After the Tide: Radical Waters and the Practice of Staying

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It begins with water that feels wrong.
Not a grand ocean, just a brackish inlet at low tide, where a river gives up its name and tries on the word sea. The surface looks calm enough, a thin gloss of light, but the smell is off, too sweet, too stale, like breath that has stayed too long in a closed room. Ropes creak on the jetty. A plastic chair has lodged in the reeds.

You look down and realise how much is missing. No fraying ribbons of kelp, no shadow of shoals. Only a pale fuzz of algae and the grey smear of silt. A place that ought to be busy feels evacuated, as if a choir has been dismissed and one thin voice forced to sing alone.

Extinction often registers like this: not as spectacle, but as a shift in what water can hold, in what you do not see when you lean over the edge.

In water, loss is not always visible as absence. It arrives as chemistry. As lag. As a delay in what should have returned. Sometimes it arrives as hypoxia, oxygen-poor water that still looks like water but no longer carries breath.

We are used to reading collapse on land: forests burned, peatlands drained, pollinators gone quiet. Yet many of Earth's great unmakings have been written in salt water first.

Over the last half-billion years, the planet has passed through several mass extinctions, episodes when the living world was cut back brutally fast in geological terms. In the worst of them, at the end of the Permian period, volcanic eruptions and greenhouse gases drove oceans toward heat and low oxygen. Shelves turned sluggish and anoxic. Life did not simply fade. It stalled.

Later, at the boundary we now call the K–Pg, an asteroid struck near what is now the Yucatán. Fire and dust dimmed the light. Acidified seas and collapsing food webs erased lineages that never became museum icons.

Again, oceans carried the shock. Again, sediment settled around absence and kept it, a slow memory that remembers disturbance in layers rather than headlines.

Our own species is a side effect of those ruins. Mammals prospered because other lineages did not. We are not exceptions to the story. We are one of extinction's children, living inside a medium that remembers what it has already done.

Today, debates about a sixth mass extinction turn on thresholds and timescales, not on whether something drastic is happening. Across many groups, from corals to migratory fishes and coastal mammals, extinction risk and documented declines exceed long-term background levels. Global syntheses of biomass and abundance suggest a stark asymmetry: humans and domesticated animals now dominate much of the planet's mammal mass and metabolism, while many wild populations have been pushed to the margins.

At sea, this imbalance is felt not as abstraction but as infrastructure. Nets that catch breath. Trawls that scrape and flatten the seabed into a simplified surface. Dredges that shave roughness from the bottom. Shipping lanes and engines that fill water with continuous sound.

Fertiliser becomes algae; blooms die; decomposition consumes oxygen. Bays become a thin medium for breath. The water feels crowded with us and thinned of others whose lives once thickened its depths.

Our language still tries to keep its hands clean.

We call it biodiversity loss, as if life had misplaced its keys. We measure stocks and services, as if oceans were misbehaving portfolios. We render water as a uniform blue field, a manageable surface, a colour-coded patch in a plan. But water does not stay inside the boxes we draw for it. It moves across jurisdictions, carries upstream decisions downstream, and returns them as oxygen curves, turbidity, shell failure, noise, and heat.

What happens if water is not backdrop but co-thinker, not metaphor alone but agent and archive?

Water is radical. Not as in purity, not as a neutral commons waiting to be managed. But water as a material that refuses the role of passive medium. Radical because it connects what institutions prefer to keep separate: river catchments and coastal zones, labour and habitat, law and chemistry, desire and extraction. Radical because it crosses scales without asking permission, and because it turns distant decisions into intimate conditions.

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Water keeps the longest memory. It carries dissolved oxygen and excess heat, nitrates washed off fields, mercury and microplastics, shipping noise, and broken shells. It holds wrecks and spawning grounds, cables and migration routes, laws and borders. It entangles physics and chemistry with kinship, labour, and colonial trade.

Thinking extinction through water means attending to currents and basins and ports as much as to names on a Red List, because water does not simply receive our decisions. It translates them.

This also requires refusing one tempting misreading.
To speak of regeneration after extinction is not to hunt for silver linings. It is not to say that loss is redeemed because something else will come. It names an intolerable fact: life reorganises after devastation, whether or not anyone deserves it, and whether or not we are ready. The task is not to take comfort from survival, but to decide what kinds of permission we refuse to take from it.

Rewilding is one of the words that has swum into this conversation, carrying more hope than it can safely bear.

On land, it can mean loosening control, allowing predators or large herbivores to return, accepting a landscape that no longer behaves. At sea, the word resists settling. Currents ignore borders. Larvae drift. Noise travels. A line on paper is not a boundary in water.

So marine rewilding, where it is named carefully, is less a single act than a sequence of restraints and repairs, a reworking of use so that ecological dynamics can begin to assemble themselves again on their own terms. It is enforcement and livelihood, access and exclusion, trawls and ports, and upstream fertiliser that arrives downstream as oxygen loss. It is the social life of a moving medium.

If water is radical, rewilding cannot be a brand of hope layered onto business as usual. It is not a sentimental invitation to "let nature heal" while extraction keeps its rhythm. In a sea structured by industrial fishing, shipping, and energy corridors, rewilding is a conflict over permission: who gets to take, how much, with what tools, and at whose expense.

Let water think with rewilding, and the story shifts.

