



Fish stories between past and future: competing and complementary heritage imaginaries in the Northeast Adriatic

Nataša Rogelja Caf¹ · Martina Bofulin¹ · Primož Pipan²

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Abstract

The article addresses the topic of coastal transformations through the lens of the critical heritage approach. It focuses on fish as a vehicle to assess how heritage as a particular type of imaginary and discourse conveys the social, cultural, political and economic transformations of the area. The two fish chosen to represent the heritage imaginaries in the Northeast Adriatic Bay of Piran are the wild mullet and farmed seabass. Both species are seen as local but each in its particular way. Mullet has acquired a local status by appearing annually in the Bay of Piran where local traditions developed around its catch. Farmed seabass became local through the process of domestication after it traversed large distances across the land to arrive in the Bay's meshed cages. Through detailed ethnographies and textual and visual discourse analysis, the authors find an array of competing and complementary heritage imaginaries surrounding both fish. These imaginaries highlight frictions as a central part of the present-day life on the coast as well as unease about the future, and can be discerned in the tense relation between fishing and mariculture, the competing ideologies of the local, national and the global and the disappearance of previous ways of life in the face of rapid coastal transformation.

Keywords Mullet · Seabass · Istria · Marine farming · Organic mariculture · Traditional fishing

Introduction

In recent years, the world's fish stocks have been decreasing steadily while the world's fish consumption has shown no signs of abating. Due to overcatch and climate change in many parts of the world, fish have relocated or simply disappeared altogether. This has left many coastal populations in a precarious situation, where their economic survival is under threat, and their way of life is disappearing before their eyes. As a panacea to the depletion of oceans and the hardships of coastal inhabitants, a new solution is offered—"a blue transformation", where fishing is increasingly supplemented

by the aquaculture production and where fishers are drawn in service industries such as tourism (Nadel-Klein 2003). This intended transformation, however, often overlooks the vast knowledge that has accumulated over generations of people living off and by the sea, in other words—their traditions, memories and histories, all of which play a key role in the heritage of coastal areas as a crucial aspect of sustainable life on the coast.

We approach the topic of coastal transformations through the lens of critical heritage approach to highlight various "uses of the past" (Smith 2006) instrumentalised for different strategies regarding the economic and cultural survival of coastal populations. This approach does not treat heritage as something old that can be readily discovered "out there" but rather as a continuous process of negotiations about what is going to be selected from the past and evaluated as important to commemorate in the present (Smith 2006; Hafstein 2018). While so far this evaluation has been done exclusively by designated (state) institutions, increasingly new voices are beginning to impact this evaluation by making heritage an inherently multiperspective endeavour (Bendix 2009). These processes are very much evident in the Northeast Adriatic, part of the Mediterranean Sea, which is

✉ Nataša Rogelja Caf
natasa.rogelja@zrc-sazu.si

Martina Bofulin
martina.bofulin@zrc-sazu.si

Primož Pipan
primoz.pipan@zrc-sazu.si

¹ ZRC SAZU, Slovenian Migration Institute, Novi trg 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

² ZRC SAZU, Anton Melik Geographical Institute, Novi trg 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

the second most depleted major fishing area in the world—according to FAO (2019), and burdened by heavy historical luggage where fishers, fish and fishing continue to play an important symbolic role in spite of everything. The small Northeast Adriatic's Bay of Piran thus is a petri dish for these processes, demonstrating local-global entanglements of coastal transformation.

In the article, we focus on fish as a vehicle to assess how heritage as a particular type of imaginary conveys social, cultural, political and economic transformations of the area. According to Salazar (2012), imaginaries are “socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices”. In that sense, heritage is a particular type of imaginary that builds on (a version) of past events, but is made and re-made in the present according to the needs of the present or future expectations (Harrison 2013). These representational assemblages connected to heritage do not refer only to humans and their discourses, but also to an arrangement of a wide variety of locally present non-humans, materials, things, technologies etc. (Harrison 2020). These include, among others, also the seemingly very mundane non-humans such as local fish. That said, the focus on such ordinary aspects may nonetheless provide a window onto not only the technology of heritage-making but also wider social and political concerns of the area as well as its possible future scenarios.

Using particular fish species to provide insight into historical and contemporary lifeworlds is not a novel approach. Through a nuanced historical study spanning a thousand years, Mark Kurlansky (1997) exposes codfish as a seemingly humdrum fish species who nonetheless brought together various cultures and were instrumental in some of the watershed moments in human history; e.g. the Vikings sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. Marianne Elisabeth Lien (2015) on the other hand offers a fascinating and detailed reading of farming salmon in Norway. She approaches salmon as “a material, embodied entity always locally situated” (2015: 16) and zooms into its domestication to show how farmed salmon becomes different creatures throughout their life cycle. Fish thus “enmesh with the human world” (Ingold 2010) in various ways and forms—not just alive or dead, but also as an “immortal” feature of local history and its imagined futures.

