

Reaching the boundaries of the blue planet: dwindling stocks, disappearing communities and the failure of solutions within the neoliberal paradigm

People once believed in the inexhaustible nature of the oceans to provide for food, something we now know it is not true. The industrialization of the fishing industry and the commodification of seafood, particularly within a neoliberal market system, led to an intensification and eventually unsustainable exploitation of marine resources. However, until today, mainstream fisheries scientists (biologists, economists and sociologists alike) seem to be ignoring, or at least fail to admit the root of the problem, which is the increasing consumption in an affluent society. Therefore, mainstream fisheries science has become focused on the idea of maximization of the yield from fisheries (using biological and economic indicators), rationalization of fishing and failed to point to the elephant in the room. This presentation will aim to bring in degrowth discussions the urgent need to reduce our impact on the oceans and its resources with solutions outside the neoliberal paradigm. A specific focus will be given to the EU and its failed attempts against overfishing.

The latest information from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2012) suggest that (wild caught and aquaculture) fish and fishery products are among the most traded food commodities worldwide, with trade volumes and values reaching new highs in 2011 and expected to carry on rising, with developing countries continuing to account for the bulk of world exports. This increase in seafood production is directly relevant with the advance of the free market which incentivized and gave rise to capital intensive and efficient practices through a push for technological advancements and industrial mode fisheries (Jacquet, 2007). It is now believed that global exploitation limits have been reached and recovery of depleted stocks must become a cornerstone of fisheries management (Worm and Branch, 2012). Decision-making bodies at different levels (national, regional and international) have come up with different solutions, with either legally binding and non-binding tools as a solution to the global fisheries crisis.

The New Economics Foundation estimated that almost one-half of fish consumed in the EU is sourced from non-EU waters. This gap is filled either by importing fish fished by non-EU or EU operators in non-EU waters. Currently, EU operators get to fish in non-EU waters following bilateral agreements between the EU and developing countries, where EU operators gain access to their coastal fishing waters in return for financial compensation. In principle, the EU will fish only where there is a surplus stock which the local fleet does not have the capacity to catch. In practice

however, due to difficulties to accurately estimating stock levels, short-term economic interests and corruption, this has not been the case and the EU has been accused of ‘stealing from the poor’.

In the EU, but also in many other industrialized fishing nations, the following have become some of the mainstream solutions to end the fisheries crisis: i) rights-based management, where tenure arrangements are assigned in order to end the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’; ii) non-state market-driven environmental certification labels where consumers have the opportunity to make informed choices when buying seafood, thus allowing the market to enforce in a way ‘sustainable practices’; and iii) the promotion of aquaculture, where farmed seafood is trying to fill the gap between the demand and supply. None of the solutions offered however, have fundamentally challenged the logic of hegemonic liberal and neoliberal markets or the dominant modes of legality of these solutions. The result is the adverse impacts of such solutions to those fishers and coastal communities, who are less able to meet the demands of the market, rationalize their activities and/or influence decision-making. Therefore, even though these solutions have come to be relevant with issues of environmental and social justice, they are still promoted and recycled with the pretext of them being the only way out of the crisis.

The strong promotion of rights-based management in fisheries have often come to mean the establishment of *de facto* private ownership over future fishing opportunities, and the establishment of markets where catch shares known as individual transferrable quotas (ITQs) can be traded to optimize efficiency. The word efficiency is used by economists to emphasize the efficiency gains and additional profits of limiting access and rationalizing management, recognizing the gains at the national aggregate level, but diminishing the regional or local losses, of access to the resource, with impacts on employment, food resource, community wellbeing and culture. Case studies from Alaska, Denmark and Iceland will be used to show the detrimental impacts of such measures to indigenous and coastal communities but also to a whole nation.

While capture fisheries production remains stable, aquaculture production keeps on expanding and aquaculture is set to remain one of the fastest-growing animal food-producing sectors and its further expansion is supported by big organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union. Its expansion also requires an increase of the farming area, which means the leasing and therefore the exclusion of others from an area of public domain. Consequently, decision-making relevant to marine aquaculture is a political process and not ‘just’ a technocratic one. Exclusion from an area that is public domain and rights of access to it, entails different interpretations of ‘what is just’,

embedded in different values and understandings of what is at stake. As decision-making and licensing for marine aquaculture is usually more centralized and away from the affected communities, it focuses on the current economic discourses of maximizing net economic gain and the contribution of a development on a country's GDP.

The example of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), the most important eco-label in fisheries (and soon in aquaculture) giving fisheries an economic incentive to improve their management and ecological sustainability will also be presented. Specifically, such eco-labels, due to their exclusive nature and by operating within globalized markets, have the potential to exclude those most in need (Hadjimichael et al., under review).

In addition to the MSC label, various e-NGOs and institutions have organized campaigns in order to promote 'sustainable fish consumption'. The EU's inseparable campaign for example promotes a change in fish consumption suggesting that "*as consumers and market actors we have to be aware that what, when and how we eat, buy and sell seafood has a huge impact on this precious food source*". The campaign on one hand, urges consumers to take simple steps like, diversify their consumption to lesser known fish species, do their research and ask questions when going to a restaurant or the fishmonger. What the campaign does not do however is tackle the fisheries crisis at its roots; it still supports the increasing human appetite for fish rather than proposing a reduction in fish consumption.

We have come to the end of the global exploitation limits of the oceans and its resources. Working within the current neoliberal paradigm and an agenda of continuous economic growth, solutions have come to directly relate to issues of environmental and social justice with detrimental impact on local communities whose space and resource is taken away and/or exclusion of those most vulnerable. The degrowth discussion for the blue planet cannot be delayed any longer.

References

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