Experiencing the Sea: Marine Planners' Tentative Engagement with Their Planning Milieu

Stephen Jay

Published online: 10 Nov 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Experiencing the Sea: Marine Planners' Tentative Engagement with Their Planning Milieu

Stephen Jay

Department of Geography & Planning, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

It is more difficult for marine planners to gain understanding of their plan areas than terrestrial planners, because of the relative remoteness of the sea. However, direct experience of the marine planning milieu, including the sea's bio-physical dimensions, may lead to better planning outcomes. A series of interviews with UK marine planning professionals reveals that experience of their planning milieu can be characterised as tentative, though also suggests ways forward in this respect. An 'experiential' approach to marine planning is proposed, by which planners seek, through multiple methods of learning, to be cognitively immersed in their planning milieu, including its non-human aspects.

And what makes how you feel?'

'The spirit', said the fish, testily,

'whether it be open or closed, narrow or wide,

whether it flows like the sea or is frozen like ice.'

The miracle would be our conversion into the mysteries of the sea.

Ben Okri (2017) The Magic Lamp: Dreams of our Age, pp 97-98

Introduction

Spatial planning is an applied discipline. It is variously practised by women and men who have educational and professional expertise in the ways by which we materially shape the world around us (Healey, 1985). In the terrestrial context, they usually have very personal experience of the world thus shaped. Many planners live and work in the vicinity of their planning efforts. Through their daily life, they know aspects of the project, municipality, region or country that they are working on; their personal and professional engagement are intertwined. They may even plan their own home environment, be familiar with its dynamics

---

CONTACT Stephen Jay ✉ stephen.jay@liverpool.ac.uk

and understand from the inside what is desirable, possibly benefiting directly from improvements brought about by their own efforts. As one experienced planner has observed:

> In my view, there is no substitute for planners getting to know the areas to which their work relates intimately by experiencing those areas at first hand as frequently as possible. Such experience can take many different forms, like walking the streets regularly, undertaking frequent site visits, attending events in the areas at different times of day, using the facilities of areas such as shops and restaurants, and having meetings with local groups and individuals (Kitchen, 2007, p. 90f).

But this is not generally the case when it comes to the sea. Marine spatial planning (MSP)[1] is usually carried out at a physical distance; marine planners are land-based and have only limited contact with the raw material of their work. Their engagement may be mostly second-hand; their knowledge about the sea is likely to be mediated through the documents, data and geographic information systems (GIS) that they handle as part of their work, and much of their understanding of human interaction with the sea may rely upon the insights brought to them by the stakeholders involved in MSP rather than their own experience. Of course, some marine planners do engage directly with the sea and its activities through recreation and aesthetic appreciation, or bring salt-water experience from previous employment, especially those with a marine science or maritime industry background. But marine planners' personal and social encounter with their planning milieu is likely to be a shadow of that of their terrestrial colleagues (even if *they* do not always follow the advice above), and there may be little expectation that it should be otherwise. Even when marine planners are embedded in the institutional machinery of marine governance, they may lack an immediacy with the object of their endeavours: 'the gaze is still very much from land to sea' (Gazzola *et al.*, 2015, p. 1156).

So there is a quandary at the heart of MSP: the imperative to plan is confounded by the inaccessibility of what is to be planned. This can be partly overcome by the geo-technologies giving us remote knowledge (St. Martin & Hall-Arber, 2008), but this will remain partial and filtered (Knol, 2011). Marine planners may be acting at too much of a physical and cognitive distance, and risk attempting crude manipulations of the marine setting as a result.

In this article, I explore the extent to which professional marine planners do indeed engage with the realities of the space that is the focus of their responsibilities. I consider whether this level of engagement is sufficient for their purposes, or whether the outputs of their work would benefit from greater direct experience of the sea. I undertake this through an empirical study in the form of a series of interviews with marine planners in the United Kingdom. This leads to reflection on an experiential approach to MSP, and the conclusion that planners could be more cognitively immersed in their setting. First of all, however, I develop an understanding of the setting that marine planners might be expected to relate to, drawing on the concept of milieu.

The Marine Planning Milieu

Berdoulay (2003) presents the term 'milieu' when considering a particular world that planners are engaging with. He is drawing upon a tradition of usage in human geography. This French word has passed directly into English, generally meaning the physical or social

setting in which something occurs (Merriam-Webster). But for Berdoulay (who is writing in French here), the term embraces both the physical and the social, or nature and society, and as such is preferable to more restrictive terms that could express a planner's world, such as 'environment' (which tends to be understood in planning circles as referring to natural settings). Moreover, 'milieu' captures the complex interactions between the physical and social. Hillier (2007) takes this further, linking milieu to the multiplicity of 'things, matters, identities, substances, entities' that constitute the spaces of planning (2007, p. 57).

