

A Few More Steps Toward Blue Justice: Territorial Security for Brazilian Artisanal Fishing Communities Affected by the Offshore Oil Industry

Introduction

The global discourse surrounding the "Blue Economy" increasingly frames marine spaces as new frontiers of the capitalist-colonialist model, endorsed by environmental conservation and scientific support. Under the auspices of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, maritime nations are urged to balance economic growth with ecological stewardship. Brazil exemplifies this contemporary paradox. Self-promoted internationally as an oceanic nation, its strategic "Blue Amazon" encompasses a vast 5.7 million square kilometers, critical for biodiversity conservation and national sovereignty. Concurrently, however, the Brazilian state continues to expand its offshore extractive frontiers, auctioning deep-water oil and gas fields to capture transnational capital. This extractivist acceleration directly collides with coastal realities. The Brazilian littoral is home to approximately two million artisanal fishers, nearly 49% of whom are women, who collectively account for roughly 60% of national fish production. Far from being mere economic agents, these traditional communities sustain distinct biocultural relations, anchoring historical memories, local ecological knowledge, and collective commons governance within marine ecosystems. Despite their socio-ecological centrality, their territorialities and ways of life are systematically marginalized or rendered invisible within federal environmental licensing processes and broader ocean policies.

This paper argues that the offshore expansion of the oil and gas industry in Brazil produces environmental conflict that threaten the survival of artisanal fishing communities. To counter the growth-oriented, commodifying rationality of the dominant Blue Economy, we propose territorial security as a foundational analytical and operational lens to implement Blue Justice. Using empirical insights gathered from participatory action research within federal environmental licensing in the southeastern Brazilian coast, this paper demonstrates how territorial security can reorient impact assessment, move beyond fragmented frameworks, and foster a decolonial, socially just ocean governance model.

Theoretical Framework: From the Blue Economy to Blue Justice

The dominant "Blue Economy" framework is rooted in a capitalist, growth-oriented paradigm that treats the oceans as empty unmapped spaces ripe for enclosure, resource maximization, and financialization. Critical political ecologists observe that under narratives of "blue growth" marine environments undergo intense processes of ocean grabbing. This phenomenon entails such as the dispossession of traditional users through the physical appropriation of fishing grounds, the legal enclosure of marine commons, and the epistemic marginalization of local knowledge systems. The environment is compartmentalized into discrete economic assets, isolating ecosystem functions from the socio-cultural webs that rely on them.

In sharp contrast, the concept of Blue Justice - frequently coupled with calls for blue degrowth. When linked to environmental justice and decolonial critiques, Blue Justice centers historical community rights, food sovereignty, cooperative economics, and collective governance over marine resources. It shifts the fundamental question of ocean governance from "How can we sustainably extract marine wealth?" to "Who bears the socio-ecological burdens of ocean industrialization, and whose rights are being erased to facilitate capital accumulation?"

To make Blue Justice operationally viable within environmental policy, this paper advances territorial security as a key category of analysis. In Latin American political ecology, "territory" represents more than a physical space or geographic coordinates; it is an ongoing socio-cultural production, woven through everyday practices, ancestral ties, and affective relationships with the land and sea. Territorial security for traditional populations is defined as the structural guarantee that a community can safely access, use, manage, and remain within its traditional spaces without fear of dispossession, environmental contamination, or cultural erasure (Melo, Tometich, Walter and Umpierre, 2024). When deployed within environmental impact assessment (EIA) and project appraisal, territorial security serves as a diagnostic lens to detect structural violence and an operational benchmark to protect the biocultural heritage of vulnerable coastal populations.

Methodology

This study is grounded in action research "Socio-environmental Impact Mitigation Assessment and Review Plan (PARMIS)", a research project executed

between 2021 and 2027, legally mandated by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) as an explicit condition of two Operating Licenses.

The methodology utilized a triangulation strategy, integrating data from institutional, technical, and grassroots sources, as documentary analysis, including review of official oil industry Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), Environmental Impact Reports (RIMAs), characterization programs, and formal Technical Opinions issued by Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA)'s analysts; empirical fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews, socio-economic surveys, and ethnographical field observations conducted within fishing communities across the impacted coastline; and institutional workshops, including deliberate multi-stakeholder dialogic spaces bringing together artisanal fishing leaders, environmental analysts and interdisciplinary researchers.

