

# It's not just a Blue Economy moment...

**Karyn Morrissey**

University of Exeter Medical School, UK

Dialogues in Human Geography

2017, Vol. 7(1) 42–44

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/2043820617691651

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



## Abstract

Winder and Le Heron (2017) advocate for geographers to engage directly and critically with the Blue Economy and to remove the 'disciplinary framings' from which the notion of the Blue Economy has emerged. While endorsing Winder and Le Heron's call for human geography to engage with debates about the Blue Economy, I argue that the lack of critical engagement within the geographical community with respect to the Blue Economy has not been imposed by disciplinary framings. Instead I ask Winder and Le Heron to clarify how a social and cultural critique of the Blue Economy will expand the current knowledge base of our oceans and seas. I also ask whether a critique of extensive literature within economics, planning and governance on the ocean resource have been the building blocks for the critical analysis of the Blue Economy provided by Winder and Le Heron.

## Keywords

Blue Economy, human geography, marine research, oceans and seas

The ocean has attracted multiple use for centuries, with fisheries, oil and gas extraction, shipping and transportation, the military, mining, recreation, conservation, among others. Many areas attract a variety of competing uses, which overlap and cause conflicts between users (user–user conflicts) and users and the environment (user–environment conflicts) (Cicin-Sain and Knecht, 1998). However, the realization that land activities have reached their limits and the availability of new technologies that allow for greater interaction with the sea (Morrissey et al., 2011; Stojanovic and Farmer, 2013; Zhao et al., 2014) the future wide-scale exploitation of the marine resource is increasingly inevitable (Ellis and Flannery, 2016). However, a history of single-sector management of marine activities with little engagement with relevant communities and stakeholders means that an estimated 60% of the world's major marine ecosystems

have been degraded or are being used unsustainably (UNEP, 2011). Indeed, there are many indicators that suggest we are failing to effectively regulate and conserve vital ocean-based resources, and that this failure will potentially lead to consequences that include ecosystem tipping points or dramatic shifts in structure and function that are hard to reverse (Selkoe et al., 2015).

Within this context, coastal and marine policy-makers and managers have become increasingly aware of the need to support and analyse the economic and social dimension of marine activity. Suddenly, the few social scientists working on anything

---

### Corresponding author:

Karyn Morrissey, European Centre for Environment and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School, UK.

Email: k.morrissey@exeter.ac.uk

that constituted an ocean-based activity, along with marine biologists, ocean chemists and physicists, were called on to build an evidence base from which the plethora of ocean activities could be developed in a sustainable manner. In response, a large body of research across the social sciences has begun to document and map this exploitation, including research in planning (Douvere and Ehler, 2009; Flannery and Ó Cinnéide, 2008; O'Mahony et al., 2009), governance (Ellis and Flannery, 2016; Evans et al., 2011), citizenship (Fletcher and Potts, 2007; McKinley and Fletcher, 2012) and economics (Colgan, 2013; Kildow and McIlgorm, 2010; Morrissey et al., 2011). International journals such as *Marine Policy*, *Coastal Management* and the *Journal of Ocean and Coastal Management* publish papers on all aspects of the oceans and new journals such as the *Journal of Ocean and Coastal Economics* further increase the platforms in which research on the social aspects of the marine can be disseminated.

The social scientists active in research on the marine resource have all had to reconceptualize their disciplines to meet the unique properties of the ocean and seas. From an economics' perspective, 30 years of debating the definition of ocean-based economic activity has laid the foreground for what is now the sub-discipline of 'marine economics' (Kildow and McIlgorm, 2010). Planning and governance colleagues have spent the last 20 years actively wrestling with adapting their static, land-based approaches to the management of the sea. The attitude among the small research community interested in the ocean-based social science research has always been one of 'there is more to be done' and lets 'get on with it'. Along with the pressures of meeting business and policy demands, this attitude has perhaps fostered a culture of 'doing' rather than 'thinking' for the social scientists engaged in marine research. However, this doing has not been to the exclusion of other disciplines.

Yet it seems to be this body of research that Winder and Le Heron (2017) utilize to make their call to human geographers to reframe the direction and focus of research on the 'Blue Economy'. However, my question to Winder and Le Heron is, with the exception of the lives and livelihoods of fishers (Urquhart and Acott, 2012), what research base has social and critical geography to reframe the debate around the

Blue Economy? Research by human geographers (Steinberg, 2001; Peters, 2010) has already noted that while representing 70% of the earth's surface, the marine or ocean or 'blue' resource has mostly been ignored by social and cultural geographers. This lack of engagement with the marine is even starker when compared to the rich critical debates offered by human geographers in other natural resource sectors, including agriculture, mining, forestry and energy. Each of these sectors has encouraged academic debates and lively sub-disciplines within human geography. In contrast to Winder and Le Heron's commentary, which assumes that strong disciplinary framings around the concept of the Blue Economy is to blame for the lack of social and critical research on ocean resources, Peters (2010) contends that this dearth of research is actually due to a lack of everyday consciousness of the marine environment among social and cultural geographers. As an economist having worked in a geography department and attending geography conferences and seminars since 2009, it is Peters (2010) narrative that I find more realistic.

