

Renewable CO_2 recycling and synthetic fuel production in a marine environment

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A massive reduction in CO_2 emissions from fossil fuel burning is required in order to limit the extent of global warming. But carbon-based liquid fuels will in the foreseeable future continue to be important energy storage media. We propose a novel combination of largely existing technologies, to use solar energy to recycle atmospheric CO_2 into a liquid fuel. Our concept is clusters of marine-based floating islands, on which photovoltaic cells convert sunlight into electrical energy to produce H_2 and to extract CO_2 from seawater, where it is in equilibrium with the atmosphere. These gases are then reacted to form the energy carrier methanol, which is conveniently shipped to the end consumer. The present work initiates the development of this concept and highlights relevant questions in physics, chemistry and mechanics.

Keywords:

renewable energy, carbon dioxide recycling, synthetic fuel

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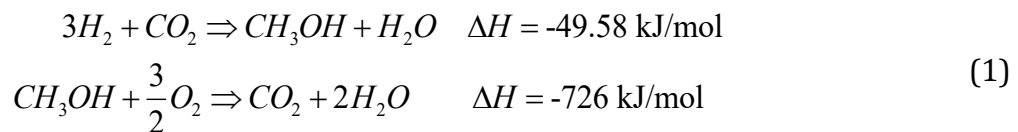
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Significance Statement

Within decades, humankind must cease CO_2 emissions from fossil fuel burning, if dangerous climate change is to be avoided. However, liquid carbon-based energy carriers are often without practical alternative for vital mobility applications. The recycling of atmospheric CO_2 into synthetic fuels, using renewable energy, offers an energy concept with no net CO_2 emission. We propose to implement, on a large scale, marine-based artificial island facilities, on which solar or wind energy powers the production of hydrogen and the extraction of CO_2 from seawater and where these gases are catalytically reacted to yield liquid methanol fuel. The present work proposes specifications for such facilities and highlights essential challenges in physics, chemistry and engineering, which must be met in order to realize this ambitious proposal.

Limiting anthropogenic global warming to below 2°C, a goal of the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [1], now ratified by 174 countries, will require within the coming decades the phasing out of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel burning. However, in the foreseeable future, carbon-based liquid fuels will continue to play an important role, in particular for aeronautical, marine and long-haul automotive mobility. It is therefore essential to investigate possibilities of using renewable energy to recycle CO_2 between the atmosphere and synthetic liquid fuel [2]. Efforts to photochemically produce synthetic fuel from CO_2 and water, *i.e.*, via artificial photosynthesis, show some promise [3]. We propose an approach using more conventional methods, but with important novel aspects.

Methanol, CH_3OH or $MeOH$, is the simplest carbon-based fuel, which is liquid at ambient conditions [4]. With approximately half the energy density of gasoline (15.6 MJ/L vs. 32.4 MJ/L), it can be used to power existing gas turbines, modified diesel engines, and direct methanol fuel cells. Methanol can serve as a feedstock for most petrochemical products, and by simple dehydration, it can be converted to dimethyl ether (DME), an attractive substitute for natural gas, and other hydrocarbon fuels. Methanol can be produced [5] by the catalytic hydrogenation of CO_2 (presently the largest methanol production facility using this technique is located in Iceland [6]), and $MeOH$ burns in air to release CO_2 and water:



An attractive scenario for the production of synthetic methanol fuel is the recycling of atmospheric CO_2 , the electrolytic production of H_2 , and their catalytic reaction to CH_3OH , with all of these processes powered by renewable energy. As a concept for realizing this scenario, the present work proposes the production of H_2 and the extraction of CO_2 from seawater and their catalytic reaction to produce $MeOH$ on clusters of artificial, marine-based photovoltaic-powered “solar methanol islands” [7] (see Fig. 1). We present an initial implementation plan - in view of many uncertainties, much additional work remains to be done.

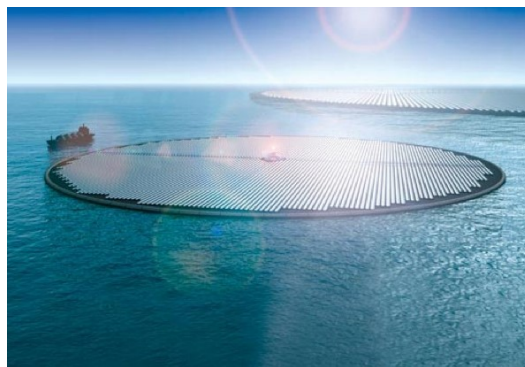


Fig. 1.

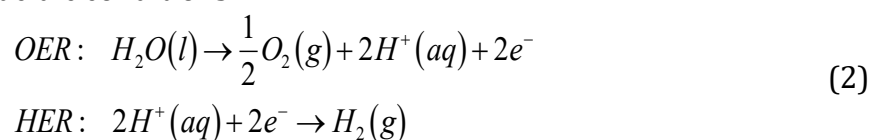
Seawater as a source of H_2 and CO_2

Renewable synthetic fuel production on distributed facilities in a marine environment has attractive features, including: abundance of insolation and raw materials, avoidance of local CO_2 depletion, convenient ship-based transport to and from the sites, flexible placement close to population centers and possible combination with aquaculture and other marine activities. The production of one mole of CH_3OH ideally requires three moles of H_2 and one of CO_2 , the production/extraction of which from seawater presents serious electrochemical challenges.

