

Life/ Levels 5-6

Reading practice

Sylvia Earle: National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence

Sylvia Earle was called a “Hero for the Planet” by *Time* magazine. She’s an oceanographer, explorer, author, and lecturer.

One of the world's best-known marine scientists and a National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, Sylvia Earle loves to dive deep into the ocean. She has spent much of her life in or under the waves. Earle has led more than a hundred expeditions, including the first team of women aquanauts during the Tektite Project in 1970. She has logged more than 7,000 hours underwater and set a record for solo diving in 1,000-meter (3,280 feet) depths.

Earle describes her first encounter with the ocean: “I was three years old and I got knocked over by a wave. The ocean certainly got my attention! It wasn’t frightening, it was more exhilarating. And since then, life in the ocean has captured my imagination and held it ever since.”

Formerly chief scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the US, Earle is the founder of Deep Ocean Exploration and Research, Inc. and chair of Google Earth Ocean, among many other roles. Her special focus is on developing a global network of areas on the land and in the ocean to safeguard the living systems that provide the foundations of global processes. She explains why this is important: “When I first ventured into the Gulf of Mexico in the 1950s, the sea appeared to be a blue infinity too large, too wild to be harmed by anything that people could do. Then, in mere decades, not millennia, the blue wilderness of my childhood disappeared. By the end of the 20th century, up to 90 percent of the sharks, tuna, swordfish, marlins, turtles, whales, and many other large creatures that prospered in the Gulf for millions of years had been depleted by overfishing and pollution.”

For those who don’t understand why the ocean is so important to life on Earth, Earle explains that “the ocean is the cornerstone of our life support system and the cornerstone of the ocean’s life support system is life in the ocean. The ocean is alive. It provides us with oxygen and uses up carbon. Take away the ocean and we don’t have a planet that works.”

Despite all of the problems seen in the Gulf of Mexico, and in particular the Deepwater Horizon Oil disaster of 2010, Earle reveals that she is optimistic. “In 2003, I found reasons for hope in clear, deep water far offshore from the mouth of the Mississippi River. It was teeming with life. Large areas of the Gulf have escaped damage. Protecting vital sources of renewal—unscathed marshes, healthy reefs, and deep-sea gardens—will provide hope for the future of the Gulf, and for all of us.”