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When 'sustainability' becomes the norm: Power dynamics in the making of a new eco-label for low-environmental-impact, small-scale fisheries☆

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, the Danish Ministry of Environment and Food launched a new state-led ecolabelling scheme for fish originating from small-scale, 'low-environmental-impact' fisheries; "NaturSkånsom". The label was introduced to a domestic market where the vast majority of the fish landed by Danish vessels was already certified by the global leader in certification of (wild caught) fish products, Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). MSC's high market penetration created a situation where especially small-scale fishers felt that MSC certification had developed into a market norm without providing fishers the benefits of demonstrating extraordinarily sustainable practices and thereby gain competitive advantages. Rather, MSC's market penetration was perceived as undermining efforts to brand and market fish originating from small-scale fisheries as particularly sustainable. This article explores the processes that led up to the NaturSkånsom labeling scheme by applying a 'power in planning and policy framework' as an analytical lens. Through the NaturSkånsom process, the article investigates what happens when an ecolabel becomes a market norm, how small-scale fisheries actors who feel disadvantaged by such a development and environmental organizations form alliances, mobilize support and multiple resources to strengthen their positions in the political settings. The examination of this case highlights how stakeholders traditionally thought of as less resourceful can gain political influence. The article offers a glimpse into a possible, emerging future where those perceiving themselves as the most sustainable producers may increasingly view large and dominating ecolabels simultaneously as obstacles and forces for positive change.

1. Introduction

This article explores issues and power dynamics around the process of establishing a new, state-led ecolabelling scheme in Denmark, *NaturSkånsom,*[3] for fish products originating from small-scale,[4] low-environmental-impact fisheries. Over the last decades, ecolabelling schemes have established themselves as an increasingly important form of market-driven approach to environmental management. Today eco-labels exist for an almost complete range of consumer products.[5] Simply put, the philosophy behind ecolabelling is that the label provides the consumer (or retailer) with the necessary information to choose a more sustainable product over a less sustainable alternative [15]. In this way the label creates a segment of products on the market that the environmentally concerned consumer can with relative ease seek out (e.g. products from organic farming) without having to have detailed knowledge about all the various producers in the category. Labeling schemes rely on a (somewhat) voluntary allegiance from producers to what are considered stricter environmental practices (and/or sometimes

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[3] Can be translated to 'caring for, or gentle to nature', but the term of is also used in the Danish fisheries regulations to categorize fishing gear that is recognized as having "low [environmental] impact".
[4] In Danish termed "coastal" and defined as vessels under 17 m with 80% of their fishing trips below 48 h.
[5] The self-acclaimed 'largest global directory of ecolabels', Ecolabel Index, currently lists 456 ecolabels over 25 industry sectors (http://www.ecolabelindex.com/).

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other aspects of sustainability) compared to those upheld by the minimum requirements set out in regulations and laws. As opposed to the producers' own (branding) claims—which can also take the material form of 'own ecolabels'—about sustainability, an ecolabelling scheme, as we use the term here, is supposed to provide a 'guarantee' that some sort of independent assessment (e.g. third-party certification) has happened and the product/production thereby live up to the acclaimed criteria. Subsequently, in theory, experiencing that the label provides a premium in the shape of higher prices or simply market access, other producers will seek to improve their practice and enter the labeling program [7,15,24,54]. As ecolabelling has flourished in the domain of capture fisheries, critiques of the structures, assessment methods, logic, impact (or lack hereof), as well as the access to ecolabelling schemes have been raised ([15,26,35], Le Manach et al., 2020). A common concern has been the inaccessibility of ecolabelling schemes for small-scale fishers especially in the Global South – often in the context of the global leader in certification of (wild caught) fish products Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) [9,16,25,56,61]. In the past years, MSC has introduced measures to support small-scale fisheries in entering certification [39]. Still, MSC is continually critiqued for structurally favoring volume-based, large-scale fisheries in the Global North (Le Manach et al., 2020; [50]).

The NaturSkånsom label was launched by the Danish government in the fall of 2020 and entered a domestic market where the vast majority[6] of the fish landed by Danish vessels was already certified by MSC. Curiously, many of the fishers expected to qualify for the new label were in fact already able to market their target species with the MSC label. The paradoxical emergence of an alternative label in this context can, however, be explained partly by Bush et al. [9]. They argue that MSC—being a pass-fail labeling system with one tier—will struggle to maintain 'credibility through continual improvement' especially when market penetration reaches a certain point, where an increasing proportion of producers will not feel that the label serves them justice as they are grouped with producers with poorer environmental—but still certifiable—practices. Similarly, consumers on the look-out for the 'most sustainable product' may lose interest in a label that fails to produce continual improvement (or communicate it) and in addition dominates the market. In their article, Bush et al. [9] recommend that MSC finds ways to publicly communicate the grading of fisheries that actually happens *within* the MSC system and thereby create incentives for, and communicate, continual improvement. Alternatively, the authors suggest, fisheries actors perceiving themselves as the highest performing will be inclined to establish more (perceived) ambitious labels outside the MSC framework, which could then again challenge the credibility of MSC. Nevertheless, MSC has stuck to its easy-to-communicate, one-tiered, pass-fail certification system, which has arguably also so far proven to be a successful strategy in the global market [59].

