



THE SCIENTIST'S AND INNOVATOR'S GUIDE TO ENGAGING WITH FISHERMEN



Brought to you by



WHAT AND WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?



Hello there! We are Emma Plotnek from Fishing into the Future and Kara Brydson from Fisheries Innovation & Sustainability.

First of all, thank you for reading this guide! It means three things:

1. You're part of the wider effort to tackle the challenges faced by the fishing industry and support a sustainable, prosperous future for our fisheries.
2. You're taking the time to thoughtfully consider how to engage with fishing communities and involve them in the problems you're researching or the solutions you're developing.
3. You've chosen this resource to guide your journey working with fishermen—and we're glad you have!

This guide was born from the many similar questions we get from research students, tech companies, and others about how to approach fishermen and build partnerships. So take comfort—there are others in the same boat as you!

Inside, you'll find 12 points divided into "Pitfalls" (traps to avoid) and "Pearls" (best practice tips), along with signposts to further resources.

While we're not fishermen ourselves, we speak with them almost daily and have strong connections to fishing communities across the UK. This guidance also draws on input from fishermen. That said, the fishing industry is incredibly diverse, and no one-size-fits-all approach exists. What works for one fisherman might not work for another. The key is to approach them with respect for their expertise, be upfront, and remain considerate— and you'll be well on your way!

If this guide sparks more questions or you'd like to know more, please don't hesitate to reach out. We're happy to help.



EMMA PLOTNEK



Fishing into the Future (FITF) is an independent, fisherman-led, UK-wide charity which seeks to equip fishermen, scientists and fisheries managers with the tools, knowledge and connections to collaborate in the pursuit of sustainable & prosperous fisheries.

[FISHINGINTOTHEFUTURE.CO.UK/CONTACT](https://fishingintothefuture.co.uk/contact)



KARA BRYDSON



Fisheries Innovation & Sustainability (FIS) is a coalition of experts driving strategic innovation for a prosperous and sustainable UK seafood industry. FIS creates a pre-competitive environment for collaboration, bringing seafood experts, government and scientists together to champion innovation in the UK seafood industry.

[FISORG.UK/SHARE-YOUR-PROBLEM](https://fisorg.uk/share-your-problem)

PITFALLS

Avoid coming to the fishing industry with preconceived notions about what they 'need' or seeking validation for decisions you've already made. This approach can discourage collaboration and diminish their interest in working with you.

Don't assume they have the same background context, and don't forget to listen to what they might know about the topic.

What is a priority for your work might not be perceived as a priority for their business.

START WITH AN OPEN MIND AND A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER



A QUOTE TO LIVE BY

“Just because we wear a boiler suit and not a 3 piece suit doesn't mean we aren't educated - a skippers ticket is equivalent to a degree”

PEARLS

Approach the fishing industry with an open mind, leaving assumptions at the door. Bring a blank sheet of paper and a willingness to listen—you may uncover unexpected challenges, solutions, or barriers that fishermen face.

Focus on understanding and building connections. Ensure fishermen recognise the problem you're addressing and back it up with widely accepted, relevant data. Without this alignment, they may not see value in the ideas or products you're offering.

Treat fishermen as experts in their field. Prioritise listening over speaking, and respect their right to decline participation. Embrace the principle that they must be active partners in creating solutions: “Nothing about us without us.”

PITFALLS

Fishermen are not just individuals—they're the backbone of families and communities. Their time is tied directly to their livelihoods, and time away from fishing has real financial consequences. When a fisherman is in a meeting or testing your equipment, the boat isn't at sea, paperwork isn't getting done, and the business is taking a hit.

It's easy to overlook this reality, but expecting fishermen to offer their expertise for free can feel unfair and even disrespectful to their hard work and skills.

Costs also pile up: who covers the time, effort, or losses if testing new equipment affects their fishing opportunities? What happens when someone from your team takes up crew space or needs additional training to work on the boat?

TIME IS MONEY: RESPECT IT, VALUE IT



PEARLS

Be mindful of fishermen's time and the value of their contributions. Whether it's a consultation, a test run, or an interview, make sure you're compensating them fairly. Offer reimbursement for their time and cover the costs of any disruptions or extra demands on their operations.

When you're planning, think practically: if someone from your team needs to be on board, will there be space, and have they got the necessary training? Approach these arrangements as you would with any professional, and ensure the details are clear and agreed upon from the start.

