

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From commons to commoning as resistance efforts to blue injustice: A sociohistorical and ethnographical approach

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Abstract

1. Over the last 20 years, collaborative efforts have emerged with the intention of going beyond the pure capitalist economy, seeking to generate transformative community-based changes that guarantee blue equity, fair distribution and well-being. In the interests of sustainability and in defence of their livelihoods and culture, these marine stewards lead community initiatives that promote a sharing approach to the defence of the oceans against the deprivation of basic needs and the commons against the growth of the ocean economy.
2. Based on historical analysis and exhaustive ethnography, this study explores the processes of the commons, decommodification and commoning throughout history to understand the continuities and discontinuities over time and uncover the drivers that can fuel transformative change. The coast of Catalonia, in the north-western Mediterranean and the Cap de Creus Marine Protected Area, in north-eastern Catalonia, serve as this case study for this research.
3. The results show that the commons are a kind of 'timeless conception', since they represent an ecological, social and cultural value of goods essential for life that exists in recognition of the action of the social ties of the community in the defence of a common interest, regardless of the tenure system, the institution or the collective management system. This socio-moral environmental principle, along with the actions of a community of marine stewards defending it against socio-ecological challenges, sustains the pre-existence of the commons over time.
4. The study highlights its potential and the need for the complicity of States, business and society to produce transformative changes. This means repositioning a moral and ecological economy at the centre of the economic system, institutionalized by a political regime through legal frameworks based on distributive justice and equity, thus guaranteeing the fundamental rights to subsistence and the prevention of exclusion.
5. The study contends about the necessity to consider historical processes to illuminate aspects that could underpin the transformation of social-ecological relations. A retrospective analysis of past management experiences is necessary to evaluate their relevance and applicability in contemporary contexts, despite considerable shifts in social, political and ecological conditions.

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KEYWORDS

blue economy, blue justice, commonization, commons, community-transformative initiatives, decommonization, marine stewards

1 | INTRODUCTION

Today, the socio-ecological crisis has brought the commons to the fore, both regionally and, more recently, globally, highlighting the need to reintegrate the economy within social relations and environmental institutions. Over the last 20 years, social and environmental movements have driven these demands through various forms of cooperation and collective action, interconnected both contextually and globally. Global platforms such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services highlight the urgent need to implement effective changes in view of unprecedented biodiversity loss acceleration over the past 50 years. It is widely acknowledged that current approaches will not solve these environmental problems. Meaningful solutions can only be achieved through transformative changes in the economic, social, political and technological domains, as well as through a systemic approach that leads to wealth distribution, well-being, equity and justice for nature and people. This approach prioritizes collective benefits rather than short-term individual gain and financial profitability for few (IPBES, 2024).

Commons have been identified as leverage points within grass-roots economies to foster socio-ecological conditions that enable this transformation (Armitage et al., 2017). As a paradigm for driving transformative change (Bollier, 2014), commons have been regarded as historical management systems that inspired social movements and collective actions that emerged out of the socio-ecological crises of the 1990s and 2000s (Nieto-Romero et al., 2019). Beyond an ethos, a driving force, an ideological response or a way of imagining alternatives focused on resource management, scholars point to the necessary change in social, political and economic systems (Bollier, 2014), but also in worldviews and mind-sets, to align the historical commons with a transformative research agenda (Nieto-Romero et al., 2019).

In this paper, we explore the blue commons, paying attention to continuities and discontinuities over time, from the historical commons and decommonization processes to contemporary commoning practices. Our aim is to uncover its potential to produce transformative changes towards sustainability. Here, we present preliminary results as a starting point for reflecting on how a just, equitable and inclusive transition to sustainability might be established by addressing the following food-for-thought questions: How can transformative community change be placed at the centre of ocean-oriented solutions without being considered an alternative process or left out of the grid? How can historical commons shed light on the political, economic and social conditions that might fuel transformation?

In consideration of the theoretical framework, this article seeks to examine the commons, decommonization, recommonization and commoning. To this end, the article will use the evolution of the

institutions of the Mediterranean commons as a case study, with a particular focus on Catalonia, located in north-eastern Spain, and the Cap de Creus, a Marine Protected Area located in north-eastern Catalonia. Cap de Creus is one of the places where historical evidence of communal management has been best preserved, with continuity over time. It is also representative of anthropogenic pressures in the Mediterranean, environmental degradation and the resurgence of the commons. The analysis will examine both continuities and discontinuities throughout the history of commons management and the development of its institutions for sustainability, considering shifting social and political contexts, fisheries and environmental policies, property regimes and the development of the ocean economy. The aim is to unveil the complexity of the commons as a constantly evolving society-environment relationship that, despite differences in political and cultural structures across historical periods, persists with varying degrees of relevance in the management of marine resources, shaped by ecological, economic and social sustainability. We aim to reveal the paradoxes as well as the aspects that may hold the key to achieving transformative processes of change. Rather than simply highlighting the differences and similarities that the historical context has created in form and function, our focus is on their implementation, with particular attention to legitimacy, reaction and vindication of rights that point to progress in the processes of transformation.

Without underestimating the complexity of answering these questions, this study aims to lay the groundwork for uncovering those sociopolitical, cultural and economic aspects, framed by historical processes, that could help answer them based on present-day community-led practices and their underlying principles.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMONS, DECOMMONIZATION AND COMMONIZATION

The basis for managing access to and exploitation of natural resources is closely linked to collective systems for managing and using these resources in communities (Ostrom, 1990). Traditionally, based on rights and duties determined by social rank, kinship status, neighbourhood relations and other social units (Chamoux & Contreras, 1996), common property exists when natural resources are held and managed by heterogeneous user groups through agreed institutional arrangements over resources (Agrawal et al., 2023). However, unlike land systems, the vague demarcation of marine territory, characterized by the presence of uncertain, variable, irregular or stochastic natural resources, creates an image of 'free access' (Aguilera Klink, 1991; Jentoft, 2023). Nevertheless, territorial demarcation, appropriation forms or territorialization, is established

through a wide combination of management forms on the basis of collective management (Pascual, 1996). The collective management of common-pool resources and tenure systems is founded on the recognition of political obligations and social and legal ties of reciprocity within a community, thereby expressing power relations that are guaranteed through social and political institutions—whether kinship, monarchy or municipalities—depending on the historical moment and geographical location (Devillard, 1996). In general, commons are defined as an institution and set of agreements (Aguilera Klink, 1991).

Nevertheless, the tension between processes of economic rationalization based on maximizing individual profit, maintaining livelihoods and socio-environmental sustainability gives rise to historical episodes of decommonization. Such tension fosters resistance and efforts to restore cooperation and collective management of the 'common good' amid the dispossession of basic needs, resources and a sustainable environment by the community. The potential of social movements has been highlighted as paramount drivers of these commonization pathways (Villamayor-Tomás & García-López, 2021) towards a more human economy, denouncing the collusion of state and capital in depriving people of basic common-pool resources. In this sense, commons, decommonization and commonization (Nayak & Berkes, 2011) are understood as an ongoing coevolutionary process shaped by, and in response to, political, economic and social factors that undermine socio-ecological relations throughout time (Galappaththi & Nayak, 2017; Nayak & Berkes, 2022).

As studies point out, common-pool resources, essential for livelihood and community well-being, have historically served as leverage for asserting rights over them. Their permeability throughout history has varied depending on several factors. One of such factors is the degree of excludability, which can be stronger or weaker in different situations. That is to say, the degree of excludability determines the relationships of exclusion, inclusion and legitimacy of use of the commons and its users. Another factor that influences permeability is subtractability, which refers to 'the idea that exploitation by one user reduces resource availability for others, and deals with the rules of resource distribution and allocation among users' (Nayak & Berkes, 2022, p. 2).

As a result of the diminishing or loss of these essential principles of common-pool resources—excludability and subtractability—various forms of decommonization may ensue. Therefore, encompassing the enclosure and privatization of resources, displacement, ocean grabbing, the absence of effective governance, market-oriented policies, the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and the exclusion of users from resource management by disrupting local political and cultural structures (Galappaththi & Nayak, 2017; López-Maldonado, 2021; MacKinnon, 2018; Pittman, 2021; Villamayor-Tomás & García-López, 2021). The process of domination and power relations shaped by history, along with the resulting cultural changes, can encroach on grassroots communal practices (MacKinnon, 2018).

