

Navigating Dire Straits in the Archipelago Sea

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Sonck-Rautio, Kirsi. 2019. *The Fishers of the Archipelago Sea – Resilience, Sustainability, Knowledge, and Agency*. 65 pp. Diss. Turku: University of Turku. ISBN: 978-951-29-7824-3 (print) ISBN: 978-951-29ex-7825-0 (electronic)

This doctoral dissertation describes the changes in the livelihoods and lifestyles of coastal small-scale fishers in the Archipelago Sea (Finland). It consists of a compilation of four scholarly articles, all of which have appeared or will appear in refereed publications. One of them is co-authored with Pekka Salmi. A summary section with an extensive introduction, overview, and analysis precedes the articles. Independently and taken together, they constitute an original contribution to political ecology and maritime social science in general, and to knowledge concerning marine socio-ecological systems (SES), local ecological knowledge (LEK), and knowledge on fishers' resilience in particular.

In her summary statement, Sonck-Rautio elaborates on her research questions and objectives, research methods and experiences, the data she gathered, previous research in Finnish ethnology and anthropology relating to fisheries, and international social science literature on fisheries and political ecology literature. This is followed by a description of fishers, fisheries, and their environment and an explanation of the theories and concepts that are key to her analyses. The summary statement succeeds in pointing out connections between the articles and their underlying common themes and issues. It also gives useful contextual information about earlier studies and presents a more detailed portrayal of the research setting and ethnographic methodology than can be done in separate articles.

The fisheries are in a crisis, and Sonck-Rautio describes and analyzes the mechanisms that lead to diminishing resilience and how a clash between the knowledges of fishers, researchers, and decision-makers play a role in this. She states that one of her aims is to “find solutions for promoting transformations that will promote cultural resilience and sustainability” (p. 4). This is of course a commendable goal, but given the complexities of the issues at stake, it is easy to comprehend that there are no (easy) solutions. Sonck-Rautio foregrounds the inclusion of local ecological knowledge in knowledge production for resource management purposes as one important way forward. Although she does not refer to him, this is much in line with James C. Scott's well-known observation on the importance of *métis*, which “represents a wide

array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (1998, p. 313).

As regards the concepts she uses, Sonck-Rautio is rather critical of the notion of “adaptation” (p. 15). Although she comes up with some objections, this criticism would have merited further elaboration. This is particularly so because the term remains important in various styles of (ecological) anthropology. More importantly, elsewhere in her dissertation, the author continues to use the notion rather extensively herself, although she explicitly favors the concepts of social-ecological systems, resilience, and sustainabilities. She critically and concisely discusses them in her summary statement, distinguishing clearly between cultural resilience and cultural sustainability. The political ecology approach that Sonck-Rautio adopts is a suitable approach to address her research questions and goals.

The first article deals with the Rymättylä winter seining for herring, which ceased to exist in the late 1990s. Sonck-Rautio attempts to combine SES with an actor-network-based perspective on “animal agency.” This attempt is certainly original and laudable, but it would have merited a much more thorough and systematic treatment. Unfortunately, the author does not refer to Michel Callon’s classical 1986 article on a closely related topic. It could have served as a good point of departure. In several other respects, Sonck-Rautio’s article is somewhat superficial and ignores recent literature on multispecies ethnography. It is not always clear how the subsections are empirically and analytically connected. This is the least coherent, the least elaborated, and the least convincing article of the collection. It attempts to include non-human actors in the equation, but it does so too haphazardly to succeed.

The second article is also about the winter-seining community of Rymättylä. Compared with the first article, the author is on firm ground here. She focuses on the effects of socio-ecological change and (the need for) human adaptation – an important and highly relevant topic. The innovative aspect of this article lies in its emphasis on the importance of *cultural* sustainability, which has so far not received due attention in the subfield of political and social ecology. It presents a useful and concise conceptual overview on matters concerning adaptation and resilience before presenting data in a clear and systematic way. Although in this part of the dissertation Sonck-Rautio seems to be curiously uncritical concerning the concept of adaptation, it is an empirically sound piece that concludes with a number of highly relevant questions and thoughtful reflections.

The third article is co-authored with Pekka Salmi. It deals with changing gender – and particularly women’s – roles in Finnish small-scale fisheries households and communities. Although in the past few decades a small body

of social science literature on women in fisheries has emerged, we still know relatively little about the topic, especially concerning women's skills, (tacit) knowledge, and their importance in adaptive strategies. The article also takes a view beyond the community of Rymättylä, as it focuses on two coastal regions. It does so in a historicizing and comparative manner, showing resemblances and differences. Theoretically, the article takes its cue from (feminist) political ecology. It aims to make women's contributions and roles visible, and it succeeds in doing so. This is important for policy matters, as statistically and politically, women's work usually remains unseen and is therefore often ignored or undervalued. It is also a welcome empirical and analytical contribution to maritime social science.

The last article expounds the current crisis of the small-scale fisheries of the Finnish archipelago from a political ecology viewpoint. It is based on research in four communities. This is the most ethnographic contribution of the thesis, in which Sonck-Rautio presents her empirical data in a substantive manner. She shows the importance of local ecological knowledge and quotes her interlocutors at some length. It makes it clear that she has done extensive anthropological fieldwork, a fact that is slightly less obvious in the preceding articles. She explicitly addresses the issue of *cultural* resilience again. She does so mainly from the fishers' (or the fishing communities') point of view. The author goes into the destabilizing impact of policy-making on the fishers' way of life and – picking up on an earlier theme – their local knowledge. In addition to fishers, her interlocutors also include members of fishing households, researchers, administrators, policy-makers, and others. She presents three case studies that focus on apprehensions that fishers express about their livelihood and lifestyles. They revolve around resource management and conservation issues concerning grey seals, cormorants, and pikeperch, respectively. Many fishers regard regulations as unjustified and unfair. However, their views and local ecological knowledge are usually ignored or contested by policy-makers, administrators, and scientists. This gives rise to resentment and reluctance to cooperate with researchers, and also leads to controversies and divisions between stakeholders. Descriptions of similar conflicts are familiar in the political ecology and maritime social science literature. The additional value of Sonck-Rautio's contribution lies in her reflections on the complex nature of the conflict, including the fact that each new regulation seems to create new problems instead of solving the initial ones. This is a fine piece of work, even though it might have merited a reconnection to the social science literature for a broader perspective. Interestingly, the gender dimension that is so important in the previous article is missing entirely.

Overall, the dissertation contributes to knowledge about social-ecological systems, local ecological knowledge, resilience, and sustainability among small-scale fishers in Finland – and beyond. The social relevance is evident throughout and can be summarized as “giving voice to fishers.” Due to it being a compilation of articles, the dissertation is slightly repetitive. It also makes for an imbalance, since some issues are dealt with in much more detail than others. The conceptual and theoretical coherence would probably have benefited had the format been a monograph. However, for those interested in small-scale fisheries in Finland and beyond, maritime social science, or political ecology, Sonck-Rautio’s dissertation presents many matters of interest and food for thought.

AUTHOR

Rob van Ginkel, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. His research has focused on maritime cultures, European ethnology, national identity formation, and the memorialization and commemoration of the Second World War in the Netherlands.

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