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Fishing, Gaelic and environment in the Outer Hebrides

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In this short, somewhat polemical essay, we address the relationship between fishing, Gaelic and environment in the Outer Hebrides, and in particular, we ask two questions: firstly, why should people who care about Gaelic care about fishing? and secondly, why should people who care about fishing care about Gaelic? The short answer to both of these questions is that in the Outer Hebrides, Gaelic and fishing are inextricably bound together. A focus on Gaelic and fishing leads us inevitably to a third term – environment – and as we shall argue, Gaelic forms an essential part of a centuries-old relationship with the sea, one premised on care, custodianship and sustainability. In addressing these issues, we will be referring to ethnographic research carried out with fishermen in South Uist and Benbecula, as well as to our joint public engagement project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). We will conclude the essay by explaining why an understanding of the cultural and linguistic foundations of fishing is critical at this particular juncture in time, when the future of Scottish fisheries is facing great uncertainty in the context of Brexit and withdrawal from the Common Fisheries Policy. Now there are of course many Gaelic speakers who are not fishermen, and a fair few fishermen who do not speak Gaelic. Nevertheless, the Gaelic language anchors a cultural relationship with the sea which continues to frame sustainable fishing practice throughout the Outer Hebrides. In other words, even those who do not speak Gaelic have a vested interest in its use and in what it represents. We would add that taking the cultural and linguistic values of fishing into account, rather than simply reducing it to numbers (of either money or fish) is relevant beyond the Outer Hebrides to other areas of Scotland and beyond.

How does fishing support and nurture Gaelic?

The first thing to note is that the percentage of fishermen in the Outer Hebrides who are Gaelic speakers is significantly higher than the 52% average for the islands, with an estimated 75% of active fishermen there speaking the language, the highest for any economic sector in Scotland. Our research establishes the importance of fishing to the Gaelic language in terms of maintenance, of transmission and of oral culture. The primary finding can be summed up in the words of one Benbecula fisherman: ‘If you rejuvenate fishing, you rejuvenate Gaelic; it’s a simple as that.’

Maintenance

Despite the fact that the majority of people in the Outer Hebrides are Gaelic speakers, many of them find their opportunities to speak Gaelic outwith the context of the home

severely limited. Fishing is an exception to this general pattern. The majority of everyday communication between fishermen on the same boat takes place through Gaelic. Likewise most radio communication between fishing boats takes place in Gaelic. The collection and preparation of the catch for transportation to market also occurs primarily in Gaelic. As a fisherman fishing out of Eriskay explained, ‘The bulk of the fishermen are all Gaelic speakers. There’s a few people fishing who weren’t brought up here and didn’t have Gaelic, but even they understand it; they have to’.

Transmission

The role of fishing livelihoods in introducing young people to Gaelic-speaking environments is crucial. As one fisherman from South Uist explained, ‘At home we spoke English as my mother was from the mainland and didn’t have much Gaelic. Although I understood Gaelic well, I wouldn’t have described myself as a fluent or confident speaker. When I went out on the boats, though, well, they just spoke to me in Gaelic, nothing else. Within a year I was as fluent as anybody’. This transmission of Gaelic, beyond the family and the school, is vital to its long-term health. A Benbecula fisherman explained, ‘It’s being nurtured in fishing more than anywhere else, even schools. There’s very few jobs where you speak Gaelic all day; just fishing, so it’s being strengthened all the time. And if we get more young people into it, they will learn it [Gaelic] a lot easier, talking it at work all the time’. This situation is also true in terms of processing the catch. When the catch is landed, processed and packaged, the young people working there are immersed in a Gaelic environment, one of relatively few Gaelic-speaking public environments that they will encounter outwith school. In sum, fishing plays a pivotal and indeed unique role in the inter-generational and intra-communal transmission of Gaelic.

