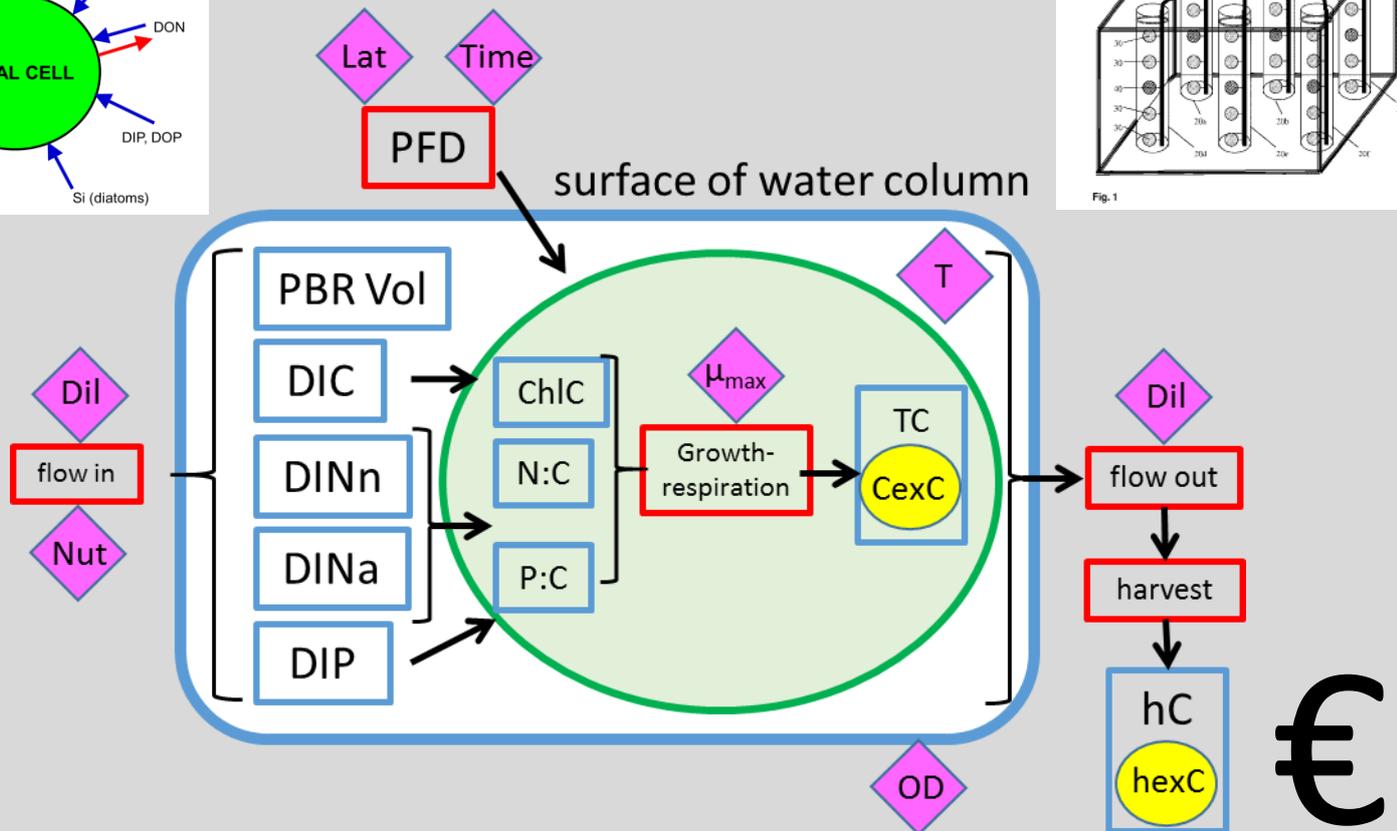
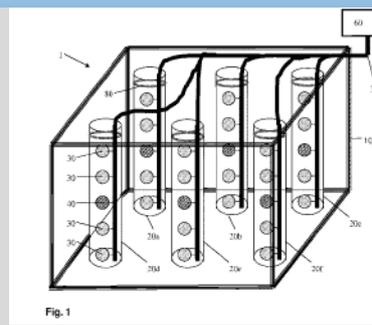
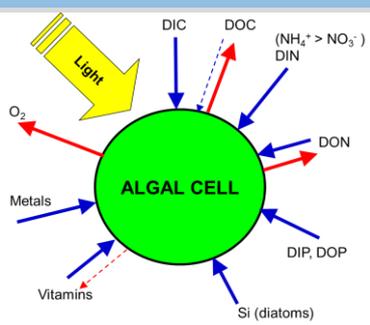


Enhancing Microalgal Production

Constructing Decision Support Tools Using System Dynamics Modelling

Kevin J Flynn



Foreword to Draft DST e-Book

PLEASE READ ME

This is a work under development as part of the deliverables for the EnhanceMicroAlgae project. “Beta” versions will be released during the course of the project, eventually leading by ca. early 2020 of a formal e-book with ISBN and various models to run as simulators of differently configured bioreactors for the commercial growth and exploitation of microalgae.

New chapters for this book will be delivered over the coming months. Be sure to check the project web site, <https://www.enhancemicroalgae.eu/>, for updates.

Inevitably, the document will mature over this period. There will also (alas inevitably) remain errors and omissions. The author welcomes any feedback; please contact him via k.j.flynn@swansea.ac.uk.

Thank you

Kevin J Flynn

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The project website is: <https://www.enhancemicroalgae.eu/>



Disclaimer

The contents of this work, and the allied simulation models, are directed towards the commercial production of microalgae. While the contents are offered free and in all good faith, neither the author nor the *EnhanceMicroAlgae* project accept any liability whatsoever for any commercial (or other) judgements made by any persons in consequence of the information contained herein or based upon the output of the models.

It is the responsibility of the end user to ensure that the models are run under conditions most closely aligned with their interests.

The simulation models for the DST were developed using Powersim software (www.Powersim.com) Studio 10; they are presented for use under the Powersim Cockpit. The author, nor the *EnhanceMicroAlgae* project, nor the project funders, endorse Powersim products in any way.

Glossary

Items in italics are described elsewhere in this glossary

α^C : the rate of photosynthesis per unit of C-biomass per photon. α^C characterises the initial slope of a C-specific *PE curve* (e.g., $\text{gC gC}^{-1} \text{d}^{-1}$ vs *PFD*).

α^{Chl} : the rate of photosynthesis per unit of chlorophyll per photon. α^{Chl} characterises the initial slope of a Chl-specific *PE curve* (e.g., $\text{gC gChl}^{-1} \text{d}^{-1}$ vs *PFD*).

Acclimation: changes in organism physiology in response to environmental factors. Often confused with *adaptation*, acclimation is an intra-generational response.

