There are shadows on the warming, northern seas. Long ago, refugees fled Doggerland when seas encroached. Now rising seas threaten low-lying shores once again. An Icelanders asked, ‘How do we say goodbye to a glacier?’ Yet these are tales to bring hope if we can reconnect with nature, community and the power of our northern sea-faring and Viking heritage.

Jules Pretty explores moving stories from Iceland, Norway’s Lofoten islands, Denmark, eastern and northern England, Lindisfarne, Shetland, St Kilda and the Faroes. His touching tales weave a rich cultural tapestry from sagas, the heroic cliff rescues of deep-water fishermen by Icelanders, how Vikings and sheep left so few trees, the miraculous escape of Danish Jews to Sweden from Denmark in 1943, the rise of Abbess Hildr of Whitby, the enslaved Grimsby orphan boys and life on Doggerland itself. He asks, as the fire and flood of Ragnarök seems to loom, how can we live wisely and well with nature and each other?

Whilst writing Sea Sagas of the North, Jules Pretty visited 150 ports, coastal settlements and islands facing and edging the North Sea and North Atlantic. He travelled on Viking longship, oyster smack and spritsail barge, lifeboat and post boat, iron ferry and wooden ferry, trawler and whaler, rowed and motored painter; and visited trawler and ship museum, whaling station, shipyard and dock. The stories centre on the kindness and stories of coastal people, the cruelty and beauty of a northern sea.

He believes Sea Sagas is important because, “Stories at particular places are important to all of us. They help create identity and meaning for living. They also increase our care for nature and each other.”

Sea Sagas is in an emerging genre of nature and history writing akin to Julia Blackburn’s Time Song: Searching for Doggerland. Sea Sagas comprises prose chapters and alliterative long-form poems/sagas. These have echoes of the Norse and Icelandic sagas of old, and tell specific tales of:

- The settlement of Iceland and the establishment of the first outdoor assembly and democratic government;
- The farming and fishing cultures of Iceland;

Wonderful words; you speak them out loud while silently reading. Such a bold and wide-sweeping work.
Julia Blackburn, author of Time Song: Searching for Doggerland

An astonishing achievement... The crackle of language, the word play, the strange music of unfamiliar words.
• The first Viking quest to Lindisfarne;
• Life in The Grit beach village of Lowestoft;
• The last North Sea barge skipper and crew;
• A young Grimsby deckie learner travelling to Iceland;
• The four heroic Hull women who fought for ship safety;
• The Shetland men who became whalers in the Antarctic;
• The Drowning of Doggerland, how the North Sea once was dry and then flooded because of climate change – the migrants went west, and were welcomed at our coasts.

Ten Questions arising

These prose tales and sagas act as mirrors for today, and may thus raise further questions such as:

1. How did Iceland’s landscape remain so stable over a thousand years that locations for the original sagas and their famed events are entirely recognizable today?

2. A Danish king united England and Denmark for nearly 20 years after the disastrous reign of Æthelred, and Canute sat before the waves to teach his courtiers and people of the value of being humble in the face of nature. What might we learn from these old ethics?

3. The Holy Isle of Lindisfarne produced many saints, and the daughter of a Bamburgh castle king became Abbess of Whitby. Hildr brought together conflicting factions at the abbey. How does life at the edge of the land and sea affect the way we understand life and nature, and how does it encourage togetherness?

4. How did Norway come to invest its oil wealth in a sovereign fund and use this for public benefit, when Britain spent its oil income?

5. How did Denmark come to turn Copenhagen into a green, active and friendly city, built on the happiness principles of hygge that comes down from Viking times?

6. How did Iceland’s coastal communities of farmers and fishers become heroic rescuers of stranded British trawlermen at the same time as the cod wars were being fought?

7. An old herring and cod fisherman said to me, we were more tolerant in those days, when we sailed back and forth between ports of the northern seas. How did we lose this sense of tolerance and common purpose?

8. When the hunter-gatherer people of Doggerland were driven away by the flooding seas, they were made welcome by the forest people of the coasts and higher land. Might we find ways to be welcoming again?

9. The waters of the North Sea and North Atlantic are warming, disrupting marine ecology and fish and bird communities. Can we race to net zero carbon emissions fast enough to prevent permanent changes from the climate crisis?

10. An Icelandic author asked, how do we say goodbye to a glacier? The Okjökull glacier has now disappeared, leaving only dust and mud, and the other 270 in the country are at risk.
Notes

1. Book Description

*Sea Sagas of the North* interweaves prose chapters and alliterative sagas. Each chapter tells of travels across shores, seas and islands. These are heroic crossings in warming waters. Each saga tells of tales and times from across the ages. This is the territory of sagas, the Norse and Anglo-Saxon gods of old, and the mythic era of Viking expansion by clinker longships. It was when dragons protected people from themselves by hiding gold and silver hoards.

