

From Eco-Conscious to Eco-Unconscious: On the Death of the Ocean and the Unconscious

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In this essay, I make a bold claim: our collective unconscious is dying in parallel with the oceans. While the death of the seas may seem like a distant speculation, the link between the human psyche and the living world is immediate. I approach this through the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961), the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology. Jung redefined libido not just as a sexual drive, but as the psychic life force animating our dreams and culture. For Jung, the conscious mind is merely a surface; beneath it lies the unconscious, a vast, oceanic realm of archetypes and instincts. Dreams are the primary channel for this communication. If the oceans are hollowing out, then the psychic energy they represent is also fading.

Have you been dreaming? Not in the sense that Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated “I Have a Dream” in his 1963 speech to the American public, but very literal, very simple dreaming when you are asleep. Neuroscience tells us everybody dreams, even those who do not remember their dreams. Sleep is a process through which the brain cleans itself and consolidates long-term memories. One of the key aspects of sleep is REM (Rapid Eye Movement), where theta brain waves and bursts of ponto-geniculo-occipital (PGO) waves dominate neural activity, producing vivid dream imagery.

Have you been dreaming? When was the last time you woke up from such a vivid dream that you couldn’t tell where your dream ended and your waking life began? Although I do not dream as much as I did when I was younger, I had such a dream, a recurring one, in fact, and it takes place in the ocean. I am standing by the shore. It is a moonlit night and the ocean is quiet. I reluctantly enter the water because I am afraid that something big and slimy will brush against my body. To my surprise, the water is warm and welcoming. I am able to breathe underwater, as is the case with some dreams, and I walk towards the rocks that separate the shore from the rest of the land.

I am surrounded by very dark, very long, and very ancient-looking fishes. They are swimming around me and I am fearful, yet I stand by them on two feet. Maybe I am one of them; I have no way of knowing because I do not see myself. There are dozens of these fishes, and I realize they are full of fear, just like I am. Their bodies move very slowly around me; I move very slowly around them. I see their small eyes and big jaws, but they are not scary looking like a great white shark or a moray eel. They do have an ancient body form; I think of the *coelacanth*, one of the oldest species alive, whose lineage stretches back roughly 400 million years. I realize we are all hiding from a danger that is coming from the land. We do not know what it is. I wake up.

It was not until recently that I started thinking about sleep and dream spaces. To be frank, I never took dreams very seriously, and I believe I am not alone in this. Although I did study the neuroscience of sleep and I lectured on dreams and their representation in the arts, specifically through the twentieth-century art movement of Surrealism, I never understood my dreams fully. At best, they were wish fulfillments: I would breathe underwater, fly a bunch, meet someone I had a crush on, and they would be nice to me, or wander through places that looked impossibly beautiful. At worst, I would be falling, I would be surrounded by ancient fishes, or I would see someone die or get lost in a terrible way and wake up in terror.

With the rising interest in consciousness, I started thinking and reading about dreams more. When I was still a PhD student at Duke University, consciousness research had already gained momentum and respectable names were asking about how and why consciousness emerges. It is around that time that I learned roughly two percent of human mental processes are conscious, while about ninety-eight percent are unconscious. I would like to note that I use the term unconscious not in the sense of being in a vegetative state, but the way Carl Jung used it in the title of the book *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916).

The originator of the concept of “flow,” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, states that we can only consciously process about 120 bits of information per second. To understand another person speaking takes about 60 bits per second. This means if two people are talking to you at once, you have reached your biological bandwidth limit (Csikszentmihalyi 29). Yet, based on informal estimates, our nervous system is bombarded with approximately eleven million bits of information per second, mostly through the eyes. And so what happens to the remaining 10,999,940 bits of information that are coming at the human mind, given that the human is engaged in the activity of listening? It goes to the unconscious. Jung proposes that the unconscious is there to “compensate to the conscious contents” (*Collected Works* 15). And how does the unconscious do that? According to Jung, through dreams.

Have you been dreaming? If yes, what do your dreams tell you?

Our inner life is linked to the outer world, and the health of our oceans reflects the state of both. In a 2006 paper, a collective of scientists claimed that by 2048 Earth's fisheries could collapse if current exploitation trends continue (Worm et al. 790). When their findings hit mainstream media, the headlines turned into "There will be no seafood left by 2048." However, Sylvia Earle, the renowned marine scientist and activist now ninety years old, warns us that as long as we perceive marine life as "seafood," we are at fault (Scripture). She says the twenty-first century is the century to fix what was demolished in the oceans. As she famously put it, "No water, no life. No blue, no green" (Earle).

In my speculative biology project, *Hollow Ocean 2048*, after a decade-long excursion into marine ecosystem issues, I created six chapters manifested in architectural form as six water columns. Three were dedicated to extraction from the oceans and three to the addition of pollutants: extraction of minerals and oil, extraction of biomass, extraction of the ocean floor; and the addition of noise pollution, plastics (and microplastics), toxic chemicals, and acidity.

