

Restoring our Oceans, Reclaiming Ourselves

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

One day, while perusing a book on women's health, I came across a reference to a man who harvested sea plants. At the time I knew nothing about seaweed aside from nori's brilliant ability to sustain a sushi roll, but the whole thing sounded fascinating, so I drafted a letter to him expressing my interest. It turned out that his mother, partner, and good friend all shared the same birthday as I, which apparently sealed my destiny as the new apprentice.

Soon after, I found myself on a humble plot of land by the sea, unraveling a sleeping bag in my new digs: a screened shed surrounded by spruce trees. With the help of my coworkers — two anarchist freight-train hoppers who shared an affinity for beer and boat building — I spent my days by the shore hanging plants. The weeds were fastened to a line like wet clothes, left to dry in the sun and wind, and then moved into solar rooms. Without moisture, their slimy brown and green bodies shriveled into dried black delicacies, thinly coated with layers of ivory salt.

Seaweeds are amazing plants, and some of the most ancient. A gift from the depths, they offer an aquatic bouquet of nutrients when gathered from pristine seas uncontaminated by pollutants. Sadly, these days it's unclear if such "pristine seas" exist. Today, mechanical harvesting and pollution from crude oil spills, industrial waste, and sewage pose a significant threat to the primordial perennials, but they are not the only ones that suffer in contaminated seas.

With all of their mystery and wild beauty, the oceans are becoming more and more toxic

every day. Out of sight where few ships sail, vortices of floating garbage swirl slowly around the surface like little plastic continents; some, like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, are said to be the size of Texas. Though the plastic does not fully degrade, it does break down into tiny pieces that birds, turtles, and other marine animals ingest — an unappetizing meal that ultimately kills them. But sea creatures aren't the only ones who dine on plastic. Those of us who eat fish also risk ingesting the particles, lodged inside the tissues of our prey.

According to Greenpeace, around 100 million tons of plastic are produced each year, and 10 percent of it ends up in the water. Actually, the majority of all pollution in the oceans originates on land, where pesticides and other poisons snake toward the sea through tributaries fed with sewage.

The United Nations Environmental Program estimates that, in the developing world, 90 percent of all wastewater still goes untreated into local rivers and streams. And where does it all end up? Yes — the oceans. These great bodies of water are intimately connected to the atmosphere, and thus greatly impact planetary weather patterns. As global warming heats up the waters, thermal expansion from melting glaciers threatens to raise sea level; for the millions of people living in coastal cities around the world, this is less than comforting. At the same time, coral reefs, so essential to the marine ecosystem, are in danger of disappearing, and countless species of fish are at risk of extinction due to overfishing.

Though invisible to us land dwellers, beneath the choppy surface of the sea lies a vast universe teeming with life. Mountain chains, volcanoes, and trenches span the ocean floor, many impossible to reach due to crushing pressure. Octopi, stingray, and starfish swim among jungles of coral while swordfish and strange creatures with monstrous fangs munch on shrimp and squid. In the depths of the briny blue where no sunlight can reach, bioluminescent beings attract mates like fireflies, emitting a glow from their very own bodies. Perhaps we could learn a thing or two about shining our inner light to draw more love into our lives.

Perhaps we could also learn a thing or two about the silence of the deep, for this same silence exists within us. Below the ever-changing thought waves of the mind rests an undisturbed stillness as vast as the sea. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to access these depths anymore, so full are our minds with the trash of negativity and fear. Running around in busy circles, we forget to care for ourselves, just as we forget that the oceans are choking on our waste.

In truth, we remain creatures of the sea. Each one of us spends our first nine months in a sac of liquid until we are squeezed out of woman's loving lair into the noisy, fluorescent world; without this amniotic abode, we would not be here. In much the same way, if we do not soon respect the wondrous waters that are home to such great life, we risk drowning in the very debris that we toss into her worn-out womb.

Let us remember this, our primal origin, before we suck the seas dry of life. Let us remember that true nourishment often dwells beneath the surface, blessing us from the great below. Just as seeds emerge from sunless soils, the seaweeds remind us that — even when rooted in darkness — we can all rise up and touch the light. 🐟

Carrie is assistant editor at Common Ground. info@thelightinside.org

