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Human Effects on the Oceans

Sylvia A. Earle received a Ph.D. from Duke University in 1966. She has served on the faculties of the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University; from 1980 to 1984 she served on the President's Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere; in 1990 she was appointed Chief Scientist of NOAA. In 1992 she founded Deep Ocean Exploration and Research, a company to design, operate, and consult on manned and robotic sub sea systems. She is also currently explorer in residence for the National Geographic Society.

Dr. Earle has led more than fifty expeditions worldwide involving in excess of 6000 hours underwater. She led the first team of women aquanauts during the Tektite Project in 1970 and holds a depth record for solo diving of 1000 meters. She is the author of more than one hundred publications and has received numerous honors, honorary degrees, and awards. The following is her address to the members of the Ecological Society of America at their annual meeting in Spokane, Washington, August 8, 1999.

Sylvia Earle:

I thank all of you for coming here tonight. It's great to see some kindred spirits, and I do feel a kindred spirit with anyone who is associated with Ecological Society of America. I knew when I was a little kid that this is what

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I wanted to do, to be a biologist and a scientist. I didn't know what to call it until I got to Duke University and discovered ecology. It was quite strange going to classes with desert ecologists and mountain ecologists and forest ecologists, and there I was, the lone student of the ocean. They'd talk about these great instruments that they could take out in the woods and how they could visit their instruments and spend time in the desert or the rainforest or other environment of their choice, and I would go to the ocean. First I had to get down to where it is I wanted to be, and if I wanted to take the temperature, I only have two hands, and it was at times literally true that I'd carry the thermometer in my teeth and go down to

take a 20-minute glimpse of the place that I wanted to see.

My passport into places in the ocean was limited as compared to going into places in the land, and they used to chide me and tease me quite a lot about little snippets of information I could get as compared to the mountains of information that they could get from the environments of their choice. Nonetheless, I felt blessed to get acquainted with some of the techniques, and never mind the instruments that everybody else could take for granted wouldn't work underwater because salt water has a way of foiling the best-laid plans of most people, where there is the slightest bit of electronics associated with it, even today.

I think if I had my way, I would have stayed as an ivory tower biologist. I would have spent the years since that time achieving the dream that I had of being associated with the university or a research institution and caring about all the little creatures that I loved and inspect rather closely.

In fact, somewhere along the line I became acutely aware of circumstances that I've heard Jacques Cousteau articulate. He said that, thinking about what he knew as a kid in the Mediterranean, and as a young man getting acquainted with parts of the ocean from the inside out, he lamented the fact that he couldn't take his boys to see many of the places that he knew when he was a boy, they had changed so much in his lifetime.