An acidic ocean leads to the collapse of the food chain as shelled beings like clams, oysters, mussels, pteropods, and corals struggle to form calcium carbonate shells. Ocean acidity impacts young organisms whose developmental progress depends on a healthy pH of about 8.1, the typical slightly alkaline condition of ocean surface waters. And yet my six chapters were lacking: there is also the increase in temperature via climate change and the accidental removal of marine life that humans do not even have any use for. With changing temperatures due to human activity, we are also looking at the slowing of ocean pumps, or thermohaline circulation, which creates underwater currents that feed marine life and move the ocean. In a 2015 project titled *Saltwater Heart*, I studied this unique type of circulation and pumped water from the Bosphorus, a very polluted strait of water that connects the Aegean Sea to the almost dead Black Sea.

I am aware that I am summarizing the threats facing marine life in broad strokes. Suffice it to say that a large proportion of species currently threatened with extinction belong to marine ecosystems, from corals and mollusks to large pelagic fishes. So it is not too bold to claim that if we take the business-as-usual path and do not follow Sylvia Earle's call to create protected ocean areas she calls *Hope Spots*, ocean life will diminish and ocean waters will be nothing but H₂O mixed with a series of foul substances that no human wants to be in.

My dreams that linger into the next day are most often guilt dreams. I am eating something I am not supposed to eat, I enter a domain I am not supposed to enter, or I take something I am not supposed to take. I personally know why this is so.

