

# Beyond Desalination: Convergent Renewable–Biotechnological Approaches to Desert Water Security

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**Abstract** — Water scarcity remains one of the major problems in arid and semi-arid areas, especially in deserts where there is almost no source of conventional fresh water. The need for dependable and environmentally friendly water sources in desert areas is becoming more and more pressing as climate change worsens and populations increase. This research paper delves into the latest scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations that aim to make water available in deserts. It looks into the methods of atmospheric water harvesting, solar desalination, fog collection, aquifer recharge, and biotechnological solutions such as water-generating nanomaterials and genetically engineered drought-tolerant plants. Considerable emphasis is put on the use of renewable energy systems, especially solar and wind, for providing energy to water production processes in a sustainable way. The paper also presents and evaluates the implementations of the technologies in the real world through the case studies of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Chile. Identifying environmental repercussions along with technical feasibility, this research intends to be a thorough introductory account of how science and technology can make the water supply system accessible in the harshest water-stressed areas of the earth.

**Keywords** — Water Scarcity; Deserts; Technological Innovations; Atmospheric Water Harvesting; Solar Desalination; Fog Collection; Aquifer Recharge; Biotechnological Solutions.

## 1. Introduction

Deserts are still a major part of the Earth's landmass, and many such areas are inhabited and used for farming. Clean and dependable water is the most important thing for living, producing food, and the growth of the economy. While deserts are still deserts, they have low precipitation, high evaporation rates, limited surface water, and often poor groundwater are increasing, and water availability is very variable not only in time but in space as well. That is why the desert water supply-related new science and technology is so important. Water scarcity is the biggest problem that the world will have in the 21st century. It is especially bad for the arid and semi-arid regions like deserts, where living is so difficult due to extreme climate conditions and limited freshwater sources. Areas of the desert, which in total take more than one-fifth of the Earth's land surface, are facing chronic water shortages. These are caused due to low rainfall, high evaporation rates, and almost total absence of surface water bodies. Still, several desert regions have the phenomena of population growth, industrial expansion, and agricultural development, all of which are further contributing to the increase in the demand for freshwater.

To deal with these problems, science and technology have played a very important role in the development of new water production methods. The term "water production" signifies, among other things, the extraction of

water from non-traditional sources (air, soil moisture, fog), producing potable water from saline or brackish water (desalination), and storing the harvested water either from rainfall or runoff. The production cost is brought down by using natural or passive energy sources (sunlight, nighttime cooling). Besides that, biotechnology and nanomaterials may be used to extract or conserve water efficiently. These kinds of solutions not only aim to satisfy basic water needs but are also intended to do so in a sustainable way, mainly by using renewable energy sources. This work explains the scientific concepts behind and the technologies involved in water production in deserts. It provides an overview of the innovations, the case studies from different desert areas worldwide, and the environmental and economic factors influencing the implementation. In the end, this work conveys that a combination of environmental science, engineering, and renewable energy disciplines can eventually resolve the water scarcity problem in the driest parts of the world.

Water scarcity in deserts has caused researchers to look for new ways of harnessing nature in a more efficient manner. This literature review covers the major scientific and technological changes that have been made to enable the production of water sustainably in desert areas. Studies made recently put the first in line the use of atmospheric moisture-capturing devices to draw water, even where the air has very low moisture, as is the case in desert areas. Kim et al. (2019) show that metal-organic frameworks are the

best possible materials that can adsorb water vapor; thus, the unlocking of solar energy-driven passive water collection becomes very easy [1]. Innovations in sorbent materials have led to a significant increase in water output, thus making atmospheric water generators a feasible water source in inhospitable desert areas [2]. Solar desalination is being looked into as a source of sustainable water and energy for desert communities, especially those situated along coastlines, where brine water is available. In their review, Elimelech and Phillip (2011) talk about reverse osmosis (RO) technology, shedding light on the new advancements in membrane efficiency as well as in energy recovery devices that have been instrumental in the reduction of energy consumption [3]. There is also a good deal of expectation from solar thermal desalination techniques such as multi-effect distillation (MED), which can be even more effective when coupled with concentrated solar power [4].

