

Scaling-up Engineering Biology for Enhanced Environmental Solutions

Francis Hassard, Thomas P. Curtis, Gabriela C. Dotro, Peter Golyshin, Tony Gutierrez, Sonia Heaven, Louise Horsfall, Bruce Jefferson, Davey L. Jones, Natalio Krasnogor, Vinod Kumar, David J. Lea-Smith, Kristell Le Corre Pidou, Yongqiang Liu, Tao Lyu, Ronan R. McCarthy, Boyd McKew, Cindy Smith, Alexander Yakunin, Zhugen Yang, Yue Zhang, and Frederic Coulon*



Cite This: *ACS Synth. Biol.* 2024, 13, 1586–1588



Read Online

ACCESS |

Metrics & More

Article Recommendations

Synthetic biology (SynBio) offers transformative solutions for addressing environmental challenges by engineering organisms capable of degrading pollutants, enhancing carbon

sequestration, and valorizing waste (Figure 1). These innovations hold the potential to revolutionize bioremediation strategies, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable environmental

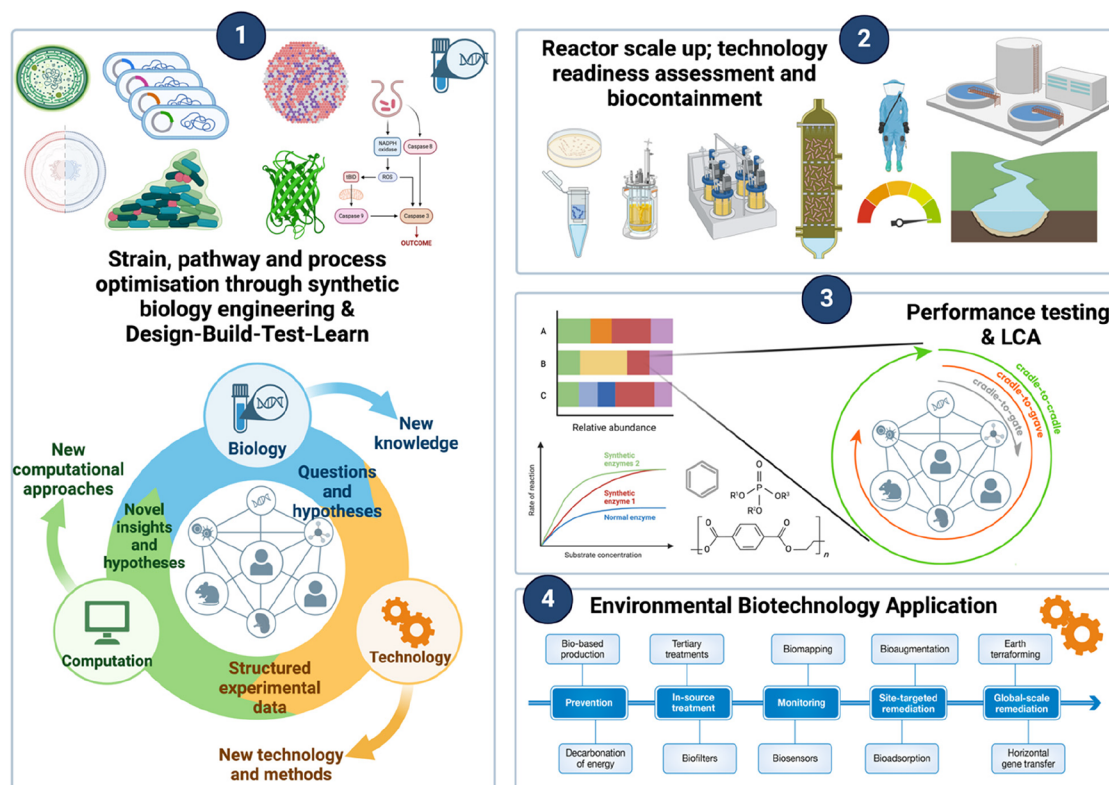


Figure 1. Research priorities for Synthetic Biology for Environmental Biotechnology Solutions. LCA = Life Cycle Assessment. Panel 4 is adapted from ref 1. Copyright 2018, EMBO Press.

