

REPORT

Meeting: **MARE Conference 2025 – People & the Sea**

Parties: **researchers, stakeholders**

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Location: **Amsterdam (NL)**

Chair: **Joyeeta Gupta (UVA), Kristen Ounanian (Aalborg University), Sebastian Linke (University of Gothenburg), Signe Sonvisen (SINTEF), Marloes Kraan (WUR), and Nathalie Steins (WUR)**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

The 2025 theme of the MARE Conference was '**Tensions, Trade-offs, and Transformations for the Ocean Decade and Beyond**', focusing on the balance between tensions, trade offs, and the transformations required for the future of healthy, biodiverse oceans, thriving coastal livelihoods, and sustainable marine resource governance. Through the presentation of many recent publications from around the world, the conference shed light onto a number of debated issues (such as MSP, development of offshore wind, value of diverse knowledge types, generational renewal, gender diversity in fisheries, etc.) using marine social science to highlight challenges and pathways for sustainable and equitable oceans. Summaries of the followed presentations can be found below, while the full programme and details of the conference (with titles of the presented papers + speakers) is available [here](#).

1. Opening session – day 1

The ocean's colour, sound, smell, and taste are changing under climate change. These environmental transformations unfold alongside global political tensions, rising conflicts, and increasing misinformation, where scientists and civil society are often silenced for questioning prevailing policies.

In ocean spaces and coastal communities, the race to develop a "blue economy" brings trade-offs, governance challenges, and contested knowledge. The UN Ocean Decade, launched in 2021 to address the under-recognition of SDG 14, calls for co-constructing the science we need for the ocean we want. It aims to integrate social and natural sciences, bringing together diverse forms of knowledge to tackle local, regional, and global issues. Yet in many countries, these disciplines still operate in silos, limiting collaboration and the ability to respond effectively.

This integration is essential not only to understand more about the ocean, but also to deepen our understanding of how to care for it, and to care for those whose lives depend on it. Here, social science plays a vital role in centring human dimensions within marine governance.

A "people and the sea" lens can help reframe fisheries governance. This approach brings to light the social and cultural impacts of policy beyond economics, exposes injustices when those most affected are excluded from decision-making, and restores humanity to debates

that too often vilify fishers. The current controversy over banning bottom trawling in marine protected areas illustrates the risk of polarisation: NGO campaigns and the recent Ocean documentary fuelled public outrage, yet little attention was given to just transition pathways, existing management measures, or constructive dialogue with fishing communities.

2 Laboring about labor in maritime space

The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), adopted in 2006 and in force since 2013, sets minimum working and living standards for seafarers. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed major vulnerabilities: public-health restrictions stranded 400,000 seafarers at sea and a similar number on land without income, closed welfare facilities, blocked shore leave, and denied medical access, even for urgent cases. Thousands of claims highlighted breaches of the MLC. These events prompted a review in 2021, resulting in eight new amendments in 2022 to strengthen seafarers' rights, though important gaps remain. Fishing is excluded from the MLC and governed under separate legal instruments.

In Catalonia, Spain, research on international migrant fishers links labour issues to generational renewal in the sector. The study focused on three fishing-dependent towns with above-average immigrant crews; in May 2024, 29% of crews were foreign nationals, many recruited in the early 2000s from countries such as Peru and Senegal and now nearing retirement. Interviews revealed four attitudes toward children entering fishing: committed continuation, conditional interest, conditional rejection, and outright rejection. Gender is not formally a barrier in Spain, but remains a cultural obstacle in some countries of origin.

Across Europe, a lack of generational renewal in fisheries is increasingly recognised but poorly addressed in policy. A review of 2,400 publications (59 analysed in depth) showed that most focus on sector crises rather than renewal, with only five explicitly addressing generational change. Key barriers include restrictive regulation, low profitability, poor working conditions, shifting youth values, and stigma. Solutions proposed include participatory governance, regulatory reform, economic independence through direct marketing, income diversification, collaborative initiatives, and raising the visibility of fishing as a profession. The analysis focused primarily on small-scale fisheries, where the problem is most acute.

3 Offshore wind power: Integration and contestation

In France, a study on fishers' responses to offshore renewable energy (ORE) projects found acceptance to be dynamic, shaped by history, early engagement, and key "turning points." Two main trajectories emerged (steady tolerance and rupture) with gear type influencing attitudes, as ORE often intensified tensions between active and passive fishing methods. While consultation committees negotiate cohabitation, developers hold final authority, and uncertainty remains over post-construction fishing access.

