





# In a post-Covid world, lessons in living must come from the ocean

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The Covid-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus the relationship people around the world have with the ocean.

As lockdowns eased, people flocked to the seashore and the beaches as the oceans' appeal to the inner stirrings of both body and soul became more pronounced.

The pandemic also brought to attention the important role that small-scale fisheries and local value chains play in our fish food systems. When global value chains faltered, retailers and consumers turned to the local fleets and supply chains. These value chains, once dismissed as inefficient and unsuited to modernity, have come to our rescue.

But the inequities of access to the ocean continue starkly.

Our coasts have been victims of creeping privatisation for numerous economic activities leading to excess pollution of the ocean and coastal groundwater, destruction of coastal vegetation and transgressing into the common spaces of the coast and the littorals.

In tropical regions, ocean infrastructure has resulted in untold erosion of sandy coasts.

With all this, the pandemic has strongly served up the message that all those who earn their livelihoods from the ocean (ocean citizens) and all the others (ocean supporters) must collaborate to ensure ocean health and ocean access.

The pandemic proved why the governance of the ocean is the collective responsibility of humanity.

FISHERMEN AT A JETTY IN  
VERSOVA KOLIWADA  
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## Blue economy thinking

Currently, discussions about the future of the ocean are dominated by 'blue economy' enthusiasts who look primarily into the 'new and material' aspects of the ocean as 'resources and services'. This approach could be termed the 'what more can we get or take from the ocean' perspective.

There is a strong case today to go beyond the material aspect and take a 'what values does the ocean offer to us' perspective. Human relationships with the ocean represent a plurality of values – material, monetary, emotional and spiritual – that must be respected and fostered.

Ocean sciences today concentrate on what we are doing to the ocean (overharvesting it, polluting it, failing to govern it). But we must also demonstrate how the coastal and oceanic parts of our history have shaped our ethical codes and moral practices. We need to emphasise, for example, how the oceans have nurtured our collective and cooperative instincts.

To paraphrase the South Pacific anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa, just as the ocean is an open and ever-flowing reality, our effort should be to transcend all forms of insularity, to become openly searching, inventive and welcoming in our approach.

## History, present and future

The history of civilisation shows that multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, polyglot and with tolerant religions, started in ports and on board ships.

The existence of ocean and coastal commons means that cooperative ways of working and living thrive on our seacoasts – when recognised and supported.

The principles and norms of free trade, neutrality, religious freedom, multiculturalism and the duty to render assistance to those in mortal danger are all maritime in origin and point toward humanity's better nature.

However, such systems are becoming rarer, on land, as our societies privatise public space and emphasise the individual more than the collective.

Currently, there are rising anxieties about increasing economic inequalities, climate change impacts, the rise of authoritarian governance and, more positively, the worldwide reckoning with racialised and gendered injustices.

This, and the moves for decolonisation, of minds as well as lands and waters, point to a fervent desire to re-examine our relationships with each other and with non-human nature.

### **Points for action**

To achieve a broader societal reflection on 'building forward better', here are some points of action.

#### **1. Broaden and humanise the ocean narrative**

Narratives motivate and inform political action. Ocean supporters should emphasise narratives that celebrate the rich diversity of human social, cultural, cognitive and emotional relationships with the ocean. This will broaden the political consensus around a sustainable ocean planet.

The economic concept of 'ecosystem services' needs to be replaced by the more socially appropriate 'nature's contribution to people' concept.

Ocean supporters should reinstate the original idea of the blue economy that was propounded by the small island states and based on the tenets of equity and environmental sustainability.

Efforts must be undertaken to restore a broader knowledge base in ocean dialogues which considers indigenous knowledge and other systems of knowledge such as history, anthropology, culture, arts, heritage and traditional ecological knowledge.

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## **2. Engage with wider constituencies for new ocean visions**

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities in the 40-year consensus on globalised and liberalised economies. Rising inequalities and inadequate action on climate change are leading to radical calls for transformative economic and social policy. Even on the blue economy discussions, there is a call for blue justice and blue degrowth.

These voices of dissent must be heard as they come from those whose lives and livelihoods depend on the oceans. This will prevent a repeat of the polarising and exclusionary processes witnessed in the industrial and agrarian revolutions.

Support small-scale fishers, who are the largest segment of the ocean citizens, and involve them as allies for ocean stewardship prioritising the democratic and human rights-based Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries framed by the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation.

The concerns and actions of port cities and coastal towns should be taken into account as they spear-head the concerns on climate change and sustainable tourism.

## **3. Support policies and finance that prioritise participatory and inclusive ocean-society relationships**

Invest in socially, culturally embedded meso-level institutions of community governance that are between the national and individual level. The non-monetary human relationships to the ocean are most evident and valued at this level.

The historical rights and responsibilities of these communities in the ocean need to be retained and expanded where appropriate. Inclusive governance is best supported by participatory democracy, which requires an active and capable civil society.

Long-term public funding should be established for repositories that preserve, enlighten and enthuse us about community-memories of events (such as natural disasters, toxic exposures, development projects). Such initiatives will even out information asymmetries, facilitate inter- generational memory and create a more level playing field for communities negotiating with external interests.

Public-interest litigation bodies should be established for ocean citizen communities to approach when their “social licence to operate” is threatened by corporate interests.

Post Covid-19 funding should be directed towards social wellbeing which will create more resilient economies and food systems. Ocean citizen communities should be included in recovery planning in other sectors, principally transportation, tourism and fisheries.

This call for harmonised ocean governance comes at a time of resurgent nationalism. This is the time to stress greater multilateralism to bring order to the governance architecture of the ocean that ensures a delicate balance between local and national priorities as well as the common good of humanity.

As we prepare for the UN Decade for Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development due to run from 2021-2030 only bold political and social leadership will make such a future a reality.

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