THE LIVING SEA: CONCEPTUALISING NARRATIVES OF CULTURAL SEASCAPES IN THE EASTERN CAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA[1]

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ABSTRACT

The sea exerts a powerful influence over coastal communities, shaping their social and cultural landscapes through a variety of intricate and diverse interactions. While these connections highlight the ocean's cultural value and its essential place in coastal lives, they are neither uniform nor equally distributed across communities. This article advocates for a broader recognition of these relationships within marine management frameworks, pressing for the inclusion of spiritual and well-being dimensions that are presently overlooked. This article draws on ethnographic research that we conducted from 2021 to 2022 along South Africa's Eastern Cape coast, from Algoa Bay to East London. It delves into how people perceive and experience the ocean as integral to cultural identity and community well-being. Through twenty in-depth interviews, themes of spirituality, cultural expression, interconnectedness with nature, healing, and the sense of access and loss emerge as crucial aspects of these relationships. This article highlights how differing relationships and understandings of the ocean expose historical divides between communities and ongoing socio-economic disparities that affect access to the sea. These narratives underscore the ocean's role in supporting health and well-being, affirming the need to incorporate such values into marine management policies.

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INTRODUCTION

The sea is neither an inert expanse nor a pristine wilderness; it is a space with material and symbolic dimensions that have inspired representations across cultures and contexts.[2] Shifts in focus towards the sea have emerged under frameworks such as the 'oceanic turn' and the 'blue humanities,' exploring how the materiality and expanse of the sea create unique cultural insights distinct from land-based perspectives. Within these frameworks, the sea is recognised as a dynamic space with its own agency, challenging notions of it as merely a passive backdrop for human use.[3] This conceptualisation frames the sea as a significant agent in the formation and maintenance of culturally embedded seascapes. Historically, the European Age of Discovery (fifteenth-seventeenth centuries) catalysed new narratives around the ocean as vessels reached unfamiliar coastlines, encountering Indigenous communities and previously uncharted knowledge of the sea. The seas became conduits for exchange, altering understandings of weather, routes, and distant places through metaphor and interpretation.[4] These early interactions reflect the complex, often contested meanings associated with the ocean—a dynamic that persists across diverse cultural interpretations today.

While the sea has a tangible presence, it is equally understood through abstractions that differ across groups, whether among scientists, fishers, or surfers. Engaging with the ocean's materiality requires a nuanced approach, recognising that the sea exists as both a physical reality and a complex cultural symbol.[5] This calls attention to how people relate to the sea not merely through formal descriptions, such as wave patterns, but through analogies and shared meanings that traverse the sensory, cultural, and social.[6] In coastal communities, these connections form a diverse, culturally embedded seascape.

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[2] Jeremie Brugidou and Clouette Fabien, "'AnthropOcean': Oceanic perspectives and cephalopodic imaginaries moving beyond land-centric ecologies,' *Social science information*, 57, 3 (2018), 359-85.
[3] Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores, "Submerged bodies: The tidalectics of representability and the sea in Caribbean art," *Environmental Humanities*, 12, 1 (2020), 132-66.
[4] Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoth* (London: John Murray, 2011); Françoise Vergès, "L'heure des cyclones," Conference paper: *Ecotones 3. Indian Ocean: Ecotones, Contact Zones and Third Spaces.* Observatoire des Sociétés de l'Océan Indian (OSOI), Université de la Réunion (2018); Rosabelle Boswell, "The immeasurability of racial and mixed identity in Mauritius," *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, eds. Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall (Cham, CH: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 457-77.
[5] Stefan Helmreich, "Waves: An anthropology of scientific things," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* 4, 3 (2014), 265-84.
[6] Ibid.

Recent scholarship emphasises moving beyond one-dimensional value frameworks in understanding the ocean's role in society.[7] However, current narratives and policies often overlook the cultural and non-market values that coastal ecosystems provide to communities, viewing the sea largely in terms of tourism or livelihoods. Historically, maritime studies often positioned the sea as a passive setting for human activity, rarely acknowledging its active role. Philip E. Steinberg critiques this static view, advocating for an understanding of the sea as intersecting with human, nonhuman, and more-than-human elements.[8] This shift has inspired new ways of engaging with the sea's conceptual and experiential dimensions, such as through sensory-based narratives and metaphors of resistance tied to offshore spaces.[9] These perspectives reveal the sea's capacity to shape perceptions of identity and history. Reports from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the United Nations indicate that policymaking frequently neglects contributions that marine and coastal environments make to cultural identity, spirituality, and traditional practices.[10] Spirituality, in this context, refers to beliefs and practices that shape people's experiences of the world and the sea in meaningful ways.

This gap in understanding South Africa's marine and coastal areas in cultural and well-being terms signals a need for further research. This article draws on data collected between Algoa Bay and East London to examine how individuals perceive and engage with the ocean through lenses of spirituality, cultural identity, nature connection, access, loss, healing, and well-being. In so doing, it seeks to ensure that intangible cultural heritage practices are represented in marine management policies. This research explores how cultural connections to the ocean extend beyond aesthetic or recreational values, shaping diverse interactions within South African coastal communities.

To achieve this, we employed the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to analyse transcribed interviews, providing insights into participants' lived experiences

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[7] See, for example: Unai Pascual, Patricia Balvanera, Sandra Díaz, György Pataki et al., "Valuing nature's contributions to people: the IPBES approach," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 26 (2017), 7-16.

[8] Philip E. Steiberg, "Of other seas: Metaphors and materialities in maritime regions," *Atlantic Studies*, 10, 2 (2013), 156-69.

[9] Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Isabel Hofmeyr, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, and Preben Kaarsholm, "Durban and Cape Town as port cities: Reconsidering southern African studies from the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 3 (2016), 375-87.

[10] IPBES, *Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services* (Bonn, DE: IPBES Secretariat, 2019): https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673 [Accessed: 15 Jan. 2025]; Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, *Engaging Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and Embracing Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Marine Spatial Planning, Volume 2: Good Practices* [IOC Technical Series No. 189, Vol. 2] (Paris: UNESCO, 2024): https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390615 [Accessed: 15 Jan. 2025].

of the ocean. IPA is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences, prioritising the subjective meanings they attach to these lived phenomena within specific contexts.[11] This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how personal, cultural, and environmental factors shape these interpretations, offering a deeper appreciation of the complexities of human experience. The article proceeds by outlining the study sites, the historical context of coastal access in South Africa, methods, key findings on cultural affiliations with the sea, discussion, and conclusions.

HISTORY OF COASTAL DIVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

In 1950, the South African apartheid government enacted a policy of violent discrimination, the 1950 Population Registration Act.[12] The National Party implemented this law to institutionalise racial segregation and discrimination. It required that each South African be legally classified according to a racial category and also provided definitions for the created categories: (i) White person: a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a White person; but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a White person, is generally accepted as a Coloured person; (ii) Native/Black person: a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa; and (iii) Coloured person: a person who is not a White person or a Native. The Indian/Asian race group was initially part of the Coloured group, however, later became an official separate category through a different legislature in 1959.[13] In the modern state, however, racial labels remain contested, as some Coloured persons are dismissing their classification as Coloured and identifying as Khoe instead. According to Rafael Verbuyst, a greater number of people have been challenging the assumption that the Khoe are extinct by self-identifying as

[11] Abayomi Alase, "The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach," *International journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 5, 2 (2017), 9-19.
[12] Geoffrey Macdonald, "The emergence of racial politics in South Africa: Lessons for peacebuilding" (United States Institute of Peace, 2012): https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/files/case-study-competition/20130322-The-Emergence-of-Racial-Politics-in-South-Africa.pdf [Accessed: 15 Jan. 2025]; Whitney N. Laster Pirtle, "'Able to identify with anything': Racial identity choices among 'coloureds' as shaped by the South African racial state," *Identities*, 30, 3 (2023), 392-410.
[13] Miquel Pellicer and Vimal Ranchhod, "Understanding the effects of racial classification in Apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Development Economics*, 160 (2023), 102998, 3.