Adaptation: changes in organisms physiology that have come about through natural selection. Adaptation is an inter-generational response to changes in environmental factors. Cf. *acclimation*.

Allelopath: chemical involved in “signalling” between organisms. These signals may be negative between competitors, or positive between organisms of the same species. Allelopaths may be growth factors. Typically, they are of unknown chemical characteristics, which may be destroyed by heat.

Anabolism: biochemistry that is constructive, making new biomass, at the expense of energy consumption. Cf. *catabolism*. In reality there are simultaneous anabolic and catabolic processes occurring as cellular components are continuously built, maintained and turned over.

Areal production: production described in units of area (e.g. $\text{gC m}^{-2} \text{d}^{-1}$). The area could be just that occupied by the bioreactor but, for financial calculations, it should include the total facility footprint. Exploiting a simple single layered *bioreactor*, the maximum rate of production is limited by the efficiency of the processes of photosynthesis to ca. $3\text{-}5 \text{gC m}^{-2} \text{d}^{-1}$. Cf. *volumetric production*.

Axenic: containing a single species. Usually implying bacteria-free. Cf. *unialgal*.

Batch culture: a culture scenario in which a single one-off culture is grown typically through different phases of the culture dynamics, to stationary phase. While the culture may be sampled continuously, the system never enters or approaches a *steady-state* condition except perhaps at stationary phase. Unlike *chemostat* or *turbidostat* cultures, in batch systems the growth rate may approach the maximum possible rate. Cf. *continuous culture*; *stretched batch culture*.

Bioreactor: a vessel in which microbes, such as microalgae are grown. Bioreactors come in different volumes (mL to 100’s of cubic metres) and different forms, from small glass flasks, to ponds dug in clay, to sophisticated arrangements of pipes and pumps made of exotic materials. See also *Photobioreactor*.

Carbonic anhydrase (CA): enzyme responsible for catalysing the conversion of HCO_3^- (usually the most abundant form of *DIC*) to CO_2 (the form of *DIC* used by *RuBisCO*). *CA* activity may be internal or external.

Catabolism: biochemistry that consumes biomass, usually to generate energy. Cf. *anabolism*. In reality there are simultaneous anabolic and catabolic processes occurring as cellular components are continuously built, maintained and turned over.

Chelating agent: a chemical that holds on to other chemicals (usually for microalgal culturing an organic compound that binds onto iron, Fe, keeping it in suspension).

Chemostat: a *continuous culture* system of constant volume into which fresh medium is injected and at a similar rate expended medium complete with cells is withdrawn. At *steady-state* the organisms grow at the same rate as the specific dilution rate of the culture system. If the dilution rate is close to the maximum growth rate there is a risk of *washout*. See also *Turbidostat* and *Discontinuous culture*.

Chl: chlorophyll_a, the core photopigment, usually augmented by various accessory pigments that collect energy across other parts of the *PAR* spectrum.

Chl:C: the ratio (usually as mass) of chlorophyll to C-biomass. This ratio varies between species (typically with a maximum of 0.06 g/g) and also increases during growth at low light and decreases with nutrient-stress. See also *photoacclimation*.

Compensation point: (*C_p*) the *PFD* at which *gross photosynthesis* = concurrent respiration; i.e. *net photosynthesis* is zero.

Continuous culture: a culture system in which, logistics constraints aside, growth continues (usually at *steady-state*) for ever. Cf. *batch culture*.

Dark reaction: the plateau value of the *PE curve*, limited primarily by the activity of *RuBisCO*.

DIC: dissolved inorganic carbon, comprising CO_2 (the substrate for *RuBisCO*, for photosynthesis), bicarbonate (HCO_3^-) and carbonate (CO_3^{2-}).

DIN: dissolved inorganic nitrogen, comprising ammonia (NH_3), ammonium (NH_4^+), nitrate (NO_3^-) and nitrite (NO_2^-). NH_4^+ and NO_3^- are the usual main forms of DIN; NH_4^+ is the “preferred” N-source in algal physiology but it is toxic at high residual concentrations (such as in undiluted anaerobic digestate liquors).

DIP: dissolve inorganic phosphorous, PO_4^{3-} .

Discontinuous culture: like a *chemostat* culture (where dilution is continuous) but with a recurring but temporally discrete replacement of a portion of the culture with fresh medium. Discontinuous removal has the advantage that a more useful volume is removed for processing. A period of maximum growth rate is not seen. If the gap between sampling is sufficient, and the proportion of culture replaced also significant, then the discontinuous culture approaches a *stretched-batch culture* system.

DOC: dissolved organic carbon (e.g. glucose).

Down-shock: response cellular physiology to application of stress (e.g., by nutrient exhaustion). Down-shock results in the de-repression of physiological processes that are repressed during *up-shock*.

Exponential growth: a rate of growth when organism-specific increase is constant. Best visualised as the linear (*steady-state*) portion of a plot of natural log (Ln) of cell numbers or biomass against time. The exponential growth rate does not necessarily equate to the maximum growth rate (though it is often confused with that).

Gross photosynthesis: photosynthesis disregarding concurrent respiration that consumes part of the products of C-fixation. Gross photosynthesis is zero when PFD=0 (i.e. in darkness). Cf. *net photosynthesis*.

Heterotrophy: nutrition and growth supported by organic sources of C. (Cf. *mixotrophy, osmotrophy, phagotrophy, phototrophy*).

in vitro: in test-tube, typically referring to quantification of materials extracted from organisms (which are invariably killed during the process). Cf. *in vivo*.

in vivo: in life, usually made in reference to measurements of processes or quantities within intact living organisms which are not usually killed in the process, though they may be damaged. Cf. *in vitro*.

Inoculum: cells introduced into a new culture system to initiate growth. Unless care is taken, typically cells in the inoculum are subjected to shock (light, temperature, pH) and often to nutrient *up-shock* as they encounter elevated nutrient concentrations.

Light reaction: the strictly light-dependant phase of photosynthesis. In a plot of photosynthesis against light (the *PE curve*), this is the initial linear slope before the curve levels off to be limited by the *dark reaction*. The light reaction rate is limited, in addition to the *PFD*, by the photopigment complement that captures photons, the value of α^{Chl} , and *Chl:C*.

Macronutrient: nutrients that comprise the bulk of the biomass upon their assimilation and thus need to be added at high concentration to the growth medium. For microalgae these are C (usually as *DIC* supplied as bicarbonate and via aeration, but possibly also by *DOC*), N (as *DIN*), and P (as *DIP*). For diatoms, Si is also a macronutrient. Cf. *micronutrient*.

