

# Crashing the Blue Party

Confronted with plans for an offshore wind farm, the fishers of the Bay of Saint Brieuc in France are clamouring for their rights to be respected and guaranteed

“It is important to highlight that the millions of people who, to this day, still rely on ocean space for their lives and livelihoods—specifically, small-scale fishers—have, for the most part, not been invited to the blue party. This poses very tricky political questions for fisher movements and allies. Some are trying to arrange an invitation into the blue economy, believing that this is the surest way to secure rights to their

request is intended to provide a transparent response to the questions asked by professionals,” according to the report by the Fisheries Committee. The fishers say they have “taken a club to the head”, following the company’s refusal to give a clear response to their repeated requests for clarification and assurances about the project’s impacts. Preparatory work for the construction of 62 huge 216-metre-high wind turbines has been well underway; the government is eager to see France finally get its first offshore field, while the countries bordering the North Sea already have thousands of wind turbines (2,225 in the United Kingdom, against only one in France).

The fishers and the Fisheries Committee have not, *a priori*, rejected the project, as they are aware of the need for energy transition—but not at any price. “Future prospects for the fishery, its fishers, the resources in the Bay of Saint Brieuc and the local economy are at stake. This is an ambitious project of colossal scale that could make our department a showcase and a model of intelligent association between the world of fishing and that of new energies,” the fishers say.

## Observation period

“A wind farm could be installed provided that it is well managed, and that it is located away from Zone 3 (state services) so that fishers can continue to practise fishing with dredges. After a period of observation, fishing and wind turbines can coexist. The installation of an offshore wind farm in the Bay of Saint Brieuc seems inevitable. The collaboration of fishers and project leaders must be carried out under the best possible conditions for both parties. For my part, having seen the size of the park in Denmark,

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fishing grounds. Others, however, are more sceptical, having witnessed how the blue growth agenda pushes small-scale fishers into an impossible corner.”

– Zoe W. Brent, Mads Barbesgaard, and Carsten Pedersen in *The Blue Fix: Unmasking the Politics behind the Promise of Blue Growth*.

On 10 December 2020, following the meeting of the management committee of the offshore wind farm project, the fishers of the Bay of Saint Brieuc, a commune in the Cotes-d’Armor department of Brittany in northwestern France, refused to continue the dialogue with the company Ailes Marines, a subsidiary of the Spanish multinational Iberdrola. “We refuse to waste our time with companies that don’t respect us,” they said. They deplored the fact that “Ailes Marines has made a mockery of the fisheries committees and state services”.

“Ailes Marines preferred to take our recommendations as additional requests...but they did not understand that this is in their interest, as our

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Dredgers in the port of Paimpol, France. A wind farm could be installed provided that it is well managed, so that fishers can continue to practise fishing with dredges

it seems important to me to be able to work inside it (dredge),” according to a fisherman quoted in the report of the study group of fishers who went to Denmark in November 2010.

Since 2012, the fishers have been engaged in a long consultation process for the choice of the zone, the type and method of installation, and the links with the land. They have obtained results that should enable them to guarantee the continuation of fishing near the wind farm. But several phenomena have contributed to the deterioration of the relations between the fishers and Ailes Marines, to the point of their seeking the cancellation of the project.

On several occasions, preparatory work was undertaken without giving the fishers timely notice and without taking into account their fishing schedule. At sea, the fishers were furious and intervened against the presence of boats carrying out

soundings in the area. They received the support of local associations that were opposed to the project as well as that of an environmentalist association, Robin Hood. The latter, contrary to the majority of the large environmental organizations supporting the project, denounced the industrialization of the sea for the benefit of powerful multinational companies and financial groups interested—through a heavily subsidized project to the tune of Euro 25 billion over 20 years—and ensures juicy profits, in the name of supporting innovation. The fishers are vehemently opposed to the privatization of their traditional working space. They realize that this is only the first manifestation of the “blue acceleration” that threatens to achieve at sea “what we have already done on land”. The blue economy will marginalize or even exclude them. Moreover, the context of Brexit and the difficulties linked to the COVID-19 crisis are exacerbating tensions.

“We are not fishers but gardeners of the sea: in the 60 years since we started fishing, we have protected the seabeds. And today we are going to destroy all the work we have been doing for years,” said one fisherman. For the fishers, the Bay of Saint Brieuc is “the nest of the Channel”, a place where many species reproduce and feed. For decades, they have implemented management programmes, particularly for scallops, that enable them to provide a base for a thriving inshore fishery. In fact, they have found that the area chosen for the wind farm, because it was less productive, has now turned out to become a high-production area. They are, therefore, demanding scientific studies on the impacts of wind farms before any work is started.

the noise generated by the construction work, which is highly disruptive to marine animals. They have also prevailed on Ailes Marines to opt for drilling installation instead of pile driving for piles that will descend to 30 m below the seabed. But no proof has been provided that the noise impacts and turbidity will be reduced.

Finally, the fishers are concerned about the significant discharges of metal (aluminium and zinc) generated by the anodes that protect the offshore installations from corrosion. Some experiments have been launched to develop aquaculture or algae culture around the wind turbines but if these work, the investments needed will be beyond the reach of the fishers.

