

# Oceans

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## OCEANS

There is more ocean on our planet than there is land, but we still know little about it. The first ship sailed all the way around the world less than five hundred years ago. And the first journey to the deepest sea floor was little more than fifty years ago.

Great waves move across the surface of the ocean, and currents of cold and warm water move past our continents. The biggest animals on our planet swim around the Southern Ocean, and in the hottest parts of the ocean we can find animals that live without light. It is a strange world – and we are just beginning to know it . . .

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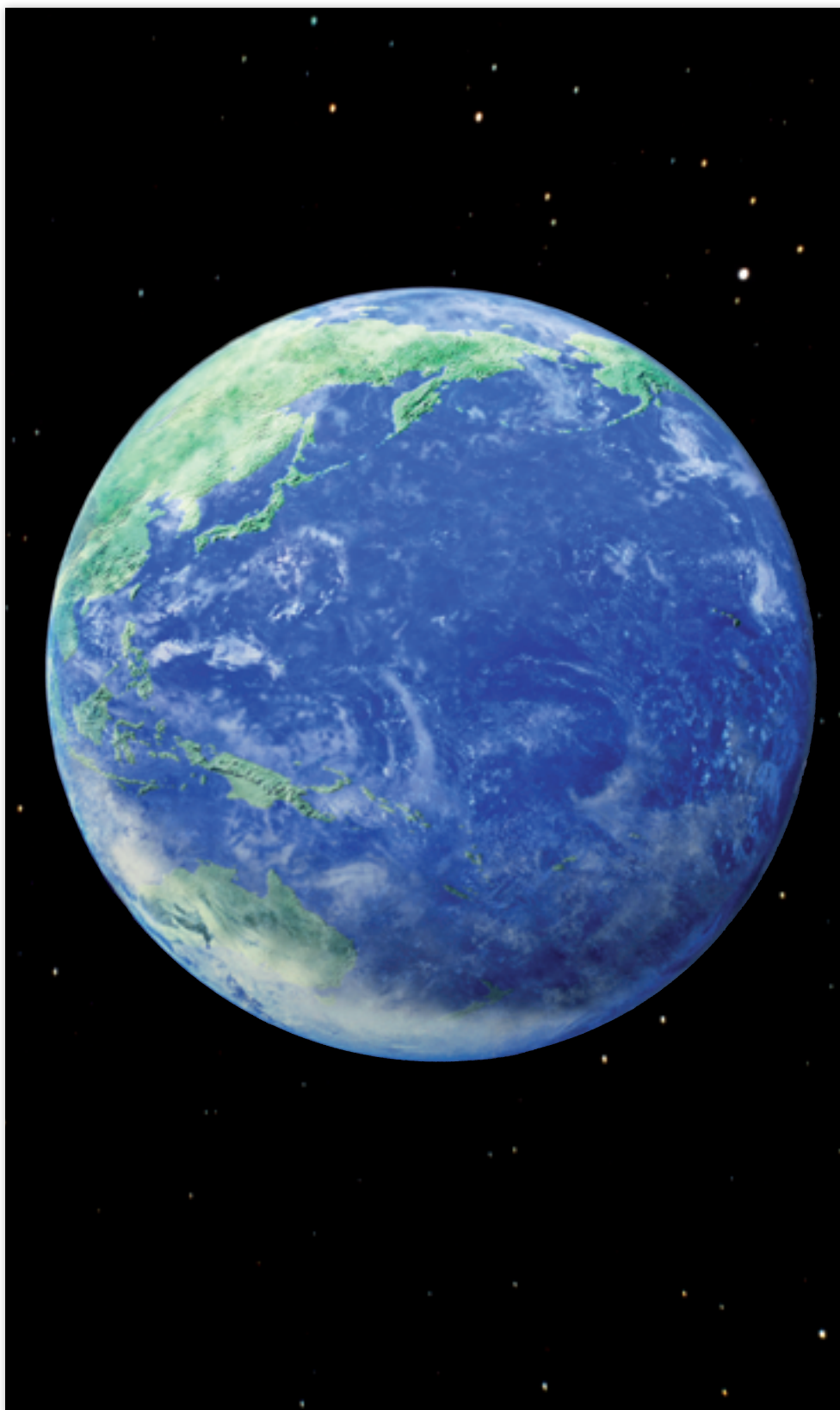


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# 1 Planet Ocean

Look up into the sky at night, and you will see stars all around you – more stars than you can count. Many of these stars give light to other planets. But only one of all these planets – Planet Earth – has life on it. Why is this? We can put the answer in one word: water. If we look at our planet from a long way away, it is not yellow like the Sun, nor white like the Moon – it is blue. Blue is the colour of the oceans, and 72 per cent of the surface of our planet is ocean. Perhaps we should change the name of our planet from Planet Earth to Planet Ocean.

More animals live in the oceans than on the land. This is possible only because there is so much food in the oceans. Where does the food come from? As we shall see in Chapter Four, the ‘first food’ of our oceans is plants. If you take all the plants out of the oceans, very few animals can live there. To make their food, plants need water and sunlight. They also need minerals, and the minerals come from the land.

So life in the oceans is possible only with help from the land. But the opposite is also true: life on land is possible only with help from the oceans. We need water to live, and that comes to us from the oceans. Rain clouds take water from the oceans, and ocean winds carry the clouds over the land, where the rain falls onto our fields and into our rivers.

