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The Soul of the Fisher

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Abstract

Fishers often describe fishing as a religion. If religion is defined as meaning making, then fishing makes meaning through their connection with the aquatic environment, through the ritual and sometimes difficult work of catching fish and through the relationship with the fish itself. In contrast, recreational fishers enjoy being in the outdoors and delight in the challenge of taking a fish home for dinner; fly fishers treat their sport with a passion bordering on divine reverence; while commercial fishers relish their connection with the ocean and the intricate skills that go with negotiating a catch in the midst of uncertainty – the weather, the ocean's power, the risks they take, their ability to locate the fish and the increasing vulnerability of the fishing industry. This paper explores the social and spiritual dimensions of fishing, as a leisure activity and profession and asks the question: What happens to the soul of the commercial fisher particularly, to their social and spiritual capital, in an era of declining fisheries resources? The answer, in part, is found in the spirit of resilience.

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This article reviews the religious and spiritual dynamics of fishing based on the perceptions and experiences of recreational and commercial fishers. Initially it examines the spirituality or ‘soul kind of feeling’ bound up with salt and fresh water recreational fishing, and later it addresses the experiences of commercial fishers in light of the impact
of fisheries decline in Australia. These issues are significant as commercial fishers especially are facing widespread changes to their careers, in part through the implementation around Australia’s coast of a raft of marine protected areas (MPAs) designed to preserve aquatic biodiversity, but in the process, may seriously impact the livelihoods of commercial fishers and their families.

Commercial fishing has an important historical and cultural heritage presence in coastal and regional Australia. It is the fifth most valuable rural industry, contributes $2.2 billion annually to the Australian economy, and employs over 21,000 people in the catching and harvesting sectors (DAFF, 2006). But the future of the commercial wild fishery is vulnerable. The federal government’s Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) estimates that several major Australian fisheries have been ‘fully fished’, while others are suffering increasing pressure from over-fishing and environmental impacts including increasing pollution, habitat degradation, invasive species, and the impact of upstream agriculture, logging and run-off. These pressures are exacerbated by rising fuel costs, swelling overseas imports threatening the viability of local fisheries, tighter quota restrictions, shorter fishing seasons, and more recently, the roll out of MPAs across Australia which has closed off valuable fishing areas to commercial operators. The combined effect of these changes has forced many fishers out of the industry either voluntarily or compulsorily and the impact is felt not only among the fishers, but also their families and fishing-centred businesses in coastal and regional areas. How fishers view these changes, and how they cope with their changing lifestyle, will be examined later in the article.
In contrast to the downsizing of commercial fisheries, recreational fishing in Australia is a booming multi-billion dollar industry. The federal government regards it as ‘an integral part of the Australian lifestyle’ (DAFF, 1994) and through a range of policy measures, seeks to sustain the leisure pursuit of over 3.4 million Australians and the species they love to fish.

**Recreational fishing**

Recreational fishers and fly fishers regard their past-time with a religious zeal. This is aptly demonstrated by the Australian writer, avid fisher and marine conservationist, Tim Winton, who regards recreational fishing as far more than a mere leisure activity. ‘It is a religion’, something totally sacred, declares Winton, and ‘anyone who sees it otherwise is an infidel’ (AMCS, 2007). These are strong words. But when speaking with recreational fishers, one quickly learns that the act and art of fishing is a religious experience of the kind Robert Orsi (2003) would call a ‘lived religion’, i.e. the practical expression of religious adherence embodied in ritual and action beyond institutional confines.

Many fishers are devoted to their sport describing it as an obsession. On recreational and fly fishing chatlines such as the Sydney Fish Finder Forum, Ausfish Australian Fishing Forums and Hook.TV Fly Fishing Forum, or on fishing devotees’ blogs, fishers share stories about what many regard is an experience of ‘the holy’ (Otto, 1950).
While many of us are at home in a synagogue or church, for some of us the water is as much our home as it is a place of worship and a place that helps remind us the importance of nature, our place in it, and the need to protect these resources for generations to come...[T]he "religion" that I practice...makes me richer inside somehow...I feel that there is some sort of spiritual practice in our endeavor... (DietshCaster in Hook.TV, 2008).

