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From Fishing Nets to Sustainable Futures: Material Ecologies and Coastal Livelihoods

Ms. Saranika S
Ph.D Research Scholar (FT),
Department of English,
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India.
saranikask04@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8103-4918
Dr Brinda P
Associate Professor & Head,
Department of English,
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract:

Abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) presents an ecological problem inseparable from the materials, labour, and institutions that sustain fishing livelihoods. This article examines fishing nets as material objects whose functions and meanings change as they are manufactured, used, repaired, lost, recovered, reused, and discarded. Drawing on Blue Humanities scholarship, material ecocriticism, new materialism, and the sustainable livelihoods approach, it proposes Material Livelihood Ecology as an interpretive framework with three dimensions: material trajectory, ecological relation, and livelihood relation. The method combines a critical review of selected studies on fishing gear and marine litter in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the Gulf of Guinea with a close reading of Aathira Vasudevan's UNDP India article, "Protecting Marine Life: How Tamil Nadu's Coastal Communities Are Clearing Abandoned Fishing Nets." The article is read both as documentation of collective environmental work and as an institutional narrative that foregrounds particular achievements, actors, and transformations while leaving other questions unresolved. The paper argues that recovering and upcycling nets may contribute to coastal sustainability when supported by accessible collection systems, safe and fairly paid labour, producer responsibility, and reliable evaluation of environmental outcomes.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, material ecocriticism, new materialism, fishing gear, marine litter.

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Introduction

The ocean is more than a natural landscape: it is an environment, a source of livelihood, a cultural space, and a material force that shapes human relations. Blue Humanities scholarship has encouraged researchers to understand maritime environments as more than settings or metaphors in literature and cultural criticism. In particular, Steve Mentz's description of blue cultural studies emphasises the role of maritime culture in literary and cultural history, while Laurence Publicover's exploration of water and non-human agency reveals how environments can actively engage in the construction of meaning (Mentz 997–1013; Publicover 280–302). Such perspectives call for the study of everyday artefacts that people use to interact with, represent, and manipulate aquatic environments.

Fishing nets offer a useful example because they connect human labour directly with marine life. Designed to catch fish, nets are also commodities and investments that require maintenance and eventual replacement. Synthetic fibres can persist in water long after nets are lost, abandoned, or discarded. A net that once supported a livelihood can therefore become a source of ecological harm. Abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) can entangle marine animals, damage habitats, and contribute to marine litter. The net's role may consequently shift from productive equipment to a hazard, a recoverable material, or a waste-management challenge.

Research from Kerala demonstrates that individual behaviour alone cannot explain the problem. In their survey, most fishers identified the lack of waste-collection facilities as a major factor in the improper disposal of damaged gear (Daniel and Thomas). Whether gear remains in the environment also depends on the infrastructure available to the people who use it. The

discussion of coastal livelihoods considers this survey alongside studies from Tamil Nadu and the Gulf of Guinea.

This article addresses three questions: How can a fishing net be understood as a material object that mediates between marine ecology and coastal livelihoods? How can a critical reading of a documentary account of community-based net recovery complicate a positive narrative of upcycling? What can Material Livelihood Ecology contribute to literary and cultural analyses of these processes?

These questions bring three areas of scholarship into conversation. Material ecocriticism and new materialism examine the agency of things; Blue Humanities considers aquatic spaces as forces in culture and history; and the sustainable livelihoods approach investigates assets, institutions, and vulnerability. Although each approach offers valuable insights, they are not always brought together to examine the net's material trajectory, the way that trajectory is narrated, and the distribution of labour and value across its life cycle. Material Livelihood Ecology is offered as a specific framework for analysing these issues. It is not intended as an alternative to the other frameworks, nor is it offered as a universal theory of sustainability.