Another perspective applied a human rights lens to the integration of offshore wind into MSP. The EU's renewable targets, aiming for a massive expansion of offshore wind capacity, have made MSP heavily driven by wind development needs, often sidelining timely local input. Strategic assessments frequently occur too late for real influence. Community benefit

schemes exist in some countries but face transparency and equity challenges, underscoring the need for early engagement and clear guidelines.

In Spain, the government's 2023 MSP identified 19 priority areas for offshore wind, sparking strong opposition from the artisanal fishing sector. Fishers criticised the lack of ecological, social, and economic impact assessments, minimal stakeholder involvement, and perceived disregard for fishing grounds. Many saw the plans as serving “energy capital” at the expense of local livelihoods, tourism, and cultural heritage. While not opposing renewable energy outright, fishers feared stock declines, loss of fishing grounds, and community decline. This resistance is rooted in perceived devaluation of their way of life and exclusion from decision-making.

A French geographical study of opposition to offshore wind found that mobilisations are led mainly by socially established groups, including some vessel-owning fishers, while employees and blue-collar workers are largely absent. Arguments focus on biodiversity and democratic deficits rather than visual impacts, differing from trends in Northern Europe and North America. Resistance remains locally rooted but linked to broader environmental and political debates.

4 Conflict and trade-offs in marine governance: policy integration and coordination in implementing the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal's vision for climate neutrality by 2050 places new demands on marine governance, yet fragmentation across EU, national, regional, and local levels, and between sectors such as fisheries, environment, transport, and energy, hinders integration. Coordinating policies is essential to avoid conflict and build synergies for healthy oceans, sustainable blue growth, and climate resilience.

The **CrossGov project** examines coherence across biodiversity, zero pollution, and climate change policies, finding that while objectives often align on paper, implementation measures can conflict. Key frameworks such as the MSFD and Water Framework Directive differ in scope and enforcement strength, lacking robust land–sea integration. Sectoral policies like the CAP and CFP reference environmental goals but remain focused on production priorities.

The **Permagov project** looks at governance capabilities, revealing institutional mismatches, limited participation, and weak conflict-resolution mechanisms. E-governance tools could improve knowledge sharing but are underused. Trade-offs are especially acute in shipping, offshore energy, fisheries, dredging, pollution, and land–sea interactions. At EU level, MSP and EBM (Ecosystem-Based Management) have emerged as key tools to balance offshore energy and fisheries with biodiversity protection. However, institutional barriers persist, including scale mismatches between governance problems and governance institutions. Regional sea conventions, member states, and sub-national bodies all play distinct but sometimes poorly aligned roles. Underexplored areas include integrating land–sea dynamics in marine protection, using e-governance to foster collaboration, and strengthening actors' capacity to address fragmentation and incoherence.

The **MSP4BIO initiative** identifies pathways to better integrate biodiversity into MSP, emphasising legal clarity, practical guidelines, stronger coordination, early stakeholder engagement, and embedding biodiversity tools directly in planning.

5. Day 2 – Opening address

The redeemability of MSP was questioned, and it was argued that resistance alone would be insufficient – instead, transformation was required. A clear gap persists between MSP’s participatory rhetoric and its technical, sector-driven implementation.

Reform opportunities include the Ocean Pact’s proposal to revisit the MSP Directive and strengthen EU coastal community resilience, and a UK parliamentary proposal advocating early engagement, a lead marine policy department, and just transition measures.

The definition of MSP (as a public process for analysing and allocating the spatial and temporal distribution of activities) appears to be outdated and backward-looking. Genuine public participation occurs only after key decisions have been made, rather than at the normative stage when objectives are set. Current processes integrate little beyond existing sectoral policies, frame conflict mainly as spatial competition, and tend to privilege powerful actors over “weaker” stakeholders.

A shift toward “MSP 2.0” was proposed, a forward-looking, just, and participatory model that defines the public interest, empowers weaker actors, integrates diverse knowledge, and shares benefits locally.

On the question of “what knowledge counts” in marine governance, it was reported that rapid corporate appropriation of coastal and ocean territories had been observed, particularly through exponential offshore wind growth. There are two different ways to imagine our oceans: there are those that treat bodies of water as economic opportunities, as a “blue economy”, something that can be exploited, and those that view it as integral to cultural identity and community life.

6. Knowledge Co-Production for Fisheries Governance

Case studies from the Netherlands, the United States, and France explored collaborative approaches to fisheries knowledge production.