Electrolysis of seawater

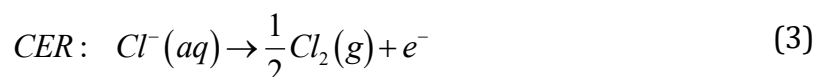
The enthalpy change in splitting liquid water into gaseous hydrogen and oxygen is 286 kJ/mol H_2 ; industrial electrolysis plants typically require 380 kJ/mol H_2 [9] and a value of 302 kJ/mol H_2 at 10 kA/m² has been demonstrated in the laboratory [10]. The efficiency of a water electrolysis cell is determined [11] by the cell potential. This quantity is equal to the sum of ΔE_n , the reversible cell voltage (see the Supplementary Information (SI) Appendix), and various “overvoltages”, which include contributions from reaction kinetics at the catalytic electrodes and from charge- and mass-transfer effects near the electrode surfaces, and an ohmic overvoltage due to the cell resistance.

For the electrolysis of pure water, the half-cell reactions (“oxygen evolution reaction”, OER, at the anode and “hydrogen evolution reaction”, HER, at the cathode) are, for acidic conditions:



As discussed in the SI Appendix, thermodynamics dictates that the reversible potential for electrolysis at standard conditions and 25° C is $\Delta E^0 = 1.23$ V.

In seawater electrolysis [12], undesirable competition to the OER at the anode arises from the “chlorine evolution reaction”, CER, which produces highly corrosive chlorine gas:



from which other chlorine-containing species, such as hypochlorite, may form [12]. At standard conditions and 25° C, the reversible potential for chlorine production is 1.36 V. Since this is greater than the 1.23 V for oxygen production, one would assume that CER can be avoided by a judicious choice of operating voltage. However, theoretical work indicates that exceeding the so-called “thermodynamic overpotential”, related to the interdependence between the binding energies of the reaction intermediates at the catalyst surface, is required for the OER to proceed [13-15]. This effectively increases the minimum potential

for OER from 1.23 to approximately 1.5 V, and hence favors CER over OER for seawater electrolysis.

A simple, inexpensive solution to the problem of chlorine generation at the anode is to desalinate the seawater prior to electrolysis: the theoretical energy expense for the desalination of seawater, with 3.5 weight % NaCl, by reverse osmosis, dictated by the free-energy of mixing, is 0.987 kWh/m³ at a recovery of 50% [16]. Large-scale industrial plants, such as the 600 million m³/yr installation near Haifa, Israel, consume 2.2 kWh/m³ for reverse osmosis, plus 1.5 kWh/m³ for pre- and post-treatment [17]. For our application, close access to the open ocean will reduce pumping costs and simplify brine disposal. Assuming 100% splitting of the desalinated water, the 3.7 kWh/m³ total corresponds to 0.240 kJ/mol H₂, or 0.063% of the energy required for (freshwater) electrolysis.

A further problem encountered in the electrolysis of seawater involves the cathode: under the alkaline conditions that generally occur at this electrode ($pH > 11$), deposits form of insoluble $Mg(OH)_2$ and $Ca(OH)_2$. As these deposits grow in thickness, the cell resistance increases, degrading the electrolytic efficiency. Although reverse osmosis desalination significantly reduces the concentration of Mg and Ca ions, the production of high-purity “process” water generally necessitates an additional deionization step using an ion exchange resin, which requires periodic regeneration [18]. Alternative methods of suppressing the hydroxide deposition include agitation, electrochemical precipitation [19] and reduction of the local pH at the cathode by feeding-back a portion of the more acidic solution from the anode [20].

CO₂ extraction from seawater

The present fractional concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere is approximately 400 ppm, corresponding to a mass density of 0.00079 kg CO₂/m³. Thus direct capture of CO₂ from the atmosphere, for example by regenerable adsorption on organic amines, necessitates the processing of large volumes of air [21,22]. Due to the reversible, pH -dependent interconversion of carbon dioxide in water between dissolved CO₂, (carbonic acid CO₂(aq)), bicarbonate (HCO₃⁻) and carbonate (CO₃²⁻) [23] (see Fig. 2a and SI Appendix), the effective CO₂ concentration in seawater at a pH of 8.1, in equilibrium with the atmosphere, is 0.099 kg CO₂/m³, *i.e.*, a factor 125 larger than in air. The time constant for the establishment of CO₂ equilibrium between the atmosphere and surface ocean waters is less than a few years [24,25].

