HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research

Volume 14 Issue 1 (2025)

The Role of Algae in Biofuel Production

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ABSTRACT

A practical alternative to conventional energy sources, algae-based biofuels was one of the solutions that were mainly proposed from the result of extensive research on climate change and the need to reduce reliance on fossil fuels – algae can produce biomass without competing with food crops for available land because of their unique cellular structure and efficient photosynthetic systems, which allows for the production of several biofuels, such as Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), bioethanol, and biodiesel. Despite these advantages, limited scalability and high production costs currently make algae difficult to achieve widespread adoption; however, ongoing research is working to address these problems by improving lipid production and cultivation techniques, as well as algal growth rates, to make biofuels more viable for real-world use.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) estimates that over 80% of world energy consumption is currently derived from fossil fuels, which substantially exacerbates environmental damage and greenhouse gas emissions (Holechek, 2022); as a result, researchers have been looking increasingly at biofuels as an alternative as international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Various strategies have been proposed to address climate change, including the adoption of renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydropower, improvements in energy efficiency, and the development of carbon capture technologies. Among these, algae-based biofuels and biomass fuels have become increasingly attractive because of their great efficiency and versatility; in fact, according to UNFCCC, the United Nations will implement various projects to use algae to develop plastics as well as cellulose nanofiber. (Foster and Elzinga, 2015; UNFCCC, 2019).

Algae is a diverse group of organisms that can perform photosynthesis independently; from microscopic microalgae to larger macroalgae such as seaweeds, these organisms have a simple cellular structure but an extremely efficient photosynthetic mechanism (Hannon et al., 2010). Common in nature, algae flourish in freshwater, marine, and even extreme settings such as hot springs and arctic ice. Among other plant-like species, they are unique in that they can photosynthesize under an extensive range of environmental circumstances; one of the several reasons algae are under increasing attention as possible biofuel sources is their flexibility (Lauritano et al., 2020). Additionally, algae can absorb and utilize large quantities of carbon dioxide during their growth, which contributes to reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions and supports climate mitigation goals (Suganya et al., 2015).

The biology of algae is fascinating due to their ability to convert sunlight into chemical energy with extraordinary efficiency – unlike more complicated structures and functions in higher plants, algae have a simpler cellular arrangement. Their simplicity allows them to devote a good amount of their metabolic activities to fast biomass formation and growth (Shalaby, 2011). Particularly in microalgae, the photosynthesis machinery of algae is highly efficient in catching light energy and transforming it into chemical compounds such as proteins, lipids, and carbohydrates. Not only are these molecules essential for the life of the algae, but they also provide the primary components needed for biofuel production. From single-celled creatures to multicellular forms, each adapted to their environmental niche, algae show a great variety of cellular architecture (Suganya et al., 2015). Usually unicellular and able to multiply quickly by means of binary fission or multiple fission, microalgae, which is significant for the generation of biofuel.

When considering algae as a biofuel source, its rapid rate of development is a major benefit since it allows the generation of biomass in relatively short periods. Furthermore, some algae have softer cell walls than higher plants, which helps to extract valuable components such as lipids, a necessary stage in the synthesis of biodiesel (Khoo et al., 2023).

Even though only a small portion of the estimated over 70,000 species of algae have been thoroughly examined, the variety among them is immense; this covers a broad spectrum of pigment, photosynthesis mechanisms, and metabolic capacity (Guiry, 2012). Some algae, for instance, can grow heterotrophically – that is, they obtain their energy by consuming organic molecules in the absence of light; as a result, this metabolic flexibility allows algae to flourish in a variety of settings. Also, to absorb and utilize different wavelengths of light, algae additionally display varying photosynthetic pigments such as phycobilins, carotenoids, and chlorophylls (Dolganyuk et al., 2020).

Algae-Based Biofuels

Classification of Algae-Based Biofuels

Table 1. Summary of Algae-Based Biofuels and Thermochemical Conversion Methods (Siddiki et al., 2021).

