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# Ocean Wonderland

By David Chocron

Here is where I live.  
Well, not right here.  
I move around all the time,  
visiting my many friends,  
keeping an eye on the situation.  
I've been doing it for years and years.  
And as you can see,  
I am far from alone down here.  
Sometimes it gets crowded.  
The ocean is home  
to countless variations of sea life.  
My grandfather used to say,  
"Even the camels wandering the Sahara,  
"even the mountain goats high up  
in the Alps are creatures of the oceans,  
"for they too depend on the oceans  
for their survival.  
"Without healthy oceans  
no life, not even on land, can exist. "  
He'd say that every time he was upset  
with the way mankind was treating our home.  
Now that I am older and wiser,  
I'm starting to understand what he meant.  
And that good-looking fellow there,  
well, that's me.  
If you'd like to tag along,  
I'll show you around.  
If you come from the inland,  
your first encounter with the ocean  
is unforgettable.  
If you've ever crossed an ocean,  
its vastness, its power and serenity  
are overwhelming.  
But only when you've dived  
beneath the waves  
does the miracle of the ocean  
and all its beauty truly reveal itself.  
The ocean wonderland.  
Here, and all around the tropics,  
is the pulsating heart of the oceans,  
the coral reefs.  
Now I could go on and on  
and tell you all about each and every one  
of the 800 known species

of reef-building corals,  
where each coral is a tiny  
colony of sea life,  
or about the incredible diversity  
of shapes and sizes.  
I could even tell you  
that a small coral table, like this one,  
is the home to, oh,  
about 300,000 inhabitants.  
But I won't.  
Too dry. Boring.  
Okay, but here's a question for you.  
What is coral? Is it plant or rock?  
It's a trick question. It's neither.  
It's an animal.  
Imagine thousands and thousands  
of tiny creatures clustering together,  
and sharing a common skeleton  
made of limestone.  
That's what coral reef is.  
Skeletons built upon skeletons,  
until big, well, sometimes absolutely huge  
structures are formed,  
like here, the Great Barrier Reef  
in Australia,  
which is so enormous  
it can be seen from space.  
Well, that's what they tell me.  
I've never been.  
Like me, corals are sensitive creatures.  
They thrive only in clear, warm waters  
with lots of sunlight filtering through.  
Coral is fragile  
and it grows ever so slowly.  
So, if some klutz breaks off a branch  
of this staghorn coral,  
it would take many years  
for it to grow back.  
Something to think about next time you're  
tempted to break off a little souvenir.  
Big boulder corals seem to live forever.  
This one is over 500 years old.  
Grandfather told me that our family  
has been swimming on the reefs for ages,

over 100 million years, actually.  
The nooks and crannies,  
the complex structure of the reef  
is something that appeals  
to a vast number of species.  
There are over 4,500 different types of fish  
on the reefs.  
They make the reef their home  
and playground  
and also their battleground.  
The batfish,  
curious and gentle wanderers  
in and around the reef.  
These are pompano, rather well-behaved  
during the day, but predators by night.  
With their bright colours  
and their beak-like jaws,  
it's no wonder they're called parrot fish.  
The giant Napoleon wrasse  
is a fabulous character,  
reaching a weight of 400 pounds,  
always inquisitive,  
always with an eye on the next meal.  
Puffer fish, about as fast a swimmer  
as poor cousin Quincy,  
are protected by a poisonous flesh.  
Like their name indicates,  
they can puff themselves up with water  
when they feel threatened.  
They become bigger and scarier-looking  
and not quite as easy to fit  
between your jaws.  
Look closely.  
No, closer.  
Can you spot the trumpetfish  
hiding amongst these whip corals?  
Shipwrecks, like this one in the Bahamas,  
are mighty popular down here.  
In many ways, they replicate  
the complex structure of coral reef  
and quickly become home  
to sea life, as well.  
Here, the fish can rest,  
hide or wait in ambush.

Beautifully coloured queen angelfish  
together with a pair of delicate butterflyfish  
has moved in and made a home  
amongst the fan corals growing on the wreck.  
With so many different species,  
the competition for space and lunch  
can be fierce.  
Struggle and swim, struggle and swim,  
but never a dull moment!  
The strangest alliances have evolved  
between species in order to survive.  
Sea anemones are animals  
that live attached to the reef.  
They capture small fish  
and kill them with stinging tentacles.  
The clown fish, however,  
is a crafty little fellow  
who has evolved a technique  
which fools the anemones,  
and therefore can move freely  
amongst the tentacles.  
The giant reef anemones  
become their safe haven.  
As you may know,  
I can't stay down here forever.  
I must surface for air once in a while,  
just like the next creature  
we're about to meet,  
the dolphin.  
Actually, they bear quite a few similarities  
with us turtles.  
Intelligence, beauty, style, grace.  
Okay, maybe they do get around  
a bit faster than us.  
Dolphins have fascinated humans  
since time immemorial.  
An encounter with one is always  
a magical moment and a memory for life.  
Hey, how often do you get the chance  
to touch a wild dolphin.  
So go on, give it a go!  
Showing off his dance moves again.  
Reminds me of myself  
in younger days, actually.

