



Being heard: Thinking through different versions of rationality, epistemological policing and dissonances in marine conservation



Jennifer J.M. Rogerson*

School of African and Gender Studies, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X2, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Emerging from ethnographic research conducted on the west coast of South Africa, this paper explores the ways in which fishers contrast their experience of fishing prior to the implementation of the Marine Living Resources Act, and the rise of fortress style conservation in fisheries management. Conservation as rhetoric has been used as a powerful means of supporting and justifying fisheries management objectives. The paper argues that fishers engage with their environments in ways that are different from how management understands human–nature relations. As a consequence, fortress style fisheries management and policing disallow fishers to engage with the sea in the ways that are intrinsic to their fishing practices. This results, in many instances, in curtailing the ways in which fishers are allowed to think about and interact with the sea. With the impending implementation of EAF in South Africa and the global call for working with multiple knowledges, the paper calls for relational ways of engaging in conservation.

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1. Introduction

It was during fieldwork, in Lamberts Bay, a small fishing town on the west coast of South Africa that the act of hearing became an experience I thought about more each day. What does the practice of hearing one another entail? What happens when one is no longer heard and cannot express one's sense of self and what one knows? It seemed, on the surface a simple practice: one person speaks and another listens. Yet, as fieldwork continued, it became apparent that to be heard was far more complex and tied to particular frameworks that allowed some voices to be recognised while silencing others. Based in a moment during fieldwork, I attempt to grapple with some of my discomforts around being (un)heard and try to give voice to some of the silences that emerged during research.

I had spent a cold winter morning speaking with some of the small-scale fishermen of Lamberts Bay. We had spent time talking about their dissatisfaction with current fishing regulation, and the difficulty of reconciling the need to respond to ever changing weather conditions and fish behaviour with the inflexibility of an administrative apparatus. Rosie, who had organised the meeting, spoke with me after the men had left and I thanked her for putting the meeting together, appreciating that the time spent talking with me, was time not spent working. To my surprise, Rosie thanked me for my time spent listening to what her colleagues had to say. I asked her why she was thanking me, after all, it was

for my research that we were in conversation. She said she was grateful because it was good to have someone “just listen” to them for once and take interest in what they had to say. She explained that they should be heard, and although the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) had promised to listen to their concerns, this had rarely happened.

That conversation brought home to me that being heard was not something that can be taken for granted. It was saddening to realise that many of the fishers working in South Africa have been rendered voiceless by the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) of 1998 and the frameworks it introduced that in turn came to underpin fisheries management.

1.1. The Marine Living Resources Act

Fish stocks in many instances are in crisis with climate change being recognised by most of the scientific community as an immediate and serious global concern. As a result, legal frameworks were developed to try and ameliorate fish stock crises. With the new rights allocation processes in terms of the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) of 1998, which sought to respond to fish stock crises, many subsistence fishers lost their rights to fish [1,2]. The MLRA aimed to address environmental and economic concerns around the sea and how to distribute resources accordingly. Permits were limited and those who were classified as being a ‘historically disadvantaged individual’ (HDI) were given rights to fish. In South Africa, these classifications were based on a complex set of criteria with the result that many fishers who did not fit into the HDI category were excluded, despite having fished for most of their lives [1–4].

* Tel.: +27 76 472 6624.

E-mail address: Jenniferjm.rogerson@gmail.com

The MLRA sought to address the injustices of the apartheid era, support a neo-liberal agenda, practice conservation and encourage entrepreneurship through fishing. Fishing is managed and rules are policed by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). However, very few small scale fishers benefitted from the new regulations – some were given no rights while others were given single species permits that expired within the first week of a fishing season and thus allowed no further fishing throughout the year. Multiple species permits were rarely granted [5]. The regulations also specify weight, boat and bag limits for various species of fish. When these changes were implemented, large fishing companies managed to protect their interests by combining multiple single permits and government regulations favoured the profitable industrial fishing corporations [6].

As more small-scale sea users were kept away from the sea, via compliance officers and police surveillance, this led to widespread dissatisfaction, and often, contempt for the authorities and the MLRA among many fishers and fishing communities. Increases in protest action and in poaching were noted by several authors [1,2,7], including that acts of non-compliance were taken as a point of pride [2; this volume]. Thus, as policing increased, so too did non-compliance; the opposite effect hoped for by state authorities. In the following account, I attempt to give expression to some of the difficulties experienced by small scale fishers and unpack why the moment described in the introduction, represents some of the challenges of fishing in South Africa.

