# Deep Identity, Shallow Time: Sustaining a Future in Victorian Fishing Communities

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Like commercial fishers everywhere, it seems, those living in coastal communities of Victoria perceive themselves to be under threat from recreational fishers, environmentalists, imposed management regimes, and modernisation and globalisation of the industry. In responding to these threats they appeal to conventional props of tradition—to continuity in genealogical time, affiliation with place and specialised knowledge and practice. This seems paradoxical, given that most established fishers in Victoria are first or second generation members of an industry that, through its 150-year history, has been characterised by innovation and mobility. That paradox, we argue, is more apparent than real. Fisher identity is grounded primarily in engagement with an environment that is not familiar to outsiders. The paradox arises because fishers, like others who seek to sustain a future in the face of threat from outsiders, reshape strongly felt identity as tradition.

## Introduction

In May 2000, we attended a public meeting, called by commercial fishers working lake, inshore and deepwater fleets, to discuss concerns related to proposed marine parks from which the fishers would be excluded. That meeting marked the commencement of our anthropological research with Victorian fishing communities. In the sometimes heated context of the meeting we were impressed, first, by the fact that people articulated a strong sense of their identity as fishers and, second, by their appeal to a lineage of fishers, and to continuity in place and of practice, in justification of that identity.

In subsequent conversations with many fishers, the appeal to tradition emerged as paradoxical. It did so on two counts. First, because most Victorian fishers are either first or second generation participants in the local industry and, secondly, because mobility and innovation have characterised that industry since it was first established 150 years ago. In short, the appeals to genealogy, to place and to practice were not substantiated by most of the actual histories of fishers with whom we talked.

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In this article we identify current threats to the life-style of small-scale commercial fishers in Victoria, and comment on ways in which they respond to those threats and assert their identity as fishers. It is through these responses and assertions that fishers strive to reproduce lifestyle, family and community within a globalising world of inevitable change. We discuss the seemingly paradoxical conjunction of appeal to tradition in an industry that, in Australia, is historically young and characterised by mobility and innovation.[2] Of course, it may well be the case that this apparent paradox lurks in the discourse of fishing elsewhere. But the comparatively brief history of commercial fishing in Australia, and the fact that much of that history has coincided with a period of extraordinary technical innovation, gives the peculiarity of an appeal to a fishing 'tradition' a salience that may not be so evident elsewhere. We do not doubt the strength of the group identity that fishers express, nor do we question the authenticity of their appeal to tradition.[3] Rather, the paradox demands that we reconsider both what we, and they, may understand by these terms and how they are related. At the close of this article we argue that fisher identity is grounded primarily in performance—in engagement with the environment and skills that constitute fishing—and show how, in a context of threat, fishers, like others who seek to sustain a future in the face of threat from outsiders, affirm identity by drawing from entirely conventional props of tradition. The source of the paradox that has motivated this article may be understood in terms of a re-reading, by fishers, of identity as tradition.

## Background

Commercial fishing was established in Victoria in the mid-1800s. A growing population in the capital city of Melbourne provided an expanding market for fish, and as more efficient systems of transport—motorised ships, rail and road—became available, fishing communities developed at suitable coastal locations (e.g. Raison 1987; Synan 1989; Warson 2000). Seafood Industry Victoria (2001), the peak body of the State fishing industry, lists 14 fishing ports in the State. If Melbourne is excluded, population sizes vary from 125 to 145,000 people. We work primarily with fishers at Lakes Entrance and Corner Inlet (the latter comprises Port Albert, Port Welshpool and Port Franklin) to the east of Melbourne and Apollo Bay to the west of Melbourne. In these coastal communities, local fishing fleets vary from about 10 to as many as 90 boats and the towns which support and are supported by these fleets vary from 125 to 6000 people. Tourism (including recreational fishing), timber and farming, together with commercial fishing provide the primary economic base of these communities.

At both Lakes Entrance and Corner Inlet the fishing fleets comprise both bay and inlet fishers (including eel fishers) and a variety of ocean-going vessels including Danish seiners, purse seiners, inshore and deepwater board trawlers and others that target shark, scallop, squid and lobster. The Apollo Bay fishing fleet is small with about 20 boats equipped to take either lobster, shark or both in the waters of Bass Strait. At all locations, fishers often change target in response to seasonal or irregular fluctuations in availability of fish. These diverse fisheries are variously subject to Commonwealth and State jurisdiction and to often changing input and output regulations. We have not yet spoken with participants in the abalone or wrasse fisheries, or with either the bay and inlet bait fishery or the aquaculture industry. In 1999-2000 the landed value of wild fish in Victoria was about 122 million dollars (87 million from Victorian fisheries and 35 million from

Commonwealth fisheries with, approximately, 50 per-cent of the total from abalone); aquaculture added another 14 million dollars (Seafood Industry Victoria 2001).

Virtually from the time commercial fishing commenced in Australia, the industry has been subject to on-going State and Commonwealth inquiries, legislated changes to management regimes and a mix of studies that have prioritised either the demographic status of fish populations, the economic status of fisheries or, in seeking to gather both under one umbrella, management procedures thought to enhance biological sustainability and economic efficiency (e.g. Young 1995; Kearney 2001). Our research is the first anthropological study of commercial fishing communities in Victoria and one of few in Australia (Wright 1992; Stella 1996; 1998). By contrast, maritime anthropology has a long history in much of the rest of the world (e.g. Andersen and Wadel 1972; Acheson 1981; Cordell 1989; McGoodwin 1990; Pálsson 1991; Crean and Symes 1996). Interpretations presented here derive from interviews and conversations in both formal and informal settings with more than 100 fishers and, sometimes, family members together with observations recorded at meetings, a protest march and court cases. We deal primarily with the perceptions of boat owners and skippers, rather than deckhands or support personnel. Owners and skippers have a significant investment of economic and intellectual capital in the fishing industry (cf. Wright 1992). They are thus strongly motivated to speak out in response to perceived threats to the future of the lifestyle and communities that sustain their investment.