Commonization and decomonization are dynamic adaptive processes that evolve over time with periods in which each process overlaps and coexists (Basurto & Lozano, 2021). Commonization can

be the result of contestation to decommonizations taken in different forms that have been named according to different terminology: Commoning, recommonization, (re)commonization, new commonization and new common-pool resources (see Nayak & Berkes, 2022 for a definition of each).

The original conception of the commons has shifted from being solely an institutional approach, focusing on norms, rules and institutional arrangements (Aswani, 1999; Boucquey & Fly, 2021; Diver et al., 2024; Jentoft, 2023; Partelow & Manlosa, 2023) to include the practice of commoning regardless of the property regime, either private, public or common (Nieto-Romero et al., 2019), conceiving the commons as a participatory social process (Boucquey & Fly, 2021; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Partelow & Manlosa, 2023; Yamashita, 2023). It is a dynamic, constantly evolving process of negotiation and adaptation through collaboration, presenting itself as a viable alternative for resource management (Agrawal et al., 2023; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Highlighting the importance of social practices, relationships and interactions is at the core of the creation and maintenance of commons (Agrawal et al., 2023; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016).

Therefore, commoning is understood as a dynamic, emergent, contingent and changing process that reflects the complexity of social-ecological interactions (Boucquey & Fly, 2021) in contemporary wicked problem scenarios. In other words, it involves collective forms of governance and social relations (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023) within an ongoing struggle for rights over marine resources. This occurs against a backdrop of environmental degradation, resource scarcity and the rapid expansion of the ocean-based economy in step with the climate change mitigation policy agenda that does not always take into account the possible uneven socioeconomic or environmental impacts. Nor does it take into account the potential conflicts that may arise, or the administrative barriers to launching socio-environmental innovation projects that profess new eco-social practices that interconnect economic, social and environmental aspects. This aligns with Nayak and Berkes' definition of commoning: 'When well-governed common-pool resources are shared and giving is respected and socially rewarded to achieve reciprocity between what is given and what is taken' (2022, p. 11).

Therefore, it is posited that recommonization phenomena may emerge as a product of the combination of different overlapping property regimes (Nayak & Berkes, 2022) in hybrid governance systems, resulting in new common-pool resource management in the current political, economic and social context (Armitage et al., 2017). For example, co-management could be considered as such in the commons' literature (Nayak & Berkes, 2022).

That is, it involves new uses, rights, rules, institutions and social actors producing 'governance attributes that support pathways for transformative change and sustainable outcomes to replace decommonization features through coordination of actor networks, strategies, power sharing, rule-making processes, and distribution of rights' (Nayak & Berkes, 2022, p. 11). Co-management that emerged as an alternative to the top-down governance system of the 1990s (Jentoft et al., 1998; Pomeroy & Berkes, 1997) was originally defined

as 'the sharing of power and responsibility between government and local resource users' (Berkes et al., 1991). Over time, it evolved into the concept of 'the sharing of responsibilities, rights and duties between key stakeholders, in particular local communities and the nation state; a decentralized approach to decision-making that involves local users in the decision-making process on an equal footing with the nation state', according to the World Bank (Soeftestad & Gerrard, 1999). It was developed worldwide in communities with open access conditions and supported by policymakers and development programmes, along with recognized legislative and governance frameworks capable of integrating functional rules, such as fishing quotas and closures (d'Armengol et al., 2018).

Ultimately, this process reflects Ostrom's theoretical evolution. Although she strongly advocated community-based management of common resources, she later introduced a crucial nuance: There is no universal set of prescriptive rules or a single panacea that ensures successful governance. Instead, effective outcomes depend on the alignment between appropriation and provision rules with specific ecological, cultural and institutional conditions in which they are embedded (Ostrom, 2005, 2007). Ostrom contends that self-governance is inherently dynamic, and at times conflictive, and that sustainability largely hinges on how cooperation is fostered and how context-appropriate institutional arrangements are established over time and across space. Today, this must be understood within a system of multiple decision-making centres—communities, local governments, states and international organizations—operating across scales amid the complex and evolving conditions of socio-ecological systems facing global environmental challenges (Ostrom, 2009, 2010).

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Study area and context description

Catalonia, in the north-western Mediterranean, has a long historical tradition of fishing (northern sector GSA06). Currently, it has 22 fishing ports and 20 fish markets. The fleet comprises different segments, officially classified into five types. According to the licences, they are bottom otter trawlers (fleet segment OTB in classification of the European Data Collection Framework), purse seiners (PS), small-scale coastal fishing (corresponding to a large variety of fishing units using set nets and traps), surface longlines (LLD) and bottom longlines (LLS). Small-scale fishing (SSF) vessels represent 52% of all fishing units, 9.01% of overall catches and 17.26% of revenues.¹

In the far north of Catalonia, the Cap de Creus Marine Protected Area (CCMPA) (Figure 1) comprises the villages of Roses, Cadaqués and El Port de la Selva (Catalan Government, 2024). The Mediterranean Sea contains between 4% and 18% of the world's marine species at the macroscopic level. The Cap de Creus is one of the main biodiversity hotspots. However, it is now one of the places that experience the highest levels of

anthropogenic pressure, as part of a general problem that affects the Mediterranean, which is one of the top tourist destinations in the world (Mallo et al., 2024). Since its establishment in 1998, SSF has been the only form of professional fishing permitted in the Cap de Creus. The Park encompasses an area of 13,886 ha of land (the Cap de Creus peninsula) and 3073 ha of sea (the waters around the Cape). It is an area with many maritime activities (recreational fishing, scuba diving, aquatic sports, swimming, etc.), socio-environmental organizations and associations, and 21 small-scale professional fishers (Catalan Government, 2024).² Currently, the development of the agenda for the transition to marine renewable energies is planning to set up an offshore wind farm in front of the Marine Protected Area and over a fisheries enclosure established in co-management to protect hake nurseries (Druon et al., 2023).

There are four SSF units from Llançà out of a total of six SSF units. Llançà is an area adjacent to but not part of the CCMPA, albeit traditionally it has always fished in Cap de Creus. There are seven from El Port de la Selva and three from Cadaqués, villages whose bays are integrated into the CCMPA. And 7 out of 10 vessels from the village of Roses were integrated into Cap de Creus, although their bays are in an adjacent area. Currently, only 5 of the 15 documented types of fishing gear (Gómez & Riera, 2007) are still used, depending on the season: trammel nets, gillnets, traps (*nanses*), longlines and *bolitxa* (traditional fishing gear for bonito). Small-scale fisheries are co-managed between fishers, public administration, scientists and NGOs according to the Catalan Maritime Strategy establishing co-management for some fisheries and species (Figure 2).

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

3.2.1 | Historical analysis

An overview of blue commons, decommonization and commonization is presented through a historical perspective, which serves as a foundation for examining these concepts in the Mediterranean through Catalonia, focusing on Cap de Creus as a case study. Historical experiences of community-based fisheries management extend throughout the Mediterranean and date back to the Middle Ages to the present day (Raicevich et al., 2018). The historical perspective provides a dynamic framework to shed light on ways of doing and undoing in relation to change processes. In other words, it helps contextualize long-term interactions between social processes and political, economic, and sociocultural factors. In short, it sheds light on how social organization systems and cultural values shape power dynamics, equity and inequality, wealth distribution, and resource management. Hence, this approach enhances our understanding of contemporary social relations within the broader processes of political and legal transformations resulting from historical conditions.

The historical analysis is based on an extensive review of historical documents from the Mediterranean, a basin with a rich historical

¹Data from the Catalan Government: https://agricultura.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/pesca/dar_estadistiques_pesca_subhastada/.

²Resolution to grant the special permit for fishing and shell fishing in the waters of the Natural Park of Cap de Creus and the Bay of Cadaqués 2025 (Catalan Government, Directorate-General for Maritime Policy and Sustainable Fishing).