Method and Scope

The method has two components. This is a qualitative textual analysis supported by a focused review of published research; it does not claim to offer original fieldwork or independently verified project data. First, the article critically reviews selected studies of fishing gear and marine litter in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the Gulf of Guinea, alongside research on recycling and producer responsibility. Second, it closely reads Aathira Vasudevan's UNDP India article "Protecting Marine Life: How Tamil Nadu's Coastal Communities Are Clearing Abandoned Fishing Nets."

The article is treated as a documentary narrative: it reports on a community-based project while selecting events, foregrounding particular people, arranging evidence, and framing environmental action. The reading therefore considers the initiative's reported achievements alongside questions the article leaves unresolved. The discussion moves from theoretical and empirical context to the proposed framework, its application to the documentary, and the implications for labour, gender, and shared responsibility.

Blue Humanities, Material Ecocriticism, and Livelihoods

Blue Humanities scholarship challenges the treatment of water as a static feature of the landscape and instead examines its material, cultural, and historical force. Mentz locates the sea in the realm of culture and literature, while Publicover's examination of non-human agency allows for a discussion of the ability of water to create textual meaning rather than being just a symbol (Mentz 997–1013; Publicover 280–302). When applied to fishing equipment, such a framework requires one to discuss the interaction between water, currents, marine animals, and humans that results in changes in the meaning of the net. The net cannot be seen just as a symbol of pollution; its materiality and connection with water have consequences.

Material ecocriticism provides a second theoretical foundation. In *Material Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann bring matter, storytelling, and ecological relationships together, showing how material things participate in narratives rather than remaining inert backgrounds (1–17). Stacy Alaimo's discussion of oceanic origins, plastic activism, and new materialism at sea further illuminates the relationship between material circulation and environmental politics (186–203). Synthetic fishing nets make these questions tangible: the

strength and resilience that make them effective fishing equipment can also prolong their harmful effects when they are lost or abandoned.

Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter challenges the assumption that objects are entirely passive or that their effects can be reduced to human intention. In the case at hand, material agency does not imply that the net is conscious, intentional, or ethically responsible for its actions. Rather, the net's design, composition, durability, location, and interactions with currents and marine organisms can produce consequences beyond its intended function (Bennett 20–24).

The social and institutional dimension draws on the sustainable livelihoods framework. Ian Scoones identifies resources, livelihood strategies, vulnerability, and institutions as key elements of livelihood analysis (3–5). Applied to fishing nets, these elements include replacement and repair costs, access to collection sites, fishing practices, available alternatives, and markets for reclaimed materials. An analysis that ignores livelihood pressures may overlook why fishers retain damaged gear or dispose of it improperly.

Each approach also has limitations. Blue Humanities and material ecocriticism examine the agency of water and matter and the narratives through which they become meaningful, but may give less attention to who uses a net, who recovers it, and who benefits from recovery. The sustainable livelihoods approach foregrounds resources, institutions, and vulnerability, but may treat resources primarily as forms of capital rather than as material objects with ecological afterlives. It may also give less attention to the narrative framing of livelihood interventions. Material Livelihood Ecology develops at the intersection of these concerns.

Fishing Nets and the Coastal Livelihood Problem

Fishing nets are tools of labour, but their material durability can outlast the circumstances for which they were designed. Fishing gear may be lost during fishing, damaged by severe weather or underwater obstacles, or abandoned when repair services and collection facilities are unavailable. Once separated from its owner, a net may continue interacting with marine animals, habitats, and other fishing gear. The term "ghost gear" captures this persistence: the object continues to affect its surroundings after it is no longer controlled by its original user.

The Kerala study provides a clear example. Daniel and Thomas surveyed 390 fishers using trawl, seine, gillnet, and trammel-net gear and assessed litter on 25 beaches. Their study identifies poor management of plastic litter aboard vessels and the loss or abandonment of fishing gear as important contributors to derelict gear. Ninety-three per cent of respondents identified the absence of waste-collection facilities as the main reason for improper disposal (Daniel and Thomas). These findings relate to a particular sample and location and should not be generalised to every coast. They nevertheless support a central point of this article: disposal depends not only on individual decisions but also on the systems available for storing, transporting, collecting, and processing unwanted gear.

