



Cultures and Local Practices of Sustainability

ROUTES Towards
Sustainability Network

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Towards the formation of ecological minds: marine imaginaries in texts for children

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I will first discuss ecocritical inquiry and the broader framework of environmental humanities. Later, I will describe a constellation of five cultural productions aimed at rising environmental awareness, scientific exploration, and activism, which have circulated in the Chilean context recently, four of them related to children's cultures. This amalgam of cultural productions exceeds the category of the literary, as well as definitions of genres within children's literature, and at the same time, reaches out to the interdisciplinary, together with international collaboration. The degree to which these boundaries are blurred seems to contribute to the extent to which the creations succeed in raising ecological awareness. The assemblage encompasses three children's books, one chronicle and a scientific exhibit, all of them related to marine life and cultures.

Keywords: picture books, environmental awareness, marine imaginaries.

This essay originates from a three-year postdoctoral research aimed at describing both the presence and/or absence of environmental awareness in Chilean picture books published in the new millennia¹. The project encompassed assessing over 3950 titles published between 2000 and 2015 registered in the national ISBN index under the children's literature category. Considering paratextual information such as the publishers' online descriptions, the National Library's entry, any interview, or marketing evidence found in the media, the cover, the title, and the author's trajectory, the research sorted out whether the texts would potentially embrace environmental significance to any extent. Thus, this first evaluation reduced the number to 900 books with potential environmental significance; after the second closer evaluation, 85 books were considered in the study and thoroughly assessed, following specific criteria on a matrix devised for this project.

Consequently, this research is aligned with the agenda of the environmental humanities. In this essay, I will first discuss ecocritical inquiry and the broader framework of environmental humanities. Later, I will describe some suggestive cases found in the aforementioned research, in contrast with two cultural productions beyond the children's literature category, in order to present how they contribute to raising environmental awareness, fail to do so, or even betray their own intention.

As the Meadows Report warned almost fifty years ago (though we do not seem to have been paying much attention)², Gianfranco Franz (2018) alerts us again in the title of his presentation that we are "close to the limits". Nonetheless, Franz's profound insights offer hope in as much as we can still work together to shape the ecological minds and cultures of sustainability required to overcome the current crisis. To this ambition, environmental humanities are a fundamental foundation, as they contribute to assessing and prompting ecological imaginaries in the arts and humanities. Quoting the Stanford Humanities Center (n.d.):

¹ Casals, A. (2017-2019). "Conciencia ambiental en la literatura y escritura infantil chilena ilustrada del nuevo milenio." Postdoctoral Research Project #3170134. Financially supported by Fondecyt-Conicyt and sponsored by Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

² See Meadows et al. (1972). *The Limits of growth*.

The humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience. Since humans have been able, we have used philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history, and language to understand and record our world. These modes of expression have become some of the subjects that traditionally fall under the humanities umbrella. Knowledge of these records of human experience gives us the opportunity to feel a sense of connection to those who have come before us, as well as to our contemporaries.

However, if we are to consider environmental or ecological humanities under this broad umbrella, what we are trying to do now is not only “to feel a sense of connection to those who have come before us [or] our contemporaries”, but more pressingly, to develop a sense of connectedness to the future generations and those —humans and more than humans— who are already suffering the consequences of living in an environmentally damaged world; a sense of connectedness that hopefully fosters an ethics of care and active commitment. As Ursula K. Heise (2017) puts it in the Introduction to *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*: “The environmental humanities ... envision ecological crises fundamentally as questions of socioeconomic inequality, cultural difference, and divergent histories, values and frameworks” (p. 2). Thus, following Sverker Sörlin, Heise quotes:

It seems this time that our hopes are tied to the humanities We cannot dream of sustainability unless we start to pay more attention to the human agents of the planetary pressure that environmental experts are masters at measuring but that they seem unable to prevent. (Sörlin, 2012, as cited in Heise, 2017, p. 3)

As an ecocritic, I investigate texts. Mostly illustrated fiction, but also poetry, nonfiction, film, song lyrics, and other cultural objects to map out how artists, creators, and composers process and document ... experience. Yet, as an educator, I am not satisfied with analysing texts that

document past and contemporary experiences only; I am also interested in how texts may shape our frameworks, values, and cultures, as Heise indicates. Moreover, I am interested in how narratives for the young audience can empower “ecological minds” (Franz, 2018) and imaginaries, and figure the years to come. As Margaret Atwood stated in Ursula Le Guin’s obituary: “In all her work, Le Guin was always asking the same urgent question: what sort of world do you want to live in?” (Atwood, para. 4). This is one of my main concerns as an ecocritic: the imaginaries of prospective experience.

