxicity in protected areas show the widespread nature of mercury contamination.

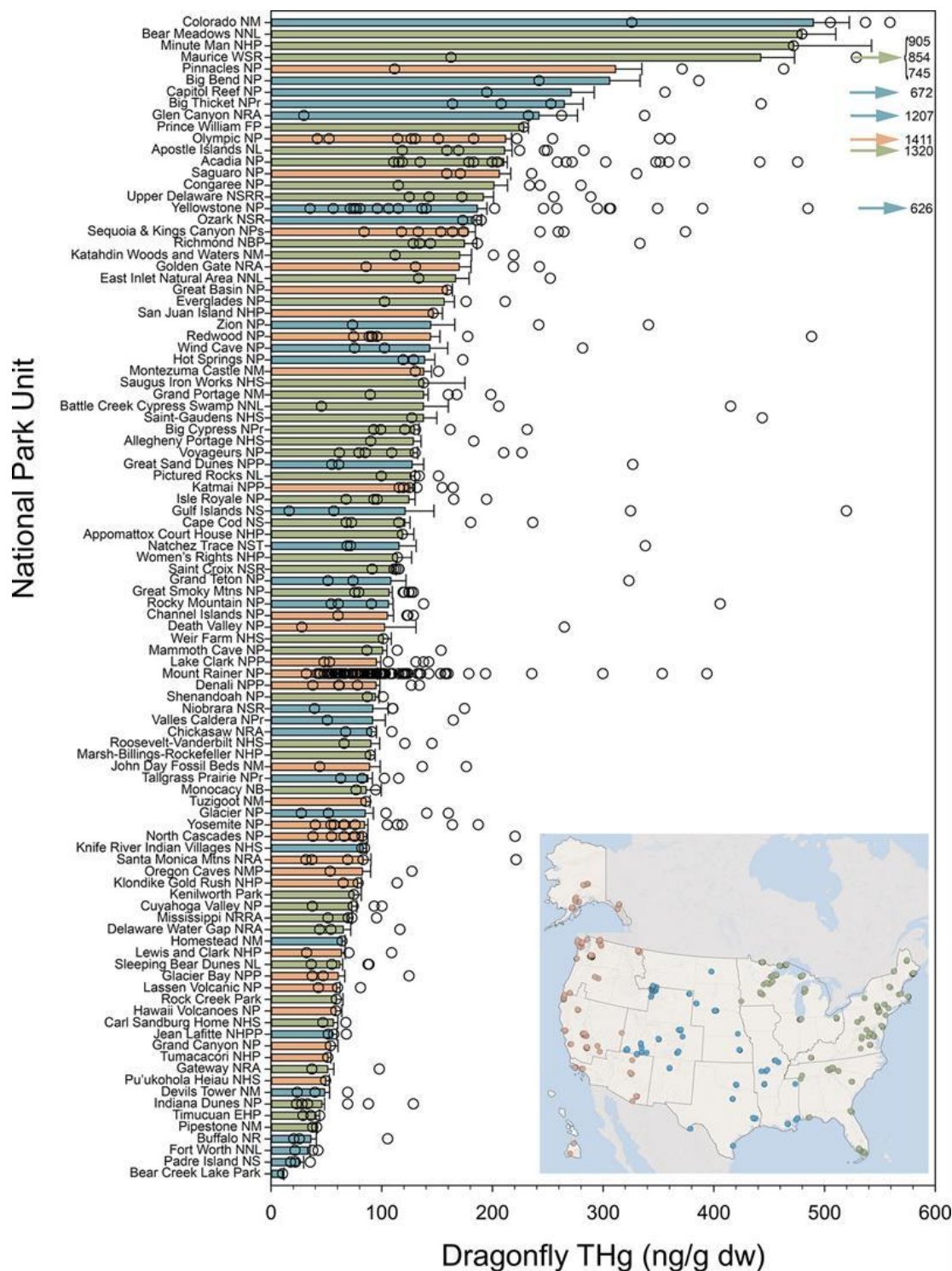
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HG IN DRAGONFLY LARVAE VARIES WIDELY

The results of this study reveal that total mercury concentrations (THg) in dragonfly larvae vary widely both among park units as well as among sites within parks. Dragonfly THg varied by as much as 135-fold among parks and 34-fold within parks. THg even varied among sites that are very close to one another, highlighting the importance of site characteristics in determining dragonfly larvae mercury exposure and accumulation.