Khoe in the post-apartheid era. The term, 'Khoe revival,' has been suggested to describe this phenomenon, including by the Khoe themselves.[14]

Within the same year of 1950, the National Party implemented the Group Areas Act, which assigned different racial groups to special urban areas.[15] These acts led to numerous injustices designed to maintain White supremacy and restrict the rights of non-White South Africans. Additionally, non-Whites faced discrimination through job reservations, pay scales, education opportunities, healthcare, residential locations, and neighbourhood quality, all of which were designated to create productivity differentials across racial groups.[16] Government policy concerning beaches reflected this segregation, with apartheid enforced throughout the South African society. The Group Areas Act (No. 36 of 1966) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (No. 49 of 1953) divided beaches and seaside recreational facilities.[17] The most desirable beaches were allocated for the White population, while lower-quality beaches were designated for those outside the White racial classification.[18] This segregation created a disconnection from the sea for many communities, impacting cultural beliefs and practices related to the ocean.[19]

In 1989, all South African beaches were formally desegregated and opened to the public. However, the economic inequalities and social injustices of apartheid-era spatial planning remain embedded in South Africa's urban landscape.[20] We agree with Luyanda Mafumbu and colleagues' recent assertion that, despite apartheid's abolition in 1994 and the introduction of legislation, such as the Integrated Coastal Management Act (ICMA) in 2008, socio-economic and spatial apartheid persists, manifesting in the country's high levels of inequality.[21] The majority of South Africa's Black population continues to reside in the most impoverished urban settlements.

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[14] Rafael Verbuyst, "Khoisan consciousness: Articulating indigeneity in post-apartheid Cape Town," *Afrika Focus*, 35, 1 (2022), 213-27.
[15] Macdonald, "The emergence of racial politics."
[16] Pellicer and Ranchhod, "Understanding the effects of racial classification."
[17] Vicki Cadman, "Open beaches: The receding tide of apartheid," *Indicator South Africa*, 3, 3 (1986), 1-4.
[18] John Dixon and Kevin Durrheim, "Contact and the ecology of racial division: Some varieties of informal segregation," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 1 (2003), 1-23.
[19] Nasreen Peer, Ella-Kari Muhl, Kamila Janna, Michael Brown, Sinegugu Zukulu, and Philile Mbatha, "Community and marine conservation in South Africa: Are we still missing the mark?," *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 9 (2022).
[20] "Apartheid power in crisis," *South African History Online* (1998): https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/apartheid-power-crisis [Accessed: 20 Nov. 2024],
[21] Luyanda Mafumbu, Leocadia Zhou, and Ahmed Mukalazi Kalumba, "Exploring coastal access in South Africa: A historical perspective," *Sustainability*, 14, 7 (2022), 3971.

EASTERN CAPE COASTLINE

Archaeological evidence shows southern Africa as an area where native people used the ocean for their livelihood, recreation, and healing, as well as being a place for ancestral reverence for indigenous people.[22] The Khoe people are recognized as South Africa's earliest indigenous inhabitants, while Bantu-language speakers, including the ancestors of today's Nguni and Xhosa communities, arrived around the transition into to the Common Era (CE).[23] Furthermore, historical research indicates that before the arrival of White settlers in South Africa, who first established settlements in the seventeenth century at what is now Cape Town and primarily encountered Khoe populations, Indigenous people had open access to coastal resources.[24] It was only with the settlers' inland expansion into the eastern Cape during the late 17th to 19th centuries that they made significant contact with Bantu-language speakers, notably the Xhosa in present-day Eastern Cape Province. Khoe populations along the coast relied on crayfish, mussels, perlemoen, and seals as their basic foods.[25] Meanwhile, intertidal and other marine resources are still harvested by coastal Xhosa peoples in ways that are consistent with practices from the deep past.[26]

Coastal spaces have been highly contested in South Africa since the expansion of White settlement, colonialism, and apartheid. The spatial-political planning of the apartheid regime re-shaped shoreline access in South Africa, along with other aspects of environmental and socioeconomic management.[27] The apartheid regime dispossessed Indigenous people of their lands adjacent to the coast, including their traditional fishing rights to harvest marine resources.[28] For example, as Lance van Sittert noted over two decades ago, the implementation of apartheid-era policies led to the forced removal of Indigenous communities from prime coastal areas, such as District Six and Kalk Bay, severing their access to traditional fishing grounds and disrupting their livelihoods.[29] This

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.; Brigitte Pakenndorf, Hilde Gunnink, Bonny Sands, and Koen Bostoen, "Prehistoric Bantu-Khoisan language contact: A cross-disciplinary approach," *Language Dynamics and Change*, 7, 1 (2017), 1-46.
[24] Mafumbu et al., "Exploring coastal access in South Africa."
[25] Ibid.; World Wildlife Fund South Africa, *Oceans Facts and Futures: Valuing South Africa's ocean economy* (Cape Town, ZA: WWF-SA, 2016).
[26] Theresa Lasiak, "The shellfish-gathering practices of indigenous coastal people in Transkei: Patterns, preferences, and perceptions," *South African Journal of Ethnology*, 16, 4 (1993), 115-20; South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity, *Coastal Fishery Resources: An Easy Guide* (Grahamstown, ZA: SAIAB, 2004).
[27] Mafumbu et al., "Exploring coastal access in South Africa."
[28] M. Sowman, D. Scott, L.J.F. Green, M.M. Hara, M. Hauck, K. Kirsten, B. Paterson, S. Raemaekers, K. Jones, J. Sunde, and J.K. Turpie, "Shallow waters: Social science research in South Africa's marine environment," *African Journal of Marine Science*, 35, 3 (2013), 385-402.
[29] Lance van Sittert, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it: Comparing fisheries reforms in South Africa," *Marine Policy*, 26 (2002), 295-305.

dispossession not only undermined cultural practices but also entrenched systemic economic marginalization. Apartheid's mandatory segregation policies shaped social relations across numerous aspects of South African life.[30] Government policy concerning beaches reflected this segregation.

INTEGRATED COASTAL MANAGEMENT ACT (ICMA)

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) underscores citizens' rights to an environment that is protected for present and future generations. This constitutional commitment has led to legislation aimed at both environmental protection and safeguarding citizens' rights. The National Environmental Management Act: Integrated Coastal Management Act (ICMA, Act No. 24 of 2008), and its 2014 Amendment (Act No. 36 of 2014), establish statutory requirements for integrated coastal management. The ICMA promotes a sustainable approach to managing coastal resources, aiming to ensure equitable access, maximise economic use, and protect natural environments. Additionally, it seeks to safeguard and elevate the coastal environment as a shared heritage, raise public awareness of marine resource complexities, and encourage active public involvement in coastal management.

