Fishing For Survival in the ‘Blue Economy’– Found Poems From the Irish Islands

Ruth Brennan

Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities
Trinity College Dublin
ruth.brennan@tcd.ie

Abstract

Almost three thousand islanders live on eighteen islands off the west coast of Ireland. While many of these islands are dependent on a small-scale fishing industry for survival, their fishing communities face challenges in navigating complex fisheries governance systems at local, regional, national and EU scales. Between 2018 and 2020, I engaged with Irish island fishing communities, the fishing industry and the policy environment in interrogating the political and institutional challenges faced by island fishing communities and their initiatives to manage island fisheries on a collective, seasonal basis. This collection of found poems emerged accidentally while I was analysing and writing up the research. As such, they are an unintended contribution to experimental geographies and join the recent resurgence in creative and arts-based work by geographers and social scientists. Created from the interview transcripts of research participants, the poems provide a snapshot of the complexity of the issues at play during the research period. They highlight the multiple storylines that jostle for space and visibility in the fisheries governance context. The mosaic of voices demonstrate that contestation and contradictions exist and play out not just between islanders and non-islanders, but between islanders themselves, often with no resolution. By allowing for a multiplicity of meanings to co-exist, my hope is that this collection of found poems will disturb the fixed narratives amongst those who are engaged in Irish fisheries, challenge the boundaries within which scholarly research is traditionally presented, and render the research accessible to a wide range of audiences.

Keywords

Small-scale fisheries, environmental governance, islands, political ecology, found poems, ecopoetry
Introduction

I accidentally created this collection of found poems from interview data gathered during the course of participatory research carried out between 2018 and 2020. By “accidentally”, I mean that I never intended to create (or publish) a collection of poems as a research output. I had been struggling to write a traditional research paper and I thought I might dislodge my ‘stuckness’ by taking time off to play with the interview data. The subject of my research (governance of Irish island small-scale fisheries) is a highly charged arena – both politically and emotionally. Over the last decade, I have consistently turned to the arts as a means of holding (and honouring) these unruly emotions that do not seem to have a place within the scholarly tradition (see MacKinnon and Brennan 2012; Brennan 2012; Hurrel and Brennan 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Brennan and Hurrel 2016; Brennan and Rozanov 2020). This, however, was the first time that I had ‘played’ with poetry. As I started to weave the interview text into poems, I relished the directness, rawness and rhythms of the voices, the emotions that were untamed by scholarly analysis, the juxtaposition of a mosaic of (sometimes) conflicting narratives that might not normally be seen and heard alongside each other (and if they were, they might risk being drowned out by shouting - or by ideological deafness). My intention is to record Irish islanders reading/performing these poems as their voices should, ideally, be heard as spoken word. In the meantime, these words will, I hope, do their political work on the page by presenting what Eshun and Madge (2016, 778) call a “pluriversal world perspective (a perspective in which many diverse worlds are valued and belong)” that disturbs fixed narratives within the highly politicised space of small-scale fisheries. The juxtaposition of voices in the poems demand recognition of such a pluriversal world perspective as the material realities of island small scale fishing communities struggle to assert themselves within the dominant ‘one-world world’ (Law 2011) of large-scale industrial fishing. By foregrounding intimate socionatural relationships within contested and politicised contexts fraught with asymmetries of power, this collection of poems addresses the absence in eco-poetry of “any embodied, physical intertwining of people – especially diversely constituted and positioned human subjects – with the physical environment” (de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017, 316).

More generally, these poems contribute to the burgeoning body of poetic and other arts-based work that are part of the “creative (re)turn” in geography over the last decade and a half (see Madge 2014; de Leeuw 2017; de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017; Eshun and Madge 2016; de Leeuw and Magrane 2019; Magrane et al. 2019). de Leeuw and Magrane (2019, 147) observe that “Geography’s recent creative re-turn is…situated within…[a] longstanding…disciplinary history of radicality and criticality.” Poetry is increasingly recognised as a valid way to do critical geography, for example, by opening up new “language-spaces” through which to “make and convey new meanings that may inspire new critical modes of action or even ways of thinking about action” (de Leeuw 2017, 313) and by placing poetry’s intimate expression of the microcosm within the broader socio-cultural, economic and political contexts (Eshun and Madge 2016).

