

An Ocean of Angst

A two-metre-long leatherback turtle floats gracefully by, gorging on jellyfish. It's critically endangered, in part by the ingestion of plastic bags, especially along the west coast of North America.

Environmental conversations can rouse deep emotions in all of us who love the sea. Unfortunately, those conversations often divide us, with economic interests pitted against sea-huggers. Since we all want the same thing for our children – a healthy, prosperous world – we need reason as much as passion. Above all, we need unity.

The media have been doing the job of keeping environmental issues at the forefront, but proximity and news necessarily take precedence. Oceans remain the ultimate fly-over zones, off our collective radar once we've cleared the coast. We know about the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" of marine debris, but very little else of the planet-wide catastrophe taking place below the surface, and even less about how to solve these problems.

Do we dare turn our minds to it? I'm far from an expert, but the information is easily accessed. Every ocean is overfished, some well beyond sustainable levels, with catches currently dropping as the need for food rises. Chemical pollution, from fertilizers to pharmaceuticals, disrupts the reproductive cycles of marine life and kills coral reefs. The effects can be "negatively synergistic" according to the [2013 IPSO report](#) on the state of the oceans. De-oxygenation from nutrient runoff, acidification and warming from elevated CO2 levels, in addition to overfishing, combine to create a high risk for "the next globally significant extinction event".

Only the last of the many recommendations in the IPSO report gave me hope. It called for "a global infrastructure for high seas governance" under the auspices of UNCLOS, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Is this, at last, a key piece to a workable solution?

It's a solution that speaks to me for a couple of reasons. I come from Newfoundland, where the unthinkable happened – fish stocks fell to 1% of former levels causing a total collapse of the fishery. Politicians, elected for short periods and at the whim of voters with vested interests, finally were forced to declare a moratorium that was to last two years. That was over 20 years ago.

The other reason is that I'm a Bahá'í: unity in diversity is fundamental to that world view. One of the things that first attracted me to this faith, decades ago, was its call for humanity to assume the responsibilities of its collective "coming of age". From its beginnings in the 19th century, it has always advocated various means for global cooperation, to ensure world peace and tranquility. The world has made enormous progress with regional and even global cooperation since then. Yet, even with survival itself at stake, we're hesitant to create mechanisms with any real regulatory power.

There exists no international body empowered to ensure compliance with UNCLOS, no organization with sufficient oversight to save the seas. Do we really think it's going to be enough for us, as individuals, to buy from approved seafood lists and avoid plastic shopping bags?

It's time to join together to seek out and support the larger, overarching solutions, as well as individual ones. Humanity has its own arc of spiritual development and learning to shoulder these responsibilities collectively is crucial to its progress. Leaders of all stripes may be surprised at how ready we are for that.

Sheila Flood is a member of the [Victoria Bahá'í community](#), and active in interfaith work. A second article on the theme of the oceans will continue online, in the [Times Colonist Spiritually Speaking](#) blog.