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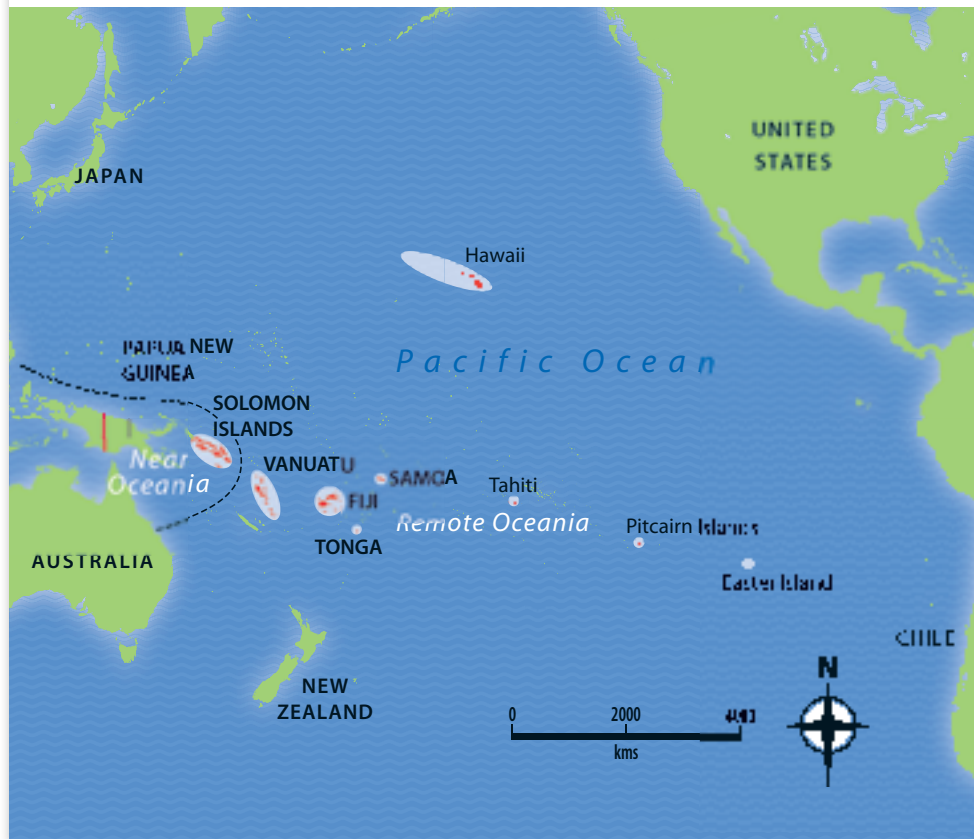
The oceans make our weather – but they also make our climate. Because of our oceans, our planet is neither too hot nor too cold. The waters of the oceans move around the world, bringing warm water to cold places and cold water to hot places. Life is possible everywhere on our planet because the water in our oceans is always moving. We will learn how this happens in Chapter Seven.

Of course, the oceans can also be dangerous. We are all afraid of storms at sea – and of the terrible waves of a tsunami. But for many of us, oceans are places of adventure, mystery, and hope. It is always exciting to climb into a boat. We do not know what we will find on the other side of the ocean, or in the deepest parts of the ocean – a hidden world until 150 years ago. But we want to try – we want to find new places and learn more about our world, just as the first ocean travellers did thousands of years ago.

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## 2 Ocean people

Easter Island is a long way from anywhere. The nearest place to it is a very small island called Pitcairn, which is 2,250 kilometres to the west. Then there is Tahiti, which is 4,250 kilometres to the northwest, and Chile, which is 3,765 kilometres to the east. Easter Island is the most remote island in the Pacific, but people have lived there for about a thousand years! How did they get there? And where did they come from?



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The earliest ocean travellers lived about 50,000 years ago. Their boats were small and they could not go far in them. But they did not have to go far. At the southeast corner of the Asian continent, the islands are near to the land, and it is easy to travel to them. The name for this group of islands is Near Oceania. These first ocean travellers went from island to island, making new homes for themselves. Then they arrived at Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. That was as far as they could go. To go any further, they needed better boats – and they needed to learn how to sail.

Both of these things happened about 4,000 years ago. The Lapita (the early people of Polynesia) had large boats: ten to twenty people could live on them. They took food and water with them, but also animals and plants. They were looking for new islands – new places to make their homes. And they made long journeys of 800 kilometres or more across the open sea.

How did they do this? At this time, sea travellers on all the other oceans stayed near to the land – they needed to see the land to get back home. They did not have compasses to show the way, and there were no maps. But the Lapita did not need them.

The Lapita were the first ‘ocean people’. They understood the ocean and were not afraid of it. They knew that the wind usually came from the southeast, but that at some times of year it changed and came from the northwest. They knew that when the waves were big, they were near land. They knew where to find fish and where to look for birds. And – most important of all –

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A large Polynesian boat



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they understood the stars and knew where to find them at different times of year. They were the first people to sail across the open ocean because they knew that they could come back. In other words, they learned to navigate.

The first long journeys of the Lapita were to the southeast. They arrived on Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga – a group of islands we call Remote Oceania – about 3,000 years ago. They travelled southeast, using the winds from the northwest, because they knew that they could easily come back with the more usual southeasterly winds. They continued travelling, but the other islands of the South Pacific were much further away. They were either difficult to find, or difficult to live on – or both. The Lapita did not make homes on the furthest islands – Hawaii and Easter Island – until just over a thousand years ago. And it took them a few hundred years more to arrive in New Zealand, after they learned how to travel across the winds to the southwest.

We also think that, about a thousand years ago, the Lapita (we call them Polynesians at this date) went all the way across the Pacific, past Easter Island, to South America. We know that they brought back a plant with them – the sweet potato – and planted it on their islands. And, strangely, at about the same time, another group of people were crossing a different ocean – the Atlantic – and pulling their boats up onto the beaches of North America. These people came from Norway and Denmark, and they were famous for fighting, killing, and stealing. They were not looking for empty islands – they were looking for gold. These people were the Vikings.

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