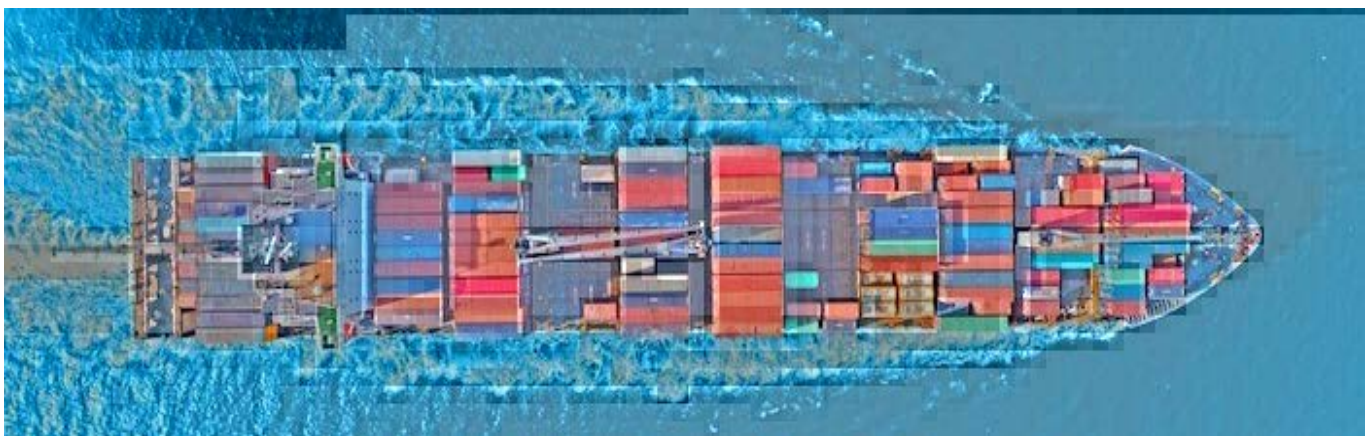


Exploring Oceans summary

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A-Level Syllabus:

- AQA: Global systems and flows.
- OCR: Exploring oceans (political factors, human influences), trade, human rights (seafarers).



Introduction: Why the sea?

With the root meaning of geography being ‘earth writing’, a lot of geographical research has focussed on land masses. Indeed, some might argue that in Western societies we are ‘sea blind’ and relatively unaware of how the oceans impact our lives. This is facilitated by representations, like world maps, that often present the sea as a blue, blank, geography-less space.

Around **72%** of our planet is ‘blue’ water, and far from being geography-less, these spaces are vital to our understanding of the world in human geography. The seas and oceans act as a space upon and through which **a whole range of social, cultural, and political, and economic processes unfold**. Key areas through which to explore this further are shipping and seafaring.

Shipping

If any one of us was to look around our rooms now, around 90-96% of its contents would have crossed oceans to get to our homes in shipping containers on board vast container shipping vessels. Indeed, **container shipping is the life blood of the global**

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economy, bringing us the goods that arrive in our supermarkets, Amazon parcels, and shops.

- Without this industry intercontinental trade, the bulk transport of raw materials, and the import/export of affordable food and manufactured goods would simply not be possible.
- It is an industry that continues to expand (premised on growing efficiency and increased economic liberalisation). It will only become more important in the years to come.
- The scale of the operation is enormous. There are over 50,000 merchant ships trading internationally, transporting every kind of cargo.
- The world fleet is registered in over 150 nations and crewed by over a million seafarers of virtually every nationality.

This process is often overlooked as it takes place out of sight and mind. It sometimes takes moments of rupture and failure to bring this into our everyday consciousness. The grounding of the Ever Given in the Suez Canal is a prime example of this.