As many thinkers have argued, we have overestimated the role of technological solutions for a sustainable development in a society that is unquestionably driven by forever-infinite-growth in a finite planet; Heise asserts: “Scientific understanding and technological problem-solving, essential [as] they are, themselves have shaped such frameworks...” (p. 2), referring to the socioeconomic, cultural, ethical frameworks mentioned above; the same frameworks that have led us to the very crises. In that sense, Le Guin’s narratives figure future scenarios where the focus is not on the likelihood of the technological devices, but, again, in the pressing questions: *would we want to live like that, is it sound, is it ethical?*

Le Guin was criticised for her more fantastic rather than technologically informed Science Fiction worlds, figuring, for example, an instant communication device, the *ansible*, that has become part of the sci-fi culture. Experts in technology seem to agree that the *ansible* is inconceivable. Yet, following Atwood, I argue that more than its plausibility, the questions about the worlds Le Guin proposes are more important. As a composer of fiction narratives, Le Guin’s imaginative worlds invite us to think critically about our expectations of the future. My point here is that perhaps, in the need to compose compelling narratives that help us think out of the box, narratives that bring together questions and perspectives from a variety of disciplines, storytellers must let go and press the boundaries of *disciplinary correctness*.

As ecocritics, we analyse what such narratives are revealing about the cultural moment when they are written, and the anxieties or certainties

they project. When describing ecocriticism, Greg Garrard (2004) explains that “environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection” and he adds, “[t]his will involve interdisciplinary scholarship that draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and environmental history, as well as ecology” (p. 14). Though Garrard has left art, music, and religion aside—going back to Stanford’s definition of humanities—, his description can be understood as what we recognise today more broadly as environmental humanities; thus, ecocriticism and environmental humanities rely on interdisciplinarity.

Garrard continues asserting that “[t]he study of rhetoric supplies us—ecocritics—with a model of a cultural reading practice tied to moral and political concerns, and one which is alert to both the real or literary and the figural or constructed interpretations of *nature* and *the environment*” (p. 14). In this sense, I would like to note that most scholars originally self-identified with ecocriticism were academics in the literary field. Therefore, analysing the rhetoric potential of works with an environmental preoccupation has been ecocritics’ most common occupation. We work with representations, that is, with “how people process and document the human experience”, knowing that these representations or “records of the human experience”, mirror the beliefs, aspirations, and anxieties of a society at the times of its creative productions and circulation (as stated in Stanford’s definition).

This is also true for the study of young people’s literature. Specialised scholars agree that any study of literature for young people is also a cultural study (Reynolds, 2011; Lerer, 2008; Hunt, 2001). As Franz asserts, “literary narratives and artistic expressions ... have always shaped the human mind” (2018, para. 4); more so, academics interested in young readers literature agree that literature for young people is a privileged site for socialisation and that many ideas that we grow into and regard simply as common sense, are concepts instilled in us at an early age from the stories we were told or read, because “children’s

literature has always been ideological" (Mickenberg & Nel, 2008, p.1) simply because "all stories are products of their times" (p. 4). As an ecocritic, this acknowledgement compels me to question young readers' texts in search for understanding to what extent, as cultural objects and socialisation agents, these narratives contribute to the construction of eco-critical thinkers and ecological citizens. The task is not as easy as it seems, considering the complexities of writing for young readers; for example, composing appealing, profound, and aesthetic works with restrictions (such as limited vocabulary and limited time spans), reducing both description and internal dialogue (Nicolajeva, 2014).

For the last three years, I have been working with seemingly eco-friendly picture books. The task is therefore even more complex, given that picture books are composed in two codes: the icon or image and the conventional written text (Nicolajeva, 2006). To achieve what I call an "environing" reading experience (Casals, 2018) or prompting a "reading ecosystem" (Ramos & Ramos, 2011) that is completed in the interplay between the readers, the narrative, and the iconic texts, together with the materiality of the book as an aesthetic object, I need to consider the actual text, the illustrations and paratexts, a method which also involves the physical book and design features. Thus, as a professor of literature, I have had to go beyond the conventional limits of literary criticism and close reading to explore disciplines, such as visual art theory and design, to understand the full meaning of picture books. Added to the analysis of the environmental content or ecological history itself, I challenge myself to go beyond the rhetoric appreciation of the written text and move across from the boundaries of literary interpretation to apply research tools from linguistics and, more specifically, from ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015).

