



Mastering the environment: frontier behaviour at an ocean Klondike during Greenland halibut fishery

Harald Beyer Broch

To cite this article: Harald Beyer Broch (2020) Mastering the environment: frontier behaviour at an ocean Klondike during Greenland halibut fishery, Acta Borealia, 37:1-2, 78-93, DOI: [10.1080/08003831.2020.1751967](https://doi.org/10.1080/08003831.2020.1751967)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08003831.2020.1751967>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 272



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Mastering the environment: frontier behaviour at an ocean Klondike during Greenland halibut fishery

Harald Beyer Broch^{a,b*}

^aDepartment of Education and Lifelong Learning, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway; ^bEmeritus of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

The expression “mastering the environment” may inspire conflicting associations depending on whether we focus on the temporality of targeted fishers, marine biologists, or policymakers. This study presents an emic perspective on how natural and social environments are understood and managed during the short fishing season for Greenland halibut. In the context of this paper, mastering has to do with communication, social relations, and efforts to live up to moral standards of behaviour and to adapt to sea bottom topography, fish-finding technology, weather conditions, and vessel safety. A particular focus is the knowledge generated through informal teaching and intergenerational support and respect. Nevertheless, this bank fishery displays characteristics of frontier behaviour, as state-induced quotas and particular events and practices onboard elicit unintended results.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 October 2019
Accepted 19 February 2020

KEYWORDS

Ethnography; fishing; frontier behaviour; intergenerational communication

Before we go to sea

This presentation is an effort to experience near, person-centred ethnography (Hollan 2001; Broch 2011). It is an anthropological study reflecting daily life on a fishing vessel engaged in Greenland halibut fishery. Relations between competition and cooperation on the fishing grounds are explored as well as how knowledge is generated through their fishing practice, social and marine environment. This environment includes official fishing regulations, laws and moral attitudes. Rather than assessing whether the fishers' behaviours were right or wrong, I sought to learn how they experience the world in which they live. The way in which the men discussed, commented on, and managed their shared experiences provide explicit demonstrations of informal teaching and learning. Through their narratives, we may enter or get an impression of the fishers's world (Broch 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and their home community, scattered over five small islands just above the Arctic Circle, adjacent to the Norwegian Sea.

CONTACT Harald Beyer Broch  h.b.broch@sai.uio.no

*Professor 2 at the project: “Valuing the past, sustaining the future: Education, knowledge and identity across three generations in coastal communities.” NTNU, Department of education and lifelong learning. Professor emeritus of social anthropology, University of Oslo.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Klondike and *frontier go together and* are terms borrowed from Tsing (2005) and tied to particular behavioural patterns. A frontier may connote characteristics such as little or no respect for formal laws, mental and physical violence, and masculinity (Emel 1998; Miller 2004; Anahita and Mix 2006). Several authors have linked these same characteristics to marine settings (Brox 1972; Roberts 2007; Helmreich 2009; Fields 2011).

Similarly, when describing fishers and their environment, McGoodwin used such characteristics as rugged individualism, lawless settings, depleted fish stocks, and an emphasis on immediate or short-term profits (McGoodwin 1990; Fagan 2017). van Ginkel (2009) reported that the prevalent opinion among citizens of the Netherlands is that fishers plunder the seas. Anita Maurstad, who worked among small-scale fishers in northern Norway some ten years before me, framed the seascape as a kind of wilderness, primarily a man's world. In her view, the fishers she came to know displayed skilled bravery rather than rugged lawlessness. The sea is a dangerous environment that requires experience and embodied or internalized knowledge (Pálsson 1994; Maurstad 2004, 2010) and courage to master. I shall not argue that the fishers in focus are a lawless bunch. Generally they do show a lot of respect for laws and fishery regulations. It is when the stakes are highest, time is limited, competition for the best sets is serious and the management regulations experienced as difficult to follow, even unjust that a "frontier" situation some times develops.

However, coastal residents do not use the term "frontier" solely as a metaphor. They also use it to describe small-scale fishers and fishing as an ultra-competitive enterprise. For example, a schoolteacher in her fifties from the local community expressed admiration for the fishers: "They are the ocean cowboys, daredevils" (Broch 2013b, 10).

The fishers may not agree, however. According to them, they do not engage in reckless or risky actions, but apply multisensory skills and experience in their work (Broch 2013b, 8). At the same time, bravery and the pride of endurance during rough weather suit most of these men's public and self-images. They repeat narratives of endeavours that can only be regarded as risky, despite being successful. Examples of proud self-expressions include: "Today we were the smallest vessel at the fishing grounds" and "Even the larger vessels stayed in the harbour today; we were the only ones to oppose the gale, and made a good catch too" (Field notes, winter cod fisheries 2008).

Yet, such declarations can be chocked up to youthful bragging. More experienced fishers frown upon boastful behaviour, and in response to such statements add words of caution: "You should understand that it means something when all the vessels stay in the harbour. You may damage your vessel, risk the life of your crew and yourself. That is just stupid" (Field notes 2008). These moral corrections serve a purpose when younger fishers overrate their skill and luck. They may think twice about safety and learn where and when to talk about what. There are local rules for which topics are suited for various settings and contexts (Norgaard 2011).

Journalists who report about fishing also use wilderness or frontier metaphors. An article entitled "The Cowboy Ocean" describes the difficult, rough labour on the open sea off Lofoten, Norway in winter, even on sunny days. One fisherman says, "There close to the shore, that is for the sissies, out here the cowboys are fishing" (Gundersen 2008).

It is not surprising, then that these metaphors of the frontier also appear in the Greenland halibut fishery. Such images are part of the speech culture, colouring ways of thinking about fishing along the continental slope, off the banks of Troms.

