

The hidden things of God in the ocean

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The ocean is experiencing tremendous threats from human activity. What is our response to these threats? We must root marine research and conservation in theology in order to live integrated lives and base our hope ultimately in God. This paper seeks to look at marine research and conservation through the theological lens of Matthew 5 and Revelation 5 and then give a short case study of how *A Rocha*, a Christian conservation organisation, is living this out by revealing and healing the hidden things of God in the ocean. Through research we are taking the “bowl” off the lamp of tropical rockpool marine biodiversity and through conservation projects assisting the healing of these habitats so that they may praise God along with the throng before the throne. Science and theology, driving our work, provides an integrated and hopeful approach which brings glory to God.

Ocean—the hidden things of God

Walking down a typical beach, it would be easy to surmise that there is little living there. If it is a calm day, you might be looking out on the sea which resembles more a sheet of glass than an aquarium. Yet below your feet, crawling in and amongst the sand grains, swimming below the surface of the sea, and fixed to rocks just out of sight live an amazing array of marine creatures—all usually hidden from sight. For most of human history, the incredible biodiversity of the sea has remained hidden from sight or only seen on the end of a fisherman's line.

Yet there are tantalising glimpses provided for us by our Creator.¹ Genesis 1 reminds us that on the fourth day the sun and moon were established to

1 Note that by using the term Creator I am not assuming a particular origins narrative.

mark out time.² While not mentioned specifically, this obviously includes the tidal cycle. Due to the force of gravity exerted on the ocean by the sun and moon (but especially the moon due to its proximity) the oceans rise and fall in regular and predictable patterns. In some places this can cause very large fluctuations in sea level. At low tide, when water is pulled to the other side of the planet, we begin to see the hidden things of God in the ocean.³

"There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number—living things both large and small" (Psalm 104:25 NIVUK). It is easy to focus on the "large" aspect of this verse. Whales, dolphins and sharks fill us with awe at their size and power. Yet hidden from site are innumerable "small" creatures which are equally amazing; their intrinsic value not determined relative to us.⁴ They have value because they are God's creation. In an exposition of Job 38:39–39:30, Richard Bauckham states that, among other concepts, this passage expresses "God's sheer joy in his creatures, their variety and idiosyncracies ..." and God "... rejoices in the unique value of each."⁵

The ocean is experiencing tremendous threats from human activity, particularly climate change, pollution, and overfishing.⁶ What is our response to these threats? Many, both secular and Christian, working in marine conservation remain hopeful.⁷ Yet how do we root marine research and conservation in theology in order to live integrated lives and base our hope ultimately in God? This paper seeks to look at marine research and conservation through the theological lens of several biblical passages and then give a short case study of one attempt at living this out in an area experiencing all the threats that currently face the ocean. While focusing specifically on the ocean as this

2 For a fuller discussion of Genesis 1 from a marine point of view, see Robert D. Sluka, *Hope for the ocean: marine conservation, poverty alleviation and blessing the nations* (Cambridge: Grove Ethics Series E165, Grove Books, 2012).

3 In places like the Mediterranean where there is essentially no tidal movement of water, this has resulted in a very poor realisation of the extent of marine life among visitors to the coast (pers. comm. Olivier Dufourneaud of Institut Oceanographique, Monaco).

4 A number of authors focus on the concept of the intrinsic value of creation including F. Van Dyke *et al.*, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); D. Bookless, *Planetwise* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2008); S. Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

5 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 51.

6 B. S. Halpern *et al.*, "A global map of human impact on marine ecosystems," *Science* 319 (2008): 948–52.

7 Meric Srokosz and Robert D. Sluka. "Creation Care of the other 71%." In *Creation Care and the Gospel: Reconsidering the Mission of the Church*, ed. Colin Bell and Robert S. White (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2016), 214–36.

is the author's background and there is a dearth of theological writing with a marine emphasis, the principles could be applied to any area of research and conservation.

Marine research—revealing the hidden things of God

Psalm 111 has been called the research scientists' psalm.⁸ The second verse reads "Great are the works of the Lord; they are studied by all who delight in them" (Psalm 111:2 NIVUK). What is the role of marine research? Certainly there are many roles, but I want to focus on that of revealing the hidden things of God. When we study the works of the Lord, we are able to make them known to those who might not otherwise have been able to see. We as Christian marine researchers utilise God's book of Words (the Bible) to make sense of and understand God's book of works (the hidden things of God in the ocean—among other creative works). This doesn't, of course, mean that the Bible will tell us how to make sense of whether competition or predation is structuring a coral reef community. However, what do these things mean ultimately? How can we see signs of the Creator in the creation? This is a different kind of natural theology: as Alister McGrath so clearly points out; Paley and those arguments are long gone.⁹ But that does not mean that we cannot show the resonance of Biblical motifs in the work of creation and to use science to inspire and turn our hearts towards the Creator.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.¹⁰

The context of these verses is the Sermon on the Mount. A crowd gathers and Jesus delivers the compelling beatitudes. We can use these verses as a guide to think about the ultimate purpose of marine research, really any research. The key to this is in verse 16 and of course, other passages that exhort us to work as unto the Lord (e.g., Colossians 3:23). Ultimately, our purpose in research is to glorify our Father in heaven.

