

Towards understanding fisheries as social-ecological systems: finding the right definition

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Abstract

The implementation of highly fragmented management schemes has led to the mismanagement of fisheries resources, which had as a consequence a drastic decline in stocks as well as unacceptable social outcomes. As a result of this situation, many scientists now agree that problems within fisheries have to be analyzed and addressed under a new conceptual approach, a social-ecological systems approach that is holistic and takes into account the natural, human, and management aspects. However, a move from one paradigm to another requires a change of theories, methods, and concepts. This study comes to meet the demand of the latter and sets up to assess whether the terms that we have at hand facilitate this move. Through a narrative literature review, we identified 12 definitions of the concept “fisheries” mostly used by policy makers, major dictionaries, and international agencies with the highest influence in fisheries management. By means of content analysis, this study investigated whether the constitutive elements of these definitions support, promote, or hinder an understanding of fisheries as social-ecological systems. The preliminary results indicate that although the existing definitions extensively address the natural components of the fisheries system, they partially address the human and management components. The aim of this study is to raise awareness and promote critical reflections around fisheries in the light of the new conceptual approach, facilitating the adequate communication of fisheries as social-ecological systems among fisheries disciplines and beyond.

Keywords: social-ecological systems; critical reflection; definition; fisheries management; new conceptual approach.

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