This ethnographic description and analysis is based on information gathered from observations while I served as a participant observer in 2010 aboard the *Northern Gannet*, a 15-meter fishing vessel. As all the fishers, also mentioned vessels in this study are given fictive names. In addition, to illuminate my account, I include references to articles, interviews, and editorials from *Fiskeribladetfiskaren*, a newspaper distributed widely among Norwegian fishers.

Although I conducted no formal interviews, I wrote daily notes, often while the crew relaxed or slept. These notes capture excerpts of conversations and discussions onboard and short messages sent between vessels by cell phone or the ship radio. I often influenced conversations by posing questions that interested me, and my mere presence surely impacted some discussions. At times, I engaged in informative private, one-on-one conversations in the wheelhouse.

A few times, I read aloud from my field diary when a crewmember encouraged me to do so; however, most times they were not interested to hear about themselves, but keen to learn my opinion about our catches and other fishing-related issues.

I also conducted fieldwork during a one-year period (2006–2007) that included some of the same men. I stayed in the home community of the fishers although most of the time on board their vessels. In 2008 and 2010, I conducted additional participant studies of coastal “sjark” vessel fisheries for a total of three months.

Greenland halibut fishing: ethnographic contexts

The *Northern Gannet* is an example of the *sjark* design with the wheelhouse toward the prow. Only vessels of a certain length are legally permitted to fish along the banks. The *Northern Gannet* had a Bank Fishing Certificate 2, which allows a vessel to fish within 200 nautical miles of the coastal baseline (*grunnlinjen*), no matter the type of fish sought; however, quotas per vessel are imposed on those fishing for Greenland halibut. These quotas are given under the precondition that all relevant requirements are fulfilled, including a bank-fishing certificate displayed on the wheelhouse wall.

The Greenland halibut fishery along Egga (the continental slope) has its peculiarities. The fishery is divided into two short seasons, one in June and one in August, to prevent overfishing like that that occurred in the early 1970s. The quota regulations were introduced in 1977 (Pethon 2005, 442). Marine biologists say that the age at which the Greenland halibut spawn for the first time has been reduced because of pressure on the species. Currently the Greenland halibut's spawning period extends from October to June, but researchers know relatively little about its behaviour and migrations (Haug 1992, 260).

In 2010, the spring quota for halibut had been exceeded by 800 tons, leaving only 1,000 metric tons to be shared among all vessels in August. Therefore, the per-vessel quota was small, and it was not profitable for vessels larger than approximately 17 metres to fish with nets or lines. (Different quota regulations apply for areas where trawlers and seiners operate.) The *Northern Gannet's* quota was set at 14 metric tons.

The maximum catch for the entire fleet is decided based on the advice of marine biologists and negotiations with the fishers's organizations. The instant the total quota is landed, the fishery administrators broadcast a message to participant vessels and fishing must stop immediately. Like a previous policy among Norwegian minke whale hunters, this quota policy induces intense competition. As a result, some unintended

consequences arise, which have been described in reports in the newspaper, *Fiskeribladetfiskaren*. One consequence of intense competition is what we may call a Klondike at sea, or a frontier situation. The words we use to describe a situation, ongoing events, or a practice are important because they colour our thinking and confirm our sense of reality (Jepson 2008). Agreement at a meso social level or among members of an in-group about how to define a situation, setting, or context can offer a moral explanation or even defence of otherwise contested or negatively laden behaviour and decisions (Gezelius 2004). Such an agreement also may serve to legitimise breaking “unjust” laws and regulations during fishing.

Uncertainty is high among the Greenland halibut fishers because no one can predict if fishing will halt before the fixed date when the season terminates. In addition to the quota’s being reached sooner than later, inclement weather may force an early end to fishing. All who work in the Greenland halibut business are familiar with this unpredictability. Newspaper reports note “Another sudden stop” and “This time the authorities made the decision to close the season Sunday at noon” (Jensen 2012, 11).

A year after my fieldwork, the skipper of the *Northern Gannet* related another example of the endemic unpredictability of fishing. In 2011, the crew had reached the total vessel quota in the spring, but was allowed an additional permit to fish another ten metric tons during the fall season. As the crew reached its fall quota, the fishery authorities declared a free fishery for Greenland halibut, no restrictions. The *Northern Gannet* took off for another go at the slope bordering Tromsøflaket. But just as crew members were running out the nets, an urgent radio message was broadcast: All Greenland halibut fishing must stop immediately.

Another reason the Klondike metaphor seems to fit the halibut fishery is that there are quick riches involved. When fishing is successful, Greenland halibut is worth its weight in gold. The young skipper said, “All in all, the last seasons I earned more on the Greenland halibut than on the winter cod fishery”. This success amounts to less than a month’s “easy work”, pleasant effort when compared with the winter cod season’s three- to four-and-a-half months of hard work.

Speed in handling fish is a valued quality among fishers (Pálsson 1994; Maurstad 2004), and becomes part of his reputation and self-image. In the frontier environment of heightened uncertainty and competition, speed, skill, and intelligence are even more highly valued. Fields (2011, 10) described a similar environment in the Alaskan fishery: “It is not by chance that the commercial fishers who work this expanse are often called ‘the last of the cowboys’”. Fields explained that fishers’s economic and personal worth are often measured by how fast they can bait hooks and pick fish from the nets and how long they can work without sleep (Fields 2011, 8).

A Greenland halibut ethnography

The race – prologue

The Greenland halibut fishery lies along the steep and rugged continental slope. The underwater topography and strong currents create problems in finding good locations to place the net chains. Fishing these waters involves a calculated risk because when a gale comes up or equipment breaks, the nearest harbour is five to six hours away.

