

Problemáticas: Multi-scalar, affective and performative politics of collective action among fishing cooperatives in Mexico

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Abstract

The world's fisheries face complex and high-stakes governance problems that increasingly require mobilizing diverse collectives of governance actors. How fishers and fishing organizations understand and articulate governance problems has implications for how they engage with governance institutions and the kinds of collective action they enact. In Mexico, cooperatives are a major form of organization for small-scale fishers. Fishing cooperatives form regional organizations (federations), which in turn form national organizations (confederations). These are nested or multi-scalar organizations that represent fishers' interests and negotiate with other governance actors. Drawing on longitudinal data from assemblies of a national organization (2016–2019) – which represents more than 30,000 fishers in Mexico organized in about 300 cooperatives – as well as regional meetings involving federations and cooperatives, this study examines how cooperativist fishers in Mexico articulate problems in the governance of fisheries and to what effect. More specifically, the paper builds on scholarship about the performativity of collective action to examine the strategic discursive and affective practices through which fishers engage with major governance problems and the implications for collective action. Through the politics of multi-level cooperative institutions, specific issues are prioritized as leaders of fishers' organizations translate diverse local-regional concerns to advance the interests of the sector at the national level. Using examples of (1) conflicts surrounding environmental conservation in the Gulf of California and (2) legacies of privatization and the decline of cooperatives in shrimp fisheries, the analysis demonstrates how discourses and affects are incorporated into specific storylines and mobilized in political spaces. Cooperativist fishers become contingently aligned along these storylines, which shapes the translation of local-regional concerns into national priorities, giving rise to a multi-scalar performative politics of collective action.

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Introduction

The world's fisheries face numerous, complex social-environmental problems, which require mobilizing diverse collectives of governance actors with differing perspectives, understandings, experiences, and degrees of power. The stakes are high for resolving global fisheries problems – whether framed in terms of food security and human rights or environmental sustainability – and the ‘adequate’ means to address these challenges are being questioned and reworked in an increasingly dynamic world. Indeed, the governance of fisheries can be understood as one of the great ‘anthropological problems’ of our time (Rabinow, 2002). Anthropological problems are “domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention” (Ong and Collier, 2005: 4).

How different groups of governance actors understand and articulate social-environmental problems matters for the kinds of solutions that become possible, who is responsible for implementing them, and the forms of individual and collective action necessary. Policy researchers have examined how analysts create problem framings or problematizations, which promote certain forms of intervention and understandings of reality over others (Fischer, 2003, Ureta, 2014). Similarly, sociologists of science and others have attended to processes of problematization through which scientists or other experts become positioned as indispensable (Blok, 2014, Callon, 1984, Choy, 2005, Li, 2007). Problematization by experts has been the focus of these streams of scholarship, while others in political science have attended to the kinds of issues and narratives that garner support by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the international community (e.g., Bob, 2002).

Considerably less attention has been paid to the ways in which organized resource users such as fishers articulate governance problems and the implications of these practices of problematization. Following Roelvink's (2016) work on the performativity of collective action, this paper takes up the question of how hybrid collectives assemble around shared matters of concern and enact various forms of collective action, focusing on the social worlds of small-scale fishing (SSF) cooperatives in Mexico. The paper examines how fishers engage with governance problems through discursive practices and politicized forms of affective expression, which influence collective action through nested or multi-level cooperative institutions.

In Mexico, cooperativism is a major form of organization in small-scale fisheries – one with a history of state-led development that has gained force among fishers as an institutional model for diverse forms of collective action, from local community development (Mutersbaugh, 2002) to negotiating resource governance nationally (Espinosa-Romero et al., 2014, García Lozano et al., 2019). Fishing cooperatives in Mexico form regional federations, which in turn form national confederations. These are important yet understudied multi-level or nested institutions for political representation and collective action. Increasingly, fishing cooperatives operate in a neoliberal policy context, where this ‘social sector’ has lost significant government support and faces increased competitive pressures from the private sector (Ibarra et al., 2000, OECD, 2006). Whereas cooperatives previously enjoyed the benefits of a paternalistic State (e.g., exclusive access to valuable species, financing, subsidies, capacity building, and commercialization through a parastatal company), fishers' accounts of recent history tell a story of government neglect and decline for cooperatives. Compounded by decentralization in federal administration, cooperatives vie for government attention and funding, while other non-State actors also increasingly participate in governance

processes (Espinosa-Romero et al., 2014, Méndez-Medina et al., 2020). These changes have produced powerful and sometimes contradictory stories and affective experiences among SSF cooperatives – from hopelessness and frustration to pleas for support and hopefulness in the State’s many promises (García Lozano et al., 2019).

Examining the discursive practices of fishers across sites offers a productive avenue for understanding how fishers articulate and position themselves in relation to governance problems and to other actors. Fishers’ discourses incorporate distinct narratives, affective experiences, histories of social-environmental change, and relationships to changing public policy regimes. There is a dynamic temporality to these discourses: they reflect an engagement with specific day-to-day issues and with broader circulating discourses about governance problems that have emerged historically. The discursive strategies fishers employ also depend on their audience. For instance, they sometimes rely on rhetorical claims about the historical and productive importance of the sector to appeal to regulatory actors or align themselves with scientists’ discourses about environmental change (García Lozano et al. 2019).