Along parts of the North Pacific coast, sea otters, sea urchins, and kelp once tangled their lives together. When otters were hunted out, urchins multiplied and grazed kelp down to rock, creating what ecologists call barrens: seafloors where the kelp canopy was erased and complexity collapsed into hunger. When otters recover under protection, they eat urchins, kelp forests can regrow, and with them a whole

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architecture of habitat returns. Light shifts. Drag changes. Sound travels differently through thickets than across bare stone.

Fishers feel these changes too, sometimes as benefit, sometimes as loss, and they also shape these waters through the pressures their practices exert, pressures themselves shaped by uneven economies and shifting ecologies. Extraction is not only an outcome of ecological change but one of its drivers.

It is tempting to tell this as a neat rescue story. But the cascade also redistributes harm. Otters are voracious shellfish hunters. Their return can hit clam and crab harvests hard. What looks like ecological healing from one angle can feel like dispossession from another.

Rewilding here is not a gift but a shift between lived states of the same coast, a rearrangement of who bears the cost of abundance.

Further north, hunters in Greenland found a strange skull: a jaw like a beluga's, teeth like a narwhal's. Genetic analysis suggested a first-generation hybrid. Its bone chemistry suggested a way of feeding that belonged fully to neither lineage.

It would be easy to call this an oddity and move on. But the hybrid swims through warming water, altered ice, shipping routes, hunting grounds, and management categories that assume clear separations. A body appears that policy did not plan for. In its teeth and collagen, water archives a politics of encounter that law will always struggle to keep pace with.

In warmer seas, corals bleach and die when temperatures exceed what their symbiotic algae can tolerate. Reefs crumble into rubble. In response, people collect fragments from tougher colonies, cross them, raise them in nurseries, and outplant them onto damaged reefs. The language of assisted evolution enters the water, meaning selective breeding and nursery rearing intended to increase thermal tolerance across generations.

Here, rewilding leans over an edge.
There is a claim of responsibility: we drove the heat, we owe help.
There is also a risk of domestication: corals tuned to perform as infrastructure, living breakwaters for economies that refuse to slow.

The distinction is not between intervention and restraint, but between reopening space for ecological self-organisation and locking life into narrow service.

Even then, water refuses a verdict. Storms tear up modules. Disease moves through fragments. New associations form. No one controls all the variables. Rewilding here is intervention braided with surrender, repair that does not close the future.

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In estuaries and bays, trawling and dredging have flattened the seabed, crushed oyster reefs, and unclipped seagrass from sediment. Nutrient pollution feeds blooms that rot and strip oxygen. What was once dense habitat collapses into mud.

Here, rewilding begins with unglamorous work. Shells are laid down. Seagrass is planted in patient grids. Trawling bans are argued for and defended. Structure returns slowly, patch by patch. Where it holds, currents slow, sediments settle, water clears, and small fishes return. Protection and repair move together. A bed built over decades can be undone quickly, so staying becomes part of the work.

And then there are places where rewilding talk feels almost obscene.

In the Gulf of California, the vaquita porpoise remains at the edge of disappearance. Monitoring and expert assessments have repeatedly revised the population downward, to a level that is now critically low. They drown in gillnets set for totoaba, a fish whose swim bladder is traded far from the gulf.

The decline stems not from mysterious biology or ecological complexity, but from enforcement failures intertwined with poverty, organised crime, and distant demand. It is also, unmistakably, a fishing story: not artisanal romance, not the noble figure on a panga at dawn, but an economy forced and lured into lethal gear, and a global market that treats a body part as luxury, a living animal as collateral damage.

To speak of afterness here risks cruelty. There is no replacement waiting. Only a narrowing of how breath, sonar, and kinship appear in this water. If something reorganises in the gulf, it will not be a substitute. It will be a remainder.

So what can rewilding afterness mean?

It cannot be nostalgia for a sea that never existed. Nor a fantasy of retreat in which people step aside and water heals itself. Rewilding afterness has to work with radical water: water already politicised, already damaged, already alive with agency. It must accept that new ecologies will not resemble what came before, and that justice is not optional decoration but a condition of possibility.

It means listening differently: listening to oxygen curves and turbidity as testimony; listening to fishers whose boats hold long, uneven records, including the record of what they were pushed to do, what they were paid to ignore, what they were punished for resisting; listening to Indigenous names for currents and grounds that maps erase; listening to the refusal of water to stay in its place.

It also means telling extinction stories that refuse both resignation and easy hope. Stories big enough to hold contradiction. Yes, kelp forests can return, and some losses are final. Yes, reef-building can buy time, and it does not excuse unending emissions.

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Yes, protected areas can foster abundance, and they can also displace marginalised lives if imposed without care. Yes, reducing fishing pressure can be a condition of ecological recovery, and it can also reproduce classed harm if transition is built on sacrifice zones for the already precarious.

In that sense, rewilding afterness is less about bringing something back than about changing the terms under which water and life are allowed to go on.

It is the decision to stop treating oceans as sinks for risk and start treating them as co-authors of any survivable future. To protect the substrate and breathe. To accept that institutions, like ecologies, must change shape, because the sea will not carry our contradictions quietly.

It is not the art of returning.
It is the practice of staying.

Staying with dead zones and nursery tanks, with hybrids and disappearances, with seagrass grids and angry hearings, with partial recoveries and deep failures. Staying inside the long, liquid interval after catastrophe, refusing denial and refusing closure.

To live after the tide is to accept that we are already in the after, and to answer for what we do there: to enforce, to repair, to limit extraction, to refuse alibis, to keep making room for lives we will never be able to count cleanly, and therefore have no right to spend or to wager.

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