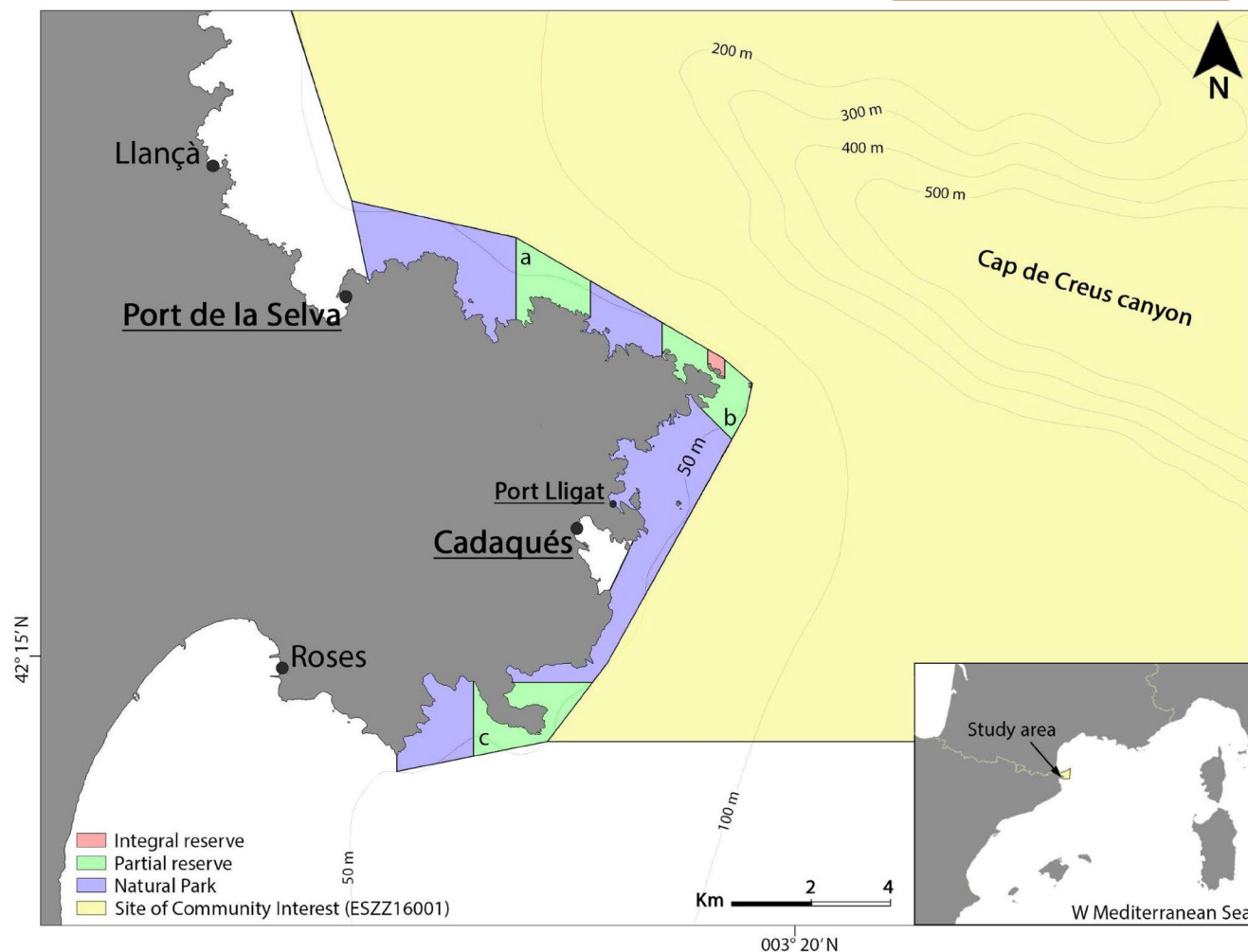


FIGURE 1 Cap de Creus Marine Protected Area. (a, b) Within the partial reserve, all activities are prohibited except for small-scale fishing, which is permitted. (c) In this sector, no fishing activity is permitted without exception since the summer of 2025. Source: Salazar et al. (2024).

legacy (unpublished manuscripts and historical memoirs from the period, and historical bibliography that are part of the results of the doctoral thesis of the second author). This review covers documentation from the northern region of Catalonia (Spain), including the Cap de Creus Natural Park. It comprises records preserved in various historical archives, records and decrees accessible in libraries and archival collections. Additionally, we consulted contemporary publications that transcribe and edit archival documents, along with recent historical works and current literature.

3.2.2 | Ethnography

Contemporary data are based on ethnographic research conducted in Catalonia, in the northwest Mediterranean. It draws on interviews and observations, but also informal conversations, and personal experiences spread over 20 years of contact and research on these fishing communities by the first author. For this paper, we utilized 48 semi-structured interviews, 31 of which were structured interviews conducted online in 2021 via WhatsApp with small-scale fishers across

the Catalan coast (Figure 2), following a snowball sampling method. In the course of these surveys, fishers were invited to share their perspectives on co-management committees implemented along the Catalan coast (Figure 2). The survey posed a closed question, asking respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the implementation of co-management. They were also asked to share their broader views on its effectiveness for management and, specifically, for incorporating the knowledge of fishers. This question was asked as part of an overall questionnaire on adapting fisheries to climate change for the European Horizon 2020 project PANDORA. The other 17 interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face in 2023 between January and May with users of the sea from the CCMPA (Figure 1), including six fishers, five representatives from civil society organizations and associations, two NGOs and four maritime business representatives. These interviews were carried out as part of the HEU project EmpowerUs, which focuses on questions on socio-environmental challenges and strategies to empower communities to address them. The questionnaire included the following: (1) Sociodemographic data; (2) Specific inquiries regarding the activity and socio-environmental challenges of each user of the sea; (3) A



FIGURE 2 Catalan Coast and co-management committees in Catalonia and year of constitution: (1) Sand eel fishery, *s.n. Gymnammodytes cicerelus*, 2012; (2) Blue crab from the Ebro Delta, *s.n. Callinectes sapidus*, 2018; (3) Octopus from the Ebro Delta, *s.n. Octopus vulgaris*, 2020; (4) Octopus from the central coast, *s.n. Octopus vulgaris*; (5) Cuttlefish from Gulf of Roses and Pals, *s.n. Sepia officinalis*, 2018; (6) Small-scale fishing from Cap de Creus, 2021; (7) Small-scale fishing from the Ebro Delta, 2022.

Source: Own elaboration.

set of open-ended questions, common to all interviewees, requesting the identification of the primary environmental and social challenges in Cap de Creus, the measures being implemented to address these problems, the institutions responsible for these measures, and whether these measures were improving the situation or not. They were also asked to describe what needed to be changed and what initiatives should be put in place to address these challenges.

These data were triangulated with participant observation (2019–2024) within the framework of the Cap de Creus small-scale fisheries (SSF) co-management committee and the Gulf of Roses and Pals cuttlefish co-management committee. In addition, non-participant observation was conducted in WhatsApp groups associated with both co-management committees, as well as another WhatsApp group of the whole Catalan territory arising from the first SSF Congress, organized by fishers themselves in 2021.

In addition to the formal monthly meetings of co-management committees, informal ongoing communication mechanisms such as WhatsApp groups allow for a direct and immediate line between the fishers and co-management committee members. These digital interactions allow discussions to extend beyond the regular agenda, where questions and comments arise spontaneously, enabling us to take the pulse of everyday concerns, as well as initiatives undertaken by fishers themselves, and coordinated actions with NGOs and other co-management members. The data collected from these online spaces open the possibility to perform digital ethnography, defined as the offline and online continuum in contemporary society, which is characterized by its existence in a space between digital, material and sensory realms (Pink, 2001).

The WhatsApp groups from both co-management committees comprise 19 SSFs and 19 representatives from science, NGOs and

public authorities. The SSF WhatsApp group from all Catalan territories connects 37 small-scale fishers with a total of 10 representatives from science, environmental organizations, NGOs and the public authorities. A total of 86 selected entries from messages posted in these digital spaces between October 2022 and May 2023 were analysed. Of these, 21 came from the WhatsApp group for the 1st Small-Scale Fisheries Congress, 50 from the co-management committee of the Cap de Creus WhatsApp group, and 16 from the Gulf of Roses and Pals cuttlefish co-management. Messages containing information on challenges were selected and classified as *fears* to contextualize the perceived commons grab. Conversely, community-based initiatives related to commoning initiatives undertaken by fishers themselves, or in alliance with other social actors, together with news celebrated as advancements were classified as *hopes*. Data were organized in a spreadsheet according to the following criteria: (1) month of publication; (2) topic label; (3) positive or negative content of the post; (3) fear or hope; (4) social actor who posted the message according to the following classification: fisher, NGO, public authority, scientist; (5) sentence explaining the key aspects of the data; and (6) data source, if available: website, press or other media. The topic labels (2) were assigned using free codes that captured the substantive themes of WhatsApp messages in different categories.

