

Reconfiguring Coastal Access: Disability, Relational Participation, and Politics of Inclusion in Blue Growth Futures

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Abstract

Coastal environments are increasingly positioned as sites of innovation through living labs and nature-based solutions. Yet disabled people remain largely excluded from these experimental practices, their participation constrained by technocratic design paradigms and normative assumptions about perception, mobility, and independence. Drawing on empirical research with visually impaired people in UK blue spaces, this article examines how disability reconfigures understandings of access, participation, and justice in coastal governance. Empirically, the study foregrounds how access is generated through relations among bodies, infrastructures, and environmental conditions rather than through individual capacity or architectural provision. Conceptually, it draws on relational disability scholarship, relational ontology, and new materialist thought to understand access as a dynamic process of composition, shaped by affective, material, and social interdependencies. Within this frame, disability is not approached as a deficit to be accommodated but as a mode of expertise that reveals the contingent arrangements through which environments become navigable and meaningful. This reconceptualisation situates blue space as a relational field in which inclusion and exclusion are continually produced through the alignment of human and nonhuman agencies—from shore gradients and currents to social relations and institutional practices. In this framing, coastal empowerment is approached as the reconfiguration of the relations through which belonging and participation take shape at the water’s edge. By tracing these entanglements, the article contributes to debates on blue justice, equitable blue growth, and participatory conservation, offering a framework that grounds environmental futures in the lived, material, and relational realities of coastal communities.

Keywords

blue growth; blue justice; coastal governance; co-production; disability; empowerment; more-than-human; relational infrastructure; risk

1. Introduction

Coastal environments are increasingly central to sustainability transitions. Across Europe and beyond, blue growth strategies, marine spatial planning reforms (Ehler & Douvère, 2009; Tafon, 2018), and governance approaches like living labs and nature-based solutions frame coastlines as sites of innovation, diversification, and participatory environmental management (Barbesgaard, 2018; Bennett et al., 2019; European Commission, 2012). Empowerment, inclusion, and co-production are often invoked as guiding principles (Blythe et al., 2018), aligned with commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations' "Leaving No One Behind" framework (United Nations, 2015, 2024). The shoreline is presented not just as a resource to manage but as a space where communities shape sustainable blue futures.

Despite this participatory turn, inclusion within coastal governance remains uneven. Empowerment is frequently operationalised through procedural and technocratic logics such as stakeholder representation, consultation architectures, infrastructure provision, and design compliance (Blythe et al., 2018; Turnhout et al., 2020). These methods often maintain baseline assumptions about participation, including normative sensory capacities, stable mobility, predictable environments, and individual independence as default access conditions (Blythe et al., 2023). In such framings, justice can become a matter of being counted rather than actively participating: who can inhabit coastal spaces, under what conditions, and at what cost—a distinction noted within participatory and recognitional justice theories (Fraser, 2009). Blue justice scholarship highlights that struggles over access, displacement, and exclusion are central to marine governance (Bennett et al., 2019; Jentoft et al., 2022). However, the everyday embodied politics of coastal participation—how bodies move, orient, and negotiate risk at the water's edge—have received less sustained attention.

Blue space research has demonstrated the restorative and therapeutic potentials of coastal and aquatic environments (Britton et al., 2020). Alongside these contributions, the field has increasingly focused on access, exclusion, environmental justice, and the social and material conditions through which blue space experiences are produced (Bell, 2019; Bell et al., 2019; Foley et al., 2019; Phoenix et al., 2021). Emerging work engages disability, risk, and diverse embodied encounters with water more explicitly, moving beyond celebratory wellbeing narratives toward critical understandings of blue un/commons, participation, and more-than-human relations (Bell, 2019; Olive et al., 2026). Yet, questions remain regarding how access is assembled in practice through bodies, environments, institutions, and social supports, particularly for those whose participation relies on sensory orientation and interdependence outside normative assumptions of coastal use.

Disability is not merely an underserved stakeholder category in coastal transitions; it offers an analytic vantage point for examining the ontology of access within governance. In policy discourse, disabled individuals are often depicted as vulnerable bodies requiring accommodation through adjustments—ramps, signage, designated sessions—rather than as knowledge holders whose lived expertise can reshape access, risk, and responsibility (Bell, 2019; Goodley, 2014; Titchkosky, 2011). In the UK, duties under the Equality Act 2010 establish legal protections such as "reasonable adjustments" (Lawson, 2025). However, in coastal settings, implementation is influenced by interpretations of liability, resource limitations, and operational pragmatism, shaping who is welcomed, under what conditions, and with what burdens of explanation or self-advocacy. Thus, inclusion is not secured by infrastructure alone; the coast is a dynamic socio-material field in which participation is continually negotiated.

This article draws on research with visually impaired people engaging with UK coastal and inland blue spaces, examining how disability reconfigures access, participation, and empowerment within coastal governance. Access is not solely determined by individual capacity or architectural provision; it is assembled through relations among bodies, material conditions, institutions, and networks. Guides, transport arrangements, shoreline gradients, and crowd movement all shape engagement possibilities. Disability is approached not as a deficit to accommodate but as situated expertise that reveals the contingent arrangements through which coastal environments become navigable.