Jen and Paceley (2021, citing Patrick 2013) distinguish between research poems and found poems. Whereas the former may draw on and include the researcher’s own words and interpretations, the latter consist solely of data provided by the research participants. Although I have labelled my poems as ‘found’, I don’t completely follow the above distinction as the poems reflect my interpretations and curation of participants’ words into a series of conversations. My voice is in the background, rather than

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1 CO-SUSTAIN: Collaborative Sustainable Innovation: co-designing small-scale fisheries governance approaches. www.belongingtothesea.com

2 For reflections on the methodological tensions of working as a participatory researcher at the science-policy-community interface, see Brennan 2021.
absent. The collection of poems presented here were ‘found’ within participant transcripts that I had coded and arranged into various themes, as part of the data analysis process. I had gathered a selection of (what I deemed to be) key participant quotations into a Word document of thirty five pages. As I delved into this document and started to play with the data poetically, both the content of the text and its rhythms and cadences guided my selection of phrases and sentences and their arrangement on the page. I did not deliberately establish any formal rules in advance of making the poems, but in hindsight, I realise that I was careful to use only phrases and sentences from the transcriptions. I permitted myself to remove words that appeared to be superfluous and to repeat certain phrases. I arranged the line breaks according to intuition rather than following any formal linguistic rules. I sought feedback on the poems from four research participants (representing the islands, fishing industry and policy environment), from three creative writers and from an academic colleague. Their responses encouraged me to submit the collection for publication.

**Rocking the Irish Fisheries Governance Boat**

The poems emerged from a research project called CO-SUSTAIN - Collaborative Sustainable Innovation: co-designing small-scale fisheries governance approaches. It involved working with a cross-islands grassroots cooperative (The Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation) and interviewing islanders, policymakers and fishing industry representatives to better understand the challenges faced by island fishing communities in the governance of island fisheries. Almost three thousand islanders live on eighteen islands off the west coast of Ireland. These islands are not connected to the mainland by a land causeway. While many of the islands are dependent on a small-scale fishing industry for survival, their fishing communities face challenges in navigating the complex fisheries governance systems at local, regional, national and EU scales. Since 2014, the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation has actively tried to address these challenges and engage with the policy environment – most recently, by spearheading two governance initiatives for the management of island fisheries on a collective, seasonal basis - a fish producer organisation specific to the islands fleet and legislation to provide island small-scale fishers with ringfenced access to valuable quota-controlled species in island waters. One of these initiatives received Government approval in February 2021 - a fish producer organisation specific to the islands fleet. The other initiative - legislation to provide island small-scale fishers with ringfenced access to valuable quota-controlled species in island waters – has not yet materialised, blocked by political and institutional forces. The islanders are caught in the cogs of a regulatory regime that is focussed more on individual economic profit and the growth of the ‘blue economy’ than the socio-ecological and social justice complexities of issues that reach far beyond a fisheries governance context. This collection of found poems is intended to provide a snapshot of the multiple storylines, during the research period, that jostled for space and visibility. The mosaic of voices in this collection demonstrate that contestation and contradictions exist and play out not just between islanders and non-islanders, but between islanders themselves, often with no resolution. There are seven found poems in the collection. Six feature islanders’ voices, while one (They will disappear again) includes the voices of policymakers, fishing industry representatives and government agency representatives, alongside island voices.

The intimate socio-natural relationships of the islanders portrayed by the poems raise questions about how mapping alternative representations of the environment can allow different narratives to emerge by challenging unspoken assumptions, for example those that frame humans and nature as ontologically separate. St. Martin (2006) has mapped ‘communities at sea’ to highlight how fisheries policy tends to map individual competing fishermen in the same space and recognises only terrestrial fishing communities, while communities at sea remain invisible. (Hurrel and Brennan's (2013) Sea Stories - an online, interactive, cultural map of the sea - mapped a representation of the cultural diversity of the sea around a small Scottish island and challenged the Scottish government’s bio-physical conservation maps that portrayed biological diversity alone. The meditative and poetic film Clyde
Fishing For Survival

Reflections (Hurrel and Brennan 2014a), based on the marine environment of the Firth of Clyde on the west coast of Scotland, challenged the usual portrayal of this environment as picturesque and ‘natural’ by taking the viewer through an immersive experience that explores the interplay between the ‘natural’ world and its representation. The 33 minute film features underwater and microscopic footage, combined with voice recordings of people who have a close relationship with, or specialist understanding of, the Firth of Clyde. These include a retired fisherman, a marine biologist, a diver, a marine conservationist, a spiritual leader and a physical oceanographer.

