EJN Investigative Ocean Journalism Ask Me Anything

Green oceanwaves in daytime / Credit: Matt Power via Unsplash.

1. **How can deep ocean issues, such as underwater mining, be addressed when there is very little scientific research on national territory, in this case on Peruvian territory? Scientific expeditions face obstacles from the state, for example, in June this year, the Peruvian navy blocked a scientific expedition because it allegedly violated national security. How can journalists report when these are the conditions?**

   - *Journalists can still report effectively by using alternative data sources, collaborating with international experts, and focusing on investigative journalism. By leveraging satellite imagery, public records, and expert opinions from global NGOs and scientists, they can build compelling narratives despite restrictions. Highlighting the ethical and legal implications of blocked research can also provide a critical angle. This way, journalists would be able to raise awareness and pressure authorities to reconsider policies that hinder scientific exploration and environmental protection.*

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2. **It is said that 30% of the oceans should be conserved; is this too little compared to general pollution? Oil spills, microplastic pollution, acidification, etc.**

   - *While conserving 30% of the oceans by 2030 is a significant step, it may seem insufficient given the scale of ocean pollution. However, this is a complex issue, and I don't feel fully equipped to provide a definitive answer.*

3. **What is your position on marine mining and how can journalists best cover it?**

   - *I have reported on deep seabed mining before. The seafloor is thought to hold trillions of dollar's worth of metals that are claimed to be essential for decarbonizing the economy amid the green technological revolution. But no solution to a problem as complex as the climate crisis will come without difficult decisions and heavy costs, especially as the global public tries to wean itself from fossil fuels.*
   The seabed is so far removed — geographically, emotionally, and intellectually — from the public that benefits from it, that it is a big challenge to stoke concern about this type of mining, and much of the knowledge we have about it relies on data provided by the mining companies. So it's important that journalists approach the topic of marine mining with a critical eye, particularly by focusing on independent scientific research, and highlight the potential long-term consequences and uncertainties of marine mining, including the risk of exacerbating biodiversity loss and disrupting global carbon cycles. Most of the world's seafloor is not even mapped, fully understood or robustly governed. So it's important that journalists emphasize the importance of uncovering the environmental, economic, and societal implications, especially for vulnerable communities.

4. **In Brazil, we have a problem with the lack of fishing data. There are not enough databases that show exactly what we catch and how much we catch. Consequently, it is difficult to make conservation policies. How can we overcome this difficulty?**

   - *The global public is woefully unaware of what happens at sea. Reporting about and from the oceans is rare and we need more awareness of what is happening out there in our communities to be able to have better conservation policies. This means support journalism about this realm because that reporting keeps intense light on the issues. Also, follow and support, financially or otherwise, the organizations that are on the front and tackling these issues. Everyone can affect pressure by factoring in these concerns when they choose what they eat, who they support, and who they vote for.*

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5. **What AI tools can be used to monitor wrongdoings in ocean issues?**

- *We usually verify vessel activity by checking MarineTraffic and Global Fishing Watch, and recently have used Allen Institute for AI's Skylight tool, a remote observation tool to track ships and identify illegal or suspicious activity. For video analysis - including extracting text from footage and/or sharpening footage - we have used Topaz AI.*

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6. **How can we organize data and AI to improve investigations?**

- *This question is likely best answered by referencing a specific example. For the recent reporting on China's seafood industry, The Outlaw Ocean Project created a comprehensive list of Chinese squid jiggers associated with various human-rights and environmental concerns. We relied heavily on remote observation tools to track ships and identify illegal or suspicious activity. We also searched for media investigations, port records, case reports from NGOs, social-media posts, photos, videos, and research from regional fisheries-management organizations, to check concerns related to each vessel. We then drew on multiple trade data sources to build a database to track abuses at sea and on land in China to importers, grocery chains, and foodservice groups globally.*

   We obtained data from aggregators of import data, importers' websites, product catalogs, and social-media profiles as well as extensive searches for brands and products across stores. This process was both time-consuming and costly, but ensured that law enforcement, industry players, NGOs and lawmakers could see exactly how we traced criminal ships or plants to end consumers globally and helped force the industry and governments to confront the extent of the illegal and illicit practices that we were exposing. The results of this analysis were ultimately published via our Bait-to-Plate tool.

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7. **As a journalist, reporting on ocean issues can be quite dangerous as depending on the topic at hand many different actors including governments, private entities, and even criminal entities may have an interest in a story not coming to light. What are some general safety tips or best practices that you might be able to share? Are there any safety related resources to also be aware of?**

- *I believe the most important tip is: work with a trusted team or companion. I have a small but incredible and tireless team around me that shares the passion for this work and has my back. We have a clear understanding of what steps to take if any problems arise. Also, build a network of trusted contacts, including local guides, fixers, government sources, and journalist support organizations. These connections can provide valuable resources and assistance in a variety of situations, offering local insight, safety, and logistical support when needed.*

  On high-risk trips, I always carry GPS satellite communication devices to stay connected with my team in remote areas and ensure precise location tracking for potential rescue or evacuation scenarios. I also have pre-arranged emergency codes in place, use encrypted communication tools like Signal to safeguard sensitive information, and regularly back up my data to prevent loss of valuable material in case my devices are compromised.

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8. **How would you say can we best report on the serious human rights abuses currently happening at sea and simultaneously create more awareness that concerns surrounding our oceans are not strictly an environmental topic but also one related to labor, human rights, etc.?**

   - *More than 50 million people work offshore, and yet, this realm goes largely overlooked by most news outlets because it is too costly, too dangerous and too time consuming to report on them. That's why I founded the Outlaw Ocean Project, to dedicate solely to producing stories about the oceans and have immersive investigations. I believe journalism can stoke urgency and help the global public reimagine the oceans not as simply a marine habitat.*
     I think, especially, being there presently and meeting these people, capturing the gritty and dehumanizing conditions on board these vessels, is the best way to report on this matter - by documenting this world rarely seen.

9. **What if we as journalists cannot go out to sea and report on the ocean? What are ways to do the reporting from home? What resources or tools do you suggest?**

   - *Even if journalists can't physically go out to sea, there are still many effective ways to report on ocean-related issues from land. They can leverage public access tools like MarineTraffic, Global Fishing Watch, and NASA's Earth Science Data to track vessel movements and monitor environmental changes through satellite data. Open-source research, scientific journals, marine science repositories, and reports from ocean conservation organizations or governments offer valuable*

insights and data. Additionally, journalists can conduct remote interviews and collaborate with on-the-ground journalists and investigators to enhance their reporting.

10. <u>**What do you think are the most pressing issues facing the ocean that are not getting enough media coverage?**</u>

- *All types of abuses happening at sea, whether they're human rights abuses, or environmental crimes, stem from a core problem: the lack of governance at sea, especially on the high seas. This is what allows misbehavior to happen offshore routinely and with impunity.*