Per, the twenty-two-year-old skipper of the fifteen-meter *Northern Gannet*, was the first from his community to decide to try Greenland halibut fishing. He had no experience with this particular type of fishing, and there was no one in the local community to ask. Per had to rely on careful planning, ordering new nets and applying for permit at the right time, but he also knew he would learn by trying, and perhaps by mistakes. He regarded this first trip as an experimental mission.

I joined Per's crew, who included Geir, a twenty-seven-year-old local fisherman who had some experience on the slope, but primarily with long lines rather than nets; and Lasse, forty-two and from Troms County, who had fished for Greenland halibut several seasons off Tromsøflaket and Fugløybanken, where we were headed.

A few days after the crew was established, I told an older fisherman about Per's plans to participate in the Greenland halibut fishery. The man had not fished this species, but had a distinct opinion about those who did: "Huff and huff, so he wants to participate in that fishing competition. Some are obviously born into it, have it in their blood. Competition, race-fishing, be the first, hurry, be the best".

During our last two hours in port, Ola, the skipper's brother and an airplane technician, fixed some problems with the map machine in the vessel's wheelhouse. Per scrutinized his brother's every move; he hoped he could manage the adjustments himself next time. Ola wished us all good luck and returned to shore. The sun had set as the *Northern Gannet* left the home pier at six o'clock on Saturday, July 31, 2010, bound for Fugløybanken and Tromsøflaket, two banks bordering the continental slope (*Egga*) off Troms County. The vessel was equipped with new topographic maps of the sea bottom.

Some twenty minutes after departure, a gale hit from behind, and the vessel made good speed (approximately twelve knots). Heading northeast, we three crew members took shifts at the helm during the night, with Per taking the most. A safety light near the tiller stick blinked red every five minutes, signalling the pilot to press a button to indicate he was awake and alert. If he did not, a loud alarm would sound.

We were late heading for the fishery. The season would open on Monday, August 2, and already the race was on to reach the best locations for both longlines and nets. Another crew from the local community had followed Per's lead and decided to give the Greenland halibut a try. That vessel, the *Viking*, was hours ahead of us, and Per wondered where her crew would attempt to fish.

As the *Northern Gannet* ploughed the sea, crew members received well wishes from family members via cell phone. The skippers of the *Viking* and the *Northern Gannet* also established contact, and shared information about positions, wave movements, wind, travelling speeds, and other vessels that seemed headed for the slope.

Twenty-four hours after our departure, the *Northern Gannet* landed on Kvaløya to pick up Lasse. He had been fishing Greenland halibut in this area for several seasons and would help pilot us. According to Lasse, the best locations were quite a distance northward, off the Fugløy and Tromsøflaket banks. He worried that we were too late to find room at the best locations and the right depths. Ideally, the *Northern Gannet* should be at the site at least one hour before the fishery officially opened. We hurried to load ice, supplied by the fish plant that would buy our catch, into the storage bins onboard.

Five hours after we left Kvaløya, Lasse discovered he had forgotten his sea boots. Observably ashamed and sorry, he avowed that nothing like this had ever happened to him. Per

nodded. It is impossible to read his thoughts, but he said, “Well, we return to shore and fetch them”.

But first, Per called the vessels nearby to ask if anyone had an extra pair of boots. Lasse did not want to be the one to make the call. Before long, the *Viking* confirmed they would exchange a pair of boots for a coffee jug – their jug was far too small. The *Viking* was on her way to Mulegga, a location nearer land and a good distance south of our destination. Per decided to run for the *Viking*, a two-hour journey rather than the five hours to Kvaløya.

The weather was fine, the sea calm with some meter-high swells. The skippers manoeuvred the vessels as close as they dared. The boots flew through the air onto the *Northern Gannet's* deck, and the coffee jug was fished from the sea!

Northward, the *Northern Gannet* ran beautifully, accompanied by schools of young mackerel and an occasional whale. Lasse hinted that perhaps it would be best to try a location farther south than we had planned. But Per declared, “You tell us that there are more and larger halibut up north. That is where we go”.

We learned the *Viking* had already started to run out nets, and at Mulegga, two vessels had begun to place their gear around ten o'clock, two hours before the legal time. It did not take long before other vessels followed suit.

When we reached Tromsøflaket, one of Lasse's suggested locations, ten longline vessels were already there. As we continued north, we saw fewer vessels, but we observed buoys and other markers of fishing lines and nets in the growing darkness. Per, Lasse, and Geir wanted to place the nets at depths between 300 and 700 metres down the slope where most Greenland halibuts gather. As a precaution, Per broadcast our position via the ship radio and asked if there were longlines or nets in the area. No one answered. It was past one o'clock. He called once more, and a skipper answered that there were longlines all along the slope, but that we should be able to set a few nets in between. Per was able to get the positions where some longlines were placed.

The fight for space at an occupied ocean place

“It is a kind of war going on here. Perhaps the best deal is separate line and net oceans (*line og garnhav*). Like it is during the winter cod fisheries off Lofoten”, Per said, considering the situation. Lasse had warned the crew that the *Northern Gannet* was late, but now he struggled to instruct the skipper on what to do next. Lasse had fished this area during several seasons, but never as the skipper who had to make the final decisions about where to place the gear. Now, he pondered these new challenges. Previously at Mulegga, there were mostly net fishers, and the long liners had sailed farther north. But not anymore. The line vessels were using exceedingly large areas paralleling the slope.

The *Northern Gannet* had come a long way by now. To the north we saw lights of more vessels. Per said, “We have the positions of some fishing gears here. May as well go for it and find room in between”.

