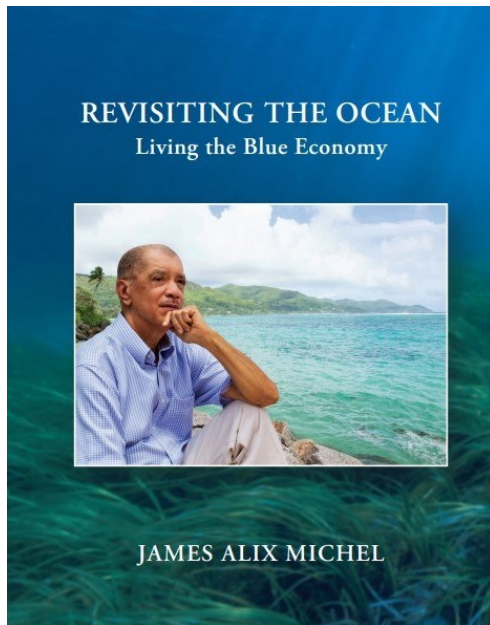


## Book Reviews...

James Alix Michel. (2023). *Revisiting the Ocean: Living the Blue Economy*. UK: Blue Gecko Books.  
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In the past decade or so there has been a visible tendency globally to position the blue portion of our planet at the very heart of discussions around a broad range of topics like climate change, biodiversity conservation, economic opportunities, and social equality. In such a diverse chorus of voices, the former president of the Republic of Seychelles, James Alix Michel, is uniquely placed to offer an authoritative take on what the fuss is about – and why it matters. Indeed, it was during his presidency that Seychelles closed the first ever debt restructuring involving ocean commitments, quickly followed by another world first with the so-called ‘blue bond’ – to name just two of his many and varied achievements in this area (The Nature

Conservancy, 2018; The World Bank, 2018). In his new book, *Revisiting the Ocean: Living the Blue Economy* (Blue Gecko Books, 2023), Michel takes the reader on a journey around the globe to show how communities, countries, regions, as well as global actors make sense of this renewed, watery (but also solid, and gaseous), interest – an interest that has been mostly described with the catch-all term of ‘Blue Economy’.

The title already frames the conversation for us: as Michel goes on to highlight later, ‘Revisiting’ refers to his previous 2016 book on the same topic, *Rethinking the Oceans: Towards the Blue Economy* (Paragon House, 2016), where he was primarily concerned with introducing the reader to the then-obscure term of the Blue Economy and its ramifications. From that starting point, in this new book he takes stock of the progress made since 2016, particularly with the popularity that the term Blue Economy has been able to gather internationally, and traces the steps he believes are needed to ensure that sustainable, inclusive, and equitable ocean economies are built in the future. There is no mistake here regarding the tone with which Michel has infused the book: although he admits that steps back, or at least not forward, have been taken on several issues; and while examples of negative practices still abound, the book ‘focus[es] on the positives’ (Michel, 2023, p.1) in trying to bring ‘hope’ and laudable initiatives to the front to counteract the pervasive

discomfort and despair that usually characterize these discussions. In keeping with such positive ethos, Michel effortlessly weaves stories, ranging from the supremely local – like the Sealife Organics enterprise and its use of seaweeds in Mauritius (Michel, 2023, p.128); to the more abstract institutional operations – like the UN Sustainable Development Agenda (Michel, 2023, pp.268-278), with a sympathetic eye always for the people working on the ground and at sea, because ‘policies are fine but, in the end, it is people who have the courage to turn back illegal fishing boats, who organise clean-up operations, and who inspire children to value their ocean inheritance, who really count’ (Michel, 2023, p.24).

