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# The Role of Microbial Carbon Fixation in Atmospheric $CO_2$ Mitigation

**Rashmi Singh[1], Prabhat Kumar Singh[1], Omkar Singh*[2] and Shivangi[3]**

*[1]KVK Sonbhadhra, ANDUA&T, Ayodhya, U.P., India*
*[2]Department of Soil Science, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut, U.P., India-250110, India*
*[3]KVK Bijnor, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut-250110, India*

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Corresponding Author: **Omkar Singh**
E-Mail: **singhomkar.agri@gmail.com**



**ABSTRACT**

*Microbial carbon fixation plays a crucial role in mitigating atmospheric $CO_2$ levels by acting as a natural sink for carbon through diverse biochemical pathways such as the Calvin-Benson-Bassham cycle, the reductive TCA cycle, and the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway. These microbes, including cyanobacteria, chemoautotrophs, and certain archaea, utilize atmospheric $CO_2$ as a carbon source, converting it into organic compounds that sustain both microbial biomass and broader ecological food webs. Unlike terrestrial plants, many autotrophic microbes thrive in extreme environments such as oceans, hot springs, and deep-sea hydrothermal vents, vastly expanding the potential zones of $CO_2$ sequestration. Furthermore, microbial communities in oceanic photic zones contribute significantly to the global carbon cycle through photosynthetic carbon fixation, with marine cyanobacteria like Prochlorococcus and Synechococcus estimated to be responsible for a substantial fraction of global primary production. Advances in synthetic biology and bioengineering are now focusing on enhancing microbial carbon fixation rates for applications in carbon capture technologies and sustainable bioenergy production, positioning these microorganisms as vital tools in combating climate change and stabilizing atmospheric carbon levels.*

**Keywords:** *Microbial carbon fixation, atmospheric $CO_2$ mitigation, autotrophic microorganisms, carbon sequestration, synthetic biology.*

## Introduction

The rising concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide ($CO_2$), primarily due to anthropogenic activities such as fossil fuel combustion, industrial processes, and deforestation, is one of the most pressing environmental challenges of the modern era. Elevated $CO_2$ levels are a major driver of global climate change, contributing to greenhouse gas accumulation and subsequent global warming. While various strategies like afforestation, carbon capture technologies, and renewable energy adoption have been employed to mitigate this issue, nature's intrinsic carbon-fixing mechanisms offer some of the most sustainable solutions [1]. Among these, microbial carbon fixation has garnered significant attention for its potential role in mitigating $CO_2$ emissions on both local and global scales.

Microbial carbon fixation refers to the ability of certain microorganisms to convert inorganic carbon, primarily $CO_2$, into organic matter using various biochemical pathways. This process is predominantly carried out by autotrophic microbes such as cyanobacteria, algae, chemolithoautotrophs, and some archaea. Unlike plants, which rely solely on photosynthesis, microbes employ a diverse range of metabolic pathways, including the Calvin-Benson-Bassham (CBB) cycle, reductive tricarboxylic acid (rTCA) cycle, the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway, and the 3-hydroxypropionate cycle, enabling them to thrive in a variety of environments, from sunlit waters to dark, anaerobic sediments [2]. This metabolic flexibility underscores their ecological importance and potential utility in carbon mitigation efforts.

Cyanobacteria, often termed the "engines of the biosphere," are among the most significant contributors to biological carbon fixation, especially in aquatic ecosystems. These photosynthetic microorganisms perform oxygenic photosynthesis, playing a critical role in sequestering atmospheric $CO_2$ while releasing oxygen as a byproduct [3]. Their presence in marine environments, particularly in nutrient-rich upwelling zones and oligotrophic waters, makes them central players in the global carbon cycle. The genus *Prochlorococcus*, for example, is recognized as one of the most abundant photosynthetic organisms on Earth, with significant implications for carbon dynamics in oceanic systems.

Beyond cyanobacteria, a range of chemoautotrophic bacteria and archaea contribute to $CO_2$ fixation in diverse and often extreme habitats. These organisms derive energy from inorganic compounds such as hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, or ferrous iron, allowing them to fix carbon even in environments devoid of sunlight, such as hydrothermal vents, deep-sea sediments, and sulfur springs [4]. Their ability to operate in such conditions extends the potential for carbon sequestration beyond the traditional confines of photosynthetically active zones. These microbes not only form the base of unique ecological food chains but also represent a biological avenue for carbon mitigation in environments inaccessible to plants and algae.

