

Essay Title: At the Edge of the Sea: changing behaviour to protect endangered species (specifically cetaceans)

Student Number: 1803668 Paula Diane Wilson

Course Title: BA (Hons) Design Crafts

Word Count: 1634/1500

Tutor: Julia Lockheart

Module: ADAD4019 - Ways of Perceiving

Exhibition Title:

At the Edge of the Sea: changing behaviour to protect endangered species
(specifically cetaceans)

The *At the Edge of the Sea* exhibition relates to the avoidable extinction of cetaceans in the United Kingdom. Cetaceans are a class of marine mammals (including whales, dolphins and porpoises) which are at risk due to a continued disregard towards the conservation of our seas (The Guardian, 2016). This exhibition aims to demonstrate that, without an urgent change in our behaviour, we are at risk of only being able to view our native sea life as skeletons in a museum (as we now view dinosaurs or dodos – see fig.1 below).



Figure 1. *The Lost World of the Dodo*, 2020

In order to demonstrate the importance of conserving our seas and sea creatures for future generations, reference will be made to The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), Small Cetacean abundance in the North Sea (SCANS) project, as mentioned by Burns and Gillespie (2003, p.284) and several theories which will include *Blue Mind Theory* as discussed by Nichols (2014) and *Proxemics* as developed by Hall (1968).

The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) calls for us to '*support sustainable behaviour*' and '*play our part*' within one of its seven well-being goals: 'A Globally Responsible Wales' (p.3). This is the responsibility of all inhabitants of Wales and we must each play our part in striving for a better future.

The SCANS Project of 1994 identified the following species:

- Harbor porpoise
- Bottlenose dolphin
- White-beaked dolphin
- White-sided dolphin
- Common dolphin
- Striped dolphin
- Long-finned pilot whale
- Risso's dolphin
- Killer whale

At that time, the last five of these were already considered to be extremely rare (Burns, and Gillespie, 2003, p. 284) and, in 2020, we have yet to control this continuous decline.

In the book, *Blue Mind* (Nichols, 2014), the author discusses the scientific theory that demonstrates being in, or under or near water has a positive effect on well-being and mental health, that by looking after our oceans they'll look after us. Referring to a literary classic, Nichols aims to show that the healing power of water was recognised as far back as 1851 (Nichols, 2014, p. 139).

One of the most famous first lines of an American novel consists of three simple words: "Call me Ishmael." But in the rest of the first paragraph of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's protagonist describes the power of water to heal his mental state...

Further research into the beneficial effects of water on well-being has been undertaken in the UK by Deborah Cracknell, an Honorary Research Fellow of the Medical School, in her book *By the Sea* (Cracknell, 2019).

American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, developed the concept of proxemics which details how peoples behaviour and reactions are affected in relation to their culturally defined personal space (See Figure 2).

Virtually everything that man is and does is associated with space. Man's sense of space is a synthesis of many sensory inputs: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and thermal. (Hall et al, 1968, p. 83-108)

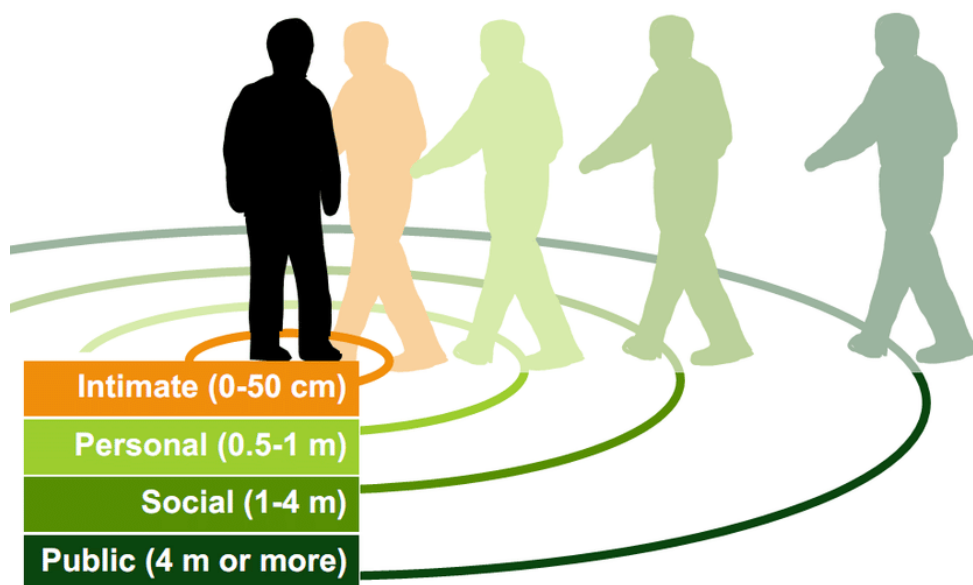


Figure 2. Hall's (1968) Proxemic Zones

The exhibition will be based at Pwll Du on the Gower Peninsula (see fig.3 below). This site has been specifically chosen as it is one of the more remote beaches in this area and is not easily accessible by car.

