

'ALIVE WITH SEALS': SEAL-FISHERY CONFLICT AND THE CONSERVATION CONVERSATION IN IRELAND

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Abstract: This article presents Irish fishers' perspectives on seal-fishery interaction as perceived increase in the population of seals causes a variety of issues including depredation of fish and damage to gear. The piece will juxtapose the fishers' own understandings with an analysis of national public discussions of the seal-fishery problem over the past year as some developments have been made in the government's willingness to engage with the issue. Grounded in recent developments of an anthropology beyond the human, this piece reflects on how anthropological knowledge can contribute to contemporary conversations around natural resource conservation in Ireland.

Keywords: environmental anthropology, County Kerry, fisheries, conservation, seals, wildlife, conflict

Introduction

The seal plays an important role in the folklore of Ireland. Historically, people making their living on the coast were 'always on good terms with the seals and close to them' and tell stories about seals taking care of lost babies, speaking, loving music or mourning the deaths of coastal people (Thomson 2001, 83). The large-scale economic exploitation of seals to the point of near extinction that took place in many parts of the world (Castree 1997) does not seem to have taken place in Ireland. Records of the harvesting of seals for medicinal purposes tend to be from peripheral and impoverished communities such as those in the Blasket Islands off the coast of Co. Kerry. These, such as Tomás O'Crohan's *The Islandman* written in 1937, already describe the sale of seal skin or oil to the mainland as a distant memory (O'Crohan 1951 [1937], 100). However, the place of the seal in the Irish consciousness is not entirely harmonious.

In the narrative of the seal bride common to Irish folklore (where a man forces a seal in human form to marry him by stealing her sealskin and she eventually, usually after bearing him children, finds it and returns to the sea) seals also represent an ambivalence in the relationship between humans and nature, as it is both 'antagonistic and productive' (Darwin 2015, 134). These stories provide foundational myths for many seafaring or aristocratic families, but also tend to associate the marriage with narratives of dispossession through the violation of some taboo. Thus the seal in the folklore is frequently connected with the downfall of the native aristocracy under English rule. These stories can be said to reflect a 'an infinitely more refined

and sophisticated understanding of the delicate balance which exists between mankind and the natural environment than we find in what would be usually regarded as more advanced systems of belief' (Ní Fhloinn 1999, 241). They emphasize the close connection felt between coastal peoples and their natural environment, but also the feeling of potential for this connection to result in disaster and dispossession.

The perceptions held by the public in contemporary Ireland of the 'people of the sea' are however much less nuanced and ambivalent than this sketch of folk understanding would suggest. At least since the 1980s, threats to seals have been met with considerable public outcry in Ireland (Sleeman 1997, 250) and seals have taken central places in international environmental campaigns (Dauvergne and Neville 2011). Academic study of marine mammals such as seals has historically been sustained mainly for 'cultural reasons', but recently industrial interests have begun to consider it less as a 'scientific backwater': It has become clear that 'marine mammals are an issue that can make or break the economic viability of these projects' due to the massive public support for the cause of marine mammal conservation (Boyd 2009, 83). Given this brief sketch it is perhaps not surprising that the seal can find itself at the centre of bitter controversy in contemporary Ireland.

This piece will focus on one such controversy emerging from the interactions between seals and small-scale fishers in the southwest of Ireland. Fishers in this part of the country periodically bring the problem of the growing seal population and the impact of this increase on their already precarious livelihoods. In public discourse, however, they routinely have their concerns dismissed and in some cases ridiculed. I reflect on why it is that it seems so difficult to take seriously the claims of fishers about their environment under current dominant paradigms of thinking about human-environment relations. Grounded in recent developments of an anthropology beyond the human, this piece reflects on how anthropological knowledge can contribute to contemporary conversations around natural resource conservation in Ireland. Moreover, I argue that a shift in scale is required in the conversation surrounding seal-fishery conflict. On all sides, the argument tends to revolve around national-scale aggregate seal population measurements and monolithic constructions of what is in fact a very diverse fishing industry. The possible solutions imagined match the scale of the problem's conceptualisation. As we shall see, fishers often call for culls, the policy discussion tends likewise to revolve around culls as though they were the only option, and when other measures are proposed, the Irish media has a habit of mixing up culls with other forms of control. The following account will draw on interviews I carried out with fishers in a village in Co. Kerry in the summer of 2016 and put these into conversation with policy literature on the subject as well as news media surrounding a recent incidence in which the issue was thrust into the public consciousness.

