The microbial nitrogen-cycling network

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Abstract | Nitrogen is an essential component of all living organisms and the main nutrient limiting life on our planet. By far the largest inventory of freely accessible nitrogen is atmospheric dinitrogen, but most organisms rely on more bioavailable forms of nitrogen, such as ammonium and nitrate, for growth. The availability of these substrates depends on diverse nitrogen transforming reactions that are carried out by complex networks of metabolically versatile microorganisms. In this Review, we summarize our current understanding of the microbial nitrogen-cycling network including novel processes, their underlying biochemical pathways, the involved microorganisms, their environmental importance and industrial applications.

Introduction

Nitrogen is an essential element for all living organisms and is required for the biosynthesis of key cellular components such as proteins and nucleic acids. Atmospheric dinitrogen gas is the largest inventory of freely accessible nitrogen and it is biologically available to highly diverse but rare nitrogen-fixing bacteria and archaea. Other organisms must rely for growth on more reactive forms of nitrogen, such as ammonium and nitrate. This bioavailable nitrogen is rare in many environments, and the availability of this growth-limiting nutrient is controlled primarily by microbial reactions that alter the oxidation state of nitrogen.

Human activity has had a profound effect on the amount of bioavailable nitrogen, mainly due to the high input of industrial nitrogen-based fertilizers[1]. Food production for about 50% of the human population currently relies on industrial fertilizers[2]. This fertilizer use and legume cultivation has nearly doubled the nitrogen input to terrestrial and marine ecosystems[1]. To predict the consequences of this input, there is a pressing need to understand the basic mechanisms that underlie microbial nitrogen transformations.

Microorganisms can transform nitrogen compounds as reactive and toxic as nitric oxide or as inert as dinitrogen gas. Microbial transformations of nitrogen are often depicted as a cycle

consisting of six distinct processes that proceed in an orderly fashion. This view of the nitrogen cycle implies that a molecule of dinitrogen gas is first 'fixed' to ammonia, which is 'assimilated' into organic nitrogen (that is, biomass). The degradation of organic nitrogen, 'ammonification', releases a molecule of ammonia, which is subsequently oxidized to nitrate through 'nitrification' ($NH_4^+ \rightarrow NO_2^- \rightarrow NO_3^-$) and eventually converted back to a molecule of dinitrogen gas through 'denitrification' ($NO_3^- \rightarrow NO_2^- \rightarrow NO \rightarrow N_2O \rightarrow N_2$) or 'anaerobic ammonium oxidation' (anammox; $NO_2^- + NH_4^+ \rightarrow N_2$). In reality, there is not one balanced nitrogen cycle. Instead, the six distinct processes are associated with nitrogen fluxes of vastly different magnitude (Box 1).

Nitrogen-transforming microorganisms are generally classified according to one of the six processes they are involved in: 'nitrifiers' carry out nitrification, 'denitrifiers' denitrification, 'N_2-fixers' nitrogen fixation, etc. However, genomic data collected during the last decade challenges this classification, as it has revealed tremendous metabolic versatility within nitrogen-transforming microorganisms. We now know that diverse microorganisms can fix dinitrogen gas and denitrify simultaneously[3, 4], and organisms classified as nitrite oxidizers can also grow on formate, hydrogen and sulfide[5, 6]. Thus, due to their metabolic versatility, it has become nearly impossible to objectively classify nitrogen-transforming microorganisms according to the six classical processes (Box 1). We will use process names, such as denitrification and nitrification, but refrain from classifying organisms accordingly. This Review will focus on the redox reactions that convert nitrogen compounds, biochemical pathways, and the responsible enzymes (Fig. 1) and microorganisms.

Based on our current understanding, microorganisms can convert nitrogen compounds spanning redox states **[G]** from -3 to +5 using fourteen discrete redox reactions (Fig. 1). There is no change in redox state in the interconversion of organic nitrogen to ammonia. Nitrogen-converting enzymes are often found in very diverse microorganisms (see below). Many of these enzymes have only recently been identified. Four new reactions were discovered in the last decade: hydroxylamine oxidation to nitric oxide[7, 8](Fig. 1; reaction 7), nitric oxide dismutation to dinitrogen gas and oxygen[9] (9), hydrazine synthesis[10] (12), and hydrazine oxidation to dinitrogen gas[10] (13). In addition, many new metabolic capabilities were discovered, such as phototrophic nitrite oxidation[11] and complete ammonia oxidation to nitrate (comammox)[12, 13], and novel microorganisms such as ammonia-oxidizing archaea[14], denitrifying eukaryotic foraminifera[15] and symbiotic heterotrophic nitrogen-fixing cyanobacteria[16] were identified.

In this Review, we present these new findings in the context of our current understanding of microbial transformations of nitrogen. We describe microbial nitrogen-transforming reactions,

microorganisms and their physiological and environmental function, and present reactions that are likely to exist, but have not yet been discovered. Furthermore, we will discuss the complex network of interactions between nitrogen-transforming microorganisms and its impact on global biogeochemical nitrogen cycling.

Nitrogen-transforming reactions

Nitrogen fixation.

Atmospheric dinitrogen gas is the largest reservoir of freely accessible nitrogen, but it is biologically available only to microorganisms that carry the nitrogenase metalloenzyme and thus can fix dinitrogen into ammonia. Nitrogenase is widespread in bacteria and archaea and provides them with a competitive advantage in environments that are depleted in bioavailable nitrogen. There are three different types of nitrogenase — iron-iron (FeFe), vanadium-iron (VFe) and molybdenum-iron (MoFe) nitrogenases[17]. They have similar sequence, structural and functional properties, but vary in their metal cofactor. All nitrogenases are composed of two components (Fig 2a). *anfDGK*, *vnfDGK* or *nifDK* encode the catalytic component of nitrogenases that have iron, vanadium or molybdenum in the active center, respectively[17, 18]. In addition, *anfH*, *vnfH* or *nifH* encode iron-containing electron transfer proteins (known as nitrogenase reductase or iron protein. *NifH* is used as a gene marker for the detection of nitrogen-fixing microorganisms in the environment[18]. The soil bacterium *Azotobacter vinelandii* encodes all three types of nitrogenases, whereas other microorganisms such as the marine nitrogen-fixers *Trichodesmium* spp. only have MoFe nitrogenase[18]. Whereas vanadium is seldom limiting, molybdenum and iron are rare in the terrestrial and marine environment, respectively, and can therefore limit nitrogen fixation in these ecosystems[19].

During nitrogen fixation, an electron carrier such as ferredoxin first reduces the iron protein, which subsequently reduces the catalytic component. This requires the iron and catalytic proteins to dissociate and reassociate[20]. Per molecule of N_2 fixed 16 molecules of adenosine triphosphate are consumed[20]. Additional bioenergetic costs arise from the production of powerful reductants **[G]** such as ferredoxin, and the protection of the oxygen-labile nitrogenase[21]. Because oxygen exposure deactivates nitrogenases, oxygenic phototrophic **[G]** cyanobacteria, such as *Trichodesmium* spp., *Crocosphaera watsonii,* and *Nodularia* spp., often separate N_2 fixation from photosynthesis, either spatially (for example in heterocysts, which are specialized N_2-fixing cells) or temporally[22]. Even non-photosynthetic organisms living in oxic environments require mechanisms, such as enhanced oxygen respiration, detoxification via

superoxide dismutase and conformational changes of nitrogenase, to protect their nitrogenase from oxygen[23]. The existence of a completely different, oxygen-insensitive pathway of N_2 fixation using an 'unusual nitrogenase' was recently refuted[24].

Although no N_2-fixing eukaryotes have been found, many nitrogen-fixing microorganisms live in symbioses with eukaryotes. The unicellular cyanobacterium *Candidatus* Atelocyanobacterium thalassa (UCYN-A), which lives in symbiosis with small unicellular haptophyte algae such as *Braarudosphaera bigelowii*, is one of the most widespread nitrogen-fixing microorganisms and has a key role in marine nitrogen fixation [16, 25]. Symbiotic nitrogen-fixing microorganisms are also part of the gut microbiota of animals such as termites and can be found in special bacteriocytes **[G]** in bivalves[26, 27]. Moreover, nitrogen-fixing members of the Rhizobiales order live in special root nodules of crop legumes, such as alfalfa, beans, peas and soy, which provide 20% of food protein worldwide (Fig. 3c.) [28].

Ammonia oxidation to hydroxylamine.

All known aerobic ammonia-oxidizing bacteria and archaea activate ammonia by oxidizing it to hydroxylamine using ammonia monooxygenase (AMO)[29]. Most ammonia-oxidizing bacteria belong to the Betaproteobacteria and Gammaproteobacteria classes and are chemolithoautotrophs that oxidize ammonia to nitrite[30]. They can be found in nearly all environments, including fertilized soils[31] and wastewater treatment plants. Archaea belonging to the Thaumarchaeota **[G]** phylum such as *Nitrosopumilus maritimus* can also grow chemolithoautotrophically by oxidizing ammonia to nitrite[14]. Their discovery resolved the long-standing mystery of the apparently rare ammonia oxidizers in the oceans[32, 33]. Thaumarchaeota are more abundant than bacteria in some sandy and silty clay soils[31, 34]. Furthermore, the isolation of the acidophilic **[G]** ammonia-oxidizing archaeon *Candidatus* Nitrosotalea devanaterra overturned the common assumption that chemolithoautotrophic ammonia oxidation could not occur at low pH because of low ammonia availability[35]. Many ammonia oxidizers, such as *Nitrosospira* sp. and *Nitrososphaera viennensis*, can also degrade organic nitrogen compounds, for example by hydrolyzing urea with ureases, to produce additional ammonia[36, 37]. The archaeon *Nitrososphaera gargensis* can also produce ammonia by hydrolyzing cyanate with a cyanase[38].

Recently, the ability to oxidize ammonia has also been found in members of the genus *Nitrospira*, which were previously assumed to only be capable of nitrite oxidation[12, 13]. The discovery of these bacteria that oxidize ammonia to nitrate (complete ammonia oxidation (comammox)), refuted the dogma that the oxidation of ammonia and nitrite requires two distinct

groups of microorganisms. The bacteria that perform the comammox process such as *Nitrospira inopinata* appear well adapted to ammonia-limited environments and can outcompete most cultured ammonia oxidizing microorganisms for ammonia[39]. 2The transient accumulation of nitrite in comammox cultures grown on ammonia indicates that they more efficiently oxidize ammonia than nitrite[12, 13, 39]. We hypothesize that bacteria that perform the comammox process would oxidize ammonia to nitrate under ammonia-limited conditions and perform partial ammonia oxidation to nitrite under oxygen-limited conditions.

