



New directions in biological nitrogen removal and recovery from wastewater

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This review summarizes strategies for biological nitrogen removal (BNR) and recovery from wastewater. The most commonly used BNR technology **nitrification/denitrification** is also the most energy intensive, even though there are lower energy options, including **nitritation/denitritation** and more efficient partial nitritation/Anammox; the latter is well demonstrated for side-stream treatment and progressing toward mainstream applications. Nitrogen recovery can be done through cell assimilation with phototrophs, but bottlenecks with solids separation and space requirements limit applications to tertiary treatment. Whereas, microbial electrochemical cells are energy efficient at recovering nitrogen from side streams, but not capable of achieving low effluent levels. The combined strengths of these emerging approaches will improve wastewater nitrogen removal by reducing energy consumption, minimizing effluent nitrogen, and maximizing nitrogen recovery.

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Introduction

Nitrogen is used for the synthesis of proteins, nucleic acids, and other cell constituents, making it one of the most important nutrients in the biosphere [1]. It is, therefore, a large part of fertilizers and foods, which ultimately end up in wastewater. Left untreated, large fluxes of reactive nitrogen to receiving waters leads to a host of environmental problems, including: eutrophication, toxic algae blooms, groundwater contamination, and atmospherically active gases that contribute to global warming [2]. Anthropogenic activity has altered the nitrogen cycle far outside the natural Earth system, and it is important that we mitigate these deleterious effects [3].

The two main strategies for removal of nitrogen from wastewater are to convert it to **dinitrogen gas** or to **concentrate and recover it as fertilizer**. Nitrogen fertilization is indispensable for sustaining agricultural yields, but production of nitrogen fertilizers accounts for 1–2% of global energy consumption [4]. Offsetting this energy consumption by reusing nitrogen from wastewater is desirable; however, the nitrogen content in wastewater often gets diluted making it difficult and energy intensive to recover via physical/chemical processes [5]. The new paradigm in wastewater treatment is resource recovery and energy reduction, and, hence, this review will focus on recent innovations in biological wastewater treatment that enhance nitrogen recovery while also reducing energy costs and production of greenhouse gases.

