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Ghostly encounters: Dealing with ghost gear in the Gulf of Carpentaria

Catherine Phillips

School of Geography, University of Melbourne, 221 Bouverie St., Level 1, Carlton, VIC 3053, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Ghost gear – abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear – has been recognised as a global environmental challenge since the mid-1980s, and yet little social science attention has fallen on the phenomenon. This paper explores how the burden of global fisheries, materialised through its gear, is experienced and managed. How is ghost gear encountered? How is it understood? What influence does it have, and what responses does it provoke? To consider these questions, the paper begins with detailing of an encounter with ghost gear and Aboriginal rangers on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia. Understanding encounters as tangles of interlaced threads, rather than isolated intimacies, the paper also follows ghost gear beyond the experience of beach clean-up. How ghost gear journeys to this beach, and the mobilities and meetings that occur during its travels is explored, as well as the policy responses to ghost gear that figure it primarily as marine debris to be managed through territorial control as isolated 'waste'. These more-than-human stories offer insights into the distributed agencies, complex relations, and differential responsibilities involved in the phenomenon of ghost gear, and efforts to deal with it as part of land-sea assemblies.

1. Introduction

Synthetic fibres, knotted together as mesh. Tangled with itself and other remains – fishing buoys and lures, seaweed and driftwood, plastic bags and toothbrushes, bits of coral and bodies of marine creatures. The once useful. Now discarded. Laying on the beach, it seems passive. But perhaps it is more provocateur than this image suggests.

The fragment of net pictured above is one example of abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear – also known as 'ghost gear'. The ghost gear phenomenon has emerged as a global environmental management issue over the last 40 years. The advent of synthetic fishing gear has altered gear colours, buoyancies, ability to withstand water flows, even twine and net size. These plastics have allowed fishing to increase targeted catch, to spread to new areas, and to develop aquaculture, supporting the global harvesting and trading of seafood (Valdemarsen, 2001). But the same characteristics – buoyancy, lightness, strength, durability – pose dangers once gear becomes abandoned (Andrady, 2011). Synthetic gear does not simply disappear when discarded at sea. In fact, projections suggest that by 2050 ocean plastics will be more prevalent than fish (World Economic Forum, 2016). First recognised internationally as problematic in 1985 by the Food and Agriculture Organization's Committee on Fisheries, it has more recently become the subject of a global, inter-sectoral initiative (the Global Ghost Gear Initiative) put in place in the wake of the United Nations Rio+20 conference. Amid efforts to regulate it, however, ghost gear continues to haunt oceans.

How is ghost gear encountered by others – human or otherwise? What responses does it engender? How are its influences dealt with? These questions orient this paper, which joins a growing research agenda investigating materialities, governance, and politics of discard. I argue that a more-than-human approach to encounters offers a useful means of thinking through sociomaterial afterlives. Taking this approach allows a foregrounding of the coming together of things and bodies in particular space-time, emphasising relations as they unfold. It also disrupts any notion that ghost gear is an isolated object that simply needs (and is amenable) to proper management. Moreover, it serves to extend waste literature toward investigation of the effort involved in dealing with discarded items (see also Gregson, 2011), and the implications of discard for nonhuman organisms and their environs. The analysis shows that a more-than-human approach facilitates a rethinking of the problem of ghost gear, and the means through which it might be redressed, by highlighting the distributed, complex, and particularity of the phenomenon in ways that attend to human and non-human agents.

However, more-than-human approaches have gathered critique as overemphasising the present and neglecting broader context (see Popke, 2009; Goodman, 2015). Addressing this critique, I

E-mail address: cphillips2@unimelb.edu.au

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argue that an exploration of encounter need not exclude terrain and relations beyond the immediately sensible. Instead, encounters consist of tangles, multiple lines coming together and that we may pick up to follow into new meetings (see Ingold, 2010; Haraway, 2008). In this way, any one encounter stretches beyond particular moments of occurrence and to draw together wider worlds. To demonstrate this conceptual point, I explore experiences, travel, and regulation of ghost gear in northern Australia.

The paper proceeds with a brief exploration of the more-than-human framing, in which focus falls on the themes of after-lives and encounter especially as they relate to ghost gear. After this, it returns, accompanied by indigenous rangers, to a meeting of ghost nets on a beach in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The narrative offered, based in ethnographic research, pays particular attention to the physical and emotional effort of rangers dealing with ghost gear, as well as the categorisations involved in their practice. The third section draws on literature to consider the oceanic journeys of ghost nets that result in their presence in the Gulf. The paper then reviews regulatory measures put in place to contain and redress the negative impacts of ghost gear, detailing some of these measures as well as the involved categorisations. The conclusions consider the contributions of this approach of more-than-human encounter to the thinking through of ghost gear, and its implications.