A 'marine planning milieu' can therefore encompass the bio-physical entity of an area of coast and sea, with its own rich interactions, and also the interactions of society with that entity through maritime activities (such as shipping, fishing, energy capture, dredging, cables), conservation efforts, governance arrangements, cultural perceptions, and so on. I also use 'the sea' as a name for this multiplicity, as a less academic term, when conducting the interviews and in the results described below. So in this article, I am interested in the extent to which marine planners engage with their milieu, or the sea in this all-encompassing sense.

As mentioned in my opening paragraph, considerable attention has been given to the need for planners to engage more closely with their milieu in terrestrial contexts. This has particularly involved a greater appreciation of social interaction with physical settings, including planners' own role as social agents within planning processes. They have brought their personal and professional experience of lived environments to bear, as they have deliberated with fellow citizens about society's relationship with its non-human surroundings and planning interventions in particular locales (Healey, 2010). They have been encouraged to do this not least through the need to access different forms of knowledge and wider social perspectives (Sandercock, 1998).

Marine planners could learn much from this, as they seek to engage with groups concerned about the sea, whether sector-defined stakeholders, NGOs or coastal and wider communities; there is scope for closer involvement during plan-making and plan implementation with the groups, individuals and organisations that make up the social world of marine planning in order to gain their insights, develop trust and find joint solutions (Flannery & Ó Cinnéide, 2008; Ritchie & Ellis, 2010). Similarly, they might benefit from a fuller understanding of the institutional and governmental structures and processes that these actors work within and that MSP must relate to.

However, the marine challenge is also to inhabit more closely the bio-physical world. This is not unique to marine planning; for example, the environmental agenda on land has heightened the sensitivity of planners to the natural settings within which they work (Rydin, 2003). But the sea presents a different order of magnitude in this respect; its dimensions, forces, ecological complexity, uncontrollability and remoteness combine to make the sea, in its broader sense, a much more 'nature-dominated matrix' when compared to the settled land (Jay, 2018, p. 7). This is a very different and more challenging setting than that which planners encounter on land. Human activities offshore are dwarfed by their natural surroundings and must be finely tuned to the physical and biological conditions in which they find themselves, which are dynamic and powerful, sometimes unpredictable and dangerous, and, at the same time, vulnerable to human-induced change. Indeed, these are precisely the conditions that have kept the whole endeavour of spatial planning on dry land until recently (Jay, 2010), and continue to militate against marine planners by preventing them from fully experiencing their milieu.

It is understandable, therefore, that planners are removed to a large extent into a virtual reality, with their gaze fixed upon the office computer. In a throwback to post-war, rationalist planning practices (Jay, 2010), MSP in many contexts is being conducted within the objective, technical space (albeit stakeholder-informed) of data assembly and representation. The virtual world may, in fact, be providing the only conveniently available proxy for the otherwise inaccessible sea. So MSP knowledge is being composed as a digital world of GIS layers, and MSP solutions (spatial proposals that maximise resource use and minimise conflict) are being constructed within the possibilities and constraints of available software, equipment and information input. The four-dimensional, temporal, far-reaching dynamics of the sea and human interaction with it are handled only insofar as is possible via a flat screen and data portal, restricting the understanding of space to its technical representation (Smith & Brennan, 2012; Boucquey *et al.*, 2016). MSP therefore runs the same risks as rationalist planning efforts on land (Davoudi & Strange, 2009), now largely discredited for failing in their attempts to model and control the urban environment on the basis of quantitative data with little reference to social and political dynamics, and planners themselves forming a distant, technical elite (Allmendinger, 2017).

The questions therefore arise: is it possible for marine planners to experience the marine milieu more directly, and if so, will this lead to different planning outcomes, potentially more attuned to that milieu? This can perhaps be described in terms of inhabiting the milieu, or, to use a more appropriate metaphor, being *immersed* in it (Jay, 2018). This sense of immersion implies two things. Firstly, it suggests placing ourselves in the milieu, physically and experientially: getting to know and understand the sea through direct contact. Secondly, it suggests letting the milieu, and our experience of it, shape our ways of thinking and acting, particularly when carrying out marine planning. The milieu should therefore inhabit us as much as we inhabit it, and we should become cognitively attached to and part of it. So the marine planning milieu is a material-social-institutional-cognitive world in which marine planners might operate more meaningfully. This is not to the exclusion of digital representations of that world, but extends the reach of planners further into that which is being represented.

In setting up this empirical study, I am also drawn to Anderson & Peters' notion of *thinking from* the sea (2014, p. 4). These geographers aim to give the sea central place in their deliberations, rather than it being peripheral to the land. This leads Steinberg & Peters to the more challenging notion of *thinking with* the sea (2015, p. 248), opening up the idea of trying to align our cognitive processes in some way to the 'realities' of the sea, both natural and social, and in particular, its state of flux and becoming (2015). This might lead further, as explored in my investigation below, to *acting with* the sea.