## Perceptions of threat

In Victoria, as is common through much of the developed world (McGoodwin 1990), many commercial fishers perceive themselves, their families, and the small communities in which they live, to be under threat. That threat comes less from declining fish stocks—a problem that fishers acknowledge is, at least sometimes, real and actively seek to address (e.g. Corner Inlet Fisheries Habitat Association 2000)—than from a variety of interconnected conflicts with recreational fishers, environmentalists, managers and the more diffuse forces of globalisation (cf. Smith 1988:45).

A concern with these conflicts dominates public comments by fishers, and emerged repeatedly in our interviews, but also pervaded conversations among fishers in situations where we were peripheral observers. Fishers are, of course, diverse in their interests, expectations and understandings with respect to the many factors which influence their livelihood and economic viability (cf. Jentoft and Davis 1993). They do not all perceive the implications of particular conflicts in the same way. There is, for example, much variation in strong opinions held with regard to the introduction of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), which reflects, at least in part, variation in the actual or expected impact of quotas on the incomes and practices of different fishers (cf. Connor and Alden 2001; McCay 1995). Some oppose the introduction of ITQs on the grounds that they pose a threat to 'life style'. Others express tentative support for possible ecological payoffs to stock. And a few assert that ITQs are both inevitable and economically sensible as a management strategy; as one fisher put it, 'this is the way of the world now'. But all agree in expressing concern about the manner in which changes are being implemented. A sense of conflict with outsiders was evident in the comments of all fishers we have met, irrespective of their economic status or fishing focus, and whether or not they were politically active in resisting the perceived threats. The most commonly articulated concerns are summarised here.

In bays and inlets of Victoria, the annual take of recreational fishers equals that of commercial fishers (Norman 2001). The contribution of recreational fishers to local economies is arguably greater than that of the commercial fishers and, by virtue of both their numbers and organisational skills, the former wield considerable political power (Kearney 2001; cf. Pool and Stuart 1988 re the salmon fishery in New Brunswick). Those who actively oppose commercial fishing assert that the benefit from 'excessively' large annual takes accrues to very few individuals—with the implication of selfishness—and propose that, in the interests of preserving fish for future generations, commercial netting in bays and inlets should be banned (e.g. Barr 2000). Commercial fishers complain that the impact of recreational fishers on fish stocks is understated, that their own activities contribute much to the economic viability of local communities and that, relative to recreational fishers, they themselves lack effective access to relevant decision-making processes.

Secondly, proposed (and subsequently successful) legislation concerning the establishment of 24 no-take marine protected areas included the added rub, for inshore fishers, that the government tried to simultaneously legislate against claims for compensation resulting from loss of income or livelihood (e.g., Environment Conservation Council 1999; Allen, T. 2001; Garrett 2001; Rollins and Baker 2001). With some justification, local fishers argued that scientific assertions about benefits of the proposed parks lacked rigorous empirical support, that likely social consequences of the proposal were not assessed, that consultation was inadequate, that denial of substantiated claims for compensation would be both unconstitutional and immoral, and that alternative proposals put forward by fishers were largely ignored (Baedle et al. 2001).[4] In May 2001, to publicise their disadvantage, 1,500 fisherfolk (fishers, family members and sympathisers) marched in protest on the Victorian State Parliament.

Thirdly, Victorian fishers are increasingly subject to both more, and more complex, management strictures and to increasing surveillance of their compliance with those strictures (e.g. Healey and Hennessey 1998). These management impositions have been combined with on-going reorganisation of Commonwealth and State responsibilities for different sectors of the fishing industry (e.g. Grieve and Richardson 2001; Tilzey and Rowling 2001). By the early 1990s, the 21 species of fish which predominated in the trawl fishery were subject to ITQs. Within each species, the kilogram value of quota units are adjusted annually to reflect variation in total allowable catches (TACs) which are themselves ideally based on stock assessment. In 2001, ITQs were introduced in both the shark and lobster fisheries. Individual transferable quotas in the Commonwealth sector of the scallop fishery are expected to follow in 2003. Fishers complain that stock assessments are suspect, that annual variation in TACs render income from fishing increasingly insecure, that contrary to advice they had received in negotiations existing input controls were not lifted when output controls were introduced, that ITQs increase the incidence of both high-grading and dumping and, in recognition of likely long-term effects, that fishing as a life-style is endangered (Smith 1988:36; see also Davis 1991, re Atlantic Canadian fisheries).[5]

Finally, the fishing communities of rural Victoria are threatened by modernisation and globalisation of the industry. Many factors come into play here. Shorter and longer term stock collapses and associated closures and entry restrictions have, in the past two decades, reduced the number of participants and contributed to consolidation of the industry about fewer, but larger-scale, operators.[6] Technological changes which allow larger, better-equipped boats to travel further and fish to greater effect have the short-term

outcome that smaller operators are competitively disadvantaged and the longer-term outcome that the economically most successful fishers, with larger boats and larger catches, may find it necessary or advantageous to remove their operations from small coastal ports with potentially deleterious consequences for the viability of local rural communities. Individial transferable quotas—particularly in a context of year to year uncertainty regarding stock and markets—are likely to exaggerate these trends (e.g. McCay 1995; Pálsson and Helgasson 1996). They will do so, particularly, in contributing to the commodification, not of fish, but of the ability to fish; indeed, in the final analysis, the commodification of the labour of those who fish. Finally, a globalising market forces fishers into competition with international operators, not just for consumers but for local stocks of fish (e.g. Allen, A. 2001). The fishers recognise these threats to their future but, as always in a global economic world, many are active and often willing agents in the processes which ultimately envelop them (cf. Menzies 1997, re Breton fisheries).