Research from Tamil Nadu provides a further point of comparison. Patterson Edward et al. examine the quantity, sources, composition, pollution status, and management of beach litter, including ALDFG, along the Tamil Nadu coast. A report on the baseline survey of 52 villages for the Tamil Nadu Fishnet Initiative states that ALDFG accounted for approximately 47 per cent of beach litter (Baraasu). Read alongside the Kerala study, these findings shift attention from the individual who discards gear to the conditions that make safe disposal possible. This shift does not remove individual responsibility; it places that responsibility within a wider network that includes gear manufacturers, fishers, port authorities, local governments, waste-management companies,

and markets. Prevention therefore requires responsible handling and disposal, accessible collection points, repair services, viable recovery systems, appropriate equipment design, and clearly allocated responsibilities across the product life cycle.

Marine litter is problematic for fishing communities outside of India as well. Ekperusi et al.'s study of artisanal fishers in the Gulf of Guinea reports that damaged and obsolete gear was commonly discarded, burned, or reused for household purposes. Most participants were reportedly unaware of the environmental consequences of inappropriate disposal. A review by Guerrato and Gonçalves identified only fourteen studies published between 2011 and 2021 that addressed marine litter's effects on small-scale fisheries. The authors argue that the social and economic costs of marine litter require greater attention, particularly in relation to artisanal fishers. Because these studies differ in geography and method, they do not establish a universal pattern. Taken together, however, they show why material properties, ecological impacts, infrastructure, and socio-economic conditions must be examined together.

Material Livelihood Ecology: A Three-Dimensional Framework

Material Livelihood Ecology responds to a limitation shared by single-framework analyses: each approach illuminates an important aspect of fishing gear, but each can also obscure other parts of its history. A materialist approach may focus on the net's persistence while overlooking the people involved in its use, maintenance, loss, and recovery. A livelihood approach may treat the net as a disposable asset without accounting for its ecological afterlife. A text-centred approach may accept a transformation narrative too readily, either blaming coastal communities for pollution or praising them for removing it without examining the conditions shaping those outcomes. Material Livelihood Ecology seeks to avoid these limitations by examining three

dimensions together: the net's material history, its ecological relations, and its relationship to livelihoods. These dimensions are neither sequential steps nor independent variables; they are interrelated perspectives. Representation is not a fourth dimension but a means of examining how the three dimensions are selected, framed, and interpreted in a text.

The first dimension, material trajectory, follows an object from manufacture and purchase through use, maintenance, damage, loss, recovery, repair, reuse, recycling, and final disposal. At each stage, the net's function and social meaning may change. During use, the net connects fishing labour with aquatic life. When damaged, it becomes an expense or liability; when lost at sea, it may remain hazardous; and when recovered, it may become material for repairs, handicrafts, or industrial processing. Tracing this trajectory challenges the assumption that waste is an inherent and permanent property of an object. A net that can no longer be used for fishing may retain strength, flexibility, and durability that make it suitable for another purpose. However, the possibility of reuse does not automatically make a process environmentally beneficial. The durability that gives synthetic nets their practical value also contributes to their persistence in marine environments. Each material transformation must therefore be assessed to determine whether it reduces harm or merely transfers it elsewhere. Reuse and environmental improvement are not synonymous, and reuse alone does not prove an environmental benefit. Evaluation would require information about the quantity of material recovered, the energy and materials used in processing, the lifespan of the resulting products, the management of residues, and the products' eventual disposal. This system's perspective is also central to policy discussions of gear recycling, which treat recycling as one stage in a broader process encompassing design, manufacture, collection, and end-of-life management (Sala and Richardson).

The second dimension, ecological relation, examines how a net affects marine animals, habitats, currents, and other fishing gear. Material agency, as used here, does not imply intention. A net may continue to affect its surroundings long after its intended use has ended. Whether lodged in a habitat or drifting in the ocean, it can remain consequential after its owner has lost control of it.

