



## Images and Imaginaries of the Sea. Introduction

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### 1. Sea spaces in geographical thought

This thematic issue comprises several contributions presented during the session on *Images and imaginaries of the sea* at the IGU Thematic Conference: The Ocean and the Seas in Geographical Thought<sup>1</sup>. Within the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), the Conference focused on marine spaces as complex and relational geographical “objects” through various focal points. Therefore, the session was committed to dealing with different visual representations of the oceans and their interconnections with other aspects of the natural world.

In June 2024, exactly one year after the conference, the *Venice Declaration for Ocean Literacy* in action reaffirmed the crucial role

played by the oceans as the “lifeblood of our planet,” being responsible for the production of “more than half of the oxygen on planet Earth, regulating our weather and climate and underpinning the water cycle which makes life on land possible”.

A deep understanding of the oceans strictly depends on their interconnectedness with “biodiversity, human well-being and climate change”, making ocean literacy a crucial tool for reshaping the relationships between human societies and marine environments in the Anthropocene. In this literacy, images play a central role, intertwining with several aspects of a broader cultural heritage about the oceans and the seas.

For centuries, the oceans and seas have connected and separated people, with different functions throughout different times and cultures. While the earliest scientific research was conducted by maritime nations, with either colonial or military reasons, more recently, the emphasis has been on the need to exploit the oceans and the links of the oceans with global changes. Hence, these liquid spaces and their

<sup>1</sup> The International Geographical Union (IGU) is an international, non-governmental, professional organization devoted to the development of Geography. The Thematic Conference: The Ocean and the Seas in Geographical Thought was held in Milan, University of Milano-Bicocca, on June 6-7, 2023.

pictorial and cartographic representations have been the object of rich studies in the geographical literature that anticipated some features of current debates on non-state geopolitics, hybridity, and global change, to mention only some of the most popular matters in broader disciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogues.

Marine complexity and its many uses and users require the disciplines within physical and human geography to combine in truly interdisciplinary studies. The ocean and seas are social, political, logistical, and cultural spaces. Since the early 2000s, the scientific community has renewed its interest in the oceans by focusing on their educational value: Ocean Literacy also means understanding the oceans' influence on human beings and, in turn, their influence on the oceans.

Furthermore, the ocean and seas are central to current climate change and sustainability debates. From an economic perspective, the sustainable use of ocean resources is one of the most critical challenges that humanity needs to tackle in the coming decades. Successfully addressing these issues implies a dialogue between disciplines, academia, public policy, and grassroots movements and activism.

In particular, there is the need to cover the continuum from ecological structure and functioning to ecosystem services and societal goods and benefits. IGU commissions and task forces have a wide array of expertise in maritime issues. The IGU thematic session aimed to combine contributions from all branches of geography and critical thinking to foster intra and interdisciplinary dialogue on such a large part of the earth's surface (70%). The part of our globe covered with waters, which geographer Elisée Reclus (1869) described as a metaphor for universal human brotherhood, represents the grand common basin where all different individual streams converge.

In a conference that focuses on the role of the sea within geographical thought, it was essential to reflect on the role of the visual representation of the sea. If geography previously used visuals as documentation, often considered objective, of seascapes and geographical objects, the most recent evolution of the discipline has given

visuals an active role in research. This allowed visual studies (Rose, 2012) not only to evaluate images to understand their content or composition (denotative level) but also to interpret ideas and feelings that can be attributed to the images (connotative level).

This thematic issue of the *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography* aims to collect contributions that reflect on the role of the arts and visual tools in constructing and communicating the image of the sea and the relationship between human beings and marine spaces. Predrag Matvejevic (1993) affirms that we do not discover the sea by ourselves nor only look at it through our eyes. We also see it as others have looked at it, in the images and stories they have left us: we come to know it and recognize it at the same time (*ibid.*). Painting, cinema, photography, cartoons, illustrations from the popular press, cartographies, street art, satirical comics, textbooks, documentaries, TV series, and music video clips all contribute to the geopolitical, environmental, and imaginary construction (Dell'Agnese, 2021) of our idea of the sea. In an era dominated by the visual and characterized by the hegemony of social media, these materials are of particular interest, shaping different seascapes that can assume both positive and negative connotations (Cosgrove, 1984).

