On Sharks Unseen: Oceanic Non-Encounters and Multispecies Ethnography

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Deborah Bird Rose Essay

An encounter with absence

In the summer of 2021, I went to look for sharks. I spent one month in the Inner Hebrides, an archipelago off the west coast of Scotland, with my research partner and friend, visual artist Miriam Sentler. Our aim, on the surface, was simple: we wanted to find the basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*), the second-largest fish on the planet—after the whale shark—known to grow up to 12 metres in length (Rudd et al.). Basking sharks are filter feeders who consume their preferred food, plankton (specifically zooplankton), by swimming slowly with their large mouths open. They are known to gather around these islands during the summer, attracted by heavy concentrations of zooplankton in the cold waters.

In the north-east Atlantic Ocean, including the Hebrides, basking sharks were hunted extensively with harpoons from at least the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth (Sims; Fairfax). Originally targeted for their large livers—a source of fine-grade oil for lamps and industrial lubricant—and later their fins, some 100,000 basking sharks were killed during the period 1946-1997 alone (Sims and Reid; Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine). Designated a protected fish in British territorial waters in 1998, they have since become something of a niche tourist attraction. It was this transformation from exploited 'resource' to tourist spectacle that we were interested in studying. Arriving in the peak of 'shark season', Miriam and I were to take a four-day trip with a wildlife tour company on the Isle of Coll with a small group of other travellers, followed by a multi-week artist residency on the Isle of Mull, where we would develop our findings.

There was just one issue: we never did see a basking shark. During our many hours at sea, the rough grey waters yielded not one of those iconic dorsal fins we had been told to look

out for. Our residency resulted in the artistic collaboration *Cairban: A Contemporary Shark Hunt* (Sentler and Hale), based not on our anticipated experiences of snorkelling with the sharks, but on their seeming avoidance of us. In the wake of our trip, we were full of questions: did their absence signal a plankton 'delay', or a problem in their ecosystem? Having known that the ocean offers no guarantees, had we been naïve in the first place to think that we could find them? In what follows, written in honour of Deborah Bird Rose, I do not make empirical claims but rather use the experience as a prompt to reflect upon those species that elude the human gaze.

Introduction: encounter and arts of attentiveness

The question I want to think through in this essay is what kinds of encounters are possible with the unseen. It is primarily a conceptual inquiry that responds to the experience described above, but it also touches upon some methodological questions. The core of my argument is that the non-encounter, as an 'encounter with absence', can open up space for examining the conditions that might lead a basking shark (or other animal) not to appear, with broader implications for multispecies projects in the Anthropocene. I address my main question by considering in turn the possible reasons why we did not see basking sharks, bringing anecdotes from the trip into dialogue with theoretical literature. I begin by outlining how the 'encounter' is understood in multispecies ethnography, the body of literature I primarily engage with. I secondly explore how oceanic non-encounters can highlight a multispecies ethnographic ethic of displacing the human. Third, I describe how our trip to a scientific lab to look at dead plankton prompted reflections on interdisciplinary multispecies work, as well as how animal death can bring anthropogenic harms into focus and raise the spectre of extinction. Finally, I think with Rose's poetics of absence and presence (Cooke 8) as a framework for basking shark autonomy.

Throughout the essay, I use the term 'non-encounter' to refer specifically to a hoped-for observation between a human researcher and a given animal species. In this, I am building on Rose's use of 'not-happening' and 'non-presence' in more-than-human nature ('To Dance' 291; Cooke 8)—forms of absence which, as she has alluded to in her study of the critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal, become meaningful precisely because they give meaning to the 'happenings' ('Monk Seals' 118-119). Building on this, the non-encounter becomes both a story on the ground (or in the water), and an analytic concept

that enables me to describe material absences and investigate possible relations with the unseen.

Multispecies ethnography emerged out of anthropology in the early 2000s, identified by Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich in 2010 as both 'a new genre of writing and [a] mode of research' (545-549). It is distinguished partly for its commitment to treating non-human animals, plants, microorganisms, and others as agents with their own political and biographical realities that can include, but also exceed, where these intersect with humans (545; see also van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 3). Multispecies ethnography seeks to go 'beyond viewing other creatures as mere symbols, resources, or background for the lives of humans' (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 6), and is notable for being responsive to ecological concerns while troubling established categories like 'human' and 'species' (Kirksey and Helmreich 548). Some of these central tenets will become important for interpreting my experience of non-encounter with the basking shark. In addition to anthropology, multispecies ethnography has become influential in human geography, literary studies, and the environmental humanities (see Locke and Muenster for a helpful review).