There are several footpaths leading to Pwll Du, however visitors to the exhibition will be directed to the cliff path route because the visitor must be prepared to put in the effort to access the exhibition. By using this route, they will catch glimpses of the sculptures as they make their way down to the beach for the final reveal.

The viewer will initially begin their journey within the area of *Public Space*, moving through *Social Space* and *Personal Space*, before finally entering *Intimate Space*: these are the proxemic zones detailed in Hall's theory (Hall, 1968) (see fig.2 above). Encouraging the viewer to cross the zones from Public Space (4m or more) to Intimate Space (0-50 cm) aims to reinforce the feeling that the closer they get, the more intimate the experience and thereby deepening their connection to the subject. Connecting to their emotions is an important part of the message of this exhibition and, even if it makes them feel uncomfortable, they are at least feeling something!

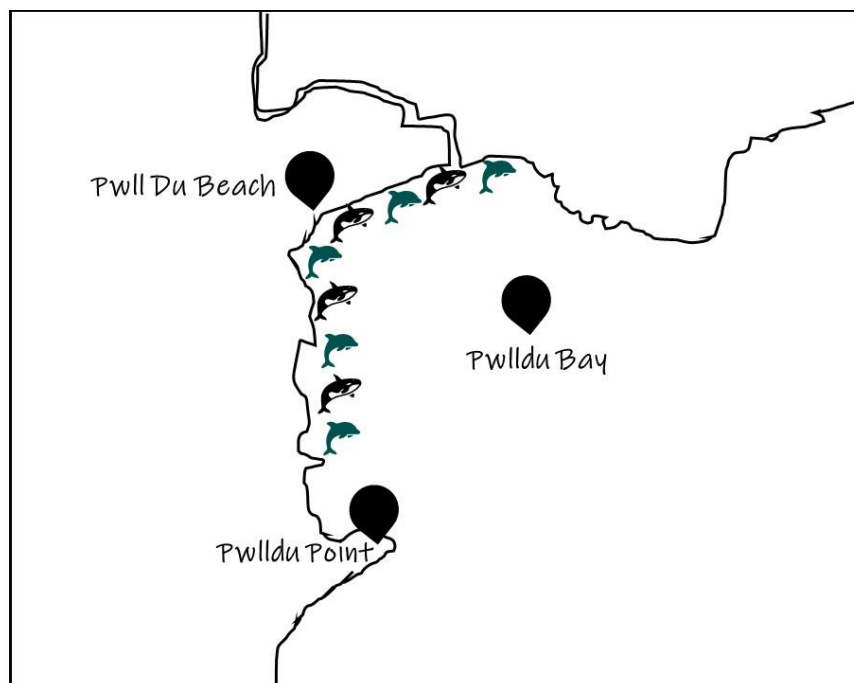


Figure 3. Pwll Du Exhibition Map (Wilson, 2020)

My personal manifesto (Ways of Thinking, 2018-19) details my belief that my work should be accessible to all, wherever possible. As access to the exhibition would be strictly limited to protect the beach environment, and to ensure that this exhibition complies with the manifesto statement for those with disabilities, the following would be implemented:

- Live streaming of the exhibition
- Voiceover recording for visually impaired (available in English and Welsh)
- Signed support for hearing impaired
- Online infographics containing conservation facts in addition to links to relevant organisations for further support and advice

The exhibition will consist of a series of ice sculptures, representing each of the small cetaceans listed in the SCANS Project. By their very nature, each of these nine sculptures will have a limited life span and visitors will be permitted to engage and interact with the sculptures during this period. It is intended that a strong emotional connection is formed between the visitor and the sculpture during this time; it is during this time that the ice cetacean will emit sounds as it cracks and change form as it slowly melts.

The inspiration behind this exhibition began with a visit to Olafur Eliasson's *In Real Life* at Tate Modern (2019). Further research led to the discovery of Eliasson's Iceberg Outdoor Exhibitions - Inviting the Public to Contemplate the Devastating Effects of Climate Change whereby he shipped thirty icebergs to London. (Artnet.com, 2018)

It is also intended that the visitor experiences a sense of 'having arrived too late', a sense of responsibility and a sense that, on this occasion, they cannot prevent the inevitability of this loss. The ice sculptures represent the continued loss of cetaceans in our waters as a result of human behaviour. Once these sculptures have melted, they will no longer exist, the remaining water will be absorbed by the sea and the created life form will have disappeared, leaving no trace that it ever existed. The emotional connection between the viewer and the location of this exhibition is ably illustrated by Relph (2007):

[Significance or Spirit of Place is] not an objective quality, or one accepted primarily as being inherent in a place, but reflects fundamental relationships between people and places. The Spirit of Place is the outcome of human inspiration, creativity, endeavour, and validates on-going interventions to preserve specific architecture, archaeology, cultural landscapes and historic urban environments with their associated memories, stories and traditions.

Relph invokes here the connections we make with places and, even though we do not always consciously recognise them, we feel them instinctively whether by visiting or through imagery (see fig.4 below).