Participation in the investigation was voluntary and the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation of the Autonomous University of Barcelona approved the research protocol (CEEAH 6309). Furthermore, participants provided informed consent before their interviews and WhatsApp messages were collected. The results were shown to the participants who corroborated them and provided additional feedback. The data are totally anonymous and do not contain any kind of personal information that might identify the participants in this non-interventional study. Data have also been aggregated to ensure that individual respondents cannot be identified.

3.3 | Data limitation

Unlike traditional data sources, the analysis of social media content offers researchers the opportunity to transcend spatial and temporal limitations, facilitating the collection of information in a less intrusive and more cost-effective manner. However, it should be noted that social media data may be unreliable or limited in time and subject to specific biases, as in the case of WhatsApp data. However, it should always be a source of information that is triangulated with other qualitative sources.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Historical overview of the commons and its institutions

In the Mediterranean, the fishing economy has historical experience in resource management rooted in community and communal law. Maritime commons originated at an undetermined time in the

early Middle Ages (10th–12th century), during the initial process of articulation of feudal jurisdiction (Collet, 1987). The first fishing communities were organized under the protection of Benedictine monasteries that accumulated rents and collected taxes on the fish caught, in exchange for recognizing the usufruct rights of the local communities over the communally managed fishing activity. The first documented references to communal fisheries management institutions date back to the 13th century (Garrido et al., 2010), appearing simultaneously in several places in the Mediterranean, within different ecological contexts: in Spain, the Albufera of Valencia, the Ebro River Delta, the low-lying beaches of north-eastern Catalonia and the rugged coasts of the Cap de Creus; in France, the lagoon systems of Roussillon and the rocky inlets of Calanques on the coast of Marseille. Wherever fishing activities were documented during the medieval period, the management regime was communal (Bosc, 2018; Féral, 2004; Grisel, 2019). This self-regulation, among other historical evidence of communal practices (Garrido, 2012), was developed through fishers' self-management institutions.

During modernity (16th–17th century), there was a consolidation of these institutions in many regions, corresponding to the *Cofradías* in Spain, the *Prud'homies* in France and the *Fraglie* in Italy (Raicevich et al., 2018). In Spain, the *Cofradías*, an old denomination taken from medieval religious organizations (Herrera-Racionero et al., 2019; Raicevich et al., 2018), oversaw ensuring access to resources to their members in recognition of their subjection to the political powers (Church and King), which acted as guarantors of regulation and administration without intervening in resource management. Management was the exclusive responsibility of the community, which could freely dispose of communally managed resources under the principle of leaving no one behind (Garrido, 2012; Prat et al., 2006). The objective was clear: to ensure the stability of the local socioeconomic system to allow for the reproduction of the community and maintain the status quo of the dominant power.

For centuries, communalism has been a tool used to reduce and mitigate the risks and uncertainties inherent in fishing activities. It could be defined as a form of risk management institution (Eggertsson, 1988; Losa, 2003). Collaborative work made it possible to catch larger fish in large quantities, using large fishing nets that were hauled from the shore, such as the case of *almadrabas*, fishing gear used for tuna. The consensual stability contained in the collective management agreements allowed them to maintain the traditional values of premodern societies: neighbourhood solidarity, social stability and the guarantee of a minimum livelihood for all families (Rahola, 1904). At the same time, safety measures to protect against the dangers of work at sea were provided in such agreements (shipwrecks, accidents, piracy, captivity, invasions, etc.). To summarize, fishing activities were structured around collective institutions linked to a 'moral economy' (Thompson, 1999) aimed at preserving and defending a collaborative way of life guaranteed in the strict application of communal norms in the face of individual or free behaviour, free riders, that opposed the collective will (Garrido, 2012). In conclusion, the commons of the sea was a social concept that appealed not only to the safeguarding

of natural resources from depredation by undermining livelihoods, but also to the reproduction of the community under a specific socioeconomic order that was maintained under an alliance between unequal but equitable social strata in a relationship of redistribution and reciprocity (Rodríguez-López & Pastor, 2000). The maritime communal regime was rooted in a traditionalist and conservative ethos. While it could not completely prevent technological advancements in fishing, it hindered them, as any disruption to the established order could threaten the fragile foundations of communal balance. Particularly noteworthy was the role of the master fishers, owners of means of production who were the only ones allowed to participate in decision-making and had the power to select the people who arbitrate controversies and administer justice on fishing conflicts, the *prohoms* (Bosc, 2018; Pujol & Garrido, 2019). They were reluctant to relinquish their power to determine the future of fishing activities or to share this authority with other non-owner fishers. Consequently, it was a restrictive and paternalistic system, reproducing power relationships and socioeconomic differences (Garrido, 2012).

Customary law institutionalized obligations, rights and duties on the basis of these reciprocal and redistributive relationships, ensuring the right to livelihoods and basic needs, following the principles of community and subsistence. This customary legal corpus generated over centuries of agreements became a legal corpus compiled in the so-called fishing ordinances (Garrido, 2012; Prat et al., 2006). The framework regulated the entire production process, including the beginning and end of the fishing season, the limits and rights of access to fishing grounds, fishing manoeuvres and operations, permitted and prohibited technologies, labour issues and workers' rights, infrastructure, taxation and a section on infractions and penalties. Participants were required to comply with these rules or risk losing the right to fish and being expelled from the community. Thus, it functioned as a hunting ground: No one from outside the community or in violation of the agreements could access the fishing grounds defined by the communal system. Geographical limits defined the boundaries between one community and another, recorded in medieval documents and were used as proof of the right of possession, control and exclusion. Each fishing community delimited its zone of influence and worked to secure exclusive rights over its use. Consequently, the size of the communal territory was adjusted to the community's ability to defend and manage it. Similarly, overall social peace was guaranteed by ensuring that all participants had access to a minimum level of resources for their subsistence (Garrido, 2012).

4.2 | Decommunization and neoliberal governance

However, the communal system conflicted with the aspirations of the liberal regime (18th–19th century) to promote fishing through the introduction of more productive technologies. From the 18th century onward, the expansion of modern trawling to ensure a steady supply of seafood to rapidly growing cities strained relations with local fishing communities.

By the mid-18th century, the Monarchy had established the *Matrícula de Mar* ('Registration of the Sea'), a system of compulsory military service for individuals wishing to work in maritime professions. Officials intervened and manipulated traditional institutions representing fishers, transforming them into instruments for recruiting sailors for the navy. To this end, all associations were unified in the form of seamen's guilds, which came to control the institutions of fishers (Llovet, 1980; Mirabet & López, 1996). While the Registration of the Sea is said to have theoretically respected the independence of local fisheries management institutions, it is documented that their capacity to act was progressively diminished in practice. This is attributed to the fact that they had fewer resources and less capacity to counteract the rise of more efficient and productive fishing methods, such as modern trawling. The decline in the associative power of the *Cofradías* (Fishers' Guilds) in the face of the advance of competitive, capitalist-oriented fishing systems reduced their influence on community welfare and their ability to ensure a basic livelihood for their members (Garrido, 2012).

Throughout the 19th century, fisheries legislation underwent a transformation towards liberalism with the aim of modernizing the entire fisheries sector, although this process was gradual and took place in several stages (Losa, 2023). This transition entailed a decommunization process, that is, the dismantling of the guild and communal structures that had characterized local fisheries management for centuries, and the introduction of new principles based on industrial freedom, technological progress and economic development, exemplified by the rise of trawling and purse seining. The 1885 Freedom of Fishing Regulations marked the nationalization of fisheries resources and the dismantling of local management structures, establishing the State as the sole authority responsible for regulating fishing activities within its jurisdiction (Giráldez Rivera, 1993).