As it has become more prevalent, multispecies ethnography's close links to anthropology have led some to take issue with its purported novelty. Tim Ingold, for instance, points instead to 'anthropology beyond the human', based on the similar foundational principle that 'the scope of anthropology must forever exceed the threshold of humanity' ('Anthropology' 21). For Ingold, the discipline has always concerned the more-than-human; whether modified as *multispecies* or something else, anthropology remains 'distinguished not by its object, as if it shone a spotlight on human beings while leaving all else in the shadows, but by its way of working, which is to learn through *participation in other lives*' [emphasis added] (21). Thus, in anthropology, Ingold argues that 'we do not make studies *of* people, or indeed *of* animals. We study *with* them' [emphasis in original] (Making 2-4). While I take Ingold's critique seriously, I also want to explore what multispecies ethnography can be when those 'other lives' are lived out entirely underwater, with no possibility of sustained 'participation' for the human researcher.

In multispecies ethnography, participation is closely linked to encounter, immersion, and 'arts of attentiveness', by which relationality and multiplicity—of species, of

accountability, of associations—come to the fore through a variety of 'immersive ways of knowing and being with others', as van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster summarise (6). While not exclusively so, this tends to include spending time in a context relevant to those others, something that is usually easier on land than at sea. Similarly, van Dooren and Rose offer an approach called 'lively ethography', which involves 'storying' non-human others in a way that can arouse public interest and drive ethical responses (89; van Dooren, 'Story(telling)'). For them, sustained observation of the 'actual' ways that animal lives are lived—where they go, how they respond to other creatures, the things they treat as important—are vital for telling stories that encourage ethical responsibility because 'ethics are situated in bodies, in time, in place and, *necessarily, in encounter*' [emphasis added] (Rose, 'Slowly' 6, qtd. In Bastian 458).

In van Dooren and Rose's extensive writing on the topic, the encounter derives its power from being a form of 'witnessing' that precipitates a move from description to ethical responsibility. Multispecies encountering of others offers something that abstracted figures cannot: 'Along with the work of remaining true to the facts of the situation, witnessing insists on truths that are not reducible to populations and data, a fleshier, livelier truth' (van Dooren and Rose 85-86). The practice of 'becoming-witness' is 'a mode of responding to others' that extends beyond a single instance of observation, 'exceed[ing] rational calculation' and, again, 'arriv[ing] through *encounter, recognition, and an ongoing curiosity*' [emphasis added] (Rose and van Dooren 124).

In the works I engage with, then, the embodied encounter is an indispensable part of any multispecies project. Miriam and I had determined from the website of the tour company that our chances of seeing a basking shark were high; we hoped to experience some of that 'fleshier, livelier truth' for ourselves. Based on this, our artistic endeavour was organised around *being there*, even as fieldwork in disciplines adjacent to multispecies ethnography has been increasingly questioned (e.g., Anna Guasco on an 'ethic of *not going there*' [emphasis in original] and Catherine Oliver on 'significant nothingness' in geographical fieldwork), especially after Covid-19 lockdowns made fieldwork difficult or impossible. Nonetheless, both despite and because of the expense and stress of navigating pandemic restrictions in summer 2021, we hoped that joining a tour would facilitate an underwater encounter with a basking shark in 'the richness of [their] own stor[y]' (van Dooren and Rose 90). If part of multispecies ethnography is getting one's 'boots muddy'

(Bubandt, Andersen, and Cypher) or, indeed, 'fins wet' (Bubandt; Palz 67-68), then travelling to basking shark territory under demanding circumstances, we hoped, signalled our commitment to participating in the entire social and environmental context in which living sharks emerge today—a refusal to treat them as 'disarticulated fragments' devoid of context (Rose, 'Slowly' 3) or symbols of a violent bygone industry (Maxwell; Geddes).