Marine Planners' Current Experience of the Sea

Methodology

I am therefore interested in investigating the level of direct experience and knowledge of the sea that marine planners have, and their understanding of how adequate this is for them to go about their work. I also seek to explore whether marine planners might be more likely to achieve their underlying planning objectives by inhabiting more fully, or being more immersed in, the marine planning milieu.

Given my concern with marine planners' practice, including their knowledge, I turn directly to those currently engaged in the production of marine plans in order to understand their current thinking and acting, as well as the potential for progression that they may indicate. This is therefore a piece of collaborative research in which I seek to develop ways forward with planners themselves. It is a gently political act, as well as academic, in that I seek to shape the future working of MSP through such interaction.

I use in-depth, semi-structured interview as a means of going about this, allowing for creative exchange with interviewees. I extend this sense of relationality to the topic of the research itself, that of planners' experience with the sea, and therefore generate a wider research – practice – sea working space. Interview questions explore the following;

- previous and current experience of the sea, and the role of personal and professional life in gaining this;
- sense of adequacy in experience and understanding of the sea for fulfilling professional responsibilities, at individual and team levels;
- possibilities for gaining greater experience and understanding of this kind, and how this might change professional work;
- the notion of 'thinking and acting with the sea'.[2]

The Interviewees

11 interviewees took part in the study, all working for MSP authorities or related agencies in the United Kingdom. They represented the devolved nature of MSP in the UK, whereby marine plans are being prepared separately by authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for their respective waters. The interviews were all individual, lasting up to an hour each; they took place online during the summer of 2020. The interviewees are referred to below as I.1, I.2, etc.

The interviewees had a wide range of academic and professional experience. All had started working in MSP relatively recently; a few (3) came directly from higher education or NGO-type work, but most (8) came from related responsibilities in government, including conservation, terrestrial planning, fisheries and regeneration. The broad background of the interviewees was nearly evenly split between marine sciences (5) and policy development or planning (6). At the time of the interviews, most (9) were working directly on the production of marine plans in one of the four UK jurisdictions, especially in the development of policies contained within the plans. (This reflects the policy-oriented nature of MSP in the UK (Hull, 2013).) Their work involved tasks such as evidence-gathering, stakeholder engagement, drafting policy and linking plans to more strategic frameworks; there was also some involvement in marine licensing. I consider these interviewees to be broadly representative of professional experience of MSP across the UK.

The results of the interviews are presented in the following sections, following the broad pattern of the interviews themselves. This is in the form of generalised descriptions of the responses, illustrated by selected, anonymised quotations, in line with the qualitative methodology adopted. There was little clear grouping of responses, except in relation to the broad, professional background of interviewees (science or policy/planning); this is indicated where relevant.

Personal Experience of the Sea

When asked about their personal experience of the sea, all the interviewees spoke positively about this. These experiences were evenly shared between those with marine science and policy/planning backgrounds.

Many (6) referred to their experience of the coast and sea in childhood or youth, sometimes in the context of family holidays. Many (7) grew up in a coastal community and/or now live by the sea; one pointed out that she can see the sea from the window of her house.

> Always had a relationship with the sea even as a young child, I would always take trips to the beach. I don't think I would live anywhere else except by the seaside now (I.3)

Some (4) openly expressed their sense of connection or attachment to the sea.

> I like just being around the sea (I.11).

Most (8) have actively engaged in coastal and sea sports and leisure activities, such as swimming, boating, diving, fishing and surfing. Many (7) enjoy quieter coastal activities, such as walking, being on the beach, observing ships and rock pooling.

> I do feel comfortable when I'm doing that sort of activity, out surfing or swimming (I.1).

> As I walk the dog daily, I see the sea much of the time and I know what the tide is doing at any moment (I.1).

This has led to some (4) observing or feeling connected to the underwater environment.

> I saw cup corals and sea grass beds and kelp forests and I was very passionate about those environments, and this was because they were out of sight and could be out of mind (I.5).

> When I go diving, it's such an immersive experience. I don't know if it's because you're surrounded by water so you feel the water on you (I.9).

For two interviewees, this has directly generated their interest in marine biology and conservation.

> It was personal hobbies and the way I was living that sparked the interest in the sea (I.1).

Several interviewees (4) spoke of the aesthetic qualities of the sea, such as its expansiveness and smell, and its therapeutic qualities.

> [Laughs] The bracing coastal breeze! I think it's the open space. I think there's a wellbeing aspect in terms of being by water. For me, that's the personal draw of the sea, having that openness, that air, that space, that light (I.8).