As a show case, I will present and describe a set of cultural compositions intended to raise awareness about life at sea. To illustrate how works of creative interdisciplinarity contribute—or not—to compelling ecological compositions, I will deal with them in a comparative manner, which is one way in which literary scholars often work.

Creative texts can be categorized as fiction, whereas seemingly objective texts that present facts, are categorized as non-fiction; though the fine line between them, as we shall see further on, is many times blurry. Under the category of non-fiction, information books are complementary to the school system and they are intended to entertain, while triggering the reader's curiosity in a specific subject matter, usually scientific ones. The information in them should be accurate and updated, though the texts should be brief, and their meaning expanded by images, pictures, and simple graphics. These books should be attractive objects. It sounds easy, but, again, explaining complex ideas in simple terms is a demanding matter. There are many decisions at play, not only those related to the written and iconic content that must complement and expand each other's meaning, but also related to the design elements that should enhance the composition; considering, for example, font size and style, or the display on the page spread, which should be seamlessly balanced into a captivating composition.

Figure 1. Chile es mar (2016), endpapers



The book *Chile es mar: guía para aprender, conservar y cuidar nuestro océano* (2016) makes an explicit callout to protect the Chilean Pacific coast and sea. It is a huge hardcover blue book (25 cm wide and 33.5 cm tall), like an information book about the ocean—I guess—should be. The authors are all experts in marine biology and ecosystems, and the book is coedited by a prestigious local publisher and the Wildlife Conservancy Society, which suggests a reliable source. However, the language used betrays their intention in as much as, for example, the written text consistently refers to the “resources” and “products” rather than the living beings in the ocean; conveying the idea that nature is ours to exploit, as if the renewability of the oceans were equivalent to infinite. This idea is emphasized by the colourful cornucopian image on the endpapers, where the repetition of marine fauna and some flora conveys an endless image; Figure 1 shows only one eighth of the endpaper spread (see Figure 1).

Likewise, an element that is suspiciously absent in the text is the allusion to the large fishing industry as one of the main agents responsible for the depletion of marine life; the text vaguely refers to drift nets pulled by ships as if these ships had a life of their own. The text describes fishing techniques, but the vague language and failure to mention industrial fishery, the tiny size of the fishery ships at the bottom of the page, and the proximity of these images to texts referring to artisanal fishermen, may lead to understand that traditional or subsistence fishing is responsible for exhausting the oceans.

As stated above, all the authors of *Chile es mar* belong to the area of marine biology and ecosystems. I believe that this team lacked, at least, a multidisciplinary approach; the contribution of an ecocritic who could point out at the cornucopian trope in which the book was rooted, or the input of a style reader who could have pointed out at the redundant use of words in the semantic webs of “production” and “resources” could have warned the team of the unforced error. Their intention to provide a guide to protect the ocean—our ocean, as the subtitle explains—is overshadowed by this *lapsus linguis* that reveals an anthropocentric and extractivist ideology underlying their discourse, despite their explicit intention.

Contrasting the scientific tone of this book, the article published by the National Geographic Society celebrating the creation of the marine parks Las Desventuradas and Juan Fernández off the Chilean coast is written in the first-person tradition of travel writing, as an “I-witness” that offers testimony. The authors of this article deploy a variety of adjectives to explain the effectiveness of the Humboldt Current in generating an ecosystem that yields such large diversity and amount of marine life in the area. Moreover, the authors specifically celebrate the agency of the organized local community in managing the lobster catch, highlighting that already in 1935, this community implemented criteria such as the size of the catch and the prohibition to capture females with eggs. The authors also foreground the community’ activism in promoting the declaration of the area as marine parks. In this sense, we have a persuasive narrative that is mindful of its textual and iconic language, deploying critical hope, as proposed by Paulo Freire (1972), in as much as it recognizes the existing threats and difficulties, while presenting the community as a role model in ecological activism.

The third example that I would like to present is a multidisciplinary exhibit that was held from August to November of 2018 at Centro Cultural Palacio de la Moneda in Santiago, called *Ballenas: voces del mar de Chile*. I say multidisciplinary, and not interdisciplinary, because the exhibit included separate spaces, each one addressing Chile’s cultural relationship to whales from a different disciplinary area; though a variety of disciplines contributed to the exhibit as a whole and offered a variety of perspectives to its diverse audience, these did not seem to produce any specific outcome or object as a result of actual interaction.

