

Splendid Isolation or Fish out of Water? Fishing, Brexit, and the Iconography of a Maritime Nation

Aadil Siddiqi and Nathan Davies

Aadil Siddiqi is an MSc student in Biodiversity, Conservation and Management at Christ Church, Oxford, where his research is housed by the interdisciplinary Oxford Seascape Ecology Lab. He assists with green transition research at the Oxford Net Zero research platform. Previously, Aadil read Land Economy at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, as a Cambridge Trust Scholar. At Cambridge, Aadil was a founding member of the University Marine Conservation Society and member of the Cambridge Conservation Forum Marine. He has previously worked in sustainable investing, environmental law (in two jurisdictions), and international development.

Nathan Davies is an undergraduate in History at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and a visiting student at Université Panthéon-Sorbonne in Paris, who believes the law is too gate-kept and inaccessible. In 2020, he co-founded legislait, a legal ed-tech startup to foster legal literacy in young people. The project is being developed with the support of the McKinsey and Company Venture Academy and will launch a trial in schools in autumn.

1. The fish are alright

Historically and presently, the United Kingdom has identified and presented itself as a maritime nation.^{1 2} Fisheries, historically a significant source of employment, cultural identity, and economic output, are a vital component of the UK's seafaring character. Amidst the decline of other British coastal industries, fishing, also in a state of 'managed decline',³ is perhaps the UK's final remaining material link to this maritime heritage.

Our article posits that the interplay of fishing, national politics, and British international affairs over several centuries engendered a fishing iconography rooted in place, power, and identity. Fishers, fishing communities, and the political class gained differing utilities from this iconography. Even as the industry's size and productivity

has declined (to 0.02% of the economy)⁴ and knowledge of fishing's adverse environmental impacts has become widespread, fishing iconography remains germane to major events in contemporary British politics.^{5 6 7} We use EU membership generally, and Brexit specifically, to highlight how conceptions of national identity influenced by the fisheries-politics-law nexus can 'bite back' to shape the activities of a political class instrumental in affording fisheries this power in the first place.⁸

Brexit is an example and an outcome of these interlocking forces. Since the UK joined the European Union in 1973, fishing policy challenged key British constitutional principles, and precipitated UK-European conflicts. This fomented pro-Leave rhetoric and ultimately directed the course of Brexit (2016–20) and the Transition Period (January–December 2020). Yet Brexit may also prove

1 Siddiqi: Informal discussions with Professors Simon Deakin, Cameron Hepburn, Catherine Mackenzie, and Yadvinder Malhi helped me clarify my contributions to Sections 2 and 4 (although the views presented here are mine alone). I am grateful for my reviewer's comments.

2 Davies: I am grateful to Dr Pedro Ramos-Pinto, Dr William O'Reilly, and Professor Christine Lebeau for their help in making it possible for me to cross the channel before 1 January 2021. Without this I would not have had the opportunity to consider many of the questions raised in this article.

3 Phrase borrowed from Marion Gibson, who used it to describe the British maritime sector more broadly. See Marion Gibson, 'Vikings and victories: sea-stories from "The Seafarer" to Skyfall and the future of British maritime culture' (2015) 17(1) *Journal for Maritime Research* 1, 1.

4 Elise Uberoi, Georgina Hutton, Matthew Ward, and Elena Ares, *UK Fisheries Statistics* (House of Commons Briefing Paper SN02788, 2020).

5 Ruth H Thurstan, Simon Brockington, and Callum M Roberts, 'The effects of 118 years of industrial fishing on UK bottom trawl fisheries' (2010) 1 *Nature Communications* art 15.

6 Ruth H Thurstan and Callum M Roberts, 'Ecological meltdown in the Firth of Clyde: Two centuries of change in a coastal marine ecosystem' (2010) 5(7) *PLOS ONE* e11767.