Biofuel Type	Source in Algae	Production Process	Applications
Bio-alcohol (Bioethanol)	Carbohydrate content	Fermentation	Transport fuels
Biodiesel	Lipid content of microalgae	Transesterification	Transport fuels
Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF)	Various portions of algal biomass	Specialized refining processes	Aviation sector

A summary of classification of algae-based biofuels is described in table 1. Algae-based biofuels fall into various types, including bio-alcohol (such as bioethanol) and biodiesel; typically, they are produced using various portions of the algal biomass, which makes the algae highly versatile for fuel production. For example, bioethanol is created from the carbohydrate content of algae through fermentation processes, while biodiesel is derived from the lipid content of microalgae through transesterification (Siddiki et al., 2021). Additionally, algae are increasingly recognized for their potential in the manufacture of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), which is gaining importance in the aviation sector as a low-emission alternative to standard jet fuels. According to Siddiki et al. (2021), algae-based fuels can serve multiple sectors, including transportation and aviation, due to their ability to produce high energy yields while capturing and utilizing large amounts of CO2 during their growth, thereby contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (Siddiki et al., 2021).

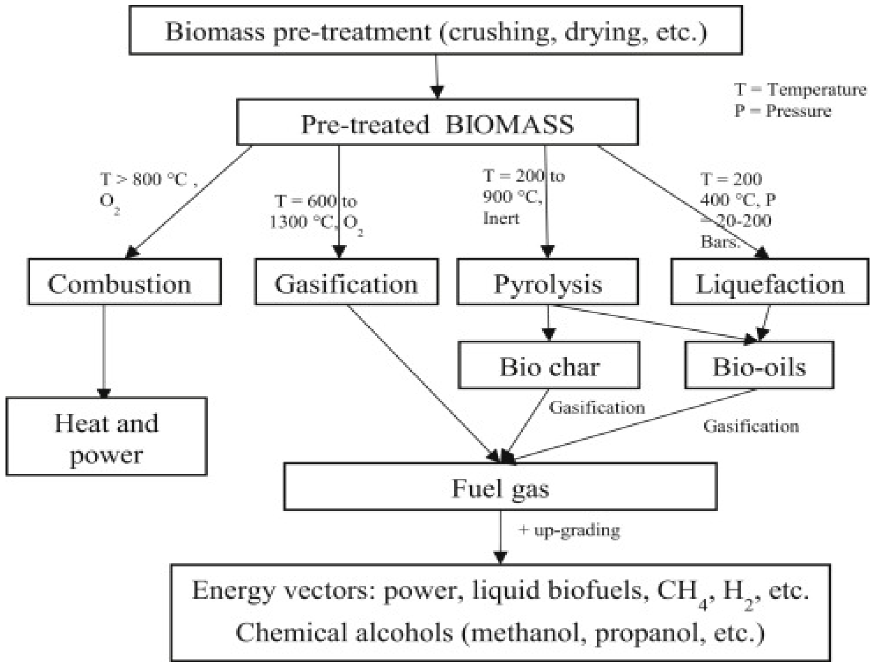

Figure 1. Overview of main thermochemical process (Ram and Mondal, 2022).

Thermochemical conversion is one of the key techniques incorporated within the biomass fuel production processes, which includes pyrolysis, gasification, and combustion. According to figure 1, pyrolysis refers to the thermal decomposition of organic materials in the absence of oxygen, breaking down algae into bio-oil, charcoal, and syngas; in fact, this process is particularly useful for manufacturing bio-oil, which can be improved into biodiesel by additional refinement (Shafizadeh & Danesh, 2022). Gasification, on the other hand, transforms algal biomass into syngas by exposing it to a controlled amount of oxygen or steam at high temperatures; this syngas can be utilized for electricity generation or further processed into liquid fuels, such as methanol. Combustion is the direct burning of biomass to generate heat and power, although this strategy is less efficient for fuel generation compared to pyrolysis and gasification (Shafizadeh & Danesh, 2022).

