

Transdisciplinary Ocean Sciences and Ocean Sustainability Activism Symposium

Co-hosted by: Ocean Sciences, Nelson Mandela University and
the Centre for Black Planetary Studies, ISHS, UNISA

Proposed date: 27 – 28 May 2026

Venue: Ocean Sciences Campus, Conference
Hall, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha

Concept note



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The climate emergency of the 21st century and the formative role played by oceans have spurred calls for urgent action and unprecedented attention to our world's oceans. The rapacious glut of resources which fuels global consumptive economies has expanded from its historical terrestrial basis and progressively entered the marine world—even as the latter has always been a site of extraction.

The urgency for arresting the harmful effects of extraction finds expression through the declaration of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), funding priorities, government actions to protect oceans through expanding marine protected areas, fishing quotas, and higher education institutions pivoting pedagogic, epistemic and research priorities towards marine or ocean and coastal studies. Nevertheless, the sustainability discourse should not be uncritically embraced, as it does not disrupt the assumptions of progress and development that produced the crisis in the first place.

However, the current violent contestation playing out in the Strait of Hormuz illustrates the fragility of multilateral institutions in protecting oceans and the broader environment. Oil tankers are targeted by warring factions with devastating consequences. On a more local scale, aided by legislative bullying, large multinational trawlers push out local fishers in the race to exploit fish stocks. Local economies and intergenerational fishing cultures and knowledges buckle under the strain.

Inept municipalities pump raw sewage into waterways, which contaminate fresh and salt waterways. These examples suggest that oceans are simultaneously global and local. The complexity and scale of the problems suggest that solutions cannot be left to any single actor. Knowledge and activist partners are important stakeholders in a widening front of those concerned with our common planetary futures.

Universities located in coastal cities, often in collaboration with community partners, have led the response to the turn to the ocean, the so-called New Thalassology. In South Africa, this has seen some encouraging inter-university partnerships, such as those between Nelson Mandela University and the University of Cape Town, for instance. Various institutions have declared the study of oceans an apex priority, with some building campuses, state-of-the-art infrastructure, and fit-for-purpose curricula and pedagogies to support this work.

However, while there is some evidence of transdisciplinary engagement in our ocean research and activism, it is not clear that universities are maximising the possibilities for an expansive transdisciplinary research and practice agenda to meet the challenge of protecting our oceans. Now into the second half of the United Nations decade for ocean science for sustainable development, it may be an opportune time to take stock and reflect on the kinds of oceanic science and practice we are producing.

Beyond universities, coastal communities and ocean activists are actively involved in grassroots measures to fight the exploitation of oceans, climate change, flooding, forced removals of working-class people and shoreline gentrification, etc. Some universities have forged meaningful horizontal relationships with community-based organisations to advance these goals. Others have infused these approaches in pedagogies across the educational lifecycle from early childhood to adult education.



Transdisciplinarity and Planetary Orientations

Transdisciplinary perspectives and university-community partnerships potentially expand how we understand the problems and potential solutions to the pressing challenges and opportunities related to ocean and coastal studies. One way into the transdisciplinary approach that we propose is a planetary imaginary that resurfaces and foregrounds indigenous knowledge systems rooted in local geographies.

At its base, the planetary is the illumination of submerged worlds and temporalities, which allows us to imagine multispecies futures that refuse racialised anthropocentric visions of the world. In this imaginary, the human is a player among other species with whom it is in relation and whose survival implicates the survival of all species. Critical university studies scholars offer a vision of the planetary as articulating a critique of existing analytics that are based on modernist linear developmental tropes.

The beliefs that industrialisation at all costs, and progressive linearity of time and development are the only ways to know the world, and around which disciplines are structured and knowledge constructed, are problematised. Instead, the planetary questions the ethical terrain and assumptions upon which universities function. In place of human-centred lenses, planetary scholars propose a “multispecies reading in which the history of humans is understood as part of a multiple species’ planetary existence, with much longer historical cycles.”

To read the ocean through a planetary lens is to undo fundamental beliefs around progress, development and advancement. It is to ask: development for whom? Progress according to which metrics? Knowledge from where? Wellbeing for which species? It is to pause and to ask questions that imagine the needs of all earthly communities.

We offer that planetary attending is to delineate ways of knowing oceans and how these perspectives sometimes complement or rub up against each other. To be conscious of tensions and synergies. It is to be aware of disciplinary limitations and to exercise curiosity about other ways of knowing.

It might be to go beyond the university in search of new questions from local communities with deep historical ties to the ocean. It is to understand that there are as many ways to understand the ocean as there are species in it. Perhaps, a planetary sensitivity is an exercise in scholarly humility. It is not to succumb to recycled scholarly cul-de-sacs. Instead, we might consider it as a form of generosity whose boundaries are porous, relational, and constantly expanding.

In this symposium, we convene across disciplines and sites of knowledge and practice to consider new ways of thinking about the planet using multifocal ways of perceiving and collectively considering the following questions:

- How are the natural and the social sciences, humanities, and other disciplines working to advance ocean science and sustainability?
- What critiques and advances have been made and what opportunities for transdisciplinary ocean scholarship and praxis are possible?
- What is the place of indigenous epistemologies in the preservation of marine biodiversity?
- What would a planetary scholarship of the ocean look like?
- How do legislation and global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals impede or advance oceanic protection?
- How can industry, community actors, ocean activists, and policy practitioners collectively advance oceanic futures in collaboration with universities?
- How does oceanic activism connect to land-based social activism?
- How might transdisciplinary scholarship and praxis simultaneously attend to questions of pollution, climate change, marine governance, sustainable livelihoods, history, creativity, and beauty?

This symposium is a gathering for various stakeholders to present their work and to collectively consider a transdisciplinary agenda that coheres around the preceding questions, among others.



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A planetary approach asks us to rethink not just how we study the ocean, but how we belong to it alongside many forms of life, not above them.

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