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# Constructing sustainability in EU fisheries: Re-drawing the boundary between science and politics?

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## ABSTRACT

This article critically assesses attempts by fishers to re-draw the science–politics boundary in European Union (EU) fisheries. Using concepts from interpretivism and constructivist institutionalism, I do this by tracing actor mobilisations to simultaneously contest the knowledge base of EU public instruments on the one hand and self-represent as holders of alternate knowledge on the other. In the subsequent re-adaptation of meanings of governing and production practices, fishers, scientists and managers alike appeared reflexive. They showed awareness of the politicisation of scientific advice, vocalised uncertainty over knowledge of fish stocks and appeared accepting of new types of everyday knowledge to assess fishing impacts. Significantly, therefore actor mobilisations appeared to be challenging the belief of a science separate from politics and which had caused failure in managing fisheries sustainably. Yet, although these mobilisations look like challenges to the narrative of the linear model of expertise, my research suggests that it is not at all clear that these actors have indeed abandoned this narrative. Rather, my findings reveal contradictory behaviour whereby actors show their awareness of politicisation of knowledge and scientification of politics, whilst simultaneously striving to keep science separate from politics. This case thus ultimately reveals the pervasive appeal of the myth of science as separate for politics and its political consequences for environmental protection policies.

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## 1. Introduction

This Special Issue asks what multiple interactions exist between the production and use of knowledge on the one hand and policy-making on the other? How can applications of interpretivist concepts and methods enable research to specify dynamics around the knowledge/policy interface and their effects? This article addresses these questions by examining efforts made by private actors to change European Union (EU) fisheries practices in the name of sustainability – and this through acknowledging recursive relationships between science and politics.

The boundary between science and politics has been conceptualised in an extensive literature (inter alia [Beck, 2011](#);

[Dodge, 2009](#); [Jasanoff, 2004](#); [Metze, 2011](#); [Miller and Edwards, 2001](#); [Wilson and Hegland, 2005](#)). For a long time, this boundary was assumed to separate science from politics. It was assumed that policymakers first defined the political problem, then requested and received expert advice, and finally a political decision was taken ([Weingart, 1999](#)). Value judgments were thought to be limited to politics, whereby the provision of scientific advice was understood to be value-free and scientists politically neutral ([Weingart, 1999](#)). Scholars have since demonstrated that this positivist understanding of science's relationship to politics does not reflect reality. Rejecting the linear model of expertise, recursive understandings of a reciprocal scientification of politics and politicisation of science have been identified in its place

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(Weingart, 1999; Wesselink et al., 2013). Science often defines problems for politics for which it then offers solutions: science and scientists are not politically neutral, rather politics structures the provision of advice in multiple ways, including structuring research programmes (Jasanoff, 2004; Schwach et al., 2007).

These debates matter for assessing sustainable development practices. Indeed, one could argue that a principal cause of failure in environmental protection has been the failure of both policymakers and scientists alike to acknowledge this recursive relationship between science and politics (Beck, 2011; Pielke, 2004). A key challenge is managing uncertainty and this because of the compelling belief endorsed by the linear narrative that science's certainty or truth legitimises the taking of certain policy choices over others (Jasanoff, 2004). Yet, as scholars have shown, more science does not necessarily produce greater certainty (Beck, 2011). Furthermore, certainty is connected in important ways to consensus and therefore to dominant scientific theories and practices. Consequently, to give effect to recursive understandings, scholars have called for more reflexive approaches to knowledge use in policymaking and identified challenges in bringing this about (Corburn, 2007; Madsen and Noe, 2012). For example, Jasanoff (2010) calls for use of other forms of knowledge, such as local and situated everyday knowledge, and participatory approaches to problem-solving. Beck calls for a spirit of "professional humility of scientists" and also for policymakers to "not base political decisions on the assumption of accurate prediction" (Beck, 2011: 304). Metze (2011) demonstrates how reflexive governing practices can enable more legitimate solutions to be found to environmental problems.

