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Engaging wider publics with studying and protecting the ocean

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The ocean is dying. The vast scientific literature diagnoses massive reductions in the biomass of fish and invertebrates from overfishing, increasing destruction of coral ecosystems in the tropics from climate change, extensive dead zones from eutrophication and collapse of marine bird populations from ingesting plastic. Even though Darwin suspected already The scale is becoming apparent only from meta-analyses at regional or even global scales as individual studies tend to focus on one fishery or one type of organisms or geographic location. In combination with deep rooted perceptions of the vastness of the ocean the changes are difficult to comprehend for specialists and the general public alike. Even though more than half of humanity is estimated to live in coastal zones as defined by some, urbanisation is removing about half from regular, more direct exposure. Yet, there is much still to be explored, not only in the deep, little studied, parts.
The ocean exercises great fascination on many people heightened since the period of discovery and the mystery of far-flung places, but the days, when Darwin's research results were regularly discussed in public spaces are gone. Rachel Carson's prize-winning and best selling book "The Sea Around Us", some serialised chapters in magazines and condensations in "Reader's Digest" transported the poetic rendering of science again to a wider public. But compared to the diversity of scientific inquiry about the ocean and importance for life-support system earth there is much room for engaging ocean science in the broad sense with larger and diverse publics.
Developing new narratives rooted in the best available sciences is among the most promising modes of connecting different areas of scientific inquiry and non-specialists alike. We know at latest since Poincaré's famous dictum that "the facts don't speak". However, contextualised information can capture the imagination of the many and thus also reveal unexpected connections, when the story travels further than the "usual suspects". The paper argues that it is essential for our societies to get better access to the sciences in order to inform and update our perceptions of the ocean and that transitions towards living within the reproductive capacity of the ocean and planet Earth require much greater conscious efforts towards story telling by the science. It presents some first hand experience with different strategies on how the sciences can critically engage and invites creative use of social media and other new ways to meet this need.