Through our presence in the field around small-scale fisheries, we experienced that in Denmark, the growing and high market penetration by MSC created a setting, where especially small-scale fishers increasingly felt that MSC had developed into a market norm without truly providing the benefits of displaying extraordinarily sustainable practices and gaining competitive advantages through the label. Similarly, national and international NGOs became increasingly concerned that the high degree of MSC certification in the Danish fisheries failed to provide continual improvement and 'sustainability' [12,23,62]. Rather, MSC's market penetration was in part perceived as undermining efforts to brand and market fish originating from small-scale, low-environmental-impact fisheries as particularly sustainable—in comparison with, in particular, bottom trawling.[7]

In this article, we explore the process that led up to the implementation of the NaturSkånsom labeling scheme, applying the analytical lens of a power in planning and policy framework to the process. We employ the framework as an analytical guide into understanding the changing landscape of seafood ecolabelling and the role of different actors in these processes. We pursue the following overall research question: what is the role of power processes in forming and enabling the creation of a state-led ecolabelling scheme as an (national) alternative to a well-establish scheme? Analyzing the process of NaturSkånsom, we detect how credibility and legitimacy are negotiated and claimed and investigate what happens when an ecolabel becomes a market norm and is challenged by a competitor claiming another form of 'environmental performance superiority'. By doing this, the article offers insights into dynamics of a possible, emerging future where those perceiving themselves as the most sustainable producers may increasingly view large and dominating ecolabels simultaneously as forces for positive change and obstacles to the same.

In Section 2, we introduce the analytical framework for the analysis, followed by a presentation of the methodology of the research in Section 3. Section 4 provides a contextual policy background for the case, and in Section 5 we return to fisheries ecolabelling in the context of Denmark. In Section 6, we analyze the different power dynamics affecting and enabling the process and end with a concluding discussion in Section 7.

2. Theoretical framework: power dynamics in planning and policy

We draw on theoretical concepts of power in planning and policy for understanding how actors have been positioned and have positioned themselves, have formed alliances and employed different capacities in order to influence the policy process leading up to NaturSkånsom. We employ the framework outlined below as an analytical guide into the processes of ecolabelling as these form on ground. Thus, the intention is to contribute to the understanding of the changing dynamics of fisheries ecolabelling with the help of analytical concepts of power in planning processes.

We are informed by work on the inclusion and exclusion of actors, the different power dynamics in policy processes, and how unequal distribution of resources come to matter in this context [4,51]. This framework builds partly on a Foucauldian understanding of power as something that is exercised rather than just held, is often hidden in structures and comes forward in instruments and ways of defining problems and how to solve them [31]. For our analysis, we employ van Tatenhove et al.'s [4] multilayered concept of power "that makes it possible to acknowledge both the influence of actors on the development of policies and the impact of the institutional and structural context in which actors operate". Building directly on the works of Arts, van Tatenhove and Ramírez-Monsalve [4,51,60], power in the context of this research is defined *as the organizational, discursive and relational capacities of actors involved in and affected by the NaturSkånsom to influence the process including the professional discussions around it.* These capacities are determined both by the structural and the discursive contexts in which the actors operate [60]. We are especially interested in understanding the process in which different actors come to form (or reject) alliances – on the basis of different interests – in order to achieve specific outcomes [51].

[6] The share of Danish landings certified by MSC varies from year to year and—based on information from the Danish MSC office—exact and credible percentages are not readily available because MSC focuses of stocks rather than countries (and many of the stocks that Danish fishers exploit are shared with other countries). However, the share has generally been increasing over the last decade and the highest share quoted is 90,6% for 2018 [11]. However, in most recent years suspensions of the MSC label for various species/stocks, incl. cod, mackerel and herring, mean that the share is currently lower.

[7] Bottom trawling, also known as demersal trawling, "involves towing nets, ground chains, ropes and otter-boards ('trawl doors') over the seafloor and this can negatively affect benthic habitats" (FAO Glossary: http://www.fao.org/faoterm/en/?defaultCollId=21, search term 'demersal trawling').

We employ Arts and van Tatenhove's [4] distinction between structural, dispositional and relational forms of power. Structural power, building on Giddens [21], is understood as the "orders of signification, legitimization, and domination that 'materializes' in discourses as well as in political, legal and economic institutions in societies" [51]. Structural power influences dispositional power, which refers to the positioning (e.g. inclusion and exclusion) of actors in the processes [51]. Relational power is the capacity of actors to employ resources (e.g. data, reports etc.) and to form alliances to achieve outcomes. Dispositional power shapes relational power that "emerges both as a result of, and as a response to, dispositional power" [51], which in turn over time has the potential to impact structural power [60]. We focus in particular on the development of relational power processes—forming alliances and the use of reports, chosen scientific material etc.—and what these lead to.

As stated by [51], the "capacities of actors to influence outcomes are unevenly distributed, due to for example an unequal distribution of resources, or the differences in the actors themselves, for instance, in their psychological or verbal capacities". Small-scale fishers are often less-resourceful stakeholders in policy-contexts and are thus vulnerable in processes that can matter greatly for their conditions of existence [31]. Throughout this article, we address how small-scale fishers through their organizations and collaborations come to affect policy processes.