In summary, recreational fishers seek to close particular commercial fisheries, in order to reserve fish for themselves and their children to catch; environmentalists seek to close particular areas to all fishing, in order to preserve marine biodiversity for all people to enjoy; managers seek to define the right to fish as a commodity in order to ensure biological sustainability and economic efficiency; and globalisation introduces competition for fish stocks and markets from players who have no commitment to local communities. Fishers dispute the evidence and arguments on which each of these groups base their case for intervention. But more than this they object to those whom they see as outsiders assuming the authority to dictate what fishers can and cannot do with their lives.

There is a sense, then, in which fishers find themselves in a position not unlike that of Fourth-World peoples—encapsulated by wider structures from which they are disenfranchised, structures which increasingly deny them their right to self-determination (cf. Kirsch 2001). They see themselves as subject to agendas whose origins lie elsewhere and whose outcomes may be to displace them from a way of life they value. Two comments from the fishers themselves capture this well. From a fifth generation shark fisher writing to the e-list FISHFOLK, a list where fishing industry members, managers, fisheries scientists and social scientists engage in often heated discussion: 'My world is controlled by people I have never met, theories I cannot make sense of and science that contradicts the knowledge passed down to me which I use everyday to catch fish'. And, more succinctly, from a second generation bay and inlet fisher at a meeting called by fishers to discuss proposed Marine Parks legislation and to launch their own counter proposal: 'I've always said that "I am a hunter". But now I'm feeling like the hunted'.

## Claiming identity

Fishers have responded to these perceived threats with community meetings, marches on State parliament, challenges in court to the legality of management decisions, support for TV and radio documentaries, letters to the press and so forth.[7] These are overt responses; they serve to unite fishers who often have different agendas and they politicise agreed concerns within a public arena. Here, however, we are more interested in the ways that fishers draw on and reshape previous understandings to secure their position as individuals, families and communities in the context of real or imagined challenges to their lives (cf. Minnegal and Dwyer 1999). To understand these changing constructions of identity, we must turn to the ways fishers present their claims.

Here we report comments by fishers that are explicitly addressed to a non-fisher audience. But that audience varies. Fishers assert their legitimacy in the mass media, for consumption by a general audience that they hope will recognise and support the validity of those claims. Similar assertions are documented in submissions to parliamentary committees, to fisheries management bodies and in court records and on one occasion were made at a public meeting addressed by both fishers and environmentalists. We, too, were included in the audience for these assertions, as potentially sympathetic academics who might be able to influence decisions by those in authority, or speak with an authority of our own that the wider (voting and fishing) public might recognise as free of vested interest in the industry. The perspectives outlined in this section emerged strongly in our earlier, more formal interviews and were expressed, somewhat to our surprise, by fishers of very different backgrounds and with very different prospects.

In asserting the legitimacy of their right to decide their own futures, fishers seek first to establish a continuity with the past. They may declare themselves, or their children, to be second, third, fourth or fifth generation fishers, assert that their own experience of fishing is of, for example, fifty years standing, or establish temporal continuity by conveying a sense of genealogical connection to juniors in the industry. As one older, first generation fisher told a journalist investigating attitudes to the introduction of ITQs for shark fishing: 'A lot of the young ones, I've known them since they came down to the wharves in their mother's arms ...' (Gough 2000). In less public contexts, as in conversations with us, fishers may assert the importance of historical ties by suggesting—of others or even themselves—that, with only 10 to 20 years experience, someone 'is new to fishing' and, thus, cannot comment with authority on the practices or concerns of the industry. The detail of constructions varies with the particulars of individual circumstance. In all cases, however, those circumstances are read in ways that emphasise historical continuity (cf. Feld and Basso 1996).

Past connections to place, too, have a role in these constructions. Fishers identify the time that ancestors first arrived at, and fished from, particular localities and recount events from the life-histories of those forebears, events that place them at particular sites. These stories from the past become part of the folklore of local communities and, in appropriate circumstances, are drawn on to validate the connections of fishers who are not themselves descendants of the protagonists. In telling them, fishers demonstrate knowledge of, and by implication participation in those events. In effect, they identify with place by taking an essence of other people's history as their own. The comparatively brief history of commercial fishing in Australia facilitates such appropriation, for those who played a founding role are tangible personalities, actually known by many of those fishing today, or still alive to communicate the events of that founding. The tangibility that a brief history confers on its central players, and on the alliances and antagonisms generated, does limit the potential to mythologise the past, to manipulate memory in order to justify current activities. This may explain the strong affiliation that some Victorian fishers express to a more abstract global fishing community, with a history that stretches further into the past and thus is more readily romanticised. But that history, having been produced elsewhere, cannot directly speak to the implications of change in Victoria. It plays little part in the discourses that are the focus of this paper, which draw explicitly on local history.

As knowledge of local history implicates an individual in that history, so knowledge of place and practice, too, establishes a claim to these elements of identity. When talking with fishers we have been told numerous details of the natural history of the animals they target, of the techniques they employ and of their understanding of the geography of

places where they fish. Specialised knowledge—the 'secret knowledge' of fishers—sets them apart from those who do not fish. This is knowledge that is not to be found in books but comes only with practice, skills that may be acquired only through direct engagement with its subject. As one person said: 'you can't take on someone with no experience, they know nothing of equipment, and ropes, and fish, have never seen a fish and don't know what they are looking at'. To get that experience 'they have to grow up with it'.[8] Or, as another expressed it, good fishers are those who 'just think like a fish'.[9]

These claims to history, association with place and specialised knowledge—to knowledge gained through personal experience, learning from older, skilled fishers, or 'thinking like a fish'—are reinforced by negative statements about scientists and managers. By highlighting perceived failures of the latter, fishers affirm their own position as specialist artisans. 'In the past', one fisher told us, 'fisheries officers used to be failed fishermen. They might not have been good at catching fish, but at least they had a feel for what is involved. Now they are all academics who have never moved out of Canberra. They have no idea of the complexity of the real world. ... They are a bunch of idiots, and getting worse'. And from another: 'It is people who have never been, never seen, never done who are telling fishers how to do it'. He made just one concession to the scientists; they knew the scientific names of the fish and he did not. A third was less convinced, asserting that a new appointee to a board of management 'thought that scallops were a kind of vegetable'. Analogous comments, again, came from all fishers to whom we spoke, from the largest to smallest operators. They were expressed not just to us but also in forums where fishers, scientists and managers interact. Essentially the same opinions of fisheries scientists and managers—of 'fishcrats'—are held by many fishers in the United States (Smith 1990).