The article employs relational ontology and new materialist approaches to understand access as a dynamic composition (Barad, 2007; Whatmore, 2006). Coastal participation is framed as an alignment of human and more-than-human agencies—from currents and wind to social norms and micropolitics (Rockliffe, 2026a). Empowerment is positioned as the capacity to participate through relational support and negotiated risk, with inclusive co-production reframed as aligning bodies, environments, and governance practices (Tafon et al., 2024).

This article asks how disability, specifically sensory difference, reconfigures participation within coastal governance and what this reveals about blue justice. Rather than proposing a new relational approach to disability, it brings relational disability scholarship into closer dialogue with blue justice, coastal governance, and embodied blue space participation. To do so, it develops a relational framework through which coastal participation is understood as assembled across three interconnected dimensions: relational infrastructures that enable access, negotiated risk through which autonomy is exercised, and material coastal forces that actively shape participation. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding participation as an ongoing relational accomplishment rather than the outcome of legal entitlement, infrastructure, or procedural inclusion alone.

Contributing to blue justice scholarship, the article shifts attention from who is represented to the relations through which participation becomes possible. It advances a policy-relevant account of coastal participation by showing how relational infrastructures, negotiated risk, and material coastal forces shape access in practice. The analysis proceeds through four stages: situating the discussion within relevant debates, outlining the relational approach to participation, presenting empirical findings, and considering implications for equitable coastal transitions.

2. Blue Justice, Co-Production, and the Limits of Technocratic Inclusion

The contemporary blue growth agenda reframes the ocean as an economic frontier of investment, innovation, and development (European Commission, 2012; Jouffray et al., 2020). Scholarship has shown that this acceleration often reproduces enclosure, corporate concentration, and uneven distributions of benefit across fisheries, marine resources, spatial planning, and coastal development (Barbesgaard, 2018; Bennett et al., 2019; Schutter et al., 2024). These debates have established blue justice as a critical response to the political economy of ocean governance, but they have paid comparatively less attention to how justice is negotiated through the embodied conditions of coastal participation.

Similar dynamics are evident in coastal regeneration and tourism-led development. Waterfront revitalisation schemes, sea pools, climate-adaptive promenades, and “rewilded” shorelines are frequently framed as

inclusive public goods and spaces of wellbeing, recreation, and civic renewal. Yet such projects may reorganise who feels entitled to inhabit coastal environments and under what conditions (Phoenix et al., 2021). Critical coastal urbanism scholarship has shown that amenity-led regeneration can expand formal access while reinforcing normative assumptions about leisure, mobility, and consumption (Bell et al., 2019). Shorelines become curated spaces where participation is imagined through walking, viewing, and independent recreation, extending the politics of enclosure beyond resource extraction to the spatial and sensory ordering of coastal life.

These concerns have contributed to the emergence of blue justice as a critical framework for understanding equity within marine governance. Rooted in traditions of environmental and social justice (Bullard, 2000; Pellow, 2025; Schlosberg, 2007), blue justice examines how the benefits and burdens of ocean development are distributed, whose identities and knowledges are recognised, and how power shapes participation in decisions about marine resources and coastal futures (Bennett et al., 2021; Blythe et al., 2023; Jentoft et al., 2022). However, these debates have largely examined recognition through the politics of resource governance, livelihoods, and stakeholder participation rather than through the embodied and sensory conditions that shape how coastal environments are inhabited in everyday life. Drawing on theories of distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice (Fraser, 2009; Fraser & Honneth, 2003), the field has illuminated patterns of dispossession, exclusion, and uneven benefit distribution across fisheries, conservation, tourism, and marine development (Bennett et al., 2021). Yet disability and sensory difference remain strikingly peripheral within blue justice debates, rarely examined as structuring conditions of who can move through, inhabit, and meaningfully participate in coastal environments (Blythe et al., 2023).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that the benefits of blue growth remain unevenly distributed through fisheries governance, public subsidies, and blue finance, often privileging large-scale industries and wealthier nations over smaller-scale and marginalised actors (Schutter et al., 2024; Skerritt et al., 2023). Collectively, this scholarship has established blue justice as a critique of distributive inequity across ocean sectors. Recent blue justice scholarship has expanded these concerns beyond distribution and participation to include recognition and capability, asking what marginalised groups are enabled to do, be, and become within marine and coastal futures (Germond-Duret et al., 2023; Tafon et al., 2024). Recognition matters because misrecognition can undermine participation, distribution, and the capacity to flourish (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

In response to longstanding critiques of exclusion, recent blue economy frameworks have increasingly incorporated social equity as an explicit objective. The United Nations Environment Programme's Sustainable Blue Economy Transitions Framework identifies equity and inclusivity alongside ecosystem health and climate resilience (Lee et al., 2020). Similarly, Cisneros-Montemayor et al. (2025) propose an equity-centred blue economy grounded in fairness, harm prevention, rights, and flourishing. These developments represent a significant shift beyond growth-focused approaches, reflecting broader concerns within blue justice regarding distribution, recognition, and participation (Bennett et al., 2021; Blythe et al., 2023).