8 R. J. Berry, "The Research Scientist's Psalm," *Science and Christian Belief* 20 (2008): 147-61.

9 Alistair McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2011).

10 Matthew 5:14-16 NIVUK.

Marine research in many ways is like lighting a lamp. There is darkness; the unknown. We use the research process to bring light to a habitat, species or process. It is not stretching these verses too far to say that researchers are the light of the world, illuminating the works of God in creation, this being a good deed so that the Father is glorified. For Christian researchers, then, it is very important to make this connection. Whilst there is value in “pure” research that we do for God’s glory alone—perhaps only coming to light by publishing in specialised research journals—there is a point where our research must not be a town built so that it can’t be seen. It must not be a lamp hid under a bowl. So how do we as researchers make the link between our research and God’s glory?

We first have to settle this for ourselves. Do we see how our research glorifies God? Can we articulate that even internally? Are we ready to give an answer to those who ask us to give the reason for the hope that we have? Certainly too, there is a role for writing and teaching other Christians. Perhaps you can give a talk at church reflecting God’s beauty and wonder seen through your research—putting the lamp out for others to see what you have already internalised. Building that town on a hill. There are many other possibilities for glorifying our Father in heaven through the light that our research shines on Him. God’s book of works, interpreted through God’s book of Words, giving glory to the Father.

It can be difficult to put our lamp out for all to see without shining it so brightly in someone’s eye that they are blinded or even driven away from the light into the darkness. But this we must do, sensitively, gently, in love, making known the mystery of Christ hidden from times past (*cf.* Ephesians 1:9)—brought to light through our research and in our lives.

Marine research then is ultimately, metaphorically speaking, bringing to light the hidden things of God in the ocean. Setting them out as a town on a hill or a lamp giving light to a dark room—publishing, speaking, educating, and sharing. Ultimately, we are revealing the hidden things of God, pointing to the Father, being careful to glorify Him.

Marine conservation—healing the hidden things of God

The ocean is not as it was nor as it will be. Humans are playing a significant role in changing the very nature of the ocean and its inhabitants. These impacts have solutions, many of which resonate with biblical principles such as giving the sea a sabbath.¹¹ Suffice it to say that we can take action, and while we need

11 Susan Powers Bratton, “Sea Sabbaths for sea stewards,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical*

to exercise proper humility in this endeavour,¹² marine conservation science as a discipline grows each day.

What is the ultimate goal, though, of marine conservation? When we think of ultimate things in the Christian faith, we often turn to the final book of the Bible, Revelation. However, is the final fate of the sea to “be no more” as Revelation 21:1 states? This passage has been discussed extensively by Jonathan Moo¹³ who clearly indicates that this passage and many other references in the Scriptures relate to the symbolic nature the sea held for ancient people as a symbol of chaos. This passage is not to be taken literally—there will be marine life in heaven and therefore presumably sea water as Revelation 5:9-13 so clearly indicates. I believe that this passage is a key to understanding the current role of marine conservation as healing, bringing the marine portions of our world into the new creation where they will be a part of the throng before the throne worshipping the Lamb.

And they sang a new song, saying:
 “You are worthy to take the scroll
 and to open its seals,
 because you were slain,
 and with your blood you purchased for God
 persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
 and they will reign on the earth.”
 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering
 thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand.
 They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a
 loud voice they were saying:
 “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
 to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
 and honour and glory and praise!”
 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the
 earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:
 “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
 be praise and honour and glory and power,
 for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:9-13 NIVUK)

Perspectives—Past and Present, ed. R. J. Berry (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 208-12; Tim Gorringe, *Harvest: Food, Farming and the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2006).

- 12 Susan Powers Bratton, “The precautionary principle and the book of Proverbs: Toward an ethic of ecological prudence in ocean management,” *Worldviews* 7 (2003): 252-73. And Meric Srokosz, “Humility: A neglected scientific virtue?” *Science and Christian Belief* 25 (2013): 101-12.
- 13 Jonathan Moo, “The Sea that is no more: Rev 21:1 and the function of sea imagery in the Apocalypse of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 148-67.

There is much that can be gleaned from this passage, but I want to focus on the praise of all creation before the throne of God. This passage comes in the midst of a difficult reading regarding judgement, coming pain and misery. But it gives us a glimpse of the ultimate goal and end of all that is. Many have focused on verse 9, all nations, tongues, tribes of humans before the throne. Giving impetus, and rightly so, to a desire to fulfil Jesus' command to go to the ends of the earth. But the passage goes on and gives an even wider and more glorious view of the throne room: all creation before the throne, praising and worshipping God.¹⁴

Too often we have a truncated version of history that starts at the fall and ends at the cross. In the larger view of the world, we must include in that meta-history the beginning and the end; which is creation and new creation. When we begin with creation and take into account the magnitude of the Fall, which broke all relationships include those between humanity and non-human creation and between non-human creation and God, we have a grander, non-anthropocentric view of history. The Fall much more deeply affects the world around us than simply breaking humanity's relationship with its Creator. The corollary to this is that the cross is so much more vastly wondrous and so much more deeply universe-changing than simply offering individuals the opportunity to get right with their Creator.