Micronutrient: nutrients that comprise a minor component of the biomass upon their assimilation, and are thus usually added to culture media at only low concentrations. These include Fe and other metal cofactors, and vitamins and other organic cofactors. Micronutrients are just as essential as are macronutrients. Cf. *macronutrients*.

Mixotrophy: combining *phototrophy* and *heterotrophy*. (Cf. *heterotrophy, osmotrophy, phagotrophy, phototrophy*.)

Model: a simplification of reality. Mathematical models range from simple statistics to complex *simulation* models running under differential calculus. Over-simplification renders models insufficiently realistic to enable them to provide a *simulation* of reality.

N-quota: the amount of N within the cell. The quota is usually described with reference to the cell (e.g., pgN cell⁻¹), or the C content (e.g. gN gC⁻¹). The value of N:C typically relates linearly to growth rate in N-limited cultures. The internal N is redistributed amongst daughter cells until the quota attains a minimum value, at which time C-specific growth halts.

Net photosynthesis: photosynthesis including concurrent respiration that consumes some part of the products of C-fixation. Net photosynthesis is zero when *PFD* is at the *compensation point*. Cf. *gross photosynthesis*.

Nutrient deplete: having less nutrient within the cell than is required to enable optimal (maximum) growth under current conditions, but growth can still continue. Cf. *nutrient limited*, *nutrient stress*, *nutrient sufficient*.

Nutrient limited: having so little of the nutrient in question that net growth halts.

Nutrient replete: having more nutrient within the cell than is required for optimal (maximum) growth under current conditions. Thus surplus P may be accumulated as polyphosphate, and cells grown on ammonium-N have a higher *nutrient-status* (higher N:C) than do cells grown on nitrate-N. Nutrient replete cells will have repressed biochemical routes to using alternative nutrients that are de-repressed during the development of *nutrient stress*.

Nutrient-status: a statement of physiological status, of *nutrient stress*, with reference to a particular nutrient. Maybe referenced as a quotient, so 0 indicates a very poor status (*nutrient limited*) and 1 is *nutrient sufficient*.

Nutrient stress: a condition between *nutrient sufficient* and *nutrient limited* during which various physiological processes are up- or down-regulated allowing the (de)repression of alternative biochemical pathways. Cf. *nutrient-status*. See also *down-shock* and *up-shock*.

Nutrient sufficient: having sufficient nutrient within the cell to support optimal (maximum) growth under current conditions. Cf. *nutrient replete*.

Osmotrophy: a form of *heterotrophy* in which nutrition and growth is supported by the use of dissolved organic sources of C. (Cf. *heterotrophy*, *mixotrophy*, *phagotrophy*, *phototrophy*.)

P-quota: the amount of P within the cell. The quota is usually described with reference to the cell (e.g., pgP cell⁻¹), or the C content (e.g. gP gC⁻¹). The value of P:C relates curvilinearly to growth rate in P-limited cultures (Cf. *N-quota*). The internal P is redistributed amongst daughter cells until the quota attains a minimum value.

PAR: photosynthetically active radiation; the portion of the light spectrum that is exploited by photosynthetic organisms. Coincidentally, this is the same as the visible spectrum for humans (light of wavelengths 400-700nm).

PE curve: the relationship between light (E) and net of gross photosynthesis (P), characterised by an initial upward slope (*light reaction*) and a plateau value (set by the maximum *dark reaction* rate).

Phagotrophy: a form of *heterotrophy* in which nutrition and growth is supported by the consumption (through engulfment) of particles of dissolved organic sources of C; usually those particles are other organisms and the phagotrophy is de facto predation. (Cf. *heterotrophy*, *mixotrophy*, *osmotrophy*, *phototrophy*.)

Photoacclimation: *acclimation* of microalgae to the supply and demand of photosynthesis balanced against light and nutrient (usually *DIN* or *DIP*) supply. Characterised by changes in *Chl:C* and often also changes in other photo-pigments.

Photobioreactor: a *bioreactor* specifically configured to be illuminated, usually to support the growth of photosynthetic organisms. Illumination may be by natural light and/or artificial light. Because light generates heat, photobioreactors often require cooling to prevent temperature increases that affect growth (see Q_{10}).

Phototrophy: nutrition and growth supported by assimilation of inorganic sources of C (de facto, CO_2) through photosynthesis. (Cf. *heterotrophy*, *mixotrophy*, *osmotrophy*, *phagotrophy*.)

PFD: photo flux density ($\text{photons m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$); the number of photons hitting a stated area per time. A light meter for biological use may report this as *PAR PFD*, as just that part of the light energy spectrum of use for photosynthesis (wavelengths 400-700nm). Note that photons of different wavelengths contain different amounts of energy; a photon at 400nm contains approaching twice (i.e., $700/400$) of the energy of a photon at 700nm.

Production: implicitly as production rate, the rate of biomass generation expressed as *volumetric production* or *areal production*. Cf. *standing crop*.

Q_{10} : the proportion by which biological process rates (e.g., growth rate) increases when temperature is increased by 10°C . Traditionally a value of $Q_{10} = 2$ is used. The value is only useful within a narrow temperature window above which thermal death occurs rapidly.

RuBisCO: ribulose biphosphate carboxylase; the enzyme responsible for fixing CO₂ (a component of *DIC*, perhaps allied with *carbonic anhydrase*, *CA*). On account of it having a low efficiency (low k_{cat}) and of the importance of primary production to life on Earth, RuBisCO is considered to be the most important single enzyme on the planet. At high O₂ concentrations (O₂ being a by-product of the *light reaction* of photosynthesis, q.v.), CO₂-fixation by RuBisCO is inhibited.

Si-quota: the amount of Si within the diatom cell. The quota is usually described with reference to the cell (e.g., pgSi cell⁻¹), or the C content (e.g. gSi gC⁻¹). The value of the Si quota cannot be related usefully to growth rate because previously assimilated Si cannot be redistributed amongst daughter cells. Cf. *N-quota*, *P-quota*.

Simulation: operation of a *model* over a course of time with an output that aligns with reality.

Simulator: a *model* that is used to provide a *simulation*

Specific growth rate: growth rate made in reference to a specific component. A value of 0.693 d⁻¹ describes a doubling per day; 0.693 = Ln(2). It should be noted that depending on the reference component the value of the specific growth rate is not the same. Thus, cell-specific (cell cell⁻¹ d⁻¹) differs from C-specific (C C⁻¹ d⁻¹), and differs from N-specific (N N⁻¹ d⁻¹), etc. Only in a culture growing at true steady-state in a heterogenous culture (organisms at all different stages of their cell cycle) will all specific growth rates be the same as averaged across the whole population. Unfortunately, because the units of the specific component cancel out, usually only the time unit is reported (e.g., d⁻¹); full units should always be given.

Standing crop: the amount of biomass present at a given time, usually expressed per area or per volume. Cf. *production*.