In this paper, we propose that this kind of discursive engagement with governance problems constitutes a performative politics of collective action, one in which the richly ‘storied’ and affective worlds (Probyn, 2016) of cooperativist fishers in Mexico are translated into particular forms of collective action through the political work of multi-level cooperative institutions. This study employs longitudinal qualitative data from assemblies and regional meetings of cooperative institutions collected between 2016–2019 to understand how fishers articulate and mobilize around particular governance issues. Fishers form coalitions around shared problem framings to draw attention to them and to set a collective national agenda, attempting to prioritize and promote the forms of collective action they envision as necessary for sustaining their organizations and resolving major governance problems. The following sections describe the methods of the study, the theoretical approach and contributions, and two specific cases illustrating the emerging performative politics of collective action.

Methods

This research took place in the context of a participatory, collaborative project involving one national fishing organization, the Mexican Confederation of Fishing and Aquaculture Cooperatives (CONMECOOP), two Mexican NGOs (Sociedad de Historia Natural Niparajá; Comunidad y Biodiversidad), and academics from Duke University. CONMECOOP represents 34 federations from 14 coastal states, which represent approximately 300 cooperatives and over 30,000 individual fishers (Nenadovic et al., 2018). The project involved a national assessment of cooperatives, the National Diagnostic of Fishing Organizations (DNOP, Spanish acronym), which informs ongoing efforts to drive fisher-led improvements in the sector. This study draws on two main sources of qualitative data collected during the DNOP: (1) Assemblies of CONMECOOP and (2) Regional data collection meetings.

First, data collection took place in the annual assemblies of CONMECOOP. Assemblies are the primary decision-making mechanism for cooperative organizations. Decisions are made democratically through open discussion, deliberation, and voting. At the assemblies of CONMECOOP, regional federation leaders – who represent cooperatives in various localities – describe governance problems and urge national leaders to act on their behalf. Assemblies also involve discussions with government officials and other actors (e.g., NGOs) who are sometimes invited. National assemblies are therefore key political spaces for problematization, where leaders from various parts of Mexico come together to voice grievances and make decisions collectively. We attended and audio-recorded the assemblies of CONMECOOP between 2016–2019. Assemblies took place over the course of 2–3 days in Mexico City each year, with around 50–60 participants. We conducted participant

observation, informal interviews, and provided notes to CONMECOOP for internal reports. Each assembly generated approximately 10 h of audio, transcribed by the first author and research assistants. Transcripts were coded qualitatively by the first author to identify the most salient problem framings and to understand how regional discourses were mobilized in national meetings (Table 1).

Second, this study draws on qualitative data collected during two phases of the DNOP, which involved data collection meetings with cooperatives and federations in six regions. Data from regional meetings helps trace the articulation of local-regional problems across sites, complementing analysis of national assemblies. Participants for regional meetings were recruited through a call (*convocatoria*) by CONMECOOP and through their networks. Separate meetings were held for organizations affiliated to CONMECOOP and unaffiliated.

Regional meetings during Phase 1 (2017) involved (a) implementing a survey and (b) plenary discussions where fishers were asked to describe the challenges faced by their organizations. Survey data are not analyzed here but a review of findings can be found in [Nenadovic et al. \(2018\)](#). Plenary discussions lasted approximately 2 h, with 40–80 participants, the majority of which were men. A total of 14 plenaries were held in the six regions. Participants represented a total of 199 cooperatives and 41 federations. Plenaries were audio-recorded (approximately 130 h of audio), transcribed, and coded inductively by the first, second and fourth authors using principles of constructivist grounded theory ([Charmaz, 2006](#)) to identify major problem framings and subcategories (Table 2), as well as the solutions being proposed by fishers. This rich dataset enabled us to understand how local-regional concerns are articulated in different regions and trace how they become mobilized in national spaces like assemblies.

Phase 2 (2019) regional meetings consisted of plenaries to present research findings and focus groups to document fishers' perceptions, priorities, and proposals for strengthening the sector. We conducted 52 focus groups across the six regions: 11 comprised of federation presidents, 22 of cooperative presidents, and 19 of regular cooperative members. Each focus group consisted of 3–8 participants. Most participants were men (269), while relatively few were women (22). A total of 149 cooperatives and 33 federations were represented. Focus groups were audio-recorded and documented in field notebooks by research assistants rather than transcribed. Plenaries were also documented through participant observation by the research team (5 research assistants, one research coordinator), which were used to generate collaborative ethnographic accounts. These are adapted from the collaborative event ethnography approach developed by [Brosius and Campbell \(2010\)](#), which has been used to study global environmental governance meetings (e.g., [Campbell et al., 2014](#)). Data from Phase 2 are used here as complementary, to enrich analysis of governance problems and how fishers describe them.

Table 1. Major Problemáticas Discussed in Depth During assemblies of CONMECOOP.

