

The Once and Future Ocean: Notes Toward a New Hydraulic Society

Peter Neill

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Peter Neill is a novelist, a maritime nonfiction writer, and the founder/director of the World Ocean Observatory, and he has seen local ocean problems firsthand. His goal with *The Once and Future Ocean*, though, is to get the word out about the worldwide crisis our oceans face.

The author believes that ocean degradation is less recognized than that of the land. There is a pervasive myth that the ocean is self-healing—it can absorb all our sewage and trash and be none the worse. Not so, he counters; “the health of the ocean is a direct reflection of the health of the land.” The ocean’s ailing condition manifests itself through overfishing, acidification, sea level rise, polar ice melt, and coral reef die-offs. The irony is that climate change, which is generally accelerated by richer countries, may have the greatest effects on poor, low-lying countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam. At the same time, developed areas like São Paulo and California face freshwater shortages as well.

The book paints quite the sobering picture, and Neill acknowledges how difficult it can be to have hope. However, he offers down-to-earth strategies for how governments and individuals can tackle what seems insurmountable. First of all, remove pro-consumption subsidies and enforce water-related regulations. An understanding of the water cycle should also contribute to new water harvesting and management technologies. Citizens can call for increased recycling, especially of plastics. An awareness of one’s “water footprint” is essential—the “Citizens of the Ocean” online pledge includes a helpful set of personal resolutions to sign up to. “We must hold ourselves accountable,” Neill charges readers in this powerful, impassioned book.

REBECCA FOSTER (Fall 2016)

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