

Description

The present invention relates to a solar ray collector for use with a spacecraft.

There has been proposed in various forms a system in which lenses or the like converge solar radiation into light conducting members so that the solar radiation is transmitted to a desired location to serve as a light source such as for lighting or culture of chlorella.

In parallel with the development in space engineering, the expected duration of stay of astronauts and others in space is growing longer and longer. A critical condition for such a long stay in space is the supply of oxygen and food in a spacecraft. While such may be implemented by loading a spacecraft with oxygen cylinders and food before launching it, the ever increasing number of crews and time of their stay in space will soon come to require oxygen cylinders and fresh food more than a spacecraft can carry. It is therefore required to furnish a spacecraft with some implementation for the self-supply of oxygen and fresh food within the spacecraft. The most effective energy source available in space is, as a matter of course, solar radiation.

US-A-3 620 846 describes a solar ray collector used for a spacecraft. This known solar ray collector is permanently attached to the outside of the spacecraft and comprises a deployable panel consisting of several articulated panel segments having mounted solar cells thereon and being adapted to be deployed to form a continuous planar cantilever surface extending laterally from the outside of the spacecraft. The panel segments are slidably mounted with their longitudinal edges in articulated track segments of a deployable track which is stowed in a folded configuration substantially parallel to the outside of the spacecraft. A support track is fixed to a base support which in turn is slidably mounted on a pair of base tracks fixed to the outside of the spacecraft. Drive means are provided to move the base support in both directions along the base tracks. An accelerative force as a result of the base support being driven along the base tracks in one direction causes the articulated tracks together with the panel segments to unfold into the deployed planar cantilevered configuration, with the panel segments and the corresponding track segments initially folded one upon the other, sliding and turning simultaneously through an angle of 90° in a direction away from the spacecraft while being supported with their leading and trailing edges by the support tracks and additional tube-like tracks perpendicular to the support tracks. When the leading and trailing edges of the panel segments are supported by the tube-like tracks only, two wing panel segments overlying the innermost panel segment are turned through an angle of 180° in a sideway direction until they are arranged on both sides of and coplanar with the innermost panel segment. Then the remaining panel segment which is in a corrugated configuration is further slid and turned away from

the spacecraft through an angle of 270° into the final configuration in which it is coplanar with the previously unfolded panel segments. Driving the base support in the opposite direction will result in reversing the unfolding operation.

Having a large number of interdependent moving parts including panel segments and track segments following a rather complicated path during unfolding and folding back, this known solar collector device is prone to malfunctions and jamming.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a solar ray collector for use with a spacecraft, which collector is of simple construction, reliable and which can be operated smoothly without malfunctions.

This object is achieved with a solar ray collector having the features of claim 1.

The inventive solar collector comprises a relatively small number of moving parts which are not interdependent from each other. Being pivotable around one cross-arm and mounted by means of this cross-arm for linear sliding movement along two posts, the pivoting movements and the linear sliding movements of each of the sub-assemblies are independent from each other. Thus no malfunctions and no jamming can occur with the inventive solar ray collector during unfolding and folding back.

The above and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the following detailed description taken with the accompanying drawings.

Fig. 1 is a perspective view of a solar ray collector embodying the present invention which is in an unfolded operative position;

Fig. 2 is a sectional side elevation (along line II-II of Fig. 3) of a collector assembly desirably applicable to the present invention;

Fig. 3 is a plan view of the collector subassembly shown in Fig. 2;

Fig. 4 is a section showing an encircled portion A of Fig. 1 in detail; and

Fig. 5 is a side elevation of the solar ray collector of Fig. 1 which is in a folded inoperative position.

Description of the preferred embodiment

While the solar ray collector for a spacecraft of the present invention is susceptible of numerous physical embodiments, depending upon the environment and requirements of use, a substantial number of the herein shown and described embodiment have been made, tested and used, and all have performed in an eminently satisfactory manner.

