



Sweden's good fishers: Skills and values in a transforming social-ecological field

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ABSTRACT: In this article we build on the “good farmer” literature to explore how Swedish coastal fishers represented the “good fisher” in the context of transformations in the social-ecological field of commercial fishing. Anthropological and other social science research on the “good farmer,” “good fisher,” “good crofter” and related life-modes, works against reductionist models of farmers, fishers, and other livelihood actors as driven by profit or economic need. When such models inform environmental policy, management, and activism, they often lead to unintended and unfortunate consequences. Here, drawing on the Bourdieusian “good farmer” tradition, we use interviews and ethnographic materials to investigate what makes the “good fisher” in Swedish coastal fishing, paying particular attention to how fishers have responded to social and ecological changes by reskilling and developing a new practical sense for their profession. Our interlocutors experienced the transformations in Swedish coastal fishing as significantly modifying the skilled performance of fishing, yet the moral values that undergirded their notions of the “good fisher” closely resemble those described in the social science literature on coastal fishers. We argue that these stable moral values relate to the stakes and interests which animate commercial fishing as a social-ecological field, which non-fishers often misunderstand or neglect. Our study challenges reductionist models of fishers and other livelihood actors, a task that many scholars regard as crucial for making progress toward sustainable food, while reworking Bourdieusian theory deployed in “good farmer” research to include not only social but also ecological dimensions.

Keywords: Coastal fisheries; good farmer; sustainability; Bourdieu; environmental management; economic rationality

Introduction

“A good fisher? Um, good...well, we, the ones who are left, we are the good fishers,” said Lars, a 35-year-old coastal fisher in the southern Baltic Sea, when we asked him what characterises a good fisher. He added:

It's us, the ones who are left. We are bloody good, because we've survived despite all the attacks we've faced! And have become, I mean – the legs that we stand on have been chopped off. Salmon fishing has disappeared [because of Swedish regulatory prohibitions], the cod fishery is closed [because of an EU moratorium] – one leg after another has been chopped off,

but we've anyway refused to give up. We've found new possibilities. I can tell you: the good fisher is the one who can adapt to whatever circumstances he's confronted with! And looks ahead and is creative. Innovative, that's a good word. That you take on new stuff, like us... So yeah, to be good, it isn't about how much fish you catch, it isn't volume or how much money you have in the bank. It's the feel you have for what you do, and how you do it.

While Lars (a pseudonym, as are the other fishers' names) responded to our question with his personal views, the 20 other Swedish coastal fishers to whom we, in 2020, posed the question, 'what characterises a good fisher?' shared his opinion. In some respects, this pattern is surprising. The fishers operated all along the 13,567-kilometre Swedish coast, in diverging marine environments such as the Bay of Bothnia, the southern Baltic Sea, the Swedish-Danish Sound, and western (Atlantic) waters. They targeted a range of species, including cod (*Gadus morhua*), herring (*Clupea harengus*), northern shrimp (*Pandalus borealis*), langoustine (*Nephrops norvegicus*), lobster (*Homarus gammarus*), whitefish (*Coregonus lavaretus*), vendace (*Coregonus albula*), pike (*Esox lucius*), perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), and flounder (*Platichthys flesus*). Some used passive fishing gears (hook and line, traps, gillnets) while others operated trawlers, and some used a combination of the two. They worked on boats ranging in size from 6 to 18 metres, alone or with one or two others. Yet despite these and other differences, including where they landed, to whom they sold, and whether they owned fishing quota, all the participants in this study unanimously agreed that the good fisher was first and foremost the one who tenaciously and adaptively kept fishing despite obstacles.

In Sweden, as elsewhere around the globe, coastal fishers regularly confront adverse circumstances inherent to the fishing profession, such as bad weather, rough seas, engine trouble, sickness, natural fish stock fluctuations, and competition from or damage inflicted by marine wildlife. Surmounting such problems is part of fishing. Yet for our interlocutors, as the quotation from Lars suggests, the good fisher was the one who survived far more significant impediments: poorly designed fisheries regulations, declining numbers of coastal fishers, negative public opinion, and economic outcomes that "don't make you rich," as Göran, who fished langoustine on the west coast, dryly put it. The good fisher developed skills to adapt to these hindrances and kept fishing. As we heard repeatedly, the good fisher was "we who remain" (*vi som är kvar*), "we who survive" (*vi som överlever*).

Anthropological and other social science research on the "good farmer," "good fisher," "good crofter" and related life-modes, responds to reductionist models of farmers, fishers, and other livelihood actors as driven primarily by profit or economic need (see Burton et al. 2021: 1-18; cf. Højrup 1983). Efforts to challenge such understandings have a long history. Already in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Bronislaw Malinowski argued that a Trobriand Islander was "not guided primarily by the desire to satisfy his wants" but instead "wants, if he is a *man*, to achieve social distinction as a *good gardener* and a good worker in general" (1922 [2002]: 47, emphasis original). Yet while copious research shows that farming, fishing, and other economic activities are moral and cultural practices dynamically shaped by co-practitioners, material and environmental circumstances, and the socio-political regimes in which practitioners are located (e.g., Burton et al. 2021: 40-63; Carolan 2020; Cusworth 2020; Gustavsson et al. 2017; Højrup 1983; O'Keeffe 2018; Saunders 2016; Sutherland and Calo 2020), reductionist models of commercial fishers continue to dominate policy,

environmental activism, and the public imagination. In Sweden, where our study is based, official fisheries and food policies privilege profitability and competitiveness over other values (see Havs- och vattenmyndigheten and Jordbruksverket 2021; Löfven and Bucht 2017; see also Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021). The scientific research undergirding such policies is exclusively biological and economic (see, e.g., Waldo and Blomquist 2020; Havs- och vattenmyndigheten 2020). The Green Party, whose members proclaim that Swedish fisheries are facing “the collapse of fishing populations and ecosystems,” identifies stopping “predatory fishing” (*rovfiske*) as a political priority (e.g., Gardfjell, Falkhaven and Riise 2021; Miljöpartiet 2021). News stories reporting commercial fishers “cheating” – violating rules to make more money – appear regularly in Swedish media (e.g., Digréus 2018; Douglas 2020; Sverigesradio 2019; TT-Ritzau 2021). In short, while anthropologists and many other social scientists agree that fishers are not single-mindedly driven by profit or economic need, this conclusion’s impact on other audiences appears limited.