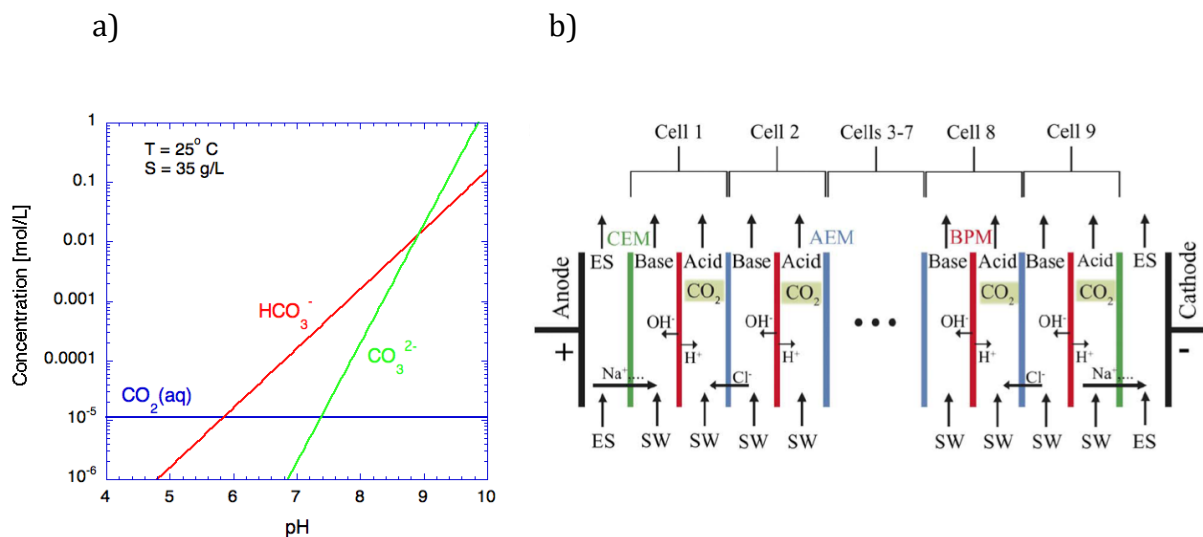


Fig. 2.

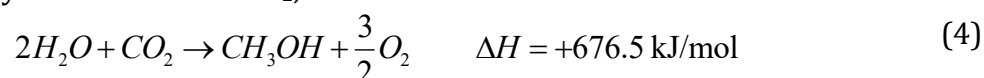
In order to extract CO_2 from seawater into a gaseous environment, it is necessary that the partial pressure of CO_2 in the water exceeds that in the gas. Since the dissolution of CO_2 in water is exothermic, extraction can be performed by increasing the water temperature. But this is an expensive option: heating from 25 to 70° C a sufficient amount of water (2.5 m³) to release, with 18% efficiency [26], one mole of CO_2 requires 470 MJ of thermal energy.

The pH -dependent chemistry of dissolved CO_2 (Fig. 2a) suggests that extraction may be accomplished by making the seawater more acidic. Eisaman, *et al*, [27] have described an electrochemical CO_2 extraction cell, which is based on bipolar membrane electrodialysis (ED) (see Fig. 2b). The seawater flows through parallel channels, which are separated by alternating bipolar and anion exchange membranes. An applied electrical potential drives OH^- and Cl^- anions towards the anode and moves H^+ cations from the “base” channels to accumulate in the “acid” channels. By thus reducing the acid channel pH to below 5, CO_2 comes out of solution and is collected using membrane contactors. In such a contactor [28], the acidified seawater flows along an array of hollow fibers, with walls made of hydrophobic micro-porous polypropylene membrane; the CO_2 gas diffuses into the fibers and is collected by a vacuum pump. Finally, the acid and base water flows from the ED cell are recombined to yield a neutral effluent. A prototype cell extracted 59% of the dissolved CO_2 and carbonate species with an (electrical) energy expenditure of 242 kJ/mol CO_2 . Further developments and economic considerations of this device are discussed in [29].

A group at the US Naval Research Laboratory is developing a device, also based on ion-exchange membranes, which extracts CO_2 by electrochemical acidification and *simultaneously* produces H_2 by electrolysis [30]. The cell is comprised of three chambers, separated by two cation-exchange membranes, with seawater flowing through the central chamber and with desalinated water in the outer anode and cathode chambers, to avoid the CER and hydroxide deposits. Work is in progress [31] to reduce the series resistance, to limit the amount of desalinated water required and to further inhibit the hydroxide deposits.

Catalytic methanol production

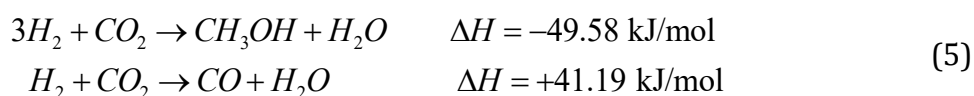
By analogy with photosynthesis [3], one could in principle produce carbon-based fuel directly from water and CO_2 , *i.e.*:



However, the high thermodynamic stability of the reactant species implies that a large amount of energy is required. Effectively supplying this energy in a single photochemical or electrochemical process remains a fundamental challenge.