Referring to Fig. 1 of the drawings, a solar ray collector embodying the present invention is shown in its unfolded operative position. The collector, generally 10, is mounted on an outer wall 12 of a spacecraft and includes six posts 14a, 14b, 14c, 14d, 14e and 14f which protrude from the outer wall 12. As shown, the posts 14a-14f are located at the apexes of a hexagon. Cross-arms 16a, 16b, 16c, 16d, 16e, 16f and 16g are

individually movable up and down along and between the nearby posts 14a—14f. Collector subassemblies 18a, 18b, 18c, 18d, 18e, 18f and 18g are mounted respectively on the cross-arm 16a—16g to be rotatable thereabout between the illustrated unfolded operative position and folded inoperative position, which will be described. The reference numeral 20 designates a housing section defined inside the spacecraft in order to accommodate the solar collector 10. If desired, the housing section 20 may be positioned outside the spacecraft.

Details of each collector subassembly 18 are shown in Figs. 2 and 3. Each collector subassembly 18 has a light receiving surface which is substantially identical in shape with the hexagon defined by the posts 14a—14f. In this particular embodiment, the collector subassembly 18 comprises sixty-one lenses 30 each having a diameter of about 4 centimeters. It should be noted, however, the number of lenses 30 shown and described is only illustrative and even several thousands or more lenses may be used. Optical fibers 32 are arranged such that their light receiving ends are accurately aligned with focal points of the lenses 30 in one-to-one correspondence. In this construction, solar rays converted by the lenses into the associated optical fibers 32 are transmitted to desired locations by the optical fibers 32 or, as shown in Fig. 2, by way of a fiber optic cable 34 to which the optical fibers 32 are optically connected.

The collector subassembly 18 shown in Figs. 2 and 3 has a very thin configuration due to the use of the lenses 30 whose diameter and, therefore, focal length is as short as about 4 millimeters. This renders the whole solar collector construction significantly thin, requiring a minimum of space in a spacecraft. While the lenses 30 shown in Figs. 2 and 3 have a small hexagonal shape, they may be formed in a circle or any other suitable shape so long as the efficiency concerning occupied area is not critical.

Referring to Fig. 4, a portion A of the solar collector shown in Fig. 1 is shown in an enlarged sectional plan view, representing the configuration of the posts 14a—14f and their associated cross-arms 16a—16g. As shown, the post 14b in the portion A is made up of two hollow tubular members, or pipes, 14'b and 14''b which are joined together in a generally cocoon shape. The cross-arms 16a and 16b, which are also hollow, respectively grip the pipes 14'b and 14''b and are slide up and down therealong. This configuration applies to all the other associated posts and cross-arms. The construction shown in Fig. 4 allows all the fiber optic cables 34 associated with the collector subassemblies 18a—18g to be led through the bores inside the cross-arms 16a—16g and posts 14a—14f. Solar radiation collected by the collector subassemblies 18a—18g are transmitted by cables 34 in the cross-arms and posts to the interior of the spacecraft. While the posts 14a—14f have been shown and described as each being made up of two pipes, they may comprise a

single hollow member having a generally cocoon-shaped cross section.

Each of the hollow posts 14a—14f has therein-side a drive mechanism for moving its associated cross-arms 16 up and down, while each of the cross-arms 16a—16g has therein-side a drive mechanism for rotating its associated collector subassembly 18. When in use, the collector subassemblies 18a—18g are moved out of the housing section 20 and, when out of use such as at the time of launching, they are kept in the housing section 20.

The folded inoperative position of the collector subassemblies 18a—18g is shown in Fig. 5. An exemplary and not restrictive example of the procedure for folding the collector subassemblies 18a—18g from the Fig. 1 position to the Fig. 5 position will be described. First, the cross-arm 16g carrying the subassembly 18a therewith is lowered along the posts 14e and 14f to a lowermost position in the assembly. Then, the cross-arm 16a, for example, is elevated along the posts 14a and 14b to an uppermost position in the assembly. Subsequently, the subassembly 18b is rotated 180 degrees about the cross-arm 16a and over the tops of the posts 14a and 14b until the subassembly 18b settles itself in the hexagonal region defined by the posts 14a—14f. In this position, the cross-arm 16a is lowered along the posts 14a and 14b to lay the subassembly 18b over the subassembly 18a. By the same procedure, the other subassemblies 18c—18g are sequentially elevated to the upper ends of their associated posts, rotated 180 degrees, and then lowered along the posts to be stacked in the hexagonal space. Thereafter, the posts 14a—14f are lowered together so that the whole assembly 10 is bodily retracted into the housing section 20. The top opening of the housing section 20 may be closed by a lid (not shown).