Problemática	2016	2017	2018	2019
Climate change	✓			
Conflicts with conservation in the Upper gulf of California	✓	✓	✓	✓
Large protected area in the gulf of California			✓	✓
Opposition to biodiversity Law reform			✓	
Construction of oil pipeline in the gulf of Mexico			✓	✓
Illegal fishing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Problems with private shipowners (<i>armadores</i>)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social security debt	✓	✓	✓	✓
Subsidies and federal funding	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2. Problem Categories Identified Through Inductive Qualitative Coding of Phase I of DNOP. Underlining Indicates Problems Also Discussed in CONMECOOP assemblies.

Problem category	Subcategory examples
Biophysical and ecological problems	Climate change Environmental degradation Pollution Scarcity of fish
Organizational problems (issues 'internal' to cooperatives)	Lack of cooperativist values Lack of capacity Debt to social security
Economic issues	Subsidies and federal funding Infrastructure needs Expenses for fishing
Conflicts with other sectors or groups	Industrial sector, private shipowners Illegal fishing Oil industry Organized crime Conflicts with environmental conservation
Problems with government	Permits Monitoring and enforcement Corruption Decision-making ignores communities Lack of government support

Some limitations of the research are worth highlighting. First, data collection occurred during specific meetings where members of fishing organizations gathered for different purposes (e.g., research, decision-making). While fishers bring their everyday experiences to these encounters, the research cannot fully account for rich local realities in the same way as long-term ethnographic engagement. However, the geographic and temporal breadth of these meetings enabled us to understand practices of problematization regionally and nationally in a unique way. Another issue relates to our positionality as researchers. Participants' perceptions of researchers as outsiders in these settings are difficult to account for. Given the participatory nature of the research, fishers tended to trust and welcome us as an extension of CONMECOOP. Nevertheless, it was necessary to remind fishers in some meetings that we were not government actors coming to solve their problems. As such, we are unable to account for any additional biases in perception that did not become apparent in the field. Lastly, despite its national scope, our study does not provide an exhaustive survey of fishers' attitudes nationally nor one that is representative of the entire SSF sector. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate how, through nested and multi-scalar cooperative institutions, fishers articulate their own views of governance problems and mobilize around these to influence national collective action priorities. The section below describes the theoretical framework informing this analysis.

Performative politics of collective action

Building on Latour's (Latour's, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) work on the politics of representation and the role of science in democracy, Roelvink (2016) examines affective and performative dimensions of collective action in the context of anti-globalization movements. This perspective is productive for discussions about how collective action emerges and is sustained. Rather than the aggregate effect of individuals' choices aiming to maximize self-interest, collective action can be theorized as a

relational and political process of mobilizing collectivities – often contingent in nature and not always stable – that often takes place through the articulation of shared struggles and histories (Leach et al., 1999, McCay, 2002), particular discourses (Clement, 2010, García Lozano et al., 2019), and politicized, sometimes contradictory affective experiences (Roelvink, 2016).

The notion of performativity is helpful for conceptualizing collective action as this relational process of articulation and coming-together. Performativity is a key concept in the work of queer and gender studies scholars such as Butler (1990, 2010) and Sedgwick (2003), who build on J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts to examine how social categories like gender are actively embodied and enacted through discourse and other everyday practices, rather than biologically essential or pre-discursive (Roelvink, 2016). Scholarship on performativity resonates with Michel Foucault's work which suggests that, rather than passively complying with external ideological forces, individuals craft subjectivities and adopt subject positions partly through their use of discourse and argumentation, engaging with and sometimes internalizing circulating discourses (Hajer, 1995, Foucault, 1991). Science studies scholars have expanded on performativity to encompass material dimensions (e.g., experimental apparatuses for scientific knowledge production; networked practices that constitute the economy), suggesting that science and other fields are socially productive rather than merely descriptive of observed phenomena (Barad, 2007, Callon, 2007, Law, 2009).

Drawing on performative accounts of the social, we conceptualize fishers' practices of problematization as political and performative, and thus constitutive of social realities such as forms of collective action. Fishers' engagement in problematization is performative in that it links discourses, affective expressions, and embodied actions to draw attention to struggles that animate or merit political and collective action. Fishers' practices of assembling around matters of concern are also political in that they position some actors as spokespersons for others (Latour, 2004a, Stengers, 2005). The political work of nested, federated cooperative organizations in Mexico relies heavily on practices of representation that shape their capacity to speak for small-scale fishers and the cooperative sector. Their work is also political in the sense that fishers' collective action around governance problems involves presence in formal decision-making spaces (e.g., government commissions).

Discourse and affect are key elements of the performative politics through which fishers in Mexico articulate and act collectively to address governance problems. Across study sites (i.e., assemblies and regional meetings), fishers make use of discourse strategically to make arguments about governance problems. More than just language, discourse is an "ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995: 44). How issues are represented and performed through discourse has implications for the kinds of governance networks that form and the kinds of action that become possible or desirable (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005).

Discursive or interpretive approaches to policy analysis highlight the importance of argumentation, rhetoric, framing and narrative for the formulation of policy problems and their solutions (Fischer and Forester, 1993, Fischer, 2003, Hajer, 1995, Roe, 1991). These concepts are useful for understanding the discursive practices of cooperativist fishers in Mexico. For instance, Hajer (1995) illustrates the formation of discourse coalitions, groups of actors that become contingently united in their shared use of specific discourses. Discourse coalitions converge along storylines or narratives that "provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding" (Hajer, 1995: 62). Through subject positioning, actors situate themselves and others in storylines, often assigning responsibility and intentionality (Davies and Harré, 1990). The storylines along which cooperativist fishers in Mexico converge, and their positioning in them, are key for understanding the forms of collective action they propose. For instance, fishers commonly position themselves as

disadvantaged by neoliberal policy changes, which have shifted the place of cooperatives from protagonists in the development of fisheries to a neglected sector.