7 Heidi Guille, Caitlin Gilmour, and Edward Willsteed, *UK Fisheries Audit* (Macalister Elliott and Oceana 2021).

8 This link is well established elsewhere. See: Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea* (Verso 2021); Carmel Finley and Naomi Oreskes, 'Maximum sustained yield: a policy disguised as science' (2013) 20(2) *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 245.

to be a critical juncture in fisheries policy, as it offers the UK an opportunity to break from perversely subsidised and unsustainable path dependencies that defined EU-era UK fishing policies.⁹

We proceed as follows. §2 articulates a historical and material foundation for British fishing iconography, arguing that it arose from the fishing communities' socio-economic and political activities to become part of British national identity writ large. We characterise this as a romanticised national iconography of fishing as a noble, distinctively British profession. In §3, we consider the implications of this by examining how fishing iconography was effectively deployed by sections of the British political elite to capture national attention during the referendum campaign, before assessing how fishing directed political events during Brexit. Having evaluated the past and present of British fishing, §4 turns to the future. Building on previous work by marine scientists, we highlight pathways to recast extractivist fishing iconography as an iconography of flourishing marine ecosystems conserved in service of public welfare interests.¹⁰

2. Tracing a British fishing iconography

Envisioning the sea as gloried separation, Britain's island nature and isolation from the European continent have historically been linked to notions of utopia, exceptionalism, and nationalism.¹¹ Others have connected Britain to its maritime frontiers. In a flawed, ethno-nationalist reading of origins, it was inhabited by 'the old Scandinavian peoples—the sea-wolves, as the Roman poet said, whose school was the sea and who lived on the pillage of the word'.¹²

Fishing towns have a unique sense of place which arises from the geographical distinctiveness of coastal settlements.¹³ ¹⁴ This is unsurprising. As junctions of land and sea, surface and water column, and settlements and travel hubs, their nature and purpose represents a distinguishing melding of communities, landscapes, and biodiversity. These interactions represent a 'complex entanglement'¹⁵ reminiscent of human-earth system interactions typical of the Anthropocene.¹⁶

Coastal communities' interplay with social values, political economy, ecological change, and technological advancement cultivated 'a tapestry of social and cultural relations' arising from fishing.¹⁷ These attributes subsequently determined fishing activity, which affects the well-being, economic productivity, and local ecological vitality of these communities.

Additionally, the interactions of fisheries with power structures in British society let fishing become an instrument of international

9 Paul S Kemp, Rainer Froese, and Daniel Pauly, 'COVID-19 provides an opportunity to advance a sustainable UK fisheries policy in a post-Brexit brave new world' (2020) 120 *Marine Policy* 104114.

10 *ibid.* See also Dieter Helm, 'Agriculture after Brexit' (2017) 33(supp 1) *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* S124.

11 Alex Law, 'Of Navies and Navels: Britain as a Mental Island' (2005) 7(4) *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 267.

12 Thomas Wemyss Fulton, *The Sovereignty of the Sea* (Blackwood 1911).

13 Timothy Acott and Julie Urquhart, 'Sense of Place and Socio-cultural Values in Fishing Communities Along the English Channel' in Julie Urquhart, Timothy Acott, David Symes, and Minghua Zhao (eds), *Social Issues in Sustainable Fisheries Management* (MARE Publication Series 9, Springer 2014) 257–77.

14 Stephen Rippon, 'Historic Landscape Character and Sense of Place' (2011) 38(2) *Landscape Research* 179.

15 Acott and Urquhart (n 13).

16 Yadvinder Malhi, 'The Concept of the Anthropocene' (2017) 42 *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 77.

17 Acott and Urquhart (n 13).

politics and national identity. Fishing rights in great power politics reflected broader efforts to divide global productive capability between imperial projects. Claiming rights to fish in order to sustain extractive industry helped Britain demarcate its sphere of influence on the European stage. These practices of partial enclosure, which broke from classical Grotian conceptions of a physically indivisible sea,¹⁸ may be traced back to monarchic claims on European fishing grounds as expressions of national sovereignty and maritime supremacy.¹⁹ British opposition to this classical model lay in its objective of maintaining exclusive access to customary fishing grounds.²⁰ As part of this foreign policy apparatus, we can locate an embryonic fishing iconography of fishing fleets as dogged, self-sacrificing participants in the cause of an island nation standing up to mainland intrusion.