Because of the architecture of the Centre, there are two exhibition rooms separated by a large hall. At the centre of the first room (Sala Andes) there was a skeleton of a whale, which performed as the heart of the exhibit, and everything else revolved around it. In the second large room (Sala Pacífico), all the displays revolved around the large, animated projection of an apparent aquarium where whales swam.

The ceiling of this room was covered with recycled plastic bottles that helped to create an underwater atmosphere given the combination of transparent, blue and green bottles, together with calling the audience's attention to the plastic islands that float in the oceans. Towards the edges of both rooms, there were tools, artifacts, and realia related to whale hunting and travelling, crafts, posters, oil paintings and photos related to marine imaginaries, a collection of Chilean books covering related topics, video explanations of oceanography, marine ecosystems, and so on.

I would like to point out at the explanation on how the presence of the Humboldt Current ensures the large diversity and quantity of marine life in our coast that was offered at the exhibit. Differing from the information book *Chile es mar* mentioned before, the language used here was cautious yet eloquent. The captions explained that the Humboldt Current is "rich in nutrients" and "sustains a huge amount of marine life", avoiding words in the semantic webs of productivity and resources. Forwarding a variety of documents that reveal our imaginaries and epistemologies on South Pacific whales, their ecosystems and ecological history, the exhibit nurtured a sense of wonder—to use the words of Carson (1956)—curiosity and empathy, especially for the whales that are part of our marine ecosystem.

Finally, I will describe two books that feature clever, curious girls as protagonists in offshore adventures. Along the research, I stumbled upon books that could not be classified as fiction nor were they strictly catalogued as part of the children's literature tradition. I called them hybrid books. The main function of these books is evidently to convey scientific information, but they are presented as a story, as an imaginative narrative. The two stories described below are inspiring examples of what interdisciplinary collaborations and international partnerships may achieve.

Sophie Scott Goes South (2013) or *Sofía viaja a la Antártida* in Spanish (2014) is set in the Southernmost seas. As the title suggests, it is a travel narrative told by an Aussie girl who accompanies her father on a short journey to Antarctica. The focus of the tale is on Sophie's expectations,

experiences, observations, and descriptions. Complying with the travel writing genre, the narrative voice offers precise information of natural phenomena, such as the formation of icebergs, the *aurora australis*, the weather, and travel history. The narrative further intertwines Sophie's own reactions to the events described and includes an array of documents such as explanatory sketches, drawings and pictures by Sophie that expand the meaning expressed by words and give the narrative an "air of reality" (James, 1884, para. 7), as if the reader was actually looking at Sophie's scrap book (see Figure 2).

Seamlessly figuring an interdisciplinary gender-balanced team on board, the story features female adventurers and scientists, and manages to model interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration. The Spanish edition expands the possibilities of collaboration to the international sphere, including a postscript with a letter addressed to Sophie from a Chilean girl living in Villa las Estrellas, at the Antarctic Peninsula, who explains what it is like to live in Antarctica. Along this narrative, readers encounter an adventurous girl —two, in the Spanish version— with a voice and agency who is interested in the world around her. Blurring the boundaries of genres, such as information books, travel journals, scrap booking, and storytelling, the composition is attractive and inspiring.

Figure 2. Photos, stamps, and illustrations. Day 22 in Sofía viaja a la Antártida (2014)

Día 22

El hielo ha estado tan espeso que hemos tardado tres días en llegar hasta aquí. Esta mañana, al salir el sol, vimos algunas orcas nadando al lado del barco. Sus cuerpos de negro brillante destacaban contra el mar dorado. Algunas sacaban la cabeza justo cuando estábamos pasando.

Después del almuerzo Sara me mostró fotos de sus viajes polares y me contó historias de algunos famosos exploradores de la Antártica.



Este es Roald Amundsen de Noruega, el primero en llegar al Polo Sur en 1911.



Este es Sir Ernest Shackleton, de Irlanda. En 1909, casi llega al Polo Sur, pero tuvo que regresar cuando se le acabó la comida. Después le comentó a su esposa, a propósito de su fracaso: "Un burro vivo es preferible a un león muerto". Shackleton es famoso porque regresó con toda su tripulación sana y salva, a pesar de que su barco fue aplastado por el hielo en 1914.



