

Picture-postcard perfect but the English fishing village is not all it seems

As tourists pour in, global forces push local fishermen out. Behind the facade of Porthleven's picturesque harbourside, its fishermen are struggling to adapt to economic challenges.

By Dan Glaister, Observer, Sunday 25 June

Source URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/24/crisis-in-britains-coastal-villages-as-fishing-communities-fight-for-survival>



It is hard to think of a more faithful depiction of the English fishing village than the scene that greets the visitor to Porthleven in Cornwall: the early summer sun glints off the water, holidaymakers throng the quayside restaurants, enjoying the fresh fish unloaded by the fishermen toiling in their boats.

Yet some argue that things are not what they seem. They say that none of the fish sold at the restaurants or cafés offering 'fresh local fish' is caught by the town's fishermen. Instead it is brought in by van from wholesalers in Newlyn, 15 miles away. And of the boats bobbing in the water, only three are commercial fishing boats. Of those, one fisherman is retiring this year and the other two are ready to call it a day.

"See all this?" says David Toy, pausing as he loads boxes on to his boat to gesture at the bustling harbour. "It's all a lie. It's like Disneyland. Look around here – all these restaurants, none of them take our fish. Good luck to them. I don't depend on them for my livelihood, none of them. I sell my fish. I've got a van and I sell it at market."

As with many rural and coastal communities, Porthleven is struggling to adapt to the challenges posed by a booming tourist sector: money comes in from outside, pushing prices up, forcing the locals out, second homes proliferate and the traditional activities that define a place become little more than window-dressing. Meanwhile that tourist money doesn't filter down to the local community. "That's the downfall of Cornwall," says Gary Eastwell, emerging from one of the other fishing boats.

"I was born here, but I can't afford to live here. It would make our lives a lot better if they would buy our fish from us, but none of them do. The people who come here think they're eating fish caught here, but they're not. Why would you put road miles on a lobster?"

The tensions are not unique to Porthleven. Around the country fishing communities are facing the pressures of adapting to a new economy. In Worthing in West Sussex, which has one remaining fisher, a social enterprise has set up the Last Fisherman Standing project to celebrate and protect the heritage of the industry in the town. It has also started a project, Catchbox, to help fishers sell their fish locally. The Northumberland seafood centre in Amble is another project that aims to boost tourism and support the fishing industry. Similar initiatives have taken place from Fleetwood in Lancashire to Sidmouth in Devon, where commercial fishing has ceased.

"Heritage has been commodified," says Chris Balch, professor of planning at Plymouth University. "We go to mining communities that don't mine. We go for the nostalgia – a nostalgia for these places that haven't really existed for a very long time. It's the nature of the changing economic base of the rural economy. Global forces push these places to the edge even more.

"The truly rural place hardly exists any longer. It's all connected to an urban base, and that's the change these rural economies are confronting. The *raison d'être* and the demographics have changed. It's very difficult to cope with. Every place is managing that change, but it becomes much more obvious in a small rural community."

In many coastal communities, locals have been encouraged to take matters into their own hands, developing economic plans and deciding for themselves how they want a community to develop. Tim Acott of the Greenwich Maritime Centre points to the example of Hastings, where the Fishermen's Protection Society has drawn attention to the work of fishers in the town and their cultural and economic contribution. "Hastings has the largest beach-landed fleet in Britain," he says, "and the community has pushed above its weight in protecting fishing as part of its cultural heritage. There are places where the fisher communities are still thriving, but there are also places in the UK where you could call it a besieged industry."

Last year the New Economics Foundation launched its Blue New Deal, aiming to identify and address the problems afflicting coastal communities. "We need a new approach to the development of coastal areas," says the foundation's Fernanda Balata. "One that puts local people in control. We need to think about places in the round and consider how all the different parts of a town's coastal economy can work together. If nothing is done, the small-scale fishing industry will die out. We can see the impact of that in inequality and

how these communities come to feel left behind, and the social and political problems that follow from that.”

Manda Brookman of the Cornwall-based pressure group Coast sees the same problems.

“We need to ask if tourism is there for the destination or if the destination is there for tourism,” she says. “Tourism should be irrigating the community, not extracting from it. Some of these places have ended up becoming a pastiche – it’s the prostitution of place. Good tourism should be making sure that there are social, environmental and economic benefits. If not, then you need to be asking if you should be doing tourism at all.”

Rick Stein’s spokesman has told the Guardian that his fish came from the area, and that customers received the same quality fish whether they were in Padstow, Porthleven or Barnes in London. He added that this model meant the business could be sure the fish it was serving came from sustainable sources.