Fishermen are as much a part of the project as anyone else in the room, and their expertise is worth recognising—and paying for. After all, consider how much you would be willing to put into a work project if you weren't being paid for it!

DID YOU KNOW?

No single fisherman's typical day will look the same. But to put it into perspective, a crab fisherman in Salcombe may typically spend 12-13 hours at sea, 200 days a year. That doesn't leave them with much free time!

PITFALLS

Fishermen's lives are busy enough without unexpected extras being added to their already full plates. Tasks like scanning signatures, completing paperwork, or seeking permissions can feel trivial in an office but can be a real hassle when you're at sea or working long days. Access to computers and printers isn't guaranteed on a fishing vessel—or even back at port.

On top of that, the rhythms of the fishing industry don't match the typical 9-to-5 schedule. Weather, engine repairs, or market demands can all throw plans into chaos. Tight deadlines and rigid timelines might seem efficient, but they can quickly become deal-breakers when they don't leave room for these realities.

FISHERMEN HAVE FULL PLATES



PEARLS

Take the load off wherever you can. If signatures or paperwork are needed, offer to handle these tasks in person rather than expecting fishers to find time and tools to do them. Be flexible and work around their schedules—they're unlikely to fit into standard office hours.

When setting timelines, give yourself and the fishermen some breathing room. Build in time for delays caused by bad weather, market changes, or equipment issues. Keep your expectations realistic and factor in the time it takes to build trust and relationships—it's just as important as hitting your deadlines.

The more you accommodate the realities of fishing life, the smoother the collaboration will be. A little flexibility goes a long way!

A QUOTE TO LIVE BY

You might have a deadline, but they have to factor in weather, tides, engine trouble, markets – these are businesses, and business must come first.

PITFALLS

Engaging with the fishing community isn't as simple as talking to one or two people and ticking a box. Ports are dynamic places, with overlapping networks of fleets, associations, and individuals—some closely connected, others barely aware of each other. If you overlook key voices or fail to understand these dynamics, it can lead to mistrust or accusations of favouritism.

You should also check who else is actively running projects with fishermen in the area - government consultants, academics, tech businesses and NGOs are often all competing for fishermen's attention. Check who else is active in the area, coordinate with them to avoid stepping on each other's toes and overloading the local community.

Lack of clarity about what you're asking can also create confusion and frustration. If you change direction partway through, fishermen may feel misled, leading to disengagement. And before you even start, failing to check whether similar work has already been done, or your work could be confused with someone else's, can waste time and damage your credibility.

DIVE DEEP - AND THEN A LITTLE DEEPER



SIGNPOST

Use the 'Who's Who' on the Fishing Porthole website, to orientate yourself around the industry, and the fisheries organisations around the UK.

WWW.FISHINGPORTHOLE.CO.UK/WHOS-WHO-IN-UK-FISHERIES

PEARLS

Do your homework before you set foot in the harbour. Map out the stakeholders in the area and think carefully about who you need to engage. Don't just focus on the easiest voices to access—make an effort to reach hard-to-contact groups or fleets. Consider the relationships within the community, and if needed, speak to representatives or family members who can provide insights or act as intermediaries.

Be crystal clear about your goals. What are you asking for, and why should they help? Define this upfront, and stick to it—moving the goalposts mid-project is a sure way to lose trust.

Finally, check the scope of your work. Is it specific to one fishery or port, or does it apply nationally? If it's across the UK, be aware that fisheries management varies by region, so you'll need to adapt your approach accordingly.

Remember, meaningful engagement takes time, effort, and patience. Put in the groundwork, and you'll not only avoid missteps but build relationships that stand the test of time.

PITFALLS

Showing up to a fishing community without any connections is unlikely to be productive. You may find yourself wandering the harbour aimlessly, unsure of who to approach or how to get started. Some fishermen can be cautious of outsiders turning up unannounced with lots of questions and ideas—it can feel intrusive, especially if there's no one to vouch for you.

A lack of local allies can leave you looking like an outsider, which makes it much harder to build trust. Without someone to guide you, you might miss key opportunities to speak to the right people or accidentally step on toes by engaging inappropriately. And even when you do find someone willing to help, it's important to ensure they have the right skills for what you need, whether it's casual introductions or convening a workshop.

CASTING YOUR LINE: FINDING THE RIGHT CONNECTION



SIGNPOST

Fishing into the Future and other fishing organisations may be able to suggest local people for these roles.