Per was at the wheel; Geir and Lasse stood ready to make sure the nets ran out well. We had three chains, two with forty nets and one with twenty. The chains were anchored with grapnels of 75 kilos each. I served as an additional scout in the wheelhouse, looking for gear-marking buoys and flags. When I discovered something, Per shouted to the men to stand by. Then he checked the echo sounder to determine where the line should be placed. On the topographic bottom map, Per discovered a gully running down the

slope and made an extra turn of the vessel, hoping to get the nets down 400 metres along the gully floor. The final chain went down at six o'clock.

Everyone was tired after a long day, but we assured each other of a good outcome. The nets were down, and they were stronger than the thin longlines, in case the gear became entangled.

As night faded towards dawn, we saw lights of other vessels, some relatively near, others farther away. The *Northern Gannet* was the last to arrive. All were passing time before pulling their lines and nets onboard. The motor was running slowly and smoothly, as the crew manoeuvred the vessel on two-hour shifts. We were surrounded by vessels, fishing gears and floats, and far from any capricious shore, yet it was impossible to cut the engine and drift. Someone had to remain awake and alert.

On the ocean with no sign of land, the hours blurred into an ambiguous flow. What day was it?

The skipper looked to Lasse to confirm his decisions. Ideally, nets should be in the water twelve hours, but now and again Per decided ten hours would do. Lasse nodded his consent, and Geir agreed, although no one asked for his opinion. The skipper ran the net hauler, an hydraulic winch that brought in the nets against the strong current pulling in the opposite direction. When there were lots of fish, he stopped to help Lasse and Geir to free them from the masks.

As the nets came in, every fish was counted, each supposedly weighing three kilograms. Exceeding the quota was not an option. My job was to cut the throat of each fish to bleed it (*bløgger*), and then to throw it into containers in the hold. Geir made sure the nets were clean, deposited in the net bin in the stern, and ready for the next set.

We took a break for a light meal – coffee, bread and butter – and then continued to haul another chain of nets, collect the fish, and reset the nets. The catch was good, 600 Greenland halibuts on each of the two long chains and some 300 on the short one. The skipper was satisfied and took time to praise Lasse for his excellent guiding.

When all three chains were reset, the skipper decided to haul (*stuppe*) in the first, although it had been down only four or five hours. The catch was less, but good enough, some hundred kilograms. Spirits were high on this first trip for the new *Northern Gannet*¹ with Per as the owner and skipper. Lasse noted that the quality of the halibut was excellent, larger than those caught during his preceding venture.

After daybreak, we did not see a single vessel, only whales, many whales. We figured that most of the long liners we had spotted in the dark had left to unload their catches.

Before we returned the net chains to the slope, Per made a radio call to all vessels in the area to inform them where we were placing our nets. He asked Lasse to talk, thinking that he probably would know more of the other skippers – at least those from Tromsø and Kvaløya. Perhaps they would tell Lasse where they had placed their gear. But Lasse refused. "You are the skipper", he said. "You are good when it comes to make fast decisions when needed". Lasse never proposed detailed directives for where to go, or where and how deep to set the chains. The skipper's decisions were what counted, not his age or experience. We received only one response, a skipper who replied "OK", and no information about where others had placed their lines.

From what we did hear on the radio, most of the line vessels were doing fine. Some complained that the fish were small in size. We heard one skipper complain that he had to run out the top line for a second time, as there were two other vessels paralleling

him with their lines deeper down along the slope. The answer to this grumbling was: “Well, we did agree about how this was to be done, didn’t we?” On the *Northern Gannet*, we could not quite determine where these vessels were operating.

By that evening, the *Northern Gannet’s* net gear was back onto the steep ocean floor. This time, it was easier to run out the nets in daylight than it had been in the dark. Preferring to place the chains somewhat deeper than before, Per made some adjustments, but had to steer away from some occupied areas. We hoped to have more space once the line vessels reached their quotas. We learned from radio communication that they had also participated in the spring season.

Interlude

The storage bins full, the *Northern Gannet* headed for harbour through the night, a trip that took ten hours against fierce currents. The crew took turns navigating in the wheelhouse, but without fixed intervals. When one got sleepy, he roused the next mate. Per took the last lap and navigated the vessel to the quay in front of the small fish plant.

Two state controllers, a man and a woman, met us to review all relevant documents for the vessel and this particular fishery. The controllers’ primary job was to control the fish plant, watch how the fishers were treated, and check all scales were calibrated correctly. They also ensured that all fish buying followed formal procedures, accompanied by appropriate paperwork.

The controllers noted that the name and number code painted on the ship did not match those on the documents. Per explained that he had just bought the vessel and was in a hurry to set out for the Greenland halibut fishery. The inspectors accepted the skipper’s defence, but added: “We would rather not meet with you at any future fishery if you have not fixed the registration marks on the vessel. Good luck”.

Per and Lasse agreed that although fishery controllers are a grumpy lot, these two were all right. Geir laughed, “Oh that woman – she is really pretty. Her name is Natali, she told me. You know, it would be no punishment to have to pay Natali a small fine, she is so appealing”.

The *Northern Gannet’s* catch registered as 4,500 kilograms of Greenland halibut, 55 kilograms of red fish (ten *Sebastes marinus*), four pieces of cod (*Gadus murhua*) and seven rough head grenadier (*Macrourus berglax*). Interestingly, both this time and the next, the number of fish caught was very low. We were told that many of the long liners were bothered by a high percentage of small Greenland halibuts; however, ours were all good sized.

The *Viking*, our companion vessel from Norland, returned to harbour before us with 2,200 kilograms of fish. Their skipper complained that he was somewhat disappointed because the Greenland halibuts were small and they had brought up quite a number of stones in their nets. Per commented that he didn’t understand why they were dissatisfied: They had told everybody that they did not expect a good catch, and they were going only to learn and gain experience.