Affective experiences and emotions also figure centrally in fishers' storytelling and other political practices. Affect has recently been the subject of increased scholarly attention, often theorized as a body's capacity to be affected and to affect other bodies (Anderson, 2006, Probyn, 2016, Roelvink, 2016, Massumi, 2002). From this vantage, affect is sometimes understood as pre-conscious or pre-discursive, sometimes eluding yet occurring concurrently with cognitive or representational processes (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Because affect is deeply intertwined with practices of meaning-making and dependent on social and material contexts, Whetherell (2015) highlights the usefulness of a practice-centered analysis, focused on *affective practices*. Affective practices include "responding to loss, dealing with threat, being joyful, showing *Schadenfreude*, claiming the moral high ground, indicating appropriate remorse, etc." (Whetherell, 2015: 148). These practices or experiences are relational and political in nature, acquiring meaning through relationships and patterns of interactions (Ahmed, 2014).

A relational, practice-oriented analysis makes it possible to describe specific instances when affect is mobilized to organize political collectivities like social movements (Roelvink, 2016). Attending to affective practices across sites also enables understanding of where collectivities fragment or diverge; for instance, when individuals in a group (e.g., 'fishers') adopt different and sometimes contradictory subject positions (Nightingale, 2013, 2019). Additionally, while affective expressions and experiences may be conducive to collective action (e.g., anger as a motivator), they can also undermine collectivities attempting to build worlds-in-common (e.g., when hopelessness precludes action) (González-Hidalgo, 2020).

During discussions at regional meetings and assemblies, fishers employ affective expressions to describe grievances, make persuasive arguments, or call others to join them in action or solidarity. They commonly adopt a mode of expression that politicizes affective experiences (e.g., anger, frustration, hopelessness), using discourse and rhetoric as much as embodied expressions like tone and body language. Through storytelling, about day-to-day problems or about broader public policy changes, affective experiences are often framed as the result of government policies or inaction, or the actions of other key governance actors such as NGOs, industrial fishers or the oil industry. This kind of externalization, where fishers focus on the role external actors play in their problems, is common in part because of the context. Assemblies and regional meetings function as spaces for fishers to voice their problems and enroll other actors (e.g., confederation leaders, government officials) in addressing them. Fishers from different regions are often also isolated, and these spaces enable them to come together to both vent about their frustrations and envision ways to resolve them.

These richly 'storied' and affective worlds (Probyn, 2016) of cooperativist fishers in Mexico are translated into particular forms of collective action through the politics of multi-level cooperative institutions. The politics involved are multi-scalar insofar as the confederation must translate local-regional concerns (and other factors) into national strategies. Translation is contingent and dynamic, since confederation leaders must contend with the changing concerns of regional groups and at the same time try to influence the governance of fisheries through relationships with government actors and NGOs.

Through engagement with fishers across sites and over the span of years, we observe a pathway for this kind of multi-scalar translation. Cooperativist fishers make use of spaces such as assemblies (where dialogue and democratic decision-making are prioritized) to foster particular understandings about the nature and scale of governance problems, the affective experiences associated with them, and the existing and desired configurations of governance actors. In these moments, fishers make use of discourse strategically in ways that weave together storylines and affective experiences. The leaders of fishing organizations (e.g., federations and confederations) act as important "mediators

between fishers' claims and politics, reshaping difficult-to-articulate, embodied knowledge into more readily comprehensible political narratives" (Quist, 2019). The agency of leaders, who become positioned as spokespersons for groups of fishers, yields specific forms of political representation and action. The authority of leaders to represent local concerns at multiple scales, and to advance the interests of both specific groups of fishers and the sector broadly, emerges from the formal, institutionalized practices of cooperative institutions as well as more informal aspects (e.g., charisma, personal relationships). Fishing organization leaders then foster alignments and alliances with other governance actors (e.g., government, NGOs) to pursue actions consistent with the priorities of fishers and translate diverse interests into concerted political strategies.

In the following sections, we examine how these processes play out in the context of two major governance problems or *problemáticas*: (1) conflicts with environmental conservation in the Upper Gulf of California, and (2) conflicts between cooperatives and large shipowners in the private sector. These are only two among other major *problemáticas* (Table 1). We have chosen them because they are recurring in national assemblies, there is extensive debate about them in regional meetings, and they exemplify the political complexity of governance problems in Mexican fisheries.