However, if human geography becomes more engaged and reframes current research on the Blue Economy, from what basis will this take place? Winder and Le Heron offer geographic assemblage theory as a new way in which to depict and conceptualize our ocean and sea resources. Assemblage theory is a well-established theoretical framework. However, is it applicable to the marine resource and the 'bluing' of the global economy? Winder and Le Heron present the ability of the marine resource to fit within this theoretical framework, but is it actually capturing the essence of the marine? If so, how? The social science community active in marine research fully realize the pitfalls of conceptualizing marine activities in land-based practices. Planners such as Jay (2013) and Ellis and Flannery, (2016) are openly critiquing the use of land-based planning practices, particularly zoning in the marine environment. Research in marine economics is reconceptualizing the role of natural resources in the core-periphery debate offered by new economic geography and establishing marine activities as a mobile, high-tech, high value-added industry (Morrissey and O'Donoghue, 2012; Morrissey et al., 2014). Research by Evans et al., (2011) examines whether current best

practice in ocean governance is applicable to developing countries. Developing countries are for the first time at the centre of an economic agenda.

Thus, my question to Winder and Le Heron is how a social and cultural critique of the Blue Economy will expand the current knowledge base of our oceans and seas? Or will it be a narrative built on a critique of the research done to date in other disciplines. Either way, it is clear from Winder and Le Heron's paper that the 'disciplinary framings' of the Blue Economy at least provide an initial building block from which social and cultural geographers can now engage with the marine resource.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

- Cicin-Sain B and Knecht RW (1998) *Integrated Coastal and Ocean Management: Concepts and Practices*. Washington: Island Press.
- Colgan C (2013) The ocean economy of the united states: measurement, distribution and trends. *Ocean and Coastal Management* 71: 334–343.
- Douvere F and Ehler CN (2009) New perspectives on sea use management: initial findings from European experience with marine spatial planning. *Journal of Environmental Management* 90(1): 77–88.
- Ellis G and Flannery W (2016) Marine spatial planning: cui bono? *Planning Theory & Practice* 17(1): 121–151.
- Evans LS, Brown K and Allison EH (2011) Factors influencing adaptive marine governance in a developing country context: a case study of Southern Kenya. *Ecology and Society* 16(2): 21.
- Fletcher S and Potts J (2007) Ocean citizenship: An emergent geographical concept. *Coastal Management* 35: 511–524.
- Flannery W and Ó Cinnéide M (2008) Marine spatial planning from the perspective of a small seaside community in Ireland. *Marine Policy* 32: 980–987.
- Jay S (2013) From disunited sectors to disjointed segments? Questioning the functional zoning of the sea. *Planning Theory & Practice* 14(4): 509–525.
- Kildow JT and McIlgorm A (2010) The importance of estimating the contribution of the oceans to national economies. *Marine Policy* 34: 367–374.
- McKinley E and Fletcher S (2012) Improving marine environmental health through marine citizenship: a call for debate. *Marine Policy* 36(3): 839–843.
- Morrissey K, O'Donoghue C and Hynes S (2011) Quantifying the value of multi-sectoral marine commercial activity in Ireland. *Marine Policy* 35(5): 721–727.
- Morrissey K and O'Donoghue C (2012) The Irish marine economy and regional development. *Marine Policy* 36(2): 358–364.
- Morrissey K, O'Donoghue C and Farrell N (2014) The local impact of the marine sector in Ireland: a spatial microsimulation analysis. *Spatial Economic Analysis* 9(1): 31–50.
- O'Mahony C, Gault J, Cummins V, et al. (2009) Assessment of recreation activity and its application to integrated management and spatial planning for Cork Harbour, Ireland. *Marine Policy* 33: 930–937.
- Peters K (2010) Future promises for contemporary social and cultural geographies of the sea. *Geography Compass* 4(9): 1260–1272.
- Selkoe KA, Blenckner T, Caldwell MR, et al. (2015) Principles for managing marine ecosystems prone to tipping points. *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability* 1(5): 17.
- Steinberg PE (2001) *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stojanovic TA and Farmer C (2013) The development of world oceans & coasts and concepts of sustainability. *Marine Policy* 42: 157–165.
- UNEP (2011) *Towards a Green Economy: pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication* (a synthesis for policy makers), United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi.
- Urquhart J and Acott T (2012) Constructing 'the Stade': fishers' and non-fishers' identity and place attachment in Hastings, south-east England. *Marine Policy* 37(1): 45–54.
- Winder GM and Le Heron R (2017). Assembling a Blue Economy moment? Geographic engagement with globalising biological-economic relations in multi-use marine environments. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7(1): 3–26.
- Zhao R, Hynes S and He GS (2014) Defining and quantifying China's ocean economy. *Marine Policy* 43: 164–173.