Yet equity remains difficult to measure and govern. Indicators can reveal important inequalities while simultaneously narrowing what counts as participation or wellbeing. As Cisneros-Montemayor et al. (2025) note, aggregate economic indicators often assume that growth translates into social benefit, while

disaggregated measures may continue to privilege dominant norms of labour, productivity, and contribution. Questions therefore remain regarding who defines equity, whose knowledge informs its measurement, and whether participatory initiatives alter underlying power relations or merely broaden representation within existing governance arrangements (Fraser, 2009; Tafon et al., 2024).

Tensions within participatory governance models like living labs and co-creation platforms illustrate challenges in collaborative design for sustainable marine futures (Lupp et al., 2020). Participation often assumes normative sensory capacities, mobility, and the ability to engage effectively, risking the reproduction of power imbalances when assumptions about who can participate are unexamined (Blythe et al., 2023; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Methods such as participatory mapping can prioritise visual cartography over experiential knowledge, echoing concerns within blue justice about procedural participation lacking substantive inclusion (Bennett et al., 2021; Tafon et al., 2024).

The UK's Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 expands legal access to shorelines through designated routes, reflecting stable mobility assumptions. Meanwhile, the Equality Act 2010 requires reasonable adjustments to prevent discrimination, but what is "reasonable" can vary greatly (Lawson, 2025). This highlights ongoing tensions between formal rights and lived accessibility (Schlosberg, 2007; Tregaskis, 2004). What remains under-theorised within blue justice debates is how embodied difference reshapes the meaning of participation itself. Existing frameworks have focused on allocation, representation, recognition, and governance structures (Bennett et al., 2021; Blythe et al., 2023; Jentoft et al., 2022), paying far less attention to the embodied, sensory, and material conditions through which coastal environments become navigable. Access is commonly conceptualised spatially—who may enter a marine area, whose tenure rights are secured, who occupies a seat at the governance table—rather than as a multisensory and relational accomplishment. This omission is particularly notable given growing calls within environmental justice scholarship to attend to lived experience, recognition, and differentiated capacities to engage with environmental futures (Schlosberg, 2025; Tafon et al., 2024). Legal expansion of access may therefore coexist with persistent inequities in navigability, orientation, and embodied confidence.

This omission matters. If blue justice is concerned with who benefits from ocean futures, it must also ask how participation in coastal life is materially assembled. Recent scholarship has foregrounded recognition and capability (Germond-Duret et al., 2023; Tafon et al., 2024), yet participation is still more often examined through governance processes than through the embodied and relational conditions that enable engagement. At the water's edge, the politics of belonging emerge through shoreline gradients, tidal rhythms, transport logistics, liability framings, environmental variability, and the coordination of people, institutions, and material coastal forces. Recent swimming scholarship has similarly argued for greater attention to diverse swimming bodies, relational swimming spaces, and the socio-material conditions through which aquatic participation is assembled, moving beyond predominantly therapeutic accounts of blue space (Olive et al., 2026). Responding to this agenda, the analysis presented here demonstrates how the socio-material conditions of coastal participation are assembled in practice through relational infrastructures, negotiated risk, material coastal forces, and embodied expertise, extending recent debates on blue justice through an empirical account of relational participation.

3. Relational Access: Conceptual Framing

Blue justice debates have focused on benefits distribution, recognition, and procedural inclusion in marine governance (Bennett et al., 2021; Jentoft et al., 2022). A relational approach to access shifts attention to how participation is constructed. Rather than viewing access as a static property granted through legal rights or representation, this perspective sees environments as dynamic fields where human and more-than-human forces continuously shape possibilities. Access, therefore, is something composed, not simply possessed (Blythe et al., 2023).

Relational ontology challenges the idea that subjects and environments exist as pre-formed entities. Barad (2007) argues that entities emerge through intra-actions rather than as independent units. More-than-human geography underscores how atmospheres, infrastructures, and nonhuman agents influence experiences and actions (Anderson, 2017). In coastal governance, this perspective disrupts the notion that participation is secured by merely opening shorelines or convening meetings. Shorelines are dynamic, altered by short-term tides and long-term erosion. This prompts the question: Through what alignments of bodies, materials, institutions, and environments does coastal engagement stabilise or destabilise (Rockliffe, 2026a)?

Access as composition foregrounds this alignment. Access is not merely the presence of a path, ramp, or legal right of entry; it emerges through the coordination of transport systems, sensory cues, institutional flexibility, and social trust. A coastal route may be legally public yet practically inaccessible if navigation depends on visual cues, uneven terrain, or unmarked gradients (Petty, 2021). Similarly, a participatory workshop may be formally inclusive yet exclusionary if it assumes visual mapping, rapid verbal exchange, or spatial familiarity. Thus, access is neither purely architectural nor procedural but relationally produced across material, affective, and institutional registers.

