Floating Bio-Islands for Wastewater Remediation Using Aquatic Plants and Microalgae

1. Introduction

Water pollution, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, is a growing concern due to excessive nutrient loads, organic matter accumulation, and declining water quality. Floating bio-islands—engineered analogues of natural wetlands present a promising, eco-friendly, and affordable solution for restoring aquatic health. This project proposes a network of floating bioremediation units built from recycled or upcycled materials. These mobile units use aquatic plants and microalgae to passively filter contaminants, enhance biodiversity, and convert biomass into beneficial resources. By combining ecological engineering with circular economy principles, this solution aligns well with urban sustainability goals and community-led environmental stewardship.

2. Concept Overview

The core idea is to develop modular, floating bio-islands that can adapt to varying water levels while hosting a symbiotic ecosystem of aquatic plants and microalgae. These islands, fashioned from repurposed boats, IBC tanks, or paddleboards, feature passive water circulation via drilled holes. Aquatic vegetation and beneficial microalgae remove excess nutrients, promote dissolved oxygen generation, and offer a habitat for aquatic fauna.

Each unit is self-contained, loosely tethered, and capable of rising and falling with the water column, making it highly suitable for canals, reservoirs, stormwater ponds, and stagnant lakes. The design supports both temporary installations and long-term deployment with minimal maintenance.

3. Key Benefits

- **Passive Water Treatment**: Functions without pumps or power, relying on gravity-fed water exchange.
- **Dynamic Water Level Adaptation**: Floats adjust seamlessly with rising or falling levels.

- **Modular & Scalable**: Each unit functions independently; clusters can be scaled based on site size.
- **Affordable Construction**: Utilizes upcycled and low-cost local materials.
- **Dual Biomass Output**: Harvestable plant and algal biomass with valorization potential.
- **Public Engagement & Education**: Ideal for involving local schools, NGOs, and citizen groups.
- **Environmental Rejuvenation**: Reduces eutrophication, boosts oxygenation, and attracts wildlife.

4. Design & Deployment Strategy

A. System Components:

- **Structure**: Recycled barrels, IBCs, paddleboards fitted with holes for water flow.
- **Biotic Layer**: Selected macrophytes and native microalgal strains.
- **Anchoring**: Jute ropes and biodegradable ballast to allow gentle movement.

1. Design Overview

✓ **Leaky Plastic Boats:** Repurposed or custom-molded plastic boats are designed with controlled leaks to maintain a shallow internal water depth of ~15 cm. This mimics wetland-like conditions ideal for plant and algae growth. The slow exchange promotes continuous nutrient uptake without stressing plants.

✓ **Material Considerations:** Use of recycled, UV-resistant PET plastics (as seen in BioHaven systems) ensures durability and environmental safety. Only BPA-free, non-leaching plastics are considered to avoid contamination.

✓ **Modular Structure:** Boats are grouped into clusters or linked modules to enable flexibility in deployment and allow natural movement without blocking water flow. Anchoring with tethers ensures positional stability while permitting limited mobility.

2. Biological Components

✓ **Duckweed and Aquatic Plants:** Duckweed (*Lemna* spp.) is ideal due to its fast growth, excellent nutrient uptake, and ability to suppress algal overgrowth through surface shading. Other compatible species include:

- ✓ ***Salvinia***: Moderate growth, good nutrient removal.
- ✓ **Frogbit:** Moderate growth, aquaponics-friendly.
- ✓ **Pickerelweed & Water Mint:** Suitable for habitat creation and moderate nutrient removal.
- ✓ **Algae:** Green algae can co-exist with duckweed in balanced systems. The controlled leak mechanism ensures nutrient replenishment without algal over blooming. If algae are used exclusively, light and nutrient levels must be carefully managed to prevent system crashes.
- ✓ **Microbial Colonization:** Surfaces of the boats can support microbial biofilms that assist in nutrient cycling and further purify the water.

3. Functional and Ecological Benefits

- ✓ **Nutrient Removal:** Plants and algae absorb excess nitrogen, phosphorus, and heavy metals, improving water quality.
- ✓ **Carbon Sequestration:** Algae act as carbon sinks, absorbing atmospheric and dissolved CO_2.
- ✓ **Biodiversity Enhancement:** Floating roots and boat surfaces create habitats for fish, insects, and microorganisms
- ✓ **Erosion Control:** The floating modules act as buffers, reducing wave energy and protecting riverbanks.
- ✓ **Mosquito Mitigation:** Continuous, slow water movement through leaks reduces stagnation, thereby preventing mosquito breeding.

4. Comparative Advantage and Integration

- ✓ **BioHaven Islands:** This use recycled plastic matrix for buoyancy and microbial colonization. The leaky boat concept offers similar benefits with added flexibility and mobility.
- ✓ **Biomatrix Ecosystems:** Known for mechanical aeration and multi-species planting systems. Integrating aeration into the boat design could further boost algal and duckweed productivity.

5. If Only Algae Is Used

The system can be optimized for algal growth alone by maintaining appropriate nutrient levels, light exposure, and gentle circulation through the leaks. This would:

- ✓ Maximize nutrient uptake and CO_2 sequestration.
- ✓ Support biofilm development on boat surfaces.
- ✓ Allow use in saline or industrial wastewater where floating plants may not thrive.