From this fly fisher’s comment, the craft of fishing is a meaning making activity apparent in the veneration of water as sacred place and home (or oikos from which comes the term ecology) which inspires his care. Fishing becomes a ritual and what might be viewed as a profane activity is transformed into the realms of the sacred (Eliade, 1959). Most recreational fishers have been fishing since early childhood (Shaw, 2008), and claim fishing as an essential part of their identity, their family heritage and their lives. As one fisher put it (following Descartes): ‘I fish, because it is my Religion, therefore I am (something).’ (Trevally in Hook.TV, 2008).

Going fishing provides an essential meaning for the lives of both recreational and fly fishers (Snyder, 2007). Ritual practices begin long before the fisher reaches the hallowed fishing spot (often a secret place whose whereabouts is tightly guarded). The whole process from preparation to catch is shrouded with serious spiritual intent. Seeking the right bait, knowing the right place to fish, crafting the lures with reverence while visualizing the fish coming up and taking a bite, and even praying for a good catch, a religious practice mentioned by ‘The Fly Fishing Rabbi’ Eric Eisenkramer (2007) and
Alaskan Episcopal Minister, Mark Wilson who prays for ‘Just one fish, that’s all I ask. I’ll release it; I swear.’ (Fly River, 2008). The whole process, not only the actual experience of fishing, is a sacred ritual which involves communing with nature and the fish and later, sharing their ‘fishtalk’ dogma online.

Adrianne Harris (2008) has been a passionate fisher since her parents introduced her to fishing on school holiday camping trips. She is also environmentalist as well as a fervent hunter and a practising Pagan, which as an ethical nature religion might seem at odds with hunting and fishing (Clifton, 1997; Orr, 2004). Harris often goes rock fishing, gingerly climbing down the treacherous cliffs while swirling waves crash on the rocks below. In the following vignette, she is on the ocean beach early one morning - a sacred place and sacred time.

I am standing, almost waist deep, in cold, salty water. ... I wade through the water, and with a flick of the wrist and a push of my shoulder, I use the ten-foot fibreglass rod to cast the weighted, baited rig into a channel that I identify by the movement of the waves and the way the birds behave on the beach. Perhaps today will be the day that the gods, and the fish of the sea will look favourably on my endeavours. Perhaps today, if the tides, the time and the season all align, I will be rewarded with a catch to sustain me...Then I catch a small glimpse of silver in the surf, long and slender. A whiting. I wind in the rod, take the whiting and remove the hook from its mouth. I take my knife from the sheath on my hip and slit the fish’s throat, then break its back. Over time, I have found that this
is the quicknest and most respectful way to kill the fish that I catch...I thank the
gods for success in the hunt and honour my ancestors, who were also fishers,
with the tales I tell.

Harris is a sustainable fisher as are many recreational fishers. This view of recreational fishing as ecological sustainable is also held by the wider Australian community, which in a study of attitudes towards fishing, viewed recreational fishing positively as a sustainable and popular family activity (Henry and Lyle, 2003). Taking children fishing, or going fishing with one’s mates is, the study found, a crucial component of recreational fishing. But studies of fisher motivations over 15 years have shown that it is the experience surrounding the act of fishing rather than the catch itself, that motivates most recreational fishers (Fedler and Ditton, 1994; Ditton and Sutton, 2004). They say they fish to be in the outdoors, to enjoy the experience of being in nature, to relax and unwind, sitting on the edge of a boat or stream, and spending the day with mates. Knowing there is a fish to catch, and even catching one, is important but it is not the main game.

With so many recreational fishers in Australia, the federal government has introduced prudent measures to avert the decline in fish stocks while guaranteeing the future of recreational fishing as ‘an integral part of the Australian lifestyle’ (DAFF, 1994). Thus, for the government at least, recreational fishing is part of what it means to be Australian. On reflection, however, it seems that recreational fishing is culturally and economically more important than commercial fishing. This view is highly relevant in situations where recreational and commercial fishers are competing for the same stock, or where, through
the introduction of MPAs, recreational fishers have access to areas previously commercially fished, while commercial fishers are locked out of what might have been their family’s fishing grounds for generations. The impact of these changes is raised in the next section.