AMO is closely related to methane monooxygenase (MMO), which is found in methanotrophs **[G]** such as gammaproteobacteria[40] and NC-10[9] **[G]**. MMO can also oxidize ammonia to hydroxylamine, although very inefficiently (Fig. 1) [41]. Similarly, AMO can also oxidize methane, but less efficiently than MMO[30]. Intriguingly, *amo* sequences of bacteria that perform the comammox process were detected in the environment (for example in groundwater) already before their discovery, but were wrongly assigned as particulate methane monooxygenase (*pmo*) genes of the filamentous methane-oxidizing *Crenothrix polyspora*[42]. Recent resequencing of *C. polyspora* and other *Crenothrix* species revealed that they actually contain typical gammaproteobacterial *pmo* and not *amo*[43].

Hydroxylamine oxidation to nitric oxide and further to nitrite.

Aerobic oxidation of ammonia to hydroxylamine is an endergonic **[G]** reaction. Therefore, all aerobic ammonia oxidizers conserve energy by further oxidizing hydroxylamine. It was believed that aerobic ammonia-oxidizing bacteria oxidize hydroxylamine to nitrite using octaheme hydroxylamine oxidoreductase (HAO). Recently, it was shown that the product of HAO is not nitrite but nitric oxide, which is further oxidized to nitrite by an unknown enzyme[7]. Although the enzyme catalyzing the latter reaction has not been conclusively identified, copper-containing nitrite reductase (Cu-NIR) working in reverse has been suggested to catalyze it[7]. All ammonia-oxidizing bacteria, including the newly discovered *Nitrospira* spp., which can oxidize ammonia all the way to nitrate, contain AMO and HAO[12, 13]. By contrast, known ammonia-oxidizing archaea do not encode HAO and the archaeal enzyme responsible for hydroxylamine oxidation remains unknown[44, 45].

HAO belongs to a family of octaheme proteins (Fig. 2b) found in diverse microorganisms[44, 46]. The genomes of anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria encode ~10 HAO-like proteins[46], and one of these also oxidizes hydroxylamine to nitric oxide[8]. In anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria this hydroxylamine oxidase (HOX) recycles hydroxylamine, which leaks from hydrazine synthase (see below).

Methane-oxidizing bacteria also produce hydroxylamine as a result of their unspecific ammonia oxidation activity[30] (see above) and diverse methanotrophs in the Proteobacteria, Verrucomicrobia **[G]**, and NC10 phyla (for example, *Candidatus* Methylomirabilis oxyfera), encode HAO-like proteins that likely oxidize hydroxylamine to nitric oxide, which is further oxidized to nitrite or reduced to nitrous oxide[8, 47, 48]. Currently, it is unknown whether this reaction directly contributes to energy conservation in methane-oxidizing bacteria.

Nitrite oxidation to nitrate.

Nitrite oxidation is the main biochemical pathway that produces nitrate, and is catalyzed by nitrite oxidoreductase (NXR). NXR is encoded by aerobic nitrite-oxidizing bacteria (members of the Alphaproteobacteria, Betaproteobacteria, Gammaproteobacteria, Chloroflexi, Nitrospinae and Nitrospirae phyla)[6], anoxygenic phototrophs **[G]** (for example, *Thiocapsa sp*. strain KS1 and *Rhodopseudomonas sp*. strain LQ17) [11, 49] and anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria[50]. Whereas aerobic nitrite oxidizing bacteria directly couple nitrite oxidation by NXR to energy conservation, anaerobic nitrite-oxidizing bacteria do not. *Thiocapsa sp*. Strain KS1 and *Rhodopseudomonas sp*. strain LQ17 can oxidize nitrite anaerobically by coupling it directly to phototrophy[11, 49]. Further, anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria might couple anaerobic nitrite oxidation to carbon fixation[51].

Nitrite-oxidizing bacteria are metabolically versatile and can grow on other substrates than nitrite[6]. Indeed, the comammox *Nitrospira* species oxidize ammonia to nitrate[12, 13]. *Nitrospira moscoviensis* grows aerobically on hydrogen and anaerobically on organic acids while respiring nitrate[52, 53]. Nitrate reduction in these nitrite-oxidizing bacteria is also catalyzed by NXR, which is related to bacterial and archaeal nitrate reductases[54].

The concerted activity of nitrite and ammonia oxidizing microorganisms in agricultural soils converts N-based fertilizers to nitrate and has a key role in the loss of fertilizers to river and ground waters leading to the eutrophication **[G]** of rivers, lakes and coastal waters. The same two processes are also used in wastewater treatment plants as the first step of conventional nitrogen removal (Box 2). In marine environments, nitrite-oxidizing bacteria generate nitrate, the dominant form of biologically available nitrogen in the ocean, and contribute to carbon fixation[55].

[H3] Nitrate reduction to nitrite.

Nitrate reduction to nitrite is used for respiration, known as dissimilatory nitrate reduction, and for nitrogen assimilation into biomass. Dissimilatory nitrate reduction to nitrite can be carried

205 out by microorganisms from all three domains of life. These microorganisms occur in all anoxic
206 environments in which nitrate is present, including soils[56], oxygen minimum zones[57], marine
207 sediments[58] and the human gastrointestinal system[59]. The reaction is catalyzed by either a
208 membrane-bound (NAR) or a periplasmic (NAP) nitrate reductase[60]. Many organisms,
209 including the model organism *Paracoccus denitrificans*, contain both NAP and NAR[60]. Nitrate
210 reduction by NAR occurs in the cytoplasm and releases protons to the periplasm (Fig 2c), and
211 thereby directly contributes to energy conservation through the proton motive force **[G]**. By
212 contrast, NAP reduces nitrate to nitrite in the periplasm, and thus does not translocate protons
213 required to create proton motive force[60].
214 Dissimilatory nitrate reduction to nitrite is not merely the first step in denitrification. Some
215 microorganisms such as the giant sulfur oxidizing *Beggiatoa* sp.[61], which is widespread in
216 freshwater and marine sediments, reduce nitrate via nitrite to ammonium and many
217 microorganisms such as some members of the ubiquitous marine clade SAR11[62] only reduce
218 nitrate to nitrite (Fig. 1). Nitrate reduction is a major source of nitrite for other nitrogen-cycling
219 processes including aerobic nitrite oxidation and anammox[62-64]. Dissimilatory nitrate reduction
220 can be coupled to the oxidation of electron donors such as organic matter[65], methane[66, 67] (for
221 example, in *Candidatus* Methanoperedens spp.), sulfur compounds (for example, in
222 *Thiobacillus denitrificans*[68]); H_2 (for example, in *Alcaligenes eutrophus*) or iron (for example,
223 *Ferroglobus placidus*[69]).
224 Nitrate is a major nitrogen source for eukaryotes, bacteria and archaea that contain assimilatory
225 nitrate reductases (NAS)[60]. Considering that nitrate supports at least 20% of marine algal
226 growth[70], nitrate assimilation likely exceeds the magnitude of most other redox driven nitrogen-
227 cycle process in the ocean (Box 1). NAS, together with assimilatory nitrite reductases (see
228 below), produces ammonia, which is incorporated into biomass[60]. Because NAS is located in
229 the cytoplasm, nitrate assimilation requires nitrate transport into the cell by ATP-dependent
230 transporters[60]. Due to this energy requirement, NAS expression is repressed in ammonia-replete
231 environments, such as fertilized soils[60].
232 Bacterial and archaeal NAS together with NAP, NAR and NXR belong to the dimethylsulfoxide
233 reductase family, whereas eukaryotic assimilatory nitrate reductases belong to the sulfite
234 oxidase family[71]. This suggests multiple origins of nitrate reductases. The distinction between
235 assimilatory and dissimilatory nitrate reduction pathways is not absolute. In principle, nitrite
236 produced by assimilatory nitrate reduction could be reduced further in the respiratory chain.
237 Conversely, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* has been shown to use the NAR complex for nitrate
238 assimilation[72].

Nitrite reduction to ammonium.

Nitrite reduction to ammonium is used for both dissimilatory and assimilatory purposes. Dissimilatory nitrite reduction to ammonium is carried out by most bacterial lineages, the thermophilic Crenarcheota *Pyrolobus fumarii*[73], methane-oxidizing archaea[67], diatoms[74] and fungi[75]. This reaction is catalyzed by the periplasmic cytochrome c nitrite reductase (ccNIR) encoded by *nrfA*, the octaheme nitrite reductase (ONR)[76] or the octaheme tetrathionate reductase (OTR)[77]. It is unclear whether the latter two enzymes are used for respiration or detoxification of nitrite or hydroxylamine. Reduction of nitrite to ammonium involves the formation of hydroxylamine as intermediate, which remains bound to the enzyme until it is reduced to ammonium[78].

Interestingly, the anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacterium *K. stuttgartiensis* can reduce nitrite to ammonium, but lacks known ammonium-producing nitrite reductases. It is hypothesized that nitrite reduction to ammonium instead might be accomplished by an HAO-like protein[46]. Recently an HAO encoded by Epsilonproteobacteria (εHAO), such as *Campylobacter fetus* and *Nautilia profundicola*, was shown to reduce nitrite and hydroxylamine to ammonium, although with poor efficiency[79].

Dissimilatory nitrite reduction to ammonium is the key reaction in the so-called dissimilatory nitrate reduction to ammonium (DNRA) process[80]. Microorganisms can grow using DNRA by coupling it to the oxidation of electron donors, such as organic matter, Fe^{2+}, H_2, sulfide and methane[67, 81-83]. Little is known about the environmental importance of DNRA[84, 85]; however, in marine and lake sediments, DNRA appears to be favored over denitrification when there is an excess of electron donor relative to nitrate[58].

Assimilatory nitrite reductases produce ammonium and are as widespread as NAS, and both types of enzymes are often encoded on the same *nas* operon[54]. The formation of primary nitrite maxima **[G]** in the ocean has been attributed to the release of nitrite due to an uncoupling of assimilatory nitrate and nitrite reduction in phytoplankton[86] . The physiological reasons for this uncoupling are still unclear.

Nitrite reduction to nitric oxide.