Case study: The Ever Given

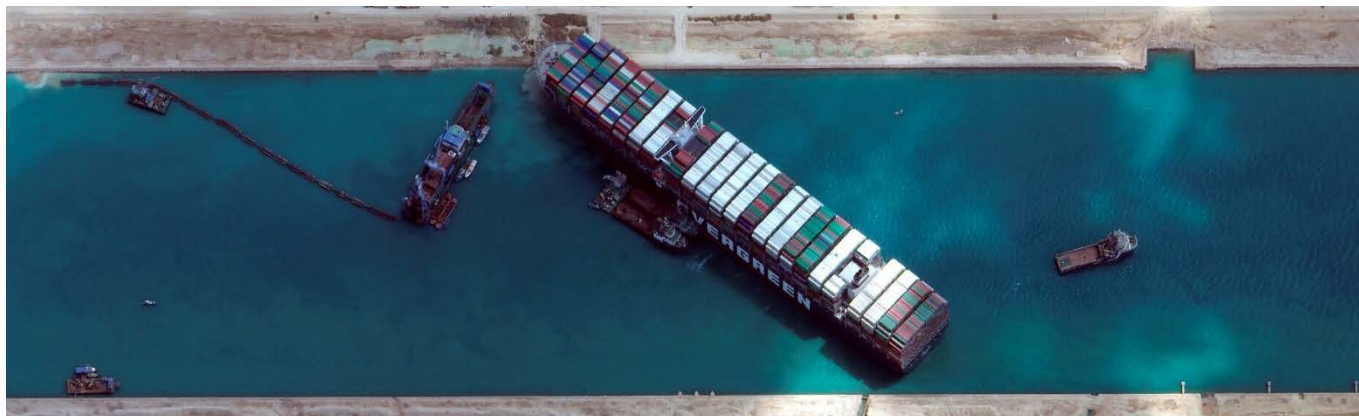
In March 2021, the Ever Given, operated by Taiwanese shipping firm, Evergreen, became lodged in the Suez Canal. If shipping is the life blood of the global economy, the **Suez Canal is a key artery**, with over 12% of global trade passing through the narrow infrastructure.

- The Ever Given weighed around 220,000 tons and at the time of its grounding, was carrying around 18,300 containers of its 20,000 capacity.
- In the 6 days it was stuck, it is thought to have cost the global economy around \$9.6 billion in global trade (Lloyd's List).
- Whilst stuck it held up over 350 other container ships waiting to pass through the canal.
- This had knock on effects around the world effecting everyone from big shipping companies to everyday consumers.
- Destination ports were particularly effected as they then had to manage a backlog of docking ships waiting to come into port after the delay.
- Whilst not as widely reported, the consequences also involved increased stress and anxiety for the 25 strong crew stuck on board.

As shops, companies, and everyday people awaited deliveries, **our profound reliance on shipping and smooth passage through the ocean was highlighted.**

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Seafarers

It is important to note that the global shipping economy rests on human labour. Often overlooked when thinking about processes of trade, globalisation, and ocean spaces, **seafarers are the beating heart of the global economy.**

Over 1.5 million seafarers work to keep the global economy afloat, ensuring that billions of pounds worth of commodities and goods transit safely through the ocean. Their work literally ensures that global economy keeps circulating.

As human geographers, questions of inequality, the effects of globalisation, and the churn of trade and the global economy are vitally important as they have profound effects on the lives of seafarers.

Key questions:

- What is the effect of the global supply chain on those that are responsible for keeping it moving?
- What are the consequences of the drive for efficiency and a 'seamless' global shipping system?

Seafarers: Entangled in the Global Economy

The global economy is driven by the capitalist demands of production and consumption. Maximising profits is at its core and this involves spending as much time as possible moving goods and commodities, and as little time as possible stationary at ports. **The economy and the labour of seafaring become entangled in a number of problematic ways:**

1. **Time at sea:** Ships, and therefore seafarers who are often overlooked in this process, spend around **93% of their journey at sea**. Within the industry, seafarers will often be contracted to spend 9-12 months aboard a vessel, meaning that they are ship bound for the majority of their journey.

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2. **Ports: out of sight and mind:** As deeper waters are required for bigger vessels, and more space is needed for greater numbers of containers, ports have moved to the outskirts of society. This conceals the labour involved in shipping and further hinders the capacity of seafarers to spend time on land beyond the port itself.
3. **Ship-shaped:** Advances in technology have made ships more efficient. This in turn means that they need less people to crew them. Some of the largest container vessels (such as the Ever Given) can be crewed by relatively few people. This makes single person tasking common and increases a sense of loneliness and isolation. This is exacerbated by a lack of internet access on board the ships.



Conclusions:

- Shipping is vital to the global economy and to our everyday lives.
- This has profound consequences for those tasked with moving goods through the oceans.
- It is important to understand the ocean as a space of lived experience and not just a blank space to be crossed as quickly as possible.

Further reading and sources:

Rose George (2013) Deep Sea and Foreign Going (a very accessible book).

Dr Olivia Swift, Social Isolation of Seafarers

<https://www.seafarerswelfare.org/assets/documents/resources/Social-Isolation-Article-PDF.pdf>

Suez Canal blockage: how cargo ships like Ever Given became so huge, and why they're causing problems <https://theconversation.com/suez-canal-blockage-how-cargo-ships-like-ever-given-became-so-huge-and-why-theyre-causing-problems-158090>

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