Per was cocky. He enjoyed telling his crew that he knew perfectly well that his local buddies hated to be out-fished. “I do not understand why they went for Mulegga, in spite of the shorter distance to the fish plant, when many experienced fishers told them that fishing had been better during the last seasons farther north”, Per said. Lasse was all smiles. Per had taken his advice and it had paid off. The *Northern Gannet* was also there to learn.

The good weather was holding, even though it could change suddenly, and spirits were as high as could be. The *Northern Gannet* could reach the assigned quota in just three, perhaps two trips, bringing in good money before the season closed. The vessel's share was 50 percent, with the crew sharing the other 50 percent at a flat rate.

We rested and enjoyed a fine dinner at the Kvaløya harbour before preparing to return to haul the nets we had left. Lasse, who lived nearby, went to visit his family. Before leaving, he said, "The most important thing is not to catch that much, but to be the best, better than the other vessels. We were the best vessel in the harbour today". The *Northern Gannet* also had travelled the longest distance northward to supply the Kvaløya plant.

Wild West on the ocean Klondike

The *Northern Gannet* left the harbour shortly after Lasse returned. It was already pitch dark, with a calm sea and no significant wind. Then, in predawn darkness, we spotted the flagged net markers at the edge of Tromsøflaket. We heard whales nearby and saw one fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) swimming through the beam of our searchlight. It looked like a perfect day ahead.

As we hauled the first nets onboard, fish poured out. We wondered if we would reach our quota in just two trips. On the first chain, we calculated the haul at two metric tons of Greenland halibut, with almost no other species – only a few giant red fish and some lesser rough head grenadiers. We noticed line hooks here and there, entangled in the net, indicating contact with longlines deep down. We reset the first chain and began pulling in the next.

On the radio, we heard that the long-liners had reached their quotas, and soon would point their bows towards the shores. But we saw no line vessels – the ocean seemed empty except for the *Northern Gannet*.

The haul from the second long net chain was looking even better – approximately one hundred kilograms on only the first three nets of the forty. The take was almost unbelievable. The crew joked that Greenland halibuts must have engaged in some kind of competition to see which could reach our nets first.

However, the nets were nearly covered with fishing hooks, indicating a serious collision between our nets and line fishers. And then, we discovered that both the float-line and the bottom line were torn off. "Burned off", Per, Lasse, and Geir agreed was a better word. "Shit, must have taken them a long time to tear off our net runners, file them off with their line gear", Per said. "Why the hell did no one answer when we radioed all vessels along the slope before we placed the nets? Damn it! Shouldn't be possible!" Per was angry, sad, and confused. Embarrassed, too, felt his reputation was threatened.

In a state of flow, everything seemed to go well – harmony and happiness. Even the weather had been cooperative, and the crew would soon rake in the money. Greenland halibut fishing seemed the best of all occupations. Time appeared irrelevant. It reminded me of how athletes express themselves after their best performances – they feel like they exist within a bubble. One of the crew said, "Sometimes I only think fish, only see fish, everything is fish, nothing else matters". But then, instantly disaster can arrive. We might not make the quota, there were wrong choices, a cocky young skipper, and soon everyone throughout the wide community of fishers would know.

Despite his emotions, Per decided there was nothing much to be done. He decided to haul in the short chain, the last one, before we did anything else. The net came out in intact, although not free of the line fishing hooks. We had approximately one and a half tons of halibut distributed among the twenty nets – acceptably good. We connected the three nets from the torn chain to the shorter one to make it a little longer.

Before resetting the chain, Per called the *Skarven*, a fifty-foot long-liner, a wooden vessel (*skøyte*) that he discovered on radar. The *Skarven's* skipper was confused because he observed the *Northern Gannet's* registration marks indicating we were from Sogn and Fjordane (mid-Norway), a remarkably long distance from Tromsøflaket. Also the name on Per's vessel did not correspond to the *Northern Gannet*. But he laughingly accepted Per's explanations of the situation and welcomed him to the "Wild West" of Tromsøflaket.

The *Skarven* skipper said he would soon take in his last lines, and then he would be done for this season. He informed Per where his lines were located and also gave the position of some other lines. "It should be space enough for you now", he predicted. "It really has been a war going on out here this year". He said even the line vessels were paying too little attention to each other, and crossed lines had resulted in unnecessary losses.

In particular, the smallest vessels showed little or no consideration of others because they knew that they would have to hurry to harbour if the weather turned bad. In addition, the season could close any day if large quantities of fish were brought to shore. "It has been just crazy around here. Everybody's fighting against all", said the *Skarven* skipper. The *Northern Gannet* crew concluded that this was a lawless, uncontrollable territory – the Klondike and the Wild West at the same time, in the same place.

While we waited for our nets to fill, the crew fixed a drag tool to a thousand-meter solid cord. The *Northern Gannet* moved as slowly as possible, as the heavy drag swept the rugged bottom for the lost string of nets. Lasse said he had never managed to save nets from such depths, but Per mentioned that he and I once had saved monkfish nets from an almost equal depth. Geir and Lasse nodded in agreement that we had no choice except to search for the nets. But out of the others' hearing, Geir told me, "The nets are lost; that is how it is".

Per phoned his father who already had heard about the loss. Per had reported the incident to companions at Mulegga, and rumours had spread quickly. His father asked directly if we had swept for the nets and if Per had reported the loss to the fishery authorities. It was a question of morals – the law prescribes all skippers to report every lost net, line, cable, or other fishery gears. Then, at the end of the season, the coast guard attempts to clear away the lost gear. Nets that are lost, called ghost nets, can harm fisheries for years.