WWW.FISHINGINTOTHEFUTURE.CO.UK/CONTACT

PEARLS

Start by recognising the importance of a trusted local connection. Someone familiar with the community can guide you to the right people, help you navigate the port's dynamics, and—most importantly—vouch for you, making others more likely to trust and engage.

Once you've identified a connection, consider the role you need them to play. For informal introductions, look for someone well-respected locally who can provide a friendly, low-pressure way to meet key contacts. They can act as a bridge into the community, offering insights into its dynamics. A day rate for their time shows respect for their efforts.

For more formal engagement—such as a meeting or consultation with stakeholders—seek someone with the skills to facilitate structured discussions. This person should be respected locally, skilled at managing group dynamics, and able to create a space for open dialogue. Offering training and fair compensation to local fishermen in this role can build capacity while ensuring productive outcomes.

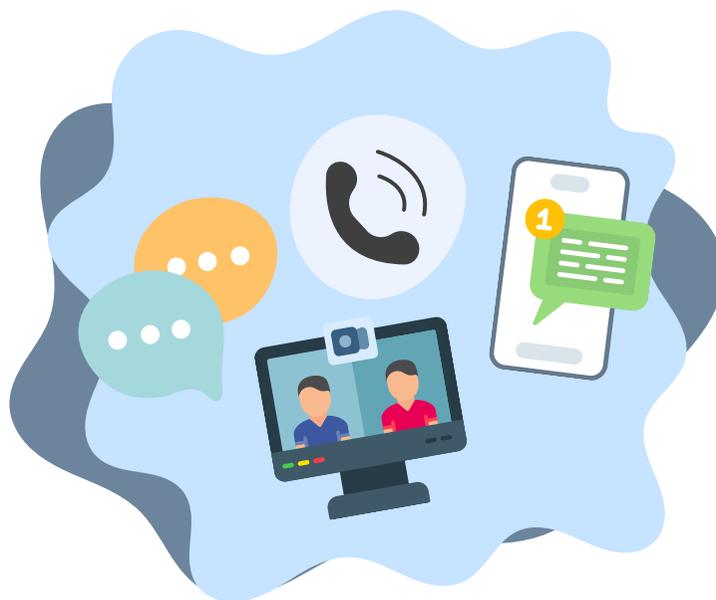
PITFALLS

It's easy to default to your own preferred method of communication, but fishermen may not respond in the way you expect. For instance, relying on emails can feel impersonal and impractical—fishermen are not sitting at a desk checking their inbox every 10 minutes. While they may have a phone on hand, they might be out at sea with poor signal or too focused on their work to respond immediately.

Every fishing community has its own rhythms, shaped by tides, weather, and long hours at sea. If you're not tuned into these realities, you risk miscommunication, missed opportunities, or appearing out of touch.

Another common mistake is expecting fishermen to work around your timeline rather than theirs. Fishing doesn't follow typical office hours, and pressing for immediate responses or assuming constant availability can lead to frustration on both sides.

GETTING ON THE SAME WAVE (LENGTH)



DID YOU KNOW?

While most fishermen will be able to get phone service up to 20 miles away from land, it is likely to be weak and inconsistent. Consider sending a text message or even a WhatsApp voice note first to ask what times may be suitable for a call.

PEARLS

Start by asking fishermen how they prefer to communicate and adapt accordingly. Some might prefer in-person conversations at the harbour; others may favour WhatsApp or even phone calls, depending on what's easiest for them during their working day. By meeting them on their terms, you're showing respect for their time and priorities, which goes a long way in building trust.

Consider the timing of your outreach, too. Recognise that a fisher might not reply to your email promptly because they're at sea or busy with other commitments. Be patient, and where possible, plan your communication around their schedules.

Finally, be consistent. Once you've established their preferred method, stick to it, so they know how and when to expect to hear from you. These small but important adjustments can help lay the groundwork for more productive and collaborative relationships.

PITFALLS

Fishermen are not codebreakers. Overusing jargon, acronyms, or overly formal language can alienate fishermen and make it harder for them to engage with your ideas. While technical terms may seem second nature to you, they might not resonate—or worse, they might create confusion or miscommunication.

Similarly, being too robotic or detached in your communication can create a barrier. Fishermen are practical and down-to-earth, and they'll respond best to someone who's genuine, relatable, and ready to communicate in a way that works for both of you. Without clarity and authenticity, your message could get lost in translation, leaving them disengaged or even sceptical about your intentions.

