

On Vulnerability: Learning from the Animals

Sunaura Celeste Taylor

University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

Vulnerability is a paradox. It is at once described as a quality that represents real danger, a condition that no one wants to be in, while increasingly being understood as a place of resistance, power, and generative ways of being in the world. Vulnerability points towards solidarity but it is also utilized to measure inequality. This essay explores the meanings and uses of the concept of vulnerability from the author's positionality as a disabled person and artist, informed by disability studies, multispecies justice and environmental studies.

Reflecting on the author's practice of creating weekly paintings of animals endangered by systems of extraction and exploitation, this essay explores the possibilities and risks of vulnerability. In particular, the essay considers the differences between the concepts of endangerment and vulnerability, exploring how vulnerability, when constructed as a measurement of inequality and risk, evades the key concern of what it is that makes vulnerable or that endangers. The essay ends by reflecting on one of the artist's weekly paintings, this one of deep ocean lantern fish. Tiny and glowing, these animals have survived for thousands of years as vulnerable embodied beings, but they are now at risk from a system that endangers them.

Keywords

vulnerability, disability, extinction, endangerment, painting

In 2025, I was invited to submit an essay to a new book called *Disability Vulnerability*, edited by the incomparable disability justice activist Alice Wong. For months I pondered what I could add to such a collection. I thought about the many debates and conversations I have had with disabled friends and colleagues about the word vulnerability: whether it is a word that we want to identify with as disabled people, or whether it is a word that we should push back against. I thought about moments in my life where I have felt particularly vulnerable, whether in my embodiment, or because of social structures. I thought about the fields I am most often surrounded by as an environmental studies scholar, fields that utilize vulnerability as a schematic of injury. However much I kept trying to think through vulnerability in terms of disability community and disability studies though, my mind perpetually brought me back to my animals.

Virtually every week for the first six months of 2025, I would spend a few hours each weekend searching the word ‘extinction’ in the news tab of my search engine. Invariably I was met with dozens of stories published during the week describing the vulnerability of nonhuman life. From leafcutter bees to crocodiles to whale sharks, I gathered an archive of an animal crisis swirling inside and outside America. I would paint one animal a week, mostly on old discarded book covers or gessoed paper (figs. 1-3), and jot down some very basic information: species name, the date, the name of the media outlet reporting on the animal, and some cursory information about why this species was dying – lamenting all the while the limitations and violent histories of centring such data points.¹ When I was finished I would add each painting to a shelf in my bedroom where I could see the animals as I fell asleep. A reminder to myself to not forget.

¹ The violent colonial histories of collecting, naming and documenting nature are well documented. See for example, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park; Alexis Pauline Gumbs; David Quammen; Harriet Ritvo; Deborah Bird Rose et al.; Thom van Dooren, *A World in a Shell*.

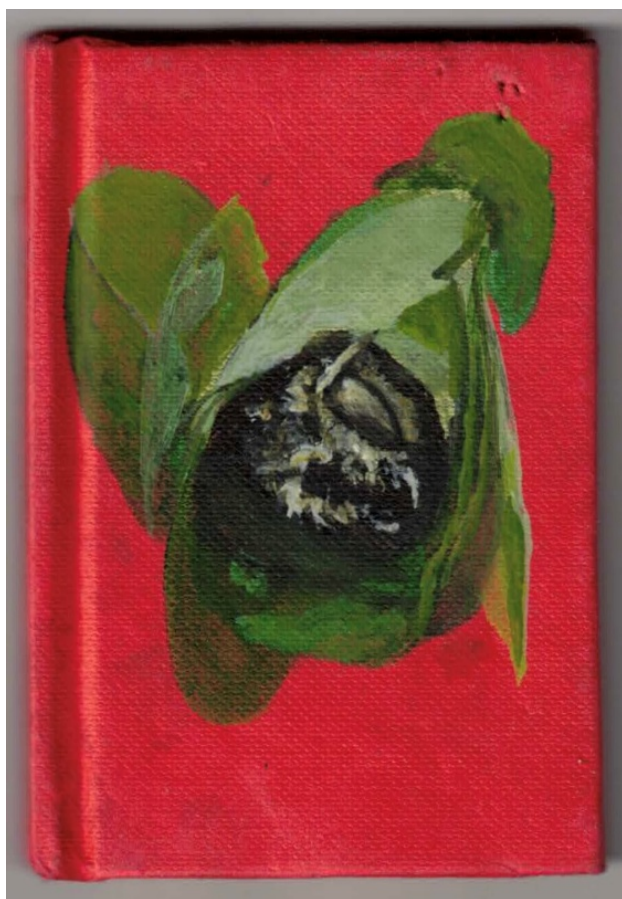


Fig 1. Sunaura Taylor, 'Leafcutter Bee' 2025, watercolour, ink, and pen on reused book cover.

