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# Political lessons from early warnings: Marine finfish aquaculture conflicts in Europe

Irmak Ertör<sup>a,c,\*</sup>, Miquel Ortega-Cerdà<sup>b,c</sup><sup>a</sup> ENT Environment and Management, Carrer de Sant Joan 39, primer pis, 08800 Vilanova i la Geltrú, Barcelona, Spain<sup>b</sup> Fundació ENT – MedReAct, Carrer de Sant Joan 39, primer pis, 08800 Vilanova i la Geltrú, Barcelona, Spain<sup>c</sup> Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Edifici Z, Carrer de les Columnes, Campus de la UAB, 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Spain

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for fish products and the stagnation of capture fisheries has promoted the growth of aquaculture globally, leading to a significant increase in socio-environmental conflicts mainly in relation with finfish aquaculture. Despite this significant global growth, the European aquaculture sector has instead experienced stagnation in the last decade. While European public authorities are currently encouraging the growth of the sector in order to change this trajectory, conflicts over finfish aquaculture have nonetheless already taken place in Europe. Based on peer-reviewed articles, gray literature, and 27 in-depth interviews, this article analyzes such conflicts in Europe in the last two decades by examining their localities, characteristics, the different actors involved, and the arguments of these actors. In this way, it explores the relation of these conflicts to environmental justice theory. Findings highlight that resistances to marine finfish aquaculture in Europe do not have a purely conservationist motivation, but rather entail a complex set of claims supported by various actors. These include demands for an even distribution of burdens and benefits resulting from marine finfish aquaculture, the right to be recognized as relevant stakeholders, an effective participation process where actors have access to adequate and transparent information and a real capacity to influence the decision-making, and to be able to maintain their social functioning. Based on this analysis, the article derives political lessons for future European marine policies.

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## 1. Introduction

The increasing demand for fish products and the stagnation of fish captures have boosted aquaculture at a global scale [1]. Yet despite significant growth of the sector at a global level, aquaculture in Europe has instead experienced stagnation in the last decade [2]. In order to reverse this trend, European authorities including the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission are encouraging the growth of the sector [3]. The recently approved Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) reform [4] and the associated European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) are expected to set up a framework that changes the current pattern. At the national level, multiannual national strategic plans for aquaculture based on the EU Strategic Guidelines [5] will be approved in 2014 by the European Commission as a tool to overcome what have been identified as the most important

barriers for aquaculture growth: “limited access to space and licensing, industry fragmentation, limited access to seed capital or loans for innovation in a risky context, pressure from imports, long and time-consuming administrative procedures and red tape” [6].

What underlies most of the previous barriers is the “difficulty to integrate environmental policy with viable aquaculture economy, due to the concerns on the environmental impact of aquaculture in Europe” [7]. This integration is especially contentious in the case of marine finfish aquaculture. The experience in other parts of the world shows that accelerated growth of fish farms may lead to important socio-environmental conflicts that decrease, or even in some cases stop the expected growth in finfish aquaculture [8–10].

In the last two decades, European finfish aquaculture has also been embroiled in several socio-environmental conflicts, which to date have not been widely investigated. This is mainly because they have been considered either as spurious or as Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) complaints, i.e. local actors' opposition against the establishment of aquaculture facilities only in their neighborhood, usually criticized for following “irrational and selfish” demands. However, it is well known that conflicts may arise when the

\* Corresponding author at: ENT Environment and Management, Carrer de Sant Joan 39, primer pis, 08800 Vilanova i la Geltrú, Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 938935104.

E-mail addresses: [iertor@ent.cat](mailto:iertor@ent.cat) (I. Ertör), [mortega@ent.cat](mailto:mortega@ent.cat) (M. Ortega-Cerdà).

institutional and political framework fails to address different actors' demands. Studying conflicts in this sense might become a way to unearth the issues that are not accurately covered in current European policies or that are not materialized in the implementation process.

Therefore, this article identifies the main finfish aquaculture conflicts that took place in the last two decades in Europe, and analyzes their characteristics by focusing on actors involved, their arguments, and their link to environmental justice. By doing so, it investigates whether these conflicts in Europe actually stem from NIMBY claims and hence are negligible and/or whether there are lessons that can potentially be incorporated into future European policies to ensure: (i) social acceptance of aquaculture activities and (ii) successful development of European aquaculture. This is especially relevant in a period in which new regulations and legislations on marine use are on the horizon.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on socio-environmental conflicts and elaborates environmental justice theory in-depth, which is used as an analytical framework to study the identified conflicts [11,12]. Subsequently, Section 3 outlines the sources of information and describes the qualitative methods used in this study. Section 4 illustrates all detected conflicts, their locations, actors involved and their arguments by analyzing their relation with environmental justice concerns. Sections 5 and 6 highlight the lessons derived and underline the need to incorporate them into European policies.