In this article we investigate Swedish coastal fishers’ understandings of what makes the “good fisher.” Our purpose is two-fold. First, we seek to challenge oversimplified models of fishers and other livelihood actors. Many scholars regard this task as crucial for making progress toward food sustainability (see, e.g., Andresen and Højrup 2008; Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021; Autzen and Ounanian 2021; Carolan 2020; Saunders 2016) – not least because environmental policy and management that treats fishers and farmers as self-interested profit-maximisers encourages them to behave in this way (see, e.g., Davis 1991; Nightingale 2013; O’Keeffe 2018). Second, we seek to contribute to reconceptualising the role that material and environmental factors play in shaping what makes the good livelihood actor in “good farmer” research (e.g., Burton et al. 2021: 130-152; Sutherland and Calo 2020). By reworking Bourdieusian “good farmer” theory to attend to how nonhuman agency shapes social practice, we join anthropologists and other scholars whose analyses reveal the liveliness and agency of the nonhuman world (see e.g., Callon 1986; Darnhofer 2020; Le Velly and Dufeu 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2010).

Conceptual framework

As mentioned earlier, we situate this study in the “good farmer” literature (e.g., Burton 2004; Burton et al. 2021; Carolan 2020; Cusworth 2020; O’Keeffe 2018; Riley 2016; Saunders 2016; Sutherland and Calo 2020). Studies of the “good farmer” first appeared during the 2000s but relate to a longer tradition in anthropology of challenging reductionist models of human behaviour (see also Burton et al. 2021: 1-18). The good farmer concept has been used to capture emic understandings of rural producers (e.g., Burton 2004; Cusworth 2020; Gustavsson et al. 2017; Sutherland and Calo 2020) and the implications of age and gender distinctions on farming (e.g., Burton et al. 2021: 106-129; Riley 2016). Scholars have also employed the good farmer concept to investigate sociocultural changes to skilled practice and moral values within the farming profession, sparked for example by organic and small-scale food movements, technological developments, and state policies (e.g., Burton et al. 2021: 40-63; Carolan 2020; O’Keeffe 2018; Saunders 2016). This research has crucial implications for food sustainability, as the moral values and skillsets that define good farming have social, economic, and environmental consequences throughout the food chain (see Carolan 2020; Cusworth 2020; Saunders 2016).

Most scholars using the good farmer concept adopt a Bourdieusian theoretical

framework, drawing on his concepts of field, capital, stakes and interests, rules of the game, and practical sense (Burton et al. 2021: 64-86). Bourdieu conceptualised a field as a “relatively autonomous world” within a highly differentiated society (1990: 73), a historically constituted area of activity with its own institutions and rules (ibid.: 87-88; cf. Højrup 1983). To function, a field depends on the existence of specific stakes and interests which “get people moving” or orient their action within the field (Bourdieu 1990: 88). Because Bourdieu thought actors could calculate how to optimise within a particular field, he chose the language of economy, capital, and interest to mark this calculus as “rational” (although not necessarily driven by economic profit-maximisation) and material in the sense of having physical consequences (ibid.: 92-93; 106-107). Bourdieu argued such calculations need not be intentional or strategic: he described the skilled actor in the field as akin to a fish in water (ibid.: 108). A given field could be understood as a “game” with rules or regularities for those who “play” (ibid.: 59-60). Experience gives players a “feel for the game” or “practical mastery of the logic” of a game that is “outside conscious control and discourse” (ibid.: 61). The “good player” is one whose practical sense enables him/her to innovate and improvise (ibid.: 64).

In this study, we modify Bourdieu’s theory in two respects. First, while many scholars have used notions of social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital to discuss the good farmer, typically because they are interested in conversion from, for example, cultural to economic domains (see, e.g., Cusworth 2020; Gustavsson et al. 2017), we avoid this terminology because it reinforces capitalism as the dominant economic system. Decoupled from any specific economic arrangement, as well as more useful for our purposes, are Bourdieu’s concepts of field, stakes and interests, rules of the game, and practical sense. Second, we expand Bourdieu’s concept of field to include not just the social – the focus of his theorising – but also the nonhuman. We reconceptualise the field as social-ecological to highlight the agentic qualities of the material world. This modification responds to new materialist scholarship in which researchers have argued that social scientific analyses must include nonhuman agency (see e.g., Callon 1986; Darnhofer 2020; Le Velly and Dufeu 2016). Recently, researchers deploying the good farmer concept have addressed this critique by combining Bourdieu’s concepts with Delanda’s assemblage theory (e.g., Sutherland and Calo 2020), or adding the concept of consubstantiality (e.g., Burton et al. 2021: 130-152). While these efforts direct attention to nonhuman agency, we opt to build directly on the analytic power of Bourdieu’s model for how fields work. Our notion of the social-ecological field evokes ecology’s emphasis on relationships and interactive processes, while gesturing toward social-ecological systems theory, which criticises reductionist models and argues for a paradigm shift in environmental research and governance (see Biggs et al. 2021; Berkes, Folke and Colding 1998).¹ Theorising commercial fishing as a social-ecological field allows us to include marine environments, fish/crustaceans, and changes to weather and water temperature caused by global warming as actants affecting the rules of the game. It also captures the socio-material hybridity of some of commercial fishing’s structuring elements, for example the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) or fisheries closures.

¹ While an in-depth exploration of social-ecological systems theory cannot be provided here, we highlight its insistence on the continuous interplay and feedbacks within and between social and ecological dimensions of complex systems that adapt to internal and external pressures (see Biggs et al. 2021; Berkes, Folke, and Colding 1998).

To date, research investigating the “good fisher” is limited to studies on North Wales (Gustavsson et al. 2017; Gustavsson and Riley 2018). However, ethnographic scholarship on fishing skills, which addresses what comprises good fishing and how fishing practices change in relation to policy, regulations, environmental shifts, and economic developments, is vast (e.g., Davis 1991; Dobeson 2019; Durrenberger and Pálsson 1986; Einarsson 2009; Pálsson 1994; Pálsson and Helgason 1998; Salmi 2005). In Europe, Icelandic fishing has received considerable anthropological attention, perhaps because of the sector’s historical and economic importance in Iceland’s national development and Iceland’s early adoption of a fisheries management tool (privately-owned fishing rights or ITQs) whose impact on coastal fishing communities has been hotly debated (see Carothers and Chambers 2012; Chambers, Einarsson and Karlsdóttir 2020). In comparison, Swedish coastal fishing is little studied, although scholarship is emerging (e.g., Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021; Björkvik et al. 2020; Gillette and Vesterberg 2022; Linke et al. 2022).

