

Resilience of Coastal Communities (ROCC)

Work Package 1: Responding to recent changes
Survey and Interview Results Summary

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Resilience of Coastal Communities research project (2021-2025) aimed to understand how people living in coastal communities in the southwest UK, particularly people working in marine industries, are responding to changes happening around them. We wanted to know what kinds of disruptions are impacting communities, how people are responding to them, and what is making it easier or harder for them to cope with, or better yet, take advantage of change. By learning from what people have done in the past and what is and isn't working now, we can learn more about how people build the skills, resources, and support to secure their wellbeing, build resilience to future change, and look after the marine environment.

WHAT WE DID

We surveyed 55 fishermen and 74 marine tourism operators across Devon and Cornwall in 2023 and interviewed 24 people who participated in the surveys. We asked about the different kinds of changes and disruptions that they had experienced in the last 10 years; how these changes had affected different parts of their lives and work; what they did in response; and what things made it easier or harder for them to respond effectively. The interviews were based on similar topics and helped us develop a more in-depth understanding of the situation. We also asked about what makes people in marine industries in the UK resilient to change.



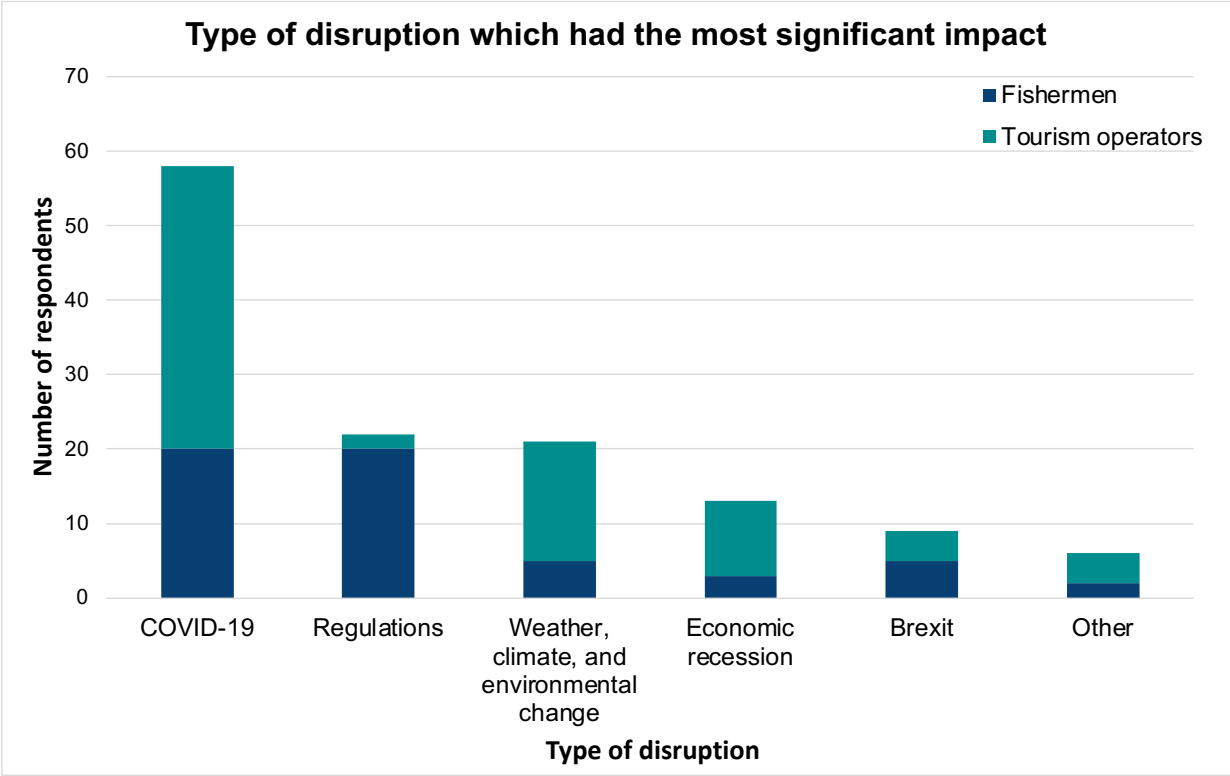


CHANGES AND DISRUPTIONS

People have been affected by **multiple disruptions** in the last few years, from the pandemic and Brexit to regulatory and environmental changes, to the cost of living and housing crisis. These changes have **often happened at the same time or right after each other**. When we asked people what disruption impacted them the most, the COVID-19 pandemic was the most frequent response, followed by regulatory changes for fishermen and environmental changes for tourism operators. Fishermen particularly talked about having to deal with many different regulatory changes from different management bodies at the same time. Both fishermen and tourism operators talked about the effect of particularly bad weather in the last couple of years on their industries. Sewage dumping on beaches where they work was a pressing concern for tourism operators.

IMPACTS OF CHANGE

Overall, most people said that the disruption did not change their satisfaction with their life overall (60%) or their ability to make ends meet (51%). However, **36% said that they were less satisfied with their life overall** after the disruption compared to before, and **45% of people found it harder to make ends meet** after the disruption than before. Less than 5% of people experienced an overall improvement. In interviews, people commonly talked about the **stress and mental health effects** of dealing with disruptions, particularly due to uncertainty, isolation during the pandemic, and the financial burden when work was disrupted.





"It's all money-related stress, and that's the best way to explain it. It's just starting with one thing, the big company buying all the quota, and it just trickles on, trickles on, until the end result is for the actual fisherman, struggling like hell to support their family, which is obviously going to bring stress and depression, anxiety, everything, all of that with it, which it does." - Fisherman