Empirical Findings: The Production of Territorial Insecurity

The investigation confirms that offshore oil expansion does not merely cause accidental environmental spillage; rather, it systematically produces territorial insecurity through deeply institutionalized, politically constructed mechanisms. Traditional environmental licensing practices in Brazil suffer from chronic structural fragmentation: impacts are assessed on a project-by-project, asset-by-asset basis, treating an isolated platform or pipeline as an independent entity (Dias and Teixeira, 2025). This approach fails to capture the cumulative, interconnected, and territorially differentiated realities experienced by traditional communities, who encounter the combined pressures of multiple oil fields simultaneously.

The empirical findings categorize these cumulative pressures into direct socio-environmental disruptions and indirect, structural vulnerabilization processes. The physical presence and operational routine of offshore oil infrastructure directly encroach upon the marine commons. Exclusive safety exclusion zones around drillships, platforms, and floating production storage and offloading units (FPSOs) legally bar artisanal boats from historical fishing tracts. This spatial enclosure forces fishers to travel further out to sea, dramatically increasing operational costs, navigational hazards, and physical exhaustion. The high-frequency circulation of massive industrial supply vessels and tankers creates severe spatial overlaps with small-scale fishing vessels. This leads to an alarming spike in maritime accidents,

including collisions and the frequent destruction or loss of expensive artisanal fishing gear. Continuous underwater noise and vibrations generated by industrial machinery disrupt marine ecosystems, scaring away target species and contributing to a localized decline in fish stocks. This ecological degradation translates directly into a reduction in fish consumption and nutritional insecurity within coastal households.

Beyond biophysical degradation, the offshore industry triggers profound transformations that erode the social fabric of coastal communities. There is a stark geopolitical disconnection between macro-political decisions made in urban centers and the physical location of industrial assets at sea. Residents are kept in states of structural misinformation regarding upcoming developments, neutralizing local governance and eroding grassroots social control. The expansion of onshore ground support facilities, ports, and industrial shipyards dramatically alters local land-use regulations. This structural shift drives real estate speculation, displaces community-based tourism, and causes severe population displacement. As fishing yields decline and the landscape is industrialized, youth displacement accelerates, severing the intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge and historical identities. Communities are forced into positions of economic precarity, inducing a damaging structural dependence on highly paternalistic, short-term corporate compensatory programs. Crucially, these processes are deeply gendered. While mitigation programs frequently target male vessel captains for financial compensation, artisanal women—who dominate post-harvest processing, bait preparation, and regional shell-gathering—remain invisible to institutional eyes, compounding pre-existing structural inequalities.

Pathways Toward Blue Justice: Reorienting Impact Assessment

To break away from these colonial continuities, environmental project appraisal must transition from a framework of corporate damage control to an active defense of traditional territories. Implementing Blue Justice requires that territorial security be placed at the center of regulatory design, serving as a threshold for project approval.

In this regard, it is suggested that territorial security be incorporated in its various dimensions, such as the legal recognition of traditional territories, the generation of employment and income, and access to public policies. Territorial security for traditional fishing communities is conceived as an analytical lens to guide

impact assessment and as an operational dimension for the implementation of Blue Justice as a counterpoint to the Blue Economy; in other words, a fundamental prerequisite for socially just and ecologically sustainable ocean governance.

Regulatory agencies must reject individual asset licensing, replacing it with regional-scale, multi-sector assessments that map how industrial expansion compounds long-term socio-ecological vulnerabilities. Also impact assessment must dismantle technical asymmetries. Traditional ecological knowledge must be granted equal regulatory and epistemological weight alongside biophysical engineering studies. Affected communities are not passive stakeholders to be perfunctorily consulted; they are primary knowledge holders whose free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is mandatory.

Corporate compensation mandates must be decoupled from paternalistic, top-down models. Resources must be channeled directly into community-led income generation initiatives, biocultural heritage conservation, and solidarity economies managed entirely by the communities themselves. Furthermore, true ocean sustainability cannot exist without legal security. Environmental licensing must formally integrate and support the legal recognition, delimitation, and protection of traditional marine and coastal territories.

Final Reflections

The expansion of offshore oil and gas in Brazil highlights the core contradictions embedded within dominant Blue Economy paradigms. Under narratives of sustainable ocean governance and blue growth, industrial extractivism continues to reproduce old colonial asymmetries, enclosing marine commons and driving the systemic vulnerabilization of artisanal fishing communities.

It is vital to acknowledge that environmental sustainability cannot be separated from territorial justice. Traditional communities are not historical remnants or obstacles to development; they are active, indispensable agents of contemporary coastal governance and marine conservation. Achieving Blue Justice requires a radical epistemic shift: redefining impact assessment to recognize that there is no sustainable ocean without absolute territorial security for the populations who have cared for it for generations.

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