The two fish chosen to represent the heritage imaginaries in the Northeast Adriatic's Bay of Piran are the wild mullet and farmed seabass. Both species are seen as local but each in its particular way. Mullet has acquired a local status by appearing annually in the Bay of Piran where local traditions developed around its catch. Farmed seabass became local through the process of domestication (Lien 2015) after it traversed large distances across land to arrive in the bay's meshed cages. While there are numerous fish species in the

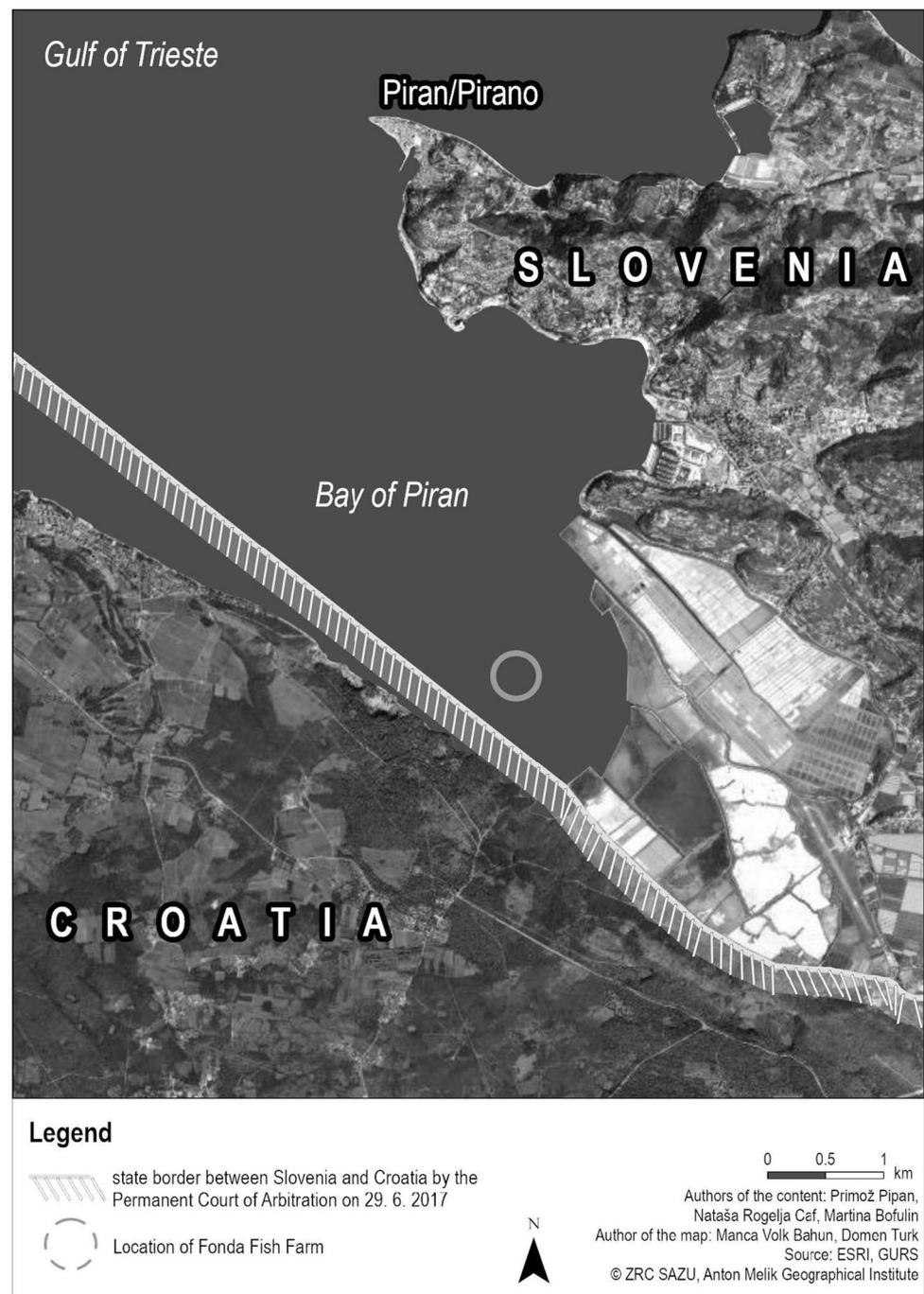
Bay of Piran, wild mullet and farmed seabass can shed new light on how the past is used in the North Adriatic, and how this affects the present and future processes, including negotiations about borders, (political) conflicts, post-socialist transition, conservation issues in Anthropocene, future prospects for the fisheries as well as local—global tensions more broadly. As observed by Lien (2015:1), we have ignored the ways in which the non-human species have histories too. Drawing inspiration from various critical approaches to heritage and drawing on our ethnographic material, we want to ask: What kind of intertwined stories are being revealed if we dare follow these two fish?

The article falls into three parts; we start by introducing the location of the Bay of Piran and giving a short historical overview as the basis for various imaginaries connected to two fish analysed later in the text. We then proceed with the ethnographic accounts of Piran's mullet and the farmed seabass that underscore different local and national modes of heritage-making, current struggles with identity-making and often conflicting visions for the future. The third part concludes with a discussion as to how the understanding of material and symbolic aspects of fish and their enmeshment with humans provide us with fresh insight on heritage-making and wider imaginaries in the Northeast Adriatic. Methodology-wise, authors used participant observation, interviews—face-to-face and virtual as part of the research was conducted in times of Covid-19 measures—as well as textual and visual discourse analysis, building on previous ethnographic work by Nataša Rogelja (2006) and colleagues (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017), geographic research in Istrian coastal areas on borders (Pipan 2007, 2008) and geographical names (Kladnik and Pipan 2008; Kladnik et al. 2014), as well as research within the field of critical heritage studies (Rogelja et al. 2020).

The Bay of Piran

The Bay of Piran and its coastal environs—the site of our story—are replete with borders and routes of all kinds and have long been defined by its position as a frontier space along the Northeast Adriatic coast and contested by competing empires and states: the Habsburg Empire, the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Ethnic, linguistic and national divisions between people living along the coast and in the hinterland became increasingly evident in the nineteenth century, and especially after 1945 when a border between the communist East and the capitalist West was drawn. Here, different modes of the past reproduced as heritage, history, memory or oblivion are thus very much alive, and competing traditions continue to resonate in the contemporary cultural representations (Ballinger 2013; Ballinger 2006; Ballinger 2004; Ballinger 2003; Baskar 2002; Cocco

Fig. 1 Research area of the Bay of Piran where mullets gather during the winter and where Fonda Fish Farm is located



2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Janko Spreizer 2019; Rogelja and Spreizer 2017). To understand the identity- and heritage-making that can be seen to permeate through the stories of the two fish, a short historical overview of the area is in order (Fig. 1).