Critical disability studies and related scholarship increasingly challenge individualised understandings of access and inclusion, emphasising the relational production of impairment, capacity, and environmental engagement (Bygdell, 2024; Goodley, 2014; Titchkosky, 2011). Disability emerges from dynamic relations among bodies, infrastructures, institutions, and environments rather than residing solely within individual bodies. Access is understood as an ongoing accomplishment shaped through socio-material relations. Scholars such as Goodley (2014) and Titchkosky (2011) argue that access is not a technical afterthought but a political question revealing whose bodies are anticipated in design and governance. Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of "misfit" illustrates that disability arises from mismatches between bodies and environments shaped by normative assumptions.

From this perspective, coastal access regimes do not merely include or exclude; they create fits and misfits. An England Coast Path focused on expansive visual appreciation and stable footed traversal may suit some bodies while rendering others precarious or reliant on additional coordination (Kafer, 2017). Duties of reasonable adjustment under equality legislation are crucial but often retrofit environments built around normative independence instead of rethinking participation from the outset. Disability is not peripheral to blue justice; it reveals the bodily imaginaries embedded within coastal governance.

Recent disability–climate scholarship reinforces this critique. Bell et al. (2019) show that disabled people are marginalised in climate adaptation and mobility discourse, often framed as vulnerable rather than as knowledgeable agents. Eriksen and Simon (2025) note that formal representation in decision-making does not guarantee justice when lived experience is ignored as legitimate expertise. These issues reflect international calls to centre disability in sustainable development and environmental governance. The United Nations’ *Disability and Development Report* (United Nations, 2024) underscores the ongoing marginalisation of disabled people in sustainability agendas, despite growing commitments to inclusion. While disability is increasingly recognised within development frameworks, meaningful involvement in environmental planning, climate adaptation, and governance remains uneven.

Understanding disability as an epistemic position extends this argument, suggesting that disabled experiences provide expertise in navigating, negotiating, and recalibrating environments rather than merely exemplifying exclusion. Fritsch et al.’s (2019) notion of “crip technoscience” and Larrington-Spencer et al.’s (2021) work on disabled environmentalisms emphasise how disabled people reconfigure environments through adaptive practices, infrastructural improvisation, and collective knowledge. These practices highlight the gap between lived capacities and normative assumptions shaping participation and environmental engagement in policy and governance.

Within coastal contexts, this epistemic shift is particularly significant. Visually impaired individuals orient themselves through varying combinations of residual vision, auditory markers, tactile feedback, relational proximity, and environmental rhythm, revealing that navigability relies on distributed sensing, embodied histories, memory, and collective coordination—conditions often unnoticed by those whose access appears frictionless. Disability becomes analytically generative, illuminating the contingent alignments through which participation is assembled. As Jampel (2018) connects disability justice with environmental justice, disabled perspectives reveal how environmental design privileges some bodies while marginalising others in subtle yet systemic ways.

This reframing foregrounds the material–affective dimensions of coastal engagement. Water temperature, tide, current, wave force, shoreline gradient, and acoustic landscapes shape embodied possibility (Bell, 2019). More-than-human scholarship emphasises that environments generate atmospheres and modulate affect (Anderson, 2017). In coastal settings, wave rhythms may stabilise orientation for some swimmers while destabilising it for others; choppy water may invigorate one body but overwhelm another (Denton et al., 2021). These experiences are relational effects emerging from bodily history, sensory capacity, environmental conditions, and social support.

Institutional practices shape this assemblage. Liability framings, scheduling norms, transport provision, and communication formats mediate how coastal participation unfolds. Institutions that interpret risk conservatively may restrict participation under the guise of protection, while those that adopt flexible coordination may redistribute responsibility across guides, organisers, and participants (Price, 2024). As Eriksen and Simon (2025) caution, justice suffers when policy frameworks ignore lived configurations of risk and care. Access is an ongoing negotiation among environmental variability, social relations, and institutional interpretation.

A relational framing does not replace distributive or procedural justice; it complements them by addressing the micropolitics of navigability. Who reaches the coast, under what sensory conditions, and with what support networks? These questions complicate conventional metrics of inclusion. A coastal site may be publicly accessible yet remain experientially inaccessible when navigation depends on sightlines, unstable terrain, or unarticulated social norms. Conversely, a minimally engineered site may become accessible through coordinated guidance, shared environmental literacy, and infrastructures of care (Hamraie, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Building on existing relational disability scholarship (Bygdell, 2024; Hamraie, 2017), the present analysis conceptualises access as relational composition and examines how these dynamics unfold within debates on blue justice and coastal governance. The accounts of visually impaired participants that follow trace how access is assembled through relational infrastructures, environmental familiarity, institutional flexibility, social support, and affective atmospheres. Rather than revealing a singular model of inclusion, they illuminate the contingent alignments through which participation is negotiated at the water's edge.

4. Research Design and Methodological Approach

This article draws on qualitative research exploring how visually impaired people engage with coastal and inland blue spaces across the UK. Fieldwork combined swim-along, go-along, and place-based conversational interviews, approaches increasingly used to examine embodied experiences of movement, place, and environmental engagement (Denton et al., 2021; Evans & Jones, 2011). These methods were undertaken primarily through one-to-one encounters in which the researcher accompanied participants during swims, walks, shoreline visits, and place-based conversations, allowing attention to how access, risk, and participation emerged through relations among people, environments, institutions, and social networks.