Industrialism, which inaugurated the age of mechanised fishing, was a major change for the industry. Trawling caused fish population declines in Europe's most productive fishing grounds, thus raising early questions about fishing-induced environmental decline.²¹ ²² ²³ ²⁴ Moreover, the deepening links between capital, fishing, and profits boosted the political influence of prominent fishing industrialists.²⁵ ²⁶

In the post-WWII era, the industrial fleet became part of Cold War power projection objectives. Distant-water vessels helped

18 Surabhi Ranganathan, 'The Law of the Sea and Natural Resources' in Eyal Benvenisti and Georg Nolte (eds), *Community Interests Across International Law* (Oxford University Press 2018). For research on the imperial origins of the 'Mare Liberum' doctrine, see Campling and Colás (n 8) 73.

19 A notable example: legitimated by John Selden's arguments, alongside recently uncovered and shaky legal precedents, Charles I styled himself 'Lord of the Seas' to signal maritime supremacy to the Dutch (see Fulton (n 12) viii). See also the national claim made by Charles' father James I on British and Irish coastal fisheries, which only permitted European nations to fish by royal license. Source: Fulton (n 12) 10.

20 David Armitage, 'Introduction' in Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea* (first published 1609, Liberty Fund 2004) xviii.

21 Jane Nadel-Klein, 'Perpetual Crisis and the Making of the Fisherfolk' in Jane Nadel-Klein, *Fishing for Heritage: Modernity and loss along the Scottish coast* (Berg 2003) 133.

22 Ruth H Thurstan, Julie P Hawkins, and Callum M Roberts, 'Origins of the bottom trawling controversy in the British Isles: 19th century witness testimonies reveal evidence of early fishery declines' (2013) 15(3) *Fish and Fisheries* 506.

23 Fishing grounds in the Firth of Clyde were declared exhausted in 1888, but are nonetheless intensively fished today. See: Thurstan and Roberts (n 6). For a higher-order explanation of these ecological changes, see: Daniel Pauly, Villy Christensen, Johanne Dalsgaard, Rainer Froese, and Francisco Torres Jr, 'Fishing Down Marine Food Webs' (1998) 279(5352) *Science* 860.

24 Thurstan, Brockington, and Roberts (n 5).

25 David Symes, Emma Cardwell, and Jeremy Phillipson, 'UK Small-Scale Fisheries: Status, Devolved Responsibility and the Challenge of Sustainability' in José Pascual-Fernández, Cristina Pita, and Maarten Bavinck (eds), *Small-Scale Fisheries in Europe: Status, Resilience and Governance* (MARE Publication Series 23, Springer 2020) 351.

26 Nadel-Klein (n 21) ch 5 describes how, in Scotland, the ascent of industrial fishing capitalists replaced local fishing activity premised on community solidarity and co-management with a new regime of capitalists and wage workers enjoying different standards of living. Media reports indicate this has continued into the present. See: Crispin Dowler, 'Revealed: the millionaires hoarding UK fishing rights' (*Unearthed*, 10 October 2018) <<https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2018/10/11/fishing-quota-uk-defra-michael-gove/>>; Crispin Dowler, 'Privatising the seas: how the UK turned fishing rights into a commodity' (*Unearthed*, 7 March 2019) <<https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2019/03/07/fishing-brexit-uk-fleetwood/>>.

collect intelligence information, and subsidy programmes enabled fleets to fish more distantly in pursuit of broader foreign policy objectives.^{27 28 29} The ecological theory of maximum sustainable yield (MSY), developed in part by British scientists, was 'abused' to justify exploiting additional fish stocks as robust fisheries management policy.³⁰ In the absence of strong scientific or precautionary limits on fishing activity, twentieth-century overfishing soon followed. This closeness to the state, and the utility of fishing for broader political interests, afforded the fishing industry substantial lobbying power.