Steady-state: a condition where all processes are progressing in unison, such that the *specific growth rate* as determined through reference to any/all components will be equal. The biochemistry of individual cells can be in steady-state while the population abundance is changing (not in steady-state). Steady-state is best achieved through growth in a *chemostat* or *turbidostat*. In steady-state, the growth rate is *exponential*. Growth in steady-state usually implies growth limited by a factor; non-decaying dead cells are also in steady-state. See also *specific growth rate*.

Stretched batch culture: a batch culture system into which fresh medium is added to balance the removal of volumes for sampling. This is a form of *discontinuous culture* in which the sample taken is so large and/or so infrequent, that the culture expresses a period of *batch culture* dynamics, including the potential for growth at the maximum possible rate.

System Dynamics models: a form of *model* in which specific attention is paid to the accounting of materials during the *simulation*.

Tangential-flow filtration: a filtration approach in which the suspension being filtered is passed over the face of the filter (at a tangent) to continuously removing particles from the face of the filter that would otherwise block the filter pores.

Tuning: a process as part of *validation* of a model during which model parameters are adjusted to achieve the best fit of the model output to real data.

Turbidostat: a continuous culture system that, in contrast to the operation of the *chemostat*, has a control of entry of fresh medium and simultaneous removal of spent medium and culture linked to the optical density of the culture suspension. Unlike the chemostat, dilution rates in a turbidostat can run close to the maximum growth rate without risk of *washout*.

Validation: a process through which the output from a *simulation model* is compared with the real world to convince the user that the *simulation* is fit for purpose.

Volumetric production: production described in units of volume (e.g. $\text{gC m}^{-3} \text{d}^{-1}$). Because of self-shading within the microalgal suspension, optimising high *areal production* and high volumetric production can be challenging.

Washout: an event when the dilution rate of a culture system (*bioreactor*) exceeds the growth rate of the organism, so washing out the culture. Washout is common in a *chemostat* at high dilution rates but will not occur in a *tubidostat*.

Unialgal: single algal species. Often used to describe a culture that contains bacteria, but only one algal species. Cf *axenic*.

Up-shock: recovery of cellular physiology from stress (e.g., by supply of nutrients to a nutrient-starved culture). Up-shock results in the repression of physiological processes that were de-repressed during *down-shock*.

Preface

The aim of this book is to provide the reader with a text that explains how to optimise the commercial production of microalgal biomass.

The target audience for this work includes, in no particular order:

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students of biology, process biotechnology and chemical engineering
- Engineers engaging in the design and optimisation of microalgal bioreactors
- Aquaculturists wishing to develop integrated platforms for the growth of shell or fin fish
- Pharmacologists and nutritionists exploring the commercial potential of whole microalgal biomass or of specific biochemicals
- Those engaged in wastewater treatment, or CO₂ removal, wishing to consider deploying microalgal bioreactors
- Venture capitalists who wish to understand more of the basics of microalgal biotechnology

Most texts and other works on the culture of microalgae emphasis only a few facets of the physical culture system and/or the biology. In reality, and because of the complex feedback processes that develop, an appreciation of all components is required. The system is highly dynamic, and things can happen, and go wrong, very quickly. Experiments, and especially large-scale experiments, are expensive in resources and time. An adequately constructed simulation platform, however, allows *in silico* experiments to be conducted quickly and safely.

Initial chapters (Part I) describe the critical components of the physical-chemical system used to grow the organisms, and also provide an introduction to the physiology of the organisms that are of importance to growth dynamics. Part II of the book is devoted to the construction of simulation platforms (model) with which the reader can explore the implications of changing different abiotic and biotic components of the system. Rather than just provide an “all-singing-all-dancing” model, the reader is led through a series of simpler models to provide a background level of understanding for this complex topic.

This text is produced in support of the Decision Support Tool development of the ERDF Atlantic Area project *EnhanceMicroAlgae* (2017-2021). There are also free-to-end-user models available at the project website (<https://www.enhancemicroalgae.eu/>).

If any errors or problems are encountered, please contact the author at kjflankton@gmail.com.

1. General Introduction

This introduction gives a general overview of the topic; details are given in subsequent chapters.

1.1 A justification to the role of simulations in microalgal cultivation

Growing microalgae has attracted commercial interest for many decades. Few of those companies that started have managed to stay the course. Most that have survived have grown a crop for a very specialised yet robust market (*Spirulina* springs to mind). There has, however, long been a view that it must be possible to grow microalgae in some form of microbial-factory scenario, making use of waste nutrient streams (and thus helping to clean water) to support the growth of organisms under different ways to make best advantage of the flexible and rapid growth potential of these organisms. Such a view has emerged especially spurred on by interests in microalgal biodiesel, with the suggestion of microalgal based biorefineries (Greenwell et al. 2010).

The purpose of this work is not to provide a guide to making money from microalgae *per se*, but rather to provide a simulation platform that will enable those interested in entering this arena, and also those within it, with which they can explore different facets of the technology.

Simulations provide a way of quickly and relatively cheaply exploring (and usually rejecting) concepts. Most emphasis in the literature on modelling microalgae for biotechnology centres on the physics and chemistry rather than on the biology. This is, in the mind of the author, a mistake. The real challenge is in understanding and then exploiting the physiological flexibility of the organisms. Far too often the emphasis on non-biological aspects (such as the design of culture facilities) has been confused by using unrealistic biological input values, or biological models that so misrepresent the behaviour of real organisms that the conclusions may be brought into doubt. Scale-up is also a major challenge in microalgal biotechnology; exploitative processes that seem viable from calculations extrapolating from small laboratory flask systems fail to make the transition to the real world where Kg or tonnes of produce are required, rather than mg quantities.

For those who wish to explore modelling ecology in more general sense, and after all a bioreactor containing a growing algal suspension is an ecological system, please check the contents of the authors' companion volume, "*Dynamic Ecology*" (Flynn 2018). That book is available via <https://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa40405>.

1.2 Target organisms

The target organisms of this work are phototrophic microalgae. While some facets of what follows also apply to the growth of purely heterotrophic microalgae, phototrophy presents various critical overriding features upon the commercial exploitation of these organisms. The mixotrophy (coupling of phototrophy and osmotrophy) of these organisms is also considered.

"Microalgae" is a collective generic terms for a very diverse group of mainly unicellular organisms that only share two features:

- i. They are microbial, requiring a microscope to observe them in any detail. Most cells are around $10\mu\text{m}$ in diameter ($1\text{mm} = 1000\mu\text{m}$).
- ii. They are algae, from which it is typically inferred that they contain pigments with which they can perform photosynthesis.