Many microorganisms have the ability to reduce nitrite to nitric oxide, for example, Proteobacteria, anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria, and Bacteroidetes[54]. These microorganisms are found in many environments, in which nitrate is available and oxygen concentrations are low, such as soils[56], oxygen minimum zones[57] and marine sediments[58]. This

reaction can be catalyzed by two unrelated enzymes: a heme-containing cd_1 nitrite reductase (cd_1NIR encoded by *nirS*) or a Cu-containing nitrite reductase (CuNIR encoded by *nirK*), which are widespread among bacteria and archaea[87]. Both enzymes are located in the periplasm and do not contribute directly to energy conservation[54, 65]. These two enzymes also occur together in a single microorganism, for example in *Rhodothermus marinus*[87].

Commonly, *nirS* and *nirK* are used in environmental studies as gene markers for 'denitrifiers', however, these genes are present in many other microorganisms, including anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria, nitrite and methane-oxidizing bacteria and ammonia-oxidizing bacteria and archaea[88]. Apart from CuNIR and cd_1NIR, other nitrite-reducing enzymes might exist; for example, some anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria contain neither of them, but can reduce nitrite to nitric oxide[89]. To carry out this reaction, these bacteria might use an HAO-like octaheme oxidoreductase[46].

Nitric oxide reduction to nitrous oxide or dinitrogen gas.

Nitric oxide is a signaling molecule, a toxin[90] and an intermediate of the denitrification, nitrification and anammox processes. Additionally, bacteria that perform oxygenic denitrification dismutate two molecules of nitric oxide to one molecule of dinitrogen gas and one molecule of oxygen[9]. Therefore, microorganisms capable of nitric oxide reduction can be found in a wide range of environments, including wastewater treatment plants[46], agricultural soils[56, 91], marine sediments[58] and marine oxygen minimum zones[57]. Microbial nitric oxide reduction (Fig. 1) is the main source of nitrous oxide, a powerful greenhouse gas (310 times more potent than CO_2) and the dominant ozone-depleting agent[92]. Nitrous oxide-producing nitric oxide reductases (NOR) are used for detoxification or respiration of nitric oxide, and belong to a diverse group of enzymes ranging from flavoproteins to heme copper oxidases, which are widespread throughout the tree of life. Flavo-diiron proteins, such as flavorubredoxin nitric oxide reductase (NORvw), are used to detoxify nitric oxide, for example by the sulfate-reducing bacterium *Desulfovibrio gigas*[93, 94]. Other NOR-type enzymes are the NADH-dependent cytochrome P_{450}NOR found in the mitochondria of fungi, such as *Fusarium oxysporum*[95], and the hybrid cluster protein HCP recently discovered in *Escherichia coli*[96].

The heme copper oxidase family contains terminal oxidases, the cytochrome c-dependent cNOR, quinol-dependent qNOR and the copper-containing Cu_ANOR, which all have a role in nitric oxide respiration[97-99]. Nitrous oxide is an intermediate of denitrification and NOR is present in microorganisms, such as *P. denitrificans* and *Pseudomonas stutzeri*[65]. Nitrous oxide can also be the end-product of denitrification in some microorganisms, such as *Pseudomonas*

chlororaphis[65]. Ammonia-oxidizing bacteria can produce nitrous oxide in a process termed nitrifier-denitrifcation, in which NOR is used to reduce nitric oxide formed upon nitrite reduction[30]. In cultures of ammonia-oxidizing bacteria and bacteria capable of carrying out the comammox process, nitrous oxide can also be formed through abiotic reactions of the extracellular intermediates hydroxylamine and nitric oxide[100]. Additionally, ammonia-oxidizing bacteria can produce nitrous oxide through the NOR-catalyzed reduction of nitric oxide, which is produced during hydroxylamine oxidation[7, 30]. Similar to ammonia-oxidizing bacteria, methanotrophic bacteria produce nitrous oxide through the NOR-catalyzed reduction of nitric oxide formed upon hydroxylamine-oxidation (see above) and nitrite reduction[47, 48]. By contrast, nitrous oxide production in ammonia-oxidizing archaea might exclusively involve the abiotic reactions of the intermediates nitric oxide and hydroxylamine[45].

The use of nitrogen-based fertilizers has drastically increased nitrous oxide emissions[101]. Due to the concerted activity of nitrogen-transforming microorganisms, 3 to 5% of the nitrogen used as agricultural fertilizer is converted into nitrous oxide[102, 103]. Nitrogen-based fertilizers are increasingly used to grow crops for biofuel production, which represents a potential replacement for fossil fuels. Herein lies a dilemma — the more fertilizer is used to produce biofuels, the more nitrous oxide emissions increase. Therefore, the fertilizer use for biofuel production counteracts the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions that is achieved by reducing the use of fossil fuels[103].

Nitric oxide dismutation **[G]** to dinitrogen and oxygen gas (Fig. 1) is a recently discovered nitrogen transforming reaction[104]. Microorganisms such as *Ca*. Methylomirabilis oxyfera found in anoxic systems rich in methane and nitrate (for example in eutrophied lakes and wetlands) use this reaction to produce their own molecular oxygen from nitrite[9]. This enables *Ca*. Methylomirabilis oxyfera to live in anoxic environments and to use the aerobic methane oxidation pathway[9]. The dismutation reaction might involve an unusual qNOR, tentatively called nitric oxide dismutase (NO-D)[9]. Nitric oxide dismutation might be more widespread than previously thought, as similar unusual qNOR sequences are present in other phyla, such as Gammaproteobacteria (for example, HdN1 strain) and Bacteroidetes (for example, *Muricauda ruestringensis*)[104].

Nitrous oxide reduction to nitrogen gas.

Microbial nitrous oxide reduction to nitrogen gas is the main sink of this powerful greenhouse gas. The only known enzyme that catalyzes this reaction is nitrous oxide reductase (NOS), which, due to its location in the periplasm, does not directly contribute to energy conservation

through proton motive force[105]. Diverse bacteria, including members of the Proteobacteria, Bacteroidetes and Chlorobi phyla, and archaea from the Crenarchaeota and Halobacteria[106] utilize NOS. The discovery of a slightly different NOS-encoding gene in *Wolinella succinogenes*[107] revealed an overlooked diversity of NOS sequences in soils[108]. Intriguingly, organisms encoding this NOS variant often have no other nitrogen-oxide reductases[87, 91, 109]. Some eukaryotes, the Foraminifera and Gromiida, also reduce nitrous oxide, but their enzymatic machinery is unknown[15, 110].

For a long time, it was believed that NOS was more sensitive to oxygen, pH and sulfide than other nitrogen-oxide reductases[105]. Based on that apparent sensitivity, environmental emissions of nitrous oxide were fully attributed to inhibition of NOS in organisms that reduce nitrate all the way to N_2, the so-called 'complete denitrifiers'. Additionally, interactions of so-called 'incomplete denitrifiers', which are microorganisms that only perform, for example, nitrite reduction to nitrous oxide or nitrous oxide reduction to dinitrogen gas, and their niche differentiation might cause imbalances between nitrous oxide production and consumption in many environments, such as soils and marine environments[91, 109, 111].

Hydrazine synthesis and hydrazine oxidation to dinitrogen gas.

Until recently, it was generally believed that ammonium could only be activated with molecular oxygen and that bioavailable nitrogen could only be lost as dinitrogen gas through denitrification[112]. The discovery of anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox) to dinitrogen gas with nitrite as the terminal electron acceptor overturned both of these dogmas[51, 113, 114]. Hydrazine synthase (HZS) is the only known enzyme that can activate ammonium anaerobically[89], and it is exclusively found in anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria that belong to five genera in the phylum Planctomycetes[89, 115, 116]. HZS is also the only enzyme known to form an N-N bond from two discrete N-compounds, producing hydrazine as a free intermediate in a two-step reaction [10, 115]. The hypothetical mechanism of hydrazine synthesis starts with nitric oxide reduction to hydroxylamine (Fig 2d), which is subsequently comproportionated **[G]** together with ammonium into hydrazine, one of the most potent reductants in nature[10, 115]. During this reaction, hydroxylamine is transfered from one active site to the next (Fig. 2d), which might result in hydroxylamine-loss from HZS. Two of the genes encoding HZS, *hzsA* and *hzsB*, are used as genetic markers for anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria in the environment[117, 118].

Hydrazine is oxidized to dinitrogen by hydrazine dehydrogenase (HDH) [10, 119]. Based on amino acid sequences, this enzyme is related to HOX and HAO; however, it is inhibited by

hydroxylamine and can only oxidize hydrazine[119]. Hydrazine oxidation occurs in a unique membrane-bound structure called the anammoxosome **[G]** and is most likely directly associated with energy conservation[46, 120, 121]. Intriguingly, all catabolic enzymes of anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria (HDH, HZS, NIR, HOX and NXR) are located exclusively in the anammoxosome[122].

HDH is responsible for the release of a substantial amount of dinitrogen to the [119] In the last decade, it became clear that the anammox process is a major nitrogen sink in the ocean[123-125] and it could also have an important role in terrestrial ecosystems[126].

Networks of nitrogen-transforming microorganisms

There is an astonishing diversity of microorganisms that transform nitrogen and each of these microorganisms has discrete physiological requirements for optimal growth. As growth conditions in nature are highly variable and seldom optimal, nitrogen turnover by individual microorganisms is bound to be inefficient. However, nitrogen transformations in the environment are carried out by microbial communities that recycle nitrogen more efficiently than single microorganisms. Consequently, very little bioavailable nitrogen escapes to the atmosphere, and the small amount lost as dinitrogen gas is balanced by nitrogen fixation (Box 1). This apparent nitrogen homeostasis not only characterizes the global biosphere, but also many ecosystems, such as forest soils and ocean gyres [**G**]. The microbial communities required to efficiently recycle nitrogen in these ecosystems are robust with respect to environmental changes and retain nitrogen-transforming reactions even when the species composition changes. The nitrogen-transforming reactions are linked by microorganisms that form complex networks in both natural and man-made ecosystems (Fig. 3).