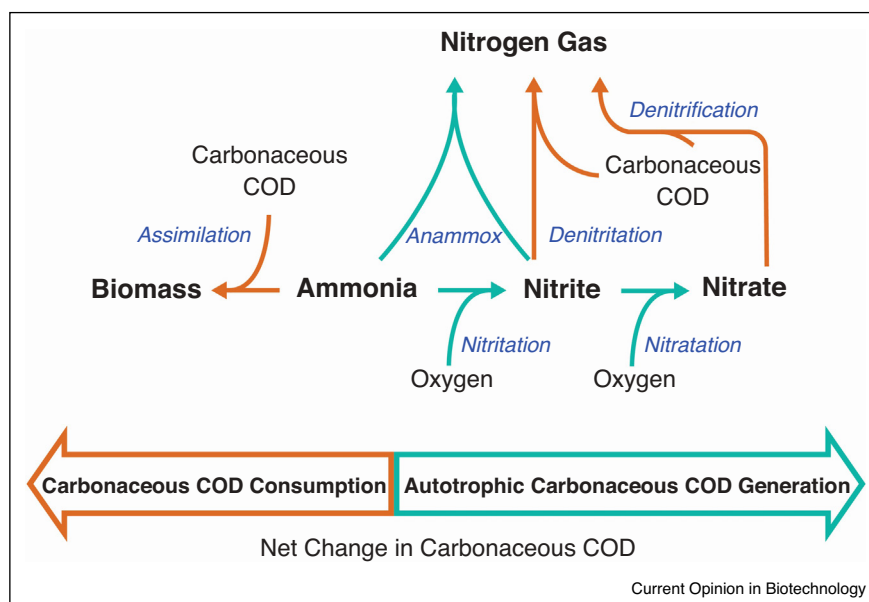
Nitrification/denitrification

Most wastewater nitrogen is present as ammonia (referring to total ammonia, or NH_4^+ and NH_3), and conventional biological nitrogen removal (BNR) is carried out by (i) **aerobic nitrification, where ammonium oxidizing bacteria (AOB) convert ammonia to nitrite (nitritation)** and **nitrite oxidizing bacteria (NOB) convert nitrite to nitrate (nitrification)**, in addition to (ii) **denitrification, where denitrifiers subsequently convert nitrate to dinitrogen gas with organic carbon as an electron donor** [5]. Although effective, both steps produce N_2O (a greenhouse gas). In addition, nitrification requires energy intensive aeration (BNR increases the energy for aeration, pumping, and solids processing by 30–50% [5]), and denitrification requires organic carbon, which could instead be recovered as energy and for wastewaters with low COD/N is a costly addition (\$1.14 per kg residual nitrate removed using methanol) [6,7]. Process optimization with real-time monitoring and control can minimize carbon and oxygen requirements [8,9], **however nitritation coupled with denitritation or anaerobic ammonium oxidation (Anammox) are promising alternatives** (Figure 1).

Nitritation/denitritation

Denitrifiers can use nitrite or nitrate as their electron acceptor, and while full nitrification requires $4.57 \text{ mgO}_2/\text{mgN}$, nitritation only requires $3.43 \text{ mgO}_2/\text{mgN}$, therefore, suppressing nitrification can save 25% of aeration costs. Furthermore, denitritation rates occur 1.5 to 2 times faster than denitrification, the organic carbon requirement is up to 40% less, and the sludge production is theoretically reduced by 33% for nitrification and 55% for denitrification [10]. The key to successful nitritation/denitritation (or

Figure 1



Microbial nitrogen transformations for removing ammonia from wastewater, including: nitrification/denitrification, nitrification/denitrification, partial nitrification/Anammox, and assimilation. Green arrows indicate autotrophic processes, where the nitrogen species is the electron donor and brown arrows indicate the need for a non-nitrogen electron donor (organic carbon, or water for photosynthesis). From left to right roughly indicates the net increase or decrease in total chemical oxygen demand (COD) from organic carbon.

'short-cut' BNR) is enriching AOB while inhibiting NOB. Different strategies have been developed to control NOB while still enriching AOB, including: alternating anoxic and oxic conditions, aggressive SRT control, step feeding, and intermittent aeration [11,12]. Intermittent aeration is widely applied in full-scale treatment plants showing good nitrogen removal and substantial energy savings compared to conventional BNR [13]. NOB activity experiences a time lag following a transition from anoxic to oxic conditions [14], and intermittent aeration also restricts dissolved oxygen (DO), which has proven effective at limiting NOB activity and is in line with literature that reports generally higher oxygen affinity of AOB to NOB [15]. A downside to short-cut BNR is that N_2O production is triggered at low DO, which offsets some of the greenhouse gas savings from less energy consumption [7].

Denitrifying polyphosphate accumulating organisms (dPAO) can simultaneously remove phosphorus and nitrogen [16]. The dPAO are enriched under alternating anaerobic/anoxic conditions, storing organic carbon in the anaerobic phase that is subsequently utilized in the anoxic phase as the electron donor to reduce nitrate or nitrite to dinitrogen gas. Compared to ordinary denitrifiers, this is advantageous to nitrogen removal because dPAO denitrify in the absence of an external electron donor. One way in which dPAO have been implemented at lab, pilot, and full-scale, is through aerobic granular sludge technology [17]. The culture is anaerobically fed

where dPAO release phosphorus and accumulate organic carbon. During aerobic conditions, AOB produce nitrite on the granule periphery, which can diffuse into the oxygen protected core where dPAO denitrify the nitrite and accumulate phosphorus utilizing their stored carbon.