The third dimension, livelihood relation, encompasses the people and organisations that manufacture, buy, repair, lose, recover, process, sell, and dispose of fishing gear. It includes labour, income, skills, time, risk, infrastructure, community knowledge, gender relations, and access to resources—issues central to the sustainable livelihoods approach. A recovery project can affect fishers, women who process recovered materials, community organisations, manufacturers, governments, and consumers in different ways. Recovery is not necessarily sustainable simply because it produces a marketable item or generates a short-term increase in income.

The three dimensions interact. Durability, for example, may prolong a net's ecological effects while also making it useful for a second application. Replacement costs can shape decisions about repair and disposal. A lack of collection infrastructure can make proper disposal difficult, while recovery creates additional demands for labour, transport, and processing. A documentary account may emphasise a final product while giving less attention to the intermediate steps that made it possible.

The Contribution of Material Livelihood Ecology

Material Livelihood Ecology does not replace material ecocriticism; rather, it extends a material reading by explicitly connecting the object's materiality to the organisation of labour and the distribution of livelihood value. It complements the sustainable livelihoods approach by tracing

the object's ecological afterlife and examining how that afterlife is represented in cultural narratives. It also contributes to Blue Humanities by showing how everyday objects connect aquatic environments with coastal populations. Its contribution lies not in claiming that these fields are unrelated, but in offering a practical method for bringing their questions together when analysing documentary, literary, and oral narratives or designing empirical research. The framework generates three diagnostic questions: What happens to the net at each stage, and does the process reduce harm or transfer it? Who handles the material, bears the risks, and receives the benefits? How does the text represent this chain of labour, and what does it leave unsaid?

Reading the Ramanathapuram Narrative

Aathira Vasudevan's UNDP India article documents a community-based ghost-gear removal initiative in Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu, near the Gulf of Mannar. Published on 21 November 2025 to coincide with World Fisheries Day, the article describes a project supported by the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme in collaboration with the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). According to Vasudevan, the initiative began in June 2023 with research and awareness campaigns among fishers, followed by community training in appropriate disposal, ghost-net recovery, and product-making. As a documentary text, the article does more than convey information; its structure also shapes how readers understand the project. It opens by describing the district's cultural and ecological heritage, including a temple, the Ram Setu bridge, and the sunrise. It then describes households engaged in fishing, seaweed gathering, dry-fish production, and net mending against a backdrop of tropical cyclones, rising sea levels, and declining catches (Vasudevan).

The narrative moves from a place presented as worth protecting, to the environmental threat, and then to intervention and scale. Its section headings follow a familiar development-communication sequence: small grants produce large impacts, impacts can be measured, and women bring about change. The title and introductory summary also position coastal communities as participants in environmental action rather than merely as people affected by pressure on marine ecosystems. The article also offers an ecological and material explanation. It links the problem to a shift from traditional natural-fibre nets made from coir or cotton to more durable, cost-effective synthetic nets with smaller mesh sizes that can increase catches but remain harmful when abandoned (Vasudevan). The adoption of synthetic gear can therefore be understood as an economically rational decision, but it also reveals the livelihood relationships that shape material choices and their consequences. A fisherwoman from Rameswaram reports that, before MSSRF's training, community members did not realise that nets left in the water harmed marine life and damaged other fishing equipment (Vasudevan). A second testimony describes a shift from viewing old nets as worthless to learning a new skill, earning income, and gaining confidence (Vasudevan). Together, the testimonies follow a conversion narrative in which training marks a transition from presumed ignorance and waste to skill, pride, and income. The article reinforces this narrative by describing fishers who have moved from tolerating ghost nets to "taking ownership of the solution" (Vasudevan). These testimonies make the report emotionally compelling and bring women's voices into view. At the same time, the publishing organisation has selected and contextualised them within its broader account of the project.