The multiple and sometimes contradictory storylines throughout poems in this paper speak directly to increasing calls within political ecology to recognise diverse ontologies in the sphere of environmental governance (Blaser 2013; Sullivan 2017; Yates, Harris, and Wilson 2017). They illustrate points of ontological friction (Blaser 2013; Yates, Harris, and Wilson 2017) where different ‘worlds’ bump up against each other, and raise questions about the governance implications of silencing certain ontologies while others are privileged. For example, large industrial fishing vessels and small-scale fisheries access fish in entirely different ways – the larger boats can follow the fish to offshore waters whereas the geographically constrained smaller vessels must wait for the fish to, quite literally, enter the small-scale ‘world’ and come within their reach. For small-scale fishers, access to fish stocks in theory does not always translate to equality or equity of access in practice. I understand ‘ontologies’ to mean that the normative assumptions that we make about the (assumed) nature of a reality that is ‘out there’ influences the choices and decisions we make in the world. As such, different worlds or ontologies are asserted and enacted depending on their underpinning assumptions (Sullivan 2017). If diverse realities can be enacted, the assertion of some worlds may be privileged over others and different worlds may collide (Blaser 2013; Yates, Harris, and Wilson 2017). By analysing the social and political ways in which knowledge is constructed and environmental phenomena are framed, critical scholars have revealed power asymmetries through the privileging of certain ontologies in producing policy-relevant environmental knowledge (Sullivan 2017) and have shown how environmental governance tends to be framed in technocratic-scientific, apolitical and ahistorical terms (DePuy et al. 2021).

This collection of poems adds to the work of scholars who have critically examined Irish fisheries in socio-cultural and socio-political contexts, drawing from fields such as political ecology, human geography and anthropology (R. E. Brennan and Rodwell 2008; Britton 2012; Macken-Walsh 2012; Donkersloot and Menzies 2015; Bresnihan 2016; 2019). This collection of poetry also extends my creative work, bringing into view diverse ontologies in the context of human-environment relationships, highlighting the privileging of certain ontologies while others are silenced, and raising questions about equity and inclusivity in environmental governance. The poems continue my efforts to work at the edges of different disciplines and to engage with creative methods and methodologies to render scholarly research more accessible to diverse audiences. Finally, my hope is that the foregrounding of participant’s voices in these found poems will disturb fixed narratives in the environmental policy sphere - in this case, in the context of small-scale fisheries governance in the Irish islands.
Figure 1. Small-scale fishing, Arranmore Island, Co.Donegal, Ireland. Image: Seamus Bonner
I love it…but I wouldn't do it
We have been told growing up
“Oh don't get into fishing”.
I love it
coming back
and doing it over the summer
but I wouldn't do it.
I couldn't see myself settling for it.
You go to college
you get bigger ideas
and bigger goals.
I could do a lot of work from home.
There needs to be financial rewards
to keep people in these places.
I think what needs to be done really
is a hand up
more than a hand out.
Level the playing field I think.
That could be the hand up they would need
to make this profitable here.
Here
it is a lot more complicated
there is more planning.
Being able to tie the boat at the pier
is crucial for us to live.
People on the mainland can just land in
and go up to their house.
These people are making money
and that is what the government sees,
and that works.
Capitalism.
You would never consider fishing here
because it is just such a hassle.
You don't have the harbours
you can't do it in the winter time
it is just not on.
If the year is good all right
you might get October, November.
But after that it might be May or April again
before you would be able to go fishing
because it is too shallow
and too rough.
People were fishing here just because they were living here.
Fishing to us
was a break from the land
and you enjoyed doing it.
It’s not looked at as an attractive place
to fish.
Because if you were a business -
and if you are fishing
it is a business -
you have to think
profit and loss
and there is just
too much
loss.

If you’re always kicking someone they will expect a kick
I know quota seems like a dirty word in the fishing industry.
It’s got to do with fellas thinking they’re going to lose.
I’m not telling you any lies.
Their worry
is that we get something that they haven't.
A slice of the pie.
I want more than you.
As long as we have that mentality in the room
it’s not going to get anywhere.
As long as that begrudgery
is put on us
then we will see it the same way
and put the begrudgery
on them.
If you’re always kicking someone
they will expect
a kick.

**Women**

Women
are not really involved
in fisheries
on the island.

She’s the backbone
keeps the whole show on the road.

Doing the VAT returns
sorting out the wages
paying bills
picking up crew
sourcing parts
going to meetings
putting up with people
constantly
coming in and out of her house.

You have so much to do
behind the scenes.