The Bay of Piran is part of a larger Gulf of Trieste which is today divided between three nation states: Croatia, Italy and Slovenia. The maritime border between Italy and then Yugoslavia was established by the Treaty of Osimo, which came into force in 1977. It built on historical events that

followed World War II, and which caused extensive population relocations in the area. The mass emigration of the Italian-speaking population is perhaps one of the most salient events triggered by the border settlement after World War II. According to the 1947 peace treaty and 1954 London Memorandum, part of the territory that came to belong to Yugoslavia was also the Bay of Piran and its hinterland (Ballinger 2012: 373). This resulted in the final mass emigration of the Italian-speaking inhabitants. From 1943 to 1954, according to Pamela Ballinger (ibid: 52), between 200,000 and 350,000

Italian-speaking inhabitants left their homes and moved to the northern side of the so-called Morgan's or Blue Line. In Piran, the percentage of Italian-speaking people fell from 90 to 15% (Pletikosič 1995: 21). Many who had left, were fishermen, leaving local fishing communities impoverished of people and fishing skills.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent gaining of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, the maritime border between Croatia and Slovenia, running through the Bay of Piran, remained undefined and is still a matter of international dispute. In more general terms, we should note that this local dispute is part of the wider decomposition of socialist countries, where newly independent states had to consider international law, e.g., The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). Despite multiple attempts at reaching agreement, the border issue between Slovenia and Croatia in the Bay of Piran has remained unresolved while numerous politicians, experts, historians, fishermen and fish, as we will see, continue to participate in the border negotiations (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017: 25). The Bay of Piran highlights the fact that while UNCLOS solutions may look simple enough on the paper, the reality on the ground (and sea) shows they are patently not so, as past legacies continue to hover over different dispute resolutions. For the most part, the border dispute tends to get reduced to heated discussions in media- and policy-scapes, but for the Piran fishermen, it is a daily lived reality often fraught with innumerable inconveniences.

In the wake of political transformations in the 1990s and especially with Slovenia joining the European Union (EU) in 2004, Slovenian environmental policy has changed substantially over the last decades. With the introduction of numerous protected areas, environmental programmes, European fishery regulations and European fishery fund opportunities, the sustainability discourse and the projectification (Packendorff and Lindgren 2014) of Slovene fishery entered the social world of the Slovenian coast. Apart from the introduction of “stakeholders”, such as NGOs, private enterprises, independent local consortiums as well as municipal and other state bodies, the other novelty to have spread rapidly along the Slovene coastal region was “adoption of the “project philosophy”, namely of fishing framed within specific discourses of competitiveness, diversification, flexibility, innovation and sustainability” (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017: 193). In this context, heritage as a European product (Welz 2015) also found its place along the Adriatic shores.

All of this is not only affecting but is also being affected by fishing, the fishers and the fish, merging in a very particular way with local realities interwoven with heritage discourses and projects springing up over the last several decades. Using the thick description of Slovenian coast's everyday experiences channelled through the discourses and practices pertaining to two locally salient fish species, the

following sections will underline the crucial social transformations that is taking place in the Bay of Piran. The story we tell might seem very particular and local but, as we will show, it touches on prevailing economic and political issues affecting coastal areas across the globe. Among these, heritage as a distinctive modern phenomenon (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013) is increasingly being used both as a tool of neoliberal appropriations of the coast and as a resistance to them.

The Piran's mullet

“The tradition of mullet fishing... have you ever asked yourself what that means to you? The fishing technique, that's one thing, how you pull the trata net, but what it boils down to, really, is that you have mullets on your plate. That's tradition! Mulletts! Do you understand? For me to make a living and for you to eat mullets from Piran.” (Ethnographic documentation 2001)

It was a grey winter afternoon in February when Nataša visited Marko, a fisherman from Piran who helped her extensively with her Ph.D. research¹. Marko invited her home for dinner in one of Piran's typical narrow houses, where he prepared fresh mullets in white wine, a catch from yesterday. He was a valuable interlocutor, a kind person and a great cook. He opened many doors for Nataša, generously sharing his ideas and enabling her to participate at the fishermen's night guards for mullets in the Bay of Piran—definitely one of the highlights of her fieldwork experience. When Nataša started her research on the fishery in Northeast Adriatic, mullet was one of the first fish she learned about, even though statistically, the golden grey mullet (*Liza Aurata*) is not among the top three fish species caught by Slovenian fishermen² (SURS 1990; SURS 2000; SURS 2019). Especially during winter, mullet whipped up any number of moderate to heated debates on the piers as well as at dinner tables. Mullet was many things: a catch, a dish, local memory, subject of a dispute over which fishing net to use, an animal with its own habits but also a secure part of Piran's heritage and thus an important player at the national level too. That evening, Nataša and Marko had an interesting discussion

¹ Nataša Rogelja Caf conducted her PhD research in the years 1998–2004 in Piran, Izola and Koper.

