

## FEATURES

**Saved by the Sea**

By David Helvarg

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After my sister died last year I got to thinking about our childhood. My best memories of our growing up on New York's Long Island Sound involved water—standing, brackish and salty.

My friends and I used to play in the swamp behind our school and wade around in the sound's shallows, searching the muddy waters with our feet for the primitive armored shapes of horseshoe crabs, which we would lift up by their spiky tails for closer inspection. Early on, our boys' culture was divided between those of us who defended the rights of horseshoe crabs to be played with and skipped across the water and older "hoods" who liked to imprison them in rock corrals and then smash their shells with heavy stones. After one fight in which by dint of numbers we vanquished a group of "hoods," a gray-haired eel fisherman came over to congratulate us, explaining how sometimes you have to fight for the creatures that can't fight for themselves.



Helvarg and his sister, Deborah, as kids.

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Today there are thousands of grown-up kids defending horseshoe crabs, American eels and other creatures threatened with extinction. Along the Jersey and Delaware shores, where millions of horseshoe crabs have been harvested for eel bait and the loss of their multitudinous eggs threatens migrating shorebirds, marine activists have won new protections for these animals that were ancient when dinosaurs were the coming thing. Others are defending the endangered American eel, whose Homeric journey from the Sargasso Sea along the Gulf Stream to the headwaters of North America's eastern rivers is now hampered by dams, development and a global seafood market that includes Asian demand for "glass eels" (or baby "elvers"), which once sold for as much as \$10 a pound.

As a result of industrial over-fishing, 90% of the large predator fish have been eliminated from the world's oceans since 1950, according to the late Ram Myers and Boris Worm of Dalhousie University. This is only one of a cascading series of disasters confronting our living seas. There's the nutrient, chemical and plastic poisoning of our coastal and deep waters; the construction boom and sprawl destroying the life-giving habitats needed for marine restoration, including salt marshes and other briny places that act as the filters and nurseries of the sea; and a fossil-fuel-driven climate shift that's raising sea levels, melting ice shelves, intensifying hurricanes, bleaching corals and making the oceans more acidic. I saw what the future may bring as I traveled the smashed and empty streets of New Orleans, the drowned bayou of Louisiana, and the devastated Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. It reminded me of wars I'd covered only with fewer deaths, far wider destruction and a million environmental refugees.

When I was eight I wanted to be a navy frogman and fight for dolphins and America. By 11 I was thinking I'd become an oceanographer and was addicted to *Sea Hunt* and Jacques Cousteau on TV. At 13 I went to my first civil rights demonstration and got swept away by the social movements and moments of my youth. Then there was that missed opportunity, a life course not taken when I was 16 and my mother took my sister, Deborah, and me on a road trip to Key West. Driving over the ocean on the old two-lane-highway bridge, looking out at the jade and aquamarine reef line, I felt I'd come home to a place I'd never seen before. We stopped at Pigeon Key, where the University of Miami had



converted an old cabin resort into a research station and storms had broken the old swimming pool, flooding it with saltwater that became home to live coral and big jacks and parrot fish. We stayed at the old Key West out by the airport and toured the Key West Aquarium full of big jewfish (now called goliath groupers), moray eels, barracuda, sergeant majors, queen angels. As I identified them, my mother turned to my sister and said, "Gee, I guess he doesn't just make all this stuff up."

**Nancy Ledansky and friends getting ready to dive the Great Barrier Reef.**

"I remember that. I was surprised you knew all those fish names," my sister tells me as we sit out on her porch in Brookline, Massachusetts, a week before she passes, the early-winter sun warming our faces, both of us now in our fifties, set in our own ways, comfortable with our common history.

As a young kid, I'd looked up at the stars and gotten pissed off, thinking I'd been born a generation too soon to explore other worlds. But that week in Key West I got hold of a mask and snorkel and got into the water and saw live rocks, and vibrant colors, sea cucumbers and a queen conch, a sea turtle and a small hammerhead gliding through a coral canyon amid shoaling fish and realized there was this whole other alien world right beyond the seawall.

Sadly, in the blink of an eye that's been my life, the Keys reef has gone from 90% live coral cover to less than 10%, devastated by pollution, physical impacts from boats, anchors, people and global warming. One night we went to the Kraals Restaurant, which still had big sea turtles in pens, and my mother had the turtle soup and let me order a vodka, and when I swallowed too much and grimaced she turned to my sister and said, "Does he make a face like that when he smokes pot?" We were both shocked.

I could have run off to sea right then. But there was a war dividing the nation and we had to get back home to New York, where Martin Luther King, Jr. soon came to speak at our high school.

