

# Controlling Humans, Uncontrollable Oceans

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Anthropology of the Ocean

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Forgive me for stating the obvious, but perhaps in the repetition I will be able to begin to wrap my head around the fact that we have traveled around the world on a ship. I swam with river dolphins in the Rio Negro, fished for piranha in the Amazon River, have gone (went?) shark cage diving in the “Great White Capital of the World”, snorkeled in Dominica, and dipped my toes in three oceans. I think on some level that gives me an authority to speak about the ocean. But looking out at the ocean, we all see different things. Our first day of class challenged us to think quickly and decide what word encapsulates the ocean for us. Words like “adventure”, “power”, “freedom”, “mystery”, and “vastness” covered the board as we attempted to describe in one word 73% of our planet (Helmreich, Lecture 1 Jan. 21, 2012). Present conceptions of the ocean underscore these word choices as we struggle to navigate our way through seas that we do not really understand. Humans have an uncanny and somewhat ignorant way of assuming we can control our environment. We have manipulated and exploited nature for centuries to satisfy our shelter and dietary needs as well as our lust for pleasure and adventure. Evolving human conceptions of the ocean have colored our interactions with it throughout history. A common thread weaves its way through these interactions: fear. Corbin described the ocean from a biblical point of view by explaining that,

“Genesis imposed the vision of the ‘great abyss’, a place of unfathomable mysteries, an uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and the unimaginable, over which the Spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation. This quivering expanse, which symbolized, and actually was, the unknowable, *was frightful in itself*” (Corbin 2).



Yet as time passed, this fear evolved and somewhat dissipated. What changed? Can we argue for natural theology or credit marine science for this shift? Or is it a curiosity about the unknown, the exoticism of danger, or perhaps an insatiable need to conquer and control nature? Whatever the explanation, water, and specifically

Reaching out and feeling the temperature difference between the Rio Negro and the Amazon River at “The Meeting of the Waters” (Manaus, Brazil).

the ocean now seduces us into its vastness and makes us push the limits of our safety in order to experience its sights, sounds, and inhabitants. But the ocean still serves as a constant reminder that we can only control nature to the extent that it lets us. Because nature can always overwhelm us, we find ourselves in a constant flirtation with danger disguised as adventure as we ask ourselves: How close do we really want to get?

On a sunny day in Amazonia, about 30 SAS students filed off a boat and on to a pier that led to a floating building that housed the inside of the Ponta do Lago Araras Tat, the Dolphin Sanctuary. We eagerly stood in a line watching the Brazilian men working there begin smacking the water with dead fish to attract the famed *Boto* dolphins. This first display of attempted control over the dolphins set us at an initial ease. But soon it was our turn to interact with the dolphins and we did not have any fish. The staff gave each of us a swimming noodle so we would not accidentally sink below “the deep” (heaven forbid). I grew up swimming, and water hadn’t scared me since I was about four years old, so I gave my noodle back and began treading water, reaching out desperately for some contact with the pink dolphins. Almost instantly, groups of screaming girls broke the peaceful silence of the river and probably scared many of the sensitive creatures away from where we were swimming.

A little frustrated, I wondered why the women screamed and the men did not. This could certainly be passed off as a masculine social construction, but history legitimizes this type of reaction from women. Being immersed in cold sea water in Victorian England elicited similar emotions from female bathers to what these girls must have been feeling. For women, “the emotion of sea bathing arose from sudden immersion,” suggesting that it was not only the intimacy of entering the dolphin’s environment that caused the screams, but the emotion associated with being engulfed by water (Corbin 73-74). This fearful sensation coupled with being under water in Victorian England arose when “The bathers (who were people) would plunge female patients onto the water just as the wave broke, taking

care to hold their heads down so as to increase the impression of suffocation” (Corbin 73). The male students certainly did not scream when the dolphins swam by as with men who partook in Victorian bathing who felt as though it was manly to face the waves “alone” with their “bathers” standing at some distance. I noticed that many of the male students in the river with us distanced themselves from the groups of girls when it occurred to me that we could not see the dolphins swim beneath us through the dark slimy water. So when a dolphin happened to swim under someone’s feet or brush up against their leg, a chorus of high pitched screams erupted. Whether the screams originated from fear or excitement, something about this experience elicited that reaction. ( I realized we cannot control what we cannot see.) I think, perhaps this was the line for these screaming girls. That line between awe and fear, adventure and danger which so interestingly coexist but often trick us into believing we are safer than we are. We want to reach out and touch. We want to have intimate experiences with water, but what happens when animals, animals that we cannot see, whose environment we have invaded, reach out and touch us? Are we afraid? Should we be afraid?

