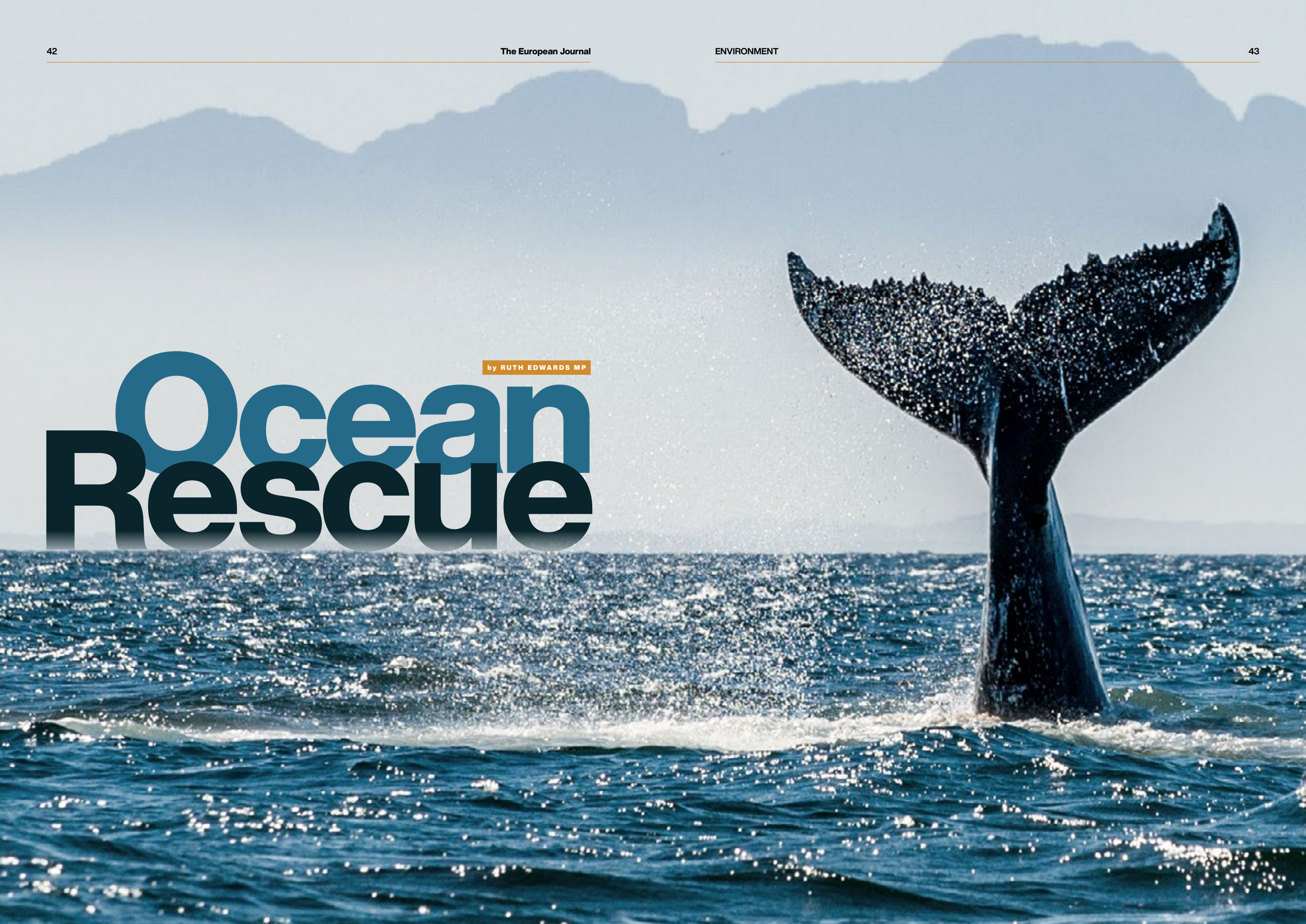


Ocean Rescue

by RUTH EDWARDS MP



Did you know that, on average, a great whale sequesters 33 tonnes of carbon dioxide in its lifetime? Whales also increase the production of phytoplankton which in turn increases the amount of carbon captured by these microscopic organisms.

They currently capture 37 billion metric tons of CO₂, an estimated 40 percent of all CO₂ produced. Remarkable, beautiful, miraculous and mysterious, oceans cover more than 70% of our planet and sustain all life on it. They produce most of our oxygen, provide sustenance and livelihoods, regulate our climate and are the source of many medicinal products. They are also in terrible danger.

Protecting marine environments: a priority for us all

Marine habitats play a major role in the regulation of the climate. The sea grass meadows, mangroves and salt marshes along our coastal systems are known to store more carbon per unit area than terrestrial forests, with the potential to lock high concentrations of CO₂ below ground for many thousands of years. They also promote resilience against the impacts of climate change, such as flooding, for coastal communities.

