



# Who is the ocean? Preface to the future seas 2030 special issue

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## Introduction: meeting the Ocean [for the first time]

*On the 20th March 2017 the New Zealand government enshrined into law that the Whanganui River is a legal entity, having rights and responsibilities just as a human person.*

This was perceived as a massive victory for Māori in getting their understanding of the river recognized in a contemporary Common Law system, and points to the central question of this preface—who is the Ocean

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Community and Indigenous statements have been written in italics in this Preface.

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from Indigenous and traditional viewpoints? It points to acknowledgement of the Māori worldview for not just the rivers but the Ocean and all life on Earth.

The Future Seas 2030 initiative and associated research is starting from a profound new point of departure—*Who is the Ocean?*

This Preface captures the voices and knowledge of the involved Indigenous and local-traditional peoples, communities and authors who are working together with marine practitioners to assess, study and ultimately save our Mother Ocean. Following the late, great Pacific thinker, Epeli Hau'ofa, instead of conceiving our island nations as 'small-island states', we

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see a sea of islands, the vastest interconnected ecosystem of the world—our seas.

Unlike most research in the past, Future Seas 2030 positions its work so that we begin from a (new) beginning. Whilst our seas have been studied for centuries, the central understanding of them as living entities interconnected all across the planet, and forming sentient relations with the Indigenous and local coastal communities, has not been the starting point of such studies within these waters in the past.

Past centuries following colonisation have entailed massive plunder, conquest, dissemination and detached intellectual analysis from a far-away vantage point that has not understood the lifeblood and depth of these sentient waters. Whilst these colonial practices in extraction and research still persist, Future Seas 2030 and the courage of a potential new start adds a new and positive dimension to ocean research and the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2020–2030).

The Karelian peoples of the north east corner of Europe and present-day Russia have a traditional song:

*tule Meren emä tuulessa tuiskamah vihurissa  
viuhkamah /  
Come forth, Mother of the Sea, Blowing in the  
Wind, Swept and Seen in the Gales*

A related peoples, who only have three individual native people speaking the language, the Livonians of Latvia, a Baltic Finno-Ugric Indigenous people, have centered their culture around *Mer jema*, the Mother of the Sea, who controls the fish catches, weather and the destinies of people. Nothing happens without her knowledge, her benevolence and kindness. No fish or seals can be caught and no good weather guides the people back home if she is angered or mis-treated.

Similar understandings of the sacred and profound relationship between coastal peoples and the seas around the world constitute the Indigenous and traditional governance of the ocean that used to exist prior to the large-scale colonisation process which transformed both the maps and the minds of all peoples. There are still remnants and rebuilt examples of this type of governance even today.

In this preface, we represent those coastal Indigenous and local-traditional communities that contributed to the Future Seas 2030 initiative and the subsequent workshops and papers. We are from

Greenland, Finnish coastal communities, Indigenous Taiwanese peoples, New Zealand Māori, Haida Nation, and Quandamooka Country and Trawlwoolway Pakana (both Australia). Additionally Future Seas 2030 invited the international Snowchange Cooperative, an organisation representing Arctic, boreal and fishing communities globally to record messages and key knowledge throughout 2019 to be included in the special issue to allow the voices of those women and men who could not join the events to share their voices using Free, Prior and Informed Consent. These people included the Skolt Sámi of Finland, Kawawana community in Senegal, Unalakleet, Alaska, USA, Nibela, South Africa, and the Chukchi of North East Siberia.

We understand that we do not represent all coastal and marine Indigenous and traditional communities and do not speak on their behalf or have a right to do so. We are only speaking and sharing from our own home communities and represent our respective nations and cultures. We are humbled to be able to contribute to the international scholarly process of a new start for the oceans and welcome all Indigenous and traditional communities to join the process where they can. We recognize and validate all of these communities and their knowledge, rights and life.

We also recognize and highlight the role of the (Palawa, Pakana) Indigenous Tasmanians of Lutruwita, where the Future Seas 2030 project began, who's culture and traditional practices have, against all odds, survived and grown following an attempted massive genocide. Thank you for hosting our delegation on your homeland and country and sharing your knowledge.