Hydrogen and CO_2 can be combined to yield synthetic fuels by the chemical reduction of CO_2 by hydrogenation. Figure 3a shows, in a modified “Latimer-Frost” diagram [32], the room temperature Gibb’s free energy of creation (CO_2 reduction) and the enthalpy change upon combustion (oxidation) of C_1 chemicals derived from CO_2 , as a function of the degree of reduction. Both methanol and methane have high molar oxidation energies, but since methanol is a liquid at room temperature, it has a higher volumetric stored energy density.

We see from Fig. 3a that the hydrogenation of CO_2 to form methanol (upper reaction, Eq. (5)) is (a) slightly exothermic, and (b) entails a net reduction in the number of molecules. In addition, (c) there is a competing endothermic reaction, the “reverse water-gas shift” (RWGS) reaction (lower reaction, Eq. (5)), which also consumes H_2 and CO_2 .



These three facts have the following implications for methanol synthesis: (a) Heat will be generated from the “chemical energy” of H_2 , which is available for reuse, (b) the reaction rate increases with increasing reactant pressure [33], and (c) competition from the RWGS reaction increases with increasing temperature. As shown in the lower part of Fig. 3b and the SI Appendix, a result of the low exothermicity of the hydrogenation reaction is that the *thermodynamic* limit for the equilibrium CO_2 conversion at practical temperatures and pressures is below 30% [34].

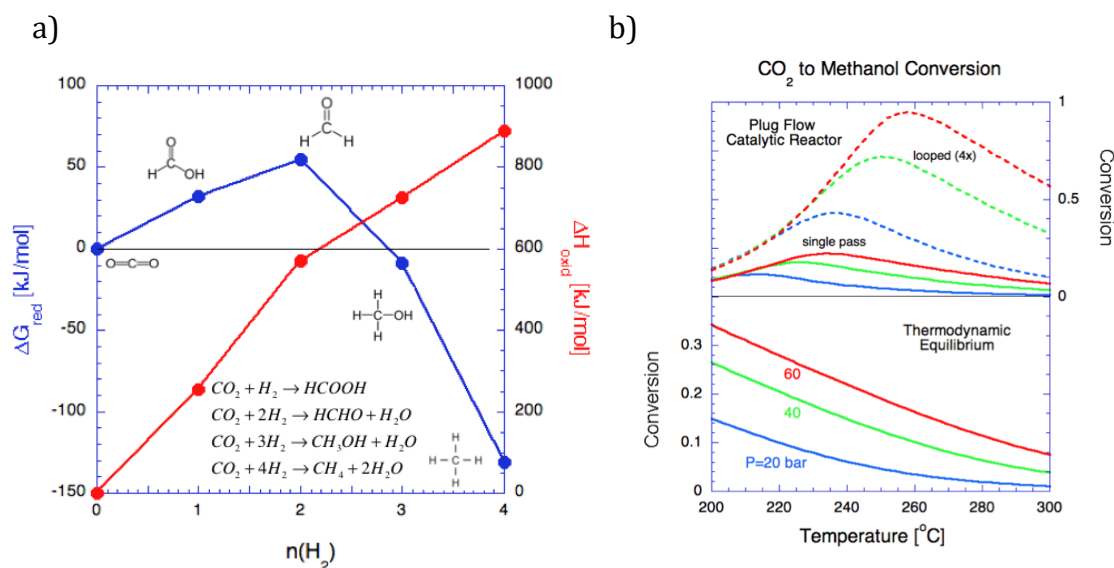


Fig. 3.

Furthermore, the thermodynamics of Fig. 3a dictates that the product of the most stable reaction path for CO_2 hydrogenation is methane. Thus a selective catalyst is required to optimize methanol synthesis. The kinetics of methanol synthesis using a standard $Cu/ZnO/Al_2O_3$ catalyst [35] is discussed in the SI Appendix, for a simplified “plug flow” reactor geometry. As shown in the upper part of Fig. 3b, whereas a single pass through the reactor cannot surpass the equilibrium conversion, performing multiple separation/recycling loops can produce high conversion at practical temperature and pressure.

A potentially interesting development for our application is the use of microstructured catalytic reactors [36]: reactor channels with transverse dimensions on the millimeter scale have the advantages over larger systems of improved heat control, more efficient catalyst use and safe operation at high pressure. Other interesting recent progress in the production of methanol by CO_2 hydrogenation are the development of highly selective $Ni-Ga$ catalysts for low-pressure synthesis [37] and the enhancement of the methanol yield by water sorption [38]. Finally, the single-step production of higher (C_{5+}) liquid hydrocarbon fuels has been demonstrated by a direct CO_2 Fischer-Tropsch hydrogenation process using a $CuFeO_2$ catalyst [39].

Photovoltaic energy collection

Large scale crystalline silicon photovoltaic (PV) technology is undergoing continual development: it is predicted that by the year 2025, commercial PV modules will be available with an efficiency of 21%, and a module price of $\$0.21/W_{peak}$. We envisage situating rows of such modules on floating island structures, with optimal inclination and row-spacing. For a 20% module efficiency and an average insolation of $220 W/m^2$, a 100 m diameter island will produce $0.35 MW_{average}$. The marine environment, although incurring the disadvantages of increased corrosion and surface fouling, has the advantage over

a land-based installation of PV cell cooling by the adjacent seawater. The electrical output of the PV array must be matched to the input of electrolytic cells, at varying levels of solar irradiation, and a particularly elegant method, without the need of active devices, is to optimally configure series/parallel connections of the PV cells with the electrolytic cells [40]. It should be noted that an interesting alternative marine-based renewable energy source for distributed H_2 production, CO_2 extraction and methanol production is off-shore wind turbines [41] - regions with high average winds tend to have low insolation, and *vice versa*.