2. Encounters with problematic discards

Ghost gear presented as potentially problematic in the late 1960s and by the 1980s was established as a global environmental problem. However, it was not until the early 1990s that communities in northern Australia began publicly articulating their concern about the amounts and impacts of discarded fishing nets washing ashore (Gunn et al., 2010). Responses included scientific assessments and consideration of management policies, often in association with other marine debris (see Gilman, 2015; MacFadyen et al., 2009; Vegter et al., 2014). There is much that might still be learned from these kinds of considerations. For instance, it has become clear that non-governmental organisations play a fundamental role in mitigation; in Australia, for instance, GhostNets Australia acts as a hub for data analysis, awareness raising, and global network development (Butler et al., 2013). There is also insight to be gained into possible technical and/or incentivised improvements to modes of collection, transport, and disposal. However, such an approach, I argue, is inadequate.

First, an observable gap remains in social and economic studies addressing ghost gear (MacFadyen et al., 2009; Vegter et al., 2014), and there is increasing recognition that accounts of the "practices and experiences in mitigating the impacts of marine debris on biodiversity would serve to better inform the development and implementation of necessary policy measures and appropriate responses to this growing threat" (SBSTTA, 2014, 1). This paper begins to address this gap in its account of the material and emotional effort involved in collecting ghost gear. Second, in addition to the lack of practice-based accounts, Moore's (2012) typology of approaches to waste would characterise the reigning conceptualisation of ghost gear as positivist and dualist – defining waste in essential and objectified terms. As Gregson and Crang (2010) observe, such an approach to waste can confine thinking to technical and institutional management, rather than open it out to broader consideration. In contrast, they point out that understanding waste as in process 'positions waste firmly within a scalar world of fixings and flows ... and signals the vitality of the inorganic within a networked world' (Gregson and Crang, 2010, 1031). I am sympathetic to the commitment, evident in much of discard studies, to critiquing uneven flows of waste and interrogating governing orders. However, this approach does not leave much space to consider the nonhuman influences or the corporeal relations that are key to making sense of ghost gear. To address these needs for experiential and relational understandings of the phenomena of ghost gear, I take a more-than-human encounter approach.

A more-than-human approach in the material register, as outlined by Whatmore (2006, 602) redirects attention from stuff or resources 'out there' to corporeality and the 'livingness of the world' enjoining 'the technologies of life and ecology, on the one hand, and of prehension and feeling, on the other'. In this understanding, the world is made and remade through an ontological relationality among heterogeneous actors – including humans but also other creatures, technologies, feelings, elements, and even policies. Recent literature has taken up this call for more-than-human understandings, for instance, to approach oceans not as staid voids but as lively, energetic assemblages of forces and elements in order to better understand how people and marine worlds relate (Bear, 2012; Peters, 2015). Much recent work in discard studies also draws upon such relational ontologies to ask questions about the processes through which 'waste' comes into being (DeSilvey, 2006; Evans, 2014; Gregson and Crang, 2010), or about how disposal reveals the orderings and valuations of economies (Gregson et al., 2007; Lepawsky and Mather, 2011; Waitt and Phillips, 2015). Taking inspiration from these literatures, ghost gear escapes sole consideration as an essentially problematic object that needs (and is amenable to) proper management; instead, it becomes a performing, affective material implicated in complex oceanic and terrestrial worlds. This shift brings with it implications for understanding, regulating, and dealing with waste.

More-than-human analyses have demonstrated a tendency toward exploring encounters, or the coming together of bodies and things in particular space-times. Laboratories, households, conservation areas, even ruins have proved fertile ground for investigation of the dynamics and differentiations involved in such meetings (DeSilvey, 2006; Haraway, 2008; Hayward, 2010). These studies provide rich insights into the performances and arrangements of humans and nonhumans, the affectivities and subjectivities involved, and the emergence of ethics. Leitner (2012) argues, for instance, that encounters hold transformative potential, perhaps especially when awkward or difficult. As will become clear, meeting and dealing with ghost gear can be disorienting – jarring aesthetic sensibilities, bringing fishing and disposal practices into question, prompting new thinking about how environments and human activities connect, and demanding practical and ethical engagement. Focusing on encounters also highlights experiential, affective, skilled interactions, interactions that ultimately serve to develop conservation methods and projects even if they tend to be obscured in official accounts and policies (Lorimer, 2015).

Sympathetic critiques of more-than-human encounter approaches note an overemphasis of present and particular experience. Goodman (2015) offers praise and caution, suggesting that wider political and economic realities can be lost to descriptions focused on individual experience and responsibility. Similarly, Johnson (2015) maintains that more-than-human encounters are too confined to the present to connect with broader contexts, while Popke (2009) argues that such analyses risk prioritising individual rather than collective responsibility and ignoring preconditioning context. This points to a common challenge for more-than-human studies: conveying the richness of embodied encounter while also making connections with that encounter's conditions and implications. This paper works to take on this challenge by considering multiple meetings of ghost gear, each tied to one another.

The emphasis of encounter on embodied experience need not exclude terrain and relations beyond the immediately sensible. Instead, encounters can be understood not only as discrete events but as knots 'whose constituent threads, far from being contained