The wind farm in the Bay of Saint Brieuc is the first in a series of six projects in the Channel and the Atlantic. After that, the time will come for floating wind turbines which will still be within the reach of inshore fishers. An experimental field of three wind turbines is being prepared south of Lorient, featuring two large fields in the heart of the langoustine fishing areas, the gold mine of the fishers of Southern Brittany. Here, too, the fisheries committees have chosen to work together, but the majority of fishers remain very suspicious and have refused financial compensation, preferring to earn their living from work. For some Fisheries Committees, there is no choice but to participate in the consultation, knowing that the installations are inevitable in the face of European and governmental pressure in favour of offshore wind energy. To be sure, fishers must play their part in the decarbonization of energy, considering the compensation going to finance programmes to improve fisheries management and practices. Yet there will certainly be strong resistance because the areas concerned in Southern Brittany are the mudflats where langoustines thrive.

#### **Other areas**

However, in other areas farther south, the reactions of fishers and committees seem less hostile for the moment. For example, off the island of Yeu, fishers' mistrust appears less marked, because the environmental impacts are not the

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The Northern European Advisory Committees have expressly asked the European Commission (EC) to initiate in-depth studies on the impacts of wind farms on fisheries and the marine environment. Scientists may claim that the negative impacts will be limited and temporary, on the basis of botched and questionable studies. They can promise positive impacts that can compensate for the losses, but the fishers are sceptical about modelling that is based on examples that do not take into account the diversity of ecosystems. The oceanographic institution Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (IFREMER) has called for special attention to be paid to spawning and nursery areas.

The fishers know that their fishing strategies and the ecosystems will necessarily be modified, even if they are guaranteed continued fishing near the wind turbines, as they employ mainly dragging engines for shellfish and fish. This promise is also questionable, as fishing is practically forbidden near the North Sea wind farms. They are also very worried about the impact of

same due to the nature of the seabed and ecosystems, and their fishing practices. Sometimes, where fishing communities are in decline, as in Dunkirk in the north of France, the promise of wind farms is welcome because it can be a source of employment and may even accelerate the decline of fishing, as is the case off the coast of England, where almost half of Europe's marine wind turbines are installed. Is it a coincidence that these are also the areas where fishers have all but disappeared? The installation of a wind farm makes it even more difficult to recruit fishers, who are attracted by the wages and working conditions offered by the few jobs in wind turbine maintenance.

The EC estimates that an installed capacity of 300 gigawatts (GW) of offshore wind power and about 60 GW of marine energy by 2050 would be needed to create an integrated, greener and climate-neutral energy system. This represents a 25-fold increase in installed capacity, at a cost of Euro 789 billion. France envisages that by 2050, 25 per cent of its electricity will come from offshore wind power. Of course, the EC assures that these wind farms will occupy only three per cent of European maritime space, but it must be considered that the impact on the coastal zone, where artisanal fishers work, will be much greater, to which must be added the impacts of port facilities and onshore infrastructure, and the need to extract sand from the sea to meet concrete needs. Coastal areas will be greatly disrupted, which will force fishers to work in smaller areas.

In Amsterdam, on June 2, 2018, hundreds of Dutch and Belgian fishers demonstrated against the wind-powered industrialization of the sea: "We must draw the attention of the population who must understand, see and hear that we are being driven out of the sea...We have almost nothing left south of the North Sea...These are the places where we have always fished from generation to generation," said one fisherman.

If offshore wind power is to find its place without jeopardizing the future of coastal fishers, it must be integrated

into a vision of the future for fishers first and foremost by respecting their rights. It is not enough to simply debate the relationship between offshore wind turbines and fishers, since they are then subject to new constraints with the uncoordinated stockpiling of reserves, protected areas, threats to ban the fuel tax exemption and fishing holidays to protect dolphins, among other things—all in the name of objectives that are quite respectable but do not take into consideration the fisher's future. In the absence of a guarantee of respect for their rights, fishers are still wary of the great promises of the blue economy which, for the moment, is their only prospect, even as they are threatened with marginalization or exclusion. The considerable amounts of public money committed to offshore wind projects must also remain under democratic control and should not be allowed to go first to feed the profits of powerful multinationals or foreign pension funds.

The way in which the consultation between Ailes Marines and the fishers of the Bay of Saint Brieuc took place—the fishers felt misunderstood, betrayed and disrespected—does not augur well in terms of long conflicts in the years to come. The fishers have already realized that their activity weighs little in the face of the immense interests at stake and the needs of an energy transition. But what is more sustainable? A fishing area well managed by fishers or an offshore wind farm that will have to be dismantled after 20 years. The answer is blowing in the wind. Yet, the question is: How can we meet, in a sustainable manner, the need for electricity, without resorting to fossil fuels and nuclear power? The answer is, unfortunately, far from obvious. 🌀

#### For more



##### **The Blue Acceleration: The Trajectory of Human Expansion into the ocean One Earth 24th January 2020.**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2019.12.016>

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<https://www.energiesdelamer.eu/2020/11/22/planification-maritime-eolien-en-mer-pose-peche-je-taime-moi-non-plus/>

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