Exploring algal blooms for biofuel production and its environmental trade-offs

Dr. Ratna Sonekar[1*]; Dr. Abhinesh Kumar Tandan[2]

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Abstract

The algal blooms have recently been a promising biological resource for producing sustainable biofuels due to their high growth rates, high lipid content, and ability to grow in other water bodies. In this paper, the two aspects of algae blooms will be explained as the source of renewable energy and a cause of severe ecological issues. Even though artificial/controlled algae growth can be incorporated in alleviating carbon and the consumption of fossil fuels, uncontrolled algae growth, especially the harmful algae blooms (HABs), can be detrimental to the quality of water, the ecological balance of the water bodies, and may cause and contribute to morbidity and mortality of both humans and organisms. The following paper will provide a comparison of the environmental trade-offs of using algal blooms to create biofuel on the basis of nutrient availability, carbon sequestration, environmental impact, and lifecycle sustainability. That is why it is essential to understand such trade-offs to develop responsible biofuels strategies that can balance energy needs and environmental safety.

Keywords: Algal blooms, Biofuel production, Environmental trade-offs, Harmful algal blooms (HABs), Sustainability, Renewable energy, Ecosystem impacts, Lipid content, Carbon capture

1*- Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.
Email: ku.ratnasonekar@kalingauniversity.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6899-7761
2- Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.
Email: ku.abhineshkumartandan@kalingauniversity.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4549-8997
*Corresponding author
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Introduction

This heightened the need to turn to cleaner, non-traditional feedstock-based biofuels, which has increased global interest in biofuels. Among them, algae are characterized by a rapid growth rate, a very high level of lipids, and the ability to grow in other water environments and not to be a direct competitor of food crops (Pérez-Almada *et al.,* 2023; Hu *et al.,* 2023). Algal blooms: A sudden increase in algal populations is both an opportunity and a problem. These flowers will also produce substantial biomass for biofuel production through deliberate cultivation (Salmeron Covarrubias *et al.,* 2025). However, uncontrolled or harmful algal blooms (HABs) can disorganise ecosystems, degrade water quality, and endanger the health of humans and animals (Harichandan, 2025; Nawaz *et al.,* 2024). This is a two-sided section, which underscores the need to critically evaluate the sustainability and environmental implications of algal bioenergy (Cheng, Bouskill and Brodie, 2019).

The paper addresses the use of algal blooms to produce biofuel and the environmental trade-offs associated with this approach. A comprehensive study of nutrient provision, carbon absorption potential, ecological risks, and lifecycle impacts is needed to understand the possible ways to use algal-derived biofuels in sustainable energy infrastructure (Kleinman and Harmel, 2024). Through research likely to contribute to the broader discourse on how renewable energy can be realized without harming the environment and ecological systems, the research aims to investigate technologies and their effects, environmental constraints, and ecological responses (Stevović, Hadrović and Jovanović, 2023).

This paper has made some significant contributions, such as,

- Assesses the suitability of algal growths as biofuel feeds, both in growth, lipid synthesis, and resource demand.
- Energy, carbon, and environmental performance of the production process.
- Elevates the idea of how management policies, rules, and technology can protect the environment.
- Identifies the current constraints and suggests the direction of research.

Literature Review

Recent research demonstrates growing interest in using algal systems to produce biofuels, while also recognizing the environmental issues posed by harmful blooms. The investigation established that advanced machine learning methods could be applied to optimize algal growth, forecast conditions for high lipid production, and resolve trade-offs between biomass and lipid production (Reddy, Cunha and Kurian, 2018). They find that computational models should be combined with experimental growth to boost biofuel performance and production, offering a new perspective on controlled algal systems (Lopez, Savage and Zhou, 2025).

The previous research (Abideen *et al.,* 2023) examined the potential of using saline resources and halophytes, such as marine algae, to produce biofuels

(Lantemona *et al.,* 2025; Gupta and Joshi, 2025). They stressed that marine algae can be grown in non-arable, salty areas where they do not compete with food crops or freshwater resources. Nevertheless, the authors not only warn of ecological traps, including nutrient overuse, accidental habitat disturbance, and lipid fluctuations under stressful conditions, but also emphasize the importance of sustainable management practices (Anburaj, Kathiresan and Prasannakumar, 2024; Kumari *et al.,* 2025).

The study (Lan *et al.,* 2024) was dedicated to the harmful algal blooms (HABs) in the eutrophic marine systems, their causes, monitoring methods, and management. Their work explains the degradation of water quality, the depletion of oxygen, and the release of toxins by these uncontrolled blooms, creating environmental hazards that complicate the use of biofuels. The paper highlights that HABs are a rich source of biomass, but that ecological issues and close supervision are of paramount importance for their responsible use.