One of the methods that has been widely researched for water supply in desert regions is fog harvesting, for which much ground has been covered in the Atacama Desert. Schemenauer and Cereceda (1994) gave the first empirical data on fog water yields and mesh designs that optimize collection efficiency [5]. Nanostructured hydrophilic coating development is one of the most recent breakthroughs in fog collection technology. As evidenced by Park et al. (2020), these new materials have significantly increased fog collection rates [6]. Maintaining clean groundwater through artificial recharge is of utmost importance for desert aquifers. Scanlon et al. (2006) talked about the different managed aquifer recharge (MAR) methods, wherein they combine surface water with treated wastewater to refill underground reservoirs found in dry areas [7].

Technologies for remote sensing, such as measurements of gravity from satellites, have improved the capability to keep track of groundwater losses [8]. Without the incorporation of renewable energy, mainly solar photovoltaic and wind power, the goal of shrinking the ecological footprint of water production systems cannot be achieved. Panagopoulos et al. (2019) look into various desalination technologies powered by hybrid renewable energy sources, and at the same time, they point to the advantages of having a coupled solar and wind system that also enjoys the presence of energy storage as a means to ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of such systems even in geographically far-flung locations [9].

## **2. Challenges of Water Scarcity in Desert Environments**

Deserts are depictions of extreme dryness, with their yearly precipitation frequently being less than 250 mm.

These places encounter the predicament where groundwater production and its management are the most challenging.

### **2.1. Climatic and Geographic Limitations**

The extreme weather conditions found in deserts, such as high temperatures, low humidity, and very little rainfall, result in a very limited supply of water from natural sources. On top of that, the sandy and porous soils present in these areas cause water retention to be very low, thus making water storage and utilization more difficult.

### **2.2. Limited Surface and Groundwater**

Compared to moderate climatic areas with rivers and lakes, deserts do not have many surface water bodies. If at all, groundwater reserves are usually very deep, non-renewable, or rapidly depleting because of over-extraction. Hence, these sources of fresh water are not reliable and sustainable.

### **2.3. High Evaporation Rates**

Desert localities have the highest evaporation rates on the planet. This is one of the reasons why open reservoirs and irrigation systems are inefficient in these areas, unless some measures for protection are taken.

### **2.4. Economic and Infrastructural Constraints**

There is a prevalent problem of water shortage in the remote desert areas that results from a lack of or insufficiency of infrastructure that is essential for large-scale water production or distribution. It has been said that the financial burden of water transportation to or in deserts is mostly extremely expensive; thus, it becomes a barrier to the local communities' access to the water supply.

### **2.5. Impact on Agriculture and Health**

Water scarcity has consequences for holding the food supply steady, public health, and economic stability. Poor water conditions in terms of quality and quantity result in the deterioration of sanitation, dehydration, and limitation of agricultural productivity in desert regions where these problems have been prevalent.

## **3. Scientific Principles Behind Water Generation Technologies**

The installation of water-generating units in deserts involves complicated science, which requires knowledge from multiple disciplines like meteorology, thermodynamics, environmental engineering, and materials science. The fundamental principles are:

### 3.1. Atmospheric Moisture and the Water Cycle

Even in dry regions, the atmosphere has water vapor in it. To get liquid water out of air, one can use either a passive method such as radiative cooling, or an active one, like a mechanical refrigerator that operates on a condensation principle. Psychrometric science helps to find out the humidity levels at which water condensation is possible.

### 3.2. Thermodynamics of Desalination and Distillation

Desert areas on the coast may opt for either membrane or thermal methods to get desalination done. For instance, the multi-stage flash distillation, which is a thermal process, derives its workings from the idea of phase change and latent heat, whereas reverse osmosis is carried out under pressure, and the membrane is filtered, and it is driven by osmotic gradients.

### 3.3. Solar Radiation Utilization

The sun is shining bright all day long over the deserts, and thus it can be used as the main source of energy to solve the water problem there. To provide energy for the pumps or reverse osmosis machines, Photovoltaic (PV) systems play the role of converting the sunlight into electrical energy. However, the solar thermal unit can be placed to offer the distillation process the needed part of the heat directly.