Production of Algae-Based Biofuels

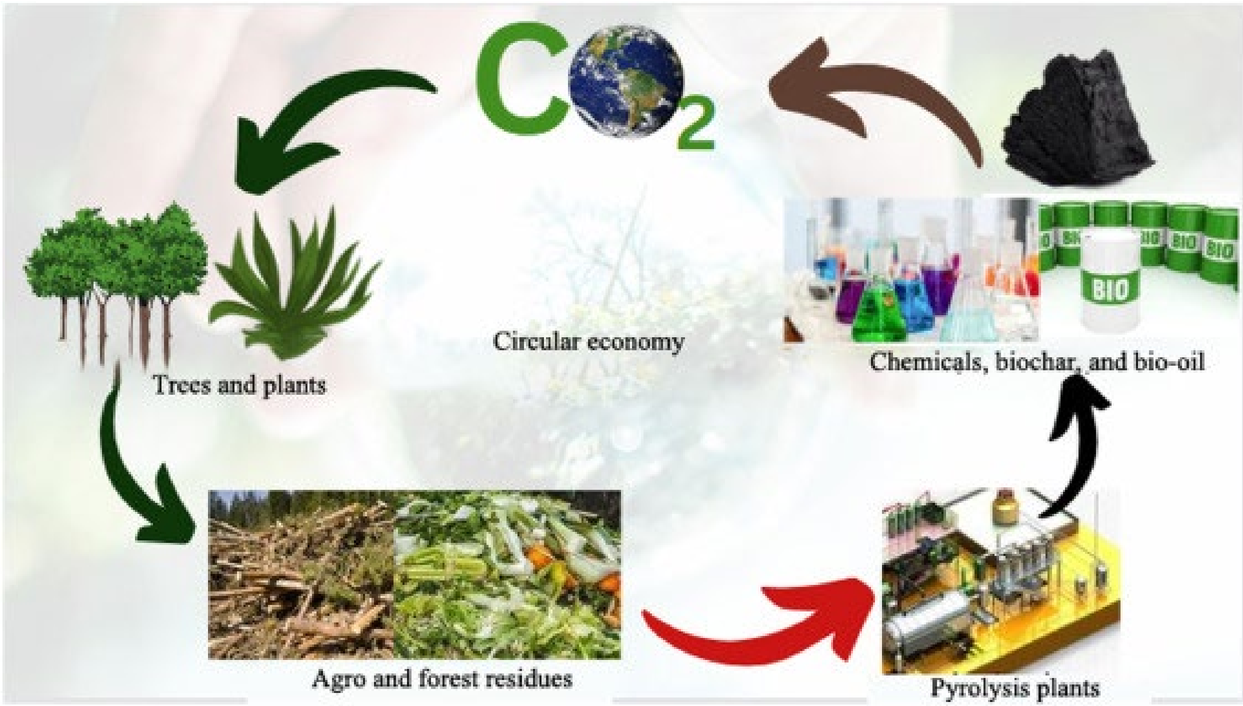

Figure 2. Conversion of forest and agricultural residues to useful energy and circular economy (Ibitoye et al., 2023).

As can be seen in figure 2, pyrolysis consists of heating biomass in an oxygen-free atmosphere to degrade organic molecules into bio-oil, charcoal, and syngas, a mixture of hydrogen, carbon monoxide, and carbon dioxide, which are operated from temperatures from 280°C to 1000°C. This is a very efficient process concerning the conversion of solid biomass to liquid fuels; in particular, fast pyrolysis is more favored towards bio-oil production, while slow pyrolosis tends to provide more biochar that may be used either as a soil amendment or a carbon sequestration material (Shafizadeh & Danesh, 2022).

Another process that has found widespread application is gasification, in which biomass is subjected to a controlled amount of oxygen or steam at very high temperatures, between 800°C and 1300°C, thus producing syngas. The resulting syngas can then be converted into electricity or heat, or even further into biofuels such as methanol or biohydrogen. On the other hand, ethanol used in gasification, according to Molino et al., is obtained from "ad hoc catalysts" such as Mo, Rh, K, Cu, Zn, and Fe (molybdenum, rhodium, potassium, copper, zinc, and iron, respectively); this can also be obtained through methanol synthesis and methanol homologation through exothermic combustion reactions. The main reasons gasification has attracted so much attention has to do with the ability to handle such a wide range of raw materials-from agricultural and forestry residues to wastes of different origin-that makes it one of the most versatile alternatives in biomass conversion. (Molino et al., 2018).

Hydrothermal liquefaction is another novel thermochemical process, particularly suitable for wet biomass, such as algae, running at lower temperatures – from 300°C up to 350°C – and using high pressure to convert biomass into bio-crude oil. It could then be further processed into transportation fuels, which would be an alternative to conventional fossil fuels (Shafizadeh & Danesh, 2022). Although the above processes have the potential to increase biofuels, they are still facing drawbacks in terms of efficiency, cost, and environmental impact. Hence, more research is necessary for the further development of these technologies in order to further improve the biofuel yields and achieve reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (Molino et al., 2018; Carpenter et al., 2014).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Biomass Fuels

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of different generations of biofuels (Devi et al., 2023).