The abolition of guild structures gave rise to new associations of organized resistance, which were secular and mutualist in nature (Alegret & Garrido, 2022). What we now call 'conservationist' positions, then considered conservative, were adopted by an important segment of the fishing sector (Urteaga, 1987). Nevertheless, communities resisted the introduction of new fishing techniques in their communal territories, promoted by capitalist entrepreneurs with connections to the central authority of the monarchy, and legislation transformed gradually the old communal structures into spaces of free access to trawling. Centralization of fisheries management in the hands of the administration further weakened the power of local communities, relegating their role in maintaining a traditional social order, more symbolic than substantive, to inlets and fishing grounds (Losa, 2023). While there are few living historical commons left, they are regulated by legal frameworks instituted in the 20th century, or simply informally to maintain the traditional customary law, although symbolically, that identifies fishing communities in emblematic places.³

³Such is the case of El Port de la Selva in Cap de Creus, where access to the inlets for bonito fishing between June and September is allocated through a lottery in order to establish an order of occupancy and a daily limit of fishing boats, maintaining the tradition as it is described by Rahola (1904).

The emancipatory and reformist experience of the *Pósitos de Pescadores* (fishers' mutual aid organizations) emerged from the associative fervour of the fishing world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These organizations, supported by the State, were conceived to address the serious problems facing the Spanish fishing sector, such as endemic poverty, a lack of public education, alcoholism and economic dependence on buyers (Ansola, 2021). The experience of the fishers' mutual aid organizations proved fruitful, with 217 established along the Spanish Mediterranean coast by the mid-1930s. However, these reformist organizations did not align with the fascist ideology of the Francoist administration that emerged in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the regime revived the traditional and reactionary organizational model of the fishers' guilds within the framework of the newly established vertical fishing union. This initiative aimed to transcend class conflict by integrating capital and labour (Alegret, 1999; Gorostiza & Ortega, 2016). However, in practice, these confraternities became instruments to serve the interests of shipowners, contributing to the development of a more intensive Mediterranean fishing industry characterized by trawling. From the 1960s onward, a fleet renewal plan considerably increased the resource extraction capacity to unsustainable levels, a challenge that, 60 years later, continues to burden the fishing sector (Punzón et al., 2020).

Reflecting the developmentalist economic policies of the late and post-Franco period (60s–90s), the growth in the sector in general of all fleet segments underpinned overfishing (Pi-Sunyer, 1977; Dahlet & Sánchez-Lizaso, 2021). The Community Fisheries Policy was first implemented in 1983, requiring all member states to adapt following their accession to the EU (Irazola et al., 1996). Catalonia only has jurisdiction in inland waters, including Marine Protected Areas (Gómez & Lloret, 2017). The first decrees already point to the direction of European policies, which focus on two main aspects in the management of fishing rights, relying on a complex regulatory system that has evolved over time: (1) the limitation of fishing capacity, dominant type in multispecies fisheries from the Mediterranean combined by fishing enclosures (Dahlet & Sánchez-Lizaso, 2021; Gómez & Maynou, 2020); and (2) the total allowable catches (TACs) and limitation of fish catch (e.g. quota systems), dominant in the Atlantic basin. The TAC and quota systems became more difficult to implement in highly diverse Mediterranean multispecies fisheries (Sánchez-Lizaso et al., 2020) and do not apply to SSF, with few current exceptions (e.g. tuna, swordfish and sand eel, although the latter is a result of co-management arrangements).

In the last 70 years, there has been an increasing expansion of sea uses beyond traditional livelihoods, leading to new environmental concerns. The sea is approached as a space of conflict and political struggles over access and rights to resources in the face of environmental risks (Bavinck et al., 2018) and new economic developments. Ocean governance and management systems are unable to accommodate the diverse purposes of sea use, levels of exploitation and growing pressures in a rapidly changing

environmental context (Bennett et al., 2021), exacerbating conflicts and tensions between economic activities, social groups and local communities (Flannery et al., 2019; Mendenhall et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2023).

In this context, and after long-lasting struggles, in 1998 social movements convinced the Catalan government to declare Cap de Creus a natural park, including a Marine Protected Area (AAVV, 2018). Despite basic zoning having been established, the Uses and Management Regulation Plan has taken more than 20 years to be approved, bowing to the pressures of some socioeconomic sectors resistant to regulatory measures that have obstructed its approval all this time. Its recent approval dates back to July 2025, after many complaints from civil society, scientists and artisanal fishers about this regulation in the face of increased maritime activities. It comes into force on 14 August 2025, amid widespread disappointment from environmental groups and civil society organizations that had hoped for bolder measures with more regulations. Currently, this blue growth of recent years (Hadjimichael, 2018) aligns with the energy transition agenda planning an offshore wind farm next to the Marine Protected Area.

4.3 | Coming back to the commons?

4.3.1 | Fisheries co-management

In the past 15 years, Catalonia has experienced a revival of commons-based approaches in response to the environmental degradation of its coastal and marine ecosystems driven by climate change, pollution and intensive human activity. Conservation policies prioritize co-management strategies that reinforce the commons framework, while simultaneously promoting the blue economy, such as renewable energy and sustainable maritime recreation, as a pathway for economic development (Government of Catalonia. Ministry for Foreign Action, Institutional Relations and Transparency. Advisory Council for Sustainable Development, 2020). The first co-management committee in Catalonia was established as a solution to address the critical overexploitation of sand eel stocks, which threatened the closure of fisheries and caused one of the biggest crises in the fishing sector. The co-management model was the result of a social mobilization of the fisheries sector itself, which sought help from environmental NGOs (WWF and Greenpeace), the Catalan administration (Directorate-General for Marine Policy and Sustainable Fisheries of the Government of Catalonia) and the scientific community. EU legislation also encouraged the co-management model by requiring strict management plans for sand eel fisheries (Lleonart et al., 2014). Subsequently, seven co-management committees created between 2018 and 2022 responded to the Catalan government's political agenda as part of the 2030 Catalan Maritime Strategy (Nogué-Algueró et al., 2023), aiming to recover the historical legacy of the self-management system of the fishers' guilds (Catalan Maritime Strategy, p. 78).

The failure of a biology-centred governance model, based on pre-established values of economic efficiency, technological development and the state-market power relations beneath the necessary certitude and control of the resources (Gómez & Maynou, 2021), gave way to a self-management model. This collaborative management model was inspired by the historical experiences of common-pool resource management, now a 'key tool where decision-making power, responsibility and accountability are shared among governmental agencies and other stakeholders, including local communities that depend on marine resources culturally and/or for their livelihoods' (Gómez et al., 2021). Co-management is taken from a holistic and ecosystemic approach that includes ecological, social and economic dimensions in a changing and uncertain environment, based on co-responsibility and co-creation of rules and reaching agreements based on the integration of scientific and fishers' knowledge ensuring the participation and participation of fishers (Decree 118/2018, of June 19, 2018).

4.3.2 | Community-based initiatives

Although the collaboration between fishers, public authorities and scientists is well received and is seen as a positive step towards improving relations between the authorities and the fishing sector, the most critical fishers express disappointment over the lack of real progress in the recovery of fish stocks and, on the contrary, sometimes perceive co-management as top-down governance intervention in a traditional self-management system, thereby undermining its original essence. As expressed in this quote extracted from an interview: *'The reality is that fishers have been applying for centuries, on their own initiative, what we now call governance, and doing management, because they were the only ones who cared about the state of the resource and, therefore, "co-management" could not have existed. (...) Co-management is an opportunity to respect and take into account the knowledge of fishers, who are the true stewards of the sea and, perhaps for this reason, they are a nuisance to other interests that do not want "spectators" who, in addition, have insight due to their extensive experience, passed down for generations. (...) Those who must understand the advantages of co-management are those who are now joining the management that our fishers have been doing for centuries (Interview 16, 2021).'*

Furthermore, fishers consider that regulations are not being enforced, despite agreements reached in co-management committees. Otherwise, they clearly expressed their disagreement with the co-management committees reporting that excessive control of fishing activities has come at the expense of the rise in unregulated recreational activities. As direct users of the sea, they demand more space and a greater voice in decision-making, not only in the negotiation processes. Although there is a certain consensus that co-management can be considered an oriented-sustainable management system reminiscent of traditional common-pool resource management systems, its institutionalization in the current context is perceived as an overlapping of powers representing different

sectors, not all of which are direct users or direct addressees of the object of regulation, such as fishers.