Oral culture

Language is more than just a means of communication; it is a repository of knowledge and of shared values. The Gaelic of Hebridean fishermen is no exception to this. There is a large amount of lore concerning the environment, marine animal species and locations which does not exist outwith oral culture. One of the clearest examples of this is the names of various fishing grounds and the accompanying features of the coastline which serve as ‘marks’ for locating them. These do not appear on maps and are not known by the non-fishing population. As one South Uist fisherman described, ‘Only fishermen, nobody else has that knowledge of the names of grounds. Even the old crofters don’t know those. Only the fishermen who fish the area know them’. He added that were fishing to be curtailed, ‘the whole Gaelic structure of the place will go. The Gaelic language that we speak, through all our work, would no longer be there. The culture, the people, everything would disappear forever’. The deep interconnections between Gaelic

and fishing are further exemplified in the huge repository of songs about fishing and the sea, some of which we discuss below in our discussion of our fishing songs project.

How does Gaelic support fishing?

The connections between fishing livelihoods and the Gaelic language described above are part of a deeply elaborated cultural understanding of fishing as central to the marine ecosystem. This was manifest in fishermen's pride in maintaining traditional knowledge of the maritime environment, and thus ensuring the sustainability and diversity of their fishing grounds over centuries.

Traditional environmental knowledge

In talking to fishermen about their engagement with the marine environment, two principal themes emerged: firstly, the cumulative nature of knowledge built up over generations and handed down from one generation to the next, and secondly, the importance of this traditional environmental knowledge to success as a fisherman. One Benbecula fishermen explained that 'My father would say to me, "You've got to go to this specific place at this specific time and there'll be lobsters." And I did that, and I'm doing that, and that's how it works. That's what my grandfather and great-grandfather did, too'. This knowledge continues to form the basis of fishing practice today, and it is dependent upon a detailed and specific understanding of marine creatures: 'You have to understand where these creatures are; it's like hunting. You've got to understand the creature you're hunting, how it thinks and then you'll catch it'. This knowledge could be productively brought into dialogue with that of marine ecologists, for as one Eriskay fisherman pointed out, 'You have to be a very good ecologist to be a fisherman, or you won't be successful'.

Local management

All of the fishermen we spoke to were clear that decisions concerning the management of the fishery should be taken at a local level by fishermen themselves. 'The people that should manage the sea are the people who are working the sea, that live in that community'. The fishermen are proud of their successful and sustainable maintenance of their fishing grounds for centuries. They all emphasised the voluntary and self-imposed nature of the most successful forms of environmental management. These practices include the return of berried females; the introduction of minimum size limits; and the seasonal closure of certain fishing grounds. These environmental practices have a pragmatic element. As one Benbecula fisherman told me concerning unsustainable practices: 'Fishermen aren't going to cut their own throats for years to come and for generations to come!' Fishing, they argue, plays a role in balancing populations and ensuring diversity. Given that the

role of human activity in actively creating and maintaining biodiversity on land has been scientifically established beyond doubt, it would certainly be worth exploring whether this holds for the seabed, too.

Community

The role of fishing in sustaining fragile Hebridean communities is significant. As one South Uist fisherman told us, ‘Once we go out of it, well, it’s going to be a major loss I would say. It would keep these islands well-populated and keep their culture’. The role of fishing in maintaining people, especially young people, in the Outer Hebrides was mentioned by all of the fishermen interviewed. Several fishermen described how the economic contribution went beyond fishing itself. An Eriskay fisherman explained that with a revitalised fishing industry, ‘people will stay in the islands, houses will be built. It generates employment for builders, in shops, and the like’.