**Commercial Fishing**

Fishers’ identity is intimately tied to their work. Thus threats to their livelihood through fisheries decline, or the introduction of MPAs, may have unforeseen implications which may affect their financial, physical and emotional health and well-being. Overseas studies have shown that while commercial fishing is motivated by financial reasons, fishers often choose their profession for reasons other than monetary reward (Pollnac and Poggie, 2008). The limited research on fishers’ job satisfaction shows that they value being in the outdoors, the thrill of the hunt, a high degree of freedom and autonomy and deep respect for the sea (Bratton and Hinz, 2002; Gatewood and McKay, 1988, 1990; Pollnac and Poggie, 2006). Overall they display a unique set of personal characteristics - being courageous risk takers, working with challenge and ever-present danger, an ability to react quickly to environmental change, and an exceptional knowledge of the marine environment (St Martin, 2001). Some fishers choose to trivialise the risks or treat them as a normal part of their working life, while others savour the risk, being on the edge of life and possible death and enjoying the experience (Hall-Arber and Mrakrovčič, 2008). Competing with other fishers might also add to the thrill of the hunt but it can also become financially problematic, particularly if the catch is too small, or if too many
fishers (recreational, indigenous or commercial) are fishing for too few fish (Sanchiro et al., 2004).

In the face of these at risks, the qualities displayed by commercial fishers indicate that there is an existential and emotional attachment connected with the job which highlights their reluctance to leave their work, the sea and their lifestyle. The intensity of the job, and the relationship they have built with the ocean environment is a vital part of their fisher identity but there is only scant mention of these psycho-spiritual attributes in the scholarly literature (Hinz and Bratton, 2000). In one article on safety at sea and the sometimes fatalistic attitude fishers have to what is a dangerous occupation, an American fisher evinces a sense of transcendence through the job and his connection to the ocean: ‘Fishing still holds me in its thrall...There's something transcendent about being on the ocean...It's an inexplicable feeling, working so close to the sea.’ (Kloberdanz, 2000). Elsewhere I have called this unexplained feeling a ‘deep blue religion’ which honours the intimate connection between humans and the aquatic environment (Shaw, 2008).

In interviews with seafarers, some openly declare a spiritual connection to the ocean, while others, notably marine scientists, divers and fishers, shy away from outwardly confessing a religious or spiritual relationship with the sea, regardless of any organised religious affiliation they may have, or not. However, like recreational and fly fishers, they also regard the sea and their connection with it as an addiction or obsession. Perhaps the lack of an acknowledged religious feeling may have something to do with the notion that institutionalised religion is bound up with hierarchy and doctrine, while others take up the
argument in Lynn White’s provocative 1967 essay in the journal Science on reasons for environmental desecration and blame Judeo-Christian teaching as the cause (White, 1967). But what stands out from the research (e.g. Henry and Lyle, 2003), and an exploration of fishers’ chat-sites and blogs, is the view that recreational fishing is spiritual, positive and sustainable, while commercial fishing is generally seen in a negative light as unsustainable, even rapacious (Aslin and Byron, 2003). This seems somewhat of a paradox in view of the growing demand for, and marketing of Australian seafood for human health and well-being, not to mention the bevy of fisheries policies designed to ensure the sustainability of fish stocks for future generations.

To offset the negative perception of commercial fishing, in mid-2008 the Sydney Fish Market launched a campaign, ‘Brought to You by Our Fishermen’, spearheaded the commercial fishers themselves to raise the profile of the industry and promote ‘Aussie Seafood’. These images not only promote the fishers and their catch, they also advance the idea that commercial fishing is responsible. Other posters highlight the health of the catch and the healthy lifestyle of the fisher, where, for instance, NSW fisherman Paul Bagnato talks with pride and passion about his Italian family fishing lineage and the deep meaning fishing has in the lives of fishers: ‘For us it’s not just a job, it’s what we live for.’ (Sydney Fish Market campaign poster, 2008).