### 3.4. Material Science and Nanotechnology

Innovations in material science have resulted in several new, very efficient water-absorbing materials like metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), hydrogels, and carbon-based nanomaterials. These substances can absorb more moisture from the air and also speed up filtration steps in the water purification apparatus.

## 4. Technologies for Water Production in Deserts

We look at how the major technologies have changed or are changing in the desert regions to provide water sustainably in this section.

### 4.1. Atmospheric Water Harvesting (AWH)

AWH devices take out water vapor from the air and turn it into liquid after cooling it down. AWH is becoming more and more feasible due to the development of new materials and energy-efficient systems, despite the fact that the relative humidity in deserts is still very low. An active AWH set is made up of a fan, a condenser, and a

refrigeration unit, all powered by electricity (e.g., Sky water machines). A passive AWH uses MOFs, silica gel, or hydrogels that absorb moisture during the night and release water during the day when heated by the sun. Source Hydro panels by Zero Mass Water (currently Source Global) utilize solar power to draw water from the atmosphere, and a single panel can deliver 2–5 liters per day. Schools and clinics in the Middle East and Africa are among the places where this water is being used.

### 4.2. Solar Desalination

Solar desalination is a process in which solar power is used to get rid of salt and other pollutants from the ocean or brackish groundwater. It can be a great solution for deserts near the sea. Solar Stills are very simple and inexpensive devices where the water evaporates under the sun, and then the vapor is condensed on a cold surface. Photovoltaic-Powered Reverse Osmosis uses solar electricity to run high-pressure pumps in RO systems.

Solar Thermal Desalination is a clean solar-powered method that heats water with the help of solar collectors. This heated water can then be used for multi-effect distillation or humidification-dehumidification (HDH) processes. As an example, the renewable water strategy in Masdar City, UAE, comprises solar-powered reverse osmosis facilities.

### 4.3. Fog and Dew Collection

Fog can become a source of water in deserts lying along the coast or in a very dry areas in high mountains. In fog nets, the tiny droplets of water are trapped from the air and later collected as liquid water. In fog nets, mesh materials with hydrophilic coatings increase water yield. These systems are passive, low-cost, and require minimal maintenance. As an example, In the Atacama Desert, Chile large fog nets provide communities with up to 15 liters of clean water per square meter of mesh per day.

### 4.4. Groundwater Extraction and Artificial Recharge

Although naturally occurring groundwater is scarce in deserts; technological advancements have made it possible to extract water sustainably and perform artificial recharge to have better control over aquifers. In this case, remote sensing and satellite mapping are the methods being utilized for locating groundwater sources (e.g., GRACE satellites). Treated wastewater or stormwater can be used for Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR). Groundwater pumps powered by solar energy are an option for rural desert areas. For instance, the Rajasthan region of India is utilizing solar pumps and check dams for water table restoration and agriculture.

#### **4.5. Biotechnological and Nanotech Solutions**

Revolutionary technique such as Microbial Desalination Cells (MDCs) employs bacteria to perform desalination and purification of water and at the same time, generate electricity. Genetically Modified Crops that consume less water or can withstand salty water for desert agriculture. Nanomaterial like graphene and carbon nanotubes can be used in ultrafiltration membranes for highly efficient water purification. As an example, MIT researchers have created graphene-based filters that can desalinate water more efficiently and require less energy than traditional RO membranes.

### **5. Renewable Energy Integration**

Water production technologies in inhospitable desert areas often lead to significant energy demands, thus hindering the possibility of implementation owing to lack of reliable grid power in many remote locations. To overcome the problem, renewable energy sources, especially solar and wind, are gradually being incorporated into water generation systems to devise clean, off-grid solutions, which in turn hardly require the use of fossil fuels.

#### **5.1. Solar Energy as a Primary Power Source**

Solar power is the most plentiful and feasible renewable energy alternative in deserts since they obtain some of the world's greatest solar irradiances. Photovoltaic (PV) modules produce power from Sun ray that may be used for water and air pumping, atmospheric water generation, and desalination. Solar-powered heat collection units narrow down the heat source to be used for thermally driven desalination extension of personalized water production idea. Photovoltaic-powered reverse osmosis (PV-RO): Solar PV systems can provide electricity for high-pressure pumps required for RO desalination.

