

# The Existential Meaning of Ocean Literacy for Maritime Bangladesh



German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) introduced the concept of Dasein (“there being”) in ontology and metaphysics. This concept suggests that humans are defined by the fact that they exist. When we consider the absence of Ocean Literature as an existential threat to maritime Bangladesh, the concept of “Dasein” becomes particularly relevant. Therefore, understanding the existential meaning of Ocean Literacy is of existential importance for us Bangladeshis, especially for our future generation—Gen Z and Gen a (alpha), as it holds the potential to secure a prosperous future for them.

To make it easy to understand why it is ‘existential’, we take the help of two facts: One is from “The Merchant of Venice,” a play by William Shakespeare, where the famous dialogue from Antonio was, and “Thou knowest that all my fortunes are at sea.” The second fact is that land resources in Bangladesh are depleting fast due to the ever-growing population. Thus, we need to look for alternative reservoirs of resources for the very existence of the country and its aspiration for prosperity. We have our Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean—the Ratnakara—a place where gems and jewels are found but, due to the “sea blindness”, lack of, or absence of required knowledge about what bounties these seas and oceans have for us to offer and then to know to harness remain a far cry.

In philosophy—more precisely, in semantics, semiotics, metaphysics, metasemantics, and philosophy of language—meaning “is a relationship between two sorts of things: signs and the kinds of things they intend, express, or signify.” What is the Ocean Literacy? Experts and scientists define ocean literacy as “an understanding of the ocean’s influence on you—and your influence on the ocean.” Ocean Literacy thus means understanding the ocean’s influence on us and our influence on the ocean. An ocean-literate person understands the Essential Principles and Fundamental Concepts about the ocean, can communicate meaningfully, and can make informed and responsible decisions regarding the ocean and its resources.

In 2015, the UNESCO-IOC—Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO

embraced the concept of Ocean Literacy and began working to boost the movement's global reach. The commitment 'Ocean Literacy for All', launched at the first UN Ocean Conference, marked the start of a series of activities to promote Ocean Literacy worldwide. In 2017, the UN General Assembly declared the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030). The 'Ocean Decade', in which 193 countries recognized ocean science's critical role in finding innovative ocean-based solutions in our volatile world.

On 12 July 2023, at the One Ocean Summit 2022 in Brest, the Director-General of UNESCO, Ms Audrey Azoulay, stated, "The international community must make education one of the pillars of its action for the ocean. Because if we want to protect it better, we must teach it better. On the occasion of the One Ocean Summit, I am setting a common goal for our 193 Member States: to include ocean education in school curricula by 2025." The Blue Curriculum of UNESCO-IOC should be thus seen in broader UNESCO efforts to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This Blue Curriculum—ocean literacy curriculum aims to facilitate and promote a whole-school approach to ocean knowledge content. It also presents an additional opportunity for state-of-the-art themes like digital literacy, a revolution in educational spaces, support of diversity, and inclusion in the school space. Once the Blue Curriculum—ocean literacy curriculum is updated, contents will likely support Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), including other education disciplines commensurate to the religious and cultural heritage of most of the population.

The first Ocean Literacy World Conference was held on June 7-8 in 2024 in Venice, Italy. This Conference aimed to bring together international experts in ocean literacy and education from various sectors. The Conference marked a significant milestone for the preparatory process for the third UN Ocean Conference that will be co-hosted by the Governments of France and Costa Rica in Nice, France in 2025. The Venice Declaration contributes to the broader global conversation around sustainability and the ocean, advocating for the inclusion of Ocean Literacy as a central element at UNOC 2025. The Declaration is considered a living document that will evolve through continuous dialogue among stakeholders across the planet ocean. The Declaration is a common heritage which will be refined and expanded from the grassroots to promote Ocean Literacy worldwide. It is to bring back humanity's relationship with the ocean. In the year leading up to UNOC 2025, the authority demands that member states implement the policies and strategies without leaving anyone behind. The policies and strategies ranged from making urban and coastal planning policies more participatory. To launch trans-disciplinary programs to understand better and inform our behavior. To develop a solid and adaptable Ocean Literacy framework for all stakeholders' formal and non-formal educational systems. To enhance access to funding to expand Ocean Literacy, sustainable ocean-climate and nature-based solutions, and social and technological innovation. Making Ocean Literacy actionable, accessible, equitable, diverse, and inclusive. To raise awareness of the complex, interconnected link between ocean health, biodiversity, human well-being and climate change. Co-create resilience programs through education, funding, and policy. Safeguard and promote the wealth of marine cultural heritage to rebuild identity and belonging.

Disseminate multi-sensorial multimedia campaigns and bottom-up initiatives to advocate for the importance of an ocean-literate society. And foster a sustainable ocean-literate workforce.

There are seven essential Ocean Literacy principles and their related significances: Principle 1 states that the Earth has one big ocean with many features. Principle 2 mentions that the ocean and life in the ocean shape the features of Earth. Principle 3 depicts that the ocean significantly influences weather and climate. Principle 4 reminds us that the ocean made the Earth habitable. Principle 5 stipulates that the ocean supports diverse life and ecosystems. Principle 6 highlights that the ocean and humans are inextricably interconnected. Principle 7 ushers new hope that the ocean is largely unexplored. The correlated significance for maritime Bangladesh appropriately include: Understanding Bangladesh's connection to the global ocean underscores the importance of protecting its maritime boundaries and managing shared resources effectively; Coastal landforms and ecosystems in Bangladesh are shaped by the ocean, making coastal management and erosion control vital for sustainable development; The Bay of Bengal drives monsoons and cyclones in Bangladesh, making ocean literacy crucial for climate resilience and disaster preparedness; The Bay of Bengal supports life and agriculture in Bangladesh By regulating climate and nutrient cycles, highlighting the need for conservation efforts; Bangladesh's rich marine biodiversity, including the Sundarbans, is vital for fisheries and livelihoods, requiring protection from overexploitation and pollution; The livelihoods of millions in Bangladesh depend on the ocean, making sustainable marine practices essential for economic and environmental well-being; Unexplored areas of the Bay of Bengal hold potential resources and biodiversity, encouraging research and innovation for sustainable marine development.

As a maritime country, Bangladesh must aspire toward a Blue Economy like other ocean/sea-based economies. There is every chance that ocean literacy will inspire more effective and sustainable economic use of the ocean. This will open outstanding prospects and new job opportunities for the next generations—Gen Z and Gen a. There are a few institutions like Blue Green Foundation, Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute (BORI), Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD), Radiant Ocean Research and Education Center (ROREC), etc., and some individual dedicated souls voluntarily promoting ocean literacy for the sustainable use of ocean resources for Bangladesh. However, a robust outcome is unlikely until a whole government approach to ocean literacy initiatives exists. The whole government approach must begin with reexamining and reconstructing the national education policy. The new education policy should include the UNESCO-IOC sponsored policies, strategies, principles, and significance mentioned above, reflecting and customizing them for not riverine but maritime Bangladesh. And the curriculum must cover the entire spectrum from kindergarten to postgraduate students and people from all walks of life. Hence, this progressive change is only possible with formal and informal total public engagement. Finally, the Existential Meaning of Ocean Literacy for Maritime Bangladesh is to be understood as a talisman—a silver bullet of social emancipation and economic reformation for a flourishing Bangladesh—the future abode of our Gen Z and Gen a.

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