Fieldwork, conducted between July and September 2025, involved 14 visually impaired participants aged 20 to 95 with self-identified sight loss ranging from partial sight to blindness, including both congenital and progressive impairments. Participants represented a range of relationships with blue spaces, from regular engagement through swimming, walking, and shoreline recreation to aspirations for greater involvement constrained by social, environmental, or institutional barriers. On four occasions, guides, swim coaches, or family members also participated. Recruitment occurred through visually impaired swimming networks, guide-swimming groups, sight-support organisations, and referrals from previous public engagement activities. A purposive sampling approach sought diversity in experiences, impairment histories, geographical locations, and blue space engagement. The design evolved through ongoing conversations with visually impaired people, swimming communities, and sight-support organisations, shaping interview formats, accessibility considerations, and areas of discussion (Duckett & Pratt, 2001; Rockcliffe, 2026b).

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Brighton Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (Reference 14001). Participants received accessible study information and provided informed consent through written and ongoing verbal processes. Information sheets and consent procedures were available in accessible formats, and participants determined where and how they wished to engage (Duckett & Pratt, 2001). Consent was revisited throughout field encounters, particularly during in situ activities where circumstances could change. Reflexive attention was given to the assumptions embedded within vision-centred understandings of access, mobility, and participation (Maxwell et al., 2020).

Participants chose how and where to engage, with encounters taking place while swimming, walking, sitting by water, at training venues, online, and in participants' homes. Extending beyond "formal" interviews, fieldwork also encompassed travel to sites, preparation for activities, and post-event conversations (Rockliffe, 2026b). While initially designed around semi-structured interviews, a more open-ended conversational approach proved more appropriate, allowing participants to direct discussion toward issues they considered significant (St. Pierre, 2019). Interviews and conversations were audio-recorded where appropriate.

Audio and written fieldnotes documented environmental conditions, sensory atmospheres, weather, water quality, ambient sounds, site use, and researcher reflections (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Emerging interpretations were discussed with participants and sight-support organisations during and after fieldwork. Analysis involved repeated engagement with recordings, transcripts, fieldnotes, and observations, alongside reflexive consideration of the researcher's assumptions and encounters (Maxwell et al., 2020). Consistent with postqualitative approaches that treat writing as inquiry (MacLure, 2023; St. Pierre, 2019), recurring moments, tensions, and encounters were revisited through movement between empirical material and theoretical concepts. Rather than applying a predetermined coding framework, patterns emerged through sustained engagement with participants' accounts, highlighting three recurring concerns: access as relational infrastructure, risk as negotiated sovereignty, and the role of material forces in shaping participation.

5. Reconfiguring Coastal Participation: Empirical Tracings

5.1. Access as Relational Infrastructure

Across participants' accounts, coastal access rarely appeared as a stable condition secured through infrastructure or legal entitlement. Rather, it emerged as a distributed relational infrastructure. For one swimmer with acquired sight loss in later life, access involved far more than reaching the shoreline itself:

People don't understand the logistics of getting there—the transport, what sort of steps there are, what shoes I need, whether I can find the entrance, who can guide me. Swimming isn't just about getting into the water. Transport is the biggest barrier for me. (Acquired sight impairment, female, 50s)

Access began long before the shoreline. Coordinating transport, guides, equipment, timing, and environmental familiarity required forms of planning and interdependence that resonate with Price's (2024) concept of crip spacetime. Barriers did not reside within individual bodies but emerged through misalignments among bodies, infrastructures, and institutional arrangements (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Titchkosky, 2011).

Many participants described guides as central to this infrastructure. They functioned as spatial anchors, safety mediators, interpreters of environmental change, and affective stabilisers. Voice proximity, shoulder contact, hand signals, and pacing cues redistributed navigational labour across bodies. In open water, some guides swam slightly ahead, adjusting direction and tempo in response to currents or choppiness; in pools, they calibrated stroke rhythm and corrected drift through subtle tactile signals. Trust was enacted through tether tension, auditory cues, and coordinated breathing, rather than abstractly declared. Guidance was therefore neither fixed nor unidirectional. It emerged as a fluid exchange of knowledge, judgement, and sensory information, with swimmers and guides continually adjusting to one another and to changing environmental conditions.

For some participants, these guiding relationships enabled forms of autonomy that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. Reflecting on an open-water swim completed without tethering, one swimmer explained:

It was the first time ever not being guided by anything or tied to anything. My swim coach said that was it—no more tether. He knew that his voice, or just a tap on my shoulder when I needed it, was enough. I'm fiercely independent with myself and competitive with myself. (Congenital sight impairment, female, 70s)

These findings challenge liberal assumptions that autonomy is achieved through independence from others. Instead, they resonate with disability scholarship that understands agency as emerging through networks of support, care, and interdependence (Goodley, 2014; Kafer, 2013; Whitburn & Michalko, 2019). Guidance was not a compensatory mechanism but an enabling relation through which participation, confidence, and autonomy became possible.