Side-Stream partial nitrification/Anammox

A further energy-saving improvement to nitrification/denitrification is teaming partial nitrification with Anammox (PNA). Anammox bacteria oxidize ammonium directly to dinitrogen gas using nitrite (produced by AOB during nitrification) as the electron acceptor. In current applications, about half of the ammonia is oxidized by AOB to nitrite, and the remaining half is anaerobically oxidized by Anammox. Key advantages of PNA over conventional BNR are: 1) no organic carbon needed; fully autotrophic nitrogen removal, 2) about 60% less energy for aeration, 3) about 75% less sludge production, and 4) lower emissions of CO_2 and potentially N_2O since both gases are not produced in Anammox metabolism [18,19] noting that AOB are reported to produce more N_2O under oxygen limited conditions [7]. More than 200 full-scale wastewater treatment plants successfully use PNA to treat warm ($>25^\circ C$) and ammonium laden (500–1500 mgN/L) anaerobic-digester-centrate-side streams with low COD/N ratios (<1 g COD/g N) [20,21].

The PNA process can be designed as a one or two-stage process. In a two-stage process, half of the ammonia is oxidized to nitrite by AOB and the resulting ammonium

and nitrite rich stream is fed to an **Anammox reactor**. The first stage is a nitrification reactor that exploits the higher growth rate of AOB compared to NOB at higher temperatures present in centrate [21,22]. In the subsequent Anammox reactor, AOB and NOB cannot grow due to absence of oxygen. In **single-stage PNA**, nitrification and Anammox are combined in one reactor and conditions are differentiated with biofilm gradients such as in: moving bed biofilm reactor, granular sludge, and rotating biological contactors [21]. The outer layer of the biofilm harbors AOB that generate nitrite, which can be used by Anammox in the oxygen protected inner layer.

Side stream PNA is a low-energy approach for reducing nitrogen recycled to the front of the treatment plant. However, due to high ammonia (and phosphate) concentrations this side stream is most suited for nitrogen recovery by physical/chemical approaches or microbial electrochemical cells.

Mainstream partial nitrification/Anammox

There is great interest in applying PNA to mainstream treatment because of the successes in side-stream treatment and the dramatic savings in carbon and aeration energy. However, some key differences make mainstream treatment challenging: 1) the COD/N ratio is higher leading to an excess of heterotrophic growth hence out selecting the slower growing Anammox, 2) the ammonia load is much lower; restricting Anammox and AOB growth, 3) the temperatures are lower, which disproportionately favors NOB relative to Anammox and AOB, and 4) effluent ammonia from mainstream needs to be much lower than from side stream [20**]. In theory, there are ways to design around these challenges: 1) carbon can be removed ahead of PNA treatment, 2) excess biomass can be retained with a membrane bioreactor or biofilm/granule system to compensate for lower Anammox activity associated with temperature and ammonia concentration [23], 3) NOB can be suppressed with mechanisms not involving temperature (f low DO, step feeding, and intermittent aeration [12]), and 4) tight process control can be employed for low effluent concentrations [24]. At present, however, successful lab demonstrations of PNA have, compromised on one or more of these challenges [20**].

There are two successful full-scale mainstream Anammox plants in operation: Strass (Austria), and Changi (Singapore). Strass supplements their mainstream sludge with Anammox granules from side-stream treatment, and applies intermittent aeration to control NOB [25**]. They do not report the relative contribution of Anammox to nitrogen removal, but report efficient granule retention in the mainstream [25**]. Alternatively, Changi uses flocculent activated sludge with step feeding and alternating aerobic and anoxic conditions to suppress NOB. Because the plant is located in a tropical environment, the wastewater temperature stays around 30°C and sludge is

enriched with Anammox [26**]. While Anammox activity is demonstrated, they estimate it only accounts for 37.5% of nitrogen removal (denitrification accounts for 27.1%) [27]. These plants are testaments to the potential of mainstream PNA, but are unique situations, and further understanding is needed before widespread adaption is possible.

Recently, organisms capable of complete ammonia oxidation (ammonia to nitrate; comammox) have been discovered [28]. These organisms show an extraordinarily high affinity for ammonia [29], and, therefore, may be problematic in PNA systems if the comammox are producing nitrate. However, early results suggest comammox are not as efficient at nitrite oxidation, and, therefore may simply function as an ammonia oxidizer [29]. Additionally, it has been suggested comammox can perform dissimilatory nitrate reduction to nitrite, which could be beneficial to Anammox systems, but this is speculative [29].