Generations of Biofuels		
	Advantages	**Disadvantages**
First	i) Less greenhouse gas emissions ii) Conversion technology is easy and low-cost	i) Food-fuel conflict ii) Land security issues iii) High cost of food due to increased demand for fuel and food
Second	i) Utilization of waste as feedstock ii) Do not compete with food crops iii) Environmentally friendly	i) Lack of mature technology ii) High production cost
Third	i) Do not need arable land ii) Absorb carbon dioxide iii) Grow easily on different types of water, such as wastewater and seawater iv) Can also be used to remediate waste water	i) High energy input ii) Insufficient biomass production for commercialization iii) High cost required for setup
Fourth	i) High biomass and production yield ii) Carbon negative technology aiming at removal of more carbon dioxide than it emits	i) Detailed information about the genome is required to modify an organism genetically ii) At early stage of research iii) Requires high investments

A summary of advantages and disadvantages of first through fourth generations of biofuels is described in table 2. First Generation biofuels primarily rely on food crops like corn and sugarcane; thus, the conversion technologies are low-cost and straightforward. Second Generation biofuels shift to non-food feedstocks, such as agricultural waste and lignocellulosic materials, which offer a more environmentally friendly solution. Third Generation biofuels, derived mainly from algae, require no arable land, can utilize wastewater for cultivation, and absorb significant amounts of CO_2 during growth. Fourth Generation biofuels integrate genetic engineering to create high-yield as well as carbon-negative biofuels, which allows for the removal of more CO_2 than is emitted during production; however, it is in the early stages of development and requires investments to continue.

According to Jabłońska-Trypuć et al. (2023), the writers emphasize that algae are a suitable substitute for conventional agricultural raw resources for biofuels, which sometimes result in higher food prices and environmental damage, as can be seen in third-generation biofuels. Growing in many habitats, including nutrient-dense wastewater, algae are capable of converting sunlight, carbon dioxide, and nutrients into biomass; biogas, bioethanol, as well as biodiesel are among the biofuels made from this material. The study also highlights how algae could surpass first and second-generation biofuels' shortcomings including their reliance on food crops and land resources; algae are well-known for their high lipid content, which qualifies them for biodiesel manufacture – they can be grown in open or closed systems, each with different benefits and drawbacks.

Khan et al. (2018) agrees similarly with Jabłońska-Trypuć et al. (2023)'s claim that microalgae can convert atmospheric CO_2 into a range of valuable molecules including carbohydrates, lipids, and bioactive metabolites, they are characterized as a flexible and sustainable resource; in fact, nutraceuticals, biopharmaceuticals, and renewable energy can all be used for these molecules. Particularly well-known for their high lipid content, microalgae are a possible material for biodiesel manufacture and can generate bioethanol from biomass high in carbohydrates; in the next part, the research addresses the advantages of employing microalgae over conventional biofuel sources including their non-reliance on arable land and fresh water, rapid growth rates, and capacity to thrive in numerous ecological circumstances (Khan et al., 2018).

One of the key difficulties and limits facing the widespread adoption of algae-based biofuels is the high production cost – cultivating, harvesting, and processing algae for biofuel generation necessitate large financial commitment, particularly due to the energy-intensive activities involved, such as lipid extraction and the maintenance of appropriate growth conditions. Additionally, the scalability of algae production poses a challenge, since current methods are difficult to grow to industrial levels while preserving efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Another problem is the high water and fertilizer requirement required to sustain algal development, which may strain environmental resources, especially in water-scarce locations. Furthermore, contamination issues in open pond systems, instability of large-scale algae cultures, and competition from other biofuel feedstocks make it difficult for algae to compete with fossil fuels in the current energy market (Gaurav et al., 2023).

Photobioreactors (PBRs) are an emerging technology for cultivating microalgae with higher efficiency and lower costs compared to traditional open pond systems; in fact, Shaikh et al. (2024) report that PBRs provide major advantages for microalgae farming, including optimized control over environmental factors such as carbon dioxide concentration, light intensity, and nutrient levels, which are important for optimal growth and productivity. Additionally, the design of PBRs allows for greater gas exchange and enhanced mass transfer of nutrients and gases such as CO2, contributing to improved photosynthetic rates and higher lipid content in microalgae, which is necessary for biofuel generation (Shaikh et al., 2024).