Microalgae are taxonomically extremely diverse, though the first split is between:

- prokaryote (bacteria-like) cyanobacteria; also called blue-green algae
- eukaryote protists

Some of these organisms have particular physiological characteristics that can be exploited, or on the converse may present challenges. For example:

- some cyanobacteria can (when starved of other N-sources) fix N_2 -gas
- most diatoms (a group of protists) have cell walls of silicate
- many non-diatom protists are motile, and die if they lose their flagella in turbulent mixing. Many of those species in nature are also mixotrophic through combining phototrophy and phagotrophy (i.e., they eat their competitors and other organisms)
- fatty acid and/or starch content is highly variable between species and also (critically) varies with the nutritional state of the organism
- bacteria represent essential contaminants in many cultures (removing them can decrease growth rates as they produce critical biochemicals)

And so on.

While microalgal physiology has a long and rich history in academic research, much of it is confusing and liable for misinterpretation by the un-initiated. This is complicated further by the periodic renaming of organisms, and because strains and clones of the same species (especially when maintained in culture for many years, during which they mutate) rarely behave in the same way.

Microalgae and their physiology are explored in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

1.3 Biomass yield vs productivity

A common mistake in this subject arena is to confuse the algal biomass held within a culture vessel with productivity. In part this is perhaps a historic overlap with terminology used in a terrestrial agricultural context; yield of wheat or rice per hectare is viewed as a single crop gathered once, or perhaps twice, a year. This would give a productivity value of x tonnes per hectare per year. However, the time unit is often ignored, and the emphasis placed solely on the biomass at the time of harvest. This analogy is not helpful when considering microalgal cultivation.

The growth rate of microalgae is such that the biomass can, under optimal conditions, double every day or so. In a laboratory system, whole cultures (flasks or similar vessels) are often harvested, and emphasis is placed upon the amount of material collected at that time. The culture systems are then started over with an inoculum from a starter-culture of perhaps 2% of the volume of the main system. However, in operating a large bioreactor a partial harvest is more likely.

While achieving a high biomass is certainly important, what is at least of equal importance is the rate of productivity. Productivity of what is an allied and equally important issue. As an example, consider the topic of microalgal biofuels production:

The biochemical constituents of microalgae required for biodiesel production are the fatty acids accumulating in cells that are starving of N-nutrient. However, the growth of microalgal cells requires sufficient light and nutrient. A high biomass of microalgae self-limits growth by light; each cell shades light from its neighbours. And, as high biomass growth requires sufficient N-nutrient, then clearly there is a conflict between the growth and production of biomass, versus the synthesis of the fatty acids required for the support of biodiesel production. To optimise production thus requires an understanding of the physiology of the organisms as well as the physics of the systems (Kenny & Flynn 2017).

1.4 Enhancing microalgal productivity

The overwhelming challenge in the commercial exploitation of microalgae centres upon maximising production rates. Specifically we need to maximise areal and volumetric production rates (AP and VP respectively). What does that mean?

Areal production is the rate of biomass produced per area (i.e., the foot-print of the facility) per day. Area is important in financial terms because it relates to ground-rental costs. Many workers measure biomass in terms of fresh or wet weight. Far better, and more meaningful from a simulation modelling perspective, is to define that growth in terms of carbon, so units for AP are as (for example) $\text{gC m}^{-2} \text{d}^{-1}$. C is the base for organism growth, C-metabolites control organism physiology, CO_2 consumption is of importance from a “green economy” perspective, and so on. C-biomass can be estimated from dry weight or from biovolume (that is the product of {cell numeric abundance} \times {cell volume}).

Volumetric production refers to the rate of biomass production per volume of water per day (e.g. $\text{gC m}^{-3} \text{d}^{-1}$). Volume is important as it relates to the consumption of water, nutrients, and the cost of harvesting etc.

In an ideal world it would be best to maximise both AP and VP, growing dense “pea-soup” suspensions. However, very quickly these ideals become self-defeating. A “pea-soup” suspension absorbs so much light that the growth of individual cells is light-limited. Not only is this bad in itself (decreasing productivity), but light limitation restricts or even prevents nutrient exhaustion, and that limits the flexibility of the production facility to provide different metabolites. Optimising AP and VP, while also providing metabolic flexibility is readily explored using simulations.

1.5 Decision Support Tools

The inherent complexity and the roles of feedback processes in the physiology and culturing of microalgae make predicting what may happen very difficult. With knowledge, however, physiological responses to transient changes (such as changes in light or nutrient supply) may be exploited. It is for such reasons that mathematical models supporting simulations of microalgal growth may be of use.

What is a simulation vs a model? A model is a simplification of reality (often an extreme simplification, exemplified by a regression line through data), while a simulation has two important facets:

- i) a simulation requires that time as a variable – a simulation is not a simple steady-state representation; if you disturb the system something happens over the following period of study.
- ii) by definition a simulation must represent reality; and that capability can be exploited for “what-if?” analyses.

Simulation models are also excellent platforms for exploring financial consequences and viabilities. Further, depending on the software platform, you can explore the risks of operating the commercial facility in different ways. This is important, because all biological systems are temperamental, and certainly that is true of microalgal cultivation systems.

1.6 Concluding comments

This text provides you with information on the building and operation of *in silico* platform for exploring microalgal growth in the context of commercial or commercial-facing interests. The emphasis is on optimising production of biomass under nutrient sufficient or nutrient deplete conditions; irrespective of the details of the organism and the product that interests you, optimising production is ultimately the target.

In working through this book you will perhaps learn much about microalgal physiology. While this text is not specifically intended for that purpose, even those established researchers in the subject are often experts in only certain facets of the topic. A real benefit of building and operating simulation models is that the whole complexity and synergistic interactivity of the biological and non-biological systems come together. The approach is thus very powerful, though limited by the complexity of the models.

Chapters in Part II develop a theme and offers suggestions for experimentation. Unlike real systems, you cannot break anything, results come through very fast, and it will not bankrupt you either. The models described herein are available in a form that can be edited and modified using a commercial software platform. However, you can experiment and learn much from exploiting the free-to-use models. To use these models, you need to download the free Powersim Studio Cockpit from https://www.powersim.com/main/download-support/technical_resources/service_releases/studio10cockpit/. Some of these models provide simple demonstrators for concepts; it would be best if you played with those models before moving on to the complex models.

The models provided here are not described in great mathematical detail. What is provided are explanations for the conceptual basis of the mathematics. For those interested, the full code is available for each model, as is a version of the model that can be opened and modified/developed using the Powersim Studio platform. Anyone who is adept enough to explore the code will be able to work out how it functions; please also explore the companion e-book on Dynamic Ecology (Flynn 2018).

All the biological descriptions are based on peer-reviewed published research papers by the author and colleagues.