We were finding no nets, but when we brought a third old longline onboard, Per was irritated: "It is impossible to drag here, lines and trawl cables rest like cobweb down there". Lasse turned to me and said he had absolutely no faith in this search – the task was impossible. But to the skipper, he reiterated the need to try.

Without much to do on deck, Geir went to the cabin to relax. He shook his head, "It is good we saved the grapnel. The likelihood to find the nets is one out of a million!"

The search went on for five hours before the skipper decided to turn to the nets we still had. The hydraulic hauling wheel was not operating properly, and now and then a net shot out.

Two tons of Greenland halibut was not bad. The skipper consulted the crew: What do we do now? Should the *Northern Gannet* go to shore with the fish or remain until the quota was secured. We were short only three tons.

Lasse was eager. He urged setting out for shore, sailing through the night. He wanted to sell the fish in the morning, take onboard more ice, then return to the nets after we had had dinner. "We stay until finished. This also gives us lots of time to search for the lost nets". Obviously, Lasse wanted to sleep at home.

Suddenly, he demurred: "What do you think, Per. You are the skipper. I will join in on everything you decide. You know as we all do, any vessel should not and cannot be ruled by democracy".

The skipper smiled, "OK, fair enough, especially when we arrive at the same conclusion".

Still, Per wanted Geir's opinion. Geir, too, wanted to go to shore, noting that the hydraulics needed to be repaired. In rough weather a broken hauling wheel could be dangerous, and he had heard a gale warning on the radio. "At the wharf we may get a new hydraulic wheel or repair the one we use".

The skipper decided to return to the harbour. Geir and Lasse set the net chain. In the wheelhouse Per nodded at me when he said "did you see how happy the two of them became. Their voices cheerful, their faces smiling. They both wanted to go to shore". Per was a good caring skipper who had created a fine atmosphere on his vessel. His father had reminded him about the importance of this, most recently when he had advised his son on how to deal with the lost gear.

At the fish plant, the buyers weighed the catch at 5,200 kilos of Greenland halibut and 100 kilos of redfish. That was quite good, especially considering the lost nets. Again the *Northern Gannet* had out-fished the *Viking*. The crews of the two vessels met in the harbour. Fishing at Mulegga was slack, and they had decided to move north where the *Northern Gannet* was operating. It was safe now that the long-liners had left.

Per's father phoned again to say that many in the home community were wondering if the *Northern Gannet* would make the quota. Some wondered whether the expedition would lead to economic ruin for the crew or the vessel. Per asserted that the quota was safe. "We shall easily catch the needed fish with the remaining sixty-nine nets. The vessel and crew will make good money", he added.

"Listen", his father instructed.

This is how it is, how professional fishing evolves. No one can practice net fishing without losing some nets. It is only to report it, where and when. This was the first time you lost nets, but it will happen again. It is irritating, it is sad, unfortunate, especially when they are stocked with fish. This is however, how net fishing is, as it always was and always will be. I bring you greetings and wishes of good luck from Grandpa and Uncle Arne [both fishers]. I really think you and your crew are skilful, doing very well.

Just before midnight, *Northern Gannet* headed for the continental slope bordering Tromsøflaket for the last time that season. The hydraulic wheel had been repaired. In the wheelhouse, we four enjoyed the hamburgers that Lasse had brought from town. Spirits were high, even though Geir hinted to me that he was worried about the cost of the lost nets.

Lasse's thoughts were elsewhere. During that year's spring season for Greenland halibut, a friend of his had drowned at Mulegga. He told us the story:

The vessel my companion was on ... it should actually never have been there – too small, too far out on the open ocean. The two men crew were gathering fish from their nets, when a large wave came in over the side. The hatch to the storage bins in the hold was open.² (Water) filled

the vessel that sank like a stone. Rescuers from other fishing vessels found one of them in the sea and saved him. My friend was dead when they discovered him. Afterwards the coast guard promised to make more inspections and send the smallest vessels home. I wonder.

Lasse asked, "We saw a coastguard vessel when we went north to *Egga* at the beginning of this season, but thereafter? I saw none of their ships, did you?"

Geir said that the coast guard surely does a good job when it comes to rescue operations and search for missing boats and people. He praised their efforts in the Barents Sea, keeping an eye on the large foreign factory trawlers there. The oceans have enough fish for everyone's need, but certainly not for every trawl company's greed, he said.

"But then I do not like the grey ones" (the colour of the coast guard ships), he said.

They think they rule the sea. Some years ago, one of them ruined my income. We were after Greenland halibut and forced to return to shore. Our vessel was too small they insisted and in addition, the officers claimed that we did not have the required safety equipment. The seas were calm, no wind, fine conditions, the coast guard youths thought it was fun to spoil our good luck, appeared as if they enjoyed the situation.

Neither the skipper nor Lasse answered him. But Per whispered to me, "Idiot".

Sailing through the calm dark night, the *Northern Gannet* reached its destination to find the *Viking* waiting for us. The crew had run out two net chains and were passing the time before tending them. They greeted us and we welcomed them.

Per had calculated that the *Northern Gannet* lacked some 2,900 kilos to reach the quota. During the first haul this grey morning, the crew brought in an intact bated longline, which had crossed over the vessel's chain of nets. Some fish dangled from the nearest hooks.

"Cut that damn line", the skipper shouted, "and tie the ends together again. Leave the fish and make sure we get clear of it all".

Some ethics prevailed, even here at the Klondike, although there were never any written rules of conduct. For instance, we tried to cause the least damage, even to others' property. Even here, far from law enforcement or watching eyes, we do not need to be villains, Per said.