In Southern African contexts, the Indian Ocean, albeit relatively underexplored historically, represents a network of interconnected trade, migration, and cultural exchange. For example, Jeremy Prestholdt highlights the exchange of goods and cultural practices between East Africa and the Indian Ocean World, focusing on the Swahili Coast's trade networks with Arabia and India.[31] Similarly, Michael Pearson examines the Indian Ocean as a space of cultural and economic interaction, tracing connections between Southern Africa, Madagascar, and the broader Indian Ocean trading system, which included commodities such as ivory, gold, and slaves.[32] Material and intangible traces of these kinds of interactions endure in South Africa's coastal regions, influencing cultural memory and identity.[33] This layered history underscores the need to connect personal experiences of the sea with broader historical, social, and political contexts, particularly

[30] A.J. Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid*, Vol. XI (London: Routledge 1994); Dixon and Durrheim, "Contact and the ecology of racial division," 1-23.
[31] Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African consumerism and the genealogies of globalization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
[32] Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[33] Pedro Pombo, "Ruins, written walls and personal museums: Belonging, (dis)place and memories at two Indian Ocean margins," in *Gages d'affection, culture matérielle et domaine de l'intime dans les société d'Europe et de l'océan Indien*, eds. Florence Pellegry, Françoise Sylvos, and Sandra Saayman (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires Indianocéaniques, 2021), 145-68.

in a highly unequal society, such as South Africa. Exclusionary practices continue to limit Indigenous communities' engagement with cultural heritage and ritual practices linked to the ocean, highlighting the importance of inclusive approaches to marine resource management.

Mafumbu and colleagues note that, although the ICMA was intended to address historical imbalances, such as the exclusive use of coastal resources, gaining access to the coast remains a significant challenge.[34] This is largely because several private properties in South Africa are situated directly adjacent to coastal areas, restricting public entry. For example, as documented by Merle Sowman and colleagues, private estates and luxury developments along the Western Cape coastline continue to limit access for local communities.[35] Additionally, Bruce C. Glavovic highlights how unequal economic structures exacerbate these barriers, with affordability and accessibility remaining the primary obstacles for marginalized groups seeking to utilize coastal spaces.[36] While legislation no longer explicitly denies access to the coast, these socioeconomic factors perpetuate inequality, underscoring the importance of equitable coastal resource management.[37]

The actors along the Eastern Cape coastline are heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of the region's population. For instance, Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), located on the coastline, had an estimated population of approximately 1,200,000 in 2023. The population includes 30.6% Black African, 27.0% Coloured, 3.2% Indian/Asian, and 37.8% White individuals, with Afrikaans (40.2%), English (33.2%), and Xhosa (22.2%) as the primary languages. Port Alfred, a smaller coastal town, had a population of approximately 26,000 in 2023, while East London, another significant coastal hub, had a population of 338,000 in 2023. Colchester, a rural settlement near the Addo Elephant National Park, had a population of around 3,000 as of 2023. These statistics underscore the diversity of coastal communities, where cultural values, interpretations, and practices vary significantly. However, historical processes, such as land dispossession and exclusionary policies, have disconnected many Indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, ways of life, and cultural practices. The values that coastal communities ascribe to nature are vital parts of their cultures, identities, economies, and ways of life.

[34] Mafumbu et al., "Exploring coastal access in South Africa."
[35] Merle Sowman, Maria Hauck, Lance van Sittert, and Jackie Sunde, "Marine protected area management in South Africa: New policies, old paradigms," *Environmental Management*, 47, 4 (2011), 573-83.
[36] Bruce C. Glavovic, "The evolving role of coastal management in South Africa: Why blood is thicker than water." *Coastal Management*, 34, 3 (2006), 243-58.
[37] Mafumbu et al., "Exploring coastal access in South Africa."

These elements should be reflected in policy decisions surrounding the natural world. By integrating diverse cultural and spiritual values into marine policies, it is possible to foster strategies that honour both ecological sustainability and cultural heritage. These approaches can bridge differences, emphasizing shared goals, such as equitable access, resource conservation, and the preservation of intangible cultural practices tied to the sea. Moreover, addressing the unequal concentration of property ownership and access to coastal resources among wealthier, predominantly White groups is crucial for creating equitable coastal resource management systems that honour the histories and contributions of all communities.

Study Sites

This study focuses on Algoa Bay (Gqeberha), Colchester, Port Alfred, and East London, covering a substantial portion of the Eastern Cape coastline (see Figure 1). This area encompasses a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural settings, providing a diverse backdrop for exploring cultural and spiritual connections to the ocean. These locations were selected for their historical and cultural significance, reflecting a legacy of Indigenous use, apartheid-era exclusion, and post-apartheid dynamics of coastal access. The selected sites are deeply interwoven with South Africa's complex history of coastal access and cultural identity. Gqeberha has been an essential coastal hub for centuries, originally used by the Khoe and Xhosa peoples for fishing, foraging, and spiritual practices. Under colonial and apartheid regimes, access was restricted, disrupting Indigenous maritime traditions. Today, it remains a focal point for exploring connections between past injustices and current efforts to reclaim cultural heritage. Colchester holds ecological and spiritual importance for local Xhosa communities. It is also a site where apartheid-era spatial segregation remains evident, with community members recounting challenges in accessing the estuarine and marine environments due to private ownership and conservation policies. Located at the mouth of the Kowie River, Port Alfred reflects a history of contested access. Indigenous fishing rights were suppressed under colonial laws, and apartheid policies further restricted access to coastal and riverine resources. Despite this, Port Alfred is significant for its enduring cultural rituals tied to the ocean and the resilience of traditional knowledge systems. With its historical connection to the Buffalo River and adjacent coastal areas, East London was a critical site of colonial maritime activity. For the Xhosa people, nearby locations like Cove Rock are imbued with

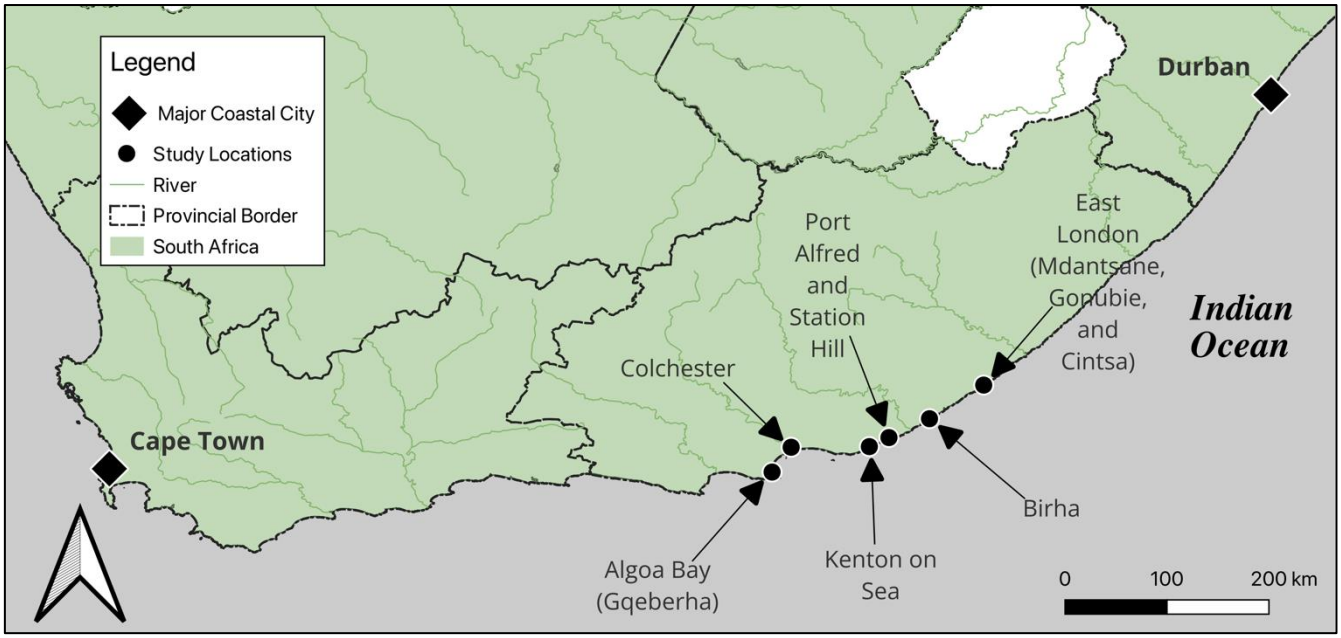

Figure 1. Map of study sites. Created by the Editors of the JIOWS.[38]