3. Methods and materials

This article builds primarily on the first author's Industrial PhD project, designed as a research-based, applied contribution to, among other things, processes of sustaining "low impact", small-scale fishing including the process of establishing the NaturSkånsom label.[8] In this paper we treat the NaturSkånsom process as a 'critical case' [19] that enables us to examine what happens when an ecolabel becomes a market norm and producers need to seek out alternatives in order to be able to differentiate their products. Based on anthropological research and ethnographic fieldwork including close collaborations with small-scale fishers, professional buyers, environmental organizations etc., the first author's PhD project has contributed critically and constructively to the NaturSkånsom process among other things through participation in ministry-led working groups focused on the label. By actively engaging in discussions, meeting with stakeholders and collaborating with small-scale fishers and their organizations, the PhD project situates itself as an 'action research' endeavor in the Scandinavian tradition, where the focus of action research has traditionally centered on less-resourceful groups [27]. As stated by Bell et al. [8]:

> action research nearly always starts with a question of the kind, 'how can we improve this situation?'. Action research activities are usually driven by personal commitments to contribute to human flourishing, and these commitments are informed by an intellectual orientation that is systemic or aware of inter-dependencies, emancipatory, critical and participatory.

The first author lives, and grew up partly, in a small-scale fishing community and thus has a professional and personal concern for these kinds of communities. Action research connects reflection and action with theory and practice, often with the aim of finding solutions to problems in collaborations with key stakeholders and people involved [49]. In this sense, the first author has strived not only to understand and explain ('research') but also to participate in actively seeking solutions together with other stakeholders of the labeling process ('action'), whereas the second author has assumed a more traditional research role in the NaturSkånsom process. The process of establishing the new Danish labeling scheme is by no means a 'neutral' process, and particularly the first author has thus been part of the power processes and dynamics critically examined in Section 6.

The action research approach has enabled and affected the access to data for this paper, in particular by enabling the first author's participation in 14 meetings. The first author's experiences from these meetings stand as core empirical material for this article. Five interviews carried out in the context of another research project,[9] in which the second author was a core participant, supplements the insights from the meetings. Finally, a document analysis with a discourse analytical focus was carried out (see Appendix 1 for a full overview of included materials, meetings and interviews). All citations from interviews, documents and news articles are translations from Danish to English by the authors. Materials, such as interview transcripts, field notes, documents etc., have been organized and coded using NVivo 12 software for qualitative analysis.

4. Fisheries policy and industry structures in Denmark

As a member of the European Union (EU), Denmark participates in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP); a centralized fisheries management system where most of the key decisions regarding fisheries management measures are made collectively at EU level with direct applicability in the waters of the member states. At the core of CFP management measures stand Total Allowable Catches (TACs), which are on an annual basis decided by, and distributed among, the EU member states through national quota shares based on the principle of *relative stability*. In short, this secures each member state the same *relative* share of specific fish stocks each year, while in principle ensuring that the overall, accumulated fishing pressure on the stocks is kept at biological 'sustainable' level, as TAC numbers are guided by scientific recommendations [28]. The historic track record of the CFP in terms of fish stock conservation has arguably been mixed but reforms in 2002 and 2013 have improved the performance by e.g. strengthening the connection between scientific advice and the level of TACs and reducing subsidies previously contributing to increasing, or too slow reduction, of fishing capacity. As a consequence, over recent years a growing number of fish stocks in EU waters have been fished according to Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) levels (defined as the maximum annual catch that can be sustained over time without reducing stock numbers) [28].

Given the centralized nature of the CFP, national autonomy in fisheries policy and management remains limited—a central national prerogative being the allocation of the national fishing opportunities to fishers. Importantly, in order to understand the ongoing structural changes and tension in the Danish fisheries sector(s), Denmark moved to a market-based allocation-system in 2003 for the pelagic fisheries (particularly for herring and mackerel) and in 2007 for the demersal fisheries. The demersal segment, which is most of interest in the context of this paper, consists of a mix of over 2000 small and large vessels employing a variety of gears and targeting a large number of species, most importantly (in value) cod, plaice and nephrops [10]. Most demersal vessels are represented by the 'traditional' Danish Fishers' Association Producer Organization (*Danmarks Fiskeriforening Producent Organisation* (DFPO)), but in particular for (comparatively) smaller vessels employing low impact gear types such as gill-nets or Danish seine

[8] The Industrial PhD program is led by the state-owned Innovation Fund Denmark that co-finances accepted Industrial PhD projects together with companies and organizations. An industrial PhD project takes form as a collaboration between a university and a host company/organization with the aim of creating value for both parties. Read more here: https://innovationsfonden.dk/en/programmes/industrial-researcher/industrial-phd-all-areas-private-sector-0.

[9] Taste for Sustainable Fish (in Danish *Smag for Bæredygtig Fisk*) is funded by the Velux Foundations and led by Copenhagen Hospitality College (CHC). The objective of the project is to move CHC towards sourcing more sustainable fish products while providing its students with knowledge to operate sustainably when it comes to fish products in their future careers.

on day-trips, a competing organization, Organization for Low Impact, Coastal Fishing Producer Organization (*Foreningen for Skånsomt Kystfiskeri Producentorganisation* (FSK)), founded in 2014, is gaining political significance [6,30,55].

Market based systems—often in the shape of systems based on Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs)—have gained popularity over the globe over the last decades [41]. They have been seen as a technical and economic fix to overcapacity (because more 'efficient' fishers can buy out less efficient) and as a way of giving fishers property-like rights over future fish, thus in principle providing an incentive not to overexploit the resource base. In practice, experiences with market-based systems have been mixed and the reality of them do not necessarily live up to the core assumptions behind them [30,37]. As an example, Høst [30] has convincingly argued that—rather than fisheries efficiency—inflow of/access to capital (in the Danish case in part available capital 'created' by the earlier shift towards a market-based system in the pelagic fisheries)—rather than the efficiency of fishers—has been a decisive force in the structural changes following the shift to a market-based system in the demersal fisheries in Denmark.