Major *problemáticas* and their implications for the politics of collective action

Conflict with environmental conservation interests: The threat of enclosure

Small-scale fishers in Mexico have a complicated relationship with biodiversity conservation and environmental groups. On one hand, findings from the DNOP suggest that fishers from all regions place high value on measures to protect ecosystems and improve fisheries management (Nenadovic et al., 2018, Méndez-Medina et al., 2021). In many cases, fishers work with NGOs to establish conservation areas and implement fishery improvement programs (Espinosa-Romero et al., 2014, Quintana and Basurto, 2021). On the other hand, fishers have conflict with some forms of environmental conservation, in part because (1) past efforts to establish marine protected areas and other spatial management instruments (e.g., refuges for protected species) have sometimes been enacted without consulting fishers, and (2) fishers are often blamed for the mortality of endangered charismatic wildlife species such as sea turtles and the vaquita porpoise (*Phocoena sinus*). Both issues coalesce into a broader narrative of enclosure that positions outside actors such as government or 'radical environmentalists' as threatening to strip fishers of rights and access to fishing zones. This narrative involves claims of *enclosure by polygons*, where polygon commonly refers to conservation areas delimited by coordinates.

Fishers in the Upper Gulf of California have been especially affected by conservation efforts to protect the vaquita porpoise, which become entangled as bycatch in gillnets (Rojas-Bracho et al., 2006). Gillnets are used by legal small-scale fishers but also notoriously by illegal fishers harvesting totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*), a Sciaenid fish targeted for its high-value swim bladder. The harvest of totoaba has been prohibited in Mexico since the 1970s (Bahre et al., 2000), but recent demand from Asia has incentivized illegal harvest in Mexico, encouraging opportunistic involvement by organized crime networks (Alvarado Martínez and Martínez, 2018). Starting in 2015, measures for protecting the vaquita include expanding an existing conservation area, a moratorium on gillnet fishing, and a compensation scheme for fishers affected by closures (SEMARNAT, 2015).

Fishers from the Upper Gulf of California complain about the dispossession and unintended impacts of these measures on small-scale fishing communities in the region. According to one fisher from San Felipe, Baja California (Phase 1):

“San Felipe is the part that is 100% affected because now we have another polygon that was implemented [...] despite not yet being made official, that polygon leaves us 100% enclosed. Why? Because that polygon will not even allow navigation. So, San Felipe is locked in, because it is enclosed by polygons, so yes, we are in a very critical situation. And the government has compensated us, yes, but really the compensation does not get us out of the problem that we have at the level of the community.”

The broader issue for communities, he argues, is that lack of work has resulted in higher levels of crime and drug use in the region. These effects of enclosure result in a ‘disintegration of the social fabric’ in communities, according to several fishers from this region (Phase 2; 2019 assembly). Similarly, one fisher argues the following: “They say the vaquita is in danger of extinction. No, the community is the one in danger!” (Phase 2).

Conflicts in the region are part of a longer history in which conservation and fisheries management figure as forms of enclosure. A biosphere reserve created in 1993 in the Upper Gulf, around the delta of the Colorado River, aimed to protect endangered species such as the totoaba and the vaquita through measures including a protected core area and gillnet restrictions (McGuire and Valdez-Gardea, 1997), both of which restricted access for fishing communities. However, many locals in the region continue to feel that, rather than mortality caused by Mexican fishers, the United States is ultimately responsible for the vaquita’s fate. Their reasoning is that the construction of the Hoover Dam and other major hydrological modifications restricted the flow of the Colorado River for decades, negatively impacting the ecology of the Gulf and the vaquita. The elusiveness of the vaquita has also contributed to circulating conspiratorial narratives that the vaquita does not exist and that regulations represent a strategy by governments or other external actors to control resource access.

Narratives of enclosure by conservation also include concerns over economic impacts, such as trade embargoes by the United States. In the 1990s, the United States banned shrimp imports from Mexico because of negative impacts on sea turtles, sparking contentious debates with environmental organizations and in the context of the World Trade Organization (Bisong, 2000). More recently, much-feared threats of embargo over the vaquita materialized, as the United States banned several kinds of seafood from the Upper Gulf of California region of Mexico (Mogerman, 2020, NOAA, 2020, Bittenbender, 2021). Fishers voice concerns that foreign NGOs have contributed to perceptions of small-scale fishers as responsible for environmental degradation. During the 2018 national assembly, one confederation leader articulated this relationship:

“Nongovernmental organizations from the United States that focus on the conservation of the vaquita and sea turtles are a very strong threat to the fishing sector in our country, where the threat of embargo is latent on Mexican fisheries products for export.”

During regional meetings and assemblies, fishers from the Upper Gulf of California emphasize injustice, impotence and suffering experienced by fishing communities stemming from interventions by government and environmentalists. For example, during Phase 1, one fisher’s emotional participation dominated the discussion. In his account of the struggles in San Felipe, he mentioned recent deaths in violent conflict that erupted in the region, the inability to fish in a community that relies entirely on fishing, and how some fishers are working despite the prohibitions because they have families and young children to feed. As he speaks, his tone shows distress and anguish, and he evokes responses of pity and solidarity from other fishers in the focus group. The tone of desperation partly stems from the recent end to compensation programs for fishers in this region, which are still subject to no-fishing zones. Similar highly emotional displays take place at national assemblies, where regional representatives urge the confederation to take action.

