



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

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## **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

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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; Hurrell and Brennan 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Brennan and Hurrell 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 socio-natural relationships within contested and politicised contexts fraught with asymmetries of power, this collection of poems addresses the absence in ecopoetry 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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<sup>1</sup> CO-SUSTAIN: Collaborative Sustainable Innovation: co-designing small-scale fisheries governance approaches. [www.belongingtothesea.com](http://www.belongingtothesea.com)

<sup>2</sup> 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. (Hurrell 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

Reflections (Hurrell 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<sup>3</sup>**

*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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<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>  
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 -*

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<sup>4</sup> 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  
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 unhailed 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<sup>5</sup> 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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<sup>5</sup> 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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