The seal-fishery problem from the perspective of fishers

Ireland has one of the largest coastlines relative to land area in the EU. Marine industries in Ireland have been historically – some argue systematically – underdeveloped (O Donnchadha et al. 2000, 2). However, *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth*, the integrated marine plan for Ireland, seeks to double the GDP share of ‘ocean economy’ by 2030– ‘determined to put behind us the days of underachievement in the marine area’ (Inter-Departmental Marine Coordination Group 2012, foreword). Within this and other strategies, the inshore fishing fleet is just one among many sectors vying for space. The Irish fishing industry is a diverse sector, ranging from large commercial endeavours to small boats carrying out seasonal fishing activity as a form of income supplement. The age profile of the industry is increasingly top-heavy as young people are less and less likely to take up roles, and between the years of 2008 and 2017 employment in the sector fell by 17% (STECF 2019, 101). This is borne out in the age profile of my interlocutors, who were for the most part over 60 years of age. In general, rural coastal areas show lower levels of affluence than other areas of the country (Hynes et al. 2019). As global fish production increases, alongside pressure on vulnerable fish stocks, the role of small-scale fisheries in national and international policy discussions tends to be marginal, but awareness is increasing that such fisheries have potential for driving sustainability in the fishing industry from social, economic, and environmental standpoints (UN FAO 2020). This awareness is demonstrated to some extent in the publication of Ireland’s first strategy for inshore fishing development through a recently established Inshore Fisheries Forum.

I conducted interviews with a small number of fishers in Dunbeg (pseudonym). Dunbeg is a small fishing village located close to the most westerly point of the European Union in Co. Kerry on Ireland’s southwest Atlantic coast. The main economic activities taking place in Dunbeg are fishing and tourism. Fishing in Dunbeg takes place on small boats (the largest being 56 feet) that fish close to the shore as they are not equipped to stay out longer than one day. With the exception of one, all of my interlocutors were extremely emotionally attached to fishing as an identity and way of life, saying that they are ‘not happy if they’re not out fishing all the time.’ The experience of fishing is as an intrinsic and embodied identity. As one interlocutor puts it, ‘I was born into it. Once the salt water goes into your blood you’re never going to get it out.’ Residents of the village are proud of its heritage as a dedicated fishing village, which is a rarity in Ireland as historically fishing has predominantly been a seasonal supplementary activity to subsistence farming. One interlocutor reacted in outrage to the recent addition of a number of historical information points around the village, calling them an ‘insult’ as they imply that the village ‘was founded by some farmers who decided to go down to the water’ as opposed to emphasising the cultural particularity of fishers. Conversely, while the fishing identity in Dunbeg is a source of pride to its inhabitants, it is impossible to ignore its coinciding disprivilege, for as one

participant observed, the only time the village had a comparative advantage over its farming neighbours was during the potato famine of the mid-19th century with a ready source of marine sustenance.

All of my informants felt that their needs were not considered a priority by politicians, and that they had been 'sold out' in favour of farmers, on both national and international scales. As one informant put it: 'there's no votes in fish.' If the Irish fishery as a whole is obscured in the priorities of government by other interests, the fishers of Dunbeg are doubly so. There is wide consensus among my informants that a major threat to the sustainability of their livelihoods as fishers is the European Union, as most of them blamed the unfair distribution of quota allocation to French, Spanish and Dutch industrial offshore fishers, who are variously described as 'devious' or 'crooks,' responsible for the majority of the depletion of Irish fish stocks. As one put it:

The fish come in from the deeper water into the shallow water to spawn. They can't come in now from the deeper water because the big boats have them all caught outside. Hundreds of Spaniards fishing outside, in hundred fathom water 10 miles off the Skelligs, landing their fish into Dingle and Castletownbere every weekend. They have twice the quota that the Irish boats have, which is all wrong... It seems that the fisheries offices along the Irish coast have hardened on the Irish fishers, and when the French and Spanish land to send away their fish nobody checks them at all and they can do what they like.