This solution was implemented in remote desert communities, where it also helped in cutting down the use of diesel generators as well as lowering operational costs. Eco-friendly solar-powered desalination schemes of the multi-effect distillation and humidification-dehumidification (HDH) rely on energy sourced directly from concentrated sunlight thereby, avoiding loss in electric energy conversion and enhancing efficiency altogether.

#### **5.2. Wind Energy Applications**

Wind turbines could provide worthy backup or entail complete energy substitution alongside solar panels in spite of as yet undeveloped. Wind harnessed energy can then be utilized to invigorate water pumping for ground suction and the making of atmospheric water collection units.

#### **5.3. Hybrid Renewable Energy Systems**

Incorporating both solar and wind power in hybrid systems allows for a more reliable and continuous supply of energy for the manufacturing of water. Hybrid systems may also include battery storage or hydrogen fuel cells as they can store surplus energy, thus giving more comfort to off-grid desert communities.

#### **5.4. Energy Efficiency and Smart Management**

An advanced control system that utilizes Internet of Things (IoT) features and artificial intelligence greatly helps in energy saving by efficiently regulating power consumption based on water supply/demand as well as prevailing conditions. Smart sensors always remain on lookout for parameters such as humidity, solar irradiance, and water production, therefore easing predictive maintenance through less downtime.

### **6. Case Study**

Realizing the technologies by examples gives the understanding of the triumphs and the difficulties of the method of making water in deserts by science and technology. Here is the representation of the case studying the dry lands of the Earth.

#### **6.1. Israel: National Water Management and Desalination**

Israel is one of the leading countries in the world concerning water technology innovation, especially in the arid Negev Desert region. The country that is facing water shortages on a regular basis has done a lot of wiring by installing desalination plants that use reverse osmosis technology powered by clean energy. The Sorek desalination plant, being one of the biggest in the world, is able to produce potable water up to 624,000 cubic meters daily that is able to fulfill about 20% of the country's water demand. Apart from desalination, Israel, by going a step ahead, has also developed drip irrigation and wastewater recycling methods that are used to maximize water utilization in the agricultural sector. The implementation of the country's integrated water management plan is a great example of how pioneering technological changes mixed with policies and conservation activities could turn dry provinces into fertile ones.

#### **6.2. United Arab Emirates (UAE): Masdar City and Solar Desalination**

On the other hand, the UAE characterized by extreme desert conditions and limited freshwater resources has decided to adopt solar-powered desalination as a solution to

its sustainability problem. The zero-carb opportunity district called Masdar City runs pilot solar desalination machines that receive photovoltaic energy that is used to power the reverse osmosis units. The city's investments in the implementation of clean energy sources seem to be the solution to the scaling of sustainable water supply in desert megacities with a big population. Besides, the UAE is taking up the most advanced thermal solar desalination technology projects that are relatively large scale to be able to reduce the environmental footprint and the dependency on fossil fuels.

### **6.3. Chile: Fog Harvesting in the Atacama Desert**

This area is a desert known as the Atacama. It is among the driest places on the planet; still, it does get a lot of marine fog, "camanchaca," is what they call it. The locals there have done well to figure out how to benefit from the natural phenomenon by creating large mesh fog collectors. The collectors, which are non-electrical devices, catch very small water particles and can gather from 10 to 15 liters of water in one square meter of mesh on an average day.

Fog harvesting in Chile through the help of the mesh is a cheap and easy way of getting water for both human consumption and irrigation. There are also some emerging challenges related to the research of mesh and the deployment strategies that could result in yield and sustainability improvements.

### **6.4. California, USA: Atmospheric Water Generation in Drought Zones**

Wherever Southern California is experiencing repeated drought, people have started to use atmospheric water generators (AWGs) to get water and hence, to supplement traditional water sources. Some companies have created solar-powered scalable AWH systems for both emergency and off-grid situations to provide potable water. The pilot projects in the rural and desert areas demonstrate that AWH can have a significant impact on water resilience if it is also integrated with renewable energy and storage solutions.