4.3.3 | Re-connecting to the sea

Emerging initiatives of alternative provisioning in fisheries appeared hand in hand with the first co-management committee in Catalonia, created in 2012. These initiatives were partly part of the context of a crisis and disappointment with a debt-based economic system and a model of economic growth in 2011. Other forms of collaboration emerged seeking to restore a moral economy and bring new meanings and well-being values in terms of environmental sustainability, solidarity practices and autonomy in the face of market forces and capital accumulation by ensuring the 'common good' (Gómez & Lien, 2017). In the fishing sector, this materialized in community organizations, associations and cooperatives that put 'people and labour before capital, voluntary cooperation, and collective action', referring to the transformation of social and economic systems (García-Lorenzo et al., 2024). Together with this, collaborative efforts have proliferated since 2015 (Gómez & Maynou, 2021) with particular emphasis on Cap de Creus and the Marine Protected Area (Antonova et al., 2025). These efforts aim to establish an alternative way of understanding socio-ecological relationships to generate community-based transformative change, while ensuring equity, fair distribution of wealth and stewardship of the commons. These emerging initiatives are based on alliances between different social actors, such as artisanal fishers, scuba divers, local organizations and associations, and environmental volunteer networks. For the sake of sustainability and in defence of their livelihoods and culture, these marine stewards (Bennett et al., 2022) are leading marine ecosystem restoration and recovery, seafood short supply chain initiatives, sea-related contemplative and wellness activities, as well as environmental communication and awareness initiatives with a systemic approach in defence not only of the ocean and small producers, but also of lifestyles that are under threat by growing economic activities at sea.

These marine stewards share concerns about the growing industrialization of the sea and coastal urbanization that they associate with a progressive 'elitization' of the sea. This is perceived to be detrimental to small producers and to local environmentally sensitive citizens, who are unprotected from the growing consumption of recreational activities, such as leisure boating, yachting and jet skiing. As such, they experience a growing sense of vulnerability and infringement of rights over what they view as historical rights morally tied to maritime uses or what we might understand as the commons given its reference to the historical bond.

The results stemming from the analysis of the topics of images and comments posted on WhatsApp are represented in Figure 3. They have been sorted according to how often they appear in the WhatsApp messages. Almost all of them were negative messages, the fears, representing 'blue commons' grabbing, that is, when fishers perceive their time-honoured rights of access and use of

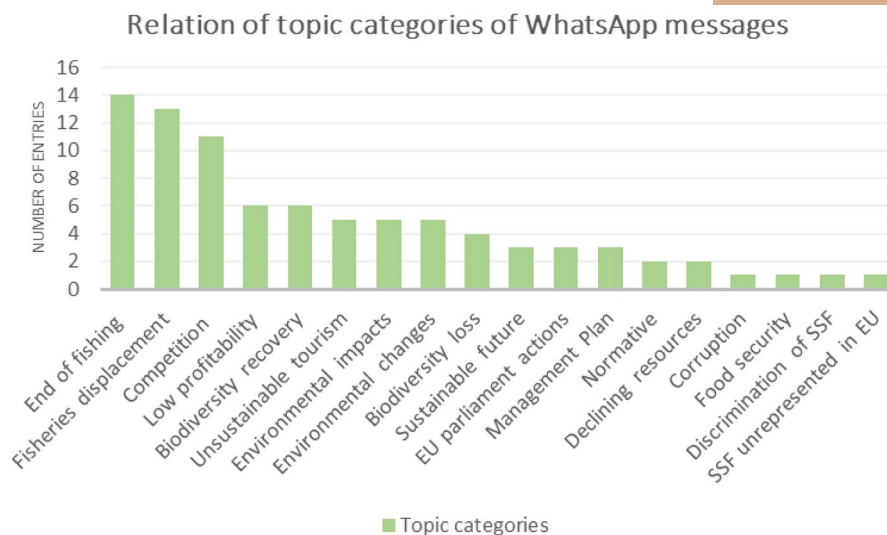


FIGURE 3 Relation of topic categories of WhatsApp messages.

resources to be threatened by those outside the community. The hopes encompass only four topics: biodiversity recovery, a management plan, EU parliament actions and a sustainable future.

With regard to fears, we learned of concerns around an offshore wind farm mega-project planned in a fishing area located between 12 and 24 km off the coast, next to the Marine Protected Area of Cap de Creus. It is perceived as a significant threat, alongside other concerns, such as a lack of generational succession. The images posted on WhatsApp allude to the collapse of fishing, which we have categorized as 'End of fishing'. Secondly, the categories 'Displacement of fishing' and 'Competition' refer to another major concern for fishers: negative encounters with individuals engaging in recreational activities that encroach on their workspace and damage their means of production, or illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, or simply competition for resources and the same target species with recreational fishers. Low economic performance, 'low profitability' resulting from fisheries policy and economic limitations, as well as the lack of flexibility of marketing systems to deal with global markets, were also highlighted as major concerns. In addition to this 'unsustainable tourism' was a recurring topic. Fishers attribute part of the responsibility for the effects of pollution that drive 'biodiversity loss' to the tourism industry, which was another topic of conversation. Topics also mentioned in the posts were the decline of living aquatic resources, categorized as 'declining resources', which, together with climate change, fuel the 'environmental changes', that cause diseases or proliferation of unusual species that interact with fishing nets and, ultimately, aggravate fishing activity and 'food security'.

Other less frequently mentioned topics were the complaint about the lack of political representation of small-scale fishers in the EU and their lack of a voice in management decision-making at different levels vis-à-vis those representing tourism activities, who exert more political influence.

Otherwise, the hopes identifying commoning initiatives refers to monitoring, recovery and restoration of emblematic habitats, such as *Posidonia oceanica*, cold-water corals, endangered and vulnerable

species like blue shark (*Prionace glauca*), and the withdrawal of invasive seaweed changing baseline ecosystems (e.g. *Caluherpa taxifolia*), grouped under the category 'Biodiversity recovery'. It represents a rather frequent topic of WhatsApp exchange. In the same vein, the Uses and Management Regulation Plan of the CCMPA is regarded as a step towards achieving environmental justice. It is an opportunity to regulate overtourism, environmental degradation and erosion, competition for the use of space and resource exploitation, and to recover rights of citizens and small-scale fishers. This topic, 'Management Plan', as well as the messages under the categories 'Sustainable futures' and 'EU parliament actions', were also frequently discussed. While the 'Sustainable futures' are long messages of reflection from fishers or scientists on the future and sustainability, the 'EU parliament actions' refer to appearances by fishers or their representatives in defence of SSF in Europe or European recognition of the work of the co-management committees in Catalonia.

The posts also highlight collaborative initiatives, many of which are mobilized through social networks (WhatsApp, Instagram or word of mouth). Such initiatives appeal to collective action, bringing together grassroots organizations, SSF, spearfishers, divers and environmental awareness associations. Participants include those engaged in open-water sports, such as swimming, kayaking and coastal activities with the aim of preserving the health of the sea and the coast while fostering greater ecological and social responsibility. These initiatives are promoted through networking to recover seagrass meadows, remove ghost nets and organize underwater and coastal clean-up days.

Civil society efforts also seek to reconnect people with the marine environment through well-being, contemplative and aesthetic activities, emphasizing the culturally salient value of the sea and ocean for health, in conjunction with primary care health centres. Environmental education activities involve fishers and scientists, or organizations and associations themselves through communication channels and social media. Additionally, fishers' guilds, environmental enterprises, and both individual and community-supported

fisheries are developing innovative seafood marketing strategies. These efforts serve as acts of resistance and resilience against global market challenges while promoting alternative, sustainable ways of interacting with the environment and producing seafood.

