

# Remembering Wallace J. Nichols: the blue mind scientist who explained our human connection to water

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The opening lines of an ancient song, The Song of Amergin, translate to “I am wind on ocean, I am swelling wave, I am roar of sea”. Believed to be the first poem in the Irish language, it reminds us of our interdependence with all life. How we have been shaped and formed by the ocean. That we are nature.

The pioneering marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols, who died in June at age 56, embodied this sentiment.

“J”, as he was affectionately known by his friends and colleagues around the world, recognised our interdependence with water. With a lifelong interest in ocean restoration, he knew that in order to protect the ocean, we need to better understand and value it, especially the crucial role it plays in our psychological wellbeing.

Born in 1967 in New York, J had what he described as a pretty “water-filled” childhood. He studied marine biology in the early 1990s, before completing his PhD at the University of Arizona, Tucson, where he specialised in turtle genetics, migration and conservation. He and his colleagues famously satellite tagged and tracked Adelita, a loggerhead turtle as it swam from California to Japan – this was the first animal to be recorded crossing an entire ocean basin.

He went on to co-found many ocean conservation initiatives including Wildcoast, an international coastal restoration charity. More than any of his impressive scientific achievements, it was J’s open-hearted generosity and collaborative energy that he was most loved for. His sudden death sent shock waves through the ocean community.

His bestselling book Blue Mind, first published a decade ago, weaved together years of research and insights into how being in, on or near water can improve our self-awareness, creativity and health. This book was foundational in bringing the understanding of water’s effect on our psychological wellbeing into mainstream, popular consciousness.

The millennia-old understanding of water’s power to heal exists in every ancient wisdom tradition in the world yet, until recently, had largely been overlooked or dismissed by western science. Blue Mind sparked a new understanding and appreciation for blue spaces in modern society. It influenced an emerging meta-discipline within scientific research called, “blue health”, as well as impacting mental health promotion, ocean lifestyle sports and social prescribing including surf therapy.

J's greatest legacy was his ability to bring people together through our shared connection with water. J's belief in the power of water to restore our wellbeing gave rise to the blue mind movement.

This movement has been instrumental in promoting awareness of water's psychological and ecological importance. J's biggest motivation was to inspire people to share their blue mind experiences by taking somebody with them into the water. He'd often give people a blue marble — representing planet Earth, as seen from space — our beautiful, watery world, and a reminder of our responsibility to care for it.

Discovering J's work was a revelation for me. It provided me with a language for what I'd intuitively known and felt my whole life — the power of water to heal. I had recently returned from Iran, documenting the story of Iran's first surfers — all women. Inspired by J's advocacy for universal access to the benefits of healthy blue spaces, I went back to Iran over the years, co-creating the Be Like Water project.

## From red to blue

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J's words were like an affirmation confirming my belief in the power of the ocean to connect. This reinforced my commitment to becoming a marine social scientist, specialising in blue health and ocean therapy. I also embraced J's blue mind philosophy in my approach to big wave surfing.

Training the body to enter a blue mind state, a place of calm and clarity, is a vital survival mechanism when in a high-stress or “red mind” situation when a freeze, fight or flight response to a threat kicks in. In big wave surfing, the biggest risk is of oxygen deprivation when being held down by a wave. Embracing a calm blue mind state is crucial for people such as emergency first responders who regularly face crisis situations.

Over the years, J became not only a teacher but a dear mentor and friend. We shared many conversations on our human relationship with water. At See Change Sessions, an online webinar event in the summer of 2021, not long after he and his family lost their home to the California wildfires, we spoke about grief and how a healthy ocean can be the best place to grieve. J shared how the ocean had held and healed his family and said “it's the best place to mourn. It's the best place to take your sorrow. It's great to roar underwater ... The ocean can take all of that — all that red mind, all of that fear and all of that emotion and absorb it.”

The loss of J is felt deeply by his family and friends on Santa Cruz county's rugged north coast, the global ocean community, and all those who have been touched by the power of blue mind.

At times of such wild uncertainty and grief, the ocean is a place of constancy. It has an ability to soothe, heal and restore. We need blue mind now more than ever. J's family have set up the Dr Wallace J. Nichols memorial fund to “continue the work of one of the world's most

important environmentalists and changemakers”.

In honour of J, may we each find our own way to connect with water, one another, and protect our blue spaces. As he'd always say after a goodbye, “I wish you water”.

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