² In the period 2010–2014, the mullet—called in local language as *zlata cipelj*, *zlataš*, *zlatec*, *zlatoperka* (*Liza aurata* (Risso 1810))—the most frequent winter visitor among mullets in the Bay of Piran—, represented 7% of the total fish catch of the Slovene maritime fishing (Marčeta 2016), which now predominantly catches molluscs (SURS 2019).

about the tradition of mullet fishing³ in Piran, trying to figure out what, precisely, is this tradition all about. After much deliberation, Marko burst forth with a comment that wound up the tradition with all of us—the fisherman, the mullets and us, the consumers more broadly, stripping our discourse on what tradition is down to the simple fact—“for me to make a living and for you to eat mullets from Piran”. Without mullets coming every winter to the Bay of Piran there would not be any traditional mullet fishing, nor would there be any traditional mullet fishing without fishers and their knowledge and finally people who eat or otherwise consume mullets. In this view, the lives and histories of humans and mullet in the Bay of Piran are closely intertwined. There are, however, additional layers attached to this rather obvious triangular scheme, such that place mullet at the very core of the contested³ maritime borders between Slovenia and Croatia. Coming close to the shores every year, they inevitably become part of contemporary “contested foreshore” (Selwyn and Boissevain 2004) characterised by consumption and conservation. Part of this process is also visible in fish ponds placed in the Bay of Piran and linked to the “blue transformation idea”, where fishing is gradually substituted by aquaculture production. As locals observe, mullets “like the blue idea”, consuming the waste feed from the farms and maybe, as some presume, potentially diminishing the environmental impact of the fish farming activity (Ethnographic documentation 2015). What is certain, the mullet fish⁴ come every winter around February to the Bay of Piran, interfering with human lives in various ways. Namely, the lives and afterlives of Piran’s mullet fish are embedded in the human social world of the present-day Slovene coastal area in complex ways that encompass economic as well as political considerations, besides the day-to-day practice of fishermen, tourists and those who participate, in one way or another, in consuming them. Starting with mullet and continuing with fishermen and consumers, including the

maritime border, museums and heritage imaginaries, we highlight this enmeshed tradition of mullet fishing.

Mullet is a common species of fish spread worldwide, drawing no special attention from either scientists or environmentalists. Mugilidae or grey mullets contain 17 genera and 72 species, most of which are classified into three genera: Mugil, Liza and Chelon (Deef and Mokhtar. 2018: 107). For Slovene maritime fishery, the golden grey mullet (*Liza Aurata*) from Mugilidae family (Mavrič et al. 2021: 125) is the most important one from the symbolic as well as from the (local) economic point of view (Marčeta 2016: 105). Migration of Piran’s mullet is seasonal. In the summer, it retreats to deeper sea; and in the winter, it merges into large compact shoals that tend to linger in the bay, near the mouths of inland waters (Marčeta 2016). Every winter from January to March, golden grey mullets—in smaller quantities also other species of mullet—see footnote 5, appear in large shoals in the Bay of Piran, where they are traditionally caught by fishermen from Piran.

Mullets feed mostly on small benthic organisms and detritus (Jardas 1996). In popular discourse, they have the reputation of being “dirty” fish due to their eating habits. In their defence, the fishermen we interviewed explained that during the winter period, the mullets fast and their meat becomes clean.⁵

Despite their humble sustenance, they have acquired resonant symbolic significance in the region. Black-and-white photos of “traditional” ways of catching mullet from the turn of the twentieth century constitute a ubiquitous part of Piran’s imaginary. We find them in the museum and the municipality halls of Piran; they crop up variously in Slovene newspapers, most often in relation to the winter catch, or quarrels between fishermen, and lately, as described below, also in relation to the maritime border between Slovenia and Croatia. In the local museum of Piran, references to mullet fishing adorn the main staircase, while in 2013, the mullet’s image was selected for the Slovene animal postage stamp. Interestingly, the stamp came with the frame, or rather, with the context story (Fig. 2).

The frame around the drawing of the mullet is depicting a traditional technique of catching mullet, mostly in use by Italian-speaking fishermen⁶ who lived in Piran before World War II.⁷ While affixing the stamp to the envelope, one cannot

³ Nataša’s interlocutors used the word tradition regularly, most often in connection with mullet fishing (Ethnographic documentation 1998–2004). For them, it signifies the repetitive arrival/fishing/selling/consuming of mullet local practice in the Bay of Piran. We will use it in the article as an emic phrase, close to the understanding of heritage as discussed by Harrison (2013).

⁴ According to the Slovene biologists, there are predominately five species of mullet living in the nowadays Slovene sea (*Chelon labrosus*, *Liza aurata*, *Liza ramada*, *Mugil cephalus*) and *Oedalechilus labeo* (for more, see Marčeta 2016), but among them, *Liza aurata* is according to the Slovene fishermen most common in the winter in the Bay of Piran (Ethnographic documentation 2000). *Liza aurata* has many synonym names; according to WRMS (World Register of Marine Species), the currently accepted name is *Chelon Auratus*. However, we use in this text term *Liza Aurata* as it is used in the texts of Slovene biologists (Mavrič et al. 2021: 125).

⁵ According to biologist Irena Fonda, this is due to the low temperature of the sea water during the winter that affects fish digestion (Ethnographic documentation 2022)

⁶ Until the mid-twentieth century, Venetian language was the dominant language in Piran, but it was replaced by Slovene, following the mass emigration, known also as Istrian exodus. Venetian language belongs to a group of dialects of Italian, spoken in north-eastern Italy.

⁷ According to the local historian Aleksej Kalc, in the 15 years after the Second World War, the towns of Koper, Izola and Piran along what is now the Slovenian coast underwent the replacement of the



Fig. 2 Mullet stamp (Bulletin of Pošta Slovenija 97 2013)

but wonder how the beautiful frame will remain stuck to the letter envelope, or rather is confronted with the inevitability of throwing the frame away. There is a clear reason for such misgivings, as without the frame, mullet becomes just a species of fish while with the frame, it becomes an identity marker.