Thus, if fishers have to leave the industry or undertake work which lacks this profound existential meaning and intimate sense of identity formation, or fails to provide the sense of adventure and challenge fishers enjoy, they may lose enthusiasm, feel displaced,
dispirited, and may not cope well or be resilient enough to deal with what appears to them like ‘dull boring alternatives’ (Pollnac and Poggie, 2008:199). As a result, a loss of fishing, or a threat to the fishers’ livelihood through policy change, MPAs or fisheries decline generally, may not only mean financial uncertainty, there is an accompanying loss of autonomy which manifests in a loss of well-being, including a loss in tradition, identity and place connection (King, 2005; Marshall and Marshall, 2007; Minnegal et al, 2003), as well as a propensity for physical and mental health concerns (Dolan et al, 2005), including stress, depression, anxiety and anger (Smith, 2003). Likewise, anecdotal evidence on the current situation of fishers from the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (pers. comm., 2008) indicates significant personal and family costs including: increased financial obligations due to escalating fuel costs, physical and mental health problems, alcoholism, domestic violence, divorce, threatened and actual suicide, and anger and frustration at a lack of recognition of fishers’ knowledge and experience. Similar issues were raised at an industry-funded meeting on social concerns among NSW fishers who felt ‘very frustrated …helpless in the face of the odds and looking for a way to resolve issues’ (Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, 2007).

Research into the effects of life stressors on individuals shows that situations of hopelessness and helplessness are risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder and are related to physiological health problems like heart disease (Koenig, 2006), while other studies suggest that a sense of hope and loss of despair correspond to positive health outcomes (Kurbansky et al, 2001; Peres et al, 2007). From the seriousness of the above
anecdotal evidence, it would appear that some fishers might regard the imposition of fisheries closures, including the loss of work, and also significantly, the loss of their connection to the marine environment, in addition to any associated financial and family strain, as akin to a stressful or traumatic experience (Carawan, 2004). It is in this context that what I term the ‘spirit of resilience’ is an important concept to show how fishers cope with changes over which they may have little control (Peres et al, 2007; Bratton and Hinz, 2002).

The concept of resilience is used within ecological and natural resource management discourse to refer to the capacity of an ecosystem to withstand change, and if damaged, to restore or rebuild itself (Folke et al, 2004). A parallel concept of ‘social resilience’ refers to the capacity of human communities to withstand change due to environmental, social or political impacts without becoming dysfunctional (Adger et al, 2002; Pollnac et al, 2006), and may include, for example, the ability of commercial fishers to deal with policy changes (Marshall, 2007). Thus, the ‘spirit of resilience’ refers to the capacity of commercial fishers to weather the changes - to their profession, their finances, their lifestyle and to the marine environment.

However, there is limited research in Australia and overseas on the social impacts of fisheries change, even less on their ethical, psychological or spiritual effects (e.g. Bratton and Hinz, 2002; Coward et al, 2000; Hinz and Bratton, 2000). Most studies have centred on the economic costs of policy actions and the effects of any accompanying structural adjustment schemes paid to fishers to offset the loss of their business (Hundloe et al,
2003; Newby, Gooday and Ellison, 2004). For example, US studies on the effects of license buyout schemes have shown a high level of disenchantment with management decisions. Fishers experienced severe financial problems including bankruptcy, suffered depression, relationship breakdown and divorce, and/or had to sell up and move elsewhere in search of work (Gilden and Smith, 1996). Similarly one Australian economically-focused study on compensation paid to fishers following the introduction of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park noted ‘industry angst, business failure and personal trauma and grief’ arising from the adjustment scheme (Taylor-Moore, 2004:1). Yet, in discussions I’ve had with fisheries administrators, there seems to be a view that such social and psychological concerns are welfare rather than industry-related issues although that perception is changing with recent Fisheries Research and Development Corporation grants to research the impact of fisheries decline on fishers and their families (FRDC 2007).

Healthy communities need healthy fish stocks, while healthy fisheries require healthy fishing-related communities. To achieve sustainable fisheries for the future, there must be greater recognition that policy decisions can and do affect, in multiple ways, the social, economic, psychological and cultural dynamics of fishing communities and the people who live and work in them.

References


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