Importantly, these guiding relations were neither fixed pairings nor one-way forms of assistance. They extended into broader relational systems: WhatsApp groups coordinating swims, lake managers adjusting entry points, safety kayakers monitoring currents, and networks circulating knowledge about accessible sites. Access was scaffolded through these distributed supports. When such networks were absent, participation required significantly greater labour from visually impaired people themselves: identifying locations, negotiating disclosure, educating organisers, arranging transport, and absorbing the affective burden of repeated explanation.

Transport repeatedly emerged as an underacknowledged governance factor. Many coastal and inland swimming sites were poorly served by public transport or dependent on car access, requiring coordination with family members, friends, or coaches. Reaching the coast often required considerable logistical and relational labour before participants even encountered the shoreline. Participants frequently encountered further navigational thresholds: locating entrances, negotiating paths and gradients, orienting at the water's edge, entering the water, and returning safely afterwards. As one participant explained:

The swimming is the easy part. The hard part is everything before it. Finding a guide, sorting transport, getting dropped off somewhere you can actually navigate, persuading people to help. By the time I get to the water, I've already done most of the work. (Congenital sight impairment, male, 40s)

These accounts suggest that participation unfolded through a series of interconnected negotiations rather than a singular moment of access. While blue justice scholarship has largely focused on dispossession, representation, and resource distribution (Bennett et al., 2021; Tafon et al., 2024), participants highlighted the micropolitics of reaching, entering, and moving through coastal environments, and the material and sensory arrangements required to do so.

Institutional responses played an important role in shaping these experiences. Some site managers adjusted safety briefings, provided orientation tours, or enabled access at quieter times. Others enforced rigid protocols or imposed additional charges for guides, increasing the financial, logistical, and emotional labour required for participation. As several participants noted, meaningful inclusion rarely depended on large-scale redesign.

More often, it involved straightforward adjustments: verbal orientation rather than gesture, clear information about entry points and gradients, flexibility around timing, and a willingness to treat guiding as routine practice rather than exceptional risk.

Rather than seeking special treatment, participants sought equitable coordination. Access emerged as an ongoing relational accomplishment, maintained through interactions among guides, organisations, infrastructures, and environmental conditions. These findings echo wider disability scholarship that understands participation and autonomy as produced through interdependence rather than individual independence (Goodley, 2014; Kafer, 2013; Price, 2024).

5.2. Risk as Negotiated Sovereignty

If access was relationally assembled, risk was relationally negotiated. Participants did not describe blue space as absolutely safe. They spoke of waves, weed beds, snapped tethers, shifting tides, cold shock, and disorientation. Yet risk was not framed as something to eliminate. It was something to calibrate.

Participants frequently distinguished between risk and restriction. Discussing the challenges of entering unfamiliar water environments, one swimmer reflected:

If you can't see and you're worried or nervous it will just stop you getting in. I don't like too many rules. Obviously you need to be safe. I'll look at the conditions and decide if it's right for me. What I don't want is somebody else deciding I shouldn't get in before I've even had that choice. (Congenital sight impairment, female, 70s)

This account illustrates how risk was understood not as something to be eliminated, but as something negotiated through experience, confidence, and support. Safety mattered, yet participants often resisted institutional approaches that transformed uncertainty into prohibition. Such accounts complicate policy framings that position disabled people primarily through vulnerability and protection. Similar critiques have emerged within disability and climate scholarship, where disabled people are frequently cast as passive recipients of care rather than holders of adaptive expertise and environmental knowledge (Bell et al., 2019).

Open-water swimming, in particular, redistributed hazards. On land, vigilance was often exhausting, requiring constant attention to obstacles, uneven surfaces, and unpredictable encounters. In water, some terrestrial risks receded while new aquatic uncertainties emerged. Participants frequently described this shift as liberating:

It's freedom. In the water I'm not disabled anymore—I'm just like everyone else. On land you're always on high alert, waiting to bump into something, trip over something, get it wrong. It's exhausting. Swimming is the only place I don't have that. I can relax, push myself as hard as I want, and still feel safe. I can't do that anywhere else. (Acquired sight impairment, female, 50s)

The risk profile changed; it did not disappear. However, institutional interpretations of risk did not always align with swimmers' own assessments. Participants described clubs declining involvement because of liability concerns, organisers anxious about "getting it wrong," and assumptions that visually impaired swimmers required tethering regardless of preference or experience. In some cases, sports bodies refused

participation or imposed additional charges for guides. Such practices reflected protective logics that, while often well-intentioned, curtailed participants' ability to exercise judgement over their own engagement with blue space.

For one competitive swimmer with acquired sight loss, such practices were experienced as a direct challenge to self-determination:

They are robbing me of my rights and entitlements. (Acquired sight impairment, male, 60s)

What was at stake was not simply access to participation, but authority over acceptable levels of challenge and risk. Participants described diverse relationships with uncertainty and support, yet consistently rejected assumptions that visual impairment diminished their capacity to make informed judgements. Such accounts reflect longstanding critiques within disability scholarship that exclusion is often produced through assumptions about competence rather than through impairment itself (Kitchin, 1998; Tregaskis, 2004).

