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## **'It's how you catch the fish'**

*debates on ecolabelling, yield thinking, and care in Denmark*

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## **‘It’s how you catch the fish’: debates on ecolabelling, yield thinking, and care**

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In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy, we are reporting that the first author has participated in the ministry-led working group of stakeholders contributing to the development of the new Danish ecolabelling scheme (as researched in this article) through her Industrial PhD project - that includes collaborations with Danish small-scale fishers.

## **‘It’s how you catch the fish’: debates on ecolabelling, yield thinking, and care**

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) has been the guiding principle of fisheries management, focused on reaching sustainability through bioeconomic modelling and harvest regulations. MSY has allowed managers to set Total Allowable Catch levels for target species with further implications for various forms of catch share programs. In this article, we employ a feminist ethic of care approach and literature on local environmental stewardship to analyze the case of a Danish environmental organization trying to introduce another dimension to fisheries management grounded on the concept of care and collective responsibility. The case includes two related attempts of establishing ecolabelling schemes for small-scale fisheries focused on a concept of careful/gentle fishing. Through the case study, we trace how a management focus on yield hinders the care perspective but also engenders forms of local and national resistance.

Keywords: ecolabelling; small-scale fisheries; care ethics; yield; MSY

### **1. Introduction**

In searching for—and negotiating—solutions to the issue of a declining small-scale fishing sector and aiming to promote ‘sustainable’ fishing practices, the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark (now the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries as of December 2020) has introduced a new state-led ecolabelling scheme (MFLF 2020). This strategy builds on years of discussions on what constitutes ‘sustainable’ small-scale fishing environmentally and socially, a discussion which was originally prompted by the Danish environmental organization, Living Sea (*Levende Hav*). Living Sea was formed by small-scale fishers and citizens in the early 1990s and

sought a means to differentiate fisheries management strategies that were preoccupied with stock assessment from more fisher-driven modes of management. Central to these discussions and our case study is the emic concept of ‘*skånsom* (careful, gentle) fishing’, articulated and conceptualized as the missing dimension of fisheries politics and inherently different from biological sustainability in the form of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). Please note that throughout the article *skånsom* will take different forms reflective of Danish syntax: *skånsom* (base form), *skånsomme* (plural form), *skånsomt* (neuter form).

MSY has been one of the guiding principles in fisheries management from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today. MSY has allowed managers to set Total Allowable Catch (TAC) levels for target species with further implications for various forms of catch share programs (McCormack 2017; Macinko 2014; Olson 2011). However, the question remains as to whether such a focus on yield creates a paradigm in which other management tools and methods are overlooked. Building on our case study, we unpack the implications of the yield mindset and discuss the implications for a care perspective in fisheries management. Larkin (1977) famously wrote an ‘epitaph’ to management based on this yield thinking, but here we explore the conceptualization of sustainability and its relationship to yield versus care. Like others in fisheries management (Ross 2021; Nightingale 2013) and human geography more widely (Lawson 2007; Tronto 1993) have proposed, we identify how care has been overlooked and undervalued in fisheries management. We question the received wisdom of MSY, namely its singularity of management through TACs and economic incentives without regard to impacts—environmental or social.

MSY centers on the premise that nature provides a surplus and that humans can simply reap this surplus yield. With fisheries management based on MSY, management

strategies narrow to a fixation on yield with translation into TACs and consequently the push toward economic efficiency, a move toward Maximum Economic Yield and tradable catch share systems (McCormack 2017; Pinkerton and Davis 2015; Macinko 2014; Olson 2011). The anthropocentric construction of surplus makes it clear that individual actions need not respect or receive consent from the environment or other human/more-than-human members of coastal and marine communities. Care stands in contrast by acknowledging reciprocity and interdependence.

Through our case study of Living Sea, and its attempt to establish an ecolabelling scheme in Denmark in the 1990s, we attend to how responsibility and ‘voices of care’ uncover power relations (Tronto 1993) and feelings of loss and illuminate fishers’ initiatives of reaching sustainability. Throughout this paper, we are interested in the tensions between fisheries management, its integral (or perceived as such) focus on MSY, tools and concepts, and fishers’ attempts of navigating and changing the focus of management to meaningful measures to follow in their everyday practices and relations with the sea, local fishing grounds and their communities. We frame the initiatives in our case study as forms of environmental stewardship, in order to understand how these were simultaneously attempts to sustain livelihoods of small-scale fishers and preserve the marine environment upon which they depend. Building on the work of other feminist scholars working in fisheries (Ross 2021; Nightingale 2013; Power 2015), we ask what a care perspective can provide to fisheries sustainability. We argue that local environmental stewardship by fishers, or in the words of Tronto, ‘taking care of’ and ‘care-giving’ (1993; Ross 2021) demand fisheries governance structures that enable fishers to take collective responsibility through their everyday practices. Through the case study, we trace how a management focus on yield hinders the care perspective but also engenders forms of resistance.

The Danish environmental organization Living Sea and its legacy in Danish fisheries policy represents a ‘critical case’ (Flyvbjerg 2006), especially its origins and the work the organization did in the 1990s. It represents a critical case in that its position allows us to (a) detect the boundary of received thinking in fisheries management and (b) recognize the legacy this group had on small-scale fishing, especially in Denmark.

