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Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine re: the Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill 2017

My name is Dr Ruth Brennan and I am a marine social science researcher from the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, Trinity College Dublin. For the last 12 years, my research field has been marine environmental governance. My approach is to identify, support and encourage marine stewardship and co-management within local communities as a means of ensuring effective governance of the marine environment. I support consideration of the Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill as I believe it has the potential to contribute to meeting our national, European and international conservation objectives for the marine environment, while at the same time providing much needed support for our island-based inshore fishing communities for whom fishing is important not just economically and socially, but also culturally. I would like to highlight the following.

Firstly, the Bill responds to, and aligns with, calls from a variety of committees and policy makers at national, European and international levels, to support resource-dependent island communities.

These include the Oireachtas Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries in 2014,¹ the Common Fisheries Policy² at a European level, and, internationally, the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries.³

Secondly, the European Commission has expressly called for Europe’s small scale fishers to take the initiative.

On the 15th of May this year I attended a Fisheries Committee meeting in the European Parliament. At that meeting, Commissioner Vella commented that supporting and helping small scale fishers is a priority for the Commission. He observed that although Member State quotas tend to end up in the “same hands” each year at national level, and “not in the hands of small scale fishers”, the Commission has no influence over how Member States distribute their quota at a national level. As such, he emphasised that small scale fishers “need to help themselves.” The Bill is an example of an initiative whereby Ireland’s island-based inshore fishers are proactively doing just that. This should be supported.

Thirdly, the Bill is an important step towards better marine governance.

It has the potential to complement conservation measures that are currently in place to protect the long-term sustainability of stocks for the inshore sector, such as v-notching of lobsters and minimum landing sizes for crab, as the introduction of island community quota access proposed by the Bill would enable island fishers to return to a low-impact practice of fishing quota species seasonally, rather than fishing non-quota species all year-round.

¹ Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries 2014. Report on Promoting Sustainable Rural Coastal and Island Communities, Recommendation 10. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/Draft-3-Final-Report-on-Promoting-Sustainable-Rural-Coastal-and-Island-Communities.pdf>

² Common Fisheries Policy Basic Regulation 1380/2013, para. 20. Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy Basic Regulation requires Member States “to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impact, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.”

³ FAO (2015) Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, p15. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4487e.pdf>

Fourthly and finally, the cultural importance of a vibrant fishing industry to our island-based communities needs to be recognised and supported.

The Bill recognises and supports islanders' strong sense of belonging to the sea. I'd like to share some research on what I mean when I talk about belonging to the sea. In 2011 and 2012, together with colleagues, I carried out research on the shared maritime traditions and beliefs in two island communities with a strong fishing heritage – one was the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides, in Scotland and the other, the Donegal island of Arranmore.⁴ Our research suggested that at the heart of these beliefs and traditions was a feeling that is universally potential in human beings: the sense of belonging to a home place, and, importantly, a sense of responsibility for that place. The great Scottish Gaelic scholar John MacInnes has described this feeling of belonging as a form of emotional energy, encapsulated by the not easily translatable word 'dúchas' in Irish, also 'dùthchas' in Scottish Gaelic. Our research described this sense of belonging to the sea, or 'dúchas na mara', that we found in these island communities, evident from their living knowledge of the sea, from its place in their stories, histories and legends, from how they have made a living from the sea, from how it has helped to shape their conduct and beliefs and from the changes that technologies have brought to their relationships with it. Our research made visible an older and deeper way of knowing the sea which is distinct from, but complementary to, a way of knowing that is largely informed by book learning and formal education processes. Further research that I carried out on the Scottish island of Barra demonstrated that this intangible cultural heritage is key to informing co-management approaches with policy-makers

⁴ MacKinnon, I., & Brennan, R. (2012). Belonging to the sea. Exploring the cultural roots of maritime conflict on Gaelic speaking islands in Ireland and Scotland (<http://www.mappingthesea.net/Belonging-to-the-Sea.pdf>)

that meet national and European conservation objectives.⁵ During the many years of this research, I spent a lot of time and energy encouraging community members on Barra to engage constructively with the policy environment rather than pushing it away, and, likewise, encouraging Scottish policy-makers to recognise the policy value of the island's intangible cultural heritage and local ways of knowing and doing. It is a breath of fresh air to see Irish island-based fishing communities being so proactive and constructive in their engagement with the policy environment here, most recently through the proposal of this Bill. I urge the Committee to grasp this opportunity and not to squander it.

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⁵Brennan RE. (2018) The conservation 'myths' we live by: reimagining human-nature relationships within the Scottish marine policy context. *AREA (Special Issue: Cultural Geographies of Coastal Change: Place, Identity and Vulnerability)*, 1-10 <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12420>

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