ancestral significance, serving as spaces for spiritual rituals and intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge. However, the apartheid legacy of exclusion continues to shape access and identity. By framing these sites within their broader historical and cultural contexts, we foreground the narratives of resilience, loss, and reclamation that underpin the lived experiences of coastal communities. This contextualisation is vital for understanding how the ocean serves as a space of cultural connection, spiritual renewal, and ongoing socio-political negotiation. Interviews were conducted in proportion to the size and diversity of the communities at each location, ensuring a representative understanding of the region's varied perspectives. The region's varied coastal actors, including recreational users, spiritual practitioners, and subsistence fishers, offer an opportunity to examine both shared themes—such as spirituality, cultural identity, and access-related challenges—and differences shaped by local histories, socio-economic contexts, and cultural practices.

In Algoa Bay, interviews were conducted in Gqeberha, located within the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality along South Africa's southern coast. The Sunday's River Estuary lies on the outskirts of Colchester, approximately 41 km from Gqeberha. Port Alfred, situated at the mouth of the Kowie River, is roughly 150 km from Gqeberha and

[38] The base map comes from Pål Wessel and Walter H.F. Smith, "A global self-consistent, hierarchical, high-resolution shoreline database," *Journal of Geophysical Research: Solid Earth*, 101, B4 (1996), 8741-3.

falls within the Ndlambe Municipality. Interviews in the Port Alfred area included Kenton-on-Sea and the Station Hill neighbourhood. Further along the coast, East London lies approximately 300 km from Gqeberha, near the Buffalo River. Interview sites in East London included Birha, Mdantsane, Gonubie, and Cintsa.

METHODS: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection took place as part of the South African Research Chairs Initiative, supported by a Community of Practice in the Ocean Accounts Framework under the oceans and cultural heritage theme. The project aims to explore identity, community, and heritage within coastal communities. Anthropological data collection methods were employed, including semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, as well as general observation and participation in community life. We provided written information detailing the research to participants and obtained informed consent before conducting the semi-structured interviews. Each interview, conducted face-to-face in participants' home environments (primarily outdoors), lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

Participants were identified and approached using snowball sampling, a method particularly effective in capturing diverse perspectives within coastal communities.[39] Initial contacts were made through local community leaders, organizations, and key informants familiar with the region's socio-cultural dynamics. These individuals helped connect us to a broader network of potential participants, ensuring representation across the varied coastal actors, including recreational users, spiritual practitioners, and subsistence fishers. Interviews were conducted in participants' home environments, primarily outdoors, fostering a comfortable and familiar setting that encouraged open dialogue. This approach allowed us to explore the perspectives of participants across urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts, reflecting the size and diversity of each community.

Both researchers are fluent in English, IsiXhosa, and Afrikaans, allowing them to address participant questions and clarify any details in a language participants understood. Participants' real names were withheld to protect their anonymity, with pseudonyms used throughout this research. This study was conducted in accordance with Nelson Mandela University's Policy on Research Ethics and the Institutional Regulatory Code of Conduct for Researchers. Figures 2 and 3 display a representation of the participants.

[39] Georgia Robins Sadler, Hau-Chen Less, Rod Seung-Hwan Lim, and Judith Fullerton, "Recruitment of hard-to-reach population subgroups via adaptations of the snowball sampling strategy," *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 12, 3 (2010), 369-74.

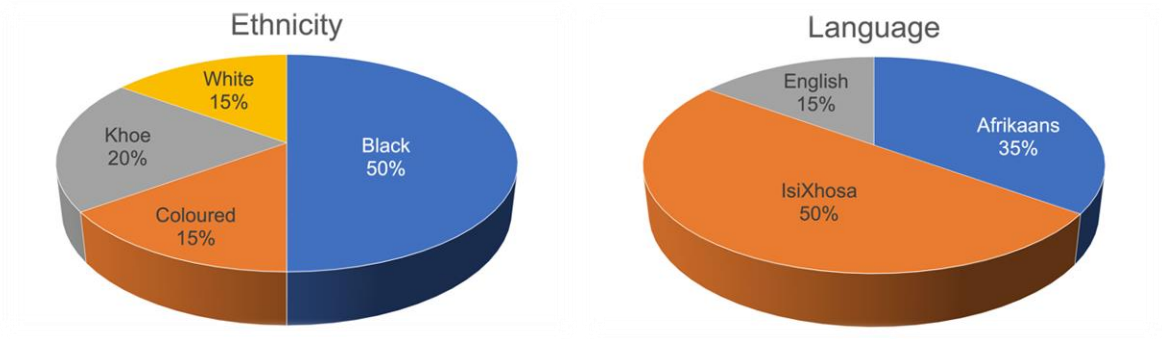

Figure 2: Pie graphs showing the ethnicity and language of the interviewed participants.

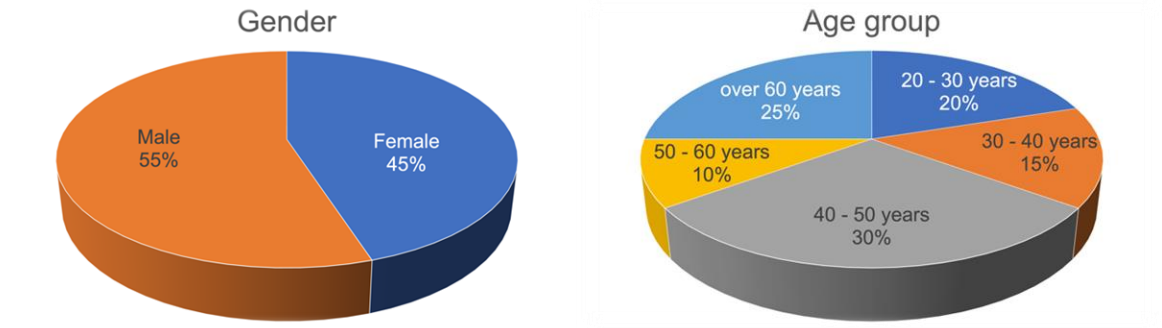

Figure 3: Pie graphs showing the gender and age of the interviewed participants.

The following questions were used to guide the participants in thought and memory:

1. What does the ocean mean to you?
2. How would you describe the ocean?
3. What is your first memory of the ocean?
4. Do you have any rituals/beliefs/practises relating to the ocean?
5. How does the ocean make you feel?