Este es Sir Robert Scott, de Inglaterra, que trató de llegar primero al Polo Sur, pero Amundsen le ganó por un mes. En su viaje de regreso él y toda su tripulación murieron de hambre.



Y este es Sir Douglas Mawson, de Australia, que exploró la Antártica. En 1922 logró sobrevivir a unas terribles tempestades de nieve después de que sus dos compañeros de viaje murieran.





La cabaña de Scott en Cabo Evans



La cabaña de Amundsen



La cabaña de Mawson en la bahía de Commonwealth



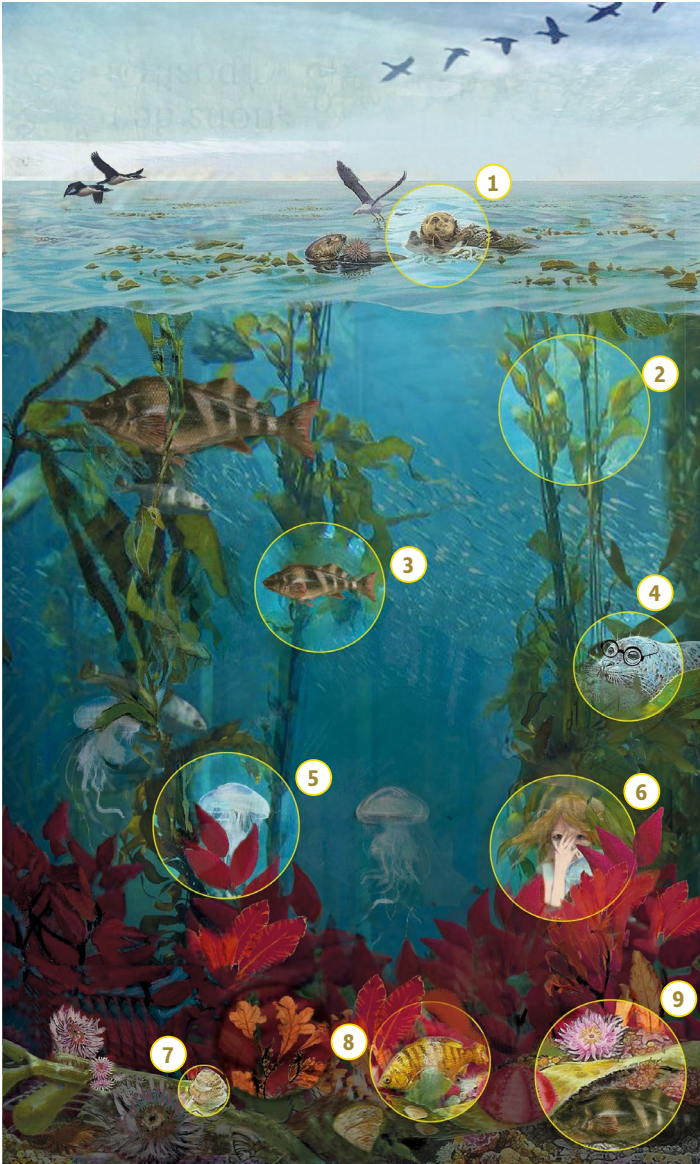
El *Endurance* atrapado en el hielo



La cocina que mantenía caliente la cabaña de Shackleton

Figure 3. Alicia y el bosque de algas (2018), p. 24

- ...Pero aquellas me parecen mucho menos familiares.
- Es normal, porque es el lecho marino de Chile y el bosque de la costa del Pacífico de ese país.



Alice et le forêt d'algues (2018) or *Alicia y el bosque de algas* (2018), is a French-Chilean collaboration. With a clear and meaningful intertext with Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the narrative tells the journey of a French-Chilean girl who lives at Île de Batz off the north-western French coast. The story begins when she receives a postcard from her Chilean grandfather who is a seaweed gatherer, like many people in Batz are too. She knows the harvest has not been good, and wonders if seaweed could eventually disappear. At this point, she sees a talking seal in the sea who summons her to come along and explore the seaweed forests under water. Like Carroll's Alice, she jumps through her reflection on the water's surface and goes down and down... Undersea, Alice and Aronnax, the seal (a clear reference to marine biologist Pierre Aronnax, the main character in Jules Verne's groundbreaking novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas: A World Tour Underwater*), hold a didactic dialogue where Aronnax explains the diversity of algae and diversity amongst one single species, their cycles and interdependences within their ecosystems, and so on. Clever as she is, Alice proffers interesting questions and precise summaries, crosschecking what Aronnax is telling, and she can even add information from her own experience as the curious and caring child she is, easing Aronnax's speech, and making the text dialogic and friendlier to the reader.