The ocean gyres, the world's largest ecosystems, are nearly nitrogen-balanced due to extensive nitrogen recycling (Fig. 3a). Here, the main nitrogen-transforming processes are nitrogen assimilation by cyanobacteria, such as *Prochlorococcus marinus*[70], ammonification by mesozooplankton[127] and heterotrophic bacteria, such as *Pelagibacter ubique*[128] and nitrification by *Nitrosopumilus* spp. and *Nitrospina* spp. (Fig. 3a; see also Box 1). Nitrogen fixation by microorganisms, such as *Trichodesmium* spp. and UCYN-A (*Atelocyanobacterium*), is a rather minor nitrogen-transforming process in the gyres[70]. Yet, due to the sheer extent of the area in which nitrogen fixation occurs, it is the main supply of new bioavailable nitrogen to the ocean.

In contrast to the ocean gyres, oxygen minimum zone waters cover less than 1% of the open ocean area, but might account for 30-50% of oceanic nitrogen loss[57, 70, 125] (Box 1). Here, anaerobic microorganisms such *Scalindua* spp. co-occur with aerobic organisms such as *Nitrosopumilus* spp. and *Nitrospina* spp. [57]. The microbial nitrogen-transforming network in open ocean oxygen minimum zones is complex[57] with all known nitrogen-converting processes occurring alongside each other (Fig. 3b).

Similar to oxygen minimum zone waters, nitrogen-removing wastewater treatment plants are characterized by imbalanced nitrogen-transformations. These man-made systems are designed to convert ammonium to dinitrogen gas, which is lost to the atmosphere (Box 2).

Agricultural fields are among the largest man-made ecosystems and their microbial nitrogen-transforming networks have been strongly affected by the anthropogenic input of nitrogen. The cultivation of legumes that form symbioses with nitrogen-fixing microorganisms have subsantially increased the nitrogen input to the environment[2, 129]. Nitrogen-fixing microorganisms, such as *Bradyrhizobium* spp., often live in specialized root nodules and provide ammonium to the legumes (Fig. 3c). Ammonium that leaks out into the surrounding soil fuels other microbial nitrogen transformations, such as aerobic ammonia oxidation. In rice paddy fields, the use of industrial fertilizers has resulted in intense nitrification and enhanced nitrogen loss[126]. Recent studies reveal that these systems have highly complex nitrogen-transforming networks, which include nitrite-reducing (*Ca*. Methylomirabilis spp.) and nitrate-reducing (*Ca*. Methanoperedens spp.) methanotrophs[130] (Fig. 3d).

In these ecosystems, some nitrogen-transforming microorganisms, such as anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria, can perform multiple redox reactions (reactions 1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13; Fig. 1). Still, processes such as nitrification and denitrification are performed by a complex network of specialists in a modular fashion (Fig. 3). Such modularity, which is a general feature of nitrogen-transforming microbial networks, results in cooperative and competitive interactions (examples in Fig. 3). A cooperative interaction exists between *Nitrosopumilus* spp. and *Nitrospina* spp. that together oxidize ammonia to nitrate (Figs. 3a, b). In most environments, nitrification is carried out by diverse assemblages of ammonia- and nitrite-oxidizing microorganisms, which also compete for ammonia and nitrite, respectively. Substrate competition also exists between microorganisms with very different metabolisms, such as *Nitrospira* spp., *Ca*. Methylomirabilis spp., *Candidatus* Brocadia spp., *Ca*. Methanoperedens spp. and *Pseudomonas* spp., which all compete for nitrite (Fig. 3d). Microbial interactions can also be simultaneously cooperative and competitive: *Nitrosopumilus spp*. produces nitrite for *Scalindua* spp., but both also compete for ammonia (Fig. 3b).

442 The factors that control these interactions are poorly understood. Sometimes, a single
443 physiological characteristic is used to explain the dominance of certain nitrogen-transforming
444 microorganisms in the environment. For example, the abundance of ammonia oxidizing archaea
445 relative to bacteria in ammonia-depleted environments was attributed to the superior ammonia
446 affinity of the archaea[31, 131, 132]. Recently, however, it was shown that the terrestrial bacterium
447 *Nitrospira inopinata*, which performs the comammox process, has a higher ammonia affinity
448 than all cultured terrestrial ammonia-oxidizing archaea[39]. Yet, the microorganisms that perform
449 the comammox process do not dominate all ammonia-depleted terrestrial environments[133]. The
450 success of nitrogen-transforming microorganisms also depends on other factors, such as the use
451 of alternative substrates and cellular energy requirements. Such variables might have general
452 roles in shaping nitrogen-transforming microbial networks.
453
454 **Concluding remarks**
455
456 Identifying the factors that shape nitrogen-transforming networks will require greater insight
457 into the physiology of the involved microorganisms and a deeper understanding of their ecology
458 and evolution. Only a fraction of all microorganisms has been cultivated, and the uncultivated
459 majority likely contains undiscovered metabolic pathways (Box 3). Cultivation, followed by
460 painstaking biochemical, physiological and genomic characterisation has already changed our
461 perspective of key nitrogen-cycle processes. Aerobic nitrite-oxidizing bacteria and anaerobic
462 ammonium-oxidizing bacteria have a hitherto unexpected metabolic versatility that renders
463 their classification as mere 'aerobic nitrite oxidizers' or 'anaerobic ammonia oxidizers'
464 inadequate. Many aerobic nitrite oxidizers might grow as hydrogen-oxidizers, ammonia-
465 oxidizers or nitrate reducers in the environment[6]. Anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria can
466 also use short-chain fatty acids, methylamines and FeII as electron donors[46, 134] and they can use
467 nitrate, MnIV and FeIII as electron acceptors[46, 135, 136].
468 On the other hand, there is a growing realization that complete denitrification by single
469 microorganisms is the exception rather than the rule, with many microorganisms being
470 specialists that perform only one or a few nitrogen-oxide reduction reactions[3, 91, 137]. Specialized
471 nitrogen-oxide reducers often lack known genes enabling them to reduce nitrate all the way to
472 N_2[87, 138]. These specialist nitrogen-oxide reducers are often described as 'incomplete
473 denitrifiers', which is comparable to describing ammonia oxidizers such as *Nitrosomonas* spp.
474 as 'incomplete nitrifiers'.

Undoubtedly, it will become increasingly difficult to classify organisms according to the classical six nitrogen-cycling processes, leaving it up to the eye of the beholder to define the function of an organism. If we can learn one thing from the last few decades of research, it is that microorganisms do not conform to boundaries. They will do whatever necessary in the perpetual struggle to survive.

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Acknowledgement

We thank Wiebke Mohr and Jana Milucka (Max Planck Institute for Marine Microbiology, Bremen, Germany) for discussions. This work was supported by the Max Planck Society (MPG) and the European Research Council Grant 640422 to B.K.

Competing financial interest statement

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

Author contributions

M.M.M.K., H.K.M. and B.K. researched data for the article, made substantial contributions to discussions of the content, wrote the article and reviewed and edited the manuscript before submission.

Publisher's note

Nature Reviews Microbiology thanks Holger Daims, Sarah Hallin and the other anonymous reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

Box 1. B**iogeochemical nitrogen cycling: global inventories, processes and fluxes.**

The largest global nitrogen inventory, with 1.8 x 10^{10} Tg nitrogen, is ammonia bound in rocks and sediments[139]. Although this bound ammonia becomes available upon erosion, it has a minor role in annual biogeochemical nitrogen cycling. Whereas the terrestrial inventory of freely accessible ammonia is unknown[140], the marine inventory[70, 139] is estimated to be between 340

908 and 3600 Tg nitrogen (see grey numbers in the figure). The largest freely accessible global
909 nitrogen inventory is dinitrogen gas with 3.9 x10^9 Tg nitrogen followed by organic nitrogen,
910 nitrate, and nitrous oxide inventories[70, 139]. Global nitrite and nitric oxide inventories are
911 negligible.
912 Biogeochemical nitrogen cycling between these inventories is often attributed to the following
913 six distinct nitrogen-transforming processes: assimilation, ammonification, nitrification,
914 denitrification, anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox) and nitrogen-fixation (see the
915 figure). We estimated the annual nitrogen fluxes for a number of these processes from the
916 available literature[129, 141-143] and based on simple assumptions (see below). In the figure, the
917 fluxes between major nitrogen species are shown in Tg nitrogen per year, with green, blue and
918 red numbers referring to terrestrial, marine and anthropogenic nitrogen fluxes, respectively. The
919 best-defined fluxes involve nitrogen loss and fixation, because they have been the focus of
920 many studies[129, 141, 143]. These fluxes are comparatively small (see the figure) but regulate the
921 availability of bioavailable nitrogen, which largely controls the removal of atmospheric CO_2
922 through the biological carbon pump[129]. Current estimates suggest that biological N_2-fixation
923 (~300Tg nitrogen y^{-1}) combined with industrial nitrogen-fixation and fossil fuel burning (~125
924 Tg nitrogen y^{-1})[129, 143] exceeds the production of dinitrogen gas by anammox and denitrification
925 (~350 Tg nitrogen y^{-1}) [129, 141]. Not all nitrous oxide produced from nitric oxide reduction is
926 further reduced to dinitrogen gas. The resulting nitrous oxide release from the marine and
927 terrestrial environment is 4 and 12 Tg nitrogen y^{-1}, respectively[129]. Although the nitrous oxide
928 flux is small compared to the other nitrogen fluxes, it has a profound effect on the environment
929 because nitrous oxide is the main ozone depleting agent and a powerful greenhouse gas[92].
930 As shown in the figure, the nitrogen-transforming processes have vastly different fluxes and do
931 not form one balanced nitrogen cycle as often depicted in papers and textbooks. The largest
932 nitrogen fluxes are associated with the interconversion of ammonia and organic nitrogen. In the
933 marine environment alone, the fluxes associated with ammonification and ammonium
934 assimilation are an order of magnitude larger (~8800 Tg nitrogen y^{-1})[142] than marine nitrogen
935 loss and gain combined (~300 Tg nitrogen y^{-1})[141]. Another substantial nitrogen flux is associated
936 with the oxidation of ammonia to nitrate via nitric oxide and nitrite (that is, nitrification).
937 Marine nitrification is associated with a flux of ~2000 Tg nitrogen per year, which explains
938 why marine ammonia-oxidizing archaea are among the most abundant microorganisms even
939 though ammonia concentrations are low in the ocean. Nitrate-assimilation related fluxes are in
940 the same order of magnitude. Marine phytoplankton accounts for 2000 Tg nitrate reduced per
941 year[142]. Compared to this, the fluxes associated with dissimilatory nitrate reduction to

ammonium are most likely smaller. Although there are no available estimates for the terrestrial environment, assimilation related fluxes are likely six times smaller due to the lower nitrogen requirement of land plants, which require about 1 molecule of nitrogen for every 40 carbon molecules fixed[144], compared to 1 molecule nitrogen per 6.6 molecules of carbon fixed by marine algae. Assuming steady state conditions (when gain of a nitrogen compound equals its loss), we estimated the terrestrial nitrification and ammonification fluxes by dividing the marine fluxes by six.