Qualitative data analysis was conducted for the interviews. We transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. Manual data analysis were undertaken, combining the Interpretive Phenomenological Method, thematic, and descriptive text analysis to examine the transcribed interviews. We did not edit the grammar of participants' responses, including direct quotations, in the summary in order to remain as faithful as possible to how the participants expressed themselves. Through the analysis process, the following themes were uncovered:

1. Spiritual and cultural expressions,
2. Nature interconnectedness,
3. Healing and overall human well-being, and
4. Access and loss

Findings and Discussion

The following ethnography presents reflections on the country's history and the ocean as a site of recovery for lived experiences that have otherwise faded from collective memory, illustrating the deep influence and resilience embedded in South African cultures.[40] Here, the ocean is portrayed as both movement and metaphor, capturing a gradual progression that reflects the slow pace of decolonisation efforts. Water serves as a metaphor, connecting groups with shared ideologies and behaviours, prompting questions about the extent to which meaningful transformation has occurred. The ebb and flow of tides suggest continuous change, yet also a sense of sameness. The vastness and darkness of the ocean depths evoke the feeling of being 'lost at sea', symbolising the uncertainty and stagnation experienced in untransformed spaces—especially where individuals feel unseen.

Spiritual and Cultural Expressions

This research highlights how coastal communities actively express spiritual and cultural connections to the ocean, drawing on long-standing traditions and practices rooted in their lived experiences. Similar observations have been made in reference to other oceanic regions: The sea is not only vital for livelihoods, but also offers an alternative perspective on the significance of the ocean to both historical and present-day identity. The maritime heritage of such communities is expressed in their spirituality—characterised by a sense of being 'with the sea' (a shared, interethnic space for rest and renewal)—and in their language, which, for example, reflects the deep integration of the sea into Creole and Mauritian identity.[41] The sea preserves memories and inspires aesthetic and sensory experiences, providing an alternative lens through which identity can be understood.

[40] Gabeba Baderoon, "The African Oceans—Tracing the sea as memory of slavery in South African literature and culture," *Research in African Literatures*, 40, 4 (2009), 89-107.
[41] Boswell, "The immeasurability of racial and mixed identity," 471.

Today, scholars view the sea as both universal and multifaceted, characterised by its fluidity and circulation, making it adaptable to diverse cultural meanings.[42] Conceptualised as both a life-like and tangible entity, the sea aligns with shifting cultural constructions, where water embodies contrasting qualities, described as 'sacred substance, life, refreshment, contaminant, grave.'[43] Early ethnographic depictions of the sea often took an impressionistic or romantic approach. Drawing on Franz Boas's idea that the colour of seawater is culturally constructed rather than objectively defined, Stefan Helmreich suggests that figures, such as Malinowski, Firth, Lévi-Strauss, and Mead, treated water less as a theoretical subject and more as a substance for contemplation beyond social theory.[44] This shift from implicit to explicit abstraction of the sea invites renewed exploration of its materiality, with implications across spirituality, nature, and culture.

According to Peter Waweru Wangai and colleagues, spiritual experiences in nature are enhanced by landscape features, water bodies, and species with spiritual significance, which often serve as venues for rituals and maintaining ancestral connections is integral to the diverse religious and spiritual practices found across African cultures, where water bodies are widely regarded as sacred.[45] These practices reflect a holistic worldview that sees natural resources as interconnected, embracing the entire ecosystem from land to sea and recognising its spiritual, cultural, and ecological significance. Rituals to be performed in these water spaces are sometimes communicated by ancestors through dreams. The following quotations reflect the ways in which some interviewed individuals engage with coastal ecosystems, including the ocean, rivers, and estuaries.

> **Ncedo, 62- year-old Xhosa male, who is a self-employed car mechanic**: I believe that our people who have transcended and are now ancestors are living depths of the ocean. These beliefs are part of our cultural heritage, I say this because sometimes before you undertake 'umcimbi' [a cultural event] one has to go to the to the ocean to have a conversation with the ancestors and discuss the cultural event with them.

[42] Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[43] Ibid., 95.
[44] Ibid., *passim*.
[45] Peter Wareru Wangai, Benjamin Burkhard, Marion Kruse, and Felix Müller, "Contributing to the cultural ecosystem services and human wellbeing debate: A case study application on indicators and linkages," *Landscape Online*, 50, 1 (2017), 1-27.

Nozuko, 32-year-old- Xhosa female, who has a calling to practise as a traditional healer: For a black person ‘ulwandle ngomnye umhlaba’ [the sea is a sacred place]. As black people we are a cultural people. I have a spiritual gift; I can see things and I dream. I therefore cannot just go to the sea, when I go before entering that space I have to throw in ‘imali emhlophe’ [coins]. Whether I am going for fun or to exercise, I just always have to throw in a coin. I have to respect my elders and the sacred space I am entering.

Siya, 40-year-old female Xhosa who practises as a traditional healer: There’s a river, we call it Inxarhuni, I always use that river because there are things that we need to see when you go to the river. There are voices we need to hear when you get to the river. I know there in Nxarhuni there are people, I’m not gonna call their names but as today we’re going to sleep by the cave because I’m doing a ritual, a thwasa lomdzawa, then she’s got to go to the cave today so we’re going to sleep at the cave today. Coming back tomorrow. There are caves around, but there are certain caves that you go there, and you get what you want. Because if I can just take you to the cave where there’s no people, it’s just a cave. That means I’ve done nothing. So I have to choose the cave for you, that you’re going to sleep at this river, you’re going to sleep with this cave. You go to sleep at this bush. Because at this bush you are going to get what you want, the connection. The connection between us, the sangomas (traditional healer) and the river and the seas and all of the other stuff that I’ve mentioned. When you get to the sea, especially in East London, there’s a place called Cove Rock. When you get to Cove Rock, you go up straight for 12 kilometers. You get the cave phaya (there) with a hole. It’s where ages ago our ancestors drowned there with a boat, even my ancestors were there. I mean, the Tshawe clan, they were there and when you get there and you ask, uphehle ibhekile yakho, uphethe islawu sakho (whisking your combination of water and traditional plants in your traditional container [‘ibhekile’] until a foam appears), you ask and utshisi mpepho yakho (burning your incense). And you ask deep down from your heart. You get what you want. So we know that if you go to Cove Rock, all the answers that you seek will be answered. The thing that we use it’s the river and the sea, even now I’ve about three amathwasa akhoyo apha endlini (trainees here at home) because we are going I think by next week or that week, two weeks, in two weeks’ time I’ve to take them to the to the sea, because their ears are running sea. When you do this, you just hear the waves and all this stuff. Your ears will just

> get water which is not dirty because if you can just do it this and you taste the sea. Okay. Yeah. So we using sea. We using the river. The connection between us, it's that when it's time for you to go for the initiation, I take you to the river, you go to sleep.
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> **Bandile, 50-year-old Xhosa Chief and community elder:** Firstly, we believe that our ancestors are in the ocean. That's why our people do not play or do silly things closer to the ocean because our ancestors are there, and they communicate through the ocean. Secondly, there are things that we use from the ocean such as seadog, there was one that was spotted here and was killed by traditional doctors because we know that they are good for protection. Even food like perlemoen, oysters and fish and many more. If a lady can't bare kids, we get her inkala 'crayfish' and we cook it with some herbs, and she will birth even twins afterwards. She can even eat the crayfish on its own without ant herbs, she'll be fertile. So, there is a lot that we get from the ocean, from communication with our ancestors to the herbs we get from it. Even twins have to toss a coin when they get to the beach because it is believed that the ancestors will claim them. Even sangomas can't just go to the beach. We believe that there are homes in the ocean, right underneath the water. Even when a crocodile would come here, I'd have to and consult a sangoma to find out what message the crocodile brought to me.