It is widely agreed that under the EU, fishing on the scale that it is undertaken in Dunbeg will cease to exist, and industry will be dominated by a few multinational companies. One interlocutor who had left fishing for IT indicated that while he did have 'yearnings' for the life of a fisher, he did not consider it a viable life choice and was unlikely to return. The various threats faced by the fishery and the apparent indifference of the government to these are compounded by the fact that the fishers have been unable to organize effectively: 'they would never agree. Even in this village, people would never get on with each other.' The ambivalence towards other fishers is encapsulated by another participant: 'That is the life of a fisherman, we all see after each other, even though we won't tell each other the truth. We never told each other the truth. God no, it's all lies.' There is thus a strong sense of community and solidarity, if not unified political cooperation or the sharing of knowledge about customary fishing grounds, about which they would never tell each other the truth. As such the fishing industry is largely ignored in a wider political context and simultaneously lacks a unified voice to advocate for itself effectively. The unwillingness of policymakers and the wider public to take seriously the knowledge and experience of fishers is reflected in the lack of confidence my informants had in their ability to contribute meaningfully to my work. For the most part they insisted they did not know

anything interesting, or apologetically ended interviews saying things like ‘I weren’t much good to you anyway.’

What the attention to the broader political and economic picture as it is conventionally depicted does not do is prepare the observer for what these small-scale fishers on the edge of Europe perceive to be one of the most serious threats to their livelihood: seals. Large increases in seal populations predominantly on the west coast have had a heavy impact on fishers as they eat large quantities of captured fish and damage gear – or, more specifically, they eat relatively small quantities but destroy the quality of the catch by eating choice parts of each fish such as the liver. Mounting evidence from Ireland and elsewhere suggests that this is carried out by individual problem seals who learn to gain an easy meal from fishing gear, rather than a practice of the entire seal population (Varjopuro 2011, Königson et al. 2013, Cronin et al. 2019). Fishers, scientists and policy makers in Ireland have for long found the issue of seals impossible to agree on, due to their ‘different views of reality’ (Brennan and Rodwell 2008, 1075). This disagreement is compounded by the fact that there is no firm national policy position on the seal issue (Cosgrove et al. 2013, 4). Fishers have been so frustrated by the lack of government support or recognition that in 2004 a group carried out an illegal cull on the Blasket Islands (Cronin 2011, 752), leading to a large increase in National Parks and Wildlife Service staff in the area (Ó Cadhla et al. 2005, 28). This situation leads to an atmosphere of intense and bitter distrust.

The fishers of Dunbeg are unanimous that seals constitute a serious threat to their livelihoods. They are described by one participant as ‘the biggest plague of all,’ and by another as an ‘awful threat altogether to people.’ One went so far as to say that seals are the ‘biggest threat of all to fishing to be honest.’ My participants all reported having entire catches of pollock from gill nets ‘all torn off and destroyed’ by seal depredation. The sense is that this is a recent change, with the consensus being that seals weren’t an issue until (depending on the fisher) about twenty to thirty years ago but now the problem is getting ‘worse and worse.’ Now, as one put it ‘the place is alive with seals.’

The fishery are ‘crying out’ for something to be done, but being ignored. At one point, the government ‘brought some people out to see the damage they were doing and they still did nothing about it.’ There is thus sense of helplessness in a situation in which the government has done nothing to help and there appears to be nothing the fishers themselves can do to alleviate the issue. As my participants saw it, the government deferred to other groups with more clout than the fishers. First is the ‘animal rights crowd’ who oppose any form of control. Secondly many referenced the farming industry as receiving far more support than fishing, as referenced in the observation that ‘if some pest came in and killed calves or cows or anything like that the whole country would be brought to a halt.’

