

Elegy for the **Earth**

DAVID ULRICH





# ELEGY FOR THE **EARTH**

*Photographs of the Oceano Dunes*

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*cover: Oceano Dunes #35, CA, 2018, left: Oceano Dunes #133, CA, 2018*



“I began to think of sacredness as a kind of dialogue between the human spirit and certain designated places. These sites that call forth reverence, awe, humility, and wonder—we make them sacred. It is a way of honoring those feelings in ourselves. And when we hear the songs the places sing, we hear our own most ancient voices.”  
—*James D. Houston*

## Introduction

CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE GREAT EXISTENTIAL REALITY of our time. How we approach this crisis will affect life on earth for all present and future generations. As a longtime resident of Hawai‘i, a tiny dot of land in middle of a vast ocean, I hold a special interest in the life of the land and how indigenous people model sustainability and harmony with the earth—so different than the colonial interests which exploit, dominate, and pollute both the islands and the planet. The Hawaiian State motto reads, “The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.” In spite of our collective ideals, irreversible damage to the environment is imminent and represents both an urgent local and global concern. The intense beauty and power of the land and ocean are tempered by the ongoing forces of capitalism, overdevelopment, globalization, and climate change that

have left indelible marks on the land and soul of the people.

As a photographer, I have spent decades making images that explore the multiple threats to the land and ocean resources of Hawai‘i. Monster storms, king tides, coastal development and erosion, storm surges, military land use, and toxic agriculture have made the islands of Hawai‘i one of the most fragile and threatened ecosystems in the United States and the Pacific region.

Yet, within the recognition of tragedy, lies hope. And within adversity, lies the potential for redemption. Along with many other photographers, I now face the question: can art help? Can images serve to activate social change and environmental healing? During an art exhibition at the 2015 United Nations climate change summit, Norwegian researchers “identified a narrow set of parameters for what makes activist art effective in altering public opinion” and engendering reflection and action. In their study, dystopian or utopian representations had no lasting effect on the viewer. Artwork that contained a hopeful message was the only genre that served to change people’s minds. “People want to be made aware of something awe-inspiring... that activates the slumbering potential in our societies.”

With this in mind, I am interested in the affective power of art; that is, the influence of art on the viewer and its role of helping to evolve consciousness. Through mind-

ful awareness and creative work, my experience of self and the world can dramatically transform my usual fractured state into an experiential recognition of a sublime order and a realization of life's unity—the interpenetration of energy in all things. Through the contemplative act of viewing certain kinds of art, consciousness expands to realize life as a dynamic interplay of energies, governed by an order we cannot name or fully know.

For the title and organization of the book, I have chosen to employ the literary form of an elegy, an extended reflection and lamentation on the earth in the twenty first century, through photographs of the Oceano Dunes. The literary form of an elegy refers to a poetic reflection, often for a transient, mortal entity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes, “Elegy is a form of poetry natural to the reflective mind.” He explains that as the poet “will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love became the principal themes of the elegy.”

Sorrow and love for the earth—indeed. No better articulation exists for my regard for our dying planet and common mother.



In May 2018, I encountered the Oceano Dunes for the

first time. On a book tour following the publication of my most recent book, I was driving down the California coast from the Bay area to Los Angeles, stopping at venues along the way. I had long known of the dunes from the photographs of Edward Weston and had always wanted to see their flowing, sensuous forms. Accompanied by my partner, we decided to stop for a day or two before our next stop in Santa Barbara. Upon accessing the dunes on a small scrubby trail from a nearby RV park, their mesmerizing immensity stopped me in my tracks in a moment of aesthetic shock.

Returning to our car after a rich afternoon of photographing, we observed a woman and her two small children entering the dunes at sunset on this same trail. As her children ran ahead, she had a similar response. “Oh my god,” she shrieked. “I knew I should have brought my camera!” The dunes have this effect on many. After coming home to Honolulu, the dunes lingered in my mind and eventually took the shape of an urgent creative project. Over the past year and a half, I have made repeated photographic trips to Oceano.