These foreign policy objectives did not go unchallenged. The Cod Wars (1972–73 and 1975–76), a series of disputes between the UK and Iceland over North Sea fishing rights, exemplified modern conflicts over marine resources in increasingly territorialised and ecologically depleted seas. Spread out over the 1970s, the Royal Navy accompanied British fishing vessels targeting fish in waters recently claimed by Iceland. The UK's loss represented a death knell for its distant-water fishing fleet.

The Cod Wars coincided with the UK's entry into the European Community (EC, now EU). The European Communities Act 1973 brought the UK into the common market, and made its exclusive economic zone (EEZ, seas within 200 nautical miles of the British mainland) open to the European fleet under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The CFP divided the European catch between Member States through quotas and extended support to fishing enterprises through subsidies.³¹ Historic state support, coupled with CFP subsidies, abetted contemporary European fishing conflicts. An over-capacity fleet of overcapitalised fishers competed for diminishing commercial fish populations on a continental scale.

The Eurosceptic Thatcher Government attempted to limit CFP-fished fishing in British waters through the Merchant Shipping Act 1988. This inadvertently restructured the fabric of the British constitution. In the *Factortame* case, the House of Lords found that the Act contravened EC law. Out of step with the hallowed British constitutional principle of Parliamentary sovereignty, the Lords issued an injunction to 'disapply' it.³² As Mark Elliott notes, this turned a pillar of the British constitution into a matter of political fact: EU law represented a superior authority to Acts of Parliament, provided the UK was an EU Member State.³³ As the *Factortame* judgment came many years after the UK's accession to the European Community, it represented a sudden recognition of the true extent of integration. From an iconographic standpoint, *Factortame* is pivotal. The judgment confirmed that the construct of the 'liquid

frontier', a matter of national interest for centuries, was permeable by a decree of unelected Brussels bureaucrats. *Factortame* therefore confirmed Eurosceptics' worst fears about integration, and acted as an antecedent to Brexit.³⁴

The legacy of fisheries' importance to Britain charged the industry with a distinctive iconography. As the industry declined, symbols of fishing were subsequently sublimated into British collective imaginations as a 'banal nationalism'. The maritime past holds equal sway in popular imaginations through literature, romanticisation, and memorialisation as it does because of any material reality.³⁵ Consequently, fishing iconography evolved from a place-based culture rooted in socio-ecological and economic experiences to a place-agnostic aspect of British national heritage and identity. There have been 'reductionist' twenty-first-century attempts to make maritime heritage more accessible by imbuing it with notions of a glorious past. These have cemented public appreciation of the sector as a figment of 'nostalgia-driven heritage [which] is in fact a version of a past which is romanticised and distanced from the everyday experience of most people', including extant fishing enterprises.^{36 37}

This is only reinforced by the present state of British fisheries. Small-scale fishers struggle to pass on their businesses to future generations, and fishers have increasingly become symbolic links to a fading past as part of a coastal pastiche that tourists find attractive.³⁸ This reflects the dominance of fishing iconography as a diffuse banal nationalism which substituted fishers' 'temporal politics of memory' with a nostalgic, nationalistic interpretation of the industry's place in British heritage and identity.³⁹ Consequently, fisheries have had to be reinvented through iconography in order to remain economically viable through tourism. Ironically, deprived fishing towns that retained most of their old fishing infrastructure following rapid industrial decline are especially attractive tourist destinations.⁴⁰

In this manner, associations with the sea become romanticised and abstracted as fishing becomes a quintessential part of British culture. Struggling post-industrial fisheries are therefore torchbearers for the construct of noble sacrifice for a greater British cause. Now, though, they perform these functions as tourism products in the consumer economy. They do so as signifiers of national heritage rather than as agents of great power politics. This changed with Brexit and the Leave Campaign.

