The Sydney Morning Herald

Marine life

I start my first job as the world careers and threatens what enriches my life

By Adam Gottschalk

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The prognosis for the Great Barrier Reef is grim. TAKUMA SATO

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his essay is about beginning a career at this time, in this climate.

I am 21 years old and a university student. It is 2023, early autumn. I am starting my first office job. It's a government job: a short-term, part-time internship in the federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (a long name with a clumsy acronym, "DCCEEW").

DCCEEW is doing important work. My team assists the financial sector to redirect capital towards activities that benefit biodiversity. They call these activities "nature-positive".

Everyone in my team is positive about nature.

It is the middle of winter and I am reading an article by one of Australia's leading climate scientists which says, basically, that because of the El Nino event just begun, the Great Barrier Reef could die this year.

This year.

I am relatively well-informed about these things – I take courses on them at university, I read and think and talk about them pretty much every day – but for some reason, reading this article is especially shocking. It is a punch to the gut from which I am reeling, and from which we will all be reeling, in one way or another, probably forever.

A career is "an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life and with opportunities for progress".

To career is to "move swiftly and in an uncontrolled way".

At this point in my life, I am making my first career decisions. I am beginning a career. And the world seems to be careering faster than ever.

Divers at Lady Elliot Island REUTERS

I am fortunate to have the freedom and means to make these kinds of career decisions. I am choosing between white-collar jobs. I am privileged to have options that many people do not have.

But there are the decisions themselves, and then there is the sensation of making them. That is, the feeling of finding myself at *this* point of my life at *this* point in time.

History moves in all directions. It moves like a puddle on uneven ground. It is difficult to predict. But these days, the ground seems to be sloping more steeply, to be absorbing less; the water seems to be spreading faster, more like mercury than water, slipping towards a sharp drop-off.

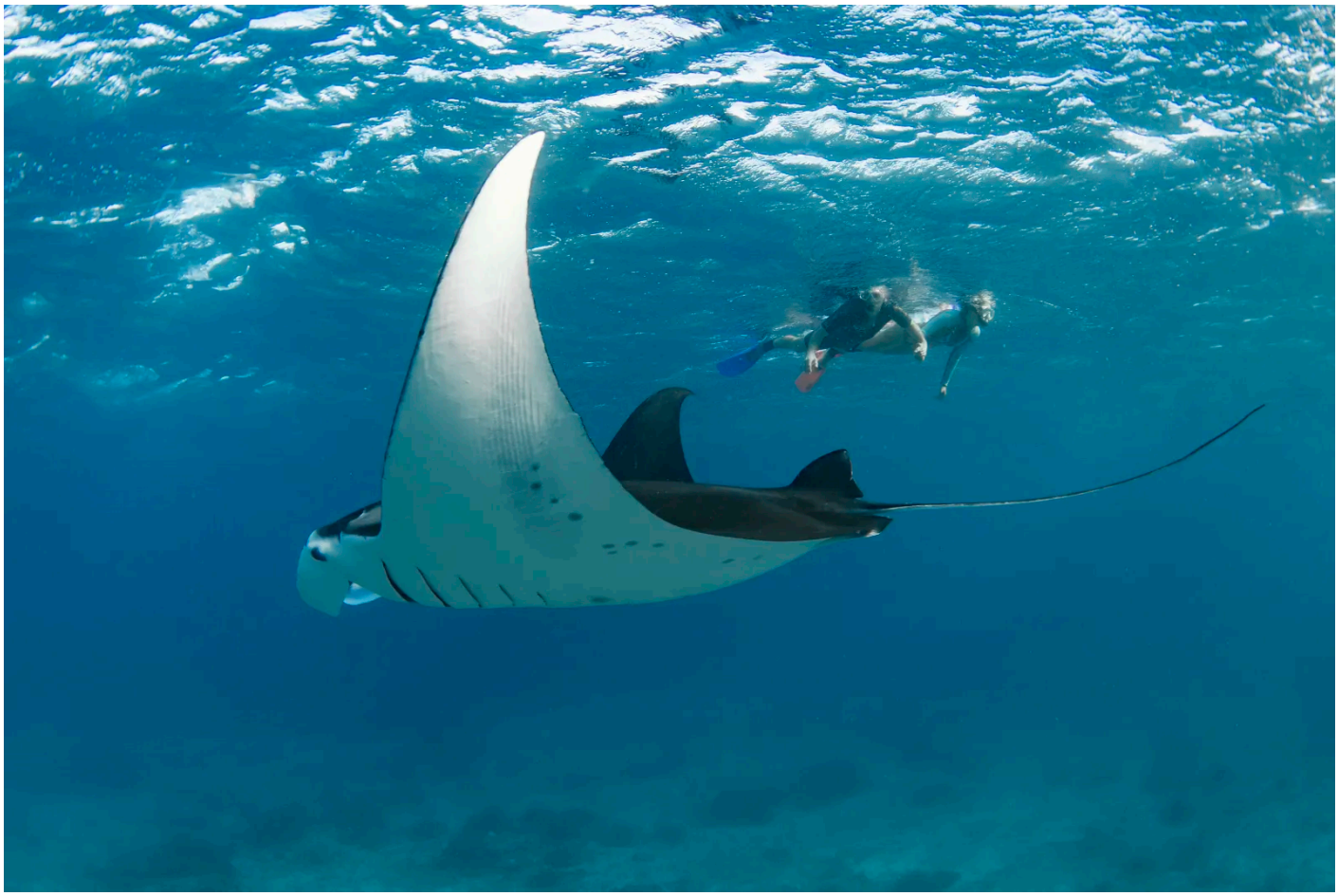
Maybe history always feels like this, in the moment. I sit with that thought. There is definitely something to it. But then I remember the reef.