Customary marine resource use systems, upheld through taboos, myths, and traditional ecological knowledge, are a significant component of coastal communities' cultural heritage. In South Africa, including the study areas, a strong body of beliefs remains. As Bernard notes, African religious practitioners, particularly traditional divine healers known as 'amagqirha' or 'izangoma' (terms used interchangeably here), uphold these beliefs.[46] Some participants in this study referenced traditional healing practices, indicating that the ocean, rivers, and estuaries are used both for training and as part of traditional healer practices. Traditional healers continue to play an essential role in communities across South Africa, as evidenced by this study.

Furthermore, the sea and rivers are regarded as dwelling places of ancestors and as sites for spirit manifestations. Many community members, including those who may not actively participate in spiritual practices, acknowledge these traditions. Such knowledge

[46] Penelope S. Bernard, "'Living water' in Nguni healing traditions, South Africa," *Worldviews*, 17, 2 (2013), 138-49.

is typically passed down through generations, both orally and by observing elders engaged in ancestral interactions during cultural practices. There is profound respect for the ocean, rivers, and estuaries, often tied to spirituality in the form of ancestral reverence. People view themselves as integrated with coastal ecosystems, considering the ocean as part of themselves rather than a separate entity. Societies possess unique histories and worldviews; the absence of an experience in one context does not negate its existence in another.

Moreover, the ocean is understood as a space that extends beyond its visual presence to encompass a richer imaginative realm—often populated by figures such as sirens, mermaids, and sea creatures, alongside descriptions like 'the white lap of the great Sea-mother, ten thousand fathoms deep… aware of a hissing and a roaring, and thumping, and a pumping, as of all the steam engines of the world at once.'[47] In the fieldwork, references were made to the mythical Mamlambo—a water snake, often envisioned as a woman, said to grant wealth. Such imaginings illustrate the dynamic and symbolic seascapes of the Eastern Cape.[48]

Even in scientific contexts, the ocean is associated with sound, music, poetic echoes, and vibrations. This conception positions the sea as a repository of symbolism and a convergence of sound, art, and science in contemporary practices.[49] Music and sound within the sea operate as sonic elements immersed in water, an 'encompassing medium within which it is performed, recorded, played back, or listened to.'[50] Here, waves create dynamic patterns, rhythm, and structure.[51] The sensory experience of the sea becomes a vital part of cultural heritage, experienced through the ears as much as through other senses.[52] In Charles Zerner's work, *Sounding the Makassar Strait*, the calls across waters

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[47] Jacques Cousteau, *The Silent World* (New York: Harper and Brothers 1953); James M. Long, "Absolute calm two miles down," *San Diego Evening Tribune*, 1 Oct 1953; Victoria A. Kaharl, *Water Baby: The story of Alvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Stefan Helmreich, "Underwater music: Turning composition to the sounds of science," *The Oxford Handbook of Social Studies*, eds. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Basel: Oxford University Press, 2011); Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond.* Princeton: Zone Books, 2011).

[48] Felicity Wood, "Wealth-giving mermaid women and the malign magic of the market: Contemporary oral accounts of the South African Mamlambo," in *Vernacular Worlds, Cosmopolitan Imagination*, eds. Stephanos Stephanides and Stavros Karayanni (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2015), 59-85.

[49] Helmreich, "Underwater music," 1-28; Stefan Helmreich, "Nature/Culture/Seawater," *American Anthropologist*, 113, 1 (2011), 132-44.

[50] Helmreich, "Underwater music," 3.

[51] David B. Knight, *Landscapes in Music: Space, place, and time in the world's great music* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

[52] Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, "Sound studies: New technologies and music," *Social Studies of Science*, 34, 5 (2004), 635-48; Cyrus C.M. Mody, "The sounds of science: Listening to laboratory practice," *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, 30, 2 (2005), 175-198; Charne Lavery and Meg Samuelson, "Literature sheds light on the history and mystery of the Southern Ocean," *The Conversation* (6 Oct. 2019): https://theconversation.com/literature-sheds-light-on-the-history-and-mystery-of-the-southern-ocean-122664 [Accessed: 16 Jan. 2025].

add to the anthropomorphic dimensions of the ocean, illustrating how soundscapes contribute to its cultural meaning.[53]

Nature Interconnectedness

People and nature are deeply interconnected, a relationship widely acknowledged within several African communities. What 'modern' or 'Western' science may interpret as conservation, these communities often view as a matter of social and spiritual responsibility. Ecosystems such as the ocean, rivers, and estuaries are regarded as sacred, serving as a bridge between humanity and the spiritual realm. This reverence fosters a commitment to avoid actions that harm or degrade natural resources, such as pollution. This understanding of the interdependence between people and nature is a fundamental aspect of many of our interviewees' responses:

> **Bulelwa, 65-year-old-Xhosa female, who used to work as a care giver at an elderly home, but is now retired**: Firstly, when you get to the ocean, you experience kindness, the ocean is kind, it is welcoming, it is loving. To me it means there are elders residing at the ocean, there are friends residing in the ocean. I once even saw a fish swimming close to me so close lovingly. The ocean is like a mother bathing and fondling a child, loving a child. The ocean has natural salts that heal you, that love you. Even if you do not have a mother, the ocean gives you love, and it gives you warmth. It is love. It also takes away burdens. It also opens doors where doors are closed. It solves problem. The ocean is scary but loving.
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> **Hennie, 50-year-old Khoe male, who works as a council leader**: We grew up near the sea. We are fisherman men. We lived out of the sea and our forefathers, they just put their houses close to the sea and that is where they found love in the sea, and we also adapted as children to that. The whole ocean, from that side we walk past and what are we doing now. It's in our blood now. It cannot go away from us. You always feel the thing... like fishing too, I said to my elder the other day and to the Chief, Chief said we must go fishing. I say Chief I have a cold I won't be able to go. But my heart is burning, I want to go because it is my interest

[53] Charles Zerner, "Sounding the Makassar Strait: The poetics of an Indonesian marine environment," in *Culture and the Question of Rights: Forests, coasts, and seas in Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Zerner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 56-108.

that I am interested in being there. So, we grew up at the sea and don't want to stay away from that place.

Greg, 40-year-old white male, chef, restaurateur and surfer: From a personal perspective, it's a place where I go to re-energise, uh, clear my mind, um, and just, just enjoy the surf and watch the beauty of it. And then from a work perspective, um, it's, it's something that, that we use. Um, to obviously get food from and, and for creative sense, um, just looking at reefs in the different colours and rock formations and, and waves breaking. It creates a sense of, of creativity.

Massie, 40-year-old white female, angler and works in the hospitality industry: I like the quietness and I like the clean air and the fact that my neighbours aren't so close to me. So all you have is the sun, the sea and the outsides and the river. So that's all you have. So if that's what you like and you like nature, you're at the right place.