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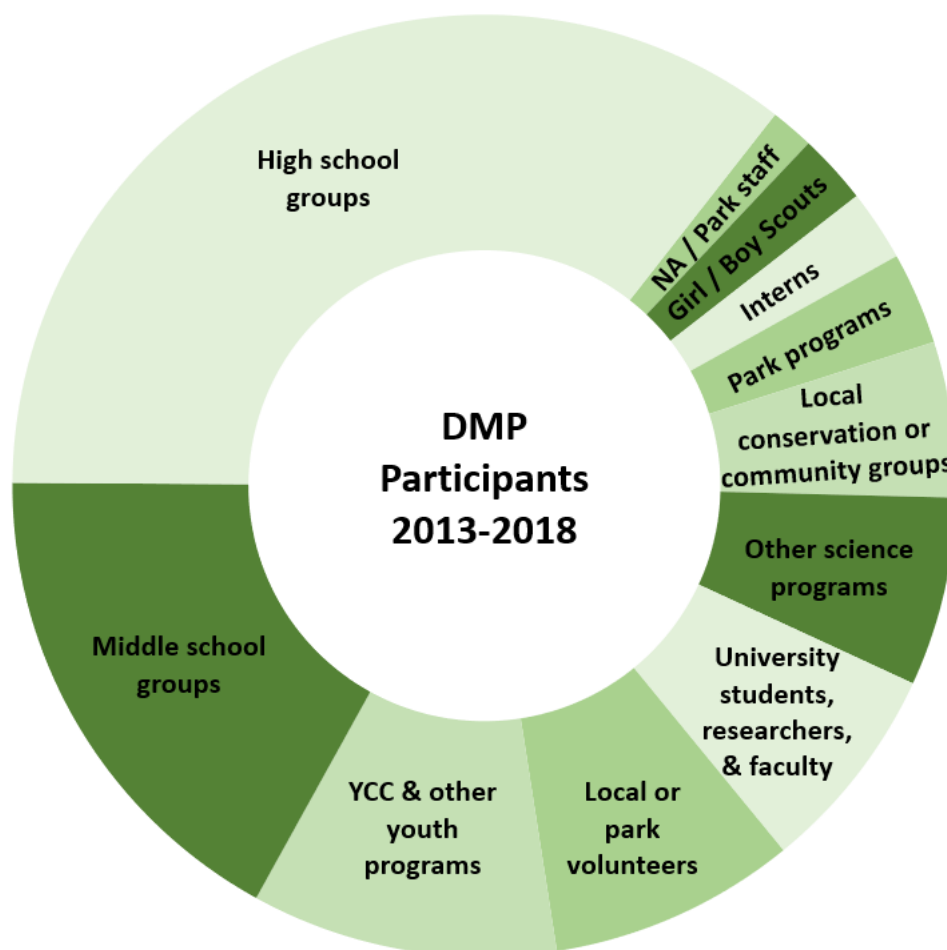
Furthermore, findings indicate that Hg risk differed among habitats, with rivers being higher than lakes, and that the presence of wetlands further increased risk in nearby water bodies. This work also found evidence that local ecosystem factors confound the direct linkage between atmospheric Hg deposition and patterns of Hg risk to fish and wildlife.

ENGAGING YOUTH

DMP sampling operates under a train-the-trainer method, whereby participating park staff and partners receive project training used to coordinate, teach, and lead citizen scientists and community volunteers. Participants follow standardized protocols to collect dragonfly larvae using dip nets, identify each larva to family, place them in zipper-seal bags, and take field notes. The lead park staff or partner then oversees the shipment of samples on dry ice to a centralized laboratory at the US Geological Survey where the specimens are analyzed for mercury.



Post-sampling interview results indicate that nearly two-thirds of the participants in the Dragonfly Mercury Project are youth. Those youth are comprised mainly of high school groups (35%), middle school groups (17%), and the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and other youth programs (11%).



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NEXT STEPS

Efforts to broaden sampling and partnerships will not only improve risk forecasting and our understanding of how best to mitigate risks associated with mercury pollution, but will also multiply opportunities to connect people to parks, advance the NPS educational mission, utilize parks as outdoor classrooms, and create next generation stewards.

The multi-agency and multi-institutional DMP Steering Committee works to stand up a robust program that provides continually relevant and applicable information for policy and management decision-making, meets the needs of stakeholders from all participating groups and agencies, and is logistically and financially sustainable over the long-term.



The DMP is poised to help protect natural resources – and the people who enjoy and depend on them – from mercury exposure. We welcome you to help us achieve that goal!

Visit our storymap (<https://wim.usgs.gov/geonarrative/dmp/>) to learn more!

ABSTRACT

The Dragonfly Mercury Project (DMP) is a dynamic national scale program coupling scientific efforts to understand mercury pollution risks to protected areas with citizen engagement and education. We conducted a national-scale assessment of mercury (Hg) bioaccumulation in aquatic ecosystems using dragonfly larvae as biosentinels and implemented a carefully designed sampling methodology for citizen scientists to facilitate biological sampling. We assessed variation in dragonfly Hg concentrations across >450 sites spanning 100 US national parks and other protected places and examined intrinsic and extrinsic factors associated with variation in Hg concentrations. Mercury concentrations ranged between 10.4-1,411 ng/g across sites and varied among habitat types. Dragonfly Hg concentrations were up to 1.8-fold higher in lotic habitats than in lentic habitats, and 37% higher in waterbodies with abundant wetlands along their margins than those without wetlands. Mercury concentrations in dragonflies differed among families, but were correlated with each other, enabling adjustment to a consistent family to facilitate spatial comparisons among sampling units. Dragonfly THg concentrations were positively correlated with THg in both fish and amphibians from the same locations, indicating that dragonfly larvae are effective indicators of Hg bioavailability in aquatic food webs. Using the relationships between dragonfly and fish Hg concentrations we developed a series of integrated impairment indices that inform potential risk of Hg exposure to fish, wildlife, and human health. Most sample sites were in the moderate to low risk category, but 12% of sites were at high or severe risk for mercury, potentially causing harm to fish, wildlife, and people who eat those fish and wildlife. The scope and depth of this work stand it up as a potential landmark study on mercury in NPS lands and across the landscape, particularly in light of the citizen science framework under which it was implemented. More information on the Dragonfly Mercury Project can be found at <https://wim.usgs.gov/geonarrative/dmp/> (<https://wim.usgs.gov/geonarrative/dmp/>) and <https://www.nps.gov/articles/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm> (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm>).



(https://agu.confex.com/data/abstract/agu/fm20/9/6/Paper_755669_abstract_724378_0.jpg)

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