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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN MARINE TOURISM DIVERSIFICATION

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Concerns surrounding overfishing and reduced fishing opportunities have driven many fishers, particularly smaller operators, to diversify into the marine tourism industry. Marine tourism is frequently promoted as a viable diversification strategy as it may offer a port in a storm to those fishers who are struggling economically, both globally and in the UK. Some research on the subject has found that transitioning from fishing to tourism work might offer valuable opportunities, but on the other side of the coin, these transitions are often neither easy nor beneficial to those being encouraged to undertake them.

Based on interviews with current and former fishers in Cornwall, our research assessed how the transition to tourism work has affected people's identity.

BEYOND THE ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

In the UK alone, the number of fishers has declined by 45% since 1994, and by 75% between 1938 and 2020, with an estimated 12,000 around the UK coast currently. There are many reasons for this decline: because the income from fishing is insufficient to be sustainable, because of overfishing, and because of increased global competition.

There can be no dispute then that for some people within the fishing industry, the transition to tourism work has been a financially lucrative one. The focus of this research was to go beyond the economic narrative and look at how transitioning from fishing to tourism work might impact people's psychological and social identity. Our research focuses on coastal and marine tourism, which has been identified as the second-largest economic contributor to the Blue Economy and is also considered one of the fastest-growing contemporary tourism sectors. Identity is at the core of decent and dignified work in tourism and must be considered within wider organisational and socio-economic



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contexts, particularly if more commercial fishers are being encouraged to pursue this path.

Tourism diversification has been practised for many years as a means of improving rural, resource-based livelihoods, and is seen as a key driver of rural economic development and regeneration. But it is a myth that tourism is always a magic wand for economic regeneration in rural communities: and the impact of this on the identities of those communities affected may be far greater than any economic gain.

In interviews with those impacted fishers in the UK, we heard that feeling valued through community recognition and support is essential to those fishers who diversify into marine tourism. Participants also talked about the fun related to interacting with customers and, where this is possible, many also expressed joy and pride if/when their boats are still used for fishing: teaching their customers to fish or taking them on wildlife watching or sightseeing trips. This clearly demonstrates that fishing remains an integral part of their cultural identity. Identity work was also apparent in narratives about how participants manage their emotions while trying to gain respect during charter trips: remaining in charge of their own vessel is also an integral part of the identity of the respondents, and related to their knowledge, skills and experience as commercial fishers.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The physical and mental strains of commercial fishing were also part of conversations in this research. The interviews revealed the importance of physical and mental health in the decision to diversify into tourism; physical and mental strength are considered to be strong markers of fishers' personal, occupational, and gendered identities. But what is interesting is that those fishers who had already diversified were more likely to acknowledge physical and mental health issues and restrictions than those commercial fishers who had not. This indicates that it is more socially acceptable within the field of marine tourism to discuss mental and physical health and well-being issues than it is to discuss these within a commercial fishing environment.

While transitioning to marine tourism for some fishers evoked emotions of failure and regret, this is not true for everyone. For some





respondents, the transition into marine tourism opened opportunities for reconstructing healthier identities, in which narratives about bodily strength are reframed to develop a new sense of body-self. The intensive work of fishing is physically and mentally demanding and some fishers are pleased to be afforded the opportunity to leave this work behind.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental aim of my research was to explore the lived experiences of fishers who diversified into tourism by looking at how this had impacted their sense of identity, rather than purely assess the economic impact of this shift, which has been the main focus of previous research into the subject matter. Findings show that marine tourism diversification experiences are dynamic, complex, multifaceted, and embedded in social encounters. By framing this shift from fishing to marine tourism in a more positive way, for example by highlighting tourism diversification as a positive experience that can enhance physical and mental health, common narratives of people feeling devalued when they transition into service-oriented and customer-facing roles of the tourism sector can be challenged.

Another important conclusion drawn from my research is that the binary understanding of identity in tourism diversification, in which people either hold a producer- or service-oriented identity should be challenged. Instead, we argue that marine diversification involves a constant complex interplay between deconstruction and reconstruction of fishing identities, in which people weave their past into the present to create coherent live narratives. When applying this conclusion to the context of fishing diversification, identities cannot be seen in isolation: they are the result of a continuous rethinking, renegotiation, and constant evaluation of our place in the world, and our social relationships with others in the environment which we inhabit.

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