If those bastards who cut our float and lead cords had taken the needed time to lash at least two of them together, they would have saved us lots of work, even some good money. They could even have pulled in their own line from both ends to save our day. Who knows, perhaps they emptied the nets before they threw them over the side.

When we had freed the two net chains of fish, we knew we had met the quota. The nets were in place on the stern, and tons of Greenland halibut lay on ice inside the hold. The expedition was over. All that remained before the *Northern Gannet* could set course for home was to drop Lasse off and sell the catch at the fish plant.

Lasse was cheerful. He said this had been one of his best times at the slope. Geir phoned his father to say we would soon be heading south. He said, "If we had not lost one chain, we would have made it in only two trips". His father asked how Per was going to account for the lost nets. "No, daddy, it is not deducted from our parts", Geir said. "The skipper deduct the loss from the vessel's part".

"Well, then", his father answered, "that must surely be a good deal, good fishing".

On the return trip, the ocean was flat, only a monotonous swell. During the five hours, the *Northern Gannet* shared the waters with various species of whales – killer whales, minke whales, porpoises, and finback whales. We saw nothing more.

When we approached the shore, we ran into heavy fog. All crewmembers were on lookout in the wheelhouse, one of us constantly watching the radar display. Lasse's father called to say he was closing in on us and would help guide the *Northern Gannet* to safety. He had the experience and local familiarity to navigate this sea port with its tiny islets, some hardly nosing above water at low tide, areas of wide shallows and piercing rocks.

We spotted him in his Iceland-designed fishing speed vessel on the radar and soon he was at our side. The dense fog muffled his voice as he urged Per to follow him closely and he would bring us right to the fish plant. Lasse's sixty-year-old father had navigated these waters since his teens. Per skippered the vessel, shaking his head slightly in acknowledgement of our pilot. "Here I would never have taken the *Northern Gannet* through, even if it had been a bright sunshine day. I shall not take this course without a local pilot, be sure about that", he said.

We were so close to shore that we could hear the occasional prop echo off the bottom. As we moored the vessel in front of the fish plant, the fog was still heavy. It was dark when we brought the fish into the plant at eleven o'clock. The manager thanked the skipper for our efforts this season and welcomed the vessel to return next year, perhaps in February for the winter cod fishery.

According to the official documentation, the *Northern Gannet* overfished the quota by some 400 kilos, an acceptable amount that imposed no fine or confiscation of fish. Finally, the crew set aside some ten fish to take home. To mark the end of the fishery the crew shared coffee and a sip of fine cognac. Lasse returned to shore, the remaining crew slept onboard.

Early in the morning, the *Northern Gannet* headed south. The skipper navigated the vessel, while Geir talked on his cell phone to his girlfriend, oblivious to the skipper or me. He was in love. Per said,

Poor guy. He does not understand that he is badly tricked. He sends this girl, who tells him the most heart-breaking stories, ... money at irregular intervals. When he is like this, you and I take times at the wheel. Geir has difficulties concentrating.

Another day had dawned when we arrived home, the skipper's mother and father on the wharf to welcome us. The trip had been unstructured in many ways. We had slept and eaten at random intervals, and had had hardly a single full supper. For the first time during months of fishing, I had not had fish for dinner!

A little later, Per's father asked me how the homeward voyage had gone and whether I were tired. He had told his son to make sure Geir rested for security's sake, just to be sure.

That evening, the skipper's parents served us grilled Greenland halibut. "Finally Harald", Per laughed, "we got fish for dinner".

Frontier behaviour once again

When I argue that Greenland halibut fishing exhibits some elements of frontier behaviour that are characteristic of the Klondike and the Wild West, I must emphasize a few

points. I do not claim that the *Northern Gannet* and its crewmembers are representative of entire Norwegian coastal or bank fisheries and fishers. Every vessel has her own atmosphere, colour, or micro culture. Every crew is composed of men (and sometimes a few women) with different personalities who shape their everyday worlds. These differences among vessels and crews are perhaps representative of Norwegian coastal fisheries. The reference to rugged individualism, competition, elusion of formal regulations and fishers' ethics are context related and situational. Catch quotas for various fish species are necessary to provide a sustainable fishery, but when vessel quotas do not mirror the overarching number allowed tons of fish, this sometimes leads to reckless competition. It is when time is running short and there are many vessels on the fishing grounds that lines cross over nets and vice versa. That is when some fishers do not pay attention to calls on the radio, what is most important is to cover the costs of the current expedition. This is but one example showing how fishing regulations may be difficult to follow because they generate task solutions too difficult for many to fulfil even when the will is present (Jentoft and Mikalsen 2001, 77). This is also where it is easy to detect unintended results of state-induced regulations.

However, the words Wild West, frontier, and Klondike are not creative metaphors picked from my imagination; rather, they are terms commonly used by journalists, by people in relevant local communities, and by the fishers themselves. The metaphors are rhetoric and surely exaggerate. I have sought to show empirically the importance of speech and communication rules at sea. It makes a difference when someone you know or know about describes an environment as the Wild West. The statement may have behavioural and interactional implications that may set thought patterns afire. Life on the frontier requires social and behavioural adaptations. When the long-line skipper of *Skarven* welcomed us to the "Wild West" of Tromsøflaket we all knew what he referred to. The label both confirmed our recent experiences, set the tone when the two skippers communicated and confirmed our situational understanding of rugged competition.