Lengthier fieldwork would have yielded different possibilities, and would merit a different kind of essay. For my purposes here, the resulting non-encounter within the bounds of our short trip serves to make explicit the patchy conditions of researching oceanic animals, particularly at a time when many species are getting scarcer (Jackson)—including the basking shark whose numbers are 'decreasing' according to the IUCN Red List (Rigby et al.). Disarticulating the conditions that lead to non-encounters—or, more pithily, moments when species don't meet (Haraway; Palz 67)—allows me to hold them in tension with the immersive methods advocated by multispecies ethnography outlined above. As will become clear, I find that the non-encounter still represents a form of encountering others that can drive ethical engagement.

Tour beginnings: humans at sea

'Keep your eyes peeled for sharks!' read the encouraging notes stuck to our lunch packs, prepared by hotel staff. It was day one of our tour, and all the difficulty of getting to Coll—cancelled trains, flooding, quarantines—was quickly fading from memory, to be replaced by excitement. The skies were grey and threatened rain. But assembled at the harbour with cameras and bright eyes, the mood amongst our small, international group was buoyant, as though all the effort of getting there would surely bring about a reward of corresponding scale.

After a briefing on the boat, we set out on the steely swell of the Sea of the Hebrides. We passed the time keeping a watchful eye on the horizon, listening as our guides told us about the sharks we hadn't yet seen. Quite a lot is known about basking shark anatomy and feeding habits, but significant enigmas remain, for example around mating behaviours (Sims et al.). At some level, such enigmas are fundamental when working with anything below water, and research on ocean-dwellers from any discipline has always had to rely upon encounters that are technologically and culturally mediated (Fish; Palz), as well as to

contend with data gaps. Our guides, for instance, told us about efforts to trace basking sharks via GPS tracker, revealing that they can migrate from Scotland to North Africa (Doherty et al.). However, the trackers in question transmit location data only when the sharks are at the surface, leaving the picture incomplete (5).

Initially alert to every sign of life, our high spirits dropped after lunch, especially when the swell grew higher. Seasickness was starting to trouble some of those around me, so I tried to focus on what we were looking for: a ripple, a sail-like fin, a rounded knob that could be the snout of a shark nudging the surface as she fed. Reliant as we were on just a few visual cues, and vulnerable to the elements, the first explanation for why we were not seeing sharks, it seemed, was our own limited human ability to sense them.

In her contributions to the field of blue humanities, Stacy Alaimo has explored the implications of 'the fact that most of the ocean cannot be encountered directly by terrestrial humans' ('Introduction' 429). At the heart of this is a paradox, for myriad traces of human *activities* are widely observable, from the surface to the deepest oceanic trenches, including pollution, acidification, warming, and sea level rise (Tyrell), as well as overfishing and defaunation (Dirzo et al.). And yet, the oceanic depths—by being largely inaccessible to humans—can 'undermine anthropocentrism' by inviting a 'profoundly nonanthropocentric' approach to the Anthropocene, precisely because knowledge of and access to the oceans by humans will always be 'peripheral' (Alaimo, 'Anthropocene at Sea' 155). The implication of this is that humans' relative physiological incompatibility with the ocean can provide a methodological stimulus (e.g., the 'rubber fins methods' outlined by Bubandt; see also Palz; Jue on scuba diving) that can lead to epistemological humility. The relevance of this for my argument is to stress the non-encounter and not-knowing as prerequisites of multispecies oceanic research.

Michelle Bastian further considers human distanciation from the deep seas in her valuable essay on whale falls—the process by which a dead whale body slowly drifts to the sea floor, becoming a food source for hundreds of others over months and years (461). While many new creatures have been discovered by studying whale fall ecologies, it is also thought that industrial whaling's mass removal of cetacean bodies from the ocean may have rendered some species dependent on them already extinct (461-462). For Bastian's purposes, the issue is that she cannot describe such creaturely extinctions in a fuller,

'fleshier' manner advanced by van Dooren and Rose (85-86), because information is scant and physical encounters impossible: 'there is not much to go on' (Bastian 464). However, importantly, she determines that lively ethography remains valuable if it is understood to be 'open to encounters with what we might awkwardly call *the unencounterable*' [emphasis added] (457).