Box 2. Nitrogen removal by microorganisms in wastewater treatment

Since the industrial revolution, agriculture, burning of fossil fuel and domestic and industrial wastewater production have been the major drivers of nitrogen pollution, which severely affects life on earth[141, 142]. Nitrogen has been recognized as an important pollutant in wastewater only in the last 40 years, when it became clear that excess nitrogen leads to eutrophication and fish mortality due to ammonia toxicity. Consequently, nitrogen-removing systems were added to many wastewater treatment plants, which were originally used to remove organic carbon. Nevertheless, most conventional wastewater treatment plants do not remove nitrogen.

In contrast to most natural ecosystems, in which precious nitrogen is recycled and retained, nitrogen-removing treatment plants are designed to convert ammonium to dinitrogen gas, which is lost to the atmosphere. In these treatment plants, organic carbon is removed first. This results in organic carbon-poor and ammonium-rich wastewater, which is fed into a nitrogen-removal system. Conventional systems rely on nitrification ($NH_4^+ \rightarrow NO_2^- \rightarrow NO_3^-$) to oxidize ammonium to nitrate, which is subsequently reduced to dinitrogen gas by denitrification ($NO_3^- \rightarrow NO_2^- \rightarrow NO \rightarrow N_2O \rightarrow N_2$). Nitrification requires extensive aeration to create conditions that are suitable for ammonium oxidation to nitrate (2 molecules of O_2 is needed per molecule of ammonium). Subsequently, external organic carbon (often methanol) is added to induce heterotrophic denitrification, which reduces nitrate to N_2. Hence, conventional nitrogen removal is costly, energy- and resource-intensive, and also produces nitrous oxide, which contributes to global warming. To alleviate these problems, different reactor configurations have been implemented to minimize external carbon addition and aeration. For example, in some systems, part of the raw wastewater, which is rich in organic carbon, is fed directly to the denitrification step or in others, intermittent aeration is used to promote nitrification and denitrification in a single tank[145].

In the last decade, anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox) emerged as an alternative process for nitrogen removal. In compact bioreactors, aerobic ammonia-oxidizing bacteria,

such as *Nitrosomonas europea*, convert half of the available ammonia to nitrite under oxygen limitation, which is termed 'partial-nitritation'. This is followed by the conversion of nitrite with the remaining ammonium to dinitrogen gas by bacteria performing the anammox process, such as *Kuenenia stuttgartiensis* (solid arrows, see the figure)[146]. In these partial nitritation-anammox systems, nitrate production by aerobic nitrite oxidizers such as *Nitrospira* spp. or *Nitrobacter* spp. is undesired as it decreases the efficiency of nitrogen removal. Oxygen-limited partial-nitritation-anammox reactors have lower aeration requirements than conventional nitrogen-removal systems, do not require organic carbon addition, and produce less nitrous oxide. Currently, partial-nitritation-anammox systems are increasingly applied to ammonium-rich wastewaters[146, 147], such as effluents from anaerobic sludge digesters [G]. Implementation of these systems in full-scale municipal wastewater treatment, which have much lower ammonium concentrations, could pave the way to more sustainable sewage treatment[146].

Some of the recently discovered nitrogen-cycling microorganisms could also be applied in wastewater treatment. Archaea that oxidize ammonia to nitrite and bacteria that oxidize ammonia to nitrate (in the comammox process) have been detected in nitrogen-removing wastewater treatment plants[133, 148] but their role in these systems is unclear. In oxygen-limited nitrogen-removal systems, such as partial-nitritation-anammox bioreactors, bacteria preforming comammox[12, 13, 39]will most likely act as conventional ammonia oxidizers that produce nitrite. Exciting new possibilities for wastewater treatment are offered by the newly discovered nitrite- and nitrate-dependent anaerobic methane-oxidizing microorganisms[66, 149]. A bioreactor that combines anaerobic methanotrophs, such as *Candidatus* Methylomirabilis spp. and *Candidatus* Methanoperedens spp. with microorganisms that perform the anammox process could simultaneously remove ammonium, nitrate and methane (dashed arrows; see the figure). Such co-cultures have already been established under laboratory conditions; however, a full-scale wastewater treatment system has not been implemented[66, 149]. In these systems, aerobic methane oxidizers such as *Methylomonas* spp. would also contribute to methane removal.

Fundamental physiological and biochemical research into nitrogen-cycling microorganisms and their application have always progressed hand in hand — newly discovered microorganisms led to more efficient and sustainable treatment systems, and vice versa. It is apparent that this trend will continue to help safeguard the environment for future generations.

Box 3: Undiscovered biochemical reactions

Numerous new microbial nitrogen-transforming reactions and pathways have been discovered in the last decade. Based on thermodynamic considerations further exergonic [**G**] reactions exist that could be exploited by microorganisms (Equations 15-26). Whereas some reactions could

be catalyzed by known enzymes, others would require hitherto unknown biochemistry (Eq. 15-19, 25 and 26). For example, nitrate-dependent ammonium oxidation (Eq. 15) cannot proceed through the known anaerobic ammonium oxidation pathway because ammonia first needs to be oxidized to the intermediate hydroxylamine or a similar oxygen containing species[46].

Eq 15 $5NH_4^+ + 3NO_3^- \rightarrow 4N_2 + 9H_2O + 2H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -297 kJ/mol NH_4^+)

Similarly, novel biochemical pathways for ammonia activation would be necessary for iron- and manganese-dependent ammonium oxidation (Eq. 16-19).

Eq 16 $NH_4^+ + 6Fe^{3+} + 2H_2O \rightarrow NO_2^- + 6Fe^{2+} + 8H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -247 kJ/mol NH_4^+)

Eq 17 $2NH_4^+ + 6Fe^{3+} \rightarrow N_2 + 6Fe^{2+} + 8H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -303 kJ/mol NH_4^+)

Eq 18 $NH_4^+ + 3MnO_2 + 4H^+ \rightarrow NO_2^- + 3Mn^{2+} + 4H_2O$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -60 kJ/mol NH_4^+)

Eq 19 $2NH_4^+ + 3MnO_2 + 4H^+ \rightarrow N_2 + 3Mn^{2+} + 6H_2O$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -249 kJ/mol NH_4^+)

On the other hand, several disproportionation [**G**] reactions (Eq. 20-24) could be carried out by known microorganisms using the existing biochemical machinery. Anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria could perform nitrite (Eq. 20) and nitric oxide (Eq. 21) disproportionation[46].

Eq 20 $5NO_2^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow N_2 + 3NO_3^- + 2H_2O$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -60 kJ/mol NO_2^-)
Eq 21 $10NO + 2H_2O \rightarrow 3N_2 + 4NO_3^- + 4H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -100 kJ/mol NO)

Similarly, disproportionation of nitrite into nitrous oxide and nitrate (Eq. 22), nitric oxide into nitrite and nitrous oxide (Eq. 23) or nitrate and nitrous oxide (Eq. 24) could theoretically be carried out by aerobic nitrite-oxidizing bacteria.

Eq 22 $4NO_2^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow N_2O + 2NO_3^- + H_2O$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -32 kJ/mol NO_2^-)

Eq 23 $4NO + H_2O \rightarrow 2NO_2^- + N_2O + 2H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -40 kJ/mol NO)

Eq 24 $8NO + H_2O \rightarrow 2NO_3^- + 3N_2O + 2H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'}$ = -56 kJ/mol NO)

These microorganisms could use nitrite oxidoreductase to oxidize nitrite to nitrate and nitrite reductases present in *Nitrobacter* spp., *Nitrococcus marinus, Nitrospira* spp. *and Nitrospina* spp. could reduce nitrite to nitric oxide[6]. Nitric oxide oxidation has been observed in *Nitrobacter* spp.,[150, 151]but it is unclear whether this reaction is biotic or abiotic and the responsible enzyme remains unknown. Nitric oxide oxidation to nitrite could also be catalyzed by Cu-containing nitrite reductases (nirK), which are known to be bidirectional[152]. The remaining reaction, reduction of nitric oxide to nitrous oxide, can be carried out by terminal oxidases, which are evolutionarily related to nitric oxide reductases[153].

Nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas, is reduced to dinitrogen gas in the absence of oxygen, whereas it is assumed to be biologically stable under oxic conditions. Intriguingly, aerobic

nitrous oxide oxidation to either nitrite or nitrate is thermodynamically feasible (Eq. 25, 26), but this reaction would also require a new biochemical pathway.

Eq 25 $N_2O + O_2 + H_2O \rightarrow 2NO_2^- + 2H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'} = -21$ kJ/mol N_2O)

Eq 26 $N_2O + 2O_2 + H_2O \rightarrow 2NO_3^- + 2H^+$ ($\Delta G^{0'} = -89$ kJ/mol N_2O)

The only way to identify microorganisms that catalyze these undiscovered reactions is to grow them under controlled laboratory conditions. It is clear that the physiology and biochemistry of nitrogen-transforming microorganisms will remain fertile fields of research for years to come.

