



1. Arctic: the Narwhal

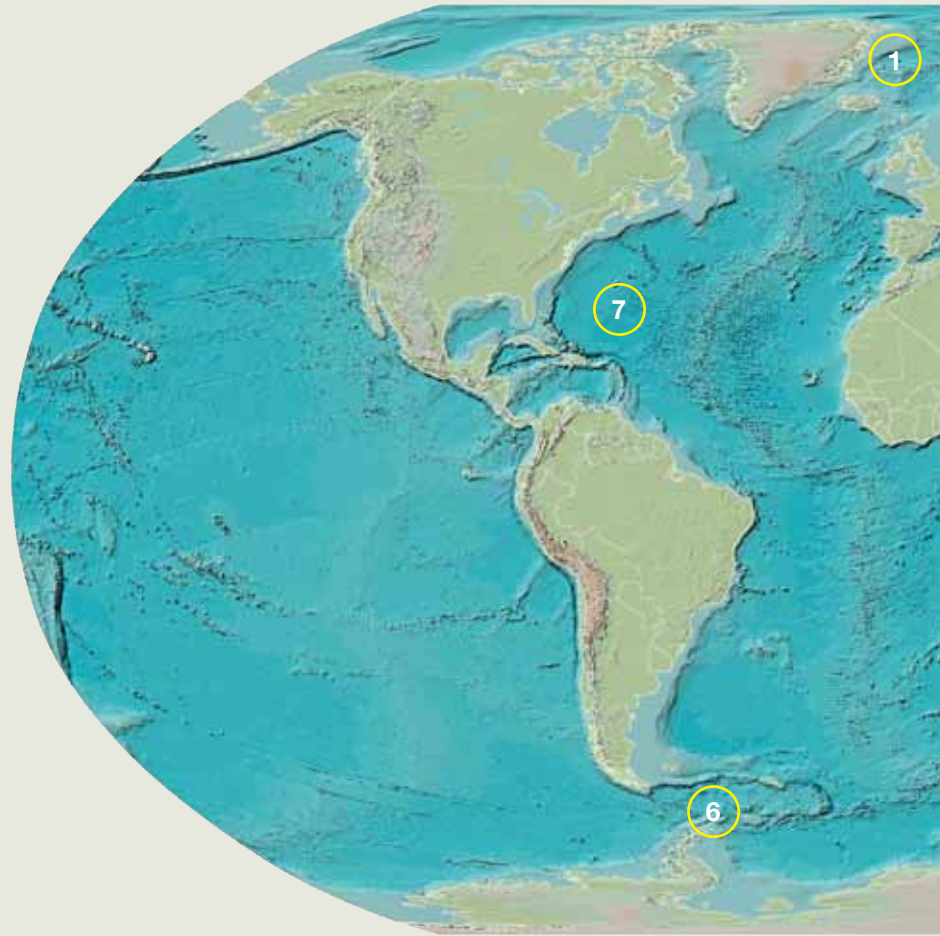
Is it a unicorn or a corpse? The narwhal whale (*Monodon monoceros*) of the Arctic – which can grow up to 5.2 metres long and weigh up to 1.8 tonnes – has been called both. Its name comes from the Old Norse words for ‘corpse whale’, though opinions differ as to why. Some say it’s because of the mottled appearance of its skin; others insist that it’s because the creature often

swims belly-up. Its more romantic appellation comes from its most distinguishing feature, the male’s usually single ivory tusk, which can grow to as much as 3 metres in length, earning it the name ‘unicorn of the sea’. Indeed the narwhal may have been the origin for the mythological animal itself.

F. Bruemmer/Still Pictures



7 Seas



7. North Atlantic: the Sargasso Sea

When Christopher Columbus bumped into masses of vegetation on his way to the New World, he thought he was about to hit land. But he was still in the middle of the Atlantic. He was in the oval-shaped Sargasso Sea – 1,100 kilometres wide and 3,200 kilometres long between the Azores and the Caribbean – which gets its name from the seaweed, *Sargassum*, that floats in huge quantities on the calm, deep blue waters. Sailors used to think their ships, slowing down in the quiet waters, were actually being held by the seaweed – giving the sea a reputation as a nautical menace. The seaweed is home to many marine species, and the sea is the breeding ground for both the American eel and the European eel.



A. Brando/Still Pictures

6. Southern Ocean: Emperor Penguins

March of the Penguins has caught the imagination of the world, making the film one of the most unexpected box office hits ever. Its heroes and heroines, the emperor penguins, are the only animals to spend the winter in the coldest place on the planet. The largest penguin species – standing almost 1.3 metres – they are insulated by a dense network of 11 feathers on every square centimetre of their bodies.

But even this cannot keep out temperatures that can plunge to minus 60 degrees centigrade. So – in a unique cooperative effort – they clump together in huge, huddled masses, taking turns to move to the inside to warm up, and then moving out to the edge again to give others their chance.



