Photosynthetic Engine over the Globe

D. C. Agrawal
Department of Farm Engineering, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221005, India.

E-mail: dca_bhu@yahoo.com

(Received 24 August 2009; accepted 15 September 2009)

Abstract
According to M King Hubbert, a pioneer on fuel reserves, on an annual basis about $1.26 \times 10^{21}$ J of solar energy in the photosynthetically active region goes for photosynthesis over the globe whereas the harvested value as reported by Food & Agriculture Organization is more than two times of this estimate. This paper derives the value of the upper limit which can be harvested under ideal conditions and it is shown that at present the world consumes only 0.1% of biomass that can be so produced. This gives hope that the growing huge population of world will not starve.

Keywords: Solar energy, photosynthetic engine, harvested value, upper limit.

INTRODUCTION

Studying, measuring, and estimating the solar energy which can be harvested by photosynthesis is of paramount importance for the purpose of feeding the huge growing population on the earth. Its value was quoted by M. King Hubbert [1], a pioneer on fuel reserves, as $1.26 \times 10^{21}$ J s$^{-1}$ out of the total solar radiation $1.74 \times 10^{21}$ J s$^{-1}$ being intercepted on the average by half of the globe. On the annual basis this corresponds to the harvested solar energy by photosynthesis as $P = 3.15 \times 10^{17}$ J y$^{-1}$ producing a biomass equivalent to $6.45 \times 10^{16}$ Kg y$^{-1}$. The reported harvested value of solar energy by plants and photosynthetic organism is $3.15 \times 10^{17}$ J y$^{-1}$ equivalent to a biomass of $1.94 \times 10^{15}$ Kg y$^{-1}$. Thus the achieved harvested value of solar energy is more than two times that projected by King. This clearly shows that the upper limit of solar energy which may be utilized by photosynthesis under ideal conditions should be higher by couple of order of magnitude. This also gives a scope to enhance the production of crop to meet the requirement [2] of the increasing population of the globe. The aim of the present comment is to address to this question for the benefit of students of physics.

II. FORMULATION

The solar energy is electromagnetic in nature which is characterized by wavelength $\lambda$, frequency $\nu$ and velocity $c$ satisfying the relation

$$c = \lambda \nu, 0 \leq \lambda \leq \infty, \infty \leq \nu \leq 0$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

The electromagnetic spectrum [3, 4] extends from below the radio frequencies at the long-wavelength end through gamma radiation at the short-wavelength end covering wavelengths from thousands of kilometers down to a fraction of the size of an atom. Assuming that the Sun has as a uniform temperature $T$ over its surface the Planck’s radiation law [4, 5] says that

$$I(\lambda, T) d\lambda = \frac{c(\lambda, T)A(2\pihc^2)d\lambda}{\lambda^5\{\exp(hc/\lambda kT) - 1\}} \text{ J s}^{-1}. \hspace{1cm} (2)$$

$I(\lambda, T) d\lambda$ is the power radiated between the wavelengths $\lambda$ and $\lambda + d\lambda$, $A$ is the surface area, $c$ is the emissivity and the constants $h$ and $k$, respectively are Planck’s constant and Boltzmann’s constant. For simplicity, considering the Sun to be an ideal blackbody ($c = 1$) the
solar flux $Q$ emitted over all the wavelengths from the unit area ($A = 1 \text{ m}^2$) of the Sun is

$$Q = \int_0^\infty I(\lambda, T) d\lambda = \sigma T^4 \text{Jm}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1},$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

where $\sigma$ is the Stefan-Boltzmann constant. When this flux reaches the earth this is diluted by a factor [6]

$$f = \frac{R_s^2}{d^2}. \hspace{1cm} (4)$$

Here $R_s$ is the radius of the Sun and $d$ is the yearly mean distance between the earth and the Sun. Now the calculation of the value of solar flux in between wavelengths $\lambda_i$ and $\lambda_f$ present in the solar radiation will be taken up.