Reading Bastian beside Alaimo re-emphasises the limitations of both human bodies in, and human knowledge of, the ocean. With Bastian, I suggest that the non-encounters that occur as a result can produce a mode of multispecies ethnography that 'foreground[s] the role of the unknowable' and the unencounterable (Bastian 457; van Dooren and Rose). Cold yet hopeful on the boat, only seeing a live basking shark would have satisfied my curiosity at that moment. Yet perhaps framed as something *unencounterable* from the start, this characteristic can motivate a more enduring form of responsibility, attentiveness, and respect for the autonomy of other species, as advocated in the practice of 'becoming-witness'—even if what one witnesses seems like nothing (Bastian; Rose and van Dooren).

At the end of the first day with no sightings, drowsy from seasickness medication, we were imagining sharks everywhere. The large stone in the harbour took on a distinctly fin-like form; a gannet at a distance teased with its triangular silhouette, only to morph upon closer inspection into a flapping, feathered being. After getting warm, we went to the pub to debrief, laugh, and gather our hopes for the next day. On an island as small as Coll, all the local people seemed to know what we were doing there—and each had their own tale to tell about basking sharks, from chance encounters with individuals to huge groups of them swimming in circles (see Sims et al.). We were in awe, and a little bit envious. They wished us better luck the next day.

After the tour: encounters with death

The following days passed in much the same way as the first. The occasional seabird punctuated the grey surface of the sea, but there were no signs of sharks. Disappointment began to set in, and our guides encouraged us to go snorkelling. Encountering a curious seal near the coast on the third day, we all struggled into our 7mm-thick wetsuits and got in at a safe distance. 'Try not to splash!' warned our guides. But clumsy in our fins,

shocked by the freezing water even through our gear, this was harder than it sounded—another reminder of our awkwardness as humans at sea.

Finally, after four days in which we covered about 60 nautical miles, our shark-less tour came to an end. In search of answers about plankton's possible role in all this, Miriam and I bade farewell to the group and took the ferry to the mainland to meet Clive Fox, a fisheries ecologist at the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) in Oban. One thing we wanted to learn more about was how a low concentration of zooplankton could reduce the chances of sighting sharks (Sims et al. 1161). Even if the sharks are in the vicinity, without a plankton 'bloom' near the surface they never come far enough up the water column to become visible to humans. This tantalising possibility—that the sharks had been right there the whole time, but out of sight—intrigued us. Clive explained that it was too early to come to any conclusions, but we discussed various influences on plankton, including anthropogenic disturbances such as sea surface temperature increases (Edwards et al.).

Talking about plankton reminded us that the shark's most important relation—far from with us—is with the zooplankton that sustain her, as the zooplankton's is with algae. Multispecies ethnography anticipates that relations between species can include, but also exceed, those with humans (Kirksey and Helmreich 545; van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 3). On our trip, the basking sharks only seemed 'absent' because of our expectations to the contrary—but they were always present somewhere else, having significant encounters with unknown others. This highlights Heather Anne Swanson's point that focusing on 'dyadic encounters' between humans and other species can detract from other interactions or phenomena which could be equally or more important (91). While glimpses and observations of salmon, her case study, are 'certainly important ways of knowing' them, the issue is that 'they reduce fish worlds to moments of intimate encounter with people' (91).

Back in Oban, Clive demonstrated the technique for gathering plankton with a hand-held net in the harbour and, back in the lab, showed us some dead zooplankton under a microscope. While recent techniques have been developed that monitor live plankton in their ocean habitat in real time (Schmid et al.), it remains difficult to identify most zooplankton species without microscopic examination, which is why they are killed first

(Fox). The word plankton is derived from the Greek, 'to wander, to drift' (etymonline); it was certainly easier to see them when they could no longer do this. As Miriam wondered aloud, looking down through the microscope: would some part of us have preferred the basking sharks to be dead too—stilled for scientific study, made accessible to our curious gaze?

There are epistemological implications in studying the dead in lieu of encounters with living animals in multispecies ethnography. In her important article about salmon and methods for multispecies anthropology, Swanson writes that when 'ethnography, rooted in direct, embodied observation and participation in salmon lives, seems impossible … anthropologists begin to lose their epistemological grip' (87). She identifies methods to 'extend our powers of observation' (87), including studying dead animals alongside natural scientists. Swanson suggests that through this collaboration, anthropologists can learn to 'read' deceased animal bodies in the manner of carefully searching historical archives for clues (84). 'If life histories, long a key anthropological object of study, are embodied in salmon flesh, we need to learn how to see that flesh ... so as to detect social relations that ethnography cannot,' she writes (89).

