

Water: not all is fresh

As an environmentalist who always tries to look at the big picture, I cannot bring myself to break our world down into its constituent parts. Everything on our planet is connected: biodiversity, air and water quality, the climate, human impact and impact on humans. Water is part of a massive cycle, and I cannot exclude the oceans from this discussion.

The oceans, or should I say the ocean, are bodies of water connected between the latitudes of 40 and 50 degrees south, along the Antarctic continent. Atlantic, Indian and Pacific are actually just names given to the oceans by maritime explorers and geographers. The oceans are crossed by a gigantic current that circulates massive quantities of water, with cold water below and warm water at the surface. These surface currents churn around 10% of the total mass of water in the oceans, and this layer of approximately 300 metres interacts with the atmosphere: evaporation, the effects of wind, the formation of clouds leading to precipitation, oceanic gyres that concentrate waste, etc.

The oceans are suffering as a result of human activities, with clearly identifiable consequences for the future of many populations. Global warming is causing the migration of certain species to cooler waters. The acidification of the oceans due to the excessive absorption of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere is causing coral bleaching. There is also the loss of biodiversity, the exhaustion of fish stocks, etc.

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Waste is another major issue. The oceans are huge and far away. They are out of sight and out of mind for most of us. Yet they are increasingly polluted by our activities on land. We produce 80% of the waste found within the oceans. A cigarette butt carelessly thrown into the gutter may be at the start of a journey taking it to the coast. A plastic bag used for a few minutes to bring some vegetables home from the market will one day find itself in the huge gyre in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, as part of the so-called “seventh continent of plastic,” a mass of semi-decomposed plastic six times larger than France. And let us not forget its smaller plastic relatives in other oceans! As a visual cue, imagine jettisoning a dump truck full of plastic into the sea every second!

But how, you may ask, is this connected to the topic at hand – water? In fact, it is quite simple. There is no direct cause-and-effect link. Rather, it is a behavioural link that passes through each one of us. It involves our relationship with our environment and with ourselves. If we are unable to protect our environment on a daily basis, we will not be able to understand the water problem in its entirety and fix it.