### **6.5. India: Solar Pumps and Groundwater Recharge in Rajasthan**

The desert state of Rajasthan has employs solar-powered pumps to draw water from deep underground aquifers and irrigate their crops in a sustainable manner. With rainwater harvesting and managed aquifer recharge (MAR) as well, these technologies work to replenish groundwater levels and make water more accessible in the dry areas. This integration of water production with management practices emphasizes the importance of not depleting the resource by coupling production with

sustainable management practices. Water production technologies in inhospitable desert areas often lead to significant energy demands, thus hindering the possibility of implementation owing to lack of reliable grid power in many remote locations. To overcome the problem, renewable energy sources especially solar and wind are gradually being incorporated into water generation systems to devise clean, off-grid solutions, which in turn hardly require use of fossil fuels.

## **7. Environmental and Economic Considerations**

Technological advances, in this case, water production in the desert, are not only environmentally sound but also economically viable and socially acceptable. This, however, requires a balance between these factors, namely, environmental impact, economic viability, and social acceptance, for their long-term sustainability.

### **7.1. Environmental Impact Energy**

*Use and Carbon Footprint:* Many water production technologies, especially desalination and atmospheric water harvesting, can be energy-intensive. Without integrating renewable energy sources, these processes may rely on fossil fuels, increasing greenhouse gas emissions and exacerbating climate change. Therefore, coupling water production with solar or wind energy is critical to minimizing carbon footprints.

*Brine and Waste Disposal:* One of the main sources of concentrated brine is desalination—a byproduct that may potentially cause fatal diseases in aquatic animals if its salinity and chemical residues are elevated, and it is left unmanaged. To eliminate the danger to the environment from brine, several innovative and environmentally friendly methods of brine management, such as zero-liquid discharge and brine mining for minerals, have been implemented.

*Land Use and Habitat Disruption:* On the other hand, giant water infrastructure projects such as solar farms or fog collection nets will undoubtedly consume a lot of space and will not only disrupt local ecosystems, but also the traditional uses of that land. These situations require environmental impact assessments to check that the disturbance to biodiversity and the presence of cultural heritage sites is minimal.

### **7.2. Economic Feasibility**

*Capital and Operational Costs:* Moreover, the high entry cost for state-of-the-art reverse osmosis membrane facilities, including atmospheric water generators and solar

desalination plants, is a viable reason for their exclusion in the most impoverished desert areas, but the situation is being gradually reversed as the prices of solar PV panels and other innovative solutions are steadily dropping.

*Cost per Liter of Water:* The unit water cost, which is technology-, scale-, and location-dependent, differs substantially among sources of production. For example, solar distillers possess low operating costs, but also output is limited, while reverse osmosis plants are capable of producing massive quantities but require more capital and maintenance.

Economic studies should take into account local water consumption, infrastructure, and financing schemes.

*Maintenance and Technical Expertise:* One of the ways to facilitate water production systems is by having trained personnel able to operate and maintain them. Desert areas that are over remote may pose various problems related to getting the support of technicians, having access to spare parts, and performing routine servicing, which in turn affects system reliability.

### 7.3. Social and Policy Considerations

#### 7.3.1 Community Acceptance and Participation

Engaging local communities in decision-making concerning both planning and implementation of the project is a major factor in realizing successful outcomes. Technologies must not only conform to the cultural backgrounds of the communities, but also contain training sessions for the stakeholders.

#### 7.3.2 Regulatory Frameworks

Some of the necessary provisions and regulations required to run water resource management smoothly include water rights, environmental protection, and renewable energy integration incentives. One of the ways governments can accelerate the water technology sector export is through providing financial support therewith and also public-private partnerships.

### 7.4. Scalability and Replicability

The innovations should have such attributes of flexibility that enable their implementation effects to extend to wildly different desert environments, thus including not only coastal and plains but also mountainous regions. These two features, namely modular designs and flexible energy integration, aid scalability in such a manner that the solutions can be customized for local needs and extended as demand increases.

## 8. Future Prospects and Research Directions

These are some of the innovative new ways we create water in the desert that save it for our future.