If all was broken at the Fall, then all is ultimately set right through the cross. Colossians 1:15-20 makes that clear. The cross then sets the stage for and ushers in the Kingdom of God: new creation.¹⁵ We see in the Revelation passage above that this ultimately is about praise of the Lamb. All creation worshipping before the throne.

The ultimate goal, then of marine conservation, is the healing of the ocean so that it praises God as new creation. How can the ocean praise God? One way of looking at it is that creation praises God when it functions as it was created to function. One place we see this spelled out in Scripture is in Genesis 1 where the sea is blessed and commanded to be fruitful and creatures teem, swarm, and are in abundance. This highlights the importance of studying the ocean in places where impacts are minimal and in setting up protected areas where the ocean can begin to function as it was intended to in order to understand what ideas like teeming really mean.

14 The theme of the worship of all creation is dealt with extensively by Richard Bauckham, *Living with other creatures: Green exegesis and theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), 163-84.

15 A recent book focussing on this is Jonathan Moo and Robert White, *Hope in an Age of Despair: The gospel and the future of life on earth* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

A Rocha Kenya—revealing and healing the hidden things of God in the ocean

Marine researchers and conservationists at A Rocha Kenya's Field Study Centre, are trying to apply these theological lessons by utilising science to make discoveries and then revealing them to our neighbours far and wide in such a way that we hope God is glorified.¹⁶ Part of our marine biodiversity research involves examining and describing species that live in the many habitats found in Watamu Marine National Park such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and sandy beaches. In 2013 we began studying the rockpools that are revealed at low tide, but remain hidden from sight at high tide. In the course of our research we found red algae, green algae, brown algae, sponges, coral, flatworms, crustaceans, marine worms, sea stars, brittle stars, sea cucumbers, sea urchins, sea squirts, and fish. Each a major taxonomic group of marine organisms—all living in tiny rockpools hidden from sight. The hidden things of God in the ocean, revealed to those that search them out.

The intertidal zone is well studied in temperate areas, but much less so in the tropics. Our recent investigations have revealed how important these habitats are for many juvenile fish species which migrate offshore and enter the artisanal fishery.¹⁷ Additionally, a rare coral was found in abundance that is not seen in the rest of studied areas in East Africa and we are working towards its conservation. These rockpools serve as places of education for the local community especially schools, revealing these hidden things to those who might not have the chance to understand.

We have also made a number of observations of IUCN Near Threatened or Vulnerable elasmobranchs—sharks, rays and guitarfish¹⁸. These species are heavily fished and the marine park serves as a nursery ground for these species where they can grow and thrive. Working with local communities to reveal to them the importance of the park in these species' lifecycles is a way of moving towards dealing with overfishing, including exploring cultural and spiritual values which may help or hinder conservation.¹⁹

16 For more details see <http://kenya.arocha.org/work/scientific-research/marine>.

17 Victoria Sindorf *et al.*, "Rocky intertidal fish assemblage in the Watamu Marine National Park, Western Indian Ocean," *Environmental Biology of Fishes* 98 (2015): 1777-85.

18 The International Union for the Conservation of Nature is an international body of conservation organisations that monitors the status of species and produces a Redlist showing the relative threats and status of species. A Rocha is the only Christian organisation that is a member of this body.

19 Robert D. Sluka and Paul Simonin, "Marine Capture Fisheries—A call to action in response to limits, unintended consequences, and ethics," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 66 (2014): 203-12.

We seek then, to uncover these hidden things of God through our research and then become a light on a hill, revealing these hidden things in a way that brings God's kingdom on earth (including the ocean) as it is in heaven. In order to bring healing to the ocean itself and those who use it, we have begun a programme focusing on the activities of young men, locally called "beach boys," who act as unofficial guides to tourists, purporting to show them the riches of these rockpools. Our research suggests that many of their activities are damaging to ocean life and the information they give to tourists is less than accurate. We are seeking to heal (conserve) these rockpools by providing accurate information and guiding material that can be used by "beach boys" as well as investing in their lives so that they can see the love of Christ through what He has made and in those of serving them.

Conclusion

Marine research and conservation go hand in hand. We must continue to understand how the ocean works, its biodiversity, and what it means for the sea to teem with abundance. Most alive today have never seen it as it once was and can only imagine how things were. The role of the marine researcher is to bring to light these hidden things and work with those in marine conservation to protect and bring to fruition new creation in the ocean. Ultimately, the goals for the Christian involved in this endeavour is to glorify the Father and work towards all creation functioning as it will in order that God is praised.

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