In this Preface we are sharing observations, knowledge and oral histories as said and recorded directly to contribute to the framing of the issues and papers that follow. For the papers within this special issue we have worked alongside scholars on specific issues related to the UN Decade of Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our paper on “A fair ocean future for earth's First Peoples” contains Indigenous and traditional knowledge referenced for the issues and ocean questions (Fischer et al. 2020, this issue).

Indigenous knowledge however does not use referencing of the academic style—it is often based on oral histories, narratives, sharing and events that matter. Therefore, this Preface follows and honours

the Indigenous way of communicating issues about the oceans. A profound example of an oral exchange of two marine Indigenous women on climate change can be found in the short film “Rise” by Greenlandic woman Aka Niviâna and Marshall Islander Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (at <https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/> and reprinted here in part with a kind permission from the authors) and partially shared here:

*we ask  
we demand that the world see beyond  
SUV's, ac's, their pre-packaged convenience  
their oil-slicked dreams, beyond the belief  
that tomorrow will never happen, that this  
is merely an inconvenient truth.  
Let me bring my home to yours.  
Let's watch as Miami, New York,  
Shanghai, Amsterdam, London,  
Rio de Janeiro, and Osaka  
try to breathe underwater.  
You think you have decades  
before your homes fall beneath tides?  
We have years.  
We have months  
before you sacrifice us again  
before you watch from your tv and computer  
screens waiting  
to see if we will still be breathing  
while you do nothing.  
My sister,  
From one island to another  
I give to you these rocks  
as a reminder  
that our lives matter more than their power  
that life in all forms demands  
the same respect we all give to money  
that these issues affect each and everyone of us  
None of us is immune  
And that each and everyone of us has to decide  
if we  
will  
rise*

### **A stark reality of climate change and pollution impacts**

Despite the progress being made globally on an awakening to the new (old) reality of who the Ocean

might be, the colonial plunder continues daily. Trawling ships depart harbours daily wrecking sea floor and coral beds, unused bycatch is dumped every minute overboard, albatrosses and dolphins are dying because of our collective greed. Even on the sea bed robotic scouting vessels and rovers are sampling sites for deep sea mining. Blood-red tide follows the factory ships every night.

The whole ocean system is already undergoing a regime shift with species on the move and collapse of fish stocks. The same governments advocating for more protection are also in some countries subsidizing large-scale fishing fleets and creating Marine Protected Areas without the consultation or dialogue with the affected Indigenous communities. Other immediate urgencies were communicated by, for example our co-author Nuunoq, a whaler and a traditional small-scale fisherman from the community of Attu, Western Greenland:

*As the climate grows warmer the ice cap is melting rapidly and as a consequence our country is beginning to lift, “surfacing”, and as a consequence the tidal currents along the coastline are not running along the routes they used to and therefore the smallest organisms have consequently made small changes to their migrational routes and those preying on them have naturally done likewise. In many instances they have moved from routes chosen as fixed lines or (geographic) points for biological studies by scientists back in a time where the climate was more normal. And in these years it always says in the biologists study reports that there are fewer numbers in the cohorts. Even though the fishermen and hunters report something quite different. Therefore, based on the above, we have suggested to the biologists in our country that they in their studies cover an area in latitude and longitude that is wider and broader than they have been doing for the past 100 years, thus modifying to the slight changes in migration routes found in the PISUNA Project (a community-based monitoring project for natural resources management in Greenland). They in return claim that if they did they would not have anything in the past to relate to and therefore they are reluctant to do so.*

There are many written stories and archaeological publications about Traditional Peoples connections to the terrestrial ecosystems. For many academics and western practitioners this is something that has been known but not clearly understood for some time. These connections for many coastal and seafaring Traditional Peoples extend beyond the highwater mark and into the marine seascapes including the high seas. This is particularly so for people of Oceania, the blue continent.

