

# Oxygen Dynamics in Algal Based Wastewater Treatment Systems

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## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Richard 

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# Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii

## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Aims of the study

1.0 Introduction.....	1
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## Chapter 2

### Literature review (Part 1)

2.1 Introduction.....	5
2.2 Wastewater treatment and Disposal.....	5
2.3 Bolivar WWTP and Wastewater Reuse in South Australia.....	8
2.4 Biological Processes in Ponds.....	11
2.5 Photosynthesis in Algal Based Wastewater treatment Systems...	13
2.6 Dissolved Inorganic and Organic Carbon.....	16
2.7 Productivity in Algal Pond Systems.....	20
Quotients of Production.....	21
Mixing and Productivity.....	24
Measuring Productivity.....	25

## Chapter 3

### Literature review (Part 2)

3.1 Introduction.....	28
3.2 Complexity in Ecological Systems and Models of Photosynthesis .....	29
Algal Fluorescence.....	32
Oxygen Dynamics in Natural and Laboratory Based Systems.....	32
Photoinhibition, Pmax and Alpha.....	36
The Primary Productivity Algorithm Round Robin (PPARR) .....	40

3.3	Conclusions and Purpose.....	43
-----	------------------------------	----

## Chapter 4 Materials and Methods

4.1	HRAP Bioreactor.....	45
	Physical Characterisation	
	Re-aeration.....	49
	Light Source.....	49
	Photon Flux Density.....	50
	Light Attenuation.....	50
	Wet Chemistry	
	Chlorophyll_a.....	51
	Suspended and Volatile Suspended Solids.....	51
	Carbon.....	51
	Chemical Oxygen Demand.....	51
	Biochemical Oxygen Demand.....	52
	Bacterial Protein.....	52
	Online Data	
	Dissolved Oxygen.....	52
	pH.....	53
	Temperature.....	53
	Standard Photosynthesis-Irradiance Determinations .....	53
	Experimental Treatments and Data Collection.....	53

4.2	Murray Bridge HRAP.....	54
4.3	Bolivar WSP.....	54
	System Characterisation.....	54
	Sampling and Experimental Design.....	54
	Online Monitoring Stations.....	55
	Weather Station.....	55
	Thermistor Network.....	56
	Sampling and Downloading Schedule.....	56
	Wet Chemistry.....	56
	Incident and Transmitted Light.....	57
	Data Collation and Analysis.....	57

## Chapter 5

### HRAP Bioreactor

	Purpose.....	59
5.1	Introduction.....	59
5.2	Materials and Methods.....	63
5.2.1	Experimental Design.....	63
	Treatment 1.....	65
	Treatment 2.....	65
	Treatment 3.....	65
	Chlorophyll_a.....	65
	Dissolved Oxygen.....	65

	Light Attenuation.....	65
	Temperature.....	65
	Carbon.....	66
	Bacterial Protein.....	66
	Steady State Conditions .....	66
	Photoperiod .....	66
5.3	Results and Discussion.....	66
5.3.1	Measures of Pond Performance.....	66
	Dissolved Oxygen .....	67
	Algal Biomass.....	70
	Suspended and Volatile Suspended Solids.....	70
	Bacterial Protein .....	73
	Inorganic Carbon.....	74
	Light Attenuation.....	74
5.3.2	Online Data and PI Determinations.....	78
	Dissolved Oxygen.....	78
	Temperature Variation.....	79
	Oxygen Utilisation Rates.....	81
	Gross and Net Photosynthetic Rates.....	84
	Comparison of Standard and Online Photosynthesis-Irradiance Metrics .....	91
5.4	Conclusions.....	96

# Chapter 6

## Oxygen and Temperature Dynamics Bolivar WSP 1

	Purpose.....	98
6.1	Introduction.....	99
6.2	Materials and Methods.....	102
6.2.1.	Sampling and Experimental Design.....	102
	Sampling and Downloading Schedule.....	104
	Wet Chemistry.....	105
	Light Attenuation.....	105
	Online PAR.....	105
	Pond Dissolved Oxygen Dynamics.....	105
	Surface Plots.....	106
	Sampling Periods.....	106
6.3.	Results and Discussion.....	107
6.3.1.	Standard Measures of Pond Performance.....	107
	Biomass.....	109
	Inorganic Carbon.....	111
	Light Attenuation.....	111
6.3.2.	Factors Associated with Patterns of Change in Pond Temperature and Thermal Stratification.....	114
	February 2005 Thermal Gradient Surface Plots.....	122
	May 2005 Thermal Gradient Surface Plots.....	126
	Thermal Gradient Discussion.....	129
	Conclusions.....	134