Background on Swedish fisheries

According to EU statistics, Sweden had 1,449 fishers and a fleet of 811 active fishing vessels in 2017 (STECF 2019: 437). As per the EU’s classification, this fleet is sub-divided into a large-scale fleet (vessels longer than 12 metres), a coastal or small-scale fleet (vessels less than 12 metres using passive fishing gears), and a distant fishing fleet (vessels over 24 metres operating outside the Swedish Exclusive Economic Zone). Scholars researching Swedish and other EU fisheries have criticised these definitions for misrepresenting the coastal fishing fleet (e.g., Björkvik et al. 2020; Pita, Pascual-Fernández and Bavinck 2020). While Sweden is governed by the EU classification system, which affects funding opportunities and some regulations related to vessels (see Björkvik et al. 2020: 564-566), Swedish authorities often eschew these official definitions in favour of terms such as “local coastal fishing” and “large-scale fishing” (see, e.g., Havs- och vattenmyndigheten and Jordbruksverket 2021). These terms are reflected in our interlocutors’ emic understandings, as we discuss in the methods section below.

While Swedish commercial fishing was once widespread, the number of Swedish fishers has been declining for years (Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021: 3-4; see also Waldo and Blomquist 2020: 5). Scholars attribute these decreases since the mid-1990s to efforts of the EU to reduce the fishing fleet and the implementation of ITQs in the pelagic fishery (ibid.; see also Bonow 2018). Other factors making coastal fishing unattractive include depleted and poor quality fish stocks and increasingly stringent regulations (see Björkvik et al. 2020: 568-573; Hentati-Sundberg et al. 2015). In the Baltic Sea, where the majority of coastal fishers operate, degraded cod stocks over the last decades have resulted in a cod fishing moratorium that has been operative since 2019. Competition from marine wildlife (seals and cormorants) and direct damage to catches and fishing gears also deeply concern coastal fishers (see Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021; Svets et al. 2019). In addition, dioxin and PCBs in high concentrations contaminate some Baltic Sea commercial species, precluding their use for human consumption and limiting markets (Karl and Ruoff 2007). Many Swedish fisheries – from 66 fish stocks landed, at least 41 per cent (n=27) – are fished unsustainably (Bryhn et al. 2020), and environmental movements, which in Sweden relate to protecting natural mileaux, biodiversity, animal welfare, climate change, and vegetarianism (see Axfood 2018; Fischer and Rööös 2018; Saunders 2016), also negatively affect coastal fishing. Presently

Sweden has an estimated 900 coastal fishers, mostly operating in the Baltic (Björkvik et al. 2020: 563). The vast majority are male and older than 55 years of age, and recruitment of young fishers is low (ibid.).

Methods and data collection

Primary data for this research comes from semi-structured interviews. We interviewed 24 fishers from a group of 143 commercial fishing license holders (*fiskelicensinnehavare*) who agreed to a follow-up interview after completing a national survey in 2019 (see Gillette et al. 2020). We selected interviewees based on where they fished, vessel size, gear type, and target species, with the goals of speaking with fishers from all parts of the Swedish coast and including representatives working on vessels from all three EU size classifications using passive and active gears. We aimed at addressing culturally significant marine fisheries, namely cod, herring, shrimp, langoustine, salmon, vendace, and eel. Interviews were in Swedish, and the participants were promised confidentiality. The interviewees ranged in age from 35 to 67. 23 were male and one female. For simplicity, we use the pronoun “he” when talking about fishers’ representations of the good fisher.

Our study focuses on the 21 fishers among our 24 interviewees who described themselves as coastal (see Table 1 for basic information on the interviewees). Interviews revealed that the fishers who belonged to the medium segment (12-24 metres, active and passive gears) considered themselves to be coastal (*kustnära*) because they landed locally and made fishing trips of short duration, versus the large-scale fishers who were gone for weeks at a time and typically landed abroad. Similarly, while many of the fishers working on vessels that were smaller than 10 metres talked about themselves as “*really* small-scale,” they also saw an important distinction between “coastal” and large-scale fishers. This related not only to where the fisher landed and the duration that vessels remained at sea, but also to how large the crews were, and the extent to which vessels could “chase” fish in distant waters.

Table 1. Study participants and basic information about their fishing

Name	Fishing location	Boat size ⁺	Target species	Gear type	Years fishing* (2020)
Claes	North Baltic	11m	Herring	Active + passive	5
Erik	South Baltic	9m	Cod	Passive	50
Hans	South Baltic	11m	Langoustine (prev. cod)	Active	40
Gunnar	South Baltic	<12m	Cod	Passive	50
Arvid	South Baltic	6m	Eel, flounder	Passive	30
Per	South Baltic	12m	Herring (prev. cod)	Passive	20
Lars	South Baltic	5m & 14m	Flounder, turbot (prev. cod)	Passive	20
Sven	South Baltic	<12m	Perch, whitefish, herring	Passive	60
Stig	South Baltic	19m	Herring, sprat	Active	50
Torbjörn	North Baltic	6m	Herring	Passive	3
Nils	South Baltic	<12m & 17m	Cod, flounder, turbot	Passive	20
Albin	West Coast	11m	Mackerel, lobster, herring, cod	Passive	40
Linus	South Baltic	12m (4 boats)	Flounder	Passive	40
Oskar	West Coast	10m	Cod, mackerel, crab	Passive	10
Ole	West Coast & Sound	<12m	Eel, langoustine	Passive	40
Åsa	West Coast	<12m	Langoustine	Passive	20
Göran	West Coast	16m	Langoustine	Active	40
Olof	West Coast	17m	Shrimp	Active	35
Staffan	West Coast	7m	Lobster	Passive	20
Bo	West Coast	14m	Langoustine, cod, haddock, turbot	Active	40
Jan	North Baltic	<12m & 12-20m	Salmon, vendace, herring	Active + passive	38

⁺ Boat size is rounded to the nearest whole number, to protect confidentiality.