The stamp, as well as the photos of mullet fishing, are also an important signifier of past communal life. In comparison to other fishing techniques, mullet fishing is labour-intensive collective work, encompassing the act of organising, catching and sorting the fish, then the act of distribution as well as keeping night watch to guard against poaching. Even though the night guards do not perform labour intensive work, they have a significant bonding role among the fishers. It was during those long hours that Nataša learned how it is practically impossible to breed mullet on fishing farms⁸ as they are,

Footnote 7 (continued)

majority of their population. “This led to radical changes in their social, ethno-linguistic and cultural fabrics. [...] The change was related to the post-war border issue between Italy and Yugoslavia, and the incorporation of Istria into the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. It triggered the mass emigration of the Italian population from Istria and all those who objected to Yugoslav sovereignty in the territory, those who did not see a future in the new socialist social order and those whose traditional and vital economic connections with Trieste had become compromised” (Kalc 2019: 146).

⁸ The biologists’ research shows that *Liza Aurata* can be stocked in saltwater ponds, but their growth rate does not compare favourably with those of other fishes (Chervinski 1975). Some blog comments of people involved in mariculture mention the mullet special “skills”: “[g]rey mullets are funny fish. When fenced off – they’ll just jump over the net cork line and laugh at you from the outside. They may also jump back and forth – just for fun”. (Worldfishing.net 2014).

it appears, too intelligent, but also because they jump too high. Fishermen also told her how the smallest hole in the net is big enough for the entire shoal to escape. Purportedly, mullets form a long line and wait patiently without jostling, escaping one by one through the rupture in the net. Fishermen also bitterly complained about the decline of fishing and the rise of the mariculture sector, observing that mariculture is not in the least environmentally benign, on top of the fact that employment possibilities in the sector are limited. Fishermen were also of the opinion that they, as fishermen of Piran, should have privileged access to mullet fishing to the exclusion of fishermen from other municipalities. This view clashed significantly with the official line of the state representatives in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, who see mullet fishing primarily as national heritage rather than local tradition (Ethnographic documentation 1998–2004).

Mullet as national heritage also became something of an important player in the negotiations about the Slovene-Croatian maritime border running across the Bay of Piran. With their perpetual circulation and appearance in the bay, mullet in a way links the present-day inhabitants of Piran (and Slovenia broadly) with the early history of the area, forming an argument for the contested maritime border in favour of Slovenia. Namely, after Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, the maritime border between Croatia and Slovenia remained undefined and is in 2022 still a matter of international dispute. Different solutions have been proposed since by the two states, and in one such proposal, mullet fishing as Piran’s traditional town’s privilege played a key role.

According to the historical records on the tradition of mullet fishing and Piran municipality’s fishing rights in the area that date back to the sixth century, Slovenia laid claim to draw the border between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Slovenia in favour of Slovenia and the Piran municipality (Mihelič 1987: 9–11; Mihelič 1998: 7–18), overriding the equidistance principle and the division along the medium line following Article 15 of the UNCLOS.⁹ This delimitation was suggested in 2001’s Drnovšek–Račan agreement between Croatia and Slovenia¹⁰ which proposed,

⁹ Following article 15 of the UNCLOS, the states should agree on the territorial sea between the states. In a case of disagreement, the states must not extend its territorial sea beyond the median line if there are no other reasons for the historic title. Where the coasts of two states are opposite or adjacent to each other, neither of the two states is entitled, failing agreement between them to the contrary, to extend its territorial sea beyond the median line every point of which is equidistant from the nearest points on the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial seas of each of the two states is measured. The above provision does not apply, however, where it is necessary by reason of historic title or other special circumstances to delimit the territorial seas of the two states in a way which is at variance therewith (UNCLOS 1982).

¹⁰ The agreement established a “high sea corridor” and following this solution, the Croatian territorial sea would be crossed by this

among other things, that the Slovene territorial sea should cover 70% of the Bay of Piran. The agreement was never realised (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017). Within this unrealised agreement, mullet, forming arguments around historic circumstances, became nothing less than international geopolitical actors.

Although mullet move between and across corridors and border lines in the North Adriatic Sea, swimming between deeper sea and inland waters¹¹, they do not “travel” much after being caught. The mullet commodity chain on the land, observed from the perspective of today, is in fact quite short. After the mullets are caught in large quantities, usually in the winter period from January to March, fishermen sell them on the pier, either directly to locals (at this time of the year the tourism season is already over), or to local fish markets, or further afield to supermarkets in Slovenia—mostly Leclerc and Spar, and to the central fish market in Ljubljana. They are considered relatively cheap fish, a fish that is eaten mostly by Slovenians, mostly coastal inhabitants or others who support local providers, also those who appreciate mullet as a part of coastal tradition or those who think mullet are reasonably priced. Fishermen told us that unlike other fish that they mostly sell on the Trieste fish market in Italy, mullet are not sold in Italy, because Italians do not particularly care for their meat. On the Slovenian side, however, the cooking recipes with mullets remain a staple and stable part of everyday cuisine in Piran, especially in the winter period.

The farmed Piran’s seabass

“At the Fonda Fish Farm, we decided to mark the PIRAN SEA BASS with a mark of origin and guarantee of quality. The recognisable mark, which we introduced as a novelty on the Slovenian market, enables lovers of marine delicacies full traceability of our fish. Thus, each PIRAN SEA BASS, immediately upon being taken out of the sea, is affixed a

mark on the gill flaps, indicating the origin and the date of their catch. This provides you with a guarantee that you have before you a product of superior quality reflecting a fresh fish which was bred in a healthy environment and in compliance with the highest standards.” (excerpt from Fonda Fish Farm Internet homepage)¹²

In contrast to Piran’s mullet, the local signifier “Piran’s” was not attributed to seabass by the locals themselves, but rather by Slovenia’s Intellectual Property Office.¹³ The farmed seabass (*Dicentrarchus Labrax*, Atlantic strain) was introduced to the Bay of Piran in 2003 by the local family Fonda who owns the Fonda Fish Farm. By registering the trademark name “Piran seabass” and adding their family name, the fish not only became symbolically adopted into the Bay of Piran but they also lost their anonymity. Also, Piran Sea Bass Fonda was the first local territorial branding of a farmed sea fish in the Adriatic Sea, thus creating a sea-based “merroir”, a derivative of land-based “terroir” (Kumer et al. 2019). With that, the farmed seabass becomes a commodity and part of the neoliberal property regime.