Finally, the diverse expressions of identity that we have depicted in terms of connections to people, place, and practice cohere under the often repeated rubric that fishing is a 'way of life', a 'life style', a 'culture'. Fishermen, we were told, are 'like a brotherhood', they know all about each other, they look after each other and they help each other because they all face common difficulties. But the consequences of brotherhood may be negative. As one man expressed it, at a public meeting: 'We are ethnics. We own the land, we own the boats, we own the fishing rights. In other places they bring in the army with guns to move you on. Here they do it with legislation.'

## Too much tradition, too little time?

It is clear, from the foregoing, that Victorian fishers adhere to and promote an image of their identity as fishers—as a community of fishers—through appeal to entirely conventional representations of tradition: these are our forebears, this is our place and this is the work we know best and others know not at all. As we began to assemble details of personal histories, however, these claims increasingly appeared problematic. While undoubtedly accurate in the case of some fishers and fisher families, this generic representation does not hold for the fishing community as a whole.

At Corner Inlet, the history of commercial fishing spans approximately 150 years. At Lakes Entrance, commercial fishing commenced 120 years ago. And at Apollo Bay, whaling began 160 years ago but people there did not turn to commercial harvesting of fin-fish until the early 1900s. Relative to Europe or North America the history of the fishing industry in Australia, and of the coastal communities where it is based, must be judged to be very short. Of course there were fishers here for many thousands of years

before this time (e.g. Bowdler 1976, Walters 1992). But these are not the ancestors of current fishers, and to date they have been effectively excluded from playing a significant part in the modern industry (e.g. Sharp 1998). When the focus is with settler society—with those who, at the present time, perform as fishers—it is apparent that construction of a fisher identity around genealogical connections, place and practice has happened relatively rapidly.

This last conclusion is reinforced by the fact that recruitment to local fishing communities has been spread across time. There are in fact some fourth and fifth generation fishers in these communities. In a sample of 69 current boat owners and skippers for whom we are confident of genealogical data, however, only 33 per-cent trace connections within Australian fishing families beyond the second generation (those connections include both paternal and maternal links for this is how the fishers themselves express their ties to fishing). In fact, 48 per-cent of our sample claim no prior family connection to fishing.[10] Through the past 50 to 60 years, within Victoria, several phases of non-genealogical recruitment are apparent: Australian residents entering the industry in the decade or so after the second World War; European migrants entering in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s; and entrepreneurial owners, without previous experience as fishers, entering and eventually exiting the scallop fishery during a short-term boom in the 1980s.

Relatively high mobility has always characterised the fishing industry in Australia. Nearly all the fishers to whom we have spoken have skippered boats out of other ports. Many have worked in at least two and sometimes as many as five different States, and in several different fisheries. There are exceptions: a few bay and inlet fishers have not experienced ocean fishing, and some scallop fishers and, perhaps, many abalone fishers have limited experience outside their specialty. In general, however, the changing fortunes of particular fishing locations and fisheries in Victoria has been regularly accompanied by both entry to and exit from the industry and, particularly, by much relocation between ports of established fishing families.

The dynamism of the Victorian fishing industry is evident also in the way that fishers, individually and collectively, have actively pursued exploration for new fishing grounds, development of new fishing techniques, and strategies to enhance the market value of their catch. Practices have changed regularly, not just in response to external imperatives of declining stocks or increasingly competitive markets, but as fishers experimented on the basis of their own observations in local waters. This dynamism may be illustrated by a brief account of changes to the primary fisheries operating in the Gippsland Lakes and from their eventual port at the town of Lakes Entrance (Synan 1989; Seafood Industry Victoria 2001). Lake fishing was the first commercial venture here, commencing in the 1870s. This has continued, though the number of licensed fishers has contracted from more than 100 in 1892, to 18 at the present time. By the turn of the nineteenth century beach seining for Australian salmon (*Arripes trutta*) was important but this eventually gave way to an emphasis on barracouta which were most commonly captured by poling. A lobster fishery commenced in the 1930s and Danish seine trawling became important in the 1940s. Through the next two decades, barracouta disappeared and new fisheries developed around shark, scallop and pilchards. The last were overfished and the fishery and local processing factory closed. An inshore prawn fishery and deep sea trawling for fin fish began in the mid-1970s and, as a late addition, squid fishing commenced in 1988.

In response to perceived threat, fishers publicly affirm their identity as fishers and, in a world where identity provides a powerful political lever, assert the right to continue to

perform as fishers. These affirmations of identity are expressed in terms of a strong allegiance to conventional notions of tradition. But the realities of genealogical depth and recruitment, combined with relatively high levels of mobility and innovative response to crisis and opportunity, are at odds with representations of identity that are grounded in those notions of tradition. This apparent mismatch between expressed ideals and actuality is not a matter of authenticity. Fishers were not misrepresenting the details of their personal histories. They simply emphasised, in the telling, the elements of continuity those stories held. But the identity of fishers does not reside in continuity alone. The 'mismatch' arises, we will argue, because the identity of fishers is ultimately constructed in ways that are inaccessible to non-fishers and, thus, in public forums, at least, must be communicated via more familiar surrogate markers grounded in connections to people, place and past practice.

