

Picture fishing: Performing global fisheries diversity

A call for contributions of images and short essays highlighting the variation of fishing people, places, practices and traditions.

The realities of fishers and fish farmers — some 57 million people worldwide — is staggeringly diverse and overwhelmingly “small-scale.” Only about two percent of fishing craft globally are the size of a vessel that might be cautiously described as industrial (FAO 2016). Meanwhile, some 35 percent of fishing boats rely on sail, paddle or other non-motorized power. Many remain at least partly subsistence fishers, following community rules or using traditional practices. Scholars and fishers themselves assert that many such fisheries are embedded in diverse webs of sociopolitical and ecological meaning and values (Johnson et al. eds. 2018). Fisher poverty while widespread is also variable and contextual (Jentoft and Eide 2011). Protecting these diverse fisheries is the aim of progressive policies such as the FAO’s 2014 Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines¹ (Jentoft et al. eds. 2017).

This call for contributions seeks images and short essays or “data” that highlight such global diversity of fisheries and their challenges. This crowd-sourced project envisions a website, papers, exhibits and a book that can *perform* diverse fisheries collectively and visually.

Beyond describing diversity, this research project explicitly seeks to challenge a prevalent imaginary of fishery industrialization and dwindling labor. Such a developmentalist narrative often defaults to the position that vulnerability and “backwardness” are *essential* to fisheries diversity (see Béné 2003). For example, Indian policymakers still summarily define their nation’s small-scale fishers as vestigial, locked in poverty and in need of “development,” despite clear social and economic diversity (Jadhav 2018). This analysis conflates value with aggregate catch and abstracts the fishery to a collection of boats and self-interested fishermen.² Fading from view are diverse, persistent fisher practices, traditions and social-ecological relations, both capitalist and non-capitalist. This synoptic reduction is performative; as fishing diversity disappears from view for policymakers and politicians, development and governance agendas focus on a homogenous, industrial future.

Against this narrow imagination of an industrial fishing future, we solicit images and complimentary text that cast a vivid light on the multi-verse of fisheries. But we intend more than just a coffee table book of beautiful images. Rather, this project seeks *performance* of diverse fisheries. We draw generally on political ecology insights and, specifically, the “diverse economies” research and ideas of performativity found in the multiple works of J.K. Gibson-Graham, among others. These critiques explicitly posit that “how we talk about and thus know the economy ensures that some economic practices are made real and dominant while others are relegated to subordinate positions or non-existence” (Roelvink, St. Martin and Gibson-Graham 2015, 19; see also Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006 and 2013). The abstractions of neoclassical growth accounting, which narrow fisheries to a model of productive capital and labor (e.g. Hannesson 2007), represent one example of how an economy — in this case, a fishery — “becomes singular and monolithic by virtue of the convergence of certain kinds of processes and practices” (Butler 2010, 147).

¹ The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication.

² Despite widespread participation by women in fishing social economies, economic models also perform gender hierarchy as *man* becomes the abstracted, stylized individual fisher.

In many geographies, diversity confounds the vision of industrialization. Perhaps 90% of the global fishing fleet is heterogeneous and small-scale (FAO 2016), and many fisheries have historical contexts and contingencies that resist capitalist development, market devices and economic models (Mather et al. 2017). Communities uphold social institutions, maintain beach commons or stake claim to sea tenure. They fight dispossession by ports and refineries. They articulate with markets — for example, sales associations (Snyder and St. Martin 2015) or certification (Foley and McCay 2014) — without being fully subsumed. Notably, fisher politics were critical to adoption of the FAO’s SSF Guidelines.

To say that fishing diversity persists is not to romanticize the small or downplay the extent of capitalist exploitation. Fishers do struggle amid poverty and ecological decline (often brought on by industrial overfishing). Fishing “community” is often mired in other social hierarchies (including race, gender and class). From Gloucester to Kampala to Mumbai, many fishers also aspire to something called “development” or a life beyond fishing. While noting variability and myriad values on the premise that small-scale fisheries are too big to ignore,³ we cannot overlook unsustainable political economy, practices and social relations.

Understanding that “how we talk” interrelates with how/what we see, we seek images with technical clarity and beauty, inspired by critical photographers ranging from Walker Evans (with Agee, 1941) to Allan Sekula (1994, 1995), and we hope contributors will push the boundaries of visual anthropology. We also recognize the need to treat the image and the visual seriously for its power as well as its historical imbrication with an imperial perspective (Jay and Ramaswamy 2014). Importantly, we desire images from fishers themselves (in addition to researchers and activists) to perhaps bring a subaltern gaze into the performance of fisheries, and we invite collaboration to enable that.

This project intends a website, exhibits, journal papers and, yes, a beautiful book. Image submissions should be supplemented with short essays, profiles, charts, “data” or other treatment. These images and text will constitute a basis for further analysis, synthesis and research. Contributors should broadly consider diverse fishery (and fish farming) practices, places, communities, work, livelihoods, traditions, politics, ecologies, technologies, consumption, sustainability, threats or political economy.⁴ We hope for traditional imagery — e.g. a lone fisher in a canoe or a family hauling in a beach seine — as well as photos from the fishmeal plant or heat maps of fishing boat traffic. We also welcome images of industrial fisheries that show their diversity or humanity.

We actively seek collaborators for future presentation and publications. For example, curated gallery shows may highlight one nation’s fisheries in relation to the world’s. Targeted distribution of country-themed reports or articles can confront policymakers with the diversity of fisheries in their own nation/region as well as others. We believe these outputs can be performative if officials, scholars and consumers can recognize extant fishing diversity — sometimes subsistence, sometimes commercial, sometimes unsustainable, but often shot through with other-than-capitalist relations.

³ The eponymous principle behind the Too Big to Ignore fisheries research initiative (<http://toobigtoignore.net>), a collaborator in the project. See also, Chuenpagdee (2012).

⁴ Including diverse aquacultures.

Potential contributors or collaborators should write to ajadhav@berkeley.edu with expressions of interest or with further queries. We have a rolling deadline for submissions with the goal of a developed web presence for the project by late summer. We also plan for an academic framing paper and an introduction/discussion to be presented at the 3rd World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress in Thailand in October 2018.

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