Recent advances in synthetic biology and genetic engineering have opened new horizons in enhancing microbial carbon fixation efficiency. Researchers are now manipulating metabolic pathways in model organisms to increase $CO_2$ uptake rates, improve biomass yields, and create engineered strains capable of withstanding environmental stresses. Such innovations hold promise for the development of bio-based carbon capture systems, bioreactors, and even large-scale applications in industrial settings. The integration of microbial carbon fixation with bioenergy production and bioproduct synthesis further underscores its relevance in the context of sustainable development and circular bioeconomy, microbial carbon fixation stands at the intersection of natural ecological processes and emerging biotechnological solutions for atmospheric $CO_2$ mitigation [5]. Its role extends beyond mere carbon capture, influencing global biogeochemical cycles, supporting diverse ecosystems, and providing a foundation for innovative approaches to climate change management. By harnessing and enhancing these microbial processes, humanity can leverage a naturally occurring solution to address one of the most critical environmental challenges of our time.

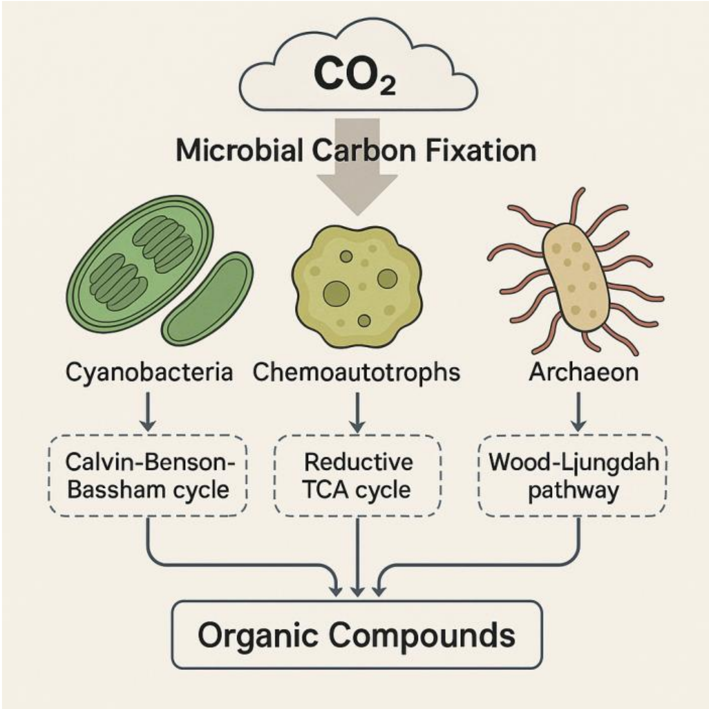


*Fig 1: This figure illustrates microbial carbon fixation pathways such as the Calvin-Benson-Bassham cycle in cyanobacteria, the reductive TCA cycle in chemoautotrophs, and the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway in archaea. These processes convert $CO_2$ into organic compounds, supporting ecosystems and contributing to natural carbon sequestration across diverse environments.*

*Table 1: Major Microbial Carbon Fixation Pathways and Their Key Organisms*

| Pathway | Key Microorganisms | Environment | Energy Source | Main Product |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Calvin-Benson-Bassham Cycle | Cyanobacteria, Algae | Oceans, freshwater | Light (Photosynthesis) | Organic Biomass |
| Reductive TCA Cycle | Sulfur bacteria, Aquifex | Deep-sea vents, hot springs | Chemical compounds (Sulfur, Hydrogen) | Organic Acids |
| Wood-Ljungdahl Pathway | Methanogens, Acetogens | Anaerobic sediments, soils | $H_2$, $CO_2$ | Acetate, Methane |
| 3-Hydroxypropionate Cycle | Chloroflexi, Archaea | Hot springs, saline lakes | Light, Chemical energy | Biomass Intermediates |