Figure 4. Pwll Du (Wilson, 2018)

Society may want to help and to make a difference, but do not know how to do so. Education is key, and we now live in an age of technology whereby a myriad of information is readily accessible. For example:

- Free online courses:
 - Ocean Challenges and Pollution (National Geographic, 2020)
- Organisations and societies, who engage through events, websites, and online platforms (such as Instagram)
 - Surfers Against Sewage (www.sas.org.uk, 2020)
 - Marine Conservation Society (www.mcsuk.org, 2020)
- Television
 - Blue Planet II (BBC, 2018)
- Artists



Figure 5. Repainted historic Whaling Wall 75 in Cleveland, Ohio



Figure 6. The Art of Jim Warren (Warren, 2020)

The 2020 Eco-Visionaries Exhibition, hosted by Royal Academy of Arts, again utilised the talents of Olafur Eliasson to raise awareness of our actions upon the planet. As we enter this new decade it is hoped that continued awareness of our impact on our planet will deepen and society will address their actions (and indeed, inactions) before it is too late.

This timely exhibition brings together international practitioners including Olafur Eliasson Hon RA, Ant Farm, and SKREI amongst others. Their provocative responses are a wake-up call, urging us to acknowledge and become conscious of our impact on our environment (Artnet.com, 2018).

At the time of writing, COVID-19 is having an impact on the way we live and much has been made of how we are now allowing the planet to take the time to heal. The Guardian newspaper reported on Greta Thunberg's Earth Day interview:

The Swedish climate activist said the strong global response to Covid-19 demonstrated how quickly change could happen when humanity came together and acted on the advice of scientists (The Guardian, 2020).

We must however continue to question. The current wave (pun intended!) of ‘good news’ stories demonstrate that we all too readily pat ourselves on the back – even when it has not been earned.

As the normally bustling canals of Venice became deserted amid pandemic quarantines, viral social media posts claimed swans and dolphins were returning to the waters. It wasn't true. The canal water, nonetheless, is clearer because of the decrease in boat activity. (National Geographic, 2020)



Figure 7. Venice Canals

It appears then that we still need to challenge apathy. We need to choose change. Artists and designers are continually promoting this need for change through exhibitions (Eco-Visionaries, 2020), artwork and donations (Under the Skin, 2015) (see fig.8 below) and funding of education and research (Wyland Foundation, 1993). Raising awareness in this way has the potential to emotionally connect and to facilitate the change that is so desperately needed.

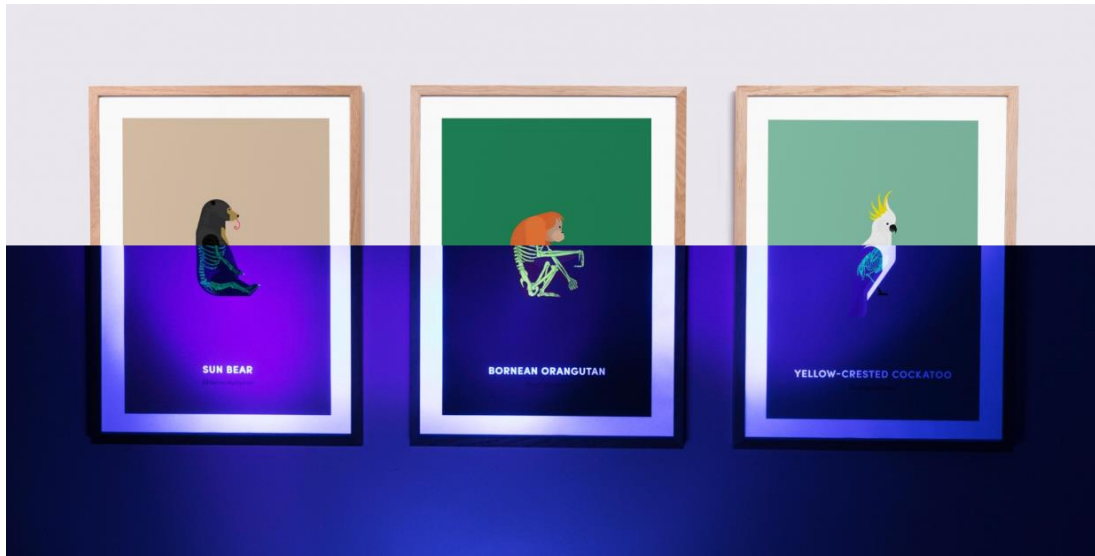


Figure 8. Handcrafted screenprints incorporating UV inks

“We believe in more than just ‘raising awareness’ of endangered species, we believe in taking action, positive change and education.” (Under the Skin, 2015)

End

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Figure 2. Proxemic Zones Edward T. Hall, Available at:
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Figure 3: Pwll Du Exhibition Map, Digitally created image, Wilson, P.D., 2020

Figure 4. Pwll Du, Photographic Images, Wilson, P.D., 2018

Figure 5. Repainted historic Whaling Wall 75 in Cleveland, Ohio, Wyland, 2019
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Figure 7. Photograph by Andrea Pattar, AFP, Getty. Available at:
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