The Danish demersal fisheries are managed under a somewhat complex market-based allocation system with multiple special (and evolving) features, tailor-made to the Danish political priorities. The system is commonly referred to as the FKA-system (from the Danish *Fartøjs Kvote Andele*, meaning Vessel Quota Shares). In particular, the system includes special provisions for boats under 17 m length operating with shorter trips; a so-called 'Coastal Fishing Scheme'; put in place in 2007 (and over the years adjusted) to maintain a segment of smaller vessels (that typically support more jobs and smaller harbors compared to the larger sea-going vessels) in a (ITQ) management regime known to challenge small-scale fisheries [6,55]. Irrespective of the special provisions, the structural development in Denmark since 2007 has led to major shifts in the demersal sector. The overall capacity of the fleet has decreased along with employment in the catch sector, vessels have on average become larger and smaller ports have lost out in the competition for landings, which are needed to maintain a working waterfront based on fisheries. Notably in the context of this paper, there has been a shift towards a larger share of the demersal catches being taken with trawl rather than with other traditional Danish gear types, such as gillnets or Danish (also termed anchor) seine – both of which gear types categorized in Danish fishing regulations as "low impact" (as an example, the share caught with gill-nets went down from 14.4% in 2003 to 7.7% in 2016 [55]). These structural changes were already in motion before the shift to the market-based system, but it is generally accepted that the shift in management has as minimum fueled, if not accelerated, this development [6,30,55].

5. Fisheries ecolabelling – the Danish context

In the highly globalized market for fish products, several ecolabelling schemes for wild caught fish have developed over the years, and today a fully established market for certified wild caught fish products exists—driven by demands from, among others, large retail chains [7]. During the past 10 years, especially MSC has established itself as the international market leader in certification of fisheries products originating from wild capture fisheries. Initially established as a cooperation between the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and multinational consumer goods company Unilever in 1997, MSC today is presented as an independent non-profit organization [40]. According to MSC, around 17% of the World's catches are either in their program or comes from fisheries that have entered an assessment process for certification [38].

In Denmark, DFPO has since 2009 been the driving force for MSC certifications of the different demersal fisheries in Denmark, and the organization upholds an ambition of getting all fish landed by Danish vessels MSC certified. According to DFPO, 80–90% of the volume of Danish landings is currently certified by MSC [48]. While a share of the Danish small-scale fishing sector is also certified MSC, there have been different efforts of branding and selling small-scale fishing products as something particularly desirable. Some initiatives have been conventional (though sometimes innovative and highly professional) marketing or branding efforts, but in very recent years a number of stakeholders coalesced around the effort to develop an ecolabelling scheme for small-scale, low impact fisheries. The group of actors include the small-scale, low impact fishers organized in particular through the FSK (but also other organizations, e.g. *Thorupstrand Kystfiskerlaug* – a modern fishers' guild with media outreach), various influential chefs/'foodies' with an affinity for the stories of small-scale fisheries and the perceived outstanding quality delivered, people involved in the organic agriculture sector, different retailers, environmental NGOs, and the (then) Ministry of Environment and Food responding also to changing signals in EU policy and the Danish public opinion. Fig. 1 contains a simplified timeline of key events leading up to the establishment of the NaturSkånsom ecolabelling scheme. In the following section, we analyze the essential power dynamics and processes enabling NaturSkånsom as the solution to a defined priority of incentivizing and promoting low impact, small-scale fishing.

6. Power processes: dominant discourse challenged

The dominant discourse in Danish fisheries management is about enabling "economic development [/growth] and sustainability" as stated in the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund's Operational Programme for Denmark (2018–2020) that refers to these as goals of EU's CFP. Such goals have—also on an international level—been objectives used to legitimize various forms of catch share programs (such as ITQ) [3] including the Danish FKA-system [30,36].

The past years' management system with tradable quota shares as well as public fisheries funding opportunities have enabled a well-organized, capital-strong, large-scale fishing fleet in Denmark with, among other things, the capacity to initiate several MSC certifications branding Danish fishing as generally "sustainable". This is reflected in DFPO's chairman's annual report from May 2020: "…[we] are in the absolute world elite when it comes to the extent of MSC certifications of our fisheries. We have over the years put in a large effort to commit ourselves to a sustainable fishery, and the large amount of MSC certifications is an apparent attest to this" [2]. The structural power built into the political and legal institutional settings in fisheries has strongly facilitated the advantageous positioning of the large-scale fishing fleet, a form of dispositional power, where the two national organizations DFPO (demersal fisheries) and the Danish Pelagic Producer Organization (DPPO) have enjoyed a close collaboration with management authorities [52,53].

The (environmental) sustainability of the Danish fisheries discourse, however, has been increasingly challenged by conflicting claims about the need to address seabed impacts of bottom trawling from environmental NGOs and a growing attention to so-called "low impact" fishing methods (non-trawling methods). In parallel, the effects of the FKA-system have created a growing public and political awareness of the decline of small-scale fishing; a decline that can also be observed in the statistics: Overall, between 2003 and 2016, the vessels below 18 m length (incl. all commercially active vessels) experienced a 24% reduction of its share of the value of landings. The decline in the share was most pronounced for the vessels under 12 m, reduced by 33% in the period [55]. An emergent narrative on the importance of small-scale, in Denmark termed 'coastal fishing' has gained strength and small-scale fishers' resistance to/articulation of the exclusion of their interests in important settings has fueled a political recognition of these actors and their sector. The attention to small-scale and low impact fishing is a part of the explanation of why the new ecolabelling scheme has been developed as a part of the political solution to a defined problem of a declining small-scale fishing sector. In the following, we analyze this as power processes where actors employ the alternative framing of "low impact fishing" and the importance of small-scale fishing as resources