At the time of launching the spacecraft or collecting it, all the collector subassemblies 18a—18g are efficiently stored in a stack inside the housing section 20 as previously stated. After the spacecraft has reached the space, the solar collector 10 is unfolded to its operative position shown in Fig. 1 by the steps of opening the lid (not shown) of the housing section 20, projecting the stack of subassemblies 18a—18g together with the posts 14a—14f to the outside of the spacecraft, and causing the previously mentioned folding procedure to occur in the reverse sequence, that is, sequentially elevating the subassemblies 30g—30b and rotating them 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

In the unfolded position of the solar collector 10, the subassemblies 18b—18g may lie in the same plane with the subassembly 18a positioned in the lowermost portions of the associated posts 14e and 14f. However, any positional relationship between the subassemblies 18a—18g with respect to height is permissible so long as their light receiving surfaces are directed on the sun. Also, the subassemblies 18a—18g may be folded down in any desired sequence if the subassembly

18a is positioned at the bottom of the stack. In this sense, the movement of the subassembly 18a along the posts 14e and 14f is not an essential feature and, instead, the subassembly 18a may be securely mounted in lower portions of the posts 14e and 14f.

Although not shown in the drawings, stops are rigidly mounted on the tops of the posts 14a—14f in order to prevent the cross-arms 16a—16f from slipping off the posts 14a—14f when they are raised to the top of the assembly.

The light receiving surfaces of the subassemblies 18a—18g are oriented sunward relying on a posture control performed by the spacecraft.

In summary, it will be seen that the present invention provides a solar ray collector which is suitable for use with a spacecraft due to the need for a minimum of space. Designed for use in the space, the solar ray collector of the present invention has no gravity during operation and, therefore, requires only a small driving force for raising and lowering and rotating the subassemblies 18a—18g as described. Such a situation also allows the subassemblies 18a—18g to be cantilevered each at one end only.

Claims

1. A solar ray collector for use with a spacecraft, comprising;

posts (14a—14f) positioned at the apexes of a hexagon which is defined on an outer periphery (12) of the spacecraft, and protruding from said outer periphery (12);

cross-arms (16a—16g) each bridging respective adjacent posts (14a—14f) and being slidable up and down along said posts; and

collector subassemblies (18a—18g) each having a light receiving surface which is substantially identical in shape with said hexagon, each of said collector subassemblies (18a—18g) having one side thereof mounted to a respective cross-arm (16a—16g) in such a manner that the collector subassembly (18a—18g) rotatable around said cross-arm.

2. A solar ray collector as claimed in claim 1, in which the collector subassemblies (18a—18g), when in operation, are unfolded to the outside of said hexagon such that the light receiving surfaces thereof are substantially perpendicular to the posts (14a—14f) and, when out of use, folded to the inside of said hexagon to be stored in a stack.

3. A solar ray collector as claimed in claim 1 or 2, in which the posts (14a—14f) are movable into and out of the spacecraft.

4. A solar ray collector as claimed in any of claims 1 through 3, further comprising another collector subassembly (18a) which is constantly positioned in said hexagon.

Patentansprüche

1. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor zur Verwendung mit einem Raumfahrzeug, mit

Pfosten (14a—14f), die an den Eckpunkten eines Sechsecks angeordnet sind, welches an einer äußeren Peripherie (12) des Raumfahrzeugs abgegrenzt ist, und aus der genannten äußeren Peripherie (12) herausragen;

Querstreben (16a—16g), deren jede jeweilige benachbarte Pfosten (14a—14f) miteinander verbindet und entlang der genannten Pfosten nach oben und nach unten verschiebbar ist; und

Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g) mit je einer Lichtempfangsfläche, die in der Form im wesentlichen identisch mit dem genannten Sechseck ist, wobei jede der genannten Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g) mit einer Seite an einer jeweiligen Querstrebe (16a—16g) in einer solchen Weise befestigt ist, daß die Kollektor-Untergruppe (18a—18g) um die genannte Querstrebe drehbar ist.