In later, more informal, discussions with fishers—particularly those where we were peripheral, incidental observers at gatherings of fishers on the wharves, where fishers were talking to each other rather than to outsiders—a very different way of talking about fisher identity emerged.

## The basis of identity

Identity is always relational (e.g. Barth 1969). We identify with others on the basis of a commonality in the ways we relate to some other element of the world in which we live. That identity may lie in the people from whom we trace descent, the place from which we came or in which we now live, or the religious or bureaucratic institutions that frame our lives. But it is not the focal people or place or institution that constitute the essence of identity. Rather, it is the fact that our engagement with these takes the same form. In the case of fishers, the essence of identity lies in a shared engagement with a particular domain, an engagement in which your life, and your life-style, ultimately depend on your ability to deal with the eccentricities of that domain—the sea (cf. Pool and Stuart 1988).

Thus a fisher could tell us that his father was not a fisher, though he held a skipper's ticket and at times skippered boats for a friend. He was not a fisher because he did not depend on the sea for his living, his income from fishing was not 'needed' given his ongoing employment as an engineer. So too with recreational fishers and marine scientists; the former may risk their lives at sea but their livelihood is not dependent on doing so, the latter may derive their livelihood from knowledge of the sea but do not generally risk their lives on a daily basis by venturing out onto it. These people are not 'fishers'.

Even deckhands, in this sense, have a somewhat ambivalent status as fishers. Though crucial to any fishing enterprise, their engagement with the sea is mediated by, and subject to, the decisions of, owners and skippers. This may be a transitional phase. All fishers have spent time as deckhands, and some deckhands may be recognised as in the process of becoming fishers—but they are not so yet. One man who, after many years working on the boats of others, at last managed to buy his own boat told us that he had 'just joined the industry'. Those who remain deckhands all their lives are looked at somewhat askance (cf. Wright 1992). Though they may, at the time, be making a living by going to sea, deckhands are free to move on and seek alternative forms of employment in a way that someone who has invested in a boat is not.[11]

It is for this reason, too, that fishers see the emergence of industrial fisheries—where skippers work for wages and have no stake in the boat—as threatening the survival of a fisher identity. The reverse is also true: a person who owns a boat but does not himself fish

is not held to be a fisher. As one such man expressed it—and he had owned a boat for perhaps twenty years—'I'm not a fisherman, I've never been a fisherman, my son is a fisherman. I accidentally ended up with a boat which has gone well for me. My wife runs the business. I do the maintenance on the boat.'

It is only through engaging with the sea as a fisher does—through actual experience of the environment and acquisition of skills familiar to fishers, together with a commitment to and dependence on their practice—that a person may become a member of the 'community of fishers'. The son of a fourth generation fisher who does not himself fish has no claim to that identity.

Our argument problematises the emphasis that is placed on tradition when fishers themselves publicly assert their identity. For if it is performance that defines a fisher, and not the particulars of genealogy and place, of targets and techniques, how should we understand the prominence accorded these? Our interpretation has three parts. The first relates to, and questions, common-place Western assumptions about tradition to which fishers subscribe as much as anyone else. The second relates to a particularity of fishing that constitutes it (for fishers and their audience alike) as an occupation ripe for ideological inclusion within the category of the traditional. And the third returns us to the context of threat in which the claims are made and to the fact that claims to tradition are always political (e.g. Sahlins 1999:403). The challenge to sustain a fishing identity and, thereby, assert rights to a future as a fisher demands that what is publicly communicated about that identity should be readily accessible to those whose engagement with, and thus experience of, the world is different.

## The place of tradition

Tradition is the orientation that comes through shared engagement. It is the tangible expression of an underlying identity. A tradition cannot be abstracted from, or transmitted in isolation from, the engagement that informs it. It is predicated on a directing of attention, not on a statement of abstract principles (cf. Ingold 2000). Thus, what is orally transmitted from mother to daughter may be considered traditional, but what is textually transmitted from scholars to students is not; what is transmitted between members of a bounded community located in a particular place is traditional, but what is transmitted within the public domain between members of society at large is not; and what is transmitted about the medicinal properties of local plants and herbs is traditional, whereas what is transmitted about the workings of the internal combustion engine is not. The above examples are merely attempts to illustrate a point of view widely but diffusely expressed in popular discourse. Within an academic context, however, the attempt to specify 'the traditional' (often re-labelled 'local knowledge' or 'indigenous knowledge') has become a matter of renewed concern, since ownership of such knowledge is now often in dispute. Thus Greaves, for example, defines indigenous knowledge in a manner that closely mirrors our understanding of the connotations of the traditional:

> The indigenous knowledge at issue here is *collective* knowledge. Assembled by past generations and passed down to its present inheritors, indigenous knowledge is, in the main, something more than matter-of-fact information. Rather, it is usually invested with a sacred quality and systematic unity, supplying the foundation on which members of a traditional culture sense their *communitas*, personal identity, and ancestral anchorage. It provides a distinctive world-view of which outsiders are rarely aware. (1996:26, original emphasis)

Victorian fishers, of course, cannot make the claim to being 'indigenous' (see below).[12] But as Ellen and Harris point out, 'with its strong moral loading, "indigenous" might seem the least useful way to describe a particular kind of knowledge'; in the end they opt for 'traditional' (2000:3).

Where the transmission of knowledge is appropriated by non-practitioners, that knowledge and the lived experience it informs are removed from the realm of tradition. It is for this reason that fishers resist attempts to remove responsibility for the transmission of skills and knowledge from their hands, into the formal contexts of college-based training programs. These programs entail an abstraction of knowledge from the engagement in which it is generated, with the result that fishing ceases to be a tradition and becomes a profession. From this perspective, tradition does not exist independently of and prior to the individual. It is constituted in and through engagement, and is reproduced through the guiding of engagement by others who direct the attention of new participants—of apprentices—to that which matters (Pálsson 1994).