For all of my participants, a cull of the seal population was thought to be required to protect their livelihoods. It is not the contention of this piece that such a cull should be carried out. However, it is important to recognize that fishers in places like Dunbeg find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place caused by inconsistent marine conservation policies. On the one hand, insufficient conservation measures of fish stocks results in large trawlers overfishing stocks before they have a chance to enter the reach of the inshore fleet. On the other, more stringent conservation of charismatic megafauna and a refusal to engage seriously with the lived experience of fishers has resulted in an unprecedented seal population. Particular individuals within this protected population cause further problems in exploiting the fish that do manage to slip through the nets of the industrial fleet through depredation of the catch. Indeed, as O Donnchadha et al. argue, the Irish fisher along with the culture 'that is the most precious heritage in Europe' (2000, 50) is now in danger of disappearing. It is instructive, in light of this, to think of the language used by my participants when they describe themselves as 'threatened' by the action of seals. The label of 'threatened', in the language of conservation, designates a risk of extinction, normally at the hands of human activity. Is it possible to conversely conceive of a form of human life as being 'threatened' with extinction due nonhuman activity (combined with a particular legal context)?

Seals and fishers in the policy conversation

Having outlined the problem as experienced by the fishing community, I now turn to examine the ways in which seal-fishery interactions are conceptualized in the policy conversation, drawing on academic work by scholars of marine policy as well as a policy statement from the Irish Seal Sanctuary. Approaches to the problem of seal depredation tend to privilege the use of abstract statistical models in order to invalidate fishers' knowledge and to construct the issue in extreme and adversarial terms as though a large-scale cull of populations were the only solution available (see e.g. Yodzis 2001). In the Irish literature relating to seal-fishery interactions, the tendency is to emphasize the fact that, while there has been outcry from fishers, the economic loss has yet to be quantified and the scale of the issue remains unclear (Cronin et al. 2014). The groups involved are often reduced to seals and the fishery, usually at a national scale, which does not acknowledge wide differences between the sizes of different kinds of fisheries and seal populations in different areas - for example, Cronin et al. dismiss the claims of fishers by comparing the aggregate 'human fisheries catches for Irish waters' with the estimated fish biomass taken by seals: one million versus 21,000 to 24,000 tonnes (2014, 126). This is a facetious argument for, as I have noted above, the problem of seal depredation in gill nets is less to do with quantity of fish, and more to do with quality, as seals tend to eat small parts of each fish in a net rather than smaller numbers of whole fish. Of course I recognize that the aggregate population is an important piece of data in this story – a greater population of seals will necessarily

lead to a greater number of interactions – but as I will argue, an excessive focus on population numbers (by actors on both sides of the conflict) does not help reach an equitable solution.

The insufficient conceptualisation of fishing diversity is highly pertinent in the case of Dunbeg as wildlife conservation measures (particularly of seals, as we have seen) disproportionately affect small-scale, inshore fishers, and yet discussion of the problem insists on referring simply to fishers as a homogenous category. Both species of seals (harbour and grey) in Irish waters are considered to be of Least Concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Cosgrove et al., 2013; 7). Seals and their habitats are protected within 12 nautical miles of the Irish coast under Irish and EU regulation (Ó Cadhla et al. 2013; 4). The Blasket Islands in Co. Kerry, within a short distance of Dunbeg and the location at which they carry out much of their fishing, host the third largest colony of grey seals in the country, and its pup production and population figures almost doubled in the years between 2005 and 2011 (2013, 13). Harbour seals have a much smaller population nationally, but several important harbour seal colonies are found in the waters surrounding Dunbeg (Cronin et al. 2003; 17). The interactions between seals and fishers in Ireland are most severe in inshore fisheries (Cronin et al 2014, 123), which is pertinent to the case of Dunbeg. There is a strong indication that following the ban of salmon driftnet fishing in 2006, there has been a displacement of seal impact from the Moy salmon fishery onto other fisheries (2014, 126). Thus if we look at the seal population as a whole around the entire coast of Ireland, it is not obvious that they might pose a threat. However, taking into account the local specificities of certain kinds of fisheries in particular places, along with variations in seal population in different places, it becomes easier to imagine that some form of intervention might be required.