What did I find there that touched me so deeply? Traversing the dunes reminded of a well-known proclamation by Oscar Wilde—one that I had formerly found suspect and irrelevant—when he wrote that “Life imi-

tates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” However, there on the dunes, in the changing light and amidst the aeolian forms, I found expression of the wide range of human experience, *my* experience, from the sharpest, most physical states of being to the most refined states of consciousness and awareness. On the dunes, I had the similar experience of viewing Mark Rothko paintings in a gallery—where powerful and even transcendent inner states are evoked through a contemplative silence. My casually expressed inner intent in photographing the dunes became known to myself as “Rothko with a camera.” Of course, I cannot hope nor try to replicate Rothko’s sublime accomplishments, but in over forty years of a personal meditation practice, both the reality and metaphors embedded in these dune images come the closest in my decades of creative work to representing the powerful emotional and mental states that I have encountered.

The dunes extend approximately 18 miles along the Central California coast from Pismo Beach to Guadalupe. Divided into three sections, the Oceano Complex, the Nipomo-Guadalupe Complex (parts of both are a natural preserve), and a large area devoted to vehicular recreation, the dunes are unlike anything I have ever experienced. The ephemeral, ever changing landscape expresses a sublime order and reflects the many correlations

between nature and the dynamics of the inner world.

The place and the images I have tried to capture remind me of Mark Rothko’s “silence and solitude” that expresses the resonance and subtle dimensions of consciousness—not the dominion of thought, but the primacy of awareness.

The devout powerful presence of the land is tempered by multiple threats such as motorized vehicles crisscrossing the dunes, the toxicity of surrounding industrial agriculture, and the second-worst air quality in the country. The California parks system strives to balance quiet recreation and conservation with the needs of motorized enthusiasts, and much of the sheer acreage of the Oceano Dunes complex allows for vehicles both on the beach and in the dunes. On a recent Memorial Day weekend, we observed a trail of hundreds of cars, RV’s and trailers making their way along the beach to their camping location. We were constantly annoyed by the background buzz of dune buggies flying around, like pestering flies on an animal’s back, and dangerously cresting over the dunes.

As I photographed this pristine silent world, a few thousand feet away a dystopian universe was taking place with the dune buggies, dirt bikes, and all manner of modified vehicles zooming up and down the beach and zipping over the unprotected dunes. The silence I felt was inner, not outer, and the contrast between the natural

preserve and American Mad Max vehicular culture was striking and disturbing. My experience of the dunes reminds me that the eternal and the temporal can be encountered and embraced in a fluid, dynamic balance.



Two highly personal experiences shaped my thinking and assert themselves prominently into this body of work. The first took place in 1970, when, as a young photojournalism student, I witnessed and documented the events surrounding the deaths of four students from National Guardsmen's bullets at Kent State. This had a profound impact on me and represented a turning point in my way of thinking. I intuited at the time that the only real agent of change that could make a difference to humanity and to the earth itself was the evolution of consciousness in the individual, multiplied into societies and nations. And in this search for awakening, art and creativity can help; they provide a pathway for personal and social evolution.

The second experience was the complete loss of my near-perfect, right, dominant eye to an impact injury at the age of thirty-three. My left eye, the inferior neighbor plagued with near-sightedness and astigmatism, became my only portal to the visual world. After decades

of delight in the shiny objects of visual perception, seeing had become something of a chore and a challenge. In the years following my injury, I realized my eye was blind but not dead. I observed several compensatory mechanisms that enliven the perception of my blind eye.

One of the most significant lessons I have learned over decades of partial sight is that *perception precedes thought*. There is a point in perception where thought cannot follow. I am fascinated with this edge of perception where verbal concepts disintegrate and have nothing to sustain their life. Thought is comprised of language and concept. The moment of seeing, however, is preverbal and primarily a function of non-verbal intelligence. My living left eye can see the facts of an event, and, at the best of times, my inward-turned right eye can sense or "see" energy itself. My blind eye can often perceive the energy that underlies surface manifestations and realize the symbols or metaphors embedded in a place or event. Due in part to these two events, I have become committed to what I might call the meta-narrative, using art to address the big picture, the very large questions of human existence.

The pathway to the eternal lies embedded in our acceptance of impermanence and change. Through images of the aeolian (wind-driven) landscape, I explore the concept of sentience in all human and natural ex-

istence. These photographs are made in the age of the Anthropocene and serve as an antidote to the apocalyptic horrors of climate change, a reminder of hope, that the earth is a transient being with great capacity to heal itself, if we let it, if we give her the space to do so. The life of the land and our own states of being are inexorably linked. Indeed, they are one and the same. For me, certain places offer a deep ecological link between the companion realities of nature and human awareness. These places, like the dunes, offer sanctuary and renewal and remind us of the unquenchable desire of the human spirit for relationship with the *otherness* of life.