Now, Grandfather, who claimed  
that camels were sea creatures,  
certainly enjoyed his metaphors.  
He compared the endless waters of an ocean  
to the endless sands of a desert,  
and the coral reef to an oasis.  
The reefs are havens where sea life abounds  
and all the different species  
depend on each other for survival.  
Huge schools of yellow snappers  
thrive on parts of the reef.  
Let me introduce you to this wonderful  
ballet my friends have prepared for you.  
Well, you wouldn't get a bunch of turtles  
to carry on like that,  
but it's rather fascinating,  
don't you think?  
Thank you, my friends. See you later.  
Now, no one particularly likes  
becoming someone else's lunch,  
but down here, we're pretty realistic  
about our place in the food chain.  
You eat and you are eaten.  
That's just the way it goes.  
These sandy plains may seem barren to you,  
but just below the surface  
live countless molluscs and small worms.  
And any creature with the right appetite,  
and the right technique  
knows they are down there.  
Stingrays are experts at finding  
and excavating their prey from the sand.  
Their mouth is under their body,  
while their eyes are on top.  
To me, this is a little strange.  
They have powerful jaws, of course.  
Not as strong as mine,  
but they are capable of crushing  
even the hardest shells.  
And as always, nothing goes to waste.  
The smaller fish feast on the scraps  
the larger ones leave behind.  
When I think of life on the reef,  
two things come to mind,

abundance and extraordinary diversity.  
These are surgeonfish.  
They graze on the algae  
growing on the rocks.  
They find safety in numbers  
and confuse their predators  
by travelling together.  
Traffic can get heavy at times.  
It's okay, I can wait.  
Bigeye trevallies  
are another sociable species,  
at least by day.  
By night, the dense schools disperse  
and each fish must find its own dinner.  
Although the barracuda exudes  
elegance and danger,  
unless provoked,  
they are no danger to you humans.  
With nightfall, a strange serenity  
descends on the reef  
and a whole new array of life is revealed.  
Many creatures filter the water for food,  
like these feather stars.  
The corals themselves  
extend their tentacles to catch zooplankton.  
Sea squirts filter the waters  
in search of nutrition.  
Small fish retreat into the delicate maze  
of coral branches.  
At night, these trumpetfish  
prefer the man-made shelter  
the shipwreck can provide.  
This puffer fish doesn't look too happy  
about our late-night intrusion,  
so let's sneak away. Come on.  
Sorry, my friend. Go back to sleep.  
Here's a creature that always makes me  
duck into my shell,  
one of the deadliest on the planet,  
the sea snake.  
Let's follow it into deeper water,  
where the colours begin to fade away.  
It moves through the water  
like a ribbon of doom,

with a venom so powerful  
that just one bite is all it takes.  
You're dead within seconds.  
I think I'd rather wait up here.  
Could we get moving?  
Everyone still with us? Good.  
Luckily for you,  
sea snakes seem to prefer seafood.  
They rarely attack humans.  
Here is one of the most important predators  
to be found on a reef,  
the potato grouper.  
Some groupers reach truly impressive sizes,  
over 8-feet long  
and weighing more than 600 pounds.  
They don't skimp on their meals, either.  
The largest ones even dine on small sharks  
and, sadly, young turtles.  
Yes, poor Quincy ended his days as  
a rather unhappy meal for a potato grouper.  
When two groupers meet for combat  
or courtship, complex rituals often ensue.  
Hard to believe and hard to admit,  
but the ocean's most graceful creature  
is not the turtle.  
It's the eagle ray.  
As these gentle giants glide along with  
the majesty of their airborne namesakes,  
it is easy to forget  
that we are viewing fish beneath the waves  
and not eagles above the clouds.  
Their wingspan can reach widths  
of up to 8 feet.  
Even in these murky waters,  
the eagle ray is an elusive beauty.  
An encounter with even just one  
is always a privileged moment.  
Sometimes I wish I had wings like those.  
But then again,  
I make out fine just the way I am.  
Diving deeper,  
you'll meet lurking among the reefs  
the most powerful predator of them all.  
The shark is among the ocean's

most ancient inhabitants  
and, for me, the scariest, I might add.  
So if you don't mind,  
I'll stay here while you look at them.  
350 million years of evolution  
have honed them to predatory perfection.  
Hundreds can find their home  
in one healthy reef.  
Fast, fierce, sleek and agile,  
an incredible animal  
that I prefer to view from afar,  
because at feeding time, they  
behave as if they have a licence to kill.  
And I suppose they do.  
Unprovoked, sharks rarely attack people,  
and yet humans have decimated  
the shark population  
by killing millions of them each year.  
Sharks are now rare on most reefs.  
Today, another darker reality faces  
our reefs. They are endangered.  
When a coral reef dies,  
all the life that thrives  
in and around it vanishes, as well.  
Since one-quarter of all us marine  
life depends on the reef for survival,  
imagine the consequences.  
The health of the planet  
depends on the health of its oceans.  
When oceans sicken and die,  
the well-being of our Earth  
is thrown into peril.  
I used to visit this reef every year  
when I was younger,  
a reef that was teeming  
with life and activity.  
Today, this reef is dead.  
There is no more life here.  
Sewage, industrial waste, pollution,  
destructive fishing practices,  
careless tourism and even deforestation  
are some of the man-made elements  
that threaten the health of our reefs.  
In addition, the massive

energy consumption of humans  
is altering the planet's climate  
and warming up the oceans.  
One silent victim is the coral.  
If human activity continues  
on its present course,  
most of the world's coral reefs  
may be dead within 50 years.  
The problem is clear.  
And many of the solutions are  
already known.  
Modern man must transform himself  
from being the threat  
to becoming the defender.  
Around the globe, many organisations,  
such as the United Nations  
Environment Programme  
and the World Wildlife Fund,  
are already working hard  
to improve the health of our oceans.  
Together, you can ensure  
a brighter future for coral reefs  
and the millions of other creatures  
that live beneath the waves.  
For yourselves and future generations,  
please help save the coral reefs  
and preserve this ocean wonderland.