As a good example of the extent of the Indigenous maritime uses, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Rarua, and Te Arawa scholar, Sandy Morrison, from Aotearoa-New Zealand, has demonstrated in her research, that Māori travelled to the Antarctic waters centuries before the non-Indigenous navigators. Memories of these significant marine voyages were kept in the oral histories of the local tribes and which were then complemented by recent archaeological findings from the Antarctic islands. It means there was no “empty” ocean devoid of Indigenous presence—in traditional times all of the Ocean was known to the coastal nations.

We wish to highlight that for many Traditional Peoples, the land, waterways, seas and skies are more than assets or resources to dominate. Indigenous Australia refers to their traditional areas as ‘country.’ Unfortunately, both the Ocean herself, and her Traditional Peoples and cultures are under threat, like many of the people of the world.

One of the most acute threats remains from climate change. The difference with non-Indigenous societies is that for the most part Indigenous and Traditional Peoples lived so sustainably with the land, seas and skies that they had little to no impact towards the rapid degradation of the earth’s systems. Yet these communities have been and will continue to be the first peoples to be affected by these changes. Issues like sea level rise and increased temperatures are directly impacting Traditional Peoples and their ways of life. The direct damages come, for example by inundating their coasts, destroying houses and sacred sites, and by glacial melts creating tremors in the continental shelf, influencing species spatial ranges.

Without rights, access and rebuilding of their societies on their own terms, the Traditional Peoples and the cultures which define who they are, will be reduced to history. This would result in a genocide that not even the colonisers were able to succeed in doing.

Co-author and Indigenous leader Sutej Hugu from Taiwan summarizes relationships of his Pacific peoples: *In Taiwan’s Tao people’s oral tradition of storytelling, there is the teaching of mavaheng so panid (the noble black-wing flying fish, *Hirundichthys rondeletii*) to the ancestors of Tao people. The teaching includes two major parts: firstly, the inter-species compact for the survival and sustenance of peoples and fish and the eco-calendar, *ahēp no tao*, that defines the arrangement of works and ceremonies all around the year. Secondly, there is the knowledge about migratory fish, species of flying fishes and their predators for harvest, and way of eating. For example, some species should not be roasted and some should never be cooked together. In the Tao marine governance institution, *rayon season*, from about March to June, is for migratory fishing only. Coral reef fishing is absolutely prohibited during this period. Catching of flying fishes is stopped when their reproduction event peaks. In the other seasons the coral fishes are divided into three categories of *oyod* (good), *rahet* (bad), and *jingangana* (inedible), to evenly distribute and mitigate the pressure on the food chain. Good fishes are firstly for women and children and bad fishes are only for men. Some fishes in the *rahet* (bad) category are even specified as *kakanen no rarakeh* (food for the Elders). All above mentioned represents an alternative multidimensional zoning system for conservation of natural resources and environment as the basis of Indigenous notions of sustainability.*

The regime shift of the oceanic system is evident from the oral histories of communities across the seas. Traditional Zulu fishing communities of the province of Kwazulu-Natal on the Eastern seaboard of South Africa are observing significant changes in the coastal forests, rivers and near shore waters of the coast upon which they and their ancestors have depended for their livelihoods for millennia:

*Our ancestors settled these coastal areas hundreds of years ago. The close relationship that we have to the marine and coastal ecosystems in our territories provide us with food. Use of these resources is part of our culture and is reflected in our customary systems of law and in Indigenous knowledge which is handed down from one generation to another. However these systems of Indigenous knowledge have been greatly impacted by a century of colonialism and*

*apartheid-based conservation and spatial planning which has separated many of these Indigenous peoples from their lands and waters or has restricted our interaction and inter-dependence with nature, dispossessing us of access to resources and cutting us off from the source of our wisdom.*

We can therefore determine that the global colonisation which has manifested in a political dominion, taking of land, territory and massive cultural imposition has altered and in some parts completely obliterated Indigenous and traditional ways of life, governance and reality. These dark chapters of history stand in stark contrast with the holistic nature of Indigenous perspectives and life. For the Future Seas 2030 project we offer the next viable alternatives and steps forwards to correct the massive damages the Ocean has suffered.