But common-sense understandings do not tend to such broad generalisations. We see, rather, a tendency to conflate process and product. The legitimacy of 'tradition' becomes entangled with the forms of engagement that are prioritised in constructing identities within a particular society or group. It is identity predicated on a shared engagement with people and places of the past that is valued in our society, not an engagement with the contemporary world. That emphasis can be traced, we suspect, to the historical determinants of life-chances in a society shaped by feudalism and empire-building. Modernity, too, may play a part in shaping that emphasis. People have always lived in the present, but over the last hundred years or so we have been conscious of living in a present that is significantly different from the past and which we expect to be significantly different from the future. Thus we become self-consciously 'modern' and create a break between that modernity which it is our fate self-consciously to fashion—which is, as it were, 'in our hands'—and a 'traditional' past in which the present merely reiterated what had been and what would be. It is perhaps that self-consciousness, that sense of being obliged to make things up as we go, that creates a nostalgia for the traditional past that we, in a typically romantic way, also locate among those whom history appears to have by-passed. Whatever its origins, however, it is the consequences of this focus on shared ancestry and origins that concern us here. For it presupposes that tradition, too, is necessarily grounded in the people and places of the past.

Things are not deemed to be traditional because they have been handed down and have a history; rather, they are deemed to have a history because they are experienced as tradition (e.g. Daly 1990; cf. Keesing 1989, Thomas 1992). To legitimise that experience to those who do not share it, however, the history must be specifiable.

Such an implicit understanding of the traditional reverberates through the comments of Victorian fishers. The recognition of its origins in engagement is apparent in their emphasis on 'secret knowledge', on local knowledge, and on knowledge derived from their own and their elders' cumulative experience of the sea (as opposed to the abstract and academic knowledge of distanced scientists and experts). It is apparent also in their emphasis on boundedness, both in terms of belonging to a particular locality, and in terms of adhering to a particular 'way of life' or 'culture'—a boundedness that sometimes prompts the politically powerful image of being 'ethnics'. But once such a discourse is embarked on, it also—and inevitably, in our society—brings with it references to historical continuity and to genealogical depth, references that can, after all, always be instantiated even if they cannot be generalised.

Here, then, is the first plank in our argument. Fishers in Victoria do indeed share a tradition, one that has a history much older than the communities in which they now live—a tradition predicated on the fact that all have learned their skills and established their investment in the industry through an engagement with the sea guided by those who fished before them. That this sense of tradition is expressed not in terms of a shared engagement but in terms of historical continuity is not surprising. Fishers are doing no more than speaking the language of tradition as they find it.

But this leaves a larger question unanswered: namely, why that language should seem so self-evidently appropriate to fishing? Here it is necessary to look beyond the experience of fishers themselves, to the ideational context within which their lives and experiences are granted special status. Fishers, after all, are scarcely the only people whose occupation may, at least on occasion, be transmitted hereditarily, and who may possess a strong sense of regional attachment. So do country-town lawyers or accountants—or, for that matter, butchers, bakers and even employees of the recently failed Australian airline company, Ansett—especially if theirs is a 'family firm'. These latter may well talk privately, within their family or to fellow practitioners, of a 'family tradition'; they are less inclined to invite ridicule by public assertions that law or accountancy constitute 'traditional ways of life'. The difference, we assert, lies in the fact that fishers are recognised—by others as well as themselves—as a category 'apart', as people defined by a distinct form of engagement with the world or, rather, through their engagement with a distinct domain in that world.

The sea, unlike the land, is not the 'proper' abode of people (e.g. Pálsson 1990). As Acheson (1981:276) wrote: 'the sea is a dangerous and alien environment, and one in which man is poorly equipped to survive. It is a realm that man enters only with the support of artificial devices ... and then only when weather and sea conditions allow'. It is an ambiguous domain, and those who live with it are socially ambiguous. Ambiguous, we argue, in that they may be marked for avoidance and censure, for veneration or, simultaneously, for both. Ambiguous too because they are deemed to have a closer relation with 'nature' than either normally befits a human being, or is nowadays the privilege of most human beings to claim. They themselves assert their status as 'hunters', others sometimes view their way of life as 'primitive'. In short, the sea and those who make their living by venturing upon it, have become—and for some very considerable time in the Western world—romanticised (e.g. Conrad 1924).

Fishers carry, decentred from the mainstream society that both extols and disparages them, a peculiarly heavy symbolic loading in which 'tradition' almost automatically conjures up what society feels it has lost. In this they are not unlike other groups that have escaped, or that live on the margins of, the 'proper' abode of people; like Gypsies, desert nomads or Amazonian Indians who are, so often, deemed to enjoy an unmediated rapport with nature. The difference is that Gypsies, desert nomads or Amazonian Indians are, as it were, certified 'ethnic groups'. Fishers are not. Like most other occupations, and despite the rhetoric of familial continuity (part and parcel of 'the traditional'), fishing is open to recruitment. But interestingly, within the Victorian fishing industry the process of recruitment seems often to have been based on an internalisation of precisely that romantic discourse of engagement with 'the other' to which we have alluded. Young men (and occasionally young women) drifted into fishing communities and became fishers, or set out for fishing communities to become fishers, because they were susceptible to, or already in the grip of, a preconstructed ideal. And first generation fishers talk of having 'fallen in love with the sea', of 'wanting to be free', and pride themselves on the

unfettered individualism commonly associated with their occupation.[13] Theirs is thus a consummated love affair with what has independently been constituted as an alluring, if dangerous, object of desire. They have achieved an engagement with the world beyond people of which others only dream.