This framing deserves scrutiny because the wider research points to more than one explanation for improper disposal. In the Gulf of Guinea study, many respondents reportedly lacked awareness of the environmental consequences of inappropriate waste handling (Ekperusi

et al.). Awareness-raising is therefore a relevant part of the response. The Kerala study, by contrast, identifies the lack of collection facilities as a major concern (Daniel and Thomas). These cases should not be generalised directly to Ramanathapuram. Nevertheless, together they suggest that awareness and infrastructure are complementary rather than competing explanations: training can change knowledge, while collection facilities determine whether safe disposal is practically possible. The article also makes the environmental work of women and young people more visible. Vasudevan reports that 123 fisherwomen were trained to make bags, mats, baskets, and coasters from recovered nets. Many reportedly earn between INR 2,000 and INR 5,000 per month; the products are also exhibited at events and promoted through a mobile application (Vasudevan). These details broaden the representation of coastal labour beyond fishing at sea to include collection, cleaning, sorting, production, and sales.

Visibility, however, does not in itself demonstrate lasting benefits. The article appears on an institutional platform whose communication purpose includes demonstrating the value of supported projects. David Mosse's ethnography of aid shows how project narratives can be shaped by institutional priorities and the need to sustain organisational legitimacy (Mosse). The article reports several outputs: 16.2 metric tonnes of marine debris collected, including 12.9 metric tonnes of abandoned nets; 559 volunteers; the involvement of 28 fishers' groups and 100 boat-owners' groups; and the rescue of ten sea turtles and one dolphin (Vasudevan). These figures are treated here as claims made by the documentary source, not as independently verified outcomes. The article does not provide evidence showing whether gear loss or marine-animal entanglement has declined. It does not specify what proportion of recovered nets was converted into products or how the remaining material was managed. Nor does it clearly state the period covered by every reported total. The article also qualifies its claims about income generation. Vasudevan reports monthly

earnings of INR 2,000–5,000 for many women and notes that stronger market connections could increase their income. It also mentions plans to form self-help groups to improve access to credit. Viewed through the three dimensions, these omissions become analytically significant. In terms of material trajectory, the article traces a movement from abandoned net to recovered material and finished product, but says little about transport, cleaning, sorting, processing residues, or the products' eventual end of life. Ecologically, removing nets from reefs and seabeds may reduce entanglement and habitat damage. The rescue examples make the potential benefits vivid, but the article provides insufficient evidence to assess long-term effects in the Gulf of Mannar. From the perspective of livelihoods, the article describes voluntary clean-up work and the training of teams to retrieve nets from the seabed, but does not explain whether this labour was compensated, what safety measures were in place, or how product-sales arrangements were negotiated (Vasudevan). The account describes income-generating work but leaves the conditions surrounding the potentially hazardous underwater retrieval work unclear.

The Tamil Nadu Fishnet Initiative provides a useful comparison. According to a March 2025 media report, the Pollution Control Board maintained a collection centre at Kasimedu Fishing Harbour and was identifying twelve additional centres where fishers would receive market-rate incentives for handing in old nets. Baraasu reports that, between August 2024 and January 2025, the Kasimedu centre collected more than eleven metric tonnes of marine litter, 97 per cent of which was high-density polyethylene nets. The centre reportedly paid nearly INR 450,000 in incentives and recycled most of the material (Baraasu). The report does not establish whether a comparable collection pathway had been identified for Ramanathapuram. Unlike the community-based initiative described by Vasudevan, this scheme is harbour-based and includes payments to fishers. The initiatives are not necessarily in competition; they address different stages of the net's life

cycle. A community project may support retrieval and small-scale upcycling, while a more formal collection scheme can connect recovered gear to established recycling routes. Sala and Richardson identify extended producer responsibility—under which producers contribute to collection and recycling costs—as one possible means of supporting such systems (36–41).