Emerging research strategies for mainstream Anammox include coupling them with either **ammonium oxidizing Archaea (AOA)** or **nitrate-dependent anaerobic methane oxidizing (N-damo) archaea**. AOA oxidize ammonia to nitrite like AOB, but they possess a higher affinity for ammonia and oxygen [30], and, therefore, could be better suited for mainstream PNA with low effluent ammonia. N-damo can reduce nitrate to nitrite with methane as an electron donor, which might offer a more reliable nitrite supply to Anammox than AOB, and eliminates the requirement for NOB suppression [31]. Methane can be utilized from the grid or utilized from a digester. If used from a digester, methane will not be available for energy recovery, but aeration energy will still be lowered compared to conventional BNR if combined with Anammox. Handling and stripping of methane (losing dissolved methane to gas), however, are potential bottlenecks for a successful application [32]. Besides nitrite, Anammox has also been shown to use small organic molecules, sulfate manganese, and iron (III) as electron acceptors for ammonia oxidation [33]. This opens a myriad of alternate metabolisms that could be exploited in niche applications.

Besides Anammox, another autotrophic ammonium removal process is the sulfate reduction, autotrophic denitrification, nitrification integrated (SANI). The SANI process was demonstrated in Hong Kong where toilets are flushed with salt water leading to high sulfate concentrations (500 mgS/L) in the wastewater. Organic carbon is oxidized with sulfate as the electron acceptor (instead of utilizing energy intensive aeration), and thus formed sulfide is used to reduce nitrate (from a nitrification reactor) to dinitrogen gas [34].

Nitrogen recovery

Recovering a pure or highly concentrated ammonia stream can be completed with physical/chemical methods: air stripping, steam stripping, hollow fiber membrane contactors,

and struvite precipitation [35[•]]. These methods are most cost effective at high initial ammonia concentrations and hence only useful on side-stream effluents or source-separated urine [36]. In the mainstream where nitrogen is very dilute, chemical recovery becomes economically unfeasible. Instead, nitrogen captured in stabilized biosolids can be directly applied to fields offsetting chemical fertilizers [5]. In the United States approximately half of all biosolids are recycled to land (US EPA; URL: <https://www.epa.gov/biosolids>). Unfortunately, for social/economic reasons, some biosolids cannot be used, and one reason is that the quality of biosolids is not high enough for land application (due to pathogens or pollutants), so they are instead landfilled or incinerated. These biosolids need to be further treated or 'stabilized' for reuse. One promising option is biodrying, which is a rapid composting/drying process that stabilizes and kills pathogens in biosolids while generating ammonia-rich air that can be scrubbed and recovered [37[•]]. In a full-scale biodrying installment in Zutphen, The Netherlands treating 150 kton/year of waste activated sludge, 7.3 kton/year ammonium sulfate was recovered and biosolids were produced that complied with the Dutch quality standards for land application and had a caloric value between 7700–10 400 kJ/kg making them a good source of energy if land application is not an option [37[•]].

Capturing soluble nitrogen in biosolids involves growing organisms that assimilate nitrogen. Heterotrophic organisms consume approximately 20 gCOD/gN, but municipal wastewater contains around 11 gCOD/gN [5]. As a result, only a 10–20% of influent wastewater nitrogen is sequestered in heterotrophic biomass. Phototrophs are an attractive alternative to capture nitrogen from low COD/N wastewater because they can obtain additional energy from light, and, therefore, assimilate nitrogen with no or less organic carbon.