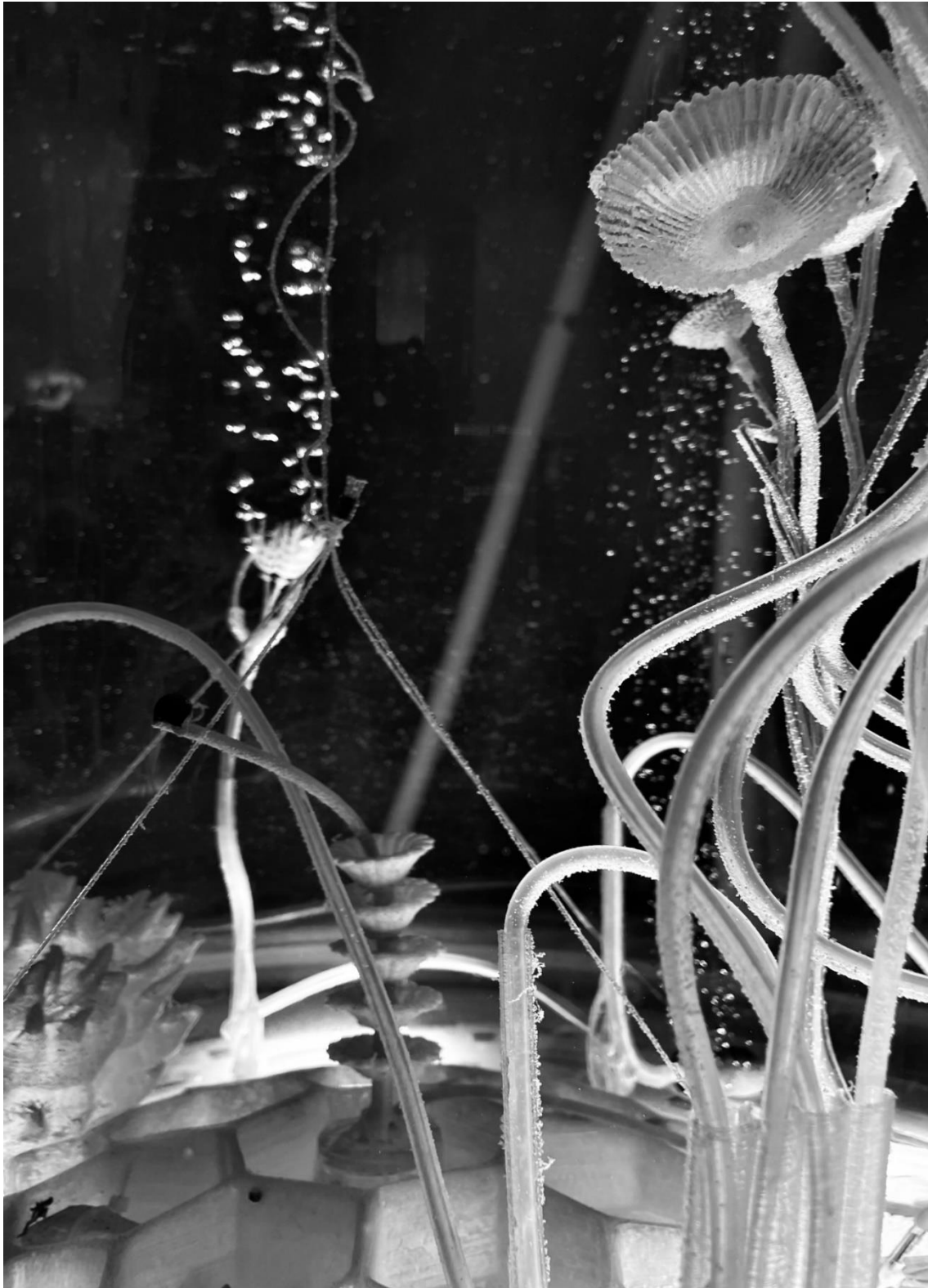


Figure 1. Pinar Yoldas, *The Dark Ocean* (detail from *Hollow Ocean 2048*), 2024. Mixed media installation. A drop of black-dyed vegetable oil represents three million liters of oil extracted from the ocean every minute. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 2. Pinar Yoldas, *Plastic Ocean* (from the installation *Hollow Ocean 2048*), 2021. Oversized 3D printed Laysan albatross skeleton, plastic particles, and synthetic heart organ. Venice Architecture Biennial. Image courtesy of the author.

Ever since I began working on marine plastic pollution nineteen years ago, I have become acutely aware of our excessive use of plastics. From disposable plastics to dumb packaging, from fast fashion to ordering goods online, which activates thousands of shipping vessels, my everyday benign human actions have an impact on marine life. One of my big guilt moments was about cherry tomatoes, which I loved so much. I lived in Berlin when a baby sperm whale beached by the coast of Spain near Almería. This town was known for growing cherry tomatoes and other produce in greenhouse structures covered in plastic. The plastic sheeting used in greenhouse agriculture was identical to the material discovered in the whale's digestive tract. When the baby animal was examined after death, roughly eighteen kilograms of plastic sheeting were found lodged in her stomach. I found a low-resolution video of this baby whale taking her final breath, a video I would go on to show in my lectures for the next decade. Her mouth opening and closing as if she wanted to say something, then a thin stream of blood emerging from it. Her mandible slowly stops moving. Her fins lie flat on the ground. I used to cry when I saw images of seals wrapped in plastic, [eagle rays](#) crucified in shark nets, or pelicans covered in thick, greasy oil after yet another spill.

After seeing thousands of images of what I can only call the “negative sublime,” my tears, which share almost the same chemical composition as saltwater, have dried up. And yet the guilt remains. Every day I purchase food, much of it wrapped in packaging. I click my touchpad to order something last minute. I pass a person sitting in their SUV doomscrolling on their phone while the car engine is running for nothing. Each of these small, ordinary moments carries a quiet and persistent guilt.

Hence the guilt dreams.

What I want to suggest is that we are not as far removed from the “Archaic Man” Carl Jung describes as modernity would have us believe. A quiet thread still binds us to the living world, and as the oceans weaken and ecosystems collapse, something deep within us (our eco-unconscious) begins to wither too.

In an earlier version of this essay, I looked into whether people across the world might be dreaming less. There was not much data. However, there was plenty of data on how we sleep less and less. Historical estimates suggest that people now sleep roughly one to two hours less per night than they did a century ago, a change widely attributed to artificial lighting, industrial work schedules, and, more recently, the constant presence of digital screens. Blue light, a hallmark of digital technology, disrupts our suprachiasmatic nucleus, the circadian clock in the hypothalamus, interfering with our natural sleep cues called *zeitgebers*. Sleep deprivation is rising globally. In many industrialized countries, more than a third of adults now sleep less than the recommended seven hours per night. Younger generations are sleeping even

less. Adolescents and young adults increasingly experience chronic sleep restriction due to late-night screen exposure, social media use, academic pressure, and irregular schedules. Because REM sleep occurs predominantly in the later phases of the sleep cycle, shortened nights disproportionately reduce the amount of time humans spend dreaming.

Back to the Boris Worm paper: if they are right, in about two decades, while we are busy with the rise of AI, missions to Mars, and declaring war on each other for stupidly human reasons, we may be losing ocean life. We may be hollowing out the ocean completely (Worm et al. 790). The question is: will we still be dreaming in two decades, or will dreams also become obsolete just like nature did? On our path to becoming cyborgs, the hybrid creatures of machine and organism that Donna Haraway famously described, will we free ourselves from the unconscious entirely? The part of us that sees everything, hears everything, touches everything, and remembers everything: will we discard that too?