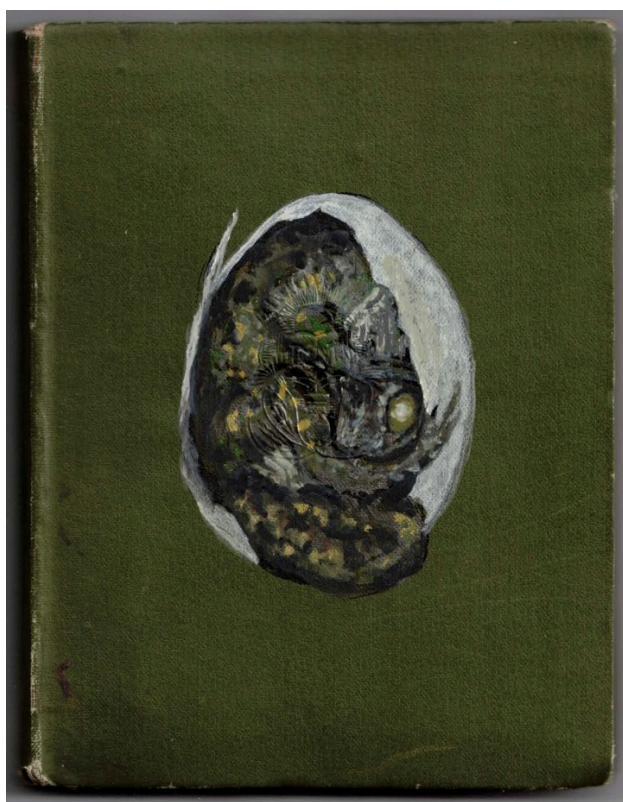
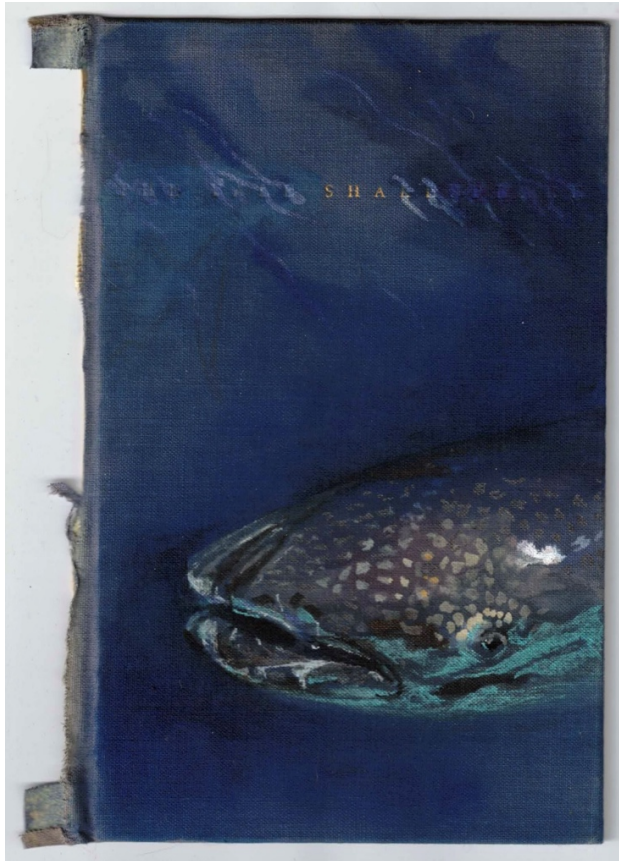


Fig 2. Sunaura Taylor, 'Crocodile', 2025,
watercolour, ink, and pen on reused book cover.



Sunaura Taylor, 'Whale Shark', 2025,
watercolour, ink, and pen on reused book cover.

My forgetting was (and is) fully possible, because at every other time I opened my newsfeed during the week I was met with the immense human suffering in the current political climate. During the week, I tried, however inadequately, to learn how to organize with my various communities, attempting to protest and build change in whatever small ways I could. During those few hours on the weekend, I protested differently, quietly, a protest against my own burnout and against forgetting that other creatures are also stuck in the crosshairs of this firestorm.