Phototrophic systems

Phototrophic systems take advantage of energy from sunlight to reduce the COD/N uptake of the BNR system. Additionally, many phototrophs can grow heterotrophically in the dark (at night). The two primary classes of phototrophic organisms considered in wastewater applications are **phototrophic purple bacteria** (PPB) for their flexible metabolism, and single-celled algae and cyanobacteria (collectively microalgae) for their ability to perform oxygenic photosynthesis. PPB can grow photo-autotrophically, photo-heterotrophically (on light frequencies down to near infrared), and chemo-heterotrophically [38,39]. PPB also grow well when fed with high strength wastewaters, and have, therefore, been used to treat a variety of agricultural waste streams [40]. While less commonly applied to domestic wastewater, PPB have been shown to assimilate approximately 16 gCOD/gN and are capable of reducing COD and nitrogen in treated water to discharge limits [41[•],42]. While better than heterotrophs, this is not sufficient for complete nitrogen removal in typical municipal wastewater and would

require supplemental carbon addition or an additional treatment step. Another limitation is that PPB are restricted to organic acids, alcohols, and some sugars, and would likely need additional pretreatment (such as pre-fermentation) for complete COD removal [35[•],41[•]]. The application of PPB, is, therefore, limited to specific situations.

Microalgae also have a variety of metabolisms, and, unlike PPB, can grow photo-autotrophically with only water as the electron donor (oxygenic photosynthesis) and assimilate nitrogen without organic carbon [1]. Cultivating microalgae on wastewater has been researched for a long time (reviewed in Refs. [43,44]), and a key challenge is solids separation. When growing suspended cultures, the use of light inherently requires low solids concentration to supply adequate light to the cell suspension. Additionally, most microalgae settle poorly making solids separation difficult [45–47]. Emerging strategies include membrane photobioreactors, photo-granular processes, and immobilizations, which could herald more compact reactor footprints and less energy intensive solids separation compared to conventional ponds or photobioreactors [48,49].

The most practical use for microalgae in wastewater treatment may be as a tertiary step to decrease nitrogen to low discharge levels without organic carbon addition [50^{••}]. Studies have shown that microalgae can reduce nitrogen to very low levels in constant and diurnal light [50^{••},51,52]. As tertiary treatment, the impairments of high capital and operational costs would be minimized compared with a full scale microalgal treatment system. Further understanding the effects of fluctuating nutrient levels, naturally assembling communities, and ideal reactor configurations still needs to be elucidated, but tertiary microalgal treatment is a promising prospect.

Microbial electrochemical cells

Applying microbial electrochemical cells (**MXCs**) to wastewater treatment provide a unique opportunity for recovering energy, valuable products, and ammonia [53,54]. In MXCs, the oxidation and reduction reactions are separated by a membrane. At the cathode (where the reduction reaction occurs) the pH increases causing NH_4^+ to speciate to NH_3 . This creates an NH_4^+ gradient across the membrane that pulls ammonia into the cathode chamber (if a cation exchange membrane is used), and because of the speciation to NH_3 , ammonia is more easily separated [55]. Although many cathode reactions are possible, the two demonstrated for ammonia recovery are (i) **oxygen reduction**, which generates electricity and (ii) **hydrogen evolution**, which requires an applied voltage [54]. Ammonia recovery is tightly coupled to current, and, therefore, systems with applied energy show higher ammonia removal [54,56]. In the first scaled-up system (0.5 m²), 31 ± 59% recovery was achieved over a 6 month period treating urine having gone through

struvite precipitation with an applied voltage of 0.5 V [57**]. This resulted in an energy consumption of $4.9 \pm 1.0 \text{ MJ kgN}^{-1}$ [57**], which is far below the energy cost of fixation using Haber-Bosch (approximately 45 MJ kgN^{-1} [58]). This is unlikely to achieve the low effluent ammonia required for mainstream treatment; however, it shows great promise for nitrogen recovery from a side stream.

Conclusions

All biological nitrogen removal strategies have advantages and disadvantages. They are also not mutually exclusive, where processes more efficient at high nitrogen loads can be applied in sequence with processes more efficient at low nitrogen. A single stage nitrogen removal system will typically save capital cost, but it may not be as robust or energy efficient as multiple stages. Looking forward, nitrogen removal needs to move away from the prohibitively energy intensive nitrification/denitrification and into next generation processes. We specifically highlight a system with mainstream partial nitrification/Anammox for energy efficient bulk removal, tertiary algal treatment for low effluent concentrations, MXC side stream treatment for energy efficient recovery, and biodrying for additional recovery and land application.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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