Visiting Fonda Fish farm in the early spring 2019 with a group of Indian, French, UK, Slovene and Norwegian researchers involved in the FisherCoast project (2022)¹⁴, one of the colleagues commented on the fact that the Fonda Fish Farm, in its appearance and vision, although much smaller in size, resembles numerous boutique fish farm companies in France. We embarked on one of the company’s vessels intended for tourism purposes¹⁵ and toured around for about an hour to see the fish cages with the guide explaining the processes at Fonda Fish Farm. His presentation was a promotional one, well prepared and informative, focusing on discussions around environmental conservation, sustainable development and the importance of organic fish farms. In this regard, he stressed the importance of “informed consumers”, who would appreciate the higher quality of meat and would thus be prepared to pay a higher price. As part of the tour, we could observe professionally designed, glossy posters depicting modern fish meshed cages, shoals of seabasses, high quality fish food, their employees, tourist tours in Fonda Fish Farms but also sporting old family photos of the owners depicting a long maritime tradition of a local

Footnote 10 (continued)

corridor, while Croatia would retain a triangle bordering on the corridor, Slovenian and Italian territorial seas. This proposal was considered by international experts to be innovative and unprecedented (cf. Arnaut 2002, 2014), and as such capable of satisfying Slovenian claims to the direct access to high sea and Croatian demand of retaining the territorial sea boundary with Italy.

¹¹ Studies (e.g. Arechavala-Lopez et al. 2010) from Mediterranean show that Golden grey mullets are frequently found around sea bream and sea bass farms (Dempster et al. 2002; Fernandez-Jover et al. 2008), where they play an important ecological role, consuming considerable amounts of waste feed from the farms and thus also diminishing the environmental impact of the fish farming activity (Katz et al. 2002, Lupatsch et al. 2003, Fernandez-Jover et al. 2008). This might be the case also with the Piran’s Golden grey mullet although we did not find any research supporting this argument.

¹² Fonda Piran seabass. <https://www.fonda.si/en/where-to-find-the-piran-sea-bass/> (accessed 24. 11. 2022)

¹³ Fonda family has registered “Fonda Piran’s seabass” trademark at Slovenia’s Intellectual Property Office in 2012.

¹⁴ More on FisherCoast project. <https://site.uit.no/fishercoast/> (accessed 31.11.2022)

¹⁵ The visit to the fish farm either on boat or paddle board is among more popular products marketed by the Slovenian Tourism Agency’s website, with Fonda representatives claiming to have had more than 3000 visitors to their “Fish Garden” in 2018 (Ethnographic documentation 2019).

family Fonda. The intended message of the tour was that Piran's seabass from Fonda Fish Farm is not just fish—it is a trademark.

Farmed seabass is a leading species in European marine aquaculture (Vandeputte et al 2001), a fast-growing industry. Although maricultural production in Slovenia is still comparatively small, amounting to 913 t in 2019 (Mavrič et al. 2021: 48), it is a developing industry in contrast to Slovene maritime fishing production, which is in decline (ibid). As other EU countries, Slovenia, after 2004, had to organise a Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG) in order to access European Union funds. The general idea behind FLAG was to support local fishing communities to build a more sustainable future by managing these funds through partnerships between local fishers and a variety of other local stakeholders (Janko Spreizer and Rogelja Caf 2020). Overview of successful project applications (for the EFF's funding period 2007–2013) reveals that out of the total 28 million EUR allocated for the development of Slovene fisheries until the end of 2014, around 10 million EUR went to mariculture, approximately the same amount for port infrastructure, 2.3 million EUR for the adaptation of fishing vessels for tourism and around 2.8 million EUR for the functioning of the FLAG (ibid.). From the 17 selected Slovene projects, several of them were appointed to the custodians of Piran's farmed seabass. While the family Fonda is locally well respected, fishermen do complain that the “real” small-scale fisheries have been left behind by the European Fishery Fund (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017: 21).

Unlike the wild mullet or wild seabass which lead dynamic mobile lives, moving between the open sea and the lagoons, the farmed seabass is mobile on land but sedentary in the sea. Each of the phases of the farmed seabass' growth is carefully controlled and monitored. This process that Lien (2015) calls domestication starts with the selection of the best juvenile fish. The Fonda company's representatives (Ethnographic documentation 2019) emphasised the importance of selecting healthy juvenile fish to ensure best possible growth, resistance to disease and other factors closely related to the success rate. Where exactly the juveniles are bought constitutes a “business secret”, but the employees revealed to us that they were buying seabass' Atlantic strain juveniles from the Italian and French hatcheries as that particular strain is more adapted to a cooler climate. There were several occasions when they even adopted a hybrid approach, so that the fish eggs were fertilised in a French breeding station and were subsequently transferred to a breeding station in southern Italy where they were raised to the proper size. Only the best juvenile seabass specimens are lucky enough to embark on a road trip and transported by truck to the Bay of Piran. Transporting juvenile fish—7 months old, 5 cm long and weighing between 4 and 6 g, is a very delicate endeavour leaving no space for mistakes. On

the last leg of their journey, the Fonda boat transports them to their final home destination—the fish breeding nets of the Fonda Fish Farm in the south of the Bay of Piran. As we can begin to appreciate, a tremendous amount of work and care is invested in the fish, and the employees of the Fonda Fish Farm were eager to communicate to us that they use the highest quality fish feed—“certified organic and made after a Danish formula”—and that the fish are manually fed (Ethnographic documentation 2019). It takes years to grow them into sizes appropriate for the final consumer; due to the colder temperatures of the North Adriatic, the average breeding time takes longer thus extending care as well as increasing costs for the Fonda family. During that time, they become sedentary inhabitants of the Bay of Piran, enclosed and trapped in floating meshed cages, occasionally catching the sight of wild mullets coming to feast on seabass' excrements and feed leftovers.¹⁶