Which brings me back to Alice's essay. I was stymied by the weight of vulnerability in this era. I found myself *too vulnerable* to write the kind of essay I may have written about vulnerability in a different context. That essay would have focused on vulnerability as a place of resistance to the very harms that emerge from it. It would have been an essay focusing on the political power of vulnerability. Instead, my own vulnerability, not to physical harm or even material political repercussions, but to the emotional upheaval of witnessing and taking in what is happening to humans and more-than-humans every day, led me back, again and again, to my shelf of animals. And those animals led me to feel far more cautious about the myriad ways vulnerability is currently utilized as a concept. Indeed, they led me to wonder whether we need to be wary of it.

Vulnerability in this era is a paradox. Vulnerability is at once described as a quality we are told we should move towards in order to heal and build a freer future, and a quality that represents real danger, a condition that no one wants to be in. Vulnerability as a feeling or mental state is understood within many psychological fields as a quality that we all grapple with, and increasingly as central to our emotional well-being (see Brown and Burke; also Seery, Holman and Silver). It is disquieting, painful at times, but something we all carry within us. In a related vein, many marginalized communities and scholars of resistance often describe the power and importance of vulnerability as a lived experience: as a place from which alternative forms of care and collective being, a kinder and more compassionate society, and indeed resistance itself, can be built (see for example Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, 5. See also Gumbs; Carrie Chennault; Silvia Schultermandl et

al.; Ingrid Ryberg, Katariina Kyrölä, and Anu Koivunen). As disability justice scholars and activists have long shown, we all exist with vulnerability, some more evidently than others (Sunaura Taylor; see also Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson; Julie A. Minich; Eva Feder Kittay; Stacey Milbern; Patty Berne). If we built our political and relational systems with this reality acknowledged, and centred our ‘magnificent vulnerability’ as Mia Mingus called it – rather than denying and disdaining vulnerability in preference for a fantasy of independence and autonomy – we would all be better off.

At the same time vulnerability is often used to describe communities on the frontlines of harm. Vulnerability becomes shorthand for the effects of structural conditions caused by systemic racism, economic inequality, climate, or extinction disasters. Vulnerability is having your community chosen as the new site for a dump, or chemical manufacturing plant, or resource greedy data centre, because your community is Black, brown, Indigenous or from a poorer nation. Vulnerability is having decades of evidence that your community has been exposed to dangerous chemicals denied. Vulnerability is knowing your community is not causing the climate crisis, but is bearing the brunt of it (Liboiron; see also David Naguib Pellow; James Healy et al.; Leon Sealey-Huggins). As Thom van Dooren writes, ‘Vulnerabilities of various kinds emerge as a feature of the specific ways in which we are entangled in our multispecies world,’ and – as he is so deft at showing – often these entanglements of vulnerabilities are the exposure points of deep harm (‘Vultures and their People’ 140).

For those in policy and management or who study environmental remediation and adaptation, vulnerability has very particular meanings. Vulnerability is generally understood as a schematic of harm, but the details are intricately debated. Take the World Health Organization’s definition: vulnerability is defined as ‘The conditions determined by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets, or systems to the impacts of hazards’ (World Health Organization). This definition parallels but also diverges from the one given by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which defines vulnerability as ‘the

propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected [by climate change]', encompassing 'a variety of concepts and elements, including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt' (Begum et al.).

What are we to do with this unwieldy concept? These definitions are wildly diverse. But they do share a core meaning: Vulnerability is by definition the susceptibility to being wounded or harmed. A definition that it should go without saying is true for every single human being on this planet, every single animal on this planet, and indeed every single entity that is bounded by materiality. Vulnerability is undoubtedly an unsettling state, a reminder that all of us are mortal, porous, precarious beings, on an equally precarious planet. Vulnerability, no matter how unsettling, is ultimately the condition we are all in.

And herein lies my discomfort: we expect the concept of vulnerability to do contradictory work. We want it to point to a quality that connects us all, but we also want it to represent a quality that separates us from each other. We want it to point towards solidarity, and we want it to measure inequality.

What does being 'susceptible' to harm mean? What does the 'propensity or predisposition' to be harmed mean? What does it mean to be 'sensitive' to harm? What are we saying when we measure a community's 'lack of capacity to cope and adapt'? For those not versed in the myriad and complex debates of climate adaptation and policy, a person would have to be forgiven for thinking this all sounds a lot like blaming the victim.

Vulnerability as a schematic of harm risks cloaking the systems and people perpetuating oppression and violence. To say that a person is vulnerable is to point to a quality of a subject. The undocumented individual is vulnerable to kidnapping and deportation; the world's poor are vulnerable to the chaos of climate change; disabled people are vulnerable to institutionalization and abandonment; Black communities are vulnerable to police violence. Vulnerability becomes not only a thing we the vulnerable have, it becomes a thing that is responsible in some way for the positions we find ourselves in. *If only we weren't vulnerable, these systems could not get us.*

In these scenarios, those who do not consider themselves vulnerable work desperately to avoid becoming part of this category. Indeed, those who see themselves as not vulnerable too often seem willing to sacrifice those who are, in order to ensure that they have the resources and security to continue imagining themselves as impervious to vulnerability.