In a report written for the FAO, which makes the case for the understanding of fisheries as cultural entities as a ‘key’ to their management, Goodwin likens fishers to ‘marine biologists,’ whose knowledge, while aimed at the exploitation of fisheries rather than the supposedly ‘pure’ motives of ecological science, must be taken into account (2001, 24). Nevertheless, the conclusion in relation to the seal problem is often that no action is to be taken in the absence of valid scientific data despite there being ‘enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that seal interaction may constitute a problem for the fishery’ (Cronin et al. 2014, 128). However, the evidence is not merely anecdotal. One study has shown that depredation rates of fish by seals off the south coast have been found in one study to have doubled since the 1990s, and to be in fact higher than the qualitative estimates provided by fishers themselves (Cosgrove et al. 2013, 27). Despite this, fishers’ experiences of depredation of their catch by seals are dismissed in the face of a supposed lack of evidence as ‘scapegoating’ in the face of resource depletion and as representing the wrong-headed viewpoint in which

‘predators are seen as problems to be controlled not as integral parts of a functioning ecosystem’ (Cronin 2014, 752).

Similarly, fishers are often cast as victims of false consciousness, for instance in a policy statement from the Irish Seal Sanctuary. It states that ‘the problem and challenge to fisheries scientists, politicians and the fishing community is to face up to the internationally acknowledged problem of over-fishing; the takeover of the fishing industry by large business corporations and the displacement and systematic depopulation of previously sustainable fishing communities’ (Irish Seal Sanctuary 2014). These are of course valid points that contribute to the problems faced by my interlocutors. The problems facing small-scale fisheries are many, including a wide variety of environmental, social, political and economic factors. However it is interesting that an organisation that ‘is actively involved in trying to assist coastal communities’ (ibid.) would be so unwilling to *listen* to those communities on their own terms. Corporate overfishing is admissible into the list of problems in mainstream discourse, but blanket conservation of wildlife is not.

In these discussions, the focus on large aggregate figures as units of analysis also means that the seal question has a tendency to revolve around the dichotomy of to cull or not to cull: the form of action matches the units of analysis. This rather stark approach leads to similar dichotomies drawn on ethical terms. Consider the following extract from a piece of work based in the Irish context:

The question of whether to cull or not to cull involves a fact/value conflict where there is a lack of agreement over both facts (as illustrated by the scientific debate above) and values (socio-economic vs ecological/ethical objectives) (Brennan and Rodwell 2008, 1073).

What is interesting here is the fact that ‘values’ are separated into two conflicting camps: ‘socio-economic’ and ‘ecological/ ethical.’ This betrays an inherent assumption that to place importance on the ‘socio-economic’ interests of one group, small-scale fishers, whose livelihoods, communities and cultures are threatened, is categorically not an ‘ethical’ thing to do. Ethics are only for the benefit of the other category of actors in this conflict, seals, and judgements are to be based entirely on scientific evidence, not on ethically suspect social factors or ‘subjective’ evidence. Under the going ontological human-animal divide, it is impossible to conceive of humans as being anything other than harmful to other organisms, and to imagine that the objects of traditional conservation policy might be causing harm to human groups. Strict sets of binaries – cull or do nothing/ethico-ecological values or socio-economic values – result in a stalemate where productive conversations are difficult, as we shall see in the next section.

Seals in the public imaginary: the 2020 Controversy

This section focuses on media discourse surrounding the seal problem. At regular intervals the inshore fishing fleet, usually focused in Co. Cork (Cronin and Connolly 2019) and Co. Kerry (Lucey 2019), calls for a cull on seal numbers, or for other measures to be taken. In recent years this has focused on the growing population in the Blasket Islands and making use of the language of sustainability, referring to seal numbers as they currently stand as ‘unsustainable’ (Lucey 2019). These calls tell similar tales to those of my own interlocutors, of how seals ‘follow boats’ and leave the fish ‘in bits,’ amid observations that ‘they cull the deer and foxes but they don’t care about the fishers’ (Phelan 2020). As we shall see, however, some key actors do *not* call for culls. Despite this the tendency of the media persists to throw the word *cull* around at times when both fisheries representatives and the government insist that a cull is not under consideration.

