

# **FISHING FOR SURVIVAL IN THE 'BLUE ECONOMY'**

## **FOUND POEMS FROM THE IRISH ISLANDS**



**Ruth Brennan**

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## **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. These islands are not connected to the mainland by a land causeway. 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 challenges faced by island fishing communities and their initiatives to manage island fisheries on a collective, seasonal basis. These initiatives - 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 – have failed to materialise. This collection of found poems is intended to 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.

## Introduction

I 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> This 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. The Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation has actively tried to address these challenges and engage with the policy environment by spear-heading 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. These initiatives have, so far, failed to materialise. 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.

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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)

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.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **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.

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>2</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  
is that quota for mackerel  
is attached to tonnage and kilowatts.

The quota for herring  
is attached to tonnage

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<sup>2</sup> This poem includes the voices of policymakers, fishing industry representatives and government agency representatives, alongside island voices. Island voices are italicised.

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>3</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 -  
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.*

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<sup>3</sup> Name has been changed

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>4</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

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<sup>4</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.

or what is going on.

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?