Such an understanding of 'flesh' sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside van Dooren's and Rose's call for 'fleshier, livelier' truths (85-86; Rose, 'Slowly' 6) and 'engagement with the world of life' (91), a discomfort Miriam and I also felt looking at the dead zooplankton. While being aware of such tensions, Swanson nonetheless critiques the often-implicit oppositions amongst 'lively' multispecies anthropology, which is assumed to '[enliven] the world' and reveal new political possibilities by showcasing 'ontological multiplicity', and science, which in contrast 'is often assumed to deaden the world by creating a singular positivist view' (93). Swanson rejects such binaries, adding that they 'make it hard to cultivate scientists and scientific practices as allies for querying non-humans' (93).

Yet if flesh is where particular relations are located, as Swanson reasons, then it seems important to take seriously what an encounter with the bodies of dead creatures could yield that fleshier encounters with the living might not. Rather than discuss the ethics of killing, which is beyond the scope of this essay (instead see e.g. Kopnina; van Dooren, 'Invasive Species'; Fry, Marino, and Nijhawan), I want to stay with Swanson's suggestion.

It seems to me that the careful attentiveness at the heart of multispecies ethnography does not have to end when the encounter—or the life of the animal in question—does. Encounters with aquatic animals tend to be fleeting, and so studying their body parts can supply stories about things like, for instance, anthropogenic stress, visible as dark lines in salmon otoliths (Swanson 90), and extreme longevity in Greenland sharks, detectable through chemical analysis of their eye lenses (Nielsen; Hale). These phenomena reveal a relation with specific human activities—salmon hatcheries, nuclear fallout that serves as the basis for precise kinds of radiocarbon dating—in complex ways that cannot be gleaned from direct observation (Swanson; Hale). In basking sharks, the genetic material contained within biopsies (tissue samples), taken from living sharks, has been used to try to determine whether there are discrete shark groups in the north-east Atlantic (Noble et al.). Studying even a small body part of a basking shark can thus be revealing of the possible relations they have with other sharks.

At the same time, such research undoubtedly demands sensitivity to the ways in which fish bodies like the basking sharks' have been violently commodified in the past. If both basking shark hunting and tourism involve marked intrusions into shark lives, other impacts are less direct—though not necessarily less harmful. Ship strikes, accidental bycatch, and entanglements in fishing nets all constitute threats to basking sharks (Inman et al.), and all occur at the intimate level of a shark body. Without reducing the value of a basking shark to only a body (part), then, tracing these anthropogenic harms to shark bodies allows us, in Swanson's memorable phrase, to 'get the size of humans right' so that 'we can observe some of the ways that people matter—in a physical sense' (91) to this species. After all, the very relationality multispecies ethnographers urge us to attend to can be asymmetrical—detrimental rather than collaborative (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 15), and perhaps only understood posthumously. Returning to the opening question of this essay, death may be the only condition under which some kind of 'encounter' is possible with the unseen.

Part of the value of dealing with (the remains of) dead animals in multispecies endeavours is therefore to complicate the notion that multispecies must always mean living. As with the branch of multispecies ethnography concerned with extinction (e.g., van Dooren, 'Vultures'; Rose, van Dooren and Chrulew), the presence of a dead animal directly points to the absence of a living one, a reminder of the darker side of relationality that often

haunts the encounter (Fry, Marino and Nijhawan 229; 240). Extinction narratives are built on a kind of negative presence, or 'the acceptance of presence of absence as a sign for absence of presence' (Jørgensen 4). It is something like this 'presence of absence' that defines the non-encounter. Through it, concerns about anthropogenic harms and relations with less visible phenomena are materialised via the bodies of dead creatures. Like many species in the sixth extinction (Ceballos et al.), the basking shark has been variously classified as 'vulnerable' and 'endangered' in the north-east Atlantic, with numbers declining globally (Rigby et al.; Witt et al. 122). In addition to historic exploitation and the contemporary threats outlined above, her slow growth rate, late age of sexual maturity, and relatively low number of young put the basking shark at an elevated risk of extinction (Dulvy et al.; Sims et al. 1161). Every incident of non-encounter in some way rouses this troubling situation, or even the shark's eventual extinction.