Figure 1. Microbial transformations of nitrogen compounds. Microorganisms carry enzymes that perform fourteen redox reactions involving eight key inorganic nitrogen species of different oxidation states (enzyme-bound intermediates and their redox-states are not shown). The interconversion of ammonia and organic nitrogen does not involve a change in the redox state of the nitrogen atom. The reactions involve reduction (red), oxidation (blue) and disproportionation and comproportionation (green). The following enzymes perform the nitrogen transformations: assimilatory nitrate reductase (NAS, *nasA* and *nirA*); membrane-bound (NAR, *narGH*) and periplasmic (NAP, *napA*) dissimilatory nitrate reductases; nitrite oxidoreductase (NXR, *nxrAB*); nitric oxide oxidase (NOD, *hmp*); heme-containing (cd1-NIR, *nirS*) and copper-containing (Cu-NIR, *nirK*) nitrite reductases; cytochrome c-dependent (cNOR, *cnorB*), quinol-dependent (qNOR, *norZ*) and copper-containing quinol-dependent nitric oxide reductases (Cu_ANOR); NADH-dependent cytochrome P_{450} nitric oxide reductase (P_{450}NOR, *p450nor*); flavodiiron nitric oxide reductase (NOR_{VW}, *norVW*); hybrid cluster protein (HCP, *hcp*); hydroxylamine oxidoreductase (HAO, *hao*); hydroxylamine oxidase (HOX , *hox*); nitrous oxide reductase (NOS, *nosZ*); nitric oxide dismutase (NO-D, *norZ*); assimilatory nitrite reductase (cNIR); *nasB* and *nirB*); dissimilatory periplasmic cytochrome c nitrite reductase (ccNIR, *nrfH*); epsilon hydroxylamine oxidoreductase (εHAO, *haoA*); octaheme nitrite reductase (ONR); octaheme tetrathionate reductase (OTR); molybdenum-iron (MoFe, *nifHDK*), iron-iron (FeFe, *anfHGDK*) and vanadium-iron (VFe, *vnfHGDK*) nitrogenases; hydrazine hydrolase (HDH, *hdh*); hydrazine synthase (HZS, *hzsCBA*); ammonia monooxygenase (AMO, *amoCAB*); particulate methane monooxyg2enase (*pMMO, pmoBAC*); cyanase (CYN, *cynS*); urease (URE, *ureABC*).

Figure 2. Enzymes catalyzing four key nitrogen cycling reactions. **a.** The molybdenum-iron (MoFe) nitrogenase enzyme contains the electron transfer protein (green; encoded by *nifH*) and the alpha- (magenta; encoded by *nifD*) and beta-subunits (purple; encoded by the *nifK*) of the catalytic enzyme. *nifH* is used to detect nitrogen fixing-microorganisms in the environment. The iron sulfur clusters mediate electron transfer to the catalytic center. The association and dissociation of the electron transfer and catalytic proteins requires the input of ATP. **b.** In the anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacterium *Kuenenia stuttgartienis*, electrons flow through the hemes of the octaheme hydroxylamine oxidase (HOX) (red arrows). Hemes belonging to different monomers are depicted in green, blue and gray. Heme 4 is the catalytic center. **c.** In the membrane-bound bacterial nitrate reductase (NAR), the catalytic dimer is encoded by *narG* and *narH*, whereas the membrane anchor is encoded by *narI*. *narG* is used to detect denitrifying microorganisms in the environment. Nitrate reduction to nitrite occurs in the cytoplasm and protons are translocated into the periplasm. Thereby, NAR contributes to the proton motive force. **d.** In *Kuenenia stuttgartienis*, *hzsA*, *hzsB* and *hzsC* encode a hydrazine synthase. The former two genes are used to detect anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria in the environment. This enzyme is proposed to perform a two-step reaction. It starts in the gamma subunit (gray) with the reduction of nitric oxide to hydroxylamine, which is transported through the substrate channel (brown) to the alpha subunit (green). The alpha subunit comproportionates hydroylamine with ammonia into hydrazine. Both reactions are catalyzed by cytochrome *c*-type heme proteins. Figure 2a was adapted from http://pdb101.rcsb.org/motm/26, 2b from Ref. 8, 2c adapted from Ref. 154, and 2d was adapted from Ref. 115.

Figure 3. **Potential nitrogen-transforming microbial networks in different ecosystems. a)** The open ocean gyres are vast nutrient-limited regions, in which nitrogen is extensively recycled. In the sunlit surface waters, cyanobacteria mainly assimilate ammonium and/or organic nitrogen compounds for growth. Viral lysis and grazing by mesozooplankton releases organic nitrogen (for example, urea), which is subsequently mineralized back to ammonium by heterotrophic bacteria. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria provide additional ammonium. In deeper waters, ammonium is oxidized to nitrate. Some of this nitrate diffuses up into the surface waters and is assimilated by phytoplankton. **b)** Marine oxygen minimum zones (OMZs) are found on the eastern boundaries of oceans, where wind-driven upwelling of nutrient rich waters stimulates primary productivity in the surface waters. The subsequent aerobic mineralization of sinking organic matters depletes oxygen in the underlying waters. Aerobic nitrifying

communities that are well adapted to low oxygen-conditions perform ammonia oxidation to nitrite and nitrate. The OMZs are major regions of nitrogen loss due to the activity of anaerobic ammonium-oxidizing bacteria and to a lesser extent denitrification. Complex communities of microorganisms are involved in the denitrification process. **c)** Amongst the largest man-made ecosystems are agricultural fields that are used for crop production. Legumes are common crops and an important source of protein. They influence the microbial community in the surrounding soil by releasing organic carbon and live in symbiosis with N_2-fixing microorganisms, such as *Bradyrhizobium* spp.. Ammonium that leaks out into the surrounding soil can fuel aerobic ammonia and nitrite oxidation. Subsequent diffusion of nitrate to anoxic zones in soil fuels nitrogen-transforming processes such as dissimilatory nitrate reduction to ammonium, nitrous oxide and dinitrogen gas. **d)** Rice paddies are flooded agricultural fields, which are fertilized with nitrogen-containing compounds such as urea to grow rice[155]. Urea hydrolysis and nitrogen fixation generate ammonia, which is oxidized to nitrate in oxic soils surrounding the rice-plant roots. Subsequent diffusion of nitrate to the underlying anoxic soil fuels processes, such as denitrification, anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox) and the oxidation of methane produced by methanogenesis.

Key points

- Nitrogen is an essential component of all living organisms and the main nutrient limiting life on our planet. Its availability depends on diverse nitrogen transforming reactions that are carried out by microorganisms.
- Nitrogen-transforming microorganisms are metabolically versatile rendering their classification as mere 'nitrifiers' or 'denitrifiers' etc. inadequate.
- The classical nitrogen cycle consisting of distinct processes that follow each other in an orderly fashion does not exist. In nature, microorganisms form complex networks that link nitrogen-transforming reactions.
- Microbial nitrogen-transforming networks both attenuate and exacerbate human-induced global change. They produce and consume the powerful greenhouse gas nitrous oxide; lead to eutrophication of aquatic systems and at the same time remove nitrogen from wastewater.
- There are still many undiscovered nitrogen-transforming reactions that are thermodynamically feasible. The microorganisms catalyzing these reactions and the involved biochemical pathways are waiting to be discovered.

Glossary Terms

Reductant

The electron-donating compound in a redox reaction.

Oxygenic phototroph

Oxygenic phototrophs obtain energy from light and use water as the electron donor, forming molecular oxygen and sugar as products.

Bacteriocytes

Special cells in animals that contain endosymbiotic bacteria.

Thaumarchaeota

The phylum Thaumarchaeaota contains the ammonia-oxidizing archaea.

Acidophile

An organism that grows in acidic environments (<pH 6).

Methanotroph

An organism that oxidises methane to conserve energy.

NC10

A candidate bacterial phylum, named after **N**ullarbor **C**aves in Australia, which contains *Candidatus* Methylomirabilis oxyfera, which is the first organism discovered that performs methane oxidation coupled to oxygenic denitrification.

Endergonic

A reaction that requires energy input.

Verrucomicrobia

A bacterial phylum with only a few described species, some of which appear to be important in the methane cycle.

Anoxygenic phototroph

These microorganisms obtain energy from light and use compounds such as hydrogen sulfide instead of water as electron donor and thus do not produce molecular oxygen.

Eutrophication

The excessive growth of algae or cyanobacteria due to increased input of nutrients.

Proton motive force

Proton dislocation creates a difference of charge and pH between two sides of a cell membrane and thereby generates an electrochemical potential, which is used for energy conservation.

Primary nitrite maxima

The peak in nitrite concentrations at the base of the euphotic zone.

Nitric oxide dismutation

Two molecules of nitric oxide are disproportionated into one molecule of molecular oxygen and one molecule of dinitrogen gas.

Comproportionation

A chemical reaction in which two reactants containing the same element with a different oxidation state react to create a product with a single oxidation state.

Anammoxosome

A bacterial organelle found in anammox bacteria, which is the only known prokaryotic membrane-bound structure that is equally divided into daughter cells upon cell division.

Exergonic

A reaction that results in the release of free energy.

Disproportionation

A chemical reaction in which a reactant is split into two species containing the same element with different oxidation states, one more oxidized and the other more reduced than the reactant.

Anaerobic sludge digesters

Bioreactors in which excess microbial biomass (sludge) produced during wastewater treatment is anaerobically converted to carbon dioxide, methane, ammonium and reduced sulfur compounds.