Rosi Bradiotti observes that 'it is important to keep in mind that the binary distinctions between nature and culture, humans/non-humans have been foundational for European thought since the Enlightenment,' but this is not necessarily the case in extra-European cultures.[54] In the diverse philosophies of Africa, many traditions hold that all entities possess a soul, encompassing both human and non-human beings within an interconnected and shared essence of existence.[55] Bradiotti further suggests that it is time to learn from the Global South regarding human and non-human relations. We concur, particularly in a context like South Africa, where these interactions and knowledges persist, yet remain marginalised despite the nation's rich diversity of people, cultures, values, and belief systems. As Gillian B. Ainsworth and colleagues highlight, understanding cultural values requires recognising how people's shared histories, places, and practices are reflected in their ways of life.[56]

The participants' expressions and descriptions of the ocean—as kind, loving, welcoming, re-energising, inspirational, and healing—illustrate a profound connection and reliance on

[54] Rosi Bradiotti, "'We' are in this together, but we are not one and the same," *Journal of bioethical inquiry*, 17, 4 (2020), 466.
[55] Ibid., 465-9
[56] Gillian B. Ainsworth, Jasper O. Kenter, Sebastian O'Connor, Francis Daunt, and Juliette C. Young, "A fulfilled human life: Eliciting sense of place and cultural identity in two UK marine environments through the community voice method," *Ecosystem Services*, 39 (2019), 100992.

the sea in many dimensions. Attributing these human qualities to the ocean suggests that participants view it as an almost human-like presence in their daily lives. This connection is expressed through the experiences of living by the sea, drawing livelihoods from it, and 'having the sea in their blood.' Such relationships demonstrate that the human-ocean connection extends beyond a simple ecological resource, embedding itself in 'group identities, norms, and values for Indigenous and local peoples.'[57]

Healing and Overall Human Well-Being

Marine ecosystems offer numerous benefits to coastal communities worldwide, including food, cultural and spiritual connections, recreational opportunities, and aesthetic value. Literature has framed the relationship between cultural practices and the marine environment as cultural ecosystem services (CES).[58] CES are associated with the intangible benefits that people derive from their interactions with nature. Belinda Wheaton and colleagues note that the links between marine ecosystems and human health and well-being remain relatively underexplored.[59] For the purposes of this article, health is defined in line with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) 1948 description as 'a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'[60]

Coastal communities, including those under review, are diverse, and this heterogeneity requires contextual understanding, as cultural and spiritual values, dimensions of well-being, and their interpretations can vary significantly. Understanding the cultural context within which connections to the sea are made is essential for fostering human well-being.

> **Vuyokazi, 60-year-old Xhosa female, who is unemployed:** My first belief is that without the ocean we will not be able to live and do certain things in life, for example the ocean is healing. If one has a calling to be a 'sangoma' they are

[57] Nathan Deutsch, *Human Dependency on Nature Framework: Qualitative Approaches Background Study* (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN and CEESP, 2014), 6.
[58] Robert Fish, Andrew Church, and Michael Winter, "Conceptualising cultural ecosystem services: A novel framework for research and critical engagement," *Ecosystem Services*, 21, B (2016), 208-17; João Garcia Rodriques, Alexis J. Conides, Susana Rivero Rodriguez, Saša Racevich et al., "Marine and coastal cultural ecosystem services: Knowledge gaps and research priorities," *One Ecosystem*, 2 (2017), e12290.
[59] Belinda Wheaton, Jordan TeAramoana Waiti, Rebecca Olive, and Robin Kearns, "Coastal communities, leisure and wellbeing: Advancing a trans-disciplinary agenda for understanding ocean-human relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 2 (2021), 450.
[60] World Health Organization, "Health and wellbeing" (2025): http://bit.ly/42h2cd8 [Accessed: 17 Jan. 2025].

required to go to the ocean. Yes, in my family there were individuals who were traditional healers and our belief was that they needed to go to the ocean to be healed and to complete their calling. Sometimes when I have problems I go to the ocean with 'imali emhlophe' (coins) and tobacco to pledge 'ukurhuma' to the ancestors. Even my kids know this. Even when I get myself seawater I never bring it into the house, I leave it outside. That is a form of respect from my side, not wanting to mix ocean and terrestrial.

Lungile, 50-year-old Xhosa male who works in the tourism sector: We use the sea water to cleanse ourselves as the Xhosa people, that is what we believe in. We cleanse ourselves with it and when I want to cleanse myself, I go to the beach to collect sea water and then drink a mug of the sea water. The sea water will then do the work. Exactly, it is medication.

Kelly, 30 year old white female and practising tattoo artist: When I came to the ocean, I noticed a huge change in my health and my wellbeing just being close to the water. A lot of people say that just being near the ocean is healing. I draw my inspiration from the same pool of imagination that everybody does. The great source, that thing we call God, the universe. I use animals and nature as my departure points to tell stories about us. So since I've come to Chintsa, I'm having my own awakening as a human being, alive, as a human. And at this time, and possibly many times before and many to come and I'm attracted to the energy and the spiritual healing of this place. So the stories of who the people are that live here and their connection with the ocean and the animals in the ocean, there's something in Chintsa that attracts people or kicks them out. There's something magic going on here. It's a little a power porthole of some kind, so that image is kind of just representative of the old ways and the people and the language that they get from this place and the connection to the old world and the ancestral ways, where we all come from and we all come from the same place, but we have different colours. Everything on our planet vibrates with some kind of frequency and if you can tune into that, you don't need healing. You're already imbalanced. But if there's imbalance, you can find something that'll match it.

The sea evokes a sense of wonder, capable of prompting either uplifting thoughts or feelings of fear. Large waves breaking on the shore may serve as a source of refuge or

induce a sense of panic. For some, immersing in the cool waves feels like entering another world, where the ocean stimulates all senses to create both physical and mental memories. These memories can become deeply imprinted, offering comfort and joy when recalled, much like a mental sanctuary for daydreaming. In this way, the sea is often personified as magnificent, powerful, and a source of joy.

Participants expressed that those who connect deeply with the sea perceive it as part of their very souls, with a unique respect for its healing and cleansing properties. They emphasised taking only what they need from the sea, viewing it as a reciprocal relationship. Beyond seawater's role in healing and wellness, marine flora and fauna are also valued for their medicinal and nutritional properties. Traditional practices, social norms, and attachments to both tangible and intangible culture around the ocean are juxtaposed against recreational behaviours and amenities, illustrating varied perspectives on the ocean's role as a source of healing.

Access and Loss

Even with progressive legislation such as the ICMA in South Africa, access to ocean spaces remains restricted for many coastal communities, and true social inclusion is yet to be fully realised. This issue is particularly evident in the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), as highlighted by participants in our study. MPAs can weaken local connections to the ocean and negatively impact livelihoods.[61] The challenge of coastal exclusion and limited beach access is not unique to South Africa; in Namibia, for instance, individuals face restricted access to coastal areas due to mining activities and, in some cases, national parks such as the Skeleton Coast National Park. Additionally, private developments have further complicated access, particularly for economically disadvantaged urban communities, who find it increasingly difficult to access and enjoy their coastline.[62]

Several factors can hinder the use of ocean spaces, including issues of accessibility, affordability, safety concerns, and environmental impact. In South Africa, economic barriers are a major factor influencing both access and the experience of loss regarding these spaces.[63]

[61] Peer et al., "Community and marine conservation in South Africa."
[62] Mafumbu et al., "Exploring coastal access in South Africa."
[63] Ibid.

Bandile: The ocean is very important to us hence we fought to regain ownership of this land.