The illustrations, inspired by Henri Rousseau, expand the story and invite the readers to jump into the fluid ecosystem of the book (see Figure 3), combining full page spreads of envioning landscapes and seascapes, and information-book-like diagrams. The illustration displayed here is a duller copy of the book's cover page (in grey scales here), which is, at the same time, a creative appropriation of Rousseau's "Tropical Forest with Monkeys" (1910). The intertext to the French artist, seduced by Mexico's southern geography, builds on to the overseas narrative, underlining the cultural and natural similitudes in the French and Chilean coast. The blurry colours of the illustration are interrupted by brighter circles spotting certain species within the composition, which appear in more vibrant tones in the original, each one identified with a number. The text above the composition displays a guessing game, where Aronnax invites Alice to try

to say the name of each species. A note, printed with a smaller font than the one used for the main text, appears at the bottom right of the picture, indicating that the correct answers are at the back of the book. Thus, the book breaks the dialogic structure with an interactive suggestion inviting the readers to play the guessing game along with Alice.

The three books, the *National Geographic* article, and the whales exhibit are all contemporary documents that reveal our current concerns for the sustainability of marine life. All five of them disclose a pedagogical function. Yet, none of them imagines plausible futures, as Verne suggested. Rather, they give testimony of the state of the art, encouraging the reader to learn more, care and, hopefully, become involved (though the message in *Chile es mar* can be misleading because of the lax lexicon and somewhat hasty design). However, it would be farfetched to ask these texts to be speculative in as much as none of them qualifies as fiction texts, least as science fiction. Nonetheless, at the end of Alice's story, she imagines her grandfather in Chile harvesting *cochayuyo*³ and wonders if he will be able to carry on with this activity: "¿Podrá su abuelo seguir trabajando en su hermoso oficio?" (p. 43). The narrative finishes with the assertion that like true guardians, seaweed forests continue to look after our common future in the planet, "Como verdaderos guardianes, los bosques de algas continúan velando por nuestro futuro común en el planeta" (p. 43), stressing the agency of the algae.

Overall, I have compared five cultural artifacts that explore and represent cultural relations to the ocean (three children's books, a chronicle, and an exhibit). Two of these were completely Chilean fabrications: the information text *Chile es mar* and the exhibit *Ballenas: voces del mar de Chile*. Both hybrid books, *Sofía viaja a la Antártica* and *Alicia en el bosque de algas* are translations, the former from an Australian book, and the latter its French counterpart. Finally, the chronicle in the *National Geographic en español* was written by Alex Muñoz, a Chilean activist who is the Latin American director of National Geographic Society's

³ *Cochayuyo* is the local name given to algae that are commonly harvested in the Chilean coast; the name is Quechua and it means "sea plant".

Pristine Seas project, and Enric Sala, the leader of National Geographic Society's Pristine Seas. Thus, this constellation of cultural artifacts that have circulated in the Chilean context in the past few years is, in itself, an expression of international collaboration targeting a global concern. None of them, however, represent what scholars in the environmental humanities would recognise as Latin American ecological literature (*literatura ecologista*, following Paredes & McLean, 2000), an indigenous Hispanic American literature (*literatura hispanoamericana indigenista*, Marrero, 2010), or mestizo writing (following Casals, 2016). Yet, as Heffes, following Binns, proposed, these artifacts "exceed the category of the literary" (Heffes, 2013, p. 52; my translation). On the other end of this interdisciplinary combination, as texts aimed at a younger audience (disregarding the chronicle in the *National Geographic en español*) the three books and the exhibit manifest a clear pedagogical function, which is inherent to children's literature. In spite of the limitations I have pointed at, particularly regarding the underestimated footprint of the language used in *Chile es mar*, these multimodal compositions foregrounding the marine ecosystem, "contribute to the formation of future ecological minds" (Franz, para. 69) that may wonder what kind of world we want to live in and what can we do to let it be. Or, as pope Francis puts it: "One should not think that these efforts will not change the world" (Francis, 2015, Sec. 212).

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