### **The Ocean we know: a look at traditional maritime governance systems**

Indigenous leader Sutej Hugu from Taiwan has called Indigenous and traditional maritime communities Indigenous and Community-conserved Areas—ICCA. They are internationally recognized designations that support Indigenous self-determination over customary territories where Indigenous peoples are seen as guardians of their particular territories:

*ICCAs are territories of life and tribal communities embedded in ecological habitats with cross-generations, inter-species and trans-boundaries connectedness to achieve the well-being for all beings around us. In the Pacific, the so-called small islands are rooted in the ocean, surrounded by coral reefs, passed by ocean currents, visited seasonally by migratory birds, by migratory fishes, encountering tropical cyclones and the Monsoon annually and connected by Austronesian Indigenous seafaring.*

In Europe, modernisation, colonial processes and several world wars obliterated many traditional and Indigenous practices. However the non-Indo-European Baltic Finnish Nations such as Livonians, Ingermanland people and coastal Finnish communities preserved their endemic governance of islands and the

coastal fisheries well into the 1800s, even into the 1900s. For example author Elias Raussi, a merchant who lived in the community of Vironlahti on the Bay of Finland described how the family-based seining fishery for the Baltic Herring was re-organised annually to make sure no one person dominates and all of the people will have a rotational shift to the best fishing spots. Such Baltic autonomous fishing communities have been recognized even by the present day nations in the case of the Maa-Kalla autonomous governance for a traditional, seasonal fishing community.

Indigenous styles of management and the way things were prior to colonisation are still being remembered and practiced by Elders around the world. For example, Jerry Ivanoff, Alaska native whaler and fisherman from the community of Unalakleet discussed these issues in October 2019, including that despite the Alaska Native Settlement Act of the 1970s and establishment of “native corporations,” equity problems persist:

*We grew in a time, where we were the only ones here and we owned the whole state. You know, the native people did. That forty million acres, sounds [like] an awful lot of land that they say they give us. But there’s 364 million acres in the State of Alaska. What happened to the other 324 million, that was divided up between the federal government and state government? Our land, and they have taken the land. They’ve taken the money derived from that land. They’ve taken the money derived from the oil, and they’ve spent it in urban centers. While our communities go without water and sewer yet.*

As is present in many voices for Future Seas 2030, including Jerry Ivanoff and Hugu’s description of their communities, the Indigenous and traditional view of the world understands the seas as living and interconnected systems that humans have profound and deep relationships with. This is evident also with the Haida.

Haida Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, who is a lawyer and a singer of her people, has recently highlighted the “female supernatural beings” of Haida Gwaii and made visible the numerous powers and guardians of the Indigenous life in her nation. These numerous female as well as male beings occupied and belonged to the sea, coasts and the land. An example is the Creek Woman who was the Guardian of individual

rivers—a concept that resonates and is related to the Maori example of the legal personhood for a river (see Fischer et al. 2020, this issue).

Hereditary Chief Nang Jingwas from Skidegate briefly describes Haida traditional maritime governance and how this has evolved in recent times.

*Haida villages were all located facing the ocean. We depended on the ocean for food and livelihood and were well known for our large ocean-going red cedar canoes. We believe that all living things have a spirit and humans are not superior to animals. According to traditional beliefs, supernatural beings reside in the ocean and on land and could transform into animal or human form. Haida oral history includes many instances where humans didn't treat other creatures properly and calamity resulted. This teaches us from a young age to respect life and other people and protect what we have. Hereditary Chiefs managed and controlled terrestrial and marine territories for the benefit of their people. In recent years the Haida have established a modern elected governance system and endeavoured to ensure respectful treatment of the ocean, important places in our territory and marine resources through both integrated terrestrial and marine protected area plans for Haida territory.*

#### The example of Haida Co-Governance and Gwaii Haanas and SGaan Kinghlas

The Haida have made significant progress with Canada towards co-governance of coastal and marine places within Haida traditional territory. Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area and Haida Heritage Site in southern Haida Gwaii encompasses more than 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> from mountaintop to seafloor. The marine area extends approximately 10 km from the coast. It is co-governed by an Archipelago Management Board which makes decisions by consensus and is made up of three representatives each from the Haida and Canada. A Gwaii Haanas gina w'adluxaan tllGuuhlGa Land-Sea-People Management Plan was completed in 2018 which places about 40% of the marine area in a high protection zone. In addition, a protected area located 180 km west of Haida Gwaii includes a shallow seamount known to the Haida as SGaan Kinghlas (“supernatural being looking outwards”), a second seamount and surrounding waters. A joint Haida-Canada management plan for SGaan Kinghlas—Bowie