First, we briefly delineate the path to MSY and its ties to economics and then tie together the complementary literatures on environmental stewardship and care in order to develop our understanding of responsibility in fisheries articulated in the case study. Following the literature review, we present the methodology and then turn to the case of Danish fisheries ecolabelling focusing on Living Sea and its advocacy campaign in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this section, we demonstrate how this history relates to the contemporary discussions of a state-led ecolabelling scheme for Danish small-scale fisheries. Here, we grapple with the challenging translation of *skånsom* into English, but also demonstrate why this term holds salience. We then discuss the relevance of the case and its connection to care and stewardship.

## **2. Sustainability through Maximum Sustainable Yield: Outsourcing Responsibility?**

Since the 1950s fisheries management regimes have been influenced by a combination of fish population dynamics and economic models (i.e., bioeconomic modelling), establishing a dominating management paradigm on how to measure and address the challenge of overfishing that has long been the main focus of ‘sustainable’ fisheries management. The hitherto most widespread tool, Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), was developed in the 1930s with the help of mathematical models in population ecology creating a practical and comprehensible model for measuring and management purposes

(Larkin 1977; Gordon 1954; Schaefer 1957). Today, MSY is ‘the most well-known acronym in fisheries science’ (Tsikliras and Froese 2018:1) utilized widely in fisheries management. MSY, put simply, is, a calculation of the largest amount of fish humans can take out of the water that allows the fish population to sustain itself (Tsikliras and Froese 2018). Or as Larkin (1977, 1) said it:

The dogma was this: any species each year produces a harvestable surplus, and if you take that much, and no more, you can go on getting it forever and ever (Amen). You only need to have as much effort as is necessary to catch this magic amount, so to use more is wasteful of effort; to use less is wasteful of food.

Although his prediction for the end of MSY did not materialize, Larkin’s *An Epitaph to the Concept of Maximum Sustained Yield* (1977) traced the emergence of management via Maximum Economic Yield (defined as Optimum Yield in the piece). Previously, regulation of fisheries centered on temporal, spatial, and technological controls of when, where, how, and what to fish. The interest in *who* fished or *how many* persons fished, was absent until the concept of limited entry emerged. To maximize the potential economic rent of the fishery (the amount of money a fisher would earn in excess of the amount of money s/he would have had to pay to go fishing), Gordon (1954) and Schaefer (1957) proposed management at Maximum Economic Yield (MEY) and to achieve this goal encouraged limitations on the (human) effort in the fishery. Limited entry, or the condition where the number of operators in a fishery are capped, materialized out of interest in proscribing those without an access privilege from fishing. Systems such as license limitation, tax incentives, and quota shares opened the set of tools available to managers to limit the number of participants in the fishery (Ginter and Rettig 1978).

License limitations proved an imprecise mechanism to manage the genuine level of effort in the fishery, rather than the number of boats on the water, due to ‘capital

stuffing' or 'effort creep', where fishers expand effort capacity by increasing technical aspects or physical means of fishing such as vessel size, horsepower, etc. (Copes 1986). In turn, fisheries economists advocated catch share programs where segments of the fishing fleet are assigned a portion of the total allowable catch (TAC) and in most instances are allowed to trade these shares (Macinko and Bromley 2002).

Tools such as MSY and concerns over the overexploitation of fishing resources have not been limited to governmental organizations. Trying to address insufficient state-led management, while trying out other ways of getting fishers to comply with defined 'sustainable practices,' in the past decades NGOs have introduced so-called ecolabelling schemes for capture fisheries. These schemes are *de jure* voluntary and define a specific set of criteria that fisheries have to adhere to and be certified as practicing in order to label their fish. NGO-led ecolabelling schemes are generally built on the idea of certifying 'sustainable' products, mobilizing consumers and retail chains to buy these products, thereby incentivizing producers (in this context fishers or fishing companies) to adopt practices deemed 'sustainable' to become certified (Eden 2011). Thus, ecolabelling essentially is supposed to codify a set of sustainable practices. Furthermore, ecolabels build on the principles of limited entry, license limitation, and catch shares by drawing a border on who is a sustainable fisher and who is not. The incentive of price premiums for fishers is directly connected to profit seeking, which became the almighty management ethos in the transformation of MSY to MEY.

While the focus of ecolabelling schemes in capture fisheries, and fisheries management in general, is not solely on securing MSY, this tends to be the foundation of the understanding of what constitutes 'sustainable fishing'. Other ecological aspects such as bycatch, the effect of fishing gear on marine habitats and ecosystems are also commonly addressed in the large-scale, international ecolabelling fisheries schemes



such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Sociocultural sustainability aspects of capture fisheries, however, are often missing (Teh et al. 2019), and international ecolabelling schemes are continually critiqued for creating monopoly-like situations and for being inaccessible for less-resourceful fisheries especially small-scale fisheries in the Global South (Hadjimichael and Hegland 2015; Stoll et al. 2019; Wakamatsu and Wakamatsu 2017). In addition, recent research on the most widespread fisheries ecolabelling scheme, MSC, has put focus on the influence of the industry on assessments bodies (in the certification processes), also criticizing assessment methods and logics (especially on benthic impacts of fishing gear) (Long and Jones 2020).