27 Mason Redfean and Richard J Aldrich, 'The perfect cover: British intelligence, the Soviet Fleet and distant water trawler operations, 1963–1974' (1997) 12(3) *Intelligence and National Security* 166.

28 Carmel Finley, 'The social Construction of Fishing, 1949' (2009) 14(1) *Ecology and Society* 6.

29 Carmel Finley, 'Imperialism' in Carmel Finley, *All the Boats on the Ocean: How Government Subsidies Led to Global Overfishing* (University of Chicago Press 2017).

30 Daniel Pauly and Rainer Froese, 'MSY needs no epitaph – but it was abused' (2020) *ICES Journal of Marine Science* fsaa224.

31 For an extended description of the CFP, see: Daniel J Skettitt, Robert Arthur, Naazia Ebrahim, Valérie Le Brenne, Frédéric Le Manach, Anna Schuhbauer, Sebastián Villasante, and U Rashid Sumaila, 'A 20-year retrospective on the provision of fisheries subsidies in the European Union' (2020) 77(7–8) *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 2741.

32 *Factortame* was a series of cases. Here, we refer to *R v Secretary of State for Transport, ex p Factortame Ltd* (2) [1991] 1 AC 603.

33 Mark Elliott, 'United Kingdom: Parliamentary sovereignty under pressure' (2004) *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 2(3) 545.

34 The suddenness with which *Factortame* clarified a novel political and legal reality to British political elites has been recognised elsewhere. Lord Pannick, acting for the 1st Respondent in *Miller** on withdrawing from the EU, noted elsewhere that *Factortame* was 'the most significant decision of the United Kingdom courts on EU law' as 'it brought home to lawyers, politicians and the public in this jurisdiction that EU law really did have supremacy over acts of parliament.' Source: Catherine Baksi, 'Landmarks in law: the 90s fishing case that stoked Euroscepticism' *Guardian* (29 March 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2019/mar/29/landmarks-in-law-the-90s-fishing-case-that-stoked-uk-euroscepticism>>. **R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union* [2017] UKSC 5, 2017 WLR 583.

35 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage 1995, as cited in Law (n 11)).

36 Ann Day and Ken Lunn, 'British maritime heritage: carried along by the currents?' (2003) 9(4) *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 289.

37 *ibid* 296.

38 Symes, Cardwell, and Phillipson (n 25).

39 Boyarin (1994) 2 (as cited in Jane Nadel-Klein, 'Fisherfolk under Glass?

Memory and the Heritage Wars' in Jane Nadel-Klein, *Fishing for Heritage: Modernity and loss along the Scottish coast* (Berg 2003) 171).

40 Nadel-Klein (n 39) ch 6.

3. Brexit and the law–politics–iconography nexus: The bait bites back

Such was the deep and abiding sentiment with respect to the sovereignty of the sea, when this king of that wished to embark upon a policy or engage in a war for an object that was secret or unpopular, there was no better method of deceiving people than by declaring that the dominion of the sea was in danger ... The sea must be 'kept'.

—Thomas Wemyss Fulton, 1911

The Acid Test of Brexit is territorial waters ... it's going to take some considerable courage to say to our European partners—I'm very sorry, I know you've had a fabulous time catching 80% of our fish, but we're actually going to take back what is rightfully ours.

—Nigel Farage, 2016

We've got our fish back. They're now British fish, and they're better and happier fish for it.

—Jacob Rees-Mogg, 2021

Drawing on 'a romanticised and constructed vision of the sea ... based upon a fictionalised and distanced version of association',⁴¹ the Leave Campaign made heavy use of fishing iconography to substantiate the case for Brexit. Iconography rooted in this banal maritime nationalism simplifies complex, contradictory histories into neat, linear narratives. Contemporary political messaging about Britain as a self-sufficient entity maintaining an inviolable 'Sovereignty of the seas' mythologises inconvenient historical facts. As Fulton demonstrates, the openness of British waters ebbed and flowed across centuries: maritime sovereignty during the Stuart era was in truth a chimaera. In other moments of its history, Britain maintained more open seas than mainland European Powers, allowing 'all people ... to come and share ... in [fisheries] ... on the English coast ... expressly provided for in a long series of treaties with foreign powers.'⁴²