The second plank of our argument falls into place. Fishers identify, and are identified by others, as such because of a shared engagement with a domain that transcends people and place. Indeed, the source community of the understandings that inform this identity is nowadays anything but local. It is global, and maintained through travel, conferences, magazines and increasingly the Internet—an international and 'virtual' community of 'those who fish', a community whose mutual recognition allows the pooling of history and traditions whose transferable sum then far exceeds that of any local community.[14]

And yet, while the engagement that constitutes fishing may have been extolled in the past it is now increasingly vilified by outsiders as exploitative. Fishers, it is said, are 'rapers and pillagers'. Indeed fishers themselves, at times, express an ambivalence about their activities (or at least the activities of other fishers) on these grounds. This brings us to the last part of our argument.

The conflicts with which we opened the paper threaten the very basis of fisher identity, for they challenge the potential to engage with the sea as fishers do. In resisting those threats that engagement is itself now being reconstructed as tradition, a tradition grounded in entirely conventional terms. For, if what is shared is not their engagement with the sea but, rather, a prior engagement with people and places and practices—with those who fished before them and the children who may fish after them—then fisher identity can be sustained, and justified, in terms that are more readily understood by outsiders.

Thus, rather than being fishers because they fish, people now claim the right to fish because they are fishers. The shift is one of emphasis, a re-reading of previous understandings, not a cynical construct manufactured for political ends. Genealogy has always mattered to fishers, for the capacity to engage with the sea on its own terms could be inherited as something 'in the blood', a capacity that nonetheless had to be realised through performance if it was to be acknowledged. And place mattered, too, for performance is always grounded and localised. And practice, of course, is the essence of performance. But the salience of these elements has increased in current discourse, as the determination of legitimacy is increasingly appropriated by those who do not share the experiences and orientations that are generated in and through performance.

That change in discourse is not restricted to fishers. We see it among others who seek to maintain identities predicated on an engagement with their physical worlds. The requirement that Aborigines in Australia legitimise their claims by tracing genealogical links and continuity in place, for example, reflects a similar shift in emphasis (cf. Sutton 1996); in seeking to communicate with a hegemonic Western legal system, Aborigines must downplay the role of performance in the construction of their identity. And the Ansett employees who, faced with the loss of their identity as such with the collapse of the airline company, sought to express what was at stake by reference to a family history of engagement with that company, are drawing on the same imperatives.[15]

## Conclusion

Whereas the identity of certain ethnic groups may be seen as problematic because it does not entail 'doing' anything other than 'being', say, Gaelic (Chapman 1978), fishers may

'do' something distinct but have difficulty convincing others that they 'are' distinct as a result. It is this dilemma that fishers confront in their responses to current conflicts.

If performance is primary in establishing fisher identity, and arises through participation within an unbounded community, fishers encounter a dual problem. In the first instance, their identity as fishers is under constant review as the particulars of practice and source community change through time. As Sahlins (1993:4) pessimistically remarked 'if culture must be conceived as always and only changing ... there can be no such thing as identity'. Which raises the second problem: in responding to perceived threat, how may fishers politicise the risks to their future? Their audience comprises non-fishers. The environment they understand is foreign to non-fishers. The community which sustains them is indefinable. And their identity as fishers is an abstraction, realised only through acknowledgement of one fisher's participation in that environment, and in that community, by other participants. From the standpoint of the audience they seek to inform, theirs is an identity that lacks a fixed point. It is nebulous. It is necessary, therefore, to reconnect their understandings to land, to reposition identity construction within a frame of reference that is familiar to all. It is for this reason, we argue, that in the final analysis Victorian fishers seek to secure their future in the arenas of public and political discourse by emphasising entirely conventional props of tradition—those of connections with people, places and practices of the past.[16]

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## Notes

1. Present address: Elliot College, University of Kent at Canterbury, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NS, UK
2. Commercial fishing has a much longer history elsewhere in the Western world, and Victorian fishers do identify with that more generic history. A few, indeed, can trace family connections back to older fisheries elsewhere. This paper, however, is concerned primarily with responses to threats that challenge the character and continuity of fisheries in Victoria and, in that context, it is the appeal to a tradition of fishing in local communities that we take as focal.
3. Establishing genealogical and lived connections to place are important when Aborigines claim rights to land under Australian law. Some observers have argued that when members of settler societies assert comparable connections with place they are, in effect, appropriating Aboriginal discourse and, for this reason, are inauthentic (e.g. Ellimor 2001; cf. Trigger 1999). We do not agree with this argument.