Received: April 25, 2024

Published: June 21, 2024



management.¹ Advances in SynBio, including automation, precise manipulation of genetic material,² and design of semisynthetic organisms with enhanced capabilities, can improve the efficiency of microbes for eliminating pollutants such as hydrocarbons and plastics or extracting valuable resources from the environment.³ Genome editing technologies, such as CRISPR-Cas9, allows the editing of genomes with unprecedented accuracy, facilitating the development of organisms with desired traits or functions.⁴ Furthermore, SynBio encompasses the engineering of metabolic enzymes within organisms, leading to the design of microbial factories capable of degrading complex and persistent chemicals, and converting waste to valuable resources.⁵ These advancements also facilitate the manipulation of bacterial social behaviors, offering the capacity for tunable control at the multicellular level and engineered biofilms.⁵

Biofoundries are taking advantages of automated and high-throughput technologies to engineer biological systems, facilitating the design, construction, and testing of genetic constructs, such as synthetic genomes and minimal cells, with specific functionalities.⁶ By providing the essential infrastructure and expertise, they play a pivotal role in advancing synthetic biology and biotechnology and therefore accelerating the development of innovative environmental biotechnologies for various applications, including environmental remediation, healthcare, and industrial processes.⁶

Despite the immense promise of SynBio for environmental applications, several challenges remain, including scaling up laboratory-based experiments to real-world applications, addressing the ethical, regulatory, and public acceptance transparently, and understanding microbial interactions within engineered microbial communities, as introducing synthetic organisms or modifying existing ones could disrupt natural community dynamics and lead to unintended consequences.⁷ Thus, balancing the desired engineering goals with maintaining ecosystem stability and resilience is crucial to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of engineered microbial communities. Emerging mathematical models for metabolic transitions and interactions are invaluable tools, enhancing our understanding of both synthetic and natural consortia. These models also play a key role in strengthening iterative Design-Build-Test-Learn (DBTL) cycles and conventional bioreactor engineering approaches⁸ (Figure 1). As the scale and ambition of SynBio solutions for the environment grow, and concomitant with the increased sophistication in the DBTL cycle, there is a need to standardize chassis specification,⁹ more robustly barcode engineered strains, and more transparently track the process of cellular engineering using specialized version control systems.¹⁰

The UK-based Environmental Biotechnology Innovation Centre (EBIC) funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BB/Y008332/1) serves as an Engineering Biology Hub for Environmental Solutions. EBIC is committed to enabling the responsible and safe scaling up of SynBio solutions for environmental remediation solutions with a focus on collaborative efforts and innovative approaches to foster sustainable solutions for the benefit of the society. The hub also allocated a flexible fund of nearly £2 million for open competition, specifically targeting early career researchers, aiming to advance SynBio research and cultivate the next generation of scientists.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

Frederic Coulon — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0002-4384-3222; Email: f.coulon@cranfield.ac.uk

Authors

Francis Hassard — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0003-4803-6523

Thomas P. Curtis — Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 5TG, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0002-9009-1748

Gabriela C. Dotro — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.

Peter Golyshin — Bangor University, Gwynedd LL57 2UW, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0002-5433-0350

Tony Gutierrez — Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, U.K.

Sonia Heaven — University of Southampton, Southampton SO16 7QF, U.K.

Louise Horsfall — University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH9 3FF, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0003-1594-2992

Bruce Jefferson — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.

Davey L. Jones — Bangor University, Gwynedd LL57 2UW, U.K.

Natalio Krasnogor — Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 5TG, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0002-2651-4320

Vinod Kumar — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0001-8967-6119

David J. Lea-Smith — University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, U.K.

Kristell Le Corre Pidou — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.

Yongqiang Liu — University of Southampton, Southampton SO16 7QF, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0001-9688-1786

Tao Lyu — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0001-5162-8103

Ronan R. McCarthy — Brunel University London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, U.K.

Boyd McKew — University of Essex, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ, U.K.

Cindy Smith — University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8LT, U.K.

Alexander Yakunin — Bangor University, Gwynedd LL57 2UW, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0003-0813-6490

Zhugen Yang — Cranfield University, Bedford MK43 0AL, U.K.; orcid.org/0000-0003-4183-8160

Yue Zhang — University of Southampton, Southampton SO16 7QF, U.K.