The case I present in this article addresses these issues directly. I show how, in European fisheries, initiatives were taken by collective private actors – fishers and e-NGOs – to acknowledge recursive relationships between science and politics and this in the name of sustainability. Significantly, actor mobilisations appeared to be challenging the linear model of expertise. This was done through simultaneously contesting the knowledge base of EU public instruments on the one hand and self-representing as holders of alternate knowledge on the other. In the subsequent re-adaptation of meanings of governing and production practices, fishers, scientists and managers alike seemed reflexive. They showed awareness of the politicisation of scientific advice, began to vocalise uncertainty over knowledge of fish stocks and appeared accepting of new types of everyday knowledge to assess fishing impacts.

Yet, although these mobilisations look like challenges to the narrative of the linear model of expertise, my research suggests that it is not at all clear that these actors have indeed abandoned this narrative. Rather my findings reveal contradictory behaviour whereby actors show their awareness of politicisation of knowledge and scientification of politics, whilst ultimately striving to keep science separate from politics. This case thus ultimately reveals the pervasive appeal of the myth of science as separate from politics and the political consequences for EU government of sustainable fisheries.

Using concepts from interpretivism and constructivist institutionalism (Section 2), I explain this by tracing how the meaning of sustainability has been socially constructed in

governing practices (Section 3). I show how actor mobilisations of beliefs from within traditions of sustainable development and ecosystem management did not replace the dominant tradition of command and control. Yet, these mobilisations were not without effects. On the contrary, understandings within command and control were adapted to reconstruct it as sustainable fisheries management, whereby science–politics boundaries were re-drawn in contingent ways.

## 2. Capturing the knowledge/policy interface: interpretivist institutionalist concepts and methods

A central point of this article is to capture shifting narratives on the relationship between science and politics as held by public and private actors in EU fisheries and which enabled changes to be made in governing practices. I do this by drawing upon theories and concepts developed within interpretivism (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, 2008) and constructivist institutionalism (Jullien and Smith, 2011; Lascombes and Le Galès, 2007; Mangenot and Rowell, 2010). Both sets of theories aim to uncover the understandings and social meanings which actors give to their practices – their "beliefs which guide action" (Hay, 2011: 169) – and how these come about – their social construction (Jullien and Smith, 2011: 364–369).

Rather than read off actors' interests from their status, therefore, I have asked what did actors think about where they were and what they were doing? To answer these questions here I draw upon research materials generated from within two research projects examining the transformation of UK-EU fisheries (Burch et al., 2001–2004; Carter, 2005–2007) and updated thereafter. As well as documentary analysis and situated observation, semi-structured elite interviews were undertaken with actors from the following groups: European Commission, European Parliament, UK Government, Scottish Government, Regional Advisory Councils, English/Welsh/Northern Irish, Scottish, and SW English collective professional bodies of fishers, Fisheries Producer Organisations, Inter-professional bodies of processors, e-NGOs, scientists, academics. Analysis was subsequently carried out of actors' written materials, public statements in the press, papers presented at conferences, scientific reports, academic articles, interview transcripts and notes taken from situated observation of meetings. These collectively reveal narratives which actors tell about their action and the various strategies they have undertaken to persuade others of their beliefs.

My search for changing meaning in governing practices is not limited to re-describing actors' stories, however. Rather, my aim is to interpret their interpretations (Hay, 2011: 168). This I do by introducing concepts of 'tradition' and 'dilemma' as developed by Bevir and Rhodes and 'institution' as deployed by constructivist institutionalists (Cleaver and Franks, 2005; Jullien and Smith, 2011; Mangenot and Rowell, 2010). Bevir and Rhodes argue that "governing practices can only be understood through the beliefs and actions of individuals located in traditions and in response to dilemmas" (2003: 198, my emphasis). The concept of tradition is the structuring part of the theory and is important for social explanation of change (Hay, 2011).

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