Michelle, 20-year-old Khoe female: You could drive to the edge of the sea; and stand on top of the embankment then you just walk down a bit, and you are at the sea. You stand on the cliff of the sea, then you walk down, but now it has now been stopped and now taken further. We must park up there now. Then you walk through the Addo National Park. You must walk through there, the problem being that have taken us further away from the sea, because now many people can't buy permits, now they can't don't go to the sea. First, we went without a permit. We only got a bush book permit which we paid R10 for that special permit because if they find you there, they will lock you up and chase you away from the sea. They are taking us away now, but the poachers are coming in.

Lungile: Well, it was 1980 the first time I saw the ocean the farmer took me to the sea. I asked him is this the water. He said man this is a lot of water . I said that is the first time I saw the sea and that was in Kenton on sea and then I came to live here in Port Alfred . I did not go and swim . Around 1988 I went to swim and put my feet in the sea. I ended up swimming. The sea is something people should look after because there are things living in the sea. I can remember it so well I was coming from school I went to West-Beach there was no people then I decided to go to the sea. I did not see any police. The first beach I swim was like something east coast of Port Alfred something like 3 km east from Port Alfred . That was where black people were allowed to swim at the beach, coloured people they used to swim. Here in town it was very difficult to swim until 1993.

Chief, 50 year old Khoe Chief: The high-water mark. That's where you stop. You are the owner up until the high-water mark. I am talking next to the river. But now they have jetties built into the river, so you don't have access next to the river. I climb through the wire there. Then, according to the owner, I am on his property, but the hood water mark is far above. So, things like that are what we are deprived off. We cannot go fishing freely on the river or go where we want to go because the lands now belong to them. That's why you heard me say that when the government is done with its process, we as the leaders of the Khoe-San here in Station Hill, we don't want to be here anymore. We want our own village where we can practice

> our culture, where we can keep livestock, where we can freely go to the sea and do as our parents did before, because everything now is a permit this way and it's a permit there and it's this and it's that.

Water serves as a powerful metaphor for human emotion, entwined with themes of power, race, access, history, and religion. A striking contrast exists between the predominantly positive, enjoyable perceptions of water among white individuals and the more negative, distressing associations expressed by Black communities—a reflection of historical disadvantage rooted in colonisation and the loss of cultural rights, knowledge systems, and rituals.[64] The symbolism of salt here evokes the weight of decolonisation efforts that aim to acknowledge and address these inequalities without erasing the past.

Participants expressed the profound sense of loss associated with restricted access to water spaces, shaped by apartheid-era exclusions, beach privatisation, MPAs, national park regulations, and permit requirements. Feelings of sadness and grief imbue the sea with a life-like, omnipotent presence, as it carries ancestral secrets and memories of those who came before. The sea, both feared and respected, is also seen as a vessel for the ancestors. Its vastness evokes an image of the ocean as an absorbent repository, holding and preserving generational memories. The echo of ocean sounds resonates with a deep sadness and sense of loss, forming an intimate dialogue between the sea—as the knowing custodian—and the individual as both the sufferer and bearer of this inherited loss. In this way, the sea becomes intertwined with the identity and suffering of those connected to it.

CONCLUSION

The ocean symbolises repressed historical trauma, embodying routes of slavery, colonialism, and pivotal historical events. It becomes a space of both the unknowable and the spiritual, offering an arena where past narratives are re-imagined, and where identity and influence can be explored along its depths. While poetic representations of the ocean may intersect with reality, the symbolic meanings—spanning themes of water, spirits, and culture—highlight distinct aesthetic connections to the deep ocean that are often overlooked in broader narratives.

Indigenous and local knowledge, particularly regarding spiritual values, remains underrepresented in coastal management and decision-making processes. This oversight

[64] Ademola Oluborode Jegede and Pumzile Shikwambane, "Water 'Apartheid' and the significance of human rights principles of affirmative action in South Africa," *Water*, 13, 8 (2021), 1104.

of cultural heritage, especially spirituality, hampers a comprehensive understanding of how disruptions affect both community well-being and the health of ecosystems. This oversight means missed opportunities for sustainable coastal zone management, where the interdependence between cultural practices and resource management is crucial. Given the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems, pressures on marine resources influence not only environmental health but also the physical and spiritual well-being of coastal communities.

The United Nations Scientific Advisory Board emphasises the importance of recognising diverse knowledge systems for addressing the world's challenges and advancing sustainable development.[65] Just as biodiversity supports ecosystem resilience, cultural diversity reinforces social resilience, an essential factor in sustainable resource management. Acknowledging diverse values within coastal ecosystems requires a similarly diverse approach to thinking, learning, and adapting to evolving cultural contexts rooted in lived experiences.

This article illustrates the varied values held by coastal communities in South Africa's Western and Eastern Cape Provinces, shaped by regional and demographic differences. For instance, interviewees from rural areas tended to emphasise spiritual and subsistence connections to the ocean, while those in urban settings often highlighted recreational or economic aspects. Age and cultural background also influenced perspectives, with older participants frequently invoking ancestral and ritualistic ties, whereas younger respondents were more likely to focus on contemporary challenges such as access and environmental concerns. While subsistence fishers were included in the participant pool, their responses predominantly centred on cultural and environmental concerns rather than specific economic challenges. However, their reliance on the ocean for livelihood informed their perspectives on access and sustainability, which aligns with broader themes of resilience and interconnectedness identified in this study.

While our sample size does not allow for definitive conclusions about the extent of these divergences, it underscores the importance of further research to explore how regional, cultural, and demographic factors shape the values communities ascribe to the sea. We argue that coastal decision-making must be inclusive, taking into account both the shared concerns and the unique perspectives of stakeholders, including their diverse belief systems and cultural practices. As Kara E. Pellowe and Heather M. Leslie note in

[65] United Nations Scientific Advisory Board, *Indigenous and Local Knowledge(s) and Science(s) for Sustainable Development: Policy brief by the Scientific Advisory Board of the UN Secretary-General* (France: UNESCO, 2016): https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246104 [Accessed: 16 Jan. 2025].

reference to their case study focusing on Peru, a holistic understanding of the values that marine ecosystems produce is essential for crafting policies that balance competing priorities and accurately reflect community perspectives.[66] Although our findings provide significant insights into the spiritual connections between coastal communities and the marine environment in Colchester and Gqeberha, they do not aim to generalise these experiences. Rather, we echo with Pellowe and Leslie's call to incorporate diverse social and cultural values into marine management to develop effective policies that safeguard the future of all marine ecosystems. Within the South African context, this involves grappling with the legacy of historical inequalities, such as apartheid-era exclusions, alongside the enduring socio-economic disparities that continue to shape coastal access and resource use. Unlike Peru, where marine management often centres on small-scale fishing communities, South Africa's approach must integrate the perspectives of a broad range of coastal stakeholders, including Indigenous groups, urban recreational users, and subsistence fishers, while also recognising the deep spiritual and cultural connections to the ocean unique to this region.

In South Africa, evaluating these values require participatory frameworks that elevate the voices of marginalised groups, particularly rural and Indigenous communities. Effective policy implementation could take the form of co-management agreements with traditional leaders, recognition of customary marine rights, and the integration of spiritual practices and beliefs into Marine Protected Area (MPA) frameworks. Moreover, policies must address the structural barriers of affordability and access that limit equitable use of the coast. By embracing these distinct dimensions, assessing and incorporating diverse values into marine management reflects the specific cultural, historical, and ecological realities of South Africa.

[66] Kara E. Pellowe and Heather M. Leslie, "Ecosystem service lens reveals diverse community values of small-scale fisheries," *Ambio*, 50 (2021), 586-600.