Current Usage of Algae-Based Biofuels

Algae-based biofuels have emerged as a major aspect of the aviation industry's attempts to achieve decarbonization, particularly through the use of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF); for example, the European Union's RefuelEU Aviation initiative mandates increasing the proportion of SAF in aviation fuel, with a target of up to 70% by 2050 – this includes algae-derived biofuels, which provide a sustainable solution to decarbonizing the aviation sector. In the United States, similar efforts are ongoing, with major airports such as Seattle-Tacoma (Sea-Tac) considering SAF integration, and airlines like United Airlines already undertaking successful test flights with algae-based fuels (Harvard Business School, 2016).

Recent improvements also indicate the expanding usage of SAF throughout the aviation industry; Air New Zealand, for instance, has begun using SAF from Neste, representing around 1% of its annual fuel imports, with plans to increase SAF utilization to 38% as production scales and costs fall. Greg Foran, Air New Zealand's chief executive, claimed that, in order to effectively test the supply chain while the premium fuel becomes increasingly affordable, the airline industries should start by importing small quantities and scale up as SAF production increases (van den Bergh, 2022). Furthermore, a report by the International Air Transportation Association (IATA) indicates that moving to net zero emissions in aviation could cost roughly $4.7 trillion from 2024 to 2050; despite the high costs, IATA believes that with appropriate investment and commitment, full decarbonization of the aviation industry is attainable (National Alternative Jet Fuels Test Database, 2024).

Research indicates that algae-based biofuels integrate with wastewater treatment, stationary power generation, and maritime energy, due to their sustainable production methods and ability to lower greenhouse gas emissions – specifically, technologies like the oil-to-jet process and Fischer–Tropsch synthesis have been highlighted for their potential to transform algal lipids into high-quality fuels (Falfushynska, 2024).

Particularly in rural or impoverished areas, algal biofuels provide a viable option for stationary power generation because of their resilience in a variety of conditions, including those not suitable for traditional agriculture; in fact, his adaptability also applies to wastewater, which can assist treating the water while concurrently generating electricity (Falfushynska, 2024; Behera et al., 2014).

Furthermore, integrating wastewater treatment with algae cultivation uses algae's capacity for nutrient removal, which addresses pollution and advances sustainability. Usually found in wastewater sources, algae flourish in nutrient-rich environments and consume common pollutants such as nitrogen and phosphorus. This integration not only helps in cleaning the water but also in decreases the expenses associated with traditional treatment approaches; thus, such integration offers a cost-effective and environmentally friendly solution for the generation of biofuel and water management (Behera et al., 2014).

Current and Future Research Topics

Current research on algae biofuels for the aviation industry focuses on producing economically feasible and sustainable alternatives to conventional jet fuels. Algae-based biofuels, notably bio-jet fuels, have showed remarkable potential in decreasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the aviation sector – according to recent studies, algal biofuels could reduce aviation-related GHG emissions by up to 60 to 80%, giving a renewable alternative to address climate change (Martins Adeniyi et al., 2018). Also, researchers have made improvements in creating “algae-based hydrocarbons” as additives to aviation fuel, and algae-derived bio-jet fuels have successfully satisfied stringent aviation fuel standards, including the ASTM D1655 specifications for aviation turbine fuel (Martins Adeniyi et al., 2018).

Future research in algae biofuels should be focused on improving the efficiency and economic viability of biofuel production by addressing key limitations – one critical area is enhancing microalgae growth rates and lipid production through genetic engineering and optimized culturing techniques; according to Khan et al. (2018), efforts are underway to develop “carbohydrate-rich microalgae species” and optimize pretreatment methods for more efficient bioethanol production. Additionally, research is also targeting the reduction of operational costs, particularly in large-scale cultivation systems, to make algae biofuels more commercially competitive. As a result, future work will involve the development of cost-effective culturing technologies and improvements in biomass harvesting and processing to overcome these challenges and make algae-based biofuels a feasible alternative to fossil fuels (Khan et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Particularly in the maritime and aviation sectors, the use of algae-based biofuels shows the extent of reductions of greenhouse gas emissions; however, difficulties including scalability and high manufacturing costs persist. Among biofuel sources, algae is particularly flexible and allows fast expansion without any competition for arable land. Improved farming techniques, advances in genetic engineering, and waste treatment technology integration into algal production suggest that algae-based biofuels perhaps are both financially feasible and a necessary component of diverse energy sources.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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