Another common form of affective expression among fishers is anger, sometimes articulated as a function of impotence or helplessness, being unable to resolve problems. For instance, one fisher in La Paz, Baja California Sur (Phase 1) describes his experiences regarding illegal fishing and having participated in fisher-led monitoring efforts:

[...] We care about our resources. CONAPESCA [federal fisheries agency] doesn't care, they just ask for their check. For us, it hurts. I have high blood pressure from when I helped with monitoring. When we caught that [illegal] boat I ended up with hypertension from the impotence, almost diabetic, one feels impotent not being able to stop illegal fishing.

Expressions of anger and frustration also take the form of concerted and direct action, such as protests. For instance, fishers recount times when they have set fire to vessels or other forms of property as a response to being ignored by government or other actors (e.g., industrial fishers). An exchange between several fishers from the Upper Gulf of California (Phase 1) illustrates why some fishers respond to various problems and frustrations – lack of order in permits, illegitimate cooperatives, fishery closures unenforced – by burning government vessels and illegal fishers' boats:

Fisher 1: Keep burning vessels!

Fisher 2: We will keep burning boats [...] if they don't get with it, we will keep burning them [...] besides, they already took away our fishing zones, the whole area of the gulf and San Felipe, they took it away.

Fisher 3: We have to have balls, we have balls.

This exchange also illustrates a connection to manhood and masculinity, framing direct action and destruction as representative of their bravery as men; an avenue for showing they have power and should be considered. These moments contrast with expressions of impotence or hopelessness, showing how different fishers employ seemingly contradictory rhetorical elements to call attention to conflicts in the management of fisheries.

Impassioned contributions by fishers at the national assemblies are met with sympathetic responses and cheers, but also efforts to temper passions and channel them towards more productive avenues, usually by leaders of the confederation (e.g., the president). There are two main underlying reasons for tempering passions. First, government officials and legislators are often invited to the national assemblies, and confederation leaders fear that angry participation by fishers could be perceived as disrespectful. Decorum, precision, and clarity are advocated by leaders as more appropriate forms of participation, and they cite the danger of losing the trust of government and access to benefits such as subsidies. Second, several federation leaders argue against 'lamentations' (2016 assembly) in favor of making concrete proposals to improve governance. In this view, fishers should embody responsibility and professionalism to deserve being heard and taken in consideration.

Although the complex problems expressed through these affective performances cannot be easily resolved, the confederation responds to regional needs in several ways. One major strategy is to represent the sector in numerous forums and decision-making spaces (e.g., the Nacional Council on Fisheries and Aquaculture; a national committee on fishery closures; legislative commissions in congress; and even international spaces such as the Confederation of Artisanal Fishers of Central America and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers). According to the president of COMECOOP, it is important for them to perform these "acts of presence" to have a seat at the table in policy meetings, formal decision-making spaces, public discussions or conferences that might affect the cooperative sector. Confederation leaders also facilitate meetings with key government

figures, including legislators and federal agency officials, and they establish formal partnerships with government agencies. For instance, they were granted the formal capacity to administer government funding for local projects, acting as a mediator between government agencies and cooperatives. These processes, as fishing leaders acknowledge, function symbolically and materially to mark the confederation as trusted and legitimate in the eyes of the State.

Conflicts with private shipowners (armadores) and the decline of cooperativism

Another major problem along which different groups of fishers converge is the issue of private shipowners (*armadores*), specifically those in the western state of Sinaloa and the states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz along the Gulf of Mexico. These are regions with rich shrimp fisheries and histories of strong, large cooperatives that have declined considerably since the 1990s. Cooperatives in these regions previously held numerous vessels and benefitted from exclusive access to shrimp, which they have since lost, and many cooperatives also relinquished fishing rights to the private sector. Now, many of the same fishers work as crew for *armadores*, which contributes to nostalgia and resentment. They feel that the social sector (cooperatives) has lost power to the private sector, and that the State is responsible for this change by neglecting cooperatives.

Fishers describe a dynamic involving local bosses who accumulate capital and consolidate different sections of the supply chain, controlling labor and production in ways that are unjust and contradictory to the cooperative movement. According to fishers in these regions, *armadores* commonly hire disenfranchised cooperativist fishers to work aboard trawlers, sometimes through cooperatives that function to organize labor but do not operate under cooperative principles (e.g., through democratic decision-making). These associations of workers are widely perceived as illegitimate.

The issue of external actors co-opting the cooperative model is common across sectors in Mexico and in the Gulf of Mexico fisheries in particular (Gatti, 1986; Cruz and Argüello, 2006). However, the origins of the dynamic fishers describe can be traced to the early 1980s, when privately owned shrimp vessels were transferred to cooperatives (*cooperativización*), because only cooperatives could access high-value reserved species such as shrimp and benefit from low interest loans from the national fisheries development bank (BANPESCA) (OECD 2006). Over time, as numerous cooperatives became indebted to BANPESCA and defaulted on loans in the 1990s, many chose to sell their fishing permits and vessels to private firms – especially in the Gulf of Mexico region. Neoliberal reforms in the 1990s also intensified tensions between private interests and cooperatives. In 1992, a reform to the Law of Fisheries stripped cooperatives of exclusive access to reserved species and enabled private investment in shrimp and other fisheries (Ibarra et al., 2000). A new Law of Cooperatives in 1994 also decreased the minimum number of members required to form a cooperative to 5, viewed widely as a blow to cooperatives because it enabled the formation of smaller and sometimes false ('paper' or 'ghost') cooperatives that do not function according to cooperative principles. This history has engendered understandings of private shipowners, as well as false cooperatives, as a major threat to the cooperative sector and symptomatic of its general decline.