However, expedient iconographies can be deployed by political campaigns to inform myth-making and emotive public messaging.⁴³ A mythic notion of fishing, rooted in its iconography, lent resonance to Leave's attempts to present themselves as 'keepers' of the sea while implicating culpability for British maritime decline to distant managers across the Channel. Farage's depiction of fish, wild animals capable of moving across national boundaries, as 'our fish', 'rightfully ours', belonging to 'our sea' and 'our territorial waters', exemplifies this. This united the iconography of fishers as dutiful providers and fishers as frontiersmen engaging with foreign rivals, to protect British strategic objectives—and Britishness itself—with deeper utopic notions of islandic exceptionalism.

The epic of fisheries, fish, and fishers benefited the Leave Campaign. However, fishing policy consumed energy, political capital, goodwill, and time during subsequent withdrawal negotiations, in a manner out of proportion with its economic importance.⁴⁴ We describe this as the process of fisheries 'biting back' political elites who relied on them for

broader ideological goals. Having made use of fishing iconography at the campaign stage, and having pandered to fishing lobbies for decades, the UK allocated significant political capital to the intractable issue of dividing declining fish populations between entrenched interests, pursuing the short-term gains of unsustainably exploiting them.⁴⁵

The final deal was therefore always likely to disappoint fishing lobbies, particularly given the no-compromise style with which politicians promised fishers higher catch allowances (and the broader repatriation of a glorious British past through withdrawal).⁴⁶ In truth, the weeks immediately following Brexit proved traumatic for the industry. Because of border disruptions, businesses encountered increased costs and reduced revenues for their catch.⁴⁷ Fishing communities, lobbies and businesses have subsequently protested and expressed feelings of betrayal to political elites claiming to champion their cause. Brexiteers' responses have thus far been superficial. As fishers protested post-Brexit border disruptions and associated export declines, Jacob Rees-Mogg characterised the deal as national deliverance for nonhuman life, rather than for the pro-Leave fishing communities reliant on exploiting fish. Victoria Prentis MP, Minister for Defra⁴⁸, has admitted to not reading the Brexit deal. It is therefore possible to appreciate how fishing iconography was used to service a suite of political ends achieved through Brexit, rather than as an expression of interest in reviving the industry by leaving the EU.

Other examples of politicians using fishing iconography during the Brexit process are readily available. Most notable among these was the flotilla of trawlers led down the Thames by Nigel Farage's luxury river boat eight days in advance of the referendum, where kippers were tossed overboard to express disapproval with the CFP. Fishing iconography, which made the industry a constituent of British 'nation-ness', let Leave depict fishers as embodying prevailing public sentiments of feeling left behind and made downwardly mobile by EU-era neoliberal reforms.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ As Brexit negotiations during Theresa May's premiership stalled, Farage tweeted an image of himself with a threatened tope shark, claiming he caught it because of 'depress[ion] over Brexit'.⁵¹ After the Transition Period deal had been completed, Boris Johnson marked the press conference about it wearing a fish-embazoned tie.⁵² Rees-Mogg's comments about happy fish characterise nonhuman lives (and commodities) as gleeful participants and objects of sacrifice in the service of the British national interest.

45 Donald Ludwig, Ray Hilborn, and Carl Walters, 'Uncertainty, Resource Exploitation, and Conservation: Lessons from History' (1993) 260(5104) *Science* 17.

46 Sivamohan Valluvan and Virinder S Kalra, 'Racial nationalisms: Brexit, borders and Little Englander contradictions' (2019) 42(14) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2393. Catherine Barnard notes that the complex nature of the Brexit process itself also made post-Transition Period tumult likely. See: Catherine Barnard, 'Law and Brexit' (2017) 33(S1) *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* S4.