* Fishers calculated their years fishing differently. Those who assisted family members with commercial fishing as children but took other jobs after concluding their education dated their years of fishing from receipt of a commercial fishing license. Others dated their years of fishing from their first paid jobs as fishers, typically as crew on someone else's boat.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to curtail plans for site visits, making it impossible to observe fishers' skilled performances, the context- and event-specific attentiveness, bodily praxis, and problem-solving that make up a fishing trip (see Dobeson 2019: 87-121). We interviewed fishers by telephone or video call, collecting their explicitly articulated

understandings of their profession, akin to research on the good fisher in Wales (Gustavsson et al. 2017). Questions probing the skills that the fishers associated with their profession, sustainability, and the characteristics of “a good fisher” (*en duktig fiskare*), plus topics related to their survey responses, were included in the interview. The median interview length was 70 minutes, with the shortest 38 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 47 minutes. We coded the 21 interviews thematically, identifying emic topics from the transcripts and then adding subjects drawn from the literature on fishing skills (e.g., Dobeson 2019; Durrenberger and Pålsson 1986; Gustavsson et al. 2017; Pålsson 1994; Pålsson and Helgason 1998).

In addition to the interviews and survey, participant observation was conducted with fishers in southern Sweden during 2019 and online “meeting ethnography” 2020-2021 (see Sandler and Thedvall 2017). The online participant observation took place at events arranged by Simrishamn township, the Skåne Innovation Network, the Swedish Water and Marine Management Agency, the Swedish Agriculture Agency, and the Rural Development Network. These meetings ranged from a panel discussion with Baltic Sea coastal fishers moderated by Gillette (preceded by several preparatory meetings and a trial run), to workshops aimed at encouraging fishers to sell their catches directly, to discussions of fisheries management policies hosted by national authorities and the Rural Development Network. Conversations and interactions from these events, in which some of the interviewees participated, contextualised the fishers’ perspectives and reinforced patterns found in the interviews.

Skills

As other fisheries anthropologists have demonstrated, skill is central to fishing and developed almost exclusively through practice (e.g., Durrenberger and Pålsson 1986; Pålsson and Helgason 1998; Pålsson 1994; see also Dobeson 2019: 87-121; Gustavsson et al. 2017). In the following sections, we present the fishers’ accounts of the skilled performances that comprised contemporary coastal fishing, which reveal how transformations in the social-ecological field demanded, inhibited, and rendered obsolete the skills associated with the good fisher.

Catches

Catches were a topic of major importance to the fishers, who initiated the topic during the course of their surveys and during interviews, in addition answering to our question about whether the good fisher was the one who caught the most fish.

Hans, Jan, and Åsa initially said that the good fisher was the one who catches the most fish, but then revised their views. Hans backpedalled and clarified by saying, “well, that was what we thought during the 1980s anyway.” Jan explained that the good fisher is the one who “is interested in fishing and catches fish” but also “takes care of” (*tar hand om*) his catches. Åsa first said that the good fisher captured large catches and was daring, but then changed her mind, saying “but that’s not sustainable.” As these three pondered further, their modified views resembled those of the remaining fishers, who said that large catches did not make the good fisher. Rather, the good fisher’s catches were sized appropriately.

Appropriateness had economic and ecological dimensions. The good fisher’s catches were sufficiently remunerated. This was not about making “shitloads of money” (*skitmycket*

pengar), as Nils put it, but catching enough to be able to support your family or earning enough to pay your bills and your debts. Catches should be adequate for “making a living” (*livnära sig, försörja sig*). “You need to get paid” for your catches, explained Hans. The work that you put in should “be in proportion” to the money you got out. When in the past Hans fished cod, too many large catches led to market saturation and falling prices. Paradoxically, this meant that he had to work longer hours, fishing more for less money “so that we could survive.” Stocks also diminished, causing Hans to switch fisheries.

Fishers linked appropriate catches to having the skills to “take care of” them. In Jan’s words:

The thing that I was brought up to do was to take care of the fish that I caught. You should take care of everything, and you shouldn’t fish more than what you are able to take care of. If you’ve caught too much, then you have to stay home the next day and take care of your catch instead of going out again. It’s a resource that you have to take care of. It’s pretty much like what they said when I was little – ‘eat everything on your plate!’ After you’ve caught it you take care of it.

Taking care extended beyond fish in the nets. As Arvid put it, the good fisher made sure that the natural resource on which he depended “would be there tomorrow.” He explained, “Good catches with the least possible impact on nature, that is important. For us, for example, at certain times, when there is warm water in particular spots, then there is a huge number of small eels. We release them anyway, but we avoid those spots when it is warm.” The fishers who used active gears described trawling as making sure that you “are in the right place at the right time,” as Göran said, “so you are not just pulling your trawl around around around around around.”

Catches proportionate to the fisher’s labour, market demand, and what the environment could tolerate depended on the fisher’s practical sense. The fisher had to judge when to fish less, to avoid saturating the market and to ensure that the stock “rested,” as Bo, a west coast fisher with licenses for several fisheries, put it. He had to be smart about his labour and his gear, so that he “got paid” and minimised his environmental impact. As Linus stated, the good fisher “fishes sustainably” (*fiska hållbart*):

If you kill something then you should take care of it wisely, I think. That’s the basic idea in the whole thing, that you do it wisely...It’s about knowing those tricks that make it possible to run a sustainable and sound fishing operation and still get good catches. It’s that balance.

Fisheries management

Interviewees were convinced that Sweden’s centralised fisheries management hampered their ability to be good fishers and was bad both for individual fishers and the environment. The fisheries regulations showed the ignorance of fisheries authorities about the realities of coastal fishing. Management restricted which fish they could catch, with key fisheries such as salmon, eel, and cod largely closed, and all fishing licenses limited in terms of which species

the fisher could target.² The gear fishers could use was also constrained. Other limitations included seasonal closures, quotas, and marine protected areas. As Albin put it, Swedish fisheries authorities were “regulating with prohibitions.” Gunnar explained:

Restrictions, restrictions, restrictions. Actually, all the gears that I fished with before 2007 are prohibited now. And the private waters that I own, the authorities have restricted what I can fish there too³. . . Look, my fishing has been based on catching the fish that is available when it is easy to catch, and the price is good. And then stop if there is a period when the fishing is bad. That is something one learns to do when one fishes in multiple fisheries. There are better and worse periods. We used to alternate between salmon, cod, and herring. . . It's terrible, what the authorities have done, terrible. It's like, everything is locked in now and nothing can be changed. The authorities just implement more and more restrictions.

Of the many regulations that the fishers faced, three elicited the most comment: 1) fisheries closures; 2) fishing licenses which limited the number of species a fisher could target; and 3) gear restrictions. Our interviewees, who tended to talk about these together, told us their ‘rigidity’ made the fishers ‘locked in,’ ‘boxed in,’ and/or ‘stuck,’ causing coastal fishing to be less environmentally or economically sustainable. They also threatened fishers’ relations with one another.