It is the end of winter and I am going to Lady Elliot Island tomorrow with my dad. Wikipedia tells me that Lady Elliot is the southernmost coral cay of the Great Barrier Reef. It has waters that are "particularly rich in sea life".

People often talk casually about "going to see the reef before it's gone". I've always found those comments glib. Not anymore. We are only going to the island for a day and yet I sense the trip will be imbued with something acute. Something plaintive.

We wear masks and slip into the water. It is clear and fresh. There are deep channels between stands of coral. There are colourful fish. Then the water deepens and we are snorkelling above a blue expanse.

Sunlight falls down in sheets and marries the sea. We keep swimming. And suddenly, a shape from the dark blueness. Lines sharpen into a body and there is a manta ray, a flying carpet, a spaceship with an alien face, a giant kite trailing its tail.



A manta ray at Lady Elliot Island. TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND

The rays are huge. They glide beneath us, wings dipping, flexing, rippling. They loop and are gone.

We are awed, overjoyed. Perhaps we whoop, the sounds muffled by our snorkels. I have never seen manta rays before. And then, before we know it, they are back. And there are more of them. And more again. One's side has a cookie-cutter chunk missing. Another has no tail. Below another swims a large fish, suctioned to a cartilage ceiling.

They head for us face-on and then swerve before they get too close. They loop around. I follow one for a minute or two. Then they outpace me and I tread water.

My short internship is coming to an end. I meet with my boss to seek some advice before I leave. She reflects on working in government, compares it to working in the private sector or an NGO.

Towards the end of our discussion, she says something, casually. She tells me that she would not be doing this work were these issues not so urgent. If they weren't so urgent, she would be doing something else, like running a bookstore.

The second part — the bookstore part — is a fantasy. In this fantasy, climate change does not exist and we can all live the simple and happy lives we would be living were it not for climate change. I have felt the power of this counterfactual. I would be a potter. Or a gardener. I would also run a bookstore.

Adam Gottschalk, highly commended in the 2023 Sydney Morning Herald Essay Prize

The fantasy is beguiling. Of course, we are fully aware that even without climate change, there would be other things to worry about, big problems to occupy us. It is nice to be beguiled, though the fantasy is thin.