In a Dutch lobster fishery, a partnership between fishers and researchers developed a stock assessment tool using AI camera technology, addressing data management, and integrating fishers’ experiential knowledge in the study. An evaluative framework was created to determine whether such knowledge had been incorporated throughout the research process (design, data collection, analysis, and results). The evaluation showed that inclusion of fishers’ knowledge improved trust in data, relationships, and research outcomes, supported by continuous communication and an interdisciplinary team. Challenges included equity concerns, limited involvement of non-members, and the absence of a long-term data stewardship plan. The resulting framework was presented as a tool for guiding future projects, fostering trust, improving fisheries knowledge bases, and enhancing management.

In order to co-produce knowledge on the fishery, a Black Sea Bass Research Fleet was established in the U.S.. The BSBRF was established to transform fishers' observations into scientific data via a dedicated app, building trust over nine years and achieving inclusion of fisher-collected data in stock assessments. Initial reluctance to accept fisher data and mismatches with other data sources were noted as challenges. The approach appears to be as cost- and time-efficient, adaptable to other species, and valuable for improving stock assessments.

A French project raised the question of “whose knowledge matters” in defining important fishing grounds. Fisheries are often positioned between nowhere and everywhere on maps and plans, and that mapping typically omits cultural, historical, and place-based values. Fishing grounds are diverse, dynamic, and socially defined, and mapping should be treated as a social dialogue rather than a purely technical exercise. Spatial fisheries data are constantly changing, requiring embedded knowledge of fishing practices for accurate interpretation. There is potential for mapping to influence debates, such as those on offshore renewable energy, though there are difficulties in quantifying such impacts. The development of formal agreements to enable informal discussions among fishers should be enacted.

7. Marine closures: comparing, complying and contesting

Research on MPAs highlights recurring tensions, particularly when fishing communities feel excluded from conservation decision-making. This dynamic has been described as “soft colonialism,” where standardised, top-down models override local knowledge and priorities. Recognising local expertise and socio-ecological ties is key to equitable outcomes

Temporary closures (e.g., in Zanzibar's octopus fishery) can enhance biodiversity and community benefits if designed with attention to species biology, closure length, and fisher compliance. Agent-based modelling offers valuable insights for tailoring closures to socio-ecological contexts, showing that neither too short nor too long closures guarantee success.

Coastal biosphere reserves offer inclusive, participatory spaces to mediate conflicts among diverse marine users, balancing conservation and local livelihoods. Their their adaptive governance and multi-stakeholder deliberations can reduce fragmentation and support sustainable marine management.

Studies of the EU's fisheries governance under the CFP highlight mixed perceptions of legitimacy. Fisheries stakeholders generally feel included but constrained by regulatory changes perceived as irreversible, while NGOs often feel sidelined. The process tends to be political, with limited genuine deliberation and coordination across sectors. National-level delays and lack of integration with other marine uses (e.g., offshore renewable energy) hinder effective management. Regional ecosystem-based approaches, such as the Sea Basin Initiative, are proposed to overcome these challenges.

There is a growing need for regionally coordinated, ecosystem-based marine management. This requires a shift away from fragmented, case-by-case national decisions toward integrated regional planning that brings together key sectors. Governance should facilitate constructive deliberation among stakeholders, building on the strengths of existing bodies such as Advisory Councils. Fisheries policies must retain a degree of flexibility to adapt to shifting conditions,

particularly in the face of climate change, as rigid and static marine spatial planning processes risk marginalizing them. Progress will depend on making full use of existing frameworks, improving coordination, and ensuring transparency across sectors, so that environmental goals and socio-economic needs can be met in tandem.

8. Day 3 – Opening address

There is a need to recognize that most countries have a mix of small-scale fisheries and large-scale fisheries, often linked through shared value chains. Moving forward requires understanding how these two parts of the sector interact, and examining cross-scale dynamics through the lens of interactive governance. Knowledge should draw from diverse worldviews and perspectives, not only statistics. It is also essential to understand the complex relationships, interactions, and power dynamics among actors, using principles such as justice, equity, and subsidiarity to guide policy and institutional decisions.

Two analytical tools were highlighted: a broadened cost–benefit analysis (CBA-2) that incorporates externalities, opportunity costs, non-monetary values, intergenerational effects, and benefit distribution; and a claim–blame analysis to assess assertions about fisheries’ social, economic, and environmental impacts, identifying who benefits, causes harm, or is affected. Careful framing is needed to avoid polarization and foster cooperative coexistence between small- and large-scale fisheries.