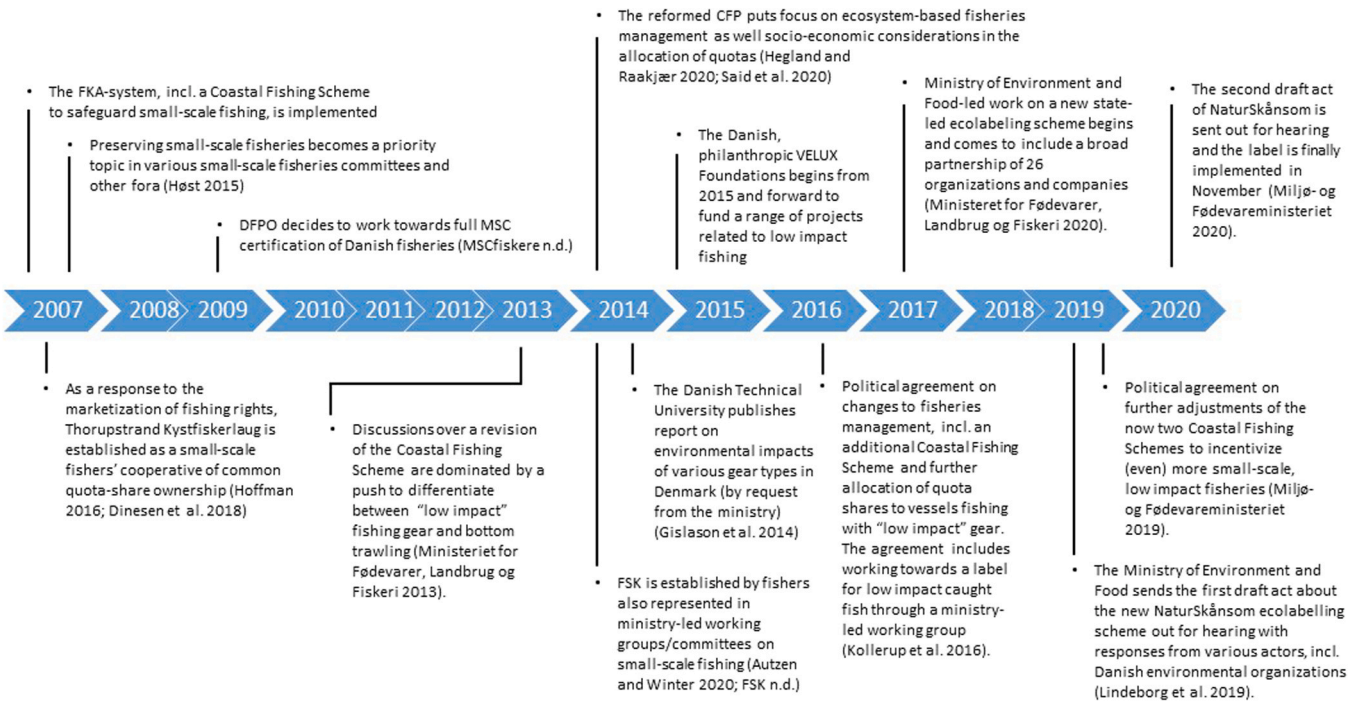

Fig. 1. Timeline of selected key events in the process towards NaturSkånsom.

and basis for alliances, which provide small-scale fishers (and collaborators) with the ability and position to change the dominant discourse.

6.1. Alternative storylines on low impact fishing – relational and dispositional power processes

Small-scale fishers have been represented in ministry-led committees discussing how to preserve small-scale fishing since before the introduction of the FKA-system—but, notably, without being thoroughly organized. The first small-scale fisheries working groups and committees working on, for instance, changes to the Coastal Fishing Scheme(s) were characterized by essential differences of opinion. Especially small-scale fishers not feeling represented by DFPO—at the time the only national organization for demersal fishers—felt disadvantaged [5,6,30].

Emphasizing low impact fishing and the need to safeguard the remaining low impact, small-scale fishers, in recent years (a group of) small-scale fishers have been able gain political influence. "Low impact fishing" works alongside the concept of 'sustainable fishing' where the latter has often been linked to biological sustainability in the form of MSY and in recent years, as synonymous with MSC certified fisheries. Low impact fishing, originally coined as an alternative to sustainability in the form of MSY, has continuously been employed by non-trawling small-scale fishers to contest sustainability claims of MSC-certified trawling fisheries [33]. In 2013, ministry-led discussions about how to protect the small-scale fishing sector, and labeling as a part of the solution, were dominated by conflicts between small-scale trawlers and 'passive-gear' users (nets, Danish seine, hooks, lines, traps etc.). On the basis of these discussions, also supported by environmental NGOs, the ministry ordered a report from the National Institute of Aquatic Studies (DTU Aqua) about sustainability in Danish fisheries [22].