To give one example, Erik, who was limited to the cod fishery, was one of many who described fishing as ‘better’ when he could switch between fisheries:

You saved the cod when you were fishing herring during the late summer. But we are no longer allowed to do that anymore. . . When I started fishing, the cod was free from fishing pressure for six to eight months. But now people fish cod all year round. Obviously if you are targeting cod all the time you are going to hurt the stocks. . . If we were allowed to fish salmon, maybe we could have survived. But that we absolutely are not allowed to do.

The fishers stressed that the regulations had interrelated ecological and economic consequences. Being prohibited from access to fisheries led to harder pressure on the stocks

² Salmon, eel, and cod fishery closures elicited extensive comments from our interviewees, but they are far from the only fisheries closures in Sweden. Commercial fishing for salmon in the Baltic Sea has been largely closed since 2013, with limited exceptions for fishers using passive gear in the northern Baltic. Swedish commercial fishing for eel has been largely prohibited since 2007, with a few exceptions and a goal of completely closing the fishery after those who currently have permits have exited the fishery. The eastern Baltic cod fishery has been closed since July 2019 and it is unclear when (or if) it will reopen. Most fisheries in the southern Baltic were closed between February and August 2021 to protect the cod stocks, with a few exceptions for coastal fishers capturing herring for food. See <https://www.havochvatten.se/fiske-och-handel/kvoter-uppfoljning-och-fiskestopp/kvoter-och-fiskestopp/fiskestopp.html> (Accessed: 14 March 2021). As we completed final revisions of this article, the Swedish fisheries agency had also closed fisheries for cod, haddock, saithe, and whiting on the Swedish west coast. See <https://www.havochvatten.se/fiske-och-handel/kvoter-uppfoljning-och-fiskestopp/kvoter-och-fiskestopp/fiskestopp.html> (Accessed: 4 September 2022).

³ While most coastal water in Sweden is public, a limited amount is privately owned. Privately-owned water (*enskilt vatten*) is an element of private property agreements on the coast and Swedish islands. According to the Swedish fishing law (Fiskelag 1993: 787, 9§), property owners control fishing in privately-owned water. However, as Gunnar relates, the Swedish fisheries authority also issues regulations that affect privately-owned water.

that the fishers were allowed to catch. Albin told us, “It used to be that you went out and caught what you could make money from. That’s what everybody did...and it made for a good spread in fishing. It wasn’t so concentrated on a single species, not like now.” Göran explained:

We can’t do what we want. We can’t switch gears because we want to. We can only fish langoustine, me and Tommy. Before, when I started, you could decide. If the fishing was bad, then you switched to herring. It, it was driven by – it was availability and demand and prices, that determined what you chose to do. That’s not how it is today. No, today you are supposed to fish stuff even if you can’t sell it. That’s what you’re supposed to do.

The fishers said repeatedly that if they were able to decide for themselves, they would fish diversely, which was more sustainable. Per explained:

I am totally dependent on the flexibility to switch fisheries. With my little boat, I must be able to adjust to the fish that are available. I have to be able to have seasonal fishing if I am going to survive: herring from March to June, then flounder over the summer, then perch, and pike in the winter...And especially tragic is that we can’t fish salmon, and no eel. And you have to understand – you had better be clear about this, it is really important that you get this right – for every species you take away from a fisher who is stubborn and wants to fish, you increase the pressure for another species instead.

Regulations also had social consequences. Fishers were hyper-aware of differences in licenses and gear permits, which sometimes elicited jealousy, anger, and competitiveness. For example, Arvid “kept a really low profile” and “didn’t talk about” fishing “because the other fishers get jealous” that he had a dispensation to fish eel. Per complained heatedly that his fishing license was more restricted than others in his harbour. “I don’t get why my colleagues have no restrictions at all while I have restrictions. We leave from the same dock; we fish in the same water...It’s my neighbour! What’s the difference between my neighbour’s boat and mine? Nothing! Nothing at all.” Staffan contrasted the competitiveness of today with fishing in the past, when “people talked to each other” when they were at sea:

It was really nice. There were a lot of boats out there, and you greeted each other, and yeah... and then there have been fewer fishers...fewer and fewer boats, in the end it was just me and another guy, just about. It doesn’t work, it’s no life, it’s no community...the network got smaller and smaller, and the conversations worse and worse: ‘How many lobsters did you catch then? Where did you get them?’ Blah blah blah. It was just money talk.

Paperwork

While the fishers described regulations as inhibiting their skilled performances, when we pressed them, it became clear that regulations also forced them to develop new skills. These included keeping abreast of the management changes, following the rules, and completing “paperwork”: filling out logbooks, applying for and renewing licenses and permits, reporting

catches, complying with traceability requirements, providing documentation and fees related to safety requirements, and so on. When we specifically asked whether such skills were part of being a good fisher, interviewees readily agreed, complaining that “all those bloody regulations” that “keep changing all the time” demanded their time and attention. Most narrated stories about making mistakes, which resulted in fines or restrictions. Yet while they admitted that coastal fishers today needed to be skilful at “paperwork,” it was clear that none of them, without our asking, would have talked about this as “fishing.”

All the fishers said they had to spend a lot of time “with licenses and courses and papers and skipper letters and safety courses and health certificates,” as Olof put it. Some, like Arvid, admitted they had “read up” and “dug themselves in” (*grottat ner sig*) the regulations. No one expressed pride in these new skills; they voiced frustration, fatigue, and apprehension. Ole said bitterly:

It is so damn much; you actually have two jobs! You don't have one job. Fishing is the most dangerous and hardest job in the world, but you have a f--king office job now too! With all the permits that have to be renewed, the courses and shit that you are supposed to be on top of. It's a huge amount of stuff that you are supposed to be working on all the time...It used to be wonderful to be a fisher. Now it's a total hell.

Explained Nils:

There is so godforsaken much paper...and a bunch of bloody regulations that are strange, to say the least. The regulations have come and gone the whole time. Someone should do a cost-benefit analysis of all these decisions, what good they actually do, what they mean...and the thing is, the fishing, the actual fishing is time consuming, so you don't have time, or energy, for Christ's sake, to devote yourself to all these papers.

Torbjörn related that keeping track of “the enormous number of rules” made him apprehensive. “You don't really know for sure that you are following all the rules, you get worried, and you keep double checking,” he said. “They are not going to take away your license, not unless you've done something really bad. But they might take your gear and you'd lose days, or even weeks of income.”