Baraasu's report is a media account rather than a research study, and the policy context may have changed. Even so, the comparison suggests that community effort alone is unlikely to secure a complete recovery system; institutions and collection infrastructure are also needed. Vasudevan's article can therefore be read with both appreciation and critical attention. It documents community action, makes women's environmental work visible, and recognises the material dimensions of the problem. Nevertheless, its institutional framing leaves questions about long-term environmental consequences, working conditions, market dependence, and the distribution of benefits unanswered.

Labour, Gender, and Shared Responsibility

A livelihood perspective requires attention to how environmental work is distributed and recognised. Fishing is often represented as men's work at sea, yet coastal livelihoods also include net mending, seaweed gathering, dry-fish processing, and marketing. Vasudevan's account places these activities within the livelihood landscape of Ramanathapuram. This representation matters because it shows that environmental work includes activities that can be overlooked when coastal villages are treated as homogeneous communities.

Representation, however, does not guarantee equality. Although a project may create new opportunities, collecting, cleaning, sorting, and manufacturing can involve underpaid or unpaid labour. Women's environmental responsibilities may expand without adequate payment or

recognition as work. Critical analysis must ask who manages the projects, owns the finished products, receives the profits, faces health and safety risks, and has a say in the terms of employment. The sustainable livelihoods approach foregrounds resources and institutions; Material Livelihood Ecology extends this attention across the entire chain of labour surrounding the net. A responsible transformation from waste to resource therefore requires workplace safety, appropriate training, fair pay, and participation in decision-making.

Responsibility must also go beyond the coastal community. Fishers have responsibilities for the appropriate use and disposal of equipment, but manufacturers make decisions about material selection, design, durability, and repairability. Producers and retailers can help establish take-back schemes, while ports and local governments can provide or coordinate collection points. Because a net's life cycle involves many connected actors, responsibility should not rest solely with the final user. Nor should community recycling efforts absolve manufacturers and producers of their responsibilities. Material Livelihood Ecology challenges both simplified narratives by examining the material, institutional, and economic conditions that shape what different actors can do.

Conclusion

Fishing nets illustrate the interdependence of coastal livelihoods and marine ecology. They support human livelihoods, yet their durability can make them persistent hazards when abandoned or lost. The literature on Kerala and Tamil Nadu indicates that ALDFG is an important problem in those regions and highlights the significance of recycling and preventative measures, while studies of artisanal fishing explain why the social and economic consequences of marine pollution need to be taken into consideration along with ecological damage.

This article has proposed Material Livelihood Ecology as an analytical framework with three dimensions: material trajectory, ecological relation, and livelihood relation. Formulated in conversation with Blue Humanities, material ecocriticism, new materialism, and the sustainable livelihoods approach, the framework traces the shifting material relations and their effects on the environment while exploring how labour, institutions, and representation influence these shifts.

The close reading of Vasudevan's UNDP India article demonstrates the importance of approaching documentary writing as a cultural text. The article makes community-based retrieval and women's participation visible while explaining the material dimensions of the problem. Its testimonies of transformation, output-based statistics, and institutional framing show how a success story is constructed. Because the article is an institutional account, its reported activities should not be treated as independent proof of measurable ecological or economic benefits. A critical reading can recognise the initiative's value while identifying the further evidence needed on material flows, product durability, working conditions, income distribution, and environmental outcomes.

This study has three principal limitations. It analyses only one documentary text, relies on published sources rather than original fieldwork, and does not test the framework against oral narratives or fiction produced by coastal communities. Coastal sustainability cannot be achieved through retrieval and reuse alone. It also depends on prevention, accessible collection systems, better material design, safe and fairly compensated labour, shared responsibility among producers and institutions, and reliable evaluation. Material Livelihood Ecology offers literary and cultural studies a practical tool for analysing how documentary, oral, and literary texts represent these interconnected processes. Fishing nets are more than symbols of pollution or innovation: they reveal the connections among material objects, water, labour, and responsibility.

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