The 17 semi-structured interviews carried out with participants from diverse social backgrounds in Cap de Creus provide us with the contextual narrative that illustrates how these mobilizations show a clear commitment to transformation. Participants expressed the need for change that encompasses political, economic and sociocultural dimensions to foster sustainability. This shift aims to foster a new way of relating to the environment while emphasizing the role of biodiversity in supporting the well-being of both nature and humans. Transformation and biodiversity are common themes in the narrative of WhatsApp messages, regardless of the type of organization to which the participants belong and the type of activism to which they respond. As expressed by a civil society organization that promotes well-being and contemplative initiatives aiming at connecting people with the sea, it is a question of: *'Raising awareness of the respectful and integrative relationship of human beings with the sea and the levels of integral health that would be at the physical, emotional, social and spiritual levels. This includes protecting the sea or preserving the sea and the coast at the level of biodiversity and then bringing people closer to the sea in a silent, respectful, and somehow transformative way (CSA1, 2023)'*. In the same vein, an association for territory and defence of the environment expressed its objectives: *'Promoting sustainability at the highest level and transforming the economic and political system in this direction (CSA2, 2023)'*.

The testimony of an ecotourism business owner shows optimism about growing corporate efforts towards sustainability and a greener economy. He argues that the transformation must stem from eco-social practices that adopt a grassroots approach to degrowth, while critically examining its discourse in Western societies. Specifically, he critiques how this discourse often preserves Western notions of well-being and comfort, which shift the burden of sustainability onto the Global South to align with political agendas: *'I could say that there are 80 or 90 or 100 companies that are starting to work in a more sustainable way. (...) The only word is also degrowth, but who is willing to degrow? Who? Yes, yes. We will ask the Africans to do it, and we will ask the South Americans to do it, we will ask them to do it? As always. Asia, right? As always, of course. As always, right? (...) The degrowth is an approach that I believe that will either be imposed on us as was the case with Covid-19 and the Covid-19 measures, or we will not enter (CSA3, 2023)'* (Figure 4).

5 | DISCUSSION: FROM THE COMMONS TO THE COMMONING

The findings of the study serve to illustrate a global phenomenon that occurs in various locations in the Mediterranean and the wider world. With the expansion of globalization and neoliberalism in the 1990s and following the economic and environmental crises of the 2000s, the commons synthesized the struggles, practices, rights

claiming and forms of existence that seek to oppose the expanding processes of privatization (Laval & Dardot, 2015). This privatization was driven by a market-state alliance that sought to concentrate the means of production while leaving wealth distribution dependent on economic growth. Commons in response to ocean grabbing and the suppression of long-lasting customary tenure rights (Bennett et al., 2024; Jouffray et al., 2020). These processes are broadly perceived as a 'new wave of enclosures' of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Laval & Dardot, 2015; Hadjimichael, 2018).

In the contemporary context, commons re-emerge as a complex, multifaceted concept that encompasses a wide range of resources and governance practices within and alongside the mainstream economy. They foster a contextually rooted autonomy or self-management system that seeks to resist the state and global market forces, which increasingly absorb small producers and socioeconomically vulnerable sectors like fisheries. They are aligned with a form of social and solidarity economy, comprising: 'associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-help groups, and social movements and networks operating in both the formal and informal economy, which prioritize a combination of social, environmental, democratic and emancipatory objectives' (ILO, 2022). However, they also involve grassroots organizations and civil society actors, defined by Buijs et al. (2024) as agents of change facing socio-environmental concerns. They range from entrepreneurship initiatives aligned with eco-social practices to active citizenship efforts that reconnect with nature through outdoor activities or recreational environmental awareness. These activities aim to transform socio-ecological relationships as a political option that advocates for a new direction in the economic system. Consequently, the traditional idea of historical commons, which designated inalienable and non-appropriable natural resources for basic needs (Laval & Dardot, 2015) and whose reproduction was based on the obligation of reciprocity linked to the exercise of the public responsibilities of the sovereign, has given way to social practices of collective action to protect natural assets. Alongside these practices, other formalized and institutionalized initiatives are emerging with the support of government agencies at different levels.

The findings show that the commons, as resources, represent a 'timeless conception', since they have no inherent legal attribution whatsoever. They encompass basic goods fundamental to life, such as air, water, coasts, the sea and ultimately, the seabed and waves, among others. Therefore, their defence will always be legitimate in any political and social system throughout history, as they represent a value—although not necessarily legal—essential for life. Common goods are non-appropriable by nature and, therefore, do not form part of a legal sphere. They are recognized by the action of social bonds formed by 'what is common to particular interests', that is, 'common interest' (Laval & Dardot, 2015). Thus, they describe resource management systems regardless of existing tenure (Nayak & Berkes, 2022). What is important, however, is the commitment of users to their conservation through systems of regulation and social organization, with power and exchange relations that ensure ecological, economic and social sustainability. It is precisely these regulatory systems that must be addressed throughout history to



FIGURE 4 (a) Picture of the original manuscript of the Calonge Fisheries Ordinances, Costa Brava. (b) Collaborative initiative between small-scale fishing (SSFs) and recreational fishers to recover ghost nets in Cap de Creus. (c) Collaborative fishing onshore using *bolitxa* traditional fishing gear in Cadaqués for fishing bonito, 18th century. (d) Leisure boating in an inlet in Roses, Cap de Creus, in summer. (e) Demonstration banner on a diving boat against the offshore wind farm planned in Cap de Creus.

Sources: (a) and (c) are from the Museu de la Pesca, Palamós; (b) Salva Manera; (d) Sílvia Gómez; (e) Boris Mörker.

understand processes of change, socio-ecological relations under political legal frameworks and economic systems.

However, the recurrent conflicts faced by maritime activities reveal a tension with what is currently perceived as a public good open to the use of all, while small producers perceive it in terms of what we could understand as (common) goods that must guarantee livelihoods. Today, where access and use are structured around equal rights to access and use the sea as a public resource for all, sometimes power imbalances are evident in the growing so-called blue economy of the last quarter of the 21st century, leaving sea workers, small producers and environmental citizens unprotected when commons open with weak restrictions or regulations.

According to our findings, the commons are emerging as a process of commoning, along with a sense of community that is joining forces through networked commoning initiatives and collective actions to defend the rights of access to and use of the sea and ecosystem services. In addition, these efforts strengthen the sense of belonging to a place and the relationship with the ocean. This is true in the face of potential harm to ecosystem health, ecological degradation, declining resources and the effects of climate change. They also respond to the risk of deprivation and the potential emergence of new rights of exclusion legitimized by conservation and climate change mitigation policies.

From a more focused point of view, marine protected areas, as in the case of the Mediterranean, can also be understood in this way when they represent restrictions to traditional livelihoods,

while they are perceived as permissible for recreational marine activities that compete for access and use of resources (Gómez et al., 2021). This situation has led to increased environmental awareness among small-scale fishers, as the depletion of fishing resources in recent years underscores the fragility of this livelihood (Blythe et al., 2023) and undermines well-being within these communities (Bennett et al., 2024). Similarly, this awareness is shaping the defence of fishing rights against other extractive activities, within sustainability discourses that encompass SSF activity, its environmental interactions, cultural attitudes and social organization systems (Gómez, 2018; Gómez & Lloret, 2017). They complain that impacts of pollution and environmental degradation (with particular reference to impacts of tourism activities), the over-frequency of maritime activities, and, more recently, the planning of new maritime activities (e.g. offshore wind farms) jeopardize the right to life systems, knowledge and cultural values rooted in historical socio-ecological relations (Gómez, 2018; Gómez & Lloret, 2017). This, in turn, challenges the very concept of the blue commons, which are recognized, for example, through the legitimacy of still-existing traditional marine tenure practices for the allocation of fishing rights in some fisheries, now threatened by the excessive frequency of maritime activities that disrupt the deployment of these fishing rights.

Our findings indicate that the principles that governed the self-management of fishing in the past of social peace, collective

welfare, wealth distribution, equal opportunities, collective protection and defence of community interests are drivers of current forms of communal management. Despite the differences in context, the argument of the present study is that some lessons from the past can be validly interpreted as a means of explaining the reasons that led fishers to start community management initiatives. This phenomenon may be interpreted as a resurgence in the application of customary law, which has implications for the conservation of ecosystems and the sustainable utilization of natural resources (Lopes et al., 2025).