Seamount Marine Protected Area was completed for this area of more than 6,000 km<sup>2</sup> in 2019. This model of co-governance has allowed Indigenous knowledge to flourish and be recognised, and provides a potential approach that could be locally adapted in culturally appropriate ways, and applied more broadly across the oceans.

#### “Begin at the Beginning”: Move Back to the Holistic Way

Building on the Indigenous and traditional wisdom of the Ocean we are arguing that we need to begin at the beginning—admit that the global, present system has not even understood who the Ocean is and how to be with her. We call for a new beginning where we need to start these conversations. The late Australian Aboriginal activist and poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) wrote about her interpretation as an Aboriginal person who had been ‘civilized,’ returning to country in her poem ‘Return to Nature’ shared below.

*Lover of my happy past  
Soothe my weariness  
With warm embrace.  
Turn not from me,  
Communicate.  
Am I strayed too long  
And now forsaken?  
Your cold winds freeze  
My offered love.*

*Was it yesterday  
Or a thousand years,  
My eager feet  
Caressed your paths;  
My opened fingers  
Counted grains of sand  
Hidden in warmth of time.*

*Now my civilized self  
Stamps its imprint  
On reluctant sands  
And time has flown.  
Impatient to converse  
My brutality  
Turns you from my touch –  
Oh lost, neglected love,*

*My tear-stained eyes  
Open now to see  
Your enemy and mine  
Is – civilized me.*  
(Walker, 1970 p. 83).<sup>1</sup>

The sentiments of Oodgeroo expressed in the poem that the greatest risk to nature is civilisation and the colonisation of the mind and activities of Indigenous Peoples. We still have time to take measures and actions to correct the present-day disruption if good will and genuine attempts are in place. Despite genocide and colonisation there are still Indigenous knowledge holders and communities who can offer powerful remedies to the crises at hand. It is our purpose in participating in Future Seas 2030 to share and participate in these corrective processes to illustrate that new kinds of relations with the seas and all of her being is possible, feasible and available.

Indigenous leader Sutej Hugu has outlined some of these overall long-term steps needed:

*While the Future Seas initiative is largely based on the framework in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly, we should appeal for a paradigm-shift and power-transition from the dominant governing-bodies on this planet that have caused the very problems that they are trying to remedy and fix.*

On a more tactical level, the recent Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 was a good start to global awareness. Existing international mechanisms such as the UN Paris Agreement on climate change and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) are urgently in need of implementation and penetrating the whole societies that have agreed to them. UNDRIP is a global coda of recognising the varied but similar Indigenous and traditional community situations and needs to be ratified.

Reconciliation will take a long time and should be initiated at all levels where possible. This should include the question of the restitutive rights, meaning the return of land and water rights to those

communities that have had them taken away by the settler governments.

For science, respectful and consented cooperation with maritime communities can open completely new understandings of marine ecosystems as our co-author Nuunoq, the Greenlandic knowledge holder explained. Greenland possesses the same level of Indigenous knowledge and governance of the marine areas as illustrated by the Haida example. These are powerful real-world ways of being with the seas that demonstrate the skills, capacities and depth of Indigenous engagement across the world.

Indigenous knowledge applications may include for example baseline information of ecological change that has been recorded in the Indigenous oral histories, and place names extending far into the past (and future, as the Indigenous timescapes are based on premises other than a linear progress), endemic, cultural indicators of species, interrelationships, currents and ocean events not even considered in the present by science and ultimately and most importantly, healthy and humble relations with the sea and the ocean using the ethics and morals of Indigenous knowledge.