2. Microalgae – a (very) brief introduction

2.1 Introduction to microalgae

The term “microalgae” is used as a generic term to describe any microbial-scale “green” photosynthetic organism. Microalgae include prokaryote (bacteria-like) cyanobacteria, and also eukaryote protists. In reality, the genetic breadth of the organisms that are collectively termed “protist microalgae” approaches or exceeds that of all the other eukaryote (non-bacterial) life forms considered together. In short, the bucket term that describes “microalgae” is truly vast in its breadth. Of these, only the merest fraction (a few 10’s of species) have been considered from a commercial or biotechnological standpoint; Figure 1 gives some idea of the types commonly used.

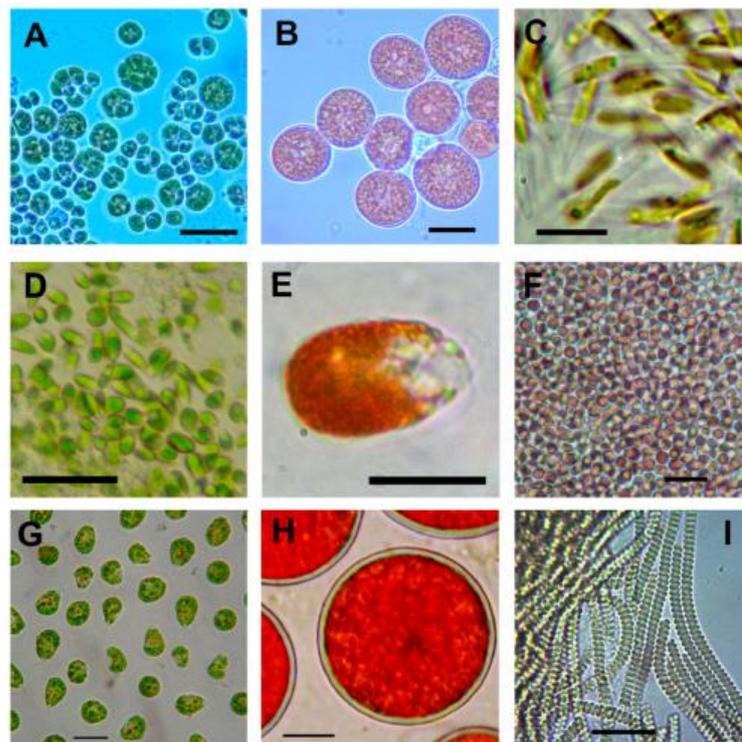


Fig. 2.1 Light micrographs of selected microalgae for commercial cultivation for various biotechnological applications. *Chlorococcum* sp. ((A,B); source for mixed carotenoids including -carotene, astaxanthin, canthaxanthin, lutein), *Dunaliella salina* ((D,E); the source for β -carotene) and *Haematococcus pluvialis* ((G,H); the source for astaxanthin) are cultivated as two distinct growth phases: (1) green-phase ((A,D,G); for biomass generation) and (2) stress-phase ((B,E,H); for carotenoids and fatty acids accumulation). (C), *Phaeodactylum tricornutum* (the source for essential fatty acid EPA), (F), *Porphyridium cruentum* (source for natural pink colourant phycoerythrin and bioactive polysaccharides) and (I), *Arthrospira* (Spirulina) sp. (source for natural blue colourant phycocyanin and multiple health benefitting ingredients) are cultivated as single-phase actively growing biomass for the targeted biomolecules. All scale bars are 25 μ m, except for (C,E), which are 10 μ m. Figure and legend from Saha & Murray (2018)

Much of what follows has little impact on the construction or operation of simulation platforms for exploring the commercial growth of microalgae. Nonetheless, there are some basic features, and terminologies, that warrant introduction.

First a note of warning.

Some confusion may be caused by reference in the literature to non-photosynthetic “microalgae”. Protists may or may not need to perform photosynthesis, to generate at least certain key cellular components through photochemistry-linked biochemistry. “Microalgae” as a term specifically draws attention to an ability (if not an obligatory need) to engage in plant-like growth; it is perhaps disingenuous to refer to non-photosynthesising protist cultures as containing “microalgae”.

In this book, “microalgae” specifically implies phototrophy. It should be noted, however, that both cyanobacteria and protist microalgae have potential to be mixotrophic by combining phototrophy and osmotrophy (the use of dissolved organic nutrients). Some of the protist microalgae may also have potential to engage in phagotrophy (feeding on particles, typically on bacteria, cyanobacteria or other protists).

2.2 Microalgae vs Phytoplankton

Some 50% of the oxygen you are breathing right now was produced by the activity of microalgae growing as free-floating organisms in the ocean. These photosynthetic organisms are termed “phytoplankton”. Some phytoplankton just float, some can swim; none, by the definition of “plankton”, can move against the tides and currents. However, microalgae do not have to be planktonic; they can grow on, or even in, other substrates. Thus, microalgae may often grow in biofilms, on stones in rivers, on walls, on the sides of bottles, and (importantly for polar ecology) also within ice. For the bulk of commercial applications, however, microalgae are grown in suspensions, *de facto* as phytoplankton. However, growth of microalgae on surfaces (on bioreactor walls) is a nuisance that adversely affects commercial activity.

2.3 Prokaryote vs Eukaryote

Prokaryote microalgae

Prokaryotes are bacteria-like organisms that lack internal compartmentalizations; no mitochondria, no chloroplasts, etc. Cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae (so called after the colour of the cyanophycin they contain) are prokaryote microalgae. They are bacteria that contain membranes arranged to hold light-absorbing pigments and the biochemical wherewithal to convert photons of light into chemical energy to support CO₂-fixation (photosynthesis).

Most cyanobacteria, and all protist microalgae, use fixed (usually inorganic) forms of N-nutrient. Some cyanobacteria, however, can also fix N₂ gas into intracellular ammonium. These “diazotrophs” may either grow in filaments of cells where some cells fix CO₂ and others fix N₂, or as single cells that separate the processes between light and dark phases of the day. The biochemical challenge that they face is that the processes of CO₂ and N₂ fixation cannot occur simultaneously within the same cell (and noting that prokaryotes lack internal structures with which they could separate conflicting chemical reactions) because a by-product of CO₂-fixation (namely O₂) poisons the

enzyme nitrogenase that fixes N_2 . The process of N_2 -fixation is also very expensive biochemically; diazotrophs only fix N_2 if there is insufficient inorganic N (as nitrate or ammonium) in their growth medium.

No cyanobacterium is motile (while many bacteria are), but various species are buoyant either directly with gas vacuoles, or indirectly by their filamentous biomass trapping bubbles of O_2 released during photosynthesis.