2. Ein Sonnenstrahlen-Kollektor nach Anspruch 1, in welchem die Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g), wenn sie in Betrieb sind, derart zur Außenseite des genannten Sechsecks hin entfaltet sind, daß ihre Lichtempfangsflächen im wesentlichen senkrecht zu den Pfosten (14a—14f) angeordnet sind, und, wenn sie außer Betrieb sind, zur Innenseite des genannten Sechsecks hin eingefaltet sind, um in einem Stapel aufbewahrt zu werden.

3. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor nach Anspruch 1 oder 2, in welchem die Pfosten (14a—14f) in das Raumfahrzeug hinein- und aus diesem herausbewegbar sind.

4. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor nach wenigstens einem der Ansprüche 1 bis 3, der ferner eine andere Kollektor-Untergruppe (18a) umfaßt, die ständig in dem genannten Sechseck angeordnet ist.

Revendications

1. Un collecteur de rayons solaires utilisable avec un engin spatial, comprenant:

des montants 14a—14f positionnés aux sommets d'un hexagone qui est défini sur une périphérie extérieure 12 de l'engin spatial, et faisant saillie de ladite périphérie extérieure 12;

des bras transversaux 16a—16g reliant chacun des montants adjacents respectifs 14a—14f et pouvant coulisser vers le haut et vers le bas le long desdits montants; et

des sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g comportant chacun une surface réceptrice de lumière qui a une forme sensiblement identique audit hexagone, chacun desdits sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g comportant un côté monté sur un bras transversal respectif 16a—16g d'une manière telle que le sous-ensemble collecteur (18a—18g) puisse tourner autour dudit bras transversal.

2. Un collecteur de rayons solaires tel que revendiqué à la revendication 1, dans lequel les sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g, quand ils sont en service, sont déployés à l'extérieur dudit hexagone de telle sorte que leurs surfaces réceptrices de lumière soient sensiblement perpendicu-

18a is positioned at the bottom of the stack. In this sense, the movement of the subassembly 18a along the posts 14e and 14f is not an essential feature and, instead, the subassembly 18a may be securely mounted in lower portions of the posts 14e and 14f.

Although not shown in the drawings, stops are rigidly mounted on the tops of the posts 14a—14f ... order to prevent the cross-arms 16a—16f from slipping off the posts 14a—14f when they are raised to the top of the assembly.

The light receiving surfaces of the subassemblies 18a—18g are oriented sunward relying on a posture control performed by the spacecraft.

In summary, it will be seen that the present invention provides a solar ray collector which is suitable for use with a spacecraft due to the need for a minimum of space. Designed for use in the space, the solar ray collector of the present invention has no gravity during operation and, therefore, requires only a small driving force for raising and lowering and rotating the subassemblies 18a—18g as described. Such a situation also allows the subassemblies 18a—18g to be cantilevered each at one end only.

Claims

1. A solar ray collector for use with a spacecraft, comprising;

posts (14a—14f) positioned at the apexes of a hexagon which is defined on an outer periphery (12) of the spacecraft, and protruding from said outer periphery (12);

cross-arms (16a—16g) each bridging respective adjacent posts (14a—14f) and being slidable up and down along said posts; and

collector subassemblies (18a—18g) each having a light receiving surface which is substantially identical in shape with said hexagon, each of said collector subassemblies (18a—18g) having one side thereof mounted to a respective cross-arm (16a—16g) in such a manner that the collector subassembly (18a—18g) rotatable around said cross-arm.