6.3.3. Factors Associated with Patterns of Change in Dissolved Oxygen Concentration.....	138
Grab Samples.....	138
Online DO and Temperature.....	139
February 2005 Dissolved Oxygen and Temperature Surface Plots .....	143
May 2005 Dissolved Oxygen and Temperature Surface Plots.....	147
Factors Determining Dissolved Oxygen and Temperature Variation .....	150
Conclusions and Implications for Wastewater Treatment .....	156
6.3.4. Rates of Photosynthesis.....	160
Comparison of Gross and Net Photosynthetic Rates .....	170
6.4. Conclusions.....	180

## Chapter 7 Discussion

7.1. Introduction.....	182
7.2. Laboratory Based Validation Study.....	183
7.2.1. Laboratory Based System Operation.....	183
7.3. Bolivar WSP.....	186
7.4. Further Studies.....	199

## Appendices

A	Macros and Scripts used for Preparation of Surface Plots.....	200
B	Electronic Files.....	218
C	Factor Analysis Output Files.....	219
References.....		247

## List of Tables

Table 4.1	HRAP Bioreactor specifications.....	47
Table 5.1	Summary Data HRAP.....	68
Table 5.1	Summary Data HRAP Wastewater Quality and Biomass Parameters .....	69
Table 5.3	Pre-Dawn Oxygen Utilisation Rates.....	84
Table 5.4	Pre-Dawn Oxygen Utilisation Rates.....	84
Table 5.5	Summary Statistics for Standard PI Apparatus.....	95
Table 6.1	Summary Data WSP February 2005.....	108
Table 6.2	Summary Data WSP May 2005.....	108
Table 6.3	Summary Online Data WSP February 2005.....	118
Table 6.4	Summary Online Data WSP May 2005.....	119
Table 6.5	Pre-Dawn Average Oxygen Utilisation Rate .....	169
Table 6.6	Pre-Dawn Average Oxygen Utilisation Rate Normalised to Unit Chlorophyll <sub>a</sub> .....	170
Table 6.7	Post-Dawn Average Gross Photosynthetic Rate .....	172
Table 6.8	Post-Dawn Average Gross Photosynthetic Rate Normalised to Unit Chlorophyll <sub>a</sub> .....	172
Table 6.9	Post-Dawn Average Net Photosynthetic Rate.....	174
Table 6.10	Post-Dawn Average Net Photosynthetic Rate Normalised to Unit Chlorophyll <sub>a</sub> .....	174
Table 7.1	Literature MBP Observations.....	197
Table 7.2	Literature MBP Gross Primary Productivity Observations .....	197
Table 7.3	Summary OUR, GPR, Pnet.....	198
Table 7.4	Summary Biomass Normalised Photosynthetic Rates.....	198

# List of Figures

Figure 2.1	The Cycle of Oxygen and Algal Production .....	12
Figure 3.1	Reproduction of figure from the paper of Emmerson and Green (1934), showing the oxygen production rate of the alga <i>Gigartina</i> as a function of light intensity.....	31
Figure 3.2	Representative PI trace showing photosynthetic O <sub>2</sub> evolution at increasing levels of irradiance (adapted from Dubinsky et al. 1987).....	35
Figure 3.3	Hypothetical photosynthesis-irradiance plots (adapted from Reynolds 2006).....	36
Figure 3.4	Factor Analysis of subset of the ClimPP data set.....	42
Figure 4.1	HRAP Bioreactor (Plan View).....	45
Figure 4.2	HRAP Bioreactor (Side View).....	45
Figure 4.3	Emission spectra of Osram HQI 400W/D metal halide lamp .....	50
Figure 4.4	WSP Plan Showing Sampling Locations.....	58
Figure 5.1	Box and Whisker Plots of Dissolved Oxygen for each Experimental Treatment .....	72
Figure 5.2	Box and Whisker Plots of Chlorophyll <sub>a</sub> Concentration for each Experimental Treatment.....	72
Figure 5.3	Box and Whisker Plots of Suspended Solids Concentration for each Experimental Treatment.....	73
Figure 5.4	Box and Whisker Plots of Protein Concentration for each Experimental Treatment.....	75
Figure 5.5	Box and Whisker Plots of Inorganic Carbon Concentration for each Experimental Treatment.....	77
Figure 5.6	Scatter-Plots of Average temperature and Dissolved Oxygen Treatment 1.....	80
Figure 5.7	Scatter-Plots of Average temperature and Dissolved Oxygen Treatment 2.....	81