Perhaps we would do better in our measuring of violence and harm and risk, to move away from asking who is vulnerable, to instead ask: who is imperilled? Who is targeted? Who is endangered?

Endangered. I return to my forgetting. The word endangered is a synonym for vulnerable. It is a word we associate mainly in this country with the sorts of animals that are added to my shelf once a week. The animals, who in 1973, in a move that seems politically impossible today, were put on a list by the US government in order to protect them (United States, Congress, *Endangered Species Act*). The word endangered does something very different from vulnerable. The word endangered invites questions. Endangered by whom? Endangered by what? Endangered is not a quality or characteristic, it is *to be in danger*.

The Endangered Species Act has had mixed results. It has certainly not stopped biodiversity from plummeting, but it has also arguably saved a number of specific species – in part because we learned and responded to what was endangering them (Goble, Scott and Davis; see also Taylor, Martin F. J., Kieran F. Suckling, and Jeffrey J. Rachlinski). Currently, there are attempts to redefine what constitutes ‘harm’ in the act, hoping to remove habitat destruction from the act’s definition. The administration has also instituted a group of individuals, nicknamed the ‘God Squad’, to decide which species should no longer be protected, because doing so gets in the way of someone’s development project and economic interests (Holmes; see also Villagomez and Cooney).

Part of my weekly memorial project was an investigation into the specific causes of animal injury and death. Like us human animals, nonhuman animals are not simply vulnerable. They are not being ‘lost’. They do not ‘vanish’ or ‘disappear’ as extinction is too

often framed. What is it that kills animals? So far my very small and unscientific study shows that it is largely those same things that kills human beings: destruction of homeland, contamination of life giving resources, the violence of the many God Squads who want to exploit, own, or remove you because your life gets in the way of their development projects and economic interests (Quammen; Rose, *Shimmer*; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; see also Kolbert).

I am not suggesting that using a language of endangerment would solve our problems. But I am suggesting that language is powerful. Concepts are powerful. Vulnerability, as a concept of solidarity, of relationality, connection, and resistance, is a profound and important political tool for justice. But I am doubtful of the usefulness of vulnerability as a schematic for mapping out harm and injustice, because it too easily evades the questions of what endangers.

One of my paintings is of a school of lantern fish (fig. 4). These fish live in the depths of our ancient oceans – 31,000 miles below the surface. These tiny luminescent fish live so far away from us that up until now they have been largely protected from our nets. Now, however, they are widely viewed by industry as ‘underexploited’ (Scales). Sometimes the language we use for animals is refreshing in its honesty.

Deep sea fishing industries are salivating at the enormous amount of fish – potentially 20 gigatonnes – they could yank from the seas. While the fish are too unpalatable and oily for direct human consumption, industries are banking on the profits to be made by turning them into fishmeal. These tiny animals, living so far away from all of us in the deep oceans, are, it must be noted, a vitally important carbon pump. Their killing would mean they would no longer capture the millions of tonnes of CO₂ they bring into the deep oceans every year.

These fish are perhaps the epitome of vulnerable. Small and glowing in an enormous hungry ocean. But they have survived vulnerable for millions of years. Looking at them from my bed, I fear they likely will not survive what now endangers them.



Fig 4. Sunaura Taylor, 'Lantern Fish', 2025,
watercolour, ink, and pen on reused book cover.

Works Cited

- Begum, R.A., et al. 'Point of Departure and Key Concepts.' *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, edited by H.O. Pörtner et al. Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 121-196.
DOI:[10.1017/9781009325844.003](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844.003).
- Berne, Patty. 'Disability Justice - A Working Draft.' Sins Invalid. 10 Jun. 2015.
<https://sinsinprocess.squarespace.com/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne>
- Brown, Brené, and Tarana Burke, editors. *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, editors. 'Introduction' to *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Chennault, Carrie. 'The Path to Radical Vulnerability: Feminist Praxis and Community Food Collaborations.' *Feminist Geography Unbound: Discomfort, Bodies, and Prefigured Figures*, edited by Sara Smith, Christopher Neubert, Michael Hawkins, and Banu Gokariksel. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2021, pp. 48-68.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81289>.
- Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750*. Zone Books, 1998.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, 2020.
- Goble, Dale, J. Michael Scott, and F. W. Davis, editors. *The Endangered Species Act at Thirty*. Washington: Island Press, 2006.
<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0631/2005026419-d.html>.
- Healy, James P., et al. 'COVID-19 and Climate Change: Crises of Structural Racism.' *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* (AMSTERDAM) 5 (February 2022): 100092.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2021.100092>.