## 2. Theory

Environmental justice as a term was first used in the US to draw attention to the unequal distribution of environmental risks and burdens, the so-called “environmental bads” [12] driven by policies discriminating “people of color” [13,14]. Grassroots resistance movements, which led to the emergence of the concept, [12] were mainly against the dumping of industrial and toxic waste in marginalized neighborhoods.

With the concept's evolution, not only the distribution of environmental bads or risks, but also of environmental goods and services, including fairness in access to commons, alongside the recognition and participation in decision-making became central. All of these steps contributed to a wider and pluralistic understanding of environmental justice which goes beyond distributional aspects alone. Indeed, Schlosberg based the theorization of the concept on the analysis of different types of grassroots movements and their environmental justice claims, and thus defined four dimensions of environmental justice: distributive justice, recognition, participative (procedural) justice and capabilities (capacities) [11,12].

In the context of this study, distributive justice refers to how risks, benefits and costs – be it social, economic or ecological – of marine finfish aquaculture activities are distributed among various actors. Recognition is associated with the question of whether different actors are considered and consulted as relevant stakeholders for any decision related to fish farms. Participative justice means to be able to participate effectively in decision-making process. This is not only restricted to having the right to participate or being consulted, but also whether there are well-established inclusive participatory mechanisms through which actors can make their voices heard. The capabilities aspect [11,12,15] is linked to the extent to which aquaculture activities generate a risk (or support) to the integrity and proper functioning of individuals and coastal communities. This embraces a range of basic needs, sustaining one's livelihood, culture and socioeconomic activities, and social, economic and political rights.

Schlosberg's framework of environmental justice is employed to elaborate this analysis for several reasons. First, this analytical framework has already been successfully applied to conflict studies related to other sectors such as forestry and mining [16,17]. Secondly, through a plural understanding of the concept, i.e. complementing the distributional aspect with recognition, participation and capabilities, it enables a comprehension of the wide range of demands encountered in these conflicts. Thirdly, this perspective emphasizes that theorizing from movement experience is suitable for studying conflicts since such an approach brings theory and practice together. Fourthly, the framework emphasizes justice both at individual and community levels. This is very useful for the article's purposes since the analysis includes different groups within various communities, who did not only have claims for individual justice, but also for the social cohesion and broader functioning of their communities. Finally, this approach helps to structure the information in a way that enables considering the transformative policy aspiration in these conflicts. In this way, based on the data and the methodology explained in the next section and with the following results, the paper underlines their significance for policymaking and the aquaculture-related research agenda.

## 3. Material and methods

Socio-environmental conflicts related to the use of nature and waste disposal have been widely studied [16,18,19]. This body of literature includes studies on aquaculture-related conflicts from all over the world [9,10,20–23]. This article builds upon such research in order to identify and explain socio-environmental conflicts related to marine finfish aquaculture in Europe over the last two decades because each information source pointed to an intensification of conflicts in this period. With this purpose, the research relies on three main sources of information, i.e. peer-reviewed articles obtained from the SCOPUS database – the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, gray literature, and 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The investigation of peer-reviewed articles within the SCOPUS database was conducted through examining the entire text of articles – including the title and abstract – to detect the combination of the following two keywords: (i) aquaculture and conflict, (ii) aquaculture and Europe, (iii) aquaculture and the country name – Spain, France, Norway, Greece, and Italy. These five countries were selected for the keyword search because they have the greatest volume of marine finfish aquaculture production in Europe. Accordingly, 2597 articles have been reviewed, out of which 213 articles were selected due to their relation to socio-environmental or socioeconomic studies on aquaculture. The latter group was refined in order to identify studies providing specific information on marine finfish aquaculture conflicts in Europe. Additionally, corresponding references in these articles were incorporated into the analysis to have a wider coverage of the existing peer-reviewed literature. Although the most relevant articles studying socio-environmental conflicts in the SCOPUS database were limited in number and detail, they helped to identify 12 conflictive cases, their places, actors involved and their arguments.

Secondly, a review of gray literature including documents and statistics published by FAO and EU, reports and press releases of NGOs [24–27], EU legislation and guidelines, documents about Common Fisheries Policy, national or European strategy documents, websites of movements [28,29] opposing fish farms, and some local or regional newspaper articles were employed to complete the information obtained from peer-reviewed articles. Following the discussions held in meetings, congresses and

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