"I wonder how we would have turned out differently if not for the sixties," my sister says. "Maybe you wouldn't have ended up doing all your medical work or being the great mom you are," I suggest. She looks unconvinced.

"Maybe we should just be in the moment," I say.

She gives me an odd look then grins. "Right, that California stuff," but is quiet and relaxed in the sun, pain-free for a time before getting back to worrying about Adam and Ethan, her boys of 16 and 18.

At 17 I ran off to protest at the Democratic convention in Chicago, where the police rioted and I got my first taste of mace, gas and blunt-force trauma. At 18 I was busted and beaten for fighting back. When I was 21, a right-wing terrorist group targeted my friends and me on the beach in San Diego (we were organizing protests against Richard Nixon's Republican convention). By the time I was 22, it was pretty clear there wasn't going to be urban guerilla warfare in America, so I went to Belfast as a reporter to see what it looked like.

It looked pretty mean but was personally challenging. It made me better able to understand the axiom that in war, truth is the first casualty. The British-IRA conflict in Ulster also made me realize I had a vocation for writing and reporting. After five months I returned to my flat from the scene of a car bombing and shoot-out only to get word my mother had contracted lung cancer (she was a pack-and-a-half-a-day woman). I sat down by the ruins of the



**Marquesas Islands**

© Jorge Lomonaco



**Helvarg, Deborah and their father.**

recently bombed Brooke Park Public Library. Someone had a radio on. It was playing Paul Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion." I flew home and helped care for her in the few months before she died. I then moved back to the beach in San Diego, where I built a career as a freelance journalist, while also finding time to bodysurf.

The Pacific Ocean took me back to the salty dreams of my childhood. I started writing stories about navy dolphins, sharks, offshore oil and mining, whatever could keep me connected to the everlasting sea. When my dad died a few years later I was living with a couple of buddies in a brown clapboard cliff house 60 feet above the ocean. To overcome my grief I went off to cover wars in Central America for five years. I went with a good friend, photographer John Hoagland. Between reporting under fire and covering civilian massacres and death squads, we'd go to the beach in El Salvador to recharge. John, a longtime surfer, liked the left break at La Libertad. I dug the long barrels along the Costa del Oro, even if I did spot the occasional bull shark in the surf line. After John and Richard Cross, another good friend who was like a brother, were killed in combat, I returned to the beach in San Diego and got my private investigator's license.



Early Navy aspirations.

Then I moved to the Bay Area, got scuba certified, and met Nancy Ledansky. She was my adventure mate and life's love. We ended up in a duplex looking down on Richardson Bay in Sausalito. We dove Australia, Mexico, The Caribbean, went to Hawaii and coastal Alaska, hiked Point Reyes National Seashore every other weekend. We got shipwrecked during a storm in Baja before refloating the boat (which was then towed and sunk by the Mexican Navy). Another time she got jealous when I rode a whale shark, which she didn't know was a vegetarian. "It's lucky he didn't mistake you for a veggie burger," she grouched.

We broke up, but not cleanly. I moved to D.C., away from her and my other love, the sea. Right after I started writing the ocean book I'd always wanted to, she found a lump in her breast. I was with her through the chemo, which was awful but seemed to work. I finished *Blue Frontier* (W.H. Freeman) and was on the Deep East Expedition 100 miles off Nantucket when Al Qaeda hit the twin towers. When I got back to land Nancy told me her cancer was back. I was with her for the last few months, in the hospital and home hospice, where we could watch the waters of the bay flowing in and out with the tide. After she died at 43 we had a memorial service on one of her favorite beaches. It was a gusty day, feisty like the gal, with the winds whipping the sand and frothing the cold translucent waves. She used to say I never looked happier than when I was coming out of the water after getting beat up by the waves. But the ocean can also provide solace, give you a sense of being part of something larger, even when large parts of your own soul have torn away.

I moved back to Washington with our cat, not sure what to do next, not sure I wanted there to be a next. I found I had three options. I could return to California and do more PI work for Scott, a lawyer friend and diving buddy, but I'd already done enough of that. I could return to war reporting, as President Bush was then planning a preemptive war on Iraq. That had some appeal, war having once proved an effective antidote to depression. I also started meeting with Ralph Nader, who had read my book and encouraged me to organize the Seaweed Rebellion that I describe in its final chapter. He offered me some support, including free office space amid a rabbit warren of public interest start-ups in a



building near Dupont Circle.

**On the beach in El Salvador after a bodysurfing session.**

After a lot of reflection I decided that while we'll probably always have wars, we may not always have wild fish, living reefs or protective coastal wetlands. I thought about the work of people who had inspired me: David Brower, Rachel Carson, Jacques Cousteau, David Suzuki, Ralph. I decided to go with my surviving love. Plus if I went to war I didn't know what I'd do with the cat. So the Poose, who hated getting even her paws wet, brought me back to the sea. And there were these other factors, of course.