Dynamics of floating islands

A constraint from a marine technology point of view is that we need low-cost, robust structures for the overall economics of marine solar islands. A plausible structural foundation for a solar island is a floating elastic torus, similar to the cage support used in aquaculture. A net-like deck, supported by additional internal concentric flexible torus-shaped floaters, would carry the PV cells, and the islands would be moored in clusters (see Fig. 4a). The machinery for H_2 production, CO_2 extraction and $MeOH$ catalysis could be mounted on a separate unit, possibly a rigid-hull ship. The island design would profit from the present trends to move floating PV arrays [42] and fish farms [43] to the open ocean: The statistical extreme values of structural stresses and mooring loads based on local and global wind conditions, significant wave height, mean wave period and wave heading must be considered with regards to operability and survivability. The mechanical stability required for the PV cell mounting needs to be specified, and ship access must be provided for maintenance. Water on deck and slamming loads must be minimized - this can be achieved by using flexible floaters that to a large extent follow the waves. The feasibility of such a structure has been documented in model tests.

The preferred materials for the floating tubes and mooring ropes of large-scale floating fish farms are polyethylene and polyamide, due to their high strength, low weight, low cost, and resistance to attack by UV radiation and chemical agents [44]. It should be noted that polyethylene can be efficiently produced from recycled plastic waste [45].

Numerical calculations and model testing have been performed of the dynamics of a single floating elastic torus structure interacting with water waves [46,47]; an approximate linear treatment of torus deflections is presented in the SI Appendix. Figure 4b shows the resulting torus deflection amplitude with respect to the water surface, normalized by the incoming wave amplitude, as a function of the wavelength λ of incoming regular waves. Curves are shown for three different values of the island diameter $2R$, and they are superimposed on a typical wave spectrum of a fully-developed sea [48]. Note that: a) for $\lambda \ll 2R$, the torus is essentially stationary, seeing the full wave amplitude, b) for $\lambda \gg 2R$, the torus effectively follows the oscillating water surface, and c) resonance effects occur for $\lambda \approx 2R$. Reducing the island diameter shifts the resonant responses out of the wave spectrum. These results have consequences for the optimal island dimensions (see SI Appendix).

The fact that the deflection amplitudes calculated using the simple linear theory are of the same order as the incoming wave amplitude demonstrates the necessity for quantitative predictions of a more detailed, non-linear analysis [47]. This is particularly true with regards to the inherently non-linear phenomena of “over-topping” (waves breaking over the upper torus surface) and “out-of-water” (protrusion of the torus above the water surface).

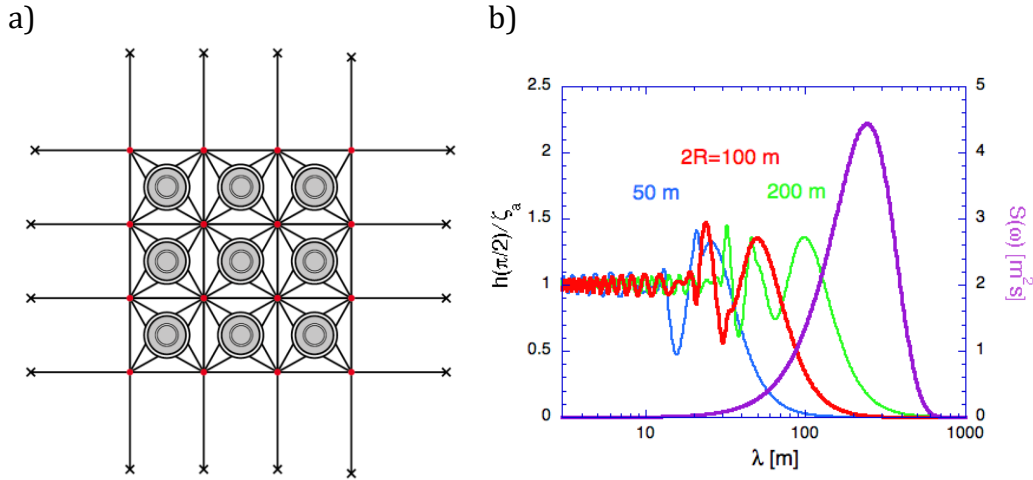
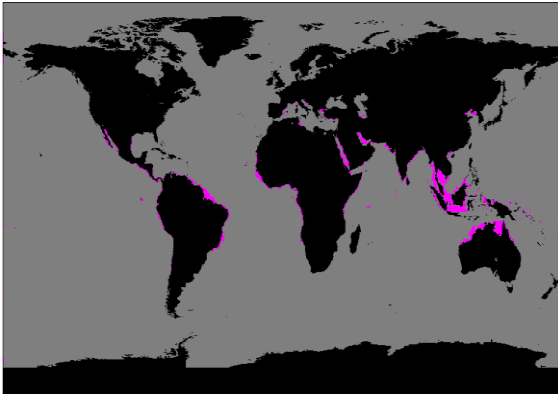


Fig. 4.