Participants demonstrated sophisticated environmental literacy, reading wave conditions, water temperature, visibility, currents, fatigue, and bodily responses in ways that informed ongoing decisions about participation. These forms of embodied expertise complicate paternalistic approaches to liability and safety, echoing calls to recognise disabled people as holders of environmental knowledge rather than passive recipients of protection (Bell et al., 2019; Eriksen & Simon, 2025).

Institutional responses varied. While some organisers imposed additional restrictions, charges, or conditions on participation, others adapted practices with little difficulty, adjusting entry procedures, providing flexibility around rules, or supporting alternative ways of engaging. These differences highlight how governance can either constrain or enable participation through its interpretation of risk. From a blue justice perspective, the question is not simply who is included, but whose expertise, judgement, and risk assessments are recognised as legitimate (Fraser, 2009; Tafon et al., 2024).

Participants' accounts resonate strongly with the concept of the "dignity of risk" (Perske, 1972): the right to encounter challenge within conditions of coordinated support. Rather than confirming narratives of vulnerability, participants articulated futures organised around challenge, exploration, and self-determination, aligning with Kafer's (2013) critique of disability imaginaries that equate safety with restriction and dependence with diminished agency.

5.3. Material Coastal Forces as Governance Actors

The third analytic tracing concerns the materiality of coastal environments. Shore gradients, wave force, tidal movement, acoustics, water clarity, pollution levels, and weather conditions were not passive settings for governance. They actively shaped the possibilities of participation. Material forces functioned as governance actors.

Entry points exemplify this dynamic. Smooth deck-level transitions fostered confidence; irregular leisure pools fractured spatial orientation. Pebble beaches enabled rapid depth access but required balance negotiation. Sand altered foot placement and tempo. Anti-slip matting stabilised slopes; uneven rocks destabilised them. Minor material differences recalibrated embodied possibility.

Acoustic landscapes were equally influential. For several participants, sound functioned as a critical navigational resource:

I use the sound of the waves to get in and out of the sea. You can really tell what the sea is doing from the sound. Wind changes it, waves change it. People make lots of noise getting into the water, so I usually know where they are as well. Sometimes I just stand still and listen. It's like reading a book—you're completely immersed in it. (Acquired sight impairment, male, 20s)

This account illustrates how navigability emerged through ongoing relations between bodies and environmental forces. Waves, wind, acoustics, tides, and water conditions actively shaped orientation and participation, resonating with blue space scholarship that understands aquatic environments as embodied and affective encounters rather than visual landscapes alone (Foley, 2022).

Participants described how sand, shingle, pebbles, currents, water quality, and weather continually reshaped possibilities for engagement. Smooth entry points fostered confidence, while unstable rocks, steep gradients, and shifting shorelines could quickly alter navigability. Wind disrupted acoustic orientation; pollution advisories rendered otherwise accessible sites unusable; tidal movements changed entry routes and swimming conditions. As one participant explained:

Every swim is different. The tide changes, the wind changes, the way the water sounds changes. Some days a beach feels easy and familiar, and the next day it's completely different. You have to keep adapting. (Acquired sight impairment, female, 50s)

Material forces therefore did not merely provide the setting for participation. They actively configured what forms of participation became possible and for whom. Regular immersion generated detailed forms of environmental knowledge. Participants described noticing algae blooms, debris accumulation, sediment movement, seasonal temperature shifts, and subtle changes in water quality that often went unnoticed by others. Such accounts position visually impaired participants not simply as users of blue space but as environmental knowers whose sensory engagements generate valuable forms of ecological literacy (Bell, 2019; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2021).

From a blue justice perspective, these findings suggest that participation is shaped not only by institutional decisions but also by material coastal forces that continually reconfigure access. Opening a coastal path, providing infrastructure, or inviting participation does not guarantee inhabitable space when tides, pollution, erosion, acoustics, and weather simultaneously shape what becomes possible. Governance therefore extends beyond policy and infrastructure to encompass ongoing responsiveness to dynamic environmental conditions. In this context, visually impaired participants emerge not simply as beneficiaries of environmental management but as contributors to environmental knowledge and coastal stewardship, extending recent calls for greater attention to disability, environmental relations, and the socio-material conditions through which aquatic participation is assembled (Olive et al., 2026).

6. Implications: Toward Relational Blue Justice

Together, the empirical tracings show that coastal participation was assembled through ongoing alignments among bodies, environments, institutions, and social relations. Participants repeatedly described access as depending on guidance, transport, environmental familiarity, negotiated risk, and institutional flexibility rather than legal entitlement or infrastructure alone. These findings have implications that extend beyond accessibility provision to how blue justice, co-production, and coastal governance conceptualise participation itself.

First, the findings suggest that co-production within coastal governance may need to move beyond consultation. Participatory governance is frequently organised through stakeholder workshops, advisory groups, and representation mechanisms (Bennett et al., 2021; Turnhout et al., 2020). While procedurally important, such approaches often assume presence equates to participation. Participants' accounts suggest otherwise. Across the empirical tracings, participation depended on the practical conditions of arrival, orientation, communication, guidance, transport, and environmental navigation. This echoes disability scholarship demonstrating that formal inclusion can coexist with epistemic marginalisation when lived expertise is not recognised as authoritative (Bell et al., 2019; Eriksen & Simon, 2025). The analysis therefore contributes to growing calls for disabled people to be recognised not solely as consultees but as contributors whose knowledge of access, risk, and environmental change can inform coastal design, governance, and stewardship. For living labs and coastal transition initiatives, this suggests greater attention to sensory diversity and the relational conditions through which participation is assembled.