*Table 2: Comparison of Microbial Carbon Fixation with Plant Carbon Fixation*

| Feature | Microbial Carbon Fixation | Plant Carbon Fixation |
|---|---|---|
| Primary Pathways | Multiple (CBB, rTCA, WL) | Calvin-Benson Cycle |
| Habitats | Diverse (land, water, extreme) | Terrestrial, aquatic |
| Energy Source | Light, chemical compounds | Light (photosynthesis) |
| Oxygen Requirement | Both aerobic and anaerobic | Mostly aerobic (oxygenic) |
| Ecological Role | Base of microbial food webs | Base of plant-based ecosystems |

*Table 3: Applications of Microbial Carbon Fixation in Biotechnology*

| Application | Microbial Group | Purpose | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Biofuel Production | Cyanobacteria, Algae | Bioethanol, Biodiesel | Algal Biofuel |
| Bioplastics Synthesis | Cyanobacteria | Biodegradable Plastics | PHB Production |
| Carbon Capture Bioreactors | Engineered Autotrophs | Industrial $CO_2$ Mitigation | Synthetic Cyanobacteria |
| Methane Production | Methanogenic Archaea | Bioenergy (Biogas) | Anaerobic Digesters |

*Table 4: Global Contribution of Microbial Groups to Carbon Fixation*

| Microbial Group | Estimated Global Carbon Fixation (%) | Main Habitat |
|---|---|---|
| Cyanobacteria | ~25% | Oceans, freshwater |
| Chemoautotrophs | ~5% | Deep-sea, hydrothermal vents |
| Algae (Microalgae) | ~30% | Marine, freshwater bodies |
| Archaea | ~3% | Anaerobic environments |

## Atmospheric $CO_2$ Accumulation and Climate Change

The unprecedented rise in atmospheric $CO_2$ due to industrialization has significantly intensified the greenhouse effect, leading to global climate change. This rise contributes to global temperature increases, altered weather patterns, glacial melting, and sea-level rise, posing a severe threat to ecosystems and human societies alike [5]. Anthropogenic activities, particularly fossil fuel burning, deforestation, and large-scale agriculture, are primary contributors to this surge in atmospheric carbon. As a response to this environmental crisis, various carbon mitigation strategies are being explored. Among them, nature-based solutions, such as enhancing biological carbon sinks, have gained significant attention. Understanding how carbon is naturally cycled and stored, particularly through microbial activity, offers a promising avenue for sustainable climate change mitigation strategies beyond technological interventions.

## The Concept of Microbial Carbon Fixation

Microbial carbon fixation refers to the conversion of inorganic carbon ($CO_2$) into organic compounds by microorganisms. This process forms the basis of primary production in many ecosystems, especially those devoid of higher plants. Unlike heterotrophic organisms that rely on organic carbon for growth, autotrophic microbes utilize $CO_2$ as their sole carbon source, driving critical ecological functions [7]. These microorganisms employ distinct biochemical pathways tailored to their ecological niches. Some use sunlight for photosynthesis, while others rely on chemical energy from inorganic compounds in chemosynthesis. This metabolic versatility allows microbial carbon fixation to occur in diverse environments, from surface waters to deep-sea vents, playing a central role in the global carbon cycle.

**Photosynthetic Microorganisms: Cyanobacteria and Algae**

Cyanobacteria, often called "blue-green algae," are among the oldest life forms responsible for oxygenic photosynthesis and significant carbon sequestration. They inhabit a wide range of environments, including oceans, lakes, rivers, and even soil surfaces. Cyanobacteria utilize the Calvin-Benson-Bassham (CBB) cycle to fix atmospheric $CO_2$ into organic matter, serving as a primary producer in many aquatic food webs [8]. Microalgae, similarly, contribute extensively to marine and freshwater carbon fixation. These organisms not only help in maintaining oxygen levels but also support complex aquatic ecosystems. Through their vast distribution and efficient photosynthetic capabilities, cyanobacteria and algae form a biological carbon sink critical to regulating atmospheric $CO_2$ concentrations.

**Chemolithoautotrophs and Their Ecological Role**

Chemolithoautotrophic microorganisms derive energy by oxidizing inorganic substances like hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, and ferrous iron, enabling them to fix $CO_2$ in environments lacking sunlight. These microbes are often found in unique and extreme habitats such as deep-sea hydrothermal vents, acidic mine drainages, and subsurface lithoautotrophic ecosystems [9]. Their ability to thrive under harsh conditions extends the reach of biological carbon fixation to environments where photosynthetic organisms cannot survive. Besides contributing to global carbon cycling, chemolithoautotrophs drive important processes like sulfur and nitrogen cycling, demonstrating their multifunctional ecological roles.

