West Coast waters:

Understanding the importance of recreational fishing through stories

by

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches this research explores the culture of recreational sport fishing around the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, this research collected the stories of anglers who actively use the waters off the southern tip of Vancouver Island for recreational fishing—either directly or peripherally. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and observing the individuals and groups using these waters. A narrative analysis of the research findings, based on the stories of the people who use these waters, highlights the past, present, and possible future of this sport. More specifically, this research identifies why recreational fishing on the West Coast waters is culturally significant to the people who practice this sport off the southern tip of Vancouver Island.

Key words: ethnography, autoethnography, narrative, culture, fishing, west coast
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INTRODUCTION

Born and raised on the West Coast of British Columbia, my family has recreationally fished the coastal waters for at least five generations spanning over one hundred years. Fishing has been a part of my life and my family’s life for as long as I can remember. I’ve lived on the southern tip of Vancouver Island for 29 years, and until a few years ago I never thought twice about the place, the ties my family has to the West Coast waters, or the future of recreational fishing. But as my mind turned to thinking about these elements, I began to realize that fishing, the resource of wild Pacific salmon, and the West Coast waters, which I had taken for granted over the years, were not as cut and dried as I once thought. It was at this moment I found myself fearful of an uncertain future and questioning whether other coastal anglers felt the same.

As a fisherman’s daughter and granddaughter, and a casual angler myself, I wanted to understand my connection, my family’s connection, and the connection other anglers feel to the sport of fishing and the West Coast waters. I wanted to understand what makes recreational fishing and the West Coast waters significant to the anglers off the southern tip of Vancouver Island.

Fishing is one of the oldest participatory activities on the West Coast of BC (Hume, 2009). With the sport being practiced for hundreds of years on the BC coast, many anglers are concerned about the future of fishing in this area (Bowling, 2007; Hume, 2009; Suzuki, 2007). The concern is derived from the changes I and many anglers have witnessed over the years: the reduction in salmon size (Bowling, 2007), the decline in wild Pacific salmon (Bowling, 2007; Suzuki, 2000), and the constant changes to regulations posted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Understanding the connection between the sport and participation, focusing on
the history and memories through anglers’ stories, provides insight into what the sport means to those participating, and helps to delineate what makes the sport culturally significant.

Within the tradition of interpretive narrative fieldwork I collected ethnographic and autoethnographic data and immersed myself into the culture of recreational sport fishing on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Through field interviews and by participating and observing the individuals and groups using these waters, I aimed to understand what makes recreational fishing and the coastal waters important to this community, and possibly to the broader province and country. Through sharing research findings based on the stories of the people who use these waters I hope to highlight the past, present, and possible future of this sport and share why this sport and this place are momentous.

This thesis is presented in two parts: this written portion and a video documentary that can be found at https://vimeo.com/109464881. During my research I came to realize that the intricacies of the people and the place couldn’t be fully articulated through the written word alone. It is my hope that the combination of both will allow readers and viewers to connect with the sport of fishing through the stories and words of anglers and with the West Coast waters through seeing the beauty of these waters.

With the changes witnessed by many coastal anglers, understanding the importance of recreational fishing in this particular area could be imperative to sustaining the sport, resource, and place for future generations.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The West Coast culture off the southern tip of Vancouver Island is unique in both location and complexion. Gaining a deeper understanding of the sport of recreational fishing, including the varying issues and concerns identified by locals, is important for understanding the views of
West Coast anglers, which may be shaping their individual stories and memories. The connection residents and anglers have to the West Coast is an important area to explore in order to better understand how the space of the waters can be transformed into a place that reflects memory and emotions for the anglers off Vancouver Island.

**Fishing and leisure sport**

On the West Coast of BC, residents have access to the sport of recreational fishing. Fishing can be viewed through many lenses: economic, social, political, historical, to name a few. Because of the various views, the area of fishing can be quite complex when understanding why and how the sport is significant to specific cultures or geographic locations.