Second, the analysis contributes to emerging blue justice scholarship by drawing attention to relational infrastructures. Existing equity frameworks have focused primarily on distribution, recognition, capability, and procedural participation (Bennett et al., 2021; Blythe et al., 2023; Tafon et al., 2024). Across the participant accounts, participation consistently depended upon often-overlooked supports: transport, guide provision, communication practices, environmental maintenance, and institutional flexibility. Similar patterns emerge in wider UK evidence on coastal accessibility, where transport, infrastructure, information, environmental conditions, and on-site support interact to shape whether people can move from arrival at the coast to meaningful participation at the shoreline (Beach Access Project & University of Brighton, 2026). Legal rights and reasonable adjustments remain essential, but the accounts presented here suggest that access is unlikely to be realised where the relational conditions of participation are absent.

Participants' accounts also have implications for how risk is understood within coastal governance. Participants did not seek the elimination of risk; they sought the ability to negotiate it. Yet institutional concerns regarding liability sometimes translated into exclusion, additional costs, or restrictions on participation. Consistent with wider disability scholarship (Kafer, 2013; Kitchin, 1998; Tregaskis, 2004), these accounts suggest that inclusive governance may benefit from moving beyond assumptions of inherent vulnerability toward understandings of risk as relationally managed through support, experience, environmental knowledge, and trust. Rather than asking whether disabled people can participate safely, the question becomes what configurations of support enable meaningful engagement.

Finally, participants consistently described generating detailed forms of environmental knowledge through repeated immersion and sensory engagement. Participants described noticing changes in water quality, shoreline conditions, acoustics, weather, tides, and seasonal variability. Such accounts resonate with

emerging scholarship on disabled environmentalisms, which demonstrates how diverse embodied engagements generate distinctive forms of ecological knowledge and environmental expertise (Bell, 2019; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2021). Coastal governance processes that privilege only technical expertise or formal stakeholder claims may therefore overlook valuable situated understandings of environmental change. Recognising these forms of embodied expertise within monitoring, planning, and living-lab experimentation would not constitute charitable inclusion; rather, it may strengthen environmental understanding, adaptive capacity, and socio-ecological intelligence.

Blue justice scholarship has made substantial contributions to understanding dispossession, enclosure, recognition, and inequity within marine governance (Bennett et al., 2021; Jentoft et al., 2022; Tafon et al., 2024). Building on these conversations, the findings presented here suggest that questions of justice also emerge through the relational conditions of participation. Across the empirical tracings, justice was negotiated not only through distribution and representation but also through the alignments that enabled people to arrive, orient, enter, remain, and return. Legal rights, consultation processes, and infrastructural provision remain essential. The findings suggest, however, that participation also depended upon relational infrastructures, negotiated risk, and recognition of diverse forms of expertise. In this sense, the analysis contributes to growing efforts within blue justice scholarship to understand coastal inclusion not simply as access to space, but as the ongoing composition of conditions through which diverse bodies can meaningfully inhabit blue environments.

7. Conclusion: Reassembling Blue Justice at the Water's Edge

Coastal empowerment cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure or procedural inclusion detached from embodied conditions. Drawing on the experiences of visually impaired swimmers across UK blue spaces, this article argues that access is a relational accomplishment shaped through interactions among bodies, institutions, environmental forces, and social infrastructures. Participation emerged through coordination, environmental attunement, risk negotiation, and institutional responsiveness, challenging assumptions that empowerment is secured through independence or architectural provision alone.

This perspective is important for blue justice, which has productively addressed dispossession, inequitable finance, and uneven participation in marine planning. Yet justice also unfolds through navigability: who can arrive, orient, enter, remain, and return to coastal environments, and under what conditions. Legal access and formal representation remain essential but do not automatically render coastlines inhabitable.

The analysis approaches disability not as a category requiring accommodation, but as a vantage point through which the contingent conditions of participation can be encountered. Participants' accounts highlighted how access depends upon trust, environmental knowledge, and institutional flexibility, foregrounding interdependence as a condition of participation.

The implications extend beyond swimming. As coastal transitions increasingly rely on co-production, living labs, and participatory experimentation, questions remain about whose participation is anticipated, whose expertise is recognised, and how conditions for engagement are assembled. Building on growing conversations within blue justice scholarship, the analysis draws attention to coastal inclusion as the ongoing composition of conditions through which diverse bodies can meaningfully inhabit blue environments.

Realising more inclusive coastal futures requires governance to move beyond treating accessibility as solely a spatial or procedural concern and attend to the relational conditions through which participation becomes possible. At the water's edge, justice is not simply about opening access, but about sustaining the conditions through which varied embodied ways of engaging with, inhabiting, and belonging within coastal environments become possible.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data are not publicly available in accordance with the ethical and confidentiality commitments made to participants.

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