F. Lochon/UNEP/Topham

2. Black Sea: the Great Flood

Many traditions tell of a great flood early in the history of civilization. Recent research suggests that it may actually have happened, forming the present shape of the Black Sea. Geologists have found evidence that water flooded from the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus – at 200 times the rate of the flows over the Niagara Falls – around 5600 BC. Marine archaeologists have found

Topfoto/NASA/JPL/NIMA



what appear to be ancient shorelines and man-made structures, dating from about the same time, under 100 metres of water off the sea's coasts. The theory is disputed, but some believe that this could solve an old mystery: what triggered the massive spread of proto-Indo-European people throughout Europe and Asia?



S. Nicklas/NOS/NGS/NOAA

3. North Pacific: the Mariana Trench

Climbing to the highest point on Earth is a doddle, compared to descending to its deepest one. Many people now scale Mount Everest each year but only two – Jacques Piccard and Don Walsh – have plunged down to the bottom of the 11-kilometre-deep Mariana Trench near Guam in the North Pacific, and that was nearly half a century ago (see page 6). Yet it contains potential treasures. In the mid-1990s, for example, Japanese scientists – using a remote-control submarine probe – discovered a bacterium, *Moritella yanosii*. The bacterium, which contains the medically useful proteins DHA and EPA, previously found only in fish oils, has potential for treating cancer and hypertension.

4. South Pacific: Kelp Forests

Everyone knows what coral reefs look like, but kelp forests – the next most spectacular habitats in the ocean – are much less well known. Thriving in cold, nutrient-rich waters around the world – with the giant seaweed growing as tall as 30 metres from seabed to surface – the dense forests house great biodiversity, providing food and shelter for creatures from the lowly sponge to giant crabs and octopi. Many are under threat. One of the world's biggest giant kelp species (*Macrocystis pyrifera*), in the waters around Tasmania, has been declining under the impact of rising water temperatures, an increase in sea urchins and pollution.



L. Rothman/Still Pictures

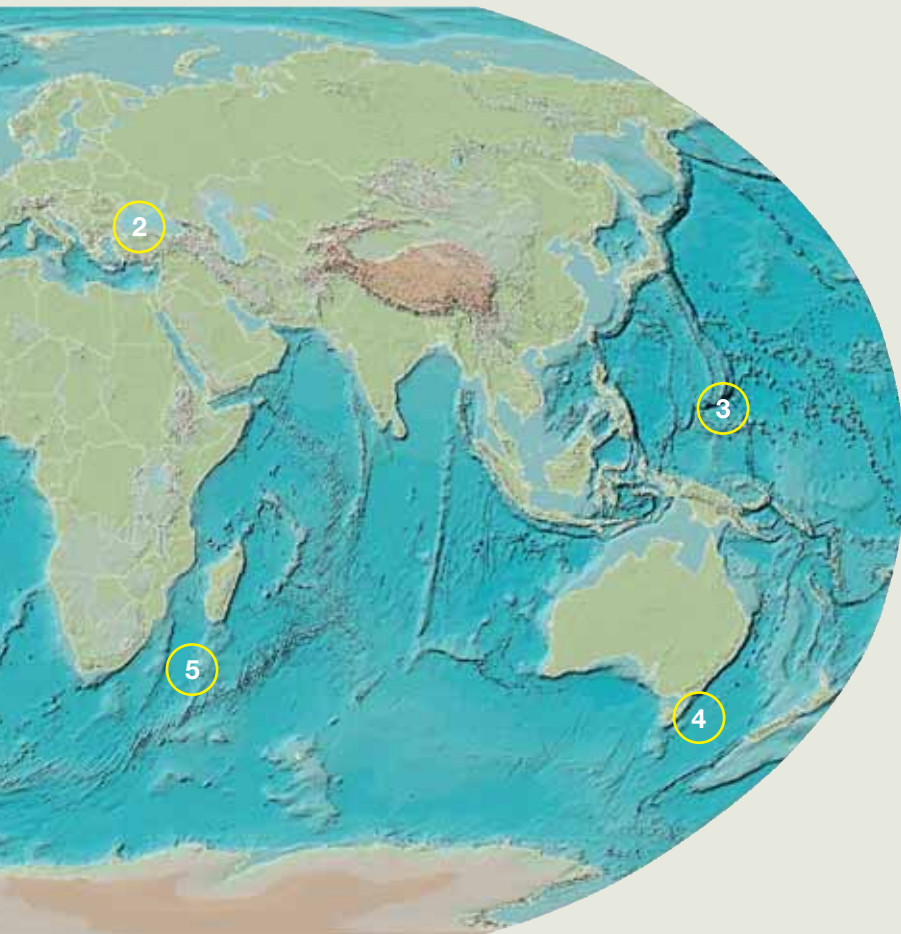
5. Indian Ocean: the Coelacanth

They thought that the coelacanth had been extinct for millions of years, but it turned up in the catches of local fishermen. Museum curator Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer spotted the unusual-looking fish when inspecting catches near the mouth of the Chalumna River, South Africa, for interesting specimens. Up to then, the fish – whose ancestors are believed to have first appeared on Earth 350 to 400 million



N. Wu/Still Pictures

years ago, and which is often described as a living dinosaur – had only been known through fossils. More of the fish were later found near the Comoros Islands, and it turned out that their people knew the fish well, but thought of it as second-rate, as it is doesn't taste very good.



UNEP-WCMC/World Atlas of Biodiversity