### **3. What care, responsibility, and subjectivities mean for stewardship and fisheries management**

Historically, stewardship has been defined as a person's responsibility over another person's property, understood as taking care of something for someone else (Worrell and Appleby 1999). In environmental management literature the concept has been expanded to include stakeholders that have, or take, responsibility for public natural resources, for example. The caring for, or responsibility of, is in this context often not only focused on the actual resource, but broadened to include the consideration of other species, the needs and wellbeing of humans and of future generations (of humans and non-humans) (Medeiros, Serafini and McConney 2014; Worrell and Appleby 1999). Some have focused on environmental stewardship as a general focus of international and national management and NGOs (Gray and Hatchard 2007), or of a variety of stakeholders as potential stewards (Worrell and Appleby 1999; Bennett et al. 2018), while others have focused on how local actors, for instance fishers, have the potential of becoming stewards (Medeiros, Serafini and McConney 2014).

In this paper, we are primarily interested in what is termed local environmental stewardship defined by Bennett et al. as ‘Actions taken by individuals, groups or networks of actors, with various motivations and levels of capacity, to protect, care for or responsibly use the environment in pursuit of environmental and/or social outcomes in diverse social-ecological contexts’ (2018, 599). This includes how local actors or communities care for the environment upon which their livelihoods depend, how they try to preserve this environment or manage their use of it. A theme that is increasingly recognized and supported in the context of small-scale fishing through for instance, on a more local level, community supported fisheries programs, but also internationally through for instance the United Nations Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (Bennett et al. 2018; FAO 2015).

Local environmental stewardship actions can occur informally or formally at different institutional levels and scales as part of decision-making processes or practices addressing environmental issues (Bennett et al. 2018). Examples in fisheries in the Global North might be fishers agreeing on not fishing in certain areas or during specific seasons, agreeing on employing selective fishing gear, etc. Research on such initiatives often focuses on how stewardship actions can be promoted or designed to be effective, what can undermine such initiatives, and how other actors, for instance authorities and NGOs, can support and strengthen local environmental stewardship. Fisheries management approaches influence the possibilities for local environmental stewardship in several ways, and we are inspired by Nightingale’s (2013) approach to understanding the relational emergence of subjects and emotions in fisheries relevant to fishers’ approaches to fishing regulations.

In fisheries management, fishers are often both explicitly and indirectly depicted as self-interested exploiters of the resource, and while such characteristics are

sometimes reproduced through fishers' engagement with management, there are many examples of fisher-led initiatives (both contemporary and historic) to protect and sustain fishing resources and ecosystems (Nightingale 2013, 2623; Medeiros, Serafini and McConney 2014). Nightingale argues that fishers' intimate attachments to their communities, the sea, and fishing itself are relationally produced. Different relations and contexts mean that fishers can come to embody conflicting behaviors that:

Show how fishing subjectivities are highly political and produce emotional and practical responses that have real consequences for how fisheries management plays out. Attending to the way in which subjectivities position fishers differently in relation to their resources and fisheries policies is therefore vital for successful management (2013, 2362).

The concept of subjectivities here is based on a Foucauldian understanding of subjects, the inherent power relations and the discursive processes around subject-making, but Nightingale employs a 'performative' conceptualization of subjectivities in order to understand how 'collective' subjects emerge relationally and are embodied by fishers in specific contexts (Nightingale 2013, 2366). This approach is based on an understanding of emotions as something that are produced in interactions, such as for instance through fishers' practices at sea, the embodied interactions with both other fishers, members of fishing communities, managers, and with the nonhuman world, the fish and fishing grounds (Nightingale 2013).

The ways in which fishers care and assume responsibility for the environment through their daily practices are not necessarily recognized in fisheries management (Ross 2021). The 'care' approach to fisheries sustainability is markedly different from the conservation and 'sustainability' focus of fisheries management. While fisheries management authorities often recognize the differences between fishing sectors, regulatory tools of fisheries management are generally based on the idea of the rational,

profit-seeking fisher: ‘In contrast to the fisheries subjectivities that emerge out of the daily practices of fishing, fisheries policy is predicated upon the ‘rational’, self-interested individual who must be regulated to prevent overfishing...’ (Nightingale 2013, 2372). This creates tensions between fisheries management and fishers that do not accept the picture of themselves as exploiters of the resource and therefore are not motivated to comply with regulations. Also, the overarching focus on MSY through TACs and catch shares set for large sea areas, contrasts with fishers’ local experience, knowledge and attachments to fishing grounds (Nightingale 2013; Ross 2015). Fishing regulations increasingly demand a form of reskilling from fishers that conflicts with local perceptions of being a skilled fisher; for instance, the digitalization of logbooks that adds to fishers’ feeling of a lack of trust between management and industry (Ross 2015). These tensions, as we will see later, matter for fishers’ environmental stewardship and engagement with fisheries management. As stated by Nightingale (2013, 2372): ‘Fisheries regulation schemes only work if fishers are committed to upholding them; otherwise, it is too easy to violate quotas’.