According to British Columbia’s Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector, 2012 Edition report recreational fishing generated nearly one billion in revenue, more than double the revenue of aquaculture and seafood processing (Stroomer & Wilson, 2013). This revenue demonstrates the involvement of residents and tourists in the sport and the economic benefit of the sport.

Mordue (2009) discusses leisure fishing as socially constructed and embodied. Mordue (2009) considers how fishing is a sport that has a multi-sensorial interaction with nature and that although the sport is socially constructed through an individual’s relationship with local culture, others, and family, the joy of the sport is shared amongst its participants regardless of the social and class differences (Mordue, 2009).

Kuehn, Luzadis & Brincka’s (2013) research around motivations for fishing concludes by noting that opportunities that “increase fishing knowledge and skills, help anglers pass on their knowledge to others, increase angler awareness of fishing access locations, and enable fishing with other anglers will likely influence participation” (Kuehn, Luzadis & Brincka, 2013, p. 337). This differs slightly from Reid (2004), who says that he fishes because “doing fishing is doing
“me” (p. 5). For several anglers, especially those who have fished for many years, fishing is an opportunity to connect with nature, others, and one’s self. Sport itself, and subsequently fishing, can be viewed as a site that provides insight into culture and cultural forms (Geertz, 1973). Whether connecting people to each other or people to place, fishing can be analyzed to better understand why anglers fish the West Coast waters, how the anglers off Vancouver Island make meaning and connect to the sport, and how the sport is part of the angler’s identity, culture, and speech (Meân & Halone, 2010).

There is skepticism about the future of the sport and the future of the resource of wild Pacific salmon. The wild salmon are declining and are “having their lives stolen from them”, (Bowling, 2007, p. 213). Even when humans attempt to help the salmon, there is a chance we are hurting them. Some locals and researchers believe the demise is caused by fish farms, urbanization, and neglect for considering the environment (Bowling, 2007; Hume, 2004). Others lean towards climate change and the management of stocks and the relationships of local, national, and international government (Glavin, 2000) as a possible cause of the demise of this natural resource.

There is overall agreement that the waters around Vancouver Island have changed. The cause is not clear, but many anglers believe these changes have impacted the sport of fishing on the West Coast of BC.

**West Coast culture**

The West Coast of BC provides residents with beauty and bounty that some would say are unmatched anywhere else in the world. Life around the BC coast feels undeniably different for islanders with a strong sense of community which is deeply valued by coasters (Vannini, 2012). Surrounded by hundreds of islands, the West Coast waters of BC provide habitat to wildlife,
recreation for residents and tourists, and economic value for businesses and the province. This is a unique place with a different feeling that West Coast residents appreciate.

Life can slow down on the coast. Born in Alberta, Reid (2004) found deep connection to the West Coast and the waters around Vancouver Island. This connection to the people and place has turned the West Coast into his home. Reid (2004) claims that a journey down the coastal waters will return one less hurried and more in touch with the fortune of our wilderness (p. 93). A seasoned angler, Reid (2004), along with other practiced anglers and BC coastal residents, Hume (2007), Bowling (2007), and Glavin (2000), perhaps have become devoted to the West Coast through many years of experience and attachment to what Mordue (2009) claims to be the embodied practice of fishing. Through writing and practicing the sport on the BC coast, these anglers have each become advocates for the West Coast culture, highlighting the way of life, beauty, and abundance of this place.

The West Coast is changing. Some anglers believe the changes on the West Coast are due to human interference. Bowling (2007) claims, “the human world is killing the past and future” (p. 176). Many residents on the BC coast, especially those whose families have fished or spent time on the West Coast waters, hold part of their identity in this place. Bowling (2007) who grew up on the West Coast only came to realize his identity attachment to the coast when he began to write about it. Similarly, Glavin (2000), who spent much of his life fishing on the coast of BC claims that salmon have become a cherished symbol of the West Coast culture and way of life, and goes on to remark that it is, “difficult to explain to people from the other side of the Rocky Mountains” (p. 213).