And even though
you’re not physically on the boat -
once they are out there
you’re with them
one hundred and ten per cent.
Women
are not really involved
in fisheries
on the island.

They will disappear again
You might hit mackerel today
and you mightn't see them again
for two or three weeks.
Last year
they didn't shoal at all
around here.

Each month
a Fisheries Management Notice is issued
and every so often
there’s a Determination.
You can’t catch mackerel
unless you’re covered by a Determination
and a Fishing Authorisation.

The Quota Management Advisory Committee
set ratios
that are maintained.
These are historical ratios
and there are different ratios
for different species.

The policy of the Department

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3 This poem includes the voices of policymakers, fishing industry representatives and government agency representatives, alongside island voices. Island voices are italicised.
is that quota for mackerel
is attached to tonnage and kilowatts.
The quota for herring
is attached to tonnage
and not to kilowatts.

I think the herrings
you can only fish them later in the year.
Say if they were here early
that we would be allowed to catch them
when they’re in our area
rather than having to wait
until the season is open.

The pelagics get individual quota
via specific allocations.
For most other species
for example white fish and prawns
the quota is a common pot
that people fish against
and nobody is guaranteed
a particular amount.
When it’s gone
it’s gone.

I’m sure you’re aware
of them wanting to get a quota
for the islands.
They can come up with some
Very Airy-Fairy Stuff.

If you have 200 tonnes of cod
in January
to be caught
and the weather is bad
you can't get out.
The Castletownbere boats
can get out and catch it
for example.
And by the time the weather settles here
there’s no quota left for us.

Fishing is rooted in those
who were willing to take risks
back in the eighties and nineties
and everything was set in stone
after that.
That’s why they get preferential access to it
now.
Nothing has changed that view
since.

An outsider looking in
would say the whole system
is broken.
It’s rooted in history.
Maybe
it’s time to go back to the drawing board
on the way we manage quotas
and ask
is there a better way to do this?
Trying to change
bits
of the current system
won't be enough.

Anybody
with any kind of head on them
would say -
it’s ridiculous
that island communities can't maximise the benefit of the water around them.

But when you’re up against the Common Fisheries Policy it’s kind of difficult to go looking for something for small island communities.

It was always the common line that Ireland is subject to the Common Fisheries Policy and there’s nothing we can do in this area. That was the line that we were given - “Our hands are tied in this”.

And that was accepted.

The quota is a national one. You can't hive off a bit of it and give it to islands. It would be illegal.

All under twelve metre boats already have access to an allocation of the mackerel. It’s never used! Only about half of it is ever taken up.

There are things you could do with the raw material you have already.
Use that to more effect
and by doing that
you could prove the case
that you deserve more
of whatever quotas are there.

Why are they not working at developing
an island brand
of absolutely pristine fish
in perfect condition?
If they could show more demand
for this very special fish
they would be in a much stronger position
to get more of that amount
that is allocated to them
at the moment.

We just kept falling down
with not being able to get fish.
So as a business model
at the scale we would have been doing it at
it just never added up
unfortunately.

Here is where the location can bring a challenge.
There’s one fishing white fish
that’s John.\(^4\)
So
if John was to haul four hundred pots today
his focus mightn’t be on white fish
it might be maybe only on the way back in -
in the evening -

\(^4\) Name has been changed
and that can be hit and miss.

You can land on a shoal of fish
Bang!
Fill three boxes!
Or not get a sprat.

It totally depends
on how their day goes
out at sea.
There are so many variables.
The plan might be to do X
and then
the plan becomes Y.

Sometimes
the five o’clock on a Thursday evening phone call
“I have a load of boxes of pollock”
and you just want to tear your hair out!
If I had known that yesterday….

Our challenge was definitely fish
and access to it.

I never realised how difficult it was
for people in the small boat sector
to actually be au fait with regulations.
Sometimes they didn't know anything
about regulations
and then other times
they had a really peculiar interpretation.

The Department told us
that the only way for it to be
stopped
is for you
to catch them in the act.
And my reply was
“We are not the policemen of the harbour.”

There would be huge hostages to fortune
if the Department
established the principle
that gives different opportunities
based on where you are
gEOgraphically.
Because boats
don't obey
a geographical location.

They land fish
and catch fish
based
on where the fish are
and where
they get the highest price.

Fish move
boats move
and you can land into different ports.
The sea is joined up
wherever you are.

The fishermen from the island
only work around a definite area.
The other fellas
can go anywhere around.