I placed the young skipper, Per, in the foreground to highlight how fishing along Egga was a new experience for him and to show how he learned through experience. As the youngest of the crew, Per managed to gain respect from his elders, by showing them respect even as he developed his authority as the skipper. During the intensive days of fishing, he drew upon advice and support from close fishers relatives. He also acknowledged both blunt and subtle hints from others, such as recognizing when his crew wanted to go to harbour. Perhaps the most important, yet most difficult, instructions came from his father and were repeated in different ways. Per was advised to make sure his crew was happy and that he, the skipper acted morally acceptable also during stressful situations. Tus Per for instance, tied the broken longline together without taking any fish and was reminded to report the location of the lost nets.

The lessons of the Greenland halibut fishery go to the core of a useful "fisherman education". Although formal education is always useful, especially secondary school specializations like fishing and fish farming, the informal, hands-on education is required to be a successful fisherman and skipper. This experiential education yields tacit knowledge, some born of intuition achieved over generations.

Notes

1. This was actually Per's third vessel, all with the same name, each one somewhat larger than the previous.
2. Keeping the hatch open is against safety measures, but for practical reasons, this is generally the practice.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank former colleagues at the department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo for much inspiration in my work with the issues discussed in this paper. More recently Anne Trine Kjørholt, NTNU, head of the programme "Valuing the past, sustaining the future: Education, knowledge and identity across three generations in coastal communities", has constructively influenced the final version of this text. Two anonymous reviewers deserve thanks for their useful suggestions, many of which have benefited the presentation of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Anahita, Sine, and Tamara L. Mix. 2006. "Retrofitting Frontier Masculinity for Alaska's War Against Wolves." *Gender & Society* 20 (3): 332–353. doi:10.1177/0891243206286319.
- Broch, Harald Beyer. 2011. "Comments on the World in Which They Live: A Narrative-Theory Approach to Meaning Making Among Young Girls on Tim Paus Island, Indonesia." *Asian Anthropology* 10: 19–43.
- Broch, Harald Beyer. 2012. "In Times of Change. Cultural Responses to the Natural and Social Environment in Nordland, Norway." In *Fishing People of the North. Cultures: Economies and Management Responding to Change*, edited by C. L. Carothers, et al., 11–28. Fairbanks: University of Alaska.
- Broch, Harald Beyer. 2013a. "Monkfish Mysteries. A Narrative Analysis of Place-Making and Knowledge Production." *Acta Borealia* 30 (1): 60–74. doi:10.1080/08003831.2013.768055.
- Broch, Harald Beyer. 2013b. "Social Resilience: Local Responses to Changes in Social and Natural Environments." *Maritime Studies* 12 (6). doi:10.1186/2212-9790-12-6.
- Brox, Ottar. 1972. *Newfoundland Fishers in the Age of Industry*. St. John's, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Emel, Jodi. 1998. "Are You Man Enough, Big and Bad Enough? Wolf Eradication in the US." In *Animal Geographies. Place, Politics and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*, edited by Jennifer Wolch, and Jodi Emel, 91–116. London: Verso.
- Fagan, Brian. 2017. *Fishing. How the Sea Fed Civilization*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fields, Leslie Leyland. 2011. *Hooked!*. Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press.
- Gezelius, Stig S. 2004. "Food, Money, and Morals: Compliance Among Natural Resource Harvesters." *Human Ecology* 32 (5): 615–634. doi:10.107/s10745-004-6099-5.
- Gundersen, John-Arne. 2008. "Cowboyhavet" [The Cowboy Ocean]. *A-Magasinet* October 24: 42–48.
- Haug, Tore. 1992. "Flyndrefisker" [Sole, Flounders, Halibut]. In *Norges dyr: Fiskene 2* [The Animals of Norway: The Fish 2], edited by I. Arne Semb-Johansson, 248–266. Oslo: Cappelen.
- Helmreich, Stefan. 2009. *Alien Ocean. Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hollan, Douglas. 2001. "Developments in Person-Centered Ethnography." In *The Psychology of Cultural Experience*, edited by Carmella C. Moore, and Holly F. Mathews, 48–67. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Jensen, Terje. 2012. "Ny Blåstopp. Blåkveite" [New Blue Stop. Greenland Halibut]. *Fiskeribladetfiskaren* August 8: 11.
- Jentoft, Svein, og Knut H. Mikalsen. 2001. *Lastet til ripa. Fiskernes rettsstilling i ressursforvaltningen*. Trondheim: Tapir.
- Jepson, Jill. 2008. "A Linguistic Analysis of Discourse on the Killing of Nonhuman Animals." *Society and Animals* 16: 127–148.
- Maurstad, Anita. 2004. "Cultural Seascapes: Preserving Local Fishers's Knowledge in Northern Norway." In *Northern Ethnographic Landscapes. Perspectives from Circumpolar Nations*, edited by Igor Krupnik, Rachel Mason, and Tonia H. Horton, 277–297. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Maurstad, Anita. 2010. "Cultural Seascapes as Embodied Knowledge." In *Mutuality and Empathy. Self and Other in the Ethnographic Encounter*, edited by Anne Siegfried Grønseth, and Dona Lee Davis, 35–48. London: Sean Kingston.
- McGoodwin, James R. 1990. *Crisis in the World's Fisheries. People, Problems and Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Miller, Gloria. 2004. "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers." *Gender, Work and Organization* 11 (1): 47–73. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2004.00220.x.
- Norgaard, Kari Marie. 2011. *Living in Denial. Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pálsson, Gisli. 1994. "Enskilment at Sea." *Man* 29 (4): 901–927.
- Pethon, Per. 2005. *Aschehougs store fiskebok* [Aschehoughs' Large Book about Fish]. Oslo: Aschehough.
- Roberts, Callum. 2007. *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. London: Gaia.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- van Ginkel, Rob. 2009. *Braving Troubled Waters. Sea Change in a Dutch Fishing Community*. Mare Publication Series No. 4. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.