Solar island placement

To investigate possible locations for solar methanol island clusters, we impose the following restrictions: average insolation greater than 175 W/m^2 , 100 year maximum wave height less than 7 m, water depth for island mooring less than 600 m and a low probability of tropical hurricanes. Compatible regions, shown in Fig. 5a, cover 1.5% of the global ocean surface and together receive a total average insolation of 1.2 PW (see SI Appendix for details). Note that suitable locations occur along the coasts of both developed and developing countries. Furthermore, placing solar methanol islands near currently oil exporting countries could offer an alternative business model under the increasingly stringent carbon emission regime of the Paris Agreement. We also note that an argument in favor of many small, dispersed facilities in the open ocean over a few large, shore-based plants is the avoidance of local CO_2 depletion (see SI Appendix for details).

a)



b)

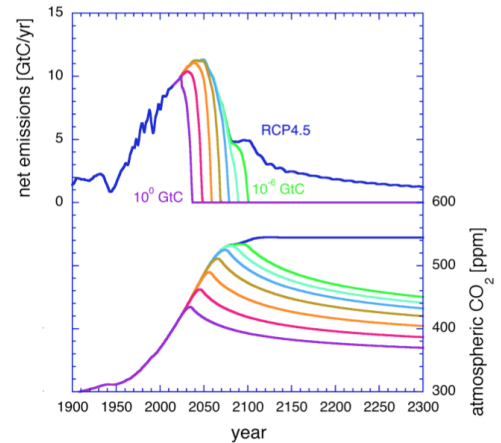


Fig. 5.

Solar methanol island operation

Operational parameters for solar methanol islands, deployed on a large scale, depend on engineering assessments and optimizations. We make the following assumptions: An individual facility is a cluster of 70 flexible photovoltaic islands, each 100 m in diameter (total PV area 550'000 m²), which occupies a total area of approximately 1 km². The islands provide electrical power to a central processing unit, mounted on a rigid ship, which houses the desalination and electrolysis cells for H₂ production, the electrochemical cells for CO₂ extraction, the catalytic reactors and associated machinery for methanol production and separation, batteries for short-term electrical energy storage, a methanol storage tank, and miscellaneous equipment and furnishings. The problems of organic and inorganic membrane fouling by seawater, in particular in the electro dialysis cells, are well known in the reverse-osmosis desalination industry and require suitable filtration/pretreatment [49].

With an average insolation of 220 W/m² (corresponding to a total incoming solar power of 120 MW) and 20% efficient PV modules, the facility produces an average of 24 MW_{el} of electrical power. A physical model for the chemical processing equipment, analyzed using the Aspen Hysys software [50] is proposed in the SI Appendix: An input seawater flow of 6.0 t/h undergoes reverse osmosis desalination and electrolysis, consuming 17.8 MW_{el} and producing 0.345 t/h H₂. Some of the produced oxygen is used to combust excess H₂ to provide process heat. A second, much larger seawater flow, 41'000 t/h, feeds electro dialysis cells, which consume 3.6 MW_{el}, plus 1.4 MW_{el} for pumping, and extract the dissolved CO₂ with 59% efficiency, yielding 2.4 t/h CO₂. This corresponds to 5'700 t/yr of carbon. The catalytic reactors and separation units consume 1.3 MW_{el}, principally for compressors, and produce an output of 1.77 t/h of methanol (and approximately 1 t/h of water). A total of 5.6 MW_{th} of thermal energy is released by gas compression and cooling, the exothermic catalytic reaction and by purge gas combustion. 2.4 MW_{th} of this energy can be recovered, which is sufficient to drive the reboiler/distillation column (1.8

MW_{th}) for separating methanol from the product water. Storage batteries allow operation of the chemical plant to continue during the night. The yearly output of the facility is thus 15'500 t/yr of methanol, which is periodically collected by tanker ship.

In 2010, the global fossil fuel consumption [51] was 123'000 TWh/yr (natural gas: 33'500 TWh/yr, oil: 47'500 TWh/yr, coal 42'000 TWh/yr). The 15'500 t/yr of methanol, with an energy content of 19.7 MJ/kg = 5.47 MWh/t, produced by one solar methanol island complex thus corresponds to 84.8 GWh/yr, or 1/1'450'000 of the global fossil fuel consumption. We assess the avoided carbon emission of a solar methanol facility as follows: The global fossil fuel mix consumed in 2010, in Mt/yr of carbon, was as follows [52]: natural gas: 1698; oil: 3100; and coal: 3832, and the corresponding energy intensities for these sources, in grams of CO₂ per MJ produced, are 56, 73 and 95, respectively. This gives an energy-weighted average energy intensity of 76 g(CO₂)/MJ. Since methanol has an energy intensity of 111 g(CO₂)/MJ, the conversion of 5'700 t/yr of carbon into methanol would effectively avoid the emission of 3'900 t/yr of carbon from fossil fuels.

