

The patchwork of blue justice: A review of *Climate Change, Small-Scale Fisheries, and Blue Justice*

Book review by

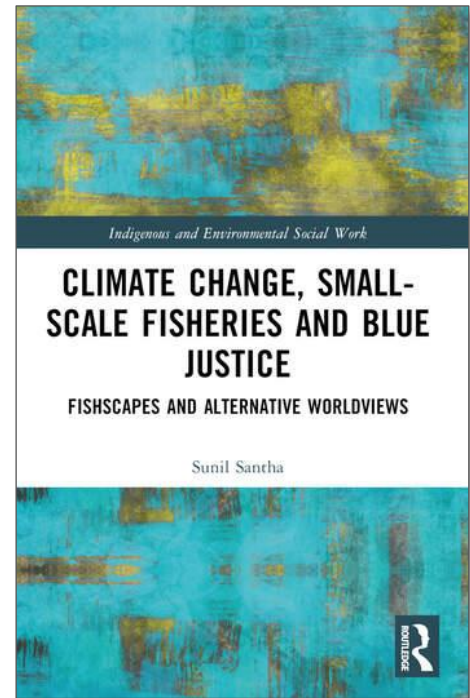
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Review of *Climate Change, Small-Scale Fisheries, and Blue Justice: Fishscapes and Alternative Worldviews*, by Sunil Santha. (2023).

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In *Climate Change, Small-Scale Fisheries, and Blue Justice*, author Sunil Santha crafts a poetic and powerful narrative grounded in the 'patchy epistemologies' of small-scale Fishers across India and the Indian Ocean region (in this review, I capitalize 'Fish,' 'Fishers,' and 'Nature' in alignment with Santha's style). While these Fishers constitute the majority of the global fisheries workforce and play a critical role in sustaining coastal food security,

they are marginally represented in policy and governance. Weaving together case studies, ethnographic accounts, and theoretical insights, Santha illustrates how their eco-social worlds are being reshaped under an increasingly globalizing food system and warming climate. This book critiques reductive climate solutions and sustainable intensification narratives while offering alternative, justice-oriented frameworks that center on the situated knowledge and lived experiences of small-scale Fishers.

Santha begins the book by establishing an analytical framework that integrates both posthumanist theory and political economy. Moving beyond human-centric ethnography, this book delves into

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several case studies featuring species such as the Bombay duck, Hilsa, shrimps, and sardines. These accounts situate Fish and Fishers in a “more-than-human” world, emphasizing their mutual entanglements as both navigate the intersecting pressures of industrial fishing and climate impacts. This posthumanist lens is complemented by Santha’s use of Jason Moore’s (2000, 2010, 2015, 2021) concept of the *commodity frontier*, which describes capitalism’s expansion into previously uncommodified spaces and the resulting ‘cheapening’ of Nature reconstructing landscapes and livelihoods. Together, these frameworks challenge dominant views of Nature as external, passive, and governable, instead revealing how environmental, social, and economic forces are deeply interdependent.

Santha’s analytical lens proves to be particularly powerful in his exploration of historical modernization projects and present-day climate adaptation approaches. One such example is the use of sand mining for shoreline reclamation efforts, which converts dynamic ecosystems into material inputs. While framed as solutions to coastal erosion, these interventions exemplify Moore’s commodity frontier logic. Projects that employ sand-mining practices have paradoxically intensified the vulnerability of coastal communities to cyclones, displacing thousands of families and disrupting Fish habitats. These newly developed landforms are seldom returned to their traditional stewards; instead, they serve as platforms for tourism or real-estate expansion.