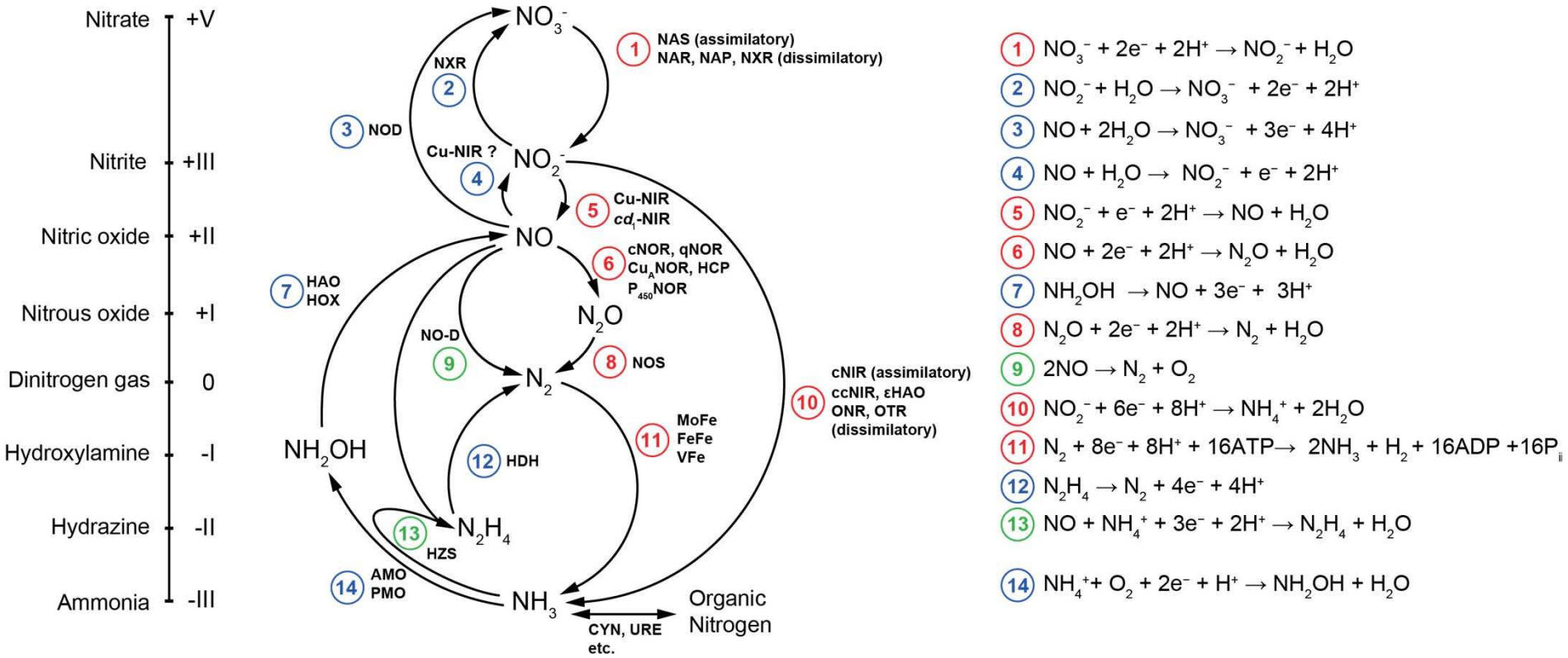
Subject categories

Biological sciences / Microbiology / Biogeochemistry / Element cycles
[URI /631/326/47/4112]
Biological sciences / Ecology / Microbial ecology
[URI /631/158/855]
Biological sciences / Microbiology / Environmental microbiology
[URI /631/326/171]
Biological sciences / Biochemistry / Enzymes / Oxidoreductases
[URI /631/45/607/1168]
Biological sciences / Ecology / Ecological networks
[URI /631/158/2463]

ToC blurb

Nitrogen-transforming microorganisms shape global biogeochemical nutrient cycles. In this Review, Kuypers, Marchant and Kartal explore the vast diversity of these microorganisms and their enzymes, highlighting novel pathways, and discuss how nitrogen-transforming microorganisms form complex nitrogen-cycling networks in different environments.

Fig. 1



1 $NO_3^- + 2e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow NO_2^- + H_2O$

2 $NO_2^- + H_2O \rightarrow NO_3^- + 2e^- + 2H^+$

3 $NO + 2H_2O \rightarrow NO_3^- + 3e^- + 4H^+$

4 $NO + H_2O \rightarrow NO_2^- + e^- + 2H^+$

5 $NO_2^- + e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow NO + H_2O$

6 $NO + 2e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow N_2O + H_2O$

7 $NH_2OH \rightarrow NO + 3e^- + 3H^+$

8 $N_2O + 2e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow N_2 + H_2O$

9 $2NO \rightarrow N_2 + O_2$

10 $NO_2^- + 6e^- + 8H^+ \rightarrow NH_4^+ + 2H_2O$

11 $N_2 + 8e^- + 8H^+ + 16ATP \rightarrow 2NH_3 + H_2 + 16ADP + 16P_{ii}$

12 $N_2H_4 \rightarrow N_2 + 4e^- + 4H^+$

13 $NO + NH_4^+ + 3e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow N_2H_4 + H_2O$

14 $NH_4^+ + O_2 + 2e^- + H^+ \rightarrow NH_2OH + H_2O$

Fig. 2

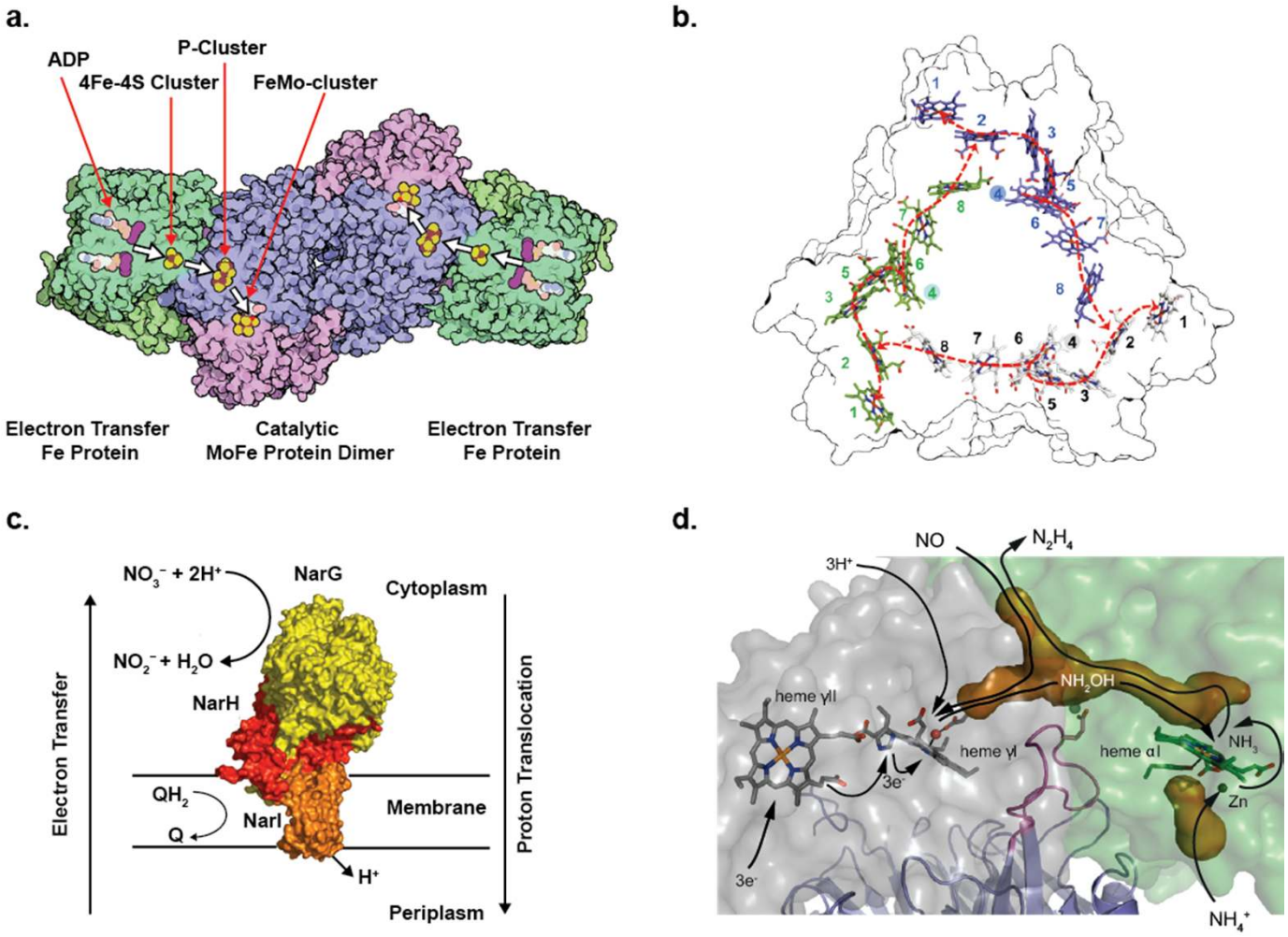
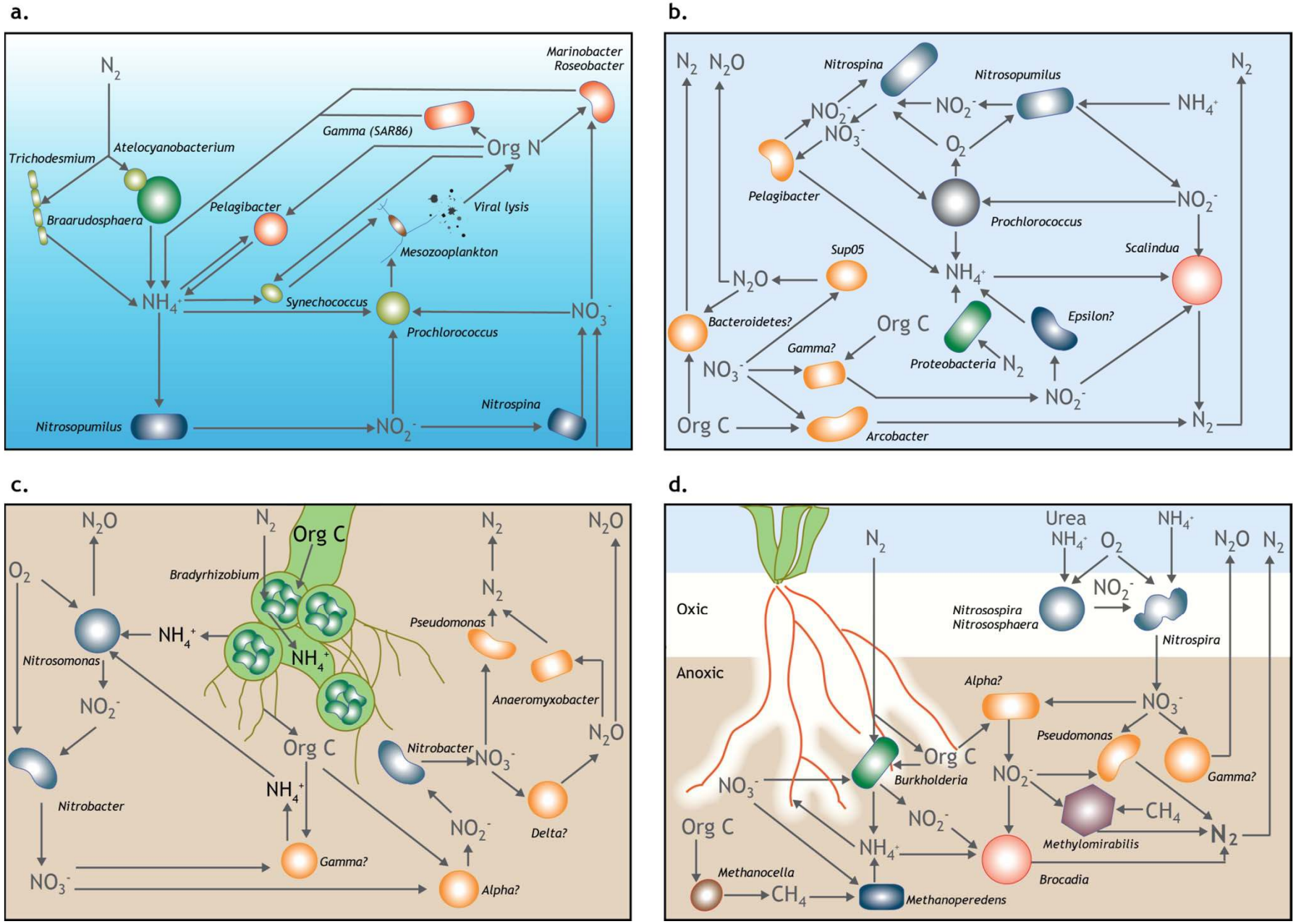
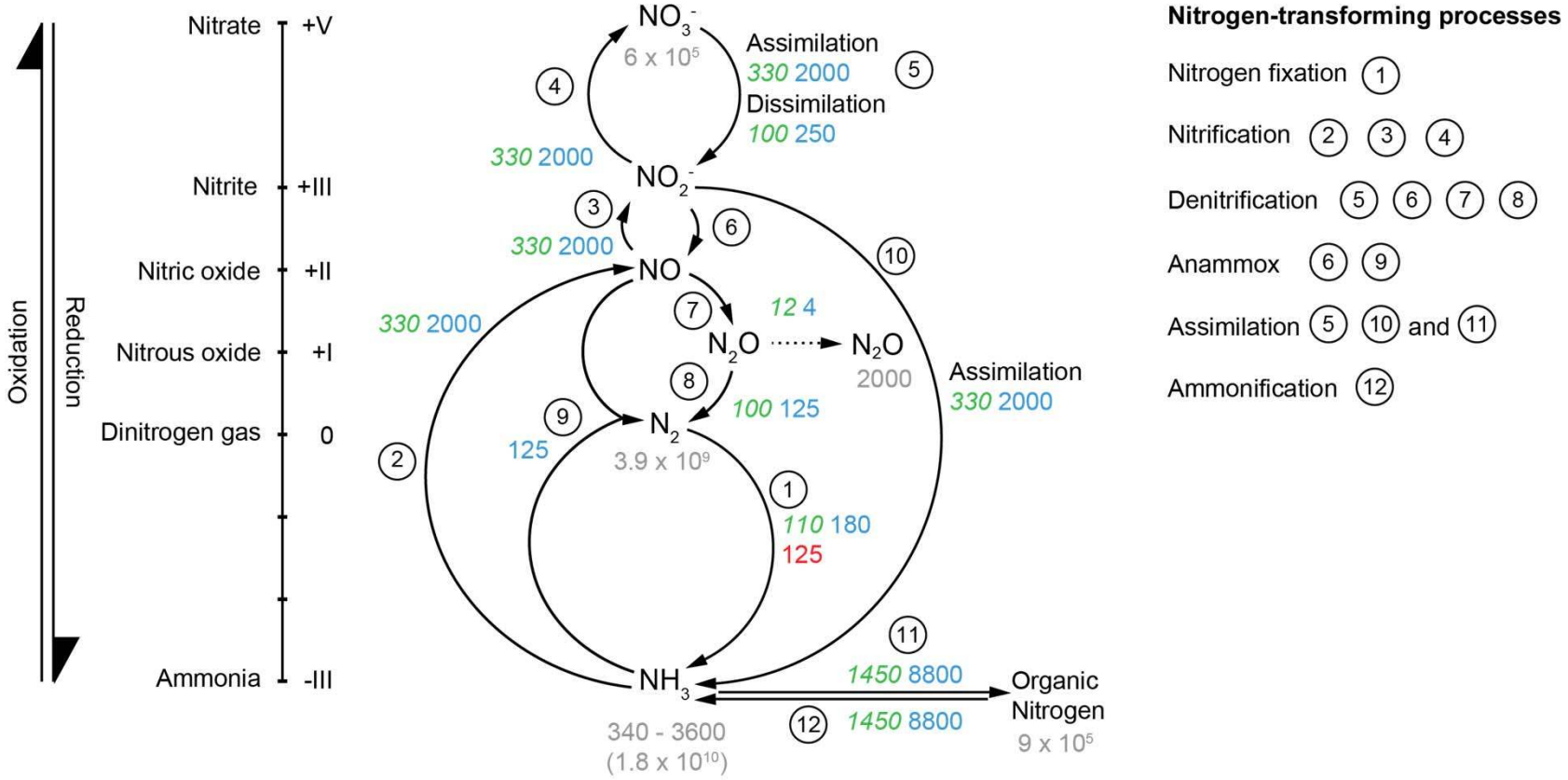