These crossing tales and sagas begin at elemental wilds of north-west Iceland. They take in the Lofoten Isles of Norway, Sjælland and the Øresund in Denmark, cross the sea to the eastern shore of England, and travel to the north lands of deepwater ports, inland abbeys and the holy shore of Lindisfarne, and then to the Atlantic isles of Shetland and St Kilda, and wind-torn fragments of the Faroes, completing the circle back at Iceland’s fire and ice.

The book comes to a conclusion with the saga of the Drowning of Doggerland, how the once dry steppe was flooded by the warming seas, making the people of the plains refugees. The book finishes as Ragnarök looms. What can be done to avoid more fire and flame? These are times when new stories will be needed.

Heroes are a central feature of the Sagas: the heroes face enemies and evil, the fierce sea and storm, the changing climate, cruel kings concerned with only their survival, the invaders seeking only money, the planners plotting destruction of the fishing villages, the ship and fleet owners exploiting labour and preventing safety investments, the financiers lending on the paper fish.

The heroes stride: women and men come up against indifference and evil. We hear tell of people who think of themselves as heroes: Vortigern the King, Æthelred the Ill-Advised, Olaf the Norse King, Kör and Hrolleif, Wulfstan the Archbishop, and many unnamed ship owners.

So, we hear tell of shaman Sky-Ryder at the flooding Doggerland, Queen Erce of the coast, Hildr the Drover and abbess of Whitby monastery, Herne the Hunter. We hear tell of Skaði the girl with magic and healing powers, Grim the longship leader, Sigi the slave singer, fisher Ned and cobbler Waxy Jack, the slave boy An, Freddie the deckie learner. There is Skipper Jack the last bargeman, Pordur the Life-Saver, and Gibbie the whaler. We hear tell of Lily and Rita and other women activists of Hull, and Mary the first female mayor.

Maps, glossary of Norse Gods, timeline, brief notes on walks connected with each chapter, stories, chapter notes and bibliography.
2. Endorsements

“An astonishing achievement. I relished the crackle of the language, the word play, the strange music of unfamiliar words. The whole thing is magnificent.”
   Richard Mabey, author of 30 books *Food for Free, Flora Britannica, Turning the Boat for Home*

“Extraordinary long-form prose-poems, a reminder of Britten’s operas... There is rhythm, sound and bite.”
   Roma Tearne, author of *Mosquito, Brixton Beach, The White City*

“Wonderful; one seems to speak them out loud while silently reading. Such a bold and wide-sweeping work.”
   Julia Blackburn, author of *Time Song: Searching for Doggerland*

“Stunning, an exceptional text; a deep sense of place and myth.”
   Rachel Lichtenstein, author of *Estuary, On Brick Lane, Diamond Street*

“Mesmeric writing, spellbinding magic of descriptions, the flow of time and sea and the magic of the naming of people and things. A rich cultural treat.”
   Robert Golden, photographer and film-maker

“The drama, emotion and practices of the sea-faring world brought into contemporary relevance. Marvellous, all sorts of new colours and emotional depth.”
   Patricia Gillies, *Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*

“A beautiful, profound work”
   Douglas Christie, author of *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*

“Rare and audacious, genuinely brave. The natural and the human are presented as inextricably linked, each creating the other over long stretches of time. A book of sounds and rhythms that points to a new genre, a wonderful achievement and a joy to read.”
   Geoff Wells, Director, Rural Communities Australia

Stirring and salutary, a beautiful and moving read. These sagas that are both epic and timeless.
   Tanya Steele, Chief Executive WWF-UK

“Masterly - evocative in substance and eloquent in style. I was transported back to my youth and moments of near terror as gales lashed the shorelines of my beloved home in Cornwall. Full of wonderful narratives.”
   Professor Richard Bawden, University of Western Sydney

“Read with great pleasure, thoroughly enjoyable”
   Professor David Orr, author of *The Nature of Design, Dangerous Years, Democracy Unchained*

“Enjoyable rhythms and evocative images, an inspiring [and] creative project”
   Professor Peggy Barlett, Emory University, Atlanta

“Old stories reimagined under the spotlight of contemporary environmental, social and political changes through complex and lilting narratives of contemporary Sagas.”
   Liz Gladin, Multispecies Story Writer

3. Book Events and Festivals
Jules Pretty will speak at over 30 talks, bookshop launches and book festivals in Summer and Autumn 2022: for full details see [www.hawthornpress.com](http://www.hawthornpress.com)

4. Interviews and Review Copies
Please contact martin@hawthornpress.com if you would like to interview the author or request a review copy (01453 757040 or 07765 006829)