



Hope from the Ends of the Earth
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Chile

Joel Peña remembers the first time he felt a real connection to the ocean. As a child he would join his grandfather on his two-week fishing expeditions along the coast of Chile. One day, as the boat was pulling away from the wharf and into the ocean, a dolphin swam by. It came so close to the boat that Joel could practically reach out and touch it. “How wonderful!” he shouted. Now he’s 20 years old; but still, every time he sees a dolphin, Joel says, “It reminds me of my connection to nature.”

Joel grew up in the southeastern part of Chile, in two different regions that experience climate extremes. Until he was eight years old, his family lived in Chaitén, a small town of about 4,000 people. Then in 2008, the eruption of a long-dormant volcano forced them to flee. They ended up on the island of Las Islas Chiloe, on the edge of Patagonia: often called “the end of the earth.”

The big island of Chiloe is like something out of a dream: colorful houses rise up on stilts in the water along the shore; behind them are lush, green forests. Here, about 40,000 people live in an area of just under 4,000 square miles.

As a curious child, Joel began exploring the incredible biodiversity of the island. On Chiloe, the animals have to adapt to the extreme conditions, which makes them remarkably diverse, and unique. There’s the *pudu*, the world’s smallest deer; and the *monito del monte*, a marsupial the size of a mouse that exists only in Chile and Argentina. In the summers, magnificent blue whales – the world’s largest mammals – migrate through the coastal waters of southern Chile. “We live in a place that’s so privileged with biodiversity,” Joel says. “There are tons of beautiful species, and flowers too. You start to internalize that nature.”

Over the years, Joel has seen how human activity is causing harm to some species, and throwing off the balance of the ecosystem. The Chilean dolphin, which so inspired Joel when he was a kid, is listed as “near threatened” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Today, only about 5,000 Chilean dolphins remain in the wild. For years, the population of dolphins off the coasts of Chile has been cut down by overfishing, and pollution from ships carrying heavy containers filled with industrial goods.

As is the case for the Chilean dolphin, for many of the marine and terrestrial animals that live in Chile, climate change is not even the greatest threat to their livelihoods. Humans are. And for Joel, the only way to save the wide diversity of animals that have made the extreme southern coasts of Chile their home – regardless of whether they live on land or in the sea – is through education, on both a local and a global scale.

That’s why Joel has made it his life’s mission to bring global awareness to the environmental and human forces threatening biodiversity in Chiloe. He’s also committed to educating his local community. “People just aren’t aware about their impact, or about how to take care of their environment,” he says. “We want people to understand, and to really dig down to see the roots of the problems.”

Joel is the perfect emissary for his island community. Like much of the local population of the Islas Chiloe, Joel comes from a Mapuche indigenous background. He knew that in order to have the biggest impact, he would have to speak with indigenous leaders in each of the main cities and towns on the Big Island (Isla Grande). But he also knew he would have to bring his message to a global audience.

That is why in 2019 Joel joined the Chilean branch of the global Fridays for Future movement. In December he represented his people at the COP 25 Conference in Madrid. There he joined with other youth leaders to call on world leaders to do much more to protect marine ecosystems and respect human rights. He was critical of his own country, where the economy has been prioritized over the well-being of its people: where even basic goods like water aren't free, but have been privatized.

Returning from Madrid, Joel was inspired to found his own nongovernmental organization, along with 15 other young conservationists. They call it Chiloe Protegido (Chiloe Protected), and they have developed creative ways of speaking to the local populations about how they can work together to protect the island's biodiversity.

They've organized beach cleanups to remove plastic from the beaches. To offset the loss of the island's one animal rehabilitation center, which is no longer active, they're planning a training program to prepare aspiring conservationists to treat wounded or sick animals. And they developed a phone app called DóndeLaViste? (Where Did You See It?) that allows users to describe the wildlife they encounter in their daily lives, both on land and at sea.

But increasingly, Joel is focusing his efforts on marine conservation. Inspired by Sylvia Earle's Mission Blue, through which ocean "hope spots" are selected to be protected, Joel wants to create a global youth movement aimed at protecting the oceans.

For Joel, human activity is just one threat to marine ecosystems. Warmer ocean temperatures, which lead to ocean acidification, has a devastating impact on species like whales and dolphins. And the algae that blooms in warmer waters leads to a phenomenon called *marea roja*, or red tide, which can be deadly for marine animals.

There are other silent killers too, like radar waves from boats that disrupt the migratory and communication patterns of whales. More than three-quarters of the blue whales that die don't end up washing up on shores, meaning that the death toll is probably a lot higher than we know.

The challenges can seem enormous, but Joel knows that he doesn't have to tackle them all on his own. "At Chiloe Protegido, we work together, at sea and on the earth. It's not only me," he says. "We founded an NGO because in the end it's not about the work of one person, but of many. I don't want to be the only protagonist."

As for his own future, Joel is eager to go to university to study conservation. He sees the work he's done so far as just the beginning; and he recognizes the need for swift action from young people around the world to protect the oceans. "I am seeing young people from every community taking up the banner in one way or another, and pushing for the changes that we need to protect the oceans," he says. "It's something very, very fundamental to all of us." From the depths of southern Chile, he hopes their united voices will strike a chord that is heard—and responded to—on a truly international level.

People ask: Why should I care about the ocean?

*Because the ocean is the cornerstone of earth's life support system,
it shapes climate and weather.*

It holds most of life on earth. 97% of earth's water is there.

It's the blue heart of the planet - we should take care of our heart.

It's what makes life possible for us.

Sylvia Earle

Call to Action: Protect our oceans and find ways to help sustain marine life. Follow Joel at <https://twitter.com/joelpanichine>

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