

BOOK REVIEW

Sea Sisters: Un équipage féminin à l'épreuve de la pollution dans le Pacifique. (Le Roux, G. 2021)

Elodie Fache¹

¹ SENS, IRD, CIRAD, Univ Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, Univ Montpellier, Montpellier, France

DOI: 10.23791/573031

Keywords: Pacific, ocean plastic pollution, citizen engagement, citizen science, Sea Sisters

Sea Sisters relates the eighth voyage leg of an all-female sailing expedition (or 'eXXpedition') aiming to explore the causes and impacts of, as well as potential solutions to, ocean plastic pollution. It offers an ethnography at sea of what the author presents as a 'citizen science' project, as carried out in March-April 2020, between Rapa Nui (or Easter Island) and French Polynesia. However, it is not a scientific publication dedicated to an academic audience. It is rather an easy-to-read text, in the first person narrative mode and accompanied by many photographs with descriptive captions, which offers various levels of reading. This book therefore appears to me as accessible to a large readership, including students and laypersons interested in learning about ocean plastic pollution, citizen science and/or Oceania. It also reflects how alternative modes of writing can be used to report on scholarly experiences at the crossroads of research fieldwork and citizen engagement.

In addition to its introduction and conclusion, this book is composed of six thematic chapters. The first one introduces Rapa Nui, the starting point of the voyage leg, and contrasts the objectives of the Motu Motiro Hiva Marine Park with an assessment of land-based plastic pollution carried

out by the newly-formed crew before boarding S.V. TravelEdge. The second chapter presents the 'citizen science' protocol that was the main *raison d'être* of this 'eXXpedition', as well as the challenges of implementing it at sea. The third chapter portrays the women who engaged in this venture, their backgrounds and objectives, while also including a focus on persistent organic pollutants (or POPs). The fourth chapter takes us off the Pitcairn Islands, located in the South Pacific subtropical gyre where plastic debris accumulate, and therefore described as "an isolated archipelago revealing the plastic crisis" (p.67; my translation). The fifth chapter relates how this voyage leg was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the cancellation of the next voyage legs, replaced by 'virtual voyages'. The last chapter comes back to the crewmembers and their role of 'plastic pollution ambassadors'. Throughout the book, the reader is immersed in life on board and discovers the relationships that develop between these 'sea sisters' or 'seasters'.

It might be argued that plastic pollution is not as great a threat to our oceans as climate change, overfishing and biodiversity loss (Stafford & Jones 2019). Yet, in the South Pacific region, plastic pollution impacts Oce-

anians' cultural, social and economic ties to the ocean in a disproportionate way compared to their own contributions to this global issue (Farrelly et al. 2020). This is particularly well illustrated in the first thematic chapter of *Sea Sisters*, which brings us to a beach on Rapa Nui where a resident shared with the all-women crew his concerns about the macro-waste from fishing activities as well as the myriad of microplastic particles that cover the island's seashore. Yet, the book does not frame ocean plastic pollution in a 'negative' way. As noted by Neimanis et al. (2015), environmental issues are often framed in such a 'negative' or even 'apocalyptic' way, which "may not lead to effective citizen participation and may stifle opportunities for innovative thinking around environmental challenges", whereas "alternative narratives [...] can inspire more creative problem solving and a strong sense of participation and involvement" (Neimanis et al. 2015: 77). I believe that the main strength of *Sea Sisters* is that it provides such an alternative narrative about ocean plastic pollution. It indeed offers a constructive and hopeful focus on a group of women of various ages, nationalities and backgrounds, who endeavoured to gain first-hand experience of this environmental issue so





Figure 1: An all-female sailing expedition or 'eXXpedition'.

that they can then contribute to tackle it, in their own ways and at different levels, for instance through actions in the field of awareness-raising, recycling, fashion, or even tattooing. This focus is also encapsulated in the book's final words, which are those of a crewmember from Rapa Nui: "I understand that if I can do it, anyone can do it. [...] We have to do better." (p.113; my translation).

Another aspect of the book that I found particularly interesting is that it gives an account of how the author, who is an anthropologist, progressively became familiar with a citizen science protocol designed by other scientists, as part of the daily routine on board. However, the author does not take a reflexive stance on what this participant observation has brought to her practice of ethnography and, vice-versa, what her ethnography brought to the way this protocol was thought and applied by the crew. On a broader level, she does not discuss the relevance and value of the incorporation of such an ethnographic approach into future citizen science endeavours. It is therefore hoped that

an article on these issues will follow, for instance based on the footnote p.10 that describes the author's participation in this 'eXXpedition' as a specific form of citizen science that combines crowdsourcing and crowd-funding.

Overall, I personally found this book very inspiring. A translation into English (and possibly in other languages) would be welcome to make it accessible to the many non-French speakers in Oceania and beyond.

Endnotes

¹ See <https://exxpedition.com/> (Accessed on 4 November 2021).

² To Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean and the Arctic.

References

- Farrelly, T., Borrelle, S., & Fuller, S. (2020). *Plastic pollution prevention in Pacific Island Countries: Gap analysis of current legislation, policies and plans. Report prepared for the Environmental Investigation Agency - EIA*, <https://reports.eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/09/Plastic-Prevention-Gap-Analysis-2020.pdf>.
- Neimanis, A., Åsberg, C., & Hedrén, J. (2015). *Four problems, four directions for environmental humanities: Toward critical posthumanities for the Anthropocene. Ethics and the Environment* 20(1), 67-97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/ethicsenviro.20.1.67>.
- Stafford, R., & Jones, P.J.S. (2019). *Viewpoint – Ocean plastic pollution: A convenient but distracting truth? Marine Policy* 103, 187-191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.02.003>.

67-97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/ethicsenviro.20.1.67>.

Stafford, R., & Jones, P.J.S. (2019). *Viewpoint – Ocean plastic pollution: A convenient but distracting truth? Marine Policy* 103, 187-191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.02.003>.

Bibliographic information:

Le Roux, G. (2021) *Sea Sisters: Un équipage féminin à l'épreuve de la pollution dans le Pacifique*. Indigène Editions. <https://indigene-editions.fr/livre-sea-sisters/>



Figure 2: Cover sheet of the book

Corresponding Author: Elodie Fache [elodie.fache@ird.fr] is an anthropologist and a research fellow at the French National Research Institute for Development (IRD). She is engaged in multi-level analyses of so-called "community-based natural resource management" initiatives and small-scale fisheries in the South Pacific region.