The Sea Looks Fine. That Is the Problem

From the trenches of trying to tell stories about a world that cannot be understood by sight alone.

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One of the hardest things about communicating ocean conservation is that **the ocean often refuses to look like a problem.**

It looks blue, open, calm, magnificent. It looks like the opposite of crisis. A coastline can appear pristine while a ghost net keeps fishing below the surface. A beach can seem clean until your eyes adjust to the cigarette butts, the bottle caps, the fragments of rope and polystyrene disguised among pebbles and shells. A stretch of water can sparkle in the sun while abandoned structures, lost gear and plastic debris slowly break apart underneath.

The sea looks fine. That is often the problem.

The more I work on stories about the ocean, the more I think this is not only a communications challenge. It is a perceptual one. **Our eyes are bad instruments for understanding the sea.** They are easily seduced by surface beauty and poorly equipped to read systems, absences, slow violence and hidden consequences.

Perhaps one of the first things the ocean teaches us is that **sight is overrated. Underwater, vision is partial and unreliable.** Light bends. Colours disappear with depth. Distance becomes difficult to judge. Motion, turbidity and particles in the water can make even simple things hard to understand. Many marine creatures live in worlds where sight is only one sense among others, and sometimes not the most important one. They listen, feel vibrations, detect pressure, follow chemical traces, respond to changes we cannot perceive.

Ed Yong writes beautifully about this in *An Immense World*: every animal inhabits its own sensory universe, its own version of reality shaped by what it can detect and interpret. The lesson is not simply that animals have extraordinary senses and humans are limited, although that is often true. It is that no creature has access to the whole world. Each one receives only a portion of it.

In the ocean, this feels especially important. We humans keep insisting on understanding the sea mostly by looking at it. And the sea, in return, fools us.

The beauty of an empty sea

We have been trained to read the ocean aesthetically. Blue is clean. Clear is healthy. Transparent water means paradise. A turquoise bay is almost impossible to photograph without making it look like good news.

But the ocean does not always follow our visual expectations. Carl Safina has written about one of the most interesting tricks of perception: the **bluest and clearest open waters can also be among the emptiest, while greener, cloudier waters are often full of phytoplankton**, the microscopic life that feeds the marine food web. What looks pure and heavenly to us can be closer to an ecological desert. What looks murky or less attractive may be where life is flourishing.

This is a useful warning for anyone trying to tell stories about the sea. **Beauty is not always evidence of health.** Sometimes it is only evidence of our distance from the system we are looking at.

The ocean is particularly good at producing reassuring images. A wide horizon makes things feel infinite. A clean surface makes things feel resolved. Waves erase traces quickly. Litter can sink, drift, fragment or be carried somewhere else. **Even when something terrible has happened underwater, the surface may return to calm with almost insulting speed.**

A forest fire leaves blackened trees. A polluted city can show its smog. A river full of foam can make contamination visible. The ocean is different. **Its wounds often do not remain in front of us long enough to become part of public memory. They disappear below. But…do they?**

We know the ocean mostly as a surface

Helen Czerski makes a point that has stayed with me: **we had to go into space to properly see that Earth is not a land planet with some water around it, but a water planet with some land interrupting it.** From the ground, the ocean is fragmented into coastlines, beaches, ports, ferry crossings, fishing grounds, tourist destinations. From space, it becomes the dominant fact of the planet. And yet, for most of us, the ocean remains a surface.

We look at it from the shore, from a boat, from an airplane window, from a satellite image, from a documentary screen. Very few people are able to go below. Even fewer can go deep. The strange imbalance is that **we often imagine space as the great unknown while forgetting how much of our own planet is still beyond direct human experience. This is not just a scientific problem. It is a cultural one.**

If something is hard to see, it is hard to defend. If something is hard to film, it is hard to explain. If something happens far from shore, below the surface or outside ordinary experience, it has to fight harder to become real in public imagination.

This is one of the daily frustrations of ocean communication. The most important part of the story is often where the camera struggles to go.

A ghost net does not always look like a tragedy

In ocean conservation, we often need images to make a story legible. We need people to understand scale, damage and consequence. But the ocean does not always cooperate with our need for clarity.