The sheer force of the mystery and beauty of the dunes captivate me—and elude capture with a camera. What kept me coming back again and again was the illusion that it could be contained within a picture frame. It's what we do as artists. Our deepest visions are unrepresentable, but the power resides in the striving, the graceful effort to crystallize something that forever resists distillation. Nature is too big, too unknowable and multidimensional to be contained on silicon bits or two-dimensional sheets of silvered paper. The highest mysteries cannot be reduced to human dimensions. The mind cannot grasp their dimensional meaning. But we try. What is seen in an artist's work is a pale reflection of a

search for truth, an echo of the song of the world. Grace is the descent of the incomprehensible into human scale.

In these photographs, I lament the dark mystery of the transient earth and celebrate the ever-flowing infusion of energy into form.

—David Ulrich, November 2019

I



1. OCEANO DUNES #1, CA, 2018



2. OCEANO DUNES #84, CA, 2019



3. OCEANO DUNES #4, CA, 2018





4. OCEANO DUNES #5, CA, 2018





5. OCEANO DUNES #72, CA, 2018



6. OCEANO DUNES #14, CA, 2018

r. top: 7. OCEANO DUNES #74, CA, 2018 / r. bottom: 8. OCEANO DUNES #32, CA, 2019







9. OCEANO DUNES #23, CA, 2018





10. OCEANO DUNES #49, CA, 2019



11. OCEANO DUNES #7, CA, 2018



12. OCEANO DUNES #105, CA, 2018





13. OCEANO DUNES #78, CA, 2019



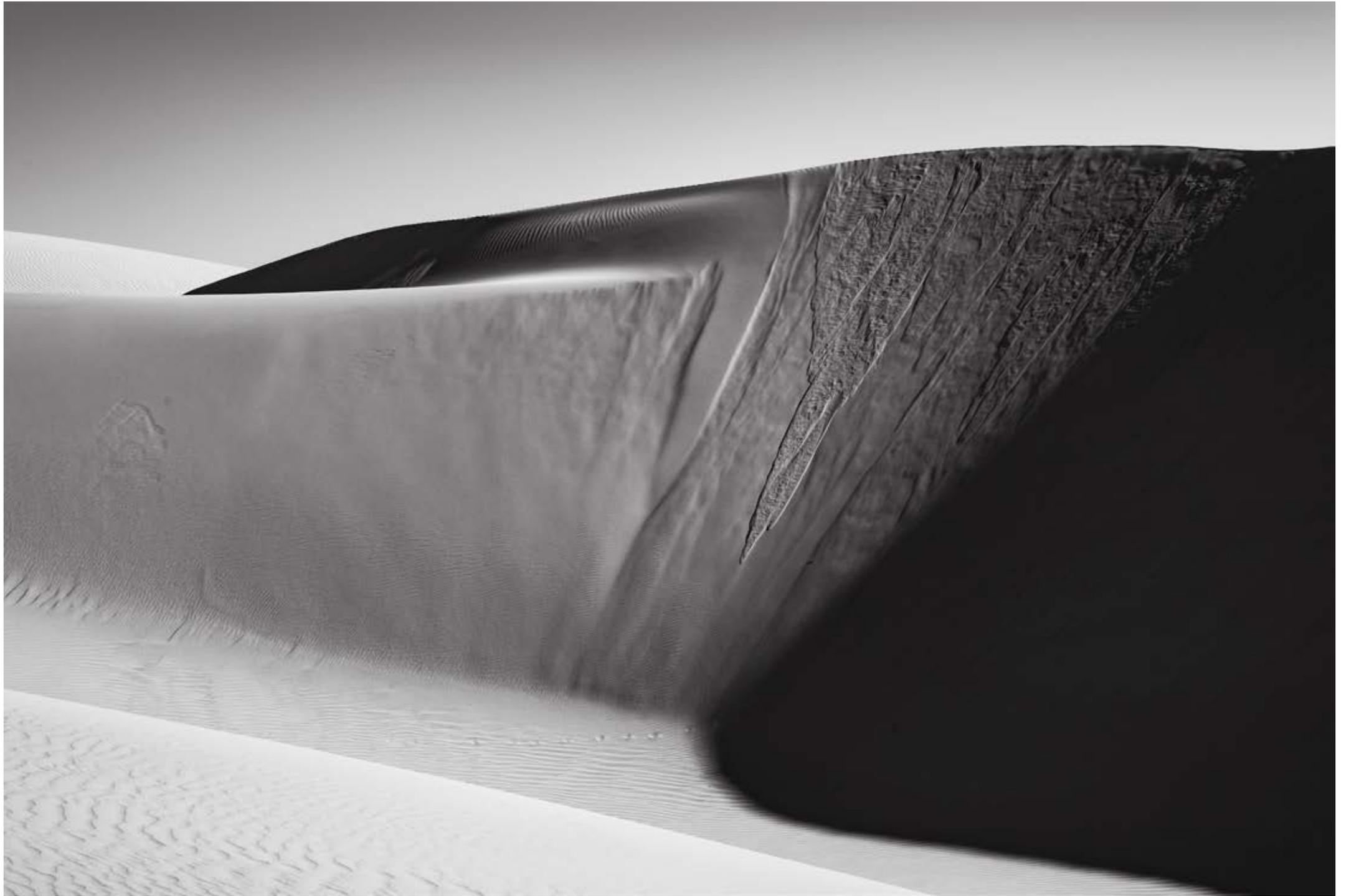
14. OCEANO DUNES #27, CA, 2018

r. top: 15. OCEANO DUNES #28, CA, 2018 / r. bottom: 16. OCEANO DUNES #24, CA, 2018





17. OCEANO DUNES #29, CA, 2018



18. OCEANO DUNES #6, CA, 2018





19. OCEANO DUNES #11, CA, 2018



20. OCEANO DUNES #146, CA, 2018







21. OCEANO DUNES #153, CA, 2019



22. OCEANO DUNES #149, CA, 2018



23. OCEANO DUNES #150, CA, 2018

II



24. OCEANO DUNES #3, CA, 2018



25. OCEANO DUNES #26, CA, 2018



26. OCEANO DUNES #33, CA, 2018





27. OCEANO DUNES #34, CA, 2018





28. OCEANO DUNES #39, CA, 2018





29. OCEANO DUNES #2, CA, 2018





30. OCEANO DUNES #35, CA, 2018





31. OCEANO DUNES #41, CA, 2018



32. OCEANO DUNES #102, CA, 2018



33. OCEANO DUNES #19, CA, 2019





34. OCEANO DUNES #114, CA, 2019





35. OCEANO DUNES #37, CA, 2018





36. OCEANO DUNES #63, CA, 2018





39. OCEANO DUNES #138, CA, 2018

l. top: 37. OCEANO DUNES #125, CA, 2018 / l. bottom: 38. OCEANO DUNES #122, CA, 2018