Connection to place

The West Coast of BC offers recreation and bounty to those who experience it. Through these
offerings it also extends an opportunity to connect with the place. Place, sense of place, spirit of place, or symbolic territories are made up of the tangible (i.e.: buildings and objects) and intangible (i.e.: memories) (Turgeon, 2009). These tangible and intangible factors can shift a space into a place that holds meaning for individuals and groups. Turgeon (2009) explains that both factors contribute to sense of place or place making and that the intangible, which is often forgotten, “should be considered for all legislation dealing with cultural heritage, and in all projects of conservation and restoration of monuments, sites, landscapes, routes and collections of objects” (p. 431).

Sense of place is developed through experience and the association between self and the environment and our attachment to symbolic territories is created through our interaction with the land (Hutchins & Stormer, 2013). Hutchins and Stormer (2013) claim this is because “recreation, as experience, is key to place making” (p. 36). This aligns with Turgeon’s position, as experience in tangible places/locations allows for intangible memories, which aid in place making.

Assi (2009) links the concept of place back to Aristotle who states, “place or topos, in his view, was the ‘where’ dimension in people’s relationship to the physical environment, conjuring up a feeling of ‘belonging’” (p. 123). Assi (2009) further asserts that the feeling of belonging can offer purpose and meaning to one’s life. This sense of purpose and belonging may be a reason that fishing has been one of the oldest participatory activities practiced on the West Coast for hundreds of years (Hume, 2009).

Turgeon (2009) declares that communication and participation are the best ways to safeguard and keep the spirit of place alive. In this case, through communicating and hopefully increasing the participation in the sport of recreational fishing, the opportunity to drive
increased advocacy for the sport and place could be established, and this would ensure that the West Coast waters, and the life it provides habitat to, are protected and sustained for the people who use it now and into the future.

**METHOD**

Grounded within the interpretivist paradigm, which allows ethnography to explore the “context, make connections, and emplace meanings,” (Hunter, 2012, p. 48) this research collected the stories of anglers who actively use the waters off the southern tip of Vancouver Island for recreational fishing—either directly or peripherally. The stories pursued are the personal narratives these coastal dwellers feel represent their reflections of participating in the sport.

Stories offer the opportunity to evoke empathy and create meaning by allowing readers to encounter the experience, versus simply receive it (Bochner, 2012). By combining narrative ethnography and reflexive ethnographic approaches, the various stories are used to delineate what makes the sport of recreational fishing important to those who participate in it. Further, the stories aid in providing an understanding of how the West Coast waters themselves are meaningful to anglers. A narrative approach was used to derive the various inscribed meanings in an attempt to increase awareness and provide a broader view (Hunter, 2012) of the significance the sport holds. Because of the deep personal connection to the topic area, the inclusion of thoughtful self-reflections (incorporating my role, experiences, and observations) was necessary to ensure that a comprehensive analysis could be conducted (Turner, 2000).

Narrative, and storytelling in particular, is a widespread activity that is endowed with cultural significance due to its universal application and ability to be translated into different
forms and still portray the same story (Altman, 2008). Narrative provides an avenue by which
to understand history, develop and recall memories, and it is claimed to be a “basic strategy of
human life” (Altman, 2008, p. 1). Storytelling provides a way to make sense of the narratives of
everyday life; it separates the overall narrative of life and gives it shape and meaning (Franklin &
Mathers, 2002). Narrative “can be a mode of representation and reasoning” (Ellis, 2004, p.195),
therefore narrative theory provided this research an avenue by which to interpret stories and
present them in a form that allows the viewers to derive meaning and significance. By translating
the narratives of the anglers and myself, the ability to share experiences is present, and as
Goodall (2004) concludes, communication professionals’ public worth is measured by “the value
of our stories in the lives of people who read and use them” (p. 193).

Qualitative data were collected through participant and non-participant observation,
interviews, autoethnographic journaling, and videotaped interviews. Because this research
collected the stories and feelings of local anglers, which involves the connection to the coastal
waters themselves, a written account alone did not do justice to the people and the place being
discussed, therefore video footage was collected to produce a video documentary.