Cooperativist fishers also argue that *armadores* create unfair labor relations, citing dangerous working conditions at sea and inadequate remuneration. In Tamaulipas, fishers claim that “the cooperatives are now in the hands of the *armadores*” and complain about labor abuses related to social security. One fisher argues that, 5 days after returning from a fishing trip, workers were removed from the social security registry. Labor abuses of this sort intersect with stories about the past, when large cooperatives thrived in these regions and protected fishers. The *armadores* storyline therefore aligns with what fishers in Tamaulipas describe as a broader decline in the cooperativist sector, which they attribute explicitly to the 1994 legislative changes and President

Salinas de Gortari, whose administration (1988–1994) has come to represent Mexico’s shift to neoliberal policy favoring private enterprise.

These historical changes influence the relationships between fishing cooperatives and the State today, including the range of affective experiences they articulate, such as anger, frustration and regret over the decline of the cooperative sector. As in the case of the vaquita, they express anger and frustration towards government officials, but also turn to government and NGOs as potential problem-solvers. Knowing that specific policies have made the sector vulnerable, government actors, in turn, play the role of listening and promising solutions, which often fail to materialize (García Lozano et al., 2019). In this context, fishers mobilize affect and discourse around these issues, in many ways externalizing responsibility.

At national assemblies, a discourse coalition formed around the problem of *armadores* or shipowners. In all the assemblies examined, fishers from Mazatlán, Sinaloa, were vocal about the issues faced by cooperatives of fishers working for private shipowners. These tensions were escalated and foregrounded in 2019 when a federation leader from Mazatlán was accompanied by several other fishers from the region, many from an older generation. They participated in every part of the assembly, attempting to center the *armadores* storyline at every turn. The issue gained traction as another federation leader from Veracruz joined and amplified their messages about unfair labor conditions and false cooperativism. The shared yet distinct experiences of fishers from different regions enabled alignment and created pressure for confederation leaders to take action. Because a federal government representative was present, confederation leaders were able to schedule a meeting for that same week involving fishers from these regions to discuss the issue further and develop a plan of action. The work of problematization and prioritization is incomplete and will likely require continued efforts by regional leaders to center the issue in various agendas. Nonetheless, this dynamic at the assembly illustrates how the discursive alignment of regional actors led to a direct response by national representatives with the potential for national collective action.

The way fishers from Mazatlán mobilize discursively to draw attention to this issue with the private sector also illustrates a broader pattern in which federation leaders aim to re-scale regional issues as national matters of concern during assemblies. Such attempts at national re-scaling (Mansfield, 2005) aim to re-signify local or regional issues as relevant to the national sector, to foster a broader sense of collective action among cooperatives, and to position the confederation as the main actor responsible for representing them. The following argument by a federation leader at the 2018 assembly illustrates the rationale for articulating a national vision of problems:

“I think we should not see them as isolated issues, as problems of different regions, that at the end of the day are common matters that we are suffering in the country. I think instead when we have a situation of this sort, we should form common fronts to at least know in depth the issues of those people and try to help each other.”

Discussion and concluding remarks

The analysis presented here aimed to sketch the features of a multi-scalar and performative politics of collective action emerging in the contemporary cooperative fishing sector in Mexico. Cooperativism among small-scale fishers has enabled nested, multi-level organizations for collective action and political representation – regional federations and national confederations. The democratic institutional processes inherent to these federated cooperatives (e.g., assemblies) are generative or performative of specific forms of problematization that shape the collective action of these organizations, both in terms of focus and scale. In different meetings, which function as sites of encounter between cooperatives and their representatives, fishers define and prioritize governance

problems, and make arguments about who should solve them and how. For instance, they make claims about what the confederation should do at the national level. In these spaces, fishers use discursive and affective practices strategically, drawing on common histories as well as crafting shared storylines through dialogues between otherwise geographically separated regions and localities.

The *problemáticas* or governance problems examined here illustrate some fundamental tensions that have emerged in the relations between the cooperative fishing sector, the State, and other actors such as environmental NGOs, which are continuously negotiated through the political practices of federated cooperatives. Cooperativist fishers harness the multi-scalar representativity of their organizations to articulate issues and make contributions to ongoing debates about fisheries governance as a complex anthropological problem – challenging what the appropriate forms of ‘individual and collective existence’ should be (Ong and Collier, 2005). Understandings about cooperatives’ roles in resolving the country’s fisheries problems are fundamentally shaped by their identity as the ‘social sector’ rather than private firms. They view cooperativism as a superior ethical or moral stance – as evidenced by their concerns over false cooperatives and the decline of government investment in the social sector. The political subjectivity they adopt reflects the social justice and solidarity values of post-Revolutionary Mexico, which historically favored institutions like cooperatives but has shifted in the neoliberal turn of recent decades.