But the first part — the urgency part — is as true a thing as can be. I feel those words so strongly that my eyes prick. I hold back my tears, but the words touch a nerve. They sink in and stay there.

This sentiment may seem trite, but if so, then that is a problem. Because these issues *are* urgent. Their urgency is fundamental. I am making decisions about my future and their urgency is inescapable.

If there is anything I wish more people understood, it is this urgency. It hangs over all.

After the rays leave us, we keep snorkelling. The coral looks rich and alive. There are a lot of fish. There are a lot of different species.

But, how much is a lot? In 1995, the fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly asked this question when he coined the term "shifting baselines syndrome". The term describes how some scientists perceive the state of the ecosystem at the start of their careers to be the natural baseline.

A whale at Lady Elliot Island.

The concept is applicable to society as a whole. Successive generations believe the environments they observed in their childhood are natural. But these baselines are themselves severely depleted. Our normal is not normal. It is normal for me to drive for hours through organised agricultural land. It is normal for me to be surprised when I see a wallaby. Like those fisheries scientists, I am beginning my career with a depleted baseline.

Writer George Monbiot relays an 18th century account of the arrival of the herring as seen from the British shore. There are miles-long "columns" of herring, the water "so black … that the number seems inexhaustible". And behind them follow "massive cod, spurdog, tope and smoothhound, longfin and bluefin tuna, blue, porbeagle, thresher, mako and occasional great white sharks … pods of fin whales and sperm whales".

This is a description of abundance. Is the coral I am seeing abundant? Is this what a thriving reef looks like? I don't know. How can I?

Where should I work? In politics? In policy? In restoration ecology?

Should I keep studying? Another degree? Or should I start working now?

If this decade is the crucial decade for climate action, as climate scientists tell us, would it be negligent to spend it studying?

Have I spent enough time waiting? Would to wait any longer be a moral failure?

These questions stick. I climb into my car and drive home from work. I fly to the Great Barrier Reef for a holiday. If there is irony, it is not lost on me.

Twenty-five homes in the Grampians have burnt down in fires this summer.

After lunch, my dad and I snorkel some more. There are no other snorkellers around. I spot a hawksbill turtle. She is heading straight towards us. She doesn't stop, and surfaces right next to us. I could touch her flippers with my nose. She hovers between us and gulps air. Her shell is more orange than I would have thought. I can see her tail. Under each front flipper, Dad points out a little metal tag. I watch her pointy beak dip in and out of the water. Then she slips below the surface and glides away.

We are speechless. The turtle came to us? Then, a minute later, she is back. Again, the same thing. Floating right next to us. Gulping in air. Letting us circle and stare and be dumbfounded.

There will be bushfires this year. There will be bad bushfires. And then there will be more next year. And the year after that. They may not reach my family or my home — we may be lucky, but we may not be.

Sometimes I am taken over by such passion, such wonder, at the grandness of it all, of living in this moment, of *working* in it. In many ways, it is a privilege to career. And then sometimes I am terrified and I grieve, for lost species and lost worlds and lost futures.

Before going to Lady Elliot Island, I had read that people often hear whale song in the water at this time of year. As we snorkel, I hold my breath and listen.

Nothing. Then, oh, very faintly, something. Is it whale song? Is it some other ocean noise? It is high-pitched, dipping, fading and returning. Am I imagining it? Am I willing it to be there? Could we all will it to be there?

Later, as our plane banks away from the island, I see a whale surface, glisten, blow. The water sprays up, then the whale sinks below.

Adam Gottschalk is an Anne Kantor Fellow at the Australia Institute in 2024. He holds a Bachelor of Politics, Philosophy and Economics and a Bachelor of Arts (Environmental Studies) from The Australian National University.

This essay was a runner-up in *the Sydney Morning Herald's* inaugural essay competition for young writers.