A. Expression of solar flux in the region $\lambda_i$ and $\lambda_f$

The photosynthetically active region (PAR) $\lambda_i = 400 \text{ nm}$ to $\lambda_f = 750 \text{ nm}$ is responsible for the process of photosynthesis [7] in plants and algae as shown in figure 1 where the light absorption (in percent) for the pigments chlorophyll, carotenoids and phycocyanin are depicted.

The collective curve corresponding to these three pigments over the said wavelengths region can be displayed as shown [7] in figure 2 enclosing the ABCDE shaded area in green. It is clear that the light absorption is not uniform over the region and this absorption factor will be denoted by $\alpha(\lambda)$ % in the sequel. The expression for the solar flux $Q(\lambda_i \rightarrow \lambda_f)$ emitted from an unit area of the Sun in between wavelengths $\lambda_i$ and $\lambda_f$ according to (3) would be

$$Q(\lambda_i \rightarrow \lambda_f) = \int_{\lambda_i}^{\lambda_f} I(\lambda, T) d\lambda \text{ Jm}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}. \hspace{1cm} (5)$$

B. Solar Flux into Photosynthetic channel

This flux will be diluted by the factor $f$ [cf. Eq. (4)] when it reaches the earth’s atmosphere. Also, multiplying this by the absorption factor $\alpha(\lambda)$ the amount of solar energy going into the channel of photosynthesis on half of the earth will be

$$Q_p = \frac{2\pi\hbar c^2 d\lambda}{\lambda^2 \{\exp(\hbar c / \lambda kT) - 1\}} \alpha(\lambda) f R_E^2 \text{J.s}^{-1}. \hspace{1cm} (6)$$

Here $R_E$ is the radius of the earth. On the annual basis the solar energy going into the photosynthetic channel will be

$$Q_p^A = 3.15 \times 10^7 Q_p \text{J.y}^{-1}; 1 \text{y} = 3.15 \times 10^7 \text{s}. \hspace{1cm} (7)$$

C. Efficiency and Biomass Production

The photosynthetic engine also works like any other engine in accordance with the relation

$$OutputPower(\eta) = Efficiency(\eta) \times InputPower(Q_p^A). \hspace{1cm} (8)$$

In the present case the absorbed solar energy in the photosynthetically active region corresponds to

$$InputPower = Q_p^A \text{ J.y}^{-1}. \hspace{1cm} (9)$$

If the efficiency of the photosynthetic engine is $\eta$ then the actual energy being utilized in the production of biomass and the value of biomass so produced would be

$$OutputPower = \eta Q_p^A \text{ J.y}^{-1}. \hspace{1cm} (10)$$
\[ M_p = 6.45 \times 10^{-8} P_p \text{ Kg y}^{-1} \]  
(11)

The factor \[ 6.45 \times 10^{-8} \text{ Kg J}^{-1} \] corresponds to production of biomass \[ 6.45 \times 10^{-8} \text{ Kg} \] for every Joule of photosynthetically active radiation being utilized.

D. Parameterization of absorption factor \( \alpha(\lambda') \)

The parameterization of the absorption factor \( \alpha(\lambda') \) present in the integrand of Eq.(6) is approximated by dividing the rate of photosynthesis curve of figure 2 in four blocks with the straight lines AB, BC, CD, and DE [cf. Fig. 3] whose equations are, respectively

1. Line AB: \( \alpha(\lambda') = 1.2698 \lambda - 487.9 \% \); \[ 400 \leq \lambda < 463 \]
2. Line BC: \( \alpha(\lambda') = -0.6437 \lambda + 398.0 \% \); \[ 463 \leq \lambda < 550 \]
3. Line CD: \( \alpha(\lambda') = 0.3231 \lambda - 133.7 \% \); \[ 550 \leq \lambda < 680 \]
4. Line DE: \( \alpha(\lambda') = -1.2285 \lambda + 921.4 \% \); \[ 680 \leq \lambda < 750 \]

Here \( \lambda' \) satisfies the relation \( \lambda = 10^{-9} \lambda' \) m and the coordinates of the points A, B, C, D, and E, respectively being (400, 20), (463,100), (550, 44), (680, 86), and (750, 0). Now we turn to numerical work.