Be mindful, too, of how your tone comes across. Avoid being patronising—fishermen have deep expertise in their field and are quick to spot insincerity. Lighthearted jokes or friendly ribbing might even signal their approval, so don't take it the wrong way.

A.A.A - ALWAYS AVOID ACRONYMS (AND JARGON)



PEARLS

Keep your language simple, clear, and accessible. Swap out technical jargon and business chat for plain English wherever possible, and when acronyms are unavoidable, take the time to explain them. Remember, the goal isn't to impress with fancy terminology but to ensure your message is understood and meaningful. Metaphors like “dropping someone a line” and “developing a toolkit” might be a bit too close to their literal daily work to make much sense!

Be personable and human in your interactions. Let your personality show—this doesn't mean crossing professional boundaries, but it does mean treating conversations as a two-way exchange rather than a lecture. A little humour or a friendly tone can go a long way toward breaking down barriers.

Finally, always check for understanding. If you're presenting an idea, ask questions to make sure it's landing the way you intended. Being approachable and open to feedback will help foster a stronger sense of collaboration and trust.

PITFALLS

Collecting data or trialling innovative tech can get complicated quickly if you're not clear about ownership and rights from the start. Questions like "Who owns the equipment? Who controls the data? And who benefits from the results?" can become points of contention if left unaddressed.

Fishermen may be wary of sharing sensitive information, such as fishing grounds or operational details, especially if it could negatively affect their livelihood. Misunderstanding these boundaries or failing to protect their interests can harm trust and derail collaboration. Similarly, unclear or overly complex contracts and data agreements can make fishermen feel excluded from or uncertain about the process.

Transparency is another potential pitfall. If it's not clear where funding is coming from or who stands to gain from the work, it can create the perception of unfairness or exploitation. Without a fair and transparent approach, your project risks alienating the very people you're trying to work with.

WHO OWNS THE WORK? DATA SHARING AND RIGHTS.



SIGNPOST

The Fishing Porthole has a set of guidelines for generating trusted, credible and relevant data. The guidelines can be widely applied to various projects.

GUIDELINES FOR INDUSTRY SCIENCE
DATA COLLECTION

PEARLS

Define ownership and rights early. Be upfront about who controls the equipment and data, how the results will be used, and who will benefit. This clarity builds trust and ensures fishermen feel their contributions are respected.

Understand and respect boundaries by discussing what fishermen are comfortable sharing and why certain information may need to remain confidential. Take the lead in drafting simple, practical agreements that balance fairness and clarity without unnecessary complexity.

Communicate openly about funding sources and how benefits, such as profits or insights, will be shared. Be prepared to adapt terms to meet fishermen's needs—flexibility and fairness are key to maintaining trust.

Finally, ensure data collected aligns with recognised frameworks and quality standards. This not only validates the work but ensures it's useful and credible beyond the scope of your work - aim high - your work could be used in Fisheries Management Plans or even by organisations like ICES if it is pitched right and meets the right criteria.

PITFALLS

As you build trust within the fishing community, people may share information with you in confidence. This can include sensitive or even conflicting insights from different individuals. Without fully understanding the context or verifying the details, there's a risk of misinterpreting or misusing what you've been told.

Sharing these comments—whether through gossip, public statements, or casual remarks—can quickly damage your reputation. Fishermen are unlikely to trust you again if they feel their confidence has been betrayed or their words have been taken out of context.

BOTTLE IT UP AND KEEP A LID ON IT



PEARLS

Treat everything you hear as confidential unless explicitly told otherwise. If someone shares sensitive information, respect their trust and keep it private. Even if the insight seems important or useful to your work, always ask the person if they're comfortable with you sharing it, and clarify the appropriate audience.

Avoid gossip or repeating personal remarks, even in casual settings like the quayside. Instead, focus on listening and understanding. If you're unsure about the context or validity of what you've been told, avoid passing it on—your role is to build bridges, not spread hearsay.

A QUOTE TO LIVE BY

“With great working relationships comes great responsibility”

By handling information with care and discretion, you'll demonstrate that you're trustworthy and professional, which will strengthen your relationships within the fishing community.

PITFALLS

Fishermen can find it frustrating when researchers or innovators take up their time and then disappear once they've gathered what they need. This "use and bail" approach can make fishermen feel undervalued and exploited, leaving them resistant to engaging in future projects—not just with you, but with others who follow.

Failing to follow through on communication or to share the outcomes of their input also damages trust. Fishermen invest time and effort into these collaborations, so if they're left in the dark about what happened with the project or who benefits from the results, it can feel like a waste of their time.