A feminist ethic of care (Gilligan 1982; Askins and Blazek 2017) brings a perspective that affirms the physical and emotional activities of caring, nurturing, and maintaining relationships, especially those through everyday interactions. The scholars who put forward the concept of care (e.g. Tronto 1993; McDowell 1999; Lawson 2007; Gilligan 1982) looked to upend the dominant moral framework of the Global North with its prevalent features of a rights-based (law, rights and justice) system, which placed higher value in the public versus private domain. Translating this critique to fisheries, we can recognize that fishers’ everyday activities of caregiving (or stewardship) are viewed as private and thus undervalued or overlooked in the dominant management systems (Ross 2021). Ethics of care is also a critique of the pervasiveness of market-

based policy interventions and the emphasis on ultimate individual responsibility (Lawson 2007). Care acknowledges interdependence and relationships and rejects the primacy of competition, efficiency, and ‘a ‘right’ price for everything’ (Lawson 2007, 3). The work of feminist geographer Gibson-Graham (2005) use care to unravel constructions of the dominant economic paradigms and uncover alternatives to organizing ownership and economies through collective practices. Tronto (1993) operationalizes care with her four dimensions: caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving. Ross (2021) works with these four dimensions in her work on fisheries management and notes:

In fisheries management, the policymakers ‘take care of’ the fish stocks by setting rules and regulations for the fishing industry, but it is the fishermen who do the ‘care-giving’ by making decisions out at sea every day about which fish to leave and which to catch. This disconnect within the caring process is exacerbated by different people having their own ideas about what ‘caring about’, ‘taking care of’ or ‘care-giving’ means, and different degrees to which they actually do the caring. Here the concept of care is not static, or universal, but particular, and the meaning of care differs between people and contexts.

Together, these notions of care, local environmental stewardship and the feminist reappraisal of dominant economic, social, and political conventions give a vocabulary and framework to investigate the case of Living Sea, its critique of MSY-centered fisheries management, and its attempt to establish a label centered on how fishing was undertaken. Building on the emic concept of *skånsom*, and based on care literature, we understand care in this context as ways of maintaining livelihoods and the environment that these livelihoods depend on.

#### **4. Methodology**

The following analysis is based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document studies conducted in the period of February 2019 to March 2020.

Document analysis was based on various texts, including meeting notes, minutes, and reports from the work of Living Sea on their vision, strategy, and their labelling idea, and from the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark on the current state-led labelling scheme. Participant observation methods supplemented the document analysis, including observations at informal meetings and a general assembly at the National Organization for Low Impact, Coastal Fishing, *Forening for skånsomt kystfiskeri*. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight different stakeholders involved with the labelling processes, including founders of Living Sea (further details in Table 1). One of the interviews was a focus group interview with three marine biologists, who authored a report on sustainability and ‘*miljøskånsomhed*’ in Danish fisheries. All interviewed informants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. We have organized, coded and analyzed the documents, field notes, and transcripts of interviews using NVivo 12 software. The interviews were conducted in Danish and thus quotations are translated into English by the lead author.

Table 1. Summary of data sources by data collection method, date and type.

**[Table 1 here]**

#### **5. Living Sea and the notion of taking back responsibility and care giving**

In the early 1990s, when Living Sea was established, the fisheries management regime in Denmark and the European Common Fishery Policy had started to employ Total Allowable Catches (TAC) as means to address overfishing by limiting catches for target species along with other more technical measures, such as closed areas. In the EU,

political actors continually negotiate and distribute these TACs among member states as national fishing quota shares for the primary target species (Urquhart et al. 2011). In turn, each member state sets national policy on how to enable fishing access and adhere to its EU-allocated TAC (Hegland and Raakjær 2020). Contemporary to this time, in the non-governmental sector, discussions of how to implement ecolabelling schemes for capture fisheries as a way of addressing sustainability were gaining traction.

While Living Sea acknowledged the importance of tools such as TACs, they did not believe that a primary focus on MSY could ensure healthy environmental conditions in the oceans, nor secure the livelihoods of small-scale fishers dependent on the fishing resources (LH 1995). Furthermore, they opposed the emerging ideas of establishing private-led, voluntary ecolabelling schemes with the aim of reaching MSY as this ‘is not something the fisher can ever take responsibility for’ (Johan, October 28, 2019). They felt that having fishers live up to an already defined set of criteria took away the responsibility, as well as the respect for and knowledge about the resource and ecosystem, from fishers and outsourced responsibility to bioeconomic modelling, or scientization more broadly, something which neither consumers nor fishers could directly influence.

Small-scale fishers joining Living Sea disagreed with the national fishing organization, Denmark’s Fisheries Association (*Danmarks Fiskeriforening PO*). A founder of Living Sea, explained that at the time Denmark’s Fisheries Association took the stance that as long as the fishers fished according to the set TAC, they were fishing sustainably:

The position of the national fishing organization was that the fishers just had to live up to the formal rules and regulations, then it was enough. But we could see that it wasn’t, and we didn’t need an education to see that it was simply not true, so we established Living Sea to discuss these issues (Johan, October 28, 2019).

In this way, MSY-based management in its connection to TACs incited resistance and the formation of Living Sea.

Members of Living Sea thus advocated for fishing practices that ‘maintain the fishers’ accountability and responsibility’ (Lasse, April 21, 2019) and at its core that fishers had to take (environmental) responsibility for their own fishing in collaboration with others (Lassen 1997). Behind this call for responsibility and focus on alternative measures to TACs was the issue of compliance. Members of Living Sea were closely related to the industry and knew how discarding (less valuable/wrong sized etc.) fish overboard was easy to practice yet hard for authorities to measure – especially in situations where regulations made it impossible for fishers to sustain themselves if they were to actually fish legally (Andersen 1996). Today, the compliance issue remains one of the organization’s criticisms of international, large-scale ecolabelling schemes:

The problem with MSC is that it takes the responsibility of how to fish away from the industry, away from the people who actually fish, by saying now we have made this structure which is based on political and biological aspects and this [is all] you need to comply with. And then the fishers say, “sure, we will do that” which means they will be cheating of course when they are able to and they just continue to do as they used to because the only thing you can control is what you can see—and this is how it’s been the past 30-40 years (Johan, October 28, 2019).