Often the discourse involves highly value-laden language. An example of this is a piece from 1996 with the headline, *Protected Species now seen by many as the enemy* (Siggins 1996). The issue of seals often prompts rather extreme acts of protest, including a 2012 case where two seals’ heads were nailed to a sign reading ‘RIP CULL’ and ‘RIP I AM HUNGRY’ outside a seal sanctuary in Kerry. Discourse surrounding this emphasizes the ‘horrific’ nature of the protests – note the opening line of this particular article which reads ‘in the past two weeks a number of incidents have highlighted the plight of seals who reside in the coastal waters of Ireland’ (O’Carroll 2012). The plight of the seals is highlighted, and not that of the fishers. One recent article, with the sensational headline ‘*Huge Rise’ In Dead Seals Includes Many With Apparent Gunshot Wounds*, goes on to say that without post-mortems it is impossible to know whether the wounds are in fact inflicted by gunshots. It quotes a spokesperson from Seal Rescue Ireland saying ‘The holes, which do appear in large numbers of the carcasses being reported, are most likely due to scavenging animals’ (Conroy 2021) – thus there is no evidence to support the implication of gunshots. In response to this story a fisherman from Dingle was quoted as saying ‘I can’t understand why the media are villainising fishers for every time a dead seal washes up’ (Sunderland 2020).

On the 23rd of September 2020 Michael Healy Rae, independent TD for Kerry, submitted a question to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, asking for details on the ‘the steps that have been taken in the past six months to address the seal population problem here’ (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020). This sparked a controversy surrounding the potential for a pilot scheme for management of problem seals by fisheries actors on an individual basis – crucially, a cull was not proposed. One license to shoot had been granted in the year up to that point, and a further three were under consideration, while one (seeking permission to shoot seals on the protected area of the Blasket Islands) had been rejected – the three pending applications were placed on hold until plans for the pilot scheme were advanced. Numerous news outlets

reported this with the Irish Wildlife Trust's description of the scheme as 'insane' in the headline (e.g. Moore 2020, Conroy 2021). Contrast this to the words of fishers calling for culls in January 2020: 'They've culled foxes in the past. But you can't touch the seals, it's madness' (Mac an tSithigh 2020). Some fishers were noted to have also claimed that while they agreed that seal populations were a problem, culling was indeed 'madness' (Duffy 2020). What is important to note here is that we have two perspectives whose proponents find each other so incomprehensible as to render each other 'insane,' but also the lack of a unified voice from the fishing industry.

The shooting of problem seals is continuously conflated by journalists with a widespread cull – see for example an article with the headline *Irish Government considers allowing cull on seals in Irish waters* (O'Connor 2020). Claims of plans for a cull have been rejected by ministers and branded as 'unacceptable' while the licensing of individual-level lethal seal management is still under consideration (Foxye 2020). Alongside the general confusion between culling and killing individual seals, the focus of the issue on the licensing of shooting seals from boats tends to be redirected from questions around ecology and animal welfare to issues surrounding safety concerns of firing a gun while on a boat (Quann 2020). Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage Darragh O'Brien tweeted on the 28th of September: 'For the avoidance of any doubt my Department has absolutely no plans for a general cull of seals as stated in the PQ response of Sept 15th & 23rd & I would not sign off on any pilot scheme which would involve fishers shooting seals from a boat.' The fact that the government continuously emphasizes the fact that individuals may apply for licenses, but simultaneously that there are no plans to approve shooting from boats for 'health and safety reasons' shows the lack of commitment to finding a middle ground solution between cull and inaction.