Learning fishing

Social relationships were an aspect of the social-ecological field that fishers found vitally important. Fishers entered the profession through social ties. More than half (12) became fishers because someone in their family fished. This was often a father, but could be an uncle (FB), grandfather (FF, MF), brother, father-in-law, or husband. Many had a “fishing family,” or, in the case of Staffan and Åsa, married into a fishing family. Staffan joked that he had “pushed his way in” (*jag trängde mig väl på*) to his father-in-law's fishing, musing that fishing with his father-in-law was “the happiest time.” Some reported their families had fished for many generations: Lars was the fourth generation of fishers in his family, Claes the seventh generation, and Albin said his family had been fishing for 500 years.

Nine interviewees became fishers because the villages where they grew up were “packed

with boats and pretty much everyone became a fisher,” as Olof put it.⁴ Many remembered becoming interested as children, “running down to the harbour to watch them unload the catches,” as Hans recalled, or “earning my first ten kronor as a five-year-old” by cleaning fish, as Torbjörn recounted. Nils explained that “you have to be able to give fishing a try” by working with someone you know. “How else can you find out whether or not you are interested?” All the fishers had fished with others during their careers, serving as crew on someone else’s boat or finding help to work on their own vessel. A few had also fished alone, either by choice or by necessity.

Learning from an experienced fisher was the only path toward practical mastery according to our interlocutors. Claes stressed that he could never have become a fisher without drawing on the experience of others. Arvid recounted that he and his brother learned from a fisher who allowed them to crew for him: “He showed us everything, with the nets. We were with him and fished with him all the time those first years. Then we went over to fishing more on our own.” Sven, who began fishing as a child with his father and grandfather, described this as crucial, underscoring how difficult it was to become a fisher. Among the skills he learned were “how the wind and current affect fishing, the conditions at various times of the year, managing the gear, repairing it, setting it out and everything. There is an enormous amount of knowledge buried in fishing,” he concluded.

Isolation

Relations with other fishers remained significant even after a fisher developed skills. Fishers shared information. For example, Åsa described learning how the fishery was doing from talking to others about their catches. Per said that he had learnt about a herring closure implemented in 2020 from other fishers, prior to the moratorium being announced. Albin recounted that he gave up Baltic Sea fishing because of what fishers he knew there had told him. “We kept contact with each other, we who were fishing and active. And when I judged that they weren’t getting any fish, these guys who were really well-known and have been fishing there all the time, well then, I knew there was no point in me fishing there.”

Relations with other fishers also facilitated access to resources. Many interviewees had acquired part or full ownership of a boat through fishers whom they knew. Some inherited or borrowed gear and workspaces from fisher relatives or friends. For example, Claes recounted that after he finally acquired a license to trawl herring – which took almost two years – he needed to acquire tonnage. “Someone who we know, he had trawling tonnage on his boat but wasn’t trawling anymore. We were able to trade with them. So, they took our [tonnage] and we took theirs.”

These relationships were being threatened, according to the study participants. Sharply declining numbers of coastal fishers meant that there were few active fishers with whom to interact. The fishers who were not “tough” (*ihärdig*) or “stubborn” enough to keep fishing had quit, and the authorities were not granting new licenses. The fishers bemoaned “how few we are” and told us about “young guys” they knew who wanted to start fishing but had been denied licenses. Erik recounted that 20 years ago there were “a hundred small vessels” in his area, fishing in the south Baltic. Now there were ten. “So, there is nothing left,

⁴ One fisher, Oskar, told us he became a fisher because he enjoyed angling. Oskar grew up in a coastal municipality with several fishing harbours. He was the first in his family to fish commercially and felt disadvantaged by not having a family member “who had already made all the mistakes so that I didn’t have to make them.”

nothing,” he said. “It’s the same anywhere you go.” Oskar witnessed a similar pattern on the west coast: harbours once filled with fishing boats were nearly empty. The disappearance of coastal fishers caused other social relationships to suffer, with wholesale and retail buyers, people who repaired boats and nets, the ice supplier. “It’s not going to work if there are only ten boats docking in the harbour,” he declared.

Interviewees projected declines into the future. Göran, citing national statistics on the Swedish fleet and the high average age of commercial fishers, predicted that “in ten years’ time, there will be no more fishers left.” Torbjörn argued that the current fisheries management push to privatise quota would soon replace coastal fishers with industrial trawling. Quota in the pelagic fisheries was privatised for ten years in 2009 and renewed for a second ten-year period in 2019, and the Swedish fisheries agency recommended in 2020 that the government privatise quota in the demersal fisheries. He continued:

It’s a dark future ahead. That’s just how it is. A few [industrial] boats will take all of [the quota] because they want to turn a profit... There will be few practitioners left. And they won’t need to be on the boats anymore! They will be able to hire people to do the actual fishing. So, the fisher will become, what should I call it... A factory worker, that’s what I believe.

Public opinion

Fishers experienced Swedish public opinion as anti-fisher. Survey responses led us to anticipate that the fishers who trawled and targeted eel (as well as the large-scale fishers) would discuss the public’s negative perceptions of them. That the other coastal fishers shared these sentiments was less expected. Only one fisher, Åsa, told us that she had never experienced negative public opinion, and she specified that this was specific to her trap fishery. “There is of course a difference if you catch langoustine with traps than if you trawl for langoustine,” she said. “The public definitely has a worse impression of trawling than trapping.”

Most blamed the Swedish Green Party and environmental activists for disseminating the view that “commercial fishing is bad, fishers are bad, half-criminals, that it is some kind of shady thing that fishers are doing, that fishers are destroying everything,” as Albin said. Jan complained that the environmental activists “act like we are a factory that is spewing out masses of crap in the water... As if it is us who are the villains. Here you are, in your tiny fishing boat, and you are treated like the worst thief ever – I mean, shouldn’t they be on our side?” Hans similarly explained that fishers were “blamed for everything that was wrong with marine environments.” He recalled that when the Green Party first came on the political scene in the 1980s, there had been cooperation between fishers and environmentalists, for example to force factories emitting pollutants into the sea to stop. “But then [the environmentalists] turned their backs on us,” he said. Linus clarified, “There is a public agenda to smear fishers. There are forces that want commercial fishing to disappear. You know yourself how Greenpeace and those people react...there are a lot of organisations who scream to get attention.”

