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Fishy Imaginaries: The Cultural Politics of De/Objectifying Fish

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Abstract

This article discusses how fish are imagined in and beyond Western popular culture. Activists and scholars with an interest in marine conservation have argued that it is difficult to mobilise for fish welfare due to their alleged lack of charisma and sentience. Expanding these existing studies on fish ethics, this article argues that in order to understand why few people seem to care for fish, we need to critically interrogate how fish are constructed in popular culture. Methodologically, the article develops its argument based on ethnographic fieldwork with actors who *resist* popular representations of fish from *under water*. I draw on 10 qualitative interviews with subsea activists and conservation divers, as well as 18 months of participant observation at and in the Baltic, the North Sea, and the North Atlantic, using snorkelling and scuba technologies, during which I encountered various species of fish. Based on this fieldwork, I discuss three hegemonic fish imaginaries in Western popular culture, which present fish as either décor, monsters, or biomass. I argue that what runs through all three representations is that fish are not only objectified as "lively capital"—a fate they share with other more-than-human animals—but rendered as *lesser-than-animal*. In consequence, popular representations of fish serve to legitimise their industrial extraction by equating fish with a wider inventory of oceanic "resources" and "raw materials" like oil, wood, or minerals. By contrast, the people I accompany in my fieldwork encounter fish in radically different ways.

Keywords

animal ethics; fish; fishing; lively capital; more-than-human; multispecies justice; ocean activism; representation

1. Introduction: Encountering Fish Above and Below the Water

The image is difficult to forget once you saw it—a hybrid creature with the body of a tuna and the face of a panda bear. This, of course, is exactly what WWF's 2011 advertising campaign intended. The campaign

was launched in the context of Atlantic bluefin tuna nearly having been hunted to extinction (Probyn, 2017; Telesca, 2020). Its tagline, "would you care more if I was a panda?" implies a clear message: if only people would consider fish to be as cute as panda bears, tuna populations could be saved. WWF's tuna campaign is illustrative of a problem that concerns animal rights activists and scholars alike: many people "(at least in many Western cultures)" seem to have difficulties "when it comes to relating empathetically to fishes" (Greenhough et al., 2024, p. 2). One possible explanation that immediately comes to mind is that humans and fish live in different elements. The fact that fish live "under the water, out of sight, out of mind" (Greenhough et al., 2024, p. 450) means that most humans do not encounter fish in their natural habitat, but in the terrestrial world, that is, from the surface. As Ferguson (2006, p. 121) writes, before the latter half of the 19th century, subaquatic animals "were usually portrayed either alive at the water's surface or dead and desiccating on land."

With the rise of Victorian aquaria in the late 19th century and underwater film technologies in the early 20th century, this changed as Westerners were now able to encounter fish—if still on the surface—then at least alive, namely behind glass or on the screen (Elias, 2019; Granata, 2021; Starosielski, 2013). Given that surface encounters behind glass or on screens define many Westerners primary exposure to live fish until today, it seems necessary—when thinking about the question of why many people do not seem to care about fish—to interrogate how fish are constructed in Western popular culture and everyday life. As scholarship of subaquatic representations demonstrated, how the subsea is imagined is not value-neutral but has deep political implications (Alaimo, 2025; Jue, 2020; Probyn, 2017; Starosielski, 2013).

Unlike scholars who have interrogated popular imaginaries of the ocean and fish on the screen, this article approaches the question of how we encounter fish not by textual analysis, but from the perspective of those who encounter fish in a radically different way, namely, *under water*. Besides 10 qualitative interviews with conservation divers, my argument derives from 18 months of *ocean ethnography* conducted in the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the North Atlantic between 2024 and 2025. During this period, I accompanied marine conservationists into the intertidal zone, coastal waters, and offshore areas using bathyscopes, snorkelling, and scuba diving technologies in order to monitor, restore, and document endangered marine habitats and species. As part of this work, during dozens of hours spent under water, I encountered different types of fish, including the three specific species I focus on in this article: Atlantic gobies, pelagic blue sharks, and Baltic plaice.

As different scholars have shown, human–fish relations are multiple: they are not only culturally specific, but also shift with changes in the ecological or economic context within which they take place (Satizábal & Dressler, 2019; Todd, 2014). Depending on context, humans might understand fish, to name but some examples, as "ornaments, pets, specimens, and food" (Granata, 2021, p. 11), as "milk" ("protein"), "meat," "resources" (Satizábal & Dressler, 2019), and as "trophies in sport fishing," or, contrastingly, as "non-human persons with agency" (Todd, 2014, p. 223). Given the importance of context, it is crucial to point out that my own ethnographic work took place in the waters bordering three Western European countries (the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands). Consequently, my analysis is limited to their respective first languages (English, German, and Dutch). Moreover, I specifically focus on Anglo-spheric popular culture because of how fish-themed films and documentaries from the US (such as Disney's *Finding Nemo*, or Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*) and the UK (such as the BBC's *Blue Planet*) have become global media phenomena. Thus, they impacted the cultural imaginaries of fish even in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where English is not the first language. While this focus on Anglo-Western imaginaries of fish is necessarily limiting and certainly not representative of *all* (and perhaps not even the majority of) human–fish relations across the

globe, I will argue that a consideration of how fish are represented in Anglo-Western popular culture is nevertheless important for understanding how these imaginaries help to legitimise the industrial-scale extraction of fish "stock" as a dominant global governance paradigm.