Goodbye to the strange summer

After our meeting with Clive, we took the ferry back to the Isle of Mull to complete our residency. Over the course of the following month, we met with many shark advocates, including marine biologists, fishers, kayakers, and artists, and were eventually able to tell the story of our non-encounter for a human public (Sentler and Hale). Yet a profound sense of mystery remained. In this final section, I turn to a conceptualisation of the non-encounter that recalls this. It is found in Rose's work on dance and rhythm in Victoria River, Australia, in which she expresses what Stuart Cooke calls an 'ecological poetics':

> Living things communicate by their sounds, their smells, their actions, the stinging bite of the march fly, the sight of flowers floating on the water. They also communicate by their non-presence. Events that occur to the same rhythm require intervals of non-occurrence. There are times when things do not happen, and it is the not-happening that makes it possible for the happening to have meaning. ('To Dance' 291, qtd. in Cooke 8)

Following Rose, non-occurrence acknowledges the capabilities of, for instance, basking sharks to behave according to stimuli humans cannot understand, as part of naturally occurring 'ecological flux, oscillation and pattern' (Cooke 1). As one grinning fisherman had remarked to us in the pub after another day with no sightings, 'You're out looking for sharks, eh? They're probably down in Ireland!' Yes, they could have been in Ireland or

even Newfoundland, according to GPS data (Doherty et al.). But environmental data tends to be temporally and spatially bound, and therefore partial (Jørgensen 3). The point is that it cannot tell us what a basking shark is doing, or prioritising, at a given moment. In a blog post published several months later, the tour company eventually labelled 2021's 'the strange summer'. The dearth of visible sharks, they said, was a result of the unusually settled weather, meaning the sea mixing necessary to stir up algae and zooplankton, and thus attract sharks to the upper layer of the food column, did not occur until late into the season (Basking Shark Scotland). This certainly made sense to us, recalling the heatwave that had occurred during our residency—Scotland's fourth-hottest summer on record at the time (Met Office). Something seemed 'amiss in nature's delicate balance,' the blog post goes on. 'When we did find the sharks, we found them feeding at depth or spending very little time on the surface.' They added that as planktivores, basking sharks are very sensitive to the weather conditions needed to generate plankton blooms, and warming seas will likely lead to zooplankton moving 'to colder waters in the future' (Basking Shark Scotland). When I wrote to Clive Fox again recently, he agreed, while noting complicating factors such as the strength of water flows and underlying periodical warming and cooling trends that make it hard to predict. But given the other dangers basking sharks must navigate, what it all seems to amount to is a future with more strange summers—and fewer sharks.

Yet as Clive's caveats allude to, our experience that summer is not entirely reducible to one explanation; the mystery is set within a larger fluctuation of basking shark presence and absence (Cooke 7). The important point here is that basking shark behaviour resists the attempts of all industries—from the Hebridean hunting of previous centuries, to tourism in the twenty-first—to standardise it. So much of what is known about basking sharks comes from encounters with humans, whether slaughter, scientific tagging, or snorkelling, that are all invasive to a greater or lesser degree. Any form of non-cooperation or withdrawal from the human gaze by the sharks therefore functions as a form of resistance. Ultimately, being evasive and selective is the prerogative of all beings: 'We have the right to be obscure,' writes Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned*, her book about black feminism and marine mammals (92). 'Boundaries can … teach so much' (92). The most important message of Rose's ecological poetics is that 'our desire to know must comingle with the mystery inherent in an always incomplete knowledge of the more-than-human world' (Cooke 7). Indeed, 'mystery signals "the integrity of larger systems"' (Rose, 'On

History' 163 qtd. in Cooke 7) which may lie beyond human comprehension. That basking shark movements cannot be rendered predictable, stripped of mystery, indexes an ongoing shark-human relation that has always included non-occurrences and non-encounters as well as happenings. To co-opt the language of lively ethography, witnessing an absence is still a form of witnessing.