Instead, enabling the users and consumers of the marine resources to take collective responsibility was key for Living Sea. Small-scale fishers were frustrated with the development in the fishing sector and the political focus on efficiency and investments on increasingly larger (but fewer) fishing vessels with increasingly larger bottom-dredging fishing gear (LH 1995). Living Sea’s strategy was to put pressure on Danish fisheries authorities, advocating a change in focus to enable fishers to take more responsibility for their fishing practices. They wanted to introduce an eco-label



characterized as an alliance between environmentally responsible fishers and consumers with criteria focused exclusively on aspects fishers found meaningful and could take responsibility for through their own fishing practices. After numerous discussions and a mobile campaign visiting the majority of Danish fishing harbors, they agreed on a comprehensive label standard in 2000. The agreed criteria focused on the fishing methods and practices with low impact on the seafloor, low bycatch of unwanted species, and low energy consumption per catch value (LH 2000). One of Living Sea founders described their eco-label:

It was an experimental scheme trying to get more responsibility into the fishing—moving the responsibility from the marine biologist down to the fishers, because we believe that fishers are better at taking this responsibility, but of course they cannot do this without some sort of framework (Johan, October 28, 2019).

Living Sea primarily collaborated with small-scale fishers, which in the Danish context meant those fishing in inshore or coastal waters, often making daytrips, and fishing out of vessels of under 17 meters. Small-scale fishers, especially those employing so-called ‘low impact’ fishing gear, relying on local fishing grounds and tacit knowledge of their adjacent waters, represented those most vulnerable in fisheries management at the time. While on the other hand, they represented the ones most likely to take responsibility because of their independent and self-employed characteristics. These fishers were also the ones that consumers and the public could meet and speak with while visiting the harbor. Living Sea envisioned, what they termed, the ‘future of fishing’, as a fishing sector characterized by diversity in vessel sizes, employing environmentally friendly fishing gear, grounded in local communities, and focused on quality of the catch instead of efficiency or quantity. Summarizing why there was a need for a ‘future of fishing’ in socio-cultural terms, one of the founders explained in a seminar in 1996:

While authorities on a national, as well as an international, level idealized a brutal, rational and efficient profit-seeking utilization of marine resource . . . they decided that the fishers could no longer administer the use of the resources—the fisher became a potential thief, and a large bureaucratic quota control system was enforced. Unfortunate concepts of the enemy were created . . . But the fishing communities lost their support base. Where fishers before felt that they belonged in a respected sector, they now feel mistrusted. . . Rarely—in my opinion—did the public understand the [fishers’] pain which was not only because of lost income but was also a sorrow over a life mode that apparently was [deemed] worthless (Andersen 1996).

Unlike other eco-labels which usually predicate industry buy-in via economic incentives (e.g. price premiums), Living Sea saw the label as part of a larger strategy to incite debate on the future of the fishing sector in order to push Danish authorities to shift their management focus. Arguing that with its primary focus on fishing quotas, fisheries management was preoccupied with management of natural resources while overlooking management of the actual fisheries, specifically the management of fishing practices. As a founder explained: ‘We really wanted to make sure that we did not just create a label that made consumers feel they had a clean conscience and that saved a few fishers’ (Johan, October 28, 2019). Living Sea’s label standard did not include any criteria based on MSY which they believed should be the minimum of public fisheries management. As MSY was not addressed, Living Sea did not want to use the concept ‘sustainability’ in the name or description of the label. They felt that sustainability was too closely linked with ‘biological sustainability’ primarily in the sense of MSY. Instead they needed a concept that could capture their focus on environmental, as well as sociocultural aspects of fishing and their emphasis on collective responsibility.

Initially, they used the term, ‘organic fishing’ in their eco-label, emphasizing that it was not the product, the wild fish, that was to be certified organic, but the fishing

practices. Organic fishing, however, turned out to be too difficult to explain. It received strong criticism, not only from the large-scale fishing sector not involved in the label, but also from the Danish organic movement, wherefrom prominent people advised Living Sea to find a concept that did not negate the conventional but rather offered an independent alternative in order to be understood by a wider constituency. Through internal discussions they decided to employ the emic concept ‘*skånsomt*’ and landed on ‘*Naturskånsomt Fiskeri*’, a concept which we analyze, especially in Living Sea’s understanding of its alternative to ‘sustainability’.

### **5.1 Caring**

The Danish word *skånsomt* is not easily translated into English—a challenge that Living Sea themselves encountered in their collaboration with small-scale fishers outside of Denmark. The dictionary suggests translations ‘gentle’ and ‘careful’ (Ordbogen n.d.), and *naturskånsomt* loosely translates to environmentally friendly, or perhaps environmentally conscious. However, we argue that ‘care’ represents a very important element embedded in the Danish word *skånsomt* and as stated in the introduction, the discursive power of care—especially in contrast to (sustainable) yield—opens up our thinking on the modern, contemporary fisheries management paradigm. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to call *skånsomt fiskeri*, ‘Fishing with Care’. Today, there is a tendency to translate *skånsom* fishing to ‘low impact fishing’, for instance as used by the new national organization for *skånsomt*, coastal fishing. Nonetheless, we will now explore what Fishing with Care was, at least initially, especially how the concept included sociocultural aspects.