When the fish arrive on our shores
if we could automatically catch them
while they are there....
They will disappear again.
If you have money you can go fishing
If you have money you can go fishing
but to start off
you just cannot get in.
It’s not a level playing field.
It depends on what you can afford to buy.

You need
track record
and tonnage
and kilowatts.

Herring is a good example.
You’re not allowed to fish herring
with a small half decker
as there’s no track record attached to it
even though there’s lots of herring
around the islands

And big boats
can fish it.
Offshore.

I am going to keep fishing
You could set a pot limit
around here
and you could get shot for saying it.
But I would be in favour
of a pot limit.

Every year
y they get more pots
and more pots.  
So they’re getting less lobsters  
Every year.  

It’s not a level playing field  
as far as I am concerned.  
It depends on what you can afford to buy.  

Some guys have two thousand pots  
they are doing it full time  
that’s their livelihood.  
They have a lot of money  
put into their boats.  

They just see Euros.  
And they look at you like  
I don’t give a shite what you have to say  
I am fishing  
and I am going to keep fishing.  
They just wouldn’t be listening to you.  
All the ground is taken up with their pots.  

I suppose what affects people here  
is when this place is fished out  
and when all the pots here are ashore  
in October  
the people that would fish all year round  
have moved to other waters.  
And then when the fish start coming in here again  
they come back  
and they’re fishing in it  
before our fellas even get a chance  
to put the gear out.
For a long time
nobody had more pots
than they could haul in a day
as the lobsters would escape.

Even longer ago
we used to haul three times a day
on each change of tide.

With the soft eye pots
the lobsters can't escape
so you can increase the pots
as you just haul
a section
every two or three days.

I hear ropes being cut
and shooting across each other.
Deliberate tactics that fishermen use.
They're blocking the best ground
with unhauled pots now.

There used to be honour
amongst the fishermen.
You would not encroach
on another person's patch of ground.
There would be fierce respect.
They would give you some distance.
Now
everyone is on top of each other.

They have to get the money back
to pay for the boats.
So it is hard on them.
And I couldn’t begrudge them their pots.
The sea is for everybody.

The islands are just awkward
You feel like you’re working
under the radar
almost afraid to raise your voice
in case
they take something
away from you.
Obstacles
put in your way.

The islands
are just awkward.

Islanders by their nature
tend to be precious about themselves.
There is a certain uniqueness
I suppose
but we’re nothing special
in the broad scheme of things.
We are the same people.
But we have
a different set of circumstances.

The islands
Are just awkward.

They’re like little countries.
Islands.
There are common themes.
A chosen isolation
rather than feeling
like you’re vulnerably isolated.
If you break down
they tow you in
and they won't charge you.

The islands
are just awkward.

On the island it’s like a jigsaw.
You need so many of everything
to make the full picture.
You need so many fishermen.
You need so many farmers.
You need so many in tourism.
You have to have an array of things
together
and you get your picture.

The islands
are just awkward.

And if you take away
one bit
the next bit will fall
and eventually
the whole lot will fall.
So you need the balance.
You can't survive in these places
on one thing alone.
You just
cannot.

The islands
are just awkward.
The Department are taking each species in isolation.
The islands want to look at species collectively for a collective seasonal fishery.
When we get recognised PO\textsuperscript{5} status that will change everything.

The islands are just awkward.

The whole thing what it comes down to is getting people to work together as far as I’m concerned. It’s all about getting the managed fishery rather than everyone just doing what they like.

The islands are just awkward.

I don't know really who is representing us or what is going on.

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\textsuperscript{5} Producer Organisation. Fish Producer Organisations are officially recognised bodies set up by producers to manage their members’ activities and support them in marketing and adding value to their catch.
There’s all these bodies
working independently of each other.
It’s like throwing money at a problem
and thinking it’ll be fixed.
We made too much progress
For some.

The islands
are just awkward.

The fishermen are often like farmers
trying to put brave faces on it
pretend it’s better than it is.
You might get
one
who’s just
bluntly realistic
about the whole thing.

The islands
are just awkward.

There’s less and less fish every year
in my little bay.
I only let island people in there
it can be overfished easily.
I control my bay.
Last year
I let an island man in
and he overfished it.

The islands
are just awkward.
A lot of people
don't want to admit
they’re at something
that is about to
collapse
out from under them.
It is hard to admit that
I’m sure.

The islands
Are just awkward.

And you suddenly
have an island of landed people.
No-one knows
how to fish the fucking sea
around us
and they have all forgotten the marks
and where you can't be at low tide
because the rip
is too big there.

Then
why be on an island at all?

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