Figure 5.8	Scatter-Plots of Average temperature and Dissolved Oxygen Treatment 3.....	81
Figure 5.9	Murray bridge HRAP Representative Online Data .....	85
Figure 5.10	Murray bridge HRAP Net Photosynthetic rate .....	86
Figure 5.11	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate Treatment 1.....	88
Figure 5.12	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate Treatment 2.....	89
Figure 5.13	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate Treatment 3.....	91
Figure 5.14	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate (Standard PI and Online P, Treatment 1.....	93
Figure 5.15	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate (Standard PI and Online P, Treatment 2.....	94
Figure 5.16	Scatter-plot of Net Photosynthetic Rate (Standard PI and Online P, Treatment 3.....	95
Figure 6.1	WSP Plan Showing Sampling Locations.....	104
Figure 6.2	Scatter Plot of Representative Data of PAR versus Depth for NW (location I) February 2005.....	113
Figure 6.3	Scatter Plot of Representative Data of PAR versus Depth for NW (location I) May 2005.....	114
Figure 6.4	Box and Whisker plots of Pond Temperature for each Sampling Location Depth of 25cm, February and May 2005.....	120
Figure 6.5	Box and Whisker plots of Pond Temperature for each Sampling Location Depth of 25, 50, 75cm, February 2005.....	120
Figure 6.6	Box and Whisker plots of Pond Temperature for each Sampling Location Depth of 25, 50, 75cm, May 2005.....	121
Figure 6.7	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Midnight</u> February 2005 .....	124
Figure 6.8	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Dawn</u> February 2005.....	124
Figure 6.9	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Mid-day</u> February 2005.....	125
Figure 6.10	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Sunset</u> February 2005.....	125

Figure 6.11	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Midnight</u> May 2005 .....	127
Figure 6.12	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Dawn</u> May 2005.....	128
Figure 6.13	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Mid-day</u> May 2005.....	128
Figure 6.14	Surface Plot of Thermal Gradient, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity; average of 10 days data for <u>Sunset</u> May 2005.....	129
Figure 6.15	Factor Analysis of Thermal Stratification February 2005.....	132
Figure 6.16	Factor Analysis of Thermal Stratification May 2005.....	133
Figure 6.17	Box and Whisker Plots of Dissolved Oxygen for each Location February and May 2005.....	140
Figure 6.18	Box and Whisker Plots of Dissolved Oxygen for each Location February 2005.....	141
Figure 6.19	Box and Whisker Plots of Dissolved Oxygen for each Location May 2005.....	142
Figure 6.20	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Midnight</u> February 2005.....	144
Figure 6.21	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Dawn</u> February 2005.....	144
Figure 6.22	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Mid-day</u> February 2005.....	145
Figure 6.23	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Sunset</u> February 2005.....	145
Figure 6.24	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Midnight</u> May 2005.....	148
Figure 6.25	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Dawn</u> May 2005.....	149
Figure 6.26	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Mid-day</u> May 2005.....	149
Figure 6.27	Surface Plot of DO, Temperature, Rose Plot of Wind Velocity, PAR; 'average day' data for <u>Sunset</u> May 2005.....	149

Figure 6.28	Factor Analysis of DO, PAR, Wind Velocity February 2005.....	152
Figure 6.29	Factor Analysis of DO, PAR, Wind Velocity May 2005.....	152
Figure 6.30	Factor Analysis of DO and Stratification Status February 2005.....	155
Figure 6.31	Factor Analysis of DO and Stratification Status May 2005.....	155
Figure 6.32	Scatter Plot of representative DO and Temperature Data February 2005.....	161
Figure 6.33	Scatter Plot of representative DO and Temperature Data May 2005.....	161
Figure 6.34	Box and Whisker Plots of Gross Dissolved Oxygen Production February 2005.....	163
Figure 6.35	Box and Whisker Plots of Gross Dissolved Oxygen Production May 2005.....	163
Figure 6.36	Box and Whisker Plots of Gross Dissolved Oxygen Production per Unit Biomass May 2005.....	164
Figure 6.37	Scatter Plot of Rate of Change in DO Concentration Pre-Dawn February 2005.....	165
Figure 6.38	Scatter Plot of Rate of Change in DO Concentration Post-Dawn February 2005.....	165
Figure 6.39	Scatter Plot of OUR/hour for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	167
Figure 6.40	Scatter Plot of OUR/hour/mgChl_a for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	168
Figure 6.41	Scatter Plot of GPR/hour for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	173
Figure 6.42	Scatter Plot of GPR/hour/Chl_a for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	173
Figure 6.43	Scatter Plot of Pnet/hour for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	175
Figure 6.44	Scatter Plot of Pnet/hour/Chl_a for all Sampling Locations February and May 2005.....	175

Figure 6.45	Equation Describing Total Water-Column Light Utilisation Index ( $\psi$ ).	177
Figure 6.46	Phi for all Bolivar Sampling Locations and Bioreactor Treatments 1 and 3.	179
Figure 6.47	Phi for Bolivar Sampling Locations, Murray Bridge HRAP and Bioreactor Treatments 2.	179



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Wastewater derived from domestic or industrial sources can contain a diverse range of dissolved and suspended chemical and/or biological contaminants (e.g. nutrients, heavy metals, pharmaceuticals, pathogens) and can present a serious risk to human health or ecosystems if not disposed of appropriately (Metcalf and Eddy 2004).