Methodology

The current study will take an integrated systems-based approach consistent with the conceptual framework and will evaluate resource inputs, algal biofuel lenses, biomass conversion, ecological trade-offs, and sustainability.

Environmental Drivers Assessment and Resources Inputs

The paper begins with an in-depth evaluation of the environmental factors that affect algal bloom development. The most important physical and chemical factors (nutrient level, especially nitrogen and phosphorus) are quantified in the chosen natural bloom locations and under laboratory cultivation. Exposure to solar energy, temperature, CO2 concentration, pH, and dissolved oxygen concentration is determined using water samples and in-situ monitoring equipment. By comparing and contrasting controlled cultivation settings with the natural bloom state, these measurements establish an environmental baseline that specifies the potential growth of the bloom, biomass accumulation, and expected lipid productivity.

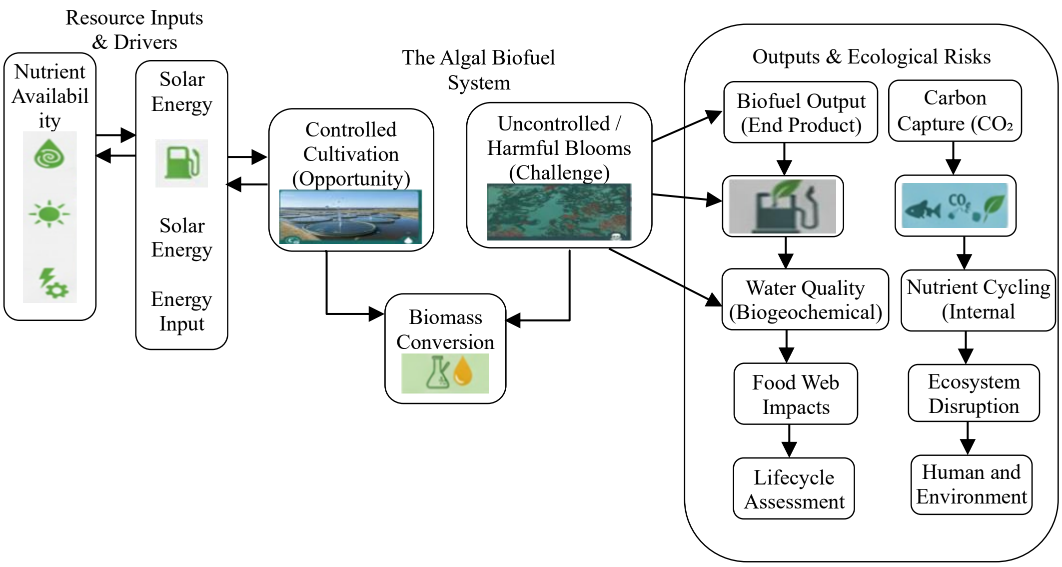

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for algal bloom–based biofuel assessment.

The systems-level model of the interaction between environmental drivers (nutrients, solar energy, CO 2) and the dual-path algal biofuel system (controlled cultivation as an opportunity and uncontrolled/harmful blooms as a challenge) and the outputs and ecological dangers are depicted in Figure 1. The framework combines the potential of biomass conversion, the yield of biofuels, the carbon capture, the effects on water quality, nutrient cycling, the disturbance of ecosystems, lifecycle analysis, and management.

Algal Biofuel System Characterization

Controlled Cultivation

Man-made cultivation systems like raceway ponds or photobioreactors are evaluated in order to find out the rate at which they can accumulate biomass and the rate at which they can produce lipids. Microscopic and DNA-based species identification, carried out on samples of these systems, is used to describe algal community composition. The Biomass density is determined by using chlorophyll a concentration, dry weight, and optical density. The quantification of the lipid content is then done through standardized solvent extraction methods, and the analysis is done through gas chromatography. The measurements give an understanding of the algal growth and biofuels performance in controlled conditions.

Uncontrolled or Harmful Blooms

Natural and harmful algal blooms are analyzed side by side to determine their potential applicability as a source of biomass and to find the ecological hazards they present. Field sampling to record the intensity of the bloom and species dominance is done by laboratory identification. The content of toxins in water is examined with the help of ELISA-based detection techniques, whereas such indicators of ecological disturbances as dissolved oxygen depletion, turbidity changes, and pH variations are observed. This appraisal defines biological and environmental issues that accompany the use of uncontrolled or harmful algal blooms. The two cultivation pathways are then fed into a biomass analysis of conversion to find out their proportions of biofuel production.