40. OCEANO DUNES #67, CA, 2019





41. OCEANO DUNES #152, CA, 2018



42. OCEANO DUNES #148, CA, 2018



43. OCEANO DUNES #151, CA, 2018





44. OCEANO DUNES #152, CA, 2018





45. OCEANO DUNES #153, CA, 2019

III



46. OCEANO DUNES #134, CA, 2019



47. OCEANO DUNES #93, CA, 2019



48. OCEANO DUNES #92, CA, 2019





49. OCEANO DUNES #96, CA, 2019





50. OCEANO DUNES #87, CA, 2019



51. OCEANO DUNES #129, CA, 2019



52. OCEANO DUNES #90, CA, 2019





53. OCEANO DUNES #131, CA, 2018





54. OCEANO DUNES #126, CA, 2019





55. OCEANO DUNES #120, CA, 2019



56. OCEANO DUNES #126, CA, 2018



57. GUADALUPE DUNES #142, CA, 2019



58. OCEANO DUNES #86, CA, 2019





59. OCEANO DUNES #61, CA, 2019



60. GUADALUPE DUNES #107, CA, 2019





61. OCEANO DUNES #115, CA, 2019





62. GUADALUPE DUNES #65, CA, 2019



63. OCEANO DUNES #155, CA, 2019







64. OCEANO DUNES #156, CA, 2019





65. OCEANO DUNES #154, CA, 2019





66. OCEANO DUNES #158, CA, 2019

IV



67. OCEANO DUNES #118, CA, 2019



68. OCEANO DUNES #116, CA, 2019



69. OCEANO DUNES #99, CA, 2019



70. OCEANO DUNES #110, CA, 2019







71. OCEANO DUNES #113, CA, 2019





72. OCEANO DUNES #81, CA, 2019



73. OCEANO DUNES #108, CA, 2019



74. OCEANO DUNES #109, CA, 2019



75. OCEANO DUNES #46, CA, 2019







76. OCEANO DUNES #82, CA, 2019





77. OCEANO DUNES #83, CA, 2019



78. OCEANO DUNES #124, CA, 2019



79. OCEANO DUNES #10, CA, 2019





80. OCEANO DUNES #12, CA, 2019





81. OCEANO DUNES #60, CA, 2019





82. OCEANO DUNES #45, CA, 2019





83. GUADALUPE DUNES #136, CA, 2019



84. OCEANO DUNES #18A, CA, 2019



85. OCEANO DUNES #18B, CA, 2019





86. OCEANO DUNES #133, CA, 2019



87. OCEANO DUNES #73, CA, 2019



88. OCEANO DUNES #127, CA, 2019





89. OCEANO DUNES #132, CA, 2018





90. OCEANO DUNES #139, CA, 2018





91. OCEANO DUNES #145, CA, 2018



## Epilogue

ARE WILD PLACES NECESSARY for our well-being and our survival? On an intuitive level, we know they are, but modernity is often so disconnected from the earth and her rhythms that we don't always cognize how or why wildness is integral for the human spirit. Preserving these places becomes a prescient act of faith so that, in time, we may continue to recognize our profound interdependence with the natural world. But perhaps it is egoistic to even think in this way, to bring everything back to the relative smallness of the human dimension. We need to preserve the earth for its own sake, not just for what it may do for us. The earth has its own order, its own necessity, and is infinitely larger than our daily concerns.

In the early 1960's, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) was planning to build a nuclear power plant on or adjacent to the Oceano Dunes against fierce opposition from the Sierra Club. Ansel Adams was a member of the Sierra Club Board of Directors and PG&E was one of his commercial photography clients. His influence was the deciding factor to build the nuclear plant elsewhere in San Luis Obispo in an area with less environmental sensitivity. Without Adams, the dunes, as we know them, would not exist today.

In these photographs, I acknowledge my gratitude to Adams—and not only for the more obvious reasons of his work as a photographer. His quiet and unflagging efforts of conservation of our natural resources that unfolded in so many known and unknown ways—and the way he created his body of photographs out an overarching commitment to a healthy earth—have been a larger source of inspiration for me than his specific images. One of my teachers once asked, “What serves what?” Does the world serve us, and our need to make art out of its many manifestations? Or rather, do we serve the higher purpose of justice, for society and for the dying earth, in our image-making? Adams inspires me to this larger aim.

I offer these images as way to honor the living earth and to strongly remind us of its need for perpetuation, preservation, and protection against its most formidable threat: unconscious humanity.



*David Ulrich @ Oceano Dunes, 2019, Photograph by Laura Dunn*



DAVID ULRICH is an active photographer and writer whose work has been published in numerous books and journals including *Aperture*, *Parabola*, *MANOA*, and *Sierra Club* publications. Ulrich's photographs have been exhibited internationally in over seventy-five one-person and group exhibitions in museums, galleries, and universities. He is currently a professor and co-director of Pacific New Media Foundation in Honolulu, Hawai'i. He has taught for Pacific New Media, University of Hawai'i Mānoa and was Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. For fifteen years, he served as Associate Professor and Chair of the Photography Department of The Art Institute of Boston (Now Lesley University College of Art and Design).

Ulrich is the author of *Zen Camera: Creative Awakening with a Daily Practice in Photography* and *The Widening Stream: the Seven Stages of Creativity*, as well as the co-author of *Through Our Eyes: A Photographic View of Hong Kong by its Youth*. He earned a BFA degree from The Museum School of Fine Arts / Tufts University and an MFA degree from The Rhode Island School of Design. He is a consulting editor for *Parabola* magazine and a frequent contributor.

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“Nature clearly requires that we change our energy technologies, our environmental legislation, and much of our wasteful way of living. But, above all, I believe, Nature requires that we awaken: we change ourselves consciously and become, as Gandhi put it, the change we wish to see in the world. “

—James George, retired Canadian diplomat, environmentalist, and author of *The Little Green Book on Awakening*.