However, several people noted **positive things** that came out of their experiences, such as spending more time at home with family, and fishermen building networks for direct sales to restaurants and local consumers. Tourism operators had a record season after domestic COVID-19 restrictions lifted but before international borders opened (though the subsequent economic crises meant that was short-lived).

HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED

People responded to change in a variety of ways. Most people **(78%)** tried to **absorb or ride-out the impacts of disruptions** through things like postponing plans and cutting back spending. Many people **(76%)** also **made tweaks or substantial changes** to how they operated, for example by diversifying the different activities they offer to tourists or selling fish directly to restaurants instead of through the main fish markets.

"We raised the prices, we offered more products, we got rid of the products that don't make us money, and we upped our communication." - Tourism operator

However, some people **(34%)** felt that because of the changes and disruptions they were experiencing, they could no longer be successful or happy in their industry and had **either left or were strongly considering changing jobs** if things got any worse.

"I think, there's a saying, 'Quit while you are ahead.' It's got to a point now, I don't think a lot of the fishermen really enjoy the job they're doing because of the level of bureaucracy... I think the time for us has come to just give it a miss." - Fisherman

In general, how well people felt they coped and how well they think they would be able to handle something similar in the future depended on the type of disruption. Despite the scale of it, people felt that they handled COVID-19 better than other types of disruptions. Some people attributed this to feeling like they were in the same boat as everyone else because everyone was being impacted, and because they perceived the pandemic as a temporary situation they just had to get through. Fishermen particularly felt that they were not able to respond effectively to regulatory changes and were much more likely to say that they wouldn't be able to handle future regulatory change and would need to leave the industry if there was a further increase in the regulatory burden.



WHAT MADE IT EASIER AND HARDER FOR PEOPLE TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY?

Two key traits stood out in our analysis of both our surveys and interviews as essential to people's ability to respond effectively to change: **flexibility and agency**.

Flexibility, that is being able to switch strategies relatively quickly and easily in response to changing circumstances, was particularly important for the kinds of adaptations people made in response to COVID-19 and environmental changes, such as switching fishing gears to target different species, altering the kinds of activities offered to tourists, or switching to a different target market.

Whether or not people felt that they had agency, that is, control over their lives and the power and resources to influence their situation and respond to the changes which were affecting them, was critical. Both fishermen and tourism operators reflected on the frustrations of feeling like they had no power to influence circumstances, particularly government decisions, which were having dramatic impacts on their lives. Whether people felt that they had agency was closely tied to whether they felt able to respond effectively, whether their life satisfaction and ability to make ends meet changed, and whether they reached a point where they were considering leaving the industry.