> When I talk about being by the sea, it makes me feel calm (I.5).

The only negative feeling was from one interviewee (a planner) who felt an aversion to being out at sea.

> I don't like being in boats or anything like that. Very good to look at but I distrust its manner when I'm on it or in it (I.6).

Professional Experience of the Sea

When asked about experience of the sea gained through their professional experience, all the interviewees had positive insights. Those with policy/planning backgrounds generally had more to say about this; all felt that engaging with stakeholders was important.

A few (3) had received some in-house training to familiarise them with aspects of the marine environment, such as fishing and governance arrangements. One interviewee mentioned personal reading as a means of increasing understanding.

More interviewees (7) spoke about learning on the job, such as through site visits to ports and renewable energy installations. This was typically coupled with learning from stakeholders, either on site or via meetings and other forms of engagement; most interviewees (9) referred to this. A few (3) also mentioned learning from colleagues.

> Most of the time when I go out in the field now it is to do with engaging with stakeholders (I.4).

> We work with people like the port authorities, fishermen, people involved in the aquaculture industry (I.10).

> You build up knowledge of different industries or sectors by having these working relationships (I.2).

> A lot of it is mediated through stakeholders and colleagues (I.6).

Similarly, personal observation was mentioned by several (5) as a way of learning about local issues.

> I drove around the coast when I first got the job to get an idea of what was going on in the area (I.4).

> What I didn't appreciate so much was the amount of coastal deprivation that exists (I.6).

However, this was generally restricted to the coast. Only two referred to going out to sea as a way of learning about the sea; this was seen as very positive.

> When I started going to sea, my experience, and probably my appreciation, of the marine environment took a huge leap forward, because suddenly you're in the environment that you're there to protect, or to regulate (I.7).

One interviewee specifically mentioned the lack of gaining any direct, physical experience of the sea through professional work. However, this person, a planner by background, stressed that the marine planning 'world' is equally the institutional context.

> Part of your planning context, an inescapable part, is the civil service itself, because you have to be able to operate in that context to be able to progress anything that you do (I.8).

Necessity of Having Experience of the Sea

When asked whether they felt that knowledge and experience of the sea was necessary for them to fulfil their professional responsibilities, a few (3) with a policy/planning background implied that it was not strictly necessary.

> I think you can do this job without the inside knowledge, or the intimate knowledge of being at sea. You can't know all of the sea, so at best you're only going to know one or two things in detail, but I don't think that should stop you being able to plan, if you follow the planning principles (I.11).

This is partly because of the nature of the current approach to marine planning.

> The majority of marine plan policies across the UK are not spatially specific to a level that allows that type of dynamism in them yet (I.6).

> Focused more on the marine plan at the moment than marine planning, trying to write a balanced policy document (I.2).

However, most interviewees (8), from science and policy/planning backgrounds, felt the opposite, that planning knowledge alone was insufficient.

> I think it helps you appreciate issues if you have an understanding of the environment that you're dealing with. I think it would be quite difficult to try to write policies for something that you don't understand or have no connection to (I.9).

> Planning information is fine with planning regulations ... but you need to know what happens in the water (I.2).

This was connected to understanding the needs of sea users. For example, one interviewee reported using specialist fisheries' knowledge to defend vigorously their interests.

> I had to fight tooth and nail for a paragraph that explained that the fishing industry from their perspective are bottom of the pile and feel that they won't be able to stand up and fight against other industries such as energy (I.1).

Similarly, two other interviewees placed more stress on stakeholder input than direct knowledge of the sea.

> That is going to be the key thing, genuinely working with stakeholders and testing things with them, co-producing things with them (I.8).

Adequacy of, and Ways of Improving, Knowledge of the Sea

When asked about whether they thought that their knowledge of the sea was adequate for their role, two interviewees felt that this was sufficient for the purposes of producing a plan, partly because the plan itself has limited scope

> I think we know enough to build the plan, and develop the plan (I.10).

> I understand all aspects of weather systems due to fishing, boating and wind surfing but this has not really come in when working with the marine plan (I.1).

However, most (7) implied that their knowledge was limited and insufficient. One felt that this could only ever be partial.

> I don't think anybody can ever have experienced enough about the sea or know enough (I.9).

Some of these interviewees (4) suggested specific areas of knowledge that they would like to improve, about both the natural characteristics and the policy framework of the sea.

> I would like to know more about the regulatory side of things and the processes involved in making decisions (I.5).

> I think we are still making decisions off poorly baselined data and evidence and that still shocks me. I thought when I first came in we would know a lot of stuff, but we actually don't (I.6).

Some (4), all from a policy/planning background, indicated that they had learned a lot on the job, generally from a very low baseline.