- Holmes, Susan. 'Turtles and Whales are Endangering Us, Defense Secretary Claims.' *The Invading Sea*, 4 May 2026. <https://www.theinvadingsea.com/2026/05/04/oil-drilling-gulf-turtles-whales-endangered-species-act-exemption-god-squad-national-security/>.
- Kittay, Eva Feder. *Love's Labors: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. Abingdon, Oxford; Routledge, 2021.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014.
- Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.
- McRuer, Robert, and Abby L. Wilkerson. 'Introduction.' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2003, pp. 1–23.
- Milbern, Stacey. 'Remarks from Light up the Blackouts: A Vigil and Community-Gathering - Oakland.' 10 Oct. 2019, <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2019/10/13/we-need-power-to-live/>.
- Mingus, Mia. 'Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm.' *Leaving Evidence*, accessed 16 Jun. 2026 <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/forced-intimacy-an-ableist-norm/>
- Minich, Julie A. 'Rehabilitating Neoliberalism: Disability Representation in the Films of Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga.' *Journal of Popular Culture* (Oxford) vol. 48, no. 5, October 2015, pp. 970–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12336>.
- Pellow, David Naguib. *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3195.001.0001>.
- Quammen, David. *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*. Scribner, 1996.
- Ritvo, Harriet. *The Platypus and the Mermaid: And Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

- Rose, Deborah Bird. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.
- Rose, Deborah Bird, et al., editors. *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*. Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Ryberg, Ingrid, Katariina Kyrölä, and Anu Koivunen, editors. *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilising Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-Racist Media Cultures*. Manchester University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526133113>.
- Scales, Helen. 'In the Ocean's Twilight Zone, A Fish that Could Feed the World - Or Destroy It.' *The Guardian*, 29 Sep. 2022. DOA 05/11/2026.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/29/into-the-twilight-zone-lanternfish-the-fish-that-could-feed-the-world-or-destroy-it>
- Schultermandl, Silvia, et al. 'American Studies as Vulnerability Studies: Introduction.' *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, Dec. 2022, pp. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v4i1.195>.
- Sealey-Huggins, Leon. 'The Climate Crisis Is a Racist Crisis: Structural Racism, Inequality and Climate Change.' *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*, edited by Beth Kamunge, Remi Joseph-Salisbury, and Azeezat Johnson. Zed Books, 2018, pp. 99–113.
- Seery, Mark D., E. A. Holman, and Roxane Cohen Silver. 'Whatever Does Not Kill Us: Cumulative Lifetime Adversity, Vulnerability, and Resilience.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Personality Processes and Individual Differences*, vol. 99, no. 6, 2010, pp.1025-1041. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021344>.
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/whatever-does-not-kill-us-cumulative-lifetime/docview/763258140/se-2>
- Taylor, Martin F. J., Kieran F. Suckling, and Jeffrey J. Rachlinski. 'The Effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act: A Quantitative Analysis.' *Bioscience (Circulation, AIBS, 1313 Dolley Madison Blvd., Suite 402, McLean, VA 22101. USA)* 55, no. 4 (April 2005): 360–67. [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2005\)055\[0360:TEOTES\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2005)055[0360:TEOTES]2.0.CO;2).

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: New Press, 2018.

United States, Congress. *Endangered Species Act*, v16 s1531-1544, 28 Dec. 1973.

van Dooren, Thom. *A World in a Shell: Snail Stories for a Time of Extinctions*. MIT, 2022.

---. 'Vultures and Their People in India: Equity and Entanglement in a Time of Extinctions.' *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 50, 2011, pp. 143-157.

Villagomez, Angelo and Margaret Cooney. 'Trump's "God Squad" Is Killing Whales Under the Guise of National Security.' Center for American Progress. April 7, 2026. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/trumps-god-squad-is-killing-whales-under-the-guise-of-national-security/>

World Health Organization. 'Vulnerability and Vulnerable Populations: Community Disaster Risk Management.' DOA: 05/08/2026. <https://wkc.who.int/our-work/health-emergencies/knowledge-hub/community-disaster-risk-management/vulnerability-and-vulnerable-populations>

Acknowledgement

This text is dedicated to the legendary disability justice activist Alice Wong who passed away in late 2025 before she was able to read these words. Alice, like the lantern fish, was undeniably vulnerable, and it was that vulnerability that turned her into the tiger that she was – the tiger that would fiercely fight back against the endangerment of all she loved.