Site visits to local fishing grounds and boat launches, and interviews arranged with
individuals who self-represent as anglers were the specific avenues by which I collected my data.
Additionally, I included the stories of angling family members who self-represent as avid
anglers. Finally, I drew upon my own memories and experiences with the sport and the place.
Six local boat launches: Sidney, James Bay, Esquimalt, Port Renfrew, Sooke, and Pedder Bay
were the specific locations where observations and interviews were conducted. Data was
collected during 15 field visits dedicated to observation. Interviews were conducted with 15
local anglers, totalling 26 hours of interview time. Additionally, seven of the 15 initial interviewees were invited to a second videotaped interview. These seven interviewees were selected based on their experience and influence in the angling community or their family connection. From the video interviews, over three hours of video was collected. Participant interviews focused on understanding the unique story of the angler.

Site visits included thorough observations of anglers. While remaining visible, I spent many hours simply observing the actions and interactions of anglers preparing to go fishing or returning. These approaches provided a sense of how anglers behave and interact while participating in this aspect of fishing.

Throughout the data collection, I remained in the environment of my participants and continued to participate in the activity of fishing. By taking this methodological approach, as noted by Willis (1980), I was able to ensure “production of a final account which, like an icon, will bear some of the marks, and recreate something of the richness, of the original” (p. 89).

Throughout the data collection period, I partook in over eight fishing trips with my family. These trips were generally four to six hours long, and while I continued to observe and listen, I also participated in the sport as I normally would. For each of these trips my father, Russ Ricketts, was present. My grandfather, Norm Ricketts, joined us on two of the days and my brother, Mark Ricketts, joined on one. The remainder of these fishing trips were just my father and I. These trips also allowed me to capture additional footage and stories from my family.

To begin to understand the importance of fishing to this community, it is imperative to understand the story of the individuals and reflect upon my own because the meaning we
construct about life connects us to others, making community and connection possible (Richardson, 2001). Narrative can be a mode of representation and reasoning (Ellis, 2004), thus providing the research an approach for cultural analysis and the ability to derive meaning from stories. Although specific questions were asked, the conversation flowed organically based on the interviewees’ interests, feelings, and what they chose to express. Unstructured interviews allowed for increased flexibility for the interviewee to discuss details they believe are important to them and their story.

Through creating the video documentary, I was constantly reminded of how passionate the anglers are about fishing and the waters. Anderson (2003) expresses that film has inherently ethnographic qualities because it is a form of human expression (p. 84), from facial expressions to the voice dynamics of each angler, the video production builds on and emphasises the feelings, memories, hopes, and fears of these anglers. While narrowing footage down was a difficult task, following the anglers’ progressive stories and feelings was continually used as a guide to build the final account and select the footage.

A narrative analysis was utilized to analyze the stories of participants. Ellis (2004) states that stories are theoretical and analytical by nature; “when people tell their stories, they employ analytic techniques to interpret their worlds” (p. 196). Further, I applied the same analysis to my story and relationship with the sport in the hope of uncovering meanings that have shaped my personal experience (Goodall, 2004, p. 5).

**DISCUSSION**
Examining the community of anglers off the southern tip of Vancouver Island through collecting stories and memories provided a glimpse of the culture of recreational fishing, the connection to place felt by local anglers, and an avenue by which to better understand my own feelings in relation to the sport and the West Coast waters.

The culture of the anglers on the coast is one of inclusion and friendship. “Fishing” Mordue, 2009, (p. 549) argues “is an embodied encounter that is popular because of its physicality, requiring a multi-sensorial interaction with nature…while fishing is socially constructed, the natural joy of its embodied physicality is shared among all of its practitioners, regardless of class or privilege.” Mordue’s argument reflects the culture experienced on the West Coast. Anglers repeatedly noted the multiple reasons for participating and enjoying the sport. Observations and interactions with these anglers also confirmed the seemingly nonexistent social barriers within the environment and culture. At boat launches and out at sea, interactions between anglers were constant. Amid gender gaps, age gaps, language barriers, and differing practice preferences, time and again the anglers proved that there were no obvious social standings; the only class was that of an angler. Individuals participating in the sport were automatically included within the cultural class, even if it only exists while participating in the sport. This demonstrated a culture of openness and acceptance.