Biomass Conversion and Biofuel Output Estimation

There was a standardized process of conversion in harvested biomass that was obtained in both controlled cultivation and natural bloom settings. The biomass was dried and homogenized, and then the process of solvent-based lipid extraction was done to extract the oil fraction. Gas chromatography was then used to extract the fatty acids in order to identify the composition of the fatty acids and their appropriateness in the production of biodiesel. After this, the lipids were transesterified to biodiesel, and the quality parameters of the fuel, such as calorific value, viscosity, and cetane number, were analyzed in order to define the performance properties of the resulting biofuel. In order to measure the biofuel potential quantitatively, the following standard equations were used:

Biomass Yield (g/L):

$$\text{Biomass Yield (g/L)} = \frac{\text{Dry Weight of Algae (g)}}{\text{Volume of Culture (L)}} \quad (1)$$

Equation 1 is used to obtain the total algal biomass or biomass generated per liter of culture and forms a foundation for comparing the productivity of controlled cultivation and harmful algal blooms (HABs).

Lipid Content (%):

$$\text{Lipid Content (\%)} = \frac{\text{Lipid Weight (g)}}{\text{Dry Biomass Weight (g)}} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

Equation 2 calculates the percentage of algal biomass that is extractable as lipids, which directly affects the yield of biodiesel and the overall biofuel potential.

Ecological Risk and Environmental Trade-off Analysis

In line with the ecological risk factors of the conceptual model, this step determines the environmental effects of algal bloom use in biofuel production. Water quality deterioration is measured by measuring hypoxia, toxin release, and turbidity variation, and effects on nutrient recycling, such as whether or not secondary bloom can form and eutrophication can occur, are determined. To analyze carbon capture efficiency, the rate of net CO 2 fixation is compared with emissions produced during biomass harvesting and processing. The disturbances of ecosystems are evaluated based on the effects on aquatic life, the integrity of habitats, and the ecological balance. These are combined into a form of ecological risk index, through which a systematic assessment of the degree to which algal bloom use causes or alleviates environmental stress is conducted.

Sustainability Assessment and Management Strategies

Simplified life cycle assessment (LCA) is conducted in order to determine the sustainability of the production of biofuel on the basis of algae blooms, with consideration to greenhouse gas emissions, energy requirements, and resource consumption on the overall production chain. This sustainability evaluation is followed by an account of the management strategies- technological interventions, ecological strategies, and regulatory frameworks that can help reduce the risks posed by harmful algal blooms or resource overuse. The joint analysis of biofuel production, ecological trade-offs, and the sustainability indicators creates a reasonable framework for evaluating the possibility and the environmental legitimacy of algal bloom-based biofuel production.

Results and Discussion

Biomass and Lipid Productivity

Table 1 indicates the comparative performance of the controlled algal growth and harmful algal blooms (HABS). There was a biomass yield of 1.8 g/L in controlled cultivation systems and a slightly higher biomass yield of 2.4 g/L in the HABs.

Table 1: Comparison of biofuel-relevant parameters between controlled and harmful algal sources.

Parameter	Controlled Cultivation	Harmful Algal Bloom
Biomass Yield (g/L)	1.80	2.40
Lipid Content (%)	32.00	18.00
Biodiesel Output (L/kg)	0.42	0.21
Dissolved O_2 (mg/L)	7.50	2.10
Toxin Level (μg/L)	0.00	35.00

Although HABs produced a larger biomass, the lipid content of their biomass was much less (18%) compared to the control systems (32%). This observation is very crucial because the concentration of lipids directly determines the biodiesel production.

The comparison of lipid contents between sources given in Table 1 demonstrates that the controlled systems are superior in the potential of biofuels. HABs yield a smaller quantity of extractable lipid with greater biomass due to species composition and changes in metabolism under stress.

Biodiesel Output Analysis

The lipid content was in tune with the yield of biodiesel, where the yield of controlled cultivation was 0.42 L/kg, which is two times less than that of HABs (0.21 L/kg). This justifies the fact that the use of controlled algal systems as the production method of biofuels can be considered to be more reliable and effective due to the optimal provision of nutrients, selection of species, and regulation of the environment. On the other hand, HABs are not homogeneous and are generally dominated by species possessing a general preference for toxin production or rapid decrease in the growth of the bloom as opposed to lipid storage, and are therefore less favourable to biodiesel processes.