Statements are frequently made in the press, as in policy literature, that overfishing and other factors contributing to ecosystem decline are the true culprit behind the problem of decreased inshore fisheries catches (e.g. in RTE News 2020). The 2020 controversy was no exception. In response to this, Patrick Murphy, the CEO of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation, was quoted saying 'they are saying that the fish stocks are decimated? How is it that the seal population is growing, what are they eating? It does not add up.' This comes alongside arguments against the need for seals in marine ecosystems as an apex predator, as Murphy expresses concerns that without a predator preying on the seals themselves, their population is out of control – he cites a story of a swan in the River Lea being killed 'in agony' as an example of troubling phocine behaviour. Murphy is, however, against culling and shooting, and suggests the use of sterilisation (Duffy 2020). Murphy appeared on Cork's 96 FM on the 30th of September to argue against the idea that shooting as the only solution requested by the fishing community, pointing out that none of the numerous licenses given for the shooting of seals in recent years had been given to the inshore fisheries. He

also points out that the derisive discourse surrounding the problem had been insulting to fishers who risk their lives in dangerous conditions to make a living (Cork's 96FM 2020). The September 2020 Controversy was characterized thus by the Fishing Daily: 'Irish fishers have been facing a barrage of abuse from an uneducated public who believe that the Irish fishers want to eradicate the seal population' (Fishing Daily 2020).

As noted earlier, the seal is a powerful figure in contemporary environmental imaginaries in Ireland, and across the western world. An examination of the media representation of seal-fishery conflict offers an insight into how the general public in Ireland understands the issue: essentially with a mixture of strong emotion, misunderstanding and misinformation. The media conversation around the seal-fishery issue is characterized most notably by conflation of culls with other forms of control by members of the public and journalists. It seems likely that this tendency to phrase the issue in sensationalist terms stems from the emotive power of the seal in the popular imaginary – that is, it makes for a better headline, and as we have seen that the emotional headlines relating to seals do not always map directly onto the facts. Secondly, I would argue, the fishing industry is commonly understood in negative terms, as we have seen in the policy literature. The differences between the scales of different kinds of fishing are not well grasped by an urban public which generally understands fishing as an overwhelmingly negative environmental force. This lack of understanding is not helped by the absence of a unified voice from within the inshore fishing industry itself, as culls are often called for by individual fishers while industry bodies insist that other measures besides culls are to be considered. In this somewhat chaotic public conversation, the monolithic figure of the environmentally destructive fishing industry prevails, and the concerns of those involved in fishing are misrepresented, ridiculed or dismissed.

Anthropological interventions

So, in light of this complex and contradictory situation, what can anthropological perspectives lend to the discussion? Ethnographic work on Irish fisheries has demonstrated how while fishing has been largely absent from national narratives, in those communities where it has a historical basis it is central to the formation of self and place. These studies demonstrate the ways in which fishing communities are embedded within local and national power networks in complex, contradictory and ambivalent ways (Donkersloot 2010; Donkersloot and Menzies 2015). Studies have demonstrated the role played by such communities in safeguarding a rich tradition of knowing and relating to the marine environment (Hinz and Power Bratton 2000). They have demonstrated how the stressed nature of small-scale fisheries endangers the indigenous environmental ethics that are central to a traditional fishing worldview (Power Bratton and Hinz 2002). Other work has demonstrated how traditional fishing worldviews, more than simply representing endangered ways

of being that require preservation, can allow fishers to offer critiques of contemporary capitalism and envision alternative futures (McCormack 2017). However I posit that beyond the documentation of the richness of human experience (itself an important enterprise), anthropology and anthropologists can offer two crucial insights here.

The first is to offer a corrective on questions of scale. As I have noted above, the discourse surrounding the seal problem tends to focus on aggregate populations and large-scale units of analysis. The problem, however, is more quotidian in scale, and this is what an ethnographic approach can best add to this conversation. What are the *actual, daily* interactions that take place between the seal and the fisherfolk? Do they take place at the level of population, or at an individual level? In other European contexts, an approach that allows for this kind of thinking about marine ecosystem dynamics has been applied. Work from Scotland and Finland allows us to view a conception of seals and fishers as individual actors locked into specific relationships in specific times and places. These examples allow for practical solutions to the issue at hand, paying attention not just to reductive aggregates but also to smaller scale interactions. Even if the local or global population of grey seals is low, the impact caused by one seal can still be significant (Varjopuro 2011, 450). This is borne out in Königson et al.'s (2013) study of underwater fishing gear, finding that 600 raids on the gear by seals could be attributed to just 11 individuals, a total of 1% of the local population. They further found the elimination of these 'problem seals' had a dramatic positive effect.