Eukaryotic (protist) microalgae

Eukaryotes are organisms with cells that contain internal compartments, such as mitochondria and (of particular importance here) chloroplasts. Eukaryotes include all so-called higher life forms, from trees to humans. Eukaryotic microalgae are protists, and the original protists were heterotrophs through osmotrophy (using organic nutrients rather like current-day yeasts do), or phagotrophy (eating by engulfing food particles). The original protist microalgae evolved through acquiring the ability to photosynthesise from their prey. Thus, the first step was of eating a cyanobacteria, but rather than digesting it the prey were retained and continued to photosynthesise within the protist. It is no coincidence that the structure of chloroplasts resembles that of cyanobacteria. Later some of those photosynthetic prey were themselves protists, and following their assimilation into predatory protists additional layers of membranes and other biochemical features differentiated the developing evolutionary lines of what we see today as phototrophic protists. A taxonomic diagnostic feature of modern-day protist microalgae is the number of membranes around the chloroplast and the arrangement of the photosynthetic membranes (thylakoids).

Today we see protists that are still wholly phagotrophic (protozooplankton), and some which are wholly phototrophic (phytoplankton). Most, however, we now realise are actually photo-phago-mixotrophic being able to eat and photosynthesise (Mittra et al. 2016). Despite this mixotrophic potential (realised by combining phototrophy and osmotrophy and/or phagotrophy), most of these pigmented organisms, protist microalgae, are studied and grown as pure phototrophs. It is suspected that this culturing technique leads to the rapid loss of phagotrophy in organisms isolated from nature, while the emphasis on cultures as being axenic (unialgal, bacteria-free) has also restricted the number of species available for commercial exploitation to a small fraction of the real genetic diversity.

Protist microalgae are typically motile, though some important groups are not (notably the diatoms, which mostly have cell walls of silicate rather than of cellulose-like material). Some protist phytoplankton can swim using their two flagella (or in very small species, just 1 flagellum) up to 10m vertically every day to obtain light at the surface or nutrients/food at depth; not bad going for an organism of perhaps 0.01mm diameter. In culture, however, this motility is usually not seen due to the turbulent water conditions; indeed too much turbulence can kill some protist microalgae through removing their flagella.

2.4 Size

“Microalgae” are typically (by definition) microbial in size; that is, their surface (and internal) features cannot be observed by the naked eye. Indeed, little detail can be seen using a light microscope either. Most microalgae are also unicellular, growing as a single cell. A “typical” microalga is around 5-30 μm in diameter; there are 1000 μm in 1 mm, so 100 cells of a typical species would form a line just 1mm long. However, many tens or thousands of cells may clump together or form chains that are not only plainly visible to the naked eye, they may actually form a mass that can hinder pumping operations. Motile cells may also congregated at the surface of a flask of water, or (motile or non-motile cells) may appear as a mass on the bottom of a flask. Gentle swirling or other agitation (including aeration) will disperse any aggregations unless they are adhering to the vessel sides as a biofilm.

The shape of microalgae varies from spheres to pear-shape, long needles, double-bun shapes, and to weird asymmetric forms. Flagella (or in the very smallest motile species, just the one flagellum), if present may be apical or emerge from a more central location; the latter positioning (as in cryptophytes) make the cells swim in a wobbly fashion. Size may be reported as an “equivalent spherical diameter”, ESD; this considers the volume of the cell as a sphere, irrespective of whether it actually is, and converts that to a diameter (through manipulation of $V=4/3\cdot\pi\cdot r^3$, where r is the cell radius, and V is its volume).

The size and shape, together with the production of mucus, affects how the cells may be separated from their growth medium during harvesting or water purification. Long thin cells pass through meshes (filters) that would not allow passage of an equal-volume spherical cell, while conversely clumps of cells, especially with mucus, can block filters that may be expected to otherwise permit their passage.

Cell size, and to a lesser extent shape, is often affected by nutritional status. Thus, microalgae whose growth is limited by light or by availability of nitrogen nutrient tend to be smaller than normal, while those limited by availability of phosphorous are larger (and often also sticky, so they clump as well).

2.5 Colour

An obvious feature of microalgae is their colour. All phototrophic species contain the green pigment chlorophyll.a. This is a key photopigment in the biochemistry of photosynthesis, and a special form of this pigment, Chl.a_{P700}, acts as a conduit for light energy collected by other chlorophyll molecules and from secondary pigments.

Chl.a absorbs light mainly in the red (ca. 650nm) and blue (ca. 450nm) sections of the visible spectrum. In doing so the pigment leaves green as the dominant visible spectra of light, hence microalgae containing mainly Chl.a appear green. To make additional use of photons of light in this “gap” in the visible spectrum, microalgae have secondary pigments. In eukaryotes, these include other chlorophylls and carotenoids; these typically confer a golden-orange colour to the organism. In cyanobacteria, major secondary pigments are phycocyanin (blue-green) and phycoerythrin (pink). These phyco-pigments are heavily proteinaceous and if the cyanobacteria are deprived of nitrogenous nutrition the organism degrades the pigment; such a change in colour can occur over a few hours and gives a ready indication of changes in cell nutrient status.

Microalgae also contain so-called sun-screen pigments, mycosporine-like amino acids (MAAs). These protect the organisms' DNA from UV damage. The concentration of both MAAs and of the photopigments reflect not only the radiant light levels (for protection) but also light-limiting conditions (where light-limited cells produce more pigment to capture more photons).

Different combinations of pigments can render a range of colours far beyond simply "green" or "golden-brown". Microalgae have been grown commercially to harvest pigments such as β -carotene and phycocyanin (as food colorants) and MAA (for making sun-lotions).

2.6 Photosynthesis

Photosynthesis, the fixation of CO₂ into organics (initially as sugars), requires light of the appropriate quantity (not too low, not too high) and quality (light in the visible spectrum), photosystems to capture photons and convert the energy into chemical energy (ATP and reductant), and also the enzymes of the Calvin cycle (most notably Ribulose biphosphate carboxylase; RuBisCO).

RuBisCO is arguably the most important single enzyme on Earth and, on account of it being a rather inefficient enzyme, it is also likely the most common enzyme as well. Importantly, the activity of this enzyme effectively limits the potential growth rate of phototrophs (Flynn & Raven 2017).

The whole photosynthetic machinery is subject (like all biochemical processes) to close regulation, but the main problem a phototrophic organism has is that it is not possible to modulate the biochemical machinery at the same pace as changes often occur in light. Too little capacity and the individual grows slightly slower (less competitively) than its neighbours; too much capacity and if light becomes too strong or nutrients become limiting then there is too much energy coming into the cell and damage occurs. With too much light, initially cells become photo-inhibited, but photodamage and death develops shortly after, as a function of accumulated photon dose. Too much photosynthesis can also result in super-saturation of O₂, which is both directly dangerous for the cell and also inhibitory of CO₂-fixing RuBisCO activity.