47 This was perhaps inevitable given the dependence of the British fleet on exporting its catch to the EU.

48 The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

49 Catherine Palmer, 'Tourism and the symbols of identity' (1999) 20(3) *Tourism Management* 313.

50 John Cromby, 'The Myths of Brexit' (2019) 29(1) *Journal of Applied and Social Psychology* 56.

51 Nigel Farage, 'Depressed over Brexit. Went fishing.' (*Twitter*, 7 July 2018)

52 Harry Taylor, 'Kipper tie: Boris Johnson sports fish symbol in Brexit message' *Guardian* (24 Dec 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/24/net-gains-boris-points-up-his-ties-to-the-fishing-industries>>.

41 Day and Lunn (n 36) 302.

42 Fulton (n 12) 8.

43 John Agnew, 'Taking back control: The myth of territorial sovereignty and the Brexit fiasco' (2020) 8(2) *Territory, Politics, Governance* 259.

44 Jim Brunson and George Parker, 'The final, frenetic hours that broke the Brexit deadlock' *Financial Times* (24 Dec 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/461b466a-533e-4742-813d-596f868ca328>>.

4. To uncharted waters: Look beneath the Channel, not across it

Romanticising fishing through iconography makes it impossible to critically evaluate it. A fair appraisal of British fishing must acknowledge the centuries of environmental damage it has perpetrated.⁵³ As a result of unrelenting fishing pressure, populations of commercial species are in freefall, while non-target species such as angel sharks, skates, wolffish, basking sharks, and bluefin tuna have become endangered.⁵⁴ Trawls and dredges have massively reduced the abundance of life in benthic ecosystems such as burrowed mud, cold-water coral formations, oyster reefs, and seagrass beds.

As a centuries-long enabler and beneficiary of unsustainable fishing, the British Government is deeply implicated in this decline. Fishing iconography has depicted seascapes as receptacles ordained by national destiny for extractivism, commodification, and private gain at the expense of environmental quality. It has thereby cemented state-sponsored overexploitation as an unavoidable facet of public policy, even before it was outsourced to the CFP. As a result, fishers benefited from unrestrained access to marine resources at the expense of the British public, who shouldered the costs of the substantial environmental externalities of fishing.⁵⁵

A robust marine conservation ethos is necessary to rejuvenate British seascapes and fish populations, and the communities dependent on them. This will require overhauling UK fisheries management and conservation policies. Sustainable resource governance is needed, to stop allocating the vast majority of ocean space to an over-capacity and overcapitalised fishing fleet and instead allocate it to public goods.⁵⁶ The CFP inflated the British fleet's harvesting capacity while making overfishing cheaper through subsidies. Withdrawing from it is a step towards this.^{57 58}

The UK must also upgrade its marine conservation estate. 98% of British marine protected areas (MPAs) are open to intensive fishing. Status quo efforts to forestall perilous marine biodiversity losses are marginal, given the scale of the stressors.⁵⁹ Additionally, conservation targets in MPAs often aim to maintain, rather than improve, biodiversity and species abundance. Having been designated in the wake of at least two centuries of fishing pressure, these objectives

are wholly inadequate for restoring depleted ecological function and commercial viability to British waters.⁶⁰

Accordingly, the Government-commissioned Benyon Review recommends establishing a 'Blue Belt' of rigorously protected MPAs in British inshore waters. This would better ensure social, cultural, and commercial use, as well as recognising the intrinsic value of healthy marine systems.⁶¹ Thus far, the Blue Belt Programme encompasses the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) but not inshore waters.⁶² Consequently, despite spearheading the Global Ocean Alliance aiming to secure 30% of national waters as MPAs by 2030, the UK's contributions towards this target outside UKOT waters are marginal. In advance of a landmark year—and decade—for global environmental policy, in which the UK plays a prominent role, expanding and improving the British marine conservation estate must be considered a matter of priority.⁶³