The methodology employed in this study allowed us to gain a situated understanding of the context in which fishers’ preoccupations with these changes have emerged, how they shape current perceptions of governance problems, and why they might animate discussions in national assemblies. For instance, interviews and discussions in regional meetings demonstrate how some of the positions expressed during assemblies and the anger, resentment, and feelings of injustice fishers experience are not only about concrete losses for the sector (e.g., loss of exclusive access to certain species) but are linked to nostalgia for a past when cooperatives were stronger, and regret for the role they themselves have played through mismanagement or by relinquishing their rights (e.g., shrimp cooperatives in Mazatlán). Fishers explicitly link these changes to the shift towards neoliberal governance – from the growing role of NGOs in conservation and management to the shifting economic pressures from private sector interests. Arguments made in national assemblies thus reflect rich narratives about the historical role of cooperatives in fisheries and national development, and how it has changed over time. In their articulation of governance problems, cooperativist fishers see their own roles in these historical changes, but largely place responsibility on ‘external’ actors such as the State and NGOs, all while seeking to maintain and augment the importance of cooperatives.

Fishers’ discursive and affective practices of problematization – which have been relatively understudied in favor of more resource management-focused analyses – demonstrate not only the importance of storytelling for collective action (Rose, 1994) but also for understanding the complex ways in which different actors position themselves when responding to governance problems. Through problematization, fishers generate and articulate shared understandings, as well as priorities and strategies for taking action to contest the prevailing governance arrangements in fisheries. Using storylines that center emotional or affective experiences, and which also aim to re-scale their local-regional problems as national matters, organizations from different regions generate calls for collective action through the confederation. That is, they position the confederation as responsible for translating these specific problematizations into action at the national level. This study therefore demonstrates not only the importance of shared discourses and understandings, but the key role of fisher leaders (both regional and national) in representing local concerns at multiple scales and translating them into national forms of political action.

The affective dimension of these processes of articulation and translation can be a powerful, often overlooked factor shaping the politics of collective action. In our study context, translation of

local-regional concerns into action takes place partly through the tempering of highly emotional experiences – dispossession, exclusion, injustice – and channeling them into more rational and professional forms of political expression. Assemblies and discussions in regional meetings create space for anger and frustration, while at the same time directing fishers to act respectfully (e.g., towards government officials) and to articulate rational solutions. In other words, representation through the confederation enables the transformation of affective experiences like frustration and anger into more acceptable expressions and pathways for collective action. This has been productive for CONMECOOP, as evidenced by their relationships with governments and being entrusted to allocate federal funding to individual cooperatives. Partly, the success of this political strategy reflects the legacy of paternalism in Mexico, since fishers and other groups (e.g., peasants) have developed tactics for securing and maintaining support from the State.

At the same time, the push to transform emotionality into rationality raises questions about what are considered appropriate forms of political participation and collective action. Emotionality is often framed as soft, feminine, and irrational, while rationality and professionalism are marked as more appropriate or respectable forms of political expression (Ahmed, 2014). Fishing organization leaders' calls to sublimate emotions like anger into more acceptable expressions therefore suggest that the political practices of representation involved may unwittingly serve to constitute cooperatives as a legitimate yet amenable and governable sector – perhaps precluding more radical forms of collective action that challenge the status quo. Elsewhere, the articulation of rage and destruction (i.e., burning vessels) as masculine, juxtaposed with moments of hopelessness and impotence, also points to questions about the role of masculinity in these organizations, which deserves greater attention in the future.

Leaders of the national confederation must reconcile diverse and sometimes contradictory calls to collective action to maintain their relevance and legitimacy as representatives of the sector's interests. As we have demonstrated, they achieve this partly by balancing charged affective expressions, but also by representing the sector in a diversity of formal and informal spaces, facilitating conversations with government, and forging alliances with other governance actors (e.g., NGOs), thus becoming directly involved in the solutions to some governance problems. However, their efforts (and the confederation itself) are not static over time. Fishing organizations experience internal and external tensions that threaten to pull them apart (e.g., lack of trust; government elections). Bridging these diverse tensions and negotiating between the social worlds of fishers and those of often more powerful governance actors is a challenging task to accomplish. Despite challenges, this study highlights the important role that nested, multi-scalar organizations for collective action might play in the future and in other contexts, given the growing intensity of struggles over natural resources and the scale of social-environmental problems (e.g., climate change). Through nested representation, for instance, fishing cooperatives are generating forms of collective action that reposition and re-scale the world of fishing cooperatives from one that might be narrowly understood as contained in the local realm into one of national or even international importance.

Given the complex governance problems that characterize the world's oceans, understanding how the dynamics examined here might play out in other contexts and scales is crucial. For instance, diverse collectives are currently seeking to articulate their needs and concerns amidst pressing challenges like climate change, growing calls for equity and justice in oceans (e.g., 'blue justice'), and the push for the development of sustainable ocean economies or 'blue economies' which characterize the current global ocean policy landscape. However, while many of the issues examined here are unique to fishing, similar challenges exist in other systems (e.g., forests, watersheds), which involve mixtures of collective and private governance arrangements, and which also face patterns of intensifying resource extraction and dispossession. As such, this study underscores the importance of understanding how groups that are often overlooked and less powerful

(e.g., organizations of workers, rural resource users, peasants) respond to these struggles over resources by engaging in practices of problematization and political representation at multiple scales – including in global forums like the United Nations – and how these influence the forms of collective action that become possible or desirable.

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