Exacerbating negative opinion were celebrity cooks, the press, schools, and the authorities. Bo and Hans marvelled at the influence that TV chefs had. Celebrity cooks “know nothing about fishing,” Hans avowed, “but as soon as they say ‘don’t eat cod’ the entire public follows... Wouldn’t it have been better for the environment if they had urged

the Swedish consumer to eat the fish that comes from the nearest harbour, the fish that we catch?” The media more generally was “a big problem.” Fishers said the media rarely if ever reported positive stories about fishing. “People are so trusting,” Olof explained. “When you read the newspaper then you assume that everything in there is true. But half of what they publish on fishing is wrong. And there are absolutely no consequences for that.” Some recounted stories of misinformation spread in schools. For example, Albin described talking with students who told him there were no fish in the sea. ““Is that what they teach you?”” I asked. ““Yes, there are no fish! It’s drilled into them already in high school, when they are 17, that there are no fish and fishers are bad.”” Compounding the problem was how the authorities talked about fishing. Arvid recounted that he rang to accuse the coast guard of “slander” for what they had told the media.

To counteract negative opinion, fishers deployed sustainability discourse. They described their own fishing, and/or the fishing that they would do if not prevented by regulations, as “sustainable” and “environmentally friendly.” They represented themselves as “taking care of” the fish and seas, capturing wisely with an eye to economic and environmental constraints. Where possible, they claimed to have a deep family knowledge about fishing, implying the sustainability of their practices through references to longevity. They emphasised the “feel for the game” they developed from spending time at sea, which meant they knew which fish would tolerate capture.

Fishers supplemented their sustainability claims by pointing to the actors that they considered responsible for degraded marine ecologies: animal predators, factories that expelled pollution into the sea, farmers whose agricultural fertilisers ran off into waterways and caused oxygen-deprived bottoms – “far more runoff than our inland seas can tolerate,” as Hans put it – and consumers who “closed their eyes” to the environmental impacts of their behaviours, as Lars and Staffan said. A subgroup blamed large-scale industrial boats. Linus, Ole, Staffan, and Jan specifically criticised “industrial trawlers” for, in Ole’s words, “ploughing to pieces” (*plöjer sönder*), or in Staffan’s, “sabotaging” the sea. While the others did not explicitly blame large-scale trawlers for fishing’s negative reputation, their views about their own judicious handling of appropriately sized catches could be interpreted as implicit criticism. The authorities were still another actor to blame, being the ones to determine the fishing quotas. As Nils pointed out, “All that, your whole life, with ‘where are the fish’ and blah blah blah, of course it is us who take the blow (*ta smällen*). Even though we’ve done nothing wrong. Even though you’ve fished your legal quota...why don’t they go after the people who set the quotas if that’s the problem?”

Values

Being a “good farmer” is about moral values as well as skills. For example, researchers have explored whether the good farmer values efficient production of large yields or “happy pigs” (Saunders 2016), family farming or short value chains (Carolan 2020). Others have asked whether the values associated with crofting encourage change when the social-ecological field transforms, e.g., by augmenting crofting with tourist amenities (Sutherland and Calo 2020). We now turn to the values that interviewees identified with the good fisher.

Tough, adaptable, creative

When we asked interviewees what characterised a good fisher, many listed values such as “tough,” “adaptable,” and “creative,” attributes that the fisheries literature indicates are essential to fishing (e.g., Dobeson 2019; Gustavsson et al. 2017; Pálsson 1994). Toughness manifested in continuing fishing. This meant putting to sea, regardless of whether you felt like it. As Olof said, “there are always a million reasons you can find not to go out...but the good fisher, he’s the one who goes out and does the best he can...He’s the one who is out fighting every day.” Fishing has always required this kind of persistence, but our interlocutors indicated that toughness also manifested in continuing fishing despite confining regulations and negative public sentiment. The good fisher “gets up and goes to work every day, even though you sometimes think it is a pain with all the authorities,” said Lars. He “doesn’t give up” when he meets opposition, as Sven and Nil put it. He “survives as a fisher,” said Ole.

To remain in the game, the good fisher adapted. In Per’s words, the good fisher can “resaddle tomorrow, now, yesterday. The whole time.” The good fisher responded creatively to impinging circumstances, whether this meant bad weather, motor problems, or, in the contemporary social-ecological field, fisheries regulations and public environmentalism. Albin explained, “That’s what fishers have done, they come up with stuff the whole time. They improve, modify. As long as I’ve been a fisher anyway, and that was true of my forefathers also...You find ways, you dig down and work on it and keep going, and in the end you fish better.” Clarified Bo, “You have to keep going, keep pushing, so that your fishing can be something.”

Toughness, adaptability, and creativity underwrote many of the skills that the fishers talked about. For example, “we who remain” were those who were tough and adaptable enough to manage “two jobs”: “taking care of” fish and completing paperwork. Toughness and creativity were required for fishers to cope with social isolation and disappearing infrastructure. The fishers’ sustainability discourses were another example of innovation. Faced with negative public opinion and rising concern about the environment, the fishers demonstrated their capacity for “invention” and “improvisation” (Bourdieu 1990: 63) by how they talked about their skilled performances and feel for the game.

Discussion

Our interlocutors’ characterisation of coastal fishing clearly indicates that the “relatively autonomous world” (Bourdieu 1990: 73) or field within which they operated was both social and ecological. Fishers’ “feel for the game” (ibid.: 61) – what Lars called “the feel you have for what you do, and how you do it” – grew from their intimate familiarity with the stocks they fished, the marine environments within which they worked, their accumulated knowledge about seasonal patterns, wind, weather, and water conditions, as well as their knowledge about the remuneration they would receive for the labour they invested in capture, market demand, fisheries regulations, the social relationships that would enable them to keep fishing, commercial fishing’s public image, environmental activism, and the many human and nonhuman actors (including farmers, factories, politicians, seals, and cormorants) whose practices affected the state of the seas. Coastal fishing’s rules, the “set of objective regularities imposed on all who join a game” (ibid.: 60) were both ecological and social in nature, as was the contextually specific and historically determined “game” (ibid.:

62; 87-8), shaped by fisheries management and the CFP, declining numbers of fishers, and the long-term degradation of Swedish marine environments.

Turning to transformations in the social-ecological field, official reports, scholarly research, and the experiences of our interviewees indicate that contemporary coastal fishing differed significantly from the past. Fisheries authorities – informed by scientists – regarded fish stocks as overexploited (Björkvik et al. 2020; Havs- och vattenmyndigheten 2019). Regulations for fisheries had increased dramatically (Hentati-Sundberg et al. 2015; Hentati-Sundberg 2017). The numbers of commercial fishers had declined significantly (Waldo and Blomquist 2020; Hentati-Sundberg 2017). Public concern about the environment and sustainability had become more urgent, with specific critiques directed at commercial fishers (see Björkvik et al. 2020; Eckeskog and Paulomäki 2014; Funck and Digréus 2020). Continuing fishing despite these new rules of the game required retooling the fishers' practical sense.