**Archaea and Anaerobic Carbon Fixation**

Certain archaeal species fix carbon using the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway, an ancient metabolic route operating under anaerobic conditions. These organisms are prevalent in anoxic environments such as wetlands, sediments, and the gastrointestinal tracts of animals. Their activity not only supports microbial ecosystems but also influences methane production, a potent greenhouse gas. Despite their indirect role in increasing methane emissions, archaeal carbon fixation contributes significantly to carbon turnover in anaerobic ecosystems [10]. Understanding and possibly harnessing their metabolic pathways could offer ways to balance carbon capture with greenhouse gas management strategies.

**Biochemical Pathways of Microbial Carbon Fixation**

Microbial carbon fixation occurs through several distinct biochemical pathways, each with unique enzymes and regulatory mechanisms. The most well-known is the Calvin-Benson-Bassham cycle, predominantly used by cyanobacteria and algae. Other pathways include the reductive TCA cycle, the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway, and the 3-hydroxypropionate cycle, each suited for specific environmental conditions [11]. These pathways demonstrate the biochemical diversity of life and underscore the adaptability of microbial metabolism. The study of these pathways also provides critical insights for biotechnology, particularly in designing synthetic systems for enhanced carbon capture and sustainable industrial applications [12].

**Marine Microbial Carbon Sequestration**

The oceans act as a massive carbon sink, largely due to the activity of marine microorganisms like cyanobacteria and microalgae [13]. These organisms form the base of the marine food web and drive the biological pump that transports fixed carbon from the surface to the deep ocean. This process effectively removes $CO_2$ from the atmosphere for extended periods. Marine microbial carbon fixation is crucial in maintaining the balance of global carbon cycles. With oceanic primary production accounting for nearly half of the Earth's total biological carbon fixation, protecting marine microbial ecosystems is essential for long-term climate stability and carbon sequestration efforts.

**Soil Microbial Communities and Carbon Dynamics**

Soil ecosystems are another significant site for microbial carbon fixation. Autotrophic bacteria in soils contribute to carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, and soil fertility [14]. They interact with other soil organisms, influencing the decomposition of organic matter and stabilization of carbon within the soil matrix [15]. These microbial processes play a key role in the carbon balance of terrestrial ecosystems. Enhancing soil microbial carbon fixation through sustainable agricultural practices can improve soil health while acting as a natural climate mitigation strategy, promoting carbon storage in terrestrial environments.

**Symbiotic Relationships in Carbon Fixation**

Many autotrophic microorganisms engage in symbiotic relationships with plants, animals, or other microbes, enhancing their carbon fixation capabilities [16[. For instance, cyanobacteria form mutualistic associations with certain plants and fungi, contributing to nitrogen and carbon fixation simultaneously. These symbioses not only support the host organisms but also have broader ecological impacts. They enhance nutrient availability, promote ecosystem resilience, and contribute to carbon cycling in various habitats, emphasizing the interconnectedness of life systems and their role in atmospheric $CO_2$ regulation.

**Technological Advances in Harnessing Microbial Carbon Fixation**

Recent advancements in synthetic biology have enabled scientists to engineer microbes with enhanced carbon fixation abilities. Techniques like metabolic engineering, CRISPR gene editing, and pathway optimization are being used to increase the efficiency and stability of $CO_2$ fixation in laboratory strains. These bioengineered organisms are envisioned for applications in carbon capture bioreactors, biofuel production, and sustainable agriculture [17]. The integration of such technologies offers promising avenues for reducing atmospheric $CO_2$ levels and promoting sustainable industrial processes with reduced carbon footprints.

**Microbial Carbon Fixation in Extreme Environments**

Extreme environments, such as deep-sea vents, polar regions, and hypersaline lakes, host specialized microbes capable of carbon fixation under harsh conditions. These extremophiles utilize unique metabolic pathways adapted to high pressure, temperature, salinity, or pH. Studying these organisms not only expands our understanding of life's resilience but also provides novel enzymes and biochemical pathways for biotechnological applications [18]. Their ability to fix carbon in such environments opens new possibilities for $CO_2$ mitigation strategies in conditions unsuitable for conventional biological systems.