The report compares fishing gear types and provides a table over the impact level of these gear types on a number of environmental aspects (such as bycatch, sea bottom impact, discard and energy consumption) in which "passive" gear types generally score best [22]. Although not intended, the report worked as a scientization of so-called low impact gear, enabling the ministry to propose a revision to the Coastal Fishing Scheme that rewarded small-scale fishers with "low impact gear" types, thus inscribing this distinction of fishing gear into fisheries regulations [46]. At the same time, a group of Danish small-scale fishers established FSK; the national fishing organization for low impact small-scale fishers based on the regulatory definition for low impact fishing. The "low impact" storyline, including the scientific report (utilized as a main scientific, legitimizing resource), is an example of a relational power process. A process that has changed the positioning of actors in Danish fisheries management (dispositional power) and enabled the establishment of FSK. As a formal Producer Organization, FSK is now represented in the same (ministry-led) committees as DFPO. FSK has since its formation pushed for more policy initiatives incentivizing low impact small-scale fishing.

Continuous discussions on trawling and projects focused on low impact fishing have been partly enabled by a Danish foundation that through its environmental funding program has funded a range of different action-oriented projects that has had low impact (non-trawling) fishing as one focal area. This funding[10] has since 2015 been essential for small-scale fishers and their organizational structures that would not have had the economic capital to participate in discussions, make reports, engage in collaborations and do political work without this financial support. Moreover, some of these projects, not directly focused on low impact fishing but sustainable fishing in general, has established and maintained a continuous dialog about the sustainability of fisheries between actors from across the food sector, public and private, as well as environmental organizations, the Danish MSC office and the fishers' organizations. These facilitated discussions have worked as a platform for new alliances (relational power processes) where

[10] Illustrative examples include NGO projects focused on impacting marine policies to have a higher environmental sustainability focus, FSK projects focused on the labeling process, projects on supporting the development of low impact fishing more generally and projects facilitating discussions of sustainable fishing as well as how to educate about it. Projects related (directly or indirectly) to low impact fishing have together received funding for about 3–4 million EUR from 2015 to 2020. Learn more here: https://veluxfoundations.dk/da/om-os/det-har-vi-stoettet#/?areas=a0Rb0000003WZNHEA4,a0Rb0000003WZNGEA4,a0Rb0000003WZNHEA4&yearFrom=2015&yearTo=2020.

stakeholders have found common ground and begun to collaborate. Effectively, impacting on the credibility of the MSC label in Denmark, several actors supporting the development of the NaturSkånsom label has openly contested the definition of sustainability employed by MSC in discussions, in particular pointing to the negative effects of bottom trawling, which makes up a large share of Danish certified fisheries.

The public debate about bottom trawling, which has a tendency to discredit MSC, has been led primarily by environmental organizations. In a campaign from 2019 called "Save the Sea Now" (*Red havet nu)* launched by the Danish office of WWF, the Danish Society for Nature Conservation, Levende Hav (a smaller Danish environmental organization focused especially on the ocean) and the Danish association for sport fishers, the negative effects of bottom trawling was highlighted as one of the main threats to the sustainability of the Danish marine areas [58]. Around the same time, WWF Denmark introduced an updated version of their public, online Fish Guide. In the new Fish Guide, MSC certified fish are no longer automatically recommended, effects of bottom trawling are described, and low impact fishing gear is recommended and explained also through video material with Danish small-scale, low impacts fishers [63]. The fish guide and reports are examples of resources that have helped low impact fishers strengthen their position publicly and politically while also strengthening the alliances between the environmental organizations and these fishers.

6.2. Power processes translating into legal and institutional settings

The formation of FSK, the collaborations and the focus on lowering environmental impacts from fishing have impacted Danish fishing policies, which now connect the longstanding issue of the decline of small-scale fishing with an aim of supporting low impact fishing. Through the dynamic interplay of structural, relational and dispositional power processes, changing the positioning of low impact small-scale fishers, actors have successfully been able to push for a new ecolabelling scheme. The first official policy mentioning of the labeling scheme is from the 2016 agreement on a "New Fishing Package" by a majority (not including the then-government) in the Danish parliament. The introduction to the agreement states clearly the framing of what is considered an issue in the development of Danish fishing:

> The fishing sector creates growth and jobs in Denmark and constitutes a significant contribution to the export … The past years, there has been a centralization of fishing activities in the larger harbors, while a larger and larger share of quotas, tonnage and kilowatt is distributed on fewer, larger fishing actors. Quota kings buy up and the coastal fishing erodes [32].

One of the measures of the agreement was the establishment of a ministry-led working group of stakeholders focused on small-scale fishing, which—among other things—should work on the ecolabelling idea for "low impact" caught fish [32]. DFPO, FSK and representatives from Thorupstrand Kystfiskerlaug were invited as the main participants in the group—positioning low impact fishers strongly through the coalition of Thorupstrand and FSK that were already collaborators and low impact gear users. The following year, the measures of the agreement were implemented, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund's Operational Programme for Denmark (2018–2020) was negotiated politically and reflected the focus on low impact small-scale fishing:

> There is and has been progress in Danish fishing in recent years… With its knowledge about sustainability and resource-efficient food production, the sector [fishing and aquaculture] contributes to establishing Denmark as one of Europe's largest fishing nations and food-superpowers. But the success story has a downside. The smaller coastal fishers and the small harbors and landing places experience hard times and decline. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund's Operational Programme shall contribute to reversing this trend. The coastal fishing contributes to growth and jobs in all of Denmark and is an important component of Danish culture [44].