The material changes produced by marine conservation policy, including changes in the appearance of the seascape and the abundance of its biodiversity, could alter the basis of coastal communities' sense of place. Consequently, the benefits of conserving ecosystems may inspire the bottom-up formation of iconographies premised on stewarding marine resources for conservation and public welfare, in place of a cycloptic focus on managing biodiversity for the benefits of fishers. The South Arran MPA in west Scotland, managed by a community trust, is a notable example of conservation policy letting communities transform seascapes into public goods conserved for commercial and non-commercial uses.⁶⁴

Marine conservation affords the UK an opportunity to break from the reductive determinism of an antiquated fishing iconography rooted in exploiting, extinguishing, and commodifying marine life. Moreover, the material seascape transformations enabled by conservation policy offer profound opportunities for the UK to 'take back control' of its seascape management. They could inaugurate an era of marine policy servicing a suite of public goods, ambitious conservation targets, and sustainable economic activity. We are therefore hopeful that protecting and restoring depleted marine systems can recast the UK's fishing iconography as one of vivid marine life, and one that shows extractive industry as an accountable constituent of the seascape, rather than its unrestrained dominator.

53 We fear that the romanticisation of fishing enterprises—particularly rhetorical and historically evident links between fishing vessels and the Navy, or subtler connections between fishing vessels and patrolling British maritime frontiers—also trivialised exploitative and dangerous working conditions in the industry.

54 Thurstan and Roberts (n 6).

55 Ella Cardwell, 'Power and Performativity in the Creation of the UK Fishing-Rights Market' (2015) 8(6) *Journal of Cultural Economy* 705.

56 Daniel Pauly, Villy Christensen, Sylvie Guénette, Tony J Pitcher, U Rashid Sumaila, Carl J Walters, R Watson, and Dirk Zeller, 'Towards sustainability in world fisheries' (2002) 418 *Nature* 689. This is a seminal article on the nature and importance of these fishing transitions.

57 Jessica Dempsey, Tara G Martin, and U Rashid Sumaila, 'Subsidizing Extinction?' (2020) 7(1) *Conservation Letters* e12705.

58 See: Tim Daw and Tim Gray, 'Fisheries science and sustainability in international policy: a study of failure in the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy' (2005) 29(3) *Marine Policy* s 5/189.

59 Frith Dunkley and Jean-Luc Solandt, *Marine Unprotected Areas* (Marine Conservation Society 2021). See also: Manuel Dureau, Kristina Boerder, Kirsti A Burnett, Rainer Froese, and Boris Worm, 'Elevated trawling inside protected areas undermines conservation outcomes in a global fishing hot spot' (2018) 362(5421) *Science* 1403.

60 Annabel A Plumeridge and Callum M Roberts, 'Conservation targets in marine protected area management suffer from shifting baseline syndrome: A case study on the Dogger Bank' (2017) 116(1–2) *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 395.

61 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, *Benyon Review Into Highly Protected Marine Areas: Final Report*.

62 Ministers have referred to UK-based MPAs and Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) as part of England's Blue Belt. However, the official Blue Belt Programme specifically addressed MPA designation in seven UK Overseas Territories. Even if this terminological distinction is foregone, any extension of Blue Belt policies to waters around the UK have thus far failed to forestall extensive fishing in almost all of its MCZs and MPAs.

63 In addition to CBD COP15 in Kunming, 2021 also inaugurates the UN Decades of Ecosystem Restoration and Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. Moreover, the UK will host COP26 climate change negotiations in Glasgow and the G7 Summit in Cornwall. It is expected that environmental policy will feature prominently in G7 talks.

64 Bryce D Stewart, Leigh M Howarth, Howard Wood, Kerri Whiteside, William Carney, Éilís Crimmins, Bethan C O'Leary, Julie P Hawkins, and Callum M Roberts, 'Marine Conservation Begins at Home: How a Local Community and Protection of a Small Bay Sent Waves of Change Around the UK and Beyond' (2020) 7 *Frontiers in Marine Science* art 76.

Further reading

In addition to the sources otherwise cited, our work was broadly but indirectly informed by the following contributions:

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