**Contribution of Microbial Carbon Fixation to Global Biogeochemical Cycles**

Microbial carbon fixation is intricately linked with global biogeochemical cycles, including nitrogen, sulfur, and phosphorus cycles. The fixation of carbon by microbes often coincides with the cycling of other essential nutrients, supporting ecosystem functions and stability [19]. This interconnectedness highlights the importance of microbial activity in maintaining environmental balance. By influencing nutrient availability and energy flow, microbial carbon fixation plays a pivotal role in sustaining life on Earth and regulating atmospheric compositions.

**Industrial Applications of Microbial Carbon Fixation**

Industries are exploring the use of carbon-fixing microbes in biofuel production, bioplastics, and bioremediation. These applications aim to harness the natural carbon-sequestering abilities of microbes for sustainable production processes [20]. Using microbial systems for industrial purposes can reduce dependency on fossil fuels and lower greenhouse gas emissions. Innovations in microbial biotechnology thus offer dual benefits: reducing atmospheric $CO_2$ while creating valuable products such as fuels, chemicals, and materials in an eco-friendly manner.

**Microbial Carbon Fixation in Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies**

Microbial-based carbon capture systems are being designed to enhance traditional CCS technologies. These biotechnological applications use engineered microbes in bioreactors to fix $CO_2$ from industrial emissions, converting it into useful biomass or bio-based products.

Such systems offer potential advantages over conventional CCS, including lower energy requirements, reduced environmental impact, and added economic value through biomass utilization. Continued research in this field could revolutionize carbon capture strategies, making them more viable and sustainable in the long term [21].

**Future Prospects and Challenges in Microbial Carbon Fixation Research**

The future of microbial carbon fixation research holds immense promise, particularly in the realms of climate change mitigation and sustainable biotechnology. Exploring new microbial species, optimizing carbon fixation pathways, and integrating microbial systems into industrial processes are key research frontiers. However, several challenges remain, including scalability, ecological impacts, and regulatory concerns surrounding genetically modified organisms. Addressing these challenges through interdisciplinary research, policy support, and public engagement will be essential for realizing the full potential of microbial carbon fixation as a tool for environmental sustainability.

**Conclusion**

Microbial carbon fixation stands as a critical natural mechanism for reducing atmospheric $CO_2$ levels, offering a sustainable and biologically integrated approach to climate change mitigation. Unlike terrestrial plants, carbon-fixing microbes operate in a diverse range of environments, from the photic zones of oceans to the anoxic depths of sediments and hydrothermal vents. Through various biochemical pathways such as the Calvin-Benson-Bassham cycle, reductive TCA cycle, and the Wood-Ljungdahl pathway, these microorganisms convert inorganic carbon into organic matter, thereby supporting both their growth and the ecological systems they inhabit. This biological process is not only essential for maintaining the balance of global carbon cycles but also serves as a foundation for potential biotechnological innovations aimed at enhancing carbon sequestration and reducing greenhouse gas concentrations.

The growing interest in leveraging microbial carbon fixation for industrial applications stems from advances in synthetic biology and metabolic engineering, which have opened avenues for creating high-efficiency, carbon-fixing bioengineered strains. These developments hold promise for the design of bioreactors, carbon-neutral biofuel production systems, and bio-based manufacturing processes that could integrate seamlessly with existing carbon capture and storage technologies. However, harnessing microbial carbon fixation at a meaningful industrial scale requires addressing scientific, environmental, and regulatory challenges. Ensuring ecological balance, preventing potential biotechnological risks, and optimizing microbial efficiency in diverse environmental conditions are essential for the responsible and effective deployment of microbial carbon capture strategies, microbial carbon fixation exemplifies nature's inherent capacity to regulate atmospheric processes and sustain life on Earth. By deepening our understanding of microbial metabolic pathways and ecological interactions, researchers can develop innovative solutions to combat the pressing issue of climate change. The fusion of natural microbial processes with technological advancements offers a promising pathway toward sustainable environmental management, fostering a future where biological systems play a central role in global efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of anthropogenic carbon emissions. As research and innovation in this field continue to evolve, microbial carbon fixation may well become a cornerstone of global carbon management strategies.

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