The damages can also be undone using traditional knowledge. Co-author and Finnish Elder Eero Murtomäki was part of a voluntary team that discovered the death spiral of the Sea Eagles on the Northern Baltic in the mid-1960s to early 1970s. These majestic birds were suffering from the presence of heavy metals, mercury, dioxins, PCB and other pesticides in the food chain (mainly from Baltic Herring and northern pike fish stocks) and this affected their nesting capacity and food systems combined with the harsh winters of the ice-locked Baltic close to Vaasa, Finland. In the early 1970s no chicks were unaffected by these drivers in the sea ecosystem.

Together with his colleagues and using their traditional knowledge Eero coordinated urgent feeding programmes, hauled clean carcasses of meat to the ice for the eagles to have access to clean sources of nutrition and alleviate the worst. In the 1970s a working group for the Sea Eagle was also founded under the WWF Finland. Artificial nests were erected in the face of massive clear-cut forestry that destroyed traditional pine tree nesting areas of the Sea Eagle. By the 2000s, Eero and his colleagues could see the result of their success—the Sea Eagle population was close

<sup>1</sup> Walker, K. (1970). Return to Nature. In: My People: A Kath Walker Collection. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press p.83. Copyright by Jacaranda Press reproduced with permission from Wiley.

to the original number, and all territories of nesting were occupied. Over 400 chicks were born in 2019.

Sea Eagles started to expand to new nesting areas in the Bay of Finland and elsewhere. This significant success story indicates that against all odds and trouble caused by industrial processes, nature can come back and the sea and interconnected species and habitats can recover if they have the time and space to adapt.

The example of restoration and the story of the Sea Eagle points to the potential of an Indigenous and traditional knowledge-led restoration and rewilding for our seas. There are already organisations like the Indigenous Australian Firesticks and the Landscape Rewilding Programme in Finland who are tackling these questions. The UN has recently declared a UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration. However, we need to ensure that much of this restoration is led or informed by Traditional and Indigenous Peoples.

From the voices above we have come to realize that the Indigenous and traditional communities on the coasts are key to worldwide solutions for a better future of the seas. In order to realize these steps towards renewed self-governance and maintaining of ecological health, Salatou Sambou, a fisherman and an Indigenous leader from Senegal positions their local work into thoughts of a sustainable, reformed future:

*Our Kawawana ICCA, because of its limited size, cannot offer sustainable long-term solutions alone. Our resources move, they migrate. That's why we need to strengthen our protection actions and rules in Kawawana, but also engage in fruitful discussions with other communities along the coast. We need more interactions between stakeholders and communities from the district level to the regional level, in order to create a communal space that will generate significant and concrete results by 2030.*

Across the world, similar sentiments are echoed by Alaska Native whaler and fisherman Jerry Ivanoff who

summarized in a short form the task in front of us for Future Seas 2030:

*Because we kinda help each other out and pull together as a band. And we need to do that as a people. And its red and yellow, black and white, you, me as a Inupiaq, Yup'ik person, join hands and say, all right. Let's respect the earth that we come from, let's respect all the animals that come from the earth, let's respect the ocean and everything that comes from it. Because if we kill it, we got nothing.*

Our Ocean teaches us endlessly. We must unite, to heal and continue to teach respect from our diverse viewpoints. For example, co-author Kimberley Maxwell, a New Zealand Māori marine researcher from the North Island's eastern Bay of Plenty states, “*Education was an important value instilled in me. My childhood was spent learning the language and traditions of my iwi (tribes) along the coast. My iwi have multiple, full Māori language immersion centres, at kōhanga (early childhood), kura (primary) and wharekura (secondary) level. Whakatōhea iwi are developing a tribal curriculum 'Tohekura' of which the moana (sea) is one of four strands. Within this curriculum the ethic of kaitiakitanga (a reciprocal relationship of care between people and their place) is instilled, and through the understanding of our pūrākau (narratives) and waiata (songs), which retain our knowledge of the environment, our knowledge is easily passed on to the next generation. Reviving and teaching sustainable practices, such as waka (canoe) voyaging and flax-basket weaving are crucial alternatives to the motorised and plastic norms we live with today. Coupled with in-depth experiences with the Ocean, such an education of our future leaders will put our Future Seas in good hands.*”

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