In Living Sea’s call for responsibility and its questioning of compliance, we can recognize the subjectivities created through NGO-led labelling schemes. In the words of Nightingale (2013, 2367): ‘In a fisheries context, this means that when fishers join

‘responsible fishermen’ schemes, they are simultaneously (re)subjected as exploiters of the sea—and it means that they may not always follow the practices of the scheme’. In other words, by joining a scheme like MSC, fishers tacitly affirm the underlying assumption that they are irresponsible exploiters. Living Sea sought to counteract this by making space for the empowered, responsible, and caring fisher subject, which they thought was compromised by private labelling schemes and the preoccupation on MSY. Living Sea cited their frustrations with the depiction of fishers as exploiters of the resource. At the same time, they reproduced the image of the profit-seeking fisher in their descriptions of the development in the fishing sector and the political focus on efficiency. With the ‘future of fishing’, they tried to communicate another, more caring type of fisher. They envisioned a fishery built on a livelihood that was almost lost, but could be revived through community-support, empowerment and a change in management focus.

Their idea of taking back responsibility was closely connected to caring and the concept of Fishing with Care. It was not just fishers who needed to care; it was also consumers and citizens (Living Sea 1997b). As stated in the notes to their labelling criteria document: ‘. . . An organic [later reconceptualized as *skånsom*] fisher weighs an honest relationship to the consumers highly and instead [of keeping information about environmental issues secret] focuses on an alliance between fisher and consumer’ (Living Sea 2000b). Through this collective action, Living Sea envisioned a sort of fellowship founded on care; the idea was to make authorities care too. The key thing about caring, in this context, is that it was meant to empower fishers and enable and unite the responsibility of fishers and consumers. The use of the concept of care instead of ‘sustainability’ helped focus the attention on the aspects of fishing that can be altered by fishers, instead of international quota recommendations and EU negotiations. On a

poster promoting the eco-label, Living Sea made the statement: ‘It’s about the way the fish are caught’ (Illustration 1). With this they wanted to communicate that it is not just about how many fish, you take out of the water (MSY) but about how you catch these fish.

**[Figure 1 here]**

Figure 1. Poster produced by Living Sea, text translating to ‘It’s about the way fish are caught’ and subtext stating ‘The environmental stamp “Living Sea” is your guarantee for Danish fish of the highest quality, caught in a way that does not wreck nature.’ Note the use of ‘naturskånsom’ in the bottom.

Not only was Fishing with Care defined by a set of perceived environmentally friendly principles, but it was a holistic approach to utilizing the marine resources while ensuring equity, caring for fishing communities and future generations of fishers (Andersen 2000). Fishing with Care implored fishers to be gentle towards (or have low impact on) marine ecosystems and their catch, but also to care about their colleagues by avoiding or rejecting fishing gear that took up excessive space and displaced other fishers. For example, the group discouraged the practice of putting out more nets than needed or could be realistically tended within a few days (Andersen 2000). As stated by Living Sea in one of their early statements:

The organic [later reconceptualized as *skånsomt*] fishing promotes fishing practices that maximize the fisher’s share of the value of the catch. In this way, it is a fundamental disassociation with capitalized investments that entail that only a smaller share of the value of the catch ends at the fisher level (LH 2000b).

Fishing with Care implied ethical considerations of the fish caught and a focus on ensuring the highest quality of the catch via an economic rationale and respect for the marine resources (LH 2000b). In addition, Living Sea was explicit about their sociocultural focus with close connection to environmental considerations:

The diversity of the fishing fleet is preserved both cost-effectively and environmentally in a coastal fishery for several reasons: The social aspect in the coastal [small-scale] fishing is very important. Fishing is still a culture, and coastal fishing shall therefore establish a fresh fish market, not in a protest against the industrial market—it does not serve this market—but as an independent market that offers: high-quality fresh fish; the preservation of the coastal fishing and thereby also the small harbors and their characteristics; the many workplaces in the catch and distributions sectors; the preservation and development of a thousand year old, culturally embedded profession (Christensen 1996, 85).

While the conceptualization of Fishing with Care influenced the debate and understanding of namely small-scale fisheries in Denmark beyond Living Sea, *skånsom*'s relationship with ideas about sustainability, especially its exclusion of MSY, continues to be debated and challenged. For several reasons—partly due to the resistance from other segments of the Danish fishing sector and the political climate at the time—Living Sea's labelling scheme never came to fruition. However, as we will briefly explore, their concept of Fishing with Care laid the foundation for Danish fisheries politics concerning small-scale fishers and a subsequent, tangentially related yet distinct, new ecolabelling scheme.

