

This Is Your Brain on the Ocean



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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY NATURE & WILDLIFE Q&A

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Interview with "neuro-conservationist" and turtle researcher Wallace J. Nichols

About two-thirds of the body is made of what is essentially seawater. But our relationship to the deep, believes biologist Wallace J. Nichols, may be more than chemical: Our minds are also linked to the ocean, he says, in some surprising -- even game-changing -- ways.

Nichols' passion for the marine environment has made him one of the world's most inspirational speakers on ocean conservation. In June, he organized the first **Blue Mind Summit**: a revolutionary new approach to studying -- and energizing -- the complex relationship between humans and the sea. The idea behind Blue Mind is simple: If the ocean has a direct, neurological impact on our brains, an awareness of this connection will change the way we treat it. The implications of this premise are profound; they may, Nichols believes, revolutionize the way we teach conservation and ecology.

"J.," as he prefers to be called, is a research associate at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and founder/co-director of **Ocean Revolution**, an international network of young ocean advocates. He earned a PhD in wildlife ecology and evolutionary biology from University of Arizona for his work with Mexico's endangered black sea turtle, and has authored more than 50 scientific papers. A resident of Davenport, California -- where he lives with his wife and two daughters -- J. juggles a daunting speaking and research schedule, traveling around the globe to promote his humanistic view of conservation.

He spoke to *OnEarth* shortly after the inaugural Blue Mind Summit. He had just learned that 2010 turned out to be the best nesting season in nearly three decades for the endangered black turtle. The recovery owes much to grass-roots community organizing, building personal relationships, "and perhaps even 'love,'" mused J., "as radical as it may seem."

What do you mean by the term "Blue Mind?"

When we think of the ocean -- or hear the ocean, or see the ocean, or get in the ocean, even taste and smell the ocean, or all of those things at once -- we feel something different than before that happened. For most people, it's generally good. It often makes us more open or contemplative. For many people, it reduces stress. And that's "Blue Mind."

How did you come to link this concept with neuroscience?

During my early years of sea turtle research in northwestern Mexico, I was involved not only in science and tracking, but also in conservation. This required building grassroots networks of fishermen and finding out who among them was hunting sea turtles, and how much the turtles were worth. My interest was in measuring, tagging and releasing the turtles; theirs was in taking them home and eating or selling them. But even though I was working with turtle poachers, I found I could engage them on an emotional level. There was a shared appreciation of their beauty.



Blue Mind/Wallace J. Nichols. Photo below by Terri Garland.

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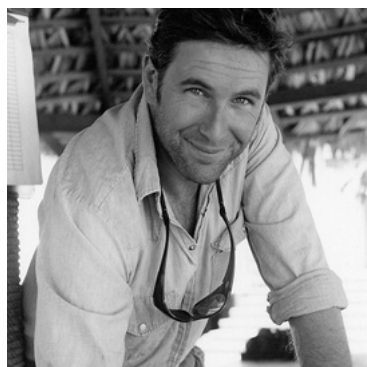
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