A recent Irish study has also found evidence to suggest that such 'problem seal' activity takes place in Irish fisheries, and argues that population level management is not justified but that the problem is best solved at an individual or operational level (Cronin et al. 2019). It is thus clear that to speak of 'seal populations' as being the problem per se is not to paint the whole picture, as they are capable of individual variation in behaviour beyond 'instinct.' This mirrors the inadequacy of statements that 'fishers' as a homogenous group are simply motivated by the drive to maximize individual profit. Furthermore, it seems as though the total population number is not likely to have as major an impact as might be imagined. Instead, viewing the problem as an undesirable interaction between a number of individual agents can provide an effective solution. A similar scheme was also trialed in Scotland, but as of February 2021, no further licenses are being granted. This is to protect seafood exports in a post-Brexit landscape because US law prohibits the import of fish from countries whose fisheries allow the shooting of seals. This approach can however allow us to look beyond the cull/no cull binary of the current discussion, and focus more on facilitating place-based individual interactions between fishers and 'problem seals.'

The second insight draws on recent trends in social theory to de-centre the ‘anthropos’ in ‘anthropology.’ Donna Haraway has argued for the recognition that we live our lives alongside other types of organisms interdependently. For Haraway, flourishing in the ‘entrails of humanism’ is a ‘discursive tie’ between all the gendered, racialized and taxonomized nonhuman others to rational Man. In response to this, including the agency of nonhumans in our accounts of social life, rather than thinking of animals as something apart from cultural life, ‘[loosens] the grip of analogies that issue in the collapse of all of man’s others in to one another’ (Haraway 2008, 18). Indeed as Rose notes, ‘the human-animal divide homogenises the beings on both sides’ (2011, 33) – therefore to allow the flourishing of diversity, the project of recognizing animal agency takes on an urgency within decolonial and feminist politics. Accordingly, the flipside of recognizing animal agency in human worlds is recognizing the ways in which humans and animals equally participate in shared worlds – what Bresnihan has referred to in his work on Irish fisheries as ‘the more-than-human commons’ (2016). Crucial also to this understanding is a commitment to ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016) and to recognize that caring for the environment in messy ‘naturecultures’ is not always kind, that killing and care are not incompatible (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Thus, I propose that the small-scale fishers of Dunbeg are conceived as part of the ecosystem and not alien to it by virtue of being human. This allows for the recent interference in their livelihood by anthropogenic changes in seal ecology (i.e. increased conservation) to be viewed as a problem caused by the social construction of one actor’s interests as ‘objectively’ more important than the other’s. Both the seal and the small scale fisher are vulnerable to the multifactorial threats to the marine environment: the difference is that one receive legal protections and one does not.

Conclusion

The purpose of this piece has not been to fetishise the ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ of fishers above other forms of knowledge, nor is it to advocate for a seal cull. Rather, it is to suggest a synthesis of two forms of knowledge that have a tendency to oppose each other in public discourse. On the one hand, I do advocate for a willingness to take seriously the claims of certain fishermen that their livelihoods are threatened by seals. More precisely, I argue, they are threatened by a combination of the actions of individual seals and a legal and ontological context in which it is difficult to imagine humans as potential victims of animals. On the other hand it is clear that a cull is both morally repugnant to the majority of the human population, as well as being unnecessary if the increasing evidence base surrounding individual ‘problem seals’ is to be applied in policy. Lessons from the Baltic Sea allow us to align our interests with fishers while making use of the latest scientific evidence. They do so in such a way that does not imply large-scale culling of abstract ‘seal populations,’ but rather allowing for interactions between individual agents to take place on a local scale. A middle ground between total inaction (the current status quo) and a cull (some form of localized, individual-based management) may allow for co-existence between seals and small scale fishers. Even if these

interactions seem 'insane' to many urban-dwellers, such approaches may help to keep the valuable heritage of our fishing communities, as well as our seas, 'alive with seals.'

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