A ghost net may be deadly and still difficult to film. It can drift almost invisibly in the water column, or lie collapsed on the seabed looking strangely harmless. **The animal it trapped may already be gone. The violence has happened, but the image is missing.**

This matters because much of the public language of environmental concern depends on visibility. We respond to what we can see. We understand an oil-covered bird. We understand a turtle entangled in plastic. We understand a beach buried in bottles. These images are painful, but they are also clear. They give the eye something to hold on to.

Ghost fishing is not always visually generous. A lost net can keep killing for months or years without producing a single image dramatic enough to travel around the world. A piece of fishing gear can become part of the underwater landscape before anyone notices it. A net can be transparent, pale, torn, floating, camouflaged by light and movement. It can be both present and almost absent.

The same is true for other kinds of ocean pollution. Styrofoam, heavily used in some aquaculture structures, can break into thousands of white fragments that disappear among stones and shells. Plastic does not simply remain as one recognisable object. It weathers, fragments, shrinks, travels and becomes harder to identify at every stage. **Microplastics and nanoplastics are not only difficult to remove; they are difficult to imagine.**

Even abandoned aquaculture sites, which can be enormous, may remain strangely invisible to public attention. Structures degrade below the surface or along remote coastlines. Ropes, pipes, nets, floats and polystyrene can slowly break apart away from the eyes of most citizens. Unless someone documents them, maps them, dives them, photographs them, removes them and brings the evidence back to land, they remain outside the story.

And outside the story, damage becomes easier to ignore.

The beach that changes once you learn how to look

One of the most revealing moments during a beach clean-up often happens at the beginning, when people arrive, look around and say some version of: “It actually looks quite clean.” Sometimes they are right, in a superficial sense. There may be no dramatic pile of trash, no mountain of bottles, no shocking carpet of waste. The beach may look ordinary, even beautiful. Then something happens.

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After ten or fifteen minutes, the eye begins to adjust. People start noticing the artificial colours, the unnatural shapes, the textures that do not belong. A cigarette butt stops looking like a pale little stick and becomes a filter made of plastic fibres. A white crumb stops looking like a stone and becomes polystyrene. A piece of rope, a bottle cap, a plastic film from a snack, a fragment of fishing line, a little blue or green or orange object half buried in the sand: suddenly the clean beach is not so clean anymore.

Nothing has changed except perception.

I find this moment important because it shows that **visibility is not only about the presence or absence of things. It is also about training.** We do not automatically see what matters. We see what we have learned to recognise.

This is one of the reasons education is so powerful in ocean conservation. Once people learn to distinguish the artificial from the natural, once they understand how small fragments travel, how rivers connect to the sea, how a cigarette butt left on land can eventually become part of a marine pollution story, the same landscape becomes different. Not uglier, necessarily, but more truthful. The beach was not empty before. We simply did not know how to read it.

There is another layer to this, one I was reminded of while reading John MacDonald’s essay on Aeon on anthropogenic rocks. He describes beaches and coastal formations where human-made **materials have become so mixed with natural processes that the distinction is no longer obvious**: industrial slag eroded by waves, fragments of brick in beach sand, even objects fused into new rock-like formations. At first glance, the landscape looks natural. Only with a trained eye does the human trace appear.

I find this strangely close to what happens during clean-ups. The beach is not only a place where litter arrives. It is also a place where the boundary between natural and artificial becomes harder to read. A white fragment can be shell, stone or polystyrene. A coloured grain can be mineral or plastic. What looks like coastline may already contain the record of us.

The ocean as a place where things disappear

For centuries, the ocean has been treated as a place where things disappear. **Its vastness has encouraged one of the most dangerous ideas humans have ever had: that “away” exists.** Away from the city. Away from the beach. Away from the boat. Away from the factory. Away from sight.

Journalist Ian Urbina has written about the way humanity has long imagined the sea as a kind of infinity, a space so enormous that it could absorb almost anything we threw into it. Waste, oil, chemicals, sewage, fishing gear, wrecks, evidence, responsibility. **Once something entered the ocean, it seemed to leave the human world. It was swallowed by distance and depth.**

But the ocean does not make our actions vanish. It stores them, moves them, breaks them apart, circulates them, returns them. Sometimes it brings them back to shore. Sometimes it sends them into the bodies of animals. Sometimes it carries them across borders, into food webs, into sediments, into places we will never visit, into the lives of workers of unethical fishing companies.