Drawing on ethnographic encounters with fish under the sea, the argument in this article unfolds in three steps. Firstly, I will review existing scholarship dealing with human–fish encounters as a question of aesthetics, ethics, and economics. Secondly, discussing my fieldwork findings, the article offers three common tropes in the popular Western imaginary of fish, which represent fish as décor, monsters, or biomass. Here, I will also demonstrate how undersea conservationists' fish encounters from below the waterline differ from these popular imaginaries. Ultimately, the third section of this article argues that all three imaginaries not only objectify fish as "lively capital" (Collard, 2020) but also render them as *lesser-than-animal*. In consequence, Western popular representations of fish serve to legitimise their industrial extraction by imagining fish not as animals but as "resource-objects," thus equating them with "raw materials" like oil, minerals, and wood. When encountered under water in the context of marine conservation, however, fish present themselves in a radically different way.

2. Caring for Fish: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Economics

The question of why humans seem to care more about the well-being of some animals than others has occupied scholars and conservationists for some time. One popular line of explanation and a key assumption that runs through much research is the implied message in the aforementioned WWF campaign: the cuter, more colourful, or more spectacular an animal is, the more humans care about their well-being. As Lorimer (2007, p. 911) argues in his seminal study of "non-human charisma": "Affect provides the vital motivating force that impels people to get involved in conservation." Thus, charisma is instrumentalised in conservation contexts, for instance, in the shape of "flagship species," in order to benefit the conservation of specific species or wider habitats. The term flagship species refers to charismatic megafauna, often large mammals such as pandas and polar bears, or, in the aquatic realm, whales and dolphins, with a high emotional, public appeal (see, for instance, Gehrke, 2024; Jepson & Barua, 2015).

Charisma has arguably become a popular line of campaigning for the simple fact that *it works*. Gehrke (2024) demonstrates how Arctic practitioners continue to use polar bears in their communication about political issues in the Arctic because it will grant these issues greater media attention, in the hope that this will lead to better conservation. At the same time, scholars like Gehrke have also criticised and pointed to the limits of flagship species as a communication strategy, because of the inherent risk of misrepresenting what is at stake. For instance, polar bear health may say little about the actual state of Arctic wildlife in the context of climate change, for while polar bears may be able to adapt to new conditions, the general state of the Arctic may still be in decline.

Conservationists and scholars concerned with fish ethics in particular have also pointed to the limits of mobilising charisma for fish welfare. As one of Gehrke's (2024, p. 17) interviewees puts it: "it's more resonant if you're talking about polar bears than if you're talking about freshwater fish." Similarly, Telesca (2020, p. xiv, emphasis added) implies that—compared to tuna—many people seem to find it easier to sympathise with Tilikum, the famous captured orca at Sea World, for the chlorine in his pool "stung and reddened his eyes *just like yours and mine would have*." Unlike orcas or pandas, Driessen (2013, p. 252) argues, fish "are

quintessentially non-cuddly animals, cold, slimy, and with their unblinking and sideways directed eyes they don't have a 'face' to us." Tellingly, it was a fish called *Psychorolutes marcidus*—better known by its less flattering name "blobfish"—who was voted the "world's ugliest animal" (Jamieson et al., 2021; Probyn, 2017).

Concerned with how humans might care for animals that are not considered to be cute or even seen as ugly, Driessen (2013, p. 253) argues for an "ethics of awe," which could apply "beyond those that look impressive or pretty" and work via other characteristics that leave an impression on humans, such as "amazing abilities." With regards to tuna, we might think, for instance, of their "cheetah-like" speed (Telesca, 2020, p. xv). However, awe, too, hits a similar limitation as charisma: What of those who can neither be understood as cute nor awe-inspiring? What of those who are "boring" to humans? Do they *deserve* to be killed? Indeed, a key limitation here is that in looking for cuteness, human-like features, or awe-inspiring qualities, human preferences remain the primary reference point against which a fish's worthiness is judged.

A second line of argument regarding how people may begin to care about fish is to do with fish sentience, thus moving from the question of a species' individual characteristics and *aesthetics* to questions of *ethics* and fish welfare. Here, scholars have argued that exposure to animal suffering may mobilise compassion with animals that humans might otherwise find difficult to relate to. If only we saw more "pictures of distressed wildlife" (Greving & Kimmerle, 2021, p. 128), "displaying the gruesome reality of immense amounts of suffering" (Driessen, 2013, p. 255), scholars argue, people would start caring. However, Driessen admits, the difficulty with fish is that the question of whether or not fish feel pain was long scientifically disputed and even though there is evidence today that fish *do* suffer, the assumption that they do not seems to stick. Indeed, Greenhough and colleagues' study of laboratory aquarium workers' relations to fish shows that workers had to learn to recognise fish suffering, because fish suffering *looks different* to human suffering: "[I]f a person is in pain, they're either going to make a face or cry….Fish don't do any of that" (Greenhough et al., 2024, p. 458). Respective scholarship, which acknowledges that fish *may suffer*, thus recommends what Wadiwel (2016) terms a "politics of doubt." Other scholars proposed ethical concepts such as animal agency (Edelblutte et al., 2023) and dignity (Franks et al., 2023), which go beyond the focus on pain and take into consideration the complexity of animals' liveworlds, including their cultures, cognition, or sociality.