The stories shared by anglers highlight their involvement in the sport from past to present and give insight into how the sport has become part of who they are. As Meân and Halone (2010) convey, sport is “an entity that has become routinely embedded and interconnected with how we define ourselves, the cultures we inhabit, and the language we use to achieve both” (Meân & Halone, 2010, p. 257). The memories and experiences shared through stories, and the connections drawn by many of the anglers themselves identified that, indeed, angling was an
activity as much as it was part of life and part of the identity of each angler. Most anglers noted their life-long participation in the sport, and often, their family lineage of generations of anglers. Tom Davis, previous owner of Rhys Davis Ltd, talked of how since his childhood he would fish with his father, who also angled these waters since childhood. Beyond family, many of the people in the lives of those who have angled for decades are also part of the same angling culture. These personal and historical connections were shared by numerous anglers and demonstrated how the sport is part of identity. The anglers I met on the southern tip of Vancouver Island speak of fishing these waters as a natural component of their lives.

Just as fishing is part of the identity of anglers, so too is the way the anglers connect to the West Coast and the coastal waters. The connection to place felt and expressed by these anglers was apparent in each participant. From my grandfather who has fished over 80 years around these waters, to my brother who has fished 26 years, and anglers with various years of fishing in between, the coastal waters are claimed to provide solace, serenity, and comfort, something I echo and feel, too. “The land is both a setting for social interaction and a vehicle for self and group expression and meaning making” (Hunter, 2012, p. 54). I reflect particularly on my grandfather, Norm Ricketts, and my father, Russ Ricketts, who both expressed the importance of the coastal waters in their lives, and their desire to always stay close to the water. To my family, and many other anglers, fishing on these waters is where relationships are built and strengthened.

From the stories shared we gain a sense of how the sport is an avenue that fosters connection between people and place. Harrington and Sullivan (2009) claim that a place is contextually formed through human experiences and attachments, and that these involvements essentially form as mortar for the bonding of the environment and people. My father, and three
of his best friends, Barry Mayes, Jim Ralph and Doug Hamilton talked of how, since high school, fishing has been a time and place where they could bond, let go of other stresses, and connect on a level they either can’t or don’t on land. Their friendship, while it transcends the sport, has been a part of their connection for over 40 years. And while on the water, anglers open up, as my uncle, Scott Norris, and brother, Vince Girard, mentioned while fishing they have bonded more than any other time in their lives. The combination of the sport, the people one is with, and the place they are enjoying brings significance and connection to the environment.

The coastal anglers involved in this research aided in providing understanding around the culture of recreational fishing, the importance of this sport, and further, their stories and perspectives helped me with better understanding and uncovering my own story.

I see and feel the removal of social classes while fishing, the inclusion of all anglers, and the camaraderie between those fishing for the table or just enjoying the coastal waters. I am not just a casual angler or a fisherman’s daughter. I am part of what it means to be a British Columbian and West Coast dweller. I am part of a community that sees the details of our land, that practices patience, and that respects our history and hopes to carry our history into the future. I am an angler.

The sport of fishing is more than simply a sport. Angling on and around the West Coast waters builds memories through participating and talking about experiences; it teaches us about the land, environment, each other and ourselves; it connects us to our roots, our own history and the history of our province; it shows us and encourages us to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the waters and coastline; it educates us about the vast ecosystems and cyclical life cycles of many of the creatures our waters give life and home to, these values provided by the West Coast
waters give it the characteristics of a heritage site that deserves preservation for current and future generations.

“We can’t own it, but we can give it to our children.” –Anonymous
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