III. NUMERICAL WORK

The analytical solution of the integral in Eq. (6) is not possible and therefore its value was obtained using Simpson’s quadrature and employing [4, 8]

\[ h = 6.63 \times 10^{-34} \text{ Js}; \quad c = 3.0 \times 10^{8} \text{ m/s}; \quad k = 1.38 \times 10^{-23} \text{ J/K} \]
\[ R_s = 6.96 \times 10^{8} \text{ m}; \quad R_e = 6.37 \times 10^{8} \text{ m}; \quad d = 1.50 \times 10^{11} \text{ m}; \quad T = 5776 \text{ K} \]

\[ \lambda_s = 400 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m}, \quad \lambda_f = 750 \times 10^{-9} \text{ m} \]

as well as relations (4), (7) and (12). The calculated value of solar energy going into the photosynthetic channel per annum \( Q_p \) [cf. Eq. (7, 9)] is listed (row 2, column 3) in Table I.

TABLE I. Reported and estimated values of solar energy which can be harvested by photosynthesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particular</th>
<th>Reported value</th>
<th>Estimated optimum value (present work)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input solar energy into photosynthetic channel ( Q_p )</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.4 \times 10^{14} \text{ J/y}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency ( \eta )</td>
<td></td>
<td>20% [9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output /harvested solar energy ( P_p = \eta Q_p )</td>
<td>1. Solar Energy [1] ~1.26 \times 10^{21} \text{ J/y}; Equivalent Biomass \sim 8.13 \times 10^{13} \text{ Kg/y}</td>
<td>Solar energy \sim 2.8 \times 10^{21} \text{ J/y}; Equivalent Biomass \sim 1.8 \times 10^{16} \text{ Kg/y}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Solar Energy [10,12] \sim 3 \times 10^{21} \text{ J/y}; Equivalent Biomass \sim 1.94 \times 10^{14} \text{ Kg/y}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The upper theoretical limit of the efficiency of the photosynthetic channel reported in the literature [9] is

\[ \eta = 20\% \text{.} \]  
(14)

The above efficiency provides an estimate for maximum possible utilization of solar energy under ideal conditions through photosynthesis [cf. Eq. (10)] and the corresponding equivalent biomass [cf. Eq. (11)] (see row 4, column 3 of Table I). The corresponding numbers reported by King and the reported biomass harvested by the mankind are also listed in Table I (row 4, column 2).

IV. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

The salient conclusions of the present work are discussed below.

- If the process of photosynthesis works as an engine then the input power in the form of solar energy in the photosynthetically active region 400 nm to 750 nm on annual basis to this engine is \( 1.4 \times 10^{24} \text{ J y}^{-1} \).
- The theoretical upper limit [9] on the efficiency of this engine being 20% the output power that can be achieved under ideal conditions would be \( 2.8 \times 10^{23} \text{ J y}^{-1} \). This is around 200 times more than
the value projected by M. King Hubbert [1] (1.26x10^{21} \text{J y}^{-1}).

- The theoretical upper limit on the equivalent biomass harvested would be 1.8x10^{16} \text{Kg y}^{-1} against the achieved biomass production [10] so far being 2x10^{14} \text{Kg y}^{-1}.

- The amounts consumed [10] by human beings are quite small (3x10^{20} \text{J y}^{-1} or 2x10^{13} \text{Kg y}^{-1}) representing only 10% of the achieved production through photosynthesis.

- The consumed part is marginal (~0.1%) in comparison to the theoretical upper limit that could be harvested. This observation gives hope that the growing huge population of world will not starve.

REFERENCES