

13.2: Metabolic Processes in Industrial Ecosystems

Industrial metabolism refers to the processes to which materials and components are subjected in industrial ecosystems. It is analogous to the metabolic processes that occur with food and nutrients in biological systems. Like biological metabolism, industrial metabolism may be addressed at several levels. A level of industrial metabolism at which green chemistry, especially, comes into play is at the molecular level where substances are changed chemically to give desired materials or to generate energy. Industrial metabolism can be addressed within individual unit processes in a factory, at the factory level, at the industrial ecosystem level, and even globally.

A significant difference between industrial metabolism as it is now practiced and natural metabolic processes relates to the wastes that these systems generate. Natural ecosystems have developed such that true wastes are virtually nonexistent. For example, even those parts of plants that remain after biodegradation of plant materials form soil humus (see “Soil Organic Matter” in Chapter 11, Section 11.8) that improves the conditions of soil on which plants grow. Anthropogenic industrial systems, however, have developed in ways that generate large quantities of wastes, where a waste may be defined as *dissipative use of natural resources*. Furthermore, human use of materials has a tendency to dilute and dissipate materials and disperse them to the environment. Materials may end up in a physical or chemical form from which reclamation becomes impractical because of the energy and effort required. A successful industrial ecosystem overcomes such tendencies.

Organisms performing their metabolic processes degrade materials to extract energy (catabolism) and synthesize new substances (anabolism). Industrial ecosystems perform analogous functions. The objective of industrial metabolism in a successful industrial ecosystem is to make desired goods with the least amount of byproduct and waste. This can pose a significant challenge. For example, to produce lead from lead ore for the manufacture of lead/acid storage batteries requires mining large quantities of ore, extracting the relatively small fraction of the ore consisting of lead sulfide mineral, and roasting and reducing the mineral to get lead metal. The whole process generates large quantities of lead-contaminated tailings left over from mineral extraction and significant quantities of byproduct sulfur dioxide, which must be reclaimed to make sulfuric acid and not released to the environment. The recycling pathway, by way of contrast, takes essentially pure lead from recycled batteries and simply melts it down to produce lead for new batteries; the advantages of recycling in this case are obvious.

There are some interesting comparisons between natural ecosystems and industrial systems as they now operate. The basic unit of a natural ecosystem is the organism, whereas that of an industrial system is the firm or, in the case of large corporations, the branch of a firm. Natural ecosystems handle materials in closed loops; with current practice, materials traverse an essentially one-way path through industrial systems. It follows that natural systems completely recycle materials, whereas in industrial systems the level of recycling is often very low. Organisms have a tendency to concentrate materials. For example, carbon in carbon dioxide that is only about 0.04% of atmospheric air becomes concentrated in organic carbon through photosynthesis. Industrial systems in contrast tend to dilute materials to a level where they cannot be economically recycled, but still have the potential to pollute. Aside from maintaining themselves during their limited lifetime, the major function of organisms is reproduction. Industrial enterprises do not have reproduction of themselves as a primary objective; their main function is to generate goods and services in a manner that maximizes monetary income.

Unlike natural ecosystems in which reservoirs of needed materials are essentially constant (oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen from air as examples) industrial systems are faced with largely depleting reservoirs of materials. For example, the lead ore cited above is a depleting resource; more may be found, but only a finite amount is ultimately available. Fossil energy resources are also finite. For example, much more fossil energy from coal may be available, but its utilization as the world's main source of energy over the long term would come at an unacceptable cost of global warming from carbon dioxide emissions. Again, industrial metabolic processes that emphasize recycling are desirable because recycling gives essentially constant reservoirs of materials in the recycling loop. Ideally, even in the case of energy, renewable energy resources such as wind and solar power provide an essentially constant, non-depleting energy source.

As discussed under “Control in Organisms” under Section 12.4 of Chapter 12, biological systems have elaborate systems of control. Considering the metabolism that occurs in an entire natural ecosystem, it is **self-regulating**. If herbivores that consume plant biomass become too abundant and diminish the stock of the biomass, their numbers cannot be sustained, the population dies back, and their food source rebounds. The most successful ecosystems are those in which this self-regulating mechanism operates continuously without wide variations in populations. Industrial systems do not inherently operate in a self-regulating manner that is advantageous to their surroundings, or even to themselves in the long run. Examples of the failure of self-regulation of industrial systems abound in which enterprises have wastefully produced large quantities of goods of marginal value, running through limited

resources in a short time, and dissipating materials to their surroundings, polluting the environment in the process. Despite these bad experiences, within a proper framework of laws and regulations designed to avoid wastes and excess, industrial ecosystems can be designed to operate in a self-regulating manner. Such self-regulation operates best under conditions of maximum recycling in which the system is not dependent upon a depleting resource of raw materials or energy.

Obviously, recycling is the key to the successful function of industrial metabolism. Figure 13.2 illustrates the importance of the **level of recycling**. In low-level recycling, a material or component is taken back to near the beginning of the steps through which it is made. For example, an automobile engine block might be melted down to produce molten metal from which new blocks are then cast. With high-level recycling, the item or material is recycled as close to the final product as possible. In the case of the automobile engine block, it may be cleaned, the cylinder walls re honed, the flat surfaces replaned, and the block used as the platform for assembling a rebuilt engine. In this example and many others that can be cited, high-level recycling uses much less energy and materials and is inherently more efficient. The term given to the value attributed to an item or material recycled near the top of the energy/materials pyramid shown in Figure 13.2 is called its **embedded utility**.

This page titled [13.2: Metabolic Processes in Industrial Ecosystems](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Stanley E. Manahan](#).