The book is structured around three sections: ‘Recognition’, ‘Transition’, and ‘The Reckoning’. The first section, ‘Recognition’, introduces the reader to Michel’s own set of key principles that must be part of the Blue Economy. Indeed, if the term has now gained enormous popularity, its exact meaning is hardly any clearer than it was in 2016 (e.g., Voyer *et al.*, 2018). This is followed by a brief review of crucial initiatives taking place in the last few years pointing to the ‘belated’ recognition of the ocean’s role in our lives. The second section, ‘Transition’, forms the great bulk of the book. Here, Michel devotes each chapter to an established or emerging sector within the ocean economy and its role while transitioning to the Blue Economy. Topics include shipping (Chapter 3), aquaculture (Chapter 4), tourism (Chapter 5), blue food sources (Chapter 6), renewable energy (Chapter 7), seabed mining (Chapter 8), waste (Chapter 9), and maritime security (Chapter 12). Although necessarily selective, Michel does a great job at balancing the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ sectors – showing how the ‘old’ sectors can in most cases acquire the ‘new’ principles of the Blue Economy, and warning how the ‘new’ sectors can quickly turn to ‘old’ exploitative practices of ocean resources. This section serves as an impressive roundup of mostly practical, usually replicable, sometimes scalable initiatives from around the world that, again, focus primarily on people and communities and their acts of care as ethical and political obligations that decentre a world where the *Anthropos* reigns supreme (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The final section, ‘The Reckoning’, wraps up the book with an analysis of ‘the present state of the play’ (Michel, 2023, p.265) supporting the Blue Economy through a discussion of global institutions (mainly the United Nations), and what Michel calls ‘ocean champions’ – that is ‘people who are making a difference’ in the ocean space (Michel, 2023, p.285).

After a life spent in politics, Michel is acutely aware that only a deep connection with people and their worlds – whether they are directly or indirectly linked to the ocean – might affect the kind of change he is calling for. Yet, the techno-utopianism accompanying the majority of initiatives Michel discusses, at times falls short of interrogating the economic, and associated political, architecture reproducing the dire state of the ocean today. In this regard, I am left wondering what it would mean to think beyond economic growth as a paradigm of the Blue Economy (Michel, 2023, p.18) and associated neo-Malthusian arguments about population growth (Michel, 2023, p.270), favouring a decolonial, degrowth-, and justice-based Blue Economy instead (e.g., Ertör & Hadjimichael,

2020; Schreiber *et al.*, 2022)? In such a world, would it be possible to reconfigure the role of governments away from recurrent neoliberal tropes of get-out-of-the-way, ‘enabling’, ‘regulating’ machines (Michel, 2023, p.15) to reimagine them as, for instance, active value-creating organisms with ‘mission-oriented’ visions (e.g., Mazzucato, 2021)? What if in such a world, instead of ‘turning to the UAE’ (Michel, 2023, p.281) for inspiration, we make space for more radically open cosmo-politics that teach us modes of ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) of a changing ocean? As far-fetched and demanding these questions may sound, I believe they are necessary if, as Michel (2023, p.278) asserts, a ‘sea change’ is required to bring us hope to survive *and* thrive in the present circumstances. After all, as Donna Haraway (2016, p.12) put it, ‘it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with’, so as to avoid the ‘failures of imagination’ (Ghosh, 2016) that too often constrain climate narratives and politics.

Written in accessible and engaging prose, Michel’s *Revisiting the Ocean* is an important contribution to current debates about the too habitually forgotten watery portion of our planet in a time of profound social, political, and environmental challenges. One thing is clear: all of us have a claim in it, and all of us have something to lose (and gain). And for that reason, people from many walks of life will find this contribution useful: from the newly-fascinated sea lover to the seasoned enthusiast, from the local community organizer to the country’s politician, from the (non-)academic researcher to the global policymaker – the stories recounted in the book will likely spark joy, hope, exhilaration, anger, sorrow and more to all of them. As time is running out to meaningfully transform the dominant relationship most of us and our societies have with the ocean, *Revisiting the Ocean* serves to catalyse our attention to the high stakes at play and set the table to discuss them more, not less – something a good book should always do.

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