

# A PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW OF THE OCEAN AND HUMANITY

## SECOND EDITION

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Reviewed by Emma Coleman

Anders Omstedt is a Swedish oceanographer, author, and professor emeritus in the Department of Marine Sciences, University of Gothenburg. The second edition of his book entitled *A Philosophical View of the Ocean and Humanity*, published in 2024, is heavily influenced by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030). In 33 short chapters, Omstedt explores an array of topics spanning oceanography, philosophy, and science communication. Despite the broad nature of the topics, he always returns to probe the central relationship between humans and the ocean. From promoting the power of dreams as a key tool for creatively imagining the future to giving succinct overviews of the major challenges in ocean science today, Omstedt maintains an interesting conversation with the ocean throughout the book, recognizing it as a partner with an active role to play in changing human behavior.

This second edition is divided into three sections. Parts I and III are entirely new. The first edition, published in 2020, is present in a largely rewritten form in Part II. The second edition also includes new illustrations along with forewords by Bernt Gustavsson, Örebro University, and Markus Meier, Leibniz Institute for Baltic Sea Research Warnemünde. The new content adds necessary depth to the book, and I encourage readers to engage with the updated edition.

In Part I, Omstedt “illustrate[s] how analytical thinking and intuition can be trained by observing how we think and feel” (p. 3). Here poetry, art, and dreams are introduced as tools that can support and foster scientific curiosity and discovery. Omstedt explores the merits of creative thinking in the Anthropocene and highlights the insights these tools offer in the face of global challenges. Part II outlines “the threats the ocean faces through various human activities...[and the need to] work across many academic disciplines, using transdisciplinary approaches and developing new skills for conversation” (p. 129). Two perspectives are interwoven throughout Part II. One gives an analytical overview of ocean science problems, and the other is represented by an intuitive conversation between a marine scientist and the ocean. By paralleling these seemingly disparate modes of

thinking, readers are given an example of how both scientific and artful inquiry work together to reframe our understanding of the ocean and ourselves. Finally, Part III “deepens the description of humans’ relationship to the ocean and our way of thinking with inspiration from literature and philosophy” (p. xiii). In this section, Omstedt grounds the ideas and cognitive tools introduced in Parts I and II by complementing analytical research with the insights gained from engagement with art and literature.

Throughout *A Philosophical View of the Ocean and Humanity*, scientific and spiritual stories are combined to encourage changes in human behavior. Omstedt asks the reader to meditate on questions about Earth and its ocean, as well as about life and our place in it. In addition to scientific facts, Omstedt draws from mythology, song, and novels, weaving together a story of the ocean and humanity. Through this weaving, the book provides a multifaceted reading experience that challenges traditional Western scientific paradigms by embracing critical reflection, personal feelings, and creative thinking. Readers may be fascinated with the oceanography-based chapters of Part II or resonate more closely with the dreamscapes illustrated in Part I. Thus, this book is suited to a wide audience, as it pieces together creative and logical ways of knowing in a broad meditation on the ocean and humanity, one that opens new avenues of thought for change-making. Oceanographers, climate scientists, science writers, and scholars of science and technology studies may find the content of this text particularly useful for informing their own work.

Omstedt makes it clear that ways of being and knowing outside of traditional science paradigms are necessary—not only for enriching human lives, but for doing better science. He uses clear language when articulating his philosophy. Omstedt avoids making technical recommendations and focuses instead on human understanding of the ocean on a philosophical level, and particularly, how that understanding shapes the practice of science. It is a push that is especially useful for today’s oceanographers and climate scientists who are pursuing their research in increasingly unstable times. Taking the time to consider and commit (or recommit) to the ethical and philosophical underpinnings

of one's research is a worthwhile process because it engenders a deeper understanding of the necessary network of support. Furthermore, expanding one's network to include non-human actors like the ocean can, as Omstedt emphasizes, reorient research in a direction that more closely aligns with actual change.

Although science provides one set of methodologies for investigating and understanding the physical world, it does not always have the best tools for influencing or changing human behavior in the context of global crises. In chapter 10, for example, Omstedt interrogates human understanding of intelligence through an exploration of art and dreams. Omstedt's analysis of unconscious knowledge is reminiscent of cognitive linguist George Lakoff's understanding of framing. Lakoff points out that "real reason is mostly unconscious (98%) [and] requires emotion...ideas and language can't directly fit the world but rather must go through the body" (Lakoff, 2010, pg. 72). It is critical for scientists and science writers to consider the felt or embodied experience, especially when attempting to understand or change human behavior. Rethinking how we motivate change is now more important than ever, given the ever escalating effects of climate change (Tollefson, 2025). No single scientific discipline holds all the knowledge needed for understanding the many facets of climate change, nor does Western science as a whole. There is increasing recognition that the tools humanity needs for mitigating and adapting to a changing climate will come from diverse sources, including STEM, social sciences (Dudman and de Wit, 2021; Berg and Lidskog, 2024), Traditional Ecological Knowledge (Kimmerer, 2012), and the co-production of knowledge (Jasanoff, 2021).

Knowledge production outside of disciplinary divides is not new in the field of oceanography, which has embraced interdisciplinary collaboration since its foundation. The Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission (IOC) was created in 1960 during the 11th general conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (UNESCO, 1961). The IOC facilitates communication and collaboration among member states regarding oceanic and coastal management and research initiatives. Former IOC Executive Secretary Gunnar Kullenberg writes about the history of ocean science in his 2020 book, *Ocean Science and International Cooperation: Historical and Personal Reflections*. This text would complement Omstedt's by providing readers with additional historical context for the expansive and interdisciplinary research methods for which he advocates. Today, one way collaboration can be seen is through the US National Science Foundation's Ocean Observatories Initiative, which shares real-time data from hundreds of instruments. As Levine et al. (2020) explain, the democratization of these data presents opportunities for oceanographers, especially those early in their careers, by increasing data access. The equity these initiatives provide allows more scientists to actively engage with the ocean as a research partner. Collaborative research, including the *Challenger*, *Vega*,

and *Albatross* expeditions that Omstedt highlights, are essential parts of oceanographic history. Omstedt advocates not only for the continuation but the expansion of this legacy.

*A Philosophical View of the Ocean and Humanity* contains many short chapters and, due to the brevity of each, the book is best suited for readers who have some background in science, oceanography, or communication studies. The book spends less time interrogating the finer details of ocean science research and reads more broadly as a rethinking of the field's underlying ontology and epistemology. Readers may find the structure of this book (especially Part I) surprising, but it offers a rich opportunity for thoughtful discussion and reflection. The discussion questions at the end provide direction for future engagement, and thus the book would be particularly well suited for use in an upper-level undergraduate or graduate classroom setting where its content may be analyzed in the context of other oceanographic or science and technology studies literature.

In addition to being a book about science, oceanography, and dreams, this book is also about science communication as it explores what kinds of thinking, discussion, and action are necessary for changing human behavior. At times, the brief chapters limit some nuance, but when read collectively, strong central themes emerge that make this a book worth reading. Omstedt interrogates the philosophical relationship between humanity and the ocean by weaving together different kinds of understanding, from scientific expeditions to art and dreams. With half of the UN Ocean Decade behind us, Omstedt's book provides encouragement to slow down and reflect upon our relationship with the ocean so that we can make the most of what time remains.

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