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Title:

Albatross, plastic, and the undoing of generations

Author:

Thom van Dooren

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Summary:

In the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, at the far north west end of the Hawaiian Archipelago, lie a few tiny coral and sand islands encircled by a small reef. Each year these little patches of dry land in the midst of a vast expanse of water are home to an incredible congregation of breeding birds. Amongst them are most of the regions remaining albatrosses, birds that struggle against growing piles of plastic and other mounting odds to do the work necessary to bring future generations into the world.

Author bio:

Thom van Dooren is a field philosopher and storyteller based at the University of Sydney, Australia. He is the author of *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* and *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds*.

<http://www.thomvandooren.org>

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ALBATROSS, PLASTIC, AND THE UNDOING OF GENERATIONS

In the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, at the far north west end of the Hawaiian Archipelago, lie a few tiny coral and sand islands encircled by a small reef. These little patches of dry land in the midst of a vast expanse of water and sky are Midway Atoll. Each year, these islands provide breeding habitat for a range of bird species. Amongst their number are the largest remaining colonies of two threatened species of albatross, the black-footed and Laysan. Between a third and two thirds of the global population of each species are tied to this place for roughly eight months each year; engaged in an endless movement between egg and chick rearing duties on land and the all-important search for food at sea.

We do not know with any accuracy how long these species have called this place home.

Like other colonial sea birds, they tend to preferentially nest in places with few or no terrestrial predators. For the longest time small islands have been perfect for this, at least until humans began introducing new species. It is likely that albatrosses once nested throughout the Hawaiian Archipelago, but this is no longer the case. Rats, cats, dogs, mongoose, and a range of other recently introduced species – alongside other forms of ongoing human disturbance – have now made most of these islands uninhabitable. (Although albatrosses can now also be found in small numbers on the island of Kauai and O’ahu, due in large part to the work of some remarkably dedicated people.)

Fossil records indicate that recognisable albatross species have been winging their way across Earth’s oceans for at least the last nine million years. Millions of years before anything like the human species appeared on the scene, these birds were here. Reduced now to a few small pockets of land, they have continued their age-old way of life: moving between land, sea, and sky, soaring effortlessly over vast distances each day, and on land courting, dancing, and singing with each other to form the strong pair bonds necessary to successfully rear chicks.

But this ancient way of life is now threatened in new ways. On multiple different fronts, from introduced species to long line fishing, we are now undermining the possibility of the continuity of albatross generations – we are pushing these species ever more closely towards the edge of extinction.

This is true even on Midway Atoll itself. Even here, in this place that is about as far as it is possible to be from a continental landform and 1,200 miles from the nearest significant human population (in Hawai'i), these birds are not safe. Even here, the toxins and detritus of human life are accumulating, insinuating themselves into bodies and lives, to do harm.

This is the part of the world's oceans that has been called the North Pacific Garbage Patch by some. Others have called it 'the seventh continent'. Whatever you call it, it is a vast and shifting expanse of ocean in which the average concentration of rubbish is significantly higher than normal (and normal isn't that great anymore). Within this area, plastic and other debris from all over the Pacific (and perhaps further afield too) collects in various densities, shaped not only by the movements of large currents, but also by smaller-scale oceanographic features.

Adult birds in search of food for their young collect these plastic items – mistaking them for food, or because they are entangled with favourite food items (like fish egg clusters). From here, they are delivered into the hungry mouths of waiting chicks where they accumulate to cause starvation, dehydration, and generally undermine the health and wellbeing of growing bodies.

The mass death of albatross chicks is simply staggering. It has been vividly captured in numerous photographs and a film by [Chris Jordan](#).



The unaltered stomach contents of a dead albatross chick photographed on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in the Pacific in September 2009 include plastic marine debris fed the chick by its parents. (USFWS/Chris Jordan)

As the bodies of young birds pile up, these species are placed at even greater risk of extinction. Fewer than one hundred years of human 'ingenuity' – in the forms of plastics discovered or commercialised in the early decades of the 20th century – circulating through rivers and oceanic currents, to accumulate in the living bodies of albatrosses and play their part in the undoing of millions of years of evolutionary achievement.

All over the world, plastic is becoming a growing problem for birds and wildlife more generally. At this stage, it seems that the albatrosses of Midway are amongst the hardest hit. Laysan albatrosses in particular may “have a greater incidence, a wider variety, and larger volume of ingested plastic than any other seabird.”

But while it is clear that Midway's albatrosses are an extreme case, they are by no means a unique one. And as time goes by, both here and in all of the world's other oceans, plastic concentrations just keep on climbing. How could they do otherwise; the stuff never disappears. Instead, plastics just break down into smaller and smaller pieces (eventually into 'micro plastics'), allowing them to enter and accumulate in smaller and smaller bodies, so that they might gradually impact upon a larger and larger range of living beings. With the exception of those plastics that have been incinerated – to contribute to other toxic legacies – all of the plastics ever produced are still around in one form or another, ensuring that countless future generations of albatrosses, humans, and others, inherit a growing problem.

It was Chris Jordan's photographs that first alerted me to the situation on Midway. The photos were first emailed to me in Australia by a friend in California. Across the Pacific they travelled. With the aid of the internet these images have circulated all over the world. As difficult as images of plastic-wrecked bodies are to look at, we need them. We need images and stories that can travel far and fast: at least as fast as the plastics whose movements are powered by huge and relentless oceanic systems. We need stories that can reconnect people with the distant and ongoing impacts of their own and others' waste in a way that might make a difference, that might hold open room, for future generations of albatross life.

References

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The contents of this post are developed more fully in Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2014.

Header image courtesy of [Bettina Arrigoni](#).