Environmental Quality and Ecological Risks

Results were vastly different in the state of dissolved oxygen. Normal oxygen concentration (7.5mg/L) was maintained in the regulated systems and was favorable to the aquatic environment. The HABs, on the other hand, were distinguished by a significant oxygen loss (2.1 mg/L), which is a measure of hypoxic stress associated with the bloom decay process. This is in accordance with the HAB-induced effects on ecosystems (fish kills and loss of benthic habitats). Ecological hazards are also indicated by measurements of toxins. Controlled systems had no detectable toxins, whereas HABs contained 35 µg/L, which indicated the presence of detrimental species, such as Microcystis or Karenia spp. Toxins not only reduce the suitability of biofuels but also cause a lot of environmental and health complications to the population.

Physiological and Ecological Performance

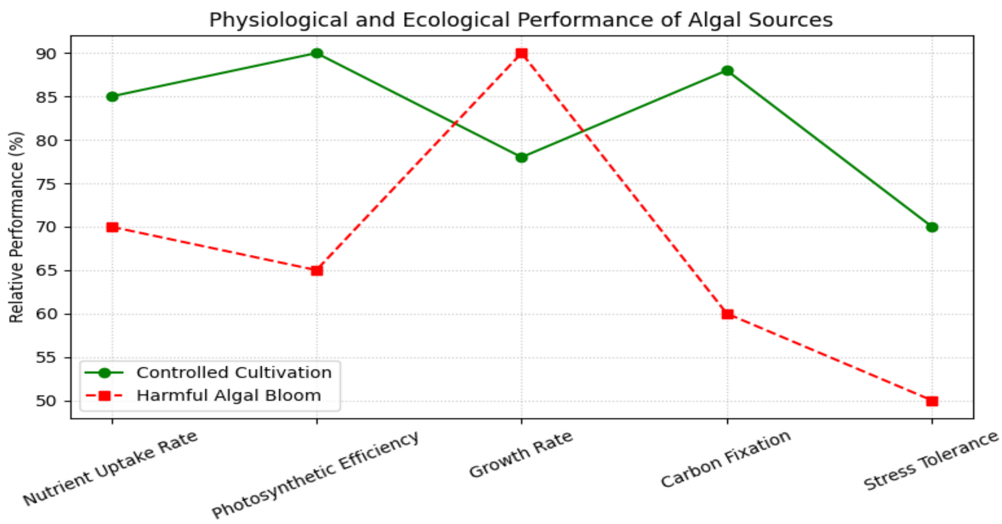

Figure 2: Physiological and ecological performance of algal sources.

The comparison of the rate of nutrient uptake, photosynthetic efficiency, growth rate, carbon fixation, and toleration to stress in controlled cultivation and harmful algal bloom (HABs) is shown in Figure 2. It notes that despite the fact that HABs have the ability to increase the rate of growth, the control systems are more efficient in photosynthetic, nutrient regulation, and stress tolerance, which are vital in the production of biofuels sustainably.

Overall Discussion

These results have revealed that there exists a very large disparity between the biofuel potential of controlled algal systems and the environmental hazard of the harmful algal blooms. Despite the high biomass production of HABs, they contain lower lipid levels, and the production of biodiesel and low oxygen consumption and toxins decreases their viability regarding sustainable energy production. Limited production is the best path towards the production of biofuels with a predictable biomass structure and environmental uniformity. The implementation of the HABs may remain even within the particular management systems, but the control of the toxins, the control of the oxygen, and the ecological risk assessment is required. Overall, the findings can be correlated with the key concept of the article: despite notable potential in the algal boom as a potential source of biofuels, it is characterized by a complex of environmental trade-offs, which must be considered in particular.

Conclusion

The production of sustainable biofuels is challenged and presented with immense opportunities by the algal blooms. This paper has revealed that controlled algal cultivation is superior in lipid content, high output of biodiesel, and stability in the environmental situation, which qualifies it to be a certain pathway in the generation of renewable energies. On the other hand, harmful algal blooms (HABs) contain a lot of biomass, but are limited by a low lipid content, oxygen consumption, and toxins, indicating their ecological risks and a declining usability in biofuel. It is also shown in the physiological and ecological performance analysis that the controlled systems are superior in terms of nutrient management, photosynthetic efficiency, and stress resilience, which are the most crucial factors in sustainable energy production. Such conclusions demonstrate the trade-offs between biofuel production and environmental preservation, which implies that, although HABs may be treated as a supplemental biomass, it is important to monitor and control the impacts of HABs on the environment as well as ensure the quality of biofuels. The optimization of controlled growth through enhanced reactor designs and nutrient recycling, development of safe harvesting and conversion techniques of HABs, assessment of life cycle and techno-economic analyses, combined ecological system, and genetic or metabolic engineering in order to enhance the lipid content at the expense of toxin production should be the direction of future studies. Such efforts will offset the potential of biofuels and the sustainability of the ecosystems, such that the algal blooms can be utilized as a renewable energy source in a responsible way.

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