Conclusions: The non-encounter in multispecies ethnography

This essay began with the question of what kinds of encounter are possible with the unseen. Put another way, as anthropologist Marianne E. Lien asks in *Becoming Salmon*, 'are we permitted to describe something we cannot physically see?' (163). This is not a new predicament; to attend to something means to wait upon it (Ingold, 'That's Enough' 389), and there are certain kinds of work, such as wildlife photography, that demand patience and perseverance in the pursuit of one's subjects. In such cases, the non-encounter is a wholly expected, and therefore respected, part of the process. Yet it is multispecies ethnography's commitments to encounters that yield 'livelier, fleshier' truths, beyond fleeting moments (Rose, 'Slowly' 6; van Dooren and Rose 85-86), that I have been most interested in here, especially when held against the challenging realities of studying water-dwellers in the open ocean. I have offered the oceanic non-encounter as both story and concept that visibilises those realities. If multispecies ethnography has thus far mostly concerned the terrestrial, then its striving towards ethical commitments to non-human others remains critical, even, and especially when, those others are not always visible.

At the centre of this essay has been the basking shark, a living, moving creature who I have still never seen alive. (One performance of *Cairban*—in Bergen's Natural History Museum—did bring us face-to-face with a taxidermied basking shark.) Evading the gaze of humans, the basking shark invites modesty about the limits of research at a time when the Anthropocene tells us that even the deep seas can no longer escape anthropogenic influence (Alaimo, 'Anthropocene at Sea'; Bastian). Yet the basking shark's ability to remain hidden does not save her from being brought into unintended and deadly entanglement with humans, for example as bycatch in indiscriminate fishing practices. If such background defaunation makes fieldwork more difficult, then multispecies ethnography cannot be reduced to direct observation alone.

Multispecies ethnography thus finds itself in a strange place, with many species becoming scarcer, while humans become more plentiful (Ceballos et al.). Even those afforded a level of legal protection, like basking sharks, may increasingly manifest by their absence—an absence that calls for attention. This adds to the complexity of following aquatic species that are already hard to observe, making non-encounters more likely; Lien reminds us that 'no fieldwork practice can ever provide an immersion in the lives of salmon [or sharks] the way that it provides immersion in the lives of other people' (168). Methodologically, this represents a challenge. Conceptually, however, the oceanic non-encounter opens up analytical and investigative possibilities. There are many reasons why one might not find a basking shark, and I would argue that 'making nothingness significant' (Oliver 84) by witnessing, investigating, and writing about the non-encounter is one of the most important contributions multispecies ethnographers can make in the Anthropocene. This may mean, in addition to conveying instances of non-encounter in ethnographic writing, turning to other disciplines for insights not dependent on dyadic encounters with living animals (Swanson).

Another suggestion in this essay has been that the non-encounter mobilises environmental concerns and helps find common ground with the natural sciences, for instance regarding sea surface temperature increases and their effect on the basking shark's main food source, zooplankton. Taking this further, if 'becoming-witness'—even to absences—is an ethical project of becoming responsible, then how does knowing that basking sharks are killed as bycatch and by ship strikes 'alter the nature of our obligation' to them? (Rose and van Dooren 125). Might shark tourism also need to change, or even cease, if it is too disruptive for the sharks? Out at sea, we were conscious of the boat's speed and loud engine, as well as the clumsy way that we, as inexperienced snorkellers, disturbed the water. A 2009 report that partly focused on marine ecotourism off the west coast of Scotland found that carefully approaching basking sharks in slow-speed boats 'has no visible effect on shark behaviour', however, the authors note that 'that does not mean that no risk exists, simply that whilst distracted by feeding or courtship, the risk changes to one of collision rather than simple disturbance' (Speedie, Johnson and Witt 10). These issues must be addressed elsewhere, but they gesture towards a multispecies politics that, allied with other disciplines, could influence future human-shark relations (Fish).

Multispecies ethnography prioritises encounters with animals 'in the richness of their own stories' (van Dooren and Rose 90), to be 'picked up' by attentive humans. Multispecies encountering in this way remains valuable, as do individual field observations which, while lacking the '(supposed) repeatability of laboratory experiments', produce the 'remarkable resource' of anecdote (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 8). Still, I propose that any search for an animal who never appears should be considered a part of the method, or even a form of communication from the animal, though not necessarily with a human listener in mind (Rose, 'To Dance' 291). On the train back from Scotland, as the coastline receded from view, we thought about how we had paid for a chance to see the basking sharks, and yet they never agreed to an appointment with us. There was no transaction here, only a hoped-for synchrony. On an increasingly species-depleted planet, such asynchrony will have to be anticipated.

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