9. Coastal community profiling, remembering and storytelling

Coastal community profiling and storytelling approaches are being used to strengthen dialogue and trust between fishing communities and external actors, including researchers. In the Jammer Bay/Skagerrak region, analysis of four dimensions (fishing methods, operational modes, cultural models of life, and homeport communities) revealed a wide variety of fishing practices and life strategies, from cost-minimizing “thrifty” fishers to profit-seeking large-scale operators. These combinations form distinct fishing cultures, each with its own economic logic and social identity. Similar profiling in the Netherlands compared the relatively well-documented community of Urk with the less-documented Arnhemuiden, highlighting differences in infrastructure, fishing diversification, seasonal patterns, and market links, as well as challenges such as vessel loss, crew recruitment, and generational continuity.

In Germany, the brown shrimp fishery faces regulatory, environmental, and spatial pressures that threaten its survival, prompting campaigns to protect it and studies assessing the public’s willingness to pay to preserve its cultural heritage. In England, a dual-continuum study of mental health among fishers found significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety than in the general population, with inshore fishers and single-handed operators showing better well-being outcomes than mixed or offshore crews. Across these cases, cultural identity, economic pressures, environmental change, and well-being are interlinked, pointing to the importance of governance and policy that acknowledge both the socio-cultural and ecological dimensions of coastal livelihoods.

10. Gender and Intersectionality in Marine Resource Governance

Research on gender and intersectionality in marine resource governance explores how social structures, cultural traditions, and power relations shape access to resources and participation in decision-making.

In the Faroe Islands, women's participation in whaling remains minimal, with only 2% of licenses held by women, despite historical cases of all-female hunts when men were absent. Historically, women were actively excluded through physical separation, superstition, and gendered social norms. Contemporary testimonies show that many women have not considered whaling as an option, with the practice framed as a masculine activity linked to food preparation and, more recently, to nationalism in response to international protest. Health advisories since 1989 against whale meat consumption, due to pollutants, have particularly targeted women and those who may become pregnant, influencing consumption patterns.

In Scotland's fish processing industry, gendered labour divisions have shifted over time. While fishing itself remains male-dominated, shore-based processing once employed local women; from the 1980s onward, this workforce has increasingly been replaced by migrant labour, now constituting 80% of the sector. Across these cases, the intersection of gender, cultural tradition, health, migration, and governance shapes who participates in marine resource use, whose knowledge counts, and how equity is addressed in policy and practice.

11. Contesting Knowledge and Ignorance in European Marine Management

Research in this stream examined how knowledge, narratives, and value systems shape marine management in Europe, and how ignorance is produced alongside knowledge. Media was identified as a critical actor in these processes, influencing how information is framed and decisions are contested.

One case study analysed the 2023–2024 conflict over the Bothnian herring quota in Sweden. ICES advice included a possible fishery closure, prompting the European Commission to propose a moratorium. This sparked significant public and political controversy, particularly in Sweden, where fermented herring is both culturally important and tied to regional identity. Stakeholders framed their positions through competing narratives, pro-moratorium, pro-quota, and reduce/reallocate, each claiming a scientific basis but emphasising different priorities. Narrative policy analysis identified shared ground, such as the value of coastal fisheries, the vulnerability of the northern Baltic, and the role of science in policy. However, key issues (such as the economics of fisheries) were largely absent from public discourse. The debate preserved existing fisheries management structures, suggesting an incremental rather than transformative outcome.

Another Swedish case explored the performance of the Ecosystem-Based Management approach through the “8+fjords” pilot project. This initiative combined scientific and stakeholder knowledge, with strong local engagement. While local observations contributed to implementation and trust, scientific knowledge retained validating authority. The case raised questions about whose knowledge is recognised, how legitimacy is constructed, and the political dimensions of knowledge inclusion. Comparisons with Norway's 23 years of EBM highlighted that, despite collaborative rhetoric, processes often remain top-down.

The “Forgotten Fish” project investigated the revaluation of overlooked seafood species through the lens of rubbish theory, which categorises objects as durables, transients, or rubbish according to their perceived value. The project aimed to elevate certain fish to the status of “heritage food” by connecting chefs, fishers, and food advocates. While chefs incorporated these species into haute cuisine, their engagement remained within existing competitive culinary systems, rather than embracing the project’s transformative goals. Fishers were largely sceptical, and the initiative struggled to alter dominant value structures. This case illustrated how efforts to reframe value can founder when actors operate within different, and sometimes conflicting, “games” of social ordering.

12. Closing

The closing discussion stressed the importance of social science in shaping future ocean governance, particularly in restoring society’s relationship with the ocean and fostering global–local partnerships. Key priorities include addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, sustainable seafood, pollution, spatial pressures, and integrating human dimensions into policy. Storytelling and amplifying diverse voices were highlighted as tools for equity. A call was made for critical, reflective research that tackles both community-level concerns and higher-level governance, while challenging overlooked issues such as ocean militarisation.