### ***5.2 Scientization, simplifications and the on-going negotiations of sustainability***

Since the formation of Living Sea in the 1990s, Danish fisheries management have gone through several transformations—the most profound being a shift to a transferable catch share system of tradable vessel quota shares between 2005 to 2007 (Hegland and Raakjær 2008; Høst 2015; Autzen and Winter 2020). Tradable catch shares were intended to create a flexible, sustainable management regime, which through capitalization of natural resources would enable quota holders to buy and sell quotas from each other, engage investors and thus realize increased profitability in the sector.

While it has increased profitability for quota owners, this privatized quota share system has challenged the livelihoods of especially small-scale, self-employed fishers making the debate about management of especially small-scale fisheries salient as the quota system has disproportionately affected this segment (Høst 2015; Ounanian 2016).

Discussions of Fishing with Care (*skånsomt fiskeri*), or more accurately in this instance, low impact coastal fishing, have been contested, employed, and debated by different actors in Danish fisheries and its related political system since the formation of Living Sea. In 2013, these discussions culminated in a ministry-led working group on small-scale fishing in Denmark. Living Sea was a part of the working group and able to influence the debate. To qualify the discussions about environmentally careful (*skånsom*) fishing practices in the working group, the ministry ordered an independent research report about sustainability in the Danish fishing (Gislason et al. 2014). The report (Gislason et al. 2014) compares different fishing gear in relation to different environmental aspects, showing the impact level of the different gear types, or the ‘*skånsomheds* level’ as one of the authors called it (marine biologist, November 25, 2019). In the report, the authors employ the concept *miljøskånsomhed*, translating to ‘environmentally friendly or low impact’, as a way of addressing the immediate observable, short-term ecological effects of fishing (marine biologists, interview, November 25, 2019; Gislason et al. 2014). In an interview, the report’s authors explained that they needed an additional concept in the report to stand alongside ‘sustainability’ and thus the Danish word for sustainable, *bæredygtig*, appears as a distinct term. The authors clarified that sustainability would have to include long-term effects on, for instance fish populations through for instance stock assessments. Since the report was to focus on the impact of different fishing gears, they coined the concept

of environmental *skånsomhed*. Thus, through their government-solicited work, these scientists codified the distinction of *skånsom* from sustainable.

Following this scientization process of *skånsom* fishing, the ministry suggested a simple distinction between *skånsom* (low-impact) fishing gear, and other fishing gear (MFLF 2013). The revision was intended to reward small-scale fishers with the defined *skånsomme* gear types in relation to the quota share system, but quickly came to matter more widely as a group of Danish small-scale fishers decided to establish the only alternative to the national fishing organization for demersal fisheries at the time; *Forening for skånsom kystfiskeri*, the Association for Low Impact, Coastal Fishing. The new fishing organization adopted the regulatory definition for *skånsom* fishing (based on fishing gear types) and pushed for more initiatives incentivizing these types of fishing gear—among others a labelling scheme like the one Living Sea tried out a decade earlier. In 2017, formal, ministry-led work on this new state-led ecolabelling scheme began with the initial premise that it was to focus on the defined *skånsomme* (low-impact) gear types and be limited to the coastal fishing sector underlining the sociocultural aspects of *skånsom*.

In late-fall 2019 the ministry sent the first draft act about the new labelling scheme for fish caught by small scale fishers with low-impact (*skånsomme*) fishing gear out for hearing. Although the concept of ‘sustainability’ was not mentioned anywhere in the act, it led the Danish office of World Wildlife Fund together with other environmental organizations to draft a collective letter to the fisheries spokesmen for all parties in the Danish parliament stressing how they could not accept an ecolabelling scheme that does not include stock assessments and incorporate MSY (Lindeborgh et al. 2019). As a backdrop, the national Association for Low Impact, Coastal Fishing invited the environmental organizations to an informal meeting discussing the matters.



Witnessing this process, it became clear that the discourse of sustainable fishing and the idea of ecolabelling in fisheries are inextricably linked with MSY. The environmental NGO letter initiated a new process internally in the responsible ministry, which led the ministry to amend the label and propose including a form of stock assessment. This means that a large proportion of fish landed by Danish low impact, small-scale fishers cannot be certified—either because there are no stock assessments of these target species or because they are not (due to decisions taken at EU level) managed according to MSY. Fundamentally this poses a challenge for these fishers who are less mobile, rely on local fishing grounds and cannot easily change target species. Thus, the inclusion of MSY in the new labelling scheme means that a part of the small-scale, low-impact fishing sector cannot become certified. Ultimately, this negatively impacts the usefulness of the scheme for small-scale fishers, the volume of certified fish as well as the scheme's ability to increase and encourage low impact fishing.

## **6. Discussion: unpacking care and yield thinking in fisheries**

*M.S.Y.*

*1930s-1970s*

*Here lies the concept, MSY.*

*It advocated yields too high,*

*And didn't spell out how to slice the pie.*

*We bury it with the best of wishes,*

*Especially on behalf of fishes.*

*We don't know yet what will take its place,*

*But hope it's as good for the human race.*

*R.I.P.*

(Larkin 1977, 10)

With the evidence compiled from this case of Denmark's efforts at an eco-label for small-scale fisheries and Living Sea's intention to break with the dominant paradigm but ultimately its failure to see this to fruition, we can still ponder the efficacy of Larkin's epitaph. Living Sea's main intention of introducing *skånsom* as a focus of fisheries management and in their labelling scheme was to enable fishers to take collective responsibility through their everyday practices of fishing (input)—to meaningfully do the 'care-giving' in the words of Tronto (1993) and Ross (2021) and have this recognized politically and publicly. As evidenced in current discussions of the new state-led labelling scheme, however, 'sustainability' in fisheries is so closely linked to MSY that it cannot be excluded in attempts of addressing environmental issues.