The program introduced funding focused especially on small-scale fishers and the value chains of their products. Meanwhile the working group continued and discussions and the focus on low impact came to influence the latest revision of the Coastal Fishing Schemes implemented in 2019:

> The local and nearshore fishery plays a large role many places in Denmark economically and as cultural heritage. The parties behind this agreement wish to secure and develop this fishery with an increased focus on low impact fishing methods that protects the marine environment. The agreement about further strengthening of the coastal fishing should be viewed in connection to a broad political wish to support the small harbors and promote a development in the fishing towards more sustainability and a more low impact fishery. As is also expressed in the decision to establish a labeling scheme for low impact fishing" [43].

This policy document, which echoes the discourse on the importance of small-scale fishing, thus presented the new labeling scheme as bridging the political focus on sustaining and developing the coastal fishing sector with the focus on "low impact" fishing methods in the context of environmental sustainability.

6.3. The use of scientific resources and claims in establishing NaturSkånsom as a legitimate alternative

In 2020, the ministry implemented the new state-led ecolabelling scheme NaturSkånsom. NaturSkånsom's criteria are based on the regulatory definitions of "coastal fishing vessels" and "low impact fishing gear" and stock assessments (from the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES)) [42]. The reactions of Danish environmental organizations to NaturSkånsom's implementation are examples of the relational power, which was essential for the whole process of creating NaturSkånsom. The WWF Fish Guide now includes information on NaturSkånsom, and the day NaturSkånsom was implemented, the Danish Society for Nature Conservation introduced the label on their homepage (among other places) stating, "…We are very happy about the label because it considers both the fish population, but also the methods used to catch the fish. Low impact [*skånsomt*] fishing affects the marine environment much less than fishing with bottom-dredging methods," [12]. Later in the text, there is an important discursive positioning where NaturSkånsom is compared with MSC:

> NaturSkånsom goes further in its guarantee than MSC. While a fish caught with bottom trawling can be certified sustainable according to MSC standards, that is a total no-go if a fisher wants to sell his/her catch as NaturSkånsom. According to senior researcher from Department of Bioscience, Marine Diversity, at Aarhus University, Jørgen L.S. Hansen, this makes good sense as fishing with bottom trawling is scientifically proven to be one of the large threats for the marine nature… [12].

The text includes a remark from the chairman of FSK and thus shows the essential coalition of environmental organizations, low impact fishers and selected marine scientists—all with different aims but a common positive view on low impact fishing as an alternative to bottom trawling. This is an example of relational power backed by common interest in "low impact". The other fisher's organization, DFPO, had less success with, or interest in, forming alliance with environmental organizations, but has also had strong collaborations with scientists especially from National Institute of Aquatic Resources (DTU Aqua), from which scientists have also commented publicly on the new label. In an article on one of the largest Danish news channels' webpage, a DTU Aqua senior researcher comments that (low impact characterized) net fishing is better for the sea floor, but worse for marine mammals and sea

birds that risk getting caught in the nets [13].

The alliance between FSK and the environmental organizations was in the process challenged by the exclusion of MSY in the initial draft act of the label. When the first draft act of NaturSkånsom was sent out for hearing, WWF Denmark, the Danish Society for Nature Conservation together with other non-governmental organizations sent a collective, public letter to the Environment and Food Committee of the Danish Parliament and the fisheries spokesmen for all the parties in the Danish parliament stressing their concern about the exclusion of MSY in NaturSkånsom [34]. The letter initiated a new process and discussions between FSK and the NGOs and internally in the responsible ministry, ultimately leading the ministry to propose a form of stock assessments as a part of the NaturSkånsom criteria. This inclusion of MSY was essential for the alliances that are key for the credibility and sustainability claims of NaturSkånsom—that with its state-led nature draw both on state authority, scientific discussions of low impact fishing gear and the backing of environmental organizations. The forming of new and broader alliances has also been an intentional strategy employed by the responsible ministry and taken form as an ongoing negotiation between key stakeholders. As a part of establishing the ecolabelling scheme, the ministry formed a partnership of interested actors including public and private organizations and companies [45].

The fact that NaturSkånsom is a state-led and -financed ecolabelling scheme is a result of specific power dynamics including a persistent push from small-scale fishers' organizations and their alliances enabled by external funding and an alternative framing of fisheries management and small-scale, low impact fishing. In an interview with an employee from MSC, it was highlighted that the state-led nature of NaturSkånsom—in the context of the Danish organic label also being state-led—can be seen as somewhat "unfair competition" because of the "free-of-charge" state authority and credibility that NaturSkånsom thus draws upon. Through its state-led nature, its local scope and focus, the use of regulatory definitions of low impact fishing gear, scientific discussions about seabed impacts and the important alliances supporting the label, NaturSkånsom has the potential to challenge the monopoly status of MSC in Danish retail and catering sectors.

7. Conclusion

Across the globe, new fisheries ecolabelling schemes are forming, some are territorial and initiated by the industry or an alliance of stakeholders [16], while the Danish case presented here is one of the less-common state-led (although co-developed) schemes. The Iceland Responsible Fisheries Certification and the Marine Eco-Label Japan are both examples of territorial ecolabelling schemes that involve a mix of state and non-state actors but operate on the global market for fish products. Others, such as initiatives in the US, are closer to the Danish case in relying primarily on state legislation and -funding. All of these have in common an articulated aim of operating as alternatives to MSC [1,16,57]. Together these examples show the complexity of the constantly developing, ecolabelling scheme landscape and challenge the perceived monopoly-status of MSC. NaturSkånsom is a critical case in this context as it is a scheme that is catered for (and limited to) the small-scale fishing sector.

