Journal of Rural Studies 32 (2013) 430–438

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

# Neoliberalizing coastal space and subjects: On shellfish aquaculture projections, interventions and outcomes in British Columbia, Canada

Jennifer J. Silver

*Department of Geography, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Road East, Guelph, ON N1G 2W1, Canada*

*Keywords:*
Aquaculture
British Columbia
Coastal development
Neoliberalization
Ocean space

A B S T R A C T

This article interrogates shellfish aquaculture expansion efforts and outcomes in British Columbia (BC), Canada. While the clearest objectives of the Provincial Government's 1998 Shellfish Development Initiative were to privatize new ocean tenures and increase the wholesale value of the BC shellfish aquaculture sector, the analysis identifies and explores a range of government-led and government-funded interventions that emerged to discipline coastal space and subjects accordingly. These include: classifying productive space and projecting economic potential; identifying beneficiaries and enrolling Indigenous First Nations entrepreneurs; and, generating supportive knowledge, practice and public relations. I argue that these efforts work to produce 'new shellfish growing regions' imagined to be homogeneously ideal for shellfish aquaculture. They also reinforce the notion that coastal residents, especially First Nations, must adopt very specific outlooks and practices before the sector's full economic potential can be met. Theorizing these processes in terms of neoliberalization provides important perspective at a time when aquaculture is being widely promoted for its potential as an approach to economic modernization and sustainability in coastal communities in BC and beyond.



## 1. Introduction

In many countries with marine coastline, intensive aquaculture is receiving attention for its rural economic development potential (Young and Matthews, 2010; Belton and Little, 2011). In the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC), a 1997 report entitled *The Economic Potential of the British Columbia Aquaculture Industry* (i.e., Coopers and Lybrand, 1997) projected that by doubling the area of ocean space available for shellfish aquaculture, the annual wholesale value of the sector would grow from twelve to one hundred million dollars in ten years. In 1998, the BC Provincial Government initiated its Shellfish Development Initiative (SDI), the most publicized objectives of which were to increase the total area under private tenure for shellfish aquaculture from 2300 to 4230 ha and achieve a $100 million wholesale sector in one decade (BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, 2010). Simultaneously, government representatives and sector advocates began to speak and write of shellfish aquaculture as an efficient and uncomplicated fix to declining fish stocks and unemployment in coastal communities. Discourse commonly inferred that improved productivity and employment opportunity would help to ease local concerns regarding changes in access to ocean space, and suggested that Indigenous First Nations communities in particular stood to benefit by participating in shellfish aquaculture.

The SDI's spatial and economic objectives have not been realized. Between 1998 and 2010, the area of ocean space under tenure in the province grew to 3728 ha (BC Ministry of Environment, 2012). The $100 million target also remains distant – the wholesale value of the sector in 2010 was $32.5 million. Finally, although new tenure-holders and businesses have emerged, much of the sector's production and employment remains within the Strait of Georgia region (map and further detail ahead). Nonetheless, expansion and intensified shellfish production appear to endure as government priorities, often reinforced by familiar statements regarding economic potential (e.g., Bellaart, 2009). To recognize and begin to learn from the gap between projected potential and actual outcomes in the BC case, this article explores efforts that have been advanced in support of the shellfish aquaculture expansion mandate (i.e., to site and regulate new private tenures for shellfish farming).

By exploring government-led and -funded efforts, the article demonstrates that the idea of shellfish aquaculture as a model approach to coastal economic development in BC emerged and persisted through programming and discourse strongly grounded in neoliberal logic(s). Specifically, three areas of effort are detailed: classifying productive space and projecting economic potential (section four); identifying beneficiaries and enrolling First Nations

*E-mail address:* j.silver@uoguelph.ca.

0743-0167/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.10.003

entrepreneurs (section five); and, generating supportive knowledge, practice and public relations (section six). I suggest that together these work to discipline coastal spaces and subjects so that *new growing regions* understood to be ecologically and socio-culturally amenable with shellfish aquaculture might emerge. This analysis broadens our understanding of neoliberalization and its contradictions in ocean space, as well as raises some of the realities and challenges of adopting industrial aquaculture as a rural economic development strategy. Most broadly, its findings support the proposition that "[l]ike any form of development, aquaculture creates winners and losers" (Young and Matthews, 2010, 196) and remind that the policy decision to pursue this economic activity must be informed by a meaningful understanding of social and ecological unevenness.

The analysis is informed by literature that theorizes nature-society relations under neoliberal capitalism (for contextual overview see: Zimmerer, 2010). Within this scholarship, privatization receives attention as a foundational process through which narrowed economic relations are structurally (re)produced (Heynen et al. 2007; Mansfield, 2008). Because it allows scholars to document how rights change, and whose interests are most reflected in the process, tracing how enclosure and privatization regulate and change access to space has been analytically prominent (*ibid*). However, as Mansfield (2007) reminded, states not only regulate and enforce property rights, they are often very active in broader efforts to re-imagine spaces and subjects in ways that encourage "both owners and non-owners to [want to] become market subjects" (396). From this perspective, the production of new spatial imaginaries and the normalization of specific 'productive' practices warrant attention as disciplinary processes through which neoliberal capitalism advances (Valdivia, 2005; Li, 2007; Bakker, 2010).