Regulating fisheries based on MSY is one of the ways, authorities, but also NGOs through private-led labelling schemes, 'take care of' fish stocks (Ross 2021). As argued by Ross (2021), the discrepancy between policymakers defining how to 'take care of' and fishers doing the actual everyday 'care-giving' at sea—and having different ideas about how to best care for the environment—easily leads to distrust. In addition, the general focus on MSY through catch share systems and consequently a definitive connection to profit maximization has contributed to the loss of livelihoods and fishing communities reflected by the dissatisfaction with fisheries management voiced by Living Sea (Andersen 1996). Though seemingly innocuous to its proponents, small-scale fishers and other supporters of Living Sea recognized that MSY oversimplified fisheries management by setting biological and then by consequence economic sustainability as its primary goal.

Since the formation of Living Sea in the early 1990s, fisheries management and marine conservation in the EU have broadened. Ecosystem-based management is

gaining traction, and as argued by Hay (2012) this could be what Larkin was looking for in replacement of MSY. In the EU policy context, ecosystem-based management is defined as: ‘an integrated approach to management that considers the entire ecosystem including humans’ (EEA 2015, 20). Ecosystem-based management is seen as a solution to failed EU management systems that have separately targeted individual sectors or species:

Up until now, environmental policies have mostly focused on improving the environmental efficiency of individual components of society and/or nature . . . By and large, such approaches have not managed to reverse the trend of negative environmental impacts . . . This has led to a realization among policymakers and public authorities that there is a very complex relationship between human activities and environmental problems . . . Successful solutions to these challenges require a more holistic, integrated and systemic approach (EEA 2015, 15).

However, TACs continue to be the foundation of EU fisheries management, and ecosystem-based management is still under implementation through different directives (Rouillard et al. 2017). Whether this acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans, and the focus on a holistic approach will allow for local perspectives is yet to be seen.

Fisheries regulations, also in the form of voluntary labelling schemes, can only have the desired impact if fishers comply. It is therefore essential that fishers respect the management regimes that they are governed by (Nightingale 2013; Hauck and Gezelius 2011). Placing the focus on aspects that fishers find meaningful and can take responsibility for collectively increases the likelihood for respect for regulations and makes space for local environmental stewardship. This demands fisheries management regimes to be sensitive towards the kind of fisher subject(s) produced in policies as well as towards local perceptions of what constitutes sustainable fishing practices. ‘Taking

care of' and 'care-giving' is premised on a sense of agency and responsibility (Ross 2021; Tronto 1993) which needs to be preserved in fisheries management and private-led management initiatives (e.g., ecolabelling) for it to function locally. Recognizing the care perspective is a first step in this direction.

A care perspective asserts the relevance of interdependence, connectivity, and impact in *how* fishing activities are carried out, opening up the conversation and providing input measures/tools for management. Sustainability, with its genesis in the Brundtland Report, was founded on the premise of providing for future generations, a notion rooted in this understanding of care. The idea that present societies must provide for future generations by taking no more than the sustainable yield, is highlighted in the concept of *skånsom*; it also requires determinations of practices that ensure sustained benefits. Although the market-based roots of eco-labels may seem incongruous with a feminist ethics of care, the case of Living Sea highlights how labels are intended to encourage care from more than managers, such as fishers and consumers. The critique of the Y of MSY is that the fishers lose a responsibility to act in the interest of their fellow fishers and the environment and in MSY's demonstrated attachment to profit-seeking as the only means to manage a collective resource.

## **7. Conclusion**

Weaving together literatures on the evolution of MSY, environmental stewardship, and an ethics of care, we have analyzed the deliberate employment of the Danish word *skånsom* in the development of two fisheries ecolabelling schemes. The direct translation of *skånsom* to 'gentle, careful, or with care', enabled us to question the dominance of the yield mindset in fisheries management and its implications for small-scale fishers. The paper drew evidence from interviews and documents related to Living Sea, a Danish NGO which sought to establish a fisheries label in the 1990s as resistance

to the use of MSY and TACs as the singular approach to fisheries management. Additionally, participant observation of the contemporary establishment of a state-sponsored fisheries eco-label in Denmark demonstrated the roots in this earlier attempt while also affirming key fisheries management actors' reluctance to do away with MSY. As it stands now, the new Danish state-sponsored eco-label precludes small-scale fishers—which it intended to help—due to the particularities of stock assessment for certain fisheries targeted by these fishers and the insistence that the label use MSY as a central criterion.

The paper also demonstrates how reflection on terms used in other languages than English can help us recognize differences in meanings and protest unchecked adoption of gendered norms. *Skånsom* has plural meanings and is a Danish word that has been helpful to many different actors. Whether or not it has been coopted by some versus others is difficult to conclude. Future discursive analysis could also unpack masculine and feminine connotations of various management terms (e.g., yield versus care) and whether preferred terms and measures reflect society's preoccupation with quantifiable over qualitative parameters and continue to affirm male dominance. The feminist perspective gives means to question what is accepted as 'truth' in fisheries management and what alternatives might look like.

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