> It was such a big learning curve for me because I didn't know anything really about the seas in general. However, I got up to speed with most of the trends relatively quickly (I. 6).

> Almost everything [was new], so learning how different ports specialise in different things and even having areas around the ports protected for aggregates (I.4).

This led to suggestions for improving this knowledge base. One suggested that there was scope for more specific training, and another that more informal learning could take place.

> I would've liked this when I first started, maybe a foundation in understanding the seas around the UK would've helped (I.6).

> I think we do all need to have a bit more knowledge, don't know how we would go about it, maybe pick up on stuff in emails or meetings (I.3).

Some (4) thought that it would be beneficial to have more direct experience of the sea, including as team activities.

> It would be really interesting to go out and about with the fishermen as well, to see their work (I.10),

> I think there are things that you definitely could do in terms of actually going out there and experiencing different aspects, not just coastal walks, but the coastal marine environment, visits to industries. We could definitely do it, and it would definitely have a benefit (I.8).

> I know they always send visual maps and things, but it's not quite the same as actually being there (I.9).

> Just to see how they carry out their fishing activities and what it means spending your days at sea, regardless to the weather (I.9).

> Because whilst I look at the maps, and I can see where they've been, it's all just dots and lines on a page, it's not an actual representation of, like going out to see the turbine and you see the scale of it (I.11).

One interviewee reported taking the initiative to set time aside regularly to learn more about specific issues.

> I try to keep Friday afternoons free to read articles or catch ups on professional training (I.3).

Some (3) specifically felt that greater knowledge could improve the outputs of their work.

> Who knows how much better we could be doing if we could get out and about a bit more into the field (I.10).

> There are many that are much less well connected to the marine environment. so yes, these people need to get out on the sea, and this would be invaluable (I.2).

Team Experience

When asked about the range of knowledge in their wider teams, some (4) stated that they had mixed backgrounds, especially of marine scientists and planners, bringing different strengths.

> We have a nice mix of 'proper planners' and marine biology which works nicely (I.2).

> You might have somebody who's more of the science specialist, marine science, somebody else who's got a specialism in being able to operate within the context of the civil service, to be able to progress what people are bringing forward (I.8).

However, two interviewees reported a lack of planning experience in the team; one stated that the team was all from a marine science background, whilst the other said that they were all marine people and civil servants, but without a planning background. Nonetheless, in one of these cases:

> I know that as a team they were benefiting from engaging with the terrestrial planning team (I.5).

One interviewee referred to a wider interdepartmental coordination group, where different perspectives could be shared.

> This is a forum where everyone is kept up to date with what is going on with different issues such as conservation (I.3).

Thinking and Acting like the Sea

When asked whether it is possible to 'think and act like the sea' (see end of previous section), one interviewee, a planner, denied this, suggesting that other considerations and pressures will dominate plan-making.

> No, the politics and economic demands will always drive the way forward . . . the focus will be on getting the marine plan written (I.2).

Another interviewee, also a planner, was uncertain about the possibility.

> That is elevated! That makes me think about what you sometimes hear in drama school, 'right, be a tree'. I'm not quite sure I can get my head round what thinking like the sea would mean (I.8).

However, all the others (9) responded positively to the suggestion, though with different interpretations of what this might mean. For two, this meant increasing the sense of connection with the sea.

> I think if you think and act like the sea, it connects you more with the sea, and I think it might give people an understanding of it's not a separate entity (I.9).

Two others underlined the need to be sensitive to the sea's ways and limits.

> If you're farming you always have to take into account the weather, but the sea brings in this whole other element, all the other forces involved in the sea, and they really have to work with it rather than just try and blaze on ahead (I.10).

> There will be a capacity to which it will not tolerate and it will respond in its own way; if it doesn't like something it will tell us (I.3).

A few (3) linked this suggestion directly to aspects of plan-making. One, a planner, related this to taking an adaptive approach to planning.

> We should continue to collect monitoring data annually and use it to anticipate what could potentially be coming through in 4 or 5 years' time and try and make those adaptions earlier (I.3).

Another, also a planner, saw this in terms of sustainable development.

> Thinking and acting like the sea to me is not just thinking about what is best for the sea in terms of the environmental side, but thinking of everybody who is impacted by the sea or gains something from the sea. So considering protecting everything that is there for future generations (I.4).

Another, a marine scientist by background, related the suggestion to the need to take a large-scale, ecosystem approach.

> [We] know that we are working with an environment that works on massive spatial scales and multidimensional environments but we are constrained by the administrative systems that we work in and our lack of knowledge. But planning should think and act in response to the way the sea thinks and acts. We aren't really planning for the sea, we are planning for a small patch of the sea and this wouldn't really be in line with the ecosystem approach (I.5).