Salt water covers 71% of the earth's surface and provides 97% of its livable habitat. While the tropical rain forests have been called the lungs of the world, the oceans actually absorb far greater amounts of carbon dioxide. Microscopic phytoplankton in the top layer of the sea acts as a biological pump extracting some 2.5 billion tons of organic carbon out of the atmosphere annually, replacing it with 70% of the life-giving oxygen we need to survive. The top two feet of seawater contains as much heat as the entire atmosphere.

Photosynthesis of carbon dioxide by plankton and terrestrial plants was thought to be the basis of all organic life until 1977, when scientists aboard a deep-diving submarine off the Galapagos Islands discovered sulfurous hot-water vents 8,000 feet below the surface colonized by giant tube worms, clams, white crabs and other animals that contain sulfur-burning bacteria, which provide an alternative basis for sustaining life. Now NASA scientists believe similar "chemosynthetic" life-forms may exist around volcanic deep-water ocean vents beneath the icy crust of Jupiter's moon Europa. Like I said before, whole other alien worlds right here on our own ocean planet, strange worlds both awesome and familiar. Our bodies, like the planet, are 71% salt water, our blood exactly as salty as the sea (when our ancestors emerged from it). This fact may explain why it's easier to fall asleep to the sound of the ocean. The rhythm of the waves is like our mother's heartbeat. For seven years I'd lived in that cliff house in San Diego that shook when the storm waves rolled in every winter. I never slept better in my life.

And so I followed the rhythm. In December 2002, after talking it over with many seaweed (marine grassroots) activists I'd met and deeply liked, I established the Blue Frontier Campaign. The idea was to strengthen the ocean constituency and help mobilize a blue movement that could change policy from the bottom up. My sister was happy I wasn't going back to war.

In the next few years we got a lot done with a staff of two and many interns, friends and volunteers. We held book events and "Celebrations of the Sea" for over 3,000 people including scientists, fishermen, surfers, divers, members of Congress and others. We held a three-day conference for 250 activists from 170 organizations, and a smaller Mid-Atlantic regional conference at the National Aquarium in Baltimore. We produced the first Ocean and Coastal Conservation Guide in print and online, listing some 2,000 "blue" groups and ocean parks. We established a website and a monthly "Blue Notes" ocean policy newsletter, wrote guides for activists, distributed free books and other materials, and produced articles, videos, opinion pieces and radio reports for a range of national and global media. I spoke to anyone I could and wrote *50 Ways to Save the Ocean* (New Word Library) (with a foreword by Philippe Cousteau and illustrations by "Sherman's Lagoon" cartoonist Jim Toomey) as a way for everyone and anyone who gets something from the ocean, whether it be recreation, transportation, energy, security, protein or spiritual renewal, to give something back. The number-one suggestion is "go to the beach," because you're more likely to protect that which you love.



The biggest personal setback was that in trying to save the ocean from a concrete-covered swamp—Washington, D.C.—I had far less water time. And so, recently thinking about the time we're allotted and the need to do what gives us passion and be where we belong, I moved back to California, a place my nephews also like to visit.

And here I am, back in cold water with Captain Jessie Alstatt of the Santa Barbara Channelkeeper. We're off Anacapa Island, California, where the keepers are tending the first-ever open ocean eel grass restoration project, part of the panoply of solutions that could still help turn the tide. The bottom where we drop in is littered with brittle stars. Closer to the eel grass beds are freestanding stalks of giant kelp, señorita and lizard fish, gobies, sand dabs, orange-throat blennys peeking out from abandoned worm tubes, and a big bat ray just hanging out. And because each dive's unique, I get to meet my first sarcastic fringe-head, a mottled shovel-mouthed fish that, if it were nine feet instead of nine inches, would be the terror of the sea.

Back on board we watch leaping dolphins, sea lions and diving pelicans feeding on a live bait ball. I am cold, wet, salty and grinning like a fool. At moments like this, enveloped by the wonder of the everlasting sea, it's hard, despite the best available science, not to be optimistic.

**DAVID HELVARG** is the founder and president of the Blue Frontier Campaign ([www.bluefront.org](http://www.bluefront.org)). A version of this essay appears in *A Passion for This Earth* (Greystone Books). "Saved by the Sea" will be published as a book-length memoir by St. Martin's Press and Greystone (Canada) in 2009. Helvarg's next book, *Rescue Warriors*, will also be published by St. Martin's in 2009.

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