Initially, 96% of the Fonda Piran Seabass (2022) was sold abroad, and only 4% in Slovenia. Gradually, the percentage sold in Slovenia increased substantially. Their meat is much appreciated among high-end restaurants, but also individual consumers with higher purchasing power both in Slovenia and across the wider region, where Piran's seabass had become a sort of coveted food item (Rogelja and Spreizer 2017), albeit not an inexpensive one. The care during the seabass' lives is extended into their afterlives—packed in aesthetic boxes designed with the family photos conferring the pedigree of the local family, they relay perfectly to the contemporary consumerism priorities and sustainability debates (e.g., the kilometre zero initiative¹⁷).

In spite of the fact that the technology used by the Fonda Fish Farm is presented as state-of-the-art, knowledge-based and future-oriented, there is also considerable effort made to localise and traditionalise the fish breeding endeavour. This effort is communicated through the slick and elegant but also highly nostalgic branding that references family and past communal life in the Bay of Piran. Family's local “roots going back several hundred years” are depicted by sepia-coloured portraits of unnamed faces invoking local

¹⁶ Marine scientists researching the movements of golden grey mullet (*Liza Aurata*) in connection to coastal fish farms in the western Mediterranean Sea report that golden grey mullets are frequently found around sea bream and sea bass farms (Dempster et al. 2002; Fernandez-Jover et al. 2008), where they play an important ecological role, consuming considerable amounts of waste feed from the farms and thus also diminishing the environmental impact of the fish farming activity (Katz et al. 2002, Lupatsch et al. 2003, Fernandez-Jover et al. 2008, Arechavala-Lopez et al. 2010).

¹⁷ A product can be called zero-km-product when it has travelled as few kilometres as possible from producer to the consumer. The idea behind the initiative is a critique of global food often of inadequately certified origin and the benefits of saving in the process of transporting the product.



Fig. 3 Farmed seabass stamp (Bulletin of Pošta Slovenija 131 2020)

and family tradition of leading a life off the sea. It seems that the more contemporary photo material aims to emulate this approach; the portrait of three main protagonists of the Fonda family, the father, the daughter and the son with their faces weathered by the sun and wind holding the seabass in their hands. Despite all of them being trained biologists, they patently shun more professional outfits, opting instead for working clothes, and being outdoors, with depictions of net-mending activities perhaps referencing the highly praised outdoor freedom attributed to fishermen lives (Fig. 3)¹⁸.

This branding exercise notwithstanding, the Piran seabass, on the other hand, has yet to find its way to heritage imaginaries of what “local” and “traditional” means in the Bay of Piran. The farmed seabass has so far not been invited into museum halls, neither has it entered the archives but it has managed to become enshrined on the postal stamps. Printed in 2020 as part of the “Gastronomy of the Mediterranean” series, the Fonda seabass is now a central part of the assemblage called “Traditional gastronomy of Mediterranean” consisting also of the extra virgin olive oil, Istrian soup as well as two local wines, Refošk and Malvazija (Bogataj 2020). But in contrast to the wild and live “mullet-the-being” with its Latin signifier, the “stamp seabass” has found its way on the plate as a nameless meal to be consumed.

Discussion

With these short ethnographies of the mullet and farmed seabass, we wanted to highlight the multifaceted embeddedness of the lives and afterlives of both the fish in the human social

world of the Northeastern Adriatic coast. Both fish constitute an indelible part of the larger economic, identitarian, social, cultural as well as political and environmental climate in which they exist and towards which they contribute. In all of these aspects, the past continues to affect the ways in which both the present and the future are lived and envisioned. At one and the same time, there exist different appropriations of the past (Rogelja et al. 2020) but for the purpose of this paper, we have focused on heritage-making, always a selective process and a subject of constant negotiations and change. We understand heritage as a particular type of imaginary or representational assemblages (Salazar 2012) that build on various interpretations of the past reworked through the present-day optics. These imaginaries consist not only of humans, but include diverse arrangement of locally present non-humans, materials, things, technologies etc. Piran’s mullet and Piran’s farmed seabass’ interaction with the human world are examples of such assemblages, bringing to the fore the particular entanglements of the past, present and future of the Bay of Piran.

At a glance, it may seem that each of the fish presented has a different relation to time—mullet swim more comfortably in the past, while farmed seabass are headed towards the future—, but in fact they are both contributing to the possible futures of the Bay of Piran and they both, each in its own way, reference the past. Although differently enmeshed in the heritage-making, they are both contributing to the same local-global story, sharing the same bay but also the same time-space of the contemporary Mediterranean, each finding its own place in the heritage’s ever-changing process. Following our two fish, we highlighted how heritage discourse is internally incoherent, and it may be that this very hindrance is what enables heritage the flexibility to accustom to various situations and for different purposes. It is this incoherence or dissonance, as referred to by Laurajane Smith (2006: 82), that both regulate and legitimise as well as negotiate, contest and challenge the existing identities, memories, values and meanings. Through such processes, the seabass and mullet merge into one heritage creature—“mulletseabass”, contributing the past and the future, tails and heads, to the story of the Bay of Piran.