NaturSkånsom was enabled by a dynamic interplay of power processes including funding from philanthropic foundations. Because of these, the scheme represents an alternative to the MSC label on a national level. The relational power processes in the forms of alliances and the use of scientific resources on "low impact" have led to increased awareness and discussions of low impact and small-scale fishing among stakeholders and buyers especially in the public (food) sector. NaturSkånsom is framed politically as a part of the solution to a defined issue of safeguarding small-scale fishing and promoting more environmentally friendly fishing. The framing of the importance of small-scale fishing is thus linked to the ongoing discussions of sustainable utilization of the fishing resource. Sustainability in fishing is a contested concept and debates on it make room for other competing concepts such as low impact fishing. Because of the many aspects of environmentally sustainable fishing (bycatch, seabed impacts, CO_2 emissions etc.), low agreement on what to prioritize and the complexity of the impacts of different fishing gear for different fish species on different marine habitats there is space for negotiation and for conflicting sustainability claims—based on different scientific materials. Discourses on sustainable fishing are produced and reproduced through scientific discussions and publications, but also through the interactions between stakeholders, in policies, and through environmental organizations' campaigns and reports. These create multiple ongoing exclusions (of trawlers, of small-scale fishers, of certain organizations, labels etc.) and influence the positioning of different actors.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication [17] and the UN Sustainable Development Goals SDG14.b ("provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets") [18] both encourage the protection of small-scale fisheries that are viewed as less-resourceful actors [31]. In a Global North context, Denmark is a case in point with a market-based approach to management and an MSC dominated consumer market. As we have argued in our analysis, specific power dynamics have enabled the establishment of the new state-led ecolabelling scheme. In this process, what seem to be less-resourceful actors, a segment of the small-scale fishing fleet, have managed to gain significant influence and thus been able to cocreate an alternative. How this alternative ecolabel will work in practice, especially in relation to MSC, is yet to be seen and studied. The process and ecolabel, however, has already positively impacted the fishers in question increasing awareness of their "low impact" practices, positioning them strongly in policy contexts and strengthening their collaborations with environmental NGOs as well as with environmentally oriented buyers. As such, it shows how alliances focused on (re)defining, and claiming, 'sustainability' can support and strengthen the position of small-scale fisheries in policy and market contexts. Drawing credibility from both environmental NGOs and state authorities through a label initiative like NaturSkånsom, small-scale fishers are enabled to create market differentiation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

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Declaration of Interest statement

We are reporting that the first author, as a part of her Industrial PhD project, collaborates with small-scale fishers and has participated in the ministry-led working group of stakeholders contributing to the development of the new Danish ecolabelling scheme. An explanation of this is also found in the article's Methods section. The first author's PhD project is based in a Velux Foundations funded project focused on sustaining and supporting low-impact, small-scale fishing in Denmark.

Appendix 1. Data sources summarized by data collection method, date and type

Documents, home page material etc.

Source	Number	Year	Type
Danmarks Fiskeriforening Producent Organisation (The Danish Fishermen's Association Producer Organization (DFPO))	2	2020	Annual report and the chairman's annual report
National Institute for Aquatic Resources (DTU Aqua)	1	2014	Scientific report
Danmarks Naturfredningsforening (The Danish Society for Nature Conservation), *Dyrenes beskyttelse* (Denmark's Organization for the Protection of Animals), World Wide Fund for Nature, Danish office (WWF Denmark), Our Fish and Greenpeace, Danish office	2	2019	Hearing statement for the NaturSkånsom labelling scheme, letter to the Danish parliament about NaturSkånsom
Ministry of Environment and Food/Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries	8	2013;2017; 2019	Drafts for NaturSkånsom; official answer to the parliament about Maximum Sustainable Yield in NaturSkånsom; presentation material for Partnership meetings; fisheries policy documents.
Danmarks Naturfredningsforening	1	2020	Hompage site about NaturSkånsom
Danish Broadcasting Operation (*Danmarks Radio*)	1	2020	Online news about NaturSkånsom
Fiskerforum	1	2020	Online article about NaturSkånsom
WWF Denmark Fish guide	1	2019	Fish guide homepage (online tool)
The [Danish] Social Democratic Party, the Danish People's Party, the Danish Social-Liberal Party and the [Danish] Socialist People's Party	1	2016	Political agreement about Danish fisheries

Interviews

Source	Number	Date	Type
Forening for Skånsom Kystfiskeri Producent Organisation (FSK, Organization for Low Impact, Coastal Fishing Producer Organization)	1	03/06 2019	Semi-structured interviews
Marine Stewardship Council, Danish office (MSC Denmark)	1	03/06 2019	Semi-structured interview
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fisheries political office	1	04/06 2019	Semi-structured interviews
Danish fishmonger	1	11/7 2019	Semi-structured interview
Industry participants in the ministry-led working group on coastal fishing and the Coastal Fishing Schemes	1	05/08 2020	Semi-structured, informal interview/dialog

Meetings

Source	Number	Date	Type
Meetings NaturSkånsom Partnership at the Ministry of Environment and Food and Ministry of Denmark	6	10/12 2020 01/12 2020 26/10 2020 01/10 2020 21/10 2019 12/12 2019	Partnership meetings; advisory group meeting
Meetings in Partnership for Sustainable Fishing (*Partnerskab for Bæredygtigt Fiskeri*)	8	28/10 2020 07/10 2020 23/09 2020 15/01 2020 15/11 2019 21/10 2019 28/08 2019 20/02 2019	Seminars; meetings; workshops
MSC Denmark	1	19/10 2019	(Danish) Annual meeting (for stakeholders and partners)

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