## 2. Neoliberalizing ocean space and subjects

Privatization occurs when access and use rights are limited to select individual(s) or firm(s); enclosure is the political-regulatory progression through which these conditions are enabled and maintained (Mansfield, 2008). Both are *social processes*, and they have received attention as such from researchers who interrogate the logics and politics of resource development under neoliberal capitalism (Heynen et al. 2007; Mansfield, 2008). While regulating and legitimizing property is central to all forms of capitalism, neoliberal logic understands privatization as central to both individual well-being and societal improvement (Harvey, 1999). Summarized another way, a neoliberal perspective advocates enclosure and privatization as fundamental to remaking "ecosystems, livelihoods, and identities" (Mansfield, 2007, 393) into more efficient assemblages for the production, accumulation and 'trickle down' of wealth.

Because neoliberalism is "significantly constituted by changing social relations with biophysical nature" (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, 275), tracing the processes through which neoliberal*ization* proceeds is of great interest to nature-society scholars. The structural 'accumulation by dispossession' pattern discussed by Harvey (2003) is substantial in its presence and material effect; privatizing for a few invariably alters socio-economic relations and opportunities for many more. Yet, as Mansfield (2007, 397) observed:

> [p]rivatization does not simply mark an institutional shift, but instead entails a more fundamental restructuring of political-economic and nature-society relations, including people's senses of themselves as subjects.

Thus, neoliberalization must also be understood in terms of how discourse, social programs, and even public planning and development interventions, articulate culture and/or identity, and in turn, influence individual and collective behaviour (Dean, 2007). For example, engaging Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (2010), Tania Li (2007) has shown how development programming in Indonesia has long employed 'community' as an idealized scale for property intervention and as a discursive construct, both in ways that ultimately discipline "the actions of subjects who retain the capacity to act otherwise" (17).

Because they contain innumerable mobile and unallocated resources and are directly accessed for food and income by millions worldwide (FAO, 2012), the relationship between oceans and neoliberal capitalism is an important, yet sometimes overlooked, topic of research (Steinberg, 2008). State, private and non-governmental interests have demonstrated growing interest in enclosing and/or privatizing ocean space for (eco)tourism, aquaculture, energy production and biological resource extraction (Conway et al. 2010; Erwin et al. 2010; Campbell and Meletis, 2011). Because they would regulate reduced access to ocean space and marine resources and (theoretically) persist in response to 'market forces', claims circulate that these activities present promising sustainable development opportunities for coastal communities (Duarte et al. 2009; Erwin et al. 2010). In the case of aquaculture, assertions that demand for specific seafood commodities will soon outstrip the current capacity of capture fisheries and aquaculture circulate with growing frequency in media (e.g., The Economist, 2003; Time Magazine, 2011) and some academic sources (e.g., Diana, 2009). Here, aquaculture expansion is framed in terms of its potential to feed and employ people in coastal rural communities while reducing pressure on wild-growing fish stocks.

Becky Mansfield's body of work provides important perspective amidst sweeping claims about the potential of private ocean property. Tracing the scientific, economic, and political lineages of US North Pacific fisheries management policy, Mansfield (2001, 2004a, b) has highlighted how political-economic objectives guided fisheries regulation and allocation when the US extended its United Nations sanctioned Exclusive Economic Zone to two hundred miles in the late 1970s. Rather than sustainably manage fisheries, she found that these regimes were explicitly constituted to "Americanize" (2004b, 567) fisheries and to maximize economic returns through a reduced fishing fleet. Management (enclosure), quota (property), and export were understood as prerequisites to achieving a given fishery's maximum sustained yield. When stocks declined and/or when anticipated socioeconomic benefits did not transpire, bureaucratic meddling, open access, 'weak' rights, and fisher inefficiency and greed became go-to explanations (Mansfield, 2004a, b; 2006).

Mansfield and others suggest at least two key contradictions between neoliberal logic and the initiation and regulation of private marine property regimes. First, and significant in the context of privatizing ocean space for aquaculture tenures, even if benefits accrue for some, existing property relations must be modified (Young, 2001; Olson, 2010). Second, it becomes more likely that marine resources and services once enjoyed or exchanged locally will be commodified (Mansfield, 2003). Both of these outcomes indicate Harvey's (2003) 'accumulation by dispossession' pattern, and remind of the narrowed options for resource use and benefit that privatization implies, particularly for local resource users. From this perspective, Mansfield's (2008, 24) assertion of marine property as "a social decision about how to allocate resources" resonates clearly, and the value in researching processes through which new ocean spaces and subjectivities emerge clarifies further.

Building on Mansfield's (2003) essay on the social construct of 'quality' in surimi (fish paste) production, Bush and Duijf (2011) explored how sustainability distinctions made by large food retailers in the United Kingdom work to regulate pangasius (catfish-