Several interviewees (4) felt that it is, or should be, possible to think and act like the sea in the more general attitude taken towards planning. They suggested emulating the sea's dynamism in various ways.

> I personally would think and act like the sea. For example, I have an innate understanding of fishing and as a marine biologist I know that what you look at on the shore is shaped by the physical elements (I.1).

> We can act dynamically as the sea does, it is constantly moving. From a tidal perspective it ebbs and flows, and there's paces at which those tidal things happen so I suppose you can work a lot in short bursts and intensely but might be good to take a step back and go back at it again (I.6).

> If we look at sea level rise, if you take that phrase on and think like the sea, then you can think about where the sea's moving, where it's rising, how will the sea behave in this bay with sea level rise, or how is it going to act against these cliffs, is it going to erode it, things like that (I.9).

> I think the first thing you'd go to is being fluid, or adaptable, and I think that's probably a good thing to be – that you have to adapt your approach and change to the circumstances, which you might say the sea does, or maybe it changes circumstances over time. And also open to the ideas from other people, and other stakeholders particularly (I.11).

Summary of the Results

The interviewees nearly all pointed to positive personal experiences of the coast and sea in their lives, often through living on the coast. Most of them described direct physical engagement through water sports and coastal recreation, and exploring its natural environment. This has led many to feel a special affinity with the sea and appreciate its aesthetic qualities, including a sense of well-being engendered by the sea.

They are all gaining ongoing understanding of the sea through their professional experience. A minority said that they had received formal training to help them learn about certain aspects, but learning is mostly through daily work, especially stakeholder engagement, site visits and hearing from colleagues. Much of their knowledge is thus mediated through others with more direct experience. However, they are also gaining their own insights as they reflect on what they hear and observe, and they reckon the knowledge gained to be invaluable. Direct experience was mostly limited to the coast rather than being out at sea.

Most interviewees felt that knowledge and experience of the sea was necessary to their work, as this helped them to understand the issues that they were dealing with and the needs of stakeholders. However, there was a minority view that the planning process could be followed without detailed knowledge of the sea.

Similarly, a small number felt that their knowledge was already sufficient to the task of producing a plan. But most felt that they, and the outputs of their work, would benefit from greater knowledge, both about the physical setting and the institutional framework that they were working in. They went on to make suggestions about improving their knowledge base, including through direct experience of being at sea with stakeholders.

Generally, interviewees felt that their teams benefited from the different backgrounds within them, particularly of planners and marine scientists, and, in one case, of interdepartmental exchange. But in some cases, there was concern about a lack of planning experience.

The concept of 'thinking and acting like the sea' generated some negative or uncertain responses. But the majority of interviewees responded positively to this suggestion, bringing varying interpretations to bear: having a sense of connection with the sea; being sensitive to the sea's way of functioning and its limits; adjusting aspects of planning to the sea's characteristics, such as taking an adaptive approach; and emulating the sea's behaviour in some respects.

Towards Immersive Marine Planning

Judging by the results presented above, marine planners' overall level of engagement with their planning milieu ('the sea', in an all-encompassing sense) might be best described as tentative, especially when compared with what are likely to be the higher levels of engagement of terrestrial planners with their milieu. The importance of, and need for, deeper engagement with the marine planning milieu is generally accepted, along with the feeling

that it would lead to better planning outcomes. Existing levels of engagement are mostly informal and indirect, usually beginning with personal experience, added to by daily work, especially as mediated by the stakeholders that planners encounter and the insights of other team members. This often leads to a deep appreciation of the sea. Despite this, marine planners mostly feel that their current level of experience and knowledge of the sea is inadequate and the outcomes of their work could be improved by greater engagement. Also, when the more aspirational notion of 'thinking and acting like the sea' is suggested to them, this is generally received positively and generates further ideas (though also leads to other limitations on plan-making being raised, such as institutional pressures).

It would of course be valuable to extend the scope of this area of study, to see if these UK-based findings are typical of wider experience, and to be open to further insights. It would also be interesting to explore practitioners' response to terms such as planning milieu, as a means of situating their work in the context of wider discussion. There is also scope for in-depth case study of particular marine planning processes, to examine more specifically where knowledge might be lacking, and where greater direct experience might lead to different planning outcomes.