A couple days later, I found myself submerged in the Amazon River. On a two day one night Amazon adventure tour, we spent part of our first day swimming. After getting out of the water, about ten yards away from where we swam, we went

piranha fishing. I think it goes without saying that some of us were a little disturbed by what we had just done and what had been in the water with us. Certainly fear of some sort is associated with swimming among flesh eating fish. After a few minutes, a couple of us caught some piranha and our guide held them in the



Our Amazon native guide, Ney holding an adult piranha for us to see and touch (Manaus, Brazil).

boat for us to see and touch. I asked if I could feel the teeth. With the smaller ones, he let me. But with the larger fish, he told me no, and rightfully so, because seconds later, the fish clamped its jaws down, hard. Why on earth would I want to stick my finger anywhere near the teeth of a creature that can strip a grown cow of its flesh in mere minutes? I am not really sure. What is there to be gained from putting myself in this danger? The triumph of being able to say I did it? Or perhaps I was curious? Perhaps I felt that because the guide had the piranha in his hands he could control its jaws. This is the line we all flirt with. This false sense of security that we are in control, because if we feel that we are in control we become less afraid and we begin to test the limits of our safety, and frankly our mortality.

Thousands of nautical miles and weeks of pasta and potatoes later, I found myself submerged once again in water. But this time it was the ocean, and I was playing with great white sharks. Let me point out that sharks are among the fiercest animals on the planet, yet 30 of us jumped in a cage in the ocean to be under water with these creatures. Why? There was nothing particularly extraordinary



Great White Shark Dive (Gannsbai, South Africa)

about how the crew lured in the sharks. They chummed the water to attract the hungry beasts and soon, we were in a boat surrounded by great whites that could easily have capsized our small vessel as well as adequate barrier off the boat. As I shimmied

into my wet suit, that false sense of security came over me again. It didn't occur to me that I could die doing what I was about to do, because the crew could control the sharks, right? Like the *boto* dolphins, the sharks were lured to the boat with the smell of an easy meal. After getting out of the water, I realized that the crew could certainly bring the sharks to the boat, but once the sharks came the crewmen had absolutely no control whatsoever of

these animals. We should have been afraid but many of us were not, until the sharks got a little too close. Because the intimate experience of immersion in water actually happened with the cage occupants completely underwater, screaming proved difficult to hear. However, it seemed as though many of us were more in awe than fearful. Perhaps the heightened level of danger during this encounter with the deadly sharks, as opposed to the cuter, child-friendly river dolphins, equalized the reactions of the men and women on this particular venture. Perhaps as danger increases, gender discrepancies in reaction decrease. To some degree this seemed true on our modest vessel, *The Barracuda*. It should be noted, however, that despite the danger, like Victorian men after a sea bath, we “hoped to emerge as heroes for having faced the staggering blows from the sea, felt the scourging of the salty water”, not to mention the proximity within which we had come with 12 foot sharks, “and overcome it victoriously” (Corbin 77).

So why do we put ourselves in this danger? What is it about the ocean and water animals that seduce us? Why do we want so badly to reach out and touch? Well, the ocean certainly looks pretty, smells fresh, promises beautiful beaches, and the adventure of not being able to see what lies beneath it without completely submerging ourselves within it beckons to our curiosity. Perhaps it is seductive to be immersed in water as the experiences of it seem to so closely mirror one another. As Corbin suggests of Victorian women, “the female bathers, held in the arms of powerful men and awaiting penetration by the liquid element, the feeling of suffocation, and the little cries that accompanied it all so obviously suggested copulation that Dr Le Coeur was afraid that the similarity would render bathing indecent” (Corbin 74). People are most certainly motivated by sex, so perhaps this plays a role, but there must be something more, another perspective that is not simply human fascination with sensory experiences.

The juxtaposition of the ocean with outer space in *Alien Ocean* offers quite a different idea about why we venture into fearful oceanic spaces: We are curious. We strive for knowledge of the

unknown and “earthly oceans have become analogs for extraterrestrial seas (i.e. alien oceans in the most cosmic sense)” (Helmreich 253). We do not know what lies beneath the ocean much like we do not know what exists in outer space, which makes us curious. But once we find what exists there, we need to figure out what to do and how to coexist with it because despite our most valiant efforts, we cannot control everything in nature. And because we cannot control it, it will always frighten us on some level. For years, “outer space, like the high seas, was treated by the United States as a zone at once outside politics and constantly in need of defending as ‘free’” (Helmreich 269). Our discussions this semester dispelled any preconceptions that the ocean is in fact “free”. It seems that everyone is jumping at the opportunity to lay some claim to its expanse. We want to know what exists in the ocean much like we want to know what lurks in outer space. We want to embark on “this quest for the universal, looking up and out into space, is a quest for romantic complexity” (Helmreich 272).

Despite the context, humans constantly search for new experiences and new frontiers to conquer. But the ocean will probably forever remain an enigma to humans, because nature lulls us into a false sense of safety that allows us to pretend that we know what we are getting ourselves into when we immerse ourselves in its complexities. An understanding “that nature is always in the being made...it resides in people as fully as people reside in it” is paramount to the future of human and oceanic

interaction (Raffles 8). Instead of seeing the ocean as full of aliens, perhaps we are the aliens to it. This perspective, that the land we live on is not the only life-bearing place in the universe, makes us curious, appeals to our sense of adventure, intrigues our minds, seduces us, and confuses us. The ocean “is what gives some of us an uncanny sense that our



Underwater at Champagne Reef (Roseau Dominica).

home is not what we thought it was; this is what makes us aliens to ourselves” (Helmreich 271).