

Ocean Literacy

From connection to understanding

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*"Even if you never have the chance to see or touch the ocean, the ocean touches you with every breath you take, every drop of water you drink, every bite you consume. Everyone, everywhere, is inextricably connected to and utterly dependent upon the existence of the sea." Sylvia Earle*

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What humanity needs is a healthy and less threatened ocean - but, currently, there is not a widespread understanding of why that is the case. Without this appreciation of what our ocean does for us and what might threaten its ability to sustain us, it can be difficult to evidence the need for action across society.

What do people need to understand?

Ocean Literacy is a widely-used term to describe the understanding of the ocean's influence on us and our influence on the ocean. An ocean literate person understands the essential principles and fundamental concepts about the ocean, can communicate about the ocean in a meaningful way, and is therefore able – and more likely – to make informed and responsible decisions regarding the ocean and its resources. There are 7 principles of Ocean Literacy, the key ideas scientists and educators agree everyone should understand about the ocean:

1. The Earth has one big ocean with many features.
2. The ocean and life in the ocean shape the features of Earth.
3. The ocean is a major influence on weather and climate.
4. The ocean made the Earth habitable.
5. The ocean supports a great diversity of life and ecosystems.
6. The ocean and humans are inextricably interconnected.
7. The ocean is largely unexplored.

Ocean Literacy is a concept that is gaining prominence in the field of global ocean protection, with many nations prioritising improvements in ocean knowledge and seeing the value of taking a 'whole of society' approach to developing an ocean-aware culture through school curricula, public awareness campaigns and ocean literate city initiatives. Ocean Literacy is also one of the key priorities of the [UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development \(2021-2030\)](#).

Why do we need to improve Ocean Literacy?

An ocean literate person, who values the ocean, grasps their dependence on it and understands the systemic impacts of people on the ocean, may be more likely to avoid disposable plastic and opt for sustainable, reusable or recyclable alternatives. They may make every effort to eat only sustainably caught fish. They may be more mindful of the myriad benefits they derive from the ocean. Their awareness and behaviours may be passed on to friends and family. They may voice their views to local and national decision-makers. They may even take a proactive role in shaping a more sustainable future for the ocean in their professional life.



On the other hand, people who are not ocean literate may feel disconnected and be less able to make informed and responsible decisions regarding the ocean and its resources. They are less likely to be agents of positive change advancing ocean action in their communities.

The other reason we need to improve Ocean Literacy is because, while evidence of the multitude of ways we benefit from the ocean is growing, information about how the ocean makes life both possible and worth living is not widely communicated or understood. Far too many people lack even basic understanding of the fundamental ocean concepts and principles, and this knowledge is not integrated in mainstream education or information programmes.

For example, preliminary investigation indicates that, whilst there is variability in levels of knowledge and understanding, people in the UK do not currently have the opportunity to consistently develop their ocean literacy and do not live in an ocean literate society. There is a big gap between what scientists and NGOs are calling for and what the public thinks about ocean issues. The majority of people demonstrate only limited understanding of the value of the ocean, why it matters for them, and the need to protect and manage it in a sustainable way.

Ocean Literacy is about value and connection

To be an effective tool for change, Ocean Literacy must go beyond knowledge, to understanding and value. The way in which people connect with and value the environment shapes the way they behave. Indeed, reconnecting people and nature is one of the current priorities

for biodiversity conservation, as behavioural change is rooted in the way people relate to and value the wider, wild environment. For people to get behind initiatives to protect the ocean, they have to resonate with and reflect their values: a clear understanding of value is essential to conservation success.

So, how can we reconcile that with the fact that most of us live blissfully unaware of how our daily actions impact the health of the ocean, or how the health of the ocean impacts our everyday lives? The ocean is still often seen either as a holiday destination, a place of leisure, a source of food or a means of transporting goods around the world. There is a paucity of real understanding around the vital planetary functions and services of the ocean and how every living being on the planet is dependent on it. This is further exacerbated by our increasingly urban lives making us disconnected from nature, digitally distracted and more sedentary.

One of the key tasks of Ocean Literacy is to rebuild these connections, and one of the most effective ways to do that is by appealing to our shared, human values. An overwhelming majority (84%) of stakeholders recently surveyed by Wild Labs believe that, of the 7 Ocean Literacy principles, principle 6 - 'The ocean and humans are inextricably linked' - is the most critical principle for society to engage with. Highlighting this fact and embedding it into the human psyche so that it inspires action to protect our ocean is one of humanity's greatest challenges today.

Ocean Literacy is a story about values and connections. By leveraging collective thinking and shared values, we can shape new stories and support coherent, compelling ocean conversations and actions.