2. A solar ray collector as claimed in claim 1, in which the collector subassemblies (18a—18g), when in operation, are unfolded to the outside of said hexagon such that the light receiving surfaces thereof are substantially perpendicular to the posts (14a—14f) and, when out of use, folded to the inside of said hexagon to be stored in a stack.

3. A solar ray collector as claimed in claim 1 or 2, in which the posts (14a—14f) are movable into and out of the spacecraft.

4. A solar ray collector as claimed in any of claims 1 through 3, further comprising another collector subassembly (18a) which is constantly positioned in said hexagon.

Patentansprüche

1. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor zur Verwendung mit einem Raumfahrzeug, mit

Pfosten (14a—14f), die an den Eckpunkten eines Sechsecks angeordnet sind, welches an einer äußeren Peripherie (12) des Raumfahrzeugs abgegrenzt ist, und aus der genannten äußeren Peripherie (12) herausragen;

Querstreben (16a—16g), deren jede jeweilige benachbarte Pfosten (14a—14f) miteinander verbindet und entlang der genannte Pfosten nach oben und nach unten verschiebbar ist; und

Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g) mit je einer Lichtempfangsfläche, die in der Form im wesentlichen identisch mit dem genannten Sechseck ist, wobei jede der genannten Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g) mit einer Seite an einer jeweiligen Querstrebe (16a—16g) in einer solchen Weise befestigt ist, daß die Kollektor-Untergruppe (18a—18g) um die genannte Querstrebe drehbar ist.

2. Ein Sonnenstrahlen-Kollektor nach Anspruch 1, in welchem die Kollektor-Untergruppen (18a—18g), wenn sie in Betrieb sind, derart zur Außenseite des genannten Sechsecks hin entfaltet sind, daß ihre Lichtempfangsflächen im wesentlichen senkrecht zu den Pfosten (14a—14f) angeordnet sind, und, wenn sie außer Betrieb sind, zur Innenseite des genannten Sechsecks hin eingefaltet sind, um in einem Stapel aufbewahrt zu werden.

3. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor nach Anspruch 1 oder 2, in welchem die Pfosten (14a—14f) in das Raumfahrzeug hinein- und aus diesem herausbewegbar sind.

4. Ein Sonnenstrahlenkollektor nach wenigstens einem der Ansprüche 1 bis 3, der ferner eine andere Kollektor-Untergruppe (18a) umfaßt, die ständig in dem genannten Sechseck angeordnet ist.

Revendications

1. Un collecteur de rayons solaires utilisable avec un engin spatial, comprenant:

des montants 14a—14f positionnés aux sommets d'un hexagone qui est défini sur une périphérie extérieure 12 de l'engin spatial, et faisant saillie de ladite périphérie extérieure 12;

des bras transversaux 16a—16g reliant chacun des montants adjacents respectifs 14a—14f et pouvant coulisser vers le haut et vers le bas le long desdits montants; et

des sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g comportant chacun une surface réceptrice de lumière qui a une forme sensiblement identique audit hexagone, chacun desdits sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g comportant un côté monté sur un bras transversal respectif 16a—16g d'une manière telle que le sous-ensemble collecteur (18a—18g) puisse tourner autour dudit bras transversal.

2. Un collecteur de rayons solaires tel que revendiqué à la revendication 1, dans lequel les sous-ensembles collecteurs 18a—18g, quand ils sont en service, sont déployés à l'extérieur dudit hexagone de telle sorte que leurs surfaces réceptrices de lumière soient sensiblement perpendicu-



lares aux montants 14a—14f alors que, lorsqu'ils ne sont pas en service, ils sont repliés à l'intérieur dudit hexagone de façon à être rangés dans une pile.

3. Un collecteur de rayons solaires tel que revendiqué à la revendication 1 ou 2, dans lequel les montants 14a—14f sont déplaçables

vers l'intérieur et vers l'extérieur de l'engin spatial.

4. Un collecteur de rayons solaires tel que revendiqué à l'une quelconque des revendications 1 à 3, comprenant en outre un autre sous-ensemble collecteur 18a qui est constamment positionné dans ledit hexagone.

5

10

15

20

25

30

35

40

45

50

55

60

65

5