Effect on global climate

What could be the long-term effect on the atmospheric CO₂ concentration of a global introduction of solar methanol island facilities? As a basis, we use the *Representative Concentration Pathway* RCP4.5, a “medium mitigation scenario” considering CO₂ and other forcing agents used by climate researchers, which presumes a dramatic decline in fossil fuel emissions beginning in 2040 and which leads to a “radiative forcing” (rate of net energy input per unit area to the earth surface and lower atmosphere, measured at the tropopause) in the year 2100 of 4.5 W/m² [53].

We make the assumption that beginning in the year 2025, solar methanol island deployment begins with an assumed “first year” capacity and that the resulting avoided CO₂ emissions thereafter grow exponentially with a doubling time of 3.4 years, equal to that for the current growth of electrical power generation from wind energy [54]. We further assume that after the avoided emissions become equal to the RCP4.5 projection, the net emission remains zero - negative emission would require carbon sequestration. In the upper part of Fig. 5b, we show historical and projected anthropogenic carbon emissions for RCP4.5 and the reduction in these emissions that could be realized by solar methanol island development assuming various first-year capacities. In the lower part of Fig. 5b, the corresponding projected evolutions of the atmospheric CO₂ concentration are presented. Details of the calculation and projected global temperature evolution are supplied in the SI Appendix.

Without the introduction of solar methanol islands, model calculations yield a continuous post-industrialization average global temperature rise, which surpasses 3.3° C in 2150. Assuming a first-year (2025) emission reduction of 10⁻³ gigatons of carbon (GtC) yields zero net carbon emissions in the year 2069 and

an approximately stable post-2150 temperature increase of 2.7° C. Note that for a carbon emission avoidance per solar methanol island cluster of 3900 tons/yr, the final number of facilities required for the 10⁻³ GtC scenario is 2'000'000. These facilities, each spanning 1 x 1 km², would cover 0.6% of the global ocean surface. This large figure is a direct consequence of the enormous scale of ongoing and projected fossil carbon emissions. Carbon emission mitigation likely requires a portfolio of measures and technologies to meet the climate targets of the Paris Agreement; solar methanol islands could be an important element in this portfolio.

Economic considerations

Methanol has an energy content of 19.7 MJ/kg, so a solar methanol island cluster which consumes 120 MW of incident solar power to produce 15'500 tons per year has an energy storage efficiency of 8.1% and will, during a 20 year lifetime, supply 6100 TJ of fuel. The cost of energy is closely related to the health of the economy, and it has been argued [55] that the maximum price consistent with economic stability is approximately \$15/GJ, which corresponds to an oil price of \$92 per barrel or \$0.054 per kWh_{el}. A \$15/GJ limit implies a maximum allowable cost, including operation, of a solar methanol island facility of 92 M\$.

The approximate capital costs of major items of a single solar methanol island complex are summarized in the SI Appendix: published subsystem costs are scaled by capacity using the “0.6 exponent rule” for chemical plants [56]. Approximate cost figures are given for the PV modules, the reverse-osmosis desalination equipment, the electrolytic cells for H₂ production, the electro dialysis cells for CO₂ extraction and for the catalytic reactor for methanol production. Missing from the summary are the highly uncertain capital costs for seawater pretreatment equipment and the floating island structures. The cost analysis presented in the SI Appendix is for a single solar methanol island facility; massive worldwide introduction of this technology will bring substantial savings due to economy of scale.

Open questions

Among the many questions that need to be addressed in more detail for a practical design of solar-powered artificial marine islands to recycle CO₂ into synthetic liquid fuel are the following: How can PV modules be adapted for large-scale deployment in a marine environment, and how can they be efficiently cleaned and maintained? Can desalination and electrolysis technology be combined to efficiently produce H₂ from seawater? Is electro dialysis the optimal method for large-scale CO₂ extraction from seawater, and if so, what membrane development and systems engineering are required to realize a large, practical marine installation? Is methanol fuel the best choice for the final product, or should one consider producing heavier hydrocarbons on site? What is the optimal design, including reactor looping and heat and pressure management, for a marine-based synthetic fuel reactor and separation system? What is the best practical design for large, floating PV islands with high survivability in

marine conditions? How can one optimize their life cycle, and what realistic growth path will have a significant long-term impact on the earth's climate? Answering these questions will require detailed technological analyses, laboratory and field tests of competing designs, optimization of integrated systems and refined cost estimates. It is imperative that innovative solutions are soon realized, in order to limit the rise in global atmospheric CO_2 concentration.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank their colleagues in the “Solar methanol group”, Davide Bleiner, Chris Rossel, Reto Holzner, Issam Kabbani, Bruno Keller, Karl Knop and Christine Ledergerber, for stimulating discussions. Further, we thank: Odd Magnus Faltinsen for insights in marine design, Meike Heinz and Ulrich Vogt for discussions of electrochemistry, Heather Willauer for expertise on CO_2 extraction from seawater, James Orr for discussions on marine chemistry, Paul Hsieh for discussions and detailed simulations of local CO_2 depletion, Malte Behrens, Ibrahim Dincer, Payam Esmaili, Nobert Heeb and Hilde Venvik, for information regarding methanol synthesis, Peng Li, Per Christian Endresen and Michael Meylan for discussions of floating island stability, Andreas Sterl and Steve Worely for oceanic data, Raphael Semiat for information on large-scale seawater pretreatment and reverse-osmosis desalination, and Eric McFarland and Christophe Ballif for economic considerations of solar energy. Fortunat Joos acknowledges support by the Swiss National Science Foundation (#200020_172476).