Below, I argue that there is a dissonance between the conservation discourses employed by the MLRA and DAFF that advocates the participation of all sea users, and the associated administration thereof. Many fishers have to navigate this rhetoric and administration, while their experience and interaction with the marine environment, is clearly at odds with these State apparatuses. As a result, being policed by the state does not just affect fishing activities but the very means by which fishers know the sea.

After providing a brief explanation of methods and theory I talk to the ways that certain fishers experienced a connection with the sea and how that belonging with the sea undergirded the ways that fishers came to know the ocean. I then describe the means by which fisheries regulations operated in South Africa and how this seemed illogical to many fishers because administrative times, for instance, are not the times that one goes out fishing. As many fishers felt they have a connection with the sea, schedules regulated by administrative rules rather than by the sea and the fish seems 'illogical'. From here I describe the ways that as more fishers found themselves unable to practice their trade and at the times that suited them, non-compliance and hence policing have increased. This policing has also included controlling the ways that people know the sea, as State regulations and law enforcement disallows their means of knowing, which is based on feeling directly connected to the sea. I then show how looking at the ways that the fishers in this paper learned to read and understand the sea, reveals multiple ways of knowing. This paper presents an analysis of fisheries regulations and policy in South Africa based on data collected in conversation with fishers from two west coast fishing communities. The paper aims to give voice to different knowledge practices and to encourage more productive conversations between the state and small scale fishers in which different kinds of knowledge might be shared.

2. Material and methods

This paper is based on field work conducted in Simonstown and Lamberts Bay, two fishing towns on the West Coast of South Africa in 2009 (one month) and 2010 (two months). The small scale fishers with whom I worked used small motor boats called

'bakkies' and fished on a small-scale basis, for West Coast Rock Lobster (*Jasus lalandii*) from October through to April and Snoek (*Thysites atun*), mainly in winter.

Fieldwork occurred primarily in people's homes. Participant observation and interviews were used as a method for collecting data. In addition, I used walking through the town and along the beach with fishers as a means of engaging with their space. Mapping was also used as a research tool so that fishers could describe places and events that were important to them and these became springboards for conversation. Maps of the region were sourced so people could draw on them as well as create their own maps, comparing their own and the official versions.

As there are several kinds of fishers, it is necessary to introduce the people with whom I worked individually. Fishers from all ages participated and some older men had been fishing before others were born. The oldest participant is Dikkie. Dikkie worked on the sea as a fisher, a skipper and a boat owner. He has owned *bakkies* (the small, two-people boats running on a motor or using paddles) as well as larger, 10-people boats. When talking in a group it was Dikkie everyone would turn to for the final answer on something. As the oldest person with a fishing background, he was considered the most knowledgeable about the sea and the fish. Hennie W. was another member of the older generation of fishers. He was born and grew up in Lamberts Bay and fished there most of his life.

Ernest was part of the younger generation of fishers. He considered Dikkie and Hennie his teachers and found it difficult to oppose their views for fear of being seen as disrespectful. He was one of the few people I worked with who referred to and used the term 'climate change'. Rosie, around Ernest's age and the only woman fisher in Lamberts Bay was proud to be fishing. She spoke about how she could have been a domestic worker but chose rather to go to sea. At sea, she said, she felt free and knew that she could never work within the structures of jobs that have time constraints. Kelvin was probably the happiest of the people with whom I spoke. In his early forties and a practising Rastafarian, he said he could never do anything besides fishing because he enjoyed it so much. Kenneth lived in Simonstown and had done so his whole life. Having been baptised in the sea, he said, he felt a deep connection with the ocean, making rights loss something he felt acutely. Russell worked alongside Kenneth and had learned much of his fishing from him.

It was in these contexts, while chatting and telling stories that conversation often turned to how people disagreed with State policy: not so much because it prevented them from practicing their trade but because the underlying logic seemed counter-intuitive to people who had worked with and on the sea for much of their lives. More than this, working as a fisher was for many people more than an occupation, it was a vocation, and the practices and rhythms that come with fishing for a living were at times disrupted by the MLRA and its effects.

3. Thinking through different ideas on fisheries knowledge

Fisheries policy in South Africa is based on the assumption that fishers are rational economic beings who will overexploit a resource and, therefore, control of fishing activities through regulation is necessary to protect the resource. Consequently, fisheries management is informed by a combination of science and economics. This view is underpinned by the modernist separation of nature and culture [8] in which science is framed as the source of objective knowledge about nature [9,10]. This distinction between subjective and objective knowledge, positions the knowledge of small scale fishers as subjective and therefore less 'true' as opposed to the objective and general knowledge of 'Science'.

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