The impact project

In 2016, we received funding from the ESRC to carry out a so-called ‘impact’ project; in other words, a public engagement project which sought to find innovative ways to present some of our ethnographic research on fishing to a broader public. This was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the mainstream public imagination of fishing is really quite negative. When you say commercial fishing to most people, the image summoned up is one of massive factory-trawlers hoovering up the sea-floor, or dumping tonnes of dead fish back into the sea, while earning millions. The reality is of course quite different. The majority of Scottish fishermen are inshore fishermen, working small one- or two-man boats within six miles of the shore, primarily for shellfish. Secondly, the Scottish Government has been implementing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which dramatically curtail fishing activity (Scottish Government n.d.). In carrying out their impact assessments for the MPAs, the Scottish Government, through its agency Marine Scotland, in our view failed to take into account the linguistic and cultural values of fishing which they were legally obliged to do under both the *Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005* and the *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*. Thirdly, Marine Scotland, despite being the public body of most relevance to the field with the highest proportion of Gaelic speakers, does not have a Gaelic language plan. Nor does it recognise the cultural, linguistic and social value of fishing communities in its plan for Scotland’s seas (Scottish Government 2015). This is in contrast to most other European countries, which do emphasise marine cultural heritage. The equivalent marine plan for Ireland, for example, emphasises the importance of preserving the cultural and linguistic heritage of fishing communities (Government of Ireland 2012). It would be unfair to be overly critical of Marine Scotland in this regard as many fishermen themselves are

not necessarily aware of the public, policy and legal recognition that their language and way of life merit. So our project sought to raise awareness of these issues not just with policy-makers and the general public, but also with fishermen themselves. What then did the project consist of? Working alongside the Western Isles Fishermen's Association we worked towards two related but distinct goals:

1. A short film, *Muir ar n-Athraichean*, which seeks to document visually the intimate connections between fishing and the Gaelic language. The film can be watched online at: <https://vimeo.com/288345185/7f93b0513a>

2. A Gaelic fishing songs project and CD. Many Gaelic songs from Uist deal understandably with the sea and fishing. Many renowned bards such as Seonaidh Caimbeul (Seonaidh Clachair) and Micheal 'Ruadh' Mac a' Phearsain, as well as many others, composed fishing songs that were a source of pride, mirth and community bonding in the *taighean-cèilidh*, where they would have been sung. However, with the decline of Gaelic as a community language and the decline of singing along with that due to changes in community work patterns and the decline of the *taigh-cèilidh*, many of the songs that were once well known in the community fell from the repertoire of the singing community. The School of Scottish Studies Archives at the University of Edinburgh are, however, rich with the fishing songs and traditions of the Southern Isles. For this project we specifically researched songs that were composed or collected in Uist and that had a connection with the fishing industry. The songs have a wealth of fishing lore and vocabulary within them and tell of how the sea dominated life and brought work and anguish, with accidents as a constant reminder of the power of the sea. We wanted, however, for this project to bring the songs that were in the Archives back to life within the community from which they had been collected and so we transcribed the songs from the recordings of the tradition-bearers in the Archives and then taught them to the community in Uist once more. This was a hugely positive experience as the community singers in Uist were keen to learn the songs and learn of the origins of the poetry and music. Importantly, the project also gave an opportunity to record an active fisherman singing 'Laoidh an Iasgair' (The Fisherman's Hymn) – a hymn that is sung annually by the fishermen and their families at the Fishermen's Mass in Eriskay. It has been heartening to experience the way that the community in Uist have grasped the opportunity to re-learn songs that were once in the local song repertoire and to strengthen the links between the Gaelic language and culture and the fishing industry once more. The 'Aig an Iasgach' album, which features community singers from Uist singing the fishing songs, has been a success in terms of the extensive airplay and the positive reviews it has garnered. However, the undoubted main success of the song element of the project has been the songs that have been brought back to life within the community and the greater awareness of the bond between the Gaelic culture and the fishing industry, from generations ago up to the present day.

Conclusion

Through this research, and the related public impact project, we hope to have demonstrated both the importance of fishing livelihoods in supporting and maintaining Gaelic language and culture, and the key role that fishermen's culturally specific and inherited environmental knowledge can play in managing the maritime environment. In many ways, the future of Gaelic and the future of fishing in the Outer Hebrides go hand in hand. Both are in a precarious position, and any negative impact through the erosion of fishermen's access to stocks could tip the balance away from any prospect of linguistic, social and economic recovery. A genuinely sustainable approach to Scotland's seas must build upon rather than work against the cultures of fishing which have sustained both fish and people for centuries.

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