### 8.1. Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology

Ground-breaking technology such as metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), graphene-based membranes, and hydrogels is transforming the way water is harvested from the atmosphere and purified. These new generation materials allow for higher water uptake, better energy efficiency, and lower production costs, thus making it possible to create water on a large scale in extremely dry deserts.

### 8.2. Integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and IoT

An intelligent water system using AI and Internet of Things (IoT) sensors is able to check conditions outdoors, system efficiency and water quality instantly. Based on predictions, the system can decide on the operation calendar, also it can forecast energy savings, anticipate faults that may happen, and increase system endurance and lessen of expense.

### 8.3. Hybrid Renewable Energy Systems and Storage

On top of this, a mix of solar, wind, and any other renewable sources of energy with latest energy storage tech (e.g., batteries, hydrogen storage) can supply energy needed for fresh water production in off-grid desert communities. Besides, investigation into efficient energy storage and grid-friendly technologies will make water production more reliable and independent.

### 8.4. Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering

Eventually, research on genetically modified crops that tolerate drought and on microorganisms capable of extracting water from unusual sources could help desert agriculture thrive. Besides, scientists may develop biofilms as well as microbial desalination cells as energy-saving water purification techniques.

### 8.5. Policy Innovation and Global Collaboration

One big step towards accelerating technology and installing it in the field is through international cooperation, sharing of data, and funds in desert water-related projects. These efforts will be supported by government policies facilitating cooperation between the public and private sectors, enabling renewable energy use through subsidies, as well as introducing sustainable groundwater management frameworks.

## 8.6. Social and Educational Initiatives

Alongside the involvement of local people through educational programs and skill training which leads to social integration as well as water system maintenance, future projects should put more focus on community ownership thereby strengthening particularly vulnerable desert societies.

## 9. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the advancements, there are still the following problems:

- **Material development:** There is a requirement for sorbents or MOFs or hydrogels that are of low cost, physically strong, non-toxic, and have a high content even at low humidity.
- **Efficiency and energy balance:** The regeneration (desorption) stage in the case of most atmospheric water harvesting technologies is the one that requires heat or energy. Reducing energy inputs (using solar, ambient heat) to a minimum is the main thing.
- **Scalability and cost reduction:** There is a need for relocation of laboratory prototypes to affordable, fieldable units; mass manufacturing; supply chains. iv. **Integration:** There is a need for the production of water to be combined with agriculture (e.g. greenhouses), energy generation (solar panels), storage, distribution networks.
- **Site specificity:** Many methods depend very much on local weather, terrain, humidity, proximity to the ocean or fog, soil type. It is necessary to map the best sites.
- **Sustainability and environmental effects:** There is a need for handling the brine that comes from desalination; water quality maintenance; ecological impacts; social acceptance.
- **Policy, finance, and governance:** There is a need for incentives, subsidies, and regulatory frameworks to support the deployment; ensuring that access is fair; inclusion of local or traditional knowledge.

## 10. Conclusion

Water scarcity in deserts is a major problem that affects not only sustainable development but also public health and food security. Nevertheless, the latest scientific and technological breakthroughs have made it possible to bring water to some of the driest places on Earth. By using such techniques as atmospheric water harvesting, solar-powered desalination, fog collection, and biotechnological methods, the researchers show that they can circumvent the constraints of the severe desert environment by combining different disciplines. At the core of making these technologies environmentally friendly and economically sustainable is the use of clean energy sources, particularly

solar and wind. Practical experiences in different countries like Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Chile, India, and the USA serve to demonstrate the opportunities as well as the obstacles in the large-scale deployment of water production systems. Firstly, it is necessary to concentrate on replacing the current energy-intensive technologies with energy-efficient ones, simultaneously developing new materials, using smart technologies and involving the community in the process. Policy support will be necessary to bring about significant changes in the scale of these innovations and to be able to adjust them to different desert environments anywhere in the world. The combination of scientific innovation, technological breakthrough, and sustainable policies could, in the end, have the effect of converting deserts into ecosystems capable of supporting human and environmental well-being, thus making them water-scarce wastelands no more.

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