From a more practical point of view, scholarship on professional human–fish relations does reveal that humans who spend time with fish *do* tend to care about fish in different ways. Greenhough et al. (2024, p. 449) show how aquarium workers "find ways to empathise with fishes" once they learn to recognise a fish's ill health. At the same time, while respective studies offer insightful observations about the meaning of care—such as that caring for fish means caring for water quality—Greenhough et al. (2024, pp. 455-456) also note that the care given by aquarium workers, for instance, still occurs in the context of captivity for human *use*, in which we "bring the fishes up to 'our level,' whilst we humans stay with our feet on land, not in the water."

As scholarship on artisanal and Indigenous fishing practices demonstrates, where humans encounter fish from *within* their own environment rather than—literally and figuratively—*looking down* on them (Franks et al., 2023), human–fish encounters might be understood as more equal, "reciprocal relationships between people and 'fish-as-non-human persons'" (Todd, 2014, p. 218). Todd demonstrates how the people from Paulatuuq of the Inuvialuit settlement region in the Canadian Western Arctic engage with fish in multiple ways, including through "storytelling, philosophizing, sharing, theorizing, songs, ways of respecting and linguistic definitions," which "extend far beyond the utilitarian procurement of food" (Todd, 2014, p. 222).

Here, as Todd (2014, p. 225) points out, fish are not "separate from humans," but "intimately woven into every aspect of community life." Similarly, Satizábal and Dressler (2019, p. 7) describe how interactions with fish are an essential part of the everyday "rhythms, memories, stories, and practices of marine social spaces" in Afro-descendent small-scale fishing communities in Colombia's Gulf of Tribugá. That respective communities "speak often of fish as milk—as sustenance, protein, and source of life" is illustrative of a "deep physical and emotional connection between them and the Gulf's waterscapes" (Satizábal & Dressler, 2019, p. 8). Crucially, both studies highlight how respective ways of encountering fish can clash with national polices and industrial practices driven by commercial logics and global value chains.

In line with respective studies of human-fish encounters *in* the water, my aim in this article is to demonstrate how Western conservationists' fish encounters *under* the water similarly contrast with predominant economic logics and, in my case, Western cultural imaginaries of fish. Thus, this article will engage in most depth with scholarship concerned with how non-human animals are folded up into capitalist relations of labour, property, and commodity governance (Barua, 2016; Collard, 2020; Fair, 2024; Shukin, 2009; Telesca, 2020; Wadiwel, 2016). Telesca's (2020) discussion of the commodification of tuna, for instance, reveals how international governance bodies existing to protect tuna serve instead to manage tuna to extinction. Here, "the problem is not the institution per se but the values that arrange it" (Telesca, 2020, p. 30). In order to understand the meaning of care in this context, she suggests, we therefore need to analyse the "hegemonic regime of value that eradicates entire life-forms for the sake of commodity empires" (Telesca, 2020, p. 5). Similarly, Collard (2020, pp. 7–8) argues that scholarship of human–animal relations "has not adequately grappled with capitalism as an organizing structure for human-animal relations." For instance, charisma's "emphasis on enchantment does not explain the logics of accumulation or how value is generated through the traffic in spectacular, lively commodities" (Barua, 2016, p. 739).

In what follows, I draw and expand on respective scholarship to demonstrate how Western popular culture has helped to normalise the imaginary of fish as commodified objects and how such imaginaries in turn serve to legitimise exploitative human–fish relations. The next section will draw out three hegemonic tropes of fish representations pervading Western popular culture and everyday life that have stood out in my fieldwork. At the same time, my subsea fieldwork with marine conservationists and ocean activists (see Scharenberg, 2025)—taking place in the fish's natural habitat—also shows how humans may relate to fish in a radically different way, namely on eye-level.

3. En/Countering Popular Fish Imaginaries Under Water

3.1. Decorative Fish: The Aesthetic "Deficiencies" of the Goby

When I joined a group of seagrass conservationists on a particularly cold February day in 2023 to better understand and support their endeavour of restoring local seagrass meadows, I found myself shivering in a wetsuit that was way too thin for the icy wind and water temperatures of UK winters. Still, I was convinced that it was all going to be worth it. After all, besides helping to restore a crucial ecosystem, there was the prospect of possibly seeing marine mammals like seals or different types of sharks, which could be found within the proximity of the particular seagrass meadows we were monitoring. In the many hours I spent under water over the course of several months, planting and measuring seagrass shoots, I was secretly always hoping to see a smaller-spotted catshark in particular, whom I had only ever encountered washed up dead on the beach

where I lived, and was keen to meet alive. I often asked my fellow divers and snorkellers whether they had seen one. "No," they responded on most occasions, but had I seen the pipefish pretending to be a seagrass leaf? I hadn't.

Over the course of the next few months, during which we returned to the same meadows over and over again, I gradually began to see the underwater seascape through the eyes of my research participants and started to get to know the many inhabitants of the area. While there were—and I did eventually see—the occasional catshark and seal, I began to also notice the vast variety of other fish using the seagrass meadow as a nursery or hunting ground: from "commercially valuable" species like cod and plaice—whom many UK residents will have only encountered wrapped in batter in their local chippy—to different types of wrasse, gobies, and blennies hiding amidst cobbles and pebbles or swimming through the meadow. As I learned more about this fascinating habitat, I began to question why it had been so important to me to see specific species when there was such an abundance of life to be encountered here. It was not until I spoke to Chris, a local underwater videographer and conservationist, about their experience of diving in the UK, that I realised where I had gone wrong. Chris told me:

> I will spend a whole dive and not really move that far, because I just watch what's going on, from the smallest goby to a large crab, you watch how things interact, and that's what I film a lot of my time. A really nice example is you look at a goby and to most people it's a plain-looking fish that doesn't really do much except live in the sand, but actually, when you sit and watch them, they have the most amazing personality….They build nests…it's star-shaped around and it looks really cool. I always think back to that Blue Planet 2 shoot where they filmed puffer fish and the puffer fish make these nests. I always think, well…it's tropical…it's a charismatic species but then you come close to home and there's this small fish that does the exact same thing they do and there is proper character behind it and it's like: please tell me what the difference is…except one is in warm water and the other is in colder temperate seawater. (Interview, March 2024)

Chris's implied critique of the BBC's popular ocean documentary and how it represents underwater habitats is echoed by academic scholarship in media and cultural studies (Cubitt, 2005; Starosielski, 2013). As respective scholarship demonstrates, the hegemonic view of the underwater world is skewed by a colonial gaze that is drawn towards tropical, colourful habitats and charismatic species. Elias' (2019) insightful study, *Coral Empire*, traces this view back to the rise of aquaria and diorama in the late 19th and then underwater photography and film in the early 20th century, which helped construct the underwater as a modern spectacle for the purpose of enchanting Western audiences. Coral reefs in the Bahamas and Australia, for instance, were regarded as the backyard of the British empire. Jue (2025) shows how this skewed aesthetic view that favours colourful species like tropical coral persists and forgets about the cold-water species that can be found closer to home—a fate that the North Sea goby encountered by Chris shares. As part of this wider fascination with tropical habitats, fish were turned into "objects of beauty" or "curiosities" (Elias, 2019, p. 9). In other words, they were constructed as *decorative objects*, valued for their aesthetic properties and "ornamental functions" and collected for the purpose of "visual *consumption*" (Granata, 2021, p. 87, emphasis added). Elias (2019, p. 9, emphasis added) demonstrates "how the desire to look at animals, to hunt with cameras, and to *consume* the exotic world through photographic reproductions and cinematic projections embodied symbolic as well as physical violence," while objectifying "marine animals as source of knowledge and entertainment" (Elias, 2019, p. 1).

Crucially, the construction of fish as *décor* is thus not merely an aesthetic matter but underlies a profit-driven logic that puts fish to work and on display for paying customers to see. Even ocean documentaries produced by public broadcasters like the BBC, as Cubitt (2005) demonstrates with the example of *Blue Planet*, are impacted by the logic of revenues through international sales, which even influences how episodes are structured to be able to include advertising breaks. Unsurprisingly, what sells best in the attention-based economy are "spectacular cinematography" defined by "grandeur"—"the series opens with a sequence on blue whales"—or "rarity" (Cubitt, 2005, p. 48). As such, they tend to favour the most charismatic, the most colourful, or the most "bizarre." As Jamieson et al. (2021) demonstrate, based on their critical analysis of the *Blue Planet II* episode that focusses on the deep sea, attention is given, here, not only to the "prettiest" but also to the "ugliest," "alien" creatures of the deep, which paints a skewed image of the deep ocean through spectacular, loaded language (see also Alaimo, 2025). For Jamieson et al. (2021, p. 797), such representations contribute to why people do not seem to "care about the deep sea."

Another example of how Western audiences have come to expect underwater habitats to look a particular way is the public aquarium, which has shaped the British popular imaginary of what can be found under the waves from the Victorian era (Granata, 2021) until today. In their study of contemporary public aquaria in the UK, Squire and Peters (2025, p. 10) demonstrate how aquaria "are carefully designed to enchant, enthral and entice audiences." This involves aquarists constructing (and viewers expecting) tanks in which the water is crystal clear, specific species (notably sharks, "Nemo's," and "Dory's") are present, and something (preferably colourful or spectacular) can be seen in every part of the tank. Put simply, the fish-encounters of the Western aquarium visitor, who already knows that there is a near guarantee that "there'd be Dory's" (Squire & Peters, 2025, p. 7), contrast starkly with Chris's experiences in UK undersea habitats. If mainstream audiences have been conditioned to expect only the prettiest, ugliest, or the most spectacular species, Chris's encounter with the goby took place while spending hours in the murky waters of the North Sea, not expecting much but to witness what was there. Rather than projecting learned aesthetic preferences for charismatic mammals, spectacular species, or colourful coral onto the cold-water habitat in which they spent time, Chris adapted their mode of seeing to the environment in which they found themselves. For them, the key was to encounter animals like the goby (Figure 1) on their own terms.

