

Are You Really So Different From the Blue Sea Blob?

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The swimming sea cucumber, *Enypniastes eximia*, sometimes referred to as the headless chicken monster. NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research

A remotely operated vehicle filmed a life-form this summer on the seafloor that was utterly strange and incomprehensible — at least to us. It was a knobbly blob, cornflower blue and blooming from the brown sludge more than 1,300 feet undersea.

The vehicle, which was controlled by researchers aboard the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's vessel Okeanos Explorer, had glimpsed a number of the blue blobs on that day in waters southwest of St. Croix. The organism stumped scientists observing the livestream from the remote camera, and the headlines announcing its discovery marveled over the creature's strangeness, calling it "alien-like blue goo" and a "mystery blob-like creature."

When humans encounter life-forms that are unfamiliar or strange to us, our instinct is often to distance ourselves from them. We gawk at how the blueprint of their body veers from our own. Sometimes they confuse or repulse us. Reports about the blue goo described it as "formless, faceless and limbless," descriptors defined in opposition to ourselves, our faces and our limbs. Before we have a chance to know what the blue goo might be, we are told that whatever it is, it is not like us.

In writing a book about sea creatures, I've found this language often applied to organisms living in the deep sea. About five minutes into an episode of the nature documentary series "Blue Planet II," David Attenborough describes the deep sea as an "alien world."

I understand his impulse. Some parallels are obvious. As I watch a transparent-faced barreleye fish drift through the dusky waters of the so-called twilight zone, the white flecks of marine "snow" look remarkably like stars.

Sometimes this comparison with an alien world becomes more literal. One popular trope in discussing the deep sea is that humans know more about the surface of Mars than the ocean floor. But this comparison assumes mapping a place is all that constitutes exploration, and it minimizes the knowledge we do have of what lives on that surface.

Of course, the deep sea is not our only target. We'll call anything alien: worms, sea slugs, fossil mollusks, even ancient humans. On one level, I understand this is just a strategy to get readers interested in science. The more people know about the blue goo, the more likely they might be to care about the conservation of the deep sea. But when an unknown species of sea cucumber is described as a shopping bag, I wonder if we forget that the sea cucumber is a living creature.

One of the easiest ways to connect with creatures is through anthropomorphism — looking to organisms for reflections of ourselves. Anthropomorphism has had a bad rap as unscientific, but it's a natural inclination, and, in my view, it can be protective. It prompts us to care about the killer whale mourning her calf, the elephants burying their family members with leaves and dirt, even the octopus fleeing an aquarium for the freedom of the ocean. To ignore or deny the ways we see ourselves in animals might enable our exploitation of them, such as through factory farms.

But anthropomorphism has limits, especially when considering creatures without faces, without nuclear families, without body plans we recognize — like the blue goo.

Instead of gawking at such creatures as bizarre, I find it more fulfilling to seek connection with them across and because of our differences. The philosopher Timothy Morton has a notion of other species as "strange strangers," arguing that intimacy should hold space for strangeness, where all beings can be their full selves, however incomprehensible those selves may be to others. Nature is beautiful and full of weirdos: slime-spitting velvet worms, fluttering sea angels, even possums. Although these creatures may be strange to us, we are strange to them, too. Dr. Morton proposes that this strangeness reminds us that we are all interconnected and that "every life-form is familiar, since we are related to it."

I believe building these connections with strange, baffling or even discomfiting organisms is a practice of radical empathy you can try in your everyday life — offering openness, wonder and care toward other creatures' incomprehensibility. When you encounter a life-form so unfamiliar that you find it uninteresting or repulsive, reach inward to find glimmers of resonance.

Maybe, like a deep-sea yeti crab, you look hairy, or like a house centipede you share a tiny apartment. Or like a city pigeon, you can trace your presence in the United States back to colonialism.

Or maybe appreciation comes through your differences, such as the mystical ease with which a sea star regenerates an arm or an amoeba engulfs its prey. Who wouldn't envy such bodily freedom? Perhaps dwelling on these differences can incite wonder — a reminder of how many strange lives, bodies and ways of being there are on this planet. As the writer Talia Lakshmi Kolluri suggests, "Sometimes that incomprehensibility can lead to reverence."



On a cluster of tube worms are snail egg cases, an octopus and a diversity of other small organisms. Courtesy of D. Fornari, WHOI MISO Facility, and Ocean Exploration Trust, Cruise NA095

Appreciating strangeness encourages us to be better neighbors on a planet that our species threatens to ruin. If people care about the fate of the sea cucumber, they may act to protect the deep sea from the imminent threat of mining. Changes also can happen in smaller, everyday moments, such as choosing not to squish the harmless house centipede in your bedroom, no matter how many legs it skitters on and how its body makes you feel. (Squishing creatures that would do harm to you or native ecosystems, such as ticks and spotted lanternflies, is OK in my book.) In my experience, the longer you sit with a creature, taking time to really look at it, the less strange it becomes.

In the moments when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's camera zoomed in on the blue goo, the scientists speculated the creature could be a soft coral, a sponge or even a tunicate, noting the mystery will likely persist until they can retrieve a sample or further analyze video. Adult

tunicates, which often resemble clusters of neon macaroni, can be unrecognizable to us as animals. But in their larval form, tunicates resemble tadpoles. They have a flexible backbone-like structure that helps them swim around and find a place to attach and spend the rest of their lives. Despite appearances, tunicates are more closely related to us than any other invertebrate — they are our strange, spineless cousins.

When I think about the blue goo, I think about how wonderful it is that we share some ancient ancestor yet found ourselves on such divergent evolutionary paths. It's funny that we call these creatures aliens; we know about them only because they exist on this planet, alongside us — our futures entangled together.