Sustainability is often a problem of visualising systems and consequences. We struggle to see connections between what we buy, what we throw away, what is produced for us, what is hidden from us, and what happens later. With the ocean, this problem becomes almost literal. The system is there, but much of it is out of sight. And what is out of sight has often been treated as out of responsibility.

The invisible engines

The strange thing is that **the ocean hides not only its wounds. It also hides much of what keeps the planet alive.**

Some of the most important forces in the ocean are difficult to film and even harder to turn into public stories. **Currents, salinity, density, heat exchange, humidity, carbon cycling, microbial life, plankton blooms, marine snow drifting through the water column: these are not easy characters.** They do not pose. They do not look heroic. They do not fit comfortably into the visual language we use for nature. And yet they are among the engines of the living planet.

Plankton can be almost invisible to the naked eye and still shape the food web. Marine snow, that slow fall of organic particles through the water, can look like underwater dust and still carry life and carbon into the deep. Currents can move heat around the globe without ever appearing in the way a river appears.

The ocean's most important stories are often not spectacular in the usual sense. They are subtle, distributed, systemic. **They require us to care about**

processes, not only images.

This is hard for communication because **images are fast and systems are slow**. A photograph can travel in seconds. A system needs explanation, patience and trust. It needs metaphors that do not oversimplify, visuals that do not betray the science, and stories that help people feel connection without pretending that everything can be made easy.

It is tempting to think that the solution is simply to produce better images. Sometimes that helps. A diver's footage can reveal what a coastline hides. A recovered net can make an invisible threat physical. A map can show the journey of litter from land to sea. A microscopic image can turn plankton into a strange and beautiful cast of characters.

But the deeper challenge is not only to show more. It is to help people understand that the visible part is never the whole story.

Bringing stories to the surface

In my work with the Healthy Seas Foundation, I often think of ocean communication as an act of reconstruction. We cannot always show the whole story directly, so we assemble it through traces: divers' footage, recovered nets, before-and-after images, maps, scientific monitoring, interviews, educational activities, illustrations, virtual reality experiences and the physical evidence of what was removed from the water.

Sometimes the evidence is a net on deck. Sometimes it is a container filled with marine litter. Sometimes it is a child holding a piece of plastic that looked like a shell from a distance. Sometimes it is an illustration that helps people understand what happens around a wreck when a ghost net turns a refuge into a trap. Sometimes it is virtual reality, allowing someone who will never dive to experience, even partially, the work of those who do. Sometimes it is a scientific tool, like biodiversity monitoring, that helps us see not only the damage but the recovery.

This kind of communication is not decoration added at the end of conservation work. It is part of how the work becomes visible, understandable and shared.

Of course, there is always a risk of simplifying too much. **The ocean does not need to be turned into a stage set for human emotion. Not every story needs a hero, a villain and a happy ending.** But without some form of translation, much of what happens underwater remains inaccessible to public attention, and inaccessible stories rarely become priorities.

The task is to bring things to the surface without flattening them. **To make people see without pretending that sight is enough.** To show the net, but also the system that lost it. To show the litter, but also the habits, industries and infrastructures that produced it. To show the beauty, but also the deception of beauty. To show the damage, but also the life that was there before and may return if given the chance.

Learning to see differently

The sea looks fine. Sometimes it is fine. Often, it is not. Most of the time, the truth is not available from the surface.

This is what makes ocean conservation such a difficult story to tell. **The ocean hides its wounds, its engines, its losses and sometimes even its recovery. It asks us to distrust the simplicity of the view. It asks us to accept that a blue horizon may contain a broken system, that a clean beach may be full of fragments, that a beautiful sea may be empty, and that the most important forms of life may be too small for us to notice.**

We need science, divers, educators, artists, storytellers, communities, maps, data, images and imagination because no single sense, no single tool and no single story can hold the sea. We need to learn from a world where sight is only one way of knowing, and not always the best one.

To communicate the ocean is to keep **building bridges between the surface and what lies below. It is to bring evidence back from places most people will never see.** It is to train attention until the artificial fragment appears among the stones, until the net is no longer just a shape in the water, until the calm surface no longer convinces us that everything underneath is fine.

The sea looks fine. That is the problem, but it also has to be where the work begins.

Ocean Conservation | Communications Strategy | Oceans | Storytelling | Visualization

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