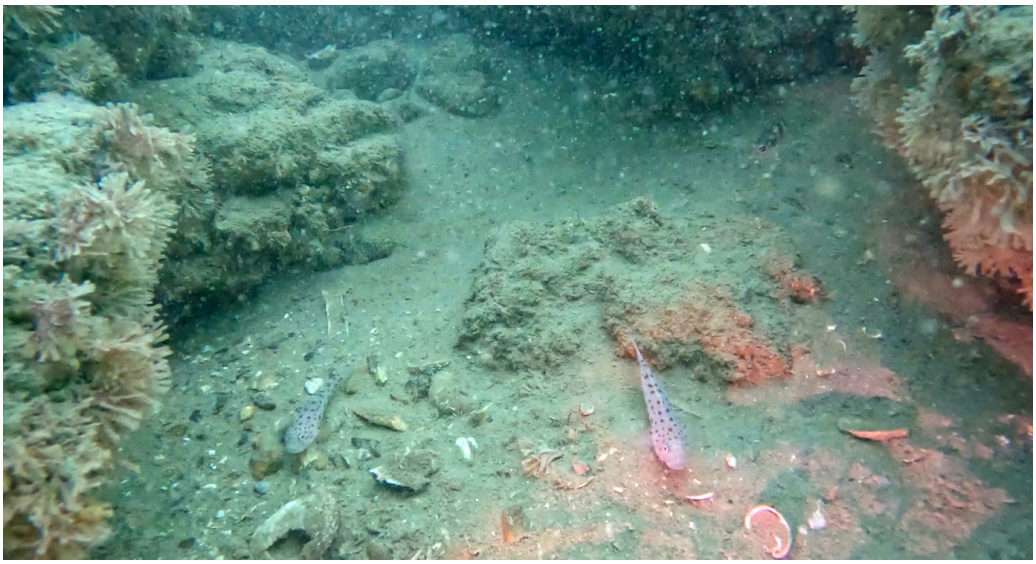

Figure 1. Leopard-spotted gobies, arguably two of the more charismatic members of the gobiidae family.

3.2. Monstrous Fish: The Production of Sharks as Machinic "Others"

After more than an hour of boat ride, in the summer of 2024, I was bobbing on the surface of the pelagic Atlantic, encircled by three sharks. Far from nightmarish, this was a *desirable* situation. I had come out here with a group of conservationists precisely because we wanted to not only see sharks but to be in the water with them in order to observe their behaviour and monitor this particular population. North Atlantic blue sharks, the species to which the three individuals encircling me belonged, had been added to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list as "near threatened" in 2018, partially as a result of ending up as "bycatch" or of being caught for their fins to enter into the global shark fin trade. In order to help protect the species, the conservationists whom I accompanied were gathering data about this population by tagging, observing, and getting to know the sharks that lived in this particular area of the North Atlantic.

As we prepared to enter the water, another person, who swam with pelagic sharks for the first time, asked the inevitable question: how likely was it that we might get *attacked*? The question was hardly surprising. All fish considered, few fish have as bad a reputation as sharks. Jo, one of the conservationists on the trip, later told me that she gets this question nearly every time she talks about her work. In fact, one of the biggest challenges to shark conservation, as I have been told by several interviewees, is this: if you say shark, people think *Jaws*.

Once again, activists and conservationists are not the only ones blaming popular culture for the negative reputation of fish. Several scholars have written about and dissected Steven Spielberg's 1975 blockbuster *Jaws* (for instance Ferguson, 2006; Neff, 2015), which sparked not only its own film genre—the shark thriller, including several *Jaws* sequels, other shark-attack-themed films such as *Open Water*, *The Meg*, or *Sharknado*, as well as a video game named *Jaws Unleashed* (Fuchs, 2018). Fuchs (2018, p. 181) critiques that what *Jaws* also does is "effectively reducing the shark to its jaws." Indeed, the film industry has constructed sharks as *monstrous* "killing machines" (Verne, 2025, p. 198), driven by the *intention* to attack (Neff, 2015) and a primal drive to kill that exclusively defines their being (Fuchs, 2018).

While Spielberg's depiction of great white sharks may have defined the contemporary imaginary of sharks like no other, *Jaws* did not invent attack-focused shark representation. "The original 'Jaws' attack" arguably took place in 1749 when Brook Watson, the owner of the Boston Tea Party's tea, went for a swim in Havana harbour (Bendersky, 2002). The scene was captured on canvas a few decades later by the painter John Singleton Copley, whose depiction of the shark reminds of the *Jaws* poster in that it shows a gaping mouth full of teeth, ready to bite. Wide open shark jaws also appear on J. M. W. Turner's famous painting *The Slave Ship* from 1840, as well as in Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* from 1899. In Copley's depiction of *Watson and the Shark*, we also see how Western humans typically respond to shark attacks: above the shark's head looms her fate in the shape of a person about to ram a spear into her back—signalling that "only a dead shark is a good shark." This trope later occurred even in Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World*, from 1956, which originally included "scenes of the crew killing sharks" (Starosielski, 2013, p. 152). Indeed, the very first-ever moving image caught of a shark was a shot of a shark being killed (Elias, 2019).

It is worth noting that respective representations of sharks can include moments in which the monster imaginary is complicated, even in movies such as *Jaws*. More than complicating, recent documentaries like Ocean Ramsey's *Shark Whisperer* seek to actively contest this trope of sharks as monsters and *re*-present sharks as in need of conservation. However, scholars have shown that conservation-minded action and

representations can have limitations or even cause harm (see Edelblutte et al., 2023). Tagging, for instance, has been criticised for causing harm to individual sharks, and TV programmes like *Expedition Great White*, which set out in the name of shark protection, still indulge in masculinist beast vs. man fantasies, anthropocentric narrations, and displays of human domination (see Fuchs, 2022). Indeed, what shark representations from Copley to Spielberg demonstrate is that shark imaginaries in popular and high culture often intimately connect shark encounters with, and thus legitimise, shark killings. Neff's (2015) work compellingly shows that *Jaws* even influenced shark policy in Australia. Similarly, in Réunion, killing sharks used to be a go-to method for dealing with shark "attacks" (Verne, 2025). At the same time, Verne's study of human-shark encounters also illustrates that where humans are willing to change their behaviour, living *with* sharks (see also Fish, 2024), rather than attempting to separate humans and sharks by default, may be possible. This might include critically assessing when and how humans need to be in the water with sharks at all (as in the case of excessive shark-themed tourism), or employing "underwater shark spotters," who "move in the water like fish," encountering sharks on eye-level (Verne, 2025, p. 212),

Back on our boat in the North Atlantic, Jo answered the question of possible blue shark "attacks" by telling us that humans are not on the sharks' menu. If a blue shark were to bite, it would be because they were "seeking information," seeing that a human bobbing about on the surface in the middle of the ocean is a rather unlikely sight for them. The circling, Jo explained, is one way of getting information. If they need more, they might use their mouths to inspect an unknown object, the equivalent of what humans would use their hands for, rather than bites being an intentional "attack." To prevent this kind of contact, Jo tells us to stay calm in the water, wear fins to avoid erratic movement, and lock eyes with the sharks at all times to tell them we are fellow predators, not food. Put differently, we should adapt our behaviour and position in the water to that of the shark (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Blue shark encounter in the open ocean.