Such effluent if disposed of without appropriate treatment can cause illness to those who have primary or secondary contact with it. In an effort to protect human health, treated and untreated wastewaters from coastal cities worldwide have traditionally been disposed of via ocean and river outfalls. Unfortunately, an unintended side effect of such disposal methods has been the eutrophication (sometimes termed cultural eutrophication) of these receiving waters and ecosystems (Nixon 1995, 1998) in addition to contamination of recreational and groundwater resources.

In Australia as elsewhere such disposal methods have been shown to contribute to the intensity of some toxic algal blooms in receiving waters (Davis and Koop 2000). Similarly there is strong evidence that disposal of treated wastewater and untreated storm-water from the city of Adelaide to the adjacent coastal environments may have contributed to large declines in sea-grass cover in this area (Fox et al. 2007).

Various methods of wastewater treatment (Chapter 2) are employed to remove nutrients, pathogens, heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants; with the treatment type determined by factors such as effectiveness, cost (land, initial and maintenance) disposal and re-use options and community and government expectation.

An effective and commonly used method for treating organic or domestic wastewaters is to detain the effluent stream in large and shallow lined ponds or impoundments for a period of time. Such ponds are typically termed 'waste stabilisation ponds' (WSP) or 'waste stabilisation lagoons' or simply 'ponds' or 'lagoons'. Ponds actively mixed using paddlewheels are typically termed 'high rate algal ponds' (HRAP) or 'high rate oxidation ponds' (HROP). Semantics and basic differences aside, such systems provide a contained environment that allows naturally occurring algae and photosynthetic bacteria to grow profusely in response to light from the sun. The abundant oxygen produced by this photosynthetic activity in a nutrient rich medium provides heterotrophic bacteria with an ideal environment in which to flourish and oxidise organic and inorganic nutrients. Such conditions can also result in dramatic declines in the concentration of viral and bacterial pathogens (Fallowfield et al. 1996, Bolton et al. 2010). Provided that conditions in a pond remain aerobic (an excess of dissolved oxygen in the water) the pond will be largely odour free due to the rapid oxidation of H<sub>2</sub>S and other odour forming compounds by dissolved oxygen. The removal of planktonic biomass (algal, bacterial, fungal matter) via settlement, filtration or both can produce an effluent (after chlorination) of sufficient quality for crop irrigation or other non-potable uses (Chapter 2).

Whilst the systems described above are relatively simple from a construction and engineering perspective, the ecology of such systems is not. Design principles have traditionally relied on 'rules of thumb' based on hard won experience of what works and doesn't in the field to determine functional pond depths, waste loading rates and retention times (Chapter 2).

A lesson from history may show how wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) operators and the community might benefit from improvements in the scientific understanding of ecological processes at work in algal based treatment systems. The Bolivar treatment system Adelaide, Australia was constructed during the mid-sixties in response to increased population size and ultimately removed the need for the disposal of screened raw sewage into the Port River and the Gulf St Vincent. The details of the system itself, including primary and secondary bio-filter components are described in Chapter 2.

Treatment failure was experienced at the Bolivar wastewater treatment lagoon during later part of the 1997 (Sheil 2000); organic content of the waste stabilisation pond influent was increased purposefully due to a managed reduction in the capacity of the primary treatment system until the pond 'mode' changed from aerobic to anaerobic, resulting in serious odour problems for the entire city of Adelaide. Prior to this incident the plant had operated to the satisfaction of the community for a period of over thirty years. It can be argued that this episode provides a useful case study where the wastewater treatment system, designed using 'rule of thumb' based approach with a large margin for error, was 'optimised' for the purposes of efficiency (cost saving) without understanding the consequences of these changes on algal productivity and oxygen production. The sulphurous odour that arose from the lagoons was ultimately suppressed when sufficient dissolved oxygen from algal photosynthesis was available in the ponds for oxidation of sulphides.

Photosynthesis drives treatment processes afforded by heterotrophic bacteria and ensures maintenance of aerobic conditions within pond, a great deal of research has

therefore been undertaken over the decades to better understand the factors that determine the oxygen dynamics, productivity and ecology of algal/bacterial assemblages present in these systems. Such research has also been undertaken in the area of algal biomass production of *Spirulina sp* for example.

The research presented in this thesis was undertaken with the goal of characterising relations between irradiance, algal oxygen dynamics and productivity. Such factors are basic to the cycling of energy in algal-based wastewater treatment systems as well as natural aquatic ecosystems. It is hoped that the findings of this research may contribute towards a greater understanding of the phytoecology of these systems.