Jung was wary of the modern fascination with technology, observing that humans had become victims of their own inventions (Jung, *Jung on Nature* 143–144). Today those machines, or technologies, are ubiquitous. While much of the world's population may not inhabit a mental universe shaped by scientific reasoning and causal thinking, nearly seventy percent of humanity now uses a smartphone. The danger of being consumed by machines is now a planetary risk. Of the 8.8 billion people alive today, a majority lives within environments saturated with technological devices, and about 4.5 billion people inhabit fully man-made landscapes. Although modern dreams may increasingly feature mechanical symbols, our unconscious still holds space for the animal and the natural. We just do not have enough of them, and have far more of us.

Have you been dreaming lately? What are your dreams about?

In Jungian symbolism, water bodies, such as oceans and seas, are considered the primary cartography of the unconscious. Water is depth, mystery, and life itself; in the theater of the night, it is the domain where the submerged parts of the psyche reside. Large, dark waters, particularly the ocean, represent the collective unconscious, that vast, primordial reservoir shared by all humanity. To find oneself in the water during a dream is to move through this psychic material, encountering aspects of the self that remain hidden in the light of day. In this sense, immersion is the first step toward integration, the slow and often turbulent process through which the conscious and unconscious selves finally meet.

If we accept that the ocean represents the unconscious, then its fate is inseparable from our own. And yet, I must admit: I do not have a solution for the death of the oceans. Or rather, the solutions of my younger self no longer seem to hold. I once believed in the transformative power of the arts to activate eco-conscious behavior

using immersive installations and activism to bridge the gap between human apathy and environmental reality. But these attempts have failed me. I have watched as ecological crisis was reduced to a mere “trend” by arts professionals, and I realized that an exhibition in a well-meaning *kunsthalle* or gallery reaches a thousand people at best. It is a drop in a drying bucket.

The shift we need is not one of consciousness, but of depth. We have attempted to be eco-conscious, but we have neglected the eco-unconscious.

I once wished for a sea of cultural producers to address our disconnect from the natural world. I employed beauty, nature’s most seductive lure, to remind humans of the love we once had for living systems. I will continue to do so as long as my vital force allows, but I do not want to sound naïve: in the two decades I have dedicated to this work, I have seen very little progress.

Living at the edge of the Pacific, I am among the fortunate few who still exist within earshot of the tide and the scent of the salt air. My beaches here are pristine compared to the Mediterranean; there is no visible debris, and on a lucky day dolphins still break the surface. But even here, the water is deceptive. According to marine biologist [Dimitri Deheyn](#), who pivoted from studying the aesthetics of marine color to the crisis of plastic pollution, microplastics and microfibers are now found across marine and atmospheric environments worldwide (Martin). The impact of our industry has moved beyond the horizon and into our very biology. Microplastics are now in our bloodstream, our brains, and the amniotic fluid of the womb. Our future generations are born already imbued with industrial waste. Just like the spirits that governed the “God’s land” of the archaic man (and woman), this degradation is invisible, yet omnipresent.

We may move through our days with a practiced indifference, but the psyche is a submerged witness to the slow ecocide we commit day in and day out. This trauma is being registered at the level of the eco-unconscious, surfacing in the dark as a mirror to our dying oceans. I want to believe I am not the only one whose sleep is restless with these guilt dreams, and that I am not alone in searching the rising tide for a language of signs and symbols that we have not yet completely erased.

On January 9, 2026, a *Mola mola* (ocean sunfish) washed ashore in Encinitas, San Diego. These fishes are the wanderers of the open sea, known for the strange, vulnerable habit of “sunbathing” at the surface, lying flat and defenseless to thermally regulate after deep, cold dives into the lightless mesopelagic zone. They are creatures of the currents, drifting through the blue as they allow cleaner fishes and birds to pick parasites from their skin, appearing less like a fish and more like a floating, ancient head. I happened to be at the gym when I saw the news of the *Mola mola* on a flat screen, situated among other screens displaying protein shake ads and wedding

reality TV. This divine being, a traveler from the deep unconscious of the ocean, was being broadcast as a curious spectacle between clips of consumerism and manufactured drama (CBS 8 San Diego).

A chill went down my spine, and this time not because of the excessive air conditioning my gym prefers. Was the *Mola mola* saying something? Was I dreaming?

In December 2025, a broadbill swordfish was spotted right by swimmers. “Swordfish are common in deeper waters off the coast, but sightings this close to the beach are uncommon,” said the reporter (NBC San Diego). The drone footage showed a confused animal surrounded by humans swimming in zig-zags. And a month before that, a whale beached not far from where I live. I wanted to go see the carcass before they removed it, but sadly my schedule did not allow that.

I ask myself: if I were truly an archaic man (and woman), what would I see? What would I make of these beings coming to the shores where humans are? Would I accept it as a weird news item and move on with my day like I did, or would I recognize a message or a symbol from the ocean spirits?

Perhaps to save the oceans, we must first save our dreams from going extinct. I wish you a restful sleep, embroidered by ancestral dreams in which you move through clear waters brimming with myriad forms of life.

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