3.3. Fish Biomass: The Reduction of Plaice to "Fish Stock"

We had been out at sea for several hours and were in the middle of hauling up several hundred kilos worth of net on deck when one of the divers suddenly shouted, "Stop!" They spotted a fish in the net that was still moving. With her mouth wide open and gills pulsating in need of oxygen, she only entangled herself further when trying to free herself. Carefully, the diver peeled her out of the net, put her back into the water, and we watched her disappear beneath the waves. The scene encapsulates precisely why the divers I accompanied out on the Baltic Sea had come here: to pull ghost nets out of the sea in order to stop the unnecessary death of fish. The term "ghost net" refers to fishing nets that have either been lost or deliberately dumped at sea and which subsequently drift in the water column or get entangled on reefs or shipwrecks. As one of the divers explained to me: the nets keep killing even when they are no longer in operation because what they caught attracts other marine life, including seals or porpoises, who subsequently get entangled. As if to prove a point, the next net we hauled up contained a fish for whom we came too late. Half decomposed, he could hardly be identified—the drifting ghost net had turned him into a ghost of himself (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Dead fish caught in a ghost net, probably a bull-rout.

While the sight was bleak enough on the surface, the images the divers regularly brought up from underneath were even more gruesome. When I asked them what the situation looked like under water, Finn, one of the divers who often takes an underwater camera down to document and make visible (see Alaimo, 2025) the damage and suffering caused by ghost nets, told me about a particularly horrific scene:

> Sometimes you document things you'd rather not film. Once, for example, we encountered a plaice caught in a net whose eyes were being eaten by crabs while he was still alive. He couldn't swim away

> and so the crabs took him to pieces; that was tough [to watch]. There's always the question of how long you point the camera at that scene for…before you free them. (Interview, July 2024)

Finn's struggle to watch and document such a situation illustrates the mental and political dilemma of documenting animal suffering for the purpose of, on the one hand, mobilising compassion, and, on the other, gathering evidence for the purpose of resisting the status quo. As Finn explained to me, it is not clearly regulated who is responsible for recovering nets once they are lost at sea, which is why volunteer divers fill this gap. Moreover, by documenting the damage these nets cause under water—including in marine protected areas—they have a lever with which they can demand change.

At the same time, my conversation with Finn demonstrates that this work is not only emotionally and physically challenging for the divers involved, but it also points to the limits of mobilising the argument of animal sentience and compassion through the documentation of animal suffering. Finn told me that many people he talks to are supportive of them removing such nets, but that there is a limit to that support:

> We often meet supporters who see our ship and ask, "what can we do?" Our answer is: "Well, you can stop eating fish and a lot would be won already." More often than not, they respond: "That's too radical." (Interview, July 2024)

Here we explicitly return to the question with which I began this article: why do people not care about fish, even when their suffering and destructive fishing techniques are being made visible? In other words, why, even when they might feel compassion for a fish's unnecessary death, do people still think that the idea of not eating fish sounds too crazy, indeed *too radical*? For Finn, the answer to why many people in the West do not seem to care for fish is this: "We don't regard them as animals." Instead, the English word *fish stock* (see Driessen, 2013), as well as the German *Fischbestand* and the Dutch *visbestand*, signals an inventory rather than a population of beings. As one interviewed UK conservationist put it, people tend to think of sea*food*, not sea*life*.

The question of language and how people refer to and encounter fish was an issue that kept coming back in various conversations I had with conservation divers. Another example that several research participants gave is that Westerners do not tend to think of fish as individuals. In this sense, fish are different from other objectified animals such as farm animals. If you ask a farmer how many cows they have, they will likely tell you the number of individual animals, say 100 cows. If you ask an industrial fishing person how many fish they caught, they will answer, say, 100 tons (an amount pelagic supertrawlers can catch in a day). Fish, in other words, is measured as "bio*mass*" not beings (see also Telesca, 2020, p. xvii). "Bycatch" (*Beifang* in German and *bijvangst* in Dutch have the same connotation) is another such term that lumps individuals together into one undistinguishable squish of undesirable catch: a form of "rubbish" that gets broomed back into the sea while dead or dying. In Sir David Attenborough's recently released documentary *Ocean*, we see the kind of footage that activists like Finn have been documenting for years. Here, a bottom trawling net is dragged across the ocean floor, destroying everything in its wake. It is the equivalent, as one conservationist told me, of going through the Amazon rainforest with a bulldozer and destroying an entire habitat to catch a single butterfly. If this happened on land, they said, most people would be outraged. But because it happens to fish under the sea, an environment that is often out of sight and out of the public eye, few seem to care.