The dissonance of the heritage imaginaries in the Bay of Piran is revealed through the ethnographies of both fish, above all in the ways in which their practices and representations interplay variously with the local, national and global contexts. Presently, wild mullet is more present in the local and the national contexts, featuring prominently in the local heritage locations such as museums. Farmed seabass is a newcomer and as such not yet part of the local memorisation and heritage-making, despite the attempts to localise it through the family legacy, albeit as part of the trademark branding. They are also both part of the modern trends of coastal life—sustainable development, projectification and

¹⁸ Advertising material on Fonda Piran seabass. <https://www.fonda.si> (accessed 24. 11. 2022).

“blue transformation”, within which mariculture has strong ideological and also, to some extent, financial support from the EFF funds. As such, two competing notions of heritage are in fact conveyed through both fish; mullet is tied more to the older, identitarian notions of heritage (Smith 2006), while seabass is on its way to become a heritage product, similar to Halloumi/hellim cheese described by Welz (2013). Both, however, represent the strategical and instrumental use of heritage—one is used to claim the national territory, the other for localisation and “traditionalisation” of novel, technologically and market friendly approaches to using “blue” resources. The pertinent question to ask at this point is whether such instrumental usages of heritage can provide reassurance to the coastal populations that their way of life will not be entirely lost.

The broader picture shows that the processes of de-Mediterraneanisation¹⁹ (Selwyn 2000) are taking place also in the Bay of Piran and are becoming visible on the day-to-day basis as in the decline of small-scale fishing, disappearance of previous (communal) way of life, changes in the coastal landscape, distribution of finances and the increase of mariculture. From this perspective, it may seem that the mullet is in fact “losing the game”, but as we have learned from the ethnographic examples, mullet has in the last decades become a one of the important geopolitical player in the Bay of Piran as it represents one of the keys to the solution(s) of delineating maritime border between Croatia and Slovenia. For this particular solution, it is of vital importance that mullet remains a creature of habit coming to the Bay of Piran year after year and let itself be caught by—preferably Piran’s—fishermen. This simple, repetitive act is what essentially creates the tradition of mullet fishing thus symbolically trumping all other arguments; the relative dislike of mullet as a food item, their derogatory characterisation as a “dirty” fish, but also the larger claim that mariculture is a more desirable way of using sea resources than fishing. This tradition is more or less self-realised; apart from the catching and selling, no human work is invested into the mullet before the fish appear in the Bay of Piran. It even seems that the fishing skills may disappear first, as mullet annual visits to the Bay of Piran has never been under question. This is in stark contrast to the meshed cages of the farmed seabass

which receives diligent and long-term care. But this attention from—and dependence on—humans makes the seabass survival precarious as various, mostly economic, pressures may threaten the survival of the fish farm in the long-run. Thus, it is the annual ritual creating the tradition that affords the mullet with a stable heritage presence subsequently providing fishers with some form of resistance against the coastal trends; the local and national tradition of mullet fishing and their importance for the local identity will exist for as long as there are fishers catching the mullet in the Bay of Piran, while if they will cease to be a tradition once there are no skills, technology or people going after them.

The material that we have presented brings to the fore frictions as a central part of the present-day life on the coast. The uneasy relation between fishing and mariculture; the competing ideologies of the local, national and the global; the disappearance of previous ways of life in the face of rapid coastal transformation—all of these processes are being contested and lived on a daily basis. The role of heritage amid these challenges, as we have seen, can be instrumental but it can also serve as a tool for resistance, ensuring overall well-being of different groups living on the coast. As fisherman Marko stressed, the tradition of mullet fishing is “... for me to make a living and for you to eat mullets from Piran...”. The wild mullet and farmed seabass highlight the inherently incoherent nature of heritage that can be used for neoliberal appropriations as well for resistance. In this, both fish cannot be neatly divided into two separate sets of imaginaries, one about the past and the other about the future, but rather they show how each is defined in relation to the other, while both present a much more holistic understanding of the coastal transformations.

Conclusion

By following wild mullet and farmed seabass, we have highlighted the Northeastern Adriatic as a place of competing and complementary heritage discourses that reflect dominant social processes in the area. Simultaneously gazing towards the past and the future, discourses around wild mullet and farmed seabass offer competing models for survival in the Bay of Piran. At a first glance, the mullet relates more to the past and the traditions of collective life on the coast. As a “historical actor”, however, it plays a significant part in contemporary discussions on the maritime border between Slovenia and Croatia in the Bay of Piran, not only raising pertinent questions but also charting future solutions in connection with maritime borders within the framework of UNCLOS. Farmed seabass, on the other hand, can be related more to contemporary global issues of sustainable development, projectification and “blue transformation”, while also embedded within, and contributing to, local issues. Being

¹⁹ The term de-Mediterraneanisation was coined by Tom Selwyn discussing the issue of tourism development in the Mediterranean. Selwyn used tourism as a prism through which to look at more general questions of socio-cultural, politico-economic and environmental processes in the region. His discussion on the de-Mediterraneanisation of Mediterranean shows “broadening disjunction between, on the one hand, tourist imagery built on rhetorical references to the traditional Mediterranean, to be found in post-cards (of peasant farming and fishing, for example) or internet advertisements (of second homes in “unspoiled” island bolt holes, for example) and the daily facts of the overuse and the running down of natural resources” (Selwyn 2000: 226).

“adopted” by the local family, the organically farmed seabass seems to guarantee the survival of coastal populations in the face of depleted sea and ecological threats by bringing in sophisticated organic technologies of mariculture. While each discourse has its own share of purchasers among local, national and transnational audience, collectively they work together to negotiate the unease connected to the future of coastal life. The two discourses around the fish are thus complementary, highlighting the desired continuity between the past and the future that strive to ensure not only livelihood but also the preservation of the local identity on the Slovenian coast.

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