4. The one alternative proposal that was not ignored concerned an area where a member of parliament—one of three independents who hold the balance of power in the Victorian legislature—was joint owner of a license to take abalone.
5. The *Australian Commonwealth Fisheries Management Act*, 1991 requires that fisheries be managed according to the principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD). The *Act* does not define ESD but related documents and discussion papers from the late 1980s and early 1990s culminated in publication of the 1992 National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (Commonwealth of Australia 1992). The stated Goal of the National Strategy is 'development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends'. Three core objectives are listed. The first reads: 'to enhance individual and community wellbeing and welfare by following a path of economic development that safeguards the welfare of future generations'. The second reads: 'to provide for equity within and between generations'. The third and last concerns the biological world: 'to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems' (Caton and McLoughlin 2000). However, despite the declared concern with social welfare and equity, the Federal Court of Australia, in a judgement handed down in August 1997, concluded that the ESD objective referred to in the legislation does not require that the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) pay any regard to social and community issues (Caton and McLoughlin 2000: 227). AFMA refers to this judgement to assert that considerations of social welfare and equity fall outside its brief. In fact, most fisheries management entails social management. As Sinclair (1990:30) argued in reference to northwest Newfoundland, interconnections between fisheries management and fishing communities 'necessarily turn fisheries policy into social policy'.
6. The Western Australian rock lobster fishery is considered to be one of the most sustainable fisheries in the world (Fisheries Western Australia 2001). It is also economically productive with an annual take valued at about 460 million dollars, about 20 per-cent of the total value of Australia's fisheries. But these favourable judgements should be placed in historical context. Since 1963, the number of boats operating in the fishery has declined from 836 to 593, between 1987-88 and 1991-92 ten per-cent of the lobster pots were removed from the industry and, at 2000-01, a 100-pot licence, together with boat and gear, was valued at about four million dollars. Clearly, development of this now highly praised fishery has entailed social costs. Many previous participants were excluded, presumably often to the detriment of the well-being of families and local communities, and current valuations render the fishery inaccessible to all but a few would-be participants (cf. Wright 1992). Similar social outcomes are evident in the development of some other Australian fisheries; for example, the Victorian abalone fishery and the South Australian bluefin tuna fishery (e.g. Fyfe and Debelle 2001).
7. 'The Money Fish', written and directed by Janet McCleod and produced by Angela Borelli, made in collaboration with local fishers at Port Welshpool and documenting their situation, was screened on ABC television in March 2001.
8. Although some may be 'born' with the ability to fish (itself usually an allusion to a family history of engagement with the sea), motivation to learn is at least as crucial. Of one 'green' (first time) deckhand, it was said that he was going to be a good fisherman because he had a wife and two kids; economic imperatives would ensure he paid attention.
9. There are, of course, contexts in which fishers see their identity *per se*, and not just the capacity to practise that identity, as under threat. For example, our questions about the impact of technology prompted reflection on earlier days when the skills and knowledge of individual fishers held more relevance than they do today. One complained that nowadays 'anyone with enough money can buy a disc with all the details of locations and shots, simply slip it into his computer and follow the instructions about where to go and how to lay out the nets'; for skippers, ocean fishing had been reduced to 'playing video games in the wheel house' and this particular man had abandoned that life to become a bay and inlet fisher where it was still possible to do 'raw fishing'.

10. The boat owners and skippers in our sample self-identify as, respectively, six fifth generation fishers, nine fourth generation fishers, eight third generation fishers, thirteen second generation fishers and thirty-one first generation fishers. Two owners have never themselves fished (taken as generation 0) though their sons are owner-skippers (first generation). If genealogical connections are traced through males only, these numbers, from fifth to first generation fishers respectively, alter to two, twelve, seven, fifteen and thirty-one. We have not included retired fishers and two women (one a fourth generation fisher, the other a first generation fisher) who have fished with their husbands for many years; these women may be *de jure* owners of the boats on which they work but are not skippers. We have also excluded genealogical connections outside Australia of migrants to Australia. Our sample is probably biased for generation depth by our early choice of informants.
11. Status, based on roles, is important in structuring relations between participants in the Victorian fishing industry and the subordinate position of deckhands relative to skippers is conspicuous. Raison (1987: 15-16), in a brief history of Queenscliff as a fishing port, wrote as follows: 'Most lads taken as crew, had to learn by observation as the men gave no explanation of their actions and refused to answer questions but lads working with their fathers sometimes fared a little better. When the fishermen gathered in the waiting shed on the pier in inclement weather, the lads were not permitted to enter the shed or to stand near the door and so hear the men's conversation. Cliff Thwaites was admitted for the first time at about the age of 17 only when some of the older men needed to have a paper read to them. His father later confessed that he had gained access in the same way many years before.' Raison was referring to the early 1950s but similar patterns of behaviour continue to the present time. Fisher identity, however, is by no mean monadic. In different circumstances the bounds of the community of fishers may enlarge or contract. Deckhands are certainly a part of the community of 'those who fish'. Their position within that community, however, is reflected in a distinct 'deckie' culture (itself the subject of ongoing research by one of us). One fisher advised us to read the novel *The Perfect Storm* to get a sense of the way of life of deckhands. And another fisher suggested that deckies were now the main repositories of 'true fishing culture', something that owners and many skippers have lost in an industry increasingly dominated by paperwork.
12. Gary Hera-Singh, a third generation fisher of the Coorong Lakes, South Australia, does draw parallels between his connection to the lakes and those of Aborigines. 'It's a very spiritual place, the Coorong. My connection to the fishery is probably similar to Aboriginal cultures, where their spirit was the land, the water, the air around them' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2002).
13. We do not deny that more pragmatic motives may play a part in drawing young people into an initial flirtation with fishing. The potential to earn good money in the short term certainly attracts itinerant workers for a season. But those who stay do so for other reasons.
14. Jentoft, McCay and Wilson (1998: 429) defined virtual communities as having 'no particular geographic or social focus beyond shared participation in a fishery'. Hønneland (1999: 401-02) wrote of virtual communities as comprising 'those at sea' and allowed circumstances in which such communities might incorporate both fishers and those enjoined to enforce management regulations. We use the term both in reference to those who fish, irrespective of the particulars of geography or type of fishing, and in allusion to the global reach of information exchange among the participants. Our usage resonates with Appadurai's (1996) notion of ethnoscape, developed with particular reference to diasporic communities, to denote collective identities which transcend place.
15. Joe Xuereb, a second generation Ansett employee commented on the collapse of the company as follows: 'I feel totally let down. It's a shock. It's distressing. Ansett has been my life for 28 years. It was Dad's life for 26 years and I was hoping one of my children would continue on' (*The Age*, September 15, 2001).
16. By promulgating conventional markers of identity within public arenas, fishers may also resolve the potential complication that the ultimate sources of identity construction exclude not merely non-fishers but the land-based members of their own immediate families. We note,

however, that a high proportion of Victorian fishing boats are named after female family members or after places with which the owner (and often his kin) is or was familiar; these naming practices provide important connections between those who fish and their land-based kin.

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