By contrast, the activists and conservation divers I followed throughout my fieldwork have a radically different relationship to fish in that they relate to fish *on eye level*. Back on deck of the ghost net diving vessel, we stopped what we were doing to pull individual fish out of the net. Under water, activists like Finn pay attention to the horrific fate of individual fish suffering. In doing so, they arguably de-objectify fish, recognising their individual stories, families, and economic dynamics (Collard, 2020) of how they end up on people's plates. In doing so, what their actions amount to is a *de-objectification* of fish, recognising them not as objects to be extracted from the sea, but as *fellow animals*. Like many of those I met who, like Finn, consider themselves ocean *activists* (see Scharenberg, 2025), I have referred to individual fish in this article as "she," "he," or "them," just like we would to a fellow human being. After all, as Telesca (2020, p. 243), who applies the same approach in her book on tuna, puts it: "Using the pronouns 'she' and 'her' is meant to contest and destabilize the commodification of fish. Surely a living being cannot be 'it.'"

4. The De/Objectification of Fish as Lesser-Than-Animal

What, then, do the three tropes I have outlined in this article thus far tell us about how Western audiences commonly encounter fish in popular culture and everyday life? What each section demonstrates is that Western popular culture and the language used to refer to fish constructs fish as objects of sorts: (a) for the purpose of entertainment and enchantment (decorative fish), (b) as machinic others to be kept at bay (monstrous fish), or (c) as a resource for industrial-scale extraction (fish biomass). Fish are often reduced to functioning as part of the *backdrop*, elevated only if they fulfil the aesthetic requirements as decorative *objects* by being tropical, colourful, or awe-inspiring. In shark representations that reduce sharks to their jaws, sharks are objectified, quite literally, as killer *machines*. Here, sharks are treated less like an autonomous animal and more like a form of *pollution* that can be removed from popular beaches and bays by means of barriers (Fish, 2024; Verne, 2025). Finally, in industrial fishing, fish are lumped together into a "biomass" rather than being recognised as a population or individual animals. In short, fish are reduced, here, to the status of objects in an anthropocentric logic that renders fish as useful or instrumental to humans in aesthetic, leisure, or culinary terms. However, what I want to argue in what remains of this article is that the fate of fish is different from that of other "use animals": fish are not only objectified into "lively capital" (Collard, 2020)—they are constructed as *lesser-than-animal*.

Crucially, the objectification of animals into commodities is not specific to fish (see Shukin, 2009). Building on Shukin's idea of "animal capital," Collard's (2020, p. 5) work on the "exotic" pet trade shows how both domesticated and wild animals are folded into human property relations, in which animals are "*made* thing*like*" when turned into a commodity or capital. Collard argues that animals are made thinglike by way of a process she terms *animal fetishism*—expanding Karl Marx's *commodity fetishism* by bringing it together with the scholarship of Donna Haraway and Sarah Ahmed. Collard (2020, p. 25, emphasis added) argues that, "animal fetishism is mobilized discursively…through the designation of *usefulness*" to humans. Animal fetishism, for Collard (2020, p. 24), "thus involves the *cutting off of the animal from the complex history of its own being*." Making a similar argument for the specific case of tuna, Telesca (2020, p. xvii, emphasis added) criticises how "the *utilitarian* logic of fisheries management under extractive capitalism depends on an *alienated* citizenry's implicit internalization of value commoditized in such a way that accepts as normal the extermination of an ocean giant." In other words, thinking of tuna as sushi has become the norm, while thinking of them as warm-blooded giants roaming the high seas is a marginalised perspective.

Yet, if objectification is the fate of all animals in an anthropocentric regime, there is still a fundamental difference in precisely *how* fish are objectified compared to other non-human animals. To paraphrase Orwell: all animals are objectified, but some animals are more objectified than others. While even pets are objectified, Collard (2020) shows that there is a paradox here, because their value as *lively* capital derives precisely from them staying alive—an argument that also applies to pet fish held in aquaria. The fate of farm animals is somewhat different. While they, too, need to stay alive in some cases (to provide milk or eggs, for instance), they are essentially kept to be killed and turned into food. There are animal welfare regulations for farm animals, including farmed fish, which outline how farm animals ought to be kept and killed to minimise animal suffering. However, wild fish caught commercially "are excluded from welfare regulations" even though fish are recognised as sentient beings in UK law (Garratt & McCulloch, 2022, p. 1).

In what ways, then, are fish different from other objectified animals like pets or farm animals? The very term "fish" is indicative here for it is unprecise at best: "fish" can be both plural or singular, refer to the animals themselves or to their "meat." By contrast, the English expressions for terrestrial animals' "meat" sustain a specific relation to the animal species or genus: In the process of hunting, deer get turned into veal, a killed cow becomes beef, a killed pig becomes pork, and a killed chicken's meat becomes poultry. Moreover, as Franks et al. (2023, p. 233) pointed out: "'fish' is not a biologically meaningful group" but rather an artificial grouping that lumps together more than 30,000 different species of aquatic vertebrates, including *Agnatha* (jawless fish like the lamprey), *Chondrichthyes* (cartilaginous fish like sharks and rays), and *Osteichthyes* (bony fish like the blenny or the plaice). The English term *fishing* (as well as the German *Fischen* or the Dutch *vissen*) is no less problematic. Which other animal gets *turned into a verb*? The verbs "deering," "chickening," "cowing," or "pigging" do not exist in the English language. The term "whaling" refers to a practice that is now banned from commercial exploitation, not least as a result of the Western public's imaginary of whales having radically shifted over the last centuries—from monsters on medieval maps to intelligent beings "like us." Birding, the exception to the rule, refers to the practice of admiring birds, rather than killing them. By contrast, fish, in the context of many fishing methods, do not even deserve individual deaths but can be scooped up as a "biomass" with heavy machinery and thrown back into the ocean as "bycatch" if deemed undesirable.