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Artist's conception of solar islands in the open ocean [8]. We envisage distributed solar methanol facilities based on clusters of such islands, including electrochemical cells for H_2 production and CO_2 extraction from seawater, and catalytic reactors for the production of synthetic methanol fuel. The chemical processing equipment could be installed on a fixed hull ship. Figure used with the permission of Novaton.

Figure 2. The carbonate chemistry of CO_2 in seawater. a) Effective CO_2 molar density in seawater in equilibrium with the atmosphere, due to the pH -dependent interconversion in water between gaseous CO_2 , carbonic acid ($CO_2(aq)$), bicarbonate (HCO_3^-) and carbonate (CO_3^{2-}) [23]. At the seawater pH of 8.1, the major part of CO_2 is bound in bicarbonate ions, which, with lowering pH , transform rapidly back to carbonic acid / gaseous CO_2 . b) The bipolar membrane electro dialysis cell of Ref. [27] uses an electric current and ion-selective membranes to produce basified and acidified streams of seawater, allowing gaseous CO_2 extraction from the latter. The abbreviations are as follows: SW=seawater, ES=electrolyte solution, BPM=bipolar membrane, AEM=anion exchange membrane, CEM=cation exchange membrane. Figure used with the permission of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Figure 3. The production of synthetic fuel. a) A "Latimer-Frost" type diagram showing, at standard temperature and pressure, the change in Gibbs free energy ΔG_{red} upon production by CO_2 reduction by hydrogenation and the change in enthalpy ΔH_{oxid} upon combustion in oxygen, for the C_1 chemicals: formic acid ($HCOOH$), formaldehyde ($HCHO$), methanol (CH_3OH) and methane (CH_4). The (slightly) negative value of ΔG_{red} for methanol formation implies an exothermic production reaction, and the large value of ΔH_{oxid} implies a high capacity for chemical energy storage. b) The thermodynamics (lower part) and kinetics (upper part) of methanol production by the catalytic hydrogenation of CO_2 . The lower graph shows the equilibrium molar conversion of CO_2 to $MeOH$ as a function of temperature and pressure [34], and the upper graph shows the predicted molar conversion achieved in a single- and a 4-pass plug flow reactor, using a $Cu/ZnO/Al_2O_3$ catalyst [35]. See SI Appendix for details. Note that the conversion in a single pass reactor cannot exceed the equilibrium value predicted by thermodynamics.

Figure 4. Marine design considerations for solar methanol islands. a) A schematic moored arrangement of solar islands carrying PV cells. Each island is based on concentric floating toroidal tubes. b) Predictions of a simple linear theory [46] for the amplitude h of the vertical motion of a single toroidal tube (evaluated at the angular position $\beta=\pi/2$ around the torus, at right angles to the incoming waves), relative to that of the water surface and normalized by the incoming wave amplitude ζ_a , as a function of the incoming wave wavelength λ , for the three lowest deformation modes: heave, pitch and fundamental bending. The red curve is for a torus with diameter $2R=100$ m, minor radius $r=1.1$ m and wall thickness $t_w=0.1$ m, and the blue and green curves are for smaller and larger torii, respectively, with the minor radius scaled to preserve the areal mass density of the island and the condition for 50% draft. The magenta curve shows a typical wave spectrum $S(\omega)$ (with the angular frequency $\omega = \sqrt{2\pi g / \lambda}$) for a fully-aroused sea, for sea state 6 in the North Pacific and North Atlantic, with significant wave height $H_{1/3} = 5$ m and mean wave period $T_1 = 9.6$ s [48]. See SI Appendix for details.

Figure 5. The geography and climatic influence of solar methanol islands. a) Geographical locations (magenta) for solar methanol islands satisfying the following physical conditions: average insolation > 175 W/m^2 , 100 year maximum wave height < 7 m, water depth < 600 m and absence of tropical hurricanes (for details, see SI Appendix). b) (top) The anthropogenic carbon emissions according to the Representative Concentration Pathway RCP4.5 (blue curve). The other curves show the net carbon emissions under the assumption that solar methanol island facilities are introduced beginning in the year 2025, with a doubling of capacity every 3.4 years. The various colors correspond to different first-year rates of avoided carbon emission, increasing from 10^{-6} to 10^0 gigatons C in steps of a factor 10. (bottom) The corresponding evolution of atmospheric CO_2 concentration, based on RCP4.5, without and with solar methanol island clusters. For details of the calculation, see SI Appendix.