"The pollution, there's nothing I can do about it. I need it at government level. Our local MP says he's trying, but you never know... How am I going to make a massive effect on that? I'm not really. I can just hope." - Tourism operator

Flexibility and agency often went hand-in-hand. We found that fishermen felt most impacted by an increasingly complicated and restrictive regulatory space which they felt they had no control over. Regulatory changes, in turn, continuously undermined their ability to switch strategies to respond to changing conditions. For example, increased regulation on some target species has reduced the diversity of fishing activity possible, meaning they can't switch between target species to suit changing markets and fishing conditions as much as in the past.

"That's my worry, is that that's going to continue, that trend of taking away options, pigeonholing us." - Fisherman

Connections to other people were also important for shaping fishermen's and tourism operators' ability to respond to changes. On the one hand, colleagues, friends, and family often provided support during challenging times or with administrative burdens. On the other hand, obligations to other people either acted as a motivator to keep trying or as a reason to not take risks.



WHAT DO PEOPLE NEED FOR THE FUTURE?

Supporting the attributes that we found were key to people's ability to respond to change, such as flexibility, agency, and social relationships will be key for helping people in marine industries continue to thrive in the face of future change. People we interviewed also identified specific things that they thought would be helpful. These were some of the common themes:

Fishermen

- Make funding more accessible for small-vessel owners and crew, and reduce red tape to make it more accessible generally.
- Strategic and forward-thinking management of the industry as a whole rather than lots of isolated regulations made by different groups who aren't well-coordinated.
- Genuine co-management rather than check-box consultations followed by decisions made behind closed doors.
- Accessible training in skills like marketing and networking needed for the modern industry.
- Accessible training and certifications which are transferable to different marine occupations (e.g. offshore energy).
- Make it easier and more appealing for young people to enter the industry.
- Raise the public profile of local fish and fisheries among consumers.

Tourism operators

- Support for local tourism operators affected by the cost of living crisis.
- Strategies for helping local communities and businesses deal with the instability caused by the increase in second home ownership, seasonal population fluctuations and unstable tourist numbers in the southwest UK.
- Invest in infrastructure to make coastal communities better places to live, work, and visit.
- Meaningful action on water quality and accountability for water companies.
- Meaningful action on climate change.
- Create a forum for tourism operators to network, learn from each other, and share ideas on how to respond effectively to change.

We will be sharing the overall findings of our project and these specific requests and recommendations with our project partners and the project steering committee, including representatives from Defra, the Marine Management Organisation, Natural England, Cornwall Rural Community Charity, and the Devon Maritime Forum.



WHAT DOES RESILIENCE MEAN TO PEOPLE IN MARINE INDUSTRIES?

Almost everyone we talked to felt that they generally are resilient and can handle change. In fact, resilience was described as a defining feature of people in marine industries. Most of the things people associated with resilience were about **character and attitude**, such as having a 'glass half full' attitude or persevering through hardship.



WHAT ELSE TO LOOK OUT FOR FROM ROCC

As the ROCC project is coming to an end (July 2025), we are developing several initiatives to help support the resilience of coastal communities in Devon and Cornwall based on our findings.

- We're helping to **raise the profile of marine livelihoods amongst the public** and share some of the unique voices and perspectives we have gathered through an upcoming exhibit at the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, opening in November 2024, and an interactive heritage walk around the Exe Estuary.
- We're developing an interactive **tool to help decision makers** to better evaluate the potential impacts of policies. This tool is called MaPTA (Marine Planning Trade-off Analysis).
- Finally, we are working with partners on several **pilot programs** designed to directly benefit the sector, including supporting the establishment of a Young Fisher's Network in the Southwest and developing plans for a possible certification scheme to help and encourage people to find locally caught, socially and environmentally sustainable seafood.



Contact:

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For project information and updates visit:

smmr.org.uk/funded-projects/resilience-of-coastal-communities



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