2.7 Nutrients and stoichiometry

Microalgae need other nutrients than just C. Nitrogen (N) and phosphorous (P) are quantitatively the next most important elements. Dissolved inorganic C (DIC; as carbonate, bicarbonate and dissolved CO₂) is present in seawater at about 2mM concentration, and usually much less in freshwaters. Inorganic N (as ammonium or nitrate) is often supplied to cultures at around 1mM, though ammonium (the major N source present in anaerobic digestate liquor) is often toxic at levels above a few 100 μ M. The solubility of P (as phosphate) is limiting in seawater cultures, as phosphate precipitates out of solution above a concentration of ca. 35 μ M (depending on salinity and temperature). Silicon (Si), needed by diatoms, can also be problematic in culture medium, readily precipitating in certain marine media. On exhaustion of Si, diatom cultures can just crash, disappearing overnight as the cells collapse. The exception is the commonly grown diatom *Phaeodactylum*, which lacks any significant Si in its wall (that which it needs is often supplied from the dissolution of silica from the culture vessel glass into the slightly alkali sweater media). As we will see below, the ratios of these concentrations does not align well with that of algal biomass. This requires that dense cultures may need nutrients to be bled in so that residual concentrations are

not too high. CO₂ is usually bubbled in (often as CO₂-enriched air); not only does this enable continuing photosynthesis but, as DIC also buffers the acidity-alkalinity of water, it is also vital to maintain the correct pH for growth.

Iron (Fe) is an important and potentially limiting nutrient unless a suitable chelating agent is used. When life evolved on Earth the planet atmosphere and waters were anaerobic and Fe-salts are soluble in such waters. However, microalgae were responsible for the greatest environmental disaster to ever impact Earth, by changing the environment to an oxidising one. This oxidation led to the formation of Fe-oxides, which are poorly soluble in water. Chelating agents (from the Greek for claw) help to keep Fe available in suspension for microalgae to acquire this element. In nature, chelating agents include organics leaked from degrading plant biomass (such as tannins); in cultures an artificial chelator such as EDTA is used. Without sufficient Fe, photosynthesis, respiration and synthesis of the enzymes of nitrate reduction are restricted.

Vitamins (especially B-group vitamins) and other cofactors (e.g., nickel is needed for the enzyme urease, to enable a microalga to exploit urine as a N-source) must also be supplied. Excess organic cofactors can promote the unwanted growth of bacteria, or fungus.

The ratio of C:N:P within organisms, referred to as the stoichiometric ratio, is highly variable in phototrophs and is especially so within microalgae (Geider & LaRoche 2002). The C:N:P ratio affects both growth rates and the chemical quality of the biomass; a high C content indicates an excess of carbohydrate and/or fatty acids, and a relative lack of proteins. The actual biochemical composition of the cells is largely reflected in commercial terms through taxonomic differences in carbohydrate and fatty acid content. These differences can be increased by careful exploitation of the impacts of nutrient stress.

Microalgae, like all phototrophs, also readily produce secondary metabolites. Primary metabolites are the protein amino acids, the nucleic acid bases and the suite of standard fatty acids and allied lipids. Secondary metabolites are other organic compounds that are not components of the major biochemical pathways. In most instances, the role (if indeed there is one) of these secondary metabolites is unknown; at least some appear as over-flow chemicals produced when normal biochemical processes are disturbed through imbalances in light and nutrient supply. They can, from a human perspective, be rather inert or useful (such as caffeine) but they can also be highly toxic (such as shell-fish toxins). The usefulness of secondary metabolites in medical science, in particular, is a subject of great interest. To optimise production of what are typically just a few fractions (<<1%) of total biomass, or possibly released (leaked) chemicals, requires close control over the growth of the organisms to exaggerate production of secondary metabolites.

An often neglected product of microalgal growth is released organics. These are compounds that are perhaps leaked rather than actively pumped out. They include sugars and amino acids, but all manner of (uncharacterised) other organics can accumulate in the water. Some 10-20% of C-fixation may be leaked allied with N and/or P depending on the stoichiometry of the chemicals.

2.8 Growth rates

Growth rates of microalgae do not even approach those of bacteria such as *E.coli*; microalgae may be “microbes”, but growth is rather slow. While *E.coli* has a generation time under optimal

conditions of ca. 20min, a typical microalga will double its biomass in ca. 24hs. Indeed, many synchronise their cell cycle to day-night (Nelson & Brand 1979), so they increase in biomass during the day with photosynthesis and go through the cell replication cycle during darkness.

Some microalgae can replicate much faster than this, but the activity of RuBisCO sets a limit to C-fixation of a few divisions per day (Flynn & Raven 2017). There is a problem then of claims in the scientific and grey literature of much higher growth rates. These most likely arise because of a misunderstanding of how to measure growth rate. This needs to be determined by an increase in C-biomass and not by any other approach. Growth may also be enhanced over short periods (ca. <6hrs) by raising the temperature, exploiting the potential doubling in enzymatic rates per 10°C (so-called $Q_{10}=2$) before the enzymes denature and cell death ensues.

Another common misunderstanding is generated by use of the term “logarithmic” or “exponential” growth. Many reports do not actually determine this value correctly at all, or do so over an insufficient period (ideally several days) to produce a robust estimate of real growth rate. Only very thin cultures of microalgae can actually grow in true exponential phase at a maximum rate. Usually culture growth is linear because growth becomes self-limiting through self-shading as the increasingly dense culture cuts out light to the individual cell. This event is readily seen in simulations, and is a factor of importance that often surprises the uninitiated.

“Exponential production rates” and similar terms can also be confusing. Growth of the organism is of lesser importance during commercial production than is “growth of the product” (which, while it may be the whole biomass, is more often a mere fraction of it). A classic example of this confusion is the production of biodiesel by microalgae. Biodiesel is produced using fatty acids synthesised by microalgae primarily when they are entering N-deplete growth. This is a period when C-biomass-growth is slowing but N-specific growth may have completely halted; algal C:N thus increases. To maximise production of fatty acids requires a balancing act between nutrient limitation and continuing growth of microalgae in optically thin suspensions (maximising light for the individual cell) (Kenny & Flynn 2017).

2.9 Conclusions

It will be apparent from the above that optimising the growth of microalgae is non-trivial. And this is before considering the vagaries of the weather for culture systems that rely on sunlight. There are additional issues of concern, or perhaps of interest, such as the growth of multi-species systems where competition and allelopathy (chemical signalling or interferences) develop, or for systems subjected to the entry of predators and disease. Developing simulation models provide approaches to explore options that would be costly in time and certainly financially through other routes. If the model does not describe what happens in reality then this indicates a gross failure in understanding of the commercial system being explored.

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