DON'T LEAVE FISHERMEN ON THE HOOK



CAUTIONARY TALE

We regularly hear complaints from the industry of people taking up their time and then bailing, it makes them resistant to engage in work after they have been burned. Don't be the person who ruins it for everyone.

PEARLS

Commit to consistent communication and effort throughout the entire process—from your first contact to the project's completion. Be clear about what fishermen's input will contribute to and what they can expect in return. Once the work is done, take the time to share the outputs, whether that's a report, paper, or summary of findings. Physical copies are often appreciated, as they can be shared easily in the community.

Acknowledge fishermen's contributions wherever appropriate, such as in presentations, papers, or reports. This small but significant step reinforces the value of their input and helps build goodwill.

Be clear and realistic from the start about what outcome is possible within the scope of the work, and don't leave the end result on a shelf to gather dust at the point your team disengages from the work. If you are developing a piece of research or technology, but not responsible for it being integrated into management or approved for fishing operations, make sure everyone is aware of this - and someone is tasked with taking your work into future stages.

By following through and keeping fishermen in the loop, you'll show that you value their time and expertise. This builds trust not just for your project but for future collaborations as well, ensuring the industry remains open to working with others.

PITFALLS

Bridging the gap between researchers, tech developers, and fishermen isn't just about fishermen understanding complex legislation or technical solutions. A significant challenge is the failure of many outside the industry to fully understand the realities of fishing life. Without this understanding, it's easy to misinterpret behaviours, make incorrect assumptions, or develop solutions that simply don't align with the industry's needs.

Fishing is demanding and deeply tied to the rhythms of the marine environment. Without insight into the daily realities of being a seafarer—the long hours, financial pressures, safety concerns, and emotional connection to the sea—you risk missing the bigger picture. Overlooking the regulatory, financial, or technical challenges they face can lead to unrealistic expectations or misaligned goals.

CHECK YOURSELF (AND YOUR FISHING LITERACY)



SIGNPOST

Use the Fishing Porthole's 'Get Connected' page to sign up for newsletters, listen to fishing podcasts and find industry news to keep yourself in the loop and abreast of the daily realities of fishermen.

WWW.FISHINGPORTHOLE.CO.UK/GET-CONNECTED

PEARLS

Spend time learning what it's like to work in the catching sector. This means more than a one-off visit to the harbour—it involves understanding the day-to-day realities of fishing, from the language they use to the pressures they face. Learn the lingo, ask questions, and listen to what frustrates or motivates them.

Dive deeper into the "why" behind their actions. Are there regulatory restrictions shaping their behaviour? Financial barriers? Market demands or technical limitations? By uncovering these influences, you'll be in a better position to understand their decisions and work collaboratively on innovative solutions.

Ultimately, building mutual understanding is about respect—acknowledging the expertise and lived experience fishermen bring to the table while being open about what you bring to the conversation too. The more you learn about their world, the more effective and meaningful your engagement will be.

PITFALLS

Fishermen have faced challenges for decades: environmental changes, shifting regulations, market pressures, and public narratives that sometimes paint the industry in an unfairly negative light.

They can also feel overlooked or taken for granted, despite their vital role in feeding communities and managing marine ecosystems.

These struggles can create a sense of frustration or disconnection between the industry and broader society. Without recognition of their contributions, fishermen may feel undervalued—missing out on the acknowledgment they deserve as both food providers and stewards of the sea.

STEER TOWARD BRIGHTER HORIZONS



A QUOTE TO LIVE BY

Recognise and amplify the resilience, expertise, and care that fishermen bring to their work.

PEARLS

Amid these challenges, the fishing industry has consistently demonstrated resilience, innovation, and ingenuity. Fishermen have adapted to ever-changing conditions, finding ways to overcome obstacles while continuing to provide vital food resources. As scientists and innovators, you have a unique opportunity to contribute to this journey and strengthen these partnerships.

Celebrate the remarkable relationships between fishermen and the broader research and innovation community. When framed correctly, most fishermen deeply appreciate collaboration that helps them tackle challenges and improve sustainability. Acknowledge them as proud guardians of the ocean and vital contributors to food security—not just for today, but for the future.

By changing the narrative to one of positivity and collaboration, you can be part of a powerful shift. Recognise and amplify the resilience, expertise, and care that fishermen bring to their work. Together, you can tackle pressing challenges, celebrate success, and steer toward a future where fishing thrives as an essential and sustainable industry.