Catches were a key arena where the fishers, somewhat reluctantly, adjusted their skills. The good fisher “fished sustainably” and “took care of” catches. This meant capturing in proportion to the fisher's labour, the market's capacity, and the condition of the stock. Sometimes handling the catches to get “the best possible returns” and inflict “the least possible impact on nature” – “fishing sustainably” – meant fishing less, rather than more.

To the fishers, complying with fisheries management primarily meant what Gieser (2014: 133) calls “skills inhibited”: truncated relations under which opportunities for learning that are essential to a craft's sustainability are diminished or blocked. Regulations “locked in” the fishers, who complained this made them less sustainable. Fishers “couldn't do what they wanted,” which was to switch fisheries if the market, weather, season, or fish stocks suggested this course. Because of fisheries regulations, stocks were no longer allowed to “rest” and fishers were disconnected from market demands, forced to “fish stuff you can't sell.” Fisheries management also inhibited skills related to social relationships. Regulations caused fishers to exit fishing and hampered good relations by inciting jealousy, anger, and competition among those remaining. “Money talk” dominated and “divisions” among fishers emerged.

Some aspects of fisheries management required reskilling. Fishers had to cope with isolation and disappearing infrastructure and fisheries-related services. Fisheries regulations required developing new skills at “paperwork,” which felt like a “second job.” None of the fishers thought that they excelled at “the administrative part,” but all agreed that the good fisher needed skills in this area.

Public environmentalism also transformed coastal fishing's rules of the game. Interviewees personally experienced what Larsson calls “a shift in the perception of the fishing sector, from being respected food providers to being considered an environmental threat” (2019: 51). As Larsson notes, the fishers associated this change with Swedish and global environmental activism. Public opinion about fishing elicited anger and fatigue, but also skilful deployment of sustainability discourses. Coastal fishers adeptly represented themselves as sustainable fishers, and others as the “real” source of marine degradation.

Although transformations in the social-ecological field affected enskilment, the values associated with being a good fisher appear stable. In contemporary Swedish coastal fishing, as in the broader social science literature on fishing, fishers value being tough, adaptive, and creative. These qualities support everyday practice on fishing trips and characterise the

“good fishers” who have successfully responded to the obstacles posed by centralised fisheries management and negative public opinion. Transformations in the social-ecological field of fishing require a new practical mastery, but the personal attributes that fishers value most are precisely the ones needed to continue fishing.

This finding diverges from other scholarship on small-scale fishers and good farmers, in which new rules of the game caused producers to change their values. For example, scholars have found that programs to “professionalise” small-scale fishers in Atlantic Canada (Davis 1991), and policies to privatise fishing rights and enable quota markets in Iceland (Dobeson 2019) have encouraged fishers to become “rapacious” profit maximisers and operate on quota markets as resource owners. In agriculture, policies to deregulate wheat export markets have caused Australian farmers to revalue competitiveness, efficiency, and business skills (O’Keeffe 2018). Studies from the US and Sweden show that changes in the social-ecological field result in farmers who prize “happy pigs” and local provisioning over efficiency and large yields (e.g., Carolan 2020; Saunders 2016). Given the magnitude of social-ecological changes that Swedish coastal fishers confront, how should we understand the persistent traits of toughness, adaptability, and creativity that Swedish coastal fishers see as essential to being a good fisher?

We argue that the answer lies in what Bourdieu called the stakes and interests that drive a field, in this case, commercial fishing. What “gets fishers moving” and makes them want to play the “game?” Survival as a commercial fisher and continuing to fish despite all odds are themselves key stakes and interests for coastal fishers. As Per said, fishers are stubborn and want to fish. They “act” and “struggle” (Bourdieu, 1990: 88) to continue because of the pleasure and satisfaction they experience in their ability to adapt to and overcome obstacles ranging from natural fish stock fluctuations and the depredations of marine wildlife to fisheries management measures that demonstrate an inadequate understanding of coastal fishing’s realities (see also Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021). Contrary to the reductionist model that guides fisheries management policies and environmental activism, fishing itself – skilled performances, creative improvisations, and intimate knowledges of lively local ecologies – drives engagement in coastal fishing (see also Andresen and Højrup 2008; Højrup 1983).

Conclusion

In contemporary Swedish coastal fisheries, as elsewhere in the global North (see Lloret et al. 2018; Pita, Pascual-Fernández and Bavinck 2020), fishers confront new social and material conditions created by environmental change, fisheries management, and public opinion. Many European fisheries have experienced similar trajectories to those we describe in Sweden: degraded marine environments, declining numbers of fishers, and stringent fisheries management policies. If we are to understand the extent to which notions of the good fisher are geographically specific or, as Burton et al. (2021) have argued for the good farmer, widely shared, more case studies of the good fisher are needed (see also Gustavsson et al. 2017). Our study contributes to this project of developing the good fisher as a field of inquiry within the good farmer literature.

The stakes and interests that get Swedish coastal fishers moving – the moral values of toughness, adaptability, and creativity – have significant consequences for fisheries management. Regulatory decisions based on reductionist models that assume fishers are

driven by profit or economic need often fail to produce the outcomes that managers desire (see, e.g., Blomquist and Waldo 2018; Holland et al. 1999). Similarly, fishing policies that ignore why different fishers participate in fishing – including sustainable fishing – can trigger the exit of fishers whom it might be better to retain. Anthropologists and other fisheries social scientists have argued repeatedly that fisheries managers must develop richer, more holistic understandings of commercial fishers for effective policymaking (e.g., Arias Schreiber and Gillette 2021; Björkvik et al. 2020; Carothers and Chambers 2012). Asking what makes a good fisher is a good place to start.

To analyse Sweden's good coastal fishers, we proposed modifying Bourdieu's concept of field to encompass not only social but also ecological dynamics. Such a move is needed if we seek to understand what gets people moving in their relatively autonomous worlds (Bourdieu 1990: 73; 88). Looking solely at social, political, or economic dynamics misses crucial actants that structure fields. Arguably, in commercial fishing as in society at large, "sustainability" is derived from environmental signals and changes as well as social, political, and economic factors. If we as ethnographers wish to contribute to developing sustainable food, then we too should be able to adapt our concepts and retool our skills, moving our research beyond the cognitive and social to include the lively material world.

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