Complete contact information is available at:

<https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/acssynbio.4c00292>

Author Contributions

F.H. and F.C. conceived and wrote this viewpoint with the input of all authors. All authors approved the final version.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is funded by Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) through an Engineering Biology

Hub award (grant number: BB/Y008332/1). The figure was produced using Biorender.

■ REFERENCES

- (1) de Lorenzo, V.; Prather, K. L. J.; Chen, G.-Q.; O'Day, E.; von Kameke, C.; et al. The power of synthetic biology for bioproduction, remediation and pollution control: The UN's Sustainable Development Goals will inevitably require the application of molecular biology and biotechnology on a global scale. *EMBO Rep.* **2018**, *19*, e45658 DOI: [10.15252/embr.201745246](https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.201745246).
- (2) de Dios, R.; Gadar, K.; McCarthy, R. A high-efficiency scar-free genome-editing toolkit for *Acinetobacter baumannii*. *J. Antimicrob. Chemother.* **2022**, *77*, 3390–3398, DOI: [10.1093/jac/dkac328](https://doi.org/10.1093/jac/dkac328).
- (3) Capeness, M. J.; Horsfall, L. E. Synthetic biology approaches towards the recycling of metals from the environment. *Biochem. Soc. Trans.* **2020**, *48*, 1367–1378.
- (4) Jaiswal, S.; Shukla, P. Alternative Strategies for Microbial Remediation of Pollutants via Synthetic Biology. *Front. Microbiol.* **2020**, *11*, 808 DOI: [10.3389/fmicb.2020.00808](https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.00808).
- (5) Rubin, B. E.; Diamond, S.; Cress, F.; Crits-Christoph, A.; et al. Species- and site-specific genome editing in complex bacterial communities. *Nat. Microb.* **2022**, *7*, 34–47, DOI: [10.1038/s41564-021-01014-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41564-021-01014-7).
- (6) Rees-Garbutt, J.; Chalkley, O.; Landon, S.; et al. Designing minimal genomes using whole-cell models. *Nat. Commun.* **2020**, *11*, 836 DOI: [10.1038/s41467-020-14545-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-14545-0).
- (7) Brooks, S. M.; Alper, H. S. Applications, challenges, and needs for employing synthetic biology beyond the lab. *Nat. Commun.* **2021**, *12*, 1390 DOI: [10.1038/s41467-021-21740-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-21740-0).
- (8) Konur, S.; Mierla, L.; Fellermann, H.; Ladroue, C.; Brown, B.; Wipat, A.; Twycross, J.; Dun, B. P.; Kalvala, S.; Gheorghe, M.; Krasnogor, N. Toward Full-Stack In Silico Synthetic Biology: Integrating Model Specification, Simulation, Verification, and Biological Compilation. *ACS Synth. Biol.* **2021**, *10*, 1931–1945, DOI: [10.1021/acssynbio.1c00143](https://doi.org/10.1021/acssynbio.1c00143).
- (9) de Lorenzo, V.; Krasnogor, N.; Schmidt, M. For the sake of the Bioeconomy: define what a Synthetic Biology Chassis is. *New Biotechnology* **2021**, *60*, 44–51, DOI: [10.1016/j.nbt.2020.08.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nbt.2020.08.004).
- (10) Tellechea-Luzardo, J.; Hobbs, L.; Velazquez, E.; Pelechova, L.; Woods, S.; de Lorenzo, V.; Krasnogor, N.; et al. Versioning biological cells for trustworthy cell engineering. *Nat. Commun.* **2022**, *13*, 765 DOI: [10.1038/s41467-022-28350-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-28350-4).



DSPACE

<https://dspace.org/>

Scaling-up engineering biology for enhanced environmental solutions

Hassard, Francis; Curtis, Thomas P.; Dotro, Gabriela C.; Golyshin, Peter; Gutierrez, Tony ...

2024-06-01

American Chemical Society

<https://doi.org/10.1021/acssynbio.4c00292>

Hassard F, Curtis TP, Dotro GC, et al., (2024) Scaling-up engineering biology for enhanced environmental solutions. ACS Synthetic Biology, Volume 13, Issue 6, June 2024, pp.1586-1588