What these examples illustrate, then, is that fish are treated, in this imaginary, rather as a part of their environment or a wider inventory of ocean-based resources—part of a landscape to be harvested (like a forest in forestry or a field in agriculture) or, indeed, a kind of *raw material* in themselves, rather than "just" an objectified animal. Tellingly, the primary management device for "fisheries"—the maximum sustainable yield—was originally developed in the forestry sector, thereby equating fish to trees or crops and treating them akin to terrestrial vegetation to be divided up based on economic exploitation and geopolitical interests (Ramesh & Namboothri, 2018). In this sense, the very practice of fishing by way of dragging a net through the ocean is more akin to ploughing the ground to harvest wheat. Fish are, thus, *more akin to crop than to cows*, more like crude oil, less like a dog—they are thought of as a raw material to be extracted from the sea. Pets, in being rendered as objects, might be lesser than humans. Fish, however, are rendered here as *lesser-than-animal*, not quite *animal-objects*, but *resource-objects*, devoid of a life of their own even before they might be caught.

How, then, may fish be encountered otherwise? The human actors I met in my fieldwork encounter fish not as "lively capital," but regard "the animal as a world-making subject" (Collard, 2020, p. 19). Using Collard's terminology, we might say that these encounters thus serve to "defetishize," or, indeed, *de-objectify fish*, in that

they recognise them as "relationally autonomous beings" with "lives of their own" (Collard, 2020, pp. 30–31). In my three case studies, activists and conservationists do this in different ways. Chris, rather than projecting aesthetic preferences onto the goby, accepts them as they are, returning to the same dive site time and again, which is precisely what allows them to acknowledge that the goby's life is as complex and valuable as that of tropical fish. The shark conservationists I spent time with do not reduce sharks to their jaws but attempt to understand the animals' behaviour in full. Rather than keeping them away, they adapt their behaviour in the water to safely be with and thus better understand sharks. Finally, Finn and his crew call fish "she," not "it," become witnesses to their deaths, and protect their habitats from ghost nets. In doing so, they shed light on the material relations of consuming fish, leading them to reassess our consumption (and production) habits and ultimately calling for a temporary moratorium on fishing in the Baltic Sea altogether. In sum, what they all do is to *de-objectify fish*, encountering fish as subjects in their own right. The radicality of de-objectifying fish, however, goes further than merely demanding fish welfare. What these acts of de-objectifying all have in common is that they invite Western humans to adapt their own behaviour, whether it is their sense of aesthetics, how they move in the water, or what they eat. That is, rather than attempting to change (the image of) fish, they seek to change the behaviour of (Western) humans.

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us return to where I began this article and consider a second example of how environmental NGOs have attempted to mobilise empathy for fish through powerful advertising imagery. This second advert shows a fish with a frightened expression on his face, not under water but on the surface, worse even: in a frying pan. The tagline "Frying Nemo" and image of Pixar's protagonist about to land on a plate were used by the animal rights organisation PETA to get consumers to reflect on the question: "if fish had personality, would you protect them?" (see Driessen, 2013). While some might argue that films like *Finding Nemo* and respective adverts can mobilise compassion and care for fish, it is also true that *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory* have taught Western audiences that they can come and expect to see "Nemo's" and "Dory's" in public aquaria (Squire & Peters, 2025). *Finding Nemo* thus illustrates both the potential of "charismatising" fish through popular culture and its limits: while people might start caring, charisma and personality do not protect fish from capture and (here, decorative) objectification.

In this article, I drew on the perspective of underwater activists and conservation divers to argue that we need to understand fish imaginaries in and beyond popular culture not only through the lens of charisma, but also pay attention to the wider cultural politics through which fish are constructed as *lesser-than-animal*. Such an analysis reveals that charismatising fish—while it might increase care to some degree—still folds fish into existing extractive relations, rather than critiquing, and thus beginning to change, the cultural and economic logics that construct fish as *resource-objects* in the first place. Put differently, in focussing on constructing fish as more likeable animals, the charisma strategy misses the fact that fish are hegemonically understood *not even as animals* in Western culture. In order to understand why many people in the West do not seem to care about fish, we need to pay attention to how popular culture serves to legitimise an idea of fish as lesser-than-animal, that is, merely another oceanic resource to be extracted. In this sense, investigating human–fish relations also raises further questions about how Western humanity relates to the ocean at large.

My aim in this article was to demonstrate that encountering fish not from the surface (from the top-down) but from under water (from below) reveals not only how extractive relations get normalised, but also brings

other, more-than-human views of the ocean into view (see Armstrong, 2025; Armstrong & Scharenberg, 2025). Crucially, as Lobo and Parsons (2023), amongst others, have pointed out, many coastal and Indigenous peoples have encountered fish and other marine animals in respectful and caring ways for centuries. Satizábal and Dressler's (2019, p. 15) work with Afro-Colombian communities, who understand fish as "milk," provides a case in point, opening up a different vocabulary and set of imaginaries based on a much more "nurturing relationship between coastal people and the sea," compared to the extractive relationship that is implied in much of Western popular culture. In this sense, my work with subsea activists and conservation divers is in line with and seeks to contribute to existing and future struggles and scholarship that aim to expand an alternative, more-than-human vocabulary *from below*.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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