Commonization in Catalonia, in the north-western Mediterranean, has led to a shift towards collaborative projects, albeit with generalized implementation by the regional government. This is the case of the co-management committees that have emerged as an ecosystemic approach encompassing ecological, social and economic aspects from an integrated perspective and holistic knowledge where values (sustainability, plural valuation, democracy and participation) are built on the basis of power dynamics, appealing to co-responsibility and co-creation in a changing and uncertain environment. These committees are a management and divergent-interest negotiation model regulated by the public administration with co-direction of individual stakeholders, but rather by the individuals and groups involved that have to participate in the management of power within civil society: enterprises, organizations and associations, scientists and NGOs. As a result, a more flexible and participatory form of governance is ensured. The result is that of a 'managerial State' (Alegret, 2020) whose role, under the principle of guaranteeing inclusivity, is limited to facilitating negotiations between sectors whose rights depend on governance skills, delegating the responsibility to the social actors involved. However, it lacks a legal framework or a sovereign power to ensure distributive justice. In the same vein, Dahlet and Sánchez-Lizaso (2021) warned of the risk of reproducing neoliberal thinking and praxis in the reallocation of fishing rights that may result from co-management while ignoring preexisting customary practices.

As our findings indicate, not completely bottom-up rather than a tool of recommodification, it has the potential to be a catalyst for resocialization, focusing on re-establishing relationships and communication between social actors with knowledge or legitimized power (fishers, public authorities and scientists). Conversely, it may also highlight potential structural barriers to the development of sustainability agreements, such as agreement enforcement mechanisms (monitoring, control, etc.). In addition, the situation of contemporary legal and property regimes is highlighted when the community of professional fishers, who live and depend on fishing, demands social justice, as opposed to the community of sport fishers, who demand equal democratic rights in access to resources. This situation creates tension with the processes of legitimization of rights and highlights the distinction between what is considered common and what is understood as public.

On the contrary, the myriad of community-led 'commoning' practices show a range of synergies and collaborations between different social actors committed to the defence of the sea and

ocean, life-supporting ecosystems, livelihoods and lifestyles underpinned by environmentally embedded cultural values. The sense of displacement and undervaluing of fishing and marine biodiversity-dependent activities (diving, kayaking, health and wellness initiatives) in the face of growing and poorly regulated recreational activities, along with new threats, such as proposed offshore wind farms, has raised concerns. These concerns have led to the adoption of sustainability ideals aimed at protecting the commons as a cultural heritage that shapes the human-sea relationship or, as Arias-Schreiber and Maris (2023) point out, a meaningful and distinctive environmental-cultural relationship.

In accordance with the findings of Tafon et al. (2023), Knol-Kauffman et al. (2023) and Sowman et al. (2023), the emergence of tensions and conflicts stemming from the perception of threats to shared natural resources has the potential to catalyse a transformation. This transformation, as conceptualized in our study, is envisaged under the umbrella of a sustainability discourse, which, in turn, is linked to a sense of environmental rootedness. This sense of rootedness shapes the concept of community and triggers initiatives of communality, solidarity and cooperation, as well as exchange and mutual aid in favour of the environment. Our research has identified the emergence of a moral dimension to the environmental conflict, which is characterized by the establishment of new intersubjective relationships between humans, the marine biota and the environment that involve political and economic transformation.

In our case study, tensions emerge as a platform where struggles for values and rights are conveyed through initiatives that react against and resist a progressive 'gentrification of the sea'. A process endangering the health of ecosystems and producing the disarticulation of local culture connected to the sea. The designation of MPAs, as demonstrated by our ethnographic findings, is regarded as a means of empowering communities and ensuring environmental justice (Asokan, 2024; Bontempi et al., 2023). These MPAs function as mechanisms to regulate maritime activities, mitigate environmental degradation and promote inclusivity, distributional justice and support for customary management practices, cultural value systems and heritage. Consequently, this empowerment enables communities to combat deprivation and address the challenges posed by global change.

This ethnographic study thus puts forward a clear aspiration and critique, positioning social actors (i.e. fishers, civil society and businesses) as agents of change. The study claims for commoning practices as moral principles that should be placed at the heart of the economic system involving political action. The historical commons demonstrated that such practices must be recognized as moral principles, as they were in former times, and not merely as social relations of a moral nature or as alternative initiatives at the margins of the mainstream economy. Conversely, the discourse surrounding the commons has the potential to perpetuate social inequities and power relations that underpin the current form of capitalism. Recognizing commoning as social practices and a sense of community, without a binding institutional framework that guarantees reciprocal relations and the principles of excludability and subtractability, could produce

the opposite effect. Unlike the commons, community is not timeless, as it is linked to social, political and economic systems. As Agrawal and Gibson (1999) point out, it has spatial and size limitations and can involve multiple interests and power relations among its actors. In our case study, the idea of community does not take into account possible demographic changes and social configurations that give rise to new socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, it is necessary to demonstrate that collective action is effectively related to environmentally friendly behaviours.

It is therefore necessary to make a comprehensive change with the cooperation of the State, businesses and society, in accordance with the contemporary sociopolitical and economic context. This means repositioning a moral ecological economy at the core of the economic system, institutionalized by a political regime through legal frameworks that draw on distributive justice and equity, thereby ensuring the fundamental rights to subsistence and the prevention of exclusion. This endeavour would imply not only the establishment of collective action networks, or the fractal or cumulative expansion of commons-based initiatives and the valorization of the aggregation of individual daily practices (Gómez & Lien, 2017), but also the commitment of governments and businesses to effect a transformation. A pertinent illustration of this approach is the proposal of a universal basic income, a policy aimed at addressing global poverty while simultaneously mitigating environmental degradation (Sumaila et al., 2024).

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Bennett (2019) argue, it is crucial to consider historical processes to enlighten the genesis of historical injustices and social inequities that shape power dynamics. In this regard, Lopes et al. (2025) illustrate the potential failure of conservation measures when ignoring local history, traditional practices and local knowledge. Going a step further, in this study, we contend about the necessity to consider historical processes to illuminate aspects that could underpin the transformation of social–ecological relations, particularly in the context of the current unprecedented interest in the oceans and their industrialization. A retrospective analysis of past management experiences is necessary to evaluate their relevance and applicability in contemporary contexts, despite considerable shifts in social, political and ecological conditions. Furthermore, a comprehensive examination is required to ascertain how collective decisions that established a normative framework were integrated with the guiding principles of the communal model. This analysis should encompass both highly successful and unsuccessful cases to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes encountered in adapting to the contemporary present-day communal model. This could provide insight into the recovery and adaptation of customary marine management practices in the contemporary context. The concerns, desires and disputes that have been at the heart of fisheries governance models since the Middle Ages are present in

contemporary debates of fishing communities. One such example is the conflict arising from appropriation and competition for access to marine space and resources. This conflict is less fierce than it has been in the past, but it is much more intense and unequal in the present day, due to the involvement of numerous other actors and players in the blue economy. To formulate effective responses to contemporary challenges, it is essential to take a comprehensive retrospective approach to the phenomena, taking advantage of the lessons of history.

The application of a historical perspective facilitates the identification of deficiencies in resource management over time, which can be used to effectively reconfigure governance relations. This enables the establishment of more sustainable forms of production, consumption, exchange and cooperation by appealing to other facets of social relations and human–environmental relations. Rather than idealizing a specific social, political or economic system from a particular historical moment, the goal should be to draw upon those aspects of the past that are relevant and can be applied in the present to address contemporary issues. This requires the implementation of transformation processes. As Marc Bloch (1984) noted, it is important to recognize that '[t]o the despair of historians, men are not in the habit of changing their vocabulary every time they change their habits' (p. 34).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sílvia Gómez and Alfons Garrido conceived the ideas, designed methodology, collected data and analysed the data. Sílvia Gómez led the writing of the manuscript and Alfons Garrido contributed to the writing of the original draft. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets used in this research are not publicly available in accordance with the UAB Ethics Committee approval (CEEAH 6309) for the purpose of protecting the identity and personal information of participants disclosed throughout the data collection process.

CONSENT STATEMENT FOR THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

All individuals in the included photographs provided their explicit consent for the use of corresponding images. The historical images are from the archives and are publicly accessible with the express permission of the Fishing Museum.

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