This commodification of Nature—whereby beings and habitats are positioned as capital—is in direct opposition to the ‘world-making’ of the Indigenous, traditional, and rural communities featured throughout this book. The central sections of this book delve into these relational knowledge systems through Santha’s fieldwork across communities, such as Kerala, Gopdihi village, Ramnagar, and the Koli people of Mumbai. In Kerala, for instance, Fishers have numerous proverbs that pass down and communicate weather patterns or seasonal shifts, such as the *Kolu*, or monsoon storms. These proverbs have been developed over generations of Fishers co-existing alongside their non-human neighbors; however, these relational ties are shifting under variable environmental and market

pressures that destabilize the landscapes on which these traditional knowledge systems are built. Santha’s contributions extend beyond mere descriptions of this knowledge, as he vividly depicts how local ethics of reciprocity and community well-being are sharply contrasted against the pressures of commodity frontiers.

The contrast is particularly glaring in Santha’s discussion of the Indo-Norwegian fisheries projects of the 1950s, which exemplifies how technological innovations and top-down modernization agendas have reconfigured both the material practices of Fishers and their traditional knowledge and cultural values. Santha best illustrates this dynamic through the subsidized introduction of synthetic gillnets. This innovation allowed Fishers to capitalize on larger landings and increase their individual agency, but what began as a technological improvement soon became a reshaping of eco-social relations. Santha quotes a Fisher who notes that, as other Fishers adopted gillnets and monopolized stocks, his adherence to traditional net weaving led to his family’s starvation (p. 34). By situating these accounts within broader systemic processes, Santha demonstrates how globalized food systems reshape societies, diets, and ecosystems. Tracing these historical trajectories points to how current Blue Revolution initiatives mirror earlier modernization efforts that prioritize productivity over equity and environmental health.


From this retrospective analysis, Santha forms the basis for his critique of sustainable intensification and climate adaptation strategies in the book’s final chapters. His review of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals reveals how trade-offs disproportionately burden Fishers and perpetuate land and ocean grabbing practices under the guise of conservation. Drawing on critical studies of sustainable development, he contends that these frameworks adopt technical, reductive measures of environmental value, and he challenges human-centered approaches to environmental governance, arguing that the complexity of defining and governing the Ocean often obscures Fishers’ situated knowledge.

This discourse raises essential questions about who defines what practices are “sustainable” and whose interests these definitions serve. These ten-

sions are especially pronounced in emerging sustainability initiatives in global seafood markets. The growing emphasis on eco-certifications and traceability systems in the Global North is increasingly shaping policy and practice, particularly in export-oriented regions of the Global South. As these third-party sustainable governance systems expand, they risk becoming new forms of exclusion if small-scale Fishers are not meaningfully included in their design. Similar to the organic movement in the United States, such systems may reinforce existing inequalities by inadvertently privileging actors with the resources to comply at a larger scale of production. From Santha's perspective, these certifications could be understood as extensions of the commodity frontier, transforming sustainability itself into a marketable attribute while marginalizing those it claims to support. Multistakeholder governance has the potential to offer a more inclusive alternative, yet its transformative success depends on whether small-scale Fishers are substantively involved in shaping definitions and regulatory practices.

Over the course of eight chapters, Santha effectively oscillates between microscale relation-

ships and macroscale critiques, consistently returning to embodied knowledge to ground his evaluations of policy and governance. The structure of the book—composed of fragmented case studies and species-specific narratives—mirrors the 'patchy epistemologies' it seeks to represent. While this can at times disrupt the narrative flow of the book, it effectively reflects the uneven and diverse experiences of systemic and climate pressures. This structural style strengthens the book's argument by grounding the specificity of place, species, and practice in the context of a global food system.

Santha's methodology enacts a truly transdisciplinary approach, bridging ecological science, political economy, and cultural anthropology to examine the intersecting dimensions of Fishers' eco-social worlds and prompting readers to rethink dominant approaches to sustainability. This exploration of relationality, equity, and multiple ways of knowing resonates strongly with agroecological principles, making this text particularly valuable for graduate-level students, scholars, and practitioners focused on smallholder production systems and advancing more just and ecologically grounded food systems transformations. 

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