a.
ADP
4Fe-4S Cluster
P-Cluster
FeMo-cluster
Electron Transfer Fe Protein
Catalytic MoFe Protein Dimer
Electron Transfer Fe Protein
b.
c.
NO3- + 2H+
NarG
Cytoplasm
NO2- + H2O
NarH
QH2
Q
NarI
Membrane
H+
Periplasm
Electron Transfer
Proton Translocation
d.
NO
N2H4
3H+
NH2OH
heme γII
heme γI
heme αI
3e-
NH3
Zn
3e-
NH4+

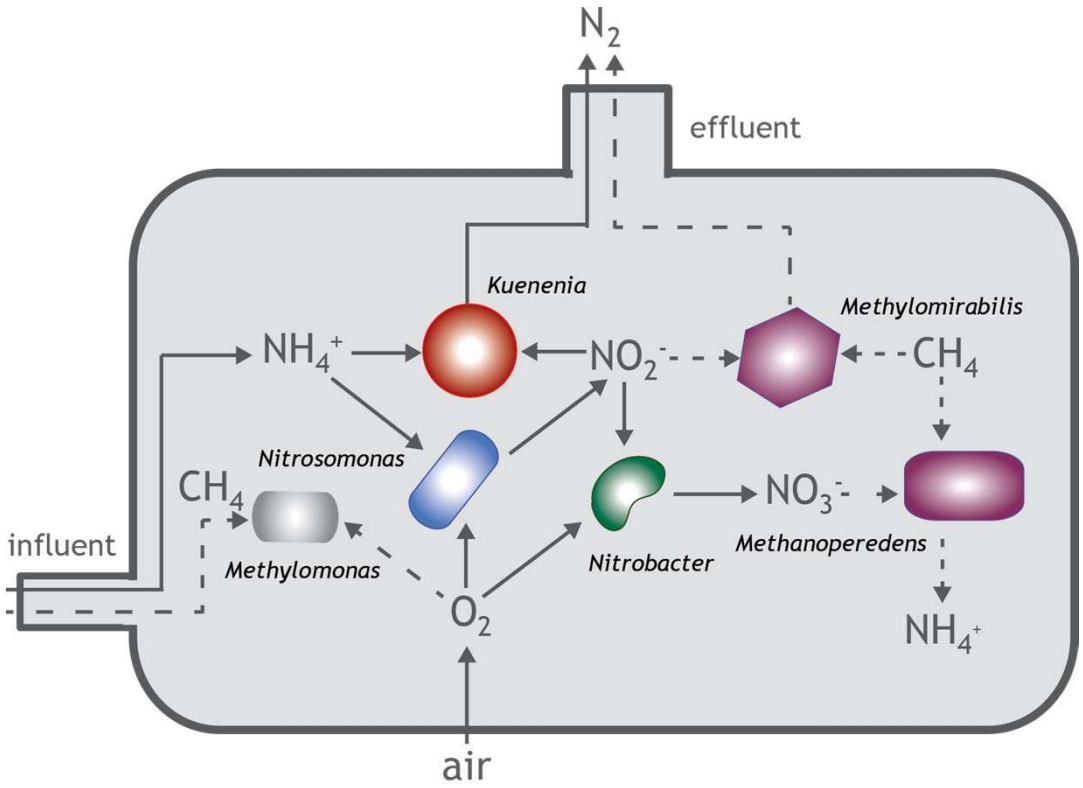
Fig. 3


a.
N2
Marinobacter
Roseobacter
Gamma (SAR86)
Org N
Trichodesmium
Atelocyanobacterium
Pelagibacter
Viral lysis
Braarudosphaera
Mesozooplankton
NH4+
Synechococcus
NO3-
Prochlorococcus
Nitrospina
Nitrosopumilus
NO2-
b.
N2 N2O
Nitrospina
Nitrosopumilus
N2
NO2-
NO3-
NH4+
O2
Pelagibacter
Prochlorococcus
Sup05
Scalindua
N2O
NH4+
Bacteroidetes?
Org C
Epsilon?
Gamma?
Proteobacteria
N2
NO3-
NO2-
Org C
Arcobacter
N2
c.
N2O
N2
Org C
N2
N2O
O2
Bradyrhizobium
Pseudomonas
NH4+
NH4+
Nitrosomonas
Anaeromyxobacter
NO2-
Org C
Nitrobacter
NO3-
N2O
Nitrobacter
NH4+
NO2-
Delta?
Gamma?
NO3-
Alpha?
d.
Urea
NH4+
N2
NH4+
O2
N2O
N2
NO2-
Oxic
Nitrosospira
Nitrososphaera
Nitrospira
Anoxic
Alpha?
NO3-
Org C
Pseudomonas
Gamma?
Burkholderia
NO3-
NO2-
CH4
NO2-
Org C
N2
NH4+
Methylomirabilis
Brocadia
Methanocella
CH4
Methanoperedens

Text Box 1


Oxidation
Reduction
Nitrate +V
Nitrite +III
Nitric oxide +II
Nitrous oxide +I
Dinitrogen gas 0
Ammonia -III
NO_3^-
6 x 10^5
Assimilation
330 2000
Dissimilation
100 250
330 2000
NO_2^-
330 2000
NO
12 4
N_2O
N_2O
2000
Assimilation
330 2000
100 125
N_2
3.9 x 10^9
125
110 180
125
1450 8800
NH_3
1450 8800
Organic Nitrogen
9 x 10^5
340 - 3600
(1.8 x 10^10)
Nitrogen-transforming processes
Nitrogen fixation 1
Nitrification 2 3 4
Denitrification 5 6 7 8
Anammox 6 9
Assimilation 5 10 and 11
Ammonification 12

Text Box 2


N_2
effluent
Kuenenia
Methylomirabilis
NH_4^+
NO_2^-
CH_4
Nitrosomonas
CH_4
NO_3^-
influent
Methylomonas
Nitrobacter
Methanoperedens
O_2
NH_4^+
air