## 2. Key to reading the different contributions

The contributions presented in the session on *Images and imaginaries of the sea* can be divided into two macro-themes: environment and activism; artistic languages and the use of visuals in educational activities.

The first contribution *Amateur films as geo-historical documents: Traditional fishing through a tourist's lens*, considering amateur films as a geo-historical document, explores how amateur films can be used in the environmental humanities, focusing on the Lab80 – Cinescatti archive in Bergamo. The research delves into the environmental discourses that emerged during the post-war economic miracle in Italy by analyzing two films by Sofia Ceppi Badoni about nascent tourism and slaughter practices in Sicily. The films offer a tourism vision that

seeks out the different and the abnormal. This contribution can make us reflect on how amateur films document and shape the collective imagination of the sea, with particular attention to socio-economic transformations and tourism perspectives.

The second contribution, *Seafaring with the Saint: An Ethnogeographical study of fisherfolks in Nagore Shrine, Tamil Nadu, India*, explores the spiritual influence of Shahul Hamid, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi master known as the “Protector of Navigation”, on the fishermen of Nagore. The study uses interviews and focus groups to investigate how the saint’s shrine provides security and connection to the fishermen’s ancestral traditions, highlighting the complex relationships between culture, spirituality, and livelihoods in Tamil Nadu’s coastal communities. This contribution highlights how spirituality and cultural traditions model the imaginary of the sea, providing support and identity to fishermen in the context of modern challenges.

How does mural art contribute to building an imagery of the sea that raises awareness and mobilizes the public to preserve marine environments? The third article, *Environmental Awareness through Mural Art: a survey of iconographic representations of whales and polar bears on Italian walls*, tries to answer this question. In response to the problem of marine pollution, various artistic and creative initiatives, such as photojournalistic investigative projects and muralism, aim to draw attention to preserving marine environments. This contribution explores, in particular, how murals shape perceptions of endangered seas, using iconic representations of species such as whales and polar bears to evoke emotions and promote conservation while running the risk of oversimplification.

The fourth contribution, *The sea on the skin*, offers an opportunity to explore the imagery of the sea through tattoos as an artistic and symbolic expression of seafarers’ experiences and identity. The article examines the role of tattoos in the maritime community from the 18th to the 20th century. Tattoos, which became symbols of identity and belonging for sailors marginalized by land-based society, were

proudly displayed as status symbols. These marks told stories of life at sea, exploits, and personal journeys, offering a unique insight into the experiences and identities of sailors and their connection to maritime spaces. Through analyzing this art form, the study seeks to unveil the meanings of tattoos and their relationship with the marine environment.

The fifth article, *Exploring underwater seascapes*, highlights the significant advancement achieved by a conference held in Brest in 2011, which contributed to the recognition of underwater seascapes according to the principles of the European Landscape Convention. These landscapes, long neglected, have gained relevance in Western cultures since the 1950s, coinciding with the development of scuba diving. Representations of this new environment began to permeate literature, film, and comics, becoming the object of reflection for an ambivalent relationship with marine landscapes and living beings, ranging between attitudes of predation and empathy. This contribution provides a lens through which to explore representations and perceptions of the sea as a physical and symbolic space and how these influence and are influenced by culture, art, and human history.

The last contribution, *Place-Based Education for Ocean Literacy: Fostering Ocean Literacy and Place Attachment through short film*, can be interpreted as an exploration of emotional and cultural connections to the oceans through place-based education and digital storytelling. This study analyzes the representations of the oceans created by university students in their short films, highlighting the potential of digital media in shaping perceptions and promoting ocean literacy and citizenship. It also highlights the fundamental role of imagination and fantasy in enhancing individual and collective relationships with the sea and promoting civic engagement for its protection.

From this thematic issue on the imagery of the sea, it is clear that it is essential to explore the multiple cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions related to the ocean. Through various academic contributions, we analyzed how the oceans have been represented, interpreted, and experienced through multiple

disciplinary and cultural perspectives. Each study has offered a unique perspective on the complex relationship between humanity and the sea. We invite readers to immerse themselves in this rich compilation of knowledge, hoping it

will inspire a greater understanding and appreciation of our relationship with the vast and fascinating marine world, prompting us to commit more consciously to its conservation and protection.

## References

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