It is far from certain what the marine equivalent to 'walking the streets regularly' (Kitchen, 2007, p. 90) might be. Interviewees made their own preliminary suggestions, generally favouring getting out to sea in some way, though were acutely aware of resource limitations as far as this is concerned. It would be unrealistic to suppose that the relative inaccessibility of the sea can be easily overcome, and that the kind of familiarity advocated by Kitchen can be simply replicated by marine planners. These practicalities probably lie behind the interviewees' own instincts to find indirect ways of gaining knowledge and understanding about the sea. Hence they were keen to continue learning from others, especially stakeholders, who have their own direct experience to share. A wider range of interactions with knowledgeable people might be possible, such as through networking events, conferences, coastal fora and consultation events. There was also recognition amongst interviewees of the value of learning from documentary and online resources; the possibility of using this kind of proxy for direct experience should not be dismissed. This could extend to a whole range of media, such as textbooks, reports, learning resources, documentaries, artistic representations, videos and games. The sterling example above, of setting aside time on a Friday afternoon for learning, might even be extended to Saturday evenings for more entertaining media! And much can be learned from the wealth of spatial data available via marine planning and other portals (despite my concerns about the danger of these leading planners into an outdated, technically-dominated approach to planning).

This suggests a more collective understanding of experience, in which planners partake of the experience of others, often conveyed through indirect media, which planners then carry forward through their own practices. This kind of approach has indeed been called experiential planning (Grant, 2009). Beasley, a planning practitioner, describes this as capturing the totality of a community's experience, including from understandings that are shared across a community. He suggests:

> It's about a fairly deep and continuous level of engagement with citizens . . . For example . . . we might [get into] housing the homeless people of the country if, in fact, we tapped into what the experiential expectations were (quoted in Grant, 2009, p. 364).

This is not just a matter of understanding other people's perspectives, but also of empathising with them, imagining oneself in their shoes and being affected by their situation – being a part of the same community. It is through 'socio-spatial learning' of this kind that marine planners can generate a knowledge store of their milieu (Natarajan, 2017, p. 1). Planners might thus learn from their encounter with others, such as sea users, who are 'thinking and acting like the sea' by virtue of their longer experience and more direct involvement with the marine environment.

However, as stressed above, 'experientiality' in the marine realm must extend much more deliberately to the non-human, as well as to the social. The challenge for marine planners is to share not only the experience of other people, but also, in a sense, that of the biophysical sea, and then to consider how society interacts with this giant of nature: to experience the sea in all its entirety. The contribution of marine scientists is invaluable here; they can, as members of marine planning teams or through their wider knowledge dissemination, enable others to appreciate scientific understandings of the material sea, as was indeed acknowledged by the interviewees. However, there is also scope for other representations and imaginings to come into play, inspired, for example, by the range of media suggested above. We can also return here to the direct, personal experiences of the marine world, as explored in the interviews.

In all these efforts to appreciate the autonomy, power and vitality of the marine world, we should accept the actant role of 'the nonhumanity that flows around and through humans' (Bennett, 2004, p. 349) and we should acknowledge our subjugation to such forces. This moves us on from concerns about the predominantly social power relations in MSP processes that have recently been the focus of debate, especially the power differentials whereby certain agendas and groups are privileged (Flannery & McAteer, 2020). We also need to take into account the overwhelming natural forces at work within the marine planning milieu (including the major shifts provoked in these forces by human action); this leads to a reappraisal of power relations. Firstly, all actors are subjected to the point that differentials between them diminish in comparison to their common vulnerability to these actant forces. Tafon *et al.* (2019) helpfully appeal to marine planners to reflect on, and contest, their subjugation to the normalising expectations of their institutional role. I suggest that further reflection is needed, on planners' and stakeholders' relative weakness vis-à-vis the bio-physical environment. Secondly, power differentials that nonetheless do exist should be measured in terms not simply of socio-economic consequences for different actors, but also of impact upon their setting, which may be considerable. This may lead to very different patterns of relations emerging; for example, socio-economic 'losers', such as fishers, may seem much more dominant when perceived from a non-human actant point of view, such as target species. Introducing the role of the marine planning milieu as a whole, with all its social and non-human dimensions, may thus radically change our understanding of the dynamics of power relations at work within MSP. Although not investigated in the current study, this is a matter for future exploration, not least in collaboration with marine planners themselves.

This exploration of marine planners' engagement with their milieu opens up possibilities of a closer relationship between them. It is possible, perhaps, through the various means of learning suggested above, for planners' conceptualisation of the sea to involve a sense of their own immersion into its dynamics; what Anderson describes as

a convergence of actor and medium, 'a coming together of mutual interaction and interference' (2012, p. 582). Similarly, returning to Berdoulay's concept of the planning milieu (2003), this notion implies that there is a reciprocal relationship of shaping and being shaped by the milieu. Indeed, planners may find it helpful to reflect on the very concept of 'milieu' as a way of re-positioning their planning efforts. Thus marine planners might be drawn into their own growing understanding of the sea, imagining themselves as active within its complexities, taking their place within the teeming, jostling centres and flows of action, human and non-human.