Beyond the benefits to our climate and the protection of our coastal cities, many people rely heavily on the oceans for sustenance and their livelihoods. Approximately 3 billion people in the world rely on wild-caught and farmed seafood as a primary source of protein. The fisheries and aquaculture sector is a major source of employment: in 2018, an estimated 59.5 million people were engaged in the primary sector of fisheries and aquaculture.

Oceans also provide many medicinal products that help fight cancer, Alzheimer's, arthritis and heart disease. For example, a group of researchers have spent the last few years investigating molecules extracted from Lamprey fish and have found that their variable lymphocyte receptors (VLRs) may be able to help transport chemicals through the normally impenetrable blood-brain barrier and help treat cancer and strokes.

We have endangered our oceans

But despite the possible wealth of discovery and scientific advancement, we aren't treating our oceans with the respect they deserve. Overfishing, exploitation of the seabed and the spilling of harmful chemicals into the marine environment have deeply damaged vital ecosystems. We are all too often confronted with heart-breaking pictures of melting sea ice, bleached coral reefs and plastic-choked sea life.

A third of global fish stocks are overfished; the percentage of fish stocks that are within biologically sustainable levels have decreased from 90 percent in 1974 to 65.8 percent in 2017. Over a third of marine mammals and a third of the world's shark species are under threat of extinction. Pollution and plastic waste also continue to be major causes for concern. The United Nations estimates that 80% of the world's wastewater enters the oceans untreated, polluting the water immediately around our most sensitive coastal marine systems.

The international community must come together to take urgent action to help protect and restore marine environments.

Millions of tonnes of plastic - 80% of which originates on land - enters the ocean every year, with high concentrations of unseen microplastics harming all aquatic life. Plastic has even been found in some of the deepest marine trenches. It is projected that, if the current rate of plastic consumption continues, there

will be more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050.

And, in the deepest parts of the ocean, trawling and mining rip up the seafloor, scarring the seabed and serrating topographical features responsible for directing currents, circulating nutrients, and hosting rich and diverse habitats. Often this activity launches plumes of once-settled material up and into the

currents, disturbing the feeding paths of larger marine animals and smothering aquatic plants as it resettles.

As a global community, we need to act now to protect our oceans; and the UK, with its long maritime history, is leading the way.

What is the UK doing to protect our oceans?

Last year, the UK created the Global Ocean Alliance. This coming together of nations is working to pass international legislation to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 through the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Domestically, the UK has already created over 350 of its own MPAs, covering over 25% of our waters, and with the addition of a new Marine Protection Zone around the remote island of Tristan da Cunha in November last year, the government's Blue Belt programme has exceeded its target of protecting 4 million sq km of ocean in the Overseas Territories - over 1% of the Earth's entire ocean.

The aim is to protect a huge number of the most



beautiful and important biodiversity-rich sites on Earth.

Just as importantly, the UK has shown its commitment to stopping domestic waste entering the marine environment and has introduced some of the most stringent bans on single use plastics anywhere in the world. For example, the charge on single use plastic bags has led to a 95% cut in plastic bag sales in major supermarkets, cutting the number that end up in the marine environment. Similarly, bans on microbeads, plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds are also having an impact.

Industrial fishing vessels operating inside protected areas are a threat to fragile ecosystems and hinder the recovery of fish populations. With limited fish stocks, these huge vessels also put at risk the livelihoods of local fishing communities.

As a member of the European Union, the UK was banned under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) from imposing restrictions on fishing activity within offshore MPAs without agreement from other member states. When the UK leaves the CFP at the end of the year, the UK Government will have new powers to regulate fishing activity in offshore waters up to 200 nautical miles from the UK's coast, including inside MPAs.

Compelling recommendations from the landmark Benyon Review go further, calling for the designation of 'Highly Protected Marine Areas' in which invasive and exploitative human activity would be strictly prohibited and ocean recovery promoted.

A global ambition

But thinking and acting domestically will never solve the problems our oceans face. We need to work globally to build on our national actions; and our presidency of COP26 gives us

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the ideal vehicle to do this and lead the way in calling for an ambitious Global Ocean Treaty.

Complicated international frameworks govern some activity in the high seas, which are beyond the jurisdiction of any single nation, yet only 1% of this space is currently effectively protected.

Next year, there is an opportunity to secure global agreement to protect at least 30% of the world's oceans by 2030.

The UN biodiversity conference in May 2021 seems like an ideal opportunity for the nations of the world to make this commitment and signal that we will throw

our full weight behind the future of our oceans. To make this happen, countries must agree beforehand a new Global Ocean Treaty at the UN, to establish an international framework for protecting marine biodiversity in international waters.

If history has taught us anything, it's that the planet's ecosystems are remarkably resilient. Given the opportunity to recover and protection from further exploitation, our ocean habitats will bounce back. But even the most robust environment has a limit.

If we take immediate global action, we can still undo much of the damage we have done to our oceans. If we wait much longer, that damage may be permanent.

As we enter the United Nations 'Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development', the message is clear; the international community must come together to take urgent action to help protect and restore marine environments. ▀

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