B. Implementation Phases:

1. **Site Assessment**
   - Identify pollution levels, flow dynamics, and ecological risks.
   - Map nutrient hotspots and stagnant zones.
2. **Prototype Development**
   - Fabricate 1–3 test units with minor design variations.
   - Test buoyancy, leakage rate, plant establishment, and tethering.
3. **Full-Scale Installation**
   - Deploy 10–50 units depending on site size.
   - Ensure placement near pollution inflow points and low-circulation zones.
4. **Monitoring Plan**
   - Monthly testing of water quality: pH, BOD, COD, turbidity, nitrates, phosphates.
   - Biomass growth rates, visual health assessment, mosquito population checks.
5. **Maintenance and Harvesting**
   - Bi-weekly biomass harvesting and pruning.
   - Periodic replanting and container checks.
   - Data collection and adaptive design improvement.

5. Biomass Valorization Pathways

- **Aquatic Plants**:
  - *Lemna* and *Azolla* are rich in proteins and suitable for animal feed.
  - Can be fermented into biofertilizers or directly composted.
- **Microalgae**:
  - Harvested biomass can be dried and carbonized into biochar.

- Can be used as feedstock for bioplastics or bio pigments.

- **Biomass Valorization of microalgae:** Once algae are harvested from the floating system, they can be processed into valuable biomass products using the following methods:

1. **Harvesting Algae Biomass:** Methods include:

✓ **Filtration:** Fine mesh or filters to separate algae from water.
✓ **Centrifugation:** Effective in large-scale setups.
✓ **Flocculation:** Using natural agents to clump algae for easier separation.

2. **Conversion to Biochar:**Biochar is produced by pyrolyzing biomass in the absence of oxygen.

✓ Drying: Algae should be dried below 10% moisture (solar or air drying).
✓ Pyrolysis: Heating between 300–700°C in oxygen-free chambers.
✓ Low temp (300–400°C) → more biochar.
✓ High temp (500–700°C) → more bio-oil and syngas.
✓ Uses: Soil amendment, water filtration, and carbon sequestration.

3. **Other Biomass Conversion Pathways:**

✓ **Biogas:**

- Anaerobic digestion produces methane-rich biogas and digestate (fertilizer).
- Effective strains: Spirulina, Chlorella (high lipid/protein content).

✓ **Biofuels:**
✓ Lipids → biodiesel (via transesterification).
✓ Carbohydrates → bioethanol (via fermentation).
✓ **Organic Fertilizer/Compost:**Direct composting of algal biomass enriches soil due to high N and P content.

Routine harvesting prevents nutrient saturation and promotes continuous growth.

6. Potential Challenges and Solutions

Challenge	Suggested Solution
Mosquito Breeding	Use mosquito fish, ensure water flow through design, optional surface agitation
Structural Degradation	Choose UV-stable, recycled HDPE; monthly integrity checks
Extreme Flooding	Use elastic mooring systems with adjustable tension
Limited Treatment Per Unit	Deploy in targeted clusters; integrate with other treatment solutions
Frequent Maintenance	Rotate volunteer/community groups; co-develop apps for scheduling
Species Invasiveness	Use native or regionally approved aquatic species only
Visual Disruption	Co-design units with local artists or schools; install educational signage

7. Economic Feasibility

Item	Cost Estimate
Boat Frame (Recycled)	$5–10
Planting Material	Sourced locally or cultivated in advance
Anchors & Tethering	<$3 per unit using biodegradable materials
Monitoring Kit (shared)	$100–200 for entire site
Labor	Volunteer-led, internship-based, or CSR-supported

Estimated Cost per Operational Unit: $10–20 depending on scale and materials.

Estimated Pilot Cluster Cost (10–20 boats): $150–300 including deployment, signage, and 3-month monitoring.

8. Broader Applications and Impacts

- **Urban Waterway Revival**: Address neglected canals and stagnant basins.
- **Education Platforms**: Floating classrooms and demonstration modules.

- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**: Branded islands as visible impact projects.
- **Climate Action Tools**: Carbon-sequestering biochar creation.
- **Livelihood Generation**: Training programs for biomass valorization.

9. Precedents and Inspiration

- **East Kolkata Wetlands, India**: Long-standing model of wastewater-fed aquaculture.
- **Dal Lake Bio-Islands, Srinagar**: Duckweed rafts for nutrient stripping.
- **Bangkok Floating Gardens**: Community-built floating vegetable gardens.
- **Kenya's Lake Naivasha Islands**: Papyrus-based floating units with fish sanctuaries.

10. Conclusion

This proposal presents a replicable, adaptable, and ecologically sound approach to wastewater treatment using floating bio-islands. With minimal cost and infrastructure requirements, the system offers an effective intervention to enhance water quality, reclaim biodiversity, and generate circular value from waste streams. The fusion of traditional ecological knowledge with modern design enables wide stakeholder participation—making this solution ideal for green cities, educational institutions, CSR programs, and policy pilots targeting water resilience.

Prepared By:

Dr. Jasmin K. A.
Chief Scientific Consultant
PhyEcoSyS Pvt. Ltd
Cochin
India.

Recommended Plant and Algal Species

Species	Tolerance to Wastewater	Suitability for Leaky Boats	Growth Rate	Key Benefits
Lemna minor	High (municipal/dairy)	Excellent	Very fast	Nutrient uptake, light suppression
Spirodela polyrhiza	High (agro-industrial)	Excellent	Fast	Heavy metal tolerance, biomass-rich
Salvinia	Moderate	Good	Moderate	Nutrient removal, floating fern
Frogbit	Moderate	Good	Moderate	Aquaponics-friendly, habitat enhancement
***Tetraselmis* sp.**	Very high (saline)	Algae-only system	Fast	CO_2 capture, salinity tolerance, lipid-rich
***Chlorella* sp.**	High	Possible (with light access)	Fast	Nutrient cycling, biomass for valorization
Pickerelweed	Moderate	Possible (if rooted)	Moderate	Habitat creation, ornamental value
Water Mint	Low to moderate	Possible	Moderate	Pollinator support, ecological enrichment