

# Engaged research at the arts-science-policy interface: Ruth Brennan



## Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

**Dr Ruth Brennan is the recipient of a Trinity Research Excellence Award for 2020 in the category 'Engage profoundly with our publics.' A marine social scientist, Ruth explores how her research engages with communities.**

I'm a marine social scientist working as an engaged researcher at the arts-science-policy-community interface. In the broadest terms, I study the relationships between people and the sea. I have been working with island fishing communities (mainly in Scotland and Ireland) since 2010. As a qualitative social scientist, I look for rich detail rather than trying to quantify issues. If there's a conflict, I probably won't be able to tell you how many people are for and how many are against something, but I'll be able to tell you about the stories underlying the conflict, where they may have come from and how they might be helping or hindering ways forward.

An important part of my research involves engaging with the policy environment which generally operates at a very different rhythm to small coastal and island communities. International, European and national policy contexts are all relevant to these communities. I sit between these many different worlds (no two communities or policy environments are the same), listen to the stories being told, and think about whose voices are being heard, whose voices are not being heard and why. Who has the power to shape the stories that we hear – in communities and in policy environments. Are these stories helping or hindering people imagine and design their own futures?

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At the start of a qualitative research project, I spend a lot of time listening rather than arriving somewhere armed with pre-designed questions. This open-ended listening at the start of a project helps me to co-design the research with the people I listen to, which hopefully means that the research focuses on questions that people (including policy makers) are interested in exploring. So, my projects generally begin with a field trip to one of the communities I want to engage with.



My current research is funded by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (2018-2020). I'm working closely with the grassroots Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation (IIMRO) to co-design practical co-management approaches for small-scale fisheries on the Irish islands that promote good governance, foster marine stewardship and contribute to sustainability goals while meeting the needs of fisheries-dependent coastal communities to flourish. The research also challenges issues of authority within the prevailing policy environment that marginalises small-scale island fishing communities, and engages in national and European policy processes to push for more equitable and inclusive management approaches.

As an engaged researcher at the social-science policy interface, I am constantly looking for ways to influence policy with insights from the emerging field of marine social science. Since I returned to Ireland in 2017, I have been gradually infiltrating the Irish marine policy environment. Over the past three years, I have written submissions for several public consultations on the Irish national marine planning process and I am currently an expert advisor on the Irish Government's Marine Protected Area Advisory Group. I have given a talk on community engagement and marine protected areas in Leinster House and advised former Senator Grace O'Sullivan on her Seanad motion on marine protected areas, bringing into view potential injustices and exclusions of marginalised voices. I have also delivered a statement and answered Deputies' questions in the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill. In the European Parliament, I advise MEP Luke 'Ming' Flanagan in the monthly Fisheries Committee and work closely with MEP Grace O'Sullivan. I recently co-founded MARSSI (Marine Social Sciences Ireland), an all-Ireland marine social sciences network to support informed decision-making in Irish marine policy.



I also work across the art-science interface. When researching a conservation conflict over a proposed marine protected area in Scotland (when I worked at the Scottish Association for Marine Science), I collaborated with visual artist Stephen Hurrell and local community members to create an online interactive cultural map of the sea, infused with local voices, representing the (hitherto invisible) cultural diversity intertwined with the biological diversity protected by the contested conservation designation. The Sea Stories map reframed the human-nature polarisation engendered

by the conservation process by foregrounding intertwined human-nature relationships. We were subsequently commissioned to make an art-science film Clyde Reflections which was installed in the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art in 2015 (pictured left). Extracts from Clyde Reflections were screened at several 'Public Dialogue for Clyde Regional Marine Plan' events in Scotland, as a means of provoking reflective public discussion.

In pursuing an engaged research path, I have learned to look underneath the bonnet of research centre/school/department titles to identify interdisciplinary teams who recognise the value of engaged research and who will support it. These may appear in unlikely places. I am not an ecologist, architect, town planner or historian, yet, to date I have worked in Departments of Ecology, Architecture and Town Planning, and History. As a critical, interdisciplinary scholar, I could choose to position myself in a range of fields or disciplines. I have deliberately chosen the engaged researcher position that I occupy, full of tensions, at the arts-science-policy-community interface, as part of my contribution to society. I hope to continue to engage in research that challenges conventional and



dominant narratives and develops effective and compelling counter-narratives to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable society.

## Ruth Brennan

Ruth Brennan is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellow (2018-2020) at the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, Trinity College Dublin and sea fisheries advisor to MEP Luke 'Ming' Flanagan at the European Parliament. Her research sits at the arts-science-policy interface and offers insights into the different ways marine and coastal spaces are conceptualised by users, managers and human-environment interactions, how this relates to natural resource governance challenges and what it means for community engagement. Her current research has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 789524.

RUTH'S PROFILE

BELONGING TO THE SEA

MAPPING THE SEA

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