Notes

1. Marine spatial planning is referred to here as the internationally-recognised term. However, as the empirical focus of this article is the UK, the UK term 'marine planning' and its derivatives 'marine plans' and 'marine planners' are mostly used hereafter.
2. Ethical approval for this research was gained from my institution, the University of Liverpool, UK.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Allmendinger, P. (2017) *Planning Theory*, 3rd ed., p. 346 (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Anderson, J. (2012) Relational places: The surfed wave as assemblage and convergence, *Environment and Planning D*, 30(4), pp. 570–587. doi:10.1068/d17910.

Anderson, J., & Peters, K. (Eds) (2014) *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean*, p. 196 (London: Routledge).

Bennett, J. (2004) The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter, *Political Theory*, 32(3), pp. 347–372. doi:10.1177/0090591703260853.

Berdoulay, V. (2003) Planifier avec le milieu: Les liens complexes de l'analyse et de l'action, *Belgeo* 3, pp. 1–12.

Boucquey, N., Fairbanks, L., St. Martin, K., Campbell, L., & McCay, B. (2016) The ontological politics of marine spatial planning: Assembling the ocean and shaping the capacities of 'community' and 'environment', *Geoforum*, 75, pp. 1–11. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.06.014.

Davoudi, S., & Strange, I. (Eds) (2009) *Conceptions of Space and Place in Strategic Spatial Planning* (London: Routledge).

Flannery, W., & McAteer, B. (2020) Assessing marine spatial planning governmentality, *Maritime Studies*, 19(3), pp. 269–284. doi:10.1007/s40152-020-00174-2.

Flannery, W., & Ó Cinnéide, M. (2008) Marine spatial planning from the perspective of a small seaside community in Ireland, *Marine Policy*, 32(6), pp. 980–987. doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2008.02.001.

Gazzola, P., Roe, M., & Cowie, P. (2015) Marine spatial planning and terrestrial spatial planning: Reflecting on new agendas, *Environment & Planning C*, 33(5), pp. 1156–1172. doi:10.1177/0263774X15612317.

Grant, J. (2009) Experiential planning: A practitioner's account of Vancouver's success, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 75(3), pp. 358–370. doi:10.1080/01944360902965875.

Healey, P. (1985) The professionalisation of planning in Britain: Its form and consequences, *Town Planning Review*, 56(4), pp. 492–507. doi:10.3828/tpr.56.4.q595g78914432w46.

Healey, P. (2010) *Making Better Places: The Planning Project in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Hillier, J. (2007) *Stretching beyond the Horizon: A Multiplanar Theory of Spatial Planning and Governance* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

Hull, A. (2013) Managing competition for marine space using the tools of planning in the UK, *Planning Practice & Research*, 28(5), pp. 503–526. doi:10.1080/02697459.2013.812375.

Jay, S. (2010) Built at Sea: Marine management and the construction of marine spatial planning, *Town Planning Review*, 81(2), pp. 173–191. doi:10.3828/tpr.2009.33.

Jay, S. (2018) The shifting sea: From soft space to lively space, *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 20(4), pp. 450–467. doi:10.1080/1523908X.2018.1437716.

Kitchen, T. (2007) *Skills for Planning Practice*, p. 277 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Knol, M. (2011) Mapping ocean governance: From ecological values to policy instrumentation, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 54(7), pp. 979–995. doi:10.1080/09640568.2010.547686.

Natarajan, L. (2017) Socio-spatial learning: A case study of community knowledge in participatory spatial planning, *Progress in Planning*, 111, pp. 1–23. doi:10.1016/j.progress.2015.06.002.

Okri, B. (2017) *The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age*, p. 115 (London: Apollo).

Ritchie, H., & Ellis, G. (2010) 'A system that works for the sea'? Exploring stakeholder engagement in marine spatial planning, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 53(6), pp. 701–723. doi:10.1080/09640568.2010.488100.

Rydin, Y. (2003) *Urban and Environmental Planning in the UK*, 2nd ed., p. 382 (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan).

Sandercock, L. (1998) *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities*, p. 258 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons).

Smith, G., & Brennan, R. (2012) Losing our way with mapping: Thinking critically about marine spatial planning in Scotland? *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 69, pp. 210–216. doi:10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2012.08.016.

St. Martin, K., & Hall-Arber, M. (2008) The missing layer: Geo-technologies, communities, and implications for marine spatial planning, *Marine Policy*, 32(5), pp. 779–786. doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2008.03.015.

Steinberg, P., & Peters, K. (2015) Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking, *Environment and Planning D*, 33(2), pp. 247–264. doi:10.1068/d14148p.

Tafon, R., Saunders, F., & Gilek, M. (2019) Re-reading marine spatial planning through Foucault, Haugaard and others: An analysis of domination, empowerment and freedom, *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21(6), pp. 754–768. doi:10.1080/1523908X.2019.1673155.